Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 41(3), pp 483–507 2010.
© The National University of Singapore, 2010 doi:10.1017/S0022463410000275

Unofficial contentions: The postcoloniality of Straits Chinese political discourse in the Straits Settlements Legislative Council

Daniel P.S. Goh

This paper reads the debates of the Straits Settlements Legislative Council to trace the political contentions over policies affecting the Chinese community in Malaya. These contentions brought the Straits Chinese unofficials to engage the racial ambivalence of British rule in Malaya, in which the Straits Chinese was located as both a liberal subject and an object of colonial difference. Contrary to conventional historiography which portrays Straits Chinese political identity as one of conservative loyalty to the Empire, I show that the Straits Chinese developed multiple and hybrid political identities that were postcolonial in character, which would later influence the politics of decolonisation and nation-building after the war.

Introduction

Scholars agree that the Straits Chinese formed a coherent and distinctive community with a hybrid culture combining Chinese, Malay and British traits and in its political identification with the British, as the community developed from its mercantilist base into a privileged class dependent on colonial patronage at the turn of the nineteenth century.[1] However, Straits Chinese contribution to the making of Malaysia and Singapore has been neglected in the historiography of nation-building and modernisation. For C.M. Turnbull, the 'counter-pull of three different cultural loyalties' to China, Malaya and the British Empire generated an identity crisis, leading to

Daniel P.S. Goh is Assistant Professor at the Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore. Correspondence in connection with this paper should be addressed to: socgohd@nus.edu.sg. This is a revised version of a paper presented at the conference on 'Lim Boon Keng and the Straits Chinese: A historical reappraisal', organised by the Department of History, National University of Singapore and the National Library Board, Singapore, 27 Jan. 2007. My thanks to Sai Siew Min, Francis Lim, Kwok Kian Woon, Chua Ai Lin and the anonymous reviewers of the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* for their critical comments.

1 Png Poh-Seng, 'The Straits Chinese in Singapore: A case of local identity and socio-cultural accommodation', *Journal of Southeast Asian History* (henceforth, *JSEAH*), 10, 1 (1969): 95–114; Yao Souchou, 'Ethnic boundaries and structural differentiation: An anthropological analysis of the Straits Chinese in nineteenth century Singapore', *Sojourn: Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 2, 2 (1987): 209–30; John Clammer, *Straits Chinese society: Studies in the sociology of the Baba communities of Malaysia and Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1980); Tan Chee Beng, *The Baba of Melaka: Culture and identity of a Chinese Peranakan community in Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk, 1988); Jürgen Rudolph, *Reconstructing identities: A social history of the Babas in Singapore* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998).

productive social and cultural reforms that spurred the modernisation of local Chinese society.[2] On the other hand, in terms of political modernisation, historians see a strong discontinuity between Straits Chinese political identities and the post-colonial political movements that developed in the wake of decolonisation after the Second World War. Yen Ching-Hwang argues that the Chinese nationalist movements in colonial Malaya, including those in which prominent Straits Chinese figures participated, were China-oriented and were uninterested in developing 'a separate overseas Chinese identity' or in getting involved in local 'indigenous nationalism'.[3]

As the narrative goes, Straits Chinese political loyalty to the Empire was then outpaced by the tide of nationalist and socialist forces that defined the late twentieth century, with the Straits Chinese dithering, as Clive Christie puts it, in political 'indecisiveness and relative ineffectuality' in the interwar years.[4] With the departure of Empire, Straits Chinese political influence was superseded by the People's Action Party (PAP) in Singapore and the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) in Malaysia and the community declined as it was absorbed into the larger immigrant Chinese community in the multiracial politics of nation-building in both countries.[5]

Yet, Straits Chinese influence in the development of Singapore's postcolonial political culture is indelible. The emphasis on Chineseness and the Mandarin language, the 'Confucian values' movement and the belittling of Anglicised Chinese youths as 'deculturalised' by the PAP ruling elites hark back to the Confucian revival movement and the sinicisation of the movement's renowned Straits Chinese leader, Lim Boon Keng. As Carl Trocki puts it, 'the urge to recreate Singapore on the part of the English-educated classes may be seen in relation to the crisis of the Straits Chinese or Baba community'.[6] After all, Lee Kuan Yew, Toh Chin Chye, Goh Keng Swee and the other Anglophone leaders of the PAP were famously English-educated Babas who, like Lim Boon Keng, have taken the extraordinary step of joining and leading a political movement dominated by Chinese-speaking nationalists.[7]

Straits Chinese influence was not limited to the PAP. As Yeo Kim Wah points out, the leaders of the political parties that campaigned to define and lead the nascent polity of Singapore between 1945 and 1955 came from the English-educated middle class, the bulk of which comprised the Straits Chinese.[8] The left-wing Malayan Democratic Union stemmed from the wartime internment experience of

2 C.M. Turnbull, *A history of Singapore, 1819–1988*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 103, 105.

3 Yen Ching Hwang, *Community and politics: The Chinese in colonial Singapore and Malaysia* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1995), p. 218; also Chui Kwei-Chiang, 'Political attitudes and organisations, c. 1900–1941', in *A history of Singapore*, ed. Ernest C.T. Chew and Edwin Lee (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 76–8, 88–9.

4 Clive J. Christie, *A modern history of Southeast Asia: Decolonization, nationalism and separatism* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1996), p. 36.

5 Clammer, *Straits Chinese society*, p. 139; Tan, *The Baba of Melaka*, p. 230; Rudolph, *Reconstructing identities*, p. 413.

6 Carl A. Trocki, *Singapore: Wealth, power and the culture of control* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 141.

7 Lim was one of the most prominent leaders of the Confucian revival movement, but he was one of the few Straits Chinese leaders among immigrant Chinese leaders in the movement; Yen, *Community and politics*, p. 245.

8 Yeo Kim Wah, *Political development in Singapore, 1945–55* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1973), p. 131.

non-Malay intellectuals who believed that an independent multiracial and united Malaya was possible because extant communalisms were rooted in socio-economic disparities between Malays and non-Malays and colonial racism. While the party did not survive the Emergency crackdowns, Yeo describes the Union as the 'first attempt by English-educated radicals to achieve independence through co-operation with the [Malayan Communist Party]', placing it as an influential precursor to the PAP.[9]

The Progressive Party, formed by politically conscious leaders of the Straits Chinese British Association (SCBA) and the Singapore Association, which represented the interests of local European society, was most directly linked to the prewar Straits Chinese community. It was, therefore, politically conservative, pro-British and anti-merger, but it proposed important welfare-state initiatives that were later taken up by the PAP. The leadership of the Labour Party and the Labour Front was more multiracial in character, with former Progressive Party member Lim Yew Hock playing a major role in both parties. Though it dominated the City Council elections in the early 1950s, the Labour Party did not survive the split between Lim's moderate faction representing professional and business interests and a more radical wing of white-collar workers. Lim went on to head the centrist-liberal Labour Front, which formed the autonomous government under the 1955 Rendel Constitution in coalition with the Alliance of the Singapore Malay Union and the Singapore branches of the United Malays National Organisation and Tan Cheng Lock's MCA.[10]

Yeo notes that the parties were all multiracial in composition and non-communal in orientation, but he largely plays down Straits Chinese influence in the parties despite their pre-eminence in party leadership, and views the Straits Chinese as represented by the SCBA, 'whose loyalty to the British Empire was proverbial'.[11] Questions of historical continuity thus remain. What exactly was 'the crisis of the Straits Chinese' and what were the different political responses to it? How did the different responses shape the different paths possible for Singapore's political development before it was locked into its current trajectory with its Confucian turn? How did Straits Chinese political discourse contribute to the construction of the field of political positions that the postwar political parties took up, which Yeo has mapped as radical, conservative and centrist-liberal positions?

Unofficial contentions in the Legislative Council

Beneath the public identity of loyal British subjects, the Straits Chinese developed complex political positions in the prewar colonial period that, together, formed a distinctive political discourse that was *postcolonial* in character. It was postcolonial

9 Ibid., p. 98.

10 Ibid., pp. 108–9, 113, 114. The Progressive Party, Labour Party and Labour Front did not survive as viable parties into the late 1950s with PAP's ascendency as a left-wing party with mass support. They were succeeded by other parties, such as Lim Yew Hock's Singapore People's Alliance and the Liberal Socialist Party, and their political platforms were taken up in various and modified ways by these successor parties. However, they too increasingly declined in importance and effectiveness as the English-educated PAP elites' grip on power tightened in the 1960s. See Yeo Kim Wah and Poon Kim Shee, 'Singapore', *Political parties of Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Haruhiro Fukui (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1985), pp. 971–97.

11 Yeo, *Political development in Singapore*, pp. 131, 138.

in the sense that the discourse contended with colonial power and crafted nascent imaginations of the nation which sought to resolve the complexities of cultural, racial and class distinctions that were functional for colonial rule. New nations, as Benedict Anderson tells us, were not born after the collapse of empires but in the crucible of discourse *in the imperial public sphere*, through mass media or colonial state institutions, producing imagined national communities preceding the actual existence of these communities.[12] Existing studies of Straits Chinese social thought have focused on individual leaders, for example, Lee Guan Kin's detailed exposition of Lim Boon Keng's engagement with Chinese and Western culture, and Yeo Siew Siang's discussion of Tan Cheng Lock's pragmatic politics and moderate Peranakan cultural views between the 'Westernised' Song Ong Siang and 'Confucianist' Lim Boon Keng.[13] Like Lee and Yeo, I discuss and compare the thought of Straits Chinese leaders, expressed in their speeches in the Straits Settlements Legislative Council from its inception in 1867 to 1942. However, I do so not to explain the biographical development of their ideas, but to determine how their political contentions in the Council shaped and evolved the collective political discourse that defined the postwar politics of nationalism in Singapore.

Writing on colonial state formation in India, Partha Chatterjee notes that the more the colonial government rationalised its administration to rule over its subjects universally, 'the more insistently did the issue of race come up to emphasize the specifically colonial character of British dominance'. This apparent paradox was fundamental to the colonial state, as it had to preserve its colonial character by reproducing the *racial* truth of colonial difference 'within the framework of a universal knowledge' of rationalising statecraft.[14] The colonial legislature was one of the most visible expressions of this ambivalence of universalism and difference in the colonial discourse of the British Empire. On the one hand, the colonial legislature was an institution of British liberalism, where laws were enacted through constitutional process, rational deliberation and representative ballot. On the other hand, it was an instrument of governance adapted to the ethnologically perceived racial character of the colony. The Straits Settlements Legislative Council was no exception. When Penang, Malacca and Singapore were established as a unitary Crown Colony in 1867, the sitting of the Council signified for the colonials not only an advance in imperial status but also the transplantation of British civilisation in the Malay Archipelago. But colonial bureaucrats taking their orders from London constituted the permanent majority, which made for an administrative assembly that followed the governor's will, though a coterie of unelected 'unofficials' representing business and native interests gave the legislature a semblance of parliamentary deliberation.

12 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, rev. edn (London: Verso, 1991).

13 Lee Guan Kin, *The thought of Lim Boon Keng – Convergence and contradiction between Chinese and Western culture* (Singapore: Singapore Society of Asian Studies, 1990); Yeo Siew Siang, *Tan Cheng Lock: The Straits legislator and Chinese leader* (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1990).

14 Partha Chatterjee, *The nation and its fragments: Colonial and postcolonial histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 19, 20; see also Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

The most significant unofficial in the light of colonial ambivalence is the 'Chinese' unofficial, the native slot that defined the Straits legislature as colonial. The Chinese unofficial simultaneously represented liberalism and colonial difference. He was there because of the universal inclusiveness of liberalism and specifically chosen because he, as a Western-educated native, exemplified the *potential* of becoming the modern liberal subject. But this latter term already contained the racial principle of colonial difference. The Chinese unofficial *qua* Chinese unofficial was only a potential liberal subject because he represented an ascribed 'Oriental' community that was seen by the British as radically different, if not diametrically opposite, in nature and culture.[15] In Council, the Chinese unofficial was expected to match the rational and liberal senses of the British officials and unofficials and yet at the same time represent the Chinese in all their Oriental character and act as a cultural broker.

But it was precisely the ambivalence of the role the Chinese unofficials played in the legislature that caused them to move beyond representing Chinese interests and expressing platitudes of imperial loyalty into the creative space of engagement with local European and non-European communities in the Settlements and the social issues that affected them. In the process, the unofficials defined the Straits Chinese as variously different from the communities, representing the communities or united with them over particular issues. Consequently, the unofficials began to imagine the possibilities of a multiracial Malayan nation, its place between the Empire and China, and their own place in it as 'transcultural' vanguards forging a new hybrid culture.[16]

The impetus was certainly the Anglicised Straits Chinese colonial desire to become modern subjects — to progress from their ascribed inferior status and surpass Anglo-Saxon civilisation in terms of modern virtue.[17] Existing studies have focused on the texts published by the Straits Chinese, for example, famously, the *Straits Chinese Magazine* and Song Ong Siang's *One hundred years' history of the Chinese in Singapore*. Legislative Council speeches and debates have been cited as important evidence in many of these studies, but no systematic analysis of Straits Chinese discourse in the Council exists. While these studies have been valuable in explaining what drove the Straits Chinese, we can better see the evolution of a coherent but multivocal Straits Chinese political discourse and its influence on postcolonial political development by looking at the Chinese unofficials' contentions with the colonial power in the Legislative Council over seven decades, at their performing of the ambivalent role as Chinese unofficial.[18] I begin by tracing the different ways

15 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978).

16 Mark Ravinder Frost, 'Transcultural diaspora: The Straits Chinese in Singapore, 1819–1918', *Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series*, no. 10 (Singapore: Asia Research Institute, 2003).

17 Yao Souchou, 'Social virtues as cultural text: Colonial desire and the Chinese in 19th-century Singapore', *Reading culture: Textual practices in Singapore*, ed. Phyllis Chew and Anneliese Kramer-Dahl (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1999), pp. 99–122; Philip Holden, *Modern subjects / colonial texts: Hugh Clifford and the discipline of English Literature in the Straits Settlements and Malaya, 1895–1907* (Greensboro, NC: ELT Press, 2000), pp. 135–8, C.J. Wan-ling Wee, *Culture, empire, and the question of being modern* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003).

18 Cheek-Milby's study of Hong Kong's Legislative Council has similarly focused on the performance of the multiple roles of legislators in shaping Hong Kong's voice and identity. Kathleen Cheek-Milby, *A legislature comes of age: Hong Kong's search for influence and identity* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Whampoa and Seah Liang Seah negotiated transcolonial politics during the era of 'secret societies' between the establishment of the Crown Colony and the federation of the Malay states. The next period saw the political and cultural ascendancy of the Straits Chinese community. Here, Tan Jiak Kim and Lim Boon Keng modernised Straits Chinese political discourse and the latter developed a discourse of imperial multiculturalism that fused the political positions of his predecessors. I then show how Lim's multiculturalism diverged into the political positions articulated by Song Ong Siang, Tan Cheng Lock and Lim Cheng Ean that came to postcolonial maturity in the twilight interwar years of empire.

Negotiating transcolonial networks, 1867–1894

Conflicts over tin interests that emerged in the transcolonial political and economic networks that enmeshed the Straits Settlements, the west coast peninsular Malay states and the India and China trade were the immediate problems facing the Straits Settlements as it became a Crown Colony in 1867. The nascent colonial government vacillated between intervention and non-intervention in the peninsular Malay states, before the policy was settled in favour of British control in 1873.[19] On the Chinese side, the transcolonial networks brought together quasi-political triad organisations, trade companies and guilds, clan and religious associations and other voluntary associations.[20] At the same time, the networks in Malaya were transethnic in character as Chinese organisations forged alliances and close economic ties with organisations and institutions of other ethnic groups, particularly the various Malay noble houses and flag societies. The quarrel between two groups of allied Chinese-Malay tin interests led, first, to the 1867 Penang riots and, in the turbulent years that followed, to the Perak and Selangor troubles and the 1872 Singapore riots. The Penang riots welcomed the establishment of the Legislative Council, and these events caused the British colonial state to view the Chinese as the pre-eminent native problem in the Settlements.

The colonial government's dependence on transcolonial capital and labour posed a danger to its stability and British hegemony. Thus, the history of British Malayan government can be read as one centrally concerned with managing the networks through a series of racial categories invented through census instruments and deployed to govern the native population.[21] Explicitly articulated later by Frank Swettenham in his *British Malaya*, the Chinese elements of the networks were to be consigned to the strictly economic, and diluted by Western capital, while the Malay elements were to be confined to the political, whether ornamental or practical.[22] However, in the representations of British Orientalism, the danger of dependence on the Chinese easily slipped into representations of the Chinese as

19 C.D. Cowan, *Nineteenth-century Malaya: The origins of British political control* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).

20 Maurice Freedman, 'Immigrants and associations: Chinese in nineteenth-century Singapore', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 3, 1 (1960): 5–48; see Mark Ravinder Frost, '*Emporium in Imperio*: Nanyang networks and the Straits Chinese in Singapore, 1819–1914', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (henceforth, *JSEAS*), 36, 1 (2005): 29–66; Carl A. Trocki, *Opium and empire: Chinese society in colonial Singapore, 1800–1910* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

21 Charles Hirschman, 'The meaning and measurement of ethnicity in Malaysia: An analysis of census classifications', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 46 (1987): 555–82; 'The making of race in colonial Malaya: Political economy and racial ideology', *Sociological Forum*, 1, 2 (1986): 330–61.

dangerous, inscrutable Orientals. We find the earliest and one of the few ethnographic reports of the Chinese communities in the Council papers in the Penang riots enquiry commission report. In the report, details of the rules, secret signs, articles of religious belief and ceremonial rites of the Kian Tek society, one of the parties involved in the riots, were published.[23]

The Kian Tek society gathered together particular trade interests and was organised around the worship of a deity uniquely local to the region. Significantly, the deity remains popular among local Chinese today and is called *Toa Peh Kong* (dabogong) in the regional language of Fujian, which means a man of great authority, similar in designation to the traditional usage of *datuk* in Malay. The fact that the Penang Kian Tek had extensive ties to other organisations in the peninsula through its branches indicated that it was connected to a transcolonial network operating through the reciprocal relations between chiefs of different ethnicities. The close link between the Kian Tek society's involvement in the transcolonial network of *datuks* and chiefs and its religious worship of a sacred figure that was closely correlated with political authority would have raised the eyebrows of a cultural anthropologist.[24] But without a cultural anthropological understanding, the ethnographic 'evidence' in the Council papers merely marked the Kian Tek as representing the esoteric danger of 'secret' societies.

It was not just the government preoccupation with secret societies that the Chinese unofficial had to contend with. The Chinese unofficial was caught in the struggle between colonial civil society represented by the British unofficials and the bureaucrats who constituted the official majority. In the first three years of the Council, before Whampoa (Hoo Ah Kay) was appointed as the first Chinese unofficial in late 1869, the irrepressible Chief Justice of the Settlements, P. Benson Maxwell, spearheaded civil society opposition to interventionist government. Turnbull sees this conflict as resulting from the cleaning up of corruption and patronage and reform of the administration for greater efficiency.[25] But if we consider that one of the major conflicts was over the Preservation of Peace Act, which gave the government despotic powers versus Chinese secret society members, our interpretation would have to be more nuanced. Maxwell argued in the vein of liberal universalism that granting the government absolute powers to inflict corporal punishment, suspend Habeas Corpus and arbitrarily banish went against 'the most importance [*sic*] constitutional principles' and was not justified on 'mere faction fights' among the Chinese 'divested of all hostility to the Government'. The Attorney General responded with the racial principle of colonial difference coupled with distinct insecurity concerning the inscrutable, dangerous Chinese and their secret societies:

22 Frank A. Swettenham, *British Malaya: An account of the origin and progress of British influence in Malaya*, rev. edn (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1948 [1906]).

23 The Penang Riots report, pp. 78–83, *Legislative Council Proceedings and Papers* (*LCPP*) 1868, Records of the Colonial Office (CO) 275/8 (record number and volume number), Public Records Office, National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom

24 See Jean DeBernardi, 'Malaysian Chinese religious culture: Past and present', in *Ethnic Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia*, ed. Leo Suryadinata (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 2002), pp. 301–23; *Rites of belonging: Memory, modernity, and identity in a Malaysian Chinese community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

25 Turnbull, *A history of Singapore*, p. 79.

> I hope I hold [British Constitutional principles] in as much respect as any one at this table; but I doubt whether they are of necessity applicable in their fullest extent to this Colony. They are admirably so to British society … But it will not do to bring them out here and make them arbitrarily applicable to a recently formed community like this: a colluvies [rabble] of half the nations in Asia … Now, to my mind the existence of the secret societies in this place constitutes a chronic emergency. It is all very well in a country constituted as England is to say that you must wait and see an emergency arising, before you act … But what opportunity have we here of knowing what is going on? In one night, without any notice, you may find all the Chinese population, and perhaps half the Malays and Klings [Tamil Indians] of the affiliated societies in an uproar together.[26]

The continuing skirmishes saw the same ambivalence of liberalism and difference brought up. Maxwell called for a race-blind universalism, arguing, 'Our law, and those who preside over its administration cannot too frequently repeat it, gives the same protection to the meanest Chinaman, Malay or inhabitant of India, as to the best of us.' To this particular speech, the Auditor-General replied that 'the interests of the European population' were not 'so closely affected by the measure' and that what the government was doing was 'for the good of these Chinese themselves'.[27] The Auditor-General's reply raises a question: why did the British unofficials defend the secret societies spiritedly when their interests were not directly and apparently affected? Turnbull observed that Maxwell's civil society leadership was due in part to his desire to protect his powers of patronage as Chief Justice, which the colonial executive was increasingly encroaching on.[28] The defence of Chinese societies was in the interests of the unofficials because British civil society, dominated by mercantilist interests, was also enmeshed in the same transcolonial networks.

It was into this extramundane Council quagmire of Orientalist representations, colonial ambivalence and government–civil society conflict that Whampoa, probably the wealthiest merchant and the most Anglicised Chinese in Singapore in his time, entered as the first Chinese unofficial. Whampoa stood solidly with the government against the British unofficials, even on measures concerning the Chinese. Calling for the employment of Chinese police officers, unofficial J.J. Greenshields argued that this was not merely necessary in policing the predominant Chinese population, but, more importantly, the Chinese were so capable that 'European enterprise would have done little here except for the aid of Chinese energy.' Wary of 'their connexion with secret societies', the government disagreed. To support the government's position, Governor Harry Ord read a paper written by a respectable 'Chinese gentleman' he consulted, where the details of Chinese racial character, such as natural corruptibility, criminality and clannishness, were given in opposition to the enlistment of Chinese policemen. To cap this damning racism from the victim's own mouth, Ord asked Whampoa whether he concurred with the 'views of his countryman'. Whampoa replied that he 'perfectly' agreed, but deflected the racism by emphasising that the main difficulty

26 Legislative Council proceedings, 17 May 1869, pp. 20, 21, *LCPP* 1869, CO 275/10.
27 Proceedings, 28 Aug. 1869, pp. 41, 48, *LCPP* 1869.
28 Turnbull, *A history of Singapore*, p. 79.

was that the Chinese belonged to 'several different tribes' — an administrative rather than a racial problem.[29]

While the government was tuning up the Orientalist discourse of dangerous Chineseness and arming itself with a battery of powers, it was negotiating its own position within the transcolonial networks. The governance of the networks necessitated first the involvement of the government in the networks. Thus, we find evidence of close collaboration between Chinese leaders of the networks with government officials in Council proceedings and reports.[30] For the Straits Chinese merchants, this reality of governmental intervention in the networks was also an opportunity to offset the power of the secret societies. It was a largely internal conflict among Chinese leaders who were naturalised British subjects, between the increasingly Anglicised Straits Chinese merchants and the more plebian heads of the secret societies, and Whampoa represented the interests of the former group.[31] On the other hand, British commercial interests stand to lose more from governmental intervention than to gain from the domestication of the secret societies in the short run. In the Council, this political negotiation of the transcolonial networks by the different parties translated into the ambivalent discourse of liberalism versus colonial difference, in which Whampoa supported the government's latter position in the interests of the merchants he represented. In 1873, the government picked up the 1871 petition by Chinese merchants to regulate Chinese immigration.[32] In effect, the regulation would deprive the secret societies of fresh membership and the control of labour. The British unofficials adamantly opposed governmental regulation on grounds of the *laissez-faire* liberal tradition of the Settlements, while Whampoa actively supported the government and was the only unofficial voting with the government and seconding the government's motions.[33]

Initially, Seah Liang Seah, who was Whampoa's successor in the Council in the 1880s and also an Anglicised Chinese merchant, seemed to have inherited Whampoa's support of increasing government intervention to reduce the power of the secret societies. When the government sought to crack down on Chinese gambling, a major source of revenue for the societies, British unofficials responded in a familiar fashion, opposing the legislation and arguing that the natives should be treated 'exactly' as Europeans and given 'neither more nor less liberty'. Seah supported the government, arguing that the legislation was 'very necessary for the well-being of the

29 Proceedings, 20 June 1872, pp. 17, 20, 21, *LCPP* 1872, CO 275/15.

30 Other than Whampoa, the colonial government sought the assistance of Tan Seng Poh, an Anglicised opium farm merchant, and Chua Moh Choon, leader of the Ghee Hok Kongsi or secret society and naturalised British subject, during the 1872 and 1876 riots in Singapore and for the 1873 Chinese policemen and 1876 Chinese labour commissions. Proceedings, 19 Sept. 1872, p. 97, *LCPP* 1872; Chinese police force commission report, Council paper no. 27, 16 June 1873, *LCPP* 1873, CO 275/16; Chinese labour condition committee report, Council paper no. 22, 3 Nov. 1876; 1876 riots report by Protector William Pickering, Council paper no. 31, 29 Dec. 1876, *LCPP* 1876, CO 275/19.

31 Protector of Chinese annual report 1877, Council paper no. 6, 15 Mar. 1878, *LCPP* 1878, CO 275/22; Protector of Chinese annual report 1885, Council paper no. 7, 6 Apr. 1886, *LCPP* 1886, CO 275/31.

32 Petition from Chinese merchants and citizens, Council paper no. 13, 23 May 1871, *LCPP* 1871, CO 275/13; 1872 riots commission report, *LCPP* 1873;

33 Proceedings, 9 Sept. 1873, pp. 147, 149, and 10 Sept. 1873, p. 164, *LCPP* 1873.

[Chinese] community' because gambling caused 'mistrust in local business' and created 'many other vices' with great 'evil consequences'.[34]

But it was soon evident that Seah did not support the government as solidly as Whampoa. In 1885, when the government sought to make permanent emergency powers to banish secret society members, Seah voted with the majority of the British unofficials and the Chief Justice who opposed the legislation because of its 'unconstitutional' character. Again, when the government sought to increase the discretionary powers of banishment in 1888, Seah opposed the move because it was 'harsh and oppressive' and joined the British unofficials in skirmishing with the government over the legislation.[35] Seah was not committed to the *laissez-faire* liberalism favoured by the British unofficials either. Seah's position was for limited government intervention in society. For example, Seah supported the introduction of legislation requested by the Straits Chinese leaders for governmental intervention into the trafficking of women in 1887, but very quickly sided with British unofficial J. Burkinshaw in opposition against granting too much power to the Protector of Chinese in the same law.[36] Even though Seah sided with the British unofficials in opposing the 1889 legislation to ban and suppress secret societies *in toto*, his position was neither identical to the liberalism of the British unofficials nor completely opposed to the racial principle of colonial difference evident in the government's view of the 'alien population' as 'ignorant, turbulent, and riotous'. Instead, Seah objected to the legislation on the grounds that it was too sweeping and not discriminating enough, as it applied to 'all societies, whether good or bad', and placed the 'most dreadful secret societies … on the same footing with the most popular ones'.[37]

In contrast to Whampoa's pro-government record, Seah's negotiation of ambivalence and occupation of the political centre was due in part to the development of divisions that cut across government, Chinese, British civil society and metropolitan imperial interests after secret society power declined with the suppressions of the 1870s. In the period after Maxwell and Whampoa, the general opposition between colonial civil society and the Crown Colony government increasingly gave way to sectorial interests represented by individual unofficials. Even government officials did not always act as a bloc and represented the interests of their bureaucratic departments. As a Chinese unofficial, Seah negotiated these crosscutting divisions and took up various positions with and against the different parties in several legislative bills in the general interests of the Chinese in the Settlement: neutrality as British unofficials sought to increase their power by adding an unofficial, siding with the Colonial Secretary and half the British unofficials in opposing the rest of government and unofficials on the regulation of Chinese companies, joining the unofficials and colonial government in opposing the imperial government on further regulation of women trafficking, supporting the unofficials on the regulation of domestic servants

34 Proceedings, 6 July 1883, pp. 44, 49, *LCPP* 1883, CO 275/28.

35 Proceedings, 16 Apr. 1885, p. 44, *LCPP* 1885, CO 275/30; 16 Feb. 1888, p. 24, and 23 Feb. 1888, pp. 29–35, *LCPP* 1888, CO 275/34.

36 Proceedings, 2 May 1887, p. 11, and 5 May 1887, p. 16, *LCPP* 1887, CO 275/34.

37 Proceedings, 7 Feb. 1889, p. 19, *LCPP* 1889, CO 275/39.

in opposition to the colonial government, negotiating with the government on the regulation of Chinese burial while the unofficials stayed on the sidelines.[38]

The imagination of the Straits Chinese as a distinct group with interests of their own emerged in these crosscutting divisions. On the burials issue, Seah sought government consideration of the interests of the Straits Chinese: 'Because they found the British rule just and equitable, many of them, especially the respectable class, descendents of the early Chinese settlers, have permanently settled here with their families.' The domestic servant issue is illustrative of how the Straits Chinese elite had begun to make a clear distinction between their own interests and the interests of the larger Chinese community while maintaining representation of the latter in Council. Anxieties concerning the close proximity of Chinese servants in the intimate space of the home led both the British and Straits Chinese elites to propose the regulation of domestic servants. But two years of regulation revealed the massive unpopularity of the measure, provoking 'a kind of confederacy among the Hylam [Hainanese] servants' that involved 'passive resistance' and 'some terrorism' and 'unwillingness' on the part of largely Chinese employers, and the government sought to repeal the law. Despite being a representative of the Chinese community, which clearly opposed the regulation, Seah joined the British unofficials and opposed the repeal.[39]

As leading Straits Chinese merchants in Singapore, both Whampoa and Seah negotiated the politics that pitted British unofficials against the young colonial government, but their legacies were clearly different. Whampoa found that full support of the government rewarded him with recognition from the British in many ways, from being the only Chinese to be appointed to the Executive Council in the history of the Settlements, his appointments as simultaneous consul for Russia, China and Japan in Singapore, to being viewed as a peer by British officials and merchants alike. Yet, given his unflinching political loyalty to Britain and Anglicised ways, Whampoa was very conservative when it came to Chinese identity, as vividly expressed when he banished his eldest son to Canton for re-sinicisation after the latter returned home from his studies in England a Christian without his pigtail. Whampoa remained wedded to his orientation towards China as his motherland and his remains were returned to be buried off Canton.[40] Ironically thus, the principle of colonial difference afflicted Whampoa as much as the government he supported — the more he subscribed to the political rationalisation of the colonial state, the more he accentuated his Chineseness.

In contrast, Seah engaged with both liberalism and colonial difference and positioned Straits Chinese interests more within colonial civil society than with the interests of government. This was due in part to Seah's family background. His father, Seah Eu Chin, was a leading member of the Singapore Chamber of Commerce, grand juror and Justice of Peace in the pre-Crown Colony period, that is, a prominent leader in civil society, while Whampoa was a first-generation migrant who made good with his connections to officialdom. Consequently, Seah crafted an independent political

38 Proceedings, 12 July 1886, *LCPP* 1886; 20 Oct. 1894, *LCPP* 1894, CO 275/48; 19 July 1894, *LCPP* 1894; 23 Nov. 1886, *LCPP* 1886, 4 and 18 Oct. 1888, *LCPP* 1888, and Council paper no. 44, 23 Nov. 1886, *LCPP* 1886; Proceedings, 15 Aug. 1887, *LCPP* 1887.

39 Proceedings, 15 Aug. 1887, p. 101, *LCPP* 1887; 4. Oct. 1888, p. 52.

40 Ibid., p. 54.

position which also reflected the fact that the Straits Chinese had by the 1890s begun to see themselves as a distinct Anglo-Chinese community with a specific place in colonial civil society.[41]

But the Straits Chinese continued to function as political and cultural brokers appointed by the colonial state to represent the larger Chinese community, in which Straits Chinese hybridity appeared merely ornamental for colonial rule. For example, as Song Ong Siang described, Seah read the address of congratulation from the Chinese community 'printed on crimson silk' on the occasion of Queen Victoria's Jubilee celebrations at the Town Hall 'in English, in true rhetorical style, with great distinctness of utterance, marking the prominent points in it by appropriate bows'.[42] Without the certainties of Chineseness that Whampoa hung on to, the next generation of Straits Chinese leaders had to face up to their hybridity and the principle of colonial difference that continued to haunt them.

Hybridity and the questioning of colonial difference, 1895–1918

Despite the increasing Straits Chinese participation in civic life, British official recognition of Straits Chinese hybridity and political significance was reluctant and conditioned by the ambivalence of liberalism and difference. In the calculations of colonial difference, the hybridity of the colonised was always achieved with loss to his native culture, but the hybridity of the coloniser was seen as cultural gain that affirmed the universalism of Western civilisation. It was through these calculations that the first Protector of Chinese William Pickering could claim his influential credentials as a learned Orientalist and authority as a colonial overlord of the Chinese against his main competitors, the Anglicised Straits Chinese leaders. An able Chinese linguist and amateur ethnographer of Taiwanese aboriginals, Pickering thought that a Chinese was 'an unfathomable creature, a mixture of every best and every worst quality in human nature'. On the Chinese immigrant masses in Straits, Pickering was disparaging, seeing them as carrying on, 'if nothing else, the prejudice of race or the remembrance of his clan or district feud', which were small 'compared with the baneful influences of the Heaven and Earth societies for the interests of which the Chinese [was] obliged and willing to forget his family, clan and district'.[43] On the Straits Chinese, Pickering's view was sceptical at best, commenting that British civilisation affected the Straits Chinese 'only as far as a business knowledge of English, and a taste for some European articles of clothing or luxury' and doubting that they made up 'for any neglect of English literature by the study of the Chinese Classics'.[44] Here, Pickering included the Straits Chinese subject within the universal bounds of liberalism, differentiated from the alien Chinese by his acquisition of British civilisation, by his Anglicisation. But, in his view, it was this acquisition, seen as 'mimicry',

41 Proceedings, 24. Oct 1890, p. 90, *LCPP* 1890, CO 275/39.

42 Song, *One hundred years' history*, pp. 227–8.

43 William Pickering, *Pioneering in Formosa: Recollections of adventures among Mandarins, wreckers, and head-hunting savages* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1898), pp. 212–13; quoted in J.D. Vaughan, *The manners and customs of the Chinese of the Straits Settlements* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1971 [1879]), pp. 98–9.

44 Protector of Chinese annual report 1879, Council paper no. 7, 20 May 1880, p. 22, *LCPP* 1880, CO 275/24.

which set the Straits Chinese as exemplifying colonial difference, as 'almost the same but not white', as the exception that proved the rule.[45]

In the high noon of British Empire in Malaya, between 1895 and the end of World War I in 1918, and alternating in office, unofficials Tan Jiak Kim and Lim Boon Keng offered two responses to the cultural calculations of colonial difference exemplified by Pickering's view of the Straits Chinese. Tan echoed Whampoa's conservatism, but shifted the cultural orientation towards 'mother' China to Straits Chinese participation in the modernisation of Chinese political culture in Malaya. Lim engaged colonial difference by inverting Pickering's calculations. With his eloquent and incisive speeches of masterly mimicry, Lim showed that he understood Western civilisation intimately, exposed the racist logic of colonial ambivalence, imagined an imperial multiculturalism and hedged the Straits Chinese bet on loyalty to the Empire as anti-imperialist nationalism loomed.

Tan's early tenure in the early 1890s contrasted strongly with his later tenure. The fourth-generation scion of a famous Malaccan business family, Tan took a conservative stance tied to Chinese mercantilist interests in his early tenure that was similar to Whampoa's. For example, when the government sought to amend the Women and Girls' Protection Ordinance to provide job training for detained girls so that they might find employment in the colony, Tan objected on the basis that 'it would prove detrimental to the future prospects of the [Chinese] girls', when the real interest was Chinese mercantilist patriarchy. Similarly, Tan joined the British unofficials to oppose government regulation of the working conditions and wages of Chinese agricultural labourers because he thought the regulation would 'seriously affect' the Chinese planters in Malacca.[46]

During Tan's longer second tenure in the 1900s and early 1910s, his discourse was, in contrast, marked by an appeal to the progressive sensibilities of British civilisation. Though the defence of local Chinese interests remained Tan's main motivation, Tan exploited the principle of colonial difference in a reverse manner, by persuading the governments of John Anderson and his successor, Andrew Young, to favour local Chinese interests because the Chinese, on the whole, preferred modern British civilisation to retrograde Chinese ways and the government should cultivate such modernising sensibilities to maintain the loyalty of the Chinese.

One of the local interests he had to defend was of key significance to the growing permanently domiciled Chinese population and the Straits Chinese: education. In 1904, advocating the expansion of government schools to meet burgeoning demand, Tan explained to Anderson, 'There are some people who say that the Chinese are quite capable of providing for their own education, but I beg to tell Your Excellency that the Chinese are doing all they can for education. Besides the ordinary school the Chinese have to provide Chinese education for their own children, and as far as English is concerned in a British Colony I think it is the duty of Government to provide education.'[47] In this short speech, Tan declared the Straits Chinese as modern colonial subjects who had taken care of the Chinese side of their hybrid cultivation

45 Homi Bhabha, *The location of culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 89.

46 Proceedings, 23 Dec. 1891, p. 114; Proceedings, 29 Oct 1891, p. 93, *LCPP* 1891, CO 275/41.

47 Proceedings, 28 Oct. 1904, p. 144, *LCPP* 1904, CO 275/69.

and to whom therefore the government now owed cultivation of the other portion. Despite the rubber boom overfilling the government coffers, the colonial government was reluctant to get involved in native education. Underlying this reluctance was deepening British suspicion of the political aspirations of the overseas Chinese, as the Southeast Asian Chinese diaspora became a major focus for political struggles between revolutionary, reformist and Imperial forces. English education was thought to make nationalists out of natives rather than loyal colonial subjects. In the Council, Tan fought a rearguard action against the reduction of the Queen's Scholarship that cultivated the rising generation of Straits Chinese leaders.[48]

Tan applied the same arguments to the economic realm. Government attempts to introduce an income tax in 1911 threatened to affect the pockets of European and Chinese businessmen and the Straits Chinese middle-class strata. Tan made one of the longest speeches in his Council career in opposition to the legislation, in which he explained why the Chinese disliked income tax:

> The Malay Peninsula is at present very popular in China and our people come here in large numbers. Why? Because they enjoy the blessings of an orderly and civilised Government, and they have justice and protection for their lives and property, and also because they are attracted by the fact that they have freedom and absence of harassing interference from Government officials. … If I may employ a Chinese phrase in English, I say that the Chinese look upon an income tax as a 'blood sucking' tax and dislike it.[49]

The subtext in this passage is the comparison between the modern and enlightened government of the Straits Settlements and the feudal and despotic system of rule in China, from which many Chinese desired to flee. Reversing the terms of Orientalist representations, Tan portrayed the income tax as a retrogressive move where British rule was becoming like Chinese despotism.

Tan was no *laissez-faire* liberal and supported government interventions that modernised Chinese economic practices. While British unofficials opposed the abolishment of indentured labour contracts, Tan rose to support it, saying, 'On behalf of my Chinese [*sic*] I am thanking the Government for giving this liberty to the Chinese coolie.' Similarly, while British unofficials opposed 'grandmotherly legislation' for stronger regulation of companies after the collapse of a Chinese bank, Tan worked closely with the government to iron out the details of the legislation. Tan even supported the regulation of customary landholdings in Malacca to prevent Malay land from falling to unscrupulous Chinese rubber brokers.[50] We see in these examples Tan's efforts to remove the unsavoury aspects of Chinese economic practices that fit the stereotype of the avaricious Oriental, thus bringing Chinese mercantilism to accord with the modernising social and cultural reforms the Straits Chinese promoted.

48 Proceedings, 27 Oct. 1905, p. 164, *LCPP* 1905, CO 275/71; 5 Mar. 1909, p. 13, *LCPP* 1909, CO 275/80.

49 Proceedings, 27 Jan. 1911, p. 5, *LCPP* 1911, CO 275/86.

50 Proceedings, 27 June, 1913, p. 137, *LCPP* 1913, CO 275/90; 27 Feb. 1914, p. 31, *LCPP* 1914, CO 275/93; 7 Nov. 1906, p. 214, *LCPP* 1906, CO 275/73.

In comparison, Lim Boon Keng took a different political approach to the goals of promoting and protecting Straits Chinese interests with far greater implications than Tan's still-conservative approach to engaging colonial power and modernising Straits Chinese hybridity. In his speeches in Council, Lim often staged a masterly performance of British wit and gentlemanly virtue to show up the racism inherent in colonial rule. The significance of Lim's wit is that it engaged the principle of colonial difference. Like Tan, Lim made use of Oriental difference. During deliberations on punitive legislation that would ostensibly prevent bankruptcy, targeted especially at the Chinese, Lim attacked the proposal to make imprisonment of bankrupts mandatory, saying, 'it is a very serious state of Affairs in a Colony, especially where many of the people are Asiatics, who are mostly ignorant of English law, if European merchants in a British Colony have any suspicion at all of the justice of an English Judge, and his power to use discretion properly'. Lim also made light of colonial difference to paint an absurdist gloss on legislations affecting Straits Chinese interests. For instance, on punitive legislation that would ostensibly prevent indiscriminate Chinese burials within municipal limits, Lim laughed at the 'fear' that the Chinese would 'bury wherever they like', and remarked, 'I do not think that the Government is so fast asleep that an important Chinaman could be buried without his burial-place being known.' On the legislation giving the government extraordinary powers to control female trafficking, prostitution and venereal diseases, Lim was more forthright in confronting colonial authoritarianism and ridiculed the colonial difference that lay at its foundation. In 1900, he sarcastically predicted the Attorney General's 'excuse' for 'extraordinary legislation, on account of the abnormal conditions which obtain here' and criticised it as one used whenever there was 'any law relating to the Chinese'.[51]

In itself, Lim's audacious performance of British wit also revealed the link between the principle of difference and colonial authoritarianism by provoking official responses exuding racial discrimination and condescension. When the government asked the unofficials to trust and vote for a large expenditure on railway extension without 'even meagre information' about the project, Lim launched into a pointed discourse on the meaninglessness of unofficial representation, saying, 'the Unofficial Members here are like puppets, for they are often made to vote, and to work and to advise … it is "Love's Labour lost"'. The Governor, the inimitable Frank Swettenham, responded with equally sarcastic wit, but one that spouted the regular colonial racism, to put Lim in his local and Oriental place:

> it is at least a source of congratulation that the Colony should have produced Dr. Lim Boon Keng. He is a local product, the product of these Settlements, and also of the Education of these Settlements … I know it is a trite saying that Love's labour is lost, but there are an enormous number of trite sayings, which have been made from the time of Confucius downwards, which really won't stand any minute examination, and I think this is one of them … my official conscience is not susceptible to the whip.[52]

51 Proceedings, 30 Apr. 1896, p. 61, *LCPP* 1896, CO 275/51; 13 May 1897, p. 42, *LCPP* 1897, CO 275/54; 8 May 1900, p. 98, *LCPP* 1900, CO 275/60.
52 Proceedings, 29 Oct. 1901, p. 119 and 123, *LCPP* 1901, CO 275/63.

Even when Lim took on a serious demeanour and called for the sensitive consideration of cultural differences by the government, the response often came couched in the principle of difference. On the burials issue, Governor Charles Mitchell brushed off Lim's concern with the strong 'national sentiment' that was 'intimately connected with the Confucian moral system' as 'the whim of a Chinaman'. On the prostitution issue, in which extraordinary powers were given to the Chinese Protector to seize females in brothels or homes on unproven suspicion, Lim pleaded with the government to consider other means such as the registration of brothels that would better deal with local Chinese practices. Governor Mitchell replied, 'The instincts, habits and manners of two great sections of the community clash without any hope of harmony … there can be no parallel between the view that is taken as Europeans of the liberty of a European girl who may … come here for wrong purposes, and the views of the low-class Chinese who mostly inhabit this Colony, as regards the girls of their own nation … It is necessary to protect these poor creatures … from themselves.'[53]

Lim's unofficial conscience was not susceptible to the racial whipping of colonial difference either. Lim did more than occupy the political centre or call for greater British recognition. He went further than advocate government education policy favouring the Straits Chinese and called the limitation of the provision of government education for children of Chinese aliens 'a retrograde policy'. He not only called for the continuation of the Queen's Scholarship and advocated government funding for higher, professional education, but also advocated the teaching of advanced Chinese and Malay 'in the very metropolis of British Malaya'. He called the pragmatic considerations with regards to refurbishing the Raffles Museum 'very unsentimental and very unintellectual'.[54] In all these, Lim created the strange sight of a native representative defending the legacy of British enlightenment in the Malay Archipelago.

It is well known that Lim and his Straits Chinese compatriots pledged complete loyalty to the Empire, raised funds for the war, constituted a volunteer force and wrote propaganda pieces concerning proper and loyal Straits Chinese behaviour.[55] But the allegiance was not unconditional. Towards the end of 1917, Lim made a long and intriguing speech in the Council. Straits Chinese concerns were raised but now framed in a global imagination. On the Queen's Scholarship and higher education, Lim said, 'Sir, you might just as well blame the knife in the case of a murder. Because you have sedition in India, therefore all education for all men in the Eastern Colonies is tabooed! — that, I think, is one of the greatest fallacies that this great war will have to kill.' The most significant portion of the speech lies in the following three paragraphs which I quote at length:

> [T]he principle directing all education must be … the training of the whole man. And surely we have here, growing up by the tens of thousands, men who ought to belong to this country, to live here and be with us, and not only find an existence as mere machines but to live the life of men and as British subjects, and I hope, always be ready to fight and to die for King and country.

53 Proceedings, 5 Nov. 1896, pp. 305 and 307, and 306; 24 Sept. 1896, pp. 257 and 304, *LCPP* 1896.
54 Proceedings, 21 Jan. 1902, pp. 7 and 8, *LCPP* 1902, CO 275/65; 19 Oct. 1900, p. 247, *LCPP* 1900.
55 Straits Chinese British Association, *Duty to the British Empire: Being an elementary guide for Straits Chinese during the Great War* (Singapore: Straits Albion Press, 1915).

> But you cannot make such men, out of the stuff that we have, if you leave them to grow under influences that will be hostile to any Government, because after all, men like the Chinese and Indians, who have brought here great traditions and great aspirations, they could not be satisfied — nothing in this world will satisfy them unless they find this Government will care for them as a parent, not only financially and industrially, but as men. That is our greatest belief as Asiatics, and I think that we are not wrong.
>
> To us who live here, and to the Chinese in particular, we find that the greatest lesson that this war has taught is in the formula expressed by our British Government, as to the freedom of all nationalities, and if the British Empire is to defend all nationalities, to secure to them freedom, in Serbia, in Poland, in Ruthenia and every small place, surely the sons of the Empire, men brought up under the flag and trained in the great ideals and aspirations of Englishmen, have the right to expect that under the flag they will have liberty — they will have the same aspirations to become men, and not to become mere machines, always under the domination of men, cursed under the condition that they are never to aspire to the rights and privileges of free men.

Here, we find Lim threading together the political tensions running through the colonial body politic in British Malaya that the war had exposed. The first paragraph revealed the humanity of the Chinese and Indian subalterns who were treated as aliens deprived of the protection and rights that the Straits Chinese elites received as British subjects. It also criticised the perception and treatment of them as mere economic animals too simple to have political and cultural aspirations. The second paragraph warned of the anti-colonial nationalism that was building up among these alienated masses. Significantly, in this paragraph, Lim identified with the masses as fellow Asiatics. Thus, Straits Chinese collaboration with the British Empire, indicated in the first paragraph as the readiness to fight and die for the king, was hedged in the second paragraph — that should the colonial government continue to alienate the subaltern natives, resulting in the growth of anti-colonial nationalism, the Straits Chinese would identify with fellow Asiatics.

The third paragraph expressed the tension between the principle of national self-determination championed by the Allies in Europe and the rising nationalisms in the colonies of the Allied empires. Here, Lim barely resolved the tension by conceding that the thirst for liberty could be achieved under the imperial flag. His vision was for an imperial multiculturalism that would solve the tensions the war had revealed. Referring to the Germans, Lim asked rhetorically, 'Is their white skin any guarantee of their morality?', and romanticised, 'we have the very auspicious phenomenon at the western front of negroes of Senegal, Moors of Tunis, and Annamites from far Tonkin, fighting under the red, blue and white of France and becoming the very heroes in the defence of liberty and righteousness'. In line with this vision, Lim called for the colonial government to extend Asiatic political representation in the Council, as the Chinese unofficial was no longer capable of 'expressing the feelings of the heterogeneous crowd', the 'Asiatic peoples' living in the Settlements.[56]

The shift in Tan Jiak Kim's conservative pro-government stance in his first tenure (1890–94) to his articulation of modern hybridity in his second tenure (1902–15) has

56 Proceedings, 22 Oct. 1917, pp. 122 and 125, *LCPP* 1917, CO 275/97.

led historians to place Tan as representing the transition from traditional to modern Straits Chinese leadership.[57] Lim Boon Keng, on the other hand, was already very much a transformed man when he was appointed an unofficial for the first time in 1895. During his Queen's Scholarship studies in Britain between 1887 and 1893, Lim experienced both admiration for British patriotism and cultural achievements and indignation at the racist sentiments and treatment of the Chinese that led him to an epiphany about his own cultural identity. He has been viewed as turning 'to the East after journeying deep into the West' after realising that Chinese British subjects 'would never be treated as the equals of British nationals' and he became a serious scholar of Chinese language and Confucianism.[58] However, Lim's engagements with colonial difference in the Council show that his sinicisation was an ongoing process between 1893 and 1921 when he left for Xiamen, and that he still hoped British liberalism would fulfil its promise of equal inclusion within the framework of imperial multiculturalism.

His 'Chinese' epiphany was significant to the extent that it gave Lim a hybrid cultural space to develop the nascent Straits Chinese political discourse that was given an independent mooring away from governmental interests by Seah Liang Seah. The Council deliberations provided an important arena where Lim could express modern Straits Chinese hybridity *vis-à-vis* the ambivalence of liberalism and colonial difference, where he could face off and bring into question racist articulations of colonial difference by British officials and unofficials and criticise the failures of liberalism. In fact, Lim Boon Keng's unofficial contentions during his first tenure (1895–1902) signified the first turning point in the development of Straits Chinese political discourse and Tan's succeeding tenure could be seen as a continuation of Lim's articulation of a distinct Straits Chinese political identity and position.

Lim's second tenure was also the second turning point. When Lim took over from Tan again in 1915, he bettered his record by sharpening the discourse, highlighting the centrality of race and culture to authoritarian colonial rule, imagining the possibility of a multiracial Malaya prospering in a plausible multicultural commonwealth and hedging his bet of loyalty to the Empire by linking race and class in the spectre of popular movements born of colonial exclusion, which the Straits Chinese would join if the principle of colonial difference persisted. As an astute observer of world events, Lim brought Woodrow Wilson's espousal of national self-determination to bear on the local context and to challenge the principle of colonial difference that denied self-determination to the 'Asiatic peoples'. After the disappointment of the Versailles Treaty and the rise of May Fourth anti-imperialist nationalism in China in 1919, which were witnessed by riots and martial law in Penang and Singapore, Lim turned resolutely to China, resigned from the Council and linked up with Malayan Chinese rubber planter and nationalist Tan Kah Kee to set up the Xiamen University to advance neo-Confucianist reforms in China. Though he seemed to have given up on British liberalism, Lim had by then thrown down the gauntlet, not

57 Yong Ching Fatt, 'A preliminary study of Chinese leadership in Singapore, 1900–1941', *JSEAH*, 9, 2 (1968): 262–3; Phyllis Chew, 'Tan Jiak Kim (1859–1917): Straits Chinese Leader' (Honours Thesis, Department of History, University of Singapore, 1975), pp. 63–6.

58 Lee Guan Kin, 'Introduction: A Chinese journey: Lim Boon Keng and His thoughts', in Wen Ching (Lim Boon Keng), *The Chinese crisis from within* (Singapore: Select Publishing, 2006 [1901]), p. vii.

just to the British colonialists, but also to the Straits Chinese to define their political positions in relation to the Empire, the local Chinese masses and a multiracial Malaya.

Maturing Straits Chinese political positions, 1919–1942

Native representation was constitutionally expanded in the Council from one to seven unofficials in 1923. In line with Lim's multiculturalism, the seven consisted of three Chinese members, one each from Singapore, Penang and Malacca, two Indian members, a Eurasian and a Malay.[59] But this significant progressive move was outweighed by increasingly hostile moves made by the colonial government to stem what it saw as a Chinese problem, with secret societies replaced by 'the most insidious and the most dangerous' nationalist and communist cells.[60] When Guillemard considered inducting an unofficial to the Executive Council, he thought that a possible candidate would be Lim Boon Keng, but he quickly reversed his position and later opposed the Colonial Office in the appointment of a Chinese member to the Hong Kong Executive Council to prevent similar demands being made in the Settlements. Guillemard's security outfit thought the Xiamen College headed by Lim 'a political and anti-British venture' and Lim was now considered a radical.[61] Later, in the early 1930s, Governor Cecil Clementi summed up the government's strategy to contain the Chinese by retaining Malay support: 'The [Malay] Rulers were not an anachronism; they were a buffer between us and political developments such as have taken place in Ceylon, a buffer also between Government and the Chinese.'[62] This strategy was used as early as 1924, when the unofficials called for the Malayan civil service to be opened to non-Malays who had been excluded since 1904. The government responded with the ideology of indirect rule, i.e. that the British were mere trustees of the Malays, 'the owners of the soil' who possessed 'special rights in this matter more than any others'.[63] During the tumultuous two decades between the world wars, the Straits Chinese unofficials found themselves increasingly caught between deepening colonial authoritarianism and growing Chinese anti-colonial nationalism. In this context, Lim's legacy and challenge gave rise to three political positions on where the Straits Chinese stood with regards to the British rulers and the Chinese masses, or more accurately, imperialism and nationalism.

59 Select committee report on constitutional changes, Council paper no. 5, 21 Feb. 1921, *LCPP* 1921, CO 275/104; Governor's annual address, Council paper no. 75, 23 Oct. 1921, *LCPP* 1922, CO 275/106.
60 Acting Colonial Secretary A.S. Haynes, 'British Malaya', lecture delivered 27 July 1934, in *Honourable intentions: Talks on the British Empire in South-East Asia delivered at the Royal Colonial Institute, 1874–1928*, ed. Paul H. Kratoska (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 446.
61 Guillemard to Churchill, 6 July 1921, CO273, file 510/Confidential; Guillemard to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 21 June 1926, CO 273, file 531/Secret; Malayan Bulletin of Political Intelligence, no. 8, Oct. 1922, CO273, file 518/Secret.
62 Note on conference at the Colonial Office, 16 Mar. 1931, CO 717, file 76/7. Sri Lankan nationalists had vigorously campaigned in the early 1920s for greater local representation in government and democratisation leading towards eventual self-rule. In 1924, when Clementi was Colonial Secretary of the British Ceylonese colonial government, the nationalists achieved the concession of majority representation in the legislature and a limited franchise to elect the representatives. A subsequent British commission in 1927 conceded universal adult franchise and executive control to the Sri Lankans.
63 Proceedings, 14 Apr. 1924, p. 35, *LCPP* 1924, CO 275/111.

An integral part of Lim's imperial multiculturalism was the representation of Straits Chinese as the fulfilment of British civilisational promise. But Lim's distinction between the Chinese masses of 'mere machines' and the Straits Chinese who lived 'the life of men' easily became a conservative position seeking British political recognition and colonial government largesse harking back to Whampoa's position. Singapore lawyer, Song Ong Siang, emphasised this conservatism in his maiden Council speech in 1921. Noting that a quarter of the total Chinese population were Straits-born Chinese and echoing Tan Jiak Kim, Song called for the government 'to feed the flames of their loyalty to the British Throne, not only by careful study of their needs, but by granting them more opportunities for fitting themselves to be useful, patriotic and good citizens of the British Empire'.[64]

The distinction between the English-educated elite and vernacular non-elite could be seen in Song's position on education policy. Whereas Lim Boon Keng was highly critical of the introduction of government powers to regulate Chinese vernacular schools to stem the spread of Chinese nationalist ideas when no government aid was offered to the schools in return, Song fully supported the regulation. Song criticised the opposition put up by the managers and trustees of the schools as employing 'base methods' and believed they had 'seen the error of their ways' after forceful government intervention. In almost the same breath, Song called for the expansion of English schools, remarking that the 'cry for more accommodation' was one the government could not 'turn a deaf ear to' because it was 'from Straits-born children'.[65] Song called for a Chinese representative in the Executive Council, stating that it was a 'humiliating fact that, after a century of British rule and tutelage, the Straits Chinese community still finds itself *in statu pupilari*'. But Song did not afford the larger Chinese community the progressive government that he sought for the Straits Chinese. Instead, he supported drastic action against disturbances among the Chinese, calling for the extension of banishment powers to 'all bad characters' and frequent flogging.[66]

Song's conservative elitism becomes clearer when contrasted with the multiracialist position of Tan Cheng Lock, a fourth-generation Malaccan planter and businessman. Like Song, Tan campaigned for greater Straits Chinese political representation and expansion of English education. But he would go beyond the elitism of Song's position in both issues. He called for free and universal education for all children born in the Settlements.[67] On representation on government committees and admission into the civil service, Tan called not for greater Straits Chinese but Asiatic representation. Indeed, Tan was sensitive to the politics of multiracial representation, pointing out that there was an 'excessive preponderance' of European unofficial membership on government committees and boards and that the usual 'solitary Asiatic member' was 'as a rule comparatively unknown to … his confreres … and almost unconsciously ignored by them', thereby making him 'almost a dummy figurehead'.[68] Tan's multiracialism was evident in the many times he voiced support for his fellow

64 Proceedings, 21 Nov. 1921, p. 233, *LCPP* 1921.

65 Proceedings, 5 July 1920, pp. 95-7, *LCPP* 1920, CO 275/102; 21 Nov. 1921, pp. 233, 234, *LCPP* 1921.

66 Proceedings, 3 Nov. 1924, p. 112, *LCPP* 1924, CO 275/111; 6 Sept 1926, p. 110, *LCPP* 1926, CO 275/116.

67 Proceedings, 25 June 1923, pp. 104-7, *LCPP* 1923, CO 275/109.

68 Proceedings, 29 Oct. 1923, p. 185, *LCPP* 1923, CO 275/109; 14 Apr. 1924, p. 33, *LCPP* 1924.

non-Chinese unofficials on community aid, for example, when he supported the call for government aid for impoverished Portuguese Eurasians, Malay fishermen and economically 'out-distanced' Malays in Singapore.[69]

Tan also went beyond the Straits Chinese campaign for political recognition by calling for wider democratic enfranchisement. In an innovative proposal in 1926, he called for the addition of three unofficials, one each from the three main communities in the British ethnological scheme: Chinese, Indian and Malay. While remaining in the imperial framework of native representation, the proposal called for 'mixed electorates' of Europeans, Eurasians, Chinese, Indian and Malay to elect each member, who, despite being a member of one of the three main races, would then represent the transethnic interests of colonial society. With this addition, the unofficials would gain Council majority. The three new members would then hold the casting vote and, thus, the balance of legislative decisions between official and unofficial interests.[70] For Tan, this democratic enfranchisement was important in curbing government powers. Official majority in the Council, Tan argued, placed the colony under 'the autocratic control' of the metropole, leaving 'the people of this Colony … utterly devoid of any effective constitutional means of repelling the invasion of our rights and the depredations on our purse'.[71]

The limitation of Tan's position was that the call for native enfranchisement remained within the imperialist framework that could not fathom commonwealth self-rule for non-White peoples. Colonial power was constituted by the racial ambivalence of the native being always, to use Song's words, *in statu pupilari* — a perpetual potential of liberalism and exception that proved the rule of colonial difference. Thus, the real choices were anti-colonial revolution or mass mobilisation to force decolonisation. Though similarly limited, Lim Boon Keng's multicultural vision contained the element of strategic anti-colonialism, as can be seen in his warning shot as to which side the Straits Chinese would identify with if their fellow Asiatics were continued to be denied 'the life of men'. While it recognised the ambivalent position that the Straits Chinese occupied *vis-à-vis* the British rulers and the Chinese masses, this radicalism did not play on colonial difference to claim a privileged elite status for the Straits Chinese nor attempt to moderate the difference through enhanced native representations along communal lines. Instead, it sought to address the interwoven racial and class dimensions of colonial inequality. The unofficial who most controversially exemplified this radical position was Penang lawyer, Lim Cheng Ean.

In his initial representations, Lim Cheng Ean appeared to be a liberal. On native admission into the civil service, he favoured 'the abolition of the colour bar' and viewed race as a 'mere accident' depriving the native of equal opportunity. When Governor Clementi tried to muzzle both the English and Chinese press after the outlawing of the Kuomintang in 1930, Lim remonstrated on 'a serious interference' and argued that press freedom should be 'conserved and protected as much as possible'.[72]

69 Proceedings, 5 Oct. 1925, p. 155, *LCPP* 1925, CO 275/113; 16 Mar. 1925, p. 42, *LCPP* 1925; 31 Oct. 1927, p. 158, *LCPP* 1927, CO 275/118.

70 Proceedings, 1 Nov. 1926, p. 160, *LCPP* 1926, CO 275/116.

71 Proceedings, 13 Oct. 1930, p. 153, *LCPP* 1930, CO 275/125; also, 12 Oct. 1931, p. 156, *LCPP* 1931, CO 275/128.

72 Proceedings, 9 Dec. 1929, p. 176, *LCPP* 1929, CO 275/122; 24 Mar. 1930, p. 24, *LCPP* 1930.

But Lim went beyond liberal sensibilities. Very soon later, Lim became the persistent voice in the Council that called for greater governmental aid to the unemployed as the world economy descended into depression. When the Clementi government sought to restrict Chinese immigration and control existing immigrants, Lim launched into an astonishing speech identifying with the labouring masses.[73] Other than calling for universal education of children of immigrants and the opening up of land for settlement to 'broaden the people's foundations', he criticised the current 'idea to exploit Malaya by means of limited liability companies' as 'a new form of slavery, capitalist slavery', where the 'land of this country' was 'parcelled out among limited liability companies, and the men who work[ed] it … slaves of the limited liability companies'.[74]

The most controversial issue in this period was Clementi's Malayanisation programme, which sought to actively discourage Chinese vernacular schooling and push the Chinese to learn the Malay language and become loyal citizens of a British Malaya defined by an Anglo-Malay cultural hegemony. Lim, who had been arguing for free Chinese and Indian vernacular education on par with the Malay vernacular education the government funded,[75] was strongly against the move. In the speech before he resigned his commission and walked out of the Council in protest, he made the race and class connection very clearly and made the warning shot of Straits Chinese alignment with the popular nationalism more forcefully, with references to Lim Boon Keng's controversial resignation from the Council in 1919 and public turn to Chinese nationalism,

> Oh, do not make me despondent, Sir! Do you want me to turn my eyes towards China? I feel this country is my own, and I feel there should be no line drawn. I can afford to pay for the education of my children, but there are many poor people who cannot pay for their children. … Do you think that because you give us free education for four years in the Chinese language we are going to become Chinese patriots? … Oh, do not be warped by this fear, this bogey of nationalism! … How many of us can think of China? We can think more of our bowl of rice.[76]

In contrast, Tan Cheng Lock supported Malayanisation insofar as it sought to consign racial categories 'to the limbo of oblivion', but opposed it if it meant the 'homogeneous amalgamation of the component races', in which 'the Malay characteristics [would] predominate'. The reason Tan gave was a genealogical rendition of Peranakan Straits Chinese history, of how the Chinese born 'with a strong Malay admixture revealed … dire physical and moral depravity', and that it was the 'continual infiltration of pure Chinese blood' through Chinese immigration which saved and allowed to prosper the Malacca-born Chinese.[77] For Lim, strategic confrontation with racial difference was the way out of the colonial quagmire of inequalities. Tan's

73 Proceedings, 7 July 1930, p. 55, *LCPP* 1930; 28 Sept. 1931, p. 131, *LCPP* 1931, CO 275/128; 26 Jan. 1932, p. 17, *LCPP* 1932, CO 275/130.
74 Proceedings, 19 Oct. 1932, p. 148, *LCPP* 1932.
75 Proceedings, 26 Jan. 1931, pp. 14-16, *LCPP* 1931; 5 Dec. 1932, p. 181, *LCPP* 1932.
76 Proceedings, 25 Oct. 1933, p. 190, *LCPP* 1933.
77 Proceedings, 12 Feb. 1934, p. 18, *LCPP* 1934, CO 275/135.

position, on the other hand, revealed the communalist ground on which his multiracialism was built.

Conclusions

In spite of the interruption of the Japanese Occupation, the three Straits Chinese political positions developed in the Legislative Council defined the political choices for the Chinese in postwar Malaya. Indeed, the era of decolonisation threw the colonial ambivalence characterising Straits Chinese political discourse into stark relief, thus raising the stakes for the adoption of the different political positions. As in the colonial era, the Straits Chinese elites were caught between liberal universalism and colonial difference, but the ambivalence had now turned into a looming confrontation between a returning but weakened imperial power buffered by surging Malay nationalism and a leftist anti-colonial movement popular with the Chinese masses. The split structure of colonial rule, constitutional indirect rule in the Federated Malay States and unfederated Malay states versus direct Crown Colony rule in the Straits Settlements, which morphed into the Malay-centred Federation of Malaya and the Colony of Singapore after the collapse of the Malayan Union in 1948, added another dimension to the political difficulties. Each of the three positions had to engage the political questions of which side to take or negotiate in the looming confrontation and how should an independent, postcolonial Malaya be constituted.

As modern nationalist political parties began to dominate the scene in the era of decolonisation, the SCBA, home base of elite conservatives, declined in significance. In response, the elite conservatives formed the Progressive Party, which enjoyed British patronage, but was largely isolated in Singapore. The Penang Straits Chinese launched an unsuccessful secession movement through the Penang SCBA in 1948 to reconstitute the Straits Settlements under British rule, which the Progressive Party supported.[78] Already isolated in Singapore from the peninsular politics that dominated British concerns, the final blow to Straits Chinese elite conservatism was its central principle of distinction between English-educated elite and vernacular non-elite. As the confrontation between British colonialism and leftist anti-colonialism spread to Singapore, the expansion of suffrage led to the eclipse of the Progressive Party in favour of the centrist Singapore Labour Party and then the Labour Front in 1955. After David Marshall's failure to obtain self-government and his resignation as Chief Minister in 1956, his successor Lim Yew Hock's aggressive crackdowns on the anti-colonial movement exposed the major limitation to Straits Chinese centrist multiracialism, where the call for democratic enfranchisement remained within an imperialist mindset that could not fathom independence on popular nationalist terms but only as a gradual expansion of liberal suffrage with greater Anglicisation.

Outside Singapore, Tan Cheng Lock initially radicalised his multiracialism by aligning it with the PUTERA-AMCJA (Pusat Tenaga Ra'ayat and All Malaya Council for Joint Action) alliance of Malay socialists, Straits Chinese radicals of the Malayan Democratic Union and other nationalists. Initially, the platform of multiracial equality united the socialists sympathetic to the Malayan Communist Party

78 Christie, *A modern history of Southeast Asia*, pp. 44–7.

and non-socialists led by Tan. But with outbreak of communist revolt and Emergency rule, Tan's multiracialism returned to its original political grounds contained in his 1926 Council proposal for constitutional change: pro-British democratisation and multiracial representation along communal lines. In early 1949, Tan established the MCA with the full support of the British authorities to achieve the twin objectives of forming 'a strong national body of Malayan Chinese' and 'a joint movement with other races' for a united, non-communist and pro-Western Malaya dominated by UMNO.[79] In effect, Tan returned to a nationalist version of his engagement with Cecil Clementi's Malayanisation programme, which he supported insofar as it promoted multiracial equality in the political sphere but preserved the racial distinction between Malay and Chinese interests.

The radical position was the most potent political force because it tied the Straits Chinese elites to the leftist mass movement through the close association forged between race and class in its political engagement with colonial racial difference and the alienation of the Chinese masses. Its rise in the PUTERA-AMCJA alliance was however derailed by the Malayan Communist Party's move towards extra-legal agitation and outright revolt. Under the black-and-white optics of Emergency rule, the British saw the radicals as ideological bedfellows with communism and detained PUTERA-AMCJA leaders. When the anti-colonial play was repeated in Singapore, this time through the People's Action Party (PAP) that brought together a new generation of Straits Chinese radicals led by Lee Kuan Yew and the popular leftist movement in Singapore, it was the skilful tactical plot by the former *vis-à-vis* their leftist allies, the Malay nationalists in Kuala Lumpur and the British colonials that saved them from the fate of their Malayan Democratic Union predecessors. Ultimately, however, the radicalism of the PAP could not gel with the racialism of the UMNO-MCA alliance and the ideological disagreements led to the Separation in 1965. After the Separation, the PAP gradually toned down its radicalism and, eventually in the 1980s, adopted a version of centrist multiracialism under the aegis of 'Asian values' in the pursuit of the re-sinicisation of the increasingly Westernised Chinese population, multiracial representation along communal lines and racial-cultural authenticity that is adamantly opposed to hybridity.

On the whole, my study, limited to the development of Straits Chinese political discourse in the Legislative Council, supports Chua Ailin's conclusions to her study of the Straits Chinese public sphere in the interwar years: that pre-War Anglophone political activism crucially shaped the postwar generation of aspiring and actual political leaders, that the hybridity of the Anglophone public sphere gave rise to incipient anti-colonial sentiments and imaginations of multiracial postcolonial possibilities, and that the Straits Chinese developed diverse and more critical political positions than the 'conservative political orientation' and 'restrictive social elitism' history has accorded them.[80] I add that the legacy of Straits Chinese political discourse continued to be influential after the 1960s and remains an accessible discourse shaping

79 K.G. Tregonning, 'Tan Cheng Lock: A Malayan nationalist', *JSEAS*, 10, 1 (1979): 60.

80 Chua Ailin, 'Imperial subjects, Straits citizens: Anglophone Asians and the struggle for political rights in inter-war Singapore', in Michael D. Barr and Carl A. Trocki, *Paths not taken: Political pluralism in post-war Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008), p. 32.

our collective memories and the reviving public sphere today, including the official scripting of history.

In the new century of intensifying globalisation, where the hybridisation of culture and politics is receiving fresh impetus, where the developmental state leverages Western capital to invest in reforming China, the PAP elites are rehabilitating Lim Boon Keng as a 'bicultural broker', an Anglicised virtuoso who was also a 'born-again Chinese', a liberal social reformer who was also a conservative Confucian modernist.[81] Lim now symbolises the local link to the triumvirate of the Haw Par Villa Hua Song Museum, Chinese Heritage Centre and Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall, which Hong Lysa and Huang Jianli tell us together posit that 'the modernising dynamism of the Chinese today resides in the overseas Chinese, and particularly in Singapore'.[82] This official history straitjackets Lim's multifaceted engagement with different cultures and their hybridisation into the narrow Anglo-Chinese biculturalism of a new elite conservatism. But this use of history to legitimise contemporary politics is hardly surprising. What is interesting is that Straits Chinese political discourse continues to be replayed in new contexts, their exemplary exponents becoming saints and sinners, sages and fools of the new order. This is probably so because the Straits Chinese political discourse was already postcolonial in orientation: history revolving into itself as we remain, stuck, in the postcolonial era.

81 Cheong Suk-Wai, 'Lim Boon Keng: Bicultural broker', *The Straits Times*, 26 June 2004, Singapore.
82 Hong Lysa and Huang Jianli, *The scripting of a national history: Singapore and its pasts* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008), p. 230.