The Legacy of Empire in Singapore

It is common for recent commentaries on Singapore to cover a few choice areas. Its rapid economic growth, its government’s penchant for “social” engineering and its unique, highly “managed” political system all receive more than adequate treatment in academic discourse as well as in popular journalism. The key interest in Singapore has been its progress from an entrepot dependent colony to one of the thriving economies in Asia. Since independence the major protagonists of Singapore’s story of ascendance are the city-state’s first Cabinet and its most charismatic Prime Minister - Lee Kuan Yew. This focus is understandable and the contribution of Singapore’s post-colonial leaders merits continued study, yet it would be difficult to imagine how, such a capable team, could have developed a successful country from scratch. At Independence, Singapore had been left with some important political, administrative and social foundations. These “foundations” of a nation were the legacy of the British Empire and (as this essay shall argue) it is these foundations that have helped shaped the nation we know as modern Singapore.

That there has perhaps not been as much emphasis on the study of the Empire’s legacy in Singapore since Independence is understandable. The period during which Singapore gained independence was an especially tumultuous one for the region and the world at large. European imperialism was in full retreat by the 1960s with rapid decolonization. Consequently, the study of imperialism also began its decline. Additionally, the policy agendas of post-war governments of Britain and France were filled with the political and social problems caused by economic decline. This continued to be the case well into the 1970s and 80s. The UK was especially hard hit; its painful economic decline was further acerbated by conflicts and the Oil Crisis of 1973. In the midst of this, UK governments were embroiled in addressing the explosive situation in Northern Ireland. Given these conditions, British governments have had little reason to encourage the study of the Empire or to explore the question of its legacy.

Public attitudes in Britain at the time did not support the development of empire studies. Middle and lower income segments of society were grappling (in varying degrees) with bread and butter issues of the time; and as more of the excesses of the colonial period came to light a new generation of public grew uncomfortable with the jingoism and racism associated with their nation’s past. As such they were generally clearly uninterested withreviving such a past. This discomfort grew further as the waves of immigrants from Britain’s former colonies landed on UK soil claiming citizenship and competing with already scarce employment opportunities. British academic boards, perhaps reacting to this lack of official and public interest downplayed the study of empire and of its legacy during this time. This in turn limited the amount of primary research being carried out that could have established the foundation of the study outside the UK.

Another reason for the lack of interest in the legacy of empire was the socio-political conditions in Britain’s former colonies. Unsurprisingly, after fighting difficult and prolonged nationalistic struggles for independence from the British, these nationalist governments were even less inclined than their British counterparts to encourage any meaningful academic discourse and study of imperialism and its legacy. In Singapore this
general lack of interest can be best summarised in the ruling political party’s position, made public in the 1970s, that Singapore had no history. Although this view has mellowed since the 1980s and more research into Singapore’s past has begun to flourish, this research has tended to be closely aligned towards national objectives. This means that interest in Singapore’s past has focussed on the genesis of a nation-state whose citizens are descendants of immigrants and of how these different cultural ethnicities have “…worked together to forge a nation”. It has also helped to portray Singapore’s first cabinet as exceptional leaders who through their own ingenuity and single-minded purpose helped shaped modern Singapore. The Empire’s role in Singapore’s history is explained but more as a backdrop for this phenomenal occurrence and in the laying the foundations of law and order as well as in basic public administration.

However since the mid-2000s conditions in both the UK and in Singapore have begun to change. More than fifty years since the commencement of decolonization, there now appears to be a more a favourable climate to study the legacy of empire. The UK government has begun an earnest process of re-conceptualising their national history – which includes the study of Empire. In Singapore, as in other former colonies, there appears to be a genuine sense of interest in studying the peculiar features of empire and how these have made a contribution to present day political, bureaucratic and social systems. This interest may inadvertently contribute to the wider strategy of building a more inclusive society which embraces the contributions of non-Asian cultures in the building of Singapore. This may be helpful given Singapore’s current strategy of attracting ever-increasing numbers of non-Asian global talent.

Governments around the world have long recognised the value of history in the process of nation-building. The construction of a national history is therefore seen as a purposeful exercise that serves to develop a more comprehensive and vibrant national identity. It is here that the study of the legacy of empire is timely and necessary not only for the UK but also for those in its former colonies including Singapore. It is in understanding the impact of its legacy that these societies can understand the context in which much of their society framed.

**The British Colony of Singapore – 1819 to 1965**

A brief survey of the founding of Singapore and its incorporation within the Empire is instructive to determining the extent of its legacy. Singapore was founded at a time when Britain’s presence in the Far East was just beginning. The British were a relatively new entrant to colonialism arriving only in the 1790s and following well behind the Dutch and the Portuguese before them. As a result they had to compete with the Dutch - to gain a toe-hold in South-east Asia. This meant that, British presence in Singapore was precarious and its commercial viability and worth needed to be realised quickly to justify the large political and commercial costs of establishing a settlement there.

The founding of Singapore in 1819 caused immediate trepidation in official British circles. This anxiety was well placed. Britain had just concluded the costly Napoleonic Wars and it was keen to develop good relations with other European powers. Although they were the
victors in the war, Britain was still vulnerable to attack from the continent. The
government was convinced that to forestall such aggression a buffer state had to be
established. To this end, the government was keen to develop reasonably good ties with the
Dutch (who were their nearest commercial rivals) in order to make Holland such a buffer
state. Singapore’s founding right within the Dutch sphere of influence could it was feared
disrupt this fine balance of power in Europe. The reputation of Singapore’s founder Sir
Stamford Raffles as a maverick Company man also did little to allay fears of political leaders
and they were concerned that his actions would further antagonise the Dutch and
precipitate a conflict with Holland in South-East Asia.

Through a series of passionate appeals and a fait accompli Raffles presented a case for British
possession of Singapore. It was based on his vision that the strategically positioned island of
Singapore would if given time and British administration become the most important
commercial hub in the area. To war weary British leaders and commercially minded
Company superiors, this vision must have appeared a pipe dream and unless Singapore
could prove itself it would be a huge liability for the Company and by extension the Crown.

Under these conditions, institutions and structures that were subsequently developed in
Singapore in the early years after the founding were uniquely adapted from Britain’s other
colonies. Their sole purpose was to support Singapore’s sustained commercial success.
Though these institutions have long since been dismantled and replaced, their underpinings
continue to have an impact on post-colonial society today and have formed the basis of
many of Singapore’s own social, administrative and political structures.

The colonial legacy can still be felt in Singapore today in direct as well as in subtle ways. A
tour of Singapore today will likely showcase the empire’s architectural legacy in the iconic
Old Supreme court building, Parliament House and other colonial edifices. More subtly, the
colonial legacy can still be heard in the Received Pronunciation accents of some older
English-educated Singaporeans and in the continuing bias in Singapore schools towards
British English. An in depth analysis of these legacies should be taken up in a separate and
more detailed study.

This essay however will focus on the Empire’s legacy in three key areas of Singapore’s
nationhood, namely: its legal system, its public administration and in its social services
sector.

**The Empire’s Legacy in Singapore’s Legal System**

The precarious nature of Singapore’s founding meant that it had to “prove” itself a valuable
asset to the Company and later the Crown. Critical to this was the need to ensure that law
and order was maintained in the trading settlement. It here, that Empire legacy is most
clearly felt.

Immediately after the founding, Singapore was placed under the legal jurisdiction of
Bencoolen in Sumatra where Raffles was still the Governor-General. Raffles had also to
report to his superiors in Calcutta. Perhaps realising how clumsy this arrangement in terms
of actually administering justice, the British decided to place Singapore permanently under
the administrative control of Bengal and the legal jurisdiction of the courts at Calcutta. Raffles argued that the “…the general principles of British law be applied to all (in Singapore) equally and alike, without distinction of tribe or nation but “…subject to local circumstances and conditions…” As testament to his resourcefulness, Raffles drew up a “…Memorandum which was concurred in by the Sultan and the Temenggong (the Malay leaders at the time) which intended to define the rights of all parties 4 years later in 1823 when he returned to Singapore to check on its progress. Clause 6 of the same reads:

“…In all cases regarding the ceremonies of religion, and marriages, and the rules of inheritance, the laws and customs of the Malays will be respected, where they shall not be contrary to reason, justice or humanity. In all other cases the laws of the British authority will be enforced with due consideration to the usages and habits of the people…” (Quoted in Soe, 1978: 1)"

This clause clearly sets out the foundations of what was to become the special position of the Malays and their customs in Singapore laws. This position is still firmly entrenched in administrative arrangements and in constitutional law in Singapore. From his experience in Bencoolen, Raffles must have realised that without such a provision, the Malay leadership would become potentially hostile to British administration and seek to return to Dutch control. This would complicate the British position and lead to a costly conflict with the Dutch in Sumatra.

The clause also provides for the separation of religion from matters of State especially as it pertains to Islam which was the religion of the Malays prior to the arrival of the British. This provision continues to remain an important consideration in the interpretation of Singapore’s current laws and has allowed the Malays to preserve their religious freedom while being part of a secular society. On a much wider plane, the clause indirectly sanctioned the development of a clearly secular settlement. This is a significant legacy, as the roots of Singapore’s success in multiculturalism and in religious and racial harmony can be traced to the provisions of Clause 6.

Another important legal legacy of Empire was the introduction in 1826 of English Law principles in the administration of justice. As Soe observes this continues to have far reaching consequences for modern day Singapore as, from that date “…all English law i.e. common law (including the law merchant) equity and statute law became part of the law of Singapore…” (Soe, 1978: 2)"

This did not mean that all English statutes passed after 1826 were immediately applicable to Singapore. Only Imperial Acts i.e. “…laws that the English Parliament had expressly provided otherwise…” (Soe, 1978: 3) could be incorporated as such. With this development the necessary legal frameworks for law, order and trade were established. The principles of English Law continue to remain an active element in the interpretation of Singapore.

While the trappings of the colonial legal system has long since been done away with: wigs for officers of the Court, terms of address and more recently, legalese substantively, Singapore’s legal system still shows the major influence of the principles set down by the British legal tradition in Singapore. As English (or Common) Law principles began to gain worldwide acceptance, Singapore’s continued use of Common Law assumptions and interpretations has allowed it to become a major legal centre in the region and in the world.
The Empire’s Legacy in Singapore’s Public Administration

In tandem with creating a viable and robust legal framework that supported the entrepot trade and the provision of law and order, British officials of the EIC and in the government understood the importance of sound administration to the furtherance of trade and commerce. Prior to the founding of Singapore, Raffles had been the Governor-General of Bencoolen, a former colonial possession of the Dutch and which came in British hands after the xxxx war. During his tenure there, Raffles grew to be highly critical of Dutch administration and felt confident that with their experiences in British India, the British would be able to do a better job.

With this in mind and soon after its founding, Raffles set up a fledgling civil service here to manage the day-to-day administration of the port and its environs. However, this first phase of colonial administration which Quah describes as the “pre-colony phase” (Quah, 2010: 26) did not measure up to Raffles expectations of good administration. Problems of over-staffing and rising costs of administration created inefficiencies and even after Singapore was subsumed administratively as a Straits Settlement under a Presidency at Penang (Prince of Wales Island) this problem persisted. Penang did not meet the expectations of the Company Directors and government officials. It was only after the EIC had been dismantled in 1858 and the Straits Settlements transferred to direct rule under the Colonial Office in London in 1867, that there was improvement in the structure of public administration in the colony.

Foundation of Law and Order – A Colonial Approach

One of the key challenges of public administration in the colony prior to and after “The Transfer” was the control of the rampant problem of crime. Prosperity and the potential for wealth brought to Singapore a wide range of criminals who were keen to prey on locals and European and regional traders who had based themselves in the colony. Crimes such as prostitution and gambling were difficult to control with the existing volunteer constabulary set up in the pre-colony phase. Without a firm administrative apparatus, corruption and ineffectiveness within the force was common. Added to this, was the rise of an illicit trade in opium and its attendant vices of gambling and prostitution. The 1st and 2nd Opium wars against Imperial China, revealed to the west Chinese weakness for this highly addictive substance. In Singapore, this generated a highly lucrative but destructive black market trade which was controlled by organized criminal organizations known as triads or secret societies. These societies exerted undue influence on commercial activities in some cases demanding a “cut” from legitimate trading activities. If left uncontrolled, these groups would have made Singapore an unattractive place to do business and would have jeopardised its future.

British officials here and in London, realised that public administration in general and the administration of public order – in particular – needed to be strengthened and the problem of secret societies brought under firm control. To this end, colonial authorities established a permanent police force on the island staffed by experienced British police officers at the middle and senior management levels did not in itself lead to a decline in crime. What was
novel was the approach that British officials took to maintaining law and order. A British official – William Pickering – began to take an active interest in studying the specific characteristics of the Chinese immigrant population and their dialect languages. Pickering’s efforts enabled colonial officials to build up information and knowledge of these various diverse groups and allowed him and other government officers after him to bridge cultural differences between the British and the Chinese. This forestalled recruitment of these new immigrants into the ranks of Chinese criminal gangs. The knowledge gained by Pickering and the Chinese Protectorate (as the department he headed was known) would form the basis of the intelligence the Singapore police force required to discover the modus operandi and practices of Secret Societies. With such information, the Singapore Police Force was able to reduce their influence in Society.

This approach to crime busting would continue for the 140 years of British rule and was eventually being passed on to the police force of the newly independent Singapore. The wealth of information collated over a century of study gave the leadership of newly independent Singapore a huge leg up when it came to crime enforcement. The value of its legacy is still felt as many of the key strategies and methods of training developed by the Chinese Protectorate have been honed and further developed; and they are in use by crime busting agencies in Singapore even to this day.

**Meritocracy – Empire’s Legacy**

Apart from the development of a robust police force, the area of recruitment of public servants is another enduring legacy of the British colonial era. Officials quickly realised that the unique strategic importance of Singapore and the growing trade for which it was quickly becoming an epicentre, required highly qualified and well trained public servants. The demand for such officers was increasing and had to be met quickly. Additionally, the release of the Northcote-Trevelyan report of 1855 had led to a critical review of public personnel policies at Home and across the Empire. Prior to 1855, recruitment to civil service appointments was based on patronage and not on ability. In fact, the dismal performance of The Singapore’s pre-colony phase public bureaucracy may be attributed to this. Colonial officials reacted swiftly by ensuring that recruitment into the Colonial Service was based on results of a highly competitive examination. In addition, newly minted public servants would have to prove their mettle by developing a rapid and in depth knowledge of the areas they were posted to. Only after measuring up to the demands of office, were they confirmed in the Service.

This recruitment philosophy is an enduring legacy of Empire here in Singapore. The origins of Singapore’s much vaunted system of meritocracy can be traced to the Colonial Government’s emphasis of academic excellence for recruitment into the highest echelons of colonial government. Many of Singapore’s pioneer leaders, Lee Kuan Yew included were products of this philosophy. Though, Lee never entertained notions of joining the colonial service, he recognised the value of using examinations as a tool for selecting the best and the brightest. Post-colonial Singapore, has taken this colonial instrument of selection and further refined it by adding finer differentiations.
Another legacy of Empire can be seen in the structure of the Singapore Civil Service (SCS). After the Second World War, the British realised that there was a need for greater co-option of subject peoples into public administration. This initiative pre-dated later constitutional developments in Singapore that eventually paved the way towards Self-Government. In 1947, just as the long colonial sunset was beginning, a commission was set up by officials in Singapore to study, “…the revision of salaries, emoluments and other conditions of service of public officers in Singapore and the Malayan Union… (later the Federation of Malaya)”.

The Trusted Commission eventually produced a report called the Trusted Report which recommended differentiating the public service here into four divisions each with their own salary scales, career progressions and organizational culture. The commission recommended that the nature of the differentiation was based on the type of academic or vocational qualifications. Division One officers, (European and Asian) would be officers with a University degree or a Higher School Certificate (HSC). This group of officials would form the nucleus of the administrative echelon of the public service. There after there was to be an Executive Service, a Clerical Service and at Division Four, A daily rated or menial level service.

This colonial method of structuring the public service remains largely in place today, despite the inroads of more fashionable and more “open” structures arising out of the “New Public Administration” school made popular by organizational theorists in the United States. Its resilience in Singapore is testimony to the unique circumstances of public service in this nation and the need for a structure of public service that bolsters a highly centralised State apparatus and stability of the political system. The “four-division” model ensures that there is a permanent and inherent hierarchy in the policy and decision-making process in Singapore. While initiative is encouraged and a bottom-up approach officially welcomed, the nature of the hierarchy limits the scope of policy input from the lower divisions.

The Empire’s Legacy in Singapore’s Social Services Sector

Britain’s empire was essentially a wholly commercial enterprise. Its primary purpose was the extraction of resources from subject lands or the advantageous use of a region’s geographical position to advance trade and commerce for the development of London (also known as the metropole). From London, the wealth generated from the colonial enterprise would be used for the development of the rest of the UK. This was significantly different from the Spanish and Portuguese empires. These empires were also commercial in nature but the influence of the Church was so powerful that they were also driven by the desire for Christian (Catholic) evangelism.

As we have seen, wealth generation and the need to sustain commercial success lead directly to the development of a robust legal and administrative framework for the colony. This is still visible today in Singapore as it is in various parts of the commonwealth. There is however another, “softer” aspect of British colonial rule here and which sometimes gets overlooked. It however, nevertheless continues to leave a mark on modern day Singapore.
Imperial government in the colonies wisely separated Church and State. This meant that in the course of 140 years of British rule, the Church of England was never allowed to have an undue influence on colonial policy. This separation of Church from State also meant that the Colonial State did not meddle in the affairs of religion except where there was a need to mediate legal disputes between churches or religious groups. The result of this “hands off” approach was that the social service and civil society sector in Singapore was left open to various philanthropic organizations. Indeed by the turn of the last century, much of the provision of healthcare, welfare and education was firmly in the hands of Christian, Catholic, Arab-Muslim and other ethnic groups. The Colonial state presence in this sector was limited to oversight and regulatory functions as well as in the provision of healthcare in the establishment of the Singapore General Hospital and in the setting up of the Raffles Institution and Victoria School for the provision of English education.

The resultant proliferation of civil society groups and associations was an important development then as it allowed the State to focus on law and order and service provision which was further improved to support commercial activities. Many of these civil society groups set up in the age of Empire still remain active in Singapore today. Examples of these are the Boy Scouts Association, The St. John’s Ambulance Brigade and the Salvation Army to name a few. At a deeper level, the activities of these groups exposed Asian communities to the value of social advocacy and the tradition of this spirit of advocacy that still echoes in Singapore even today. Though the issues and contexts of social advocacy of changed considerably, the spirit of providing a voice to the voiceless as well as the provision of welfare services and support continues. This spirit of advocacy acts as an important counter-balance against an official position against formal state sponsored welfarism.

The importance of appreciating legacy

The Empire’s legacy should not be missed in the interpretation of any history of the UK or of its former colonies. The administrative and legal legacy of the British Empire as well as its influence on the development of civil society continues to reverberate throughout the world. Seen in this light, the histories of “former colony” and “metropole” are inextricably linked. Understanding the unique influences that continue to have an effect on the societies of both the UK and in its former colony enriches our knowledge of what the Empire was.

It is therefore encouraging to note that the UK government has in recent months begun a review of the way its nation’s history is being taught in schools and in institutions of higher learning. This review will allow for a fresh look at Empire, one which allows for a deeper appreciation of its worth based on the resilience of its legacy in its former colonies.
Endnotes

1 Soe, Myint, General Principles of Singapore Law, Kong Brothers Press, Singapore: 1978, p1

2 Ibid 2