

***Cultural intermediaries as psychological warriors:  
British and American propaganda in early Cold War South East Asia***

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**Abstract:**

Owing to the nature of the Cold War, determining how best to influence individuals, groups, communities and even whole societies was of paramount importance in a number of key strategic areas of the world. One such area for a number of the Cold War's principle actors – the US, UK, France, the PRC and the USSR – was South East Asia. Officials widely acknowledged from an early stage, drawing on lessons from World War Two and before, that overt ('white') government propaganda would not achieve significant results in influencing those 'fence-sitting' communities and societies around the world which were most prized, and thus most competed over. 'Grey', or unattributable, propaganda, therefore, became increasingly highly regarded. This worked by identifying key unofficial individuals, groups, or communication channels deemed to be of most influence in shaping opinion in their respective societies – 'gatekeepers' or 'cultural intermediaries' – and using them as 'cut-outs' for state influence. This masked the covert governmental source of information, increased the perceived authenticity of the overt source, and framed the information in more locally-tailored and, therefore in theory, influential ways. How certain types of 'knowledge' were framed as and accomplished the status of being legitimate or credible information, and were thus treated as such by the next person/group/institution in the 'chain' of information dissemination, thus rested on particular framers/framing.

This paper will examine several case studies of how British and American governments sought to work through such intermediaries in South East Asia in order to prevent the spread of communism, manage regional decolonisation, and more generally build support for non-communist, pro-democracy, pro-Western governments and politico-social systems. One significant tactical example is the British use of Surrendered Enemy Personnel (SEP) as psychological warfare devices targeted at communist insurgents and their civilian support networks during the Malayan Emergency. More generally, several other cases will be addressed: leaders and organisations of labour, students, religion (primarily Buddhism), intellectuals, and the Overseas Chinese communities in several nations in the region, all principal zones of Cold War and colonial/anti-colonial competition. As will be demonstrated, however, such intermediaries were not mere puppets. Government control over them was not usually great or constant and they had their own additional agendas. Determining the extent to which such state efforts to operate through cultural intermediaries was 'successful' is, therefore, far from clear.