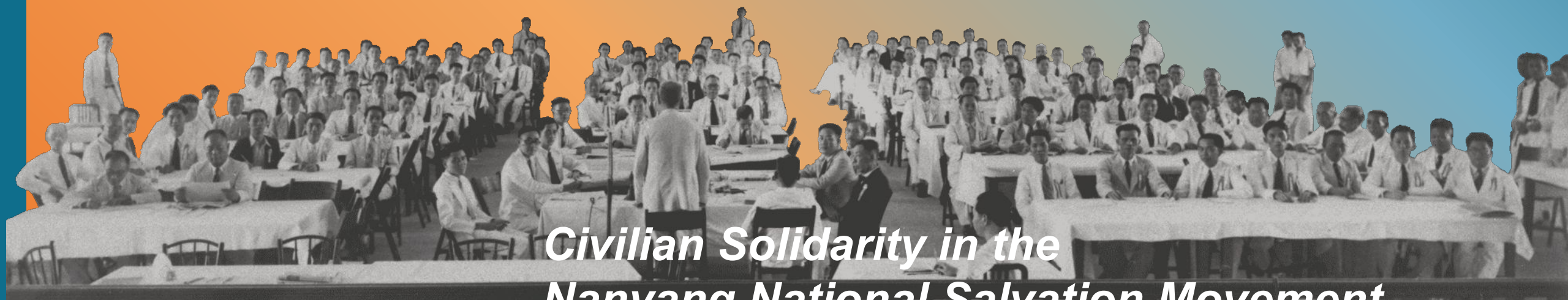


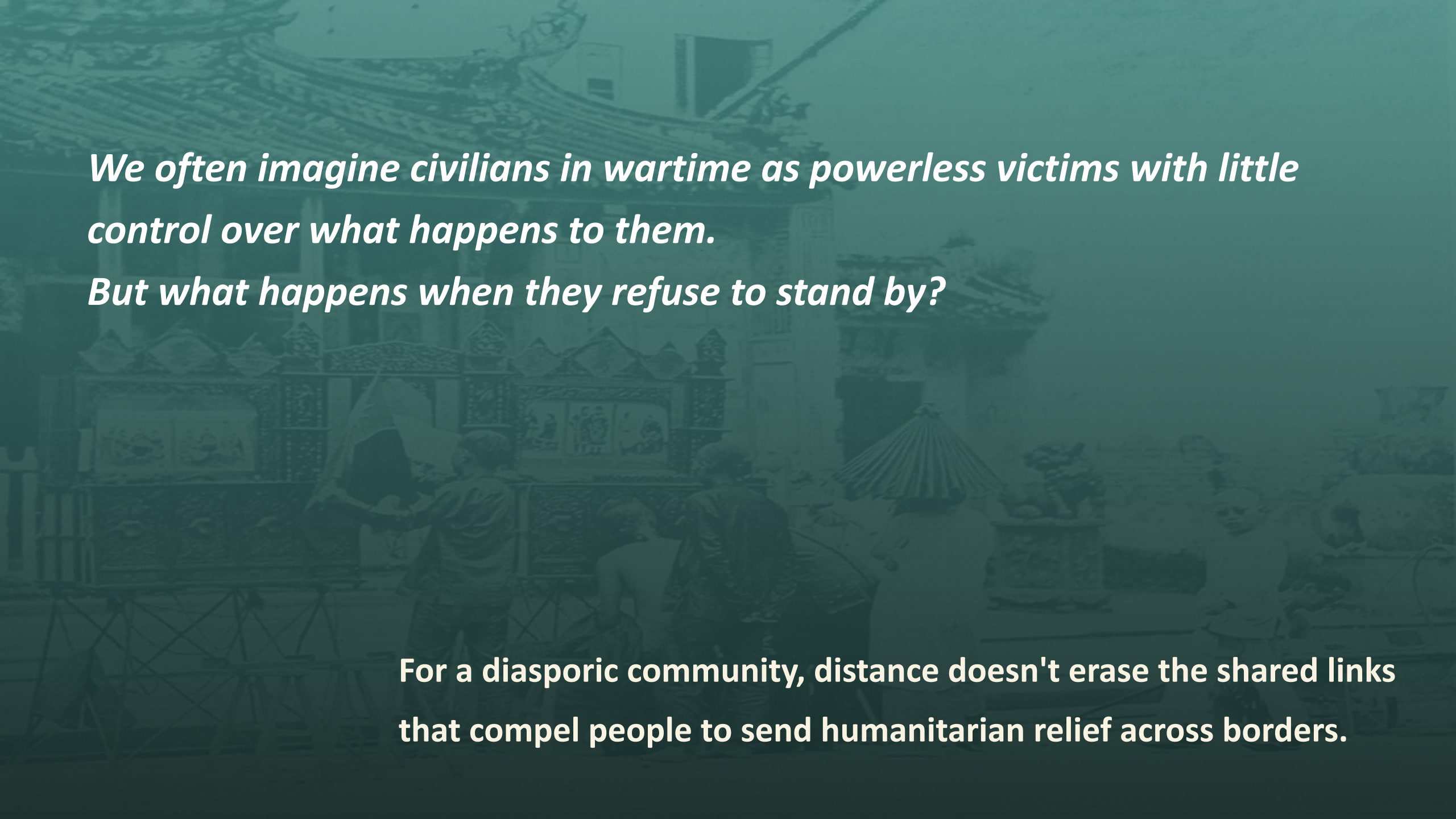
FROM COMPASSION TO COLLECTIVE ACTION

Edith Tso



*Civilian Solidarity in the
Nanyang National Salvation Movement*

南洋華僑救國運動 · British Malaya, 1937-1941



We often imagine civilians in wartime as powerless victims with little control over what happens to them.

But what happens when they refuse to stand by?

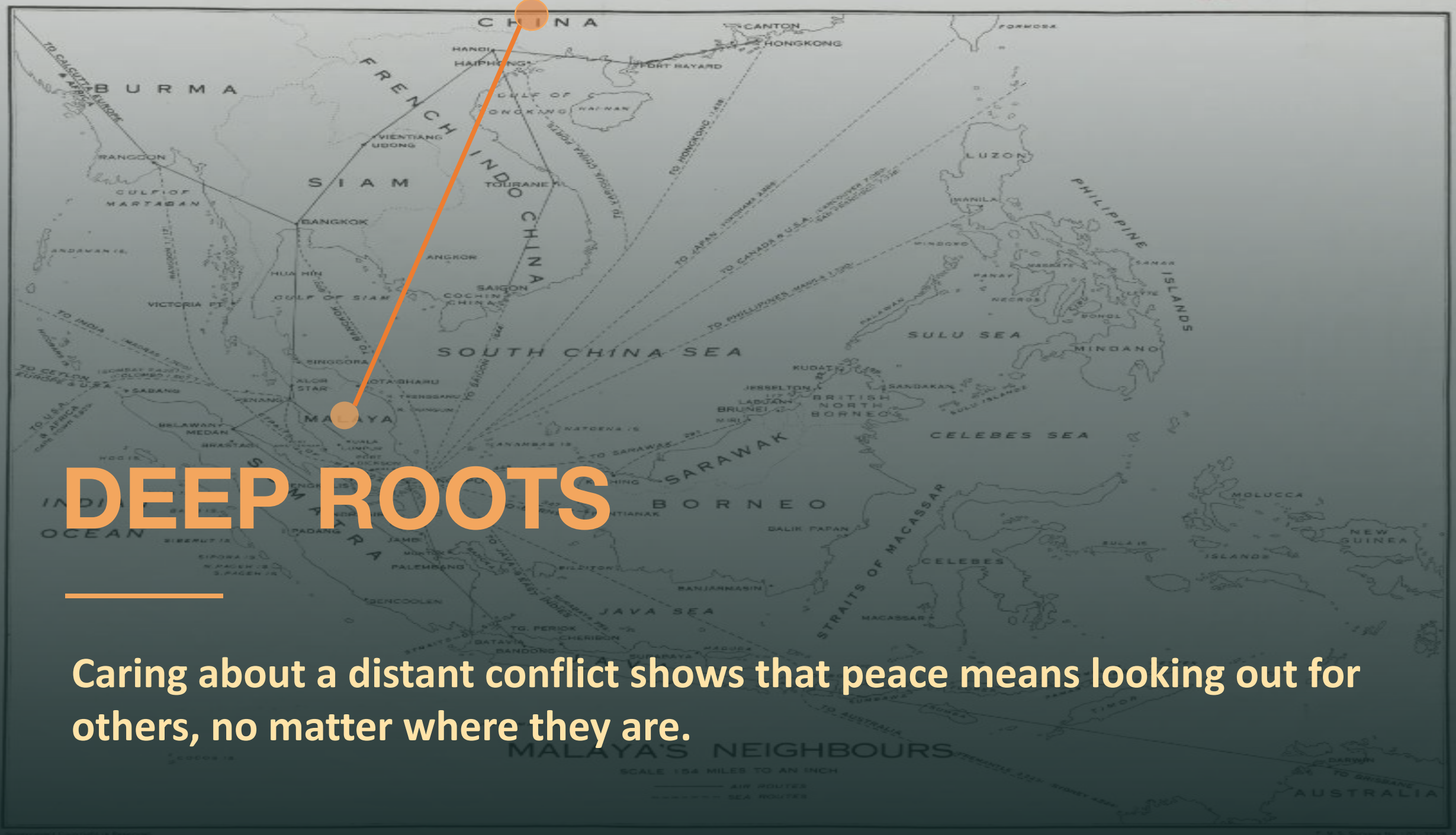
For a diasporic community, distance doesn't erase the shared links that compel people to send humanitarian relief across borders.



What Was The Nanyang National Salvation Movement (NSM)?

A **civilian-led movement** through which overseas Chinese communities across Southeast Asia mobilised to support **China's resistance** against Japan during the **Second Sino-Japanese War** (1937–1945).

THE EE HOE HEAN CLUB :
headquarters for the anti-Japanese Chinese salvation movement



DEEP ROOTS

Caring about a distant conflict shows that peace means looking out for others, no matter where they are.

Chinese population within British Malaya

The peninsula was home to Malays, Chinese, Indians, and others.

By 1931, Chinese accounts for 39.2% for total population

Internal Diversity

Varied by birthplace, ethnic origin,
and clan.

- 69% TOTOK (China-born)
- 31% PERANAKAN (Straits-born)



Nanyang Northern Chinese Clan Association,
1939

Malay Peninsula was a British colony.
Singapore was part of it — one of the **Straits Settlements**.

How Chinese Political Consciousness Was Cultivated Under Colonial Rule

Early 1930s, British Colonial proscriptions banned overt political organizing



Turn underground and through indirect means

Institutional Path (KMT / Nationalists)
cultivated overseas Chinese national consciousness
via

Chambers of Commerce

Education

Newspapers

local-level community organizations

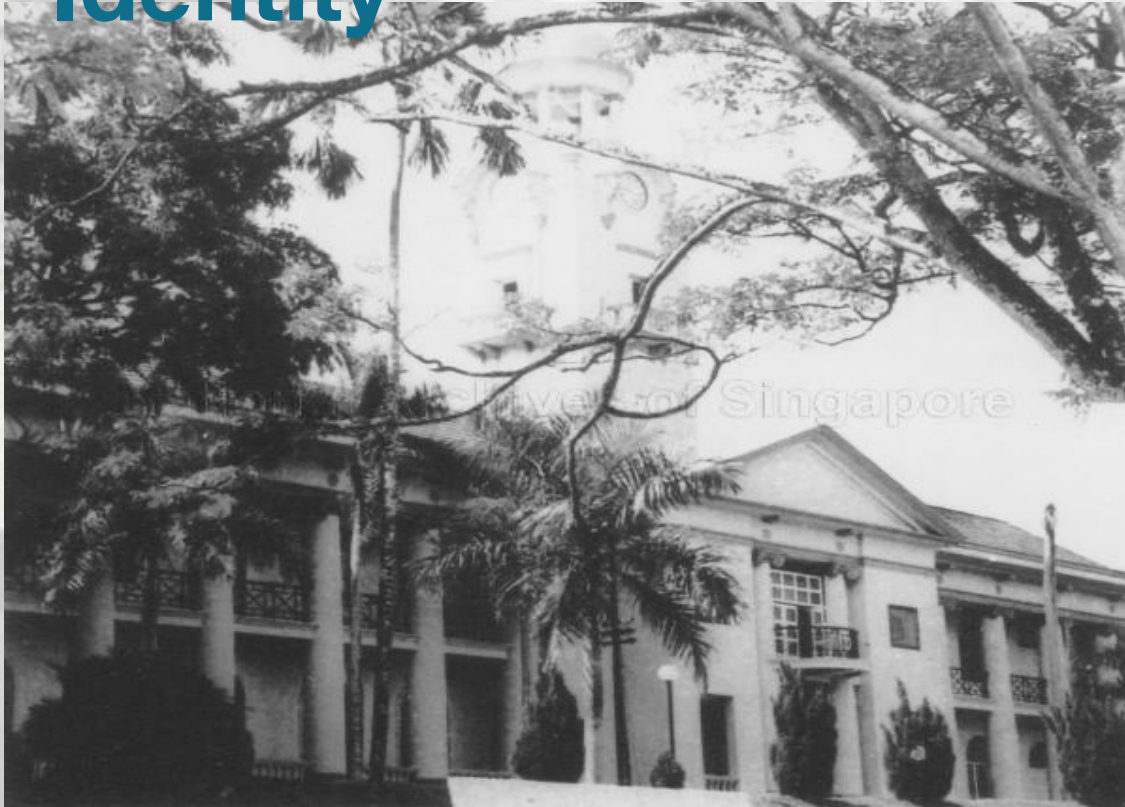
Grassroots Path (MCP / Left-wing Activists)
Built capacity through labour fronts & front organisation

Boycotts and anti-imperialist mobilization emerged long before 1937 in **The Jinan Incident (1928)**:

“Fujianese masses said that...the cause of national salvation is the right cause and one should not ask whether it is communists or non-communists who led it.”

(A report by the Nanyang Provisional committee to the CC,” RGASPI 495/62/1/1-17.)

Education as a Means of Preserving Cultural Identity



Nanyang Overseas Chinese School, first secondary school in Southeast Asia catering to overseas Chinese community.

Whether local-born or migrants, few youth had a direct, lived connection to a physical China.

EDUCATION help bridge the gap through

- A curriculum similar to schools in China (e.g., Three People's Principles, Chinese history)
- Mandarin instruction
 - > overcome dialect differences and establish a common language
- Teachers from China who transmitted cultural knowledge and values.

shared cultural foundation

> continued transmission and reproduction of cultural identity across generations

How Did People Come To See Themselves As One Nation?

Information vacuum

Sin Kuo Min Press was founded, precisely because
"overseas Chinese...were unable to understand the truth of the national affairs, especially in Nanyang Chinese...".

(The 16th Week Anniversary Issue of this Press, Sin Kuo Min Press, May 20, 1930, page 25. Cited in Liu & Kong)

MEDIA / PRESS: For Chinese by Chinese

- **Exposing** Japanese aggression
- **Promoting** relief campaigns
- **Documenting** diaspora mobilization

Benedict Anderson Nations as "Imagined Communities"

A nation is a mental bond between strangers who will never meet.

Simultaneity

Media facilitates real-time, shared experiences, regardless of geography.

Shared Identity

Weaving common language & history
> unified national consciousness

Extended Discussion

- How did these ideas help us understand why overseas Chinese in Malaya came to see themselves as connected to a wider community?
- If nations are built through shared stories, who decides which stories are remembered?
- Today, what role do mass media play in shaping who “we” are?



THE POWER OF CIVILIANS

Without a single weapon, ordinary individuals can build a massive rescue network simply by choosing to stand together.

How Did A Humanitarian Movement Take Shape?

Sino-Japanese War begins



7 JULY 1937

Marco Polo Bridge Incident

32 representative for different dialect groups



15 AUGUST 1937

**The Singapore China Relief
Fund Association (SCRFA) established**

Representatives from 45 cities coordinate relief across SE Asia



OCTOBER 1938

**Nanyang Federation of China Relief
Fund (NFCRF) established**

NETWORKS BECOME MOVEMENT

Recap : Why Did So Many Civilians Participate?

Identity

National consciousness

cultivated via **education** & **media**

Security

Shared threats to
homeland and livelihoods



Capacity

Association, business, media
existed before 1937

Those With Money Contribute Money 有錢出錢, 有力出力 Those With Strength Contribute Strength

---- relief fundraising, war bonds, family remittances, labour strikes and boycotts of Japanese goods

Ordinary people also contributed — and their combined donations surpassed those of wealthy donors.

WHOLE NATION UNITED AGAINST AGGRESSION.

Ready To Help In Sale Of
Salvation Bonds.

DIPLOMATIC OFFICERS GIVE MONTH'S SALARY.

"I HAVE come to assure the Chinese population that their Government is doing everything in its power to resist aggression," stated Dr. Philip K. C. Tyau, former Consul-General, in Malaya in a special interview with the Straits Times, on his arrival in Singapore by the P. and O. Corfu this morning.

"If," he added, with a smile, "I can help in the campaign for the sale of the Chinese National Salvation Bonds, I shall do my best and if the Chinese believe me they will purchase more of the bonds."

TAXI-DANCERS AID CHINA RELIEF FUND.

ABOUT \$100,000 (China currency) for the China relief fund was raised by the three special nights at the Great World. Cabaret entrance tickets were sold for \$5, \$3 and \$1 and the taxi-dancers contributed a night's earnings.

Similar efforts to raise funds will be made by the New World and the Happy World, each of which is expected to add \$100,000 (China currency) to the fund.

Children Give Part Of Cake- Money To Red Cross.

\$12,000 FROM PRESIDENT.

By Our Chinese Correspondent.

MANY Chinese wage-earners throughout Singapore have announced their intention to devote a portion of this month's earnings to the Chinese Chamber of Commerce's Red Cross Fund, which is rapidly approaching the \$500,000 mark in Chinese currency.

SCHOOLCHILDREN are giving a portion of their cake-money and taxi-dancers at the city's cabarets have expressed a desire to do their part in aiding the fund.

Mr. Tan Kah Kee, President of the Singapore Chinese Red Cross Fund, has this morning placed to the credit of the fund \$12,000 Straits, representing one year's contribution by him. This is in part fulfilment of his promise to give \$1,000 per month until the Sino-Japanese war ends.

China Singapore Chinese last night were calmly burning away hundreds of dollars in the form of joss papers and joss sticks and making elaborate offerings of food and drink to propitiate the hungry ghosts, who, according to Chinese legend, are released to roam the earth from the 15th., to the last day of the seventh moon.

Chinese leaders' appeal for the abolition of this rite in view of the Sino-Japanese conflict apparently fell on many deaf ears.

Known as the Festival of Hungry

(The Straits Times, 6 October 1937)

(The Straits Times, 20 August 1937)

When Civilians Chose to Risk Their Lives: The Nanyang Volunteer Mechanics (1939–1942)

When Japan blockaded China's coastline, the Burma Road became China's last major supply route.

In February 1939, China appealed to overseas Chinese for volunteer drivers and mechanics.



One mechanic gave up a monthly salary of \$200 in Malaya to earn only \$30 in wartime China (Akashi 114).



3,200

mechanics and drivers enlisted,
nearly 90% from British Malaya

500,000t

of supplies transported into
China, 1939–1942

1,000+

volunteers lost their lives

Keeping The Movement Alive

Money mattered, but the movement also depended on keeping people informed, engaged, and involved.



Patriotic entertainers in Singapore do special shows or give a percentage of their takings to raise funds for China's war effort

馬華巡迴歌劇團
三月初或可出演
該團組織簡則經已擬定

由於南洋文化人之努力
推動，馬華劇團，日趨
活躍，各地救亡劇本，
紛出，出演於籌賑祖國傷
兵難民遊藝會之舞台上
，而每次劇本之演出時
，頗多場露曉略主義者
，破壞世界之和平，及
反映民族之勇抗戰堅決
之意志，激起觀衆衷心
之共鳴，予觀衆以深刻
之印象，足見馬華劇團
已跨進大時代之前夜矣
，是以本坡劇界同人，
爲擴展馬華劇運起見，
以配合於各地觀衆之需

社
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六、
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七、
如下
「甲」
領袖

馬華巡迴歌劇團
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Nan Yang Shang Bao, 9 February 1938

Malayan Chinese Touring Opera Troupe performed anti-Japanese dramas to promote national resistance against the Japanese invasion, and raise funds for war relief

What Can A Community Achieve When It Acts Together?

One of the largest civilian mobilisation efforts in Southeast Asia.

157.7M yuan raised by Malayan Chinese

44.5% of the region's total giving, from just **28%** of its overseas Chinese population

As wartime inflation intensified after 1939, overseas Chinese monetary contributions helped prevent the Chinese government from going bankrupt.

The NSM showed what a united community could achieve, but how might such visibility be perceived by those on the other side of the conflict?

Qiaopi (僑批): Carrying Money, Messages, and Hope Across the Sea

What is Qiaopi (僑批)?

A letter + remittance sent by Overseas Chinese in SE Asia to families in China.

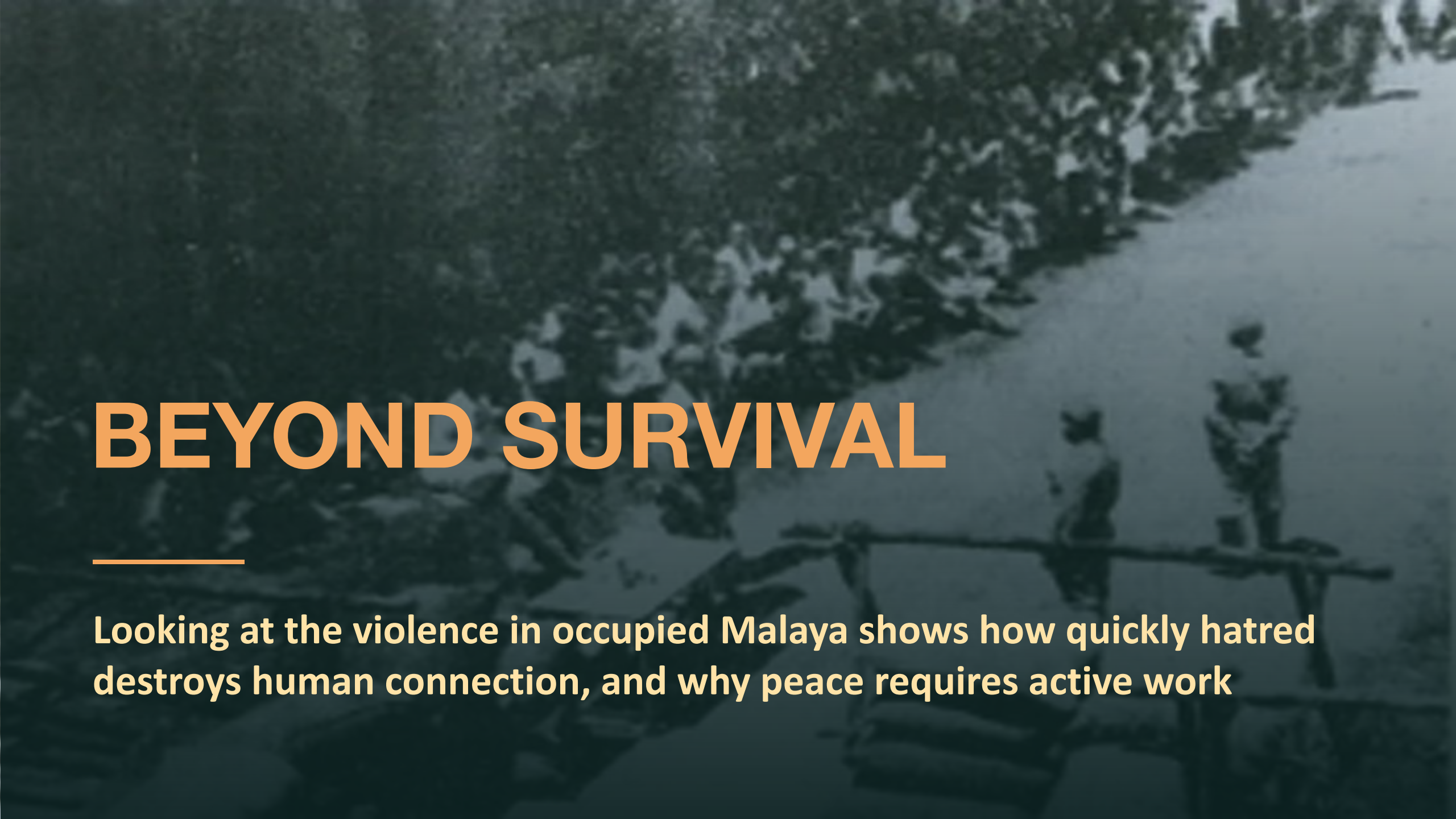
劉甫盈, a Chinese migrant in Kuching, Sarawak, to his wife and family in Nan'an, Fujian, 1940–1941

"Rice and daily necessities have become several times more expensive... I will send the family expenses regularly. The two boys must continue studying, so they will not become people without ability or prospects." July 1940

He enclosed 80 yuan, including money for school fees.

"I hope the whole family remains under Heaven's protection and remained safe. Japan is moving southward and intends to attack Singapore... Prepare rice and grain, for if sea and land routes are blocked, the family will surely suffer." 1941

He sent 180 yuan, more than double.

A dark, grainy, black and white photograph of a river scene. In the foreground, a bridge or structure is visible with several people standing on it. The background shows a river and dense foliage on the banks. The overall tone is somber and historical.

BEYOND SURVIVAL

Looking at the violence in occupied Malaya shows how quickly hatred destroys human connection, and why peace requires active work

Japanese Threat Perception: Why the Chinese Community?

An unresolved strategic dilemma

ECONOMICALLY NECESSITY

Chinese commercial networks were vital for stability and resource extraction

POLITICALLY SUBVERSION

Fundraising, boycotts & media were viewed as active resistance supporting China.

□ Internal Japanese reports admitted a **total failure to co-opt Chinese leaders;** anti-Japanese sentiment was too deeply entrenched to neutralize.



Does the success of the NSM explain the subsequent Sook Ching massacres?

Sook Ching in Singapore (Feb–March 1942)

After Singapore fell in February 1942, the Japanese military launched a mass screening and execution campaign.

Target

1. Persons who had been active in the China Relief Fund
2. Rich men who had given most generously to the Relief Fund
3. Adherents of Tan Kah Kee, the leader of the Nanyang National Salvation Movement; schoolmasters, teachers, and lawyers
4. Hainanese, who, according to the Japanese, were Communists
5. China-born Chinese who came to Malaya after the Sino-Japanese War
6. Men with tattoo marks, who, according to the Japanese, were all members of secret societies
7. Persons who fought for the British as volunteers against the Japanese
8. Government servants and men likely to have pro-British sympathies
9. Persons who possessed arms and tried to disturb public safety



The Human Toll

Estimates range from **6,000 to 40,000 victims**, with Chinese sources generally reporting higher casualties than Japanese accounts.

Did Violence End Resistance?

"All anti-Japanese feelings of the Chinese found their source in the sook ching and the \$50 million gift. It gave the Communist guerrillas a propaganda windfall contributing to their anti-Japanese solidarity and legitimized for the Chinese their resistance"

Japanese Police Chief Ōtani Keijirō, cited in Akashi

— Ōtani Keijirō, Japanese Police Chief

- The direct trauma of Sook Ching pushed thousands of civilian youths to join the **armed resistance of the Malayan Peoples' Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA)**

Use of violence

- Generates entirely new, radicalised cycles of conflict

What This History Teaches Us About Civilians In War



ACTIVE CHOICE OF AGENCY

The NSM proves that even under total war, communities are not **passive victims**.

*In A **Paradise Built in Hell**, Rebecca Solnit argues that crises often reveal people's **capacity for cooperation** rather than **panic or selfishness**.*

WHY DISASTER SPARKS ALTRUISM

Hierarchies and institutional barriers dissolve,

> bring forth **networks of mutual aid, shared responsibility, and collective action** that are less visible in everyday life.

Collective effort as disruptive agency can ignite and spread good causes across borders and generations.

The NSM shows how ordinary civilians transformed solidarity into **resistance, survival, and hope.**



Does knowing the history of the NSM change how you view diaspora political or humanitarian action today?