

Chinese Politics in Malaya *

By WANG GUNGWU

DURING the past 20 years, the politics of the Chinese in Malaya has been a subject of international interest. The Malayan Communist Party has been predominantly Chinese; it was Chinese politics in Singapore (briefly part of Malaysia) which produced the phenomenon of Lee Kuan Yew; and the Kuala Lumpur riots of May 1969 are widely thought to have been efforts to stem a Chinese challenge to Malay supremacy.¹ The Chinese in West Malaysia, especially when taken together with those in Singapore, have earned the attention of governments, journalists and scholars alike. They form the largest concentration of Chinese outside of Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong; their economic life is among the most sophisticated in Asia; their social and cultural life probably the most complex that Chinese anywhere have ever known; and, above all, their political life has been more open and exposed than that of any other kind of Chinese.² This last, their political life, has been difficult to evaluate for a number of reasons. The main reason is that two contradictory views about them have long prevailed: that the Chinese are non-political and that the Chinese are political in a secretive and inscrutable way. These views are based on a concept of politics in the democratic tradition and are either anachronistic or misleading. Chinese, Malay and colonial political systems have been, in varying degrees, authoritarian, and Chinese political life must be seen in that context except in the period 1957–69. For this later period of demo-

* Before 1957, Malaya often referred to both the Federation of Malaya and the Colony of Singapore. From 1957 to 1963, Malaya normally referred to the Federation and after 1963, Malaya would refer only to the States of Malaya in West Malaysia.

¹ The official published report, *The May 13 Tragedy* (Kuala Lumpur, 1969) has listed factors which emphasize the Chinese (or non-Malay) challenge and does not discuss the deep fears that most Chinese have of Malay supremacy. The book by the Prime Minister, Tengku Abdul Rahman, *May 13: Before & After* (Kuala Lumpur, 1969) places the blame for the riots mainly on the Malayan Communist Party and its sympathizers. Since internal and external propaganda over a period of some 20 years has successfully played on the idea that the communists in the country are Chinese, it has been easy for non-Chinese to suspect that most Chinese are either communists or potential communists. All this has, of course, made Chinese politics in Malaya of even greater international interest; see Lucian W. Pye, *Guerilla Communism in Malaya* (Princeton, 1956; reprinted 1964); J. H. Brimmell, *Communism in Southeast Asia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959); J. M. van der Kroef, *Communism in Malaya and Singapore* (The Hague, 1967), for three different approaches to the subject.

² Chinese political life became more open to external gaze only in the last 50 years, and especially after the Second World War. Much of it was probably still out of sight, but compared with Mainland, Taiwan and Hong Kong Chinese on the one hand, and with other Chinese minorities in South-East Asia on the other, Malayan Chinese politics is incomparably open.

cratic politics, there has also been a reluctance to look specifically at the Chinese because of the widely shared desire to portray Malayan politics as primarily non-communal and any attempt to examine it in communal terms as reprehensible. Finally, it has to be admitted that Malayan Chinese politics has certainly been complicated, mobile and even unstable, and most books on Malaya have been at a loss to explain its many features.³

This article is an attempt to look historically at some of the key features of the political Chinese in Malaya. Its starting-points are that the Chinese are more politically alert than has been realized and have always been aware of the significance of power; that they have adapted their traditional methods of response to problems of power quite considerably during the past century; and that they are still in a transitional stage of evolving more successful methods of dealing with the unprecedented phenomena of South-East Asian nation-states growing up in an era of an increasingly powerful China. The evidence for these assumptions has not been entirely conclusive, although it ranges from documents and events directly to do with Chinese activities to complementary materials concerning what indigenous and colonial governments did when they included the Chinese in their political calculations. On the one hand, we have some data concerning the political skills the Chinese showed in their secret societies, in their dealings with kings, rajas and sultans, in their quick grasp of the essentials when political power passed from Malay rulers to British colonial officials, in their subtle dabbling in China's affairs without losing grip of their status and influence in the local hierarchy, and also in their use of new legal and political institutions to protect themselves against the threat of Malay extremism.⁴ On the other hand, we have data about Chinese political alertness as reflected in official debates and discussions about how to restrain and channelize Chinese energies, how

³ Most books have not looked directly at the politics of the Chinese, but merely at specific activities which are contrasted with those of the Malays, the British and others; see K. J. Ratnam, *Communalism and the Political Process in Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur, 1965); R. Allen, *Malaysia: Prospect and Retrospect* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968); and J. M. Gullick, *Malaysia* (London, 1969), as three recent examples.

I confess to having been myself most reluctant to examine Chinese politics separately because of a deep-seated hope that communal politics will matter less and less. While I do not share the confidence of most Malaysian leaders before the 13 May riots that the less said about communal politics the sooner it will go away, I am still to be convinced of the opposite view that the more politics is asserted as having to be communal, the quicker we will be rid of communalism.

⁴ There is a vast literature about this, but this is not the place for a long bibliographic essay. The variety of the sources can be seen in Victor Purcell, *The Chinese in Malaya* (London, 1948; reprinted 1967), and several relevant studies in the *Journal of the Malayan Branch Royal Asiatic Society* (Singapore), the *Nanyang hsueh-pao* and the *Journal of Southeast Asian History* (Singapore).

to curtail their ambitions for influence and indirect power, how to plan new developments and receive Chinese help and co-operation and how to ensure that they would work loyally in an open society of citizens rather than in a closed economically-independent community.⁵ Most of the official documents are in English or Malay and the series is long and continuous, while most of the community's own materials in Chinese became sizeable only since the 1920s.⁶ Even taken together, they have not been conclusive about the extent, intensity and variety of Malaysian Chinese politics largely because it has been very difficult to see any pattern in their political behaviour, thoughts and passions. But there is certainly enough to justify the assertion that their politics has had an important place in modern Malaysian history for at least the past hundred years.

I have suggested elsewhere that the Chinese had a keen sense of social leadership and that they had traditionally seen political leadership as deriving from deep-rooted ideas of status and the potential for public office.⁷ Distinctions of status and potential for office, of course, were among many other distinctions observed within the community. The more obvious have been the early secret society and commercial rivalries, the language and dialect separateness, the China-born and the local-born, the divisions according to education, the disagreements about political ideologies and, more recently, the differences in political party affiliation. All these divisions have been important at one time or another and have all contributed towards Malayan Chinese ideas about politics. Certainly

⁵ Executive Council minutes and legislative council proceedings, government gazettes and annual reports, all bring out (though not always explicitly) the problems of dealing with the Chinese community. Colonial office records, especially the Confidential C.O. 273 despatches, reveal a great deal from time to time. Although most of the materials are couched in terms of technical problems of administration, they often make quite clear that the problems were ultimately political and involved issues of power, authority and control.

⁶ Before 1941, Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States documents were mainly in English, while more Malay documents are found in states like Kedah and Kelantan and, to a lesser extent, Johore. From 1945 to 1957, most official documents are in English. Since 1957, there has been an increasing use of Malay as the National Language, but a large proportion of the published documents have still been in English.

Chinese materials before the 1920s are slight except for the surviving newspapers. The increase in the number of newspapers, magazines and books in the 1920s and 1930s was remarkable, but a great deal of the printed matter in these publications was derived from sources in China. From 1945 to the early 1960s, there was a flood of local publications in Chinese. This has fallen off considerably (except in Singapore) since 1965. Several efforts have recently been made to compile comprehensive lists of Chinese books and serials, notably by the Nanyang University and in the pages of the *Nanyang hsueh-pao*. The best single collection is in the National Library of Singapore.

⁷ "Traditional Leadership in a new nation: the Chinese in Malaya and Singapore," in G. Wijeyawardene (ed.), *Leadership and Authority* (Singapore, 1968), pp. 208-222; also see discussion in Wan Ming Sing, *The History of the Organizations of the Chinese Community in Selangor, with Particular Reference to Problems of Leadership* (unpublished M.A. thesis, Malaya, 1967).

they have helped to determine different political goals and the different purposes for which political activity was desirable or necessary.

In this historical essay, the various divisions will be taken into account when they can be seen to influence political attitudes, or are clearly the result of differences in such attitudes. It is recognized that the divisions overlap, and Chinese divided in any one way come together in other groupings at other times or other places. Because of this, I have long felt that any study of Chinese politics in Malaya cannot depend exclusively on any of the well-known divisions. Instead, it may be helpful to take a broader view which could be used to analyse a large overseas community which is self-sufficient in many aspects but which has been, and still is being, pressured by circumstances and tradition to identify either with their ancestral home or with their country of adoption. This factor of identification appears to have been politically significant at all times, both within the community and among those ruling officials who have wanted to control the Chinese. It is in this context that I have suggested elsewhere that the Chinese throughout South-East Asia have at all times manifested three distinctive political groupings based on their commitments to politics in China, to the politics of the respective overseas communities, and to local politics whether indigenous, colonial or nationalist.⁸ It will be seen that these groups are not rigid, that they rest on the premise that the Chinese do want to remain culturally distinguishable, and that they are drawn in this century both towards nationalism in China and towards embracing local loyalties by the same forces, that is by the pressures of modernization and the erosion of traditional values. It will also be seen that the divisions are not determined only by the Malayan Chinese themselves, but primarily by events in China and developments in Malaya, and by the several ways the Malayan Chinese have been forced to respond to the changing political environment.

The three political groups are, firstly, Group A which maintains links with the politics of China, either directly or indirectly, and is concerned always to identify with the destiny of China. It is the most obviously political of the three, but, given the restrictions of distance away from China and of wariness on the part of colonial or nationalist governments, is also probably the most ineffective and frustrated. The second is Group B which consists of the hard-headed and realistic majority of the Chinese who are more concerned with the low-posture and indirect politics of trade and community associations. They are also the most modest in their aims and frequently give the impression

⁸ "Political Chinese: an aspect of their contribution to modern Southeast Asian history" (unpublished paper, Seminar on Southeast Asia in the Modern World, Hamburg, 1970).

of being non-political. This arises from the fact that they seldom openly engage in issues of national or international power and rarely express themselves on questions of political ideals and long-term political goals. They are usually content to work through established hierarchies and calculate matters of influence and power *within* such hierarchies, whether they be Chinese, Malay or British. Also, having the safety of numbers, they are more confident of their community's power and are never phrenetic as Group A Chinese are wont to be. On the other hand, they tend to be smug in their belief that money and organization are the roots of all politics and they have both. As for the third group, Group C, it is a small group often uncertain of itself because it is uncertain of its own identity, but generally committed to some sort of Malayan loyalty. It is a mixed group, consisting of several layers of members ranging from Babas, British Straits Chinese and Malayan nationalists to others with motives of different degrees of dubiousness.⁹ For all of them, however, the problems of identification with the country are enormous and the politics that the act of identification demands requires considerable sensitivity and subtlety.

As a corollary, the three groups also divide in similar ways in their attitudes towards the Malay and Anglo-Malay elites and the goals of Malayan or Malaysian nationalism. Group A Chinese tend to ignore or discount political developments among the Malays and other ethnic groups as irrelevant to their political life, while Group B Chinese pay some attention to the politics of the Malays and of others only when it obviously impinges on their interests. Group C Chinese, on the other hand, are more keenly aware of Malay political power, but even among them, probably only a small number have taken pains to try and understand the dynamics of contemporary nationalism among the various classes of Malays. Such attitudes suggest that the Chinese have not really been politically alert. But, as will be shown later, they reflect limitations in the Chinese system of values which led the Chinese to miscalculation and error rather than any carelessness about systems of power.

This brief picture of the three groups is meant to bring out their

⁹ These are historical layers. The Babas emerged in Malacca before the British arrived in the late eighteenth century; the Straits Chinese grew out of the settlements in Penang and Singapore and some followed the British into the Malay States after 1874; while Malayan nationalists are the few, often newly English-educated, who were never "Straits Chinese" but who had high expectations in a post-colonial English-language state.

There were also the few others who were quick to understand the developments in Asia since 1945 and sought to identify with the Malayan Union in 1945-47, with the Federation of Malaya in 1948, with the movement for independence in the early 1950s and with the new nation after 1957. The motives varied considerably and might have been regarded with scepticism by officialdom, but they are difficult to distinguish clearly and do not, I feel, seriously affect Group C identification.

main characteristics. It needs to be emphasized that they are not static groups and that the lines between Groups A and B and Groups B and C are often difficult to draw. There has always been some mobility both ways. There has also been some mobility from Group C to Group A under conditions of stress, and it may even be argued that there could also be mobility from Group A to Group C but this is less likely.¹⁰ Also there are men who have the key attitudes of one group but would like to pretend they belong to another, or even that they belong to no single group. And it should also be added that there are many "marginal men" who are genuinely unable to decide which group they should throw their lot in with; but their uncertainty is usually with the choice between A and B or B and C, and rarely between A and C. Only a very few individualists would either reject all groups or be really uncertain in choosing from among all three groups, but one cannot, of course, rule out the cynical and the totally opportunistic who are prepared to move freely between them all.¹¹ I am aware of all these possibilities, but would suggest that they do not affect the main pattern of political consciousness reflected in the three groups.

It is important to begin by recognizing that the Chinese lived in a rapidly changing situation during the last hundred years of Malayan as well as Chinese and British colonial history. They were primarily transient sojourners before 1900, increasingly settled after that, and almost entirely a settled population after 1945. There are several variables affecting the composition and the direction of growth of the three groups, and it is difficult to determine the actual changes within the Chinese community as a whole from year to year, or even from

¹⁰ This is the well-known process of "re-sinicization" by which Baba or Straits Chinese learn the language and return to the larger Group B community. Occasionally, some have become more Chinese than the Chinese and identify completely with the politics of China. Theoretically it is also possible for Group A Chinese to become so thoroughly disgusted with political developments in China that they switch completely to a local loyalty. But it is more likely that this occurs in two stages: first to Group B, and then (more likely, their sons) to Group C. For an admirable discussion of "re-sinicization" see M. Freedman, *The Chinese in Southeast Asia: a Longer View* (London: China Society, 1965). Also see Wang Gungwu, *A Short History of the Nanyang Chinese* (Singapore, 1959).

¹¹ Cynics, opportunists, individualists, "marginal men," waverers and fence-sitters are to be found in any community. There is probably no such thing as a peculiarly Chinese psyche. But the way social pressures to conform work among the Chinese, the function of shame and the duty to be members of established social groups are well-attested. See a recent discussion of this in C. P. FitzGerald, *The Third China: the Chinese Communities in Southeast Asia* (London: Angus and Robertson, 1965). Modern Chinese school textbooks continue to sustain these pressures down to the present. See an earlier discussion of these texts in V. Purcell *Problems of Chinese Education* (London, 1936). There are several sets of such textbooks (both pre-war and post-war) preserved in the Singapore National Library and in private collections; see Mabel Yung Yuet-hing, *Contributions of the Chinese to Education in the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States (1900-1941)* (unpublished M.A. thesis, Malaya, 1967).

decade to decade. The most satisfactory periodization is to look at the stages in which the political features of one are significantly different from those of the next. Two breaks readily suggest themselves, the transition from indigenous to colonial rule after 1874 and that from colonial to nationalist rule in 1957. But, while these breaks may be satisfactory from the point of view of Malay polity and Malay nationalism, they do not bring out the most important features of Chinese political life in the country. For this study of the three-group pattern, the more suitable breaks which mark the transitions from traditional to colonial to nationalist rule are the turn of the century (sometime between 1895 and 1911) and the Japanese occupation of South-East Asia (1942, or more convenient, 1945).¹² These breaks also take into account major changes in China which could have directly affected Malayan Chinese politics. The last 100 years would then divide roughly into the first 35 years or so, the next 40 years, and the most recent 25.

All three periods were periods of political change. The first marked the beginning of hesitant and reluctant change, painfully slow in China and minimal in Malaya; the second was a period of intense passion in China and gradual adaptation to new legal and economic institutions in British Malaya; while the third saw the establishment of a new orthodoxy in China and a demanding nation-building process in Malaya. By observing the three groups of Malayan Chinese changing from one period to the next in these stages, we can begin to explain some of the perplexing twists and turns in Chinese political behaviour, and this should help give us the perspective to understand the political Chinese in West Malaysia today.

THE EARLY PERIOD: PRIOR TO 1942

First, during the period of transition from weak Malay governments to firm British control and from a largely transient to an increasingly settled Chinese population, the Chinese were also noting the rapid deterioration of Chinese imperial prestige and authority in China. All these factors demanded fresh political calculations from the different Chinese groups in Malaya. Group A, for example, had experienced increasing restrictions on their traditional semi-political secret societies which had helped them keep firm links with China and with Chinese

¹² 1895-1911 is suggested because the period takes in the extension of British power through the 1895 federation and the Anglo-Siamese treaty of 1909 as well as the obvious decline of the Chinese imperial system culminating in a new kind of republican politics after 1911. 1942 marks the end of a phase in Malayan political history while 1945 marks the beginning of a new one. 1945 is also significant for China's politics as a "Great Power," although 1949 might make a clearer watershed with China coming under Communist rule.

elsewhere.¹³ On the other hand, their sympathies for anti-Manchu movements had recovered from the failure of the Taiping rebellion and they were beginning to observe the rise of broader nationalist organizations on the southern margins of China. There was a glimmer of hope in the efforts of Sun Yat-sen and his followers who came one after another to Malaya; the calls for revolution and the overthrow of the Manchus revived the group and gave it a new focus. Some names of the group's leaders have survived but they do not help us generalize about their class, status or occupation. Most of them were not locally prominent men, though some had inherited wealth and others had had an education in China. They were mainly those who felt deeply about China's weakness, who had a higher degree of political idealism and zeal and who were unlikely to have been comfortable with either the Anglo-Malay or the Chinese merchant elites. They were not politically sophisticated, having had no notable experience in the community's politics or the politics of accommodation with colonial rule. To them, only China's politics was a legitimate route towards honour, influence, even fame. To the majority of Chinese, however, this kind of politics was rather remote and abstract and could only be sustained by high and incautious emotionalism, and this was, in the context of a foreign land, both dangerous and irrelevant.¹⁴

Group B certainly felt uninvolved with the precarious activities which might harm their families in China and damage their credit with the local authorities. They kept their links with some secret societies but restricted themselves to a few discreet subscriptions to causes in China when hard-pressed by their enthusiastic compatriots, and continued to concentrate on the politics of their traditional organizations. These organizations had evolved over centuries to cope with strong, stable hierarchies and were soundly based for the multiple roles they had to play. They led to local influence, even some power, prestige with similar organizations in China and elsewhere in South-East Asia, and were unexceptional to the colonial government. They helped business,

¹³ In the nineteenth century, the secret society provided the Chinese with both local power and links with political groups in China: W. Blythe, *The Impact of Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), and W. L. Wynne, *Triad and Tabur* (Singapore, 1941). Although no detailed study has as yet been made of the techniques of control in the Malay States, much can be gleaned from the studies made of Singapore: E. Thio, "The Singapore Chinese Protectorate: events and conditions leading to its establishment, 1823-77," *Nanyang hsueh-pao*, No. 16 (1960), pp. 40-80; Ng Siew-yoong, "The Chinese Protectorate in Singapore, 1877-1900," *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, Vol. II, No. 1 (1961), pp. 76-99; R. N. Jackson, *Pickering: Protector of Chinese* (Kuala Lumpur, 1965).

¹⁴ Yen Ching-hwang, *The Chinese Revolutionary Movement in Malaya, 1900-1911* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Australian National University, 1970); Yong Ching-fatt, "Chinese leadership in Nineteenth Century Singapore," *Hsin-she hsueh-pao* (Singapore, 1967), pp. 1-18; also see Wang Gungwu, "Sun Yat-sen and Singapore," *Nanyang hsueh-pao*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (1959), pp. 55-68.

provided security and recreation, offered their leaders respect and status, and, most of all, they preserved Chinese customs and practices and kept them all Chinese. In addition, the organizations were flexible and were adjusting successfully to the new British laws, the new administrative practices, the new capitalist opportunities and the need for more complex kinds of pressure groups and official representations. They had to be constantly modified and watchfully developed and strengthened also to handle the affairs of a larger Chinese population. Their structures became more differentiated and often new kinds of organizations were spawned and greater specialization demanded. There were also trends towards keen rivalry between different organizations and between Chinese and non-Chinese interests. In short, there was a great deal to do and a great deal which required political sense and responsibility. We may even go so far as to say that, where the government was not Chinese and not likely ever to be Chinese, these organizations provided the community with its highest kind of politics and at one level a very complex and demanding politics at that.¹⁵

As for Group C, it was already showing signs at this early stage of being a difficult one for most Chinese to identify with. The core of the group were the Babas, partially assimilated to the Malay way of life before the British arrived and moving towards an Anglo-Chinese way of life during the last part of the nineteenth century. This was particularly so in the Straits Settlements, but members of the group had followed the British into several parts of the Malay States. Most of them spoke no Chinese at all, mixing Malay with English and increasingly English-orientated by the turn of the century. Their alienation from the larger Chinese community was usually complete if they adopted Christianity as well. But they were beginning to have some political advantages if not political ideals; their leaders in Penang and Malacca were favoured by the colonial administrators as spokesmen for the Chinese; some of them were moving into a new and prosperous class, that of the professions of law and medicine; others, because they were bilingual, were able to move comfortably with the new English-speaking Malay elite. They were probably not concerned to increase their own numbers since their numbers did not promise them added political strength at this stage, but they had every prospect of gaining recruits from some of the Group B Chinese who had recognized the importance

¹⁵ Yao Nan, *Ma-lai-ya hua-ch'iao shih kang-yao* (*A Brief History of the Overseas Chinese in Malaya*) (Chungking, 1943); T. Negishi, *Shina girudo no Kenkyu* (Tokyo, 1940); T. Suyama, "Pang Societies and the Economy of Chinese Immigrants in Southeast Asia," in K. G. Tregonning (ed.), *Papers on Malayan History* (Singapore, 1962), pp. 193-213; M. Freedman, "Immigrants and Associations: Chinese in 19th Century Singapore," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (The Hague), No. 3 (1960), pp. 25-48.

of a colonial education and prepared some of their children for potential membership of a group with distinct though small privileges. The politics of Group C, in short, was principally the politics of dependence.¹⁶

The second period was superficially one of colonial rule in West Malaysia. But, in fact, there were varying degrees of Anglo-Malay partnership and varying degrees of British tutelage and bureaucratic dominance.¹⁷ Depending on which part of the country they lived in, the Chinese found that they had in fact to deal with different political situations. It was one thing to deal with British officials on their own, whether they were paternalistic or not; it was different when British officials were working with Malay assistants on behalf of Malay sovereignty; and it was different again when neither British nor Malay officials were explicit about whose sovereignty they were working for. How much the Chinese were aware of the subtle differences is difficult to determine, but there is evidence that they varied their behaviour according to their location and their numbers during most of this second period ending with the outbreak of the Second World War.¹⁸ We must not, however, exaggerate the variations. Events in China during the 40 years were swift-moving, and with improved communications, these events often appeared immediate and excitingly relevant. Again and again, China's politics became wide open and rival groups fought fiercely and brought some of their issues before the overseas Chinese. There was tremendous pressure to make all Chinese display their Chineseness and these pressures counteracted against the earlier trend towards the differentiation of the three groups described earlier and against any other local political variants arising from the distribution of power among the British, the Malays and the non-Malays.¹⁹

Group A Chinese, for example, became increasingly confident of

¹⁶ Song Ong-siang, *One Hundred Years of History of Chinese in Singapore* (London, 1923; reprinted Singapore, 1967) is rich with data about certain Chinese attitudes which were also found among the Chinese in Penang and Malacca. The data about Malay States Chinese during this period have yet to be closely examined. Also see Diana Ooi, *The English-speaking Chinese of Penang* (unpublished M.A. thesis, Malaya, 1966).

¹⁷ The different emphasis in the Straits Settlements, the Federated Malay States and the other five (unfederated) Malay States.

¹⁸ C. S. Wong, *A Gallery of Chinese Kapitans* (Singapore, 1963) gives some idea of local variations in the nineteenth century.

¹⁹ Png Poh-seng, "The Kuomintang in Malaya, 1912-1941," *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, Vol. II, No. 1 (1961), pp. 1-23. A great deal of the exhortation to be Chinese appeared in the numerous Chinese newspapers. The best known are *Lai pao* (1880-1932), *Nanyang siang pao* (1923-42; 1945-) and *Sin chew jii-pao* (1929-42; 1945-). These directly affected the Chinese-educated, while clubs and associations and business needs extended the pressure to those who did not read Chinese. Other Chinese writings are to be found mentioned in Lee Ah-chai, *Policies and Politics in Chinese Schools in the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States, 1786-1941* (unpublished M.A. thesis, Singapore, 1957).

their capacity to follow politics in China and dominate local Chinese politics. Those who had earlier committed themselves to the republican cause were jubilant about the 1911 revolution. Soon after, others began to identify with China's new government as openly as they could. Their support had attracted attention in China, their keenness to modernize according to China's new needs was infectious and they soon mobilized to try and convert most Chinese to their point of view wherever they might be. Almost from the start, they dominated the two closely related fields of publishing and education, and the strength of the group increased rapidly as literate newcomers were imported to edit the newspapers and magazines and to provide teachers for the increasing numbers of Chinese schools. They gave themselves the two-fold task of heightening Chinese consciousness among the adult Chinese and discouraging them from accepting grudging Anglo-Malay tolerance and goodwill, and of preparing the young school-going Chinese to be prouder, more self-respecting and ready to return to China. Ultimately, they wanted all Chinese to be completely and passionately dedicated to the welfare of China and China alone. But, despite their enthusiasm, despite their near-monopoly of education and the press, there were clearly defined limits to what they could do. By the 1920s, their leaders were mainly modern Chinese literati supported by some of the schoolboys and poorer artisans and urban labourers. They had no money of their own and received no money from China; on the contrary, they were expected to drum out money from the local Chinese to help the struggling factions in China. They had no time for the British colonial regime since some of their most stirring slogans were aimed at British imperialism in China itself. They were impatient with the subtleties of the mixed Anglo-Malay polity and were furious at the restrictions that polity imposed on their freedom to preach and vilify as they pleased. When some of them were arrested and deported, they were helpless, when some of the organs (especially political party branches, magazines and adult education schools) were closed down, they could do little without compromising with the hateful imperialists. Thus, in practice, they had to turn to and depend on the Group B Chinese majority to support them in their mission, and this, with the tightening up of local laws and immigration policies, they had increasingly to do.²⁰

Despite the claims of Group A Chinese to ideological leadership of

²⁰ There is considerable literature illustrating Group A Chinese political attitudes; see Hsü Yun-ts'iao, "Nanyang wen-hsien hsü-lu ch'ang-pien," *Nanyang yen-chiu*, Vol. 1 (1959), pp. 1-170. Magazine articles were particularly extensive and many are to be found listed in *Index to Chinese Periodical Literature on Southeast Asia, 1905-1966* (Nanyang University Institute of South-East Asia, Singapore, 1968). These include writings published in China and Hong Kong by literate Chinese visitors to Malaya and Singapore as well as Group A Chinese contributions.

the community, the Group B Chinese were still able to restrain their excesses and call some of the tunes. The Group B majority was not about to risk their achievements, their working arrangements with the colonial government and also their control over well-established traditional organizations in order to follow the uncertain steps towards China's prosperity, or to accept any of the disputed ideals of warring parties thousands of miles away. Group B politics have always been unobtrusive and modestly defined to safe and achievable goals. They do not doubt their own Chinese qualities and do not hanker for power beyond what they could understand and beyond what they would need to survive as a viable Chinese community. During this second period, there is ample evidence that they were moved greatly by events in China, but not to the extent of throwing all caution to the winds. They supported newspapers and engaged radical editors, paid for new schools and accepted radical teachers; most of them did not hesitate to help these editors and teachers when they ran foul of the colonial authorities, nor did they hesitate to send their own children to study in their politically slanted schools. But they always had some reservations. This might have been because they were brought up to be sceptical about China's central governments; it might have been because they had been long enough overseas to know that China's strength and prosperity had not always helped them, and Chinese communities abroad have always, in the last resort, had to fend for themselves to the best of their ability with whoever was locally powerful. To them, local politics, the politics of those whom you could reach and reason with, had always been the more relevant and calculable. They saw nothing to be ashamed of in this: to master local politics in a low-posture sort of way, to keep the politics *within* the community constructive and flexible, to adapt existing organizations to their changing needs and bring new organizations under their guidance, all required great alertness, much hard negotiation and, not least, the highest loyalty to being Chinese. Thus Group B Chinese leaders kept their fingers in many pies and certainly did not shirk the hot political pies when it was necessary. The group was large enough to permit an inclusiveness and eclecticism which Group A would not tolerate nor could afford. On either margin, Group B Chinese supported political parties like the Kuomintang or the united front organizations favoured by the communists or joined respectable western-type clubs and philanthropic societies. As long as they were assured of their community identity, there was room for a variety of political activities for the group and enough justification for us to see them as mainly of the same communal persuasion.²¹

²¹ The Chinese newspapers for the period illustrate Group B attitudes most clearly, although official British documents show a keen awareness of (if not sympathy for)

It was, of course, far more difficult to remain Group C Chinese during this second period before the Second World War. The British officials gave little away and the pressures to be more Chinese, towards "re-sinicification," were increasing throughout the 1920s and 1930s. On the surface, it would appear that Group C Chinese would find it easy in the Straits Settlements (S.S.) where the British had no constitutional obligations towards the Malays. But it was also in the Straits Settlements that the Chinese community was largest and Group A and Group B Chinese the most active in almost every field. There was still a great deal Group C leaders could do whether in the colonial legislative council or in the clubs and societies where they alone among the Chinese could move freely and easily with the officials, the professionals and the trading executives. It was simply more complicated, as, since their Chinese compatriots were numerous, they found themselves influential because the British preferred to work through them, and yet they were not really in sympathy with the kind of politics most Chinese understood. Group C Chinese were not prominent in the British-ruled Malay States (especially the four Federated Malay States (F.M.S.)); it would seem that having chosen to identify with the power of the British, they had lost some of their earlier ability to communicate with the Malay political elite. Only in states which were predominantly Malay-ruled, like Kedah, Kelantan and Trengganu, do we still see Malay-speaking Chinese, mainly Group C in attitude, achieving positions of some influence. They were, however, by this time distinct from the Group C Chinese who dealt mainly with the British and had quite a different picture of their own role in areas of relatively small Chinese populations. It was not until the third period after 1945 that the two branches of Group C began to find something in common again.²²

We know something of what the British and Malays thought of the Chinese at this time. Official records contain reports and comments on Chinese economic and cultural activities, and are specially careful about their political movements after 1920. Newspapers in English and Malay

some features of Chinese community politics from time to time. For example, see *Monthly Review of Chinese Affairs* after 1928 (Secretariat for Chinese Affairs, Singapore).

²² V. Purcell, *The Chinese in Malaya*, and *The Chinese in Modern Malaya* (2nd ed., Singapore, 1960), outline some of the activities of group C Chinese in the Straits Settlements; see also Soh Eng Lim, "Tan Cheng Lock: His Leadership of the Malayan Chinese," *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, Vol. 1 (1960). In the F.M.S., prominent Chinese, like Loke Yew, Foo Chee-choon, Yau Tet-shing, Leong Sing-nam and so on, were typical and they were clearly Group B Chinese leaders.

As for the Northern Malay States, I found from interviews with prominent Chinese in 1958 and 1959 that pre-war leadership did come from Group C Chinese who had been in the States for two or more generations and spoke fluent Malay, little Chinese and even less English. It was emphasized strongly to me that conditions there were different from those existing in the F.M.S. and the S.S. For the background of this difference, see C. S. Wong, *A Gallery of Chinese Kapitan*.

were often brutally frank about the excesses of noisy nationalists and admonished the Chinese to keep China's politics out of Malaya. On the other hand, there were sympathetic voices raised on behalf of the loyal and accommodating Chinese and the hard-working and peaceful majority who wanted no more than to be left alone and get on with their business. How non-Chinese generalized about the Chinese depended very much on the kind of Chinese they personally knew, and they either defended or criticized the community accordingly. Both critics and defenders occasionally perceived that the community was a very complex one at that stage and admitted either that most Chinese were good and law-abiding and only a few troublesome, or that there were some good and politically sound Chinese but that most of them were untrustworthy.²³

The Chinese image of themselves was slightly more subtle, but the judgements of one group of another were often fiercer than any the non-Chinese might have had about them. Group A Chinese were the most out-spoken and their newspaper columns roundly condemned Group C Chinese for not speaking Chinese and for their collaboration with the imperialists. They were kinder towards Group B Chinese only because the group was numerous and many of them wealthy; for these cautious Chinese, the tone was persuasive and the admonitions to be more patriotic were usually gentle and appealed to Chinese sentimentality. Occasionally, when Group B Chinese were seen as over-cautious, there would be shrill attacks on their timidity and opportunism and warnings against their joining Group C types and losing their Chinese identity. Group C Chinese were generally defensive, some in terms of gratitude for the law and order provided by colonial rule, others in terms of their superior mastery of English and, consequently, their modern and progressive outlook, and a few were apologetic about not knowing Chinese and made ostentatious but feeble efforts to learn. But occasionally, they counter-attacked Group A Chinese for their emotionalism and actions which endangered the community as a whole in the eyes of the British and Malay authorities, and needled Group B Chinese for their fence-sitting and lack of political principles and their tendency to seek the best of all worlds. The group attacked on both sides, Group B Chinese, because of their view of politics as a double-edged weapon to be used with great care, rarely retaliated against the

²³ Chinese protectorate files (fragmentary) in the National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, are typical; so are those in the *Monthly Review of Chinese Affairs* (Singapore). The English-language newspapers, *The Malay Mail* and *The Straits Times*, are the best examples of British opinion; see the extensive citations in Lee Ah-chai, *Policies and Politics* (unpublished M.A. thesis). As for examples of Malay newspaper comments, see W. R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

two other groups. It is difficult to determine what they really thought, but there is evidence that such Chinese did admire Group A for their convictions and were merely critical of their methods, and that they did feel sorry for Group C for their loss of identity but also sometimes envied them their official and professional successes.²⁴

I have so far emphasized differences in Chinese political awareness and commitment. There were, as mentioned earlier, other kinds of differences which kept the Chinese loosely apart and contributed towards their ideas about politics, such as their different language groups (Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew, Hakka, Hailam, English and English-Malay), their occupational background (merchants, artisans, clerks, labourers, and "squatter"-farmers), their education (Chinese, English, illiterate) and something resembling the beginnings of middle-class snobbery and lower-class aspirations and resentments. It is possible to suggest that at all times, Groups A and C divide according to education received, that Group A consist partly of alienated intelligentsia and Group C of a western-type middle class, and I have suggested elsewhere that traditional ideas about status and leadership still play a part in the political rivalries of both groups seeking wider support from the relatively non-committal Group B majority.²⁵ But by the end of the second period, with the rise of Chinese nationalism, older language, clan and guild divisions were all becoming less relevant to the struggles for political recognition which both Groups A and C sought from the Chinese and the Malayan Governments respectively. By the third period, political activities became more clearly defined as conditions changed to allow for the growth of party politics on lines similar to those found in either Britain or in China.

FROM JAPANESE OCCUPATION TO INDEPENDENCE

It has often been remarked that the Japanese occupation of South-East Asia (1942-45) changed the course of South-East Asian history. This was less obviously true of Malaya than of several other countries, but

²⁴ Group A opinions are gleaned from the pages of newspapers like the *Nanyang siang pao*; the collection of essays, *Che-pan-ke shih-chi (This Half Century)* (Singapore, 1940); and occasional articles in magazines published in Nanking in the 1930s like the *Hua-ch'iao pan-yueh k'an (Overseas Chinese Bi-monthly)* and the *Ch'iao-wu yueh-pao (Overseas Chinese Affairs Monthly)*, and in the Shanghai Chi-nan University Journal, *Nanyang yen-chiu* (1928-43). A representative view is that of Ch'en Chia-keng (Tan Kah Kee), *Nan-ch'iao hui-i lu* (2 vols., Foochow, 1950). Group B opinions are reflected in the editorial policies of newspapers like the *Nanyang siang pao*, but it is very difficult to be sure how widely such views were shared. Group C opinions are mainly found in Legislative Council Proceedings and occasional speeches reported in *The Malay Mail* and *The Straits Times*.

²⁵ Wang Gungwu, "Traditional Leadership," in Wijeyawardene (ed.), *Leadership and Authority*.

the effect on the Chinese is worth noting for its influence on the political experience of all three groups. Briefly, Group A Chinese were sharpened in their commitment to Chinese patriotism, Group B somewhat cowed by the ferocity of Japanese retaliation against Chinese hostility, and Group C wholly bewildered by the new set of imperialists and the uncertainties of such a large-scale war. But, behind this simple picture, there were other changes less easy to describe and evaluate. For one thing, the occupation period was short and little was recorded. For another, the experience of having China and Britain on the same side against a common enemy blurred some of the distinctions between Groups A and C, however temporarily. What is interesting is that the Japanese did perceive the existence of the three groups and recognized that it would be worth their while to win over a Group C-type of pro-Japanese Chinese to help them control the sullen majority, and even fight against the members of Group A who had taken up arms in resistance. The Japanese did not have enough time to succeed and Chinese collaborators were few. But the fact that the protagonists were Japanese who were enemies of China in China itself and enemies of Britain in its colonial territory led to a new three-group distribution. Some Group A and Group C Chinese who had little in common before 1941 found themselves together in the Anti-Japanese Army in the jungle and their influence on each other had post-war repercussions. For the duration of the occupation and where the Japanese were concerned, they now formed two branches of a wider "Group A." Most other Group A and Group C Chinese were forced to be inactive and, to all intents and purposes, behaved like the great majority of Group B Chinese. They did not appear to produce many collaborators, although there were a few Group A Chinese who aligned themselves with the politics of Wang Ching-wei and the puppet government in Nanking and were successfully wooed by the Japanese. For the rest, there were a few Group B Chinese whose desire to survive and prosper brought out their political ambivalence and some were to find themselves vilified as collaborators, a sort of pro-Japanese "Group C." The important feature of the political adjustments enforced by the three years and eight months of Japanese occupation is that major political changes reshuffled Group A and Group C Chinese to some extent, but the occupation's initial impact would probably have been to encourage Group B behaviour on the part of almost all Chinese.²⁶

²⁶ Hai-shang-ou, *Ma-lai-ya jen-min k'ang-Jih chün* (*The Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army*) (Singapore, 1945); Hu Yü-chih *et al.* (eds.), *Ta-chan yü Nan-ch'iao* (Singapore, 1947). Most of the available material comes from Chinese literary works after 1945 and in the 1950s. These are briefly discussed in my introduction to *Malayan Chinese literature* in T. Wignesan (ed.), *Bunga Emas: Contemporary Malaysian Literature* (London, 1964). A useful check-list of post-war Chinese writings in Malaya is

Thus the Chinese in Malaya entered the third period after 1945 hardened and chastened by their own experiences, but also jubilant at the Allied victory and by the emergence of China as one of the Great Powers. Group C looked forward to their new bargaining position on the return of the British, Group B felt confirmed in the cohesion of the community and looked forward to benefits which a strong China might, perhaps only indirectly, bring to them, and Group A resumed their enthusiastic involvement in China's politics, some returning to China in the hope of joining its reconstruction on the ground floor.

The world, however, had changed far more than any one of them expected. Political events moved far faster than any that they had experienced before the war, and moved at many more levels. The British returned with a ready-made Malayan Union proposal. This was a package deal that threatened to deprive the Malays of their sovereignty without giving much away to the non-Malays. It looked like a consolidation of colonial rule and was greeted with opposition by the Malay nationalist groups and with a mixture of suspicion and resignation by the Chinese. Where the Chinese groups were concerned, a new element had entered their calculations—the power and organizational skill of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) with their mainly Group A Chinese leadership. The community was thrown into a more open political situation, more competitive and more divisive than they were prepared for, and in those first three years after 1945, most of them were clearly perplexed as to where their best interests lay.²⁷

It is in this context that we should examine the reconstitution of the three groups from the Malayan Union debacle and the challenge of the MCP to the preparations for Malayan independence in 1957. First, Group A and its immediate division into those who favoured Kuomintang (KMT) nationalists or some of the ineffective anti-KMT liberal democrats and those who threw in their lot with the Communists and actively supported what they saw as their Malayan counterpart, the MCP. The division was reflected in the newspapers and magazines, in the schools

that by Huang I-jung in *Nanyang hsueh-pao*, Vol. 14, Nos. 1 and 2 (1958). Also valuable are short historical notes on Malayan Chinese writings by Fang Hsiu, *Ma-hua hsin wen-hsueh shih-kaio* (*Draft History of Malayan Chinese Literature*) Vol. 1 (Singapore, 1962), and Miao Hsiu, *Ma-hua wen-hsueh shih-hua* (Singapore, 1968). Also, there is a careful study by Yu Wang-lun, *Ma-hua wen-hsueh ti hsing-ch'eng yü fa-chan* (*The Rise and Development of Malayan Overseas Chinese Literature*) (unpublished M.A. thesis, Malaya, 1967). In English, Chin Kee-onn's *Malaya Upside Down* (Singapore, 1946) and F. Spencer Chapman's *The Jungle is Neutral* (London, 1949) are both useful.

²⁷ There are several journalistic accounts of the 1946–48 period, and some discussion in K. J. Ratnam, *Communalism and the Political Process in Malaya*. For two recent studies which touch on the Chinese response to the Malayan Union, see Michael R. Stenson, *Repression and Revolt: the Origins of the 1948 Communist Insurrection in Malaya and Singapore* (Athens, Ohio, 1969); and J. de V. Allen, *The Malayan Union* (New Haven, 1967).

and cultural organizations, and even in the trade unions, and was hardly disguisable in the respective covert Party branches. Significantly, as has always characterized Group A politics, the divisions had no real local context and the issues were mainly those related to the reunification of China. Thus, some of the keenest and most active political Chinese were locked in arguments and calculations which had no direct bearing on what was rapidly happening in Malaya. The MCP leaders, which included Group C Chinese recruited into the movement during the war, did make an effort to define their political goals in local and Malayan national terms, but within the community as a whole this was not seen as its central aim and most Chinese either supported or rejected the MCP because of its relationship with the larger aims of Chinese communism. Thus the MCP threat to the Anglo-Malay re-formulation of the destiny of Malaya posed a particularly agonizing problem for those other Chinese, whether Groups A, B or C, who had begun to perceive that local politics was much more relevant to them than politics in China and elsewhere. Within the months between early 1948 and early 1949, a new set of political lines was drawn. The Federation of Malaya restored sovereignty to the Malay rulers and the Communist victories in China were about to seal the fate of politics in China. The whole Chinese community in Malaya was shaken by the MCP decision to take up arms against colonial rule, and bring what many considered to be the politics of China into the local arena.²⁸

As for the Group B Chinese, still clearly the majority, they were understandably bewildered. The impression at the time was that they were complacent and indifferent. This was not true. They were aware of the increasing complexities around them though they underestimated the importance of the new political forms and style. What worked against them was their reluctance to give up the security they enjoyed in their traditional kinship, district and guild organizations to pin their hopes on trade unions and political parties exclusively. They remained optimistic that the community was strong and flexible enough to absorb the radical change of circumstances in the long run. It was their preference for joint communal activity which led to the formation of the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA). Responding to the Malay communal politics of the United Malay National Organization (UMNO)

²⁸ Li Jui-hua, *Ma-lai-ya hua-ch'iao (Overseas Chinese in Malaya)* (Taipei, 1954). A large number of short-lived Chinese newspapers and magazines appeared in the years 1946-49 and engaged in fierce polemics. Even the cautious and respectable *Nanyang siang pao* and *Sin chew jit-pao* could not avoid reporting some of the bitter debates. But it has to be assumed that these represent only the tip of the iceberg. A great deal more discussion in ephemeral pamphlets and circulars did take place and some of the most radical which I have seen have found their way into police files not accessible to the public.

and without involvements in alien ideologies, the MCA was to act as the grand super-organization loosely co-ordinating all traditional associations to look after the community's political interests. Not all Group B Chinese supported the MCA, the margins included a few whose sympathies were with the KMT remnants in Malaya or whose location forced them to commit themselves to help the MCP. But, clearly, the bulk of Group B Chinese found that the MCA was just the kind of organization they could understand and operate. At the same time, they also recognized the need to have as the leaders of the MCA prominent members of Group C Chinese who were acceptable to the British and the Malays alike. Thus it was essential for the initial success of the MCA that a highly respected figure like Dato Sir Cheng-lock Tan be supported fully as its leader.²⁹

Thus, as in earlier periods, Group C Chinese faced a situation of great ambiguity. Most of them certainly welcomed the return of the British, but they were also alerted about the intensity of Malay nationalism and the eventual withdrawal of imperialist powers from South-East Asia. Some were sympathetic towards Malay elite aspirations which included an independent Malaya in which Group C Chinese would have a strong place, and a few who had worked with the MCP in anti-Japanese resistance were persuaded that the MCP leaders were more Malayan-orientated than China-orientated and could be transformed into a radical Malayan national movement with Group C Chinese help. But the majority consisted of those who pressed the British directly to allow them to share part of the inheritance when the British finally went. The ablest of their leaders, Dato Sir Cheng-lock Tan, was astute enough to show sympathy for Malay nationalism and to try to win MCP sympathizers and other left-wing and radical Chinese over to a greater Malayan nationalism. He had some early success, but when the MCP and its front organizations were suppressed and Malay nationalism consolidated behind the UMNO with its large membership, the problem of numbers became acute. It was also obvious that Anglo-Malay discussion about citizenship was linked to the question of a universal franchise and an elected legislature. Under the new circumstances, Group C Chinese as a small minority could never hope to command on its own the bargaining power for the politics of parliamentary democracy. It was at this point that Dato Sir Cheng-lock Tan and other Group C leaders, together with a number of key Group B leaders, took the unprecedented step of coming together to form the MCA. It was a

²⁹ Tan Cheng-lock, *Malayan Problems* (Singapore, 1947); Soh Eng Lim, "Tan Cheng Lock"; also *Chin-jih ch'iao-ch'ing* (*Contemporary Overseas Chinese Affairs*), Vols. 1-2 (Taipei, 1954 and 1956), which gives what may be described as a Group A Chinese view of MCA's successes and failures.

brilliant marriage of Group B numbers to Group C connexions, a Group B type organization to Group C leadership. In one stroke, Group C leaders were able to claim a strong political base and the bulk of Group B Chinese was launched into full participation in Malayan politics. The later success of the MCA in harness with the numerically even stronger UMNO was in no small measure due to the alliance of two of the three Chinese groups in open defiance of the claims of Group A Chinese and the MCP.³⁰

It is, of course, possible to trace the conflicts of class interests which led some of the Chinese to support the MCA or the MCP, but it would be misleading to simplify the issues and organizations involved in both the parties to matters of political ideology.³¹ By the 1950s, Group C itself was changing in composition; intensified education in English, which Group B Chinese had begun to accept more and more easily, was adding to the numbers moving towards Group C aspirations and calculations; even Chinese education itself, with its modified and Malayanized curriculum under firmer colonial control, was preparing a new kind of Group C Chinese from among the traditional Group B type. All this was in response to the demands of an independent Malaya. British tutelage in the last decade before 1957 was directed, among other things, to increasing the number of Malayan Chinese who would have a stake in the country and who could be expected to be loyal to it—such Chinese would, in fact, be potential members of Group C. And with Group C increasing, divisions on ideological grounds and grounds of personal ambitions began to appear. While few Group C Chinese were prepared to sympathize openly with the MCP, some had accepted the MCP as an essentially Malayan political party with minimal outside support. Others condemned the resort to armed rebellion and strongly supported the MCA and the political force of Group B Chinese behind this party. Still others rejected both the MCP and the MCA because one was mainly Chinese and the other wholly communal, and favoured non-communal national politics; and these further divided between those who wanted the Anglo-Malay-Chinese partnership to remain as long as possible and those who supported some kind of social democracy.³²

³⁰ Two recent studies which have tried to reconstruct the origins of the UMNO-MCA Alliance are M. Roff, "The Malayan Chinese Association, 1948-1965," *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, Vol. VI, No. 21 (1965), pp. 40-53 and R. K. Vasil, *Politics in a Plural Society* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Malaya, 1969).

³¹ Lucian W. Pye, *Guerilla Communism in Malaya*; J. J. Puthuchery, *Ownership and Control in the Malayan Economy* (Singapore, 1960), provide some background to the class conflicts.

³² Two journals occasionally published articles purporting to represent the Malayan Chinese point of view during the 1950s. They are the *Shih-chieh chih-shih* (*World Knowledge*) in Peking and the *Tzu-yu Chung-kuo* (*Free China*) in Taipei, and it is interesting to see how both had come round to trying to see the problems of Malayan politics in terms of Chinese who had made their homes there. They were not

Thus, within a decade, Group C Chinese had been transformed into the vanguard of Malayan Chinese politics, and the more self-conscious they became, the more they sought to define political goals in ways which gave them clear political roles to play. Minor political parties were formed and feeble attempts were made to combat the trend towards the communalization of politics. But the UMNO-MCA Alliance was so successful in the negotiations for independence that there was really no room for other parties. The new nation came into being in August 1957 with the majority of Chinese wholly behind the MCA.

AFTER INDEPENDENCE

Since independence, a large number of developments have been relevant to the changes in Malayan Chinese politics. Only the most important which affected the three-group pattern traced above need be considered here. Within Malaya, the frustrations of young non-elite Malay nationalists put an enormous amount of pressure on the Alliance Government, especially during the elections of 1959, 1964 and 1969.³³ The doubts and anxieties of young Group C Chinese who had great expectations weakened the MCA within the Alliance. Also, the expansion of English and national education seemingly at the expense of Chinese education troubled the Group B majority within the MCA itself and produced serious repercussions.³⁴ National politics leading to the

successful in so far as both journals tended to reflect their respective positions in the Cold War and emphasized either that most Chinese were progressive and anti-imperialist or that most Chinese were respectable and anti-communist.

Two reports which deeply affected the education of Malayan Chinese were the well-known Fenn-Wu Report (*Report on Chinese Schools and the Education of Chinese Malaysians*, Kuala Lumpur, 1951) and the decisive Razak Report (*Report of the Educations Committee*, Kuala Lumpur, 1956).

R. K. Vasil is particularly illuminating on those Chinese who supported neither the MCA nor the MCP; see *Politics in a Plural Society*, esp. Chap. 2 and Chaps. 4 and 5.

³³ Apart from election studies which touch on this (K. J. Ratnam and R. S. Milne, *The Malayan Parliamentary Election of 1964*, Kuala Lumpur, 1967), the most illuminating materials come from the verse, drama and fiction by young Malay writers. Many have appeared weekly in the literary pages of the *Berita Harian* and the *Utusan Melayu* (and their Sunday editions); others have been collected in anthologies. Some notable recent examples are Hassan Ibrahim, *Tikus Rahmat* (Kuala Lumpur, 1963); Usman Awang, *Dari bintang Ke-bintang* (Kuala Lumpur, 1965); Shahnon Ahmad, *Menteri* (Kuala Lumpur, 1967) and *Perdana* (Singapore, 1969); the short story anthology *Pertentangan*, ed. by Omar Mohd. Hashim (Kuala Lumpur, 1968); and the verse anthologies, *Teluk Gong* (Kuala Lumpur, 1967) and *Kebangkitan* (Kuala Lumpur, 1969). Also the historical study by Amat Johari Moain, *Sejarah Nasionalisma Maphillindo* (Kuala Lumpur, 1969).

³⁴ The Rahman Talib Report (*Report of the Education Review Committee*, Kuala Lumpur, 1960) lays the foundation of this uneasiness among Group B Chinese. The doubts of young Group C Chinese are more difficult to document. Some of these doubts first emerged with the crisis in the MCA in 1959; see M. Roff, "The Malayan Chinese Association," in *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, Vol. 2, No. 21 and Roy H. Haas, *The Malayan Chinese Association, 1958-1959* (unpublished M.A. thesis, Northern Illinois University, 1967). Others came to the surface with the

formation of Malaysia and the coming in and going out of Singapore and Lee Kuan Yew's People's Action Party (PAP) was a major trauma for all groups of Chinese. Outside Malaysia, there was the growth of the power of China in the late 1950s and early 1960s and there was Indonesian Confrontation and the effects of post-Confrontation Indonesian politics on Malay nationalism. All these helped to bring about the dramatic events following the last Malaysian elections in May 1969.²⁵

It may be argued that, after 1957, the contributions of the political Chinese can be studied in terms of political parties or even political ideologies. Left-wing and right-wing differences were present, membership of political parties can be examined and graphically presented. We could also focus on leading parties and study the Chinese in terms of MCA and anti-MCA elements, or in terms of their willingness to join communal or non-communal parties, or even in terms of their response to the much more sophisticated politics of the PAP in Singapore. I persist here with the three-group pattern of analysis because both ideological and party differences do not as yet seem fundamental to many Malaysian Chinese. The reason is largely due to the fact that there is still a deep cleavage between Chinese who look to the politics of China and those who accept the immediacy of Malaysian politics and between both these minority groups and those who are primarily concerned with the preservation of the community as a whole. To a greater or lesser extent, all three groups are divided among themselves by ideology and party affiliation across the whole spectrum of ideas and organizations available in Malaya. I am led, therefore, to believe that Chinese political activity can be better understood in terms of the three groups rather than in terms of party membership alone, or in terms of loyal and disloyal Chinese, or in terms of communists and anti-communists.

Who have been the Group A Chinese during the past 12 years? Some are MCP supporters who, since the failure of the MCP, have been

formation of Malaysia and the separation of Singapore in 1965; see Ratnam and Milne, *The Malayan Parliamentary Elections of 1964* and R. K. Vasil, *Politics in a Plural Society*. Also see V. Purcell, "The Chinese in Malaysia," in Wang Gungwu (ed.), *Malaysia: a Survey* (London, 1964), pp. 190-198.

²⁵ It is too early to provide detailed cause-effect relationships for the internal and external events of the 1960s. Malaysian official sources have been relatively silent, except on Confrontation and subversion. Exceptions are Senu b. A. Rahman, *The Truth About Us* (Kuala Lumpur, 1964), and Ismail b. Dato A. Rahman, *Alliance Malaysian Malaysia in Two Stages* (Petaling Jaya, 1964). Much more explicit on internal politics have been the leaders of the PAP in Singapore and the Democratic Action Party (DAP) in Malaya; see Lee Kuan Yew, *Battle for a Malaysian Malaysia* (2 vols., Singapore, 1965); DAP, *Who Lives if Malaysia Dies?* (Kuala Lumpur, 1969); Alex Josey, *Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore, 1968). The official report, *The May 13 Tragedy*, provides some cause-effect explanations. Also see N. M. Fletcher, *The Separation of Singapore from Malaysia* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1969).

forced to be quiet if not inactive. The majority, however, remain only marginally interested in the MCP's pretensions to lead a genuinely Malayan anti-colonial, anti-feudal, anti-neo-imperialist movement. They are more clearly defined as those Chinese who continue to see politics in China as the only politics worthy of their concern. The power struggles around them, while giving them cause for anxiety from time to time, are essentially insignificant, even ephemeral. A vision of a future South-East Asia within China's sphere of influence sustains them and they are content to bide their time and prepare themselves for that destiny. The Chinese in the republic in Taiwan no longer concern them mainly because they are no longer relevant to this vision. In short, Group A Chinese are not communists so much as chauvinists for whom there can be no substitute for the resurgence of Chinese authority and majesty. That the group exists there can be no doubt, although for obvious reasons this cannot be easily documented. It can be traced to earlier groups openly active in the politics of China, very small in the first period before 1900, still small but growing in the second period to the outbreak of the Second World War, and promising to be large in the late 1940s. But the pressures of local and regional politics in the 1950s and 1960s have reversed the tide and much of the fervour and conviction have been diluted. It is impossible to say how small the group is, but it is easy to imagine that, without new recruits from either new immigrants or the local-born who now claim a role in Malayan politics, it is much smaller than it was in the second period. Many of them may have opted out of local politics, but their existence has been used as an instrument to embarrass other Chinese and therefore they remain an important factor in Malayan Chinese politics.⁸⁶

That Group B Chinese still comprise the majority there can also be little doubt. The chief difficulty since this group was weaned from traditional community politics and brought into Malayan political life is that it has become more difficult to draw a line between them and Group C Chinese. For the first two periods before 1941, it had been easy to distinguish the two groups from each other because Malay polity and colonial administration had demanded little from the community and offered little advantage to those who chose to identify with

⁸⁶ References about Maoist Chinese have been frequent since the Confrontation years (1963–1965). The most recent are Tengku Abdul Rahman's *May 13: Before and After* and the official *The May 13 Tragedy*. It may well be that communists are communists and anti-communists must fight them as such however small the numbers of communists may be, but for an understanding of Malayan Chinese politics, it is vital to distinguish between those Group A sympathizers who have no commitment to local politics and MCP members and followers who believe they are leading a Malaysian revolution (Group C) and those whose concern for the community has led them to seek a communist solution (Group B); see Lucian W. Pye, *Guerilla Communism*.

local political activities. It was not until the 1950s that this position was radically changed. As outlined earlier, the MCA played a major part in this change and provided the basis for Group B and Group C Chinese to work together for at least parallel ends. In particular, the actual participation in the Alliance Government from 1957 to 1969 encouraged the two groups to stay together and submerge their differences for the sake of communal strength in a communally-structured system.

Yet there are significant differences between the two groups which deserve close attention. They derive from the different criteria employed by each group concerning the legitimate rights of the community, the question of political assimilation and the different visions of the future of South-East Asian nation-states. Group B Chinese, as in the past, believe in the integrity of the community and the necessity for the survival of its essential social, economic and political features. Its politics is still primarily that *within* and *for* the community. Group C Chinese, in direct descent from the group in the first and second periods, accept greater ambiguities and are still faced with the difficulties of being recognizably Chinese and yet trying to move out of the community in order to identify fully with the nation-building process. Both groups are known to have been active at several politically significant levels, but, with the advent of party politics and the information now available about parties, Group B and Group C participation in the respective political parties is important in any attempt to explain the nature of Malaysian Chinese politics in recent years.

Although Group B Chinese provide the numbers so important in democratic politics, it was Group C Chinese who took the initiatives in national politics and in party leadership. What kinds of parties did Group C Chinese form and support? The most important aspect of the group's post-war dynamism is their conviction that they shared the British colonial heritage with the Malays and the other races in the country. They were led to feel this largely because the British encouraged them in this belief, and also because, having no other nation to belong to, the fact of eventual British withdrawal and Malaya's independence gave them the right to claim that share. Most of them therefore thought in national, non-communal terms, and some chose to support ideologically-based politics. The result was that Group C Chinese led and joined a whole range of political parties.

I have already mentioned that a few Group C Chinese supported the MCP before and during the Malayan Emergency (1948-60) (and many of the Chinese MCP leaders today may be sincere in claiming that they are loyal to Malaya in ways similar to those of Group C Chinese). I have also mentioned that Group C Chinese provided some

of the main leaders of the MCA, and that these men tried to bridge the gap between Group B Chinese and themselves. It was also these leaders who tried to inculcate a sense of commitment to the new nation among Group B Chinese, and with the MCA staying a partner in the Alliance Government, they sometimes appear to have succeeded.

The remaining handful of Group C Chinese who supported other political parties had varying fortunes.³⁷ Two smaller groups may be discerned: those who helped to form the Labour Party and the People's Progressive Party (PPP) with other nationals, of Malay and Indian descent, and those who formed the DAP and the Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (GRM) much later, also with non-Chinese. All these parties reject the idea of communalism in politics, and can hardly hope in themselves to appeal to Group B Chinese. The first two, the Labour Party and the PPP, made very little headway except in two or three large towns. And as long as they could not reach the bulk of the Group B Chinese who identified themselves with the MCA, they could not become significant in national politics. Their following improved, however, whenever the MCA faltered or was thought to have failed some of the Group B Chinese. In the elections of 1959, following the open UMNO-MCA quarrel, a strong protest vote from Group B Chinese went to the Labour Party and the PPP. Also, the failure of the MCP's armed rebellion had brought about a change of tactics and some of its supporters, whether originally Groups A, B or C in their attitudes towards Malaya, were encouraged to work within the Labour Party.³⁸

As for the two newer parties (the DAP formed in 1965 when the PAP of Singapore was ejected from Malaysia and the GRM formed in 1968), they came into being at a time when Group B Chinese confidence in the MCA was at a low ebb and the growing numbers of younger Group C Chinese either found themselves increasingly disillusioned with the MCA for its weakness, or could not reconcile themselves to a communal organization. The crucial point in the formation of these two new parties, however, is to be found in young Group C Chinese leadership and support. This group had grown rapidly during the last years of British rule when English education was designed and expanded

³⁷ There has been no separate study of the Chinese contribution to non-communal opposition parties, but the study by R. K. Vasil shows clearly why a small group of Chinese felt that non-communal politics was their only chance of finding a legitimate place in national politics. The study also shows why many Malay political leaders suspected that non-communal politics would give an unfair advantage to non-Malay (especially Chinese) groups who had considerable economic and educational advantages.

³⁸ M. Roff, "The Malayan Chinese Association," in *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, Vol. 2, No. 21; Roy H. Haas, *The Malayan Chinese Association*; K. J. Ratnam and R. S. Milne, *The Malayan Parliamentary Election of 1964*; R. K. Vasil, *Politics in a Plural Society*.

precisely to produce Chinese who would place loyalty to Malaya above that to the Chinese community. The numbers continued to grow after independence because the Alliance Government genuinely wanted more of such loyal Chinese and endorsed the English education policy. By so doing, of course, they also increased the number of Chinese who considered it their right to share equally in the heritage of independence. The more loyal they thought they were, the more they expected from the government, and since they were forced as Chinese to think in terms of participation through the MCA, their demands on the MCA became more and more difficult to satisfy. At this point, the brief entry of Singapore into Malaysia provided the catalyst. On the one hand, Lee Kuan Yew's PAP showed up most of MCA's weaknesses; on the other, it raised disturbing questions about the UMNO-MCA agreements which had been built into the Constitution in 1955. Young Group C Chinese began to wonder if Alliance Government policies would not, in the long run, deprive them of their share of the heritage and the very fruits of loyalty itself. In this frame of mind, most of them turned to politics to redress what they considered to be injustices.³⁹

The debate among the younger Group C Chinese between 1964 and 1969 had great significance for Malaysian political history. The actions which followed the debates determined the course of the 1969 elections and, to that extent, the May 13 tragedy itself. Two main factions emerged and their rivalry led them to challenge each other for the leadership of the whole Chinese community. Firstly, both groups had no time for the outlawed MCP, nor did they have any for the Labour Party which both thought was too heavily ideological to have any manoeuvrability in an intensely anti-communist atmosphere. The choice was then between accepting the communal frame of the MCA and working for its reform and updating from within, or modelling themselves on the non-communal PAP to fight in terms of abstract political principles for the equal rights of all Malaysians. But whichever the choice, it was clear from the start that their numerical support had to come from the Group B Chinese majority. There remained a small group of Group C Chinese who wavered between the two and joined neither the MCA nor the DAP, either because they were opposed to communal loyalties or because they were put off by the apparent anti-Malay trend in the DAP. These eventually chose the middle course of supporting

³⁹ The impact of Lee Kuan Yew on the Malayan Chinese in the period 1963-65 cannot be measured by the 1964 election figures; Ratnam and Milne, *The Malayan Parliamentary Elections of 1964*. Group C Chinese are completely out-numbered by other Chinese in all constituencies, except possibly in Bungsar where the PAP candidate, Devan Nair, won easily. For some of the reasons for excitement among Group C Chinese, see Lee Kuan Yew's speeches in parliament, 1963-65, and *Battle for a Malaysian Malaysia*.

the GRM. But even these, in the heat of the 1969 elections, were tempted to ally with the DAP in search of the vital support of discontented Group B Chinese.⁴⁰

Thus Group C ideals and ambitions were recognized to be meaningless at the 1969 elections without Group B numbers. Where numbers count, the Group B majority must play a pivotal role. All parties which have Chinese leaders, whether they are communal or not, must woo the Chinese majority if they want to share power in a democratic but communally-structured system. Thus the stubborn pull of community politics which have been the main strength of the Chinese cannot be ignored. We have already seen how Group B political sentiments and behaviour dominated the MCA and its key policies in the 1950s. Their traditional Chinese organizations formed the backbone of the MCA and often made the MCA act as an extension of those organizations. This was not to the liking of the MCA leaders of Group C origins who were often unsympathetic with Group B demands and sought to modify the goals of the party in order to turn it into a modern national party. Whenever this was attempted, it came to be seen as concessions made to UMNO, the senior partner in the Alliance. Probably the clearest example of the conflict within the MCA was the question of Chinese education. Group B Chinese had learnt over a period of four or five decades to consider Chinese education (at least a minimum of it) as essential to the survival of the community. They came to see any attempt to whittle away this education for their children as a direct, if long-term, threat to the community's effectiveness and self-respect. Thus when they found some of the MCA leaders, Group C Chinese mainly, agreeing to limit the extent of Chinese education in the national interest, many of them began to agitate from within the party or to lose interest in it and turn elsewhere. From such beginnings, it was easy for discontent to spread quickly to other areas where Group B Chinese felt themselves threatened, especially in areas concerning commercial licences and opportunities, and for rival parties to say that the MCA was really letting the Chinese side down.⁴¹

⁴⁰ For the MCA, the establishment of Bintang and Maju wards in Penang and Kuala Lumpur respectively satisfied most of its Group C supporters. The electoral alliance of DAP, GRM and PPP was no surprise after the Serdang Bahru by-election in December 1968, although there remained important differences in the DAP and GRM election manifestoes. In practice, the three parties agreed mainly to make a big dent in the Alliance majority and the electors were not expected to distinguish between them.

⁴¹ The Merdeka University issue dominated the political scene for Group B Chinese and most Group C leaders felt obliged to support it or at least not oppose it. DAP, *Who Lives if Malaysia Dies?* See also the recent study of Chinese community leadership by Li I-yuan, "Ma-lai-ya hua-jen she-hui ti she-t'uan tsu-chih yü ling-hsiu hsing-t'ai," in *Academia Sinica Ethnographic Research Centre Papers*, Vol. 20 (Taipei, 1965), reprinted in *Hua-ch'iao wen-t'i lun-ts'ung*, No. 1 (Taipei, 1968), pp. 129-195.

In the earlier years before the formation of Malaysia in 1963, some MCA support slipped away to the Labour Party and the PPP, but not significantly because neither of these parties really fulfilled the Group B desire for a party that worked primarily for the community's welfare, which the MCA at least tried to do. For most Group B Chinese, political ideology and multi-racialism would appear inconsistent with what they wanted, and at best premature. But as confidence in the MCA was being eroded in stages between 1959 and 1969 and the PAP storm left the DAP to accommodate the demands of Group B, the ground was prepared for the results of the 1969 elections. The last-minute efforts by the MCA to give the Group B Chinese some of the things they wanted failed because they came too late; at the same time, the MCA attempt to win some Group C Chinese support by bringing younger men into the leadership further displeased the Group B party stalwarts who felt betrayed. On the other hand, the DAP and its election partners, the PPP and the GRM, were led to fierce denunciations of the MCA and its Alliance partners which won considerable approval from most discontented Chinese. It is far from clear that dissident Group B Chinese really favour these multi-racial parties; they may have great reservations about the parties' leadership, structure and platforms. What they probably wanted to achieve was to show that their support is decisive for any Chinese political leader who hopes to share power in Malaya, and this they did only too well.⁴²

CONCLUSION

In tracing the above pattern of Chinese politics historically in the Malayan or West Malaysian context, this article has perhaps suggested a persistence and continuity which may be greater than is really warranted. In fact, I have attempted equally to show how much the Chinese have changed and are changing. Within the framework of these three groups, there have been radical and unlikely changes. Some of them have been the result of major world events, others of the internal transformations which each group has experienced and yet others the work of the outstanding individuals who have had the courage to challenge the inertia in their respective groups and propose new courses for them to take. There is no reason to believe that the events of May 1969 which have closed one chapter in Malaysia's history will in themselves seriously affect the pattern of change and continuity which the

⁴² For an attempt to analyse Chinese votes in the 1969 elections, see T. G. McGee, "Down—but not Out," *Far Eastern Economic Review* (Hong Kong), No. 23 (1969), pp. 566-568; also see C. S. Gray, "The 1969 Malaysian Elections," in *The May Tragedy in Malaysia* (Melbourne, 1969), pp. 14-18; and a brief reference in Anthony Reid, "The Kuala Lumpur Riots and the Malaysian Political System," *Australian Outlook* (Melbourne), Vol. 23, No. 3 (1969), pp. 258-278.

Malayan Chinese have shared together. It may be inevitable that future governments will continue to respond to this Chinese pattern and go on with the task of isolating Group A, winning over Group C and giving enough to Group B to ensure its stability and co-operation. If this should be so, it is to be expected that among the Chinese themselves, Group A will grow smaller and remain nostalgic about China's glories and negative in its impact on local politics; Group B will also be smaller and more grateful for the opportunity to preserve its social mores as long as possible; and Group C will grow in its effort to meet the new demands of the nation-state and mark out its rightful place within it. It is, of course, possible that, if the country does not return to democratic politics but develops an increasingly authoritarian government which the Chinese will come to see as based on principles of Malay supremacy, both Groups A and C will diminish and Chinese politics will revert to something akin to the traditional concern with the community's survival. But, taking into account the numerical and economic strength of the community and the trends of the past century, it is difficult to imagine that the Chinese will be content to accept such a position. Any effort to drive the Chinese back to the low-posture hierarchical politics of the past is more likely to produce grave instability in the country.

This article has not tried to evaluate the quality of Chinese political life in Malaya. That will have to be the subject of more detailed study. From the above, only a few remarks may be attempted here. First, Group A and Group C Chinese are capable of being politically sophisticated, but this sophistication does not originate from Malaya itself. The ideals which Group A Chinese have from time to time espoused have come from an understanding of the social revolution in China, the need for reconstruction in China's economy and the international position of China. When they are more progressive than chauvinistic, they may be aware of the legitimacy of Malay nationalism and may even be sympathetic to the need for a Malay cultural revolution. Only their preoccupation with China as the true arena, or as the best model, prevents them from playing an effective role in Malayan politics. As for Group C Chinese, they have also learnt to consider higher political goals and aspire to national leadership. Whether through the study of British or Chinese history, or modern history and politics in general, or both, many of them have developed an understanding of national birth pains, a desire for freedom and equality, and a respect for laws and institutions which promote both material and cultural development. Their weakness lies in that their ideals have often been borrowed wholesale from outside the country and have not been adapted to suit the uniquely multi-racial politics of Malaya. Most of them have also failed to appreciate the deep emotional appeals of Malay nationalism. Thus

sophistication has often meant alienation from and contempt for the awakening majority among all races. Group C Chinese are indeed capable of sharing in national leadership. The deceptively smooth transition from colonial to national government, however, has blunted their imagination; perhaps the tragedy of May 1969 will release them from their dependence on the received textbooks of high politics.

As for Group B Chinese, their politics have been mainly of the local and parochial kind, cohesive when necessary but limited. It is only in the last two decades that some of them have thought beyond their community's immediate interests, and this has already had a considerable impact on the nature of politics in Malaya. What they eventually have to offer to the new national framework is still not clear. Should more and more of them reach out for an active political life and lead others in the group to see their destiny as one with *all* Malaysians, there could indeed be a transformation in the country's politics as a whole. But this article shows us that we should be cautious about expecting too much in the foreseeable future. The long persistence of Group B as a majority group and the evidence that most Chinese clearly prefer to be with the majority suggest that Group B is not about to be carried away by political ideals alone nor about to wither away to make room for a Group C majority. The trends of the past century remind us that recent pressures have been to thrust favoured political positions upon Group C Chinese, but there is as yet no proof that Group C Chinese are able to consolidate their leadership of the community as a whole and bring it into the nation-building mould. Much will depend for many years to come on the quality of Chinese politics in the Malayan context, on a genuine sharing of political ideals among at least Group B and Group C Chinese. An essential first step after May 1969 may be for the national-minded Group C Chinese to regain the trust of the Group B majority and convince them of the virtues of an open political system. This would probably require greater dedication and sustained effort in politics than any Chinese has yet shown in Malayan history.