Complicity and Resistance: English Studies and Cultural Capital in Colonial Singapore

Abstract
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Complicity and Resistance: English Studies and Cultural Capital in Colonial Singapore

In his recent memoirs, former Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew notes a surprising connection between himself and other leaders of newly independent Commonwealth states in the 1960s. Recalling his studies at Raffles Institution, the colony’s premier Anglophone secondary school, and his sitting for the Junior Cambridge and Senior Cambridge School Certificates, Lee notes that he was following a syllabus taught throughout the Empire. ‘Many years later, whenever I met Commonwealth leaders from far-flung islands in the Caribbean or the Pacific. I discovered that they had gone through the same drill with the same textbooks and could quote the same passages from Shakespeare’. The institution of English Studies in former British colonies has often been studied with reference to the projection of colonial power. Lee’s testimony hints that it may also be readily analysed to explore occluded continuities between colonial and post-independence states, thereby providing a certain discursive leverage on national narratives of modernity and development.

THEORISING COLONIAL ENGLISH STUDIES

Much analysis of colonial English studies, notably Gauri Viswanathan’s *Masks of Conquest*, has seen the discipline through a Gramscian lens as a means of maintaining ‘Western cultural hegemony’ through ‘the creation of a blueprint for social control in the guise of a humanistic program of enlightenment’. While Viswanathan’s work has been useful in opening up an area of debate, its Gramscian framework tends to devalue the admittedly compromised agency shown by colonial subjects in using the legacies of English studies, and tends to stress textual over material practices. In my work on Straits Chinese participation in the reform movement in colonial Singapore, I have found the work of Pierre Bourdieu useful. Education systems, Bourdieu and Passeron argue, do not merely inculcate linguistic competence: they also transmit certain modes of behaviour and social competences which privilege some students over others. Cultural capital is produced, consisting of ‘the cultural goods transmitted by the … [pedagogic actions]’, which enable ‘social reproduction, by enabling the possessors of the prerequisite cultural capital to continue to monopolise that capital’. Bourdieu is here concerned with class, but his concepts might readily
be applied to the production of Anglophone colonial elites in British colonies. Cultural capital seems potentially more productive than, for instance, Althusser's notion of interpellation, precisely because it preserves a notion of compromised agency. Given colonialism's constitutive contradictions, there were many opportunities for members of the colonial elites to put cultural capital to various uses — some resisting, others compliant — within the market of the colonial public sphere. It is thus possible to speak of an agency in resistance here, while being fully aware of the limitations upon this agency.

Related to the accumulation of cultural capital is Bourdieu's notion of the habitus, the manner in which each subject lives out his or her life through a series of repetitive actions and choices which are nonetheless governed by certain parameters, a sort of art of living. Produced by both 'the material conditions of life, and ... pedagogic action',^ the habitus would thus include actions as various as the choice of clothes one makes, one's use of different languages, and different registers of languages in different social settings, and one's choice of a form of regular physical exercise. Using the notion of the habitus in the study of colonial elites grounds one in material practices and events, such as the choice of colonial newspapers by a reader, or the decision to adopt Western, or a revised interpretation of traditional dress. Furthermore, concentration on the habitus pulls analysis towards material practices rather than away from them, as the investigation of 'subjectivity' encouraged by narrowly Foucauldian or psychoanalytic approaches tends to do. Discussion of English studies in a colonial context, for instance, is often accompanied by suggestions about physical discipline and training of the body, and the inculcation of 'character' and 'taste' in colonial subjects: Bourdieu's conceptual framework allows us to see the connection between these apparently disparate elements, and to integrate discussion of them.

THE CAMBRIDGE CERTIFICATE AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

In Singapore, education in English became of increasing concern to the colonial authorities in the late nineteenth century. Students who remained at school after Standard Six were mostly entered for the University of Cambridge Junior and Higher local examinations, which were administered in Singapore from 1891 onwards. While the number of students sitting the examinations was small, it was from this group that the English-speaking elite able to act within the colonial public sphere would be drawn. Success in the Cambridge Higher, or in a separate, competitive examination, might result in the award of a Queen's Scholarship to study at a British university. Both Lim Boon Keng and Song Ong Siang, prominent members of the Straits Chinese community at the turn of the century, won scholarships and furthered their studies in the United Kingdom before returning to Singapore.

English studies formed a central part of the Cambridge syllabus. At the junior level, papers were offered in English Composition, English Grammar, and on individual works of literature, mostly Shakespeare plays. The Higher examination featured papers in both English Language and Literature and in the
History of English Literature: favoured authors included Shakespeare, Milton, Burke, Byron and Scott.

There was considerable dissatisfaction in Singapore regarding the Cambridge syllabus's bias towards a metropolitan audience. In the 1902 Kynnersley Report several committee members, including Lim, then the Legislative Council member with responsibility for education, criticised the Anglocentrism of the English studies element of the Cambridge exams:

As might be expected this subject is studied from the point of view of a pupil to whom it is the mother tongue. In preparing for it, attention must be paid to the history of the language, rather than to the acquisition of a working knowledge of modern English, and of the alternative subjects of literature set for study in the present Syllabus none is later than Addison's Spectator. Cambridge papers from 1905 onwards appear to take criticisms such as these into account. There are more recent, although no contemporary authors, and some of the composition questions are more consciously directed towards a potential colonial examinee. Locally-targeted examinations, however, were not introduced for another ten years, and today Singapore students still sit their descendants, University of Cambridge 'O' and 'A' level papers, over a decade after the former have been superseded in United Kingdom.

English studies stressed both the study of grammar and an intimate knowledge of English and Imperial culture. A randomly selected question from a junior examination demonstrates this:

Correct the following sentences, giving reasons for the alterations which you make:
   a) Japan has one of the best armies and natives in the world.
   b) Neither team won the cup, and probably did not do themselves justice.
   c) Hannibal devoted himself to the ruin of Rome, and it is well within the bounds of possibility that he would have done so, if he had received proper reinforcements.
   d) The Maoris are of copper-brown colour, and not black like the ordinary negro is.

An imperial subject is called into being through this paper, one who is concerned about the projection of imperial power and historical precedents, and who subscribes both to a hierarchy of races and to a code of late-Victorian manliness encouraged by team games. The English language, many commentators in colonial Singapore felt, would provide a means of improving the character of students, of making them modern colonial subjects. The Kynnersley report thus encouraged schools to mark out playgrounds which 'would be of immense benefit to the boys physically, morally, and also as a direct aid to the teaching of the English language and of English habits of thought'. Since the terminology used in team games played on the playground was mostly English, the report's authors noted, 'the bigger boys would certainly be encouraged to speak English, they would acquire a more manly and less selfish habit of thought, and their health and physique would be greatly improved'. It is clear here that the use of English is part of a larger colonial habitus, which colonial elites are to be encouraged, to a degree at least, to acquire.
The study of English Literature in preparation for the Cambridge examinations would have involved a similar process of interpellation as an imperial subject which we might also read, through Bourdieu, as an accumulation of cultural capital. English Literature was studied in parallel with English history, and as the climax of a cultural narrative which began in Classical Greece and Rome. Examinees were thus encouraged to decode Classical allusions and historical references in Shakespeare and Milton. They needed not only intimate knowledge of individual texts, but also an appreciation of the literary and historical environment in which such texts were produced, an environment seen through a sharply-focused lens. Works of literature were repeatedly presented in such a manner as to inculcate ‘taste’ and ‘character’. The Higher examination for English Language and Literature sat on June 18, 1901, for instance, asked students to ‘[d]istinguish those features of the Faerie Queene which are characteristic only of the literary taste of Spenser’s day from those which have influenced later English Poetry’, and to evaluate Spenser’s powers of observation of character. The June 17 1896 Higher English Language and Literature paper asked students to explain how selected passages of Julius Caesar illustrated ‘the character of the speaker’ and to comment on Shakespeare’s ‘use of the storm in Act I as a text of character’.

The recurrence of the words ‘taste’ and ‘character’ might alert us to what is happening in a student’s preparation for the examinations. Through accumulating the linguistic and cultural capital inculcated by English Studies, the student would reach ‘the accomplished form of the habitus, i.e. the degree of cultural attainment by which a group or class recognises the accomplished man’. Bourdieu’s terminology is more useful than Gramsci’s or Althusser’s here because it recognises the agency of colonial subjects. The Cambridge Examinations were not primarily designed for non-European colonial subjects such as Lim and Song, but rather to ensure the transmission of cultural capital within metropolitan and colonial European communities. The cultural capital which Singaporean students acquired might be put to uses other than those intended by the colonial administration. Lim and Song could not control the market in which the capital was distributed, and both remained deeply reliant upon late-Victorian ascetic masculine habitus — in this sense they were interpellated as colonial subjects — but they could control individual distributions of that capital.

RESISTANCE AND COMPLICITY: THE ECONOMY OF COLONIAL CULTURAL CAPITAL

As Anglophone elites emerged in Singapore, so did their demands for equality in the colonial public sphere. Debates concerning the rights of colonial subjects to equal participation in the public sphere were thus often phrased as, or often eventually became, struggles over the use of the English language. A reader could, for instance, tell a newspaper’s politics from whether it used the prefixes ‘Mr’ and ‘Mrs’ when writing of non-Europeans. The Straits Times, which the Straits Eurasian Advocate described in its opening editorial as an
‘organ of the ruling race’ did not. The *Straits Echo*, printed in Penang but available in Singapore, and managed by Lim Seng Hong, declared in its first issue its intention to ‘indicate the points of reasonable difference of opinion (from that of the Straits Settlements government) and to encourage a tone of independent judgment upon local as well as Imperial affairs’; it demonstrated this by according non-European men the title ‘Mr’.

An example of how struggles to speak by non-European elites in the public sphere became inexorably associated with the use of the English language is shown in the ‘Lady Baby Broker’ court case of 1903. As the *Straits Times* reported, a woman called Mrs. B. Waddell, ‘English born, of Saigon’ advertised a baby for adoption by a ‘wealthy person (of any nationality)’. Later she sent in advertisements for other babies for sale. The newspaper informed the police, who arranged a trap in which a Chinese detective posed as a likely buyer — the ‘babies’ were then revealed to be teenage girls sold into prostitution. Mrs. Waddell and two Japanese nationals were charged under the Women’s and Children’s Protection Ordinance with attempting to procure a girl under the age of sixteen for immoral purposes. In a move which the *Straits Chinese Magazine* felt was significant, Mrs. Waddell’s bail was set at $200, while the Japanese nationals were charged $500. Predictably, Mrs. Waddell jumped bail and left Singapore, thereby relieving the colonial authorities of the embarrassment of a trial which raised questions about any putative European moral superiority.

In its coverage, the *Straits Times* attempted to deflect attention away from Mrs. Waddell herself to other communities. The babies, the paper noted, were most likely sold ‘to Chinamen for unmentionable purposes’. Through the medium of *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Lim and Song hit back strongly, an unsigned editorial noting that selling children was ‘an offence which, in my humble opinion, totally eclipsed the enormity of the crime of infanticide so commonly laid at the door of the Chinese’. Yet the editorial also made substantial use of cultural capital. Mrs. Waddell was referred to as a lady, it noted, but had behaved in a distinctly unladylike manner:

> It is a matter much to be regretted that the lady in question was English, for if she had been a Chinese or Indian woman, or indeed had she belonged to any of the other coloured races, the public would have been treated to more lengthy and nauseating accounts of a hideous crime, which is gratuitously and magnanimously conceded to be the peculiar and exclusive property of Eastern races generally and the Chinese nation in particular.

Lim and Song’s cultural capital here enables them to prise apart the moral category of ‘lady’ from the racial category of ‘European’, thereby undoing a connection which the colonial authorities worked assiduously to promote.

The ramifications of the case, however, did not stop with the response of the *Straits Chinese Magazine*. In its original coverage, the *Straits Times* noted that Mrs. Waddell had apparently stayed with an ‘Arab gentleman’ during her time in Singapore. Two members of the Arab community, one of whom was M. Idid, Secretary of the Arab Club, wrote to the newspaper protesting that the man was not, in fact, Arab. The *Straits Times*, despite apparently admitting the mistake in
correspondence, refused to publish the letters or a correction. The two men then turned to the **Straits Echo**, which printed the letters in order ‘to give every man the chance to defend himself when assailed either in a direct or indirect manner’.\(^\text{20}\) Grudgingly, the **Straits Times** finally agreed to publish the letters. In an editorial, however, it made depreciating comments about their use of English, noting that ‘[w]e do not pretend to be able to scan the first half of the above notice’.\(^\text{21}\) If the arguments of colonial subjects for their rights to speak were unanswerable, their speech itself might be discredited through the use of the techniques of English studies.

If the **Straits Times** used grammar and parsing, elaborately learned through English Studies, as a method of disqualifying non-European speech, the same tools might also be used by those claiming a right to speak in the Anglophone public sphere. While colonial civil service officers in the Straits settlements and Malaya from the 1880s onwards tended to have a university or public school background,\(^\text{22}\) many Europeans lower down in the hierarchy were much less well educated. Police inspectors were a particular anomaly: police work involved the highly visible imposition of the colonial government’s power, and an obvious hierarchy. An informal bar upon non-Europeans serving as police inspectors existed until 1904, when it was formalised.\(^\text{23}\) Non-Europeans were not promoted to such positions in the Federated Malay States until the 1920s. Economic necessity, however, meant that the inspectors could not be recruited as part of the cadet service: rather, they were either selected locally from non-commissioned officers in army units, or hired from British police forces.\(^\text{24}\) Their education level was thus substantially below that of a number of their non-European subordinates, and this made them a ready target for critique.

The **Straits Eurasian Advocate** agitated for Eurasian police officers, noting the disparity between the European inspectors’ physical and intellectual training:

> Physically speaking, they are a fine class of fellows — stalwart, brawny, strong in limbs, and capable of undergoing an amount of fatigue which the average Kling or Malay policeman is unable to undergo — that is all. In intellectual attainment they are nowhere.... [M]ost of the men elevated to Inspectorships within the past few years are entirely unsuited to such posts from an intellectual point of view, and in our opinion, these appointments are the outcome of favouritism.\(^\text{25}\)

One of the paper’s correspondents, only signing himself ‘An Eurasian’, was more direct in his attack. Rather than merely criticise educational deficiencies, he gave examples of error-ridden letters sent by Englishmen in positions of authority who had ‘had the advantage of all the Board Schools in England’. ‘The Queen’s English,’ he noted, ‘is not murdered by Eurasians alone. People who live in glass houses should be careful how they throw stones’.\(^\text{26}\)

Ability in grammar and spelling were useful elements of cultural capital which could be utilised to good effect in the colonial public sphere: proficiency in writing literature was another, and perhaps more potent, means of interlocution. Lim and Song’s **Straits Chinese Magazine** published a substantial...
number of stories written in English, largely, but not exclusively, by Straits Chinese authors. It would be a mistake to think of all the stories as writing back to colonialism — many were concerned with manufacturing or consolidating a ‘Straits-born’ identity through the retrieval of Chinese or Peranakan myths and stories, and their translation into English. Several, however, used their authors’ obvious familiarity with English literary conventions to again point out the contradictions of colonial rule, and to demand a right to speak and to be heard.

Wee Tong Poh’s ‘Is Revenge Sweet?’ is an example, and it again takes a manifestly incompetent police inspector as its target, comparing him unfavourably with the protagonist, an affluent Straits Chinese doctor. The doctor, presenting the story in first person, recalls being called upon to attend to a ‘towkay’s wife’ on her deathbed. He somewhat callously informs her that ‘I could hold out no hope of her recovery’, and the woman then asks to make a confession to him. She wishes, she informs him, to confess that she has framed another woman in a case involving the illegal chap-ji-ki lottery, an action which has resulted in the woman being jailed. She wishes to confess to the police inspector in the presence of the doctor, in order that her words not be mistranslated by the Teochew informer who accompanies the inspector, and who also has a financial interest in the case. The ironically-named Inspector Catspaw arrives to transcribe the confession: this is effected after considerable humour at his expense. The story then switches genres, and concludes as a ghost story. At the moment of death, the towkay’s wife has a vision of being strangled by the woman she unjustly sent to prison, who has just died. The following day, the doctor receives a note that the innocent woman in jail ‘had starved herself to death and ... her soul had departed from its earthly frame just about the time when my late patient was making her confession in her house in Mitchell Terrace’.

‘Is Revenge Sweet?’ is structured around a comparison between the Straits Chinese doctor and European inspector. This comparison in itself is a staple of late nineteenth-century detective fiction. Arthur Conan Doyle was a doctor, and several commentators have noted that both the inspector’s and the doctor’s gaze are part of a Foucauldian disciplinary culture in the late nineteenth century, both associated with the ‘ideology of examination and the gaze of science’. Wee Tong Poh’s Straits Chinese doctor, in this reading, removes the European from the centre of the panopticon. Linguistic ability and cultural knowledge enable the doctor to conform more closely to the ideal late nineteenth-century masculine habitus, to enter into every corner of life, to survey it, and to classify it, while still retaining a position of disinterest.

The detective story, D.A. Miller reminds us, however, did not merely celebrate totalising surveillance in the late nineteenth century. In its identification and pinning down of crime, paradoxically, the detective story produced a sense of freedom in its readers, an ideological illusion of the remainder of ‘everyday life as fundamentally “outside” the network of policing power’.
It is often argued that the detective story seeks to totalise its signifiers in a complete and all-encompassing order. On the contrary, it is concerned to restrict and localise the province of meaning; to guarantee large areas of irrelevance.... For as the fantasy of total relevance yields to the reality of a more selective meaningfulness, the universality of suspicion gives way to a highly specific guilt. Engaged in producing a social innocence, the detective story might well take for the motto of its enterprise, ‘The truth shall make you free’.  

What is surely significant about Wee’s story is that it resists the closure of the detective novel through a transformation of genres. Rather than focusing upon highly specific guilt, its conclusion rather suggests cosmic forces of retribution outside the rational order which the detective story promotes. These forces, again surely significantly, come from a vital oral culture: they have their source in a spiritual domain away from the public sphere which Catspaw and the agents of colonial jurisprudence cannot penetrate.

If ‘Is Revenge Sweet?’ illustrates the possible uses of the cultural capital acquired through English Studies to undermine colonial authority, the story equally precisely indicates the complicity involved in such a transaction. In order to create, in the figure of the Straits Chinese doctor, an ideal expression of a \textit{fin-de-siècle} masculine habitus, Wee must create a category of others, those colonial subjects who cannot be admitted into the public sphere. Hence, far more than Catspaw, it is the informant who accompanies him who is subject to the narrator’s critical gaze:

Following close at his heels, came one of those objectionable individuals who, under the name of informers, make a living out of the fees imposed by the Police Magistrates on gamblers against whom they have information. He was a Teochew Chinaman, with a cunning and crafty look in his eyes and dressed with bad taste. I loathed at [sic] the very sight of the man.  

Much here — including the implicit comparison with a dog — is drawn from the similarly racist depictions of Chinese characters in the writings of colonial officials, notably Hugh Clifford. To these Wee adds a special emphasis on a middle-class colonial elite habitus, on the accoutrements of gracious, middle-class living. His doctor has just smoked a cigar: he now cannot help noting the informant’s want of dress sense. The roles are also rather unsubtly gendered. The innocent, Christian Chinese woman is sacrificed in prison, while the urbane Straits Chinese professional man demonstrates his competence to enter the public sphere.

If this story, and the other interventions discussed, do point out the contradictions of colonialism, twisting a knife, as it were, into the cracks between overlapping discursive formations, they do so at a certain price. The price is the creation of a respectable Chinese or Eurasian subjectivity, one modelled on the late nineteenth-century English masculine habitus, in which public is divided from private, masculine from feminine, and work from leisure.
CONCLUSION — BOURGEOIS ASIAN MODERNITY

What is most interesting in the interventions discussed above is the manner in which they re-constellate Asianness. The Straits Chinese Magazine, we see, creates a bourgeois Asian subject differentiated both from the decadence of the colonial regime and the boorishness of the masses. In other writings, Lim stressed a reformed Confucianism rephrased as the only legitimate heir of Enlightenment rationality. Lim, of course, was influenced by many sources, including the reform movement in late Qing China, whose world view, Prasenjit Duara has noted, "may be the most proximate ancestor of the phenomenon called "Confucian capitalism" in the Pacific Rim today". The particular manifestation of that capitalism in Singapore, however, marked by a commitment to ‘Shared Values’ (a work ethic which Max Weber would have found familiar), a faith in rationality placed in ‘Good English’ as the language of technology, and a commitment to literature and the arts as a means of encouraging a ‘gracious society’, bears clear traces of cultural capital acquired under colonialism and now re-invested, put to a different — and yet not so very different — use.

NOTES

4 Bourdieu and Passeron. p. 47.
7 For instance, the December 12, 1906 English Composition paper gives examinees the choice of writing an essay, among other topics, on ‘Any one of the English counties or of the British colonies’. All quotations are taken from examination paper copies provided by the Archivist, University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, Cambridge, U.K.
9 Wong and Gwee. p. 39.
10 Higher Examination in English Language and Literature, June 18. 1901. 25–26. See note 7.
12 Higher Examination in English Language and Literature, June 17, 1896. 17. See note 7.
13 Bourdieu and Passeron. p. 34.
Straits Settlements Civil Service recruits took a competitive examination before 1882, but they had to be nominated for it by the Secretary of State. In 1882 the Colonial Office began open competitive examinations for the ‘Eastern Cadetships’ (Straits Settlements, Ceylon, and Hong Kong) See John G. Butcher, The British in Malaya 1880–1941: The Social History of a European Community in Colonial South-East Asia (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 41.


Wee, p. 100.

In 1979, indeed, Lee spoke to civil servants at the Regional English Language Centre, and promoted the study of English as a 'discipline', in which ideas might be properly 'thought out and dressed in clean, clear prose'. Both government courtesy campaigns and visions promoting the place of the arts in society have frequently used the words 'gracious' and 'cultured', often bearing the traces of the kind of habitus idealised by English studies. See Lee Kuan Yew, 'Clean, Clear Prose', in *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and His Ideas*, eds. Han Fook Kwang, Warren Fernandez and Sumiko Tan (Singapore Times, 1998), pp. 393–95.