

## Cold War Rivalries Fuel

# PROPAGANDA BATTLE IN

# GANDA SINGAPORE

## in the 1940s and 1950s

**STARTS TODAY!** **REX**  11, 1.45, 4.  
6.30, 9.30

STORY OF  
MALAYA'S  
FIGHT  
AGAINST  
TERRORISTS

Dialogue  
in Malay



**"KAMPONG SENTOSA"**

WITH A CAST OF MALAYS & CHINESE

Filmed  
by ACE  
AMERICAN  
CAMERAMEN  
in MALAYA

Dist. by  
Shaw Bros

In the post-World War II period, Singapore was a battleground for ideological competition between the Soviet Union and China on one side, and the United States and United Kingdom on the other.  
**By Chow Chia Yung**

On 10 May 1953, the *Straits Times* ran a story about a film titled *Kampong Sentosa*,<sup>1</sup> which had premiered in Singapore at the Rex Theatre. In Malay with an all-local cast, the film tells the story of a village in Malaya which was being terrorised by bandits in the surrounding jungle during the Malayan Emergency (1948–60). The story has “love interest and enough suspense to draw Malay-speaking audiences”.<sup>2</sup>

This, however, was no ordinary film. Declassified archival materials reveal that *Kampong Sentosa* was actually secretly funded by the State Department in Washington DC.<sup>3</sup> This was part

**(Facing page)** An advertisement for *Kampong Sentosa*. The film premiered at the Rex Theatre in 1953. Image reproduced from “Page 4 Advertisements Column 2,” *Straits Times*, 12 May 1953, 4. (From NewspaperSG).

of a global Cold War effort led by the United States (US) to roll back against the spread of communism.

In the post-World War II era, the world was riven by great superpower rivalry, with the US and its allies on one side, and the Soviet Union and its allies on the other. Apart from the nuclear standoff, the conflict was also an ideological one with both sides attempting to win the battle for hearts and minds.

### Soviet Cultural Offensive

“Soviet social system has proved to be a more viable and stable than the non-Soviet social system, that the Soviet social system is a better form of organisation of society than any non-Soviet social system.”<sup>4</sup>

— Soviet Union Premier  
Joseph Stalin, 1946

Film is a very powerful medium, and some of the earliest efforts by the

Soviet Union relied on the power of film. In 1947, Director of Malayan Security Service John D. Dalley informed the Colonial Secretary in Singapore “that there is a campaign in Singapore to spread Soviet propaganda through films and periodicals”. In that year, two Soviet documentaries, *May 1st Celebrations* and *Festival of Youth*, were screened at the Jubilee Theatre in Singapore.<sup>5</sup>

The *Morning Tribune* reported that the documentary on the Soviet Union’s 1946 May Day celebrations in Moscow had highlights that included a gigantic military parade which was reviewed by Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin. The other film, *Festival of Youth*, focused on the “vitality and talent of the youths of Soviet Russia who participated in an all-day sports parade...” Both films were in technicolour, noted the newspaper. It added that they “compare very favourably with those from Hollywood in technique and production” and “should serve as an ‘eye-opener’ for those of us who know so little, except from book and news extracts, about a country which is branded as ‘Red’”.<sup>6</sup>

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*May 1st Celebrations* was in Mandarin, while English commentary was provided for *Festival of Youth*. These two films attracted huge Chinese audiences. Jubilee Theatre also issued concession tickets for the viewing of these two Soviet films to schools and associations.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to films, the Soviet Union also relied on print materials. According to an American State Department report, the Soviet Union produced approximately 25 to 30 million books in various languages in the 1950s and most of them contained Marxist-Leninist titles or themes. Some of these works found their way to Singapore. They include titles such as *Study the Philosophy of Marxism and Leninism* and *A History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*.<sup>8</sup> Both books were translated into Chinese.

The Soviet authorities also sent propaganda items to Russians living in Singapore to convince them to return to their home country. In 1956, the *Singapore Standard* noted that Singapore was being flooded by “Russian booklets, weeklies and pamphlets depicting a ‘new way of life’ in the Soviet Union”.<sup>9</sup>

### China’s Revolutionary Literature

“Proletarian literature and art are part of the whole proletarian revolutionary cause...”<sup>10</sup>

– Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong, 1972

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, Chairman Mao Zedong pledged to support global communist revolutionary movements. It would take a while but the effort would eventually take off. In 1959, a sessional paper from the Legislative Assembly of Singapore noted that “certain publishing houses – the majority of which are in mainland China – are consistently exporting to Singapore books, both ancient and modern, literary and scientific, which are tainted with Communist ideology”.<sup>11</sup>

One example cited was a Chinese-English dictionary, *通俗小字典 (Popular Small Dictionary)*, published by the Tung Fang Book Co. in Shanghai. In it, the entry “敬爱”, which means “respect and love”, has this example given: “Everyone respects and loves Chairman Mao.”<sup>12</sup>

The dictionary’s definition for the Chinese Communist Party (“共產黨”) was the “[V]anguard of the Proletarian rebellion. It is the political party of the workers class”. It went on to define communism as the “realisation of a Communist society wherein there is no fleecing of some persons by some other persons. In this kind of society, everybody does the job he can do best, get what he needs, and leads the most reasonable and most happy life”.<sup>13</sup>

Another Chinese-English dictionary highlighted was *新華字典 (Sin Hwa Dictionary)*, which was published by the People’s Education Publishing House in Peking (now Beijing). It defined the characters “擺脫” to mean “get rid of” and gave the example: “Today, one third of the whole human race have already got rid of the oppression of capitalism.” The character “蔑” was translated to mean “look down upon” and the example given was: “We must look down upon American imperialism.” “共產主義”, which means “Communism”, was defined as “the highest stage in the development of human society”.<sup>14</sup>

Dictionaries were not the only focus. The book, *Singing and Acting for Young Children Vol IV*, had songs with lyrics that glorified the success of communism in China such as “The entire China wants liberation” and “Equality and freedom in New China”.<sup>15</sup>

China also produced literature in support of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) during the Malayan Emergency period. The educational book in English, simply titled *Malaya*, sought to get readers to sympathise with the MCP and to support their efforts. The book noted that the party had to go underground in 1948 because “of the persecution of the British imperialists. Following this it initiated and led armed resistance against the British in the struggle for national liberation... the MCP has been carrying on its struggle against enslavement and colonial rule”.<sup>16</sup>

A significant quantity of communist materials published in China made its way into Chinese bookshops in Singapore before the British colonial government began to impose strict controls starting from September 1950. It was not completely successful though, and a spokesman of the Chinese Secretariat in Singapore commented in 1951 that

“now and then a Communist book might slip through our net”.<sup>17</sup>

### British Anti-communist Efforts

“We should adopt a new line in our foreign policy publicity designed to oppose the inroads of Communism by taking the offensive against it... and to give a lead to our friends abroad and help them in the anti-Communist struggle... to provide material for our anti-Communist publicity through our Missions and Information Services abroad. The fullest co-operation of the BBC Overseas Services would be desirable.”<sup>18</sup>

– British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, 1948

In response to the communist propaganda in Singapore, the British initiated a series of counter-measures. Besides banning the imports of communist films and literature, the government established the Anti-Communist

Bureau to “stimulate active democratic sentiment and to endeavour to win over Communists and fellow travellers”.<sup>19</sup> This bureau oversaw and implemented activities to counter the flow of communist propaganda.

In late 1949, some 200 pamphlets were distributed across Singapore to warn people against communism and make them enthusiastic about democracy.<sup>20</sup> An anti-communist pamphlet, *The young man who couldn’t take any more*, was produced in English and Chinese, and thousands were printed with the intention of being distributed in schools by 1950. This pamphlet provided “a plain account of what happens to students in Communist countries, who wish to preserve their freedom to think”.<sup>21</sup> It was also designed to portray communism in a negative light.

Radio broadcasts by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) were another tool used by the colonial government. BBC emerged from World War II with a greatly expanded audience and a reputation for objectivity and

truth-telling. That reputation made its news credible and gave Britain a major propaganda advantage.<sup>22</sup> The BBC’s credibility was crucial in serving Britain’s anti-communist publicity objectives.

The BBC accepted an invitation from the United Kingdom government to establish its radio broadcasting service in Singapore and it ended up taking over the British Far Eastern Broadcasting Service. The BBC began its radio operations in Singapore in 1948 with its office and studio on Caldecott Hill. Singapore residents could tune in to local radio programmes directed by BBC personnel as well as news from London. In addition to English, the BBC radio station in Singapore also aired daily radio programmes in Mandarin and Cantonese.<sup>23</sup> This was part of the BBC’s strategy to reach out to the predominantly Chinese population in Singapore.

The BBC radio station in Singapore was also used by Britain as a regional radio base to broadcast anti-communist information across Asia. As the *Straits Times* noted in 1949: “It was the intention to build a new station which was



Sergeant Danny Bulpett of the Royal Marine Commandos at the British Broadcasting Corporation studio in Singapore, where he was delivering Christmas greetings at the first live radio connection between Singapore and London, 1950. He was in Malaya on anti-riot duty during the Malayan Emergency. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

(c) Another dictionary which follows the normal Communist pattern is the (新華字典) or SIN HWA Dictionary, produced by the People’s Education Publishing House, Peking. The Communist policy of infusing the minds of the young with deliberate distortions is clearly illustrated by the following extracts:—

“擺脫” = get rid of.

Today, one-third of the whole human race have already got rid of the oppression of capitalism.

“蔑” = look down upon.

We must look down upon American imperialism.

“共產主義” = Communism

Is the highest stage in the development of human society. Under this social system, productive materials are the common property of the public. There is no fleecing of one person by another person. There is no racial oppression. Everybody works to the best of his ability, and the material and cultural needs of society are assured of maximum satisfaction.

“解放” = liberate

To overthrow the reactionary ruling classes so that the great masses of the people may shake off the oppression of Imperialism and of the reactionary classes.

Entries from the *Sin Hwa Dictionary*. Image reproduced from “Legislative Assembly, Singapore, Sessional Paper No. Cmd 14 of 1959,” in the National Archives (United Kingdom), Singapore: Control of Cultural Influences from the Chinese Mainland. Secret – Migrated Archives, 9 March 1952, 6. (From National Archives of Singapore, accession no. FCO 141/15152).

to become the Voice of Britain in Asia, radiating programmes to the entire Far East – from Japan to India... Obviously the campaign against Communism in Asia must be fought in Asia... If the radio weapon is to be of real use to Britain, and to Malaya, then the main broadcasts must have their origin in Singapore...<sup>24</sup>

### The United States Information Service

"We must make ourselves known as we really are – not as Communist propaganda pictures us. ... We must make ourselves heard round the world in a great campaign of truth."<sup>25</sup>

– United States President  
Harry Truman, 1950

Just as the British had the BBC, the US relied on the United States Information Service (USIS). This was a state agency that served the political interests of the American government, which included assisting in "the offensive campaign of truth against Communist propaganda".<sup>26</sup> To this end, the USIS launched a series of overseas information programmes under its cultural diplomacy initiative.<sup>27</sup>

The Singapore branch of the USIS Library was officially opened on 2 May 1950 in Raffles Place. Its collection – consisting primarily of American books, newspapers and magazines – exposed the people in Singapore to American values and worldviews.<sup>28</sup>



(Above and below) The United States Information Service Library in Raffles Place, c. 1950s. Courtesy of the U.S. Embassy in Singapore.

Books such as *Animal Farm* by George Orwell and *Rice-Sprout Song* by Eileen Chang made their appearances on the library's bookshelves.<sup>29</sup> These two titles were known for their anti-communist themes. The USIS Library's collection was curated in a way that would sell American ideals to the people here, which was essential in undermining the appeal of communism.

The USIS Library welcomed the public to browse or borrow its reading materials regardless of membership. There was a constant stream of patrons visiting the library, which welcomed its 10,000th member within a few months of its opening.<sup>30</sup>

The USIS also funded the production of anti-communist films in Singapore such as *Kampong Sentosa*. The agency provided covert financial support for the production of this film, which was helmed by Hollywood director B. Reeves Eason.<sup>31</sup>

Besides *Kampong Sentosa*, the USIS also developed its own documentaries for public viewing at the USIS Library. The documentaries portrayed the domestic and international policies of the US in a favourable light. The collection of the library also included anti-communist documentaries such as *In Defense of Peace* and the *Hungarian Story*.

*In Defense of Peace* documented measures by the Soviet Union to obstruct the efforts of the United Nations to maintain world peace in the aftermath of World War II, while *Hungarian Story* showcased Hungarian citizens staging a revolt against the oppressive Hungarian communist regime.<sup>32</sup> The distribution of these USIS films to Singapore was intended to persuade the people to be wary of communism and to cultivate the perception that communism was a threat to peace and stability, both domestically and internationally.

### Immense and Intense

The Cold War period was a major period of geopolitical tension that played out in various spheres: military, economic, political and culture. Given that both the US and the Soviet Union were superpowers, it is fortunate that they never escalated into a nuclear war, though the world certainly came close with events such as the Cuban Missile Crisis.<sup>33</sup>

While hard power – measured by the size of armies and nuclear arsenals



The opening scene of *Kampong Sentosa*. Courtesy of the United States and Records Administration (NARA).

– was important, soft power was just as crucial. The propaganda battle was an integral component of the Cold War as both blocs vied for influence. They leveraged print, radio and films to promote

their own point of view and undermine those of their ideological opponents. This battle played out throughout the world, and Singapore was very much part of the battleground. ♦

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<sup>25</sup> Nicholas J. Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945–1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 55. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. R327.11 CU)

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<sup>27</sup> Pamela Spence Richards, "Cold War Librarianship: Soviet and American Library Activities in Support of National Foreign Policy, 1946–1991," *Libraries & Culture* 36, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 193. (From JSTOR via NLB's eResources website)

<sup>28</sup> "For Those Who Love Reading," *Indian Daily Mail*, 24 April 1950, 4; "Singapore's First Free Library," *Malaya Tribune*, 29 April 1950, 4. (From NewspaperSG)

<sup>29</sup> "Books In Malay Now at USIS Library," *Singapore Free Press*, 11 August 1960, 15. (From NewspaperSG)

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<sup>31</sup> Hee, *Remapping the Sinophone*, 114, 116.

<sup>32</sup> United States Information Service (Singapore). Audio-visual Section, *Catalog of 16mm Motion Picture Films* (Singapore: U.S. Information Service, Audio-Visual Section, [n.d.]), 47. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCL05 016.79143 UNI)

<sup>33</sup> The US and the Soviet Union engaged in a tense, 13-day political and military standoff in October 1962 over the installation of nuclear-armed Soviet missiles on Cuba, just 90 miles (145 km) from American shores. Disaster was averted when the Soviet Union offered to remove the missiles provided that the US promised not to invade Cuba.