

Transnationalism and Chinese Diaspora's Struggle for Identity in British Malaya (1900- 1957)

Transnasionalisme dan Perjuangan Identiti Diaspora Cina di Zaman British Malaya (1900-1957)

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ABSTRACT

Malayan Chinese muted response to the Malayan Union proposal in 1946 which promised common citizenship rights and equal opportunity to non-Malays have not been sufficiently explained by existing literature. This article suggests that such muted response is due to the presence of Chinese transnationalism that diluted and diverted the community's attention from seeking a Malayan identity. The article provides evidences that the increasing return nature of Chinese transnational politics and the institutionalisation of Chinese transnational linkages made a complete removal of Chinese transnational ties difficult. This article employs a historical institutional analysis, tracing the development and evolution of Chinese transnationalism from the mid nineteenth century to the period of Malaya's independence. Using tools like process tracing, increasing returns, institutional density and path dependence, it will chronologically piece events throughout the above said period to explain how Chinese transnationalism evolve into a Malayan nationalism as a result of a confluence of factors – Malayan independence, the start of China's communist rule in 1949 and the integration of Chinese communities within the larger Malayan community. Contrary to existing arguments, Chinese nationalism towards Malaya and Malaysia is a relatively new phenomenon; it had its roots probably in the late 1940s and almost certainly after the 1950s. This work is important because the "migration" from Chinese transnationalism to Chinese nationalism after the 1950s, could help provide clues towards understanding the political construction of modern Malaysian society.

Keywords: Transnationalism; Chinese Transnationalism; nationalism; Institutionalism; Malaya

ABSTRAK

Tindak balas orang Cina Malaya terhadap cadangan Malayan Union pada tahun 1946, yang menjanjikan hak kewarganegaraan bersama dan peluang sama rata kepada bukan Melayu belum cukup dijelaskan oleh sorotan kajian lepas yang sedia ada. Artikel ini menunjukkan bahawa tindak balas yang disenyapkan sedemikian adalah disebabkan oleh kehadiran transnasionalisme Cina yang mencairkan dan mengalihkan perhatian masyarakat daripada mencari identiti Malaya. Artikel ini memberikan bukti bahawa sifat pulangan politik transnasional Cina yang semakin meningkat dan penginstitutionan hubungan transnasional Cina menjadikan penyingkiran sepenuhnya hubungan transnasional Cina adalah sukar. Artikel ini menggunakan analisis institusi sejarah, dalam menelusuri perkembangan dan evolusi transnasionalisme Cina dari pertengahan abad kesembilan belas hingga zaman kemerdekaan Tanah Melayu. Kaedah analisis menerusi pengesanan proses, meningkatkan usaha mengenalpasti kekuatan institusi, dan laluan pergantungan secara kronologi dalam menghuraikan peristiwa sepanjang tempoh tersebut di atas mengenai transnasionalisme Cina yang berkembang menjadi nasionalisme Malaya hasil daripada penemuan beberapa faktor - kemerdekaan Tanah Melayu, permulaan Pemerintahan komunis China pada tahun 1949 dan integrasi masyarakat Cina dalam masyarakat Malaya yang lebih besar. Bertentangan dengan hujah yang sedia ada, nasionalisme Cina terhadap Tanah Melayu dan Malaysia adalah fenomena yang agak baru; ia berakar umbi mungkin pada akhir 1940-an dan hampir pasti selepas 1950-an. Kajian ini penting kerana "penghijrahan" daripada transnasionalisme Cina kepada nasionalisme Cina selepas 1950-an boleh membantu memberikan petunjuk ke arah memahami pembinaan politik masyarakat Malaysia moden.

Kata kunci: Transnasionalisme; Transnasionalisme China; nasionalisme; institusionalisme; Malaya

INTRODUCTION

The Malayan Union proposed by the British authority after the Japanese Occupation of Malaya in 1945 was a bold attempt at creating a unitary state. The Union would amalgamate the Federated Malay States (FMS), the Unfederated Malay States (UMS) and the Straits Settlements (with the exception of Singapore) into one political entity. Under the Malayan Union, Malaya would come under Britain's foreign jurisdiction act which "will render unnecessary any further dependence on Treaties with rulers in any future revision of the constitutional arrangements."¹ The Union would replace the existing practice of indirect rule through the Sultans and that there would be a central administration headed by a Governor based in Kuala Lumpur. It would also grant non-Malays citizenship status, employ equal citizenship rights and revoke Malay special status.

The Union was Britain's response to Malaya's growing plural society. The drafters of the Union had the Chinese community in mind.² In fact prior to introducing the Malayan Union the colonial administration had made several efforts to grant non-Malays citizenship rights but these efforts hit a road block due to restrictions imposed by existing laws in the Malay States. But in October 1941, just months before the Japanese occupation of Malaya, Sir Edward Gent, then the head of the Eastern Department in the Colonial Office, asked Shenton Thomas, the High Commissioner, to come up with ways for the British government to annex the Malay States, as annexation would provide an attractive option to circumvent the Malay states existing laws on citizenship.³

Despite British intention to reconfigure citizenship issue, the attractive nature of the Malayan Union was greeted with muted response by Malaya's non-Malay community. Edward Gent, expressed his surprise that neither the Chinese nor the Indians displayed any preference for either the Malayan Union or Federation.⁴ A British Intelligence report dated March 1946 reported Chinese and Indian detachment from the Malayan Union issue saying that the Chinese "are very apathetic about the question of citizenship and are much more interested and excited about the Manchurian situation." The report also disclosed that the Indian are equally "engrossed in Indian politics at present to pay attention to the minor question of citizenship."⁵

Why was there a lukewarm response by Malaya's Chinese community, especially when

the Malayan Union was designed to promote non-Malays citizenship right? Thus far existing literatures have not provided satisfactory answer. An explanation that's often given is that the muted response was due to the disorganised nature of the Chinese community after the war. The literatures argue that at the time of the Malayan Union proposal, the Chinese community was devoid of leadership and hence representation and that the community was more concern on reviving a broken economy. However, these literatures do not provide evidence giving the impression that the reasons given could well be an afterthought.⁶ In fact, these explanations fail on the following counts. First, there is doubt that the Chinese community suffered a void in leadership because in spite of the devastation that plagued all Malayan communities during the Japanese occupation, the Chinese community was much better organised compared to other Malayan communities. For example, there were visible Chinese political and social organisations before, during and after the Japanese occupation of Malaya. There was a plethora of Chinese organisations ranging from the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), the Kuomintang (KMT) movement and the Chinese Chamber of Commerce which had branches throughout the Malay States and the Straits Settlements.⁷ Given the eclectic nature of Chinese organisations, it could be argued that these organisations would have provided the leadership in the early months of the proposal.⁸ Second, the argument that the Chinese community needed time to rebuild the post-war economy also holds little sway. This is because despite the fact that all Malayan communities suffered from a broken economy, the Malays, surprisingly, reacted vehemently against the proposal. The reaction from the Malay community was even puzzling because the Malays did not have sophisticated organisations to promote their cause unlike the Chinese community. In fact, before the Japanese war there was no prominent Malay political and economic organisations parallel to those established by the Chinese community. Second, there is reason to believe that the Chinese community could have been aware that the British government were discussing Chinese citizenship status with Malay rulers before the war. These discussions which took place in the 1930s would have provided the Chinese community and Chinese leaders lead time to digest the merits of the Malayan Union proposal and common citizenship.

Why was there a lukewarm response by the non-Malays, Chinese in particular, when the terms of the

Malayan proposal were clearly favourable to them? This article purports that a prime reason for the muted response is due to the presence of transnational ties and transnational politics felt among the majority of the Chinese community at the time. The paper sees that transnationalism - not nationalism - had diverted the Chinese community attention away from the Malayan problem and the Malayan Union solution. In supporting such claim this article will provide evidences that the presence of Chinese transnationalism and transnational politics in the better part of the twentieth century had structured how Chinese view the Malayan polity and their place within the polity which, collectively, diluted their response to the Malayan Union proposal.

This article is laid out as follows. It will start by providing a brief description of the term transnationalism. The next section will describe the presence of transnationalism in the Chinese community in Malaya. It will describe the various forms of Chinese transnational organisations that captured the heart and minds of the majority of the Chinese population in the nineteenth and twentieth century. The next part of the article will describe the Malayan Union where it will provide evidences largely drawn from colonial documents that suggest the prevalence of transnational thinking among the Chinese at the time. The article will then conclude with some suggestions on future works on Malaysia and transnationalism.

TRANSNATIONALISM

Transnationalism refers to “multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions, across the borders of nation states.”⁹ It is also defined as the set of processes by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement.¹⁰ Immigrants who develop such social fields are called “transmigrants”. Put differently, transnationalism involves immigrants who have their feet in two or more places. They choose to live their lives across borders but make efforts at maintaining their ties in the country of their origin by developing identities and social networks that bind them to their birthplace.¹¹ These social networks and relationships could come in the form of economic, social, religious and political organisations. Itzigsohn’s (2000) work on the existence of transnationalism among immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Haiti and El Salvador in the United States for instance, describes the

various political, social and economic networks that transmigrants employ to maintain their links with their country of origin. He identifies three forms of linkages that exist between the diasporas and their states of origins and these linkages are manifested in new forms of institutional arrangements which are designed to maintain transnational links. Some of these institutional arrangements include: the extension of the idea of citizenship by the mother country to migrants; the promotion of non party immigrant organisations to allow migrants to participate politically in the affairs of their mother country; and the promotion by the mother country for migrants to participate in the socioeconomic life of their place of origins.

What motivates transmigrants to establish social networks and develop identities that bind them to their place of origin? One probable answer is that transmigrants are usually proletariats in the place of their host and in their country of origin. As such, their transnational tendencies could be due to the difficulty they face in constructing a secure cultural, social and economic base within their new setting as a result of economic and social dislocation.¹² In negotiating their new social and economic setting transnational migrants “acts and reacts in ways that emphasise, reinforce, or create cultural differentiation and separate identities.”¹³

The term “transnationalism” has been given renewed attention especially in the 1990s and thus far studies on transnationalism have largely centred on the issues of migration in North America and on contemporary forms of transnationalism involving migrant communities in America. Nonetheless, these works provide powerful conceptual framework which are useful in understanding the issue of transnationalism in Malaya in the nineteenth and twentieth century. The various dimensions of transnationalism described above, though non-exhaustive, seem to have parallels with the political, social and economic activities of the Chinese community in Malaya in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Itzigsohn’s (2000) generic description of elements of transnationalism for example, fits well with Yong and McKenna (1990) description of the Kuomintang movement in the Malay States in the late nineteenth century. In fact, even if no reference is made on transnationalism, the works by Khoo (1973) and Wang (1959) also suggest elements of transnationalism in the Chinese community. Both Khoo (1973) and Wang (1959) describe that political consciousness among Chinese in Malaya with

regards to political development in China became highly visible before the close of the 19th century.¹⁴

One could also go further by suggesting that there were traits of Chinese transnationalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. This came in the form of Chinese secret societies or Chinese *Kongsi* which could be viewed as a societal response to provide political, social and economic support for newly-arrived Chinese immigrants or *sinkhehs*.¹⁵ Newbold (1841) for instance describes Chinese secret societies as a place where Chinese immigrants “**would find the advantages of binding themselves together as a means of defence and self protection in a foreign land.**”¹⁶

Transnationalism thus seems to explain Chinese political, economic and social participation in Malaya during the nineteenth and twentieth century.¹⁷ We discuss now the nature of Chinese transnationalism during that period.

THE START OF CHINA – BASED TRANSNATIONAL ORGANISATION

THE MANCHU REGIME

Transnational links between mainland China’s political organisations and overseas Chinese in Malaya started in earnest towards the last quarter of the nineteenth century after China’s Manchu government (Ch’ing) changed their perception on overseas Chinese who they previously viewed as traitors to the Chinese cause. This change in policy was driven by the need to court the increasing wealth of overseas Chinese. For the Manchu government, overseas Chinese investment was needed to resuscitate China’s economy and to prop up the regime’s waning legitimacy. This change in policy stance was indeed welcome by overseas Chinese as it allowed them to re-establish links with their motherland when before any attempts to return to China will be met with persecution.

The first Ch’ing consulate was established in Singapore in 1877. The first Manchu Consul General was Hoo Ah Kay, better known as Whampoa, who was a rich Singapore Chinese merchant.¹⁸ The setting up of the consul general in Singapore was followed by similar offices in other Straits Settlements and the Malay States.

In the coming years, efforts at raising China and Manchu nationalism among migrant Chinese communities gathered pace and this came especially

after the appointment of Tso Ping-Lung and Huang Tsun Hsien as Consul General to replace Whampoa.¹⁹ Between the years 1890 to 1911, there were at least six major visits by Ch’ing imperial envoys to Malaya, with some of the visits marked by a show of force. These missions bore transnational elements that involved establishing contact with local communities, conducting fact finding mission, raising funds for China’s famine and selling Manchu official titles and honours.²⁰ These visits were often greeted by rich local Chinese merchants, some of whom had Ch’ing brevet title, signifying that they were Ching officials.²¹

It is evident that throughout the late nineteenth century the Manchu government was re-establishing transnational linkages with overseas Chinese community using local Chinese community leaders to draw transmigrants’ support for the regime. Rich Chinese merchants obviously held dual loyalties. Even when they proclaimed loyalty to the British Empire, these Chinese leaders also pledged loyalty to the Ch’ing government and played key roles in establishing transnational links.²² Take the example of Foo Chee Choon. Foo was a well known Chinese millionaire in the Malay State of Perak dubbed as the “King of tin mining”. He was also conferred the Manchu third class official title and was frequently called by the Manchu government for consultation on the tin mining business. Foo was also made the Superintendent of Hainan Mining and Agriculture, a portfolio akin to a minister.²³ Besides Foo there were other prominent Chinese personalities who were also given honorific titles and lucrative business deals. In return these Chinese leaders would organise events related to the regime which included the celebration of birthdays of the Emperor and the Empress-Dowager and organising ceremonies like the rites of prostration.²⁴ These community leaders would also mobilise local Chinese support by helping to proclaim public holidays on special occasions relating to events in Manchu China.

Transnational linkages also came in the form of promotion of Manchu culture and identity through education and promotion of Chinese literature. In 1882, the Consul General helped set up a literary society, the first in Singapore and the Malay States. In the 1890s the Manchu regime helped initiate the Confucian Revival Movement which was headed by Dr Lim Boon Keng, a Straits-born Chinese.²⁵ Other efforts at revving up transnational links include mobilising overseas Chinese support to raise funds for famine victims in China. At the close of the

nineteenth century, southern China's provincial governments for instance, sent missions to Malaya to ask for financial support from overseas Chinese, many of whom came from the southern provinces of Fukien and Kwangtung.

Another manifestation of Manchu transnational was the regime's extension of citizenship after its Consul General, Huang Tsun Shie, issued *ju-tan* (passport) to all Chinese who applied regardless of their place of birth. Huang's move which was clearly meant to rekindle transnational links, created unease in the British administration with the Assistant Protector of Chinese, G.T Hare, raising concerns that if Huang were to remain for another five years as Consul General he "could have seriously weakened the loyalty, undermined the good feeling hitherto existing towards us among the Chinese, and generally disturbed the harmonious relations that have up till now obtained between the Chinese colonists and the local government."²⁶ In response to Huang's initiative, the British authority in the Straits Settlements responded by granting the status of British subjects to Straits-born Chinese based on the principle of *jus soli*.

Another important transnational initiative by the Manchu government and which has now become an enduring institution in Malaysia is the regime's setting up of Chinese Chamber of Commerce. Chinese Chamber of Commerce was first set up in Singapore in 1906. Soon after there were Chinese Chamber of Commerce offices in Penang and Malacca and later in the urban cities of the Malay States – in Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh and Seremban. The Chinese Chamber of Commerce occupied a special status within the Manchu administration. It acted like an external arm of the Manchu regime, helping to facilitate trade links between the regime and overseas Chinese in Malaya.²⁷ The Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Malaya for instance was granted official seal by the Manchu government and officially recognised by the Department of Agriculture, Industry and Commerce in Beijing which meant that it could communicate directly with China's Department of Agriculture, Industry and Commerce.²⁸

The setting up of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce brought unintended consequence as it also brought about pan-Chinese support from across the different dialect groups which in turn helped consolidate transnational linkages. Chinese Chamber of Commerce became focal points for Chinese of different dialect groups to settle trade disputes and conduct trade negotiations. They also took on social

duties where they managed Chinese community affairs and helped set up social welfare organisations like the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall, the Perak Chinese Association and the Johor Bahru Chinese Association.²⁹ Given its wide ranging role, it is not surprising that with years, Chinese Chamber of Commerce produced prominent Chinese leaders who would play a significant role in the rise of China-based nationalism in the twentieth century. Some prominent personalities included Tan Kah Kee, Lee Kong Chian, Lim Keng Lian, Ho Pao Jin, Lau Pak Kuan, H S Lee or Lee Hau Shik, Ong Keng Seng and Saw Seng Kiew.³⁰ In the years after the Manchu regime, Chinese Chamber of Commerce would later become an important conduit for China-based political organisations like the Kuo Mintang (KMT).

It is evident that the Manchu regime's aggressive posturing at bringing about Chinese nationalism in the late nineteenth century saw the start of Chinese transnational political activities. More importantly, the Manchu regime's transnational activities helped lay the groundwork for future China's transnational political organisations. In the twentieth century Malaya would see the establishment of more transnational organisations in the form of the Reformist movement, the Kuomintang and the Malayan Communist Party.

THE KUOMINTANG AND REFORMIST MOVEMENT

The reformist movement and later the Kuomintang movement started to make forays into British Malaya at the start of the twentieth century and came on the heels of a severe political flux that was enveloping in Ch'ing China.³¹ The reformist movement was led by K'ang Yu Wei, who went on a road tour to Southeast Asia to garner support from overseas Chinese and to highlight the political uncertainty surrounding the future of the Ch'ing dynasty and the need for reform.³² K'ang found ready support from Chinese in the Straits Settlements and the Malay States. Some of the leading personalities who supported the reform movement included Khoo Seok-wan, son of a wealthy rice merchant and Dr Lim Boon Keng. Khoo Seok Wan, in fact donated some \$250,000 in 1900 to the revolt movement in China that attempted to oust the Emperor Dowager.³³

To promote K'ang's reform agenda, the *Thien Nan Shin Pao*, a Chinese news publication was established.³⁴ Kang Yu-wei also set up the Emperor

Protection Society or *Pao Huang Hui* in Singapore with the help of rich Chinese merchants led by Khoo Seok Wan. The *Pao Huang Hui* was a typical transnational political organisation, whose aim was to promote the restoration of China's Emperor Kuang-hsu and its effort found ready alliance from local Chinese communities. Despite not being registered as a society, the *Pao Huang Hui* managed to promote its transnational activities by setting up a front organisation called the *Hao Hsueh Hui* (Chinese Philomatic Society) in 1889. Interestingly, the *Hao Hsueh Hui* was established by Dr Lim Boon Keng, a local Chinese, who was also a member of the Legislative Council in Singapore.³⁵

If the *Thien Nan Shin Pao*, *Pao Huang Hui* and *Hao Hsueh Hui* were political vehicles to further K'ang's royalist reform movement, Malaya also became the political theatre for another of China's counter political movement - the republican Kuomintang movement (KMT) who initially went by another name in Malaya called the *T'ung Meng Hui* or the United Allegiance Party. After 1912, the *T'ung Meng Hui* was renamed the *Kuomintang Party* (National People's Party).

The *T'ung Meng Hui* was founded in 1906 in Malaya and came on the back of anti-Manchu or republican efforts in China that started in 1901. The republican movement was promoted by revolutionaries like China's Sun Yat Sen and Yu Lieh. Yu Lieh in fact fled China for Malaya in early 1901 where his political cause found sympathy with rich Chinese merchants in Malaya like Lim Nee Soon and Tan Chor Nam - all Straits-born Chinese - which then led to the formation of an underground political party called the *Chung Ho T'ang*.³⁶ Lim Nee Soon and Tan Chor Nam also found the *Thoe Lam Jit Poh*, a publication meant to promote anti-Manchu revolutionary cause.

Malaya, without doubt, was instrumental to Sun Yat Sen's revolutionary cause.³⁷ Sun's revolutionary movement found currency with a large segment of the Chinese population especially the middle and labouring class. There were also prominent wealthy Chinese leaders in Malaya that became part of the Sun's revolutionary movement. This included well known Chinese personalities like Lim Boon Keng, Tan Boo Liat, son of Tan Kim Cheng and Lim Nee Soon.³⁸ The high degree of support from Chinese in Malaya prompted Dr Sun Yat Sen to consolidate *T'ung Meng Hui's* operation where he made the Straits Settlements and the Malay States focal points of his effort at promoting anti-Manchu movement

throughout Southeast Asia. The Singapore branch of the *T'ung Meng Hui* for instance helped spread similar branches in Siam, Burma and Indonesia. The Malayan branches also provided refuge for Chinese who fled China. In 1907, 400 Chinese soldiers found refuge in Malaya after the revolutionary movement failed to topple the government.³⁹

Support for the revolutionary movement grew with time. Between 1906 and 1910, there were 20 *T'ung Meng Hui* branches spread in the Straits Settlements and the Malay States (Table 1). Though the official *T'ung Meng Hui* branches were twenty the movement took on various guises by using front organisations like the reading rooms or the *Shu Pao Sheh*.⁴⁰ These reading rooms acted as centres for conducting lectures and propagating materials to further anti Manchu revolutionary cause. They also acted as recruitment centres. Between 1908 and 1911, 58 *Shu Pao Sheh* were established throughout Malaya. Besides using reading rooms, the *T'ung Meng Hui* also used theatrical groups to help spread its revolutionary message. Other means of promoting anti Manchu cause was in the form of Chinese publications like *Chong Shing Yit Pao* (1907 - 1910), the *Yang Ming Pao* (1908), the *Nam Kew Poo* (1911 - 1914), the *Chi-lung-po Jih Pao* (1909 - 1910).⁴¹ Given such aggressive posturing, the KMT movement consolidated its political presence in Malaya and by the 1920s, the KMT became a formidable organisation.

TABLE 1. *T'ung Meng Hui* Branches in Malaya

Branches	Year Founded
Singapore	1906
Penang	1906
Malacca	1908
Malay States	
Muar	Before 1910
Seremban	1906
Kuala Pilah	1907
Kuala Lumpur	1906
Klang	Before 1910
Ampang	Before 1910
Ipoh	1907
Taiping	Before 1910
Sungei Siput	Before 1910
Prai	Before 1910
Lahat	Before 1910
Kampar	Before 1910
Menglembu	Before 1910
Kuantan	1908
Lembing	Before 1910
Kuching (Sarawak)	Before 1910

Sources: (Yong and McKenna 1990) p. 13

The active posturing by the KMT did indeed draw the attention of the British government who began to see Chinese organisations as an extension of China's struggle. However, British clampdown on KMT branches did little to stop Chinese transnational sentiment. Indeed, the consolidation and institutionalisation of Chinese transnational movement throughout the years had made it more difficult for these organisations to be eliminated overnight. In fact, as mentioned earlier, the KMT movement continued through various proxy organisations-reading societies, legitimate society, Chinese publications and Chinese Chambers of Commerce - which clearly made British efforts at eliminating Chinese transnationalism difficult, if not impossible.⁴²

The attractiveness of transnational linkages is manifested in the form of dual loyalties assumed by well known Chinese personalities; personalities who had a great deal of influence within the British administration but who at the same time, maintained links with Chinese transnational political organizations. One example is the prominent Straits businessman Tan Kah Kee. Tan was well known to the British administration but he was also a leader of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and was also highly involved in the KMT movement. Between 1929 and 1936 Tan Kah Kee was made an Honorary Adviser to the Overseas Affairs Committee at Nanking, the new capital of the Kuomintang government. He was also conferred the Order of the Brilliant Jade, Second Class for his services in China. Tan's loyalty was clearly multifaceted when in December 1941, he was appointed by the British government to head the Chinese community in the government's war efforts against Japanese invasion. Another personality is Teo Eng Hock. Teo was a wealthy Straits merchant who was also the founder of a KMT branch in Singapore. Despite his links with the KMT, Teo was appointed Justice of Peace by the British authority in 1925. But between the years 1926 – 1927, Teo went back to Kwangtung province and became the Mayor of Swatow.

Chinese transnationalism was made obvious when in 1929, China's Kuomintang-led government issued a law on Chinese nationality that stipulated that persons of Chinese race, wherever they were born, were considered as Chinese nationals. Although there was the possibility of "denationalisation", most overseas Chinese did not take such an option as the uncertainty of their residential status in Malaya and the strict set of regulations imposed by the Chinese government served to discourage Chinese intentions to denationalise.⁴³

Transnational linkage was also aided by the importation of China's social and economic life into Malaya. In the 1920s and 1930s, large number of Chinese schools came under the influence of the KMT. Textbooks were imported from China. Schools had curricula that mirrored that of China's and covered subjects ranging from Chinese literature, history and geography. In fact, this British "endorsement" of transnational links in no small ways helped set in motion a segregated Chinese vernacular education system, which has become an enduring feature of present-day Malaysia's education system.

The economic uncertainties of the 1930s also made transnational politics especially appealing. The depression created an unsettled Chinese population. It left many Chinese unemployed and made it more difficult for the community to treat Malaya as home. At the same time, the depression also made China's political struggle and development more appealing especially to Chinese labouring class who was still holding out hope of a possible return. This hope was satiated by the ready presence of Chinese transnational organisations. In fact, in the economic lean years of the 1930s, one would witness an overt display of Chinese transnational politics to an extent that "one is struck by the complete domination of the community's political life by external issues."⁴⁴ Indeed, the depression years of the 1930s, provided fertile ground for another Chinese transnational political organisation, the Malayan Communist Party (MCP).

COMMUNISM AND THE MALAYAN COMMUNIST PARTY

Communism started in Malaya in 1925 as a result of the Soviet-Kuomintang collaboration in 1923 which encouraged the spread of communism to the *Nanyang* (Southeast Asia). In 1925 communist agents were sent to Malaya and used Chinese *Hailam* night schools, trade unions and youth movements to propagate the communist ideology. The purging of the communists by the KMT in China and the breakdown of the Soviet-KMT alliance in 1927, led to a reorganisation of the communist movement in Malaya. In 1927, five Chinese communist party agents were sent to Malaya to set up the Nanyang Communist Party, which came under the control of the Chinese Communist Party. In 1929, as a result of a decision made at a conference in Singapore, the Nanyang Communist Party was dissolved and renamed the Malayan Communist Party (MCP).⁴⁵

The MCP provided for a more varied transnational politics. Unlike the KMT, the MCP had little appeal to wealthy Chinese *towkays* and hence could not tap on influential Chinese business organisations for support. It drew its support mainly from Chinese working class, propagating its message through the *Hailam* night schools and labour unions. Support for the MCP began to grow in the second half of the 1930s. During that period, the MCP managed to mobilize significant Chinese support where it used labour unions to stir up support and mass agitation. In 1936, the MCP took advantage of a recovering economy and high tin and rubber prices by organizing labour agitation to demand for wage increase by using its labour arm, the Malayan General Labour Union.⁴⁶

Despite its “Malayan” name, the MCP was seen, at least in the 1930s and 1940s, as a Chinese transnational organisation. Its top leadership, at least in the early years, were all Chinese. In the period 1930 - 1938 nearly thirty of MCP’s top party officials were deported to China under the Banishment Ordinance.

The MCP also orientated itself towards mobilising Chinese support and capitalised on the start of the Sino-Japanese war in China to raise its profile with the Chinese community.⁴⁷ In 1935 it established an anti-Japanese movement in Malaya which was initiated after the Seven Comintern Congress in China held that year. In 1936, seven communist agents from China were sent to Malaya to help establish the anti-Japanese movement. In 1937 the MCP set up the Overseas Chinese Anti-Japanese National Salvation Association, an exclusive movement open to Chinese of all political views to aid China’s war with Japan.⁴⁸ The MCP also set up the Overseas Chinese Anti-Enemy Backing-Up Society (AEBUS) to rival Tan Kah Kee’s KMT-linked China Relief Fund Committee.⁴⁹ The setting up of AEBUS led to the establishment of numerous other Backing-Up Societies linked to the MCP. These were predominantly Chinese organisations ranging from shopkeepers’ associations to youth movements (see Table 2).

TABLE 2. List of MCP-led front organisation

List of MCP-led front organisation
The Chung Hwa National salvation Society
The Chung Hwa National Salvation Backing-up Society
The Singapore Overseas Chinese Anti-Japanese Mobilisation Society
Resist - the- Enemy and Exterminate the Traitors Volunteer Corps
The Singapore Shop Assistants Resist-the-Enemy Backing up Society
The overseas Chinese Youths National Salavtion and Exterminate the Traitors Volunteer Corps
The Singapore Overseas Chinese all circles resist-the-enemy Backing society
Malayan Chinese vocational workers’ anti-enemy backing society
Malayan labourers anti Japanese corps
The Malayan Chinese national salvation corps
Exterminate the traitors corps and mobile troops
The iron and blood corps
The racial revival corps
The Chinese-anti enemy national salvation traitor removing corps
The Malayan overseas Chinese students’ anti-enemy backing up society
Singapore Chinese various trades shop assistants anti-enemy backing up society
Overseas Chinese anti-enemy national salvation society
Singapore Chinese national salvation service corps
Youth national salvation union

Sources: Various issues of Monthly Review of Chinese affairs from August 1937 to May 1939. The last three organisations on this list were founded in 1940 after the claimed destruction of various branches of AEBUS. For this information see CO 273/666, File No. 503336/41. Extract from the Malaya Combined Intelligence Summary, 9 (1 November to 30 November 1940) cited in (Yong 1977) p. 201. Between the years 1937 – 1941 these organizations became part of the movement that stirred up mass agitation which included industrial unrest, active propagation of the communist ideology to the proletariats and aggressive recruitment of new members.

The MCP capitalised on overseas Chinese nationalistic fervour over the Sino-Japanese war to great advantage. The AEBUS acted as a convenient vehicle to rake up Chinese support. Its call for the boycott of Japanese goods appealed to Chinese businesses and Chinese community. In the years leading to the Sino-Japanese war, the MCP heightened their transnational appeal by organising tours to schools, bringing speakers from China to talk about China's current struggle in Shanghai and parts of China. It also set up branches in areas with large Chinese concentration where these branches doubled up as social organisation for the Chinese community.⁵⁰ To some extent MCP efforts paid off as it managed to recruit new members. These were largely China-born and Chinese-educated ranging from workers, union leaders, shopkeepers, teachers and journalists. The party was especially appealing to Chinese –educated scholars who left China after they failed to secure administrative positions in China. The MCP, as mentioned, was especially appealing to Chinese labouring class, the group that was badly affected by the depression and who saw in the MCP an organisation that was capable of providing them support, akin to earlier Chinese organisation or *kongsis*.⁵¹

The MCP efforts clearly demonstrate Chinese transnational efforts in Malaya. Though many scholars are of the view that the MCP had a wide leftist appeal, it is evident that the party played on Chinese transnational appeal to rake support. The party's overzealousness in championing Chinese transnational politics however, would come at a political cost in the later years as the party struggled to shed its Chinese image and make itself appealing to Malaya's Malays and Indian population. As Pye (1956) would account that

“...the failure of either the Malays or the Indians to take much early interest in Communism increased the tendency of all the racial groups to consider the MCP a Chinese activity. In time, this development created a racial barrier that made it increasingly difficult for Indians and Malays to accept the idea of joining a predominantly Chinese party”⁵²

To make for a stronger case that the MCP was pandering for Chinese support, even the MCP's supreme leader, Chin Peng admitted in his latest memoir that the MCP was only strong among the Chinese and not among the Malays.⁵³

By the 1930s, it became apparent to the British authority that the Chinese community was becoming increasingly politicized by China's political

development and if left unattended would create problems to an emerging plural polity. The 1930s then saw efforts by the colonial administration to curb the activities of the MCP and the KMT. We turn now to attempts made by the British authority to curb overt display of China's political struggle in Malaya.

EFFORTS AT CONTAINING CHINESE TRANSNATIONALISM

To contain Chinese transnationalism and to nullify Chinese government's citizenship law of 1929, the British authority mulled over the idea of a Malayan citizenship for Chinese. In 1931, British administration wanted to declare all Chinese born in Malaya as “British Protected Persons” and effectively overruled their status as Chinese nationals. The administration however abandoned the plan as such policy would contravene the rule of International Law.⁵⁴

In 1935, the colonial administration revisited the idea. This time, the British Foreign Office tinkered on the possibility that “pressure could be applied on the (Malay) rulers to approve the necessary legislation (and to make) local-born Chinese their subjects.”⁵⁵ Noting the difficulty of convincing Malay rulers to implement such legislation, the Colonial office came up with another plan; to convince the Malay rulers to allow the British government a limited grant of jurisdiction that would allow British authority to declare Chinese born in or resident of Malaya as British Protected Persons.⁵⁶ In 1936, the colonial office in London instructed Shenton Thomas to discuss issues of nationality with the Malay rulers and the possibility of coming up with a state nationality legislation.⁵⁷ In 1939, Thomas reported that it was difficult as the laws in the Malay State stipulated that the one must be of the Malay race and it was “not easy to see anyone can prove that he-or she- is of Malay race.”⁵⁸

Short of using the term transnationalism, it is clear that British move to grant Chinese “Malayan” citizenship was an acknowledgement of Chinese transnational links and an effort to delink Chinese affiliation to China's politics. The initial proposal to granting Chinese citizenship in the 1930s, however, was revisited in the years after war. It came in the form of the Malayan Union.⁵⁹ Clearly, the Malayan Union proposal had the Chinese and Chinese transnational politics in mind. It was part of an effort to “Malayanised” the Chinese and to involve them in Malaya's future political process.⁶⁰ We turn to this next.

THE MALAYAN UNION

As mentioned earlier, despite British best intentions, the Malayan Union proposal received a lukewarm response from the Chinese community. It is evident, from the description above, that the majority of Malaya's Chinese population was still caught up with Chinese transnational activities. A substantial segment of the Chinese population still held transnational links and could not fully appreciate the Malayan Union proposal even though the terms of the proposal, on hindsight, were favourable to them.⁶¹

The reaction from the Malay community to the Malayan Union proposal was distinctly different and clearly delineates the difference between nationalism and transnationalism. The Malay response was clearly that of nationalism as it was grounded by the community's political interest on the Malay States. The Chinese response, in contrast, was that of transnationalism, grounded by their affiliation to China's political struggle.

This contrast in reaction to the proposal was clearly evident in a letter by Edward Gent, one of the main architect of the Malayan Union proposal, to the State Secretary of the Colonies, where he wrote of the rising Malay nationalism against the proposal. He wrote:

"I met representative of the Malay Nationalist (corrupt group) this morning and had long discussion with them on the basis of their memorandum. They stressed that, although in favour of the Union, their views were not shared in that respect by large body of Malay opinion, which it was essential to respect. They showed considerable apprehension of any substantial admission of non-Malays to citizenship rights."⁶²

The reaction of the Chinese population was however in sharp contrast. Rather than refuting Malay apprehension on citizenship and supportive of the proposal, Chinese reaction clearly portrayed transnational tendencies. An Intelligence report dated March 1946 reflects Chinese and Indian detachment from the Malayan Union as highlighted above.⁶³ In a separate report, the Malayan Security Service also suggested that the Malayan Union proposal enjoyed a lukewarm response by nonMalays because the **"acceptance of Malayan Union Citizenship would entail renunciation of Chinese nationality and this was regarded as ridiculous by the Chinese."**⁶⁴ To take another view, the **Chung Shing Jit Pau**, a Chinese publication, also voiced Chinese transnational tendencies stressing

"...that while participating in local politics and demanding legitimate political rights, Chinese in Malaya should not forget that they are overseas Chinese, and that they should therefore interest themselves in the welfare of their home country and the Chinese race."⁶⁵

In fact, Chinese transnational attachment was still felt well after the Malayan Union proposal. As late as 1948, a top secret document, suggests that a large segment of the Chinese population still held transnational attachment when it suggests that:

"The existence of the KMT in Malaya is an obstacle to the political progress of the Chinese in Malaya. It stands for Chinese nationalism and cannot give leadership in the pursuit of political rights for Chinese in this country. The increased activity of the Chinese consuls also militates against any attempt at the Malayanisation of the Chinese."⁶⁶

In pointing out Chinese transnationalism, one must also note that the Chinese population at the time was not homogeneous and that transnational politics was felt more by the large majority of China-born and Chinese educated than it was for English-educated Straits born Chinese.⁶⁷ This heterogeneity of the Chinese populations confirms with Wang's (1970) assessment of the Chinese community where he made a distinction between Chinese educated, China-born Chinese with that of Straits-born, English educated Chinese. The colonial administration knew of such heterogeneity. A colonial report depicts the tension faced by the administration in negotiating Chinese transnational issues given the Chinese community's heterogeneity. The report says:

"While there is a section of Chinese opinion which wishes to emphasise its Malayan loyalty, there is another which wishes to emphasise the indestructible ties of the Chinese to his native country. Aw Boon Haw in the "Sin Chew Jit Poh" contends that overseas Chinese should return to their mother country to assist in the task of rehabilitation and to lay a foundation for future generation in China."⁶⁸

Though Chinese who held little or no transnational links were in the minority, it was this group of Chinese that lent a voice for the inclusion of the non-Malays into Malaya's political process. A year after the Malayan Union proposal was made, an alternative proposal was mooted by the All Malayan Council for Joint Action in late 1947 and this was led by Straits-born Chinese, Tan Cheng Lock. In the years ahead, Tan Cheng Lock made efforts at reducing Chinese transnational links, convincing the Chinese to make Malaya their home though he acknowledged that the "majority remained apathetic and politically disengaged."⁶⁹

The above evidences are but a few of other documents that suggest the prevalence of transnational elements within the Chinese community.⁷⁰ They lend to the argument that even at the close of the 1940s, Chinese transnationalism was still very much a part of Chinese political life. Such transnational attachment, without doubt, diluted the community's attachment to Malaya which help explains the community's muted reaction to the Malayan Union proposal.

CONCLUSION

The above discussions have clearly demonstrated Chinese diaspora's struggle for identity. It is evident that the majority of Chinese in Malaya were still captured by China's political, social and economic struggle. If anything, the Malayan Union episode best captures such a dilemma, demonstrating as it is the consequence of untrammelled growth of Chinese transnationalism and transnational politics in the twentieth century. Put differently, the increasing return nature of Chinese transnational politics and the institutionalisation of Chinese transnational linkages made a complete removal of Chinese transnationalism difficult.

This article also suggests that contrary to popular belief, Chinese nationalism towards Malaya and Malaysia is a relatively new phenomenon and had its roots probably in the late 1940s and almost certainly after the 1950s. It is apparent that the "migration" from Chinese transnationalism to Chinese nationalism after the 1950s, could help provide clues towards understanding the political construction of modern Malaysian society.

NOTES

(Notes place here)

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- 1 Draft Directive on Policy in Malaya in Appendix I of the report of War Cabinet Committee on Malaya and Borneo, CAB 98/41, dated 18 May 1941 in (Cheah 1979) p. 12
- 2 Read Van Vorys (1975) pp 65 - 75
- 3 There were several efforts in the 1930s to provide Malayan citizenship for Chinese in the 1930s. In 1931 British wanted to declare all Chinese born in Malaya as "British Protected Persons" but it was abandoned because it contravened International Law. In 1936, the Colonial Office instructed Shenton Thomas to come up with plans to convince Malay rulers to allow British government a limited grant of jurisdiction that would allow the British authority to declare Chinese born in Malaya or resident in Malaya as British Protected Persons. In 1936 Shenton Thomas approached Malay rulers to discuss nationality issue including the possibility of changing state nationality legislation. Read CO 323/1364 no. 2255/3. 10 August 1936.
- 4 4 May 1946, Gent to Hall in CO 537/1529 no. 50823
- 5 15 March 1946, CO 537/1548
- 6 See the various works by (Cheah 1977),(Purcell 1948),(Ratnam 1965),(Silcock 1973) for discussion on the Malayan Union. (Van Vorys 1975) also provides an interesting take on the Malayan Union proposal, but his explanation remains ambiguous as he cites the Malayan Communist Party's remarks that the proposal was a reincarnation of imperial rule but still short of addressing the concerns of the Chinese community.
- 7 Malayan Communist Party was seen as a Chinese organisation given its history and the monopoly of Chinese in its top leadership
- 8 During the Japanese occupation the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) and the Kuo Mintang(KMT) took advantage of their special position with the British authority to establish armed units; the MCP established the Malayan People Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) whilst the KMT established Force 136 respectively.
- 9 (Vertovec 1999) provides a comprehensive discussion on the different clusters or subthemes of transnationalism
- 10 (Schiller et al. 1992a) p. 2
- 11 For a good introduction on transnationalism please read (Schiller et al. 1992b)
- 12 (Schiller et al. 1992b) p. 13
- 13 (Schiller et al. 1992b) p. 12
- 14 Read (Wang 1959) and (Khoo 1973)
- 15 There are various works on secret societies particularly (Blythe 1947), (Trocki 1990),(Freedman 1960) and (Comber 1957)
- 16 (Newbold 1841) p. 130
- 17 (Itzigsohn 2000) description is consistent with the claims made by (Yong and McKenna 1990) pg. 6 though the latter never broach the idea of the existence of transnational politics.
- 18 Hoo Ah Kay was also known as Whampoa, He was named after a village in KwangTung province where he was born.
- 19 (Yong and McKenna 1990) p. 6
- 20 " Before 1896, the Singapore Chinese Protectorate recorded the visits of four Chinese Commissioners who went to study conditions of the Chinese in Malaya. Besides the Commissioners there were also visits by 26 Ch'ing officials for fund raising purposes, the arrival of 11 Ch'ing dignitaries for selling official titles and honours and visits by 17 Ching representatives for collecting subscriptions for famine relief in China"(Yong and McKenna 1990) p. 7
- 21 In 1894, for instance, the visit by an Imperial envoy, Ting Ju-Ch'ang was accompanied by four warships.
- 22 (Yen 1982) p. 413
- 23 (Zheng 1997) p. 81
- 24 (Yen 1982) p. 411
- 25 (Yen 1976) p. 33

26 10th of June 1896, CO 273/218. No. 464

27 (Yen 1982)

28 (Yen 1982) p. 414

29 (Heng 1988) read pp 19 - 20

30 (Heng 1988) p.21 cited from (Leong 1976)

31 At the time, China was suffering from the effects of the Sino-Japanese War of 1894 – 5, the palace coup in China where the Empress Dowager Tz'u-s took control from Emperor Kuang-hsu and the failure of the Hundred Days Reform.

32 See (Yong and McKenna 1990) p 8 and (Yen 1982) p. 416

33 (Yen 1982) p. 420. Khoo donated the amount in support of the reform movement but a year later when the coup failed, he was disheartened and stayed away from the reform movement and in fact pledged his support for the Ch'ing dynasty.

34 Besides the reform agenda, the Thien Nan Shin Pao also provided a platform to the Confucian Revival movement which was led by Dr Lim Boon Keng. The movement was Aimed at promoting conversion to Confucianism and its agenda included studying the Confucian text, setting Confucian temples and observing Confucius birthday. (Yen 1982) p. 406

35 For a full account please read (Yong and McKenna 1990) pp 7 - 8

36 (Yong and McKenna 1990) p. 9

37 See Yong and McKenna

38 (Yong and McKenna 1990) p. 12

39 See (Yong and McKenna 1990) p. 9

40 (Ting 1976) p. 135

41 (Yong and McKenna 1990) pp 14 - 15

42 (Yong C F 1984) p. 91

43 To “denationalize” the Chinese government impose conditions that the applicant must give the compete details of the place his ancestors were born in China, which would be an arduous task. On top that he had to secure two mercantile guarantors to testify that he had no military service liabilities as it is compulsory for anyone aged 21 as Chinese law states stipulates that denationalisation would not be allowed for Chinese “who has attained military age, is not exempted from military service, and has not yet served in the army” Minute by Edward Gent, 7 October 1941, CO 323/1626 no. 2255/3 cited in (Lau 1989) p. 218

44 (Ratnam 1965) p. 12

45 (Brimmel 1956) provides a good account of the origins of the communist party in Malaya.

46 (Pye 1956) p. 60 see also (Brimmel 1956) p. 12

47 (Pye 1956) p. 59

48 (Brimmel 1956) p. 12

49 (Yong 1977) p. 201

50 (Pye 1956) pp 63 – 64

51 See Lucian Pye pp 53 - 54

52 (Pye 1956) pp 57-58

53 (Chin 2003) pp 119-25, cited in Cheah (2012) p.149

54 Clementi to Cinliffe-Lister, 3 Mar 1932, CO 323/1177 no. 90297 ; also G R Warner (FO) to R V Vernon, 1 Jun 1933 no. 90297) cited in (Lau 1989) p. 218.

55 Cowell to Beckett, 20 th February 1936, CO 323/1262 no. 30330/3)

56 (Lau 1989) p. 219

57 10 August 1936, Ormsby-Gore to Thomas Shenton, CO 323/1364 no. 2255/3

58 28th Jun 1939, Shenton Thomas to Malcolm Macdonald CO 323/1626 no. 2255/3

59 In the years ahead, there were many concatenating factors that led to the eventual granting of citizenship to non Malays leading up to Malaya's independence in 1957. Apart from the Malayan Union, . Events after the Japanese occupation, the increased activities of the Malayan Communist Party, the eventual control of Chinese Community Party in mainland which put a closure to China's decades of political and economic flux and stamped any possible movement of Chinese to return to the mainland created pressure to grant citizenship to non-Malays. .

60 (Van Vorys 1975) made several references how British officials during the Japanese occupation was designing ways to do away with Malaya's existing administrative arrangement and to incorporate the non-Malays into the political process. Read especially pp 69 - 75

61 The Japanese Occupation of Malaya raised Chinese as a significant political actor. The MCP, for one, lent itself greater credibility as it turned itself into an ally of the British forces during the occupation. The MCP was also part of a Chinese mobilization council and together with the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and the KMT-linked China Distress Relief Fund, the MCP helped form a Chinese resistance group against the Japanese forces. The China Distress Relief Fund was chaired by wealthy Singapore Chinese Philanthropist Tan Kah Kee and established with the sole aim of raising money among overseas Chinese to help fund China's war effort. In fact, Malaya was the largest contributor to the fund. For the collaboration between the MPAJA and the British government read (Purcell 1948) p. 259. Besides the MCP, British authority also worked with the KMT to offer resistance to Japanese occupation. With the KMT the British formed a guerrilla movement called Force 136. British recruited Lim Bo Seng to head Force 136. Lim Bo Seng was a KMT supporter and who was also the Chinese Government's representative in Malaya. After getting approval from General Chiang Kai Shek, Lim Bo Seng put together a band of 500 men - all KMT sympathisers. Read (Purcell 1948) pp 258 - 263 and (Cheah 1977) pp 54 - 56

- 62 From Edward Gent to SS of Colonies, 29 April 1946, CO 537/1548
- 63 15 March 1946, CO 537/1548
- 64 30 April 1946 Malayan Security Service MSS/PIJ cited in (Lau 1989) p. 229
- 65 Chung Shing Jit Pau, dated 2 December 1947, reported in Review of Chinese Affairs, December 1948, CO 537/3750
- 66 Extract from Political Report for November 7, 1948 from Federation of Malaya in CO 537/4252
- 67 The heterogeneity of the Chinese and the different political, social and economic aspiration is discussed in greater detail in (Wang 1970)
- 68 Taken from the Review of Chinese Affairs, December 1948, CO 537/3750
- 69 (Roff 1965) p. 40
- 70 Read also (Van Vorys 1975)