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BERITA

Malaysia/Singapore/Brunei Studies Group
Association for Asian Studies



Berita

Malaysia/Singapore/Brunei Studies Group Association for Asian Studies

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Letter from the Chair

As I write this letter, we are hopeful that for the first time in two years, many members of our group will be able to be physically present at the upcoming Association for Asian Studies Conference, scheduled to take place in Hawaii between March 24 to March 27, 2022.

We hope some of you will be in attendance and that you will be able to attend our annual MSB Studies Group Business Meeting on Saturday, March 26, 2022 at 2:15pm-3:45pm. At the meeting, we'll present our annual awards, discuss plans for the future of our group, and for the first time, will have a small reception, giving us a chance to renew old connections and make new ones with other scholars with interests in the Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei region. (Of course, if the format of the Conference changes, we will let you know. The MSB Business Meeting will also be available virtually; see our Facebook page for updates.)

This year, I'll hand over the chair of our group to my friend and colleague, Cheong Soon Gan, of the University of Wisconsin-Superior. When Cheong Soon takes over as chair, I become 'Chair Mentor'—or the *ex officio* chair, replacing Eric Thompson of the National University of Singapore (NUS), who has guided me wisely during my term. Serving as the Deputy Chair under Cheong Soon will be Elvin Ong, of NUS. Elvin brings both a long record of engagement and a keen commitment to our MSB group. My role as chair has allowed me to connect more deeply with many of our members and I have gained tremendously from my association with this group.

This past year we made the best of our virtual connection by sponsoring the first-ever MSB Annual Lecture, featuring James Chin, Professor of Asian Studies at the University of Tasmania. One of the leading commentators on Malaysian politics, Dr. Chin's lecture, *NEP @ 50*, assessed the success and failure of the policy and the key lessons from Malaysia's experiment with social engineering. We held the lecture on August 6th via Zoom, precisely fifty years to the day that Tun Razak gave the first speech concerning 'Malaysia's New Economic Policy' to the Economic Bureau of UMNO. The lecture was followed by a commentary by Dr. Sharifah Munirah Alatas, Center for Research in History, Politics and International Affairs National University of Malaysia and Dr. Kikue Hamayotsu, Department of Political Science at Northern Illinois University. Nearly 60 listeners from all over the world joined us live, and the YouTube video of the lecture was watched by hundreds of other people and can be viewed here: <https://bit.ly/3r8Z28m>

Following the success of last year's event, we'll be organizing another annual lecture via Zoom in 2022.

Starting with this issue, Dr. Sarena Abdullah, Universiti Sains Malaysia, has taken up the role of *Berita* editor, and Dominik Mueller, who has served as editor for four years becomes 'editor mentor.' Dominik did a brilliant job bringing *Berita* to press twice a year, and Sarena undoubtedly will bring as much energy and commitment to keeping our MSB publication alive. As always, we are eager to include any of



your submissions to *Berita* and we welcome short articles, book reviews, member updates, updates from ongoing research, and announcements. Again, let us know.

Finally, make sure you are a member of our Facebook group: 'Official Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei Studies Group (MSB)'. That's where you can find past issues of *Berita*, many postings providing up-to-date news about the MSB region, job and lecture announcements, and engage with nearly 800 other people who share your interests.

Best wishes,
Patricia Sloane-White
Chair, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei (MSB)
Studies Group
pswhite@udel.edu

Looking Forward to the Annual Association for Asian Studies Conference



This year's annual Association for Asian Studies Conference will take place from Thursday, March 24 to Sunday, March 27 at the Hawai'i Convention Center in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Two important dates for your calendar:

The Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei Studies Group Annual Business Meeting will take place at on Saturday, March 26, 2022, at the Hawaii Convention Center, Rm 316B, at 2:15pm-3:45pm HST (Hawaii). You do not need to be a member of the group to attend the meeting. Information on how to attend the meeting virtually will be announced prior to the date.

The panel 'Haze, Sand, Fire, Water: Environmental Crises in Southeast Asia' proposed by the Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei Studies Group has been named one of two



‘Designated Panels’ by the Southeast Asian Council (SEAC) of the AAS and has received special funding for presenters. It is scheduled for an in-person session on Sunday, March Sunday, March 27, 10:45am – 12:15pm HST (Hawaii).

The following are panels with Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei content, organized by in-person and virtual panels (12 in-person panels, roundtables, and workshops; 7 virtual panels, roundtables, and papers):

In-Person Panels

Conservative Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia: Priorities, Contentions, Evolutions

Friday, March 25, 9:30am – 11:00am HST (Hawaii)

Organizer(s)

Nancy Smith-Hefner, Boston University

Session Abstract:

Long regarded as among the more tolerant and forward-looking of Muslim majority countries, the Southeast Asian nations of Indonesia and Malaysia have, over the past thirty years, witnessed an upsurge in the observance and assertiveness of what is widely described as conservative Islam. In both countries, the “conservative turn” (van Bruinessen 2011, 2013) has been highly heterogeneous in its normative foci, social mediations, and relative political influence. In both countries, too, the religious and political issues prioritized by ostensibly conservative groups have evolved over time, not least with regard to questions of gender relations and political participation. The response from state-linked and otherwise

“mainline” Muslim associations has been equally varied. Responses vary from accommodation and cooptation of conservative aspirations to, as with the Nahdlatul Ulama in Indonesia, fiercely anti-Islamist counter-mobilization. This panel brings together specialists of Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia to examine the evolving social organizations, ethical prioritizations, and political dynamics of conservative Islamic movements in Malaysia and Indonesia. It highlights commonalities and divergences in the normative ideals, social organization, and political influence of conservative Muslim groupings across the two countries. It also explores the agonistic plurality characteristic of conservative groupings, and the varied and sometimes inconsistent response of state agencies to conservative mobilizations.

Protracted Relations – Navigating the New Indian Ocean World in the Twentieth Century

Friday, March 25, 9:30am – 11:00am HST (Hawaii)

Organizer(s)

Nurfadzilah Yahaya, National University of Singapore

Session Abstract:

This panel explores tensions across the Indian Ocean from Middle East to South Asia and onward to Southeast Asia through the lens of bureaucracy, imperialism and nationalism. The first paper by Yahaya investigates the subversive side of powers of attorney without an end date that connected Hadhramaut (Yemen) to Southeast Asia thus extending legal temporalities of ownership and jurisdiction indefinitely. The next paper by Lhost looks at Indian Muslims’ legal disputes within British



jurisdictions in South and Southeast Asia as part of broader pan-imperial dialogue. She connects these disputes to legacies of pan-imperial cosmopolitanism and local histories of decolonization—particularly in relation to the buildings and material edifices that formed the focus of their disputes. In the same vein, Ramnath tracks journeys of ordinary Indians from the former princely state of Travancore in southern India to Ceylon, Burma, and Malaya after the end of World War II to highlight the impact of Partition in 1947 on Indians outside of the subcontinent. Through personal and family histories, her paper looks at how Indians navigated the legal and bureaucratic regimes in a new world of nation-states. Finally, Wan picks up the thread to trace moral panics surrounding “phony citizens” in newly independent Malaya from 1957 to 1963, usually impoverished Chinese and Indians who were poorly documented historically. He looks at how subsequent bureaucratic encounters, a recurrent theme of the panel, were sites of migrants’ subject formation as minorities and the Malayan state’s formal stance towards non-indigenous subjects that emerged dialogically.

Workshop: Initiative for the Study of Asian Catholics

Friday, March 25, 1:30pm – 3:00pm HST (Hawaii)
Organizer(s)

Michel Chambon, National University of Singapore

Bernardo Brown, International Christian University, Japan

Workshop Abstract:

This workshop brings scholars involved in the Initiative for the Study of Asian Catholics (ISAC)

to discuss the urgent needs for scholarly inquiry about Catholics in contemporary Asia. Catholics living across the continent are often members of minority communities. Either within the boundaries of their own nation-state or within world Catholicism, their visibility and roles are frequently overshadowed by more powerful dynamics that shape their environment. Even if Catholics are numerous in some parts of Asia, their regional and global influences can remain difficult to perceive. But while many Asian Catholic communities may locally appear as religious minorities - and, therefore, face various forms of hostility and discrimination calling for international attention - they are part of one of the largest and most institutionalized religions that actively influences world affairs. Entangled in this paradox, Asian Catholics are embedded in networks that transcend national, linguistic, and regional boundaries. They question the ways in which Asian nation-states redefine themselves, construct frameworks of coexistence for religious and ethnic diversity, and contribute to the international community. In addition to manifesting the rich and complex history of Christianity as well as the current mutation of world Catholicism, Asian Catholics are actors of contemporary globalization who stand as unique witnesses to understand the current evolution of Asia and the World Catholicism. Nonetheless, available scholarship exploring the current innovations and challenges encountered by those religious groups are relatively few. Compared to Catholic communities in Europe, the Americas, and Africa, research on Asian Catholics remains limited. And even when scholarship on Asian Catholics has made important contributions to the understanding of ethnic and national realities, there have not



been sustained efforts to situate these academic works in a regional or global context to understand transborder dynamics as well as the transformation of world Catholicism. Thus, the workshop discusses how the Initiative for the Study of Asian Catholics addresses this situation and presents ongoing research projects and academic actions designed to increase scholarly research on Asian Catholics.

**Infrastructures of Urban Life Yet-to-Come:
(Session I, MODELING THE GLOBAL CITY)**

Friday, March 25, 3:30pm – 5:00pm HST (Hawaii)

Organizer(s)

Jessica DiCarlo, University of British Columbia

Courtney Wittekind, Harvard University

Session Abstract:

Asia is awash with proposals for new urban forms and futures, distinct from existing “old cities” and from out-of-date models stereotyped as producing unequal, unsustainable, and unlivable urban spaces. “New city” efforts, whether advertised as “green cities,” “smart cities,” or “special economic zones,” share a common vision—to rupture histories of flawed development, even as they channel built-from-scratch cities found in other times and spaces. While much attention has focused on new developments’ utopian forms, few have materialized as “world cities” of the kind imagined at the outset. We propose that, within extended processes of infrastructural development, these cities “yet-to-come” have surfaced as intensely charged objects of anticipation, able to transform not just local futures, but models of capitalist development, networks of regional interconnection, and avenues for global investment.

In this panel—the first of a two-part session—we reflect on the region-spanning models mobilized by politicians, developers, and planners of cities “yet-to-come.” New city building actors rely not only on a widely recognized but internally variegated “China model,” but also on South Korean state-led “newtown” plans, and the continent-spanning proposals of private investors. Tracing the interconnections between projects as well as their movement across China, Southeast Asia, and even to Africa, this panel asks what new spaces or zones, relationships, and networks are created when “new city” models travel globally. In doing so, it questions conventional spatial boundaries with a goal of theorizing the local implications of global investment in “new city” proposals.

**Technology Facilitated Sexual Violence (TFSV)
in Singapore**

Friday, March 25, 3:30pm – 5:00pm HST (Hawaii)

Virtual Organizer(s)

Shivani Gupta, National University of Singapore

Michelle Ho, National University of Singapore

Session Abstract:

This panel explores technology facilitated sexual violence (TFSV), a phenomenon that is rapidly increasing in Singapore and other parts of Asia. TFSV refers to a range of behaviors using or aided by various digital technologies to harm, offend, humiliate, or intimidate women and other individuals, some examples of which include sexual voyeurism, online sexual harassment, and non-consensual distribution of unwanted and sexually explicit content. Although the current scholarship on TFSV has so far examined Australian, North American, and United Kingdom contexts, few academic studies have so far been



done in Asian contexts. This is despite rampant TFSV occurrences in Asia in recent years, such as the spy camera epidemic in South Korea and pervasive spread of image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) across Taiwan, Malaysia, and Cambodia, especially during the coronavirus pandemic. Collectively, all three presentations trace the lived experience of TFSV victims-survivors in Singapore, drawing primarily on ethnographic data. Examining abusive online behaviors through interviews, Catherine Chang and Holly Apsley identify five clusters of abuse that occur in Singapore and four overlapping categories of harm. Based on interviews with IBSA victims-survivors, Yi Ting Lee argues that currently available recourse options frequently enact violence on them. Drawing on digital ethnography, Shivani Gupta and Michelle Ho contend that university students who experience TFSV and campus sexual misconduct have a complex relationship to their digital well-being. Comprising an interdisciplinary and diverse group of scholars, this panel is timely and significant for contributing to a growing body of work on TFSV in Asia.

Roundtable Session

Chineseness in Question: Connecting and Comparing the Historiographies of the Chinese in the Americas and Southeast Asia

Saturday, March 26, 4:00pm – 5:30pm HST (Hawaii)

Organizer(s)

Chien-Wen Kung, National University of Singapore

Roundtable Abstract:

What can historians of the Chinese in the Americas and Southeast Asia learn from each

other? The historiographies of diverse "Chinese" peoples in these two world regions emerged from within distinct intellectual frameworks such as US and Latin American history, imperial history, Sinology, and Area Studies. As a consequence, they have developed largely independently of each other. To bridge this divide, and drawing inspiration from emerging fields such as Sinophone Studies and international and transnational history, this roundtable brings into conversation five scholars of Chinese migration and diaspora whose research encompasses the United States, Mexico, Malaya, the Philippines, and beyond. In addition to discussing the methodologies, sources, and themes that can help us connect regionalized Chinese historiographies, we will also consider how migration historians might contribute to contemporary debates about "Chineseness" in a global context.

To these ends, the discussants will first present briefly on their own research. Sandy Chang will explore how the migration of over a million Chinese women and girls to British Malaya at the turn of the 20th century reconfigured border control practices, transformed colonial households, and redefined "Chineseness." Fredy González will discuss differences between the Hongmen Chee Kung Tong in the Americas and other Triad brotherhoods in China and Southeast Asia. Madeline Hsu will examine how the ideologies, strategies, and institutions of immigration regulation and citizenship shaped the protocols and conventions of sovereignty in North America and Southeast Asia. Finally, drawing upon his first book, *Diasporic Cold Warriors*, Chien-Wen Kung will outline a comparative approach to the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) as an overseas Chinese institution.



Following these presentations, the discussants will comment on each other's work and reflect on the continuities and reverberations between their scholarship and present-day concerns about anti-Chinese racism and Han nationalism in the shadow of the "rise of China" and the so-called "New Cold War."

Southeast Asia and the Cultural Cold War

Saturday, March 26, 6:00pm – 7:30pm HST (Hawaii)

Organizer(s)

Darlene Machell Espena, Singapore Management University

Elmo Gonzaga, Chinese University of Hong Kong

Session Abstract:

In the growing scholarship on the cultural Cold War, Saunders (1999) and Appy (2000) describe it as a bipolaristic battle for hearts and minds between two competing ideologies of capitalist democracy and authoritarian communism where cultural weapons like literature, cinema, and the arts were deployed. This panel builds on the pioneering edited volumes *Cultures at War* (Day and Liem, 2010) and *Connected Histories* (Goscha and Ostermann, 2009) in expanding the scope of discussion to Southeast Asia, where national governments and cultural producers sought to navigate the terms of collaboration and non-alignment under conditions of decolonization and development.

The papers in this panel contribute to this growing scholarship by exploring the permeation and negotiation of Cold War culture across different forms of aesthetic and cultural production, which straddle the local, national, global, and regional. Espena looks at traditional Khmer dance as a diplomatic tool to assert

Cambodia's neutrality in relation to its Asian neighbours amidst Cold War tensions. Gonzaga analyzes how iconic Filipino star FPJ's Western and war films mediated the fear of the unknown outsider against the backdrop of authoritarian, anticommunist rhetoric in Southeast Asia. Singh uncovers how the dynamics of incarceration, resistance, and censorship in Indonesia and Singapore produced/reframed silences in postcolonial literary realism and modernism. Lastly, Creak studies how the region-building goals of the Thai military junta's inaugural Southeast Asian Peninsular Games (1959) featuring anticommunist and neutralist countries produced regional and domestic themes that gave meaning to the very idea of the Cold War in Southeast Asia.

Vernacular Narratives within Micro Communities in Asia (China, Japan, Nepal, and Singapore)

Saturday, March 26, 6:00pm – 7:30pm HST (Hawaii)

Organizer(s)

Michelle Lim, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Session Abstract:

Personal stories and local histories are easily subsumed by national narratives built on political expediencies and social mythologies engineered to repress and suppress inconvenient ideologies. In this panel, artists and researchers excavate and explore vernacular narratives that exist within sub or micro communities in China, Japan, Nepal, and Singapore. These histories, often containing threads of resistance and resilience from individuals or marginalized groups, can become



diminished, lost or buried under sweeping national or regional identities. The presentations will include recent research and projects on a former leprosarium in Japan, a rural redevelopment project in eastern Nepal, reinventions and retelling of an old Chinese legend in different diasporic Chinese communities, and the queer community in post-independence Singapore. This multidisciplinary survey reveals how vernacular and unique narratives can anchor and sustain different micro communities searching for new ways to retain their memories, self-identities and traditional values. The panel members will discuss and examine the significance of these shared narratives and the private/public politics embedded within, raising new issues in cultural heritage, sustainability, and queer representation.

The Struggle for Democracy in East and Southeast Asia

Sunday, March 27, 9:00am – 10:30am HST (Hawaii)

Organizer(s)

Hanisah Abdullah Sani, National University of Singapore

Elvin Ong, National University of Singapore

Session Abstract:

Over the past few years across the world, there is a palpable perception that democracy is under attack and in retreat. In East and Southeast Asia, the narrative is no different. Authoritarian politicians have toppled or undermined democratic regimes, harnessed and centralized state powers, and muffled their populations. The COVID-19 global pandemic has exacerbated this trend. In the name of public health, governments

have buttressed the surveillance state, eroded personal privacy rights, and suspended democratic procedures. Under what conditions can democratic erosion be resisted? How and when do citizens act collectively to resist growing authoritarianism? When do they fail?

This panel brings together a diverse range of young scholars (in terms of gender, ethnicity, disciplines, professional status, and institutions) to investigate how authoritarian states attempt to erode democracy and how citizens struggle to respond to democratic erosion across East and Southeast Asia (Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, and Hong Kong). The first set of two papers focuses on how authoritarian states aim to influence their respective societies to suppress their citizens and entrench rule. The second set of two papers examine citizens struggling to resist authoritarian state influence.

Aurel Croissant, Editor of the journal *Democratization*, will be panel Chair and discussant for the papers. Through an engaged discussion comparing experiences across the region moderated by an esteemed senior scholar, this panel seeks to highlight commonalities and uncover previously obscured themes. Ultimately, this panel contributes to a broader debate and literature about the future of democracy in Asia.



Deathscape Discourses in Urbanizing Southeast Asia: Rituals, History, and Heritage

Sunday, March 27, 9:00am – 10:30am HST (Hawaii)

Organizer(s)

Rita Padawangi, Singapore University of Social Sciences

Session Abstract:

“Do you want space for the living or for the dead?” That question has been more common in rapidly urbanizing Southeast Asia, such as in Surabaya, Singapore, and Manila, to justify favoring housing and other urban projects over cemeteries. Pursuance of economic growth has dominated formal mechanisms in allocating space and time in modern cities. But deathscapes, as spatial aspects of social and cultural practices in relation to death and dying, continue in everyday life with all their contradictions. While deathscapes may shrink or move, they can also evolve to induce social, cultural, and economic adjustments. Cemeteries may be pushed away, but some graves may stay, memorials may expand. Some practices may be watered down, while others continue; some rituals are exoticized and some evolve symbiotically with industrialized economies. Some narratives may wither but some others adjust or become more powerful. What are discourses of deathscapes in urbanizing Southeast Asia? How contested are these discourses? What are the connections between social-economic transformations in Southeast Asia’s urban transition and evolutions of legends, myths, narratives, rituals, spaces, and environments? As part of a 2-panel series on deathscapes discourses in urbanizing Southeast Asia, this panel brings together papers from

literature, archaeology, history, and architecture to move away from life-death dichotomy in understanding deathscapes and their evolution. Papers will be circulated among the panelists to be read before the session. Each paper presentation begins with a summary by another panelist, followed by responses by the author, before opening the discussion to all attendees.

Deathscape Discourses in Urbanizing Southeast Asia: Life, Death, and Spatial Contestations

Sunday, March 27, 10:45am – 12:15pm HST (Hawaii)

Organizer(s)

Rita Padawangi, Singapore University of Social Sciences

Session Abstract:

As spatial aspects of social and cultural practices in relation to death and dying, deathscapes include life experiences that vary from one society to another. These life experiences range from attitudes towards death, near-death experiences, encounters with death-related rituals and spaces, and other social occurrences pertaining to death and dying. In Southeast Asia, those deathscapes are situated in a rapidly urbanizing region with its social and spatial inequalities. Life, death and everything in-between have spatial implications and are therefore subjected to contestations in the production of space of cities. In what ways do urban development impact death-related life experiences in the city? Why do deathscapes become inseparable parts of everyday life experiences of some communities but become separated or marginalized in others? Considering ever-expanding urban landscapes and complexities of a socially diverse city life, can



deathscapes and livelihoods collide? If so, what are the consequences? From landscapes of fear and sadness to landscapes of aesthetics and the sacred, to what extent do deathscapes and their transformations affect everyday practices and social action? As part of a 2-panel series on deathscapes discourses in urbanizing Southeast Asia, this panel brings together papers from literature, art studies, sociology, and anthropology to move away from life-death dichotomy in understanding deathscapes and their evolution. Papers will be circulated among the panelists to be read before the session. Each paper presentation begins with a summary by another panelist, followed by responses by the author, before opening the discussion to all attendees.

Haze, Sand, Fire, Water: Environmental Crises in Southeast Asia

Sunday, March 27, 10:45am – 12:15pm HST (Hawaii)

Organizer(s)

Patricia Sloane-White, University of Delaware
Chong Ja-lan, National University of Singapore

Session Abstract:

Massive deforestation, transboundary haze, sand mining, altered rivers and erosion, depleted fish stocks, pollution. These are among the many increasingly serious environmental consequences that have come with Southeast Asia's rapid development and economic growth over recent decades, fueled by global and regional capital as well as mass movements of migrant labor. With a particular focus on stakeholders' roles in this regional/global process, this panel proposes to examine and compare the effects and impact of these crises

on local livelihoods, land, and social cohesion, as well as the role they play in contestation, compromise, and cooptation across Southeast Asia, as presented through political participation, knowledge production, and public sentiment.

Virtual Panels

Collisions, Contradictions, and Camp: Revisioning Bangsa Malaysia through Malay Performing Arts

Friday, March 25, 9:30am – 11:00am HST (Hawaii)

Virtual Organizer(s)

Adil Johan, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

Session Abstract:

In Malay, "bangsa" denotes both "nation" and "race," a controversial concept ripe for sloganeering in Malaysia's political landscape. The term bangsa Malaysia entered contemporary political discourse in the 1990s when former prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, instituted the Bangsa Malaysia Policy. Touted as a more inclusive version of the previous National Culture Policy, it remained contentious by privileging majority Malay groups, i.e., bangsa Melayu (Malay), over Malaysia's diverse population—symbolically and through affirmative action legislation. This panel explores how bangsa Malaysia is revised and reconstructed through a performance lens, focusing on themes of gender, race, nation, and how state/religious authorities police these intersectional categories. Each paper demonstrates the diversity of Malay expression, dispelling notions of homogeneity propounded through concepts like bangsa Malaysia. The first



paper traces these themes in relation to the national pop icon, Sudirman (1954-1992), who used the cultural capital of Malay folk songs to subtly transcend Malay hegemony and subvert traditional understandings of gender and sexuality. The second paper shows how the dance drama, mak yong, complicates notions of Malay Muslim piety and state-sanctioned “national” arts. The third paper considers how extravagant state-sponsored displays of heritage work against stereotypical understandings of a “gentle” Malay aesthetic while at the same time reframing gender and racial norms. The last paper analyzes a relatively recent (1990s) revitalization of gendang silat (martial arts drumming), reflecting how ideas of Malay Muslim culture and identity were transforming in the national imagination well before the bangsa Malaysia slogan became part of mainstream politics.

Roundtable

Fleeting Agencies: A Social History of Indian Coolie Women

Friday, March 25, 2022 11:30am – 1:00pm HST (Hawaii)

Virtual Organizer(s)

Sidharthan Maunaguru, National University of Singapore, Singapore

Roundtable Abstract:

Organized around a new book on inter-Asia colonial migration, women’s labour history, gender history within colonial contexts, and strategies required to engage with silence in archives around these themes, this roundtable focuses on labour migration, (im)mobilities and agency during the colonial times across South Asia and South East Asia. These themes come

out of Arunima Datta’s book *Fleeting Agencies: A Social History of Indian Coolie Women in British Malaya*. Datta’s book disrupts the male-dominated narratives by focusing on gendered patterns of Coolie migration and showing how South Asian women labour migrants engaged with the process of migration interacted with other migrants and negotiated colonial laws. The book invites scholars not only to shift the focus on other spaces to recover voices of women’s history such as temporary sites and moments, but also problematizes binaries of victimhood and agency as fixed categories. In the process the book asks questions like- through the lens of coolie women’s history what kind of lesser known inter-Asian colonial histories can be studied? How can we think anew in our approach to archives which often silence women labour migrants’ history? The book therefore invites readers to bear witness to the accounts of coolie women and see how their histories help us to revision and remember women’s labour migration histories in more complex ways than the way they have been usually imagined.

This roundtable initiates conversation among scholars whose work touches on labour migration, gender, agency, women history, archives, historical methodologies in contemporary South East Asia and South Asia. The roundtable will explore the politicization of labour migration trends and gender relations in the colonial plantation societies in Asia, all to foreground the long-silenced histories of, migrant women workers across South and South East Asia. By doing so the roundtable will discuss at large about how to rethink about labour migration history, women history, and women voices along with silenced archives in the contemporary world.



Durian Matters 1: From Farm to Table

Friday, March 25, 1:30pm – 3:00pm HST (Hawaii)

Virtual Organizer(s)

Gaik Cheng Khoo, University of Nottingham
Malaysia

Session Abstract:

Following a signed agreement between the Malaysian and Chinese governments, China began to allow the import of nitrogen frozen whole durians from Malaysia from mid-2019. China is the largest and fastest-growing global market for durians. So far, only 3% of the China market is consuming durian so there is a scramble to scale up musang king (a type of durian) production in Malaysia from three to ten-acre home orchards to 10,000 acre mega-plantations, with expected attendant environmental consequences. This panel focuses on producers/farmers and consumers of the durian supply chain from the local farm in Malaysia to the transnational consumer overseas. Specifically, we concentrate on three sites on the supply chain which may not necessarily be continuous: 1. Hakka durian farmers in Balik Pulau, Penang, who focus on promoting durio-tourism as a way of preserving durian diversity in the domestic market, 2. the subsidiary role of agrochemical companies in Malaysia, many of whom target the new modern durian entrepreneurs who grow for export, and 3. the durian's transnational supply to Canada, surprisingly the largest market for durians outside of Asia in the last decade and the largest outside of Asia for Malaysian fresh durians. How do producers and consumers tackle issues of identity and sustainability? What kinds of creative culinary strategies by Asian and Asian

Canadian chefs are in place to undermine food colonialism in Canada?

Durian Matters 2: Impact of Covid 19 on the Durian Industry

Friday, March 25, 3:30pm – 5:00pm HST (Hawaii)

Virtual Organizer(s)

Gaik Cheng Khoo, University of Nottingham
Malaysia

Session Abstract:

Durian is serious business in Southeast Asia, with exports earning Thailand USD1.5 bill in 2019. Malaysia, a much smaller contender, is one that observers warn will be outpacing Thai exports to China by 2025 because of the rising popularity of its premier durian, Musang King. Between 2012 and 2017, the export volume of Malaysia's durian grew by 143%. The durian is regarded as a new source of agricultural wealth, not just through its exports in the form of fresh durians and frozen pulp and paste, but in the form of multiple downstream products. Additionally, the Malaysian government encouraged durian tourism and promoted packaged tours in China pre-Covid. Orchard owners were attracted by the idea of establishing durian home stays and farm stays during the season. Malaysians are the largest consumers of its own durians and pre-Covid lockdowns would see outdoor durian stalls fill up with groups of people enjoying many varieties of durians. While the first year of Covid lockdown surprisingly saw some resilience as younger people began to help older farmers sell and deliver their durians using apps, and Grab deliveries, the second year impacted the industry hard. Tourism dried up. Homestay rooms turned mouldy through disuse. The aggressive variants scared customers from going



out to buy from their usual outdoor stalls. So how do customers negotiate buying online? How does social media enable the selling and buying of a sensory fruit like the durian? What additional benefits come with the turn to online sales?

Beyond the Coloniser-Colonised Divide: Other Approaches to Singapore's Colonial Histories

Sunday, March 27, 12:30pm – 2:00pm HST (Hawaii)

Virtual Organizer(s)

Shuqin Sandy Wang, National Archives of Singapore

Session Abstract:

Colonialism remains a key theme in the writing of Singapore's history. While there have been attempts to diversify approaches to the study of colonialism, these attempts largely continue to be within the premises of a coloniser-colonised binary. More often than not, they also perpetuate an "European-Asiatic" binary. While serving as useful starting points for understanding colonialism, these approaches are limited as they hinge on homogenising the categories of "colonisers" and "colonised". More importantly, the experiences of colonialism and the everyday rhythm of a colonial society cannot be thoroughly articulated with the continued perpetuation of this binary. Rather, it runs the risk of obfuscating the intricate textures of British colonial rule in Singapore. This panel seeks to examine the ways in which we can move beyond the coloniser-colonised binary, and in so doing, open up alternative lenses through which the colonial era and its legacies in Singapore can be studied and written. The papers presented will span a broad time frame covering the early

formation, height and final days of the colonial state in Singapore.

Old and New: Biopolitics in Asia

Sunday, March 27, 12:30pm – 2:00pm HST (Hawaii)

Virtual Organizer(s)

Mohammad K. Bin Khidzer, University of California San Diego

Session Abstract:

States in Asia are faced with shifting economic and demographic demands. From developing precision medicine to tackling a greying population, these changes have undoubtedly shaped the understanding of the self, allowing us to revisit key questions on 'Asian' Biopolitics raised by Nicolas Langlitz (2011). What is unique about 'Asian' Biopolitics? More importantly, where do we locate 'Asian' biopolitics? This panel juxtaposes 'new' modes of biopolitics represented by biotech with 'old school' public health and population policy to better understand how Asian life is co-produced. Drawing on interviews with biomedical researchers, Shirley Sun and collaborators highlight the universalized problem of 'pragmatic racialism' in precision medicine in Singapore and North America. They show that that the use of race and ethnicity as proxies for genetic diversity not only reproduce essentialized categories but are also rife with contradictions and arbitrariness. Mohammad Khamsya's historical study of postcolonial healthcare financing in Singapore traces the development of the self-responsibilized subject which affords new ways of articulating unhealthy bodies. This is captured in Ann Hui Ching's auto ethnography of medical education in Singapore



where health issues are described in relation to racial stereotypes that can be traced back to colonial times. Lastly, Shiwei Chen's account of informal strategies of elder care points to the implications of broader migration trends and policies that impact the experience of being elderly in China. Altogether, these studies provide a strong base for understanding the lumpiness of Asian Biopolitics as it intersects with local and regional histories and epistemologies.

Spatial History of the Bengali diasporas in Colonial Singapore

On-Demand (Virtual, On-Demand Papers)

Paper Abstract:

By the turn of the 21st century, Bangladeshi migrants constituted the second-largest number of foreign workers, which has made them a significant part of public space in postcolonial Singapore. The number will be more if the Bengalis from the West Bengal of India are included. Such a substantial number of Bangla-speaking migrants reflect on a long and complex history of their presence in colonial Singapore. However, there has been no significant study on the emergence and development of the Bengali diasporic space in Singapore. Most literature focuses on current migration-related issues from an economic and sociological perspective. Furthermore, Bengali migrants' history has been overlapped with the generic term "Indian." Therefore, this paper attempts to address such lacuna in the history of Bengali diasporas by exploring their various professions with parallel development of their civil societies and associational activities. In doing so, this paper deals with two broader sets of issues. Firstly, it

discusses the diverse profession of the Bengali migrants during the colonial period. The second set of issues relates to the Bengali's civil societies in a cosmopolitan city-state. By examining a range of archival records, old newspapers, and oral testimonies, this paper reveals that Bengali's quotidian life and opportunities had a historical pedigree; and their presence in Singapore during postcolonial times was built on their mobility in the colonial period. Thus, this study offers a modest attempt to contribute to the existing knowledge of cosmopolitan Singapore, more broadly to the flourishing of mobility studies in modern Asia.



Article

BEYOND ETHNICITY AND DIALECT: THE ORGANIZATION, SCOPE AND CLIENTELE OF THE KWONG YIK BANK IN SINGAPORE*

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The year 2021 witnessed two key commemorative events in Singapore's financial industry: the fortieth anniversary of the founding of Singapore's sovereign wealth fund GIC and the fiftieth anniversary of the formation of Singapore's central bank and financial regulator, the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS). Central to both events was the publication of two books which provide new insights on the history of Singapore's finance. In *Bold Vision*, Freddy Orchard (2021) sheds light on the key roles and visions of politicians and senior civil servants in conceptualizing, forming and expanding Singapore's sovereign wealth fund. In *A History of Money in Singapore*, Clement Liew and Peter Wilson (2021) have painstakingly produced the first work on the development of currency and finance of Singapore. They demonstrate how money has been tied with the city-state's entrepot trade, developments in the regional and global economy, and trace the changes in how people interact with money from the 19th century till the present.

Still a key node in the financial world, banks, remain understudied in the historiography of

finance in Singapore and Southeast Asia (Wong, 1979; Koh, 2019), despite their important role in actively influencing — and being influenced by — political, social, and economic developments of nations and countries (Teichova et. al., 1997; Mikheeva, 2019). Existing works pertaining to Singapore and Malaysia involve mostly the development of individual banks and the role of key personalities in the post-1960 period (Chew, 1993; Lien, 1994; Gomez, 1999; Wong, 2005; Pang, 2014).

There are even fewer academic works covering Singapore and Southeast Asia during the early twentieth century, which witnessed the formation of the earliest incorporated banks (Nagano, 1997; Van Roy, 2007; Tai, 2013). In Singapore and Malaya, these banks were owned by different Chinese-dialect communities (Tan, 1953). According to banking historian Lee Sheng Yi (1986), they were 'commercial banks in the modern sense' that differed from the 'traditional Chinese old-type banking and remittance houses' in terms of managerial structure and dynamics, including their incorporation under the colonial limited liability system. Following Lee, subsequent works reiterate that these Chinese banks became modernized only after incorporating banking practices from Europe and America (Brown, 1996; Loh et. al., 2000; Tai, 2013; Yang, 2013; Low, 2017). Yet, their organizational structure continued to be organized along dialect lines and they served customers of the same dialect group (Lee, 1986; Brown, 1996).

With reference to new evidence obtained from Chinese and English newspapers and archival sources, this article seeks to review the



characteristics of 'modern' Chinese banks in Singapore during the early 20th century. It aims to answer the following questions: How are diverse Chinese dialect groups involved in banking in Singapore during the early 20th century? Were the organizational structure, scope/services, clientele, and network restricted solely to the dialect group of the founders of each bank?

The remainder of this article comprises three parts. It first illustrates the changes in the economic and business environments that gave rise to the new Chinese banks at the turn of the twentieth century, then surveys their formation, organization, scope, and clientele using the Cantonese-dominated Kwong Yik Bank as a case study. This article concludes by proposing new characteristics of early Chinese banking in Singapore and areas for further research.

Changing Economic and Business Environments

According to the historian Christopher Bayly (2004: 451), the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century was a period of 'Great Acceleration', one that witnessed dramatic social, economic, and political change. Higher population growth rates, income levels, as well as technological innovations in communications, transportation, and manufacturing were key drivers that led to an expansion of business interests worldwide (Chandler, 1977). Improved connectivity, coupled with order brought about by the consolidation of European colonial rule, led to an influx of Western — European and American — capital that competed with Asian businesses in the growing, processing, trading, and logistics of key commodities (Huff, 1995; Koh, 2019: 421).

There were four main developments in this dynamic period that led to the emergence of Chinese 'modern' (or incorporated) banks in colonial Singapore and the Malay States: the growing competitiveness of Western enterprise, the decline and cessation of revenue farming, the introduction of a new currency, the Straits Settlements dollar (SS\$), and the changing political and economic connections between Southeast Asia and China.

Growing competitiveness of Western enterprise

From the 1890s, the hitherto interdependent relationship between Asian and European businesses shifted to one that was more competitive, particularly in the agricultural and mining industries (Drabble, 2000: 54-55). The strengthened British colonial state — after the signing of the Pangkor Treaty (1874) — began favoring Western, particularly British, tin mining companies instead of Chinese ones due to the former's capability in supplying capital-intensive technologies needed for deeper tin mining, at a time when surface tin was running out (Wong, 1965: 238). This capability was derived from their ready access to large amounts of capital via joint-stock companies floated on stock exchanges in the colonial metropolises (Huff, 1995: 87). Access to these funds also enabled Western enterprise to gain competitiveness against their Asian counterparts in the growing of rubber, which required a higher capital investment than other cash-crops due to its longer gestation period of approximately six years (Huff, 1995: 181-182).

Given their lack of access to capital markets in the colonial metropole and the absence of a



stock exchange in colonial Singapore and the Malay States, Asian businesses were relatively weaker in mobilizing large amounts of capital needed to remain competitive during this period. Confronted by this challenge, several Chinese entrepreneurs banded together to form new joint-stock companies and banks with organizational models modeled after their Western competitors, including the adoption of limited liability under the colonial Companies Ordinance (Ray, 1995: 512-513).

End of Revenue Farming

Another key impetus behind the formation of new Chinese banks was the decline of revenue farms. A major source of financing available to Chinese businesses, revenue farms were first introduced by William Farquhar in the 1820s when the colonial bureaucracy was relatively weaker. Under the farming system, syndicates of Chinese businessmen would bid for the rights to operate a farm and collect taxes — on behalf of the state — on products and activities such as opium, alcohol, and gambling (Trocki, 1990: 70-77). While revenue farms were not strictly financial institutions, they could produce substantial profits for successful bidders who retained the liquid capital that they collected over and above the amount that they agreed to pay the colonial state (Dick, 1993: 28).

Subsequently in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, revenue farming became less profitable due to a stronger colonial state bureaucracy that no longer relied on intermediaries to collect taxes on its behalf. New regulations such as enhanced restrictions on the preparation and sale of opium and greater distancing between pawnshops and gambling

houses reduced the profitability of revenue farming. More importantly, to push up the prices of farms and to prevent any individual or syndicate from dominating them, the British colonial state made bidding more competitive by inviting more Chinese capitalists from the region to participate in this process, which led to higher bids that diminished the profitability of revenue farming (Butcher, 1993: 29-35). The declining profitability of revenue farms coincided with the stronger demand for liquid capital — which could not be supplied by existing financial institutions and arrangements discussed above — to compete with the expanding Western enterprises in mining and plantations during this period. It was such circumstances that led to the need for new Chinese banks as an attempt to mobilize the capital required for Chinese businesses to expand and modernize their operations.

Introduction of the Straits Settlements dollar

The introduction of the Straits Settlements dollar in 1903 improved the viability of setting up new banks in the Straits Settlements and Malay states. Prior to this, a range of currencies based on the silver standard, such as the Mexican dollar, American and British trade dollar, Hong Kong dollar, the Spanish dollar, and Japanese yen, was legal tender in the Straits Settlements. Despite this, the quantity of money was inadequate to support the increase in trading activities (Lee, 1986: 7-12).

Alongside the shortage of money, the declining and fluctuating price of silver vis-à-vis gold and sterling was another perennial issue in the economies of the Straits Settlements and Malay states. According to J. O. Anthonisz (1915: 9), the



Treasurer of the Straits Settlements, the exchange rate between the silver dollar and sterling fell from five shillings to 2.7375 shillings between 1872 and 1893, which caused discontent among public servants and workers earning fixed wages as the real value of their salaries were reduced significantly. Between 1893 and 1903, these employees, along with companies represented by the European-dominated Singapore Chamber of Commerce, as well as 'wealthy and influential Chinese' called upon the Straits Settlements government to introduce a new state-backed currency pegged to the gold standard to stabilize the exchange rate and boost external trade in the Straits Settlements (Chiang, 1966: 11-12). The ensuing stability brought by the Straits Settlements dollar was highlighted by former banker Tan Ee Leong and Patricia Wong, great-granddaughter of Wong Ah Fook, as a catalyst in the formation of the Cantonese dominated Kwong Yik Bank, the first incorporated bank established in Singapore in 1903 (Tan, 1953: 113; Wong, 2002: 110-111).

Changing connections between Southeast Asia and China

The establishment of early Chinese banks in colonial Singapore and the Malay states was also tied closely with the changing political and economic connections between China and the Southeast Asian Chinese during the late nineteenth century and 1900s. This period witnessed the late-Qing state's growing interest in attracting the capital and expertise of Chinese communities in Southeast Asia for its political, economic and cultural reform, revolutionary and developmental programs (Koh, 2019: 321-322). As a result of these efforts, alongside the

developing economic and social connections between the Overseas Chinese and their native place in China, nearly every Nanyang Chinese 'came to share a connection with the fate of the China homeland' in varying degrees by 1900 (Godley, 1981: 4). However, this connection was ambivalent as the overseas Chinese entrepreneurs opposed Western intervention in China through the unequal treaties — or supportive to the extent that it helped their trade — and capitalized on economic opportunities in European colonies in Southeast Asia at the same time (Godley, 1981: 174). Similar to their counterparts in other parts of the world, the Southeast Asian Chinese took on multiple identities as they straddled between China and colonial environments (Wang, 2018: 97-101).

Economic modernization was a key theme in the Qing's reform efforts in response to intensified competition posed by the onslaught of Western capital in the treaty ports since the mid-nineteenth century. Chinese officials and intellectuals called for the formation of new companies (Lee, 1996: 460-473). Besides companies, banks were also regarded as key institutions that would accumulate the capital needed to boost agricultural production, industrial manufacturing and trade (Liu, 2013: 36-37).

Similar discussions on the necessity of modern companies and banks were also present in the commentaries published by *Lat Pau* and the *Union Times* in Singapore during this period. A *Lat Pau* commentary (30 April 1904: 1) discussed the benefits of forming Chinese-owned modern banks, particularly its role as the hub of all



businesses given its capability in funding other commercial and industrial enterprises. The local Chinese press also recognized the importance of capital, as demonstrated in a *Union Times* article (11 June 1909: 8) which contended that money served as ‘a major foundation of the world’.

In their attempt to court overseas Chinese capital and expertise, the Qing state often invoked the term ‘commercial war’ (*shangzhan*). First used by Zeng Guofan in a correspondence in 1862, this term referred to the economic competition between the Chinese and Western enterprises. This anti-colonial ‘commercial war’ was conceived in response to the decline in Chinese-owned interests and rights (*liquan*) in China’s economy with the domination of Western industries and commerce. Using this concept, the Qing state appealed for investments from overseas Chinese communities to buy out foreign interests in the economy and to form new Chinese-owned corporations in various industries, particularly manufacturing, shipping and banking. By increasing the proportion of public and private Chinese ownership in these industries, the Qing state sought to reclaim its economic sovereignty in the ‘commercial war’ (Chong, 2009).

The developing economic and political ties between China and Southeast Asia seemed to have played an important role in the formation of the Kwong Yik Bank. Associating the bank with China’s ‘commercial war’, a *Lat Pau* commentary (5 January 1904: 1) highlighted the bank’s instrumental role in helping China to reclaim its *liquan* by gathering Chinese-owned capital and providing liquidity to Chinese firms. It added that Chinese communities beyond the Cantonese in Singapore would benefit from the newly formed

bank in the form of loans offered at lower interest rates than those offered by the Chettiars, whose high interest rates made the Chinese ‘suffer in silence’ (*anzi chiqui*). At the same time, this commentary emphasized the Kwong Yik Bank’s sincerity and reliability given the reputability of its founders in business and social circles in the Straits Settlements and Malay States. The next section will elaborate on the formation and organizational structure of this bank.

Formation and Organizational Structure

The Kwong Yik Bank was the first Chinese-owned incorporated bank not only in Singapore, but also Southeast Asia. It was formed in 1903 by ten Cantonese businessmen and one Peranakan comprador with a capitalization of S\$850,000 (The Straits Times, 15 February 1904: 5). Existing works credit Wong Ah Fook as the KYB’s main promoter (Wright & Cartwright, 1908; Tan, 1953: 114; Lim, 2002: 110-111). A Cantonese hailing from Taishan, Wong had wide-ranging interests in opium farming and construction, and owned gambier, pepper, rubber, and tapioca plantations in both Johor and Singapore. Wong had close ties with the Johor Sultanate as Johor Sultan Abu Bakar married a consort, Sultanah Fatimah, who regarded him as her ‘elder brother’ (Wong Ah Fook Collection, Folio II, n. d.) This relationship was instrumental in the expansion of Wong’s business interests, as he obtained the right to construct several important buildings in Johor, including the Sultan’s palace, as well as the appointment of a kangchu, or ‘lord of the river’, with the rights to start plantations on a river, collect taxes, and govern the immigrant workers working on these plantations (Trocki, 1976).



Leveraging on common business, provincial, and dialect ties, Wong Ah Fook obtained the support of ten businessmen in forming the Kwong Yik Bank. As listed in Table 1 below, six out of a total of 11 directors were born in Guangdong province — and four directors, including Wong Ah Fook, hailed from Taishan county in Guangdong (Lim, 2002: 111; Lat Pau, 9 December 1903: 5). Family

and two managers. Notably, despite his leading role in forming the bank, Wong Ah Fook did not take on the positions of Managing Director and Assistant Managing Director until 1908, and his exact role in the bank remains unclear (The Straits Times, 22 February 1909: 8). The appointment of the bank's Managing Director and Assistant Managing Directors might have

Position	Businessman	Dialect	Place of Birth
Managing Director	Lam Wai Fong	Cantonese	Taishan, Guangdong
Assistant Managing Director	Wee Kay Siang	Peranakan	Singapore/Malacca
	Boey Lian Chin	Cantonese	Singapore
Directors	Wong Ah Fook	Cantonese	Taishan, Guangdong
	Choo Su Meng	Cantonese	Guangdong
	Koh Joo Soon	Cantonese	Guangdong
	Yow Ngan Pan	Cantonese	Singapore
	Wong Kwong Yam	Cantonese	Taishan, Guangdong
	Boey Pak Fook	Cantonese	Taishan, Guangdong
Managers	Wong Mun Po	Cantonese	Unclear
	Wong Ming	Cantonese	Unclear

TABLE 1 Founding Managerial Structure of the Kwong Yik Bank (1903)

ties were also important in the bank's formation as Wong appointed his nephew, Wong Kwong Yam, as a director of the bank (Kua, 1995: 134, 184). Besides having common provincial, dialect and family ties, the bank's founders also had overlapping business interests in the planting of agricultural commodities, construction, revenue farming, pawnbroking, as well as the import and export trade (Lat Pau, 9 December 1903: 5; Song, 1923).

The Kwong Yik Bank's founding organizational structure comprised a Managing Director, two Assistant Managing Directors, seven directors,

been based on financial expertise and reputation within business circles in the Straits Settlements and Malay States. Lam Wai Fong, the founding Managing Director, owned two pawnshops in Singapore, as well as rubber plantations in Johor, Klang, and Seremban in Malaya that were valued at S\$535,000 in 1915 (The Straits Times, 23 July 1915: 8). It is plausible that Lam became the first Managing Director due to the scale and nature of his business interests, as well as his standing within the Cantonese and Chinese business communities, evidenced by his role as the one of the ten founding directors of the Singapore



Chinese Chamber of Commerce ('Election Results', 2 February 1906).

The Assistant Managing Director, Wee Kay Siang, was a Peranakan born either in Malacca or Singapore (The Straits Times, 1925: 10). He was a director of Singapore and Hong Kong's opium farms, as well as the comprador of the Brinkmann and Company, a British agency house which imported goods from Europe and exported commodities such as gambier, pepper, and copra from Singapore and Malaya (Wright & Cartwright, 1908: 156, 679). Wee might have been sought out by Wong due to their common interest in the Singapore opium farm, as well as their sharing of the same Chinese surname. Additionally, Wee was competent in English — having received education at Singapore's Raffles Institution for five years — which was necessary for communicating with the Straits Settlements government, American and European banks, as well as companies. This was indeed a valuable competency in an environment where individuals fluent in both English and Chinese were scarce (Tan, 1975: 28).

The second Assistant Managing Director was Boey Lian Chin, the son of Boey Ah Foo who hailed from Canton (Kua, 1995: 184). Compared to Wee Kay Siang, Boey was less competent in English, evidenced by his need for a translator in court (The Straits Times, 1 September 1914: 9). As a major building contractor, the elder Boey clinched several government projects, including the erection of blocks of shophouses along North Bridge Road, Rochor Road and Malabar Street that were worth S\$800,000 in 1919 (Song, 1923: 141). Boey Lian Chin took over these business interests upon his father's death in

1899 and diversified into the pawnshop industry. Boey was also indirectly connected to revenue farms through his uncle, Boey Ah Sam, who operated opium and spirit farms in Batu Pahat, Johor (Song, 1923: 260). It is plausible that Wong Ah Fook reached out to Boey in light of their common involvement in the construction industry and connections within business circles in Johor. Alongside these ties, Boey's financial expertise in managing pawnshops might have also led to his appointment as the second Assistant Managing Director of the bank.

The Kwong Yik Bank's formation was also tied to the broader mobilization and organization of Cantonese business and social interests in Singapore during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Several bank directors and their concerns were involved in the establishment of important Cantonese associations during this period. Wong Ah Fook, Lam Wai Fong, Yow Ngan Pan and Boey Pak Fook, among other Cantonese businessmen, were key promoters of the Yeung Ching School (*Yangzheng xuetang*) in 1905, an institution that sought to cultivate talent to 'save the motherland' (Lat Pau, 19 April 1906: 8; Lee, 2017: 121-122). In 1910, Wong, Lam, Yow, and Choo Su Meng were among the first trustees of the Cantonese Kwong Wai Siew Hospital (*Guanghuizao yiyuan*), which received funding from the Cantonese business community and donations from the public at fund-raising performances (The Union Times, 22 March 1909: 2). As a financial institution, the KYB was also essential in the formation of these institutions by handling and processing the donations received from businessmen and the broader society (Lat Pau, 27 April 1906: 9; The Union Times, 1 April



1909: 2). The next section will discuss how the bank reached out to the Cantonese community and the broader society in colonial Singapore and Malaya.

Services and Clientele

The Kwong Yik Bank provided financial services to a broad segment of society. It was the first incorporated bank in Singapore and Malaya which made its deposit and mortgage services accessible to not only 'gentlemanly' merchants, but more importantly, workers, who could set up an account with a minimum of S\$5 (Lat Pau, 9 December 1903: 5). This was unlike other major banks such as the Mercantile Bank, which promoted its services mainly to merchants and rich individuals (Lat Pau, 15 December 1903: 8).

To attract depositors, the bank offered higher interest rates than its competitors. It offered 4.50 percent to deposits fixed for six months and 5.00 percent to deposits fixed for one year, as compared to the Mercantile Bank which paid 3.50 percent and 4.00 percent respectively (Lat Pau, 9 December 1903: 5; 15 December 1903: 8). Unlike modern banks in its day, the bank also provided pawning services — the specialty of Lam Wai Fong, Boey Pak Foo, Boey Lian Chin, Wong Ah Fook, Wong Kwong Yam, and Wong Mun Poh who owned pawnshops — that offered flexible repayment rates. A notice on the *Lat Pau* (2 August 1906: 6) stated that for the 'convenience of fellow Chinese', customers were required to pay interest on their pawned items till the day of retrieval within a year, unlike other pawnshops which enforced a mandatory repayment of a year's interest even though customers retrieved their items earlier. It was very likely that the provision of this pawning

service enabled the bank to attract the patronage of a broader segment of society beyond big businesses, especially among the Chinese communities which made up the majority of Singapore's population.

Besides placing deposits and obtaining loans, customers could also access insurance services through the Kwong Yik Bank given its role as a sub-agent for the British Sun Fire Insurance Company under the main agent Brinkmann and Company, where Wee Kay Siang, the Assistant Managing Director, worked as a comprador (Lee, 2012: 69-70). These functions of insuring and pawning strongly suggest that the business interests and networks of the bank's directors were important in enabling the bank to broaden its functions beyond deposits and loans. Subsequently in 1912, the bank, along with other Chinese businessmen from various dialect groups, organized the first Chinese-owned insurance company in the Straits Settlements and Malay States, the Eastern United Assurance Company Limited, which was capitalized at S\$5,000,000 (Lat Pau, 21 December 1912: 10-11).

While the Kwong Yik Bank was predominantly owned by Cantonese business interests, it did not necessarily mean that its clientele base was constrained to the Cantonese community. The bank attracted customers from various dialect and ethnic groups, as well as clients in Malaya, Hong Kong, and China. Possibly reflecting its association with the Chinese reformists of the day, the bank served Khoo Seok Wan, a Hokkien poet and reformist who collected donations from his friends and sympathizers to deal with costs arising from his bankruptcy lawsuit upon



losing the entire S\$700,000 of his inheritance on land and property speculation (The Straits Times, 8 December 1908: 6). The bank also serviced businessmen beyond the Chinese community, such as Chettiars and Malay merchants, with their cheque and current account facilities (Singapore Free Press, 22 April 1909: 252).

and national concerns involving railways, steamships and banks as shown in Table 2 below (Lat Pau, 7 September 1906: 6; 12 October 1906: 6; 17 September 1907: 8; 8 December 1908: 8; The Union Times, 29 January 1909: 7; 3 April 1909: 3).

Company/Bank	Year
Suzhou Railway Company	1906
Guangdong-Wuhan Railroad Company	1906
Hong Kong-Canton Mortgage and Accumulation Bank Limited	1907
China Steamship Company Limited	1908
China Merchant Bank Limited	1909
China Industrial Bank Limited	1909

Table 2 Companies and Banks in China offering share subscriptions through KYB

On a regional level, the Kwong Yik Bank facilitated economic exchanges by recognizing and handling drafts from other banks, such as the Sarawak Banking Company, as well as those issued by companies from the Dutch East Indies (Weekly Sun, 26 August 1911: 5; The Straits Times, 1915: 9). Like the companies of its individual founders, the bank's function as a share agent for newly established banks and companies in China was also important in strengthening the financial linkages between Southeast Asia and China. Throughout its decade of operation between 1903 and 1913, the bank collected share subscriptions of these regional

The bank's directors were also investors in these new companies. Wong Ah Fook purchased S\$300,000 worth of shares among the S\$2,000,000 allocated by the Hong Kong-Canton Mortgage and Accumulation Bank (Lat Pau, 17 September 1907, 8). Also, along with Lam Wai Fong, as well as the Hokkien and Teochew committee members of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, Teo Sian Keng, and Tan Teck Joon, he published a letter on the *Union Times*, urging its readers to purchase the shares of the China Industrial Bank Limited — a firm floated in Beijing that sought to gather capital to fund major industries in China — at



SS\$1 each (The Union Times, 3 April 1909: 3). Wong himself invested SS\$3,000 in this company.

Besides serving these concerns, the Kwong Yik Bank also contributed to the Chinese Revolutionary Government by undertaking the sale of SS\$200,000 worth of bonds in Singapore in 1913 (Singapore Free Press, 25 January 1913: 4). Indeed, the bank might have benefited as the intermediary of the Chinese government with the funds obtained from the latter for its services. At the same time, these investments and services for the Chinese government would have strengthened the identification of the bank with China's 'commercial war', raising their appeal towards the diasporic Chinese communities in Singapore and Malaya. Alongside ties with Chinese businesses and communities in Singapore and the Chinese government, the regional connections of Wong Ah Fook were also pivotal to the bank's dealings with the Johor Sultanate and state government. In 1993, the former Chief Minister of Johor, Dato' Abdullah Mohamed highlighted Wong as the 'number one Chinese pioneer among several others', being a major financier to the Johor state government (Wong Ah Fook Collection Folio VIII, 25 November 1993). Prior to the founding of the Kwong Yik Bank, Wong loaned money to the Johor state government in his personal capacity and failed to receive repayment of these loans, along with the cost of his construction works for the Johor government on time. This led Wong to approach the Chettiars for high-interest loans (Wong Ah Fook Collection Folio VI, 1 September 1903; Folio VII, 22 October 1910, 24 October 1910, 31 October 1910 & 10 June 1911). With the formation of the Kwong Yik

Bank, it is plausible that Wong financed loans to the Johor government through the bank. An undated memo of the Johor state equated Wong with 'Bank China', which very likely referred to the bank. The loans obtained by the Johor government from the bank through Wong as an intermediary — and possibly, guarantor — was worth SS\$160,000 in January 1907 (Wong Ah Fook Collection, Folio VII, n d.).

Concluding Remarks

Using the Kwong Yik Bank — first Chinese incorporated bank formed in Singapore and Southeast Asia — as a case study, this article proposes three new characteristics of early Chinese banks in colonial Singapore and the Malay States. First, the establishment of these banks was tied closely with dynamic changes in global, regional, and local business and economic environments. They entailed not only the growing competitiveness of Western enterprise, the cessation of revenue farming, the introduction of the new Straits currency, but also the developing economic and political ties between China and Southeast Asia.

Second, the Kwong Yik Bank suggests that early Chinese banks in colonial Singapore and Malay States were far more complex than simply being 'commercial banks in the modern sense'. Even as the bank adopted the 'modern' colonial limited liability status, common business, provincial, dialect, and family ties remained key in the ownership and management of the bank.

Third, the bank indicates the possibility that these early Chinese banks were organized across dialect lines, and they served a broad clientele comprising not only different Chinese dialect



groups, but also other ethnicities. Indeed, Wong Ah Fook and his contemporaries had reason to reach out broadly beyond their dialect communities, as they were attempting to accumulate capital amidst a dynamic business and economic environment.

To validate these three characteristics, further research is necessary on the corporate organization, dynamics, and networks of other key Chinese banks in colonial Singapore and the Malay States in the early twentieth century. They include the Teochew-dominated Sze Hai Tong Bank and the three predecessors of the Hokkien-dominated Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation, the Chinese Commercial Bank, Ho Hong Bank and Oversea-Chinese Bank. Comparisons between colonial Singapore and Malaya's early Chinese banking industry and its counterparts in greater China, as well as the banking industries of Western countries, would reinforce efforts in bringing Southeast Asian businesses and banks to the forefront of Chinese and global business and banking histories.

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Article

SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THE SCHOOL OF AUTONOMOUS KNOWLEDGE IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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Introduction

This article is a discussion on Autonomous Knowledge, an emerging school of thought in Southeast Asia that links social science research and thinking to specifically Asian problems (Alatas, 1979). Specifically, it is a critique of Eurocentrism as well as other hegemonic orientations in the discipline of International Relations (IR), such as androcentrism, traditionalism, and ethnonationalism. An attempt is made to unpack the effects that these orientations have on IR theorizing, suggesting that this approach represents an alternative School of Autonomous Knowledge in IR.

In 2006, a year before his passing, Syed Hussein Alatas published an article titled 'The Autonomous, the Universal and the Future of Sociology' (Alatas, 2006). It was an urgent call for sociologists (and social scientists in general) to critically reflect on the discipline, due to epistemic problems that had emerged over time. He wrote,



This problem is the emergence of imitative thinking arising from over-dependence on the western intellectual contribution in the various fields of knowledge, not so much at the practical level of the applied sciences, but at the level of intellectual reflections, planning, conceptualization and the need to establish a genuine and autonomous scientific tradition. (Alatas, 2006, p. 8).

Essentially, Alatas's article is about developing an autonomous social science tradition and its relation to its universal foundation. The move for autonomy is not a rejection of other traditions but rather a process of linking social science research, thinking, and pedagogy to regional problems, selected by regional scholars (Alatas, 2006, p. 12).

Alatas saw the need for an autonomous tradition because of the distortions present when conceptualizing universal phenomena and their concrete manifestations in societies of different histories, political structures, class structures, cultures, values, and religions. Although there is validity in universal concepts, Alatas suggests that they must also be conditioned by their 'temporal, spatial and cultural frameworks' (Alatas, 2006, p. 8). Even though Alatas's article focuses on the discipline of sociology, his analysis is relevant to other social science fields, including IR. The development of the field of IR since the end of World War II has revealed its West-centric biases, and hence the need to propose a more post-hegemonic, autonomous paradigm.

Contextualizing West-centrism in IR

West-centrism is a Euro-American style of thought in which the assessment and evaluation of non-Western societies is shaped by one's own cultural assumptions and biases. In IR, this means a Euro-American interpretation of geopolitics (among others) has generated an intellectual trend in knowledge production. This trend is not only about writing the history of IR from a Euro-American perspective, but also about falsely designating Europe and North America as the originator of all developments that define world order, i.e., what was, is, and should be an established and universal understanding of world order (Alatas, 2020).

The phenomenon of Eurocentrism is an offshoot of ethnocentrism, which is the belief that one's own ethnic group or society is superior to others. Other groups are assessed and judged in terms of the categories and standards of evaluation of one's own group, often defined as 'othering' in post-colonial discourse (Alatas, 2016).

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the trend in the discipline of IR was to build a grand narrative of global events, based on the glory of the nation state, i.e., a history of sovereign nations since the Peace of Westphalia (1648). In this sense, Eurocentrism in IR perpetuates the Westphalian bias. It suggests that the Treaty of Westphalia, which was intended to represent peace in the Holy Roman Empire, is supposed to create an international (global) order, thus solving the problem of anarchy characteristic of European history at the time. The Westphalian system set in motion, a history-specific form of contractual evolution among nation states which had not existed before. This analysis of the



incessant wars prior to 1648, derives from an understanding of anarchy and the 'Hobbesian necessity for a Leviathan' or an organizing body politic.

According to Thomas Hobbes, the absence of peace was due to the prolonged religio-political conflict, perpetuated by a lack of a common authority. Without the Leviathan, society will be in a constant state of anarchy, i.e., a struggle for power because people only took care of themselves, not each other. The Peace of Westphalia was supposed to end this state of anarchy and establish a civilized order embodied in the sovereign state system. Since the process began in Europe, non-Western states lacking this European contractual agreement have supposedly remained in anarchy and in a less-than-civilized state.

However, the goal for a universal calm and order among states premised on the structures established after Westphalia, must be contextualized within a pre-Westphalian European reality. It was a reality engulfed in a century of endless slaughter over religious and political domination, among entities vying for exclusive hegemonic status. It can be argued that this European reality did not mirror conditions outside Europe during the same period. The events leading up to the Treaty of Westphalia can hardly be considered a global reality that would justify an 'international' benchmark' (Buzan and Little, p. 89).

It is here that Syed Hussein Alatas's call for an autonomous selection of data applies. It allows us to apply theoretical constructs that are more relevant to regional and local conditions. While

Europe was facing almost a century of anarchy from the mid-16th to 17th centuries, other civilizations were thriving and were hardly less-than-modern. Europe was integrating into a more global economic system, expanding its geographic reach, trading in new commodities and producing goods from raw materials obtained from newly discovered and colonized lands in Africa, Latin America and Asia. These beginnings of commerce were also highly unstable, and led to economic, financial and political crises among competing European colonial powers. This explains the century of extreme instability and conflict.

Conversely, densely populated regions outside Europe were engaged in active commerce. There were markets and shops, and busy streets and towns engaged in trading activities. Furthermore, the degree of conflict was considerably low, if not absent, despite the intense economic activities. Also, the emergence of different classes in societies did not seem disruptive to daily social activities. For example, in Latin America general stores sold everything from flour, dried meat and beans to precious stones, and even traded in slavery. Fernand Braudel writes the following about regions under Muslim control:

Islam is famous for its crowded markets and streets of narrow shops, grouped according to their specialty and still to be seen today in the celebrated souks of its big cities. Every imaginable kind of market is to be found here; some outside the city walls, spreading over a wide area and forming a gigantic traffic jam at the monumental city gates [...] In short, all the characteristic of the European



market are there: the peasant who comes to town, anxious to obtain the money he needs to pay his taxes, and who simply looks in at the market long enough to do so: the energetic salesman with his ready tongue and manner who pre-empts the rural seller's wares, in spite of prohibition. (Braudel, 1979, pp. 114-115).

In India, the situation was similar. Under the Moghuls there were villages outside the towns and cities which had bustling markets engrossed in active trading. There was also movement of peoples between villages and towns, in pursuit of merchandise through trading activities. Immanuel Wallerstein provides ample evidence of the rural-urban class relations, as well as the existence of a global class structure in the sixteenth century (Wallerstein, 2011, pp. 85-87). China too, according to Braudel, had an abundance of towns and busy markets (Braudel, 1979, p. 117).

The question of instability and anarchy in Europe during the same period warrants a discussion on the role of the state in maintaining law and order. When referring to the pre-Westphalian era, we conceptualize the state as a socially constructed identity and organization, devoid of the concept of 'nation', with its notions of citizenship, national boundaries and sovereignty. These concepts had not yet emerged. Instead, the pre-Westphalian order was shaped by the role of the Church and the monopoly of power by despotic dynasties through the coercive loyalty of their subjects. Empire and religion functioned in an interactive network of commerce, warfare, socialization,

and long-distance communication with colonies in the non-West.

External to Europe, the Ottoman Empire was a formidable power with which these European polities had some form of interaction. It is common to find early modern and contemporary Euro-American writings about the Ottoman Empire, which often referred to the Ottomans as 'living for war'. These biased depictions implied that the Ottoman state was relentlessly martial. Another misleading aspect of this analysis is that such militarism was peculiarly foreign and contrary to Western norms (Goffman, 2002, p. 1).

Yet, as we observe European literature between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, such as the plays of William Shakespeare, many espouse soldierly virtues. For example, King Henry V of England (from Shakespeare's play *Henry V*) seemed to become kingly only through the vehicle of war (Goffman, 2002, p. 4). Voltaire's writings are known as crusading works against tyranny, bigotry and cruelty, convinced that kings were indispensable agents of progress. It is clear that both Shakespeare's and Voltaire's milieus were one of military conflict and religious persecution. Voltaire ironically referred to Shakespeare's plays as 'barbaric' due to the dramatic force of the plots. Both were in fact immersed in a worldview of conflict and violence.

Often, biased interpretations of history inform the discipline of IR. The idea that the Treaty of Westphalia represents a transition from medieval chaos to modern civilization is an accurate interpretation, insofar as European



history goes. However, these same events had different or minimal impact on other regions of the world. Here is where the particular selection of data is vital, as Syed Hussein Alatas suggests. Data relating to the events leading up to the Treaty of Westphalia should not be uncritically applied to the study of geopolitics, strategy, anarchy and other forms of state behavior in non-European traditions, for historical or contemporary analysis. Also, the process of interpreting relevant data is important so as to avoid what Alatas observes as, 'the emergence of imitative thinking, arising from overdependence on the western intellectual contribution in the various fields of knowledge' (Alatas, 2006, p. 8).

West-centrism in IR is reflected in how the category of non-West is articulated, and its assigned place in world order. Epistemic binaries are present in IR discourses, resulting in hierarchical representations that define the nature of state behavior and how they 'fit in' with world order. For example, sovereignty, hegemony, and anarchy are a few of the concepts on which interpretations in IR are based. These are designated as European in origin, and assumes the West introduced these to the non-West. This epistemic binary is articulated through spatio-temporal hierarchies, which in turn constructs and classifies universal standards for state behaviour and modes of interaction.

In line with Alatas's suggestion for autonomous social science, the inclusion of an autonomous interpretation of IR concepts is also in order. An autonomous conceptualization means the choice of new themes with relevant connection

to Western affairs *as well as* conceptual contribution to general and universal theory formation (Alatas, 2006, p. 21).

Generating Autonomous IR Epistemes: Southeast Asia Within a Multiplex World Order

After WWII and decolonization, there was a 'great outburst of cultural contact and intellectual interaction following the independence of the countries previously colonized by the West' (Alatas, 2006, p. 6). However, another form of hegemony, according to Alatas, emerged. This was not the kind of domination or coercion imposed by Western colonialists over the colonized. Rather, it was the emergence of 'imitative thinking arising from overdependence on the Western intellectual contribution in the various fields of knowledge, not so much at the practical level of the applied sciences, but at the level of intellectual reflections, planning, conceptualization and the need to establish a genuine and autonomous scientific tradition' (Alatas, 2006, p. 7).

A similar trend in IR knowledge production currently exists in the Global South, highlighting the need for a more autonomous intellectual tradition. Such a paradigm shift would help to eradicate the hierarchical binary in IR epistemology, which imposes one form of conceptualization over another. In other words, a West-centric concept of power would leave no room for a different articulation, which may be tied closely to non-Western historical or religious experiences. Also, the concepts of world order and the path to stability must consider temporal and spatial trajectories of different polities, with diverse historical and political backgrounds. Such paradigm shifts have implications on how



countries interact, manage conflict and negotiate at the diplomatic level. Furthermore, geopolitical reality dictates that diverse cultures with equally diverse historical and political developments have different approaches to conflict management, diplomacy and peace.

An important question to ask at this juncture is, why would nations of the Global South accept the concept of 'multipolar'? The term describes a world order that is neither unipolar nor bipolar. It is also outdated because it refers to a particular period in European history, i.e. pre-WWII. That era is unlikely to repeat itself, as the 21st century is no longer an era of inevitable conflict. Times are different today, with the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and advanced cybertechnology, and intricate communication links that are not only confined to governments. In other words, there are more actors with more powers of agency in world events. Large segments of society have access to these which places more checks and balances on their negative uses. Conflict is thus not as guaranteed as it used to be a century ago.

A more accurate term for world order would be 'multiplex' world order. In a 2017 essay, IR scholar Amitav Acharya, who coined the term, considered using a metaphor from the world of cinema and film. It suggests that the world will be like a multiplex theater, where the audience has the option of choosing between many movies, directors, actors, producers and plots. (i.e. choosing between many leaders, loci of power, and many regional centers of influence).

Multiplex conveys the idea of multiplicity and complexity, due to the growing number of

diverse actors in constructing world order. Acharya's conceptual approach fits in with Alatas's prescription for an autonomous selection of data. Conceptualizing a multiplex system is an autonomous approach that allows us to apply theoretical constructs that are more relevant to regional and local conditions. Apart from states, multinational corporations, non-governmental organizations, transnational movements, individuals, and other non-state actors are facilitating agency in world order. All these suggest that world order is made by 'multiple' actors.

There is also a growing number of transboundary issues which have become more prominent and more urgent. The latest Covid-19 pandemic is an example of a multidimensional and unpredictable transnational threat. It has affected transcontinental shipping, trade, tourism, financial markets, public health, educational schedules (schools and universities), international enrolment of students across continents, local economic conditions, etc. Similar to the 2008 Financial Crisis, these transnational issues are impossible to be addressed solely at the national level. A multiplex paradigm is much more democratic, less hegemonic, and does not impose a single world order where the 'audience' does not have a choice but to view it, despite not being familiar with the actors. In today's world order we must have a choice between different narratives, because there are now more opportunities for diverse voices to be expressed.

Eurocentric IR projects an order that was single-handedly created by the US and to a lesser extent, Europe, creating 'polar' structures that



divided the world. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the world was divided according to two blocks, resulting in a bipolar world order. Today, more narratives are emerging about how other countries and regions played equally important roles that contributed to world order, then, and continue to influence it today. Continuing with the movie metaphor, Southeast Asia as a region can be described as another 'plot', with different actors, directors and producers. The plot may be scripted and produced by China, (for the sake of argument) but the movie creates demand, continues to run, and entertains a majority of 'viewers' (Southeast Asians). In the event that tastes change, producers adapt to this change in demand. So, conceptualizing a multiplex world order suggests more elements of accommodation and compromise, which results in a level playing field.

By promoting greater diversity in agency, and by leveling the playing field, we are reducing elements of hegemony in world order. Alatas's Autonomous Knowledge approach is a step towards leveling the field. This approach fits in snugly within a Multiplex World Order, towards a truly Global IR.

Discounting 'Benign Hegemony' via the Autonomous Knowledge Tradition

'Benign hegemony' (Mearsheimer, 2016) is a term that is often used to tone down what appears to be acts of domination by big powers over small states, especially when it comes to calling for alliances in conflict situations. It promotes a false consciousness about domination and exploitation. Benign hegemony is hardly benign because it still implies

domination and exploitation over the weaker states of the Global South. Conversely, a multiplex world order would not be dominated by a single power; there will be room for emerging powers, and non-state actors.

Diversity has become a priority concern for universities, journals and academic associations but this commitment is often very superficial. There is little progress when it comes to making real changes. However, there is a growing body of non-West-centric theoretical literature in IR. Over the last two decades, scholars residing in the West, as well as from the Global South have been questioning the dominance and suitability of Eurocentric IR theory. Having said that, IR scholars in Southeast Asia remain largely a-theoretical, the exceptions being scholars based in Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines, and to some extent in Vietnam and Cambodia. The time is ripe to establish a systematic repository of autonomous theoretical research, whether in the form of published writings, popular and academic debates, media op-eds, or even media coverage on the subject. This is sorely lacking in the Southeast Asian context.

It is also important to remove barriers to women in the field of IR in Southeast Asia. For too long, there have been too many 'manels' in regional IR fora and seminars, the last few years being more obvious with the mushrooming of webinars on account of the Covid-19 pandemic lock downs. Also, real changes for universities in Southeast Asia should include the following:



- i. Reform PhD programs and train more Global South scholars in theory;
- ii. Insist on mastering the English language, which does *not* mean paying less attention to indigenous languages; provide more institutional translation services to facilitate this;
- iii. Encourage classroom discussions on nationalism, gender studies, Marxism, imperialism, corruption, and race theory, while highlighting the essentialist paradigm of nativism;
- iv. Universities must hire more lecturers who are committed to critical theoretical approaches; intellectual change has to begin at the theoretical level;
- v. Revise (not ban) the use of IR textbooks which are currently Eurocentric; include texts that emphasize decolonial ideas, as well as ideas that critique androcentrism, gender bias, and racism in IR;
- vi. Revamp course offerings and reading lists in IR programs; expand these lists to include other social science disciplines, such as anthropology, sociology, social psychology, and history; include 'home-grown' decolonial thinkers from the region, such as Jose Rizal, Syed Hussein Alatas, Raden Adjeng Kartini, Tjokro Aminoto, Chandra Muzaffar, Syed Farid Alatas, Sharifah Maznah Syed Omar, Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, Vineeta Sinha, Shahrudin Maaruf, etc.;
- vii. Provide more citations to Global South scholars;
- viii. Encourage more journal submissions that project the agency of Southeast Asia as a 'multiplex' player;
- ix. Insist on pluralizing membership in international academic committees;
- x. Encourage more Southeast Asian scholars to speak at world academic congresses; they must be encouraged to author more theoretical articles and books, and if these are in English, they must be translated into indigenous languages of the region, for wider distribution and interpretation.

Conclusion: A Proposal for an IR School of Autonomous Knowledge

If all the above are realized, a School of Autonomous Knowledge in IR would eventually emerge in Southeast Asia. While Alatas wrote of the intellectual domination of previous colonial powers, such as the British, Dutch, and Spanish, a parallel can be drawn today, to the domination of US power, seen through established (and often biased) concepts that are universally accepted without any question. An autonomous tradition in IR would emerge in Southeast Asia if the region's post-colonial leaders themselves avoid the colonial practices of discrimination, and oppression, which would in turn, perpetuate an unequal playing field in their respective countries. A School of Autonomous Knowledge would suggest that IR is not just about states' foreign policy or the diplomatic behaviour of politicians. Instead, it would encompass theories on how these relations enable or prevent a decent life, by disabling imperialistic powers, corrupt leaders, and authoritarian governments.

Incorporating a multi-disciplinary analysis into IR theorizing would expose more of the historical forces of nationalism, decolonization, and the struggle for independence. These experiences have shaped the collective aspirations of



Southeast Asians and have conditioned their 'agency' in regional order. The phenomena of gender and ethnic exploitation (i.e., sexism and racism) must also be included in the study of Southeast Asia's autonomous IR approach because the notion of colonial administrative oppression draws many parallels with post-colonial polities in many parts of Southeast Asia.

Following the logic of the multiplex world order, Southeast Asia (i.e., its mainland and maritime entities, peoples, and institutions) has the most expertise, interest, and capabilities to 'handle' big powers in the region, such as the US and China. The region has been in China's proximity for centuries. Southeast Asia has also maintained friendly relations with the US for a long time. However, there has been considerable controversy about ASEAN's agency in the region, which is partly due to the inflated evaluation of the importance of the disputed waterways in the South China Sea (Quiggin, 2021). Furthermore, the threat to shipping within these passageways are exaggerated.

While the Straits of Melaka are the shortest and cheapest route between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, there is also a long way around. A recent essay on the topic had this to say: 'A major shipping route, yes, but vital?' (Quiggin, 2021). In other words, there are alternatives, but this reality is suppressed, which demonstrates a form of 'benign hegemony' (Mearsheimer, 2016).

Polemics that refer to the South China Sea as a vital shipping lane, give the impression that the freedom of navigation via the Melaka Straits is in jeopardy because of the presence of China. The small states of ASEAN have consistently

refrained from taking sides, neither balancing against China, forming alliances with the US, or band-wagging with China. ASEAN (since 1967) has remained neutral, adopting a non-aligned policy. This approach (the ASEAN Way) has successfully averted violent conflict in the region, yet recognition of such agency is subdued, even ridiculed by West-centric theorists. The School of Autonomous Knowledge would address the situation in the South China Sea (and many other theoretical misunderstandings) beyond the narrow strategic and military dimensions.

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Biographical Note

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Article

A REFUGE FROM CHAOS: THE STAGE CLUB AND THE BRITISH COLONIAL EXPERIENCE OF SINGAPORE'S INDEPENDENCE, 1964-1965

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Introduction

Nestled within the archives of The Stage Club is a plaque commemorating the opening of its Clubhouse in 1965 (Fig. 1) at 41 Malcolm Road, a Black and White colonial bungalow (Fig. 2) leased by the Club from the Singapore government. This plaque was hung near the entrance of the bungalow, proclaiming that the first President of Singapore, Yusof Ishak, opened the Clubhouse on Oct 9, 1965. The Stage Club is one of Singapore's oldest theater companies, formed by British soldiers in 1945 as a volunteer-run theater club outside the ambit of the British military, with its early membership derived primarily from the British population in Singapore. With the Club producing approximately seven public productions a year by the 1960s (The Stage Club, 1965), the acquisition of a permanent Clubhouse at 41 Malcolm Road was a point of pride for many Club members. Beyond a milestone in the institutional history of the Club, understanding the historical context of the Club's acquisition of 41 Malcolm Road in 1965 allows us to explore the experience of Singapore's independence from the perspective of the British population in Singapore. Obtaining 41 Malcolm Road was not

only a means for the British members of The Stage Club to construct a place of physical and cultural refuge amid the tumultuous decolonization process, but it also indicated an acknowledged vital shift in the power dynamic between the British in Singapore and the newly formed Singapore government. Especially given

The Stage Club's acquisition of their first permanent home coincided directly with Singapore's politically tumultuous declaration of independence, it is worthwhile to explore how the shift from ex-colonial master to grateful tenant was understood by the British expatriates within the closed social circles of an amateur theater club.

With the rise of xenophobia in Singapore during the current pandemic, as well as Singapore's uneasy relationship with our colonial past, The Stage Club's acquisition of a home in post-independent Singapore serves as a reminder that choice, rather than race or nationality, determines the willingness to make a country one's home.



Figure 1 The Stage Club's plaque commemorating its opening in 1965.





Figure 2 A photo of The Stage Club's first Clubhouse, a Black-and-White colonial bungalow at 41 Malcolm Road.

Theater as a form of Escapism

The prolific production of shows by a voluntary, not-for-profit amateur theater company for the well-heeled English-speaking public in Singapore happened against the backdrop of a politically tumultuous post-war period, especially during the period of self-governance to independence in 1965. From 1958 to 1965, The Stage Club produced an average of seven shows per year, pumping out public shows performed in the Victoria theater while outside, political crisis raged. Self-governance in Singapore after 1959 was marked with increasing political destabilization, particularly after the defection of the pro-communist wing of the PAP in mid-1961 to form the *Barisan Sosialis*. Such factionalism came to a head with Operation Cold Store in 1963, with the arrest of suspected communist sympathizers, many who were prominent members of the newly formed *Barisan Sosialis*. This unstable political environment gave rise to the British colonial government's worry that Singapore would "lurch leftwards or fall into disorder" without being a

part of the Malaysian Federation (Hack, 2001, pp. 277-278). Even though the proposed merger with Malaysia was meant to stabilize Singapore, it precipitated more political instability with incompatible visions for the new state. Lee Kuan Yew pushing for racial equality against UMNO's vision of Malay dominance, amongst other concerns, erupted into racial riots in 1964 (Hack, 2001, p. 276). Throughout it all, the British colonial government hovered awkwardly as a proponent for the merger, a colonial-master worried about Singapore's future stability and for continued British influence after decolonization (Hack, 2001, pp. 274-277). No doubt, The Stage Club's British members were fully aware of the political context. As a closed social club allowing its members a respite from the contentious politics of decolonization, the creation of plays served an escapist role for many Club members, given the voluntary nature of The Club and the high levels of commitment needed for members to put up a successful piece of theater.

The escapist function of The Stage Club's productions is further evidenced by the choice of performances staged: classical and modern English language plays together with the British year-end tradition of a Christmas Pantomime. Far from reflecting the messy decolonization process in Singapore, The Stage Club instead offered English-speaking audiences a version of the hottest new theater productions in London, such as *The Unexpected Guest* (1965) by Agatha Christie which opened in the West End in 1958, and the comfort of classic Shakespearean plays such as *The Merchant of Venice* (1965). As Daniel Goh reflected, for colonials "under the siege of alien cultures and climates", the colonial



bungalow was a “refuge for the sustenance of metropolitan cultural identity” (2010, p. 179). Similarly, in producing theater familiar to English-speaking audiences in celebration of British cultural identity, The Stage Club served as a cultural refuge for their mostly British members and audiences in a fraught political climate.

Desire for a Physical Home

For The Club’s leadership, the search for a permanent Clubhouse point to a desire for a physical refuge for the Club’s social and cultural activities. As Chris Allen, an ex-Stage Club President noted, before the Clubhouse, the various theatrical assets of the Club were “distributed amongst members” who offered their personal spaces, such as “garages, spare rooms and carports”, with rehearsals being held in the homes of various members and spaces subject to availability (1995). While the need for a centralized location for ease of logistics was a key reason for the desire for a physical home, the ability to physically demarcate and domesticate a space indicates a greater need for shelter against the outside world. Hannah Arendt once noted that the Ancient Greeks demarcated the political and domestic space within a city physically, with walls that: “harbored and enclosed political life as the other sheltered and protected the biological life processes of the family” (1998, pp. 63-64). For The Stage Club, the desire for a physical space can also be seen as a retreat and refuge from the unstable political space into one that protects the cultural processes of theater-making to maintain cultural identity.

The physical reality of the colonial bungalow also lent itself to the crafting of domestic space for the Club members, further insulating The Club from the political world that lay beyond. The desire to create both a *domestic* and social space for a closed community, rather than a purely public space, can be seen from the detailed planning to introduce household items into the Club such as the “purchase of a sewing machine and an electric iron” as well as the effort made to ensure that the correct model of a refrigerator was chosen as “there was probably not [sic] room for a large model” (Lawson, 1965c). The domestication of 41 Malcolm Road allowed for the resolution of external anxieties relating to colonial politics and control via the “controlled intimacy of homely colonial comfort” (Goh, 2010, p. 179). The gendered domesticity is also made apparent in the minutes, as the then-treasurer Mr. Lett suggested that the responsibility of buying “certain basic kitchen equipment” for the Clubhouse kitchen be assigned to a “Mrs. Tunnicliffe and Mrs. Lawson” (Lawson, 1965c). The allocation of responsibility to the Club’s women relating to the kitchen places “the white woman [as] the gentle mistress” of the colonial bungalow, further cementing the domestication of the bungalow (Goh, 2010, p. 179). Within 41 Malcolm Road, the Club members were “under the siege” of not just “alien cultures and climates” (Goh, 2010, p. 179) but also the shifting power dynamics of decolonization and a self-governed Singapore. Situating the processes of theater-making within a domestic space further emphasizes the nature of refuge that the British, through The Stage Club, sought within the climate of Singapore’s political context of 1964-1965.



Homemaking in the Singapore State

The legal relationship between the Club and Singapore over the Club's new home points to a marked shift in power relations between the British and Singapore. According to the Club meeting minutes on 11 June 1965, The Stage Club "submitted an application to the Ministry of Finance for a Government Bungalow for rent", including the property on 41 Malcolm Road (Lawson, 1965a). The use of the adjective "Government" (referring to the Singapore government) to modify the noun "Bungalow" within the minutes is of particular interest, given that the property in question is a Black-and-White colonial house. This naming of the property as belonging to the Singapore government, used widely in the press (The Straits Times, 1965a), reflects the clear ownership of a symbol of colonial power by the self-governing Singapore government in 1965, reinforced by the legal relationship between the Singapore government and the British as owner and tenant of a colonial bungalow respectively. The Stage Club's longed-for home sits on the crossroads of the extremely recent colonial past and the future of the fledgling sovereign state.

By inviting the Yang di-Pertuan Negara Yusof Ishak as the key guest to perform the opening of the Clubhouse, the leaders of The Stage Club deliberately sought the domestication of the Club by the newly independent Singapore government. The ability to invite Yusof Ishak shows the strong social connection between the Istana and The Stage Club, evidenced by the presence of a 1963 New Year greeting card (Fig. 3 and 4) from Yusof Ishak and his wife within the Club archives, and their presence at the July 1965 production of "The Waltz of the Toreadors"

announced in *The Straits Times* (1965b). However, it does not answer why the Singapore Head of State was chosen to open a Clubhouse of an ostensibly British amateur theater group concerned with putting up British plays. In fact, by the mid-1960s, The Stage Club still maintained strong ties to the British military. Beyond the constant engagement with amateur theater troupes within other branches of the British military such as the Kluang Garrison and the frequent reliance on the equipment of the British Army for printing purposes, The Stage Club regularly donated proceeds from plays towards charity funds for the British military, such as the Army Benevolent Fund (Sweeting, 1964). Why would the Club leadership pick the Yang di-Pertuan Negara of Singapore, given that the opening would be a public event, where the guest list included the "Press, Radio, T.V. [sic] Government officials" together with prominent Club members (Lawson, 1965b)? Part of the answer lies in the timing of the Club's acquisition of their home coinciding with Singapore's abrupt independence.



Figure 3 The outside of the New Year greeting card from the Istana (1963)



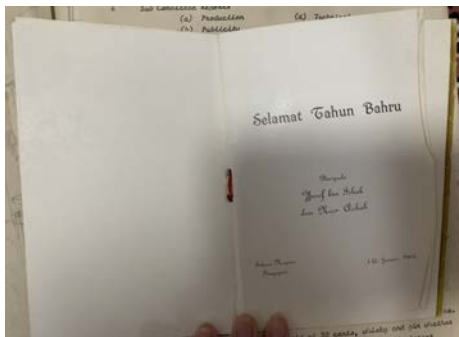


Figure 4 The inside of the New Year greeting card from the Istana (1963)

From the meeting minutes, “full permission” for the leasing and use of 41 Malcolm Road as a Clubhouse was given by the Singapore government to The Stage Club by 30 July 1965 (Lawson, 1965d). The decision to invite Yusof Ishak as the VIP was made two months later on 13 September 1965, during a discussion on the official opening (Lawson, 1965b). Contextually, Singapore’s sudden declaration of independence from Malaya on 9 Aug 1965 happened during the process of The Stage Club’s acquisition of their Clubhouse. Lee Kuan Yew’s televised declaration was only made known to the British a day before the announcement, a shock to the Singapore public and the British administration after months of political instability (Hack, 2011, p. 277). The Stage Club’s decision made barely a month after Singapore’s independence to invite the newly independent Singapore’s Head of State to celebrate the Clubhouse’s opening was made with full awareness of the new political context. Such a public gesture visually reverses the role of the British in Singapore from colonial masters to local subjects, cementing The Stage Club’s activities and its members as willingly

being under the rule of a newly sovereign country.

Choosing Yusof Ishak as the Guest-of-Honor also distances The Stage Club from its British military connections. The Straits Times article declaring the opening of the Clubhouse made no mention of its British or military roots, simply stating instead that it was a club “founded by a small group of enthusiasts” (1965a). Conversely, a deliberate emphasis in the article from a Club spokesperson was made to highlight that “Inche Yusof and his wife, Puan Aishah, have been keen supporters” of The Stage Club (*The Straits Times*, 1965a). Opening the Clubhouse would have been one of Yusof Ishak’s earliest public engagement sessions after Singapore’s declaration of independence. Although he continued the role of the Head of State since Singapore’s self-governance in 1959, his role in politics as a symbol had been relatively important during the tumultuous years of 1964-1965, especially in his attempts to calm the racial tensions generated by racial riots via radio broadcasts and speeches (Saat, 2015, pp. 56-63). His presence as the *only* VIP at the Clubhouse’s opening could be read by the non-British public aware of The Stage Club as a continued acceptance of British within Singapore by the newly formed Singapore government. And finally, the presence of Yusof Ishak’s name on the plaque in Fig.1 that rests in front of the entrance of the Clubhouse served as a daily symbolic indication of The Stage Club’s continued existence within the newly formed state of Singapore, as it blatantly and officially acknowledges Yusof Ishak’s symbolic dominance of The Stage Club’s place of refuge. The choice of Yusof Ishak as the VIP was a deliberate decision



made by The Stage Club leaders to cement The Stage Club as not a British or military-founded entity, but a local one under the support of the newly formed Singapore government.

Conclusion

In acquiring a much longed-for Clubhouse at 41 Malcolm Road, the British in The Stage Club could finally freely construct a physical and cultural refuge from political upheavals of decolonization in Singapore. Through the Club's legal relationship with the Singapore Government, the narrative of Singapore's independence and dominance over colonial symbols was made clear. More than that, The Stage Club's active courting of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara as the main VIP of the Clubhouse's opening ceremony indicates an acknowledgement of the new political realities of Singapore, as well as The Stage Club's place in the newly sovereign state. In his note in the program booklet of the Christmas play in 1965, Club President Ray Coombs wrote this message: "In the closing few remarks, I would like to say that I hope the year ahead will continue the trend of progress made in 1965" (The Stage Club, 1965). Indeed, for The Stage Club and Singapore, such a tentatively hopeful closing remark seems to hold true. The Stage Club's obtaining of a home is useful to understand the willing transformation of the relationship between the now-British-expats in Singapore and the Singapore state. The role of The Stage Club in Singapore's cultural history will only grow in significance as debates on the roots of Singapore's cultural identity continue to develop.

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Article

SOY SAUCE AND INDUSTRIAL FOOD PRODUCTION IN SINGAPORE*

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Introduction

What can we learn about the history of Singapore's development through food? In this short article, I trace the postwar history of one particular foodstuff – soy sauce -- in Singapore through the history of two soy sauce manufacturers founded during World War II. Lighthouse Soy Sauce (manufactured by the Yeo Hiap Seng Company) and Kwong Woh Hing offer contrasting examples of the development of this industry and lessons for thinking about the relationships between industrial development, national identity, and taste.

Soy sauce was present in Singapore from the earliest days of its colonial history. Soy sauce manufacturing practices traveled to the Straits Settlements with immigrants from China. Shipping manifests from the 1820s mention the trans-shipment of 'Japanese soy' to European ports. During the nineteenth century, both soybeans and soy sauce (much of it from Japan) were valuable imports to Europe (for use in local sauces such as Worcestershire, for example) and Singapore played a central role in this trade. However, much of the soy brought to Singapore was consumed locally, either as soy sauce or tofu. Some factories in Singapore in the early



twentieth century, but most soy sauce was produced by many individuals and families either in their homes or small shops. Such sauces might be consumed at home or sold by itinerant hawkers.

Yeo Hiap Seng

Yeo Keng Lian established a soy sauce business in Zhangzhou, Fujian in 1901. By 1937, Fujian was under siege by Japanese forces and the eldest son of the founder, Tian In, sought to relocate his business to Nanyang. The reasons for choosing Singapore included linguistic and cultural ties to the Hokkien community, good weather for soy sauce production, ready supplies of salt, and good infrastructure.

Tian In's business, Yeo's, was established in 1938 on Outram Road, close to Chinatown. Unlike most other soy sauces businesses in Singapore, Yeo's struggled through the Japanese occupation, avoiding take-over by the occupiers and managing to maintain both supplies of raw materials (salt, sugar, and beans) and distribution networks in the Malay Peninsula.

After World War II, Yeo's developed both its soy sauce manufacturing as well as diversifying its business rapidly. As the economy expanded, Tian In sought to modernize his soy sauce production. In 1951, he established a plant in Bukit Timah that fermented the soybeans under machine-controlled conditions, using thermostats and laboratory-like environments. The factory also installed automated filling and labeling machines. These efforts resulted in both increased production and reduced costs.

In the 1950s they also expanded into the canning and beverage businesses, transforming the company into a growing international empire. By the 1960s, with the support of the Singapore government (who were keen to support industrialization and create jobs), Yeo's was exporting products to Brunei, the Philippines, the UK, New Guinea, Australia, and the USA.

During the 1970s, although Yeo's business continued to grow, shifting economic priorities of the state affected their business as priorities shifted away from labour-intensive industries to capital-intensive industries. After the death of Yeo Tian In in 1985, Yeo's was riven by family in-fighting, and control of the company was lost to the real estate magnate Ng Teng Fong in 1994. Yeo's exists today not as a soy sauce company but as a global food and beverage empire.

Kwong Woh Hing (KWH)

Initially, KWH Soy Sauce followed a similar path: Woo Hoh, an immigrant from Guangzhou, arrived in Singapore in 1940. Woo, however, did not come from a soy sauce-making background in China; he learned how to make soy sauce in Singapore. After spending some time learning and saving money, Woo opened a factory in 1943, in Lavender Street near the Kallang Gas Works. KWH maintained traditional soy sauce production methods throughout the 1950s. However, their business became increasingly marginalized. In 1960, the Lavender factory was relocated away from the centre of the city to an industrial area at Lorong Tai Seng. This was the first phase of Singapore's efforts to modernize the economy, shifting away from agriculture and traditional industries.



Although continuing as a small-scale, family run business, KHW managed to endure. Simon Woo, the current proprietor, became a third-generation soy-sauce maker; KWH did not close, but in the 1980s they were forced to move their factory yet again (to Defu Industrial Park). Nevertheless, KWH continued to produce soy sauce in the traditional manner, using large earthenware vats exposed to the sun. The business attributes their success to the continuing loyalty of a small group of customers. However, in the last fifteen years, KWH has also benefited from a resurgence of interest in and attention to 'traditional' foods and businesses. The language used to describe KWH is consistently centered on notions of tradition, heritage, artisanal production. For example, the Straits Times ran a 2017 story that described KWH as a 'local company [that] sticks to tradition despite the challenges'.

Conclusions

The story of two soy sauces tells us about a changing economy and the changing value of different kinds of businesses – an industrial soy sauce for an industrializing Singapore, and the revival of an artisanal brand at the time when preservation and heritage are increasingly valued. The story tells us about the changing values and tastes of food in Singapore. The success of Yeo's suggests that during the 1950s and 60s Singaporeans increasingly valued hygienically packaged 'convenience' foods like canned and packaged foods. These foods were not only cheap and easy to prepare, but also were considered efficient, healthy, and sophisticated.

The recent re-discovery of the importance of 'traditional' foods suggests that, for at least some Singaporeans, tastes have changed. What is valued in Kwong Woh Hing's sauces is old-time methods, the unique taste, and the value of preserving Singapore's national heritage. These two threads – the economic and the gustatory – are linked. Changing patterns of economic development are intertwined with changing ideas about what and how to eat. Ideas about 'what tastes good' also have a history that is connected to the broader history of Singapore's development.

* This is a summary of the article Hallam Stevens (Nanyang Technological University) presented at the 2021 AAS Conference and the winner of the 2021 John A. Lent Award for the best paper presented on Malaysia, Singapore, or Brunei that year. The award will be presented at the MSB Studies Group Business Meeting at the upcoming 2022 AAS Conference.

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Fieldnotes

Berita welcomes descriptions of in-progress fieldwork conducted by scholars.

The following is a selection from Alicia Izharuddin's Bandar Baru Bangi Fieldnotes – August 2021

On my revisit to Bandar Baru Bangi (New Town of Bangi) in August 2021, I spent hours exploring the town with my assistant behind the wheel. We were also there to see Mrs Hamidah again, a publisher and owner of a romance bookshop I had been interviewing for years. It is an hour's drive from Kuala Lumpur, a journey through a sprawling and frequently desolate landscape of power, punctuated with bombastic monuments to modernity and progress. The administrative capital Putrajaya, the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, and foreign university campuses dot this landscape. They were no older than three decades at the time, built rapidly on the coattails of global-neoliberal development. As we head in the direction of Bangi, it was as if we were going back in time to when global manufacturing granted the country a seat amongst Asia's rising economies not too long ago. Bangi was a jewel in the Southeast Asian Tiger's crown. When we arrive on its margins, its 'gateway', we were greeted by Japanese electronics factories established in the years of the 'Look East' policy under the fourth prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, still standing but less lustrous today.

I was fortunate that my assistant Ita* was a native of Bangi and hence perfectly suited to show me around, offering a running

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commentary that was part personal geography part historical tour. She had lived in the township all her life and had seen the changes that have taken place over the course of thirty years. In many ways, Ita is an offspring of the wealthy New Malay (Melayu Baru) generation that benefited from the New Economic Policy (NEP), a profound redistribution of wealth and resources through affirmative action founded in 1971. Ita was in her mid-thirties and educated abroad, but due to a number of health complications, she had never worked and lived with her parents in an exclusive gated community nearby. Her parents financially supported her and have purchased for her a newly-built apartment in a high-rise condominium not far from where they live as a type of insurance. As far as Ita is concerned, her parents, although retired, are wealthy enough to support her until the end of their days. Like many newly rich Malays of her parents' age, they have leap-frogged their way into great wealth in just one generation through generous state-funded education followed by an effortless rise to corporate leadership roles in government-linked agencies and companies.

Bangi today comes across as a microcosm of urban Malay modernity. Though it is a palimpsest of sorts; recast by layers of colonial industry and its afterlife, an industrialising recent past, and a modern religious ethno-scape in the present. I wondered what would come next to remake this malleable landscape. A casual visitor to Bangi will quickly take note of the impressive McMansions in gated communities and clusters of shop-houses mounted with huge billboards advertising luxury prayer garments and hijab, an outcome of decades-long accumulation of

ethno-religious capital. An expansive golf course next to a four-star hotel close to the landmark university campus complete the town's image as a playground for the newly rich. These places signal ostentatious wealth and prestige of a group that redefined its political and economic destiny first as an expression of self-determination, then as difference.

Balancing the worldly affluence is the outsized expression of Islamic architecture scattered around the town. Nestled between the neat rows of more modest middle-class terraces and standalone bungalows are the many large prayer halls (surau) that rival the grandeur of mosques. They are the centre of community life in Bangi and cater to worshippers of competing political allegiances: the moderate ethnonationalist UMNO or Islamist PAS. An opulent sharia courthouse is situated in the commercial centre. Perched on its roof is a miniature royal blue and white criss-crossed dome reminiscent of the iconic Shah Alam Blue Mosque in the state capital. By mimicking a mosque, the sharia courthouse blurs the aesthetic boundaries of buildings made for worship and legal arbitration. Here, buildings of Islamic public life should look like mosques.

Before my revisit, I contacted Mrs Hamidah to find out how her bookshop and publishing company, Kaseh Aries, were faring when many businesses were forced to close during the multiple pandemic lockdowns in Malaysia. I was worried about her business closing permanently, as other independent enterprises have. Major chain bookshops have closed their franchises up and down the country and the international book fair in Kuala Lumpur has yet to resume its



in-person events. To my relief, she spoke buoyantly about her continued success to sell many books and publish new titles even under stringent economic and logistical restrictions. She was proud to launch three new novels that August, something that small publishers struggle to do even in the best of times. I asked her what the secret to her success was. Profit was never the point she tells me on the phone. It was for the sheer love of publishing popular romance and making women happy. She is thankful that she and her sister, who was co-owner, kept their business model modest. They did not take out a bank loan for capital and that decision has paid off during the harsh economic shutdown.

Several other publishing companies and bookshops have gone closed down because they have larger overheads. As for Kaseh Aries, they have moved their bookselling operations online almost immediately, and for a few months early in the pandemic, she tells me, their bookshop was the only one that expanded their online presence, taking advantage of the momentary commercial vacuum. The years of trial and error from running their bookselling and publishing businesses have made them much more agile to shocks and changes. It struck me that Mrs Hamidah's mode of production is made to survive the protracted economic shutdown. It is not one of pursuit for substantial commercial gain nor survival but operates almost as a kind of gift economy, for the sheer love of it. Even though the bookshop had been closed for a number of months during the pandemic, it immediately became a place to reconvene upon its re-opening. Although the annual book fair in Kuala Lumpur had been an important site for generating revenue, Mrs Hamidah tells me that

other spaces, not necessarily physical ones, can easily facilitate connections with readers and the dissemination of their books.

*All names have been changed to protect their identities.

Biographical Note

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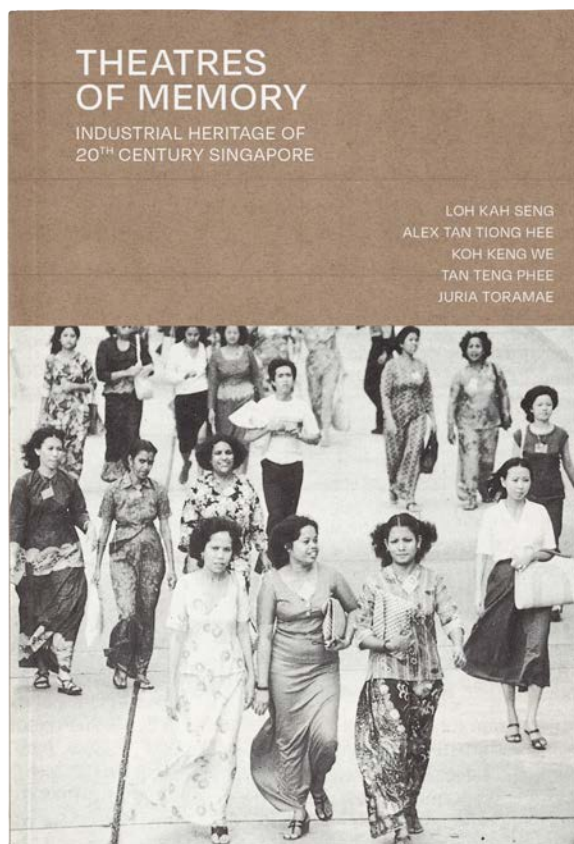
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Book Review

Theatres of Memory: Industrial Heritage of 20th Century Singapore

Loh Kah Seng, Alex Tan Tiong Hee, Koh Keng We, Tan Teng Phee, Juria Toramae.
(Pagesetters, Singapore, 2021)



Review by Jeremy Goh
Nanyang Centre for Public Administration,
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Singapore

The historiography of industrialization in Singapore and Southeast Asia has been dominated by perspectives of newly independent nation-states, multinational corporations, and government-linked companies (Yoshihara, 1976; Rodan, 1989; Suehiro, 2008; Amakawa, 2010). Little research has been done on the perspectives and experiences of workers and families who were involved not only in industrialization, but also in the broader economic development of the city-state. In *Theatres of Memory: Industrial Heritage of 20th Century Singapore*, historian Loh Kah Seng and his associates fill this gap by adapting British historian Raphael Samuel's concept of 'theatres of memory' to tell the story of Singapore's industrialization on a 'broad social canvas', involving politicians, businessmen, foreign experts, male and female workers, and foreign workers, as well as their families (p. 5), focusing largely on the time period between the 1960s and 1990s (p. 12) (Samuel, 2004).

Theatres of Memory starts by illustrating the historical context in Singapore after World War II, a city experiencing high population growth, high unemployment, and underemployment. There was a need for the state to provide full-time employment to not only support livelihoods, but also to better manage political agitation and nurture a sense of belonging and citizenship in Singapore as it underwent political decolonization in the 1950s and early 1960s.

The main body of *Theatres of Memory* may be divided into four parts. The first part, comprising Chapters Two and Three, covers the cradle of Singapore's industrialization journey in the western region of the city-state, Jurong. Chapter



Two highlights the roles played by three foreign experts in Singapore's industrialization (p. 48): Dutch economist Albert Winsemius, Japanese engineer Y. Yanagisawa, and French iron and steel expert Philippe Scherechewsky. These experts worked closely with Singapore state officials and local and foreign businessmen in the establishment of new manufacturing companies such as the National Iron and Steel Mills in Jurong, proposed by Scherechewsky with investments from Singapore's Economic Development Board (EDB), local firms Sim Lim and Tat Lee, as well as Indonesian-Chinese capital. Chapter Three introduces readers to the Jurong Town Corporation (JTC), a state institution which developed the living amenities in Jurong as a 'garden industrial town' for businesses, workers and residents (p. 63). In this chapter, we see varied accounts of Jurong's male and female 'pioneer workers' who undertook tough work in Singapore's new manufacturing factories with signs of 'underlying optimism', trust in social mobility, and a sense of liberation for young workers who gained the freedom to live independently (pp. 68-74).

The second part of *Theatres of Memory*, comprising Chapters Four, Five, and Six, elaborates on the culture of work. Chapter Four details JTC's role in expanding Singapore's industrialization program by constructing flatted factories across the whole city-state after 1968. Oral interviews and research conducted by Loh and his associates reveal not only gender inequality on the factory floor, but also the 'varied experiences' of female factory workers and their agency in 'carving out new futures through employment' in these flatted factories (p. 96). Amid the Singapore government's

productivity drive between the 1960s and 1980s, these workers had 'agency' in adapting to the new industrial system and defining the workplace, turning the factory floor into a 'vibrant, noisy and lively' space (p. 114). The strong bonds forged from interactions between workers made work manageable and productive. Yet, Chapter Six reveals the limits of such agency, as workers had to resign if they did not embrace the shift system implemented by companies to increase production numbers (p. 138). This chapter includes numerous accounts of adaptation and struggle by female workers who had to manage their shift work at night and domestic duties in the day, highlighting the sacrifices that these workers and their families made in Singapore's industrialization journey.

The third part of *Theatres of Memory*, comprising Chapters Seven, Eight, and Nine, turns the reader's attention to products manufactured in Singapore, memories of producing, possessing or consuming them, as well as recollections of being trained to produce them. Chapter Seven highlights various efforts made by state institutions and trade associations such as EDB and the Singapore Manufacturing Association in promoting local industry and goods manufactured locally. It also covers memories of people wearing locally made Bata shoes, watching Setron television sets, and consuming soft drinks in the 1970s and 1980s. Chapter Eight zooms in on the case study of Rollei Singapore, with references made to interviews conducted by Loh with ex-Rollei employees and a panel discussion with three of them at the National Museum of Singapore. This case study reaffirms the main findings of the second part of *Theatres of Memory*, that the



agency of workers was key in Singapore's industrial manufacturing and the social bonds forged by them made work productive. Chapter Nine covers the collaboration between multinational companies such as Rollei, local companies, schools and the state in cultivating a 'technical generation' through institutionalized training programs and apprenticeships. It ends by illustrating the rich and diverse memories and experiences of this generation.

The fourth part of *Theatres of Memory*, Chapter 10, covers the perspectives and experiences of foreign workers in the industrialization of Singapore. The bulk of this chapter is dedicated to the memories of Malaysian workers who formed the majority of Singapore's foreign workforce. Based on their research findings, Loh and his associates argue that there 'seemed little tension' between Malaysian and Singaporean workers (p. 250), and they highlight the interconnectedness between Singaporeans and foreigners not only in the history of Singapore's industrialization, but also the city-state's ongoing economic development (p. 265).

Taken together, *Theatres of Memory* makes three major contributions to the historiography of industrialization and economy of Singapore. First and foremost, Loh and his co-writers have succeeded in crafting the first inclusive story of Singapore's industrialization by bringing together the voices of numerous actors, particularly those of workers and their families in a coherent manner. *Theatres of Memory* is groundbreaking not only in terms of uncovering perspectives from the ground, but also the many countries that were tied with Singapore's industrialization. The transnationality of

Singapore's industrialization journey is clearly evident throughout the book, from the varied experiences and fieldwork of the foreign experts, adaptation of the 'garden industrial town' from Britain, flatted factories from Denmark, Rotherham and Hong Kong, as well as the technological transfers from multinational corporations to Singapore's local workforce. These examples reinforce our understanding of how Singapore's economy was and remains closely tied to the world.

Second, *Theatres of Memory* stresses the centrality of memories in industrialization, and rightly argues that industrial heritage should be part of everyday life as 'living history' (p. 268). Third, and closely related, Loh and his associates have demonstrated the potential and value of social media (in this case, Facebook) in historical research. The Facebook page of their project has around 1600 members at this point of writing, providing a multitude of first-hand accounts and recollections of their training, work, products, and industrial sites since 2017 (Facebook, 2021). Access to this information is particularly crucial in the context of lockdowns amid the ongoing pandemic. In addition, as part of their research, Loh and his co-writers have recorded hours of oral history recordings with 35 individuals that can be publicly accessed on the National Archives of Singapore's webpage (National Archives of Singapore, 2021). These recordings are indispensable historical resources for anyone interested in the economic history of Singapore. There remains considerable scope for further research, at least in two areas. First, a gap remains in Singapore's industrial history prior to the 1950s, which must be better addressed for an improved understanding of the industrial



heritage, or of industry in a broad sense, of twentieth-century Singapore. *Theatres of Memory* has indicated signs of early secondary industry in early twentieth-century Singapore, such as the rubber manufactory of the Hokkien tycoon Tan Kah Kee (p. 24) and the Ford Motor car assembly plant set up in 1926 (p. 175). It is important to note that for Tan, his rubber manufactory was not merely 'a way to diversify' (p. 25) his business, it was the multimillion crown jewel of his business portfolio (Tai, 2018, pp. 232-276). More research on him and his contemporaries with interests in manufacturing is needed to better understand the base of Singapore's industrialization.

Second, *Theatres of Memory* serves as a great inspiration for similar studies in the region. What are the industrial, or economic 'theatres of memory' in Southeast Asia, and how should we study them? How would the 'theatres of memory' of other Southeast Asian nation-states be similar to or different from Singapore? There is indeed great potential for a project to forge an inclusive history of industrialization of Southeast Asia.

In sum, with the inclusion of many voices and photographs, *Theatres of Memory* is poised for a large readership beyond academia. It is recommended to anyone with a broad interest in Singapore's modern economic history.

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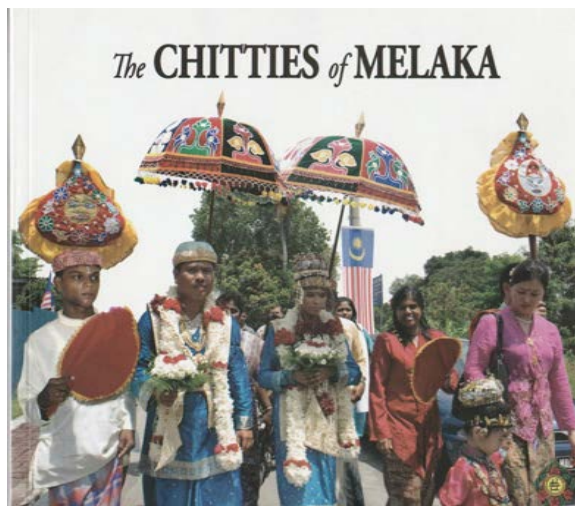
Biographical Note

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Book Review

The Chitties of Melaka

Karen Loh and Jegatheesan Valupillay (Kuala Lumpur: Department of Museums Malaysia, 2017). 243 pp. RM 40.00, ISBN 978-967-0372-27-3



Review by Wilbert W. W. Wong
A Ph.D. Candidate at the Australia National University (ANU)

As Malaysian historian Sandra Khor Manickam notes in her study *Taming the Wild: Aborigines and Racial Knowledge in Colonial Malaya*, Malaysians were, and still are, mostly 'categorised as Malay, Chinese or Indian, with some mixture in-between but predominantly falling into one category or another' (Manickam, 2015, p.3). This idea of Malay, Chinese, and Indian as the centre of Malaysian identity is further promoted in the country's political and education narratives, as a 2018 Malaysia Studies (*Pengajian Malaysia*) reference textbook indicates (Mardiana and Husnah, 2018, pp. 204-215). Malaysians who do not fit into any of the three racial groups, especially those of mixed-racial communities, are simply relegated as 'others' or '*lain-lain*' (which can also include the Orang Asli and East Malaysia indigenous communities who do not identify as Malay). Little attention is given to mixed-racial communities in Malaysia's national narratives, although they represent an important element of the nation's history – a crossroad of cross-cultural encounters.

It is therefore refreshing and encouraging to see the book by Karen Loh and Jegatheesan Velupillay on *The Chitties of Melaka*, a Department of Museums Malaysia publication, which explores a group of this sidelined 'other' in Malaysia – the Chitties. *The Chitties of Melaka* is a reminder that Malaysia has a much richer and diverse multicultural identity and history than is often envisioned. This cross-cultural diversity is evident in the Chitty community in Malaysia. The Chitties are a non-Muslim Peranakan Indian (the offspring of Southern Indian men and local women in the Malay Peninsula) community in Malaysia and Singapore who trace their history



and ancestry to the Melaka Sultanate period (1402–1511) (p. 2). They are mostly Hindus (p. 22). Their background is similar to the Chinese Peranakan, or the Baba (male) and Nyonya (female), who are the product of Chinese-local cross-cultural intermarriage in the region. Like the Chinese Peranakan, Malay was generally the traditionally household language of the Chitties. However, as Loh and Jegatheesan note, little is known about the Chitties even amongst Malaysians despite their historical presence in the region, unlike the larger Chinese Peranakan communities who are often celebrated in the region's popular and culinary culture (p. 3).

Loh and Jeatheesan are correct in pointing out that people's imagery of the Peranakan are those of the Chinese Peranakan rather than the Indian-Peranakan like the Chitties (p. 3). The book is therefore an excellent addition to existing works on Malaysia's culture and history, as it promotes awareness and knowledge of this little-known ethnic community that has a distinct culture and tradition that has 'endured for 600 years' in the region (p.3). In so doing, the authors demonstrate that Malaysia is more than just a story about the Malays, Chinese, and Indian communities, and that mixed-ethnic communities such as the Chitties are a distinctive feature of Malaysia's identity.

The Chitties of Melaka is written in a simple style that makes it easy to read and understand. High-quality visual sources such as photographs and artistic impressions appear, organised in a way that complements the texts, serving as useful visual guides to readers. The rich use of images also makes the book engaging. At the start of the book, the two photographs of a male and female

couple in traditional Chitty attire show Malay and Indian influences. These photographs indicate the multicultural influences that made the Chitties a distinct community in the region and serve as an example of the good use of imagery by the authors. The way the book is presented makes it ideal for a general readership, which seems to be the target audience and aim of its authors. It does not seek to achieve the level of scope and depth of more detailed studies of the Chitties and Peranakan Indians that academic audiences value, such as the widely praised 2015 book by Patrick Pillai, *Yearning to Belong: Malaysia's Indian Muslims, Chitties, Portuguese Eurasians, Peranakan Chinese and Baweanese*. Even so, researchers would still find *The Chitties of Melaka* a useful source on the Chitties, especially its documentation of contemporary cultural and religious practices of the Chitty community in Melaka which is drawn from first-hand observations by the authors. The book is the product of the collaboration and information shared by the Chitty community of Melaka, especially K. Nadarajan Raja and his family, a prominent Chitty who in 2017 was the Chairman of the Chitty Living Gallery Melaka, and his family (preface).

The Chitties of Melaka is organised into eight sections: Historical Background; Chitty Temples; Ceremonial Rites, Wedding Customs and Ceremonies; Festival and Ceremonies, Megammay/Dato Chachar Festival; Traditional Food; and Language and Traditions. The short preface at the opening of each chapter is helpful in providing readers with a quick overview of each chapter's contents. The Melaka Sultanate is used as a starting point for the chapter on the



history of the Chitties, which is followed by the Portuguese period, the Dutch period, the British period, the Japanese period, and closing with the present period.

It is shown in the chapter on historical background that the Chitties' historic identity emerged during the Sultanate of Melaka from the intermarriage between Indian merchants and local women (p.4). The children from this relationship were raised by their mothers and thus spoke the Malay language rather than the language of their sojourning fathers (Tamil) (p.4). A distinct ethnic community was thus developed over time from such relationships (pp.4-6), losing its family ties and sense of belonging to India (p.4). The authors believe that the term 'Chitty' came out of 'Chettiar', a term given to a mercantile and trading group from India (p.6). When covering the British period, Loh and Jegatheesan make good use of a 1891 British map of Melaka from the National Archives of Malaysia to mark the location of Kampung Chetti (Chitty village), enabling readers to position the Chitty community in the historic city (p.13). This excellent use of maps in the later chapter on Chitty religious practices marks the location of temple lands, which helps demonstrate the significant presence of the Chitties in Melaka (p.27). When discussing the Chitty community during the present period, the authors note how it continues practicing the Hindu religion and cultural festivals (p. 16), but highlight that Chitties face challenges such as migration, religious conversion and intermarriage, which threaten to diminish their numbers and identity (pp. 18-19). Effort have been made by the Chitty community, including the publication of this

book, to preserve the culture for the benefit of future generations (preface, p.18-19).

The bulk of the book covers the religious and cultural practices of the Chitties of Melaka, such as religious festivals, birth rites, the ear-piercing ceremony, courtship customs, and marriage, which are based mainly on the authors' observations of the practices of Nadarajan's family, and the information provided by them. The processes and the steps involved in these ceremonies are thoroughly documented and photographed in a way that gives readers the sense that they are observing the ceremonies themselves. The part on the cultural and religious ceremony is arguably the most interesting and best feature of the book, and the use of high-quality photographs bring these ceremonies to life.

There are several aspects of the book, however, that could benefit from further clarity. The source of the quote about the Chitties in the opening line of the preface is not indicated, leaving readers at a loss to the quote's background and significance. Was the quote from a seventeenth century English account of the Chitties in Melaka, or a quote made by a recent figure? Clear indication of timeline when covering the past would also keep readers better informed and is not simply a matter of historical convention. In the section on 'Language and Traditions' for example, readers are unable to establish when the black and white photographs of the Chitty house and 'the late Mr Kanagasabai Chitty' in traditional Chitty attire were taken as the date or time period of the photographs are not indicated (pp. 220, 223). A timeline would help readers appreciate the historical value and



background of these images. Explaining the reason behind some of the cultural practices covered, such as the shaving of a baby's head 'when the baby is between five months to a year old', would also benefit readers and help make the custom discussed more valuable (p. 44).

Overall, *The Chitties of Melaka* is a welcome addition to works on Malaysia that highlight its ethnic diversity. It succeeds in its goal of bringing to the surface an obscure but distinct ethnic group that had emerged in the region out of cross-cultural engagement and has a long historical presence in the region. By promoting their rich culture and traditions and documenting them in this well-presented and engaging book, Loh and Jegatheesan have done justice to the Chitty community of Melaka, especially Nadarajan and his family, who have contributed to the production of this book with the hope that their culture and tradition will be preserved and appreciated by future generations. The alarming decline of the Chitty population — who numbered 340 in Malaysia in late 2009 according to Pillai — makes such initiative by Loh and Jegatheesan valuable (Pillai, p.56).

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Biographical Note

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- Abdullah, S. (2021) 'Internationalizing Arts, Gaining Visibility: Internationalization of the National Art Gallery through the Promulgation of the Malayan Identity and Commonwealth Ideas.' In *TRANS: Trans-Regional and National Studies of Southeast Asia*, 2021.
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- Amrita Malhi's article discusses the creation of the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA)'s entirely Malay Muslim Tenth Regiment, in the context of the Malayan Emergency (1948-60). It argues that the Emergency was embedded in a Cold War conflation between 'communism' and 'Chineseness' on the one hand, and 'anti-communism' and 'Malayness' on the other. This conflation displaced the ideas and politics of the Malay Muslim Left into the realm of nostalgia, which is where they have remained ever since, and paved the way for the independent Malayan state to be organised around the principle of race.
- The article is part of a special issue (45:3) of *Itinerario: Journal of Imperial and Global Interactions* called 'Coercing Mobility: Territory



and Displacement in the Politics of Southeast Asian Muslim Movements,' co-edited with an extensive introductory article by Joshua Gedacht and Amrita Malhi. The special issue also looks at Patani, Aceh, and Java, and features additional articles by Francis Bradley, David Kloos, Joshua Gedacht, and Chiara Formichi. Together, the articles explore legacies of the experience of coercion and displacement in the politics of Southeast Asian Muslim movements.'

Job Announcements

Migration Mobilities Malaysia

The Migration and Mobilities Research Cluster Asia Pacific (MMAP) is a new strategic cross-school initiative at Monash University Malaysia. The cluster aims to promote interdisciplinary dialogue and collaboration on migration and mobilities across various Schools in Monash University Malaysia, and between Monash University Malaysia and Monash University Australia. This initiative is led by Dr Sharuna Verghis (Jeffrey Cheah School of Medicine and Health Sciences) and Dr Koh Sin Yee (School of Arts and Social Sciences).

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