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Article

ENCOUNTERING COMMUNISM IN A COSMOPOLITAN CITY: THE DUCROUX CASE IN THE EYES OF THE SINGAPORE PRESS

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“From the very outset, subversive activities in Malaya were due to outside influences. There was no irritant within Malaya to give rise to such a reaction (to communism). There was no organization within Malaya which was capable of producing such clever political propaganda. All of it came from China! It was smuggled in a variety of ways, re-adapted for local consumption, and secretly distributed. This was not an unconnected or individual effort confined to Malaya alone. It was part of a coordinated Far Eastern plan. Its main object was to create local Communist Parties, each able to stand on their own. It made special use of popular movements such as patriotic boycotts or local wage disputes to increase the difficulties of and discontent against local authorities, and to gain sympathy and fresh adherents for the Party.”²

The sensational remark above comes from the memoir of Rene Onraet, who served as the director of the Criminal Intelligence Department (CID) of the Straits Settlements Police from 1922 to 1935, and as the Inspector-General between 1935 and 1939.

Similar to many colonial administrators of his time, Onraet believed that British Malaya’s primary security challenges originated from not within but outside of the colony. Due to Malaya’s sizable immigrant population, the British authorities considered the Chinese community as prone to receiving various political influences from China. Particularly threatening was international communism coordinated by the Moscow-based Communist International (Comintern), which provided anti-colonial movements across the globe with both coherent theoretical guidance and an extensive organizational network.

Scholars commonly regard the Comintern as having played a critical role in the emergence of the communist movement in late-colonial Malaya.³ When discussing the Comintern’s early influence, existing scholarships often use the arrest of Joseph Ducroux — alias Serge Lefranc, a French agent of the Comintern — in Singapore in June 1931 to illustrate the Comintern-China-Malaya connection.⁴ Additionally, historians have attached special meanings to the Ducroux Case, primarily because of the more significant repercussions it caused internationally. With the information obtained in this operation, the British colonial authorities managed to apprehend Hilaire Noulens, a high-ranking official of Comintern’s Far East Bureau (FEB) in Shanghai on June 15, 1931, as well as Nguyen Ai Quoc (later known as Ho Chi

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² Onraet, René 1947, *Singapore: A Police Background*, Dorothy Crisp & Co., London, p. 109.

³ Kheng, Cheah Boon 1992, *From PKI to the Comintern, 1924-1941: The Apprenticeship of the Malayan Communist*

Party: Selected Documents and Discussion, SEAP, Southeast Asia Program, Ithaca, N.Y., pp. 15-17.

⁴ Streets-Salter, Heather 2014, ‘The Noulens Affair in East and Southeast Asia’, *Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, vol. 21, no. 4, pp. 397-398; C. F. Yong, *The Origins of Malayan Communism* (Singapore: South Seas Society, 1997), xv.

Minh) in Hong Kong on 6 July 1931.⁵⁶ Using both official records and Ducroux's diary, Laurent Metzger has conducted detailed research on Ducroux's arrest in and eventual exile from Singapore between 1931 and 1932.⁷ While such an account is useful in demonstrating the incident's international significance, little is known as to what immediate impression it created in the cosmopolitan port city. Moreover, it is also unclear how Singapore's general public perceived communism when communist organizations had yet firmly established themselves in the British colony. This article seeks to make sense of such issues by investigating how the Singapore press reported on the Ducroux Case.

Historical Background

The Comintern played a pivotal role in the establishment of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 1921 and was deeply involved in formation of the alliance between the CPC and the nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) during the Chinese Revolution of the mid-1920s, whose anti-imperialist campaigns posed unprecedented threats to British interests in the Far East. Despite the collapse of the KMT-CPC alliance in 1927, followed by the nationwide anti-communist purge by the KMT leader Chiang Kai-shek, the Comintern kept its operations in China by moving to Shanghai's International Settlement, where its Western agents could enjoy the protection of extraterritoriality.⁸ Comprised of the Far East Bureau (FEB) and the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat

(PPTUS), the Comintern's Shanghai headquarters made various efforts in promoting communist movements across East and Southeast Asia and connecting them into a giant liaison network. The two organizations' tasks included, but were not limited to, allocating funds, dispatching couriers, recruiting and training new agents, as well as helping them to go to Moscow.⁹

As a result, the British kept a vigilant attitude towards the rapidly changing political situation in China and its potential ramifications in Malaya. With the increase of subversive activities and the constant influx of Chinese immigrants, British authorities adopted stringent measures to nip the communist threat in the bud, which thoroughly paralyzed early communist organizations in the colony. The Malayan Communist Party (MCP) was founded in 1930, but communist movement remained weak under the British rule. It was only during the World War II that the MCP gained more substantial influence through guerrilla warfare against Japan.

The Surveillance

In April 1931, the FEB sent Ducroux to Singapore in hopes of connecting local communist organizations in Malaya to movements elsewhere in Asia. Using a counterfeit passport under the name of Serge Lefranc, Ducroux disguised himself as a businessman representing French hardware and wine companies. A few days after his arrival, Ducroux rented an office at Winchester House, hiring only one Indian

⁵ Litten, Frederick S. 1994, 'The Noulens Affair', *The China Quarterly*, vol. 138, p. 494.

⁶ 'Notorious French Communist Sentenced' 1931, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, June 23.

⁷ Metzger, Laurent 1996, 'Joseph Ducroux, a French Agent of the Comintern in Singapore (1931-1932)', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 69, no. 1, pp. 1-20.

⁸ Lethbridge, Henry J. 1991, *All about Shanghai: A Standard Guidebook*, Oxford University Press, Hong Kong, p. 22.

⁹ Onimaru, Takeshi 2016, 'Shanghai Connection: The Construction and Collapse of the Comintern Network in East and Southeast Asia', *Southeast Asian Studies* vol. 5, no. 1, p. 116.

servant. Having received intelligence, the police deployed two agents to keep watch on the Frenchman from an office nearby.¹⁰ The agents reported that Ducroux only left his office for lunch and did not seem to be working at all except receiving occasional visitors behind a locked door. Ducroux's odd behavior and his frequent contact with Chinese communist suspects confirmed police suspicions.¹¹

On 22 May, the police intercepted a letter that Ducroux wrote to a Shanghai address before it reached the post office. Written in mixed French and cipher, the unsigned letter mentioned a number of places in Malaya such as Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Malacca, Ipoh, and Terengganu. Five days later, the police intercepted a second letter to the same address in Shanghai. Although the letter was insufficient for the police to proceed against Ducroux, a particular sentence caught the attention of the authorities. The sentence read, "we are about to organize," and the words were followed by ciphers.¹² The CID chief René Onraet inferred with the use of other evidence that the letter contained information on activities of communist organizations. To prevent Ducroux from noticing the interception, the police passed on the original letters to Shanghai after making copies of the two letters.¹³

The Arrest

The Straits Settlements authorities finally took action against Ducroux on 1 June. After Fu Tai-keng and Wong Muk-han, the Frenchman's two Chinese visitors left the room, the police broke into the office and

arrested him. Besides a small amount of money and common office necessities, a "highly seditious" book entitled "Workers of the Whole World Unite" was found in the pocket of Ducroux's pants.¹⁴ More importantly, the police discovered a contact book that included addresses of his contacts in Shanghai and Hong Kong. Subsequently, Ducroux was taken to his boarding house, where the police confiscated more of his money in American travelers' checks amounting to \$12,000.¹⁵ While the purpose of the funds was unclear, the authority found two unsigned letters in Ducroux's mailbox, which further corroborated suspicions of his connections to communist organizations in Shanghai.¹⁶

The incident also dealt a crushing blow to local communist organizations. Rai Bahadur Prithvi Chand, the Chief Inspector of the CID, identified one of Ducroux's two Chinese visitors arrested on the spot as local communist leader Wong Muk-han, who had been charged for his involvement in a communist bomb factory on Balestier Road and subsequently banished from the colony in 1929.¹⁷ With the information discovered in Ducroux's address book, the police raided several houses across Singapore in the following few hours. In Lorong 30 Geylang, the authority discovered a secretary office of the Communist Party, where various propaganda literature was brought to light. Among various documents seized was a letter in English from the Communist Party of India in Calcutta, which congratulated their Chinese comrades in Malaya for their

¹⁰ 'Alleged Communistic Activities' 1931, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, June 20.

¹¹ '18 Months for Ducroux' 1931, *The Straits Times*, June 23.

¹² 'Alleged 'Reds' on Trial' 1931, *The Straits Times*, June 20.

¹³ 'Alleged Communistic Activities' 1931, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, June 20.

¹⁴ 'Alleged 'Reds' on Trial' 1931, *The Straits Times*, June 20.

¹⁵ 'Red Movement in Far East' 1931, *Malaya Tribune*, July

¹⁶ 'European Red Sent to Prison: Probability of an Appeal' 1931, *Malaya Tribune*, June 23.

¹⁷ 'Alleged 'Reds' on Trial' 1931, *The Straits Times*, June 20.

success in carrying out propaganda campaigns.¹⁸

Shortly after, the police searched a house in the nearby Sims Avenue that Wong Muk-han frequented after visiting Ducroux's office at Winchester. The detectives found a complete set of printing equipment as well as numerous copies of a red newspaper entitled "Malayan Worker."¹⁹ The police continued by storming the servants' quarters attached to a European's house on Cairnhill Road. As a result, the detectives found more "seditious publications" by the Communist Party and associated organizations such as the Singapore Trades Union, the Singapore General Labour Union and the Anti-Imperialist League.²⁰ In addition to the seizure of communist propaganda materials, a number of communist suspects were apprehended in a series of police operations. Following Ducroux's arrest, 16 Chinese, including a Cantonese girl, and an Indian named Saminathan Amalu, were taken into custody.²¹

The Trial and Sentence

Ducroux and 15 other communist suspects were brought to court on 18 June, which captured unexpected attention from the public. *The Straits Times* called the Ducroux Case "one of the most startling political trials which has ever taken place in Singapore."²² The authorities withdrew the charge against Wong Muk-han — who had initially been marked as the third accused — by establishing a separate case for him, since Wong was both a convicted communist and returned banishee.²³ Another Chinese

suspect managed to escape a week before the commencement of the trial while being transferred from the Police Court to the Central Police Station. Among all the accused, only Ducroux was legally represented, by a lawyer named M.C. Johannes who had been chosen by the French Consulate in Singapore.²⁴ Fu Tai-keng and Saminathan Amalu, numbered as the second and the 17th accused respectively, spoke English in the court and required no interpreter.²⁵

As the chief witness, CID Director René Onraet supplied various pieces of evidence in court that the police had collected through surveillance and raid operations against Ducroux. Ahmad bin Swahim, a Malay tailor from Geylang, testified as the second witness that he had known Fu Tai-keng since 1929 through a Javanese communist agent named Ali Majid. While working as Ali's secretary, Ahmad "learned about capitalism, imperialism, and the 'wickedness of the world'."²⁶ They also had many opportunities to meet Fu, whom Ali identified as a leader, in various local communist meetings. The police captured Ahmad and Ali successively in a series of anti-communist operations, which ultimately led to the latter's banishment from the Straits Settlements. However, Ahmad's understanding of communism appeared to be quite shallow, which was vividly reflected by a conversation of his in the court:

J (Judge): *What is the object of the Communist Party?*

¹⁸ 'Alleged Communistic Activities' 1931, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, June 20.

¹⁹ 'Alleged 'Reds' on Trial' 1931, *The Straits Times*, June 20.

²⁰ 'Joseph Ducroux, Alias Serge Lefranc, Is Unmasked' 1939, *The Straits Times*, March 12.

²¹ '18 Months for Ducroux' 1931, *The Straits Times*, June 23.

²² '18 Months for Ducroux' 1931, *The Straits Times*, June 23.

²³ 'Alleged Communistic Activities' 1931, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, June 20.

²⁴ 'Alleged 'Reds' on Trial' 1931, *The Straits Times*, June 20.

²⁵ "Alleged Communistic Activities," *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, June 20, 1931.

²⁶ 'Alleged Communistic Activities' 1931, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, June 20.

A (Ahmad): *To follow Soviet Russia*

J: *What is Soviet Russia?*

A: *The Soviets destroyed the Russian Government and were against Imperialists.*

J: *Who are the Imperialists?*

A: *All the Europeans here are Imperialists.*

J: *Even Mr. Ducroux?*

A: *Yes.*²⁷

Ducroux's Indian servant, who turned out to be working for the CID's surveillance mission, appeared in court as the third witness. Although only receiving meager incentives from the police, the servant kept good records of Ducroux and his visitors' activities in Winchester House. In addition to surveillance, he also seamlessly passed Ducroux's letters to the police without his French boss realizing. The servant's testimony in court further substantiated Onraet's claims against the accused.²⁸

Ducroux's lawyer protested that there should have been a separate trial, as he suggested that evidence presented against other accused might prejudice his client. The judge rejected the proposal on the ground that Fu Tai-keng and Wong Muk-han's frequent visits to Winchester House were indeed relevant to Ducroux's case.²⁹ In his statement, Ducroux repudiated the credibility of the letters reproduced by the police and asserted that his correspondence to the Shanghai address was for purely

business purposes. The Frenchman also denied his connection to local communist organizations, as he spoke neither Chinese nor Malay. He further claimed that Fu and Wong were seeking employment at his office. Although Ducroux admitted that he engaged in lengthy conversations with Fu and Wong on business and local situations, sometimes they ran into difficulties in understanding each other, as the two Chinese visitors did not speak English fluently.³⁰

Despite Ducroux's denial of the charges, the court eventually sentenced him to 18 months of rigorous imprisonment.³¹ It turned out that not only did the authorities collect ample information through well-planned surveillance and raid missions in Singapore, but they also received useful intelligence from their counterparts abroad. Sufficient evidence indicated that Ducroux had become a militant communist in France since 1923.³² Before his arrest in Singapore, Ducroux had visited Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Saigon under the pseudonym Serge Lefranc.³³ It was revealed later that Ducroux's long-term assignment from Comintern was actually to organize a communist movement in India. Although he was trying to build connections to local communist organizations, the primary purpose of Ducroux's stay in Singapore was to get the visa to proceed to his main destination.³⁴

In sharp contrast to local media's detailed coverage of Ducroux's story, the other

²⁷ 'Alleged Communistic Activities' 1931, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, June 20.

²⁸ Alleged 'Reds' on Trial' 1931, *The Straits Times*, June 20.

²⁹ 'Notorious French Communist Sentenced' 1931, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, June 23.

³⁰ 'Notorious French Communist Sentenced' 1931, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, June 23.

³¹ '18 Months for Ducroux' 1931, *The Straits Times*, June 23.

³² 'Notorious French Communist Sentenced' 1931, *The*

Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser, June 23.

³³ Metzger, Laurent 1996, 'Joseph Ducroux, a French Agent of the Comintern in Singapore (1931-1932)', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 69, no. 1, pp. 3-4.

³⁴ Metzger, Laurent 1996, 'Joseph Ducroux, a French Agent of the Comintern in Singapore (1931-1932)', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 69, no. 1, p. 10.

accused received very little attention. Their names were either mentioned only briefly or not talked about at all, despite their possibly more prominent roles in local communist organizations. In a separate trial, Wong Muk-han was sentenced to lifelong imprisonment for breaching the Banishment Ordinance and eventually died of illness in jail in 1932.³⁵ Fu Tai-keng, whose information had already been well known to the police before Ducroux's arrival, was sentenced to six months of imprisonment.³⁶ Although the police initially suspected Saminathan Amalu of being connected to the Indian Communist Party, the court discharged him together with five others for lack of evidence.³⁷ The rest were given relatively lenient sentences of two months in prison.³⁸

The Aftermath

The address book found in Ducroux's office ultimately caused the capture of several highly ranked communist agents. Among the important ones were Hilaire Noulens (Jakob Rudnik) in Shanghai and Nguyen Ai Quoc (Ho Chi Minh) in Hong Kong — both exerted profound impacts on communist movements across East Asia and beyond.³⁹ After conducting intensive investigations into Noulens' case, the British-led Shanghai Municipal Police revealed that Noulens was leading the Comintern's Far East Bureau, which aimed to oversee and coordinate communist activities in China, Burma,

Malaya, French Indochina, and the Dutch East Indies.⁴⁰ While the arrest severely weakened the FEB's organizational network, influential figures such as Albert Einstein, H.G. Wells, and Madame Soong Ching-ling became actively involved in an international committee to defend Noulens and his wife. The case was also brought into discussions at the British House of Commons and the United States Senates.⁴¹

In his memoir *Singapore: A Police Background*, Onraet wrote about the Ducroux Case in great detail and proudly admitted its significance to his career.⁴² When Onraet retired as the Inspector-General of the Straits Settlement Police in March 1939, an article in *The Straits Times* honored him as “hav(ing) more to do than any other man in the Force with the disruption of communism in Malaya.”⁴³ To illustrate Onraet's prominence, the article related the story of Ducroux's arrest and referred to the event as the officer's greatest success in his three decades of service in the Singapore police. According to the same article, the communist influence in Malaya was almost negligible towards the end of the 1930s as a result of this effective police action.⁴⁴

³⁵ Metzger, Laurent 1996, 'Joseph Ducroux, a French Agent of the Comintern in Singapore (1931-1932)', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 69, no. 1, p. 11.

³⁶ 'Notorious French Communist Sentenced' 1931, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, June 23.

³⁷ 'Alleged 'Reds' on Trial' 1931, *The Straits Times*, June 20.

³⁸ 'Notorious French Communist Sentenced' 1931, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, June 23.

³⁹ 'Joseph Ducroux, Alias Serge Lefranc, Is Unmasked' 1939,

The Straits Times, March 12.

⁴⁰ Litten, Frederick S. 1994, 'The Noulens Affair', *The China Quarterly*, vol. 138, p. 492.

⁴¹ Litten, Frederick S. 1994, 'The Noulens Affair', *The China Quarterly*, vol. 138, p. 496.

⁴² Onraet, René 1947, *Singapore: A Police Background*, Dorothy Crisp & Co., London, pp. 88-107.

⁴³ 'Joseph Ducroux, Alias Serge Lefranc, Is Unmasked' 1939, *The Straits Times*, March 12.

⁴⁴ 'Joseph Ducroux, Alias Serge Lefranc, Is Unmasked' 1939, *The Straits Times*, March 12.