

THE SUPER SPY OF MALAYA

The story of Lai Tek the secret agent is a tale of treachery, espionage and intrigue. The impact of his dramatic role in Malayan history is now being unravelled by the research of historian Cheah Boon Kheng, writes **HIMANSHU BHATT**

IN April 1943, 29 senior members of the underground Malayan Communist Party (MCP) and their bodyguards — all wanted by the Japanese occupiers — gathered in Batu Caves in a shroud of secrecy.

While almost everyone showed up, one person was conspicuously absent — the secretary-general who had called the meeting.

As they waited, the gathering was startled by a *kempetai*, or Japanese military police, squad swooping in from an ambush. Every one present — comprising the MCP's politburo and central committee — was killed.

What these members would never have suspected was that they had been betrayed by the very person they so trusted — the secretary-general they knew as Lai Tek.

With a string of about 20 aliases and a bevy of mistresses whom he used as couriers and messengers, the story of Lai Tek is one of the most intriguing and little known tales of espionage and treachery to have emerged from our shores.

A cunning triple agent who was feted by the British, the Japanese and the French, Lai Tek infiltrated the MCP to become its secretary-general from 1938 till 1947. His duplicity was discovered in late 1945.

Most significantly, his command within the MCP while being a secret British operative may have influenced the very course of Malaya's political history after the Japanese surrender.

"His story was incredible," says Dr Cheah Boon Kheng, a retired USM history professor, and an authority on Malaya's communist movement and Emergency period.

"He was ruthless and opportunistic. He was all the time working for his own self-interest." The origins of Lai Tek, a Vietnamese of Chinese descent, are wrapped in mystery.

He is believed to have been trained in Moscow, and to have been active at one stage in the Chinese Communist Party and the Shanghai town committee. From his features, Cheah feels he may have had European ancestors.

He assumed names like Loi Tak, Wong Kim Giok, Huang Shao-dong and Lao Wu.

The British Special Branch had recorded him as Nguyen Van Long while the *kempetai* record called him Hoang A Nhac (or Huang A-yue in Mandarin). He was even referred to by the local English Press as Mr Wright.

About three months before the Japanese conquered Malaya, Lai Tek showed up wearing dark glasses in Cecil Street, Sin-

gapore, to meet Britain's special operations body, Force 136, for a pact to prepare the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA).

He was so crafty that he would appear to meet this same force in disguise as MCP member "Chang Hong" on at least three occasions after the Japanese occupation. The officers never suspected his identity.

Among his long list of treachery, he exposed a Singapore-based Kuomintang major, Lim Bo Seng, who was planning a secret network in Ipoh. The Japanese detained Lim for a year before executing him.

"He ruthlessly eliminated his comrades," says Cheah. "He regarded the communists as expendable, to be used by him."

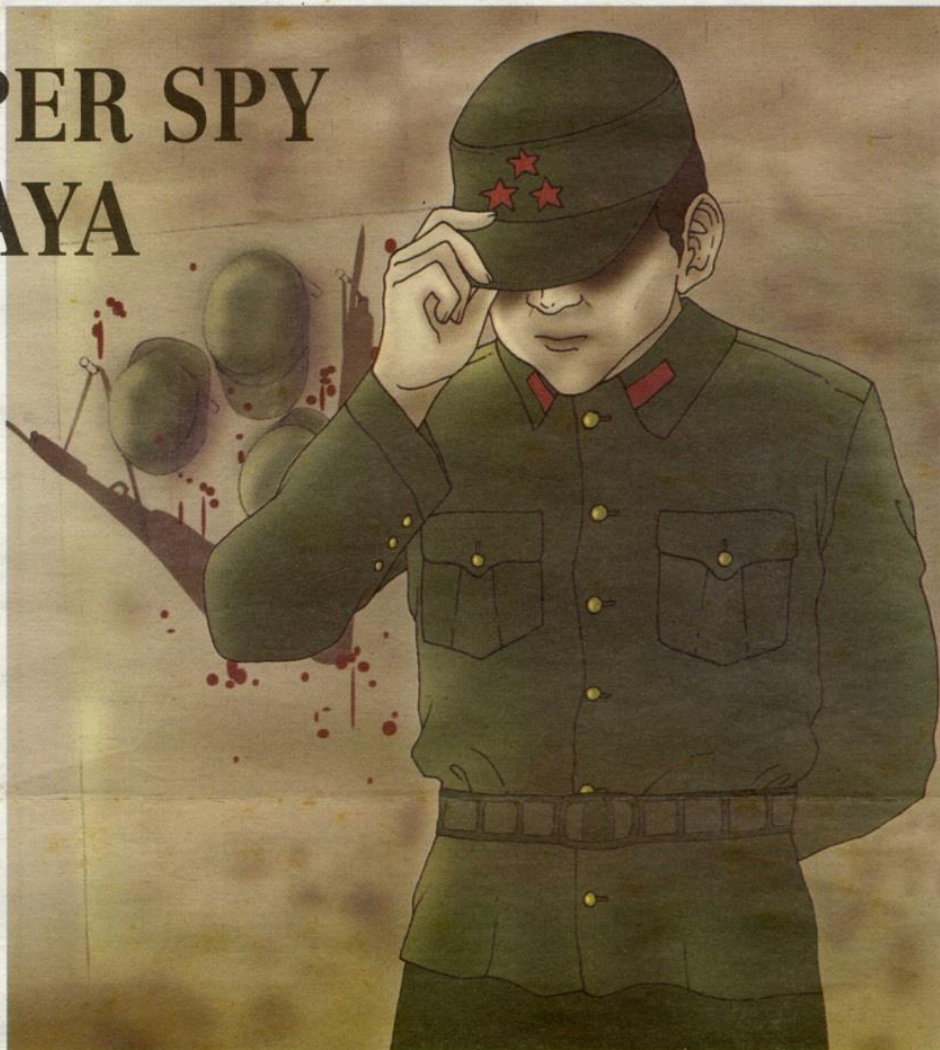
Cheah is the author of the acclaimed book, *Red Star over Malaya*, and editor of the Encyclopaedia of Malaysia's volume on early modern history.

Throughout his years of study on the region's history, the persona of Lai Tek has particularly captivated him.

Cheah has been burrowing through archives in London, Japan, Singapore and Malaysia since the 70s to piece together details of this elusive character.

"I've always been interested in the story of Lai Tek," he says.

Cheah, who plans to write a novel based on the topic, recently gave a talk on his findings in an event organised by the Socio-Economic and Environmental Research Institute.



Lai Tek was so crafty that the British didn't suspect his true identity

Lai Tek's move to Malaya from Vietnam came about after his cover was blown while spying on the Indo-Chinese Communist Party for the French.

According to British police records, the French then decided to pass him on to the British. How this was done is not known.

"My theory is that the British decided to plant him in the MCP," says Cheah.

It is possible that Lai Tek used his contacts with Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam's communist leader, who came to Malaya in 1930 and founded the MCP.

He may also have used his connections with the Seamen's Union, an important courier service for the Chinese Communist Party in Southeast Asia.

Fortuitously enough, just after Lai Tek emerged in the MCP in 1934, the party was hit by factionalism.

"It was a period of industrial unrest," Cheah explains. "There were strikes by communist unions all over Malaya and Singapore with rubber estates, tin mines and factories being affected."

"Lai Tek showed himself to be a great organiser and agitator in the trade unions. He took a militant line to appear acceptable to the leadership."

And he rose meteorically, becoming a member of the party's central committee in 1936 and deputy secretary the next year, before wresting the secretary-general's post in 1938.

Interestingly, Cheah found Special



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Branch records in London revealing that the British had conducted several raids on communist premises and printing presses during this time.

"You can guess it was Lai Tek who helped the British carry out these raids," he says. "And the British were impressed by his role."

When the Japanese occupied Malaya in the Second World War, he managed to manoeuvre himself to become their secret agent even after being caught in Singapore.

"At first, he said he had nothing to do with the MCP," Cheah says. "But the *kempeitai* head, Sartoro Onishi, coaxed him with good treatment and food."

"He gradually said he was a committee member before finally disclosing that he was in fact the secretary-general."

Onishi was taken by surprise. To prove himself, Lai Tek called for a meeting of the MCP's Singapore Town Committee which the *kempeitai* then raided, killing several members.

He deviously called for meetings in other places, including the ill-fated one in Batu Caves in 1943 where the MCP's entire central committee and politburo was eliminated.

Fellow prisoners who spotted him with Onishi tried to warn their comrades outside.

Lai Tek shrewdly asked Onishi to free them and then got his unsuspecting MCP cadres outside to kill them. One was even buried alive.

On one occasion, he gave away information to the Japanese about a covert British landing in Lumut. The British, however, managed to flee to the hills before they were raided.

"The British did not know of his relationship with the *kempeitai*," Cheah says. "They found out only later, but were convinced that he never betrayed them."

As the end of the war loomed, he stepped up co-operation with the British even as he enjoyed a Japanese military car to travel around.

"His activities were ambivalent. He was weighing his odds," says Cheah. "There was a point in the early stages of the Japanese occupation when he had doubts about the British."

"But when Germany surrendered in May 1945, he knew the Japanese would lose. His co-operation with the British then became absolute. By the time the war ended, he had hedged his bets."

In fact, on Aug 27 1945, he ordered the MCP's Selangor committee to issue a statement offering co-operation to the returning British military administration.

Cheah points out that the communists could have taken over major cities as soon as the Japanese left — as had occurred in Vietnam — and changed the course of history if they had not been controlled thus.

"I have evidence that the revolutionary spirit of the rank and file was very high during the war. They wanted to launch an armed rebellion. But here was a man restraining them."

"When the Japanese surrendered in Hanoi, the communists came down from the hills and jungles and took over the radio stations and facilities, and then invited Ho Chi Minh to lead the country."

"Something like this could have happened in Malaya."

The turning point in Lai Tek's career happened in September or October 1945 when a Chinese newspaper in Penang splashed a story accusing him of collaborating with the *kempeitai*.

The news shook the MCP. It became divided between those who supported him and those who distrusted him.

Lai Tek himself did not make a statement as the British also began looking for him.

By mid-April 1946, investigations had begun with MCP's Chin Peng and Yeung Kuo looking into his wartime role.

Members began to piece the news with witness accounts, even as former acquaintances in Vietnam came out to reveal his dubious role in his early years with the Indo-Chinese Communist Party.

By March the next year, there was enough information to unmask him.

The MCP convened a central committee meeting, but Lai Tek did not attend. He had absconded to Hong Kong with loads of MCP funds.

"He had alerted the British that his cover was blown. They got him a ship, feted him and bade him farewell," notes Cheah.

Chin Peng then decided to hunt him down, and despatched agents to Hong Kong and Bangkok.

Finally, sometime in 1947, a three-man killer squad of the Thai Communist Party cornered Lai Tek in a cubicle of a tenement shophouse in Bangkok. Chin Peng was with them.

There was a violent struggle as Lai Tek resisted. He was eventually strangled.

"Chin Peng tried to stop them, but the struggle was so severe that Lai Tek was foaming at the mouth," Cheah says.

His body was bundled into a sack and thrown in the Chao Phraya river.

What was ironic about the situation was that Chin Peng had been groomed by Lai Tek.

During an interview in Canberra in 1998, Cheah asked Chin Peng if he had known all along that Lai Tek was an agent. "He said he did not," remembers Cheah.

"He was so close to Lai Tek, and yet he did not know. This shows Lai Tek was such a good actor that he managed to conceal his role."

What is even more impressive is that no one in the MCP suspected that he could be Vietnamese. He could not speak Mandarin, but still managed to lead the party using Cantonese which he knew.

Most of all, what stood out in his personality was the incredible scheming and guile he employed as he covertly negotiated between different parties.

"He always covered his tracks. And when dealing w Cheah says.

"To serve three foreign intelligence services and to be paid well in that difficult period showed that he was good in his role, that he was good in surviving."

A giant step for Malaysia towards Vision 2020



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Hari Raya Aidilfitri has always been a special occasion for all Malaysians.

This year is even more the case in view of the 50th anniversary of independence, epitomised by the launching of the first Malaysian into space.

The word "victory" would most appropriately describe these major events.

Hari Raya Aidilfitri, for instance, is a big "victory" for those who have completed a month-long fast during the holy month of Ramadan.

They rightly deserve to celebrate Hari Raya as a reward for their victorious struggle against worldly wants and demands.

More significant is the mastering of the ego and desires through the disciplined spiritual practices advocated during the fast.

It is without doubt that achieving Merdeka is also a victory. There can be no more important victory for any nation than freeing itself from the shackles of the colonial yoke.

Many lives were laid down to accomplish such a mission, going to show just how prized such victory is. And to be able to sustain it the last 50 years, makes it even more invaluable.

In short, Malaysians of all walks of life have every reason to celebrate this highly symbolic event.

Putting Malaysia's first angkasanawan in space this year makes it even more symbolic.

It may be more appropriate to call him "angkasanawan", much like the Chinese taikonaut, Russian cosmonaut and the US astronaut.

It is plain to see how the space mission is a definite victory, not just to one person but to an entire nation that has just celebrated 50 years of nationhood. Like the other two victories, this one will also have many ramifications.



Dr Sheikh Muszaphar Shukor Sheikh Mustapha has made Malaysia proud

Closely intertwined with the notion of victory is yet another word: "freedom". For instance, the Hari Raya celebration is marked by freedom from the constraints observed during the Ramadan fast.

Since in practical terms there is no such thing as "absolute freedom", the preferred expression of such freedom is in the path of moderation. This is akin to an independent nation that is more in the context of today's interdependent world.

For the angkasanawan, too, the freedom encountered — although of a different kind — is not total. This in part explains why those in space need to be restrained despite being free from the forces of gravity.

The more recent "victory" was when a Malaysian teenager was successfully given a "new" heart, "freeing" her from the heart machine that had sustained her for so long.

She is reportedly getting "stronger" with no indication of tissue rejection — an assuring sign that her road to "freedom" is now within reach, God willing.

Thus far, this one victory has already generated tremendous multiplier effects, be it in terms of Malaysian kindness and generosity and the outstanding medical skills shown by the team at the Institut Jantung Negara.

It was a major victory for

race relations when the first donor and recipient were from two different ethnic groups.

To quote a leader of a political party: "This act of kindness should be an example for all Malaysians. This is what the true spirit of Malaysia is all about."

There's one lesson in all this: perhaps linking "victory" and "freedom" is a matter of the heart.

This is where kindness, sincerity and courage to act seem to originate in making each victory and freedom feasible.

After all, in all these victorious moments, many a heart was touched. Along with it comes "freedom" in the true Malaysian spirit.

Yet, of late, it is this true spirit that has been called into question. Though "victory" and "freedom" are often desirable, they are not without adverse consequences, unless handled properly.

For example, "victory" is not a licence to practise "freedom" according to one's whims and fancies. Similarly, "freedom" cannot be the "absolute" demand of anyone in pursuit of "victory".

Some recent events have raised concerns that there are quarters who might have gone overboard either way, putting the future of the nation at risk.

We, therefore, must be more vigilant and responsible.

Otherwise, it would not be possible to stand as a nation in recognising a momentous victory today as we proudly welcome our angkasanawan back to Mother Earth.

He has ably represented the country in fulfilling the challenge made by second prime minister Tun Razak Hussein during his National Day address in 1971.

More than that, the space adventure has not only united us in our hearts as Malaysia, but most definitely "freed" our minds to go where Malaysians have not dared to go before.

The next destination must be to attain victory and freedom under Wawasan 2020. Bon voyage, Malaysia.

■ The writer is vice-chancellor of Universiti Sains Malaysia