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Conflicting Modes of Colonial Occupation in British Malaya, 1874–95

Joanna Lee

Introduction

In the existing literature on colonial Malaya during the late nineteenth century, most authors have focused on the economic and political motivations behind colonial intervention or highlighted how the British used the region's natural resources (Parkinson 1960; Cowan 1962; Chew 1965; Webster 1998). In this chapter, however, I examine administrative writings on Malaya from the period between 1874 and 1895 to foreground how colonial perceptions and understandings of the environment of the Malay States factored into policies surrounding its usage – particularly in the realms of tin mining and agriculture. Despite being motivated by economic gain, British officials did not single-mindedly set out to extract natural resources from the Malay States. Rather, they approached the region with a slew of economic, social and aesthetic motivations in mind, thereby resulting in a somewhat ambivalent approach to land use and colonial governance.

Notably, this situation was not unique to the Malay States. As demonstrated by David Arnold in his 2005 work on the 'travelling gaze' in nineteenth-century British India, colonial officials applied various economic, moral, aesthetic and scientific lenses to their environmental interactions. Expanding on this theme, other scholars such as Susie Protschky (2011) and Sean P. Smith (2019) have interrogated how landscape paintings of the Dutch East Indies and travelogues of British Burma, respectively, could capture a myriad of viewpoints about colonized environments, these ranging from the socioeconomic to the political. Just as colonists across varying locales viewed their surroundings through a plethora of

Figure 3.1 Map of the Malay Peninsula (c. 1902), published in H.C. Belfield (1904), *Handbook of the Federated Malay States*, London: Edward Stanford.

different perceptions, so too did their counterparts in the Malay States use a range of understandings to make sense of how best to use this newly occupied space.

While it is certainly true that other parties such as British businesses and foreign traders might have held similarly complicated views about these activities, this chapter is specifically concerned with the approach of British

administrators on the Malay Peninsula, as they were often the main stakeholders driving change across the region. As I contend, this change was by no means straightforward or even particularly well-planned. The reality of the situation was that official British approaches to economic development in the Malay States were fraught with conflict and contradiction. This is because they were rooted in irreconcilable views. Tin mines, with their unsightly pits (as was particularly the case in seemingly ‘unscientific’ open-cast mining) and ‘unruly’ Chinese coolies were required for economic advancement, but these undesirable aesthetic and social aspects did not fit comfortably with colonial ideals of a beautiful and stable environment. Agriculture, on the other hand, had the potential to offer what mining could not – neat, picturesque villages and a settled population.

With the first Malayan rubber plantations only being established in the mid-1890s (Tate 1996: 206; Drabble 1973: 19), it is important to note that this period preceded the expansion of the rubber industry in this region. At this point, rubber was not yet the money-making behemoth that it would later become and agriculture in the Malay States was still largely focused on crops such as sugar, coffee (Lees 2017: 32, 175–6) and rice (Cheng 1969). Agriculture during this time was thereby simply nowhere near as lucrative as tin mining. Nonetheless, as will be demonstrated, British administrators who were driven by visions of an ‘ideal’ colonial society and its associated environment still agitated for agricultural development over mining, despite the latter’s considerable economic remuneration.

In making this argument, I highlight how British colonial rule Malaya was not merely a matter of acquiring and occupying new spaces, as colonial officials also had to grapple with the pressing question of what to *do* with such spaces. Given that there was no central, homogenous approach in place, administrators struggled to articulate what this colony *could* and *should* be. This confusion was linked to the very administrative structure of British rule in Malaya, which was a cobbled-together amalgamation of direct and indirect rule. On the ground, this meant that while some officials might have had clear materialist intentions for these colonial spaces, others were instead more aware of the social and aesthetic effects that their actions would have on the land itself. Colonial representations and perceptions of space were thus often out of step with their intended usages, as officials tried to determine which economic activities would best serve their myriad interests.

With reference to the presence of these multiple colonial projects, this chapter examines how British administrators approached tin mining and agriculture

through two specific lenses: a socially engineered colonial society and the picturesque aesthetic. Racial stereotypes led British officials to believe that Chinese miners would be an undesirable type of colonial settler, while the picturesque aesthetic suggested an idealization of a social landscape that harkened back to a pre-industrial Britain. Given this imposition of British frameworks of understanding on the Malay States, this chapter also builds on David Cannadine's thesis in *Ornamentalism* (2001), wherein he argues that colonists 'understood their empire *on their own terms*' (10) – which is to say, the British transported their own societal structures to their colonies. It is worth noting, however, that colonial administrators did not merely assume that certain colonized communities were similar to their own domestic structures. In some cases, these foreign societies were even deemed superior to the metropolis of an increasingly urbanized British home (Cannadine 2001: xix). The export and implementation of these social hierarchies from Britain to the periphery of empire were essential to what Cannadine describes as the 'spectacle of empire' (2001: 122–3), as the British organized their colonies according to the familiar differences of rank, status and race. Stratifying their empire as such, the British imagined that they still occupied a more traditional social hierarchy, one that was contingent on agriculture, land ownership and feudal relationships. Consequently, the centrality of these structures to British colonialism meant that the empire was 'about land and agriculture and the countryside' (Cannadine 2001: 130–1).

Applied to the context of the Malay States in the late nineteenth century, I show how agriculture was the vehicle through which British administrators tried to create what they believed to be an 'ideal' colonial environment in Malaya. While Chinese miners were thought to be troublesome and difficult to control, indentured Indian agricultural labourers were cast as more docile and amenable to British rule. Simultaneously, the picturesque qualities of agriculture also promised a return to the feudalism of British landed estates, though in the context of the Malay States, it was the Malays themselves who occupied the role of the yeoman peasantry. Through the process of engineering and controlling these relationships, British colonial rule could ultimately be entrenched at the apex of this social hierarchy. This was therefore no simple case of the British merely occupying a space with physical structures and warm bodies. Oft-conflicting perceptions, beliefs and imagined ideals, too, were woven into the very foundations of these more tangible products of colonial rule.

Tin for the taking

When the British began administering the Malay States in the late nineteenth century, it was with the confident knowledge that the region held vast mineral reserves. Deposits of gold, coal, iron and other types of ore were scattered across the Malay Peninsula (Yuen 1974; Dodge 1977; Carstens 1980; Kaur 1990). Tin, however, was by far the most common and remunerative of these mineral reserves due to its high demand – a topic that is covered in Yi Li's chapter in this volume. Mining interests in the region had primarily been controlled by the Chinese since the mid-1700s (Reid 2011), though by the mining boom of the early-twentieth century, European companies had started to corner an increasingly large share of the market until the monopoly on production rested in their hands instead.

The importance of tin to the British administration of the Malay States was helped along by the convenient fact that colonial intervention in this region had coincided with the onset of increased industrialization – a period in which various parties were clamouring for more ready supplies of this particular metal. Incorporated into broader imperial circuits of trade and consumption in this manner, tin prices in the Malay States spiked. While one *pikul* (approximately 60 kilograms) cost \$20 (Straits dollars) during the 1850s, this rose to more than \$30 (Straits dollars) per *pikul* in the latter half of the nineteenth century (Yip 1969: 62; Chiang 1966).¹ In response, export duties on tin soon constituted the highest source of revenue for the colonial Malayan government, earning them a staggering \$25 million (Straits dollars) between 1875 and 1896. In contrast, the second most lucrative source of income for the colonial government was railways, at a mere \$6.7 million (Straits dollars). Land revenue was, in turn, another half of that at \$3.5 million (Straits dollars) – all meagre sums when seen in comparison to tin (Raja 2018: 22). As such, tin mining and its near astronomical returns rapidly became the bedrock upon which the British colonial government of the Malay States was raised.

To encapsulate how British officials described the benefits of tin mining, we can first look to the words of W.E. Maxwell, whose long and distinguished career in both the Malay States and the Straits Settlements spanned from 1865 to 1895 (Pakri 2011: 33–7). Addressing the Royal Colonial Institute in 1891, Maxwell asserted: 'Our hopes, of course, rest almost entirely on the tin-industry.' Cultivation of cash crops such as pepper or tapioca could be hoped for, but even then, it would not come close to the results of a 'successful mining rush'. For

Maxwell, tin mining was the perfect vehicle for colonial development. With the Malay States 'supported by splendid mineral resources', the British would be able to entice both migrant labour and capital to the region, thereby helping to drive up excise revenue as lands and houses subsequently increased in price (Maxwell [1891] 1983: 151).

Nonetheless, tin mining came with its own issues, as an overreliance on this particular commodity subjected the rest of the colonial economy to the effects of price fluctuations. Take, for instance, the onset of low tin prices in the late 1870s, which led the Resident of Selangor, William Bloomfield Douglas, to complain that the centrality of tin to the economy meant that every other industry was being affected (*Papers Relating to the Protected Malay States, C.-3095* 1880/1881: 12). Similarly, the governor of the Straits Settlements, Frederick Weld, wrote to the colonial secretary in 1880 to describe how the revenues of Sungai Ujong, a district of Negeri Sembilan, were mainly derived from tin royalties and excise duties. Given the influx of planters into the region, however, he harboured reasonable hopes that the region's future would 'rest on a firmer basis than the fluctuating value of tin' (*Papers Relating to the Protected Malay States, C.-3095* 1880/1881: 4). With tin as an economic cornerstone, weakened prices could very well endanger the rest of the colonial economy.

Nevertheless, diversifying economic development was not the only issue that troubled British administrators as many of them also indicated a great desire for a settled population in Malaya. This was due to mining forming part of what Corey Ross calls the 'commodity frontier', where boundaries of extraction were moved ever further to exploit and exhaust available resources. Given that speculators adopted a utilitarian approach to land, these 'windfalls' of resources tended to draw transitory populations (Ross 2014: 457). In practice, this meant that once a place was utterly divested of all that could be extracted from it, these communities would pack up and move on, thereby pushing the frontier further out again. Subsequently, Ross argues that the temporary nature of these populations, lack of political consequence and accompanying assumption of practically infinite resources led to transient and destructive modes of extracting mineral wealth in Southeast Asia (Ross 2017).

In comparison, agriculture promised the far more desirable possibility of settled populations and continuous revenue, making it a better long-term alternative. As per the investigations of James C. Jackson (1968: 223–4), Paul Kratoska (1985) and Lim Teck Ghee (1976: 88–9, 101–12), the administrative tendency to agitate for increased agriculture was generally fuelled by a desire to see the Malay States settled with permanent populations that could also

contribute lasting revenue. To achieve this aim, the British colonial government implemented a variety of policies to encourage the spread of agriculture, including rent remissions for new settlers, the distribution of plants and seeds to enterprising cultivators, and judicious loans – all of which were offered to both subsistence and commercial planters (Sadka 1968: 357–60).

These beliefs in the benefits of agriculture were held by various administrators. Take, for example, William Bloomfield Douglas's 1880 missive to the secretary of the Straits Settlements, which expressed hopes for a time when, at the expiration of their work contracts, immigrant miners would turn to other industries and settle down permanently. It was, as Douglas claimed, not 'a healthy state of things' when the country's main population was made up of 'large employers and labour and their rude uncivilized labourers', rendering the country 'a vast jungle yielding nothing in ... agricultural produce', or even any rice (*Papers Relating to the Protected Malay States, C.–3095* 1880/1881: 36).

Nevertheless, matters had improved by 1882 when the superintendent of public works and surveys, D.D. Daly, spoke to the Royal Geographical Society. Addressing his audience, Daly described how Selangor's revenues prior to British intervention depended entirely on tin exports, which were 'always a precarious

Figure 3.2 Liberian coffee on a Malayan plantation. Photograph possibly by C.J. Kleingrothe (c. 1910). Courtesy of the Leiden University Library (KITLV, Image 79941, Collection A360).

and fluctuating source'. With the onset of British rule, however, their presence in the region had caused agriculture to drastically increase and 'a revenue formerly unknown' was being coaxed from the land (Daly 1882: 402). Following Daly's presentation, Mr Adamson, a merchant who had previously been a member of the Straits Settlements Council, was called upon to offer some additional observations. Adamson thus proceeded to express his ardent hope that young Englishmen would soon go to the Malay States to set up coffee estates there, while also anticipating that 'the Chinese would flock into these territories, and assist in promoting such cultivation, until the country would become rich and prosperous, and a credit to this country [Britain] in every way' (Daly 1882: 411).

These sentiments were echoed some years later by the acting British Resident of Selangor, J.P. Rodger, who noted in his annual report for 1885 that the local administration had a 'most urgent need' for the presence of a large agricultural population. While tin revenues were steadily increasing and would continue to increase for some years to come, he thought 'it would be unwise not to fully recognize the fact that at some future period, more or less remote, these alluvial tin mines will gradually become exhausted ...' (*Further Correspondence Respecting the Protected Malay States*, C.-4958 1887: 109–10). Addressing the governor of the Straits Settlements in 1889, the colonial secretary seemed to share these views: 'To the spread of agriculture,' he wrote, 'I attach the greatest importance.' This was not merely due to agriculture's ability to supplement tin mining, but also because the 'progress of agriculture taken in connexion with the constant stream of immigration' would spread the population more evenly across the peninsula, rather than have it clustered around mining areas (*Further Correspondence Respecting the Protected Malay States*, C.-5884 1889: 114). J.F. Dickson, who was in charge of administrative duties during the governor's absence, agreed wholeheartedly and concurred in his reply, similarly noting that: 'It is on the extension of cultivation with a settled population that the future progress and permanent prosperity of these States must mainly depend' (*Papers Relating to the Protected Malay States*, C.-6222 1890: 10).

This desire to see a settled, agricultural population in Malaya remained a common refrain well into the 1890s. The Resident of Selangor, W.H. Treacher, opined in 1893 that in a country made prosperous from tin, few would 'dispute the desirability ... of giving every possible encouragement to agriculture, the soundest basis of permanent prosperity and of a contented population in all countries' (*Reports on the Protected Malay States for 1893*, C.-7546 1894: 44). Frank Swettenham, who was the Resident of Perak during this period, also thought it wise to encourage agriculture, the improvement of labour supplies,

and 'the employment of every reasonable means to induce European and native planters to convert . . . forest land into plantations'. As he concluded, it was only through these methods that it would be possible to secure revenue independent from mining, which 'cannot alone ensure real and permanent prosperity' (Swettenham 1893: 74–5).

Later, in 1895, Swettenham also asserted that the opening up of agricultural capabilities would give them:

the best thing we can hope for: a settled agricultural population and a body of Europeans who will . . . convert our jungles into extensive estates of permanent cultivation, a form of enterprise such as no Asiatic has hitherto had the ability, experience, or determination to attempt.

Reports on the Protected Malay States for 1894, C.–7877 1895: 22

In this manner, Swettenham was not merely echoing the preferences of administrators before him, but also harking back to the now-familiar myth that native Malays simply did not have the constitution to undertake meaningful enterprise (Alatas 1977). For the British, agriculture was associated with sustainable remuneration and a settled, rural society – key qualities of a thriving colony and the very antithesis of what tin mining resulted in.

The pursuit of (appropriate) people

The desire for an agricultural population aside, writings from the likes of administrators such as J.F. Dickson, W.H. Treacher and Frank Swettenham evidenced colonial desires to see the Malay States not only settled, but settled by the 'right' kind of population. This was particularly evident in the context of tin mining. Prior to the first quarter of the twentieth century, tin mining on the Malay Peninsula was monopolized by the Chinese, with up to 78 per cent of tin in 1910 having been extracted by Chinese producers (King 1940: 130). In contrast, European efforts were relatively muted until the 1880s – a 'feeble commencement', as the Resident of Perak, Hugh Low, would say in 1883 (Yip 1969: 95).

During these early years, European investors were largely uninformed about the potential of the Malay Peninsula, and the ones who did know about it ultimately decided to proceed with extreme caution. Even then, however, the unlucky few who invested in the region found the business to be an uphill struggle, with many soon shuttering their mines after finding it too difficult to compete with Chinese prospectors who had a labour-cost advantage (Courtenay

1972: 90). Reminiscent of the failures encountered by their spice-planting predecessors in Penang (Langdon 2015), many also severely underestimated the challenges that the Malay States posed to their pre-established methods of extraction (Yip 1969: 99–100). Consequently, when British officials wrote about mining during this period, it is quite likely that the overwhelming Chinese element (and perhaps the failures of Europeans) would have been at the forefront of their minds.

Such circumstances were also tempered by pre-existing attitudes towards the Chinese, which were ambivalent to say the least. In his work on race in British Malaya, Charles Hirschman describes Europeans as having a ‘sense of resentment and hostile admiration’ towards the Chinese (Hirschman 1986: 346). On the one hand, Chinese labourers were thought to be excellent workers – hardworking, skilful and adaptable – while on the other, they were considered troublesome and difficult on account of being involved with secret societies (Loh 1969: 144). For the British, Chinese workers were both bane and boon: a necessity for economic development but at the same time not the ideal permanent settler.

These contradictory racial beliefs were held by a number of colonial administrators. Colonial engineer and surveyor general for the Straits Settlements J.F.A. McNair, for instance, wrote that the ‘busy hands of the Chinese people’ would make Malayan lands ‘one of the most productive under the sun’, and that Chinese skilled labour in ‘mining, agriculture, and artifice’ was a ‘valuable acquisition to the country’ (McNair 1878: 3, 130). Meanwhile, in writing his history of British Malaya in 1906, Swettenham implored readers to ‘understand at once what is due to Chinese labour and enterprise in the evolution of the Federated Malay States’ (232–3).

Nevertheless, other British administrators declined to share such sanguine views of the Chinese. William Napier, who had previously been the lieutenant-governor of Labuan and the chairman of the Straits Settlements Association, was one such example. In his 1876 work, *The Malays: and a few words regarding Perak and Salangore*, Napier noted with some disquiet that the 20,000 Chinese in Larut (now Taiping) – a key mining district in the state of Perak – were mostly adult males. Although he described them as ‘industrious settlers, and generally disposed to peaceful courses’, Napier also thought that they harboured secret societies and had shown themselves capable of violence (Napier 1876: 18). His son-in-law, the Resident of Perak, Hugh Low (Begum and Mohamad 2009: 25), similarly adopted this stance. In 1882, Low’s annual report described how Chinese miners ‘were of all men the most rude, conceited, and ignorant, with no confidence in Europeans, easily oppressed . . . misled by their own countrymen

who employed them, and . . . greatly influenced by the secret societies of Penang' (*Correspondence Respecting the Protected Malay States, Including Papers Relating to the Abolition of Slavery in Perak*. C.–4192 1884: 26).

While mining was a predominantly Chinese affair, agriculture was increasingly characterized by the use of Indian indentured labour. This occurred because the British considered Indian labourers to be the best type of plantation worker. Where the Chinese were thought to be unruly and disruptive, Indians – especially those from the Madrasi caste – were idealized by the British as docile and easily managed. Employing a racialized hierarchy of labour, the British further believed that Tamils, and south Indian peasants more generally, were ideal labourers as they were seen as lacking ambition and self-reliance. Other so-called 'positive' traits included the belief that Indians were amenable to low wages, cost less in maintenance, were used to British rule, and easily acclimatized to tropical weather, as south India was climatically similar to the Malay Peninsula (Sandhu 1969: 56–7).

Importantly, these British perceptions were not merely about finding the 'ideal' worker. Echoes of white saviourhood and colonial paternalism were evident in these depictions as well, since Indian immigration was framed as not just a service to the Malay States, but also to British India. In his letter to the colonial secretary in 1881, the governor of the Straits Settlements, Frederick Weld, described how immigration was in the best interests of both administrations, as it would benefit British capital and commerce while also serving as a relief to overcrowding in India (*Papers Relating to the Protected Malay States*, C.–3095 1881: 44). Later in the year, he similarly told the Straits Settlements Legislative Council that introducing Indian immigration would bring a 'fresh impetus' to the prosperity of the Malay States. Commerce could be promoted, while the immigrants themselves would also derive great benefits. As 'a race eminently suited to the country, and fitted to develop its resources,' Indians were thereby thought to be suitable 'coolies' and 'small landowners, which they would speedily become' (cited in Loh 1969: 145–6).

Resident Hugh Low, in responding to Perak's great need for labour, further entrenched these beliefs by passing the Indian Immigration Enactment in 1882 (Wilkinson and Burns 1971: 240–9). Safeguards for wellbeing aside, the enactment ensured that family and spousal units were not to be split up, while also enforcing a certain ratio of men to women in each group (Loh 1969: 147). Subsequently, this had the effect of making incoming Indian family units who helped promote settled agriculture far more preferable to the largely transient, single male Chinese workers who staffed the tin mines. Two years later, updated

legislation was passed to also include the Straits Settlements and the Malay States, so that by 1886, Governor Frederick Weld was glad to report that with increased Indian immigration, Perak not only had settled Tamil agricultural families, but the European planters themselves were now also 'saved from imminent ruin' (*Further Correspondence Respecting the Protected Malay States*, C.-4958 1887: 117).

While the British saw mining's profitability as inextricable from the undesirable aspects of its Chinese labourers, agriculture, in contrast, promised both sustainable revenue and a seemingly malleable Indian population. These colonial preferences for agriculture demonstrate how administrators were motivated by a combination of both economic *and* societal concerns. It was not enough to merely weigh the benefits of one economic activity over another; the ensuing, envisaged society and the imagined traits of its people had to be taken into consideration, too.

Despite scholars such as Colin Abraham (1983) having demonstrated that the British were indeed manipulating ethnic relations to their benefit, it would be erroneous to assert that race was the exclusive reason for the migration of labour to Malaya. Though the British had a direct hand in both encouraging and causing Indian migration via the mismanagement of famines during the late-nineteenth century, Chinese miners had already been operating on the Malay Peninsula from as early as the 1400s – long before British interference in the region (Blythe 1947; Currie 1991; Arnold 1993). Flows of migrant labour into the peninsula were also dictated by larger historical and socio-economic forces beyond the control of British Malayan administrators during this period (Sandhu 1969). Famine, drought or a troubled political environment might have pushed migrants out of their home countries towards the Malay Peninsula, while at the same time, favourable economic conditions in the Malay States also pulled migrants towards these places (Vlieland 1934; Huff and Caggiano 2007; Ota 2014). In attempting to engineer a colonial society, officials were thus largely making use of and expanding upon pre-existing conditions, rather than actively creating their own.

The picturesque

British colonial concerns about mining were not merely limited to the issue of incoming migrants; they also needed to consider the situation of local Malays. To begin examining how British officials tended to associate Malay villages with

settled agriculture and its perceived aesthetic benefits, we might first look at Frank Swettenham's 1893 publication *About Perak*, which is a compilation of articles that Swettenham had originally penned for the *Straits Times*. Here, Swettenham described Kuala Kangsar in the following terms:

... there are no mines and though there is a small, neat village ... it is the absence of the Chinese element that, with the extreme Vitality of the place, makes Kuala Kangsar so attractive. It is the very paradise of Malays; a wide, shallow, clear river with high banks covered for miles with picturesque villages, hidden under a wealth of palms and fruit trees.

Swettenham 1893: 38

Beyond the typical association of mining with the undesirability of its Chinese community, Swettenham's invocation of Kuala Kangsar as a 'paradise' of Malays implied that these two visions were incompatible with each other. This was further demonstrated by Arthur Keyser, who was magistrate and collector for the district of Jelevu in Negeri Sembilan. In his 1893 report on the region, Keyser noted that mining was slowly ousting local rice planters who were, in turn, reacting to this development with mixed feelings. Planters were reportedly 'distressed at the sight of their cherished field being converted into unsightly pits', and yet, 'fully alive to the advantages to be derived from the receipt of compensation'. In an attempt to preserve Malay cultivation, Keyser added that he had set aside valleys as reserves, but still 'feared that should temptation be offered, there will be little doubt that the miner will prevail' (*Reports on the Protected Malay States for 1892, C.-7228C* 1893: 71).

Reading these two texts, we find that both Swettenham and Keyser subscribed to the idea that mining degraded the appealing qualities and visual aesthetic of Malay agriculture. While the excerpt from Swettenham highlighted his preference for peaceful Malay villages over the ugliness that came with Chinese miners, Keyser went one step further by translating these sentiments into actual policy. Indeed, Keyser's actions might have constituted one of the earliest examples of legislation that helped give Malay farmers a secure tenure for their land. Over time, this policy eventually evolved to become the Malay Reservations Enactments of 1913 (Kratoska 1983; Kratoska 1985) and 1933, the latter of which is still enforced today in Malaysia.

As Paul Kratoska (1983) has argued, colonial officials tended to perceive Malays as part of what he calls the 'yeoman peasantry: independent, self-sufficient small landowners' (149). This in turn stemmed from a British tendency to see Malay society as feudal and a mirror image of Britain's own, pre-Industrial

Revolution past (Butcher 1979: 52). Expanding on this point, Phillip Loh notes that the Malay Reservation policies were not only intended to secure land revenue for the colonial government but were also an attempt to prevent Chinese immigration from overwhelming the Malay countryside. In maintaining the link between Malay communities and idyllic villages, British administrators could thus assert their position as 'intercessor and protector' over a traditional society that needed to be preserved in their agricultural ways, thereby further reaffirming the paternalistic aspect of British intervention on the peninsula (Loh 1969: 123).

Importantly, this practice was not unique to British officials in the Malay States. In other places such, as Burma and the Dutch East Indies, longstanding racist notions about native labour sought to portray colonized peoples as inherently suited for agricultural work – so much so that former colonial official J.S. Furnivall stressed the importance of conserving 'traditional' village life even in the midst of progress (Furnivall 1948: 469–76). Situated within this legacy of colonial thinking, mining seemed to be the very antithesis of what British administrators hoped for.

These societal concerns aside, there was also a clear aesthetic dimension to how colonial officials approached the physical consequences of mining in the Malay States. In stark contrast to European attempts that were touted as professional and scientific (Macleod 1994; Harvey and Press 1989), Chinese mines with their giant 'pockmarks' in the earth were thought to be ugly and unsightly. Meanwhile, settled agriculture invoked picturesque scenes of an idyllic countryside instead.

Popularized during the eighteenth century, the 'picturesque' bridged nature and art by rendering each with aspects of the other. Picturesque art mirrored nature and corrected its perceived faults, while picturesque nature implied that the scene had picture-like qualities (Trott 1999: 80). The native English landscape – particularly its humble, rural scenes – served as the template for these works, the likes of which populated the oeuvres of artists such as John Constable, Thomas Gainsborough and J.M.W. Turner. Despite interpretations of the picturesque changing over the years, it is worth noting that some key qualities still remained. These included distinct characteristics such as landscape distances with a hazy background and detailed foreground; features that harmoniously balance the composition so as to draw attention to the middle distance; a winding river and rugged mountains in the background; and a soft, gold tint to the light (Bermingham 1986: 57; Auerbach 2004: 48).

The picturesque was itself a process of recognition, where a particular scene was framed against a set of pre-established artistic conventions (Casid 2005: 45). Correspondingly, this transformative act made the picturesque an important component of colonial discourse, as Europeans used the picturesque as a lens to render foreign landscapes into recognizable ones instead. As Jeffrey Auerbach (2004) argues, organizing and perfecting landscapes in imperial art reflected changes to the type of interests within empire – from explorations to discover an untouched Eden in the late 1700s, to presenting foreign spaces as safe and familiar during the mid-nineteenth century to encourage settlement. Writing in the context of Burma, Stephen Keck (2004: 394–7) similarly notes that travel writers such as Alice Hart used picturesque tropes as a means of justifying the ‘civilizing mission’. Foreign landscapes could be picturesque but their scientific unknowns and perceived social ills were fertile grounds for colonial development.

Consequently, this was the context in which British administrators described the environment in colonial Malaya. Colonial secretary for the Straits Settlements, W.E. Maxwell, for example, wrote that ‘Miners do not make the best colonists’, and that some officials would perhaps prefer to see in Malaya a ‘peaceful landscape of rural hamlets, instead of the hastily-built towns of a floating mining population’ (Maxwell [1891] 1983: 145). Others still combined their distaste for mining with an appreciation of the picturesque aesthetic. This is particularly noticeable in Swettenham’s *Malay Sketches* (1895), a collection of observations that occupy a curious place between fiction and truth. To quote Swettenham’s description of the book, these vignettes were intended as an attempt to ‘awaken an interest’ in the people who lived in ‘one of the most beautiful and least known countries in the East’ (vii).

In the last chapter of *Malay Sketches*, Swettenham described the view from a mountain summit as he imagined himself looking out towards the rest of the country. Written as a love letter of sorts to the Malay Peninsula, he detailed the region’s numerous beauties in a style that draws heavily on the picturesque aesthetic. Far out in the distance, hazy mountains rise on the horizon, and a ‘golden veil’ hangs over the entire scene. Meanwhile, on the western side of the peninsula, the Dinding coast, with its vivid green patches of cultivated cane and rice fields, lies ‘flat and fertile, a feast for the eyes’. All of this lovely scenery is nevertheless broken up when the reader’s gaze comes to rest on the town of Taiping in Perak:

You might cover the place with a tablecloth for all its many inhabitants, its long wide streets, open spaces, and public buildings. And those pools of water all

around the town, what are those? They are abandoned tin-mines, alluvial workings from which the ore has been removed, and water mercifully covers, in part, this desolation of gaping holes and upturned sand.

Swettenham 1895: 283–4

In this excerpt, the after effects of mining are depicted with particularly evocative imagery. The tranquil flow of nature and cultivation is interrupted by the presence of Taiping, its urbanity sitting at odds with the peaceful, rural scenes that Swettenham just described. Such is Swettenham's apparent dislike of this place that he even prescribes a tablecloth to cover it, so as to hide its existence. Indeed, one might go as far as to detect a note of dismay in the way he enquires about the pools – what are *those*? Given Swettenham's choice to write of abandoned mines rather than working ones, these depictions give life to his misgivings about the effects of the commodity frontier. Having rendered their mines unproductive, the miners had moved on and left only ugly desolation in their wake.

Swettenham's distaste for mining was not merely limited to his more informal writings. Written during his tenure as Resident of Perak, Swettenham's 1894 annual report for the state evidenced similar language when he urged a shift

Figure 3.3 Painting by H.C. Barnard entitled 'Old Tin Workings'. Note the water-filled holes that have been left behind by mining activity. From C.W. Harrison, ed. (1920), *An Illustrated Guide to the Federated Malay States*, London: Malay States Information Agency, title page.

towards more agrarian policies. Like so many other colonial officials, Swettenham noted his preference for agriculturalists over miners, the latter being described with some measure of derision:

We give to the miner what is often fine land covered with magnificent forest, and, when he has destroyed the timber, he turns the soil upside down and after a few years abandons it, leaving huge stretches of country a sightless waste of water-holes.

While Swettenham recognized that miners undoubtedly brought in useful revenue for the Malay States, he also believed that planters were far more worthy of praise, as they converted jungles into fields, settled on the soil and kept the land in productive cultivation. Permanent remuneration could thus be gained from the sale of produce, so much so that it required ‘no great effort of imagination’ to see a time when agricultural exports exceeded that of minerals. ‘To make it easy to mine successfully and difficult to plant with profit may be good shop-keeping,’ concluded Swettenham, ‘but seems indifferent administration’ (*Reports on the Protected Malay States for 1894*, C.–7877 1895: 22).

In 1895, Swettenham’s successor in Perak, E.W. Birch, made his stance even more explicit by including a section entitled ‘Agriculture as opposed to Mining’ in his own annual report. Describing himself as being ‘imbued’ with Swettenham’s ideas on agriculture from the previous year, Birch asserted that it was impossible to disregard these perceptions when living in a country perfect for agricultural development, but ‘which has hitherto been practically handed over to miners, who turn upside down lands that could be beneficially occupied by permanent settlers’. This ‘process of devastation’ only resulted in the over production of tin and punishment of the mining community. Birch thus believed that it was ‘surely time’ for the government to limit its revenues from minerals and to discourage mining and smelting (*Reports on the Protected Malay States for 1895*, C.–8257 1896: 23).

To explain these attitudes further, we can refer to David Arnold’s work on the contradictory relationship between romanticism and economization, or ‘improvement’, in both a capitalistic and imperial sense. Writing in the context of British India, Arnold argues that while Europeans maintained a sense of romantic appreciation for nature’s wonders, they also desired to ‘improve’ the country. The latter presented two types of improvement: a capitalistic, profit-generating one, and an aesthetic kind that concentrated on transforming wild jungle into orderly cultivation (Arnold 2005: 104–9). Transplanted to the Malay States, these ideas of ‘improvement’ meant that the immense profits of mining were nevertheless

tempered by their adverse effects on the surrounding environment. Agriculture, on the other hand, was the perfect vehicle for accomplishing these visions of an 'improved' colony, as it not only had the potential for sustainable remuneration, but also possessed picturesque qualities. These qualities in turn reflected colonial desires to see the presence of British aesthetics in the Malay States – which is to say, rural landscapes bearing signs of agricultural development. Correspondingly, while mining could only partially fulfil the capitalistic and aesthetic conceptions of 'improvement', agriculture fitted into both categories perfectly.

Given the background of these perceptions, it is perhaps of little wonder that British officials in the Malay States frequently invoked the picturesque qualities of settled agriculture. In a journal detailing his journey from Perak to the region of Slim in 1888, Frank Swettenham arrived at the confluence of two rivers, only to describe it as 'the picture of rest and beauty', with the 'two or three picturesque huts' on the riverbanks leading him to imagine that this 'might almost be a village in Switzerland' (Swettenham 1880: 58). Others, such as the superintendent of public works and surveys in Selangor, D.D. Daly, also explored the Perak region and returned with reports of passing through 'most picturesque country' which consisted of large fields and numerous Malay huts and gardens (Daly 1882: 399). Similarly, colonial engineer Major McCallum's record of a trip across the Malay Peninsula with the governor of the Straits Settlements indicated how Pahang's scenery had changed for the better once they were out of 'dreary, monotonous jungle', the company eventually finding themselves amongst paddy fields, gardens and orchards instead. Encountering 'ideal bits of Malay kampong scenery',² McCallum took to describing them with some indulgence as they 'stood out well in the early morning sun which was lighting up the blue hills ... in the background' (McCallum 1894: 11).

Appreciation for such scenery also held more practical motivations, as evidenced by the writings of Martin Lister, who was the Resident of Negeri Sembilan during the late 1880s. In his 1889 annual report for the state, Lister wrote of being incredibly satisfied to see gardens and houses springing up around the region of Kuala Pilah. For Lister, this type of settling for cultivation constituted 'a better compliment to the Government of a state than the opening of mines and large plantations', since it demonstrated that the local populations had intents to settle permanently. Subsequently, Lister argued, this would give them confidence in the state's future (*Papers Relating to the Protected Malay States*, C.-6222 1890: 75).

These positive sentiments towards the relative simplicity of rural agrarian settlement formed part of a much longer historical trajectory, one that stretched as far back as Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt (Bunce 1994: 5). As a comforting

myth that invoked some long-passed golden age in which things seemed simpler or purer, the countryside stood in opposition to the increased social tensions and change associated with urbanization. Fears of the future and an imperfect present thus rendered the rural past into an ideal (Short 1991: 31). Indeed, as Kratoska (1985) demonstrates in his work on Malay peasantry and land ownership, British misunderstandings of Malay customary law even led to the incorrect assumption that Malays had some kind of inviolable relationship with their land. Subsequently, it was these misunderstandings that also informed numerous misguided attempts to mould colonial land legislations and policies around this presumed sacred relationship.

In this case, nostalgia for a rustic, rural life was nothing new by the time of British intervention in the Malay States (Wiener 1981), though we can certainly point to industrialization in Britain as an important catalyst that helped fan these sentiments amongst colonial administrators. By the middle of the nineteenth century, factory production and mining had overtaken the agricultural sector, and while urban populations boomed, the countryside languished. At the dawn of the twentieth century, Britain was almost entirely industrialized and urbanized (Bunce 1994: 10).

Simultaneously, this shift from the agricultural rural to the industrial urban was accompanied with changes to social structure. As Michael Bunce summarizes, the paternalistic, interdependent ties of agriculture were replaced with the anonymity and insecurity of factory-work instead (Bunce 1994: 11). The mid- and late-nineteenth century thus saw landowners respond by building model villages or cottages which both perpetuated the picturesque aesthetic and evidenced a paternalistic social concern on the landowners' part. This paternalism stood in opposition to the 'hard selfishness' of the market, reviving previous forms of social thinking that focused on 'mutual responsibility and deferential hierarchy' instead (Burchardt 2002: 60). Considering this situation in the metropole, we can begin to understand how such beliefs might have been transplanted to the Malay States. Rapid industrialization and urbanization invoked a sense of nostalgia for a simpler, rural past, and when officials arrived in Malaya, that was exactly what they saw.

Conclusion

At the close of the nineteenth century, British rule in the Malay States was characterized by its close association with a number of different colonial projects.

Having examined the realms of tin mining and agriculture, this chapter demonstrates that these economic activities brought their own distinct effects on the region's economy, society and – perhaps most importantly for this volume – physical landscape. As officials debated the merits of each economic activity, what emerged from this confluence of approaches was a picture of colonial rule that was predicated on a range of environmental and racial attitudes, there being no single coordinated effort towards an overarching policy for the region.

In this case, occupying a space did not necessarily come hand in hand with clear-cut objectives for Malaya, as colonial interests tended to contradict each other. Despite the vast riches offered by tin mining, colonial administrators frequently voiced their preference for agricultural development instead. British intervention in the Malay States was thus not merely about extracting financial benefits; the social organization it governed and its corresponding aesthetics also required careful consideration. To help explain the inconsistency of such an approach, this chapter has argued that British officials approached agriculture not just as a long-term investment, but also as a vehicle through which they could socially engineer a preferred colonial settlement and reinforce the picturesque aesthetic. Seemingly docile Indian agricultural settlers were preferable to the rabble of Chinese miners while, from an aesthetic point of view, Malay villages which were so closely associated with settled agriculture stirred nostalgic sentiments for a simpler, rural time before the industrial era.

Viewing the industrialized metropole and rural, untouched periphery as dichotomies of a terrible modernity and paradisiacal agricultural past, British officials championed the continuation of the picturesque aesthetic. To achieve this aim, the British colonial government implemented a variety of policies to encourage the spread of agriculture. In an attempt to further preserve desirable aesthetics and economic practices, colonial administrators in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries even turned to creating special regions that sought to uphold these ideals, such as the Malay Agricultural Settlements and Malay Reservations. As a result, the British could go on to cast themselves as protectors who had a duty to preserve this 'better' past from the ravages of industrialization and urbanization. With the onset of industrialization brought on by developments in tin mining, however, the British were fighting a losing battle.

In sum, this chapter has demonstrated how colonial preferences for agriculture over the profitability of mining were driven by a mix of economic motivations, nostalgia and desires to 'improve' the country – a slew of seemingly incompatible desires which nevertheless worked together to further entrench the British colonial presence in the Malay States. For the British in Malaya, to occupy was

not only to build, mine and harvest, but also to imagine, idealize and impose, the afterimages of which can still be seen today.

Notes

- 1 Indian rupees were used as official currency during Company rule in the Straits Settlements, with Straits dollars only being used from 1867 onwards. Silver dollars from other areas were also considered legal tender at this point, while local currencies such as gold and silver coins were also in circulation on the peninsula. British trade dollars were introduced in 1895, only to be replaced with the Straits Settlements dollar in 1903 when the Settlements moved to the gold exchange. Official tender in the Malay States largely corresponded to these changes.
- 2 Kampong is a Malay word for ‘village’.

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