

Lim Teck Ghee and Charles Brophy (eds.), *The Straits Philosophical Society & Colonial Elites in Malaya: Selected Papers on Race, Identity and Social Order 1893–1915*

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“British Malaya” was the proud moniker given to that late 19th century colonial creation which came into being when Raffles’ Singapore found its hinterland in Swettenham’s Federated Malay States. Within twenty years of Singapore’s tentative intervention in the mining wars of Perak and Selangor, Chinese enterprise, under the aegis of British colonial administration, had created an immense source of wealth based on tin, amplified a decade later by the even more successful development of the rubber industry, driven this time by Western science and capital.

This was the setting for the existence of the Straits Philosophical Society, founded in Singapore in 1893 by leading members of the British colonial elite for the purpose of engaging in rigorous intellectual discourse on issues of the day. From their regular monthly meetings over a continuous 20-year period, at which members (only a select 15 in all) had in turn to present a paper in written form, 238 essays are extant. It is only thanks to the serendipitous discovery in 1976 of a collection of the original transcripts in the Penang Library that the sustained intellectual labour and debates of this early group of colonial elites have now been made available for public scrutiny.

The 28 papers selected by the editors, Lim Teck Ghee and Charles Brophy, all wrestle with the question of colonialism and colonial governance. Arranged into 4 sections, the first set of papers deal with the ideological basis of colonial rule, the second with concrete policy issues in governing the colony, the third with the Chinese in the colonial order, and the fourth with colonial ethnography of the Malay world. Each essay is provided with an introduction highlighting its main themes, as well as useful background references on the author and issue treated. Bookending the essays are a valuable and erudite Introduction and Conclusion by the editors in which they trace the enduring influence of the foundational tropes of “race”, “modernity”, “survival of the fittest”, and “protection of the native race” in these early colonial discourses through to the various nationalist ideologies of a latter-day Malaysia.

To the present-day Malaysian reading public, the best-known of these colonial elites of a century ago may be H.N. Ridley, the so-called “Father of Malaysian Rubber”. Ridley was the Director of the Singapore Botanic Gardens from 1888 to 1912, during which time he was one of the most active and influential members of the Philosophical Society. He is represented in this volume with 4 essays, all heavily impregnated with a Social Darwinistic discourse on race.

In the 1900 paper, “The Doctrine of the Survival of the Fittest as Applied to Man”, Ridley sketched the outlines of an imperial world order in which the “the white races of Europe”, having taken over the temperate zone, were now competing in the colonization of the tropics. Here, the “more adaptable, energetic Saxon race”, having outmatched the earlier Latin races in the game of colonial conquest, were presently facing competition from the Japanese and the Chinese. The theme of racial competition and the fundamental incommensurability and incompatibility between races was further elaborated in his 1907 presidential address to the

Society, in which a broad-brush overview of the history of civilisations leads to the conclusion that “Oriental and Occidental will remain distinct to the end of time”. In keeping with this “scientific” theory of race, Ridley also predicted, in a 1902 paper entitled “The Future of the Malay Race”, that “all evidence seems to show that such a race ... will be absorbed by the more ambitious and energetic one”, in this case, the Chinese.

Here, British elite opinion clearly diverged. To the “scientific” doctrine of the survival of the fittest was elevated the political doctrine of the protection of the Malay race. British Malaya operated under the guise of Malay sovereignty, but British colonial policy dictated the opening of the territory to free trade, free immigration and a free land market. In the first paper in the volume, “Dutch and English Administration in the East”, presented in 1894 shortly after the foundation of the Society, Walter J. Napier, a prominent Singapore lawyer, contrasted the record of Dutch colonialism in Java, which “kept the land out of the grip of the European or Chinese outsider and in the hands of the Javanese” to the situation in British Malaya, where “our object has been to get it occupied by the race most fitted physically and morally to survive”. Invoking the “old question of competition against protection”, Napier argued that “a conquering European power which encouraged racial competition also had the duty to prevent the race in possession of the land of the country from being “ousted”. The 1901 presidential address to the Society by Charles Kynnersley, then Acting Colonial Secretary of the Straits Settlements, raised the clarion call of “Our Duty to the Malays”, noting that it was “not too late to make what amends we can for the shortcomings of the past”. In 1907, James Aitken, another leading Singapore lawyer, in calling for “The Reformation of British Malaya”, began with the indictment that “the great blot on all the progress of the past is that the Malay, the original native of the soil, has not received the consideration and attention which he deserves”.

The policy conundrum of competition vs protection is demonstrated in the papers presented in Sections III and IV on the Chinese and the Malays respectively. While those on the Chinese deal with politics and economics, the Malay papers are concerned with folk psychology and Islam. These early instances of colonial ethnography, mostly by Christian missionaries, have since been surpassed by modern scholarship and are now interesting only for the light they throw on the thinking of their time. The Chinese papers on the other hand, written by the two Straits Chinese members of the Society, Lim Boon Keng and Tan Teck Soon, reveal an astounding depth and breadth of knowledge of the political and economic life of the Chinese society of which they were leading members.

Tan Teck Soon’s 1901 paper on “Chinese Local Trade” in particular, merits special mention. In a penetrating analysis, Tan presents Chinese local trade as a highly integrated system of inter-locking trades forming the basis of the domestic economy. He begins with an ethnographically rich account of the ubiquitous figure of the Chinese petty trader who, in “supplying the natives with the chief necessities of life... form an intermediate link between the distant Malay kampongs and the chief centre of trade.” Far outweighing the importance of this petty intermediary trade however, were the innumerable planting and mining enterprises on which the real wealth of British Malaya was built. Beyond the mere availability of endless streams of cheap immigrant labour, the real key to their success, Tan argues, was a system of “financial advances for capital account, and of exacting payment at a reduction of the actual market price”. In a capital-poor and labour-rich economy, this helped spread risk and reward throughout the entire chain of production and circulation from town trader to coolie labourer, and was typical of the “cooperative and socialistic tendencies so manifest in all Chinese commercial undertakings”. The immense labour force mobilisable for this mode of production

in turn generated an enormous demand for goods and services whose market value far exceeded that of an ordinary Malay kampong. Chinese trade arose primarily to serve Chinese trade, in a self-generating feedback loop which accounted for its collective competitive strength.

Writing in 1910 some ten years later, as the newly-developing rubber industry was to open a whole new flank of the country's economy to British capital, Lim Boon Keng concludes his review of "The Chinese in British Malaya" by pointing to the growth of "local communities of Chinese descent" with a stake in "the country in which they have so much interest". In the face of increasing economic competition, Lim endorsed the need for "special care and protection" for the Malays but asserted the claim of such local communities of Chinese descent to "equal opportunity with the Europeans to share in the further development of the country".

Not long thereafter, the outbreak of the Great War and its aftermath led to the eventual demise of the Society and the colonial construct of "British Malaya". But the realities created and the narratives forged during this foundational era of phenomenal economic growth set the stage for the debates around development, nationhood and identity in the decades to come. In unearthing this intellectual legacy, these judiciously excavated papers also reveal the value of a well-trained and well-read governing colonial elite keenly aware of the importance of informed policy, and open to criticism and intellectual debate with dissenting opinion. Is it too much to be hoped that the same holds true of their successors, the current national elites of today?