

Workshop on Publics and Public-spheres in Colonial Singapore

(Cluster 'Asia and Europe in a Global Context', University of Heidelberg)

09.00-10.00 Registration

10.00-10.30 *Welcome and introduction: Publics and Public Spheres in Colonial Singapore*

10.30-11.00 Coffee-break

Panel 1

11.00-11.45 *Becoming Visible: Muslim Printing and Publishing in Colonial Singapore*
(Holger Warnk, Goethe-University Frankfurt)

11.45-12.30 *Learning to Speak? Tamil Newspapers and the Public Sphere in Singapore, 1875-1915*
(Torsten Tschacher, Georg-August-University Göttingen)

12.30-02.00 Lunch-break

Panel 2

02.00-02.45 *Advertising Community: The 'Union Times' and Singapore's Public Sphere, 1906-1939*
(David L. Kenley, Elizabethtown College)

02.45-03.30 *Isolation and Interaction: Eurasian Publics in Interwar Singapore*
(Kirsty Walker, University of Cambridge)

3.30-04.15 *Coffeeshops and Vernacular Publics in Colonial Singapore*
(Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, National University of Singapore)

04.15-04.45 Coffee-break

04.45-05.30 Final Discussion

Becoming Visible: Muslim Printing and Publishing in Colonial Singapore

Holger Warnk (FB 9: Southeast Asian Studies, Goethe-University Frankfurt)

The Muslim printing and publishing scene was a fascinating sphere in colonial Singapore. Starting from modest beginnings in the late 1850s with lithographic printing presses, it soon developed into a bustling industry in the late 1870s. Although the vast majority of publications was written in Arabic-Malay jawi script, neither the readers nor the booksellers and publishers necessarily were Malays. In fact, the majority of Singapore Muslim publishers up to the 1910s was of Javanese, Indian Muslim or Arab descent. Their outcome included first vernacular newspapers and a huge variety of books, while usually the print-run followed popular tastes. Nor was the language always restricted to Malay – also titles with Islamic contents in Arab, Javanese, Sundanese or Indian languages were published.

With the appearance of the reformist journal *Al-Imam* in 1906 a major shift in Islamic publishing in Singapore and the Malay Peninsula in general appeared. While publishers in the decades before more or less printed what they could sell, afterwards the printing of newspapers, journals and books with a focus on Islam established itself as an important instrument of religious, social and – from the 1920s onwards – also of political changes.

Learning to Speak? Tamil Newspapers and the Public Sphere in Singapore, 1875-1915

Torsten Tschacher, Ph.D. (Centre for Modern Indian Studies, Georg-August-University, Göttingen)

Vernacular newspapers in colonial Singapore are often assumed, in an extension of Benedict Anderson's claims regarding the connection between the rise of nationalism and print-capitalism, to have been closely linked to the formulation of community identities among Singapore's Asian population. An important role in this process is ascribed to the role of newspapers in bringing their readers into contact with discourses produced elsewhere in Asia, such as Chinese and Indian nationalism and pan-Islamism. This is supposed to have resulted both in a growing sense of difference among Asian Singaporeans as members of distinct and separate 'communities' and in a diasporic outlook of these communities as being more closely linked with China, India, or the Middle East, than with Singapore.

Taking the example of the Tamil press, this paper seeks to present a more nuanced picture of the rise of the vernacular press in Singapore. Rather than studying the Tamil newspapers of the 1930s, whose partisan support for various political movements in India is well known, the focus will be shifted to the period between the 1870s and the First World War. By locating the rise of a Tamil print-industry in the specific context of late-nineteenth century Singapore, I hope to show that the India-centeredness of the post-World War One Tamil press was not the natural outcome of the rise of Tamil print-capitalism, but was shaped fundamentally by the asymmetries of Singapore's public sphere(s) in the late-nineteenth century. Looked at from this vantage point, the diasporic orientation of colonial Singapore's vernacular press appears less as the product of increased communication between different parts of Asia and Europe, but as a result of the misunderstandings, refusals, and failures to communicate transculturally in nineteenth-century Singapore.

Advertising Community: The 'Union Times' and Singapore's Public Sphere, 1906-1939

Associate Professor David L. Kenley (Department of History, Elizabethtown College)

Newspapers have long played an important role in Singapore's vernacular public sphere. Community elites used Chinese, Tamil, English, and Malay-language publications to construct and deconstruct collective identity. At the same time, sub-elites used these same venues to challenge and contest a group's accepted "borders." It was not simply editors and writers that contributed to the "imagined community" of newspaper readers. Advertisers and illustrators also played an important and often overlooked role. Because businessmen desired to reach the largest possible audience, they designed their advertisements to transcend traditional social boundaries and expand the public sphere.

In this paper, I investigate the role newspaper advertisements played in early twentieth-century Singapore. In particular, I analyze the Chinese-language "Union Times" (Zonghui bao, 总汇报) between 1906 and 1939 to understand the cross-cultural messages of these ads. In the process, I will examine what ideas they conveyed about gender, modernity, community inclusiveness, and civil society as they peddled wares within a multi-cultural context.

Isolation and Interaction: Eurasian Publics in Interwar Singapore

Kirsty Walker (University of Cambridge)

From the late nineteenth century, through newspapers, journals, clubs and associations, Singapore's Eurasian elite had tentatively begun to articulate conceptions of their 'race', nationality and political rights. Many saw this gradual isolation as a conscious rejection of more cosmopolitan publics, by those who felt Eurasian interests were not sufficiently well represented. But these articulations were far from insular; the construction and evolution of Eurasian identity in Singapore was a product of interactions and debates with other communities - both within and beyond Malaya. Tracing these interactions in print, they appeared fragile, revealing tension and misunderstanding as well as mutual learning. By the interwar period, the Eurasian public sphere contained a spectrum of discordant opinions. Alongside narrow self-interest and undisguised communalism, efforts were made by Eurasian leaders to align themselves with the other domiciled communities in Malaya. In addition to drawing inspiration from local debates, the Eurasian public sphere was shaped by long-held intellectual exchanges and kinship connections with other Eurasian communities across the Indian Ocean. The interwar period saw this network expand beyond the British Empire, as connections were made across Southeast Asia, and beyond.

Coffeeshops and Vernacular Publics in Colonial Singapore

Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljuneid (Assistant Professor, Department of Malay Studies, NUS)

Recent historiography of colonial Singapore in the postwar period demonstrates a growing interest in analyzing the rise of vernacular publics that influenced the politics and a variety of social causes on the island. At the centre of this burgeoning revisionist scholarship are the significant roles played by the print media and socio-political collectives in shaping the minds of the general populace. Missing however in such analyses are the crucial sites that helped to foster the growth of a new public sphere in Singapore and elsewhere in the Straits Settlements. In this paper, I will delve on one vital site – the coffeeshop – which has played a key part in the creation of a politicized and engaged Singaporean public.

Although the study of coffee houses and salons as contributive factors that led the creation of the public sphere has gained much attention among European, American, Indian, Middle Eastern and African scholars, thanks to path-breaking work of Jürgen Habermas, the same cannot be said in the case of Southeast Asian historians and historiography. In this paper, I intend to show that coffeeshops were democratic spaces that made room for interactions and exchanges about social and political issues of the day. In the context of colonial Singapore, coffeeshops were also sites where persons from different classes, ethnicities and ranks in society converged, ushering the intersection of different interests towards common ends. As such, the core argument of this paper is that any study of the public sphere in colonial Singapore and the Straits Settlements must take into consideration the spatial arrangements that permitted the coming together of seemingly contrasting publics – vernacular, diasporic and so forth.