

The Case for British Colonialism in Malaya

By S.G. Cheah

Academics as a species tend to be critics. They tend to assess and to disparage. Whenever an opinion is presented, the scholar's natural instincts tend to lead them towards imparting an intellectual assessment of the issue at hand.

It is perhaps a habitual reflex for the scholar to be critical, for we as a society leave it to our scholars and academics to be the core influencers of public opinion. We place in the hands of academia the power to sway the direction of society's mainstream culture.

Part of this unwritten, but recognizable, social agreement is sustained through academia's promise of upholding the rigorous standards of academic freedom. Our society's intellectual class are expected to safeguard amongst themselves the highest of moral and ethical certitude of this standard.

It was thus a troubling occurrence for us, as part of society, when some in the academic world acted to suppress Professor Bruce Gilley's paper "The Case for Colonialism" because his case presented to them what they deemed a shockingly unacceptable opinion. Troubling because it demonstrates the betrayal of our scholars' sacred role in society, when it's academia itself which acted to intentionally abandon their own standards of academic freedom.

For this reason, as part of general society, I would like to bridge our dissonance with academia by serving to remind the academic world of why the voices of men like Professor Gilley are important, for his opinion serves as part of our voice, those of us outside of academia.

Modern day critics of colonialism over-emphasize their own frame of reference as they make their case, and in doing so, drown out the bulk of the voices of those who lived through that experience firsthand; essentially re-framing history to fit their own world view. The unrecognized danger of this is in the dilution of the historical account of the men and women who actually lived through this period in history.

Contrary to most anti colonialist commentary, the immediate recollections of the men and women alive amid the times of colonialism tends to be colored with favorable memories and stories of life during that era, instead of the often scathing narrative of colonial oppression presented by its critics.

One then has to wonder why so many of these positive accounts concerning life during colonial times tend to be washed away in favor of more critical remarks during that time in history. For that we must ask: What are the agendas of those in control of the standard, accepted canon? What are they trying to preserve that makes it so vital to suppress positive accounts that conflict with their narrative?

As such, I think it's imperative for us as independent thinkers not be too easily persuaded by their narrative, because if we did, it will be done at a cost of the men and women who lived through that time in history. It is not our right, nor our claim to re-write their personal history by disregarding the private accounts of their lives during the time under the British Empire, most of which happen to be positive in reflection.

My hope is to help address some of the common fallacies frequently stated about the alleged oppression, rot and cruelty of the British rule in Malaya. While I might not be able to speak of all forms of colonialism, for my direct experience was based only on the British Empire's rule of Malaya, the truth is that Professor Gilley's case for colonialism isn't a controversial premise when it is presented to my fellow Malaysians who lived under British rule in Malaya. Overwhelmingly, the time of British rule is viewed in a positive light by a significant number of people who still proclaim today, just how much better it was "back in the good old days of the British".

But if we insist on retrospectively judging history by the standards we currently hold today, as we seem to judge the history of Western colonialism, then it should be only fair that we judge all other cultural and societal alternatives equally by the same standard. Listed here are the few examples to the alternative of British colonialism as told by those who'd lived in that era of history.

Universal slavery under an emperor king.

When the question was asked of my father on why the Chinese immigrants (they set voyage to Malaya in droves as indentured servants) do not have any qualms of "shedding their Chinese identity" in favor of adopting the fashions and behaviors of the British, his answer, I paraphrased, was "the Chinese were more than happy to don themselves with Western clothing, because they saw it as a form of liberation after their horrific existence under the Manchu Emperor. The Imperial Order, to ensure that the Han Chinese would not engage in an uprising, was to keep the people humiliated and reminded that they were nothing more than the Emperor's worthless subjects. An example can be seen with the 'queue hairstyle'. To the Han Chinese, the queue hairstyle with the braid on their head reminded them of how they were nothing more than the Emperor's cattle; they view the braid they donned as symbolic to a donkey's tail. They were more than happy to chop it off in favor of the Western look, for now they were safe to do so under the dominion of Great Britain"

Systematic oppression under an inescapable caste system

Apart from the Chinese, the Indians were another group of immigrants whom benefitted from life under British Malaya. Most of the Indian nationals whom likewise made the voyage away from India left behind the inescapable caste system of India. In British Malaya, the bulk of the Indian immigrants were employed as coolies to work for the rubber plantation efforts. While some critics may argue that as coolies, their treatment was that of exploitation by the colonialist, what they fail to mention was how the

'mistreatment' of the Indians by the British was no different from the handling of their immigrant Chinese counterparts in the tin mines. The descendants of these Indian immigrants today, due to their hard work and resourcefulness, have risen into positions of power within the Malaysian community. An impressive 38% of the Malaysian medical workforce consists of Malaysian Indians today. Could we declare that same statement for their descendants had they not ventured to British Malaya, successfully escaping their entrenched state under the caste system of India?

Lack of development from the instability brought by local warring powers

One of the most popular denunciations of the British colonial era in Malaya is in regards to their often cited 'exploitation of the colony's riches'. Anti-colonial sentiments tend to present British forces as the 'evil Imperialist' caricature, whose sole purpose was the exploitation of Malaya and Borneo's natural resources. What they tend not to mention however, was how it was nearly impossible to create any meaningful industry under the instability of the many conflicts and disputes among the multiple warring factions locally prior to British involvement. It wasn't until the promise of peace that the British created by numerous treaties and armistices with the local warring sects that there was enough stability to start work on long term investments and development. Otherwise, without the promise of peace secured under British supervision, the untapped natural resources would have remained just that, untapped.

The concealed costs of anti-colonialism

In his paper, Professor Gilley dedicated a section on the cost of anti-colonialism. I should go much further and disclose a cost far graver than even Professor Gilley would dare to consider, because I, along with many more of my fellow Malaysians today, had to bear the cost of experiencing this observable fact; we have overwhelmingly surrendered our own faculty of reason, our willingness to think, in order to play along with the anti-colonial doctrine presented by our own ruling government's distortion of history.

How is one supposed to hang on to one's own clear independent thought when the firsthand account of one's own recollection of history conflicts directly with the government's mandated official version of history? Should it come as a surprise that Malaysia today provides a constant stream of exodus of its brightest minds to the shores of Singapore, New Zealand and Australia? All of them happen to be countries which embraced their colonial history in a more favorable light. The brain-drain is thus the concealed cost of anti-colonialism.

When Malaysia shed the traces of her colonial tradition, she shed along with it, the advantages of societal advancement brought by adopting Western civilization. Her people are thrown behind into the backwaters of history, to be kept in the dark and their minds shut away from critical thinking. All of which makes perfect tyrannical sense as this renders it easier for the oppressors in power to keep their control over their subjects. To get an idea of how deep this rot is entrenched in the system, one simply

needs to observe how the powerful elites in Malaysia staggeringly send their children to be educated at private international schools. The same political elites decrying their repugnance of the West and colonialism have no qualms forking over exorbitant fees for international schooling in order for their offspring to attend these institutions of learning whose curricula are founded on the Western tradition.

Given this essay's topic and my own lack of academic sophistication, I'm curious about whether the reader can relate to any of these experiences when they lack the personal link to my retellings of these historical anecdotes. I am concerned not to come off as insensitive or preachy when what I really am is troubled.

Given the historical records and collective recollections of the people involved who lived during the British Colonial Era in Malaya, what ethical convictions do those in academia uphold when they reject conflicting ideas by detractors like Professor Gilley, whose sin was to attempt to put forth a differing view of the mainstream narrative?

And for those academics who refuse to even entertain the possibility of Professor Gilley's opinion bearing any trace of truth, for it risks crumbling their carefully constructed worldview, the question arises; in comparison to what other alternative?

When anti-colonial ideologues argue their case by stating examples of imperial violence, what are they comparing it to during that period in history? The headhunting of your rival? Castration as a form of punishment? Mandatory immolation of widows? These are very real facts of life back in pre-colonial history, all of which were wiped away by the so-called 'evil imperialist' from the West. Are these the traditions that our anti-colonial scholars yearn to preserve by their silencing of Professor Gilley?

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