Raffles Unravelled: Unpacking Singapore's Colonial History

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Abstract

Sir Stamford Raffles was a man whose name is identified with prestige and is widely regarded as the 'founding father' of Singapore. But does he deserve this title? In this paper, we unravel the modern implications of celebrating a colonial figure like Raffles in Singapore's history and discuss its impact on the development of Singapore, and what it means geopolitically for contemporary Singapore. We explore the varying perspectives of Singaporeans' attitudes towards colonization that contrast the typically presented dominant narrative that Singaporeans were "okay" with the nation's colonial history. We argue that this perspective continues to exist through commemorating figures like Sir Stamford Raffles. Furthermore, we also explore the extent to which the dominant perspective excluded ethnic minorities like Malays and women historically, and continues to exclude them in the present day. Likewise, we uncover the geopolitical dynamics of internal racial and national identity and how this connects to larger regional issues within Southeast Asia, mainly Singapore's political relations with Malaysia and others. This paper aims to create further awareness of the complex legacy of colonialism, highlighting typically forgotten perspectives of minority Singaporeans, and how it continues to contribute to Singapore's cultural, economic, and geopolitical realities. We ultimately argue that showcasing the contributions of Singaporeans as opposed to one individual, Raffles or any other, will allow the nation to create a more equitable present and future.

Who Was Raffles: Initial Career and Historical Context

Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles was born on July 6, 1781, on a ship off the then British colony; Jamaica. Raffles came from an average-income family as his father was a captain, and he did not receive formal education. At the age of 14, Raffles entered the employment of the British East India Company as a clerk in London, a semi-official enterprise responsible for British colonial activities in the Far East. His work attitude was serious, and he learned a wealth of knowledge through self-study (Nasir, n.d.). Before we can assess Raffles' role in Singapore's history, it is crucial to explore the life and motivations of the man who has become a symbol of colonialism and nation-building.

In 1805, at the age of 24, Raffles was sent by the company to Penang, Malaysia, to serve as an assistant secretary, thus beginning his interests in the development and use of Southeast Asia for the British (Pearson, 2019). Britain was actively expanding its colonial empire in Southeast Asia then, and Malacca was transferred from the Dutch to British control. Stamford Raffles had ambitions for the colonial empire and worked hard to learn Malay to familiarize himself with the local customs. He also made efforts to interact with the Malays and learn about their social customs, gradually becoming a skilled navigator and earning the respect of the local Malays. However, it should be noted that Raffles' approach was less about mutual respect and more about establishing British dominance under the guise of cooperation, which we will explore later. (Alatas, 1971). After strategically forming relationships with the local Malays, Raffles suggested that Malacca be made a British military base, and he spent years traveling and working to make this happen. In 1815, Britain returned Java to the Dutch as a condition for obtaining control of Sumatra, and Raffles returned to Britain. In 1818, he returned to Sumatra again, and

on February 29, 1819, he established a free trade port on an island at the southern tip of the

Malay Peninsula, which is now Singapore. Raffles became the governor of Singapore and

remained in office until 1823. Despite commonly noted accolades during this time, issues of

racial and social hierarchies, exploitative labour, amongst others can also be attributed to Raffles

and the colonial rule to an extent. We will explore how this is possible by reflecting on how

Raffles actions were an extension of British ideas and interests.

Raffles as an Agent of the British Empire

Britain's relationship with Singapore in the 19th century was strategic, as the nation was

greatly interested in controlling the Indian Ocean. As suggested by Panikkar (1945), during this

period, the Indian Ocean, in effect, was 'a British lake', and Singapore presented one of the

pivotal points of control in the east that bonded the entire control structure together in facilitating

Britain's hegemony in international trade and communication with its colonies worldwide. In

addition, "Envisioning An Imperial Outpost" (2018) amply demonstrates the extent of migration

from China that turned Singapore into a heavily Chinese city during the 19th century. Alongside

British industrialization, this demographic shift further solidified Singapore's importance as a

strategic outpost for Britain. "Continuities and Changes" (2018) identifies Singapore as a port

city and an administrative capital for the British colony of Malaya, hence its great importance in

British colonial functions.

Firstly, let's review the dominantly shared narrative about Raffles's encounters and plans

for Singapore. When Raffles first arrived in the nation, he organized a meeting in April 1823 to

lay the framework for settling in the area (Nasir, n.d.). His urban planning of Singapore in 1819

is noted to have laid the foundation for the city-state's development. Raffles' vision included a hierarchical social structure, free trade principles, and Western ideas of democracy and justice. His efforts included establishing kampongs for various ethnic groups, creating botanical gardens, and writing a constitution (Cangi, 1993). His policies successfully developed Singapore as a strategic international port and trading city (Rakhman & Hidayat, 2021). Raffles' urban planning significantly influenced Singapore's post-independence urban development, which focused on attracting foreign investment through modern infrastructure (Tan & Low, 2019). The city-state's planning framework, rooted in European colonial practices, has shaped its current urban structure and development (Yuen, 2011). In principle, such a view and discourse on efficient and growth-oriented urban planning in Singapore will be best understood as representing state capitalism. The Singapore government has regarded land acquisition and management as one of the strong tools for revenue generation, attaining redevelopment objectives, and influencing society and the economy as a whole (Shatkin, 2014). It has made Singapore - barring a few criticisms - address urban livability and sustainability challenges by adapting to changing global and local contexts (Tan & Low, 2019; Yuen, 2011).

Raffles as a Symbol of Colonialism

The founding of Singapore as a British colony by Raffles in 1819 advanced British trade and colonial interests. The effect of Raffles on British trade and colonial enterprise is reflected in the development of an imperial icon within the narratives of colonialism (Brain, 2022). Raffles marked out Singapore as a primary site for British expansion in Southeast Asia due to its strategic position along the trade routes between China and India. He also tried to obtain a trade monopoly and British protection for the territories he administered, furthering British economic

interests. Raffles' centralizing policies in Java had promoted the colonial ambitions of the British in the region (Harrison & Trocki, 1980). Sophia Raffles interpreted her husband's objective as obtaining 'a British Empire of free trade' (Ng, 2018). While Raffles conceptualized early institutions for Singapore's development, his role in furthering British colonial ambitions was significantly enhanced through posthumous commemoration (Barnard, 2019).

The thoughts and attitudes towards Raffles, mainly his contributions to the state and community in Singapore, vary significantly amongst different groups. Some regard him as a racist schemer, while others regard him as a reformist who played an essential role in shaping the history of Singapore. Raffles' legacy was initially shaped by his wife Sophia's memoir, chronicling his career from clerk to colonial administrator (Sophia Raffles, n.d.). Raffles' letters and artifacts provide insights into his life and thoughts. In the twenty-first century, the Raffles name continues to adorn various landmarks, including Raffles City, Raffles Hotel, NUS Raffles Hall, and Raffles Lighthouse, to name a few (Bastin et al., 2009; Vernon, n.d.). The commemoration of Raffles has played an important role in framing Singapore's historical narrative. Statues and memorials have been built to honor him, reinforcing his image as a farsighted leader. Such acts of commemoration have been part of a greater imperial mythology celebrating British colonial achievements (Hao, 2023). The recent installation of a new statue to commemorate Raffles brought various criticisms from Singaporeans. For instance, a Singaporean social media account activist page asked, "Why do you still love your ex-overlords? The feeling wasn't mutual. Ever. Get the hint?" (Yong, 2014). This perspective allowed us to challenge the dominant perspective and the notion that all Singaporeans hold positive sentiments toward colonization.

Questioning Raffles as the 'Founding Father' of Singapore

Despite Raffles' celebrated status, his legacy is not without controversy. Recent scholarship has questioned the traditional narrative surrounding Raffles and Singapore's founding. Critical responses to the historiography dominated by colonialism have cropped up: for example, "Raffles Renounced" (2021) and "Thomas Stamford Raffles: Schemer or Reformer?" (1970) dismantling the positive imagery of Raffles. Alatas (1971) questions whether reflecting on Raffles as a "humanitarian" is fair. He argues against this typical narrative through examples of how Raffles deliberately issued the order that enabled those women to be seized and for them to be brought to Banjarmasin, Indonesia, and also sought to "develop" Singapore because of his desire to check Dutch supremacy in the area and meet imperial interests (Alatas, 1971). At this time, the Dutch had been restricting British trade in the region, imposing high tariffs and prohibiting British operations in their ports, which made Singapore's strategic location an appealing countermeasure ("SACM", n.d.). These ideas challenge the traditional narratives and support a decolonial approach toward the history of Singapore by citing a diversity of perspectives and sources that reflect non-British perspectives (Miharja, 2021). In addition, Raffles' decision to regulate opium smoking in 1830 could be noted as a reason for the eventual crisis that negatively affected many Singaporeans (Thulaja, n.d.). While opium smoking was common throughout Asia, the decision to regulate opium in Singapore under British rule significantly contributed to the opium crisis in Singapore. This is through their creation a structured but exploitative system that facilitated widespread addiction among local populations. For instance, the auctioning of licenses that allowed opium to be widely distributed amongst Chinese labourers, who played a key role in building Singapore's economy (Lee, 2015).

Moreover, Raffles is not the only key individual who is noted as the founding father of Singapore, as the nation's first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, often holds this title. Both Raffles and Lee played crucial roles in shaping Singapore's development and identity. Lee Kuan Yew's education at Raffles College further solidifies the connection between Raffles and the foundation of Singapore (2015). Different from Raffles, Singapore's modern development is largely credited to Lee Kuan Yew, who led the country from a third-world nation to a first-world economic powerhouse (Zhai et al., 2023). His leadership was characterized by a single-minded focus on growth, efficiency, and order while navigating challenges from colonialists, communists, and communalists (Lee, 1999). We believe that Lee Kuan Yew is more deserving of the honor of 'Founding Father of the Nation' than Raffles by the very definition of the title, as such an honor is usually bestowed on those who have contributed greatly to the founding of a nation or to its independence. In contrast, when Raffles was Governor-General of Singapore on behalf of Britain's colonial interests, 'Singapore' was more strictly a geographical concept than a national one. It was not until 1965 when Singapore attained independence from Malaysia and became a sovereign independent state, that the word 'Singapore' became a nation's representation. In fact, Lee Kuan Yew's legacy is deep in the political heritage of Singapore. His contributions are feted as part of the official narrative of the nation's success, which is inextricably linked to contemporary politics (Henderson, 2015).

While Raffles is credited with establishing Singapore as a British trading post in 1819, this portrayal overlooks Singapore's pre-existing settlements and trade networks, such as those amongst the Malay community, that were integral to the region's development. We argue that the framing of Raffles as the sole founder of Singapore is an appropriation of Singapore's local

history, where the contributions of Singaporeans are neglected. The persistently shared viewpoint that Raffles is the founding father of Singapore, along with the continued use of his name for various landmarks throughout the country, supports colonial perspectives and reinforces a Eurocentric interpretation of history. This diminishes local agency and contributions. As Harrison (2010) explains, amplifying local voices is crucial in shaping heritage practices and policies because it allows these communities to reclaim their histories from colonial interpretations. Encouraging a perspective that promotes Singaporeans as the founding people of the nation, allowing marginalized groups to have ownership of their heritage and history. This consequently can uplift these groups in Singaporean society, as there is regained control over cultural narratives (Harrison, 2010).

The critical view of Raffles as the 'founding father' of Singapore is supported by historical events and the lasting impact of his actions on the nation's development (Yong, 2024). This attitude makes us wonder if noting Raffles as Singapore's founding father accurately portrays this nation's history and geopolitical implications. We argue that the earlier focus on Raffles can lead to a skewed historical memory that centers on colonial figures and their contributions, potentially invalidating Singaporeans' struggles and negative emotions during colonization. It is crucial to recognize that history is multifaceted, and the celebration of Raffles often comes at the expense of a more inclusive and balanced understanding of Singapore's past and limits one's vision for the future. This leads us to explore why some Singaporeans still feel positively about Raffles.

Why Do Some Singaporeans Feel Positively About Raffles?

There is a commonly presented perspective that Singaporeans had positive thoughts and feelings towards colonization. However, this is a very reductionist view of colonization and instead highlights the views of the Singaporean elite, including government members and those who fit into higher classes, which tend to be those of Chinese heritage (Montsion & Parasram, 2018). Although Chinese Singaporeans tend to be of higher educational and socio-economic class currently, many Chinese people came to Singapore as migrants. Despite Chinese migrant labor being likened to slave labor in terms of structure and health impacts, the positive sentiments that many Chinese Singaporeans continue towards the British contrast sharply with the sentiments of those who have faced slavery or oppression in other contexts. For instance, African Americans regarding slavery in the U.S. and indentured laborers in India continuously take stances that systemic oppression and colonialism were harmful to its people (Lung-Amam et. al, 2016; Cecco, 2024).

To unpack why Chinese Singaporeans feel this way, we must reflect on the various institutions and factors that have continued to perpetuate the narrative that British rule was good for its people. The experiences of marginalized groups in Singapore directly contrasts the commonly encouraged belief that exists in Singaporean society: that all Singaporeans were and continue to be okay with colonization. It is crucial to note that Chinese in Singapore were absolved from harm under colonial rule, however, the colonial government often depicted the Chinese as industrious and capable. This arguably led to their relative empowerment within the colonial structure compared to other ethnic groups like Malays and Indians. The economic opportunities that Chinese migrants had under colonial rule can explain why many Chinese Singaporeans historically viewed British colonization as positive (Stan, 2019). This perception

contrasts with the experiences of minority groups that experienced marginalization or exploitation under colonial rule. We classify minority groups as anyone who does not fit into the category of being from a high socio-economic status or a part of the dominant race, which at the time was Chinese people.

Chinese Singaporeans were not free from the harmful actions of the People's Action Party, as evident through the closure of the Nanyang University which had large negative pushback from the Chinese community in Singapore (Hong & Hiang, 2008). However, despite this, there were still numerous efforts to educate Chinese Singaporeans in their native language which resulted in this ethnic group having greater access to educational and work opportunities in comparison to other ethnic groups (Min, 2021). However, even within this ethnic group, there were differences in experiences between those of different socio-economic classes (Min, 2021). Overall, Chinese migrants had a stronger historical relationship with the colonial empire which resulted in more opportunities for this ethnic group to increase their social and economic mobility in comparison to others. Moreover, although many Chinese labourers were affected negatively by the opium crisis, the experiences of wealthy Chinese businessmen were quite different. Businessmen like Cheang Hong Lim, Tan Seng Poh and Tan Hiok Nee, were able to make great profits off of the opium crisis (Lee, 2015). This shows how the experiences of the poor and rich were greatly different from one another, indicating how race is not the only factor that results in different opinions towards British rule.

As a result, we believe that this relationship has allowed wealthier Chinese Singaporeans to continue to hold the belief that British rule was not that bad in Singapore. We also want to note that there is the possibility for people from other ethnic backgrounds to also feel positive

about colonization. If this is the case, we would argue that these attitudes are for the same

reasons that many Chinese Singaporeans have- the ability for them as individuals to increase

their social and economic status. It can be hard to pinpoint what is the greater drawing factor for

Chinese Singaporeans- their ability to do business, the fact that they were able to make good

lives for themselves during and post-colonial rule, or the fact that they were the preferred ethnic

group during colonial rule. We think that it is likely a combination of all three. Beyond ethnic

groups in Singapore, there are also other individuals who may be more likely to reflect on the

effects of colonization, like business owners who value the stable environment for trade and

commerce in the nation post-colonial rule. However, we are also mindful that business owners in

Singapore and those who tend to be in more lucrative fields, tend to be Chinese as well. A

nuanced understanding of which Singaporeans are of the mind that colonization was a good thing

is crucial in terms of determining domestic policies for the future.

The Role of the People's Action Party (PAP) in Pushing the Dominant Narrative

It is crucial to note that even during the colonial period, Singaporean institutions

contributed to the perpetuation of the narrative that the British and those who were of elite

socio-economic status were better than other Singaporeans. For instance, the Malayan Civil

Service (MCS), which was headquartered in Singapore until World War II and governed all of

Malaysia was notorious for its racist and sexist values of recruiting male Europeans (Allen,

1970). The People's Action Party of Singapore continues to push the narrative that Singapore has

become the global superpower that it is because of colonization. Some scholars note that the PAP

party makes a continuous choice to positively reflect on colonial rule through the retention of

Stamford Raffles monuments (Hong & Huang, 2008). After examining the history of the PAP, it

is evident that the narrative that the PAP supported was one that was meant to advocate for those

who helped contribute to the population in the ways in which the party valued- the Chinese elite.

In the 1980s, PAP was criticized by former opposition politician Tang Liang Hong, a champion

of Chinese language and culture, as being mainly composed of English-educated and Christian

elites (George, 2020). This indicates how the racial dynamics in Singapore were tense

historically despite the common narrative that Singapore is racially harmonious and embraces its

multi-ethnic identity. For instance, the former first Minister for Foreign Affairs Sinnathamby

Rajaratnam helped encourage this sentiment by stating that Singaporeans should not view

themselves as Chinese, Malays, Indians, and Sri Lankans, but rather view themselves as

Singaporeans, otherwise, Singapore would collapse (Rajaratnam, 1984). Despite this notion,

discrimination and prejudiced ways of thinking continue to be a large issue in Singapore. George

(2020) notes that the "PAP is color-blind when it plays the racial harmony card against political

opponents" (p. 87). But why is this? And can we link this back to colonization and the narrative

perpetuated through Raffles?

The beliefs of the PAP are arguably a direct reflection of colonial and Western imperialist

views that were cemented during British rule. For instance, Edward Said (1977) notes that

Western colonial powers were able to power over Eastern nations during colonization and in the

post-colonial world due to their role in shaping views on the Eastern role as being the "Other".

The notion of the "Orient" has been willfully used by the Western and European world to

dehumanize Eastern nations and their peoples (Said, 1977). In the case of Singapore, we see how

these perceptions made their way into the PAP party as Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew himself

stated that, "there was no organized human society in Singapore, unless a fishing village can be called a society" (Dziedzic, 2020). This leads us to explore how the commemoration of Raffles has affected Singapore's development as a nation and as a global power.

Explanation of Singapore as a global power and as a nation

It is widely accepted that Singapore's development narrative, engineered by the PAP, projects economic development and modernization as part and parcel of national identity that has transformed Singapore from a third-world to a first-world country (Furlund, 2008). Within this timeframe, the development has had immense effects on Singapore's urban landscapes, such as Chinatown and Little India. Singapore's national narrative has been significantly shaped by its colonial history, with the government crafting a story that begins in 1819 with British arrival, effectively erasing centuries of Malay agency (Barr, 2021). The government approach, inspired by modernization theory, has achieved spectacular economic growth while simultaneously widening the gap between the official story and the residents' interpretation. This narrative embraces colonial claims of British achievements on terra nullius, delegitimizing Malay claims and creating a contradictory relationship between colonialism and the nation-state (Holden, 2019; Barr, 2021). The government's focus on economic development has led to a hegemonic narrative where national identity is equated with economic identity, reflecting an appreciation of inherited colonial modernity (Wee, 2001). This perspective has influenced Singapore's cinema, with film historians often overlooking colonialism's role in shaping cultural identity (Sim, 2011). Despite challenges, the persistence of this singular narrative can be understood through the concept of "ethically constitutive stories" central to individual subject formation (Holden, 2019).

The dominant discourse of British colonial rule over Singapore is a complex topic, highlighting certain perceived benefits and significant detriments. On the one hand, the British are credited with modernizing Singapore and developing its infrastructure, establishing systems of law and order that spurred economic growth and stability (Leonard, 2012). British colonial rule introduced Western education, which entailed teaching students in the English language and promoted Western ways of thinking. Although the value of this education and the potential biases in these ways of learning are important to note, at the time, these forms of education helped build a skilled workforce and gave Singaporeans opportunities for upward social mobility. However, those who could experience the latter, were often limited to those from wealthy families. Contrastingly, British Colonial rule also had darker aspects which are often neglected from mainstream messaging. There was an exploitation of local resources, erosion of cultural identities, and creation of social hierarchies that worked against indigenous populations (Amasiatu, 2020). In more ways than one, the British laid Western political systems that influence governance to this very day, though planting in its wake the seeds of ethnic fracture that continue into today's political landscape. Socially, the segregation and class policies pursued during the colonial era have forever changed the direction and definition of Singapore's social cohesiveness, forging a multi-ethnic society out of the various migrant populations, which works while keeping cultural heritage amidst the onslaught of Western culture.

Japanese Colonization's Impact on Singapore's Narrative of History

We also believe that Japanese colonization in Singapore deeply impacts the nation's attitudes towards its Britain-colonized history. The dominant narrative of the Japanese

colonization period known as the Syonan-to period, is often quite negative, contrasting the

positive affinity that many seemingly have towards British colonial rule in Singapore. The

occupation imposed significant burdens on Singaporeans, which worsened as Japan's military

fortunes declined (Gillian Huff, 2019). According to Professor Liao, Japanese authorities

attempted to mobilize and discipline youth to create new subjects for their pan-Asian empire,

efforts that influenced subsequent social policies after the war (2021). Shortly after Singapore's

fall, the Japanese military conducted the Sook Ching massacre, targeting the local Chinese

population (Hayashi, 2009). The legacy of the Japanese occupation is that of suffering and

resistance, which contributed to the understanding of colonialism in Singapore. The stark

contrast between the two experiences of colonization in Singapore has brought forth a complex,

ambivalent narrative toward British colonial rule. Singaporeans compare and contrast the impact

that both colonizations have had on the identity of their nation and will note that the Japanese

colonization was more harmful than the British colonization. This is likely due to the reductionist

view that anything that occurred during the British colonial period can be attributed to the rulers

at the time, rather than the people.

The post-war relationship between Singapore and Japan has been marked by economic

cooperation and strategic reconciliation. Japan played a major role in developing the economy of

Singapore by foreign direct investment and the presence of Japanese multinational corporations

in different industries, as Shimizu (2008) points out. However, the ghost of Japanese colonization

still influences contemporary Singaporean culture and politics. This reality has placed

colonialism within a more critical context of inquiry in terms of its influence on development in

Singapore due to the juxtaposition with less brutal yet exploitative British rule. The Japanese

Occupation serves as a reminder of the darker side of colonialism, which has informed

Singapore's approach to its history and its relationships with former colonizers. This dual

colonial experience has contributed to acknowledging the complexities of colonialism's impact

on Singapore's identity and its path to nationhood (Terada, 2006).

Present Impacts of Colonization on Singapore's Relations with Other Nations

The effects of colonization are seen in many aspects of foreign relations, including the

approach toward issues like the shortage of water and energy resources, as Cahillane provides

(2020). The shared history of colonization influences the relationships of countries in Southeast

Asia, including Singapore. As a small island nation with a predominantly Chinese population

surrounded by larger Muslim-majority countries, Singapore has had to carefully navigate its

relationships with neighbors like Malaysia and Indonesia (Lim, 1990; Ganesan, 2005). Both

complementarity and conflict characterize these relationships. Moreover, the historical context of

colonization and the subsequent economic roles played by Singapore in the region have

contributed to the tensions and movements within ASEAN since the 1960s. From a regional

dynamics perspective, the nature of Singapore's functions in the region, as determined by its

colonial history, has been very significant in defining the cohesion and development of the

city-state. History lessons, including the colonial experience, have significantly shaped

Singapore's strategies and policies within the ASEAN framework.

The country's foreign policy combines realist self-reliance with the need for economic

interdependence, emphasizing both competitive and cooperative approaches (Ganesan, 2005).

While Singapore has maintained some colonial legacies, such as naming landmarks after British figures, there have been efforts to counter Western influence and cultivate a distinct national identity (Pinnamaraju, 2023). With formal relationships through trade agreements such as those within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Free Trade Area, Singapore often acts out of self-interest which puts it at odds with its neighbors ("ASEAN", 2024). However, in recent times, Singapore has seen an improvement in relations with other countries such as India, building economic, defense, and educational programs together (Singh & Rahman, 2010). This complex interplay of historical, cultural, and strategic factors has continued in the post-colonial era to shape Singapore's relations with the international community.

Balancing Perspectives: The View of Minority Group

Many Malay and Indians in Singapore took on labour jobs in Singapore as well, however, they did not have the same relationship to the colonial regime as their Chinese counterparts. This leads us to explain the perspectives of minority groups and how beliefs that were held in the colonial era have continued to affect present Singaporean society. These workers had limited protections and rights in general which can begin to explain why these groups do not positively reflect on colonization (Tjin, 2007). Singapore's national narrative was crafted to exclude centuries of Malay agency, legitimizing British achievements and role in Singapore's development while delegitimizing the contributions of Malays in doing the same (Barr, 2021). Women played active roles in the anti-colonial struggle, with some joining the Communist Party of Malaya, a political party active in Singapore between 1930- 1989, to fight against British imperialism (Teresa Bergen, 2009). These women were deeply entrenched in the anti-colonial

struggle, indicating that this was a key priority for many at the time. However, this perspective is continuously willfully forgotten, with very little information online that highlights the actions and efforts of women within the Malaya communist party. As a result, this large push against colonialism in Singapore is often forgotten. We argue that because Malay women and other minority groups held many anti-colonial viewpoints, that this is a reason for this lack of highlighted history.

What About Women?

As we noted earlier, even Raffles' legacy was shaped via the contributions of his wife Sophia (Sophia Raffles, n.d.). Regardless of whether one accepts Raffles as the founder of Singapore, many may be able to recognize that his wife is rarely mentioned as being a part of his legacy. Having Raffles, or any man for that matter, as the political symbol of what created a country discredits the contributions that women have made politically and socially to the development of Singapore. Although the term founding father is commonly used when examining a nation's history, many studies note that the continued connection of politics as a male discipline through political symbols can explain why men are often noted as having more political ambition than women (Clayton et. al, 2024). We counter these viewpoints with the following question, why would women have political ambition if the contributions of those who came before them are never highlighted? The role of women and the lack of representation of women in Singapore's history are an explicit example of what scholars refer to as double colonization. This is the notion that women are simultaneously colonized by colonial and patriarchal realities (McLeod, 2000). The refusal of highlighting the contributions not only has

political implications but also social implications. For instance, the constant reminders of Raffles as the founding father and even the debate of whether he or Lee Kuan Yew is the founding father can result in the encouragement of the perception that leadership is always male-centered. This can have lasting negative impacts on the experiences of women in the workforce and even in their interpersonal relationships because it reinforces patriarchal beliefs that women are not as capable as men to achieve such great measures, such as the development of a nation.

As explored in the section, *The Role of the PAP in Pushing the Dominant Narrative,* the PAP's role in perpetuating interconnected patriarchal and colonial beliefs continues on in present society. It is crucial to note that the PAP's enactment of the Women's Charter in 1961 was a transition into ensuring more protections and rights for women. Key provisions of the Charter include advocating to end polygamy for non-Muslim men, ensuring equality for both male and female partners in marriage, and allowing women to own, buy, or sell property. However, the PAP party did not retain its pro-women positioning as it initially was founded with, as reflected by the lack of women in party leadership during the 1950s and 1960s (Koh, 2019). Similarly, Singapore is often noted as the safest country in Asia and an overall safe country to travel alone and live in as a woman with many noting this being a result of limited crime in the country, effective transportation, and good public order ("GPI", 2022; "Solo Female Traveller Index", n.d.). Although effective government leadership and policies are important to the current order of Singapore, there are a plethora of organizations and individuals who applied pressure to ensure equal rights for women and men and helped make Singapore the safe nation that it is. For instance, the Association of Women for Action and Research ran a public awareness campaign to

end gendered violence towards women and girls and worked with the Singapore police force to develop standard police procedures on rape management in the early 90s. (Ho, S. & Kee, A., n.d.). While Singapore has made numerous advancements in terms of gender inequality compared to other nations, the nation is still not free from patriarchal beliefs. For instance, one study showed that although there are neutral sentiments about having women and men in leadership roles, there are certain biases that many Singaporeans still hold that are reflective of traditional gender roles ("Ipsos", 2024).

Significance of Unpacking Singapore's Colonial History

Our research on this topic aims to examine how Singapore's attitudes towards its colonial past were formed. We believe It is important to recognize that the act of colonization itself does not warrant appreciation or glorification. The underlying objective of colonization is to benefit the colonizer's own country. In Singapore's case, this manifested in the form of Britain's global colonial network, which sought to establish a stronghold in Southeast Asia. Consequently, the act of colonization should not be automatically acknowledged merely because it has led to the objective development of the colony. However, we observed practices in Singapore that appeared to acknowledge the legacy of the colonizers, or rather, seemed to do so from a foreigner's perspective. We were surprised that similar sentiments are not held in other former British colonies and felt compelled to investigate the history of colonization in Singapore to figure out why it is this way. Recent research has pointed out the importance of developing critical attitudes towards colonization among the youth in Singapore, who require an objective assessment of their country's history. Specifically, Tan (2017) stresses that critical thinking education should be

adapted to cultural contexts and points to challenges within Singapore's communitarian society. Crinson (2008) discusses post-colonial architecture in Singapore through the critical regionalism balancing local and universal forms at a key political juncture. These studies focus on the significant inter-relationships between critical thinking, cultural identity, and post-colonial legacies that shape Singapore's educational and social development, and hence call for balanced approaches to fostering critical attitudes among younger persons. It is our belief that the younger generation of Singaporeans should take pride in the contributions of individuals from diverse origins and backgrounds to the development of Singapore. However, they should not empathize with the colonialists, who were not directly involved in the labor and construction of Singapore.

As we have identified so far, there are differences in opinions on colonization among the various ethnic groups, social classes, and between men and women in Singapore. A nuanced understanding of which Singaporeans are of the mind that colonization was a good thing is crucial in order to determine domestic policies for the future. The evidence that Malays, Indians, and women continue to face discrimination and poorer quality of life outcomes compared to their Chinese counterparts shows a need for greater policy initiatives to protect these minority groups. Furthermore, by critically examining the dominant narrative and facilitating open discussions about race, identity, and historical grievances, policymakers can help bridge divides within society that Singapore is actively trying to reduce. Our exploration of highlighting various marginalized perspectives of history is relevant for present-day society because encouraging peace and racial harmony are goals of the Singaporean government. This is evident through the presence of existing policies that are meant to encourage interaction among different communities. An example of this is the Ethnic Integration Policy which was introduced in 1989

as a means to encourage racial harmony amongst those who were looking to purchase a Housing

Development Board flat ("HDB", n.d.). Creating platforms for dialogue among various ethnic

groups can promote understanding and reconciliation among Singaporeans. In addition, it can

allow for the further development of existing policies that seek to uplift various ethnic groups

and people of different social classes. It is clear that limiting negative health outcomes for those

with lower social classes and other vulnerable groups is a priority of the Singapore government

as evident through the various HDB initiatives and targeted interventions that seek to address

Singapore's aging population ("MOH", 2023). Since the aging population of Singapore, women,

those of lower socio-economic status, and minority ethnic backgrounds- it is crucial for the

Singapore government to acknowledge the varied experiences that some elders may have

compared to others.

Conclusion

We argue that unpacking Singapore's colonial history and challenging the dominant

narrative that it was beneficial for all Singaporeans is crucial in order to understand the current

struggles that Singaporeans face. These include the social dynamics, economic struggles, and

geopolitical tensions that the nation is faced with. Ultimately, by acknowledging history and

rejecting the notion that Singapore's founding father was Raffles and solely built by British rule,

the nation will be able to more effectively work towards achieving inclusivity in the nation.

When the contributions of various minority groups are recognized not only within the individual

communities that people are a part of, positive attitudes towards other marginalized groups will

increase. This is crucial in ensuring harmony for Singaporeans, as many ethnic minorities,

women, and people from lower social classes experience discrimination by others. We feel that rather than emphasizing individuals like Raffles or even Lee Kuan Yew as the founding father, it is more appropriate for the nation to shift towards the message that Singaporeans are the founding people of the nation. This messaging would allow for there to be generational healing amongst ethnic minority groups in Singapore, many of whom played a role in the nation's development, yet are still referred to as not Singaporean. Similarly, this would allow for the contributions of women to be reflected upon and can encourage the belief that women were and can be political people. Ultimately, by delving into Singapore's colonial history and presenting a more inclusive and accurate reflection of history, the nation will be able to give a voice back to those who were historically neglected by institutions and continue to be. This will help Singapore move towards a more equitable present and future where every Singaporean, regardless of their heritage, can claim a rightful place in the country's history.

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