



CHIN KEE ONN

# MALAYA UPSIDE DOWN



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LEADERSHIP  
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## 2 Malaya Upside Down

How was this lightning conquest possible? Was the much-vaunted, mighty Fortress of Singapore, acclaimed impregnable and what-not, mere propaganda? Why did more than sixty-five thousand well-equipped men of the British and Australian Forces surrender to the Japanese, instead of fighting it out? Were the British and the Australians short of food, short of arms and ammunition? No! Then, why was there no fight in them except withdrawals and withdrawals? Could it be that Fate was shaping a new destiny for the East?

Time and History will furnish the complete answers. At time of writing, we in Malaya, could only draw conclusions based on what was known in the wake of war.

It was the general opinion of people in occupied Malaya that the first contributory cause that gave Japan this cyclonic victory, was the success of her surprise attack on Pearl Harbour on the 8th. of December, 1941. This crushing blow crippled the main strength of the American Pacific Fleet. It smashed vital military installations, military stores and strategic facilities in that stronghold. In boxing *parlance*, Japan had committed a double-foul. Firstly, she struck before the declaration of war, while her special envoys were still in America talking peace, which was tantamount to striking an opponent before the gong. Secondly, she struck at such an unexpected place, that it was tantamount to striking at the vitals of an opponent below the belt.

Japan argued that since Britain and the U.S.A. had applied on her all their political and economic screws and had thereby put her against the wall, they had no excuse not to be prepared for any exigency. But no amount of self-justification and wrangling could exonerate Japan.

So great was the damage done to Pearl Harbour that the United States momentarily staggered. The programme of Allied strategy and military co-ordination in the Far East had to be drastically altered. And while the Allies were beset with grave, precipitous and unexpected problems, while momentous events in Europe and the Middle East and in the North African Front were changing with kaleidoscopic rapidity to the advantage of the Axis Powers, the Japanese, fully prepared for war and conscious of the great advantage gained by their first foul blow, forged right ahead! Supreme opportunists that they were, they

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*To  
All Who Suffered in Malaya  
During The Japanese  
Occupation*





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## Foreword

THE occupation of Malaya by the Japanese cut off this country from the world-at-large. This fact has caused a sort of hiatus in the understanding between Malaysians who were in the country during the occupation and Malaysians who either happened to be out of the country or got away at the last moment. It is most important in the interests of both of those who stayed and those who were away that the ignorance should be remedied on both sides. How often have I noticed in conversation, especially with ex-prisoners of war and internees, a curious though imponderable time lag between our outlooks!

Speaking for those who were not here I will say that in spite of the many accounts we have received of experiences under the Japanese Terror, we are just beginning to have a conception of what things were really like. Mr. Chin's book, "Malaya Upside Down", to which I am invited to contribute this Foreword, is a most complete and illuminating account of Malaya under the Japanese. In particular his analysis of the expedients of the invader to enslave the population and to squeeze the country of its wealth in the interests of Japan must be of the greatest value to the student of Far Eastern economics and politics. I feel that the book will take its place alongside those few choice works which make Malaya a reality to the reader.

VICTOR PURCELL

*Singapore, November, 1945*

## Postscript to Foreword

Since the above Foreword was written, Mr. Chin Kee Onn's book has had a most gratifying reception and a second edition is now called for. On every hand I have heard favourable comments expressed of the book—in particular from a distinguished neutral who was in Singapore during the whole of the Japanese regime and who declares that Mr. Chin Kee Onn's descriptions are in no way exaggerated.

I hope that we shall see before long both British and American editions. They would do much to correct the perspective of people far from this country who do not completely realise what liberation meant to Malaya and who do not know that the present troubles, though distressing, are as nothing compared with what was endured by the people of Malaya during the three and a half years of terror. Now there may be hardship — but there is no FEAR! Everywhere one goes one can sense the relief from tension in the smiling faces of the people.

V.P.

*February 25, 1946*

## Preface

THERE is no apology for writing this book. It was not written out of spite or hate. It was not written to condemn or to praise.

It is a record of the times—a commentary on the history of the period.

As the eyes of the world were focussed on Malaya when the Japanese whirlwind swept through the country, the historical scene was suddenly blotted out on the 15th. of February, 1942, when Lieut.-General A.E. Percival signed the surrender—and Malaya was lost to the free world!

What happened to Malaya after that? What did the conquerors do to the land and its people? What was Japanese Administration like? What was the meaning of The New Order, The Co-Prosperity Sphere, Hakkō-Ichiū (Universal Brotherhood) and Japanese Culture? How did the peoples of Malaya respond to Japanese overlordship? What went on politically, economically, and socially in Malaya? Did the people like the new rulers or did they prefer the old? What was life like under the changed conditions?

All these, the people who have had connections with Malaya, want to know. All these, the world wants to know. Malaya, lying at one of the cross roads of the world's commerce, is important to the world. Malaya, the link that joins East to West, certainly has a destiny which is both important and interesting to the world.

This is an unbiased record of its trials and tribulations. It deals with the historic lacuna from the 8th. of December, 1941, when disintegration first set in, to the 5th. of September, 1945, when British re-establishment first began.

This book was written without frills and veneers. It is neither fiction nor propaganda, but a plain testimony of events that happened. Only the most important features are recorded and

only a bird's-eye view is given. Into one book it is futile to cram too many episodes. Documentary details are left to historians.

The times were such that everything was shrouded in the mists of fear, secrecy and suspicion. It was an era of fantastic rumours, but care has been exercised in separating fact from fiction.

This book was written under the constant shadow of death, for literally, walls had ears, and spies were among the best of 'friends'. Such were the circumstances, and so many the pitfalls, that if there had been but one unguarded action, one careless move in the quest for information—then this book would never have been completed.

This is an attempt to fill the historical gap and to place before the world, succinctly and plainly, as true a picture as possible of conditions in Malaya during the brief but tempestuous sway of Japanese suzerainty in this part of Southeast Asia.

THE AUTHOR

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To (*the late*) Mr. Loke Wan Tho, for editing the first Mss. and general assistance.

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To Mr. H. Schweizer, Representative, International Red Cross, Malaya, for his Commentary.

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CHIN KEE ONN

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## A Commentary

MALAYA emerged from Japanese Military Occupation as one emerges from a feverish nightmare, feeling battered and upset, but still sound in mind and body.

I am glad Mr. Chin Kee Onn wrote this book at the time he did. The days are passing quickly. We who have been here during the Occupation already begin to forget the evil atmosphere that prevailed around us and permeated every waking hour of our existence. He captured this atmosphere in his book in a way which later works, on a more historical basis, may not capture anymore. It is good to be on record to remind us of—and to make us ever again enjoy and cherish—the Justice that has come back to us, that priceless Justice and the Freedom that we had lost for so long. It must also remind us of those who fell in battle, or perished in dungeons, so that we may continue to mourn their loss and increase our determination jealously to guard our new-found Liberty against materialism and militarism.

I should like to avail myself of this opportunity to thank the many Chinese, Malay and Indian friends, who, at considerable risk to themselves, remained loyal to the white man as represented by the handful of neutral Europeans who were not interned. They helped us when help was most needed, in the same way as they helped the prisoners-of-war and internees. My thanks also go to those countless and unnamed market-women, stall-holders and shop-keepers who supplied us with food and other necessities, often at reduced prices, although we could offer no reward; and to those people of humble station who served us in a hundred different ways and did not take advantage of the fact that a white face was at a discount under the Japanese regime, that there was no recourse for us against denunciation, petty persecution, bad will, or malice.

For the sake of this good faith alone, which the majority of the population kept towards us, it was worthwhile staying and sharing their hour of trial. I hope it has brought us nearer to each other and taught us that by pulling together, there is nothing that can keep the East and West apart, that we are all members of one Universe, and that it is up to us to make it a pleasant and peaceful Universe to live in.

H. SCHWEIZER

*Representative, International  
Red Cross, Malaya*

*22nd. April, 1946, Singapore*

## Confusion

**BEFORE** the dawn of the 8th. of December, 1941, Singapore was bombed, and before the dawn of the 16th. of February, 1942, Singapore had fallen! Shortly after two months of war, the whole of Malaya had passed into Japanese hands.

The speed of Japanese arms was stupefying. They struck out from the north with a three-pronged, double-column drive down the Malay Peninsula, via the East Coast, the centre, and the West Coast. Before the 10th. of December, 1941, forced landings had been successfully effected at Kota Bahru, Singora and Patani, and once they entered the Peninsula, their progress was irresistible.

Put chronologically, the Japanese sweep-through was as follows:

12th. December,	<b>1941:</b>	Jitra Line in north Kedah pierced.
15 th. December,	<b>1941:</b>	Kedah overrun.
19th. December,	1941:	Penang fell.
28th. December,	<b>1941:</b>	Ipoh occupied.
11th. January,	<b>1942:</b>	Kuala Lumpur occupied.
14th. January,	<b>1942:</b>	Seremban occupied.
<b>16th. January,</b>	<b>1942:</b>	Malacca, Batu Pahat, and Batu Annam occupied.
22nd. January,	1942:	Mersing River crossed.
31st. January,	1942:	Johore Bahru occupied.
4th. February,	1942:	Bombardment of Singapore started.
9th. February,	1942:	Forced landings on Singapore Island effected.
11th. February,	1942:	Bukit Timah reduced and infiltration into Singapore suburbs began.
15th. February,	1942:	Surrender signed at the Ford Plant at Bukit Timah at 7.50 p.m., Malayan Time.



## 2 *Malaya Upside Down*

How was this lightning conquest possible? Was the much-vaunted, mighty Fortress of Singapore, acclaimed impregnable and what-not, mere propaganda? Why did more than sixty-five thousand well-equipped men of the British and Australian Forces surrender to the Japanese, instead of fighting it out? Were the British and the Australians short of food, short of arms and ammunition? No! Then, why was there no fight in them except withdrawals and withdrawals? Could it be that Fate was shaping a new destiny for the East?

Time and History will furnish the complete answers. At time of writing, we in Malaya, could only draw conclusions based on what was known in the wake of war.

It was the general opinion of people in occupied Malaya that the first contributory cause that gave Japan this cyclonic victory, was the success of her surprise attack on Pearl Harbour on the 8th. of December, 1941. This crushing blow crippled the main strength of the American Pacific Fleet. It smashed vital military installations, military stores and strategic facilities in that stronghold. In boxing *parlance*, Japan had committed a double-foul. Firstly, she struck before the declaration of war, while her special envoys were still in America talking peace, which was tantamount to striking an opponent before the gong. Secondly, she struck at such an unexpected place, that it was tantamount to striking at the vitals of an opponent below the belt.

Japan argued that since Britain and the U.S.A. had applied on her all their political and economic screws and had thereby put her against the wall, they had no excuse not to be prepared for any exigency. But no amount of self-justification and wrangling could exonerate Japan.

So great was the damage done to Pearl Harbour that the United States momentarily staggered. The programme of Allied strategy and military co-ordination in the Far East had to be drastically altered. And while the Allies were beset with grave, precipitous and unexpected problems, while momentous events in Europe and the Middle East and in the North African Front were changing with kaleidoscopic rapidity to the advantage of the Axis Powers, the Japanese, fully prepared for war and conscious of the great advantage gained by their first foul blow, forged right ahead I Supreme opportunists that they were, they

kept on striking when their opponents were dazed and disabled.

The second contributory cause towards this quick Japanese victory, was the easy submission of Thailand. The Thai Government had made powerful statements through the Press, the radio and diplomatic channels, proclaiming the strict neutrality of Thailand, and had reiterated in unmistakable terms 'that every Thai would fight to the last man should her territory be invaded'. So convinced were the British and the U.S. Governments of Thai support that every possible military and economic aid was expeditiously extended to Thailand, and a Thai Military Mission, just before the Japanese offensive, was welcomed to inspect the Fortress of Singapore and the defences of Malaya. Instead of making a stand upon the violation of her territory, she succumbed either to Japanese pressure or to Japanese persuasion, and concluded a War Alliance with Japan. By this Alliance, Thailand had to facilitate the passage of Japanese arms through Thai domains. It was alleged she gave Japan aid in men and supplies.

At that period, the North African Front and the threat to the Middle East having become critical, British war policy was to play for time. Britain had depended on Thailand to make a stand, at least to retard the progress of the Japanese. That faith was shattered. That messed up the British time-table.

Apologists have advanced the view that Thailand (like Belgium, Holland, and Denmark) being a small and weak nation could not but do what she had done to prevent national suicide. There is no attempt here to condemn Thailand or to condone with her. The fact that stands unshakable is that Thailand, by her submission to Japan, had badly upset the calculations of the British High Command. The armour of British confidence received its first crack, and confusion began to seep through.

The third contribution towards the Japanese walk-over was the sinking of the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* off north east Malayan waters, two days after the outbreak of the East-Asia War. The 'unsinkable' was sunk! The news shocked and electrified an unbelieving world. It benumbed the British in Malaya. The effect on morale was petrifying. Many British civilians were known to have wept after the first shock of the news had been absorbed. Even Churchill admitted: 'In all my experience I do

#### 4 *Malaya Upside Down*

not remember any naval blow so heavy or so painful as the sinking of the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*'.

The Pride of the British Navy went down to tactics hitherto unheard-of for sheer unorthodoxy, downright fanaticism and undreamed-of foolhardiness. Simultaneously with high-altitude bombing, wave after wave of dare-devils dive-bombed from all directions. They roared through the curtain of terrific gun-fire from the two battleships and discharged their torpedoes. The ferocity of the Japanese attacks was said to have outshone the British action at Taranto. Now only did the British realise that they were up against a foe who could not be taken lightly.

With the sinking of those two capital ships, British hopes started to flounder. Confusion and anxiety became general. The exodus of the British to the south began. It started from the north and gained momentum as it proceeded southwards. As soon as the military started to plan withdrawals, heads of large European concerns and government departments decided to leave, and when they left, civil disorganisation set in. The masses, feeling the loss of leadership and British protection grew panicky, and panic intensified as European evacuation forged southwards. Within two to three weeks, townships, one after another, had been hurriedly evacuated. Confusion and general disorganisation increased. Many people, putting all their faith in the British, followed the military until eventually they reached Singapore. It must be mentioned that throughout this period of steady falling back towards Singapore, there were some Britishers, Europeans, and Americans in government, missionary and commercial appointments who held on to their jobs, until 'ordered south' by the military. It was great of them to desire to stick on, but if they had not left they would have been butchered by the Japanese (and many such instances occurred!). No aspersion is cast on those who (as the Japanese said) 'ran away'. That was a time for fast thinking and faster action, and all civilians, whether European or Asian, were caught in the surging flood of panic and disruption.

The fourth contributory cause was the work of *Fifth Columnists*, before and during the course of the Malayan Campaign. Espionage in Japan had always been an elaborate science, perfected into a national art. It was well-known that every

Japanese photographer, fisherman, planter, farmer, taxidermist, trader, barber and dentist abroad, was a potential fifth columnist.

It was alleged that long before the outbreak of the East-Asia War, every harbour in Malaya, every river, every highway and jungle-path intersecting the States, every air-port, in short, every detail of strategic value for military operations had been plotted, mapped, and filed in Tokyo. What was said of Malaya could be said of the Netherlands East Indies, Borneo, Celebes, New Guinea and the hundred and one islands that dot the south-western Pacific, leading to Australia.

It was asserted that Tokyo knew that hundreds of aircraft, tanks and artillery, earmarked for Malaya, were at the last moment diverted to Russia and the Middle East; that all that Malaya could boast of were a few dozen noisy out-dated Buffalo-fighters; that at best, Australia and the Dutch East Indies could afford very scanty air-support to Malaya. All told, Japanese espionage had called off the British bluff.

It was further alleged that for the Malayan Campaign, Japanese and Sumatrans specially trained for espionage and propaganda, had been planted in Malaya by Japanese agents. They first worked among the kampung-folk and the aborigines in the jungles. Before the outbreak of hostilities, there was already a corps of well-trained Japanese agents consisting of Indonesians, Malays, Indians, Formosans, Chinese and Thais, spread throughout Malaya, so that wherever the Japanese entered, there was immediate co-operation, immediate information regarding the latest British moves and the next likely moves.

*Fifth Columnists* led Japanese troops through jungles, rubber-estates, over hills and down valleys. That was why the Japanese were always outflanking the British, always threatening their retreat routes. The British everywhere were continuously harassed by precipitancy and uncertainty of action. Fifth columnists also percolated into villages and towns, announcing the invincibility and on rush of Japanese arms, and terrorising the country with tales of rape and brigandage, so that the people should run while the running was still good.

Thus they achieved their object—that of disseminating alarm, chaos and total disorganisation.

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The fifth contributory cause was the lack of national consciousness in Malaya. A large part of the population considered themselves as 'guests and sojourners'. They were peace-loving folk who did not know what war meant. Look at the variety of races that were in Malaya then: Malays, Chinese, Indians, Ceylonese, Burmese, Thais, Arabs, Filipinos, Jews, Indonesians, Japanese, Russians, British, Australians, Dutch, Italians, Germans and Eurasians. Excepting the Malays and the aborigines, the others came to Malaya for trade and commerce. It mattered little to them who ruled the country, as long as they got freedom and justice. Therefore, there was no Home Front in Malaya. The people were not organised for total resistance and total war. There was no such thing as defending Malaya to the last man.

The Japanese knew that to the inexperienced, it would not be easy to make out by appearance alone whether an Asian were Japanese, Chinese, Malay, Thai or Burmese. So, Japanese soldiers disguised as Chinese or Malay farmers mingled with the disorganised masses and infiltrated towards the south as their army's vanguard. It was impossible for the British to sort out the sheep from the goats. The trains were choked; the trunk roads were crowded; everybody was bound somewhere. There was simply no time to check on everyone's bona-fide.

Thus the Japanese exploited civilian disruption, and they ploughed through the country as if going through loose sand.

The sixth cause (considered in many quarters as the most vital one) was the lack of air-support for the British. The Japanese had air superiority over Malaya. Not that there were no air-engagements over Malaya—the R.A.F., the Australian Hudson-bombers and the Dutch Martin-bombers were not in sufficient numbers to cope with the Japanese air-arm. The direct result was the demoralisation of the British and Australian forces. The *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* had gone down to attack from the air. British positions everywhere in Malaya were heavily bombed and strafed and were without sufficient and effective air retaliation. Retreating columns and motor-transports were pestered and chased from the air, resulting in hundreds of damaged trucks and armoured-cars lying along the highways from Penang to Singapore. The Japanese Air Force co-operated so efficiently with their ground forces, especially in their outflanking moves

that it created nausea among the British and Australians at the helplessness of their position.

The Japanese used their Air Force not only to hit at military objectives but to create as much panic as possible among the civilians. In their attack on towns they dropped only bombs of small calibre, and resorted to machine-gunning of people in the streets and buildings. The disruption of Penang ending in its easy capture was achieved through air terrorism. By such tactics, the Japanese caused the helter-skelter evacuation of towns and villages, turning them into deserted ghost-habitats.

The **seventh** contributory cause was the loss of British sea-power in the East. The sinking of the two capital ships placed Malaya and East Asian waters under Japanese control. It had much to do with the transfer of British naval forces from Trincomalee to Madagascar. Japanese sea-power even showed its fangs in Ceylon and South Indian waters. Because of naval supremacy in 1942, Japan was able to launch simultaneous campaigns against Hong Kong, the Philippines, Borneo, Celebes, New Guinea, Java, Sumatra and Burma. The Allies in East Asia were simultaneously engaged and distracted in all directions. In all these campaigns, the Japanese effected successful surprise landings wherever they planned. British sea-lanes and supply-routes from India and Australia were cut off. No large-scale outside aid could reach Malaya, although the tottering British resistance was kept alive by daily hopes that reinforcements especially air-support, would somehow appear in the nick of time. British hopes held on when General Sir Archibald Wavell declared on the 19th. of December, 1941: 'Although the Japanese have gained advantage in the south, there is still a long way to take Singapore or Malaya.'

The hopes of all Malaysians were aroused when Sir Shenton Thomas, Governor of the Straits Settlements, declared on the 20th. of December: 'Singapore must not fall, it shall not fall. We must protect every inch of ground towards the great task that lies ahead of us, knowing as we can know for certain, that ultimate victory will be ours.'

Later, when almost three-quarters of the Peninsula had been lost, Major-Gen. Gordon Bennett, C-in-C of the Australian Forces in Malaya, announced: 'The situation is well in hand





### CHIN KEE ONN

The author was born in Ipoh, the centre of Malaya's richest tin district. He was teaching in an English school in Singapore when the Japanese overran Malaya. During the Occupation he tried his hand at all manner of jobs, finally joining the Culture and Economics Research Institute in Ipoh. While there, the idea of writing this book germinated. After the Liberation he was a teacher until his secondment to the Government Information Services. He worked as a State Information Officer in Perak and Pahang before becoming Press Attache in the Malayan High Commission in Canberra in 1963. For four and a half years after his retirement from Government service in 1965 he was the general manager of a bank in Kuala Lumpur. A keen sportsman, he was three times Malayan Tennis Champion and has represented Malaya in Shanghai & Batavia. Now he devotes his time entirely to writing. He is the author of two other books: *Marahee* and *The Grand Illusion*.

- What did the Conquerors do to Malaya?
- What was the 'NEW ORDER' like?
- What did 'Co-prosperity' mean?
- What was the Secret of Japan's military strength?
- How did the Malayan people respond to Japanese rule?
- What went on politically, economically and socially in Occupied Malaya?