

‘Someone Else’s Empire:’ European Colonialisms in South East Asia, 1800–1914

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*To the last and the largest Empire,
To the map that is half unrolled.*
—Rudyard Kipling, *The Native Born*

This paper is a synopsis of my current research, which explores the European colonial experience in South East Asia through a comparative examination of previously unpublished documents produced by colonial personnel from 1800 through 1914. During these years, the constituent regions, countries, kingdoms, and states of what is generally collectively designated South East Asia were occupied by a multiplicity of colonial powers, with more than one territory changing hands between different colonial ventures. This, then, was a place where different colonial powers interacted on a scale unmatched anywhere else; as many as eight European powers were encamped at one time or the other on these islands and peninsulas between the South China Sea and the Indian and Pacific Oceans.¹

For some of these powers, acquiring a colony in South East Asia was felt to be imperative to protect other colonies they might possess; the British being a case in point: Penang, Melaka and Singapore were all part of a chain of fortresses that girdled the globe, the toll gates and the barbicans, as it were, of the Indian Empire. For some, as for the Dutch, it was the avenue to commercial greatness. For the Americans, the acquisition of the Philippines was the equivalent of a coming-out ball—it announced to the world that they were now to be reckoned with as a power beyond the confines of the Americas. For the French, Indochina expiated somewhat their

¹ These powers included the British in Burma (1826–1948) and Malaya (1786–1956), the Dutch in the Indonesian archipelago (1595–1949), the French in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos (1860–1954), the Portuguese in Timor (1515–1975), the Spanish in the Philippines (1521–1898), the Germans in New Guinea (1885–1915), the Australians in Papua and New Guinea (1915–1975), and James Brooke and his descendants in Sarawak (1841–1946).

failure to take India from the British. For the Germans, New Guinea was a reluctant acquisition, an attempt to demonstrate their new-found cohesion according to their contemporaries' yardsticks of what constituted a Great Power in the late nineteenth century: the possession of colonies. When New Guinea was handed over to Australia by mandate in 1920, it marked Australia's entry into the international community as an active and contributing member, something that would be reinforced by the 1951 ANZUS Treaty another war later. Yet others sailed through the Straits of Malacca not to annex a piece of tropical rainforest for their country, but to found a whole new nation-state. Finally, there was the settling in the region, in great numbers, of Chinese emigrants, largely from southern China, adding yet another entity to the regional political smorgasbord.

My project focuses on the interaction between the colonial powers present in the region as played out through their personnel, and how representatives of the colonial powers in South East Asia viewed the other colonial powers therein. It aims to find out what administrators helping run one Empire thought of empires other than their own; many committed and unashamed imperialists were scathing about their rivals' abilities to build and maintain an empire, especially one that was of mutual benefit to the rulers and the ruled. and equally, seasoned administrators could voice criticism of the system they worked under through a comparison with a rival system. The study looks at crucial, often pivotal, points of inter-colony engagement and the versions of these events presented by people who participated in, witnessed, or indeed, were affected by such engagements. It thus focuses on the accounts of officials on the spot, or long serving commercial agents or residents, because this is a good opportunity to discuss Great Power diplomacy and interaction over their colonial possessions, and officials were, of course, the people involved in the high politics of empire building—or rather to look at officials' reactions

to the prevailing diplomatic view in the metropole. How did, say, Portuguese officials in Timor feel about the 1859 Treaty of Lisbon, which saw the island partitioned between themselves and the Dutch? Perhaps officials in London believed French assurances that they had no designs on Siam, for instance, but what, did George Curzon, the future Viceroy of British India, which, after all, abutted Siam, make of such claims while travelling through South East Asia in 1892? He was convinced that Indochina remained for the French a poor substitute for the Indian Empire they had “lost” to the British in the 1750s; the fact that Indochina might be a valued colonial possession in its own right, with its own rich resources and trade links, apparently did not occur to him.²

Predominantly, studies of colonialism in the colonised territory have focused on the bilateral relationship between the colonisers and the colonised. Studies of interaction between colonial powers have only focussed on their struggle over any one piece of territory; by implication, these studies conclude with the assumption of control over the territory by the victorious power. But interaction between officials of colonies administered by different colonial powers is crucial to an understanding of nineteenth century European colonialism, especially in the South East Asian context. Orientalism, especially, has focused on how European colonial powers read and interpreted Asian cultures, but this interpretation was not confined to ‘Asian,’ or indeed, ‘colonised’ cultures. It extended to their fellow European colonial powers. This examination was not solely the result of political exigency; studies, even comparative studies, have tended to stress the point that all modern European empires were essentially the same;³ but each colonial Empire operated differently. The most visible instance of this was the Portuguese

² George Curzon, *Strange Cities in the Far East*, Curzon Papers, Mss Eur F111/18.

³ D.K. Fieldhouse, *The Colonial Empires: A Comparative Survey from the Eighteenth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 374–80.

tendency to impose spiritual as well as temporal authority on the populace, as opposed to the rather more ‘secular’ nature of British or Dutch colonialism. Each empire had its own singular, perhaps defining, characteristic; “the keynote of the Dutch policy was monopoly and exclusion, that of the English policy free trade and free immigration,” but it did not follow that one was of necessity more effective than the other, as “while the former has given Holland one of the finest agricultural colonies in the world, the latter has added to the British Empire one of its greatest trade depots.”⁴ Such differing approaches to exercising power and the implications these could have in terms of the drive for expansion of their overseas possessions ensured that European colonial powers kept as watchful an eye on their counterparts as they did over the people they ruled. As Tarling notes, “the interrelationship between Europeans and South East Asians was complicated by the relationship among the Europeans. Rivalry was a longstanding feature of their activities overseas, and in the nineteenth century it was still influential, though modified by the temporary primacy of the British.”⁵

The British, for instance, made as many assumptions and hypotheses about the French as they did about the South East Asians themselves. George Curzon’s patriotism, for instance, extended beyond extolling the virtues of British rule for the ‘[natives]’—he also must needs proclaim the superiority of British methods of running an empire: “the German grows fat, the Frenchman withers, while the Englishman plays lawn tennis under the tropical sun.”⁶ Not that every colonial administrator was as dismissive of other people’s efforts as Curzon; the Dutch Orientalist Snouck Hurgronje was acutely aware that

⁴ Alleyne Ireland, *The Far Eastern Tropics: studies in the administration of tropical dependencies* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1905), 123. It should be noted that these differing approaches to colonial administration played a considerable role in shaping the characteristics of the post-colonial nations that succeeded these empires.

⁵ Nicholas Tarling, *South East Asia: A Modern History* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001), 89.

⁶ George Curzon, *Problems of the Far East* (London: Archibald Constable & Co., 1896), 427.

for the Atjehnese Penang is truly the gateway to the world...exclusively on the experience of Atjehnese in Penang rests the general conviction in Atjeh that the rule of the English would be infinitely preferable to ours...no difficulty or sacrifice can be too great for us to give the Atjehnese in their own country what Penang is for them now.⁷

Yet others took advantage of inter-colony interactions to slip from the service of one colonial power to another; James Loudon, the son of an official who followed Raffles to Java during the English occupation of the island, studied in Holland, and eventually in 1872, became the Governor-General of the Netherlands East Indies and opened the Aceh War.⁸

In terms of the time frame for the study, 1800 has been chosen as the commencing date because it was the year the VOC (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie) ceded the Indonesian archipelago to the Batavian Republic; events in Europe immediately after this marked the start of intensive inter-colony engagement in South East Asia. In 1914, Australian troops ousted the Germans from New Guinea on behalf of the British, perhaps the last time a colony was thus acquired in the region, which is why the study closes here.

The British, the Dutch and the French, the major colonial powers in the region, are the chief focus of the project. British-French rivalry in Asia, already referred to above, ended up keeping Siam as an independent 'buffer' state between British India and French Indochina—though Bangkok, as Curzon points out, was open to mercantile houses of all nationalities, thus obviating the need for formal colonialism⁹. In 1824, the British and the Dutch reached an accord, the Treaty of London, that left the Malay Peninsula to the British and the Indonesian archipelago to the Dutch, but they also had to deal with other powers; the British had to contend with the French in Indochina, and the Dutch with the Portuguese in the Sunda Islands. And both were

⁷ C. Snouck Hurgronje quoted in Anthony Reid, *The Contest for North Sumatra: Atjeh, the Netherlands and Britain, 1858-1898* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1969), 269.

⁸ James Loudon, *Eer en fortuin: leven in Nederland en Indië: autobiografie van gouverneur-generaal James Loudon*, eds. Henk Boels, Janny de Jong, C.A. Tamse (Amsterdam: Bataafsche Leeuw, 2003).

⁹ George Curzon, *Strange Cities of the Far East*, Curzon Papers, Mss Eur F111/18.

vexed by the problem of James Brooke, the British subject who set up a state in Sarawak. These entities in turn formed their own views about the dominant colonial powers and such views, transmitted to their respective colonial offices back in the metropole, informed the negotiations that preceded the signing of treaties and agreements. While scholars (and indeed administrators) have previously compared the systems of governance of these powers,¹⁰ my approach is rather more open-ended, in that it seeks to understand what each of these powers thought about the other, as opposed to pronouncing a verdict as to the impact each colonial system had on South East Asia.

The project thus involves examining and interpreting about a dozen separate documents, each written by someone who lived and worked in the region during the time frame of the study and involving the themes listed below, as well as showing a chronological progression. The documents examined themselves take various forms, ranging from the Englishman Stamford Raffles' account of revamping the administration of the Dutch East Indies, a fine example of official, controlled, inter-colony engagement; to the accounts of the first Australian governor of mandatory New Guinea about taking over this German territory in 1914, an account of the transition from one colonial government to another¹¹, to Affonso de Castro's (the Portuguese governor of Timor when the demarcation treaty was signed with the Dutch) assessment of the Dutch *cultuurstelsel* (a plantation policy that decreed how much land farmers should devote to cash crops) in Java and how best it might applied to Portuguese Timor.¹² In the event that there are multiple and perhaps contesting views—British opinion, for example, was sharply divided when it came to an assessment of the Dutch in Java, with Raffles' contemporaries and associates

¹⁰ See, for instance, J.S. Furnivall, *Progress and Welfare in South East Asia: A comparison of colonial policy and practice* (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1941).

¹¹ Seaforth Simpson Mackenzie, *The official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918, Vol. 10: The Australians at Rabaul* (N.P. University of Queensland Press with the Australian War Memorial, 1987 [1927]).

¹² Affonso de Castro, *As possessoes Portuguezes na Oceania* (Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional, 1867).

condemning it as an abomination,¹³ while the Indian civilian J.W.B. Money thought it was the ideal system for running a colony¹⁴—extracts from more than one account will be used and a broader approach will be adopted with regard to that particular section. The final assessment of the idiosyncrasies of each occupying colonial power may perhaps be left to the Straits Chinese, themselves an emigrant group who brought about a more informal, less political, but perhaps longer lasting in its effects, form of ‘colonialism.’¹⁵

The documents examined and the themes and engagements thus explored will be arranged chronologically to show how colonial presence in the region evolved both in itself and in terms of acknowledging and perhaps accommodating rival presences. The project seeks to accord equitable coverage to non-Anglophone sources, especially those which have not received much Anglophone scholarly attention to date, incorporating translated extracts where possible. It is, of course, neither practicable nor politic to compare endeavours springing from very different impetuses and often with wide time gaps between them, but the strong linkages between different colonial enterprises must be explored further.

¹³See the Raffles Papers, India Office Private Collection, Mss Eur F202/1.

¹⁴J.W.B. Money, *Java, or How to Manage a Colony* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1985 [1861]).

¹⁵See, for example, Victor Purcell, *The Chinese in South East Asia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).