

Reluctant Revolutionaries: Indonesian and Filipino Communist Exiles in the People's Republic in the Wake of Sino-US Rapprochement

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Panel 15: *In the Shadows of the Cold War: Marginal Actors in Global Politics*

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Abstract:

How can we manage disruptions to our personal lives caused by unforeseen international events? How should we re-evaluate our options when suddenly confronted with a changed world? The challenges many of us presently face in the time of pandemic echo those of members of the Indonesian and Filipino Communist Parties living in China during the Cultural Revolution. Political upheavals in their home countries—the September Thirtieth Movement in Indonesia in 1965 and the Plaza Miranda Bombing in Manila in 1972—turned their originally temporary travels abroad into long-term exiles. The rise of anti-communist, authoritarian regimes led respectively by Suharto and Marcos made it unsafe for these exiles to go back and stranded them indefinitely in a foreign land. In the 1960s and early 1970s, under the protection of the Chinese government, they lived a materially privileged life and were exempt from the economic hardship faced by ordinary Chinese citizens. Yet they were also constantly surveilled and closely controlled by their Chinese host. The excruciating political campaigns during the tempestuous Cultural Revolution caused internal fissures among the exiles and challenged their previously utopian views of Communist China.

With the 1972 Sino-US rapprochement, China redirected its foreign policies and retracted its support for foreign revolutionary forces. As China sought normalization of diplomatic relations with Suharto's Indonesia and Marcos' Philippines, the exiles' very existence became an embarrassment to Beijing. Meanwhile, Chinese staff of the International Liaison Department (ILD) of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) whose careers centered on making life arrangements for the "foreign guests" suffered a significant pay cut as the state no longer prioritized financial aid to the international communist movement. How did the exiles and their Chinese caretakers adapt to a new era of Reform and Opening? The exceptionally entrepreneurial staff members of the clandestine "510 Office" of the ILD in the suburb of Nanchang, the provincial capital of the landlocked Jiangxi in southeast China, responded creatively. They used a closed compound built for the exiles to profit from China's burgeoning hospitality industry. As for the exiles, many had left for Western countries by the early 1980s. The Indonesians who stayed became naturalized Chinese citizens and some even transformed themselves into devoted advocates for "socialism of Chinese characteristic," as epitomized in Deng Xiaoping's developmentalism. In a historical twist, a few Filipino exiles took up positions as leading journalists for American broadcasting companies in China including CNN, ABC and NBC and became well-known for their reporting on the 1989 student movements in Tian'anmen Square.

The exiles' predicament has parallels to that of many of us during COVID-19, as we endure hardened international borders, restricted mobility, family separation, derailed career plans, and

difficulty navigating a confusing information sphere. Their experiments offer possible ways to stay flexible and hopeful in the face of an uncertain future while helping us reflect on how individual memories—both theirs and our own—were and are being shaped by shock, seclusion, and structural changes across the world.