The Contested Development of Nationalism in Colonial Malaya
(1930 – 1955)

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Source: Map of South East Asia from the University of Texas Libraries,
http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/southeast_asia_pol_2003.jpg (accessed 6 Feb 2017)

Acknowledgements

One cannot speak of Malayan national identity without evoking the related concept of forgetting, so prevalent in the rhetoric of its nationalist discourse. Forgetting, however, presumes something worth obscuring. Hence, the absence of James Puthucheary, Hedwig Aroozoo, Wang Gungwu, Lim Thean Soo and their colleagues from the University of Malaya; of Lim Boon Keng, Ong Song Siang, Tan Cheng Lock, Lim Cheng Ean, and other early nationalists from the national narrative, has its own presence in the gaps of collective memory.

While vicariously living the lives of these forgotten heroes, I cannot help but to also pay tribute to my very own. This thesis would not have been without the patient stewardship and generous counsel of my thesis supervisor, Dr. Elisheva Carlebach, and Dr. Charles K. Armstrong at Columbia University. I am indebted to Dr. Ngoei Wen-Qing of Yale University, whose deep intellect I have retreated into for assurance and constructive criticism. Edmund (Ned) Brose, Joshua Jesudason, and Hygin P. Fernandez are amongst those I have spoken to at length about on this topic, which so thoroughly fascinates me, and will continue to do so.

Finally, to mum and dad, whose interests lie elsewhere, but never showed it. I love you both, always.

Table of Contents

Introduction: "Contested Malayas"

> *"The only proven history Singapore had was in the eyes of most nationalists a shameful episode of exploitation, oppression, and humiliation of a people who nevertheless wanted to remain in Singapore."* [1]
> – S. Rajaratnam, 1987.

For Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, Singapore's first foreign minister, the colonial history of Malaya, and by extension Singapore, was a history defined by "exploitation, oppression, and humiliation".[2] In a speech made in 1987, during the opening of an art exhibition commemorating Singapore's past, he asserted with ruthless idealism: "Patriotism required that we perform some sort of collective lobotomy to wipe out all traces of 146 years of shame".[3] A member of the ruling People's Action Party's (PAP) "old guard," Rajaratnam believed in the limitless capacity of the state to shape its people through constant reminders of a nationalist movement made more defiant in retrospect.

The "146 years of [colonial] shame" that Rajaratnam wanted forgotten, nonetheless, was a complex history defined by instances of collaboration with, and resistance to British authority not unimportant to the broader discussion of the Malayan nation. It was also a history that encompassed many contested Malayas. As Tim Harper's monograph demonstrated, the British "rarely possessed the capacity to intervene in [the] social and economic life" of Malaya."[4] This was true throughout British colonial rule. Under the "old order", Britain's twin dependence on the political authority of the Malay Sultans (Kings) for legitimacy, and the economic prominence of the Straits Chinese to advance their trade interests, empowered both these groups within the colony, allowing them to "co-imagine"

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[1] Transcript of speech by Senior Minister of Singapore, Mr. S. Rajaratnam, at the official opening of the exhibition "A Vision of the Past," at the National Museum Art Gallery, at 1810H on Thursday 14th May 1987. Web. National Archive Singapore.

[2] Singapore was governed as part of Malaya under the British Empire until 1946, when it was made a crown colony in its own right. See page 31.

[3] S. Rajaratnam, "A Vision of the Past."

[4] Timothy Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 21.

Malaya with the British.[5] After World War II, local involvement in the creation of Malayan identity intensified after Malayan nationalists began challenging the viability of British rule itself. The cleaving of Singapore from the Malayan Union in 1946 complicated the possibility of a unified "Malaya" by setting both countries off on different political trajectories. Still, many Singaporean nationalists continued to imagine a Malaya that included Singapore. To forget the "shameful episode of exploitation, oppression, and humiliation", would be to overlook these innovative attempts of colonized Malayans to wrest agency from the British, who were both their partners and opponents.

This thesis will relate Harper's analytical approach of treating Malayan actors as political agents in their own right, to a broader discussion on the contested development of nationalism in colonial Malaya, where political power was linked to national identity creation. Beyond resisting aspects of British colonialism, my thesis argues that local Malayans were engaged in a struggle with their colonial masters to define "Malaya", even before formal decolonization began. Britain's "Malayanization" policy, which was enforced to ease control over its colony, introduced the "imagined community" of Malaya to a disparate people who would not have primarily identified themselves as such before British rule. However, once introduced, the British were incapable of exercising full control over the discourse surrounding Malayan identity. In rebuking successive attempts by the British to intervene in Malaya's social and political life, Malayan nationalists conceptually reinterpreted "Malayanization." The term took on an anti-colonial bent after World War II, and was finally employed by Singaporean legislators in 1955 to describe the process of replacing British civil servants with Malayans in the lead up to self-rule.

The contested development of nationalist thought in colonial Malaya demands a re-examination of several of Benedict Anderson's core claims on nationalism, which continues

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[5] Harper, 14.

to loom large in discussions on the subject. Although intuitively compelling, Anderson's framework, which emphasized imagined commonality and the cohering of identities through the "fixing of print languages", glossed over the conflictual process through which the synthesis of national themes often occurred.[6] Furthermore, South East Asian nationalism was not merely an imitation of a "formal model" that developed in Europe, as he claimed.[7] Nationalist thought in Malaya had its own developmental trajectory, unique to the nuances of its demography and political makeup under British colonialism. This is not to presume that Malayan nationalism was a homogenous movement, nor that it evolved linearly, which simply replaces Anderson's teleological description of how nationalism developed with another one; but to appreciate that "Malaya" was always a fluid concept. The struggle to "Malayanize" mentioned above produced a web of nationalist ideas that were in *synthetic antagonism* – constant communion and tension. A nuanced history of the development of nationalism in Malaya must take into account the multiplicity of nationalism in colonial Malaya, which were not necessarily always "anti-colonial" even as they were subversive. It should also accord attention to the impact of colonial policy, which defined the parameters of national imagination.

Historical writings on the subject have generally reified anti-colonial nationalism in alignment with Anderson's teleological description, which culminates irrevocably with political independence. The dominance of this paradigm has resulted in an overlooking of other nationalisms that do no conform to the trajectory of decolonization, which are presumed to be substantively different from the independence-oriented political movements that emerged after World War II. Anthony Reid's typology of nationalism, for example, included only "anti-imperial" and "outrage at state humiliation" nationalism amongst more established

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[6] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983): 36.
[7] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 45.

categories of nationalism.[8] His analysis presumed that British colonial nationalism in Malaya, as well as local movements more concerned with social and cultural community were somehow less "nationalist". As later chapters will demonstrate, there was considerable diversity amongst even nationalist movements considered "anti-colonial", along ideological and ethnic lines. "Nascent" identities that were not explicitly anti-colonial were, nonetheless, broadly "ideological movements," to use Liah Greenfield's definition of nationalism.[9]

The first chapter of my thesis will focus on Governor Cecil Clementi's "Malayanization" policy and its after-effects (1930 – 1943), which continued earlier efforts to "ethnicize" the peninsula through the promotion of Malay language and culture. The British were the first to systematically attempt to unify the disparate people and states of the Malayan peninsula. Clementi's "Malayanization" sought to promote Malay identity through various social and political programs, all aimed at promoting integration between the disparate Malay states – the Federated Malay States (FMS), Unfederated Malay States (UMS) and Straits Settlements.[10] Clementi's "Malayanization" institutionalized what Partha Chatterjee has coined, a system of "colonial difference," which maintained colonial hierarchy while offering a program of reform for the nationals colonized.[11]

While the Malay elite welcomed "Malayanization", significant resistance arose amongst prominent Straits-born Chinese men, who through their influence in the Straits Settlement Legislative Assembly (SSLA) based in Singapore, criticized these colonial "ethnicization" policies. The Straits Chinese were a powerful bloc within Malaya by the 1930s owing to their status as choice-collaborators with the British. Articulate assemblymen like Tan Cheng Lock exploited British insecurity over their influence on the Chinese

[8] Anthony Reid, *Imperial Alchemy: Nationalism and Political Identity in South East Asia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 10.
[9] Liah Greenfield, *Nationalism: Five Roads to* Modernity (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1992): 13.
[10] See map of colonial Malaya, p.10.
[11] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992):6.

population to undermine the "Malayanization" policy. A systematic analysis of their interventions in the assembly will demonstrate how through contesting Clementi's "Malayanization," they articulated alternative interpretations of Malayan identity that instead privileged multiculturalism without making explicit anti-colonial demands.

Chapter 2 focuses on Malayanization efforts after World War II, particularly British plans to impose a Malayan Union in 1946. The new Malaya envisioned by the British borrowed heavily from the multicultural themes articulated by the Straits Chinese before the war. The initial goal was to unify all Malay states, including Singapore under a Malayan Union, with equal citizenship offered to individuals of all races. However, demographic differences between Singapore and Malaya made this proposal untenable to Malay nationalists keen to preserve their traditional privileges. Singapore had an overwhelming Chinese majority. Its inclusion in the Union would have distorted the demographic balance on the mainland in favour of the Chinese minority there. Britain was eventually compelled to rule both separately. Access to a hitherto unexamined (to the best of my knowledge) collection of privately assembled primary sources from this period, from Cornell University Library's *Division of Rare and Manuscripts Collections*, has allowed this thesis to offer additional depth to analysis of the Malayan Union debate.[12]

The failure of the Malayan Union did not extinguish Britain's commitment to Malayanization. Despite the cleaving of the island from the mainland, Singapore, nationalists continued to imagine a unified Malaya. Chapter 3 will explore Britain's continual efforts to "Malayanize" the peninsula through education reform in post-war Singapore, where it still had direct control. Colonial authorities pushed for English to be institutionalized as the

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[12] This private collection of sources assembled by Judith Rosenberg between 1945 and 1956 is part of the George McTurnan Kahin Papers, #14-27-3146, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. The collection contains a series of unpublished correspondences between the principle actors involved in the Malayan Union debate, amongst other newspaper clippings and reports related to the political development of Malaya in this period.
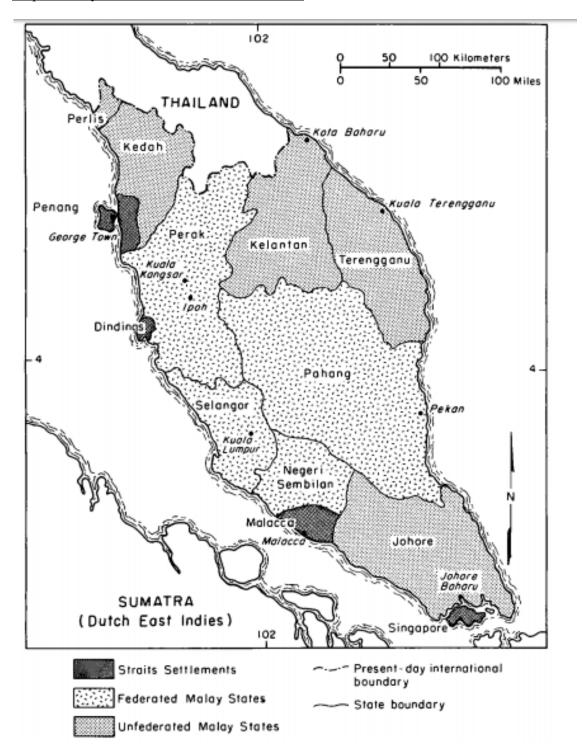
country's common language, and also established the University of Malaya in Singapore (1949), to train an Anglophone Malayan elite that would be sympathetic to its interests. By the 1950s, though, it became apparent that local Singaporean nationalists had successfully wrest the right to "Malayanize" the country from the British. Instead of being used as a site for the construction of a British leaning Malaya, the University of Malaya evolved into the source of anti-colonial and socialist nationalist thought.

My concluding remarks will return to the conceptual debate set up in this introduction. Anderson rightly postulated that local nationalists responded to conceptions of the nation that had already become "modular" elsewhere.[13] In the case of Malaya, the British defined through successive education and administrative policies, the "language" and geographical boundaries of the Malayan nation, while nationalists contested Britain's "Malayanization" attempts. However, this process of co-imagining Malaya was far from clear-cut nor strictly two-way since it involved successive British colonial governments over time and Malayan nationalists of diverse interests, beliefs and goals. The "Malayas" articulated in the later colonial period borrowed from past discourse on Malayan identity, which both colonizer and colonized Malayans shaped.[14] To this degree, "colonial" and "post-colonial" nationalism should not be accepted as discrete categories, but products of the same discourse.

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[13] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 86.
[14] The term "collective lobotomy" is attributed to S. Rajaratnam, Singapore's first Foreign Minister.

Map of Malaya Under British Rule (circa. 1930)

THAILAND

Perlis
Kedah
Kota Baharu
Penang
Kuala Terengganu
George Town
Perak
Kelantan
Kuala Kangsar
Terengganu
Ipoh
Dindings
Pahang
Selangor
Pekan
Kuala Lumpur
Negeri Sembilan
Malacca
Malacca
Johore
Johore Baharu
SUMATRA
(Dutch East Indies)
Singapore

Straits Settlements
Federated Malay States
Unfederated Malay States
Present-day international boundary
State boundary

Source: Bunge, Frederica M., ed. Malaysia- A Country Study. Area Handbook Series. Foreign Area Studies, The American University. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984: xxii,34.

Chapter I: The "Malayanization" Policies of Sir Cecil Clementi

The "Malayanization" policies of Sir Cecil Clementi (1930 – 1934) represented some of the most deliberate and aggressive attempts to force upon the inhabitants of Malaya a collective consciousness consistent with the colonial policy of indirect rule. The unprecedented pace and intensity of these reforms threatened the traditional balance of power between the British colonial authorities and their diverse subjects, provoking significant backlash. Contest over the meaning and form of "Malayanization" between the British and local Malayans facilitated the expression of themes that became foundational to Malayan nationalist discourse after World War II.

Britain's Grand Strategy and Decentralization

Clementi's "Malayanization" operated within a broader context and certainly active discourse on imperial citizenship across the British Empire in the early 20th century, where concepts of race, nationality, and citizenship intersected. Owing to the complexity and size of Empire, the ideology of *mission civilisatrice* was interpreted differently at local levels of colonial governance. For example, imperial ideologues like Richard Jebb, an influential writer on colonial nationalism in the period, advocated for a tiered application of imperial citizenship in which colonies were said to be unfit for civic integration into the broader empire because they were "not in the same stage of development" as dominions owing to the absence of a white-settler base.[15] The British "liberal" mission had to be manifested in Malaya in a way that accommodated fundamental differences between the peoples of the colony and the metropole, while instilling a sense of general patriotism to the imperial enterprise.

Clementi took the British mission to its logical conclusion in the policy of "Malayanization," which manifested primarily in a series of education reforms. These

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[15] Daniel Gorman, *Imperial Citizenship: Empire and the Question of Belonging (*Manchester Scholarship Online: *2007)*: 148 – 155.
http://manchester.universitypressscholarship.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/view/10.7228/manchester/9780719075292.001.0001/upso-9780719075292.

included the passing of the *Malayan Education Policy* on 25 October 1933, which limited the colonial government's responsibilities for the provision of English education, but created provisions for "free elementary Malay-medium education." [16] The re-allocation of funding to Malay schools took away resources from vernacular Chinese and Indian education. The result was an increase in the school fees of government-aided English schools – a price inflation that penalized the Anglo-Chinese community particularly.

Initially, Clementi defended the policy as a reaction to economic demands. The success of English schools was said to have created an oversupply of qualified candidates for clerical jobs in the British administration.[17] But by 1933, the association between education and colonial nationalism was clear. In a speech made in that same year to the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlement, Clementi acknowledged that "the primary aim of education" was to "teach boys and girls whose parents are domiciled here," whether "Malay, or non Malay, to live together in amity."[18] For this to occur, there was a need to impose "a common language."[19] In Malaya, this "could only be the Malay language."[20] His views were echoed again in the Singapore Straits Times the following year, where he affirmed that the purpose of education was to "Malayanize the children of the permanent population, i.e. to make them true citizens of Malaya", with the eventual goal of producing a "law abiding thrifty and industrious population."[21]

Clementi's choice of Malay as the national language was consistent with the conventional colonial strategy of leaning towards the Sultans, whom successive Governors had depended on as figureheads to legitimize their authority. Demonstrating a commitment to

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[16] Siew Min Said, "Educating Multicultural Citizens: Colonial Nationalism, Imperial Citizenship and Education in Late Colonial Singapore," *Journal of South East Asian Studies* 44, no.1 (2013): 55
[17] Lennox A. Mills, *British Rule in Eastern Asia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1942): 356.
[18] Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements (PLCSS), 25 Oct. 1933 (Singapore: Government Printers), col. B161.
[19] ibid.
[20] ibid.
[21] Alastair Pennycook, *The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language* (London: Routledge, 2013): 92.

Malay was especially important in the Straits Settlements, of which Singapore was a part, because the Malays were a minority by 1931. The Chinese population was the "distinctive majority," constituting 70% of the Straits population according to a census taken that year.[22] Previous Governors were keen to offer assurances to the Sultans that their interests would be protected across Malaya. In a 1927 speech to the Federal Council, the ruling council of the Federated Malay States (FMS), Governor Hugh Clifford, affirmed the "special duty" owed to the Sultans, committing the British colonial administration to the "amelioration of the conditions of the indigenous Malaya inhabitants." [23] Irrespective of how this played out in reality, successive British Governors justified their presence as efficient custodians of an otherwise "troubled house" in which the backward status of Malays was a primary concern.[24]

There are also strong ideological parallels between Clementi's "Malayanization" and Sir Stamford Raffle's "doctrine of trusteeship." Both sought to promote Malay language education in Singapore as a means to reinforce local identity, although Raffle's variant bears a stronger flourish of enlightenment thinking.[25] The colonial administrations in between Raffles and Clementi offered only incremental assistance to Malay and English school in comparison, vacillating between providing "minimalist intervention" in vernacular Chinese, Malay, Tamil and English schools.[26]

These explanations though, which are rooted in precedent, cannot account for Clementi's exceptional commitment to aggressive "Malayanization" in this particular period, which have to be understood in relation to the more immediate strategic demands. The most pressing of these was the decentralization of the Malayan colonial bureaucracy that had by Clementi's appointment become dominated by the Federal Council, the governing body in the

[22] "Migration in Asia and Oceana," in *The Cambridge Survey of World Migration,* ed., Robin Cohen (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995): 394
[23] Mills, *British Rule in Eastern Asia,* 56.
[24] ibid.
[25] D.D. Chelliah, *The History of Educational Policy of the Straits Settlements* (Singapore: G.H. Kiat, 1960) :13.
[26] "Vernacular Education," *Singapore Infopedia*, web (last accessed 28 Oct 2016). http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2016-10-03_094744.html

FMS. In a speech to the Council, published in the Straits Times on November 16 1931, Clementi defended his proposal of devolving federal powers as a means to purge "the federal concept from incongruous accretions." [27] By this he meant the growing power of federal-level officials, who had by the 1920s usurped much of the traditional prerogatives of the Malayan Sultans in the FMS.[28] Clementi's rhetoric presented decentralization as a return to the original "federal ideal" negotiated between Sir Stamford Raffles and the Sultans, which legitimized colonial oversight but demanded that the British respect the sovereignty of the Malay Kings over their respective states. He hoped that decentralization would encourage greater local participation in the affairs of FMS and eradicate differences between the governing structures of the FMS and the UMS.[29] The latter enjoyed considerable autonomy throughout British rule.

Clementi's rhetoric, which played up British fidelity to the ideal of colonial tutelage, however, obscured his intention to extend British control over the loosely governed confederation of states. Prior British colonial governments had sought to do similarly but had failed. Sir John Anderson, who was the High Commissioner and Governor in 1910, for instance, was the first to propose unifying the FMS and UMS together with the Straits Settlements "under a single entity." Unification met little success because of the reluctance of the traditional Malay elite in the Unfederated Malay States (UMS) to relinquish their powers to the Federal Council.[30] Governor Laurence Guillermard revived the idea of unification after World War I, but through a politically decentralized model. He hoped to assuage the Malay ruling elite in the UMS even as they were part of a "wider loose-knit union of Malay states."[31] Even this adapted variant of unification failed because of concerns by unfederated rulers that

[27] "Sir Cecil Clementi on his new policy," *The Straits Times* (16 November 1931): 11.
http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19311116.2.45.aspx
[28] Yeo Kim Wah, *Political Developments in Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1973): 5.
[29] "Sir Cecil Clementi on his new policy," 11.
[30] Yeo, *Political Developments*, 4.
[31] Yeo, *Political Developments*, 5.

a closer association with the Straits Settlement would eventually result in their respective states becoming crown colonies.[32]

Clementi sought to remedy both Guillermard and Anderson's shortfalls. The "Malayanization" of education policies across the peninsula signalled to the Malay Sultans that closer association with the Straits settlement would not lead to the privileging of Chinese interests. Expanding the power of the State Councils, where the Sultans had more influence, would also assuage their concerns of a federal takeover. Neither of these developments threatened the foundational political structure of British colonial rule, which centered executive power in the Governorship. In the 1931 speech previously cited, he confirmed to legislators in the Federal Council, anxious about the implications of decentralization, that they would still "retain the keys of federal finance," one of the most important sources of its power.[33]

At the same time, Clementi wanted a degree of decentralization that would not jeopardize the unity of Malaya as a single entity. Beyond education reforms that aimed to create socio-cultural contiguity, Clementi proposed the creation of a *Customs Union for Malaya* at his first meeting with the Malay Sultans in 1930 that would pull the Malay states into a closer economic association.[34] He further announced unprecedented willingness to compromise on the issue of tariff restrictions, reflecting his devotion to the idea of "Malayanization."[35] Hitherto, the Straits Settlements had been resistant to suggestions of a unified tariff regime owing to its commitment to free trade. Decentralization and "Malayanization" were thus intrinsically intertwined. The latter constituted a sophisticated tool to negotiate the demands of a *prima facie* commitment to the liberal mission, whilst accommodating the strategic needs of Empire.

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[32] ibid.
[33] "Sir Cecil Clementi on his new policy," *The Straits Times*, 11.
[34] Original Correspondences from the Straits Settlement, "Dunbar at Singapore," 16 Oct 1930 (Great Britain, Public Record Office), CO. 273. 568.
[35] ibid.

<u>The "Chinese Problem"</u>

Another often overlooked rationale behind "Malayanization" was the containment of Chinese interest. The Chinese population in Malaya had grown over successive waves of immigration to become the local majority in the Straits Settlements by the 20th century. Their active participation in the commercial life of the three port cities of Malacca, Penang and Singapore, made them indispensable but also threatening to the British. In the early 1930s, Clementi went as far as to declare the Sultans "a buffer between Government and the Chinese" and a means of balancing between the different local centres of power.[36] In leaning towards the Sultans, Clementi hoped to pit the interest of the Malays against the Chinese, as part of "divide and rule."

"Malayanization" fitted into a broader strategy of co-option and coercion that paid close attention to the sub-divisions within the Chinese population. Historians of the Chinese diaspora have picked up these demographic nuances, and have generally distinguished between the Straits Chinese and the Chinese immigrants.[37] The Straits Chinese (also known as *Peranakans*) were the descendants of early Chinese migrants that had by Clementi's administration developed into a powerful indigenous merchant class.[38] Their distinction as a group from the "immigrant Chinese" masses was accentuated by their unique customs, which amalgamated Chinese and Malay cultures.

Prominent Straits Chinese like Lim Boon Keng and Ong Song Siang were Anglicized patriots of Empire.[39] Their loyalty to Britain and their culturally ambiguous collective identity is well exemplified in their literature. The Straits Chinese Magazine was one publication devoted to the affairs of this community. In an article published in 1899, the unnamed author

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[36] Daniel Goh, "Unofficial contentions: The Postcoloniality of Straits Chinese political discourse in the Straits Settlement Legislative Council," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 41, no.3 (October 2010): 501.
[37] Png Poh-Seng, "The Straits Chinese in Singapore: A Case of Local Identity and Socio-Cultural Accommodation," *Journal of South East Asian History* 10, no. 1 (1969): 99.
[38] Yong Hock Lee, *A History of the Straits Chinese British Association, 1900 – 1959* (Malaysia: University of Malaya Press, 1960): 10.
[39] ibid.

refuted the Chinese government's claim over the children of all Chinese subjects, including straits-born Chinese as its subjects.[40] The article declared the Straits Chinese community "protégés" of the British, whose "loyalty and full devotion to the betterment of the colony" had given them the full right to "British nationality".[41] Cecil Clementi's approach towards the Straits Chinese was to co-opt its most prominent leaders into the colonial administrative machinery, a strategy that had worked for his predecessors. He relied on the Straits Chinese elite as mediators between themselves and the Chinese masses, as well as executors of colonial policy, though this did not always play out in reality. All three of the Chinese non-official representatives of the SSLA incidentally also held positions in the Straits Chinese British Association (SCBA), which was established in 1900 to facilitate Straits Chinese involvement in the political affairs of the settlements.[42]

A vast majority of Chinese, on the other hand, were "latecomers," drawn to *Nanyang* (Southern Seas) in search of economic opportunity only after it had become prominent port city in the late 19th and early 20th century. According to a 1931 census, only 38% of residing Chinese were born in the Straits Settlements.[43] Unlike the *Peranakan* elite, migrant Chinese identified primarily with Chinese cultures, and were directly invested in the political developments unfurling in China following the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in the 1912. The involvement of these overseas Chinese in the power struggle between competing factions of Chinese nationalism was a source of consternation for the colonial government. The interest of Chinese migrants is relevant to our discussion because Clementi's attempts to curb the influence of the *Kuomintan* (KMT), the ruling nationalist party in China, and their communist rivals in the Straits Settlement contributed to the failure of his policy of "Malayanization." Both parties waged a proxy battle in Malaya for the support and resources

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[40] Lim Book Kiang and Song Ong Siang, (eds.), "Are the Straits Chinese British Subjects?", in *Straits Chinese Magazine* III, no.10 (Singapore: The Proprietors, 1899): 67.
[41] ibid.
[42] Yong, *A History of the Straits Chinese British Association*, 11.
[43] Chelliah, *The History of Education Policy*, 7.

of overseas Chinese, thereby competing with the British for the allegiance of the Chinese population.

Correspondence between the English Colonial Office in Singapore and the Secretary of Colonies in England reveal that the Chinese "threat" had been an early pre-occupation of Clementi's.[44] The crackdown on Chinese political activity across Malaya began as early as in 1925, when the Governor dissolved all branches of the KMT.[45] Still, Malayan members of the KMT were able to effectively re-organize in spite of the ban, under the auspices of the *British Malaya Head Branch of the China Kuomintan* (BMHB), formed in 1928 to better coordinate fund-raising for the KMT. Worse still for the colonial government, the KMT's Northern expedition to purge the party of communist influence in the late 1920s had energized the party base.[46] Upon his appointment in 1930, Clementi put a stop to official KMT activity. The leaders of the BMHB were summoned to a conference on February 1930 in Singapore where they were castigated for their alleged duplicity and asked to discontinue all activities.[47] Clementi re-stated the British position, that "only one government" had the authority to rule any given territory, which in Malaya was indisputably the British Government.[48]

By November the same year, Clementi had expanded the staff of the Chinese Secretariat and elevated the status of several of its offices within the Malayan Civil Service to accommodate the logistical demands of expanded censorship and scrutinizing of Chinese affairs.[49] This newly empowered Chinese Secretariat issued a series of comprehensive monthly reports on "Chinese Affairs" that have yet to be systematically analysed until now. The reports offered some of the most up-to-date intelligence on the evolving political

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[44] Original Correspondences from the Straits Settlement, "Chinese Secretariat Staff," 6 Nov 1930 (Great Britain, Public Record Office), CO. 273. 568.

[45] C.F Yong and R.B McKenna, "The Kuomintang Movement in Malaya and Singapore, 1925 – 1930," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15, no.1, (March 1984): 91.

[46] ibid.

[47] Young & McKenna, "The Kuomintang Movement," 101.

[48] Foreign Office Files for China, "Minutes from conference held at Government House in Singapore," 20 Feb. 1930 (National Archives, United Kingdom), FO. 371. 14728.

[49] Original Correspondences from the Straits Settlement, "Chinese Secretariat Staff," 6 Nov. 1930 (Great Britain, Public Record Office), CO. 273. 568.

situation in China, policies of the KMT government in Nanjing towards the overseas Chinese, and local responses in the vernacular press. They suggest that British fear of KMT influence in Malaya was acute, and grounded in national security concerns that the loyalties of Chinese Malayans to the British would be compromised by the allure of Chinese nationalism. The urgency to pursue more aggressive "Malayanization" should be seen as part of a high-stakes trans-regional power play between the Chinese KMT Government and the British colonial administration for the hearts and minds of the Chinese Malayans.

Clementi responded pragmatically to the Chinese "threat", allowing most of the dominant Chinese newspapers to continue operation, despite their reputation as vessels for Chinese political interests. The colonial government believed that published material from the Chinese vernacular press could be analysed and used to gauge the loyalty of Malayan Chinese to the British.[50] The reports from 1931, for instance, were primarily interested in understanding how Malayan Chinese were reacting to anti-Chinese riots in Korea, at the height of Sino-Japanese hostilities in 1930 and highlighting pro-KMT material.[51] Korea was at this point a colony of Japan, and hence aligned with the Japanese against the Chinese. The Chinese Secretariat flagged local reports that encouraged the Chinese in Malaya to "rise up and unite strongly" with the Chinese government as it entered into a trying geopolitical state of affairs, reflecting its sensitivity to attempts by Malayan Chinese to politically mobilize on behalf of China.[52] When newspapers published material deemed too subversive, they were subjected to punitive review. In July 1931, the colonial government issued a warning to the *Min Kuo Jit Poh* for publishing material that "could stir trouble."[53]

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[50] Young & McKenna, "The Kuomintang Movement," 101.
[51] Original Correspondences from the Straits Settlement, referenced in "Report on Chinese Affairs," May,1931 (Great Britain: Public Record Office), CO. 273. 571.
[52] Original Correspondences from the Straits Settlement, referenced in "Report on Chinese Affairs," July,1931 (Great Britain: Public Record Office), CO. 273. 571.
[53] ibid.

The evolving domestic political situation in China, nonetheless, did not make the job of British intelligence agents in the Chinese Secretariat easy, which explains why Clementi's treatment of the KMT lacked consistency. Excerpts from a series of correspondences between the British government highlighted by an article entitled "Policy of Colonial Government" in 1931, suggested that Clementi might have been considering a *modus vivendi* with the KMT.[54] The Malayan colonial administration followed up with a promise to reverse the ban on the KMT in exchange for the [Chinese] National Government's promise to not "interfere in the domestic affairs of Malaya," which it subsequently did.[55] The KMT could continue operating outside of Malaya and would be acknowledged by the British government as a legitimate political actor in China, but it remained prohibited from organizing within British Malaya.[56]

This fragile compromise did not last. A commissioned report in 1932 expressed the colonial government's continual distrust of the KMT. While it accepted that local KMT organizations "had not displayed anti-British tendencies," it argued that the nationalist tendencies of the KMT meant that it would always be "anti-foreign" and hence prone to hostility towards sources of authority that were not Chinese.[57] The commission supported Clementi's decision to retain the prohibition on KMT activities within Malaya, but also called for more to be done in curbing KMT influence in local schools.[58] This could be done either through the reform of Chinese schools or the promotion of alternative vernacular education. Clementi's education reforms affirmed the latter. It was hoped by the British that the propping up of Malay schools through reduced fees would erode the prominence of Chinese schools and combat the Sinification of the local population. Malay schools could also serve as

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[54] ibid.
[55] ibid.
[56] ibid.
[57] Original Correspondences from the Straits Settlement, referenced in "Report on Chinese Affairs," October, 1932 (Great Britain: Public Record Office), CO. 273. 580.
[58] ibid.

vessels for the promotion of "anti-foreign propaganda" that could resist the Chinese political-cultural gravitational pull.

<u>Threats from Anglophile-Chinamen</u>

"Malayanization," however, proved untenable, both as a means to create greater national uniformity and as a way to extend British control over the Chinese population. While it appeased Malay political interests, it provoked severe backlash from the Straits Chinese elite, many of whom were English-educated. In engaging with Clementi's policies forcefully, through their representatives in the SSLA, these individuals became articulators of an alternative interpretation of "Malayanization."

As two of three Chinese non-official representatives of the SSLA, Tan Cheng Lock and Lim Cheng Ean were at the forefront of debates surrounding "Malayanization" and its associated reforms. Their efforts forced the colonial government into the defensive, and contributed to the eventual abandonment of the policy in 1934, with Clementi's resignation as Governor. Central to their criticism was the charge that Clementi's "Malayanization" amounted to a form of racial discrimination, which violated the social compact between the different racial groups and the colonial government. This has its roots in earlier claims, such as that by Lim in a 1931 session, when he accused the government of preferential treatment towards Malay schools at the cost of Chinese vernacular education.[59] Lim's consistent strategy was to portray the Straits Chinese community as an equal stakeholder in colonial Malaya.

In a similar debate on immigration restrictions later, Lim bemoaned the absence of a "fixed and constructive policy to win over the Straits and other Malayan-born Chinese, who are subjects of the country, and foster and strengthen their spirit of patriotism and natural love

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[59] Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements (PLCSS), 26 January. 1931 (Singapore: Government Printers), col. B14.

for the country of their birth and adoption."[60] By referencing the writings of notable colonialists such as Sir Frank Swettenham, he extoled the Chinese community's historical contribution over a 500-year history, going back to its involvement in the "formation of the Federal Malay States."[61] Lim's definition of loyal Chinese subjects though, did not include the Chinese masses. Having been politically involved since Clementi's appointment, he was aware of British suspicion towards the majority of Chinese migrants, and had in an earlier breadth highlighted the Straits Chinese support of Clementi's ban on the KMT.

Lim was certainly willing to exploit the "Chinese problem" to pressure the colonial government to acceding to their demands when appropriate, comparing the Straits Chinese to "a flock of sheep abandoned by the shepherd," who might be "led astray, to go in the wrong directions."[62] Before his public resignation from the assembly in protest to Clementi's education reforms in 1933, he once again replicated the performance of a colonial subject forced towards the Chinese orbit. With reference to an earlier resignation by the elderly assemblyman Dr. Lim Boon Keng, he dramatically proclaimed: "Oh, do not make me despondent, Sir! Do you want me to turn my eyes towards China?"[63] If the younger Lim's insinuations were not clear before, they were certainly made explicit by his warning to the colonial government not to push the Straits Chinese into supporting the Chinese nationalist activities. That threatening the colonial government was even a risk worth taking suggests that he was aware of British dependence on the Straits Chinese as mediators of the broader Chinese community.

Tan, on the other hand, was more pragmatic in his defiance, appealing instead to British enlightenment ideals in his proposal to redefine the state's education aims. He

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[60] Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements (PLCSS), 19 October. 1932 (Singapore: Government Printers), col. B145.
[61] ibid.
[62] ibid.
[63] Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements (PLCSS), 25 October. 1933 (Singapore: Government Printers), col. B190.

demanded "a system of public education available for all persons capable of profiting from it" in place of pro-Malay reforms initiated that same year, on the basis that "elementary English education should be free for all", regardless of race.[64] Tan's rebuttal to the Acting Colonial Secretary displayed both an appreciation for British liberal ideals that assumed the moral equality of individuals; and an astuteness to expose the contradictions within a "Malayanization" policy that aspired towards national conformity by playing to particular ethnic interests. He emphasized the incompatibility between the reforms in Malaya and British education practices in the metropole, from which the colony was supposed to take reference. Presumably, he was referring to the right of all citizens of the United Kingdom, including Scotland and Ireland to an English education, thereby casting English as the prerogative of British subjects.[65]

Tan was able to creatively appropriate the colonial civilizing rhetoric in his portrayal of reforms as an assault on education generally. He described education as the "great humanizing and uplifting force," of which it was the duty of the colonial government to "give increasing support and not hamper and restrict".[66] Non-Malays were unlikely to attend Malay schools, even after subsidies, because it was of "no practical use" to them.[67] The reduction of aid to English, Chinese, and Tamil schools would contribute to "increased illiteracy, ignorance and economic inefficiency" – a reneging of the *white man's burden*. [68]

While both defended English education vigorously, as the language of access, both assemblymen were careful not to suggest that Malay should be displaced entirely as the country's *lingua franca*, nor did they oppose explicitly Malayan unification through decentralization. In a later session, held later in 1933, Lim stressed that Malay would continue

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[64] Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements (PLCSS), 13 July. 1933 (Singapore: Government Printers), col. B99.
[65] Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements (PLCSS), 13 July. 1933 (Singapore: Government Printers), col. B110.
[66] ibid.
[67] ibid.
[68] ibid.

to be widely spoken even if resources were diverted to English education, and would therefore retain its privileged position.[69] Malay vernacular education was unnecessary for the teaching of spoken Malay since this was easily picked up as a colloquial language. Instructing students in written Malay, on the other hand, was "of no use whatsoever because it [was] not used as a means of communication."[70] By affirming that "Malay was the language of the Malay states" but English "the language of the colony," Lim was implying that the Straits Settlement was exceptional in Malaya due to its cosmopolitan nature.[71] Lim's statement might have been the earliest public declaration of the Straits Settlement, of which Singapore was the most prominent port, as a separate socio-cultural entity from Malaya. Tan similarly accepted Clementi's decentralization if it meant the "consigning of racial categories to the oblivion."[72] He sought to appropriate the task of Malayan unification to the ends of promoting a national identity in which the Straits Chinese were equal rather than secondary members – a multicultural model of sorts.

How then should we account for the Straits Chinese community's ambivalence towards Chinese culture? What are its implications on the colonial identities they articulated? These legislative speeches demonstrate that the Straits Chinese saw themselves as culturally Chinese but political subjects of the British Empire, hence members of two different *imagined communities* at once.[73] In a 1934 session, Tan explicitly expressed this cultural hybridity by affirming the "infiltration of Chinese blood" that had over centuries enriched the *Peranakan*s and prevented it from degrading into "physical and moral depravity", while touting his allegiances to the British crown.[74] Hybridity also recurred in the literature

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[69] Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements (PLCSS), 23 October. 1933 (Singapore: Government Printers), col. B99.
[70] ibid.
[71] ibid.
[72] Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements (PLCSS), 12 February. 1934 (Singapore: Government Printers), col. B18.
[73] See introduction for references to Reid and Greenfield.
[74] Referenced in Goh, "Unofficial Contestations," 504.

published in the *Straits Chinese Magazine*, which commonly featured articles in defence of both Chinese history and Chinese culture beside similar opinion pieces extolling British rule.[75] The amalgamation of seemingly incompatible identity markers with the Straits Chinese problematizes existing typologies of nationalism because they were neither strictly "anti-colonial" in nature, or entirely "colonial" creations.

Although difficult to reconcile with the contemporary model of the nation-state, which presumes synergy between political and socio-cultural identities, the bifurcated identity of the Straits Chinese would have made sense within a colonial context in which political participation was limited, and where the relationship between the political sovereign and its subjects was negotiable. Partha Chatterjee argued in his work on Bengali nationalism that colonial conditions often precluded participation in the outer domain, leaving the inner or spiritual domain as the only spaces for the colonized to assert itself.[76] For the Straits Chinese, the domain in question had to be that of culture. Their insistence on "Chinese-ness" was an attempt to negotiate a space in which British imperialism could have no monopoly – one where they could have both a Chinese "heart" and an Englishman's "mind".

Another notable feature of these legislative speeches was the use of colonial mimicry by the two Straits Chinese leaders to advance a variant of Malayan multiculturalism rooted in British rule itself. The assemblymen's creative use of colonial civilizing rhetoric to affirm the importance of English education is an example of how themes and tropes from British colonial discourse were adapted by local Malayans to advance their own positional interests in the colony. As the post-colonial theorist, Homi Bhabha argued, "colonial mimicry" reflected "ambivalence" on the part of the colonized towards the hegemonizing identity of the

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[75] Lim Boon Keng, "The Renovation of China," in Lim Book Kiang and Song Ong Siang, (eds.), *Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol. II, No. 6 (Singapore: The Proprietors, 1898): 89 – 98.
[76] Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, 6.

colonizer.[77] The colonial subject's repetition, within a native context, of the "rules of recognition" that identified colonial speech, was one way through which colonial modes of discourse were subverted. In relation to "Malayanization," this was clearly effective given that Clementi abandoned his reforms. Clementi's successor, Sir Shelton Thomas reversed the policy of favouring Malay schools and extended more funding to Chinese schools in 1935.[78]

That said, mimicry served more than a subversive function than suggested by Baba's post-colonial framework. It was pragmatically employed to reinforce the relevance of the Straits Chinese community in a political space crowded by a range of competing interests, and in which the Straits Chinese were in a minority position on two levels. First, in relation to the influential Malay *Sultans*, who were the preferred partners of the British, and second within the Chinese community itself, which they were both a part of and distinguished from by virtue of their economic collaboration with the British. Lim and Tan's opposition to colonial policy cannot be exclusively understood in anti-colonial terms, as they also reflected the needs of a precariously situated social class to negotiate a complex political space in which strategic confrontation with the colonial authority on issues of inequality had to be tapered by considerations of self and community preservation

The ethnicization of the Malayan population was unfeasible from the get go because it underestimated the threat of nationalism amongst the Chinese masses, and the Straits Chinese elite as a powerful lobby, but only in retrospect. To Clementi in 1933, "Malayanization" presented the most logical alternative to the status quo. Hitherto, former Governors had failed to reign in Chinese schools because of the prevalence of powerful Chinese interests. In 1920, an ordinance requiring the registration of all private schools including Chinese vernacular schools met with "strong opposition."[79] This led to amendments made in 1923 to introduce a

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[77] Homi K. Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817", *Critical Inquiry,* Vol. 12, No. 1, (Autumn, 1985): 144-165.
[78] Mills, *British Rule in East Asia*, 356.
[79] B.R. Sinha, *Education and Development* (New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2003): 241.

"grants-in-aid" scheme instead, which was less intrusive, but failed to "prevent the politicization of Chinese schools."[80] "Malayanization" promised a radical revamp to an education system that was ununiformed and difficult to control at the time of Clementi's appointment. Its failure, however, did not mean an abandonment of the imperial strategy to use Malayan national identity as an instrument of control. When the British returned after World War II, a new form of "Malayanization" emerged with new force; the explosion of nationalist resistance following the Japanese occupation, nonetheless, facilitated its second death.

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[80] ibid.

Chapter 2: The Malayan Union

World War II (1939 – 1945) was a turning point in the intersecting histories of British colonialism and Malayan nationalism. The fall of Singapore in 1942 to invading Japanese forces exposed to the British the limitations of maintaining an empire of its size and magnitude, and demanded a recalibration of its colonial strategy. An article from the *Economist* in 1942 called for "the creation of independent nations linked economically, socially, and culturally with the old mother country," reflecting the then-predominant view that World War II presented new opportunities to modernize the British Empire in South East Asia.[81] In the interim between the Japanese surrender in September 1945 and the re-imposition of colonial rule April 1946, Malaya's transition back to British rule was vigorously debated within the Colonial Office in London. The series of recommendations that emerged in these discussions reflected British intent to re-assert colonial rule in the region. Although some of these were abandoned before they reached the implementation phase, they represented the beginning of a second attempt to "Malayanize" the peninsula.

Most Malayans who had endured the brutal three years of Japanese Occupation between 1941 and 1945 were sceptical of British intentions, with the exception of a few Straits Chinese elite who had looked forward to British return.[82] British failure to circumvent the swift Japanese takeover of the Malayan peninsula in 1942 shattered the myth of European ascendency and ripped through the social contract that had held together the legitimacy of imperialism. In the words of former Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew, Britain's 1942 defeat "broke the spell" that had enslaved, or perhaps even endeared, the British to the colonized peoples of the port city.[83] It ushered in a paradigm shift in colonial mentalities that

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[81] Jost Dulffer, "The Impact of World War II on Decolonization," in Marc Frey, Ronald Pruessen, and Tan Tai Yong, (eds.), *The Transformation of South East Asia*, (New York, M.E. Sharpe, 2003): 31.

[82] Yong & McKenna, "The Kuomintang Movement," 94.

[83] Transcript of interview between Mr. Lee Kuan Yew and Alan Ashbolt, recorded in Canberra TV Studios, broadcasted by Radio Malaysia in Singapore on 24 March 1965, *National Archive Singapore* (accessed 14 November 2016).

accelerated the trajectory of nationalist independence movements across the peninsula. More crucially, the political transitions occurring in the initial ten years after the end of the war created opportunities for Malayans to express a wide range of interests and beliefs in the language of nationalism and nationhood. The manner in which these nationalists responded to Britain's revived "Malayanization" effort, as well as the new national identities articulated out of successive attempts by nationalists to determine the fate of post-war Malaya, will be the subject of this chapter.

From the perspective of the British, the question of how Malaya should be governed was a matter for colonial policy rather than negotiation with local nationalists. Plans for colonial re-imposition began in London as early as 1942, while Malaya was still under Japanese Occupation. In 1943, the War Office established a Malayan Planning Unit (MPU) to oversee British return to the region, suggesting that Britain considered Malaya an integral part of its extended empire even as it was involved in a war of liberation from European colonialism. Sir Winston Churchill, expressing this conviction, proclaimed in 1942 that the British could not stand by to see one of its dominions "overwhelmed by a yellow race."[84] His commitment to restoring British rule in Malaya was echoed by his post-war successor, Clement Attlee, who boasted of the survival of Britain's empire in Asia in the post-war period.[85] Britain's position on its ownership of Malaya remained unchanged, despite the fact that it had assented to the Atlantic Charter in 1941, which had enshrined the right of nations to self-determine.

Britain's unwillingness to relinquish control over Malaya was rooted in ideological, strategic and economic motivations. In ideological terms, Britain adopted an imperial model based on *association*, in which the treatment of its respective colonies was expected to be

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http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/lky19650317.pdf
[84] Dulffer, "The Impact of World War II," 30.
[85] Christopher Bayly & Tim Harper, *Forgotten Wars: The End of Britain's Empire in Asia*, (London, Penguin Books, 2007): 96.

individuated. Under this paradigm, self-determination, as opposed to political independence, would be granted in degrees according to the perceived political maturity of the colony. Attlee thus saw no contradiction in accepting the need for greater political liberalization in India, which he considered more developed, while simultaneously advocating for a return to direct rule in Malaya. In economic terms, British leaders recognized that Malaya was one of the largest suppliers of rubber in the world, and thus regarded it as an essential part of the empire's "dollar arsenal."[86] Malaya's port cities were strategically located at the epicentre of vital sea-lanes in the region and were considered part of Britain's "great fortress," a vital element of the empire's worldwide economic dominance.[87] British colonial policy in the decade after World War II was primarily tailored to the preservation of these economic interests.

Decolonization movements sweeping across the British Empire in the immediate aftermath of World War II weakened Britain's position elsewhere, but strengthened its resolve in Malaya, at least in the short-term. Anti-colonial nationalist movements like Gandhi's "Quit India" movement heightened Britain's determination to retain its territories where it still could. For these reasons, the Japanese occupation of Singapore offered Britain an opportunity for "moral rearmament" rather than moral abandonment of the imperial enterprise.[88] "Rearmament" was characterized by a renewed drive to legitimize the re-colonization of Malaya under the guise of facilitating the region's own movement towards self-determination, albeit with an indefinite deadline. Colonial nationalism would play a part in this, though it remained unclear to the British how this should manifest itself.

From its establishment, the MPU was less an instrument for the conceptualization and implementation of "Malayanization" than it was a crucible for the negotiation of competing

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[86] Bayly, *Forgotten Wars*, 98.
[87] Martin Rudner, "The Political Structure of the Malayan Union," in *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society 43*, no.1 (1970): 117.
[88] Bayly, *Forgotten Wars*, 96.

positions on Malaya's future. The British had not settled on a clear strategy beyond the need for a re-assertion of control during this initial phase of planning. Although it was an autonomous unit charged with the task of determining the post-war colonial policy in Malaya, the MPU consulted heavily with key political and economic stakeholders based in Britain and abroad. One notable recommendation that the MPU reviewed extensively was the proposal to unify all three sections of Malaya – the Federated, Unfederated, and Straits Settlement States – under a single centralized political entity. This was suggested by the *Association of British Malaya*, which represented the rubber and tin interests in London.[89] The recommendation faced intense censure from British businessmen based in the Straits Settlement, who argued that the economies of the Malay states were more backward than and hence incompatible with those of the region's port cities.[90]

Another set of complications were demographic differences between Singapore and the other Malay states. This issue was raised by an influential member of the MPU, Dr. Victor Purcell, whose interest in Chinese diasporic identity conditioned his awareness of the fragile ethnic balance within Malaya. While Purcell did not explicitly reject the proposal or propose an alternative for a unified Malaya, he warned against repeating the old colonial strategy, which respected the sovereignty of Sultans over the Malay-Muslim population but left the Chinese population in an ambiguous position between the Malay and British ruling elite.[91] Purcell advocated for a model that would "fully develop the plural society" of Malaya.[92] He articulated the British consensus view that a future Malayan identity had to appeal to the different local ethnic communities, unified by a common civic culture and common language. In doing so, he revived the familiar theme of multiculturalism that had echoed in the

[89] Rudner, "The Political Structure of the Malayan Union," 117.
[90] ibid.
[91] Bayly, *Forgotten Wars*, 99.
[92] ibid.

legislative chambers of the Straits Settlement by Straits Chinese assemblymen before World War II.

That said, the British were aware that they were operating within a new paradigm that could not ignore the renewed demand by nationalists for more political control, and sought to tailor their "Malayanization" strategy accordingly. Part of this awareness was conditioned by the climate of decolonization engulfing the entire Third World, including some of Britain's other colonies in Asia and Africa. A more immediate explanation, though, was the involvement of local agents in the liberation of Malaya from Japanese rule, such as the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA), which was made up mostly of Chinese fighters who had much to lose under Japanese rule. The MPAJA received extensive support from communist guerrillas operating in the jungles of Malaya and generous funding from powerful Straits Chinese businessmen like Tan Kah Kee, who also supported the Malayan Communist Party.[93] Although reluctant to see Malaya fall into communist hands, the British were compelled to offer a veneer of support to these emerging self-determination movements. Purcell's additional recommendation for "free association and speech" to be permitted in Malaya disguised a pragmatic strategy to nourish nationalist movements, but only ones that would be sympathetic towards British interest.[94] It was hoped that by creating a more liberal political environment, other nationalist parties would emerge as buffers against the growing momentum of Communists. In the interim, Britain saw colonial rule as necessary for the paternalistic nurturing of these movements.

Ingenious Compromise or "High Policy"?

When the Malayan Union was formally proposed in the British House of Commons in 1946, it sent shockwaves across the peninsula. The Secretary of State for the Colonies,

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[93] Bayly, *Forgotten Wars*, 120.
[94] Victor Purcell, "Malaya in Crisis," Transcript of Speech broadcasted from *Radio Singapore* on 12 November 1945. George McTurnan Kahin Papers, #14-27-3146, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. See footnote 12 for full description.

George Hall, conveyed the position of the British government that Singapore and Malaya were to be governed separately. Given the complications of demography and economic incompatibility within Malaya, Hall's "Malayanization" strategy was more an approach than a coherent policy at this point. The idea was for all Malay states to be ruled by a centralized government under a new Governor, Sir Edward Gent. In Singapore, pre-war Governor Sir Shenton Thomas would be re-commissioned, with the aim of preparing the port city for "eventual" self-rule but primarily to cultivate a closer political relationship between it and the rest of Malaya.[95] The most contentious issue introduced in this session of debate was that of citizenship rights, which illustrates the colonial government's intention to introduce into the peninsula a conception of multicultural citizenship. Hall proposed that in the new Malayan Union, Chinese residents of Malaya be given equal citizenship rights as the Malays themselves—comparable to the earlier status of the Straits Chinese in colonial Malaya, who had enjoyed dual-citizenship status as Chinese nationals born and residing in British-administered territory.[96] Hall's proposal would have pursued a similar approach in Singapore, stressing the unifying aspects of colonial citizenship in a multicultural and multi-religious socio-political space.

Neither the separation of Singapore and Malaya nor the recommendation of equal citizenship amongst Chinese and Malays residing in the Union was received with particular enthusiasm, both from within the colonial administration and in Malaya. An op-ed published in the *Straits Times* before the proposals were formally introduced, by Richard Winstedt, a former colonial administrator, lambasted the MPU's proposals as a form of "high policy" reflecting the British government's "pusillanimity" and lack of "sensitive regard for subject

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[95] George Hall, "Proposed Union," *Speeches from the House of Commons* (written responses), 17 April 1946 (last accessed November 16 2016).
http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/written_answers/1946/feb/20/proposed-union-representations#S5CV0419P0_19460220_CWA_142
[96] ibid.

peoples."[97] In the next breath, the author compared the inclusion of Malacca and Penang in the Malay Union to the hypothetical "transfer to Scotland [of] two English counties,"[98] and accused the British government of biting off more than it could chew in attempting to accommodate both Chinese and Malay interests. The exclusion of Singapore from the Union was meant to appease the Malay Sultans, who were worried that the inclusion of all three Straits Settlements would upset the Malay majority balance on the mainland. Nevertheless, this came at the cost of the integrity of the Straits Settlements, whose status as a British colony guaranteed legal protections hitherto enjoyed by a multitude of Chinese merchants.[99] Concurrently, the extension of legal rights to the new Chinese "citizens" of the Union was meant to remedy this deficit. Yet, it disturbed the privileged position of Malays whom the Union was also meant to protect. Extending equal citizenship rights to all was akin to, in the words of Winstedt, the "extinction of the Malay in political dominance" given the economic sway of the Chinese merchant class. Having failed the natives in war, London was lambasted for now "rushing them in peace." [100]

Winstedt's censure of Hall's recommendations resonated particularly amongst Malayan Malays, who objected to the 1945 variant of the Union. The Malayan Chinese position was more subdued, owing to the MPU's concessions in the area of citizenship rights and to the fact that the Chinese population could still appeal to the colonial authority in Malaya in the short term. Similarly, with the return of Shenton Thomas as Governor, the political situation in Singapore remained relatively unchanged compared to the pre-war situation. The most strident pushback against "Malayanization" in the form of the Union thus

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[97] Richard Winstedt & Eric Macfadyen, "The Malaya Union," *The Straits Times*, 15 November 1945 (last accessed 12 November 2016)
http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19451115.2.12
[98] ibid.
[99] Singapore was previously governed by the British together with Penang and Malacca as part of the Straits Settlements. See map on page 10.
[100] ibid.

came from various Sultans of Malaya directly, who were concerned that union meant the eradication of state individuality.

A flurry of letters between various Sultans and the Conservative Member of Parliament, John Foster, that have yet to be examined (to the best of my knowledge), reveal in detail the Sultans' attempts to derail the MPU recommendations against the wishes of the Secretary. Particularly, dispatches sent on the 28th and 29th of March 1945 suggested that the Sultans were coordinating a direct petition to King George VI.[101] The Sultans had intended for the petition to make public their reservations concerning the Malay royalty without confronting the Secretary openly, with the hopes that doing so would complicate the implementation of the Union. Their protestations, though, did not translate into much active resistance. The Sultans eventually signed treaties with Sir Harold MacMichael, the British government's plenipotentiary, in late 1946. These agreements granted the Crown permission to enforce the Union, and were condemned by the local press as an act of betrayal to the Malay people, to whom their duties were owed.[102]

Initial objections of the Sultans gave voice to a similar disenchantment among the Malay population that was reflected in the pages of various Malayan news sources. An editorial from the *Majlis* (Malay Daily) lamented the insensitivity of Secretary Hall to the diminished position of the Malay community vis-à-vis Chinese economic dominance.[103] A similar article from the *Times*, another local news source, stressed the essential Malay character of the country, and warned against granting citizenship rights to minorities whose

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[101] Copies of Letters from Sultans of Malaya and their Solicitors. "Judith Rosenburg" collection, George McTurnan Kahin Papers, #14-27-3146, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. See footnote 12 for full description.
[102] Boon Kheng Cheah, *Malaysia: The Making of a Nation* (Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies, 2002):16.
[103] Excerpt of editorial published in *Majlis*, 30 November 1945. "Judith Rosenburg" collection, George McTurnan Kahin Papers, #14-27-3146, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. See footnote 12 for full description.

allegiances were ultimately not to the Sultans.[104] By the end of 1946, the Malay public, which previous colonial governments had previously dismissed as apathetic and passive, had awakened. This backdrop of popular furor over the Colonial Secretary's vision of a multicultural Malay that guaranteed equal rights to all its residents provoked the first surge of nationalist sentiment.

<u>Nascent Nationalism in Malaya</u>

At this time, two competing visions of Malaya emerged amongst the local population in response to the proposal of the Union. Both built on the legacies of the pre-war Malayanization contest, even if they did not engage the term "Malayanization" explicitly. The first was envisioned by the Malayan Democratic Union (MDU) in 1945 Singapore, where the Malayan Union's initial promise of equal citizenship rights for all races appealed to the Chinese majority. The MDU advocated for a unified Malaya consistent with the MPU guidelines, echoing the earlier Straits Chinese argument. It sought a multi-cultural Malaya, which guaranteed equal citizenship for all races and a common English language. Not much has been written about the MDU, as it was quickly dissolved in 1948 after it became perceived as a front for communist insurgents. Nonetheless, the MDU's strain of nationalism was picked up by dominant Singaporean parties like the People's Action Party and Labour Front Party shortly after, illustrating the extent to which the demographic demands of Singapore had begun shaping its politics differently from the mainland.[105]

The second vision of "Malaya" was championed by nationalists in peninsula Malaya, desperate to re-assert the primacy of Malays. This radical brand of nationalism co-opted the

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[104] Excerpts from articles by Ismail b. Ali, published sometime in 1945 before the Malaya Union in the *Times*. "Judith Rosenburg" collection, George McTurnan Kahin Papers, #14-27-3146, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. See footnote 12 for full description.

[105] Copy of the election manifesto of the Labor Front in 1955. "Judith Rosenburg" collection, George McTurnan Kahin Papers, #14-27-3146, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. See footnote 12 for full description.

"ethnicization" aspects of the old "Malayanization" for its own ends.[106] One of the earliest beneficiaries of resentment amongst Malays towards Hall's equal citizenship proposal was the Malay Nationalist Party (MNP) – founded in 1946 by conservative Malay elites. Some of the MNP's most vocal leaders, such as Dato Onn bin Jaafar, articulated a Malaya that prioritized "indigenous" Malays and embodied Malay cultural and religious norms. More crucially, Onn expressed a national identity that situated Malayan political legitimacy among the people rather than simply in the Malay crowns. The perceived servility of the Sultans towards the colonial government prompted the MNP slogan: "they have become the *raja*, and the *raja* have become the *rakyat*."[107] The call explicitly re-ordered the relationship between the Malay people (*Rakyat*) and their kings (*raja*), implying that sovereignty was now situated amongst those directly representing the collective – the party itself. Theorists have considered such "democratization" of power the precursor to "modern" nationhood because it allowed all members of a given community to feel a part of it. This was certainly true with the MNP's movement, which "awakened" Malay political consciousness and popularized a brand of identity politics that privileged ethnic Malays.

The formation of UMNO on the 11th of May 1946, with Dato Onn as de facto leader was intended to channel Malay frustration over the status quo into a concrete strategy to oppose the Malayan Union plans, as well as the provisions for equal citizenship. This succeeded to the extent that UMNO was recognized as a legitimate actor in constitutional negotiations by the end of 1946. It achieved this by playing on British fears of alienating its Malayan partners, demonstrating the strategic capacity of successful nationalists to adapt their ideologies to suit changing political circumstances. In a letter to Governor Edward Gent, at the cusp of a constitutional negotiation between the British and Malay representatives, Dato

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[106] See chapter 1.
[107] Anthony Milner, "How 'Traditional' is the Malay Monarchy," Virginia Hooker & Norani Othman, (eds.), Malaysia, Islam, Society and Politics (Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies, 2003): 172.

Onn warned of Malays defecting to "a coalition of parties definitely anti-British," should there be further delays on a decision on the Union. He pressed the Governor to affirm Malay interests or risk "sacrificing them to political expediency", a reference to British postponement of a decision to consult the representatives of other ethnic groups.[108] This strategy exploited Britain's insecurity amidst the wave of decolonization, demonstrating the degree to which early nationalism depended on the ambiguity surrounding their expressed intentions, often not explicitly anti-colonial, to further their "ethnicization" agenda.

While there is a temptation to classify these movements as earlier manifestations of anti-colonial nationalism, doing so risks imposing a retrospective understanding of the term on actors operating in a context whereby the possibility of political independence was uncertain. A series of negotiations between Malay nationalists and the British ensued after 1946 over Malaya's political future, many of the earlier discussions did not immediately result in self-rule, much less full independence. Furthermore, British military presence was believed to be indispensable in the immediate post-war period, as a safeguard against the Malayan communist guerrillas.[109] The relationship between Malayan nationalists and the British, in lieu of their uneasy mutual dependence, was more ambiguous than a plain "anti-colonial" glossing of these early movements would give credit for.

UMNO's political pressure on the British succeeded. The plan for the Malayan Union was abandoned in December 1946. A summary of amended proposals, published by the working committee appointed by Gent, settled on a decentralized system that respected greater autonomy for individual states but mandated coordination under a Malayan Federation.[110] Provisions were also made to render the criteria for citizenship rights more

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[108] Stockwell, The Formation of the first years of U.M.N.O: 497.
[109] A.J Stockwell, *The Formation of the first years of the United Malay National Organization* (U.M.N.O): 1946 – 1948, *Modern Asian Studies 11*, no. 4 (1977): 498.
[110] Working Committee on the Constitutional Proposals, *Summary of constitutional proposals for Malaya: summary of the report of the working committee appointed by a conference of his excellency the governor of the*

stringent, excluding mostly diasporic Chinese individuals who held ROC and British citizenship. When the British introduced the notion of Malayan citizenship rights in 1946, a concept that had not existed before the war, Malay nationalists were forced to grapple with its legal implications. The end-result of a tiered citizenship system, which guaranteed protections for the Chinese under British law, but limited their political participation under a newly formed Malayan constitution, expressed the inherent tension in UMNO's "Malaya". This was one that asserted Malay primacy, while claiming to be accommodating to other ethnic groups.

UMNO did move towards a more inclusive variant of its ethnic nationalism, but only after it became clear that the demands of ethnic Chinese and Indians could no longer be side-lined. This realization was brought to the fore by the Malayan Emergency (1948 – 1960), during which the Malayan Communist Party recruited heavily from disenfranchised Chinese Malayans. Sensing that communal tensions were threatening the Malayan social fabric, the British Commissioner General, Malcolm Macdonald, and Dato Onn jointly set up the Communities Liaison Committee, with the aim of easing communal tensions and promoting Malayan unity.[111] The committee concluded that there was a need for a moderate front for the advancement of Chinese interest, in opposition to the Malayan Communist Party. This paved the way for the founding of the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) by former Straits Chinese assemblyman Tan Cheng Lock in 1949.[112] Tan, true to the ideals he espoused in the Straits Settlement Assembly before the war, revived his calls for a truly multicultural Malaya that treated all ethnic groups equally. He rallied his members, in an opening address to the MCA, to make Malaya "one country and one nation and the object of [collective] loyalty, love, and devotion."[113] Ironically, Tan's MCA failed to gain traction in Singapore, despite the

Malayan Union, Their Highnesses the rulers of the Malay States and the representatives of the United Malays National Organization, revised up to the 19th of December, 1946 (London: Newton & Co. Publishers, 1947).
[111] Referenced in K.G. Tregonning, "Tan Cheng Lock: A Malayan Nationalist*", Journal of South East Asian Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (1979): 60.
[112] See chapter 1: 19-21.
[113] K.G. Tregonning, "Tan Cheng Lock: A Malayan Nationalist*"*, p.61.

expected appeal of his variant of multiculturalism in the egalitarian port city. The opening of the MCA's Singapore branch in 1950 immediately drew flak from both the colonial government and the Singapore Chinese British Association, which perceived the MCA as a competitor for the loyalties of Singaporean Chinese.[114] The MCA's inability to expand in Singapore was perhaps one of the earliest indication that Singapore and Malaysia were embarking on divergent political trajectories.

The pervasiveness of identity politics in peninsula Malaya, however, eventually forced Tan to accept the limitations of egalitarian multiculturalism, as originally conceived. Success at the local polls demanded that the MCA remain devoted to Malayan Chinese, while forming partnerships rather than integration with the other ethnic parties. In 1953, UMNO, now under the new leadership of Tunku Abdul Rahman entered into an alliance with the MCA, establishing the foundations for a new "multi-racial nationalism" in peninsula Malaya, albeit one quite different from both Tan's and the Singaporean variant.[115] Under the MCA-UMNO alliance framework, Chinese interests would be protected in exchange for their acknowledgement of Malay political primacy. That both Tan, initially ideologically committed to the ideal of equal citizenship, and the Tunku, who began as a Malay chauvinism, were able to arrive at this creative compromise, testifies to the malleability towards which "multi-racial nationalism" was approached in peninsula.

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[114] ibid., 64.
[115] K.G. Tregonning, "Tan Cheng Lock: A Malayan Nationalist", 60.

Chapter 3: Malayanization Renewed

The demise of the Malayan Union did not result in a total abandonment of "Malayanization." Although it was clear by December 1946 that a unified Malaya, tied politically and economically to Britain, was unfeasible, the colonial governments both on the mainland and in the port city of Singapore proceeded with the social aspects of the strategy. This was laid out in a directive issued by the MPU, entitled "Malaya's long-term policy directives: education policy." One of the objectives it singled out pertained to nation-building and civic education, calling for the "fostering [of] a sense of a common citizenship and of partnership with the British commonwealth." Special attention was paid to the "breaking down of community barriers" through the promotion of English as the common language – a significant departure from previous colonial governments' treatment of English since past administrations had valued the language for its administrative utility.[116] The directive also resembled earlier proposals echoed in the legislative chamber of the Straits Settlement in the 1930s by Straits Chinese assemblymen for the promotion of multiculturalism through English.

Despite the MPU's long-term policy directive, which championed English, the explosion of ethnic nationalism in Malaya complicated attempts by the British to universalize the language. Proceedings from an advisory council debate in 1947 – the peninsula Malayan equivalent of the Singaporean legislative assembly – illustrate the extent of this pushback. The suggestion by the Director of Education to introduce a bilingual policy over time was swiftly resisted by Malayan members. V.M.N Menon, who represented Malayan labour, accepted that a common language was necessary to promote "inter-racial harmony," but

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[116] Copy of "Malaya. Long Term Policy Directives: Education Policy" issued by the Colonial Office (Singapore, *National Archives)*, WO 203.4585.

argued instead for Malay to be the national language.[117] Confronting Malay nationalists head-on in the wake of the Malayan Union's immense unpopularity would have been akin to political suicide for the Malayan colonial government, which was already desperate to manage anti-colonial sentiment on the mainland. This explains why the MPU's proposed reforms failed to manifest in any strong form.

In contrast, British position was more secure in Singapore, which again came under the direction of its pre-war Governor, Sir Shenton Thomas. There was also symbolic weight to the choice of the port-city as the primary site of Britain's continual "Malayanization" efforts. Singapore had been the epicentre of political activity throughout colonial rule, serving as the colony's unofficial capital, and would now be moulded to represent the kind of cosmopolitan Malaya that Britain had initially envisioned envisioned, prior to the failed Malayan Union proposal. That Thomas actively fought for the implementation of the bilingual policy was no accident. The experiences of his predecessor, Sir Cecil Clementi, had demonstrated that English was the only viable bridge language among a majority Chinese population that would have vociferously rejected any attempt to enforce education in Malay. A long history of political lobbying on the part of the Chinese population also underscored the point that any introduction of a national language had to be mediated by concessions towards local vernacular education. Still, the returning colonial government was adamant that English should be the language of both instruction and administration.

Thomas' education reforms were given formal political weight through the Ten-Year Plan (TYP) of 1946, which aspired towards a "six-year course of free primary education for all children in Singapore in a system of regional schools *distinct from racial schools*."[118] The colonial government's 1949 Education report made further references to the importance of

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[117] Proceedings of the Advisory Council of the Malayan Federation (1947): B31 – 34. "Judith Rosenburg" collection, George McTurnan Kahin Papers, #14-27-3146, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. See footnote 12 for full description.
[118] *Singapore Sessional Papers* (1948-1950), "Report on Education," CO940.40

English "in a polyglot population," acknowledging that vernacular schools were not the appropriate vessels for the engineering of a unified society.[119] Expanding English-education over time would hopefully diminish the prominence of Chinese schools, though the same report accepted that it would not eradicate interest in vernacular education.[120]

As expected, the TYP was coldly received by a majority of Chinese-educated residents, worried that a more centralised public education system would eclipse vernacular education over time.[121] Chinese objection was nonetheless overshadowed by the outbreak of the Malayan Emergency, which was fought as much in the jungles of Malaya as in the classrooms. In response to the threat of communist infiltration in Chinese schools, the colonial government released a Supplementary Five-Year Plan in 1948, intensifying efforts to provide sanctioned primary education to all. Its goals were as ambitious as they were strategic, seeking to accommodate "all children of school-going age by 1954 in an effort to compete with vernacular schools suspected of communist infiltration."[122] The *Whitepaper on Bilingual Education in Schools (1953)* was meant to appease the Chinese intelligentsia while extending the scrutiny of Chinese schools. It promised more aid to Chinese schools in exchange for their accepting of the British bilingual policy, initiating a fragile modus vivendi between Chinese-educated intellectuals and the colonial government.

The crown jewel of the "Malayanization" reforms in education, though, was the establishment of the University of Malaya. To the British, the university had represented the pinnacle of colonial modernity and a powerful symbol of Malayan unity, despite the separation of Singapore from Malaya in 1946. Prior to this, higher education had been confined to two tertiary institutions: the humanities-oriented Raffles College and King Edward VII Medical College for the study of sciences. A report by the Carr-Saunders

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[119] ibid.

[120] ibid.

[121] These concerned were conveyed through a series of editorials published by *Nanyang Siang Pau* in 1950, and are referenced in Sai's "Educating Multicultural Citizens," 67.

[122] Referenced in Sai, "Educating Multicultural Citizens," 65.

Commission in 1948 called for both to be merged into the University of Malaya. From its inception, the university was envisioned as a Pan-Malayan project that would serve the English-educated, British-leaning elite of the peninsula. Four hundred and six students from its pioneer class came from the mainland, and only 237 from Singapore.[123] The report, as highlighted by historians like A.J Stockwell and Sai Siew-Min, underscored the university's role as the "crucible of the Malayan nation."[124] It was to "provide for the first time a common centre where varieties of race, religion and economic interest could mingle in a joint endeavour."[125] It was further hoped that the university would serve as a political space for the cultivation of nationalist movements that would not threaten British commercial and political interests. The relaxation of censorship within the university was an acceptable risk if it allowed for the greater control over the pace and nature of decolonization.

The gamble of increased political freedom in exchange for deference to colonial authority did not pay off for the British. While a vast majority of the university's Student Union hailed from the more moderate English-speaking middle class – the same subsection that produced the Straits Chinese collaborators of pre-war Malaya – the creation of a relatively unregulated space opened the floodgates of politicization. For the first time, students were given access to socialist texts and a platform to translate newly learned ideologies into coordinated acts of resistance. They did this with a passion since unmatched, forming a range of student groups like the Malayan Undergrad that disseminated subversive pro-communist material. Many of these student activists also formed the core of the English-speaking wing of the Anti-British League (ABL), which had ties to the Malayan Communist Party.[126]

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[123] Edgar Liao, Cheng Tju Lim & Guo Quan Seng, *The University Socialist Club and the contest for Malaya: Tangled Strands of Modernity* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012): 45.
[124] Referenced in Anthony Stockwell, "Crucible of the Malayan nation:" The University of Malaya and the making of a new Malaya, 1938–1962', Modern Asian Studies, 43, 5 (2009): 1149–87.
[125] Referenced in Sai, "Educating Multicultural Citizens," 61.
[126] Liao, Cheng & Guo, *The University Socialist* Club, 46.

The British responded swiftly to the perceived threat of the university. In 1951, Special Branch forces entered the university for the first time, expelling ranks of teachers and students suspected of communist affiliation. Still, leftist writing continued to circulate. The political and literary works published by student activists who survived the purge deserve attention because they were the earliest attempts to wrestle control over the "Malayanization" project away from the British. The party-centred political history of Singapore tends to overlook the preceding forms of activism that also played a role in the shaping of Malayan identity. If the nation is to be conceived as an *imagined community*, then attention must be paid to the parties involved and the historical contingencies governing this act, because they explain the trajectory of its development.

<u>Puthucheary and Aroozoo: Competing Malayas</u>

If local response to Britain's initial post-war attempt to subvert the Malayan Union had occurred in the political space, student activists resisting the new education policies did so through culture and literature. Their efforts suggest that there was a strong desire amongst intellectuals, especially from minority ethnic groups in Singapore, to articulate an alternative to the parochial ethnic chauvinism of the predominant Malaya nationalist groups.[127] James Puthucheary was one such figure at the forefront of defining a multicultural Malaya that competed with the more culturally-specific variant of UMNO. Active in the anti-colonial movement even before the founding of the University of Malaya, he had declared: "for the university to play an important role in the development of the country it must become the advocate and guardian of the concept of Malayan nation and work towards the achievement of this ideal."[128] True to his word, he participated vigorously in its political life, together with other notable contemporaries like Hedwig Aroozoo, and was arrested during the 1951 crackdown only to be released shortly after. Puthucheary went on to co-found the university's

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[127] Liao, Cheng & Guo, *The University Socialist* Club, 8.
[128] ibid.

first socialist club, a subject that has been well studied.[129] The final section of this chapter will focus on both their literary and theoretical writings as examples of nationalist ideas emerging out of Britain's "Malayanization" strategy through education. These works offer a personal dimension to the political activism of these young nationalists. They also remain one of the few primary accounts of early Malayan socialist nationalist thought that were tolerated by the British after the 1951 purge, providing insight on how Malayan students contested the use of their university as an instrument of colonial policy.

Puthucheary blurs the line between Singaporean and Malayan nationalism because his definition of Malaya was not explicitly articulated in his writing. The party he helped found after he left university in 1954, the People's Action Party, although committed to a unified Malaya, was also active in agitating for Singapore's distinct self-rule and later political independence throughout the 1950s and 1960s.[130] The ambiguity towards which Puthucheary treated the Malayan subject reflects the conceptual fluidity of "Malaya", amidst the uncertainty of decolonization. Furthermore, the heavily socialist slant in his poetry suggest that nationalists were ideologically experimental during this stage of national imagination. Puthucheary's audacious references to social justice and demands for radical economic redistribution reflect the enduring hold of socialist thought on nationalist intellectual circles in the early 1950s, which did not last into the 1960s. Puthucheary was himself purged in *Operation Coldstore*, a 1963 crackdown on alleged Malayan Marxists, by the Singaporean ruling party he helped found.

Of the works published in *The New Cauldron* – a forum for nationalist writing within the university – Puthucheary's "Song of the Workers" (1950) was the most political, reflecting his determination to use the intellectual sanctuary promised by the British against

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[129] ibid.
[130] Gerry Rodan, *The political economy of Singapore's industrialization : national state and international capital*, (Basingstoke : Macmillan, 1989):67.

it. The poem drew a direct association between colonial resistance and Marxist revolution, boldly calling to attention the economic injustice arising from the British colonial economic system.[131] The poem called for the "multitude" of working class Malayans, the "worms in Gorgonzola cheese," to "shatter" the oppressive machinery of capitalism, metaphorized as "electric driven chariots."[132] What tied this description to the colonial situation though was his allusion to the "smell of cheap fish" and the "unwashed grime." The former referred to the fishing community, and the latter to labourers on rural Malaya's rubber plantations.[133] Puthucheary was able to draw parallels between the experiences of being colonized with the plight of the working class. In an encoded warning to the ruling elite, which included the colonial authorities and their collaborators, he decried local social conditions as untenable, akin to living under knives held back by "sarong shreds."[134]

This did not mean that Puthucheary was unaware of the complexities of forging a national identity out of racial and religious diversity. As a student activist, he had, alongside other student radicals, advocated for a Malayan identity that transcended racial categories, believing that a "Malay nation" as "essentially racial" and "reactionary" would "result in suppressing the rights of the majority who have contributed extensively to the wealth and progress of the country."[135] In a tone strikingly and perhaps somewhat ironically similar to Rajaratnam's later lobotomy comment, Puthucheary in one piece even declared that the "various communities [of Malaya] must fuse with one another, lose their separate identities and evolve the Malayan nation."[136] His views fused Marxist-Leninist calls for unity amongst

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[131] ibid.
[132] James Puthucheary, "Song of the Workers," in Poon, Angelia, Philip Holden & Shirley Geok-lin Lim, (eds.), *Writing Singapore: An Historical Anthology of Singaporean Literature*, (NUS Press: Singapore, 2011):104.
[133] ibid.
[134] ibid. A *sarong* is a delicate garment often worn by Malay women in the region.
[135] See Edwin Lee, *Singapore the Unexpected Nation* (Singapore, Singapore Institute of South East Asian Studies, 2008): 65.
[136] ibid.

colonized people with particular themes of Malayan nationalist thought, underscoring the influence of socialist thinking despite the communist movement's limited political successes.

The works of Puthucheary's peer, Hedwig Aroozoo, similarly reflected the prevalent view amongst young nationalists that issues of class and coloniality were intertwined. Aroozoo would later withdraw from political activism, eventually becoming the first director of the National Library of Singapore in 1960. But in 1951, her poetry, which was also published in the Cauldron, offered a similar critique of colonial rule through the lenses of Marxism. *Rhythm* (1951) criticized the discrepancy between the expatriate and local community.[137] Her caricature, Mrs. Mildred Barrington-Smith, engages with a range of charities associates with high society living, but is blithely perplexed by the alleged "ungratefulness" of the natives.[138] Furthermore, Aroozoo excoriated the colonial criminal justice system for both its partiality and incompetence. She contrasted rule of law in England, where policemen were "solid and real," with the laxity of the colonial state's security apparatus in Singapore, which failed to prevent even bandits from periodically escaping.[139]

Beyond anti-colonial rhetoric, Aroozoo's poetry provided context to the appeal of socialism previously discussed by framing it as an external counterforce to an entrenched coloniality. She implied that British reluctance to devolve power was not the only reason for the "faint and slow" chant of *Merdaka* (independence) since nationalist failures were equally to be blame. By expressing a deep-seated frustration over the failure to give form to a Malayan national consciousness – "government of the people, by the people…who are the people?" – she underscored how the general struggle to give the nation form had undercut claims of a right to self-determination.[140] For Aroozoo, the "flaming Red stars" of the East – a dramatic reference to the communist insurgency – promised hope that independence was

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[137] ibid, 13.
[138] Hedwig Aroozoo, "Rhythm in Time" in *Litmus One: Selected University Verse 1949 – 1957* (Singapore: Raffles Society of the University of Malaya, 1958): 22 – 24.
[139] ibid.
[140] ibid.

within reach, despite Britain's ongoing political and military monopoly. The optimism expressed towards socialism represented a commonly held attitude at a historical moment when the successes of revolutions in South East Asia offered an alternative route to independence that might have broken the stalemate befalling Malayan nationalists.

The blatantly anti-colonial views and stridently pro-socialist sentiments expressed by Puthucheary and Aroozoo are but two of the more prominent Anglophone examples of nationalist appropriation of the University of Malaya as a space for political subversion. Other student activists, like Wang Gungwu and Lim Thean Soo, deserve mention as fellow collaborators of this endeavour. Like Aroozoo, both Wang and Lim opted to pursue careers in the academy and the civil service rather than politics after their stint in the University of Malaya. The works examined also do not represent the full spectrum of nationalist activity from this period, which also saw the participation of Chinese and Tamil-educated Malayans in other intellectual spaces.

The University of Malaya was indeed a successful instrument of "Malayanization," but not in the manner that the colonial government had intended and certainly not for the British. Young and idealistic nationalists creatively exploited various assurances offered by the British strategy of cultivating loyal subjects towards their own political ends. In doing so, they laid the foundations of Singaporean nationalism. The enduring impact of these early students was reflected in the manifestos of all major parties contesting the 1955 election, which constituted Singapore's first step towards self-rule. The Labour Front (LF), which won the 1955 general election under conditions of self-rule, offered to extend the "Malayanization" efforts of the student activists further.[141] David Marshall, leader the the LF, coined reforms that sought to reduce British influence in the Singaporean administrative

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[141] Copy of the election manifesto of the Labor Front in 1955. "Judith Rosenburg" collection, George McTurnan Kahin Papers, #14-27-3146, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. See footnote 12 for full description.

service "Malayanization", therefore formalizing the nationalist connotation of the term. The People's Action Party, which came in second but would later win the 1959 election, similarly promised a multicultural and inclusive Singapore held together by equal citizenship rights.[142] Nonetheless, these parties were quick to obscure the socialist foundations of early pan-Malayan nationalism. Socialism as a viable political platform only existed for a brief moment between 1961, when Malayan leftists broke away from the People's Action Party to form the Barisan Socialist Party, and the aforementioned Marxist crackdown in 1963. The halls of the University of Malaya encased a moment in time when socialism was not simply a political possibility, but the most compelling vehicle for the expression of Malayan multicultural nationalism.

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[142] Copy of the election manifesto of the People's Action Party in 1955. "Judith Rosenburg" collection, George McTurnan Kahin Papers, #14-27-3146, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. See footnote 12 for full description.

Conclusion: Rethinking "Imagined Communities"

"Government of the people, by the people…Who are the people? Tida-apa la! Mana boleh la!" – Hedwig Aroozoo, from "Rhyme in Time," 1951[143]

"Malayanization" was the cornerstone of imperial strategy throughout the history of British rule in Malaya. Its central goal was to define, in the words of Hedwig Aroozoo, "the people" of Malaya, as a socio-political-cultural collective.[144] However, once asked by the colonial government, the question: "Who are the people?" could not be easily withdrawn from the discursive space of Malayan politics.[145] The failure of Clementi's Malayanization campaign in the 1930s, and Britain's inability to control the discourse on "Malayanization" after World War II, illustrated that colonial policy, initially intended to extend Britain's hold on the loyalty of Malayans, instead opened up multiple sites of resistance that offered opportunities for the emergence of different iterations of "Malaya".

Throughout colonial rule in Malaysia, both the British and local nationalists made successive attempts to "lobotomize" Malaya's collective memory in a battle for hearts, minds, and political power. These variants do not conform neatly to categories of nationalism – "[ethnie]", "civic" and "anti-colonial" – previously explicated by theorists like Greenfield and Reid.[146] Colonial nationalism as expressed through "Malayanization" amalgamated elements of both "[ethnie]" and "civic" nationalism.[147] Clementi treated race as an instrument to shape loyalty to the British Empire. The ethnicization of non-Malay residents failed because of a mismatch of means and ends. His prioritization of Malay language and culture undermined his administration's claims of promoting multicultural inclusivity.

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[143] *"Tida-apa la! Mana boleh la!"* is a Malay vernacular phrase used to convey incredulity and frustration. The literal translation in English is: "Is not what! Where can!"
[144] Aroozoo, "Rhythm in Time", 22 – 24.
[145] ibid.
[146] Reid, *Imperial Alchemy*, 10.
[147] Greenfield, *Nationalism*, 13.

Neither was local nationalism anti-colonial until well into the post-war era. Before World War II, "proto" identities, such as the ones expressed by Straits Chinese assemblymen although expressed in opposition to Clementi's ethnicization attempts, were couched in socio-cultural terms. Their championing of a Malaya that respected its ethnic plurality did not amount to a challenging of colonial sovereignty. The Straits Chinese remained loyal British subjects till the post-war period and were eager to preserve their status as British subjects during the onslaught on Malay nationalism during the late 1940s. Still, their vision of a multicultural and inclusive Malaya endured beyond their articulators, becoming a site of contest between nationalist and the British.

World War II was a watershed event because it disrupted the configuration of power within Malaya, re-ordering the manner in which questions of identity and power were negotiated. Politicized conceptions of the Malayan nation began to be articulated as the nation-state gained a fixed modality during the period of decolonization. British "Malayanization" policy, in the form of managed colonial nationalism, unintentionally created opportunities for independent-minded nationalists to mobilize. Their efforts were aided by an internationalist climate conducive for self-determination. Nationalist movements across South East Asia, including Malaya, had to express their desire for independence politically, as statist successors to their respective colonial administrations in order for their sovereignty to be acknowledged externally. Of the range of nationalist movements from this period, the Malay-oriented nationalism of UMNO, and the multicultural alternative articulated by political parties in Singapore were dominant. Even amongst multicultural Malayan identity, schisms emerged between the socialist-leaning anti-colonial movement that grew out of the University of Malaya, and the more right-wing politicians that came to dominate in Singapore by the 1950s.

This thesis' dependence on written works as primary evidence of a bourgeoning national consciousness validates Benedict Anderson's idea of "print capitalism" as a necessary pre-condition for collective imagination. However, the Malayan example has also cast doubt on several of Anderson's claims, such as the idea that South East Asian nationalism mirrored European nationalism.[148] Malayan nationalism developed according to its own unique trajectory in response to conditions peculiar to it. Colonialism introduced the concept of the "Malaya" to the peninsula, and arguably created conditions for early Malayan national identity to emerge, but the development of nationalism always involved local actors even during the height of Empire.

Moreover, Anderson's emphasis on collective "imagination" does not give sufficient weight to the conflictual process through which identity formation occurred. Nationalist "language" in Malaya was for all intents and purposes heteroglossic since there was no English monopoly over national imagination. Unlike in 17th century Europe, where according to Anderson's narrative, largely homogenous ethno-linguistic nations emerged; multiple communicative spheres co-existed in Malaya, resulting in distinct Malayan identities emerging and contesting within the same geographical space, along ethnic, linguistic and ideological lines.[149] Although this thesis focused exclusively on the Anglophone community, similar projects of national imagination were being undertaken in vernacular Chinese, Tamil and Malay.

Rather than to treat nationalism as the product of either colonial policy or local agency, the contest over "Malayanization" suggests that national identities arose out of a *synthetic antagonism* between various domestic factions competing for attention and legitimacy of the colonial government, and between the British and local nationalists. Malayan nationalism was both a movement and a discourse whose meaning and vocabulary

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[148] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 45.
[149] ibid.

changed according to the actors that appropriated them, as changing approaches towards "Malayanization". The concept began as a function of colonial "divide and rule" policy, but eventually became associated with independence-oriented movements after World War II. Thematic consistencies such as multiculturalism and civic-neutrality, which are woven like a thread through the Straits Chinese Magazine of pre-war colonial Singapore and the more politicized anti-colonial literature after the Japanese Occupation, reflect enduring demographic concerns in a multicultural space where different ethnic identities had to be carefully managed.

The "inherently limited and sovereign" nation-state model only emerged in Malaya and Singapore after political independence, in the 1957 and 1965 respectively.[150] Demands of survival placed at the forefront of the new state's agenda the need to consolidate around a single homogenous, purpose-driven national identity. A final "lobotomy" was attempted, this time definitively and resolutely, creating conditions that legitimized the nation-state's side-lining of competing national interpretations expressed by its former political rivals. Malaya's enforced amnesia is not unique – all nation-states are complicit to some degree in the obscuring of history – though it continues to be perpetuated through its official narrative, felt in the unaddressed gaps of collective memory, and experienced in the lives of still-living actors excluded from the national discourse. Historians interested in uncovering a more accurate and richer understanding of now Malaysian and Singaporean nationalism must confront the multi-variety of its past identities – colonial, anti-colonial, and everything in between – with both confidence and honesty.

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[150] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

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