

## Cities in Motion

In the 1920s and 1930s, the port-cities of Southeast Asia were staging grounds for diverse groups of ordinary citizens to experiment with modernity, as a rising Japan and the growth of American capitalism challenged the predominance of European empires after the First World War. Both migrants and locals played a pivotal role in shaping civic culture and the emergence of the modern woman. Moving away from a nationalist reading of the period, Su Lin Lewis explores layers of cross-cultural interaction in various spheres: education, popular culture and the emergence of the modern woman. While the book focuses on Penang, Rangoon and Bangkok – three cities born amidst British expansion in the region – it explores connected experiences across Asia and in Asian intellectual enclaves in Europe. Cosmopolitan sensibilities were severely tested in the era of post-colonial nationalism, but are undergoing a resurgence in Southeast Asia’s civil society and creative class today.

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# Cities in Motion

*Urban Life and Cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia, 1920–1940*

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Su Lin Lewis

University of Bristol



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For Ken and Wendy



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## Introduction: Seeing through the City

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In 1922, the Edinburgh Geographic Institute published a new edition of the *Times Atlas of the World*.<sup>1</sup> Vivid colours portrayed old empires, new empires, and burgeoning nation-states in the wake of the First World War. The political map of Asia featured a blush of British imperial red crossing Afghanistan, India, and Malaya. Purple enveloped Korea as part of the Japanese empire. A lemon-yellow China occupied its centre, connected in colour to an independent Siam, which sat nestled between British Burma and French Indochina. A distinctive new Turkey jutted towards the map's top left corner, while Java, the last stronghold of the Dutch maritime empire, dipped below its frame. On closer inspection of the bottom half of the map, where the sea appears in faded blue, one finds a constellation of lines tracking distances, marked in nautical miles, from Aden to Zanzibar and Bombay, from Colombo to Rangoon and Penang, from Singapore to Bangkok and Saigon, from Manila to Hong Kong and Shanghai, and from Yokohama to Vancouver and San Francisco. Snaking black rail lines linked ports to hinterlands, and cities to each other across porous borders. The plotting of these routes signalled an inter-connected web of mobility and exchange, linking Asia's busiest ports.

These lines depict a world in motion, in which port-cities were nodes of commerce, communication, and power. Old European empires had invested in them, making them prizes that a rising new Japanese empire sought to claim. By the 1920s, they were dynamic environments in which Asians could re-imagine the world. The drawing of new borders as well as the speed of travel and communication inaugurated radical mental shifts. Port-cities were hotbeds for religious reformers, aspiring political leaders, new literati, and a rising middle class. News of the Philippine Revolution of 1898, the Chinese Revolution of 1911, and the Russian Revolution of 1917 inspired Asian nationalists and socialists to join forces against European colonial rule. The Khilafat movement of 1920 led Muslims to see themselves as part of transnational Islamic *umma*, as Malay,

<sup>1</sup> This map is available at [www.cambridge.org/Cities\\_in\\_Motion](http://www.cambridge.org/Cities_in_Motion)

Sumatran, and Javanese students formed new regional communities in Cairo. Martial ideas of race in Europe and the colonial world existed alongside calls for world brotherhood. Asian anarchists and communists saw the city as a site of economic disparity, while Asian capitalists saw opportunity and social mobility. Women, for the first time, joined international movements and seized new educational and professional opportunities, while the modern girl emerged as a global phenomenon in fashion, advertising, and film.<sup>2</sup> Gramophone companies, jazz musicians, cinema magnates, and entertainers moved through Asia, introducing technologies, sounds, and images shared at a global level.

While movement, migration, and bustling cities characterize this period, the story of twentieth-century Asia has been dominated by the rise of the nation-state. Upon inheriting the state from departing colonial powers, Asia's post-colonial political leaders wove narratives of the greatness of past civilisations, while elevating the importance of race, religion, and language as fundamental social bonds. School textbooks focus on revolutionary wars and key nationalist elites. Scholarly accounts of the period, born largely out of regional studies departments created during the Cold War, dwelled on the emergence of distinct ethnic and religious identities. Recently, historians have begun to focus on gender and notions of 'popular' nationalism; while illuminating, these continue to be confined within particular country histories. This book widens the lens, adopting three inter-connected cities rather than the nation as a frame of reference. It focuses on the urban sphere as an environment that was simultaneously modern and multi-ethnic. Rather than privilege any one ethnic community or nation-state, I locate the emergence of a nascent and cosmopolitan civil society in Asia in its multi-ethnic port-cities.

Four themes run through this book: global and regional connection, the city as a cosmopolitan site, the rise of a self-consciously progressive middle class, and the cultivation and prominence of youth in modern civic life. The port-city was a site of encounters and tensions between the local and the global, between various ethnicities and religions, between authoritarian rulers and a critical public, and between the young and the old. Colonial-era port-cities were fraught with racial hierarchies and economic inequality, yet they were also incubators of modern sensibilities open to new ideas of political and social change, from democratic government to women's rights. These cosmopolitan histories have been buried

<sup>2</sup> Louise Edwards and Mina Roces, 'Introduction: Orienting the Global Women's Suffrage Movement', in *Women's Suffrage in Asia: Gender, Nationalism and Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2004): 1–23; Alys Eve Modern Girl Around the World Research Group et al., *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

in acts of post-colonial forgetting and the creation of ethno-centred national narratives; yet they nonetheless left substantial legacies for cultural pluralism and activism still present in these cities today.

### A World of Connections

While sociologists see ‘global cities’ as a phenomenon of the late twentieth century, associated with accelerated flows of capital, information, and migrant labour accompanying global integration, historians have traced these processes much further back in time. Port-cities and market-oriented city-states, antecedents to today’s global cities, knitted together the world’s regions and acted as key nodes within social and commercial networks. The cosmopolitan trading ports of maritime Asia have deep roots, and are part of the history of globalisation. The area known to Chinese merchants as the ‘Southern Ocean’, the *Nanyang*, and to Indian, Malay, and Arab merchants as the ‘land below the winds’ has acted as a gateway for Asian and global commerce for over a millennium.<sup>3</sup> From spices and copper in the early modern age to rice, teak, and tin in the colonial era, the region’s wealth of natural resources and long coastlines have long provided a stimulus for maritime trade. Historians often compare Southeast Asia to the Mediterranean – an interconnected zone of commerce, unified by the sea.<sup>4</sup> Some argue that it is Southeast Asia’s long-standing involvement in trade and receptivity to the outside world that has enabled many ordinary Southeast Asians to develop ‘modern’ sensibilities, open to the cultural appropriation of new trends.<sup>5</sup>

In his seminal two-volume work, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, Anthony Reid points to the vibrant, adaptable trading cultures of early modern Southeast Asia to highlight its central role in a world linked through maritime trade. This world suffered a contraction in the seventeenth century and was further disrupted by the entry of European trading powers, backed by weapons and gunships. Local rulers’ loss of control over trade in the eighteenth and nineteenth century resulted, according to

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce: The Lands Below the Winds, 1450–1680* (New Haven: Yale, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Georges Coedès, *Les États Hindouïsés D’Indochine Et Indonésie*, Paris: E. de Boccard, 1948; Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450–1680 Vol. 2: Expansion and Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Francois Gipouloux, *The Asian Mediterranean: Port-Cities and Trading Networks in China, Japan and Southeast Asia, 13th–21st Century* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2011). For a critique of this approach see Heather Sutherland, ‘Southeast Asian History and the Mediterranean Analogy’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 34:1 (2003).

<sup>5</sup> O.W. Wolters, ‘Southeast Asia as a Southeast Asian Field of Study’, *Indonesia* 58 (1994): 1–17. Barbara Watson Andaya, ‘Historicising “Modernity” in Southeast Asia’, *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient* 40:4 (1997).

Reid, in the demise of cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia's port-cities and a shift of direction that was not to be reversed until nationalists were able to wrest control of the state in the revolutionary and post-colonial era of the 1940s and 1950s. Yet during the colonial era, regional and global connections, urbanism, and cosmopolitanism were revived and transformed. Empires linked vast swathes of territory, and produced accelerated amounts of traffic in various forms. The late nineteenth century was a watershed for new connections to emerge, following the opening of the Suez Canal, when the flow of capital, goods, and ideas in, through, and out of Asia grew exponentially. This was a turbulent age, in which Southeast Asian port-cities, some of the most ethnically diverse urban centres in the world, experienced unprecedented levels of economic and demographic growth. Urban geographers attribute the spectacular levels of growth in these cities to their status as 'nerve centres for colonial exploitation' and gateway cities that channelled primary commodities – rice, tin, rubber, and sugar – from their hinterlands into the global economy.<sup>6</sup> European commercial firms grew rich on these resources, and adopted ideas of 'white prestige' and racial superiority to justify their right to rule.

While port-cities were, indeed, vectors for the exploitation of raw materials, they also produced dynamic societies transformed by demographic growth, migration, and investment. By looking through the lens of multiple port-cities, we see how global networks and channels of influence ran through the region simultaneously. Innovations in sanitation, public transportation, and municipal governance changed the shape of modern urban life. Sojourning migrants began to put down roots, building families in expanding cities. The growing ease of travel and the acceleration of communications served as a channel for ideas and the emergence of a small professional, intellectual, and creative class.<sup>7</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s, young men and women flocked to cities for education and social mobility. Port-cities were entry-points for books, newspapers, films, and other sources of information. Tracts espousing communist revolution, pan-Asianism, and religious reform circulated through underground networks and via the speeches of travelling pundits in public halls and city streets. Reuters wires and discerning Asian newspaper proprietors and editors channelled news of social and political movements occurring elsewhere in the world. Film magnates brought cinema from Hollywood, Bombay,

<sup>6</sup> T. McGee, *The Southeast Asian City* (New York: Praeger, 1967); Gregg Huff, 'Export-Led Growth, Gateway Cities and Urban Systems Development in Pre-World War II Southeast Asia', *Journal of Development Studies* 48:10 (2012): 1431–52.

<sup>7</sup> On the 'creative class', see Richard Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class* (London: Routledge, 2005).



Hong Kong, and Shanghai to Asian audiences, while jazz, Tamil and Hindi drama music, and Chinese opera circulated through the radio and the recordings of the Gramophone Company, inspiring Asian artists to create new forms of popular culture that combined both local and global influences.

Competing models of modern life emerged from all over the world to challenge existing structures of power within colonial society, ridden with ossified racial hierarchies. Western influences contested each other, with the popular ascendancy of what Henry Luce called 'the American century' providing a new model of the West for Asian audiences. Democratic ideals and the mass consumer culture of the jazz-age side lined the image of colonial empires, weakened, and weathered after the First World War.<sup>8</sup> News of the proceedings in Paris in 1919 was transmitted over news wires to cities all over the world, with the Wilsonian ideal of self-determination and the League of Nations providing the promise of an international fellowship of free states.<sup>9</sup> While ideas of internationalism continued to resonate, visions of pan-Asianism and socialist brotherhood emerged as the League's promises proved futile to the colonial world, generating a new sense of imaginary, non-imperial futures.<sup>10</sup> Moscow offered the promise of a truly international brotherhood, while Ireland's fight for independence provided a blueprint for colonial states under British rule. Meanwhile, industrialising Japan, revolutionary China, Russia, India, Turkey, and Egypt provided non-Western models of independent, modern, and politically dynamic societies. These events, reported in local newspapers, made an impact not only the mentalities of emerging political elites, but everyday urbanites – from doctors, journalists, and teachers to aspiring musicians, cinema-goers, schoolchildren, and modern girls. They provided a new framework for comparison to that of metropole and colony, creating fresh vocabularies for Asians to challenge the colonial order and view their place on an international stage. Outside influences and ideas came from all over the world, and were turned over, debated, appropriated, hybridised, and made relevant to local audiences.

New rail and communications links enabled states to exert control over the hinterland and centralise their administrations, but they also forged connections to the world and to the rest of the region. A regional rail

<sup>8</sup> For an excellent account of America's influence in the region during the interwar period, see Anne L. Forster, *Projections of Power: The United States and Europe in Colonial Southeast Asia, 1919–1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> See Manu Goswami, 'Imaginary Futures and Colonial Internationalisms', *American Historical Review* (2012): 1461–85.

network connected Bangkok, Penang, and Singapore, facilitating inter-city travel and accelerating Siam's engagement with Europe and the Indian Ocean world. Independent learned societies in the region, formed of both Asian and Western intellectuals, wrote to each other and exchanged publications, and were the first to generate the term 'South-east Asia'. Clubs and associations generated new regional networks as well as publications calling for colonialism's demise and new visions of multi-ethnic citizenship. Intensified connections produced new modes of belonging not simply to empires and ethnicities, but to cities, to civic cultures, to multi-ethnic nations, to new regional and transnational communities, and to a world becoming increasingly, perceptibly smaller.

The Depression highlighted how closely Southeast Asian societies were integrated into the global economy. As Wall Street collapsed at the end of the twenties, Americans stopped producing automobiles and global sources of credit dried up. By the 1930s, Southeast Asian economies suffered from an oversupply of rubber and sugar, while the rice frontiers of the Mekong, Irrawaddy, and Chao Praya river deltas came to a close.<sup>11</sup> Indian Chettiar migrants, having lost access to sources of outside credit, were forced to foreclose on loans to Burmese agricultural workers, halting the flow of capital that had helped open up the delta and breeding seething discontent in the countryside. Many urbanites were able to make do as commodity prices fell, yet the Depression also tested race relations. Colonial authorities and commercial industries divided workers along ethnic lines during periods of social unrest and imposed new immigration restrictions, and unemployed native workers lashed out at new, migrant communities who worked for lower wages. Long-standing, affluent migrants, such as the Chinese, were forced to seek new sources of revenue as tax-farms on opium and gambling were shut down. It was a difficult time for Southeast Asian economies, but it was also one in which government intervention and investment into industry grew – due in large part to the Asian commercial class – and urban economies remained relatively robust. In spite of the economic and racial tensions exacerbated by the Depression, particularly in the countryside, Asian urbanites continued to look outwards as well as in, forming connections and seeking new sources of social change.

### **The Cosmopolitan City**

Cosmopolitanism is an elusive but exceedingly popular term among scholars, one that resonates with the consciousness of living within an

<sup>11</sup> Peter Boomgaard and Ian Brown, *Weathering the Storm: The Economies of Southeast Asia in the 1930s Depression* (Leiden: KITLV, 2000), p. 2.

increasingly integrated world. Around the turn of this millennium, scholars of international law and ethical philosophy reclaimed Kant's Enlightenment vision of a global fellowship of nations, or a 'global civil society', as a cosmopolitan ideal. Literary critics, sociologists, and anthropologists employ cosmopolitanism as an analytical category which destabilises rigid cultural identities within a globalised world, punctured by the movements of exiles, migrants, and travellers.<sup>12</sup> In the words of historical geographer Caroline Cartier, cosmopolitanism is a useful, 'humanist counterpart to globalization.'<sup>13</sup> Discerning scholars have made a distinction between cosmopolitanism as an abstract moral ideal and cosmopolitan practices, or 'actually existing cosmopolitanism'.<sup>14</sup> The notion of cosmopolitanism as a practice, and more specifically a process, is adopted in this book. A number of historians have latched onto cosmopolitanism as a mode of describing 'ways of being' in the world that move away from the stark, anachronistic boundaries of nations to examine cross-border flows, hybrid identities, and modes of affiliation that cross-cut communal divides.<sup>15</sup>

The port-city, in particular, is an appropriate site to ground cosmopolitanism, given its status as a node within global commercial, migratory, and intellectual flows, and its ability to attract inhabitants of diverse backgrounds. Alexandria, Tangiers, and other port-cities of the Mediterranean have long been seen as cosmopolitan arenas, where people adapted and adopted cultural forms from other confessional groups.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See for example Carol A. Breckenridge et al. (eds.), *Cosmopolitanism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Stephen Vertovec and Robin Cohen (eds.), *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Bruce Robbins and Pheng Cheah, *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Carolyn Cartier, 'Cosmopolitics and the Maritime World City', *Geographical Review* 89:2 (1999): 279.

<sup>14</sup> See Craig J. Calhoun, 'The Class Consciousness of Frequent Travellers: Towards a Critique of Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism', *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101:4 (2002); Magdalena Nowicka and Maria Rovisco, *Cosmopolitanism in Practice* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> See Glenda Sluga and Julia Horne, 'Cosmopolitanism: Its Pasts and Practices' and other articles in *Journal of World History* 21:3 (2010); Sheldon Pollock, *Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit Culture and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Shuang Sheng, *Cosmopolitan Publics: Anglophone Print Culture in Semi-Colonial Shanghai* (New Jersey: Rutgers, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Kenneth McPherson, 'Port Cities as Nodal Points of Change', *Modernity and Culture: From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 83; Dieter Haller, 'The Cosmopolitan Mediterranean: Myth and Reality', *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 129:1 (2004): 29–47; Henk Driessen, 'Mediterranean Port Cities: Cosmopolitanism Reconsidered', *History and Anthropology*, 16:1 (2005), 129–41; Will Hanley, 'Grieving Cosmopolitanism in Middle Eastern Studies', *History Compass* 6:5 (2008): 1346–67.

At the eastern end of the Indian Ocean littoral, Southeast Asia's port-cities have been just as diverse, though the extent to which their inhabitants interacted and emulated each other is still up for debate.<sup>17</sup> Penang, Rangoon, and Bangkok – though late eighteenth-century creations – emerged within a historical lineage of Southeast Asian port-cities exposed to high degrees of cross-cultural interaction and long-distance trade. A walk through their waterfront landscapes, markets, and built environments is a visible testament to long-standing communities of multiple faiths. Chinese, Indians, Armenians, Baghdadi Jews, Hadrami Arabs, and other regional trading communities from the Mons of Burma to Javanese and Bugis traders constituted a powerful presence throughout these cities. Western observers tended to describe Asian port-cities as 'mosaics' and 'kaleidoscopes', as 'colourful' but also fragmented spaces. The influential colonial scholar J.S. Furnivall argued that these distinct communities were 'plural societies' that were self-segregating, engaging with each other only in the realm of commerce. Historical geographers have continued to turn to Furnivall to describe colonial port-cities like Singapore, where diverse communities lived essentially separate lives, interacting only in the marketplace. The spatial geography of colonial cities such as Singapore as well as Rangoon, with its European cantonment areas, is a testament to this, as are distinct ethnic enclaves of native, Chinese, and Indian communities.

In Southeast Asia, colonial-era port-cities were *visibly* cosmopolitan in that they accommodated a host of diverse ethnic and religious groups, but they were also sites of racial tension and conflict. Europeans created stark racial hierarchies, spatial divisions, and, within colonial settings, erected seemingly insurmountable barriers to positions of power. Migrant communities were seen to occupy privileged economic positions, and were sometimes viewed as isolated communities who kept to their own kinship groups. But from street markets and festivals to buildings and infrastructure, these cities were built on migrant labour and economic activity derived from trade. Most migrants were not at the top of the social ladder, but often worked in the lowest-paid and most demanding jobs that locals refused to take – as street-sweepers, rickshaw runners, petty traders, and dockworkers. At times of economic crisis, as in 1930s Rangoon after the Depression, racial tensions erupted into conflict when many Burmese were traders and artisans were forced to compete with menial Indian (and particularly Indian Muslim) labour.

The particular context of colonial modernity, while creating social divisions, also produced new kinds of affiliation. Some of these were

<sup>17</sup> McPherson, 'Port Cities as Nodal Points of Change', p. 83.

'national' in character, reaching out to a wider ethno-linguistic community to restore a sense of cultural pride. Many of the promoters of nationalism were themselves cosmopolitans – they went to multi-ethnic schools and universities within towns and cities, they studied foreign languages and ideas, and they drew on various models of political change from elsewhere. But cultural nationalism was one mode of affiliation among many new kinds of identities emerging within the context of the cosmopolitan city. Popular theatre, entertainment parks, and street parades created a spectacle of a hybrid, multi-ethnic social landscape. What Sumit Mandal calls 'trans-ethnic solidarities' also emerged among the urban poor in colonial settings; oral history interviews point to evidence that in 1930s Penang, low-income communities relied heavily on their neighbours as a social safety net regardless of race; even among the racial conflicts of 1930s Burma, intellectuals accused the colonial government of inciting divisions between communities, advocating workers' solidarity.<sup>18</sup>

Nowhere was cross-cultural interaction more apparent than among an aspiring, urban middle class. In colonial cities, the 'Colour Bar' limited Asians from attaining high positions in the colonial civil service, but experiences of exclusion also served to unite Asian professionals. The 1920s and 1930s were a period of political and social change: a small number of Asians began to enter the ranks as magistrates, legislators, parliamentarians, lecturers, and higher-level civil servants. Some Europeans stepped out of, or avoided, the walls of the colonial clubhouse to fraternise with Asians in underground associations and other semi-private venues. Furnivall himself was a member of a learned society which accommodated European, Burmese, as well as Chinese members. While some migrants did remain in their own self-enclosed communities, others participated in civic life with local counterparts. Alongside communal and religious associations, traditionally seen as the hotbeds for ethnic nationalism, emerged non-political organisations of minority communities, as well as a host of multi-ethnic secret societies, labour unions, women's groups, philanthropic and professional associations, sports teams, and literary societies. These associations testify to the emergence of a 'civic' rather than an 'ethnic nationalism' within cities, one which cross-cut ethnic lines.

<sup>18</sup> Sumit Mandal, 'Transethnic Solidarities, Racialization and Social Equality' in Edmund Terence Gomez, *The State of Malaysia: Ethnicity, Equity, and Reform* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004), pp. 49–78; Harold de Castro, oral history interview conducted by Michelle Low, 2 September 2005, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Disc 1; Than Tun, 'Race Riots in Burma', *Workers' International News*, September 1938.

The vernacular press was a harbinger of nationalism rooted in linguistic solidarity, as Benedict Anderson has argued, yet Asian port-cities also witnessed the emergence of presses in various languages, and thus multiple 'imagined communities' existing in the same civic space.<sup>19</sup> In cities like Penang, Singapore, Rangoon, Bangkok, and Manila, which witnessed a host of newspapers emerging in a number of Asian languages, a new kind of English press emerged, which in many cases challenged English-language papers written by and for European elites. These new newspapers were financed and staffed by a diverse group of multilingual Asians and covered multiple dimensions of urban life, while critiquing the policies of the colonial and, in Bangkok's case, absolute state. Mission schools, schools started by long-established migrant communities, private experiments in bilingual education, and universities at home and abroad brought different communities together to learn in pluralist educational environments. These served as platforms for Asian urbanites to challenge rigid hierarchies, assert new and often hybrid visions of cultural identity, and interact among diverse ethnic groups.

For many urban-dwellers at this time, personal experiences of migration, sociability, exposure to books and ideas, new educational environments, popular culture, and trade and consumption entailed encounters with foreign ideas and ways of life, and instilled a sense of an awareness of the wider world, one that occurred simultaneously with a search for cultural authenticity. Apart from cross-cultural interaction, cosmopolitanism also entailed a process of becoming self-consciously 'modern'. What Frederick Cooper calls the 'politics of engagement' within colonial situations often required, on the part of Asian actors, mentalities that were cosmopolitan, reflecting a willingness to take on new ideas and employ them to make political claims.

In this book, the city provides the arena for examining different layers of cross-cultural interaction, challenging historical narratives of the period that focus on communal division. Here, cosmopolitanism is not an abstract ideal, nor a condition of migration or exile, but a *process* of negotiation between diverse communities participating in a dynamic and shared public sphere. I look at three different aspects of cosmopolitanism: the interactions between various ethnic groups within the domain of the city; the appropriation, integration, and hybridisation of various cultural influences to produce new visions of modernity; and a commitment to social improvement that often cross-cut communal lines. As a site populated by migrants, continually exposed to new ideas

<sup>19</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

and influences, and where various races and classes had to learn to live together, the city provided the venue for all three strands of cosmopolitanism to feed off each other. Cosmopolitanism entailed a sense of 'double consciousness' of both global processes and local pluralism, as well as a commitment to social change. This commitment could take the form of broad-based nationalism, civic participation, philanthropy, social reform, or participation in spheres of debate and in the production of hybrid cultural forms. To enclose the politics of the colonial era within the singular category of anti-colonial or ethnic nationalism is to miss the other kinds of everyday politics that emerged in these plural societies. The inclusion of non-colonial Bangkok in this study and engagement with the historiography of 'popular' nationalism in early twentieth-century Siam allow us to see connections we may miss when we focus solely on anti-colonial politics, or when we forget the importance of the urban environment.

The process of cosmopolitanism that emerged in Southeast Asia's colonial-era port-cities was profoundly local, rooted in cities where diverse ethnic and religious groups lived in close proximity, and where an emerging group of civic leaders, professionals, artists, literati, and students worked with and inspired each other to make cultural and political claims in the interests of a broader society. The patterns of exchange that emerged between the trading communities of an earlier, pre-colonial age persisted tenaciously in the age of colonialism, communalism, and narrow nationalism. In the city, civic communities were not imagined, but *built* through the intimate, face-to-face interactions of individuals able to look to shared notions of community, despite racial and religious differences.

### History from the Middle

Popular portrayals of the contemporary Asian middle class depict a picture of Asian consumers, attached to cell phones, frequenting shopping malls, and eating at Western fast-food chains.<sup>20</sup> Marketing companies see them as symptomatic of white-collar professionals emerging out of the Southeast Asian economic boom of the 1980s. The middle classes have also been an important source of contemporary social change in the region, bringing down dictators in the Philippines in 1988 and in Indonesia in 1998, and providing the bulwark of civil society as members and patrons of the press, NGOs, and voluntary associations. Yet the

<sup>20</sup> See Richard Robinson and David S. G. Goodman. *The New Rich in Asia: Mobile Phones, McDonalds and Middle-Class Revolution* (London: Routledge, 1996).

Asian middle class is not a new phenomenon, nor is it one modelled on the West, as some historical narratives would have us believe.<sup>21</sup> The origins of the middle class in Southeast Asia lie at least as far back as the early modern era, and particularly to the mobile Asian trading communities who were not bound by hierarchical loyalty to native kings and feudal lords. The autonomous, cosmopolitan maritime kingdoms of the early modern era are often seen in a positive light, yet were largely built on slave labour, feudal obligation, and often discouraged the rise of a native commercial class.<sup>22</sup> This was particularly true in the seventeenth century with the introduction of revenue farming, where predominantly Chinese businesses were given a monopoly on port and market duties, salt, opium, and gambling in return for an advanced sum given to the ruler. In the nineteenth century, both colonial rulers and Siamese kings irrevocably transformed the urban and rural landscape, and depended on trading diasporas to provide small-scale capital and spur commercial growth. Powerful Chinese business communities emerged in Bangkok, Rangoon, Singapore, Saigon, and Manila throughout the nineteenth century. Migrant traders to the region followed the pattern of marrying native women, resulting in the creation of hybrid communities who were influential in shaping a nascent public sphere, as in the case of the Straits-Chinese and Jawi-Peranakan (Tamil Muslim and Malay) communities in Singapore and Penang, who played a critical role in establishing printing presses in Chinese, Malay, and English.

The late colonial era was an age of opportunity for an expanding urban middle class, one composed of local, migrant, and hybrid communities. By the 1920s and 1930s, most Southeast Asian cities saw a marked expansion in education, particularly for women.<sup>23</sup> This resulted in the rise of urban professionals – of teachers, doctors, lawyers, journalists, and civil servants – some of whom were barred from exclusive professional associations and the higher echelons of government service, either due to their race (in colonial Southeast Asia) or their lack of noble blood (in Siam). It was a landmark period for the formation of modern,

<sup>21</sup> A. Ricardo Lopez with Barbara Weinstein, 'Introduction: We Shall Be All: Toward a Transnational History of the Middle Class', in *The Making of the Middle Class: Toward a Transnational History*, eds. Lopez and Weinstein (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> See Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce Volume 2*; Anthony Milner, 'Who Created Malaysia's Plural Society?', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* (2003): 1–24; Ian Brown, *Economic Change in South-East Asia, c. 1830–1980* (Oxford, 1997).

<sup>23</sup> For excellent synopses of the entry of women into the public sphere and public discourse in Bangkok and Rangoon, see Scot Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok: Love, Sex and Popular Culture in Thailand* (Bangkok: Silkworm, 2002) and Chie Ikeya, *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011).



outward-looking, middle-class sensibilities in Asia, with professionals and educated youth participating in new kinds of critical and associational life. In Burma, educated urbanites read Marx and the tracts of Fabian socialism, and helped organise labour movements in the 1930s in the wake of the Depression, arguing on behalf of those without a voice in the public sphere.

The expansion of print and associational culture in this period has often been viewed through the lens of nationalism, in both colonial and non-colonial contexts. In a classic, yet still unpublished PhD dissertation, Matthew Copeland re-examined the 1920s as period of popular (rather than state-driven) nationalism in Thailand, describing processes such as the growth of the press, the critique of authority, and calls for democracy.<sup>24</sup> While 'nationalism' has often served as a useful framing device, the growth of print culture in Siam and elsewhere in Southeast Asia can more broadly be attributed to processes of increased urbanisation, rising educational levels, and the desire for political participation by an emerging and socially engaged middle class. In the colonial context, 'nationalism' has often been seen as an anti-colonial reaction among a group of radical intellectuals, often resulting in the emergence of new racial identities. William Roff situates the growth of the Malay press and the rise of an 'autochthonous intelligentsia' within the rubric of nationalism, while Anthony Milner examines the rise of race-based nationalism in Malaya, particularly around the use of the Malay term *bangsa*. Members of the *thakin* movement in Burma often employed the language of race in pursuit of nationalist aims, excluding politically active students from migrant backgrounds. Ethnic and religious nationalisms were among many offshoots of a broad-based process of imagining modern notions of self and community, one that came from educational opportunities and new professional and political expectations. A number of important intellectuals, activists, and others emerged within the pluralist, multi-lingual context of Penang, Singapore, Bangkok, and Rangoon, and consciously moved away from race-based nationalism to argue for broad-based social change and pluralist visions of the nation.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> See Matthew Copeland, 'Contested Nationalism and the 1932 Overthrow of the Absolute Monarchy in Siam' (unpublished PhD dissertation, Australian National University, History, 1993) and Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*.

<sup>25</sup> Singapore is not included in this study, but excellent work has already been done on the city and its Anglophone intellectuals by Mark Frost, 'Emporium in Imperio: Nanyang Networks and the Straits-Chinese in Singapore, 1819–1914', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36:1 (2005) and Mark Ravinder Frost and Yu-Mei Balasingamchow, *Singapore: A Biography* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009); as well as Chua Ai Lin, 'Imperial Subjects, Straits Citizens: Anglophone Asians and the Struggle for Political Rights in Inter-War Singapore's in *Paths Not Taken: Political Pluralism in Post-War Singapore*, ed. Michael D. Barr and Carl A. Trocki (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008).

By the early twentieth century, it was becoming increasingly common for both long-established migrant communities as well as affluent and urban Malay and Burmese communities and professionals to send their children to Western and bilingual schools. Members of this aspiring middle class have often been portrayed as a homogenous group of ‘Western-educated’ professionals, officials, intellectuals, and merchants, shaped largely by Western values emanating from the colonial metropolis.<sup>26</sup> Yet, particularly in Asia’s cosmopolitan cities, this class was ethnically diverse and often multi-lingual, moving in and out of various social worlds and networks. European languages – particularly English – solidified imperial linkages while also providing a means of questioning these ties in the languages of the coloniser, employing ideals of citizenship, freedom, and self-determination. More importantly for the purposes of this book, English (and in some cases, French, Spanish, and to a lesser degree, Dutch) also served as link languages between educated Asians of diverse backgrounds within the city, the region, and the wider world.<sup>27</sup> While Siam’s aristocracy had taken to Western education since the late nineteenth century, by the 1920s and 1930s, a growing group of middle-class professionals in Bangkok learned English, French, and German in order to work alongside Europeans in Siam’s civil service and expand their professional clientele, and also so that they could read and learn about the world. In colonial settings, these local bilingual literati translated books as well as foreign news for the vernacular press, providing ‘models’ of nation-ness, as Anderson has argued, as well as other models of modernity, including international feminism. Local bilingual Asians – rooted cosmopolitans – were transmitters of new ideas from, as well as *to*, the world outside the port-city.

In Bangkok, Singapore, Penang, Rangoon, and Manila, English newspapers and journals were produced and funded by Asians to reach a wide audience. They were vehicles by which Asians moved beyond discussions of ethnicity to speak to each other in a period when English grew in importance as a powerful global, and regional, lingua franca. Readership of such newspapers was limited to a few thousand at most. Yet their readers were influential figures within emerging, cosmopolitan publics, providing critical voices and forming new networks to push for political change. They suggest that print-capitalism not only invented a sense of nationalism, as Anderson has suggested, but also overlapping

<sup>26</sup> Takashi Shiraishi, ‘Introduction: The Rise of Middle Classes in Southeast Asia’, in *The Rise of Middle Classes in Southeast Asia*, eds. Takashi Shiraishi and Pasuk Phongpaichit (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2008).

<sup>27</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 5.

notions of community within cities and across borders. The use of English by Asians as a sign of modernity and worldliness did, nonetheless, spark class divisions within cities and between cities that emerged particularly in the post-colonial period of nation-building and continue today. Yet among a burgeoning civil society in the region, English also served to connect diverse communities and contributed to ideas of broad-based social justice, while also giving Asians an outlet to challenge the tenets of colonial rule and, as in the case of Siam, renegotiate unequal extraterritorial treaties on a diplomatic stage.

Anderson has argued that around 1900, 'young educated people in Batavia (Jakarta) knew more about Amsterdam than they did about a Cambodia with which their ultimate ancestors had close ties, while their cousins in Manila knew more about Madrid and New York than about the Vietnamese littoral a short step across the South China Sea'.<sup>28</sup> Yet increasingly by the 1930s, new venues were emerging where Asians from all over the region met each other in professional associations and learned societies, in higher education establishments in London and Paris as well as Hong Kong and Manila, and even in the multi-ethnic sports teams that often travelled throughout the region. International civic associations, from the YWCA to Rotary, often (but not always) used English as a medium of communication, and provided ways in which Asians could connect across ethnic lines and belong to a global civil society. Modern associational forms, circulating through cities, inspired early nationalist organisations like the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) of Burma, founded on the model of the YMCA (as was the case with the YMBA in Colombo and San Francisco and the Young Men's Muslim Association in Cairo). The roots of civil society in Southeast Asia, as in much of the world, lie in the global circulation of new associational models and organisations, from Asian commercial guilds, Asian and Western secret societies, new international civic associations, early trade unions, and women's leagues. Within these arenas, a socially conscious sector of the middle class emerged as active participants in a vibrant civic life, leaving important legacies that would help shape post-colonial and contemporary civil society.

This book is thus a history from the middle. It is, largely, a social history of an aspirational multi-ethnic group of urban professionals and their children who moved and thrived within the context of the colonial-era port-city. While it makes use of a number of official archives, it also seeks to recover the forgotten voices and conversations that do not fit

<sup>28</sup> Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1998).

comfortably within the dialectic of colonialism and anti-colonial nationalism. It includes interactions and friendships between indigenous and migrant groups, and features ardent internationalists and self-consciously cosmopolitan modern girls. These voices are found within the readers' pages of newspapers, editorials, memoirs, student magazines, and oral histories, as well as interviews with those that experienced the cosmopolitan city as children.

But rather than view the middle class as an isolated social phenomenon, this book demonstrates a degree of porousness between the worlds of the middle and working class within the city.<sup>29</sup> A sector of the middle class engaged with issues affecting the working class through civic activism and philanthropy, while broad-based interactions occurred on public transport and in cinemas, music halls, and entertainment parks. Due to the persistent inequalities of the archive, we have more material about what middle-class cosmopolitans thought and felt than we do of the working class in these cities.<sup>30</sup> But their stories nonetheless tell us something about what it meant to live within a particular dynamic time, when questions of national identity were very much in flux. They tell us something about the ways in which identities are composite and multi-layered, forged through relations with others and looking outwards to the wider world.

### Cities of the Young

'Youth' has a particular, revolutionary salience in nationalist narratives and Southeast Asian histories. The late colonial era is often told through the stories of then young, usually male nationalist heroes, from burgeoning political leaders such as Sukarno and *pemuda* revolutionaries in Indonesia to Aung San and the *thakins* in Burma who revolted against colonial regimes. This book examines the emergence of a much broader and diverse spectrum of 'the young' within a world shaped by the actions of their parents' generation. I argue that it was the first generation of what

<sup>29</sup> On experiences of colonialism modernity among the working class, see Takashi Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion: Popular Radicalism in Java, 1912–1926* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); James Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore 1880–1940* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003); James Warren, *Ah Ku and Karayuki-san: Prostitution in Singapore, 1870–1940* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003).

<sup>30</sup> On working-class cosmopolitanism, see Abidin Kusno, 'From City to City: Tan Malaka, Shanghai and the Politics of Geographical Imagining', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 24:3 (2003): 327–39; Tim Harper, 'Singapore, 1915, and the Birth of an Asian Underground', *Modern Asian Studies* 47.6 (2013): 1782–811; Contemporary examples include Joel Kahn, *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2006).

Anderson calls 'creole functionaries', the handful of those that schooled in colonial metropolises in the decades around 1900, who helped build the educational world of cosmopolitan youth in the 1920s and 1930s, by shaping colonial educational policy and funding innovative, often bilingual schools that combined a respect for Asian religions and customs with Western-style education. Due to the increased investment placed in education at this time, a much broader group of children had access to educational opportunities than the handful of students initially sent abroad.

School networks and university experiences abroad created new kinds of solidarities among students, who often rebelled against structures of authority. Alliances were formed in mission schools and the playgrounds of the Penang Free School, where children defied their European teachers by speaking in hybrid slang. A privileged few were given scholarships to attend universities in London, Paris, Madrid, Amsterdam, and Cairo. These metropolitan experiences did not simply inculcate colonial students in Western thought; rather, they also provided opportunities to know, meet, and socialise with other Asian students. Paris was a hotbed for young, cosmopolitan Asian revolutionaries from Indochina, China, and Siam who gathered in the hostels of the West Bank. London and Oxbridge, similarly, provided a venue for Indian, Burmese, Straits-Chinese, and Malay students to meet each other, to debate and critique Western policies, and to plug into international socialist networks that promised racial and economic equality for all. Cairo attracted Muslim students from around the world. Asian port-cities were also becoming important educational nodes at this time, drawing students not only from the hinterland but also from around the region. Penang was a regional hub for English, Islamic, and Chinese secondary education, while Hong Kong, Manila, and Rangoon boasted excellent new universities. Teacher-training schools, nursing hospitals, and vocational schools provided an expanding class of youth, and particularly women, with new opportunities to build a professional life.

Schools drew students from all over the region, taking them out of the home and exposing them to the urban environment. In turn, they reshaped the city on their own terms. In cinemas, dance halls, and city streets, a generation of young men and women embraced trends in popular culture from Hollywood, Shanghai, and Bombay, while refashioning their own forms of music, dance, and theatre. The city was the locus of modernity, a place where Asians came to feel, and become, modern. Residential schools and universities provided an opportunity to escape familial networks and engage in new friendships and affiliations outside of their immediate kinship group. Away from the watchful eyes of their parents

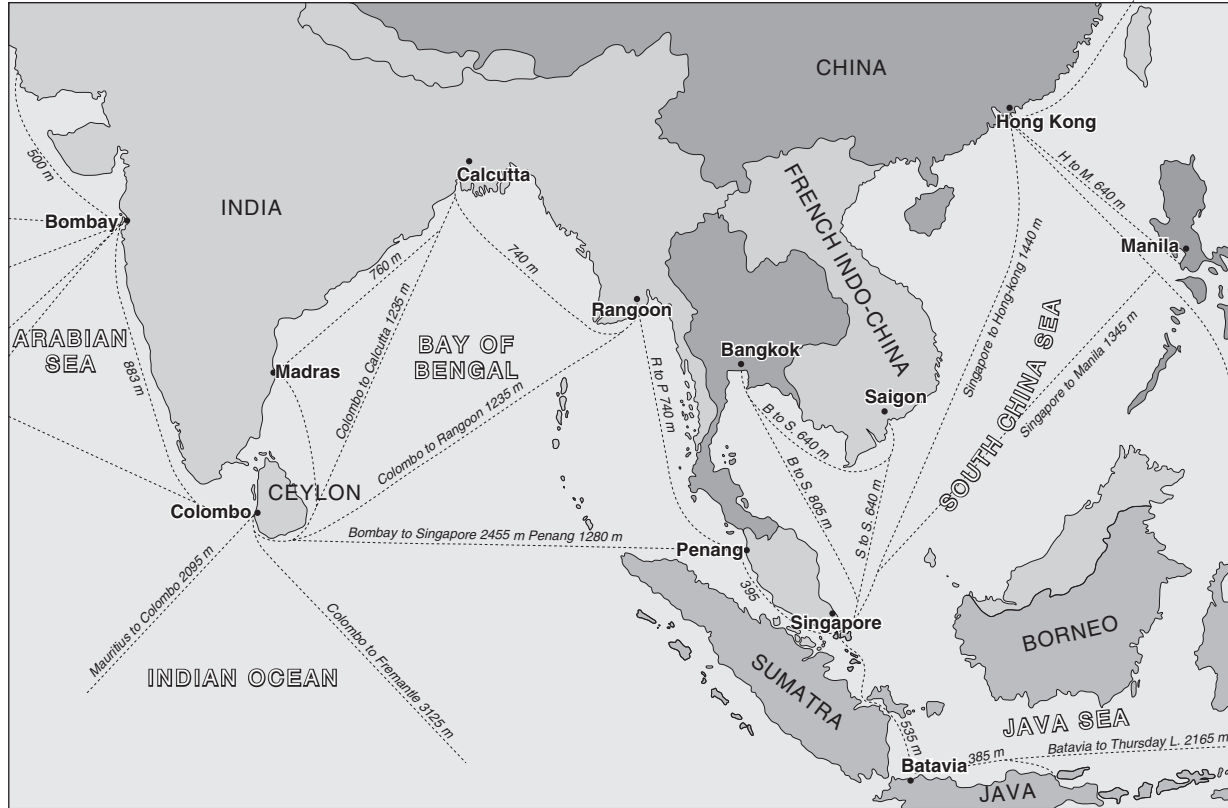
and families, young men and women indulged in new romantic and sexual relationships in the city and in the clandestine halls of student dormitories.

Perhaps the most cosmopolitan figure of the era was Asia's modern girl, who observed the slim, shapely cuts of the age in magazines and cinema, and transformed traditional elements of Asian fashion to suit the times. She was by no means a homogenous figure, but a shape-shifter, who emerged simultaneously in various Asian cities adopting her own sense of style. She conversed with and often married whomever she pleased. She was a popular figure of debate among both Asian men and women that wrote in the pages of the local press. She was a constant target of attack by male nationalists, who accused her of being too Western, too liberal, and too independent, even when she participated in student politics and heated intellectual debates. While the young male nationalists of the 1920s and 1930s may have encapsulated the freedom of the nation, the modern girl symbolised the freedom of the city to reshape oneself, one's culture, and one's community in new ways.

### A Web of Three Cities

While examining the connections and comparisons between a number of cities across maritime Asia, this book largely focuses on three sites: Rangoon, Penang, and Bangkok. These three cities were closely connected to one another geographically. By the turn of the twentieth century, they were well placed on the steamship routes that connected Europe, India, China, and America after the opening of the Suez Canal, yet have garnered little attention within the Asian network of colonial-era port-cities in comparison to Batavia, Singapore, and particularly Shanghai, which has generated its own sub-field of modern Chinese and urban history.<sup>31</sup> Singapore would have been an obvious choice for such a study, and

<sup>31</sup> See Leonard Blussé, *Visible Cities: Canton, Nagasaki, and Batavia and the Coming of the Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); Jean Gelman Taylor, *The Social World of Batavia: European and Eurasian in Dutch Asia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983); Chua Ai Lin, 'Modernity, Popular Culture and Urban Life: Anglophone Asians in Colonial Singapore, 1920–1940', Unpublished PhD dissertation, Cambridge University, 2007; Frost and Balasingamchow, *Singapore*; T.N. Harper, 'Globalism and the Pursuit of Authenticity: The Making of a Diasporic Public Sphere in Singapore', *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 12:2 (1997): 261–92; Sunil Amrith, 'Asian Internationalism: Bandung's Echo in a Colonial Metropolis', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6:4 (2005): 557–69. On Shanghai studies, see for example Gail Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Leo Ou-Fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Hanchao Lu, *Beyond the Neon Lights: Everyday Shanghai in the Early Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Meng Yue, *Shanghai and the Edges of Empire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).



Map 1 Asian port-cities in the 1920s.

makes multiple appearances in this book. Much excellent research has been done on Singapore's cosmopolitan past by Tim Harper, Mark Frost, Chua Ai Lin, and Sunil Amrith, whose work I build upon. Singapore's cosmopolitan history and multi-ethnic heritage is fast becoming a part of its own national identity as a global city-state. Penang, Rangoon, and Bangkok were on par with Singapore in their diversity (and also, in the case of Rangoon and Bangkok, in size), yet in the post-colonial era their histories as cosmopolitan port-cities were quickly subsumed within ethno-nationalist narratives of the state in the making of post-colonial Malaya, Burma, and Thailand. As port-cities, they owe their existence to the resources of the hinterland – the tin-producing Kinta Valley in the case of Penang, and the Irrawaddy and Chao Praya delta and teak forests of northern Burma and Siam in the case of Rangoon and Bangkok. This meant that their citizens, by the 1920s, negotiated the outward-looking, cosmopolitanism of their cities with an astute awareness of the need for social and economic integration within what would become nation-states.

From the perspective of anti-colonial nationalism, Rangoon, Penang, and Bangkok could not have been more different. The British seized the port of Yangon during the Second Anglo-Burmese War and named it Rangoon, a provincial capital of British India, which later replaced the royal court of Mandalay as the administrative centre of colonial Burma. Penang was ceded to the British East India Company early in the age of free trade liberalism, turning a sparsely populated island into a thriving free port that attracted immigrants and traders from all over maritime Asia. As a result, whereas Penang's civic leaders were often heavily Anglophile, embracing British citizenship and using British ideals of a free press, rule of law, and social justice to argue for piecemeal political change, Burmese students in Rangoon took part in one of the strongest anti-colonial nationalist movements in Asia. Bangkok, meanwhile, was the capital of the only non-colonised state in Southeast Asia, thanks to its geographical position as a buffer-state and the diplomatic wiles of its modernising kings.

Yet an examination of Penang, Rangoon, and Bangkok as dynamic, multi-ethnic port-cities lends itself to untold connections and comparisons between them and with other Asian cities. All three cities were born within thirty years of each other, their origins entwined in regional geo-political struggles between warring kingdoms and Western colonial expansion into the region. They emerged out of a lineage of inter-Asian trade – the waves of migrants from China, India, and the Arab world that flocked to the region in the colonial era echoed the movements of Asian traders who came at an earlier time, building temples, mosques, and churches in the coastal vicinity of these cities. In the early twentieth



century, steamship, rail, and communications routes linked Penang, Rangoon, and Bangkok to each other and to the outside world. These cities were made by migration and acted as crossroads for various Asian and Western intellectual traditions, including Marxism, Fabian socialism, Chinese republicanism, as well as Confucian, Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic reform movements. Associational and educational networks allowed Southeast Asians to travel throughout the region and meet each other for the first time. The aim of this book is not only to examine shared experiences of diversity and modernity in Southeast Asian cities in the early twentieth century, but also to contribute to a new field of inquiry that moves away from histories of the nation in favour of a deeper exploration of urban intellectual formation, civic cultures, regional connections, and transnational networks in the twentieth century.

While each of these cities is distinctive, they are all finding a new lease of life in their cosmopolitan pasts today. Penangites have long taken pride in their multicultural island past. Penang was founded in 1786, forty years before Singapore, as the first free port in Asia, with trade protected under the British flag. Within a few years of its founding, the port had attracted thousands of Asian merchants from all over the region, away from Dutch monopolies in Batavia. Even after being eclipsed by Singapore in the mid-nineteenth century, Penang was still a favoured destination for fortune-seeking immigrants, political exiles, and religious reformers. Throughout the colonial era, Penang was run nominally by a colonial administration seated in Singapore, and in reality by a motley mix of secret societies and Asian capitalists, while boasting a more tolerant atmosphere of press freedom than colonial Singapore. Penang is and always has been the contrarian island, a hub of social, intellectual, and political activism and opposition to the state-imposed status quo in contemporary Malaysia.

Bangkok shares its global city status with Singapore, yet until recently there was little acknowledgement of its multi-ethnic past. Historical debates about the colonial era dwelled on Thailand's uniqueness in avoiding colonialism, although Benedict Anderson, in 1978, led the charge of a new group of historians who pointed out that Thailand was never as 'unique' as Thai historians supposed, but shaped to a large extent by neighbouring colonial powers.<sup>32</sup> Siam's aristocracy, unhindered by solid colonial ties, sent their children and their country's best and brightest abroad to learn how to be *sivilai*, that is, 'civilised' in the ways of the West, but also to confirm Siamese superiority within the international

<sup>32</sup> See Benedict Anderson, 'Studies of the Thai State: The State of Thai Studies', in *The Study of Thailand*, ed. Eliezer B. Ayal (Athens: Ohio Centre for International Studies, 1978); Tamara Loos, *Subject Siam: Family, Law, and Colonial Modernity in Thailand* (Bangkok: Silkworm, 2002).

sphere.<sup>33</sup> Siam's openness to outside influences dates back to Ayutthaya, known in the early modern era as the 'Venice of the East' and the model for modern Bangkok. Bangkok's urban landscape in the 1920s and 1930s resembled that of other colonial port-cities, its waterfront dotted with foreign consulates and commercial firms, Chinese shop-houses, Indian fabric markets, and Portuguese churches, and built largely by migrant labour. Models of modernity influenced critical intellectuals and civic actors in Bangkok not only via journeys abroad and migrant histories, but also through new experimental schools, cinema, and popular culture.

Rangoon's downtown core is home to Buddhist and Hindu temples, mosques, churches, and a synagogue, all nestled within a densely packed urban area. Isolated for decades under xenophobic, military rule, Rangoon's urban landscape, with its crumbling grand colonial architecture, was for many decades a testament to a bygone era when it was one of the world's busiest ports. Foreign observers of Rangoon in the 1920s and 1930s called it an 'alien city', in which over 60 per cent of its population was born elsewhere. Yet the site on which Rangoon was founded had its antecedents in Dagon and Pegu, coastal nodes that attracted both merchants and pilgrims from around the region. Colonial rule resulted in a major demographic shift. As part of British India, Burma's borders were open to Indians, who saw it as a land of wealth and opportunity, much as many Chinese entrepreneurs saw the *nanyang* as a whole. Rangoon was built on the backs of Indian labour, run largely by middle-brow Indian civil servants and injected with flows of capital from Anglo-Indian businessmen and Chettiar money-lenders. Yet it was within the dynamic framework of the colonial-era port-city that everyday urbanites in Rangoon, as in Bangkok and Penang, found a voice, looking inwards as well as outwards, and harnessing ideas circulating in an interconnected world.

Although the bulk of the book is a comparative study, these cities were also close enough to each other to have influenced each other's trajectories, as Chapter 1 makes clear through its examination of the entwined origins of all three sites. In the late colonial era, Penang was a regional hub for English, Islamic, and Chinese education, with Thai elites and intellectuals schooling in the city from the 1920s. Schoolchildren and sports teams travelled the length of the Southeast Asian peninsula, gaining a new awareness of urban and regional neighbours. The mother of Malaysia's first prime minister was Thai, and Tunku Abdul Rahman himself spent

<sup>33</sup> See Thongchai Winichakul, 'The Quest for "Siwilai": A Geographical Discourse of Civilizational Thinking in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Siam', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 59:3 (2000): 528–49.

his early school days in a multi-ethnic neighbourhood of Bangkok before moving back to Penang. The primacy of English in the early twentieth century enabled new connections among an emerging class of multi-lingual Asians, both within the region and outside it in the interwar educational hubs of London, Paris, and Cairo. Learned societies in Bangkok and Rangoon exchanged publications, inspiring each other and promoting the growth of a new regional intellectual culture across borders.<sup>34</sup> By looking at all three cities together, we can come to appreciate neglected comparisons and connections in a region whose modern history has long been studied through the lens of the nation.

### Plan of the Book

Chapter 1 examines the older, commercial linkages within maritime Asia that produced the Southeast Asian port-city through engagement with literature on pre-colonial port-cities in the region. In doing so, it situates Southeast Asian cosmopolitanism within a much older geographic unit than the modern nation-state. It traces the emergence of Southeast Asia's major urban centres – Jakarta/Batavia, Singapore, Penang, Rangoon, Bangkok, and Saigon – as port-cities emerging at the advent of European imperialism in the region. It concludes with a look at the revival of intra-urban connections throughout the region through steamship, rail, and air travel. By tracing the entwined origins of these cities within a regional framework of geopolitics and power, I provide a starting point from which to study modern Asian cities and their inhabitants outside a national framework.

Chapter 2 emphasises the transformation of the cosmopolitan port-city within a colonial-era context. It stresses the simultaneity of modern metropolitan life around the world from the late nineteenth century, exploring the role of municipal councils in borrowing models of managing urban growth, from public transport to zoning residential and commercial districts. It examines different urban spaces transformed by the influx of migrants and capital, from the waterfront, the downtown core, ethnic enclaves, and markets. The chapter ends by looking at ways in which the city was re-claimed on Asian terms, through architectural statements, boycotts, and strikes, stressing the combustible nature of the colonial-era port-city.

The next two chapters consider the tensions and possibilities that came with the development of a cosmopolitan public sphere. Chapter 3

<sup>34</sup> Su Lin Lewis, 'Between Orientalism and Nationalism: The Learned Society and the Making of "Southeast Asia"', *Modern Intellectual History*, 10:2 (August 2013).

examines urban associational life in the city. Departing from the study of ‘proto-nationalist’ associations which have characterised the modern historiography of the region, it focuses on cross-cultural sociability through the role of freemasonry, Rotary clubs, learned societies and reading groups, professional associations, and philanthropic organisations, from the Red Cross to women’s councils. Chapter 4 looks at the role of print and the accessibility of books and newspapers in creating new *informed* communities. It considers the ways in which print-literature invented not only indigenous nationalism, but also print-reading communities in various languages that linked readers to a wider world abroad and local, multicultural affairs within the world of the city. It focuses on the way in which Anglophone Asians used the English-language press to reach a wider audience within the city and the world beyond to debate with each other and articulate their claims.

The final two chapters are primarily concerned with ‘the young’ as new and visible participants in urban life. Chapter 5 examines the plurality of educational initiatives within the port-city. Penang’s schoolchildren, Siamese students in Paris, and Rangoon University students provide case studies of the possibilities of primary education, education abroad, and higher education at home in fostering cosmopolitan sensibilities. Chapter 6 explores the rise of the modern girl within the context of popular culture. It explores the impact of cinema and jazz in introducing mentalities of popular modernity, shared with urbanites around the world. It looks at shifts in gender relations among the young and the impact of the educated young woman as a new model of femininity.

By exploring interactions and networks across Asian port-cities, I seek to open up new questions on the nature of urban society, multiculturalism, and globalisation in Asia. Via these six themes – urbanism, associational life, the press, education, and popular culture – I situate the emergence of a cosmopolitan set of urbanites within pan-Asian and global experiences of modernity. In investigating the spaces in which diverse communities found commonalities with each other, while reaching out to a wider world, we can begin to unearth a forgotten history of urban cosmopolitanism in early twentieth-century Asia that has left important legacies in the post-colonial era up until the present day.

The children of the interwar period grew to adulthood during the war and made their careers in a post-imperial world – as professionals, artists, journalists, activists, and intellectuals. The memory of studying in multi-ethnic schools and universities and of navigating cosmopolitan port-cities in an era of possibility stayed with them as they contested the rise of crude ethnic nationalisms. The ‘imaginary futures’ of the interwar era led to a necessary civic negotiation of the post-colonial state as Thailand entered

the American era, as Burma entered a difficult period of fractious parliamentary democracy, and as Malaya underwent a decade of decolonisation. The battle between narrow, prescriptive views of the nation and more pluralist sense of community continues to be fought by civil society actors today.

Today, Southeast Asia is one of the most dynamic regions in the world. The cosmopolitan port-city has now become the cosmopolitan airport city. Both Asian and Western models of political and cultural modernity vie for ascendancy. A young generation of affluent Asians who have had the opportunity to work and study abroad have returned to invest in the cultural life of their homelands. Whereas past rulers looked to artistic and literary influences from India and China, this young generation is inspired by Mumbai novelists, the Beijing art scene, Shanghai design, and Singapore restaurant entrepreneurs. Some are opening up bookshops in which novels by Asian authors, undiscovered by publishing houses in London or New York, sit side by side with the latest Booker Prize winner. Hotels, galleries, and restaurants draw upon colonial grandeur, Art Deco, and the hybrid cultures of the 1930s, such as the Peranakan Straits-Chinese. Southeast Asia's creative class is investing in the architectural history and the eclectic hybridity of its cosmopolitan past.

Meanwhile, a new intelligentsia is finding ways to improve their country's economic, social, and environmental situation through multi-lateral institutions such as the UN, the World Bank, and international NGOs such as Oxfam, Save the Children, and the Red Cross, as well as Google and internet start-ups. Activists working in local NGOs – women, environmentalists, journalists, educators, and LGBT communities – appeal to 'issue-based' trans-national networks throughout the region and the rest of the world. Journalists and bloggers draw from international standards, human rights discourses, and contemporary politics elsewhere to criticise authoritarianism at home. Even under Myanmar's most repressive periods of rule, urban Burmese still listened to the BBC and Voice of America, circulated literature, and frequented the long-standing Indian and Chinese street-stalls that still line the streets of downtown Rangoon.

Local historians, museum curators, and filmmakers are now challenging the older narratives of nationalism institutionalised in state museums – relics of a colonial past that demanded a linear, national narrative of civilisational progress. Instead, they are drawing on a more cosmopolitan past to turn Southeast Asian cities into global cities. All this is happening beneath and across the realm of nation-states. While a policy of 'official nationalism' in post-war Southeast Asian history was at first

empowering, it became dangerously homogenous and culturally prescriptive, leading pragmatic and visionary cosmopolitans to reach out for the more universal and cross-cultural connections within and across national borders. The persistence of cosmopolitan civic culture in Southeast Asia has not easily withered away despite attempts to stamp it out. The dynamism of the region today springs from long and deep roots.

# 1 Maritime Commerce, Old Rivalries, and the Birth of Three Cities

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Modern histories of Southeast Asian nations are often narrated separately, through the lens of the nation. When taught to schoolchildren, Thai history centres largely on the emergence of the *Tai* people, Burmese history on the *Bhama*, and Malaysia on the *Melayu*, the ‘sons of the soil’. Nationalist histories often begin by tracking the footsteps of original inhabitants and recounting the splendour of pre-modern polities. The true inheritors of the nation, according to the logic of ethnic nationalism, are those who share a common linguistic and cultural identity constituting the majority of the population, and are born within, not outside, its borders. The ‘newness’ of Southeast Asian nations in the second half of the twentieth century warranted a sense of national unity and identity. Nationalist history required beginnings rooted in geographies of place and language, lineages of blood and belonging, and mythologies of eras of past greatness. The rise of the great, classical empires of Sriwijaya, Angkor, Bagan, Sukhothai, and Majapahit dominate the early history of the region and form their foundation myths.<sup>1</sup> ‘Minority’ indigenous groups, such as the Mon, have sought to revive their own nationalist histories, defining themselves in opposition to the majority and putting forth new claims that cross-cut or splinter the territorial maps of nations.<sup>2</sup> We are left with linear narratives of nations, boxed in by post-colonial borders, but few stories of the webs of exchanges between peoples, goods, and ideas that shaped a shared regional and global history.

Cities, like nations, have their origin myths, and their stories are also not often told together. States seek to make cities subservient to the

<sup>1</sup> See for example David Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2003); G.E. Harvey, *History of Burma* (New York: Octagon Books, 1967). On use of ‘Melayu’ by nationalists and in historical perspective see Anthony Milner, ‘Who Created Malaysia’s Plural Society?’ *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* (2003): 1–24.

<sup>2</sup> For a recent overview of Mon nationalism see Ashley South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma: The Golden Sheldrake* 76:2 (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003).

nation, and their histories are often subsumed within nationalist narratives. Bangkok is the Thai capital and the centre of royal power, while Rangoon is an 'alien city' created by British rule. George Town is the heart of Penang, an island geographically separate from the mainland, and one that continually challenges the racial balance of the nation through political opposition and a celebration of its multi-ethnic past. These were cities born of visions and built on journeys. The mythology of Rangoon begins a thousand years ago, with the voyage of two rice merchants to India seeking the blessing of the Buddha Gautama. Bangkok began as a settlement of Teochew merchants, who aided the Sino-Thai General Taksin on his flight from the ashes of Ayutthaya, which had been devastated by Burmese armies. Penang's tranquil harbour appealed to Francis Light, a seafaring entrepreneur seeking favour with the East India Company by finding a new port on the eastern edge of the Bay of Bengal, one that would draw Asian merchants away from Malacca and the Dutch East Indies. The origins of these three cities were entangled in a regional battle for power between Burma and Siam in the late eighteenth century, amidst the ascendancy of British and French commercial interests in Asia.

These cities emerged together out of the winds of commerce, following a lineage of cosmopolitan urban life in Southeast Asia that dates back hundreds of years. Anthony Reid has dated the most dynamic period of commercial interaction in the region to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, describing a vibrant maritime trading world linked through port-cities. In Reid's account, we see Indians, Chinese, Arabs, Bugis, and Mons trading and mingling in ports; we see women warriors and female entrepreneurs. We also see slaves bonded to feudal lords, and festivals and amusements meant to enhance the glories of kings who harnessed new ideas and innovations from the outside world. Reid's narrative of vibrant and adaptable trading cultures stops in the late seventeenth century. He argues:

The most important shift in the long term, however, was not any absolute decline in trade but the reduced importance of commerce, merchants, urbanism, and cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asian life. The age of commerce had been marked by constant innovation, by repeated adaptation and incorporation of new ideas. The multi-ethnic market cities had set the pace of that change and had kept Southeast Asians for better or worse involved with the world of commerce. The seventeenth century marked not only a retreat from reliance on the international market but also a greater distrust of external ideas.<sup>3</sup>

For Reid, the loss of indigenous states' control over trade in the colonial era resulted in the demise of a long history of cosmopolitanism in

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce Vol. 1*, p. 328.



Southeast Asia's port-cities.<sup>4</sup> Yet practices of cosmopolitanism and commerce did continue despite this loss. Although *states* had lost their capacity to dictate the terms of maritime commerce, those who lived, moved, and traded within the port-city still showed a capacity to innovate, adapt, trade, and co-exist throughout the colonial era. While many indigenous inhabitants moved of the colonial city,<sup>5</sup> encouraged by the colonial state to focus on agricultural production, some stayed or were drawn to cities, interacting and in some cases intermarrying with the newly arrived migrant communities who put down new roots. A rising multi-ethnic Asian commercial class found ways of adapting to the colonial environment, one that brought new sets of interactions between cultures and communities.

Embedded in regional and global networks of trade and migration, cities provide us with a different kind of history than the territorial boundaries of kingdoms and nations. The porousness of the port-city continually posed challenges to the centrifugal, homogenising tendencies of the dynastic, colonial, and nation-state. The vibrancy of its commerce fuelled the state and was built on interactions with the outside world. The visibility of racial and class hierarchies created the conditions for conflict, particularly in times of economic distress. Yet new experiences of urbanism also brought together people of diverse economic and linguistic backgrounds within a common framework of experience. Rather than the 'imagined communities' of nations put forth by Anderson,<sup>6</sup> the city provided a shared home for local peoples, indigenous traders, migrants, and hybrid communities, who often met face to face as strangers, interacting on an everyday basis. Though these banal and unrecorded interactions left little trace, by examining the growth of cities and their spaces we can begin to trace a lineage of cosmopolitan social practices and regional connections that complicate, enrich, and exist alongside histories of the nation.

### Entwined Origins

Yangon is the oldest of the three sites examined in this study, but it is also the most problematic to study within the framework of the nation-state. It has often been seen as an artificial city born out of British imperial rule, populated largely by Indian immigrants and supplanting the centre of Burmese courtly life at Mandalay. Yet the Shwedagon and Sule pagodas

<sup>4</sup> See also Reid, 'Southeast Asian History and the Colonial Impact', in Ts'ui-jung Liu et al. (eds.), *Asian Population History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 55–59.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55. <sup>6</sup> See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

were the two axes around which colonial Rangoon was built, and they had long, ancient histories.<sup>7</sup> Historically, they provided a continuous point of popular cultural and religious affiliation for Buddhists, particularly the Mon- and Burmese-speaking inhabitants of Lower Burma, while royal, walled cities in the interior north shifted and changed sites. The religious appeal of the town of Dagon, as Yangon was then known, was linked to trade. B.R. Pearn, one of the few colonial scholars of Southeast Asia to study cities, argued that Hindu traders originally constructed the shrine.<sup>8</sup> Beginning in the fourteenth century, Dagon grew as a centre of religious life for the inhabitants of the multi-ethnic world of Lower Burma, including nearby Pegu, one of the largest, richest trading empires in pre-colonial Southeast Asia and the only one of Burma's dynastic cities to be located near the sea. In the late sixteenth century, an Italian traveller compared Dagon to his home city of Venice, describing gilded, wooden houses and delicate gardens, and the Shwedagon as a 'Varella' featuring a street 'greater than Saint Markes [*sic*]', where people came to hear Buddhist monks preach.<sup>9</sup> Pearn argues that Dagon's seasonal fairs and major religious festivals played a transformative role in the economy of Burma as they generated a great market for overseas trade, enabling the city to seasonally rival Pegu.<sup>10</sup> Dagon was connected to the region through Pegu's ties to Portuguese Malacca, the centre of the Asian spice trade, supporting the city with rice, foodstuffs, locally built ships, and luxury goods. Tomé Pires pointed to trading customs shared between Dagon and Malacca and also the attraction of Pegu traders to Malay women.<sup>11</sup> The geographical positioning of Dagon, situated near a major seaport, gave it an early history of multi-ethnic interaction that enhanced its spiritual significance.

Bangkok's immediate precursor as a royal city was Ayutthaya, known to European traders as the 'Venice of the East', and the main rival of Pegu and Malacca as a regional commercial power. Dynastic chronicles suggest that Ayutthaya was founded by a Chinese sea merchant, whose travels took him down the coast to the Malay Peninsula.<sup>12</sup> The city prospered due largely to the presence of Chinese, Indian, and Arab mercantile communities living just outside the city walls and the influence of the Chinese Hokkien community at court.<sup>13</sup> Like the Burmese capitals of

<sup>7</sup> See B.R. Pearn, *A History of Rangoon* (Rangoon: American Baptist Missionary Press, 1939), pp. 12–20.

<sup>8</sup> Pearn, *History of Rangoon*, p. 11.      <sup>9</sup> Pearn, *History of Rangoon*, p. 30.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29–30.

<sup>11</sup> Pires, *The Suma Oriental of Tome Pires and the Book of Francisco Rodrigues*, p. 103.

<sup>12</sup> Charnvit Kasetsiri, *The Rise of Ayutthaya: A History of Siam in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 63.

<sup>13</sup> Wyatt, *Thailand*, pp. 54–55.

Sagaing, Ava, Toungoo, and Pegu, the city was encased in walls based on a square plan.<sup>14</sup> Yet unlike these capitals, which rose, fell, and revolved around the region for strategic as well as cosmological purposes, Ayutthaya was firmly rooted in one place, its rulers looking continually towards the sea.<sup>15</sup> The eighteenth-century ‘coastal map’ featured in Thongchai Winichakul’s *Siam Mapped* belies the cosmological mindset of Siamese rulers: Ayutthaya is a large square space at the centre of the map, while coastal ports from Canton to Pegu and Malacca are portrayed in a series of small bulges jutting into the ocean.<sup>16</sup> Unlike the Burmese capitals with fortress walls, Ayutthaya was a marvel of ‘amphibious’ urban planning in mainland Southeast Asia.<sup>17</sup> The city restructured itself constantly, with new canals dug to replace older ones in reaction to the changing flows of the Lopburi River, a pattern replicated in Bangkok’s waterways. But it was this amphibian nature of the city that made it vulnerable; its walls twice failed to keep Burmese invaders at bay, once in 1569 and again in 1767.

The end of a century of political turmoil in the region, including wars between Burma and Siam, coincided with the expansion of British and French trade in the late eighteenth century. Britain’s ‘imperial meridian’ began to swing eastwards after the loss of the American colonies.<sup>18</sup> The salons and drawing rooms of the Enlightenment age were sustained in part by tea sourced from China. Bengal opium and Indian cotton were exchanged for the increasingly popular commodity, prompting a geographic shift in European maritime commerce to Asia from the mid eighteenth century. The Bay of Bengal was poised on the edge of a ‘commercial revolution’, in which networks of Asian traders competed with Dutch, Portuguese, French, and English private traders.<sup>19</sup> Seeking

<sup>14</sup> For more on Burma’s square, walled cities and Buddhist cosmology see: Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce Vol. 2*, pp. 77–82; U Kan Hla, ‘Traditional Town Planning in Burma’, *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 37:2 (1978), 92–104. On Ayutthaya’s cosmological significance from an architectural point of view see Sumet Jumsai, *Naga: Cultural Origins in Siam and the West Pacific* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>15</sup> For an excellent analysis of Ayutthaya’s origins as a maritime commercial power, see Chris Baker, ‘Ayutthaya Rising: From Land or Sea?’ *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 34:1 (2003): 41–62.

<sup>16</sup> Thongchai, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of the Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1994), p. 29 (figure 4).

<sup>17</sup> See Jumsai, *Naga*, p. 77 ff.

<sup>18</sup> Christopher A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830* (London: Longman, 1989).

<sup>19</sup> Om Prakash, ‘From Hostility to Collaboration: European Corporate Enterprise and Private Trade in the Bay of Bengal, 1500–1800’, in *Commerce and Culture in the Bay of Bengal*, ed. Om Prakash and Denys Lombard (Manohar: Indian Council of Historical Research, 1999), 135–61.

to establish trading posts throughout the east, Europeans curried the favour of local rulers with exotic commodities in the Burmese delta, Southern Siam, and Kedah, their foreign weapons fuelling the ambitions and failures of kings.

The territorial expansion of the East India Company was not simply a one-way process, but occurred in tandem with the desires of local rulers to harness new forms of military technology and organisation.<sup>20</sup> The emergence of Yangon as the chief port of the Irrawaddy delta in 1755 began with a conflict between rulers in Lower and Upper Burma, with both sides seeking to capitalise on newly available French and British military technology. In response to a Mon revolt that made use of modern French cannon, an ambitious township headman appealed for more arms from the British at the port-settlement of Negrais. After devastating both Pegu and Syriam, then the chief port at the mouth of the Irrawaddy, the headman styled himself King Alaungpaya and made Dagon the new southern seaport, renaming the city 'Yangon', 'the end of strife'.<sup>21</sup> I use the Burmese term 'Yangon' when referring to the city under Burmese rule from 1755 until its conquest in 1852 by the British, from which point I refer to the city using the British term 'Rangoon'.

Unlike Siam's rulers, who seized the commercial opportunities of their seaport-capital, Alaungpaya largely ignored Yangon. Retreating to Ava in the interior, he entrusted governance of the town to Portuguese and Armenian tax collectors while centralising the Konbaung state's rule from Ava. Maritime trade provided the revenues for state expansion, yet it was never the focus of Konbaung interests, which were to consolidate a fragmentary, heterogenous state under strong, centralised rule.<sup>22</sup> Modern Bangkok emerged as a result of Alaungpaya's deathbed wish to re-conquer Ayutthaya, a task carried out by a merciless Burmese army in 1767. The city was desolated in a maelstrom of rape, pillage, and plunder.<sup>23</sup> Ten thousand Siamese captives, many of them from the country's intellectual class, were brought back to Burma, eventually inspiring a cultural renaissance of Burmese court culture.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> D. A. Washbrook, 'Progress and Problems: South Asian Economic and Social History c. 1720–1860', *Modern Asian Studies* 22:1 (1988): 57–96, 13.

<sup>21</sup> For a detailed account of this see Victor B. Lieberman, *Burmese Administrative Cycles: Anarchy and Conquest, 1580–1760* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 237–277. See also Pearn, *History of Rangoon*, p. 47.

<sup>22</sup> See Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800–1830 Vol. 1 Integration on the Mainland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 67–180.

<sup>23</sup> Wyatt, *Thailand*, p. 118.

<sup>24</sup> Aung Htin, *A History of Burma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967); Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 93.

Out of the vacuum of power in Siam, a charismatic Chinese-Thai general, Taksin, founded a new base at Thonburi opposite a Teochew settlement at Bangkok. Trade generated by the Teochew community helped Taksin raise an army of Chinese traders, adventurers, and minor nobility to defeat the only surviving Burmese army in the region.<sup>25</sup> As the Burmese threat subsided, the old nobility resurfaced and two of Taksin's generals, brothers excluded from holding official positions, struck back at Taksin, resenting his Teochew origins as well as his new supporters.<sup>26</sup> The rebels mounted a coup and executed Taksin on charges of treason, as one brother, Thonggduang, ascended to the throne to restore a lineage of kings.<sup>27</sup> With the founding of a new capital at Bangkok, Teochews were uprooted from their homes and forced to move south of the walls of the new palace. Other ethnic groups, including the Hokkien (the Teochew's main rivals), Portuguese, Lao, Cham, and Indian communities, were not required to relocate.<sup>28</sup>

The expansion of the Konbaung state and the destruction of Ayutthaya unwittingly provided the impetus for the Siamese monarchy to re-invent itself in the late eighteenth century by establishing a new, modern capital that lay claim to a glorious past. At the expense of Taksin and the Teochew community, the continuity of Ayutthaya was represented in the new dynasty; the cosmological heart of Siam was again epitomised in a divinely ordained ruler. The settlement, '*bang kok*' – literally, the 'waterfront settlement of hog plums' – was given a more suitable name: '*krung thep*', the royal city protected by angels.<sup>29</sup> The walled, royal heart of the city, Rattanakosin, modelled on the former capital, was built with the symbolic rubble of Ayutthaya using the sweat of corvée labourers, who dug new canals and waterways while craftsman constructed temples and a new palace. The monarchy seized the opportunity to renew itself through modern notions of accountability, reaching out to the public by propagating a new set of laws, decrees, and proclamations.<sup>30</sup>

The founding of Bangkok, in turn, fostered a new set of urban connections. Wars with the Burmese have been an important part of Thailand's national narrative as a victim of an aggressor, although less has been said of the history of Siam's own exploitative relationship with its southern

<sup>25</sup> See Edward Van Roy, 'Sampheng: From Ethnic Isolation to National Integration', *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 23:1 (2008), 5; Wyatt, *History of Thailand*, p. 123–125.

<sup>26</sup> Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 27.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>28</sup> Van Roy, p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Takashi Tomosugi, *Reminiscences of Old Bangkok: Memory and the Identification of a Changing Society* (Tokyo: The Institute of Oriental Culture, 1993).

<sup>30</sup> Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, p. 131.

neighbours in the Malay states.<sup>31</sup> These tensions were responsible at least partly for the founding of Penang as the first British colonial outpost in the region. The sacking of Ayutthaya created a window of opportunity for the Malay kingdom of Kedah to end its vassal state status on the southern fringe of the Siamese kingdom. The Sultan of Kedah sought to assert his kingdom's autonomy and sever its tributary relationship to Siam. When approached by an English country trader, he bargained on the promise of British military might. Francis Light proved an ideal interlocutor, speaking fluent Siamese and Malay, and aided by his Portuguese-Malay mistress, Maria Rozelles, from Junk Ceylon (now Phuket).<sup>32</sup> Acting without any affiliation to the colonial government in Madras, Light promised the Sultan that in exchange for the island of Penang, the British would cancel Kedah's debts to the King of Siam with a lease of 6,000 pounds and provide protection to end the 'slavery' of his people.<sup>33</sup> The promises proved false, and ten years later Kedah fell under Siamese rule.

Though their histories have often been seen separately, the geopolitical conflicts between the kingdoms of Upper and Lower Burma, Siam, and Kedah resulted in the emergence of Yangon, Bangkok, and Penang as new Asian port-cities in the late eighteenth century. By telling their stories together, we gain a sense of the ways their emergence was entwined, embedded in struggles of both Asian and Western power, rather than a narrative of straightforward European expansion into Southeast Asian states. Writing to the East India Company on his own initiative, Light sensationalised regional conflicts to make the case for Penang and its tranquil harbour as a new Asian port, describing a pirate-ridden Aceh, constant skirmishes between the Burmese and Peguers (which ruled out the port of Negrais), and the 'fluctuating', 'despotic' government of Siam (which ruled out Junk Ceylon).<sup>34</sup> With a peaceful port at Penang, the English could undermine Dutch domination of the region by drawing Asian trade away from Malacca. Light wrote that 'Malay, Buggises [*sic*] and Chines [*sic*] will come to reside here, it will become the Exchange of the East if not loaded with impositions and restriction'.<sup>35</sup> The choice of Penang as the first outpost of British imperialism in Southeast Asia was

<sup>31</sup> See Richard Windstedt, 'History of Kedah', *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 14 (1936): 156–176.

<sup>32</sup> On Rozells see Nordin Hussin, *Trade and Society in the Straits of Melaka: Dutch Melaka and English Penang, 1780–1830* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007), p. 298. See also 'Wife of Penang's Founder', *Straits Echo*, 5 May 1938, p. 13.

<sup>33</sup> Light described this relationship as 'slavery' in his letters to the East India Company. See Bengal Proceedings relating to Penang, 1786–1787, India Office Records G/34/2, 27.

<sup>34</sup> Light, 23 February 1767. Bengal Proceedings, India Office Records G/34/2.

<sup>35</sup> Light, 5 February 1767. Bengal Proceedings, India Office Records G/34/2.

a direct result of Light's perception of regional instability, informed by his local contacts, and made for a convincing case to company officials.

Penang fell under the administrative control of Bengal until 1805, when its status was raised to a presidency like Madras, Bombay, and Bengal. Penang also enjoyed the same status as Madras, Bombay, and Calcutta as a free port. Its initial Malay population was 158. Light needed labour to establish Penang as a viable port, and relied particularly on a thriving Chinese community on the mainland province of Kedah.<sup>36</sup> Within a decade, ten thousand Malay, Chinese, and Indian merchants from Malacca, Batavia, South China, and the Coromandel Coast arrived on Penang's shores. Many of them sought to escape Dutch and Siamese royal monopolies, lured by the promise of trade without duties or licences and protection by the British flag. Penang inherited the hybrid cultures of old Malacca, Kedah, and Southern Siam, including communities of Portuguese Eurasians, Straits-Chinese, and Jawi-Peranakan, as well as a minority of Burmese and Siamese Christians.<sup>37</sup> Sir George Leith, Penang's new governor, said of the settlement in 1801, 'There is not, probably, any part of the world where, in so small a space, so many different people are assembled together or so great a variety of languages spoken.'<sup>38</sup> Out of the regional conflicts of the late eighteenth century rose the first British colonial port-city in Southeast Asia, providing a new model of an Asian port-city founded on the ideals of free trade.

### Maritime Asia Transformed

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, the British Empire was not a cohesive entity but an informal commercial empire, backed by London-based financiers with an enormous amount of capital to invest in shipping, communications, and trade.<sup>39</sup> The primary task of Britain's East India Company was to follow the pattern of the Dutch and secure port-cities as gateways into the Asian trade. From the mid-nineteenth century into the twentieth, as Europe's industrial revolution took off and

<sup>36</sup> C.M. Turnbull, *The Straits Settlements* (London: Athlone, 1972), p. 9.

<sup>37</sup> For an analysis of Penang's early ethnic make-up see Hussin, *Trade and Society in the Straits of Melaka*, pp. 294–319.

<sup>38</sup> Sir George Leith, *A Short Account of the Settlement, Produce, and Commerce of Prince of Wales Island in the Straits of Malacca* (London: Barfield, 1804), p. 25.

<sup>39</sup> For debates on the nature of Britain's 'informal empire' see John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, 'The Imperialism of Free Trade', *The Economic History Review* 6.1 (1953): 1–15; Peter Cain and Anthony G. Hopkins, 'Gentlemanly Capitalism and British Expansion Overseas I. The Old Colonial System, 1688–1850', *The Economic History Review* 39.4 (1986): 501–525; and John Darwin, 'Imperialism and the Victorians: The Dynamics of Territorial Expansion', *English Historical Review* (1997): 614–42.

commerce intensified to meet a limitless demand for Asian raw materials, the modern Asian port-city began serving not only as a trading emporium but as an imperial bridgehead, extending the tentacles of empire into the hinterland. Penang, Rangoon, and Bangkok emerged within a network of port-cities, from Bombay to Shanghai, serving to expand the imperial reach of Europe's Asian empires.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, as European commercial interests nibbled away at the edges of Asian territories, Burmese, Siamese, and Malay rulers did not choose to promote sea-borne commerce among their own subjects as they once did two to three hundred years earlier.<sup>40</sup> While Burmese kings and Malay sultans consolidated their authority inland, Siamese rulers encouraged foreign merchants in Bangkok to capitalise on the Europe–China trade, resulting in a large influx of Chinese immigration and intermarriage between Thais and Chinese. British commercial interests began lobbying their government to establish British legal institutions and property rights to ensure social stability and safeguard their commercial contracts and financial investments. In some cases, these succeeded in generating new loyalties from Asian trading communities drawn to the opportunities of the port-city, enabling them to accumulate private capital. David Washbrook observes of South Asia that both 'progress and problems' emerged out of the entrenchment of European ideologies, state and legal institutions, ranging from an increased ability to invest in infrastructure and agriculture to the subordination of labour and production practices.<sup>41</sup> In Southeast Asia, both progress and problems were compounded by the fact that those most willing to subscribe to such ideologies and institutions were Chinese and Indian immigrants.

Lauren Benton has argued that the imposition of domains of legal and territorial sovereignty by European empires was marked by shifting uneven geographies of control and legal anomalies.<sup>42</sup> While Penang was a testing ground for new ideologies and institutions in Southeast Asia, these were not grafted onto the island wholesale but incorporated, in patchwork fashion, into an immigrant society that followed many of the

<sup>40</sup> See Milner, 'Who Created Malaysia's Plural Society?'. Milner compares the Malay case to analyses of Burma and Siam in Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier, 1852–1941* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974) and Constance M. Wilson, 'Revenue Farming, Economic Development and Government Policy during the Early Bangkok Period', in *The Rise and Fall of Revenue Farming*, eds. J. and H. Dick Butcher (New York: St. Martin's, 1993), 142–65.

<sup>41</sup> See Washbrook, 'Progress and Problems'.

<sup>42</sup> Lauren Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).



old rules of the Asian entrepôt. Initially, as in Ayutthaya, Malacca, and Batavia, *kapitans* were appointed to represent, administer, and resolve disputes among each of the Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities present in Penang.<sup>43</sup> While the colonial government abolished the legal functions of these kapitans after 1808, when a Court of Judicature was set up, kapitans continued to have an informal role to resolve disputes and act as intermediaries for their respective communities well into the nineteenth century; most communities continued to take disputes to their elders rather than the courts.<sup>44</sup> The colonial state established a police force that was run by British supervisors and staffed largely by Indian migrants, along with a few Chinese, Malays, and *Jawi Peranakans* (Indian-Malays). The British official James Low observed that while these groups were more loyal to their own communities than they were to the British judicial code, the effectiveness of the system depended on their cooperation, and that of the communities they represented.<sup>45</sup>

Despite teething problems, the massive population growth Penang witnessed in its first few decades made it a remarkably successful model of a free-trade port in the region, leading to the founding of Singapore in 1819. Due to its location at the foot of the Straits, Singapore overtook Penang as the primary trade entrepôt for Straits trade. Early nineteenth-century Yangon, by contrast, lacked the regulatory conditions to which European, Indian, and Chinese traders involved in Indian Ocean commerce were growing accustomed. The city's population was ridden with scurvy and dysentery. Violent crime, theft, and robbery were endemic, with prevention efforts relying on citizens and the interventions of Burmese monks rather than authorities.<sup>46</sup> An American missionary described the police of the time as 'blood-suckers on the community . . . ready to stir up strife between neighbours'.<sup>47</sup> Calcutta officials saw European merchants in Yangon as 'undesirables' who had defected from the East India Company and married local women.<sup>48</sup> Many of these merchants nonetheless looked to Penang and the ports of British

<sup>43</sup> For antecedents, see Luis Filipe Thomaz, 'Melaka and Its Merchant Communities at the Turn of the Sixteenth Century', in *Asian Merchants and Businessmen in the Indian Ocean and the China Sea*, eds. Denys and Jean Aubin Lombard (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 25–39.

<sup>44</sup> Hussin, *Trade and Society in the Straits of Melaka*, pp. 245–46; Turnbull, *The Straits Settlements*, 106.

<sup>45</sup> James Low, *The British Settlement of Penang (1836)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 243–44.

<sup>46</sup> Pe Kin, 'History of Rangoon', *Guardian* (1969), p. 25.

<sup>47</sup> Cephas Bennet, 'Rangoon Fifty Years Ago' (1884) as quoted in Pearn, *History of Rangoon*, p. 132.

<sup>48</sup> Pearn, pp. 78–79.

India, complaining to Colombo that Burma's arbitrary restrictions and monopolistic practices inhibited the free trade of goods.<sup>49</sup> Yangon fell into stagnation after the First Anglo-Burmese War, while Moulmein rose as a commercial centre and the first British capital in Burma. Chinese merchants forged new links between Moulmein and Penang through Tenasserim's incorporation into the Straits Settlements.

Siamese rulers looked at the founding of Penang and Singapore, as well as encroaching British expansion into Burma, with trepidation. In 1826, the year that the East India Company subsumed Penang, Singapore, and Malacca into a single administrative unit, the Straits Settlements, Henry Burney travelled from Penang to Bangkok to gain an audience with the Siamese court. The treaty was negotiated amidst the end of a war waged between the British and Burmese in Arakan, on the northeast Indian border, and Tenasserim, bordering the northern Malay states. With British forces occupying Rangoon, looting its pagodas, and making their way up to Ava, Burma's King Bagyidaw signed a treaty ending the First Anglo-Burmese War. British forces retreated from Rangoon only after the Burmese state paid a million pounds to the British government.<sup>50</sup> With news of the Burmese defeat, King Rama III's inflexible attitude to Burney's treaty changed. Siam's rulers became aware of the increasing technological and military superiority of the British, backed with a mass supply of Indian sepoy for combat.<sup>51</sup> Siam sacrificed its own autonomy to dictate the terms of trade, yet the reduction of taxes, the substitution of a single duty, and the decline of royal monopolies resulted in a massive increase of British trade with Siam in the wake of the treaty. Much of this trade was conducted through Singapore via the Siamese and Chinese junk trade, and Singapore merchants began pressing for more liberal terms in Bangkok similar to those negotiated in Nanking for the Chinese treaty ports, undermining the Siamese government's attempt to control its trade via monopolies and restrictions.<sup>52</sup>

Local conflicts between Burmese authorities and British officials and traders in Yangon culminated in the Second Anglo-Burmese War and the city's seizure in 1852.<sup>53</sup> Yangon was destroyed, its pagodas looted once more, its downtown core scorched by retreating Burmese armies and shelled by advancing British forces. The British took full control of

<sup>49</sup> Oliver Pollak, 'The Origins of the Second Anglo-Burmese War (1852–53)', *Modern Asian Studies* 12:3 (1978): 490.

<sup>50</sup> Donald M. Seekins, *State and Society in Modern Rangoon* (London: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>51</sup> Baker and Phongpaichit, *History of Thailand*, p. 39.

<sup>52</sup> Anthony Webster, *Gentleman Capitalists: British Imperialism in South East Asia 1770–1890* (London: Tauris, 1998).

<sup>53</sup> Pollack, 'The Origins of the Second Anglo-Burmese War (1852–53)'.

Yangon, renamed it Rangoon, and administered the city from Calcutta, pulling it into an imperial network of port-cities.

In the midst of European commercial and territorial expansion, the kings of Burma and Siam in the mid-nineteenth century did not isolate themselves from European ideas and technologies but appropriated them. After losing Lower Burma to Britain in 1852, Burma's Mindon Min began a policy of 'defensive Westernisation' and sought to create an efficient, 'modern' administration while maintaining Buddhist principles.<sup>54</sup> He ran complimentary missions between Mandalay and Calcutta, sent steamers up the Irrawaddy River to provide the British with back-door access to China, and built telegraph lines connecting Rangoon to Mandalay.<sup>55</sup> He invited Western missionaries to court and developed a keen interest in Western science and philosophy. Meanwhile, Siam's fourth Chakri king, Mongkut, came to the throne quite late, spending much of his young adult life as a practising monk who cultivated relationships with Western missionaries, learned Western languages, and engaged in fierce debates on religion and material progress. Leaders of commercial Bangkok clustered around the court and brought Western innovations, as printed and imported books circulated among literati and the elite.

Mongkut was fully aware of the destruction of Lower Burma and Yangon in 1852, occurring one year after he had come to the throne at the age of 47. He wrote personally to John Bowring, the governor of Hong Kong, seeking to deal with a representative of the Foreign Office rather than the colonial governments in India or the Straits Settlements. Bowring and Mongkut negotiated a treaty that gave foreigners the right to trade freely and extraterritorial protection from Siam's legal system. Parts of Bangkok began to look like a Chinese treaty port, but the Royal Palace was still very much in place. Competition between rival European powers allowed successive Siamese governments to engage in diplomatic tactics to secure Siam's independence.<sup>56</sup> Notably, the extra-territorial treaties included Asian colonial subjects: British Burmans, Dutch Javanese, French Indochinese, as well as Chinese and Siamese employees of European and American firms, which by the 1930s numbered 'several tens of thousands'.<sup>57</sup> The new terms of trade also benefited Bangkok's

<sup>54</sup> Oliver B. Pollak, *Empires in Collision: Anglo-Burmese Relations in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (London: Greenwood, 1979), p. 113.

<sup>55</sup> Thant, *Making of Modern Burma*.

<sup>56</sup> See Ian Brown, *The Elite and the Economy in Siam* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>57</sup> See Tamara Loos, *Subject Siam: Family, Law, and Colonial Modernity in Thailand* (Bangkok: Silkworm, 2002), p. 4; Lysa Hong, "'Stranger within the Gates': Knowing Semi-Colonial Siam as Extraterritorials', *Modern Asian Studies* 38:2 (2004): 327–54; W.A.R. Wood, *Land of Smiles* (Bangkok: Krungdebararnagar Press, 1933), p. 37.

original inhabitants, the Teochew. The abandonment of royally administered trade, under British pressure, meant that the previously marginalised Teochew community in Sampheng was given a competitive edge, undermining the Hokkien economic base privileged by the Thai elite.<sup>58</sup> The Teochew, once seen by their sophisticated Hokkien and Cantonese rivals as ‘impoverished country bumpkins’, now bid for state monopolies, the most important of which were opium, gambling, lottery, and spirits, providing the seed money for later Teochew investments in steam milling, maritime transport, banking, and property development.<sup>59</sup> Virtually all of Siam’s trading monopolies were abolished, but in the years following there was a dramatic expansion in the volume and value of trade.<sup>60</sup>

In the 1860s, in the midst of an industrial revolution that drastically heightened the demand for Asian commodities and resources, Europe’s scramble for empire began in earnest. After the Indian Rebellion of 1857, the British government dissolved the East India Company and assumed direct control over the Indian subcontinent from Calcutta. Europe’s insatiable demand for Chinese luxury items led the British to renegotiate treaties with China to secure ‘most favoured nation’ status for British, American, and French powers operating in the region. French naval forces, meanwhile, moved into the lower basin of the Mekong River in what would become South Vietnam, following early urgings of Catholic missionaries to ‘liberate’ Tonkinese converts.<sup>61</sup> Saigon was captured in early 1859, and the French began a massive development of the Mekong Delta to improve rice production. In 1860, Multatuli, a former Dutch colonial official, published *Max Havelaar*. The book highlighted the injustices of the ‘Cultivation System’, which since the 1830s had turned Java into an exploitative plantation economy geared towards the production of tea and coffee. The book’s impact on public perceptions of empire came later, and the Dutch continued to expand their territorial reach into Sumatra, Kalimantan, and Bali, eventually occupying the entire archipelago by the turn of the century.

In 1867, the Straits Settlements became a new crown colony. It was directly ruled from London to better serve the interests of Britain’s expanding merchant firms, whose eyes were on the lucrative tin lands in the interior. The British pushed the Malay sultans of the interior to sign the Pangkor Treaty in 1874, effectively giving themselves an advisory role to make the peninsula more favourable to trade and commercial exploitation. Chinese mine operators and merchants moved in, recruiting large

<sup>58</sup> Van Roy, p. 12.    <sup>59</sup> Ibid.    <sup>60</sup> Webster, *Gentleman Capitalists*, p. 161.

<sup>61</sup> Pierre Brocheux, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization 1858–1954* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

numbers of indentured labourers from southern China. The tin mines of the Kinta Valley fuelled the regeneration of Penang, which had been relatively sleepy throughout the mid-nineteenth century, and made it into a hub of trade and migration into and out of northern Malaya. The tin industry also moved into Southern Siam via Chinese and European merchants, pulling the region much closer to Penang and Singapore than to Bangkok, and connecting Siam's entire southwest into a web of international commerce.<sup>62</sup>

From Rangoon, the British fixed their sights on the forests of Upper Burma; teak was proving to be an extremely lucrative commodity in shipbuilding and construction in British India.<sup>63</sup> After Mindon's death in 1878, one of his sons, Thibaw, came to power in a bloody succession battle. He imposed high tariffs on trade, particularly to British firms working the teak forests, and negotiated new commercial deals with the French.<sup>64</sup> In retaliation, the British invaded Upper Burma in 1885. The royal court at Mandalay was destroyed, and the palace was turned into a British club as British soldiers trampled in boots through sacred Buddhist temples. The dismantling of the court severely weakened the power and authority of the Burmese gentry class throughout the country.<sup>65</sup> Burmese peasants, meanwhile, were able to capitalise on agricultural opportunities encouraged by the British, who sought new sources of rice after the Indian rebellion and American Civil War.<sup>66</sup> From the last half of the nineteenth century to the early decades of the twentieth, the Irrawaddy delta underwent a complete transformation, with restrictions on rice exports removed, peasants given land-ownership rights, and smallholder rice producers making use of expanding retail networks and capital provided by both Indian and Burmese moneylenders.<sup>67</sup>

With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, maritime Asia witnessed a communications and transport revolution. Major changes occurred in almost every sector of the shipping industry, as steamships rapidly

<sup>62</sup> See Arjun Subrahmanyam, 'Reinventing Siam: Ideas and Culture in Thailand, 1920–1944', PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2013, pp. 52–62.

<sup>63</sup> Raymond L. Bryant, 'Consuming Burmese Teak: Anatomy of a Violent Luxury Resource'. Environment, politics, and development working paper series, Department of Geography, King's College London (2009): [www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/departments/geography/research/epd/BryantWP23.pdf](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/departments/geography/research/epd/BryantWP23.pdf)

<sup>64</sup> Anthony Webster, 'Business and Empire: A Reassessment of the British Conquest of Burma in 1885'. *The Historical Journal* 43:4 (2000): 1003–25.

<sup>65</sup> Myint-U, pp. 197–98.

<sup>66</sup> Robert E. Elson, 'International Commerce, the State, and Society: Economic and Social Change', in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia Vol. 3*, ed. Nicholas Tarling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 139.

<sup>67</sup> Adas, *The Burma Delta*.

replaced sailing vessels. Rising demand for Asia's resources made port-cities both the gateways of trade and bridgeheads for territorial expansion, and resulted in the complete environmental transformation of rice deltas, teak forests, and mineral-rich hills. The violence of imperial acquisition, increases in tax collection, and the entrenchment of property rights drew Asian societies into the all-encompassing machine of the global economy and made them much more volatile to shifts in the world market. This was also a period of accelerated connections, which linked local producers and migrant traders to regional and international markets. People, ideas, and goods moved throughout the region at an astonishing, unprecedented rate. Migrant labourers and social reformers circulated around the region along the same lines as flows of capital, remittances, ideas, and expertise.<sup>68</sup> Asia's coastal polities underwent a period of intense cultural exchange, linked by the movements of migrants and the rapid circulation of information through postal communications, books, and newsprint.<sup>69</sup>

Over the ensuing decades, legal and commercial frameworks laid down in the founding of the new ports pulled Asia's port-cities into a web of global capitalism, dominated by foreign mercantile firms. Asians with the most success in this new world of transnational capital were hybrid, mobile, and adaptable communities, as in early modern port-cities. Chinese and Indian Muslim traders with large, regional networks married local women, creating hybrid communities who shifted between different linguistic worlds. Chinese immigration into Bangkok increased throughout the nineteenth century, with Bangkok's established *jao su* communities of Chinese merchant lords prospering on royal patronage and taking enthusiastically to Thai culture, funding Thai *wats* as well as the arts, and marrying one (or several) Thai wives.<sup>70</sup> Chinese communities operated along the eastern Indian Ocean littoral, from Rangoon to Phuket to Penang, Singapore, and Medan, embracing new technologies of steam and investing in tin, rice, and timber mills. A number of powerful Chinese families dominated the region, including the Khoo, the Cheah, the Yeoh, the Lim, the Tan, and the Khaw groups.<sup>71</sup> The Hakka

<sup>68</sup> Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, *Empires and the Reach of the Global 1870–1945* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2012), pp. 12–13.

<sup>69</sup> Mark Frost, 'Asia's Maritime Networks and the Colonial Public Sphere, 1840–1920', *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 6:2 (2004): 63–94.

<sup>70</sup> Baker and Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand*, p. 36.

<sup>71</sup> For a recent analysis of powerful family networks in Penang see Wong Yee Tuan, 'Penang's Big Five Families and Southern Siam During the Nineteenth Century', in *Thai South and Malay North: Ethnic Interactions on the Plural Peninsula*, ed. Michael Montesano and Patrick Jory (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008), pp. 201–13. See also J.W. Cushman, *Family and State: The Formation of a Sino-Thai Tin-Mining Dynasty 1797–1932*, ed. Craig J. Reynolds (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991).

industrialist, Cheong Fatt Tze, had houses and wives in both Penang and Medan, while the Rangoon-born Aw brothers, inventors of the popular cure-all medical ointment Tiger Balm, had bases in Singapore and Hong Kong. The opening of the Chao Phraya and Irrawaddy deltas led to Bangkok and Rangoon becoming the world's key ports for rice export, aided respectively by Teochew and Chettiar capital. Indian Muslims flocked into Burma, bolstering and influencing the local Burmese Muslim community by establishing mosques, religious schools, and other institutions.<sup>72</sup> Increasingly from the late nineteenth century, migrant groups in Bangkok as well as colonial Penang and Rangoon sent their children to English schools and became the middlemen and compradors of British economic expansion, while others began their own businesses and cultivated their own inter-Asian commercial and social networks. The port-city, entwined in new imperial and commercial networks that traversed the boundaries of the ever-expanding state, also enabled more intimate connections between Asian migrant communities across the region.

### Reviving Connections

By the early twentieth century, faster steamships as well as rail links provided new, trans-urban connections across the region. New modes of transport and communication connected cities to each other, resulting in the growing accessibility of travel and an awareness of the rest of the region and the world. Burma's mountainous borders made it nearly impossible for railways to connect Rangoon to cities in India and Siam, thus the maritime connection remained paramount. In 1920, a new rail line greatly enhanced communications and travel between cities, linking up to maritime routes. Via rail, Penang connected Bangkok to the Bay of Bengal as the departure point to Europe and Indian Ocean port-cities, including Rangoon. From his home in Penang, where he spent his retirement in exile after the 1932 coup, Siam's Prince Damrong boarded a steamship to Burma, chronicling his journey in his 1936 *Journey through Burma: A View of the Culture, History, and Institutions*, a congenial travelogue of a country that ordinary Siamese had so often thought of as an enemy.<sup>73</sup>

Regional radio communication grew from the beginning of the twentieth century at a rate that alarmed colonial authorities in Singapore, who

<sup>72</sup> Moshe Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrosowitz, 1972), p. 27.

<sup>73</sup> See Damrong Rajanubhab, *Journey Through Burma in 1936* (Bangkok: Riverbooks, 1991).

hoped that the city would be a central hub of communications within the region. In 1929, the secretary of postal affairs sent an anxious letter to the colonial office, advising:

The idea of Singapore as a Clapham Junction for wireless is out-of-date and fallacious; for modern high-powered wireless requires no Clapham Junctions, it goes direct. The following is a list of the existing Wireless Services of our neighbours; they leave no room for us to come in except as regards local traffic, which at present is being efficiently handled by cable or land-line.<sup>74</sup>

The letter noted the following connections: the Netherlands East Indies, via Malabar, had services to Amsterdam, Berlin, Paris, San Francisco, Saigon, and Manila; French Indo-China, via Saigon, was connected to Paris, San Francisco, Manila, Honolulu, Tahiti, Madagascar, and Netherlands India, and via Hanoi to Paris and Osaka; Manila was connected to San Francisco, Berlin, Shanghai, Netherlands India, Saigon, and Osaka. By contrast, Rangoon was connected only to Madras and London. In the realm of radio, British port-cities were becoming less, not more internationally connected than port-cities governed by the French, Dutch, and Americans. This did not go unnoticed by Asian cosmopolitans – an editor at the *Eastern Courier*, an Asian-owned English newspaper based in Penang, complained that in 1929 Malaya lagged behind world communications, particularly in comparison with the wireless, broadcasting, and air transport in neighbouring countries:

Bangkok can talk with Berlin and is arranging to talk with London; Java can speak with Holland, and Indo-China talks to Paris. Malaya alone, in the midst, remains dependent on her antiquated services and cannot even boast a telephone system through its own area.<sup>75</sup>

The new rail and wireless links that emerged by the 1930s symbolised a modern web of connections, from Europe to Asia, Asia to America, and various Asian cities to each other. Siam, as an independent nation, took full advantage. The Colonial Office, monitoring the activities of Prince Purachatra, the minister of commerce and communications, noted that Siam had begun setting up its own independent communication networks with America, France, Germany, Australia, the Dutch East Indies, and the Philippines via a new base station at Sala Daeng. RCA, or the Radio Corporation of America, had already offered a continuous world service via Manila, provided that the Siamese buy three of their installations.

<sup>74</sup> 'Radio and Telegraph Communications in Siam', 1928, London, National Archives, Colonial Office Records, Straits Settlements Original Correspondence, CO273/552/6, p. 29.

<sup>75</sup> 'Sleeping Malaya', *Eastern Courier*, 6 April 1929, p. 9.



In order to remedy the situation, it was recommended that Britain should promote the idea of an international conference, where representatives of the countries of Southeast Asia could meet to put an end to the present 'chaos' by working out a joint wireless policy between Siam, India, Burma, Malaya, Indo-China, Manila, and the Dutch East Indies.<sup>76</sup> One year later, the *Bangkok Daily Mail* reported favourably on the speed at which Siam had taken advantage of short-wave wireless in the country, since being dependent on foreign-controlled cables was 'politically unsatisfactory'.<sup>77</sup> This was a first opportunity to make Siam independent of foreign companies, at least in regards to communications.<sup>78</sup>

The future of travel was in the air. Siamese princes, keen to be seen as harbingers of modernity, grasped this early on. They hosted an Aviation Week as early as 1910 and held the first flying demonstration on the grounds of the Bangkok Sports Club. Siam's first pilots received their training in France. By the 1920s, air travel was set to reduce the distance between cities to a fraction of the time of steam travel. Colonial officials were adamant that the London–Australia route would become the 'first essential route of the Empire'.<sup>79</sup> Singapore was again set to become the 'Clapham Junction of the East', with auxiliary airlines branching from Singapore to Siam, Japan, China, Russia, and the East Indies.<sup>80</sup> Siamese princes and affluent Asians acquired pilot licences and joined flying clubs. The Rangoon Flying School came into being in 1934, with two young Burmans, Maung Tin Ngwe and Maung Thant from Mandalay, congratulated by *New Burma* for passing their tests and receiving their India and Burma aviator's licences.<sup>81</sup> The most inspiring story of Asian air travel was that of Kyaw Yin, a Burmese schoolteacher from Tavoy who personally designed his own hot air balloon. He flew fifty-five times throughout Burma and donated most of his income to charity.<sup>82</sup> By the end of the 1930s, the skies provided a new realm of freedom, a stratospheric layer of modernity for Asians to aspire.

For centuries, the sea provided the means of connection between Asian communities. It brought European traders into the region in the late eighteenth century, fuelling the creation of three new port-cities. These cities were pulled into a network of colonial ports and served as bridge-heads for expansion into the hinterland. Migrant communities capitalised on networks running throughout the region. By the turn of the century,

<sup>76</sup> 'Radio and Telegraph Communications in Siam', 1928, London, National Archives, Colonial Office Records, Straits Settlements Original Correspondence, CO273/552/6.

<sup>77</sup> *Bangkok Daily Mail*, 5 June 1930, p. 5. <sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> 'Aviation and Malaya', *British Malaya* 4, p. 23. <sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> 'Our Flying School', *New Burma*, 12 September 1934, p. 9.

<sup>82</sup> *Encyclopaedia Birmanica* Vol. 2 (Rangoon: Sar-pay-beikman, 1955), p. 23.

the accelerated traffic of people, goods, and ideas pulled Asian societies within web of mobility and global commerce. Advances in radio communication and air travel in the 1920s and 1930s provided a glimpse of the future – of everyday Southeast Asians harnessing new technologies to connect to the region and the world on their own terms. Within this ever-spinning web, the cosmopolitan port-city became the site where they would experience jarring encounters with modernity, and, most acutely, with each other.

## 2 Asian Port-Cities in a Turbulent Age

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As generations of urban sociologists have long noted, cities have the capacity to produce new forms of differentiation as well as new kinds of connection. Louis Wirth first argued in 1938 that the city was a ‘mosaic of social worlds’ where the juxtaposition of divergent personalities and modes of life result in a sense of relativistic perspective and toleration of differences.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, this diversity provides a basis for rationality and secularisation; on the other, the co-existence of individuals with few sentimental or emotional ties breeds competition, mutual exploitation, and alienation.<sup>2</sup> Cities are sites of segregation, economic diversification, and complex social hierarchies.<sup>3</sup> The potential for conflict and public disorder generates the demand for formal social controls. But for its inhabitants, cities are also sites of freedom, interaction, mobility, broad-mindedness, and dynamic exposure to the new, the different, and the modern. They are, in the words of Lewis Mumford, ‘theatres of social action’, where activities are focused into meaningful, collective culmination.<sup>4</sup> They are sites where emerging citizens contest and slip through hierarchies and disciplinary categories, and where they challenge existing structures and rework notions of power.

Like Chicago, the city where Wirth spent much of his intellectual career, Asia’s colonial-era port-cities attracted communities from all over the world to live and trade in close proximity. Asian trading communities took advantage of enhanced shipping and communication technologies to forge new commercial links throughout the region.<sup>5</sup> Between

<sup>1</sup> Louis Wirth, ‘Urbanism as a Way of Life’, *The American Journal of Sociology* 44:1 (1938): 15.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*; Leonard Reissman, *The Urban Process* (New York: The Free Press, 1970)

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*; Max Weber, *The City* (New York: The Free Press, 1958).

<sup>4</sup> Lewis Mumford, ‘What Is a City?’, *Architectural Record* 82:5 (1937): 59–62.

<sup>5</sup> See Daniel R. Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); Frost, ‘Asia’s Maritime Networks’; D. Lombard and J. Aubin, ‘Introduction’, in *Asian Merchants and Businessmen in the Indian Ocean and China Sea*, ed. D. Lombard and J. Aubin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Rajat Kanta Ray, ‘Asian Capital in the Age of European

1891 and 1931, the populations of Rangoon, Singapore, and Penang tripled, while Bangkok's quadrupled; meanwhile, the population of Mandalay, the old, inland heart of the Burmese kingdom, declined by almost a quarter.<sup>6</sup> Some migrants came to cities from the countryside, but most came from the Coromandel Coast, Fujian, and Guangzhou in pursuit of economic opportunity. Urban populations in Southeast Asia were growing faster than European cities and matched the pace of the expanding cities of the United States, which welcomed droves of new migrants from the British Isles and Eastern Europe.<sup>7</sup>

Interactions between the city's diverse inhabitants stimulated the evolution of shared and complex notions of identity, solidifying both communal and inter-communal ties. Following, to some extent, the custom of Asia's early modern ports, spatial divisions emerged around particular ethnic communities. In this chapter, we look at the emergence of distinct ethnic enclaves in the downtown core, which gave rise to a new sense of alienation and moral policing along both class and racial lines. The presence of large numbers of transient male migrants – both European and Asian – generated an increase in prostitution, gambling, and opium use, creating enclaves of vice. Meanwhile, electric streetlights and cinema halls made the downtown core come alive at night for all city-dwellers. Entertainment parks and urban festivities created opportunities for Asians of all races and classes to pick and choose from an eclectic cultural emporium of performances, films, variety shows, and culinary tastes. Everyday urbanites moved in and out of different areas of the city to trade, shop, and be entertained.

We also see divisions emerging between the ruling class and the ruled, and view the city as a site for the exertion of the power and authority of the colonial state and, in Siam's case, the monarch. Siam, led by the modernising King Chulalongkorn, followed the pattern of colonial and European cities in attempting to make the urban landscape more rational, efficient, and clean, while using architecture and the ordering of space to legitimise dynastic rule. As in other colonial cities, sanitation, public order, and suburban spaciousness were initially prioritised for European residential areas; the same was true of Bangkok for the residential playgrounds of Siam's ruling elite. In colonial Rangoon, European officials continually disparaged the unruly, downtown core as ridden with disease

Domination: The Rise of the Bazaar, 1800–1914', *Modern Asian Studies* 29:3 (1995): 449–554.

<sup>6</sup> Gregg Huff, 'Export-Led Growth, Gateway Cities, and Urban Systems in Pre-World War II Southeast Asia', *Journal of Development Studies* 48:10 (2012): 1431–52.

<sup>7</sup> See Adam McKeown, 'Global Migration 1846–1940'. *Journal of World History* 15:2 (2004): 155–89.

and disorder, which they attributed to the racial characteristics of Indian labourers. Meanwhile, both European and Asian landowners built squatter houses that exploited the colonial state's demand for migrant labour and contributed to overcrowding.

The 'disciplining' of the city might be seen in a Foucauldian light, as an exertion of power and social control by the colonial and absolute state. But we can also see it as a global phenomenon of attempted social improvement towards better living conditions at a time in which the expansion of cities all over the world necessitated similar methods of managing growth and containing disease. Municipal councils, staffed mostly by Europeans and an increasing number of Asian civil servants, adopted modern techniques of planning to institute public order and enable the city to run. Urban planning became a truly transnational practice around the turn of the century, as the world's population began moving into cities at an astonishing rate. C.A. Bayly has argued that the advent of industrialisation and the disciplining of public space led to the emergence of global urban culture as a distinct pattern of living.<sup>8</sup> Bayly uses the term 'uniformity' to refer to the global changes that came with the impact of industrialisation and the integration of the world economy from 1780 to 1914.<sup>9</sup> But with reference to the intense period of urban growth between 1880 and 1920, 'simultaneity' may be more appropriate. The term connotes not only a temporal aspect, with innovations in town planning occurring at similar points in time, but also allows for the varied ways in which such innovations were integrated into multiple local settings. Municipal administration, transport systems, suburbs, and urban parks were characteristics that Bangkok, Penang, and Rangoon shared with cities around the world. The tram and the streetcar enabled Asian urbanites to experience technological modernity simultaneously with city-dwellers elsewhere.

We also see how the lines between the colonial elite and the masses, and between segregated ethnic areas, began to blur in the late colonial era, as a rising Asian elite joined affluent European communities in garden suburbs, and as new multi-ethnic middle-class communities emerged around the edges of the downtown core. A new vocabulary of civic nationalism made its mark on the urban landscape, through architects who sought to transform the built environment through hybrid cultural forms that blended both Asian and Western architectural motifs. Asians began demanding access to public services – parks and recreational space – hitherto available only to Europeans and elites.

<sup>8</sup> C.A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World 1780–1914* (London: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 170–98.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12–19.

Ethnic tensions, class divisions, and the increasing mobility and political awareness of the urban population made Asian port-cities particularly combustible in the 1930s. Particularly after the onset of the Depression, a growing number of labourers, students, and ordinary citizens used the city to challenge the authority of the state. When the pace of urban life was brought to a standstill through riots, strikes, and boycotts, governments reacted, usually with brute force. Urban areas expanded and grew denser, while communities grew both fractured and integrated. Throughout this era, the city emerged as a site of social and political experimentation, a crucible of social change.

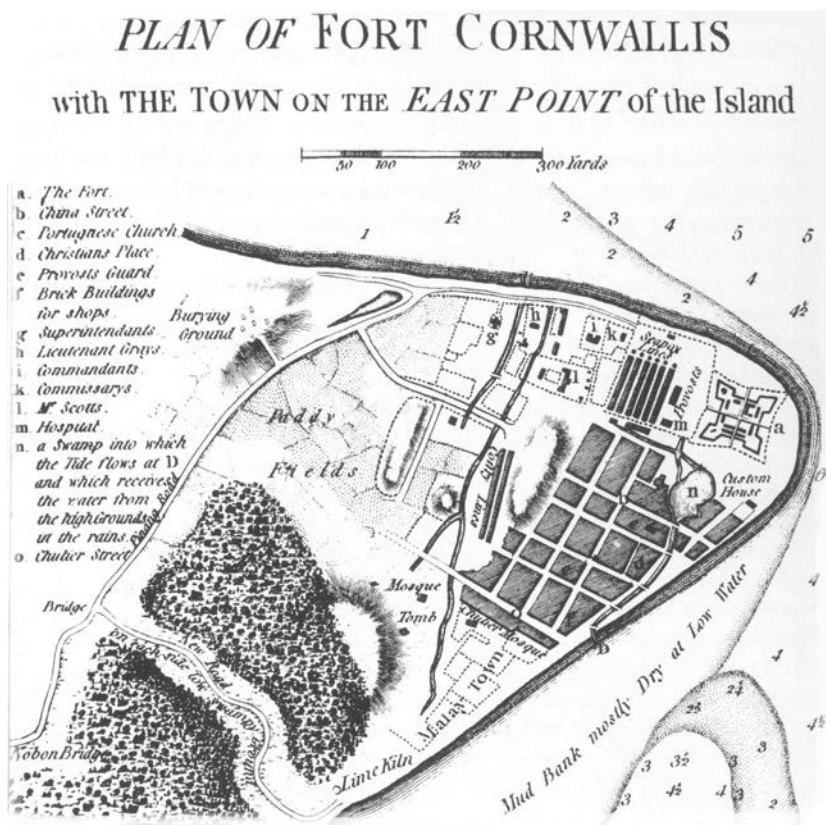
### Visible Continuities and Demographic Disjuncture

The space of the Southeast Asian port-city underwent rapid demographic and economic changes throughout the colonial era, but also showed some visible continuity with port-cities of the age of commerce. These cities were, as always, striking in their diversity, particularly in the proximity of neighbourhoods structured around ethnic communities. While urban geographers often attribute the ethnic division of colonial port-cities to imperial policies of ‘divide and rule’,<sup>10</sup> ethnic enclaves of Indians, Chinese, and other communities in Penang and Singapore had their analogues in the pre-colonial Malacca sultanate. Portuguese and British colonial powers continued to encourage immigration. Asian communities, moreover, had an initial role in the planning process of colonial port-cities. In laying out Penang, Francis Light looked to Portuguese Malacca and consulted with the heads of major ethnic communities in Kedah, applying a small grid model to Penang next to the fort. Kedah Eurasians resided and set up a church on Bishop Street, which ran parallel to China Street, where Chinese merchants lived and set up shop, and Chulia Street, where South Indian Muslims (‘Chulias’) lived and traded, frequenting a nearby mosque.<sup>11</sup> Malays and Sumatrans created a village south of the formal grid, resulting in the emergence of Acheen Street and Malay Lane, which later became Armenian Lane as Armenian merchants moved in.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See for instance: Ahmad Sanusi Hassan, ‘The British Colonial “Divide and Rule” Concept: Its Influence to Transport Access in Inner City of George Town, Penang’, *Transportation* 36:3 (2009); Yue-man Yeung and C. P. Lo, *Changing South-East Asian Cities: Readings on Urbanization* (Singapore; New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 124.

<sup>11</sup> Khoo Su Nin, ‘The Development of George Town’s Historic Centre’, in *George Town: Heritage Buildings of Penang Island George Town: An Inventory of the Heritage Buildings and Ensembles of George Town, Penang* (Penang: Penang Municipal Council Building and Planning Department, 1994), p. xv.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*



Map 2 Popham map of George Town.

A Burmese-Siamese enclave developed to the west of the town centre, with commercial ties maintained with both Burma and Siam. Neighbourhoods in Penang grew haphazardly around the grid system, outpacing plans for mathematically precise streets. Communities on the island were mobile; Eurasians moved out of Bishop Street by the early 1800s to escape the congested commercial centre, while Armenians moved in. From the 1850s, Straits-Chinese moved into the area, changing its urban layout with clan temples and row-houses. Rational planning played catch-up, accommodating to the increasing demand for land and housing as merchants continued to flow into the city. Singapore fared slightly better, but the same problem of grid-like planning, followed by haphazard growth, continued.

By 1855, when faced with a flattened, post-war Rangoon, colonial planners worked from a blank canvas, predicting a massive influx of Asian

migration based on the Penang and Singapore model. William Montgomerie, Singapore's chief surgeon, proposed a wildly ambitious plan of long, narrow streets on a chessboard pattern to accommodate the highest degree of urban density near the waterfront. The city shared its aesthetic destiny with Manhattan, whose narrow grid plan facilitated the orderly sale and development of property, forming the basis of a commercial port.<sup>13</sup> Despite the 'artificial' nature of the scheme, traces of the old city still survived. Fraser and Montgomery created the grid around a central axis: the Sule Pagoda. The British retained the Shwedagon, located at the highest point of the city, as a military post with a powder magazine and a stockade on its western side; Burmese could worship at the pagoda but only access it through its southern entrance. The city prioritised the merchant community, composed largely, in its early years, of British, Indian, Eurasian, and Chinese communities; at the time, the Burmese were not an economic force, though some did work for the colonial administration.<sup>14</sup>

Without direct colonial intervention, Bangkok resembled most closely the pattern of the older Southeast Asian city, with a central cosmic order at its core: Rattanakosin, the walled royal city.<sup>15</sup> On the east side of the island were commoners' settlements, consisting mostly of Thais dwelling along the waterways but also Muslims, Mons, Lao, Khmer, Mon, and Chinese engaged in small trading activities. In an age of increased maritime commerce, the dynamic, commercial heart of the city was south of the palace walls, closest to the sea. The largely Teochew settlement of Sampheng, its bazaars, the commercial heart, and the waterfront shared the characteristics of a colonial port. Chinese and Indian merchants built shops and warehouses, steam-mills and saw-mills, Malays manned navy vessels and built new mosques, and the Catholic descendants of Portuguese and Japanese Christians built new churches; Mons, Vietnamese, and Khmer, and Sunni Muslims also settled here.<sup>16</sup> Bangkok's new government continued its policy of benign neglect of ethnic communities. It recognised the autonomy of migrant communities and relegated jurisdiction to 'governors', 'shahbandars', or 'kapitans' – a similar pattern as had existed in old Malacca, Pegu, and Ayutthaya.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Phillip Lopate, *Waterfront: A Journey around Manhattan* (New York, N.Y.: Crown Publishers, 2004), p. 4.

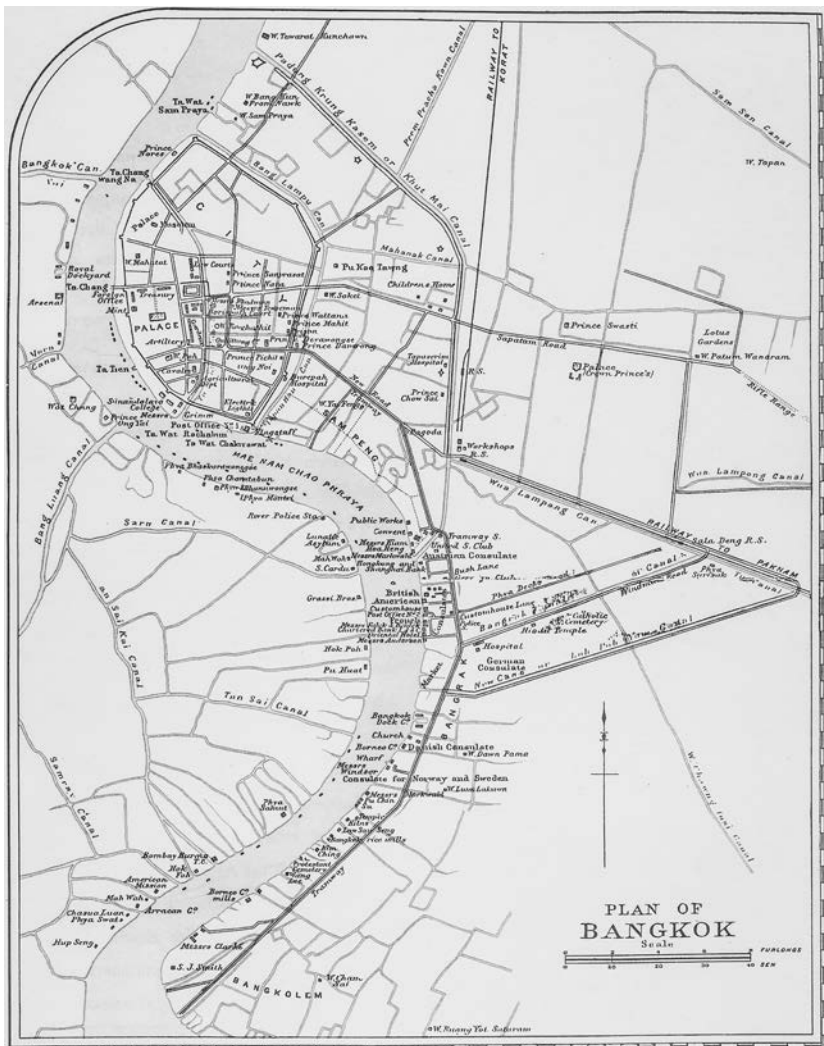
<sup>14</sup> Sarah Maxim, 'The Resemblance in External Appearance: The Colonial Project in Kuala Lumpur and Rangoon', Unpublished PhD Thesis, Cornell University, 1992.

<sup>15</sup> See Reid on 'the Structure of the Southeast Asian City', in *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce Vol. 2*, pp. 77–90.

<sup>16</sup> Wyatt, *Thailand*, p. 129; Tomosugi, *Reminiscences of Old Bangkok*, p. 14.

<sup>17</sup> Van Roy, 'Sampheng: From Ethnic Isolation to National Integration', p. 8; Thomaz, 'Melaka and Its Merchant Communities at the Turn of the Sixteenth Century'; Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce Vol. 2*.





Map 3 Map of Bangkok, 1910.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Bangkok was composed of two different centres of power (see Map 3). To the north was the royal city, where political decisions were made in the palace and carefully channelled to the outside world. To the south was the city's multi-ethnic, commercial heart, dotted with markets, churches, mosques, and temples

that resembled an older Southeast Asian port-city, soon to be joined by the warehouses, rice mills, commercial firms, European banks, and foreign consulates of the colonial era.

Though there were visible similarities with the port-cities of an earlier age, the sheer scale and pace of migration in the colonial era gave the modern Asian port-city a radically new dynamic from the late nineteenth century onwards. Reid argues that there was a trend of 'de-urbanisation' at the beginning of the late colonial period, as colonial governments put an emphasis on agricultural production that resulted in a rapid growth of the rural population, particularly among indigenous groups.<sup>18</sup> Independent Siam, where rural transformation was not as intensive as colonial states, still had a large proportion of its population in Bangkok.<sup>19</sup> Yet all Southeast Asian cities were demographically transformed by the influx of Asian migration during the colonial era. The growth of Rangoon, Bangkok, and, to a lesser extent, Penang as commercial cities required a massive input of labour from the Coromandel coast and the Southern Chinese seaboard. The British encouraged an open-door immigration policy while the Siamese, struck with an investment and export boom, imported labour from Southern China. In the period 1910–30, thousands of Asian migrants flooded into Rangoon, Penang, and Bangkok. Rangoon became, by 1931, a largely Indian city.<sup>20</sup> Bangkok's Chinese population swelled so that by 1935, over a third of the population was thought to be of Chinese origin. Penang's population was largely Chinese.

Table 1 below indicates the demographic mix of ethnicities in each city; however, the stark racial divisions in the census did not always apply to social realities, given the history of intermarriage between long-domiciled migrants and local communities. It also indicates the relative sizes of each city, providing examples of large, medium, and small port-cities at this time (although Penang figures are for the municipality only, not the greater metropolitan area as in the case of Rangoon and Bangkok).

Led by the colonial scholar J.S. Furnivall, historians have stressed that communal tensions were particularly prevalent in Burma. Burmese marginalised from the growing colonial-era economy saw affluent foreign Asian merchants and Europeans who spoke no local languages extracting a wealth of resources from the hinterland for their own profit, and

<sup>18</sup> Anthony Reid, 'South-East Asian Population History and the Colonial Impact', in *Asian Population History*, ed. Ts'ui-jung Liu et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 54–57.

<sup>19</sup> Reid, 'South-East Asian Population History', p. 55; Elson, 'International Commerce', p. 143.

<sup>20</sup> Nalini Ranjan Chakravarti, *The Indian Minority in Burma: The Rise and Decline of an Indian Community* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 19.

Table 1 *Urban populations and ethnic distribution between 1931 and 1935 based on census data, compiled from the 1931 Census of Burma, 1931 Census of Malaya, and Siam Yearbook 1934–35.*

Nationality	Penang (1931)	Rangoon (1931)	Bangkok (1935)
Indigenous	17,766	121,998	645,806
Chinese	101,242	30,626*	241,277
Indian	24,120	181,707**	31,800 (incl. Malays)
European	1,526	4,426	1,354 ('white race')
Eurasian	1,976	9,977 ('Anglo-Indians')	2,137
'Others'	1,760	2,315	43
Japanese	N/A	(359) <sup>21</sup>	213
Cambodian/ Annamese	N/A	N/A	634
Shans and Burmese	N/A	N/A	490
Malays	See 'Indigenous'	296	See 'Indian'
TOTAL	149,408	400,415	921,617

\* Of these, only 16,865 were born in China, meaning that almost half the Chinese population was born in Rangoon.

\*\* As there are two different 'Indian' census classifications, this figure relates to those 'born in India (not Burma)'.

dispossessing the Burmese of their land.<sup>22</sup> This engendered communal resentment, particularly in the wake of the global Depression of the 1930s. Robert Taylor makes the point, however, that members of the Burmese and other indigenous groups were not powerless; Mons and Karens, in particular, 'continued to act as traders, moneylenders, and held important positions in the administration. More important, however, for the power of the Burmese, was the inability of the alien groups to govern and trade without the compliance, if not the support of the indigenous population.'<sup>23</sup> Migrant groups made large contributions to the port-city economy simply by way of tax revenue; in 1931–32, Burmese paid less than 1 per cent of the income and super-tax on commercial incomes, whereas Indians paid over 25 per cent and Europeans over 70 per cent.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Burmese were by no means at

<sup>21</sup> Based on 'List of Permanent Japanese Residents in Burma', Yangon, National Archives. Acc. No. 9527, File No. 278B (1922).

<sup>22</sup> See Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma*, pp. 29–39; J.S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (New York University Press, 1956).

<sup>23</sup> R.H. Taylor, 'The Relationship Between Burmese Social Classes and British-Indian Policy on the Behavior of the Burmese Political Elite, 1937–1942', Unpublished PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 1974, p. 13.

<sup>24</sup> Statement of Income Tax and Supertax for Rangoon Town District, 1931–32, as qud. in *ibid.*, p. 17.

the bottom of the urban hierarchy; Burmese resentment towards Indians was not only towards upper-class Gujaratis and Chettiars, but also towards dock-workers, lower-caste ‘coolies’, and street-sweepers who took on jobs that Burmese refused to take.<sup>25</sup> It was these groups who were responsible for making the city run, and also those who lived in the most abject poverty in crowded, unsanitary conditions. In the 1930s, the cartoonist Shwe-Ta-Lay depicted an affluent Burmese – smoking a cigarette, sporting a jacket, round glasses, leather shoes, and wearing a longyi – having his toenails cut by a Manipuri manicurist in Fychte Square as a stock part of Rangoon’s urban landscape.<sup>26</sup> In a city where affluent Indians were often targets for Burmese resentment, this image shows instead the subservience of lower-class Indians to affluent Burmese.

Siam’s rulers followed a policy of ‘benign neglect’ of different ethnic communities, encouraging Chinese migration for the purposes of trade. Yet anti-Chinese sentiment grew in Bangkok during the 1920s, as newly arrived Chinese communities no longer assimilated into Thai society by learning the Thai language and Sampheng became a hotbed of radical political activity (explored further in Chapter 3).<sup>27</sup> The legal protection given to British Burmans, Dutch Javanese, French Indochinese, and Chinese and Siamese working for American and British firms as foreign subjects caused resentment.<sup>28</sup> The Thai ‘commoner-intellectual’ Phya Anuman reflected on the tensions their unique legal status presented among Bangkokians: ‘some of them turned pompous because of such status and became fearless because they were “protected by the flag” . . . Many such men were snobbish, troublemakers or even gangsters. Hence the term “protected by the flag” inspired both disgust and fear among all people.’<sup>29</sup>

The massive increase in immigration into Burma, Malaya, and Siam led Furnivall to theorise them as ‘plural societies’, crudely structured in a racial hierarchy with Europeans at the top (and in Siam, the aristocracy at the very top), foreign Asian merchants in the middle, and indigenous groups at the bottom.<sup>30</sup> Yet in the city, these stark racial divisions were

<sup>25</sup> See C.A. Bayly, ‘Rangoon (Yangon) 1939–49: The Death of a Colonial Metropolis’, *Centre of South Asian Studies Occasional Paper 3* (2003), p. 9; Chakravarti, *The Indian Minority in Burma*; Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma*.

<sup>26</sup> U Ba Gale, *Shwe-ta-lay Katvan! Shwe-ta-lay cartoons* (Mandalay: Ludu Book House, 1969).

<sup>27</sup> See G. William Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957), pp. 213–60.

<sup>28</sup> Loos, *Subject Siam: Family, Law, and Colonial Modernity in Thailand*, p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> Phya Anuman Rajadhon, *Looking Back: Book One* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1992), p. 83.

<sup>30</sup> On the differences and similarities between Siam and colonial states vis-à-vis the plural society, see Charles Keyes, *The Golden Peninsula: Culture and Adaptation in Mainland Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1995), pp. 280–81.



Figure 1 Shwe-ta-lay cartoon, c. 1930s.

regularly transgressed. Foreign Asians occupied a large range of class levels, from the very bottom to the very top. With expanding educational opportunities, affluent and middle-class Burmese became a significant political force from the 1910s onwards. The city provided new sites of civic participation and cross-cultural interaction, despite the increasing stratification of cities along class and ethnic lines.

### The Unruly Core

The city's waterfront and downtown core were sites of transience and mobility. Since the 1880s, waterfronts were the most visible link between port-cities all over the world, epitomising a new age in which maritime Asia played a central role in global commerce. Harbours were filled with jostling steamers and junks, flying flags of various colours. New wharves, warehouses, foreign banks, and mercantile firms lent a visible coherence to ports from Liverpool to Port Said, Bombay to Shanghai, and Hong Kong to San Francisco. The neo-classical imperial architecture of colonial ports was also visible in Bangkok, where foreign consulates fronted the water, protecting European commercial interests and creating a visual coherence with neighbouring colonial port-cities.<sup>31</sup> Bangkok's Oriental hotel, Penang's E&O, Singapore's Raffles, and Rangoon's Strand Hotel – the latter three owned by the Armenian Sarkies brothers – were iconic symbols of the age, the watering holes of the European expatriate communities, tourists, and only the most affluent Asians. More affordable hotels, guesthouses, and seamen hostels also sprang up along the waterfront and downtown. Increasing arrivals of tourists and steamships created a diversity of new professions. A burgeoning Asian tourist industry employed cleaners, hotel cooks, and multilingual tour-guides.

On jetties, rickshaw drivers waited to take passengers into town, while dockworkers and stevedores provided the labour for unloading ships and working in rice mills. The languages heard on the docks were varied: Tamil, Chittagonian, and Telegu dockworkers were prominent in Rangoon, while Teochews and Hokkiens laboured in Bangkok. In Penang, Muslim sailors and stevedores lived along King Street, three streets north of the waterfront, called by Tamils 'the Street of Boatmen'.<sup>32</sup> Among the ranks of stevedores were also intriguing European figures who had fallen between bureaucratic cracks. A. Vrsalovich, for example, was

<sup>31</sup> On the architecture of colonial Asia see Thomas Metcalf, *An Imperial Vision: Indian Architecture and Britain's Raj* (London: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>32</sup> Khoo Su Nin, *Streets of George Town Penang* (Penang: Janus Print & Resources, 1993), p. 100.



Figure 2 Postcard of Weld Quay, Penang.

born in 1869 to Serbian parents in Dalmatia, grew up in Wales from the age of seven, and joined the British army to arrive in Burma in the wake of the Third Anglo-Burmese War with the Rangoon Volunteer Force.<sup>33</sup> After having lived in Rangoon for forty years, a city he considered home, he petitioned to fight with the Indian Defence Force during the outbreak of the First World War, whereupon he discovered that he was declared an ‘enemy alien’ due to his birthplace in the former Austro-Hungarian empire, an accusation which led him to petition the British government for naturalisation papers.

Usually, migrants were single and transient men, considered by urban geographers to be a ‘floating population’.<sup>34</sup> As a result, prostitution flourished as it had in Madras, Colombo, Shanghai, and Singapore, with brothels catering to both Asians and Europeans. Rangoon’s infamous red-light district, rivalled only by Singapore’s, was home to hundreds of prostitutes from as far away as Germany, Russia, Japan, China, the Levant, and even England.<sup>35</sup> Hierarchies of prostitution emerged, as

<sup>33</sup> A. Vrsalovich. Myanmar National Archives, Yangon. ‘1920 Naturalization’ files. 2N-4.

<sup>34</sup> Spate and Trueblood, ‘Rangoon: A Study in Urban Geography’, p. 64.

<sup>35</sup> On European prostitutes and white prestige, see Philippa Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 303.

**RANGOON BURMA  
NOT A BURMESE  
TOWN AT ALL**

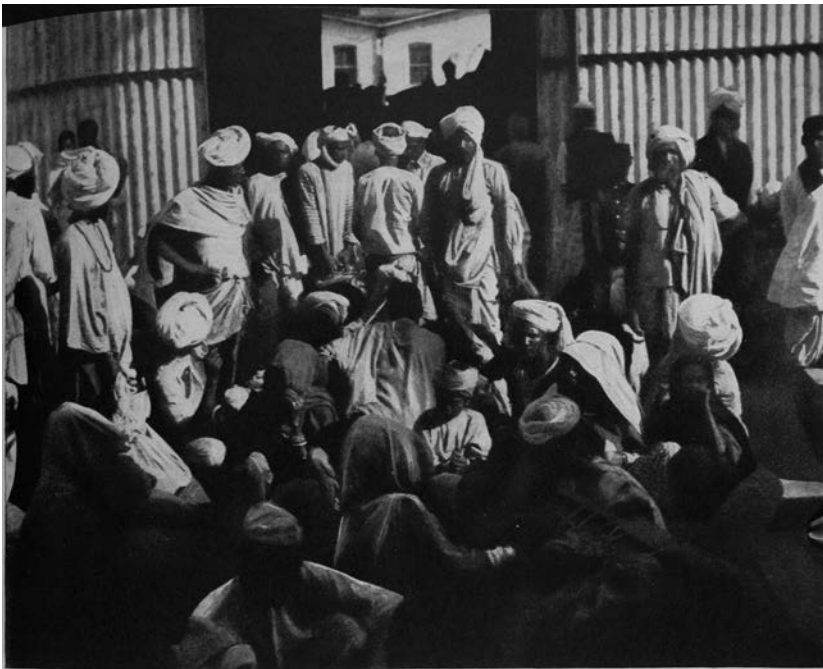
People of many races make up the population of Rangoon, capital of Burma. In a city where Indians outnumber Burmese, it is not surprising to see a well-to-do Indian Moslem woman (above) in the street with her Hindu maid. The high percentage of Indians in Rangoon may have influenced Burma's recent vote to stay with India.

Thousands of Chinese make their homes in Rangoon, where their industry and thrift assure them a livelihood. And, being Chinese, they love to buy food from a traveling restaurant such as this fellow countryman of theirs carries about the streets. From its compartments he brings forth dishes that are hot, tantalizing and cheap.



Figures 3 and 4 Photo essay on Rangoon from *Asia* magazine, 1933. Images of a Muslim woman with a Hindu maid, a Chinese street-food vendor, a crowd on the dock, and Burmese women on the street.





A. S. ROSE



EDGAR ALLEN FORBES

Rangoon is a river city, twenty-one miles from the sea. To handle its huge export trade—for it is the third seaport in British India—about fifteen hundred steamers make entry here in a single year, besides sailing vessels. Almost all incoming visitors land in Rangoon. Above is a crowd at the dock, waiting for a passenger boat

At the left is a Rangoon street scene. Even if Rangoon is more cosmopolitan than it is Burmese, it has something of the happy spirit of the Burmese people, who, because they are so gay, vivacious and indolent, are sometimes called "the Irish of the East." They allow the various aliens in the midst of them to make all the money

Figures 3 and 4 (cont.)

they did in Victorian London and Shanghai, mirroring the class structures of the cosmopolitan city.<sup>36</sup> By the 1920s in Bangkok's Sampheng, increasing numbers of single working-class Chinese were frequent visitors to brothels, serviced by Chinese, Thai, Japanese, Vietnamese, and Russian prostitutes.<sup>37</sup> Prostitution was then one of the most ubiquitous features of Bangkok's urban landscape, even in the most public spaces from Lumpini Park to Ratchadamnoen Road.<sup>38</sup> In Penang, according to labour historian Leong Yee Fong, brothel areas were 'well demarcated: along Campbell Street where the higher class prostitutes and virgins were located for the wealthy, Cintra street where Chinese and Japanese brothels were found, Rope Walk and the Kuala Kangsar Road area (behind Chowrasta Market) where services could be obtained at budget prices for the 'coolie' class and the rickshaw pullers'.<sup>39</sup>

Transgender entertainment was also a feature of Rangoon's red-light district. Such practices have had a long history in Burma, where male performers have been known to don female attire in courtly theatre and musical entertainment, as well as in popular spiritual rituals.<sup>40</sup> In the case of the red-light district, the clientele seemed to be an Indian merchant class. The missionary and abolition campaigner John Cowen reported with horror on the coffee-shops and concert rooms frequented by Muslim and Hindu traders, where young men dressed in saris entertained visitors who sat along the walls, drinking, smoking, talking, and enjoying the dancing. An 'educated Indian acquaintance' told Cowen that he did not 'practice the habit' himself, but went to enjoy the music, and only with women.<sup>41</sup> Rangoon's red-light district was clearly becoming a centre of popular entertainment even for 'respectable' South Asian men, as well as an area where European prestige was heavily undermined. European traders and soldiers swaggered out of brothels in a drunken state, much to the amusement of Indians, Burmese, and Chinese passing by.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (London: Virago, 1992); Gail Hershatter, 'The Hierarchy of Shanghai Prostitution, 1870–1949', *Modern China* 15:4 (1989): 463–98.

<sup>37</sup> Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, p. 77; Lawrence Chua, 'The City and the City: Race, Nationalism, and Architecture in Early Twentieth-Century Bangkok', *Journal of Urban History* 1:26 (2014): 17.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>39</sup> Yee Fong Leong. 'Prostitution in Colonial Malaya with Special Reference to Penang: Some Preliminary Thoughts'. Paper presented at Penang Story Conference, 2002 (<http://penangstory.net.my/chines-content-paperLeongYeeFong.html>).

<sup>40</sup> Michael Peletz, *Gender Pluralism since Early Modern Times* (London: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>41</sup> John Cowen, 'Report of Observations in the Segregated Areas of Rangoon in March 1915', Association of Moral and Social Hygiene Files: Burma and Rangoon. 3 AMS/D/37/02. London Metropolitan Women's Library, London.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

Challenges to public order and social mores, such as the increase in prostitution, served to mobilise both local and global civil society. Burmese community leaders signed a petition to the municipal council for the prosecution of the large number of foreign men engaged in the traffic. Cowen's report to London's Association of Moral and Social Hygiene noted the worrying proximity of the brothel district to schools, churches, and other civic institutions.<sup>43</sup> International legislation had little effect. As a result of the 1921 League of Nations convention for the Suppression of Traffic in Women and Children, brothels in both Rangoon and Penang were formally closed. According to E.J.L. Andrew, a sociologist studying labour conditions in Rangoon, the trade then spread all over the city, 'often in the least expected places to the annoyance of respectable residents', and 'led to open soliciting in public places and to an increase in venereal disease'.<sup>44</sup> A British journalist based in Penang wrote that the trade persisted through the illegal houses opened by 'wily Chinese proprietors and proprietresses [*sic*]'.<sup>45</sup> In order to ensure that closed brothels would not reopen, efforts had been made in Rangoon by the police to encourage 'a respectable class of Indian workpeople and their families to come in and reside in the premises' so that former brothels became 'full of the bustle and life of healthy and honest coolly [*sic*] families'.<sup>46</sup> While the colonial state, and sectors of Rangoon civil society, saw single, transient migrants as morally degraded, they welcomed families of hard-working migrants, particularly Tamils, among whom prostitution was less common.<sup>47</sup> The unhindered growth of the port-city began to take a turn towards more long-term patterns of settlement by Asian migrants, a process increasingly seen as integral to social stability.

Red-light districts were often associated with Chinese enclaves, a perception rapidly becoming a global phenomenon. From the late nineteenth century, 'Chinatowns' emerged from San Francisco to London's Limehouse, seen by Westerners as sites of a mysterious, self-enclosed, and often criminal world. An intrepid Swedish prince recorded

<sup>43</sup> John Cowen, 'Public Prostitution in Rangoon. Report to the Association of Moral and Social Hygiene', Typescript Report. Association of Moral and Social Hygiene Files: Burma and Rangoon. 3 AMS/D/37/02. London Metropolitan Women's Library, London.

<sup>44</sup> E.J.L. Andrew, *Indian Labour in Rangoon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 188–89.

<sup>45</sup> George Bilainkin, *Hail Penang!: Being the Narrative of Comedies and Tragedies in a Tropical Outpost, among Europeans, Chinese, Malays, and Indians* (London: Sampson Low, Maston & Co, 1932), p. 97.

<sup>46</sup> John Cowen, 'Public Prostitution in Rangoon. Report to the Association of Moral and Social Hygiene'.

<sup>47</sup> The point about Tamil labourers is made in Andrew, *Indian Labour in Rangoon*, p. 187.

hazy opium dens and lurid gambling halls ‘housing collections of criminal physiognomies to rival even the London Docks’.<sup>48</sup> Somerset Maugham, encapsulating European perceptions of the degradation and disorder of ethnically segregated areas, described in a travelogue of Bangkok a web of dark and squalid streets, ‘tortuous alleys’ paved with cobble stones where industrious Chinese ‘live their lives apart and indifferent to the Western capital that the rulers of Siam have sought to make out of this strange, flat, confused city’.<sup>49</sup> Yet distinct ethnic enclaves had been an enduring phenomenon of the Southeast Asian port-city and, contrary to European perceptions, were not self-enclosed worlds. Reid’s analysis of early port-cities describes Chinese quarters as resembling a fair, where townspeople went to buy tools and small manufactures went to eat and to drink.<sup>50</sup> They were sites of commerce, cuisine, and entertainment open to all visitors.

While Western travel accounts view Chinatowns as sources of disorder and criminality, Burmese and Thai memoirists treat encounters with Chinese ‘otherness’ with fascination.<sup>51</sup> Khaing was in awe of an affluent Chinese home she visited in Rangoon, with yellow cakes, mother-of-pearl chairs, portraits of Confucian gentlemen, and girls clad with diamonds. Phya Anuman’s fragmentary memoirs of Sampheng describe a world populated mostly by both Thai and Chinese speakers, though Burmese, Malays, Arabs, and Indians also kept shops there. Where Maugham saw ‘tortuous alleys’, Anuman describes small streets full of Chinese artists and painters who set up small desk-studios to work on paintings and writing.<sup>52</sup> Scenes of lottery clerks and street performances, gambling dens, and even grotesque canal scenes are recounted with a child’s delight.<sup>53</sup> Where gambling centres in European accounts are described as disreputable, ‘hazy’, and ‘criminal’, Anuman describes them as ‘centres that drew crowds and were full of fun’.<sup>54</sup> Shows at gambling houses include Chinese opera as well as Thai classical drama, Laotian song and dance, or Thai folk singing. Anuman watches Chinese opera late one night at the Phrommet Shrine, at the mouth of Sathorn lane. He follows the love story involving a man and a female ghost, and comments, fascinated by the staging and singing of the songs, feeling ‘pleasantly

<sup>48</sup> William Louis Charles, *In the Lands of the Sun. Notes and Memories of a Tour in the East* (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1915), p. 100.

<sup>49</sup> Somerset Maugham, *The Gentleman in the Parlour* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 117.

<sup>50</sup> Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce Vol. 2*, p. 92.

<sup>51</sup> On Chinese ‘otherness’, see Anthony Reid, *Imperial Alchemy: Nationalism and Political Identity in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 49–80. See also the analysis in Chua, ‘The City and the City’, of the urban reflections of the Thai poet Nai But, p. 17.

<sup>52</sup> Anuman, *Looking Back*, p. 173. <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143. <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

sad without any understanding of the dialogue', and intrigued by the voice of a young girl accompanied by a Chinese 'fiddle'.<sup>55</sup> Popular street theatre thus provided a mode where Chinese 'otherness' became an integral part of the spectacular urban public culture of Asian port-cities.

Muslim and South Asian popular theatre also emerged in these cities. *Likay*, Siamese folk theatre, was first introduced in Bangkok by Thai Muslims in Sampheng. Plays featured an opening piece with an 'entrance of Indian', a comedian styling himself as a 'Babu' dressed in white with a cap, dancing, singing, and parodying an Indian accent.<sup>56</sup> The deployment of cultural stereotypes provided a mode in which Indian 'otherness' was played with, satirised, and made familiar. In Penang, where Chinese were in a majority, distinct Tamil enclaves sprang up, where Tamil stage dramas were regularly performed in the 1930s at an open area next to the villages, attracting large crowds.<sup>57</sup> Penang's 'Boria' entailed choral street performances by Indian and Malay Shiite Muslims during the Islamic lunar new year, and drew together multiple sections of the community by the early twentieth century. By comparison, the lack of South Asian or Chinese street theatre in Rangoon is noticeable. The dense, mathematical layout of Rangoon's downtown core promoted efficiency and discipline, creating stark lines between public and private space, demarcated in narrow blocks of ethnic enclaves rather than the fluid, partly hidden urban villages and meandering side streets where popular migrant street theatre could flourish.

### Markets, Street Food, and Amusements

Asian port-cities hosted various 'sites of interaction' between diverse Asian communities.<sup>58</sup> Many of these emerged around cultures of eating, shopping, and popular entertainment, and were often located near to or within the ethnic enclaves of the downtown core. J.S. Furnivall noted dryly that in the colonial 'plural society' epitomised by that in Burma, races met only in the marketplace, returning home to their own customary traditions and sharing no common values apart from economic

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>56</sup> Mattani Moj dara Rutnin, *Dance, Drama and Theatre in Thailand: The Process of Development and Modernization* (Bangkok: Silkworm, 1996); Anuman, *Looking Back: Book One*, p. 131.

<sup>57</sup> Tamil writer Anthony Muthu as quid. in Himanshu Batt. 'Little India', The Penang File ([www.theoifamily.com/ThePenangfileb/jan-2003/history26.htm](http://www.theoifamily.com/ThePenangfileb/jan-2003/history26.htm)), last accessed 14 August. 2010.

<sup>58</sup> Tim Harper and Sunil Amrith, 'Sites of Asian Interaction: An Introduction', *Modern Asian Studies* 46:2 (2012): 249–57.

demand.<sup>59</sup> Yet Furnivall's denigration of the market overlooked its social significance in Southeast Asian societies. As Reid observed of the early modern history of the region, markets were the central organising principle of trade even in extreme periods of growth.<sup>60</sup> While markets were a distinct feature of pre-industrial societies throughout the world, multi-ethnic markets were a noticeable feature of the Southeast Asian port-city. Prices were fixed in the process of bargaining, with stalls run by indigenous women traders as well as male migrant traders from South and East Asia and as far away as Persia and Europe. Market practices had long been ingrained with economic as well as social relationships that generated trust between customers and vendors. Processes of financial transaction, bargaining, exchanging gossip and news, securing goods, and setting prices enabled urban-dwellers to connect across ethnic lines.

The multi-ethnic Asian market adapted to the growth of the modern city. In Penang and Rangoon, municipal councils attempted to bring the traditional marketplace into the modern world via the shopping arcade. The success of these plans hinged on their ability to attract Asian traders. Grand visions of municipal governments to create modern emporiums resulted in the establishment of Chowrasta market in Penang, which was populated largely by Indian Muslims, and Pulau Tikus market, which attracted a massive influx and was then deserted save for a solitary pair of stallholders.<sup>61</sup> Rangoon's Scott Market, a municipal market completed in 1925 and named after the city's municipal commissioner, consisted of a massive central covered arcade thirty feet high, made of steel and concrete with roof tiles from Marseilles. Over a thousand stalls were available for traders in the market, with a separate building known as the Chinese bazaar devoted to the sale of pork and vegetables. The market was expected to 'take its proper place as a leading emporium for the trade of the City and the supply of the daily necessities of life'.<sup>62</sup> At first, Scott Market had trouble fulfilling the vision of planners in the 1920s, with half of the stalls remaining empty. Asian traders initially resisted filling the modern stalls, retaining older market traditions of open-space bazaars.

By the 1930s, however, Scott Market acquired more traders and became a popular shopping venue for both Western and Asian middle-class women. The market was the hub of a globalising world, providing everything from native fruits and vegetables to 'cottons from England and Japan, silks and velvets from France, handlooms of Amarapura, and *pinni*,

<sup>59</sup> Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice*, p. 304.

<sup>60</sup> See Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce Vol. 2*, p. 91.

<sup>61</sup> *Eastern Courier*, 7 December 1929, p. 5.

<sup>62</sup> 'Report on the Municipal Administration of the City of Rangoon 1925–1926', London, India Office Records. IOR/V/24/2958.

the handwoven cotton goods of Burma'.<sup>63</sup> Indian vendors sold leather slippers embroidered with gold and silver, while Chinese shoemakers adapted to Western tastes by making 'fashionable, handmade European shoes'.<sup>64</sup> Besides Indian and Chinese traders, young Burmese women also had stalls in Scott Market and the Soortee Bazaar.<sup>65</sup> The enduring presence of these young Burmese women in the market suggests a persistent tradition in Southeast Asian societies where local women played a central role in indigenous commerce along with migrant traders.<sup>66</sup>

Shopping provided a new mode of freedom for middle-class Asian women, drawing them into a global market that provided a wealth of consumer choices within the city. An affluent and emerging middle class frequented traditional markets as well as new department stores such as Roe & Co. in Rangoon. They bought food and house-wares from street hawkers and ordered items from overseas catalogues. Khaing encapsulates the experience of a bourgeois Burmese woman who, through shopping, leaves the home to explore the city. Her narratives of the city resemble those of urban female writers in London as well as the Shanghai writer Eileen Chang, who flits between the modern department store to shopping in open markets for groceries, engaging with ordinary Chinese, while focusing on the sensuous, trivial, and superfluous details of urban life.<sup>67</sup> Khaing's experience of the city through consumption is similar, yet her urban world is more culturally diverse than London or Shanghai, both in the globalism of its products and the ethnic background of its vendors. Shopping for a Burmese outfit encompasses, in her words, 'the varied talents of all communities of the cosmopolitan city'.<sup>68</sup> She buys *longyis* from Indian merchants in Scott Market and finds combs in a Sino-Burmese quarter and cotton prints sold by Burmese, 'made in Japan but manufactured with such an eye to Burmese requirements as regards texture, colours, design and width'.<sup>69</sup> Goldwork, she notes, is still given to Burmese goldsmiths in preference to any other, while trade in diamonds is in the hands of Hindu jewellers on Mogul streets.<sup>70</sup> Glass

<sup>63</sup> Muriel Sue DeGaa Upfill, *An American in Burma, 1930 to 1942* (Tempe: Arizona State University, 1999), p. 12.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>65</sup> Mi Mi Khaing, *Burmese Family* (London: Longmans, 1946), pp. 114–15.

<sup>66</sup> See Anthony Reid, 'Female Roles in Pre-Colonial Southeast Asia', *Modern Asian Studies* 22:3 (1988): 629–45, and a nuanced analysis by Barbara Watson Andaya, 'Women and Economic Change: The Pepper Trade in Pre-Modern Southeast Asia', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 38:2 (1995): 165–95.

<sup>67</sup> See Virginia Woolf, 'Street Haunting', in *Collected Essays Vol. 1* (London: Hogarth, 1967); Erika Diane Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Lee, *Shanghai Modern*, pp. 267–306.

<sup>68</sup> Khaing, *Burmese Family*, p. 114. <sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 114–16. <sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

buttons, imported from Czechoslovakia, are thought too frail and ephemeral, so glass from Mandalay is sourced from a cousin instead.<sup>71</sup> While the experience of shopping was celebrated as a treasure hunt for the best and most affordable items, Khaing's preference for high-quality, locally made products (Asian rather than Western, and, if possible, Burmese-made) in the purchase of a Burmese outfit suggested that her mode of consumption rested loosely in the desire for cultural authenticity and popular nationalism. This was part of an ongoing practice of material politics in colonial society, where consumption, particularly by women, played a vital role in the construction of the public sphere.<sup>72</sup> Radical nationalist students would later promote a hard-line policy of wearing and cajoling their female peers to only buy Burmese-made goods, drawing on models of popular protest from India.

Street food attracted cosmopolitan crowds in all three cities. Chinese, Indian, and Muslim enclaves were sites where Asians of all backgrounds gravitated. Urbanites travelled to different parts of the city attracted by affordable, appealing culinary fare. Partaking in diverse eating rituals enabled curiosity and sensory connection with other communities' cultural worlds, while experiments in mingling different culinary traditions resulted in hybrid cuisines distinctive to the cosmopolitan Asian port-city. Penang's street-food heritage is legendary, constituting an eclectic mix of Hokkien, Hainanese, Cantonese, Malay, Tamil, and Thai cuisine, generating a host of unique dishes. In Bangkok's Sampheng, food stalls around gambling centres sold Chinese, Indian, and Thai 'fast food' (rice, curry, noodles, and sweets).<sup>73</sup> A resident of Rangoon noted:

Rangoon was the gourmet's paradise. Besides Western and Burmese dishes one could obtain every kind of Chinese delicacy in the city's Chinatown, the largest outside China after Singapore. Halal food was sold in the food-stalls in the shadow of the mosques on Mogul Street. Scattered all over the city were the eating-houses of the other communities that made up cosmopolitan Rangoon. There were Hindu and Muslim sweetmeat shops, Brahmin and Punjabi hotels and Panthay (Chinese Muslim) restaurants.<sup>74</sup>

The Chinese and Indian sections of Rangoon's downtown core hosted night bazaars that were popular with all communities of the city, lit by new technologies of electrification. As Khaing observed:

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Matthew Hilton and Martin Daunton, 'Material Politics: An Introduction', in *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America* (Oxford: Berg, 2001).

<sup>73</sup> Anuman, *Looking Back: Book One*, p. 145.

<sup>74</sup> Frank Hastings, *Burma Yesterday and Tomorrow* (Bombay: Thacker & Co, 1944), p. 7.



Night bazaars were eminently respectable, all Rangoon families being addicted to the habit of eating out as a supper after their dinner at home. They drove in cars to the pavement stalls of Chinatown, Moghul Street and Yagyaw . . . at Indian and Chinese shops they had a plank thrust through to rest on the doors of the car, and ate sitting there. After eating rich Mohammedan food or delicious Chinese dishes, they drove a few streets further on to eat in the same fashion at an ice-cream or sherbet stall.<sup>75</sup>

The accessibility of cheap, quality food downtown and in ethnic enclaves thus facilitated movements to subversive parts of the city; a popular Japanese food-stall on 34th street, for instance, attracted Asians to the middle of Rangoon's brothel district.<sup>76</sup>

In Bangkok, public fairs took on two different roles – as sites of fraternisation between the Europeans and the Siamese elite, and more popular sites of interaction between the diverse Asian citizens of Bangkok. In staging fairs and exhibitions in parks, class distinctions in Bangkok were actively enforced. In his 1928 *Guide to Bangkok*, Eric Seidenfaden described 'the cold weather fair', held in January and February in three royal parks, as 'a kind of Tivoli, Lunapark or Coney Island only more aristocratic'.<sup>77</sup> The fair was divided into two parts, the latter portion staged and frequented by the aristocracy and meant to impress European visitors. It featured stalls kept by aristocratic women, performances of classical Thai plays, exhibitions of the Red Cross movement and Royal State Railways, large dance halls, restaurants, and open air cafes, where, on a Friday evening, orchestras played selections of European and American music.<sup>78</sup> They catered to the European taste for oriental exoticism by advertising that in the fair, 'tourists will meet the whole "upper ten" of Siamese society and have an opportunity to admire the Siamese lady, who with her slender graceful figure, her wealth of dark tresses, black lustrous eyes and pearl white teeth ranks in charms and elegance with any type of beauties of the world'.<sup>79</sup> This portion of the fair permitted the upper class to showcase their own vision of the modern Thai nation: technologically and culturally up to date (railways, dance halls, and Western music), humanitarian (the Red Cross movement), yet

<sup>75</sup> Khaing, *Burmese Family*, p. 118.

<sup>76</sup> John Cowen, 'Public Prostitution in Rangoon. Report to the Association of Moral and Social Hygiene', Typescript Report, London Metropolitan Women's Library, Association of Moral and Social Hygiene Files: Burma and Rangoon. 3 AMS/D/37/02.

<sup>77</sup> Seidenfaden, *Guide to Bangkok*, pp. 60–62.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. See also Elizabeth Moore and Navanath Osiri, 'Urban Forms and Civic Space in Nineteenth- to Early Twentieth-Century Bangkok and Rangoon', *Journal of Urban History* 40:1 (2013): 10.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

'authentically Thai' (classical Thai plays, the promotion of an ideal of Siamese womanhood).

By contrast, the more 'popular' portion of the fair was a haphazard and less staged affair, where 'the Chinese dominate with their stalls, selling cheap toys, cakes and sweets. Besides this all sorts of popular amusements such as animal theatres, strong men, sorcerers, etc., are found here and the populace enjoys itself immensely.'<sup>80</sup> Popular Chinese entertainments were also advertised in the local press, including a Chinese circus featuring elephants, horses, tigers, acrobats, a Chinese orchestra, and Asian dance. Accessibility was available to all at a range of prices from 16-baht box seats to 50-cent stalls.<sup>81</sup> Chinese circuses also visited Penang, featuring tamed tigers and bears. On one occasion, the 'Great Chinese Circus' held a special performance to raise funds for a 'Chinese Pressmen's Association', giving the circus free publicity in Penang's *Eastern Courier* and suggesting shared aims and patronage networks in print and popular urban culture.<sup>82</sup> Chinese patrons treated culture as a commodity, making the thrill of the spectacle available to a mass audience for a price.

Entertainment parks provided a chance for various forms of popular entertainment to co-exist in the same space, providing what Meng Yue calls an 'entertainment cosmopolitanism'.<sup>83</sup> As in Shanghai and Singapore, where the 'Worlds' entertainment parks provided a venue for multi-racial interaction, Penang had the 'New World' entertainment park, which showcased Chinese opera, Malay *bangsawan* (a hybrid form of popular theatre discussed in Chapter 6), cinema, and food stalls in the same space.<sup>84</sup> These venues were open to the public, allowing crowds to move fluidly through different cultural experiences, hear different languages, and mingle with people of difference classes and cultures.<sup>85</sup> As Yue argues with reference to Shanghai, the interaction of various 'subjects from all levels of culture' could be interpreted as 'affirming, critical, or both; and it brought to the urban crowd a strategy for understanding its complicated and deceptive cosmopolitan world'.<sup>86</sup> Though the 'Worlds' were conceived and funded by Chinese communities, the space they provided allowed multitude of communities to collectively experience a shared, cosmopolitan identity grounded in the diversity of

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. <sup>81</sup> *Krungthep Daily Mail*, 4 January 1928, p. 4.

<sup>82</sup> *Eastern Courier*, 21 December 1929, p. 6.

<sup>83</sup> Meng Yue, *Shanghai and the Edges of Empire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 171 ff.

<sup>84</sup> Wong Yunn Chii and Tan Kar Lin, 'Emergence of a Cosmopolitan Space for Culture and Consumption: The New World Amusement Park – Singapore (1923–70) in the Interwar Years', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 5:2 (2004).

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. Khoo Kiet Siew. Interview by author. Penang. 31 October 2007.

<sup>86</sup> Yue, *Shanghai and the Edges of Empire*, p. 206.

the port-city. The persistence of these fairs resonated with an older age of commerce, as in the early descriptions of Dagon, where the town's great seasonal fairs attracted multitudes of people by land and sea.

### Disciplining the City

From the point of view of municipal and state authorities, the 'unruly core' of the port-city needed to be managed carefully. As Europeans moved into Southeast Asian port-cities, they brought with them Victorian obsessions with hygiene, public order, and social control, seeking to protect themselves from disease, disorder, and the potential for local rebellion. The literature on the colonial city has emphasised the segregation between the 'modern' European town and the 'traditional' native area, pointing to examples of European cantonment areas and hill stations in which Europeans isolated themselves from the native population.<sup>87</sup> Other scholars have challenged the stark 'dual city' model of the colonial cities by pointing to the blurring of boundaries between European and 'native' areas. In Calcutta, as Swati Chattopadhyay has argued, the lines between Calcutta's 'White Town' and 'Black Town' were fluid, as neither area constituted a homogeneous community.<sup>88</sup> Even before colonial administrators set down boundaries in the late eighteenth century, both Indian and European investors bought large tracts of land. In the early 'free trade' context of Asia's port-cities, money rather than colonial authority dictated the use of such spaces.<sup>89</sup>

In Penang, founded without the backing of the colonial government, spatial and ethnic divisions within the city were less rigid than they were in more rigorously planned colonial cities like Singapore. Penang relied, as Anoma Pieris has observed, on the cooperation of non-European traders; with Asians and Europeans living adjacent to each other, racial and territorial boundaries were often blurred.<sup>90</sup> In Singapore, by contrast, Raffles made a concerted attempt to divide ethnic communities along spatial lines, using geographic barriers and urban regulation to segregate

<sup>87</sup> The classic study of the 'dual city' is Janet Abu-Lughod, 'Tale of Two Cities: The Origins of Modern Cairo', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 7:4 (1965): 429–57; Anthony King, *Colonial Urban Development: Culture, Social Power, and Environment* (London: Routledge, 1976); Paul Rabinow, *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

<sup>88</sup> Swati Chattopadhyay, 'The Limits of "White Town" in Colonial Calcutta', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 59:2 (2000).

<sup>89</sup> Chattopadhyay, 'The Limits of "White Town"', p. 155.

<sup>90</sup> Anoma Pieris, *Hidden Hands and Divided Landscapes: A Penal History of Singapore's Plural Society* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), p. 43.

and contain the poor.<sup>91</sup> Rangoon, divided into a mathematical grid system by a British surgeon from Singapore, took this one step further, following the standard pattern of colonial cities in segregating European areas into a cantonment area around the Shwedagon Pagoda, replete with large compounds, clubs, manicured lake gardens, and open spaces preserved for the European community. These were reserved solely for Europeans, distinct from the bustling core of downtown Rangoon. Colonial cities focused on channelling improvements in sanitation and a potable water supply on European residential areas first, as Jyoti Hosagrahar has shown in the case of colonial Delhi.<sup>92</sup> Yet towards the end of the nineteenth century, colonial planners increasingly took a citywide approach to sanitation and transportation, attempting to both control and connect different parts of the city.

While colonial knowledge on urban planning and management circulated across colonial cities, this expertise was not confined to imperial networks alone. Municipal administration became a necessary requirement for managing growth and maintaining social order in cities around the world. Pierre-Yves Saunier and Shane Ewen have referred to the late nineteenth century as the ‘transnational municipal moment’, when municipal administration and technical know-how was circulated across borders by municipal officials, technicians, firms, scholars, and reformers, thus placing cities in a new realm of ideas, technologies, and regulations with its own cartography and chronology.<sup>93</sup> By the late nineteenth century, the growth of municipal government in British India as well as England influenced municipal councils in the Straits and Rangoon. Rangoon municipal commissioners, for instance, looked to urban models such as the zoning of East Birmingham into factory and residential zones, as well as the broad layout of new American cities in the 1910s, knitted together with ‘cheap lighting’ and ‘cheap pipes’.<sup>94</sup> Asian port-cities cannot simply be characterised as colonial cities but aspired, as Prashant Kidambi has argued, to be ‘modern metropolises’, responding to the challenges of rapid industrialisation and massive labour migration, including public health and sanitation.<sup>95</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>92</sup> See Jyoti Hosagrahar, *Indigenous Modernities: Negotiating Architecture and Urbanism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), pp. 83–113.

<sup>93</sup> Pierre-Yves Saunier and Shane Ewen, ‘Introduction’, in *Another Global City: Historical Explorations into the Transnational Municipal Moment, 1850–2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>94</sup> *Report of the Suburban Development Committee of the Rangoon Development Trust* (Rangoon: Government Press, 1917), p. 4.

<sup>95</sup> Prashant Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis: Colonial Governance and Public Culture in Bombay, 1890–1920* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 9.

As we have seen, Bangkok shared some characteristics of a colonial port-city or extraterritorial port, with commercial firms and foreign consulates lining a bustling waterfront, while retaining its status as a royal capital. In designing Rattanakosin, the royal city within Bangkok, Siam's government drew inspiration from both colonial and European cities. From the mid-nineteenth century, Siamese monarchs, like Meiji rulers in Japan, embraced Western ideas. Among the aristocracy, a discourse of *siwilai* emerged with the aim of attaining for Siam the same 'modern' status as the 'civilisations' of Europe.<sup>96</sup> With King Chulalongkorn's ascension to the throne in 1868, the Siamese court fully embraced modernisation through a series of reforms. In 1870, Chulalongkorn visited colonial cities in Java and British India, where governments combined judicial and bureaucratic administration for tighter control of the state. In 1888, the king sent a group of young Siamese officials on a tour of Singapore, Penang, and Rangoon with the aim of setting up a public works department, established on their return.<sup>97</sup> The king's first visit to Europe in 1897 provided him with a range of models for constructing a modern city. The king observed that not all European cities were comparably 'civilised': Scandinavian countries, Spain, and Portugal failed to impress; Venice had no modern sanitation system and was still lit with gas-lights, while Bangkok had had electric street lights since 1870.<sup>98</sup> London and Paris were chief sources of inspiration, and the king returned with plans for a new, broad avenue extending outwards from the palace similar to the Champs-Élysées and the 'Queen's Way' in London's Green Park, naming it Ratchadamnoen, or the 'royal (raja's) way'.<sup>99</sup> The avenue was used for royal processions meant to stage the king in front of his subjects, entrenching the authority and power of Siam's absolute monarchy.<sup>100</sup> The redesign of the palace district turned the area from a traditional, swampy paddy field into a Western-style plaza with

<sup>96</sup> See Winichakul 'Quest for "Siwilai"'.  
<sup>97</sup> Pirasri Povatong, 'Building Siwilai: Transformation of Architecture and Architectural Practice in Siam During the Reign of Rama V, 1868–1910', PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2011.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 175–176.

<sup>99</sup> Moore and Osiri, 'Urban Forms and Civic Space', 5; Nattika Navapan, 'Absolute Monarchy and the Development of Bangkok's Urban Spaces', *Planning Perspectives* 29:1 (2014): 7. On Paris as the model nineteenth-century city, see David van Zanten, *Building Paris: Architectural Institutions and the Transformation of the French Capital, 1830–1870* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Mark Girouard, *Cities and People: A Social and Architectural History* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 285–300.

<sup>100</sup> For a nuanced account on the role of pageantry and procession in 'staging' the monarchy, see Maurizio Peleggi, *Lords of Things* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002).

greenery, similar to the squares and open public plazas of European cities. The plan emerged as the new green, public spaces of America's 'City Beautiful Movement' took hold in cities like Chicago.<sup>101</sup>

With urban administration dictated by hand-picked bureaucrats rather than elected representatives, Bangkok, though politically autonomous, represented a more limited vision of civic participation in municipal affairs than its neighbouring colonial port-cities. Maurizio Peleggi has argued that Chulalongkorn's modernisation reforms lacked the dynamics of public debate and concerted decision-making (such as town councils, professional bodies, and government agencies) common in European cities.<sup>102</sup> As a result, Bangkok 'had more in common with urban development in colonial rather than metropolitan centres.'<sup>103</sup> Yet in terms of participatory municipal government, colonial cities were somewhat ahead of independent Siam by the turn of the century. In Penang and Rangoon, multi-ethnic representatives were elected to municipal councils. To be sure, this franchise was small and weighed heavily towards the European community, particularly in the initial stages. It was a token effort by the European community to introduce a modicum of public consultation and employ interlocutors with various ethnic communities, one aim of which was revenue collection. Penang's fully elected town council evolved from a Committee of Assessors, which included representatives from the Chinese, Indian, and Malay communities, their chief aim being to collect tax. In the early days of municipal government in Rangoon, minutes of a town meeting in 1884 falsely stated that a concourse of 'Burmese, Europeans, Chinese, and natives of India' unanimously agreed to pass a proposal on the necessity of annexing Upper Burma.<sup>104</sup> According to the *British Burma News*, however, there were in fact only a handful of Burmese, Chinese, or other non-English members present; the Burmese members of the Municipal Committee had convened their own meeting resolving non-interference in Upper Burma. This case speaks to the need for the policies of the colonial government to appear 'legitimate' in the eyes of the native population, but also the role of the press in contesting these claims before the public (to be discussed further in Chapter 4).

With steamships rolling in and out of Southeast Asia's port-cities after the opening of the Suez Canal, states began investing heavily in their urban hubs. While colonial ports were tightly controlled to regulate trade and the movements of people, 'hybrid' forms of local government were

<sup>101</sup> Pornpan Chinnapong, 'Bangkok's Sanam Luang (the Royal Ground)', in *Globalization, the City and Civil Society in Pacific Asia* (Routledge, 2008).

<sup>102</sup> Peleggi, *Lords of Things*, p. 76. <sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Pearn, *History of Rangoon*, pp. 250–251.

required to address the basic needs of the population.<sup>105</sup> Municipal committees had been formed in Rangoon and Penang from the 1850s, but it was not until the 1880s that they were given the necessary impetus to press forward with urban reforms. Elected municipal commissions came into being in Rangoon in 1885 and Penang in 1887. With an extremely conservative franchise of about 5 per cent of the local population in Rangoon, Burmese, Europeans, Americans, Eurasians, Jews, Parsees, Hindus, Chinese, and Karens were elected to serve on the board. Municipal government was extended to other towns in Burma via the Burma Municipal Act. The election of officials to these boards allowed a handful of Burmese to begin participating in a system of democratic government, even if enthusiasm on the part of the electorate to put up candidates was somewhat lukewarm.<sup>106</sup> In a popular book, *Citizen of Burma* written in 1914, the Burmese writer U Po Ka cautioned his fellow countrymen:

it is the duty of every citizen of Burma, who has the franchise, to be very careful for whom he votes at municipal elections; for, it must be remembered, the elected candidate will be on the municipal council, for good or for evil, for at least three years; and voters should realise that they are directly responsible for the conduct of their representative, since it was they who elected him.<sup>107</sup>

In her work on colonial Singapore, Brenda Yeoh has identified cases where, within the Straits Settlements Legislative Council, representatives from Penang played an important role in contesting top-down policies of the colonial government with regard to municipal affairs. In 1888, the first petition protesting the passing of a new municipal law came from Penang, urging the bill's suspension until it was translated into the principal languages of the colony.<sup>108</sup> In 1911, A. Huttenbach, a German industrialist and the unofficial council member representing Penang, contested the argument that Asians were 'apathetic', pointing to municipalities in Indian townships as proof of native interest in municipal affairs should they be given a larger say in administration.<sup>109</sup> Both of these cases testify to a more liberal atmosphere in Penang compared to Singapore with regard to Asian participation in municipal affairs. By 1923, Penang was able to boast of an Asian majority in its municipal government, providing a model of elected municipal government in the region by the

<sup>105</sup> Robert Home, *Of Planting and Planning: The Making of British Colonial Cities* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 64–91.

<sup>106</sup> Pearn, pp. 291–292.

<sup>107</sup> Po Ka, U. *The citizen of Burma* (Rangoon: British Burma Press, 1914) p. 28.

<sup>108</sup> Brenda Yeoh, *Contesting Space: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment in Colonial Singapore* (Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 51.

<sup>109</sup> Yeoh, p. 56.

1930s.<sup>110</sup> After helping to orchestrate the coup that ended absolute rule in Siam, Pridi Panomyong instituted Siam's first municipal act, giving local self-government and democratic elections to all municipalities in Siam. In the 1930s, Pridi's government sent a group of eighteen undergraduates from Thammasat University to Penang, partly to examine the workings of what was seen to be an efficient municipal and sanitary administration.<sup>111</sup>

Asian representatives on municipal councils reflected a specific cross-section of Asian society. They spoke English and acted as interlocutors between the Asian and European community. The views of 'traditional' community leaders like Chinese clan leaders or Muslims responsible for administering *waqf* charity endowments were often marginalised in favour of the views of this English-speaking elite.<sup>112</sup> Yet as Yeoh observes, even if Asians who gained entry into the council were pro-British and English-educated, 'this did not necessarily prevent them from representing the views and interests of wider Asian communities'.<sup>113</sup> In the 1920s, municipal councils, made up of limited participation by a small local elite, were only a small concession by the colonial government towards self-rule, yet they had wider repercussions for political representation. The fight for municipal autonomy was linked with the demands of local public opinion for self-rule. When a bill giving a provincial member executive power as a municipal commissioner was introduced to the Burma Legislative Council in 1920, it was heavily contested on the grounds that it breached municipal autonomy. The council argued that the bill was in conflict with public opinion and 'modern' trends, and that it would neither constitute an advance towards the 'gradual realisation of complete Local Self-Government nor stimulate in the average citizen that sense of responsibility by which the rate of progress is accelerated'.<sup>114</sup> Asian city-dwellers witnessed municipal policies daily and heavily criticised them in the press, which provided both a locus to gauge public opinion as well as an outlet for reporting on important legislation passed in the municipal and state-wide legislative council.

The growth of the modern city necessitated administration by Asians who claimed to represent the people, as monarchs, in the case of Siam, and as elected upper- and middle-class representatives in Rangoon and

<sup>110</sup> City of George Town, *Penang Past and Present 1786–1963: A Historical Account of the City of George Town Since 1786* (George Town: City Council, 1966), p. 73.

<sup>111</sup> *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*, 14 April 1937.

<sup>112</sup> Khoo, Salma Nasution. 'Colonial Intervention and Transformation of Muslim Waqf Settlements in Urban Penang: The Role of the Endowments Board.' *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 22:2 (2002); Yeoh, p. 64.

<sup>113</sup> Yeoh, p. 66. <sup>114</sup> Pearn, *History of Rangoon*, p. 293.



Penang. In Asian port-cities, as in cities elsewhere in the world, rational urban planning was required to maintain social and economic order and efficiency. Fire-prone Burmese teak and wooden Chinese shop-houses necessitated fire brigades. Periodic outbreaks of disease (e.g. cholera, smallpox, malaria, and the plague) called for sanitation systems, health services, and a fresh water supply. Sectors of the working classes, particularly new, impoverished migrants, lived in squalid and unsanitary conditions and were subject to high mortality rates. In Rangoon, Indian immigrants, in particular, were targets of a vaccination campaign with dubious racial undertones that blamed Indians for the increase in the spread of plague, cholera, and smallpox.<sup>115</sup> Rangoon's municipal council prosecuted landlords for overcrowded buildings but made no provisions for suitable and sanitary accommodation for the migrants, as noted by the sympathetic colonial official and sociologist E.J.L. Andrew in 1933.<sup>116</sup>

Due to the rapid circulation and interaction of peoples, colonial-era port-cities were particularly susceptible to disease. Municipal governments employed discourses of social control and racial categorisation to manage and shift blame on segments of the population. Yet there were, nonetheless, tangible benefits accrued by investments in potable water, sanitation, and municipal services, resulting in at least patchwork improvements in public health throughout the colonial era. With the increasing demand for migrant labour, overcrowding in cities continued to be a problem that was not managed successfully; but as health services improved, there were steady declines in adult and infant mortality throughout Southeast Asia, particularly in urban areas.<sup>117</sup>

The entry of more Asian voices in municipal government, and a growing awareness of the responsibilities of an effective municipal government, also created a new space for Asians to make claims for social improvements within their city. These included demands for more green spaces, a global urban fantasy emerging throughout the world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, first initiated with Ebenezer Howard's vision of the 'garden city'. Public parks and zoological gardens, usually accessible only to Europeans, allowed Asians to escape the filth

<sup>115</sup> See Noriyuki Osada, 'An Embryonic Border: Racial Discourses and Compulsory Vaccination for Indian Immigrants At Ports in Colonial Burma, 1870–1937.' *Moussons* 17 (2011); Judith Richell, *Disease and Demography in Colonial Burma* (Singapore, NUS Press, 2006), p. 191.

<sup>116</sup> See E.J.L. Andrew, *Indian Labour in Rangoon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 177–179.

<sup>117</sup> See Home, p. 90; Richell, pp. 165–216; Anne Booth, *Colonial Legacies: Economic and Social Development in East and Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), pp. 138–39.

and cramped surroundings of modern life.<sup>118</sup> Young students in Penang wrote of the splendour of the botanical gardens on the island. One noted, 'in it one cannot help thinking that one is out of the ordinary world. There the air is so fresh and fragrant, Nature so beautiful and realistic, and everything so fantastical and pleasant, that, for this short moment, all worries and cares of life are forgotten, and all recent and evil desires abandoned.'<sup>119</sup> Asian literati called for similar opportunities to return to the spiritual purity of rural life, complaining about the inaccessibility of many parks to the majority of the population. Rangoon, like Singapore, was described by Europeans as a 'garden city', notable for the proliferation of greenery, yet its parks were located mainly in areas dominated by the affluent and inaccessible by public transport. One Burmese writer complained in the *New Burma*:

Of the citizens of Rangoon, only the very fortunate, which is synonymous with only the very rich, can enjoy the pleasures of getting away the noise and glare of Rangoon streets once for a while. The big gardens along Prome and Kokine roads afford these people suitable places for relaxation and recreation. But for those who are not unduly burdened with the world's wealth, these delightful resorts are as surely inaccessible as if they are in fairyland.<sup>120</sup>

The writer noted that the opportunities provided by public parks should be accessible to all, drawing on examples from elsewhere in the world. Urbanites were detached from rural life and there were few opportunities for children or teachers to 'know that milk does not have its origin in a tin, but in a cow'. He describes his fellow urbanites' mentality as such:

Most of the citizens are forced to live in the capital because of their work. Most of them do enjoy the amenities of a big city, and would not dream of living in a country. But all city-dwellers lead a dreadfully artificial life, from which they should be able to escape for a little with little extra cost. In the West, the middle-class citizens as well as the manual worker can take a bus to get out of the machine life of the cities [and] can return home at the end of the day . . . All this, it must be remembered, in addition to the existence of excellent and enormous parks in the cities themselves. Rangoon is singularly poor in parks, the only one worth considering being the Royal Lakes . . . which is not popular. Rangoonites must be given an opportunity of tasting the sweet delights of the country. Rich and poor alike should be able to get these pleasures.

<sup>118</sup> For a historical analysis of the role of Singapore's botanical gardens see Emma Reisz, 'City as Garden: Shared Space in the Urban Botanic Gardens of Singapore and Malaysia, 1786–2000', in *Postcolonial Urbanism: Southeast Asian Cities and Global Processes*, ed. Ryan Bishop et al. (London: Routledge, 2003); on the connections between botanical gardens and empire see Richard Drayton, *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the 'Improvement' of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

<sup>119</sup> *Penang Free School Magazine*, April 1933.      <sup>120</sup> *New Burma*, 12 September 1934, p. 8.

The demand that the ‘pleasures of the countryside’ to be given to all urbanites, rather than a select few, came from an increasingly vocal literati nostalgic for a connection with the natural world. This was also an indicator that everyday citizens, like municipal governments, had begun comparing their cities within a global framework, cognisant that the desire for green space was an aspiration they shared with city-dwellers worldwide.

### Transport: Cities on the Move

Municipal governments invested in better roads and transportation and telegraph systems to transport people and goods from different parts of the city, the hinterland, and the globe. Infrastructural improvements, particularly in transport, signalled a sense of technological modernity emerging in Asian cities at the same time as cities around the world; these innovations were contemporaneous with the West rather than derivative. The first horse-drawn and steam-powered trams arrived in American cities in the 1830s and appeared in a more modern form in Rangoon in 1884, Penang in 1887, and Bangkok in 1888, the same year as in Stockholm.<sup>121</sup> Only a decade after the first American electric rail lines were laid in major American cities like Cleveland and New Orleans, Bangkok inaugurated its first electric tram in 1894, followed by electric trams in Penang in 1905 and Rangoon in 1906 – matching or outpacing cities in Japan or the West. New roads were paved and motorcars appeared on streets in the first decade of the century and grew in numbers, particularly in colonial Malaya.<sup>122</sup> By 1915, Rangoon had 8 buses and 28 taxicabs, 426 private cars and lorries, and 139 motorcycles.<sup>123</sup> Penang had more buses (30 in 1914) than Rangoon but fewer private cars and motorcycles (211 private cars in 1916 and roughly 75 motorcycles at the same time), signalling a greater comparative investment in public transport. In 1922, Penang’s trolleybuses were heralded as the ‘vehicles of the future’, while the Penang Hill Railway opened to the public the following year.<sup>124</sup>

<sup>121</sup> Pearn, *History of Rangoon*, p. 266; City of George Town, *Penang Past and Present 1786–1963: A Historical Account of the City of George Town since 1786*, p. 52; Wiroj Rujopakarn, ‘Bangkok Transport System Development: What Went Wrong?’ *Journal of the Eastern Asia Society for Transportation Studies* 5:1 (2003).

<sup>122</sup> Sofiah Hashim, ‘Transport in Penang: A Brief History’, *Malaysia in History* XXI:2 (1978): 1–16, at p. 36.

<sup>123</sup> Noel F. Singer, *Old Rangoon: City of the Shwedagon* (Gartmore: Kiscadale, 1995), p. 180.

<sup>124</sup> Ric Francis and Colin Ganley, *Penang Trams, Trolleybuses & Railways: Municipal Transport History, 1880s–1963* (Penang, Malaysia: Areca Books, 2006), p. 26.

Though it symbolised metropolitan efficiency, the advent of a modern road system resulted in the demise of a unique transport system in Siam. New Road, Bangkok's first proper thoroughfare, was proposed by a group of Western merchants in 1856 and finally built in 1862, not without resistance from both wealthy and poor residents protesting against rampant land speculation.<sup>125</sup> The road, running parallel to the waterfront and past the fringes of Sampheng, connected the European residential area to the palace and was soon lined with Chinese shops along its full two miles. As a result of the rise of motor and rail transport from the turn of the century, water-based transport used to navigate through the city in the past declined. A modernising administration built new roads and filled in canals, many of which fell into neglect and filth, particularly in Sampheng and poor parts of the city. The amphibious city, central to the heritage of Ayutthaya and Bangkok, was abandoned for modern convenience, with the city's population moving from the banks of rivers and canals to shop-houses, resulting in the decline of the floating market.

New urban public transport systems were deemed affordable and efficient, and attracted a broad spectrum of users. The Danish writer and Bangkok resident Erik Seidenfaden observed the social composition of Bangkok's trams in 1925: 'There will be found sitting together yellow robed Siamese monks, long bearded Arabs, sarong clad Malays, voluble Chinese . . . dark-skinned Tamils, Burmese, Mon, the panung-clad Thai and members of a host of other races.'<sup>126</sup> In Rangoon, trams were used by all sectors of society, from hawkers and pilgrims using the line to the Shwedagon pagoda to schoolchildren and monks navigating the downtown core.<sup>127</sup> Class hierarchies on public transportation systems existed in colonial Penang, where trams operated on a 'two class system', with a space reserved in the trams for first-class passengers, often unused.<sup>128</sup> The racial segregation on trams that caused severe hostilities on mainland Malaya was absent in Penang. Class, more than race, was a more visible distinction of social hierarchy.

Older forms of public transport persisted, providing local and pan-Asian modes of indicating communal preference and status. The

<sup>125</sup> Chua, 'The City and the City', p. 8.

<sup>126</sup> Erik Seidenfaden, *Guide to Bangkok* (Bangkok: Royal State Railways of Siam, 1927), p. 35.

<sup>127</sup> Tilman Frasch, 'Tracks in the City: Technology, Mobility, and Society in Colonial Rangoon and Singapore', *Modern Asian Studies* 46:1 (2012): 106–110.

<sup>128</sup> On the class system on the tramways in the Federated Malay States see John G Butcher, *The British in Malaya, 1880–1941: The Social History of a European Community in Colonial South-East Asia* (Kuala Lumpur; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979). See also Ric Francis and Colin Ganley, *Penang Trams, Trolleybuses & Railways: Municipal Transport History, 1880s–1963* (Penang, Malaysia: Areca Books, 2006), pp. 27–29.



Figure 5 Postcard of Burmese girls on the tram in 1906.

bullock-cart, an Indian import used largely by Indians, was probably the oldest form of multi-purpose conveyance in Penang.<sup>129</sup> Rickshaws, invented in Japan in the 1860s, had by the early twentieth century become a pan-Asian industry, built on small amounts of capital and low-cost labour. They were a popular mode of transport for diverse sectors of society, and also signalled the growth of vast gulfs in economic inequality within the city. In Rangoon and Penang, affluent students and Chinese preferred to ride in rickshaws even though they were more expensive and slower than motorcars and trams, while Europeans favoured motor-taxis.<sup>130</sup> In Rangoon, well-off Asian trader families travelled to the cinema in rickshaws so women could show off their diamond jewellery.<sup>131</sup> The Singapore press reported on the arrival of the new 'tricycle' rickshaw in Rangoon and Bangkok in the late 1930s, which helped alleviate humanitarian concerns about the welfare of rickshaw pullers, while serving as a new source of profit for rickshaw owners looking to 'modernise' their vehicles.<sup>132</sup>

<sup>129</sup> Ibid. p. 38. <sup>130</sup> Francis et al., *Penang Trams*, p. 29.

<sup>131</sup> Khaing, *Burmese family*, p. 113.

<sup>132</sup> 'The Rickshaw Problem', *Malayan Saturday Post*, 4 April 1925; 'Tricycle Rickshaw', *Straits Times*, 3 March 1936; 'Tricycle Rickshaws: Chinese Gaining Control', *Singapore Free Press*, 22 June 1947.

From Beijing to Singapore, as David Strand and James Warren have observed, rickshaw pullers symbolised poverty and hardship.<sup>133</sup> Usually migrants, they lived short, fast lives due to the physical hardship of their work, unsanitary living conditions, and susceptibility to the escapism of opium addiction, gambling, prostitution, and even suicide.<sup>134</sup> Far from being passive subjects of urbanisation, they were intimately acquainted with the rhythms of cities, aware of its institutions of power and underground entertainments and acting as vectors of news and information.<sup>135</sup> Increasing demands for affordable forms of transportation and urban mobility resulted in the growing professionalism of the rickshaw industry. In Singapore and Penang, rickshaw pullers resisted the growing competition from tramways through small acts of sabotage, from laying stones on the tracks to derail them to slowly pulling their vehicles on the tracks themselves, forcing trams to slow down.<sup>136</sup> In Rangoon, South Indian rickshaw pullers became a significant political force, constituting one of the first trade unions in the city. Rangoon's Chinese community imported the rickshaws, owned by Chettiers and controlled by middlemen who leased them to Telegu migrants from South India. In 1917, 200 Indian rickshaw pullers petitioned the police commissioner that they had no leading authority to fight their cause or speak their language. The protest gained the attention of Indian politicians in the Burma legislature, who fought to legislate on rickshaw licensing, ending the servitude of the coolie to his master.<sup>137</sup>

Transport workers were instrumental in the functioning of the city as a whole. It was the heightened consciousness of their importance that enabled transport workers to work together for political gain, drawing on their intimate knowledge of urban geography. As Warren has noted of Singapore's first strikes, rickshaws were indispensable; Europeans could not do without them.<sup>138</sup> Municipal governments were keen to ensure that the city continued to run smoothly, and could not afford to take the claims of transport workers lightly. Similar alliances to those formed between rickshaw pullers were formed among other groups of transport workers. In Bangkok, transport-workers emerged as an organised labour force after 1932, where the Tramway Men's Association and Taxi Drivers'

<sup>133</sup> See David Strand, *Rickshaw Beijing: City People and Politics in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); James Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore 1880–1940* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003); Tim Wright, 'Shanghai Imperialists versus Rickshaw Racketeers: The Defeat of the 1934 Rickshaw Reforms', *Modern China* 17:1 (1991): 76–111.

<sup>134</sup> Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie*, p. xiii. <sup>135</sup> Strand, *Rickshaw Beijing*, p. 23.

<sup>136</sup> Frasnch, p. 104.

<sup>137</sup> See Usha Mahajani, *The Role of Indian Minorities in Burma and Malaya* (Bombay: Vora & Co, 1960), pp. 11–12.

<sup>138</sup> Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie*, pp. 111–113.

associations were the first labour organisations in the country, and also inspired women to form similar types of workers' unions.<sup>139</sup>

Through transport, all urban inhabitants experienced the sense of the city as an integrated space. New transport routes facilitated the movement of people from different parts of the city, connecting it as a whole. Tilman Frasch has noted that, as in Western cities, tramways rearranged the spatial structure of cities, tying outlying areas more tightly into the urban orbit, and initiated 'a kind of urban transport revolution which resulted in a massive growth in the mobility of citizens'.<sup>140</sup> Movement and connectivity allowed city-dwellers to view the urban realm in a new way, marvelling at new technologies and the accelerated speed of modern life, travelling in tandem with others, and witnessing a city in motion.

### Where to Live

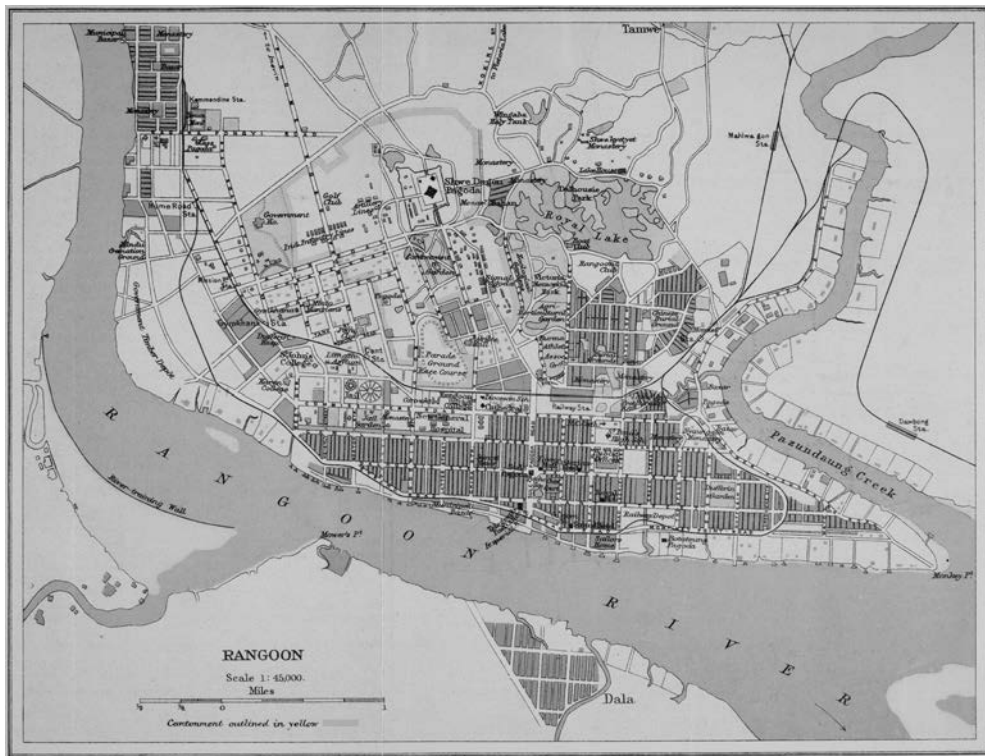
Municipal committees designed new zones for residential neighbourhoods to house different sectors of society, who were to commute to the city using new transport links. The Rangoon Development Trust assigned residential areas along broad lines of class.<sup>141</sup> The first suburbs were the preserve of affluent Europeans who, following the Victorian model of separate public and private spheres, sought to move out of the densely populated heart of the city. Rangoon's cantonment area became a new residential district on an elevated terrace around the hill of the Shwedagon, where open spaces, gardens, public halls, racecourses, and parks made the area a playground for Rangoon's colonial elite (see Map 4). The area featured spacious compounds on winding, leafy roads with pastoral English names, such as Windermere Road.<sup>142</sup> In Bangkok, the suburb of Bangrak grew around the southern end of New Road and the European residential neighbourhood, featuring foreign legations, banks, and offices. By the early twentieth century, Bangkok hosted sports clubs, libraries, churches, and social clubs for the European community, as in colonial cities. The Siamese aristocracy created their own playground in the Dusit suburb, north of the palace, where fenced villas and rectilinear streets designed for automobiles signalled the Bangkok royalty's affiliation with the architectural aesthetic of Victorian England, as in Meiji Japan.<sup>143</sup>

<sup>139</sup> Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, p. 220.   <sup>140</sup> Frasch, p. 117.

<sup>141</sup> *Report on Suburban Development* (Rangoon: Rangoon Development Committee, 1917), p. 13.

<sup>142</sup> Wai Wai Myaing, *A Journey in Time: Family Memoirs (Burma, 1914–1948)* (New York; Lincoln; Shanghai: iuniverse, Inc, 2005).

<sup>143</sup> Peleggi, *Lords of Things*, p. 77. On Victorian influences in Meiji architecture see Dallas Finn, *Meiji Revisited: The Sites of Victorian Japan* (New York: Weatherhill, 1995).



Map 4 Map of Rangoon, c. 1930.



New residential neighbourhoods also housed a growing multi-ethnic political and professional class. Their move into suburban areas previously dominated by Europeans signalled a gradual shift in political and economic power. In Rangoon, the military barracks moved from the Shwedagon into an open area near the lake, which also saw new developments such as a university, an airport, and a new residential area called the 'Golden Valley'. Living here were wealthy Asian 'public men' educated overseas, particularly in law.<sup>144</sup> The area achieved political significance in the 1920s as the home of an emerging multi-ethnic political elite. The Progressive Party was one of the first local political parties in Burma, similar to moderate liberal parties in India (by the 1930s, it had lost political power to staunchly anti-colonial and ethno-centred political parties).<sup>145</sup> This cosmopolitan group of Burmese, Karens, Chinese, Indians, Anglo-Indians, Anglo-Burmans, and Europeans was also known as the 'Golden Valley Party', a reference to the winding green suburb where this wealthy, politically astute Asian elite lived among the ranks of European colonialists.

In Penang, a new class of Anglophone Asians rose to prominence, constituting a visible shift towards Asian power and wealth on Northam Road, jutting out from the heart of the British civic district along the waterfront. By the 1920s, the road was known as 'Millionaire's Row', dominated by the palatial residences of the Straits-Chinese. Though some were English-trained barristers trained abroad, like those living in Rangoon's Golden Valley, others were home-grown millionaires who built mansions bigger than any houses owned by Europeans. They had made their fortunes as miners and planters in the tin and rubber boom of the late nineteenth century created by the opening of the Kinta valley. Khoo notes that 'the towkay mansion was a status symbol par excellence, for behind almost every architectural extravagance was a rags-to-riches story of how a penniless coolie became a towkay'.<sup>146</sup> The architectural roots of the towkay mansion lay in the Anglo-Indian detached bungalow and the decorative qualities of late Victorian architecture in England.<sup>147</sup> Previously, Straits-Chinese millionaires had employed European architects from Singapore-based firms and gave the houses names reminiscent of England and the Empire, from 'Nova Scotia' to 'Mandalay' villa.<sup>148</sup>

<sup>144</sup> On Asian 'public men', see C.A. Bayly, *Empire and Information Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 347.

<sup>145</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 168–74.

<sup>146</sup> Salma Nasution Khoo, 'Villas and Mansions', in *The Encyclopaedia of Malaysia Vol. 5: Architecture*, ed. Chen Voon Fee (Singapore; Kuala Lumpur: Archipelago Press, 1998), pp. 96–97.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

Hill villas designed with names such as ‘Tosari’ and ‘Lausanne’ showcased Asian wealth and worldliness. By the 1920s and 1930s, Straits-Chinese departed from Victorian classicism and began importing Italian tiles and Venetian glass, looking to Italian design in art and architecture, as did the Siamese elite. Rather than employing European architects to build their houses, as they had at the turn of the century, Straits-Chinese began patronising Western-trained Chinese architects such as Chew Eng Eam, known for incorporating Chinese forms, such as the moongate, into the Art Deco-style houses of the Asian elite.<sup>149</sup>

The advent of affordable public transport meant that an emerging middle class could also live outside the congested heart of the city. To the west of the affluent houses of Rangoon’s Golden Valley were the cottages of the Burmese suburb of Kemmendine. Urban geographers writing in 1940 noted that this was one of the most interesting parts of Rangoon: ‘it really is a huge Burmese village . . . [with] its own Burmese industries: cheroot rolling, gem polishing, boatbuilding, the making of umbrellas and this, the metal finial ornaments for pagoda spires. The streets are village streets, the houses not much more village huts, well shaded and often with the verandas half screened by flowering shrubs.’<sup>150</sup> Semi-affluent urban Burmese were often accused of adopting Western ways and affecting European customs and manners.<sup>151</sup> Yet some town Burmese practised their own ‘authentic’ modes of living. Instead of the stark borders between public and private space typical of closed Victorian-style houses, lawns, and gates, these houses featured wide verandas, similar to vernacular models of tropical architecture, encouraging neighbourliness and a blurring of distinctions between private and public space.

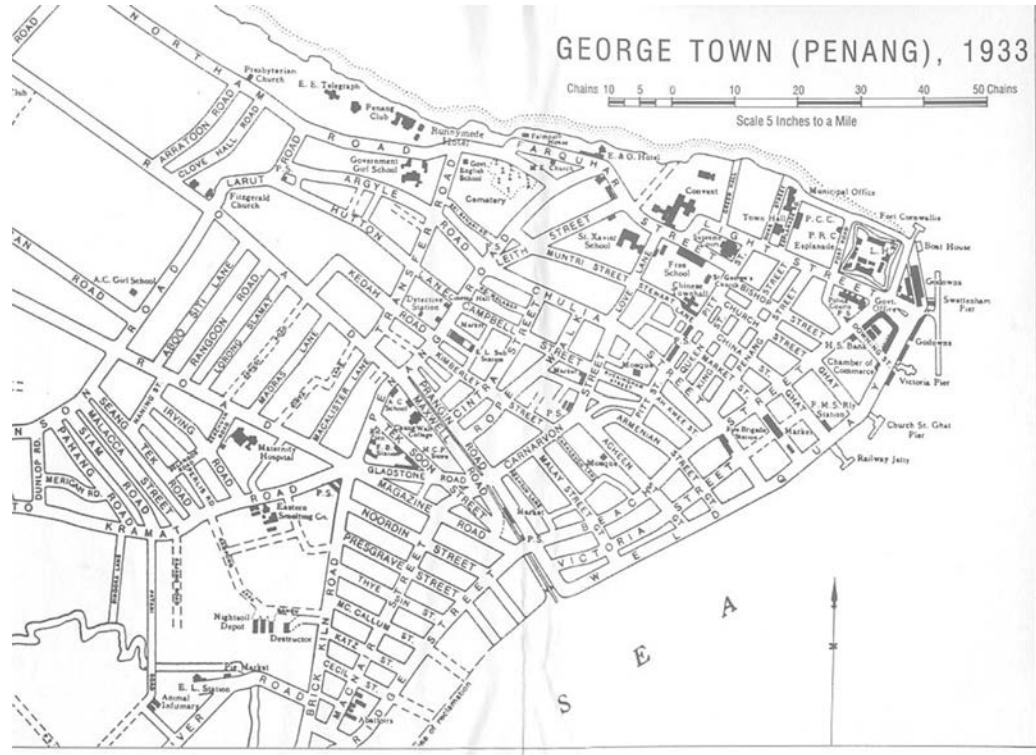
New, multi-racial neighbourhoods cropped up in Penang and Bangkok for an emerging professional class of traders as well as government servants, teachers, doctors, and clerks. In 1930, a Penang writer observed that ‘the suburbs of George Town . . . are growing so rapidly in importance today that it is becoming increasingly difficult to discover where the city ends and where suburbia subsides into rustication’.<sup>152</sup> Former social workers Dato Selina, of Straits-Chinese origin, and Jazmyn Chelliah, of Indian origin, grew up in multicultural residential neighbourhoods around Irving Road in Penang where Chinese, Indians, and Eurasians

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> O.H.K Spate and L.W. Trueblood, ‘Rangoon: A Study in Urban Geography’, *Geographical Review* 32:1 (1942): 72.

<sup>151</sup> For a scathing critique of the ‘town-bred Burman’ or *myotha* see U Po Ka, *Citizen of Burma* (Rangoon: British Burma Press, 1914), p. 27.

<sup>152</sup> *Eastern Courier*, 15 March 1930, p. 16.



Map 5 Map of George Town, 1933.

lived side by side.<sup>153</sup> In Bangkok, Silom Road became the site of an ascendant Siamese, Chinese, and Indian commercial class. Interactions between different ethnic groups in these areas presented a departure from existing urban patterns around ethnic segregation and contributed to new kinds of solidarity among an emerging middle class.

In crowded conditions within economically deprived areas and slums, communities depended on neighbours to take care of each other and their children. In Sampheng, Phya Anuman described growing up among Indian, Chinese, Muslim, and Thai children who played with each other near the growing filth of Bangkok's canals. Barracks were provided for the urban poor in Penang.<sup>154</sup> Former athlete Harold de Castro recalled growing up in one of these kampungs, located near Transfer Road.<sup>155</sup> The close-knit community shared washing areas and kitchens, as children called each other 'cousin' and were punished by their 'aunties'. Indians, Jews, and Eurasians lived in the area; de Castro's father was a Filipino musician. Itinerant Filipino boxers and musicians (who we will meet again in Chapter 6) found jobs and residence through communal networks in the kampung. De Castro's testimony portrays a world where cross-cultural interaction emerged as a social safety net – a gritty cosmopolitanism born of necessity and co-dependence, and one deserving of much further attention than this study can offer.

Unearthing the memories of cross-cultural sociability in both working-class and middle-class areas is a difficult task, built largely on oral histories and memoirs rather than administrative censuses and sociological studies that tend to reinforce ethnic divisions. Spate and Trueblood's study of Rangoon in 1940 is a fascinating exploration of the social topography of the city. It focuses on stark ethnic divisions and describes uniquely 'Burmese' areas such as Kemmendine rather than mixed areas. By contrast, the author Mi Mi Khaing describes middle-class areas in west Rangoon where families that lived in 'unpretentious' houses sat outside in the evenings, puffing cheroots, calling out to neighbours, and eating a variety of foods at nearby Burmese, Chinese, and Indian restaurants.<sup>156</sup> A Burmese politician (interviewed by political scientist Lucian Pye) described being reprimanded by an English friend at school

<sup>153</sup> Dato Selina (educator). Interview by Author. Penang, 15 August 2007; Dr Jazmyn Chelliah (educator), oral history interview conducted by Claire Low, 13 October 2007, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Disc 2.

<sup>154</sup> Anuman, *Looking Back: Book One*.

<sup>155</sup> Harold de Castro, oral history interview conducted by Michelle Low, 2 September 2005, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Disc 1.

<sup>156</sup> Khaing, *Burmese Family*, p. 113.

in the 1930s for his lack of knowledge of ‘Burmese customs’.<sup>157</sup> The Burman noted his surprise: ‘I grew up in Rangoon and there were always Indians, and Karens, and Arakanese, and all kinds of people around; so it didn’t seem strange that people were different from each other.’<sup>158</sup> We must consider the possibility that over time, through census categories and sociological divisions, distinctions of communalism have been imposed where notions of ‘community’, particularly in middle-class urban areas, may have been experienced as more fluid and hybrid.<sup>159</sup>

### Reclaiming the City

In Rangoon and Bangkok, Asian elites inscribed a new political landscape on the built environment of the city. Civic buildings became spaces where new, nationalist political identities could be visibly asserted by Asian political elites, drawing on the radical aesthetic of modernist architecture and signalling a departure from the colonial age. The Victorian era had brought a classical aesthetic to Asian cities along the lines of imperial Rome and the Gothic Revival. As Thomas Metcalf has argued, in India, British architects sought to create a distinctive colonial architecture that made visible Britain’s imperial position as a ruler, which included not only the appeal to classical forms but also Indian architectural elements associated with the Mughal empire.<sup>160</sup> Many of these forms were imported to Malaya, contributing to the spectrum of a pan-Islamic identity across the colonial world, and radically altering the design of Malay religious architecture.<sup>161</sup> Similarly, most of the buildings in Rangoon were influenced by the architecture of the Raj, mixed with the Byzantine Orientalism of Indian cities, without any allusions to Burma’s classical architectural past.

In Rangoon, by the late 1920s, the press began deriding the aesthetic sensibility of the city’s buildings. Basil Ward, a visiting architect with the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) and one of the pioneers of British modernism, likened them to a ‘visible encrustation of a dozen

<sup>157</sup> Lucien Pye, *Politics, Personality and Nation Building: Burma’s Search for Identity* (New Haven; London: Massachusetts Institute for Technology, 1962), p. 258.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258.

<sup>159</sup> Nirmala Purushotam, ‘Disciplining Difference: Race in Singapore’, in *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand*, ed. Joel S. Kahn (New York; Singapore: St. Martin’s Press Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, 1998).

<sup>160</sup> See Thomas Metcalf, *An Imperial Vision: Indian Architecture and Britain’s Raj* (London: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>161</sup> Thomas Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 56–67.

dead styles.<sup>162</sup> Inspired by a lecture that Ward gave at Rangoon's Rotary club on a return to the simplicity of Asian forms, U Ba Pe, a leading political figure in colonial Burma, gave a rousing speech in the Burma Legislative Council proposing a design for the new City Hall. The design came from Burmese architect U Tin, combining modern, streamlined forms of stark vertical lines with Burmese ornamentation in the style of old Pagan.<sup>163</sup> U Ba Pe drew on Ward's professional expertise to highlight Burmese architecture's compatibility with modern, civic architecture. He drew on the success of the Burmese Pavilion at the Wembley Exhibition in 1924, also designed by U Tin, which showcased the popularity of Burmese architecture to a wide audience. When European members of the Council contested the use of religious-inspired architecture for civic buildings, U Ba Pe argued that 'no civic architecture in the world can be found that is not founded on either ecclesiastical, monumental or other



Figure 6 City Hall, Rangoon.

<sup>162</sup> 'Architecture in Burma', *New Burma*, 19 January 1930.

<sup>163</sup> The turn to Pagan as a great civilisational model for Burmese history was likely aided by the efforts of the government archaeological survey and the brilliant Burmese archaeologist Pe Maung Tin, one of the founding members of the Burma Research Society. The Burmese elite appealed to this new, localised Orientalism in asserting a new Burmese cultural identity.

religious architecture in other countries from religious, monumental or royal edifices'.<sup>164</sup> Drawing on examples from Delhi to London to make nationalist political claims, U Ba Pe won the debate. U Tin's design was selected for the new building, and prominently featured a three-tiered, palatial roof and traditional Burmese iconography of peacocks and *naga* water-serpents.

The victory of City Hall, situated in Rangoon's central axis, reflected a turning point in the power of the Asian public to dictate the visual impact of the city's political centre. Urban architecture was becoming more modern, streamlined, and functional, but the urban aesthetic was increasingly being determined by Asians rather than a British colonial elite. As the Rangoon Municipal Commission reported in 1935, 'The New City Hall is the first public building of importance in which features of Burmese architecture have been incorporated with striking success. The building is worthy of the metropolis and inaugurates a new era in secular Burmese Architecture.'<sup>165</sup> Other buildings, such as the Convocation Hall of the new Rangoon University, married Burmese ornamentation with streamlined functional architecture attuned to the local climate. Strong vertical columns and archways open to the environment allowed the building to cool while providing protection from the sun and rain.<sup>166</sup>

Meanwhile, in Bangkok, the Siamese elite sought to emulate the West while promoting a classical Thai aesthetic. The Siamese aristocracy returned to classical Asian features within a modern architectural framework. From the turn of the century up until 1932, architects mixed Thai ornamentation with European classicism in civic buildings from schools to museums. Yet after the fall of the absolute monarchy, a new political elite departed from allusions to classical Siamese architecture, breaking with Siam's dynastic past. They drew, instead, on the streamlined, functional style of Italian futurism. The locus of their efforts was Ratchadamnoen, 'the royal way'. With the institution of a new constitutional government, this main thoroughfare became a highly contested space where the new 'democratic' nation could be asserted.<sup>167</sup> The road began at the palace and ended with a new conglomeration of public buildings built in the new futurist Italian style of the 1930s: the headquarters of the Ministries of

<sup>164</sup> 'Burmese Architecture', *New Burma*, 9 March 1930.

<sup>165</sup> *Report on the Municipal Administration of the City of Rangoon 1935-36* (Rangoon: Government Press, 1937), p. 28.

<sup>166</sup> U Than Tun [Burmese architect]. Interview by author. Yangon. 3 August 2008.

<sup>167</sup> Hans-Dieter Evers and Rudiger Korff, *Southeast Asian Urbanism: The Meaning and Power of Social Space* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2000), p. 85.

Justice and Defence, and Thammasat University. Instead of royal processions, military parades were staged, resulting in a shift of the main axis of the city from the palace to this civic space.<sup>168</sup>

This swing towards the northeast part of the city resulted in a visual turn away from the waterfront and Sampheng as a focus of power.<sup>169</sup> It coincided with Pridi Panomyong's renegotiation of Siam's extraterritorial treaties in the 1930s, restoring the Thai government's autonomy to dictate its own legal and commercial affairs. In shaping the new city, the government drew inspiration from the city that had earlier inspired Chulalongkorn: Paris. Ideas for a constitutional monarchy had already been considered under King Chulalongkorn's reign, yet, as we shall see in Chapter 5, it was in 1920s Paris where a group of young law students and military cadets met to usher in a change of government at a much quicker pace than the royalty had planned.<sup>170</sup> In 1939, Phibun Songkhrum, then prime minister and head of the army, commissioned a 'Democracy monument' to commemorate the June 24th National Day marking the coup.<sup>171</sup> Like Chulalongkorn, who envisioned Ratchadamnoen as Thailand's version of the Champs-d'Élysée, Phibun continued this project as the cornerstone of a Westernised Bangkok, with Ratchadamnoen ending with the Democracy Monument as a version of the Arc de Triomphe.<sup>172</sup>

Changes to civic architecture reflected the reclamation of the built environment by political elites from above, yet the urban public also sought to reclaim the city from below. Class and ethnic divisions made cities sites of conflict and competing political nationalisms. The sheer concentration of capital within port-cities and the visibility of both rich and poor provided the impetus for new modes of political articulation that mobilised communities across class and ethnic lines. In the wake of the global Depression and competition over jobs, race riots between Burmese and Indian-Muslim workers tore through Rangoon. Political agitation had various causes and aims, products of both political and economic dissatisfaction by a range of actors. Protests against the state encompassed all sectors of society. In 1939, 1,200 oil workers mobilised from all over the country and marched on Rangoon, resulting in a takeover of the city from the marginalised workers in the countryside.<sup>173</sup> Rangoon University students joined these efforts, keen to align themselves against

<sup>168</sup> Ibid. <sup>169</sup> I thank Matthew Phillips for this insight.

<sup>170</sup> Vichitvong Na Pombhejara, *Pridi Banomyong and the Making of Thailand's Modern History* (Bangkok: Vichitvong Na Pombhejara, 1980).

<sup>171</sup> Ka F. Wong, *Visions of a Nation: Public Monuments in Twentieth-Century Thailand* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2006), pp. 56–57; Pornpan Chinnapong, 'Bangkok's Sanam Luang (the Royal Ground)', in *Globalization, the City and Civil Society in Pacific Asia*, Routledge, 2008): pp. 254–267.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid. <sup>173</sup> *Rangoon Gazette*, 16 January 1939, p. 14.



the colonial regime. The oil workers' strike had resonances of Gandhi's salt march in 1920. Boycotts, strikes, and other models of urban protest circulated throughout the region. As with popular, radical movements (*pergerakan*) in Java through the 1920s, an early generation of activists inherited a new political language in newspapers, rallies, strikes, and ideologically divided parties.<sup>174</sup> These new vocabularies also circulated via underground communist networks, politically astute working class leaders, and press reports of activities in China and India.

Some of the first strikes in Bangkok came from the Chinese in Bangkok against the government's tax policy.<sup>175</sup> A decade later, labour unrest in the form of a violent tramways strike in Bangkok in 1922–23 testified to an early example of popular nationalism rather than the official, state-led nationalism promoted by the monarchy.<sup>176</sup> The attack came from labour representatives at a Thai newspaper, launched against the Western bosses of the Siam Electric Company and the Thai elite invested in its activities. New models of popular protest came back to Burma via the press and interactions with Indian political elites. As we will see in Chapter 5, the Rangoon University strike in 1920 was aided in part by Burmese barristers schooled abroad, some in Calcutta, where they were introduced to new tools of political protest. The *swadeshi* movement in India inspired Burmese nationalists to instil a policy of only buying Burmese goods. Alarmed by Japanese aggression and inspired by boycotts in China, Chinese communities instituted boycotts in Bangkok in 1919 and 1928.<sup>177</sup>

In a society built on the moral economy of the marketplace, boycotts took on particular significance in Penang. No large-scale anti-colonial movements occurred on the island, as they did in Burma, yet such boycotts signified the seething resentment of the colour bar that privileged white society. In 1930, an island-wide boycott occurred to protest the assault of a Straits-Chinese woman, B.H. Oon, the first woman barrister in Malaya, by a European. G.R. Lenders was a white Belgian representative of Messrs. Huttenback, Lazarus and Sons, the company marketing Craven A cigarettes. Lenders hit Oon on the shoulder during a fight with her brother, the barrister Lim Khye Seng.<sup>178</sup> The incident inflamed tensions over the colour bar between whites and Asians in Penang, particularly among the Asian elite, and signalled the power of Straits-Chinese networks within the wider Penang community. Three

<sup>174</sup> Shiraishi, *Age in Motion*, p. 341.

<sup>175</sup> Scot Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the Creation of a Thai Identity* (Singapore: Social Issues in Southeast Asia, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), p. 25; Chua, pp. 1–26.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32. <sup>177</sup> Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand*, p. 238.

<sup>178</sup> *Eastern Courier*, 2 April 1930, pp. 2–3, 30.

days after the incident was made public, not a single shop in Penang sold Craven A cigarettes. All signs of the firm were torn down, representatives received death threats and Craven As were no longer available from young cinema vendors.<sup>179</sup> The case provoked bitter feelings between the European and Chinese communities, though the firm issued a series of apologies in the press, making every effort to win back the custom of its Asian market. The boycott became a powerful tool by which Asians could intervene and upset the economic balance of the colonial-era port-city.

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Asian port-cities were cosmopolitan sites, visible nodes of global capital and communication technology, sites of estrangement and interaction. Municipal administration, public transport, and new residential neighbourhoods provided arenas where different communities distinguished each other along class lines, while also providing means of interacting as both strangers and neighbours. The downtown core of the city, particularly the area near the waterfront, witnessed the highest concentration of transient migrants, prostitutes, and visitors from around the world. Yet even here, Asian urbanites watched popular, migrant street theatre, ate in ethnic enclaves, shopped in multi-ethnic markets, and shared parks and public spaces, partaking of a new world of consumption and leisure. Exhibitions, particularly the 'Worlds' in Penang, allowed visitors to witness diverse cultural products and interact within the same urban space, creating a kaleidoscopic spectacle of the city as a whole.

The concentration of wealth and power in the city held within it the potential for combustion and radical political change, as well as the desire for connection to the rest of the world. Labour strikes, riots, public protest, and boycotts reflected the vulnerability of colonial society and inter-racial harmony, but also the ability of urban inhabitants to harness new political vocabularies and strategies to reclaim the urban sphere. New political elites asserted a change in regime through architecture, signalling a new age of nationalism and Asian ownership over secular, civic space. The cosmopolitan port-city provided a dynamic environment in which Asian urbanites continually re-defined themselves, their communities, and, increasingly, their nations.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

### 3 Cosmopolitan Publics in Divided Societies

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City-dwellers, more often than not, are social creatures. Habermas' classic formulation of the public sphere – where 'private people come together as a public' – is grounded in the emergence of a thinking, reading, urban elite who conversed in the coffee-shops and salons of early modern Europe, and in de Tocqueville's descriptions of voluntary associations in early nineteenth-century American towns.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have only just begun to investigate the antecedents and analogues of 'civil society' in Asia. Jack Goody has criticised Weber's conclusion that Eastern cities failed to meet the necessary criteria of civility (autonomous legal institutions, inalienable property rights, and a semi-autonomous government), and points to early examples of vibrant, commercial Eastern cities – from Hanzou to Ahmedabad – that provided non-administrative structures of social and political power in guilds, 'proto-capitalist corporations', and other voluntary associations.<sup>2</sup> Eiko Ikegami observes that in Tokugawa, Japan (1603–1868), new associational ties were formed through poetry and visual circles, creating 'bonds of civility' that enabled people from very different backgrounds to connect for the first time.<sup>3</sup> Even within a neo-feudal society, they provided a 'cultural grammar of sociability' that governed practices of interaction in public spaces.<sup>4</sup> In the Indian context, as Dipesh Chakrabarty reminds us, Bengali models of 'sociality' or *adda* emerged through organic, limitless conversation and debate; *Adda* constituted a syncretic combination of traditional elements of the *majlish* – an older but similar kind of 'gathering' patronised by the wealthy – with that of coffeehouse conversation among an emerging urban commercial

<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> Jack Goody, 'Civil Society in an Extra-European Perspective', in *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*, ed. Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 149–64.

<sup>3</sup> See Eiko Ikegami, *Bonds of Civility: Aesthetic Networks and the Political Origins of Japanese Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

class.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, in colonial Bombay, an efflorescence and variety of voluntary associations fashioned urban civil society, as it did in many of Asia's most vibrant port-cities.<sup>6</sup>

From the late nineteenth century, as cities grew, 'modern' forms of association took on an increasingly similar character, often to the detriment of older models. The culture of the modern city required a shift in loyalties, departing from those rooted in a common agrarian culture and a vertical allegiance to a ruler to those forged through horizontal affiliations. New identities were articulated through discussion and exchange and built on the strength of voluntary associational ties. Chris Bayly has argued that the modern urban lifestyle became a 'reference point for intellectuals and political leaders across the world', creating common patterns of leisure in the profusion of urban societies, clubs, meeting halls, community associations, and cafes.<sup>7</sup> Commercial and cultural associations in both Europe and Asia enabled connections between hosts of individuals from a variety of different backgrounds. Ikegami points out that the possibility of choosing multiple identities seems to be an important index of modernity: 'Any society that does not allow individuals association ties other than those they are born with – whether territorial or religious affiliations or kinship ties – cannot be called modern.'<sup>8</sup> As Asian cities grew in size and diversity, an increasingly prosperous, aspirational middle class began engaging in new types of association. Traditional religious institutions and kinship associations adapted as secular associational culture mushroomed, coinciding with the exponential growth of the press in Asia, Africa, and Latin America as well as the expansion of leisure culture accompanying rising income levels. Modern associations became a global phenomenon, connected, enriched, and inflected by local cultures in diverse sites.

Recently, scholars have noted that, as opposed to a singular public sphere, there are multiple and overlapping publics, or a range of public arenas where interests are articulated, campaigned for, and often contest each other.<sup>9</sup> This was certainly true, perhaps more than elsewhere, for colonial-era port-cities in Southeast Asia, which witnessed diverse religious, kinship, and increasingly secular associational cultures interacting and overlapping. As Tim Harper observes of Singapore, these were 'polyglot, migrant world[s], dominated by a small European diaspora,

<sup>5</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 188.

<sup>6</sup> Kidambi, *Making of an Indian Metropolis*. <sup>7</sup> Bayly, *Birth of the Modern World*, p. 194.

<sup>8</sup> Ikegami, *Bonds of Civility*, p. 368.

<sup>9</sup> See Calhoun and Fraser in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*; Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2000); Harper, 'Globalism'.

in which communities not only had to find ways to relate to distant homelands, but had to learn to speak to each other, in many cases for the first time'.<sup>10</sup> They were arenas that were, nonetheless, 'shaped by the boundaries of race and power set by colonial rule'.<sup>11</sup> Learned societies, translation bureaus, and masonic lodges were institutions on which empire thrived, allowing the state to gather local knowledge – both secular and sacred – integral to its own ability to govern. Social reform movements helped legitimise, as well as contest, empire's 'civilising' mission, yet they also inspired soul-searching among Asians themselves, prompting religious revival movements which resonated with traditional forms of philanthropy.

From the pre-colonial period through to the mid-nineteenth century, as formal municipal and state institutions evolved, the social fabric of commercial Bangkok, Penang, and Rangoon consisted of an ad-hoc coalition of temples, mosques, churches, clan associations, and secret societies – civil, religious, and 'uncivil' or illegal informal institutions. The state cracked down on secret societies in the second half of the nineteenth century, requiring registration, but it also tended to entrust local leaders to manage and discipline their own communities.<sup>12</sup> By the turn of the century, new, Western-style associational models emerged, creating barriers between white and Asian communities as well as new meeting places. Battling against the exclusionary walls of the colonial clubhouse, where power conglomerated behind a fallacy of white prestige, Anglophone Asian gentlemen, the 'public men' of the age, appropriated the institutional model for their own ends, forming their own clubs or, in the case of Siam, giving existing clubs royal patronage.<sup>13</sup> Due to their donning of Western dress and fluency in English, these urban elites at times fell prey to accusations of 'false imitation' by their contemporaries, equivalent to post-colonial critiques of colonial 'mimicry'.<sup>14</sup> Yet as educated, professional, and socially conscious individuals, they commanded respect and positioned themselves at the interstices of local, colonial, and global associational networks. In Rangoon and Penang, they broke through the racial hierarchies of the colonial arena. In Bangkok, they sought to protect Siam's sovereignty by maintaining prestige and appearing *siwilai* ('civilised'). In Burma, public men helped form new, quasi-political forms

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 263.    <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 263.

<sup>12</sup> See Mahani Musa, *Malay Secret Societies in the Northern Malay States, 1821–1940s* (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 2007), p. 82.

<sup>13</sup> On Asian 'public men', see Bayly, *Empire and Information*, p. 347.

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, accusations of the 'false imitation', in *The Straits Echo*, 22 February 1938, p. 13, and attacks on the 'town-bred Burman' or *myotha* in U Po Ka, *Citizen of Burma* (Rangoon: British Burma Press, 1914), p. 27. On colonial mimicry, see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 121–31.

of association, directed towards the restoration of cultural pride using the language of race, territory, and homeland. Burmese, unlike Siamese or even most Malaysians, were united by a desire for independence, thus the process of 'imagining' a horizontal ethno-linguistic social bond provided new civic alignments between farmers and urbanites, workers and intellectuals, monks and politicians, providing proto-nationalist urban elites with the legitimacy of 'national' representation. Malay Associations provide a parallel case to Burma, though they emerged much later and were much less overtly political.<sup>15</sup>

Working-class associations also emerged in this period, and drew from global models. Chinese and Indian workers inaugurated the first workers' organisations in Southeast Asia. In Malaya, Chinese craftsman guilds initially provided a meeting ground for employers and workers, a site for dispute resolution as well as social welfare. These guilds came under threat as industrial societies dismantled the division of labour into guild monopolies on particular crafts and trades, and as the colonial state cracked down on the secret societies associated with the guilds.<sup>16</sup> The rise of a militant labour movement in China in the mid-twenties influenced the rise of Chinese trade unions in Malaya. Indian workers in Penang, inspired by the visit of the Indian activist E. Ramasamy, started an organisation to remove caste distinctions, the Maruthuvar Sangam.<sup>17</sup> In Burma, some of the first labour strikers were of Indian origin, and originally joined forces with Burmese workers in forming Burma's first labour organisation in 1897.<sup>18</sup> As in the case of the 1930 dockworkers' strike, the colonial government sought to divide its increasingly politically active workforce along racial lines, with Burmese trade unions later co-opted into the students' nationalist movement.

Much of the historiography of colonial Southeast Asia has focused on religious or ethnic forms of association and social empowerment, seeking to present them as 'proto-nationalist' organisations through the lens of the post-colonial state. As empowering as many of these early organisations were in fostering a unified sense of community, they also tended to promote an anti-immigrant stance. Few historians have examined the late nineteenth-century roots of modern associational cultures in Asia or the

<sup>15</sup> William Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

<sup>16</sup> Charles Gamba, *The Origins of Trade Unionism in Malaya: A Study of Colonial Labour Unrest* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press Ltd, 1962).

<sup>17</sup> Yee Fong Leong, *Labour and Trade Unionism in Colonial Malaya: A Study of the Socio-Economic and Political Bases of the Malayan Labour Movement* (Penang: Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia, 1999).

<sup>18</sup> Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 'Associational Life in Myanmar: Past and Present', in *Myanmar: State, Society, and Ethnicity* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007).

increasingly cosmopolitan and international context in which such associations came to the fore from the early decades of the century. Alongside a mushrooming of new communal and religious organisations, an aspirational and multi-ethnic middle class engaged in a process of cosmopolitanism by interacting with each other through new professional and cultural networks, political campaigns, or philanthropic efforts directed towards the wider urban, national, and global community. Driven in large part not only by Western-educated men, but also elite and middle-class women and expatriate or long-domiciled migrant communities, these alliances drew on discourses of global citizenship focused on the civic culture of the city. They promoted community service, moral and social uplift, and cross-cultural friendship and sociability.<sup>19</sup> Their associations provided new modes of citizenship and belonging that overlapped with, and potentially marginalised, ethnic modes of territorial solidarity and the desire for radical, revolutionary reform. In Bangkok, even within the overarching framework of Buddhist kingship, these arenas provided the aristocracy with an opportunity to showcase themselves as benevolent, cosmopolitan rulers oriented towards gradual democratisation, while opening up new venues for interaction with urban literati and professionals.

From these semi-private associations, diverse groups formed new alliances and collectively contributed to civic life through public campaigns and print literature. Their interactions with each other as well as the broader community suggest that they thought of themselves as part of a cosmopolitan 'public', alongside other 'publics' that were deeply divided along communal lines. Were these communities simply a small and powerful minority of Western-educated urban elites who succeeded in legitimising the more idealistic, 'civilising' aims of formal and informal imperialism, or did they offer possibilities for a more inclusive, pluralist vision of the nation within an increasingly globalised world? This question forms the crux of intellectual debates that link cosmopolitanism with civil society, and have always been critical of its emancipatory potential and its actually existing practices of inclusion and exclusion.<sup>20</sup> What is clearer, from a historian's perspective, is that public life in Asian cities was becoming much more plural and dynamic. It was composed of multiple

<sup>19</sup> For recent work on cross-cultural friendship, see Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> See debates summarised in Craig Calhoun, 'Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere', *Habermas and the Public Sphere* and Sunil Khilnani, 'The Development of Civil Society', in *Civil Society: History and Possibilities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 11–32.

arenas, where various religious, diasporic, intellectual, and increasingly international networks opened up new opportunities for elite and aspirational middle-class Asians to promote piecemeal social change. This chapter tracks the emergence of the range of arenas that promoted cross-cultural sociability in the three port-cities in an age where various ethnic and religious communities were becoming increasingly polarised. We begin with religious toleration in the pre-colonial era, move on to fraternity and respectability within a colonial context, look at the globalisation of the public sphere through trans-national organisations, explore a case study of the Rotary movement in the 1930s, and end in a Penang *kopi tiam*.

### Cities of Multiple Faiths

Western political theorists value the working, egalitarian multicultural society as the teleological end of the public sphere, in which diverse private interests come together as a public. Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor celebrates the ‘fusion of horizons’ by which cultural contrasts are articulated, noting that ‘all societies are becoming increasingly multicultural, while at the same time becoming more porous due to immigration’.<sup>21</sup> Nancy Fraser debates the merits of multiple publics versus a single public for egalitarian multicultural societies, which are ‘likely to be inhabited by social groups with diverse values, identities, and cultural styles, and hence to be multicultural’.<sup>22</sup> The distinctiveness of migrant communities, argues Will Kymlicka, is manifested in family lives and voluntary associations, with wider integration possible through participation in public institutions and in speaking the dominant language.<sup>23</sup> While Western scholars are only recently coming to grips with the political and ideological challenges of managing immigrant societies, the lived reality of multiculturalism in Southeast Asia is nothing new. Particularly in its port-cities, there are long histories where individuals with diverse ethnic and religious interests learned, by necessity, to co-exist. The heritage of religious pluralism in such cities around the world is comparable throughout the urban landscape. London, which today prides itself on its multiculturalism, had its first synagogue built in 1841, its first mosque in 1889, and its first Hindu temple in 1920. Yet these sites existed in disparate parts of an expanding

<sup>21</sup> Charles Taylor, ‘The Politics of Recognition’, in *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 63.

<sup>22</sup> Nancy Fraser, ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy’, in ed. Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, p. 125.

<sup>23</sup> Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 14.



city, catering to the faiths of marginalised minority communities who had little to do with each other.

By contrast, the urban landscapes of Bangkok, Rangoon, and Penang feature centuries-old religious sites co-existing in close proximity, near the waterfront and the downtown core. This fascinated Europeans. The travel literature of the region features a consistent trope of what we might call visible cosmopolitanism, where Western authors juxtapose diverse institutions, practices, and people in their portrayal of Asian port-cities.<sup>24</sup> Foreigners experienced wide religious tolerance under Southeast Asian rulers well into the nineteenth century. In Rangoon in 1855, the British answered the memorials of many diverse inhabitants who had existed in the city before its occupation and suffered under its destruction (apart from Buddhists, who saw no reason to petition an alien power).<sup>25</sup> Free grants of land were given to the American Baptist mission, the Armenian Church, a Hindu Temple, two mosques, a synagogue, two Chinese temples, and a convent.<sup>26</sup> The British followed the tolerant policies of Southeast Asian rulers towards diverse religious communities. While the British planned a new Rangoon in the 1850s, King Mindon, known for his charity towards other religions, built churches and mosques in Mandalay as well as a hostel in Mecca for the comfort of Burmese Muslim pilgrims, even covering their travelling expenses.<sup>27</sup> Whereas religious tolerance had been a characteristic feature of Buddhist kingship, the destruction of Burmese courtly culture and the diminished authority of the Buddhist *sangha* resulted in religious toleration *enforced* through colonial rule. But in the first years of the twentieth century, as Alicia Turner has shown, Buddhism, faced with the threat of decline, experienced a full-scale revival, the quantity and diversity of Buddhist associations far outstripping other religious and ethnic groups throughout the colonial era.<sup>28</sup>

Foreign communities enjoyed the same degree of religious tolerance in Bangkok as they had in Ayutthaya. In Bangkok, Portuguese and Armenian churches, mosques, and Hindu and Buddhist temples existed in close proximity near the waterfront. The king granted plots of religious land near the palace; Mahanak mosque, built in 1870, used such land for a cemetery, rental property, a market, and a school.<sup>29</sup> The Rosenbergs,

<sup>24</sup> See, for instance, on Rangoon, W.J. Grant, *The New Burma* (London: George Allen, 1940); on Malaya, Victor Purcell, *Malaya: Outline of a Colony* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1946), p. 91; on Bangkok, William Louis Charles, *In the Lands of the Sun*.

<sup>25</sup> Pearn, *History of Rangoon*, p. 191. <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>27</sup> Yegar, *Muslims of Burma*, p. 15.

<sup>28</sup> See Alicia Turner, *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014).

<sup>29</sup> *Brief History of Mahanak Masjid Mosque, Cemetery, School and Illustrated Map* (Bangkok: Bamrung Islam Witthaya School, 2002).

a prominent Jewish family who settled in Siam, opened one of the city's first modern hotels and also built Bangkok's first synagogue in the 1920s. Most early Jewish arrivals were poor and Yiddish-speaking, though they quickly learned both Thai and English.<sup>30</sup> The monarchy's policy of 'benign neglect' evolved into a more diplomatic styling of a benevolent ruler presiding over a diverse nation. As the power of newspapers and publicity grew, the image of a benevolent monarchy was fostered through speeches of goodwill and friendship during royal visits to religious institutions on their memorial days and the openings of festivals.<sup>31</sup> In the eyes of the Siamese state, the city's diverse religious communities were united through a vertical allegiance to the monarch and knowledge of the Thai language as well as their own. The American writer Virginia Thompson observed candidly that Chulalongkorn, the great moderniser, was 'perfectly willing for his subjects to choose the religion they preferred; in his opinion religions were so much alike that there was no difficulty in bridging the gap between them'.<sup>32</sup>

Some religious sites brought diverse ethnic communities together. Bangkok's Haroon mosque, estimated to be built around 1870, was located on the present site of the Royal Customs House in the heart of the commercial district (the land was exchanged to the place it inhabits today, set back from the river). Both Muslim and non-Muslim communities have rented land from the mosque for centuries. An interview with a group of men at the mosque today yields clues to the diversity of the community in the early part of the twentieth century. They trace their mixed ancestry back to Chinese Muslims, South Indian and Tamil Muslims, Persians, Cambodians, Vietnamese, Mons, Malays, and Indonesians.<sup>33</sup> All are Muslims, many are related, and the community has sustained links with other mosques in the city and with the world, from Penang to Pakistan to West Africa. A detailed ethnography of the diversity of Bangkok's Muslim community and its trans-national links, evidence of a long lineage of Muslim cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia's ports, is long overdue.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> S.M. Mallinger, 'An Introduction to the History of the Jewish Presence in Thailand' (unpublished manuscript presented to the Neilson Hays Library, Bangkok).

<sup>31</sup> See, for instance, 'Santa Cruz Celebrates Founding', *Bangkok Daily Mail*, 19 September 1930, p. 5; 'Indian Festival', *Bangkok Daily Mail*, 10 September 1930, p. 6.

<sup>32</sup> Virginia Thompson, *Thailand: The New Siam* (New York: Paragon, 1967), p. 635.

<sup>33</sup> Imam Thanarat Watcharapisud and others. Interview by author. Haroon mosque, Bangkok. 22 January 2009.

<sup>34</sup> For examples of recent scholarship on Muslim cosmopolitanism, see Humeira Iqtidar, 'Muslim Cosmopolitanism: Contemporary Practice and Social Theory', in *Handbook of Globalization Studies*, ed. Bryan Turner (Oxford: Routledge, 2009); and Engseong Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006).

Due to its origins as a migrant port and its relatively smaller size, Penang contains the most striking example of different religious sites co-existing in close proximity. Penang's first Jewish cemetery was built in 1805, near the heart of George Town. By 1818, within four decades of its founding, Pitt street in Penang, the town's central axis, contained representatives of the world's four major religions, featuring a church, Chinese Buddhist temple, Hindu temple, an Indian Muslim shrine, and a large mosque nestled together in a row (aptly, it became known locally as the 'Street of Heavenly Harmony').<sup>35</sup> A Burmese-Siamese enclave emerged to the west of the town centre, where the *stupas* of Buddhist and Siamese temples strove to outdo each other, while their worshippers shared each other's food as neighbours, and participated in each other's festivities, united in their shared allegiance to Theravada Buddhism.<sup>36</sup> Religious sites were also symptomatic of divisions between, within, and across religious and ethnic communities. As Amrith notes, Hindu and Muslim communities had to learn to negotiate the public spaces shared between their respective spiritual sites, not without some contest.<sup>37</sup> Chinese temples, meanwhile, were often symbolic of division rather than unity, as each dialect group had their own favoured deities.<sup>38</sup> Throughout the nineteenth century, Penang's various public and private mosques acted as meeting venues for two competing Malay secret societies, both affiliated with rival Chinese secret societies.<sup>39</sup>

Temples, mosques, churches, and synagogues were devoted to the spiritual, social, and educational needs of their own religious communities, often serving as a place of commerce and networking among local and visiting traders. Washbrook argues that there is no greater site of proto-capitalism in Asia than the South Indian temple, a centre of economic activity as well as lively discussion.<sup>40</sup> The Chettiar temple in Rangoon, as Adas notes, served as a place where the community 'held periodic meetings, determined current interest rates, settled disputes, formed common opinions regarding important political issues (such as proposed tenancy or land alienation legislation), and exchanged gossip'.<sup>41</sup> Land granted to religious institutions,

<sup>35</sup> Khoo Su Nin, *Streets of George Town Penang* (Penang: Janus Print & Resources, 1993), pp. 147–50.

<sup>36</sup> For a history of Penang's Buddhist temples, see Benny Liow Woon Khin, 'Buddhist Temples and Associations in Penang 1845–1948', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 62.

<sup>37</sup> Sunil S. Amrith, 'Tamil Diasporas Across the Bay of Bengal', *American Historical Review* 114 (2009): 555.

<sup>38</sup> Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand*, p. 138. <sup>39</sup> Musa, p. 79.

<sup>40</sup> D. A. Washbrook, 'Progress and Problems: South Asian Economic and Social History c. 1720–1860', *Modern Asian Studies* 22:1 (1988): 68.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Adas, 'Immigrant Asians and the Economic Impact of European Imperialism: The Role of the South Indian Chettiars in British Burma', *Journal of Asian Studies* 33: 3 (1974): 396–97.

the ancestral relationships of patronage existing in the Chinese *tong*, and the endowments of the Muslim *waqf* provided the economic base for local philanthropy, requiring engagement between community leaders and members on the best use of land and funds. In Southeast Asia, as Engseng Ho has argued, the Hadramis, as bearers of Islamic knowledge and prestige, were 'everywhere potential creators of public spaces and institutions such as mosques, courts, schools, and pilgrimage shrines'.<sup>42</sup> The interplay of different religious bodies engaged in the welfare of their own communities and maintaining cordial relationships with their neighbours created an urban patchwork of social capital centred on local institutions and leadership.

Religious bodies also provided services that crosscut ethnic lines, testifying to the growth of a wider and growing civic consciousness. Before formal and informal colonial structures were in place, mission schools provided English education to diverse religious groups, often without the requirements of conversion. Sikh temples, by tradition, provided free meals to all members of the community. In the heart of Sampheng, the Li Ti Meow temple, built early in the twentieth century by Hakka merchants, was known as a 'healing temple' where Chinese, Thais, and Indians received free medicine with a donation and a prayer lit with incense sticks. The Muslim Free Hospital in Rangoon, set up in 1937, acted as a free dispensary to serve the public, regardless of race or class. The civic practices of religious bodies that extended beyond their own denominations speak to their role as 'public' service providers with the ability to cater to a wide community of diverse private interests, and deserve a central place when considering the evolution of a cosmopolitan Southeast Asian public sphere.

Mobility, diaspora, and transnational networks were key aspects of these ports and their communities in a global age; settlement, co-existence, and lived multiculturalism were equally important.<sup>43</sup> Oral tradition, memory, inscriptions, legal documents, and religious sites themselves have helped preserve the local micro-histories of communities that came together in worship. The built environment testifies to their ability to co-exist, to dwell on entangled roots. Members of different religious faiths may have never entered each other's temples, yet given their relative proximity they certainly learned to tolerate each other as neighbours; some may have found ways of speaking to each other outside their temples, in the marketplace, on the street, or at a festival, bridging differences and finding commonalities across various faiths. Implicit in the architectural legacy of these cities is an informal and enduring 'politics of recognition' between multiple

<sup>42</sup> Engseng Ho, 'Empire through Diasporic Eyes: A View from the Other Boat', *Comparative Studies in History and Society* 46:2 (2004): 210–46.

<sup>43</sup> Amrith, 'Tamil Diasporas'; Harper, 'Globalism'; Frost, 'Asia's Maritime Networks'.



Figure 7 The Li Ti Miao 'Healing Temple' visited by Chinese, Indian, and Thai communities in Sampheng, Bangkok.



Figure 8 The Muslim Free Hospital in Rangoon.

religious communities, born out of the capitalist conditions of the cosmopolitan port. Despite some tensions over civic space, religious co-existence constituted a foundation for cross-cultural sociability; this would be heavily tested through the introduction of new ideas of respectability, racial difference, secularism, and globalism in the colonial era.

### **Fraternity and Respectability in the Colonial Era**

European expansion resulted in new hierarchies of race and power, particularly in the latter half of the nineteenth century as racial ideologies become more entrenched. But the early years of imperial expansion also brought Enlightenment ideals of cosmopolitan solidarity.<sup>44</sup> Claims of universalism were made through the encyclopaedic accumulation of knowledge, cosmopolitan brotherhood, and a collective platform of ‘civilised’ debate and discussion between respectable, educated men,

<sup>44</sup> See Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1997). The cosmopolitan ideas of the Enlightenment are encapsulated in Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Essay* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1917); for a recent overview of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism, see Michael Scrivener, *The Cosmopolitan Ideal in the Age of Revolution and Reaction, 1776–1832* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2007).

resulting in the rationalisation of civic culture. Imperialism valorised the expansion of respectable, bourgeois 'civil' society, promulgated by white men, while inadvertently spreading new forms of associational life. Historians have traditionally treated the spread of such values from the late eighteenth century as one monolithic phenomenon, couched under the guise of a 'civilising mission', while new research has tried to understand how imperial mentalities were forged through complex social networks and ideological tensions between the metropole and the frontier.<sup>45</sup> Freemasonry, for one, was intimately bound up in the imperial project, providing the networks central to the building and cohesion of empire.<sup>46</sup> Yet its radical ideological roots in eighteenth-century republicanism provided an expansive social experience in which religious and racial boundaries were routinely crossed.<sup>47</sup> Ideas of a cosmopolitan brotherhood, applied on the colonial frontier, necessarily began to include a small minority of Jewish, Muslim, and South Asian elites, positioned within these wide networks under the umbrella of the cosmopolitan ideal.

Scottish Masons, imbued with the libertarian ideals of the Scottish Enlightenment, founded the first Masonic lodge in Southeast Asia in Penang in 1801. They were also responsible for establishing the first Masonic temple in Siam in 1911, which attracted Westerners from all nationalities as well as Western-educated Thais. As Europeans in the colonies began interacting with local elites, freemasonry provided an early example of an inter-communal association that sought to create new solidarities, bringing together respectable men of any race from monotheistic religious backgrounds. Masonic membership in Southeast Asian port-cities, in particular, seemed to justify freemasonry's universal appeal. Their influences in the region were apparent even in the mid-nineteenth century – the sultan of Riau (r. 1841–64) was known to fraternise with Dutch officials and participate in masonic rituals.<sup>48</sup> The masonic scholar J. Ward observed in 1926 that in numerous lodges in India, brothers of every caste and creed met on the level and part of the masonic square, 'particularly in Rangoon, where every office was held by

<sup>45</sup> See David Hancock, *Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735–1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); David Lambert and Alan Lester, *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); J.P. Daughton, *An Empire Divided: Religion, Republicanism, and the Making of French Colonialism 1880–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>46</sup> See Jessica L. Harland-Jacobs, *Builders of Empire: Freemasons and British Imperialism, 1717–1927* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

<sup>47</sup> Margaret C. Jacob, *Strangers Nowhere in the World: The Rise of Cosmopolitanism in Early Modern Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2006), p. 11.

<sup>48</sup> Virginia Matheson, 'Mahmud, Sultan of Riau and Lingga (1823–1864)', *Indonesia* 13 (1972): 121.

a man of a different race and creed, thereby bearing witness to the wonderful and universal nature of Freemasonry.<sup>49</sup>

Masonic networks thrived in the fluid, frontier situations of colonial port-cities, where both Western and Asian migrants sought to create settled patterns of sociability that gave them a wider sense of belonging to both a distant home and a world larger than the realm of the local. These dovetailed with the associational networks that connected Chinese communities across vast swathes of territory. As the expansion of the Manchu state caused havoc in villages in Southern China, émigrés fled into Southeast Asia, with clan associations (*kongsi*) initially providing protection and assistance to their members. They provided a model for Malay secret societies, both functioning as an *imperium in imperio* throughout the nineteenth century, an ‘order within an order’ as the colonial state fulfilled only the most basic functions.<sup>50</sup> Such societies rose to the top of the informal economy through their control over gambling, opium, and prostitution as revenue farms, with the Chinese often relying on Malays as interlocutors with the police.<sup>51</sup> By the early twentieth century, Malay and Chinese secret societies joined forces within White Flag and Red Flag societies, competing in cross-ethnic alliances in Penang.<sup>52</sup> Secret-society networks crossed the length of the Malay Peninsula, extending into Southern Siam and Bangkok.

Masonic and Chinese secret societies shared the same hierarchical structures, with degrees of status and archaic rituals.<sup>53</sup> Jean DeBernardi argues that from the early 1800s, freemasons in the Straits Settlements drew striking parallels between their own rituals and those of the Chinese sworn brotherhoods, with some arguing that the two organisations shared historical roots dating back to antiquity.<sup>54</sup> In the sworn brotherhoods’ opposition to China’s last imperial dynasty, there were parallel traditions of republicanism in values of liberty, fraternity, and equality.<sup>55</sup> Yet while European freemasons were fascinated by the rituals of Chinese secret societies, they had no qualms about exposing them to the public and keeping their own under wraps.<sup>56</sup> Conversely, Chinese communities

<sup>49</sup> J.S. Ward, *Freemasonry and the Ancient Gods* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co, 1926).

<sup>50</sup> Tan Liok Ee, ‘Conjunctures, Confluences, Contestations’, in *Penang and Its Region: The Story of an Asian Entrepot*, ed. Yeoh Seng Guan et al. (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), p. 15; See also Musa.

<sup>51</sup> Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand*, p.140.

<sup>52</sup> This is explored in Musa, *Malay Secret Societies in the Northern Malay States, 1821–1940s*.

<sup>53</sup> Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand*, p. 140.

<sup>54</sup> Jean DeBernardi, *Rites of Belonging: Memory, Modernity, and Identity in a Malaysian Chinese Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 57.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*



from South China who fled from the Manchu empire were drawn to Masonic ideals, particularly newly affluent merchants and entrepreneurs who sought to extend their professional and social networks. Lee Ah Lye was an avid mason as well as one of the most prominent Chinese community leaders in 1930s Rangoon; according to a contemporary South Asian journalist, he opened his home to friends irrespective of race or nationality and was 'loved and respected by all those who came into contact with him'.<sup>57</sup> Ward may have been speaking of Lee when he said that in Rangoon, he

came to know quite a number of important Chinese, men of unquestioned integrity and uprightness of character. They were particularly noteworthy for their honesty and for their generosity to the poor and distressed, not only to their own people, but to men of all races and creeds. Quite a number of these men were members of the Chinese secret societies; and if a tree is known by its fruit, then the Lodges they honored by their presence could not be the evil places some ignorant folks will pretend.<sup>58</sup>

The philanthropic impulse of freemasonry coincided with elements of public service and merit-accumulation for Chinese community leaders.<sup>59</sup>

Freemasonry's republican creed provided a model of cosmopolitan associational life, where the realm of the sacred coincided with politics, yet it was very much an underground movement, a strange and archaic fraternity operating behind the doors of the Masonic temple. In 1923, a European observer noted that such societies presented 'an odd sort of underworld in which certain European and Eurasian elements meet socially in semi-secret . . . worth discovering, if you can overcome the fanatic prejudices of the East'.<sup>60</sup> Such prejudices were blatantly displayed in the colonial clubhouse, an integral part of the colonial public sphere.<sup>61</sup> Behind the walls of the Penang Club, and Rangoon's Gymkhana and Pegu clubs, colonial officials and expatriates gossiped, discussed politics, drank gin-and-tonics, and played billiards with members of their own race, enforcing their own sense of white prestige.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>57</sup> S. Chatterjee, *Meeting the Personalities* (Rangoon: 1959), p. 50.

<sup>58</sup> Ward, *Freemasonry and the Ancient Gods*, p. 84.

<sup>59</sup> On school donations in particular, see Tan Liok Ee, *The Politics of Chinese Education in Malaya, 1945–1961* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 28.

<sup>60</sup> Richard Curle, *Into the East: Notes on Burma and Malaya* (London: Macmillan, 1923)

<sup>61</sup> Mrinalini Sinha, 'Britishness, Clubbability, and the Colonial Public Sphere: The Genealogy of an Imperial Institution in Colonial India', *The Journal of British Studies* 40:4 (2001): 489–521.

<sup>62</sup> On 'white prestige' in Malaya, see John G Butcher, *The British in Malaya, 1880–1941: The Social History of a European Community in Colonial South-East Asia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 77. See also Ann Stoler, 'Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of Rule', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31:1 (1989): 138.

As opposed to the tenets of freemasonry, which, in principle, advocated the inclusion of respectable men, such clubs symbolised the racial hierarchy of what Furnivall called 'the plural society' in colonial Southeast Asia, with Europeans at the apex, affluent foreign Asians in the middle, and indigenous groups at the bottom.

Demarcations of race and exclusion in the public sphere, bridged in 'semi-secret' among whites and respectable Asians, blatantly showcased the contradictions of colonial culture and the incoherence of its cosmopolitan ideals. Asians, meanwhile, used the European club model to strengthen their own social and business networks. European merchants entrenched their commercial stronghold over colonial ports by founding the Penang Chamber of Commerce in 1837 and the Burma Chamber of Commerce in 1887, which gradually began to include non-European members. By the 1920s, Penang had Chinese, Indian, and Muslim Chambers of Commerce, while Rangoon had Burmese and Burmese Indian Chambers of Commerce. Such clubs solidified networks of capital, community, and trust along ethnic lines. Engseng Ho has argued that an elite class of Malay, Indian, and Chinese Anglophones emerged out of the break-up of powerful multi-ethnic alliances of Penang Chinese financier-gangsters, Indian Muslim societies, and Malay nobles who had competed with each other in the tin mines in the peninsula.<sup>63</sup> As a result, they 'became increasingly divorced from political life, now understood in racial terms, and reconvened over drinks at the clubhouse instead'.<sup>64</sup> Ho argues that although such gentlemen, often Western-trained barristers, were made in the mould of Indian public men, they 'lost their will to politics', retreating into a narrow, legalistic formulation of identities and rights.<sup>65</sup> In Bangkok, meanwhile, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce acted as a non-political, purely commercial front for the Kuomintang, with some of its Straits-born Chinese dodging allegations of political treason through the extra-territorial rights they received as British citizens.<sup>66</sup> The Siamese elite, desiring to appear *sivilai* ('to be civilised') in the eyes of the West, had begun to adopt Westerners' denigration and distrust of the Chinese, their commercial rivals.<sup>67</sup>

In spite of the racial ideologies underlying colonial culture, the attainment of gentlemanly respectability in Penang and Rangoon allowed Western-educated Asian barristers and professionals to extend their professional and commercial networks and raise their social standing within

<sup>63</sup> Ho, 'Gangsters into Gentlemen: The Breakup of Multiethnic Conglomerates and the Rise of a Straits Chinese Identity in Penang', Paper presented at the Penang Story Conference, Penang, 2002.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1. <sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>66</sup> Baker and Phongpaichit, *History of Thailand*, p. 115. <sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

the public sphere. In Bangkok, however, *siwilai* was a matter of national integrity. The campaign emerged in the late nineteenth century as a conscious attempt on the part of the Siamese elite and urban intellectuals to confirm the relative superiority of Siam in comparison to the West, both a threat and a trope of *siwilai*.<sup>68</sup> Appearing *siwilai* was of utmost necessity in the club-culture and diplomatic circles of Bangkok, which often, if not overtly but psychologically, mirrored the racial hierarchies of the colonial public sphere. The Royal Bangkok Sports club was a European club, and Thai members were nearly all members of the Royal Family who went to prestigious schools abroad, playing rugby and golf. Here, European as well as Asian nations vied to curry political favour from the ruling elite. Foreigners at the Sports Club isolated themselves according to nationality; 'each table', noted the journalist Andrew Freeman, 'seemed to be invested with extra-territorial rights'.<sup>69</sup> The patronage of Anglophone club life by the royal elite fostered a vertical relationship of deference from the international community towards the Thai ruling class. In maintaining *siwilai*, an air of Western-style respectability combined with an assertion of Thai blue-blood identity, the Siamese elite played on European 'ornamentalism' rooted in an obsession with Asian pageantry, status, tradition, and prestige.<sup>70</sup> In their eyes at least, this helped to maintain a careful balance of political power and ensure a diplomatic safeguarding of Siam's borders.

Though many Anglophone Asian gentlemen, as well as Siamese elites, remained isolated and divorced from public life in the 1920s and 1930s, leaving their luxury homes only to show status at the racetrack and the polo pitch, others looked outwards to the wider community and engaged in philanthropic activity. A number of Asian community leaders invested heavily in education and social welfare, primarily within their own community but often for the public as a whole.<sup>71</sup> In the 1920s, Khoo Sian Ewe, a Straits-Chinese leader, provided funds to build a mosque in a Chinese-

<sup>68</sup> Winichakul, 'Quest for "Siwilai"'; Thongchai Winichakul, 'The Others Within: Travel and Ethno-Spatial Differentiation of Siamese Subjects 1885–1910', in *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States*, ed. Andrew Turton (London: Curzon Press, 2000).

<sup>69</sup> Andrew A. Freeman, *A Journalist in Siam (1932)* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2007), p. 91.

<sup>70</sup> David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (London: Penguin, 2001).

<sup>71</sup> See biographies of prominent persons featured in Arnold Wright and H. A. Cartwright, *Twentieth Century Impressions of British Malaya: Its History, People, Commerce, Industries, and Resources* (London: 1908); William Ng Jit Thye et al., *Historical Personalities of Penang* (Penang: The Historical Personalities of Penang Committee, 1986). On the contribution of Burmese as well as Chinese and Indian elites in Rangoon, see Chatterjee, *Meeting the Personalities*, pp. 51, 64. For a unique interpretation of the biography of one Malayan Chinese community leader, see Sharon A. Carstens, 'From Myth to History: Yap Ah Loy and the Heroic Past of Chinese Malaysians', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 19:2 (1988): 185–208.

populated area of Penang. As in Hong Kong and Singapore, Anglophone Chinese drew on Victorian ideals of social reform, mingling them with the Confucian revival movement, which sought to reform the Chinese community along the lines of older values of public service.<sup>72</sup> Partly to increase their own social standing within their communities, they established a number of schools, charities, and welfare homes for the poor and marginalised. Penang's English-educated Muslims (Jawi Peranakan, Indians, and Arabs) formed social and philanthropic clubs under the auspices of the whole Muslim community.<sup>73</sup> In Bangkok, a circle of progressive Thai princes (Prince Damrong, Prince Purachatra, Prince Varnvaidya, Prince Siddhiporn) helped shape a public sphere in Bangkok via their patronage and involvement in literary societies and internationally recognised philanthropic initiatives. These continued throughout the 1930s even after the fall of the absolute monarchy.

Gentlemen's clubs also helped foster inter-Asian alliances. Asian elites in Rangoon were barred from entry into the white-dominated Gymkhana and Pegu clubs. In retaliation, they formed the Orient Club and subsequently excluded Europeans.<sup>74</sup> The 'Union of Burma Club' was formed for Burmese, yet the club was not so racially exclusive in principle, particularly towards other Asians. The Indian journalist S. Chatterjee recalled being brought there by his Burmese friends:

I had the opportunity not only to meet but to develop real acquaintance with leaders in politics, education, business and legal profession. Situated in the heart of the city it was well patronised by its members and if one desired to meet any prominent Burmese he could be almost sure to find him there in the evening. It was a club for recreation and had the full facilities for the same and even those who did not indulge in drinks came there regularly for wholesome fellowship and genuine friendship. Topics of course covered all aspects of human life and these talks kept them well informed and closely linked.<sup>75</sup>

Chatterjee also enjoyed free access to the clubs of the Chinese community, learning 'their habits, tastes, their way of living', and impressed by

<sup>72</sup> See Wai Kan Chan, *The Making of Hong Kong Society: Three Studies of Class Formation in Early Hong Kong* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Chua Ai Lin, 'Imperial Subjects, Straits Citizens: Anglophone Asians and the Struggle for Political Rights in Inter-war Singapore', in *Paths Not Taken: Political Pluralism in Post-War Singapore*, ed. Michael D. Barr and Carl A. Trocki (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008), pp. 16–36; Christine Doran, 'The Chinese Cultural Reform Movement in Singapore: Singaporean Chinese Identities and Reconstructions of Gender', *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 12:1 (1997): 92–107.

<sup>73</sup> Helen Fujimoto, *The South Indian-Muslim Community and the Evolution of the Jawi Peranakan in Penang up to 1948* (Tokyo: Gaikokugo Daigaku, 1989), p. 133.

<sup>74</sup> Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Armies*, p. 85.

<sup>75</sup> Chatterjee, *Meeting the Personalities*, p. 32.

‘their unfailing courtesy and lavish hospitality’.<sup>76</sup> Such clubs helped create a new sense of solidarity between the emerging Burmese, Indian, and Chinese professional classes and created new opportunities for political discussion and debate, albeit behind closed doors.

One of the few venues where Europeans and Asians interacted publicly as equals was in the learned society. Such societies existed within a particular space of intellectual idealism, an Enlightenment belief in the interaction of a community of scholars, gentlemanly sociability, and education as the basis of an informed public sphere. The learned society’s complicity in gathering knowledge in the service of the imperial project has been well documented by historians, particularly in the case of the Raj.<sup>77</sup> Early on, the Royal Asiatic Society – which established branches from Bengal to the Straits Settlements – provided a mode of imperial information-gathering by colonial officials. By the early twentieth century, learned societies became venues for intellectual inquiry into Asian history and culture that often ran counter to the aims of the colonial state, opening up new debates about indigenous societies that were not always welcome.<sup>78</sup> In contrast to the RAS, the learned societies of Bangkok and Rangoon came into existence under different circumstances than those of the Raj. From 1905, both European and Asian literati formed such societies not as an initiative of the colonial state but as independent, joint endeavours.<sup>79</sup>

The premise for the foundation of the Siam Society and the Burma Research Society was the explicit need for Asians, rather than foreigners, to write their own history.<sup>80</sup> In 1888, W.H. Mundie, editor of the *Bangkok Post*, launched an appeal for such a society by criticising the Siamese class system: ‘It is thus, we think, a reproach of which the educated Siamese should hasten to free themselves, that they have done absolutely nothing for the increase of knowledge regarding their own country and their own people.’<sup>81</sup> Seventeen years later, the Siam

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>77</sup> See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978); Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, N.J.; Chichester: Princeton University Press, 2001); Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, N.J.; Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1996); Bayly, *Empire and Information*; and Michael S. Dodson, ‘Orientalism, Empire and National Culture: India, 1770–1880’ (2007).

<sup>78</sup> For an overview on the tensions of knowledge and rule, see Cooper and Stoler, *Tensions of Empire*, pp. 11–18.

<sup>79</sup> Lewis, ‘Between Orientalism and Nationalism’.

<sup>80</sup> See G.E. Harvey, ‘The Writing of Burmese History’, *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 9:1 (1919).

<sup>81</sup> W.H. Mundie, ‘Siamese Historians: A Want’, *Bangkok Times*, March 17, 1888 as qutd. in Bonnie Davis, *The Siam Society Under Five Reigns* (Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1989), p. 11.

Society came into being in 1905 under royal patronage, becoming a vehicle for Europeans and Asians with an interest in Thai history and culture to interact in an intellectual setting. The initial membership included a German-Jewish diplomat, an Italian colonel, British officials born in India, and a Japanese legal advisor. Prince Damrong was the enthusiastic vice-patron of the Society, knowing most of the foreigners in Bangkok who shared his scholarly interests.<sup>82</sup> He encouraged the involvement of younger Thais with a similar interest in history, including ‘commoner-intellectuals’ such as Phya Anuman Rajadhon, who had little formal education but became a leading scholar and head of the Department of Fine Arts at Silpakorn University (and whose childhood memories of Bangkok featured in Chapter 2).<sup>83</sup>

Inspired by the Siam Society’s example, J.S. Furnivall and the leading Burmese politician U May Oung formed the Burma Research Society as a ‘meeting place’ between East and West.<sup>84</sup> Though the society gained the approval of the governor, Furnivall was warned to avoid economic issues or both Burmese and European civil servants would be called on to resign. Burma’s financial commissioner withdrew his signature on the grounds that the movement was ‘political’. Furnivall relayed later:

In this, of course, he was right. For we were attempting something new. It was the first attempt to provide Europeans and Burmans with a common meeting ground other than the market place or race course, where they met to make money out of one another; it was the first time that Europeans had been encouraged to express sympathy with Burmese culture or that Burmans had been encouraged to express an interest in Burmese life; and it was the first attempt, except by the government, to promote cultural interests in Burma. It was, on a very modest scale, an event of political significance; morally, and potentially, of great significance.<sup>85</sup>

Though officials suggested that the organisation tie itself to the Royal Asiatic Society, and thus into a markedly imperial project, Burmans and many Europeans rejected the proposal, seeking to focus the project on Burma itself.

New intellectual hierarchies emerged within the learned society, which criticised other Westerners for their lack of knowledge about local culture. An article in the first issue by the Burmese politician Maung Tin deplored

<sup>82</sup> See Davis, *The Siam Society*, pp. 11–16.

<sup>83</sup> On ‘commoner-intellectuals’ see Baker and Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand*, pp. 74–75. On Phya Anuman Rajhanon, see William Warren, *The Siam Society: A Century* (Bangkok: The Siam Society, 2004), p.5.

<sup>84</sup> J.S. Furnivall, ‘Sunlight and Soap’, in *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 8:3 (1918): 199.

<sup>85</sup> J.S. Furnivall, ‘Twenty Five Years: A Retrospect and Prospect’, *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 25:1 (1935): 41–42.

the Burmese language skills of American missionaries. By contrast, European scholars were judged within these literary circles on the basis of their grasp of the language and the length of time spent in the country. In such social circles, having a Burmese wife, as Furnivall and GH Luce did, was a great asset, even if it ostracised them from the 8,000-strong white population.<sup>86</sup> Luce was told by the governor that he was 'pro-Burman', which, according to the writer, scholar, and Luce's contemporary Maurice Collis 'meant that you had for the Burmese a greater feeling of sympathy and fellowship than was sanctioned by British opinion at that date'.<sup>87</sup> Did Luce care? Titi Luce was a formidable figure in her own right, introduced to Luce by her brother U Pe Maung Tin, whose status as head archaeologist at Rangoon University plugged Luce into new local networks of artists and literati.<sup>88</sup> Furnivall, Luce, Duroiselle, and Collis were exposed to degrees of intellectual stimulation from their Asian friends that they never experienced at the Gymkhana club. Collis related in his memoirs, 'to see nobody but my own countrymen appeared to me a gross stupidity. The educated Burmese, Indian, and Chinese were very friendly, and an acquaintance with some of them enabled me quickly to form a picture of the Rangoon of the period and so, later on, to see things in perspective.'<sup>89</sup> Meetings were run like university seminars, with European and Asian literati commenting on papers and discussing their various merits. Bilingual versions of both journals allowed participation by Asian scholars without a grasp of the English language. Though they constituted a small minority of colonial society, the interactions of Furnivall, Luce, Stewart, Collis, and their Asian counterparts – U May Oung, Taw Sein Koh, Pe Maung Tin, U Ba Han, and many others – left a rich intellectual and institutional legacy, whereas the *sahibs* of the Gymkhana clubs garnered nothing but disdain from the wider Burmese community.

By the 1920s, both the Siam Society and Burma Research Society were well-established forums for interaction between cosmopolitan literati. They also widened their scope towards cross-cultural exchange, seeking to foster a more public intellectual culture. Whereas the original aim for the Burma Research Society in 1911 had been a bilateral one, to 'increase the good feeling and mutual respect between Briton and Burman', by 1920, the object had become more inclusive, that is, to 'promote

<sup>86</sup> Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Armies*, p. 87.

<sup>87</sup> Maurice Collis, *Into Hidden Burma* (London: Faber, 1953), p. 44.

<sup>88</sup> See *ibid.* These alliances have similarities with networks described in Gandhi, *Affective Communities*.

<sup>89</sup> Maurice Collis, *Trials in Burma* (London: Faber, 1938), pp. 34–35.

sympathy between members of different communities'.<sup>90</sup> Prince Dhani changed the motto of the Siam Society in 1926 to one rooted in a Pali verse – 'Knowledge Gives Rise to Friendship', conveying the idea of 'a friendly spirit of collaboration' between Europeans and foreigners.<sup>91</sup> The products of such intellectual exchanges were becoming increasingly available to a wider public. Schools, hotels, embassies, companies, missionary societies, various government ministries, and national and private libraries began stocking the journals, testifying to an unknown but growing readership by the public. Young researchers were encouraged to contribute. The Burma Research Society actively sought to recruit young scholars and give public lectures, extending invitations to various associations from the YMCA, youth and literary societies, and chambers of commerce. Offshoot projects of the Burma Research society included the Pali Text Society and the Burma Education Extension, which sought to promote the cause of literacy throughout Burma. The association published a literary monthly magazine, *The World of Books* (discussed in Chapter 4), which published in both English and Burmese and was highly critical of government policies.

Ideas of 'friendship' and 'knowledge' helped create new modes of understanding between Westerners and Asians, and also among Asians themselves. While new ethnographic categories were popularised by social scientists, Asian literati began to read about the histories, literature, and cultural practices of Mons, Arakanese, Chinese, and Muslims. They also began to travel. Burmese scholars such as U Ottama taught in India and Japan, while others visited Prince Damrong at his home in Penang after the prince's own visit to Burma in the late 1930s.<sup>92</sup> Scholars have pointed out that the practice of ethnology created distinct cultural categories where distinctions were much more fluid, yet in providing a framework for intellectual inquiry, they also encouraged a deeper level of understanding and empathy between Asian literati and their neighbours. Burmese and Thais, who in collective memory had been 'others' and 'enemies', began reading each other's history: U Aung Thein translated Prince Damrong's work for the Burma Research Society, and wrote to him in English with the 'grateful devotion of the translator' in 1938. From Penang, Prince Damrong also wrote to

<sup>90</sup> See appeals in *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 1:1 (1911) and *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 10:2 (1920).

<sup>91</sup> 'The Emblem of the Siam Society', *Journal of the Siam Society* 20:3 (1927): 259.

<sup>92</sup> On U Ottama's travels, see Chatterjee, *Meeting the Personalities*. On exchanges between Burmese literati and Prince Damrong, see Damrong Rajanubhab, *Journey through Burma in 1936* (Bangkok: Riverbooks, 1991).



a Burmese scholar, U Ba Dun, to source an English translation of Mon works published and obtainable in Burma.

Inter-Asian scholarly endeavours took place independently of Westerners. The Cambridge-educated Baron Kishichiro Okura, close to King Prajadhipok, first established a society to promote Siam-Japan relations. A new 'Siam Society of Japan' was established in 1927, with Prince Konoe as its president. The Japanese Minister K. Hayashi wrote to the palace with the hope that the Siam Society of Japan could 'bring about intimate and friendly relations between Siam and Japan, spreading knowledge concerning them among the peoples of both countries'.<sup>93</sup> The aims of the society involved the investigation and study of the two countries through observations, touring parties, educational studies, and business engagements, the improvement of communication and the promotion of trade.<sup>94</sup> It was a precursor to the Japan-Siam Association formed in 1935 under Phibun's military-style government. This project of extensive knowledge-gathering about Siam was connected to Japan's promotion of the East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere, an excuse for Japan's imperial ambitions in the region; yet it nonetheless brought Siamese and Japanese intellectuals in conversation with each other. Correspondence was in English, the lingua franca in which Thais communicated with other Asian literati.

Itinerant Asian scholars who learned Thai, however, made a strong impression. Towards the end of 1932, King Prajadhipok presided over an annual meeting of intellectuals at Chulalongkorn, with Prince Wan suggesting the king invite his friend, the Indian scholar Swami Sayanand. The king assured him that he could speak in English, but the swami, having learned to speak and write Thai within six months of his arrival in the country, read his speech in Thai to the apparent delight of the crowd.<sup>95</sup>

Though no major learned society was formed in Penang, half of the corresponding members of Singapore's Straits Philosophical Society (1893–1915) were from Penang, and contributed to meetings where subjects ranged from Spencer and Darwin to race and religion.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>93</sup> Letter from Japanese Minister K. Hayashi to Prince of Nagor Svarga, 8 January 1928, Bangkok, National Archives. Ministry of Royal Secretariat King Rama VII. R.7 and R.L. 17. Microfilm Reel 2.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> Roger Beaumont, *The Hidden Truth: A Tribute to the Indian Independence Movement in Thailand, Based on the Recollections of Mr Darshan Singh Bajaj* (London: Minerva, 1999).

<sup>96</sup> *The First Annual Report of the Straits Philosophical Society*, Singapore, N.D. [1894?]. See also H.N.R., 'Introduction', in *Noctes Orientales: Being a Selection of Essays Read before the Straits Philosophical Society between the Years 1893 and 1910* (Singapore: Kelly and Walsh, 1913), pp. i–iii; for more on the Straits Philosophical Society and its wider context, see Harper, 'Globalism', p. 277; Frost, 'Transcultural Diaspora: The Straits-Chinese in Singapore, 1819–1918', ARI Working Paper No. 10

Throughout the 1920s, a number of literary associations in Penang promoting language, culture, and heritage on communal lines proved a more informal version of the learned society. Much of this was geared towards youth, which will be discussed further in Chapter 5. In 1926, the Young Muslim Union was formed in Penang with the object of promoting reading, recreation, and social intercourse among young Anglophone Muslims. The Union taught extra-curricular classes in Malay, mathematics, and English, and also offered classes in Arabic, French, and Jiu-Jitsu. It provided a billiards hall, tennis court, and library, with money raised to buy a radio and a gramophone. Social gatherings included Hari Raya celebrations, supplied with cake and Hindi music. The object of the society was to train the boys to be ‘useful and polished citizens’, many of them preparing to enter government service. The aim was to restore pride in both the Malay language and the Muslim religion itself, aided by lectures and debates between both men and boys of the community. As the Union’s magazine noted:

A well-conducted Debating Society is a very real aid to education, and an excellent stimulant for mental exercise; for it offers one an opportunity for acquiring many accomplishments and forming many habits, which will help to fit him for practical duties in the larger school of life. Such a Society is a fruitful source of general and particular information, and a valuable centre of intellectual recreation, where many to their mutual advantage may meet for the interchange of thought and the promotion of good-fellowship.<sup>97</sup>

Similarly, the Hu Yew Seah aimed to immerse English-educated Chinese youths in welfare, educational and literary activities. Although primarily a Chinese organisation, it had as its honorary members non-Chinese personalities such as the Indian community leaders N. Raghavan and Dr. N.K. Menon, who orchestrated the visit of Rabindranath Tagore to lay the foundation stone for the association’s new site on Madras Lane in 1927.<sup>98</sup>

Early in the century, Europeans who engaged in associations such as masonry and learned societies were seen as outcasts and rebels by those who engaged in exclusive colonial club life. However, increasingly in the 1920s and 1930s, even in the heyday of the colonial clubhouse, mixed associational venues emerged, particularly among Asians. Masonry, gentlemen’s clubs, and learned societies became venues where not only

(2003) ([www.ari.nus.edu.sg/pub/wps.htm](http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/pub/wps.htm)), p. 30, fn. 48; Christine Doran, ‘Bright Celestial: Progress in the Political Thought of Tan Teck Soon’, *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 21:1 (2006): 46–67.

<sup>97</sup> *Young Muslim Union: Committee Report for 1926* (Penang: Criterion Press, 1926), p. 8.

<sup>98</sup> Tan Siew Inn, ‘Koh Sin Hock: Anak Pulau Pinang’, *Malaysia in History* 23 (1980): 91–100.

European-Asian but inter-Asian alliances were made, forging cracks in the racial hierarchies of the colonial era. Many Asian community leaders spread themselves across a range of organisations: from communal associations and reform leagues to professional associations of civil servants and barristers, justices of the peace, journalists, doctors, and educators. Rao Bahadur Naidu, an advocate of the Rangoon High Court, was president of the Hindu Social reform association, a patron of a charity feeding society, a member of the bar association, the Orient Club, and the Madras Cosmopolitan Club, and 'a good Templar and Freemason of over twenty-five years standing'.<sup>99</sup> Prominent Burmese, such as U Ba Pe, U Khin Maung (a mason and Rotarian), U Tok Kyi, U Hla Pe, U Ba Glay, and U Tin Paw, helped develop a Burmese press and established new Buddhist political and religious revival associations.<sup>100</sup> Asian bourgeois women became involved in social reform movements, and a small handful attained an equal level of respectability as men as educators and in the legal profession. Daw Phwar Hmee became the first Burmese woman barrister in 1925, while B.K. Oon from Penang became the first Chinese woman lawyer to be admitted to the English Bar in 1926.

The increasingly 'public' orientation of club life must be seen in parallel with the growth of the press. Learned societies publicised lectures through the press; people grew aware of new community associations and read about each other's models. The ability to reproduce photographs in newspapers gave a radical boost to Asian philanthropy by making such activities that much more visible; in the pages of the press, Asian elites were *seen* donating generous funds to hospitals, schools, charities, and libraries, which built up social capital and increased their prestige. Both Europeans and Asians contributed to various projects to alleviate problems of unemployment, educate communities, and care for young people. Newspaper men threw themselves into charity work: FH Grummit, the proprietor of Penang's *Straits Echo* (1903–86), established a home for destitute old people in Penang who begged in the streets, while Frank McCarthy, editor of the *Rangoon Gazette* until 1920, was said to have performed numerous acts of charity unknown to the public.<sup>101</sup> G.H. and Titi Luce established a 'Home for Waifs and Strays', while the Rotary club of Penang funded a home for Tamil Muslim boys. In Asia's *Who's Who* guides, the performing of 'charitable acts to all nationalities without

<sup>99</sup> *Who's Who in Burma* (Calcutta; Rangoon: Indo-Burma Publishing Agency, 1925), p. 161.

<sup>100</sup> See *Who's Who in Burma* and Chatterjee, *Meeting the Personalities*.

<sup>101</sup> M. Saravanamuttu, *The Sara Saga, with a Foreword by the Right Honorable Malcolm Macdonald* (Penang: Cathay Printers, 1970), p. 140; *Who's Who in Burma*, p. 134.

distinction' and to be 'popular among all communities' was a new indicator of respectability in Rangoon society that was solidified in print.<sup>102</sup>

Apart from the General Council of Burmese Associations, which took on an increasingly anti-colonial character after the organisation split in 1916, most associations were not outwardly political, but their focus on cross-cultural networking, intellectual exchange, and public service testified to the emergence of a sense of civic responsibility. New philanthropic models resonated and operated alongside a multitude of older religious institutions in George Town, Sampheng, and Rangoon. Besides existing clan and religious associations, which had traditionally cared for migrant and diaspora communities, new organisations sprang up which brought cases to the attention of the public through the local press and in-depth reports. A Social Service League sought to address conditions of poor labourers in Rangoon, including the problem of overcrowding in coolie barracks, and issued a damning report about the state of Indian labour.<sup>103</sup> A committee in Penang addressed the grievances of Indian migrant workers, publishing an extended report of the abhorring conditions of passage in the pages of Penang's *Eastern Courier*, a newspaper addressed to all English-speaking Asian communities in Penang. Via the press and the emergence of new, informed communities discussed<sup>104</sup> in Chapter 4, Victorian-era social reform movements gave rise to a new sense of civic responsibility within the bounds of the cosmopolitan port-city. They emerged within the context of a more expansive, global vision that looked outwards to the wider world.

### Globalising the Public Sphere

In the first decades of the twentieth century, due to rising prosperity and increased urbanisation, an increasingly visible, public orientation of associational life emerged in cities, linked to associations around the world through the expansive reach of international organisations.<sup>105</sup> A generational shift after the First World War meant that a new crop of colonial officials and expatriates – and, perhaps more importantly, their wives – were increasingly oriented towards projects of social reform, involving the cooperation of both Asians and Westerners. Increasingly, new and younger expatriates from outside Britain (America, New Zealand, and Europe), as well an emerging Asian professional class saw

<sup>102</sup> See a number of examples throughout *Who's Who in Burma*.

<sup>103</sup> E.J.L. Andrew, *Indian Labour in Rangoon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 170.

<sup>104</sup> *Eastern Courier*, 19 November 1929, p. 22.

<sup>105</sup> Akira Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

the exclusive clubs of Europeans as ossified relics of a Victorian age. Asians returning from school abroad faced a sharp contrast in European racial attitudes between the metropole and the colony.<sup>106</sup> The Red Cross, YMCA, YWCA, Boy Scouts, and Girl Guides arrived in Southeast Asia and the rest of the colonial world via socially conscious Westerners and well-travelled Asians.

These organisations brought with them a lexicon of international fellowship, world peace, and cross-cultural cooperation, which were particularly salient in the aftermath of the First World War. The activities of Chinese and Japanese Red Cross societies provided inspirational models for Malaysians and Siamese elites. The worldwide growth of the press helped publicise the activities of a connected network of international nongovernmental associations, giving a sense of global purpose to the work. Rotary, born in Chicago in 1905, was an American service organisation that went global with the expansion of Rotary clubs throughout the world by the 1930s. In response, Masonic lodges all over the world were forced to account for their archaic, secretive practices and take on a more public face, with visible social activism taking precedence over secrecy and ritualism.<sup>107</sup> Burmans drew on associational models from South Asia as well as the rest of the world. The YMCA inspired Asian literati to form Burma's first nationalist organisation, the Young Men's Buddhist Association in Rangoon, which had its analogues in Colombo, Calcutta, Tokyo, and San Francisco.<sup>108</sup> Similar associations of young Buddhists in Siam emerged spontaneously, akin to Japanese young Buddhists and American YMCA organisations, with Siamese characteristics.<sup>109</sup> Both the National Council of Women of India and the International Council of Women provided key associational models for middle-class women in Burma to begin campaigning for women's rights and urging social reform.

Women were at the forefront of these early social reform initiatives, being united by a common cause to promote the role of women across racial lines. The YWCA in Shanghai provided one of the first new forums where women workers could meet together, and trained many women to

<sup>106</sup> T.H. Silcock, *Towards a Malayan Nation* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1961), p. 1.

<sup>107</sup> See Lynn Dumenil, *Freemasonry and American Culture 1880–1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

<sup>108</sup> See Maung Maung, *From Sangha to Laity: Nationalist Movements of Burma 1920–1940* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1980); Frost explores the YMBA's other incarnations in the Indian Ocean in Mark Frost, "'Wider Opportunities': Religious Revival, Nationalist Awakening, and the Global Dimension in Colombo, 1870–1920", *Modern Asian Studies* 36:4 (2002): 937–67. For an in-depth look at the YMBA in Rangoon see Turner, *Saving Buddhism*.

<sup>109</sup> Thompson, *Thailand: The New Siam*, p. 645.

become leaders in the labour movement.<sup>110</sup> In Malaya, European women educators taught and tested out modern ideas of equal citizenship and multi-racial co-operation via the missionary school and organisations such as the YWCA and Girl Guides.<sup>111</sup> Scathingly critical of European racial attitudes towards Asians in Penang in the 1920s, the journalist George Bilainkin wrote that there were only a handful of exceptional European women who worked in such associations, despite a complete lack of encouragement from white society.<sup>112</sup> The social and economic dislocations of the colonial-era port-city were at least partly stymied by their efforts.

Middle-class and elite women in Rangoon and Penang became heavily involved in curtailing the spread of prostitution by campaigning against the regulation of brothels and reforming 'fallen' women. Straits-Chinese women established the Penang Po Leung Kok, a welfare home geared towards the uplift of Chinese women, the protection of girls from being sold into prostitution, and the education and 'marrying off' of former prostitutes.<sup>113</sup> The Association for Moral and Social Hygiene (AMSH), headquartered in London, actively monitored local campaigns in Malaya and especially in Rangoon, particularly after John Cowen's damning reports of Rangoon's segregated area. The Rangoon Vigilance Society, described by Cowen as a 'non-Christian body' because of its inclusion of Burmese and Indian as well as European women, was nonetheless found to be doing 'good work' by the Association.<sup>114</sup> In 1929, the Vigilance Society informed the AMSH of its work in campaigning to close the segregated area, as this was the aim of the AMSH, but argued that the Rangoon Vigilance Society's strategy lay more on the preventative side. This entailed opening a home for illegally trafficked women in difficulty and cooperating with the National Council of Women for legislation on child protection as well as sheltering and educating the over 500 stray children on the city's streets.<sup>115</sup> While the ASMH was driven by a Christian missionary impulse, local civic associations such as the

<sup>110</sup> See Emily Honig, *Sisters and Strangers: Women in the Shanghai Cotton Mills, 1919–1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986).

<sup>111</sup> See Janice Brownfoot, 'Sisters under the skin: imperialism and the emancipation of women in Malaya, c. 1891–1941' in *Making Imperial Mentalities* (1990), pp. 46–73.

<sup>112</sup> George Bilainkin, *Hail Penang!*, p. 77.

<sup>113</sup> Neil Khor, *The Penang Po Leung Kok: Chinese Women, Prostitution and a Welfare Organization* (Selangor: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 2004).

<sup>114</sup> Letter from John Cowen to Mr. Kent, 23 March 1915. London Metropolitan Women's Library. Association of Moral and Social Hygiene Files: Burma and Rangoon, 3AMS/D/37/02.

<sup>115</sup> Letter from the Rangoon Vigilance Society to Alison Neilans, 18 March 1929, London Metropolitan Women's Library. Association of Moral and Social Hygiene Files: Burma and Rangoon, 3AMS/D/37/02.

Rangoon Vigilance Society were motivated by shared perceptions of morality and social justice between both European and Asian women of different religious backgrounds.

Much of Rangoon's philanthropic activity was pioneered by 'respectable' elite and middle-class women. Daw Mya Sein, the daughter of Burmese politician and scholar U May Oung, returned from Oxford to serve on the boards of various welfare organisations. The range of associations in which such women were involved included the Infant Welfare Society, the YWCA, the Girl Guides, and the Salvation Army. Muriel Uphill, the American wife of a New Zealand businessman who lived in Rangoon in the 1930s, commented that 'Nowhere in the East, I am certain, was there such a feeling of civic pride as existed among the many races and nationalities resident in Rangoon.'<sup>116</sup> Uphill pointed to the National Council of Women in Burma, composed of members of all nationalities, as a key example of this:

Burmese, Indian, Parsee, Chinese, Anglo-Indian, British, American, Dutch, French, Portuguese, Danish, and German, all worked together for the betterment of the community. Its aims were fourfold: to promote sympathy of thought and purposes among the women of all races in Burma; to associate women in the service of the community and train them in the responsibilities of citizenship; to promote especially the welfare of women and children; and the coordinate, and where necessary supplement, the work of existing women's societies in Burma.<sup>117</sup>

The Council was responsible for organising child welfare centres for underprivileged children and established a nursery for the children of working mothers. A workroom for unemployed women provided a venue for sewing and mending, utilising skilled and unskilled labour to provide support for over thirty women of different races. The Council also established a Rangoon Boys' Home, a self-supporting institution that cared for and schooled some 150 boys ranging from the ages of five or six to young men of high school and college age in English and vernacular languages.

The worldwide growth of nursing as a profession put women at the forefront of a global revolution in public health and humanitarian aid. Many newly trained Burmese nurses (discussed further in Chapter 5) specialised in maternity work, including the Burmese woman doctor Ma Saw Saw, who provided voluntary services to the prenatal clinic established by the National Council of Women. Red Cross-trained nurses filled railroad carriages with exhibits and interpreters to promote public

<sup>116</sup> Muriel Sue DeGaa Uphill, *An American in Burma, 1930 to 1942* (Tempe: Arizona State University, 1999), p. 111.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

health and infant welfare across the country. Diasporic nationalism, international humanitarianism, and local cosmopolitanism conflated in 1930s Penang after Japan's invasion of Manchuria. Penang girls took up the cause of the China Distress Fund, playing football, selling Red Cross flowers, undertaking house-to-house collections, organising charity dances, and appearing in amateur stage performances.<sup>118</sup> Yet it was not just the Chinese who contributed to the fund, but also Indians, Europeans, Malays, Ceylonese, and even, it was reported, a Japanese firm.<sup>119</sup> As one Malay from Penang wrote, 'You will agree with me that these are not the days where we must take race, creed and colour into consideration and that under the four seas, we are all brothers of the Chinese. We should, therefore, give every monetary assistance to the wounded soldiers.'<sup>120</sup>

Siamese elites wholeheartedly adopted new ventures around the internationalisation of public health. Through their travels and diplomatic connections, they were exposed to and adopted new global philanthropic methods that helped entrench their role as modern rulers concerned with the welfare of their communities. The Red Cross had already appeared in Siam in 1893 during a territorial dispute on the border between Siam and French Indochina, when a group of female volunteers dealing with the casualties petitioned Queen Sawang Watthana, the king's highest consort that King Chulalongkorn set up The Red Cross Society of Siam, a request he fulfilled. When he returned from school in England and passed through Japan, Chulalongkorn's successor, King Vajiravudh witnessed the work of the Japanese Red Cross and raised funds to build a Red Cross Hospital in memory of his father. The Red Cross of Siam was officially recognised by the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1920. The Thai elite also partnered with the Rockefeller Foundation to endow a first-rate medical college, as well as with the French to establish the Pasteur Institute, dedicated to the study of tropical medicine.

The groundswell of international organisations from the turn of the century culminated in a new international framework for states after the First World War. When it came into being in 1919, the League of Nations came to symbolise a new order of world fellowship for internationalist mass-member pressure groups in Europe.<sup>121</sup> In Asia, it had

<sup>118</sup> This has analogues in an Ottoman context of Red Crescent societies, patriotism, and the mobilisation of women as seen in Eyal Ginio, 'Mobilizing the Ottoman Nation during the Balkan Wars (1912–1913): Awakening from the Ottoman Dream', *War in History* 12:2 (2005): 156–77.

<sup>119</sup> *Straits Echo*, 1 February 1939, p. 5. <sup>120</sup> *Straits Echo*, 15 October 1937, p. 5.

<sup>121</sup> See Helen McCarthy, 'The Lifeblood of the League? Voluntary Associations and League of Nations Activism in Britain', in *Internationalism Reconfigured: Transnational Ideas and Movements between the Wars*, ed. Daniel Laqua (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010);



a range of different meanings. For Japan, as Naoko Shimazu argues, the appeal for a racial-equality clause within the League of Nations covenant was motivated by Japanese domestic politics, anti-Japanese immigration status in Western countries, and Japan's desire for great power status.<sup>122</sup> For Siam, the League provided Western-educated Thai princes with a chance to thrive in a new international setting, showcasing their ability to ease in and out of diplomatic circles.<sup>123</sup> Prince Varnvaidya, Siam's minister in London, served as the chief rapporteur for Siam in the League of Nations on various issues in the 1920s. For colonised nations, the promise of international fellowship was wholly hypocritical. Diplomatic historians have long noted that the extension of the principles of self-determination to non-Europeans was never on the agenda of the peacemakers of Versailles.<sup>124</sup>

Though the League never fulfilled its promise of being a truly international world fellowship during the interwar era, the ideal held merit for many Asians. In a 1929 issue of Penang's *Eastern Courier*, an article pointed to examples from Nicaragua to China where the League had failed to intervene. It went on to argue:

It is a thousand pities that the League of Nations has apparently thought fit to more or less ignore the rising forces in Asia and has failed to enlist the confidence, sympathy, and support of most Asiatic countries . . . It is therefore clear that the League as it exists cannot contribute much towards the peace, progress and prosperity of the world, and that the time has come to examine in detail its structure and achievements, and suggest ways and means to transform it into a world force for good.<sup>125</sup>

But the promise of global inclusion was still seen as a worthy cause – the author rejected a suggestion on the part of some Asian intellectuals to form an Asiatic League of Nations:

Asiatics should never become parties to a separatist institution . . . it would stand in danger of being accused of perpetuating racial rivalries, if not antagonism. At a time when 'the Parliament of Man and the Federation of the World' is

Jean-Michel Guieu, *Le rameau et le glaive: les militant français pour la Société des Nations* (Paris: Presses de la fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 2008).

<sup>122</sup> See for example Naoko Shimazu, *Japan, Race and Equality: The Racial Equality Proposal of 1919* (London: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>123</sup> On Siam's involvement with the League, see Stefan Hell, *Siam and the League of Nations: Modernisation, Sovereignty and Multilateral Diplomacy 1920–1940* (Bangkok: River Books, 2010).

<sup>124</sup> Manela, *Wilsonian Moment*; Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

<sup>125</sup> 'World's Greatest Need: A World League', in *Eastern Courier*, 13 April 1929, p. 3.

becoming the ideal of the best brains in all countries, let it not be said against Asiatic leaders that they have striven to emphasise points of disagreement and disunion among mankind. What we have to strive for is one powerful organisation of which every nation in the world would be proud, to which every weak national unit would look with confidence for support, guidance and protection, and in which all the different countries of the world would be able to feel as important and influential as their most powerful neighbours.<sup>126</sup>

As Erez Manela has shown, the promise of the League was appropriated all over the world, from Egypt to Korea, as a vehicle for nationalist claims.<sup>127</sup> In Penang, however, Asians drew on the model of the League as a mode of collective self-definition of its multi-ethnic island society, a macrocosm of its own local 'internationalism'. Even in 1937, when Japan invaded Manchuria and much of the world gave up on the League of Nations' promise, a headline ran under a photograph of a group of Indian, Chinese, and Malay community leaders pledging donations to the new Anglo-Chinese school: 'Donors Represent a Miniature League of Nations.' This was internalised, as well, by Penang's children, as will be examined in Chapter 5.

By contrast, the institutionalisation of an international fellowship of nations made the Burmese more determined to put an end to colonial rule and campaign for national sovereignty. Thant Myint-U notes that in the 1920s, after the establishment of the League, Burmese politics 'went from placid to passionate'.<sup>128</sup> U Ottama returned from India calling for 'Home Rule' and monks protested the wearing of shoes in Buddhist pagodas.

THE STRAITS ECHO, MONDAY, DECEMBER 13, 1937.

## The Donors Represent A Miniature League Of Nations.

### NEW ANGLO-CHINESE SCHOOL BUILDING.

Brilliant Gathering At Opening.

**HIS EXCELLENCY THE GOVERNOR ON REAL AIM OF EDUCATION.**

"I sincerely hope that youth will go from the doors of this Anglo-Chinese School, Penang, with not only an intellectual outlook but with steady character constructively expressing the will for co-operation in the affairs of humanity... The various agencies and individuals and communities that have co-operated in the building of this institution represent a miniature League of Nations. Let such an ideal continue," said Bishop Edwin Lee of the Methodist Mission at the opening of the new Anglo-Chinese Middle & Primary School Building at Westlands on Saturday.

His Excellency the Governor, who performed the opening ceremony, later in the course of an address to the boys, referring to the aim of education said: "It is not made up of separate



Dr. Dodsworth said that the new building cost \$10,000, that was, including the furniture and equipment. The site and development cost \$45,000. The new Primary Building which was at the moment under construction, adjoining the school building, would cost more than \$45,000. The total acreage of the site was therefore 138,000.

**\$12,000 MORE WANTED**

Against this, the School had the grant from the Government of the Straits Settlements for \$50,000. The Methodist Mission had had given the cost of the site and plan, namely, the sum of \$45,000. A sum of \$50,000 had to be collected from the public of Penang. They had already subscribed \$33,000. They needed about \$17,000 more, and the speaker who says that their friends among the public of Penang would help them to collect the additional \$17,000 by next April when the Primary School building would be completed.

Dr. Dodsworth then introduced several other members of the Anglo-Chinese School to the gathering. The first he introduced was the vice-president of the Anglo-Chinese School, Mr. D. J. Chisholm, Clerk, C. S. S. Club, president of the Old Boys Committee, who next was followed by Mr. One-see Sun, secretary and treasurer of the club.

Figure 9 'A Miniature League of Nations' in *The Straits Echo*, 1937.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. <sup>127</sup> See Manela, *Wilsonian Moment*.

<sup>128</sup> Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps: Histories of Burma* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 204.

Empire, for all its hopes of making the new internationalism compatible with imperial cosmopolitanism, could not compete with a framework that stressed the sovereignty of states, providing a universal language recognised the world over. Viewing themselves within a spectre of comparisons, the Burmese sought to join the international 'family of nations' on its own terms.<sup>129</sup> By 1930, as Daw Mya Sein became one of only two female delegates to the League of Nations, Burmese activists and intellectuals began to play a major role on the international stage. Liberation was in the air. Major political concessions were made towards Burma's independence, particularly in 1937, when Burma's new constitution was put into action, and its two parliamentary chambers occupied by 'pure Burmese'.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, decades in which many European states closed their borders and turned inwards, a burgeoning Asian middle class looked outwards, embracing opportunities that a new international order promised.<sup>130</sup> Nationalism took different forms, and need not solely be characterised by anti-colonial radicalism or xenophobic fears of immigrants. The desire for self-determination emerged within the context of growing internationalism. Through the rapid circulation of news, ordinary Asians became increasingly aware of vast changes emerging in the rest of the world. New associational models and increased interactions with both Western and Asian social reformers had provided the catalyst for a revitalisation of the public sphere. This led not only to the emergence of new communal associations that promoted ethnic unity and cultural or religious reform, but also philanthropic organisations, women's organisations, and other groups working for the social good of a multi-racial community. Civic nationalism, in the form of cross-cultural associational life, emerged within the context of cosmopolitan cities, and provided a tenuous counterweight to the rise of ethnic nationalism in 1930s Southeast Asia.

### The Rotary Movement

Rotary International was the most organised and far-reaching international organisation of the 1930s. The organisation provided a new associational model that combined elements of freemasonry, the gentleman's

<sup>129</sup> See Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1998). The Burmese scholar and politician Maung Maung used the 'family of nations' metaphor in the 1950s in *Burma in the Family of Nations* (Amsterdam: Djambatan, 1957).

<sup>130</sup> See Andrew Arsan, Su Lin Lewis, and Anne-Isabelle Richard, 'Editorial – the roots of global civil society and the interwar moment', *Journal of Global History* 7:20 (2012): 157–65.

club, the learned society, global civil society, and local philanthropy, under the new interwar rhetoric of international fellowship. The movement spread throughout the world on the back of early international organisations – many early Rotarians, from San Francisco to London to Rangoon, had been freemasons or scouts and drew on their organisational forms.<sup>131</sup> Rotary's appeal was global, spreading to the Caribbean, Latin America, Europe, and Asia through the movements of trans-national business elites who promoted Rotarian ideals of professionalism, friendship, community service, and international cooperation. Rotary signified the emergence of urban middle-class and elite men connected through trans-national sociability throughout the world. Its promise of world fellowship in the interests of capitalist gain brought together odd pairings of Japanese princes and Kansas shop-owners speaking to each other in the same language.<sup>132</sup> Brendan Goff refers to Rotary as a particularly American ideology of 'civic internationalism', a form of 'Wilsonianism without the state'.<sup>133</sup> Yet the success of Rotary's diffusion around the world was a testament to its flexible institutional form and its adaptability for use by civil society actors in diverse settings. Rotary sought to bring together representatives of a number of different professions. As Penang's *Eastern Courier* explained in 1929 – 'in one Rotary club you may find a lawyer, doctor, motor manufacturer, newspaper proprietor, hotel manager, chemist, dramatist, novelist, and so on, but never two of the same trade in the same club'.<sup>134</sup>

The first Rotary clubs in Asia, formed in Calcutta, Shanghai, and Manila in 1919, reflected the inequalities of wealth in colonial society. Composed mainly of British and American expatriates, they were often seen as 'enclaves of foreign devils', initially only admitting one token (albeit very affluent) Asian member.<sup>135</sup> This testified to the persistent process of colonial exclusion, which was slowly rectified as the years went on, but it also indicated scepticism among Asians about Rotary's benefits. In Rangoon, Burmese and Chinese businessmen flatly refused to join at first, with its initial composition including businessmen,

<sup>131</sup> David Shelley Nicholl, *The Golden Wheel: The Story of Rotary 1905 to the Present* (Estover: Macdonald and Evans, 1984), pp. 223, 452.

<sup>132</sup> See Brendan Goff, 'Philanthropy and the "Perfect Democracy" of Rotary International', in *Globalization, Philanthropy, and Civil Society: Projecting Institutional Logics Abroad*, ed. David C. Hammack and Steven Heydemann (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), pp. 47–70.

<sup>133</sup> See Brendan Goff, 'The Heartland Abroad: The Rotary Club's Mission of Civic Internationalism' (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, History, 2008), p. 26.

<sup>134</sup> *Eastern Courier*, 9 November 1929, p. 26.

<sup>135</sup> Nicholl, *The Golden Wheel: The Story of Rotary 1905 to the Present*, p. 173.

officials, educators, professional men, engineers, and scientists, but 'only a few representative Burmans'.<sup>136</sup> It later became popular with prominent Burmese, Chinese, and Indian personalities in journalism and politics, many of them also freemasons. U Ba Win, the club's president, was a barrister in the House of Representatives and the Rangoon Corporation who possessed an 'international outlook' and an 'absence of any kind narrowness', according to S. Chatterjee, an Indian journalist and avid Rotarian.<sup>137</sup> The pattern of Rotary clubs in Burma echoed the Indian model, with meetings conducted in the vernacular, even in Rangoon. In a meeting of pan-Asian Rotary clubs held in Penang in 1938, Chatterjee expressed surprise that clubs in Malaya were conducted in English rather than the vernacular as they were in Burma, which 'every native could understand'; visiting members of the clubs would have the discussions and lectures of the clubs explained to them by a member conversant in their own particular language.<sup>138</sup> Rotary in Burma thus took on a multi-racial 'national' character, bringing together Indian, Chinese, and Burmese urbanites conversing in Burmese.

By contrast, clubs in Shanghai, Singapore, Bangkok, and Penang were conducted in English, and all competed to be the most cosmopolitan Rotary club in the world. In 1930, Bangkok held the record, with the *Bangkok Daily Mail* announcing that fifteen nationalities from practically every social and business activity in the city formed the nucleus of the club, making it the most diverse association of its kind. By 1934, Singapore took the world record with 26 nationalities in a single club. For a small group of European colonial officials, Rotary provided an appealing venue to showcase Malaya as a shining example of 'racial harmony' under colonial administration.<sup>139</sup> The 'cosmopolitan' compatibility of Rotary ideals with commerce suited American business communities of Asian port-cities equally well.

Yet in promoting ideals of cosmopolitanism and creating a venue for public debate, Rotary also created a space where such claims could be questioned. In 1938, Haji Mohd. Eusoff of Kuala Lumpur gave an address to Penang Rotarians in which he drew on Rotarian ideas of 'international understanding and goodwill' as well as a recent article in the *Economist* entitled 'Colonial Responsibilities' about the ignorance of colonial authorities of the societies in which they lived. He argued:

<sup>136</sup> Ibid. <sup>137</sup> Chatterjee, *Meeting the Personalities*, pp. 52–55.

<sup>138</sup> *Straits Echo*, 19 April 1938.

<sup>139</sup> Butcher, *The British in Malaya, 1880–1941: The Social history of a European Community*, pp. 168, 190.

In this country, there is not a single institution or Society having as its object the promotion of friendship and contact with the Malay peoples. The absence of this contact has accentuated the fact that out of the millions that have been made out of the country nothing has come back in the shape of benefactions for the promotion and encouragement of academic prowess of the people of this country . . . We are never tired of congratulating ourselves on the harmony and tolerance that exist among the diverse races: we are apt to forget because the Malay has been such an incredibly good host. It is too much to expect that this will last forever.<sup>140</sup>

The lecture suggested ways in which non-Malays could alter their behaviour towards Malays with renewed sensitivity to their customs and beliefs. The Malays, he argued, had been forced to adjust to a foreign, cosmopolitan culture for too long, as evidenced by their being unable even to travel through their own country without speaking a language besides their own. He continued by addressing the very conditions in which he was allowed to speak: 'Take this example: I am addressing you in English and my pronunciation may be grating to your ears; you may involuntarily shudder at my "murdering" the English language. Now, suppose you take my place and speak in Malay.'<sup>141</sup> The lecture ended with a caution that Malays were being denationalised, providing what the *Straits Echo* editor called a 'thought-provoking address' to the largely diasporic community of Penang that foreshadowed the tensions of race, language, and nationalism in a multi-ethnic society.

In Siam, the Rotary club provided a rare venue where princes mixed socially not only with the European elite, as they had always done, but with an ascendant Thai middle class as well. The first meeting of the Rotary club included European, Siamese, and Chinese businessmen, as well as Siamese artists, architects, writers, lecturers, and civil servants (from the Post and Telegraphs office, Customs office, and the Information bureau).<sup>142</sup> The *Pagoda*, the magazine of the Shanghai Rotary club, reported that on the first meeting of the Rotary club attended by the King of Siam, he asked to be permitted to 'drop all pomposity' and to 'speak in a lighter vein than is customary' which would be 'more in keeping with the democratic spirit of Rotary'.<sup>143</sup> Through Rotary, the Siamese aristocracy could assert themselves as 'modern' rulers, able to fraternise with its professional and business community, both Asian and European. Prince Purachatra became the first president of Bangkok's Rotary club in 1930 and a Rotary enthusiast, addressing clubs in several

<sup>140</sup> *RODA* (September 1938) and *Straits Echo*, 15 September 1938, p. 11.

<sup>141</sup> *Straits Echo*, 15 September 1938, 11.

<sup>142</sup> See list in 'Bangkok Rotary Club Formed', *Bangkok Daily Mail*, 18 September 1930, p. 3.

<sup>143</sup> *Rotarian* 16:2 (1932): p. 31.

European countries during visits abroad. He was a quintessential modernist, responsible for building Siam's modern railway system, introducing wireless radio, and playing an integral part in the beginnings of the national film industry.

Rotarians were often accused of superficiality, confining themselves to a small and exclusive cult of luncheon meetings, particularly in Malaya and Bangkok. While such accusations were valid, the club also reached out to a wider public by supporting a number of humanitarian and community-service initiatives.<sup>144</sup> Penang's Rotary club sponsored a boys' club that fed and found unemployment for poor boys, encouraging them to open savings accounts. Leper asylums in Penang and Bangkok received regular support, while unemployment, poverty, and illiteracy were tackled locally. Partnership with the local scouts and YMCA fostered a culture that looked to the young as harbingers of the future. In Rangoon, activities ranged from finding suitable accommodation for the homeless, registering the unemployed, and enlisting the aid of the public to deal with various relief problems, particularly after the 1930 earthquake. In 1938, at the height of communal violence between Indians and Burmese, the Rotary club held a special gathering of journalists who resolved to use their influence to resolve the communal violence. Chatterjee commented that it was the first time in the history of Rangoon that all the editors connected with the leading papers, published in different languages, had assembled together on a common platform.

One of Rotary's greatest achievements was in fostering a culture of public intellectual activity. Visiting scholars, professionals, and Asian literati gave public lectures that were disseminated through the pages of the Asian-owned English press. The intellectual arguments put forth in these lectures, bolstered by international professional expertise, provided fodder for making important semi-political claims within the colonial context, as will be seen in Chapter 2 with the endorsement of Asian rather than colonial architecture. Lectures focused on religion, history, and culture, as well as new 'modern' innovations such as the 'evolution of the writing machine' and technologies of 'duplication'. The Penang-based Islamic scholar H.G. Sarwar, one of the first Muslims to translate the Qur'an into English, gave lectures on Islam. Via Rotary lectures and periodicals, Asian elites visibly began taking a cultural interest in each other's affairs, in plain view of the public. In Penang, the Indian community leader and medical doctor N.K. Menon gave a lecture on the part played by Dr Sun Yat Sen on the history of Chinese secret societies. Through such lectures and periodicals, Rotary

<sup>144</sup> For critiques of Rotary in the press, see 'The Rotary Religion', *Bangkok Daily Mail*, 24 Sep. 1930; Butcher, *The British in Malaya*, p. 191.

provided a public arena where different diaspora communities began to understand each other's heritage.

While Rotary's official policy was initially to exclude women as members, Asian Rotary clubs supported new advances enhancing women's role in the public sphere, partly by inviting women to give Rotary lectures. A European female teacher in Singapore gave a lecture attacking orthodox economics, while Asian women gave lectures on their changing role in the modern world, overturning cultural stereotypes about the 'passive' Asian woman. An American Rotarian at the Singapore club was astonished at the beauty and effectiveness of a Chinese woman's English. Writing in the *Rotarian*, Rotary's global periodical, he noted 'It came as quite a shock to many of us to realise what modern Chinese woman-hood is capable of. In some ways that speech was one of the most significant for the future of Malaya that I have heard.'<sup>145</sup> In 1937, at the Rangoon Rotary Club, a speech given by Daw Khin Myint, a Burmese woman, entitled 'Englishmen as seen by Burmese women' challenged the superior status of Western women by pointing to the inability of Western men to trust their wives, while Burmese women were seen as 'keepers of the family purse'.<sup>146</sup>

Besides fostering conversations among communities at the local level, Rotary also began cultivating a new regional sensibility among neighbours. U Ba Win visited Colombo and was given unprecedented permission to worship at the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic according to Burmese Buddhist custom. Through *RODA*, the Rotary publication for Siam and Malaya, Rotarians in the region read about each other and made new comparisons and connections on a pan-Asian level. The idea of 'Southeast Asia' had not yet taken hold, but in April 1938, Penang held a conference of Rotary clubs in 'Middle Asia' with representatives from India, Burma, Siam, Indonesia, and Ceylon. Present at the conference were Rotarians from Bangkok, Singapore, Surabaya, Batavia, Manila, and Kupang. Though Rotary club meetings in Asian port-cities were usually held in English, a key feature of the Penang conference was that at one point, speeches were given in different tongues. The Siamese delegate spoke in his native tongue, while a Rotarian from Bandung spoke in Javanese, 'Frankels' of Singapore followed with a speech in Malay, and *Straits Echo* editor M. Saravanmuttu ('Sara') in Penang gave an address in Tamil.<sup>147</sup> Though Rotary's director-general transmitted a message that

<sup>145</sup> Richard Sidney, 'Rotary Takes Root in Malaya', *The Rotarian*, July 1937, p. 50.

<sup>146</sup> Daw Khin Myint, 'Englishmen as Seen by Burmese Women', *Ngan Hta Lawka* [*the World of Books*], January 1937, as quoted in Chie Ikeya, 'The Traditional "High Status" of Burmese Women', in *Journal of Burma Studies*, 10.

<sup>147</sup> *Straits Echo*, 18 April 1938.



pleaded for a universal language, the performing of ‘national’ identities spoke to a desire to preserve a sense of cultural authenticity in a cosmopolitan setting. While Western ideas of universalism were often founded on the promotion of English as an ‘international’ language, Asian Rotarians celebrated the articulation of cultural difference through a panoply of languages, bridged through translation.

Asian Rotarians found resonances with older cultural traditions and languages in Rotary’s ‘service above the self’ club motto. In an address in Penang, Swami Bhaswarananda pointed to the nineteenth-century mystic Ramakrishna: ‘in his life, I find that there is the nucleus of service which he taught to mankind . . . he distributed food to hunger-stricken people’.<sup>148</sup> At the conference, a Javanese Rotarian noted, ‘In the most aristocratic idiom of the Javanese language the personal pronoun “I” has the same roots as the word “service”. It means that “service” is an idea that belongs to the higher regions of the human mind.’<sup>149</sup> He linked this to an old doctrine of mutuality in Asian philosophy. A Siamese speaker found the phrase ‘service above self’ impossible to translate into Thai, but sought to understand what it meant, giving a light-hearted speech that ran through a number of interpretations: ‘You must serve yourself rather than let self dominate you’, ‘You must think of doing good to the community and to yourself’, referring to a Biblical analogy ‘Give and it shall be given to you’ and joking about the ‘tennis of life’ – that without service one would never get the advantage of a deuce – before commenting on the ‘spirit of fellowship’ present at Rotary gatherings.<sup>150</sup> Siamese princes, meanwhile, yielded a more serious interpretation anchored in the agricultural image of the Siamese nation. Prince Biyalankarana wrote essays on Siamese history for Rotary’s magazine, one of which noted that the principles of Rotary were entrenched in the mindset of Siamese farmers, towards whom royalty had always taken a paternal (and often patronising) attitude:

indeed the common people of Siam have always acted on the principle of service above self. Owing to the lack of labour the peasant cultivators have always combined in both planting and harvesting their crops, quite in the spirit of Rotary. Further, on these occasions, a meal in common is the rule. One may reasonably hope, then, that the Rotary movement will have an abiding influence in the country.<sup>151</sup>

Rotary values, far from constituting a fixed set of cosmopolitan values, were translated and internalised by Asians in different ways.

<sup>148</sup> ‘A Swami on Service’, *RODA* (December 1938), p. 189.

<sup>149</sup> ‘The Personal Pronoun Synonymous with “Service”’, *RODA* (May 1938), p. 238.

<sup>150</sup> ‘Bangkok Rotary Club Installation Dinner’, *RODA* (June–July–August 1938), p. 23.

<sup>151</sup> ‘H.H. Prince Bidyalankarana on Siamese History’, *RODA* (October 1934), p. 213.

In stating his hope that Malayan clubs would follow the Burmese model and conduct their meetings in the vernacular, Rangoon's S. Chatterjee may have hit a nerve. Penang's most ardent champion of Rotary, Manicasothy Saravanamuttu, was, like Chatterjee, a South Asian journalist, yet he had spoken in rusty Tamil when speeches were given in national languages. English was Penang's lingua franca, particularly among its elite and middle classes. In a venue that promoted inter-*nationalism*, which Asian Rotarians took advantage of by promoting their own 'national' languages, Penangites stressed Malaya's cosmopolitanism and compatibility to the *spirit* of internationalism, compensating for its own lack of a unified national identity and their own lack of fluency in Malay. Saravanamuttu pressed Rotarians as well as the wider community to think beyond the tenants of local community and practice a more global outlook:

Our community is a somewhat cosmopolitan one and we are inclined to think that we are practicing international service in meeting and mixing at our meetings with Rotarians of other nationalities and races. It is however a great deal more than that and Rotary, even if it has not hitherto achieved much, has made real attempts in the field of international service.<sup>152</sup>

Saravanamuttu alluded to examples of Rotarians from France and Germany working towards mutual understanding. He focused on its role as a real force for world peace, through its fellowship of businessmen and professionals:

The express purpose of the Fourth Object of Rotary is a creation of the international mind among Rotarians of all races and nations. By an international mind, I mean a mind which, looking out beyond its own racial and territorial boundaries, discerns the essential oneness of all humanity. The things that differentiate men into races, and nations and classes and creeds are of little consequence compared with the compelling unities that binds them all together as members of one great human family. It is not my intention to preach a sermon, although the foregoing sounds very much like a pulpit utterance, but what I want to do today is to indicate what Rotary has done and can do to help to break down the barriers that have been set up between nation and nation and bridge the boundaries between the various countries.<sup>153</sup>

Saravanamuttu's appeal to the 'international mind' advocated a new kind of 'globalism', of thinking and acting on a global basis, in the common interest of nations and races; yet it also presented the unique standpoint of Penang's multi-ethnic middle class, which saw itself as a microcosm of the new internationalism. Unlike the Burmese, they fought to preserve this at all costs, often aligning themselves with colonial officials' ideas of cosmopolitanism and communal harmony rather than striving to become

<sup>152</sup> *Straits Echo*, 18 November 1937, p. 5.      <sup>153</sup> *Straits Echo*, 18 November 1937, p. 5.

a sovereign member of the 'family of nations' with a distinct ethnic identity. This would prove a difficult philosophy to reconcile in the post-war period.

Networks forged via Rotary clubs also spilled out into more informal sectors within the city. Penang Rotarians formed a discussion group called Lost Souls in 1933, which included Dr Ong Chong Keng and M. Saravanamuttu. Lim Cheng Eu was a schoolboy in the 1930s and observed 'They were people one aspired to be, but they didn't know where they belonged – they were too clever.'<sup>154</sup> The group's name suggests, already in the 1930s, a sense of collective nostalgia, or to use Will Hanley's term, a 'grieving cosmopolitanism' between a group of men connected not by their ethnicity but by their Western education abroad and their allegiance to an imperial identity with a global reach – and a point to which we will return in the Epilogue.<sup>155</sup> The atmosphere of the club, however, was anything but sombre. Khor Cheang Kee, then a cub reporter for the *Straits Echo*, recalled that its members met every Friday night, often in one of the popular restaurants in town, and they became a popular feature of Penang's social and intellectual life in the 1930s.<sup>156</sup> This was a venue where they could informally discuss their grievances with the colonial government, at times in the company of colonial officials. The club, however, was unregistered with the colonial government, and was therefore akin to a publicly recognised 'secret society'. Though the initial group constituted nine members, others joined for dinner and 'permanent inclusion in the fast-growing band'.<sup>157</sup> Writing in response to Khor's recollection of the group, a Rotarian writing in 1948 thought this was an admirable informal alternative to the Rotary practice of having papers read every week. The practice of a discussion group, rooted in the open-air environment of a Penang *kopi tiam*, at which everyone was welcome to join in to discuss politics and matters of interest, grounded the public sphere within an intimate and informal public space, centred on Penang culinary culture and giving new meaning to Asian cosmopolitanism.

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In colonial Rangoon and Malaya, a politics of colonial exclusion forced Burmese and Malays to strengthen their own communal networks not only in the city, but across Burma and the Malay Peninsula.

<sup>154</sup> Dato Lim Cheng Eu (former Chief Minister to Penang). Interview by author. Penang. 25 April 2008.

<sup>155</sup> Hanley, 'Grieving Cosmopolitanism'.

<sup>156</sup> Khor Cheang Kee, 'The Lost Souls of Penang', *Straits Times*, 11 November 1948, p. 6.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

The gentlemen's ethos of the Victorian age that fostered clubs based on particular ethnic communities merged into pseudo-nationalist organisations that tapped into grassroots, religious and linguistic ties linking city and countryside. The General Council of Burmese Association was widely regarded as the first 'nationalist' organisation because it extended its associational networks throughout the 1920s outside Rangoon into towns and villages in the countryside, working with Buddhist monks to effectively politicise the peasantry.<sup>158</sup> The Malay Associations emerged later in the 1930s and were less politically oriented, yet their associational networks throughout the Peninsula led to a strengthening of communal ties and a renewed, collective self-definition, particularly against the perceived encroachment of migrant and colonial cultures.<sup>159</sup> Both kinds of associations emerged out of a perceived need for moral and social progress in colonial society.

Though psychological racial barriers certainly existed in Bangkok, the absence of any institutionalised exclusion from colonial clubs provided less impetus for a civic consciousness united in opposition to colonial rule. Apart from the handful of new middle-class professionals in Bangkok's Rotary club, the inclusion of elite Thais into European associational life in Bangkok succeeded in entrenching class divides between cosmopolitan, multi-lingual Thais (largely made up of an aristocracy with a 'divine mandate' to rule) and the mass of the population. After the 1932 coup, Siamese princes, now in exile in various locations around the region from Penang to Medan, continued their affiliations with Rotary. Having given way to a new, democratically driven government in Siam which marginalised them, the princes sought to assert themselves as promoters of Siam's intellectual and cultural place within the region and the world from exile. From exile in Penang, Prince Damrong engaged in new scholarship of Thai-Burmese relations and corresponded with a host of friends from around the world. Prince Purachatra became the director of RODA, the Rotary periodical for Malaya and Siam. Prince Biyalankarana wrote essays on Siamese history for the magazine, while Prince Varnvaidya represented Siam on the world stage, serving as a minister of Siam in London and in the League of Nations.

Even after the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932, the divide between cosmopolitan, Western-educated Thais and Thai-speakers at home continued to provoke resentment. In a 1937 article in *Krungdeb Varasab*, a Thai nationalist newspaper, Nai Rackhati 'The Patriot'

<sup>158</sup> Patricia Herbert, 'The Hsaya San Rebellion (1930–1932) Reappraised'. Paper presented at the British Library Department of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books,

<sup>159</sup> Roff, *Origins of Malay Nationalism*, pp. 235–47.

described the luxury cars parked in a row outside a brightly illuminated British Legation for a party hosted for Thai students returning from school in England under the patronage of Prince Varndvaidya. The article expressed xenophobic fears that Siamese would be co-opted into admitting state secrets and exposed to dangerous new ideologies that would 'endanger the Siamese nation . . . If they give their love to other nations for some little favour done, they will forget their Siamese ancestors.'<sup>160</sup> The necessity of instituting a unified vision of the Thai nation, bringing together people and government under a shared national ideology, was understood by Phibun and his communications minister, Luang Wichit Wakanan. In 1939, the country's name changed from Siam to Thailand, land of the free and, more importantly, land of the 'Thais'. For a brief time, the Siam Society became the Thailand Society, its lectures and publications delivered in Thai.<sup>161</sup>

The turn to ethnic nationalism allowed urban elites and the middle class to reach out to a wider public to address the racial imbalances of colonial society in Burma and Malaya, and the class divides between the elite and the masses in Siam. This chapter has stressed that communal associations formed one part of a plurality of associational ventures in cities from the late nineteenth century, many of which were equally important in instituting a new civic consciousness among a wide range of actors, particularly an emerging multi-ethnic urban elite and middle class. New forms of association helped Asians extend their professional and social networks through institutions that promoted interactions between ethnic communities, from freemasonry to the learned society, from women's leagues to Rotary.<sup>162</sup> The visible contribution of elite and middle-class Asians helped publicise ideas of civic duty that resonated with older forms of Asian philanthropy and social service. The efforts of women, bolstered by a new framework of burgeoning international feminism, in social service initiatives and international organisations highlighted their visibility as important actors in civic life. The emergence of a collective idea of public service, as well as actual friendships between urbanites of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, helped to constitute a form of multi-ethnic representation in a shared associational space, overlaid onto many other visions of community. From the 1930s and particularly in the post-war era, this layer of cosmopolitan civic life grew increasingly vulnerable to more powerful, unified visions of the nation rooted in ethnic solidarity.

<sup>160</sup> Siam Reports 1937. CO278/626/1 1937.

<sup>161</sup> *Minutes of the Siam Society*, 1939–40. Bangkok: Siam Society Archives.

<sup>162</sup> Harper, 'Globalism', p. 263.

## 4 Newsprint, Wires, and the Reading Public

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From the mid-nineteenth century, new technologies of print and communication emerged throughout the colonial world. Cities were hubs for information and the birthplaces of a new print culture. Missionaries and a European commercial elite initially set up a press to proselytise, transmit information, and in some cases contest official policies. Increasingly, by the early twentieth century, Asian media entrepreneurs began using the English- and Asian-language press as a mouthpiece for migrant and native populations. By the 1920s and 1930s, print culture had exploded in Asian cities, marginalising older forms of literary communication. The ease with which texts could be mechanically reproduced resulted in the abandonment of older forms of literary endeavour, such as palm-leaf manuscript writing in Burma and Siam, which had its own geography of textual exchange between Buddhist literati in the region. Yet the ‘sacred’ knowledge embedded in palm-leaf manuscripts, previously available only to Buddhist scholars, took on a new and popular form through print.<sup>1</sup> Local cultural renaissances preserved and disseminated older elements of popular culture through the printing of traditional Malay *pantuns* and Burmese chronicles in learned society journals and books.

By the early twentieth century, print culture began to reach beyond the city, standardising vernacular languages and creating a sense of ‘horizontal’ affiliation between speakers of the same language who had never met.<sup>2</sup> Dominant forms of communication continued to be oral, but in towns throughout the country, newspapers were often read out in coffee-shops, resulting in a wider community of listeners as well as readers.<sup>3</sup> As scholars of Southeast Asia have shown, newspapers provided distinct conceptions of ethno-linguistic solidarity, often in response to the perceived

<sup>1</sup> See Turner, *Saving Buddhism*, p. 42.    <sup>2</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

<sup>3</sup> See William R. Roff, *Bibliography of Malay and Arabic Periodicals Published in the Straits Settlements and Peninsular Malay States 1876–1941; with an Annotated Union List of Holdings in Malaysia, Singapore and the United Kingdom* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972); Mark Emmanuel, ‘Viewspapers: The Malay Press of the 1930s’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 41:1 (2010): 1–20.

encroachment of immigrant communities. Malay newspapers were critical to the emergence of a Malay racial and political consciousness.<sup>4</sup> In Burma, a renaissance of literary culture became an essential component of nation-building.<sup>5</sup> Siam's monarchy used the press as a means of educating the populace to turn Siam into a 'modern' nation, while an emerging Thai middle class used the press to promote popular nationalism and anti-elite sentiments.<sup>6</sup>

This classic linear model of the organic relationship between print and nationalism often obscures a more multi-layered perspective on print culture. Newspapers were no doubt integral to the creation of new conceptions of 'national' consciousness, rooted in a common language and history; but they also created multiple, intersecting modes of belonging. With reference to 1920s Bangkok, Matthew Copeland has noted that although the printed vernacular facilitated the 'imagining of a novel political space', the newspaper was 'an inherently multi-voiced medium, [requiring] the juxtaposition of rival viewpoints and conflicting accounts within the confines of a single discursive space, belying the idea that the linguistic collective was a homogenous community of opinion'.<sup>7</sup> In Vietnam, as Shawn McHale has shown, the popularity of morality tracks, low-brow fiction, and translations of Chinese fiction show that most Vietnamese were more concerned with questions of 'tradition', romance, and women's roles than revolutionary nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>8</sup> Print also facilitated a new *global* political space, with a diversity of opinions shared across borders. Urbanites became increasingly aware of regional and international events through syndication networks and the increase in imported publications. As Bryna Goodman argues with reference to transnational news networks in Shanghai, newspapers evoke complex notions of identity, suggesting a 'variety of extra-national (and sub-national) imagined spaces' that do not map neatly onto the 'imagined community' of the nation.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Roff, *Origins of Malay Nationalism*.

<sup>5</sup> See U Tin Htway, 'The Role of Literature in Nation Building', *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 55:1&2 (1972); Anna J. Allott, 'Burma', in *Traveller's Literary Companion to South-East Asia*, ed. Alastair Dingwall (Brighton: In Print Publishing, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> See Copeland, 'Contested Nationalism', including references for works in Thai, p. 15; Sukanya Tirawanit, *Prawatkan nangu-phim Thai phai dai rabob somburanayasiithirat [A History of the Thai Press Under the Absolute Monarchy]* (Bangkok: Thai Wathana Phanit, 1977).

<sup>7</sup> Copeland, p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> Shawn Frederick McHale, *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Bryna Goodman, 'Networks of News: Power, Language and Transnational Dimensions of the Chinese Press, 1850-1949', *China Review* 4:1 (2004): 1.

Newspapers, as Anderson has rightly argued, provided a ‘spectre of comparisons’ through which urban intellectuals could judge their own society through nascent concepts of the nation, yet they also testified to a plurality of communities *within* cities and across oceans.<sup>10</sup> Amid the long-standing, multilingual oral cultures of the port-city, ethno-linguistic divisions were certainly made sharper through print, giving a growing community of literate Asians a deeper connection to those with whom they shared a language. But besides the emerging vernacular ‘national’ languages of majority groups, languages of diasporas and religious faiths brought communities together across vast swathes of territory. From the 1910s, a shared Chinese print-language – *kuo-yu* (described by a watchful colonial government as ‘a sort of Chinese Esperanto’)<sup>11</sup> – created a bond between multiple Chinese dialect groups and brought them closer in touch with a shared ‘homeland’. South Asian diasporic communities spoke to each other in Tamil, Hindi, Gujarati, and Sinhalese.<sup>12</sup> The introduction of new Arabic-language texts, translated into local vernaculars, created a growing and inclusive pan-Islamic consciousness for Malays and Jawi Peranakan (hybrid Malay/South Asian communities) in Penang and Singapore as well as Muslim communities in Rangoon and Bangkok. English also became increasingly important as both an international and regional lingua franca, as we shall see.

The port-city provided a venue for overlapping ‘print-worlds’ to co-exist in the same civic space. They linked a growing reading public not only to the affairs of a particular linguistic community, but to the politics and culture of multiple and varied communities: to cities, towns, and rural areas, to diasporic homelands, and to the wider world. The communications revolution that began in the late nineteenth century created an accelerated demand for knowledge and information by both Europeans and Asians alike.<sup>13</sup> The speed at which many ordinary people were becoming more *informed* meant that more people began to ‘imagine’ and, more precisely, define their societies in more nuanced terms, and often from a plurality of perspectives. With the international scope of much of the periodical press, and competing formations of ethnicity and class in the port-city, literate Asians emerged as new, modern subjects, given the myriad of choices for their sources of news, ideas, and affiliations available to them. The plurality of press ventures that mushroomed in Southeast Asian port-cities in the 1920s and 1930s signified a diverse

<sup>10</sup> Anderson, *Spectre of Comparisons*.

<sup>11</sup> Jordon to Gent, 20 December 1934, London, National Archives, Colonial Office Records: Education Policy – Malaya, 1934, CO 273/600/12.

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Amrith, ‘Tamil Diasporas’. <sup>13</sup> Frost, ‘Asia’s Maritime Networks’.



urban community, fractured by language, yet also finding new commonalities and connections through a shared world of print.

### Contesting the State: Origins of the Press

Asia's free press emerged in response to the need for European and Asian trading communities to stay informed within an increasingly connected and globalising world. It evolved as a platform for new ideas, in tandem with the growth of formal state structures. Anderson and Bayly have argued that the press served to circulate 'models' of nationalism.<sup>14</sup> While the map, census, and museum were tools of 'nation-building' commissioned by the state, the press emerged organically, from below. Newspapers and printing presses began as private enterprises by Western merchants, literati, and missionaries, and were similarly developed by Asian entrepreneurs, literati, and religious reformers. Press cultures in Asia did not emerge in isolation, but as a connected phenomenon. The newspapers of neighbouring cities provided models for savvy entrepreneurs, as editors moved posts around the region and syndication networks allowed newspapers to borrow and report on news elsewhere. The press depended on multiple networks of official, religious, secular, and communal networks of patronage, some extending across cities and colonial states. These created a number of political visions that contested the state as well as each other as they competed for the attention of a diverse audience. Competing networks and motivations underlay the growth of the press and its potential as a political force, and also the subsequent controls imposed upon it.

Until 1857, the East India Company administered the Straits Settlements from Calcutta, resulting in an atmosphere of relatively free expression for the rise of an independent press. The *Prince of Wales Government Gazette*, the first newspaper in Southeast Asia, appeared in Penang in 1806, initiating a long and largely uninterrupted history of newspapers on the island.<sup>15</sup> The paper was established not by the government but by an English printer who had lived in India and was engaged in a business partnership with a Penang auctioneering firm.<sup>16</sup> As with similar ventures such as the *Rangoon Times* (est. 1856) and *Bangkok Times* (est. 1887), it catered to the foreign merchant community. In providing

<sup>14</sup> See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Bayly, *Empire and Information*, p. 241.

<sup>15</sup> Turnbull, *Straits Settlements*, p. 130.

<sup>16</sup> Geoff Wade, 'New Ways of Knowing: The Prince of Wales Island Gazette – Penang's First Newspaper'. Paper presented at the Penang Story, Penang, 18–21 April 2002 (available online at [www.penangstory.net.my/docs/Abs-GeoffWade.doc](http://www.penangstory.net.my/docs/Abs-GeoffWade.doc), last accessed 18 August 2010), p. 4.

news from abroad, shipping timetables, new colonial regulations, and advertisements for merchant wares, such newspapers became central to the imperial machine of global capitalism.

Newspapers offered not only information, but also a venue to voice public opinion. The Logan brothers, who arrived in Singapore in 1842 to practice law, were among the first men in the region to begin using the newspaper as a powerful political tool. Abraham Logan, editor of the *Singapore Free Press*, widened the paper's narrow mercantile scope to include more overseas news and argue for constitutional reform on behalf of Singapore's business community.<sup>17</sup> After founding the *Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia*, James Logan went on to take over the *Prince of Wales Government Gazette*, which became the *Pinang Gazette*. In his editorials, he raised public issues, criticised the dictatorial policies of the East India Company, and championed free trade. He interacted with local Indian and Chinese elites through his law practice, and used the press to argue that 'respectable and influential natives' should be given a role in municipal government.<sup>18</sup> In publicly championing the cause of representative government at the local level, and calling for the inclusion of Asians, Logan helped open up a new space for political discourse. By mid-century, the idea of newspapers as 'guardians of the liberties of the community' was firmly entrenched in Straits political culture.<sup>19</sup> Communications, central to the governing colonial ideology of free trade, also required the free circulation of information.<sup>20</sup>

The Straits Settlements have also been credited as the birthplace of the world's first Chinese periodical press, established not by merchants but missionaries. In 1815, William Milne, a missionary pushed out of Canton by an imperial decree banning foreign missions, moved his base to Malacca, where he established the *Ch'ai shih su mei yueh t'ung chi ch'uan* (*Chinese Monthly Magazine*) as a means of reaching readers in China.<sup>21</sup> Milne copied the format of Chinese official gazettes, using a title with a classical Confucian maxim and the Chinese dynastic year. Although the magazine was established to appeal to the Chinese in China, its circulation was far more extensive among Chinese settlements in Southeast Asia.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Turnbull, p. 131.

<sup>18</sup> Jean DeBernardi, *Rites of Belonging: Memory, Modernity, and Identity in a Malaysian Chinese Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 49.

<sup>19</sup> Turnbull, p. 132.

<sup>20</sup> T.N. Harper, 'The State and Information in Modern Southeast Asian History', in *House of Glass: Culture, Modernity, and the State in Southeast Asia*, ed. Yao Souchou (Singapore: ISEAS, 2001), p. 216.

<sup>21</sup> Chen, Mong Hock, *The Early Chinese Newspapers of Singapore 1881–1912* (Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1967).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

After the Opium Wars in 1843, missionaries moved their bases back to Hong Kong and the treaty ports, but the precedent for a Chinese periodical press had been set.

Protestant missionaries were also the first to introduce newspapers to Burma and Siam. In 1842, Baptist missionaries established the *Dhamma Thidinza* (*Religious Herald*), the first Burmese-language periodical.<sup>23</sup> In 1834, Daniel Beach Bradley, a Boston medical doctor and missionary, arrived in Bangkok to open a medical dispensary and begin preaching, writing, translating, and printing. Like the Logans, he inaugurated a new space for debate, one that heralded a seismic shift in Siamese politics. He established the first Thai newspaper, the *Nanseu jotmai-het*, or *Bangkok Recorder*, whose prime objective was to promote Christianity and Western science to a meagre thirty-five subscribers, including two commoners and thirty-three royals.<sup>24</sup> After the negotiation of extra-territorial rights for foreign nationals in the 1850s, foreign-owned newspapers were given licence to criticise Siamese authorities, which resulted in a much wider readership.<sup>25</sup> Commoners used Bradley's *Bangkok Recorder*, revitalised in 1865, as a venue to publicise complaints about the behaviour of elites, leading to an undermining of the moral and judicial authority of the state and an increasing inability to control public discourse.<sup>26</sup>

From the mid-nineteenth century, Burmese and Siamese kings began characterising their rule as modern, liberal, and benevolent (as opposed to 'backward', 'despotic', and 'oppressive', as characterised by Western imperialists). They seized on the new medium to gauge public sentiments, keep informed, and communicate with the populace. One way of controlling the popular medium was to subsidise it. In the 1870s, the modernising King Mindon gave the English merchant J.A. Hannay a grant to establish the *Burma Herald*, Rangoon's first Burmese newspaper, and the *Friend of Burma*, an English-language bi-weekly.<sup>27</sup> Being in Rangoon, away from the royal court, the press had more freedom to publish at will, but restrained from criticising the king, instead focusing on the affairs of Lower Burma.<sup>28</sup> King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910)

<sup>23</sup> *Encyclopaedia Birmanica* (Rangoon: Sar-pay-beikman, 1966).

<sup>24</sup> Thanapol Limapichart, 'The Emergence of the Siamese Public Sphere: Colonial Modernity, Print Culture and the Practice of Criticism (1860s–1910s)', *South East Asia Research* 17:3 (2009): 369–70; Tirawanit, *Prawatkan nangu-phim*, p. 9 (fn 5).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 373. <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 376.

<sup>27</sup> Arnold Wright, *Century Impressions of Burma: Its History, People, Commerce, Industries, and Resources* (London: 1908), p. 132.

<sup>28</sup> Ludu U Hla, 'Boe-waziya-go-ani-kat-lay-largyat' [A close study on Po Waziya, journalist], read at Writers' Day Event in the Upper Burma Writers' Association (1969 December). Reprinted in U Hla, *Kyun-taw-sar-dan-kyun-daw-ahan-mya* [*My Papers and Speeches*] (Mandalay: Ludu, 1983), pp. 112–14.

similarly began subsidising the *Bangkok Times* in 1892 and the *Siam Observer* in 1893. Both papers published daily issues in Thai, gaining popularity among Siamese readers. The *Siam Free Press*, the ‘first radical newspaper’ published in Siam, was initially edited by a teacher from Singapore who, in 1893, took up a position in Bangkok’s Assumption College as head English professor.<sup>29</sup> Newspapers from Penang and Singapore arrived in Bangkok, providing new print-models and a wider sense of the affairs of the region.<sup>30</sup>

State efforts to shape press discourse through patronage were only partially successful. Journalism opened up a discursive space that required multiple voices to be engaged in ‘public’ debate rather than a single source of authority emanating from the court.<sup>31</sup> Under Chulalongkorn’s reign (1868–1910), ‘commoners’ became directly involved in both journalism and publishing. K.S.R. Kulab and Thien Wan, previously employed by the royal government, established their own papers, but were tried and imprisoned for their criticisms of the king.<sup>32</sup> In his editorials, Thien Wan appropriated the elitist doctrine of *siwilai* (‘to be civilised’) and *khvam jaroen* (‘progress’) to argue for democratic political institutions, such as ‘the power of citizenship’ and ‘parliament’.<sup>33</sup> The court mocked their efforts, yet by entering press discourse, royals presented themselves as one voice among many, thereby undermining their sacred authority.

Foreign protection provided the cover for many local Siamese, as well as Malays, to criticise their traditional sources of authority. In his study of the growth of the Siamese public sphere, Thanapol Limapichart has shown that Siamese seeking to wield influence in the port-city hired foreign ‘owners’ (i.e. French and British subjects), giving their newspapers the protection of extraterritorial rights.<sup>34</sup> This striking observation suggests that the extraterritoriality system, usually seen as a sign of Siam’s political submission to foreign powers, helped open up cleavages for Siamese not only to critique, but *fund* newspapers critical of the Siamese state via the system of foreign protection. Similarly, the Straits Settlements of Penang and Singapore became the staging grounds for a new, Malay-Muslim reform movement to emerge precisely *because* new

<sup>29</sup> Arnold Wright, *Twentieth Century Impressions of Siam: Its History, People, Commerce, Industries, and Resources* (London: Lloyd’s Greater Britain Pub. Co, 1908), p. 297.

<sup>30</sup> Baker and Phongpaichit, *History of Thailand*, p. 107.

<sup>31</sup> This point is emphasised in Copeland, ‘Contested Nationalism’, and Limapichart, ‘The Emergence of the Siamese Public Sphere’.

<sup>32</sup> Sulak Sivaraksa, ‘Thailand’, in *International Book Publishing: An Encyclopaedia*, ed. Philip G. Altbach and Edith S. Hoshino (New York; London: Garland, 1995), p. 524.

<sup>33</sup> Limapichart, ‘The Emergence of the Siamese Public Sphere’, p. 384.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 387.

Malay literati were free from the authoritarian religious institutions in the peninsula patronised by the Malay aristocracy.<sup>35</sup> Singapore had a paramount role to play in Malay-Muslim publishing in the late nineteenth century, but as censorship and state control grew in the colonial city, the role was assumed by Penang, a hub of radical intellectual activity by the 1920s.

Hybrid communities, born out of unions of foreign traders and local women, were able to negotiate between cultural and linguistic worlds, and thus played a major role in the development of the local press. In the Dutch East Indies, Eurasian and Chinese peranakan communities played a major role in establishing newspapers and using them as agents of social change.<sup>36</sup> In the Straits, Jawi-Peranakan communities, descended from Tamil Muslims, spearheaded the Malay-Muslim reform movement. Penang's publishing world blossomed from the turn of the century due to the efforts of the Straits-Chinese community leader Lim Seng Hooi, who established the first locally owned printing press in Penang, operating a machine type for English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil characters. In 1900, the company brought out the first newspaper in typeset Jawi, replacing lithography as the sole mode of Malay publishing due to its speed and affordability. Merchants by trade, the Lims saw the commercial value of the press in publishing shipping timetables and advertisements, and producing local, Penang-based news rather than relying on the Singapore press. In 1894, they launched a Chinese daily paper called the *Penang Sin Poe*, and four years later, in 1898, they founded a Malay weekly, the *Chahyah Pulau Pinang*. These were the only Chinese and Malay newspapers in Penang at the time. In 1903, Lim established the English-language *Straits Echo*.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Kuomintang support networks helped establish a 'radical' Chinese press throughout various Southeast Asian port-cities, providing syndication networks for the transmission of local and Chinese news to a regional audience. The Tongmenghui, the secret society formed by Sun Yat Sen in Toyko in 1905, planned to publish the *Kwong Wah Yit Poh* (*Glorious Chinese newspaper*) on a visit to Penang in 1907, but received no financial backing due to the drop in tin prices. Meanwhile, the Rangoon branch of the Tongmenghui took up the idea and started the *Yan Kon Kwang Haw Pao*, which was soon banned by the British colonial government due to its

<sup>35</sup> Roff, *Origins of Malay Nationalism*, p. 81.

<sup>36</sup> Ahmat Adam, 'The Vernacular Press and the Emergence of Modern Indonesian Consciousness (1855–1913)', *Studies on Southeast Asia* 17 (1995); Leo Suryadinata, *The Pre-World War II Peranakan Chinese Press of Java: A Preliminary Survey* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Centre for International Studies, Southeast Asia Program, 1971).

radical content.<sup>37</sup> When the Rangoon Tongmenhui leader Zhuang Yin-an came to Penang, a committee was formed to establish the *Kwong Wah Yit Poh* as a daily paper in 1911. Twenty years later, it was documented to have the largest circulation (3,000) of any newspaper in Penang.<sup>38</sup> The *Sin Kuo Min Pao*, published in Singapore in 1919, became one of the most influential official newspapers published by the Kuomintang. In Bangkok, the movement found a willing supporter in Seow Hood Seng, a Bangkok-born businessman, distinguished Chinese scholar, and the son of a Malacca-born entrepreneur. Seow's Malacca friends contacted him in 1905 to support the revolutionary movement, and with the support of some help from Canton, he established the *Chino-Siamese Daily News*, one of the most successful publishing ventures in early twentieth-century Bangkok. The Chinese version, *Hsua-hsien Fih-pao*, was overtly supportive of the revolutionary cause; contemporaries considered the Thai version, *Jinno-sayam Warasap*, a 'candid and highly independent' source of news.<sup>39</sup> Chinese papers often focused on Chinese diaspora politics, but had local offshoots published by the same printing press. Chinese-backed vernacular papers often offered more intelligent and critical perspectives on state and society than Europeans or local elites were able to muster. The bilingual *Chino-Siamese Daily News*, published in Chinese and Thai, was described in 1908 as 'the most important newspaper enterprise in Bangkok, apart from the English daily papers', having a large circulation in Siam and abroad.<sup>40</sup>

In the Straits, Kuomintang supporters provided the expertise and capital to fund a local English press. In 1903, the Straits-Chinese publisher Lim Seng Hooi hired a pro-revolutionary English journalist, Chesney Duncan, as the first editor of the English-language *Straits Echo*. Duncan had been editor of the *Hong Kong Telegraph*, which, along with the *China Mail*, were the first English papers to champion the revolutionary cause. One Hong Kong memoir notes that Duncan wrote manifestos for Sun Yat Sen while editing the *China Republican*.<sup>41</sup> He was also an avid freemason who helped found Lodge Scotia in Penang and belonged to Hong Kong's Lodge Zetland and Lodge Kinta in Ipoh.<sup>42</sup> Colonial-era freemasonry networks, discussed in Chapter 3, likely played a role in Duncan's ability to move in and out of different locations as a journalist, fraternising with Asian

<sup>37</sup> Khoo Salma Nasution, *Sun Yat Sen in Penang* (Penang: Areca Books, 2008), p. 59.

<sup>38</sup> Straits Settlements, *Straits Settlements Blue Book* (Singapore: Straits Settlements Government Printing Office, 1931), p. 156.

<sup>39</sup> Arnold Wright, *Twentieth Century Impressions of Siam*, p. 295. <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 289.

<sup>41</sup> See 'Letter to Captain Tsao', in George Ernest Morrison, *The Correspondence of G.E. Morrison, Vol. II: 1912-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

<sup>42</sup> Wright, p. 262.

and Western elites. Duncan lasted a short spell with the *Echo*, seeing it through its inception, then moved to the *Times of Malaya*, returned to Shanghai to edit the *China Republican* in 1913, and came back to Penang in 1929 to launch the *Eastern Courier*, which was affiliated with the *Kwong Wah Yit Poh*. He shared editorial duties with Huang Feng-Hsiang, an editor and publisher from Hankou and head of the reference department of the National University Library.<sup>43</sup> Duncan, as the paper's European face, wrote to the colonial office to defend the paper's aims and appealed to the government's sense of justice at the actions taken against Chinese nationalists in Malaya, accusing it of creating a 'perfect terrorism' against its own citizens.<sup>44</sup> The Colonial Office saw the paper as evidence that the 'better class of Chinese' supported recognition of the Kuomintang in Malaya, which they had been led to believe was not the case.<sup>45</sup> The paper was recognised as one of the best periodicals in Malaya and had a large circulation of 3,000 that rivalled the Chinese-language *Kwong Wah Yit Poh* in 1931. For mysterious reasons, it stopped publication the following year.

The 1920s were a period of relative openness and dynamism for the press in Southeast Asia. Philippe Peycam has shown how in 1920s Saigon, an emerging group of Vietnamese political journalists seized upon French republican ideas to contribute to the rise of a Vietnamese political culture of contestation.<sup>46</sup> In Hanoi, young journalists experimented with reportage, creating a new genre of social realism by the 1930s.<sup>47</sup> In colonial Malaya, it was Penang that became the hotbed of radical Malay-Muslim intellectual activity, as the colonial government tightened press restrictions in closely controlled Singapore.<sup>48</sup> The Jelutong press, spearheaded by the efforts of Syed Shaykh Al-Hady, became the largest Malay publishing house in Malaya and a focus of reformist publishing activities, notably the monthly journal *Al-Ikhwan* (est. 1926) and the daily newspaper *Saudara* (est. 1928).<sup>49</sup>

<sup>43</sup> *Who's Who in China: Biographies of Chinese Leaders* (Shanghai: China Weekly Review, 1936).

<sup>44</sup> Duncan to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 29 July 1929, London, National Archives, Colonial Office Records: Straits Settlements original correspondence, CO273/554 Kuomintang 1929.

<sup>45</sup> S. Caine covering letter, 28 August 1929, London, National Archives, Colonial Office Records: Straits Settlements original correspondence, CO273/554 Kuomintang 1929.

<sup>46</sup> Philippe Peycam, *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism: Saigon 1916–1930* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

<sup>47</sup> Greg Lockhart, 'Introduction', *The Light of the Capital: Three Modern Vietnamese Classics*, ed. Greg Lockhart and Monique Lockhart (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>48</sup> On colonial control in Singapore, see C.F Yong, *Chinese Leadership and Power in Colonial Singapore* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1992), pp. 308–21.

<sup>49</sup> Roff, *Origins of Malay Nationalism*, p. 83.

Under the reigns of King Vajarivudh (r. 1910–25) and King Prajadhipok (r. 1925–32), press culture in Bangkok thrived, with many ordinary people starting their own ephemeral papers, literary journals, and magazines that contributed to new and critical discourses on modernity, liberality, politics, and popular culture.<sup>50</sup> At any one time in Bangkok there were some ten to fifteen Thai-language newspapers, a multitude of journals catering to special interests, and also several English- and Chinese-language papers.<sup>51</sup> The Japanese emerged as a new source of patronage, with a Japanese-owned Thai vernacular paper, *Yamato*, promoting a strong pro-Japanese line and allegedly involved in intelligence activities in Thailand. These activities prompted a retired Thai judge to found an anti-Japanese oppositional paper, the *Wayamo*, whose editor became the first Thai newspaperman to be arrested and jailed for *lese-majeste* (the crime of defaming the monarchy, instituted in Siam in 1908) after offending the king in print.<sup>52</sup> By the end of the decade, however, there were growing restrictions on the expanding Chinese press. Chinese immigration had swelled in the 1920s, with many new ‘transient’ migrants unable or unwilling to speak or learn Thai and returning remittances back home to China. The king himself contributed articles to the press about the Chinese, the most famous being a series entitled the ‘Jews of the Orient’ published in the English-language *Siam Observer* in 1920, an analogy he drew from European advisors who used the phrase in books on Siam published two decades earlier.<sup>53</sup>

Fears of underground communist networks and the promotion of ultra-nationalist Chinese sentiment prompted the Thai elite to try to curb immigration, enforce education laws, and implement, in 1927, a more stringent press law. In 1925, the *Straits Times* reported that the *Chino-Siamese Daily News* was closed down at the order of the Siamese authorities ‘as a result of paragraphs of inflammatory and Bolshevik tendency’.<sup>54</sup> Seow Hood Seng claimed that the paragraphs had been

<sup>50</sup> See Copeland, ‘Contested Nationalism’; Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*.

<sup>51</sup> Benjamin A. Batson, *The End of the Absolute Monarchy in Siam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 73.

<sup>52</sup> Scot Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the Creation of a Thai Identity* (Singapore: Social Issues in Southeast Asia, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), p. 33, fn. 101.

<sup>53</sup> The analogy first appeared in the works of two European advisors to King Chulalongkorn’s government in describing the Chinese in Siam: H. Warington Smyth, *Five Years in Siam* (London: Murray, 1898) and J.G.D. Campbell, *Siam in the XXth Century* (London: Edward Arnold, 1902), p. 268. Moreover, as Vella points out, the analogy was made for the benefit of the European community rather than Thais, for whom the analogy would have little meaning; see Walter F. Vella, *Chaiyo! King Vajiravudh and the Development of Thai Nationalism* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawai‘i, 1978), pp. 193–95.

<sup>54</sup> ‘Newspaper Closed Down’, *The Straits Times*, 9 July 1925, p. 14.



inserted without his knowledge. By 1928, the *Straits Times* reported that Seow and others were being interrogated for suspected involvement with the Japanese boycott, a charge they denied, while admitting that they had been working for the Nanking government 'in order to make its aims and objects understood'.<sup>55</sup> The revocation of Chinese newspaper licences under the 1927 press law became more frequent after the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931, when Chinese newspapers vigorously attacked Japan. In Singapore, the British strictly controlled the press, particularly the Chinese press, yet censorship policies were more lax in Penang, leading the Malay-Muslim reform movement to move there from Singapore in the 1920s.<sup>56</sup> The Kuomintang-supported *Kwong Wah Yit Po* vied with the *Straits Echo* to have the largest circulation in Penang well into the 1930s, with both reaching a circulation of 4,000 by 1936.

In Rangoon, the atmosphere of press freedom was, at times, relatively liberal but also inconsistent, with arbitrary censorship regulations emerging up until the late 1930s.<sup>57</sup> Protests in the House of Commons about the right to free speech helped curb over zealous use of censorship legislation in Burma.<sup>58</sup> Asians were quick to capitalise on this dispute, using the power of the newspaper both as a source of news and a venue for criticism by which to appeal to diverse communities within the port-city. Rangoon already had twenty-six newspapers in 1903 (sixteen in English, eight in Burmese, one in Tamil, and one in Gujarati).<sup>59</sup> Asian-language newspapers were owned, operated, and funded by Asians. According to the *Gazetteer* of 1908, none of the Burma journals were actively political, and none printed in English or Burmese was addressed to any special class of the reading public. English papers such as the *Rangoon Gazette* and *Rangoon Times* were well established along with the Burmese-language *Friend of Burma* and *Burma Herald*. Other newspapers followed in the 1910s, including the *Burma Guardian*, *Rangoon Mail*, and a host of other short-lived ventures. U Hla Pe and U Ba Pe established the first Burmese-owned newspapers in Burma – *The Burman* (1909), *The Sun* (1911), and *Thuriya* (1915). As argued by U Tin Htwe, the task of the *Sun* was 'not only to enlighten the Burmese public on questions of domestic affairs and local administration but also to keep them informed of events in the

<sup>55</sup> 'Notes from Siam', *The Straits Times*, 11 September 1928, p. 12.

<sup>56</sup> Ching Fatt Yong, *Chinese Leadership and Power in Colonial Singapore* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1992), p. 15.

<sup>57</sup> For an excellent analysis of censorship in colonial Burma, see Emma Larkin, 'The Self-Conscious Censor: Censorship in Burma under the British 1900–1939', *Journal of Burma Studies* 8 (2003): 64–101.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 66–69.

<sup>59</sup> *Gazetteer of India: Provincial series – Burma vol. 1* (Calcutta: Government Press, 1908–1909), p. 141.

international sphere and lead the crusade for social reform'.<sup>60</sup> As in Bangkok, where newspaper publication mushroomed in the 1920s, colonial records show that over a hundred new papers emerged in Burma throughout the interwar era, including both religious and secular papers in Chinese, Tamil, Persian, Karen, Bengali, Hindi, Telugu, Urdu, and Kachin in cosmopolitan Rangoon.<sup>61</sup> This, in particular, testifies to the existence of overlapping, multiple 'imagined communities' existing in the same civic space.

With such a diversity of languages and standpoints, the colonial state had a difficult time monitoring political opinion in colonial Burma. While authorities encouraged editors and publishers to practice self-censorship, they never gave clear-cut guidelines as to where the line was drawn.<sup>62</sup> In an annual report on periodicals in Burma, newspapers were described as ranging from pro-government to extremist, with the majority described as 'moderate'.<sup>63</sup> *New Burma* went from being categorised as 'moderate' in 1926 to 'anti-government' in 1928. Indian communities, traditionally seen by the Burmese as the 'stooges' of British colonialism, published some of the most extremist and anti-government newspapers in Rangoon. The *Bandoola* journal, which had a large circulation of 3,500, was described as 'anti-government', while the *Rangoon Mail*, owned by Ramesh R. Caherhan and with a circulation of 1,000, was described in 1928 as 'Rabid Anti-Government in Tone. Extremist, supporting the policy of the Revolutionary Party in India.'<sup>64</sup> Somehow, this did not warrant a shutdown; the paper was still running in 1932, when it was again described as 'rabid' and 'extremist'.<sup>65</sup> Newspapers owned by Anglo-Indians, by contrast, were moderate and 'loyal' in tone.<sup>66</sup> Some newspapers, such as the *Burma Patriot*, were simply described with the vernacular term *wunthanu* – nationalist, or 'of the people' – suggesting some confusion over whether this was a good or bad thing. These

<sup>60</sup> Htway, 'The Role of Literature in Nation Building', p. 22.

<sup>61</sup> See *Annual Statement of Newspapers and Periodicals published in the Province of Burma 1926–1940*. London, India Office Records, V/25/960/44.

<sup>62</sup> Larkin, 'The Self-Conscious Censor: Censorship in Burma under the British 1900–1939', pp. 78–79.

<sup>63</sup> See *Annual Statement of Newspapers and Periodicals published in the Province of Burma 1926–1940*.

<sup>64</sup> 'Statement of Newspapers and Periodicals Published in the Province of Burma During the Year 1928', in *Annual Statement of Newspapers and Periodicals Published in the Province of Burma 1926–1940*, London, India Office Records, V/25/960/44, p. 15.

<sup>65</sup> 'Statement of Newspapers and Periodicals Published in the Province of Burma During the Year 1932', in *Annual Statement of Newspapers and Periodicals Published in the Province of Burma 1926–1940*, London, India Office Records, V/25/960/44, p. 16.

<sup>66</sup> 'Statement of Newspapers and Periodicals Published in the Province of Burma During the Year 1926', in *Annual Statement of Newspapers and Periodicals Published in the Province of Burma 1926–1940*, London, India Office Records, V/25/960/44, p. 8.

anxieties reflected the dilemma of Burma's colonial government, which from the 1920s publicly stated its desire to see the country on the road to self-determination, yet also sought to keep British political and commercial power in check.

The presence of a vibrant and free press testified to an active citizenry, and a growing contingent unable to tolerate either alien or absolute rule for much longer. Both colonial and monarchical governments who sought to style themselves as 'modern' had to contend with the existence of a free press as a hallmark of liberal society. As Emma Larkin has argued, Britain's strong tradition of freedom of expression made the colonial authorities wary of over-censorship, resulting in rather arbitrary practices of control over the public sphere.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, King Vajiravudh saw the press as a 'problem' which required control; yet having spent most of his youth in England, he admired the country's free press and sought to promote an atmosphere of tolerance and liberality.<sup>68</sup> Ironically, it was after the end of the absolute monarchy, in 1932, and the introduction of a new 'democratic' government that Bangkok's vibrant press culture of the 1920s dwindled as press freedoms became more restrictive.<sup>69</sup> Siam's new nationalist government was keen to show that it had no intention of letting the press dictate its policies, thereby drawing criticism, particularly from the English-language *Bangkok Daily Mail*, for ignoring civil liberties.<sup>70</sup> Throughout the region, Asian editors and journalists were quick to seize on the ambiguities of colonial modernity in the 1920s and 1930s, continually validating the role of newspapers as representatives of public opinion and a necessary attribute of modern, liberal society.

### **The English-Language Press and the Expansion of Journalism**

With growing nationalism among the Chinese diaspora population, as well as Burmese and Indian political agitation in Rangoon, press laws grew tighter in the late 1920s. Compared to vernacular papers, the English-language press was relatively free from such laws, providing a means by which Asians could argue for political change on the basis of libertarian ideals in a colonial and increasingly international language. English newspapers provided a means by which Asians could participate in a shared, multi-ethnic public sphere at the local, regional, and global level. Historians have tended to overlook this in focusing on the vernacular press. Much of the historiography of colonial Malaya notes that

<sup>67</sup> Larkin, 96. <sup>68</sup> Vella, *Chaiyo!*, p. 253.

<sup>69</sup> Batson, *End of the Absolute Monarchy*, p. 75. <sup>70</sup> Thompson, *Thailand*, pp. 795–96.

diasporic nationalism among migrants was so strong that a sense of political cohesion and collective belonging among diverse communities was impossible to imagine. Yet English provided a mode in which English-reading Asians could converse in a shared and international print-medium.<sup>71</sup> Though English readers were still in a minority, throughout the 1920s and 1930s numbers climbed into the thousands rather than a small handful of privileged elites. This entailed a widening sense of cosmopolitanism among an emerging multi-lingual middle class, as well as awareness and connection to a global community, which led to new claims upon the state. English-speaking Asians began playing a major role in the professional sphere, as civil servants, lawyers, teachers, and doctors. An emerging circle of journalists and writers translated cabled news and books into vernacular languages, channelling new ideas.

A diverse and influential audience in the Southeast Asian port-city read English-language newspapers in the early twentieth century. More Asians were becoming literate in English, as English-language education provided lucrative employment with foreign firms and the civil service, in Bangkok as well as colonial Rangoon and Penang. English-language education, discussed in the Chapter 5, was growing increasingly attractive to urbanites from the late nineteenth century. In 1921, 12.4 per cent of Penang's male population and 4 per cent of its female population spoke English (Singapore figures are 9.7 per cent for men and 5.3 per cent for women, with Malacca 9.1 per cent for men and 6.2 per cent for women).<sup>72</sup> In 1931, figures for the whole Straits Settlements show a climb, particularly for men, indicating that 41.9 per cent of men and 7.1 per cent of women spoke English.<sup>73</sup> In Rangoon in 1931, 15.1 per cent of the entire town population were literate in English, as were 14.5 per cent of Rangoon's Burmese population.<sup>74</sup> In Bangkok, Thai civil servants joined Eurasians, Malays, Burmese, and Indians in working for foreign firms and government departments where English was the lingua franca used by foreign advisors. The Thai intellectual Phya Anuman recounted that his father learned basic English from an Indian neighbour in Sampheng, who also taught lessons to nobles, government officials, and businessmen.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>71</sup> The use of 'Anglophone Asians' is borrowed from Chua Ai Lin, 'Imperial Subjects, Straits Citizens: Anglophone Asians and the Struggle for Political Rights in Inter-war Singapore', in *Paths not taken: Political Pluralism in Post-War Singapore*, ed. Carl Trocki (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008).

<sup>72</sup> J.E. Nathan, *The Census of British Malaya, the Settlements, Federated Malaya States. 1921* (London: 1922), p. 110.

<sup>73</sup> C.A. Vlieland, *British Malaya: A Report on the 1931 Census and on Certain Problems of Vital Statistics* (London: 1932), p. 93.

<sup>74</sup> J.J. Bennison, *Census of Burma, 1931: Report* (Rangoon: Government Printing Press, 1933), p. 163.

<sup>75</sup> Anuman, *Looking Back: Book One*, p. 299.

From the early twentieth century, Asian media entrepreneurs saw the potential in the English-language press in attracting a growing and influential group of English-reading Asians by serving as their mouthpiece within the colonial public sphere. Lim Seng Hooi was the first Asian in Penang, and indeed, the region, to establish an English daily, the *Straits Echo*, in 1903. It became known as 'the People's Paper', its stated purpose being to 'defend the weak against the strong, and the right against the wrong, regardless of nationality, race, or creed'.<sup>76</sup> Its editorial and correspondence pages targeted a wide and multi-ethnic readership, providing a source of news and a platform for opinion up until the late 1940s. Though based in Penang, its sheets travelled to Siam, Java, India, Sumatra, China, and even to a sole subscriber in Leningrad.<sup>77</sup> The colonial government regarded it as representing a 'tolerably responsible quasi opposition and a large body of Chinese traders'.<sup>78</sup> Yet its correspondence columns suggest that the *Echo* provided a venue for debate between the multi-ethnic communities of Penang on a wide range of issues.<sup>79</sup> Using the model of the unsubsidised British press, it upheld British ideals of justice and 'fair play' as a mirror to the British colonial administration, allowing Asian readers and writers to make political claims using the tenets of imperial citizenship. The *Echo* was particularly influenced by the *Manchester Guardian* (now the *Guardian* newspaper), which under C.P. Snow promoted progressive politics abroad by arguing for the rights of Irish and Asian communities to self-determination.

The *Bangkok Daily Mail* emerged in the late 1920s, owned by Prince Svasti, the uncle of King Prajadhipok and former Minister of Justice, who bought the paper as a retirement project. The retired prince was keen to promote a fresh, contrarian perspective, particularly in contrast to more conservative, British-dominated papers in Siam's capital. Like a number of aristocrats of his era, he was fascinated by America; a 1928 *New York Times* article quoted the prince stating that it was the United States who had 'first recognised Siam as a sister among the nations by abandoning extraterritoriality'.<sup>80</sup> He invited the American journalist Andrew Freeman to edit the paper. Freeman recalled a first encounter where Prince Svasti told him, 'I never realised that there was so much news in Bangkok until

<sup>76</sup> As qtd. in *Straits Chinese Magazine* Vol. 7, 1908: 61–65.

<sup>77</sup> Bilainkin, *Hail Penang!*, p. 50.

<sup>78</sup> 'Daily Newspapers Supply from the Straits Settlement', London, National Archives. Colonial Office Records: Straits Settlements. CO 273/621/13.

<sup>79</sup> Su Lin Lewis, 'Echoes of Cosmopolitanism: Colonial Penang's "Indigenous" English Press', in *Media and the British Empire*, ed. Chandrika Kaul (Basingstoke: Routledge, 2006), pp. 233–49.

<sup>80</sup> 'Wants Siam to adopt methods of America', *New York Times* 20 May 1928.

I read your American headlines. That's what we need here – enterprise and energy. I see you are not going to be a “yes-man”. That's the expression, isn't it? We've got too many people here who don't know how to say “no.”<sup>81</sup> Freeman concluded that the prince was ostracised by the rest of the royal family for the frankness of his views, yet neither the prince nor the king interfered with the paper's editorial content

The paper styled itself as ‘Siam's Progressive Newspaper for Progressive People’, along the lines of the *Straits Echo*. Both papers were launched as alternative sources of English news to the more established *Penang Gazette*, *Bangkok Times*, and *Siam Observer*, which had traditionally catered mostly for the European community. The *Bangkok Daily Mail* explicitly stated that it was ‘not edited for foreigners exclusively but for ALL who read English’ (see Figure 4). A cheaper price removed it from the elite class of the more expensive *Bangkok Times* and *Siam Observer*, and garnered a larger circulation among English-reading Asians.<sup>82</sup> Freeman drew on figures from the Ministry of Public Instruction estimating that there was an English-reading public of twenty-five thousand among the native population, including Malay, Chinese, and Indian merchants, Siamese government officials, and children required to study the language within the upper grades of government and private schools.<sup>83</sup> It was, as Freeman noted, an ‘untouched field’ of Asian consumers and he proceeded to ‘champion the cause of the Siamese’.<sup>84</sup> The paper's masthead boldly declared ‘*The Daily Mail* has neither selfish interests to promote nor propaganda in the interest of any country to broadcast. *The Daily Mail's* sole aim is to bring Siam before the world and to bring the world to Siam.’

Under Freeman's editorship, the paper boasted sensationalist headlines, a strong visual impact through advertising (women's products, Leica cameras, gramophones, and ‘talkie’ films) and photographs, popular entertainment, and stories of flyers and new technologies. Tabloid-style crime stories, increasingly popular in America and especially Freeman's native New York, also populated the pages of the paper.<sup>85</sup> Freeman himself also practised long-form journalism, writing feature articles on Siam for the *New Yorker*, *Asia* magazine, and various American newspapers. The paper's tiny cosmopolitan staff included: the paper's Eurasian (French-Siamese) manager, Louis Girivat, with whom Freeman became close friends; one sole young Siamese reporter who had managed and

<sup>81</sup> Freeman, *Journalist in Siam*, p. 87. <sup>82</sup> Thompson, *Thailand: The New Siam*, p. 793.

<sup>83</sup> Andrew A. Freeman, ‘A Tabloid in Bangkok’, *Asia*, August 1930, p. 559.

<sup>84</sup> Freeman, ‘Tabloid in Bangkok’, p. 559.

<sup>85</sup> Samson W. Lim, ‘Murder! In Thailand's Vernacular Press’, *Journal of Asian Studies* 73:02 (2014): 359–376.

interpreted for a troupe of Siamese dancers travelling in America; fourteen Chinese and Indian typesetters; Freeman's wife, Mary Alice, who copy-edited the paper, handled advertising, and became an 'authority on Chinese affairs' with the help of a Chinese staff-member; and, crucially, a Siamese photographer who had previously worked for a Hearst publication in Boston, allowing the paper to publish daily news photos.<sup>86</sup> The dour pages of the *Bangkok Times* and *Siam Observer* paled in comparison, as the *Bangkok Daily Mail* heralded a new age of American-style consumption, sensational drama, and technological wonder.

The *Bangkok Daily Mail* distinguished itself from the more established English papers by criticising the ossified, colonial-style culture of the foreign advisory community in Bangkok. Freeman himself was Jewish-American and would have been aware of the anti-Semitic sentiment pervading the European community in Bangkok, who approved of King Vajiravudh's derogatory 'Jews of the Orient' articles.<sup>87</sup> In his memoirs, Freeman recounted the number of enemies he made among the white community in Bangkok for undermining their prestige. A columnist's reference to 'a white prostitute in a rickshaw sitting demurely beneath

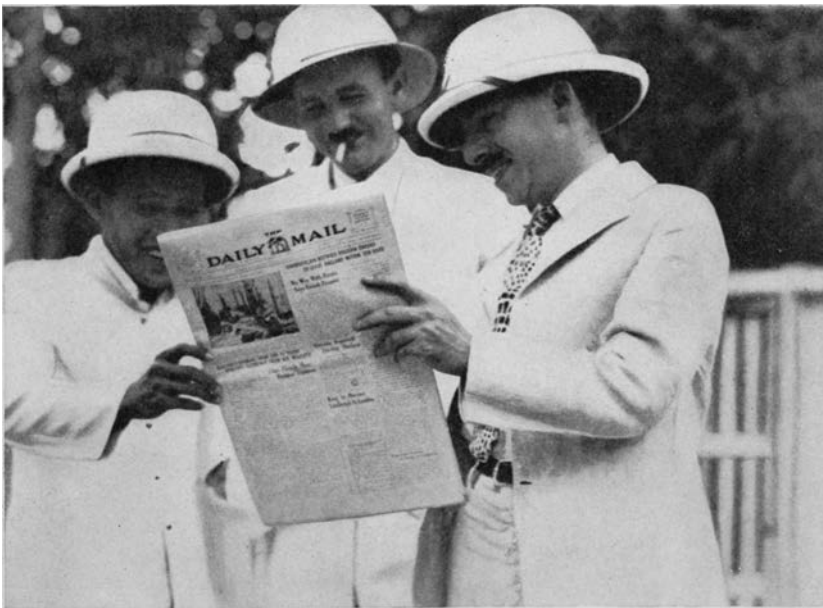


Figure 10 Andrew Freeman and *Bangkok Daily Mail* staff.

<sup>86</sup> Freeman, 'Tabloid in Bangkok', p. 557. <sup>87</sup> Vella, *Chaiyo!*, pp. 193–94.

a parasol' resulted in the loss of one of the paper's largest English advertisers.<sup>88</sup> When Freeman approached Prince Svasti on the dangers of offending the British merchant community, who controlled 90 per cent of local advertising, the prince reportedly told him, 'So long as you are fair to every one irrespective of colour, there's nothing to be afraid of.'<sup>89</sup> The paper put forth scathing critiques of the government's railway board and the inefficiency and corruption of the Bangkok police department, including a case of a young Cantonese prostitute abused by the police, which infuriated the Chinese community.<sup>90</sup> The Royal Bangkok Sports Club once cancelled all its advertising and printing orders, incensed by an article berating one of its secretaries for ordering the beating of a ten-year-old Thai boy accused of cashing a forged racing ticket. Freeman brazenly seized the opportunity to print the Club's letter on the front page, along with a cartoon of the Club president shooting a popgun at an elephant representing the *Mail*, backed by two angels labelled 'Bangkok Times' and 'Siam Observer'. The strategy worked – he noted that for every foreign cancellation, the paper received ten new native subscribers.<sup>91</sup> For savvy media entrepreneurs, commercial pragmatism trumped the racial hierarchies of the colonial era.

Manicasothy Saravanamuttu, the Ceylonese chief editor of the *Straits Echo* in the 1930s, also attracted more Asian readers by defending their causes against the colonial government. 'Sara', as he was known, was educated at Oxford and brought in by Lim Seng Hooi from Colombo as a sports editor. In Colombo, he had worked for another influential Asian media entrepreneur, D.R. Wijewardene, who established a number of highly successful dailies, including a Tamil and Sinhalese newspaper, along with the *Ceylon Daily News* and *Ceylon Observer*. Sara took over the editorship of the *Straits Echo* from Bilainkin in 1931, becoming the first non-white chief editor of a Malayan paper. Attributing his editorial policy to his training as a Fabian, he championed the cause of 'local people', arguing that even though it 'led to the charge by the ruling class that I was a Communist, [it] brought dividends in the form of mounting circulation'.<sup>92</sup> By the mid-1930s, the *Straits Echo* was vying with the *Kwong Wah Yit Poh* to be the most popular paper in North Malaya, with circulation tripling to 4,500 under Saravanamuttu's editorship.<sup>93</sup> In a letter to the paper in 1938, the Straits-Chinese writer Lim Cheng Law praised the *Echo*'s achievements as a newspaper:

<sup>88</sup> Freeman, *A Journalist in Siam* (1932), p. 292. <sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 295. <sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 560.

<sup>91</sup> Freeman, *A Journalist in Siam*, p. 295. <sup>92</sup> Saravanamuttu, *Sara Saga*, pp. 56–57.

<sup>93</sup> *Straits Settlements Blue Book for the Year 1937*, Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1937, p. 150.



the medium it offers for the expression of public opinion and the insistence of public protest should commend it to a very wide circle of readers . . . It is a source of much satisfaction that the 'Straits Echo' is the only daily English newspaper in Malaya edited and staffed entirely by Asiatics but in its principal function as a newspaper, which is to collect and print news, it has sought to cater for no particular community but for all.<sup>94</sup>

In defending the interests of Asian communities, newspapers appealed to a broad range of interests and were attractive investments for advertisers. In Rangoon, many bilingual Burmese literati established Burmese-language papers, but the city also had a number of English-language papers owned and edited by Burmese, such as the *Burma Observer* and *New Burma*, which appealed to a broad English-speaking Asian audience. 'Result-seeking advertisers', proclaimed the *New Burma*, 'seek to learn whether a newspaper carries its favour from a few foreigners and anti-nationalists or the courageous defence of the public cause'.<sup>95</sup> The paper advertised itself as 'Read in nation-wide good will . . . because it has served the people for about a decade and is still working for their good'.<sup>96</sup> In these papers, Burmese as well as Indian literati wrote and responded to each other, linking the shared nationalist aims of Burma and India while fiercely debating issues surrounding Indian immigration into Burma. An article praised Indians in India for their 'struggle for the common good', while Anglo-Indians [in Rangoon] were accused of clamouring for their 'own selfish interests in Burma without any regard to the well-being of all the people in the country'.<sup>97</sup> As tensions mounted between Burmese and Indians in 1930s Rangoon, Burma's English-language newspapers provided a highly charged venue for debate and discussion between Burmese and Indian literati over issues of national sovereignty.

The expansion of journalism allowed a growing number of people not only to interact with each other but also to contest the colonial state and, increasingly, the monarchy in Siam. Young writers and journalists in Siam undermined the monarchical state in the 1920s by attacking their wealth, privilege, and even their practice of polygamy.<sup>98</sup> In Penang, meanwhile, criticisms of the colonial government were couched in the language of rights, responsibilities, and fair play, while writers in Rangoon drew on ideas of 'democracy'. *New Burma* quoted an article in a British

<sup>94</sup> *Straits Echo*, 15 September 1938, p. 8.

<sup>95</sup> Advertisement, *New Burma*, 3 January 1930, p. 5. <sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> 'India and Burma', *New Burma*, 21 December 1934, p. 13.

<sup>98</sup> For the role of newspapers in undermining the authority of the monarchy, see: Copeland, 'Contested Nationalism'; Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*; Tirawanit, *Prawatkan nang-uhim*; and Limapichart, 'The Emergence of the Siamese Public Sphere', pp. 361–69.

paper by the Labour politician George Lansbury, stating that ‘the essence of democracy is to be found in individual people thinking and acting for themselves’.<sup>99</sup> Another editorial quoted the Indian politician Srinivasa Sastri in arguing that journalists were essential to a democratic society, but that they were also ‘bound to become a danger to the community if they were not properly trained’.<sup>100</sup> Attacks in the vernacular press were often vicious, direct, and inflammatory, while other criticisms were written in a more careful yet no less angry language. Asian readers demanded objectivity and journalistic integrity; they criticised newspapers that distorted facts, while supporting those that brought forth reasoned criticisms of the government. As one bilingual reader wrote in the *Rangoon Gazette* in 1939:

I read the vernacular press everyday and everyday [*sic*] I read not only misrepresented facts, but come across often repeated arguments in political leaders which if brought up in fair debate against any educated person of whatever race or political beliefs could not stand examination for a minute. I am careful at this point to add that in certain of the Burmese papers I have come across perfectly logical and reasonable criticism of the present Government, and in cases where the attack is based on true facts and on promises which intelligent men can accept, I do not quarrel with a certain amount of violence of language.<sup>101</sup>

More Asians were becoming interested in journalism as a profession. An important aspect of the early historiography of nationalism is the production of a class of unemployed, politically dissatisfied youth, many of whom turned to journalism and became a key force in anti-colonial agitation.<sup>102</sup> The problem of unemployed youth was also a source of public anxiety at the time, but *New Burma* deemed journalism a viable profession when it called for it to be taught at Rangoon University on a similar level to the training of teachers, doctors, and lawyers. One writer argued, ‘journalism has a better future in this country as elsewhere. We find that the number of journalists has increased by 1,000 percent in 20 years. The function of a University is not to cater for the present needs only. It should have foresight to think of the future’.<sup>103</sup> This

<sup>99</sup> ‘Democracy’, *New Burma*, 18 November 1934, p. 8.

<sup>100</sup> ‘Schools of Journalism’, *New Burma*, 31 October 1930, p. 6.

<sup>101</sup> ‘The Political Crisis in Burma’, *Rangoon Gazette*, 2 January 1939, p. 2.

<sup>102</sup> See Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968); Robert Van Niel, *The Emergence of the Modern Indonesian Elite* (Dordrecht: Foris, 1984); Rex Stevenson, *Cultivators and Administrators: British Educational Policy towards the Malays, 1875–1906* (Kuala Lumpur; London: Oxford University Press, 1975); Philip Fook Seng Loh, *Seeds of Separatism: Educational Policy in Malaya, 1874–1940* (Kuala Lumpur; New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

<sup>103</sup> ‘Journalism at University’, *New Burma*, 17 October 1934, p. 9.

professionalisation of the media also occurred in Siam, despite the new press laws in Siam of the 1930s and periodic periods of censorship that closed down press freedoms. The Thai press association, launched in 1930, continued to operate and a journalism department was inaugurated at the new Thammasat University. In Penang, Sara trained many cub reporters, some of whom grew to become post-war Malaya's leading journalists, including Khor Cheang Kee and Lee Siew Yee, both popular editors at Singapore's *Straits Times*.<sup>104</sup>

Journalism also provided a new venue for women to read about the world and contribute to intellectual discussion. Newspapers, easily read from home, provided women an escape from the toils of everyday domesticity. The Burmese social commentator Mi Mi Khaing wrote of an aunt who read the *New Light of Burma* daily on her veranda with a bottle of lemonade, describing the paper as filled with 'international news, home politics, articles on the economic development of the country and attacks on the abuses prevalent in social life, exhortations to good behaviours to the younger generation, reports of cases of a scandalous nature, just like a popular daily anywhere in the world'.<sup>105</sup> Women gained a greater sense of awareness of both their community and the wider world, and participated in a public sphere that had previously been denied to them. In Burma, female journalists and editors were becoming increasingly prominent as more educated women graduated from the ranks of the new Rangoon University. Many women, including Burma's most famous female journalist, Luthu Daw Amar, not only wrote and translated for popular newspapers and periodicals but owned and edited their own papers.<sup>106</sup> In Penang, women were frequent contributors to the correspondence columns of the *Straits Echo*, often engaging in heated and colourful debates with men on the role of the modern girl.<sup>107</sup> They drew on models of female modernity from Shanghai to America. In Bangkok, women, along with a larger number of educated men, formed the basis of an avid young, cosmopolitan reading public, with many seeking to become writers and journalists.<sup>108</sup> The *Bangkok Daily Mail* printed an interview with a woman who sent a petition to the Queen of Siam asking for a law against polygamy.<sup>109</sup> A host of women's papers and magazines

<sup>104</sup> See Khor's tribute to Sara on behalf of the North Malayan Journalists' Union in 1961 in Saravanamuttu, *Sara Saga*, pp. 211–14.

<sup>105</sup> Khaing, *Burmese family*, p. 120.

<sup>106</sup> Chie Ikeya sees these women within the context of increased female liberality in the colonial public sphere in *Refiguring Women*, pp. 41–44.

<sup>107</sup> Su Lin Lewis, 'Cosmopolitanism and the Modern Girl: A Cross-Cultural Discourse in 1930s Penang', *Modern Asian Studies* 43:6 (2009): 1385–419.

<sup>108</sup> Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, p. 137. <sup>109</sup> Freeman, 'Tabloid in Bangkok', p. 651.

appeared throughout the 1920s, portraying a diverse outlook ranging from the political position of women to fictional and sentimental literature.<sup>110</sup>

Correspondence pages opened up a new world of interactions between readers and writers, allowing a diverse group of ordinary people to participate in the new sphere of letters. Literate men and women from various communities, different classes, young and old, contributed their own individual observations to form a body of 'public opinion' and joined a discourse of ideas. This represented a radical mental shift, creating not only an 'imagined community' of readers (within a locality, a 'nation', and the world) but a community of individuals, each with their own take on the social, cultural, and political issues of the day. The guise of anonymity, in particular, allowed them to lose their social status by employing pen names. As Stephanie Newell has argued with regard to the colonial West African press, pseudonyms allowed writers not only to escape colonial surveillance or hide writers' identities from influential members of their community, but 'to experiment with voices, to vocalize, to project and to play with subjectivity, agency, genres, and opinions'.<sup>111</sup>

What was new, and modern, was that any literate person could be an author, entitled to his or her own opinion, and contribute to the public discourse of the day. For young Asian newspaper readers of the 1920s, this was a world that was radically different from that of their parents. The emergence of a public sphere in which they could participate simply by writing to a newspaper, convincing others of their views, and engaging in an argument or conversation with their fellow readers, belies a complex and shifting relationship between self and society. The 'nation' may have existed as a potential imagined political community, but it was a much less concrete form of affiliation than forms of self-identification that were closer to home. Along with a new awareness of 'national' belonging was a growing sense of being, variously, a 'modern boy' or a 'modern girl', a member of a professional class, an 'Asian', and a member of a religious or diasporic community.

The readers' page in Penang, for instance, presents a striking example of a cosmopolitan newspaper-reading community in which individual, often anonymous identities take precedence over larger political ones. The page, beginning in the late 1930s, showcased a cast of colourful Penang writers, young and old, male and female. Writers wrote on topics of immediate relevance: local and diasporic politics, love and the modern girl, festivities, and popular culture. Readers approached and exchanged

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Stephanie Newell, 'Something to Hide? Anonymity and Pseudonyms in the Colonial West African Press', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 45:1 (2010): 9–22.

views from generational, gender-based, as well as cultural perspectives. There was an intimacy to the writing, signifying a close-knit community of homespun talent, with key writers portrayed in a series of cartoons (see Figure 14). On the second anniversary of the readers' page, a contributor offered a list of regular types: the 'egotist'; the 'reader with a grouse, real or imaginary'; the reader who 'writes to the press because has nothing else to do'; the 'retired government servant'; the 'writer who believes his opinion to be the right one'; the 'contributor whose real object is to offer sincere and constructive criticism on some particular subject'; 'high-brows' and 'star writers'; 'political writers'; 'factious writers' using pseudonyms such as Jesting Pilate and Samuel Pepys; 'romantic writers'; and 'social writers'.<sup>112</sup> 'Madame Chevalier' referred to herself as an 'able sharpshooter' and a 'sophisticated lady' with a weakness for cocktails. Maureen Cheah and other modern girls engaged in debates with 'modern men' on issues ranging from the war in China to the wearing of sunglasses.<sup>113</sup> The celebrated Muslim scholar and polymath H.G. Sarwar, known as the 'Grand Old Man' of Penang letters, offered political and cultural commentary on a range of topics from the Russo-Japanese war to the role of literature and science; diaries of his Hajj pilgrimage were published in the *Straits Echo* and read avidly by young readers. Reflecting on the popularity of the readers' page, Sara recalled:

Page 13 started as an accident but has stayed to be one of the best things in Malayan journalism . . . It is human. It is alive. One can almost hear its heart throb. It has become the public forum of Penang and it is now our duty to raise it and keep it at a high level . . . Let us keep it largely as it had been only not flog any subject to death, and in any controversies retain that dignity and restraint which are the outward signs of education and culture.<sup>114</sup>

In Penang, the *Straits Echo* readers' page gave rise to a local brand of cosmopolitanism among an intimate and diverse community of readers and writers, beginning to understand themselves, despite their differences, as a 'public'.

At the same time, the growth of an inter-connected worldwide press prompted a much greater awareness of a 'global community'. Stories of war and injustice outside one's borders, transmitted through news wires, prompted sentiments of empathy and of belonging to a common humanity. A web of new connections through syndication, wires, and the increasing availability of print media from abroad, created more intimate relationships with the rest of the world. Wire services including Reuters,

<sup>112</sup> 'Page 13 Types', *Straits Echo*, 13 April 1939, p. 13.

<sup>113</sup> 'Madame was drunk!' *Straits Echo*, 23 September 1939, p. 13.

<sup>114</sup> 'Editorial', *Straits Echo*, 14 April 1939, p. 5.



Figures 11 to 14 Cartoon portraits of popular female contributors to the *Straits Echo* readers' page.

the French *Agence-France Press*, and the German *Transocean* competed to provide information. Rangoon had a Reuters office as early as 1903, to which both English-language and Burmese papers, such as the *Sun*, subscribed. Reuters was intimately linked with the world of imperial

communications; but it helped deliver relatively accurate information about world events and international politics, from the establishment of the League of Nations to salt marches in India.<sup>115</sup> The *Bangkok Daily Mail* made use of British, French, and German wire services, considered by Freeman to be ‘distributors of propaganda’ even though they guaranteed his paper a regular flow of foreign news.<sup>116</sup> Regional syndication networks were equally important. News was as likely to appear borrowed from the *South China Morning Post* as it was from the *New York Times* or *San Francisco Chronicle*. S. Chatterjee, who became president of the Rangoon Journalists Association and an avid Rotarian, arrived in the city in the 1920s to establish a branch of the Associated Press of India. As communication improved through the 1920s, English newspapers in particular shared news and editorials on an inter-city basis; columns of the *Rangoon Times* and *Rangoon Gazette* relaying local news would often appear in the *Singapore Straits Times*, *Malaya Tribune*, *Penang Gazette* and *Straits Echo*, *Bangkok Times*, and the *Calcutta Herald*. Bangkok did not receive its first Reuters office until 1935, but syndicated news from other newspapers in the region. Freeman claimed that his newspaper sent the first letter to be carried by airmail outside Siam’s borders – to the *Java Bode*, a daily newspaper in Batavia.<sup>117</sup>

New region-wide literary magazines were launched in the new regional lingua franca of English, including *Inter-Ocean*, a ‘magazine of distinction’ in the Dutch East Indies.<sup>118</sup> The journal of the American Asiatic Association, founded in 1898, was rebranded as *Asia* magazine in 1917 and run out of New York by both male and female editors; throughout the 1930s it increasingly targeted a growing audience of bilingual Asian readers.<sup>119</sup> Both reflected on a range of issues from around Asia, from politics to travel and feature pieces. Foreign journalists – including the editors of the *Rangoon Times*, *Siam Observer*, *Malay Tribune*, the *South China Morning Post*, the *Shanghai Mercury*, and the *China Press* – collaborated on a 1923 volume entitled *Seaports of the Far East*, meant to herald a new age of industrial progress in the region, which would far surpass that of the West.<sup>120</sup> International magazines and papers from abroad became

<sup>115</sup> See Simon Potter, ‘Webs, Networks, and Systems: Globalization and the Mass Media in the Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century British Empire’, in *The Journal of British Studies* 46:3 (2007).

<sup>116</sup> Freeman, ‘Tabloid in Bangkok’, August 1930, p. 557.

<sup>117</sup> Freeman, ‘Tabloid in Bangkok’, September 1930, p. 635.

<sup>118</sup> ‘Inter-Ocean’, in *Straits Echo*, 1 April 1929, p. 5.

<sup>119</sup> Letter, Fletcher to Macgregor, 15 August 1935, File 155/8 ‘Asia’ (1934–1948), India Office Records and Private Papers IOR/L/I/399.

<sup>120</sup> Allistar Macmillan, ‘Seaports of the Far East’ (1923), p. i.

new sources of authority.<sup>121</sup> As we have seen, in his speech to the Penang Rotary club defending the rights of the Malays, Mohd. Eusoff quoted an *Economist* article on ‘colonial responsibilities’. Such references were a mark of sophistication and worldliness, an assertion of Asian literary cosmopolitanism within an Anglophone reading public.

Print culture also introduced elements that did not require high degrees of literacy, but were equally important in fostering a new awareness of the ‘global’. Political cartoons were rife with social critique of political elites, from the colonial establishment to the Siamese monarchy.<sup>122</sup> *Punch* magazine inspired a generation of Asian political cartoonists, the legacy of their political cartoons suggesting a wide engagement with international affairs. International advertising and the new medium of photography transformed social perceptions in the 1920s. Kodak, Ford, Cadbury’s, Max Factor, and McCallum’s whiskey were familiar brands to Asian audiences, while new Asian and local products emerged, in particular in the cosmetics sector, geared towards attracting new women consumers. Visual print culture allowed communities to see the possibilities as well as the jarring differences of wealth by noting what it was and was not possible to afford. New cultures of consumption, as well as the sexual freedom exhibited in representations of the West, could be both liberating and also alienating. While advertising made the modern girl a globally recognised visual object, it also reinforced her new role as a consumer, both liberated and limited by her spending power.<sup>123</sup> Through the written word and the image, the new world of the press provided a platform for the achievements of modern women around the world to be reported, for their voices to be heard, and for local women to participate in new debates in which they were becoming an object of speculation.

### New Reading Publics

The emergence of reading publics in Bangkok, Penang, and Rangoon in the first three decades of the twentieth century was due largely to an expansion of education, particularly for women, and increased exposure

<sup>121</sup> Lysa Hong argues that the ‘quality metropolitan presses’, such as the *Times*, were far more influential on the Siamese political elite than the domestic English press in ‘Stranger within the Gates’, p. 331.

<sup>122</sup> Copeland, Barmé, and Ikeya use political cartoons in their analysis of Bangkok and Burmese society in the 1920s and 1930s. See Copeland, ‘Contested Nationalism’, Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, and Ikeya, ‘Modern Burmese Woman’. See also Ritu G. Khanduri, ‘Vernacular punches: cartoons and politics in colonial India’, *History and Anthropology*, 20:3, 359–486.

<sup>123</sup> See Modern Girl Around the World Research Group et al., *Modern Girl around the World*.



to literary texts and books. The Asian public consisted of literati and also readers who began establishing book clubs, joining literary societies, subscribing to journals, and frequenting libraries.<sup>124</sup> Jennie Neilson, the Danish wife of American doctor Thomas Heward Hays, founded the first public library in Bangkok in 1869, the Neilson Hays Library (originally the Bangkok Ladies Library Association), to serve the reading needs of the English-speaking community. In 1905, Prince Damrong amalgamated three existing Royal Libraries to form the Vajirana National Library for use by the general Thai public. In Rangoon, the Bernard Free Library (est. 1883) was established and chiefly maintained by a government grant. The aim, set forth by its founder, was 'to enable scholars and students, especially poor scholars and students, to consult books of reference, and to prosecute researches beyond the compass of a private library'.<sup>125</sup> Later, in 1909, a group of Buddhist scholars opened a free Buddhist library, which came to replace the Bernard Free Library as a source for monks to prepare examinations and consult palm-leaf manuscripts for printed editions.<sup>126</sup> A government report of 1937 noted that educated Chinese and Malay readers regularly frequented the Penang Library.

Cultures of reading and literary endeavour concentrated around schools and universities. A student writing to the *Penang Free School* reviewed the statistics of books taken out of the library, observing that 'fiction is the most popular reading matter, then, in order of popularity, geography, literature, general knowledge, ancient history. Old magazines still continue to be popular. Parents like to see boys taking magazines home, so that they may see what the world is doing.'<sup>127</sup> This reflects an interesting post-colonial predicament: in much of the post-colonial world, as Anderson has pointed out, the status of the first generation to be educated in significant numbers marked them off linguistically and culturally from their parents' generation.<sup>128</sup> Yet as this student noted, the privileges granted to this new group could also be passed on to their parents. Popular magazines such as *Readers' Digest* and magazine images of other countries transported parents, as well children, to new worlds, broadening their imaginations. Book enthusiasts in Bangkok's Sampheng who could not read would ask others, often children, to read to them.<sup>129</sup>

<sup>124</sup> Frost, 'Asia's Maritime Networks', p. 23.

<sup>125</sup> *Catalogue of Bernard Free Library*, 1917, London, British Library. V8951. India Office Records.

<sup>126</sup> Turner, p. 38.

<sup>127</sup> 'Penang Free School Library', *Penang Free School Magazine*, April 1929, p. 5.

<sup>128</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 119.

<sup>129</sup> Anuman Rajadhon, *Looking Back: Book One*, p. 311.

Strong literary traditions in Thai and Burmese had always promoted translations and adaptations of Asian literature.<sup>130</sup> Chinese epics were particularly popular in Bangkok, with a new translation of the *Three Kingdoms* undertaken by Prince Damrong in 1920. For Thai children, they provided a window to understanding Chinese history.<sup>131</sup> Bilingual Burmese literati translated works of great literary texts, such as the *Arabian Nights* (translated in 1908). Historical novels became increasingly popular. Writers in Bangkok and Rangoon drew on Western stories, such as the *Count of Monte Cristo*, adapted as the first Burmese novel in 1904. Detective fiction and short stories proved to be easily reproducible forms of literary experimentation, adapted with Burmese and Siamese characters and settings. As a boy, the Thai intellectual Phya Anuman, in Bangkok, read the Grimms' fairy tales, detective fiction, and subscribed to *Tit-Bits* – a popular English magazine of short stories.<sup>132</sup> The Burmese writer Shwe U-Daung adapted the Sherlock Holmes stories and set them in a crime-ridden 1930s Rangoon amidst nationalist fervor, featuring a multi-ethnic cast of characters.<sup>133</sup> Shakespearean adaptations were popular for theatrical troupes and playwrights in all three cities, particularly in Rangoon after Burmese translations of the bard's works by U Kru in the early 1920s.<sup>134</sup> A pioneer of bangsawan theatre (discussed in Chapter 6) recounts that 'the Malay impressario', concerned with generating laughter from the audience, turned Hamlet into a comedy in which the part of the ghost was played by a clown.<sup>135</sup>

In colonial Burma, the flood of new books, combined with a strong literary and literate culture, prompted a steady development of a reading culture, not only in Burmese but also in multiple vernacular and Asian languages. From 1910 to 1920, publications appeared in Burmese, Pali,

<sup>130</sup> On cosmopolitan court cultures, see notes on sixteenth-century Arakan in Burma Thant *River of Lost Footsteps*, p. 74; on the court of King Rama I (1782–1809), see Wyatt, *Thailand*, p. 137.

<sup>131</sup> Anuman Rajadhon, *Looking Back: Book One*, pp. 294–95.

<sup>132</sup> Anuman Rajadhon, *Looking Back: Book Two* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1992), pp. 125–30.

<sup>133</sup> See Yuri Takahashi, 'The Case-Book of Mr San Shar: Burmese Society and Nationalist Thought in the 1930s As Seen in the Burmese Sherlock Holmes Stories', paper presented at the 17th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia, Melbourne, 2008.

<sup>134</sup> See Tan Sooi Beng, *Bangsawan: A Social and Stylistic History of Popular Malay Opera* (Penang: The Asian Centre, 1997); Mattani Moj dara Rutnin, *Dance, Drama and Theatre in Thailand: The Process of Development and Modernization* (Bangkok: Silkworm, 1996); D.K. Kyawt, 'Annotated Bibliography of Burmese Drama published between 1872–1922', Fellowship of the Library Association, 1992.

<sup>135</sup> 'Bangsawan in Malaysia: An Oral Interview with Noor K.K. & Ahmad C.B.' Interview by Abu Bakar, Jamiah Hj. 29 April 1977. Kuala Lumpur, National Archives. Oral History Collection, LS315.

Urdu, Arabic, Karen, Shan, Parsi, and Tamil. Interests ranged from fiction, poetry, philosophy, logic, Buddhist metaphysics, and Burmese design.<sup>136</sup> The eleven dramatic works that appeared in 1915 included two in Gujarati. As in Siam, the serialisation of novels and short stories in literary magazines, particularly from 1915, helped create an atmosphere for the emergence of Burmese fiction, which mushroomed in the following years.<sup>137</sup> The 136 works of fiction appearing in 1920 included two written in Tamil.<sup>138</sup> The year 1930 witnessed 192 new publications, with Burmese language publications increasing from thirty-eight to ninety-three, Pali-Burmese from twenty-two to forty-four, as well as a new South Asian language heading, *Oriya*, due largely to the founding of an Oriya Press, which dealt mostly with tales from Hindu mythology.<sup>139</sup> By the 1920s, the growth of printing presses matched the growth of film companies. A 'List of Firms' counted no less than fifteen local printing presses and six booksellers owned by Rangoon inhabitants with both Burmese and non-Burmese names.<sup>140</sup> These included the Rakatoolan Printing Works (run by Abdul Rahman), the Maung Pu Brothers Printing Press, the Standard Press (run by Sheik Gulam), the Bandoola Company, Ambiya Press, Mya Kyi Press, and Vihayagar Press. Booksellers included the Friends' Union Bookstall (run by Mohd. Kemar Dhar).

As in Japan, self-help books were increasingly important to a society in which success-seeking Asians responded to the competitive demands of global capitalism.<sup>141</sup> The appearance, in 1915, of Kin Maung Gyi's *How to Become Rich* and Maung Kyaw's *The Way to Health* were, according to a government report, 'apparently intended to teach the Burmese that unless they unite and adopt the business methods of the West they cannot expect to prosper in trade'.<sup>142</sup> A Tamil primary school teacher wrote a book on how to obtain wealth (described by one Burmese reviewer as

<sup>136</sup> See 'Reports on Books and Publications Issued in Burma 1902–1940', London: India Office Records. V/25/960/1–32.

<sup>137</sup> 'Report on Books and Publications Issued in Burma in 1915', London: India Office Records. V/25/960/10.

<sup>138</sup> 'Report on Books and Publications Issued in Burma in 1920', London: India Office Records. V/25/960/14.

<sup>139</sup> 'Report on Books and Publications Issued in Burma in 1930', London: India Office Records. V/25/960/22.

<sup>140</sup> See *List of Firms Registered under the Burma Registration of Business Names Act, 1920* (Rangoon: Government Printing Press, 1927).

<sup>141</sup> On the reception of self-help books in Nineteenth-century Japan, see Sarah Metzger-Court, 'Economic Progress and Social Cohesion: "Self-help" and the achieving of a delicate balance in Meiji Japan', *Japan Forum* 3:1 (1991): 11–21.

<sup>142</sup> 'Report on Books and Publications Issued in Burma in 1915', London: India Office Records. V/25/960/10, p. 2.

'fairly interesting').<sup>143</sup> *Euro-Asian*, published under the auspices of the Anglo-Indian Empire League, explored the weaknesses and strengths of the Eurasian community. A large growth in works on religion in 1930 were part of a religious revival, addressing the reform of Buddhism as well as information on Christianity, including a small number of works comparing the two faiths. Guides on accounting for Burmese housewives appeared, and were deemed unintelligible to one bilingual Burmese male reviewer (who noted 'it is probably intentionally difficult, for a system which is not readily understood by the male brain must have a special appeal to the Burmese housewife').<sup>144</sup> Self-help magazines and journals also helped develop new notions of masculinity and femininity. In Penang, magazines sold in second-hand bookstalls provided tips for young men from low-income backgrounds on how to build up their physique. An oral history reveals that Penang-born Harold de Castro, who emerged as one of Singapore's great sportsmen, was inspired by images of body-builders in magazines to put on weight and train.<sup>145</sup> In Bangkok, women's publications grew exponentially from 1915 to 1930, aiming to change the social position of women in society and achieve their role as equals with men.<sup>146</sup>

Throughout the decade, Rangoon literati had taken an active role in promoting literacy to a wide audience, particularly through the Burmese Education Extension. The slogan 'Read! Read! Read!' jumped from the covers of the *World of Books*, paid for by the National Educationist Board. The Burma Book Club advertised that 'booklovers and students' could order the 'world's great books' from the Everyman's Library, including those of Wells, Conrad, Byron, Maugham, Voltaire, and Huxley. Magazines ranged from *Boys' Own* to *Good Housekeeping*, *the Strand*, *Wide World Magazine*, and *Woman's Journal*. In 1932, the Burma Education Extension reported that it had opened a bookshop at the university, moved its town branch to a location more accessible to the general public and started a modern readers' circulating library, with the *World of Books* journal meant to keep those in outlying districts in touch with the book world.

Articles in the *World of Books* promoted a culture of reading. Useful tips included taking notes while reading ('Elaborate note-making is not

<sup>143</sup> Anonymous Burmese reviewer as qtd. in 'Report on Books and Publications Issued in Burma in 1930', London: India Office Records. V/25/960/22, p. 2.

<sup>144</sup> 'Report on Books and Publications Issued in Burma in 1930', London: India Office Records. V/25/960/22, p. 2.

<sup>145</sup> Harold de Castro, oral history interview conducted by Michelle Low, 2 September 2005, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Disc 1.

<sup>146</sup> Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, p. 133.

essential. Keep notes of what books you have read and give a short characterisation about it or comment in the fewest number of words') and keeping a dictionary ('keep in a place where you can find it at once . . . learn the geography of your dictionary . . . to find the word you want to refer').<sup>147</sup> Advice on reading newspapers suggested: 'never skim out headlines and sheet promiscuously. If a caption catches your eye never stop there – read it and understand its contents.'<sup>148</sup> Acknowledging the political bias of 'many good newspapers', the article also suggested that it was 'good to read newspapers of different political views other than your own'.<sup>149</sup> Tips on forming a private library appeared: 'without books of your own you cannot hope to be a book lover . . . Without books of your own you will only be a dreamer. You must therefore own a little library of your own. However small or humble it is you should be proud of it . . . it should be truly representative of one's taste and personality'.<sup>150</sup> A suggested private library included: standard texts from *Arabian Nights*; the Grimms' fairy tales; classics from Homer to Plato; and histories including G.E. Harvey's *History of Burma* and *The Glass Palace Chronicles*, the dynastic chronicles of Burma compiled by the last Burmese kings and translated by Pe Maung Tin and G.H. Luce in 1923.

A critique of Burma's intellectual heritage emerged in the pages of the Burma Research Society's journal and the *World of Books*. Some of this criticism regarded itself as far more sophisticated than the new Burmese novel. Ba Han, the brother of Dr Ba Maw, was a Burmese intellectual who studied in Paris and wrote an acclaimed critique of William Blake's concept of mysticism and the imagination, contrasting it with the mysticism of Christian and Buddhist mystics. Ba Han also wrote for the Burma Research Society, beginning a critical review of a new Burmese novel with Matthew Arnold's dictum: 'I am bound by my own definition of criticism: a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best of what is known and thought in the world'.<sup>151</sup> Ba Han's quote showed his particular sensibility to the emergence of a global republic of letters which incorporated both Western and Eastern ideas, and valued cultural achievement on a universal, humanist scale. Another writer, under the pseudonym 'Sisyphus', criticised the teaching of canonical literary texts from writers such as Shakespeare and Keats to Rangoon university students, and instead advocated historical context and the 'hard-boiled' prose of contemporary writers such as H.G. Wells.<sup>152</sup> Elite writers were

<sup>147</sup> 'A Short Talk on Books and Reading', *World of Books* (March 1933), pp. 61–67.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68. <sup>149</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>151</sup> Ba Han, 'U Ponnya's Paduma', *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 7:2 (1917).

<sup>152</sup> 'English in Universities', *The World of Books* (December 1998): 493–95.

not blindly drawn to the Western literary canon, but sought to transform it.

Others, such as Mi Mi Khaing, enjoyed the mix of both 'high' and 'low' literary culture prompted by the immense diversity of new material. She recalled that 'poetry and prose were not the monopoly of a class of intellectuals although certain periodicals such as the *World of Books* endeavoured to contain only literary excellences; wit and vivid description could be present in the tuppenny novels . . . largely drug-like and pornographic in nature'.<sup>153</sup> As the trade in cheap romance novels grew in Rangoon, enterprising hawker boys set up mobile libraries. In Penang, roving fortune-tellers were quick to capitalise on the popularity of Chinese and Malay comic books, memorising their entire contents. The books became extremely popular, and were sold on the roadside or rented out for a few cents at a time, or read for free with a cent haircut in riverside stalls.<sup>154</sup> As in cities all over the world, the spread of both high- and low-brow literature throughout the city replicated a kaleidoscopic set of representations of urban modernity, contributing to the fashioning of a self-consciously cosmopolitan urban culture, one that was critical as well as consuming.<sup>155</sup>

### Political Modernities in Circulation

The web of new inter-city and global connections that Asians experienced through print culture signalled an age of growing prosperity and mass consumption in the 1920s, making the world seem closer than ever in the urban popular imagination. New ideas of internationalism, novel technological discoveries, cultures of consumption, and diverse forms of popular entertainment, criminality, and religious belief circulated throughout the region. By the 1930s, as the worldwide Depression sunk in, as Japan sought to gain economic supremacy over Asia, and as ethnic-based nationalisms began rising around the world, more Asians were prompted to define their place within the world through print culture. Anderson argues that bilingual intelligentsias of the colonial world had access, inside and outside the classroom, 'to models of nation, nation-ness, and nationalism distilled from the turbulent, chaotic experiences of more than a century of American and European history'.<sup>156</sup> Yet some of the most

<sup>153</sup> Khaing, *Burmese Family*, p. 121.

<sup>154</sup> Lim Teong Beng, 'Lang Ting Tang', in the Penang File ([www.theoifamily.com/ThePenangfileb/oct-2000/index8.htm](http://www.theoifamily.com/ThePenangfileb/oct-2000/index8.htm), last accessed 26 August 2010).

<sup>155</sup> Peter Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin 1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 4; Des Forges, *Mediasphere Shanghai: The Aesthetics of Cultural Production* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, Press, 2007).

<sup>156</sup> Anderson, *Spectre of Comparisons*, p. 140.

important intellectual influences in terms of nationalist models, for many inhabitants of Penang, Rangoon, and Bangkok, with their large Chinese and Indian diasporas, came not from the West but from Asia itself. Siam's monarchy had long been fascinated with Japan's ability to combine nationalism with modernisation. Bilingual elite and middle-class readers were more likely to be affected by wars playing out contemporaneously in the region rather than those fought a century ago on Western shores. The Chinese Revolution and the battle for Indian independence were felt immediately because of their impact on diasporic communities in cities themselves, as new waves of migrants arrived at port. Kuomintang propagandists speaking in the local market in Bangkok inspired rising political leaders such as a young Pridi Panomyong, one of the key instigators of the 1932 coup that brought an end to Siam's absolute monarchy. Pridi begins his memoirs by recalling changes in Chinese styles of dress, particularly the cutting of the queue associated with Manchu rule, focusing his understanding of revolution.<sup>157</sup> The success of the Chinese Revolution in 1911 engaged many members of the public, who were growing more interested in international affairs.<sup>158</sup>

A weekly literary magazine with a pan-Asian intellectual scope was Penang's *Eastern Courier* (1929–31). The journal, funded initially by the Kuomintang, emerged initially to target the Anglophone Chinese community in Malaya to keep them informed of events in China. While the Colonial Office viewed it as a powerful instrument of Chinese nationalist propaganda,<sup>159</sup> the content of the journal suggests that it served as a shared political platform for diverse Asian communities to exchange views. The inaugural issue stated that it was meant 'not merely for the use and benefit of the Chinese but as a service to the people of all nationalities, whose interests are our interests and whose lasting welfare is, and ever will be, our first concern'.<sup>160</sup> Covers of the magazine paid tribute to the thought of Sun Yat Sen through colourful cartoons of the man and his catechisms (see Figure 5).

The paper published basic Mandarin lessons in response to the deracinated predicament of the Anglophone Straits-Chinese, many of whom could not read or write Chinese. T.M. Chen, in an open letter to the Straits-Chinese, confessed to the shame of not knowing Mandarin. He

<sup>157</sup> Pridi Panomyong, *Ma vie mouvementée et mes 21 ans d'exil en Chine populaire* (Paris: UNESCO, 1972), p. 27.

<sup>158</sup> Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, p. 32.

<sup>159</sup> See Letter from Government House, Hong Kong to Lord Passfield, 12 December 1929, in London, National Archives, Colonial Office Records: Straits Settlements original correspondence CO 273/470 Kuomintang 1929.

<sup>160</sup> 'Our Raison d'être', *Eastern Courier*, 8 August 1929, p. 1.



Figure 15 Cover of *The Eastern Courier* featuring Sun Yat-Sen.



urged his compatriots, 'Learn English by all means, but let us be acquainted with our own language too.'<sup>161</sup> The paper had global aspirations, seeking to target English-speaking Asian communities in Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, Borneo, Burma, and 'and other parts of what is sometimes not altogether inaptly designated the Middle East' ('Southeast Asia' had not emerged as a popular term for the region at this point, apart from among select scholarly journals).<sup>162</sup> The paper covered regional affairs, reporting on a visit of Prince Damrong to the prominent Khaw family in Southern Siam, and praising his efforts to found the National Library and rescue Siam's stone records from oblivion – 'a most important contribution to the nation's history, for the other records of the past perished when the Burmans sacked and burnt the old capital of Ayuthia'.<sup>163</sup>

Though initially targeted at Anglophone Chinese, the paper encapsulated a multi-ethnic world and acted as a bridge between a sense of cosmopolitan civic consciousness and more overtly political ideologies. The *Courier* covered a range of issues: Chinese topics from the origins of the May Fourth Movement to municipal Shanghai news; Indian topics from Bengali politics and the Indian women's movement; and news on the economic and industrial development of Malaya. Local Malayan intellectuals advocated for better conditions for Tamil migrants on steamships and championed the rights of local squatters. On the other end of the class spectrum, an editor concurred with the complaints of an African-American billionaire denied entry into a fashionable London hotel, an experience that elite Asians barred from colonial Penang's luxury hotels would have been familiar with. One article admonished the government for its 'lack of consideration' to Malays and Asiatics as a whole, pointing to government notices published in English, without translations in Malay, Tamil, or Chinese.<sup>164</sup> Public intellectuals emerged to contribute to the discussion, such as Ong Joo Seng, an English teacher who wrote on Chinese and modern youth. Penang's multi-ethnic literati reconciled their dual loyalties to both their diasporic homeland and to Malaya through a wider sense of globalism. In the same issue, the *Courier* valorised the ultra-nationalist beliefs of Sun Yat Sen while endorsing Tagore's sense of internationalism, despite the actual tensions between the two that emerged with Tagore's visit to China in 1924.<sup>165</sup>

<sup>161</sup> T.M. Chen, 'An open letter to the Straits-born Chinese', *Eastern Courier*, 27 April 1929, p. 13.

<sup>162</sup> 'Chinese Papers', *Eastern Courier*, 8 Aug. 1929, p. 10.

<sup>163</sup> 'Visit of Siamese Prince: Tribute to Penang', *Eastern Courier*, 14 September 1929, p. 17.

<sup>164</sup> 'Asiatics' Status', *Eastern Courier*, 18 July 1929, p. 8.

<sup>165</sup> Stephen N. Hay, *Asian Ideas of East and West: Tagore and His Critics in Japan, China, and India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 146–245.

The *Eastern Courier* lasted only two years, and had a respectable circulation figure of 3,000. The reasons for its decline may be due to pressure from the Colonial Office to shut down, given that it was closely monitored, or equally it may have been because of a lack of funds. Yet for a short period of time, it represented the eclectic imagination of Penang's multi-ethnic literati, juggling multiple models of Asian nationalism and internationalism, engaged in discussion with each other and finding local causes to champion within Malaya and their own communities. The paper celebrated local leaders, such as P.K. Nambyar, a champion of the Indian community of Penang, as those 'who fought for the poor regardless of caste, creed, or nationality'.<sup>166</sup> Besides reporting on events in China and India, the paper also reported on overseas Chinese and overseas Indian communities abroad, linking Asian diaspora communities within the region and around the world. A Penang writer covered Rangoon's celebration of the Double Tenth Festival, describing flags of the Chinese Republic lining the streets of Chinatown and schoolgirls marching through the streets in celebration of a day when 'nationalism was ushered in substitution for clannism and familism'.<sup>167</sup>

The message of Asian intellectual giants – Tagore, Sun Yat Sen, Gandhi, José Rizal, and other Asians – circulating throughout the region resonated across racial lines. Newspapers published life sketches and biographies of these figures, inspiring a new generation of Asian leaders. World-renowned religious figures, political leaders, and literati such as Nehru, Tagore, and H.G. Wells travelled through Southeast Asian port-cities, their travels and speeches reported in the local press. Although many Asian intellectuals were well-travelled polymaths, often educated abroad, their message was nationalism – they were citizens of the world, yet turned to the nation as the most authentic means of individual and cultural expression. Sun Yat-Sen grew up in Hawaii and travelled around the Pacific Rim raising funds for his revolutionary cause. Despite his own cosmopolitan background, his treatises on putting 'nationalism before cosmopolitanism', which he associated with imperialism, were printed in Penang's *Eastern Courier* as well as translated into Burmese by the Nagani book club in Rangoon.<sup>168</sup> The Filipino nationalist José Rizal studied in Madrid, Paris, and Heidelberg, and spoke multiple languages. His ideas

<sup>166</sup> 'Honour to Indian Patriot', *Eastern Courier*, 20 April 1929, p. 5.

<sup>167</sup> 'The Double Ten Festival: How Rangoon Celebrated It', *Eastern Courier*, 9 November 1929, 29.

<sup>168</sup> For a fascinating and in-depth analysis on the translation see reviews in Hans-Bernd Zöllner (ed.), 'Material on Four Books about Sun Yat-Sen', Working Paper No. 10:16, *Myanmar Literature Project* especially Salai Kipp Kho Lian, 'Book Review on Sun Yat-sen's "The Three Principles"' ([www.burmalibrary.org/docs11/mlp10.16-op.pdf](http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs11/mlp10.16-op.pdf)).

were also popular in Burma, with his thoughts on language appearing in the *New Burma* in 1934: 'Do not try to shine in borrowed finery. While you learn other languages to be able to associate with other peoples, do not forget to preserve your own which is really meant for you to express the conception of your brains and the feeling of your hearts.'<sup>169</sup> Such figures inspired bilingual urban intellectuals and politicians not to imitate the West but to claim modernity for themselves, to shape their own political destiny and find strength in their own cultural and linguistic heritage.

The examples of the Young Turks and the Caliphate movement, the Chinese and Russian Revolutions, and Gandhian politics were a testament to a changing world, one in which Burmese literati sought to take part, often, as Aung San Suu Kyi claims, without fully digesting their ideas.<sup>170</sup> Ba Maw, one of the most outspoken politicians against colonial rule and elected as the first Premier of Burma in 1937, wrote in his memoirs, 'Most of those who accepted them did not much care whether the ideas were black or red or yellow, whether they were from Russia or Germany or China or Japan. It was enough that they promised something new and were on their sides, as against their colonial rulers, and held out a future that would be totally their own.'<sup>171</sup> Some articles in the *World of Books*, between promoting book-reading, literature, and Buddhism, contained articles that showed sympathy for the fascist governments of Germany and Italy, arguing that their peoples were 'very happy under their dictators and are also united'.<sup>172</sup>

Inspired, in part, by Ba Maw's revolutionary nationalism, Rangoon university students – including Burma's future nationalist hero, Aung San, and other future politicians of the 1940s and 1950s – formed the Dobama Asiayone (meaning 'We Burmans'). The association, which modelled itself on Ireland's Sinn Fein ('We Ourselves'), promoted a culturally homogeneous nationalism. Marxist nationalists criticised the association for being racist and sectarian because of its narrow appeal to Burmese Buddhists.<sup>173</sup> In 1938, the Nagani Book Club, the Burmese version of the Left Book Club, embarked on a translation of Dr Sun Yat-sen's lectures on 'Nationalism, Democracy, and Social Welfare'. The cover of the volume, designed to attract Burmese readers, advertised

<sup>169</sup> 'Rizal's writings', *New Burma*, 12 September 1934, p. 3.

<sup>170</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi, 'Intellectual Life in Burma and India under Colonialism', in *Freedom from Fear and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 130.

<sup>171</sup> U Ba Maw, *Breakthrough in Burma: Memoirs of a Revolution, 1939–1946* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 4.

<sup>172</sup> 'On minding one's own business', *The World of Books* (February 1938), p. 10.

<sup>173</sup> Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Burma* (London: C. Hurst & Co, 1987), p. 207.

it as ‘the ethic that will change a slave nation into a master nation’ and ‘a document of the highest standard among world literatures’.<sup>174</sup> In his introduction to the volume, U Ba Cho noted that as ‘the Irish leader de Valera’s strength has become the strength of the Irish people, Lenin’s strength become Russia’s strength, Mahatma Gandhi’s strength becomes the strength of India, Dr. Sun Yat Sen’s strength has today been transformed into a powerful strength of the entire Chinese people’.<sup>175</sup> Yet ‘nationalism’ was translated into the Burmese word *lumyoyetaya*, which is more akin to ‘racism’ in contemporary literature.<sup>176</sup> For some Burmese literati, the wholehearted adoption of nationalist ideas had an increasingly ‘racial’ focus.

While Burma’s *thakins* began to promote a more race-based nationalism, other Burmese intellectuals sought a more inclusive view, inspired by socialist internationalism. Like the editor of Penang’s *Straits Echo*, U Ba Khine took his influence from Fabianism, promoting piecemeal social change and departing from the revolutionary politics of his contemporaries who sought a complete overthrow of the state.<sup>177</sup> J.S. Furnivall would have encouraged these ideas, as he promoted his Fabianism to young Burmese through the Burma Research Society and the *World of Books*.<sup>178</sup> Ba Khine’s ‘Political History’ pointed to narrowness in Dobama ideology: ‘The word *Dobama* belongs to nationalism – one race or one nation, but socialism belongs to a world proletariat, in other words, internationalism.’<sup>179</sup>

Reflecting on race riots in Burma in 1938, a young scholar of G.H. Luce, Than Tun, wrote an editorial in *Worker’s International News*, a London-based periodical, which urged colonial workers to ‘form a united front against the common enemy, British Imperialism, which throws white against coloured, Moslem against Hindu, Arab against Jew, to preserve its own domination’.<sup>180</sup> Accusing the British authorities of

<sup>174</sup> Salai Kipp Kho Lian, ‘The Nagani Project Book review: The Burmese version of Sun Yat-sen’s “The Three Principles”’, p. 3.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5. <sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> Hans-Bernd Zöllner, ‘The Young Revolutionary and the Sceptic Nationalist: Towards a Typology of Burmese Political Thought’, Paper presented at the Burma Studies Conference, DeKalb, 2008, p. 4.

<sup>178</sup> For a study of Furnivall’s Fabianism, see Julie Pham, ‘J.S. Furnivall and Fabianism: Reinterpreting the “Plural Society” in Burma’, *Modern Asian Studies* 39:2 (2005): 321–48.

<sup>179</sup> Ba Khine, *Political History*, as qtd. in Zöllner, Hans-Bernd. ‘The Young Revolutionary and the Sceptic Nationalist: Towards a Typology of Burmese Political Thought’. Paper presented at the Burma Studies Conference, DeKalb, 2008, p. 6 [published at [www.phil.uni-passau.de/fileadmin/group\\_upload/45/pdf/workingpaper/mlp5\\_1\\_1.pdf](http://www.phil.uni-passau.de/fileadmin/group_upload/45/pdf/workingpaper/mlp5_1_1.pdf)].

<sup>180</sup> Than Tun. ‘Race Riots in Burma’ from *Workers International News*, 1:9 (September 1938), pp. 8–10.

inciting communalism, he argued that ‘racial hatred against Indians was a thing unheard of in Burma’ and wrote favourably of the efforts of the nationalist Dobama Asi-Ayone organisation to bring the two communities together.<sup>181</sup> One contributor made a similar statement in the *New Burma* while addressing problems of communalism in India.

Burma fortunately has been spared this communal war-fare and it is our earnest hope that the good feelings existing between Indians and Burmans and between Buddhists, Hindus and Mahommedans will not be impaired in any way. Hospitable and generous by nature, Burmese leaders have always looked upon this question from a liberal standpoint, particularly when the interests of Burmans and Indians are identical.<sup>182</sup>

In the face of long-standing Burmese antagonism towards the Indian community and the ethnocentric views of the Dobama Asi-Ayone, this statement advocated working-class solidarity between the two communities. Addressing the problem in a global and anti-colonial context, these writers debunked the idea that communalism was an indigenous problem. They blamed the colonial government for stirring up the issue, and insisted on the common political cause that united the communities.

In 1930s Penang, anti-colonial sentiment was far more muted than in Burma. Radicalism took the form of diasporic nationalism, but with regard to the future of Malaya, arguments for self-determination had to be carefully staged, particularly in observing the growth of ethnocentric visions of nationalism elsewhere. Unlike Rangoon, immigrants had lived and often prospered on the island under a British flag a century before all of Burma fell under British occupation. Malays were a small proportion of cosmopolitan Penang; those at the top of the economic and political hierarchy were Jawi-Peranakan, themselves a relatively affluent hybrid Malay-Indian Muslim community.<sup>183</sup> In the 1930s, it was in the interest of many long-domiciled migrant communities, particularly the elite and middle class, to remain imperial citizens while also arguing for a greater share in government. This is not to argue that Asians in colonial Penang were any less politically conscious or active than their nationalist counterparts in Rangoon, but that politics took a different form. Political claims were fought for using the language of rights and responsibilities of citizenship within a context of imperial belonging and cosmopolitanism, with the aim of bringing the logic of free-trade imperialism to a fully democratic

<sup>181</sup> Ibid. <sup>182</sup> ‘Communalism’, *New Burma*, 14 October 1934, p. 9.

<sup>183</sup> For a masterful study on the shifting communal allegiances of the Jawi-Peranakan community in pre- and post-war Penang, see Helen Fujimoto, *The South Indian-Muslim Community and the Evolution of the Jawi Peranakan in Penang up to 1948* (Tokyo: Gaikokugo Daigaku, 1989).

conclusion.<sup>184</sup> Penangites saw themselves as sharing a common struggle against the colour bar, making claims for all ‘Malayans’, rather than just one ethnic group, to gradually take over administration in the country.<sup>185</sup>

Continuing the left-leaning editorial line of the *Straits Echo*, Sara promoted the cosmopolitan ideals of empire in order to make political claims for more Asian representation and political reform. The possibility of Asians having a greater share in the management of their own affairs, he argued, was ‘the only policy that would be consistent with the aim of the British Empire’.<sup>186</sup> Whereas Burmese journalists looked to India as a model for its anti-colonial nationalism, Sara pointed to the crown colony of Ceylon as a model for a multi-ethnic democratic society:

The excuse that this country is very backward and therefore not fit or ready for any advance on the present system of benevolent bureaucratic government is a very hollow one and one that does not bear close inspection. Equally hollow is the excuse that the cosmopolitan character of the Malayan population does not easily lend itself to political progress. Ceylon is very little, if at all, less cosmopolitan as regards its population, yet has enjoyed universal suffrage now for eight years and . . . progressed sufficiently to be fit for the Cabinet System of Government – the most advanced of all modern forms of democratic government.<sup>187</sup>

Inspired by the newspaper’s editorial stance, the *Straits Echo*’s most dedicated readers became the vanguard of a cosmopolitan ideal of Malaya. A group of young Straits-Chinese who contributed frequently to the paper’s letters section proposed the formation of a ‘Straits Echo League’, whose object was ‘to foster harmonious relations among the various races of Malaya’ and ‘to be the organ instrumental in letting the people have a voice in the administration of the country’.<sup>188</sup> Rather than viewing themselves as separate from the mainland, these Penangites increasingly felt a sense of attachment to the Peninsula, bolstered, perhaps, by economic connections to North Malaya’s tin and rubber plantations. With foresight, perhaps, of the separation to come in the post-war era, one writer wrote of Singapore politicians that they gloried in their separate identity, and would like nothing less than to be known as ‘Singapore and Malaya’; Penang, on the other hand, was ‘glad to be part of Malaya and as the northern gateway into Malaya, fulfil an important part in the economic life of the country’.<sup>189</sup>

<sup>184</sup> On the tensions and possibilities inherent in imperial citizenship, see Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, and History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 171–90.

<sup>185</sup> See Su Lin Lewis, ‘Rotary International’s “Acid Test”: Multi-Ethnic Associational Life in 1930s Southeast Asia’. *Journal of Global History* 7:2 (2012): 319–23.

<sup>186</sup> *Straits Echo*, 4 January 1939, p. 5.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> *Straits Echo*, 18 November 1937, p. 13.

<sup>189</sup> *Straits Echo*, 16 April 1936, p. 13.

A regular feature on 'Malayan Men and Matters' invited Malays to take pride of place: 'The Malays have been slow to wake up to the changes in their country, but there are clear indications today that the higher-born amongst them wish to take their place in the scheme of things as it is today and who can deny them that. It is their country: their land for generations; their home; their all.'<sup>190</sup> The patronising tone towards the quiet, docile, and 'good-natured' Malay was offensive to a new generation of increasingly vocal Malays, and the recognition that the country belonged to them was one that many Malays began to put forth, in publications such as Penang's *Saudara*.<sup>191</sup> Penang's English-educated Asian community, meanwhile, tended to see Malaya as belonging to all those born in the country. As islands populated largely by long-established immigrants, with a local history of trade, intermarriage, cross-cultural interaction and openness to the world, both Penang and Singapore were the vanguard of the idea of Malaya for 'Malayans' rather than 'Malays'.<sup>192</sup> These rifts in perspective on new ideas of the nation played out only in the aftermath of the Second World War, as colonial powers prepared to leave, and nations became defined increasingly by homogenous conceptions of race and religion.

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Urbanites in Southeast Asian port-cities began developing their own print cultures from the late nineteenth century, and encountered new ideas, voices, and opportunities to exert their own opinions through the local press. They were also given a momentous degree of choice on what they were able to read. For the polyglots among them, the diversity of print-languages and publications enabled them to belong to different kinds of communities. The literary, intellectual, and imaginary world of Asian urbanites was expanding, and was growing more open, fluid, and inter-linked than ever before. New connections, as well as new tensions, emerged through print-literature, newswires, a flood of foreign publications and serials, and a mingling of both high and low literary cultures. The global republic of letters that emerged from the end of the nineteenth century was in flux and multi-centred, creating new reading publics in which Asians sought to define themselves in new ways: as individuals, as citizens, as men, as women, as humanists, and as patriots with different visions for the nation. The press, like associational culture, allowed

<sup>190</sup> *Straits Echo*, 5 March 1936, p. 5.

<sup>191</sup> See Roff, *Origins of Malay Nationalism*, pp. 212–21.

<sup>192</sup> For a discussion on how these tensions played out after the war, see Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Wars: The End of Britain's Asian Empire* (London; New York: Allen Lane, 2007), p. 131.

individual and collective identities to be articulated within a shared public space, and provided a venue for modern ideas of citizenship, society, and individualism to be discussed. In looking to the future, both cultures of association and cultures of print saw a new generation inheriting this legacy.



## 5 Playgrounds, Classrooms, and Politics

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In July 1920, an official circular went to all the district commissioners in Burma from the colonial office, outlining in numerous pages the ideology of ‘bolshevism’, its effects, its system of government, and its impact on India. The only effective method of fighting Bolshevism would come from the educated classes and those with good social standing. ‘If they make up their minds to improve the condition of the lower classes, and to act with generosity and kindness towards their tenants, employees, servants, and dependents, they can accomplish in ten years more than Government can do in a century.’<sup>1</sup> By the 1920s and 1930s, it was growing increasingly important to colonial authorities that more had to be done in the area of education to counter problems of social inequality that could lead to socialist revolution. By then, however, it was almost a question of ‘too little, too late’. Colonial administrations never instituted a policy of mass education in Southeast Asia apart from in the Philippines. From the late nineteenth century, states had increasingly begun to provide grants to educational initiatives, but much of the impetus to widen access to education came from a nascent civil society, from early missionaries to the first generation of educated Asian professionals, including affluent migrant communities who saw the expansion of education as the key to social progress.

Historians have long seen modern education as the bridge between colonialism and nationalism, providing one of the ‘channels for change’ for the emergence of an Asian nationalist intelligentsia.<sup>2</sup> Colonial education policy sought to create a small, educated elite to aid in administration, yet the introduction of new political ideas enabled this group to tackle the tenets of colonialism in the coloniser’s language and promote a collective vision of the nation. C.A. Bayly has argued that the print culture of nationalism was ‘spread as much through the schoolroom as

<sup>1</sup> ‘Miscellaneous’, Office of the District Commissioner Tharrawaddy, 1920, 4M-6/701, Myanmar National Archives, Yangon.

<sup>2</sup> David J. Steinberg et al., *In Search of Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1987), pp. 261–68.

through the newspaper'.<sup>3</sup> Yet the 'nation' was only one mode of belonging among many. Just as print culture gave rise to a wide and interconnected framework for understanding the world, education also widened the scope of the imagination. To borrow Anderson's phrase, education itself, the exposure to new ideas, and new educational environments allowed students to see themselves within a 'spectrum of comparisons'; cities were units of comparison that were as important as nations for these historical actors.<sup>4</sup> As with the press, multiple networks of patronage existed that enabled actual and imaginary educational experiences to cross boundaries, giving rise to communal, cosmopolitan, religious, diasporic, professional, and global modes of belonging that overlapped with each other, existing in tandem with nationalism.

From the late nineteenth century, a Western education was the ticket to lucrative employment in colonial society as well as in 'semi-colonial' Siam. Even today, the idea persists that Asians who are sent to English-language schools or educated abroad are 'Westernised'. Yet to label them within such a binary category is to rob them of agency, to flatten the complexity of educational experience, and to ignore the tensions around cultural authenticity and education that emerged in both the private and public sphere. Parents often faced difficult choices when considering sending their children to English-language schools. Public debates reflected a widespread concern that children would lose their heritage; these occurred in colonial Rangoon and Penang, as well as Siam. Chinese and other migrant families who chose to send their children to Thai schools in Bangkok had similar concerns about the cost of assimilation.<sup>5</sup> As a result, many sought to ensure that the young retained their cultural and linguistic heritage through new initiatives in extra-curricular language and bilingual education, or via modernised forms of religious education.

I want to widen the scope of our understanding of education in the colonial period by focusing on the role of Asians in shaping new educational initiatives. From the late nineteenth century, an older generation of Asian teachers, barristers, aristocrats, scholars, literati, and religious leaders, educated in Asia as well as in the West, helped inspire and train a younger generation to critique and transform their societies in the 1920s and 1930s. Clusters of students schooling in London, Edinburgh, Paris, Calcutta, Cairo, Hong Kong, and Tokyo returned to help transform state educational systems from within, establish and reform modern religious

<sup>3</sup> Bayly, *Birth of the Modern World*, p. 68.      <sup>4</sup> Anderson, *Spectre of Comparisons*.

<sup>5</sup> Though her focus is on the 1950s and onwards, these concerns are best captured in Botan's semi-autobiographical novel about a Sino-Thai family in Bangkok in Botan, *Letters from Thailand* (Bangkok: Silkworm, 2002).

and private educational institutions, and contribute to educational debates in the local press. Colonial categories tended to divide ‘modern’ colonial education and ‘traditional’ religious and vernacular education, but religious reformers incorporated ‘modern’ subjects into the curricula of religious schools, particularly in urban areas. These initiatives emerged within a plurality of competing educational models within the colonial-era port-city. State scholarships as well as private patronage networks allowed a handful of Asians who could not otherwise afford it to go abroad, and return to contribute to political and intellectual life in burgeoning nations. Through a spectre of comparisons, Asians with the opportunity to travel and study abroad saw the benefits of a modern education and also the challenges of preserving a sense of cultural authenticity. They fought to ensure that new avenues for social mobility and diverse educational initiatives were open to the next generation.

The experiences of Asian urbanites in Penang, Bangkok, and Rangoon tell us something about the pluralist and transnational educational environments that emerged in this period, moving us out of the colonial-nationalist teleological framework. We begin by looking at the diversity of private and public educational initiatives that emerged from the nineteenth century, focusing in particular on English-medium schools as a forum for cross-cultural sociability, with Penang as a case study of the possibilities of a cosmopolitan childhood. We track the web of educational pilgrimages not only to London, the British colonial metropole, and Paris, a hub of interactions between Asian and international students in the 1920s, but also to Asian cities elsewhere in the region. Finally, we examine the beginnings of higher education in Asia, seeking to undo the teleology of nationalist historiography by situating ‘proto-nationalist’ youth within the cosmopolitan time and place in which they studied. We explore the role of radical intellectuals and everyday student life at Rangoon University. Student magazines – such as the *Penang Free School Magazine*, *Young Muslim Union Magazine*, *Anglo-Chinese Girls School Magazine*, *the Rangoon College Magazine*, and *Oway* – move us out of the colonial archive to capture the voices of the young. From student essays as well as memoirs, oral histories, and private archives, it is clear that modern youth engaged thoroughly in debates in the public sphere, and that ‘youth’ itself had a powerful purchase on the political imagination of the day.

### **Educating Children in Plural Societies**

Up until the 1860s, education in Asia was characterised by a laissez-faire attitude on behalf of both indigenous and colonial states, leaving

educational provision largely in the hands of monastic schools, madrasas, and Christian mission schools.<sup>6</sup> Long before state intervention in education, monastic schools in Burma and Siam had provided a free education to Buddhist boys, resulting in some of the highest literacy rates in Asia. Several British censuses from the late nineteenth century noted the discrepancy between Indian and Burmese figures (even as late as 1931, the census noted that the proportion of literates in Burma was three times higher than any other province in India).<sup>7</sup> Scholars have highlighted the way religious education adapted modern educational forms in the colonial period.<sup>8</sup> Less work has been done on mission and English-medium schools, even though these schools have been acknowledged as one of the only available educational arenas for cross-cultural interaction across ethnic lines.<sup>9</sup> These schools no doubt created class divisions between Western-educated students and those educated in vernacular languages, and between 'town' and 'country'. Yet they also created a cosmopolitan educational experience shared between multiple ethnic groups, and opened up a new world of interaction with Western concepts and ideas through foreign languages. Such schools were becoming increasingly affordable to a rising urban middle class, and though there were many who could not afford such an education, a number of mission schools were initially directed towards the most underprivileged sections of society, often beginning as orphanages. Schools such as the Penang Free School and Anglo-Chinese school in Penang gave government-funded scholarships or stipends to low-income families by the 1920s and 1930s.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of the history of education in Burma, see U Kaung, 'A Survey of the History of Education in Burma Before the British Conquest and After', *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 46:2 (1963), and for Thailand see David K. Wyatt, *The Politics of Reform in Thailand: Education in the Reign of King Chulalongkorn* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969). For the most comprehensive overview of the historical encounter between South/Southeast Asian and Western educational models, see J.S. Furnivall, *Educational Progress in Southeast Asia* (New York: International Secretariat Institute of Pacific Relations, 1943).

<sup>7</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 28–29; J.J. Bannison, *Census of India, 1931* (Rangoon: Government Printing Press, 1933), p. 160.

<sup>8</sup> See recent analyses on monastic education in Burma and Siam: K. Dhammasami, 'Between Idealism and Pragmatism: A Study of Monastic Education in Burma and Thailand from the Seventeenth Century to the Present' (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Turner, *Saving Buddhism*; and in Malaya, see Khoo Kay Kim, *Malay Society: Transformation and Democratisation* (Subang Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 2001), pp. 125–56.

<sup>9</sup> This point is made in Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 267. Mission schools are discussed in Philip Fook Seng Loh, *Seeds of Separatism: Educational Policy in Malaya, 1874–1940* (Kuala Lumpur; New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 51–67.

Like many of the world's port-cities, Penang, Rangoon, and Bangkok, like Singapore, had long histories of missionary education. As in other parts of the British Empire, education, particularly English education, was the key means by which Asians in the colonial port-city could move above their class to join rich commercial firms or enter government service. In the Straits and Bangkok, mission schools appealed to mixed-heritage and commercial families, such as Eurasians, Straits-Chinese, Jawi Peranakan, the *jao su* in Bangkok, and other migrant communities. Traders who had married local women sought to provide their children with the Western-language education that would allow them to succeed within colonial-era port-cultures. Burmese Christians in Arakan and Tenasserim, the first areas of Burma to be colonised by the British, were privy to English educational early on. The Arakanese intellectual U May Oung – one of the founders of the Burma Research Society – rose quickly within Rangoon public life. In Penang, English schools initially had trouble attracting Malays. Many did not live in the urban areas where the schools were located; those that did were often too poor to send their children to such schools, and those that did not were reluctant to send their children to face the perils of urban life.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, some urban Burmese and Thais were increasingly attracted to the education offered by mission schools as early as the late nineteenth century. King Chulalongkorn's decree of religious toleration in 1878, as well as the palace's intellectual engagement with missionaries, prompted more Thais to send their children to schools where they could learn French and English in addition to Thai.<sup>11</sup> Despite the popularity of such schools, missionaries were not particularly successful in gaining Christian converts among Burmese, Thai, or Chinese Buddhists, as the flexibility of the religion saw no contradiction in pragmatic learning within a Christian environment while maintaining a Buddhist faith. Missionaries also had a difficult task in convincing such parents about the merits of girls' education, particularly by foreigners.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the difficulty of conversion, missionaries carried on with their task as educators. They were part of a vast transnational network, composed of particular geographies of educators working from Europe and America to Africa and China. The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools was rapidly becoming one of the largest teaching orders in the world, training both religious and lay teachers and acting as a global

<sup>10</sup> Roff, *Origins of Malay Nationalism*, p. 113.

<sup>11</sup> John Audric, *Siam: Kingdom of the Saffron Robe* (London: Robert Hale, 1969), p. 154.

<sup>12</sup> John Ebenezer Marks, *Forty Years in Burma* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1917), pp. 132–33.

pioneer for universal vernacular education.<sup>13</sup> These Catholic Brothers founded the St. Xaviers institution in Penang in 1825. Bishop Bigandet, of the same order, established the St Paul's High School in Rangoon in 1861, attracting Burmese, Anglo-Burmese, and Anglo-Indian elites. A French Catholic parish priest, Father Emile Colombet, started a small school for orphans, which opened in 1885 to thirty-three students of various nationalities; Assumption College grew to become the most prestigious school in Bangkok by the early twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> The Wattana Wittaya Academy (est. 1874) was Bangkok's first boarding school for girls, run by Protestant missionaries and located in the royal palace to teach girls reading, writing, sewing, and biblical studies. Roman Catholic nuns established the first public institutions for women's education in the region, with the founding of St Joseph's Convent schools in Rangoon in 1840 and Bangkok in 1907. Three Belgian nuns from the Sisters of the Holy Infant Jesus order established the Convent Light School in Penang in 1852.

North American missionaries were also instrumental: American Presbyterians founded Thailand's oldest school, Bangkok Christian College, in 1852; the Methodist English High School was founded in 1882 in Rangoon; and Canadian Methodists established the Anglo-Chinese School in Penang in 1891, as well as a girls' school the following year. One of the most successful initiatives was Rangoon's St John's College (est. 1864), launched by John Ebenezer Marks of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. Marks was a priest 'of Jewish extraction' who began his extraordinary career as an unpaid pupil teacher in a rough neighbourhood of East London, working with a group of young men called the 'Hackney Bulldogs'.<sup>15</sup> The hospitality of St John's College played a major role in the social life of mid-nineteenth-century Rangoon. While King Chulalongkorn gave patronage to Assumption, King Mindon supported both Bigandet and Marks, using them as interlocutors with the British and French governments.<sup>16</sup>

The Penang Free School is the oldest non-sectarian English-language school in Southeast Asia. In 1819, R.S. Hutchings, an Anglican priest from Devonshire, assembled leading members of different communities to address the lack of educational facilities on the island. Drawing on the

<sup>13</sup> See Edward A. Fitzpatrick, *La Salle, Patron of All Teachers* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1951); W.J. Battersby, *De La Salle: A Pioneer of Modern Education* (London: Longmans, 1949).

<sup>14</sup> See A. Monthienvichienchai, 'Thai Nationalism and the Catholic Experience 1909–47' (London: University of London School of Oriental and African Studies, 2009), pp. 113–27.

<sup>15</sup> W.C.B. Purser, 'Introduction', in Marks, *Forty Years in Burma*, pp. 1–2. <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

model of the Calcutta Free School (est. 1789), Chinese, Tamil, Chulia, and Eurasian merchants agreed to build their own 'free school' – 'free' in the sense that it was open to pupils of any race, colour, or creed. Though educators were initially English missionaries, the 1816 school's charter stipulated that should Malay or Hindu parents wish to educate their children in their native tongue rather than English, teachers of those languages should be found.<sup>17</sup> Public interest in the school was exhibited in its ability to raise private funds: an appeal to the public brought \$5,960 from leading members of different communities. Affiliated girls' and Malay schools were also opened temporarily, the first of their kind. The production of the school's charter, reflecting the demands of local communities and the financial contributions from the public, constituted an early example of civil society initiative, pioneered by the community rather than the state or the church.

Penang's Free School and mission schools initially fulfilled the demands for a small cadre of Western-educated Asians. Colonial and Siamese rulers' attention to education grew after the 1860s, when the acceleration in maritime commerce prompted a greater demand for clerks and administrators.<sup>18</sup> The civil service competed with private commercial enterprises to employ literate, bilingual Asians who could read, write, think, and translate. The colonial state relied on educated, indigenous elites to maintain social stability by acting as interlocutors with local populations. Furnivall, an educator himself, observed dryly that, 'government learned that the mission school produced the most useful type of public servant, and the people learned that the mission school opened a path to well paid jobs'.<sup>19</sup> As in India, government was wary about maintaining religious neutrality.<sup>20</sup> By the 1860s, policy ideas from colonial India began to filter to Burma and Malaya, particularly the provision of government grants-in-aid to indigenous educational initiatives.<sup>21</sup> The government of Burma aided lay schools, which were less attractive than religious schools for the bulk of the population (in 1869, there were 5,069 pupils in 340 lay schools, while 42,773 pupils attended 3,428 monastic schools).<sup>22</sup> Despite the monks' interest in introducing English classes, the plan to support mass vernacular education through traditional religious schools never came to fruition as lay schools were deemed to be

<sup>17</sup> D.D. Chelliah, *A History of the Educational Policy of the Straits Settlements with Recommendations for a New System based on Vernaculars* (Kuala Lumpur: The Government Press, 1947).

<sup>18</sup> Furnivall, *Educational Progress in Southeast Asia*, p. 24. <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>20</sup> Clive Whitehead, *Colonial Educators: The British Indian and Colonial Education Service 1858–1983* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5. <sup>22</sup> Kaung, 'A Survey of the History of Education in Burma', p. 34.

more efficient.<sup>23</sup> One of the positive and largely neglected outcomes of the policy, however, was that it opened up new possibilities for the education of girls, who formed about half of their total number of pupils.<sup>24</sup>

In Malaya, as in the Dutch East Indies, educational policies were arranged so as not to disturb the traditional divide between the ruling elite and the rural masses.<sup>25</sup> From 1870, state education was provided for Malays, but not the 'transient' immigrant populations of immigrants and Chinese. This provision constituted the minimum standard of vernacular education, maintaining an acquiescent agricultural base of slightly better educated Malay farmers and fishermen. There was a small window of opportunity where educational policy might have taken a more progressive, inclusive direction. R.J. Wilkinson, then Inspector of Schools, proposed an educational policy using textbooks promoting Malay history and culture, aimed also at migrant communities recognised as a permanent part of the Malayan landscape.<sup>26</sup> The government abandoned the scheme and Chinese and Indian communities were left to educate their own children through private initiatives and mission schools, if they could afford them. By the early twentieth century, when more Malays and Chinese schools demanded English education, colonial officials were reluctant to expand it due to the high costs involved and fears of social disruption caused by a large number of English-educated unemployed youths.<sup>27</sup> Elite English education was provided through the Malay College in Kuala Kangsar, established in 1905 to educate well-born Malays to fill a small number of political and administrative positions. This resulted in the strengthening of traditional structures of rule rather than contributing to their breakdown, and entrenched the racial and elite character of the civil service, a legacy that would endure in the post-colonial era.<sup>28</sup>

In Bangkok, demands rose for young men fluent in English, French, or German to work in Western as well as Chinese commercial firms, banks, and shipping agencies. After returning from visits to Singapore, Java, and

<sup>23</sup> Furnivall, *Educational Progress in Southeast Asia*, p. 28.

<sup>24</sup> Kaung, 'A Survey of the History of Education in Burma', p. 34.

<sup>25</sup> Thant, *Making of Modern Burma*, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, p. 237. See also Roff, *Origins of Malay Nationalism*, pp. 130–35.

<sup>27</sup> Tan Liok Ee, *The Politics of Chinese Education in Malaya, 1945–1961* (Kuala Lumpur; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 19.

<sup>28</sup> See Khasnor Johan, *The Emergence of the Modern Malay Administrative Elite* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984); Rex Stevenson, *Cultivators and Administrators: British Educational Policy Towards the Malays, 1875–1906* (Kuala Lumpur; London: Oxford University Press, 1975); Roff, *Origins of Malay Nationalism*, pp. 100–113; Loh, *Seeds of Separatism*.



India, King Chulalongkorn witnessed broad-based, government-sponsored education and formed his own modernising policies for Siam. A royal decree in 1875 introduced modern educational concepts, such as textbooks, to formalise instruction in Thai. The intention was to 'compete with and counteract' the growing popularity of the mission schools among the elite, yet the programme was unsupported by conservative elements within the government.<sup>29</sup> The king collaborated with the American missionary Dr Samuel McFarland to found the Suanan school in 1878. Even though it initially aimed to subsidise education for the aristocracy, the school was more attractive to affluent Thonburi Chinese. The architects of educational reform – King Chulalongkorn, Prince Damrong, and Prince Wan, all privately educated by Thai and Western tutors – initially struggled politically with an older generation of statesmen and pursued modernising educational initiatives on their own.<sup>30</sup> Prince Damrong founded the Suankulab School in 1881, which was strongly influenced by Western-type schools.<sup>31</sup> Religious education was reformed as the primary means for state education, which was run from Bangkok. Prince Wan Wachirayan established the Mahamakut Royal College as the headquarters of Buddhist education in Siam, devising new textbooks in Central Thai script to standardise the teaching of moral as well as 'other useful subjects' ('secular' was a contested word), which provoked strenuous objections from Buddhist monks in the provinces.<sup>32</sup>

Bangkok, Penang, and Rangoon became centres of experimentation for private initiatives by Asians to educate their children on their own terms and compete with mission schools. Just as Siam's modernising princes experimented with new educational reforms that combined secular and religious education, educated Burmese employed new strategies to ensure that Buddhist principles were not lost. In 1897, a prominent Western-educated Burmese couple opened the Empress Victoria Buddhist Boys' and Girls' Schools, which taught the government's Eurocentric curriculum while employing a Burmese layman to give Buddhist religious instruction every morning.<sup>33</sup> Chinese, Hindus, Muslims, and even the Theosophists set up schools in Rangoon.<sup>34</sup>

Left to their own devices, Chinese schools cropped up throughout Southeast Asia. Increasingly from the 1920s they became a source of

<sup>29</sup> David Wyatt, 'Education and the Modernization of Thai Society', in *Change and Persistence in Thai Society, Essays in Honour of Lauriston Sharp*, ed. G. William Skinner et al. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 134.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136. <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Dhammasami, 'Between Idealism and Pragmatism', p. 244.

<sup>33</sup> Turner, *Saving Buddhism*, p. 67. <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

concern to the colonial as well as the Siamese state, both fearing that Chinese boys and girls were being introduced to radical new views and unable to assimilate into broader society.<sup>35</sup> Most early Chinese schools were established as private enterprises of individual teachers or through the *kongsis*. Without government support, they were usually quite poor, though they sought to remain fiercely independent of any foreign system of instruction and were often seen as hotbeds of radicalism.<sup>36</sup> Chung Hwa School, established in Penang in 1904, was the first 'new-style' Chinese school in Malaya, abandoning old teaching texts and Confucian classics in favour of special textbooks and an expanded curriculum that included history, geography, science, music, and education.<sup>37</sup> Penang's Chung Ling High School was established in 1923 with funds raised by members of the Penang Philomathic Union. David Chen, principal of Chung Ling, introduced a novel system of bilingual education that taught in Chinese at primary school level, introduced English in middle school, and taught English at the senior levels, enabling its students to integrate into Penang society where the lingua franca was English.<sup>38</sup> Schools revived their connections to China in the late 1930s; fleeing the Japanese invasion, Chinese poets, intellectuals, and writers from provinces throughout China came to teach in Penang, exposing students to regional variations of Mandarin.<sup>39</sup> Nanyang educational institutions drew together Chinese literati of diverse backgrounds for the first time, instilling a diasporic consciousness.

In colonial Rangoon and Penang, Indian and Jewish migrants established their own schools, and in some cases opened them up to other communities. While many Burmese-Muslims sent their children to be educated alongside Burmese boys, Rangoon's Muslims also built *madrasa* schools alongside their mosques.<sup>40</sup> Some attracted pupils of all nationalities, most likely those living in the schools' vicinity. Rangoon's Madrasa Mohammedia Randeira High School (established by the Soorti

<sup>35</sup> John Leroy Christian, *Modern Burma, a Survey of Political and Economic Development* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1942), 270. For an overview of Chinese education in Southeast Asia, see Victor Purcell, *The Chinese in Southeast Asia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), on Burma see p. 72; on Malaya see pp. 270–81; on Siam see pp. 141–47.

<sup>36</sup> Lee Ah Chai, 'Policies and Politics in Chinese Schools in the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States 1786–1941', MA dissertation, University of Malaya, 1957; p. 2; Purcell, p. 72.

<sup>37</sup> Tan, *The politics of Chinese education in Malaya, 1945–1961*, p. 14.

<sup>38</sup> Interview transcript. Lee Koon Choy, Singapore National Archives Oral History collection. B000022/72. Also see Lee Khoo Choy, *On the Beat to the Hustings: An Autobiography* (Singapore: Times Books, 1988).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> *The Burma Moslem Society* (Rangoon, 1909), India Office Library IOL.1947.b.638.

community in 1867) was open to all pupils, including non-Muslims, and had government support.<sup>41</sup> Hajee Mahmood Esoof Bhyameah established the Bhyameah Vernacular Free School and the Fatima Bibi Bhyameah Girl's School in his parents' memory (his father was educated in Urdu, Persian, and Gujurati in Bengal before arriving in Rangoon, where he attended St Paul's High School).<sup>42</sup> By 1925, the former provided education to 500 boys of all nationalities, housing a boarding hostel for Muslim students, while Esoof sat on various Muslim educational committees and the Rangoon Educational Board.<sup>43</sup> Baghdadi Jews, who followed imperial trading networks, also sought to retain their diasporic traditions. The 2,500-strong Jewish community in Rangoon established the Jewish English School, which taught Hebrew and other religious subjects.<sup>44</sup> Affluent Baghdadi Jews sent their children to the Methodist English School in Rangoon, along with Russian, French, Japanese, and Chinese classmates. While viewing English education as an opportunity for social advancement, parents also feared the loss of their Baghdadi Arabic, Hebrew, and Jewish heritage, anxious that their English-educated children were no longer able to follow Hebrew ceremonies at Passover.<sup>45</sup>

Penang outpaced Singapore as an important centre for reformist Islamic education. By 1916, there were 6,218 students registered in Malay schools in Penang (including 672 girls), an impressive figure particularly compared to 1,322 students registered in Singapore.<sup>46</sup> The establishment of the Almashoor Islamic School in 1916 by a Hadramaut trader accounts for some of these figures. The school played a major role in the *Kaum Muda* ('new party') movement, distinguished from the older *Kaum Tua* ('old party') through its appropriation of reformist ideas from the Middle East.<sup>47</sup> With the arrival of the worldly and entrepreneurial *shariah* lawyer Syed Shaykh Al-Hadi as headmaster in 1920, the school implemented a series of reforms that reconciled the institution with aspects of Western-style education.<sup>48</sup> Syed Shaykh campaigned for vernacular schools to provide 'good worldly teaching', with

<sup>41</sup> Yegar, *Muslims of Burma*, p. 43.

<sup>42</sup> *Who's Who in Burma* (Calcutta; Rangoon: Indo-Burma Publishing Agency, 1925), p. 21.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Ruth Fredman Cernea, *Almost Englishmen: Baghdad Jews in British Burma* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2007), p. 44.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>46</sup> Abu Bakar Hamzah, *Al-Imam: Its Role in Malay Society 1906–1908* (Kuala Lumpur: Media Cendakawan, 1991), p. 67.

<sup>47</sup> See Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, pp. 56–90.

<sup>48</sup> Omar Farouk, 'The Arabs in Penang', *Malaysia in History* 21:2 (1978): 1–16, at 7–8. For more on Sheikh Al-Hadi's background and contribution to the world of Malay letters, see Roff, *Origins of Malay Nationalism*, pp. 62–63, 81–83; Hamzah, *Al-Imam: Its Role in Malay Society 1906–1908*, pp. 137–42.

Islam as one of the subjects, even though it would deprive the village-level *pondok* teachers of an income as the sole source of religious instruction.<sup>49</sup> Almashoor taught English, Islamic Jurisprudence, Grammar, Quranic interpretation, and the history of Sunni Islam and its four schools of law (Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki, and Shafi'i). After a few years, Syed Shaykh left to pursue his career as a writer and publisher and Sheikh Abbas Bara Rafie of Hyderabad arrived to assume headmastership. Syed Shaykh had been disappointed with the lack of progress of the school, and sought to establish an Anglo-Malay school where English was the language of instruction.<sup>50</sup> Failing to garner sufficient initial interest from the Malay community, the plan was abandoned after Syed Shaykh criticised Malay parents for failing to give their children suitable educational opportunities.<sup>51</sup> Nonetheless, Almashoor's reputation had begun to attract Muslim students from all over peninsular Malaya, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Brunei, the Philippines, Indonesia, and India.<sup>52</sup> Almashoor also served as a preparatory school for higher education in the Middle East, including Cairo's Al-Azhar University.<sup>53</sup>

Penang played an increasingly important role as a prominent *regional* educational centre for Chinese, Islamic, as well as English education. By the 1920s, the long-established Penang Free School and St Xaviers institutions gave the island a reputation for outstanding English education, drawing students from around the region, particularly from Siam. These also acted as 'feeder schools' for higher educational establishments in other colonial port-cities, particularly Raffles College in Singapore and Hong Kong University. Penang hosted multiple centres for the Cambridge Local Examinations, which created a new standard of social achievement that cut through the global colour bar.<sup>54</sup> The *Straits Echo* reprinted the comments of one Cambridge examiner after the empire-wide results of the Cambridge Local Examinations were culled:

<sup>49</sup> Syed Mohamed Alwi al-Hady, 'Syed Shaykh: Through the Prism of a Child's Eyes and the Al-Hady Clan', in *The Real Cry of Syed Shaykh al-Hady*, ed. Alijah Gordon (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 1999), p. 92.

<sup>50</sup> Linda Tan, 'Syed Shaykh: His Life and Times', in *The Real Cry of Syed Shaykh al-Hady*, ed. Alijah Gordon (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysia Sociological Research Institute, 1999), p. 152.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Farouq, 'The Arabs in Penang', p. 8; Michael Francis Laffan, *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia: The Umma Below the Winds* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), p. 136.

<sup>53</sup> Moh Sarim Mustajab, 'Shaykh 'Abd Allah Maghribi: Teacher and Kaum Muda Activist', in *The Real Cry of Syed Shaykh al-Hadi*, ed. Alijah Gordon (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 1999), p. 250.

<sup>54</sup> Sandra Raban, *Examining the World: A History of the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)

Good papers came from West Africa . . . and delightful papers from Mauritius in broken English that was half French. But the gem of the collection was a batch of twenty supremely beautiful papers from Penang . . . every one of them was a work of art, a joy to the eye and a rest to the brain . . . therefore let us teach our children to write clean sense in simple English words, or let us charter a large ship and invite the entire population of Penang to get aboard of her, come to this island of superstition, slaughter and lies, and undertake the gigantic task of our education.<sup>55</sup>

This was a unique case of the colony, for once, being asked to educate the metropole, if only metaphorically. It was also a testament to the quality of English spoken by the Straits-Chinese, who spoke English at home.<sup>56</sup> Increasingly in the interwar era, the use of English as a mother tongue was becoming a source of anxiety to the Straits-Chinese, who were fearful of losing their Chinese roots.

Grades and exams provided a new standard of achievement that allowed students to reach a level of parity with those outside their social class, particularly with results printed in the local press. Some students received more attention than others, particularly those who came from affluent families able to afford private tutors. Many children in English schools found it difficult to keep up with those who had exposure to English education early on. Others, such as Anuman Rajadhon, were fortunate to have literate, multilingual parents who tutored them in the evening.<sup>57</sup> An oral history reveals that others had no such opportunities, but managed to surmount them. Teresa Hsu and her sister came from humble origins. Abandoned by her husband, Hsu's mother moved her daughters to Penang from Swatow and faced class divisions from the affluent and educated doctors and lawyers in her extended Chinese family.<sup>58</sup> Hsu and her sister attended Convent Light School. They lived and worked on church premises and studied at night, unable to attend social gatherings frequented by their classmates. Around 1927, both girls passed the Cambridge Senior examination with the highest marks of any student in the entire Straits Settlements, each receiving a \$120 award, a fortune to a family that rented a room for \$4 a month. As Hsu related, 'my mother saw the sky open, my relatives all came and gave us *ang pao* [red envelopes given to children by adults on special occasions].'<sup>59</sup> Good grades enabled the girls to achieve a new level of respectability and transcend class prejudices (Hsu was nonetheless harangued about marriage, eventually escaping Penang's

<sup>55</sup> *Straits Echo*, 23 March 1939. <sup>56</sup> *Straits Echo*, 3 February 1938.

<sup>57</sup> Anuman, *Looking Back: Book One*, p. 284.

<sup>58</sup> Hsu, Teresa. Interviewed by Annie Chua. 25 April 1994. Singapore National Archives Oral History Collection.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

stifling Victorian atmosphere to work in China as a journalist and later as a leading social worker in Singapore).<sup>60</sup>

Historians of Britain have linked the sporting culture of English public schools with the cultivation of imperial loyalty. Team sports such as football, hockey, rugby, and cricket were built on a belief that education involved building 'character' as well as intellect, and promoted loyalty to the school and empire.<sup>61</sup> Yet rather than blind attachment to empire, ideas of 'fair play', inherited from sport, also permeated the discourse of Penang's English-educated literati in the local press as a vocabulary to criticise Europeans in their treatment of Asians.<sup>62</sup> They also influenced a new generation of Asian women that ran meetings and asserted their opinions as members of sports clubs.<sup>63</sup> Athletics also built up camaraderie among youths of different ethnic and class backgrounds. Chinese, Sikh, Malay, European, and Eurasian women played hockey together, while students in the Young Muslim Union shared a cricket pitch with Penang's Indian Christian Association.<sup>64</sup> Sporting competition created shifting and fluid scales of solidarity between members of a school, a city, a state, and a nation. Students from Bangkok's Thammasat University, which saw 'travel as a means of education', went to Malaya on a football tour.<sup>65</sup> School competitions provided opportunities to travel outside one's city, encouraging greater awareness of the region.

English-medium and mission schools had long been places where children were forced to speak 'proper' English and endure punishments such as canings from Catholic priests and nuns. They would have been exposed to different accents and cultural views, as teachers in such schools came from a range of Asian as well as Western backgrounds, including English, Irish, Scottish, Welsh, Portuguese, American, French, Indian, Chinese, Eurasian, Karen, Burmese, and Thai. In colonial Penang and Rangoon, children sang 'God Save the King' and learned more about the history of English kings, Christianity, nursery rhymes, and the location of Piccadilly Circus than their own region and religions.<sup>66</sup> Yet they were also places where children could rebel, through what Michel de Certeau calls the 'practices of everyday life'.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> See J. A. Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School: The Emergence and Consolidation of an Educational Ideology* (London: F. Cass, 2000); Harold Perkin, 'Teaching the Nations How to Play: Sport and Society in the British Empire and Commonwealth', *International Journal of the History of Sport* 6:2 (1989): 145–55.

<sup>62</sup> *Straits Echo*, 1 June 1903, p. 1.

<sup>63</sup> Janice N. Brownfoot, 'Sisters under the Skin', p. 57.

<sup>64</sup> *Straits Echo*, 14 December 1937; *Young Muslim Union Silver Jubilee 1936*, p. 4.

<sup>65</sup> *Bangkok Times*, 14 April 1937.

<sup>66</sup> Nelly Lim. Interview by author. Penang. 26 October 2007.

<sup>67</sup> See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

Schoolrooms provided venues where children grew up as active agents, manipulating the ‘nets of “discipline” imposed from above.’<sup>68</sup> Under covers of Christian hymns like ‘Mater Dei’, Buddhist girls mischievously sang their own Burmese version, roughly translated as ‘Tie Aunty Mary with a rope’.<sup>69</sup> Khaing describes an incident at her convent where she and a classmate banged their desktops when their Irish teacher mispronounced the name of the anti-colonial leader of Burma’s 1930 rural rebellion, Saya San. No harsh words or canings followed, and as Khaing noted, ‘Perhaps it was a sign that times were changing.’<sup>70</sup> At Assumption College, Bangkok students were able to smooth-talk themselves out of fierce punishments for speaking Thai rather than English in school (during the school’s early years, before the medium of instruction switched to Thai).<sup>71</sup> On the playgrounds of Penang’s English schools, children continuously challenged authorities by refusing to speak proper English, resorting to hybrid slang, or, as one municipal commissioner put it, ‘the slovenly mixture of English, Malay, and Penang Chinese that one hears so frequently in the streets’.<sup>72</sup>

Teachers never faced a submissive audience of youths. Since only a few years of primary education were compulsory, and often not strictly enforced, those whose parents never pushed them to stay in school were there on their own volition. Encouragement, or lack thereof, in the schoolroom could make or break a child’s willingness to continue, given that the city offered other temptations and opportunities to make money. Harold de Castro’s oral history reveals that he left school as a teenager due to the lack of inspiration from school, though at one point, the popular school-reader poem ‘Casabianca’, by the British poet Felicia Dorothea Hemans, struck a chord:

I was thinking if I had the right teacher and the right encouragement I could have been a good pupil, I could have achieved something ... because you know ... I liked poetry you know, I don’t know why, it had no connection with my life, no connection to anything ... You know there are some of them, “the boy stood on the burning deck when all but he had fled, the flames that lit the battle rack shown round him all the dead” ... I said that’s beautiful, I can relate to that! But somehow it’s just that, just a flash ... and somehow it goes on.<sup>73</sup>

Many children stayed in school for only a few years and took what they could from the education they received. Teenage boys had to work to

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., pp. xiv–xv.

<sup>69</sup> Mi Mi Khaing, ‘Chapter 3: Secluded and Alien’ (unpublished autobiography, sent to the author by Khai Mong, 24 December 2009), p. 10.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 14. <sup>71</sup> Anuman, *Looking Back: Book One*, p. 325.

<sup>72</sup> *Straits Echo*, 22 October 1937, p. 5.

<sup>73</sup> Harold de Castro, oral history interview conducted by Michelle Low, 2 September 2005, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Disc 1.

support families. Girls were often married off, particularly those from more conservative backgrounds. The vast majority never got to travel or enter the echelons of higher education.

Schooling, however, took children out of their homes and opened up a new urban landscape to them at an early age. Children in Rangoon often skipped school to go the cinema, while young Penang writers took leave to stroll around the Botanical Gardens.<sup>74</sup> Many young male students were caught visiting the brothels of downtown Rangoon before the city's red-light district was shut down. In Bangkok's Sampheng, Phya Anuman wrote of looking for places to seek fun, throw stones, climb trees, and test the 'acceptable practices' of each locality.<sup>75</sup> Those frustrated and uninspired by academic life had little respect for teachers and found different sources of authority from powerful and often violent young men. Such young men, or 'protectors', in Sampheng 'behaved like gang leaders whom the smaller kids greatly admired and regarded as heroes to imitate, since by nature, youngsters always seek adventure and excitement'.<sup>76</sup> Anuman believes he was one of the few within his circle of childhood friends not to have entered into a life of crime. Others were enthralled with cosmopolitan popular culture in the city. P. Ramlee, the most beloved Malayan performer of the 1950s, was one of many 'reluctant schoolboys' who paid little attention in the classroom, and instead could often be caught humming to himself and choosing to follow visiting Philippine musicians around Penang instead.<sup>77</sup>

### Penang: Cosmopolitan Childhoods

Histories of 'youth', and particularly of young men, have had a particular purchase in Southeast Asian history as the source of emerging nationalist movements.<sup>78</sup> In comparison, histories of childhood have been largely neglected, particularly considering their growing popularity in European

<sup>74</sup> *Penang Free School Magazine* (August 1932), pp. 40–41. <sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>77</sup> James and Ahmad Sarji Harding, *P. Ramlee: The Bright Star* (Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk Publications, 2002), p. 6.

<sup>78</sup> On youth movements in Southeast Asia, see Aye Kyaw, *The Voice of Young Burma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1993); Leo Suryadinata, 'Indonesian Nationalism and the Pre-war Youth Movement: A Reexamination', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 9:1 (1978): 99–114; Keith Foulcher, 'Sumpah Pemuda: The Making and Meaning of a Symbol of Indonesian Nationhood', *Asian Studies Review* 24:3 (2000); in Vietnam, Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1992), and David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920–1945* (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1981).



history.<sup>79</sup> Anderson's work on Indonesian *pemuda* youth sees the militant ideology provided by Japanese soldiers during the occupation resonating with deep-seeded sentiments of heroism and fraternity in Javanese culture, leading to revolutionary nationalism.<sup>80</sup> Penang, however, encouraged a self-consciously cosmopolitan childhood, promoted by English schools that attracted a diversity of children from different ethnic and social groups. This included Malays, who, by the 1920s, were more willing to send their children to study in cities like Penang. Studying in a multi-ethnic environment where English was the lingua franca, Penang students, like their parents, were made aware of the challenges of maintaining their own cultural traditions while valuing the English language. Ideas of imperial cosmopolitanism were promoted through the boy scouts and in the speeches of colonial officials who saw in Malaya an example of communal harmony. Scouting helped bolster this idea, associated with a sense of wider internationalism, but also with the cultivation of allegiance to the empire.

Penang's young writers internalised internationalist ideas, seeing themselves as a cosmopolitan microcosm of a larger world. In 1921, a young Penang student captured the paradox of this collective fantasy. An essay described himself and his schoolmates on the way to a public lecture: 'There we went, with aspirations that we would appear as the "Great Five" of the League of Nations. I am sad to relate, we more resembled the five barbary apes behind the bars of the London Zoo than the "Great Five" of the League of Nations. Thus our graceful charming air vanished.'<sup>81</sup> This is a curious statement: one could read it as an endearing and self-deprecating anecdote about a ragged crew of aspirational and self-consciously multicultural Penang youth; or as a deeply perceptive and unsettling commentary on the persistent racial biases of empire and internationalism by Penang's children.

The prevalence of school magazines pointed to a new and expanding print world, uncharted by historians. This was a reading republic for the young, linking them as a collective force and providing a forum for debates about language, education, and authenticity, often well before

<sup>79</sup> For a foundational history of childhood in a European context, see Lloyd DeMause, *The History of Childhood* (London: Souvenir Press, 1976), and recently Colin Heywood, *A History of Childhood: Children and Childhood in the West from Medieval to Modern Times* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001). In world historical and South Asian contexts, see Peter N. Stearns, *Childhood in World History* (New York: Routledge, 2006), and Vyvyan Brendon, *Children of the Raj* (London: Phoenix, 2006).

<sup>80</sup> See Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Java in a Time of Revolution: Occupation and Resistance, 1944–1946* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972).

<sup>81</sup> 'The Consequences of a Visit to a Lecture', *Penang Free School Magazine* (December 1921), p. 10.

adults articulated them in the public sphere. The *Penang Free School Magazine* began in 1909 and exchanged publications with other student magazines: *The Pioneer*, *The Pelican*, *The Island*, *The Wulfrunian*, the *Penang Anglo-Chinese School Magazine*, the *Rafflesian*, the *Malay College Magazine*, and the *Edwardian*.<sup>82</sup> Mission schools in Rangoon also had pen-pal schemes that put them in touch with students in the region (Burmese historian and former Rangoon Diocesan student Dr Ohn Gaing wrote to a pen pal in Malaya up until the Japanese occupation).<sup>83</sup> The magazine *Boy's Life* circulated throughout the port-cities, featuring Rangoon, Penang, and Bangkok in its travel stories, giving young children a new awareness of how they were seen by Western children elsewhere.

These magazines show that Penang's children were certainly not passive recipients of colonial education. The writers among them were involved in the most important educational debates of the day. They fought for the issue of 'mother-tongue' education at an early age, seeing their plight in comparison with those of other communities. The Queen's Scholarship, which allowed students to further their studies in England, became a barometer of achievement between communities, tapping into broader discourses about cultural inferiority and progress being played out in the Malay press by nationalist Malay literati such as Sheikh al-Hadi, Za'ba and Haji Abdul Majid b. Zainuddin.<sup>84</sup> One Malay boy raised the question of Malay 'backwardness' compared to Chinese and Indian compatriots, and advocated the broad pursuit of knowledge, cultural authenticity, and industry as the key to improvement for both Malay men and women. In a 'Word to the Malays', 'Anak Wattan' wrote:

This is the Malay Peninsula and its native inhabitants are ourselves the Malays. How many of us have won a Queen's scholarship? None. Why? It is definitely sure that most of us have awakened and realised our backwardness . . . The key to all success is KNOWLEDGE. Therefore, seek knowledge, the higher the better! Get away with the old and absurd idea that religion forbids the pursuit of knowledge such as we are now doing. Hear what our Holy Prophet said, 'Verify the pursuit of knowledge is a bounden duty of every Muslim – man and woman.' Also 'Seek knowledge even unto China' . . . But of course, you need not be Westernised if you want to be successful. It does not mean that you can be successful only if you wear 'collar neck tie' instead of the 'baju and songkok' . . . It is by knowledge and

<sup>82</sup> *Penang Free School Magazine* (April 1925), p. 8.

<sup>83</sup> U Hla Shain and Dr. Ohn Gaing (Myanmar Historical Commission). Interview by author. Yangon. 27 July 2008.

<sup>84</sup> See for instance Sheik al-Hadi's call for Malays to look to Chinese achievements as *qutd.* in Hamzah, *Al-Imam: Its Role in Malay society 1906–1908*, p. 140. See also Haji Abdul Majid bin Zainuddin, *The Wandering Thoughts of Dying Man: The Life and Times of Haji Abdul Majid bin Zainuddin* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1978).

industry that one wins a Queen's scholarship. If others have been successful, come on, let us be successful too! Difficulties are meant to be overcome.<sup>85</sup>

'Seek Knowledge even unto China' was bound to be one of the most popular hadith in Penang, where Muslim and Chinese boys fraternised regularly (it was also one of Syed Shaykh al-Hady's favourites, one which he quoted in 1930, five years after the above article had been published).<sup>86</sup>

Meanwhile, comparing themselves to the Malays, Straits-Chinese students complained that they lacked basic education in their 'mother-tongue' languages, which was subsidised by the government only for Malays. In 1920, well before the Straits-Chinese councillor Lim Cheng Ean walked out of the Straits Settlements Legislature after failing to convince legislators to fund vernacular education for Tamil and Chinese schools in 1932, a student wrote in the *Penang Free School Magazine*:

The Malays rather more than a hundred in number, have generally passed through a Vernacular School, but the Chinese in most cases leave school unable to read and write their own language. The writer of these lines has grave doubts as to whether the policy followed is a sound one, but it is the policy of the Education Department of the Colony and in this respect the Free School is not entirely its own master.<sup>87</sup>

Urging the government to consider an experiment of teaching Chinese, the student looked to the Malay example where vernacular education *enhanced* English-language skills rather than detracted from them: 'Malay is taught to Malay pupils and this has been found to improve their English as well as their knowledge of their own language and literature.'<sup>88</sup> This is a unique perspective deviating from the standard interpretation of colonial educational policy in Malaya, which argues that the compulsory four years of vernacular education *inhibited* Malays from pursuing English education.<sup>89</sup> This Chinese student observed that vernacular education improved Malay students' study of English, an observation frequently made by scholars of bilingual education.

Students affiliated with the Young Muslim Union, an association promoting extra-curricular education for English-educated Muslims, also engaged in language debates. As one student wrote:

We delight in communicating with each other in English when we have a language of our own and in which we have been taught . . . One who has no knowledge of his

<sup>85</sup> Anak Wattan, 'A Word to the Malays', *Penang Free School Magazine*, December 1925.

<sup>86</sup> Tan, 'Syed Shaykh: His Life and Times', p. 159.

<sup>87</sup> 'Notes on the History of Penang Free School', *Penang Free School Magazine: New Building Inauguratory Number*, 9 January 1928.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>89</sup> See for example Loh, *Seeds of Separatism*, p. 83.

mother-tongue has usually very little love for his nation or community . . . to send our children to English Schools without first giving them education in the mother tongue and a little Islamic teaching, is to lose them in the end . . . The Malays are an Asiatic race. To Europeanise an Asiatic race is not advisable, when it is clear, that Asia is the mother of Europe.<sup>90</sup>

The last line of the essay signalled that students were well aware of orientalist arguments that Asia was the birthplace of Indo-European languages. The Association's patron was the prominent Muslim scholar H.G. Sarwar. Despite English education at school, cultural associations such as the Young Muslim Union, as well as the Hu Yew Seah, provided additional classes, lectures, and community activities that ensured young Muslim and Chinese students would not forget their roots.

The essays that appeared in school magazines indicated that a number of Penang students were increasingly able to travel. Via school or family holidays, youths, like the wider public, took advantage of better roads, railways, and the growing accessibility of travel. Travelogues appeared by those fortunate enough to journey to China, Japan, India, and Hong Kong by steamship. Rail trips to Bangkok and Singapore became more affordable, while schools organised road and bicycle trips on the peninsula. A *Straits Echo* editorial advocated the advantage of school holidays in allowing children to learn about the world outside of books, advising,

Notes should be made of all that is seen, and this will soon begin to add and not to detract from the enjoyment of one's holiday . . . In Malaya this is even more necessary than in many other places for the ignorance of the average teacher about the country in which he lives of the customs of the people and other kindred subjects is extraordinary.<sup>91</sup>

Students began to see themselves within a spectre of comparisons within the region. This highlighted to students the Western bias of English education. In preparation for a trip to Java, one student found not a single book on the island in the school library. In Java, by contrast, he found piles of Dutch East Indies magazines (possibly *Inter-Ocean*), superbly printed and illustrated, leading him to comment on the poor quality of Malayan magazines. Extolling Java's stunning physical landscape, he described Java's hills as green and luscious, compared to Malaya's dark, jungle-clad hills: 'In Java the hills are a delight to the eyes; in Malaya I find them often depressingly ugly.'<sup>92</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Yusoff, S. Md. 'Our Mother Tongue', in *Young Muslim Union Magazine* 1925, pp. 7–8.

<sup>91</sup> *Straits Echo*, 18 August 1925, p. 5.

<sup>92</sup> 'The Christmas Holidays and a Trip to Java', *Penang Free School Magazine*, May 1938, p. 19.

In the *Pioneer*, the magazine of Penang's Anglo-Chinese Girls' School, one girl wrote a dialogue about Singapore's merits as a great port-city. It began with a defence of Singapore against a typical tirade of an Englishman who lambasted the filth and lewdness of the port-city with the comment '[ships] don't make a city . . . what do you say about the vast areas of slum, the scum of nations, the dirt, the evil – you know the list'. His fictional companion replied, 'There is more real public spirit and "esprit du corps" in this city than in any other city in the East in which I have lived.' The companion ended with a compelling case for Singapore as a world city: 'Singapore must one day be the meeting-place, not only of the industry and commerce of a League of Nations but of the art and beauty of many nations – in education, music, literature and drama. The seeds of its future greatness are alive today, and can be seen by all those who seek to find them.'<sup>93</sup> To cloistered Straits-Chinese girls in Penang who found their parents' conservative attitude towards women stifling, Singapore provided a beacon of more liberal attitudes. A former Methodist girls' school student saw Singapore as more modern, cosmopolitan, and liberal in gender relations, with boys and girls mixing at school and dances.<sup>94</sup>

A Muslim student wrote of a trip to Bangkok, where he and four of his friends took the train to be met by old boys of the Penang Free School and members of the Young Muslim Union. They saw new tramways as well as rickshaws, houses inscribed with Siamese characters, wide roads, and modern architecture. In describing Chinatown, the student noted: 'There are many Chinese shop-keepers and one would feel quite at home in Bangkok . . . We felt as if we were in Penang. The only difficulty that confronted us was that the lingua franca was Siamese. Chinese is understood by many, and so we had not much trouble in shopping.'<sup>95</sup> The ease with which these Malay-Muslim students were able to drift into Chinese indicates the multiple linguistic worlds that Penang youth inhabited at the time. It also suggests an extended continuum of Asian cosmopolitanism within Southeast Asian port-cities, one in which Penang students growing up in a 'polyglot, migrant world' felt easily at home.<sup>96</sup> Constant mental translations and shifts between languages cultivated an urban subjectivity akin to what Meng Yue has observed in Shanghai, one that was essentially plural, exercised through relations with others.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>93</sup> 'This City Fair: A Conversation', in *The Pioneer* 1:1 (October 1926), 1.

<sup>94</sup> Nelly Lim. Interview by author. Penang, 26 October 2007.

<sup>95</sup> 'A Trip to Bangkok', *Young Muslim Union Magazine* 1925, p. 18.

<sup>96</sup> Harper, 'Globalism', p. 261.

<sup>97</sup> Meng Yue, *Shanghai and the Edges of Empire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), pp. 204–5.

Though Yue examines the role of the carnival atmosphere in fostering this mentality, for Penang's multi-ethnic children, this was a subjectivity that was literally born in the playground.<sup>98</sup>

### A Web of Creole Pilgrimages

In *The Spectre of Comparisons*, Benedict Anderson argues that by 1900, 'young educated people in Batavia . . . knew more about Amsterdam than they did about a Cambodia with which their ultimate ancestors had once had close ties, while their cousins in Manila knew more about Madrid and New York than about the Vietnamese littoral a short step across the South China Seas.'<sup>99</sup> Colonial educational institutions and pilgrimages undertaken by an emerging, creole elite cemented the links between metropole and colony.<sup>100</sup> The institution of the Queen's Scholarships in the Straits Settlements and state scholarships for Burmese to study in Britain helped promote these educational links between Britain and its empire. Such scholarships were mainly aimed at training barristers, public administrators, and medical doctors. Towards the end of the 1930s, Britain also put increasing resources into training military officers and pilots from around the world.

But the metropolitan experience was an education in itself, exposing Asians to a breadth of new social interactions. The 'cosmopolitan' aims of the British Empire were tested through the inter-racial relationships Asians had abroad. Relationships between Asian men and white women, while becoming more prominent, were also discouraged and served as an excuse for the colonial state to educate more Asian women.<sup>101</sup> Even as young white women made choices about who they could see, the barriers put up by their parents exposed Asian men to deep-seated racial prejudices; the activist lawyer Lim Kean Chye recalled the parents of an English girlfriend who refused to have him over for tea.<sup>102</sup> In white colonies, however, students witnessed a reversal of class and racial hierarchies. Lim's brother, Kean Chong, accepted at the University of Melbourne as an engineering student, was amazed at an offer from a white man on the street to clean his shoes.<sup>103</sup> Burmese students observed that Oxford and Cambridge were more sociable venues for interaction with English students, while Burmese students in metropolitan London created a 'little Burma', banding together

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. <sup>99</sup> Anderson, *Spectre of Comparisons*, p. 5. <sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> A.J. Stockwell, 'Leaders, Dissidents and the Disappointed: Colonial Students in Britain as Empire Ended', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 36:3 (2008): 489.

<sup>102</sup> Lim Kean Chye. Interview by author. Penang. 21 March 2008.

<sup>103</sup> Lim Kean Chong, *My Life: Chronicles of a Wartime Pilot and Other Stories* (Kuala Lumpur: Trafalgar Publishing House Sdn. Bhd, 2006), p. 9.

to frequent Chinese restaurants in Piccadilly Circus and Charing Cross Station.<sup>104</sup> Asians studying in universities in Europe struggled with the small allowances they were given, faced with the high expenses of living in a Western metropole. Commenting on Burmese students' propensity for play, an official report made the racist assumption that Burmese students:

lacked supervision and guidance, both in educational and economic prudence and were distracted by the temptations of the city ... the youth of eighteen who comes to London, the *Tekkatho* of his ambitions, to pursue his studies has no settled principles, deepest because unfelt, to guide him. He has the warnings of his parents and of his teachers before him, which he has taken deeply to heart; but he has not the underlying sense of fitness which leads a well-bred English youth to shun a public-house or dubious company.<sup>105</sup>

Connections in the metropole meant that students from around the colonial world began meeting and speaking to each other for the first time.<sup>106</sup> Early in the century at the University of Edinburgh, Lim Cheng Ean (father of the Lims mentioned above) met his wife Roseline, a Chinese nurse from British Guyana. When she moved to Penang with Lim, Roseline brought her two brothers with her from the West Indies, one of whom was instrumental in pioneering the Straits film industry, as will be discussed in Chapter 6. When their son, Lim Kean Chye, arrived at Cambridge in 1939, he became secretary of the Cambridge Union, and often took the floor with Indian students ('R. Chandra', 'D. Amarasekara', and 'I. Gupta') to condemn British policies in the Far East and argue for Indian independence.<sup>107</sup> The debating floor also put Lim Kean Chye in contact with the Singapore-born Lim Hong Bee, with both going on to found the Malayan Democratic Union, a multi-ethnic leftist association that became Singapore's first political party after the Second World War.<sup>108</sup> Political contests were played out in university debating halls, mirroring the wider struggles in the rest of the world. Anti-colonial sentiment drew students in the metropole closer to communist ideas, which worried colonial authorities.

<sup>104</sup> 'Burmese Students in England', in *Oway Magazine* 7:1 (1938). Reprinted in *Yangon tekatho hmiq ngà-s'eh, 1920–1970* [*Rangoon University 50 Years: 1920–1970*] (Rangoon: Rangoon University Press, 1970), p. 84.

<sup>105</sup> Arrangements for Burmese Students in England, India Office Records, MSS. Eur. F. 92. 29. Tekatho is the ancient Buddhist university thought to be the 'seat of all knowledge' based in the city of Taxila in modern-day Pakistan.

<sup>106</sup> For a recent investigation on colonial elites in the British metropole see Stockwell, 'Leaders, Dissidents and the Disappointed', pp. 487–507.

<sup>107</sup> *Cambridge Union Society Record of Debates 1938–1950*. Manuscript Room, Cambridge University Library.

<sup>108</sup> For clarification on the founding of the MDU see Gerald de Cruz, 'Correspondence', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 1 (1970): 123–25.

Political struggles were also played out in London, as students were drawn to the League Against Imperialism, launched in 1927 as a mass anti-colonial movement supported by the Comintern.<sup>109</sup> Scotland Yard kept tabs on Maung Oo Kyaw, a promising Burmese student who had risen up from the ranks of the Anglo-vernacular school system, passed the London matriculation in Colombo, and began degrees in Economics and Political Science at the London School of Economics and Birkbeck College. He joined the central YMCA and was reported to be closely associated with Indian student revolutionaries and Shapurji Saklatvala, a British MP of Indian origin and a member of the British Communist Party. Oo Kyaw allegedly helped disseminate leaflets of an inflammatory character to Indian lascars on ships and the docks of London's East End. He was followed, his landlady was warned, his correspondence tracked, and his funds intercepted. Oo Kyaw repeatedly wrote to the secretary of state for India, pledging British citizenship and protesting against harassment from the police, to no avail. Upon applying to renew his passport, he was denied access to the continent (being suspected of being groomed for Moscow), and issued a document valid only for return to Burma. Scotland Yard dismissed the story as a sad case of a promising career gone awry, blaming the Communist Party for using Oo Kyaw as a tool.<sup>110</sup> Educational experiences in the metropole, rather than cementing imperial ties, thus fostered new, anti-colonial networks that brought Asian students closer together, while putting them under the gaze of a state concerned with curtailing the spread of international communism.

Anderson's observation of the role of vertical movements of creole elites from colony to metropole was path-breaking; yet it has also obscured other web-like movements throughout Asia and the rest of the world in the early twentieth century.<sup>111</sup> Due to Burma's ties with India, Rangoon elites from the late nineteenth century were as likely to school in Lahore, Delhi, and the University of Calcutta as they were to go to Cambridge. By the 1920s, some taught in Japan, such as the Burmese Buddhist monk U Ottama. Many Malays, along with Indonesians, went to Cairo. In the 1920s, the city eclipsed Mecca as a new, modern Islamic metropolis and witnessed a flowering of new student communities.<sup>112</sup>

<sup>109</sup> For an exploration of radical student politics in the British metropole, see Hardie, J. 'Colonial Radicals and the British Metropole c. 1905–1952' (unpublished M.Phil. thesis, Cambridge University, History, 2009).

<sup>110</sup> Burmese Students in London. 1931. London, British Library. India Office Records. IOR/L/PK/12/488 File 302/35.

<sup>111</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, pp. 113–40.

<sup>112</sup> See William Roff, 'Indonesian and Malay Students in Cairo in the 1920s', *Indonesia* 9 (1970): 73–87; Michael Laffan, 'An Indonesian Community in Cairo: Continuity and Change in a Cosmopolitan Islamic Milieu', *Indonesia* 77 (2004): 1–26.



Malay and Indonesian students began organising themselves as 'Jawa' students at the University of Al-Azhar, chiefly through a new magazine called *Seruan Azhar*.<sup>113</sup> Asian students found commonalities abroad through pan-Asian connections and regional affiliations.

Connections between Chinese students who met overseas continued when they returned home. Ung Bok Hoey, a brilliant Penang Free School student, went to King's College London on a Queen's scholarship and was soon distracted by the 'gay life of the metropolis', returning to Penang ill and penniless in 1905. Journalism was an apt profession for such a man, and he was quickly snapped up by the *Straits Echo* to become its first Asian sub-editor.<sup>114</sup> Like many Asian students returning home, Ung threw himself into Penang public life and revived the connections he had made abroad. In 1905, he inaugurated the World's Chinese Student's Federation in Penang with Wu Lien-Teh.<sup>115</sup> Wu, unlike Ung, finished his schooling at Cambridge and went on to research diseases at hospitals in London, Liverpool, Germany, Paris, and Northern China. He became a pioneer of modern public health, representing the League of Nations as a health and plague expert in the 1920s. The World Chinese Students Association, whose Penang branch was co-founded by Wu and Ong, had its base in Shanghai and drew together Chinese students from Europe, America, and Southeast Asia to support China's nationalist aims.<sup>116</sup> While abroad, Anglophone Chinese students were increasingly made aware of their 'Chinese-ness', and upon returning home made new efforts to learn Mandarin and ensure that their children were educated in the language. One of Wu's contemporaries, Lim Boon Keng in Singapore, pioneered a Chinese cultural reform movement to safeguard these aims and revitalise Straits-Chinese culture, partly due to experiences of studying abroad and confronted with the shame of not being able to speak Chinese.

British colonial port-cities fostered new educational connections. At least three Penang Chinese attended the new Rangoon University to study Engineering (and are remembered for opening a popular Asian restaurant).<sup>117</sup> Many more went to the University of Hong Kong, established in 1911 and sustained with endowments from Malayan-Chinese

<sup>113</sup> Roff, 'Indonesian and Malay Students in Cairo in the 1920s', p. 73.

<sup>114</sup> Wu Lien-The and Ng Yok-Hing, *The Queen's Scholarships of Malaya 1885-1948* (Penang: Penang Premier Press, 1949), p. 25.

<sup>115</sup> 'Dr. Wu Lien-Teh', *Weekly Sun*, 14 October 1911, p. 3.

<sup>116</sup> See S.K. Tsao, 'The World Chinese Student Federation', in *Proceedings of the Eighth International Congress of Students* (Ithaca: Cornell Cosmopolitan Club, 1913), pp. 142-45.

<sup>117</sup> U Hla Shain and Dr. Ohn Gaing (Myanmar Historical Commission). Interview by author. Yangon. 27 July 2008.

*towkays*. A sizeable number of undergraduates came from the Dutch East Indies, occasional students from Burma and Siam, and a large Malayan contingent that included Chinese as well as Malays, Indians, and Eurasians.<sup>118</sup> After 1918, scholarships were given to train promising Malayan teachers at HKU before the opening of Raffles College in Singapore in 1928.<sup>119</sup> In 1925, Mustapha bin Osman (a PFS graduate) became the first Malay to obtain a medical degree under a Rockefeller Fellowship, later becoming Hong Kong University's professor of Pathology and Bacteriology. The sense of camaraderie solidified a Penangite identity abroad, particularly through alumni networks with the Penang Free School, which featured a regular 'Hong Kong Letter' in its magazine. Penang boys took part in committees, student associations, literary societies, photography clubs, and played a major role in university sporting life. They were known for being fun-loving, frivolous, and sportive, particularly in comparison to their more 'bookish' Chinese contemporaries.<sup>120</sup> One of the most prominent and active figures in HKU's social life was Ong Chong Keng, who came from a poor household afflicted with opium addiction and was given a scholarship from a rich towkay, as long as he returned as a medical doctor to marry his benefactor's daughter.<sup>121</sup>

Thai students, unhindered by direct colonial ties, went to universities in England, Paris, Hong Kong, Japan, and America. In 1913, a major International Congress of Students was hosted in Ithaca by the Cornell Cosmopolitan Club, of which three Thai students from Bangkok were members (the World Chinese Student Federation was also represented).<sup>122</sup> In 1938, the Foreign Office noted that Britain was facing stiff competition in attracting students of higher education from Siam given the provision of new scholarships from France, French Indo-China, Italy, Germany, and Japan. Banjong Sricharoon, a Thai Muslim, also studied in Cairo, and later joined his Thai contemporaries in Paris, where a small group of law students and military officers in training began agitating for political reform at home. The experiences of this group in Paris provided the backdrop for the most decisive moment in Thai political history, yet they have never been contextualised within the

<sup>118</sup> C.M. Turnbull, 'The Malayan Connection', in *An Impossible Dream: Hong Kong University from Foundation to Re-establishment, 1910–1950*, ed. Kit-ching Chan Lau and Peter Cunich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 99–117 at p. 101.

<sup>119</sup> *Federated Malay States: Annual Report on Education in the Federated Malay States for the Year 1931*.

<sup>120</sup> Turnbull, 'The Malayan Connection', p. 106.

<sup>121</sup> Pamela Ong Siew Im, *Blood and the Soil: A Portrait of Dr Ong Chong Keng* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1995), p. 16.

<sup>122</sup> *Proceedings of the Eighth International Congress of Students*, p. 70.

thriving, cosmopolitan environment of Paris. For many Asian students with the opportunity to study there in the 1920s and 1930s, Paris offered the world.

### Paris: Shanghai of the West

If the movements of students from the non-European world in the 1920s constituted a web of creole pilgrimages, then Paris was its most concentrated node, if not its centre. Scholars of Thai history refer to the plotters of the 1932 coup who met in Paris for the first time as ‘educated in the West’.<sup>123</sup> Yet the cosmopolitan context in which they studied provided diverse cultural influences that complicate the idea of what being ‘educated in the West’ means. Paris in the 1920s was an international city that drew students, artists, and literati from all over the world. Pascale Casanova writes,

Faith in the power and uniqueness of Paris produced a massive stream of immigration, the image of the city as a condensed version of the world . . . The presence of a great many foreign communities – Poles, Italians, Czechs, and Slovaks, Siamese, Germans, Armenians, Africans, Latin Americans, Japanese, Russians and Americans who had settled in the French capital between 1830 and 1945 – as well as political refugees of every stripe . . . made Paris a new ‘Babel,’ a ‘Cosmopolis,’ a crossroads of the artistic world.<sup>124</sup>

Yet rather than take a Eurocentric approach in considering Paris the ‘capital of modernity’, as Casanova does, it was rather, I would argue, a city of minor republics from the perspective of the colonised, an extension of their worlds at home and a venue in which to argue for liberation.<sup>125</sup> Shanghai has long been known as the ‘Paris of the East’, yet if we take an Asian perspective, Paris was, in fact, the ‘Shanghai of the West’, a mecca for Asian cosmopolitans of the colonial world.

The city’s vibrant artistic and literary scene drew inspiration from its radical political potential in the aftermath of the 1919 Paris Peace conference. The ‘Wilsonian moment’ raised the expectations of colonised peoples throughout the world, particularly the students who aimed to lead burgeoning nations.<sup>126</sup> Paris was ‘a grand bazaar of ideas in 1919’, where aspiring black and Asian political leaders sought to reshape the international world

<sup>123</sup> Sulak Sivaraksa, ‘The Crisis of Siamese Identity’, in *National Identity and Its Defenders: Thailand Today*, ed. Craig J. Reynolds (Bangkok: Silkworm, 2002), p. 46; Batson, *End of Absolute Monarchy*, p. 152.

<sup>124</sup> Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, Mass.: London: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 30. See also Christophe Charle, *Les intellectuels en Europe au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1996), pp. 110–13.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88. <sup>126</sup> Manela, *Wilsonian Moment*.

order on the back of the promises of self-determination.<sup>127</sup> Li Shizeng, a Francophile Chinese intellectual, established a work-study scheme, supported by the French government, in Paris in 1916 to train Chinese workers in French republican ideas.<sup>128</sup> By 1920, when the post-war Depression hit, there were 700 Chinese students in the Paris region, unable to attend school or find a job.<sup>129</sup> Some joined Zhou Enlai, Chen Yi, and members of the radical student group, the Awakening Society, who formed the China Youth Communist Party in Europe, the overseas branch of the Chinese Communist Party, in 1922.<sup>130</sup> Affordability made Paris even more compelling to the world's artists, students, and literati; it cost half as much to live in Paris than to live in London or Edinburgh, one of the main reasons that Zhou Enlai transferred there in 1921.<sup>131</sup>

New regional sensibilities among Latin Americans, Asians, and Africans trumped internationalism in the intimacy of their connections. On a long journey to Rangoon, where he would take up a post as Chilean consul, Pablo Neruda was urged to go to Paris, the spiritual home of Latin America literati. He described a city divided into neighbourhoods between new-found compatriots who spoke the same languages: 'Paris, France, Europe, for us small-town Bohemians from South America, consisted of a stretch of two hundred meters and a couple of street corners: Montparnasse, La Rotonde, Le Dome, La Coupole, and three or four other cafés.'<sup>132</sup> Within these narrow confines, Neruda 'did not meet a single Frenchman, a single European, a single Asian, much less anyone from Africa or Oceania. Spanish-speaking Americans, from the Mexicans down to the Patagonians, went about in cliques, picking on one another, disparaging one another, but unable to live without one another.'<sup>133</sup>

Just as Neruda's Paris solidified the links between Latin American writers and revolutionaries, so too did the city bring together Asian students, communicating with each other in French and reading the same political literature. Only a few blocks east of Neruda's Latin neighbourhood, Nguyen Ai-Quoc mobilised students from a host of colonised countries in a dilapidated flat. He set up the Inter-colonial Union, and became founder, editor, and distributor of its organ, *Le Paria*, appearing between 1922–1926 with a cover title published in Arabic, Chinese, and

<sup>127</sup> Jay Winter, *Dreams of Peace and Freedom: Utopian Moments in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

<sup>128</sup> David S.G. Goodman, *China and the West: Ideas and Activists* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 82.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>130</sup> Chae-jin Lee, *Zhou Enlai: The Early Years* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 161.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154. <sup>132</sup> Pablo Neruda, *Memoirs* (London: Condor, 1976), pp. 67–68.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

French.<sup>134</sup> He recruited students from a hostel in the rue du Sommerard.<sup>135</sup>

It was exactly on this Left Bank street that the promoters of Siam's 1932 coup met for the first time, perhaps in the same hostel.<sup>136</sup> Pridi Panomyong was engaged intellectually not only in the historic struggles of the West, but also in the political struggles of the colonial world. In the vicinity of the University of Paris, he met nascent revolutionaries face to face and made new connections through them as well as sympathetic French friends. In his memoirs, written from exile in France in 1974, Pridi wrote:

Since the Revolution of 1789, Paris had become the cradle of democratic revolutions in many European and Asian countries – a tradition rich in the theory and practice of revolutionaries with a lineage to the age in which I studied. Marx, Engels, and the great revolutionary Lenin went there in their time. Asians, who aspired for a complete national independence and who sought to tear their countries away from colonial or semi-colonial regimes, found themselves in France at this time, notably Nguyen Ai-Quoc, Chou En-Lai, Chen Yi and other revolutionaries from diverse countries ... through the relations I had with my Siamese and French colleagues, I came to know a number of Asian revolutionaries and there was a time when, in a Chinese restaurant, we formed an association for Asian friendship and solidarity.<sup>137</sup>

The ad-hoc formation of the association signalled that for the first time, burgeoning Asian leaders began speaking to each other, recognising their shared struggle on a world stage over bowls of noodles.

Pridi, like Ai-Quoc, commanded the attention of his Thai contemporaries, who nicknamed him *acharn* ('professor'). As head of the Association Siamoise d'Intellectualité et d'Assistance Mutuelle, Pridi mobilised students over a stipend dispute that put him under the watchful eye of Thai authorities in Paris. The secret meeting held in 1927 to form the People's Party and establish a new government in Siam included three military students, a science student, a London barrister, and a deputy at the Siamese mission in Paris.<sup>138</sup> One of the young military officers was the 'charming and persuasive' lieutenant, Phibunsongkham, who was equally inspired by his time in France, and later regarded it as significant that his birthday fell on 14 July, the anniversary of the French

<sup>134</sup> Jean Lacouture, *Ho Chi Minh* (London: Allen Lane, 1968), p. 18. See also Pierre Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 18–19.

<sup>135</sup> Lacouture, *Ho Chi Minh*, p. 17.

<sup>136</sup> Judith Stowe, *Siam Becomes Thailand: A Story of Intrigue* (London: C. Hurst & Co, 1991), p. 12.

<sup>137</sup> Translated by author, Pridi, *Ma Vie Mouvementée*, p. 31.

<sup>138</sup> Baker and Phongpaichit, *History of Thailand*, p. 116.

revolution.<sup>139</sup> They recruited other students in England, as well as Banchong Sricharun, the Thai Muslim student studying in Cairo.

Unlike Ai-Quoc, who would later become Ho Chi Minh, Pridi and Phibun returned to lead a revolution that was bloodless. They modelled the new government on a constitutional monarchy imbued with both republican principles. No one was out in the streets; rather, it was a behind-the-scenes *coup d'état* that transferred power from an old elite to a new one. The policy reforms that Pridi devised in Paris were based on a socialist economic plan that sought to redistribute wealth from the aristocracy to the state.<sup>140</sup> Charges that his policies were communist put Pridi into 'voluntary' exile in 1933, though he would return the following year, assuming the posts of minister of interior, minister of foreign affairs in 1937, and minister of finance in 1938. Schemes to form co-operatives and promote new sources of employment were not implemented due to a lack of political will and administrative machinery.<sup>141</sup> While Pridi was continually suspected of extreme, 'communist' tendencies, Phibun consolidated his role as a military leader in support of fascism and ultra-nationalism. Phibun's regard for the 'sophistication of French life' has parallels in the experiences to those of Vietnamese and Cambodian nationalists, whose emotional attachment to French civilisation resulted in a radical backlash: a xenophobic hatred of foreign influences and a devout commitment to building a nation on a firm, civilisational foundation.<sup>142</sup>

The idealistic political visions brewed in Paris in the 1920s united a diverse group of students who faced the grim reality of bureaucratic execution and political factionalism in the 1930s. The new government employed the same excuse as King Chulalongkorn and Prince Damrong in delaying the institution of a fully democratic system: the low general educational level of the population. Only when this had increased would a fully elected assembly become a reality. Yet the People's Party took more aggressive steps than its predecessors in implementing and enforcing a law on universal, compulsory primary education, seeking to bring the country's literacy rate up to 50 per cent.<sup>143</sup> Literacy for both men and women climbed in the 1930s due to these efforts, rising from 0.7 to 1.7 million over 1931–39. Local government was given much greater

<sup>139</sup> Stowe, *Siam Becomes Thailand*, p. 11.

<sup>140</sup> S. Jeamteerasakul, 'The Communist Movement in Thailand' (unpublished PhD dissertation, Monash University, Politics, 1991).

<sup>141</sup> Baker and Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand*, p. 122.

<sup>142</sup> See Scott McConnell, *Leftward Journey: The Education of Vietnamese Students in France 1919–1939* (Oxford: Transaction, 1989); and Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860–1945* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007).

<sup>143</sup> Wyatt, *Thailand*, p. 238; Purcell, *Chinese in Southeast Asia*, p. 144.

autonomy and spending was increased on roads, hospitals, and electricity.<sup>144</sup> The *Straits Times* reported in 1936: 'Siam today appears to be getting on top of most of her problems and much of the credit is due to three Ministers – Luang Pradit (Pridi), Luang Pibul and Luang Dhamrong. All these are comparatively young men and their success so far is a triumph for youth.'<sup>145</sup> During Pridi's travels abroad in 1936, his 'energy and passionate sincerity' made a major impression on the heads of foreign governments as he persuaded them to renegotiate Siam's unequal extraterritorial treaties into treaties of cooperation and friendship.<sup>146</sup> In the eyes of the world, the most radical achievements of Siam in the 1930s were driven, as they would be in post-colonial nations in the 1950s, by the youthful enthusiasm of a new political generation.

### Higher Education at Home

The experience of different systems of higher education in the West and in Asia provided new models for higher education at home. London University became an important counterweight to the Oxbridge system, a residential system reserved only for a select few. Initial plans for Rangoon University were fraught with arguments between Oxbridge and London-educated Burmese barristers, the latter of whom favoured a less elite-centred educational system. Taw Sein Ko, a Sino-Burmese intellectual, attended both Calcutta University and Peking University (est. 1898). When he made the first plea for a university in Rangoon in 1908, he warned the colonial government not to model the institution on a solely Western curriculum, but to include a Faculty of Oriental Studies as could be found in Lahore's University of the Punjab. Just as this university rejected English education in favour of a multiplicity of Indian languages and religions, Taw proposed a similar faculty in Burma to focus on Burmese, Sanskrit, and Pali, reviving an interest in Burmese language and literature among the Burmese-speaking majority. Despite Taw's early efforts, it was not until 1920 that the dream of a university for Burma was realised.

In 1911, the first modern university was established in Southeast Asia: Manila's University of the Philippines. The Americans had introduced state-sponsored mass education to Southeast Asia, an approach that encapsulated their policy of 'tutelage' towards self-determination.<sup>147</sup> The university constituted the highest echelons of the system, its purpose to provide advanced instruction in literature, philosophy, science, and arts, and to provide

<sup>144</sup> Baker and Phongpaichit, *History of Thailand*, p. 123.

<sup>145</sup> 'Young Statesmen', *The Straits Times*, 12 July 1936, p. 16.

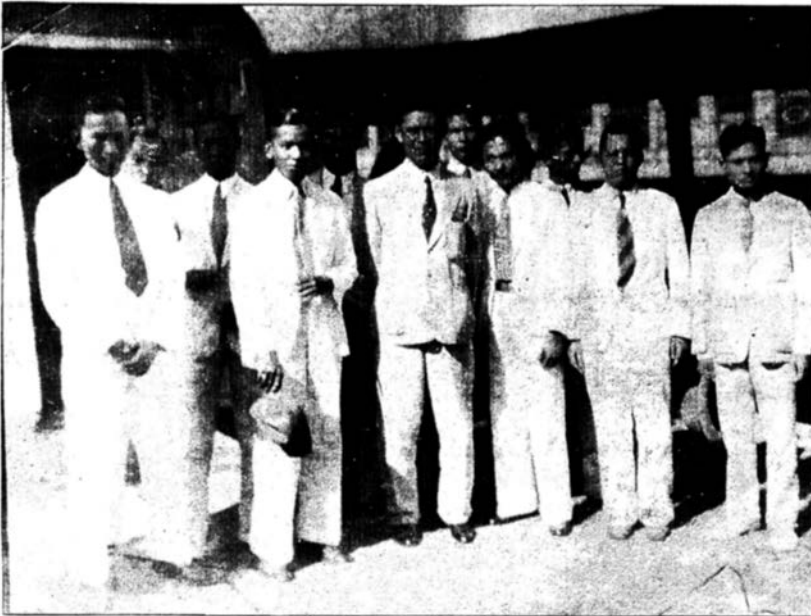
<sup>146</sup> Audric, *Siam: Kingdom of the Saffron Robe*, p. 126.

<sup>147</sup> Steinberg et al., *In Search of Southeast Asia*, pp. 269–81.

professional and technical training. The university's calendar found its way into the library of Prince Damrong, who helped transform the Civil Servants' School into Chulalongkorn University in 1916. Training a cadre of civil servants was still the chief aim of the university, which offered subjects in arts, science, engineering, architecture, medicine, pharmacy, and nursing. New medical facilities were given a large grant by the Rockefeller Foundation, signalling a new American interest in promoting technical training not only in the Philippines but elsewhere (Rockefeller also provided a large grant for the construction of Judson College in Rangoon). Many Siamese students went to the University of Manila to study. One Siamese nurse, trained in Manila, returned to direct Chulalongkorn's School of Nursing, and the school maintained close connections with Manila for postgraduate work.<sup>148</sup>

Pridi's most enduring legacy was the founding of Thammasat University (the University of Moral and Political Sciences) in 1933.

#### Siamese Health Official In The Philippines



Luang Guan Yulhivesya, of the Department of Public Health, who is now on a tour of the various countries of the Orient. Here he is seen with the Siamese students in Manila.

Figure 16 Thai medical students at the University of Manila, 1930.

<sup>148</sup> Alice Fitzgerald, 'Nursing in Siam', *The American Journal of Nursing* 29:7 (1929): 820.



The university provided a novel approach to higher education in Siam, opening its doors to anyone with a secondary education rather than catering to administrative demands. In 1934, Chulalongkorn University's total enrolment number was 228. By comparison, Thammasat's initial enrolment was a staggering 7,854 for the standard college course.<sup>149</sup> Some transferred from Chulalongkorn University, particularly the Law School, but most came directly out of secondary education.<sup>150</sup> The university's first woman graduate noted that students had complete freedom to study whatever they wished. In 1935, enrolment dropped to 987, with students studying economics, political science, diplomacy, and law, while the number of awarded degrees only reached 163 in 1938 and 227 in 1939. Thammasat's emphasis on law, particularly constitutional law, instituted a new mode of citizenship that valued equality under the law within a new democratic framework. Thammasat produced its own scholarly law journal, *Nitisan*, along with instructional texts for students unable to attend classes.<sup>151</sup> Pridi enjoyed enormous popularity as the young, passionate, and popular rector of the university, and became a mentor to a generation of Thai students at home.

The entry of women into university was a global phenomenon, experienced simultaneously in Asia and the rest of the world. Compared to men, their numbers were small, and as such they were the centres of attention. It took ten years for Chulalongkorn University to admit women, finally admitting seven in 1927, with five of them graduating with medical degrees in 1932.<sup>152</sup> In Rangoon University's 1939 intake of students, there were 1,613 men compared to 337 women.<sup>153</sup> Between 1933 and 1938, there were 47 women out of 251 students graduating from Singapore's Raffles College. In providing co-educational experiences, these higher education establishments were more progressive than prestigious universities in Europe and America (Cambridge did not make women full members of the university until 1947, while Harvard did not provide degrees to women students at Radcliff College until 1963).

Medical and teacher-training colleges provided professional training deemed suitable for women. The Red Cross played a major role in

<sup>149</sup> *Statistical Yearbook of the Kingdom of Siam* (Bangkok: Department of Commerce and Statistics, 1935–37), p. 412.

<sup>150</sup> Charnvit Kasetsiri, *Pridi Banomyong and Thammasat University* trans. Michael Wright (Bangkok: Thammasat University, 2000), p. 56.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>152</sup> LeeRay Costa, 'Exploring the History of Women's Education and Activism in Thailand', *Explorations in Southeast Asian Studies* 1:2 (1997) (available online at [www.hawaii.edu/cseas/pubs/explore/v1n2-art4.html](http://www.hawaii.edu/cseas/pubs/explore/v1n2-art4.html), last accessed 26 August 2010).

<sup>153</sup> *Report of the Executive Committee of the Council of the University of Rangoon 1937–38* (Rangoon: Rangoon Times Press, 1938).



Figure 17 Residents of Inya Hall, University of Rangoon, 1936.

developing training programs in the region and postgraduate networks abroad. The Siriraj Training School for Nurses, attached to Chulalongkorn University's medical school, and the Red Cross Hospital, known as the Chulalongkorn hospital, provided nursing education for women in Bangkok, and were monitored under strict 'convent-like' rules. By 1929, medical students were trained side by side with female nurses, creating new relationships of professional respectability between men and women.<sup>154</sup> As a visiting American nurse observed in 1929, regional and international meetings provided occasions for nurses to 'meet as colleagues and part as friends'.<sup>155</sup> Bangkok hosted the conference of the Far Eastern Association of Tropical Medicine in 1930, bringing together doctors, nurses, and medical specialists from around the region. Chinese, Indian, and a small number of Malay women attended the King Edward VII Medical College in Singapore (between 1905 and 1949, 384 men and 33 women graduated with degrees from the college).<sup>156</sup> The Rangoon General Hospital supervised a large training school that trained Karen, Burmese, Anglo-Indian, and Indian nurses every year.<sup>157</sup> The Red Cross provided

<sup>154</sup> Fitzgerald, 'Nursing in Siam', pp. 817–23. <sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> See FMS report on education, 6; Khoo Kay Kim, *100 Years of the University of Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 2005), p. 16.

<sup>157</sup> Edith V. Blackwell, 'Nursing in Burma', *The American Journal of Nursing* 38: 10 (1938): 1077–82.

help for many Burmese nurses to go to Delhi for courses in infant welfare and public health.<sup>158</sup>

Trade schools and teacher training schools drew together teachers and vocational students throughout Burma. In 1917, Kasetsart University began as an Agricultural Primary Teacher Training School within Chulalongkorn University, later expanding into the provinces and developing into secondary schools.<sup>159</sup> In Malaya, the Sultan Idris Training College, founded in 1922 in Perak grew as a hub for Malay vernacular education and a centre of Malay literary activity, particularly through the teachers' magazine, *Majallah Guru*.<sup>160</sup> Rangoon's Teacher Training College trained Burmese vernacular schoolteachers. Art academies were established. Yong Mun Sen of Penang, the father of modern painting in Malaya, helped establish the Nanyang Academy of Art in Singapore in 1937. In Bangkok, the education ministry established Silpakorn, a school for fine arts, in 1934, partly due to the efforts of Italian sculptor Corrado Feroci, an influential figure in modern Thai art.

No universities were established in Malaya in the colonial era. This was partly due to the insecurities of colonial authorities in Singapore, who witnessed the radical potential of new student movements in the region. Winstedt, then education director, distrusted radical American influence and pointed to dissidence among students in China after the 1919 May Fourth movement, unrest in Indian universities, and strikes at the University of Rangoon.<sup>161</sup> Raffles College, however, did create an educational experience for multi-ethnic students drawn from around Malaya, funding themselves privately or on scholarships. A number of Penangites studying there became prominent political and cultural leaders in Malaya after the war, including Lim Kien Siew (future leader of the Labour Party), Philip Hoalim (another founder of the MDU), as well as the jazz musician Jimmy Boyle. Higher education in the region thus drew together a diverse group of men and women from a range of different backgrounds, thereby fostering new professional, generational, national, and global sensibilities.

### **Rangoon University and Everyday Student Culture**

The announcement of the colonial government's plan for an elite residential system on the Oxbridge model in Rangoon prompted the first

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Paitoon Sinlarat, 'Thai Universities: Past, Present and Future', in *Asian Universities: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Philip G. Altbach and Toru Umakoshi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 206.

<sup>160</sup> Roff, *Origins of Malay Nationalism*, pp. 142–57.

<sup>161</sup> Turnbull, 'The Malayan Connection', p. 103.

large-scale political movement in Burma. A mass student boycott mobilised youth, monks, and others across the province, using the networks of the Burmese and school associations, to denounce colonial elitism and argue that the university be open to all. While scholars of Burmese nationalism have seen 1920 as a beginning, it is important to situate the founding of the institution within a wider and broader educational framework, one that began as a long, slow campaign for a university by various Asian educators and scholars early in the century. Students who participated in the strike came from a range of backgrounds, and included U Razak, a Burmese-Muslim and aspiring educator who would later join Aung San's cabinet.<sup>162</sup> Funding came from a range of patrons within Rangoon's commercial community. The Burma Oil Company donated £100,000 to fund a mining and engineering college. Western and Indian commercial firms including the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company, the Turf Club, Rao Bahadur S.R. Reddiar, and the Chettiar Community gave a lakh of rupees each. Burmans gave 'gladly and greatly', some anonymously.<sup>163</sup> The chancellor of the university noted in 1927: 'Never has a national and nation-building movement been marked by so much enthusiasm.'<sup>164</sup> The university became the symbol of civic pride, administered by a council of seventy members of Rangoon civil society, including high-ranking members of the Buddhist monkhood, graduates, barristers, doctors, educational administrators, and municipal officers (judging from names alone, the council perhaps comprised twenty-seven Europeans and forty-two Asians, including thirty Burmese, Chinese, and Indians).<sup>165</sup>

The story of Burmese nationalism is often told through the eyes of Aung San and the *thakin* movement at Rangoon University. This section situates them within a broader, kaleidoscopic educational context. The everyday practices of students at Rangoon University have been marginalised in the context of the *thakin* story of the making of the nation, and by recovering the broader context in which they operated, we might understand how nationalism moved from a narrow political vision to a broad-based movement. The *thakins* were a small group of radicals at Rangoon University who certainly weren't loved. They even had a rival group in terms of their power and popularity: the writer U Tet Toe distinguished between the 'I.C.S worshippers' and the 'firebrands, the

<sup>162</sup> Nyi Nyi, 'Sayagyi U Razak: A Patriot, a Visionary, and a Dedicated Teacher', *U Razak of Burma: A Teacher, a Leader, a Martyr* (Bangkok: OS Printing House, 2007).

<sup>163</sup> 'Speech delivered by his Excellency the Chancellor at the Annual Convocation of the Rangoon University', 7 July 1927 in *Who's Who in Burma* (Calcutta; Rangoon: Indo-Burma Publishing Agency, 1925), p. ii.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> *University of Rangoon Calendar 1934–1935* (Rangoon: British India Press, 1935).

thakins'.<sup>166</sup> Candidates preparing for the Indian Civil Service exam were, apparently, looked upon with admiration by women and a tinge of envy by male students. As Wai Wai Myaing notes in her memoirs, 'Rangoon's "marriage market" was very heavily stacked in favour of the ICS, the BCS, and the London-returned barristers-at-law.'<sup>167</sup> To Tet Toe and his group, 'these ICS candidates were just ordinary fellows, like anybody, who would get puffed up when they came back from England, if at all they went there, and live their upper class lives'.<sup>168</sup> The radicalism of the thakins was ignited by this rivalry with the Indian Civil Service students, whom they saw as pandering to British interests.

The majority of the student population fell within a large spectrum between the two groups. Tet Toe identified himself as 'among the lazy louts, the Bohemians, the class-cutters, and the "gated ones." We bunked classes, singly or in groups, and loitered about in town, and if we had some dole, went into cinemas, had a sumptuous feast at a restaurant in Chinatown after the show, and came back to Pagan Hall, late.'<sup>169</sup> Unlike the ICS students and thakins, Tet Toe recalled: 'We had no ambition of that sort, nor . . . any ambition to speak of. Personally, I had a great desire to be a writer. My friends laughed at the idea, and I had to keep quiet since I could not prove that it was not to be laughed at. I read a lot, scribbled a lot, and nothing happened.'<sup>170</sup>

Though they would regret it later, young Burmese women never heard Aung San speak at the union because they were wary of his admonishments that they stop wearing *longyis* bought from Indian capitalists.<sup>171</sup> The thakins, following Gandhi's example, insisted on wearing *longyis* made of homespun cotton, and masculine slippers of wooden clogs and stout leather thongs rather than velvet straps.<sup>172</sup> This emerged within a wider context of shifting gender relations, discussed in Chapter 6, where women's increasing liberalism was often unacceptable to Asian men. As a small minority, women at Rangoon University faced similar challenges to women in higher education elsewhere. Penang's Ong Chong Keng also condemned women students at Hong Kong University for wearing trousers and over-emphasising Western fashion.<sup>173</sup> Sally Ford's observation about the interwar student generation at

<sup>166</sup> Tet Toe, 'Dark before Dawn', *University College Annual Vol. II*, p. 17.

<sup>167</sup> Wai Wai Myaing, *A Journey in Time: Family Memoirs (Burma, 1914–1948)* (New York; Lincoln; Shanghai: iuniverse, Inc, 2005), p. 25.

<sup>168</sup> Tet Toe, 'Dark before Dawn', p. 17. <sup>169</sup> Ibid. <sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Mi Mi Khaing, 'Chapter Four: Exhilarations of Release', Unpublished Autobiography, p. 83.

<sup>172</sup> For an analysis of Burmese male critiques of Burmese women's fashion, see Ikeya, 'Modern Burmese Woman'.

<sup>173</sup> See Ong Chong Keng, 'What City Woman Do I Name?' (Appendix 5) in Ong Siew Im, *Blood and the Soil: A Portrait of Dr Ong Chong Keng*, pp. 241–48.

Hong Kong University rings true for universities around the world at that time: women ‘occupied a physical and intellectual space often marked by men’s expectations about where they should go and what men thought they should study, see, wear, hear or do’.<sup>174</sup>

*Oway*, Rangoon University’s student magazine, is best remembered as the magazine that published ‘Hell-hound at Large’, the article that prompted the 1936 university strike while Aung San was editor.<sup>175</sup> Yet it also forms part of a longer history of student magazines that gave a voice to students, beginning with the *Rangoon College Magazine*. An older generation of Asian intellectuals, schooled abroad, played a major role in providing advice to the younger generation on how to make such magazines work. Writing an introduction to the first issue of the *Rangoon College Magazine* of April 1914, the Sino-Burmese scholar Taw Sein Ko – educated in Calcutta, Peking, and England and arguably the most important ‘public intellectual’ of turn-of-the-century Rangoon – alluded to its role in ‘serving the same useful purposes as the *Cambridge Review* and the *Granta* in reflecting contemporary student life’, predicting that, ‘later on, it will develop into a quarterly, or even a monthly Journal’.<sup>176</sup> By the late 1930s, the scholar U Ba Han was the consulting editor to *Oway*, the edgy, new bilingual student magazine that nurtured not only Aung San (editor of the Burmese section) but Dagon Daya, one of the most beloved writers of post-colonial Burma. *Oway* featured essays by the prominent intellectuals of the day: Jawaharlal Nehru’s ‘Return from Burma’, Bertrand Russell’s ‘Why is modern Youth Cynical’, and H.G. Wells’ ‘Four Years at College are Wasted’. These were interspersed with writings by Burmese students and intellectuals. The leading editorial of 1938, ‘Two Worlds’, commented on a divided world, referring to the untenable position of international capitalism and the ‘dawn of a new era of hope and achievement under socialism’.<sup>177</sup> School magazines trained young Burmese writers and journalists to articulate their ideas for a wider public. While the Penang students mentioned above and Bangkok youth, such as Kulap Saipradit, wrote largely for fellow students, Burmese students saw themselves within a *world* republic of letters.<sup>178</sup> This was

<sup>174</sup> Sally Ford, ‘Women, Gender, and HKU’, in *An Impossible Dream: Hong Kong University from Foundation to Re-establishment, 1910–1950*, ed. Kit-ching Chan Lau and Peter Cunich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 119.

<sup>175</sup> See Maung Maung, *Burma’s Constitution* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1959), p. 36; June Bingham, *U Thant of Burma* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1966), p. 134.

<sup>176</sup> Taw Sein Ko, ‘Success in Life’, *Rangoon College Magazine*, April 1914, p. 1.

<sup>177</sup> ‘Two Worlds’, *Oway* (February 1938), p. 1.

<sup>178</sup> David Smyth, ‘Introduction: Kulap Saipradit (Siburapha): His Life and Times’, in *Behind the Painting and Other Stories* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1990) edited by David Smyth, p.2.

solidified, in part, by Wells' visit to Rangoon University in 1937, where he was hosted by students, journalists, and writers at the University Boat Club, who fed him 'Burmese cakes and accounts of British brutality'.<sup>179</sup>

As a student and an aspiring journalist, the writer Khin Myo Chit was close to the thakins and drawn to their dynamic political discussions. They gathered around a bookshop in the west wing of Scott Market and the traditional Burmese family home of a friend. They had no means of livelihood and were given financial support by a quiet municipal school-teacher. Through her friendship with Thakin Than Tun, who was inspired by Marxist teachings and critical of the monk-hood, Khin Myo Chit found herself agreeing with their views based on the behaviour of monks she had witnessed herself: 'I saw through their pedantic sermons into which they poured their learning and I realised they could not satisfy my inquisitive mind . . . According to monks and savants, Buddhism is very delicate, very subtle, it is very difficult to comprehend, so it is not meant for the man on the street.'<sup>180</sup> It was the narrowness and withholding of knowledge that she objected to. She criticised the Buddhist teachings she had been brought up with, from the standpoint of a modern woman rather than that of a Marxist:

I had seen time and time again how Buddha's teachings had been twisted to suit the purpose of the older generation. It was my Karma that I should be content to stay at home like a nice young lady. But who wanted to be a nice young lady when there were so many interesting things to do such as becoming a doctor or a journalist? I failed to see how poor old Karma had anything to do with my not being allowed to become an individual.<sup>181</sup>

She began making her own choices about what she read, and rebelled when the thakins piled Left Book Club books on her: 'With Ko Gyi Nu's admonitions to religion on one hand and this heap of unreadable books on the other, I retired into a wonderland of movies and yellow-jacked novels. Living in Rangoon had opened up a new world of reading for me.'<sup>182</sup> Khin Myo Chit, who had previously read Victorian novels and pored through art books in her father's library, discovered current magazines, pulp fiction, detective novels, and the movies, much to the chagrin of her thakin friends. Thakin Tun, she recalled, 'frowned upon them. He had thought a tom-boy like me would take to Left Book Club literature like a duck to water. His ideologies failed to infiltrate the stronghold of the religious up-bringing and the liberal education my family background had given me.'<sup>183</sup>

<sup>179</sup> Ba Aye, 'Vintage Vignettes', in *University College Annual Vol. 2*, p. 9.

<sup>180</sup> Khin Myo Chit, 'Many a house of life hath held me', Unpublished manuscript. London, India Office Records, European Manuscripts, MSS Eur D 1066/1, p. 26.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25. <sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32. <sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*



Figure 18 Khin Myo Chit in the offices of the Toetatye publishing house, 1937.

The memories of Tet Toe and Khin Myo Chit, who grew to become popular writers in post-war Burma, complicate and diversify the nature of the student experience at Rangoon University in the 1930s, thus shifting the standard historiographical focus on the thakin movement in the 1930s.



Michel de Certeau has referred to the puzzling 'kaleidoscopic' nature of university student culture, which duplicates society's very form, acting as a microcosm of pluralism; 'the greatest degree of heterogeneity rules among students, through their family origins, their milieus, their readings, and their cultural experiences'.<sup>184</sup> De Certeau was describing the restructured University of Paris after the 1968 student protests, yet his observations ring true of Rangoon University in the 1930s, where students were drawn from throughout the country, of different races, classes, and religions. They aspired for different professions and had varying visions of how to be modern; the university provided a venue for debating these and seeing themselves in comparison to each other. A female student wrote of different 'types' at Inya Hall, the residential hall for women, including 'hard-working students', 'slaves of fashion' who had to choose between fashionable feathers and 'nationalist' *pinnai*, and athletes perhaps 'dreaming of a Burmese regiment of Amazons to help defend the country in times of war or fight for equal rights with men in times of peace'.<sup>185</sup>

In the student body, there existed a range of arts and science associations, 'religious and racial fraternities, more social than intellectual in their activities', and the Student Union, where 'there was no lack of exciting and impassioned discussions'.<sup>186</sup> There were photography and radio clubs, literary and economics societies, and sports teams. Karen, Muslim, Chinese, Indian, and Anglo-Indian student associations sought to promote a strong sense of communal self-consciousness among peers. The Rangoon University Muslim Association had male and female members, and promoted better social relations and understanding with non-Muslims.<sup>187</sup> The Rangoon University Chinese Association held events featuring Chinese Dragon Dances, Burmese music, and cinema screenings. The University College Indian Association was particularly active in fostering political discussions regarding social issues in India. Shan students hosted Prince Damrong during a visit to the university while on his 1936 visit to Burma.<sup>188</sup> Multi-ethnic friendships also existed and were fostered through music, theatre, and sports. Frank Haskings co-founded with Prince Taw Paya Gyi (King Thibaw's grandson) a popular all-Burma youth organisation and the youth magazine *New Life*.<sup>189</sup>

<sup>184</sup> Michel de Certeau, *Culture in the Plural* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 47.

<sup>185</sup> 'The Buzz of an Inya Bee', *University College Magazine* 30:1 (1939): 80.

<sup>186</sup> Khaing, *Burmese Family*, p. 94.

<sup>187</sup> *University College Annual: Special New Year Number 1937*, p. 5.

<sup>188</sup> Damrong Rajanubhab, *Journey through Burma in 1936* (Bangkok: Riverbooks, 1991), p. 208.

<sup>189</sup> 'Publisher's Note', Frank Haskings, *Burma Yesterday and Tomorrow* (Bombay: Thacker & Co, 1944).

Though they were a privileged group, students began taking an idealistic, if naïve, interest in the welfare of the rest of the country. A popular course at Judson College was entitled 'Rural Reconstruction' and included weekend visits by student groups to rural communities in the vicinity of Rangoon, where they engaged in public health activities and supported the Rangoon Red Cross and government health services.<sup>190</sup> A 'Rural Reconstruction League' was also formed, prompting members of the Burma Education Extension to promote literacy alongside public health. A *World of Books* writer advocated that students on their long summer vacation should take their cue from Indian student workers and go out to the countryside armed with 'interesting pictures, a distribution of magazines, journals, and newspapers', and nothing less than a 'short but convincing talk on the current history of the world'.<sup>191</sup>

The centre of university politics was the Student Union. Although run by a majority of Burmese students, the union was led by U Raschid, an Indian Muslim, and member of the University Muslim Association and the Indian Association. Raschid's role as one of the most important members of the nationalist generation has been marginalised from the historiography of a nation that has not yet come to grips with the positive contribution of Indian Muslims in shaping it.<sup>192</sup> Raschid was unanimously elected as Union head in 1936 to replace U Nu, expelled due to a speech given at a student debate criticising the university's principal for interfering in the personal affairs of students. After Aung San was expelled for refusing to give the name of the author of the offensive 'Hell-hound' article in *Oway*, a meeting was held at the Student Union. Raschid took the floor, addressing a packed Union Hall audience in English, and succeeded in inspiring half of the combined student population of Rangoon University and Judson College to strike, including young women.<sup>193</sup> He led the students through a peaceful demonstration that resulted in the indefinite postponement of student examinations and the subsequent granting of all student demands. Although Raschid was born in India, he grew up, schooled, and worked among Burmese.

The notes written in Raschid's autograph book testify to the extraordinary friendships he had with the two leaders of post-colonial Burma.

<sup>190</sup> John Cady, 'Contacts with Burma: A Personal Account'. Paper presented at the Papers in International Studies Southeast Asia Series, No. 61 (Athens: Ohio University Centre for International Studies, 1983), p. 4.

<sup>191</sup> *World of Books*, 24:1, 1938, p. 486.

<sup>192</sup> Historians who have examined the contribution of Indians to modern Burmese history include Michael Adas, 'Immigrant Asians and the Economic Impact of European Imperialism: The Role of the South Indian Chettiars in British Burma', *Journal of Asian Studies* 33:3 (1974): 385–401, and Bayly, 'Rangoon (Yangon) 1939–49'.

<sup>193</sup> Aye Kyaw, *Voice of Young Burma*, p. 70.



Figure 19 Rangoon Student Union, 1936.

U Nu wrote: ‘I love those who love Burma: I love those who are honourable . . . I have loved, respected and followed you’. A note scrawled in Aung San’s handwriting read:

My dear Bhai’shid . . . From M.A. San to M.A. Raschid, but no M.A. after our names. This is one point of resemblance between us – but others too, which you know of course. We two have served together on University E.C. and perhaps will have to do so till our death.<sup>194</sup>

Death had a way of crystallising the scattered struggles of a generation. In 1938 nine years before the assassination of Burma’s post-colonial leaders (Aung San and six of his cabinet ministers), another death laid bare the hypocrisies of a colonial state’s desire to instil values of citizenship and civility among its youth. Ko Aung Gyaw, a student leader, was beaten to death by the Rangoon police. He became a student martyr, and his bereaved mother Daw Kyawt spoke at his funeral ceremony: ‘My son had not even a needle as a weapon . . . How can I ever forgive . . .’<sup>195</sup> Among the mass procession that marched through the streets of Rangoon

<sup>194</sup> Bilal Raschid, ‘M.A. Raschid: A Founding Father of Independent Burma’, biographical sketch sent to the author by email, 30 June 2009.

<sup>195</sup> Aye Kyaw, *Voice of Young Burma*, p. 84.

were a number of Indians who were said to be members of the Congress Party.<sup>196</sup> Police patrols were strengthened in anticipation of more violence resulting from an overflow of public anger.

Over a hundred students had been injured in the strike. The 1938 strike began over the arrest of Aung San, who succeeded Raschid as president and general secretary of the All Burma Student Union and the Rangoon University Student Union. The students picketed the secretariat buildings and the police used force even though protesters were beginning to withdraw. Women joined in, marching in fours. Khin Myo Chit gives a disturbing description of police brutality towards the young:

We were all just a lot of enthusiastic young people with no thought of violence. We were more like students on holiday than agitators. So it was a great shock when we were confronted by a group of baton-wielding policemen, some mounted. The policemen were all Indians and the mounted men were Anglo-Indians. All of a sudden, like a flash sequence on a cinema screen, everything became a confusion of horses' legs and batons and to my horror I saw girls falling in pools of blood on the tarred road. I tried to pick them up in my arms and soon blows fell on me. It was a nightmare. My mind flashed back to the massacre of the crusading children by the fierce Saracens. Ma Ma Tin's nieces and I came home bedraggled and covered with bruises and blood.<sup>197</sup>

In his observations on the aftermath of the strike, Aye Kyaw notes that most parents disapproved of nationalist political involvement, yet there was no proof that they worked hard to prevent their children from going into politics: 'it was the popular belief, then, that young college students had to instruct the people in the ways of democracy and had to lead the Burmese in their march towards national independence'.<sup>198</sup> Soul-searching between the old and the young followed in the pages of the English press. Dr Ba Maw's party was blamed. Parents were angry, arguing that their children were led astray. To this, one young student attempted to write in English to respond, arguing that they had joined the strike voluntarily.<sup>199</sup> A moderate letter from one student pleaded that the pressure of political involvement was too much for the young:

We may be 'emotional, irrational, credulous and apt to err greatly' . . . politics is not an easy game to be played by the youths. It is meant for the well-educated and matured men who can think and correct their errors . . . To take it up while our intellectual developments have not reached a high pitch means a fatal sacrifice of

<sup>196</sup> *Rangoon Gazette Weekly Budget*, 2 January 1939.

<sup>197</sup> Khin Myo Chit, 'Many a house of life hath held me' India Office Records: Maung Maung private papers, Mss Eur D 1066/1.

<sup>198</sup> Aye Kyaw, *Voice of Young Burma*, p. 80.

<sup>199</sup> 'A Reply to Parents Feelings', *Rangoon Gazette*, 2 January 1939, p. 3.

some of the would-be intellectual giants who would be of better service to the country in future.<sup>200</sup>

Schoolchildren followed the example of the university students. Parents wrote letters to school principals on the participation of students in picketing Rangoon Corporation's vernacular schools, government high schools, St. John's College, and St. Mary's high school. One read:

Many parents have allowed themselves to be manoeuvred and hoodwinked into a position in which they acquiesce in their children playing the part of protagonists in the political arena and arrogating to themselves the right to dictate to the Government, parents, elders and teachers. The situation is grotesque. The children of the country create civil disturbances, in order, presumably, to ventilate the grievances of parents who ought to use their power as voters to express grievances and to follow constitutional methods to rectify the grievances! The tail wags the dog ... In a certain district near Rangoon it has been put about that the streets of Rangoon are running with the blood of school children. Such propaganda is monstrous.<sup>201</sup>

The state was in crisis. It had lost its legitimacy not only to a generation of university students, but to angry ten-year-olds: by 1939, Rangoon was a city ruled by the young.

By setting these political movements within the context of the varied and everyday experiences of youth, we can appreciate the universality of anti-colonial feeling and widening of modern, political claim-making during this time. The student movement was built on a political vision of a new Burma beyond colonialism and beyond ethnic politics. This political vision also emerged on an international stage. Turning back to Paris, in 1939, the World Student Association organised an International Students' Conference to discuss and inform students on colonial problems. Representatives from the Arab world, Burma, Ceylon, Indonesia, India, Africa, as well as Europe took part. Burma was represented by Ko Thain Han, Maung Ko Lay, and Maung Kan Gyi, while Ko San Hywe, a Burman studying in Dublin, attended as an observer.<sup>202</sup> Burmese students reported on the development of student movements in Burma, beginning with the 1920 university strike and the opening of the national schools, the 1936 university strike and the brutal suppression of the 1938 civil disobedience campaign. The conference resulted in the promotion of closer relationship between students of colonial and metropolitan countries who exchanged publications and resolved to agitate against the colour bar and racial prejudice.<sup>203</sup> Burmese students had begun enacting

<sup>200</sup> *Rangoon Gazette*, 2 January 1939, p. 3.      <sup>201</sup> *Rangoon Gazette*, 7 January 1939, p. 7.

<sup>202</sup> 'Burma and Publicity Abroad', in *University College Magazine*, Vol. XI., No. 1, 1940. Reprinted in *Yangon teqátho hníq ngà-s'eh, 1920–1970*, p. 87.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 88–89.

a narrative of anti-colonial nationalism in the company of fellow students from around the world, and in so doing contributed to a global movement for post-colonial liberation driven by the young.

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Asian students were not simply ‘Westernised elites’ or ‘proto-nationalists’, but emerged within a pluralist and transnational educational framework in the 1920s and 1930s. Two generations of Asian students seized upon cleavages within colonial-era modernity that opened up new ways of thinking about the world, using new vocabularies for making political and cultural claims.<sup>204</sup> In the absence of open political debate, education became one of the most fiery and legitimate issues to be discussed in the press, featuring a spectrum of opinions advocating more English education at a younger age, wholly vernacular school systems, more funding for minority languages and migrant initiatives, linguistic assimilation, bilingual education, and universal education. As the first generation to receive education on a large scale, students took an active part in these debates within schools themselves, in their school magazines, in the press, and as visible political players on city streets. They became a critical and important voice for educational reform within a larger reading public, and had a transformative effect on society.

Their experiences emerged within a larger, global context in which youth were seen as symbolic of modern times, the ‘harbingers of the future’.<sup>205</sup> Discourse on ‘youth’ was everywhere, encouraged by a global popular culture that valorised the young and modern, while linking youth and nationalism in political struggles elsewhere in the world. The campus spilled out into the city, as the young became much more visible in urban public life. As diligent students, sportsmen, and aspiring professionals, they were the state’s most valuable assets; as delinquents, rebels, and *en masse*, they were its greatest fear. Among themselves, they forged friendships across racial and gender lines, and as the first generation to experience intellectual parity between the sexes, they transformed gender relations. It is to the broader, popular experiences of the young, and particularly the modern girl, that we now turn.

<sup>204</sup> Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, p. 145.

<sup>205</sup> Adrian Bingham, *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Inter-war Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004), p. 83.

## 6 Gramophones, Cinema Halls, and Bobbed Hair

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In the 1920s and 1930s, one of the most visible changes in cities around the world was the appearance of the modern girl – in the city, in print, and as a spectacle-in-motion on stage and screen. She emerged within a broad landscape of popular modernity, one that inspired a new generation to strive to become ‘modern’. With the cultural ascendancy of jazz, cinema, and Art Deco, Victorian England was no longer the index of Western-style modernity for a small elite. Modernity emerged audibly and visibly, in multiple centres, constantly remade within an inter-connected web of popular culture. Urbanites from Cairo to Tokyo experienced simultaneous encounters with new technologies of sound and cinematic imagery. Young Asians listened to the newest jazz numbers, watched the latest Hollywood movies and saw live performances of touring Western and Asian companies. New movements in the West drew on the global and exotic; jazz had roots in African and Latin American rhythm, while Art Deco, a movement named for the first time in Paris, looked laterally to the East, to Africa, and Latin America in search of a truly international style. Asian urbanites revelled in Hollywood, Bombay, and Shanghai cinema and consumed new products from America and Asia – from Japanese cameras to cheap Chinese-manufactured household goods, and, for some, Detroit automobiles. The interlinked web of capital and consumption fuelled and shaped the growth of the middle classes around the world. It was partly, at least, due to an increase in global consumer demands for motorcars, and the rise of the car as a local status symbol, that colonial Malaya’s rubber economy boomed, leading to a marked expansion of its middle class, particularly in comparison to the rice economies of Siam and Burma.

The growth of popular culture created a horizontal, imaginary affiliation with other consumers of popular culture around the world, fostering a new sense of globalism through sensory experience. Miriam Hansen has argued that Hollywood cinema presented ‘something like the first global vernacular’ for mediating and articulating an experience of the

modern.<sup>1</sup> This occurred even earlier through the mechanical reproduction of sound and image. From around 1920, the gramophone and the wireless created a new, mass experience of listening to music and stories, divorced from live experience and occurring in the comfort of one's home, or in the home of one's neighbour, or in a crowd on a street. Removal of the immediacy of connection to the performance resulted in a profound change in one's cultural milieu. Freed from a dependence on local performance rituals, mechanical reproduction allowed culture to be experienced by a mass and global audience. The most marked characteristic of popular culture was that it was de-centred from its point of origin and locality, divorced from the performer and the 'aura' of the artist.<sup>2</sup> The graphic imagery of advertising and cartoons lent a visual simultaneity to newspapers around the world, a stark change from purely text-based broadsheets. Culture became a commodity, sold through the appeal of stylised images. Cinema further integrated graphic motifs in print culture, as movie posters, advertising, and new pulp fiction fed off and fed into the cinematic world. Walter Armbrust's observation of Egyptian popular culture – that it 'has no up, no down, no beginning or end' – encapsulates the spread of popular cultures in Southeast Asia and around the world.<sup>3</sup> They were inter-textual, comprised of sound, screen, and print media that referred back to and reflected each other; they fused local forms of performance with new sounds and technologies, adapted Western stories while reviving classical texts and experimenting with local and pan-Asian literary and cultural forms. Asian producers and artists re-invented popular theatre through new musical influences and instruments, while providing potential new stars for fledgling local film industries.

Throughout the region, Asian women were heard for the first time on the radio as singers and seen on stage as performers.<sup>4</sup> Both Western and

<sup>1</sup> Miriam Bratu Hansen, 'The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism', *Modernism/Modernity* 6:2 (1999): 66.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 217–52.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Shanghai scholars in particular have highlighted the links between gender and popular culture. See Lee, *Shanghai modern*, pp. 168 ff.; Michael G. Chang, 'The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Movie Actresses and Public Discourse in Shanghai, 1920s–1930s' and Andrew D. Field, 'Selling Souls in Sin City: Shanghai Singing and Dancing Hostesses in Print, Film, and Politics, 1920–1949', in *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922–1943*, ed. Yingjin Zhang (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Andrew F. Jones, 'The Sing-Song Girl and the Nation: Music and Media Culture in Republican Shanghai', in *Constructing Nationhood in Modern East Asia*, ed. Kai-wing Chow, Kevin M. Doak, and Poshek Fu (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), pp. 317–42.



Asian actresses appeared as active, independent agents on screen, as career women, struggling prostitutes, and romantic leads. The visual imagery of the 'modern girl' has been decoded in various national contexts by the authors of *The Modern Girl Around the World*.<sup>5</sup> She emerged as a global advertising phenomenon, characterised around the world by her 'bobbed hair, painted lips, provocative clothing, elongated body, and open, easy smile'.<sup>6</sup> Yet in Southeast Asia, where diverse Asian and Western cultural influences intersected, women read and saw different 'national' versions of the modern women on screen and in print, and drew on a discourse of international feminism. The globalism engendered by popular culture brought the 'spectre of comparisons' directly into the realm of the local, inspiring new ways by which urbanites could articulate their own version of modernity.<sup>7</sup>

The emergence of the modern woman in cinema and advertising was paralleled by new, actual achievements of women in the public sphere. More women were going to school, entering the professions, and playing a role as active consumers as well as active citizens. Often for the first time, the modern girl could choose who she could be and whom she could marry. Society, particularly young men, both applauded and criticised her, and in many cases she fought back, either through direct engagement through the press or by continuing to exercise her independence in the public sphere. She posed a challenge to the more conservative elements within her own kin and community, yet by encouraging her liberalism, her education, and her achievements, cultures could be remade and reinvented.

Occupying the imaginations of people throughout the globe, the modern girl provided a threshold to 'modernity' that had to be crossed locally. I use 'modernity' here not as a measure of progress within an evolutionary, linear model of history, but as a tool within national and colonial discourses of power and representation, which allowed Europeans, Africans, and Asians to forge communities and argue for political and cultural change within their societies.<sup>8</sup> In looking at local manifestations of the modern girl, many scholars have focused on the role of modern women in articulating new national identities. She was a controversial figure: while her role as a consumer attuned to the fashion world generated charges of superficiality, her independence was heralded as a necessary marker of civilisational progress. In Japan, the modern girl, or *moga*, with her bobbed hair and short skirts, was a 'powerful symbol of

<sup>5</sup> See Modern Girl Around the World Research Group et al., *Modern Girl around the World*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2. <sup>7</sup> Anderson, *Spectre of Comparisons*.

<sup>8</sup> See Cooper on 'Modernity', in *Colonialism in Question*, pp. 113–49.

Taishi modernity', generating anxieties among intellectuals and the public at large about the direction of Japanese society.<sup>9</sup> In India, images of Bombay cinema actresses of the 1920s in varied modes of Western and Asian dress, symbolising their cosmopolitan modernity, were deplored in the 1930s by powerful elites seeking to promote via cinema the modest, sari-clad Hindu woman as the model for emerging nationalism.<sup>10</sup> In both China and India, the symbol of the modern girl was, for better or worse, 'part of a modernising discourse that made possible the imagining of a new nation'.<sup>11</sup> Hindu reformers and Chinese republicans attempted to set agendas for educational and social reform for women.

Much of the above scholarship focuses on the role of men in attempting to discipline the modern girl in service of the nation; Chie Ikeya highlights this on her own work on the modern woman in Burma.<sup>12</sup> While I am indebted to Ikeya's work in unravelling the complexities of gender, nationalism, and modernity in colonial Burma, I take a slightly different view by focusing on the attempts by modern women to articulate a new role for themselves as independent and moral agents. Urban middle-class women played a central role in new debates about sex, love, and morality, as Scot Barmé has shown in a Bangkok context. Penang, meanwhile, provides a case study of the way in which the modern girl was used as a trope of self-definition by a multi-ethnic society, used to publicly articulate a shared sense of cosmopolitanism.<sup>13</sup> Debates about the modern girl and changing gender relations provided a platform for educated men and women to position themselves as a new, progressive, and up-to-date urbanites who sought to align themselves with global discourses of new-found independence for women and the young, while testing 'traditional' frameworks of morality and authenticity. The modern girl, and her relationship to the modern boy, formed a central axis of debate around which tensions of nationalism and cosmopolitanism converged.

We begin by situating the emergence of the modern girl within the vibrant, cosmopolitan context of urban life in this era and the diversity of cultural influences on popular culture. Via their consumption of popular culture, the city provided a venue for young Asian men and women to

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Sato, *The New Japanese Woman: Modernity, Media, and Women in Interwar Japan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 49–56.

<sup>10</sup> See Kaushik Bhaumik, 'Sulochana: Clothes, Stardom and Gender in Early Indian Cinema', in *Sulochana: Clothes, Stardom, and Gender in Early Indian Cinema*, ed. Rachel Moseley (London: British Film Institute, 2005), pp. 87–97.

<sup>11</sup> Louise Edwards, 'Policing the Modern Woman in Republican China', in *Modern China*, 26:2 (2000): 115–47.

<sup>12</sup> See Chie Ikeya, 'The Modern Burmese Woman and the Politics of Fashion in Colonial Burma', *Journal of Asian Studies* 67:4 (2008): 1277–308.

<sup>13</sup> Lewis, 'Cosmopolitanism and the Modern Girl'.

'authenticate' and display their own version of modernity.<sup>14</sup> Fashion and the modern girl emerged as part and parcel of this process. Yet women were not merely objects for speculation, but defended themselves and articulated their new role, participating in new debates about morality and changing gender relations. They did so in dialogue with young men and were often supported by a progressive, older generation of Asian cosmopolitans who valued their role as 'harbingers of the future'.<sup>15</sup> The way in which these debates played out speaks to the varying ways and extent to which it was possible for new urban middle-class men and women to be cosmopolitans as well as patriots.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, through popular culture, Asians were increasingly becoming aware of shifts in perception of the Asian city. While Europeans described its downtown core and ethnic enclaves as mysterious, exotic, and underground, the Asian city was quickly becoming a marker of cosmopolitan modernity, characterised by its youth, dynamism, diversity, and visible liberality.

### Soundscapes and Cinema in Globalising the City

In 1941, a story appeared in Rangoon's *University College Annual* depicting an 'old-fashioned Burman' shocked to hear 'Johnny', a popular radio DJ adored by the Burmese public, introducing his audience to the Swiss art of yodelling. The narrator thus assured him:

This is the modern trend in Burmese music. Like the modern trend, you know, in Chinese and Japanese and Siamese music. The whole East is going Far West. And Johnny is nothing. Listen, tomorrow I'll bring you a whole set of records such as the younger generation swoons over in ecstasies. I'll give you an idea of what it's like. There's Morning Tin Tin singing *Goo-da-maw-nin da-lin*. Then film star May Than in *Oh-swee tee-da-lin* – I love you. But you must have the latest – positively the latest Topical songs like *Aingyipah* and *Tha-ma-wa-ya-ma* by Ma Kyi Aung the famed Burmese singer – all put to sweet English tunes ...<sup>17</sup>

The story highlighted the transition between indigenous and global popular music, and between the tastes of the old and the tastes of the young, that characterised the sensory transformation of the modern Asian city. The writer explained the nature of the 'modern trend' that had created this generational rift, blaming the flooding of the gramophone market with 'Burmese renderings of English songs, well mixed, and loudly

<sup>14</sup> See E. Taylor Atkins, *Blue Nippon: Authenticating Jazz in Japan* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> Bingham, *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press*, p. 83.

<sup>16</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, 'Cosmopolitan Patriots', *Critical Inquiry* 23:3 (1997): 617–39.

<sup>17</sup> Minthuwan, 'Burmese Nursery Songs', *University College Annual Magazine* 11:1 (1940).

accompanied by Hawaiian guitars, Hill Billy Banjos, Harlem (Negro) Saxophones and Cornets. What a tragedy if this trend does not stop before swing and hot-cha comes creeping in – and how unbearably comic it must be to others.<sup>18</sup>

Comic as it seemed, simple, punchy standard jazz tunes, usually created for musicals and vaudeville acts in America, were adapted by Burmese musicians as they were by musicians around the world as a platform for experimentation, transformed into something fresh, new, and wholly modern. Through the proliferation of gramophones, the same phenomenon occurred all over the world, including in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.<sup>19</sup> The spread of popular music was never a case of simple diffusion from West to East. Rather, the gramophone industry had grown up dependent on revenues from an emerging, multi-centred global market. Newly minted corporations such as the Victor Talking Machine Company, the Gramophone Company, and the Compagnie Phonographique Frères fanned out across the globe from the turn of the century searching for new sounds and consumers.<sup>20</sup> They were highly dependent on local and regional interlocutors. Fred Gaisberg made the first foray into the Asian market when he arrived in India in 1902. With the help of Amarendra Dutt and Jamshedi Madan, the doyens of the Calcutta theatre world, he recorded several hundred titles in Calcutta and then moved eastwards, setting up ad-hoc recording studios in his hotel rooms and using local agents.<sup>21</sup> Between 1900 and 1910, the Gramophone Company had made 4,410 recordings in India, 508 in Burma, 121 in Malaya, 97 in Siam, and 93 in Java.<sup>22</sup> The recordings were sent back to Europe, processed and shipped back to local agents (such as Solomon and Co. in Rangoon) along with gramophones manufactured by the same company.<sup>23</sup> Columbia and RCA followed the trend (Gramophone became ‘His Master’s Voice’ in 1924).<sup>24</sup> Sheer market capitalism, motivated by the need to sell as many records as possible, had resulted in the preservation of diverse musical traditions and the

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> See Atkins, *Blue Nippon*; Andrew F. Jones, *Yellow Music: Media Culture and Colonial Modernity in the Chinese Jazz Age* (Durham, N.C.; London: Duke University Press, 2001); John Baxendale, ‘... Into Another Kind of Life in Which Anything Might Happen’: Popular Music and Late Modernity, 1910–1930’, *Popular Music* 14:2 (1995): 137–54.

<sup>20</sup> See Jones, *Yellow Music*, pp. 13–14; Pekka Gronow, ‘The Record Industry Comes to the Orient’, *Ethnomusicology* 25:2 (1981): 251–84.

<sup>21</sup> Michael S. Kinnear, *The Gramophone Company’s First Indian Recordings, 1899–1908* (London: Sangam Books, 1994), pp. 11–20; Gronow, ‘The Record Industry Comes to the Orient’, p. 253.

<sup>22</sup> Gronow, ‘The Record Industry Comes to the Orient’, p. 255.

<sup>23</sup> Kinnear, *Gramophone Company’s First Indian Recordings*, p. 45. <sup>24</sup> Ibid.



Figure 20 Columbia record of Burmese and Indian music, c. 1930s.

exposure of local Asian audiences to new forms of both Western and Asian music.

Asian musicians brought jazz to a new generation, creating a mode of authentic belonging to modern popular culture experienced simultaneously around the world. Recognisable refrains had a global resonance, traceable to standard chord changes, but localised through the addition of new melodies, experimentation with different instruments, and linguistic and lyrical adaptation. Burmese musicians created their own forms of hybrid popular music, engaging audiences by mixing both traditional and modern styles. They worked with popular Burmese women singers such as Ma Than E and Ma Khyi Aung. Burmese melodies were mixed with a cha-cha rhythm on the piano, or a Western melody with Burmese lyrics that worked with Burmese



Figure 21 HMV record of Burmese music, c. 1930s.

drum patterns.<sup>25</sup> Khaing described Burmese popular music in the 1930s: ‘The technique was to take the refrain of a Western jazz tune as the repetitive theme, with a slight alteration to the rhythm, and to embroider this extensively with a slapdash quality of Burmese turns of melody.’<sup>26</sup> The ‘Isle of Capri’, a sentimental jazz tune with a slight polka rhythm, popularised by the British crooner Al Bowly in 1934, was transformed into a rich, textured melody and sung in a girlish garble by the charismatic Ma Kyi Aung. This was not a case of colonial mimicry. The content of the song had political purchase, its lyrics attacking colonial culture; Khaing describes it as a ‘sickly

<sup>25</sup> Kit Young (ethnomusicologist), e-mail message to author, 26 March 2010.

<sup>26</sup> Khaing, *Burmese Family*, p. 119.

account of a romantic meeting in isle of Capri converted into a satirical skit on the Rangoon fashion of giving garden tea-parties in the English manner'.<sup>27</sup> The tune was expanded, re-worked, and became an instant success, with the original song chords remaining only as a faint refrain.

The transformation of the 'Isle of Capri' into a parody of colonial culture echoes the practice of Filipino jazz musicians, the 'minstrels of the South China Sea', who created an atmosphere of irony, humour, and carnival during their performances.<sup>28</sup> Lee Watkins argues that these musicians echoed the 'minstrelsy' of blackface performers in nineteenth-century America, who attacked the excessive lifestyles of the European-inspired dominant culture through parody.<sup>29</sup> Filipino jazz musicians were commissioned to provide the latest American music at hotels and dance halls in Singapore, Penang, Rangoon, and Bangkok. The Manila Orchestra Company called on musicians in Bangkok to 'become popular and play for profit or pleasure.'<sup>30</sup> In Shanghai, as Watkins observes, Filipino musicians 'took out whatever frustrations they had through boxing and had good relations with everyone else.'<sup>31</sup> An oral history highlights this unexplored link between boxing and music in Penang, where a struggling Filipino saxophonist in Penang raised his family in a *kampung* community of Filipinos, Indians, Jews, and Eurasians, many of them boxers and musicians.<sup>32</sup> The Filipino contribution to the development of 'national' music cultures in Southeast Asia is evident in their influences on aspiring performers in the 1930s, such as P. Ramlee, Malaya's most beloved performer in the 1950s. Ramlee followed the latest bands arriving from each engagement, listening to each number and comparing their approaches, techniques, and styles.<sup>33</sup>

Musicians in port-cities drew from an eclectic range of influences. The vibrant, cacophonous streetscape of colonial Penang included Western popular music, Chinese opera, Malay and Tamil songs, and Indonesian *kronchong*. In the 1930s, musicians of the 'Moonlight Gay Melodians', a young Chinese jazz group with one Thai musician, followed various street festivals and music styles and listened to box-radios in coffee-shops and neighbours' houses.<sup>34</sup> Catering to demand, they

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Lee Watkins, 'Minstrelsy and Mimesis in the South China Sea: Filipino Migrant Musicians, Chinese Hosts, and the Disciplining of Relations in Hong Kong', *Asian Music* 40:2 (2009): 72–99.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 76. <sup>30</sup> *Bangkok Daily Mail*, 30 September 1930, p. 5. <sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>32</sup> Harold de Castro, oral history interview conducted by Michelle Low, 2 September 2005, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Disc 1.

<sup>33</sup> James Harding and Ahmad Sarji, *P. Ramlee: The Bright Star* (Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk Publications, 2002), p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> Khoo Kay Hin. Interview by author. Penang, 21 August 2007.

usually played popular Malay music, even at Chinese New Year festivals.<sup>35</sup> Bangsawan orchestras, characterised by their flexibility, incorporated new instruments from the saxophone to Spanish maracas to the Malay *rembana*, a frame drum with possible origins in the Middle East.<sup>36</sup> Burmese orchestras frequently incorporated foreign instruments such as the piano, violin, mandolin, Hawaiian slide guitar, Chinese lute, and banjo, experimenting in their accompaniment of silent movies.<sup>37</sup> In Bangkok, Western show tunes, jazz, and tango became popular via the gramophone. Kru Eua Sunthornsanan (1910–81) returned from studies in England to work in the fine arts department, where he was first introduced to jazz music. As a violinist and student of classical music, he began translating traditional Thai songs into Western musical scales, recording the re-worked Thai melodies in 1931.<sup>38</sup> Eua popularised the trend when, in 1936, he began combining jazz and classical Thai music in scores for new Thai movies.<sup>39</sup>

In Colombo, recording companies latched onto popular theatre stars, turning their vocal talents into saleable commodities that facilitated the emergence of a mass culture of Tamil music and created records that made their way to the Straits with Tamil migrants.<sup>40</sup> Similar transformations occurred in Burma and Penang, where popular theatre stars reached new audiences through records. The capital acquired by major local stars, such as Po Sein, from such ventures helped to transform traditional popular theatre itself. Around 1910, partly to release him from a contract with a shrewd theatrical agent and partly to introduce him to new influences and techniques, the recording company HMV sent Po Sein to India. He travelled to Jaipur to see Kathak dance, finding similarities with the rhythmic local dances of Burmese villages, and to an Indian circus in Kompur, where he learned that through a performance hall one could watch a performance without the distractions of an outdoor setting, and facilitate the collection of admission tickets.<sup>41</sup> In Allahabad and Calcutta, Po Sein witnessed scenes from the Ramayana and the heroic

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. <sup>36</sup> Tan, *Bangsawan*, pp. 76–77.

<sup>37</sup> Kit Young, 'The Strange, The Familiar: Foreign Musical Instruments in Myanmar/Burma', *Asia Society* (30 November 2003 ([www.asiasociety.org/arts-culture/performing-arts/music/the-strange-the-familiar-foreign-musical-instruments-myanmarburma](http://www.asiasociety.org/arts-culture/performing-arts/music/the-strange-the-familiar-foreign-musical-instruments-myanmarburma) last accessed 17 August 2010).

<sup>38</sup> Kitchana Lersakvanitchakul, '35 Most Influential Thais: Eua Sunthornsanan – A Virtuoso', *The Nation: Arts & Culture Magazine* (July 2006), 106.

<sup>39</sup> Lersakvanitchakul, '35 Most Influential Thais: Eua Sunthornsanan', 106.

<sup>40</sup> On the growth of Tamil popular music, see Stephen Putnam Hughes, 'Music in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Drama, Gramophone, and the Beginnings of Tamil Cinema', *Journal of Asian Studies* 66:1 (2007): 3–34.

<sup>41</sup> Maung Khe Sein and Joseph A. Whitley, *The Great Po Sein* (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 1998), pp. 57–59.



historical plays of Bengali theatre guru Girish Chandra Ghosh. He was inspired to return to Burma and begin the dramatisation of the *Jataka* stories on the life of Buddha.<sup>42</sup> By the 1920s, Po Sein had acquired a troupe of 180 dancers and introduced complicated group dances modelled on those of the Siamese Royal Court.

Other innovations included the introduction of more intimate partner dancing on stage, a departure from the tradition that the *mintha* and *minthami* (lead dancers) remain a shawl's length apart.<sup>43</sup> This newfound intimacy also occurred in new dance halls, discussed later in the chapter, that were symptomatic of changes that popular culture brought throughout the world. In Britain, popular music signalled changes in gender relations 'with a new focus on the couple as an expressive and consuming unit', and music and dance playing a mediating role.<sup>44</sup> In Penang, bangsawan theatre featured more emotional expression than traditional *wayang* (puppet) theatre, with lovers using endearments and being able to 'touch hands, giggle, and sit next to each other', while nonetheless showing emotional control and restraint.<sup>45</sup> The creation of new and 'authentic' national popular cultures, drawing on a range of influences from abroad, also internalised and visibly promoted the liberalisation of gender relations.

In Penang, the popular musical theatre form of bangsawan came to symbolise a hybrid and authentically cosmopolitan form of Straits culture, fusing a number of diasporic, foreign, and local influences. Bangsawan had emerged since the nineteenth century by mingling Parsee theatre with Arab and Malay influences, later adding Western subplots and Italian opera inspired by touring vaudeville and operetta troupes. Tan Sooi Beng's landmark study of bangsawan in colonial Malaya stresses the variety of its appeal to a multi-ethnic audience, where an evening featured a Hindustani or Arabic fairy-tale, a Shakespearean tragedy, a Chinese romance, and an English or Dutch play – although performers would always speak in Malay, which was understood by most of the audience.<sup>46</sup> Types of audience were always taken into account when selecting stories for bangsawan plays, and the variety of music and dance numbers included not only a diverse range of Asian music, but also 'exotic' numbers such as Hungarian, Cossack, and Hawaiian dances.<sup>47</sup> Bangsawan songs were recorded by major recording companies, becoming popular hits of the day. Bangsawan actors and actresses learned the latest dances (the tango, blues, Charleston, foxtrot,

<sup>42</sup> Khe Sein and Whitley, *The Great Po Sein*, p. 60. <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* p. 78.

<sup>44</sup> John Baxendale, "'... Into Another Kind of Life'", p. 143.

<sup>45</sup> Tan Sooi Beng, *Bangsawan: A Social and Stylistic History of Popular Malay Opera*, p. 124.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38. <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

quickstep, waltz, and the rumba) from the talkies, which were later emulated in Penang's dance halls.<sup>48</sup> While bangsawan grew especially popular with young people, it also began losing not only audiences but its greatest stars to the cinema. Top performers were lured to the big cinema houses, such as the Shaw Brothers, to become film stars.<sup>49</sup>

Asian and Western music surged through the gramophone and the radio, injecting new life into leisure entertainment, particularly among the urban young. In Penang, George Bilainkin unwittingly unravelled the myth of the 'legendary' life of European expatriates in the tropics in his observations of bored expatriate barflies and lonely hearts, placing them in sharp contrast to the vibrant, leisurely life of Asians and Eurasians, who could be found drinking, gossiping, and listening to gramophone music until the early hours of the morning.<sup>50</sup> The 1941 story at the beginning of this section stated that the 'old-fashioned Burman' had not been exposed to the 'sound of gramophones blaring out tunes from the latest Burmese records on Dalhousie Street in West Rangoon. If he had passed swiftly in a car, the raucous noises he heard, he put down to the dratted Chinese.'<sup>51</sup> In Bangkok, inhabitants in crowded downtown residential areas complained of the noise from Chinese families who played some form of music reminiscent of 'the wailing of lost souls' speakers loud into the night, compared to a Thai family next door who played a wireless quietly without speakers.<sup>52</sup> The city was permeated with new technologies of sound and an eclectic mix of styles, brought in by migrants and the young. Just as the young were those most willing to seize new forms of popular culture that brought them in touch with a wider, modern world, so migrant communities seized the opportunity to connect to a diasporic homeland through the wide availability of Chinese and Tamil music.

Unlike jazz, which could be easily adapted into local musical forms, local cinema would need a greater degree of capital and vision to match the cultural impact of major international film industries. In Rangoon, though young English-speaking men and women were won over by Burmese jazz, they rarely went to Burmese films, choosing instead to go Hollywood movies.<sup>53</sup> Why were Hollywood movies so overwhelmingly popular with such diverse audiences? In her study of the early Shanghai

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 44; Che Bahrudin. Interview by author. Penang. 11 December 2007.

<sup>49</sup> Che Bahrudin. Interview by author. Penang. 6 December 2007.

<sup>50</sup> George Bilainkin, *Hail Penang!*, p. 91.

<sup>51</sup> Minthuwun, 'Burmese Nursery Songs', *University College Annual Magazine* 11:1 (1940), Reprinted in *Yangon teqkàtho hniq ngà-s'eh, 1920-1970*, p. 100.

<sup>52</sup> 'Voice of the People', *Bangkok Daily Mail*, 29 September 1929, p. 5.

<sup>53</sup> Khaing, *Burmese Family*, p. 119.

film industry, Hansen attributes this in part to the immigrant composition of 1920s Hollywood, arguing:

The devices by which Hollywood succeeded in amalgamating a diversity of competing traditions, discourses, and interests on the *domestic* level, that is, by forging a mass public out of an ethnically and culturally heterogeneous society . . . may have accounted for at least some of the generalised appeal and robustness of Hollywood products *abroad* (a success in which the immigrant, and relatively cosmopolitan, profile of the Hollywood community no doubt played a part as well).<sup>54</sup>

Rangoon film producers made similar observations about the broad appeal of Hollywood movies in interviews with the Indian Cinematograph Committee in 1928. The Committee's report is a fascinating sociological record of the film world of colonial India, including Burma. A key finding of the committee was that the cinema had reinforced ethnic and class lines: Burmese went to see Burmese films, Indians to Indian films, Chinese to Chinese films, while Western films managed to attract the English-educated members across all ethnicities, and 'first class features' such as the *Thief of Baghdad* attracted 'every caste and creed'. When a group of film producers were asked why such films were able to appeal to diverse audiences, one responded:

The Western films are universal ones. They are universal to all . . . Everyone likes to see his own people and his own surroundings. Our films would not appeal to others, on account of the nature of the subject matter and it would not have a market in the West because they are accustomed to their own needs. Our films have not come up to their standard.<sup>55</sup>

Local Burmese films thus failed to do what Hollywood films had done in America in assembling a diversity of competing traditions that appealed to a broad spectrum of people.

Nonetheless, local cinema industries were certainly not parochial in their vision. As in Hollywood, investment in the cinema was a cosmopolitan affair, built on the initiative of immigrants with capital and vision. Japanese promoters introduced films early on to Bangkok and Penang.<sup>56</sup> A company formed by a group of Indian film magnates, Madan Theatres, established the first theatres in Rangoon, which along with Bombay and Calcutta became one of the key centres in India for the

<sup>54</sup> Miriam Bratu Hansen, 'Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Film as Vernacular Modernism', *Film Quarterly*, 54:1 (2000): 10–22.

<sup>55</sup> *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee* (Calcutta: Government of India Central Publication Branch, 1928) p. 568.

<sup>56</sup> On Bangkok, see Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, p. 44. On Penang, see Clement Liang, 'The Prewar Japanese Community in Penang during the period 1880–1940', Paper presented at the Penang Story conference, 18–21 April (available online at <http://penangstory.net.my/docs/Abs-ClementLiang.doc>), p. 5.

emerging Indian motion-picture industry. During the investigations of the Indian Cinematograph Committee, Madans defended itself against charges that it had pushed out the local Burmese cinema industry, arguing that it had provided two theatres to show Burmese films and leased halls to Burmese producers at a low rate.<sup>57</sup> Directors from Bombay and Madras were also instrumental in establishing the Malay film industry, beginning with the production of *Laila Majnun* in 1933, and initially echoing the subject, style, and music of early Indian cinema.<sup>58</sup> The Shaw Brothers, meanwhile, branched out to Southeast Asia from Shanghai and Hongkong, exemplifying, as Poshek Fu notes, the ‘cosmopolitan, boundary-crossing business culture of diasporic Chinese capitalism in the realm of mass entertainment.’<sup>59</sup> The British Guyana-born Chinese Ho Ah Loke (brother-in-law of Penang’s Lim Cheng Ean) joined forces with the Shaws, building a chain of Odeon cinemas from Bangkok to Singapore.<sup>60</sup> According to Ho’s nephew Lim Kean Siew, he saw the value in ‘locally produced Malay films made locally for local people’ where the Shaw Brothers did not.<sup>61</sup> Other doyens of the Penang Chinese community invested in cinema. Khoo Sian Ewe built one of Penang’s first cinemas, the Majestic, in 1924. By the 1940s, there were thirty to forty permanent theatres throughout Malaya, with the larger theatres open seven days a week and averaging forty-eight performances a month.<sup>62</sup>

Siam’s film industry had links to the Straits and the wider region. Siaw S’onguan Sibunr’urang, schooled in Malacca and fluent in English, Malay, and Hokkien, established the first cinema company in Bangkok, the Siam Cinema Company. In contrast to the Western names of cinemas in Shanghai and Rangoon – the Odeon, the Palladium, the Excelsor – the names of the cinemas operated by Siam Cinema Company in Bangkok had either Thai names (the Sathorn, the Phathanakorn, the Banglamphu) or names associated with the region: the Hong Kong, the Penang, the Singapore, the Java.<sup>63</sup> Bangkok’s film magnates either actively or

<sup>57</sup> *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee*, p. 611.

<sup>58</sup> Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, ‘The South Asian Cultural Impact Upon Penang’, Paper presented at the Penang Story Conference, 2001.

<sup>59</sup> Poshek Fu, ‘Introduction’, in *China Forever: The Shaw Brothers and Diasporic Cinema*, ed. Poshek Fu (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008), p. 4.

<sup>60</sup> See William van der Heide, *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2002), pp. 118–19; Lim Kean Siew, *The Eye over the Golden Sands: The Memoirs of a Penang family* (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1997), p. 119.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Rex Stevenson, ‘Cinemas and Censorship in Colonial Malaya’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 5:2 (1974): 219; John A. Lent, *Asian Film Industry* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1990), p. 187.

<sup>63</sup> Erik Seidenfaden, *1928 Guide to Bangkok* (Bangkok: Royal State Railways of Siam, 1928); Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*.

unwittingly promoted a new, regional landscape of popular Asian modernity within Bangkok's urban landscape.

Cinema permeated into every aspect of popular culture. Artists made their first commissions by designing movie posters; aspiring jazz musicians composed film scores, and cinematic plots found their way into popular, urban street literature. This resulted in the proliferation of a popular, night-time entertainment culture. Street-stalls, coffee-shops, and eating houses cropped up around the experience of going to see a film, resulting in complaints about night-time noise levels to the press.<sup>64</sup> Rangoon University students skipped classes and went to the evening cinema, feasting at Chinese restaurants after the show to return late to be locked out of their residence halls.<sup>65</sup> Equally, local street practices also seeped into the cinema; Penang's Lim Kean Chye, who stopped in Rangoon on his way to England to study, went to see Bette Davis' *Jezebel* in a Rangoon cinema and fainted due to the haze from foot-long cheroots smoked by Burmese women.<sup>66</sup>

Cinema houses were sites of rampant squalor and anarchic, disorderly behaviour. As such, they served as sources of anxiety to both the colonial and absolutist state in Siam. As in Penang, where crowds filed out of the theatre as 'God Save the King' played, crowds in Bangkok refused to pay patriotic respect to Siam's national anthem, milling out of the cinema hall, talking noisily, and paying little attention.<sup>67</sup> State authorities, meanwhile, worried about the mass gatherings of people in the cinema that could potentially break into a riot, signalling their role as new, democratic spaces. Attempts made to discipline the crowd through security guards were met with harsh criticisms in the local press:

As the last embrace flashes across the screen and another 6000 feet of film ends its trip through the machines, the *jagas* [guards] spring out of their coma and bang shut the big doors. This is to stop the hordes of Asia making a dash for the street when 'God Save the King' blares forth. Not until the last bars have died away can anybody move. A strange way to imbue people with feelings of loyalty.<sup>68</sup>

Colonial censorship practices have long been linked to fears of the loss of white prestige, as authorities worried about the reaction of Asian 'natives' to seeing white men and women in intimate, compromised settings.<sup>69</sup> Asians also employed their own practices of censorship. In Rangoon, middle-class Asian women were concerned about cinema's depiction of

<sup>64</sup> *Straits Echo*, 9 September 1989, p. 13.

<sup>65</sup> Tet Toe, 'Dark before Dawn', *University College Annual Vol. II*, p. 16.

<sup>66</sup> Lim Kean Chye. Interview by author. Penang, 21 March 2008.

<sup>67</sup> Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, p. 72. George Bilainkin, *Hail Penang!*

<sup>68</sup> 'Random Notes', *Straits Echo*, 30 March 1938.

<sup>69</sup> See Stevenson, 'Cinemas and Censorship in Colonial Malaya', pp. 209–24.

'love scenes' between white men and women. This was a generational issue as much as a cultural one. Khaing wrote that while she and her friends went to Hollywood films, her mother and aunts chose Burmese films instead: 'My mother and aunts like the way love is depicted in Burmese films, concentrating on sentimentality rather than sex – American films make them uncomfortable'.<sup>70</sup> Asian as well as European respondents to the Indian Cinematograph Committee's report commented on the worrying amount of love scenes and the low moral standard of the films. Europeans who had lived in Burma for a long time noted that Burmese films showed a higher degree of 'decency' than American films. The National Council of Women in Burma, made up of Western as well as Asian women, issued its own report on the state of Burmese films, advocating for stricter censorship guidelines. Ma Lay Kin, a schoolmistress and representative of the board, accounted for the establishment of the Rangoon Vigilance Society due to high degrees of crime and lowered moral standards. She objected to the 'pictures of women almost naked, close-up kisses, crime', especially young children, who were making a habit of going to the cinema due to the serialisation of films.<sup>71</sup> Hollywood was to blame: 'In Los Angeles, the actors and actresses emphasise loose life.'<sup>72</sup> The involvement of these Asian women in policing cinema's moral boundaries, particularly in protecting children from 'adult' content, indicates their increasing prominence and activism in civic life, and their desire to control the effects of Western cultural production on their own societies, particularly on the young.

Others deemed the NCW's report too 'puritanical', one arguing that cinema impressions were of a 'temporary nature' that did little harm.<sup>73</sup> The Burma Cinema Film Producers' Association complained that the 'vogue' of censorship deterred creative production, interfering with plot lines and dictating that men and women were not to touch each other. While Western films were allowed to show public displays of affection, in censored Burmese films, as one producer argued, characters 'don't kiss each other, but they only smell . . . Without touching each other we cannot construct a story at all. That is our grievance against the Burma Board of Film censors.'<sup>74</sup> Some schooled youth also participated in discourse on the cinema. In Penang, debates on the pros and cons of the cinema raged in the debating halls of mission schools and in the pages of school magazines. One student wrote on the 'ideals of youth', arguing that while youth were fascinated by the days of science and scientific

<sup>70</sup> Khaing, *Burmese Family*, p. 118.

<sup>71</sup> Ma Lay Kin as qutd. in *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee*, p. 586.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 568. <sup>74</sup> U Ba Hyn as qutd. in *ibid.*, p. 567.

inventions, 'cinema has done an evil in that it has represented life, not as it really is, but as it is in the studio. Some youths have excessive passions and lack the necessary emotional education to control their feelings.'<sup>75</sup> Most children, however, could not get enough of the cinema, deemed by one headmaster as the schoolmaster's worst enemy.<sup>76</sup> Colonial authorities called on the advice of the International Educational Cinematograph Institute, established under the auspices of the League of Nations, to see whether the introduction of films of a more educational nature could solve the problem.<sup>77</sup>

For some members of the public, cinema was seen to have an adverse effect on the language and habits of the young. In Penang, one *Straits Echo* reader noted that 'the local quest for glamour' had inspired a 'craze among a certain set of youngsters to take themselves the names of film stars' such as Robert Taylor and Richard Green – some had screen 'heart-throbs ... what would psychologists think if they know certain people are day-dreaming of being a screen hero, and falling in love with screen-stars?'<sup>78</sup> On the same page, Madame Chevalier, a popular writer and most likely a widow or divorcée, defended the celebrities of the silver screen: 'Robert Taylor is King Solomon, Valentino, Don Juan and Romeo put together – my two daughters and myself would be delighted to have him in our family. He can choose any one of us. If he chose me, he would be a ready-made father.'<sup>79</sup> Behind this statement was an idealisation of a new kind of man promoted by the cinema, the romantic hero, who provided a new model of fatherhood and masculinity for Asian women.<sup>80</sup> Screen sirens, meanwhile, provided new models of femininity to be emulated by modern women and adored by modern men.

Whereas cultural exchanges between East and West, as well as between different parts of Asia, had hitherto been confined to face-to-face interactions between travelling performers and aristocratic elites, by the inter-war era, the public shared cultural reference points that were simultaneously global as well as local. This was illustrated most vividly by cultures of celebrity, a product of the 'imagined intimacy fostered by the media', shared around the world.<sup>81</sup> Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford toured the Straits in 1929, and Charlie Chaplin arrived in

<sup>75</sup> *Penang Free School Magazine* (June 1939).

<sup>76</sup> Note from Erah Stowell to International Educational Cinematograph Institute. Kuala Lumpur, National Archives. Departmental Papers, S.H.C., 3297–1351.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>78</sup> *Straits Echo*, 7 September 1938, p. 13.

<sup>79</sup> *Straits Echo*, 7 September 1938, p. 13.

<sup>80</sup> For a British perspective on this, see Billie Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination* (1988).

<sup>81</sup> Richard Schickel, *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1985), p. 20.

Singapore in 1932 and 1936. Closer to home were stars of Asian cinema, familiar to diasporic Indians and Chinese well aware of the Bombay cinema sensation, Sulochana, and Shanghai movies stars such as Ruan Lingyu and Olive Young.<sup>82</sup> Though at the time the film industries in Burma, Malaya, and Siam were fledgling, forms of popular theatre, modernising and innovating while competing with the cinema for audiences, produced new stars of their own. Local stars provided a means of authenticating and appropriating Hollywood film culture by drawing comparisons to global household names. Talented bangsawan stars were given special honorary titles: Tan Tjeng Bok, 'the Douglas Fairbanks of Java'; Yem, 'the Ramón Novarro of the East'; Aion Chik, 'the Greta Garbo of Malaya'; Aman Belon, 'the Charlie Chaplin of the East'; and Purita Clarino, 'the Jazz Queen'.<sup>83</sup> U Po Sein was indeed the beloved star of Burmese popular theatre in the 1920s, but according to a Rangoon film producer he lacked the 'face' to be 'Burma's Douglas Fairbanks', the *Thief of Baghdad* being one of the most popular films in interwar Burma.

Anna May Wong, who featured in the *Thief of Baghdad* and *Shanghai Express*, was a Hollywood but also an Asian star, emblematic of the crossing of Asian and Western boundaries in the global imagination. Wong's reception in America was representative of Western orientalism and fetishisation of the exotic, particularly as she was more popular as a silent actress than one with a voice.<sup>84</sup> To Asian modern girls, however, she represented the Hollywood dream. For many Asians, she also highlighted the injustices of the colour bar at a global level. An article in Penang's *Eastern Courier* complained of censorship of *The Road to Dishonour* by colonial film censors. Depiction of intimate contact was prohibited between John Longden, the romantic lead of the film playing a handsome Russian officer who falls in love with the Chinese girl played by Wong:

<sup>82</sup> On both these Asian film-stars in Bombay and Shanghai cinema history, see Priti Ramamurthy, 'All-Consuming Nationalism: The Indian Modern Girl in the 1920s and 1930s', in Weinbaum et al., *Modern Girl Around the World*; Bhaumik, 'Sulochana'; Hansen, 'Fallen Women'; Hung-Yok Ip, 'Fashioning Appearances: Feminine Beauty in Chinese Communist Revolutionary Culture', *Modern China* 29:3 (2003): 329–61; Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>83</sup> Tan Sooi Beng, *Bangsawan: A Social and Stylistic History of Popular Malay Opera*, pp. 60–65.

<sup>84</sup> On orientalism and Anna May Wong, see Graham Russell Hodges, *Anna May Wong: From Laundryman's Daughter to Hollywood Legend* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).



He may sit at her feet, sing her a love song, touch at her hand with his lips, even clasp her in his arm. But kiss her, no. And all because Miss Wong is really Chinese. Were she a white girl made up as a Chinese, John could kiss her to his – or the producer's – heart's content.<sup>85</sup>

Longden's own reaction was also recorded in the *Eastern Courier*: 'it is utterly and completely absurd . . . This is typical of certain English standards of morality . . . It is farcical.'<sup>86</sup> An English celebrity's public undermining of colonial censorship practices gave further impetus to Asians to see how 'un-modern' colonial society really was.

With the power to charm a mass audience within the city, the nation, and possibly even the world, celebrities were symptomatic of the growing turn towards Hollywood, rather than Victorian England, as the marker of cosmopolitan modernity. This was as true for the Siamese elite as it was for middle-class Asians. Departing from the Victorian sensibilities of Chulalongkorn's generation, by the 1920s, Siam's aristocracy displayed their modernity through their fraternisation with American celebrities, as noted by the visit of Prince (later King) Prajadhipok to Hollywood to socialise with Fairbanks and Pickford in 1924.<sup>87</sup> The mass, popular culture of Hollywood and celebrity helped unhinge Victorian hierarchies of class and prestige in Siam, as it did in England.<sup>88</sup> Just as England's Prince of Wales was a sensation in Hollywood, put on par with stars such as Clark Gable, modernising royals in Siam began cultivating a similar cult of American-style celebrity through the media.<sup>89</sup> An article in the *Bangkok Daily Mail* depicted a large photograph of a smiling Prince Purachatra, one of the early promoters of film in Siam, ascending from a decompression chamber used by workers on the Memorial Bridge. The article appeared on the same page as a piece on King George V, who, 'like the Queen, has a middle class seriousness and is a commoner amongst the commons', and one who moves 'quite freely among the common people and enjoys their talk and delights in it'.<sup>90</sup> Even if the constitutional monarchy was not yet a reality, in the pages of the Bangkok press, Thai princes sought to appear as democratically minded rulers, styling themselves as celebrities for a mass audience.

Conversely, while the monarchy began catering to the public taste for celebrity, cinema ushered in a wave of popular participation and social critique from below. Barmé argues that the development of cinema in Bangkok 'heralded the beginning of a new era in which members of the rising middle class contested the long-standing dominance of the royal-noble elite

<sup>85</sup> 'Anna May Wong in Film', *Eastern Courier*, 18 January 1930, p. 29. <sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> See Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, p. 54.

<sup>88</sup> Laura E. Nym Mayhall, 'The Prince of Wales Versus Clark Gable: Anglophone Celebrity and Citizenship between the Wars', *Cultural and Social History* 4:4 (2007): 529–43.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>90</sup> *Bangkok Daily Mail*, 3 June 1930, p. 3.

in Siamese cultural life'.<sup>91</sup> *Woman, Man, Bangkok* is a fascinating study of how this played out in a number of arenas, from popular fiction to graphic critique. Barmé's work presents a crucial departure from Lysa Hong's definition of cosmopolitanism in Siam, which links it with Thonchai Winatachul's discussion of *Sivilai* and the aims of a small, aristocratic elite operating under a yardstick of Western-style modernity.<sup>92</sup> The 'cosmopolitan' outlook of Bangkok's rising middle class was facilitated by the entry of global popular culture through sound, cinema, and print, which helped flatten vertical relationships between ruler and ruled.

Whereas previously it was the aristocratic elite in Siam or affluent Asians in Rangoon and Penang who travelled, went to school abroad, and fraternised with foreigners, the entry of cinema allowed many more Asians to witness other worlds, particularly that of the West, and, in the case of the middle class, critique their own societies through that lens. The dominance of American film culture, one that portrayed a democratic society of independent men and women as well as idealised romance to a mass public, provided a conceptual change for the young to critique their societies through a new spectre of comparisons. To be cosmopolitan no longer meant one was part of a privileged, well-travelled elite – one could be locally cosmopolitan simply by absorbing new trends in music and film, leading to critical debates about gender, race, and class in one's own society.

### Fashioning and Debating the Modern Girl

What the modern girl did, and in particular what she wore, was one of the most popular topics of debate in the pages of the Asian press in the 1920s and 1930s. In Siam, fashion became a means for the state to discipline Thai bodily practices, urging citizens to abandon the 'backward' clothing of farmers and wear Western clothing and hats, particularly during the *sivilai* campaigns of the late nineteenth century and under Phibun's regime in the 1930s.<sup>93</sup> Yet in the 1920s, monarchs and middle-class urbanites simultaneously appropriated the same sartorial discourse to articulate a new, modern sensibility. There was a synchronicity in the jazz-age fashions of the modern monarchy and the urban Bangkok elite, both of whom sought to distinguish themselves as 'modern'. Films had a powerful influence on the fashion and hairstyles adopted by Siamese

<sup>91</sup> Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, p. 43.

<sup>92</sup> Hong, 'Stranger within the Gates', p. 336; Thongchai, 'Quest for 'Sivilai'.

<sup>93</sup> Maurizio Peleggi, 'Refashioning Civilisation: Dress and Bodily Practice in Thai Nation Building', *International Institute for Asian Studies Newsletter: The Politics of Dress* 46 (2008): pp. 8–9.

youth, just as Siam's aristocrats sought to portray themselves as up-to-date with the latest fashions. Barmé points to a striking image of modish young women smokers in 1920s-style flapper headbands and tight dresses.<sup>94</sup> Queen Rambaibarni, similarly, was often photographed in a flapper-style dress and long strings of pearls, as well as her crown jewels.

Cinema, advertising, as well as women's magazines from all over the world set the trend for modern men and women. Writing in the early twentieth century, the urban sociologist Georg Simmel observed that fashion was an expression of the individuality of the modern self.<sup>95</sup> In multi-ethnic colonial contexts, it allowed Asians to express cultural solidarity while recasting new, modern cultural identities. The sleek and athletic lines of Art Deco couture and the provocative fashions of modern cinema inspired Asian fashion to modernise traditional clothing styles. Notably, this did not happen in modernising Japan or Siam, where urbanites strove to adopt Western fashions. Around the Sri Krung Film Studio, established in 1932 in Bangkok, young upper-middle class men and women showed off the latest cinema-inspired fashions, including short trousers and long slacks for women, bathing suits, and short and perm hairstyles.<sup>96</sup>

While Japanese and Thai urbanites wholeheartedly adopted Western fashions, Asians in colonial contexts promoted local Asian fashions by fusing them with Western trends in a hybrid style. In Penang, for instance, young women copied the short bobs and waves of Clara Bow and Shanghai film actresses, yet they also looked to modern Asian fashion elsewhere. In China, India, and Burma, Asian sartorial fashions that had been loose and long became tighter, shorter, and exposed more of the female form. The *qipao* or *cheongsam* was an invention of the 1920s that merged the traditional robes of Manchu men with an Edwardian high collar, stressing the female figure and popularised through Shanghai and Hongkong film stars.<sup>97</sup> Sulochana, the star of 1920s Bombay cinema, drifted in and out of different roles through fashion, giving the sari a modern touch by wearing it lightly across her shoulders, exposing her neck and upper bust, and adapting Indo-Persian fashions to become sleeker and featuring new designs. Rather than traditional weave or design patterns, new Asian fashions experimented with new and often

<sup>94</sup> Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, p. 49.

<sup>95</sup> Georg Simmel, 'Fashion, Adornment, and Style', in *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, ed. David Frisby (London: Sage, 1997), pp. 187–218.

<sup>96</sup> Mattani Moj dara Rutnin, *Dance, Drama and Theatre in Thailand: The Process of Development and Modernization* (Bangkok: Silkworm, 1996), p. 187.

<sup>97</sup> Antonia Finnane, 'What Should Chinese Women Wear? A National Problem', *Modern China* 22:2 (1996): 108.

provocative designs. Malay batik sarongs began featuring new 'exotic' patterns – cowboy prints, palm trees, Spanish flamenco dancers, bullfighters, even the three wise men on camels – inspired by cinema images, foreign books, and magazines.<sup>98</sup> Fashion, like jazz, was a way in which women could authenticate modernity by visibly displaying their authority to mix and modernise styles.

In Rangoon, the modern, or 'khitsan', woman sought a compromise between traditional Burmese and Western styles, wearing sandals with platforms or 'Cuban' heels, shorter and more transparent jackets, and smart wrist watches.<sup>99</sup> The speed and finesse of the age was encapsulated in her hairstyle; a contemporary observer noted that women 'substituted the highly elaborate, old fashioned sadone by more stream-lined styles of hair dressing like the aeroplane sadone'.<sup>100</sup> The connections and exchanges between Burmese and Straits fashion, particularly via Peranakan Chinese networks, deserve further investigation. Nonyia women from the Straits appeared in Rangoon in the early twentieth century, marrying single men from Guangdong and Fukien who had come to Burma to find their fortune.<sup>101</sup> They brought their modes of dress to Rangoon, wearing batik sarongs, collared blouses, embroidered jackets, and hairpins.<sup>102</sup> Their fashion styles may have influenced Burmese women to adopt new clothing practices. In Penang, the blouse adopted in the 1920s and 1930s was the sheer kebaya, worn with the batik sarong, a garment similar to the Burmese longyi. Influences may also have gone the other way. In Penang, marriage photographs of Chinese and Burmese women indicate an adoption of Burmese hairstyles and fashions, particularly in the nineteenth century. In the 1920s, Penang girls also adopted the sadone and 'airplane hairstyle', styles characteristic of the modern Burmese girl, featuring one large bun pulled back, or two on each side.<sup>103</sup> This indicates both a synchronicity of 'cultural borrowing' within shared colonial economies of imported clothing and advertising of

<sup>98</sup> Raymond Kwok, Interview by author. 19 October 2007. Also see Datin Seri Endon Mahmood, *The Nonyia Kebaya: A Century of Straits Chinese Costume* (Singapore: Periplus, 2004).

<sup>99</sup> Frank Hastings, *Burma Yesterday and Tomorrow* (Bombay: Thacker & Co, 1944), p. 10.  
<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> See U Thaw Kaung and Daw Win, 'Preliminary Survey Penang-Myanmar Relations from mid-19th to mid-20th Centuries', Paper presented at the Shared Histories Conference, Penang, 2003. As an example also see the Lim family interviewed in J.C. Thein, 'The Resilience of an Immigrant Community: The Chinese-Burmese in Twentieth Century Rangoon Chinatown' (unpublished MA dissertation, Harvard University, East Asian Languages and Civilizations, 1997). pp. 40–42.

<sup>102</sup> U Hla Sein and Dr. Ohn Gaing (Myanmar Historical Commission). Interview by author. Yangon, Myanmar. 27 July 2008.

<sup>103</sup> Michael Cheah. Interview by author. Penang. 30 October 2007.

European lace, as well as more concrete connections between fashion in colonial Burma and the Straits.

Reactions to the new fashions by the public in Rangoon and Penang differed greatly due to their differing relationships to colonialism. While a discourse of fear and hatred of the fashions of the modern girl emerged among Burmese men, reactions in Penang's *Straits Echo*, the major paper of the island's Asian communities, were much more muted, amounting to jeering at worst.<sup>104</sup> Burmese men saw the sheer blouse as 'foreign', Western, white, British, Indian, or generally associated with foreign capitalists.<sup>105</sup> In Penang, the wearing of the sheer blouse was an evolution of the *nyonya* (Straits-Chinese) style of hybridising Western and Malay (*batik*) fashion and was thus less contentious to men. The new *nyonya* woman fit somewhere in between the cloistered *nyonya*, confined to the home, and the new, liberated Chinese modern girl.<sup>106</sup> This was a contest played out publicly on Penang's Esplanade. Once a year, affluent Straits-Chinese families paraded *nyonya* women out of their homes in luxury cars by their families to attract a wealthy husband; during the rest of the year, the Esplanade was a site where one could glimpse the latest fashions and, for the first time, young and visible romantic couples. The journalist George Bilainkin noted a tussle between the modern and the old China in the Straits – as opposed to the traditional, cloistered *nyonya* woman, a growing minority of Chinese girls in the 1920s were driving motorcars, shingling their hair, wearing short skirts and silk stockings, and attempting to copy Shanghai styles.

The modern Chinese woman, with her bobbed hair, skirts, trousers, and sunglasses, was a striking disjuncture from traditional norms in Penang. Yet she signalled a sense of solidarity with the emergence of the modern Chinese woman, playing on diasporic Chinese nationalism. She also provided a model of liberality for other communities. One writer wrote to the *Straits Echo* complaining of the conservatism of Indian parents:

Most of the girls taking stroll on esplanade, botanical gardens, and cinema halls are Chinese, Eurasians, etc. but seldom Indians. Although many Indian girls are well educated yet they do not move about according to our modern world. Is it because they do not wish to go about in the evenings and enjoy themselves like others? Or is it because of parents that these girls are compelled to remain at home? . . . I sincerely hope all Indian parents will be more broad-minded and also see that their daughters do not remain ancient but on the contrary become – Modern.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>104</sup> See Ikeya, 'Modern Burmese Woman'. <sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1285.

<sup>106</sup> On keeping *nyonya* daughters 'cloistered' as objects of cultural capital, see Neil Khor, 'Origins and Development of Straits Chinese Literature' (Cambridge University, Faculty of English: 2007), p. 100.

<sup>107</sup> *Straits Echo*, 18 February 1938, p. 13.

Meanwhile, a Muslim woman observed Malay-Muslim girls following the steps of her 'progressive sisters and Western lassies' in terms of education, style, ways, manners, and ideas.<sup>108</sup> She celebrated the freedom that women had with regard to education and the cultivation of independent thought, but suggested that young women wear Muslim dress on the Sabbath day, to remind themselves of their religion.<sup>109</sup> She hoped that they would set a better example than Muslim men, who were returning from universities abroad, 'devoid of all Muslim principles, with everything Western in them, as if Muslim religion has been a damnation on their progress'.<sup>110</sup>

As a society in which migrants formed the majority, Penang provides a unique case where changing gender relations and the emergence of the modern girl could be seen within a context of local, grounded cosmopolitanism essential to the island's self-definition as a liberal, multi-ethnic community within a multi-ethnic nation. As such, cultural values were more amenable to shifts and adaptations in dialogue across cultures. The correspondence pages of the *Eastern Courier* and the *Straits Echo* provided an intimate venue where literati, young and old, men and women, Chinese, *peranakan*, Eurasian, Indian, and Malay came together to converse and contest important political and social issues of the day. In contrast to Rangoon and Bangkok, the self-consciously polyglot nature and comparative smallness of Penang's polyglot population allowed a neighbourly intimacy between diverse groups in the public sphere. As noted in Chapter 4, this was exemplified by the *Straits Echo's* readers' page, where Penang's multi-ethnic middle class participated in a shared forum of debate.

When men criticised the modern girl's wearing of sunglasses and trousers, the bobbing of her hair, and her 'continual change of styles of dress', women wrote into the readers' pages to defend themselves.<sup>111</sup> Both heated and friendly exchanges existed simultaneously on the same page, testifying to a culture in which healthy debate between men and women was publicly welcomed. In general, both women and men defended women's increasing liberality in the Asian-owned English press. They drew on models of womanhood from elsewhere – particularly from China. As a commentator in the 1929 issue of the *Eastern Courier* wrote, 'Independence is the new cry. Just as it is the cry of womankind elsewhere in the world, it has been echoed and amplified in China today.'<sup>112</sup> One article described the ascendancy of 'Turkish womanhood', where educated women were coming to prominence, albeit

<sup>108</sup> *Straits Echo*, 18 April 1939, p. 13. <sup>109</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> *Straits Echo*, 8 July 1937, p. 13. <sup>112</sup> *Eastern Courier*, 15 June 1929, p. 7.

without the support of most Turkish men. Another contributor pointed to the achievements of 'extraordinary' women such as Madam Chiang Kai-Shek, Isabel de Palencia of Spain, Eleanor Roosevelt, Maria Montessori, and the Garbos and Shearers of Hollywood, asking whether any women in Malaya could qualify under such a classification.<sup>113</sup>

In Burma, meanwhile, women regularly fell prey to attacks from Burmese men regarding their styles of dress and 'licentious' behaviour in their relationships with foreign men. Men were largely devoid of criticism, prompting the head of Rangoon's Teachers' Training College to ask: 'If women are to be forced to wear *pinni* [homespun cotton] jackets, why should men be allowed to freely to don whatever mixtures of Eastern and Western garments they wish?'<sup>114</sup> The correspondence pages of the Burmese-owned English press provided a venue where women could fight back. Ratana Sein, writing in *New Burma*, sought to provoke Burmese women into writing to the paper by deploring the 'backwardness' of modern educated women, even while acknowledging their reputation for advancement. He noted:

I thought the bevy of modern beauties would soon refute the accusation. But I see none so far. Perhaps the statement was so true and struck home so nicely, that my ladies, ever so brave and forward in other directions, have thought it wiser to follow the maxim that silence is golden. Or perhaps there being no prospect of monetary gain, my ladies, generally guided by good business ideas as they are, do not think it worthwhile to enter into the arena of intellectual warfare.<sup>115</sup>

One week later, an anonymous Burmese woman writer, 'Maid of Burma', wrote a crusading defence of the modern Burmese woman's claims to liberality and achievement in service of the nation, comparing the achievement of Burmese women to those of women internationally. Writing in *New Burma*, she noted how discouraging it was that Burmese women 'have been criticised everywhere, and at every opportunity'.<sup>116</sup> She mentioned burlesque parodies, the local press and cartoons, and even school and college magazines that had held Burmese women up to ridicule. Placing Burmese women within a global context, she argued:

Burmese women of today can hold ourselves equal to that of any women in the east and most of those of the West. We have had our hand in almost every sphere of life e.g. commerce, politics, education, surgery, social service and so on, although some conservative Burmese would rather have liked us to adhere to

<sup>113</sup> *Eastern Courier*, 10 May 1938, p. 7.

<sup>114</sup> U Ba, *Burma*, p. 141. See also Ikeya on the hypocrisy of the thakins in 'Modern Burmese Woman', p. 1292.

<sup>115</sup> 'The Way of the World', *New Burma*, 5 September 1934, p. 5.

<sup>116</sup> 'How can anything be wrong with Burmese women?' *New Burma*, 12 September 1934, p. 11.

old traditions and customs, and to stay in the home. In spite of all, the rising young women of Burma have cast aside most conventions in their eagerness to acquire a footing in the modern world.<sup>117</sup>

She railed against the injustice that Burmese women students worked hard and were, in fact, ‘much more ambitious than Burmese men’, but could not sit for the Indian Civil Service and other examinations. Contrary to public opinion, women did, she argued, take an interest in politics, as evidenced by the recent success of one Burmese woman in achieving a seat in the Legislative Council. The letter ended with a plea to the public to look on Burmese women with sympathetic tolerance of help, amidst a culture of ‘mud-slinging’ by Burmese men. She noted that in fashion, women continued to be bound by strict conventions – the lack of women in sports, for instance, was due to the restrictive requirements of wearing Burmese dress, which made it impossible to play games and hampered ‘the health and physical development of the young womanhood of Burma’.<sup>118</sup>

While women in Penang had more freedom of dress and liberality in the public sphere, women in Rangoon, due to the presence of the university, had many more professional opportunities. Penang girls who aspired to become barristers, nurses, or journalists would often leave for educational and employment opportunities elsewhere. Despite the emphasis on the liberality of women, the institutional opportunities were not as readily available in Penang or even Singapore as they were in Rangoon. In an oral history interview, social worker Teresa Hsu noted that despite her educational achievements, women had two choices in Penang: ‘either you became a teacher or you became a mother’.<sup>119</sup> She left Penang for Swatow, where she took stenography and bookkeeping classes by night, eventually finding a job at an English newspaper as a journalist covering the war in China. Many other Penang Chinese girls went to China to aid in the war effort against Japan. A *Straits Echo* writer, Lillian Looi, left for Hong Kong, yet her correspondence with Kingsley Goh, a long-time contributor to the readers’ page, continued. Goh sent her cuttings from the paper and published her responses to him in the readers’ page, including her reply to his criticism of Penang Girls for playing football for the cause of the China Relief Fund. She pointed to examples of ‘heroism’ and ‘patriotism’ that she had witnessed in China in the wake of the Japanese invasion.<sup>120</sup> Intellectual debate between Penang’s men

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.    <sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Hsu, Teresa. Interviewed by Annie Chua. 25 April 1994. Singapore National Archives Oral History Collection. 001481 Reel 4.

<sup>120</sup> ‘Feminine Heroism in China Today’, *Straits Echo*, 6 May 1938, p. 13.



and women, as well as the patriotism of Penang's modern girl, thus ran across borders, rather than within them.

### The Perils of Modern Love

Middle-class women began to articulate new, modern identities for themselves against a backdrop of rising sexual consumption by men. The emergence of red-light districts in all three-port-cities originally catered to transient migrant populations, sojourners, and travellers, as mentioned in Chapter 1. By the 1920s, the ranks of potential sexual consumers grew to include new types of urban men: the salaried bureaucrat, working professionals, as well as a growing class of indigenous wage labourers.<sup>121</sup> The social realist Thai novel *The Prostitute* indicates that they may also have included members of the nobility. In Rangoon, students were deemed possible new sexual consumers. The Association of Moral and Social Hygiene noted that young Burmese men living in the city were continually exposed to the brothel area. Students going to and from the central colleges were even noted by the governor to be exposed to the advertisement of vice and given an 'easy way to fall into temptations'.<sup>122</sup>

Students themselves engaged in discussion about the problems wrought by the prevalence of prostitution in the city. In a conference held by the Rangoon Vigilance Society in 1919, an association composed of Western and Asian women, Rangoon university students complained of 'up-country' students arriving in the city with a great deal of liberty, encountering 'not a lane without a brothel and older students to inform them'.<sup>123</sup> Another argued that foreigners were to blame for leaving behind women who fell easy prey to prostitution. A Burmese teacher declared that the colonial opinion that prostitution was a 'necessary evil' was not held among the Burmese, and that a large cause of students going to these places were the men or 'sharks' ready to take them there. Girls suffering from poverty were also 'trapped by men who go into the district well dressed with offers of marriage'.<sup>124</sup> Due to the efforts of the Rangoon Vigilance Society and others, the segregated area was eventually closed

<sup>121</sup> Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, p. 77.

<sup>122</sup> Cowen, John. Report of observations in the segregated areas of Rangoon in March 1915. Association of Moral and Social Hygiene Files: Burma and Rangoon. 3 AMS/D/37/02. London Metropolitan Women's Library, London.

<sup>123</sup> 'Memorandum – Notes of a Conference of Rangoon Students', 8 March 1919. Association of Moral and Social Hygiene Files: Burma and Rangoon. 3 AMS/D/37/02. London Metropolitan Women's Library, London.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

down in 1921, and few reports remain of whether students continued to frequent brothels through the 1920s and 1930s.

In the 1920s, dance halls, made popular in Shanghai and Singapore, provided a new public venue that blurred the lines between sexual consumption and courtship in Penang and Bangkok.<sup>125</sup> Some, located in large hotels and cabarets, catered to European and wealthy, often Chinese men, who mingled with taxi-dancers and high-class prostitutes, usually of Chinese or Eurasian origin; others catered to working-class men. In the dance halls of Penang, for the first time, young men could dance with young women; previously, convention had frowned upon unmarried women going out into the night with men. The Malaysian labour politician Lim Kean Siew wrote of these venues, 'Had Hollywood been here and its spirit had prevailed, I am sure some of them at least would have become quite famous actresses. As it was, their only hope of a good future was to marry someone they met at the dance-hall.'<sup>126</sup> In the amusement parks, dance halls included stages for cabaret and *joget* (Malay dance), catering to largely working class men, who paid a ticket to his favourite dance hostess for a foxtrot, waltz, or rumba.<sup>127</sup>

Historical accounts of the experiences of taxi-dancers themselves are sparse, yet they loom large in memoirs and fictionalised accounts, a source of fascination to elite and middle-class men (café waitresses played a similar role for bohemian writers in interwar Shanghai and Japan).<sup>128</sup> For middle- and upper-class women, meanwhile, taxi-dancers served as a trope of self-definition. Leo Ou-Fan Lee argues that the popularity of dance halls in Shanghai's urban life 'seems to have served ironically as the necessary, albeit negative, backdrop for the emergence of a new public persona for women'.<sup>129</sup> The taxi-dancer was publicly and visibly acknowledged as an object of male desire, and served as a symbol by which the bourgeois woman could identify herself with or against. One woman defended the decision of modern Chinese women in Penang to wear the cheong sam against one male writer's charge that it was used by dancing hostesses and should not be used conspicuously by intelligent women. Notably, she argued that it should be used in the style of 'variety of dressing', meaning that 'today a girl puts on trousers, tomorrow the Bandoeng dress and the day following, the "Cheong

<sup>125</sup> On Shanghai see Lee, *Shanghai Modern*, pp. 23–29.

<sup>126</sup> Lim, *The Eye over the Golden Sands*, p. 228. <sup>127</sup> Tan, *Bangsawan*, p. 14.

<sup>128</sup> See Lim, *The Eye over the Golden Sands*; Gregory de Silva, *Only a Taxi Dancer: A Romance of Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur: International Printers, 1939). On Japan, see Elise Tipton, 'The Café: Contested Space of Modernity in Interwar Japan', in *Being Modern in Japan: Culture and Society from the 1910s to the 1930s*, eds. E.K. Tipton and J. Clark (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), pp. 119–36.

<sup>129</sup> Lee, *Shanghai Modern*, p. 28.

Sam”'.<sup>130</sup> The versatility of fashion choices for the middle- and upper-class woman with capital and social mobility signified her ability to choose to be, on the one hand, an object of sexual desire, and on the other, a stylish, cosmopolitan woman who could draw on various Asian fashion trends, and distinguish herself as one with the freedom to do so.

In Rangoon, however, an Anglo-Burmese observer noted that in pre-war times, few Burmese men and even fewer women attended or participated in dances or balls, and that unlike in Japan, China, the Philippines, Siam, and Malaya, there were no dance-hostesses and taxi-dancers in Burma. When a few Burmese co-eds at Rangoon University attempted to indulge in Western forms of dancing they apparently became the targets of a vigorous press campaign.<sup>131</sup> Rangoon University was an oasis of visible experimentation with romance and shifting relations between the sexes. Male and female students mixed company in the drawing rooms of Inya Hall, which turned into a ballroom on weekends, playing the latest jazz tunes.<sup>132</sup> Khaing looks back at the general atmosphere of Rangoon University in the 1930s with nostalgia:

For a keen interest in politics, for wit, for exquisite coyness or a proud beauty, the girls in University College were in as much limelight as can surround a rigger hero at an English University . . . if a report had gone abroad that a girl had swum the 2,000 yards of the cross-lake track, or had harangued a group of young men for bad manners, or was coming to a lecture with her hair in an informal knot at the back of her head instead of a formal *sadone* [Burmese updo], she was greeted on entrance by a hundred odd youths stamping and cheering and jeering and all shouting, ‘Hero! Hero! No wonder there was love everywhere. Even in modern Rangoon an unmarried young man and woman could not be seen without the presence of a third person, but sentimental love flourished all the more for that.’<sup>133</sup>

Few sources exist about same-sex relations at this time; Burmese society has generally been viewed as more conservative with regard to homosexual activity. Whether this is a cultural trait or a symptom of repression under the military government over the latter half of the twentieth century is unknown, although Burmese society has tended to be viewed as more conservative than neighbouring countries in terms of sexual relations. In her social commentary on Burmese women, written in the 1980s, Khaing argues that female closeness was generally accepted by Burmese society as natural companionship, rather than lesbian relationships as perceived in the West.<sup>134</sup> Yet she also notes that same-sex sexual relations

<sup>130</sup> ‘Feminine Styles of Dress’, *Straits Echo*, 2 March 1938, p. 13.

<sup>131</sup> Haskings, *Burma Yesterday and Tomorrow*, p. 10.

<sup>132</sup> ‘The Buzz of an Inya Bee’, *University College Magazine* 30:1 (1939): 80.

<sup>133</sup> Khaing, *Burmese Family*, p. 124.

<sup>134</sup> Mi Mi Khaing, *The World of Burmese Women* (London: Zed, 1984).

were common among young girls in dormitories. The dormitory system of Rangoon University, which Khaing herself was exposed to, took students away from home, and may have helped in creating a new venue for sexual experimentation that defied the stark lines of male–female relations, if only in private.

Heterosexual love, meanwhile, was celebrated openly among a new generation of youth, and was anything but conservative. U Tet Toe referred to ‘love adventures on the bund of Inya Lake, involving certain college beaux and belles’.<sup>135</sup> Students complained of the criticism they faced by their parents and school authorities for their continued fraternising with members of the opposite sex, calling for mixed common rooms to ‘remove the disasters of pent-up passions for healthy friendships’.<sup>136</sup> The Teachers’ Training College, by contrast, provided a more casual atmosphere where men and women dined together in a common dining hall and supported each other during debates with the Rangoon University Student Union. This may simply have been a case of women outnumbering men: in 1938, figures at the TTC totalled thirty-six men to forty-two women. In the same year at University College, there were 1,849 men to 381 women.<sup>137</sup> Both these educational environments provided an atmosphere where a small number of young men and women could experiment with changing gender relationships through notions of intellectual parity and bourgeois love between men and women. Students defended their right to ‘freedom of association’, while they noted that visitors to the institution were apt to go away with the idea that the college was more of a matrimonial agency than an educational institution.<sup>138</sup>

At least some of the romantic escapades of Rangoon University students found their way into the popular imagination. A 1915 report on Burmese publications observed that fiction as a genre was beginning to blossom, literally, as love stories written in a conversational style became increasingly popular. Heroes of the novels were students of colleges and Anglo-Vernacular schools in Rangoon. Though colonial officials deemed the novels of having ‘no literary merit’, the Burmese scholar Ba Han believed that the appearance of a 1909 novel by Ma E Kin, one of Burma’s first woman novelists, called *True Love*, showed the challenges of youth in ‘awakening and disillusionment’, revealing the ‘true nature of the Burmese upper class’ and comparing her to Jane Austen.<sup>139</sup> By the

<sup>135</sup> Tet Toe, ‘Dark before Dawn’, *University College Annual Vol. II*, p. 17.

<sup>136</sup> ‘Mixed Common Room’, *University College Magazine* (1941): 56.

<sup>137</sup> *Report of the Executive Committee of the Council of the University of Rangoon 1937–38* (Rangoon: Rangoon Times Press, 1938).

<sup>138</sup> *University College Annual* (Rangoon: Maung Thein Hpay, 1941), p. 40.

<sup>139</sup> ‘Notes and Reviews’, *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 1 (1911): 191.

late 1930s, the Burmese writer Ma Lay began exploring in depth the relationship between the politics of gender and colonialism in her novel, *Not Out of Hate*. In the novel, a Burmese woman falls in love with an Anglophile Burmese, who works for a British commercial firm and rejects traditional Burmese customs for Western ways. Besides its blatant critique of the damaging effects of colonial culture, the novel also critiqued the suffocating demands imposed on Burmese women by Burmese men.

In colonial Penang, debates about love, marriage, and the modern girl were discussed openly in the readers' pages of the *Straits Echo*. Young middle-class men and women defended themselves against attacks on their 'shallowness' from an older generation. One commentator noted that 'a large majority frequent the cinema-halls and have no time left for literature, art or music. More are absorbed in search for Romance.'<sup>140</sup> There were frequent complaints about the number of times discussions of 'love' appeared in the *Straits Echo's* readers' pages among serious topics such as foreign news and educational issues. Young women complained of the 'difficulty of choosing a husband'.<sup>141</sup> As in Bangkok, readers and editors in Penang voraciously attacked traditional and 'backward' practices of polygamy and arranged marriages. 'Common sense' urged that the 'evil' and 'antiquated' institution of Chinese marriages be abolished, seeking a middle ground that drew on outside experiences without resorting to the 'ultra-liberalism' of the West:

Careful examination of the experience of other countries may prove helpful in no small measure in arriving at a system which, while it would be unencumbered with the evils attendant on such an ultra-liberal system as I, in common with thousands, take exception to, and would be devoid of evils existing in Western countries, may yet be in keeping with the times, and would contribute in no small way towards the happiness of well-nigh countless millions of my fellow-citizens of both sexes and, may be, of diverse creeds.<sup>142</sup>

Progressive Asian writers battled against the argument of Asian conservatives that Western marriage systems based on love were associated with divorce, while the traditional Chinese system ensured that divorces occurred much less frequently. As an *Eastern Courier* reader put it, 'If the divorce machinery were available in China as a means of relief from domestic drudgery, and if Chinese women married under the old system were as unhampered socially and economically as their sisters in the West, then it is not inconceivable that the percentage of divorces would far exceed the maximum figure pertaining elsewhere.'<sup>143</sup> Corroborating this point, the *Eastern Courier's* editor noted as fact that

<sup>140</sup> *Straits Echo*, 19 March 1938, p. 13.

<sup>141</sup> *Straits Echo*, 14 December 1937, p. 13.

<sup>142</sup> *Eastern Courier*, 4 May, 1929, p. 29.

<sup>143</sup> *Eastern Courier*, 31 August 1929, p. 15.

hundreds of wives in China at all levels of society were committing suicide annually as a result of forced marriage leading to the husbands' taking of second wives and concubines. Moderately favouring Asian ideas of sexuality and chastity over Western liberty, Ong Joo Sun wrote, 'Short skirts, bobbed hair, and the freedom to mix with members of the opposite sex certainly cannot be objected to. It is the diseased mind that abuses liberty under the cloak of emancipation that is an enemy to social well-being . . . let the emancipation of Chinese women be built on the solid foundation of our (Eastern) ideas of chastity.'<sup>144</sup> Young people wrote back, arguing that it was unfair to accuse an entire generation of advocating sexual freedom – one young writer argued that parents should restrict their children from attending social gatherings where 'free love' was indulged, and advocated a path of moderation. Criticising the custom of arranged marriages, a Penang writer, Miss L.C.M., wrote: 'A true union is the union of the inner hearts of a male and female. Let love be its base and virtue its bond. So let it be borne in mind that true love is noble, pure, and generous . . . A marriage with love is never broken.'<sup>145</sup>

Penang's public discourse was unique in its open discussion about the merits of inter-racial marriage. This emerged in stark contrast to the Burmese press, which criticised the temporary liaisons between European men and Burmese women, and with reason: when Burmese girls were encouraged by their mothers to 'marry up' to become a European's mistress (a '*bo-gadaw*'), these 'temporary' liaisons would end as soon as European wives came to join their husbands, or when men left to return home, leaving women penniless and degraded.<sup>146</sup> The Burmese community found Anglo-Burmese liaisons problematic, but were less offended than the British, who saw miscegenation as harmful and damaging to British colonial rule.<sup>147</sup> Yet the second kind of mixed marriage discussed by Ikeya is more interesting: that of 'marrying down' to Indian Muslims, which brought no apparent cultural or social incentive. She notes that the dangers of miscegenation, a 'publicly acknowledged reality' by the 1920s, were directly implicated in a discourse propagated by disempowered Burmese men to attack Burmese women who defied cultural norms to seek status and prestige.<sup>148</sup> This too was a hypocritical discourse, as some Burmese elites who went abroad also brought back Western wives. But in focusing too much on the critical discourse generated by Burmese men in the popular press, Ikeya shifts our attention from

<sup>144</sup> *Eastern Courier*, 14 September 1929, p. 5.      <sup>145</sup> *Eastern Courier*, 29 June 1929, p. 5.

<sup>146</sup> See Ikeya, *Refiguring Women*, pp. 120–42.

<sup>147</sup> See *ibid.* as well as Penny Edwards, 'Half-caste: Staging Race in British Burma', *Postcolonial Studies* 5:3 (2002): 285.

<sup>148</sup> Ikeya, *Refiguring Women*, p. 136.

the independence of Burmese women, who were choosing to marry Indians outside their race, despite attacks in the popular press, and exerting an autonomy that operated outside a xenophobic nationalist framework. In the 1930s, there was clearly no public venue in Burma where one could write about inter-racial relationships in a positive light, despite their frequent occurrence.

As noted elsewhere in this book, Penang's view of itself as a microcosm of internationalism gave English-educated urbanites a sense of themselves as a cosmopolitan community, albeit under a British flag. As such, the issue of mixed and inter-racial marriages figured prominently in public discourse, and were sometimes seen by Penang cosmopolitans as nothing less than a viable solution to world peace. This was provoked, at least in part, to Rabindranath Tagore's visit to Malaya, where the great poet, referred to as the 'high-priest of internationalism' had asked whether the international idea could ultimately lead mankind to inter-racial fusion, given that 'the feeling of brotherhood can only be realised where there is the animating spirit of the family'.<sup>149</sup> Drawing on Tagore's discourse of kinship and internationalism, C.W. Chellappah ventured to suggest that such marriages would be the mark of a united Malayan nation: 'the day may come when there shall be no distinctions of caste, creed, and colour, when all the races in Malaya will merge into one, Chinese with their creative genius and their business acumen, the Indians with their poetry and philosophy and the Malays with their amiable disposition and urbane temperament.'<sup>150</sup> Elsewhere, Dr Ong Chong Keng, in a speech to the Penang Rotary Club on 'Human evolution in the future', looked forward to a time when 'physical differences which distinguished the members of one race from another will gradually diminish . . . colour will no longer serve as an infallible guide in their determination of one's race'.<sup>151</sup> Here, the desire for homogeneity seemed to trump an appreciation of the diversity of cultural differences and traditions. One writer noted that the 'world would be a real "cosmopolitan home" and her children first born of heterogeneous parentage would through a physiological process evolve gradually into a homogenous race, perhaps to supersede the many different races now existing in conflict with each other'.<sup>152</sup> Attacking this presupposition as an indisputable chimera', another argued that in propagating this ideal, 'some so-called educated Chinese and Indians seem to forget their respective nationalities . . . a visible danger is high foolery and self-debasement in life'.<sup>153</sup>

<sup>149</sup> C. W. Chellappah, 'Inter-Racial Marriages', *Eastern Courier* (16 November 1929), p. 18.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid. <sup>151</sup> 'Human Evolution in the Future', *RODA* (July 1936), p. 61.

<sup>152</sup> *Eastern Courier*, 21 September 1929, p. 25.

<sup>153</sup> *Eastern Courier*, 28 September 1929, p. 29.

In reality, however, upper- and middle-class women in Penang often chose and were encouraged to marry within their own kinship or religious group. Penang's various communities were marked by intermarriage that crossed the boundaries of religion, as evidenced by the existence of the Straits-Chinese, Eurasians, and other hybrid communal groups in Penang. But since the turn of the century, Straits-Chinese families had advocated marriage with other affluent Chinese families rather than outside the Chinese racial group. Nonetheless, young women battled against these restrictions. An exchange between Maureen Cheah, a popular Penang Chinese writer, and a Western writer over the progressiveness of Penang's modern girl towards the advances of Western men suggests that inter-racial courtship on relatively equal terms did exist, entailing a large degree of independence for a young generation of Asian women.<sup>154</sup> Ambivalence towards the advances of Western men was a mark of the Penang girl's modernity and her ability to exercise choice, founded on moral values. As one reader noted: 'Penang Chinese do not discard their traditions aimlessly, they only discard those that are a hindrance to their progress and adopt those that are conducive to their development.'<sup>155</sup> A celebrated case of inter-racial marriage occurred between two of Penang's most prominent Jawi Peranakan and Straits-Chinese families – the Merican and Khoo clans. When Dr Ali Osman Merican fell in love with the 'fashionable and outgoing' Khoo Phaik Suat, a well-educated woman who ranked among the first women to complete her Senior Cambridge examinations, the family objected to Khoo's marriage to a non-Chinese. The couple eloped, Khoo took the Muslim name of Fatimah and was known as 'one of the most progressive women of her time', learning to drive a car, and insisting on going up in a plane with her husband.<sup>156</sup>

Bangkok's rising middle-class men and women redefined gender relations by critiquing the monarchy and the nobility in the 1920s, particularly their practices of polygamy. Barmé argues that 'the media, in particular newspapers and journals, played a major role popularising concepts of love and creating a discursive environment for the process of social redefinition'.<sup>157</sup> He tracks the emergence of a notion of 'modern love' formulated by and for the reading public. The emergence of 'bourgeois' notions of love came from male writers who advocated monogamy, sexual morality, and the nuclear family, posed in sharp contrast to

<sup>154</sup> This debate is recounted in Lewis, 'Cosmopolitanism and the Modern Girl', p. 1402.

<sup>155</sup> *Straits Echo*, 26 July 1937.

<sup>156</sup> Datin Ragayah Eusoff, *The Merican Clan: A Story of Courage and Destiny* (Times Books International: Singapore, 1997), p. 54.

<sup>157</sup> Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, p. 179.



critiques of practices of polygamy by the ruling class and elite. Women, meanwhile, used romantic prose stories in magazines and novels to advocate new ideas of female independence in love. These reflected the experiences of a broad cross section of society by the 1930s, rather than a select group of educated men and women.

Distinctively in Bangkok, middle-class woman writers began writing about the underside of the urbanisation as it affected other kinds of women besides the newly confident and independent middle-class woman: the prostitute. The prostitute appeared as a character in musical dramas and literary journals. Yet the most popular, sympathetic, and critically acclaimed exploration was K. Surangkhanang's 1937 now canonised Thai novel, *Ying Khon Chua (The Prostitute)*. In the novel, a well-dressed Bangkok pimp lures a rural Thai girl to the city. Wahn/Ruen, the main character, abandons her family and the idyllic life of the countryside for the city because she hopes to become a sophisticated modern girl, wearing beautiful clothes and 'walking and sitting in a different way than the villagers'.<sup>158</sup> What follows is a realist and deeply sympathetic portrayal of innocence lost as she falls into a life of prostitution. Wahn suffers the stigma of being a prostitute from outsiders, and is cheated by neighbours, brothel owners, and Thai men. She returns briefly to the countryside later in the novel with bobbed hair, dressed like a city girl, but lives a life of despair and social exile from which she is unable to escape. The novel is an acknowledgement of the limited and often negative impact of Bangkok's cosmopolitan modernity. It paints an unsettling picture of the deep divides between the urban elite and the rural poor, where the impossibility of attaining social mobility without education, capital, or connections in the city forces women to resort to prostitution as a survival tool.

Rather than a novel of the nation, *The Prostitute* was a novel of the Asian metropole, out of which emerged both the modern girl and the prostitute. The empathy shown towards prostitutes as moral agents was wholly new. Publishers initially rejected the novel due to the author's background; Kanha, the author, was the educated daughter of a Thai civil servant. She attended the convent and a prestigious secondary school, becoming a teacher before turning to journalism as a profession.<sup>159</sup> In researching the book, she visited a brothel, with her husband, to observe conditions first hand.<sup>160</sup> The male hero, or anti-hero, of the novel is an educated, aristocratic Thai man who falls in love with Reun and is later sent away by his family to the University of Manila. Education prompts him to realise

<sup>158</sup> K. Surangkhanang, *The Prostitute*, Trans. David Smyth (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>159</sup> David Smyth, 'Introduction' to K. Surangkhanang, *The Prostitute*. <sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vi.

that the way he has behaved was selfish, particularly after marriage to a virtuous, middle-class woman. Reun, the prostitute, emerges as the novel's heroine and a paragon of virtue, sacrificing her own life to ensure that the child they have together grows up with opportunities she never had. In introducing a realistic portrayal of the stark disparities between the urban elite and the poor, *The Prostitute* spoke to a broader and harsher experience of Southeast Asian urbanism and the limits of the modern girl's world.

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If global popular culture was characterised by shared reference points – cinema, jazz, the modern girl, and romance – it was also complex, mobile, and multi-centred. Each of these facets opened up the space for new cultural encounters and processes of authentication by artists, performers, and youth. Both cinema and Asian popular theatre saw more intimacy in the depiction of relationships between men and women. The influx of mass popular culture created a new dynamism in society crystallising around the young. The popular love song, the newfound intimacy and emotionally expressive performances of local theatre stars, and cinematic 'love scenes' prompted Asians to see themselves within a new framework of comparison. Young men and women articulated new identities as independent and culturally authentic moral agents and redefined gender relations through fashion and debate in the public sphere.

Asia's modern girl emerged within the context of mass, global popular culture, revealing the ways in which practices of cosmopolitanism emerged in tension, as well as in tandem, with discourses of nationalism. In Rangoon, while many middle-class Burmese men applauded the professional achievements of educated Burmese women, particularly in comparison to the West, modern, liberal Burmese women as a whole were a constant target for moralising men, who attacked them in the Burmese press. The absence of Burmese women's voices within this discourse, apart from the long defence of Burmese women mentioned above, suggests that many women refused to or had no interest in engaging with such debates. Some middle-class Burmese women, however, also sought to define themselves as moral agents, becoming involved in censorship practices geared at protecting the young. Others became performers, singers, and writers who increasingly attacked colonial culture through their art in the 1930s, signalling their appropriation of new cultural models for nationalist articulation as well as popular entertainment.

In Penang, *bangsawan*, a popular theatre tradition that continually reinvented itself by adopting new styles, became an authentic expression of Penang's hybrid popular heritage. Yet no writers produced novels or

classic literary works, despite the impulse of amateur writers in the local press. A diasporic imagination and a lack of a strong, shared literary heritage made it difficult for Anglophone Penangites to transplant and adapt the storylines of these Western novels and short stories to a local and 'authentic' Malayan setting, as Thai and Burmese writers could do. What little record we have of the period through literature takes the form of inward-looking, Straits-Chinese women's memoirs rather than any significant social commentary.<sup>161</sup> Nonetheless, the participation of various amateur writers in the local press testifies to the existence of a shared public sphere of debate for a broader, multi-ethnic base of young men and women. Penang's modern girls compared their progressiveness to each other as well as 'patriotic' women in China, India, Turkey, and beyond. The modern girl, in all her many guises, became a trope of flexible, cosmopolitan self-definition for a multi-ethnic society.

In Bangkok, both the aristocratic elite and a rising urban middle class were drawn to Hollywood and cinema-inspired fashion. Yet it was the latter that began to articulate a new, cosmopolitan sensibility in the public sphere, inspired by the new worlds of romance and bourgeois love they encountered in cinema, as Barmé has argued. What this signalled was a new claim to cosmopolitanism by the rising urban middle class, and a flattening of relations between ruler and ruled. In defining themselves as modern, urban subjects, however, they distanced themselves from traditional, and particularly rural, Thai culture – modern Thai literature of the 1920s and 1930s thus reflected this nostalgia for the countryside, while the 1937 novel *The Prostitute* was a reflection on the inaccessibility of the modern, urban, cosmopolitan lifestyle to those without capital, connections, and education.

The entry of mass, popular culture through the radio, screen, and the printed image nonetheless had instituted a sea change in the 1920s and 1930s, as an increasingly larger group of young urbanites regarded themselves as 'cosmopolitan'. Participation in popular culture, fashion, and debates about love and the modern girl became modes in which they could articulate their own version of modernity in the urban landscape and public sphere. At times, this helped form the crux of new, modern and flexible visions of the nation, articulated in shared spaces of debate, while the existence of a global space of popular imagination constituted a new arena for comparison and connection within a much wider world.

<sup>161</sup> See for instance Queenie Chang, *Memoirs of a Nonya* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1981).

## Epilogue: Cosmopolitan Legacies

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In the early twentieth century, more and more Asians emerged as self-consciously *modern* subjects. From the establishment of Rangoon, Bangkok, and Penang as port-cities, and particularly by the 1920s and 1930s, an increasing number of Asians became social organisers, community leaders, professionals, literati, critical readers, artists, and trendsetters. Operating along as well as against the grain of colonial-era society, they contributed to the economic and cultural vibrancy of the port-city in shaping urban space, associational life, the press, education, and popular culture. Out of the racial hierarchies and complex entanglements of colonial society emerged new, cosmopolitan mentalities that valued interactions across cultures and advocated a new kind of internationalism. Their visions were promoted publicly, particularly by vocal Penangites in the English press, but also by a number of middle-class professionals, students, and literati in Rangoon and Bangkok. They envisioned post-colonial futures founded on pluralism, tolerance, and a 'broad outlook' as opposed to a narrow nationalism.

The war changed everything, compressing social changes that were thought to take decades into a few years. In December 1941, Penang witnessed, in the words of Chris Bayly and Tim Harper, the 'moral collapse of the British Empire' when the British evacuated the island.<sup>1</sup> With Japanese bombs falling on the city and Penang left as an 'open town', the Anglophone public men of the 1930s continued to serve as community leaders during the Japanese occupation, while new actors came into the fold from below. A Penang volunteer corps quickly mobilised to patrol streets and distribute food to those who could afford to pay and those who could not, with former Straits Settlements Legislative Councillor Lim Cheng Ean acting as advisor.<sup>2</sup> M. Saravanamuttu, the pioneering Asian newspaper editor and ardent champion of the cosmopolitan ideal, supervised essential

<sup>1</sup> Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Armies*, p. 223.

<sup>2</sup> Oh Kee Tiang, 'When Penang was an Open Town', *Straits Times*, 17 December 1947, p. 6.

social services and raised the white flag over the colony after the European community fled the island. The Penang Amateur Wireless society sent a desperate message to Japanese headquarters in Malaya: 'There are no armed forces nor any defence whatever in Penang. The British have evacuated Penang. Please stop bombing Penang.'<sup>3</sup> Young women who had years earlier playfully debated on love and the merits of choosing a husband, were hurriedly married off as Japanese soldiers arrived on the island in droves. Witnessing the war-torn victims of the occupation in the hospitals in which they worked, many of them grew up very quickly.

In Burma, when bombs began to fall that same month, around 600,000 Indians, Anglo-Indians, and Anglo-Burmese left Rangoon, constituting one of the largest mass migrations in history. At the end of the war, the Indian journalist S. Chatterjee made his way back to Rangoon from the jungles of northern Burma, where he had been stranded, but many never returned, remembering the increasingly anti-foreign fervour of the late 1930s. Mi Mi Khaing, whose liberating experiences of 1930s Rangoon have emerged throughout this book, bordered a British army ship to Simla, and found herself cleaning cabins, classed within a racial hierarchy of assignments, below 'purely British women' who took care of the wounded but above 'dark-skinned' Eurasians who were to clean the bathrooms, and was thus confronted head-on with the injustices of colonial society.<sup>4</sup> U Tin Tut, a Cambridge-educated economist who had spent time in India with the Indian civil service, spent the war in Simla drawing up a plan for post-war reconstruction. As finance and foreign minister in Aung San's cabinet, Tin Tut urged partnership between Burmans and non-Burmans, whom he saw as valuable sources of foreign contacts and capital. M.A. Raschid, the Indian-Muslim who had been head of the Rangoon University Student Union and the level-headed leader of the 1936 university strike, contributed to the drafting of the constitution and was instrumental in persuading Aung San to add amendments such as ensuring equal rights for all minorities.<sup>5</sup> At the inaugural address of the Anti-Fascist People's Liberation Front in 1947, Aung San addressed Indians and Chinese residing in Burma as friends and neighbours, and reassured the ethnic minorities by promoting a vision of 'unity in diversity.'<sup>6</sup> Aung San's stated vision of nationalism was one in

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Mi Mi Khaing, 'Kidnapped by the British Army', chapter of unpublished autobiography sent to the author by Khai Mong (available online at <http://mimikhaing.blogspot.com/2009/12/kidnapped-by-british-army.html>, last accessed 25 August 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Maung Maung, *Burma's Constitution* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1959), p. 94; Bilal Raschid, 'M.A. Raschid: A Founding Father of Independent Burma', biographical sketch sent to the author by email.

<sup>6</sup> Josef Silverstein, 'Introduction', in *The Political Legacy of Aung San* (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1972), p. 7.

which 'every nation in the world being a conglomeration of races and religions should develop such a nationalism as is compatible with the welfare of one and all, irrespective of race, religion or class or sex'.<sup>7</sup>

The war's immediate aftermath provided a watershed opportunity to collectively imagine a new Asia, with nations joined in the spirit of anti-colonial liberation. Aung San spoke of the laudable aims of new international organisations such as the United Nations, but also insisted that Asians would not be ignored and that the days of colonialism were numbered.<sup>8</sup> In doing so he heeded the advice of Daw Mya Sein, the daughter of Burma Research Society founder U May Oung, a prominent women's activist and one of the only female delegates to the League of Nations. During the war, she voiced her hope that Burma would seize the opportunity to look beyond its borders in the war's aftermath:

Burmese nationalists need to be less absorbed with the internal problems of Burma and take more cognizance of world affairs. Perhaps the shock of war will bring a sense of added realism into Burmese politics and persuade political leaders that Burma's problems must be considered now not merely as internal concerns of a unique and isolated 'Golden Country' but as part of the whole international system. Closer contact with China, India and Siam as a result of the improvement of communications in war-time and the importance of Rangoon in the Far Eastern air routes will make it increasingly necessary for Burmans to have a realistic outlook towards external relationships.<sup>9</sup>

The Asian Relations conference, hosted in New Delhi in March and April of 1947, brought together a host of Asian luminaries to participate in creating a shared future. A message from Aung San promoted all-Asian unity and solidarity. M.A. Raschid and U Ba Lwin, a leading Burmese educator, represented Burma at the conference. Philip Hoalim, a Malayan-Chinese originally born in British Guyana (who followed his sister Roseline to the Straits after her marriage to Penang's Lim Chean Ean) represented Malaya. The conference provided an opportunity for Asian leaders to discuss national liberation movements, race issues, inter-Asian migration, economic transition, agricultural reconstruction, and industrial development, and was also a forum for cultural and scientific debates.<sup>10</sup> Women participated in these debates, and women's movements were also a major topic of discussion. That June, the United Nations held a conference in Nanking on 'Fundamental Education' in

<sup>7</sup> Aung San, *New Times of Burma*, 10 December 1946, p. 4 as qtd. in *ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Aung San, *Burma's Challenge*, 1946, as qtd. in *ibid.*, pp. 57–58.

<sup>9</sup> Daw Mya Sein quoted in Frank Haskings, *Burma Yesterday and Tomorrow* (Bombay: Thacker & Co, 1944), pp. 90–91.

<sup>10</sup> See *Asian Relations being the Report of the Proceedings and Documentation of the First Asian Relations Conference* (Delhi: Asian Relations Organization, 1948).

Asia, which sought to promote ‘full and equal opportunities for education for all’ and grant ‘fresh impulse to popular education and to the spread of culture’.<sup>11</sup> U Ba Lwin attended along with another educator, U Cho. The chair of the session was the Malayan Union representative and Straits-Chinese leader Dr Ong Chong Keng, formerly a Rotarian, a member of the Lost Souls, and a vocal advocate of cosmopolitanism.<sup>12</sup>

Siam, then known as Thailand, had been politically torn apart by the war, divided between camps of supporters of Phibun and Pridi, the two promoters of the 1932 coup who were friends as students in Paris. While Phibun had sided with the Japanese, Pridi formed the heart of the Free Thai movement in Siam, with a host of diplomats and royals mobilised abroad, as well as pro-Allied students, including Puey Ungpakorn (one of the first students to attend Pridi’s Thammasat University, then the London School of Economics). With the Allied victory, the temporary removal of the Phibun’s military, pro-Japanese government from the scene resulted in fresh attempts to establish a constitutional democracy. New political parties, including the Communist Party, as well as trade unions emerged as Siam joined the United Nations.<sup>13</sup> When Pridi travelled to America in 1947, partly to deflect a territorial dispute by the French on the Indo-Chinese border, he proposed an idea for a concept of a Federation of Southeast Asian states, initially including Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.<sup>14</sup> Pridi’s sympathy with revolutionary movements in French Indochina had grown from his student days in Paris, and also stemmed from contacts with representatives of Cambodian and Vietnamese nationalist groups in Bangkok.<sup>15</sup> Partly to legitimise the new constitution as well as this new, Southeast Asian alignment, Ananda, the prince regent, was called from Switzerland to assume the throne on his twentieth birthday.<sup>16</sup>

Many of these pan-Asian visions of post-colonial solidarity and liberation were founded on experiences of education, travel, and inter-racial friendship by the leading lights of the 1920s and 1930s. Yet these figures, now in powerful political positions, were also the most vulnerable to the

<sup>11</sup> UNESCO: Report on the Regional Study Conference on Fundamental Education, Nanking, 2–14 June 1947, UNESCO/Educ./6/1947 (available online at [www.unesco.org/library](http://www.unesco.org/library), last accessed 19 August 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> See S. Jeanteerasakul, ‘The Communist Movement in Thailand’ (unpublished PhD dissertation, Monash University, Politics, 1991).

<sup>14</sup> E. Bruce Reynolds, *Thailand’s Secret War: OSS, SOE and the Free Thai Underground during World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 414.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 415.

<sup>16</sup> Alec Waugh, *Bangkok: The Story of a City* (London: Eland, 1970, republished 2007), p. 159.

rising tide of ethnic nationalism and fears of the spread of communism. In July 1947, Burma lost Aung San, U Tin Tut, U Razak, and nine other members of the cabinet to an assassin's gun. In Bangkok, royalists blamed the mysterious death of the newly crowned King Ananda on Pridi, while charges of communism re-surfaced. Pridi was run out of the country, spending twenty-one years in China before retiring in Paris, never returning to the country whose modern history he had helped to shape. Phibun returned to power, backed by the Americans, until he too was ousted from power by royalists in 1957.

Despite an offer from his Cambridge Union debating partner, Kingsley Martin, to join the *New Statesman*, Lim Kean Chye returned to Malaya with a new political vision for his country.<sup>17</sup> He formed the Malayan Democratic Union with other English-educated leftists in Singapore. Unhappy with the status of non-Malays in the Malayan Federation proposals, the separation of Singapore, and the return of the British, the MDU formed the All-Malayan Council of Joint Action, mobilising various, multi-ethnic elements of the left together to protest the proposals including satellite organisations of the Malayan Communist Party.<sup>18</sup> These included youth movements, women's movements, trade unions, the Malayan Indian Congress, and the Malay Nationalist Party. The 'People's Constitution' they formed was a progressive testament to how far a new generation of Malayan political leaders had moved past communal divisions and diasporic nationalism towards a common vision of a 'Malayan' nation. To Lim's surprise, Chinese leaders such as Tan Cheng Lock agreed to make Malay the national language, while 55 per cent of the representatives in the national legislature were initially to be of Malay descent.<sup>19</sup> A 'Council of Races' was formed to monitor racial discrimination, and all Malaysians were given equal political rights, including the right to vote. When the British rejected the proposals, a nation-wide 'hartal' was called for 20 October 1947. Shops and cinemas all over the country were closed and streets deserted.

The hartal highlighted the power of a potential alliance between aspiring politicians and small businesses with the Malay, Chinese, and Tamil working class; yet it was one that was fraught with tensions,

<sup>17</sup> Kingsley Martin's offer is as told by Lim Kean Chye, email message to the author, 8 December 2009.

<sup>18</sup> See Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Wars*, p. 363.

<sup>19</sup> See Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Wars*, pp. 361–71; *The People's Constitution Proposal for Malaya 1947 drafted by PUTERA-AMCJA* (Kajang: Ban Ah Kam, 2005); for a recent documentary on the hartal, including testimony from its participants, see Fahmi Reza 'Sepuluh Tahun Sebelum Merdeka', 2006 (available online at [www.vimeo.com/344899](http://www.vimeo.com/344899), last accessed 19 August 2010).



particularly as Kuomintang influence grew.<sup>20</sup> Instead of supporting the multi-ethnic, centre-left alliance, the British promoted the more conservative option: an alliance with ethnic-based political parties, the business community, and the traditional Malay aristocracy. The communists were driven underground, and retaliated against those they saw as collaborators. For his efforts to ‘maintain peace and order’ during the Japanese occupation and if its aftermath, Ong Chong Keng paid with his life.<sup>21</sup> In July 1948, he gave a speech at the Legislative Council to quell the tensions within the Chinese community:

I would strongly urge those of my Chinese friends who feel the urge to take active sides in this conflict, either for the Kuomintang or for the communist party, to curb their enthusiasm until they have returned to China, for it is in China that they can be of real use to the cause which they espouse . . . Malaya is not our second home; it is our only home . . . in our war against the communists, let us conserve our huge stock of inter-communal goodwill.<sup>22</sup>

The *Straits Echo* published the speech under the misleading title ‘Total War Against Communists Urged’.<sup>23</sup> A few weeks later, Ong, riding his Harley Davidson motorcycle to see a patient, was lured into a field and shot. Later that December, a public meeting was held between an older generation of Penang’s civic leaders, led by the Straits-Chinese, who feared the resurgence of Malay power and sought to assert their claim to British citizenship.<sup>24</sup> The loss of free-port status was the greatest source of dissatisfaction to Penang’s merchant community.<sup>25</sup> Penang civil society felt it had not been consulted over the Federation proposals, particularly in contrast to the Malay sultans. They found themselves caught between worlds, nostalgic for the pre-war tranquillity and communal harmony of an earlier age and wary of a new post-colonial future in which they were referred to as ‘aliens’ and ‘immigrants’.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, the ‘Jawi Peranakan’, who previously in the 1930s had had their claims to Malayness questioned on the basis of racial purity, were now seen as UMNO’s allies in Penang, consolidating their identification with the wider Malay

<sup>20</sup> On these tensions see Yeo Kim Wah, ‘The Anti-Federation Movement in Malaya, 1946–48’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 4:1 (1973): 48–51.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Review of Chinese Affairs’, September 1948, London: National Archives, Colonial Office and predecessors: Confidential General and Confidential Original Correspondence – Eastern, CO 537/3750, p. 18.

<sup>22</sup> Ong Chong Keng, Speech to the Straits Settlements Legislative Assembly, 27 July 1948, reprinted in Pamela Ong Siew Im, *Blood and the Soil: A Portrait of Dr Ong Chong Keng* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1995), p. 178.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>24</sup> Mohamed Noordin Sopiee, ‘The Penang Secession Movement, 1948–1951’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 4:1 (1973): 52.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54. <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

community but putting them in a subordinate role to the ‘intensely pro-Malay leanings of the Peninsular Malays’.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the rise of ethnic nationalism, those who had grown up in the tranquil world of pre-war Penang grew to become the charismatic Malays able to project pragmatic political and cultural visions of the new, multi-ethnic nation. Tunku Abdul Rahman, schooled at Debsirim School in Bangkok and the Penang Free School, emerged as the country’s first prime minister, seeking to reconcile Malaysians within a Malay nation.<sup>28</sup> P. Ramlee, the reluctant but musical Penang Free School student, became Malaya’s most beloved performer, entertaining through comedy and music and popularising the ‘traditional’ Malay values of the idealised kampung along with new notions of love and romance. Joel Kahn has come to see Ramlee’s films as a model for cosmopolitan governance in the post-colonial state, in which ‘without giving up their unique identity, Malays could work with and accommodate other communities as long as those communities were prepared to accept their special position’.<sup>29</sup> This was a limited cosmopolitanism portrayed in popular culture, a far cry from the visibly and audibly eclectic form of *bangsawan*, yet elements of these early hybrid models of music and theatre seeped into Ramlee’s work. New forms of popular culture emerged with Malayan jazz, pioneered through Penang Eurasian Jimmy Boyle, while multi-ethnic translators, poets, and writers experimented and hybridised new Malay literary forms, looking across the Straits to Indonesia and beyond.

Though studies have dwelt on the political challenges of the immediate decolonisation period, little has been said of the spaces that were opened up for civil society actors during this time.<sup>30</sup> Despite the political factionalism of Burma in the 1950s, one of the most enduring relationships during this time was between U Nu and M.A. Raschid (who, as U Nu’s biographer notes, had few surviving allies after the death of Aung San).<sup>31</sup> U Nu encouraged Burmese cultural development through the establishment of schools of music, drama, and fine arts, as well as the foundation of a national library, national historic commission, a Burma Translation

<sup>27</sup> Helen Fujimoto, *The South Indian-Muslim Community and the Evolution of the Jawi Peranakan in Penang up to 1948* (Tokyo: Gaikokugo Daigaku, 1989), p. 157.

<sup>28</sup> See T.N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 349–50; N. J. Funston, *Malay Politics in Malaysia: A Study of the United Malays National Organisation and Party Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Educational Books (Asia), 1980), pp. 137–39.

<sup>29</sup> Joel S. Kahn, *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006), pp. 164–65.

<sup>30</sup> This has been examined in a Malayan context in Harper, *End of Empire*.

<sup>31</sup> Richard Butwell, *U Nu of Burma* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963), p. 155.

Society, and a new Burmese encyclopaedia.<sup>32</sup> Nu and a host of Burmese politicians and literati, including Daw Mi Mi Khaing, contributed to a special 1957 issue of America's foremost literary magazine, the *Atlantic Monthly*, devoted entirely to Burma as a rising post-colonial nation. As minister of labour, Raschid became heavily involved in the trade-union movement, representing Burma at the International Labour Organisation conference in Geneva in 1961. He also became president of the Burma Muslim Organisation, with his translation of the Qur'an into Burmese described by U Nu as a 'landmark in Burmese literature'.<sup>33</sup> Raschid's wife, N.A. Khan, played a major role in civic life, sitting on the board of the Burma Red Cross and various NGOs including the National Council of Women and welfare clinics.<sup>34</sup> Burma enjoyed a free and vibrant press and the promotion of traditional Burmese culture on a world stage, as well as experimentation with new cultural forms at home, such as graphic novels and film.

While Rangoon underwent a cultural renaissance in the 1950s, eating away at the edges of the state were the demands of ethnic minorities who could not see their place within the new framework of the Burmese nation. The loss of state stability resulted in the 1962 takeover by a caretaker military government headed by Ne Win. As Thant Myint-U notes, Ne Win's experience of losing his coal business to competition from Mughal Street in the 1930s instilled a lifelong grudge against Indians and a desire to rid the country of foreigners.<sup>35</sup> From 1964, hundreds of thousands of Indian professionals, shopkeepers, and ordinary workers, many of whom had lived in the country for generations and spoke nothing but Burmese, were expelled from Burma and sent to India and Pakistan.<sup>36</sup> Raschid, as well as U Nu, were both thrown in prison.

It is tempting to see the period of decolonisation and its aftermath as the passing of a cosmopolitan era, one for which we might even 'grieve', given its loss to the 'tyranny of the nation'.<sup>37</sup> And certainly, in Southeast Asia as elsewhere, cosmopolitan political visions suffered with the rise of ethnic nationalism in the 1960s and the resurgence of the military power in Burma and Thailand. Yet this era left quiet and tenacious legacies. Working underneath the machinations of the state were the institutional and associational remnants of an earlier age, which served as the foundations for the development of civil society in the post-colonial era. Rangoon University and Thammasat University became centres of

<sup>32</sup> Butwell, *U Nu of Burma*, p. 82.

<sup>33</sup> Bilal Raschid, 'M.A. Raschid: A Founding Father of Independent Burma', p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>35</sup> Thant, *River of Lost Footsteps*, pp. 294–95. <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 296.

<sup>37</sup> See Hanley, 'Grieving Cosmopolitanism'; T.N. Harper, 'Empire', p. 160; Gerard Noiriel, *La Tyrannie du national. Le droit d'asile en Europe 1793-1993* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1991).

opposition where students bravely held the state to account, often with dire consequences. Penang today has become a centre of oppositional politics, the home of the first multi-ethnic political party in Malaya, and a hub for subaltern international organisations such as the Third World Network. Local non-governmental organisations, progressive religious organisations, and the press have worked across communal lines and envisioned pluralist coalitions and alternatives for the future. While the Muslim Free Hospital continues to provide free medical care to all communities in Rangoon, Bangkok's Haroon mosque welcomes visitors from around the world, conducting its services in Arabic, English, and Thai. The overflowing library of the Consumer Association of Penang – the birthplace of the international consumer movement – empowers citizens to be active consumers. In downtown Yangon, under military rule up until the first decade of the twenty-first century, second-hand bookstalls, buzzing conversations in teashops, radios playing the BBC World Service, and internet cafés with proxy servers indicated a public keen to keep ideas and information flowing even in the midst of a police state.

New museums, such as Bangkok's Siam Museum and Penang's State museum, celebrate pluralist visions of the past, recognising the contribution of migrants and the hybrid influences from outside. The Yangon Heritage Trust, a non-government body of architects, engineers, and academics, is currently at work in highlighting the unique, multi-ethnic heritage of colonial Rangoon. It works in cooperation with architects and planners from around the region as well as the Penang Heritage Trust, a body of activists working on heritage issues for over thirty years, and largely responsible for UNESCO's 2007 listing of Penang and Malacca as historic maritime cities of the Straits of Malacca. Writers, artists, photographers, and videographers continue to capture the built environment of cities and their vibrant street-life.

From the fifties and sixties through to the present age of globalisation, the legacies of civil society in Southeast Asia are rooted in the vibrant, multi-ethnic port-cities of the region. Port-cities were, and have always been, nodes in which networks of people and ideas converge, shaping Asia's multiple experiences of modernity by providing a site for a necessary negotiation of difference, a breadth of opportunities for inclusive, cosmopolitan participation, and a means for Asians to question received wisdom, speak to each other, and continually forge links within the region and the world.

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# Index

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*As this book takes the city as the primary unit of interest, the index has reflected this by referring to cities, ethnic, religious and other groups, rather than countries. It is hoped that, by virtue of the relevant entries being naturally grouped in alphabetical order, a reader interested in a particular country should still be able to find the entries that interest him/her without difficulty.*

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