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**THE PARADOX OF INDEPENDENCE: ARTICULATING THE
EVENTFULNESS OF THE COLD WAR IN SARAWAK, BORNEO**

By

KEE HOWE YONG

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City
University of New York**

2003

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

THE PARADOX OF INDEPENDENCE: ARTICULATING THE EVENTFULNESS OF THE COLD WAR IN SARAWAK, BORNEO

By: Kee Howe Yong

Advisor: Professor Michael Blim

Communism is not only treated as a past phenomenon in Malaysia but it is considered so benign that its government recently restored several underground tunnels and caves at the Malaysia-Thai border as a museum project for tourist consumption. Seen in this manner, communism in Malaysia is portrayed as a momentary interruption in the writing of the history of its “assured” nation statehood. It is to this assuredness that provided the framework for my investigation. This thesis is based on 12 months of fieldwork in Sarawak where I worked with bus conductors, bus drivers, clothing vendors and others who were former communists or communist sympathizers.

Indeed if the history of communism in Malaysia is treated as an aberration in order to deny its eventfulness, have the events that transpired during the 1960s and 1970s been forgotten, erased from the consciousness of those who were affected by it? If so, has this erasure to do with something else altogether? Here I am alluding to the sensitivity that might have contributed to such forgetting or even to amnesia. On another level, how has such unremembered events been ignored by the historian and by the nationalist project? However, if the events of the 1960s and 1970s are still in the memories and consciousness of a section of the population, how can we write the dimension of

domination and disdain and its messiness back into the fore of history – in short, how can we recapture their eventfulness back into history'?

It would be one thing to say that this thesis is about the stories told by a certain population who were dislocated and displaced as a consequence of a series of ordinances, bills, and operations carried out by the government during the 1960s and 1970s. In my discussion of the twin problems of silence and indifference, this thesis also deals with the problem of stories that cannot be told by the victims whose lives were directly or indirectly immersed in communist revolts and government repression. These were silences for those who surely remember.

Acknowledgements

To summarize the seeds that sustain a dissertation is an incredibly overwhelming experience. Indeed I can only hope to make a few gestures of acknowledgement towards the most pressing gratitude I am indebted to and if I left out some individuals, allow me to offer my apologies in advance. First, thanks are due to Michael Blim for not only being a constant source of encouragement and guidance through my thesis but also my graduate career. He not only knew when and how to nudge me along but also left me enough of my own space that I seem to require. Thanks go as well to my other committee members. Each has been an inspiration through their research and a constant source of guidance. Vincent Crapanzano's incisive questions profoundly changed and deeply instructed how I think through the many issues of this project. Miki Makihara was especially insightful with the linguistic aspects of the data I amassed. Anna Tsing, my outside reader, was and continues to be, from my first encounter with her work, a model for the possibilities of a reflexive and politically engaged research. But most of all, I am grateful to my committee members for the confidence in me, even when my own was weak, and the enthusiasm they sustained for this project. I hope this work in some way reflects well on their teaching.

I would also like to thank Louise Lennihan, May Ebihara, Marc Edelman, and Ida Susser for guidance and support through graduate school. I am indebted to Nilajana Chatterjee for her tireless effort working with me in thinking through the proposal for this project. I would also like to acknowledge Nancy Peluso who opened many doors for me to do fieldwork in Sarawak. Similar gratitude is due to Christine Padoch. In addition, I would like to thank fellow students Molly Doane, Aseel Sawalha, Murphy Halliburton,

Jennifer Lutton, Laura Kaehler, Martha Kebalo, Banu Karaca, Yizhou Jiang, Raja Abillama, and a friend, Andrew Fremont Smith, who, at different junctures, offered much-needed sources of rich intellectual support as well as entertainment. I can't imagine how I could survive graduate school without our Program Assistant, Ellen DeRiso. Her generosity and support can never be repaid. Similar gratitude is due to Heather Clarke and Janet Kaplan. To my sisters Ming Chuin, Swee Boon, and Lee Chuin, I can finally say there is now a doctor in the family. I offer my thanks to them for supporting my decision to pursue a career in anthropology.

Of those who took time to work with me during my fieldwork, I would like to record my gratitude to Michael Leigh and Wan Zawawi Ibrahim at University Malaysia Sarawak, Daniel Chew at the Sarawak Development Institute, and particularly, my buddy Kevin Egay. I would also like to thank the staff at the Sarawak Museum Library for their hospitality and assistance, especially to Puan Rokiah and Mrs. Chan. For fear of reprisals against those concerned, I deeply regret that I am unable to reveal the names of my interlocutors in Sarawak who worked with me, often at no little risks to themselves. I trust that they will recognize who they are and understand the depth of my gratitude to each of them should any of them ever happen to read this thesis.

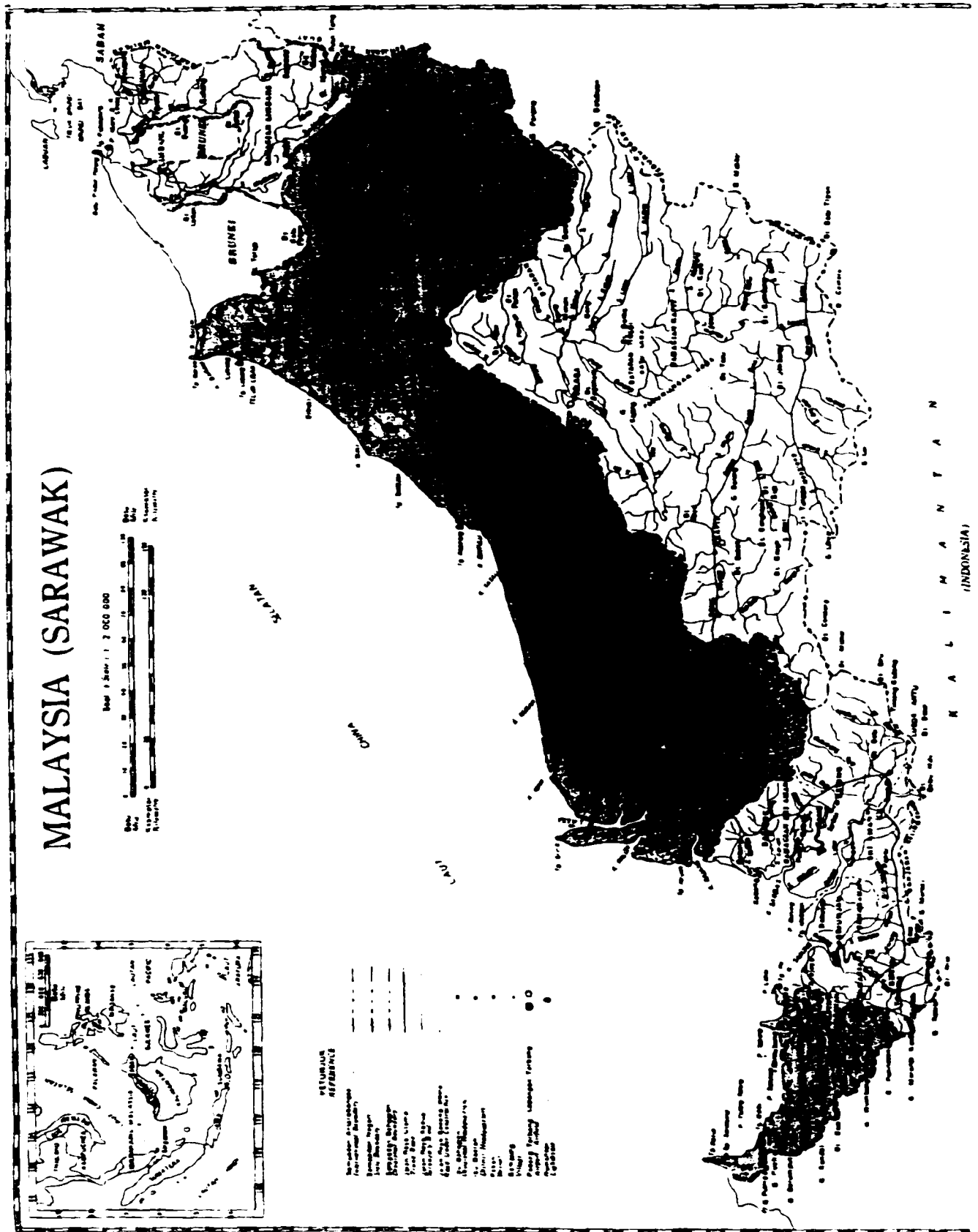
This thesis would not have been possible without the financial support I received for my research. I am grateful to a Fulbright Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Grant that funded my research in Sarawak. For making it possible to write this thesis in New York City, my gratitude to a Ralph Bunche Dissertation Fellowship and a CUNY Writing Fellow.

Finally, and forgive me for being repetitive, I owe an immeasurable debt to my committee members in steering through the final passage of this voyage. Naturally, neither of those whom I named above or my interlocutors bears any responsibility for any aspects of the contents of this book, the onus of which rests on me alone.

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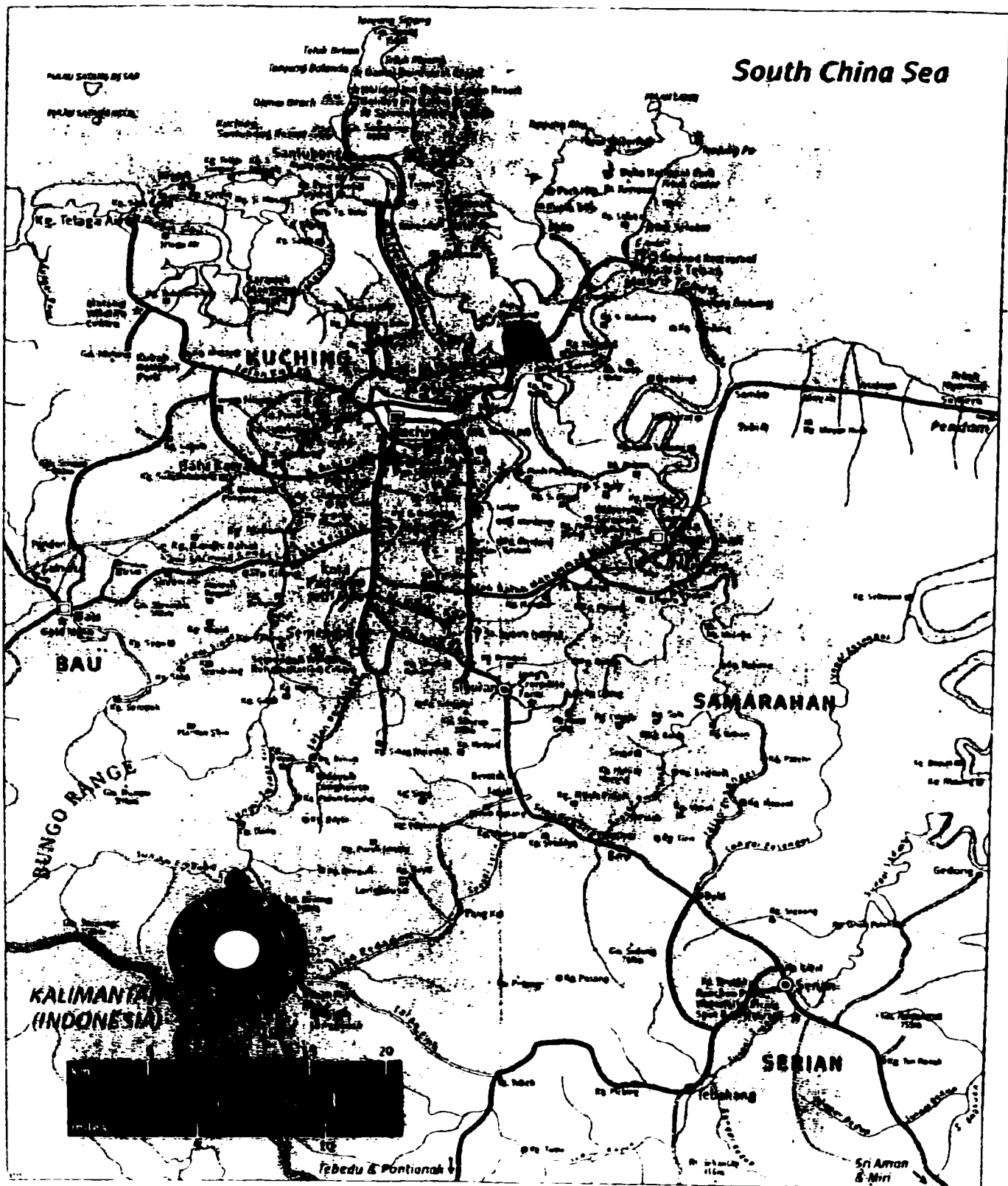
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MAP 1: SARAWAK



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MAP 2: DISTRICT OF KUCHING



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Chapter One: By Way of Introduction

“As they became evil, they talked about fraternity and humanitarianism and came to understand those concepts; as they became criminal, they invented justice and drew up voluminous codes of laws to enforce their justice, ... and built a guillotine to enforce their laws.”

(Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*, 1980 (1834): 221)

At about 9 a.m. on April 20th, 2000, I was with a few bus conductors and drivers inside a coffee shop across from the Sarawak Omnibus Company (SOC)¹ bus station when we heard that the former president of the Sarawak United Peoples Party (SUPP), Tan Sri Ong Kee Hui had died the night before. According to the local newspapers, the late Tan Sri Ong's body would be laid at the SUPP headquarter for two days for those who wished to pay their last respect. From there his body would proceed to the Saint Thomas Cathedral for a memorial service before heading straight to the Kuching Hokkien cemetery.

The topic that was immediately raised by these bus conductors and drivers that morning, including myself, was whether or not there would be a funeral procession for Tan Sri Ong through the streets of Kuching, as was traditionally the case for the death of Chinese leaders in the past. After all, Tan Sri Ong's father and grandfather were given such an honor. But it was not to be. There would be no procession through the streets of Kuching. Perhaps this inspired many that were present at this coffee shop to recall a funeral procession that took place in the early 1960s that was not only extremely grandiose, at least in the way they talked about it, but defied the power of the government.

¹ Except for political and public figures, I have substituted pseudonyms for all my interlocutors as well as the names of places and business companies throughout this thesis.

The funeral procession they were referring to was the “celebration” for three heroes, two males and one female, communist leader Wang Yong-zen, Loh Lian Chen, and Chong Yung-hwa who were killed by the government during the early 1960s. I stress “celebration” because that was how my interlocutors put it. From what I was told, the three heroes symbolized the “never-give-up” mentality of the communist movements during the Cold War. They told me there was a massive turnout for the funeral procession, with people coming from all over Sarawak, from Serian and Simanggang and as far away as Sibu and Miri, journeys that take at least an entire day. Some twenty or more busloads of people made it to the celebration. Many arrived on their bicycles and others walked.

As a Chinese bus driver put it, “That was an angry lot! We were there to show our anger towards the government.” They mentioned that there were many Ibans and Bidayus at the procession as well as some Malays. Perhaps because of the massive turnouts the procession was marked by yelling and swearing at the police, venting their anger at the violence unleashed by the government on a certain section of rural Hakka populations in Sarawak. The Hakkas are one of the main Chinese speech groups² in Sarawak who resided predominantly in the rural areas during the 1960s and 1970s. The Hakkas are also called Khek, which means “guest people,” an historical designation for them in southern China that signified their foreignness to the region. To this day the Hakka populations in Fukien and Amoy provinces, for example, are predominantly found in the highlands of these areas, areas that are supposedly less fertile compared to the

² The regional languages of China have often been described as “dialects.” However, as Robert Ramsey (1987:16) points out, these dialects “are as different from each other as French from Italian and, when taken together, are probably more complex than the whole Romance family.” In linguistic parlance, they are mutually unintelligible in spoken forms.

lowlands occupied by the indigenous Hokkiens and Teochius. I should also state that there are numerous interpretations as to the origin and history of the Hakkas in China, depending on whom you speak to.³

Today, there is a monument for the three heroes at the 7th Mile Khek (Hakka) Association cemetery ground. The monument is located next to the Kuching/Serian road, making it highly visible. The fact that it is located on a Hakka cemetery ground would suggest some sort of connection between the Hakkas in Sarawak and things that might be interpreted as socialist. According to many of my Hakka interlocutors, the site chosen for the monument was selected using *Feng Hsui* calculations – sitting on top of a hill that is reserved, even to this day, only for very special Chinese individuals.

I bring up this episode in the hope of shedding some light on the undesirable state of social, economic, and political affairs that most, if not all, of my interlocutors experienced as hyphenated citizens of Malaysia. The signs and grandiosity of a previous event were the standard against which the present funeral for Tan Sri Ong Kee Hui was assessed - that he was not given the privilege of having a funeral procession through the streets of Kuching. From what I was witnessing that morning, it seemed as if everyone had become something of an “historian[s] with an axe to grind. ... [They were advancing] a claim, to levy praise and blame, and to justify or condemn the existing state of affairs” (Scott, 1985:178).

To use the term by anthropologist Paul Farmer (1992:21), their assessments were “positioned rhetoric” – “largely a rhetoric of complaint within a particular social and

³ For a review of these interpretations of the Hakka people in China and elsewhere, see the collection of essays in *Guest People: Hakka Identity in China and Abroad*, edited by Nicole Constable. Seattle:

political context.” It is the understanding of such “positioned rhetoric” that allows us to reflect and possibly understand what transpired and continues to affect the lives of a certain segment of the population in Sarawak. In other words, the comments on both funeral processions materialized out of a complex and complicated set of narratives that were affected by a certain history and of a certain collective memory.

Expanding on Freud’s theory of the memory of the individual, French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs claims that the individual’s capacity to remember and to recall is influenced and shaped by his/her social environment. In short, how we can remember our history is determined by the circumstances and conditions of our remembering, that is, the collective memory of any society at each epoch can only be reconstructed by the interplay of both its historical as well as its contemporaneous frame of reference (1980 [1950]).

Following Halbwachs’ work, Pierre Nora and several dozen French historians (1996 [1984]) come up with the notion of “sites of memory.” These are basically external props “that help incite our remembering. ... tangible reminders of that which no longer exists except *qua* memory” (7-8). Nora argues that the creation of “sites of memory” is a reaction of modern societies to an increasing and acceleration disappearance of memory and he identifies globalization, democratization and the advent of mass culture and the media as the main causes for this fundamental change in memory. Borrowing the term of “*loci memoriae*” from classical Mnemotechnique,⁴ Nora labels those places – artifacts.

University of Washington Press, 1996.

⁴ In this, Nora refers to Yates (1966), *The Art of Memory*. According to classical mnemotechnique the orator links up every idea of his speech to a distinct place or object. He then produces an inventory of these items, the “*loci memoriae*” that then helps him to recall his ideas.

monuments, rituals, and festivities – as “sites of memory” that are capable of stimulating acts of recollection.

Although Nora and his colleagues focus on the investigation of French history and society, one can discover similar trends and processes in other societies, including those in developing countries. After all, capitalism is to a greater or lesser extent affecting virtually all societies in the world. This process is already visible in societies in Sarawak. Dissolution of traditional structures, rapid uneven economic growth, new patterns of working relations, and global economic integration are eroding traditional modes of living memory. In their stead we are witnessing the creation of archives, museums, and monuments; in short, historical storehouses that are imbued with all sorts of commemorative, even sentimental, value.⁵

The lively conversations that transpired that morning at the coffee shop did not materialize out of a void but out of an historical and societal condition. Sites of memory that were functional (their recollection of the funeral procession of the Three Heroes), material, and symbolic (the monuments for the Three Heroes) affected the way they commented on the absence of a funeral procession for Tan Sri Ong through the streets of Kuching that morning. At the same time, it was the event that morning that provided the stimulus for their remembering of an earlier event, the funeral procession for the Three Heroes. As anthropologists Paul Antze and Michael Lambek remind us: “memories are never simply records of the past, but are interpretive reconstructions that bear the imprint of local narrative conventions, cultural assumptions, discursive formations and practices, and contexts of recall and commemoration” (1996: *vii*, quoted by Crapanzano 2003).

Narratives of the funeral procession and others I have collected during my fieldwork are useful for a reconstruction of Sarawak's histories during the past forty-odd years and offer possible interpretations of the contemporary conditions in Sarawak.

A brief description of Kuching

Sarawak is the largest state in Malaysia, located on the island of Borneo. It shares the island with another east Malaysian state of Sabah, Brunei, and the Indonesian province of Kalimantan. Sarawak, like other areas in Borneo during the early part of the 19th century, was in a state of constant battle among the different tribes. That was the period of the Brunei Sultanate. When James Brookes, then a young English officer with the East India Company, arrived in Borneo in 1839, the Sultan sought his help to put down the rebellion. As a result, Brookes was not only awarded the title of White Rajah but a sizable territory that was to become known as Sarawak. What is today called Kuching was this sizable territory. So, in fact, when one talks about Sarawak in the historical sense, one is really talking about Kuching. Looking at the size of Sarawak today will give one an idea of the relentless pressure that Brookes exerted on the Brunei Sultanate for more land and power (see Map 1 and 2).

The Brookes regime lasted about a hundred years. During this time the administrative and infrastructure of Sarawak flourished, especially Kuching, its administrative capital. Kuching has a long history as a trading center with settlers coming from far away. Over the centuries, Chinese, Malays, South Asians, Europeans, and others have joined with the many indigenous groups to create a vibrant and rich cultural heritage that is uniquely

⁵ But, as Pandey (2001) notes, this is not to suggest that face-to-face interactions are no longer important in producing collective memories in both capitalist centers and in the peripheries.

Sarawak. For all practical purposes, the Brookes regime ended when Japan invaded Sarawak in 1941. When Japan surrendered in 1945, Sarawak was placed under the Australian Military Administration and was ceded to Britain in 1946. Sarawakians were clearly divided on the cession, as witnessed by massive resignations of government officers and teachers and growing anti-cessionist movements. Eventually these anti-cession movements subsided and relative peace was once again restored, until the Cold War. The Cold War is the period within which my thesis focuses.

Most of the Sarawakians I have come to know are very proud of their history, Sarawak's ethnic diversity, and the abundance of natural resources. Sarawak is quite different from the rest of Malaysia in that not one identifiable ethnic or religious group makes up more than 30% of the population. The population of Kuching was around half a million in 1999. Chinese is the predominant group with Malays coming in second. There are more than twenty other indigenous groups consisting of the Ibans, Bidayus, Melanaus, Kenyahs, Kayans, Kelabits, and others. There is also a small population of Europeans.

During my fieldwork, one of my favorite pastimes was to walk along the riverfront of the Sarawak River. It cuts right into the heart of the town, dividing Kuching into its northern and southern hemispheres. The areas north of the river are predominantly Malay *kampongs* (villages) while the Chinese occupy the areas south of the river. This south side is where some of the oldest buildings in Kuching can be found, at Kuching's Chinatown. The most common form of transportation across the Sarawak River in Kuching is the *sampan*. These are small wooden long-boats, often with tin roofs. I spent many evenings by the riverfront watching and photographing these long and colorful sampans as they

crisscrossed the river. Riding on these sampans is a splendid way to catch the spectacular view of Kuching town, with 19th century Chinese shop houses along the Main Bazaar.⁶ the few colorful Taoist temples, the Brooke era buildings, the Mosque, and the waterfront park on the south side of the river. On the northern side of the river you have the attractive Fort Margherita (originally built to monitor the river against pirates), the Astana (palace), and the Malay *kampongs* with their gorgeous mountainous backdrop (see Map 3). I have fond memories of traveling on these sampans when I crisscrossed regularly from the bus station to the Malay kampongs across the river.

Lest that I forget about hospitality, let me add that many of my Sarawak friends call their state the “Land of Smiles” (the first being Laos, of course). People are friendly, whether you meet them on the streets, in coffee shops, food markets, at their homes, or, of course, at pubs. But although Kuching, or for that matter, Sarawak, is relatively peaceful today, it did have a history of violence during the 1960s and 1970s, especially in the rural areas of Sarawak. Moreover, what may seem relatively peaceful at the surface can be quite violent beneath, especially when they can be easily manipulated by insincere ethnic brokers who often gain their narrow support by invoking an appeal to ethnicity, religion, or some other marker of nationalism. An understanding of Sarawak’s past and current policies of managing its diverse populations can provide an understanding of the social and political analysis of governance and history of other so-called developing (or Third World) communities. It is to this violent history of Sarawak’s past I will now turn.

⁶ This is home to many souvenir and handicraft shops, antique shops, as well as businesses like grocery shops and old-fashioned coffee shops. At the western end of the Main Bazaar is where the SOC bus station is located, one of my primary field site.

The History of Communism

Many scholars have pointed out that official claims (and denials) by nationalist leaders and official historians lie at the heart of the “aestheticizing impulse” of the nation-state. In other words, one of the hallmarks of the state’s pedagogical discourse is its ability to camouflage violence and disorder underneath the construction of its imagined nationalized glorified pasts and intended destiny (Anderson, 1991; Daniel, 1996; Redfield, 1999). One of the purposes of this thesis is to debunk such stirring fables by concentrating on the violence imposed on a segment of the Chinese Hakkas in Sarawak who were portrayed as communists during the 1960s and 1970s. By focusing on the official claims of the history of communism in Sarawak, and, conversely, what it silenced, I seek to understand what it tells us about Malaysia’s claim to Sarawak as one of its states and about the procedures of nationhood, history, and particular forms of sociality. On the flip side, I also seek to understand why was it so hard for my interlocutors to talk about the politics of the 1960s and 1970s?

Communism in Malaysia is today considered a phenomenon of the past. Much of its history has been censored, treated as archival material. In fact, communism is now considered so harmless that the Malaysian government recently restored several underground tunnels and caves at the Malaysia-Thailand border as a museum project for tourist consumption – perhaps to remind its populations of the bleak living conditions of former communists who have since “returned to normal lives.” Seen in this manner, communism in Malaysia is portrayed as a momentary interruption, an aberration in the writing of the history of nation statehood. By this I mean that, even as communism was

addressed as part of the nation's history, it is seen as one of many national struggles towards an "assured" specified nationhood.

It is this assuredness that provided the framework for my investigation. If the history of communism is treated as an aberration in order to deny its eventfulness, have the events that transpired during the 1960s and 1970s been forgotten, erased from the consciousness of those who were affected by it? If so, does this erasure have to do with something else altogether? Here I am alluding to the sensitivity that might have contributed to such forgetting or even to amnesia. On another level, how has such unremembered events been ignored by the historian and by the nationalist project? However, if the events of the 1960s and 1970s are still in the memories and consciousness of a section of the population, how can we write the dimension of domination and disdain and its messiness back into the fore of history – in short, how can we recapture their eventfulness back into history?

It would be one thing to say that this thesis is about the stories told by a certain population of Hakkas who were dislocated and displaced as a consequence of a series of ordinances, bills, and operations carried out by the state government during the 1960s and 1970s. But the problem goes deeper. In my discussion of the twin problems of silence and indifference, this thesis also deals with the problem of stories that cannot be told by the victims whose lives were directly or indirectly immersed in communist revolts and government repression. These were silences for those who surely remember. Notably, besides touching on the struggles of a community to cope, to survive and to build anew – in essence, "a history of contending politics and contending subject positions" (Pandey,

2001: 18). I am also seeking to understand my interlocutors' evasions and refusals to articulate and engage with their recent histories.

Some of the questions I asked during my fieldwork were: How was families dislocated and divided and how did they cope with the trauma? Equally important, how did they rebuild their lives and what resources, both physical and mental, did they draw upon? Also, how did the experience of dislocation and trauma shape their lives and shape the "new villages"⁷ and towns they settled in? All of these are essential to our knowledge of the Cold War in Sarawak. Besides bringing to light the different stories of what communism was from different perspectives, I am also asking if these local events can be folded into the national history in certain kinds of ways at that particular juncture of dislocation in Sarawak's history. If nothing else, this does pose a legitimate challenge to the historian and nationalist claims (and denials).

In this respect, my approach is like many Marxists or Foucaultian approaches that stress historical forces and cultural discourses when speaking of the shaping of self and personhood of a specific community of individuals. But I wish to transcend these approaches by paying attention to the events and doings of everyday life, however interesting or mundane, that shaped the minds and personhoods of my interlocutors. In this respect, I am influenced by the work of scholars who stress everyday life and the specificity of place and time in the shaping of the self.⁸ To be sure, it is to the everyday life that allowed me to emphasize the dilemmas I experienced in talking to my interlocutors about their histories.

⁷ These are villages where many rural Chinese were relocated beginning in the early 1960s.

Throughout this thesis, I set the stories of my interlocutors' silences and indifference to their past histories as well as heavy politicization of ethnicity in Malaysia in relation to the double dichotomies of capitalism/communism and Chinese/Malay. I argue that most of my interlocutors' reluctance to discuss about their past had to do with the imminent danger of getting in trouble since communism is illegal in Malaysia. Furthermore, being Chinese already made one suspect, in particular, the danger of being labeled subversive. This, I argue, had a lot to do with the historical portrayal of the Chinese communities in Sarawak (as well as throughout Southeast Asia) and the continued politicization of ethnicity to this day.

If both elites and working class Chinese endorse political indifference, it is in part because they have agreed to work within the powerful framework of "Chineseness" that has been presented to them – not just from the state and other Orientalist discourse, but also from their own communities. The collaborative stability of an Orientalist commitment to "Chinese" wisdom and identity were used for mobilizations and self-identifications, as well as discipline. On the one hand, colonial prejudice homogenized and exoticized Chineseness; on the other hand, Chinese elites found such identification to their advantage. *Chung Yung*, a concept I discuss in Chapter Five, is an important feature of this collaboratively established identity whereby essentialized understandings of so-called Chinese wisdom and identity are instrumental in facilitating many diasporic business connections, the formation of cross-class patronage networks, and ultimately, the mixture of privilege and discrimination (cf. Yang, 1994; Yan, 1996; Kipnis, 1997).

⁸ As Robert Desjarlais (1997: 28) put it, we need to develop the habit of critically examining "the plurality of forces that occasion diverse ways of being at any moment within a society. ... How patterns of sensation, forms of agency, or a sense of personhood came about in specific social interactions."

The capitalism/communism dichotomy continues to have force today. The recent changes in the organization of work at one of the bus companies I studied made it difficult for workers to think of themselves in any way other than as self-interested individuals. They want their bonuses but were not sure when the company would fulfill their part of the bargain. Their union was all but dead. There was no point in even thinking about collective solidarity. It would seem that it was precisely because of such scenario, their everyday work processes that made the passions of organizing, or complaining about collective woes, less intelligible and less able to be told. Instead, what I found was how the "official" frames (both state ethnic discourse and their complaints of the changes at the workplace) became lodged in everyday practices of self-identification and story telling.

Much of my understanding of the history of communism in Sarawak comes from field research during the twelve months I spent in Kuching, from September 1999 to August 2000, looking into archival materials as well as working with a figuration of bus conductors and drivers, clothing retailers and others, all of whom were either former communists, communist sympathizers, or were labeled as one of the two by the federal and state governments. It is from this experience of fieldwork and archival research that I have come to understand that the incorporation of Sarawak into the Federated States of Malaysia came out of a complex set of politics: colonialism and its racist ideology, Orientalist discourse, elitist interests and manipulation, the ideological battle between so-called democracy and communism (Cold War politics), and the politics of decolonization.

I find the concept “figuration” useful to talk about my interlocutors. According to sociologist Norbert Elias, “... societies are nothing other than figurations of interdependent people” and individuals within a figuration can be amicable as well as hostile to one another (1983 [1969]: 18-161). What allows me to talk about these individuals as a “figuration of individuals” I have chosen for my fieldwork is their experience, whether directly or indirectly, of a specific history in Sarawak. Most of them are in some manner related to the various “new villages” that were set up by the government beginning in the mid 1960s. Either directly or indirectly, all of them experienced some form of dislocation and displacement because of the politics of the Cold War.

Since I am using the narratives of my interlocutors to tell a different history of the Cold War in Sarawak, I am emphasizing the performative discourse of language that treats utterances as speech acts (Austin, 1962). In the performative discourse of language, the emphasis is not on whether statements (or utterances) are facts of truth or falsity but, instead, on what such utterances accomplish or do not accomplish. It is not so much what was said or could be said but what was happening or taking effect between speaking bodies (my interlocutors and I) during the interlocution. In other words, the emphasis here is both on the sign (signifier/signified) as well as the utterance, a combination of what is actually verbalized and what is non-verbalized but assumed by all the interlocutors in conversation. As Bakhtin (1984 [1965]: 207) puts it, “The simultaneity of the said and unsaid is apparent in the effects of intonation (how a thing is said) on language (what is said).”

This is especially important when one considers how communism is still a sensitive topic in Malaysia. To state it differently, if I were to take their narratives as true/false statements of facts (as in the constative discourse of language), it would be impossible for me to ascertain if some of them were actually involved in communist activities during the Cold War or not, especially if one considers their reluctance to retell their experiences of this period. Throughout this thesis I will highlight the degrees of difficulty in my attempts to excavate stories of communism in Sarawak.

During my fieldwork, the state and federal governments were actively involved in promoting “Malaysian nationalism” as part of a strategic (if not rhetorical) response to their falling popularity in the aftermath of the 1997 region-wide financial and economic crisis. Moreover, the defamatory accusations surrounding the trial of the former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim continued to roil the established order. Malaysia was also witnessing, for the first time since independence, the emergence of a strong opposition coalition, *Reformasi* that consisted of political parties across ethnic lines. At the same time, in November 2000, UMNO⁹ suffered a shocking defeat in a local election within the state of Kedah, the Prime Minister’s own home state.

In the face of such disunity within the Malay population, UMNO, or more precisely, the Prime Minister launched a full-scale ideological campaign to regain lost ground. The term “common enemy” resurfaced time and time again within the nationalist language against both so-called internal and external threats. Disunity within the Malays was considered “UnMalay” and globalization and its new world order was neo-colonialism. What was apparent is that this “common enemy” rhetorical strategy was essentially a

⁹ United Malay National Organization, which is also the leading party within the ruling coalition.

rephrasing of an old vocabulary used throughout Southeast Asia during the Cold War.

Back then, the “common enemy” was communism.¹⁰

Within the context of the current political and economic atmosphere in Malaysia, my thesis also hopes to illuminate just how effective this heightened “nationalist discourse” was on the lives of my interlocutors, and by extension, the lives of many ordinary people in Sarawak during the period of my fieldwork.

My subject positioning

Like so many Chinese Malaysians of my generation who grew up in west Malaysia, I had been told repeatedly of the horrors of the Japanese Occupation - stories of killings, of hiding in the jungles, of tortures. Yet these stores came out of a different time. They meant little to me. I did not experience them directly. When it came to my awareness of the Cold War or of communism in Malaya, I had only read about them in the history textbooks. I knew there was a Malaya Communist Party and that its leader’s name was Chin Peng. I knew that he and his comrades were forced to retreat into the jungles of north Malaya. There were conflicting rumors about Chin Peng escaping to China. Others said he was still hiding in the jungles. Like I said, they were rumors. Nothing had been written about the lives of the communists who went “underground” during the Emergency in Malaya in the 1950s and I was not terribly concerned about them. Concerning communism during the Cold War in Borneo, I had never heard of it until I started my fieldwork in September 1999.

¹⁰ The rhetorical predisposition of the current regime would make an interesting study in the history of rhetoric and its links to imperialism and colonialism.

My curiosity and perception of the history of Malaysia began to change about five years ago. I began to ask what had brought me to New York City in the first place. Perhaps it was the glamour of the city but this had since worn thin for me. So, why was I still here and why did I have no inclination to go back to Malaysia? To answer these questions I will have to talk about my feelings about Malaysia or, to be more precise, my feelings toward the ethnic agenda that encouraged me to leave the country in the first place. And regarding this ethnic agenda, the New Economic Policy (NEP) comes to mind.

The NEP was launched in 1970 and affected most non-Malays economically, socially, and politically. Businesses were not only encouraged to have Malay partnerships but by the way government contracts were awarded, it became imperative to do so. Government business loans, national bonds, government scholarships, and all sorts of state and federal government benefits and incentives were reserved for the *Bumiputra*.¹¹ It was put forth as a very stringent affirmative action package to help the Malay populations. However, even studies that seem to argue that the NEP has led to a decline in poverty within the Malays nonetheless reveal that income inequality and wealth differences among the Malays have also increased substantially (Mehmet, 1986). Those who indicated that the NEP had promoted, at least psychologically, a sense of well-being among the Malay populations, as witnessed by the increase in Malay family sizes, note that with its "Money Politics," the NEP has created the "New Rich" through what they coined "rentier opportunities" (Gomez and Jomo, 1997).

¹¹ Literally "sons of the soil." Politically, it refers to the Malays, and only symbolically, to the indigenes.

I felt the impact of the NEP while I was in elementary school when all of the subjects I had been taught in English were changed to the Malay language to reflect the new policies. My two elder sisters could not assist me in my homework since they had learned those subjects in English. I also recall hearing constant laments of the NEP within the confines of our home or, sometimes, at coffee shops, albeit with caution since it was against the law to complain about the government. To be sure, I heard plenty of jokes about the deceptions of “Ali Baba” business arrangements, jokes that usually affirmed an interpersonal ethnic victory of the Chinese over the *Bumiputras*. According to anthropologist Donald Nonini (1997), an “*Ali Baba*” business arrangement is when a Chinese “*Baba*” invites a *Bumiputra* “*Ali*” to be a business partner and uses his/her name for government contracts. Quite often the “*Ali*” is a sleeping partner. But I have my reservations here. Jokes of these “ethnic victories” are only “beneficial” to certain Chinese Malaysians while the majority of the Chinese in Malaysia remain deprived of equal opportunities because of the NEP.

On the whole, the NEP discourage - perhaps frustrate is a better word - most non-Malay “citizens.” The sense of being Malaysian for non-Malays continues to be questioned by the State. Since the inception of the NEP, more and more non-Malay families are sending their children overseas for their education. Many send their children to New Zealand, Australia, Britain, and North America, hoping that this might be a way for their children to apply for permanent resident status there and, subsequently, sponsor their parents and siblings. Prior to 1970 this was a phenomenon reserved for the very rich. Nowadays, even parents from the lower middle class are trying everything possible to send their children overseas.

It is extremely difficult for non-Malays to be admitted into local universities, let alone top local universities or departments of their choice. It is quite common for local Chinese newspapers to carry headlines describing the frustration of parents of students with straight A's denied entry into local universities. Furthermore, it is commonly heard among non-Malay parents that the overall standard of education has deteriorated tremendously over the past thirty years - or they say that the standard was much higher when Malaya was still a British colony. Sour grapes aside, there are a lot of truths in their assertions.

In the mid-1990s, after more than thirty years of the NEP, the Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamed launched "Vision 2020" and, with it, many rhetorical gimmicks, in varied jargons: for example, OPP2, GMP, NDP, and so on. Ironically, the *Barisan Nasional*¹² continues to make political appeals along ethnic lines even as "Vision 2020" calls for a "Malaysian" context as opposed to NEP's "Bumiputra" context. Ethnic agenda continue to serve as smokescreens in order to obscure significant private accumulation by the politically well connected, especially with privatization and other policies associated with economic liberalization since the mid-1980s.

During my fieldwork I was bewildered by the setting up of government-sponsored independent research bodies to investigate the "brain-drain" phenomenon that was happening in Malaysia. I await their findings and, even more, what they intend to do about it. For those of us who are educated abroad, whether by choice or otherwise, many are not planning to return. For many of us, the conditions "back home" are unfavorable if not utterly restrictive. The question I ask is: Can non-Malays ever be Malaysian without

ethnic differences being politicized? In many ways, the NEP and the series of other policies force a switch in self-identity among most Malaysian Chinese, including myself, from the “we” (active agents) to the “us” (dominated subjectivity), denoting the passive subjectivity that seems to cloud our existence. In the same realm, one could also ask: how different is the history of the *bangsa Melayu* (the Malays), whose position is so natural that they are not even aware of their privilege as citizens (I acknowledge that I am generalizing here), whereas for non-Malays, the phrase “privileges of citizenship” sounds almost ironic?

Having been discriminated against by the policies of the NEP, the stories of the Japanese Occupation, the Emergency in Malaya, and the Cold War in Sarawak no longer seemed quite so remote to me. I began to realize that the past was not a closed chapter of history. Policies from the past, both within and without the nation, continued to divide us Malaysians. I could no longer pretend that these were histories that belonged to another time, to someone else. I began, like any other researcher, by looking at what had been written - about the Cold War in Sarawak and so on. Yet, as I read, I found myself becoming increasingly dissatisfied, sometimes even angry. If the materials I was reading were to be believed, the actions taken by the administration during the Cold War were justified (I will talk about these in Chapter Four). They are not.

Furthermore, I find no discussion on the existence or the degree of brutality that was imposed at the various “new villages” or at the various so-called “correction centres” during the Cold War. In essence, the stories of the thousands of people who lived through that experience seem to have an invisible status. But why should we be surprised, since

¹² The ruling coalition parties, with UMNO as the main component.

silences and omissions are an essential part of any ideological discourse (see Duby, 1985 [1974])? Or, as Gyanendra Pandey (2001) points out, history proceeds on the assumptions of a fixed subject – community, nation, state – and a predominantly pre-determined course of human development or transformation. Hegel’s position on this continues to be influential even today: “History is the charting of Freedom and Freedom is only possible in the State” (1953: 74-5 and *passim*, cited by Pandey, 2001). The violence that accompanies “progress” and “civilization” finds little place in the historical narratives, unless it is of the extreme – such as insurrection, uprising, revolution, or war. Usually the “less extreme” forms of violence are reduced to a set of grand statistics that find no expression of agency or contestations.

When I looked at what the larger political facts of this history seemed to be saying, and if I was reading them right, it would seem that those periods are now over and done with, a thing of the past. But I see a different reality. In contemporary Malaysia, the government is still using attribution of racial (or ethnic) divide and, lately, religious fundamentalism or terrorism as master narratives to explain all sorts of public disturbances. The old British administrators’ deployment of a “divide-and-rule” strategy is safeguarded as a family recipe in order to foster local divisions and thereby wield undisputed authority and maintain magisterial rule. Indeed, the racial riot of 1969 is constantly invoked not as a dark spot in Malaysia’s history but as a warning of the consequences (specifically for the Chinese population) of yet another communal riot.

Furthermore, the Internal Security Act (ISA) – a legacy from the colonial past most Malaysians would rather do without - is still very much alive. Over the years, the Malaysian government has consistently used the ISA for a wide range of purposes,

detaining thousands of ordinary citizens as well as opposition leaders, trade unionists, academicians, religious, social, environmental, and women's rights activists. As recently as the 1997 regional financial crisis, when the ruling regime's popularity was being challenged, ten people were arrested under the ISA for allegedly spreading Shiite teachings deemed detrimental to national security. In 1998 it was used against the former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and his political supporters. Since the attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, the government has justified the use of the ISA on counter-terrorism grounds. In fact, the Act can be used for just about anything the government considers a threat to national security.

Political parties in Malaysia are still divided along racial lines and the "brain-drain" phenomenon is on the rise. New Zealand, Australia, Britain, and the United States still seem to offer a much better refuge for middle and upper class Chinese Malaysians. I believe, therefore, that it is more crucial than ever to analyze the meaning of many omissions from the archives pertaining to the Cold War period in Sarawak. I believe that I would be committing a grave mistake by ignoring these omissions.

It is also by offering a critique of these omissions that I can give voice to those who could not afford to emigrate to other countries. I am referring to the fate of many Malaysian Chinese who were not educated abroad or who do not have huge bank accounts in acquiring Permanent Resident status in other countries. During the past twenty years, not only has there been an increase in the Malaysian labor force in neighboring countries like Singapore, Hong Kong, and Japan, but many Malaysian laborers have traveled even further, to the United States, England, and beyond. Many have ended up working long hours for low wages in restaurants, as nannies, or in

sweatshops. Does this phenomenon have anything to do with the general state of the economy in Malaysia or has it got to do with something else? I suspect it has a great deal to do with the bleak future most Chinese Malaysians fear they will face due to the lack of opportunities for hyphenated citizens. After all, "affirmative action," even though it is no longer called the NEP, is still the reality that affects social, economic, and political policies and subjectivity in Malaysia.

All of this seemed to me to indicate that the politics learned from the Cold War could not so easily be put away, that its personal meanings, its profound sense of rupture, and the differences it engendered or strengthened, still lived on in many people's lives. I began to realize that the Cold War was surely more than an ideological battle of political divide. It was also a division of properties, of assets and liabilities, or, as one of my interlocutors put it, "a division of feelings." It brought untold suffering, trauma, and violence to communities that had hitherto lived together within some kind of social contract, even amicably. It is true that many of my interlocutors managed to move on, developing a sense of indifference towards their community leaders, their employers, and the State. However, this feeling of indifference was the result of Cold War politics. In many aspects, it changed their lives forever.

Before I talk about the Chinese communities I worked with in Sarawak, an overview of the history of the "Overseas Chinese" of Southeast Asia is useful in developing an understanding of how the "Chinese" have been characterized in historical monographs, anthropological, sociological, political science, and geographical studies. Especially important is how these characterizations affected the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia during the Cold War and continue to do so in contemporary settings.

Overseas Chinese

Let me begin by stating that the term “Overseas Chinese” is an Orientalist construction and has a heavy “China-Centeredness” connotation. It implies sojourning and diaspora. This is inaccurate since an overwhelming number of Chinese living in Southeast Asia and elsewhere have no plans to “return.” It is vital to stress that the “cultures” of Chinese living outside of mainland China grew out of special social circumstances and are not a mere approximation of the culture of the “homeland.” Throughout this thesis, if I use the term “Overseas Chinese,” it is with this awareness and reservation.

The history of the “Overseas Chinese” in Southeast Asia can be described as having passed through a number of phases. The first was when the countries in Southeast Asia were still ruled by their native princes. During this period the Chinese settlements were small, though on occasion isolated groups of Chinese were able to maintain a local independence of some sort as in Palembang in the 15th century and in West Borneo during the late 18th and early 19th centuries (Purcell, 1965; Bassett, 1980; Chew, 1990).

The second phase was when the European powers had established their colonies, and the expansion of trade opportunities as well as the protection provided by the colonial governments encouraged Chinese to emigrate from south China to Southeast Asia in larger numbers (Purcell, 1965; Skinner, 1957, 1996, Wickberg, 1965) and the majority became poor wage laborers (Chew, 1990). To this day, millions of Chinese in Southeast Asia are street hawkers, trishaw drivers, shops assistants, squatters, and wage laborers of all sorts (Soon, 1962). In 1833, with the Act of Emancipation (the abolishment of slavery in Great Britain), cheap laborers for the colonies had to be sought from elsewhere. Indian

coolies (indentured laborers) were sought in South Asia in 1838 and around 1845 Chinese coolies from south China started to emigrate in masses to the Caribbean, the Americas, and Southeast Asia to take the place of the former slaves (Campbell, 1971; Breman, 1989).

As demand increased, heavy competition to ship coolies took place between syndicates consisting of brokers, junks, and European vessels using the cheapest ports and routes. Chinese coolie brokers in Singapore and Penang were working in cooperation with “eating-house” keepers in Swatow and Amoy, China, as well as in Hong Kong and Macao. Recruits were subject to fraudulent methods of recruitment and kidnapping, shortages of food and water, frequent riots and murder (Campbell, 1971). Similar to slavery, coolism produced communities of indentured laborers in Southeast Asia as well as in the Americas, largely in Central America and the Caribbean. Extremely racist descriptions of the “sub-human” aspect of coolies and their social structure in the colonies were common. Many coolies, concubines, female and male prostitutes became victims of infectious diseases, including a virulent form of syphilis (ibid). In essence, the coolie labor systems of the 19th and 20th centuries (1845-1911) were, largely, a veiled slave trade of indentured laborers replacing earlier slaves. Notwithstanding, there are many stories of coolies who became prosperous merchants over time (Chew, 1990), and such “rag-to-riches” stories are written by official historians, told in coffee shops, and re-told inside the homes of ordinary people. These are common and yet important stories for those who did not “make it,” providing inspiration in order to endure the harsh realities in the countries they had “adopted.” But for those Chinese who were doing well in the colonies, the colonial governments had another weapon. It was racialism.

Hannah Arendt (1951) has pointed out that there was a vital qualitative shift in European colonialism during the third quarters of the 19th century. Colonialism, which up to that period had been essentially a Crown project, became an enterprise for the new *bourgeoisie*. It was during this period that a full-scale racist (anti-Semitic) ideology was imported from Europe and imposed on the colonies in their effort to naturalize ethnic divisions and justify the necessity of colonial presence. Racialism in Southeast Asia, as many have pointed out, was imported from Europe (Campbell, 1971; Breman, 1989). Anti-Semitic texts became the bible for anti-Sino discourse. The Sinophobic spoke only of the rich Chinese and ignored the thousands who died in shipwrecks during the Middle Passage, in mines, on the rubber plantations, and in the overcrowded quarters of indentured coolies.

In addition, the characterization of Chinese communities in one country continued to affect the diverse Chinese communities in other places. Racialism in one country helped to create an armory of racialism in another as well as from one regime to another in the same country. For instance, as early as 1898, Warrington Smyth, the British Director of the Royal Department of Mines in Thailand, called the Chinese subjects in Thailand the “Jews of Siam.” Soon anti-Semitism and the “Yellow Peril” doctrines from Europe were circulating among the Thai elites, most of whom were Western educated. In 1914 King Wachirawut launched several Sinophobic [which continued for the duration of his reign], starting with a series of articles called “The Jews of the East” which equated the Chinese with the anti-Semite caricatures of the Jews (Skinner, 1957; Soon, 1962).

Under the Spanish Regime the Spaniards freely catalogued more than forty “evil cultural characteristics” of the Chinese communities in the Philippines. They were

restricted to *parian* (quarters) and had to pay higher taxes because it was assumed that the Chinese (as they were homogenized) had the highest earning power and assets. When the Philippines entered into the second period of Western tutelage, this time under America control, the Americans immediately applied the same Chinese Exclusion Act that existed within the United States (Wickberg, 1965). Treatments of more or less similar natures were found in Indonesia, the former South Vietnam, and Malaya (see Furnivall 1967 [1939] for Netherlands India; Mackie, 1976 and Coppel 1983 for Indonesia; Freedman, 1979 and Purcell, 1965 [1951] for Southeast Asia). The Chinese communities in Southeast Asia were variously depicted or utilized as “middlemen” between the Colonial governments and the native populations, and often became easy targets for various forms of “scapegoating.” As such, these Chinese communities in Southeast Asia were depicted as “uncivilized” and generally loathed, in anti-Semitic vocabularies.

During the first half of the 20th century, another development that had a tremendous impact on the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia was the rise in popularity and power of the Kuomintang (KMT). For one, the KMT’s attempt to form an *imperium in imperio* in each of the Southeast Asia countries not only provoked the Colonial governments but also aroused the resentments of the indigenous peoples among whom the Chinese were living, in part by stimulating an opposition to the growth of local nationalism (Fitzgerald, 1972). Among the local elites, most of whom were educated in Western countries and learning the meaning of modern nationalism, many came to appreciate the political dimensions of ethnocentrism and the doctrine of anti-Semitism (see Skinner, 1957; Soon, 1962; Purcell, 1965; Wickberg, 1965).

It is not incorrect to say that the “Overseas Chinese” in Southeast Asia were, from their earliest arrivals, considered to be outsiders, regardless of whether their arrivals were considered and treated as positive or negative phenomena (for similar arguments, see Heidhues, 1974; Freedman, 1979; Bassett, 1980; Milner, 1986). The concept of the “plural society” coined by J.S. Furnivall (1939) was to affect scholarship on the Chinese communities of Southeast Asia from the 1930 all the way through the 1970s. This scholarship was preoccupied mainly with concepts of assimilation and acculturation and how these affected the socio-legal distinction between alien and locals in the host countries — all within the framework of integration theory (see, for example, Furnivall, 1967 [1939]; Purcell, 1965 [1951]; Skinner, 1957; Lockard, 1973). In many countries, these studies even described how the Chinese tried to oust local people from purely indigenous economic pursuits. What preoccupies most of these analysts are issues concerning the allegedly unique “social cement” of Chinese communities, typically stressing elements of sworn brotherhoods, *kongsi*, *Kapitans*, and the role of the Chinese as the “middlemen minority” (for a similar argument, see Cushman and Wang, 1988). (*Kongsi* were Chinese business enterprises that were larger than small, family-run businesses. *Kapitan* was the term for a Chinese leader who was elected by the colonial government to collect tax revenues and manage the internal affairs of his particular Chinese community).

In addition, these studies were preoccupied with describing the manner in which Southeast Asian states imposed structural limitations on labor, land, and property rights on its Chinese populations (see T’ien, 1953; Lockard, 1973 for Sarawak; for similar accounts in other parts of Southeast Asia, see Furnivall, 1967 [1939]; Skinner, 1957;

Wickberg, 1965). In each country, the colonial administration passed various land ordinances that dictated the specific settlement patterns of the various Chinese “dialect” groups. These ordinances or, rather, restrictions, in turn, shaped the occupational, socioeconomic and political dispositions of the Chinese as they competed amongst themselves as well as with other ethnic groups for resources and/or to overcome the civil restrictions placed upon them.

Though speech group distinctions were often more important than ethnicity in defining their places in social and economic hierarchies, this literature often ignores the divisions and competitions within the Chinese communities. What is also puzzling in these studies is that the idea that heterogeneous societies existed in Southeast Asia prior to the European conquests seems to have escaped most of their imaginations. From my reading of these literatures, including articles from the *Sarawak Gazette* and other older English newspapers in Sarawak, I detected a sense of aloofness in the authors’ attitudes towards the countries or the communities they are describing.

Hannah Arendt (1951) made a convincing argument about aloofness on the part of British colonialists. She argued that the “British Commonwealth” was never a “Commonwealth of Nations” but was built on an assumption of one nation dispersed over the earth. British subjects believed that they had reached a comparatively high plane of civilization and therefore held positions of power by right of birth, regardless of personal achievement. They also saw it as their right to spread British law and culture; consequently, over the course of Empire, argued Arendt, there was a tremendous degree of aloofness exerted by the colonizers over its subjects. Such aloofness, Arendt continued, can be seen in Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, wherein a new body politic was

outlined to correspond to the new needs and interests of a new class (the *bourgeoisie*). Hobbes's insistence on power as the motion of all things human and divine sprang from the theoretically indisputable proposition that never-ending accumulation of property must be based on a never-ending accumulation of power. This determined the "progressive" ideology of late 19th-century Great Britain and foreshadowed the rise of imperialism.

I believe that it is with such aloofness that much of the literature surrounding issues of nationalism, modernity, development, and progress in Southeast Asia were written. Even at a later stage an array of ethnic studies, both in the former colonies as well as in the West, continued to display this aloofness. Time and again, "Chineseness" became essentialized or homogenized and transformed into an obstacle towards the formation of a common "Will" in the colonies - the materialization of the colonies as one Commonwealth of Great Britain. Hence, in their effort to examine the different countries and societies in Southeast Asia, even when divisions by speech groups were acknowledged, the primordial or tribal unity of "Chineseness" when faced with an "External" force was being accepted by the writers of these studies without question.

It will not be an overstatement to say that most of the scholarship on the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia can be seen as part of an effort to draw synthesis or antithesis with Weber's *Protestant Ethics* (see, for example, Geertz, 1963; Purcell, 1965; for a similar argument, see Wertheim, 1964; 1995). Depending on the scholars, the country, or the period studied, most of this scholarship is involved in debating the nature

of Chinese capitalism, whether to add salience or debunk Weber's thesis of pariah capitalism.

In the two decades prior to 1997, when most countries in Southeast Asia were not only registering high GNPs and economic prosperity but were competing with Western nations in the global economy, we see a proliferation of triumphalist literature that celebrates Chinese capitalism. Much like earlier scholarship that focused on community leaders and their achievements (see, for example, Ong, 1990; Chin, 1996) this literature concentrates on the industrialists, financiers, and conglomerates of Chinese "transnational" entrepreneurs. "Citizens without borders" and "holders of multiple passports" were terms used to describe Chinese entrepreneurs as they jet-setted between the many metropolises of capitalism (Ong, 1997). Once again, stereotyped "cultural values" of the family, *quanxi* (networking), and Confucianism are used to justify the successes behind "Overseas Chinese" capitalism (see, for example Goldberg, 1985; Berger and Hsiao, 1988; Yoshihara, 1988; Tai, 1989; Castells, 1996, Ong, 1997).

This literature seems to be arguing for the legitimation of Chinese capitalism as anything but a pariah. But by rendering them as Asians par excellence this literature disenfranchises other non-Chinese groups and negates the class alliances between Chinese entrepreneurs and local political leaders (Blanc, 1997). Somehow, "Chineseness" is transformed from an ethnic group into an upper-class elite category. This obscures a very essential feature of economic development in capitalism: the sweat of poor working-class Chinese who began their sojourning as one of the "unsuccessful" reserve armies in the world economy (Dirlik, 1993). Inadvertently, this literature also fosters an eternal

“China-centeredness” among “diasporic” populations, ignoring these populations’ concrete life trajectories in their respective countries (Mackie, 1996; Skinner, 1996).

In the aftermath of the 1997 regional financial crisis, will we see a counter-production of studies, only this time in support of Weber’s pariah capitalism thesis? As anthropologists we should be aware of some of the issues surrounding the usage of “culture” or “tradition.” Maurice Freedman (1975) once pointed out that culture is not a homogeneous substance with the power to spread like butter, but that is how Chinese culture seems to be presented in this literature: as a pattern of seepage, of slow over-spill. He points out that there is a tendency to look for order and concurrence once we use the word “culture,” blinding us to all its ambiguity, movement, and complexity; and, in the case of the triumphalist literature, focusing on a collection of stereotypical values and behaviors at the level of the nation-state that have been made exotic by the latest form of capitalism.

The above outline indicates some of the preoccupations among scholars of Southeast Asia with the question of China and the Chinese living in Southeast Asia. In the Western world, and to a limited extent inside Southeast Asia, the concept of China remains that of a giant with an expanding population that will someday overflow beyond its frontiers. This of course is not a recent fear but in the maintenance of Western policy it is both politically and economically desirable that the nations of Asia be constantly reminded of the danger in which they stand from an imminent Chinese expansion. And, to the extent that the reality of this threat is accepted, it sways the attitudes of the indigenous peoples of Southeast Asia toward the Chinese communities in their midst.

The Chinese communities of Sarawak since the Second World War

During the Second World War the Japanese Occupation had a tremendous effect on the Chinese communities throughout Southeast Asia. This was the period during which some of the most vicious crimes were committed, and the Chinese communities, as a whole, appear to have suffered more than any other group (Soon, 1962; Heidhues, 1974; 1996; Wang, 1981). One important element about this period that has received little treatment is the degree of collaboration between the Japanese military and the indigenous, the Malays, and to a degree, some Chinese merchants. According to the British-trained anthropologist T'ien Ju-Kang (1953) there were quite a substantial number of Chinese collaborators in Sarawak who were not only permitted to retain most of their property but also in many cases added to their possessions during the Japanese Occupation.

One of the consequences of the Japanese Occupation was that it increased the appeal of Chinese nationalism. With the Sino-Japanese conflict of the 1930s, there was an increase in China-focused nationalism in Southeast Asia and in the development of organizations with a political and quasi-political emphasis. In Malaya, the Anti-Fascist League was formed within this context. In Sarawak, collections for war funds, patriotic entertainment, and the boycotting of Japanese goods played an ever-increasing part in local Chinese life. At the same time, more than half of the Chinese population hid in the interior regions to avoid the Japanese soldiers. Those who remained behind to manage their shops did so at high risk of endangering their lives or of being harassed and forced to sell their stocks to the Japanese soldiers at very low prices. At the beginning of the Occupation, the Japanese military made an attempt to recruit Malay support, and rice was

distributed free to Malay families. Many Malay civil servants were requested to remain at their posts but this time serving the Japanese military. In many ways this exacerbated intra-group divisions, especially between the Chinese and the Malays (Liew, 1956).

The Japanese surrendered in 1945 and Sarawak was ceded to England in 1946. Cession marked a temporary halt of special privileges accorded to the Malays in education and government employment (Said, 1976); perhaps a reflection of European resentment toward alleged Malay collaboration with the Japanese. At the same time, the role of the Chinese *Kapitans* also diminished and, by the late 1950s, they became largely honorific. Crown colony status brought closer relations between British-ruled Malaya and Singapore, and large European and Chinese companies in these colonies began expanding their operations to Kuching. Most Chinese, especially among the business class, and indigenous leaders welcomed the new arrangement as they saw the transfer to crown colony status as promising to improve trade prospects and perhaps widen their role in local political affairs (*Tribune*, 1946; Chew, 1990).

By this time, another set of politics were unfolding, which would affect the various Chinese communities in different parts of the world. For thousands of less privileged Chinese in Sarawak and, for that matter, the other Chinese communities throughout Southeast Asia, the simultaneous relinquishment of control of their dependencies by the colonial powers and the triumph of communism in China became the two forces exerting the greatest influence on their fortunes. The growth of communism in China and the hostility between the Communist Party and the Kuomintang resulted in an increasingly divisive ideological conflict within and among these Chinese communities (Yen, 1976).

In Sarawak there was a correlation between speech group and political affiliation within the Chinese communities in Sarawak. The Kuomintang branch that was established in Kuching in 1946 had a strong Cantonese and Teochiu attachment. Many of these Cantonese and Teochius joined, hoping to use the Kuomintang affiliation in their commercial rivalry with the local Hokkiens. On the other hand, there was a nascent communist movement, especially with the Hakkas in the rural areas. It is also true that pro-Kuomintang sentiment (at least until the late 1940s) remained dominant at the elite level, whereas the lower classes were more towards the socialist movements (T'ien, 1953). As such, China-focused nationalism was therefore closely entwined with local speech group hostilities and class considerations.

The development of a strong Chinese-language press in Kuching also spurred interest in events in China and elsewhere during this period. Between 1945 and 1956, nine Chinese newspapers were established. Even though none of them had any long-term operation as the government at one point or another would ban them, usually within less than two years of operation, they usually reappeared under different names (Lim, 1970). From my reading of the *Sarawak Gazette* and various Chinese newspapers published at the same period, I observed that there was an increasing interest in "pan-dialect unity."¹⁴ This refers to the move to support the Mandarin language as the medium of instruction at Chinese Chung Hwa schools and de-emphasize speech group differences. Chung Hwa schools were private schools supported by individual Chinese philanthropists, Chinese associations, and any kind of financial contributions they could generate from the general

¹⁴ Although the term is misleading in a linguistic sense, "pan-dialect unity" denoted an emphasis on Mandarin as the unifying language for the different speech groups in Sarawak.

public, mostly the Chinese themselves who felt the need to sustain these schools if they wanted their children to have some form of Chinese education.

Theoretically, “pan-dialect unity” movement was supposed to bring unity to the Chinese communities in Sarawak but in practice it suffered from several problems revolving around traditional speech group and commercial rivalries. For instance, most of the committee members of the Chung Hwa schools were rich merchants with limited experience in education. Many of these merchants were English-educated and knew little or no Mandarin themselves. Usually, they served as committee members for philanthropical reasons. The Chung Hwa the teachers had no administrative authority, nor job security (see *The Sarawak Gazette*, 1959).

The Chung Hwa schools were unpopular with the government for two reasons: their dedication to instilling Chinese values at what the government considered was against [so-called] social integration, and the opportunities for political agitation which they presented. T'ien Ju-Kang notes that “it is not surprising that in their frustration [many of the teachers and students of these Chung Hwas] turn to China” (1951:88). Many graduates from these schools who left Kuching for advanced study in China were not allowed to return. At the same time, the government outlawed the first student society at a Chung Hwa school as a “subversive” organization (*Sarawak Tribune*, 1947:26). It was no coincidence that the first strike by students in Kuching occurred at these Chung Hwa schools in 1955, indicating the extent to which the Chinese schools had become politicized.

On another level, the rise of Mandarin education at the Chung Hwa schools had the effect of accentuating differences between the Chinese-educated and English-educated Chinese. Mandarin schooling provided a common ground that was inaccessible to the English-educated Chinese. Ironically, the growing split came at a time when English-medium schools, particularly the mission schools, were educating an ever-increasing numbers of Chinese students. Even as both the Anglican and Catholic schools in Sarawak began placing more emphasis on Chinese language training, in general they remained important agencies for "Westernization" (*Sarawak Tribune*, 1946 and 1953). The rise of Mandarin education and the simultaneous growth of English-medium schools were therefore highly significant developments, suggesting a situation in which the language of education and cultural orientation (Eastern versus Western) might eventually supplant speech groups as the major division among the Chinese, at least among the literates.

With the developments of the post-war period, there was an increased interest in women's rights. The Chung Hwa Women's Association was founded in 1947, calling for equality, friendship and the protection of the interests of Chinese women. Other developments included the formation of Chinese youth organizations such as sports and swimming clubs, as well as labor and trade unions that consisted of members from different speech groups. But these did not completely supplant the traditional organization of the Chinese community nor did they necessarily imply a total rejection of speech group particularism. Speech groups association remained dominant in economic and commercial life, as seen in rivalries in many different trade organizations. The old *towkays* (rich merchants or established shopkeepers) may have died or retired but the tradition was carried on by the younger *towkays*. Most of these were sons or occasionally

business partners of earlier leaders. Many of the younger *towkays* were mission-school educated. Despite the new developments in Sarawak, the Chinese communities were becoming more fragmented: old and new, Chinese- and English-educated, were vying for leadership.

During the post-war period, the potential for conflict became even stronger. The Malays were increasingly distrustful of Chinese nationalism, particularly since the traditional “favoritism” for the Malays was weakened under the new colonial administration. Furthermore, the Malays were concerned with the popularity of communism within the Chinese communities, especially since the ideology was interpreted as being anti-religion (Said, 1976). For their part, the Chinese leaders (mostly merchants) may have considered the increasingly well-organized Malay political organizations and Malay nationalism (ibid) as constituting a long-term threat to the favorable economic position to which they believed their numerical superiority throughout Sarawak entitled them.

In the Cold War context, beginning in the latter part of the 1950s, the situations I have described in Sarawak had tremendous implications for some Chinese communities in Sarawak. Sarawak became one of the ideological battlegrounds between so-called democracy and communism that further complicated existing racial politics. In 1963, when Sarawak became part of the Federated States of Malaysia, the Chinese communities throughout the rural areas of Sarawak were treated as a “Fifth Column” and by extension, socialist inclined. The Fifth Column was usually associated with or referred to China’s “Overseas Chinese” and with loyalties to China. Under a series of state and federal bills and ordinances, many rural Chinese were detained as communists or communist

sympathizers at various so-called correction centers, serving from a few to as many as fourteen years.

Many rural Chinese, predominantly Hakkas, were relocated to barbed-wire new villages, often with restrictions on their movements and abandonment of their vegetable and pepper gardens. Many households that had to abandon their gardens then had to take up wage-labor jobs at urban centers. It is not entirely clear whether the purpose of these correction centers was to save rural Chinese Sarawakians from the “scourge of communism,” as the government would have it, or to serve the purpose of sustaining the policy of racial domination. One of the purposes of this thesis is to demonstrate that the Cold War in Sarawak was fought not along one but at least two divides – the Malay/Chinese racial divide and the ideological divide of so-called democracy versus communism – that were superimposed one upon the other.

In order to understand the complexity of the situation during the Cold War in Sarawak, I performed archival research at the Sarawak Museum Archival Library and the Sarawak United Peoples’ Party library on materials touching on issues of communism during the 1960s and 1970s. In the archives I read and reviewed newspapers reports from 1946 to 1970 – English newspapers and translated versions of Chinese newspapers – most of which were banned at some point during the 1960s and 1970s, and the Malay editions of the *Sarawak Vanguard* and *Utusan Sarawak*. Some of the translated version of the Chinese newspapers I read included the *See Hua Press*, *Min Chong Pau*, *Sin Wen Pau*, *Sa Min Pau*, *Sarawak Times*, *The Vanguard*, *See Hua Daily News*, *Sarawak Express*, and *International Times*.

I also looked at other kinds of documents I felt were important for my work: reports of enquiry commissions, pamphlets, journals, and, of course, books. Of these, the *Sarawak Gazette* is the most comprehensive but contains a colonialist bias, especially during the Brookes regime and throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Taken “archeologically,” most of the written history in the archives reveals layered strata of colonial and postcolonial views of Sarawak. Many of the recent attempts at writing Sarawak histories seem to me as if they were creating new layers that mirror earlier reports (see, for example, Fidler, 1972; Lockard, 1973; Ong, 1990). However, within their recurring images and for all their limitations, there is a certain stability in their interpretations of Sarawak and of what has been systematically omitted. It is in such stability and systematic omissions that a different Sarawak can be glimpsed - the histories from a non-elite perspectives.

In addition to archival research, I worked with a figuration of individuals who were either former communists or falsely labeled as communists by the state. My purpose is to provide accounts of how certain individuals became communists or communist sympathizers (whether real or labeled) and also to ascertain what they interpreted as communism. Some of these individuals had escaped from the new villages; quite a substantial number of them ended up working as bus conductors and drivers in Kuching from the first half of the 1960s. In choosing which bus conductors and drivers to work with I made a conscious effort to include individuals from different ethnic groups to see if there were indeed communist activities, or representations of communist members, among the non-Chinese. I even considered them as suitable candidates if someone in their family or one of their neighbors fell into the above categories. Obviously, I also

befriended others who fell outside of these categories simply because they had things to say and I enjoyed their gossip. Besides the bus conductors and drivers, I also included many who were now living marginally as small retail operators at hawker centers and others. Consequently, the selection of people I worked with was both random and by design.

From the archives and fieldwork, I have reconstructed many different voices of the Cold War and the current context: official, unofficial, and my own. These include the voices of people telling their stories, their reluctance to tell their stories, the voices through which they speak of their experiences, the experiences of others they know, those experiences that are evident in the divisive discourses, and, woven through it all, my own voice - reading, speaking, questioning, and hazarding explanations. Together, these have made for a narrative in which my presence, as author, as a friend and acquaintance of my interlocutors, as mediator and interpreter, and even as adversary, is quite visible. I make no apologies for this. I have always had a deep suspicion of histories that are written as if the author were but a mere vehicle, histories that, to paraphrase Roland Barthes (1972), seem to write themselves as if the absence of the "I" in such histories helped to achieve the illusion of objectivity, to establish factuality.

Throughout this thesis my subject positioning and biases will become obvious. While going through the fieldwork, I felt involved in it intensely, emotionally, and politically. One might even say that the "histories" I am writing are an attempt to reconcile the needs of academia with the demands of conscience. It is also a response to the needs of the moment. As Pandey (2001) points out, decolonization or the independence of "new nations" has, in many ways, roused our consciousness about the rape of colonization.

Independence has, in most cases, been succeeded by another kind of internal colonization. One might argue that they are essentially the same kind of violence, with similar or worse effects on their subjects: the continued adverse effect on ethnic minorities, communities that had abundant reserves of memory but little in the way of history. As such, this thesis is an attempt to give history to the communities that have been negated.

In line with some of the agendas of the “new historians,” I am more concerned with effects than causes, less interested in the actions than in the traces left behind by those actions, less interested in “what actually happened” than in the influence on successive presents. To quote Pierre Nora, “In short, a rememoration – a history that is interested in memory not as remembrance but as the overall structure of the past within the present: history of the second degree” (1996: xxiv). On another level, I seek to identify both the local contexts as well as the conceptual frameworks that construct “Chineseness” historically and in the contemporary setting. This can provide invaluable insights into how being “Chinese” has come to be an inescapable, if perhaps incoherent social ascription in contrast with the stereotyped conception of Overseas Chinese as merely a collection of merchants, community leaders, or “middlemen minorities” (Coppel, 1983).

By way of concluding

The above is a general overview of the various scholarships on the Chinese living in Southeast Asia. The particular is harder to discover: it exists privately in the stories told and retold inside many households. Even though the episodes of dislocation and displacement during the Cold War in Sarawak cannot be compared to those of the Jewish

Holocaust, the “extremest of extreme” events as it has been characterized,¹⁵ some of the scholarships written on the Holocaust are helpful for providing both questions on and understandings of the notions of violence, memory, history, and state power. James Young, writing on Holocaust memories and testimonies, poses the question: How can we know the Holocaust except through the many ways in which it is handed down to us? (1990). Young answers by suggesting that, as much as through its “history,” we know the Holocaust through its literary, fictional, historical, and political representations, and through its personal, testimonial representations. Not only are the “facts” of any event important but how people remember those facts and how they represent them are equally important.

The question might be extended to the Cold War in Sarawak. Memories of the violence during the 1960s and 1970s in Sarawak are very much alive among a certain population that came from the rural areas within the former First, Second, and Third Divisions of Sarawak, albeit they were very reluctant to talk about the period. We can know the event through the ways in which it has been handed down to us: through individual and collective memories, through the divisions it has unleashed, and through the stories it has produced. Their children accepted and internalized, by and large, the stories they had been hearing, especially when they heard and learned them from those who went through the violent experiences. This collection of narratives, individual and collective, familiar and historical, is what makes up part of the reality, the eventfulness of the Cold War. They are part of the history of the event.

¹⁵ See Dan Diner, 1992: 128.

I am aware that the employment of narratives for a reconstruction of history is a deeply contested method in historical discourse as well as in ethnography (Crapanzano, 1984). There is no way of knowing if the stories people choose to tell are “true” or not, nor of knowing what they choose to suppress. How can we know that, four or five decades after the period, the stories are not rehearsed performances, or that they are told differently for different people, perhaps tailored to suit what the story tellers think the researcher wishes to hear? Also, working with memory is never simple or unproblematic. Memory is never pure, unmediated, or stable. So much depends on who remembers, when, with whom, to whom, why and how. Recall is often, if not always, filtered through memories of earlier memories and by what and how others have told them. The “past that was” and the past as chronicled are continually confused, and memories are often selectively used and abused (Bakhtin, 1984; Lowenthal, 1996). In essence, new experiences and revised expectations continually reshape them. Recall also reveals a past that is all along being altered to conform to present expectations. In changing the “records” of former times, we change ourselves as well, all of which alters our own identity (Lowenthal, 1985). This essentially poses an epistemological question: How should we consider feelings, memories, and discontinuity in the concept of history?

In excavating the past, we also need to address the issue of forgetting or the reluctance to recall. What, my interlocutors would ask me, is the use of remembering, or excavating memories they have put behind them; essentially, they are saying what is past is past. Many studies on history, memory, and violence have pointed out that often there is the need to forget about the past in order to continue to live. For example, in Robert Goodfellow’s (1999:2) discussion of the Indonesian killings of 1965-66, he notes, “*Sing*

wis, ya wis” (“What is past is past”), which, when enunciated in a soft tone of the high Javanese language (*kromo*) means, “What is past is past. All is forgotten and forgiven.” However, when it is enunciated using the harsher tones of lower Javanese (*ngoko*) means “Watch yourself; I will act swiftly and harshly.”

During my fieldwork, the reluctance to respond to my queries was not only common but was the norm. How does one interpret this reluctance, this silence? There is also the moral question of whether the silence should or could be “penetrated” in order to give voice to it. Or, perhaps it is better to move on, to search for another interlocutor, even to leave the stories untold. After all, how can the researcher face up with the inherent danger if his/her protagonists are still alive? The breaking of silences has to be done with a great level of sensitivity to what can be pursued and what is better left as “silences.” Each time I was faced with such a question, I came up with a question of my own. Why, I wondered, were some of these people so reluctant to remember this experience? Surely this reluctance in itself pointed to something. Has it to do with the horrific nature of events? Or, has it got to do, at least for some of my interlocutors, with their own complicity in this history? And if this is so, surely that should tell us something about why people did not wish to remember except perhaps within their families, within the confines of their homes?

In addition, we need to address the notion of intersubjectivity, translation, and what Crapanzano (1980) refers to as double editing, the mediated encounters that take place between the researchers and his or her interlocutors and subsequently during the literary (re)encounter. Indeed, in *Tuhami* (ibid), the book is more concerned with Crapanzano’s musings upon Tuhami and his relationship with him than with Tuhami’s own words.

Furthermore, in transferring words to text, so much is lost: the particular inflection, certain feelings, the body language, the hesitation over certain thoughts and phrases, all of which often tells a different story from what was said. Indeed, so much is lost in the conscious “shaping” of the conversation by the researcher, who is usually in a situation of power vis-à-vis his or her interlocutors.

In writing of the ethnographic enterprise in general, Rabinov (1977) notes that the data we collect are always already “doubly mediated, first by our own presence and then by the second order reflection we demand from our informants” (119). Equally important is that we recognize how our interlocutors perceive us. Dumont asks, in *The Headman and I* (1978), “Who or what was I for Panare?” and notes the importance of understanding “how they gaze at me” (1978:3). There is a call here to recognize the agency of our interlocutors, who, like the researchers, are actively involved in constructing the dialogues of the field encounters.

Having said this, I should underscore that the way people choose to remember or forget an event or a history is at least as important as what one might call the “facts” of that history. But facts too are interpretations, as remembered, recorded, or performed by one individual or another. All told, my analytic process is interpretive and inferential since it is quite impossible to really know the “lived experience” of cultural subjects. I can only talk with them and live for a time with them, and so must rely on my reading into the dialogic “telling” of their lives and into their words for traces of meaning along with other non-verbal actions – bodily gestures, silences, jokes, laughter – all of which are “riddled with cultural assumptions, political tensions, pragmatic moves, rhetorical pitches, and subjective vicissitudes” (Desjarlais, 1997:10).

Chapter Two: Traveling Lenses

The idea of utilizing bus conductors and drivers to look at certain part of the social history of Sarawak first occurred to me when I was traveling from Kuching to Kampong Pueh, Semantan, back in 1996. During the summer of 1996, I spent five months at a longhouse in Kampong Pueh, Sematan (Sarawak), researching property issues, particularly land and fruit tree tenure. I spend another four months in 1998 in the same area researching labor issues and the conceptualization of national boundaries by the Indonesian laborers and the villagers who hired them. During these fieldtrips, whenever I had to travel by bus from Kampong Pueh to the townships of Bau, Lundu, or Semantan, I was always fascinated with the level of interaction between the bus conductors and drivers with their passengers. In addition to being a form of public transportation, the bus provided other transactions or facilities. Often bags or boxes of groceries, newspapers, livestock (chicken, ducks, etc.), and sometimes even articles of furniture were brought onto the bus to be delivered to their destinations or dropped off at pathways leading to houses or villages scattered along the Kuching/Lundu/Sematan route.

I was also amazed with how the bus conductor and driver could remember where these items had to be dropped off, since there were not any notes or instructions on them. When they had reached their respective destinations, sometimes with a few honks, receiving parties would run out of their houses or villages to retrieve the items. Sometimes they were already there waiting for the bus, convincing me that these transactions were not only prearranged, but routine. The passengers, including myself, would help to unload the items through the entrance/exit stairs or through the windows. There was a certain casualness about it that seemed very interesting to me.

After living a few months at Kampong Pueh in 1996, I realized that the bus conductor and driver were also used as lottery agents (or runners) for the various village inhabitants since the bus traveled daily to the closest lottery outlet - at Lundu, some eighteen miles away. Twice a week villagers would hand cash folded inside pieces of papers with numbers written on them to the bus conductor or the driver. During the few times when I was on the bus to Lundu, I would see children running to the bus as it slowed down and handing folded pieces of paper to the outstretched arm of the bus conductor.

Surely there were some economic exchanges for the services provided, but I believe it also had something to do with social ties. When someone won the lottery, there might be some financial rewards for the bus conductor and driver, but usually it was more of an invitation to feast at the home of the lucky winner than anything else. The line between commerce and sociability was not clearly drawn here. I remembered how their disregard or lack of regard for monetary or material rewards would challenge some of my presumptions about the generality of "money" and an idea of reciprocity that was somehow always clouded with materialist preconceptions.

In relation to the anthropological literature, what I was witnessing was an illustration of the work done in *Money and the Morality of Exchange*, edited by Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch (1989). Parry and Bloch call for a consideration of cultural specificity of the meanings of "money" in order to heighten our sensitivities toward the particularity of economic and social transactions peculiar in each setting, enabling us to talk about our subjects' understanding of, and temporal orientation, toward money – in essence, their distinct "regimes of values," to borrow a phrase from Arjun Appadurai (1986: 15).

Since the bus conductor and driver had been working on the same job and often on the same route for many years, it is conceivable that they were extremely familiar with the people from the various communities that traveled on their bus. I saw the bus conductor and driver at festivals of different villages, and eventually we got to know each other. Over time I consulted them for information pertaining to this or that household for my land and fruit tree tenure research. It was also at this time that I read Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). In many ways the bus and its travel along its route would resemble the "long poems of walking" that de Certeau identified in his musings on big city life (91-102); only in this case it was in the countryside. In other words, I could just as easily contemplate these "long poems of walking" through the countryside as experiences of journeying, sharing, suspense, happiness, identification, altruism, and so on, that the bus conductor and driver had with the residents of the different villages.

It was from witnessing the degree of familiarity between the bus conductor and driver with the people of the villages that gave me the idea of utilizing them to look into the social histories of the Cold War in Sarawak. As it turned out, many bus conductors and drivers not only worked for the same bus companies, but they had also been working on the same routes for more than thirty or forty years. It is not too difficult to imagine the level of familiarity these bus conductors and drivers had developed with the area as well as with their passengers over the years. Also, many bus conductors and drivers were themselves affected by the politics of displacement and dislocation of the Alliance government in Sarawak during that period. As such, I am not only using these bus

conductors and drivers as portable lenses to look into the social history of Sarawak during the Cold War, but also to examine their personal experiences¹ during that period.

For this chapter I will use the bus conductors and drivers at the Sarawak Omnibus Company (SOC) as my primary source of information. I will also include the narratives of employees from other bus companies for several reasons. First of all, some of them were former SOC employees and they offered negative, positive, or different perspectives of their former employers and colleagues. Secondly, even though some of them had never worked for the SOC, their complaints, admiration, and even gossip about the SOC and the overall bus industry offered added insights into the complexities of the situation. The narratives I have compiled from working with these bus conductors and drivers not only provide a glimpse into their past but also touch on the current conditions that were affecting their daily lives within the structural hierarchies of the workplace that were to a certain extent connected to the larger political economy.

There are important reasons why I have chosen the SOC as one of the primary focuses of my thesis. From what I have gathered from my working relationship with SOC employees, management, and others,² the SOC was the first, and one of the biggest, bus companies in Sarawak. It was also uniquely connected with the Sarawak United Peoples' Party (SUPP), the most active opposition political party during the 1960s. In addition, the majority of its earlier employees were rural Hakkas who "escaped" from the many "barbed-wired villages," something I shall talk about in Chapter Four. SOC's former General Manager, Hong Hee

¹ Experience here is both a verb, as in experiencing something, as well as a noun, as something one has. This double-barred connotation noted by William James (1912) for experience included both what men did and suffered as well as how they acted or were acted upon, cited by Desjarlais (1997:12). Needless to say, there was not a single and finite interpretation of the experiences of my interlocutors.

² Others here would refer to some of the owners, employees, and the regular customers of the various shops located by the SOC main bus station in Kuching. I also considered a few Malay residents across the river

Siaw was one of the most radical and outspoken leaders of the former SUPP, and he had a good deal of influence over SOC policies and its employees. Finally, in 1998 the management of the SOC was reorganized and in mid-1999 a *Bumiputra* company acquired thirty percent of the company. These developments had brought about a change in the company's philosophy and are affecting the employees' opinion of their company. I use the term "working relations" to denote my interactions with my interlocutors. It has several connotations. It could be an ongoing working relation, sometimes even a confidential one. It could be sporadic conversations or only greetings. It also stresses the unequal footing between the researcher and his/her interlocutors.³

From the very beginning of my fieldwork, I was curious as to why so many rural Hakkas from the barbed-wired new villages ended up working at the SOC. Was it because both the SOC and these rural Hakkas shared some similar agendas and that perhaps there was a synthesis between the socialist agenda of the SOC and the political motivations of these rural Hakkas? Or was it because they needed to find work at urban centers after they had abandoned their vegetable and pepper gardens? Most likely there was a bit of both. Also, the SOC was expanding during the 1960s and needed more drivers and conductors.

As I was reading through my field notes, I noticed an interesting interconnection between dislocation and displacement, on the one hand, and movement and controls, on the other. Being dislocated or uprooted and resettled into new villages, escaping into urban centers, working as bus driver or bus conductor – all these involved movements

from the bus station in this category since they had been traveling to and from the bus station for most of their lives.

³ See Crapanzano (1980) on the discussion of the unequal relationship between the researcher and his/her interlocutors.

that could be seen as possible reaction against being controlled. For instance, some bus conductors and drivers told me the attraction of working at the SOC lay with its “outstation” routes, that is, the opportunities to travel from Kuching to the outer towns and villages, including their places of origin. Working on these “out-station” routes allowed them to frequent their villages or at least to be in their vicinity on a daily basis. They said that it made them feel as if they had never left. Psychologically, it meant that they were able to ignore, or at least lessen the displacement and dislocation imposed on them by the government.

But being a bus driver or bus conductor were not the only jobs available for these rural residents when they first arrived in Kuching. The massive urban migration of these villagers during the 1960s and 1970s provided workers for many urban industries, from construction laborers, mechanics to seamstress, nannies and maids to cooks, as well as bus conductors and drivers. Those who ended up working at the SOC were mostly recommended by their siblings or by fellow villagers who were already working there. A bus driver, Keong Wen, once told me that personal connections got him a job working for the SOC, at the same time saying, “I should have followed my brother’s footsteps into construction. He now owns two shop lots at Serian. He is his own boss. Look at me. When I started at the SOC, at first I thought I would still be at Serian, close to my family, but ... there is no future as a bus driver. I am not even sure if I can afford to buy new clothing for my children and Chinese New Year is coming up.”

Others have mentioned that they joined the SOC because of job security - at least that was what I was told by a few bus drivers. Since it was a big company, they felt that as long as they performed their responsibilities, they would not be out of a job. During my

fieldwork, both the SOC and KTC were constantly advertising for bus driver positions but were getting few applicants. The usual remarks I heard from senior bus drivers was that young people were better off seeking other job opportunities instead of the long and hectic hours of a bus conductor or driver. The salaries were also relatively lower than other blue-collar jobs and there were almost no fringe benefits.

I suspected that a substantial number of them participated, either directly or indirectly, in leftist revolutionary activities. Of the total of close to 800 employees at the SOC during the 1960s, the overwhelming majority of them were rural Hakkas. Some of my interlocutors mentioned that they had joined the SOC precisely because of such leftist connections. It was their way to get involved with an organization that they believed was engaged in promoting social change, and an organization, by way of its connection with SUPP, that was opposing a government that had implemented a series of laws relocating them into new villages.

I was told that some employees had distributed communist literature, mainly one-page leaflets, while on the job during the 1960s and early 1970s. Others collected donations from the general public as well as from their own colleagues as financial contributions to the various “night classes” that were taking place at different unions or associations. Some night classes were used to teach the Mandarin language but others were in fact social events where socialism was discussed. In a sense, these were quite similar to “*Hsueh Hsih*” cells or collectives of the communist organizations.

But I should also state that during my working relations with these employees, denials of being involved in activities that might be interpreted as communist were common. Many vowed that although they had nothing to do with such activities, because of their

employment at the SOC they were inevitably labeled as socialists, if not communists. There were also instances when some of them would hint or confide to me that they were involved in activities that could be termed subversive, but later would deny them. For instance, a female bus conductor once told me she was sent by her cell leader to pick up some Marxist literature at a certain jetty. Unfortunately our conversation ended as she rushed off to her bus that had to leave the station. I thought that I could catch up with her on another occasion, but I was wrong. When I saw her the day after she refused to talk with me and avoided me for the rest of my fieldwork. She was even angry with me on a several occasions for trying to pursue a conversation. After a while, perhaps because I was feeling rather uncomfortable as well, I reacted by avoiding her myself.

I had another encounter with two Chinese bus drivers very early on during my fieldwork. This was immediately after my second visit with their former General Manager, Hong Hee Siaw. I had the feeling then these two bus drivers must have known that I had just seen their former General Manager, because as soon as I walked into the canteen, the two of them asked me to sit with them and began treating me as if we were old friends, putting their arms over my shoulders and ordering coffee for me. Immediately they started to ask me where I came from and how long I planned to stay in Kuching. Even before I could talk about my research, they were telling me that there had been many communists in Sarawak in the past. They also confided to me that they often came across communists at the outskirts of Serian as they traveled on their daily routes (the Kuching/Serian route). I recall feeling very pleased, hoping all my interlocutors would be this accommodating and helpful and thinking I would be gathering plenty of accounts of the Cold War during the rest of my fieldwork. Unfortunately, since I had

already made an appointment to see someone else at the SOC bus station next to the river. I had to excuse myself - but not before assuring them that we had to meet again, possibly within the next few days.

But that was not meant to be. As it turned out, such friendly and accommodating responses when it came to queries about communism were extremely rare throughout my fieldwork. When I approached the same bus drivers two weeks later at the same canteen, I was rudely awakened by how unresponsive and indifferent they had become. Their uncomfortable smiles made them appear a little apprehensive about my presence. This time around they told me they knew nothing about communism in Sarawak. "But what about the things you told me two weeks ago?" I was feeling shocked, that it couldn't be true. I thought they were joking. I noticed a slight twitching on the face of one of them when he replied: "We were joking with you then. We heard about your project ... something about communism." At that instant, the other bus driver started to laugh at his colleague's response, which was beginning to irritate me, and he added: "We just thought it was funny. No, we have nothing to tell you. We had never walked that path,"⁴ speaking flatly without any attempt to explain or elaborate further.

At that point, I was sure they knew I was annoyed. I looked at one of them but he turned away. I asked the other bus driver why they thought my project was funny, but he remained quiet. I realized that confronting them would not be fruitful, and would even be rude on my part. I tried to assure them that any information they were willing to provide would be kept in utmost secrecy. I even showed them my "Human Subject Interview Consent" forms as well as the letters I had obtained from their former General Manager

⁴ "Walk that path." was a euphemism for stating that one belongs to a certain organization or adhere to a certain ideology.

that authorized me to interview senior SOC employees. They read Hong's letters with enthusiasm but repeated they could not assist me since they had never "walked that path." I realized there was nothing I could do at that moment but hope they would change their mind on another occasion. I regretted I had not taken advantage of our earlier meeting when they had been so friendly and accommodating. It took me a few weeks to confirm that the drivers' change of attitudes had to do with the directives from the current management, and it ultimately became incredibly difficult for me to get any bus conductors and drivers to talk about anything, let alone about things concerning the Cold War.

I bring up the above episodes to illustrate how my interaction with my interlocutors has to be analyzed in reference to the concrete context, situations or circumstances that took place during my fieldwork. The sudden change of reception I experienced from some of my interlocutors illustrates the dynamics that transpired during my fieldwork and inevitably affected the level of interaction between my interlocutors and I. Still, there were many other factors that affected my relationship with them - factors that were more nuanced or hidden from me, things that were more difficult to uncover, let alone analyze. But it is through such retelling and their refutation of it, even their unwillingness to recall that offers a possible glimpse into what actually occurred and was experienced by my interlocutors.

Simply put, if I were to take their narratives as true/false statements of fact (in the constative discourse of language), it would be impossible for me to state if some of them were actually involved in communist activities during the Cold War or not. My emphasis is not whether my interlocutors' statements (or utterances) were true or false, but instead

what their utterances accomplished or did not accomplish (Austin, 1962). Unlike Saussure's structural linguistics or the Chomskyan transformational grammar that rejects or often ignores the question of reference to linguistic reality, the theory of the performative insists that the referent is central to that linguistic reality. This is what Austin (1962) meant when he insists that we need to analyze speech acts "with reference to the context of the interlocution, to the concrete and conventional discursive situation in which speech acquires, above and beyond its meaning" (noted by Felman, 1983).

In a sense, when I try to deconstruct the histories of the Cold War through the narratives of my interlocutors, I am not only concerned with the total speech act through which a speaker actualizes his/her vocabulary of a certain language in a particular situation of exchange, but also in situating the very act of enunciations within the network of social practices, the speakers' past and current situations at SOC, the place where the conversations took place (on the bus, at the Malay *warong*, at other coffee shops, at their home, at the bus station office, etc.), who was present with the interlocutors at the time, whether any significant or insignificant event had happened prior to or was happening during our interlocution, snippets of different, if not conflicting, accounts of from different interlocutors that allowed me to comprehend certain stories; and so on. Obviously, I could not forget my own presence that was affecting the dialogic encounters. Each of these dialogic conversations established a present relative to a time-and-place, and posited a series of contracts with the others (other interlocutors as well as the researcher) in a network of places and relations.

Even though I am more inclined towards language as performative discourse, my belief is not doctrinaire. After all, how could it be possible that a researcher attempting to

deconstruct the histories of any community would be able to fully grasp the totality of all the contexts, situations, or circumstances from all the dialogical conversations that took place during fieldwork? This thesis therefore, should be read as an interpretation of the stories I have collected that has gone through different levels of mediation both during the fieldwork encounter as well as in the process of writing it.

The Sarawak Omnibus Company (SOC)

For the purpose of this chapter my focus is on the period from the initial formation of the company in 1951, all through the 1950s, 1960s, and until the management reorganization in 1998. My first understanding of SOC history was obtained from two retired managers, Mr. Poh Shui Kim and Mr. Lee Shee Kang. Many SOC employees informed me I could learn a lot from them, not just about the SOC but about the overall history of Sarawak. There were other old timers, but none of them were as accommodating as Poh and Lee. "Old timers" here refers to the original partners that helped set up the company, as well as employees who had worked at SOC for more than thirty or forty years, including those who had retired. Obviously, my working relations with other SOC employees as well as others added to my knowledge of the history of the company. Here is a description of my initial meeting with Poh and Lee very early on during my fieldwork, in late November of 1999.

Poh had retired a few months before our first meeting. He was in his mid-seventies. He had hurt his leg and was limping slightly when we met. Lee, a former Assistant General Manager, had retired several years before we met and was in his early eighties.⁵ Even though they were both retirees, they remained active shareholders of the company

⁵ In order to further hide the true identities of my interlocutors, if that is even possible, I will not disclose their exact age.

and they were constantly in touch with the current management and employees. Little of what went on at the SOC was beyond their knowledge.

My first meeting with both of them was set up at Poh's house, some ten miles from Kuching along the Kuching/Serian Road. This is one of the many places on the outskirts of Kuching that were considered "communist influenced" during the 1960s and 1970s. Poh was waiting for us on the front porch of a rather simple wooden house when we arrived that Monday morning. He immediately invited us into his living room and instructed me to take a seat across the table from him. Lee sat behind Poh, further away from the table. There were other household members in the house, his wife and grandchildren, but they stayed away from the living room.

There I was, sitting in the room with two old timers. I recall how nervous I was, all the while thinking, "What if the materials I had read from the archives were inadequate to have a proper conversation⁶ with two eminent experts on the history of SOC, or for that matter, on communism in Sarawak?" Sure enough, I started on the wrong foot by asking if they could tell me about SOC's past relations with issues or activities that might be interpreted as socialism or communism. This made them uncomfortable. Poh said they were not familiar with such things. Lee was silent and looked at Poh. I should mention our initial conversation was taped, albeit intermittently since I was instructed by both of them to turn off the recorder each time our conversations touched on topics that were

⁶ Some anthropologists and other advocates of "conversation analysis" are sensitive to the different between dialogue and conversation. To them, "conversation" is preferred over "dialogue" in order to stress the unequal power relations in any communication (See C. Goodwin, 1990; M. Goodwin, 1990, Desjarlais, 1997). For the purpose of my research, I am using the terms interchangeable, in part because my interlocutors describe our verbal interaction or socializing with the Chinese term "*Tan-Hua*" or "*Cerita*" in Malay. "*Tan Hua*" can mean a dialogue or a conversation or multiple conversations. "*Cerita*" literally means stories but here it refers to conversations or a dialogue. Notice that I use "conversations" since not only was I having a dialogue with both of them, but there was also, concurrent dialogue between the two of

deemed to be politically sensitive – topics such as the Anwar Ibrahim sodomy charges, or the recent PAS victory in Kelantan and Trengganu. These did not seem sensitive issues to me since they were widely mentioned in the newspapers, especially the Chinese newspapers. But like I said, they instructed me to turn off my tape recorder.

Our conversations were punctuated with intermittent silences between my questions and all the while I was aware there were other family members of Poh within hearing distance. There were times when I was at a loss as to what I should be asking. Furthermore, there was no flow, no continuity in my questions. For example, I would start by asking a historical question about the year in which the SOC was formed, only to juxtapose it with a more contemporary one about whether the SOC was going to automate its fleet of buses. Even then, I wondered then how uncomfortable it must have been for the two of them to be subjected to my awkward juxtapositions of historical/contemporary questions as noticed by the lack of flow in our conversation.

After less than twenty minutes into our conversation both of them began to talk to each other instead of waiting or responding to my questions. That happened after I had put the tape recorder back into my backpack when I had realized that the entire process of turning it on and off was not only disrupting our conversation but also made it very difficult to take any notes. Ever since that meeting, I became very reluctant to utilize the tape recorder. In fact, many of my working relations would have been impossible had I insist on taping our dialogues.⁷

them. In short, there were concurrent, if not simultaneous, dialogues happening at certain period of our meeting.

⁷ Some of my interlocutors would only engaged in a dialogue with me on condition that I did not ask for their names, their addresses, or telephone numbers.

By now Poh and Lee had begun to reminisce about the early days of SOC. Looking back at my field notes, I suspect the reason they started to talk to each other was perhaps their tactic to get me to settle down as well as to suggest that I might want to pay more attention listening to their stories instead of presuming I needed to ask questions or direct our conversation. In a sense, instead of being an interlocutor to the dialogue, they wanted me to be an interauditor, privileging the discourse of listening over that of talking.⁸ Since this meeting took place during the early stages of my fieldwork, most of the issues about which they were talking were new to me and I found myself desperately trying to keep up my note taking, scribbling as fast as possible for fear that I might miss out on important details.

I should point out that when they were talking with each other they conversed in Hopo Khek, a different Hakka dialect from the one I was familiar with, which is Taipu Khek.⁹ But when they conversed with me, we mostly spoke in Mandarin and Hokkien, interspersed sporadically with Hopo and Taipu Khek. There I was listening to their dialogues in an unfamiliar dialect and jotting them down in English, a daunting task by itself. Incidentally, to consider Hopo and Taipu Khek as Hakka dialects would fit awkwardly within the usual linguistic definitions of dialect and language.¹⁰ Hopo and Taipu Khek are quite different and they are not necessarily fully comprehensible for speakers from each dialect group. For that reason, some of my interlocutors could not

⁸ As Robert Desjarlais (1997) points out, the Bakhtinian focus on intertextuality that underscores the role of others in shaping the self and personhood in people's lives (and thus getting away from idea of human beings as autonomous, monadic, monologic, and self-constituting), is unfortunately geared towards tendency that pays more attention to the discourse of speaking than to active reception in listening. See also Don Ihde (1976) and Gemma Corradi Fiumara (1990) for a similar critique of ideas of discourse and talking over those of listening.

⁹ The lingua franca in rural Sarawak, for the most part except in areas surround Sibu, is Hopo Khek.

¹⁰ In Western linguistic terms, speakers from different dialects should understand each other as long as the dialects they speak are from the same language.

understand my Taipu Khek and would subsequently converse with me in Mandarin, Hokkien, or Teochiu, depending on with which of these languages we felt comfortable.

Moreover, since my initial meeting with Poh and Lee took place during the early phase of my fieldwork, not only had I not had enough opportunities to reacquaint myself with Taipu Khek, the same was true for all the other languages I needed - Hokkien, Teochiu, Mandarin, Cantonese, Malay, and a little bit of Selako.¹¹ It also took about the same time to reacquaint myself with multilingual conversational habits to which most Sarawakians are accustomed. It was awkward during the first month of my fieldwork when my interlocutors sensed that I was struggling to find the proper words. To complicate matters, all the other Chinese languages I spoke were slightly different from theirs, not only in terms of dialect but also of idiomatic expressions. In fact, the Malay language in Sarawak sounded different from the West Malaysian version as well. It took me weeks before I managed to familiarize myself with their versions.¹²

As I listened to Lee and Poh, I realized that all they had been talking about was the origin of the SOC and its business related matters. There was almost no discussion on, to paraphrase Lee's expression, *pu-see sen-zhi see-ching* (in Mandarin: "non-business related matters").¹³ Perhaps it was a tactical move on their part: by avoiding non-business related matters, they had hoped to avoid (refract) talking about sensitive topics that once invoked might force them to confront issues pertaining to communism during the Cold War. But as it turned out, discussion of business-related matters and Cold War issues,

¹¹ Being in America, I have not had any opportunity to converse in the Chinese languages with which I am familiar. As such, it took me more than a month living in Sarawak to "recover" the languages I used during my fieldwork.

¹² Throughout this thesis names of individuals, places, and Chinese expressions are left in their original dialect forms as they were narrated to me instead of the standardize romanized pinyin.

even the current political scenario of Sarawak, was not easily separable. This will become evident in the following pages.

As they reminisced about the SOC's past, it almost seemed to me they were competing with each other for the preferred version of the "facts" or events that had transpired. For example, they would go into minute details of the number or types of buses, kind of taxes, startup capital, number of partners, financial crisis of the company, and so on – all without any sense of chronology. When I looked at my notes for this interview, I realized that they were also quite reluctant to talk about the current situation at the SOC, especially concerning the new management and the SMH partnership. They did not even once touch on the subject of the union.

Each time I tried to get both of them to talk about the current situation at the SOC they would switch to other topics. When asked about the current management of the SOC, in particular the new General Manager and the recent partnership with Sarawak Multipurpose Holdings (SMH), a Bumiputra company, Lee and Poh proceeded to tell me about Stephen Yong (the former SUPP Chairman) or Lee Kuan Yew (the former Prime Minister of Singapore) because, as it so happened, these were both Taipu Kheks, just as I am. I couldn't help but smiling when Poh and Lee commented that Taipu Kheks were generally very talented individuals and they possessed the '*liu*' (real talents) among the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. Time and time again, they would refer to Stephen Yong and Lee Kuan Yew to substantiate their claim. Most Hakkas in Sarawak were of the Hopo and Hwee Lan Khek, different dialects of Hakka.

¹³ Sometimes I leave a speech in the original language(s) before attempting to translate them into English, in part because a translation loses the original feeling or meaning and also because certain words, phrases, or expressions are difficult, if not impossible to translate directly into English.

In any case, here are some of the “facts” of the SOC from these two “old timers” that I have put together in a somewhat chronological order. Prior to 1951, there were no bus companies in Kuching or in Sarawak. All that existed were individual operators, about 156 of them within the Kuching area. According to Poh and Lee, those vehicles were not what one would normally think of as buses. They were smaller vans with a maximum capacity of five to seven passengers per vehicle. Poh laughed when he said: “And they had no tops on them. When it rained, the drivers had to rush out the canvass tops from underneath his seat and the passengers had to help. Most of the time they were already soaked before the covers were up.”

Lee was laughing as well, interjecting impatiently, “You should have seen those vehicles.” But he added, “It’s a shame none of them survived. Otherwise we could restore them for the museum. Too bad! They were antiques.”

Poh nodded in agreement, sighing, “It’s a pity. They were what we started out with. They were our history.”

Prior to 1951 there were also no regulations as to which bus routes the individual operators could travel on or the fares they could charge their passengers. As a result, competition was so intense that quarrels and fights were frequent among the operators. According to Poh and Lee, in an effort to regulate and control these operators, the colonial office issued a directive in 1951 ordering all the operators to form a bus association. Having mentioned this, Lee quickly asserted there was a real motive behind the formation of a bus association, smiling at Poh when he said this.

“Real motive? How do you mean?” I was curious.

Poh jumped in: "This was what happened. After the bus association was formed, several group of individuals consolidated their vehicles to form different bus companies. That was how the SOC started. The main directive to form a bus association was to restore law and order to the transport industry, but my colleague here is right. There was an obvious reason why the colonial office wanted us to form a bus association." Poh turned and looked at Lee before continuing, "It was for tax purposes. You have to understand. Before that it was impossible for the colonial office to collect all the taxes. There were no records. How can you know who were the operators? And you should know this if you know anything about the English [he was referring to British Colonialism]. When it comes to having proper records, you tip your hat to them. They cannot live without proper records, proper bookkeeping." There was a slight sneakiness in his smile when he uttered his last remark about the British colonial regime ways of doing things.

Interestingly, it reminded me of some recent postcolonial discussion on modernity that argues that practices and interactions learnt during colonial encounters gave birth to modernity in Europe.¹⁴ The central the argument is not to suggest that modernity came from the colonies but that without them, without the sites that offered the opportunities to carry out numerous ways to practice and sharpen administrative skills, book-keeping, transportation of raw materials and laborers, and so on, modernity would never have materialized the way it did, at least European modernity. What better place could there be for England, and the rest of the European colonial powers to practice and sharpen their administrative skills but in their respective colonies?

¹⁴ See "*Questions of Modernity*", T. Mitchell, ed., Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 2000, especially the introduction chapter.

A year after the SOC was formed in 1951, another group of individuals followed suit and formed the Kuching Transport Company (KTC). Soon after that, a third company, Hap Tong Fatt Bus Company was established. According to Lee, the SOC was losing money during its first two years of operation since it was heavily burdened by the colonial taxation system. Between 1951 and 1952 bus companies were taxed not according to a percentage of revenues earned but on the number of vehicles owned. A predetermined tax based on number of vehicles owned meant that each company had to pay a certain amount of taxes regardless of the revenues generated. At that time, the SOC owned close to eighty vehicles.

Besides the system of taxation, the nature of competition in the bus industry was trapping each company in a vicious circle. The SOC could not get rid of its extra vehicles for fear they might be bought by individual operators or the other two bus companies, resulting in unwanted competition. Also, bus companies had to deal with a few colonial officers who were demanding more money than the official rate per bus in order to pocket the difference as bribes. Poh complained that some of the colonial officers were demanding as many as three to four dollars per vehicle over the official rate of fifteen dollars per vehicle every six months. The currency then was called Straight Dollar. Lee interjected to underscore: "You need to understand that those were English dollars we are talking about, not ringgits. Stronger than ringgits! And we had to pay every six months. That was not easy on our cash flow."

Poh added: "Money was really strong back then." He felt that the SOC would have gone bankrupt had it not been for a change of colonial policy in 1953.

This time it was Lee's turn to interject, telling me that in order to pay the taxes, the company had to borrow from different sources, both from individual partners' own savings and from outsiders. Sometimes, in the process of borrowing, outsiders became SOC partners. Neither of them revealed to me, however, that some of the money came out of the salaries of SOC workers, something I later learned through other employees. In fact, that was not the only time the SOC was bailed out by its employees. It happened on several other occasions in the 1960s and 1970s. A few bus conductors and drivers informed me it was the employees who had suggested to the management that they delay paying out employees' salaries, and once a group of employees even pooled together whatever meager savings they had to help the company.

In 1953, business began to pick up after the colonial office realized that it had to change its policies if the bus companies were to remain in business. Bus routes were determined and awarded that year to respective companies and the system of taxation was modified. Once again, Poh assured me that the colonial office was looking after its own interest when he asked, rather disingenuously, "Who do you think benefited the most from the changes?" before adding, "After all, the colonial office needed us to remain in business. We were their source of revenue."

That same year the SOC was awarded quite a substantial number of bus routes, in particular the highly profitable Kuching/Serian and Kuching/Bau routes. On the other hand, the KTC was given near monopoly over most of Kuching's domestic routes. Hap Tong Fatt Bus Company was rather short changed and only allocated some rural bus routes. In 1953 the system of taxation was also changed to being based on percentage of revenue instead of the number of vehicles owned by each company. A few months into

the new system of taxation, a few partners at the SOC thought it would be beneficial to expand its operation by acquiring more buses to cater for the increased routes they had been awarded. Former General Manager, Hong Hee Siaw invested another 40,000 Straits Dollars of his own money. "That was a lot of money," both of them said, making sure I understood those were Straits Dollars they were talking about.¹⁵ To come up with that kind of cash, Hong Hee Siaw had to sell most of his property, even his wife's jewelry.

"But that made Hong the main partner and the General Manager," Poh pointed out. Lee was rather proud when he told me that the SOC not only acquired more buses but bigger ones shipped from Singapore. They had a capacity for 25 seated passengers, unlike the vans that needed a canvas top when it rained. Once again Poh reiterated: "The new tax system was better off for us and the English. For every six cents [of revenue the SOC made], the colonial office took one cent [as taxes]. On top of that, they also made sure that there were no more private operators that dared to cut into our business. The colonial officers personally undertook the task of ..."

Lee interrupted impatiently before Poh could finish his sentence, reminiscing: "Those were the good old days. The colonial officers did their best to deter individual operators from picking up our passengers. Some did but they were heavily fined when they were caught. Some even had their vehicles confiscated and that really scared them off. Mind you, most of them did not own their vehicles. If their vehicles were confiscated, they had to pay the owners. As it turned out, most of these operators ended up joining SOC or the other companies."

¹⁵ One of the complaints I would constantly hear from many Sarawakians during my fieldwork in 1999 and 2000, was the devaluation of the Malaysian ringgit. Since the 1997 financial and economic crisis, the Malaysian ringgit is pegged to the US dollars one U.S. dollars to 3.8 ringgits. Prior to the pegging, it used to be 1 U.S. dollars to 2.1 or 2.2 Malaysian ringgits.

“How did they end up joining the SOC? As employees?” I asked.

“No, more like partners. The SOC took in their vehicles as part of our operation. That made them our partners. Remember, the tax system was no longer based on number of vehicles owned. They would continue driving their vehicles, but now as part of the company,” both of them explained. That was how many of the current and past partners ended up with the SOC.

Poh turned around and looked at his son who had just walked in the room before commenting, rather proudly: “I don’t care what you have to say about the English but as far as I am concerned, they were good for business. Things were much better during the English period. So many things were better then. Take education for one.” His son remained silent.

Lee agreed with his colleague, nodding. “Everything they study nowadays is in Malay.” He looked at Poh’s son before continuing. “Besides, the current tax system is quite stiff as compared to when it was during the British.¹⁶ And bus companies are again facing all sorts of competition. I am not talking about [competition from] other bus companies but minivans, tour buses, and taxis, even school buses. We are losing a lot of business to them. The worst are the minivans. Do you know who gets these minivan licenses?” He looked at Poh since his old friend had not been to Kuching since he had retired a few months before. He added, “You should take a look at the station [by the river]. Sometimes our buses cannot even get in. You have minivans everywhere. Who do you think are driving these minivans? Look at their ‘road tax.’ Most of them had Malay

¹⁶ During my fieldwork, the tax was 60 ringgits per passenger per annum. As such, for a bus with a carrying capacity of 50 passengers, the tax will be $60 \times 50 = 3000$ ringgits per year (US\$900). With the SOC owning 200 buses, it cost the company 600,000 ringgits (U.S.180,000) per year in taxes

names, a few *la chi* [meaning, indigenes]. If you see Chinese, they are mainly employees.”

It was Poh’s turn to respond: “Oh they were there before I retired. Some of those minivans are actually owned by Chinese, but their licenses were issued to Malays. The usual *Ali Baba* businesses.” He turned around to his son who nodded his head in agreement.

“The Malays get the licenses and Chinese operate the businesses,” said Poh’s son as he smiled at me and introduced himself.

But Lee intervened to note that there was a slight different here, saying, “These are not exactly your typical *Ali Baba* businesses. They are not even supposed to operate beyond their village areas. Their licenses were only for the *kampongs* [villages], taking passengers from their village to other villages or to the nearest bazaar. But they are operating beyond that. They now pick up passengers wherever it fancies them. Isn’t that against the law?”

“Law? What law? Whose law? Laws are for us but when it comes to their own ... [referring to the Malays]” Poh and his son interjected.

Before I could finish asking Poh and Lee what they meant by tour buses (and I was also going to ask about funeral buses), Poh interrupted as if he were reading my mind: “Sure, the SOC used to cater to tour companies but that was before these tour agencies got their own buses. Go ask our bus drivers. Those who were lucky enough to get assigned got to see the national parks. On top of that they got tips from the tourists.” He laughed at this last point before he continued, “School buses? We used to provide all the

school buses in Kuching. Now you have contractors doing that, mostly Malays or *Ali Baba* contractors.”

It was true that the bus drivers who were assigned to the tourist jobs still talked about them. A few times I overheard some drivers cursing at tour coaches that stopped by the station to let off European tourists. The area by the station was one of their stops as part of the Kuching town sightseeing package. Looking at these buses reminded them of the good old days when they were the recipients of the tips, when they visited some of the national parks and, equally important, when they had the opportunity to get away from their mundane daily work routines. The fact that these tour buses stopped very close to the station did not sit too well with the bus drivers and the management.

Not forgetting funeral possessions, Lee added that the SOC used to cater these occasions as well. Poh corrected him by stating that the SOC was still in the business but they no longer had the monopoly. The other bus company, KTC, has become involved, along with some tour companies. How strange, I thought, to see tour buses used in funeral possessions.

“When did this happen? I mean tour buses and school buses,” I asked.

Both of them looked at each other and figured it must have been only a few years before. Considering the type of taxation and the controls of competition by the colonial government, it was easy to see why the 1950s were considered to be good for bus companies. The SOC increased its number of buses to take advantage of the regulated bus routes it was awarded in 1953. As a result, the company had to expand its workforce by hiring more bus drivers, conductors, mechanics, and other administrative personnel.

According to Lee, the overwhelming majority of SOC's workers were Chinese, if not rural Hakkas during the first twenty years of operation.

When I asked Poh, Lee, or any of the other old timers whether it was by design that the majority of the SOC's employees in the past happened to be rural Hakkas, all of them would come up with a somewhat similar initial response: that in the past the *la-chi* [indigenes] were not interested in working for bus companies or other industries. They explained to me that the indigenes had "tracts of land" and they were mostly swidden farmers. They were suggesting that, in contrast, the Chinese did not have such luxury. Land is still one of the most sensitive issues in Sarawak. It was only when I pointed out to the old timers that during the 1960s many rural Hakkas had ended up in Kuching when they fled from new villages that they agreed with me that much of the hiring was due to a matter of timing. Still, they would reiterate that the indigenes were not interested in working as bus conductors or drivers before the past ten years or so.

I met up with Lee and Poh a week later at the same place. This time I began our conversation by telling both of them, as I have told most of my interlocutors during my fieldwork, that my research was not about the leaders in their communities but rather about them - bus drivers, bus conductors, and other ordinary people – whose histories should be given a voice, the "human dimension" that seemed to be missing from official history. Most of the time my interlocutors would appear slightly embarrassed that I thought so highly of them as agents of history. Ironically, this would encourage them to want to talk less about their past for fear that they were not talking about the "facts." Instead they would give credibility to those "higher-up," as if material wellbeing corresponded with knowledge and truth.

But I was glad Lee and Poh acted differently. As it turned out, after assuring both of them of the worthiness of their stories, they felt a little more comfortable about touching on some of the sensitive issues from the Cold War period. Lee began by reminiscing about the good old days, saying, "The 1950s was a good decade for us. Everybody was happy. The company, the staffs, even the colonial officers [laughing]. Business was operating very smoothly. Then things changed."

"How so?" I asked, waiting eagerly for him to continue but both of them remained silent for a few minutes, perhaps still somewhat reluctant to look beyond the 1950s. I had the feeling they suddenly realized they were faced with the decision whether or not to tell me something they had been trying to avoid. As I mentioned earlier, it was not easy to separate business from non-business related issues in the case of the SOC's history. Although it was by definition a business entity, it had at the same time a certain political anchor to it, even if it was not that of communism, as it navigated through the stormy passage during the 1960s and 1970s.

They told me that the changes had nothing to do with taxation or competitions, but with something else. Both of them begged me not to write anything down on my notebook. As they put it, "treat this like a friendly conversation between friends. There is no need to record down everything." Adding some humor, Poh joked, "Don't be like the English. Not everything needs to be recorded." According to the two old timers, things quickly turned for the worse beginning in 1960 and hit bottom in 1969. That was the year their colleague and General Manager, Hong Hee Siaw, was arrested and imprisoned in Kuala Lumpur. The 1960s was a decade in which the SOC's operations were thoroughly affected by the various anti-communist campaigns. For instance, the company was

constantly getting summonses for all sorts of offences - ranging from a broken tail light, a dimmed light, or not enough air pressure in the tires to faulty brakes or speeding. It cost the company a lot of headaches, not to mention expenses incurred engaging lawyers to deal with those summonses.

Incidentally, Stephen Yong, who not only was a very outspoken and active Secretary General of SUPP, was also the SOC's lawyer. Both Poh and Lee assured me that the police would have overlooked the above offenses if the law had not been so unfavorable towards the SOC at that time. As Poh puts it, "None of that ever happened in the 1950s. Even today, you might get one or two summonses for broken taillights and what not, but these are what we call Chinese New Year summonses. You know! If you forgot to take care of them [the police] at that time of the year." I have heard similar comments from bus conductors and drivers from the KTC about these unnecessary summonses around Chinese New Year.

Apart from summonses, there was something else. Lee asked cynically if I had ever been subjected to curfews. I told him no. He said curfews were not only constant events during the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s but they were usually enforced without any prior warnings, thereby creating a great confusion and chaos for the public transportation companies and the general public. Being a public transport company with "outstation routes," the SOC had to service all the smaller towns and rural areas within the Kuching district regardless of the inconvenience and the risks involved. The way Lee put it, "What choice did we have? Regardless of whether we ran our buses or not, we still had taxes to pay, salaries, all sorts of expenses. Do you think our creditors would extend

our debts if we did not pay them on time? Under such circumstances, it was extremely difficult for us to balance our books.”

Furthermore, Poh added, “By operating under such conditions, there were human consequences and dangers as well,” referring to the SOC employees. “Quite often our buses were stopped and told to turn back [to the depot at 5th Mile]. Sometime the soldiers harassed our drivers and conductors. Some were slapped by the soldiers.” He began to laugh when saying this and he turned towards Lee to see if his old colleague felt it was funny. Lee did not laugh.

“But why were SOC buses inside the curfew zones?” I was curious.

“Why? Nobody told us about any curfews. That’s why. How could we know if this or that area was off limits at any given day?” This time around Poh’s voice was getting slight louder as he recalled those years. “Let me tell you,” he continued, now he tried to hide his irritation by lowering his tone. “We were at a loss as to which routes we could operate on any particular day. Nobody had any idea. Isn’t that right?” Again he turned around and looked at Lee. “Not only was it inconveniencing those of us in charge of operation but what about our bus conductors and drivers? They were the ones who were screamed at and sometimes slapped before they were told to turn around and head home. And where do you think they headed first when told to turn back?”

“Where?” I asked.

“Our depot at 5th Mile and I was always the first one they came to see.” Poh was in charged of the depot since he was the chief mechanic. I sensed a tone of pride in Poh’s voice when he commented. “But you know what? There was not even a single resignation during that entire period. Sure, everyone was frustrated and angry, but we all

stood firm. Many could have resigned and worked elsewhere or joined the KTC, but no, everyone stood firm with the SOC.” It was true that many of them could have joined the KTC and avoided making those “outstations” trips to the rural areas where most of the harassments took place. Both of them said that the SOC was like one big family with very resilient individuals who hung together during the entire 1960s and the first half of 1970s.

But in all their retelling about that chaotic period, they did not tell me that SOC buses were distributing socialist pamphlets as they traveled through the rural areas. I learned about this from some bus conductors and drivers. According to my investigation, not only were the vast majority of the partners and employees of the SOC during the 1960s SUPP members, they belonged to the group of socialist-inclined radicals within the party. In essence, the accusations of the postcolonial government of communist infiltration into SUPP were directed towards this section of the party, and by extension, toward many of the SOC’s employees. Here is how I found out about these radical elements within SUPP.

Whenever I was at the SOC bus station by the river, I always made it a point to stop at a particular *warong* since I could always find some SOC bus conductors and drivers to talk to. If not, there were other regulars who had been hanging out there for many years. There was even a name for this warong - “*Warong Muhibah*” (*Muhibah* in Malay means living amicably amongst the different ethnic groups). Compared to the other coffee shops at the bus station, this *warong* was livelier and had a friendlier atmosphere. It was located next to the river, and one could always feel the afternoon breeze. Quite often I would sit there observing the interaction between the Chinese, Malay, and Dayak bus conductors and drivers as they chatted about their workday, teasing each other, complaining about

the company, the system (the government), or just about anything. Sometimes I would sit there with some of them without talking, observing the coming and going of buses and their passengers, or simply gazing at the *sampan* (small ferry boats) as they arrived and departed at the jetty about twenty feet from the warong. It was as if we were all searching for quietude amidst all the noises at the bus station.

After frequenting this *warong* for almost a month, one afternoon a rather reserved Chinese bus conductor in his late fifties who had the reputation of being unapproachable, quietly confided to me that SOC buses had distributed anti-government materials as they traveled to the rural areas of the former First, Second, and part of the Third Divisions of Sarawak. But before he could elaborate further, some of his colleagues arrived and sat at the table next to ours. Even as he tried to speak softly, his Dayak and Malay colleagues stopped chatting and began to listen, making him uncomfortable. They encouraged him, saying, "*Jangan takut-lah! Kami biasa cerita itu.*" (In Malay: Don't be afraid! We are used to those stories), in a sense, reassuring him it was yesterday's news. He proceeded to tell me that he was aware that certain colleagues of his [underscoring "they are no longer working at SOC] had distributed *fan chin-fu* (in Hakka: anti-government) and *kong chang tong* (in Hakka: communist) literature back in the mid 1960s.

I asked him what they looked like. Were they books? I was getting excited since that was the first time anyone had ever mentioned anything that would directly link the SOC or its employees with anti-Malaysia or pro-socialist activities.

"No, not books. They looked like any other one-page leaflet with Chinese characters written on it - just like that red piece of leaflet on the lamppost [pointing towards a one-page advertisement on the lamppost]." Usually in red paper with black inked Chinese

characters. They were pamphlets calling for an end to imperialism and for eventual Sarawak self-rule, that sort of things.”

“Were they distributed on the buses along their usual routes?” I asked.

“No, not on the bus. They were dropped off somewhere near rural bus stations, or sometimes scattered alongside the road ... usually at entrances or pathways leading to rural villages, much like what you see during a funeral possession – papers thrown off the buses windows, scattered along the road. I heard sometimes they were handed out to passengers but seldom,” he responded without looking at his colleagues.

At that moment a bus driver, Keong Wen who had just walked in and sat down next to me interjected rather sarcastically, “Spies, oh, that’s something else. The SOC is full of them. So many of them you have to watch out for your back,” he started to laugh. This made others slightly uncomfortable but a few of them dared him to blare it out in front of the station office. “Me? I am not scared of them,” he responded, feeling proud. The rest of his colleagues were a little put off by his remarks. However, even though they were uncomfortable with his boastfulness, they shared his opinions. They too were unhappy with the company, especially at that particular moment, when none of them were certain if the company would be handing out their bonuses. I shall return to this in the next chapter.

In any case, because of Keong Wen’s abrupt, if not abrasive, interruption, the other bus conductors and drivers started to disperse. Some of them, I presumed, had to make the next bus runs. I ended up alone with Keong Wen, but he could not really tell me much about the pamphlets since he did not join the SOC until the late 1970s. He did however mention that he had heard of them but had no idea what was written in them. The next

day I tried to ask the same individuals who left after Keong Wen's abrupt interruption if they could fill me in on what they knew about the pamphlets. But like so many other encounters that had become the routine replies to my queries, they denied my request by claiming their ignorance. This time, one of them commented, "Oh! We knew nothing of it. We were just playing along to get him excited. We wanted to hear his stories as well."

The fact that those pamphlets were written in Chinese characters meant that they were targeted towards Chinese readers. But this did not necessarily mean that they were targeted solely at rural Chinese residents since many indigenous people in Sarawak read Chinese. Indeed a substantial population of non-Chinese could read Chinese then and the trend has been growing, even after the implementation of the national school system in the 1970s following the policies of the NEP.¹⁷ In Sarawak, I discovered that there was a significant population of indigenous and Malay parents who sent their children to Chinese Chung Hwa schools, a phenomenon that does not occur where I grew up in Muar, west Malaysia. According to Poh and Lee, there were fifty-six Chinese Chung Hwa schools within the First Division alone. In Muar, a district that was only slightly smaller than Kuching, there were only a handful of them.

When I asked Lee at a later date if it was true that SOC buses used to distribute socialist literature during the 1960s and early part of 1970s, he said he was not aware of it. As the former Assistant General Manager, I find his reply highly suspect. But I also find it puzzling that not even once did he query me as to where I obtained this piece of information, even after I specifically told him yet another time that I had heard it from some bus conductors and drivers at the SOC as well as at the KTC.

¹⁷ As I mentioned in Chapter One, with the NEP all subjects that were formerly taught in English at national schools were switched to Malay.

Another thing worth mentioning is Poh and Lee's timing in bringing up a question when I met up with them on another occasion. When I asked both of them the same question about the pamphlets, immediately after replying they had no knowledge of it, they asked if I were aware that Hong Hee Siaw was arrested and imprisoned in Kuala Lumpur in 1969. Were they implying that Hong had some affiliation with some communist organizations or was their response purely coincidental? Throughout my fieldwork I have never been informed directly by any of my interlocutors that Hong Hee Siaw was a communist. As in the cases of the overwhelming majority of the arrests during the Cold War in Sarawak, Hong was never officially charged for his arrest and, subsequently, was never given a trial. He was released in less than two years, a sentence that was considered to be relatively light considering that many others were detained for much longer period for their suspected roles in so-called communist activities.

Once again Poh said that that was the lowest point in the history of the SOC, since everyone in the company was worried about Hong or if more arrests would follow. For two years after that, Lee was the acting General Manager, but he was quick to point out that he was mainly in charge of business issues, things pertaining to the operation of the company, and not of the communist activities to which I had alluded before. It was interesting to observe him being so careful about things that had happened a long time before. There was a brief pause, as if he was waiting for me to comment on what he had just said before continuing, "Eventually Hong was released in 1971, but even then he was not allowed to travel anywhere. As the General Manager he was not even allowed to visit our offices outside of Kuching, especially Simanggang. He was stationed in Kuching. That was absolutely unnecessary and unreasonable. Do you know anything about red

identification card? Hong had to carry one after his release.¹⁸ With all these restrictions it was difficult for him to perform his job as the GM.” He raised his arms, telling me how unfair and impractical the government was.

“Why Simanggang?” I asked, somehow feeling that there must have been a reason, or several reasons, as to why he had made reference to that township. I was preoccupied with Simanggang at that time of my fieldwork. It is the town where one of the communist leaders of the *North Kalimantan People's Army*, Fong Cheok Chee, signed the Sri Aman Peace Treaty in 1974 with the Chief Minister of Sarawak in which close to five hundred communists agreed to lay down their weapons and surrender to the government. Both of them responded that Hong was forbidden to travel outside of the Kuching area, period. This included Simanggang and the other townships. However, I was not willing to let this slip by without further elaboration. I continued with my question, this time asking Poh why he did not mention Bau, Semantan, Serian, or any other townships but instead spoke of Simanggang. Both of them appeared a little uncomfortable but fortunately once again Poh's son bailed me out when he interjected by repeating my question, almost disingenuously: “Was there something about Simanggang?” He was grinning as he spoke and nodded to me that I might have touched upon something worthwhile.

I was glad that the two old timers took it well and began to smile. Lee even teased Poh's son that he should be on his way to work as it was almost past his lunch hour. I was convinced Poh's son must have heard a lot of stories about the past either from his father or from others. I jotted down on my pad that I must try to see him on another occasions, preferably alone. Eventually Poh tried to answer my question but through an indirect

¹⁸ A red identification card is issued to convicts. Ironically, as in this case, a red identification card was also issued to an individual even if he or she was never charged while being detained in prison.

route. He said that it was true some SOC employees were revolutionaries, once again being quick to reassure me that not all of them were. Even though there was much effort to recruit others into the anti-imperial cause, many managed to stay away from such associations. He reiterated the bottom line was that the SOC was a business entity, a company that was set up to make profit. Both Lee and Poh made this statement several times throughout our working relations. They also reminded me that because of its connection with SUPP the company was inevitably affected by the policies of the postcolonial government during the 1960s. As Poh put it, "The SOC had a unique relations to SUPP and SUPP's position vis-à-vis the government back then. What more can I say?"

Besides this, from what I have gathered from other SOC employees, things were not so black and white concerning activities that might be interpreted as either communist or business. It was certainly true that when the SOC was set up in 1951 its primary motive was to make profit. But among the original partners that formed the company in 1951, some were definitely communist-inclined, if not communists themselves. And during the 1960s, especially when government policies were determined primarily by Cold War politics, economic issues became more and more entangled with political complexities. Otherwise how could one understand the constant issuing of summonses and the harassments of SOC bus conductors and drivers inside the curfew zones? In the face of the constant harassment by the authority, wouldn't the management and employees have reacted with disgust, if not hatred? But should their disgust with the government be labeled as subversive?

I believe part of my initial problem in determining if the SOC or part of it was communist lay with my tendency to adopt a prior understanding of what communism is or was and then to use that understanding to determine if my interlocutors fitted into that paradigm. My inquiry about communism or the history of communism in Sarawak, whether consciously or otherwise, lay in my preoccupation with debates or critiques of capitalism, democracy, and communism that were always clouded by notions of equalities, progress, and civil liberties. Perhaps it comes as no surprise that these notions lay at the root of most of our investigations (some with a philosophical vein) on topics such as egalitarianism, exploitation, genocide, unionism, labor issues, migration, immigration, and so on. Having said this, should equalities, progress, and civil liberties (to mention just three) be the same across different societies, whether temporally or spatially? Shouldn't they be considered as things that arise out of specific contexts instead of treating them as givens, unchanging and ontologically prior to the situations in which they arise? This question or tendency, however, is not easily answered or avoided. One is constantly reminded by just how resilient adopting a prior understanding into our investigation is.

“What about the fact that the SOC was predominantly a Chinese company in the past? Do you think that might have determined the government's attitude towards it?” I asked Poh and Lee.

Lee said that was probably true, but quickly retracted it when Poh reminded him that the KTC was also a Chinese company and was not subjected to the same kind of treatment. At this point Poh even confided that there were communist elements at the KTC but with a qualitative difference. I believe I detected a sense of pride when he said:

“Unlike the SOC ... how can I put it ... they did not have the kind of direct connection we had with SUPP. Most, if not all of our employees were SUPP members.”

“Even now?” I asked, still trying to grapple with his last statement.

“I would think so, eh... perhaps that is no longer true,” Lee replied.

“No, I don’t think it is still true. Not now. The majority of the new hires are Dayaks, you know ... Iban, Bidayuh, even Malays. They usually vote for their own parties,” Poh interjected, agreeing with Lee.

As I have argued in Chapter One, the extreme action by the government was more of a means of silencing a certain section of SUPP, the left radical faction that had obtained a lot of support from the rural population, especially the rural Hakkas. These were the “angry young Chinese” (Leigh (1974:15) who found in SUPP, as they found in the SOC, an outlet to express their dissatisfaction of the government. But whether these individuals ended up as communists or not remained a fuzzy question. Most individuals would not openly admit to it but there were certainly indications either coming from the way they talked or addressed certain issues during the Cold War or when a third party confided their past identities to me, that they were profoundly influenced by socialist ideas of equality and a brighter future.

Furthermore, there were different roles and responsibilities for communists in Sarawak during the Cold War. There were those who went into the jungle to wage guerilla warfare against the Allied forces. Many remained in society, responsible for disseminating communist literature to the general public (mostly in the rural areas), and for providing information, food, and what other assistance they could muster for their

comrades in the jungle. The SOC's involvement was mainly the latter. What proportion of its employees were involved and in what capacity I was not able to determine.

I should also mention that whenever I asked the bus conductors and drivers who I had been told had distributed pamphlets during the Cold War, if they could tell me anything about the content of the pamphlets, they would all deny my assertion. If I were really persistent, begging them to tell me something, anything, they would often reciprocate with smiles. Time and time again they would repeat that they hadn't the slightest idea about them since, as they put it, "*Ngai mo hang ke tiu loo*" (in Hakka: "we don't walk that path/road"). However, there was something peculiar about it. As I reviewed my field notes, I realized that not once did any of these individuals refute the assertion that the distribution of socialist literature by SOC employees took place. I was also surprised that never once did any of them become upset with my persistence but responded typically with a smiling refusal. In fact, some were rather polite as they tried to convince me that those who liked to brag about things connected with communism had misled me.

One afternoon as I was having coffee across from the station office, two very senior Chinese bus drivers who operated on the Kuching/Serian route advised me to be cautious about what I heard. Selecting their choice of words rather carefully, they said: "Mr. Yong [most of my interlocutors would call me Kee], there are some who think there is something heroic about being a communist. The way they would talk about the communists, as if they were heroes. A few hundred fighting thousands of soldiers, fighting Imperialism, you know ... that big word. Not to mention under-armed." They continued, "People like to make things up. You need to be careful when you hear these sorts of things. Mr. Yong, you are new to Sarawak and people are aware of that. It is not

easy for you to double-check their stories. You should be aware of that instead of wasting your time.”

I told them others have given me similar advice but it was impossible for me to be sure if people were telling me the “truth” or “lies,” and for that reason alone, I had to seek their proper advice and guidance. I continued: “After all, both of you have worked for the SOC for over forty years and as drivers operating on the Kuching Serian road, you could tell me a lot about your experiences during the 1960s and 1970s.” But all they did was smile and reiterate the same response many others had before them - that they knew nothing of it.

I paused a few minutes before I was overtaken by the temptation to find out more about Fong Cheok Chee, a name I was preoccupied with at that period of my fieldwork. I asked if they could tell me something, anything, about Fong and the whole affair of the Sri Aman Treaty. That was a mistake. They gave me a typical response: “Fong Cheok Chee, sure, who hasn’t heard of Fong. Everybody in Sarawak knows Fong but that’s all we can tell you since we don’t know him personally. If you are so interested about Fong you should interview him at Simanggang. Sometimes he is in Kuching. Or you can contact his brother here in Kuching.” After saying that, they got up to excuse themselves, saying, “We have to make the next run to Serian.” I asked if I could go along but they smiled and walked away. As for myself, I walked across the street to the Malay warong to hang out with some other SOC employees, just like any other late afternoon when I was at the station.

At other encounters, my interlocutors would cite the present situation as a reason not to discuss communism in Sarawak. They would emphasize that Sarawak was relatively

calm nowadays (as compared to other parts of Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia) and it was inappropriate to dig up stories of the past. Strangely enough, condemnations of wanna-bees or the reluctance to talk about the past somehow only heightened my conviction that these individuals were indeed communists who, at the current juncture, preferred not to talk about it.

I believe there is a connection between this reluctance to talk (or to recollect, retell, or reminisce) about the past and the awareness of their current dispositions. The bitter fate they experienced during the Cold War was not the end of the story. Most of the individuals who joined the SOC because the company offered them a venue to express their dissatisfaction against the government now found themselves facing a management that bore no resemblances to the one they once supported and to whom they were once loyal. I will discuss this in Chapter Six. Also there is the SUPP factor. Many of them not only said SUPP had gone "soft" since joining the Alliance government in 1971, but they even went as far as suggesting that their participation as a member of the Alliance government was indeed a Faustian pact. Past battles against imperialism, against colonialism, and so on, now seemed like an illusion. It is no wonder that some of them even joked bitterly about those battles, as for instance, a few hundred communists fighting thousands of soldiers who were far better equipped. I have the feeling that quite a lot of these individuals felt jilted, betrayed by SUPP, and now by the changes at the SOC, especially the Malay partnership. This latest move had, for many of the bus conductors and drivers severed all links with the workers' past struggles and aspirations.

I am convinced that my queries must have been painful for them, since they reacted so defensively or that they dispensed so much effort to convince me I was wrongly led.

But I am also convinced that such transactions did transpire during the 1960s, that certain bus conductors and drivers at the SOC were distributing communist literature as they were traveling along their daily bus routes to the rural areas in the former First and Second Divisions of Sarawak. I need to reiterate that denials of being involved in any activities that might be interpreted as communist were typical responses I received during my investigation with most of the bus conductors and drivers. There were even times when some of them would mention something about being involved in such and such activities, only to deny them later.

To Austin (1962), infelicity, failure, misfire, miscue, and so on, is not accidental of the performative at all but rather essential, inherent, and central to it – they are what constitute it. The possibility of infelicity falls inside (and not outside or externally) of the performative, that is, both inside of the language act and inside its theory. In other words, the ranges of infelicities are what actually constitute the Austinian performative discourse of language. Such ranges of infelicities (besides misfire, miscue, misinterpretation, and I might add, indifference) were central in the speech acts between my interlocutors and myself.

By way of concluding

During the last two weeks of my fieldwork, I met up with Poh and Lee for one last time at our usual meeting place at Poh's house. Among other things, I asked both of them about the overall percentage of SOC employees who were communists. This time I expected them to be honest with me since we had been working with each other for almost a year. But both of them looked at each other and started to laugh, without offering any figures. After a few minutes, while still smiling, all they said was that it was

a thing of the past and it was not worth talking and writing about. I almost felt as if I were back to square one, as if I had just met them for the first time. When I followed by asking if they themselves were communists. Lee responded, somewhat strategically ignoring my query with, "The SOC is a business entity for making profit. We were good at running a bus operation and that was all we did."

Poh's son who was once again back for his lunch, signaled to me from where he was sitting that I was on the right tract by nodding his head. That was the third time he had helped me out. When Poh realized that his son had once again given away the answer to my question, he smiled, first facing his son and then turning to me, saying, "Please do not write it down. That was the past and it is not worth writing." He did however continue with the same topic when his son hinted at a certain encounter with a police constable. He said his father was accused by a police constable inside the SOC depot of being a communist, to which Poh laughed and said, "I looked straight into the constable's eyes and said: If I am a communist, you must be Mao Tze-tung."

Reading my field notes about the two old timers, I realize how irrational I had been when I had insisted my queries concerning communism in Sarawak, and more specifically, if they themselves were communists. Once Lee had to step in to tell me, rather flatly, that, "You are asking about something that is no longer relevant to our lives. A lot went on in the past." Then he got a little poetic, saying, "It's like the water flowing under the bridge, a lot had swept by. Sure the government used to accuse the SOC of being infiltrated by communist elements. It was the same rhetoric they used against SUPP. You told me earlier you have read some literature from the SUPP library. Well? Don't you see the similarities? As we have been telling you all the while, the SOC has

always been a business entity and like any business entities, we operated in the hope of making a profit.”

At that instant I realized he had said what he wanted to reveal but I was not entirely sure if I had obtained a satisfactory answer to my query. But I realized that in many ways both of them had given me as much information I needed about their previous identities or their involvement with things we might call communism. In short, to understand the situation, one has to decode the hidden message behind the narratives, to situate them within the bigger context of the politics of the Cold War and the race relations that have existed in Sarawak since the era of British Colonialism.

Looking at my notes, Lee’s analogy between the SOC and SUPP as two entities that were accused of being infiltrated by communist elements was his indirect response to my query. By treating Lee and Poh’s analogy between SUPP and SOC as a performative utterance, they were producing at one and the same time a meaning effect, or effects, that there were communist elements within the SOC during the Cold War and that both of them might be treated as communists during that period. Borrowing Austin’s theory of illocution, I might state that, paradoxically, Lee, Poh, and my other interlocutors were attempting to offer the heterogeneous images of what was considered to be a communist or communism during the Cold War.

They were trying to emphasize that there were many more definitions or referents as to what one might call communist or communism than those power-laden identities deployed by the federal and state government. A lot of it had to do with certain links. As I have already mentioned, as far as I have gathered from my fieldwork, the overwhelming majority of all the “senior” employees at the SOC were not only SUPP members but they

belonged to the radical left wing component of the party. And their former General Manager was Hong Hee Siaw, probably the most outspoken left-wing radical spokesperson of SUPP. Not forgetting, of course, they were Hakkas from the rural areas of Sarawak, areas that were considered to be “communist influenced” by the government.

In the case of Lee’s indirect response (as it was with most, if not all of my interlocutors’ responses), his language was already imbued with all sorts of referents to the context of Cold War politics and communism. The referents, being communist, in this case, were no longer simply a pre-existing substance, but an act of being communist. Lee’s performed utterances of drawing an analogy between the SUPP and SOC was an action that exceeded a simple response to a query but it nevertheless left traces on the real or intended query, that is, “Was he a communist?” Being indirect, or using an analogy, Lee’s responses or performed narratives can be seen as being analogous to the speech act of practicing discreetness or of being refractory in that it contains within it the possibility of different interpretations or miscues,¹⁹ thereby allowing him, the interlocutor, to deny or refract any direct reference to the real or intended query – in another words, “by committing speech acts [Lee] literally escapes the hold of truth” (Felman, 1983: 31).

Unlike the constative discourse of language, the performative does not refer to a perfect symmetry between statement and enunciation. On the contrary, it is from asymmetry that Austin’s thought proceeds, from the excess of utterance with respect to statement. In fact, one would argue that analysis using the performative discourse of language is the only way to read into Lee’s knowledge of what transpired during the Cold War. More importantly, in the final analysis, the performative has the property of subverting the alternative, the opposition between referentiality and self-referentiality. In

a sense, there was a kind of intelligence in Lee's narratives that was so submerged in the logic of tactical practices that it can only be communicated or decoded within the contexts of the Cold War in Sarawak. To paraphrase de Certeau (1984: 79), narrative does have content, but that content is also part of the art of "scoring": it makes a detour through the past ("in former times"), or by the way of a quotation (a "saying" or a proverb, or an analogy), in order to seize an occasion and make an unexpected modification in the precarious balance of things. These kinds of practices play on time; they wait for the right moment, at the moment of interlocution between different interlocutors.

The reluctance of revealing one's past identities, in this case, of being a communist, was in no way unique to Lee or Poh. To be sure, my interlocutors' reluctance to directly answer my queries would suggest a few levels of possible interpretations. They were (still) uncomfortable with the researcher at that juncture, they were no longer proud of being communist, it was still too risky to reveal their previous identities, they do not find it empowering to talk about their past when their current positions were just as marginalized as in the past, or in fact they had already revealed their past to me but in a disguised fashion. Many of my interlocutors seemed to have given up hope for a better tomorrow. As they looked back at the past forty years or so, it was quite clear to them that not only had their aspirations been defeated but the very company they had been working for most of their lives as well as the political party they had supported had undergone major changes. SUPP has been part of the Alliance Government since the early 1970s. SOC underwent massive management reorganization in 1998 and quite recently has acquired a *bumi* partnership.

¹⁹ Thereby identity, in this case, becomes a site of possible contestation.

It seems to me that there was a correlation here between their lack of attribution toward memory (here I am treating memory as an act, as the process of reminiscing or recollection) and their reluctance to be politically engaged.²⁰ especially if one were to take their current dispositions into consideration. After all communism is still considered to be illegal in Malaysia and the ISA still exists. One might even call it the abeyance of agency seen from the context of indifference or even resignation towards life rewards or aspirations. Most, if not all, of the bus conductors and drivers at the SOC (as well as at the KTC) have not attended any SUPP meetings for more than fifteen years. Neither were they interested in the opposition parties, such as the Democratic Action Party (DAP). Most of my interlocutors do not believe that the opposition parties could challenge the fully oiled election machinery of the *Barisan Nasional*.

²⁰ I thank Prof. Vincent Crapanzano for pointing this out.

Chapter Three: The Data Speak Back

“Today many countries in the world are still faced with a similar internal armed struggle of one sort or another. Some have inherited the problem from past regimes, *others have only themselves to blame for causing the problem.*”

(Excerpt taken from the introduction section of “Sri Aman: Peace Restored In Sarawak,” 1974, compiled and published by the Malaysian Information Services, Sarawak; emphasis mine)

When it comes to anthropological fieldwork up to date, only a few ethnographies have considered how the anthropologists themselves may prejudice the data collected (see, for example Crapanzano, 1980; 1984; Tsing, 1993; Desjarlais, 1997). One of the main concerns of this chapter is about the anthropologist’s subjectivity. Most specifically, what happens when researchers themselves inadvertently impose personal bias or prejudice that influence the grounding of the questions posed and, consequently, the responses collected? Consequently, what happens when some of our interlocutors represent the same agendas that we criticize in our research proposal and how this might affect the way we interpret the data collected from these individuals?

As Talal Asad (1994: 58) points out, “besides observing, asking questions, conducting surveys, and reading local documents, [the researcher] also make acquaintances, friends,” and sometimes, *even enemies*. This is crucial if we consider that during any fieldwork encounter, the anthropologist is one of our primary data sources and he/she is inadvertently engaged with his/her subjects who are often involved in cooperation and competition with each other. In the course of my fieldwork, I was fortunate to meet some interlocutors whom I found to be interesting. Yet, at the same time, there were others who were boastful and at times irritating. Some were only interested in making my acquaintance because I came from a supposedly higher position (pursuing a PhD degree and/or coming from an American

university), and so on. To be sure, in our working relations, we were subjected to some partial reformulation of each other that was determined by our fluctuating emotion, sympathy, and individual complicity during the course of our dialogic encountering.

For the purpose of this chapter, I will talk about my working relations with two different groups of former communists from two separate organizations that had a history that was anything but amicable. This history affected the working relations I had with members of these two groups of individuals. I argue in this chapter that the grounding of my research questions, which in many ways influenced my intersubjectivities, determined the extent to which some of my interlocutors became objects of my friendship and alliance whereas others became objects of my critique. Conversely, there is also the process of myself (the researcher) becoming an associate in certain groups and/or a subject of avoidance among others. During my fieldwork, my position was constantly shifting as I interacted with these individuals. Inevitably these affected the way I interpreted the data collected from this heterogeneous group of interlocutors.

Anti-imperial movements in Sarawak

Sarawak has a long history of anti-colonial organization movements that goes back to the Japanese Occupation. If there was one common characteristic among these organizations during the first half of the 1940s, it was that they were all anti-imperialist in nature. After Japan surrendered in 1944 and when Sarawak was ceded to Britain in 1946, these organizations shifted their focus to the British Administration. The aim of these organizations remained the same, to achieve eventual self-rule and self-determination. However, this fell short when Sarawak became a part of the Federation of Malaysia on September 16, 1963. As noted by the Sarawak Gazette (12/31/63), "it was a day of contrast:

on the one hand you have the official celebrations, on the other hand ostentatious absence of many municipal officials, community leaders, and other persons of position, whose presence upon such occasions was normally presumed obligatory.” But why should we be surprised?

Frantz Fanon put it so aptly that:

“... in the majority of cases, for 95 percent of the population of underdeveloped countries, independence brings no immediate change. ... Already we see that violence used in specific ways at the moment of the struggle for freedom does not magically disappear after the ceremony of trooping the national colors”

(*The Wretched of the Earth*, 1963:95).

All throughout the 1950s to the early 1980s, the British Colonial administration and later, the post-colonial nationalist government strategically considered these anti-imperial organizations in Sarawak as communist-inclined, if not strictly communist. But the matter was not only about communism. In the previous chapter I have already alluded in the previous chapter that there was more than one divide during the Cold War in Sarawak. One was the ideological battle between communism and so-called democracy, and the other was racial. From my reading of the various journals, newspapers, and books written about Sarawak, all throughout the Brookes, during the colonial and postcolonial period, race was the official category used to describe and divide the various ethnic groups in Malaysia. Mahmood Mamdani (1996, 2001) makes a similar argument for many former colonies in Africa, that the divisions between Cold War and racial ideology were often quite blurred, if not often interlocked.

In 1963 the Information Ministry of Sarawak published a report entitled *The Danger Within*. This report was produced at the time when Malaya and Britain were formulating a plan to annex Sarawak as part of the Federation of Malaysia under the proposal called Greater Malaysia. This was a proposal formulated by the first Malayan Prime Minister,

Tunku Abdul Rahman, to include the territories of Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak, North Borneo (Sabah), and Brunei into a single union. Great Britain and the United States of America, as part of a strategic move to counteract the expansionary vision of President Soekarno of Indonesia and by extension that of the former Soviet Union, supported it.

As the so-called protector of the people, the Alliance government of Sarawak, together with the support of Malaya, declared in the report that “they have done everything possible to keep the public informed of the communist danger in its midst” (2). Beginning in the early 1960s, with the report, a specific segment of the Chinese populations was not only targeted and coined as Sarawak’s “common enemy,” but also as its internal enemy. Essentially, any sentiment that was anti-Malaysia became synonymous with pro-Communism. Furthermore, the communist problem was treated as a “Chinese” problem. As such, all of the earlier anti-imperial movements in Sarawak, especially those movements considered as Chinese-based, were outlawed (*The Danger Within*, 1963).

The Danger Within claimed the existence of a communist-inspired organization in Sarawak as far back as 1941 (2: 45). To be specific, the report refers to the Sarawak Anti-Fascist League, an anti-Japanese organization that was extremely active during the Second World War. Although this organization fought alongside the Allied forces against Imperial Japan during the Second World War, in the context of the Cold War, almost twenty years later, it was labeled a communist-inspired organization and considered dangerous. One can not help but contest such an assertion. Was it because the Sarawak Anti-Fascist League, which fought against Japanese imperialism during the Second World War, also had certain connection with China, which was after all also at war with

Japan? Wouldn't this be underpinning a certain history? Meaning, how could this organization not have any connection with China when the Chinese populations all over Southeast Asia were the primary targets of the Japanese armies? What is most intriguing to me is this: Why was the Sarawak Anti-Fascist League not considered a threat during the Second World War but only almost twenty years later when Malaya and Britain were formulating a plan to annex Sarawak (and Sabah) as part of the Federation of Malaysia?

Similarly, the report also claimed that many other organizations were already "communist inspired" as far back as the early 1950s and they were subsequently banned or deregistered. Deregistered here meant that their licenses were taken away by the Government Registrar's Office and they were therefore considered illegal. These were to include the Overseas Chinese Young Men's Association, the Sarawak Overseas Chinese Democratic Youth League, the Sarawak Liberation League, and the Sarawak Advanced Youths' Association, all of which, needless to say, were Chinese based (2-4). By the time *The Danger Within* was published in 1963, most Chinese-based trade unions were also blacklisted or were deregistered (16). During the same time, most Chinese students and teachers at Chinese schools were deemed to be communists or communist sympathizers. As a very convenient way to lump all these different organizations into a single category, they were loosely classified as the "Clandestine Communist Organizations" (CCOs). *The Danger Within* claimed that the CCOs' major effort was already aimed at the Chinese peasantry in 1962 and consequently it declared that the Sarawak Farmer's Association was a satellite of the CCOs.

It is interesting to note that *The Danger Within* claimed that the CCOs were 100 percent Chinese in makeup. I did not come across any government reports in Sarawak of

any forms of dissident feelings among the indigenes that were against the inclusion of Sarawak as part of Greater Malaysia or the notion of a Dayak reunification. This would have to come from a classified/controlled paper of the United States Information Agency (USIA), entitled "Sarawak and North Borneo Insurgency: Racial and Ethnic Factors," a mere fourteen page report published in June 17, 1963.¹ This information was declassified decontrolled on August 6, 1979.

According to this report, dissident groups in Sarawak and West Kalimantan, most of them of indigenous makeup, had been active since the early 1950s for possible reunification between the Dayaks of Indonesia West Kalimantan and their Dayak brothers in the British zone of Sarawak and North Borneo (Sabah). A substantial number of them were receiving training in guerilla warfare and were being morally supported in the early 1960s by the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) (4). In December, 1962, the Governor of Indonesian West Kalimantan, Oeray, who was also a paramount Dayak leader, threatened to launch Dayak "volunteers" in a "*kajau anak*" (jungle warfare) to reunite with their brothers in Sarawak. Many Dayak leaders shared Oeray's assertion that "Geographically, ethnologically, and from the standpoint of traditional bonds, the entire Dayak people consider themselves one and united" (2). They were against the idea of a Greater Malaysia. In fact, Dayak leaders in the entire western region of Borneo have on occasion asserted that the very name of "Malaysia" sounds odd and unpleasant to their ears since they consider themselves to be the true indigenes of Borneo (2).

Furthermore, according to the same report, in 1963 a radio station of the North Borneo (Sabah) Rebel Government, calling itself the "Voice of Kalimantan Utara (North Borneo)

¹ The index number for this report with the US Information Agency is R-118-63 [AF], June 17, 1963.

Freedom Fighters,” made its debut in Borneo in the Malay, English, Indonesian, and Iban languages. Its leader, Azahari, and commandant, Zulkifi, were demanding the overthrow of Malaya’s Tunku Abdul Rahman, Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew, and, of course, the British imperialists (5). In addition, as early as 1963, the Indonesian press and news services carried periodic reports of Dayak mobilization in response to the North Borneo liberation struggle. For example, the Djakarta Domestic Service announced that thousands of Punan Dayaks employed as miners in West and East Kalimantan provinces intended to join their oppressed fellow tribesmen in their struggle to liberate the colonial area (3). Colonialism, as one Dayak spokesmen charged, “has split the island into pieces” (4).

However, regardless of the evidence, the strategy of the federal government of Malaysia and state government of Sarawak were to treat these indigenous dissidents as isolated instances and to put their concerted effort on the main issue of the Cold War, the war against the CCOs, and in particular against a specific segment of the Chinese population, the rural Hakkas. As far as the Malaysian government was concerned, the gravest insurgency danger in the Borneo territories during the early 1960s consisted of the possibility of a revolt in Sarawak engineered by the CCOs and the discontented members of Sarawak’s anti-Malaysia political parties, in particular the Sarawak United Peoples Party (SUPP).

After the SUPP was formed in 1959, not only was it the first political party in Sarawak, it also became the largest and most active opposition party throughout the 1960s (Leigh, 1974). At the beginning of the 1960s, the party claimed a membership of 47,000 – about half of Chinese descent and the rest indigenous. As the Sarawak government stepped up its anti-Communist/pro-Malaysia campaign in the early 1960s, the SUPP became its primary

target and suffered detentions of many of its Chinese members, who were charged with having communist connections (Teng and Ngieng, 1990).

From my reading of the SUPP's official account of the Cold War, *The Challenges: SUPP in Focus* (1990), other government publications, the United States Information Service's report on Borneo (R-118-63 [AF], 1963), and Chinese newspapers articles,² it seem to me that there appeared to be two emphases behind the government's campaign against the SUPP during that period. One stressed on ideology while the other focused on race. In broadcasting that young Chinese Communists - most of whom were Chinese educated - were controlling the SUPP branches in the major towns of Sibu, Miri, Simanggang, and elsewhere, their strategy was to create tension and rivalries within the party. In particular, the government was trying to stir up concern among SUPP's moderate-to-conservative English educated members that included the urban Chinese businessmen in Kuching. This led to a continuous battle between the two camps and on several occasions it almost led to the party's collapse.

On the other hand, branding the SUPP as a Chinese-dominated organization proved to be extremely useful in persuading many prominent Iban (indigenes) leaders to jump-ship to the various existing Alliance parties in Sarawak³ that supported the formation of Greater Malaysia (*The Danger Within*, 1963). Nonetheless, in certain areas, there were residues of support or sympathy for the SUPP, especially for its anti-Malaysia stand, but these sentiments were downplayed or not reported by the state-owned media.

² I learned about non-Chinese involvement in CCOs activities by reading through the various Chinese newspapers in the archives.

³ The Alliance parties consisted of PBB, PNB, SNAP, and PANAS. They formed the coalition government of Sarawak during that period.

Besides the archival research, I collected stories from a “figuration” of local bus drivers, bus conductors, clothing vendors, and other individuals in Sarawak to reflect upon a set of questions, some of which are: What does one think of the various treaties signed between the various communist leaders with the government? What is one’s opinion of the various “communist” leaders? What is one’s interpretation of Socialism/Communism through time? I should state that it was extremely difficult for me to get some of my interlocutors to explain why they became communists during the 1960s or 1970s. These do not only offer important insights into the “hidden” history or silences of that period, but by paying close attention to how some of my interlocutors talked about themselves as communists, or as being labeled as communists, it allows a nuanced understanding of what communism was to both my interlocutors and the government, as well as its relationship to racial discourse during that period.

I should emphasize that most of my interlocutors were in their teens and early twenties when they became affected by Cold War politics. When asked why one became a communist and, if at all they were willing to answer, this particular statement seems to reflect many of their responses: “I was very young then ... very ‘green’ about a lot of things.” Indeed, there were many criteria or circumstances surrounding how one became a communist. One could become a communist because one believed in its ideology of equality,⁴ especially when one was forced to relocate into the new villages and to give up vegetable and pepper gardens that took years to cultivate. One could also become a communist because one was labeled a communist by the government and consequently became one. Sometimes one became a communist after one was detained or one was a

suspect that escaped detainment. Other times, one was associated with certain organization that was labeled as communist by the government. This happened to teachers and students at Chinese medium school and members of the Overseas Chinese Swimming Club, etc. Or one's siblings, father, or relatives were communists. Indeed, notions of camaraderie as well as adversity materialized out of each individual's respective complicity with communism, which I believe was a direct consequences out of the Cold War and existing racial politics – the policies and practices of targeting a certain rural population in Sarawak (in this case, rural Hakkas) as communists, communist sympathizers, or socialist inclined. To be sure, my interlocutors who were communists, or who became communists during that period were not pawns in the plans of distant powers. They were local stakes involved in communism – of being labeled and dislocated, of getting back their land (or gardens), to get rid of the government, the struggles for equality, and so on.

In essence, the roots of being communist might lie less in an individual's mind than in culturally, historically, and politically systemic ways of meaning and knowing. Those cast by others or themselves as being in essence "communists," "communist sympathizers," or "subversives" were the direct result or casualties of what Roland Barthes once called the "disease of thinking in essences" (1972:75). In any of the circumstances, once an individual was labeled as a communist, it produced set lasting identities, a certitude of identities, if I may, both by the parties who were doing the labeling as well as by the subjects who were labeled. Still, there is a qualitative difference. For those who were labeled as communists, the lasting identities were/are never fixed, and are in a sense, heterogeneous. They can either be positive or negative, or in-between the two, ambivalent.

⁴ Obviously I am using "ideology" here in a much generalized sense, and it is my hope that some details or descriptions of communist ideologies will come up in this chapter and beyond, thus giving a local flavor of

and contradictory. In short, their identities as communists were/are in constant flux depending on the circumstances and contexts. It is my hope that this will become obvious as I attempt to write about the lives of my interlocutors in this thesis.

However, heterogeneity of identities was often ignored and obscured by those who were/are doing the labeling. When used, the noun “communist” is lasting and all encompassing but nevertheless remained in the singular. Government officials, pro-government journalists and others often speak of a “communist” with the same certitude that they identify someone as a “doctor,” a “politician,” a “lawyer,” and so on. This is ironic especially when one considers the inherent problems of defining what communism or what a communist was/is in any context. Coupled with this, Sarawak societies have always been internally diverse (T’ien, 1997 [1953], Chew, 1990). If nothing else, the way an identity (in this case, “communist”) was singularized by those who did the labeling raises questions not so much about what communism was or who the communists in Sarawak during the Cold War were, but about power and representation. It is for this reason I will now examine the official history of Sarawak during the 1960s.

The Official History

According to the official History of Malaysia, it was the concerted effort of both the colonial and postcolonial governments in “awakening” and “educating” the populations of Sarawak of the “danger within” the state that ultimately led to the CCOs eventual disintegration (Asli, 1993; Mahmud, 1993; Pusat Arakib Negara, 1994).⁵ I quote at length the language that was used to sum up the Sri Aman Treaty by the Sarawak Government, a

what communism was during the Cold War in Sarawak.

⁵ As far as I am aware, only two individuals have access to the Special Branch files and both of them were former Special Branch officers who are now appointed as professors at two local universities.

peace treaty signed at the township of Simanggang between the government and the leader of the North Kalimantan Peoples' Army:

The Sarawak Coalition Government has thus become the first government in the world to successfully deal with a well-established communist armed struggle by means of a *political strategy – a humanitarian approach* based on the simple human virtues of understanding of our fellow beings, their weaknesses and emotions, their strengths and rationales. In other words *a political solution to a political problem.*"

(Excerpts taken from the Sri Aman Treaty, March 6th, 1974, pg. 3, emphasis mine)

I recall when reading this article I was quite disturbed about the notion of a humane approach and the phrase "a political solution to a political problem." The enactment and reenactment of various bills, ordinances, the launching of relocation operations and the corresponding controlled villages, the imprisonment of communist cadres or communist suspects, the mobilizing of its whole military might with weapons far more modern than those of the communists, and the harassment of farmers and cultivators were hardly humane nor were they part of the dialogue of political process. Moreover, nothing has been written that touched on the degree of violence visited upon the so-called communists in the jungle as well as those living in the controlled settlements. Similarly, nothing was ever published of the systematic and random raids, usually within the evening curfew hours, on the residents of these controlled villages.

As it appeared in Sarawak, communism was identified as a Chinese problem because of the SUPP's virulent anti-Malaysia position; it was also viewed as a SUPP problem. The Alliance government announced that CCO field workers had infiltrated a large part of the SUPP (Teng and Ngieng, 1990) and this had the effect of accentuating rivalries among the various different groups within the party. By constructing the communist problem as a Chinese issue throughout the Cold War, the government also hoped to prevent any types of

alliance the Chinese communities in Sarawak might have with indigenous groups that might perhaps threaten the wielders of power.

All throughout the history of Malaysia the government has always made it a point to remind its population of its sweeping executive power by enacting and reenacting all sorts of restrictive bills and ordinances. Under the pretext of safeguarding the nation-state from this internal “common enemy,” the Alliance government during the 1960s enacted the Restricted Residence Bill, the Preservation of Public Security Ordinance, and a series of other ordinances and operations in order to round up certain rural Chinese communities into controlled settlements. While the State of Emergency, a bill enacted by the British colonial authorities against the perceived threat by the Communist Party of Malaya, officially ended in 1960, the postcolonial government of Malaysia proceeded by amending it into a permanent law in 1960 as the Internal Security Act (ISA). Individuals charged under the ISA are deprived of their right to a fair trial, of being presumed innocent until proven guilty, and not being subjected to torture or other cruel treatment (Amnesty International Index: ASA 28/006/2003). That might explain why most of my interlocutors have the habit of whispering whenever the topics of conversation were thought of as something sensitive even when that something was historical, historicized as a story(ies). Many of them still fear reprisals of being accused of things that might be considered subversive to the nation.

Another element that is often downplayed by the official History concerning the eventual downfall of the CCOs in Sarawak was the immense division, conflict, and competition that existed between and within the various organizations. In the official History, although conflicts and skirmishes continued until the late 1980s, the beginning of the end of the CCO movements occurred with the signing of the Sri Aman Treaty in 1974. I

would argue that it was the divisions within the CCOs that ultimately accelerated, if not led to their disintegration in the mid-1970s.

For the purpose of this chapter, I will talk about the divisions and competition between the North Kalimantan People's Army (NKPA) and the Sarawak People's Guerrilla Force (SPGF).⁶ Although the NKPA was operating in the former Third Division (now Third, Sixth and Seventh Divisions) and the SPGF was scattered throughout the former First Division of Sarawak, my work with former members of these two organizations clearly indicated that the division and conflict between them continue even to this day, more than twenty years after the Sri Aman Treaty. It is my interaction with these comrades that provide the data for this chapter.

When the Sri Aman Treaty was signed in 1974, the township of Simanggang was officially changed to Sri Aman, which is the Malay word for peace. Interestingly enough, most of locals refrain from using the "officially" designated name unless they have to engage with government bureaucrats. Under the treaty, one of the leaders of NKPA, Fong Cheek Chee, together with 482 comrades "laid down their arms and rejoined society" (Malaysian Information Services, Sarawak, 1974:2). It is thought that some of the communists who surrendered through this treaty were given lands and cash as a means of supporting a new lease in life, a life that supports and conforms to the so-called "peace and prosperity" of the nation. People I worked with believe that Fong received a substantial

⁶ It has been suggested to me that I should offer some sociology of these two organizations: in terms of its structure, the size of its membership, its hierarchies, and so on. However, precisely because of the questions of security, members of these organizations were only limited to the identities of one's cell group and any knowledge of members of other cell groups or the entire organization was purely conjectural. As such, I do not feel confident to touch on the sociology of these organizations, because it would be strictly speculative on my part.

amount of land and cash for signing the treaty as well as for “persuading” nearly five hundred of his comrades to surrender to the government.

I recalled the first time I met a former communist from the NKPA and who was still a staunch supporter of Fong. This was a certain Teochiu, Mr. Yeo. He was described to me as a “know-it-all.” That was how a retired manager at STC, Mr. Lee Shee Kang introduced me to Yeo. On our way to Yeo’s house located a few miles from the township of Serian, Lee warned me about his friend’s boastful character but at the same time told me I could learn a lot from him. As it turned out, Yeo was already waiting for us when the STC bus we took pulled over by the roadside. Once we got inside his house, without even waiting for me to introduce my research project Yeo launched into snippets of different accounts of communism in Sarawak. He talked about these or those shooting episodes, these or those ambushes, of being in curfews, these or those heroes, of nothing to eat, ... and so on - referring mostly to the areas that I thought could have been Serian and Simanggang (now Sri Aman) where his organizations were operating during the Cold War.

I had the feeling then Lee must have told him about my project. His manner of talking involved a lot of name dropping: he was a personal friend of the current governor of Sarawak, he was familiar with some of the leaders of the SUPP, and so on. He even mentioned that he used to take orders directly from Fong, hinting at his closeness with the top commander of NKPA and that he was still in touch with Fong’s brothers, although very occasionally, and so on. This was extremely rare, since most of my interlocutors would never reveal their communist background during the first meeting. While I was listening to Yeo, I had the feeling Lee was aware that it might be difficult for me to follow or comprehend his friend’s conversational snippets on the Cold War since this was still very

early into my fieldwork. I also think he was a little put off by Yeo's off-handed lack of self-consciousness about his name dropping when he interjected, "*Lau Siong* (in Mandarin: an euphemism for an older brother), you need to go slow, try telling one story at a time. There is no need to rush. Our young friend here will be around for a while and he will be paying you more than one visit." ⁷

When I asked if Yeo could arrange a meeting with Fong, he suddenly turned quite serious and said after a long silence, this time in Mandarin, perhaps to be formal: "*Che ker kee see pu chein tan*" (This is not that simple) and that he would need to make a few phone calls. He also reminded me not to call him before the week is over, perhaps in his effort to convince me it would not be an easy task. The meeting with Fong did materialize a month later but it was very brief and it would turn out to be my only meeting with him. A brief description of my meeting with Fong will help explain how it affected my feelings towards him and his supporters.

When I asked where I could locate Fong's house when I got off at the bus station in Simanggang, a middle aged woman and a younger man responded in Hakka, with a slight grin on their faces: "Fong's house. You won't miss it. It's the biggest one here. Cement. But he might not be here. We did not see his Pajero this morning [a Mitsubishi SUV]." Both of them then turned to others in the vicinity to ask if they saw Fong's Pajero that morning before continuing, "He has so many businesses in Kuching." I think I detected some sarcasm underlying their narratives, as if they were part of a rehearsed statement.

When I finally met Fong at his house, he refused to discuss any issues relating to the Cold War or the Sri Aman Treaty, a treaty in which he was one of the central players. It

⁷ My conversation here with Lee and Yeo switched back and forth in Mandarin, Teochiu, and Hakka.

seems to me that he was “forgetting” the past when he mentioned twice that he could not remember much about the treaty but directed me instead to the archives. However, he did asked whom I had seen and each time I tried to change the subject, to get him back to talking about the Cold War, he would once again direct me to the Sarawak Museum Archival Library or he would refer me to the official publication covering the Sri Aman Treaty. Our meeting lasted less than fifteen minutes, even though I told him it took me almost five hours on the bus to get from Kuching to Simanggang (Sri Aman).

The very fact that he refused to even discuss about his role in the Sri Aman affair is by itself quite telling. I thought I detected a sense of guilt (and possibly shame) on his part. As I was sitting on the bus waiting to get back to Kuching I jotted down on my note-pad: “Selling out?” How do collaborators. I asked myself, those who sell out talk about the experience of collaborating? My subjectivity should be obvious to the reader: Fong had become an object of my critique.

From the bus station I called Yeo about my brief meeting with Fong and asked if he could arrange another meeting. This would prove to be a long and tedious affair with no further result, but I did manage to learn something about the NKPA from him and his buddies. Although I came to the realization that I would never see Fong again, I did remain in contact with Yeo and his buddies,⁸ and ended up seeing them regularly for more than two months at his house. Most of Yeo’s buddies are rural Hakkas and Yeo is a Teochiu.⁹ He introduced me to his buddies on the condition that I would not ask for their real names,

⁸ Yeo and his buddies would address each other with the Mandarin words *lao xiong* or *xiong tee*. Both of these terms are more accurately translated into “buddies” as opposed to “friends.” “Buddies” also has a kinship connotation, which existed between Yeo and his buddies.

⁹ When Yeo spoke in Mandarin and Hakka, he spoke with a heavy Teochiu accent, on account of which his buddies would tease him. As for his buddies, all of them would speak to me in Hakka, probably because I am a Hakka. They would also speak with each other, including Yeo, in Hakka.

addresses or telephone numbers. Each time I visited Yeo, he had a habit of phoning people in the middle of our conversations whenever he felt a little cloudy as to the details of a particular story he was telling me (or he was rehearsing to me). But when asked with whom he was talking over the phone he would brush off my queries with the usual remark: “*lao peng yiu*” (in Teochiu: old buddies of mine). A few times he would mention, while covering the mouthpiece, that it would be better off that I remained clueless as to the identities of the individuals.

Normally when I showed up at Yeo’s house in the morning, a handful of his buddies would be there. All in all, there were seven of them. I would address them as *Ah Quio* (in Hakka: uncles) since I was told not to ask for their names. Needless to say, none of our conversations were taped. For the entire duration I worked with them, they refused to tell me where they lived or what they did for a living. A few times in the middle of our conversations, some of them would leave, telling me they had things to attend to, but were back within the half hour. I suspected they lived not too far from Yeo’s house, but I don’t believe they were farmers. Farmers usually have to be at their gardens in the morning hours. Furthermore, not once did any of them talk about pepper or other cash crop prices, something most farmers in Sarawak would do.

During the same period I was frequenting Yeo’s house, I was also working with another group of former communists from another division, the Sarawak People’s Guerilla Force (SPGF). These individuals were now clothing vendors at the Tong Fong Hawker Centre, a convenient location for me as it was situated next to the STC bus station, one of my primary field sites. For two months I would visit Yeo and his buddies in the morning and take the STC bus back to Kuching around noon in time to spend some time with the other group of

former communists. As it turned out, the timing of my interaction with these individuals of the two communist organizations proved to be useful for me to observe if there were any differences in the way they talked about the Cold War.

I should point out that for most of my interlocutors, when asked about the 1960s and to a certain extent the 1970s, in Sarawak, they would refer to it, if they were willing to talk about it at all, as the “times of immense chaos” (in Hakka: *hou ruan see kien*). They talked about the relocations (and dislocations) into new villages, the curfews, having to deal with the incessant presence and harassments from soldiers, the SUPP anti-government rallies, and so on. I say this because as I looked into my field notes, there was only one entry for Yeo in which he actually uttered the Mandarin equivalent for Cold War, *Len Zhang*, when talking about the period. There were two other interlocutors, Chao Kui Ho, whom I will discuss extensively in this chapter and elsewhere, and one other interlocutor, who used that term. That was all.

I raise this because our very choice of reference, or naming, not only affects our images of the past, in this case, the period of the Cold War in Sarawak, but also determines the questions we ask about that history and contemporary events.¹⁰ The way they talked about the Cold War captures the gravity of what happened in Sarawak during the 1960s and 1970s, a gravity that is not usually conveyed in the “normal” discussion of Cold War. It was how the period was remembered and more specifically, what the period meant to most of them. The violence unleashed through Cold War politics and how it affected their lives were the most salient features of their memories (or recollection) as and when they choose to talk to

¹⁰ James Young (1990) talks about the important of naming in informing us about the particular understanding of the Holocaust. For example, the term *sho'ah* and *churban* figure these events in uniquely Jewish ways, a specifically Jewish understanding and memory of the period.

me about the period or, in essence, how they choose to talk about it. Incidentally, considering these features of the Cold War also leads us to question the meaning of history, especially in regimes that have obliterated the Cold War experiences from national consciousness, and where there is no history of the everyday – “a history of contending politics and contending subject positions” (Pandey, 2001:18).

One of the topics that Yeo and his buddies loved to talk about was combat stories. Oddly enough, Yeo and his buddies usually put on a smile as they were telling these combat stories to me, as if there were something gratifying or victorious about them. There was also a certain heroic element in the way they talked about their combat experiences. They would constantly use phrases like “the communists were extremely *li high*” (in Mandarin: skillful, smart, witty) or “they were *ying siong*” (in Mandarin: heroes) in describing this or that episode during the Cold War in Sarawak. However, they would not reveal who these “*li high*” and “*ying siong*” individuals were and each time I asked for their names, they would brush off my queries with the usual caution: “It is safer that you don’t know.” They even suggested that I call these individuals “*lao siong*,” “*tar ker*,” (elder brothers), or “*siong tee*” (brotherhood) in my field notes. There are two entries in my field notes when they referred to their comrades as “*tar chea*” (big sister) and “*mei mei*” (younger sister).

On a few occasions I was quite taken back when Yeo and his buddies mentioned they had killed several soldiers, or at least some of them believed they had. But I never managed to extract the exact details as to where or when such incidents occurred. They would say, “We killed them in the jungle” or “We ambushed and blew up their *lori*” (a truck). They could not, or quite possibly, would not, tell me if it happened at some border town like *Tebedu*, *Biawak*, *Penrissen*, *Lubok Anto*, or elsewhere, or was it at some inner township like

Engkilili, Simanggang, Sibul, Betong, or Bau. I even asked on several occasions if it had happened at any of above places just so that I might be able to check it with the archival materials. But instead they would reiterate the usual recollections: “Oh! When we blew up a *lori* full of soldiers ... near the border or was it,” meanwhile looking at each other for confirmation, but none was coming. Or they said “We must have killed some of them when we surrounded them.” After a while, I was beginning to doubt their stories, since they were extremely vague and had too many pauses. I was beginning to suspect that they were exaggerating their stories.

Since I had, at that point of my fieldwork, heard other stories of the encounters between the communists and Allied soldiers from my other group of former communists, I queried Yeo and his buddies further if they had shot at a *lori* full of Malay soldiers or if there had been some indigenes among them. I raised this because I have heard many accounts in which the communists, if they ever happened to ambush a *lori*, would go out of their way not to harm the indigenous soldiers. Many former communists have told me they could tell by looking for tattoos, since Malay soldiers do not have them. One might say that the communists in Sarawak were quite discriminating when it came to whom they identified as enemies. A clothing vendor told me it was imperative for them not to hurt any indigenes since that would only diminish what ever support they could get from them.

However, Yeo and his buddies could not offer any answers and in fact even seemed a little puzzled by my question. My intuition led me to be more doubtful towards Yeo and his buddies. Their accounts were quite graphic, so surely they had to at least remember where the attacks had taken place, and it would have to be within the then Third Division of Sarawak since that was where the NKPA operated during the 1960s and the 1970s. I have

the feeling that they had been inventing versions of each story for their own collective consumption, as well as for mine.

In contrast, the stories I heard from the clothing vendors who had been associated with the SPGF were qualitatively different. To begin with, they were very reserved and unwilling to talk about the Cold War. When I finally got them to speak about their experiences (in their case, mostly within the jungles of the First Division of Sarawak), they told me they had spent most of the time hiding from the Allied soldiers. They never mentioned surrounding any troops but instead had been mostly on the defensive side of things. From the newspapers and official documents I read in the archives, the Allied soldiers heavily outnumbered the communists in Sarawak all throughout the Cold War and it was the Allied forces who were always on the offensive. Furthermore, after 1966, the Allied forces and the Indonesian military were cooperating against any communist elements in Sarawak. As such, the clothing vendors' accounts that they had been mostly on the defensive seemed more accurate. Besides, they were also able to tell me the locations where they had been attacked or of their hideouts, something I will return to shortly.

One night when I was reading my field notes for that month, after three weeks of meeting with Yeo and his buddies, it occurred to me then that none of them had mentioned anything about the kind of weapons they had used. I have heard plenty of comments about guns made out of water pipe from the clothing vendors and a few other former communists and about how useless they were. As some of them would comment, "One could not even hit a target less than twenty feet away." Others laughed that the pipes would burst after several firings and sometimes even injure the users. They would smile when commenting on the disparity of firepower between them and the Allied forces.

When I met up with Yeo and his buddies the next morning, I casually asked if they had used AK 47s or other types of weapons, to which they responded by saying that they had used semi-automatic rifles. It was only after I revealed my knowledge of the pipe guns that they admitted to using them and I could tell they were not proud of it. Yeo tried to explain: “*Bor Pien* [in this instant, *Bor Pien*, in Teochiu, meant “what choice have we got” or “we were desperate”]. You know, those water pipes. They were useless but what else did we have?” All his buddies were silent. I nodded my head towards them while I acknowledged Yeo’s reply until one of them tried to counter: “Even so, the soldiers were scared of getting shot.” forcing some smiles from his other buddies.

“What about the semi-automatics you mentioned?” I asked.

“Oh! ... We had some, but not many,” Yeo’s response sounded almost apologetic at this point.

It was also during this point of my fieldwork that I got hold of a copy of *The Danger Within* and familiarized myself with some of the organizational structures of the CCOs. After reading it I went back to Yeo and his buddies and consciously inserted in my discussion some terminology pertaining to the structure of the CCOs. I pushed them to tell me the size of their operating unit, especially in reference to their offensive operations. I asked if they had operated as a cell unit or a branch, a district, or if it was, as one of them had mentioned, an entire division. These are terms with which they were supposed to be familiar and I think from that moment onwards they realized that I had done my homework and that I was able to refute or verify some of their stories.

I also repeated my query of what it was like to be facing the Allied soldiers when most of them were only equipped with pipe guns. At this point, one of the “uncles” replied in

Hakka: "But of course the soldiers were aware of those pipe guns. After all, they confiscated many of them from the houses at the *san chun* (new villages). But still," he turned to his buddies for support before continuing, "they would not take any risk of getting shot. I remember this time ... we were convinced they knew about our whereabouts. Most of us were carrying pipe guns. We were there for almost a month but nothing happened. We saw 'each other' during our patrols but nothing happened. An entire month!"

"An entire month and you had many hideouts? I asked.

"Sure ... we had to be on the move all the time. We were covering a huge area in the jungle as a division. We had to buy time and wait for the right moment," another "uncle" interjected.

At this point Yeo interjected, saying, "You know, after 1965 or was it 1966? Things got worse. What's his name, Suharto?" He looked at his buddies for confirmation. One of them said Soekarno before others corrected him. "Suharto, Soekarno, whatever!" Yeo started to laugh. "We had to look out for Indons after that [1966]. I remember this time we were operating in this area. The soldiers were aware of our routes and hideouts but they did not attack us. They did their daily patrols and ignored us. We did the same thing. We ignored them and pretended not to care. What could we do? [We were] heavily outnumbered and under-armed. Like you said, pipe guns." Again there was laughter among his buddies. "We would see each other during our patrols but we would ignore each other. Sometimes we came as close as a few hundred feet but nobody wanted any trouble."

"Was that usual? I mean, ignoring each other?" I asked.

"No, not always, but it happened," Yeo replied.

“Earlier on this uncle mentioned that you all were covering a huge area in the jungle as a division. Was that an entire division? Perhaps you were referring to your individual cell or with a few other cell units?” I further asked.

“No. We moved with the entire division. We were spread out but as a division,” Yeo answered.

I tried not to be puzzled by his answer and followed by asking, “Where was this?” Again, all he could offer was that it was near the border. I remember being curious about how Yeo could remember the approximate year the jungles of Kalimantan (meaning the Indonesian side of Borneo) was no longer a safe sanctuary for the communists, but neither he nor his buddies could remember where their exact hideouts were, or the time when they ambushed and shot at a military *lori*. I found this a little suspect. Furthermore, I was hardly convinced that they were operating and moving about in the jungle as a division. It would be like putting all of one’s eggs in one basket, something the communists would never do. After all, they were engaged in the tactics of guerilla warfare that played upon time to make up for its material weakness, in this case in terms of weaponry as well as the number of communists in relation to the Allied forces. Of course Yeo could have been confused or was not listening to my question when I asked him if the Allied soldiers saw his entire division, the entire NKPA. I wish now I had questioned him further then.

Another detail that was puzzling to me was the mobility and the scale they were covering in the jungle. Yeo and his buddies told me on several occasions they were scattered all throughout the former Third Division of Sarawak. As Yeo puts it rather nonchalantly, “We would appear at Engkilili one day, and then at Sibu the next day, or inside central Kalimantan (Indonesia) the next day. We were covering a lot of ground in the jungle.” I felt

a little awed by their mobility. I asked them if it was possible to emerge in one place and reemerge at another within a day, especially when they were moving about in the jungle. “Engkilili to Sibu, or to central Kalimantan within a day or two? That’s amazing.” I commented. I did not, however, query them on the point about being in central Kalimantan after 1966 since that would contradict what was mentioned to me earlier. Instead I asked, “Were there some secret pathways in the jungle that were only known to you and not to the soldiers, including the Indonesian army?”

Yeo thought about my question but did not offer any reply. Instead he changed the topic by saying that he might be able to set up a meeting for me with Fong Cheok Chee. Once again he mentioned that he still had to make a few more phone calls. That second meeting with Fong never materialized. Usually Yeo and his buddies’ stories of combat experience did not hold up when pushed for further details. For example, how did they travel on foot from Engkilili to Sibu within a day through the *jalan tikus* (rat trails or jungle path)? Also, why would they operate in Central Kalimantan when it was known to be too dangerous after 1965?¹¹ I mentioned this because there was a certain mythical, even spiritual manner about the way some of my interlocutors would talk about communists in Sarawak.

These kinds of representations of the communists were also quite common in the stories I heard from other interlocutors who were, as a few of my interlocutors would call them, the fake communists or the “wanna-bees.” The stories from these wanna-bees would always emphasize how the communists would escape unscratched each time the soldiers surrounded them or how they would kill several soldiers before they were captured or killed. Their

¹¹ 1965 proved to be a crucial year for the CCOs in Sarawak. After Suharto dethroned President Soekarno, the communists in Sarawak that were once assisted by the Parti Komunis Indonesia were all of a sudden hunted by the Indonesian army. The jungles of central and west Kalimantan ceased to be safe hideouts for them.

stories too have a certain heroic element to them, hinting at an element of invincibility on the part of the communists.

The second group of former communists I worked with came from the Sarawak People's Guerrilla Force (SPGF). They were now earning a marginal living as clothing retailers at the Tong Fong Hawker Centre. They "came out" from the jungles of the First Division of Sarawak a year after the Sri Aman Treaty when their leader, Chao Kui Ho, and about one hundred comrades surrendered to the authorities sometime in 1975. In contrast to what was said about Fong and a few of his supporters, Chao and his wife, who was a communist herself, told me they never got any land or cash for "coming out." All they received was a hawker's license to operate at the hawker centre. I mention this because there was, supposedly, a somewhat comical relationship between one's rank and the reward upon "coming out" or surrendering. Many of Chao's comrades who are now clothing vendors at the same hawker centre joked that "if you want to be communist, you must aim to be the captain, if not, a lieutenant, but not merely as a private." "The higher you were," they would say, "the more you got." Many of my other interlocutors, including the bus conductors and drivers, had made similar comments.

It was not difficult to detect their sarcasm, since that was their way of addressing one of the ironies of being a communist in Sarawak – in particular, what happened to Fong, his brothers, and a few of his supporters after the whole Sri Aman affair. However, none of them was sure as to the actual amount of land or cash Fong and his brother had received from the authorities. But they did have the living proof of this contradiction when their own leader, Chao, received only a hawker's license just like the rest of them – a form of living in which it was getting more and more difficult to make ends meet.

As I mentioned earlier, the Tong Fong Hawker Centre was located next to the STC bus station, making it very convenient for me during my fieldwork. Built in the mid-1970s, the centre was a single story building. It had about sixty retail lots divided into three rows crammed up in a space about three quarters the size of a basketball court. Besides two food stalls and one tailor shop operated by Malay vendors, the rest of the stalls there consisted of Chinese clothing vendors, and quite a few of them were former members of the SPGF.¹²

Throughout my working relations with these vendors, they would constantly complain about the lack of business. Often they would say that business was so slow they could hardly keep their eyes open. For them, the lack of business was not entirely due to the economic downturn, but because most of the general public preferred bigger and more “modern” air-conditioned departmental stores. Their lack of business also served as a convenient pretext for me to spend many afternoons chatting with them. But I did worry about them since none of them, as far as I knew, had other income or plots of land on which they could cultivate some pepper or other cash crops.

Of the more than twenty vendors I interviewed, only two of them owned their houses; the rest rented them. Some could only afford to rent a room. Most of them lived at the several low cost housing estates build during the 1970s by private enterprises on the outskirts of Kuching. Most of these vendors were in their mid fifties to early sixties. Almost all of their children attended the Chung Hwa Chinese schools (as opposed to the Malay medium primary and secondary national schools). From what I heard quite a few of their children worked at factories in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. Three vendors told me their sons

¹² Due to the issue of sensitivity, I will not disclosed how many of them were former communists or information that might reveal their true identities.

worked in Taiwan and Japan. I would see some of their children helping their parents at the centre, but only occasionally since there were hardly any customers to attend to.

They told me that prior to the advent of the more modern department stores, the centre was one of the busiest shopping spots in Kuching town. That was during the latter half of the 1970s and early 1980s. But now it was considered old and dilapidated, catering mostly to those looking for cheaper clothing. But that was not entirely true. I was told that some of the merchandise they carried was of similar quality as that sold at the bigger and more “modern” outlets both in Kuching and Sibul. In fact some of them came from the same suppliers. But the fact remains that since the centre was no longer considered “modern,” they were hardly any customers regardless of how cheap the merchandise was. As a few vendors put it, most of the people that stop by the centre were window shoppers, killing time as they waited for their buses to take them back to their kampongs. Most of these window shoppers were either rural indigenous or Malay folks who came to Kuching by the STC buses.

One of the first things I noticed when entering the centre was its dim lighting and overcrowdedness, in this case not because of customers but rather because of its vendors and their merchandise. Every inch of space within each lot was utilized to its maximum and every vendor was displaying his or her merchandise almost onto a third of the passageway. It was not unusual to catch some of the vendors dozing off in their lots during the afternoon, in part due to the cool afternoon breeze coming from the river next to the building. Others would be seen chatting among themselves, reading the Chinese newspapers, and occasionally attending to customers. Each time I was there, it seemed as if there were more vendors than customers. Furthermore, a lot of the rural people are nowadays more inclined

to shop at another nearby shopping area located less than two hundred meters from the centre, the *Jalan India*.

Chao Kui Ho, the former captain of the Sarawak People's Guerrilla Force (SPGF), was the first person I met at the Tong Fong Hawker Centre. When I became aware that Chao and the rest of the former communists were working as clothing vendors at the centre, I reasoned that I should first approach and make friends with their leader, thereby hoping to gain acceptance from his comrades. That proved to be the correct strategy, but there were still a few vendors at the centre who refused to have any interaction with me. I would often acknowledge these vendors but that was as far as I got.

Unlike most of the former communists I met during my fieldwork, including the clothing vendors at the centre, Chao still retained much of his socialist outlook.¹³ We would talk about many things: the socio economic situation for people like him, the lower working class, the political climate in Sarawak, in Malaysia, or in the region, and even world politics. We even discussed the history of communism, beginning with the Paris Commune, the Bolshevik Revolution, and the Peoples' Republic of China. He had read Marx, Lenin, and Mao. We even talked about the situation in Tibet and he raised very interesting questions about the one-sided Western opinions of it. He agreed with me about the atrocities during the Cultural Revolution but he also pointed out my biased opinion of China's subjugation of Tibet has to do with the information I got from the West. He even suggested that I should do some fieldwork in Tibet that might perhaps changed my opinion; that "common" Tibetans

¹³ All of my conversations with Chao were conducted in Mandarin although both of us are Hakkas and we speak several other Chinese languages. I have heard Chao conversing in Hakka, Hokkien, and Teochiu, and Malay with his customers. With his comrades at the centre, we switched back and forth in Mandarin, Hakka, Hokkien, Teochiu, and occasionally, in Malay. As close as I was with Chao, there was always a degree of formality in our interaction. Perhaps that would suggest why our conversations were always conducted in Mandarin.

might very well be happy with China, that they were relieved to be rid of the immensely hierarchical structure of the old Tibetan societies where the monks lived in their monasteries like elites, including the currently exiled Dali Lama. I will not deny that there is room for different interpretations.

But the topics of our conversations that seemed to interest him most concerned injustice on local, regional, as well as international levels and other topics of universal conflicts and concerns. However, in all the issues we discussed there was always a hint of resignation in his narrative, in which he fell short of offering any prophetic call for social action. When he talked about the Malaysian government discourse on institutions like the universities, the civil service, government loans for small business, high yield government bonds that were reserved for the *Bumiputra*, business opportunities for the *Bumiputra*, poor social medicine, and so on, he would refrain from offering any solutions. Chao was always composed. Instead, he would ask my opinion. In fact, Chao was most enthusiastic about my thesis topic. He felt that the stories need to be told, not just about what happened in Sarawak during the Cold War, but about the continuing injustices suffered by lower class working people all over the world. He did not say “lower class Chinese working people.” The one thing that struck me throughout our many conversations was his reluctance to couch his analysis in ethnic, religious, or national terms. To him, it was always class that mattered.

Looking back at my notes, I suspect his reluctance to offer any solutions to the injustices in the world had to do with his resignation about life. I recall an instance when he spoke very quietly, feeling ashamed afterward: “Put it this way, we lost. We lost to *Di Guo Zhu-yi* [Imperialism]. Look at us. Every day, six, seven days a week we open our stalls, but there are hardly any customers.” I can’t help but feel that they were shortchanged upon

surrendering to the government in the mid-1970s. These clothing vendors at the old and dilapidated centre were no longer fighting imperialism but were fighting to make ends meet. But what other choice did they have? It is my opinion as well as that of a few other interlocutors that the communists in Sarawak were fighting a losing battle from the very beginning, especially after Suharto dethroned Soekarno in 1966.

When Suharto secured formal power from Soekarno on March, 1966, the New Order (Pancasila) and the Ideology of Anti-Communism was launched as weapons of repression and terror against dissent within the mass base of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), the greater Indonesian society, as well as against any disfavored generals within the Indonesian Armed Forces (ABRI) (Cribb, 1990; Tanter, 1990; Goodfellow, 1995). With the developments in Indonesia in 1966, the various communist movements in Sarawak essentially lost one of their strongest supporters. The jungles of Kalimantan became enemy territories by 1966 as the Indonesian military were not only no longer sympathetic towards them but collaborated with the Allied forces. This turn of events was a huge blow to the communists in Sarawak, both physically as well as psychologically.

Soon I would visit Chao at his lot on a regular basis, at times almost daily for weeks on end. Sometimes even as he was running off for some engagement, he would offer to have a quick cup of coffee at the shop by the far end of the street. Chao was very particular about where to have his coffee, even about the table at the most interior part of the coffee shop. Our conversations were always held in private, whether it was at his lot or at the coffee shop. I cannot recall if there was a single instant when any of his neighbors at the centre joined in our conversations. They still had an immense respect for Chao, and they would allow him a certain distance. However, that was not the case when I was in the middle of a

conversation with other vendors at the centre. Others would always join in and sometimes inappropriately discouraging a particular individual from telling me some of their personal experiences of the Cold War.

Over time, my friendship with Chao promoted envy and, to a degree, discomfort among many of my other interlocutors, both at the centre and as well as those who worked at STC or at the various coffee shops by the bus station. Sometimes others would ask what we talked about. In particular, they wanted to know what Chao told me about the past or how he talked about the past, both his personal past and the general scheme of things during the Cold War. I am not surprised that they were aware of my close acquaintance with Chao, as they would often see me walking in and out of the Tong Fong Hawker Centre or having coffee with him at his particular coffee shop. But it could be quite uncomfortable to be constantly watched, especially during a period of almost a month when a few individuals by the bus station started to call me Mr. *Swa ngiau chee*, which literally meant “jungle rats.” That was the first time I heard the term “*swa ngiau chee*,” but it would be one of those term that concerned me for the rest of my fieldwork. It was their way to tease me, this nosy researcher who was asking all sorts of question about communism in Sarawak. Perhaps it was also due to my close association with Chao.¹⁴ Eventually I had to beg them to stop since the last thing I needed was to attract attention.

But I was especially surprised and curious when Yeo and his buddies started acting very inquisitive about my meetings with Chao. Whenever I met up with them at Yeo’s house, they would ask the dates, the times, or the venues of my meetings with Chao. I became suspicious of their inquisitiveness: were they compiling reports for someone? Their curiosity

¹⁴ I thank Prof. Michael Blim for pointing this out.

further increased my discomfort with them that had grown from my feelings that there had been a lot of exaggeration in their accounts of the Cold War. I was also getting tired of Yeo's boastfulness. After a while I lost count how many times Yeo had mentioned the names of the current governor of Sarawak, or Chinese leaders like Stephen Yong or Ong Kee Hui, the former leaders of SUPP, as though they were his friends. I also began to suspect he was not entirely performing for my benefit but for his buddies as well. He also mentioned that he and Fong went very far back, which in a way was quite annoying considering that he had not managed to set up another appointment for me.

One afternoon at Yeo's house, he asked in an uncomfortable manner, "Have you been seeing Chao Kui Ho lately? I presume you know who he was?" Before I could reply, he surprised me further with very detailed information like "You were with Chao the other day at this particular coffee shop that he frequents. Am I right?" He also mentioned I had seen Chao at least five times during the past week. He proceeded to ask me what we talked about. Did Chao talk about his days in the jungle? He did not, however, ask me if Chao had made any comment about Fong.

I told Yeo that we mostly talked about the economy and how slow business had been lately. I also told him we discussed the highly charged upcoming elections in Taiwan, a topic most of my Chinese interlocutors were preoccupied with at that time. However, I do not think Yeo was completely satisfied with what I was willing to share with him. Over the next few weeks he would call me very frequently, usually using the pretext of setting up another appointment with Fong, but then he would switch back, as if in automatic mode, to his enquiry about my most recent conversation with Chao. Once he even behaved very

childishly and begged me, “Kee, you must tell me what the two of you have been talking about. Otherwise it will be very difficult for me to sleep tonight.”

During the two months I was in regular contact with Yeo, I was awakened several mornings by his telephone calls, sometimes as early as 6.30 in the morning (I presume he is an early riser like most of my interlocutors), asking if I would be meeting Chao that day and telling me I should call him back that very evening for details of my rendezvous with Chao. It should be clear at this point, that not only was I finding his behavior childish and annoying but, at the same time I was also puzzled as to the lengths he was willing to go in his attempt to fish out information about Chao. I was also getting messages on my answering machine from him and two of his buddies, asking the same questions. Sometimes there was more than one message from the same caller in one day. Needless to say, whenever I met up with Yeo and his buddies, they would go through the same routine about what transpired during my meetings with Chao or with the other clothing vendors at the Tong Fong Hawker Centre. I soon realized that, even after thirty years, most of the social, economic, and political ties of these former communists were still affected by their past involvement - by their complicity, so to speak.

In contrast, even though some of clothing vendors at the centre were equally curious about my countless meetings with Chao, they were subtler, less inquisitive and they never left any messages on my answering machine. Furthermore, none of them ever asked about what had transpired during my one conversation with Fong. As for Chao Kui Ho, he never asked, not once, about Fong or his comrades even though I mentioned to him several times my meeting with this or that individual of the former NKPA. The most he would do was

smile. There were times I wanted to tell Chao about the inquisitiveness of Yeo and his buddies but decided against it for fear that something unpleasant might result.

As I stated above, when I first met the vendors at the centre they were extremely reluctant to tell me about their combat experiences, usually answering with a polite smile that they could not remember that period since it had happened almost thirty years before. It took more than a month before they were willing to touch the surface of the subject. I suspect they became more willing to talk with me about their experiences after they saw me visiting and chatting with their former leader, Chao Kui Ho, on a regular basis, thinking that I must have already been told about the past. Somehow I had the feeling none of them wanted to be the first one to tell me about it.

But still, unlike with Yeo and his buddies, I remember how difficult it was trying to obtain accounts of combat experiences from these clothing vendors. The times when I was chatting with them in front of one of the stalls, if I ever asked them for stories of their experiences during the Cold War, they would usually force a smile and soon the crowd would get smaller. Unlike the almost heroic-like accounts from Yeo and his buddies, the conversations I had with the clothing vendors were more reserved and subdued. Moreover, a central element in their “remembering” of the Cold War experience was fear - that is, fear of the enemy, fear of death. This seemed to be missing in Yeo and his buddies. When asked about the frequency of encounters with Allied forces and their normal course of action, that is, if they exchanged fire or ran for cover, the stories I collected from the clothing vendors revealed another element I had not thought of in my usual understanding of battle scenes – the lack of actual fighting. Here is one of the narratives I obtained from one of the clothing

vendors that reflected the “collective memories”¹⁵ of the rest of the vendors at the centre:

“We saw each other [the communists and the Allied soldiers] all the time, sometimes daily. But nothing happened. We did nothing to each other. We would ignore each other. You have to understand. Nobody wanted to pull the trigger. Nobody wanted to die.”

The accounts I collected among the clothing vendors would suggest that there was often little actual exchange of fire between themselves and the Allied soldiers during those years in the jungle. In addition, most of their stories indicated that they were mostly on the defensive since they were heavily outnumbered and under-armed. From these accounts, it would also appear that fear was not unique to them but also existed among the Malaysian, Indonesian, and the British soldiers, including the seasoned Ghurkhas. Both sides were trying to stay alive. According to the Sri Aman report (1974), there were more than seven battalions of allied soldiers, excluding the Indonesian army, which were used against less than seven hundred guerillas. Even though the Allied forces clearly outnumbered the CCOs by a large degree, all apparently lived with fear of injuries or death. It will not be an exaggeration to say that there was even a degree of mutual respect for each other’s lives. This came out clearly in the following statement by another clothing vendor: “Sure, they were just as scared.” After a long pause, he continued, “You know, [in many ways] being a soldier is like taking up a job, earning a living. Those soldiers knew that. They knew what to do. They wanted to get by another day without getting hurt or killed.”

The following day, I went straight to this vendor to continue our conversation. At first he tried to divert my questions on the subject we had discussed the day before to topics that

¹⁵ Human beings, according to Halbwachs, can remember their history, but they cannot freely choose the circumstances and conditions of their remembering. In short, collective memory is the complete stock of memories a society of each epoch can reconstruct within its present frame of reference (1980 [1950]).

were more pressing at that time: like the upcoming elections in Taiwan and the issuance of a new *Amanah Saham Malaysia* (The Malaysia Bond) that many of my Chinese interlocutors were joking about at that time. It was the first time since the implementation of the NEP back in 1970 that a government saving bond was eligible for non-Malays. However, from what I gathered, there was plenty of skepticism as to its worth and most of the people with whom I spoke considered the offer a desperate attempt on the part of the government to squeeze out as much liquid capital as possible from the population. To use an expression of this particular vendor, it was “a desperate attempt to recover from the 1997 financial fiasco.” Otherwise, as most of these Chinese interlocutors reasoned, why only now, almost thirty years after the NEP, were non-Malays given the “privilege” of buying government saving bonds that were reserved only for *Bumiputra* in the past.

Trying to get back to our topic from the day before, I told him that it was particularly revealing for me to realize that fear was a central element in his experience as well as for the Allied soldiers during the Cold War. I told him that I want to emphasize the centrality of fear in my thesis, for it was clearly there in their narratives. Often the sensation of fear is deleted or obscured behind the veil of machismo of soldiers normally depicted in the majority of war movies or books. I asked him if he was aware of the recent movie, “*Lt. Ednan*” that was showing at a few cinemas in Kuching. I went on to tell him what I had read on the English and Malay newspapers about this movie. I thought it was interesting when he told me that nothing have been written or advertised of this particular movie in the various Chinese newspapers. The movie was set during the Emergency in west Malaysia in the 1950s and in it, the main protagonist, Lt. Ednan, and his fellow police officers were portrayed as national heroes when they managed to defend their police station and defeated

the communists who heavily outnumbered them. His respond was: "It's a government movie, isn't it? Why am I not surprised?" I could not help but smile at his comment for after all, the victors usually write history.

Another vendor who was listening to my description of the movie was in deep thought about what I said, asking if I had seen the movie, when a third vendor interjected, "Once we were operating around Gunung (Mount) Gading.¹⁶ We were quite sure the British special unit was aware of our whereabouts. Their camp was stationed less than a kilometer from us, further up on the slopes. In fact their helicopters frequently flew over our hideouts but they would leave us alone."

"You mean you were aware of their station further up the slopes and there was no attempt to attack them? You know, hit-and-run tactics." I queried.

"No, we did not. There was no order to attack them, not against a special unit equipped with heavy machine guns and helicopters. Later we were told to move to another area," he replied rather flatly.

"So, did you have battles with the soldiers?" I asked.

He looked at another vendor who now took up a stool next to me. "Barely. When it happened it was usually when we were attacked, when the soldiers knew we were heavily outnumbered. Otherwise they would leave us alone. Mostly, we would ignore each other," he replied.

"Have you ever attacked or ambushed any soldiers?" I asked, reflecting on what Yeo and his buddies had told me.

¹⁶ Gunung Gading is located on the northwest of Sarawak and part of this mountain range falls on the Indonesian side of Borneo.

“Well ... only once. Once we ambushed a *lori* (truck). We cut a few trees down to block the path, and when it stopped, we fired at them,” another vendor chipped in this time.

“Did you kill any of the soldiers inside the *lori*?” I asked but neither of them would answer. A few days earlier, the same vendor told me his division (the SPGF) had gone “underground” in the early 1960s and had not “come out” (meaning come out of the jungle or surrender) until 1975. Some of his comrades had not “come out” until 1976 or 1977. It was hard to imagine that for almost ten years he had only been involved in one offensive attack.

Another vendor joined in to comment on my earlier remark: “The truth is that there was a lot of sitting around. We would make our daily patrol just as the soldiers did theirs. The whole idea was to get by another day without getting killed. You need to understand what it was like living in the jungle. After a while the only thing that occupied your mind was to survive. To get out alive! We all knew it was only a matter of time before we would have to leave the jungle.”

“Are you referring to surrendering? Were you aware of what happened to Fong Cheok Chee and the treaty in 1974 before you all finally surrendered in 1975?” I asked. At this point I was hoping they might reveal to me their real feelings about Fong and the whole affair surrounding the Sri Aman Treaty.

He winked and spoke with an evasive obscurity: “We heard rumors about hundreds of our comrades at the [then] Third Division surrendering to the authority but like I say, they were mostly rumors. Nobody was sure. There were plenty of stories, mostly *rojak* [a Malay term for “mixed up”]. You have to understand. We were roaming in the jungle in our individual cell units, at the most five comrades. Communications with other cell units were

infrequent and when it happened, it was mainly through our cell leaders or those higher up. You must know about the nature of our operation from him,” nodding towards the direction of Chao’s lot. Upon saying this, I noticed there was a sudden twitch on his face as he threw a glance at the two other vendors, perhaps feeling sorry for something he should not have said or commented upon.

I recall reading the literature of the CCOs about how hierarchical their organizations were and their strict directives prohibiting communicating unless directed by a superior. I wanted to ask if he was referring to Chao Kui Ho as one of those “higher up” and how he might have kept the information from his comrades in regards to the treaty but I didn’t. I was glad my curiosity did not win over my better judgment. I was getting along extremely well with Chao at that point.

The vendor tried to justify his comment and by then I noticed his voice was getting a little hoarse. Clearing his throat, he added: “We knew the odds were against us. We had inadequate weapons and were heavily outnumbered. Furthermore, not only did we have to worry about the soldiers, there were other dangers as well - animals, snakes, crocodiles, insects. You had pythons that could swallow up an entire water buffalo and there were plenty of poisonous snakes, spiders, and scorpions. We tried to stay alive. They [the soldiers] were doing the same thing. They were out there facing the elements as well and they wanted to stay alive.”

They all laughed when another vendor who had just joined in our conversations interjected, “They needed to be alive to get paid.” As a way to get back at the soldiers, I have heard on several occasions how they would refer to them as mercenaries. More than once they have raised this remark: “Are you familiar with the Ghurkhas? You know, the

ones with turbans. Do you really think they were loyal British subjects?’” I remembered reading Amitav Ghosh’s *Crystal Palace* and how similar his description of Indian soldiers all throughout the British Empire was when he wrote: “In this sense all soldiers, in all modern armies, were mercenaries. ... soldiering was a job, a profession, a career. Every soldier was paid and there was none who was not a mercenary (2001: 301). Each time I had a conversation with these clothing vendors about their experience in the jungle, I would find it difficult to picture them as former communists engaged in guerilla warfare. They seemed like ordinary people trying to earn a living, something that was getting harder by the day.

I once asked Chao why the SPGF (meaning him and his comrades) did not surrendered immediately after the Sri Aman Treaty. Did it have to do with his reservations, if any, concerning the treaty and Fong’s complicity in it? I realized immediately that I should not have mentioned Fong’s name as Chao had proven to be profoundly reluctant, even indifferent, when it came to talking about Fong or his supporters with me. I am not suggesting he was oblivious or even uninterested but indifference had provided a tactical shelter of a certain kind for him so he would not have to openly expose his discomfort with Fong’s complicity in the Sri Aman Treaty. After forcing a smile and thinking about my question, he offered a rather evasive, if not poetic, reply: “Every *hao zi* (in Mandarin: mouse) has a home but not all of them leave their home at the same time. Some in fact never left.” *Hao zi* is the Mandarin word for mice, as opposed to *lao tzu*, for rat. In the Chinese languages, there is a different between a mouse and a rat. To call someone a rat has a negative connotation.

There is something philosophical and euphemistic in his statement. First of all, by identifying himself and his comrades as *hao zi*, meaning mice, he was rejecting the

derogatory term *swa-ngiau-chee* that meant for jungle rats. Secondly, there was an admission on his part that after being forced to go underground, they, the former communists, had come to accept the jungle as their home, and when they had to leave their "home," they would refer to the act as "coming out," instead of using the word "surrendering." And lastly, it was certainly true that not all of them surrendered at the same time and in fact, some never did. Once the government declared that the communist problem was over in Sarawak in the mid-1990s, the presence of a very small group of communists still living in the jungle or at large within the general society was no longer considered a threat to national security. As a matter of fact, two of my interlocutors never "surrendered" to the authorities, in the sense that they were never forced to officially sign a letter of confession as most of the communists did when they surrendered during the 1960s and 1970s.

Let me note that in no way am I suggesting that throughout my fieldwork, whenever I met with these clothing vendors we would talk about their combat experience. In fact, these were rare occasions. The usual replies whenever I pursued my queries along this line were: "Come on my friend, what is there to tell? That happened a long time ago. A lot has changed since." Or has it? Memory - whether it is remembering, recollecting, reminiscing, or retelling - is a complex thing, especially when it involves memories of violence. The collective memories, to use Halbwachs term, of a society, especially on issues of violence, differ in focus and intensity depending on the prevailing social and historical context. For example, in repressive societies, when the population does not want to remember a certain past, we talk about not only a loss of social or historical continuity, characterized by the language of loss - "rupture," "fissure," and "fracture" - but also, a loss of openness and

integrity. Seen in a different light, one might say that it is something people in those repressive societies have forgotten to remember. Drawing on Nietzsche's (1874) essay, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," Edward Casey (1987: 1-4) suggests that, like the bovine, people are capable of "forgetting what it is to remember," even to the point of having "forgotten [their] own forgetting."

In describing about the violence suffered in Japan and China in the twentieth century, Kurt Radtke (1999: 19) points out "Having gone through traumatic events, societies need to 'go on living' ... 'forgetting' is one way to achieve this." Similarly, in describing a Javanese way of "forgetting what it is to remember," Robert Goodfellow (1999:11) argues that in Indonesia, "forgetting has been both active and passive. For those who were implicated as participants in the violence during the past [four] decades, they would assume a position of passive silence. However, this was very different for the victims when they needed to work hard at constructing the means of forgetting the memory of violence and brutality." When it comes to the experiences these clothing vendors went through during the 1960s and 1970s in Sarawak, it would seem to me that they did not just "forget" about it, they were actively silent about it, even to the point of a loss of their openness and integrity.

Looking back at my notes, these former communists who were now clothing vendors at the Tong Fong Hawker Centre were the ones who talked the least about their experiences in the jungle, but in many ways it seems that their stories were more genuine. I also realized that I was constantly bombarding them with my questions about their experience in the jungle whenever I had the opportunity. Perhaps this was affected by the timing of my encounters with Yeo and his buddies who were always talking about their combat experiences. Some of my questions to these former communists were: Have you ever been

directly fired upon by the soldiers or vice versa? Did you ever injure or kill any soldiers? What about those “peoples courts”? Were you ever involved in one of them? Did you mainly operate in the jungle or did you come out to urban areas once in a while? Did you ever receive help from the residents at the “new villages” and which villages were these? How did you live your life in the jungle? How did you manage? And so on.

Even when some of vendors had already revealed to me their “limited” combat experiences during the course of my fieldwork, they preferred to talk about other topics. They would remain extremely reserved, much to my disappointment as I thought I had gained their trust and acceptance. There were a few times when I tried to incite them by stating that I had heard such and such a story from my other group of interlocutors, former members of the NKPA, their comrades in competition, so to speak. It never worked. They remained uninterested in offering their own version to either contradict or add to the stories. It would not be incorrect to suggest that there was still a certain level of mistrust, even jealousy, they had towards some of these comrades of the NKPA, especially the few individuals who were currently doing extremely well economically and politically. They would joke from time to time about these wealthy former communists by referring back to their earlier statement, “If you want to be communist, you must aim to be the captain. ... not merely as a private. The higher you were, the more you got.”

Unlike these clothing vendors, Yeo and his buddies would go straight into their personal combat experience or would discuss incidents they knew of as soon as I informed them what kind of stories I was most interested in. It is true that these two groups of interlocutors were situated at different parts of Sarawak during the Cold War and that they were under very

different kind of leaderships. The NKPA operated at the former Third Division of Sarawak¹⁷ and they were a much bigger organization in terms of membership compared to the SPGF. The SPGF were mainly “moving about” within the former First Division of Sarawak. The different Divisions of Sarawak might even have had a different make-up of Allied counterparts, battlefield intensity, and numbers of Allied soldiers, not to mention their Indonesian “partial” ally after 1966. I mentioned “partial” because even as it was historically recorded that the Indonesian armies were collaborating with the Allied forces in hunting down the Sarawak communists deep in the Kalimantan jungles, it would not be wrong to suggest that there was a certain degree of mistrust between them since Indonesia and the Philippines were both vying for the annexation of Sarawak and Sabah into their own territories even after they had become part of Malaysia in 1963.

However, I remained somewhat puzzled about the different combat story frequencies the two groups of former communists had in their narratives. Could it be attributed to differences in geography, the structure, and leadership of the two organizations or did it have to do with the interlocutors’ willingness to talk and, I suspect, their tendency or desire to exaggerate their accounts? I have to admit that during my fieldwork I did develop a closer relations with the clothing vendors than with Yeo and his buddies. My bias had to do with several factors: my growing friendship with Chao Kui Ho who was not only the former leader of these clothing vendors but was now a vendor himself; my sympathy with their current occupation as clothing vendors, an existence in which it was getting more and more difficult to make ends meet; the fact that I saw the vendors more than the other group since the centre is located next to my other field site, the STC bus station; and the fact that they

¹⁷ The former Third Division of Sarawak is the largest division in Sarawak. It has since been divided into the Third, Fifth, and Sixth Divisions of Sarawak.

were more reserved and careful in their accounts, giving the impression that their stories had a higher degree of credibility. so that, I was less suspicious of exaggerations.

Most of the time when the clothing vendors were in the mood to have a conversation with me, they much preferred to talk about the United States. Throughout my fieldwork, I was reminded how “Westernized” I had become whenever my opinions did not synchronize with those of my interlocutors. In a sense many of them would invoke my “foreignness,” but not without pity – the fact that I had been “away” for so long, the fact that I was studying in an American university, the fact that I was in Anthropology, a discipline they were not entirely convinced about regarding its usefulness or practicability.

Looking back, I wonder if Yeo and his buddies were putting on a rehearsed performance each time I saw them. I did not record any account from them asking about the U.S., or even New York, a city that would generate an almost automatic response with anybody I spoke with in Sarawak as soon as I introduced myself. With the clothing vendors, throughout my fieldwork I was constantly bombarded with their cynicism towards the U.S., especially with the “number one” mentality the U.S. has of itself and its responsibility to police the rest of the world. Whenever there was any opportunity to joke about the U.S., rest assured most of my interlocutors would seize upon it. I remember one afternoon when a clothing vendor brought a few local Chinese newspapers over to me as I was chatting with his neighbor. He had a huge grin on his face when he approached me, asking, “Why is it that your *Mei Kuo* [United States of America] is so preoccupied with one little Cuban boy? That is all we read about your *Mei Kuo* nowadays,” showing me different newspapers. Note how he was identifying the U.S. as mine, that I was more American than Malaysian.

I reminded him I still carried a Malaysian passport. He wasn't listening and continued, "Your *Mei Kuo* is treating this boy as if he were a toy, a game in some kind of a tug-of-war."

"Well," I replied, "don't you think it has anything to do with Cuba?"

"Of course. It has everything to do with Cuba, with communism. But the fact remained that your *Mei Kuo* just can't seem to leave others alone. *Mei Kuo* is such a busy body! It involves itself in just about anything in the world, even the custody battle over the life of one little boy from Cuba. Doesn't *Mei Kuo* have more important things to deal with?"

This conversation soon attracted the attention of other vendors and since there were no customers to attend to, they were only too eager to join in the tirade, commenting about how idiotic the whole saga seemed to be while flipping through the newspapers. At some point, another vendor commented philosophically and with a certain historical accuracy, "*Mei Kuo* created two Vietnams, two Koreas, installed dictatorial regimes everywhere, Indonesia for example, and has been preventing the unification of the two Chinas." He paused and then continued rather poignantly, "I wonder if there should also be more than one *Mei Kuo*: A White *Mei Kuo*, a Black *Mei Kuo*, and so on?"

At this instant, Chao Kui Ho, who normally did not mingle with the rest of the vendors, his former comrades, smiled at the comments and offered a rather philosophical take on the U.S. before heading back to his lot: "*Mei Kuo* is constantly criticizing and meddling with the affairs of other nations but look at the country. It has a long history of slavery and it is far from emancipating its Black populations. It has a very high crime rate, poverty, and they probably have more homelessness than any industrialized country, perhaps even more than

most poor countries. With all these, *Mei Kuo* still expects the rest of the world to look at it as the model of peace, democracy, and human progress.”

Many of these clothing vendors who were also former member of the SPGF, hinted to me that they had questioned whether their comrades from the NPKU had surrendered to the authority during the Sri Aman Treaty on their own accord or whether Fong and his three brothers had coerced them. They also hinted that Fong’s three brothers were collaborating with the Special Branch, the department of the police handling all sorts of subversive elements, including the communists. Some of them even went so far as to suggest that Fong’s brothers had tortured their own comrades at the police stations in the then Third Division of Sarawak. I also heard similar remarks from a few individuals when I was at *Simanggang, Bau, Serian*, and elsewhere. In many ways, even though none of the clothing vendors ever openly uttered the word, it did not take much to say that they thought of Fong as a “*choo kuo*,” in Mandarin, a sell-out or a traitor, literally “a running dog.” They thought the same about some of Fong’s supporters as well, especially those who are currently doing extremely well economically as well as politically. Some of Fong’s comrades are now active members of the SUPP, a party that has ceased to be a radical left wing party but instead has become an important component of the Alliance government. Some of the clothing vendors as well as a few bus conductors and drivers would sometime quip when we talked about the SUPP, “The party has gone mainstream, they have taken the middle-path, softened up.” Some would even go as far as suggesting that the SUPP is now a party for the rich.

In contrast, Yeo and his buddies would often praise Fong for guiding them towards a normal and decent life, a life that conforms to the “peace and prosperity” of the nation. I

often felt a little uneasy when I heard such comments but all I could do was listen. I learned quite early on during my fieldwork not to form a quick judgment on the things I heard, at least not in front of my interlocutors. If there was one incident that brought this home, it involved their opponent, Chao Kui Ho. This happened one afternoon at the Tong Fong Hawker Centre. I was having a conversation with a vendor when I heard someone cursing loudly a few stalls away. When I looked over, there was a middle-aged woman screaming at Chao Kui Ho. As I walked over trying to figure out what was happening, I noticed that there was only one other vendor trying to calm her down. The rest remained quiet at a distance. All that I could understand was that she was accusing Chao of the death of her son. I recall that I was shocked at her accusation but at the same time, I was puzzled as to why the other vendors were silent, seemingly at a loss as to what they should do. Was her accusation true? Could Chao have committed such an act, I asked myself.

Before my ethnographic fieldwork, I had read in the archives reports in the newspapers on what was called the “people’s trial” or “people’s court” during the 1960s. These were trials in which a comrade was charged as a spy or an informer of the government and these trials usually took place in some remote area, usually at rural basketball courts. The usual sentence, if found guilty by the “people” of the charge, was death (see, for example, *The Sarawak Gazette*, December 1963; *Sarawak Information Service*, 51/63).

For almost a week I couldn’t bring myself to talk with Chao while I tried to gather more information. In a sense I was afraid to confront him with the truth and my position towards him was momentarily shattered. It was only after I was given snippets of the overall stories by some clothing vendors as well as by some bus conductors and drivers that I began to catch a glimpse of the complexity of the situation during the Cold War. Apparently, this

woman's son was put on trial by his fellow comrades for being a spy and was sentenced to death. Chao, being one of the leaders, might have given consent to the sentence. Even so, there was still another question that was bothering me. I kept asking myself why it took so many years for this woman to finally approach him. Even if her son were killed towards the end of the Cold War in Sarawak, say, in the early eighties, it would still have been more than twenty years ago. Why now? Did it take her all these years to put the facts together as to who was responsible for the death of her son? Or, one might argue that her anger with the circumstances that led to the death of her son was simply too much for her to engage in any kind of "active forgetting," to use Goodfellow's (1999) phrase, so that she could live on.

However, I can only speculate about the truth of the entire story since none of the people I approached at the bus station wanted to expand on it. I remember feeling very uncomfortable trying to ask them about what, how and where the incident took place. When I tried to bring up the story two weeks later, thinking that some of them might feel less tense, all I was told was that the incident did happen but that I should let it rest. What is past is past. It was then their turn to be passively silent of the tragic event. One vendor told me politely, "Forgive me but please ...". As I am reading through my notes, I am not entirely sure if Chao was responsible for the incident or that he alone was to blame for the death. The fact is that I simply did not have the courage or the decency to pry any further during that time.

I recalled one evening, a month after this incident, a bus driver everybody calls "Tall" Tan (he is quite tall by local standard), lectured me that I must understand the complexity of the situation during the Cold War before I could even begin to fully comprehend the stories I have been told. Quite serious, he said, "You need to understand that many communists were

hunted down or killed because they were betrayed by *choo kuo* (running dogs). Many that were arrested, even killed by the authorities were not even communists but guess who would determined their fate? *Choo kuo*, of course! They handed out names to the Special Branch. If you ask me, sure ... these *choo kuo* deserved to die. But then again, many simply did not have any choices, since they had sons, brothers, fathers, or relatives who were in prison. They were force to tell, and they even lied and made up names of people.” Soon I began to see Tan at the bus station during the early evening hours. It is hard to imagine the contrast of the bus station during the evening hours, completely deserted as compared to the busy atmosphere during the daytime. These quiet evenings would also prove to be the most convenient time for Tan to tell me stories of communism in Sarawak, but he would always reiterate that he was never one of the *swa ngiau chee*, insisting: “Make sure you put that down on your notes.”

Tan was the only person who was willing to tell me about the death of his siblings. Usually I would hear about it not from the deceased’s sibling(s) but it from someone else. One evening he revealed to me that both of his elder brothers had been communists and that both of them had been shot and killed by the soldiers in their village in the coastal area. He sincerely believed his brothers’ own comrades had sold them out but he did not have the proof, or perhaps, he did not want to reveal it to me for his own reasons. One of his brothers was in his early twenties and the other was only eighteen. Shaking his head, he said, “That is why I refused to join. You have no idea how many times they approached me ... but after seeing what happened to my brothers I knew there was no hope. They were fighting a losing battle. There was absolutely no future in the cause.”

A few months later, during one of his days off, he took me to the village where he grew up, one of the *Hai Wai*, the coastal villages. He still had some relatives who now occupied his parents' house. As soon as we reached there, he led me to the spots where his brothers were shot, within less than a hundred meters from the house. This was one of the villages that were considered to be "communist influenced" during the Cold War. The Chinese residents of these villages still retain the name *Hai Wai* instead of the officially designated Malay names of individual *kampongs* (villages) like Atapak, Jemukan, Asa Jaya, and so on. This phenomena of retaining the original names of a place or space – whether they are Chinese or indigenous names - is quite common in Sarawak, something I will touch upon in the next chapter.

My conversations with Tall Tan were helpful for me to catch a glimpse of the complexity of the situation during the Cold War. Since then I would always remind myself that I was not there when it had happened. I did not experience what had transpired during that period. As I now look at my field notes, I realize there are certain things we cannot ask or that it is best to leave within the realm of silence. Issues of my interlocutor's own complicity in the general scheme of things is one of them. For example, in the case of collaborating or selling out, or if an interlocutor did in fact sentence their comrades to death, how does the investigator ask about it?

By way of concluding

In Asad's (1994) article, "Ethnographic Representation, Statistics, and Modern Power," he cites two prominent anthropologists' descriptions (Condominas and Evans-Pritchard) on fieldwork as generating "a particular kind of experience" – our *rite of passage* – into becoming anthropologists (58). According to Condominas (1973: 2), fieldwork "transforms

each of us into true anthropologists. [But] before undertaking one's fieldwork, one needs a solid intellectual background, ... A minimum of human warmth and a certain openness are necessary in order to establish contact with others, and to maintain it" (cited by Asad, 1994: 59). Similarly, Evans-Pritchard (1951: 82) argues that the anthropologist "has to decide what is significant in what he observes and by his subsequent relation of his experiences to bring what is significant into belief" (cited by Asad, 1994: 59).

But as Asad points out, "it remains unclear whether it is through our embodiment of a certain solid intellectual background and/or a minimum of human warmth and openness during the fieldwork encounter that produces our ethnographic writing (1994: 83). This point will be especially feeble when we, as anthropologists, find ourselves in situations when our interlocutors represent the same powerful agendas we tend to critique. In this chapter, I try to show how the various interlocutors were engaged in cooperation and competition with each other and how some of them treated the researcher as a source of information, albeit at times negatively. Through all my interactions with these former communists I could not help but developed a bias towards certain groups. I would feel more comfortable spending time with Chao and his former comrades at the Tong Fong Hawker Centre. On the other hand, I had to hide my uneasiness, if not annoyance, whenever I had to deal with Yeo and his buddies, all of who still talked highly of Fong Cheok Chee or their comrades who were now wealthy businessmen and politically connected. Perhaps it was also because of the extreme nosiness of some of Fong's comrades that ignited my negativity towards them and as such persuaded me to suspect the level of exaggeration in their stories.

The narratives I have collected from all my interlocutors that form part of my general data will inevitably be filtered through a biased lens. Unless I am willing to incorporate

these biases in my ethnographic writing, how can my readers detect them? On the other hand, if, according to Vincent Crapanzano, the “line between conscious and less than conscious awareness of what one is doing is always difficult, if not impossible, to draw, can we ever know our bias? Can our readers know? Can our readers and we know if we write hypocritically, manipulatively, and politically?” (2000: 207).

As such, our “particular kind of experience” and its resulting ethnography is by itself a highly subjective production. As Asad (1994) has argued forcefully, when skeptics challenge such representations or ethnography, they usually argue in terms of a differential experience, much like those who employ “strong languages” in statistical arguments, thereby failing to question our particular kind of experience. Perhaps, says Asad, this is because “it is less easy to question the ethnographer’s [representation], ...partly because they are guaranteed by the ethnographer’s personal experience (she witnessed the character, the reader did not)” (77; emphasis original).

Furthermore, as Crapanzano points out, what is also missing from such challenges is that “they tend to ignore or sidestep the ‘lens’ of our morality and understanding that affects the way we look at the facts” (2000:207). In my case, perhaps some of the Marxist orientation I received from my department is a case in point. On one hand, Chao and his comrades were desperately trying to make ends meet and on the other their “adversaries” who supported their leaders who purportedly guided them into a life that conforms to the peace and stability of the nation. Their principal leader was now relatively well provided for. I was more sympathetic and in agreement with the former and was rather uneasy, if not critical, of the latter. However, there are also other factors that affected my subjectivity.

During my fieldwork, my position was also constantly shifting, and it was defined in part by the heterogeneous figuration of individuals with whom I interacted. Besides the subjective bias on the part of the researcher towards certain individuals (those like Fong who became the object of my critique, and those like Chao who became the object of my friendship and alliance), my positions with the “supporters” of these two individuals were never fixed. When some of Yeo’s buddies teased him about his heavy Teochiu slang when he spoke in Mandarin or Hakka, I couldn’t help become closer to them, but only at those instances. Similarly, and this was quite rarely, when one of Yeo’s buddies corrected him about certain names he was “dropping” in his narratives, I felt a sudden bond with that individual for his effort to hold Yeo’s inflated ego in check.

Similarly, I am not suggesting that I got along amicably with all the clothing vendors at the centre throughout my fieldwork. There was one particular vendor with whom I got along very well during the early phase of my fieldwork. In fact he was the first vendor I approached after I had met Chao and we had several lunches across from the centre. During this period our conversations were restricted to the purpose of my research and he seemed extremely interested in the United States. But as soon as I tried to get him to tell me about the Cold War, I noticed he began to distance himself from me. Not only that, as I found out from other vendors, he was also dissuading his immediate neighbors at the centre from talking with me. After that, each time I walked past his lot he would pretend not to notice me, making it uneasy for both of us. In the end, I did not manage to get any stories from him about the Cold War. Still, there were other characteristics that might easily have affected my interaction and feeling with each interlocutor. During our fieldwork, we are not entirely

partial, insensitive to the array of different mannerisms, tact, or other characteristics of our interlocutors that affect our rapport with them. The reverse is equally true.

In addition, there was the inter-subjective process of the researcher becoming an associate in their group(s), or a subject in their process of interaction or avoidance. In many ways, this will affect my reading of the data as I attempt to differentiate between experience and the articulation of experience, the performative (Austin, 1962), or to ask whether or how the articulation of experience was realized in the experience itself (Crapanzano, 2000). All of these can easily influence our trust in our interlocutors (and vice versa) and our evaluation of their credibility, which, in the final analysis affects the way the data speak to us. In short, following Evans-Pritchard's descriptions about fieldwork, how do I decide what is significant in what I observe and by my subsequent relation of this experience bring what is significant into belief? Clearly, this is not a straightforward enterprise that can be done without considering the issues of our morality and understanding issues that clearly determine what we consider as significant and worthwhile to write as well as who our intended readers are.

There is another issue involve here. By scrutinizing our intersubjectivities, it should be clear that one's positionality is constantly shifting, if not ambivalent and it is most definitely not determined by whether the anthropologist is an insider or an outsider. Seen in this light, one can argue that the positionality (insider/outsider) debate has the effect of sidestepping the key issue of subjectivity, namely, how is our subjectivity, or any subjectivity, construed; and how does it influence readers for readers to homogenize the Anthropologist's interlocutors, or the community she or he has studied? Furthermore, the insider/outsider debate also obscures the real meaning of the word "interlocutor." What might the

Anthropologist be referring to when he/she talks about an “interlocutor?” Does the word refer to the dialogue between the anthropologist and his/her “native” subject or does it refer to the dialogue between the anthropologist as author and his/her academic audiences? Or both? (Maranhao, 1993). These issues should also reverberate back to Anthropology’s handmaiden debate: that our scholarship cannot be viewed simply in reference to the authority of writing but in relation to a wider nexus of institutional and political regulation (Clifford, 1983; Rabinov, 1986; Asad, 1994; Chun, 2000). If anything else, these are clearly dangerous indicators of anthropological “subjectivity.”

Chapter Four: New Villages

“ Even if ... protests may be sincere and often fruitful, it makes protesting too easy for itself. ... The radicalism of these radicals would have more weight if it really penetrated the structure of reality, instead of issuing its decree from on high. How is everyday life to change, if even those whose vocation is to stir it up pay it no attention?”
(Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses*, 1998 [1929]: 101)

“What is there to tell? One might go to prison for telling such things” a bus conductor once scolded me when I asked if she was familiar with the life in the new villages during the 1960s and 1970s. She was the first employee from the Kuching Transport Company (KTC) that I met when I got on the bus one morning after I felt that I had enough reasonable archival research to embark on the other part of my fieldwork. A few days after this encounter I found out from her colleagues that she did indeed have a lot to tell me, that is if she were willing to, about life at the new villages. They confided to me that not only did she come from one of the villages I was interested in but that both her father and brother had been killed in the village. Needless to say, I would seek out other similar tragic stories throughout the remainder of my fieldwork.

From the stories I have collected, systematic and random raids during the evening curfew hours were a constant terror to the residents of the new villages. Physical as well as psychological tortures and deaths were real experiences lived by these people for more than ten years, from the mid 1960s to the late 1970s. This chapter deals with the history of dislocation to these new villages. In essence, I am dealing with aspects of how dislocation and trauma shaped the lives of those that were forced to live in these new villages - how families were divided and how they coped with that dislocation and trauma. I am also concerned with how they rebuilt their lives, what resources, both physical and mental, they drew upon, and how that shaped the new villages and towns they settled in.

The manifestations of certain vocabularies in the lives of my interlocutors, their refraction from the wielders of power, so to speak, in dealing with the social realities both during the Cold War period as well as in the contemporary context is the underlying theme of this chapter. Narration of random as well as systematic violence experienced by my interlocutors, their family members and friends will weave in and out of the texts of this chapter, much like the asymmetrical warp and weft of an Iban *ikat* (a traditional Iban weaving). It was my hope that such an approach would encourage my interlocutors and others to raise important questions about the Cold War in Sarawak, in particular themes centering around the notion of what was remembered, what was retold, what was forgotten and why, or the reluctance to speak about the past. Correspondingly, their obtuse responses to my probing also gave rise to a number of questions, namely: should we leave the past as past, should old wounds be reopened, or should the grief of the past be allowed to pass from memory into history?

Controlled (Re) Settlements

Without prior warning, in July 5th 1965, the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Abdul Razak, announced that the resettlement of people living in “communist-influenced areas” in Sarawak would start immediately (*Sarawak Gazette*, 09/30/65, herein SG). By “communist-influenced areas,” the government was essentially referring to some rural areas that were predominantly populated by Hakka small holders growing cash and subsistence crops.¹ Various operations were immediately launched to round up certain Chinese communities and force them into controlled settlements.

¹ According to the 1947 Census, 83% of the Chinese in Serian District and 89% in Bau District was of Hakka origin.

According to BA thesis written by Leslie Porrit (1991), within a three-day period, from July 5th to the 7th, 1965, some 1,200 families, close to 8,000 rural Chinese, most of whom were Hakka smallholders, were forcibly resettled into controlled settlements with high wire-mesh, barbed-wire capped and flood-lit security fences around the perimeters. Sentries patrolled the settlements continuously and a dusk to dawn curfew was in force until the mid-1970s. Some representatives of the Sarawak United Peoples Party who visited these villages described these controlled areas as “more like a concentration camp” (SG, 07/15/65). To no one’s surprise, two days after these remarks, the Police issued six “restricted orders” to members of the SUPP banning them from visiting these controlled areas or any place or area near other controlled areas. By then a 24 hour curfew had been imposed in the controlled areas prohibiting all 8,000 Chinese living in these “protected” areas to leave the settlements (SG, 07/17/65).

These resettlement schemes in Sarawak were not without precedent. More than half a million dispersed squatters and small landholders, mostly Chinese, were forcibly resettled by British and Malayan military during the Emergency in Malaya during the 1950s into some five hundred fenced and curfewed resettlement camps (Strauch, 1981). At the time Malaya was still a British colony, but the Emergency lasted until 1960, three years after Malaysia became independent in 1957. It is important to note that the Sarawak resettlement into new villages occurred less than two years after it became part of Malaysia. These operations and relocation schemes contradicted the supposedly “neutral” finding by United Nations observers in 1963: that the overwhelming populations of Sarawak supported the Greater Malaysia proposal.²

² Obviously, this was against the evidence on the ground. For starter, there were more than two thousand anti “Malaysia” demonstrators protesting the United Nations team when it arrived in Sarawak to ascertain

Although there were many other ethnic groups living in these “communist-influenced areas” in Sarawak, resettlements to the controlled areas were restricted only to the Chinese (Porrit, 1991), especially the Hakkas. As I have mentioned earlier, downplaying non-Chinese involvements with communist activities was central to federal and state discourse during the Cold War. It is not difficult to notice that that was an age old *divide et impera* strategy, dividing up the different ethnic groups in Sarawak whose alliances could threaten the wielders of power, especially a possible alliance between the indigenes and the Chinese, the two largest populations in Sarawak. If an indigene were suspected of being a communist or a communist sympathizer, the usual course of action was to place the individual under house arrest, restricting him to the confines of his longhouse or village. His Chinese counterpart would suffer imprisonment at what was euphemistically called “correction centres.” Normally, the house arrests for the indigenes would only last no longer than a month.³

When reading the *Sarawak Gazette* (from 1946 to 1980), *Sarawak by the Week* issued by the Sarawak Information Service (from 1956 to 1966), and the *Information Department Monitoring Reports on Chinese newspapers* (from 1956 to 1975), I find it interesting that reports of indigenes being arrested or held under house arrest in their longhouses could only be found in Chinese newspapers. A report from the *Sarawak Vanguard* dated August 17th, 1968, states, “White Terror operation: more than 30 Dayaks were arrested in a jungle military/police operation in the Second Division – in the

the views of the people on “Malaysia.” It was even reported in the Sarawak Information Service’s monitoring of Chinese newspapers (33 63) that anti “Malaysia” demonstrators were waiting at the Kuching airport as well as in the town of Sibuan and Miri to “welcome” the U.N. team. When news of the U.N. pro “Malaysia” report became public, several anti-Malaysia riots broke out in Sibuan, Miri, and several other smaller towns (SIS, 35 63). The SUPP, the largest political party during that time, was anti “Malaysia,” blaming the Greater Malaysia Plan for the internal dissension in Sarawak (SIS, 21/63).

Engkilili/Lubok Antu area. 19 of them were *Tuai Rumahs*.⁴ The arrested Dayaks were said to be strong supporters of [the] SUPP (some were Executive Committee of SUPP Engkilili Branch). Residents in the 26 longhouses were disallowed to leave their house and no outsiders were allowed to enter. ... The arrests of these democracy fighters meant that there was no more existence of even a vestige of democracy.” Incidentally, I did not come across any report of any Malay being arrested or suspected as a communist in the archives. To this day, according to the national archive board, the communist problem during the Cold War period was still considered a Chinese problem (Pusat Arakib Negara, 1994).

Even so, it is incorrect to say the communist problem during the Cold War was a Chinese problem. After all, the Chinese communities in Sarawak have always been very diverse and in constant competition with each other. As anthropologist T'ien Ju'Kang (1953) has pointed out, there have always been tremendous conflicts among the different Chinese speech groups in Sarawak. The “old guards,” the Teochiu and Hokkien merchants in Kuching, have always been wary of possible inroads by the rural Hakkas into their business realms. In fact, some sectors of the Chinese population in the urban sectors were fully supportive of the government's propaganda against communism. The Teochiu Association in Kuching, for example, even carried out an advertisement in the Sarawak Gazette announcing their full support for Operation Hammer the day after it was announced (07/08/65). Operation Hammer was one of the first operations designed to

³ I owe this piece of information to a certain *penghulu* (chief) who openly told me that he was once a communist.

⁴ *Tuai Rumah* is title given to someone given charge of the longhouse. This title is slightly lower than the *Ketua Kampong* (Chief) in their traditional ranking.

round up rural Chinese populations into controlled villages along the Kuching/Serian Road.

In fact, one can trace these conflicts back to the Brookes regime. During the Bau Revolt in 1857, local Hokkien and Teochew merchants in Kuching were instrumental in helping the Brookes against the Hakkas *Kongsi* miners from Bau (Chew, 1990). It was widely rumored among my interlocutors as well as among certain Hokkien and Teochiu merchants along the Main Bazaar that the tremendous wealth and influence of one of the richest Chinese families in Kuching, the Ong family (Hokkiens), come about because they were harboring James Brooke (the *White Rajah*) in their house from the Hakka miners when Kuching was burned to the ground. Others gave even more details, insisting that James Brooke was hiding underneath Ong Eng Lai's bed during the Bau revolt and that this particular bed is now displayed at the Sarawak Museum.⁵

According to Craig Lockard's study of the social history of the Chinese communities in Kuching, the Chinese tended to form regional communities with each speaking mutually unintelligible languages. Their degree of contact with other Chinese and non-Chinese, for that matter, was in most cases a strategic consideration based on economic and political necessity (1973; see also, T'ien, 1953 for a similar view).⁶ Although economics can be instrumental in determining the nature of social contract, other considerations such as ideology, regional affiliation, Chinese association, religion, English versus Mandarin speakers, class, the policies of the State, and colonial policies were equally important. To be sure, interests and loyalties were multiple and often

⁵ It is true that there is a display of a traditional Chinese bedroom at the museum but there is no indication on the display that it belongs to the Ong family. Needless to say, there is no indication that the *White Rajah* used to hide underneath the bed.

mutually contradictory, and solidarity and factiousness formed both horizontally and vertically.

This said, although the origins of ethnic conflict can be traced to the colonial past, its continued presence today must be attributed to post-colonial policies that manipulated ethnic issues to benefit the Malay elite in their drive for more and more economic power (Gomez, 1990; Gomez and Jomo, 1997). It is against this backdrop of local politics and the possibility of ways of ethnic and language group manipulation that allowed the State to encapsulate certain Chinese speech groups. Although some have argued that the various operations and resettlement schemes succeeded in preventing a certain section of the Chinese population from contributing to covert activities (Asli, 1993; Reduan, 1993; Pusat Arakib Negara, 1994), the most obvious (or serious) consequence of the settlement campaign was to legitimize second-class status of the Hakka population in Sarawak.

Some critics contend that the actions taken were an extreme form of communalism stemming from the fears of the governing elite about a potentially powerful dissident ethnic minority group, the rural Hakkas. I would not contest that there were possible grounds for such fear during the 1960s. As T'ien has pointed out, "historically the Hakka speaking people have a long history not only as farmers and sojourners in China, but also as reformists" (1953: 14, see also Hsu, 1983, Constable, 1996). But there are other interpretations of the Hakkas both in China and elsewhere, depending on whom one asks. As a Hakka myself, I have heard numerous interpretations of my ancestry, from being the imperial seal carriers to the most marginalized peasants in south China. Returning to the situation in Sarawak, I would argue that the extreme action was more of a means of

⁹ It is ironic that even as Lockard sets out to challenge Furnival's long prevailing plural society thesis (1939), his final analysis inadvertently falls right back into it – that it is still economics that determined the

silencing a certain section of the SUPP that happened to be getting a great deal of support from the rural population.

Let's not forget that we are talking about late 1950s and early 1960s. Immigration from China had virtually ceased since the Japanese Occupation. By 1965, the majority of the younger generations of Sarawak Chinese were locally born and/or educated. But the stigma remained. Politically, there was the conflict of living in a society where communism was proscribed and being Chinese made one an automatic suspect. During the early 1960s, the majority of the Chinese population in Sarawak strived for self-rule and was opposed to the Greater Malaysia Plan (U.S. Information Agency, R-118-63 [AF], 1963). As such, after becoming part of Malaysia in 1963, the idea of independence was lost as Sarawak moved from a colonial to a neocolonial entity.

Another important development, or element, that shaped the consciousness of the majority of the Chinese population in Sarawak during the Cold War was the Chinese newspapers. They were very instrumental in affecting their Chinese-educated audience's attitude towards the Alliance government. The government was fully aware of this since most, if not all, of the Chinese newspapers were deregistered or banned at one point or another, only to resurface under different names (Lim, 1970). News of arrests, hunger strikes of political detainees at the correction centers, SUPP annual celebrations, last minute cancellations of permits by the police of these events after they have been approved, and any other issues involving the SUPP were covered daily in the Chinese newspapers. In fact, these newspapers still play a very important role in the current settings in terms of disseminating news and viewpoints for their Chinese-educated readers. I often witnessed bus conductors and drivers, despite their busy working

degree of interaction among different Chinese communities.

schedules, reading the early or afternoon editions of the various Chinese newspapers. The same was true for the clothing vendors at the Ban Hock Hawker Centre.

Besides local events, these newspapers were the source of information about world events, in particular events that were unfolding in the former Indo-China during the Cold War. Obviously, the U.S. anti-communist campaign influenced events in Sarawak as well as the region. Readers of these newspapers were also exposed to indicators like the standard or cost of living, routinely published by the Chinese newspapers. Every reader was aware of the role China played as a major provider of rice and other foodstuffs to Sarawak. China was also a major importer of rubber from Sarawak. As the *See Hua Daily News* reported: "China needs great quantity of rubber. To trade with China will improve the livelihood of Sarawakians in the country" (03/01/68). Other countries that were importing rubber from Sarawak include the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, all of which had communist regimes. A headline on the *Chinese Daily News* read: "Good news for rubber trade – China, the Soviet Union, and Yugoslavia to buy rubber from Sarawak" (01/27/68).

The Chinese newspapers also commented on the relatively insignificant role played by Western countries in the general welfare of Sarawak, and this probably made Sarawakians critical of their pro-Western Alliance government. For instance, the general public was dismayed and angry when the Federal government in Kuala Lumpur and the State government in Sarawak decided to boycott certain items as well as to impose higher import duties on goods, from China (*International Times*, 7/11/70). As one newspaper reminded its reader on its headline: "Confrontation between East and West is not fought

there but in Third World's turfs. This will never be beneficial to Third World" (*See Hua Daily News*, 02/14/68).

News of China and the rest of the communist nations continued to captivate the imagination of the Chinese-educated population in Sarawak. China's successful launching of its atomic bomb in 1964 was widely advertised and celebrated among the Chinese populations in Sarawak (*Sarawak Vanguard*, 10/17/64). Every local Chinese newspaper dedicated its front page to this event. A few years later, news of China's launching of her first satellite on April 24th, 1970 created much joy among the ethnic Chinese population in Sarawak. *The International Times*, *See Hua Daily*, and all the other Chinese newspapers in Sarawak dedicated nearly their entire front pages for this news. *The International Times* even reported this story with big pictures and red letters that read: "China proudly enters into the era of space. She becomes a strong space nation just by a leap and the power of her rocket has worried the U.S. ... The Soviet Union considers that China's influence over the Afro-Asian and Latin American countries is bound to be strengthened" (27/04/70). *The Chinese Daily News* headlines read: "China enters into the Space-Age elite group." (27/04/70). If anything else, these events gave these newspapers an added impetus to criticize the true intentions of the United Nations. *The Chinese Daily News* article went on to criticize the international committee by stating, "Now that China has emerged as a nuclear power, it is really unreasonable that she is still kept outside the door of the United Nations."

Because of such politics, living in Sarawak for most of the Chinese population, especially for the rural Hakkas, was full of contradictions, suspicion, and danger. In this context, a political outlet was found through the formation of the SUPP in 1959. As

political scientist Michael Leigh puts it, the SUPP provided a focal point for the “angry young Chinese” (Leigh, 1974: 15). It is no coincident that most of these displaced “angry young Chinese” who managed to escape from the atrocities at the rural areas, including the new villages, joined the SOC, and by extension, became members or supporters of the SUPP.

Barely one year after the foundation of the SUPP, the Legislative Council of the Alliance government promulgated the “Restricted Residence Ordinance,” giving the Attorney General arbitrary power over any political activity in the state. To express its disgust and total opposition to the ordinance, the SUPP organized rallies to “mourn the death of democracy” at its party headquarter in Kuching. About 5,000 people attended the rally wearing black armband as a sign of mourning. A black paper coffin with the word “democracy” written on it was placed on stage as if in a real mourning ceremony. Many fiery speeches condemning the ordinance was made by party leaders and the ceremony was followed by a procession on the streets of Kuching and ended with a “burial” process. Similar rallies were held in Sibul, Miri, Simanggang, and Engkilili (Teng and Ngieng, 1990:30-31). Events like these became “sites of memory” that were often invoked by my Chinese interlocutors when they reminisced about the SUPP of the past and compared it to its present as part of the Alliance government.

The government responded with accusations of communist infiltration into the SUPP and with many arrests. These arrests could not be timelier, since they also served to deprive the SUPP of candidates for local and regional elections. In addition, the Alliance government adopted certain measures that forced people in the new villages to join the Sarawak Chinese Association (an alliance party) or else be branded as criminals, thus

losing the freedom of movement in and out of the new villages (*Sarawak Information Service reporting on Chinese newspapers*, 01/02/1966). That, in fact, was contrary to the regulations of controlled settlements that stipulated that no political parties or political activities were allowed within them. Over time, chaos and mistrust prevailed among the rural Chinese population within these controlled settlements, and rumors of spies and informers abounded.

The SUPP's popularity with ordinary Chinese people as well as its substantial indigenous support had to do with the above scenario. In essence, it stemmed from the inherent contradictions of living under politics of the Cold War that had little consideration for local conditions in Sarawak. Those politics had little to do with securing or obtaining moral and legal legitimization (Habermas, 1975 [1973]). The state ruled through coercion exercised through its military power and controls, its various bills and ordinances, and from 1963 onwards, the all powerful ISA. It was dominance without hegemony.

The “Operations”

Beginning with Operation Hammer in 1965, there is a long list of operations that were supposed, “to protect innocent Chinese families from communist acts of terrorism.” This includes Operation Letter Box 1 and Letter Box 2, Operation Jala Raja, Operation Freedom, Operation Harapan (Hope), Operation White Terror, and Operation Spearhead. Weeks after “Operation Hammer” was launched in 1965, three new villages were set up along the Kuching/Serian Road. Soon the designation of “controlled area” spread to other parts of Sarawak and once again it was determined by the presence of significant Chinese populations, specifically, the rural Hakka populations. Coastal areas (in Mandarin: *Hai*

Wai) like *Atapak*, *Jemukan*, *Nonok*, *Simunjan*, *Sebujau*, and *Asa Jaya* were zoned as restricted areas and patrolled by military personnel. Similarly, *Batu Kawa*, *Matang*, *Bau*, *Lundu*, *Simanggang*, *Engkilili*, and most border towns and outposts⁷ were to be classified as sensitive areas. Military personnel from west Malaysia, many of which were Malays, were called in to patrol these areas. Almost immediately, their arrival became a source of contempt for many Sarawakians, not only among the rural Hakkas and the indigenes but with the local Malays as well. There are plenty of reports of skirmishes and clashes between the Sarawak Malays and the Malay soldiers from West Malaysia in the local newspapers, even in the Malay newspaper, *Utusan Sarawak* (*Sarawak Information Service*, 12/26/65).⁸

When I began to track down potential candidates for my project, I was first led to bus conductors and drivers, as well as others who had either lived or who still had relatives living among the three new villages located along the 17th, 19th, and 21st miles of the Kuching / Serian Road. The three villages were given the Malay names of *Siburan*, *Beratok*, and *Tapah*. *Siburan* is *Xin Sheng Cun* in Hakka, “New Life Village;” *Beratok* is *Lai Tuo Cun*, for “Come and Develop Village;” and *Tapah* is *Da Fu Cun*, “Great Wealth and Prosperity Village.” It is not difficult to detect the degree of cynicism in these names or to imagine the level of insult for those who were rounded up and had to abandon their vegetable and pepper gardens, only to be relocated in these villages. Incidentally, the controlled settlements that came out of Operation Letterbox II were called “Islands of Freedom.”

⁷ Towns and outposts along the Malaysian-Indonesian border.

⁸ Incidentally, most of the newspapers reports of these fighting have to do with jealousy over women.

I have often wondered how these village residents felt about the patronizing names of their villages or the operations that relocated them. One Sunday afternoon, as I was playing a game of mahjong on the second floor of a coffee shop with some of the residents at *Tapah* (Great Wealth and Prosperity Village), I asked the players about their opinions, if any, of the name of their village. I had also asked the residents of the other two villages when I first visited them more than a month before. An individual at another mahjong table behind me practically shouted, "Damn, why can't you stop nagging us with these names?" The others in the room seemed somewhat embarrassed by this sudden outburst, but I had the feeling they agreed with him. The way a player on our table put it, "*Lao Siong* (which means brother), let's not spoil our Sunday." Sundays was their only off day from work and even more so, as some of them openly admitted to me, from the constant nagging and demands of their respective wives and families. The player next to me added, "Do you know what *Tapah* means? Do you see a lot of wealth and prosperity here?" I got his point. They preferred not talking or discussing on certain issues, especially on Sundays. There is not a lot of wealth and prosperity at *Da Fu Cun* (Tapah), which means "Great Wealth and Prosperity Village." Most of them worked as shop assistants for the few grocery stores in the village or found odd jobs at pepper gardens from time to time.

I never got a satisfactory response from the residents of *Tapah* (*Da Fu Cun*/Great Wealth and Prosperity Village), *Beratok* (*Lai Tuo Cun*/Come and Develop Village), or *Siburan* (*Xin Sheng Cun*/New Life Village) as to how they felt about these names. But when I went over my field notes a few months later I realized that none of them ever utilized or referred to the Chinese given names of their villages. Instead, they always

resort to its officially designated Malay names – *Tapah*, *Beratok*, and *Siburan*. This was especially interesting, since prior to that I had observed the opposite phenomenon with the residents at the other places. The families I visited at the coastal village of *Jemukan* still retained the name *Hai Wai* (in Hakka, “coastal villages”) instead of the officially designated Malay names. Other Chinese residents at *Atapak*, *Nunok*, and *Asa Jaya* similarly retained the name *Hai Wai* as well. The Chinese and indigenous population at *Simanggang* continued to call their township *Simanggang* (an Iban name) even though it had been officially changed to *Sri Aman* (Peace) after the treaty in 1975.

With that in mind, whenever I met up with the villagers at *Tapah*, *Beratok*, and *Siburan*, or when I chatted with bus conductors and bus drivers who came from any of the new villages, I would be especially alert as to how they would address the names of their villages. As it turned out, it appeared to me that there was a pattern: they would adopt the names that were least insulting to them. Can this then be read as part of their effort, consciously or not, of alleviating the degree of condescension and injury of not only being displaced and relocated, but also of having to live in villages with names that signify their subordination as well as their supposed repentance and acceptance of a state discourse that theoretically adhered to the “peace and prosperity” of the nation? This was equally true for those who refused to use the name *Sri Aman* which, in their opinion, was supposed to commemorate the official surrender of the communists in Sarawak when in reality the treaty only affected one of the communist organizations, the North Kalimantan People’s Army. Apparently it did not sit too well with the rest of the community at *Simanggang*, be they former communists, communist sympathizers, or just plain *Simanggang* residents. How they felt about Fong Cheok Chee was also important.

Equally interesting is the fact that the residents at Tapah, Beratok, and Siburan adopted an umbrella name of their own for the three villages that resulted from Operation Hammer. They called it *Thei Chui-cuns* which literally meant “Hammer Villages” in Hakka. This acted as a reminder to them that the origin of their villages lay in the rounding up of Hakka farmers under Operation Hammer. The adoption of these different names here are acts of remembering as well as forgetting. In a sense, their adoption of and/or refusal to articulate certain names can be seen as performances that help to alleviate the insult and injury of their past and current situations and also, at the same time, to remind themselves of their specific history. What is happening here is their contestation through the terrain of different names they choose to adopt and, in essence, its meanings and its power.

Within two years after Sarawak became part of the Federated States of Malaysia in 1963, the lives of a huge proportion of its population were to be changed forever. It should be pointed out that the series of operations and the politics of controlled settlement in Sarawak were a departure from more than a hundred years of reasonably sound relations between the Sarawak government and its Chinese populations. Not since the Bau Revolution in 1857 had there been any form of serious confrontation between them. Residents of these controlled settlements were subjected to real hardships from overcrowding, lack of adequate water supplies, loss of income from the abandonment of their vegetable and pepper gardens, and lack of freedom to move in and out of the settlements without a special pass and/or police escort.

In fact, movements were curtailed even within the controlled areas. In terms of spatial arrangement, each household was allocated less than an eighth of an acre of land on

which to build their house. On top of that they were told to use the remainder each household's land to cultivate vegetables and fruits and to rear poultry. From the stories I have collected from the residents of these villages, there was hardly any room left for serious cultivation of cash crops after building a house. The most one could do with the remaining land was to rear a few chickens.

That was a sharp departure from their notion of space prior to being relocated. Most, if not all, of these residents had held at least a few acres of land they had leased from indigenous landowners. After years of hardship transforming tracts of primary forest into vegetable and pepper gardens, they were literally taken away from them. With curfews and other sorts of restrictions at the new villages, it was practically impossible for the residents to attend to their gardens, which lay outside of the village fences. The few mahjong players at *Tapah* once told me about their reluctance to venture beyond the fences. I heard similar comments from other residents at *Siburan* and *Beratok*. Not only were they trying not to inconvenience themselves if by chance they were confronted by the communists at their gardens but they were also afraid of being harassed by the Malay soldiers who, they said, "would come up with all sorts of wild accusations" – providing rice or strategic information to the communists were two of the most common. They wanted minimal contact with these soldiers, and at least some of them wanted to avoid the communists as well.

When I visited *Siburan* for the first time, as I stepped out of the bus I couldn't help noticing the main watchtower was still there, although it was no longer used. In his essay "Ideologies in Social History," Georges Duby notes that quite often "non-verbal documents are likely to provide even more information, since ideology sometimes finds

more direct and richer expression through visual signs” (1985:157). Even though Duby refers to signs like emblems, costumes, festivals, monuments, art and so on, when he talks about non-verbal documents, the concept can be applied to things that are less glamorous, (if not just opposite of glamorous) in excavating the meaning of a particular discourse or ideology. The Holocaust concentration camps is one extreme. In my case, I am referring to the architecture of these new villages, including the arrangement of social space within them, through which memories of the Cold War are perpetuated. In the broadest sense, these are what Pierre Nora would constitute as “sites of memory” whereby “any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community” (1996: xvii).

There was a watchtower at *Siburan* next to the police station situated on a hill that overlooked the entire village. I can’t help but visualize what life must have been like back then, living under constant curfews, restrictions and harassments, the occasional firing of shots followed by silence, wailing, and funerals. Residents of this village showed me a few blocks of cement with metal stems at various spots that were remnants of the other watchtowers. Other remnants from the past included a few fading metal signs. One of these are no trespassing signs that had clear indications of the territory, both forbidding outsiders (including the SUPP representatives) from entering the village without proper authorization, as well as restricting village residents from traveling beyond the fences. Beneath the bold letters “No Trespassing,” were caricatures of a man being fired upon as he tried to escape. To pick up from Pierre Nora (1996) again, these were the traces left behind by actions, in this case, actions that materialized from Cold War politics.

Similar to the new villages (*sancun*) studied by Judith Strauch (1981) in west Malaysia, the controlled settlements in Sarawak persisted as viable social units long after the fences were opened. Obviously there had been changes since they were established in 1965. There were now many new families who had moved in long after the fences had been taken down. No doubt, most of these new families were related in some way with the original residents through kinship. Just as in any communities, there was a barbershop, several groceries, a meat market, a couple of fish stalls, and a Taoist temple. But the liveliest place at *Siburan* was the row of coffee shops that lay adjacent to the Kuching/Serian Road. This was very similar to *Tapah* and *Beratok*. I think it had to do with it being next to the Kuching/Serian Road where one could catch the public buses and the minivans. I often hung out at the coffee shops at the three villages, usually on Sundays when some of the villagers and a few pepper farmers from the surrounding area were there. These pepper farmers usually sold their peppers to the grocery shops at *Tapah* (if they had more in terms of volume, they would sell them to the merchants at the Main Bazaar in Kuching for slightly higher prices).

Some of these pepper farmers had once been residents of the village but had since moved back to their land after the fences opened up in either 1976 or 1977. I say this because none of the residents at the three villages seem to have a unanimous agreement as to when the “restrictions” at their village ended. To most of the residents of these villages, the pepper farmers were considered the lucky few who managed to renegotiate their original leases with the indigenous landowners. Others who were not so lucky ended up working at the various shops in the village, and quite a few were unemployed, picking up odd jobs here and there within the village during the fruit tree season, or with these

pepper farmers if they needed an extra hand or two. Some traveled as far as the Fifth Division to either work on the Bakun Hydro Electric Dam project or with some logging companies. Many would often travel to urban centers for work.

Very often I would detect elements of envy towards the pepper farmers in the tone of some local residents at the new villages. The usual comments I got were “*Goyang kaki!*” (Shaking one’s legs!), or “*Senang!*” (Easy!),⁹ or “Pepper prices have been really good over the years.” These would usually be followed with “you know, I used to have acres of pepper myself, more than ... [so and so].” One might even say that they have become jealous of their own past, that their bitterness towards these pepper farmers was born out of the dislocation of that period and the subsequent abandonment of their pepper and vegetable gardens. In response, most pepper farmers would tell me that life was not as easy as one might think since there was a great deal of work and risk in cultivating pepper. There is a lot of truth to that, as pepper plants are extremely prone to all sorts of diseases and its prices do fluctuate quite rapidly.

Another possible reason for the bitterness they have towards the pepper farmers has to do with the amount of living space at the new villages. Space congestion was a social problem at these villages. Once I helped a bus conductor, Yong Huah Li, move into a low cost apartment she would be sharing with two of her female cousins. This was the bus conductor mentioned earlier who had lost her father and brother in the 1960s. Huah Li used to live at *Siburan* with her family before she fled to Kuching at the age of sixteen. She had since worked as a bus conductor at the KTC for the past thirty odd years. When I was observing her tiny two-bedroom low cost apartment, she assured me it was far better

⁹ *Goyang Kaki* (shaking one’s leg) denotes that one’s life is so free that you have a lot of time to sit around and shakes one’s leg. Similarly, *Senang* (easy) means one is having a good or easy life.

than *Siburan*, where she came from. As she put it, “At least I now have my own bedroom. Back at *Siburan*, we were crammed up. All seven of us in one room! And you have neighbors to your left, right, in front of your doors as well as the back.”

At the new villages, households were practically stacked next to each other. The residents at these villages not only complained about the size of their houses but also the size of their bathrooms. I also noticed that almost every household had thick cardboard and layers of posters accumulated over the years over the wooden plank walls. I was told that this was to insulate noise between households, as well as the visibility between the cracks between each wooden plank. Still, one grandmother complained to me she had not been getting much sleep lately because her neighbors had a new baby. She said, pointing towards the wall on her left, “They have many children. Very noisy! It makes my heart restless. They have a new baby ... cries day and night.” It was true. As soon as the grandmother mentioned this, the baby next door started to cry.

Even with all the cardboards and posters on the wooden wall, I could still hear occasional chatting from the houses next door, or sounds from the chopping block when someone was preparing lunch or dinner, and when someone was taking a shower.¹⁰ One could practically hear everything through the walls. That might explain the level and frequency of whispering among the people there.

Because of the level of surveillance and violence, together with the problem of overcrowding, most adults that could be conveniently targeted by the authorities as socialist-inclined tried to escape to urban centers. Many did, and two of the many jobs they found were as bus conductors or drivers. As I mentioned earlier, restriction of

¹⁰ The normal way of taking a shower is to use a plastic cup to scoop water from a plastic or ceramic container.

movement was not only limited for spaces outside of the controlled settlements but also even within them. In fact, restrictions were so intense that the population within these settlements internalized the very idea of restriction. The best way to avoid any possibility of harassment or violence was to have as little contact as possible with the soldiers. However, that was extremely difficult, considering that these controlled settlements were essentially, to repeat the SUPP representatives' remark, "concentration camps." Soldiers were constantly patrolling within the fences and making random checks or raids on individual households.

According to the residents I met at the "Hammer Villages" as well as those at the *Hai Wai* (coastal villages), sometimes the curfews would go on for several days, or even weeks. During curfew hours, the residents of these settlements were forbidden to step out the front or back doors of their own houses. The four walls within each household felt like prison walls. Those who ventured out of their house in the evening hours or during curfew hours did so at the risk of getting shot at.

In the course of my fieldwork I managed to collect a substantial amount of material pertaining to stories of assaults and harassments that were inflicted by the soldiers. This is a story from a bus driver named Soo Li Yi. He was dozing off under the warm tin-roofed passenger seating area, as anybody would have under the circumstances, when I walked up to him. He had lived in one of the controlled villages near Betong before moving to Kuching while still in his teens. As in the case of many of my interlocutors, his family used to be vegetable and pepper farmers before circumstances forced them to give it up.

When I mention that most of the residents of the controlled villages used to be vegetable and pepper farmers, I am not suggesting that they owned the plot of land they farmed on. Most of them leased their land from the indigenous landowners, usually in the form of verbal agreements instead of written contracts. Because of that, there were plenty of ways the Chinese small holders could lose their gardens. During the 1960s and 1970s, many indigenous landholders or their relatives ended up cultivating the existing gardens when they were abandoned by their Chinese leaseholders. As Li Yi puts it, "things were really fuzzy then, and are even today when it comes to land issue. I am not even sure if my dad had a lease. Perhaps he made an agreement with some *la kia* [Hokkien for indigenes] to work on a particular plot of land in return for some cash. You know, if there is one thing *la-kia* have in Sarawak, it is land. Some of them have as much as an entire mountain. The only thing Chinese are not allowed to own in Sarawak is land." He was speaking metaphorically, but it is true in the legal sense when one talks about designated *Natives Customary Land*. Obviously, there are other channels of obtaining land for farming. Marrying an indigenous woman was a common practice.

None of Li Yi's siblings had the urge to go back to Betong after moving to Kuching more than thirty years ago. When I met him, he was working as a "spare driver," that is, he only worked when needed by the company. This had to do with the kidney complication he had developed two years before that had seriously affected his health. In fact, he had not driven a bus for almost a year and his situation had since deteriorated quite rapidly. But he still showed up at the bus station, thinking that by showing up at the station the supervisors might contemplate asking to drive when they needed a driver. I have to admit that under the circumstances, that was not very likely.

For income, Li Yi was getting 300 ringgits per month (around 80 dollars) from the SOC, but that was not enough to feed his wife and son. He told me his wife could not look for work since she had to take care of him. His twenty-year-old son had just started apprenticing at a mechanic's shop. Li Yi was hopeful that thing would change for the better once his son started earning some money. Fortunately, he was getting some assistance from the State Social Welfare Department to pay for the renal dialysis treatment and as well as 265 ringgits (around 70 dollars) per month for living expenses. He assured me securing this assistance had cost a great deal of effort and he had spent months securing letters from different community leaders to support his application to the agency. Even with this money, however, all he could afford was one room for the three of them. The room cost 82 ringgits per month (26 dollars). The thing that really angered him was the SOC and his colleagues. He confessed to me that he believed the company (and some of his colleagues) wished him dead, saying, "If I die, they can each donate a few ringgits towards my funeral expenses and be done with me. I know they think of me as a burden."

Not knowing how to respond, I offered to buy him coffee. When we were walking to the coffee shop across the street, I noticed he was limping quite badly. He also appeared weak. He said that the kidney treatment he was getting three times a week had greatly diminished his appetite. He kindly declined my offer to buy him lunch, again citing his lost of appetite. But after my insistence he finally agreed to have his lunch packed so that he could eat them when he was hungry, or at least his wife or his son could have it. While we were sipping coffee he confided to me that he had been observing me for a while after he heard that I had been asking a lot of questions at the us station about

communism. He was curious as to why I was interested in communism in Sarawak and, for that matter, why I was not approaching people like Fong Cheok Chee or other “captains” of this or that communist organizations. It was true that I had been asking a lot about Fong at that phase of my fieldwork.

In fact, it was through Li Yi that I learned about the former communists at the Tong Fong Hawker Centre. I was thrilled with this discovery, but at the same time, I felt somewhat disappointed with the other people I had interacted with at the bus station. None of them have mentioned anything about the centre. Like many of my other interlocutors, Li Yi was quick to assure me he had never been a communist but that many of his friends were. Then he quickly retracted that and claimed he was guessing. He said that given the complexity of the situation during the “chaotic period” (in Mandarin: *hen ruan te see chien*) it was extremely difficult to tell who was a communist and who wasn’t. Speaking softly but in a serious tone, he added, “It was not that simple. Everybody was caught up in the whole mess. The government thinks you are a communist and the communists expect you to help them with food and information just because you happened to be Chinese. Quite frankly, most of us were simply bystanders. We were mostly scared. And after you were constantly harassed, sometimes slapped and kicked by the soldiers, you tend to hate the government as well as the *swa ngiau chee*. We were trapped, you know ... like young trees in the jungle in the face of an elephant stampede. A lot of us, young men and women left our village because of that. We were fed up with the situation. Why do you think many of us refuse to talk about it? Furthermore nobody is listening. Nobody cares.” This reminded me what James Scott

once said in any war, hostilities are conducted over a shifting terrain where there are many neutrals and reluctant combatants (Scott, 1985).

After seeing Li Yi for more than a week at the bus station, he told me a personal experience he would never forget. This was the encounter he had with a Malay commanding officer in 1968 when he was barely eleven years old. He made it a point of mentioning that this Malay officer was from West Malaysia. The incident took place when he was studying at a primary (elementary) Chong Hwa Chinese school at the 32nd Mile Kuching Serian Road, in the Serian district. He was interrogated and detained in the *lockup* (cell) for more for three days because he absent-mindedly forgot to carry his “Transfer Identification Card,” a document authorizing him to be in the district of Serian, since he was from Betong. During the entire three days he was held incommunicado. None of his family members were informed of his whereabouts. During this time he was slapped several times for reasons that were beyond his comprehension. He said, “Sometimes they would slap me for no reason. I was thrown into this *lockup* with others, there must have been twenty of us. We were treated like dogs. I also heard screaming and crying in the other cells. I think those were the *swa- ngiau-chee*. Sometimes I would see soldiers carrying slabs of ice. You know what they were for.” I nodded. I will explain the ice slabs torture technique in the next chapter.

On the fourth day, Li Yi was removed from the *lockup* only to be tied onto a tree. He recalled, “I am not sure why they tied me to that tree but I was there for an entire afternoon.” Luckily for him, a local army officer from his hometown in Betong recognized him and spoke with the West Malaysian commanding officer. Still, that wasn’t enough to get him released. In fact, Li Yi remembered how the Commanding

Officer got furious with this local officer. He was eventually untied and released that evening, and he would never forget to carry his "Transfer ID" again.

During the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s, long curfews proved to be a nightmare for the residents at the controlled settlements as well as for many other rural Chinese. Those at the new villages were at the mercy of the soldiers who would randomly raid their houses during the evening hours. Because of the nature of curfews, all family members had to remain inside their houses, feeling trapped and praying that it was not their turn to be searched by the soldiers. According to some stories I collected, it was during these random searches (or raids) that the soldiers were most daring, doing whatever they pleased, including sexually harassing female household members. Some of my interlocutors confided to me that they knew of this or that neighbor who was forced to watch while their wives or daughters were being sexually assaulted. Those who retaliated were severely beaten. As some of my interlocutors put it, "the soldiers would always find ways to get you once you started to cause trouble for them. Remember, we were practically cooped up like chickens. Even if you could run, what about your family?"

Similar to Gyanendra Pandey's convincing elucidation of the violence during the Partition between India and Pakistan, narrations of violence by some of my interlocutors of the ill fortune that befell others are dictated by a discourse of "violence out there" (1990). For instance, in referring to accounts of those who were sexually assaulted at the controlled settlements, why is it that such stories were told to me not by members of the victims' families but always by an "outsider"? Thus the narratives that went something like "There were these brutal incidents that happened to this or that family where ..." or "My neighbor's daughter/wife were...." It seems to me that underlying these stories is the

notion that not only was violence committed to others but that they happened to others. However, unlike during the Partition when violence could only occur at the boundaries of communities (ibid), the violence that occurred to the residents within the new villages only occurred at the boundaries of other households and not one's own. Most, if not all, of the accounts of atrocities were told to me not by the immediate family members or relatives of the "victims" but almost always through the mouths of others. Furthermore, these stories of torture and death always seemed to befall a victim who was outside the narrator's immediate family. It was always this or that family, their neighbors, or someone from the adjacent village who suffered from the violence. Could it be that violence always lies beyond the boundary of each household so as to constitute and reconstitute "us" and "them" within the displaced and dislocated communities; to constitute "us" who did not experience the extreme degree of torture or death and "them" who unfortunately did? In a sense, everyone appears in the position of "victim," but there is a differential degree of being victimized. Somehow violence and household appear to constitute each other.

For instance, several bus conductors and drivers at the KTC and the SOC told me what happened to Huah Li's father and her brother. I first heard the story from one bus driver and when I tried to gather more information, the story became the conversational gambit at a *warong* next to the KTC station one afternoon. According to them, Huah Li's father was shot and killed when he had to visit the bathroom during one of the curfewed evenings. What was so tragic was the way her father was killed: he was drunk one evening and absentmindedly stepped out of his house to visit the bathroom. They said he was immediately shot dead by the soldiers before he could even step outside the door of

his own house. Their collective stories were unanimous as to how Huah Li's father was killed.

However, there were conflicting stories about her brother's death. Some said he had suffered the same ill fortune as his father. Others said he had been killed while fleeing the village. Still others said he had died in a cross fire between the soldiers and the communists. Some said he had been a communist. There was also another version that said her brother had been killed when he was caught in his garden trying to pass information or food to the communists. I must emphasize that many of the stories I collected have differing, even contradictory details coming from different individuals. Sometimes the story was told differently even by the same individual at a different time, and it could get extremely fuzzy, exaggerated, if not outright inaccurate.

There is another such fuzzy story. During my fieldwork I would gladly accompany any bus conductor and driver during their day off to their villages or longhouses, to Chinese temples, or just about anywhere. I even had a conversation with a bus conductor when she was having her hair permed. Once in a while a few bus conductors and drivers would plan to have the same day off to go for a picnic or to visit a temple together. One time I went with four female bus conductors – two Chinese, a Bidayuh and an Iban - to a Chinese temple located at *Hai Wai*, one of the former “communist influenced areas.” As we were waiting for more than an hour for the bus to take us back to Kuching, the bus conductors, almost out of nowhere, began to talk about one of their colleagues, a C61 (Mrs. Pang). They said that they felt sad for Mrs. Pang because her husband had recently passed away at a young age and that her youngest son was a good-for-nothing, always staying home and waking up late instead of looking for a job. All of a sudden, perhaps

because we were then at a former “communist influenced area,” they started to tell me about Mrs. Pang’s father. The place where we were constituted a “site of memory” in the sense that it provided the stimulus to help incite these bus conductors recall an earlier event, whether real or imagined. In this case, I later discovered the event was simply untrue.

According to the bus conductors, when they were still living at this particular village back in the 1960s, Mrs. Pang’s father was tortured and killed because he refused to hand over a pipe gun to the soldiers. I was told that many families had pipe guns hidden in their house just in case they had to use them. for instance, if they had to confront the soldiers during one of the scary “random searches.” Still others interjected: “No! Sharpened bamboo sticks or a pot of boiling water were better. You can always say they are for cooking purposes.” At that point, Mrs. Yeo, a retired bus conductor quipped, “Who would not retaliate if they intend to rape your wife or daughter? Pipe guns, bamboo sticks, boiling water, anything. Sure they were no match for guns but what choice did most people have?”

There were numerous occasions during my fieldwork when I asked: What have these rural Hakkas in Sarawak got to do with the distant ideological battle between communism and democracy (or capitalism), a battle that originated in the Western and Northern Hemisphere and determined their fates, thousands of miles from the epicenters of the Cold War capitals? What of the other lives in the other battlefields where the Cold War was fought? This may sound very naïve on my part but it does affect the way I am writing this thesis.

When asked if anyone in the village had ever reported the brutalities to the authority, Mrs. Yeo cried out, "What is the point? Do you think those soldiers would be so brutal if they were afraid of being caught? Those curfews and [controlled] villages gave them the perfect atmosphere to do those things. It's the same during the Japanese Occupation. The Malay government (*Malai chen fu*) has always hated us. They think all Chinese are bloodsuckers, that we were robbing their land. At one minute the government thinks we were pro-Kuomintang, the next, that we were communist." The discussion became even more illuminating and insightful with this remark from Mrs. Wong, usually a very quiet person, "It is funny that they think poor people can be pro-Kuomintang. How can we afford to buy those titles?"

The possibility of the tapping into the resources of the various Chinese communities living outside of China by successive Chinese governments has been discussed by many scholars. The Manchu government did it and the revolution of 1911 was partly financed by the "overseas" Chinese communities (Yen, 1976). After that, remittances and investment by these communities were a major preoccupation of the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party (Williams, 1960). In fact, one of the main functions behind the establishment of Kuomintang Consulate offices throughout Southeast Asia was to woo Chinese contributions and investments. In return, rich Chinese merchants were awarded with titles from the Kuomintang regime (Yen, 1970). If anything else, Chinese education was always used as a pretext of their involvement into the affairs of the overseas Chinese communities but underlying this was primarily a financial motive - with every new pronouncement on education, there was always a call to increase the flow of money to China (*ibid*).

Mrs. Wong continued. "We have no say at all in whom we are. Things haven't changed a bit. What has 'Number One' (the Prime Minister, Mahathir) done for us 'tar-kung-ren' (the wage earners)? Perhaps if you ask the towkays they might say 'Number One' is good for business, not us."¹¹

It appeared to me that we had waited more than an hour for the bus. In fact, the bus had arrived half an hour before but the driver decided to take a short nap. Realizing I was getting a little impatient, since there were no shade where we were squatting next to the road, Mrs. Yeo moved towards me and spoke quietly, "We don't know this bus driver. This is a new [bus] company." *Pantu*, a Bidayuh bus conductor began to curse loudly, trying to wake up the driver, insisting that he should at least let us on the bus even if he was not leaving yet. She even tried to get his attention by walking back and forth next to the driver's window and making childish noises but to no avail. The driver remained asleep. Sometimes these middle-aged bus conductors could be very childish. They often tickled each other or called each other funny names ranging from shorty, fatso or *gemok*, curry chicken, skinny chicken, *lao-chia-poh* (spinster), *kedicut* (stingy), and so on. They seemed like an amicable group.

"What about reporting the violence at the village to SUPP representatives, or to Chan Siaw Hee?" I added, hoping to discourage Pantu from mocking the driver.

"SUPP?" once again Mrs. Yeo spoke out, this time raising her voice, perhaps it was her turn to wake up the driver. "They were not allowed to visit the village. Many SUPP representatives were themselves detained."

¹¹ Incidentally, there is always a taint of sarcasm when they mention either "Number One" or "Number Two" (the Deputy Prime Minister). Somehow, the mentioning of these terms usually denotes, behind the sentences, their cynicism towards the degree of corruptibility on the person referred to.

I knew I needed to get the story from Mrs. Pang herself but I was not sure under what context it would be appropriate for me to ask about her father's death. Within two weeks after my trip to the temple with her colleagues, Mrs. Pang invited me to her house. While I was there, her youngest son appeared from his bedroom, apparently just waking up. Feeling rather embarrassed, as it was almost two o'clock in the afternoon, Mrs. Pang shook her head: "He's out late every night." As we chatted, I took the liberty to browse through a photo album that was lying on the table next to me. Inside there were some old family photos, judging by how yellow they were. When I showed them to Mrs. Pang, she told me the man in the middle was her father. It was the opportunity I have been waiting for, and I told her the story I had heard. She looked puzzled but was not angry by what I had told her, assuring me that I had been misled, thinking that her colleagues must have been referring to someone else. I told her I did double check with them the employee ID numbers of the person they were talking about. In this case, it was C61, which belonged to Mrs. Pang. The bus companies in Sarawak issued employee's identification numbers and the employees at the Kuching Transport Company Bus Company had the habit of addressing each other by one's ID numbers as opposed to their names or nicknames. In the case of Mrs. Pang, her ID number was C61. "C" stood for conductor and "D" for driver.

Mrs. Pang told me her father had not been killed by the soldiers but by certain Ibans back in the 1950s. He was a river peddler, selling pots and pans and other merchandise to indigenous people from whom he would also buy jungle goods. On one of these trips, her father was attacked and beheaded by certain Ibans for reasons that remained unclear. There were many incidents of Chinese river peddlers or *singkeh*, as they were called

back then, whom indigenous groups beheaded when they took the risk of peddling deep into indigenous territories. Local historian Daniel Chew, in his book *The Chinese Pioneer of Sarawak* (1996), refers to these river peddlers as the “unsuccessful” Chinese settlers who never got written up in the usual “triumphalist” history of overseas Chinese. Stories of such misfortunes abound in Sarawak and from my own observation, the notion of headhunting created a heightened sense of fear towards the indigenous peoples among ethnic Chinese people. Unfortunately it also provided some Chinese with stereotypical descriptions of the indigenes, citing headhunting practices as an excuse for avoiding them.

A few weeks later, as I was having coffee with Mrs. Pang, she told me it was imperative that I double-checked my sources as well as the stories I had collected. She cautioned me, saying, “Many people like to spread rumors or exaggerate their stories in part because these stories do not affect them directly. It is more difficult for the living members of the victims to tell them.” “Tell me,” Mrs. Pang asked, “what do you know about the *swa ngiau chee*?” “Let me assure you,” she continued, “The real *swa ngiau chee* are usually very discrete about their identity. Those who boast about it are often fakes.” As if not satisfied with what she said, she added after a short pause: “You need to understand. There was something heroic about being a *swa ngiau chee* then, ... even today. It still has that stature of a fighter, something brave about it that the soldiers were scared of.”

Chao Kui Ho, one of the “captains” who had by then became my constant companion, shared the same opinion. He offered a few reasons as to why people liked to exaggerate or boast about being communists. First of all it had to do with the perceived heroic act of

having the courage to stand up against imperialism and capitalism. Secondly, and he felt this was rather ironic, it had to do with the current economic and political stature of a few former *swa ngiau chee*. He would not refer directly to Fong Cheok Chee. As I elaborated in Chapter Three, there was still an underlying rivalry between Fong and Chao and their respective supporters. He also thought that there were a lot of people “out there” who would either lie or hint that they had once been a “swa ngiau chee,” or that their father or brother had once been communists because they were probably covering up their own guilt, if not their lack of courage, to stand up and fight imperialism and capitalism when, as he once put it, “the situation left you with no other choice.” He also felt that it had to do with the fact that I was an outsider. As an outsider, I would not have the same familiarity or channels of network to confirm or refute their claims. In other words, regardless of how familiar I was with my interlocutors, I would always remain an outsider. I had fewer resources to double-check their stories and most of them were aware of this.

But I must state that even if some stories I collected were exaggerated or outright lies they were not produced in a vacuum. The Cold War in Sarawak is handed down to us through memories (usually impure and mediated), individual and collective, through the divisions it has unleashed and, through the histories it has produced. Bakhtin would say that the past are continually confused, rehearsed, and performed (Clark and Holquist, 1984) and is often selectively both used and abused (Lowenthal, 1996). It is not inconceivable that many of the stories that were told during the violent period of the 1960s and 1970s in Sarawak were twisted, exaggerated, or even fabricated. Stanley Tambiah notes in his studies of riots in India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka that rumors –

specifically, exaggeration and fabrication of events and stories - always exist and operate in any period of violence. In a dialectical sense, there is on the one hand the government-controlled mass media and on the other hand, the role of rumor. Both are responsible in transmitting information and misinformation during any period of crisis and violence (1996: 270).

I submit that a lot of these contradictions or different versions of the same story I have collected pertaining to the experience of dislocation, brutalities, and death within these controlled (re) settlements have to do with the rural Hakka population's sense of dispossession, and by extension the resulting level of exaggeration that produced all sorts of gossips and rumors. In the aftermath, rumored stories are continually reproduced by those who heard of them either directly or indirectly. However, this collection of memories - individual and collective, familiar and historical - is what makes up the memories of the Cold War. In essence, I am looking at memories in their own right – even if they are shifting, changing, ambivalent, or even unreliable. To come back to James Young once again, these “are not deviations from the ‘truth’ but are part of the truth in any particular vision” (1990:32).

Even as the tension and exaggeration has subsided, stories that were generated out of rumor in the past continue to play an essential part in the retelling of these events and stories at the present time. For instance, there was a famous story about the deportation of two famous communist couples in the late 1960s with which many of my interlocutors were familiar. But there were different versions of this story. In the version I heard from Chao Kui Ho and at least ten other interlocutors, one of the two couples did not make it back to Sarawak after they were deported to China, until 1999, almost thirty years later.

But the version I heard at the *warong* and coffee shops was very different: that neither couples went to China when they were deported. They never left Borneo. They managed to sneak back to Sarawak through the porous borders of Kalimantan. One of the couples only went back to China in the late 1970s but this time not because they were once again deported but because they left on their own accord.

After I heard about what happened to Huah Li's father and brother, I tried to ask her about it, but each time the encounter turned out to be quite awkward. I recalled a time when I walked up to her while she was having her quick lunch between bus-runs,¹² and she snapped at me, saying, "You must be crazy. Why are you listening to rumors"? She stood up and left in a hurry, making me feel sorry for interrupting her lunch. After that incident, each time she saw me, she would either avoid any eye contact or she would hurry off in some other direction, as if she carried a banner that said, "Leave me alone." Mrs. Pang and Chao were absolutely correct to say that stories of death during the 1960s and 1970s were easier to narrate for those who were not the direct victims, those who did not have any direct family members that died during that period, or those who were not *swa ngiau chee*. Those who were directly inflicted with painful memories and those who were once members of one or another communist organization were more selective, reserved, and reluctant in retelling the stories of the past. It was not more than a month afterwards that she finally spoke to me. Well sort of, since it was two sentences: "Be careful. You might get blacklisted by the Special Branch." Then she hurried off. I have

¹² Depending on the routes, on an average twelve hour workday (from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m.), a bus has to make between twenty to thirty-two runs. Each run begins at the bus station and go on a predetermined route. There is a maximum of only five minutes break between each run and this was when most bus conductors and drivers took their lunch or coffee break. Most drivers would speed up during certain runs to make up more time for lunch. The bottom line is that they had to make the number of assigned bus runs. I have seen bus conductors having their lunch on the bus while they were working. Some bus drivers would eat snacks while driving as part of their lunch.

often thought about what she said, about being blacklisted by the Special Branch. After all, I was a nosy researcher asking all sorts of questions about the Cold War in Sarawak.

I would have to wait for a few more weeks. One afternoon she finally agreed to have lunch with me at a hawker's stall located by the industrial areas where it was less expensive. These stalls catered mostly to blue-collar factory workers. My lunch with Huah Li was especially late that day considering she usually ate around eleven in the morning to compensate for not having breakfast. This proved to be more conducive for talking since the place was almost empty by then. Huah Li made a similar comment to what she had said when I first met her on the bus that morning a few months before, "What is there to tell," before adding, "Those soldiers shot my father. He got drunk and was careless. They didn't care if you needed to visit the bathroom or not."

"Just like that?" I asked. I was unsure if I should show some sympathy or not.

She was silent. After a brief moment, in between bites of food, she continued, "There were others who died the same way. Our neighbor across from us! People got shot when they tried to run away."

"Why were they running away?" I asked.

"Oh ... I'm not sure. They thought the soldiers were coming. There was so much confusion. People were scared. Everybody was extremely cautious and easily panicked. You don't trust your neighbors. No one knew who might be selling you out. No one knew who the soldiers would raid the next evening."

"What do you mean 'selling you out'?" I asked. "Do you mean somebody informed the army that so-and-so was a *swa ngiau chee* or they were assisting the *swa ngiau chee*?"

“Well...” she paused and then said, “that too, but everybody was confused. You really don’t know who was a *swa ngiau chee* and who was not. Sometimes when you were working at your garden (during hours that were allowed, which were very sporadic and limited) a few of them suddenly appeared from the jungle and asked for rice or something to eat. Sometimes they asked for information about the soldiers or other things. What could we do? We were scared. They had guns too.” Without looking at me, she continued, “We could not just let those peppers and vegetables unattended, and watch them rotting away. But eventually we were forced to abandon them. It was getting too dangerous. Sometimes, the curfews would last several days. If you sneaked out to the garden and came across the *swa ngiau chee*, soon others would know about it.”

“How? Unless you told others, right?” I asked.

“That was usually what happened. You got home. You might tell your family. Then your relatives or your neighbors heard about it. Soon the entire village might be gossiping about it. Someone might say you helped the *swa ngiau chee* and that was a dangerous accusation. But it happened. Everybody at some point would come across the *swa ngiau chee*, especially at the gardens, but yet everybody was denying it.”

I forgot to ask Huah Li if the cracks between the wooden walls of each household unit at the new village might contribute to their habit of whispering in their speech. Instead I asked, “Denying what?”

“Denying that you had an encounter with them, or that you gave them some rice. Usually it was rice we brought for ourselves to eat at the garden but they took it anyway. They were skinny. Others might soon learn of these encountering and before you knew it, you might be seen as a collaborator. If, these stories somehow ended up with the soldiers,

or you thought they did, you panicked, thinking that the soldiers might be paying you a visit soon, perhaps that very evening. In fact a lot of shooting and killings started that way, when people panicked and ran, especially at the night when we were not supposed to leave our house.”

“How did the soldiers learn of the ‘visits’ at the gardens and who told them? I thought all of you were united against the soldiers for confining you and depriving you of your previous livelihood.” I asked and after a brief pause, I added: “Do you mean there were *choo kuo* [literally translated as running dogs: traitors] in the village?”

“Sure there were plenty of *choo kuo*, if you want to look at it that way. But it was not that simple. Sometimes folks had no choice but to talk, making up stories. You have to understand the way we were treated. They could detain and interrogate us at any time. No reasons offered. Say they found something at your house - an axe, bamboo sticks, anything – they would say you were using them as weapons. That would get you into a lot of trouble. They might then make you an offer in return for information. A lot of that sort of thing happened. Everybody was nervous. You just don’t know how things can be cooked up, stories made up. Eventually everybody kept things to themselves, within each individual household. After all, we don’t really know our neighbors. We had been living miles apart before we were forced to live in a very cramped atmosphere, like chickens in a coop.”

“Does that explain why a lot of you are always whispering? I asked.

“Whispering?” she sounded puzzled.

“Yes, whispering. I have noticed that habit with you, most of you, including, you know, former *swa ngiau chee*. Every time the subject touched on certain events during

the *Len Zhang* (Cold War), or about this or that 'captain,' or about death, shootings, and so on, ... you know, suddenly most of you would whisper. Are you not aware of it?"

She forced a smile. Then her famous response, "*Pu-chee-tao!*" (I don't know!).

Not knowing if that was the right time, feeling a little uncomfortable, I asked, "Can you tell me what happened to your brother? I mean ... was he shot the same way as your dad?"

She did not answer my question but directed my attention to the bus driver who had been waiting for her to start their next bus run. I took the ride back to the bus station. Since we were passing through an industrial zone and it was then slightly after two in the afternoon, there were no passengers on board. The factory workers would not be getting on the bus until around five. I was hoping that Huah Li might want to tell me about her brother but she stood silently, holding on to the metal railings next to the bus driver while I remained seated a few rows back. We did not talk along the way and immediately upon reaching the bus station she practically jumped off the bus before it came to a full stop. She rushed to the office to have her bus-run sheet signed by the stationmaster and her tickets checked, and before I realized it, she was out of sight.

I waited for her at the bus, meanwhile chatting with a Bidayuh bus driver. About five minutes later, Huah Li showed up, but just as she has done in the past, she avoided having any eye contact with me, in a way telling me not to pursue my query further about her brother's death. At that point, another bus conductor showed up and asked if I wanted to join her for coffee, which I did. Usually I had to beg them to have coffee with me.

When I went back to the bus station, I asked Mrs. Pang, who also happened to come from one of the controlled villages, why they had the habit of whispering. Like Huah Li, she looked puzzled as well before replying, "Whispering or because we speak softly? Perhaps we are being polite. At least we are not shouting when we speak." I am not suggesting these bus drivers and bus conductors spoke softly all the time. In fact most of them tended to speak rather loudly, considering the level of noise on the bus or at the bus station. After a few minutes, Mrs. Pang suggested that the habit might have come from living at the new villages. She added, "It's not polite to let your neighbors hear everything in your house. The walls were pretty thin," laughing as she recalled how life was at the new village.

"I know," I replied, "I have seen them."

"When you were there, did you visit the pepper gardens," she asked before adding, "One has to walk quite a distance before you get to the next house. Our houses were quite big, lots of rooms." She was referring to their sense of space before the relocation. She added: "I think you might be right. We probably got the habit of whispering from living at the new village."

"Why? Was it because your neighbors can hear you talking or because the soldiers might hear up?" I asked.

"Well ... both," she replied, "neighbors and soldiers. Everybody was extremely careful of what to say and to whom. You never know."

I recalled the numerous visits I made to *Jemukan*, one of the coastal villages that were once zoned as "communist influenced areas." I observed the residents there still had the habit of whispering each time they touched on things deemed sensitive, things that could

be labeled as threats to the so-called “national security.” For instance, they would whisper each time they talked about the violent events during the Cold War period: about the activities of the military, of curfews, or names of former communists or those who were arrested. But within these whispering tones, there was some inventiveness about it. Somehow as the conversation got more interesting I could almost see the glow in their eyes. The idea was not getting caught. Let me remind the readers these conversations took place within the confines of their living room and there were no longer any soldiers roaming in their village. However, the degree of surveillance and control during the 1960s and 1970s had penetrated so deeply into every form of social network that it continued to have credibility for my interlocutors. They were still acting and living in accord with it.

It was a few weeks later, on the bus, when Huah Li decided to tell me about her brother’s death. Prior to that day, I had seen her almost everyday, but I was patient enough not to raise the question. As it turned out, her brother was not killed the exact same way as her father. He was shot and killed while attending to the vegetable garden during the curfewed hours. Imagine the horror of attending to one’s garden under such circumstances. She could not, however, remember the exact year it happened, but thought it was around the same year as her father’s death. “They were months apart. That I can never forget. I know I came to Kuching in 1970. I can ask my sisters when I see them at *Tapah*.” She still had two sisters living there.

“Do you and your sisters talk about your father and your brother?” I asked just because I thought it might be a proper thing to do.

“No! Not for years. What is the point? When I visit them, we cook. I play with their children. Sometimes we play mahjong. Do you play?” I had the feeling she did not like to be reminded of the past, especially when her present positions was not especially favorable.

During the early part of my fieldwork, I made the mistake of enquiring about my interlocutors’ marital status, especially with the female bus conductors. I learned very quickly that such line of inquiry could be quite embarrassing for unmarried women as they were one of the favorite “backstage” topics of conversation among the young or married colleagues. This was frequently reflected by such remarks as “*Lau-chei-poh*” (old female spinster) or, in a rather condescending fashion, “Oh, you know! So-and-so has a good life since she has only one mouth to feed. And besides that, she is such a *kedicut*, a *kiam siap*” (*kedicut* in Malay: a stingy person; similarly *kiam siap* is a Hokkien word for a stingy person).” I bring this up to note that the bus conductors and drivers were preoccupied with many other things on a daily basis instead of just dwelling on sensitive issues or the painful events that transpired during the Cold War, or on issues of ethnicity.

Huah Li was one of the women at the KTC who was often the target of gossips. I often heard remarks of how “tomboyish” or hot tempered she could be. I observed her toughness by the way she talked and the way she moved during work. She was always walking extremely fast, even to the point of running, while at work. For her part, she told me that she couldn’t be bothered by what others said about her behind her back. She would say, “Let them say whatever they choose. I can’t stop them if they have so much time.” I do not recall ever seeing Huah Li having her coffee break with her colleagues

when I was at the KTC bus station. When I asked her colleagues if they had seen Huah Li, their usual response was “*Pu-chee-tao*” (in Mandarin: Don’t know), or more forthcoming from a Bidayuh colleague, “*Dia tak campur*” (in Malay: She doesn’t mix). Others would say that Huah Li had never wanted to talk with her colleagues for as long as they could remember. I have often wondered how she managed to play this solitary game for so long, for more than thirty years at the KTC.

This reminds me of something Trinh Minh-ha once wrote. “Silence as a refusal to take part in the story,” writes Trinh Minh-ha, “does sometimes provide us with a means to gain a hearing. It is voice, a mode of uttering, and a response in its own right. Without other silences, however, my silence goes unheard, unnoticed; it is simply one voice less, (one) more point given to the silencers” (1989:83). To remain indifferent to the gossip in this case, is to not give in and not to participate, since speaking up might intensify the gossip and losing one’s temper would mean having to see the satisfied grins and the mean pleasure of having gotten a reaction. Speech for the sake of speech only worked to keep Huah Li tied to those who would assume her silence. I suspect Huah Li was aware of that.

Huah Li revealed to me that she spent a lot of time with her sisters whenever she had a day off, either together at *Tapah* or they would visit her in Kuching. She could also be very evasive. She would make excuses to evade my request to follow her to *Tapah* on her day off, each time telling me, usually after the fact, that she had visited them at the very last minute or that she had not made any specific plan for her next off day. When I tried to get her to tell me about the past, about her neighbors or any stories about life at *Tapah*, she would force a smile and deploy her usual tactical response, “*pu-chee-tao*” (don’t

know) or “pu-tar-ching-chuo” (not sure). She was not the only one who used such tactics. They could be frustrating for me, but they were extremely useful responses to terminate my queries at that particular moment.

I also need to stress that most of the stories I collected pertaining to the brutalities that happened at the controlled settlements were told to me only after months of working with my interlocutors, after months of talking with them about other topics that were deemed less sensitive, or less political. Usually, somewhere along the course of our less “sensitive” conversations, hoping to get things started, I would hint to my interlocutors that I was aware of a certain event that had happened to his or her family. I would then proceed rather carefully to retell the story I had heard, depending on the timing or opportunity, and to wait for the response, if any, either to confirm, refute, elaborate, or correct it. That was how I ended up with different accounts of the same story. However, very often this technique would not generate any response. Most days the conversations would track back to less sensitive topics like work (including mine), where s/he lives, with whom, does s/he still visit the village to which they were once relocated, does s/he still have siblings or relatives living there, their children, their parents, and so on. They were also interested in the kind of salary their occupations would fetch in the U.S., the type of buses (automatic instead of stick shift), about President Bill Clinton, Monica Lewinsky, and so on. The bus conductors were especially disappointed to learn that conductors were obsolete in New York City due to automation.

It seem to me there was a tremendous will to forget about the past, either because it was too bitter to tell and they preferred to let the past be past, or because they seemed to think that their stories, this “human dimension” of history had a “lesser,” even invisible

status as compared to grand events or the stories of the so-called leaders of their respective communities. Some of the usual responses I would get were: "Have you spoken to Stephen Yong" (the former Secretary General of SUPP) or "I think you will be better off contacting this or that Y.B. After all, we are only the 'tar-kong-chai' (in Hakka: wage laborers). What do we know?" Y.B. is an acronym for an official title "*Yang Amat Berhormat*," which means, "The Respected One." Much like many of us in the academia, the bus drivers and bus conductors cannot altogether escape the Historian's agenda of associating History with "grand" subjects or with important individuals.

I visited several VIPs for many reasons, one of which was to please my interlocutors. What was interesting, if not ironic, was that many of my interlocutors would be the ones to tell me, rather candidly, that they were aware of my visits to this or that VIPs, sometimes within hours after my visits. On top of that, they never failed to comment on my change of attire: that I looked rather "nice" with long pants and shirt as opposed to my usual shorts, T-shirt, and sandals. As it turned out, most of my visits were rather unproductive since the VIPs would either profess that they were unfamiliar with what had transpired during the Cold War or they would choose not to discuss it. If there was any reluctant discussion about the Cold War, their statements sounded exactly like any governmental reports: the operation and resettlement schemes were successful in isolating and protecting a certain section of the Chinese population from the communists.

But two of these VIPs did bring my attention to a certain resettlement scheme in Kuching. They told me the Kuching Municipality had recently zoned a certain area in Kuching for the squatters that used to live at various locations along Foo Chow and Chawan Roads. But neither of them revealed to me the origins of these squatters in the

first place, that they were part of the massive exodus from several new villages. I found this out from my interlocutors from *Hai Wai* areas. These squatters originated from the various villages at *Haw Wai*, and like many of my interlocutors, had to abandon their homes and squat in Kuching in order to escape the degree of surveillance and violence at *Hai Wai* during the 1960s and 1970s. By 1985, some 50,000 Sarawak Chinese (20% of the Chinese population or 6.5 % of the entire population) were resettled in one form or another. It was only in 1998, after years of public outcries, the state government finally relocated these squatters on a piece of land at *Stampin*, officially known as the *Atapak Resettlement Scheme*.

Even so, these Chinese squatters did not occupy the entire scheme, as there was a huge population of Malays as well as indigenous on it. In fact, there existed a sharp geographical division between tracts of land that were reserved exclusively for the Malays and other sections occupied by non-Malays. Thus there are the Malay sectors, Chinese sectors, indigenous sectors, and lastly, the mixed sectors that consisted of Chinese and indigenes. According to a former opposition representative I spoke with, part of the State's strategy to encourage "mixed" area occupancies was not so much for promoting multiculturalism but rather for gerrymandering election outcomes – making sure that no single ethnic group could determine the outcome of who got elected, assuming, that is, the voting pattern in Sarawak usually follows along ethnic lines.

An Iban bus conductor and her Chinese driver who worked on the route to this resettlement scheme offered a factual, if not ironic, comment as to why there were different sectors at the Scheme along ethnic lines: it had to do with food taboos. They said that not only do Malays (or Muslims) not consume pork, they find it offensive to

have to smell their neighbors cooking it. A rather restricted way of promoting multiculturalism, I thought. The few times I was at *Atapak*, I could not help but notice that the SOC buses only ran through the Malay sector. When asked, the same bus driver responded, "It is so convenient for them. They have the bus right up to the doorsteps. It is almost like having your own car. There is no bus stop here. You can get on and out the bus anytime." The non-Malays, on the other hand, were deprived of this convenience since their houses were far from the bus route. Both bus conductor and driver took a detour for my benefit, showing me some of the houses in the non-Malay sectors, located on swampy land. The occupants there had to spend thousands of ringgits laying down truckloads of pebbles and sand on the ground before they could build their houses on it. I was disappointed with the *Atapak Resettlement Scheme*, a project that materialized out of the government's response towards the outcries of Chinese squatters in Kuching. It seemed to me that the discriminating resettlement schemes drawn along ethnic lines that started in 1965 continue to this day.

After almost forty years of being part of the Federation of Malaysia the fate of many Chinese remained mired in a discriminatory limbo. Local politicians remained aloof to their welfare unless an election was near. It was common knowledge among these poor working people that the visibility of these VIPs increased as the elections drew closer and they just as quickly disappeared from the scene after the event. Common remarks were like: "Days before any election, the VIPs behave as if we were old friends, smiling, talking to us, shaking our hands," or "They would canvas like door-to-door salesmen," or "They were nothing short of being in the Chinese Opera" (*chor-tar-shee*). Saying that

someone is performing a “*Chor-tar-shee*” refers to the individual as acting in the Chinese Opera, that is, the person is putting on an act and the intention is all too obvious.

Such refreshing candor serves to remind us that these interlocutors were well aware of the system they were entrapped within and of the various “levels” of management they have to deal with: from management at work all the way to the State and Federal government level. Obviously these interlocutors were not familiar with the concept of hegemony. However, they would argue that if hegemony does exist, it is not based on consent and passive compliance of subordinate classes, ethnicities, language groups, and so on, but rather it is based on sanctions and coercion, if one chose to subscribe to a Gramscian interpretation.¹³ In short, they know nothing of ideological domination or the promulgation of false consciousness.

By way of concluding

If this thesis is based on the life of a figuration of individuals I can call my interlocutors, I need to address what was central to them in their daily life. In my thesis, I prefer the term refractory as a better interpretation in describing how my interlocutors deal with the structure of power, be it coming from the State, their local community, or in their workplace. In many ways, the word refractory has a lesser tendency to obscure practices of competition, cooperation, co-optation, collaboration, or alliance with existing power structures that affect their daily lives, or better, that structure their way of living

¹³ False consciousness in this sense usually denotes a degree of passivity, if not a fatalistic acceptance and personal complicity on the part of the subordinates of their social order. In the Marxist tradition, this is usually associated with the arguments made by Gramsci that emphasize more the level of ideas than behavior (cf. *Selections from the Prison Notes*, 1971). However, many have argued that even a close reading of Gramsci does not tell you how voluntary and complete hegemony is in any setting. For an excellent discussion of hegemony and consciousness, see Joseph Femia (1975), “Hegemony and Consciousness in the Thought of Antonio Gramsci.” Similarly, Perry Anderson (1976) has pointed out that “hegemony” was first used by the Bolsheviks to refer to the domination of the peasantry by the proletariat.

sanely, albeit at times tragically, in accordance with their experiences, situations, and limitations. In short, following Marcel Mauss's (1979) discussion of *habitus*, an agent's actions are not so much read as rejections or acceptances towards discourse, but rather come out of a set of cultivated sensibilities that are affected by both historical forces as well as contemporary conditions. It would be better then to treat them as "learned capabilities ... that are linked to authoritative standards and regular practice" (noted by Asad, 1993: 74-75; see also Asad 2000:38).

According to Webster's Third New International Dictionary, refractory is defined as, among other things, resisting control or authority, stubborn, unmanageable, and perverse. To refract also captures the notion of being indifferent (whether individually or collectively) towards the wielders of power. My interlocutors had to deal not only with memories (real or rehearsed), but also with the will to forget about events of the past, something that was momentarily interrupted when they were dealing with me, the researcher. One could even say there was a tremendous will to forget about one's past so as to live on. And why shouldn't they do so when one considers that their current living conditions were just as bleak as they were during the Cold War? Even though the killings and tortures have stopped, their current social, economic, and political situation has not improved a bit. What preoccupied them most were their survival techniques – today, this week, this month, this year – within an entire complex of a social, economic, and political system that saw them as second-class citizens. In other words, it was the present that affected them, whether or not there was even the possibility of changing it. To most of them, the past was history and the future was quite gloomy. Many of the bus conductors

which implies more political control rather than consent. For a convincing elucidation that there was dominance without hegemony during British Colonial India, see Guha, 1997.

and drivers had been doing the same job for over three or four decades, day in and day out, and with low salaries. Most of them were already in their late-fifties to mid-sixties.

My interlocutors were fully aware that the form of government they were subjected to in Malaysia did not govern based on the principle of legitimacy or the “right” to govern. To put it another way, as far as the government was concerned, the very idea of legitimization was not based on common consensus or moral justification but on sanctions and coercion of the masses. The NEP that started in 1970 and the subsequent policies with different names were essentially a string of austere affirmative action packages that were, “supposedly,” geared to benefit the Malays. These policies produced such a degree of structural limitation for the non-Malays that they considered themselves as hyphenated second-, even third class citizens. On top of this, the lower class non-Malays, among whom most, if not all of my interlocutors belong, often felt that their past and current dispositions were not only considered as insignificant by the federal and state governments, but even by the other sectors of the Chinese communities that did not share their “common experience.” It seemed to them that the other Chinese communities in Kuching were indifferent to their misfortunes. To put it differently, their history was simply not acknowledged and recognized by others.

During my fieldwork I had the opportunity to meet a few Hokkien and Teochiu merchants along the Main Bazaar, a busy street I would frequently pass by as I made my way to the SOC and KTC bus stations located at the furthest west-end of this street. The Main Bazaar was the oldest and busiest street in Kuching, situated parallel to the Kuching River. This was where most of the old established Hokkien and Teochiu merchants had their shops. Apart from doing my occasional grocery shopping at their shops, I also

checked out the daily pepper prices so I could start up conversations with the rural Hakka pepper farmers when I saw them at any of the new villages along the Kuching/Serian Road. Over time, as I became more familiar with some of these merchants, they would often ask if this or that pepper farmer I knew was utilizing some other buyer since they had not seen them for quite some time. For my part, I pretended to have no knowledge of it.

From the few conversations I had with these merchants as I did my grocery shopping at their shops, I was at times somewhat dismayed and irritated to find out that many of these Kuching-born Teochius or Hokkiens were not aware of the dislocations that happened to the rural Hakkas during the 1960s and 1970s. Or were they pretending not to know? Moreover, they seemed rather puzzled as to why I was interested in the history of those living at a few controlled villages. To my annoyance, some of these merchants even asked why I should be interested on such bleak history and not on the so-called Chinese leaders, namely the Ong or the Yong families of Sarawak. The owner of a Hokkien grocery shop once remarked, "The leaders are the ones who can tell you about the history of the Chinese in Sarawak, not those ordinary folks."

These Teochiu and Hokkien merchants had many contacts with the Hakkas from these villages. They were, after all, one of the main buyers of pepper from the small Hakka farmers. But even as these merchants might have been told stories of curfews and deaths that occurred within the controlled (re) settlement, they meant little to them. They were not the victims. I realized that the reality of the fundamental history of displacement and dislocation remains very much within the boundaries of those who were directly or indirectly displaced. This degree of specificity, I argue, has to do with the long

established divisions that exist between the different sectors of the Chinese population in Sarawak along the contours of specific language groups, classes, occupations, religions, region, and so on.

Indeed, the specificity of which history is worth writing (or narrating) has to do with the degree of complexity and complicity within the general Chinese population. The displaced Hakkas from rural areas have no camaraderie with the urban Teochius and Hokkiens, and vice versa. This intense feeling of betrayal and competition among some of the Chinese population in Sarawak has to do with a particular history. During the 1960s and 1970s, Kuching was predominantly a Hokkien and Teochiu area. Some of my Hakka interlocutors recalled how unsafe it was for them to walk through certain streets in the evening hours, in particular along the Main Bazaar or the Padungan areas, unless they were in groups. According to them, those were Hokkiens and Teochius dominated areas, and they did not like any outsiders (in this case, the other Chinese language groups) to enter their turf.

The degree of contact between the other Chinese language groups with these merchants was in most cases a strategic consideration based on economics. The Hakka farmers need to sell their peppers or vegetables to these merchants and they did their grocery shopping there as well (see T'ien, 1953). Beyond that, these merchants were not concerned with the violence that occurred in the rural areas, the violent experiences of their Hakka pepper farmers who also happened to be their customers. Besides being indifferent to the history of the Hakkas, some of whom were their customers, they even looked down at them. On several occasions when I was shopping at their shops, both the towkays and their employees would make comments like: "Those are the *san-sang*

(mountain/rural) people, the *sancun swa ngiau chee* (the village jungle rats).” In Sarawak as well in Peninsula Malaysia, there is a notion of backwardness when someone is said to have come from the mountain or rural areas.

But I suspect there were specific reasons behind the comments made by these Hokkiens and Teochius *towkays* and their employees. A lot of it has to do with the increasing number of Hakka living in Kuching. The massive movement during the Cold War of young Hakkas from the new villages that ended up living in Kuching, many of them remained as squatters to this day, as well as the Hakkas coming from traditional Hakka stronghold in Bau, has been significant to making their presence felt in Kuching. During my fieldwork I have heard comments from Hokkiens and Teochius at coffee shops, food markets, or even at pubs about how they now have to learn the Hakka language because of the increasing presence of this speech group in Kuching. There was, however, another factor that contributed to the increasing number of Hakkas in Kuching. That occurred in the mid-1980s when the pepper prices were extremely favorable to Hakka pepper farmers. With significant capital, many of the Hakka pepper farmers from the Serian district started to venture into all sorts of businesses in Kuching. Many Hokkiens and Teochius would agree, albeit reluctantly, that the Hakka language was becoming the lingua franca of Kuching and that was not sitting too well with them. In many ways, I suspect their disinterested attitude towards the Hakkas reflected their refusal to acknowledge the growing presence of the Hakkas in Kuching and, in retrospect, it provided them with a conceptual discourse to hold on to the conceptual façade of their past business monopoly in Kuching.

It is of my opinion that the past and the present inevitably lay down the limits of my interlocutors' existence in Sarawak. It is out of these concrete experiences, both from the discourse of dislocation during the 1960s as well as their current dispositions as low-income working class bus conductors, drivers, and clothing vendors that shaped, to a degree, their outlook. What was most urgent and preoccupied my interlocutors were their day-to-day survival protocols. Most of their daily maneuverings, even as they were uneven and contradictory - actions such as pilfering, foot dragging, gossiping, and all the other activities - were pragmatic in spirit, even ironic, humorous, and most of all, had the capacity of hardened stubbornness that allowed them to remain indifferent to the institutional circuits of symbolic powers. These activities or behaviors should not, and must not, be identified as their form of alienating themselves from or resisting against the normative consensus. If anything else, these routines of theirs can at best be seen as their attempts to reduce the degree of subjugation, as "working the system to their minimum disadvantage" (Hobsbawn, 1973:7).

Being indifferent was a big part of the survival tactics that sprung from their experience of their past as well as the daily material they faced in the present context. These were individuals who had been deprived of their equal opportunities in life because the dominant ideology in Malaysia not only rationalized (on ethnic vocabularies) their material deprivation and low status but also enforced it with a very stringent form of affirmative action and other disciplinary apparatuses. They were confronted with daily evidence that flew in the face of official discourse – of entrenched privilege and corruption, aloofness of officials (VIPs), inaccessibility to all sorts of benefits and resources for non-Malays, repression of freedom of speech, political proclivities, and so

forth. As far as these individuals were concerned, coercion and sanctions were the name of the game in both colonial and postcolonial Sarawak. For them, it had always been “dominance without hegemony.” Make no mistakes about it, my interlocutors were fully aware of the political system in Malaysia: a system founded on Malay dominance, particularly by a small elite group within the Malay population (Jesudason, 1989; Gomez and Jomo, 1997. Gomez, 1999). If it is even possible to talk about the goal of these interlocutors, if there was any, it was not to overthrow or transform the system of domination but rather to survive. Their intention was always survival and persistence. They were, after all, pragmatic individuals.

Chapter Five: *Chung Yung*

In Southeast Asia we are witnessing the emergence of forceful “national” discourse aimed at regulating the life of its citizens (cf. Nonini, 1997 for Malaysia; Kipp, 1996 for Indonesia; Heng and Devan, 1995 for Singapore; Blanc Szanton, 1997 for Thailand and the Philippines, Smith, 1983, and so on). How do these nation-states manage their heterogeneous populations, characterized by pluralities of classes, religions, and ethnic groups? Is it through consensus building or through coercion? Or are we dealing with the processes of a subjectification in the Foucaultian sense that transcends the duality between consensus and coercion?

Although class differences have increased within each ethnic group (among the Malays, the Chinese, and the Indians) in Malaysia since its independent in 1957, class-based conflicts have not emerged. This is because Malaysia, similar to many other nation-states in Southeast Asia, has continued to cultivate ethnic differences as useful adjuncts of nationalism, in essence, muffling incipient class conflict. Ethnicity has been a tool of the state in allocating resources and political control (Ackerman and Lee, 1988; Cushman and Wang, 1988). If anything else, the reification of communal identities serves to bolster the overall power of the state and at the same time camouflages its fragile unity or unpopularity. The politicization of ethnicity is in fact an old recipe learned from former colonial regimes, a remanufacturing of the “divide-and-rule” strategies of earlier colonizers.

This historical mix of bureaucratic ascription and social description of ethnic identities has meant legitimate freedom and emotional well being for some, while prescribing violent consequences for others who have been stigmatized in the process. The economic and political crisis (pace 1997) has triggered waves of violence in various

communities throughout Southeast Asia, most particularly in Indonesia where antagonistic indigenous rhetoric has stigmatized their Chinese communities as sojourners, undesirables, and disloyal “Others” (Kipp, 1996). While this might not be the case for Malaysia, the current administration has often reminded its population of the indefinite “preventive” detention power of the ISA, proscribing any hope of political activities.

Many studies have argued that the cultural politics of the various Chinese (or other ethnic) communities in Malaysia must be understood by looking at the effects produced by the so-called modernizing projects by the State, namely the NEP that started in 1970 (Jomo, 1986; Jesudason, 1989; Osman-Rani, 1990) and later, the *Vision 2020*. For me, this is not enough. I propose that we also need to analyze the roles played by its Chinese (and other ethnic) politicians and/or “ethnic entrepreneurs” and their recruits. In other words, an understanding of the extreme degree whereby ethnicity is being politicized and a critical understanding of the various local collaborations, that is, explicating the degree of co-optations, competitions, and alliances, are not only vital but also necessary. Failing to do so often results in some kind of dualism that either focuses on the centrality on the various disciplinary apparatus of the State on the one hand, or couches within the notion of resistance on the other hand, both of which focuses having the tendency of obscuring the multiple levels of agents’ negotiation and creativity.

If we have learnt anything from the colonial encounter, the discursive discourses of any colonial regime cannot be forced onto its subjects indefinitely without elements of collaboration and/or cooperation from some portion of its so-called subalterns. Some scholars might want to call this “local hegemony.” I need to clarify that at any time in this thesis when I use the concept “hegemony,” it is with reservation since I am not entirely convinced it is an appropriate concept given that most colonial subjectivities were born

out of coercion and all types of sanctions instead of acceptance or compliance. In Southeast Asia, “local hegemony” often has an ethnic flavor to it. In fact, cultivating contrastive ethnic identity in Others is often the project of politicians and/or “ethnic entrepreneurs” who endeavor to mobilize their ethnic kind and thereby build themselves a constituency. During my fieldwork, I came across many such ethnic entrepreneurs, even among my lower working class interlocutors. These were the individuals who would constantly invoke their ethnicity as a form of identity or, I would argue, as a rhetorical device to assist or resist in their daily maneuverings, in their constant lamentation about those they classified as “Others.” In short, these were the one who used the ethnic flag in essentializing, in stereotyping both themselves and the “Others.”

As I mentioned earlier, I find it useful to talk about my interlocutors as belonging to a certain figuration of interdependent individuals. Within this figurations of interdependent people – the management of SOC and KTC, the bus conductors and drivers of SOC and KTC, the clothing vendors at the hawker centre, and other vendors at the bus station - are networks that are formed according to ethnicities, Chinese speech groups, surnames, age groups, religion, work, and the villages they escaped from, or in fact some kind of shared consciousness derived from their own complicity or histories from the Cold War.

According to Elias, “Even those who, by specific social standards, are the greatest, the most powerful people, have their place as links in these chains of dependence” (1982 [1969]: 26). Such an analysis allows me to explore the latitude given to an individual by his/her position within a specific figuration, in the “tactics” of his/her personal behavior.

I am not implying that my other interlocutors whom I do not consider as ethnic entrepreneurs did not invoke the ethnic flag or vocabulary. Indeed, ethnicity is a very convenient flag that can be used to both empower as well as discriminate against agents

and it is used at all levels of society in Malaysia. To be sure, everybody is essentialized, but it is how one is essentialized, when, how often, and for what purposes (whether it is a conscious effort or otherwise) that forms the basis of my analysis. In this regards, anthropologists and other social scientists are no exceptions. We invoked, essentialized ethnicity, perhaps out of ignorance, our lack of (long-term) responsibility, our lack of auto-critique, our habit to categorize, or simply, in order to manufacture topics in order to create positions, and to continue to write articles and books about such topics in order to secure these positions.

I submit that this too has to do, at least in part, with the habit of constituting and reconstituting the “us” and “them” by these social scientists. Affected by the discursive “chronology of History,” they do not situate themselves within the concrete complexity of everyday lives. Taking a cue from Kant,¹ this in fact illuminates the limits of theory: over the past three centuries what we have of different theories are “explanatory discourses that bring forth into light an inverted representation of its opaque sources” (de Certeau, 1984:72; see also Jameson, 1981, especially Chapter 1: On Interpretation). We are thus led to question the underside of such inquiries and to ask whether their observation, if not their theoretical urgency, does not in fact function as a collage – juxtaposing the “us” and “them,” linking less and less effectively the theoretical ambitions of the discourse with the stubborn persistence of the opaque reality of the everyday. It is to the latter that I will now turn to.

This chapter addresses the implications of ethnic identifications from the ground level among non-elite Chinese populations in Sarawak, Borneo. For the half million persons of Chinese descent living in Sarawak, the question of how they identify themselves and

what that means to them and to other Malaysians are important matters. What they have in common is not so much a language or a cultural inheritance but a "certitude of identification," both imposed by others as well as adopted by themselves as "Chinese."

Allow me to quote at length from Michel de Certeau:

"We must first analyze its manipulation by users who are not its makers. Only then can we gauge the difference or similarity between the production of the image and the secondary production hidden in the process of its utilization" (1984: xiii).

During the early stage of my fieldwork, my understanding of ethnicity or identity was somewhat shattered by my interlocutors. It occurred to me then that the only occasion I would get a response from them suggesting they were Chinese, Malays, Ibans, Bidayuh, Hakkas, Sarawakians, or other forms of identifications would be contingent to the questions I asked, for example: "Do you see yourself as a Chinese, a Hakka, a Hokkien, a Teochiu, and so on? Or do you see yourself as a Malaysian, a Chinese Malaysian, a Sarawakian, or a Kuchinite?" In truth, my interlocutors were too busy to deal with the topics we call ethnicity or identity. After all, ethnicity was priority number one of the State. When asked about ethnicity, some of the usual responses were: "Of course we are Chinese. We are not Bumis, no land, no handouts. No *Amanah Saham Nasional* (a high yielding interest and dividend paying governmental bond that is specifically entitled only to Bumiputra), ... What we get is a big fat egg."² Perhaps it was their tactical response to the constant reminder that they were Chinese and therefore existed outside of any governmental incentives or handouts that they choose to remain aloof, to be indifferent to ongoing propaganda on ethnicity. To counter, they would deploy their local tactics to

¹ See especially *On the Old Saw: That May Be Right in Theory but it Won't Work in Practice*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania. 1974

² In Mandarin, egg ('chee-tan') also stands for zero or nothingness.

“not read,” “not hear” the constant harassment of the state-control media, be it the newspaper, radio, or television.

Unfortunately I did not have the luxury to ignore the various state orchestrated examples of propaganda. I cannot even begin to describe how quickly boredom and condescension seep in as I was forced to read, watch, and listen to the same repetitive and rhetorical ‘speeches’ during my fieldwork. At numerous occasions when I was at several longhouses in Sarawak I could not help but noticing how several village seniors were dozing off while some government officials were delivering their speeches. Initially I wondered if it was the intense heat that created such a drowsy atmosphere or if it was the monotony of their speeches. It could not be the heat since they were used to it. It had to be the latter or perhaps a combination of both. Even though some of these officials were aware that the speeches they gave during the many pompous official functions were basically recycled, even though they were aware that a huge segment of the population was not “buying into it” (and was dozing off while they were giving their speeches), these speech were continually being produced on a massive scale on all levels of society - whether it was on the village, town, city, or the federal level, or even deep inside the rainforest. As Philip Cornigan and Derek Sayer have perceptively noted, the production of discourse is an integral part of the state’s exercise in legitimation, or as they put it, “the State never stops talking” (1985:3; see also Bernard Cohn, 1996).

The common theme underlying all the speeches by the VIPs (and there are many VIPs in Malaysia) was that the government was the unquestioned legitimate ruler of the nation and it was the sole guardian in terms of guiding the populations towards a just and moral society, towards progress and development. To be sure, obtaining a just and moral society, and progress and development, meant voting for the *Barisan Nasional* (the ruling

coalition government). The issue of legitimization or what may appear as moral truth was taken as a given and was not to be questioned. To question *Barisan Nasional* was unMalaysian, and considered dangerous and subversive.

All during my fieldwork, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dr. Mahathir Mohamed would appear on the air (radio and television) at least once a week, reminding Malaysians of national unity, patriotism, and the “common enemies.” Unlike during the Cold War, Malaysia currently had two common enemies during my fieldwork - the evils of globalization, and the dangers within its own boundaries (the *Reformasi* movement). Incidentally, this twin common enemy theme surfaced only after the 1997 region-wide economic and financial crisis. Indeed, most of my interlocutors knew a lot about the “common enemy,” especially those who had been labeled as communists in the past. It was not surprising to me that most of them had a rather indifferent attitude to the recent surge of paranoiac anti-globalization and anti-*reformasi* discourse orchestrated by the Mahathir regime in the aftermath of the 1997 financial crisis. One wonders if years of displacement and violence have lent them the currency to see clearly the rhetorical elements behind the state and federal governments’ propaganda. To them, the government’s portrayal of globalization as the “common enemy” of the nation state had the same clothing “communism” used to wear.

Most of my interlocutors at the bus station would laugh when I asked if they had heard Mahathir’s speech over the airwaves. They would quip sarcastically, “Are you referring to his sermon?” or “we have heard that speech a million times,” or “he is so laughable,” and so on. To them, the message was always the same: you have danger within your very community and it was the responsibility of the government to make sure that these elements were destroyed or curtailed. I am not suggesting that my interlocutors

could live their lives unaffected by the official discourses of the State or completely ignore them. Being dislocated, displaced, and outside of any governmental incentives, they had the tumultuous tasks of either having to obey laws whose authority they had never recognized or to remain indifferent to the authority of rules from which they could not escape. From this point of view, to acknowledge the authority of rules is exactly the opposite of obeying them (cf. de Certeau, 1984).

There is something else to it. The State would regard its legitimacy not by revealing what was not working but by pointing towards any form of signifiers that suited its need. For example, more reverential than anything else, patriotism or the popularity of the State is usually marked by the outcome of elections; that after all the *Barisan Nasional* stills succeeds in each and every state and federal elections in convincingly landslide results. Michael de Certeau (1984) has pointed out that such behavior has as its corollary the conviction by representatives of the State that although the public is more or less resistant, they are nevertheless molded by the State. The set of standardized education and the state-run media apparatus believe that its population believes in what they receive. The underlying assumption here is that production is active whereas consumption is essentially passive.

Obviously the inherent elements that determine the outcomes of election results – the degree of limited media coverage given to competing parties or candidates, the counting of votes, the existence of phantom votes, or the jailing of opposition candidates just before the election, or how populations are coaxed into voting for whom, and so on - are obviously left out of the equation. Given this fiction of legitimacy, the State has the conviction that it is succeeding very well in managing its affairs. The *Barisan Nasional* only has to (re)count the citations of whatever phantom witnesses it can gather by surveys

and statistics that are favorable to its goals. In this sense, the *Barisan Nasional* is a champion when it comes to using statistical “strong languages” to its advantage (cf. Asad, 1994 on a discussion of strong languages and social representation).

Back to my interlocutors: Am I implying that some of my interlocutors were denying that they were Chinese? Am I implying that they were completely devoid of any form of identity, especially ethnicity? Absolutely not. The fact that they were Chinese was a given. To them that question has no validity. Often they would laugh at me as if I was asking an obvious and silly question when I asked if they considered themselves Chinese. I recalled a timekeeper at the SOC, a Ms. Tan, who once said to me, “If you say I am Chinese, I am Chinese. But I can also be a Sarawakian, a Malaysian, a Heng Hwas (a certain Chinese speech group), a Tan, a SOC employee, or an old woman. Of course I am Chinese but there is more than being Chinese. It depends on your life, your work, where you live and ... you know? But why are you asking me such a question?”

The point is that most of them have many other important agendas that were more urgent in their daily live – they have to deal with responsibilities at the work place; they have to negotiate with the management (especially the new management, in the case of SOC employees), their colleagues, and they have their family to think of. On the whole, these employees realized the tactical role they needed to play in order to negotiate living in an unjust world. Unfortunately, even as their tactics allowed them to buy time on one level, they also served to reinforce and legitimate their subordination on another level, since their use of tactics does “not manifest itself through its own products but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order” (de Certeau, 1984: xii-xiii).

In the various different “tactics” they deployed, there was one common underlying component, the notion of essentializing. In fact I would argue that essentializing itself was a tactic. I will use some of my interlocutors who are of Chinese descent to illustrate my point. Being “Chinese,” especially when it is imposed by the State and essentialized by both popular as well as scholarly literature, comes with certain opportunities as well as limitations. I have already briefly discussed the scapegoat aspect of being Chinese in Southeast Asia. I will now elaborate what I mean by opportunity.

As most of us are aware, it is commonly perceived that there is a certain mythical synthesis (perhaps a chimera is a better description) concerning the level of understanding Chinese peoples has toward Eastern philosophies. This is not entirely an Orientalism manufactured by so-called Westerners on so-called Chinese subjects but even among most Chinese themselves. Being Chinese, most of them (including myself) assume they know about things “Eastern” – “*Ying Yang*,” “*Chi-Qong*,” “*Feng-Hsui*,” “*Confucianism*,” “*Mencius*,” “*Lao-Tzu*,” and so on. Or at least they pretend or allude to others that they do.

And here is my point. Everybody essentializes, especially when it is to his or her advantage. Call it “strategic essentialism,” if you prefer. But the issue I have is not about essentializing but rather, how one essentializes and what the effects it produces are. When my interlocutors speak about Confucianism (or other Eastern philosophies), they imply, invoke, or allude to having a certain understanding of such philosophies. But their enunciation of Confucianism and other Eastern philosophies are only performances and they are not reducible to a knowledge or competency of these philosophies. Moreover, knowledge and competency are not necessarily synonymous. However, my emphasis here is on “performance” rather than on competency or knowledge of these Eastern

philosophies. My intention is to concentrate on the point of enunciation, privileging the act of speaking and how it effects an appropriation, or reappropriation of the self (in this case, Chineseness or even a certain mythical privileged position) by the speaker. In other words, it is a tactic that promotes some kind of “knowledge” or “feelings” on the actors.

What I argue in this chapter is that psychologically such elocutions or tactics enable them to survive within the dominant cultural economy. I will elaborate one of these tactics with the concept of *Chung Yung* (the Doctrine of the Mean) that was so commonly invoked by some of my interlocutors. However, before I go into the various incidents in which the concept was invoked, this is a sample (among many others) of how *Chung Yung* is described:

“Being without inclination to either side is called *Chung*; admitting of no change is called *Yung*. By *Chung* is denoted the correct course to be pursued by all under heaven; by *Yung* is denoted the fixed principle regulating all under heaven. This work contains the law of the mind, which was handed down from one to another, in the Confucian school, till Tze-sze, fearing lest in the course of time errors should arise about it, committed it to writing, and delivered it to Mencius. The Book first speaks of one principle; it next spreads this out, and embraces all things; finally, it returns and gathers them all up under the one principle. Unroll it, and it fills the universe; roll it up, and it retires and lies hidden in mysteriousness. The relish of it is inexhaustible. The whole of it is solid learning. When the skilful reader has explored it with delight till he has apprehended it, he may carry it into practice all his life, and will find that it cannot be exhausted”

(Legge, 1971: 382-383).

From the above description, *Chung Yung* can denote inexhaustible elements or thoughts, one of which is the “Middle Path.” Moreover, the “Middle Path” can denote “walking the middle-road,” “balance,” “avoiding the extreme,” “avoiding attention,” “playing it safe,” and so on. In fact one could conjure up new meanings of the concept as one goes along applying the term. In many ways this reflects its usefulness, its pragmatism. Here are some of the examples by what I meant by the idea of *Chung Yung* that was narrated or invoked by some of my interlocutors.

Hong Hee Siaw:

Before I met Hong Hee Siaw, I read extensively in the archive about his roles with the SUPP, his engagement with the general public, and his opposition towards the Sarawak Alliance government during the 1950s and 1960s. There were many articles and government reports about him – his speeches at rallies, the heated polemical debates that went on for years between him and the Chief Minister of Sarawak, and so on. This was no ordinary person. He was one individual who was not afraid of the authorities. In fact, the reverse was probably more accurate. Hong was a people-oriented politician, frequenting correction centres, attending to dislocated households, and I was told that he would pack an entire basketball court every time he spoke, generating a great deal of excitement. Besides being one of the most outspoken figures in Sarawak throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Hong was most definitely inclined towards Marxism. Because of that, he was imprisoned right before the General Election in 1969. However, he was only imprisoned for less than two years. The short jail period was suspicious considering that many others were detained for much longer period for merely being suspected communists.

I was thrilled to have an opportunity to see him, to listen to someone who could give me first hand knowledge about what happened during the Cold War, the level of atrocities, the sentiments of those being dislocated or displaced, and so on. I suppose we are all driven by our propensity to get information from someone who possesses the authority to speak. Hong Hee Siaw was in his late sixties when we met. He had retired as the General Manager of the SOC, a company he helped founded. However, he still worked as a consultant for the company.

I saw Hong Hee Siaw during the early phase of my fieldwork. I was surprised that he agreed to see me the very first time I called. We met at his office at the company's

headquarters. With all that and through a longish dialogue³ I asked many questions based on what I had been told about him by others and what I had read about him in the archives. I have to admit I could not completely escape the historian's agenda, asking about "grand" subjects like "The Cold War," "Communism," "The Sri Aman Treaty," "Hunger Strikes," "New Village" relocation schemes, his opinion of Malaysia, the British Administration, the United Nation, and so on – subjects he is all too familiar with. I was hoping these "grand" subjects would get him excited, get him started telling me stories, events, and descriptions of the atmosphere from the recent past.

However, he was not moved and remained expressionless before my line of queries. That was an awkward moment for me. I remember thinking to myself, "What is wrong with him? Did I ask the wrong questions, about the wrong topics? Why isn't he reacting? Am I being rude? Am I out of line?" I waited for some signal but there was none. I asked myself, "How can his mind be elsewhere when I am asking him about some very essential issues that have not only affected him for most of his life, but also others he cares so deeply of?" I was trying to find some excuse for his unresponsiveness. I had heard from some of my interlocutors – and they were always very respectful when they talked about Hong Hee Siaw – that he had not been the same person after he was released from prison. He was no longer the explosive and captivating speaker he had been before. True, a stroke had affected his speech. But surely he would still react to these "grand" subjects.

Thinking back, I wonder if my interlocutors were using Hong's stroke to justify his setbacks – not contesting in any elections since his released from prison, having to give up thirty-percent of his company to a *Bumiputra* holding company and worst of all, of

³ We spoke in Mandarin. Hong is a Chaoanns, a language I am not familiar with.

seeing his own party, the SUPP, conforming to the status quo. Still, something was not quite right chronologically. Hee Siaw had the stroke in the early eighties but he had not run in any elections since his release in 1971. Someone once told me he suspected Hee Siaw was told to stop opposing the government “or else.”

On the other hand, there is also the possibility that he finally saw the bigger picture, which is, that it was pointless to fight when all he/they possessed were tactics and not strategies. The maneuvers available to him at that point, and for that matter to the rest of the leaders of the SUPP, were simply ploys to buy time, not positions they could secure or improve upon. When all was added up, what they had was diplomacy without any military fire power. The odds were stacked too heavily against them. Not only did they have to deal with the Administration of Malaysia, but that of Britain as well.

So why was Hong unresponsive to my questions? He appeared to be gathering his thoughts while remaining silent. Finally, he uttered the word *Chung Yung*. It took me a while to understand what he meant by it. My initial reaction, based on what little I knew about the term, was disappointment, if not disillusion, especially when the man who said it was someone of whom I had such a high opinion, a fighter against imperialism. What had happened to his radicalism? What was this idea of the middle path, of avoiding the extremes, of staying out of troubles? When I told him I was confused as to what he meant, he responded, “*Chung Yung* is the way to live one’s life. This is from Confucius, our great *Shen-Shien* (Great Benefactor).”

Here is my point: by invoking Confucius, “our” Great Benefactor, he was perhaps drawing an analogy, inserting metaphors and, precisely in that measure, they become

acceptable, taken as legitimate.⁴ Reacting to my confusion, if not to my initial disappointment, I asked if the Doctrine of the Mean (Chung Yung) was something he began to think about after going through the Cold War experience. I was assuming so, since there was nothing I had read or heard from others that would describe him as the kind of person who would be taking the Middle Path. Again he did not offer an immediate answer. While waiting for a response I jotted down on my note-pad: “Why *Chung Yung*? Is he trying to avoid the issue of why the SUPP gave up its role in opposition the government? How do I or should I ask about it?”⁵

The Cold War was essentially a large battle between communism and capitalism, but the distinction between the two could be blurred, or they could overlap. Contrasting the roles played by the leaders of the SUPP earlier and their current socio-economical and political positions would certainly attest to the overlapping between communism and capitalism. This is a history that the “victim” denies – a denial arising from his subsequent “success” in the business and political world. Perhaps there was a concealed sense of shame, of defeat, or of political suppression. Perhaps.

After some thoughts he offered this remark, speaking like an elder: “We do not have to do the extremes to change things. Sometimes things change by themselves, but when or how much later, we don’t know. The important thing is to avoid being an extremist. There are more ways to negotiate when one is in the middle. When there is a middle path.”

⁴ I did not tell him that the Doctrine of the Mean (Chung Yung) was not written by Confucius but by one of his grandson; K’ung Chi. I do not mean to be too detail-oriented, but this is to prove my point that most of my Chinese interlocutors invoke and assume they know something about Chinese philosophy when in essence, they do not.

⁵ On the question of the practical impossibility of speech in such situations, see Urvashi Butalia’s (1998) remarkable chapter on her uncle, “Blood,” chapter 2.

It was my turn to think about what he said. He was silent, waiting for me to respond. I was not sure if I should answer with the following response, but I did anyway: "You have a point but ... wouldn't that be like ... [I wanted to say selling out] admitting defeat? Admitting you was wrong in the past?" I sensed he was not too happy with my remark. His face took on a look of grim seriousness. He was not longer smiling. I realized I had been overly aggressive. It would not have been helpful for my research to annoy this man, since he could easily have refused me permission to work with the bus conductors and drivers at the SOC. Legally he could not that but I was fully aware of the shady definition between legality and illegality.

What he then said made perfect sense. It had to do with different dimensions of life, recognizing that changes do not have to come from politics. He told me how he used to believe that changes could only be achieved through the political process, in particular, through political organization. He was referring to the SUPP's initial agenda to promote change and to improve the quality of life for Sarawakians - that Sarawakians should enjoy the fruits of their labor and the abundance of natural resources in the state instead of being exploited by external forces such as England and later on, Malaysia. He said, "To depend solely on politics for change is simply too unrealistic. Furthermore, can socialism assure that everyone will be equal, that everybody can aspire to do what he wants, that there will be no greed or ambition once socialism is achieved? More importantly and realistically, changes can also occur within the economic and the social spheres, and religion can promote changes as well. Moreover, economic and social activities are not as ideological as political activity, and they have longer lasting effects."

I was beginning to see his point. I would agree that changes that come about from the economic, social, and religious spheres can have a more powerful and lasting impact than

those coming from political activity, that is, if one can in fact make a separation between politics and the other dimensions of life. "But what about *Chung Yung*?" I asked since I was still not clear why he brought up the term.

"What about it?" he replied.

"Well," I said, "doesn't *Chung Yung*, the way you explained it, mean walking the Middle Path, not causing any problems with the authorities even if you disagree wholeheartedly with them - in short, being a conformist? Isn't that the complete opposite of what the SUPP set out to do, to fight for justice and equality, to fight for independence, to fight for the rights of Sarawakians, to fight against Imperialism and policies that were orchestrated from overseas, policies that had nothing to do with the social realities or the general consensus of Sarawakians?" I took out my other notebook and flipped to a certain page before adding, "I'm aware of the chilling reception Sarawakians gave to the United Nations' entourage in 1963. It's in the archives."

He was quiet for a while before saying, "You do not understand what I meant by *Chung Yung*. You are not seeing the bigger picture."

Perhaps that was true, and I was waiting for him to elaborate but he did not. He suggested that I should spend some time at the SUPP library, read the literature there and meet some politicians who could familiarize me with Sarawak. He then proceeded to tell me he had retired from politics some twenty years ago, after the stroke, and that right now, his son and grandson had taken over running the company. I suspected he was saying that as a convenient point of departure from our discussion of his politics during the Cold War. He was quick, however, to tell me he was still politically connected, that he was still one of the several Honorary Chairmen of the party, a position he had held since 1984. Before that, from 1954 to 1983, he had been the Secretary of Public

Information (except for the two years when he was in prison). It was true that since his stroke in 1981, he had not been actively involved with the administering of the SUPP. He did not go to meetings anymore. He would say, "That's up to the new generation." I was hoping he would continue talking but he just stopped and smiled at me. I realized I should perhaps continue our conversation on another occasion instead of pushing for more information.

The SUPP was no longer the same party it used to be. The radicalness of the party was all but a thing of the past. Many of my interlocutors shared this opinion. The SUPP's aim of achieving self-rule, of achieving independent not only from England but also from Malaysia was buried somewhere in their archives after it became part of the state coalition government in 1970. However, even though the idea of self-rule was sidestepped or censured by the party, it was not forgotten. I heard it mentioned by many of my interlocutors from time to time, especially those who were no longer supporters of the party. The fact that the current leaders at the SUPP were not entirely new bloods but were essentially hand picked by the old guard did not sit too well with some of these former members or supporters. They felt let down and sold out. Such sentiments were easily discerned in the comments of many bus conductors and drivers, or some bus passengers, comments such as "Nowadays all of them have *pangkat* (titles). 'Y.B.s,' 'Datuks,' some even 'Tan Sri.'⁶ These are what we call 'big people.'" As pointed out by many of my interlocutors, these *pangkat* holders were the same individuals who would come to see them in the past, who would arouse common people to oppose the administrations of the British, Federal, and State government. Nowadays the only way to

⁶ The Sultans in Malaysia usually present these *pangkat* during their birthdays.

see them would be to make an appointment or, as most of my interlocutors would comment: wait until just before elections.

Just before the end of our first meeting, Hong Hee Siaw offered to take me to the SUPP headquarters the following week. I accepted his invitation without hesitation, thinking about what an opportunity it would be to be introduced to the staff by none other than Hong Hee Siaw. I was still savoring the prospect when suddenly I realized he was excusing himself, getting ready to leave. He mentioned that lately he only stayed in the office until lunch hours. I realized that I had to see him again if I wanted a satisfactory answer as to why he was not the same person I had read about in the archives. Besides, I was also anxious to find out about the way he enunciated "*Chung Yung*" and what manner of (re)appropriation that enunciation provided for him as a formerly progressive SUPP leader in his current position. Besides, "*Chung Yung*" was the term I would constantly encounter throughout my fieldwork among many of my Chinese interlocutors.

Before leaving, Hong Hee Siaw asked me to come to him the following week for some letters. These were letters signed by him authorizing me to "interview" some of the senior employees (as it turns out, mostly, station managers) at different locations throughout Sarawak. I cannot explain how excited I was. I realized I should stop pursuing any more questions at that point for fear that he might not draft and sign the letters.

When I visited him the following week for the letters, I confided to him that I had been thinking about *Chung Yung* the entire week, but somehow I had failed to fully comprehend the concept in respect to his position, or rather, his former position vis-à-vis the State, the Federal government at Kuala Lumpur, or with the British Administration. I begged him to explain the concept, but this time with concrete examples about being

Chinese, being a former active opposition member, and so on, and how that way of life could be deemed as being *Chung Yung*.

He smiled. I was glad my line of inquiry had not offended him. He asked if I was aware of the latest political development in west Malaysia – that the opposition party *Parti Islam SeMalaysia* (PAS) had won the state elections in two northern states of west Malaysia - Clanton and Trengganu. “With the PAS,” he said, “You don’t have *Chung Yung*. There is no middle path for the Chinese and Malay to work together. PAS is an Islamic Party. Sure, the UMNO [the ruling party: United Malay National Organization] is an Islamic Party and Malaysia is an Islamic country but they are not extremists unlike the PAS.” He continued, “if more States in Malaysia go to the PAS in future elections, Malaysia will no longer be *Chung Yung*. Now they have Kelantan and Trengganu. If they get more than that, we Chinese will have to be very careful. We Chinese have to be united; otherwise you will have another *Woo Yeah See-san*.”⁷ He asked if I was beginning to see the bigger picture, adding, “think of the situation of the Chinese population in Malaysia during the past thirty years. Also, think about our situation as compared with the Chinese in Indonesia. Imagine what will happen if the PAS takes over. That will be like losing the *Chung Yung* we have.”

He definitely had a point. Not knowing exactly what to ask, I said, “What do you consider what you were doing, or the SUPP was doing when you opposed the formation of Malaysia? That was not *Chung Yung*, was it?”

He paused for a while, seeming uncomfortable. Finally he responded, “Last time, against the *chien fu* (government) ...[he was interrupted by an employee who came in with folders of documents for him to sign]. You mean *Kuo Chen* (the state)?”

⁷ This was the racial riot that happened on May 13th, 1969.

“Yes, the state Alliance Government, the Malayan Government, and before that, the British Administration, ... before 1970,” I added.

“Well, things were different then. We thought we were doing something, fighting for what we thought was best for Sarawak, for Sarawakians. We wanted to have more progress for Sarawak. We wanted independence. Things are different now. There have been a lot of changes. But that does not mean we are not progressing. The SUPP is still working to achieve more developments for Sarawakians ... bridges, roads ... Things are changing for the better. The SUPP is no longer the opposition party but then again we helped achieve the same goals. Whatever political parties you are in, whatever your ideology, you still work for the same thing, progress. Progress for Sarawakians! Otherwise you won’t get reelected. During the British Administration, things were different. Everything went to England. All our revenues! But not now! We now have more infrastructures, a better standard of living. We have universities, roads, bridges, electricity, and so on. We are peaceful, unlike Indonesia,” he smiled at me for having offered a lengthy response.

The comparison with Indonesia was something I would constantly encounter all throughout my fieldwork. I asked him if after the transfer of power, west Malaysia was not enjoying the same position that England had before. He felt a little uncomfortable, but said, “But we have made a lot of progress, whether for the Chinese or others. Things are in *Chung Yung*. That is what I have been trying to tell you.”

I was beginning to see his point. The way he used *Chung Yung*, the way he enunciated it, in fact alluded to the available local tactics for “minorities” to deploy within the dominant structure, both for himself as an individual as well as for the SUPP as a political party that was suppose to represent the Chinese population in Sarawak. In

short, given the minority status of the Chinese in Malaysia, to collaborate or to work things out with the heavily Malay-dominated government instead of opposing was the best alternative in terms of carving out some sort of middle ground for the Chinese instead of opposing them. It was the strategy of trying to get the best out of what is available. Being *Chung Yung* alludes to the possibility of having a high degree of maneuverability but within the constraint of “making-do-with-what-you-have.”

His appropriation of *Chung Yung* could also be seen as a strategy, since he had positions to secure or defended - his position in the SUPP, his ownership at the SOC, and even the very existence of SUPP as a political party. Michel de Certeau (1984) distinguishes between “strategy” and “tactics” in the following terms. A strategy has the ability to “transform the uncertainties of history into readable spaces” (36). The type of knowledge derived from strategy is “one sustained and determined by the power to provide oneself with one’s own place” (36). Strategy therefore belongs to an economy of the proper place and to those who are committed to the building, growth, and fortification of a “field.” A tactic, in contrast, is “a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus.” Betting on time instead of space, a tactic “concerns on operational logic ... that disguise or transform themselves in order to survive” (37).

As such, neither he nor the SUPP were entirely powerless. The moves deployed were both strategies and tactics. One might even argue that the SUPP stood to have more negotiating power as part of the Alliance government as opposed to being an opposition party. Its power lay in its capabilities to negotiate with the rest of the Alliance parties (mainly with the UMNO), although within the rules that were largely dictated by the latter. It was true that the current administration was rather heavy handed in favoring the Malays, but there was still some breathing space – a middle path in which the Chinese

and the Malays (and other ethnic groups) could carve out a way of living together - a way of living without the open armed conflict experienced in Indonesia. What Hong was trying to allude to was that there was still some degree of moderation within the current Administration, and following his line of reasoning, such moderate space would dissipate or disappear if the PAS was to win more elections in west Malaysia, or worse, in Sarawak. Then there would no longer be any *Chung Yung*. However, the possibility of compromise was not an option available to most common Chinese people in Sarawak, and certainly it was even less available to most of the poorer Chinese population in Sarawak. To them, *Chung Yung* practices were local tactics that had less to do with securing or fortifying a position than they were for someone like Hong Hee Siaw or the other so-called Chinese leaders at the SUPP. I shall discuss these tactics in a moment.

When I attended a few SUPP meetings a week after my first meeting with Hong Hee Siaw, I could not help noticing a similar strategy adopted by the various speakers. At each of these meetings the speakers would caution its members (mostly Chinese, but there were a few indigenous among them) to consider the adverse consequences in store for them should the PAS win the state elections in Sarawak, and how that would disrupt the *Chung Yung* in Sarawak. All that the SUPP had achieved for them and all that the Chinese had benefited from the coalition government would be lost. There were also references to sayings, idioms, and teachings from the Sages of China at these events. I now wonder if Hong's appropriation of *Chung Yung* was in fact provoked by this political strategy, bearing in mind he was still one of the Honorary Chairmen of SUPP.

When I was at these SUPP events, I could not help but felt the irony of having to hear members chanting their original party slogan, "*Sa 'ati, Sa 'ati, Sa 'ati,*" (which literally means Independence). Before the SUPP joined the state Alliance government in 1970,

Sa'ati stood for the unity of all ethnic groups in Sarawak to fight for self-rule, to be independent from Malaysia. But since becoming part of the state Alliance government, its meaning had changed. Although *Sa'ati* was still the party slogan, it now denoted a moderate calling, “the voices of the people” (*Suara Rakyat*), in essence reflecting its acquiescence to the social and political reality of being part of Malaysia.

The way Hong Hee Siaw and leaders of the SUPP would invoke *Chung Yung* and how they appropriated it for their positioning and identity had an ethical, esthetic, and practical character. Coming from the Sages of China, it strategically increased the saliency of its rhetoric, at least symbolically, both for the locators and well as for their fellow Chinese audiences. But there was something awkward here. All throughout the history of the SUPP, at least rhetorically, it had always claimed to be a political party representing Sarawakians of all ethnicities. Its opponents had always claimed otherwise, since SUPP's members, past and present, had always been predominantly Chinese. However, if *Chung Yung* or other tropes of Confucianism were invoked to supposedly win consensus and support from its Chinese members, would the other non-Chinese members feel marginalized?

On another level, it seems to me that by invoking *Chung Yung* and the Sages of China, Hong Hee Siaw and the speakers at the SUPP meetings were appropriating an avenue or a “knowledge” that in their opinion had a status or “civilization” higher than that of the dominant discourse under which they were being subjected. To bring back de Certeau once again, in a sense, it was “an ethics of tenacity ... the countless ways of refusing to accord the established order the status of a law, a meaning, or a fatality” (1984: 26). One might even say that treating *Chung Yung* as a principle of social life, Hong and the SUPP were politicizing the term, treating it like free standing explanatory

tools or terms like “democracy” or “freedom.” Interestingly enough, *Chung Yung* was used here as a tactic as well as a strategy. The way SUPP leaders (including Hong Hee Siaw) would talk of the potential threats posed by the PAS and how it might eliminate the *Chung Yung* atmosphere in Sarawak had all the indicators of securing and protecting their own position and the existing status quo.

I would argue that the threat from the PAS was mere speculation on the part of Hong and leaders of the SUPP. There was absolutely no way of predicting whether the Chinese population would be worse off should the PAS won the state elections in Sarawak. It would help if we look at the situations in Kelantan and Trengganu, the two states won by the PAS in recent elections. I was told by a former opposition politician in Kuching that the majority of the Chinese population in Kelantan and Trengganu, especially those that lived in urban towns, continued to vote for the PAS during the past two general elections. If the PAS was even as half as detrimental to the Chinese as had been claimed by the SUPP leaders, why was the voting trend by the Chinese population in these states not reversed?

As such, the arguments made by the SUPP (and Hong Hee Siaw) were not supported by any concrete evidence and their appropriation of *Chung Yung* was nothing but a strategy to defend and secure their position as the political party representing the interests of the Chinese communities in Sarawak. Seen in this light, Hong Hee Siaw and the other SUPP leaders have made *Chung Yung* something like their ethos, as opposed to using it for timely tactical ploys, like my other interlocutors who had no position to secure or defend. I will now explore how *Chung Yung* was used by those interlocutors who appropriated it as a tactic, betting on time instead of space.

Pay Lai En:

After my initial discussion with Hong Hee Siaw, I spent the entire following week at the SOC bus station asking certain Chinese employees about their opinions of *Chung Yung*. Most of them had anecdotal answers like, “sure, in that way we stay out of politics,” or “by being *Chung Yung*, we do not allow ourselves to be caught in any awkward position the government can use against us.” Staying out of politics is very different than being part of it, like the leaders of the SUPP. Staying out of politics can also be read as adopting an indifferent attitude towards the government or, taking a cue from de Certeau, of creating a mental space in order to protect themselves from the attacks of State discourse, “by shutting themselves off from [the State’s] injunctions” (1997: ix).

As it so happened, I made the mistake of being too literal and asking the bus conductors and drivers to tell me more about the concept of *Chung Yung*, its author, how it could be applied to their lives in Sarawak, and so on. That made them tongue-tied and they referred me to Pay Lai En, saying, “Pay is a scholar. He is the right person for you.” After asking several bus drivers and conductors to set up a meeting for me with Pay, I finally obtained his telephone number. Pay finally agreed to see me at his house since he was still recuperating from a broken foot. When I arrived at Pay’s house, his wife opened the door for me but she wasn’t smiling. I detected that she was suspicious of me, perhaps she might have heard from her husband’s colleagues that I have been asking a lot of questions about communism in Sarawak as well as about her husband.

Pay had worked at the SOC as a bus conductor since 1965 and was “promoted”⁸ to a ticketing supervisor in 1982. As I mentioned earlier, I too had been caught up with

⁸ Promotion here does not denote a salary increment. Instead of working as a bus conductor, Pay sat inside the station office and had a certain authority over the bus conductors and drivers: he made sure that they showed up at work on time, that they make the specific required number of bus runs each shift, and so on.

“grand” topics especially after I had read through the documents and reports in the archives for data pertaining to my research project. It should come as no surprise that the first question I asked Pay would concern the Cold War in Sarawak. Pay lowered his voice and said, “You are referring to the 1960s and 1970s, the *Len Chang* (Cold War). Very chaotic! Lots of unrest.” As I mentioned earlier, Pay was one of three individuals that used the term *Len Chang* when talking about the Cold War. Even though the effects of the Cold War were felt even before Sarawak’s inclusion into Malaysia, for Pay, the troubles in Sarawak started in 1967 during a SUPP celebration. At the time, he was already a SOC employee and a SUPP member. According to Pay, as SUPP’s members and/or supporters were leaving the celebration at its headquarters, a few truckloads of army personnel arrived and began to arrest most of them under the pretext that they were either communists or communist sympathizers. As noted earlier, besides the communist elements, it would not be incorrect to say that the main target here was the SUPP and underlying all other categories – whether the arrested person was a SUPP member, a union member, or a SOC employee – was the fact that he or she were a Chinese. From the archives as well as from my fieldwork, the overwhelming majority of those that were arrested or detained during the Cold War were Chinese.

Pay was quick to respond when I asked if he had ever arrested, saying “Oh no, I was never a *swa-ngiau-chee*.” Pay was also uncomfortable when asked if he had been sympathizer. He tried to explain: “Things were really messy during the sixties,” and added after a long silence, “It’s not that simple to explain. It was very chaotic, confused. Most of us were scared and confused ... trapped. Not only did you have to concern yourself with the soldiers but with the *swa-ngiau-chee* as well. We had to be extremely cautious. Constant curfews. The soldiers, you stayed away from them. Many Chinese

schoolteachers and students were detained and some never made it back. Some were sent back to China – teachers and students.” In this case, the “we” refers to Pay and his family, and presumably other Hakkas families living in Kuching. Although I did not ask him, the “we” could also refer to his Chinese colleagues at the SOC.

I must stress that although most of these teachers and students that were detained and/or expelled from Sarawak were locally born, since they were overseas Chinese, it was presumed that they were Chinese nationals living overseas. As I have argued in Chapter One, a lot of such sentiments had to do with the way they were portrayed by colonial administrators, postcolonial nationalists, and popular as well as scholarly literature.

Pay liked to switch topics when we talked. He proceeded to tell me that he was born in Kuching and was quick to assert that his parents came from the Chin Ann Khek prefecture in the Kwangtung Region of China. He then justified why he had never been to China or to his parent’s village by saying, “My financial circumstances do not allow me to ‘go back’ (*hui chii*).” The emphasis here is “*hui chii*,” which was the perlocutionary force of implying that China is his home. He added, “But how could I have the time with my kind of work? Furthermore, I’m not familiar with the situation in China.” Thus lacks of funds, time, as well as familiarity were conjured up as tactical responses for not being able to “go back” (*hui chii*) to China. Perhaps to further elaborate his humble situation, he proceeded to tell me his only material possession after thirty-five years of working at the SOC was a residential house next to the company’s depot. This was something most of his colleagues were without. Many of them had to rent their houses or had only a room for boarding.

Pay's house was one of twenty houses located next to SOC's depot. Most of the owners of these houses were SOC mechanics that had worked thirty years or more with the company. Many of them took a loan from the company to buy the house, something that was no longer available under the current management. It was extremely convenient for the mechanics, since the depot was literally located next door. Others like Pay and some bus conductors and drivers who lived there would use the company's buses to take them to work at the main bus station or the headoffice.

I should mention that my first interview with Pay took place very early on during my fieldwork. Being caught up then on issues of ethnicity, I enquired about his neighbors' ethnicities as well as their Chinese language groups. He replied however, by telling me that first of all they were his colleagues, and some of them happened to be Hakkas, Bidayus and Ibans. As if he could read my mind, he added that all their children went to the same Chinese Chong Hwa school a few miles down the road. To Pay, and he was by no way unique, one of the reasons Sarawak had rather amicable racial relations had to do with the fact that most of its population was bi- or tri-lingual. He said that most of his indigenous and Malay colleagues knew some Hakka and Hokkien and likewise, most of the Chinese employees could manage some Malay or Iban. He believed that some familiarity with different languages helped prevent some of the misunderstandings associated with different customs, traditions, or religion.

Many of my interlocutors shared the same opinion. A Malay bus driver at the Kuching Transport Company (KTC) once told me when we were having coffee that because of the language barrier, many of his fellow villagers (Malays in this case) were suspicious of the Chinese that lived close to their *kampung*. He would say, "*Kami kurang faham. Rugi-tau.*" [in Malay: we lacked understanding. A real waste!]. What is

significant here is the term “*Rugi-tau*,” for it refers to the waste of opportunities for developing an amicable relationship because of the lack of understanding due to language differences or miscomprehension. I would argue that the same was equally true for many of the Chinese I worked with that did not speak Malay or the indigenous languages. They were usually the same individuals who tended to stick to themselves. I also observed that my interlocutors who spoke some indigenous languages, in this case, Bidayuh and Iban, were usually the ones who had a lesser tendency to resort to stereotyping the others. It is no coincidence that one of my Chinese interlocutors, a banana seller at the bus station who grew up in Engkilili speaking fluent Iban and Malay, would complain to me how racist some of her Chinese friends were, including her own relatives. I remember on numerous occasions how I was in awe of her fluency in Malay and Iban when I visited her stall.

Pay lived with his wife, son and daughter. He made around 600 ringgit per month (US\$158.00), which was barely enough to support his family. Luckily, as he put it, “I paid back all my loans for the house.” He did not really want to talk about his family, and he changed the subjects talking about the SOC. SOC had around 800 employees back in the 1980s, including employees from the other smaller towns. Most employees were union members at that time but during my fieldwork there were about 600 employees and about less than half were union members. Pay blamed the increase of private car ownership in Sarawak as a possible reason for the reduction in SOC employees, but the reason for a drop in union memberships had to do with the nature of the union and its relation with company management. Pay had this to say: “The union [at the SOC] has changed drastically in recent years. Back in the sixties and seventies, the union not only looked after its members but, ...” He paused at this point when his wife walked past the

living room on her way to the kitchen, before continuing, “it was also a venue for indoctrinating socialist ideology. A lot of discussions went on at union meetings. I never joined in any of the conversations. Many of us would not get involved. We remained quiet.”

I tried to get him to tell me the specific topics of conversations at the union meetings, but once again he switched to another matter, this time telling me how SOC employees had bailed out the company on several occasions in the past when it was facing financial hardship, how many employees volunteered to forgo their salaries, for sometimes as many as three to four months in order to help restore the company to liquidity. Pay was beaming with pride as he reflected on the past but it quickly faded as he juxtaposed it with the present, adding, “There was a lot of respect and loyalty towards the company in the past but ... it’s no longer true. A lot has changed.”

When I tried to get him to tell me about what caused the changes in the employees’ attitude towards the company, he replied by talking about the union instead. He said that currently all the union did was to collect membership dues and to help out funeral expenses of its members or those of its members’ immediate family. A few other interlocutors have similarly commented that their union has essentially become much like a benevolent society. Furthermore, its members no longer elect the union representatives, the company management appoints them.

When I asked Pay about his perspectives of the current situation in Sarawak, in particular in reference to being Chinese, he looked at me in a rather nonplussed fashion. He managed a smile, nonetheless. I told him I needed to hear it from him even though it might be repetitive. I said narrative is a very essential ingredient of my dissertation, trying my best to explain to him that narrative was an art of speaking, of operating, and

thinking (Goodwin and Duranti, 1992; Duranti, 1993; 1994). I was not sure if it made any sense to him. He remained silent. Eventually he responded by stating, "What is there to say? Most businesses are nowadays in the hand of the Bumis. It is now the same as where you came from [west Malaysia]." But then he tried to state a case for the relatively peaceful situation in Sarawak by comparing the present with the past, stating, "However, the overall situation in Sarawak is relatively calm and peaceful [nowadays] except in the interior. Compared with the past, things have improved ... except in the jungle. But robbery is on the rise in Sarawak, especially in urban areas. There have been quite a few incidents of robbery, even bank robberies." Pay was not the first, nor the last person to juxtapose his bleak conditions with worst off situations, as if comparing it with Indonesia, (one of the common cases), gave him a knowledge of particularity, a mental shield that helped him live sanely in an unjust situation.

Pay suspected these robbers came from Indonesia and were Javanese. However, feeling somewhat guilty for not having any evidence to support his suspicion, he quickly proceeded to justify what he had said, "But life is very difficult over there [in Indonesia] for the Chinese, even for most Indons [lower class Indonesians]. The Chinese are living in very precarious situations. Those who can afford to have already left the country. Those who can't afford to leave because of financial difficulties or because they have to look after their house or their shops are living in constant fear. Their shops are burned down. You read about them in the newspapers. The Indons would throw burning tires at Chinese shops, and rape their wives and daughters. Things are really bad." Again he tried to come up with a reason why some Indonesians might be involved in the recent bout of bank robberies, saying: "They are mostly poor people. Most of them don't even know

how to put food on the table. It's no wonder they would resort to crime. The stomach instead of the brain takes over. Many have become mercenaries."

"How do you know that for sure? That they have become mercenaries? Was it in the newspapers?" I asked.

"I heard it somewhere," he answered. He seemed slightly uncomfortable at this point. Many times when I challenged my interlocutors' assertions or opinions, the usual responses I would get are: "I hear people saying it," or "I heard it somewhere" or "I can't remember." The most common responses were "Pu-chee-tow" (in Mandarin: I don't know), or "Pu-tar ching-choo" (in Mandarin: I am not too sure) or "Entah?" (in Malay: No idea). These can be honest responses or they can be one of the multifarious tactical techniques of evading or refusing a query. It can be translated as "I prefer not to talk about it," or "you better ask someone else since I have no authority on such matters," or "I don't understand your question," or "do you need to confront me with such pointed questions?" or even, "why are you asking me such a stupid question?" Essentially, these were tactical responses many of my interlocutors would use not only in their interactions with the researcher but also in everyday engagements with colleagues, their superiors, or the people they met on the street. These are tactical techniques that are useful for evading or side-tracking questions or issues at that particular juncture when they arose, allowing one to "escape" from such verbal confrontation (de Certeau, 1984).

"The shrinking work force at the SOC has affected the working environment," said Pay as he once again switched to another topic. "With fewer employees," he continued, "we all have to work longer hours and this can be dangerous. Driving a bus is a very hectic job. With the economy slowing down, you have a smaller labor force, fewer riders and less revenue for bus companies. Most of the new employees are Dayaks. Just look at

Christmas and Gawai (the indigenous new year), when the Dayaks leave for their village to celebrate. The SOC has to shut down its depot and work with fewer employees during these holidays.”

“What about Chinese New Year? I asked.

And here Pay was quick to respond, “On no! Nobody left for a week. Not back then or now. We [Chinese employees] work during the Chinese New Year. I worked during Chinese New Years. If we take time off, it is no more than two days.”

In continuing to essentialize between “we” (*war-men*) and “them,” Pay pointed out that “a lot of Dayaks work for “us” (*war-men*) – at Chinese retail outlets, coffee shops, and so on. Over the years, as they gained experience they would start their own business ... [However] only those who learnt from ‘us’ (*war-men*) or those who had some sort of joint ventures with ‘us’ (*war-men*) are doing well. Not those who are on their own, those who started with loans from the government, you know, the MARA types.”⁹

I sensed then he was referring more to the Malays than to the indigenous. I opted not to point this out or to contradict him. It is interesting to note his usage of “we” and “us” as they were both “*war-men*” and, in this case, they both referred to Chinese. It is also interesting to note that at some point, Pay was also including the researcher (myself) in the “us” category of the collective inclusive “us” when he said “only those who learnt from ‘us.’” In the other instances, even in the sentence “... or those who had some sort of joint ventures with ‘us,’” he was using the exclusive ‘we’ or ‘us’ and I was excluded from the term since I had no experience working in any of those outlets.

I was curious by what he meant “the MARA types” and why they often failed. He did not offer a direct reply but instead provided me with some concrete accounts to support

his statement (or rather, his opinion): “Look, have you seen those Malays and Dayaks who hang around at the bus station? What do they do all day? They ‘*lepak*’¹⁰ all day long! It’s the same with the ones who work at the SOC. They only work when they feel like it. It’s their habit. This is affecting the ethnic relations at the SOC as well. There were plenty of good workers at the SOC but not during the past two years. The SOC now lacks good workers since most Chinese have left. Now you get a majority of Dayaks and Malays who are pretty lazy.”

It is interesting that he was drawing a parallel between ethnicity and working relations. “Do you mean all Chinese are hardworking and the Dayaks and Malays are lazy?” I was challenging his opinion.

Pay did not give a clear yes or no. Instead he reasoned, “The SOC tries to hire more workers but there is a lack of applicants, especially Chinese applicants.”

I heard similar comments from a few station supervisors, that the company had been advertising for bus drivers for quite some time and that the few applicants that had applied were non-Chinese. The question remains, however, not whether most Chinese employees at SOC worked through their New Years in the past but rather were there some historical elements that promoted a certain bonding between these employees (who happened to be mostly Chinese) and the company apart from reasons based on ethnicity? As far as I know, most of the older Chinese employees who joined the SOC in the 1960s or early 1970s did so when they escaped from the new villages. Another reason had to do with the SUPP and the principle owner of the SOC, Hong Hee Siaw, who was a sort of a cult hero during the 1960s.

⁹ MARA is a semi-governmental organization that gave loans only to the Malay population to start up small businesses.

¹⁰ *Lepak* is a very common word in Sarawak (even in Malaysia) that means that a person is taking it easy, doing nothing productive. It has the pejorative connotation of being a bum.

In short, these older Chinese employees shared the same history with the SOC and the SUPP when it comes to their view of the State. I am not implying that there was a homogenous degree of loyalty among these older Chinese employees towards their employers. But most, if not all of them, had certain similar characteristics: they had been rural Chinese during the Cold War, employees of the SOC, members or staunch supporters of the SUPP, and members of the bus union. In a sense, they were historical cohorts, and as far as the State was concerned, all of these different characteristics were communist-inclined and they were variously labeled as the “common enemy.”

Using Wittgenstein’s (1953) question of “how my pain may reside in another body,” it might be conceivable that this figuration of individuals experienced the same pain during the Cold War that rendered not entirely inexpressible among themselves the possibility of some similar imagination and acknowledgement. However, this was not the case with the recent employees. The recent employees who were mostly non-Chinese did not share the same sentiments, consciousness, or experience. They were not displaced, dislocated, or violated. As such, why should they have to be loyal to the company, especially when there was a new management style that seemed to be encouraging a rigid division between the management and the rank and file? Pay was not making the distinction even though he was aware that these recent Chinese employees might not share the same sentiments as he has for the company. Instead, Pay (as well as some other older employees at the SOC) chooses ethnicity as the vehicle (no doubt, rhetorical) in describing the general working atmosphere at the SOC, and by extension, their uncritically reverential statement of their situation of living as a Chinese in Sarawak.

What is interesting for me is that in drawing uncritically reverential claims to state their past and current situations, these interlocutors would also create excuses to tactically

resolve their powerlessness. Even as Pay commented on the fact that most businesses were currently in the hands of Bumis, he immediately countered it by mentioning the acute situation in Indonesia, which thereby allowed him to refer to the notion of being slightly better off than most Indonesians. Throughout my fieldwork, the theme of comparing Sarawak with its immediate neighbor, Kalimantan (Indonesia), occurred on a very frequent basis, especially when my interlocutors (of all ethnicities) dealt with their current (and past) dispositions. It was very common for me to hear them talking about the desperate situation in Indonesia: the high level of unemployment, riots, corruption among the government officials at all levels, the illegal Indonesians in Sarawak and their willingness to work for very low wages, and so on. In many ways such comparisons gave my interlocutors the excuses, even if it was mostly psychological, that their current situations, as bad as they may seem, were relatively better than the Chinese and non-Chinese in Indonesians. In referring to the escalating rate of robberies, Pay blamed it on the Indonesians but not without reasons and empathy. Whatever situation he or the SOC was currently in had to do with the general economy of Sarawak, if not Malaysia and the wider region, instead of a change of management policy. The work force had shrunk not because the SOC was not hiring but because the jobs had lost their attractiveness.

Thus far I had held off asking Pay about the Doctrine of the Mean since he was enthusiastically talking to me about so many other issues. Not many of my interlocutors were this talkative, at least not during our first meeting. Finally, I asked, “What is ‘*Chung Yung*’?” I did not however, tell him I had heard about it from his “boss” (Hong Hee Siaw), since that might affect the way he would respond. Unlike most of his colleagues, Pay had attended mid-level Chung Hwa Chinese school and many of them considered this an accomplishment. They referred to him as the “scholar.”

Pay said that *Chung Yung* is also called *Chong Li*. He told me the main component of *Chung Yung* is neutrality – i.e., to neither support nor oppose the status quo, in essence, to take a middle or neutral position. Most importantly, it allowed one to pursue a flexible position, a position suited for maximum maneuvering. However, it could also translate into being non-political, non-participating citizen. Looking at it from a different and yet related perspective, it was both creative and counter-productive. It is creative in that it could be viewed as providing the individual with the multifarious tactical positions for maximum maneuvering within the ruses of the dominant discourse. However, by an ironic circularity, it was also individualistic and promoted some sort of apolitical attitudes that could prove to be detrimental to the Chinese community as a whole. The following narrative seems to suggest such a scenario.

According to Pay and other Chinese interlocutors, the intra-ethnic relationships amongst the Chinese in Sarawak had become very businesslike in recent times. “We are competing among ourselves, there is no brotherhood anymore. We have become selfish. Everybody is trying to survive at the expense of another Chinese. Every interaction is a business-like,” said Pay. On the political front, he added, “Most Chinese are simply uninterested and indifferent to the current political scenario in Sarawak or in Malaysia.”

I think he was mostly referring to the lower class Chinese population in Sarawak. For example, Pay and many of my interlocutors (both Chinese and indigenous, but not the Malays) were not at all interested in the current battle between the UMNO and the *Reformasi*. They were indifferent to it. In contrast, most of my Malay interlocutors were quite vocal and preoccupied with this particular battle. The common remarks I heard from many of my non-Malay interlocutors were “It has nothing to do with us. We must remain *Chung Yung*” or “It is none of our business. They are both Malay parties, *sama-*

sama" (in Malay: same-same)." I wonder at whether this was the *Chung Yung* way of not choosing sides or if it was because they were both Malay parties. Still, *Reformasi* was a coalition and it had some Chinese representatives in it. I tried to tell some of them that *Reformasi* included the Democratic Action Party (DAP), a party that was predominantly supported by the Chinese population. But they would counter, "*Reformasi* is Anwar's parties. DAP has only a tiny role in it."

I tried to reason with Pay as well with others on different occasions that the general attitude of indifference amongst the general Chinese population in Sarawak and Malaysia might send the wrong signal to the ruling regime that the Chinese community as a whole was passive and divided, if not unconcerned about their current situation.

He looked at me in a nonplussed manner. "Of course we are concerned. The ordinary folks are concerned but what can we do? We have no power, nothing. It's different with the rich towkays [rich Chinese merchants]. They are still making lots of money with their Ali-Baba contracts." In a rather sad tone Pay looked at me and said, "The Chinese communities are not united, not anymore. Things used to be different. We were all very active then. We would get involved in all sorts of communal activities, setting this up, setting that up, we would attend political rallies, we would think of the future of Sarawak. Those sentiments are gone. Nowadays, we are just getting by. Of course we have to *be Chung Yung* to get by."

Notice the idea of "getting by" – most of my interlocutors were "getting by with what they had" - and that kind of living necessitated conjuring up knowledge of local tactics in order to maneuver their way through the ruses of the dominant structure. These were tactics that capitalized on time rather than space (de Certeau, 1984).

I argue that such indifference on Pay's part had a lot to do with his reaction towards the politicization of ethnicity by the State that created such a divide between the Malays and the non-Malays. Many have argued that the politicization of ethnicity in Malaysia is mainly camouflage to obscure the increasing economic and social disparity within its boundaries resulting from uneven development (see, for example Jomo, 1986; Osman-Rani, 1990; Gomez, 1990; Case, 1993) But precisely because of the heavy politicization of ethnic discourse by the State, a huge section of its population chose a route of indifference as their recourse. To be sure, they were concerned with how federal and state government policies continue to discriminate against them because of their ethnicity and class, but they remained powerless to do anything about it. As I mentioned several times in this thesis, the Chinese leaders that were supposed to "represent" them had their own agenda to enrich themselves - they were part of the local hegemony.

This suggests that there were at least two separate worlds in Sarawak, but two that are mutually interdependent. There seemed to exist two different layers of interaction for the different ethnic groups or the general public in Sarawak, one based on relatively amicable interactions without involving entanglements with the Law, and the other informed by the politics of ethnicity that constantly reminded one of the racial and political divide. The way most of the lower working class Chinese population had been categorized and displaced in Sarawak and their cynicism towards the rhetorical discourse of the State (and this applies to the general public as well) contributed to a fortified separation between the general public and those in office – the VIPs and the VVIPs.¹¹ I should also say that because of the facility with which one could acquire titles in Malaysia, whether they were

¹¹ In Malaysia, the term "Very Important Person" is not longer especially attractive or prestigious since there are so many of them. Anyone who can afford to be some kind of philanthropist can have some sort of pangkat bestowed on them by the Sultans or the King. As such, they have to come up with a higher term, "VVIP" for "Very, Very, Important Person."

given by the sultans of the respective states or by the federal government, many of my interlocutors considered them as meaningless, although still in use, the same way one may be an atheist and still say “Thank God.”

I told Pay that I was a little puzzled about the current position Hong Hee Siaw and the SUPP were taking. Frankly I was disappointed with them for becoming part of the status quo. But I was a little uneasy in asking the question for fear of offending him. From what I gather, most of the old timers at the SOC, including Pay, had an immense respect for Hong Hee Siaw. I often heard remarks like “I wouldn’t be working for the SOC all these years if not for *Lao Hong* [“Old Hong”]. We have gone through a lot together.” Pay paused for a few minutes before he proceeded cautiously, “It is not true *Lao Hong* has changed. He has handed the business over to his son and grandson. They are the new generation. You have to change with the times.”

I interjected, saying, “no, I am not referring to the SOC, yes the SOC but more so about the SUPP and Hong Hee Siaw. I read in the archives...”

Pay shook his head and interjected before I could finish my sentence, “Sure, but the SUPP and *Lao Hong* were different then just as the situations were different then as compared to the present. They had to change with the times. That is *Chung Yung*.”

I asked him if Hong Hee Siaw (and the SUPP) only decided to practice *Chung Yung* after they realized they needed to change or were they practicing *Chung Yung* all along, even during the era when they were actively opposing the State.

“Well ... in a way, they were. They thought they had a chance to do something that could work. They wanted to fight for independence ... to stop the out-flowing of natural resources to someone else.” He responded. Pay tried to explain to me that being *Chung Yung* was to achieve the best overall positioning and SUPP thought that fighting for self-

rule and achieving independence was the best position for them as a political party at that time. Pay asked if I was aware of just how rich Sarawak is, and of the fact that most of the resources went to Kuala Lumpur. Raising his voice slightly, he added, "And before Malaysia, it was England." The controversial construction of the Bakun Hydroelectric Dam is a case in point. From what I have gathered from my interlocutors, the energy generated from the project would not be used in Sarawak but would be piped to west Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries. On top of that, the revenue generated from supplying electrical energy to other counties would be administered by Kuala Lumpur.

Still, I could not help questioning the way he talked about *Chung Yung*. From my reading in the various newspapers in the archives, throughout the 1960s, the SUPP was the most radical component within the opposition front. Not only did it oppose the Alliance government, it opposed the very form of government itself. How was that *Chung Yung*? How was that taking the middle path, remaining neutral, acquiring maximum maneuverability? It would seem to me that not only was flexibility one of the main elements of *Chung Yung*, it was also how some of my interlocutors would use the concept. They were inherently flexible. Ambiguity as well as contradiction was inherently imbued in such flexibility, in the manner they spoke of or invoked the doctrine. This fits nicely into my argument. Both Hong and Pay would invoke *Chung Yung* without any reservation since invoking the term supplied them with an argument, a perception, or a weapon they could use in order to achieve an advantageous position at the point of enunciation. In each incident they would conjure up the meanings of the concept. Although such favorable positioning was assumed or psychological, it allow them to "get by with what they had."

I countered by asking Pay if Hong Hee Siaw or the SUPP were practicing *Chung Yung* because they have lost their bargaining power as one of the main opposition parties. I realized then I was asking him to comment on the actions or past actions of a person and an organization he held in high esteem. His wife, who had been sitting nearby, seemed extremely uncomfortable. I believed she was worried that her husband might say something sensitive. I could reasonably understand her discomfort. After all, that was the first time I had met the couple and in their minds I might have been an official collaborator. She seemed to suggest to her husband that it was best for him not to answer my question when she spoke: "What do we know about such things? You should ask some of the politicians or the big towkays in Kuching." She proceeded to walk away, I think, towards the kitchen.

Pay kept quiet for a while and then said something, this time almost whispering, "What alternatives, what choice did *Lao Hong* (Hong Hee Siaw) or the SUPP have? For that matter, even Ong Kee Hui and Stephen Yong had to bend.¹² Tunku Abdul Razak [the late Deputy Prime Minister] had a talk with them and before you know it, the SUPP became part of the Coalition Government. It was like 'take it or else...' You need to understand the situation then. So many Chinese were arrested, including *Lao Hong*, and some for long periods. There weren't any trials. Eventually many confessed to anything they were asked to confess. Ice slabs were deployed. Many would sign their names on the dotted lines. It was that bad. Are you aware of the series of hunger strikes?

Yes, I was aware of the hunger strikes. I read about them in the archives. "But ice slabs?" I asked. His wife overheard our conversation and spoke to her husband from a distance, this time with her voice slightly raised, "Old Pay, you better be quiet. Don't you

¹² The former Chairman and the Secretary-General of the SUPP

just say things ... ” This time she walked from the kitchen to bring me a glass of Milo, a favorite local beverages. I noticed she was not smiling. Fortunately she had to leave the house for errands in Kuching and the next bus was arriving in front of their house in a few minutes. I was glad she had to leave, giving us more freedom to talk. As soon as she left, I asked Pay, “What ice slabs?” It occurred to me I was beginning to follow their habit of lowering their voices each time a sensitive topic was addressed.

Pay confided to me, also in whispering tone, that during the course of interrogation detainees were often forced to embrace slabs of ice until they passed out, and if the interrogators were not satisfied with the confessions, more ice slab treatments would ensue. Most of the interrogations involved extracting the names and whereabouts of communists. Here is a further irony. The communist organizations that were set up during the Cold War were fully aware that any one communist was not capable of giving away more than a handful of his/her comrades, the members of his/her cell unit. Each cell unit within an organization was set up to prevent comrades from confessing too much information under interrogation. In fact, the structure of the CCOs and the notion of a cell unit were extensively written up in the government report *The Danger Within*. As such, it seems that the authorities were not interested in rounding up real communists, but instead finding an excuse for detaining as many individuals as possible. In this case, they wanted to arrest Chinese, as so-called communists or communist sympathizers.

Other forms of torture, like physical beatings, were also deployed. However, ice slabs usually did the job. A few of my interlocutors who went through the experience confided to me (again in whispering tone) that one’s entire body would be numb after a while. The pain, they said, became internalized as the lack of blood circulation affected the entire body. After a few rounds of ice slabs, they said, one would sign any confession one was

given, whether it be an admission to being a communist or revealing the names of fellow comrades, real or otherwise. As a result, many more individuals were detained or arrested.

As I mentioned in my introduction, those who were detained during this period did not have rights to a trial and they could be detained indefinitely. A plastic lighter repairman by the SOC bus station who spent thirteen years at several correction centres only for suspected of being a communist suspect put it this way: "I was never charged but they kept me for thirteen years. They never told me why I am being detained all those years I was inside," forcing a bitter smile on his face. They took away thirteen years of his life. His wife left him for another man a few years after he was detained. Trying to justify why his wife left him, he said, "It was quite common. Most women left their husbands to marry again. They needed support and we were not there for them. I would have done the same if I was her." I cannot comprehend how he must have felt all those years "inside" or even now as he sat there on the "five-foot-way" repairing plastic lighters during the day and sleeping in a tiny little room at a cheap hotel next door. He had no family to go home to in the evening. He always bought his lunch and dinner from food vendors.

Returning to the question of *Chung Yung*, Pay confided to me that Hong Hee Siaw and the SUPP simply did not have any choice. He said, "You either join them or you are out. That was the ultimatum. But that is precisely why *Chung Yung* is a useful. You take the middle path. You try to survive in light of the circumstances that are available. What is the point of fighting when you can't win? Obviously it is better for the SUPP to be part of the coalition than to be out of the political scene. Now tell me, what could the SUPP do for the people if they were declared an illegal party? Have you heard of the

word deregistered? Associations got deregistered, unions, even newspapers. They became illegal entities. And look at the *swa-ngiau-chee*. What did they accomplish? Nothing! Most of them were starving in the jungle ... forget about looking after our interests. In fact they had to depend on 'us' [the rural Chinese population] to feed them, causing so many problems and even death for some of us."

It was true that the majority of the Chinese population in the rural areas who were displaced and dislocated during the Cold War were caught in-between the government soldiers and the *swa-ngiau-chee*. Many who came from the controlled resettlement villages, including the villages by the coastal regions, confided to me that they simply had no choice but to give rice to the communists, and at times, to harbor them in their house. They were harassed by the communist as well as by the soldiers.

Pay continued, "Being practical is *Chung Yung*. You might have interesting ideas but if they don't work, you need to rethink. The SUPP and *Lao Hong* had to look at the bigger picture, at the long run. They needed to be part of the Coalition in order to serve the people. They realized that they could achieve more for the people by being part of the coalition than being an opposition party under the circumstances. That's why I am still a SUPP member. I know the SUPP is doing the right thing. What would you do if you were in the same position as *Lao Hong* or the rest of us Chinese in Sarawak?"

I had no answer. I was not expecting this counter question from him. Pay told me the main usefulness of *Chung Yung* is its flexibility and it is not limited to Chinese people. He continued, "It is a form of living, a philosophy. Ying and Yang are similar to *Chung Yung*. They are from the Sages of China." Like Hong before, here Pay was appropriating a genealogy or "knowledge" that in his opinion came from a "Civilization" higher than that he was being subjected to.

“Ying and Yang?” I asked. “What do you mean? Is that part of *Chung Yung* as well?”

“Sure,” he replied, “to balance things out.” Pay asked if I was aware of the common voting pattern among many Chinese voters in Sarawak. In fact I was. A bus conductor, Ms. Tan, once told me she had voted for the *Barisan Nasional* candidate (she could not even remember his name) in the Federal election and the candidate she had voted for won the election. In the following State election, she voted for the opposition candidate. When I asked her if she could tell me the name of the opposition candidate, she replied, “All that matters is that he is the opposition candidate.”

According to Ms. Tan (and other bus conductors and drivers at the KTC and SOC), the idea of voting “Ying Yang” was to balance things out by not casting both of their votes for the same candidate or party in the State and Federal elections. That was their way of ensuring (or I should say, they believed they were ensuring) that they were not giving too much power to one candidate or one party. The idea was to prevent a landslide victory. Thus the logic here, if there was any at all, was more practical than ideological. Moreover, most of my interlocutors felt that there were no ideological differences between the different political parties in Malaysia. To most of them, all public officials had an immense tendency to be aloof once they were in office, especially when they felt that their positions were not threatened. As they said, “you only get to see or hear from them just before the elections.” They believed *Ying Yang* voting technique might send the message to these public officials that they could be held accountable for their actions once they were in office and discourage them from being aloof, or at least too aloof.

I would argue this technique is unfortunately only effective when there are adequate opposition representations in the Malaysian Federal or State governments,¹³ which is not the case. I pointed this out to Pay, Ms. Tan, and other bus conductors and drivers at the KTC and SOC. A different Ms. Tan, also a bus conductor, somewhat agreed with me, saying, "You know, it is very difficult for opposition candidates. Running an election campaign is very expensive. Besides, they do not have the 'fully oiled election machinery' like the SUPP or the rest of the *Barisan Nasional*. The *Barisan* people are seasoned politicians, elections experts. But I agree with my colleagues. I voted the same as well. Besides the *Ying Yang* technique is also *Chung Yung*. You like to take away some power from one single party or candidate so that they are not too powerful, or at least that is what we hope." She paused upon saying that as she realized what she had said was wishful thinking, and added, "But of course *Barisan* is too powerful. Everybody in Malaysia knows that."

Obviously there is a contradiction, if not illogical reasoning, but my main concern here is on how she was appropriating *Ying Yang* or *Chung Yung*. When Ms. Tan appropriated *Chung Yung* or other Eastern concepts, she had a certain "intentional meaning," what speech-act theorists might call "illocution effects" (see Austin, 1962) that made her utterances understood by her audience even if the way she articulated the concepts, in this case, the voting techniques, turned out to be quite illogical. My interpretation of her utterances, that they were illogical, was a "perlocutionary effect" as far as my interaction with her was concerned. Her colleagues may have interpreted the same utterances differently. This was possible because she was using the conventionality of certain interpretations, in this case *Chung Yung* and other Eastern concepts, that was

¹³ In Malaysia, a candidate could run for both Federal as well as State elections. Besides the federal

partly defined by the norms and social codes of these Chinese interlocutors and that were evoked in a rather casual manner at a given time and place (see Duranti, 1993 for similar argument for the participants in a politico-judiciary meeting in a Western Samoa village).

On the other hand, Pay had a different opinion as to why the *Barisan Nasional* candidates managed to recapture their seats. He believed that the *Barisan* candidates had learned from their previous defeats not to take things for granted. He believed the *Ying Yang* voting tactics had somehow taught these politicians to be more responsive to the people's needs. It is interesting to see how the *Ying Yang* voting techniques were interpreted qualitatively differently by different individuals and, how in each case it could be seen as producing positive outcomes but in a different manner. Pay also believed that the Coalition candidates owned both the State and Federal seats and if they lost them, it was entirely their own doing (for being aloof), and it had nothing to do with the quality of their opponents or the wishes of the people. That did imply that the populations of Sarawak were fully supportive of their elected politicians. However, many of my other interlocutors would admit that the opposition candidates simply did not have the revenue to run an effective campaign; they did not have a fully oiled election machine and the main reason some of my interlocutors voted for the opposition was because they felt that it was their duty to not give too much power to the government.

In truth, there are a variety of reasons why each individual or the community as a whole, voted. Some would conjure up the idea of *Ying Yang* to talk about their voting habits. Others honestly believed in the ideology of a party. Still, others voted for reasons of necessity. Many rural folks in Sarawak voted for the *Barisan Nasional* candidates because they wanted development, infrastructure like proper roads or bridges, or even

government, there are thirteen state governments representing the thirteen states in Malaysia.

utilities like electricity and running tap water. I remember a certain chief of a longhouse once told me that “they” (meaning, the residents of his longhouse) voted for the *Barisan Nasional* so that they could have roads and bridges to their longhouse, and a regular supply of electricity. He confided to me that the future generations might vote for the opposition but not before they had the above facilities.

If anything else, to say that the general populations in Sarawak were fully supportive of the elected politicians, which in this case were overwhelmingly *Barisan Nasional*, was to obscure the economic and social inequalities in Sarawak, as well as to deny the history of displacement and dislocation that so many ordinary folks had experienced in Sarawak during the Cold War era. Had Pay forgotten his own history? I did not however, bring this up with him. To most of my interlocutors, the *Barisan Nasional* was the status quo because it was the “fully oiled election machine” and practicing the *Ying Yang* voting technique was a tactic to try to hold the *Barisan Nasional* representatives to be more accountable while they were in office, regardless of what the actual end result might be. To be sure, such maneuvering tactics can also be interpreted as partly psychological and partly pragmatic. These Tactical plays survive on a daily basis within whatever ruses exist within the dominant discourse, regardless of their actual effectiveness.

By way of concluding

There were many ways *Chung Yung* can be invoked, enunciated, and given meanings in the various sets of practices and settings. However, whatever meanings one can possibly invoke or conjure from the concept are necessarily ambivalent, ambiguous, and tactical. Whether it was Hong’s (or SUPP) appropriation of *Chung Yung* that had elements of both strategy and tactic, or those of Pay and others which was strictly tactical, they could be seen as maneuverings that were deemed necessary in order to get

by with what they had. *Chung Yung* is seen here as an important feature of the collaboratively established identity. If both elites and working class Chinese endorsed *Chung Yung* and political indifference as part of their strategies and/or tactics of survival, it was in part because they have agreed to work within the powerful framework of “Chineseness” that were imposed on them not only through Orientalist, colonialists, and postcolonialists discourses but also from their own communities. They depended on the existence of a dominant discourse to provide the necessary field to practice out their local tactics. In their case, they had the history of colonialism, the Cold War, the politicization of ethnicity, the dominance of the *Barisan Nasional*, and so on.

In addition, these maneuverings can be understood as transformations of units of meanings, as identities or signs. If anything else, if ethnicity was pivotal as a form of identity among my interlocutors, it had more to do with their reaction towards the heavily politicized racial policies of the state than their own concepts. To them ethnicity was a category of identity that was obvious, but it did not appear to be the superimposing marker of their very existence. It is one of several markers my interlocutors used or invoked. They have other forms of social demarcation that were dictated by their affiliations of kinship, religion, ideology, speech group, level of education, age group, association membership, gender, and so on.

If there was one common denominator when ethnicity or any other forms of identities were invoked, it was the ambiguity behind some of the ways they would identify themselves. In essence, one might even call this the logic of ambiguity. In fact, ethnicity and/or identities were something they were not preoccupied with “twenty-four-seven,” rather issues that appeared if they were asked about them (in this case, by the researcher) or when there was a need to use them, especially when they had something to complain

about. These were also the moments when I could contradict what they said or how they stereotyped others or themselves.

Chineseness was invoked as part of their tactical response to the dominant discourse, to which they had the task to both conform and yet be indifferent, but which still was something they could not escape. This was the conundrum they had to live with. As such, there was the interplay between the dominant discourse and the plays of tactics. On the one hand the State held to the conviction that the public is necessarily passive: "Give me your body and I will give you meaning; I will make you a name and a word in my discourse" (de Certeau, 1984: 149). On the other hand the displaced and dislocated were constantly occupied with deploying their local tactics to negotiate within the rules and ruses of the dominant state discourse, as well as other aspects of their lives, including dealing with the people at their workplace.

Unlike the state, they did not have the power to invent "facts" to support their own convictions but they did have the flexibility of invoking *Chung Yung*, other Eastern philosophies, or any other tactics of their personal behavior. They understood the practical role they needed to play in order to negotiate their lives in an unjust world. Ironically, even as such tactics allowed them to buy time on one level, it also served to reinforce and legitimate their subordination on another. They escaped it without leaving it. Moreover, as every form of interaction became less personal and more businesslike, they lost their earlier comradeship and they became more individualistic.

Chapter Six: Edges of Indifference.

From the words and emotions of those I worked with during my field research, it would not be an overstatement to say that throughout the 1960s and up to the mid 1990s, employee/employer relations at the SOC had been one of mutual respect and a high degree of loyalty. However, things had changed in recent years. The management reorganization in 1998 instituted sharp divisions between the management and the employees, creating not only an air of uncertainty and impermanence at the workplace but also a feeling of betrayal and resentment towards the company. In many ways the bus conductors and drivers' opinion of their company worsened with the recent partnership with Sarawak Multipurpose Holdings (SMH), a *Bumiputra* company. It is to how most of the SOC employees talked about the current management, their union, and their own powerlessness that I will attend to in this chapter.

In Chapter Two, I talked about how the two old timers, Poh and Lee, were reluctant to talk about or criticize the current management. However, one afternoon in late May 2000, after I have had more than five meetings with both of them,¹ they finally gave in. Lee made a concerted effort to justify the SMH partnership by saying, "You need to understand. The SOC is a big company. We have more than 200 buses, and that requires a lot of capital and spare parts. In case you are not aware, it cost SMH 5 million ringgits."²

Poh, who was usually the more expressive of the two, remained quiet, looking away as if preoccupied with something else. I was thinking about what Lee had said and was

¹ I saw Lee on many other occasions when he stopped by at the SOC bus station or when I followed him to the wet market down the road from the station. Because of Poh's health, he was confined to his house. Lee, on the other hand, was incredibly healthy and agile for someone in his early eighties.

² About US\$1.5 million

hoping he would elaborate further, but he did not. Neither did Poh. I had the feeling both of them were still reluctant to touch on the topic. We sat there in an odd silence for a few minutes and then I asked, "You sounded as if SMH was some kind of a financial bailout for the SOC. Has the company been doing badly lately? I understand the SOC is a well established company, if not the first in Sarawak." I was hoping to instill some pride into them since both were still partners of the company. I also mentioned to them that most of the people I had spoken to believed that the Chief Minister of Sarawak owns SMH. In other words, did the two of them have any comments about such a connection, about the SOC taking in such a big player into its operation? If anything else, would it have any effect on the overall morale of its employees, bearing in mind its long history of being anti-establishment?

Again both of them remained silent. I decided then to tell them that others at the SOC and beyond had confided to me about SOC's past financial difficulties and how each time the company always managed to survive, something was worked out with creditors on a few occasions or employees delayed taking their salaries or bonuses in order to allow the company to pay off some of its debts. I felt that I must have struck a sensitive chord when I mentioned bonuses because that was when both Lee and Poh decided to be frank with me. I was aware that the SOC had been holding off paying employee bonuses for the past three years, something unprecedented in the company's history. Both of them, almost speaking in unison, mentioned the word, "Sibu."

"Sibu?" I asked, pretending I had no idea what they were referring to. Sibu is probably the second biggest town in Sarawak.

This time Poh started by saying: “We lost a lot of money there and it is still [adversely] affecting us [financially]. You need to understand how unreasonable some of our suppliers are ... even our long time suppliers. But everybody has been having cash flow problems in recent years. The economy is bad. The SOC needs to pay for spare parts and other expenses to stay in business.”

Lee interjected to remind me: “And we have more than 200 buses. That’s a lot of spare parts we need to carry.”

I believed Poh was tired of beating around the bush when he finally said, this time addressing Lee. “We were stuck with a lot of buses from Sibü. We had to shut down that outfit but nobody wanted the buses unless, of course, we sold them cheap. So you see, SMH was one way out.” I noticed a taint of doubt in his voice pertaining to the last point. The buses from the Sibü operation were eventually brought to Kuching to be used as Regas buses, a joint venture between SOC and some Bumiputera partners.

“Why was Sibü a mess?” I asked, hoping they might add something but they didn’t. Again I asked, but this time in an insinuating tone. “So, how is the current management? How is George Hong?” I briefed them about what transpired during my meeting with George even though I was pretty sure they were aware of it.

Over the course of my field research, many SOC and KTC employees as well as those who worked or hung out at the bus station have told me that the Sibü operation was George Hong’s pet project. A very senior Chinese bus driver at the KTC (the SOC’s main competitor) once puts it rather sarcastically: “George took it upon himself to invest in Sibü. He decided on the scale [of operation], the number of buses, the workforce, and so on. He did it all by himself.” There were many other more pejorative comments I have

heard about George Hong. Some even said that George thought he had not needed to consult with any of the managers because he felt his business degree would suffice. In short, many of their descriptions would suggest that the Sibu operation was a total miscalculation by a novice who was too proud to take advantage of a pool of experienced staff with almost fifty years in the business.

Perhaps Lee and Poh talked to each other about George and the current management, but not with me. After all something had happened to both of them that I was sure had made them angry. As retirees, both of them had been receiving 250 ringgits (70 dollars) per month as pensions, but that had stopped sometime in mid-1998 after the company had undergone management reorganization. Perhaps it was out of respect for their longtime colleague and former General Manager, Hong Hee Siaw that I did not hear, not even once, any complaints about George or the current management from the two of them.

As I already mentioned, very early on during my fieldwork a SOC security officer interrupted and ended my conversation with a bus driver. This was less than a week after I had already obtained permission from Hong Hee Siaw to “interview” SOC employees. From then on, I would carry the hand-written letters I had obtained from Hong Hee Siaw in my backpack. There was a psychological reason I carried them – it was my acknowledgement that I had with me letters written by someone who had earned much respect from the employees of the SOC. In my opinion, the abrupt interruption by the security officer and the new directive preventing me to work with SOC employees was not only an attempt to undermine Hong Hee Siaw’s authority, but also of all the other old timers that had helped set up the company.

After learning that the directive came from the current General Manager, George Hong, I knew I had to meet him if I wanted to continue with my fieldwork. I had initially thought of consulting George's grandfather, Hong Hee Siaw, to resolve the problem, but I was also afraid that might put him in an awkward position since, the directives came from his grandson and, as they say, "Blood is thicker than water." I set up an appointment and saw George Hong at the head office two weeks after I met his grandfather. That was late November 1999. His office, like the other managers' private offices (as I later found out), was installed with "one-way" mirrors facing the general staff located in the middle of the floor. In many senses, it resembled Foucault's (1980) description of Jeremy Bentham's plan for the Panopticon. Although this was not a prison or an asylum, or even a factory, it had an "all seeing" structure that confined the staff in such a way that their actions could be observed by the unseen managers hidden inside their respective private offices. Such an architectural arrangement of space was conducive in creating a sense of "exact legibility," leaving "no zone of shade," so to speak, in which the office staff could hide.³ They were constantly visible and knowable, feeling the continuous power coming from the private offices that housed the managers.

Each time I was at the head office, I noticed that these general staff workers were glued to whatever tasks they were performing, such as auditing the bus schedules submitted by the supervisors of each bus station, tallying the ticket numbers and fares collected from individual bus conductors, and typing various memos coming from the managers. I hardly noticed any conversations between them, as if they were not encouraged. It was as if their freedom of action has been taken away from them as a result of their visibility, their lack of "shades." They appeared so disciplined.

³ Foucault 1980: 154; 1977: 207.

There was something else – a lack of interaction between the staff at the office and the bus conductors and drivers. I noticed that they were behaving like strangers to each other. I later found out from a cashier at the head office that the management indeed discouraged interactions between the two categories of employees.⁴ I once saw a manager approach a clerk who was having a conversation with a bus conductor and ask if she had nothing else to do. The bus conductor was there to hand in the weekly schedules from the station supervisors.

Unlike the general staff at the head office, the bus conductors and drivers were not confined within this “all seeing” structure. For them, there were zones of shade that were opaque enough for them to not only engage in some outside activities but even to “hide” their presence from the gaze of the management. I will show in this chapter that this “hiding” was indeed double-edged. In many conversations I had with a few managers at the head office, they often resorted to telling me about the so-called “new” philosophy of the SOC: the effort to modernize the company by getting newer buses equipped with automated ticket dispensers (in essence, replacing bus conductors with machines), the plan to expand into other towns, or the renovations going on at the head office to accommodate new managers and additional directors from the SMH partnership. Not once would they talk about the welfare of bus conductors and drivers, the plight of the old timers and their contributions and past loyalty to the company. As a matter of fact, when I forced the issue on them, their response had been negative, if not outright demeaning. A few times I heard managers referring to the bus conductors and drivers as

⁴ This particular cashier was once a bus conductor. She told me she missed chatting with her “former colleagues” each time the latter were at the head office.

kuo (in Mandarin or Hakka: dog). In essence, the management was disrespecting and distancing itself from those it subordinated.

In reacting to the disrespect shown by the management towards the employees, many of the bus conductors and drivers would distance themselves and try to ignore the physical presence and directives of the management as much as possible. This explains why most of them congregated in various groups at different coffee shops or at the Malay *warong* at any given workday. When asked if they were aware of the renovation at the head office or the appointment of new managers and directors, especially from the SMH partnership, the usual response I would get was “*kuan-tar*” (in Mandarin or Hakka: “who cares” or “its none of our business”). They appeared disinterested with events transpiring beyond their control.

Besides these groups that hung out at the coffee shops and the Malay *warong*, there were some who sought obscurity by remaining alone, trying to go unnoticed. These were some of the individuals who had worked at the SOC since the very beginning and by now seemed resigned to working the remaining days of their lives or to quit before that. Although I had never heard this directly from them, it appeared to me that they were staying clear from the various groups that congregated at the coffee shops by the bus station that, in my opinion, were more visible to the management.

George Hong must have been in his mid to late-twenties when we met. We spoke in English, interspersed with Hokkien, on general issues like the atmosphere of the bus industries in Sarawak, what my research was about, even about New York City since he used to live in Boston and had visited New York City several times. I did not bring up the

abrupt interruption from the security officer during our conversation. Neither did I ask him about SMH. In fact, it was he who brought up the SMH partnership.

According to George, the SOC has accepted a partnership with SMH (Sarawak Multipurpose Holdings) in September of 1999. Underscoring that SMH is a state subsidiary, he said: "This is a strategic move for the SOC, to accept the modern reality of M'sian governmentality." This was different from Poh and Lee's perspectives. I was also struck by the word "governmentality." Was he implying that with the political and economic reality in Malaysia, for the SOC to remain competitive it was best to have a *Bumiputra* partnership? That seemed to be the case in the following remarks from him. "Being in the public transportation industry," he continued, "we have to be monopolistic, and the way to do that is to have a minimum of thirty-percent *Bumi* partnership. In fact the SOC has been trying to get a *Bumi* partnership since 1970, but the MARA deal fell through. So, this partnership with SMH is perhaps the best deal the SOC can ever hope for." He seemed to be smiling as he reflected upon what he has just said. 1970 was at the beginning of the NEP.

With the partnership, there would be a new management and a new Board of Directors. Seven directors would be selected from the SOC and three from SMH. George's father would be the Executive Director. He and his uncle, Hong Khai Seng, who was also the Mayor of Kuching South District, were also on the board. He then proceeded to tell me about the SOC's "present" philosophy, saying, "The SOC is a company committed to growth and reinvestment. This is the policy of the present management." I felt it was rather disrespectful for him to say that, in case he had

forgotten that his grandfather was one of the founders of the company and there had been plenty of reinvestment since the 1950s.

I was further bothered by his remark about the SOC's main competitor, the KTC. "Unlike the KTC," he said, "the SOC is committed to the long-term." He smiled and leaned back in his chair, projecting a somewhat authoritative stance. I smiled back but with a puzzled look on my face, hoping to encourage him to elaborate on what he has just said. "Every year-end," he continued, "if the KTC makes a profit, their directors split the profit instead of reinvesting it back into their operation. That is not the case for the present SOC. Reinvesting is one of our prime directives. We are modernizing our company." It got even better. "The KTC is not like us. All the directors there are old and when they pass away, the company will die with them."

A rather harsh statement, I thought, coming from a novice. Perhaps it is not superfluous to remind my readers about the Sibü fiasco. During my fieldwork, each time I came across new and "modern" KTC buses, I could not help smiling since that contradicted George's assessment of its main competitor. In fact, the KTC has more modern buses than the SOC. Besides, most of the SOC's relatively new buses were reconditioned vehicles brought over from Sibü.

As far as continuing my working relations with the SOC's employees went, George insisted that I make out a list of questions pertaining to my "interviews" and in return, I would receive a letter of approval from the board of directors. We phoned each other back and forth for more than a month before I finally received the letter. Unlike the letters from George's grandfather, this time the letter contained a set of conditions, more like directives, that I had to follow if I were to conduct my research with SOC employees.

One of the conditions insisted on the presence of management staff during my interviews with their employees and, on top of that, all interviews had to be held within the SOC head office at 2 1/2 Kuching/Serian Road. Also, I had to arrange the time with the management a week prior to the event and all interviews had to be conducted during the employee's days off.

The last condition seemed paradoxical to me, for it seemed to invalidate all the other conditions. If I could only interview SOC employees during their days off, how could the management have any jurisdiction over how their employees should spend their leisure time? I did not, however, bring this up with George Hong since it would not be wise to be confrontational. But I did try to explain to him that my research was not a survey and, as such, there wasn't a pre-determined set of questions. I had the feeling he refused to understand the kind of qualitative research I was concerned with and insisted that I followed those conditions, repeating each time that they had already been agreed upon by the new Board of Directors, of which he was one. In many ways it was the timing of the letter that made it harder for me to bear its content since it was only slightly a month earlier that I had received the letters from his grandfather authorizing me to interview some senior SOC employees. I was interpreting George Hong's letter as undermining the authority of his own grandfather.

Incidentally, George was not at the office when I went back to pick up his letter. As I was leaving, the office manager, Chow Siaw Kwan, escorted me out of the building. I had already heard about Chow from a few employees at the station. They told me he had "crossed-over," meaning that he had switched alliances from being a union leader to an office manager and that I should watch out for him. A Hakka bus driver, Tan Hin Sung,

told me Chow was a very capable union leader and that was why he was “brought over” by the management. As I was leaving I thought it was more than just coincidental that Chow escorted me out. He was probably making sure that I did not wander into the canteen and start chatting with some bus drivers or bus conductors like I had done the last time I had visited the head office.

To resolve my problems with the conditions for “interviewing” SOC employees, I took the advice from some local scholars to meet with a few VIPs, including Hong Khai Seng, George’s uncle who was also the Mayor of Kuching South District as well as one of SOC’s directors. After listening to my research plan for the SOC employees, Khai Seng told me that using bus conductors and drivers to look into the social history of Sarawak was a unique and excellent idea. He was rather smooth, saying diplomatically: “Apparently there must have been some miscommunications. I am sure it can easily be sorted out. I will speak with George. Go ahead with your research.”

The meeting lasted less than fifteen minutes. After that I was never again interrupted or stopped by the SOC security officer. However, since there was no official memo rescinding George’s earlier directive, it continued to have some negative effects on my working relations with some SOC employees, since many of them were not a hundred percent sure if they should talk with me. Obviously there were other reasons. After all, part of my research was to investigate what had transpired during the Cold War, an issue that had remained sensitive. Furthermore, I suspected some of them were unwilling to “bad-mouth” the present management out of respect for the previous management, especially for Hong Hee Siaw. Needless to say, others simply refused because they did not feel it worthwhile to talk about the past or their company, especially to an “outsider.”

After my meeting with the Mayor of Kuching South, I started to see different station supervisors as well as some managers whose names were on the letters written by Hong Hee Siaw. As it turned out, a few managers would brag to me about the numbers of days the company gave out as employees' bonuses and the company's housing loans. But they did not tell me neither the bonuses nor the loan policy still existed. I mention this because my realization of the "truth" affected my trust towards these managers, and as I built up closer working relations with the bus conductors and drivers, it became obvious to the management that I was on the workers' side. If there was one incident that made my position obvious to the management, it happened when I was trying to help a bus conductor who had been fired.

There had been various incidents in the past when bus drivers or bus conductors were fired. Often these happened when they were "caught" by ticket inspectors for failing to issue a single ticket, sometime for as little as a forty cents ticket (US ten cents).⁵ One such incident happened early on during my fieldwork when the General Manager fired a bus conductor, Kee Sey, for apparently failing to issue a forty-cent ticket. This incident took place during rush hour when the bus was packed with students heading home from school.

The day after Kee Sey was fired, when I asked a few bus conductors and bus drivers at the station office about him, instead of telling me he had been fired they told me he had resigned. I restated my question: "Did he resign or was he fired?" It was only then that they felt more comfortable to talk, signaling me to follow them to *Warong Muhibah*. This

⁵ The practice of rewarding ticket inspectors had the negative effect of encouraging them to fabricate cases of cheating. During my fieldwork, upon mounting complaints by the employees, the management was

warong is located about thirty feet from the station office and many bus conductors and drivers considered it as a place where they could enjoy some freedom from the new station manager, Peter Kwong. It resembles Bakhtin's description of the marketplace in Rabelais's time (1984 [1965]), a place that has the reputation of shaping and inducing lively conversations with the qualities of frankness, teases, curses, and laughter.

In Bakhtin's reading of Rabelais, the carnival and marketplace atmosphere during the Renaissance was the antithesis to the totalizing controls of the Holy Roman Empire and the Church. Bakhtin invokes this in order to engage in a meditation on freedom in his own time, as a metaphor that worked not only against the totalizing discourses of Stalinist tyrannical ideologies but also against any other dogmatic languages, including those of the bourgeois intellectual tradition. Similarly, I also invoke Bakhtin's reading of Rabelais as a metaphor to make a contrast between two separate spaces, the lively atmosphere at *Warong Muhibah* and to a lesser degree the other coffee shops on one hand, and the dry and rigid atmosphere of the "official" spaces at the station office, the accounting department, and at the head office, on the other. At the former spaces a difference sense of time and place were felt, one with a different ethos that not only undermined and debunked the authority and controls of the management, but also offered a healthy antidote to the dullness and dryness of the language of the current management. It was at these spaces that I found expressions of fearlessness in their critique of the controls, the rigidity, and the disrespect shown by the current management. It was at these spaces that I would witness their attitude of indifference towards the management in their speech and

forced to fire a ticket inspector because he was fabricating all sorts of highly questionable "cheating incidents." This ticket inspector often boasted about his feats each time he saw me.

gestures as they conversed amongst themselves, with me, with the shop owners and employees, or with other regular customers.

To use a Bakhtinian phrase, it was at these spaces that I found the interaction of bodies in the spirit of “joyful relativity,” as seen by their laughter as they teased and mocked each other, even physically, or as they joked about the silliness of the new management, the politicians, and the state while they ate their afternoon snacks and drank their coffee. It was very much out of these lively conversations that I managed to get their opinions of the management, other colleagues, and the government. One might even call them “anti-company” or “anti-establishment” spaces. Peter Kwong and the other managers who dropped by periodically at the station office would sometimes have coffee at one of the coffee shops but never at *Warong Muhibah*. I suspect they knew that they were not welcome there. Perhaps the idea of giving each other some distance or separate space was mutual. I have fond memories of *Warong Muhibah* where I spent so much of my time during fieldwork.

I need to stress that I often found myself engaging in more than one conversation at once when I hung out at these venues. For instance, at *Warong Muhibah* I might be talking with Tonlin about her village, while Zuariah was asking what I was doing at the head office. Pak Buang, the sampan-man who had just arrived to exchange some coins with the *warong* owner, interrupted to find out when I planned to visit his house at the Malay kampong across the river or to his brother’s house at one of the Hammer villages. Ah Fon might interrupt our conversation by talking to Tonlin, and others who were there might be teasing each other about different things. On top of this, these conversations were happening in different languages – Hokkien, Malay, Hakka (Hopo, Hwee Lan, and

Taipu dialects), Bidayuh, Mandarin, and Iban. In Malaysia, the common term for this kind of conversation is *rojak*, named after a local salad dish where many different types of vegetables are mixed together. Most of my interlocutors spoke two, three, or four languages. These conversations continued simultaneously, with each of them trying to be “with” me or to be “with” another individual, and me and others trying to engage with all of them, if that was even possible.

In the beginning it was difficult for me to follow what was going on in all these concurrent conversations as I tried to acquaint myself with their strands of space, time, and meaning, not to mention their different personalities, mannerisms, styles of speech patterns, and so on. In socio linguistic terms, I was grappling with the disparate subjectivities of my interlocutors as they talked about a number of diverse issues and concerns that were still foreign to me. One might even say that there were too many disparate subjectivities and there was not enough intersubjectivity. It took me about two months before I could honestly say that I was able to follow the dialogues closely, before I was able to engage with just about anyone that showed up at these joints – bus conductors, drivers, the store owners, their regular customers, even bus and sampan (small ferries) passengers who were passing by. Underneath these concurrent dialogues there were often some forms of collaborative discussion pertaining to the pressing concerns of their most immediate environment – the politics of their workplace. Obviously anything on the news would also capture their attention, for instance, the Anwar Ibrahim trial, the “Armed Heist” in West Malaysia,⁶ the number of headless

⁶ This was the main news for over a week. It concerned a group of heavily armed men who attempted to rob guns and artillery at a military installation. According to all the local newspapers, the government claimed that the entire affair was masterminded by the PAS, one of the opposition parties, to disrupt the so-called peace and prosperity of the country.

victims showing up in Sarawak that many locals believed belonged to illegal immigrants, and so on. Through what I took to be our mutual enjoyment in talking with one another, not to mention my paying for drinks from time to time, I was learning about their lives while they raised their concerns and frustrations about their company, the State, and other issues.

One of the things that delighted me was that most, if not all, of the different cliques congregating at the *warong* and the other coffee shops transcended the usual racial and gender denominators I was familiar with growing up in Muar, west Malaysia. Malays, Javanese, Hakkas, Hokkiens, Chao Anns, Teochius, Bidayuh, Ibans, men and women would mix at any available table – teasing each other, chatting, sharing food, paying for a colleague’s beverages, and so on. It would seem to me that their sociability was geographic in form, since most of their chatting took place in these “anti-company” venues where the levels of surveillance and restriction were markedly reduced. To be sure, the gatherings of different cliques at these joints, even if they did not have any real sense of political and social resistance, was generating some discomfort for the management, as I could tell by the occasional glances by the station managers, or even by the security officer, as they walked past. Usually at these moments the employees would lower their voices but would burst out laughing as soon as the air was clear of any eavesdropping. They knew better than to raise their concerns and frustrations when management or security was near.

The afternoon after Kee Sey was fired, the bus conductors Zuariah, Tonlin, Lina, and Ah Fon signaled me to follow them to the *warong*, which was literally packed with their

colleagues and other regular customers, much more so than normal. But the usual lively atmosphere was replaced by the somber mood over Kee Sey's termination. In a sense, many of them were in disbelief, shaking their heads asking each other what had happened to Kee Sey as if the whole thing were not real. "George fired Kee Sey over a forty-cent ticket, just one ticket. Just like that, thirty odd years, without any compensation," said Lina and Tonlin, one Malay and the other Iban. That seemed to be the general feeling of the rest at this *warong*, disgust with the company. They were genuinely sad and angry since Kee Sey's presence would be missed. Having worked much longer at the SOC, he was like an elder brother to many of them.

"It is difficult to find such a nice and humble person as Kee Sey. Perhaps that is why the company always picked on him," said Zuariah, a Javanese bus conductor who also had a brother and a father working at the SOC.⁷ Ah Fon, a Hakka bus conductor who still lived at one of the "Hammer villages," shared the same opinion. She added after a brief pause, "That's true! Those heartless people! How could George do that?" Even though I hardly knew Kee Sey at that point, I had noticed that he was usually very quiet when he sat among his colleagues, always smiling at them as they teased each other or cursed the management, the *sar kaar* (brownnosers), or the politicians. I will touch on the notion of brownnosing shortly.

⁷ When I first met Zuariah, she did not reveal to me that both her father and brother worked at the SOC. The same was true for her brother and father. I mention this because quite a few of my interlocutors always remonstrated with me that they wanted their children to have a better, easier, and "cleaner" work than they performed themselves.

“What about the union? Has he consulted Robert [the union head]?” I asked, even though I was aware that it would be pointless.⁸ I wanted to hear their responses.

All of them looked at me and laughed. “What Robert? Don’t talk about that *binatang* (in Malay: animal).” Lina raised her voice at the same time but was smiling at my inquiry, which she thought was ridiculous. Zuariah added, also laughing, “Robert is scared of the managers. He always disappears when there are problems. A coward.”

Again I asked, even though I could easily imagine the answer myself, “Then how did he end up as the union head?”

Again Zuariah replied after a brief pause, waiting for others to fill in, “Don’t know! We are also unsure.” Her response was interesting, for clearly they knew that Robert was appointed by the management. By stating “We are also unsure,” they left open the possibility of a challenge to the way Robert was appointed. The union head was supposed to be elected by union members and not appointed by the management. For the rest of the afternoon, before most of them took off for their respective bus runs, they talked about Kee Sey’s misfortune. How would Kee Sey feed his wife and his children who were still at school? They commented that Kee Sey married late in his life and that his children were still very young, too young to look for work. To this, Zuariah who was only in her early twenties said, “That is why it is good to marry young.”

⁸ Throughout my fieldwork, when the conversations took place in a group context and in the presence of some indigene interlocutors, I usually conversed with them in Malay, unless of course they started to talk to me in some Chinese languages since most of them spoke some Hakka or Hokkien, if not fluently. The same could not be said for many of my Malay interlocutors who don’t speak any of the Chinese or indigenous languages. Zuariah and Lina spoke fluent Mandarin and Hakka.

To be sure, although issues of race or ethnicity, gender, marital status, and wealth played themselves out daily, and some of the bus conductors and drivers, including some of the other regulars at this *warong*, could be blatantly racist and sexist at times, these were not the most important social categories at the Malay *warong*. “*Ini warong muhibah*” (in Malay: This is *Warong Muhibah*), one regular customer that everyone called “Pak Gemuk” (in Malay: Mr. Fatso) said one afternoon. “At this warong, we like to joke and tease each other but we live in peace, no trouble here. That is why this place is called *Warong Muhibah*, you understand?” There were other more pervasive dramas or referents of differences that took place in which those identified as the regulars at this Malay *warong* tended to orient themselves in terms of values derived largely from criticizing the present management of the SOC or that of the federal and state government. It was to these values that I had often observed the collective *kami* or *kita* (in Malay: *kami* – we exclusive, and *kita* – we inclusive) in their speech. For example, the collective *kami* (we) was used by Zuariah – *Kami pun kurang faham* (“We are also unsure”) - in response to my question as to how Robert ended up as the union head. Similarly, whenever I asked someone about his/her relation with the management, the most common response I would get was “*Kita tak campur*” or “*Kami tak campur*” (“we don’t mix”), instead of “*Saya tak campur*” (“I don’t mix”).

Besides the clique at *Warong Muhibah*, there were other smaller cliques that hung out at other Chinese-owned coffee shops situated across from the station office. Each of them had their own regular set of SOC employees. Initially I thought there was an ethnic consideration behind these groups at the different anti-company spaces. But that was not to be the case. For instance, Yong Pau Sau and a few Malay, Bidayuh, and Iban

colleagues would hang out at a particular coffee shop in the middle of the block across from the station office. Meanwhile Yong's partner, Tonlin, an Iban bus conductor, would frequent *Warong Muhibah*. There were a few old timers who would have their coffee at the shop furthest away from the station office. The preference for which of these anti-company spaces they hung out also had to do with the level of comfort they developed from years of familiarity with the owner or employees of each shop, as well as each individual's taste for coffee or food. Everyone, I was told, has his/her own favorite coffee. It was not uncommon for me to hear my interlocutors arguing over who has the best coffee at the bus station, or for that matter, in Kuching.

Because I can always find some SOC bus conductors or drivers at any of these coffee shops, including *Warong Muhibah*, they were where I obtained most of the "anti-company" stories. Like the Malay owner at *Warong Muhibah*, the owners of these coffee shops were also extremely familiar with the history of the SOC, since they had been operating at the same locale for almost as long as the SOC. Quite often they were quick to interrupt, interject, or add to the conversations I was having with SOC employees. The conversations could be about any issues but especially the deteriorating working conditions at the SOC, specifically, the distancing mentalities of the present management.

Besides the deteriorating working conditions at the SOC, there was another issue that occupied the consciousnesses of the communities at the bus station. The entire area by the Kuching waterfront that included the SOC bus station, the wet market,⁹ the Ban Hock Hawker Centre, and the hawker stalls next to the river would soon be redeveloped into a tourist center. New buildings with retail arcades catering for tourists would be built and at

⁹ The wet market was where fresh seafood, meat, and vegetables were sold.

the time of my fieldwork nobody had any idea who the new tenants of these shops would be. This whole business of redevelopment and relocation was constantly in the minds of most of the bus conductors and drivers, including those whose livelihood depended on the traffic of customers at the bus station.

Although my interlocutors were not the homeless shelter subjects in Boston that Desjarlais studied, I agree with him that the “movements from one locale or social world to another imply a transformation in sensibilities and subjective consciousness” (1997: 226) and, if I may add, anxiety. Within the context of ethnic politics in Sarawak, there was an air of uneasiness with the redevelopment plan, since most Chinese hawkers and stall owners suspected that they would be left out and that the new facilities would most probably be reserved for the Malays. As some of them put it, “That has always been the case in Malaysia. Anytime the government has developed a new facility, it were always reserved for their own people.” meaning, in this case, for the Malays. Still, others, perhaps putting on an air of optimism, welcomed the potential of catering to the supposedly more profitable tourist business, that is, if they were allowed to stay. But if and when the redevelopment happened,¹⁰ SOC would have to relocate its bus station to the outskirts of Kuching, and with it there would be plenty of readjustment at the new environment, not just in terms of operations but on the lives of SOC employees as well as the others whose livelihood had centered around the bus station, for many of them for as long as fifty years.

¹⁰ I mention, “if and when the development happened” because that was how most of my interlocutors talked about it. In Sarawak, large- scale project usually took a long time to materialize.

That evening when the station was rather empty, I thought it might be a good idea to approach Tan Hin Sung, a bus driver whom I had met frequently over the past four months, about Kee Sey. There were two other bus drivers there but they remained silent, not wanting to offer any opinion about the episode. Hin Sung told me he wasn't clear on the matter. He told me the two station supervisors, Mr. Fong and Ah Pin were not consulted before Kee Sey was fired. That was something new since the two station supervisors had overseen the welfare of the bus drivers, bus conductors, and the ticketing personnel at this particular bus station in the past. With the new management, Mr. Fong and Ah Pin have lost most of their influence on the running of the company since they were now considered "old school." Throughout my fieldwork, Mr. Fong spent most of his time sitting idly at the station office, passing each day before he decided to call it quits.

With no reason whatsoever, I asked Hin Sung if Robert, the union representative, had been notified. As I had expected, as soon as I mentioned that Hin Sung and the others burst out laughing. "Why even mention that *hantu* (in Malay: devil)?" Hin Sung was shaking his head. Derogatory words like *hantu* (devil) or *binatang* (animal) were often used by most of my interlocutors to refer to traitors, brownnosers, as well as the new station manager, Peter Kwong, and the new management at the head office, or any of the politicians they were not fond of. I could not help laughing since that same day Robert has been called an animal by the conductors at *Warong Muhibah* and now, a devil. "Then how was he elected?" again I asked, trying to further instigate their frustration. A bus driver who had refused to have anything to do with me responded, "You are right. He was elected by the company," he said with a matter-of-fact shrug of his shoulders before walking out of the station office.

About ten minutes later, Hin Sung dragged me to our favorite chicken rice shop across the street. While we were eating, he decided to be frank with me, albeit with a slight guilt since Kee Sey was after all an old colleague of his. "What happened to Kee Sey is a horrible thing but he does have a bad history stealing off ticket fares. The last time he was caught was last year (mid-1999) when he was short by fifty cents on his daily collection (less than US fifteen cents). The company forfeited his 1999 bonus for that." But as soon as Hin Sung said that, he started shaking his head and laughing, saying, "But so what? What bonus? None of us have seen any bonus. Besides, there was nothing any of us, not even Mr. Fong, could do for Kee Sey."

Lee was right. With the perilous status of their union and against a management that tried to obscure and distance those they subordinated, Kee Sey's firing was a done deal. A bus driver puts it this way: "The management is not interested in our complaints. Our concerns are like pieces of rocks that sink to the bottom of the river." And what about the insulting statement I heard from some managers: that bus conductors and drivers are like dogs. As far as the management was concerned, when someone was suspected of or "caught" stealing, the burden lay with the accused to prove his/her innocence and this could be a daunting task.

The atmosphere at the station office was still gloomy two days after Kee Sey's termination. Both station supervisors, Ah Pin and Mr. Fong looked away when I arrived. So did Hin Sung. Mei Mei, the other ticket personnel, who was usually extremely agreeable and gregarious toward me, pretended not to see me. Geok Bee, who usually was the first to acknowledge me whenever I arrived at the station office, kept quiet. I suspected they were not in the mood to deal with me, especially with questions pertaining

to Kee Sey's dismissal. Only the *warong* regulars - Tonlin, Ah Fon, Zuariah, Lina, Fuad and a few others - were talking quietly among themselves at one corner inside the station office but they soon dispersed and headed to *Warong Muhibah*.

Because of this incident, I followed up the matter to find out if there were other such mishaps. As it turned out, quite a few employees had been caught for either stealing or for being short on their daily collections in the past. Zuariah, the Javanese bus conductor, once had sixty percent of her bonus deducted for being eighty cents short on her daily collection (around US 20 cents). Ah Fon, the Chinese conductor who lived at Tapah, one of the Hammer villages, received only a warning for failing to issue a ticket since that was her first offence. Ah Fon told me that her best friend, an Iban bus conductor, Toni, had to resign before the company could fire her. The two of them occasionally planned to have their days off on the same date in order to hang out at either Ah Fon's house at Tapah or Toni would pick up Ah Fon at her village for a movie in Kuching. Toni was well liked among her former colleagues at the SOC. She had since been working for the competitor, the KTC. There were many other cases, so many that in 1998 the SOC came up with a new policy requiring all new hires to have a guarantor and a deposit of five hundred ringgits (US 125 dollars) in order to work there. The deposit would be given back when the employee left the company – minus any deductions if there were penalties. None of the other bus companies in Kuching had this policy.

Even though it was not possible to come up with a percentage of those engaging in these practices, I suspect it was quite high and that the number would continue to rise unless there was a change in the management's attitude towards its employees. The heightened level of surveillances and controls would only increase the level of disloyalty

the employees feel for the management. If anything else, they would only play into the hands of the bus drivers and the bus conductors, since they have the advantage over the management when it came to cat and mouse games. Their experience on the job, familiarity with passengers, knowledge of possible locations where the ticket inspectors could hide, or collaboration with the ticket inspectors all favored them over the company. Furthermore, the company could not simply fire or replace the bus drivers or bus conductors since these jobs were no longer attractive, apparent lack of applications when they advertised in the local newspapers during my fieldwork.

A week after Kee Sey was fired, I ran into a Chinese bus conductor reading the afternoon edition of the *Nanyang Siang Pau* (a Chinese daily) in the passengers' waiting area. When asked what the news was that day I thought his reply expressively reflected the political situation in Malaysia as well as the conditions at his work place. His response was: "The news? Oh, it is all about west Malaysia. That is where all the events are, where all the news is. That is all they write these days. Nothing about Sarawak! Here in Sarawak, we get no attention from the media. It's like the SOC."

"What do you mean it's like the SOC?" I asked. It took me a few minutes to figure out what he was hinting at. He gave me a look, lifting his eyebrow, for not getting his coded message before saying, "What do I mean? Look at the station [office] lately. Has anyone talked about Kee Sey? More than thirty years of service and then just like that. Without a trace, without any news! It is as if everyone had forgotten him. Worst of all, no compensation." His analogy of what constituted news made a lot of sense in that particular moment and in that particular context. Someone he and most of his colleagues had known for over thirty years was suddenly gone, out of their daily lives, as if

forgotten, erased. I felt compelled at that moment to speak with Mr. Fong or Ah Pin, to find out if there was anything we could do. But first I asked the conductor if Mr. Fong had already “represented” Kee Sey before the management. Once again, he gave me that same look, lifting his eyebrow ever so slightly and shrugging his shoulders, “What can Tar Su (Mr. Fong) do?” looking slightly annoyed but at the same time, feeling rather helpless. His response and behavior aptly described the general sentiments or mentalities of most of his colleagues towards Kee Sey’s termination.

That evening as Ah Pin was leaving, I decided to walk with him to the other end of the station where he would take the bus home. He knew exactly what my motive in pursuing him was. Walking side by side, he brought up Kee Sey’s track record, telling me how he felt about the whole thing before I had a chance to ask him. He added: “He asked for it. He had been caught in the past and should have been more careful.” I also detected a sense of powerlessness when Ah Pin mentioned that both he and Tar-Su (Mr. Fong) had been told to steer clear of the matter. As recently as the beginning of 2000, both of them were no longer in charged of employee affairs. That was now under Peter Kwong, the new station manager. All of the older senior station supervisors, including Ah Pin and Tar-Su, were now slowly being phased out.

The only recourse available for most of these older employees was to try and ignore the new reality, by acting as indifferently or nonchalantly toward it as they could. This was captured best by Ah Pin’s speech: “Kuan tar che yang-tor (in Mandarin: Why bother so much about them?) What can we working class people do?” He smiled and added after we have taken a few more paces: “After all I can retire anytime I want to. My children are grown up and married. I even have a few grandchildren.” There is something implicit

here: Ah Pin could afford to be indifferent to the new management and he could retire if he wanted to. In a way there was a sense of personal honor in Ah Pin's seeking to obtain satisfaction at least through speech. However, there was also a taint of bitterness in it, even before he followed up with this remark: "But it's still a shame. I never imagine this could happen, feeling unwanted after all these years." As he was getting on the bus, he turned around and said, "Sarawak has a history of running dogs." The synthesis between his current and past situations should be obvious, if not incredibly touching.

As the bus left I turned back towards the station office. For a brief moment I stood in the middle of the road staring at the station, feeling sad not just for Ah Pin and Kee Sey, but for most of the old timers who felt that they were not longer appreciated, that they were taking up space. I realized I had not heard Ah Pin speak more than one sentence to me in the past since he was usually glued to his table overseeing the daily schedules of all the buses coming and leaving the station. I was deeply touched by what he said, not by his pragmatic stance, not so much because he wanted to act and feel in a certain way, but because he had to in order to maintain a sense of pride and sensibility, of living sanely in an unjust situation. Having said that, the process of being indifferent or nonchalant towards the latest developments at the SOC was double-edged, for while it involved the tactic of ignoring the institutionalization of various new arrangements that were encroaching on his authority, it also left behind a bitter sense of being disrespected, if not displaced, after years of hard work and loyalty to the company that took up most of his life. It seems to me that Ah Pin, like many other old timers, was surviving only inertly, without getting involved into the dialectics of the prevailing conditions. If anything else, they were undermining the legitimacy of their continued existence. The firing of Kee

Sey, supposedly over a forty-cent ticket, awakened an air of uncertainty and impermanence at the station, especially among these old timers. Up to the end of my fieldwork Kee Sey never engaged a lawyer and he remained unemployed.

As I headed back to the station office, I thought of how the bus station, the old buildings across from it and the entire area would look like once the Kuching Waterfront redevelopment project started. With it, what would happen to the livelihood of the people I have come to know? But then again, the redevelopment scheme might never materialize. The last I heard when writing this dissertation was that the bus station is still there and the coffee shops and *Warong Muhibah* still serve as “anti-company” spaces for the bus conductors and drivers.

I did mention to my other interlocutors that I had approached a lawyer friend who told me about Key Sey’s chances of winning the case. Naturally, many of them were curious as to what their long-time colleague might do or was able to do. A few of them asked me in a joking manner if I would be writing about this episode in my dissertation. When I told them I probably would, some of them thought I was pulling their legs. A few shook my hand because I was concerned with their politics. Tonlin said, “Yes, tell the world about this lousy company,” as she laughed with her colleagues. Some were cheering loudly because they believed I would be exposing their company’s dirty politics. I tried to tell them I did not have such power or authority but ... I thought I should let them enjoy the moment, even if it was deceitful on my part. As a matter of fact, less than an hour later, a few other employees that normally frequented other Chinese coffee shops stopped by the *warong* to ask if I was serious about writing up this episode. Once again I

told them I might, together with many other subjects I felt were important, for instance, their experiences during the Cold War.

It was perhaps out of this episode that some of my interlocutors took my curiosity for a sincere interest in their welfare and became interested in talking with me. There were also others who wanted nothing to do with me. Most of the managers fell under the latter category. Considering this, it was inevitable that my perspective was slanted more to the points of view of the employees than those of the management, to those who were willing to talk with me than to others who vehemently refused to make my acquaintance.

Concerns and Complaints

Besides their union, the other concern or complaint most of my interlocutors at the SOC were willing to share with me was about their yearly bonus. Here is a brief description of my interactions with a female Chinese bus conductor, Ms. Chin Liang Siat that touched on these concerns. Her complaints in many ways reflected the general sentiments of most of her colleagues towards the company.

Ms. Chin worked on the Kuching//Bau route, a route that traveled 28 miles each way from Kuching to Bau. Each day, she started her workday by getting on her bus at six in the morning as it made its journey from Bau to Kuching. The bus made five runs each day, taking an average of 2 hours each way, and the last run ended around seven in the evening. She normally got home at eight. Ms. Chin started working at the SOC when she was only fourteen and she was in her mid-fifties when we met. I recall the first time I approached her she fled from me, saying, “Why do you want to interview me? I have no

stories to tell.” She was still saying “*pu-yiao, pu-yiao*” (in Mandarin: don’t want, don’t want) as she ran away.

Over the course of spending time at the bus station, I noticed that Ms. Chin was always alone. If I ever saw her at the *Warong Muhibah* or other food stalls, that was because she was there to buy food for lunch. But she never consumed it there, preferring to eat inside her bus. I once asked her colleagues at the *warong* why Ms. Chin was always alone, to which one of them said, “*Entah? Dia-tu susah nak campur*” (in Malay: No Idea! She is not an easy person to get along with).¹¹ I suspected Ms. Chin’s status, as a single woman was partly the reason. As I mentioned before, unmarried female employees were often favorite targets of gossips, especially among the young or married employees, as frequently reflected by the remark: “So-and-so is a *Lau-chei-poh*” (in Mandarin and Hakka: an old female spinster). Such backstabbing or character assassination was quite common whenever these employees gathered at their anti-company spaces.

As it was one of my routines to travel on the buses in order to work with bus conductors and drivers, I decided to meet Ms. Chin on her bus one afternoon. Moreover I thought it was time to contact some of SOC’s employees in Bau, especially those whose names were already given to me on the letters from Hong Hee Siaw. Ms. Chin got on board, and she smiled when she saw me sitting at the rear end of the bus. I remained seated, thinking that she would have to say something as she worked her way towards me. When it came to my turn to pay my fares, she asked, “What are you doing here? I

have no stories for you.” I smiled and paid for my fare. By the time the bus was at the outskirts of Kuching, when most of the passengers had gotten on and paid their bus fares, she approached me and started to chat.

She told me that she lived in Pasar Paku, a very small single roll bazaar town located very close to Bau, assuring me that she would point it out when we reached it. She lived with her younger sister who ran a food stall at a shop house that Ms. Chin bought a few years before. I was surprised that she owned a shop house with the meager salary of a bus conductor, averaging 480 ringgits a month (USD 130). She was then quick to assert, “Drivers make 585 ringgits a month, more than us,”¹² perhaps signaling that she must have been incredibly resourceful to own not just a piece of real estate but a shop house. She went on to say, “At the SOC, there is no overtime ... [but] plenty of checking, lots of surveillance nowadays.” Right there and then I suspected she was not too pleased with the company. From what I later learnt, it was not entirely true there was no overtime at the SOC but that only those in the management’s good book were allocated overtime shifts.

Ms. Chin’s parents used to plant pepper back in the sixties before the Bidayuh¹³ owner took the land back. I was curious why her parents did not attempt to renew the lease, to which she replied, “*Pu-chee-tao* [in Mandarin: don’t know], ... probably the land owner wanted them back to plant pepper. Besides none of us [her siblings and herself] were home. We were in Kuching.” She assured me that her family and the

¹¹ “*Entah?*” is written with a question mark in the Malay language but translated as “No Idea!” with an exclamation point. That is because “*Entah*” here is not really a question but an expression, albeit, a sarcastic remark in this case.

¹² Actually that was not entirely true. Some drivers made less than that.

Bidayuh family who took back the land remained very good friends. In fact, they sold their vegetables to Ms. Chin's sister. She also said that the Chinese and the Bidayuh got along very well at Bau and she attributed it to the fact that all of them spoke at least two languages, that is, Bidayuh and Hakka.

"When was that? When did the Bidayuh owner take back the land?" I was curious.

"Oh, early seventies, seventy three, seventy four."

Ms. Chin completed primary five¹⁴ at a local Chung Hwa Chinese school in Bau and moved to Kuching with her siblings when she was barely twelve years old. The three of them rented a small room and both she and her sisters started working as seamstresses for about two years before she joined the SOC. As to why she gave up working as a seamstress and joined the SOC, she replied, "I knew a few people from my village who were working at the SOC." Many of her colleagues had a similar path as to working at the SOC.

I asked if she was a SOC union member. I did not, however, ask if the union had changed. She laughed at my question, saying, "Why talk about the union? All it does is collect money from us." She did not seem too happy. She continued, "I pay 2 ringgit every month (USD .55 cents) but there are always other collections, sometimes a few times per month. You know, funeral monies."

"Funeral monies?" I was curious.

¹³ Traditionally called the Land Dayak, the Bidayuh is one of the biggest groups of indigenous people in the northwest of Sarawak.

¹⁴ Somewhat equivalent to the Fifth Grade.

“Oh! Say, if a family member of a union member passed away, we had to contribute some cash. These are expenses for the undertaker, for the *sai-kong* [these are monks that perform during the funeral ceremony], this, that. Funerals are expensive, even the simplest ones,” she paused briefly before adding, “Just last month alone I paid nine ringgit for three funerals. That’s eleven ringgit if you add the two ringgit union fee.”

Ms. Chin was not the only person who complained about the costs of being a union member, but the issue was not so much about paying the monthly fee and funeral contributions but about feeling trapped because they were reluctant to give up their memberships. These sentences from a Hakka bus driver, Yong Pau Sau, reflected the same sentiments shared by Ms. Chin and most of her colleagues: “We have already been paying for so long. It would be giving up a lot if we stopped. Once you are out, you are no longer entitled to any funeral contributions should someone in your family pass away.” That was one of the questions these bus conductors and drivers had to face: whether to continue to be a union member when the union no longer had any bargaining power with the present management. It was ironic, but for all practical purposes, the only reason they remained union members was to “benefit” from such funeral contributions.

Ms. Chin then proceeded to tell me what she thought of Hong Hee Siaw, even before I had a chance to ask: “Hong Hee Siaw is a good boss. There are others, for instance, Lee [the former Assistant General Manager], but most of them have retired or passed away. I saw you walking with Lee towards the wet market the other day. He was a good manager.” Having said that, she went back to contrasting them with the present management, complaining, “It is not the same anymore. George, you know ... he has no *liau* [in Mandarin and Hakka: quality] compared with his grandfather.” I should point out

a certain pattern here: many SOC employees I worked with would tell me how they felt about Hong Hee Siaw and other older managers whom they respected, all without my asking. It was as if they had to bring this up in order to contrast it with what they wanted to tell me about the precarious situation they now found themselves in.

Ms. Chin asked if I was aware of the SMH partnership, commenting: "The SOC will have more Malay managers from now." She disapproved of the SOC's eventual succumbing into the structural politics and racial realities in Malaysia. She then glanced over at her passengers sitting across from us before lowering her voice, "Our CM, has an interest in SMH! That family [meaning, the Chief Minister, his sons, and brothers] have their fingers on everything in Sarawak." I had heard similar comments from many of my interlocutors as well as in conversations I had engaged in at restaurants, coffee shops, or at pubs: that the Chief Minister and his family were involved in most of the major business ventures in Sarawak. She continued, "Do you know the SOC owned Regas? *Ali Baba* business." She was sighing at this point. She felt that even with all the recent business ventures the SOC had engaged in and profited by, supposedly, the employees were left out of the equation. She asked, "But so what! What about our bonuses?"

To be sure, the existence of their union was currently more symbolic than practical. Even though there had not been a lot of conflicts between the union and the management in the past, the union had been involved in some negotiations of employee salaries. There had even been a half-day strike to reinstate an employee who was fired in the early 1970s when he was caught failing to issue a single bus ticket. But that was the past. Moreover, since there had been more cordiality and respect between the employees and employers in the past, there hadn't been many incidents that called for the union to represent its

members' interests. But the working atmosphere had since changed and so had the idea of the union. As Ms. Chin put it, "Have you heard of a union whose representatives were appointed by the company? The current union leader, what's his name? That's how much I care about the union. He might as well be dead." Indeed, all the bus conductors and drivers I worked with complained that all the union did was collect money from them and that it was co-opted by the management, especially since the management reorganization in 1998.

They had another issue with the union. In the past, a union member was entitled to 51 days of bonuses each year as opposed to 49 days for a non-union employee. After 1998 the number of days was reduced: 41 days for union employees and 39 days for non-union employees. That was a ten-day reduction. But since they had not collected any bonuses since 1998, the reduction felt like a non-issue. As such, the grievances of the employees were not over the reduction in their bonuses but the actual money they had yet to collect.

The insignificance of the union was also reflected by the decline in membership over the years. Most of the recent hires, especially those who had joined after 1998, were non-union employees. Indeed the usual comment, "*Buang masa saja*" (in Malay: "It's a waste of time") was their usual response whenever I asked them about the union. Of the current labor force of approximately 650 employees at the SOC only around fifty percent of them were union members. As Pay Lai En, a very senior employee, once told me, before the 1980s seventy to eighty percent of SOC employees were union members and the company had around 800 employees. Considering that, the actual percentage of union members was not a mere drop of twenty to thirty percent but significantly higher.

One afternoon a recent hire bus driver, Mr. Fan Pan Chor, upon hearing my conversation with Zuariah and Tonlin about their union drew a parallel between the union and the *Yang Berhormat* (Y.B.s) of Sarawak that I thought was a rather accurate description of the changing political scenario in Sarawak, and in retrospect, about the SOC. *Yang Berhormat*, literally “The Respected One,” was one of the titles given to politicians or any other holders of official government power. Fan had this to say: “The union representatives of the SOC are like the Y.B.s. The Y.B.s of yesteryear were much more outspoken and more responsive in carrying out their duties to represent and protect the interests of their people. For instance, Stephen Yong [the first Secretary General of the SUPP]. He was relentless in protecting the interest of his people. Then you have the second batch of Y.B.s who were not as courageous as their predecessors. Take Y.B. Sim Kheng Hong [another former Secretary General of the SUPP]. He did not do much for his constituency. It’s the same with the union representatives at the SOC.” He walked away as if satisfied after giving a good lecture on the topic. I called to him to stay but he smiled and proceeded to walk away. Many of my interlocutors had this habit of walking away in the middle of a conversation or after they had given their brief opinions of this or that issue.

I was surprised to hear a similar comparison from another bus conductor, B.B. Chin who had discontinued his union membership after more than thirty-five years. He made a remark after he found out that I had just paid a visit to a Y.B., Datuk Sim Kheng Hui, that morning.¹⁵ As I mentioned before, each time I had an appointment with a Y.B., or when I visited their head office, most of these bus conductors and drivers would know of it

almost immediately. In any event B.B. Chin made this elaborate comment as soon as he saw me approaching the station office: "The Y.B. you saw this morning, Sim Kheng Hui, is one of the third generation SUPP leaders." I was somewhat puzzled by what he meant by "third generation SUPP leaders." He smiled and offered this elaboration: "The first generation SUPP leaders had to fight, they had to be arrested. Many were arrested. Some were sent 'back' to China. The second-generation SUPP leaders were slightly different. Some were arrested but they eventually became Y.B.s; they managed to obtain titles and they became [part of] the government. Some of the second generations had to fight, but not a lot. But the third generations have it easy: they don't have to fight; they don't have to get arrested. *They only need to be Y.B.s.*" He grinned at his sarcastic remarks before continuing: "The foundation had already been laid down for them. It's the same with SOC union representatives. They sit at the office, *goyang kaki* and draw their salaries. They are like the civil servants, *Gaji Buta*." *Goyang kaki* (in Malay), literally shaking one's legs, is the metaphor for being idle while at work. It also referred to the good fortune of the recipient of a lot of leisure time. *Gaji Buta* (in Malay) means one is drawing a salary without doing any work. It also refers to the laziness of the person. Incidentally, this reference is usually made to civil servants in a bureaucratic environment.

Others at the station office were also grinning, agreeing with B.B. Chin's assessment of their union representatives, the Y.B.s of Sarawak, and the civil servants. But I suspect their grins were not without irony and bitterness since it did invoke the general sensation of the inequalities in the social and political relations they had experienced for the most

¹⁵ Y.B. Datuk Sim Kheng Hui was the Secretary General of the SUPP as well as a State Assemblymen. No

part of their lives. They had to work hard to make ends meet whereas the “third generation Y.B.s,” the civil servants, and their union representatives had had it easy.

Most of the SOC employees I worked with felt that it was a waste of their breath and a waste of energy to talk about their union. Besides there were more urgent matters they were preoccupied with, their bonuses for one. Ms. Chin was like this when she complained to me that very first time we had a conversation on her bus. Echoing the feelings of the majority of the bus conductors and drivers, she said: “Most of us are very angry at the moment. Not a word from the company. In the past we were getting 51 days as our bonus. Sometimes, every six months of work, you get one extra month of salary.” Like many of her colleagues, Ms. Chin did not feel frustrated and angry with the company without reason. They had gone through the ups and downs of the company in the past and they felt they deserved some respect and consideration. Justifying her complaints, she continued: “In the past when the company had financial difficulties, we would forgo our salaries.” And then recalling something that really angered her, she raised her voice: “Not only have we not received our bonuses, the company even tried to cheat us. They did not pay their shares of our EPF [Employee Providence Fund] in 1999. How low was that?” shaking her head in disbelief. “That was illegal,” she continued, “They did not pay for April, May, and June [of 1999], over 20,000 ringgits.”

Ms. Chin wasn’t sure if the company eventually repaid the EPF contributions after some of her colleagues lodged a complaint to the EPF agency. Others said the company was fined but they were not entirely sure. Still some were not worried at all, like Faizal, a Malay bus driver, who said one morning: “Even if the company hasn’t repaid their shares

blood relation with Y.B. Sim Kheng Hong.

of our EPF, they can't run away." He puts it quite simply: *"Itu law, company tidak dapat lari. Tidak! Nanti kena bayar bunga lagi"* (In Malay: "That's the law! The company can't run away. No way! On top of that, they will have to pay interest as well").

On another occasion when I spoke with Ms. Chin over the phone, perhaps because she was feeling guilty for complaining too much about the SOC, she started our conversation by telling me how much she respected her former General Manager, Hong Hee Siaw. I don't remembered asking her about communism or the Cold War up to that point, but she confided to me that there had been many communists within the SOC in the past. I suspected there were definite reasons why she would suddenly mention about communism immediately after telling me how much she respected Hong Hee Siaw. She also informed me that she was approached several times during the early 1970s to join certain organizations that would be deemed as communist by the government, but each time she would decline, saying, "I don't want to get involved with such a thing." She offered no additional reason why she declined the invitations. She would not, however, disclose who approached her or if they were her colleagues. As for the people at her village and the surrounding areas, she said: "Quite a lot of them were communists, both Chinese and Bidayus."

When I was on her bus on another occasion, this time from Bau to Kuching, Ms. Chin reiterated her feelings towards the SOC, saying, "Right now, you have more managers, supervisors, ticket inspectors than us ... and you have those whom the company liked and those they don't. Recently, do you know that George even hired a former army officer

from Penang as our security office?”¹⁶ Again she contrasted it with the past: “Unlike before, when everybody worked for the company. We did not have so many managers then. The company was generous. But nowadays even our salaries are late. We used to get paid every 1st and 16th of the month, but not anymore. This is horrible for those who have children. They need to buy new uniforms, books, shoes, and tuition. Just last week, school started on the 17th but we got paid on the 18th. Many of my colleagues were really angry.” I did ask others about the new trend of getting their salaries late and they were deeply concerned.

Like many of her colleagues who were extremely unhappy with their union and the management that seemed to have little consideration for their years of loyal service, Ms. Chin would only perform the minimum requirement of what was needed of her as a bus conductor. She made sure she showed up for work on time (meaning, in her case, getting on the bus at six in the morning as it was heading to Kuching), made the necessary bus runs each day, maintained the necessary minimal fare collections each week, but nothing more. That seemed to be the general attitude of most of her colleagues. Some even said: “We now work for ourselves,” meaning that they could care less about the welfare of the company.

Ms. Chin once snapped at me when I asked why she wouldn’t mix with her colleagues, not even during her lunch. “Why bother? It’s not as if we have just met. There is nothing new to say to each other. Moreover, there are so many *saa-kar* [brown nosers] at the SOC. I am better off minding my own business. Furthermore, I might be

¹⁶ This was the same security officer who interrupted my conversation with a bus driver.

quitting.¹⁷ I can always stay at home and help my sister's business. After all, I own the shop." Perhaps she was reacting against those she suspected were often teasing her for being a spinster when she remarked, "The few that hang out at the *warong* are nothing but bums. We have a word for them in Sarawak. They are called *kaki lepak*.¹⁸ Everyday they *lepak* at the *warong*, badmouthing others, spending their money. If you don't believe me, go ask if they have any savings." She smiled since she was, after all, the owner of a shop house at Paku. But I suspected her last remark had more to do with her resenting their gossip about her than anything else.

So how exactly did she manage to own the shop house? Like many of the other bus conductors and drivers, Ms. Chin was not without other recourses to supplement her meager salary of 480 ringgit a month. In truth, the salary of a bus driver or a bus conductor was not the only form of income for most of them. There were all sorts of "activities" connected with the job that offered ways to generate some extra income, as well as taking loans. These "activities" ranged from delivering miscellaneous items to families that lived along the way, or delivering newspapers to vendors along the routes. Ms. Chin worked on one of those routes where all kinds of items were regularly transported on the bus. For instance, twice a day (once in the morning and once in the afternoon) newspaper agents would bring piles of different newspapers to be delivered to the vendors along the route, all the way to Bau. For this, the agents paid two ringgits per trip. There were other miscellaneous items that were transported besides newspapers – just about anything as long as it fit inside the bus. Sometimes they were transported for

¹⁷ Ms. Chin was not the only one who told me she might be quitting. But like many of her colleagues, she probably had been talking about quitting for years.

free but the driver or Ms. Chin would accept a token ringgit or two if they were offered. I had observed similar transactions and gratuities on many occasions on other buses that traveled to small townships and villages.

Besides these transactions, Ms. Chin had at least one other trick up her sleeve. Twice she showed me her collection of foreign notes, all carefully arranged in a few photo albums. She also had several smaller bags of foreign coins. She said she would “beg” for them whenever she had overseas tourists on her bus, which was quite regular since that was the bus that took them to a national park at Gunung Gading. This was a favorite spot for many overseas tourists during a certain time of the year when the world’s largest flower, *Rafflesia*, measuring up to a meter across, could be found blooming inside the park. Over the years, she had managed to collect quite a substantial amount and variety of foreign coins and notes from these tourists and they were worth quite a lot. She mentioned that she collected them not only for their value but as a hobby as well. However, immediately after saying that, she added: “But they are worth quite a lot of money. They are all foreign, mostly European and American, even Australian. They are worth many times more than the Malaysian currencies,” and then she smiled before adding, “and they are not *rupiah*.”

One could also pocket some of the bus fares. An Iban bus conductor once smiled and responded when I asked if it was worth taking the risk, saying, “A few ringgit here and there add up pretty fast.” So how does one cheat on the bus fares? There were several tactics one could deploy. One could pocket the bus fares collected and not issue any

¹⁸ *Lepak* (in Malay) means to remain idle, unproductive. *Kaki* (in Malay) means feet and when used with another word, it refers to the holder of this or that trait. *Kaki lepak* means someone who likes to *lepak*.

tickets, or one could issue tickets with a smaller fare than the actual money collected. It took me awhile to figure out the whole scheme, which I thought was ingenious but not entirely foolproof. For instance, one could issue a ticket with a lesser fare as soon as a passenger paid or one could issue it later on along the journey. Bearing in mind that the conductors and drivers were familiar with most of their regular passengers and knew whom they could engage such practices. Besides, the conductors roughly knew what ticket fares to issue in order not to make it too obvious should a ticket inspector come on board. Similarly, the conductors and bus drivers usually knew which spots along the route ticket inspectors would most likely show up, which allowed them ample time to figure out when to issue out tickets and at what values. Contrary to de Certeau's (1984) distinction that tactics hinge on time as opposed to strategies that hinge on space, my interlocutors had to consider both time and space when engaging in these activities.

I was not able to confirm if ticket inspectors were also involved in the schemes. I did, however, come across a few occasions when no tickets were presented to the ticket inspectors when they asked the passengers for them, and much to my surprise, nothing happened. The ticket inspectors moved on to inspect the tickets of other passengers as if nothing were wrong, scribbled on their pads, and left. No one – neither passengers nor bus conductors or drivers said anything. I was the only one who was curious and surprised as to what had just transpired.

Tonlin, the Iban bus conductor, apparently had it all figured out with her longtime Chinese bus driver, Yong Pau Sau, when it came to supplementing their income. Both of them had been working on the same route for more than ten years, a route that now

Similarly, *kaki judi* (in Malay: gambling) means a compulsive gambler.

traveled to the Atapak Resettlement Scheme (see Chapter Four). During the first few times I was on the bus, Tonlin was cautious about engaging in her scheme in front of me. Since I normally sat at the front end of the bus, across from the bus driver, I had to turn around if I wanted to observe her and her passengers. But each time I did, she would tell me to stop, uncomfortable about being observed. Soon I learned to use the driver's rearview mirror to check out the activity at the back, but that too caught her attention. Over time as we got to know each other, she would feel less embarrassed. But I would still pretend not to take any notice, since it was not my business to meddle in their affairs.

Tonlin and Yong were not only familiar with most of their passengers, but like any seasoned bus conductors and drivers, they were also familiar with the probable times and spots the ticket inspectors would be waiting to get on board. On several occasions Tonlin and Yong pointed out to me where the inspectors would normally be waiting as we drove passed them, and if the inspectors were not there, where they might be at another spot further along the route. On the other routes, the ticket inspectors would usually check more than once during a single bus run, but not on Tonlin's route. I once asked her why that was the case. In fact, why was there hardly any inspection on her route? She smiled and directed my attention to her bus driver, Yong, before saying, "See that skinny guy over there? He gets along extremely well with the ticket inspectors. Why do you think I enjoy working with him?" She was still smiling as she walked up to Yong and tapped him on his shoulder.

Does that mean that the ticket inspectors, or at least some of them, were accomplices or was it because they were more likely to turn a blind eye if the driver or conductor also happened to be a long time colleague? One afternoon when I was alone with Yong at his

favorite coffee shop. I asked him. He tried to smile but I suspected he was feeling a little uncomfortable about my directness. Instead of giving me a straight answer he offered a more metaphoric response: "Let's just say a lot has passed under the bridge," an expression I had heard on other contexts. But what did he mean by that? Were some of the ticket inspectors collaborating in the scheme, or was he referring to the ethics and etiquette between old colleagues, or both? I did not pursue the question since I was feeling embarrassed for being so direct. There were a few issues that were difficult to ask about during my fieldwork and my interlocutors' involvement and complicity in these practices was one of them. Even though I would repeatedly assure them that I had no issue with these practices considering how the management treated them, it remained a thorny subject.

The underlying questions I wish to address are these: Why was there an incentive for some employees to cheat on the job? Furthermore, was the frequency of cheating on the job lower in the past, before the change of management philosophy at the SOC? From what I gathered, it would seem that the amount of cheating had gone up. The question also touched on the issue of the loyalty these employees had for their companies, and in part they allow me to analyze and deal with the etiquette or sentiment of these bus conductors and drivers toward their company. Their actions can be treated as mirrors of the functions of the power structure of their workplace (Goffman, 1959; Elias, 1983).

In the previous chapter I mentioned a certain bus driver, Keong Wen, who was complaining about his company in front of his colleagues when I first met him. Keong Wen was in his early fifties and he lived with his wife and three young daughters in a rented room on the outskirts of Kuching. His daughters were still in primary school. Over

the months Keong Wen and I became quite close, but there were moments when he was disruptive while I was talking with his colleagues. He had the knack of making others uncomfortable, since not only was he constantly complaining about the system - his company, the State, and so on - he was also extremely loud. But there was something interesting about him: he knew when to stop and where his limits were. Otherwise he would have been fired a long time ago. My guess is that the rest of his colleagues often felt uneasy with Keong Wen's presence not so much because of his loud but because his remarks made them consciously aware of their own situations and powerlessness.

Keong Wen once went on a tirade about the company at the station office. Even the station supervisors, Mr. Fong and Ah Pin, pretended to look away. When they threw glances at Keong Wen or in my direction, they had a sympathetic look in their face, as if agreeing with what they heard. Peter Kwong, the station manager, was there, and he was whispering something to Geok Bee, a ticketing employee whom all her colleagues called the biggest "brown-noses" at the SOC. Both Peter and Geok Bee remained in the furthest corner of the station office. I sensed that there was something peculiar about the scene, as if the episode was revealing some divisions at the bus station office that in a sense was a microcosm of the divisions at the SOC. It turned out that I was right. There were two distinct divisions at the station: the old versus the new generation of leaders. Mr.. Fong and Ah Pin represented the old generation, and Peter Kwong and a Mr. Poh who visited the station office from time to time represented the new. The new generation was chiseling away at the old power structure.

The general staff (ticketing employees, ticket inspectors, bus conductors and drivers) were directly affected by this division at the station. Besides a few brown-nosers who

sided with the new batch of leaders, the overwhelming majority was with Ah Pin and Mr. Fong, the older faction. Perhaps it was out of loyalty or out of empathy. But every employee at the station was fast succumbing to the rising influence of the new leaders. After all, their sick leaves, annual leaves, assignment of shifts, overtime shifts, and the kind of buses they were assigned to were determined by the new leaders, in particular by Peter Kwong.

I mention about the existence of “brown-nosers” because they were a crucial part of the experience at the SOC. In Sarawak, the term for brown nosers is called *Saa Kar*, which literally meant tripod-stands, the instrument that supports someone’s buttock. It is also interesting to note that one who was called a *Saa Kar* (brown-noser) at the SOC was also called a *Choo Koo* (running-dog, traitor). In fact, the terms were often used interchangeably. This interchangeability of terms within the context of the SOC is worth noting since it had something to do with a certain history, or should I say a certain “scandal,” in the making of their history.

My usage of “scandal” here is influenced by a Nietzschean reading of the notion of “promise” in the “progression” of history. As opposed to Descartes’ notion of humans as the thinking animals, Nietzsche suggests that it would be more accurate if we consider ourselves as “promising animals,” considering how history can be seen as a series of broken promises (Nietzsche, 1983 [1874]). I prefer such a reading when it comes the writing of history, or the critiquing, since it clearly incorporates the performative aspect of language and takes into consideration the notion of felicities and infelicities – of misfire, miscue, and broken promises. In such reading of history, history no longer proceeds, as it did for Marx, from a logic of contradiction (of contradictions between

classes or contradictions inherent in the discourse of the dominant class), but rather from a logic of scandal – resulting from the scandalous promises made by leaders of nation states, the management of companies, and even that made by individuals.

Consider the common experiences the bus drivers and the bus conductors had gone through, in particular, those who had been with the company since the 1950s. It would not be an exaggeration to state that there were a sense of comradeship not only among the employees but between them and the management, especially during the 1960s and 1970 even though not every employee during that period was involved in activities that could be labeled as communist or pro-communist. But most of them were now disappointed with the company they had spent most of their lives working for. The same could be said about how they felt towards the SUPP and the leaders at the SUPP who had not only given up their oppositional roles of bringing about changes in Sarawak, but had in essence become part of the status quo and had “forgotten” about my interlocutors as their past supporters. Wouldn’t this then amount to a scandal in the sense that what they had believed in turned out to be a lie, broken promises by both the past management as well as the leaders of the SUPP? Consider this history and the changes that occurred with the management reorganization in 1998, when all sorts of restrictions or conditions¹⁹ were institutionalized and new positions were created,²⁰ generating an atmosphere of compartmentalization and distrust at the workplace. In so many ways it reminded them of the familiar experiences at the various “new villages” to which they had been relocated and had to escape from.

¹⁹ For example, the difficulties in getting paid leaves or sick leaves, a three-day limit to answer to a memo from the HQ, a guarantor and deposit to work at the SOC, the difficulty of meeting face-to-face with the managers at the HQ if the need arise, and so on.

²⁰ Station managers, office managers, the security officer, etc.,

During my fieldwork, a facsimile machine was installed at the accounting office located across from the station office. Obviously it served many functions but there was one in particular that stood out. Apparently one of the primary purposes of installing a fax machine was to enable memos or directives to be relayed from the head office to the station supervisors, replacing the face-to-face interactions between the office managers and station supervisors who in the past would visit each other to discuss company matters. Many employees pointed out that the idea behind this new channel of communication was to discourage contact between the personnel at both ends and to install a sense of distance between them. One bus driver puts it this way: "Since they installed the machine, orders and penalties are delivered to us via fax. They don't even have to see us anymore." Ah Pin once mentioned that he had not been to the head office for many months and thus was not aware of the renovations to accommodate the new spatial arrangement that came with the SMH partnership.

Under such circumstances, those who resorted to brown-nosing were not only labeled as a *Sar Kaar*, but were scorned as *Choo Koo*, in essence, as sell-outs or traitors. In short, considering the SOC's involvement in the past with activities that could be interpreted as anti-establishment, it is not difficult to understand why the recourse taken by the few to brown-nose the present management was seen as being treacherous. However, brown-nosing, I argue, was one of the central ingredients in the structural logic of the hierarchy at the SOC. Brown-nosing existed for many purposes. In "glorifying," praising, or agreeing with their superiors,²¹ they made the latter felt important about their positions

²¹ I used the word superior here to denote just about anyone the individual brown-noser felt was important to his or her own positioning, not to mention his or her existence and identity. As such, supervisors, managers, even colleagues of the same rank who were considered to have certain leverage in the power

and with their power. The existence of brown-nosers also enhanced the divisions instituted by the management. Not only did brownnosers serve to reinforce both alliances and competition between employees and management, they also served to create divisions amongst the employees. At the same time, the very existence of brownnosers provided an avenue or targets for others to express their concerns and frustrations with the existing system.

For instance, Geok Bee was one of those who was often ridiculed for kissing up to the management, sometimes even to her face, by both old and new colleagues - male, female, Chinese or otherwise. The fact that she was still unmarried made her an even more attractive target. But the irony here was that her brown-nosing was not even appreciated by the management. They too were indifferent towards her, and they poked fun at her, calling her a *lao chai por* (in Mandarin: old spinster). Actually brown-nosers existed at many different levels of the organization. Besides Geok Bee, some office clerks at the head office, current and former union representatives, some managers, and last but not least, the security officer liked to brown-nose. I found it distasteful to hear the security officer's constant praising of the General Manager, George Hong, the person responsible for creating the positing and hiring him, while at the same time he ridiculed those he called "the oldies who would not quit." It seemed to suggest that the construction of his mentality was bound up with that of his employer. Since George Hong adopted the master-in-the-house attitude, the security officer, the managers, and even some brown-nosers, acted like little masters.

relations within the hierarchy of the management structure could be considered the brownnoser's respective superiors.

As I mentioned before, I often took rides on the buses to interact with the bus conductors and drivers and to observe their relations with their passengers. I usually stood up front next to the driver, holding onto the metal railings next to the entrance/exit stairway and suffering the noises and the heat coming from the engine as the vehicle roared from Kuching to the outskirts and back. That was how I worked with Keong Wen most of the time - in his hot and noisy bus. I was often aware that some of his passengers sitting in the front were eavesdropping on our loud conversations, since we were practically shouting when we spoke. I could tell from their occasional smiles that they were following the topic of our conversation. Keong complained that after 18 years he earned less than 550 ringgits per month, 535 to be exact (around 140 dollars). On top of that, he was furious because he suspected the company was distributing the bonuses on racial terms – that some Malay employees had already received their bonus during the Hari Raya Adil Fitri, the Malay New Year. Some other Chinese bus drivers had expressed the same concern.

I double-checked with a few Malay employees. The whole thing turned out to be a rumor. A Malay driver raised his voice when I asked him: “Bonus, apa bonus? Bila? Mana!” (In Malay: Bonus, what bonus? When? Where?). Then he shrugged his shoulders at me in disgust before walking away. Ah Pin laughed at me when I asked him the same question. As it turned out, a few Chinese employees were spreading the rumor about their Malay colleagues getting their bonuses. But why were they spreading such a rumor? Writing about the rhetorical use of glossing in his essay, “Glossing Emotions,” Vincent Crapanzano finds that “words and propositions that gloss emotions derive their rhetorical force from their putative referentiality [in this case, the state of ethnic politics in

Malaysia]. They are thought to refer to, denote, describe, and signify a particular state of affairs: the emotion being experienced. It is the existence of this state of affairs, this emotion, their truth value, as it were, that gives such words their rhetorical power” (1992:232). Was it because some of these Chinese employees knew or suspected that their story (or their glossing) carried a great deal of rhetorical force, especially because of often shared emotions about the state of ethnic politics in Malaysia, which persuaded them to spread such rumors? As it is, it is difficult to determine the truth and sincerity of such glossing.

Presumably Keong Wen must have thought that we shared the same emotions about the ethnic politics in Malaysia - since I am of Chinese descent and was born in west Malaysia – when he hinted that the issuing of the bonus to Malay employees might signify the beginning of a new era within the SOC. Speaking metaphorically, once again he said, “This road is getting more and more difficult to travel on.” I asked if he was referring to the recent SMH partnership but he made no effort to respond. Instead he just smiled at me as if I was the one playing dumb. As he put the bus into the proper gear, he launched into another one of his many tirades, shouting: “You know, now that we Chinese are the minority at the SOC, it is an even bigger insult to us that we are not getting our bonuses.” I felt a little uncomfortable since two passengers whom I thought were Malays were sitting in the front seats.²² I leaned over and asked him to lower his voice, meanwhile nodding toward the two passengers. He took a look at the rear view

²² Sometimes it was not easy to differentiate between Malays and indigenes. Some of the Selakos I was familiar with could easily pass as Malays.

mirror before shouting back at me. “Kuan tar” (in Mandarin: who cares),²³ before continuing, “Now that we are the minority, it should cost the company less.”

Keong Wen did in fact write a letter to the General Manager about the bonuses sometime in late November of 1999, and he was not the only one. But as Keong Wen put it, “All our letters we sent to the General Manager were treated like stones that he threw into the sea. Like stones, they sank right into the bottom of the sea, without any trace.” He immediately followed with another comment: “But the situation is just the opposite when it comes to receiving letters from the management.” According to Keong Wen and others, when George Hong issued a letter to an employee, he or she has three days to response. Failing to respond would result in disciplinary action, either in a deduction in their paycheck, termination of employment, or a deduction in one’s bonus. My interlocutors would ask: “What bonus?”

To further justify why he was so angry with the General Manager or the present management, he explained how lately, meaning the past few years, the management had been indifferent to their welfare. “Suppose they would tell us our bonus would be late, no matter how late? At least we would know that the management had heard our grievances. But no, nothing at all! It is as if we don’t exist.” He recited a Chinese saying: “Chinese New Year will be like a lantern whose light is diminishing and once it is extinguished, it will never be lighted again.” Although I have yet to grasp the connection between Chinese New Year and a lantern, I think it was a direct reference to the need of the bonus or money in order to celebrate.

²³ This is one of those expressions that are difficult to translate. It could mean, “why care about them,” or “there is no reason to pay them any notice.”

To conclude

In my discussion of employee relations or actions with each other as well as with their management, I treat this vast miscellany of actions and relations as refractory maneuvers or refractory tropes as they zigzagged through the bureaucratic hierarchy instituted by the new management of the SOC. By refractory I am referring to their tactical actions and their invocations of the management's discourse as seen by the building of alliances as they congregated at the various coffee shops and at *Warong Muhibah*, their attitudes of indifference towards the management, as well as their preference for minimal contact with the station managers or other personnel of the current management.

Their congregation at these various coffee shops and *Warong Muhibah* could be seen as the creation of a separate social space from those of the official culture, meaning, those spaces controlled by the management. These were anti-company spaces that had some resemblances to the carnivalistic marketplace atmosphere in Rabelais's time. In fact, most of the employees I worked with were content with the lack of direct contact with the management. Those who had to go to the head office for gasoline would leave in a hurry, and those who had to stick around for tickets or stationery preferred to hang out at the canteen instead of waiting on the second floor where the management personnel were located.

When asked about their feelings toward the management, I often received the dismissive "*Kuan Tar*" (in Hakka or Mandarin: "I could care less" or "why bother" or "who cares") or "*tar chou tar te, wor chou wor te*" (in Hakka or Mandarin: "they work their ways, we work ours"), as if saying, "out of sight, out of mind." Or they would snub

my queries and change the topic of our conversations. Some would even leave me and just walk away. Part of these attitudes, as I have argued, can be interpreted as their reaction towards the disrespect shown by the current management. They countered by being indifferent.

The production of such attitudes of indifference reminds me of a study of a homeless shelter in Boston by Robert Desjarlais (1997). In his study, Desjarlais finds out that the shelter staff's effort to obscure the visibility of the homeless in the shelters is one of the factors that promote differences between the homeless and the staff. I found this to be true with my own research. The distancing and obscuring discourses of the management were diametrically opposed to the employees, yet within the vocabulary of their language, feelings, and actions the employees invoked them. When I asked about employee/employer relation, a Chinese bus driver had this to say: "The managers at the head office often refer to us as dogs. I often hear them saying "*nar ke koo, che ke koo*" (in Mandarin: "that dog, this dog") when they talk about us. Now tell me, how can we respect them? In many ways, it unites us." I have heard many similar remarks from his colleagues.

But I should point out that the formation of the different cliques was neither formal nor intentional in the sense that it was not a political formation with clear purposes. Rather, they materialized partly as a function of the different anti-company spaces such as the coffee shops and *Warong Muhibah*. It was at these venues where the shaping of consensus feelings, sensations, and sensibilities were solicited amidst their teases, curses, and laughter as they drank their coffee, and tried to stay awake for the rest of their shifts. It was here that I witnessed their laughter over the installation of the fax machine and its

purported intention, their gossip about the Sibü fiasco, and their mocking of the few brown-nosers. But the determining factors behind the formation of these cliques and/or alliances was their reactions towards events that were most immediate to them, such as anger and sympathy over Kee Sey's termination, the awareness of the current state of their union, their frustration over their bonus, or their anger when they found out that the company had tried to cheat them on their Employee Providence Fund.

To be sure, there were some who strategically sought some sort of vertical alliances for more favorable working hours, overtime shifts, nicer buses and the permission for taking leaves. But I suspect that the true sentiments these employees had for the management would not go beyond mere "disinterested liking."²⁴ Still, others viewed such vertical alliances with distaste since they had different interpretations and valuations of those supposed incentives. Also, there were some who brown-nosed the management even though their feelings and sensations were not listened to, acknowledged, or acted upon by the management. The irony here is that the distancing and obscuring discourses of the management did not seem to discriminate. The brown-nosers were similarly treated with an air of indifference by the management, homogenized like the rest of their colleagues as subordinates. Even worse, because they were forcing their presence on the management, these brown-nosed were often belittled and ridiculed behind their backs by the management as well as by their colleagues, and sometimes bluntly in their face, as in the cases of Geok Bee and Robert.

Still, others preferred to be alone, obscuring themselves by staying out of the limelight. These were mainly a few senior employees who had been through a great deal

with the company but were now disappointed with a management that had shown no sympathy, gratitude, and respect for their many years of service. They would continue to work until their services were no longer needed, a highly possible scenario for bus conductors as the newer buses came equipped with automated ticket dispensing machines. Moreover, some preferred to keep their dissatisfaction to themselves, in part because of their respect for the company they had worked for so many years and for the former General Manager, Hong Hee Siaw. But somehow I do not feel that Hong Hee Siaw was in the position to do much to prevent the current dehumanization process instituted by the present management, a management that had somehow forgotten about the long history both employees and the former management had gone through over the past fifty years.

I should state that by paying attention to the bus conductors and drivers' attitude of indifference to the management, I am recognizing their voices or agency without romanticizing them. As Talal Asad (2000:29) has argued, there are "assumptions of self-empowerment, responsibility, and constructivism" among most contemporary anthropologists when they talk about agency that intentionally or not introduce "a triumphalist vision of history." This, according to Asad, "are not only inherently questionable, they also distract our attention away from the need to understand how different traditions articulate the idea of living sanely in a world that is inevitably painful"(1). Because of a lack of political capabilities, the employees tended to rely on tactics to get things done, to act and interpret rationales or reasons not in terms of future possibilities but more so, in the present, the here and now. For the most part, through

²⁴ The concept "disinterested liking" is taken from Kant (*Critique of Judgement*).

their tactical action towards the immediacies of their lives and the pragmatic, social, political, cultural, and psychological elements of those immediacies, they became hardened individuals with an air of indifference towards the new divisions, regulations, and restrictions instituted by the new management that in many ways reminded them of the atmosphere they had been subjected to during the Cold War.

Even as most of the bus conductors and drivers lacked any political leverage, their adoption of an attitude of indifference toward the management (although not affecting the fear of losing their job) generated a certain strength, a mental logic if I may, in dealing with the distancing and obscuring discourses they faced in their daily lives. As I have explained, the notion of being indifferent was practiced by both the employees and the management. Seen in this way, the notion of dependency would at least appear to be reciprocal to some degree. The employees needed to work and the company was having a difficult time hiring new bus drivers. This would seem to contradict some literature on patron-client relationships that describe the dependency linkages suffered by powerless clients at the hands of powerful patrons in their descriptions of vertical linkages and top-down asymmetrical power relations. Crapanzano (1980) has said as much when he disagrees with Rosen's argument (1972) that the competitive environment in the struggle for dominance in social relations in Morocco produces or heightens the notion of dependency of clients towards their patrons. The data from my fieldwork would seem to suggest that the social relations among my interlocutors were more nuanced and complex and that dependency was not as straightforward or black and white as it might seem on the surface.

In essence, we are dealing with a subculture that consisted of cynical, hardened individuals. But there was a qualitative difference between the past and present. In the present, they had become ostensibly inassimilable to any current register outside of their naked self-interest. Some of them seemed to say, although sarcastically and remorsefully, that the only thing that interested them in the present was the pursuit of wealth, however little, as captured by the phrase *sui pe yao chien* (in Mandarin: “who doesn’t want money”). Considering their common history, or the “scandal” in the making of their history, I believe their present self-interested attitude is a departure from what they used to feel in terms of their self-existence and their self-referentiality. Before, they felt like a part of a bigger family, as the employees of a bus company that was not just another business entity but also supported a political life with its unique connection with the strongest opposition party in Sarawak, the SUPP, as well as its anti-Imperial sentiments.

Under the present management and the SMH partnership, I suspect the distance between the management and the employees will only widen. With a modern management philosophy, the employees’ loss of freedom may no longer come through strict rules, surveillance, and punishment, but through the discourse of rationalization - modern management’s rhetorical usage of concepts like effectiveness, efficiency, productivity, and so on. If that were to happen, the distance and separation that exists at the SOC will not only be between employees and management, but even among the employees themselves.

From the stories I collected from the bus conductors and drivers, the ways they would talk about their dispositions gave voice to a social being situated within the hierarchies of power that were most immediate to them - the context of their working life. In short,

their experience of exploitation, competition, alliance, brown-nosing, and so on, did not take on that abstract form we call resistance or social change, but were embedded in the context of their daily working lives. What is even more evident from my observation is that these bus conductors and drivers were not in the position to constantly jockey for power and prestige. They realized the practical role they needed to play just in order to negotiate their daily lives at work.

Because of the low salaries at the SOC and the general loss of respect and loyalty towards the company, I suspect there will be an increased frequency of pilfering on the job. Consequently, this might call for heightened surveillance – resulting in the hiring of more ticket-inspectors, the appointment of new station managers and ticketing personnel that adhered to the new management policies, and stricter directives to station supervisors via the facsimile machine. Such heightened surveillance would further create a degree of mistrust amongst fellow bus conductors and drivers for fear of being reported by another colleagues. By extension, the surveillance of employees might encourage and produce brown-nosers whose very self-identities were referential to the embodiment of a hierarchical structure. Would this not remind them of the experiences they went through at the new villages?

Most, if not all, of these bus conductors and drivers had to contend with a gamut of pressing concerns at their workplace and most of their energies were devoted to getting by on a daily basis. As much as they might want to think of the future, it was “the present” that underscored much of their coevality. Whether one chose to form cliques and/or alliances, to brown-nose, or one chose to remain alone were all just tactical practices that on one level allowed them to buy time but on another level also served to

reinforce and legitimate their subordination. Once again, I come back Michel de Certeau (1984: xii-xiii): "they escape it without leaving it." My interlocutors' tactics of stealing on the job, brown-nosing, developing hardened and indifferent mentalities towards the management, and so on, were by-products of reactions, resistances, refractions, frustrations, anger, or compliances towards an order, in this case, the bureaucratization and division at work.

In other words, these employees depended on a series of tactical actions in which complaints, questions, cynicism, distancing, pilfering, and indifference often worked as necessary ingredients within their rhetorical languages and feelings as they tried to get by with the practicality of their daily lives. On a daily basis, some of their preoccupations included: the type of shift they would be allocated the following day; how many bus runs they would need to make on each shift and how to make up time for their lunches; their interaction with the station masters and time keepers during the end of each bus run; whether to pilfer some money on the job, either by not issuing bus tickets to some passengers or by issuing a lesser bus fare and consequently, to watch out for the random appearance of ticket inspectors; their pay check, and lastly, especially with SOC employees, when would they get their yearly bonuses, something the company had not handed out since 1998.

In Maussian's (1977) notion of *habitus*, my interlocutors' actions would be derived out of a sense of cultivated sensibilities that had less to do with resistance than with the idea of living sanely in an "insane" and unjust world. In short, their actions would be read not so much in terms of rejection or acceptance of discourse but as a set of cultivated sensibilities that were affected by both historical forces as well as contemporary

conditions. Their history had taught them, even if it may seem ironic from our point of view, to view resistance as something unworthy of their time and effort, since they had been dislocated and continued to be subordinated by a management that had shown little respect for them, as well as by a government that heavily favored the *Bumiputera*.

If one were to accept the “scandalous” nature of the writing of History, it would seem that my interlocutors’ sense of history was one of constant promises and the breaking of these promises. Seen in this light, it is reasonable to suggest that the recourse available to them was to be indifferent, to remain obscure, to refract as much as possible from the discourse that subordinated them. As bad as it may sound, I prefer to be true to what I had observed as opposed to creating some form of illusion. By treating their actions as refractions, even refractory tropes, I hope to avoid the illusion of social change that so much scholarship seems to allude to when their interlocutors clearly lack such a luxury. On another level, as naïve as it may seem, this also proves to show that it is extremely rare that a common oppression necessarily leads to the formation of a common front.

Chapter Seven: Facing the Artifact

In the previous chapters, as I have attempted to talk about the history of a certain population of Sarawak and their contemporary conditions, I have also inevitably touched on the fecundity of certain theories concerning, to name only two, the performative aspect of language and historiography. In essence, this thesis is an exercise, in putting it to work, so to speak, of data collected during fieldwork that are not without prejudice or feelings. By extension, I am also engaging my interpretations with certain theories that have seemed to capture the imagination of so many scholars.

By using the narratives of my interlocutors (as well as my own), I sought to ask if there are ways in which people's stories, notwithstanding all the problems, can somehow expand and stretch the definitions and boundaries of history, and bring the events back into the fore of history and public consciousness. It is obvious that I am writing this thesis through a political – and personal – engagement with history, contemporary nationalist discourses, and the popular discussion of the Cold War. But I should also state that even though I was born in Malaysia, I am not offering an insider's perspective of any sort. My position with my interlocutors was constantly shifting and ambivalent during my fieldwork and was largely determined by the interactions I had with my heterogeneous interlocutors.

By emphasizing the inter-subjective process of the researcher with his/her interlocutors, it should be clear how I have read into the data collected and consequently what I have considered as significant and worthwhile to write about, keeping in mind not of course, who

my potential readers are. Tangentially, by scrutinizing intersubjectivities as an element in the production of our ethnographies, it makes the insider/outsider debate in Anthropology seem almost dispensable. In fact, one can argue that the insider/outsider debate has in fact sidestepped the key issue of subjectivity, namely: how is our subjectivity, or any subjectivity, construed? On another level, the insider/outsider debate obscures the real meaning of the word "interlocutor." What might the Anthropologist be referring to when he/she talks about "our interlocutors"? Does the word refer to the dialogue between the anthropologist and his/her "field subjects," or does it refer to the dialogue between the anthropologist as author and his/her academic audiences (Maranhao, 1993), or to the intersubjective dialogues that the anthropologist undertakes with him/herself? These are clearly dangerous indicators of anthropological "subjectivity."

Since much of my research dealt not only with the investigation of memory and history, but also with the memories of violence, there were times when I found myself facing situations in which I simply did not have the stomach or the courage to pursue certain queries and I felt that certain things were better left unasked, unsaid, and left within the realm of silence. In my fieldwork, these queries referred to issues of collaboration or betrayals that some of my interlocutors were involved in, intentionally or otherwise. Besides, there was also the danger that if I were to be too insistent, it might sever an existing relationship, a trust that took much time and effort to garner. I need to address the ethical dimension of my work since what I chose to write may inexorably affect the welfare and safety of my interlocutors, as well as my own, since I am still a citizen of Malaysia. I am dealing with sensitive issues in this research. Let us not forget communism is still illegal in Malaysia.

Furthermore, there is also the question of the roles we can or should play as researchers when excavating history, especially history in repressive regimes in which people are “discouraged” from remembering. In such cases, should we look at forgetting as a loss of openness and integrity, in a sense, a destruction of memory by history? Or, to bring up an important question raised by the Holocaust historian Lawrence Langer (1991; 1995): should we hope to cure or to right a wrong? I agree with Langer that the worst thing to do is to minimize human misfortune by celebrating the success of survivors or treating them as a discourse of resistance that replaces the one of meaningless suffering. He argues instead that we must accord all possible dignity to our subjects and be honest about the nature of the violence and injustice, which means, in the case of Sarawak, that the memories of dislocation and the violent experiences at the new villages, the detentions and imprisonments, the torture and so on are not an illnesses from which they could be cured by our writing.

We know that new experience and revised expectation continually reshape our memories, revealing a past that is constantly being altered to conform to present expectation. In addition to the filtering of memories, I have alluded to the need to consider the role of rumors, exaggeration, and fabrication of past events in the act of recalling or retelling. In reference to my own research, considering the role of rumors and the degree of exaggeration or fabrication in recollecting and retelling events, how would these events played themselves out in the different facets and characteristics of “sites of memory” described by Pierre Nora and his colleagues at the *Annales* school? In other words, if “sites of memory” were external props that act to stimulate recollection, should we not also consider who is doing the recollecting and retelling, and hence, the degree of

exaggeration and fabrication involved in such recollecting and retelling? Clearly these are very complex tasks that might prove to be methodologically daunting, but they are not impossible. All of this essentially poses an epistemological question: Given that we must feelings, memories, and discontinuity in the concept of history, how do we go about that? And what are the roles played by rumors, exaggeration, and fabrication in memories and recall?

Obviously when one uses narratives or stories for reconstructing a certain history, we are also dealing with the issue of forgetting and the motives for our amnesia. Indeed a lot of ideas have been raised and dealt with concerning remembering and forgetting, ranging from those that deal with it on an epistemological level – of the “active forgetfulness” that Nietzsche (1874) proposed in order to avoid the heaviest of burden (the weight of eternal remembering)¹ to Kundera’s lightness of forgetting (1985). But what is relevant in my research is whether there is a “freedom” or an encouragement to remember as well as to forget in a particular place and time? What, my interlocutors would ask, is the use of remembering, of excavating memories they have put behind them? The notion of remembering and forgetting do change under different political, economic, and social circumstances.

In some of the recent studies about Indonesia (see, for example Goodfellow, 1999; Radtke, 1999), it is interesting to note that incidents of remembering the violent past have in fact increased in recent years after the fall of the Suharto regime. Such outpouring of popular memory magnified the contrast between the period before Suharto’s resignation

¹ “Even a happy life is possible without remembrance, as the beast shows; but life in any true sense is absolutely impossible without forgetfulness” (1983 [1874]: 62). Here of course, Nietzsche was advocating for his doctrine of eternal recurrence.

and after, showing the degree of self-censure individual Indonesians had gone through for more than thirty years. These events of remembering have not only challenged historians to think of more inclusive ways of melding the experience of human memory and forgetting, but also to think of them within their particular cultural frame of reference. What is happening in Indonesia also raises some important, if not resonant, questions about remembering (or collective memory), forgetting, and history. Fundamentally, if the degree forced self-censorship during the Suharto era was to signify how history had “conquered” memory, following with Pierre Nora’s argument, it also asks if government directed massacre and ethnically targeted mob attacks can indeed be placed and understood in a historical sequence when history is now nothing less than archetypal myths, a national memory as it were.

Unlike what is happening in Indonesia after 1998, my interlocutors have not been enabled, so to speak, by the passage of time. The current perilous positions of my interlocutors influenced, to a huge degree, their willingness and unwillingness to recall. Forty years have passed since Sarawak became part of Malaysia in 1963 but unlike Indonesia, it has not produced a set of new perspectives and questions that would encourage them to “remember” the past outside of the official “remembering the remember.” In fact, they are still living under a government that most of them objected to during the 1960s. On top of that, for the bus conductors and drivers at SOC, there had been a dramatic change in the philosophy of the company and management they had been loyal to for the past forty years.

Their unwillingness to recall their past, I would argue, also had to do with the degree of specificity in their history. The history of the violent past during the 1960s and 1970s

in Sarawak remained very much limited the boundaries of those that were displaced. I have shown in this thesis that this degree of specificity had a lot to do with the divide and rule practices of the colonial and postcolonial regimes. In addition, there were also the long established divisions that existed between the different sectors of the Chinese population in Sarawak along the contours of specific language groups, classes, occupations, religions, regions, and so on. It was precisely because of this specificity of history that many of my interlocutors seemed to ask about the use of talking when there was no audience to acknowledge and recognize the pain suffered by them during that terrible episode of Sarawak's history. To quote from Veena Das's eloquent article about the suffering of women during the Partition of India and Pakistan, "In the register of the imaginary, the pain of the other not only asks for a home in language but also seeks a home in the body" (1997:88).

When we talk about the specificity of history, memory, and forgetting in a place, we also need to consider our subjects' awareness of the history and events of other places. Here I am referring to the constant comparisons many of my interlocutors would make when talking about their dispositions with situations in Indonesia that were far worst than their own. It would seem to me that it was within this understanding of the situations in other places, the situations of many Indonesian Chinese in particular and other Indonesians in general, that affected the ways they viewed themselves and thus how they acted accordingly in their own environment. As such, it would not be inappropriate to stress that the conditions that allow for any social analysis must also take into account not only the specificity of a particular place but also its references to other sites that are of significance to our subjects' existence.

I bring up all of the above not only because I want to emphasize the complexities, multiple perspectives, and ambiguities of our protagonists' motives and behavior, but also to point towards the unstable relationship between memory and history, a much greater factor than we care to acknowledge. If anything else, all these issues serve to put concepts like history, memory, forgetting and so on under the sign of a question mark. They also point towards the fact that history, or to be more specific, the writing of history, has always been implicated in a political project, consciously or otherwise.

In this thesis I talk about the miscellany of everyday actions of my interlocutors as actions that came about from their understanding of a certain common history, a collective memory, and their reactions to their current positioning. In essence, these were actions that were deployed to allow them, presumably, to live sanely in an insane and unjust world. I have drawn out a list of situations, contexts, and circumstances to help achieve an understanding of their actions as tactics of indifference, refraction, distancing, refusals to engage, or working the official discourses to its minimum disadvantages (Hobsbawn, 1973). In other words, what I was trying to do was to achieve an effect with their narratives (our conversations) and to do things with what was said. By showing that their tactical actions were reactions that came out of a set of cultivated sensibilities (Mauss, 1979) as a result of a history of dislocation and an increasing and accelerating compartmentalization instituted by their current management.

If I portrayed, albeit unintentionally, their actions with a vocabulary of resistance, I want to make it clear that I am not suggesting these were actions that could amount to social change. To use a military term, these were actions that do not stockpile their winnings but were mainly tactical ploys that capitalized on time, as opposed to strategies,

in a de Certeau sense. Some of these could be a refusal to participate through the relationship of silences to speech, or their famous tactical responses such as “I don’t know” (*pu-chee-tao*), or “who cares” (*kuan-tar*) that had the force to forestall a query at a particular moment and end a conversation. Their silences and tactical responses can be seen as providing them with some sort of shield, “mental protection from attacks, by shifting themselves off from their injunctions” (de Certeau, 1997: ix).

I did not come up with a perfectly compact notion of what these actions were. There were many other factors that were more nuanced or hidden from me, things that were more difficult to uncover, let alone analyze. After all, how could it be possible for a researcher attempting to deconstruct the histories of any community to be fully able to grasp the totality of all the contexts, situations, or circumstances from all the dialogical conservations that took place during fieldwork? If my descriptions of their actions seem to lack something or have the feeling of incompleteness, it would then be an infelicity or a mistake on my part, begging for alternative interpretations, a new beginning. Perhaps it is only proper that I end this thesis with a quote by Shoshana Felman (1983):

Perhaps I have only spoken the seduction exercised on me by certain texts, certain theories, certain languages; perhaps I have in turn, in this book, only perpetrated scandal, only articulated my own promise. Perhaps I have spoken here only the unknown of my own pleasure (12).

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