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ARTICLE

British Subjects by Birth, Imperial Citizens by Choice: The Straits Chinese and Cultural Citizenship in Colonial Malaya

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Abstract

In 1897, a diplomatic incident involving a Straits Chinese trader in Amoy who was arrested by Qing authorities, despite his claims of being a British subject rather than a Chinese national, set into motion a series of public and private debates about British subjecthood and the rights that it ought to accrue to those that held said status. Drawing from contemporary accounts from the time, this paper investigates how Straits Chinese with the status of British subjects conceived of their subjecthood and understood their place in the British Empire and beyond. In particular, I make the case that Anglophile Straits Chinese understood British subjecthood as a form of what historian Daniel Gorman calls "imperial citizenship": legal and juridical rights in exchange for loyalty to the Crown. Drawing from the wider new imperial studies scholarship which has made a compelling case for how being British went beyond legal definitions of status and incorporated a cultural identification with the symbols, language, and style of the empire, I contend that this conception of subject as citizen derived from a sense of cultural citizenship developed through the inculcation of cultural "Britishness" within sections of the community.

Keywords: Straits Chinese; imperial citizenship; Britishness as cultural citizenship; Malayan history; colonial society

Introduction

> The Chinese are passionately loyal to the King and country of their adoption. They obey the laws which they have a voice in making; they have a corps in the Volunteers, and a very smart Corps too; they subscribe most generously to every public movement.
>
> — G.E. Raine, "The King's Chinese" (1906)

In November 1897, a seemingly ordinary and minor financial disagreement in Amoy (modern-day Xiamen), China, sparked off reverberations that went far beyond Chinese shores. The dispute arose when a German firm alleged that the Straits Chinese trader Khun Yiong—initially identified as Teng Cheong by the *Straits Times*—had fallen in arrears in relation to the chartering of one of their steamships. Seeking to recover costs, the company initially seized Khun Yiong's property after making a complaint to the Qing authorities via the German Consul. The Straits Chinese trader was able to arrange for his

property to be temporarily released back into his possession after presenting identity documents, namely, a passport issued by the British colonial government of the Straits Settlements, which indicated to Qing officials that he was a British subject rather than a Chinese national.[1] Under the condition of extraterritoriality afforded to British subjects operating in treaty ports, enshrined within the terms of the Supplementary Treaty of the Bogue (1843) signed between the British Empire and the Qing Empire, Khun Yiong ought to have remained beyond the reach of Chinese authorities.[2] This was not to be.

In an attempt to find a suitable resolution, Khun Yiong agreed to meet with the German Consul but was summarily arrested by the diplomat and handed over to Chinese authorities for imprisonment after refusing to pay a bond of $20,000 Straits dollars as security for the German company while the situation was being investigated.[3] Despite protestations that he was a British subject by virtue of birth and residence in Singapore, both the British Minister in Peking Claude MacDonald and the British Consul in Amoy Christopher Gardner repeatedly denied representation to the Straits Chinese trader on the basis that he was not a "true" British subject but rather a Chinese national attempting to exploit his birthplace in a British territory to escape Chinese sanction.[4] Khun Yiong's treatment at the hands of both Chinese and British authorities animated complex and difficult questions about not only the legal status of British subjects in China but also what belonging in the British Empire meant to one group of subjects in particular. The community at the heart of this study are the Anglophile Chinese communities of the Straits Settlements which consisted of the Crown Colonies of Penang, Malacca, and Singapore. Straits Chinese individuals, particularly those who held the status of subjects of the British Empire by virtue of birth or naturalisation within the colonies, had a vested interest in the outcome of Khun Yiong's case. Not only was he a member of their community, but the (in)action of Whitehall in intervening on the trader's behalf and the confusion regarding the status of Chinese British subjects who travelled to China brought to the fore serious questions regarding what rights and privileges were and ought to be accorded to them as British subjects.

This article investigates the ways in which an Anglophile subset of the Straits Chinese community conceptualised their status as subjects of the British Empire as a form of imperial citizenship and how this influenced their thoughts and actions in relation to their position within colonial society. In particular, it draws on both the intellectual discourse generated during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by leading Straits Chinese figures, as well as the ways the wider community sought to display their allegiance to the empire to construct a sense of citizenship contingent on the receipt of legal and juridical rights in exchange for their loyalty to the British Crown. This sense of belonging was underpinned, as Lynn Hollen Lees has demonstrated in relation to Anglophile elites within British Malaya more broadly, by an embrace of cultural citizenship through what the community understood of "Britishness" as a form of identity to formulate claims for legal and political rights within the empire.[5] Such ideas emanated from a long exposure to and subsequent adaptation of the symbols, language, values, and style of the empire by members of the Straits Chinese community who viewed

[1] "Extraordinary Incident at Amoy," *Straits Times*, 4 December 1897.

[2] For an overview of extraterritoriality in nineteenth-century Qing China, see Pär Kristoffer Cassel, *Grounds of Judgment: Extraterritoriality and Imperial Power in Nineteenth-Century China and Japan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 51–62.

[3] "Extraordinary Incident at Amoy."

[4] The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNA), CO273/2243/3395, British Minister in Peking Claude MacDonald to Foreign Office, 16 December 1897; TNA, CO273/2243/3395, British Consul in Amoy Christopher Gardner to British Minister in Peking Claude MacDonald, 11 February 1898.

[5] Lynn Hollen Lees, "Being British in Malaya, 1890–1940," *Journal of British Studies* 48:1 (2009), 76–101.

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their relationship with successive British colonial administrations as a mutually advantageous arrangement. Understanding the Straits Chinese conception of subjecthood as citizenship generates new insights into the ways in which myriad colonial subjects sought to appropriate and leverage the institutions of the British Empire to secure particular rights and privileges which they were theoretically entitled to, but which were oftentimes not forthcoming.

Questions of who belonged and what citizenship of the empire entailed was not isolated to the British Empire but was also a recurrent question in other contexts during the zenith of the imperial age. Between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, debates also recurred within the French, German, Ottoman, and Russian Empires between imperial authorities, colonial governments, and residents within colonised territories over how the latter ought to be formally recognised.[6] Yet, it was within the British imperial milieu that making claims for equal status and treatment was particularly commonplace, a phenomenon likely reflected by the ambiguities of what subjecthood and citizenship entailed prior to their codification within the British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act (1914) but with room for interpretation still remaining even after its promulgation. The Straits Chinese community's claims fit within a larger mosaic of fellow subjects engaging in the practice of reimagining their status as a form of citizenship in places as far afield as Australia, Canada, Ethiopia, Hong Kong, India, Nigeria, South Africa, and the West Indies.[7] These subject-citizens, as they conceived of themselves, contended that they ought to receive equal treatment as white Britons on the basis of loyalism, or the idea that they were entitled to certain rights and privileges, regardless of their ethnicity and how they came to acquire their status as British subjects, so long as they continued to profess their loyalty to king (or queen) and country.

In making equivalent claims as their counterparts across the breadth of the empire, the Straits Chinese were imbricated within a global context far beyond the shores of the Straits Settlements and British Malaya—or in some cases Southeast Asia more broadly—

[6] Lorelle Semley, *To Be Free and French: Citizenship in France's Atlantic Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Emmanuelle Saada, *Empire's Children: Race, Filiation, and Citizenship in the French Colonies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Lora Wildenthal, "Race, Gender, and Citizenship in the German Colonial Empire," in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 263–83; Julia Phillips Cohen, *Becoming Ottomans: Sephardi Jews and Imperial Citizenship in the Modern Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Karen M. Kern, *Imperial Citizen: Marriage and Citizenship in the Ottoman Frontier Provinces of Iraq* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2011); Jane Burbank, "An Imperial Rights Regime: Law and Citizenship in the Russian Empire," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 7, no. 3 (2006): 397–431; Alexander Morrison, "Metropole, Colony, and Imperial Citizenship in the Russian Empire," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 13:2 (2012), 327–64.

[7] Kama Maclean, *British India, White Australia: Overseas Indians, Intercolonial Relations, and the Empire* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2020); Irina Spector-Marks, "'The Indian's Own Magna Carta': Britishness and Imperial Citizenship in Diasporic Print Culture, 1900–1914," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 16:3 (2015), 1–14; Robert Shilliam, "Ethiopianism, Englishness, Britishness: Struggles over Imperial Belonging," *Citizenship Studies* 20:2 (2016), 243–59; Catherine S. Chan, *The Macanese Diaspora in British Hong Kong: A Century of Transimperial Drifting* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021); Sukanya Banerjee, *Becoming Imperial Citizens: Indians in the Late-Victorian Empire* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010); Mark Ravinder Frost, "Imperial Citizenship or Else: Liberal Ideals and the Indian Unmaking of Empire, 1890–1919," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 46:5 (2018), 845–73; Saheed Aderinto, "Empire Day in Africa: Patriotic Colonial Childhood, Imperial Spectacle and Nationalism in Nigeria, 1905–60," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 46:4 (4 July 2018), 731–57; Jared McDonald, *Khoesan and Imperial Citizenship in Nineteenth Century South Africa* (New York: Routledge, 2023); David Killingray, "'A Good West Indian, a Good African, and, in Short, a Good Britisher': Black and British in a Colour-Conscious Empire, 1760–1950," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 36:3 (2008), 363–81; Lara Putnam, "Citizenship from the Margins: Vernacular Theories of Rights and the State from the Interwar Caribbean," *Journal of British Studies* 53:1 (2014), 162–91.

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as they have oftentimes been contained within in the majority of works that have been produced about them. The ways in which Anglophile Straits Chinese elites constructed themselves and their fellow subjects from across ethnic, religious, and geographic divides as coalescing around a particular conception of Britishness represented a distinctly cosmopolitan and inclusive sensibility that placed them in conversation—both literally and metaphorically—with counterparts from around the (British) world.[8] Yet, what made them distinctive was their emphasis on culture as the entry point towards making claims towards citizenship. While other British subjects also drew on cultural Britishness to prove that they were indeed imperial citizens, this was largely secondary to more legalistic approaches centred on challenging racially discriminatory legislation to be able to access the same rights and privileges as white Britons. The Straits Chinese community also drew on the juridical line of claims-making, as will be seen below, but it was cultural citizenship that remained at the heart of their arguments for equal status and recognition.

The underlying questions that were stirred up by Khun Yiong's arrest and the unwillingness of British authorities to intercede on behalf of an erstwhile British subject continued to be debated in the Straits Settlements long after the trader disappeared from the public discourse. His arrest and imprisonment at the hands of the Qing government, then abandonment by British authorities in Amoy sparked difficult deliberations and contestations among Straits Chinese community leaders and colonial officials in the Straits Settlements as well as imperial mandarins in Whitehall. These questions took on a renewed intensity in 1904 following a pronouncement issued by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Lord Lansdowne regarding the question of protections afforded to British subjects of Chinese descent when they visited China in response to a petition submitted by Chinese merchants based in Bangkok who held British subjecthood. The traders had requested clarification on the matter due to the long-standing practice of British consuls in China refusing to provide official recognition of these traders as British subjects, which put them in danger of facing a similar fate as Khun Yiong.[9] Lord Lansdowne made a determination that any Chinese who was registered as a British subject in Bangkok, had been resident in the Siamese capital for more than three years, and was able to produce a passport attesting to the previous two conditions would be granted full protection as a British subject during any travel to China.[10]

Given the proximity of Lord Lansdowne's declaration to the Khun Yiong case, this naturally prompted a flurry of public correspondences in the *Straits Echo* as Straits Chinese with the status of British subjects questioned why there was no corresponding provision for them, particularly given they were a significantly larger population.[11] It was later clarified that the colonial secretary's proclamation was based on a determination in June 1903—which had not been publicised—that British subjects of Chinese descent who had been resident in the Straits Settlements, Federated Malay States, and Johor for three years and were registered as such were under the aegis of British consular protection when they travelled to China.[12] The discourse surrounding British subjecthood in the case of Khun Yiong in 1897 and British Chinese from Bangkok in 1904 are illuminative

[8] For more on the idea of a British world defined by more than notions of imperial power, see Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorowich, eds., *The British World: Diaspora, Culture and Identity* (Abingdon, U.K.: Routledge, 2003).

[9] "A Chinese Grievance," *Straits Echo*, 23 May 1904; "Chinese Traders in Siam," *Straits Budget*, 26 May 1904.

[10] "Chinese British Subjects in Bangkok: Important New Regulations," *Straits Echo*, 27 October 1904; "Chinese British Subjects in Bangkok," *Straits Echo*, 28 October 1904.

[11] "Chinese Affairs," *Straits Echo*, 3 November 1904; "Chinese Affairs," *Straits Echo*, 11 November 1904; "Chinese Affairs," *Straits Echo*, 4 November 1904; "The Status of the Straits-Born Chinese," *Straits Echo*, 11 November 1904; "Wanted: Protection in the Treaty Ports of China," *Straits Echo*, 11 November 1904.

[12] *Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements for the Year 1903 with Appendix* (Singapore: Straits Settlements Government Printing Office, 1904), B153.

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of how Straits Chinese who held the status of British subjects thought of themselves within the imperial milieu, but only offer hints as to how they came to this self-conception.

The Straits Settlements in Context

Before exploring the notions of subjecthood held by Anglophile Straits Chinese and how it developed over time, it is necessary to first provide some insight into both the Straits Chinese community and the Straits Settlements, particularly the ways in which residency in the colony inculcated a distinct sense of belonging within the British Empire. In the first instance, it is important to acknowledge that the Straits Chinese were not a monolithic bloc but rather a heterogenous community constituted of both China- and overseas-born ethnic Chinese. The community at its broadest spanned a range of topolect groups, predominantly those with historical connections to the south-eastern provinces of Fujian and Guangdong in mainland China. Reflecting the diversity of their origins, Straits Chinese also had variegated conceptions of identity and belonging in relation to the Straits Settlements. There were sojourners—oftentimes newcomers to Malaya called *sinkheh* who arrived during successive waves of Chinese migration from the mid-nineteenth century onwards—whose sole object was to earn a fortune in the Nanyang [Southern Seas] before returning to China. Alongside sojourners whose primary desire was a permanent repatriation to their homeland were peripatetic individuals like Khun Yiong based either in China or the Straits Settlements but travelling frequently between the two to conduct their business. Moreover, there were also hybridised communities like the Peranakan Chinese who held an unshakeable sense of belonging in the Straits Settlements, as they came from prominent families whose lineage could be traced back to the fifteenth century when the earliest Chinese merchants in the region married indigenous women from the Malay World.[13]

The development of a significant Anglophile component among the Straits Chinese—particularly among the latter two categories outlined above—was a consequence of the nature of the Straits Settlements themselves. Part of this was a legacy of the formative years of the British imperial project in the Malay Peninsula as British and Chinese pioneers forged a mutually beneficial relationship as early as 1786 with the founding of the English East India Company (EIC) settlement on Penang Island by Francis Light. The nucleus of what would become the Straits Chinese community had made their way to Penang soon after the EIC's arrival at the behest of the trader Koh Lay Huan, who was seemingly attempting to diversify his commercial and political interests in the region by making an early investment in the Company, which at this point was an unproven entity rather than the pre-eminent power in the region that it would become. Light himself recognised Koh as a valuable asset for the fledgling settlement who not only commanded the growing Chinese population on the island but also provided entrée into networks of trade and commerce that stretched across Southeast Asia and beyond.[14] The trader was rewarded for his cooperation with the beginnings of the British imperial project by being appointed *Kapitan Cina* [Chinese captain] in 1787, marking the beginnings

[13] For an examination of Straits Chinese identities, see John Clammer, *The Ambiguity of Identity: Ethnicity Maintenance and Change among the Straits Chinese Community in Malaysia and Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1979). On the nuances of Peranakan Chinese identity and how it fits within a broader Straits Chinese framework, see Leo Suryadinata, "Peranakan Chinese Identities in Singapore and Malaysia: A Re-Examination," in *Ethnic Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia*, ed. Leo Suryadinata (Singapore: Times Academic Publishing, 2002), 69–84.

[14] British Library (hereafter BL), IOR/G/34, Letter from Francis Light to Governor-General of the Bengal Presidency Sir John MacPherson, 12 September 1786.

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of Straits Chinese integration into the machinery of the colonial administration. More of the community were further entrenched within the fledgling British imperial presence in the Straits of Malacca following Stamford Raffles's establishment of an EIC outpost in Singapore in 1819 and the institution of British control over Malacca in 1824, as Straits Chinese individuals continued in their role as influential colonial intermediaries between the British, Chinese, and Malay communities across the peninsula.

The status of the Straits Settlements as a directly ruled colony also played a vital role in the development of a particular sense of belonging within the British Empire felt by Anglophile members of the Straits Chinese community. As residents of a British colony, Straits Chinese who were born in the Straits Settlements were granted *jus soli* subjecthood—with the caveat that both parents had to be British subjects either through birth or naturalisation as well—while those who could prove long-term residency had the option to be naturalised as a British subject. In contrast, those residing in the Federated Malay States of Selangor, Perak, Negeri Sembilan, and Pahang and the Unfederated Malay States of Johor, Kedah, Kelantan, Perlis, and Terengganu[15] were only ever eligible to the status of British protected persons. The category of British protected person was a vague and ill-defined status that identified citizens of a British protectorate as aliens falling under the protection of the British Empire but with no associated juridical rights—and responsibilities—like British subjects.[16] This distinction between the two legal statuses in the empire was further delineated by those designated British protected persons having no real avenue of achieving British subjecthood through naturalisation since they did not fall under the direct jurisdiction of Whitehall.

Under the policy of indirect rule, the Malay States were rendered as protectorates under the aegis of the British Empire that maintained their sovereignty, which meant that any subject of the Malay rulers remained as such and could only be granted the additional status of British protected person rather than British subjecthood. While those of Malay descent were automatically subjects of the Malay Rulers and consequently designated as protected persons, Chinese residents who were born in China and a majority of those born in the Malay States were not considered as such. Chinese communities outside of the Straits Settlements were instead classified by both the British and Malay administrations as resident aliens on the assumption that they were sojourners with no real orientation towards either the individual Malay polities or to the British Empire.[17] The Qing Dynasty's enshrinement of *jus sanguinis*—or blood lineage as the basis for citizenship— through the promulgation of the 1909 nationality law which set out that all those born to Chinese fathers, regardless of where they were born, were by definition Chinese nationals provided a further legal basis to reinforce the idea that they were an itinerant population.[18]

Political distinctions between the directly ruled Straits Settlements and indirectly ruled Federated and Unfederated Malay States was reflected in the domestic legal status

[15] The Federated Malay States exercised control over internal affairs but were also incorporated into a federated administrative structure based in Kuala Lumpur that was controlled by British colonial officials. In contrast, the Unfederated Malay States were nominally sovereign polities with more autonomy on paper as individual protectorates of the British Empire. While each of the states were ruled independently by their respective sultans and the Yang di-Pertuan Besar in the case of Negeri Sembilan, they fell under de facto British control over the course of the late nineteenth century. For more, see Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia* (London: Palgrave, 2017), 174–7, 185–7, 194–203.

[16] Ann Dummett and Andrew Nicol, *Subjects, Citizens, Aliens and Others: Nationality and Immigration Law* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990), 114–5.

[17] Lee Hock Guan, "Shades of Citizenship: Betwixt the Civic and the Ethnic," *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2013, 170–1.

[18] Shao Dan, "Chinese by Definition: Nationality Law, Jus Sanguinis, and State Succession, 1909–1980," *Twentieth-Century China* 35:1 (2009), 4.

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of their residents as British subjects and British protected persons respectively. It is worth noting that this delineation was blurred somewhat outside the borders of the empire due to both categories of persons being issued with British passports for travel.[19] Consequently, the Foreign Office viewed the two as holding the same prerogative for protection under the aegis of the British flag, though as we have seen in the case of Khun Yiong, whether this was put into practice was a different consideration altogether. Nonetheless, the starker contrast between the two statuses within Malaya as a whole would come to play a vital role in socialising groups like the Straits Chinese within the imperial edifice. As subject-citizens whose everyday lives were governed by the machinery of the colonial state and who were regularly confronted with the symbols, personnel, and institutions of empire, Anglophile communities in the Straits Settlements were imbued with a particular sense of belonging in what was visibly an imperial constituency. This stood in stark contrast with how residents of the Malay States—both Federated and Unfederated—conceptualised their place within the British Empire. In the first instance, the predominantly Malay population residing outside the major urban centres on the Malay Peninsula dominated by British colonial administrators retained a political culture centred around *kerajaan*, the long-standing custom of orienting their allegiance towards the ruler of their state in whom sovereignty was invested.[20] Meanwhile, Chinese coolies recruited to work the tin mines on the mainland from the mid-nineteenth century onwards were predominantly sojourners whose notion of identity was tied with kinship and locality in China more so than Malaya and the British Empire.[21] Perhaps the only exception to the largely limited sense of place in the empire in the Malay States was in terms of the Indian labourers transplanted from the subcontinent—which was itself under direct British rule—to work on agricultural plantations and public works. Yet, in a similar vein as their Chinese counterparts, their sense of belonging was contingent not on imperial linkages but rather longstanding historical associations with one's caste, religion, and place of origin. Moreover, the nature of mass Indian migration in the nineteenth century, particularly the influx of "assisted migration"—a euphemism deployed by British authorities to obfuscate what was in effect indentured servitude—further complicated how ethnic Indians in Malaya related to their new surroundings.[22]

Which is not to suggest a complete absence of those on the mainland whose allegiance gravitated towards the British Empire. Economic and political elites from the Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities of Peninsular Malaya whose fortunes and influence were underpinned by their relationship with the British imperial project oftentimes articulated a strong connection to the empire. Moreover, within the discourse around modernisation and progress within the intellectual milieu of the mainland, there were also as many of those who were admirers of colonial forms of modernity as there were critics of imperial dominance. Among Malay elites, exposure to ideas of the modern took place within the context of their appropriation within the colonial bureaucracy either informally through the co-opting of the court structures of the Unfederated Malay States or formally within the Malayan Administrative Service in the Federated Malay States.[23] Yet, the extent and depth to which the population in the Malay States

[19] Lees, "Being British in Malaya, 1890–1940," 80.

[20] For the definitive work on Malay political structures, see Anthony C. Milner, *Kerajaan: Malay Political Culture on the Eve of Colonial Rule* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1982).

[21] For a concise discussion of the plurality of Chinese identities in the Malay Peninsula, see Yen Ching-Hwang, "Overseas Chinese Nationalism in Singapore and Malaya, 1877–1912," *Modern Asian Studies* 16:3 (1982), 397–425.

[22] For more on Indian migration to Malaya and its complexities, see Sunil S. Amrith, "Indians Overseas? Governing Tamil Migration to Malaya 1870–1941," *Past and Present* 208:1 (2010), 231–61.

[23] Raymond L. M. Lee, "Modernity, Anti-Modernity and Post-Modernity in Malaysia," *International Sociology* 7:2 (1992), 157. For a more comprehensive study of the incorporation of Malay elites within the colonial state, see

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associated themselves with the British Empire never quite matched the level and speed of identification reflected among their counterparts in the Straits Settlements. In no community was this Anglophile tendency more apparent than among the Straits Chinese, who not only took up employment with the political and economic institutions of the empire but also adopted a range of cultural practices as a means of displaying their commitment to it.

(Re)Constructing the Straits Chinese as "British"

Over the course of British rule in Malaya, Straits Chinese identity came to be deeply intertwined with notions of Britishness. One instructive anecdote from *Singapore Free Press* editor J. D. Vaughan is demonstrative of the community's self-perceptions regarding the depth of their connection to the empire. In his 1879 tract on the Chinese communities of the Straits Settlements, Vaughan described how "*Babas*[24] on being asked if they were Chinamen bristle up and say in an offended tone 'I am not a Chinaman, I am a British subject, an *orang putih* [white man]'" and that there was nothing the community would consider a higher honour "than being British subjects."[25] One major outlet by which the Straits Chinese (re)constructed their identities as British was through education. Following in the footsteps of Koh Lay Huan in embracing British colonists as an opportunity rather than a threat, the progenitors of what would become some of the most powerful Straits Chinese families in the colonies made the conscious decision to learn English in order to develop a working relationship with the EIC during the early years of the British presence in the Straits of Malacca.[26] To build on the early connections they forged with the colonial apparatus, these families would also send successive generations of their children to the new English-language schools established by the colonial government and Christian missionaries over the course of the nineteenth century.[27] By the end of the century, English education had become so entrenched among the Straits Chinese that their children could be found filling the majority of places in these schools across the Crown Colony.[28] In eminent educational institutions like the Penang Free School, Malacca High School, and Raffles Institution, Straits Chinese children developed an affinity not only for the English language but were inculcated with the traditions, cultural practices, and central tenets of Britishness as part of their education.

The enthusiasm for an English education among the Straits Chinese presents a striking contrast with the intentions of the colonial powers-that-be in offering it. Though writing

Johan Khasnor, *The Emergence of the Modern Malay Administrative Elite* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1984).

[24] A male honorific for a member of the Peranakan community, a subset of the Straits Chinese borne of intermarriage between the Chinese and Malay communities that developed their own unique creolised culture and identity. For a comprehensive overview, see Tan Chee-Beng, *Chinese Peranakan Heritage in Malaysia and Singapore* (Selangor: Fajar Bakti, 1993).

[25] J. D. Vaughan, *The Manners and The Customs of the Chinese of the Straits Settlements* (Singapore: Mission Press, 1879), 4.

[26] Song Ong Siang, "The King's Chinese: Their Cultural Evolution from Immigrants to Citizens of a Crown Colony," *Straits Times Annual*, 1 January 1936.

[27] Leslie N. O'Brien, "Education and Colonialism: The Case of Malaya," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology* 16:2 (1980), 55–6. The educational system in colonial Malaya consisted of a complex mix of government-, missionary-, and community-run schools that were divided primarily along the lines of language. English-language schools operated alongside vernacular Malay, Chinese, and Tamil schools, with the former being well resourced and supported by the government while the latter three oftentimes depended on philanthropic funding from the relevant communities. For a detailed analysis, see Abu Zahari Abu Bakar, *Perkembangan Pendidikan Di Semenanjung Malaysia: Zaman Sebelum Merdeka Hingga Ke Zaman Sesuah Merdeka* [Educational development in Peninsular Malaysia: From the pre-independence era to after] (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Fajar Bakti, 1980).

[28] "English-Speaking Chinese," *Straits Times Weekly Issue*, 14 March 1893.

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towards the end of the British Empire's hold on Malaya rather than during its zenith, the Malaysian author Han Suyin presents an evocative description of what constituted an English education under colonial rule and its reverberations:

> And what do we do to fit our English-speaking Chinese, our docile and happy, our truly loyal servants, for the Asia of the future? We teach them English history: Henry the VIII, Elizabeth and Victoria, English geography, three-quarters of the book the British Isles, one quarter the rest of the world. Literature: *Lamb's Tales* from Shakespeare and *The Mill on the Floss*, all in Basic, as they aren't to know the complexities of our tongue. We cut them by the accolade called the Overseas School Certificate from their own learning, their traditions; if that were cutting them off merely from the past, it wouldn't matter, but also and more dangerously, it cuts them from the present, and perhaps the future of Asia. With these happy eunuchs who are bound to us by their knowledge of English we run this country well as our colonial preserve.[29]

While colonial officials were certainly motivated to provide an English education to communities like the Straits Chinese by a practical desire to reinforce their own power, English-educated Straits Chinese had other ideas for how to utilise their tutelage in the ways of their colonial rulers. In making the case for establishing a free universal system of English education in the Straits Settlements, the eminent Straits Chinese leader Tan Cheng Lock encapsulated the position held by many of his contemporaries in arguing that sending their progeny to English schools "inculcates good citizenship, it enables him a good living, and ... is eminently fitted to give the best training to his mind, body and spirit," which in turn would allow them to develop a "British outlook, in order that they may grow up to be loyal British subjects, and good, useful and patriotic citizens of the British Empire."[30] Education was thus not only a practical pathway for members of the community to acquire the working language of the colony to gain otherwise inaccessible economic opportunities. It was also a means by which the Straits Chinese could (re)construct themselves as British through the adoption of the cultural mores and values of the empire.

Academically inclined Straits Chinese students embedded themselves deeper within the imperial milieu through higher education, which they often undertook beyond the confines of the Straits Settlements. This was partly a consequence of tertiary education facilities in the colony itself being found lacking until the establishment of the King Edward VII College of Medicine—the forerunner to the University of Malaya—in 1904.[31] And even then, demand consistently outstripped the number of places available for taking up more advanced studies. Straits Chinese individuals and their families were moreover deeply enthusiastic about the prospect of travelling overseas to gain higher qualifications as it meant not only advancement within one's selected profession but also the ability to express one's Britishness within the wider empire. The establishment of the Queen's Scholarship scheme in 1889, which defrayed the costs of steamship travel to the metropole as well as providing its holder with a small stipend, enabled a range of remarkable

[29] Han Suyin, ... *And the Rain My Drink* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1956), 273–4. An inimitable postcolonial writer, Han Suyin could be characterised as the diametric opposite of Anglophile Straits Chinese. For more on her life and history, see Ina Zhang, "A Dissenting Voice: The Politics of Han Suyin's Literary Activities in Late Colonial and Postcolonial Malaya and Singapore," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 57:2 (2021), 155–70.

[30] *Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements for the Year 1923 with Appendix* (Singapore: Straits Settlements Government Printing Office, 1924), B104.

[31] D. D. Celliah, *A History of the Educational Policy of the Straits Settlements, 1800–1925* (Kuala Lumpur: Government Press, 1960), 117.

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Straits Chinese individuals like Dr Lim Boon Keng, Sir Song Ong Siang, Dr Wu Lien-teh, Yeoh Guan Seok, Leong Yew Koh, and Dr Lim Chong Eu to attend some of the best universities in Britain.[32] Queen's Scholars were not the only Straits Chinese who gained an education in the metropole. The scion of elite Straits Chinese families would also oftentimes be sent by wealthy relatives to study overseas as an investment into a future tied deeply to the British Empire.[33] A majority of Straits Chinese youths were sent to Britain, but some were also sent to other institutions of higher learning elsewhere in the empire including Hong Kong and Rangoon.[34] In these educational settings, successive generations of Straits Chinese socialised with fellow subject-citizens from all corners of the empire, providing an impetus for the development of a strong imperial-oriented identity built from their commonalities and shared experiences. It should be noted, however, that attending university in the metropole could sometimes have the inverse effect, particularly from the interwar period onwards as some Straits Chinese students came to be influenced by fellow subjects from other parts of the British Empire who held deeper anti-colonial convictions.[35] Nevertheless, this represented a much smaller proportion of those who undertook their studies abroad, with the majority developing either an affinity towards the British Empire or a desire to reform it from within rather than outright enmity against it.

Promising Straits Chinese men—and increasingly women from the early twentieth century onwards—were not only trained in their chosen professions of engineering, law, and medicine in the storied university halls of Cambridge, Edinburgh, and Oxford. Their time in the metropole also yielded professional connections with white Britons who would later become senior officials in the Straits Settlements Civil Service and in Whitehall that they could call on, integrating them deeper within the machinery of the imperial bureaucracy. But more than that, Straits Chinese students at these leading universities also received valuable cultural tutelage from socialising within an elite British context, which equipped them with the language and tools to better engage in what Lynn Hollen Lees has evocatively described as "performances of Britishness."[36] Yet, engagement with Britishness as a cultural phenomenon went far beyond performance and instead reflected a deep-seated conviction in what they believed to be their rightful place within the empire as subjects of the Crown. For Anglophile members of the Straits Chinese community, the adoption of the vocabulary of empire was not simply an act of colonial mimicry in the sense of expressing subservience or engaging in mockery of the coloniser, as in Homi Bhabha's influential conceptualisation.[37] Rather, it was part of a deliberate process to (re)construct themselves as cultural citizens of the empire.

Displaying Straits Chinese Citizenship

This process of, in a sense, becoming British was expressed not only in the written and spoken word but within a visual repertoire as well. Corresponding with increasing numbers of young Straits Chinese men and women receiving an English education both at

[32] For a full list of Queen's Scholars, who counted among their ranks some of the leading figures of both post-colonial Malaysia and Singapore, see Wu Lien-Teh and Ng Yok-Hing, *The Queen's Scholarships of Malaya, 1885–1948* (Penang: Penang Premier Press, 1949).

[33] "Straits Students," *Straits Times*, 3 January 1917.

[34] Su Lin Lewis, *Cities in Motion: Urban Life and Cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia, 1920–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 205–6.

[35] See A. J. Stockwell, "Leaders, Dissidents and the Disappointed: Colonial Students in Britain as Empire Ended," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 36:3 (2008), 487–507, for an examination of radical student politics among colonial students in London in the post–World War II period.

[36] Lynn Hollen Lees, *Planting Empire, Cultivating Subjects: British Malaya, 1786–1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 285.

[37] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 129–31.

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home and abroad, members of the community could be seen more frequently sporting "Western" fashion in public from the turn of the century. As Katon Lee demonstrates in his study of suit-wearing among elite Chinese men in early twentieth-century Hong Kong, the process of adopting Western dress was intimately connected with colonial education. English-medium schools in both the Straits Settlements and Hong Kong—and in colonies across the empire—fostered a predilection towards Western style through programmes of cultural Westernisation. This was done through the regulation of fashion, manner, and etiquette, which was in turn reinforced by everyday encounters between local students and British educators and students who modelled how to look and act British.[38] In wearing Western vestments outright or Westernising traditional attire, Straits Chinese men and women engaged in a process of refashioning not only their wardrobes but their cultural identities as well. For elite and middle-class Straits Chinese, the conspicuous adoption of Western dress symbolised an embrace of colonial modernity and a means by which to signify their social status and distinguish themselves from their Sino-centric counterparts.

Dressing in Western clothes among Anglophile Straits Chinese began as a predominantly male affair in the late nineteenth century, reflecting the educational opportunities and role in public life afforded to them in contrast to their female counterparts. The primary outfit by which men within the community demonstrated their inculcation within the milieu of Western fashion was the suit. Putting on a suit created a distinct visual identity for Straits Chinese men who were not only cast within the mould of a European gentleman in terms of style but also served as a marker of wealth given the high costs associated with sartorial production. Alongside the donning of suits, Straits Chinese male fashion also involved cutting off the *towchang* (queue), which began as a practical measure to ensure that Straits Chinese men travelling to China would be able to avoid the same predicament that befell Khun Yiong in 1897, but quickly took on a powerful symbolic meaning. The act of cutting off one's *towchang* by Straits Chinese to distinguish themselves from Chinese nationals—who were required by law to sport the braid—became a symbolic rejection of the perceived backwardness of Qing Dynasty rule in China and an embrace of British subjecthood as part of their cultural identity.[39] In an article advocating for queue-cutting among Straits Chinese men, the prominent legislative councillor and community leader Dr Lim Boon Keng conceptualised the act as belonging to a broader programme of cultural reform which would demonstrate "by the lives and conduct and works of our people that we are deserving of the citizenship of the British Empire."[40]

Straits Chinese women also underwent a transformation in style towards Western vogue but did so later than their male counterparts and in a distinctly more cosmopolitan fashion. This shift occurred as part of broader global developments during the interwar period as increasing educational and employment opportunities for women brought the phenomenon of the "Modern Girl" to life in major cities around the world. Challenging traditional expectations of a woman's role in society, the "Modern Girl" cut an alluring figure on both the page and the screen, selling an idea of female independence and modernity that was ultimately underpinned by conspicuous consumption.[41] The Straits Chinese incarnation of the "Modern Girl" adopted a more mediated approach to Western fashion, followed in the footsteps of her counterpart from Shanghai, the *modeng*

[38] Katon Lee, "Suit Up: Western Fashion, Chinese Society and Cosmopolitanism in Colonial Hong Kong, 1910–1980" (PhD diss., University of Bristol, 2020).

[39] *Cherita Fasal Towchang* [A tale of the Chinese queue] (Singapore: Straits Chinese Printing Office, 1899).

[40] Lim Boon Keng, "Straits Chinese Reform I – The Queue Question," *Straits Chinese Magazine* 3:9 (1899), 22–5.

[41] For an overview of the "Modern Girl" and her various incarnations, see The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group, *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008).

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xiaojie, in deploying a repertoire of fashion that included both traditional outfits updated to reflect a modern style as well as taking up Western dress outright. She exhibited a striking new look that brought together a shortened and form-fitting *qipao* or *cheongsam*—or *kebaya* in the case of Peranakan Chinese women—sporting Western motifs with bobbed hair, high heels, and make-up.[42] Beyond a visual demonstration through fashion, the Straits Chinese Modern Girl could also be seen as engaging with Western cultural norms through her embrace of independence from traditional social structures and gender roles, her participation in civic life, and her consumption of the products of capitalist modernity.[43]

Identification with the symbols, language, and style of the empire by Anglophile members of the Straits Chinese community was not solely a cultural exercise. It had a distinctly political impetus, demonstrating one's Britishness as a means of claiming the political and juridical rights that leading members of the community believed the community were entitled to as full subjects of the empire. This understanding of subjecthood among the Straits Chinese as a status entitling them to broader rights and privileges should be understood within the context of "becoming imperial citizens"—to borrow the evocative phrase used by Sukanya Banerjee—both in the sense of the process of claiming citizenship as well as reflecting their suitability to be citizens.[44] Like their contemporaries in the British Raj, Straits Chinese political figures were drawing on an affective conception of citizenship wherein they abstracted themselves as part of an expansive community of equals that stretched across the empire. This reflected the discourse around subjecthood within the empire during the Victorian period, particularly in relation to how imperial thinkers and policymakers were attempting to define the status of white Britons in the settler-colonies of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa. While such ideas were never codified into law nor seen to be applicable to anyone other than white British subjects, there existed a universalist discourse of citizenship that all those born or naturalised within the British Empire "whether in London or Lagos, were technically subjects, all owing allegiance to the crown," which was in turn "reciprocated through the protection the State provided its citizens."[45]

This understanding of subjecthood as citizenship was a major feature of Straits Chinese political life and can be seen in how Straits Chinese elites attempted to construct the community as an engaged citizenry. One major outlet for their civic activities was the Straits Chinese British Association (SCBA), which acted as a hybrid between a community organisation and a political lobby group. The SCBA was initially established in Singapore on 17 August 1900 with subsequent branches opened in Penang and Malacca in the next few years. From its earliest days, the SCBA served as a proving ground for many Straits Chinese individuals who would rise to prominence in both the colonial and postcolonial periods.[46] It acted as a space for them to set out their bona fides as community leaders as well as providing opportunities for them to socialise and network with not just fellow Straits Chinese luminaries but also British elites who were oftentimes invited as guests of the association. The SCBA was the product of prominent Chinese from all three

[42] Thienny Lee, "Dress and Visual Identities of the Nyonyas in the British Straits Settlements; Mid-Nineteenth to Early-Twentieth Century" (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2016), 235.

[43] Su Lin Lewis, "Cosmopolitanism and the Modern Girl: A Cross-Cultural Discourse in 1930s Penang," *Modern Asian Studies* 43:6 (2009), 1408.

[44] Sukanya Banerjee, *Becoming Imperial Citizens: Indians in the Late-Victorian Empire* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 7.

[45] Daniel Gorman, *Imperial Citizenship: Empire and the Question of Belonging* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 19.

[46] For an overview of the SCBA's history, see Lee Yong Hock, "A History of the Straits Chinese British Association (1900–1959)" (BA honours thesis, University of Malaya, 1960).

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settlements including Dr. Lim Boon Keng, Sir Song Ong Siang, Tan Jiak Kim, Seah Liang Seah, and Wee Thiam Tew coalescing around a desire to demonstrate the community's loyalty to king and country.[47] Beyond an external display of allegiance, the SCBA was also designed to inculcate a sense of imperial belonging amongst the Straits Chinese, as made evident in its founding charter, which described the organisation's ultimate objective as promoting "among the members an intelligent interest in the affairs of the British Empire and to encourage and maintain their loyalty as subjects of the British Empire."[48] Both the internally and externally oriented facets of the SCBA's mission can be seen clearly in their public contributions to the cultural life of the colony.

One notable way the association sought to make their mark within the more immediate confines of the Straits Settlements as well as in the broader empire was through ostentatious acts of pageantry, which were on display during two visits by the royal family in the first decade of the twentieth century. The first royal visit took place in March 1901 when the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York embarked on a world tour of the British Empire—the longest in the history of the royal family to date—which included a stop in Singapore.[49] To commemorate the event, nearly three hundred members of the SCBA volunteered to organise a grand reception in honour of the royal visitors, with the association's executive committee approving the exorbitant sum of $2,800 Straits dollars for the event's budget.[50] What eventuated was indeed magnificent as the SCBA contribution to the royal visit included a seven-storey pagoda surmounted by a figure of Britannia holding an illuminated torch, which was "intended to express the [Straits] Chinese belief in the advancing influence of Great Britain for the benefit of mankind."[51] A visit by the Duke of Connaught and Strathearn on the way to Japan in January 1906 featured a similarly illuminated welcome, with members of the association putting on a torchlight procession in their honour as well as a fireworks display following the formalities.[52] These displays of "public spirit" earned them the title of the "king's Chinese" in the metropole as they were lauded for their stirring demonstration of loyalty to the Crown, a moniker that they proudly adopted to reflect their sense of belonging within an imperial milieu.[53]

Imperial Citizenship in Action

Beyond spectacle, Straits Chinese political actors also demonstrated their engagement with imperial citizenship through their recurrent involvement in the apparatus of the colonial state. This was an expression of their citizenship in the sense of contributing to civic life, which was demonstrative of the community's stake within the Straits Settlements and the British Empire more broadly. But perhaps more importantly, it also reflected a nuanced understanding that being a citizen constituted not only rights but responsibilities as well. Prominent community leaders were active participants within the machinery of government in the Straits Settlements, serving as unofficial councillors in the Straits Settlements Legislative Council, community liaisons in the Chinese Advisory Board, commissioners in the municipal commissions of each of the three settlements, and

[47] Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* (London: John Murray, 1923), 455.

[48] "Straits Chinese British Association," *Straits Times*, 18 August 1900.

[49] Harry Price, *The Royal Tour, 1901, or, The Cruise of* H.M.S. Ophir*: Being a Lower Deck Account of Their Royal Highnesses, the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York's Voyage Around the British Empire* (New York: W. Morrow, 1980).

[50] "A Chinese Trophy," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 21 March 1901.

[51] "The Royal Visit," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 23 April 1901.

[52] "Presentation to the Prince," *Straits Times*, 5 February 1906.

[53] G. E. Raine, "The King's Chinese," *Daily Mail*, 14 April 1906.

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as justices of the peace. Straits Chinese involvement in the Legislative Council—the hybrid legislative and advisory body intended to serve as a facsimile of Parliament in the colonies—was of particular note as the men who took up appointments as unofficial legislative councillors were a veritable who's who of Malaysian and Singaporean politics. The trader Hoo Ah Kay—more commonly known as Whampoa—was the inaugural unofficial legislative councillor representing the Chinese communities of the Straits Settlements and took up the position in 1869, just two years after the establishment of the Legislative Council.[54] His successors included luminaries like Seah Liang Seah, Dr Lim Boon Keng, Tan Jiak Kim, Sir Song Ong Siang, Yeoh Guan Seok, Lee Choon Guan, Tan Cheng Lock, and Lim Cheng Ean, whose voting records and speeches highlight just how seriously they took on their responsibility in the colonial legislature.[55]

They did not serve as token representatives who were solely there to rubberstamp government policies but took on an active role in challenging the colonial state when it violated its ostensible values as well as putting forward their own political agendas. During their tenure, the aforementioned Straits Chinese unofficials used their position in the colonial legislature as an opportunity to construct a more representative system of governance by variously cooperating with, cajoling, and contesting their counterparts within the colonial government. They conceived their role in the Legislative Council as providing representation for their community by giving voice to their concerns and priorities in the administration of the Settlements. Later councillors like Tan Cheng Lock from Malacca and Lim Cheng Ean from Penang articulated a particularly cosmopolitan imagination of who their constituents were, advocating not only for their fellow Straits Chinese but also for other Asian communities resident in the Straits Settlements.[56] In the aftermath of the First World War, both men mounted vociferous challenges against the racialised hierarchies inherent in the colonial system in an attempt to remake the Colony into a distinctly more democratic and representative space for their fellow non-European subject-citizens.

Between 1923 and 1933, Tan undertook a long-standing campaign to dismantle the colour bar—both the formal restrictions preventing non-Europeans from advancing beyond a certain level in the Civil Service as well as the unwritten constraints in other bodies—imposed in the Straits Settlements. He began by making the case that the government ought to "appoint more than one Asiatic member on the various government committees, boards, and other bodies appointed to deal with questions in which the entire community is concerned" and that there were "many able, educated, and public-spirited Asiatic gentlemen who are willing to serve if called upon to do so" in the Colony.[57] Tan found it "so absurd, so contrary to actual fact and manifest truth, so opposed to the plain

[54] "Friday, 24th December," *Straits Times*, 25 December 1869.

[55] *Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements for the Year 1887 with Appendix* (Singapore: Straits Settlements Government Printing Office, 1888), B1; *Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements for the Year 1890 with Appendix* (Singapore: Straits Settlements Government Printing Office, 1891), B119; *Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements for the Year 1895 with Appendix* (Singapore: Straits Settlements Government Printing Office, 1896), B32; *Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements for the Year 1903 with Appendix*, B1; *Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements for the Year 1922 with Appendix* (Singapore: Straits Settlements Government Printing Office, 1923), A12; *Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements for the Year 1923 with Appendix*, B1; *Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements for the Year 1924 with Appendix* (Singapore: Straits Settlements Government Printing Office, 1925), B105; *Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements for the Year 1931 with Appendix* (Singapore: Straits Settlements Government Printing Office, 1932), B21.

[56] For a detailed examination of the politics of Straits Chinese unofficial legislative councillors, see Daniel P. S. Goh, "Unofficial Contentions: The Postcoloniality of Straits Chinese Political Discourse in the Straits Settlements Legislative Council," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 41:3 (2010), 483–507.

[57] TNA, CO275/109, Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements, 29 October 1923, 185.

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dictates of common sense, so preposterous" that the governor would justify the colour bar on the grounds that the majority of the populace preferred having Europeans in positions of authority.[58] Going beyond challenging the colour bar, the unofficial councillor from Malacca also proposed further democratic representation in the Legislative Council itself in 1926, bringing forward the proposition that there should be one unofficial councillor for each of three major ethnic communities in the Colony—Chinese, Indian, and Malay—rather than the more ad hoc system of always appointing a Chinese councillor and sometimes appointing an Indian or Malay councillor.[59] He made the case that expanding the legislature and giving the population a greater voice within it was a matter of principle as it would mean an engaged citizenry had the "effective constitutional means of repelling the invasion of our rights."[60] In his advocacy for increasing Asian representation in the institutions of power, Tan revealed a fundamental principle motivating Straits Chinese political activity, that those with the privilege of being subjects of the Crown were deeply invested in the Straits Settlements and had a duty to improve conditions for their community, which included more than just fellow Straits Chinese.

Like his contemporary, Lim Cheng Ean also used his privileged position in the Legislative Council to voice the concerns of the myriad communities that constituted the populace of the Straits Settlements. The unofficial councillor from Penang was similarly active in challenging the government's discriminatory approach to staffing the Civil Service and campaigned for the abolition of the colour bar.[61] Yet, Lim's priorities extended far beyond high politics and included a political programme focussed on social issues on the ground in the three settlements. He was a consistent proponent for welfare provision during the Great Depression, arguing that the government ought to provide unemployment benefits and engage in large-scale poverty alleviation programmes rather than just subsidising the largest—predominantly European—commercial firms.[62] Lim colourfully took the colonial government to task when they proved reluctant to support the unemployed, describing it as "doleful news indeed … that relief cannot be given to them because it has to be in the way of doles and the Government does not approve of doles."[63] In campaigning for social welfare, he made no distinction on the basis of ethnicity on who should be eligible, demonstrating a distinctly cosmopolitan conceptualisation of who the communities he represented were. More remarkably, Lim Cheng Ean viewed himself as not only responsible for all those already residing in the Straits Settlements but for future ones as well. He strenuously objected to the government's attempts to introduce the Aliens Bill (1932), which sought to restrict Chinese immigration by introducing excessively high entrance and landing fees as well as imbuing the colonial government with draconian powers of deportation and banishment. He questioned the administration's seemingly paranoid fear of new Chinese migrants and countered that if he headed up the government, he would not charge them to enter the country and would instead "pay immigrants $5 or $10 to come to this country" and would travel to China to "get the best possible immigrants, the most suitable immigrants, for this country."[64]

Another major outlet for Straits Chinese expressions of civic responsibility was decidedly more martial, as men from the community volunteered to participate in the defence of the colony through the auspices of the Straits Settlements Volunteer Force

[58] Ibid., 186.
[59] TNA, CO275/116, Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements, 1 November 1926, 160.
[60] TNA, CO275/125, Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements, 13 October 1930, 153.
[61] TNA, CO275/122, Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements, 9 December 1929, 176.
[62] TNA, CO275/125, Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements, 7 July 1930, 55.
[63] TNA, CO275/128, Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements, 28 September 1931, 23.
[64] TNA, CO273/577/3, "Draft Aliens Ordinance," Minutes of a Meeting of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements Meeting on Wednesday 19th October 1932, 19 October 1932, 20.

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(SSVF). Straits Chinese contribution in the empire's armed forces had its origins in 1901 when the unofficial legislative councillor Tan Jiak Kim—lobbying on behalf of the SCBA—was able to convince the government to allow for the creation of a Chinese regiment within the Singapore Volunteer Force.[65] Their counterparts in Malacca attempted to follow suit in 1902 but were refused the privilege of forming their own regiment by the powers that be. Not to be discouraged, those that did volunteer opted to join a mixed-race Rifles Corps in the Malacca Volunteer Force which consisted of "Malays, Portuguese, Klings [Indians], Chinese, Eurasians, and Orang Puteh [Britons]" to fulfil what they saw as their responsibility to defend the colony.[66] It was not until 1916 that the community was finally granted permission by the governor to form an exclusively Straits Chinese contingent—dubbed the Malacca Chinese Volunteer Company—within the settlement's defence forces.[67] Straits Chinese men from Penang were able to form their own company sooner, constituting a rifle corps in the Penang Volunteer Force in 1907.[68] While their numbers and perceived efficacy in the eyes of British officers fluctuated, the Straits Chinese companies were a long-standing fixture of the SSVF, demonstrating the community's sense of patriotism towards the empire through a commitment to its defence.[69]

Following the outbreak of World War I, the SSVF—and the Chinese companies in particular—took on a vital role in home defence as it replaced the regular British and Indian garrisons which had been sent off to fight on the Western Front. The SCBA were especially active in recruiting more men to serve in the volunteer forces and, in doing so, declared that it was because the Straits Chinese were a "thoroughly loyal and happy community owing allegiance to the King of England" who believed that there was "nothing better than to live in and die for the land of their birth."[70] Alongside taking up defensive duties, Straits Chinese also sought to express their commitment towards being loyal citizens of the empire through generous financial contributions to the war effort. They did so primarily through the mechanism of the War Loan Bonds, with the community investing so enthusiastically in each new issue of bonds that they ended up investing an astronomical sum of $1,346,000 Straits dollars by 1917.[71] Perhaps the clearest demonstration of Straits Chinese loyalty in contributing to the war effort—especially considering the community's long-standing opposition to any government attempts to levy them—was the SCBA's vociferous campaigning within and outside the Legislative Council to ensure the passage of the War Duties Bill (1916) which imposed an income tax on all residents in

[65] "Militant Singapore," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 14 November 1901.

[66] "Malacca Notes," *Straits Times*, 26 March 1902.

[67] "Malacca Chinese Volunteers," *Straits Budget*, 23 December 1915.

[68] "Social and Personal," *Straits Times*, 4 September 1907.

[69] TNA, CO1073/67, "Straits Settlements Volunteer Force: Progress Report for August 1922 to April 1933," 2 May 1923; TNA, CAB9/19/36, "Straits Settlements Volunteer Force: Annual Progress Report, 1925," 15 February 1927; TNA, CAB9/19/47, "Straits Settlements Volunteer Force: Annual Progress Report, 1926," 12 January 1928, TNA, CAB9/19/149, "Straits Settlements Volunteer Force: Annual Progress Report, 1927," 30 July 1928; TNA, CAB9/20/5, "Straits Settlements Volunteer Force: Annual Progress Report, 1928," 28 February 1929; TNA, CO273/565/19, "Straits Settlements Volunteer Force: Annual Progress Report, 1929," 17 February 1930; TNA, CAB9/20/25, "Straits Settlements Volunteer Force: Annual Progress Report, 1930," 25 July 1931; TNA, CAB9/20/47, "Straits Settlements Volunteer Force: Annual Progress Report, 1931," 10 January 1933.

[70] Dr Lim Boon Keng, *Why Straits Chinese Should Interest Themselves in the War* (Singapore: Straits Chinese British Association, 1915).

[71] "The New War Loan," *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 29 June 1915; "The War Loan," *Malaya Tribune*, 7 July 1915; "War Loan Bonds," *Malaya Tribune*, 8 November 1916; "War Loan Bonds: Support of the Chinese," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 9 November 1916; "Straits War Loan: The Chinese Support," *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 15 November 1916, sec. 5; "Chinese and the War Loan," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 16 November 1916; "Our War Loan," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 3 May 1917.

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the Straits Settlements.[72] Their firm support for the war elicited effusive praise, such as the *Straits Budget*'s declaration that the Straits Chinese "were a model community in the sense of the interest that they take in civic and Imperial affairs," a view also reflected by not just the colonial government but authorities from the metropole as well.[73]

Outside the confines of the imperial edifice, the Straits Chinese idea of citizenship as an act of contributing to the betterment of the empire can be seen in the community's philanthropic endeavours. Leading individuals from the community generously donated both resources and time to an eclectic selection of causes, including poverty relief, anti-trafficking, public health and medicine, education, and opium eradication among others. Straits Chinese munificence was partly driven by adherence to longstanding Chinese cultural practices of philanthropy, which was underpinned by the Confucian virtues of *ren* (benevolence) and *gong* (public-mindedness).[74] This coalesced with the agenda of social betterment held by progressive members of the community who viewed the improvement of conditions for their fellow subject-citizens as a social responsibility for good imperial citizens like themselves. The charitable institution which best reflected the synthesis of philanthropy as an expression of both Chinese cultural tradition and of imperial citizenship was the *Po Leung Kuk* [Office for the Preservation of Virtue]. Established in Singapore and Penang under the auspices of the Chinese Protectorate in 1888 with a subsequent branch opened in Malacca in 1915, the organisation was an offshoot of a body set up a decade earlier in Hong Kong to provide a refuge for young Chinese women who had been rescued from forced prostitution.[75] As responsibility for administering the association on a day-to-day basis shifted from the colonial government towards the community, the remit of the Po Leung Kuk expanded, and it became a women's shelter that provided housing, welfare, and education to girls and young women from less fortunate backgrounds.[76]

The role of Straits Chinese leadership in the organisation—which included both men and women from the community—and their contributions to what had begun as a colonial rather than Chinese enterprise reflected a commitment to reflecting and enforcing ostensibly British liberal values geared towards the protection and uplifting of women and children. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the Po Leung Kuk's position on the *mui tsai* (little sister) controversy—the practice of girls from less fortunate families being adopted by wealthier families to work in their households until they reached marriageable age—that took place in the post–World War I period. As Rachel Leow has demonstrated, the *mui tsai* controversy was an intricate and complex imbroglio involving anti-slavery organisations, feminist groups, the colonial government, and competing factions of the Straits Chinese elite which should be understood not as an essentially Chinese issue as it has historically been characterised, but a transracial problem that imbricated non-Chinese *mui tsai* and adopting families.[77]

Nevertheless, the salient point for the purposes of this article is the way in which the issue pitted Anglophile Straits Chinese against more conservative members of the

[72] "The Income Tax," *Straits Times*, 30 August 1916.

[73] "The Straits Chinese British Association," *Straits Budget*, 21 January 1916.

[74] Glen Peterson, "Overseas Chinese and Merchant Philanthropy in China: From Culturalism to Nationalism," *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 1:1 (2005), 89.

[75] For detailed studies of the Singapore and Penang branches, see Grace Paul, "The Poh Leung Kuk in Singapore: Protection of Women and Girls" (Honours thesis, Singapore, National University of Singapore, 1990); Neil Khor Jin Keong and Khoo Keat Siew, *The Penang Po Leung Kuk: Chinese Women, Prostitution and a Welfare Organisation* (Penang: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 2004).

[76] "Chinese Topics in Malaya," *Straits Times*, 22 September 1932.

[77] For an excellent and nuanced investigation of the *mui tsai* controversy, see Rachel Leow, "'Do You Own Non-Chinese Mui Tsai?' Re-Examining Race and Female Servitude in Malaya and Hong Kong, 1919–1939," *Modern Asian Studies* 46:6 (2012), 1736–63.

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community. The former camp aligned with the colonial government's view of the practice as a form of slavery, believing that its continued existence was antithetical to their embrace of modernity, reflecting a cultural identification with British ideas and principles.[78] Consequently, Anglophile members of the community energetically threw themselves into the work of rescuing and rehabilitating *mui tsai* via the *Po Leung Kuk* as well as campaigning in favour of the colonial government's efforts to abolish the practice altogether, actions that demonstrated their commitment to executing their duty as good imperial citizens.[79] This clearly distinguished them from their compatriots more attuned to Chinese cultural traditions who made the case that rendering *mui tsai* as slaves was a fundamental mischaracterisation of a custom of legitimate adoption that saved girls from infanticide or lives of crushing poverty.[80]

While charity began at home in the Straits Settlements for Anglophile Straits Chinese, it very much extended abroad to the rest of the British Empire and oftentimes went beyond it as well. Members of the community were generous donors during an intensified period of philanthropic activity geared towards their fellow subject-citizens over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a phenomenon evocatively described by Mark Ravinder Frost as an "overseas aid craze."[81] Straits Chinese from all social classes and walks of life displayed a deep sense of imperial compassion by donating to appeals organised by the colonial administration. The community demonstrated an enduring sense of solidarity with their Indian counterparts in particular, with individuals and organisations donating generously towards famine relief in India in 1874, 1897, and 1900.[82] Beyond India, Straits Chinese could also be found contributing to other humanitarian efforts within the British Empire, including the Irish Famine Relief Fund in 1880 and the South Africa War Relief Fund in 1900.[83] The generosity shown by the community should be understood not only through the lens of Straits Chinese demonstrating a sense of public spirit and loyalty towards the empire but also as a mechanism to make claims as imperial citizens. One member of the community going by the pseudonym of "A Chinese Resident" demonstrated this layered positionality in a letter to the *Straits Times* in 1880, challenging the colonial government's attempts to forcibly acquire a piece of land in front of the Chinese temple in Teluk Ayer, Singapore, that had historically been used for religious ceremonies. They questioned whether the administration's heavy-handedness towards the community was "an appropriate return for their such acts of liberality" given that the Straits Chinese had always "readily responded with a free hand and a liberal mind to the demand of Government for subscriptions in the case of any distress, such as the late famine in India and the present one in Ireland."[84] Straits Chinese philanthropy was thus a microcosm for the community's conceptualisation of their reciprocal

[78] "Mui Tsai and Slavery," *Straits Echo*, 3 September 1930.

[79] "An Appeal to the Chinese," *Straits Budget*, 1 April 1937; "Mui Tsai and the Public," *Straits Budget*, 1 April 1937.

[80] Claire Lowrie, "The Transcolonial Politics of Chinese Domestic Mastery in Singapore and Darwin 1910s–1930s," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 12:3 (2011).

[81] Mark R. Frost, "Humanitarianism and the Overseas Aid Craze in Britain's Colonial Straits Settlements, 1870–1920," *Past and Present* 236:1 (2017), 169–205. As Frost's compelling study demonstrates, philanthropic activity in the Straits Settlements during this period was manifestly cosmopolitan both in terms of the donors and the causes they chose to support. The Straits Chinese were joined by Malays, Indians, Arabs, Armenians, Bugis, and Javanese among others to contribute to a dizzying array of international causes.

[82] "The Bengal Famine," *Straits Times*, 16 May 1874; "The Indian Famine," *Straits Budget*, 26 January 1897; "The Indian Famine," *Straits Budget*, 16 February 1897; "Indian Famine Relief Fund," *Singapore Free Press*, 21 August 1900.

[83] "The Distress in Ireland," *Straits Times*, 3 April 1880; "The Irish Famine Relief Fund," *Straits Times*, 17 April 1880; "Straits and Malayan South Africa War Relief Fund," *Straits Times*, 17 March 1900.

[84] "Chinese Temple at Teluk Ayer," *Straits Times Overland Journal*, 20 April 1880.

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relationship with the British Empire, where their enactment of subjecthood as citizenship entitled them to fair treatment from colonial authorities.

The Limits of British Subjecthood

Yet, despite their myriad displays of allegiance to the Crown and to the empire, Straits Chinese claims towards subjecthood as citizenship continued to be constrained by both administrative and societal limits. The plight of Khun Yiong which opened the article not only created the impetus for debates about who constituted a British subject and what rights and privileges that entailed but was also emblematic of the ways in which Straits Chinese were excluded from the entitlements they believed was their birthright as British subjects. Picking up the narrative thread left off earlier, the trader's travails did not end with the refusal by the British minister in Peking and the British consul in Amoy to countenance any aid to him. In an attempt to force British authorities to provide him with the consular protection he believed he should have been afforded, Khun Yiong went so far as to send a petition to Governor of the Straits Settlements Charles Mitchell in order to prove his status as a British subject.[85] Mitchell immediately commissioned an investigation, and the report produced as a result did corroborate some of Khun Yiong's claims, particularly that he was born in Singapore to parents who were themselves British subjects and that transactions in the trader's accounts suggested that he was in Singapore at the time the German firm alleged he was chartering the steamship in Amoy. At the same time, the report also provided further ammunition to the initial accusations by the British Empire's representatives in China that while he was a de jure British subject, not de facto. Mitchell's inquiries into Khun Yiong also revealed that the merchant maintained two separate families in Amoy and Singapore, with his Singaporean wife also residing in Amoy at the time of his arrest.[86]

The British minister in Peking thus justified his initial and continued reluctance to intervene on behalf of Khun Yiong on the grounds that

> Her Majesty's Government cannot allow persons of Chinese race born in this Colony [the Straits Settlements] to enjoy the benefits of a double nationality, that is to say, it cannot permit them after acting as the petitioner has done as if they were subjects of the Emperor of China by residing and owning property in the interior forbidden to British subjects, afterwards to deny Chinese nationality and obtain as British subjects that full protection and countenance which can be accorded only to those who have consistently from their birth conducted themselves and been registered as British subjects.[87]

Ultimately, Khun Yiong's petition was unsuccessful, and while Colonial Office records are unclear on his fate, it is most likely he ended up serving out his term in prison following Whitehall's determination that Her Majesty's Government ought not intervene given he was not a "true" British subject.[88] Notions of Britishness as being synonymous with whiteness inflected this decision, particularly given the continued dominance of racialised

[85] "The Amoy Incident," *Straits Times*, 6 December 1897.

[86] TNA, CO273/243/12383, Governor of Straits Settlements Charles Mitchell to British Minister in Peking Claude MacDonald, 25 January 1898.

[87] TNA, CO273/243/12383, British Minister in Peking Claude MacDonald to Governor of the Straits Settlements Charles Mitchell, 13 March 1898.

[88] For a more detailed examination of Khun Yiong's predicament in Amoy, see Sai Siew-Min, "Dressing Up Subjecthood: Straits Chinese, the Queue, and Contested Citizenship in Colonial Singapore," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 47:3 (2019), 446–73.

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hierarchies being the primary mode of social structure within both the metropole and in the colonies. Demonstrations of loyalty in word and deed by the Straits Chinese went far in pushing the discourse on what the status of subjecthood actually entailed, but would be confronted time and again with the realities of who held power and their interpretations of not only who could be considered a British subject but even if they were recognised as such, and what rights they were entitled to.

Another evocative example of these limits can be seen in the aforementioned campaign by Tan Cheng Lock to dismantle the colour bar in the institutions of state in the Straits Settlements, which was ultimately unsuccessful. Despite an acknowledgement by the colonial government that Straits Chinese civil servants had indeed demonstrated unfaltering loyalty and carried out their duties with distinction, the powers that be in the colony and the metropole nevertheless would refuse to allow the community and other "Asiatics" from advancing up the ranks on the basis of race. Though never explicitly articulated, the centrality of race in this decision can be seen in Secretary of State for the Colonies Lewis Harcourt's justification that the point was moot given non-European residents of the Straits Settlements would "dislike and resent officers of alien origin being placed in authority over them unless those officers are of pure European descent on both sides."[89] Race—alongside class and gender—would continue to serve as a powerful counterpoint to more liberal conceptions of subjecthood as citizenship within the halls of power and in the minds of imperial thinkers as well as more quotidian settings in the metropole and colonies. Within the eyes of imperial and colonial authorities, to be British was to be white, and as such, colonial subjects of colour were thus ineligible to make claims towards equal standing and treatment. But it is precisely because of such narrow-minded interpretations of belonging within the empire that prompted the Straits Chinese and many of their fellow non-white colonial subjects to articulate a new vision of what it meant to be British.

As Vivian Kong has masterfully demonstrated in her recent monograph about the nature of Britishness in Hong Kong—a study with implications in many settings across the British Empire including the Straits Settlements—the question of who was considered British and what that meant to both coloniser and colonised was not a static construction.[90] These notions of inclusion and exclusion were shaped and reshaped by contestations not only between non-white British subjects and imperial and colonial authorities but also between the former and their white counterparts within the social and cultural milieu. Straits Chinese efforts to lay claim to a sense of British cultural citizenship operated in both official and unofficial settings should thus be read not only as a means of circumventing rigid racialised colonial hierarchies but precisely also as a means of challenging prevailing notions of Britishness and rethinking what it meant to be a British subject. In relation to being British, this meant expanding the horizons of race and nationality to accept a wider, more diverse range of communities as sharing particular characteristics of Britishness rather than equating identity with race. Concurrently, the status of being a colonial subject of the British Empire was also reinterpreted as holding equivalency in terms of holding the same rights—and responsibilities—as citizens in the metropole.

Conclusion

For Chinese communities residing within the Straits Settlements deeply enmeshed within the imperial milieu, British subjecthood represented more than a status or category. To be

[89] "The Colour Bar," *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 4 June 1912.

[90] Vivian Kong, *Multiracial Britishness: Global Networks in Hong Kong, 1910–45*, Modern British Histories (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

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a British subject meant that one was an imperial citizen who was entitled to the associated legal and juridical rights that came with citizenship. Over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Anglophile members of the community attempted to prove their entitlement to these privileges by making a claim towards cultural citizenship of the British Empire. They did so by embracing an English education in both colony and metropole, which provided them not only with the vocabulary of empire but socialised them within the practices of being British. Beyond the classroom, Straits Chinese men and women displayed their cultural alignment by embracing Western fashion and cultural norms. Embodying the symbols, language, and style of Britishness as an expression of cultural citizenship was not simply performance or mimicry on the part of Anglophile Straits Chinese but rather a genuine (re)imagination of themselves as British and as such, deserving of equal status with white Britons as citizens of the empire. But more than that, the community demonstrated a complex conception of subjecthood as a form of imperial citizenship, one that entailed responsibilities alongside rights. They did so not just in word but in deed, demonstrating their loyalty to the Crown by taking up office and arms and demonstrating solidarity with fellow subject-citizens by donating to charitable causes. As this case study of Straits Chinese who conceptualised their British subjecthood as imperial citizenship has sought to demonstrate, the question of who belonged in the empire requires a more careful consideration of the ways in which the colonised understood their own place within an imperial context. Challenging the prescriptive legalistic definitions deployed by their colonisers, colonial subjects like the Straits Chinese were active agents who were able to employ a diverse set of tools to not only make the case that they belonged but that they had every right to do so.

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