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Rotary International's 'acid test': multi-ethnic associational life in 1930s Southeast Asia*

Su Lin Lewis
University of California–Berkeley, Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies, 7233 Dwinelle Hall, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA
E-mail: sulinlewis@berkeley.edu

Abstract

The social history of colonial Southeast Asia has often been narrated through the lens of 'plural societies', where various ethnic groups rarely mixed. This article challenges that narrative by pointing to traditions of multi-ethnic interaction, particularly in port cities, dating back to an early modern age of commerce. Although colonialism introduced new racial hierarchies that reinforced stark ethnic divides, it also created arenas where these could be transgressed. In the interwar era, international organizations, such as Rotary clubs, provided a way of breaking the colour bar of colonial society and a venue for multi-ethnic representation in a shared associational space. They converged with existing notions of civic duty, while promoting a public intellectual culture in cities for both men and women, as well as a new sense of regionalism. In ethnically divided Malaya, Asian Rotarians questioned the importance of race and debated the possibilities of a multi-ethnic future for the nation. While such cosmopolitan ideals were more vulnerable in the post-colonial era of nation-states, the organizations of the interwar era left important legacies for civil society in the region.

Keywords civil society, philanthropy, port cities, Rotary, Southeast Asia

Introduction

In April 1938, the Penang Rotary Club hosted a regional conference that brought together Rotarians from all over 'Middle Asia', conceived, in Rotary's map of the world, as a region stretching from Afghanistan to the Philippines. The gathering included Asian as well as Western representatives, from Rangoon, Bangkok, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Malacca, Surabaya, Batavia, Manila, and Kupang. The speeches given over the three-day conference were self-congratulatory, remarking on the progress that Rotary had made in establishing clubs throughout the region, and on the opportunity that such clubs provided for breaking down racial boundaries between all 'classes and creeds'. Western Rotarians, in particular,

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made much of the 'cosmopolitan' nature of the gathering and the ethnic diversity of its attendees. R. Boyd, a Rotarian and member of the Malayan Civil Service, noted that, in the region, 'people speak hundreds of languages and dialects and most speak no language but their own … they worship at countless different altars … Is there anywhere in the world an area so divided within itself by language, religion, custom, culture, ways of thought, political traditions, hopes, and aspirations?'[1]

Foreign commentary on the cultural diversity of 'Southeast Asia', from which most of the delegates hailed, was nothing new; travellers to the region had commented on this for hundreds of years. Yet, in the interwar era, the recognition of ethnic pluralism in the region now converged with the internationalist rhetoric of American civic organizations such as Rotary. W. A. Zimmerman, a Rotarian and head of the Bangkok branch of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), focused on the unusual opportunities of the region for 'advancing international understanding, goodwill, and peace', the fourth object of Rotary International. He noted:

> I am convinced that it is in this part of the world that all Rotary objects have undergone acid tests. Those of us who live here are aware of the frictions that exist between racial and national groups; and the deep-rooted prejudices, which impede the way to potential fellowship. Every club in this region is cosmopolitan in membership. If the whole Rotary idea is western in its inception, the Far East is the real research laboratory. … in our region we are confronted with the unfortunate traditions of international and interracial contracts; with grim realities of exploitation and crass economic competition; with social attitudes based on arrogance and half truths; and active antipathies that retard justice and right thinking.[2]

Zimmerman's critique of the 'unfortunate traditions of international and interracial contracts' – a reference to the unequal, extraterritorial treaties imposed on Siam by foreign colonial powers, as well as the region's long history of absorbing migrant populations – was echoed in the observations of the colonial scholar J. S. Furnivall. According to Furnivall, the medley of diverse ethnic communities in the region met only in the marketplace.[3] They lacked a 'common cultural tradition', and hence any sense of political community. This was exacerbated by the open-door immigration policies of colonial states, which created a racial hierarchy of 'plural societies' with Europeans at the top, foreign Asian migrants in the middle, and natives at the bottom.

The rhetoric of internationalism emerged in full force in the interwar era, bolstered by the creation of the League of Nations. At this time, Southeast Asians were beginning to challenge the rigid, racial hierarchies of colonial society. While colonialism had exacerbated racial tensions between communities, the accelerated flow of ideas due to advances in communication and travel generated a host of new ways to imagine communal differences as well as to surmount them. Ideas of ethnic nationalism were in the air, but so were the wider, global affiliations. The rise of communism in Southeast Asia has been well studied

1 'The future of Rotary in Middle Asia', *Straits Echo*, 19 April 1938.

2 W. A. Zimmerman, 'The highest form of citizenship', *Straits Echo*, 26 April 1938.

3 J. S. Furnivall, *Colonial policy and practice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948, pp. 304–5.

within particular national contexts.[4] Scholars, including Carolien Stolte in this special issue, are beginning to explore the internationalization of labour in this age, particularly in Asia. Moreover, the study of transnational movements of Asian traders and 'capitalists' has gained new credence, particularly within the context of Indian Ocean studies.[5]

These wider networks have been obscured by Southeast Asian historiography's focus on anti-colonial forms of ethno-nationalism, born out of the perceived encroachment of migrant communities on 'native' territory, as in the case of the radical Burmese 'Thakin' movement and Malay Associations of the 1930s.[6] There has been little, if any, research on Siam's pre-war associational life, partly as the result of the focus on high politics around the 1932 coup; and the 'official nationalism' of Siam in the decade before and after the coup has often been seen as targeted towards Chinese and other migrant communities, with notions of Thai ethnic identity taking primordial place as the defining feature of the state.[7] Scholars of migrant and minority groups, meanwhile, have tracked the emergence of diasporic mentalities through these communal associations and enhanced networks with migrants' homelands, but have not said much about their contributions to the wider communities in which they settled.[8]

Alongside ethnic nationalism, the diasporic nature of Southeast Asian port cities produced cosmopolitan communities that valued a global outlook and multi-ethnic interaction. In his study of cosmopolitanism in Middle Eastern historiography, Will Hanley has called for a specification of the term, attributing it to particular social classes at particular moments.[9] The cosmopolitan ideas of internationalism and cross-cultural friendship that I examine belonged to a class that some scholars might call a port-city 'elite', as Hanley does with regards to Alexandria, but which I refer to here as an emerging, publicly oriented professional class of doctors, lawyers, newspaper editors, and civil servants – those not at the apex of colonial society, a place reserved only for whites, but with some power and will to shape the colonial-era public sphere through their own professions, philanthropy, associational life, and contributions to

4 See, for instance, Frank Trager, *Marxism in Southeast Asia: a study of four countries*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1959; Ruth McVey, *The rise of Indonesian communism*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1965; C. F. Yong, *The origins of Malayan communism*, Singapore: South Seas Society, 1997.

5 See, for instance, Leila Tarazi Fawaz and C. A. Bayly, *Modernity and culture: from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002; Denys Lombard and Jean Aubin, eds., *Asian merchants and businessmen in the Indian Ocean and the China Sea*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000; Mark Frost, 'Asia's maritime networks and the colonial public sphere, 1840–1920', *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, 6, 2, 2004, pp. 63–94.

6 See Robert Taylor, *The state in Burma*, London: C. Hurst & Co, 1987; William Roff, *The origins of Malay nationalism*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967.

7 See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities*, London: Verso, 1991, pp. 100–1; Water F. Vella, *Chaiyo! King Vajiravudh and the development of Thai nationalism*, Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1978; Scot Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the creation of a Thai identity*, Singapore: Social Issues in Southeast Asia, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993.

8 See, for instance, Victor Purcell, *The Chinese in Southeast Asia*, London: Oxford University Press, 1965; Wilfred Blythe, *The impact of Chinese secret societies in Malaya: a historical study*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969; Kernial Singh Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969; Ravindra K. Jain, *South Indians on the plantation frontier in Malaya*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970; Nalini Ranjan Chakravarti, *The Indian minority in Burma: the rise and decline of an Indian community*, London: Oxford University Press, 1971; Moshe Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: a study of a minority group*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrosowitz, 1972.

9 Will Hanley, 'Grieving cosmopolitanism in Middle East studies', *History Compass*, 6, 5, 2008, pp. 1346–67.

the press. In the context of Southeast Asia's 'plural societies', they prioritized connection across racial lines, and promoted the improvement of local, urban, and national communities within the context of a *truly* global capitalism, in which Asians, rather than Westerners, could decide their own economic futures.

When it began in Chicago in 1905, Rotary's aim was to bring together representatives of a number of different professions, re-creating the fraternal camaraderie of small-town America through the ideal of public service. By 1920, these principles had been carried forth to the Caribbean, Latin America, Europe, and Asia through movements of transnational businessmen who promoted Rotarian ideals of professionalism, friendship, community service, and international cooperation, operating within the institutional framework of Rotary International. The movement signalled the emergence of urban, professional men, connected by transnational sociability throughout the world, although it also included progressive aristocrats in non-colonial Japan and Siam, who sought to showcase their cosmopolitan sensibilities and links to the world of commerce. As Brendan Goff has noted, the promise of world fellowship in the interests of capitalist gain brought together odd pairings of Japanese princes and Kansas shop-owners, speaking to each other in the same language.[10] Goff refers to Rotary as a particularly American ideology of 'civic internationalism', a form of 'Wilsonianism without the state'.[11] Yet the success of Rotary's diffusion around the world was a testament not only to the efforts of its North American promoters but also to its flexible institutional form. It was adapted for use by local civil society actors in diverse settings, while operating seamlessly within the overarching framework of interwar internationalism.

Rotary's focus on creating networks across racial lines made it particularly appealing to an emerging Asian professional class. In the transition from colonial rule, Asian Rotarians reached out to a wider interwar internationalism while exploring ideas of multi-ethnic community. This was a novel idea in a world dominated by nation-states, which often presented themselves as racially homogenous entities. Goff argues that, while Rotary provided a means by which white Americans could export an ideal of a culturally homogenous nation abroad, increasing international engagement after the First World War destabilized the 'tacit whiteness of Rotary International's civic internationalism'.[12] Through internationalist rhetoric, Rotary provided Asians with the opportunity to promote the cultural pluralism that defined the region as a positive force, and with a semi-public civic space to test out new ideas of citizenship, economic empowerment, and piecemeal social change. Focusing on Burma, Siam, and, in particular, Malaya, this article examines the way in which Rotary clubs, in promoting new forms of sociability among an emerging professional class not only helped create a new associational space that broke through racial barriers in colonial society but also provided a home-grown vision of a modern, multi-ethnic community that the movement's founders did not foresee.

10 Brendan Goff, 'Philanthropy and the "perfect democracy" of Rotary International', in David C. Hammack and Steven Heydemann, eds., *Globalization, philanthropy, and civil society: projecting institutional logics abroad*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009, pp. 47–70.

11 Brendan M. Goff, 'The heartland abroad: the Rotary Club's mission of civic internationalism', PhD thesis, University of Michigan, 2008, p. 26.

12 Goff, 'Heartland', 83.

Cosmopolitan foundations and the breaking of the 'colour bar'

While both Zimmerman and Furnivall, writing in the 1930s and 1940s, saw the diversity of Southeast Asian societies as a negative trait, contemporary theorists might refer to the transnational movements of capital as evidence of 'actually existing cosmopolitanism' in the region.[13] The region's port cities, in particular, witnessed a diverse array of religious, kinship, and increasingly secular associational cultures, existing in close proximity. From the region's 'Age of Commerce' in the sixteenth century through to the early twentieth century, the social fabric of Southeast Asian port cities consisted of an ad hoc coalition of temples, mosques, churches, trade and clan associations, and secret societies – religious, civil, and subversive informal institutions.[14] The texture of associational life in such cities was rich and diverse in its scope. Chinese clan associations, mosques, Hindu temples, and churches provided venues in which communities found spiritual sustenance, as well as sites for forging commercial networks along communal lines.[15] There were many cases of inter-racial marriage, as foreign Asian and Arab traders came to the region and took local wives, enhancing their own social networks. Communities did interact, and have always interacted in the city's public spaces, not least, as Furnivall drily noted, in the marketplace. This was one of the 'central organizing principles of trade' in Southeast Asian port cities, and it is unlikely that social connections across ethnic lines never occurred during practices of financial transaction, bargaining, exchanging gossip, securing news, and setting prices.[16] While an emerging sense of political community according to the Western, nation-state model may have been absent, a sense of social integration within the port city as a multi-ethnic space, linked to a wider regional and global world, existed among a trading class operating relatively freely under indigenous rulers who encouraged maritime commerce.

The arrival of colonial powers led to both inland retreat and resistance by indigenous rulers, as the Malay archipelago, Burma, and Indochina fell into foreign hands. European powers put an end to royal monopolies in Siam, and negotiated contracts enforcing their right to trade freely in Bangkok. Some local rulers barred their subjects from engaging in maritime commerce, leaving this to foreign traders, while Siam continued to encourage Chinese migrants to assimilate and compete commercially with its increasingly powerful colonial neighbours.[17] Port cities, in particular, were largely populated by an influx of foreign migrants. With the founding of Penang, Singapore, and Rangoon in the nineteenth century,

13 See Bruce Robbins, 'Actually existing cosmopolitanism', in Bruce Robbins and Pheng Cheah, eds., *Cosmopolitics*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998; Craig Calhoun, 'The class consciousness of frequent travellers: towards a critique of actually existing cosmopolitanism', in Daniele Archibugi and Mathias Koenig-Achibugi, eds., *Debating cosmopolitcs*, London: Verso, 2003.

14 On pre-colonial cosmopolitanism, see Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the age of commerce, 1450–1680, Vol. 2: expansion and crisis*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993.

15 On Rangoon's Chettiar temple, for example, see Michael Adas, 'Immigrant Asians and the economic impact of European imperialism: the role of the South Indian Chettiars in British Burma', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 33, 3, 1974, p. 396.

16 Reid, *Southeast Asia*, p. 91.

17 See Anthony Milner, 'Who created Malaysia's plural society?', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 2003, pp. 1–24; William Skinner, *Chinese society in Thailand: an analytical history*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1957.

both ad hoc and official municipal councils created some sense of an urban political community among elites, drawing representative leaders from multiple communities to deal with the pragmatics of urban planning, usually linked with colonial projects to discipline vice, establish order, and enhance the welfare of wealthy European residential areas. While many communities often married within their own ethnic groups, inter-marriage between migrants and local communities did result in the formation of powerful hybrid communities of Eurasians, Sino-Thais in Bangkok, and Straits Chinese and Jawi-Peranakans (Indo-Malays) in Malaya. These groups were integral to the formation of a new public sphere, establishing presses (often in multiple languages) that catered to wider communities.

From the late nineteenth century, the associational life of such cities was soured by the politics of race. Segregation on the railways and in the civil service helped to enforce the 'colour bar' in colonial Malaya and Burma, and Malays were only allowed into the lower and middle rungs of the administration.[18] This was exacerbated, no doubt, by the existence of the colonial clubhouse, and its equivalent in Bangkok's expatriate clubs. Such clubs provided arenas to entrench notions of 'white prestige', differentiate Europeans from Asians, and secure vital political and economic contracts among Western communities.[19] Phiroze Sethnan, the first Asian member of Bombay's Rotary Club, echoed many of the sentiments of the Asian commercial class when he complained, in the India Round Table conference of 1930, that Indians were never given the same opportunities as Europeans, partly because Europeans had ready access to officials through their clubs:

> Blood is thicker than water … [A European] can settle things very easily, if not at the office then at his club over a peg of whiskey or a glass of vermouth, whereas the Indian merchant might have to kick his heels for days, perhaps for weeks, before he can even gain admission to the room of the English official.[20]

In some cases, Asians responded to the exclusionary walls of the colonial clubhouse by forming their own clubs and associations, such as chambers of commerce, replicating the European model of gentlemanly respectability. Such clubs helped to foster new, inter-Asian alliances, as in Rangoon, where an 'Orient Club' was founded to the exclusion of Europeans. Here, Burmese, Chinese, and Indian professionals were drawn together in lively conversation, friendship, and political debate – albeit behind closed doors.[21]

Western-style associational models created barriers between white and Asian communities as well as new meeting places. Learned societies and translation bureaus were institutions on which empire thrived, allowing the state to gather local knowledge, both secular and sacred, which was integral to its ability to govern.[22] In some cases, however, they also provided venues where a new generation of educated Asians fraternized with Europeans, and spoke to a

18 See John G. Butcher, *The British in Malaya, 1880–1941: the social history of a European community in colonial South-East Asia*, Kuala Lumpur and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.

19 *Ibid*. See also, in the Indian context, Sinha Mrinalini, 'Britishness, clubbability, and the colonial public sphere: the genealogy of an imperial institution in colonial India', *Journal of British Studies*, 40, 4, 2001, pp. 489–521.

20 *Indian Round Table Conference Proceedings*, Calcutta: Government of India, 1931, p. 152.

21 S. Chatterjee, *Meeting the personalities*, Rangoon: Rasika Ranjani Press, 1959, p. 32.

22 See T. N. Harper, 'Globalism and the pursuit of authenticity: the making of a diasporic public sphere in Singapore', *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 12, 2, 1997, p. 263.

wider world. In independent learned societies, such as the Siam Society (established in 1905) or the Burma Research Society in Rangoon (established in 1910), both Asian and Western scholar-officials and literati exchanged ideas and worked on scholarly projects.

Freemasonry was intimately bound up in the imperial project, providing networks central to the building and cohesion of empire.[23] Yet its radical, ideological roots in eighteenth-century republicanism provided an expansive social experience, in which religious and racial boundaries were routinely crossed.[24] Ideas of a cosmopolitan brotherhood, applied on the colonial frontier, necessarily began to include a small minority of Jews, Muslims, and South Asians. As Europeans in the colonies began interacting with local elites, freemasonry provided an early example of an inter-communal association that sought to create new solidarities, bringing together respectable men of any race from monotheistic, religious backgrounds. A Masonic scholar, J. Ward, observed that, in Rangoon, brothers of 'every caste and creed' met on the Masonic square.[25] Jean Debernardi notes that, from the early 1800s, freemasons in the Straits Settlements drew links between their own rituals and those of Chinese secret societies, seeing parallel traditions of republicanism in values of liberty, fraternity, and equality. At the same time, they were perfectly willing to expose the secret rituals of their Chinese brethren while safeguarding their own.[26] Theosophical societies and Masonic lodges thus provided rare, albeit lopsided, venues where Europeans drew from Asian spiritualism and fraternized with local populations. A travel-writer to Rangoon described them as 'an odd sort of underworld in which certain European and Eurasian elements meet socially in semi-secret … worth discovering, if you can overcome the fanatic prejudices of the East'.[27]

When Rotary arrived in Southeast Asia as a meeting place for business and professional communities, it drew on many of these older models of sociability in the colonial context. Like a gentleman's club, Rotary was often seen as exclusive, and was accused by its own associates in Malaya and Siam as being 'superficial' and 'cultish'.[28] Unlike the colonial clubhouse, however, Rotary drew on the rhetoric of theosophy and freemasonry to encourage fraternity between East and West.[29] Some Western Rotarians, like the theosophists before them, saw in Asia the key to resolving the crisis of Western industrialization and its lack of spiritualism. Rotary International's French President, Maurice Duperry, a China scholar, echoed theosophy's ethos in this speech, given at the 1938 Penang conference: 'Wisdom is returning to

23 See Jessica L. Harland-Jacobs, *Builders of empire: freemasons and British imperialism, 1717–1927*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

24 Margaret C. Jacob, *Strangers nowhere in the world: the rise of cosmopolitanism in early modern Europe*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, 2006, p. 11.

25 J. S. Ward, *Freemasonry and the ancient gods*, London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co, 1926, p. 1.

26 Jean Debernardi, *Rites of belonging: memory, modernity, and identity in a Malaysian Chinese community*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004, p. 57.

27 Richard Curle, *Into the East: notes on Burma and Malaya*, London: Macmillan, 1923.

28 Ho Seng Ong as quoted in Butcher, *British in Malaya*, p. 191; St. Clair McKelway, 'The Rotary religion', *Bangkok Daily Mail*, 4 September 1930.

29 On theosophy in an Asian context, see Mark Frost, '"Wider opportunities": religious revival, nationalist awakening, and the global dimension in Colombo, 1870–1920', *Modern Asian Studies*, 36, 4, 2002, pp. 937–67.

the Occidental hemisphere and Rotary in Asia may help to promote it. Beware of leaving the East and leaving its secret behind.'[30] Freemasonry, meanwhile, produced adherents to Rotary in Asia, as it did in the wider world. Many Rotarians, from San Francisco to London to Rangoon, had been freemasons and were inspired by freemasonry's philanthropic activities. In America, as Lynn Dumenil has argued, freemasonry declined with the rise of American service clubs, whose civic actions made secretive rituals seem outdated and archaic.[31]

While Rotary drew on older networks of association, it was also a part of a growing, public culture of philanthropy, inspired by new international associations, from the Red Cross to the YMCA. By the early twentieth century, Southeast Asia was witnessing the arrival of these institutions as they sought to extend their global reach. The Chinese and Japanese Red Cross societies inspired the Queen of Siam in her own humanitarian activities, while the YMCA, its female equivalent the YWCA, and Scouts and Guides arrived in colonial Southeast Asia via young colonial expatriates and their wives. Those involved in such organizations were atypical of the Western colonial establishment. Commenting on the stark racism of colonial Penang's colour bar, the journalist George Bilainkin then pointed to the head of the local YWCA, noting that it would be a 'heinous offence to overlook the few women in Penang who had a proper conception of their duties to native people. They were the exceptions and worked despite complete lack of encouragement.'[32] Western teachers taught and tested modern ideas of equal citizenship and multi-racial cooperation through organizations such as the YWCA in Malaya.[33]

Such organizations also inspired local offshoots. In response to the arrival of the YMCA, Burmese formed the Young Men's Buddhist Association in Rangoon, which had its analogues in Colombo, Calcutta, Tokyo, and San Francisco.[34] Similar associations of young Buddhists in Siam emerged spontaneously, akin to Japanese young Buddhists and American YMCA organizations.[35] Asian women's movements took inspiration not only from these organizations but also from each other. Both the National Council of Women of India and the International Council of Women provided key associational models for middle-class women in Burma to begin campaigning for women's rights and urging social reform. The campaign for women's suffrage in the Netherlands influenced the formation of multi-racial women's groups in colonial Batavia, and sparked the emergence of an indigenous Indonesian women's movement.[36]

30 'President of R.I. delights the large audience', *RODA*, May 1938, p. 232.

31 Lynn Dumenil, *Freemasonry and American culture 1880–1930*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984.

32 George Bilainkin, *Hail Penang! Being the narrative of comedies and tragedies in a tropical outpost, among Europeans, Chinese, Malays, and Indians*, London: Sampson Low, Maston & Co, 1932, p. 93.

33 See Janice Brownfoot, 'Sisters under the skin: imperialism and the emancipation of women in Malaya, c.1891–1941', in J. A. Mangan, ed., *Making imperial mentalities: socialisation and British imperialism*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990, pp. 46–73.

34 See Maung Maung, *From sangha to laity: nationalist movements of Burma, 1920–1940*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1980. On YMBA's other incarnations in the Indian Ocean, see Frost, '"Wider opportunities"'. For an in-depth look at the YMBA in Rangoon, see A. M. Turner, 'Buddhism, colonialism and the boundaries of religion: Theravada Buddhism in Burma 1885–1920', PhD thesis, University of Chicago, 2009.

35 Virginia Thompson, *Thailand: the new Siam*, New York: Paragon, 1967, p. 645.

36 Susan Blackburn, 'Political relations among women in a multi-racial city', in Kees Grijns and Peter J. M. Nas, *Jakarta-Batavia: socio-cultural essays*, Leiden: KITLV Press, 2000.

The effervescence of new kinds of transnational association, inspiring local forms of activism and social mobilization, occurred within an emerging framework of internationalism, put in place by the promise of the League of Nations. While independent Siam played an active role at the League of Nations table, many Asians in the colonized world began to see a future in sovereign states, even though the League never fulfilled its promise of being a truly encompassing world fellowship during the interwar era.[37] Around the time that Rotary clubs were established in Southeast Asia, discussions of the failures of the League of Nations emerged in the local press. In a 1929 issue of Penang's *Eastern Courier*, a literary magazine published with the support of Kuomintang networks for English-speaking Asians in Southeast Asia, an article pointed to examples from Nicaragua to China where the League had failed to intervene. It went on to argue:

> It is a thousand pities that the League of Nations has apparently thought fit to more or less ignore the rising forces in Asia and has failed to enlist the confidence, sympathy, and support of most Asiatic countries … It is therefore clear that the League as it exists cannot contribute much towards the peace, progress and prosperity of the world, and that the time has come to examine in detail its structure and achievements, and suggest ways and means to transform it into a world force for good.[38]

However, the promise of global inclusion was still seen as a worthy cause, for the author rejected a suggestion on the part of some Asian intellectuals to form an Asiatic League of Nations:

> Asiatics should never become parties to a separatist institution … it would stand in danger of being accused of perpetuating racial rivalries, if not antagonism. At a time when 'the Parliament of Man and the Federation of the World' is becoming the ideal of the best brains in all countries, let it not be said against Asiatic leaders that they have striven to emphasise points of disagreement and disunion among mankind. What we have to strive for is one powerful organisation of which every nation in the world would be proud, to which every weak national unit would look with confidence for support, guidance and protection, and in which all the different countries of the world would be able to feel as important and influential as their most powerful neighbours.[39]

Although the League was not fulfilling its promise of a truly international fellowship, the arrival of Rotary, in the meantime, as an organization that welcomed members from all over the world, provided one possibility for grounding these hopes.

Rotary fever in interwar Asia

The earliest Rotary clubs in Asia, formed in Calcutta, Shanghai, and Manila in 1919, reflected the inequalities of wealth in colonial society. Composed mainly of British and American expatriates, they were often seen as 'enclaves of foreign devils', initially admitting

37 On Siam, see Stefan Hell, *Siam and the League of Nations*, Bangkok: River Books, 2010. See also Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian moment: self-determination and the international origins of anticolonial nationalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

38 'World's greatest need: a world league', *Eastern Courier*, 13 April 1929, p. 3.

39 *Ibid*.

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only one token, albeit very affluent, Asian member.[40] This testified to processes of colonial exclusion, but also indicated initial scepticism among the Asian commercial elite about Rotary's benefits. In Rangoon, Burmese and Chinese businessmen blatantly refused to join, with the club's initial composition including businessmen, officials, educators, professional men, engineers, and scientists, but only 'a few representative Burmans'.[41] In other areas, however, Asians were immediately drawn to Rotary. In Burma in the 1920s, deputy commissioner W. L. Baretto, an Anglo-Burmese barrister, returned from a visit to Ireland, where he had attended a Rotary club meeting in Cork, and established a club in Thayetmyo, a frontier town. The club's motto was 'Under Heaven one Family', and it had an almost entirely Burman membership that met for tea on Saturday evenings and dinners once a month. The club led an isolated existence until Davidson arrived with an official charter.[42] Such ad hoc, unofficial formations of Rotary clubs testified to the adaptability and appeal of Rotary ideals for middle-class sociability in small towns as well as large cities.

The club soon became popular in Rangoon, with prominent Burmese, Chinese, and Indian personalities in journalism and politics, many of them also freemasons. U Ba Win, the club's Burmese president, was a barrister and member of Rangoon's municipal council. According to the Indian journalist S. Chatterjee, who became the Rotary's club secretary, U Ba Win possessed an 'international outlook' and 'absence of any kind of narrowness'.[43] In Burma, the pattern of Rotary clubs echoed the Indian model, with meetings conducted in the vernacular. At the 1938 meeting of pan-Asian Rotary clubs held in Penang, Chatterjee expressed surprise that clubs in Malaya were conducted in English rather than the vernacular, as they were in Burma, which 'every native could understand'; visiting members would have the discussions and lectures of the clubs explained to them by a member conversant in their own particular language.[44] Rotary in Burma thus took on a multi-racial 'national' character, bringing together Indian, Chinese, and Burmese professionals conversing in Burmese. By contrast, clubs in Shanghai, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Bangkok, and Penang were conducted in English, and all competed to be the most 'cosmopolitan' Rotary club in the world, including having the most nationalities in a single club. Among the nationalities represented, particularly in Bangkok and Singapore, were Russians, Swiss, Germans, Dutch, and Jews, alongside Chinese, Japanese, Indians, Malays, Eurasians, and Arabs.[45] Although English-speaking Asians held positions of prestige, the membership of clubs in prominent colonial cities was still more European than Asian at the beginning of the 1930s.

James Davidson, a Canadian businessman who chartered many of the Asian Rotary clubs from Istanbul to Hong Kong, originally sought to make Westerners the nucleus of the clubs, because he felt that the clubs would only thrive under 'men whose traditions, customs, and

40 David Nicholl, *The golden wheel: the story of Rotary 1905 to the present*, Estover, Plymouth: Macdonald and Evans, 1984, p. 222.

41 *The Rotarian*, May 1931.

42 *The Rotarian*, November 1929.

43 Chatterjee, *Meeting the personalities*, pp. 52–55.

44 *Straits Echo*, 19 April 1938.

45 See James Davidson papers, as quoted in Goff, 'Heartland', p. 262; *Bangkok Daily Mail*, 18 September 1930.

way of life were compatible with those of the country in which Rotary was born'.[46] Throughout the 1930s, however, the club increasingly appealed to Asian members, who welcomed the opportunity to break through the colour bar of colonial society, and to join wider social and business networks, beyond those of their particular community. Rotary's associational model provided a means of extending the social, commercial, and philanthropic networks that Asian capitalists had already forged in business and professional associations, clan associations, mosques, and temples. Choo Kia Peng, president of the Kuala Lumpur Club, noted the resonance of Rotary with existing communal traditions in a speech given a year after the club's formation: 'Malaya has a rich legacy that every community lend its ardent support to movements to help the general welfare. Until Rotary came, the only obstacle has been for the leaders to decide in what manner this result could best be achieved. Rotary principles fit in exactly with our aims, since it teaches service and cooperation.'[47]

Asian members played an important role in refiguring Rotary, forcing the organization to reconsider its institutional rules and to adapt to the region's plural societies. In order to attract members in Malaya, Rotary was obliged to consider the possibility of 'racial classifications' within the organization, so that clubs would have to include not just one profession but professions representative of different ethnic communities, thus providing a thorough representation of society.[48] In his speech given in Penang on Rotary's 'Acid Test', Zimmerman, based in Bangkok, called for clubs to be both nationally and racially representative of their community.[49] Not only did Rotary's extension into Southeast Asia challenge the unquestioned solidarity of 'whiteness' forged across the Atlantic, as Goff argues, but it also, crucially, provided a platform by which multiple ethnic and religious communities were represented in a shared associational space.

In Siam, ruled by an absolute monarch until 1932, Rotary provided a small opening for the democratization of Thai political culture. Thai historiography has tended to see the monarchy as existing within an entirely different social world from that of 'commoners', but progressive Thai princes were some of Rotary's early adherents, with Prince Purachatra serving as the first president of Bangkok's Rotary Club in 1930. Purachatra was a quintessential modernist, responsible for building Siam's modern railway system, introducing wireless radio, and playing an integral part in the beginnings of the national film industry. Rotary provided a rare venue where Thai princes mingled not only with the European elite, as they had always done, but also with an ascendant Siamese professional class.[50] Bangkok's Rotary Club had sixty-two members initially, including European, Siamese, and Chinese businessmen, as well as Siamese artists, architects, writers, lecturers, and civil servants from the Post and Telegraphs Office, the Customs Office, and the Information Bureau, all ministries that depended on connections with the outside world.[51]

46 Herbert W. Bryant, 'Rotary in Middle Asia', *The Rotarian*, September 1946.

47 Choo Kia Peng, as quoted in *The Rotarian*, February 1930, p. 7.

48 Goff, 'Heartland', p. 312.

49 *Straits Echo*, April 1938.

50 Siamese' is used here as both a period term and to designate a more plural conception of ethnic and national identity than 'Thai'.

51 'Bangkok Rotary club formed', *Bangkok Daily Mail*, 18 September 1930, p. 3.

The Pagoda, the magazine of the Shanghai Rotary Club, reported that at the first meeting of the Rotary club attended by the King of Siam, he asked to be permitted to 'drop all pomposity' and to 'speak in a lighter vein than is customary', which would be 'more in keeping with the democratic spirit of Rotary'.[52] Rotary thus provided a venue where the Thai nobility could assert themselves as 'modern' rulers, able to fraternize with both an Asian and a European professional and business community.

Asian Rotarians fell into a new social category. A few were wealthy, but most were Asians of 'moderate means'.[53] While there were some Western-educated barristers, such as the Straits Chinese legislator Lim Cheng Ean, who could be compared to the liberal-minded Indian 'public men' of the late nineteenth century, Rotary also represented a broad cross-section of an ascendant professional class.[54] This included not just lawyers, but also educators, journalists, civil servants, doctors, architects, and businessmen. They came to the fore of public life in the 1920s and 1930s, and looked not only to imperial metropoles but also to Republican China, Japan, India, Ceylon, Turkey, Egypt, and America, as models of modernity. Many Asian Rotarians were conversant in multiple languages, and hailed from a diversity of professional and ethnic backgrounds. They welcomed the opportunity to break the racial hierarchies of colonial society and sought to expand their networks beyond the scope of their own ethnic communities, their professions, and even their class.

Philanthropy and public intellectual culture

While Rotarians could be accused of exclusivity amid their closed-door luncheon meetings, the club reached out to a wider public by supporting a number of philanthropic initiatives. Commitment to community 'service' was the criterion for one's nomination for membership of the club. Donations for community-oriented projects were called for at every meeting, and were put towards school scholarships, infant welfare centres, and an Asiatic employment fund. Leper asylums in Penang and Bangkok received regular support. In Rangoon, activities included finding suitable accommodation for the homeless, registering the unemployed, and enlisting the aid of the public to deal with various relief problems, particularly after the 1930 earthquake. Penang's Rotary Club sponsored a boys' club in Ayer Itam that fed and found employment for Tamil and Chinese street-children in the city, as well as the Malay boys originally living in the area, providing them with a small hostel.[55] The boys were given skills training and put into jobs so that they might become 'self-reliant', with the money they earned going into savings accounts. While this was an attempt to spread the capitalist ethos, it differed from missionary and other philanthropic organizations by treating the boys not as victims and projects of social uplift but as agents who could shape their own future. The Rotary programme was explained to them with a question: 'were they willing to be guided, disciplined, but otherwise run their own affairs?' Seventy-five boys enrolled in the programme, and were employed in the market, at the harbour, at the Penang Cricket Club,

52 *The Rotarian*, 16, 2, 1932, p. 31.

53 'Penang', *RODA*, 1931.

54 See C. A. Bayly, *Indian thought in the age of liberalism and empire*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 185–6.

55 'The Rotary club of Penang', *RODA*, November 1934, p. 297.

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and as newspaper sellers. Rotary also funded a sports ground and a boxing ring, which the boys took care of themselves.[56]

In the region's cosmopolitan port cities, where associations thrived, Rotary did not introduce a culture of philanthropy, but provided an additional venue in which community service could be exercised and demonstrated. Many Asian community leaders spread themselves across a range of organizations, from communal associations and reform leagues to professional associations. They made a conscious move to engage in philanthropic activity, whereas many Asian elites remained isolated and divorced from public life in the 1920s and 1930s, leaving their luxury homes only to show status at the racetrack and the polo pitch.[57] There is ample evidence that Asian community leaders who were not Rotarians continued traditions of investing heavily in education and social welfare, primarily within their own community but often for the public as a whole. In the 1920s, Khoo Sian Ewe, a wealthy Straits Chinese leader, provided funds to build a mosque in a Chinese-populated area of Penang.[58] As in Hong Kong and Singapore, Anglophone Chinese drew on Victorian ideals of social reform, mingling them with the Confucian revival movement, which sought to reform the Chinese community along the lines of older values of public service.[59] English-educated Muslims (Jawi Peranakan, Indians, and Arabs) in Penang and Rangoon formed social and philanthropic clubs under the auspices of the whole Muslim community.[60] Partly to increase their social standing within their own ethnic communities, as well as the wider public sphere, they established a number of schools, charities, and welfare homes for the poor and marginalized.

Rotarians often spread themselves across this range of both communal and cultural associations. H. G. Sarwar was a Rotarian, a prolific scholar, and also on the board of the Young Muslim Union in Penang, a social association for young Muslim boys. Heah Joo Siang, a Straits Chinese businessman, was a Rotarian who established the Straits Chinese British Association, as well as a literary society, whose foundation stone was laid by Rabindranath Tagore. In some cases, philanthropy was also a way of 'giving back'.

56 *Ibid.*

57 On Asian elites who favoured luxury over public life, see Engseng Ho, 'Gangsters into gentlemen: the breakup of multi-ethnic conglomerates and the rise of a Straits Chinese identity in Penang', unpublished paper for 'Penang Story' conference, Penang, 2002; Maurizio Peleggi, *Lords of things: the fashioning of the Siamese monarchy's modern image*, Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002.

58 See biographies of prominent persons featured in Arnold Wright and H. A. Cartwright, *Twentieth century impressions of British Malaya: its history, people, commerce, industries, and resources*, London: Lloyd's Greater Britain Publishing Co., 1908; William Ng Jit Thye et al., *Historical personalities of Penang*, Penang: The Historical Personalities of Penang Committee, 1986. On the contribution of Burmese as well as Chinese and Indian elites in Rangoon, see Chatterjee, *Meeting the personalities*, pp. 51, 64. For a unique interpretation of the biography of one Malayan Chinese community leader, see Sharon A. Carstens, 'From myth to history: Yap Ah Loy and the heroic past of Chinese Malaysians', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 19, 2, 1988, pp. 185–208.

59 See Wai Kan Chan, *The making of Hong Kong society: three studies of class formation in early Hong Kong*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991; Chua Ai Lin, 'Imperial subjects, Straits citizens: Anglophone Asians and the struggle for political rights in inter-war Singapore', in Michael D. Barr and Carl A. Trocki, eds., *Paths not taken: political pluralism in post-war Singapore*, Singapore: NUS Press, 2008, pp. 16–36; Christine Doran, 'The Chinese cultural reform movement in Singapore: Singaporean Chinese identities and reconstructions of gender', *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 12, 1, 1997, pp. 92–107.

60 Helen Fujimoto, *The South Indian–Muslim community and the evolution of the Jawi Peranakan in Penang up to 1948*, Tokyo: Gaikokugo Daigaku, 1989, p. 133.

Thus, Dr Ong Chong Keng, a president of the Penang Rotary Club, was born into a poor family of opium addicts, yet a wealthy Chinese benefactor paid for his medical education in Hong Kong, with the understanding that Ong would marry his daughter. As a well-off Straits Chinese doctor in Penang, Ong belonged to a Chinese clan association, and was a municipal councillor and justice of the peace. He was also a patron of and a performer in the *bangsawan*, a hybrid form of local popular theatre.[61] These Asians increased their social standing by contributing to the social and cultural improvement of their own communities, while at the same time reaching out to others. Little is known about the membership or activities of Rangoon's Rotarians in the 1930s, but they might have been the same men featured in a *Who's who in Burma* list from 1925, a regional commercial publication that applauded the Indian, Burmese, Muslim and Chinese community leaders in Burma who made philanthropic contributions 'irrespective of class or creed', including building schools, establishing charities, and starting youth groups.[62]

While Rotary ideals of community thus dovetailed with some of the philanthropic models already in existence in Southeast Asian port cities, Asian Rotarians also found direct resonance with the club's motto of 'service above self' in their own cultural traditions and languages. At the 1938 Rotary conference in Penang, delegates from around the region translated the motto in this way. In a speech, Swami Bhaswarananda pointed to the nineteenth-century mystic Ramakrishna: 'in his life, I find that there is the nucleus of service which he taught to mankind … distributed food to hunger-stricken people'.[63] At another point, a Javanese Rotarian noted, 'In the most aristocratic idiom of the Javanese language the personal pronoun "I" has the same roots as the word "service". It means that "service" is an idea that belongs to the higher regions of the human mind.'[64] He linked this to an old doctrine of mutuality in Asian philosophy.

Rotary values, far from constituting a fixed set of values, were translated and internalized by Asians in different ways. A Siamese speaker found the phrase 'service above self' impossible to translate into Thai, but sought to understand what it meant, giving a light-hearted speech that ran through a number of interpretations: 'You must serve yourself rather than let self dominate you'; 'You must think of doing good to the community and to yourself'; referring to a Biblical analogy, 'Give and it shall be given to you'; and joking about the 'tennis of life' – that without service one would never get the advantage of a deuce – before commenting on the 'spirit of fellowship' present at Rotary gatherings.[65] Siamese princes yielded a more serious interpretation, anchored in the agricultural image of the Siamese nation. Prince Bidyalankarana noted that the principles of Rotary were entrenched in the mind-set of Siamese farmers, to whom kings had always taken a paternal (and often patronizing) attitude:

> indeed the common people of Siam have always acted on the principle of service above self. Owing to the lack of labor the peasant cultivators have always combined in both

61 See Pamela Ong Siew Im, *Blood and the soil: a portrait of Dr Ong Chong Keng*, Singapore: Times Books International, 1995. On *bangsawan*, see Tan Sooi Beng, *Bangsawan: a social and stylistic history of popular Malay opera*, Penang: The Asian Centre, 1997.

62 *Who's who in Burma*, Calcutta; Rangoon: Indo-Burma Publishing Agency, 1925.

63 'A swami on service', *RODA*, December 1938, p. 189.

64 'The personal pronoun synonymous with "service"', *RODA*, May 1938, p. 238.

65 'Bangkok Rotary Club installation dinner', *RODA*, June 1938, p. 23.

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> planting and harvesting their crops, quite in the spirit of Rotary. Further, on these occasions, a meal in common is the rule. One may reasonably hope, then, that the Rotary movement will have an abiding influence in the country.[66]

It is worthwhile to note that, after the 1932 coup, Siamese princes, in self-imposed exile in various locations around the region from Penang to Medan, continued their affiliations with Rotary. Having given way to a new, democratically driven government in Siam, and being marginalized from any real political power, the princes sought from exile to assert themselves as promoters of Siam's intellectual and cultural place within the region and the world. While some Thai princes, such as Prince Varnvaidya, continued to play an important role in the League of Nations in Geneva, others stayed in the area to cultivate its regional relationships. Prince Purachatra became director of *RODA*, the Rotary periodical for Malaya and Siam. Prince Biyalankarana, a civil servant, writer, publisher, and member of the Siam Society, wrote essays on Siamese history for the magazine. Throughout the 1930s, other Thai members contributed articles to *RODA*, including Luang Siddhi Sayamkarn, head of the League of Nations section in the Foreign Ministry, who wrote on the treaties with foreigners that were renegotiated in the 1930s, namely by Pridi Panomyong, a brilliant French-trained lawyer, who helped orchestrate the 1932 coup. Sayamkarn wrote that Siam's new treaties with foreign powers were 'based on reciprocity, equity, and mutual benefit', with Siam having now attained 'full and independent sovereignty'. This was a public announcement to the region that Siam had finally broken free from its 'semi-colonial' status.

One of Rotary's greatest achievements in 1930s Southeast Asia was fostering a culture of public intellectual activity. Visiting scholars, professionals, and Asian literati gave public lectures, which were transmitted in the pages of the Asian-owned English press (Penang's *Straits Echo*, Burma's *The Nation*, and Bangkok's *Bangkok Daily Mail*), bilingual literary periodicals such as Burma's *World of Books*, and regional periodicals such as *RODA*. Lectures focused on religion, history, culture, literature, and libraries, as well as on new 'modern' innovations, from the 'evolution of the writing machine' to technologies of 'duplication'. Rotarians were fascinated by technologies of communication at a time when advances in postal and print communication, press photography, wireless radio, and aeroplanes brought the world closer than ever. During the Penang conference, one delegate declared 'distance is being eliminated': 'a month or so ago two men entered middle Asia from the West and left it in the East between a sunset and a sunset. The air is alive not only with aeroplanes but with the voices and music of the world.'[67]

Arguments by visiting international 'experts' often provided fodder for making important semi-political claims within the colonial context. From the 1920s, the Burmese press had been deriding the aesthetic sensibility of Rangoon's civic buildings, built by colonial architects in various styles, from the Gothic Revival of the Victorian era to Anglo-Indian orientalism. Basil Ward, a New Zealand architect trained by the Royal Institute of British Architects and one of the pioneers of British modernism, gave a Rotary lecture likening the buildings to a 'visible encrustation of a dozen dead styles'.[68] The next day, U Ba Pe, a leading political figure in

66 'H.H. Prince Bidyalankarana on Siamese history', *RODA*, October 1934, p. 213.

67 'The message of Rotary', *RODA*, April 1938.

68 'Architecture in Burma', *New Burma*, 19 January 1930.

colonial Burma, gave a rousing speech in the Burma Legislative Council proposing a design for the new City Hall by a Burmese architect that combined Art Deco minimalism with classical Burmese ornamentation. Along with examples from elsewhere, U Ba Pe drew on Ward's lecture, published in the daily press that morning, to highlight Burmese architecture's compatibility with modern, civic architecture, and won the argument. The victory over the new design for City Hall, situated in colonial Rangoon's central axis, reflected a turning point in the power of the Asian public to dictate the visual impact of the city's political centre.

Through Rotary lectures, transmitted in the local press, Rotarians as well as the broader public learned about both modern innovations and the rich histories and cultures of their own communities. The Penang-based Islamic scholar, H. G. Sarwar, one of the first Muslims to translate the Qur'an into English, lectured on Islam and Sufism. In Penang, the Indian community leader and medical doctor N. K. Menon lectured on the Chinese reformer Dr Sun Yat Sen and the history of Chinese secret societies. Charlton Maxwell, who grew up in Malaya as the son of a British official, gave an inspiring Rotary lecture in 1934 on the secrets of the Malay language, exploring the nuances of its grammar to explain why the language was 'worth studying' (before his tragic death, Maxwell had apparently been working on a theory that the Malay language was onomatopoeic and had a close affinity to a 'world language', its sounds being similar to those in other languages).[69] Through such lectures and periodicals, Rotary provided a public arena where different diaspora communities became familiar with each other's heritage, shaping the diverse strands of a shared, public history.

Asian Rotary clubs supported new advances enhancing women's role in the public sphere, partly by inviting women to give Rotary lectures. One European female teacher in Singapore gave a lecture attacking orthodox economics, while Asian women gave lectures on their changing role in the modern world, overturning cultural stereotypes about the 'passive' Asian woman. An American Rotarian at the Singapore club was astonished at the beauty and effectiveness of a Chinese woman's English. Writing in *The Rotarian*, Rotary's global periodical, he noted 'It came as quite a shock to many of us to realize what modern Chinese woman-hood is capable of. In some ways that speech was one of the most significant for the future of Malaya that I have heard.'[70] In 1937, at the Rangoon Rotary Club, a speech given by Daw Khin Myint, a Burmese woman, titled 'Englishmen as seen by Burmese women', challenged the superior status of Western women by pointing to the inability of Western men to trust their wives, while Burmese women were seen as 'keepers of the family purse'.[71]

However, as part of Rotary policy, women were initially excluded from Rotary as members. Rotarians in Southeast Asia – a region where women have historically played an important economic and social role in their communities – expressed a distinct interest in having women attend Rotary clubs, yet the organization's response was to promote its idea of Rotary's 'Inner Wheel', for the wives, daughters, and mothers of current Rotarians.[72]

69 See Charlton Maxwell, 'Some secrets of the Malay language', *RODA*, 1934; 'Mainly about Malayans', *Straits Times*, 10 November 1940.

70 Richard Sidney, 'Rotary takes root in Malaya', *The Rotarian*, July 1937, p. 50.

71 Daw Khin Myint, 'Englishmen as seen by Burmese women', *Ngan Hta Lawka (World of Books)*, January 1937, as quoted in Chie Ikeya, 'The traditional "high status" of Burmese women', *Journal of Burma Studies*, 10, 2005–06, pp. 64–5.

72 'Women in Rotary: more information', *RODA*, August 1940.

According to Rotary's own website, Rotary did not admit women until the 1980s, but it was in Asia where the first demand for women to enter Rotary occurred: in 1950, a Rotary club in India proposed deleting the word 'male' from the Rotary constitution; in 1964, a Rotary club in Ceylon sought to permit women into Rotary.[73]

Besides fostering conversations among communities at the local level, Rotary also began cultivating a new regional sensibility among neighbours, not only through reading about each other but also through travel. U Ba Win, Rotary's president in Rangoon, visited Colombo with his wife for a Rotary meeting and was given unprecedented permission to worship at the temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic according to Burmese, rather than Sinhalese, Buddhist custom. Meanwhile, through *RODA*, Rotarians in the region read about each other, and made new connections on a pan-Asian level.

The idea of 'Southeast Asia' had not yet taken hold, but the Penang conference of 1938 for 'Middle Asia' helped representatives from India, Burma, Siam, the East Indies, and Ceylon to meet each other, and to conceive of themselves as a common regional community. During the conference, different ethnic and national identities were evoked as a testament to the region's cosmopolitanism. At a dinner hosted by a wealthy Chinese philanthropist, speeches were given in different languages. The Siamese delegate spoke in Thai, a Dutch Rotarian from Bandung spoke in Javanese, 'Frankels' of Singapore followed with a speech in Malay, and the Ceylon-born editor of the Penang *Straits Echo*, M. Saravanmuttu, gave an address in Tamil.[74] Though Rotary's French director-general transmitted a telegram advocating the need for a universal language, the performing of discreet ethnic identities spoke to a desire to preserve a sense of cultural authenticity in a cosmopolitan setting. While Western, and particularly American, ideas of universalism were often founded on the promotion of English as an 'international' language,[75] both Asian Rotarians and Western Rotarians long resident in Asia celebrated the articulation of cultural difference through a panoply of languages, bridged through translation.

Networks forged via Rotary clubs also spilled out into more informal sectors. Some Penang Rotarians formed a discussion group in 1933 under the name, 'The Lost Souls'. They included Dr Ong Chong Kheng and M. Saravanamuttu. The group's name suggests a sense of collective nostalgia, or what Hanley, in reference to interwar Alexandria, refers to as a 'grieving cosmopolitanism' between a group that was connected not by their ethnicity but by their Western education abroad and their allegiance to an imperial identity with a global reach.[76] The atmosphere of the club, however, was anything but sombre. Khor Cheang Kee, then a cub reporter for the *Straits Echo*, recalled that they met every Friday night, often in one of the popular restaurants in town, and became a standard feature of Penang's social and intellectual life in the 1930s.[77] This was a venue where they could informally discuss their grievances with the colonial government, at times in the company of colonial officials.

73 Susan Hanf and Donna Polydoros, 'Historic moments: women in Rotary', 2009, http://www.rotary.org/en/MediaAndNews/News/Pages/091001_news_history.aspx (consulted 5 April 2012).

74 *Straits Echo*, 18 April 1938.

75 See T. N. Harper, 'Empire, diaspora and the language of globalism', in A. G. Hopkins, ed., *Globalization in world history*, London: Pimlico, 2002.

76 Hanley, 'Grieving cosmopolitanism', pp. 1346–67.

77 Khor Cheang Kee, 'The lost souls of Penang', *Straits Times*, 11 November 1948, p. 6.

The club was not registered with the colonial government but acted as a publicly recognized 'secret society'. Although the initial group was constituted of nine members, others often joined during lively dinner sessions. The men came together within Rotary's club walls, but the movement of the group into a popular restaurant, at which everyone was welcome to join in to discuss politics and matters of interest, grounded civic culture within an intimate and informal public space, centred on Penang's famous culinary culture. A Rotarian writing in 1948 in response to Khor's recollections thought this was an excellent alternative to the Rotary practice of having papers read every week. Like the coffee houses of Vienna or Istanbul, the practice of weekly, lively conversation at a restaurant or the local *kopi tiam* (Malay coffee house) was a highly localized mode of association, in which Asian cosmopolitanism manifested itself within the multi-ethnic port city, enduring well into the post-colonial period.

Imagining a multi-ethnic nation

Although it is difficult to know what the 'Lost Souls' might have discussed in their coffee-house meetings, their intellectual positions vis-à-vis the future of Malaya emerged in contributions to the regional publication *RODA* and the *Straits Echo*, Penang's most popular newspaper among English-reading Asians.[78] In the 1930s, the *Echo* was owned by F. H. Grummitt, a prominent Rotary member, and edited by Saravanamuttu, a member of the 'Lost Souls' and one of Rotary's most ardent champions. While scholars have used the Malay press to show how the end of the 1930s witnessed the birth of Malay nationalism, the debates that emerged in publications associated with leading Rotarians are evidence of the way in which non-Malays participated in the imagining of a multi-ethnic nation, in conversation with Malays.[79] They also showcase the tensions, limitations, and possibilities in these visions.

The 1938 Rotary conference in Penang inspired soul-searching among Malayan Rotarians. When, during the meeting, Rangoon's S. Chatterjee stated that he hoped that Malayan clubs would follow the Burmese model and conduct their meetings in the vernacular, he may have hit a raw nerve. Saravanamuttu was, like Chatterjee, a South Asian journalist, yet he had spoken in rusty Tamil when speeches were given in national languages.[80] English was the lingua franca of Malaya's urban-based elite and middle class, stemming from a common educational experience. In a venue that promoted internationalism, with Asian Rotarians promoting their own, 'national' languages, Penangites, in particular, stressed Malaya's cosmopolitanism and compatibility with the spirit of internationalism, thus compensating for Malaya's own lack of a unified national identity and their own lack of fluency in Malay.

78 See Su Lin Lewis, 'Echoes of cosmopolitanism: colonial Penang's "indigenous" English press', in Chandrika Kaul, ed., *Media and the British empire*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006, pp. 233–49. *Straits Echo* circulation figures at this time were around 4,500, but as newspapers were available and read in coffee shops and other public places during this time, readership may be wider than the actual circulation figures.

79 See Roff, *Origins*; Anthony Milner, *The invention of politics in colonial Malaya*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002; Mark Emmanuel, 'Viewspapers: the Malay press of the 1930s', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 41, 1, 2010, pp. 1–20.

80 Special Rotary supplement, *Straits Echo*, 18 April 1938.

Saravanamuttu pressed Rotarians, as well as the wider community, to think beyond the tenets of local community, and to practise a more global outlook:

> Our community is a somewhat cosmopolitan one and we are inclined to think that we are practicing international service in meeting and mixing at our meetings with Rotarians of other nationalities and races. It is however a great deal more than that and Rotary, even if it has not hitherto achieved much, has made real attempts in the field of international service.[81]

He alluded to examples of Rotarians from France and Germany working towards mutual understanding, and focused on its role as a real force for world peace through its fellowship of businessmen and professionals:

> The express purpose of the Fourth Object of Rotary is a creation of the international mind among Rotarians of all races and nations. By an international mind, I mean a mind which, looking out beyond its own racial and territorial boundaries, discerns the essential oneness of all humanity. The things that differentiate men into races, and nations and classes and creeds are of little consequence compared with the compelling unities that binds them all together as members of one great human family.[82]

Saravanamuttu's appeal to the 'international mind' indicated the appeal of interwar internationalism on a broad, global scale, while also presenting the unique standpoint of Penang's multi-ethnic middle class. Penangites often saw themselves as microcosms of the new internationalism: the press once compared a multi-ethnic group of donors to a new school to a miniature 'League of Nations'; similarly, a young student, writing in a school magazine, playfully compared himself and his friends to the 'Great Five' of the League.[83]

For people such as Saravanamuttu, as well as many Penangites, a cosmopolitan outlook was necessary to subvert the injustices of the colonial colour bar (Saravanamuttu himself had been barred from a meeting of Malayan editors on account of the colour of his skin) and imagine a Malaya in which foreign-born citizens and long-domiciled migrants had a place. Race could not be a barrier preventing citizens from participating fully in the social and political life of the country; nor could it be the defining feature of the nation. Through Rotary platforms, Penang's intellectuals strove to downgrade the importance of race. In May 1934, Dr Ong Chong Keng addressed the Penang Rotary Club with a lecture on 'Human evolution in the future', envisioning a world free of racial prejudice. Via inter-racial mixing, 'Physical differences which now distinguished the members of one race from another will gradually diminish, and racial prejudices will disappear, for the simple reason that colour will no longer serve as an infallible guide in the determination of one's race.'[84] For these Asian cosmopolitans, Rotary provided both an ideological and an associational venue to bridge racial boundaries in colonial society and envision a world of greater equality between whites and Asians, and between indigenous and migrant communities.

From the perspective of working-class and rural Malays, struggling in the wake of the worldwide depression, this cosmopolitan outlook was the luxury of the city-dweller, and did

81 *Straits Echo*, 18 November 1937, p. 5.

82 *Ibid*.

83 *Straits Echo*, 13 December 1937; *Penang Free School Magazine*, April 1925, p. 8.

84 'Human evolution in the future', *RODA*, July 1934, p. 64.

not reflect the realities of a nation in which Malays felt de-territorialized, as second-class citizens in their own country. This was a regular topic of discussion in the Malay press in the 1930s, where the notion of *bangsa* (akin to race) created a new sense of solidarity among Malays.[85] Such arguments would have been familiar to Haji Mohammed Eusoff of Kuala Lumpur, who came from a politically influential family in Perak and was a founder member of the Ipoh Rotary Club in 1930. As Assistant Commissioner of Co-operative Development, which took him throughout the country interacting with members of the Malay agricultural and working class, he sympathized with the plight of rural Malays and advocated solutions to his fellow Rotary members.

Displaying his own sense of worldliness, Eusoff drew on Rotarian ideas of 'international understanding and goodwill', as well as a recent article in *The Economist* on 'Colonial responsibilities', to comment on the ignorance of colonial authorities of the societies in which they lived. Addressing a group of Penang Rotarians in 1938, he argued:

> In this country, there is not a single institution or Society having as its object the promotion of friendship and contact with the Malay peoples. The absence of this contact has accentuated the fact that out of the millions that have been made out of the country nothing has come back in the shape of benefactions for the promotion and encouragement of cultural and academic prowess of the people of this country …. We are never tired of congratulating ourselves on the harmony and tolerance that exist among the diverse races: we are apt to forget because the Malay has been such an incredibly good host. It is too much to expect that this will last forever.[86]

The Malays, Eusoff argued, had been forced to adjust to a foreign, cosmopolitan culture for too long, unable even to travel through their own country without speaking a language other than their own, while foreigners could 'spend years in the country without knowing a word of Malay, and what is more, claim a voice in the administration of the country whose people he knows very little'.[87] He continued by addressing the very conditions in which he was allowed to speak: 'Take this example: I am addressing you in English and my pronunciation may be grating to your ears; you may involuntarily shudder at my "murdering" the English language. Now, suppose you take my place and speak in Malay.'[88] He went on to say, 'the soul of a country does not lie in its large cities. There one finds all that is worst, the greed of riches and the misery of poverty. The real Malays are to be found among the peasantry while those who live in the cities are no longer Malays as we are apt to understand the word.'[89] The lecture ended with a caution that Malays were being denationalized, and called for Rotarians to do service to their host culture, by altering their behaviour towards Malays, with renewed sensitivity to their customs and beliefs.

Eusoff's sympathy was with the rural Malay populace, although the large number of Chinese and Indian workers and labourers were in a similar position with regard to the promotion of English. Laissez-faire educational policies had done little to promote the Malay

85 See n. 79.

86 *RODA*, September 1938, and *Straits Echo*, September 15, 1938, p. 11.

87 *RODA*, September 1938.

88 *Ibid.*

89 *Ibid.*

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language, which few Europeans, Indians, or Chinese had taken the time to learn well. While foreign migrants were allowed to establish schools in their own languages, or send their children to English schools, government-sponsored education for Malays was only at primary level, leaving little room for social mobility or interaction with other groups who could not speak their language. Some Malays did, increasingly, send their children to urban English schools in the 1920s and 1930s, where Malay children were often given scholarships. There, they gained a very different experience from that in the vernacular or communal schools, which fostered distinct senses of community for both indigenous and immigrant communities. 'Town Malays' mixed and mingled within a multi-ethnic society, and found ways to adapt and change their traditions, finding creative ways of fusing them with those of others.[90]

In September 1939, the Reverend Ho Seng Ong, a principle of the Anglo-Chinese School in Malacca, applauded this propensity for adaptation and intercultural contact. Recognizing that racial prejudices and narrow nationalisms were endemic to the region, he nonetheless argued that Malaya could be an object lesson in racial harmony and tolerance:

> Malaya is fortunate in having several different racial strains living side by side, for history teaches that all real progress in culture, both material and spiritual, comes mainly from the contact of peoples. Any attempt at racial insulation and social segregation because it is thought each is fundamentally different and eternally distinct is to lay stress on our differences and to postpone the coming of universal brotherhood and world peace …. It is dangerous to regard the social and religious practices and beliefs of a given people as static phenomena. Man keeps a plasticity, a power of adaptive response to changing circumstances. We know this is happening in Malaya. Who, thirty years ago, would have thought that we could have co-education in English schools, Malay girls, garbed in uniform, taking part in sports, Asiatics finding recreation in ballroom dancing; mixed swimming in public; a Malay girl preparing for the medical profession?[91]

A liberalization of gender relations was at the heart of his story of Malaya's progress, but so were the young. Young people, he noted, were learning in the same schools, members of the same cooperative societies, and playing in the same tournaments. They were an example that Malaya's distinct communities could share a common future.

One month later, another transcript of a lecture, given in Penang by a Malay Muslim, Yusuff Izzudin, appeared in the *RODA*. He blamed Malays' 'backwardness' on the denial of a 'true and liberal education' to Muslim women, in direct contradiction to the true Islamic spirit. Educated Malay women were the key to the improvement of the physical, intellectual, moral, and spiritual condition of the Malays. Izzudin appealed to the history of Islam, from its beginnings to the seventeenth century, where women 'occupied comparatively equal positions, and also were given the rights of citizenship, property, and the like, which were essential for women to prosper'.[92] Muslim women controlled the exchequer, commanded

90 On one sector of Penang's 'town Malays' (Jawi Peranakan), see Fujimoto, *South Indian–Muslim community*. For recent work on urban Malays, see Joel S. Kahn, *Other Malays: nationalism and cosmopolitanism in the modern Malay world*, Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006. For an example of hybridity in popular culture see literature on *bangsawan* (Malay popular theatre) in Tan, *Bangsawan*.

91 'Race and nationality in Malaya', *RODA*, September 1939, p. 16.

92 A. M. Yusuff Izzudin, 'Muslims and education of women', *RODA*, October 1939.

armies, and acted as soldiers, judges, peace-brokers, intellectuals, calligraphers, and poets. He argued that, previously, it had only been in Islam that men and women had once been considered equal, and given absolute freedom. Malays had forgotten this heritage of Islamic womanhood, and it was only when women were given an education that the community could 'shine in the future in the world, among the nations of the age'.[93]

Ironically, it was the young and women who were seen by these Asian Rotarians as the harbingers of the nation, even though these two groups were never included in Rotary's luncheon meetings. However, by providing a platform for the discussion of cosmopolitan visions, along with a recognition of the problems as well as the possibilities of ethnic pluralism, Rotary venues gave the basis for imagining a modern, multi-ethnic community within a larger international framework of nations. As citizens of the world, Rotarians were aware of the opportunities that increasing numbers of young people and women all over the globe had to shape the political and cultural life of emerging nations. In Rangoon, where anti-colonial nationalist feelings ran high, the multi-ethnic youth and women of its university participated in protests and the creation of a national literature. In Bangkok, young men and women gathered around university campuses and film companies to start literary periodicals and question their society's class structure and traditions, before a group of Paris-educated young men took over the nation.[94] In Penang, young men and women wrote to newspapers to debate their own visions of cosmopolitan community.[95] In recognizing the speed with which young people were participating in public life and interacting with each other, and in enhancing their opportunities to do so, Asian Rotarians echoed the final lines of Zimmerman's speech on Rotary's 'Acid Test':

> If you really want to know what all races and nationalities hold in common at the threshold of life, integrate your interest with young people. Study their yearnings and aspirations, analyse their fundamental needs, then associate yourselves together in projects that will lift the level of opportunities for them … no greater challenges exist than among the youth of our own cosmopolitan communities in south eastern Asia.[96]

Conclusion: civil society legacies

A lexicon of internationalism provided a lens by which Rotarians could critique their own multi-ethnic societies and articulate a cosmopolitan relationship to each other, giving way to more grounded understandings of inter-racial friendship in Southeast Asia, while advocating a responsibility to a wider community. This was a community that was simultaneously local, national, and global, not imagined through a shared vernacular language but built through civic engagement – by endowing schools, giving public lectures, investing in youth, and promoting female education.[97] Asian Rotarians believed that active participation in the economic and civic life of the country was the basis for a viable national community.

93 *Ibid*.

94 See Scot Barmé, *Woman, man, Bangkok: love, sex and popular culture in Thailand*, Bangkok: Silkworm, 2002.

95 See Su Lin Lewis, 'Cosmopolitanism and the modern girl: a cross-cultural discourse in 1930s Penang', *Modern Asian Studies*, 43, 6, 2009, pp. 385–419.

96 *Straits Echo*, 26 April 1938.

97 On the imagination of the nation as a vernacular linguistic community, see Anderson, *Imagined communities*.

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The lines of ethnicity hardened in the post-colonial period, with the rise of authoritarian regimes during the Cold War. In post-colonial Malaya, racial politics prevailed over pre-war cosmopolitanism in the political shaping of the nation, particularly from the 1960s. When a military dictatorship took power in Burma in 1962, thousands of Burmese Indians, Muslims, and Western foreigners were forced to leave the country. The name of Siam changed to 'Thailand' – land of the Thais – under the military rule of Phibun Songkram, followed by clampdowns on Chinese involved in political activity, labour organizations, and, as in much of the region during the Cold War, leftist organizations.

Despite the machinations of states, however, the legacies of multi-ethnic civil society persisted. A multiplicity of religious institutions – from Rangoon's Muslim Free Hospital to the Li Ti Miao temple in Bangkok, to Sikh temples throughout the region – continue to open their doors to a diversity of ethnic communities. Owing to an impressive grassroots effort by scholars and activists to transform the way in which the histories of their nations have been told, the Penang State Museum and the Museum of Siam celebrate the historical ethnic diversity of their local and national communities. Philanthropy, volunteerism, NGOs, and women's movements in the interests of multi-ethnic communities continue to characterize local cultures of civil society in the region, with migrant communities playing a major role.[98] One of the Indians expelled from Burma to Pakistan in the 1960s was M. A. Raschid, an Indian Muslim who led the 1936 student strike in Rangoon. He was one of the architects of the Burmese constitution, and contributed to Burmese civil society in the 1950s as president of the Burma Muslim Organisation, Minister of Labour, and Burma's representative to the International Labour Organization in 1961. His wife, N. A. Khan, played a major role in civic life, sitting on the board of the Burma Red Cross and various NGOs, including the National Council of Women and welfare clinics. Their son, Bilal Raschid, is now an avid Rotarian, along with his wife, Tin Tin Nu Raschid, one of the first woman district governors of Rotary. They live in the United States.

Meanwhile, Southeast Asia's pre-war Rotarians left important legacies in the region, not least in the form of their children, who have had a significant impact in the fields of political activism and civil society development. Lim Cheng Ean's sons and daughter – Lim Kean Siew, Lim Kean Chye, and Dato P. G. Lim – have played an active role in Malaya's Labour Party and socialist movements, mobilizing trade unions and establishing legal aid. Ong Chong Keng's daughter, Pamela Ong, is a lawyer and president of the Penang Arts Council. M. Saravanamuttu's son, Johan Saravanamuttu, is a prominent and politically active academic, and one of the founding members of Aliran, a human rights organization based in Penang. While states in Southeast Asia have long sought to promote ethnocentric narratives of the nation, it is clear that histories of civil society in the region have tangled and multiple roots, which are only beginning to be uncovered.

Su Lin Lewis finished her PhD in History at the University of Cambridge in 2010. She holds a Mellon Post-doctoral Fellowship in the Humanities at the University of California–Berkeley, and is a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies.

98 See, for instance, Daniel Lev, *No concessions: the life of Yap Thiam Hien, Indonesian human rights lawyer*, Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2011.