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INTRODUCTION

The Straits Philosophical Society and Colonial Elites in Malaya: Perspectives on Race, Identity and Social Order

Founded in Singapore in 1893, the Straits Philosophical Society was, in the tradition of other learned societies throughout the British Empire, a space within the colony for the “critical discussion of questions in Philosophy, History, Theology, Literature, Science and Art”.¹ With a membership restricted to graduates of British and European universities, fellows of British or European learned societies and those with “distinguished merit in the opinion of the Society in any branch of knowledge”,² it was a meeting place for the educated elite of the colony made up of colonial civil servants, soldiers, missionaries, businessmen, as well as prominent Straits Chinese.

Colonial associations have been increasingly recognized in colonial historiography as important sites in the lifeworld of the colony.³ Sports clubs, church associations, charitable groups and educational institutions have been studied as spaces in which the social life of the colony, the political, social, and economic ideologies and the ordering of colonial rule, particularly along racial lines, were reproduced and reinforced. The clubhouse, in particular, has been shown by historians to be a pivotal

institution—becoming a sacred ground for Europeans as a bastion of racial prestige, whilst also reinforcing the mystique of the ruling caste.⁴ The limited, but politically significant, integration of colonial subjects it permitted was similarly a vital wellspring of colonial hegemony.⁵

More recently scholarly societies have been studied as important centres in the intellectual and ideological life of the colony. Firstly, as spaces for the dissemination of colonial knowledge and systems of thought; and secondly, as spaces in which the colonized learned and responded to the thinking of the representatives of colonial power. Su Lin Lewis, touching on the Straits Philosophical Society, the Siam Society and the Burma Research Society, has argued for the colonial learned society as a site of “sociability and intellectual exchange” producing independent intellectual cultures which would later contribute to the rise of social reform movements and early nationalist movements.⁶ These societies, she argues, “contributed to an emerging intellectual culture of libraries, public lectures, and universities” and the flow of intellectual ideas through “correspondence, travel, and exchanges of publications”.⁷ Carol Ann Boshier’s work on the Burma Research Society has also provided an in-depth analysis of the intellectual exchanges between colonial officials and Burmese thinkers which the Society fostered.⁸ The earlier Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge in Bengal, and the Young Bengal movement around it, has similarly been highlighted as a space in which Western knowledge and philosophies were being appropriated and modified for the local conditions of colonial India.⁹

Unlike other colonial learned societies, the Society was more exclusive in its membership. The founding members of the Society, with one exception, were European men from the colonial administrative elite in Singapore.¹⁰ From among the founding members, Mr (later Sir) J.W. Bonser was a leading jurist in the colony. Mr A. Knight was a Straits civil servant and Secretary of the Society for twenty years who, among other pursuits, had a lifelong commitment to the Presbyterian Church alongside Reverend G. Reith and Reverend J.A. Lamont, both of whom made contributions to missionary work and education in the Straits Settlements. Dr D.J. Galloway was a prominent medical authority in the Straits Settlements. Dr G. Haviland was appointed the Raffles Library and Museum curator in 1893 and was also a member of the

Committee of the Library and Museum, as were Mr T. Shelford and Mr R.W. Hullett. Mr Hullett was one of Singapore's leading educators. His students included Mr Tan Teck Soon, social reformer and activist, the only non-European founding member of the Society, and one of the longest-serving founding members, as well as future member Dr Lim Boon Keng, a prominent physician and social reformer. Also connected to Hullett was Mr (later Sir) H.N. Ridley with whom Hullett shared a passion for botany. Ridley was the Director of the Botanical Gardens from 1888 to 1911 and a stalwart of the Society. Mr R.N. Bland and Mr C.W.S. Kynnersley were senior officers of the colonial administration. Among the founding members of the Society was also Mr J. McKillop from the business community and an employee of the Straits Trading Company. Finally, among the prominent founders of the Society, there was Sir Charles Warren who was the Society's first president and a distinguished military official and a scholar. It is noteworthy that throughout its existence the Society had no representation of Jawi Peranakan or Malay members, or any women members.

The origins of the Society lay in a meeting at the house of Sir Charles Warren in March 1893. Present were Warren, Rev. G.M. Reith, J.W. Bonser, W.J. Napier and H.N. Ridley, who agreed on the need for a "local association to discuss the many important questions that press upon modern thought and life". A committee was formed and Warren was appointed president. Membership was capped at fifteen and a small list of corresponding members from outside of Singapore was established.¹¹ Charles Warren's presidency was, however, brief. He would be replaced in 1894 by W.R. Collyer, a prominent lawyer who had earlier served in Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast and Cyprus. In 1903 Collyer would become the Attorney-General of the Straits Settlements. He would serve as president of the Society between 1894 and 1901 and then from 1902–6 before leaving the colony. He was replaced as president by H.N. Ridley who served from 1907–12. In 1912, A.W. Still, a journalist and prominent editor of the *Straits Times*, assumed the presidency. It would appear that at some point after Still, Lim Boon Keng would assume the position of president.¹² By 1901 the Society also expanded outside of Singapore, when an attempt to form a branch of corresponding members in Penang led to the formation of the Penang

Philosophical Society. The first president was C.W.S. Kynnsersley who had relocated there from Singapore, though he would later return to Singapore. Penang members visiting Singapore could attend the meetings of the main Society. Around 1913 the rules of the Society also changed, allowing for an expansion of the membership and the formation of a Kuala Lumpur branch. We know, however, little about the functioning of these branches.

It is unclear for how long the Society was in operation. It appears that it was still functioning as late as 1923, before slowly entering into decline.¹³ Speaking in 1935 to the Raffles College Union, then Colonial Secretary Sir Andrew Caldecott located the Society's demise "in the first years of the war".¹⁴ Yet in response in the pages of the *Singapore Free Press*, F.C. Peck, a prominent merchant, suggested that papers of the Society continued to be printed until 1918 and he would recall reading papers to the Society as late as 1921 and 1923.¹⁵ During the last three years of the Society's life, the members produced only "two essays between them" before the Society entered into demise. Yet, as no records of the proceedings have survived beyond 1918 it can be assumed that the Society met regularly between at least 1893 and 1918.¹⁶

The format of the Society's meetings appears to have been consistent throughout most of the Society's life. Membership was limited to fifteen in number and members, meeting on the second Friday or Saturday of every month, took it in turns to read a paper. This was followed by a critique of the paper by another member before a general discussion ensued, chaired by the president.¹⁷ Whilst the choice of topic was open to members, three principles structured their discussions. One was that the speakers were expected to provide amusement as well as knowledge. A second was that the papers be of general, and not merely specialist, interest. Finally, there was a request that "so far as is practicable, our geographical position may influence our labours and give colour to our thought, so that each subject in our papers may be affected by local circumstances".¹⁸ This was intended to encourage members to apply their knowledge and research to the colony in which they lived and worked.

Although the Society was not exclusively European, and many of its members did not hold full-time administrative office, many had some direct responsibility for public policy. Yet, notwithstanding the privileged

FIGURE 1.1
Members of the Society at the farewell banquet to W.R. Collyer
at the Singapore Club on 19 January 1906



Back row (left to right): Tan Teck Soon; Lieutenant-Colonel Sankey; Rev. W. Murray; W.R. Collyer; H.N. Ridley; A. Knight; Lieutenant-Colonel Pennefather; G.E. Brooke; H.F. Rankin; Dr D.J. Galloway.

Front row (left to right): R.W. Hullett; Dr Lim Boon Keng; R. Hanitsch; Lieutenant J.N. Biggs; G.E.V. Thomas; C. Emerson; P.J. Burgess; Major Ritchie.

Source: Gilbert Edward Brooke, Roland St. John Braddell, and Walter Makepeace, *One Hundred Years of Singapore*, vol. 2 (London: John Murray, 1921).

position of its members, the papers of the Society are important for the candour with which the issues that dominated colonial policy were discussed. One of the few constraints on discussion, particularly in the early years of the Society, was that it was “strictly private”, and members were forbidden to divulge the content of proceedings to the colony’s press without permission. The after-dinner discussions following the talks were designed to institutionalize “freedom of thought and expression”, outside of the gaze of the colony’s developing public sphere.¹⁹ This allowed the members to stray into more controversial territory. F.C. Peck would later recall reading a paper on Christianity and Christian morality which “was, and still is, unsuitable for publication” based on

views which “if not universally accepted in 1935, were very unpopular and even ‘disloyal’ and ‘seditious’ in 1923”.²⁰

Nevertheless, some of the papers did later appear in print, especially in the *Straits Chinese Magazine (SCM)*, one of the first organs of local opinion in Malaya, which was co-founded by prominent member Lim Boon Keng. The lively public debates to which the *SCM* gave expression helped to insert the more private discussions of the Society into the mainstream social and political debates of the time. The *SCM* also highlighted important interactions between the European members of the Society and Straits Chinese elites. Another outlet for the Society’s papers was a collection compiled by Henry Ridley, then president of the Society, and published in 1913 as *Noctes Orientales*. This collection printed those papers of local interest and, as Ridley suggested, many of the papers were as relevant in 1913 as at their time of being read to the Society.²¹ The proceedings of subsequent years 1911–16 were made available in pamphlet form by the Methodist Publishing House of Singapore.

The aim of the present volume is, however, to make widely available a broader selection of papers from the Society, particularly those which touch on themes important to the intellectual history of British Malaya from the end of the nineteenth century. As Tim Harper has noted, large swathes of the intellectual history of Singapore and Malaya remain untold.²² Whilst in recent years some key gaps have been filled, this collection includes some previously unpublished and less easily available papers to provide a more detailed and revealing view of colonial thought, especially on the themes of race and government in British Malaya. This provides an important background and context to understanding and unravelling the policies that have continued to be crucial to the political and social development of Malaysia and Singapore.

Race and the New Imperialism

The intellectual world in which the Society was situated was that of the era of the “New Imperialism”. The period from the 1870s had been marked by several factors which demarcated a new age in colonial rule: new rounds of imperial expansion, emerging economic globalization

through an expanding capitalist world economy, a growth in global connectivity through new technologies such as the telegraph and developments in shipping, and a growing interaction between colony and metropole. This entailed a move from a more indirectly ruled, distant and diffuse empire, towards a more modern and systematic imperial project.

The reduction in physical and non-physical distance heightened European concerns over the ends and means of empire. Frederick Cooper and Laura Ann Stoler have noted that by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, European empires were now

taking pains to reassure each other that their coercion and brutality were no longer frank attempts at extraction but reasoned efforts to build structures capable of reproducing themselves: stable government replacing the violent conflictual tyrannies of indigenous polities; orderly commerce and wage labour replacing the chaos of slaving and raiding; a complex structuring of group boundaries, racial identities and permissible forms of sexual and social interaction replacing the disconcerting fluidities of an earlier age”.²³

What they term the “*embourgeoisement*”²⁴ of imperialism in the late nineteenth century marks the greater focus placed on the modernization of the colony (only sometimes including the colonized), an emphasis on new systems of administration, new programmes of colonial economic development and a growing concern with bourgeois morality in the exercise of colonial rule.

As Hobsbawm has noted, by the late nineteenth century this trend was part of a wider transition ongoing in European society. The growth of mass democracy, mass working class movements and the Long Depression were unsettling the bourgeois liberal order which had dominated mid-nineteenth century Europe with its belief in progress, reform, and moderate liberalism.²⁵ European politics with the rise of Germany—an illiberal economic and technological power—became increasingly statist, conservative and anti-democratic. Whilst in an earlier period a liberal bourgeoisie had reconciled itself to imperialism on modernizing grounds and had embraced a nationalism that remained in touch with universal bourgeois aspirations, by the end of the nineteenth

century both imperialism and nationalism, and the struggle between nations and races, became ends in themselves.

This transition towards a more conservative and statist bourgeois order gave a central place to the question of race. By the mid-nineteenth century ideas of race had come to develop alongside new scientific theories of heredity, phrenology, and Darwinian evolution. Whereas before, “race” had been a relatively general term, denoting varying groupings of people—in the way for example that Raffles would talk of the Malay race—the concept of “race” was gradually used as a narrower biologically-defined classification and would generate a series of essentialist and fixed assumptions. Prominent intellectuals such as Herbert Spencer and Francis Galton would apply Darwinian thinking in the emerging fields of sociology and eugenics respectively, both to understand the functioning of human society and as a moral discourse. Spencer, the most prominent sociologist of the late nineteenth century, coined the term “survival of the fittest” to denote both the struggle for survival that underlay human society, as well as the role of this struggle in producing a higher and more civilized society. The categories of breeding, inheritance and environmental determination emerged then as characteristics that would define a particular society.²⁶

This process has been understood by Partha Chatterjee in terms of the “rule of colonial difference” which largely centred on a new importance given to the category of race in the exercise of colonial rule.²⁷ Late nineteenth-century colonial rule, according to Chatterjee, took Europe’s “modern regime of power”—its new tools of administration, classification, and economic development—to modernize the administration in the colony. However, in asserting the racial and developmental difference between Indians and Europeans, colonial states also maintained a paternalistic and despotic power over the colonized. The colonized, it would be argued, could not simply be made in the image of the colonizer and emphasis should be placed on managing the border between the colonized and colonizer, rather than on projects of liberal reform.

Linked to the focus on race was also a growing focus by the colonial state on the category of community as primordial and fixed,²⁸ defined not only by race but also by religious, national, or linguistic grouping.

Sudipta Kaviraj has understood this transition in terms of the move from “fuzzy communities” to “enumerated communities”²⁹ in which, through new practices of classification and counting by the colonial state, increasingly fixed rigid boundaries were established between groups based on “scientific” and bureaucratic criteria. Anderson has talked of the emergence of a totalizing classification in which new tools of “census, map, museum” would produce totalizing identities that would supersede an earlier fluidity of identity.³⁰ The census, in particular, would emerge as an important tool for the government and its classifications of colonial populations.³¹ More recently, the works of Karuna Mantena³² and Mahmood Mamdani³³ on late nineteenth-century liberal imperialism highlight the way in which a new focus on customary law in the work of Henry Maine encouraged the preservation and codification of custom within modern colonial frameworks. This, in turn, required greater attention to anthropological study, ethnography and knowledge production within colonial rule. Such a development entailed significant criticisms of liberal, modernizing, and reforming ideas of empire. It also increasingly encouraged British power to exercise itself indirectly over colonial populations. This reasoning would influence later British expansions in Fiji as well as in the Malay Peninsula.

Philosophically this late nineteenth-century focus on race and community also implied the suspension of the universal claims of liberal thought and generated a discourse of liberal exceptionalism. This entailed the common idea that liberal principles of government could not be applied to all societies equally. John Stuart Mill in his treatise on representative government would complain that earlier utilitarianism had ignored the stage of advancement of societies:

The recognition of this truth, though for the most part empirically rather than philosophically may be regarded as the main point of superiority in the political theories of the present above those of the last age; in which it was customary to claim representative democracy for England and France by arguments which would equally have provided it the only fit form of government for Bedouins or Malays.³⁴

Such an idea entailed the belief that colonized populations could be governed in non-liberal ways which were more natural to their condition.

It also formed the basis for the development of liberal communitarian thought which, based on the influence of social Darwinism and the growing role of the state, gave a greater role to national, religious, and racial communities within liberal thought both in Europe and in the colonial world.³⁵

The Malay Peninsula in the History of Colonial Thought

The Straits Philosophical Society was a part of this intellectual history of late nineteenth-century colonial thought, caught up in its broader political and intellectual developments. In keeping with global transformations, the Straits Settlements were increasingly moving in status from an outpost of empire to that of a more integrated colony. In 1867 the Straits Settlements would become a Crown Colony, governed directly from London not via Calcutta. By the 1870s the opening of the Suez Canal was increasing trade through the Straits, whilst telegram and postal ships increased communication. Economically, the period saw the consolidation of the agency houses over individual merchants, and the spread of Chinese capital from entrepôt trade to investing capital in the interior, particularly in the tin trade. Linked to this was a growth in labour migration. This heightened connectivity would also stimulate the intellectual life of the colony. European members of the Society would regularly refer to ongoing debates in Europe over political and social reform, the rise of socialism and new trends in colonial policy. The Straits Settlements were also a site through which scholars and an emerging regional nationalist intelligentsia would pass (from Rabindranath Tagore to Kang You Wei), alongside a growing regional press and book trade, via Europe, China, India, and Egypt. Mark Frost has noted that in 1876 the post offices of the Straits Settlements received just 21,241 books (including trade circulars and pamphlets) and dispatched 5,481, but by the year 1891, two years before the founding of the Society, they received 137,500 books and dispatched 59,000.³⁶ These connections served as the basis for an emerging diasporic public sphere for the colony in the 1890s and early twentieth century.³⁷

The 1870s also saw colonial attention drawn to the interior of the Malay Peninsula and to the development of British intervention in the

Malay States. In doing so the periphery of the empire also came into contact with broader trends in imperial thought. This included ideas of indirect rule, concepts of racial difference, the counting and specification of “native” communities, the instrumentalization of anthropological and ethnological knowledge, as well as critiques of modernization and reformist ideas of colonial rule.

This defined the terms of British intervention. On the one hand, it was driven by a moralized image of the Malay sultanates as spaces of lawlessness, violence, caprice, tyranny, and waste which could only be improved on contact with British civilization. On the other hand, it was marked by a belief that colonial control and attempts to reform or modernize the Malay sultanates too quickly, would serve only to invite rebellion. This was most evident in the fall-out from the Perak War and the debates around debt-slavery and toll collection which saw Hugh Low assume a more gradualist and measured policy in the aftermath of Birch’s killing.³⁸ In keeping with the feudal image of the Malays developing amongst the British, this ideology of colonial intervention became focused not only on the maintenance of racial difference but on something more akin to a paternalistic management of modernization which drew upon critiques of liberal and reformist ideas of empire; and which suggested that colonial populations should be improved on their own terms.³⁹

Spearheading these endeavours was a new generation of colonial officials, who ventured into the Peninsula combining the tools of colonial knowledge production with the expansion of British administrative control—a process in which the colonial administrator could be said to be “making a slow transition from the status of social engineer to that of social conservator and anthropologist-as-legislator”.⁴⁰ Much has been written about the role of Frank Swettenham (whose brother J.A. Swettenham was a member of the Society) as a central ideologue of the British forward-march across the Malay Peninsula. Swettenham was representative of this new figure of the “anthropologist-as-legislator” who was keen to study the Malays and to understand their ways as a basis and further justification for British intervention. The same was true of officials such as Hugh Clifford (a corresponding member of the Society in 1893) and Hugh Low, as well as scholar-administrators

represented by William Maxwell and William Walter Skeat,⁴¹ who were mixing ethnographic studies of the Malay language and customs, with bureaucratic forms of data collection, from census taking⁴² to land registration.⁴³ Within the Society, figures including H.N. Ridley, W.G. Shellabear and C.W.S. Kynnersley—with their concern with the anthropology of the Malay Peninsula and the consolidation of British rule—were important to this link between the production of colonial knowledge on the Malay Peninsula and the development of political ideologies of colonial rule.

Race and the Critique of Liberalism

The role of the Straits Philosophical Society within this new discourse on race and colonial rule was two-fold. It was firstly a space in which earlier liberal and reformist approaches to empire were criticized, and secondly a space in which the category of race was being constructed in colonial Malaya.

Whilst earlier figures such as Raffles and John Crawfurd had drawn from Enlightenment ideas of progress and liberalism, the papers of the Society highlighted a rejection of this earlier thinking.⁴⁴ Raffles and Crawfurd had centred their “enlightened” approach to empire on the criticism of the mercantilism of the Dutch. Yet in the Society figures such as Walter J. Napier and Ridley, in early contributions in 1894, would criticize British rule in Malaya for its overtly *laissez-faire* approach and would speak in favour of the more authoritarian approach of the Dutch in Java. Others like Gilbert E. Brooke in his essay on education, in 1904, would build upon the thought of Herbert Spencer to criticize liberal and reformist approaches to mass education both in Britain and in Malaya. Brooke would advocate for the maintenance of social hierarchy as dictated by what he termed the “necessities of modern social and political economy”. Other essays reflected a broader critique of utilitarian thinking that was in keeping with the revaluation of figures like John Stuart Mill. In contributions in 1908 and Venning Thomas would engage more directly with liberal thought and criticized utilitarianism for its emphasis on equality and on the rule of the majority which they associated with the rule of the mob. To buttress his position Ridley

highlighted the happiness of the old English and Malay peasantry who existed without either development or the vote. For Venning Thomas a paternalistic definition of utilitarianism allowed for the removal of the vote from the mob and the removal of the *keris* from the Malays.

These critiques of the liberal and reformist ends of the empire also reflected the growing concern with race in the Society. A figure such as W.R. Collyer in his 1898 Presidential Address would argue pessimistically that the civilizing mission of European empires increasingly came up against the reality of racial difference.

We ... have become sceptical as to the universal mission of our race. Of its steady progress and vitality we may have no doubt, but as to its missionary force and its power of assimilating other races, we feel that there is a good deal to be said on both sides.

“Every race”, he would note, “seems to receive impressions in a way peculiar to itself, according to its natural receptivity”, and this to him was evident by a comparison of British influence in India and China. Whilst in China Western civilization had had a negligible influence, in India the British had been able to have some “civilizing” impact on educated, upper-class Indians, although for the Indian masses it had achieved far less impact—a fact which justified an increasingly paternalistic approach to British rule.

How little European precept and example has influenced the life of the masses in India is shown by the present position of Bombay, the main lesson of which seems to be how unfit the people of India are for any kind of self-government, and how necessary it is, for the preservation of order and peace, that some white race should rule them.

In China, on the other hand, Western civilization was seen to have had a negligible influence and this failure seemed to Collyer to entail a need to revise the civilizing mission itself. Suggesting that it should not be aimed at overarching projects of reform and modernization of colonial societies, he argued for colonial powers to deal with colonized peoples “honestly, openly, and considerately” to spread the benefits of Western civilization over time through gradual persuasion rather than forced imposition.

Other figures in the Society remained, however, more pessimistic about the ability to fundamentally change Eastern societies through contact with Western culture and civilization. In H.N. Ridley's 1907 piece, "East and West" he argued, highlighting a biological metaphor, that:

By cultivation you may improve or modify thorns and thistles, but you will never be able to gather grapes off thorns or figs off thistles. The inherent qualities of the species remain the same to the end of time.

Ridley's contribution to the Society reflected his broader interest in American racism and social Darwinist thought.⁴⁵ This led to the argument that, whilst the British could help to produce a better quality of Indian, African, or Malay, such races would continue to be defined by their particular racial characteristics. Against liberal doctrines of improvement and progress, Ridley's writings would constantly reject what he regarded as artificial interventions in the operation of the law of the survival of the fittest. His basic argument was that such attempts to counteract its effects were only leading to the production of weak and degenerate races. In other contributions to the Society, Ridley would call for an approach to politics that balanced the interests of the individual with that of the race. This justified, in the name of racial progress, illiberal forms of government. Yet Ridley's particularly biological and Darwinist approach did not always dominate the Society's proceedings. Another member, W.M. Runciman, would also highlight the impact of climatic influences on racial characteristics. Yet unlike Ridley, he would emphasize the possibility through moral and religious influence of counteracting the effects of climate to improve groups such as the Malays. Such questions over race and the improvement of non-European races became central to the discussions of the Society, particularly in the discussions of the future of the Malays.

The "Real Malay"

Central to the critique of liberal ideas of empire was the growing relationship between colonial thought and anthropology. This increasingly tied the imposition of colonial modernity to the anthropological study

of the colonized, both in terms of the body (physiognomy, race, social Darwinism, and climatic and environmental determinism) and culture (language, custom and society). Linked to this was also the growing importance of the discipline of psychology to colonial thought in problematizing the mindset or character of colonial peoples.⁴⁶ In the debates of the Society this gave particular emphasis to the study of the Malays, in keeping with the emergence of the new “anthropologist-as-legislator”. Thus, officials such as Swettenham and Clifford published anthropological accounts of the Malay character and Malay society and these writings highlighted the need to understand the current character and future potential of the Malays as a basis for colonial policy.

Syed Hussein Alatas has highlighted the presence within colonial writings of pop-psychological analyses of the Malays and their mindset which were based on simple observation and stereotype. In the Society such a tendency was evident across many of the papers of the European and, as we shall see, non-European members. This trend was evident in D.J. Galloway’s essay on *latah*, a nervous condition seen as particularly prevalent amongst the Malays, which was discussed in terms of their racial and psychological character—notably their higher susceptibility to external stimuli and a lack of inhibition. Yet this anthropological and psychological image was also regarded as subject to change. As Galloway and his respondent Ridley would come to argue, with education and urbanization *latah* was disappearing amongst the Malays, suggesting that their character was changing with developments on the Peninsula.

Daniel P.S. Goh has highlighted how the image of the Malays in late nineteenth-century colonial thought came to be defined not in terms of an irredeemable oriental otherness, which would have positioned the Malays completely outside the colonial modern, but rather in developmental terms, which saw the Malays as biologically, culturally, and historically behind Europe. Central to this was an idea of the feudalism and medievalism of the Malays.⁴⁷ As Goh has argued, such medievalism was related to Darwinian notions of evolution and thus evolutionist notions of social development. This situated the Malays as pre-modern and underdeveloped but also as having the potential under British tutelage for a measure of development and modernization.⁴⁸

As Clifford would argue of colonial intervention through a biological metaphor,

one cannot but sympathise with the Malays, who are suddenly and violently translated from the point to which they had attained in the natural development of their race, and are required to live up to the standards of a people who are six centuries in advance of them in national progress. If a plant is made to blossom or bear fruit three months before its time, it is regarded as a triumph of the gardener's art; but what, then, are we to say of this huge moral-forcing system which we call "Protection"? Forced plants, we know, suffer in the process; and the Malay, whose proper place is amidst the conditions of the Thirteenth Century, is apt to become morally weak and seedy, and to lose something of his robust self-respect, when he is forced to bear Nineteenth-Century fruit.⁴⁹

The practical effects of this image can be seen in the British development of a traditionalist and protectionist approach to Malay politics and society. Policies were enacted which sought to protect the Malays from economic competition from immigrant races and from what was seen as the onslaught of modernization. Economically this occurred through the exclusion of the Malays from the commercial plantation economy, particularly through colonial land policy,⁵⁰ whilst politically it rested on the preservation and extension of what was viewed as the age-old customs of Malay political culture that emphasized the centrality of the sultans and the Malay aristocracy.⁵¹ It is in the Society's debates over the protection and modernization of the Malays that we can see these ideas in their process of formation.

We can detect in the Society's discussions on the relationship between the current racial character of the Malays and their potential for progress several differing interpretations. Rev W. Murray, for example, argued in his 1909 paper, "The Influence of Modern Civilisation on the Malay" that the Malays had been left lazy and unambitious on account of the climate of the Malay Peninsula as well as the nature of the pre-colonial system of governance, which had reduced incentives for hard work. The British presence had been able in part to counteract this and, by providing a system of peace and law and order, had been able to effect external changes in the Malays. This, he observed, could be translated

into internal changes that could modify the Malay from a pirate and warrior to a lover of peace and order. David Bishop, on the other hand, who viewed this in terms of the domestication and taming of the Malay character, did not agree that the Malays would modernize fully. Their character and nature would rather require their continued dependence on British tutelage.

Civilisation works on him slowly in charges external and internal, but it has not inspired him with a spirit of self-confidence or self-help. He is not likely to be exterminated by the nations of the West, but rather to increase under their influence.

Bishop would offer a more critical take on the modernization of the Malays under British influence which idealized their feudal character. Rather than the improvement of the Malays, he argued that there had been a deterioration of character under British rule:

The ordinary, Malay of today, as compared with his ancestors, suggests the poor, tame, spiritless lion born and bred in a cage at the Zoo, contrasted with the grand and noble animal which has never suffered bondage... Meaner qualities have replaced the grander, and the modern Malay is less simple, less sincere, less trustworthy, less noble than his ancestors.

This suggested to him that the modernization of the Malays was producing moral deterioration and not progress.

The question of immigration and its impact on the Malays was also important in the Society's deliberations. C.W.S. Kynnerslay would offer a more positive account of the potential for Malay development by arguing that in those states where the Malays were in a majority, they showed an ability to govern themselves and develop their states. Hence, he noted that the British importation of clerks and civil servants was preventing them from advancing. Kynnerslay went on to argue for the British to train and recruit Malays into the civil service. Ridley, however, emphasized a more social Darwinist approach to the question of immigration. Believing that the Malays lacked the character and racial biology to prevent subsumption by immigrant races, in particular the

Chinese, Ridley pointed to two trends that might delay this subsumption. One was the presence of Islam as a differentiating factor between the Malays and Chinese. The second was the presence of the British who could for some time artificially protect the Malays from external competition. In response, Hanitsch would argue that protection of the Malay race might be possible but only based on the restriction of immigration and through a system of education, which would build upon existing trades and protect the current state of Malay society. As Hanitsch would argue:

The Malay is in many ways so childlike that for a long time he will require careful training and nurturing. If we left him alone, and all Europeans took passage for home to-day, I really believe he would turn to-morrow again into the bloodthirsty pirate he was before. But duly taken care of for some generations to come,—and I don't think ever any native race required more careful handling, I believe that the Malays would have a bright and prosperous future before them.

These calls for the protection of the Malays, on account of their character and competition from more advanced races, were not isolated: they came into the debates over immigration, civil service employment, economic protection, native upliftment, and other subjects and would continue to influence debates over Malayness and key matters relating to government and administration in the late-colonial and post-colonial period.

The Malays and their Religion

In both Murray and Ridley's essays, we also see discussion of another aspect of the Malay character—Islam—which as a religious ideology was argued to stand in the way of the modernization of the Malays.

Islam held a problematic place in relation to colonial assumptions around Malayness and this was clearly reflected in the Society's proceedings. As adherents of Islam the Malays, rather than being isolated and disconnected, were part of a global religious, monotheistic, discourse. At the same time, Islam offered an alternative religious, philosophical, legal, and cultural system to that of the Western modern. The reaction to

this in colonial thought was often to downplay the importance of Islam, as a religious and cultural doctrine, within Malay society. Thus, in the work of officials such as Raffles, Marsden, Skeat, and R.J. Wilkinson, we see the privileging of the importance of pre-Islamic customs and society in the definition of Malayness.⁵² Such privileging was based on two further assumptions. The first was an attempt to racialize and particularize Islam within the Malay world, tying it to Arabness and Arab culture.⁵³ The second was the assumption that the Malays had adopted Islam superficially and ritualistically, thus rendering Islam a “veneer” over true Malay traditions and customs.⁵⁴ This assumption, mirroring assumptions around their superficial reception of Western values, suggested that the Malays lacked an intellectual character and education which would allow them to adopt and fashion ideas of their own accord.⁵⁵

At the same time, European discourse on Islam in the colony was defined by ongoing discussions within the Christian community, and particularly in its missionary variant. The discussions of the Society were taking place during a period of change in the church due to the influx of Methodists and Presbyterian missionaries. The composition of the Society itself reflected the escalation of this missionary work. W.G. Shellabear was the founder of the Methodist Publishing House and a gifted scholar of Malay. G.M. Reith, Archibald Lamont, as well as Murray, worked at the Presbyterian mission in Singapore. Lamont specialized in educational work in the Amoy dialect and worked with Tan Teck Soon to found the Eastern School. Murray had only limited knowledge of Chinese but had learned Malay during a period in Penang (1893–99) and had baptized one Munshi Othman. In Singapore, he operated the Baba Mission and introduced the Boys Brigade into the colony.

Early missionary thought was hostile to Islam, on account of the theological challenges it posed to Christian thinking, and the experiences of missionaries in their work among Muslims which tended to produce hostility between the two.⁵⁶ This tension, which often hampered the role that missionaries played in the colony, was reflected in the discussions on missionary work that took place in the Society.⁵⁷ At the same time,

the discussions on Islam in the Society can be seen to mirror the debates taking place in colonial and missionary circles between liberal and conservative schools. These in turn contributed to broader debates on the modernization of the Malays.

Three papers that highlighted these trends were G.M. Reith's 1895 paper on "Christianity and Mohammedanism" and W.G. Shellabear's papers on "Moslem Influence on the Malay Race" (1913) and "Mohammedanism, As Revealed in Its Literature" (1915). Reith's paper represented a more liberal tendency in the Church and, building upon Darwinian terminology and ideas of race, he highlighted the similarities rather than the differences between Islam and Christianity. So too would he suggest that the aim of missionaries should not solely be the conversion of Malays to Christianity, but the development of a critical intellectual spirit amongst the Malays that would mirror the critical re-adjustment which had occurred in Christianity. This suggested the possibility of a modernization of the Malay character beyond the narrow discourse on Malayness which dominated discussions of the Society.

This revaluation of Islam and the Malay character was also evident in the contributions of W.G. Shellabear. As Robert Hunt has argued, Shellabear was central to the revaluation of the role of Islam in Malay society by challenging the assumption of Islam as a mere veneer over Malay society, and in arguing for the need for missionaries to understand the true nature of Malay society to contribute towards its modernization and development.⁵⁸ In so doing, Shellabear would take up an Orientalist focus upon language and texts⁵⁹ to better understand the Malays, a position also prominent in his subsequent essay "Mohammedanism, As Revealed in Its Literature". Here Shellabear was reproducing assumptions that Islam played a limited role in civilizing Malay society. Comparing a list of Malay words derived from Arabic and Sanskrit, he argued that Hinduism was "by far the more effective civilising agency". He would also observe that the influence of Islam on the Malays was largely restricted to the sphere of religion, and the terminology for books and writing, but not to the language of government and commerce. To him, the adoption of words from European and Chinese languages suggested that "the Chinese and European peoples have done infinitely more than the Arabs to give the Malays the fruits of civilisation". This suggested

to Shellabear that the reform and modernization of the Malays was to come from the influence of non-Islamic cultures, and not from Islam or the Malays themselves. An extension of this analysis was the role the British Empire was to play in the development of the Malays.

I would suggest that what Islam has failed to do for the Malay race, Christian civilisation, as represented by the British Government and British commercial enterprise, has already gone far to accomplish.

Yet Shellabear's essay is important also for the contemporary reflections it would make on the role of Islam in the development of a modern nationalist identity among the Malays. Arguing that for them "Islam is not so much a religion as a nationality"—his was an early work identifying ideas of *bangsa* with Islam. Another observation was that of the influence of Turkish nationalism on the Malays which he saw in the development of an Islamic public sphere in the colony, one which was in contact with Islamic writings from the Middle East and South Asia. In doing so he was highlighting a process of modernization which, as we will similarly see amongst the Straits Chinese, broke with colonial assumptions of racial identity, and proposed an alternative model of modernization and social reform. This lay the groundwork for the advance of Islamic and nationalist movements in the period after the Society.⁶⁰

Governing the Colony: Race, Crime, Opium and Law

Colonial concern towards the urban life of the colony was an experience common throughout the empire.⁶¹ Urban government and planning were spheres in which ideas of "colonial difference" were confronted with the daily, and intimate, contact of Western and non-Western populations, and spaces within which Western morality and sensibility were confronted with transgression. Urban life produced a whole series of anxieties and concerns around sanitation, hygiene, crime, construction, sexuality, and migration, problematizing for colonial administrators how they should intervene in what was perceived as chaotic and transitory urban spaces in the name of colonial order. In this regard, the Straits Settlements, and particularly Singapore, were no exception.⁶²

In keeping with the racialization of colonial thought, the “urban problem” was commonly identified as a “racial problem” and in Singapore, the “racial problem” was significantly seen as a “Chinese problem”. From the 1830s onwards the Chinese formed the largest ethnic group in Singapore. By 1849 they formed over half of the population, and by the end of the nineteenth century over 70 per cent of the population was Chinese.⁶³ Of this population the vast majority were new migrants participating in a migration boom which, from the 1870s, saw a dramatic increase in Chinese immigrants to the colony, rising four-fold by the time the Society began meeting in 1893,⁶⁴ with only around 10 per cent of Chinese in the colony having been born there.⁶⁵ Of this population three divisions were stark. The first was the segregation along dialect and clan lines, which formed the basis for the self-organization of the Chinese in the colony through clan associations or *kongsis*. The second was the gender division with a particularly high ratio of Chinese men to women—as high as 14 men to 1 woman in the 1860s, before steadily declining in the 1870s to 6 men to 1 woman and then to 4 men to 1 woman in the 1890s.⁶⁶ Even after the major influx of Chinese after the 1870s, it was still believed by colonial officials that no “respectable”, i.e. married Chinese women had migrated to the colony.⁶⁷ Finally, the third division was along class lines, between the new migrants of the coolie trade and petty traders, and the more established, and wealthier, traders and businessmen of the colony who were increasingly English educated and often more loyal subjects of the British Empire.

Such divisions brought with them problems for the colonial administrators. The Chinese were a population that British colonial administrators were largely unused to governing. The fact that in the early years many of the European administrators and traders had arrived in the colony via India, and the fact that the Straits Settlements were under the Government of India, meant that Europeans, who were familiar with Indian and Islamic law and customs, had no such familiarity with Chinese law, language, and customs. This was the source of constant dissatisfaction amongst the Chinese community when they turned to British courts for justice.⁶⁸ Indeed a figure such as Governor Blundell feared that any attempt to translate English law into Chinese was “utterly hopeless” on account of the nature of the language.⁶⁹

The background history of this problem was addressed by W. Napier in his *Introduction to the Study of the Law Administered in the Colony of the Straits Settlements* which was published in 1898. In the following year Napier addressed the Society on “The Application of English Law to Asiatic Races, With Special Reference to the Chinese”. As Napier would note the problem lay in the initial declaration of the Settlements as unoccupied thus allowing for the wholesale importation of English law without clear mention of the accommodation of customary law. This in effect allowed judges to apply English statute in the colony without consideration of local conditions. Napier noted the impact of this on the Chinese:

The wholesale introduction of English law disappointed Chinese expectations and ideas on three points at least — (i) in its non-recognition of adoption, (ii) in its giving the wife and the daughters a large, and in the case of the latter an equal share with that of the sons, and (iii) in the impossibility of tying up property for several generations with a view to the due performance of the “sinchew” or ancestral worship. All these questions have been fought out in the Courts of the Colony, and in each instance have those Courts refused a recognition of the native custom.

Even though by the 1890s in the Malay States, Chinese law had attained a degree of recognition and a draft code on Chinese customary law was being developed, the legacy of the division between colonial administration and the Chinese population had already laid the groundwork for the Chinese to adopt a system of self-government for the resolution of disputes and the regulation of social life through the secret societies.

This system of self-government had long unsettled colonial administrators and merchants, and was perceived to be at the root of a whole series of issues: popular unrest and violence, petty crime, abuses in the coolie trade and the sex trade. These perceived transgressions had led to constant demands for the Chinese to be brought “to heel”.⁷⁰ A key argument was that the majority of the Chinese who migrated to the colony never came into contact with the colonial state and that this reality was not conducive to law and order. In the aftermath of the Penang Riots of 1867, intervention began in the form of the Dangerous

Societies Suppression Ordinance 1869, with the intent of recognizing and registering secret societies. In 1876, an incident resulting in the ransacking of a post office in Singapore was seen by the colonial authorities as the work of Chinese secret societies and lent urgency to the establishment of the Chinese Protectorate in the colony in 1877.

The office of the Protector was initially established under William Pickering to handle matters related to the Chinese population of the settlement and to replace the previous dependence of the colonial government on prominent community leaders.⁷¹ The main tasks of the Protector reflected the significant social problems which were seen to emanate from and impacted the Chinese. The Protector was tasked with the regulation of immigration, particularly male coolie labourers and female sex workers, the regulation of the sex trade and the regulation of secret societies. To respond to these concerns, a new bureaucracy was established for the registration, categorization, and surveillance of the Chinese with an emphasis placed on the regulation of the ports, brothels and lock hospitals, intervention in labour contracts and medical examinations. The Chinese Protector was also appointed as the Registrar of Societies to negotiate with the secret societies and bring them under the control of the colonial state.

How intervention should occur was a long-running debate in the colony.⁷² In the end, the nature of the Chinese Protectorate was significantly shaped by Pickering's sensibilities and his experience mediating between warring Chinese secret societies in the Malay States in the 1860s and early 1870s. Drawing upon his long stint working in Hong Kong where he learned Mandarin and the southern Chinese dialects, Pickering, as with other moral reformers in the colony and wider empire, made the Protectorate an extension of his Christian morality and the "civilizing mission". His establishment, with the assistance of prominent Chinese and European missionaries, of a refuge and rehabilitation centre for women who had turned to sex work in 1878 was testimony to this moral drive.

Yet as the papers of the Society highlight, the role played by the category of race in this moral discourse was key. In the debates of the Society, these issues were particularly evident in the papers of D.J. Galloway on sexual disease, George M. Reith, and Arthur Knight on the

opium trade and C.W.S. Kynnersley on the prison system in Singapore. All of these papers highlighted the governance of the Chinese, yet they are also prominent for their emphasis on the racial characteristics of the Chinese and their supposed susceptibility in the Straits to crime, sex work and opium smoking. This led to criticisms of liberal and moral reformers—in keeping with the writings of Brooke, Ridley and Collier outlined above—and the suggestion that such reform was inapplicable to the Chinese in the colony.

For Galloway, in the case of the sex trade, and Kynnersley, in reference to prison reform, they suggested the need for firm interventions to reform Chinese society in the Straits. Actions such as the detention of sex workers and petty criminals were therefore deemed desirable. Reith, who was a minister with the local Presbyterian church, regarded the smoking of opium by the Chinese as inevitable “The Chinaman will have his opium somehow; if not with the consent of the Government, then without it”. He pointed out that its suppression would only lead to violence in the colony which justified for him the continuation of the opium trade.

Yet questions of urban government produced another practical question for colonial officials—namely, the extent to which the colonial government had any role to play in developing or facilitating the formation of a society in the Straits Settlements, or whether it was to be restricted only to governing “alien” populations. This was not only a significant area of debate within the Society amongst its European members, but it also was a major point of contention between its European and Straits Chinese members. This was evident in the contribution of W.R. Collyer to the Society in 1903 which pointed out that, if in the early years of the colony the distinction lay between the diverging application of law to European and non-European populations, by the turn of the twentieth century, the contradiction lay between the interests of business in the colony and legal order.

This, to him, raised the question of whether the colony was simply a place to make money or a place in which legal order had intrinsic value. This consideration was evident also in James Aitken’s essay of 1907, “The Reformation of British Malaya”, which contained a broad dissection of what he saw to be the failings of British policy in

Malaya and which, in his view, called for the British to generate for the colony a fuller level of economic and social development. The debate would, inevitably, also focus on the position of the Malays, and British responsibility to include them within the development of the colonial economy and colonial society. Aitken was an associate of Song Ong Siang, a prominent Straits Chinese lawyer who, together with Dr Lim Boon Keng, a society member, had started the *Straits Chinese Magazine*. It is very probable that the journal, the first English language one edited and published by the local community, provided both material as well as ideas for Aitken in his call for a more modernizing and developmental ethos within colonial policy.

The Colonial Order and the Chinese

It was through such debates over colonial policy in the Society that the English-speaking Straits Chinese could offer to the European members alternative perspectives on the colony's Chinese community. So too would they bring into question racial assumptions around Chineseness which structured the Society's discussions.⁷³ The presence within the Society of well-educated members of the Chinese community: Lim Boon Keng, Tan Teck Soon and later Choo Kia Peng, gave a prominent perspective on Chinese issues and subjects of concern. This was reinforced by the fact that their educational credentials and social standing often surpassed those of many of the European participants. The biographies of Lim Boon Keng and Tan Teck Soon, in particular, are informative as to their impressive political achievements and intellectual capabilities.

First educated at Raffles Institution, after his time as a Queen's Scholar in Edinburgh, Lim Boon Keng returned to Singapore in 1892 to establish a medical practice and was soon named a member of the Legislative Council. During this time, he emerged as a prominent social reformer and proponent of Chinese nationalism and Confucianism. He co-founded the Singapore Chinese Girls' School, together with Song Ong Siang, the Chinese Philomathic Society, and the Anti-Opium Society, as well as the *Straits Chinese Magazine*. Despite his Chinese roots and concerns, he was also a figure fiercely loyal to, though not

uncritical of, the empire.⁷⁴ Aside from membership of the Society, he was also a founder of the Straits Chinese British Association, to give the Straits Chinese British a collective voice in the colony. He was also the colony's representative at the two royal coronations in 1902 and 1911, and an advocate of the British war effort through the Straits Volunteer Corps.⁷⁵ He was also a founding member of the Tongmenghui in Singapore, the precursor to the Kuomintang branch, whilst with the formation of the Chinese Republic he became a private secretary and personal physician to Sun Yat Sen and an Inspector-General of hospitals in Beijing. So too with Tan Teck Soon, who was also educated at Raffles Institution, before leaving for China on the Guthrie Scholarship to study at the Anglo-Chinese College in Amoy. In the years after his return, he became the editor and proprietor of the *Daily Advertiser*, a newspaper which covered news from mainland China. He was also an educator through the Singapore Chinese Educational Institute, an institute for adult education; the author of *Bright Celestials* with Reverend Arthur Lamont; and subsequently the manager of the Chinese-language newspaper *Thien Nan Shin Pao*. Alongside Lim Boon Keng he was also a regular contributor to the *Straits Chinese Magazine*.

Both these personalities highlight some common trends in the intellectual life of the Straits Chinese in the period. The first was loyalty to the British Empire through organizations such as the Straits Chinese British Association and the Straits Volunteer Corps. The second was the belief in the importance of modern science, medicine, technology, and education, and thus the progress that Western societies could offer to the societies of the East. The third was their committed participation in the development of a public sphere in the colony in which they contributed to a proliferation of print media in English, Malay and Chinese, as well as through their active role in the formation of new intellectual societies.⁷⁶ Finally, they were also participants in a diasporic nationalism and a cultural sense of Chineseness which provided a basis for differentiating themselves from Western and colonial thought and was also the starting point of a Malayan consciousness.⁷⁷

These trends formed the basis for a complex political identity,⁷⁸ and their critical discussions in the Society, as well as their contributions

to other forums such as the *Straits Chinese Magazine*, reveal that their accommodation to colonial thought was an uneasy one. In one of his most well-known contributions to the *Straits Chinese Magazine*, titled “Our Enemies”, Lim Boon Keng sought to define the approach which the Straits Chinese should take in their interaction with Western knowledge:

the Chinese-born British subjects are now in the state of transition, socially and intellectually, between the old ways of our forefathers and the new doctrines of European civilisation. Naturally, we are interested in the criticisms advanced in favour of or against the ancient systems and institutions, which had served our ancestors so well. It is excusable for us to be anxious to uphold these in the face of all attacks, but, however apt we are to act rashly and to regard influences which threaten to change our views as hostile to the integrity of permanence of our institutions, social or religious, we should conduct our defence intelligently and reasonably.⁷⁹

This dynamic of accepting “the new doctrines of European civilisation” whilst “intelligently and reasonably” defending traditional institutions was not unique. It was also a theme common to the experiences of the creole and “middling” classes in the colonial world, who, while accepting the modernizing framework of colonial thought, attempted to differentiate themselves from it on the basis of their own national culture.⁸⁰

This was perhaps most evident in the themes and concepts which the Straits Chinese intellectuals utilized in their discussions in the Society in which they mobilized ideas of liberalism, nationalism, race, and evolution, yet in ways that countered European doctrines of racial superiority, racial difference and illiberal models of colonial government.⁸¹ Their challenge occurred in three key ways.

The first took the form of social reform movements, which sought to bring the Straits Chinese society in line with modern values. This was expressed in Tan Teck Soon and Lim Boon Keng’s advocacy for education, and opposition to the queue and opium consumption as contained in the pages of the *Straits Chinese Magazine*, as well as in their contributions to the Society. In Lim Boon Keng’s essay on “Opium versus Alcohol”, themes of race, political economy, and medicine would be mobilized to call for the prohibition on opium use.⁸²

The second was an attempt to link traditional Chinese society, culture, and religion with modern forms of knowledge; and in effect, highlighting a culturally Chinese basis for modern systems of thought. This resonated with Tan Teck Soon's revaluation of traditional Chinese thought as highlighted by Christine Doran who pointed to Tan's emphasis on themes of "change, dynamism, progress and popular sovereignty in his conception of the centuries-long development of Chinese society".⁸³ This was evident too in Lim Boon Keng's writings on Confucianism in which he sought to continuously highlight the compatibility between Confucian thought and modernity.⁸⁴ He would not only see a Confucian basis for liberal, socialist and evolutionary thought. He also posited Confucianism as a universal and rational religion, applicable to all societies which could provide for an alternative way of thinking the new category of "race", beyond questions of supremacy.⁸⁵ For Lim this formed part of a broader criticism of racial discrimination within the British Empire.⁸⁶ Attending the Universal Races Congress in London in 1911 Lim argued that Chinese society did not have any "race-prejudice which would make the colour line a question in their country".⁸⁷

Finally, this took the form of a critique of Western ideas of modernity, often in terms of its materialism, nihilism, and lack of spirituality; and the ensuing argument that non-Western cultures offered a more ethical form of modernity. The resulting logic was a long-running theme in Lim Boon Keng's thought. Earlier, in 1894, Lim was discussing the issue of the degeneration of the Baba, arguing that in their emulation of European culture and materialism, the Straits Chinese had "deteriorated morally" and lost their Chinese culture.

The Baba class, as young men, chiefly engaged themselves as clerks to merchants. Their ambition was to dress, to be stylish and in every way to emulate the airs and graces of the Europeans. This led them into extravagances wholly foreign to their forefathers. Money-making became the chief aim. ... If they wished to progress at all, their only hope lay in keeping to the lines laid down by China centuries ago, instead of endeavouring to assimilate an exotic civilisation.⁸⁸

These themes of Baba degeneration and the regressive effects of commercial life in the Straits was a theme found in the *Straits Chinese*

Magazine. It was also central to Lim's essay on "The Chinese in British Malaya" which was read to the Society in 1910. Here he would again argue that the pampered life in the Straits and the mixing of Chinese blood with Malay blood had led the Straits Chinese to "despise labour, and prefer the easy-going dependence of a clerkship to any kind of work involving toil". This was a theme that would also emerge in Lim's war-time lectures, where he argued that the Straits Chinese had become "machines of the merchants", their business houses had entered into decay and they had inherited from the Malays a distaste for hard work. This mirrors similar themes of degeneration that emerged in colonial Bengal in the mid-nineteenth century. In the same manner that Bengali intellectuals came to oppose British modernity to the ethical culture of Hinduism, for Lim the solution to the degeneration of the Baba was adherence to Confucianism.⁸⁹

Confucianism was here understood by Lim as a system of morality and education that provided the basis for an ethical society and one which could account for economic and social development whilst maintaining order and the importance of traditional customs. As he would argue in "The Chinese Revolutionary Movement in Malaya" and "Socialism Among the Chinese", adherence to Western political thought had led extremists in China towards ideas of nihilism and anarchism, the abolition of religion and the advocacy of equality in all things. To combat these, Lim advocated Confucian values and Confucian forms of socialism as a path that would avoid such extremes. This ideological position would later lead Lim into disputes with more radical nationalists in China who rejected a Confucian basis for a modern Chinese nation. Lim who remained unconvinced would continue to advocate for a Confucian basis for modern Chinese nationalism.⁹⁰

Hybrid Identities

In the case of Malaya, the nationalist schema was complicated by the fact that the Straits Chinese were a community in a multi-ethnic society. This fact placed them outside of monolithic discourses of nation, identity and belonging.⁹¹ What is discernible in the writings of the Straits Chinese on modernity and nationalism was both a transnational concern with China

and Chineseness, as well as a concern with local culture and politics, which formed the basis of a hybrid social and political identity.⁹²

This hybrid identity was evident in the public sphere of the Straits Chinese. In their early literary endeavours, the Straits Chinese pursued predominantly Malay literary forms, the *pantun* and the *syair*, whilst the Straits Chinese press pursued publications in Romanized Malay, in particular the *Surat Khabar Peranakan* (Straits Chinese Herald), *Bintang Timor* and the *Malaysia Advocate*. Such papers, which featured national and international news, opinion, and literary pieces, formed the basis for the interaction between the Straits Chinese and Malay communities. *Bintang Timor*, for example, received sponsorship and contributions from the Dato' Bentara Luar of Johor, whilst the paper also ran opinion pieces on Malay issues. Most notably this occurred in a series of eleven articles in 1894 under the title “*Mengapa Melayu Layu?*” (Why are the Malays Withering Away?) in which the author, writing under a pseudonym, “offered a scathing analysis of the alleged reasons for Malay economic and educational backwardness”, which reproduced many of the terms of European criticism of the Malays, and in return received a scathing reply from the *Jawi Peranakan* newspaper.⁹³

As this exchange evidenced, the dynamics of hybridity did not escape the space and confines of European thought. Similarly, as in the case of Bengal analysed by Chatterjee, the Straits Chinese leaders continued to accept many of the terms of European reasoning related to issues of racial difference, underdevelopment and government although they also challenged these terms in the name of the future development and modernization of the peoples of the colony.⁹⁴ In doing so it can be argued that they were contributing towards the development of a proto-Malayan nationalism that situated the colony as a space for the development of modern society and as a space of political belonging. Nevertheless, in so far as this was true, it was to be mediated by two important factors. On the one hand, there was a belief that the British Empire would itself be a significant agent in the modernization of the colony; and on the other hand, there was also a recognition that racial differences within the colony were fundamental dividing lines, which would structure the colony's future political development.

This juxtaposition of consciousness and reasoning was evident in Tan Teck Soon's essay on educational problems in the colony—an essay in which he would take up a problem central to the issue of social reform amongst the Straits Chinese and which touched also upon the educational challenges faced by the other communities of the Peninsula. Key in his essay was the critique of the supreme position of the Europeans in the colony and in particular their lack of concern for the peoples of the settlement. Echoing his earlier critiques of British governance in the colony,⁹⁵ he argued that the Europeans lived in a world separated from the other members of the colony and made only “feeble and spasmodic attempts” to understand and reform the other communities. Criticizing this failure, he stressed that the British Empire had a duty to elevate and modernize the population in the colony whilst acknowledging that the potential for modernization would be determined by the nature of the constituent groups in the colony.

Turning to the Malays, Tan pointed out that they were as a group defined by apathy towards local government—even towards those ordinances “affecting even their highest interests”. The only remedy for this situation according to Tan lay in “increasing mutual knowledge” and a “more extended intercourse and exchange of ideas between governors and governed”. For him, this necessitated turning Malaya into a political community, in which all groups would participate and discourse. But he also recognized that what was lacking in Malaya was a sense of community itself, made more acute by the reality of the “plural society” in which “except as regards the strenuous pursuit of dollars, each leads a life of his own entirely indifferent to the existence or proximity of the other”. Tan's opinion on the plural society in the colony may be seen to anticipate Furnivall's later depiction of the “plural society” of colonial Java and Burma, in which Europeans, Chinese and natives, each contained within their own religion, culture and language, met only in the marketplace.⁹⁶ Yet this limited community was also understood by Tan in racialized terms. Echoing European thinking on the Malays, Tan argued that the Malay “want of stamina and character is inherent, and if entirely left to itself the race will in all likelihood degenerate and die away in a not very distant future”. For him, what was required for the “child of the soil” was their protection and upliftment by the British.

Hence his advocacy of the education of the Malays, and in particular, of Malay women.

Similar themes would also emerge in a later essay by Lim Boon Keng, “The Chinese in British Malaya” which dealt with the effect of life in Malaya upon the Chinese. One significant factor for Lim was the mixing of Malay with Chinese blood and the belief that life in the tropics was tending towards the degeneration of the resident Chinese race and producing inferior offspring. To him, it was fortunate that “the infusion of Chinese blood from China has frequently checked the degenerative process” and whilst the education of girls could delay degeneration, he argued that “unless young people are removed from the tropics, there seems very little hope of maintaining the stamina and the virile qualities of the race-attributes due principally to the Chinese environment, which itself is the outcome of six millenniums of ceaseless social struggles”.

In Malaya, on the other hand, Lim noted that “the pampered lives more of these people lead” ensured that Chinese children were becoming more and more like the Malays. The example of those born in Malaya who were seen to despise manual labour and prefer office work was provided for his broader arguments on the degeneration of the Baba. This concern with degeneration also reflected broader thinking on racial mixing which as in H.N. Ridley’s essay to the Society on Eurasians, highlighted the racial weaknesses that mixing was seen to produce. All the same, rejecting the idea of Europeanization, which he argued was “unattainable and undesirable” to halt the degenerative process, he advocated a return to the teaching of Chinese morality and an education system mixing manual labour with an academic curriculum.

Similarly, as with Tan, Lim was equally concerned with the position of the Malays in the colony. Colonial policy, he argued, did not need to interfere with the Chinese because as a race they had the means to uplift themselves if given a system of just and equitable treatment. Drawing attention to mukim regulations in Malacca, he argued that the Malays would require “special care and protection” without which they would lose out to “well-equipped foreigners—Europeans, Indians or Chinese”. For him, “Justice requires” therefore “that the Malays should receive more attention from the Government” as well as necessitated

differential treatment between the Malays and Chinese to ensure their mutual economic and social development. These important themes emerging from the Society proceedings and developed out of ideas and debates of race, culture and modernity would also assume centre stage in the development of Malayan nationalism later in the 1930s and 1940s.

Conclusion

With the advent of the First World War many European members of the Society were conscripted for war service, whilst others were preoccupied with business, and the Society witnessed dwindling membership. As no records have been kept after 1916 it is not known when precisely the Society was dissolved. It would appear that meetings continued to be recorded between 1916 and 1918 and that the Society continued to meet until at least 1923, but it would seem that by this date meetings were less regular and less well attended.⁹⁷ In the post-War years the Society was also deprived of its prominent Straits Chinese members, Lim Boon Keng, the last recorded president of the Society, would be appointed the President of Xiamen University in China in 1921, whilst Tan Teck Soon passed away in 1922. The memory of the Society continued, however, to impact the intellectual life of Singapore. Colonial Secretary Sir Andrew Caldecott would suggest in 1935 for the Raffles College Union to become “an essay club and dialectical society on the lines of the Singapore Philosophical Society”, directing members to the papers of *Noctes Orientales*.⁹⁸

Nevertheless, beyond the model of the philosophical society the Society represented, the ideas propounded in the Society can also be said to have had far-reaching consequences beyond its life. The mixture of ideas around liberalism, Darwinism, colonial modernity, and race, constituted the basis for a dominant ideology in colonial Malaya, centred on the necessity of European modernization, a critique of liberal ideas of empire, the protection of native races, and the racial distinction between Europeans and Asians. Yet as the Society also evidenced, this schema also contained its own tensions—tensions which were played out in the presentations and critiques of the Society. More importantly, in opening

a space for non-Europeans to engage with colonial thought, the Society also made possible its appropriation and modification and, as in other colonial learned societies, contributed towards the development of an independent intellectual culture in British Malaya, developing around ideas of nationalism and national modernity. This engaged not only with transnational flows of nationalist and modernist thought in the colonial world but also formed the basis for early nationalist thought and development in the Malayan Peninsula. In this process the categories of race and identity remained open to modification, appropriation, and debate. At the same time, they remained an anchoring point around which the intellectual culture of the early twentieth century through to the post-colonial period contested and collided.

Notes

1. See *The Rules of the Straits Philosophical Society* (Singapore: Straits Philosophical Society, 1893), British Library: 003395413.
2. *Ibid.*
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