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Dressing Up Subjecthood: Straits Chinese, the Queue, and Contested Citizenship in Colonial Singapore

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ABSTRACT

On 4 December 1897, a major English press in Singapore ran a story headlined ‘Extraordinary Incident at Amoy.’ A Singapore-born Chinese trader named Khun Yiong was imprisoned by the provincial authority in Amoy (Xiamen) in China after a German firm charged him for reportedly defaulting on a payment. Reporting him to the Chinese authority, the Germans managed to get Khun Yiong arrested. Claiming to be a British subject, Khun Yiong sought British protection and immunity from Chinese law, but his request was denied. Khun Yiong’s case ignited an intense public discussion in Singapore over the troubled legal status of the Straits Chinese British subject. One major thread of discussion involved an 1868 regulation which the British Government imposed on all British subjects of Chinese descent obliging them to wear non-Chinese clothing while travelling in China, something Khun Yiong had apparently failed to do. This article tracks the controversy surrounding Khun Yiong’s case which culminated in a social reform movement in Singapore urging Straits Chinese British male subjects to cut their queues and change the way they dressed. Departing from analyses discussing the ‘dual or multiple nationalities’ of Southeast Asian Chinese migrants using nationalist frameworks, this article situates the troubling legal status of the Straits Chinese within a transborder history of imperial formation. Using the concepts of ‘imperial citizenship’ and ‘subject-citizen,’ the article demonstrates how Straits Chinese British subjects like Khun Yiong and his contemporaries were caught up in as well as how they engaged with creeping projects of imperialist and nationalist border-making. This was a multilateral and open-ended process that involved re-working languages of imperial citizenship and tangible identity markers which underscores the necessity of grounding a discussion of contested citizenship not just in hardcore legal prescriptions but also material cultural histories.

KEYWORDS

Multiple nationality; consular protection; imperial citizenship; imperial formation; subject-citizen; queue-cutting; Straits Chinese identity; Straits Chinese reform movement

Introduction

On 4 December 1897, the leading English language newspaper in Singapore, the *Straits Times*, ran a story headlined 'Extraordinary Incident at Amoy.' A Singapore-born Chinese trader named Khun Yiong whom the paper described as 'reputable and well-known' was imprisoned by the provincial authority in Amoy (Xiamen), China. A German firm had charged Khun Yiong for reportedly defaulting on payment for a steamship he had chartered from the company. Thinking he was a Chinese subject, the Germans reported him to the local authority in Amoy and managed to get Khun Yiong jailed. Claiming to be a British subject, Khun Yiong sought protection from the British Consulate at Amoy and the British Minister in Peking but was not given any. Desperate, he petitioned the Governor of the Straits Settlements in Singapore. For the entire month of December 1897, Khun Yiong's case ran its course in the eye of the local public. Beginning with Khun Yiong's petition, there were almost daily press reports on the telegraphic exchanges between Singapore, Peking, and Amoy. Readers were plied with reports of interviews with local luminaries, commentaries and even a letter by a retired high-ranking official specialising in Chinese affairs in the Straits Settlements. The topicality of the case was, however, overwhelmed by a subsequent discussion over an 1868 dress regulation which escalated into a full-scale reform movement urging Straits Chinese British male subjects to cut their queues and changed the way they dressed.

Using the Khun Yiong case as a focal point of discussion, this article tracks how the troubled legal status of the Straits Chinese had been described, deliberated and debated as part of the process underpinning the formation of racialized subjecthood in colonial Singapore. This was not a process engineered by the colonial state alone; it was also driven by members of the localised Straits Chinese community who actively engaged in exercises of self-definition though claiming imperial citizenship. This article argues that the hyphenated term 'subject-citizen' better describes open-ended and multilateral efforts at defining racialized subjectivities that were provocative of responses from the colonial regime and that stretch, at the same time, the tame meanings associated with colonial subjugation. As Straits Chinese in Singapore seized upon the Khun Yiong case to invest meaning in their legal identity as Straits Chinese British subjects, they updated notions of Chineseness and imperial citizenship to push for rights and protection befitting their status as respectable members of the British empire.

I approach Straits Chinese subjecthood-citizenship in this way for three reasons. First, the literature investigating Southeast Asian Chinese identities has rarely touched upon the legal dimension of identity formation. Scholars in this field assume that elements of Chinese identity were primarily cultural, religious or social and therefore, do not question how the law, in this case, colonial law, impacted the lives of Chinese persons and their families or how colonial law

could have generated novel understandings of Chinese identity. The scholarly tendency is to ignore the legal dimension of Chinese identity formation, implying that the law was largely inconsequential to Southeast Asian Chinese who could dodge or manipulate the law to their advantage. This is especially the case for the sojourning Chinese male merchant class, the best studied group of Southeast Asian Chinese. Man-Houng Lin, for instance, tracks the economic activities of Amoy-born merchants between the 1890s and the early decades of the twentieth century, arguing that they acquired multiple legal statuses as a means of expanding their businesses and managing business risks. Lin reports that by the 1930s, it was commonplace for merchants in Amoy to obtain multiple identification papers from Japan, England, the United States, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and France.¹ Likewise, Aihwa Ong has analyzed the transborder economic activities of ethnic Chinese businessmen albeit for a much later moment than the 1890s. Ong coins the term 'flexible citizenship' to describe their strategic utilisation of multiple passports which, she argues, is part of 'a cultural logic' embedded in familial strategies of capital accumulation across the Asia-Pacific at the turn of the twentieth-first century.²

While these writings grant agency to mobile Chinese businesses, highlighting their resourcefulness at border-crossing, whether in the 1890s or 1990s, critical attention is deflected from the equally pertinent question of border creation and regulation. The popular portrait of the resourceful Chinese businessman skilled at playing off multiple legal statuses bears an unmistakable likeness to the Straits Chinese British subject who hid and displayed his British/Chinese status as and when it was necessary. He was a staple figure in the colonial archives, and British officials spilled much ink condemning his 'double-dealing' ways as well as deliberating how best to counter and preempt his 'abuse' of British legal status, deliberations that fed into questions about what constituted authentic and fraudulent British/Chinese identities.

The concern with strategic identity switching of Straits Chinese underscores not simply the promise and rewards but also the risks and dangers of boundary transgression. Adam McKeown suggests that our understanding of globalisation as interconnection and integration is half-hearted if we forget that 'the history of globalization and interaction is inseparable from the globalization of borders.'³ McKeown describes the global order as the product of a history of global flows that was simultaneously a history of border control which features regulation of Chinese migrants as its key element.⁴ Originating from long-standing flows of people and goods between the Southern Chinese seaboard and Southeast Asia, the Straits Chinese were caught up in creeping imperialist and nationalist projects of border-making. The 'problems' caused by their multiple legal statuses emerged from a paradoxical history of globalisation, one that saw intensified movement of peoples, enabled in this case by British empire-making, but also the erection of boundaries at once territorial, physical and cultural.

Second, situating Straits Chinese within nebulous zones where borders were transcended and regulated has implications for how we conceptualise diasporic Chinese legal status and identity. To begin with, the dominant portrayal of Southeast Asian Chinese success in boundary transgression tells part of the story. Delving into the minutiae of Khun Yiong's predicament, a far messier picture tied to imperial formation emerges. Ann Stoler has argued that processes driving imperial formations did not lead to fixed and singular states of being especially when colonial regimes became adept at inventing exceptional categories of population and spaces of control— think of the diverse types of protectorates, mandated territories, trusteeships, and in this article, the treaty port. Imperial formations, therefore, did not assume one standard type and terms of inclusion and exclusion in an imperial realm were constantly reviewed, whether judicially or politically.⁵ Other scholars have used concepts, in particular, 'imperial citizenship' and 'subjects-citizens' to highlight the blurred lines between 'legal' and 'cultural' terms of inclusion in an imperial polity. Daniel Gorman, for example, argues that British notions of subjecthood rests on 'the language of imperial citizenship' which functioned mainly as 'consecration of cultural connection' in the empire.⁶ Gorman emphasises the cultural content of British subjecthood, describing it as a 'hybrid citizenship model of subjecthood' which was premised on 'a sense of shared cultural citizenship, the articulation of what were perceived to be common linguistic, historical and customary bonds, both real and imagined.'⁷

Crucially, Sukanya Banerjee has argued that the colonised and subjugated in the British empire have resorted to the languages of imperial citizenship in the 'cultural, imaginative and affective fields' to mount challenges to their imposed legal status.⁸ The hyphenated term 'subject-citizen' not only captures the 'easy elision' with which contemporaries at the turn of the twentieth century use the two words.⁹ By pointing to the gap between actual and potential status, the term captures the ways in which 'the empire itself provided the ground for claiming citizenship even as the thrust of these claims implicitly critiqued British colonial practices.'¹⁰ Such practices of critique and resistance derived from the logic of empire-making were not unique to the British. Historians studying the French presence in Syria, Lebanon, and West Africa before and after World War Two, show that genealogies of citizenship did not move in a fixed trajectory from empire to nation-state. Whether it was a 'colonial civic order' or a larger 'French Union or Federation,' colonised French subjects used empire to project other types of imagined communities.¹¹

Khun Yiong and the category of Straits Chinese exemplify such exceptional subject populations living in and moving across grey zones of imperial formation. Their liminality is best reflected in the definitional problems confronting researchers working on the community. Surveying 'Straits Chinese' and other cognate terms such as 'King's Chinese,' 'Peranakan Chinese' or 'the Babas,' Jurgen Rudolph observes the tendency to define all of these terms

using cultural traits such as kinship system, clothing style, cuisine and language use.¹² These culturally-inflected definitions typically highlight the ‘hybridity’ of Straits Chinese, emphasising the distinctive ways they have syncretised Malay and Anglophone elements with Chinese culture.¹³ Yet, as Ai-Lin Chua reminds us, most definitions stress the existence of ‘Malay-influenced hybrid culture,’ but by the inter-war period, the Straits Chinese category included local-born Chinese whose families had settled in Malaya for generations without exhibiting any ‘Malay-influenced culture.’¹⁴

In contrast, Rudolph and Chua suggest that place of birth or domicile, as well as legal status, are important criteria for defining the Straits Chinese. Rudolph argues that until the outbreak of World War Two in Southeast Asia and during the immediate postwar period, birthplace in the Straits Settlements, legal status, and Chinese ethnicity constituted the three conditions qualifying an individual as Straits Chinese. This politically-weighted definition, he contends, only gave way to culturalist definitions as nation-building projects got underway in Singapore and Malaysia.¹⁵ Under British application of *jus soli* (birth on the soil of the country), birthplace and legal status were indeed vital considerations. Nevertheless, as Chua explains, the Straits Chinese were also technically ‘dual nationals’ because Chinese nationality law based on *jus sanguinis* (right of blood) did not permit them to disavow their Chinese nationality.¹⁶

The scholarly effort seeking definitional clarity is conscious of the cultural hybridity and ambiguous legal identity of Straits Chinese. However, in approaching these characteristics as obstacles defying clear-cut definitions, scholars have not appreciated these definitional problems as part of a history of Straits Chinese identity formation tied to the problem of border creation, crossing, and control. In this article, I privilege the mobility of Straits Chinese, using ‘Straits Chinese’ to refer broadly to migrants from the Chinese seaboard who were part of the long-standing traffic between the Straits Settlements and coastal China and who might or might not be born and settled in the Straits Settlements. Southeast Asian Chinese migrants like Khun Yiong could not depend on fitting themselves into fixed definitions and legal categories. Instead, they had to develop compelling narratives of legal and cultural identities.

British officials undoubtedly possessed the means and power, vis-à-vis the Chinese communities they governed, to decide who should be granted protection but there were few hard and fast rules they could rely on. British officials attempted to establish fair and standardised regulation but whether or not a Straits Chinese individual received consular protection in China, often appeared utterly arbitrary. They debated legal principles, norms and rules that would apply to Straits Chinese British subjects in China as the divergent interests and positions of the Straits Settlements government, the Colonial Office, Foreign Office, and British officials stationed in China complicated the issue. Governors in Singapore were conscientious in sending missive after missive to

London requesting clarification on the status of Straits Chinese or requesting the Foreign Office to intervene, but the hands of Governors were tied if London backed up their men in China, who had different priorities. Moreover, as Khun Yiong's case provoked soul-searching amongst his contemporaries in Singapore, the issue of the proper definition of Straits Chinese identity entered the arena of public contestation. Cases like these surface tensions between idealised laws and principles of subjecthood in the empire and the uneven execution of these laws and principles in reality.

Finally, this article focuses on the slippery nature of legal and cultural definitions of Straits Chinese British subjects because this approach enables a grounded history of Straits Chinese cultural hybridity. The different agents involved in debating Straits Chinese British subjecthood— down to the detail of hairstyle and dress — included British officials who conceded the Straits Chinese were in an awkward position and proffered creative solutions aimed at making them 'look' different. If Straits Chinese British subjects could never become truly 'British' in spirit and substance, the British authorities insisted they must sport a distinctive look in China. One solution imagined that they must reject the Manchu tonsure if they wished to keep their queues. Alternatively, as opponents of queue-cutting argued, a Straits Chinese who sported a queue but spoke impeccable English would be the 'better man' than someone who had cut his queue but possessed weak command of the two languages, English and Chinese. I situate these competing narratives of hybridity constructed on the male Straits Chinese body as part of a transborder history of liminal Straits Chinese British subjects. As their bodies transgressed boundaries that were erected in spaces where projects of imperial formation were unfolding, tangible signs of their physical difference would gain potency and acquire unusual biographies.

Khun Yiong: A Contested Portrait of Straits Chinese British Subjecthood

When the Khun Yiong story broke, readers in Singapore learned that the official reason he was denied British protection in China was his failure to register himself at the British consulate in Amoy until after the Germans commenced legal proceedings. Khun Yiong's negligence notwithstanding, there was much public sympathy for him. A correspondent reported that public sympathies were with 'the Chinese born in the Straits Settlements' who were 'very indignant.'¹⁷ The *Straits Times* thought that the official reason was 'unsatisfactory.' The newspaper found Khun Yiong's non-registration at the consulate 'perfectly regular' because 'as a general rule, the British subject does not trouble his Consul unless there is a reason to do so.'¹⁸ Local luminaries notably Edinburgh-trained physician and Chinese representative in the local legislature, Lim Boon Keng — more about him later— opined that Khun Yiong's predicament reflected a

pattern of ‘double jeopardy’ for Straits Chinese: British consular staff in the Far East were far too nonchalant about protecting them while they were far too ‘timorous’ to assert their claim to protection.¹⁹ The difference between local sympathy for Khun Yiong and the hardline position of British officialdom in China points to a fundamental divergence of interpretation of the Straits Chinese British subject as a rights-bearing individual. Just as the *Straits Times* found it apt to compare Khun Yiong’s non-registration with the behaviour of a ‘British-born’ subject, the Governor, Charles Mitchell, argued that had Khun Yiong claimed British protection after he was sued, he was still entitled to protection since ‘as a British subject’ he possessed an ‘inherent right to be tried by British Consul.’²⁰ Against Singapore’s understanding that Khun Yiong possessed an inherent right to protection, the British Minister in Peking, Claude MacDonald, stressed the ‘circumstances’ of his case, ‘the right to such protection in China being conditional.’²¹

Two critical issues surface at this juncture. The first concerned the ambiguous character of British subjecthood since it was not clear if British subjects had any inherent rights; the second concerned the location of British consular protection, that is, in a treaty port where British subjects enjoyed extraterritorial immunity from Chinese law. As scholars of British imperial citizenship note, the Republican model of a rights-bearing citizen was not entirely applicable to the British experience. Strictly speaking, there were only British ‘subjects’ who were not ‘citizens.’ Also, British subjecthood was not formally defined by statute until the passage of the British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act in 1914; statutory definition of British citizenship came even later with the British Nationality Act in 1948.²² The legal basis of British subjecthood, in line with English common law tradition, was allegiance to the Crown and the *jus soli* (birth on the soil of the country) principle: ‘all those born within the sovereign’s empire were deemed to be British subjects and enjoyed, in theory, all privileges attached to this status.’ Allegiance, which was the ‘cornerstone of English common law,’ underwrote all rights and privileges the subject enjoyed at the pleasure of the sovereign.²³ Not equality but shared subjugation in relation to the sovereign was the ‘defining principle of British imperial citizenship.’²⁴ What Mitchell described as Khun Yiong’s ‘inherent right to be tried by British Consul’ was a reference to his right as a subject born in a British colony to British protection. He possessed this right not as an equal to other British-born subjects but in common with them.

In fact, the rights of a British subject varied enormously across the empire. Even within Britain itself, there were four sub-categories of citizens with differential rights: natural-born, naturalised (whose citizenship was effective across the empire), naturalised (whose citizenship had only local effect) and denizens. In India, British-born subjects were further distinguished from two other categories of subjects, i.e. ‘non-European, natural-born British subjects’ who enjoyed fewer rights than British-born subjects as well as ‘British Protected

Persons' which was a category applicable to the principalities that were not administered directly by the British.²⁵ As for the Straits Settlements which was a full-fledged Crown colony, the British only applied *jus soli* in modified form. Those who were born in the Straits Settlements could claim British subjecthood *provided* their parents were also British subjects or naturalised British subjects. Children, who were born in the Straits Settlements to parents who were aliens, remained like their parents, alien residents. Naturalised British subjects fell into a separate category from natural-born subjects; they could enjoy rights and protection within the confines of the colony but were not entitled to British consular protection overseas. This modified application of *jus soli* would later be challenged by Straits Chinese reformers when the issue of proper legal status became bound up with the issue of hairstyle and dress. Viewed holistically, this was a highly 'complex and stratified picture of subjecthood' in the British empire with its 'varied categories of territorial control.'²⁶ When the extension of British power into the nebulous zones of treaty ports in China is considered, we can perhaps understand why MacDonald felt exasperated with Singaporean sympathy for Khun Yiong.

Even as events developed in the glare of public scrutiny, British authorities in China persisted in denying Khun Yiong protection. From citing his failure to register at the consulate, they launched into a narrative portraying Khun Yiong as a 'fake' British subject. It is notable that they did not accuse him of using false identification papers, which was one reason British Consuls frequently used to deny Straits Chinese protection in China. His papers were genuine enough. Instead, they took issue with Khun Yiong's ambiguous legal status. What appeared specifically objectionable was Khun Yiong's apparent cunning in using his British subject status when he had lived and acted like a Chinese subject. According to papers filed by the British Consul of Amoy and the British Minister in Peking, Khun Yiong was 35 years old and born in Singapore to parents who were both British subjects. When Khun Yiong was five years old, he returned to Amoy to live and had 'passed as a Chinese subject ever since.'²⁷ From the age of twenty, Khun Yiong traded as a Chinese subject in Amoy and even held 'landed property in the interior where no British subject can hold landed property.' Khun Yiong did return to Singapore but only 'occasionally.'²⁸ He was married in Amoy, and his wife and children all lived on Chinese soil. Khun Yiong even had a seventeen-year-old son who was born and lived all his life in China and by all accounts, had never left China. British officials in China judged these personal details, particularly the fact that Khun Yiong possessed property in the interior— a right denied to British subjects — to be the most damning evidence against the authenticity of his British identity. Building on this portrayal of Khun Yiong's 'bogus' British identity, MacDonald wrote that

after the warrant was out against him, Khun Yiong absconded to Singapore and obtained from the Straits Government the passport of a natural-born British subject, and on his return to Amoy, claimed as a British subject the protection of Her Majesty's Consul.

As such, MacDonald considered Khun Yiong's case to be a

particularly flagrant case of a British subject of Chinese race enjoying all the privileges of a Chinese subject by concealing his British nationality until he found it expedient to take advantage of it in order to obtain immunity from offences committed by him.²⁹

Khun Yiong's side of the story, which we can only glimpse from the single petition his lawyers submitted to Governor Mitchell, painted an entirely different picture of him as a British subject. Khun Yiong's petition was filed before exchanges between Singapore and Peking drew out the details of the case against him. Written in English and in the first-person voice, the petition contained a clearly-worded point-by-point rebuttal of the anticipated official story. This was a scripted Khun Yiong speaking as a British subject worthy of protection, the outcome of intelligent collaboration with competent lawyers. Significantly, Mitchell ordered an investigation into Khun Yiong's case, producing a report that corroborated parts of Khun Yiong's story. Read together, not only do Khun Yiong's petition and Mitchell's report offer a counter-narrative, they show us the underbelly of consular protection in China's treaty ports.

Khun Yiong's petition made four key points. First, Khun Yiong established his British subject status, going into his parents' background and his long and permanent residence in Singapore as opposed to Amoy. Khun Yiong wrote that he was born in Singapore, 'of British parents' where he had 'ever resided, and established (himself) as a merchant under the firm, name, and style of Teng Cheong.' He visited Amoy 'occasionally' but chose not to register himself at the consulate because his stays there were short and 'there appeared to be no occasion to assert (his) nationality.'³⁰ Conveniently, Khun Yiong did not mention that he had a family either in Amoy or Singapore and he glossed over his possession of some property in Amoy. In fact, Mitchell's report discovered that Khun Yiong was married in both Amoy and Singapore; his wife from Singapore was then living in Amoy. However, Mitchell's report highlighted Khun Yiong's long residence (he stayed 'fifteen years' at a permanent address) in Singapore. Mitchell described Khun Yiong as a 'travelling trader' whose business took him to the immediate environment of Singapore, namely Batavia, Semarang and Surabaya (in the Netherlands East Indies) where he could be away 'from one to two months.' In fifteen years, he had only been to Amoy twice, on each occasion staying for 'a few months.' One key finding of Mitchell's report was that between August 1896 and September 1897 when the German firm sued Khun Yiong, his accounts books showed he was in Singapore and its adjacent territories. He did not abscond to Singapore from Amoy, as alleged by the British officials in China.³¹

Next, Khun Yiong narrated the sequence of events concerning his involvement, or rather non-involvement with the German firm, arguing that he had been scammed. He claimed not to have business dealings with the Chinese company that had chartered the steamship from the German firm and was merely made a scapegoat. The owners of the Chinese company had either died or were bankrupted. Khun Yiong claimed that someone had tipped off the German firm alleging he had shares in the Chinese company. On learning that his property in Amoy was confiscated, he 'applied for and received a passport from His Excellency, the Governor of my native country, to visit China.' Mitchell's report supported this portion of Khun Yiong's petition, but Khun Yiong went further. He showed himself utterly respectful of the British legal system while expressing absolute lack of faith in Chinese law and justice, in so doing, invoking stereotypical ideas about Chinese law and justice familiar to Europeans. As scholars of extraterritoriality demonstrate, the European *poChinwers* had justified the establishment of extraterritorial jurisdictions in China through denigrating Chinese law and justice.³² Khun Yiong pleaded that if he were really indebted to the German firm, he would be willing to be tried by the 'Consular Court of my native country' and therefore, 'could not avoid the consequences of my own acts.' He was appealing for British protection 'not to avoid justice' but because the Chinese authorities were extorting money from him on a daily basis 'without any regard to justice.' Khun Yiong feared he would lose his entire fortune before his case was dealt with in Chinese courts.

Khun Yiong's final two points were startling for he insinuated that he had fallen victim to not one but two money scams which implicated the British Consul in Amoy. Having landed on the wrong side of Chinese law, he was then caught in an elaborate scam perpetuated, wittingly or otherwise, by the combined efforts of British, German and local Chinese officials in Amoy. Khun Yiong recounted that when he arrived at Amoy, he visited the British Consul and registered himself. Consul Gardner agreed to write to MacDonald as well as the Chinese authority in Amoy while investigating his legal status. Gardner then 'solicited that (Khun Yiong) should give (the Consul) a security of \$5,000 for the space of three months for (his) appearance,' to which Khun Yiong consented. Khun Yiong did not hear from the Consul until 19th November, 'when to (Khun Yiong's) great surprise,' Gardner informed him that '(Gardner) could not do anything for (Khun Yiong). The question of (Khun Yiong's) nationality had not been gone into, nor had (Khun Yiong) been given an opportunity to prove his claims.' Gardner then advised Khun Yiong to go to the German Consul which he did. Khun Yiong reported that the German Consul demanded '\$20, 000 to answer as security,' which would be returned to him 'if all turned out well.' This time around, Khun Yiong refused to pay up. The German Consul immediately had him arrested. And Khun Yiong ended up in the local gaol. These 'security deposits' demanded by the British and German Consuls were hefty amounts. It is extremely revealing

that all the letters and reports filed by the British officials in China made no mention of the monetary transactions that had taken place whereas these transactions formed the centrepiece of Khun Yiong's narrative.

Lofty principles of British legal status and money made strange bedfellows, but since the 1860s, British Consuls in China reported imposing monetary security as a practical means of weeding out 'respectable' Straits Chinese British subjects from 'fake' ones. While this appeared to be standard practice, the imposition of monetary deposits and their potential pitfalls were not raised in papers discussing the legal status of Straits Chinese British subjects, thus suppressing wealth and class as covert requirements of British subjecthood. Khun Yiong's petition was, therefore, startling on two counts: first, it unearthed the suppressed element of wealth as crucial criterion of Straits Chinese British subjecthood; second, it raised the spectre of pervasive corruption and widespread abuse of consular services in the treaty ports.

Khun Yiong's account was plausible. Researchers working on extraterritoriality in China describe the pedestrian practice of wealthy Chinese residents 'buying' foreign nationality privileges from foreign Consuls to enjoy mobility, extraterritorial rights, and tax exemption. In 1908, for example, the Spanish Consul confirmed that forty persons in Amoy and Shanghai had 'donated money' and became Spanish nationals. Likewise for some ten rich merchants in Qiqihar Heilongjiang who became Russian nationals in the early months of 1907.³³ Eileen Scully provides an evocative picture of the underbelly of American extraterritoriality in China, describing it as 'commodified foreign privilege' that could be made available to 'interested Chinese on a simple cash-and-carry basis.'³⁴ Scully reveals that between 1904 and 1906, the State Department launched a special investigation of its consulates in China which exposed widespread misconduct and corruption of American Consuls and officials in Shanghai, Canton and possibly Amoy. These included selling American passports to non-Americans, illegally extending consular protection to Chinese subjects, extorting money for judicial services and selling fraudulent certificates to 'coolies' under the guise of merchants.³⁵

Still pondering Gardner's inaction in Amoy, Khun Yiong's fourth and final point tried to reinforce the impression of the Consul's corruptibility. Khun Yiong implied that Gardner had been negligent even if he was not involved in the scam. Khun Yiong wondered if MacDonald had 'acted without the facts before him' because Gardner 'took no testimony whatever, nor made any efforts to ascertain the truth of my assertions ... I am at a loss to know what the hypothetical case he could have submitted to the British Minister.' Rebutting Khun Yiong, Gardner accused him of perjury and stressed that Khun Yiong was informed that the legality of his British status would be challenged because he had admitted to passing as a Chinese subject for all of his thirty years in China.³⁶ Moreover, MacDonald maintained that Khun Yiong was a Chinese subject in reality and castigated his opportunistic switching of

identities. Pointing to Khun Yiong's ownership of landed property in the interior, MacDonald declaimed that his government would not allow 'British subjects of Chinese race to enjoy privileges from which other British subjects are excluded, and to evade responsibilities to which other British subjects are liable' and yet provide them with 'the same measure of protection.'³⁷ As for Khun Yiong's assertion that he had been scammed, the British Consul, the Minister, and the Governor were curiously silent.

Further underscoring the arbitrary nature of power, the Colonial Office agreed that the Governor had put up a good case but chose to side with the Foreign Office. We do not know what became of Khun Yiong after he was denied protection but this scribbling on the Colonial Office folder on his case reminds us that the question of who counted as a Straits Chinese British subject can never be a straightforward one:

The question whether (Khun Yiong) had any claim to be regarded as a British subject is not yet definitely cleared of, but I think he pretty certainly had none. In any case, someone has perjured himself freely. No action is required.³⁸

Khun Yiong could have been that figure scholars have grown familiar with: a Southeast Asian Chinese male merchant adept at switching identities. Yet, his story reads like a veritable parable on what could go wrong should identity-switching fail. Just as one could play with multiple identities, one could also be played. Khun Yiong's story points to the dubious workings of extraterritoriality giving life to the Janus-faced character of identity play. Scholars examining extraterritoriality in China have moved away from portraying it as a fixed system imposed by aggressive Westerners on ignorant and xenophobic Chinese. They now argue that the workings of extraterritoriality are better studied as evolving practices bearing marks of active participation from multiple agents—foreign and Chinese— as well as of multiple indigenous legal systems in East Asia.³⁹ This approach to extraterritoriality reveals a more fluid picture of treaty port zones where it was by no means obvious who were the true beneficiaries and losers of extraterritoriality. The two contrasting narratives of ambiguous identity presented here belong to this dynamic picture of treaty port zones and the individuals who lived, travelled and transacted their businesses in them. Treaty ports were microcosms of McKeown's 'melancholy order.' More than any other kinds of spaces, treaty port zones were intensely 'internationalized,' economically, socially and culturally. Yet they were also spaces cross-cut by differences, hierarchies and inequalities. Crucially, subject-citizen status mattered in treaty ports, if only because their inhabitants needed to be sorted, categorised and placed under the 'correct' legal jurisdiction. As Khun Yiong's case demonstrates, individuals in treaty ports could not be arbitrarily slotted into pre-arranged categories without negotiation or contestation. Treaty ports are, thus, exemplary sites for investigating citizenship understood as 'a set of mutual, contested

claims between agents of states and members of socially-constructed categories⁴⁰ in an emergent global order.

Khun Yiong came from a long history, predating the formation of treaty ports, of mobile male Chinese merchants who had maintained familial, social and economic connections with southern China for generations, often, marrying and bearing children in more than a single territory. Indeed, Amoy with its centuries' worth of trade and migration was a prime site of such transborder histories. As internationalised ideas about modern citizenship serve to bring people into one citizenship regime and territorial state to the exclusion of another, Khun Yiong and individuals like him became 'if not pitiful victims of political chaos, then free riders, whom no government would tolerate.'⁴¹ Criss-crossing borders, they confronted elusive subjecthood-citizenship regimes where seemingly broad legal criteria fused with fickle demands for 'cultural proof' that could range from anything linguistic, social, habitual or psychological to the somatic. This article will now turn to examine an unlikely transborder history of the queue and male dress as part of the material cultural history of liminal Straits Chinese British subjects.

A Transborder History of the Queue

About four days after the Singapore public learned of Khun Yiong's plight, the *Straits Times* unearthed a notification by the first British Minister in Peking, Rutherford Alcock, dating back to 7 October 1868.⁴² The 1868 Alcock regulation commanded, 'all British subjects of Chinese descent shall while residing or being in Chinese territory, discard the Chinese costume and adopt some other dress or costume whereby they may readily be distinguished from the native population.' The costume regulation was a necessary 'remedy' because 'great practical inconvenience frequently results to the parties themselves and to the authorities of both countries' due to 'serious difficulty' in distinguishing people of Chinese descent who claimed to be British subjects and the 'natives amenable to Chinese laws only.' The regulation would help maintain 'order and good Government of British subjects of Chinese descent resorting to China' as well as 'friendly relations between British subjects and Chinese subjects and the authorities.'⁴³ The *Straits Times* speculated that the Alcock regulation could be the reason why the British Minister denied Khun Yiong protection in China. The newspaper's speculation was greeted with doubt. The newly-launched *Straits Chinese Magazine* noted in its December issue that Khun Yiong 'possibly did not know' of the regulation. 'As far as we know British Chinese subjects have never discarded the Chinese dress on their visits to China.'⁴⁴ Other reports recalled there were prior cases of Straits Chinese wearing Chinese dress who were given protection in China.⁴⁵ Notwithstanding the adverse reaction to the *Straits Time's* speculation, its report shifted public attention away from Khun Yiong to the issue of male dress and visual markers of identity.

No less than William Pickering, the formidable ex-Protector of Chinese in the Straits Settlements wrote a letter to the Colonial Office which was publicised in England and Singapore. Pickering addressed the dress issue, focusing on the queue. He pointed out that

in China the very fact of shaving the head and wearing a queue is an acknowledgment of subjecting to the dynasty which reigns at Peking, (sic) and any Chinese official is justified in considering such a person as under his jurisdiction.

Drawing on his experience, Pickering wrote that for years, the Straits Settlements government and the British Minister have studied 'the necessity for insisting on some distinctive mark in coiffure and dress between the Straits-born Chinese and subjects of the Emperor' but with no success. Pickering blamed the Straits Chinese who had been 'obstacle in the way of any satisfactory arrangement.' He opined that

whatever these people, born under our rule, educated in our schools and made wealthy by our protection, may say or write, in their hearts they consider themselves Chinese, despise all other races as being inferior foreigners, and only plead British nationality to enforce a claim or when they are in trouble.

Proposing a 'compromise' solution, he suggested that Straits Chinese British subjects should allow the hair on their foreheads to grow if they wished to keep their queues thereby distinguishing themselves from native Chinese, failing which they had only themselves to blame if the authorities denied them protection in China.⁴⁶

Not much has been written about the queue and queue-cutting outside continental China. Tejapira, who wrote about the history of the queue in Thailand, argues that the meanings of the queue 'were pluralistic and situated, even inconsistent and contradictory over time.'⁴⁷ Tejapira's insights would be equally valid for the Straits Settlements. Pickering's proposal for giving Straits Chinese British subjects a distinctive look in 1898 was not new. The question of what Straits Chinese British subjects must wear when they travelled to China occurred soon after several ports opened to British shipping after the First Opium War. In July 1844, Robert Thom, then British Consul at Ningpo, reported that the Chinese Intendant at Ningpo had threatened to detain and punish a trader, Wee Cheong San based on the statute that prevented all Chinese from going overseas. Wee, born in Malacca and living in Singapore, had arrived in Ningpo as the Supercargo on board a British-registered ship. Although Thom managed to intervene successfully on behalf of Wee, arguing that Wee was a Straits Chinese British subject, Thom suspected that the Intendant had threatened action, not on account of the desire to enforce what he knew was an 'obsolete statute,' but to undermine British shipping in China. Anticipating more of such gestures from local Chinese authorities as British shipping to China increased, Thom urged better protection of Straits Chinese British subjects

such as Wee.⁴⁸ After Wee's incident, the Straits Settlements government began issuing paperwork confirming their bearers were British subjects to Straits Chinese travelling to China.⁴⁹ It was further recommended but not made compulsory that Straits Chinese British subjects should wear European dress while in China to prevent harassment by Chinese officials.⁵⁰ The issues of dress and consular protection of Straits Chinese in treaty ports were, thus, fused from the earliest moment when treaty ports were created in China.

The 1868 Alcock regulation was the outcome of a convoluted discussion within British bureaucracy that examined the extension of consular protection to rightful Straits Chinese British subjects through imposing visible markers. In September 1865, an exasperated British Consul of Canton complained that a Penang-born Straits Chinese, Cheong Quan Seng had produced what he suspected was an identity certificate belonging to either another person or someone long dead. Describing these 'Singapore and Penang quasi-British subjects' as 'a mischievous lot' who frequently hoarded and transferred these certificates to one another, Consul Robertson used dress which he regarded as a 'natural and visible sign' to adjudicate their claims of British subjecthood.⁵¹ When Robertson's action was referred to the Law Officers in London, they found that he had 'no right to make his recognition of these claims dependent on the circumstances of dress.' However, the Law Officers proposed that Straits Chinese should be 'induced, if not required, to adopt some distinguishing badge or article of apparel, through the adoption of the European dress might not be insisted upon.'⁵² They had in mind requiring Straits Chinese to refrain from shaving their crowns but the India Office, which was governing the Straits Settlements at that time, as well as the Foreign Office, opined that 'great practical inconvenience' would arise if dress was made the sole criterion for extending protection. Instead, they preferred a stricter system of issuing certificates of nationality. This decision was then communicated to the Governor and Alcock in March 1866.⁵³

In April 1866, Alcock negotiated with Prince Kung, who was then the top official responsible for the Qing government's foreign relations, over the status of British subjects of Chinese descent. As instructed, Alcock did not pursue the dress proposal. He did succeed in getting Prince Kung to agree to a procedure for processing Chinese individuals who claimed British subjecthood in China: when a Chinese person declared himself a British subject, the nearest British Consul must be informed and no further action should be taken until the status of the prisoner was confirmed; if proven to be a British subject, he should be handed over to the Consul. Alcock also suggested that the two governments should cooperate on developing a system of certification and registration of Chinese British subjects. Prince Kung agreed that 'the separation and distinguishing of British and Chinese subjects were the most important of the questions in which China and foreign countries had a common interest,' but he was non-committal about Alcock's proposal of a certification and registration system. In January 1867, Alcock drafted a circular to all British Consuls as

well as a public notification on the procedure that the two governments had agreed on. When the notification was sent to the Law Officers, they proposed again that Chinese British subjects should adopt a 'distinctive habit or dress' to differentiate themselves from native Chinese, only this time Alcock included their suggestion in the final notification.⁵⁴

Throughout this discussion, there was hardly any clarification on what constituted 'Chinese dress' or whether the queue was part of 'Chinese dress.' While it seemed implicit that British subjects must wear 'European dress,' the injunction in the finalised Alcock notification did not prescribe it. Neither did the regulation prescribe the Law Officers' initial proposal of keeping heads unshaven. In fact, queue-cutting or modification of the Manchu tonsure did not feature at all in the notification. The absence of explicit instruction left room for rebellious and ingratiating individuals to exercise their creativity. Shortly after the Alcock regulation was announced, Lo Yuen-yen, a Straits Chinese based in Shanghai submitted a petition to the British Minister requesting for freedom of choice of dress since the regulation only required abandoning Chinese dress but did not specify a particular look. Lo asked for permission to adopt 'their ancestral dress worn during the Ming Dynasty' because the present way of dressing was forced upon them by the 'Manchu Tartars.'⁵⁵ Lo, and a group of 'Singaporean British subjects' in Shanghai were suspected of harbouring 'anti-dynastic sympathies.' They had apparently supported a Taiping rebel group when it occupied the city briefly in 1853. Their petition was rejected.⁵⁶ On the other extreme, there were reports of men in Amoy seeking to create a unique accessory by mounting rupees in gold-coloured frames with the Queen's head pointing outwards. Their wearers pinned these badges to their hats to demonstrate they were 'Queen Victoria's men.' It was not clear if 'Queen Victoria's men' had abandoned their Chinese dress or if they still wore their queues.⁵⁷

Alcock's vague regulation should be understood in terms of what he hoped to achieve on account of the following issues: sensitivity of the Qing conquest regime toward queue-wearing, wariness of Straits Chinese toward radical changes in hairstyle and dress, and finally, British anxiety over Straits Chinese participation in anti-Manchu activities when extraterritoriality protected them. The British recognised the value the Qing attached to queue-wearing. In 1851, at the request of Britain's China representative Samuel Bonham, the Imperial Commissioner Xu Guangjin provided a list of 60 Singapore-born Chinese British subjects living in Amoy. On that occasion, Xu commented that the certainty of a person's dress and hairstyle would provide a better gauge of whether or not they were subjects of the Qing, not some accident of birth or residence.⁵⁸ Reacting to Alcock's regulation, the Qing government, 'insisted upon it that unless these (Straits Chinese British) men ceased to shave the head and wear tails, no change of costume would be of the least use.'⁵⁹

The dress regulation was undoubtedly a loyalty test, but it was a peculiar test. Alcock wrote that Straits Chinese should be ‘called upon in some manifest manner to identify themselves with the nationality under which they claim protection.’⁶⁰ Yet, he refrained from calling for queue-cutting and full conversion to European dress, fearing this would inadvertently embolden anti-Manchu rebels. Alcock was very sympathetic to the Qing’s portrayal of ‘these returned colonists from the British settlements ... as the most dangerous and troublesome of their race.’ He accepted the Qing government’s caricature of Straits Chinese affiliation with secret societies ‘plotting against the peace of the country and the Manchu dynasty.’⁶¹ Alcock, his successors, and the Foreign Office also appreciated that mere suggestion of dress change would deter all but the most genuine Straits Chinese claims of British subjecthood. At the minimum, some modification of dress would help the authorities in the two territories identify and police the Straits Chinese in China. Thus, the dress regulation was worded not for purposes of weeding out British subjects from the large mass of Qing subjects to protect. Demonstratively deferential to, even exploiting the importance the Qing attached to queue-wearing, Alcock’s regulation was worded to evade or reduce British responsibility for protection so as to deter Straits Chinese claims of British subjecthood without stating as much. As Julian Pauncefoot at the Foreign Office wrote, those who sought British protection in China were in general ‘a class of people whom it is by no means desirable to protect ... the existing system, which, with all its objections, has at least the merit of reducing British protection to Anglo-Chinese in China to a minimum.’⁶²

The exact nature of the required costume change was never clarified. In July 1879, Thomas Wade, who was then the British Minister in Peking, rallied the Straits Chinese to make one more attempt to resolve the dress issue. Their response was lukewarm. Wade announced that he had instructed British Consuls to register any applicant who could produce paperwork proving their British status but all applicants were warned that as long as they continued wearing their Chinese dress *and queue*, they should be ‘doubly careful’ not to engage in transactions not permitted to foreigners. While the circular did not ‘intend ill-will to Chinese British subjects,’ Wade hoped that the matter would be settled expeditiously because ‘until such an arrangement be devised, it will scarcely be possible, in many cases, that their claims should receive more than a qualified support.’⁶³ This was the status quo confronting Khun Yiong who, in all likelihood, was wearing Chinese garb with his queue intact when he showed up at the British consulate in Amoy in 1897.

Straits Chinese and the *Towchang* Controversy

As Khun Yiong faded into oblivion, the effects generated by the publicity of his case ramified throughout the early months of 1898 when educated Straits

Chinese launched into impassioned debates about the ‘*towchang* controversy.’ When the queue entered the Straits Settlements, it became known as *towchang*. *Towchang* was the Chinese word for ‘queue,’ pronounced in the Hokkien topolect and rendered in romanised Malay script. This hybridised Malay-Hokkien word is the best evidence for the queue’s transgressive history in colonial Singapore. As a *Straits Times* article headlined ‘Reforming Babas’ reported, Khun Yiong’s case had ‘stirred up some younger men of the Baba community’ pushing them to identify more closely with ‘British ideas’ by discarding their queue.⁶⁴ The *Singapore Free Press* also editorialised that ‘a strong party among the educated Chinese of the Straits Settlements have decided to introduce reforms amongst themselves’ which involved making ‘important changes of dress, including the discarding of the *towchang*.’⁶⁵ This ‘strong party’ of educated Chinese reformers referred to the group led by Lim Boon Keng. A Queen’s scholar, Lim was a physician-turned-Confucian philosopher. Returning home from his studies in England in 1893, Lim and like-minded associates started a reform movement targeted at improving the social habits and cultural lives of Straits Chinese. To achieve their reform objectives, they leaned on the revival of Confucianism in China and Southeast Asia during the late nineteenth century and propagated the learning of Chinese script and Mandarin. Lim was himself a key theorist of this regional wave of neo-Confucianism.⁶⁶ Khun Yiong’s case occurred at a critical moment when Lim and his group appeared ready to ‘accelerate’ the pace of action.⁶⁷

By all accounts, the *towchang* controversy touched a raw nerve and ignited a firestorm amongst educated Straits Chinese males. An official report from the Straits Settlements government described the confrontation between reformers and their critics over queue-cutting as ‘bitter’ and ‘even personal.’⁶⁸ Lim’s professional reputation was smeared when he found placards put up near his dispensary denouncing his moral integrity and questioning his medical competence in March 1898. The press speculated that these acts of sabotage were caused by ‘ill-feeling created by the recent controversy regarding the *towchang* question.’⁶⁹

Above all, the queue-cutting campaign created animus between Lim and his erstwhile backers. Tan Jiak Kim and Seah Liang Seah were two of the wealthiest and most influential Straits Chinese community leaders in Singapore. They had long years of public service under their belts, including being the community’s representative in the local legislature for lengthy periods. Tan and Seah were Lim’s main backers. Tan had successfully plotted for Lim to take over his position at the local legislature when he retired in 1894. But Tan opposed queue-cutting vehemently. The queue was so important to Tan that he wore it until his death in 1917, well after the Qing dynasty gave way to the Chinese Republic in 1912.⁷⁰ Initially, Tan tried to persuade Lim to recant on queue-cutting. When Lim refused, Tan tried to obstruct Lim’s re-nomination to the local legislature. Tan’s manoeuvre led to another divisive public debate over Lim’s re-nomination

in August 1898. Lim's critics questioned his representation of the community in the local legislature because his position on queue-cutting was anything but representative. His supporters, on the other hand, cheered Lim for his progressive ways.⁷¹

The extended fallout from Khun Yiong's case and the *towchang* controversy motivated Lim to outline the reformers' agenda systematically. In late 1897, Lim and fellow reformers had established a platform where they could put their ideas about reform on paper. The mouthpiece of their movement, the *Straits Chinese Magazine*, was first published in December 1897. However, it was only from 1899 onward, not long after a particularly acrimonious year for Lim in 1898, that he took to writing a series of articles entitled 'Straits Chinese reforms' in the magazine. This series gave readers a broad, cogent and tightly-argued overview of the reformers' agenda. The very first instalment of 'Straits Chinese Reforms' was entitled 'The Queue Question.' Lim's article on the queue question summed up the key arguments reformers had made on why Straits Chinese must cut their queues. This was followed by a second instalment on 'Dress and Costume.'⁷² Following the publication of these two instalments by March 1899, Lim finally cut his queue. Before this, Lim had been taunted for not leading by example because he had kept his queue while other reformers like Lim Ah Yan and Song Ong Siang had cut theirs at the height of the controversy in 1898.⁷³

In 'The Queue Question,' Lim began by stating categorically that his arguments were applicable only to Straits Chinese, who were British subjects. Lim elaborated by asserting that Straits Chinese British subjects possessed 'rights and privileges' which were 'the birthright of all who owe allegiance to the Queen.' Lim wrote in the hyperbolic language evocative of loyalty to the British empire and that typified assertions of imperial citizenship: 'it is unpatriotic and unwise on our part to allow the prejudices of our forefathers, who were not British subjects, to deter us from pursuing the only course to advancement socially and intellectually.'

Lim argued that reforms were necessary 'or else we as Chinese must forfeit all the advantages which we otherwise enjoy and must be content with only a secondary place in the social and commercial struggles of the nations.' Tying the need for reforms to their possession of British subjecthood, Lim argued that if the claims of Straits Chinese British subjects were to be 'respected by the proper authorities, we must prove by the lives and conduct and works of our people that we are deserving of the citizenship of the British Empire.' One of the first measures Straits Chinese must adopt to prove themselves worthy of British subjecthood, Lim exhorted, was to cut their queues. Since the queue was a 'sign of allegiance to the Manchu sovereign,' it was 'indefensible' and 'improper' for British subjects to continue with this practice.

Lim explained further that reformers advocated queue-cutting because the 'conservative instinct of our race is so great and so deeply rooted that unless

some important step is definitely taken to indicate a forward march there will always be back-sliding.' Queue-cutting was 'merely a sign that those who give up the custom are prepared to change their ways and views in any direction whatsoever in order to improve themselves and their people.' From Lim's perspective, queue-cutting was not an act of rebellion against the 'alien' rule of the Manchus, for surely the British were as 'alien' as the Manchus. Lim interpreted queue-cutting as a progressive gesture that would blaze the way for further reforms which would then enable the Straits Chinese to assert their rights and privileges as worthy British subjects.

If Lim deployed the language of imperial citizenship to explain reformers' rationale for queue-cutting, he did not push for full adoption of European dress but called for the reinvention of Straits Chinese clothing. Lim argued that the queue was not authentic to Straits Chinese dressing which had never been 'wholly Chinese.' They had evolved a 'special kind of dress' combining 'European,' 'Chinese' and 'Malay' element. The queue, Lim wrote, was 'hardly part of our dress' and was 'merely a mode of doing up the hair.' The hybridised way Straits Chinese dressed did not bother Lim for he pointed out that 'a Chinese always remains a Chinese, however, he may dress or wherever he may live.'⁷⁴ The supposed insignificance of hairstyle and dress, relative to the weightier topics Lim discoursed about in subsequent instalments of 'Straits Chinese Reforms' — education, religion, filial piety, funeral rites — did not prevent him from writing a second essay challenging the Straits Chinese to create 'a dress evolved out of our own ideas.'⁷⁵

Unlike the reformers, those who opposed queue-cutting in Singapore did not form a close-knit group with an activist agenda. Queue-defenders were family, friends, business partners and former political allies who moved in the same circles as the reformers. Queue defenders opposed cutting the queue for several reasons. Tan Jiak Kim who set the tone for queue-defenders, 'ridiculed the idea entirely.' Tan claimed that 'popular feeling' was against queue-cutting: 'almost without exception, the older members of the community were for letting the *towchang* remain as it is.' He characterised advocates of queue-cutting as 'young men who had either been misled or were not of an age to judge the wisdom of the proposed innovation' and 'who only wished to do away with the queue in order to adopt European fashion entirely, something which most *Baba* young men then would not do.' Tan told the *Straits Times* that it was common practice for Straits Chinese young men who went abroad for further studies to cut their queues and to wear it again when they returned home to Singapore. On the issue of demonstrating British subjecthood, Tan failed to see why Straits Chinese must cut their queues to bring themselves in line with the few who went and stayed in China.

The most critical point queue-defenders made was that queue-cutting was tantamount to 'de-nationalization.' Tan stated that the queue was 'a distinctive mark' of the Chinese race and wondered if the queue was cut, under what

‘nationality’ the Chinese would be classified? There were younger Straits Chinese such as Wee Theam Tee who felt that Tan made sense because without the queue, the Straits Chinese would become ‘neither European nor Chinese.’ For Wee, the queue was ‘the distinguishing mark of a Chinaman and directly he loses it, he practically cannot claim any nationality at all.’⁷⁶

To bolster their position, queue-defenders frequently circulated a quote scorning the importance reformers attached to queue-cutting:

a Straits-born Chinaman with a *towchang* and a thorough understanding of the English language, would be a better man than a Straits-born Chinaman who cut his hair in the English fashion and understood but a little English and a little Chinese.⁷⁷

It is a matter of high irony, perhaps intentional, that before they cut their queues, Lim and his associates exemplified the look of the ‘better man’ preferred by their opponents. One letter contributor calling himself ‘Anti-Reformer’ praised this portrait of the ideal Straits Chinese man because ‘he would have a better chance of earning his livelihood.’ Conceding that such a person may not possess knowledge of Chinese language, literature and history to pass on to his children, ‘Anti-Reformer’ was quick to remind his readers: ‘if our children wish to know something of the prowess of the ancient Chinese, have we not the “*Sam Kok*” (*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*) rendered into *Baba* colloquial Malay?’⁷⁸ Remarkably, even for queue-defenders who equated the queue with racialized Chinese-ness, the *towchang* was interpreted as an integral part of a hybridised Straits Chinese identity.

Part of the problem caused by the *towchang*’s unstable signification of Chinese-ness in colonial Singapore has to do with language. In 1899, Song Ong Siang, a close Lim ally and co-founder of the *Straits Chinese Magazine* wrote an article appropriately entitled ‘Are the Straits Chinese British Subjects?’ A lawyer by training, Song wrote that he meant to discuss the ‘nationality’ of the Straits Chinese, that is the ‘permanent or native section of our Chinese population’ from ‘the political standpoint.’ Song used the word ‘nationality’ to refer to the legal and political status of the Straits Chinese. As queue-defenders’ equation of queue-cutting with ‘de-nationalization’ underscores, ‘nationality’ was not an innocent word. Thus, Song clarified: ‘What is the nationality of the Straits-born Chinese? In other words, to the sovereign of what country do they owe political allegiance?’ Song wrote the article out of concern that modified application of *jus soli* in the Straits Settlements opened a loophole for the Qing government to exploit the principle of descent to claim the loyalty of all Straits Chinese settled in the colony. Song was incredulous that the Foreign Office was partial to the Qing government’s position. He commented wryly that it would be ‘difficult to find another instance in the history of the international relations between England and other powers or nations of the feverish willingness of England to yield to a bare claim made upon her by another nation.’ Song urged the British to apply *jus soli* consistently to *all*

children born in the colony, including children whose parents were Qing subjects, arguing that consistency of application of *jus soli* would pre-empt the Qing government from using *jus sanguinis* to claim the loyalty of all Straits Chinese.⁷⁹

Song's article represented one effort in claiming a distinctive identity for Straits Chinese with its attendant difficulties reflected in the very issue of terminology. Lim Boon Keng's writings in the same magazine represented another effort. Lim was also careful about using precise terminology. When Lim discussed the queue question, for instance, he used terms like 'subjects' and 'citizens' to refer to the 'British' or political component of Straits Chinese identity while reserving the terms 'nationality,' 'race' and 'people' to refer to racialized elements of Chinese identity. Both Song and Lim used the strategy of splicing apart the political and racialized meanings of Straits Chinese identity while repositioning the queue as a legal-political rather than racialized-cultural marker of identity. This was one way they attempted to unhinge the connection their critics made between cutting the queue and becoming un-Chinese. This seems to be a neat strategy but was not entirely convincing precisely because 'nationality' had different meanings for Song and Lim. Whereas 'nationality' meant 'political allegiance' to Song, in Lim's usage, it meant 'nation-race.' This meaning was similar to what Anthony Reid describes as the salient Asian concept of 'the ethnies.' As Reid explains, in most Asian languages, the concepts for 'nation' and 'race' are fused together in a single term such as *minzu* in Chinese, *chat* in Thai and *bangsa* in Malay. Reid notes that for most of the nineteenth century, the two concepts of 'nation' and 'race' for English language users were also fused but had been gradually differentiated.⁸⁰ Leaning on these tentative meanings of 'nationality,' Lim's and Song's discussion of Straits Chinese subjecthood-citizenship in relation to the *towchang* controversy in Singapore captured one moment of change in the concept of 'nation-race' in the English language in a marginal corner of the empire.

Conclusion

It is tempting to analyze the queue-cutting controversy in Singapore with reference to similar developments in China. Thus, Finnane grants that 'Chinese overseas led the way in queue-cutting' but states that this was 'not necessarily a sign of disaffection with the Qing, merely one of acculturation.'⁸¹ As this article shows, queue-cutting in Singapore was contentious even though the gesture did not necessarily express anti-Manchu disaffection. Earlier writings examining Lim and the Straits Chinese reform movement also attribute queue-cutting and the reformers' agenda to intellectual and political ideas emanating from continental China.⁸² There were certainly significant points of convergence between the queue-cutting movements in Singapore and continental China. Just as revolutionaries championing queue-cutting in China held up the queue

as a sign of political allegiance to the Qing, Straits Chinese reformers argued likewise that the queue was a 'political' rather than 'cultural' symbol of Chinese identity.

In recent years, however, scholars have questioned such conventional arguments referencing an implicit 'continental China core' where historic events and phenomena could spill over and influence the 'overseas Chinese periphery.' Scholars tracing the intellectual genealogies and activities of Lim and Straits Chinese reformers have countered this geopolitical map of Chineseness by documenting the dynamic pathways through which ideas and displaced intellectuals travelled and interacted in this part of the world. These inter-connections defy Sinocentric assumptions about centres and peripheries.⁸³ The queue-cutting controversy in Singapore was an example of dynamic inter-connections enabling exchange and appropriation of ideas. It is extremely telling that whereas only the most rabid anti-Manchu rebel would dare cut off his queue in China in the late 1890s, queue-cutting in Singapore was accomplished as a progressive act championed by self-professed reformers who refashioned a blend of Confucianism while invoking imperial citizenship to push for phased improvements to and increased security of their legal status within the British empire. These discursive moves centred on the queue occurred as educated Straits Chinese debated the connections between British subjecthood and queue-wearing in the aftermath of Khun Yiong's case.

Threading Khun Yiong's case through a discussion of Straits Chinese subjecthood-citizenship, this article has situated the troubling legal status of Straits Chinese British subjects within a substantial transborder history of imperial formation. Imperial formation gave rise to ill-defined geopolitical spaces and population categories. This article has revealed gaps, arbitrary workings and dubious operations of extraterritoriality, detailing their effects on mobile Straits Chinese like Khun Yiong. Tracking the movement of male Straits Chinese bodies through a visual and tangible identity marker in the *towchang*, this article discovers a potent history of the queue in the British empire. This article uses the concepts of 'imperial citizenship' and 'subject-citizen,' to further illustrate the subjective responses and agency of Straits Chinese who re-worked terminology, languages of imperial citizenship, hairstyle and clothing in multiple ways. This approach underscores the necessity of appreciating contested citizenship not in terms of how errant subjects violated hardened legal categories but rather in terms of specific linguistic, material and cultural histories shaping the contours of contestation. For Straits Chinese whose lives, livelihoods and identities had long been tied to the problem of border crossing and border control, these efforts in navigating the minefield of contested citizenship were not simply attempts at 'playing both sides.' They were also attempts at articulating novel senses of selfhood and community with potentially serious consequences.

Notes

1. Lin, "Overseas Chinese Merchants and Multiple Nationality," 10.
2. Ong, *Flexible citizenship*.
3. McKeown, *Melancholy order*, 3.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, 10.
6. Gorman, *Imperial Citizenship*.
7. *Ibid.*, 18.
8. Banerjee, *Becoming Imperial Citizens*.
9. Jayal, *Citizenship and Its Discontents*, 27.
10. Banerjee, *Becoming Imperial Citizens*.
11. See Cooper, *Citizenship Between Empire and Nation*, Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*.
12. Rudolph, *Reconstructing identities*, 29.
13. Chua, "Imperial Subjects, Straits Citizens"; Hung, "There Are No Chinamen in Singapore."
14. Chua, "Nation, Race, and Language," 287.
15. Rudolph, *Reconstructing identities*, 37.
16. Chua, "Nation, Race, and Language," 288.
17. *The Times*, 8 December 1897, CO273/234/26489/97, The National Archives, United Kingdom (TNA).
18. *ST*, 7 December 1897
19. *Ibid.*
20. Telegram from Governor of SS to British Minister in Peking, 13 December 1897, CO273/243/3395, TNA.
21. Telegram from British Minister in Peking to Governor of SS, 14 December 1897 in *ibid.*
22. Banerjee, *Becoming Imperial Citizens*, Hansen, *Citizenship and Immigration in Post-war Britain*, Jayal, *Citizenship and Its Discontents*.
23. Hansen, *Citizenship, and Immigration in Post-war Britain*.
24. Jayal, *Citizenship and Its Discontents*.
25. Karatani, *Defining British Citizenship*.
26. Jayal, *Citizenship and Its Discontents*.
27. British Minister in Peking to Foreign Office in London, 16 December 1897, CO273/243/3395, TNA.
28. Consul of Amoy to British Minister in Peking, 11 February 1898, CO273/243/12383, TNA.
29. British Minister in Peking to Foreign Office in London, 16 December 1897, TNA.
30. All quotes from Khun Yiong's petition are from *ST*, 4 December 1897.
31. All quotes from the Governor's report are from Governor of SS to British Minister in Peking, 25 January 1898, CO273/243/12383, TNA.
32. Chen, *Chinese law in imperial eyes*.
33. Dan, "Chinese by Definition."
34. Scully, *Bargaining with the state from afar*, 95.
35. *Ibid.*, 98–100.
36. Consul of Amoy to British Minister in Peking, 11 February 1898, CO273/243/12383, TNA.
37. British Minister in Peking to Governor of SS, 13 March 1898, in *ibid.*
38. Note by T.C.Macnaghten, 3 June 1898, Colonial Office, London, CO273/243/1283, TNA.

39. Cassel, *Grounds of Judgment*.
40. Cited in Scully, *Bargaining with the State from Afar*, 2.
41. Scully, *Bargaining with the State from Afar*, 28.
42. *ST*, 8 December 1897.
43. *Singapore Government Gazette*, Government Notification 194, 13 Nov 1868.
44. Anon., “British subject of Chinese descent,” 156.
45. *ST* and *Singapore Free Press*, 27 December 1897
46. All quotes from this paragraph are from Pickering’s letter published in *ST*, 24 January 1898. His letter addressed to the Under Secretary of State for the colonies, dated 9 December 1897 is also in CO 273/234/26489/97, TNA.
47. Tejapira, “Pigtail,” 101.
48. Letter from Consul of Ningpo to the British Representative in China (Hong Kong), 3 July 1844, NL85, National Archives of Singapore (NAS).
49. Letter from Governor of SS to Resident Councillors of Penang, Singapore and Malacca, 18 September 1845, NAB1668, NAS.
50. Extract of a despatch from the British Representative in China (Hong Kong) to the India Board, 6 August 1844 in NL85, NAS.
51. Letter from British Consul of Canton to Charge D’Affaires in Peking, 15 September 1865, CO273/9, TNA.
52. Law Officers’ report (Sinclair Inn) to India Office, 10th March 1866 in *ibid*.
53. Letter from the Undersecretary of State, Foreign Office to British Minister in Peking, 26 March 1866 in *ibid*.
54. Exchange of correspondence between British Minister in Peking and Prince Kung, cited in Memorandum by Mr. Streatfeild respecting the Protection of Anglo-Chinese in China: Negotiations with the Chinese Government, 18 March 1886 in CO273/142/22732.
55. Petition of the Undersigned British Subjects of Chinese descent Resident in Shanghai, 23 November 1868 in NL925, NAS.
56. Minute by Sir Thomas Wade Respecting the Petition of Lo Yuen-yen and other British Subjects of Chinese Descent Regarding Costume, 9 July 1878 in CO273/253, TNA.
57. British Consul in Amoy to British Minister in Peking, 24 December 1868, NL925, NAS.
58. Nield, *China’s foreign places*, 29.
59. Cited in Memorandum by Mr. Streatfeild respecting the Protection of Anglo-Chinese in China: Negotiations with the Chinese Government, 18 March 1886 in CO273/142/22732, TNA.
60. British Minister in Peking to Foreign Office, 6 May 1869 in CO273/34/8123, TNA.
61. *Ibid*.
62. Memorandum by Sir J. Pauncefote respecting British Protection to Anglo-Chinese in China, 15 March 1879 in CO273/253, TNA.
63. *ST*, 12 July 1879.
64. *ST*, 26 January 1898.
65. *Singapore Free Press*, 27 January 1898.
66. For more on the Straits Chinese reform movement, see Rudolph, *Reconstructing identities*, Doran, “The Chinese Cultural Reform Movement in Singapore”; Yen, “The Confucian Revival Movement in Singapore and Malaya, 1899–1911.” Recent writings on Lim include Soon, “Science, Medicine, and Confucianism in the Making of China and Southeast Asia- Lim Boon Keng and the Overseas Chinese, 1897–1937”; Chan, “The Case for Diaspora”; Yan, *Ethnicities, personalities, and politics in the ethnic Chinese worlds*.
67. Shinozaki, “Contesting Chineseness,” 96.

68. *Straits Settlements Annual Report for the Year 1898*, 111, CO275/57, TNA
69. *ST*, 14 March 1898; *Mid-Day Herald*, 30 March 1898
70. Rudolph, *Reconstructing identities*, 140.
71. The section detailing Lim Boon Keng's relationship with Tan Jiak Kim and the debate over Lim's re-nomination is reconstructed from numerous reports and letters published in the *ST* and the *SFP* between 8th and 19th August 1898. Since this is a long list, I am not listing the newspaper material individually.
72. Lim, "Straits Chinese Reform I"; Lim, "Straits Chinese Reform II."
73. *ST*, 26 January 1898
74. All quotes on Lim's discussion of the queue are from Lim, "Straits Chinese Reform I."
75. Quotes in this paragraph on Straits Chinese dress and "reform shoes" are from Lim, "Straits Chinese Reform II."
76. All quotes from this and the preceding paragraph are from *ST*, 27 January 1898.
77. *Ibid.*
78. "Baba Malay" refers to the creolized Malay spoken by some of the Straits Chinese. *SFP*, 1 Feb 1898
79. All quotes in this paragraph are from Song, "Are the Straits Chinese British Subjects?."
80. Reid, *Imperial Alchemy*.
81. Finnane, *Changing clothes in China*, 78.
82. See Yen's writings for example. Yen, "The Confucian Revival Movement in Singapore and Malaya, 1899–1911"; Yen, "Overseas Chinese Nationalism in Singapore and Malaya 1877–1912."
83. Frost, "Emporium in Imperio"; Kwartanada, "The Tiong Hoa Hwe Koan School" and Sai, "Mandarin Lessons."

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