

Archive Fever.....in Singapore

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Derrida and the Archival Turn

Amongst Jacques Derrida's multiple signature texts, none have been regarded with as much derision and threat by practitioners of history as *Archive Fever*. Published in book form in 1996, the English language text of *Archive Fever* first appeared as a paper delivered in a London conference on the topic "Memory: The Question of Archives" in 1994. Most scholars, history buffs and erudite readers would by now, have some vague inkling and perhaps discomfort about the connection between Derrida's deconstructive provocation and the current move in the Euro-American academia to "interrogate the archive". Few, however, would have read and understood *Archive Fever*. Fewer still would know, given Derrida's cachet that while Derrida created an eminently citable word/sign, what has been called "the archival turn" was well underway by 1994. In the words of Ann Stoler, Natalie Davis' *Fiction in the Archives* (1987) and Richard Thomas' *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (1993), not to mention Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) "suggest that Derrida's splash came only after the archival turn had already been made."

If It Ain't in the Archives, It's Not History.

These writings "interrogated the archive" not simply by unraveling the political interests and positions of those mostly nameless bureaucrats and famous statesmen who wrote the countless classified memoranda and papers that were subsequently filed away only to be resurrected and reconstituted as "primary documents" to be consulted by historians in the archive. The interrogation of the archive goes further beyond critiquing the way primary documents are handled methodologically by historians: what kinds of questions are asked (or not asked) of the documents, who were the target audience, what documents are excluded or included and so on.

These critiques addressed something more fundamental, namely, the omnipotent *status* of the archive itself as a basic epistemological unit in the writing of history. Some of these writings have been preoccupied with reflecting upon the status and cultural value attached to the archive in the writing of history in present times. What is the nature of the archive and how did it acquire its authoritative status? If it is not obvious already, these scholars are saying that this way of producing knowledge about the past, what we now understand as "history" is of recent vintage, a particular way we moderns live down our past. In an equally famous volume commenting on *Archive Fever*, historian Carolyn Steedman writes that several topics came into focus in Derrida's text in 1994: the archive as "a way of seeing or a way of knowing; the archive as a symbol or form of power". If that is the case what constitutes "the power" of the archive? Why must countries possess national archives? How does the archive direct our way of knowing the past?

Unconventional Archiving

The “fever”, it seems has finally spread to Singapore. Or rather, the fever has always been here, un-diagnosed. In this issue, we bring some of these questions to bear in our profile of an archivist and historian. Since 1995, Mr CC Chin (陈剑) has spent more than ten years researching and collecting materials on the history of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). s/pores members Lim Cheng Tju and Sai Siew Min sat down with Mr Chin one September evening to talk about Mr Chin’s “unconventional archiving”. We reproduce here a transcript of that interview.

As Mr Chin noted that day, there are books on the history of the MCP but these have not made use of materials produced and released by the party itself. Neither do these books attempt to represent the voices of the leaders and followers of the Communist movement in Malaya. We did not get directly into why this was the case and what it says about the state of historiography in Singapore and Malaysia. Instead, through Mr Chin’s from-the-ground-up snippets on his archiving efforts, we got a glimpse of an archive-in-the-making. There is a tendency these days to read *Archive Fever* (or anything written by Derrida for that matter) as an elaborate metaphor for something else and to treat the text as not about any “real” archive or processes and methods of archiving in particular. Mr Chin’s reflections confound such a dichotomous reading of the metaphorical and the historically “real” archive. As historian Achille Mbembe observes about the authoritative status of the archive, its aura is drawn from its very materiality:

The term “archives” first refers to a building, a symbol of a public institution...However, by “archives” is also understood a collection of documents—normally written documents—kept in this building...The status and power of the archive derive from this entanglement of building and documents. The archive has neither status nor power without an architectural dimension, which encompasses the physical space of the site of the building, its motifs and columns, the arrangement of the rooms, the organization of the “files”, the labyrinth of corridors..... (“The Power of the Archive and its Limits” in Carolyn Hamilton ed. *Refiguring the Archive*, 2002)

Our interview with Mr Chin reveals the difficulties of working with and against this authoritative archive, one that proves its authenticity and power through a concrete architecture of building and documents. As Mr Chin notes at the beginning of the interview, the difficulties of writing a history of the MCP begin at the most fundamental level, i.e. absence of “a real” archive and therefore, the need to create one. Yet at every turn, the aura of the real archive intrudes in the creation of a particular archive seemingly ill-suited to such a definition. The problem of archiving the MCP was already embedded decades ago in its struggle against the colonizers. Party documents were scattered, buried, lost and destroyed; Party followers and leaders remain bound to one another in a complex thicket of entangled interests, emotions, fears and differential reassessments of their individual and collective past. Mr Chin’s “archive” appears to be the antithesis of the austere and powerful state archive outlined by Mbembe, causing us to pause and re-think

the quotidian effects of power in utterly rearranging the architecture of this particular archive. An anthropologist who has worked on archiving in Greece once wrote:

Just as an archive of power asserts its autonomy and self-sufficiency by centralizing its holdings and importing materials from other locations to subsume its categories, the inability to hold on to important documents and halt their materialization as paper, pulp, garbage, or ashes can be a telling sign of political subordination or persecution. (Penelope Paipillias, *Genres of Recollection: Archival Poetics and Modern Greece*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005)

Most of what is written about the archival turn in the academia concern un-packing the aura of the archive especially the colonial archive. Few have ventured to think about the effort to mimic the aura of the archive even as its creators realize how their best archiving efforts are consistently undone by the uneven-ness of political, economic and cultural resources. Our interview with Mr Chin reveals, not *pace* Derrida the unraveling of an archive of power. Instead, it left us wondering about the distinctive character of the archive that Mr Chin has put together under tremendous difficulty. Mr Chin's archiving efforts made us realize that the archive is not an epistemological unit—a written primary document consulted by historians in a spare reading room. Mr Chin's archive bears the traces of history as well. For this reason alone, his archiving efforts tell part of the story about the MCP's struggle, the consequences of which have not been adequately understood. An important sub-text to the writing of an authoritative history of the MCP is how this history is to be written in contemporary times in which case, the effort to archive the MCP is unavoidably also a gesture at keeping history alive. We hope our interview with Mr Chin will alert s/pores readers to the nitty-gritty nuts-and-bolts of how the archive directs our way of knowing the past.

Profile: an Interview with Mr CC Chin (陈剑)

C.C. Chin alias Chen Jian was born in 1940 in Singapore. A graduate of Nanyang University (1965–66), he is an independent researcher and has been a visiting scholar with the Centre for the Study of the Chinese Southern Diaspora, Australian National University; a Research Fellow of the Institute of South East Asian Studies, Jinan University in Guangzhou, China and affiliated researcher in Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. He has been involved in research on the history of the Chinese in Southeast Asia, and on the Hakka dialect group. He has also been a council member of the National Archives of Singapore (1990–2000), Adviser to the Society of Asian Studies, and a Council member of the South Seas Society, as well as Chief Editor of the *Journal of the South Seas Society*. He has written a number of articles and book chapters in both English and Chinese on the history of the Japanese Occupation and the Malayan Communist Party, and in 2004 he co-edited (with Karl Hack) *Dialogues with Chin Peng: New Light on the Malayan Communist Party* (NUS Press).

The interview was conducted in Mandarin by Lim Cheng Tju and Sai Siew Min. This transcript is translated, extracted and adapted from the Mandarin original by Sai Siew Min.

Interviewers:

Perhaps you can begin by telling us how you became interested in researching on the Malayan Communist Party?

CC Chin:

I was initially involved in literary criticism. In this area, Mr Fang Xiu, 方修(Translator's note: A seasoned journalist, Fang did pioneering research on Chinese literature in Singapore and Malaya) had already done a lot in terms of analyzing and collecting related historical materials. After reading him, I started to go through some old newspapers and discovered that between the mid-1920s and mid-1930s, Mr Fang referred to this period as the "Newly-emerged Literature" Actually a group of left-wing writers who came from the North (mainland China) and some were in fact Communists, they were influenced by socialist thinking from Japan and launched a Proletariat literature movement. When they came to Singapore, they also advocated the same thing. However, during the 1960s, because Mr Fang was constrained by the political environment, he did not use the term "Proletariat literature movement". Instead he used the term "new literature" and not "Proletariat literature movement". So, I realized that from very early on, in Singapore and Malaya, the socialist realist literature was influenced by left-wing thinking. What was this left-wing thinking? It referred essentially to the ideological influences of Communism. Later on, in the 1950s and 1960s right up until the 1980s, people considered it taboo to use the term "left-wing", so they used the word "progressive" instead. But the word "progressive" is very ambiguous. What is progress? What is the basis for referring to your literature as "progressive"? Your literature must be influenced by something, a strand of thought or ideology. What is this ideology? To me, I am interested in reassessing Singapore-Malayan literature. Since I research on ideology, I am interested in using ideology to position literature. From the point of view of ideology, I argue that the social realist literature in Singapore and Malaya was in actual fact, left-wing literature.

Interviewers:

So, you mean your interest in history began because of literature?

CC Chin:

Yes. I began from there. I realized that there is some connection to the revolutionary movement led by the Malayan Communist Party. For example, after World War Two, there was a debate between two camps in the field of literature. One camp advocated Malayan literature. These days, we tend to refer to this camp as representing consciousness about "localization". The other camp advocated a sojourner (qiaomin, 侨民) consciousness. In this debate, the localization-Malayan camp was represented by the Malayan Communist Party while the latter was represented by Hu Yuzhi, 胡愈之 and the China Democratic League. (Translator's note: Hu is a very prominent personality in modern Chinese literature. Writer, translator and political commentator, Hu had served as

Chief Editor in Singapore's *Nanyang Siang Pau*, an important Chinese daily founded by Tan Kah Kee before the Japanese Occupation.) So, I felt that that we should get history of the MCP right. Of course, in the past, I have always been interested in the history of Malaya and in the MCP in particular. I have read a lot about it. I have read a lot of books written especially by foreigners because there was nothing written on this by the locals. There was a book on the national liberation movement in Malaya published by the Nantah alumni. I was also involved in that. In actual fact, however, no one has written a complete history of Communist thought and movement in Malaya. To do so demands going back to the source, that is, the Malayan Communist Party. So, I went to see them. I went to see Fang Zhuangbi. (Translator's note: For details on Fang, see s/pores, Vol.1, Issue 1) Fang threw up his hands and said there was nothing. I went with Fang to see Chin Peng. Chin Peng also said he had nothing. They said there was no history? How can there be no history? After fifty or sixty years of political struggle, so many from the Left, including myself, who had supported the left-wing movement, so many people who had supported the MCP would want to know how the struggle unfolded, how the Communist movement developed. How can there be no history? This state of affairs prompted me to reflect deeply on the issue. I put aside literature and went into researching the history of the MCP. This was how it began.....

Interviewers: We would never have guessed it started from (your engagement with literary criticism)!

When I went into researching this history (of the MCP), existing historians, whether they be historians supporting the government or independent scholars, relied mainly on second hand materials, mainly those kept and maintained by the archives. These consisted predominantly of reports by intelligence officers. These reports have their limitations. What are some of these limitations? For example, if I need to report on a particular incident that will cost me a spanking and yet I have no choice but to report on it, what do I do? I downplay its significance. But what if I report on an incident that will earn me money, accolades and promotion opportunities, I magnify its significance. So, when we use these reports and materials, we have to be critical. How can we be critical of these materials? How do we know when a report has amplified or downplayed the significance of an incident? That's not easy, especially in a situation when there is no corroborating material; we have no choice but to accept the veracity (of the archival materials) in its entirety. Many historians and scholars think that because these archival materials are official documents, they are absolutely trustworthy and their veracity is unquestionable. When I undertook the research, it is not possible to do this. Of course, the official documents are part of what I have to consider but it only constitutes one part of the materials I need to consider. I cannot take them at face value.

More important are the first hand sources. What are these sources? Documents issued by the MCP. I said (to the MCP), please support my research and allow me access to the Party materials. But documents belonging to the Party cannot be so casually turned over (to an outsider). So, I suggested to Fang Zhuangbi that we cooperate since Fang is interested in historical research and writing as well. Fang will be responsible for collecting Party documents while I would be responsible for collecting official archival

materials. Let's work together. Fang Zhuangbi was terribly excited. But when we went to the village, he said that this project needs the approval of the MCP North Malayan Politburo but they rejected his request. I told Fang to see them again, to tell them that CC Chin has decided to continue with this project since this part of history cannot be left blank. I hope that the Party will give me his support. This time, the reply came quicker than our last request. Why should our history be written by an outsider? So our request was again rejected.

I was rather angry at their response. I decided to go ahead without the support of the Party. I was thinking what's wrong with these MCP leaders. Here is someone willing to come all the way to research and write the history of the MCP, why the attitude? Who is going to write this history? Their position was that the history of the MCP should be written by "us"? Who's "us"? Can they write their own history? Can they treat their history in a just manner? Do they dare confront their history? I have my doubts. Even at that stage, from even my slight understanding, I know that in the overall struggle of the Left-wing movement, the MCP had made several mistakes. How are you going to confront these mistakes? How are you going to account for the sum of your historical experiences? Can you confront these mistakes? These are all problems. But given the Party's position, there was nothing we could do about it. Fang said he would help me as far as possible in his personal capacity. But I have already decided. This history cannot remain one-sided, meaning that it cannot be dominated by writings from the Western perspective, Cold War thinking and the like. There has to be a more just position from which to review this history.....

Interviewers: Why the reluctance to let someone write the history of the MCP, you think?

The Party has not reached an agreement over many incidents and historical episodes, how do you write a history about something that does not have a conclusion? Second, with regards to my position, attitude and why I am researching the history of the MCP, the Party is still doubtful, even though I am on friendly terms with Fang Zhuangbi. Where Fang is concerned, the Party also has their own evaluation of him. This is what I know. Singaporeans in the MCP, the Singaporean comrades in the MCP are a marginalized lot.

Interviewers: Including Fang Zhuangbi?

CC Chin:

Fang Zhuangbi was such a talented person. He should be given due credit for his work even if he had not been entirely successful but even in his death, his position within the Party was not clear at all. He was not part of any central or state-level committee of the MCP. Back then, according to party organization in Singapore, he should be the secretary of the Singapore City Committee. (Translator's note: MCP branch organization in Singapore) Before him was Eu Chooi Yip. Fang led the MCP underground movement in Singapore, so he should be considered the secretary of the Singapore City Committee. But just before Eu Chooi Yip's time, the Singapore City Committee was disbanded and a working committee took its place. Even during Eu Chooi Yip's time, the Singapore City Committee no longer existed. Since the Singapore City Committee no longer existed,

there should not be a “secretary” position for the committee. Fang could be given an equivalent official position but (the Party) has never done so.....

Interviewers: How did you continue with your research since they were not supportive of your effort?

CC Chin:

I have my ways. After all, history is not something that can be monopolized by a few individuals. Hundreds of thousands of people were involved in this movement. If I include supporters and sympathizers, there could be a million people involved over such a long time period. Even if you were Chin Peng, there would be a limit to how much you would know. This was a mass-based movement. So the only solution was to return to the grassroots, the people, the masses and the ordinary Party members.

Moreover, the political struggle undertaken by the MCP took place in a dispersed manner. Individuals would only be in charge of a very small area of responsibility with no knowledge of how fellow members are operating. Chin Peng would have some general knowledge of the struggle but what happened in concrete terms, he would not know. He would have to locate the individual concerned. So, I went back to the grassroots, to locate these individuals, to conduct oral interviews with them. So I have done a lot of oral history recordings. But of course, there are also problems with this methodology. People age and their memories are no longer reliable. There is also the possibility that they may try to hide or glorify something. Still, at least seventy to eighty percent of what people say was true. For the same incident or process, you could ask ten people. From what these ten people tell you, you would be able to get a “relative truth”. In other words, “history” would more or less emerge from here. This was the painstaking method I used.

Interviewers: How many people have you interviewed now, in more than a decade?

CC Chin: More than two hundred people, fully funded by myself. Whether the people I met were MCP leaders or just ordinary Party members, I encouraged them to tell or to write. I have published a series of books (drawing from these oral history materials). My intention is to use these publications to show everyone that these stories can be told, can be made public and that there is nothing to hide. There is no need to worry. Hopefully, it would encourage more people to do the same. These publications had the intended effect.....In the MCP, there are those who were marginalized, or who had split from the Party or were branded as “traitors” or “deserters”. Regardless of their status now, they had played important roles in that process. This should be documented as well, so I encouraged them to write and tell. Some were willing but there were those who hesitated. When I first began, I encountered tremendous difficulties.

There were multiple concerns on the part of these former participants. For example, if they are now living in the PRC and are PRC citizens, what is the position of Chinese Communist Party government on their speaking out? The CCP may say that since you are now a PRC citizen, you should not concern yourself with Malayan affairs. Second, this was a clandestine operation and any information on it was considered secret. Should I be

publicizing this? Third, how would Chin Peng see me? Will I be seen as leaking Party secrets? There were so many worries. How will it impact me if I tell? How will you write about me? If I give you the ingredients, you are the chef. You may come up with something negative about me and the Party. There were so many of these fears. There was a lot of going back and forth. I could interview the same person five times and I would have five different stories of the same event.

Interviewers: When you first started out, how did you decide who you would interview? Did you lay out a systematic research plan or did you just speak to anyone willing to talk to you?

CC Chin:

I did not have a lot of choice. Of course, I do have a plan. If you want to know about Party policies, you have to talk to the Party leaders. If you want to talk about an event or incident, you need to talk to the individuals who were involved.

Interviewers:

So, was your plan to start by looking at Party policies or key incidents?

CC Chin:

I could not follow a research plan to the letter. Whoever I could “get my hands on”, I would approach. I would meet someone, after figuring out his identity, I would ask.

Interviewers: You described earlier interviewing people in the PRC. Did you begin with a particular country, say Malaysia, before moving onto the PRC or Singapore?

CC Chin: No. I was going all over. Wherever I happened to be, (if there was an opportunity), I’ll be getting hold of people...

Interviewers: Do you think some of the concerns and anxieties of your interviewees about speaking out differed according to their current citizenship as well as where they are residing now?

CC Chin: As I have mentioned earlier, there are concerns about personal interests, situation, political responsibility and so on. Some (in the PRC) may still have family and relatives in Malaya and Singapore. Their knowledge about the situation here is quite vague and not so updated. They do not know about the position of the governments here for example, with regards to ideological issues, the position of the governments here (on these historical issues) and what they will do. So, they will worry about whether what they say will implicate their family members living here. They will not want to speak out or will be very vague about what they say.

Interviewers: What about those living in Malaysia now?

CC Chin: Those who have returned to civilian lives in Malaysia and have settled down, they have a better grasp of the local situation now and will speak out because they don’t

think it is a big deal. But there are those who are afraid of implicating fellow colleagues who are still alive, so they will refuse to speak. Some do not want their current lives to be disrupted. So, it varies from individual to individual...

Interviewers: What about Singapore?

CC Chin: It is the same with Singapore. It varies from person to person but it is harder to make people speak out in Singapore. (These anxieties and concerns) vary case-by-case. There is also another reason. For some people, the outcome of this political struggle has been a source of profound disappointment. They feel that I have sacrificed my whole life, my career, my happiness, my family, everything. I have to start from scratch. Have I wasted my life? Some feel that they have led glorious lives. Others feel they have wasted their lives. The former will speak. The latter, on the other hand, do not wish to re-visit the past. To them, this is a failed history, why do I want to talk about "failure"? This is their perception of the past.

Interviewers: What about your collection of written materials?

CC Chin: That is the biggest difficulty. Now that the dust has settled and some publications are coming out in black and white, people are more relaxed about speaking out. Where oral history interviewing is concerned, some people are now approaching me on their own accord to tell their stories. I have been very busy. Sometimes, they work by a referral system. A would recommend B and B would refer to C. Moreover, I have been doing this for so long. Over the years, I have also established a reputation and rapport with them. They know my position, work and attitude. They have begun to trust me. They know I am sincere, just and fair and that I have a deep understanding of these issues. I am not going to demonize them.

Where collection of written documents is concerned, the MCP was in a constant combat situation. They were very mobile and the situation was so fluid. When they moved, some documents will be lost. Sometimes when it was not impossible to take along documents, they will bury them and now these can no longer be found. They are lost. So locating written documents is a painful process. The archives of the Internal Security Department of Singapore and Malaysia are very rich in documents but getting access is a huge problem. These are considered "classified materials" and access is difficult. I have tried. So, I can only get hold of written documents from old comrades who had managed to preserve them with great effort and sometimes even at great personal risks. After I have won their trust they may show me some of the materials they had kept. Bit by bit, piece by piece, I managed to accumulate and build up a collection of documents. It was a very painful process. Of course this also means that my collection is incomplete but it was better than not having anything. People will still keep things. For example, at the house of an old comrade now living at Tianjin, I got a stack of newspapers, the *Freedom News*. (Translator's note: The *Freedom News* is the samizdat newspaper printed by the MCP in Singapore) These were printed in 1955. I also managed to collect over the years all kinds of party documents. I spent more than ten years collecting these documents. This is more than ten years worth of effort.