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The Unsuccessful Development of Southern Burmese Tin Mines in the Nineteenth Century

Yi Li

Introduction

On 29 November 1888, a two-man delegation left Rangoon (now Yangon) for northern Malaya. Their mission was to collect facts for the government of Burma (now Myanmar) on tin mining in Perak, where the successful extraction of the mineral, administered by the British Resident and his staff in the Sultanate of Perak,

had acted as a model for British Asian colonies since 1874. The two delegates represented two separate but complementary administrative sectors of governance in the potential development of southern Burmese tin. As the director of land record and agriculture, W.T. Hall represented the Burmese colonial government, which had recently annexed the whole of Burma and now was on its way to govern this newest province of British India. T.W.H. Hughes, on the other hand, was a technocrat from Calcutta (now Kolkata), the central seat of government in British India, where he worked as the superintendent at the Geological Survey of India (GSI). First established in 1851, the GSI was a government organization responsible for the study and surveying of land, and its many natural resources, under British rule.

Hall and Hughes spent less than a month touring Perak and Penang in northern Malaya, then sailed along the coast of the Bay of Bengal to Ranong in southern Siam (now Thailand), before crossing the Burma-Siam border to Maliwun, the southernmost village in Burma. Both of them swiftly completed and submitted their reports by the end of 1888. Despite promising expectations, Hall and Hughes's visit to Malaya eventually made little impact on Burmese

tin-mining operations on the ground. This represented a failure for all parties involved. Even though new capital and labour forces were introduced by Rangoon in the following decades, indicating an immediate connection with northern Malaya as recommended in their reports, tin mines in southern Burma remained a disappointment throughout the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, the visit itself, as well as subsequent reports, raised interesting questions about how the British colonial administration, a relatively newly arrived political institution in this region, navigated its way in complicated natural and human spaces under its occupation, and challenged the very concept of political spatial demarcation.

This chapter explores the colonial management of Burma's rich mineral deposits at the political frontier between British Burma, British Malaya and the Kingdom of Siam during the second half of the nineteenth century. These three territorial entities occupied the entire western coastline of the Malay Peninsula, with the Siamese territory sandwiched between the two British colonies. This narrow strip of Siamese land, known as the Kra Isthmus, also existed between two different administrative systems of the British Empire in Asia: to its north was British Burma, which directly reported to Calcutta as part of British India (and eventually its metropolitan representative, the India Office); to the south was the collection of states known as British Malaya, where – as Joanna Lee explains in her chapter in this volume – the British governed using a complex mixture of indirect and direct colonial rule (Sadka 1968).¹

The area surrounding the Kra Isthmus – the 'neck' of the Malay Peninsula – has for centuries been a contested zone among competing powers in Southeast Asia, and occasionally external players (Kulke et al. 2009). Being a vital point of transshipment between the Bay of Bengal to the west and the Bay of Bangkok (and the South China Sea) to the east, it has attracted anyone with an interest in intra-Asian trade. Over the centuries leading to 1888, it was the Burmese and Siamese kingdoms that competed for control over it. Until the Burmese Army sacked Ayutthaya, the Siamese capital, in 1767, Siam enjoyed full control of both coasts of the peninsula, from Martaban and Moulmein in the north to the Kra Isthmus and below. However, the Tenasserim coast was taken by the Burmese after 1767, and later annexed by the British East India Company when it defeated Burma in the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824–6).

Political changes and the redrawing of borders did not affect the continuity of the land itself, nor the natural resources it contained under or above the ground. One key geological feature of the area is an extended, unbroken tin-bearing belt of granites in mountains and riverbeds, running through the entire stretch of the peninsula and its submerged extension to the south. Almost all tin mines in the

region benefited from this belt: at its southern tip was Sumatra and the Riaus, from where the islands of Bangka and Balitun produced some of the best tin in the world and brought significant economic benefits to the Dutch East Indies (Somers Heidhues 1992). Up north, tin mines became the defining landscape of British Malaya and vital to its colonial economy (Wong 1965; Yip 1969; Hillman 1988). In southern Thailand, mining practices were prevalent on Phuket Island and the coastal areas between Trang and Ranong (Cushman and Reynolds 1991). The same belt extended further north, crossing the border and reaching Tenasserim and Karenni in Burma (Hillman 2011), arguably going as far north as the Sino-Burma border and the Chinese province of Yunnan (Giersch 2020: 123–43).

United by this extraordinary line of natural resources were communities that crossed ethnic and political boundaries, who shared similar patterns of work and life, and who constantly communicated with and influenced each other. In the nineteenth century, this multi-ethnic population on a 'plural peninsula' (Montesano and Jory 2008) that was engaged in tin mining not only included Indigenous communities such as Malays and Siamese, but also foreign settlers and sojourners – such as European, Chinese and Indian people – who represented relatively new arrivals in the region.

Taking this 1888 Burma-Malaya study visit as a lens to dissect the complicated interaction of multi-ethnic agencies in this ever-changing political and communal space, this chapter challenges the very foundation of spatial demarcation under colonial occupation – a key theme that is linked directly to the writing of 'spatial histories' of colonialism in Asia, and that is addressed in a number of other chapters in this volume. Unlike Hillman's (2011) narrative of the development of Burmese tin (that focuses on ethnic and production/capital relations), the chapter situates itself in 'a meeting place of peoples in which geographic and cultural borders were not clearly defined ... [and] intercultural relations produced mixing and accommodation as opposed to unambiguous triumph' (Adelman and Aron 1999: 815–16). I argue that the transition of this space from a frontier to a borderland was tangible, as 'contested boundaries between colonial domain' (Adelman and Aron 1999: 816) were recently drawn and started to be felt, despite ongoing, extending and overlapping networks across these new lines (Baud and van Schedel 1997: 225). Here, human occupation was intricately intertwined with political and institutional occupation, both of which played an important role in shaping the natural and social landscapes. As the 1888 study visit and its aftermath suggest, a realignment of space, with multiple dimensions and under multiple scales, was tentatively attempted. Ultimately, however, this yielded to the increasingly rigid and inflexible political

and institutional boundaries that came to represent the nature of colonial sovereignty in the region.

Locating tin deposits in southern Burma

People in Southeast Asia worked the region's tin deposits long before the arrival of Western colonial powers. The mineral was a desirable commodity for the Burmese and Siamese courts, was probably traded by the Arabs in the ninth century and attracted the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in the seventeenth century (Hillman 2011: 122–3). The method of working the mineral was simple. It involved shallow pits or dugouts and a washing trough to collect stanniferous gravel from streams and then to separate tin crystals from overburden. These were often worked by locals such as the Shans and the Karens (Helfer 1839: 32; Tremenheere 1841: 845; Penzer 1921: 137; Oldham 1856: 57).

In this politically contested zone, the last pre-colonial conflict between Siam and Burma did not end until 1793, when Siam formally ceded Tenasserim to Burma. In the late 1830s, when Europeans first set out to explore for natural resources in the area, it was less than half a century since peace had been restored and the region was yet to recover from large-scale depopulation. Although 'traces of the work of many thousands of men [were] evident in several places' (Tremenheere 1841: 845) in the mid-nineteenth century, most of them were in a ruinous state and barely recognizable, and few local people had living memory of mining practices in the region.

Shortly after the British annexation of Tenasserim in 1826, and as part of a systematic process to obtain knowledge about Britain's newly acquired territory and its peoples, several journeys were undertaken in the mid- to late-nineteenth century by various colonial administrators based in Calcutta and Rangoon. Findings from the ground were consistent: rich tin deposits in Tenasserim, 'washed by stream works', were considered 'the best' and were comparable to those from Bangka Island (Helfer 1839: 33), whose reputation had already been established in the European market. In particular, high-quality and easy-access tin was found in Maliwun, a border village at the southernmost tip of Tenasserim.

The first person to identify the potential of Maliwun was a young naturalist called Johann Wilhelm Helfer – 'the first German in Burma' according to Zöllner (2002: 34). Helfer was commissioned by Calcutta in January 1837 'to undertake an exploring expedition in the provinces in the peninsula of Malacca, not long before conquered from Burmah' (Nostitz 1878: 58). In his reports, Helfer

confirmed several tin ores near Tavoy and Mergui, but it was not until late 1838 or early 1839 that he managed to visit the southern border between Burma and Siam. He believed that the best tin was located along the border river of Pakchan.² He noted that:

This year having examined the country to the south of Mergui, it was found that the country to the north of the Packchan river is the richest in tin ores of all the districts in Tenasserim. The range of mountains in which the tin ore is found, is a continuation (only divided by the Packchan [Pakchan] river) of the Siamese tin territory of Rinowng [Ranong]. The tin is found in the debris of primitive rocks, like in all other parts of Tenasserim, but the grains or crystals are much larger (sometimes of the size of a pigeon's egg) and the soil in which they are buried, yields 8 to 10 feet of tin; while at Tavoy the utmost is 7 feet.

Helfer 1840: 20–1

This discovery was later confirmed by George Borlase Tremenheere,³ the executive engineer of Tenasserim, who made further surveys in the same region from 1841 to 1843. He again confirmed the location and quality of tin deposits, with a special recommendation of several sites, including Maliwun. In March 1843, Tremenheere spent several days in Maliwun, finding it the 'only spot in these Provinces, where people have located themselves for the purpose of collecting tin' (Tremenheere 1843: 528). Like many other sites examined by Helfer and Tremenheere, tin was extracted from streambeds or riverbeds, often known conveniently as stream tin or alluvial tin (Tremenheere 1843).

A decade later, in 1851, Thomas Oldham, an established Irish geologist, was appointed the first director of the GSI. Once again, Burma's tin deposits became a point of interest for Calcutta. Soon after, Britain won the Second Anglo-Burmese War (1852–3) and annexed Rangoon and the surrounding Irrawaddy Delta, and 'British Burma' was to be incorporated into British India. Shortly after the war, in 1855, the GSI conducted its first comprehensive survey of Burma, which was led by Oldham. Oldham had heard about the great potential of Tenasserim tin previously, but he was sceptical about the reports and samples that he had received, seeing them as not meeting his high professional standards (Oldham 1852). However, once in Tenasserim, Oldham became fully convinced of the quality of the ore, claiming without hesitation that the 'greatest mineral wealth of the Southern portion of the Tenasserim Provinces consists in the extensive and valuable deposits of tin ore which they contain ... The principal source of the ore is however in the extensive deposits of "steam tin"' (Oldham 1856: 56).

While the geographical findings had now been firmly established and officially endorsed by the GSI, the prospects for the commercial development of the area were also laid bare. Oldham noted with frustration: 'A most serious drawback to the opening up of this country exists in the *total absence of any roads* . . . Another very serious difficulty in undertaking any mining works, or even in the making of roads, is the great want of labour, owing to the very scanty and sparse population of the Provinces' (Oldham 1856: 64–5). For officials in Rangoon, the next question was clear: how would they extract the tin and make it profitable for the colonial government?

Developing Maliwun

Before 1888, there were several serious attempts to extract the ore at Maliwun by a variety of interested parties. These included a Chinese headman and a Rangoon-based British company. However, time and again, and until the 1888 visit, such efforts appeared to have been doomed to failure. Indeed, the so-called tin 'dream' persistently tested the patience of Rangoon.

Maliwun was at the centre of these efforts from the beginning. It was one of the five townships in the Mergui District in Tenasserim. Up until 1891, it was also the headquarters of the township, before this was moved to nearby Victoria Point (present-day Kawtaung) (Andrew 1912: 31; Butler 1884: appendix ix). Although present-day Maliwun is a mere half hour's motorbike-ride from Kawtaung along a relatively well-built road, it was notoriously inaccessible during the colonial period. Access to the area was mainly through the border river of Pakchan. At its mouth to the sea at Victoria Point, Pakchan was over 3 kilometres wide and was navigable for steamers upstream for about 16 kilometres, where it reached the Maliwun Creek. Here one would change to smaller vessels and continue to sail for another 11 kilometres to reach the village itself. However, there was no guarantee of getting there, as the creek only worked 'on the flood tide, junks of twenty or thirty tons; but at low tide there is no water to float the smallest canoe' (Tremenheere 1843: 523, 528). The village, however, was a pleasant and hospitable place, with 'a range of high hills between it and the sea', a rich moist soil suitable for cultivation, sugar cane, and areca trees that bore fruit after three years, instead of the usual seven- or eight-year period. Indeed, a district engineer noted that the village enjoyed a '... climate more resembling that of Penang than any other part of our [Tenasserim] coast' (Tremenheere 1843: 528).

The first resettlement of the village after the British annexation was recorded to be no later than 1840. Three years later, an estimated 500 inhabitants, including 100 Chinese, 160 Malays and 160 Siamese, were living in Maliwun. Like everywhere else in the region, Chinese worked the tin deposits under their headmen, and Malays and Siamese primarily worked as cultivators (Tremenheere 1843: 528). In 1859, the village was still 'described as wild and uninhabited', with 733 Chinese, Malay and Siamese residents working directly or indirectly on extracting tin, but no Burmese or Talain (Mon) (Hall 1888: 19). The same occupational pattern remained well into the following century. By then, and with the exception of a few Burmese government workers and their families, Chinese migrants continued working on tin, Siamese on the rice fields along the Pakchan River and Malays more often along the coast closer to Victoria Point (Andrew 1912: 31–2).

As early as 1830, Calcutta received a suggestion that the East India Company 'should establish a "chop" of its own' to fetch a better price for minerals in Burma than in the Malay Peninsula if the company could guarantee its quality (Hall 1888: 19). However, even after receiving a professional nod from the GSI, only the tin in Maliwun was seriously worked (Hall 1888: 19). The first organized attempt at commercial production was initiated by Hopkinson, the commissioner of the Tenasserim Division in 1860. Hopkinson leased the entire district to a Chinese man called Chit Syang for ten years at an annual rental of 650 rupees.⁴ The local government expected an extra income of 60 rupees per year for permission of liquor sales, and an annual profit of 2,000 rupees from selling government opium. Sale of both these products passed through the hands of Chit Syang, who also worked as Maliwun's *myook*, or extra assistant commissioner (Hall 1888: 19; Butler 1884: 29–30).

The 1860 lease allowed Chit Syang significant autonomy to mine on his own terms. In doing so, it also allowed him to follow a common practice of 'coolie labour' among Chinese migrant mining workers in the region. By paying for legal access to the land (the mines) and provisions under excise control (liquor and opium), Chinese headmen like Chit Syang could recruit workers and source other living essentials (such as food and accommodation) through their own networks, open and maintain pits and furnaces, organize and oversee working shifts, and make a profit by selling mineral products. The mining methods used at the time remained almost unchanged from those of pre-colonial years (Butler 1884: 29–31).

In the last year of Chit Syang's decade-long lease, tin appeared on the district revenue book as a deficit of 388 rupees. Such a meagre income (2,720 rupees)

could not cover the cost of keeping police in the region (3,108 rupees), and ultimately acted as a drain on the local government. Not surprisingly, Chit Syang's lease was not renewed and the government turned its attention to a Rangoon-based, British-owned company whilst they continued to debate the suitable length of a new lease term (Hall 1888: 20).

W. Strang Steel and Company succeeded Chit Syang in Maliwun and was awarded a lease on the deposit for thirty years at an annual rent of 1,000 rupees in 1873. Indeed, Maliwun tin was one of the very first enterprises taken by this new company, which had been recently founded by William Strang Steel in 1870. By that time, William Strang Steel had been in Rangoon for almost a decade, having worked for the Rangoon branch of Gladstone Wyllie and Co. to trade Burmese rice since 1862. Steel's company, later renamed Steel Brothers, would go on to huge commercial success, and was best known for its monopoly in Burmese rice. One account accurately summarizes that 'the history of these sixty years of development and expansion of business in Burma can largely be told in recounting the story of the growth of Steel Brothers and Co. Ltd' (Anon c. 1970). True enough, the company's experience faithfully captured the frustration over Burma's commercial development of its southern tin deposit. Steel's involvement in Tenasserim proved to be an exceptional disaster in the company's otherwise impeccable profit-making record.

One of Steel's agents, William Quiller Rowett, visited Maliwun in 1874. By then, Maliwun village 'consist[ed] of a few struggling houses' (Rowett 1874: 20) and was considered 'filthy' by Rowett (Rowett 1874: 21). The area had a guard made up of one corporal and two peons for the protection of the company's warehouse at night (Rowett 1874: 18). Outside the village, Chinese labourers worked two charcoal pits that provided fuel (Rowett 1874: 22). Nearby, three mining pits operated in a 'tributary system', which meant the Steel Company advanced funds and provisions (including opium) to the Chinese headmen, who then managed the sites and labour, and returned the mineral products to the company, in the same 'coolie labour' way as Chit Syang had done before. As had been the case with Chit Syang, this method was financially unsuccessful, and one pit had to be abandoned. The fourth pit, however, presented an opportunity in the eyes of Rowett. It was newly opened by the company's own workers, who were specially sourced from India, and was under the direct management of the company with no middleman involved (Rowett 1874: 25). In addition to these small-scale working pits, there were several Chinese individuals and groups working in sites left by Chit Syang, with an irregular schedule and minimal outcome.

Labour was a major issue at the site. A German company which leased a nearby site and invested 75,000 rupees over a two-year period found it difficult to recruit 100 Chinese workers from Penang. By the time of Rowett's visit, less than half of these workers remained due to a lack of facilities, absenteeism and disease (Rowett 1874: 5–6). Steel did not fare any better, despite a conscious effort to use new sources of labour from India to avoid the hassle of dealing with Chinese labourers and the Chinese 'coolie labour' practice. However, Indian labourers, who – in the eyes of European officials and businessmen – 'understood nothing of mining' (Butler 1884: 28), proved to be one of the two fatal factors in Steel's downfall. After investing 300,000 (three lakh) rupees in Maliwun, Steel's project ultimately lasted only four years. In 1877, the company ended operations and left Maliwun with significant losses.

Thereafter, operations on the ground became quiet. Chinese workers continued their own mining methods, struggling to pay for their living with the little income they received from the tin they mined. In the following decade, ground rent was sporadically imposed but never enforced, along with export duties. In 1888, Maliwun had two smelting houses and a handful of pits outside the village but no cart track linking them with each other or with the village, and two broken bridges. Nine Chinese in the village claimed to be 'mine owners'. Among those, three had around twenty labourers each and the rest fewer than ten. Workers were brought from China or Penang at a high cost and many absconded (Hall 1888: 17–18). The small and unclear amount of mineral output was carried across the river to Ranong in Siam, by-passing any Burmese revenue offices. The district statistics of Mergui shows near-zero economic activity in the years after the Steel Company left the region. Although 'no reliance can be put in their [i.e. statistics'] accuracy', the lack of interest from all parties was evident (Hall 1888: 17–18). Maliwun felt like, and essentially was, a dead zone.

Visiting Perak, Penang and Ranong

Frustrated by repeated and unexplainable failures from the south, Rangoon had to look elsewhere for new inspiration as well as new resources. Although Rangoon was administratively subordinate to British India, Calcutta provided little support throughout Burma's struggle with its tin deposits. Meanwhile, news from the south, at the border of the Siamese Kingdom and the British-controlled Malay Sultanate of Perak, seemed to be promising. Less than two decades after the signing of the Treaty of Pangkor (1874), British administrators, working

closely with Chinese labour and capital, and supported by the sultan of Perak, were on track to create one of the most profitable tin mines in Southeast Asia, whose annual export would increase three-fold in less than a decade, from 4,135 in 1879, to 12,973 tons in 1887 (Hall 1888: 1–2). Revenue in Perak increased almost five times from \$388, 372 (Straits dollars) to \$1,827,476 (Straits dollars) during the same nine-year period, from mining-related income, both directly (through royalties, fees and rent) and indirectly (through permission to sell opium and liquor) (Hall 1888: 3).

This success in Perak was in a sharp contrast to the stagnation in Tenasserim, especially considering that nature seemed to provide an equal, if not better, share to Burma than to its counterparts in Malaya. Indeed, the involvement of the British colonial establishment in northern Malaya began relatively later and was certainly more volatile than that in southern Burma. The control of tin mines was a key issue between rival Chinese factions in Malaya, who were in constant and open conflict, and who were supported by their respective Malay allies including the family of the sultan and his court. From the early 1860s, a series of violent conflicts broke out in various mining sites in Perak and nearby Penang, which caught the attention of the British administration in the Straits Settlements, which saw an opportunity to intervene in the tin industry for its own sake. In 1874, through the Treaty of Pangkor, the British managed to extend their influence in Perak, establishing a British Resident at the sultan's court (Sadka 1968; Wong 1965).

In 1867, while Chinese and Malays were at war over tin, the Straits Settlements was also administratively transferred from British India to the Colonial Office in London, becoming a Crown colony. This was part of the larger administrative reshuffle after the Indian Rebellion of 1857 – an event which, as Vishvajit Pandya and Madhumita Mazumdar demonstrate in their chapter in this volume, also had implications for the spatial governance of other parts of British-controlled Asia – signifying the end of the monopoly of the East India Company in India. In retrospect, however, the separation of British colonial administrative spaces by the Bay of Bengal – between colonies in the South Asian subcontinent and maritime Southeast Asia – seems to have been a rational and almost inevitable move. Since the late eighteenth century, a flow of East India Company men had travelled eastward and across the Bay of Bengal to explore the coast, the peninsula and the islands of what is now referred to as 'Southeast Asia', hoping to extend the company's influence to this side of the bay. Many of these men were pioneering colonizers in British Southeast Asia, including Francis Light, Stamford Raffles, John Crawfurd and Henry Burney. Despite being hired by a

company that was firmly based in India and its surrounding areas, they were embarking on a different path, diverging from other company employees who devoted their career to the subcontinent. They became familiar with the unique customs and languages of Southeast Asia (Raffles 1817; Crawford 1820, 1829, 1830, 1852; Burney et al. 1995), a categorically different knowledge set from that which had been needed by the company's South Asia-oriented employees.

This first generation of British colonizers, moving across the Bay of Bengal, saw two distinguishing spheres that deserved two distinctive approaches, even though this was often institutionally overlooked by their India-centred company colleagues and their peers in Britain, who conveniently allocated both the Straits Settlements and Burma to Calcutta's administrative sphere. In hindsight, the separation of the Straits Settlements from India signalled an early readjustment of the colonial rationale of spatial demarcation. Burma, however, would remain part of British India, despite its 'mis-orientation [and] awkward[ness]' (Li 2017: 5–6) for seven more decades, until 1938, when it too became a Crown colony and reported directly to a newly formed Burma Office in London.

As had been the case in southern Burma, tin was a well-known local resource in Malaya long before the arrival of the British. In many ways, tin extraction in Malaya and Burma provides an interesting opportunity for comparison. Geographically, Taiping (formerly Larut) – the main mining site in Perak – was similar to Maliwun. Situated more than 90 kilometres from the island of Penang, a British settlement, the site was about 12 kilometres from the coast (Hall 1888: 3). Transportation in Taiping, however, was anything but similar to that in Maliwun. Until 1885, a profitable railway operated between Port Weld and Taiping, as well as over 75 kilometres of metalled road, over 60 kilometres of unmetalled road and around 450 kilometres of bridle tracks in Perak (Hall 1888: 5). More roads and railways were planned when the Rangoon delegation visited.

When Hall and Hughes arrived at Perak on 5 December 1888, they went directly to Taiping. Although the British Resident, Hugh Low, was away at the sultan's court in Kuala Kangsar at the time, the staff at Low's headquarters, including the assistant Resident, the secretary for Chinese affairs and the inspector of mines, were extremely supportive and provided as much information as possible to their anxious colleagues from the north (Hall 1888: 1).

Taiping was essentially a self-contained Chinese town by this time. Its primary workforce was made up of Chinese miners who were under the direct supervision of Chinese mine owners. Among other regular features, such as smelting houses, miners' huts and mine-owners' houses, the jail and the bazaar, Hall and Hughes also visited a Chinese hospital, a Chinese theatre, a museum, liquor shops, a

gambling house, a pawnshop and the Canton Club (Hall 1888: 1). Recognizing the dominance of the Chinese population, a Chinese Department had been created in Taiping in 1883. This was staffed by a secretary for Chinese affairs, his assistant and several 'Chinese writers' (Hall 1888: 5–6). The main function of this department was to settle arbitration amongst Chinese labourers, to register mines and, most importantly, to monitor the activities of Chinese secret societies within the mining population. In addition, opium, gambling and pawn-licensing were carefully managed to balance supply and demand among the Chinese labourers while generating significant profit for the government. In addition, a hospital was set up on-site at the request of the miners with several Chinese doctors, as well as an English doctor. Each site was also allocated a European magistrate at the request of the Chinese (Hall 1888: 5). According to the officials, these arrangements, intended to manage the multiple interest and demands of the Chinese mine owners and miners, worked well enough to make 'Perak popular among the Chinese immigrants' (Hall 1888: 7).

Nevertheless, it was not only the Chinese who were thriving in Taiping. Although few in number and relatively small in scale, some European mining companies, including the Melbourne Tin-Mining Company, Sandhurst Mining Company and Larut Tin-Mining Company, were also active in Taiping. The largest of these were at a similar level of productivity as the medium-sized Chinese companies (Hall 1888: 13).

Hall and Hughes were particularly interested in the land and labour system installed by the new British Resident, and painstakingly brought back copies of various contracts as templates for future use in Burma. Licences, duties and contracts covered different stages of the mining operation, for various sizes of land plot, and for different types of people who worked at the mines, such as owners, individual miners and labourers. These contracts were valid for different periods (from six months to twenty-one years) and were all fixed at different prices. It is worth noting, however, that the officially sanctioned contracts between Chinese mining labourers and their employees marked no substantial departure from the old 'coolie labour' system between Chinese headmen and labourers that had been practised for decades in the region. However, the fact that such contracts were carefully designed and managed by immigrant regulations and were officially monitored by officials in the Straits Settlements, especially when they involved new workers who entered Perak through the Immigrant Depot in Penang (Hall 1888: 10), suggests that this Chinese practice was now well recognized by and integrated into the British system. As in Maliwun, there was a continual problem with an insufficient supply of labour,

and Tamils from south India were also recruited. However, the result (as far as the British were concerned) was unsatisfactory (Hall 1888: 10), echoing Steel's unsuccessful recruitment from north India during an earlier era. To tackle the perennial problem of labour shortages, efforts were made to by-pass ports such as Singapore and Penang, and to establish a direct supply line between south China and Perak to avoid any loss to other rival sites in the wider region, such as Sumatra in the Dutch East Indies (Hall 1888: 11).

For the moment, however, the real powerhouse for the Perak mining operation remained firmly in Penang – the next stop on the route taken by the delegates. Penang was the source of Perak's Chinese capital and labour, as well as a major centre for European commercial operations, all of which were regulated by a watchful colonial government. In Penang, the delegation wasted no time in calling on all key players, including fellow colonial officers at the Immigrant Depot and the Chinese Protectorate, the smelting operation of the large Singapore-based trading company Messrs. Boustead and Co. (Hall 1888: 1), and 'a few respectable Chinese capitalists . . . who have expressed a willingness to try a hazard on the Burmese continent, and who would carry out their own prospecting' (Hughes 1888: 3). The stop-over in Penang further expanded the delegates' knowledge of Chinese networks, European merchants and colonial management.

On 14 December, the delegates left Penang on a small steamer, sailing north along the coast. Three days later, Hall and Hughes arrived at the Burma-Siam border. Before returning to Burma, they called upon Ranong, where the governor (raja) of Ranong and his family lived. In 1846, King Mongkut of Siam had appointed a Chinese man, Khaw Soo Cheang, to take full control of Ranong.⁵ Khaw was Hokkien – his ancestral homeland was Fujian in south China. Before settling in Ranong, Khaw Soo Cheang had pursued various ventures in Penang as well as in coastal areas in southern Siam. When the Burmese delegates visited, the current governor was his second son, Sim Kong, who had inherited the title from his late father. By then, the Khaws had successfully extended their political and commercial bases in the area connecting northern Malaya and southern Burma, through Sim Kong's brothers who ruled the neighbouring southern Siamese districts of Trang, Langsuan and Phuket, most of which were known for their active tin industries and growing Chinese communities (Cushman and Reynolds 1991).

Ranong sits across the Pakchan River from Maliwun. However, in the eyes of Hall and Hughes, with their fresh memories of Perak, the river separated not only two political zones but also two completely different universes – both

physically and mentally. Indeed, despite being a Siamese territory that had been managed by a Hokkien Chinese family for almost half a century, Ranong bore many similarities with Taiping. First of all, labour in Ranong was supplied by depots in Penang and was under the surveillance of the Chinese protector, who explained the terms and conditions of employment to the labourers before they entered into a contract, even though this area lay well beyond the administrative boundaries of the Straits Settlements (Hall 1888: 16). Like Perak, steam engines for pumping water were commonly used, indicating that 'mechanical power was understood' (Hughes 1888: 2). In terms of transportation, a regular steamer route connected Ranong with Rangoon and Penang. Inside the town, there were street lamps and clean roads, 'evidences on all sides of the Raja's desire to make improvements' (Hall 1888: 16–17).

The sharp contrast between Ranong's thriving, healthy and content Chinese population – funded, no doubt, by a constant flow of profits from tin – and the miserable situation in Maliwun was nothing new for European visitors from the opposite side of the border. During the dry season of 1838–9, Helfer met the Chinese 'stadtholder', probably none other than Khaw Soo Cheang himself, who 'improve[d] the circumstances of the inhabitants', and made Ranong 'a central station' (Nostitz 1878: 236). In 1843, Tremenheere noticed one well-worn furnace (just over a metre in height) in the town. By then, there were no more than fifty families (predominantly Chinese) in Ranong. The Chinese headman in charge, presumably the same person who met Helfer, was said to pay Bangkok 6 tons of smelted tin each year, from an estimated 60 to 70 tons of its production (Tremenheere 1843: 531). In 1874, Rowett, on his way to Maliwun, also noticed Ranong's 'thriving appearance'. Its Chinese population had reached about 1,000 by this time, with newly-built houses and well-stocked shops. He also noticed 'a large quadrangular court' with several buildings, which were 'much after the style of a Penang Bungalow' and were used both as the family house for the governor, as well as the venue 'for smelting and storage of tin' (Rowett 1874: 11–13). On the south side of the quadrangle, tin ores were brought in by elephants and charcoal by cart. There were six furnaces, each with a daily smelting capacity of 'eleven blocks of 80 lbs' (Rowett 1874: 11–13). The monopoly of tin mining by the Khaws and its absolute priority in the work and life of Ranong was unmistakable. Hall again noticed that the furnace, the only smelting facility of the town, was 'just outside the palace wall and all the tin got in the mines is smelted here' (Hall 1888: 17). Hughes succinctly summarized that what they had seen in Ranong was 'a thorough appreciation of the administrative and executive

conditions requisite to secure progress' (Hughes 1888: 2) – a sharp contrast with Maliwun, its neighbour across the river.

The 'California of the Straits Settlements'

After leaving Ranong, the delegates spent a few days in Tenasserim, and eventually took a steamer north to Rangoon. By the end of December 1888, with rich material collected 'in the field', both Hall and Hughes were full of new ideas about how to mine in the region, developed around what they saw as a winning 'formula' of three mutual-supporting factors: Chinese labour, European technology and a sound colonial administration. At a more concrete level, several key items of infrastructure, such as transport, legislation covering fields such as labour, leases and taxation, and a willingness from all parties involved, were all recommended in their reports. Certainly, these were not best-kept secrets, and nothing in these reports was necessarily new. Almost all of their suggestions were either openly practised or had been suggested for decades already in mining sites both in and outside of Tenasserim. Was there anything that the delegation really found in Perak, Penang and Ranong that was not already known in Tenasserim? Importantly, a careful reading of the suggestions in their respective reports and the implementation (or the lack thereof) afterwards, provides a clue that potentially challenges the very foundation of colonial administration and its boundaries.

Hall, the delegate from Rangoon, applied his line of thought within the existing framework and context of the Burma administration. His four recommendations were to appoint an assistant commissioner at Maliwun; to allow long leases to induce European and other capital; to remit licence fees, export duties and ground rent; and to improve communications with the area by sea and land (Hall 1888: 21). All these factors indicated that he saw it best and most practical to transplant existing good practice from Perak, Penang and Ranong to Tenasserim, essentially replicating an operational space that existed in Malaya to improve the system in Burma.

But others had a different vision about mineral development in the region, especially when they had less of a direct connection with the Burmese administration. The Calcutta delegate, Hughes, went a step further than Hall by recommending not only the transplanting of the Malaya model into Burma but also recommending the use of Malayan personnel. He particularly singled out the inspector of mines in Taiping, who could claim twelve years' experience dealing

with the Chinese, to be seconded to southern Burma for a fixed period (Hughes 1888: 2). This, however, would not be a simple internal relocation, as Perak and Tenasserim belonged to two distinctive colonial institutions, both on the ground (the Straits Settlements and Burma) and in the metropole (the Colonial Office and the India Office), and a transfer like this would involve extensive, multi-party negotiations.⁶ In addition, Hughes, unlike Hall, suggested encouraging Chinese investment in the mines, with an open preference for the Khaw family of Ranong. In both cases, Hughes' approach was more thorough than Hall's, as he saw beyond the verbatim replica of an operational space. Engaging human resources with transferable skills was as important as (if not more important than) the geographical setting and administrative system. Hughes emphasized the individual contribution in space-making rather than the role of institutions.

Nonetheless, both men stopped short of questioning the overall spatial plan in the colonial framework of British India, whose demarcation of provincial and state borders until the 1880s was less a consideration of local suitability than an arbitrary result from existing borders and the hazard of wars. It would take another individual from outside the British India system to bring up the bold suggestion of re-designing the colonial border and realigning the institutional spaces, just as the Straits Settlements had tried (and succeeded) to do more than two decades earlier.

In 1892, three years after the study visit, E.H. Parker, in his capacity as officiating adviser on Chinese affairs in Burma, conducted an extensive tour in the major towns in Tenasserim and visited a number of Chinese communities, including Ranong. 'Maliwun is the Ultima Thule of the Indian Empire', Parker wrote in his diary on 2 November 1892, adding that 'it might and ought to be California of the Straits Settlements, with which it is in close touch' (Parker 1892: 7). Although Hall and Hughes recognized the important influence on Tenasserim from Malaya and Siam, it was Parker, whose career was entirely in the Foreign Office's consular service in China, and who had only been working in Burma for a short period, who bluntly spoke of something that neither Hall nor Hughes meant or dared to say – 'less connection to Rangoon, especially Calcutta and Simla' (Parker 1892: 7), the better for Tenasserim, Maliwun and the tin.

Conclusion

The story of unsuccessful tin mining in southern Burma presents an interesting case through which we can reconsider the nature of the geographical, human

and institutional spaces of this region – at the border of what we now call ‘South Asia’ and ‘Southeast Asia’ – under colonial occupation during the late nineteenth century. On (and underneath) the land and waterways of southern Burma, where geography connects natural resources and ethnic communities, and politics divides practice and mentality, tin symbolized not only a failure of commercial development, but also a failure of colonial rationality of spatial demarcation and management.

In the end, it was E.H. Parker, a complete outsider from the existing institutions of British India (and British Burma), who touched upon the very basis of the issue: the colony’s spatial division was problematic from its inauguration in Burma, and southern Burma was in every sense part of the Malay-Siamese world of maritime Southeast Asia. However, that was as far as Parker, and the British Burma government he worked for temporarily, could go. Parker’s plans would remain a short entry in an internal government document, the recommendations of which would never be followed up. Over time, Maliwun saw itself trapped in the increasingly rigid Rangoon/Calcutta administrative sphere, with the fluid trespassing across the Pakchan River and further south soon becoming a thing of the past. None of the recommendations from the study visit materialized in the long term, and more than a century on, Maliwun remains a sleepy village on the southern border of Myanmar, with almost no memory about the dreams, hopes and frustrations of tin once harboured by colonial visitors to it.

Notes

- 1 In 1888, Penang was part of the Crown colony of the Straits Settlements. Perak was under British protection by a British Resident and was soon to be incorporated into the Federated Malay States (1895). The northern Malay Sultanates of Kedah and Perlis would not be ceded to Britain from Siam until the signing of the Anglo-Siamese Treaty in 1901.
- 2 There were border disputes around the Pakchan River between British Burma and Siam at this time, as both parties were interested in the rich minerals on both sides of the river (Winichakul 1994: 65–6).
- 3 Tremenheere is a typical Cornish surname. However, I am yet to establish a clear link between Tremenheere’s professional activities in British India and the Cornish tin-mining industry.
- 4 In other contemporary sources, this individual’s name is given as ‘Sit San’. The spelling of the name varies, but all are obviously based on the same pronunciation of a Chinese dialect.

- 5 This happened on the 'fifth lunar day of the first lunar month in the *Yiji* year of the reign of the Daoguang Emperor of China' which is 31 January 1845. This date is recorded on an inscription, *xugong lingmu bei*, from the tomb of Khaw Soo Cheang in Ranong. The inscription was made on the ninth year of the reign of the Guangxu emperor (i.e. 1883).
- 6 However, this was not unprecedented. Precisely around this time, Burma first borrowed, then permanently hired, one China expert (William Warry) from the Foreign Office's China Consular Service to help with Sino-Burma border issues. The existing paper trail between China, Britain, India and Burma on negotiating Warry's relocation indicates the complicated nature of an intra-empire, inter-departmental transfer, and the very limited role that Rangoon was allowed at this level (Li 2016).

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