

French Memories of Malaysia: Literary Excursions & Fortuitous Encounters

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In recent years, historical scholarship on British Malaya has moved beyond the conventional emphasis on the four largest racial categories within the polity – the Malays, the Chinese, the Indians, and the British – to present a more complex and granular understanding of its pluralism. There are now entire monographs dedicated to the Sri Lankan Tamils, Creole Arabs, the Chettians, the Sikhs, and the Peranakan Chinese, as well as an upcoming edited volume on Eastern European experiences in colonial Southeast Asia.

One might not expect a Malayan connection to Czechoslovakia, but the ubiquitous Bata shoe company hails from Zlín. The authors of *French Memories of Malaysia: Literary Excursions & Fortuitous Encounters* strive to point out similarly unexpected (and oft-overlooked) French connections whenever they can. Alfred Clouët founded the Ayam Brand in Singapore in 1892 (pp. 138-141). Victor Hugo popularised the pantoum – a derivative of the pantun – amongst the European literati through a note for *Les Orientales* (1829). The Seri Gemilang Bridge in Putrajaya draws direct inspiration from the Pont Alexandre III, which spans the Seine in Paris.

Examples like these are used to support one throughline through the book's 14 chapters: French contributions to Malaysian nation-building. As Serge Jardin, the book's editor and main contributor, emphasises early on, “many of the French endeavors covered in this book contributed to the building and shaping of Malaysia and deserve to be acknowledged” (16). This nation-building throughline largely rests on the para-colonial trifecta of the missionary, the miner, and the planter.

French missionaries did not introduce Catholic churches or English language schools to the peninsula, but French Catholic institutions like the De La Salle Brothers, the Sisters of the Infant Jesus, the Marist Brothers, and The Society of Foreign Missions of Paris (*Société des Missions Etrangères de Paris* a.k.a. M.E.P.) certainly made an enduring impact on the state of education in Malay(si)a. Meanwhile, the *Société des Etains de Kinta* (SEK, a.k.a. The French Tin Mining Company), which was once managed “the richest and best equipped mine in British Malaya” (*L'Éveil économique de l'Indochine* 1928, quoted on p. 135) pioneered the use of hydropower plants in Perak in 1906.

It is the French planter, however, who is perhaps best remembered today because of literature's potential to be a long-term medium of cultural memory. Before Henri Fauconnier

(1879–1973) won the prestigious Prix Goncourt in 1930 for his debut novel *Malaisie*, he made a living through the *Société Financière des Caoutchoucs* (Rubber Finance Company, a.k.a. Socfin). Fauconnier and Socfin also played a role in pioneering commercial palm oil plantation in Malaya: a landscape-defining crop that eclipsed rubber and became Malaysia's main agricultural export.

In hindsight, these French connections to Malay(si)a – which are not always literary or fortuitous, as the book's subtitle suggests – are only surprising because we are often primed to frame the past through the dichotomy of coloniser and colonised. Though British rule certainly resulted in greater economic and cultural linkages between Malaya and London (and in significant efforts to preserve and augment those linkages after independence), *Pax Britannica* also meant that the entire region of Southeast Asia became deeply integrated into the world capitalist economy:

The era of high colonialism, in short, did not simply see the various colonies of Southeast Asia connected ever more closely to various colonial metropolises, as the deepening incorporation of the region into the circuitries of the global market worked to expand, extend, and enhance the cosmopolitan connections and sense of connectedness of the region vis-à-vis diverse distant sites across the world.

(Sidel 2021, p. 10)

And given that the French were an imperial presence in neighbouring Indochina since the 19th century who generally enjoyed good relations with the British after the 1904 Entente Cordiale, the French were not as “distant” as the geographical distance between Paris and Kuala Lumpur might suggest. Furthermore, the popularisation of air travel and ongoing economic diversification during the postcolonial era (rubber, like tin, could not be king forever) allowed a new generation of French writers and entrepreneurs to participate directly and indirectly in Tourism Malaysia's efforts to promote the country as an attractive travel destination. Cold War-era spy novels set in Malaysia featured detailed knowledge of local attractions and landmarks, allowing these popular texts to function like a travel guide before the Malaysian government began to proactively court Western tourists (pp. 94-97). Once Tourism Malaysia was established in 1972, French expertise in tourism development and the business of hospitality soon became an entry point. Club Med (previously known as *Club Méditerranée*) began constructing Club Med Cherating in 1976 (pp. 278-280). Jean-Christophe Robles became the Sarawak Tourism Board's first Director of Marketing in 1997, becoming yet another mover and shaker in “the Sarawakian trilogy of culture, adventure and nature” (p. 369).

Though *French Memories of Malaysia* is presented as being “neither a celebration nor a condemnation” (p. 16) of the approximately 200 distinct French encounters with Malay(si)a, the nation-building throughline and the support the publication received from the Chamber of Commerce and Industry France Malaysia (CCIFM) makes it difficult to ignore the book's commemorative thrust.

It also makes the occasional condemnation and admission of ambivalence stand out. As James Hodkinson (2017) argues, a para-colonial positionality occupies an “interstitial cultural space” that allows someone who is technically not part of the colonial regime – e.g. German soldiers in French Algeria, American missionaries in Ceylon – to participate in the process of colonisation whilst still being able to “disassociate themselves from it and, on occasion, to critique it” (p. 264). Though an overt critique of the British colonial administration is not discernible here, there is notable apprehension of the darker consequences of globalisation via capitalism. The French writer Gabrielle Wittkop, who travelled throughout Southeast Asia over the course of two decades, is quoted for proclaiming that “tourism has done more harm in sixty

years than 3 centuries of colonialism” (p. 362). Jardin himself strikes an ambivalent and melancholic note by recognising that economic development and ecological destruction can be two sides of the same coin:

Today, tourists driving on the highway from the south to the north of the Peninsula and saddened by the ecological disaster caused by the oil palm do not know that the primary forest was first and foremost burnt by the rubber planters a century ago. The burning, a spectacle that was enjoyed earlier, would be considered pollution today. And very few French tourists, after their road trip in Malaysia, know that the man who introduced the palm oil tree (*Elaeis guineensis*) in the country over a century ago was a Charentais named Henri Fauconnier.

(p. 47)

For the most part, the eight contributors to the book avoid prescribing how French encounters with Malaysia should be remembered. Given its impressive chronological and geographical scope – from the heyday of the Malacca Sultanate to the present; the authors dedicate a chapter to each state, from tiny Perlis (which only takes up one page in the book) to legendary Melaka (which takes up 52 pages) – it is understandably difficult to synthesise a conclusion from the diverse and disparate lived experiences and cultural texts (poems, novels, memoirs, diaries, travel writing, newspaper articles, feature films, documentaries, and photographs) that resulted from the Franco-Malaysian encounter.

Encounters that led to fame and fortune – or a significant career, whether as a writer, scholar, educator, evangeliser, or entrepreneur – tend to result in a more substantial paper trail, but the traumatic facet of the French experience in Malaysia does not go unmentioned. Events like the Great War, the Japanese Occupation and the Malayan Emergency recur throughout the chapters, impacting different historical actors in various locales in similar and unique ways. Other misfortunes are idiosyncratic, e.g. “a defrocked MEP priest who died a monk in Belgium, after fathering ten children in Penang” (p. 146) and Béatrice Saubin’s experience of being imprisoned for 11 years in Malaysia after her Malaysian Chinese fiancée concealed 534 grams of pure grade heroin in her suitcase (pp. 202-205).

By sacrificing depth for breadth, *French Memories of Malaysia* does not offer readers a holistic social history of the French in British Malaya or Malaysia, as Margaret Shennan attempted to do for the British in *Out in the Midday Sun: The British in Malaya 1880-1960* (2004). It also does not engage with the relatively recent concepts that have emerged from the field of memory studies (which would be useful for distinguishing between memory on an individual vs. collective level, as well as differentiating between cinema, photography and literature as mediums of cultural memory). It nevertheless presents itself as an invaluable resource for readers and scholars who are interested in such questions, as Jardin acknowledges early on: “At best, it is an invitation to further explore the French memory of Malaysia” (p. 16). The wealth of detail here will be useful to anyone interested in a more multifaceted social, cultural, economic, cinematic, and literary history – especially those who cannot easily access French sources and archives themselves.

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