

Mapping ‘the whirligig of amusements’ in colonial Southeast Asia

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This article assesses the interconnected nature of Southeast Asia around 1900, the transnational entertainment scene in Southeast Asia, and the role of Singapore as a hub for commerce, shipping, and entertainment. The global and regional development of transportation and communications technology and networks facilitated the movement of people, goods, ideas, and amusement forms. The article is based primarily on archival research from colonial newspapers in the region. It surveys and maps more than one hundred itinerant entertainment companies that travelled throughout Southeast Asia around the turn of the century, thereby creating and visualising a circuit of entertainment.

On Wednesday 8 June 1904, Wayang Kassim, the most prominent *bangsawan* (Malay theatre or opera) troupe in the region, performed the Javanese play *Panji Semirang*, translated into Malay, at the Novelty Theatre on North Bridge Road in Singapore to a packed house of Chinese, Malays, Indians, and Europeans, including the Governor of the Straits Settlements, John Anderson. The evening also featured music from a Javanese band and the Town and Volunteer band.¹ Wayang Kassim consisted of between fifty and eighty artists with Malay, Asian, Eurasian, and European backgrounds.² The Singapore-based itinerant company was founded in 1883 by S. Kassim in Penang, and advertised itself as ‘the only Malay Theatre that is patronised by all members of the community’,³ including many notable guests, such as King Chulalongkorn, in its tours throughout British Malaya, Java, Sumatra, and Siam (see [fig. 1](#)).⁴ The troupe performed different types of plays to attract an

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1 Advertisement, *Singapore Free Press*, 7 June 1904, p. 2; Advertisement, *Singapore Free Press*, 8 June 1904, p. 2; ‘Wayang Kassim’, *Straits Times*, 9 June 1904, p. 5.

2 Advertisement, *Straits Times*, 16 Apr. 1902, p. 4; Notice, *Malay Mail*, 13 May 1907, p. 2; Advertisement, *Malay Mail*, 29 June 1907, p. 2. The troupe also went under the names the Indra Zanibar Royal Theatrical Company of Singapore and the Dutch and Malay Variety and Comedy Company.

3 Advertisement, *Straits Times*, 18 June 1908, p. 8; ‘The Wayang Kassim’, *Straits Times*, 18 May 1909, p. 8.

4 Notice, *Straits Echo*, 6 Mar. 1905, p. 4; ‘The Wayang Kassim’, *Eastern Daily Mail*, 12 Mar. 1906, p. 3; Advertisement, *De Sumatra Post*, 5 Sept. 1906, p. 7; Notice, *Malay Mail*, 29 Nov. 1906, p. 2; Matthew Isaac Cohen, *Komedie Stamboel: Popular theater in colonial Indonesia, 1891–1903* (Athens: Ohio

The Famous
Wayang Kassim
 THE INDRA SAMBAR, ROYAL THEATRICAL
 COMPANY OF SINGAPORE.
 OR
 The Dutch and Malay Variety and Comedy
 Company composed of Selected actors
 and actresses

ARRIVED! ————— **ARRIVED!!**

and will open
 at
 The New City Theatre Hall, Malacca Street,
 opposite the Fire Brigade Station,
 on
 Wednesday, 28th Nov., 1906.

New Faces.
 New Scenery,
 New Dances,
 New Dresses,
 Lovely Music.

7 GOLD AWARDS 7

The only Malay Theatrical Company that
 has been patronised in every clime it has
 visited.

A few of our notable patrons

— — — — —

The Sanbwa of Kien Tung Biraiah
 H. R. H. Prince Demet of Siam
 Admiral Evans of the American Navy,
 Manila
 The Governor-General of German New
 Guinea
 H. E. Sir F. A. Swettenham K. C. M. G.
 H. E. Sir A. R. T. Darnley K. C. B. D. S. O.
 H. H. the Maharajah and Rani Sahiba of
 Karpurthala and suite
 H. R. H. the son of Prince Su of China
 H. E. the Hon'ble Alimud Azaonlah Bey,
 Imperial Turkish Consul General,
 Singapore
 The Rt. Hon'ble The Earl of Crawford, of
 the R. V. S. Valhalla
 H. E. Sir John Anderson K. C. M. G.
 The British Resident, Perak
 by special request at the Federal Dutch,
 Kuala Lumpur.

For Admission and prices
 See hand bills.

Re-erve tickets can be booked from
 Messrs. Chow Kit & Co., the Cycle Car-
 riage Co. and Mr. F. O. Deagon.

S. KASSIM.
 Director & Sole Proprietor.

1913.

Figure 1. Advertisement for Wayang Kassim in Kuala Lumpur (*Malay Mail*, 27 Nov. 1906, p. 3)

University Press, 2006), pp. 319–25; Tan Sooi Beng, *Bangsawan: A social and stylistic history of popular Malay opera* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 18, 37.

ethnically diverse audience, with a repertoire ranging from *Aladdin*, *East Lynne*, and *Hamlet*, to the Malay play *Chelorong Cheloring*, the Chinese play *Sam Pek, Eng Tye*, and the Hindi play *Zulm-i-Vahashee*.⁵

Singapore often hosted several different troupes simultaneously, illustrating that merchants and wage earners then had money and time to spend on leisure activities. That same evening, 8 June 1904, performances by Henry Dallas Musical Company, Harmston's Circus, and two cinematic exhibitions took place at other venues in the city. Wayang Kassim encapsulates many features of the Southeast Asian entertainment world: they were multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and travelled throughout the region (albeit not venturing as far as other itinerant companies).⁶ S. Kassim bought a cinematograph in January 1905, which became part of Wayang Kassim's tour of British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies for more than a year as the Paris Cinematograph.⁷

Southeast Asia was an interconnected region with considerable cross-border movement of people, goods, technologies, and ideas.⁸ The cross-boundary Malay, Indian, and Chinese communities and businesses illustrate this interconnectedness. The Malays lived and moved across national borders in the region, being in Singapore, British Malaya, Dutch East Indies, southern Siam, Mindanao, and parts of Indochina.⁹ The Chinese provided a workforce, created trade links in the region, and were an essential aspect of the commercial growth and development of Singapore in particular.¹⁰ Singapore, labelled 'the second doorway of the wide world's trade' in Rudyard Kipling's 'The Song of the Cities', was the most important colonial port for commercial development in the region and an integral part of the British imperial structure with its trade and shipping network and strategic geographical position.¹¹ It was a diverse and cosmopolitan city; in the 1901 census, 52 different

5 Advertisement, *Straits Times*, 3 June 1904, p. 5; Advertisement, *Straits Times*, 7 June 1904, p. 5; Advertisement, *Straits Times*, 11 June 1904, p. 5; Advertisement, *Straits Times*, 14 June 1904, p. 5; Advertisement, *Singapore Free Press*, 14 June 1904, p. 2; Advertisement, *Singapore Free Press*, 18 June 1904, p. 2.

6 For more on Wayang Kassim, see Matthew Cohen, 'Border crossings: Bangsawan in the Netherlands Indies in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries', *Indonesia and the Malay World* 30, 87 (2002): 101–15; Jan van der Putten, 'Bangsawan: The coming of a Malay popular theatrical form', *Indonesia and the Malay World* 42, 123 (2014): 268–85.

7 'The Paris Cinematograph', *Straits Times*, 19 Jan. 1905, p. 4; Notice, *Straits Times*, 28 Mar. 1905, p. 4; 'The Paris Cinematograph: An interesting exhibition', *Eastern Daily Mail*, 23 Mar. 1906, p. 3.

8 The interconnectedness can be studied from many different perspectives, see for instance, Anthony Reid, *Charting the shape of early modern Southeast Asia* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 1999); Eric Tagliacozzo, *Secret trades, porous borders: Smuggling and states along a Southeast Asian frontier, 1865–1915* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Rachel Loew, *Taming Babel: Language in the making of Malaysia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Su Lin Lewis, *Cities in motion: Urban life and cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia, 1920–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

9 Joel S. Kahn, *Other Malays: Nationalism and cosmopolitanism in the modern Malay world* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006); Anthony Milner, *The Malays* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

10 Song Ong Siang, *One hundred years' history of the Chinese in Singapore* (London: John Murray, 1923); Victor Purcell, *The Chinese in Southeast Asia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965 [1951]); Edgar Wickberg, *The Chinese in Philippine life, 1850–1898* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965); Lee Poh Ping, *Chinese society in nineteenth century Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1978); *Chinese circulations: Capital, commodities, and networks in Southeast Asia*, ed. Eric Tagliacozzo and Wen-Chin Chang (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

11 Douglas A. Farnie, *East and west of Suez: The Suez Canal in history, 1854–1956* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), pp. 101–2; Francis E. Hyde, *Far Eastern trade, 1860–1914* (London: A&C Black, 1973), pp. 16–17.

nationalities were recorded.¹² In her travel writings from 1897, Eliza Ruhamah Scidmore describes Singapore as ‘an ethnological center’ that ‘holds a whole congress of nations, an exhibit of all the races and peoples and types of men in the world’.¹³

In this article I assess the transnational and interconnected nature of Southeast Asia, and the role of Singapore as a hub for commerce, shipping, and entertainment, by surveying and mapping the regional circulation of amusement companies around the turn of the century. In total, I have found more than one hundred different itinerant entertainment companies which toured Southeast Asia during that period.¹⁴ The article is primarily based on archival material from contemporary colonial newspapers in the region. It consists of three parts: a mapping of the movement of itinerant entertainment companies in Southeast Asia; a survey of the local entertainment world, including theatre, opera, circus, cinema, and music; and an evaluation of the profitability of these companies.

Mapping the transnational entertainment circuit

Industrialisation and urbanisation in the 1800s led to more developed transportation and communication networks, to increased leisure time, and higher demand for, and supply of, public entertainment. In the second half of the century, the shipping industry developed, new railway lines were built, and trade within and outside Southeast Asia multiplied. Gary Magee and Andrew Thompson call the development of transnational networks an informal process without a grand design that helped create a world market with regional hubs.¹⁵ The development of transportation networks made travelling cheaper and faster, facilitating the expansion of entertainment circuits. Building and sustaining communication networks, such as shipping routes and railway lines, were also part of the imperial ambitions of colonial powers, and an explicit strategy to increase their influence and trade. Andrew Clarke, Governor of the Straits Settlements (1873–75), believed that British traders all over the world should be assisted and protected, since they were building a British empire.¹⁶ Frank Swettenham, Resident-General of the Federated Malay States (1896–1901) and Governor of the Straits Settlements (1901–04), wanted to open up British Malaya by constructing ‘high-class roads, railways, telegraphs, waterworks’.¹⁷

Shipping lines were initially dependent on mail contracts and government subsidies to serve regular long-distance routes between Europe and its colonies. Most lines operating between Europe and Asia or within Asia during the second half of the century, whether British, French, Dutch, or Japanese, started with or were sustained by mail contracts.¹⁸ The mail was prestigious, and delays led to indignation,

12 J.R. Innes, *Report on the Census of the Straits Settlements taken on the 1st March 1901* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1901), pp. 29–33.

13 Eliza Ruhamah Scidmore, *Java: The garden of the East* (New York: Century Co., 1898), p. 1.

14 In addition, several companies stayed in one city or country; those are not included in my tally.

15 Gary B. Magee and Andrew S. Thompson, *Empire and globalisation: Networks of people, goods and capital in the British world, c.1850–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 235.

16 Harry Miller, *The story of Malaysia* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965), p. 104.

17 Frank Swettenham, *British Malaya: An account of the origin and progress of British influence in Malaya* (London: John Lane, 1907), p. 294.

18 A. Fraser-Macdonald, *Our ocean railways; Or, the rise, progress, and development of ocean steam navigation* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1893), pp. 97–101; Daniel R. Headrick, *The tools of empire:*

as illustrated by an editorial in the *Straits Times*: 'This is the greatest, the most important seaport in all the Colonies of the Empire. Is it right that we should be the slowest with our mails?'¹⁹ As ships became faster, together with the building of the Suez Canal, voyages from Europe to Southeast Asia went from taking three months in 1850 to less than a month in 1900.²⁰ Consequently, several new shipping lines opened, both within Asia and to other parts of the world.²¹ Railway lines, symbolising economic progress and modernity, also developed in Southeast Asia in the late 1800s. It was a capital-intensive way to promote and develop colonial areas, access natural resources, increase trade, and yield commercial advantages to the colonial powers. Ronald E. Robinson described the railways as a symbol for, and an actual physical extension of, empire-building.²²

Entertainment companies toured a circuit of cities based on the infrastructure of transportation. The companies strengthened the transnational connections in the region while following paths of commerce and shipping. Early itinerant companies performed exclusively in the main shipping ports because of easy accessibility. As new shipping and railway lines were created, new places were included in the touring schedule of the companies. It was a process of experimentation; if visits to cities and towns were successful, other entertainment companies followed, thereby gradually creating established routes.²³ Based on researching primary material such as advertisements and reviews in contemporary colonial newspapers, I have documented and mapped the movement of about a hundred entertainment troupes in Southeast Asia around the turn-of-the-century, and visualised their paths of circulation. Five distinctive features can be discerned through the mapping of these routes (fig. 2).

First, the most common way to enter Southeast Asia was via British India.²⁴ In addition to European entertainment companies, Parsi theatre companies, such as

Technology and European imperialism in the nineteenth century (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 138–9, 142; Daniel R. Headrick, *The tentacles of progress: Technology transfer in the Age of Imperialism, 1850–1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 37–41; Maarten Kuitenbrouwer, *The Netherlands and the rise of modern imperialism: Colonies and foreign policy, 1870–1902*, trans. Hugh Beyer (Oxford: Berg, 1991), p. 154; Hyde, *Far Eastern trade*, p. 159.

19 Editorial, *Straits Times*, 28 Oct. 1903, p. 4.

20 Headrick, *Tools of empire*, p. 130; Headrick, *Tentacles of progress*, pp. 20–21; H. Conway Belfield, *Handbook of the Federated Malay States* (London: Edward Stanford, 1902), Appendix A. The transit time through the Suez Canal was cut in 1887 when night travel became possible through electric ship headlights. The Canal was also made deeper and wider (Headrick, *Tentacles of progress*, pp. 26–7).

21 'A new line: Between Bangkok and Singapore', *Malay Mail*, 9 July 1901, p. 3; 'The Pacific trade', *Straits Times*, 28 Nov. 1903, p. 5; *Bangkok Times*, 17 Apr. 1905, p. 3; 'Trans-Pacific trade: Two new steamers to run from Seattle to the East', *Straits Times*, 10 Oct. 1907, p. 8.

22 Ronald E. Robinson, 'Introduction: Railway imperialism', in *Railway imperialism*, ed. Clarence B. Davis and Kenneth E. Wilburn (New York: Greenwood, 1991), pp. 1–4.

23 This is also valid for other geographical areas throughout Australasia. See Matthew W. Wittman, 'Empire of culture: U.S. entertainers and the making of the Pacific circuit, 1850–1890' (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2010), pp. 224–5; Stephen Putnam Hughes, 'When film came to Madras', *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 1, 2 (2010): 157; Cohen, *Komedie Stamboel*, p. 24; Richard Waterhouse, *From minstrel show to vaudeville: The Australian popular stage, 1788–1914* (Kensington: New South Wales University Press, 1990), p. 111; Mark St Leon, *Spangles & sawdust: The circus in Australia* (Richmond: Greenhouse, 1983), p. 99.

24 For a historic overview of the Bay of Bengal, see Sunil S. Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The furies of nature and the fortunes of migrants* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).



Figure 2. Map of entertainment companies' circuits in Asia c. 1890–1910. The original map is taken from: *Karte der grossen Postdampfschifflinien im Weltpostverkehr* (Berlin: Verlag des Berliner Lithogr. Instituts, 1899).

Victoria Parsee Theatre and New Elphinstone Parsee Theatre, frequently toured Southeast Asia in the late 1800s.²⁵ The Victoria Parsee Theatre went from Bombay to Calcutta, Rangoon, Singapore, Java, Surabaya, Bangkok, Singapore, and back to Bombay via Colombo.²⁶ Another, less usual, way was the Pacific and Australasian circuit, where entertainers came from the West Coast of the United States, Hawaii, or Australia. As colonial ports such as Singapore and Hong Kong developed, the circuit and itineraries of these troupes changed.²⁷ When the Philippines became a US colony in 1898, it also became a stepping-stone to Southeast Asia for American companies. Entertainment troupes often travelled back and forth between India, Southeast Asia, and East Asia (Hong Kong, China, and Japan). The Ada Delroy Company from Australia, for instance, went from Madras to Calcutta, Rangoon, Penang, Singapore,

25 For more on the Parsi theatre and its circulation in Southeast Asia, see Somanatha Gupta, *The Parsi theatre: Its origins and development*, trans. and ed. Kathryn Hansen (Kolkata: Seagull, 2005); Kathryn Hansen, 'Mapping melodrama: Global theatrical circuits, Parsi theatre, and the rise of the social', *BioScope* 7, 1 (2016): 1–30; Kathryn Hansen, 'Parsi theatrical networks in Southeast Asia: The contrary case of Burma', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 49, 1 (2018): 4–33.

26 'Parsee theatre', *Straits Times*, 21 May 1898, p. 2; Notice, *Singapore Free Press*, 18 July 1898, p. 3; Advertisement, *Singapore Free Press*, 18 July 1898, p. 2; Advertisement, *Soerabaiasch Handelsblad*, 8 Dec. 1898, p. 3; 'The Parsi theatre', *Bangkok Times*, 5 June 1899, p. 2.

27 Wittman, 'Empire of culture', pp. 291–3.

Hong Kong, and Manila in early 1900.²⁸ The Barnes' Entertainers went in the other direction in 1902: from China to the Philippines, Singapore, and Penang.²⁹

Second, the Straits of Malacca was the most common entry point to the Malay Archipelago and Southeast Asia. Most entertainment companies and ships from Bombay, Calcutta, Colombo, and Rangoon passed through the Straits of Malacca. The other route to the Malay Archipelago was through the Straits of Sunda.³⁰ With the completion of the Suez Canal in 1869, however, the Straits of Malacca overtook the Straits of Sunda as the shortest and fastest way between Europe and Asia, enhancing the importance of Singapore and Penang at the expense of Batavia and Surabaya.

Third, and related to the previous point, Singapore was the regional hub for itinerant entertainment companies around the turn of the century. Most companies returned to Singapore two or three times during a Southeast Asian tour. Singapore's role as a centre for regional trade and transshipments expanded, and direct routes between other Southeast Asian ports decreased.³¹ As a transshipment port, most cities carried direct shipping lines to Singapore; an entertainment company could thereby have the following itinerary: Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Java, Singapore, Saigon, etc. Examining the trade and shipping traffic of Singapore gives indications of the distribution paths and patterns of entertainment companies. Trade in all the Southeast Asian countries multiplied between 1890 and 1910, especially intra-regional commerce.³² In 1897–99, around half of Singapore's trade was with other Southeast Asian countries, primarily the Dutch East Indies and the Federated Malay States.³³ Fifteen large ships (with a capacity of over fifty tons) entered Singapore per day in 1904 and 1905; around 70 per cent came from within Southeast Asia, with similar statistics for ships leaving Singapore. About 35 per cent of the maritime traffic was with the Dutch East Indies, and 25 per cent with the rest of British Malaya.³⁴

28 'The Delroy Company', *Straits Times*, 5 Apr. 1900, p. 2; 'The Ada Delroy Company', *Singapore Free Press*, 6 Apr. 1900, p. 3; 'Ada Delroy Co', *Straits Times*, 9 Apr. 1900, p. 3; 'The Ada Delroy Company', *Singapore Free Press*, 10 Apr. 1900, p. 3; 'The Ada Delroy Co', *Straits Times*, 11 Apr. 1900, p. 2; 'En teatro Zorrilla', *El Progreso*, 17 May 1900, p. 3.

29 'The Barnes' Entertainers', *Straits Times*, 30 May 1902, p. 4; 'The Barnes Company', *Straits Times*, 5 June 1902, p. 5.

30 The Dutch controlled both straits until the British East India Company leased Penang from the Sultan of Kedah in 1786. Penang was a strategic port of call heading to China, and hindered the Dutch trade. Nordin Hussin, *Trade and society in the Straits of Melaka: Dutch Melaka and English Penang, 1780–1830* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2007).

31 Farnie, *East and west of Suez*, p. 468.

32 B.R. Mitchell, *International historical statistics: Africa, Asia & Oceania, 1750–2005*, 5th ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 561–8.

33 W.G. Huff, *The economic growth of Singapore: Trade and development in the twentieth century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 50–52; A.J.H. Latham, 'The dynamics of intra-Asian trade, 1868–1913: The great entrepôts of Singapore and Hong Kong', in *Japanese industrialization and the Asian economy*, ed. A.J.H. Latham and Heita Kawakatsu (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 147–51. Transshipment, however, led to inaccuracies in trade statistics regarding origins and destinations; see D.R. SarDesai, *British trade and expansion in Southeast Asia, 1830–1914* (New Delhi: Allied, 1977), p. 277.

34 Huff, *The economic growth of Singapore*, pp. 123–6. The share in terms of tonnage was different though, as ships arriving from Europe, Japan, or the United States were much larger. The national label of merchant vessels clearing Singapore shows that slightly more than half the ships were from Britain, followed by ships from the Netherlands and Germany.

Fourth, shipping was used to a much larger extent than railways, naturally, considering the archipelagic nature of Southeast Asia. Port cities, such as Rangoon, Singapore, Penang, Batavia, Surabaya, Bangkok, and Manila, were better connected than routes between the port cities and the inland towns, and hence travel was easier between ports. The geographical reach of entertainment companies and variety artists into smaller inland cities and towns was, however, dependent on the railway. British Malaya, Dutch East Indies, Indochina, and Siam all multiplied the length of their railways between 1890 and 1900, and again between 1900 and 1910 (see Table 1). In British Malaya new railway lines connected inland towns to port cities to provide for the tin mining industry.³⁵ The Dutch East Indies, likewise, expanded their railways, and in 1888 eight railway lines connected the fifteen largest cities and towns on Java. The volume of passengers (and freight traffic) multiplied accordingly: 20 million in 1895, 38 million in 1900, and 50 million in 1905.³⁶ In 1897, Harmston's Circus travelled with the railway throughout Java, performing in Blitar, Kediri, Mojokerto, Madiun, and Surakarta.³⁷ They included a cinematograph on their tour, and were the earliest film exhibitors in many parts of Java.

Finally, and connected to the previous points, British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies were the most toured areas for several reasons. The infrastructure was well developed; distances were short, which saved companies time and money; the railway network was developed; and the area was at the intersection of, and thus connected to, India, Australia, China, and Japan. Daily steamships, which took two days, went between Singapore and Batavia.³⁸ The movement of Willard Opera Company illustrates the centrality of those countries. In 1895 and 1896, the British company went from Bombay to Colombo to Penang, Singapore, Batavia, Yokohama, Hong Kong, Singapore, Penang, Medan, Penang, Rangoon, India, Penang, Singapore, India, London, India, Singapore, Penang, Deli, Singapore, Batavia, Surabaya, Singapore, and back to India.³⁹ Moreover, a common lingua franca, Malay, facilitated the touring of Malay-language theatre groups.

This last point is a reminder of the interconnectedness of Southeast Asia and its colonially constructed national borders. Pre-colonial borders in Southeast Asia were

35 Belfield, *Handbook of the Federated Malay States*, pp. 60–62, 80, 91; Chai Hon-Chan, *The development of British Malaya, 1896–1909* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1964), chap. 5; Huff, *The economic growth of Singapore*, p. 67.

36 Mitchell, *International historical statistics*, pp. 761–4. British Malaya had four million passengers in 1903 and five million in 1905, Siam had two million in 1905, French Indochina had eight million in 1907, and the Philippines had two million in 1910. The population of the Dutch East Indies was, however, considerably larger.

37 Advertisement, *Soerabaiasch Handelsblad*, 14 July 1897, p. 3; Advertisement, *De Nieuwe Vorstenlanden*, 6 Aug. 1897, p. 3.

38 Scidmore, *Java*, pp. 3, 7; Walter del Mar, *Around the world through Japan* (London: A&C Black, 1903), p. 39; J.F. van Bemmelen and G.B. Hooyer, *Guide through Netherlands India, compiled by order of The Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij (Royal Packet Company)*, trans. B.J. Berrington (London: Thomas Cook & Son, 1903), p. 8.

39 Notice, *Pinang Gazette*, 31 May 1895, p. 2; 'Paul Jones', *Singapore Free Press*, 9 Oct. 1895, p. 3; 'The Willard Opera Company', *Pinang Gazette*, 23 Oct. 1895, p. 2; 'The Willard Opera Company', *Singapore Free Press*, 3 Mar. 1896, p. 2; 'Willard Opera Co.', *Straits Times*, 18 June 1896, p. 2; 'The Willard Opera Company', *Straits Times*, 7 July 1896, p. 3; 'The Willard Opera Company', *Singapore Free Press*, 20 July 1896, p. 2; 'The Willard Opera Company', *Straits Times*, 5 Oct. 1896, p. 2.

Table 1: Length of railways in Asia, 1890–1910 (km)

	1890	1895	1900	1905	1910
British Malaya	56	261	417	678	867
China	225 ^a	435	1,516 ^c	2,755	8,601
Dutch East Indies	1,593	2,098	3,574	4,728	5,145
French Indochina	71	171	182	894	1,717
India	26,400	31,329	39,834	45,524	51,658
Japan	2,349	3,783	6,300	7,793	8,661
Philippines		196 ^b	196	196	206
Siam		94 ^b	125	457	896

Notes: ^a1892; ^b1898; ^c1901

Source: B.R. Mitchell, *International historical statistics: Africa, Asia & Oceania, 1750–2005*, 5th ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 723–5, 728.

fundamentally different, as the region did not really consist of nation-states, but rather political centres of influence, autonomous provinces, and stateless societies. The largely artificial colonial borders were kept, strengthened through school education, and in essence form the national boundaries we have today.⁴⁰ As a further illustration of the artificiality of these national borders, Sumatra under the Dutch was part of a currency area with British Malaya rather than with Java, thus using the Mexican silver dollar or Straits dollar instead of the guilder or florin.⁴¹

Entertaining Southeast Asia

Audiences in Southeast Asia experienced different forms of Western and local entertainment through travelling theatre, opera, vaudeville, circus, and cinema. A city like Manila had regular performances in several languages, and Italian, French, Cuban, Spanish, English, American, Russian, Chinese, and Filipino artists performed in different theatres and shows.⁴² Singapore had theatres, street operas, film exhibitions, billiards, skating rinks, bars, dances, and bands appealing to all social and ethnic groups. Entertainments provided sites for new impressions and reflection. In North America, these amusements had a significant impact on the creation of an imagined community, across class and ethnic barriers.⁴³ These observations were to some extent also valid for the colonial societies of Southeast Asia. Entertainment companies

40 The independence process in Southeast Asia resulted in culturally heterogeneous nation-states, what Anthony Reid calls the 'imperial alchemy': transforming different ethnic groups such as Acehnese, Bataks, and Balinese into Indonesians; and Chinese, Malays, Kadazans, and Tamils into Malaysians. Anthony Reid, *Imperial alchemy: Nationalism and political identity in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

41 In the 1890s, the Mexican silver dollar was the standard currency in British Malaya, and the US trade dollar, Japanese yen, and Hong Kong dollar were made unlimited legal tender. In 1904, a Straits dollar, connected to the gold standard, replaced the Mexican dollar at the same value.

42 'Teatralerias', *El Mercantil*, 19 June 1903, p. 1; 'De Teatros-Cinematografos. En El Parisien', *El Mercantil*, 16 May 1905, p. 2; Advertisement, *El Mercantil*, 27 June 1905, p. 4.

43 See, for instance, Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight hours for what we will: Workers and leisure in an industrial city, 1870–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap amusements:*

gathered people from all strata of society to their programmes, and helped create temporary liminal spaces where audiences with varied ethnic and social backgrounds mixed, especially at the more affordable film exhibitions and circuses.⁴⁴ The travelling amusements worked on several levels simultaneously, as sites for cultural exchange and symbols of cultural imperialism. International companies added local artists to their shows to add local flavour, trim salaries, and refresh their programmes, while some local amusements appropriated Western commercial forms; this led to a continuous exchange of ideas, forms, and performers.

Around the turn of the century at least sixty different itinerant opera, theatre, and variety companies were touring Southeast Asia.⁴⁵ It is problematic, and slightly misleading, to assign a particular national identity to these itinerant troupes, as they typically consisted of mixed ensembles with changing performers. Based on the proprietor of the company, more than half of them originated from Europe (Britain, France, Spain, and Italy) or the United States. Of the remaining twenty-three, eleven were of Malayan origin, four from India, three from Japan, three from Australia, and one each from New Zealand and China. The touring Malay companies were *bangsawan* groups combining theatre, opera, and dance. Tan Sooi Beng describes it as ‘the non-Europeans’ version of Western theatre modified and adapted to suit local tastes’.⁴⁶ In addition to these travelling entertainment companies, many more local forms of amusement — such as theatre (*zarzuela* and *moro-moro* in the Philippines, *bangsawan* in the Dutch East Indies and British Malaya, *likay* and *lakhon* in Siam), Chinese street opera (*jiexi*), and shadow puppet theatre (*wayang kulit* in the Dutch East Indies and British Malaya) — that did not tour the region attracted large audiences on a nightly basis. Most such performances were not advertised in the local press, however, and it is hard to gauge their volume and frequency. Chinese street opera, or theatre, was very popular in Singapore, as discussed by Tong Soon Lee, and one of the most affordable entertainment forms.⁴⁷

Working women and leisure in turn-of-the-century New York (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); David Nasaw, *Going out: The rise and fall of public amusements* (New York: Basic, 1993).

44 In my dissertation, I assess how film exhibitions affected colonial society, primarily in Singapore. Nadi Tofighian, ‘Blurring the colonial binary: Turn-of-the-century transnational entertainment in Southeast Asia’ (PhD diss., Stockholm University, 2013).

45 The companies I have found include Abell and Olman’s Variety Co., Ada Delroy Co., Australian Burlesque Variety Co., Australian Vaudeville Co., Bandmann Comedy Co., Bandmann Comic Opera Co., Bandmann Dramatic Co., Bandmann Opera, Banvard’s Variety Co., Barnes Co., Beresford Variety Co., Bijou Entertainers, Burmese Theatre, Cordelier-Hicks Variety Co., Dallas Opera, D’Arc’s Marionettes, Elsie Adair’s Entertainment, Empress Victoria Jawi Pranakan Theatrical Co., Excelsior Vaudeville, Flying Jordans, Frawley Comedy, Freear’s Frivolity, French Opera, French Variety Co., Gaiety Stars, Grand Opera, Gulzar-e-Nekey (Bombay Theatrical Co.), Hicks Orioles Co., Hicks Variety Co., Indra Bangsawan Theatrical, Italian Opera, Japanese Imperial Acrobatic Co., Japanese Magic and Comedy, Japanese Tamakichi Troupe, José Zappala’s Opera, Jovial Opera, Klimanoff Co., London Lyric Co., Malay Opera, Malay Theatrical Co., Malaya Opera, Merry Little Maids Opera Co., New Elphinstone Parsee Theatrical Co., O’Connor Opera, Opera Indra Permata Theatrical Co. of Selangor, Opera Indra Zabba, Opera Macao, Parsi Curzon Theatrical Co., Parsi Theatre Co., Pollard’s Lilliputian Opera, Stanley Opera, Star Opera, Straits Opera, Transatlantic Variety Co., Wayang Ayesha (or Aishah), Wayang Indra Jaya, Wayang Kassim, Wayang Stamboul, Wayang Yap Chow Thong, Weatherley’s, Wellington Barracks Theatre, Willard Opera, and Williamson & Maher’s Chicago Tourist Minstrel and Variety.

46 Tan, *Bangsawan*, pp. 18, 31.

47 Tong Soon Lee, *Chinese street opera in Singapore* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

Visitors to Southeast Asia testified to the significance of these entertainment forms. In 1905, Augusta de Wit claimed: 'To all other pleasures, the Javanese prefers that of witnessing a performance of the wayang, the native theatre.'⁴⁸ Henry Norman portrayed the love of the Siamese for *likay* and *lakhon* plays in his travel journal from 1895: 'To an ordinary Siamese it is the height of happiness to sit jammed in a dense crowd on the floor, from seven p.m. to two a.m., watching the same play.'⁴⁹ Ernest Young called the theatre 'the most popular of all amusements' for people of all ages in Siam, and 'a purely native institution, unaffected by those Western influences that are so rapidly destroying in the East the many Oriental manners and customs that were once the delight of the traveller'.⁵⁰ The Bangkok Amateur Dramatic Society was formed with Siamese actors in the early 1900s with the support of the Siamese Crown Prince who acted and wrote for the company. Its style was reportedly more 'Western', and it performed Western adaptations and original Siamese plays.⁵¹

Matthew Cohen writes about the Eurasian Malay-language *bangsawan* troupe, Komedi Stamboel, founded by A. Mahieu in 1891, and assesses its impact in the Dutch East Indies, particularly in Surabaya. The Komedi Stamboel combined the Malay language, Eurasian actors, Mahieu-composed melodies, and Chinese management to create a mixed amusement form, neither European nor native, with a multi-ethnic troupe of Dutch, Chinese, Arab, Javanese, and Indian actors, combining elements from the circus, the opera, and the theatre. It thus shared many traits of Wayang Kassim described in the introduction. Komedi Stamboul was very popular, and attracted a wide array of audiences; as such it challenged social and racial barriers. The company existed for around a decade, then gradually lost its appeal, experiencing financial losses along with a decline in popularity.⁵² A. Mahieu and part of his company joined Wayang Kassim for a period in 1902 after Komedi Stamboel closed down.⁵³

Another illustration of the cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic, and multi-lingual nature of the entertainment world is the Victoria Parsee Theatre led by Khurshedji M. Balivala from Bombay. In Bangkok in 1899, they performed *Ali Baba and the forty thieves*, *Aladdin*, as well as Indian operas and comedies at Mom Chow Alangkarn's Theatre, which also was the location of the earliest cinematic exhibitions in Bangkok two years earlier. A Siamese company performing and singing in Thai accompanied the group, and during the intervals English songs were sung. Japanese lanterns lit the hall, and the performances were under the patronage of

48 Augusta de Wit, *Java: Facts and fancies* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1905), p. 137. W. Basil Worsfold made a similar observation a decade earlier in *A visit to Java: With an account of the founding of Singapore* (London: Bentley & Son, 1893), p. 56.

49 Henry Norman, *The peoples and politics of the Far East: Travels and studies in the British, French, Spanish and Portugese colonies, Siberia, China, Japan, Korea, Siam and Malaya* (New York: Scribner's, 1895), p. 421.

50 Ernest Young, *The Kingdom of the Yellow Robe: Being sketches of the domestic and religious rites and ceremonies of the Siamese* (London: Constable, 1907 [1898]), p. 161.

51 'The drama in Bangkok', *Bangkok Times*, 19 June 1905, p. 3; 'The theatre in Siam', *Bangkok Times*, 9 Oct. 1905, p. 3; 'Siamese theatricals', *Bangkok Times*, 28 Sept. 1907, p. 2; 'The theatre in Bangkok', *Bangkok Times*, 2 Oct. 1907, p. 3; 'The theatre in Bangkok', *Bangkok Times*, 1 Mar. 1909, p. 4.

52 Cohen, *Komedi Stamboel*.

53 Cohen, 'Border crossings': 112.

the French chargé d'affaires and a Russian minister. The successful programme was concluded with cinematographic pictures, including films from the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria, warmly applauded by the large audience.⁵⁴ Two years later the Victoria Parsee Theatre performed *Hamlet* in Hindi for a large audience in their temporary theatre on Beach Road in Singapore, and the press described it as 'excellently staged and produced' and 'a pleasure to witness'.⁵⁵ Christopher Balme's work on Maurice Bandmann and his different opera and theatre troupes, based in Calcutta but travelling throughout the world, is yet another good case study to illustrate the transnational entertainment circuit of the time. Bandmann also later became a cinematograph owner.⁵⁶

Circuses were significant in creating and developing an Asian entertainment circuit since no city in Southeast Asia was large enough to support a permanent circus troupe. I have identified twenty-eight circus companies that toured Southeast Asia during a period of ten years around the turn of the century. Most circuses consisted of some forty to ninety artists and performers, with acts, people, and animals from around the world. With its ethnic diversity, the circus could offer a tour of the world, something cinema also later claimed to do.⁵⁷ Again, it is hard to assign a national label, but around two-thirds of the circuses originated from Europe (Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Russia, and Italy) or the United States. Of the remaining ten, six originated from India, two from Australia, one from South Africa, and one from the Philippines.⁵⁸ Large circuses often integrated other exhibitions in their programmes, performers frequently moved between different companies, and local performers, such as Filipina tightrope walkers and Malay-speaking clowns, were employed.⁵⁹ Many performers initially employed by itinerant entertainment companies in Europe and the United States decided to stay on in Southeast Asia, and joined other companies. Troupes were also usually refreshed between seasons in

54 'The Parsi Theatre', *Bangkok Times*, 5 June 1899, p. 2; Notice, *Bangkok Times*, 8 June 1899, p. 2; 'Parsi Theatre', *Bangkok Times*, 9 June 1899, p. 2; 'The Parsi Theatre', *Bangkok Times*, 10 June 1899, p. 2; 'Parsi Theatre', *Bangkok Times*, 13 June 1899, p. 2; Advertisement, *Bangkok Times*, 15 June 1899, p. 2; Advertisement, *Bangkok Times*, 16 June 1899, p. 3.

55 'The Parsee Theatre', *Straits Times*, 1 Sept. 1901, p. 2.

56 Christopher Balme, 'The Bandmann circuit: Theatrical networks in the first age of globalization', *Theatre Research International* 40, 1 (2015): 19–36; Christopher Balme, 'Maurice E. Bandmann and the beginnings of a global theatre trade', *Journal of Global Theatre History* 1, 1 (2016): 34–45.

57 Alison Griffiths, "'To the world the world we show': Early travelogues as filmed ethnography", *Film History* 11, 3 (1999): 282–307; Jennifer Lynn Peterson, 'World pictures: Travelogue films and the lure of the exotic, 1890–1920' (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1999).

58 The touring circuses I have found include Abell's (and Klaer's) Circus, Apollo Circus, Bartelle's Circus, Bose Circus, Bostock's Circus, Chatre's New Indian Circus, Circus Ibanez, Cooke's Circus, Filipino circus, Fitzgerald's Circus, Frank E. Fillis' Circus, Great World Circus, Harmston's Circus, Hippodrome Circus, Indian Sandow's (Professor Ramamurti) Circus, Krishna Rao's Bombay Circus, Ott's Circus, Pacific Circus, Parasram Rao's Circus, Paul's Great Indian Circus, Prof. Deval's Indian Circus, Royal Italian Circus, Russian Circus, Spampani's European Circus, Walle's Circus, Warren's Circus, Willison's Circus, and Wirth Brothers' Circus.

59 See, variously, 'El circo Ruso', *El Progreso*, 10 Jan. 1902, p. 2; Advertisement, *Straits Times*, 24 Feb. 1905, p. 4; 'Warren's Circus', *Bangkok Times*, 14 Nov. 1905, p. 3; 'Harmston's Circus', *Straits Times*, 10 July 1906, p. 5; 'The Opera Indra Zabba', *Straits Echo*, 17 Aug. 1905, p. 4; 'Harmston's Coming', *Straits Times*, 9 Oct. 1905, p. 5; *Straits Echo*, 4 Dec. 1906; 'El circo Spampani', *El Tiempo*, 5 Feb. 1908, p. 3; 'The Wayang Kassim', *Perak Pioneer*, 16 Feb. 1909, p. 4; Cohen, *Komedie Stamboel*, p. 18.

order to include new performers, and the latest spectacles and acts, making for novelty each time they came to a city.

The circus was particularly popular as it appealed to audiences across social, ethnic, and linguistic barriers. Circuses helped create a shared leisure culture, as it was a community occasion for all ages and social classes due to lower prices compared to other itinerant entertainment forms. Even the unloading of the animals and setting up of the tent was part of the spectacle, as was the large audience.⁶⁰ The circus was the benchmark for other entertainment forms in Southeast Asia, and people reportedly asked for advance wages and pawned their valuables to visit the circus. Newspapers in the Dutch East Indies frequently compared *Komedie Stamboel* and *Wayang Kassim* to circuses, in terms of tents, seating arrangements, audience size, and quality.⁶¹ Janet Davis sees the circus as metonymic for the infrastructural and national expansion of the United States, since it too spread along with the railways and exhibited the latest technology; she also depicts the size and scope of the circus as a sign of European imperialism.⁶² Gillian Arrighi argues that technologically up-to-date circuses with electricity and gas installations were symbols of modernity, and that the itinerant circuses were instrumental in spreading that view.⁶³ In their heyday, circuses continually grew bigger, enlarging their tents and adding more rings and acts. They also lowered general admission prices, making circus-going even more accessible, and charged extra for the sideshows.

Notwithstanding all these troupes, foreign-language newspaper editorials and reports throughout Southeast Asia criticised the dearth of good amusements, by which they meant Western entertainment companies.⁶⁴ *Bangkok Times* wrote: 'Singapore and Hongkong have a plethora of entertainments to brighten their lives and drive dull care away, but Bangkok pursues its solemn leaden course content to be neglected by the whirligig of amusements.'⁶⁵ A certain rivalry also existed between the different cities; after one month of performances in Bangkok, Harmston's Circus was reported to leave for 'Hongkong and other undeserving spots'.⁶⁶ The lack of amusements often resulted in entertainment companies prolonging their stay, which was both a publicity and marketing ploy. D'Arc's Marionettes from Britain, for instance, stayed two weeks instead of three days in Penang 'owing to the unprecedented and enormous success'.⁶⁷ *Straits Times* yet complained about the lack of theatre plays: 'Singaporeans can boast many pastimes, but play-going cannot be said to rank as foremost — it is a luxury which is given us only occasionally, and by only one

60 Janet M. Davis, *Circus age: Culture and society under the American big top* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), pp. 6, 14, 38; Michael Kammen, *American culture, American tastes: Social change and the 20th century* (New York: Knopf, 1999), pp. 77–8; M.B. Leavitt, *Fifty years in theatrical management* (New York: Broadway, 1912).

61 Cohen, *Komedie Stamboel*, pp. 12, 107, 111, 126.

62 Davis, *Circus age*, pp. 194–5.

63 Gillian Arrighi, 'The circus and modernity: A commitment to "the newer" and "the newest"', *Early Popular Visual Culture* 10, 2 (2012): 169, 171.

64 'Miss Elsie Adair's Entertainment', *Bangkok Times*, 7 Dec. 1896, p. 2; 'D'Arc's Marionettes', *Bangkok Times*, 4 May 1901, p. 3; Editorial, *Bangkok Times*, 11 Oct. 1902, p. 2; 'The Chronograph Show', *Perak Pioneer*, 31 Dec. 1906, p. 5; *Straits Echo*, 24 June 1907.

65 'The Bioscope in Bangkok', *Bangkok Times*, 3 Feb. 1903, p. 2.

66 'The Circus', *Bangkok Times*, 21 Dec. 1900, p. 2.

67 Advertisement, *Pinang Gazette*, 7 Mar. 1895, p. 2.

company [Dallas Company].⁶⁸ Singapore, of course, had dozens of different Chinese and Malay theatre groups, but the only theatre the colonial papers counted was the European. Arnold Wright and H.A. Cartwright summed up the entertainment scene (slightly inaccurately) suitable for Europeans in British Malaya in 1908:

In Singapore occasional concerts are given by the Philharmonic Society, composed of local amateurs, and theatrical plays are sometimes presented by the Amateur Dramatic Club. Touring theatrical companies and circuses visit the town at intervals, but seldom stay more than a few nights. The only permanent places of amusement are cinematograph shows and a Malay theatre, where English plays are rendered in the vernacular. In Pinang they have a Choral Society and an Amateur Dramatic Club, and there are dramatic societies also in the chief towns of the Federated Malay States. Europeans have therefore, to a large extent, to make their own amusements; hence almost every house has its tennis court. Dinner and card parties are frequent, and informal dances are often given. The usual round of private social functions is supplemented by the amusements provided by numerous organisations. Cricket, football, tennis, hockey, golf, rowing, swimming, and other clubs and places of resort, where billiard handicaps and chess, bridge, and other tournaments afford varied forms of recreation.⁶⁹

Technological development, such as the phonograph, kinoscope, and cinematograph slowly changed the nature of the entertainment and leisure world.⁷⁰ The cinematograph, and its film exhibitions, was an entertainment form that could easily travel and tour across national borders.⁷¹ When cinema arrived in Southeast Asia, it provided added opportunities for local musicians. Live musical accompaniment played a central role in the cinematic experience, and was a way to market a cinematographic exhibition and distinguish it from others. Phonographs or gramophones often accompanied cinematographic exhibitions, playing English, Chinese, and Malay music and songs in Singapore.⁷² Phonographs gradually lost their appeal, and audiences wanted live musical accompaniment. Piano was the most common live accompaniment to films, especially if exhibitions took place in a town hall or theatre rather than in a tent. The American Biograph was accompanied by Miss E. Wood on the piano at the Town Hall in Singapore.⁷³ The Royal Bioscope was accompanied by a

68 'The Dallas Company. First night performance: "A country girl"', *Straits Times*, 8 Feb. 1905, p. 5.

69 Arnold Wright and H.A. Cartwright, *Twentieth century impressions of British Malaya: Its history, people, commerce, industries, and resources* (London: Lloyd's Greater Britain, 1908), p. 198.

70 For the history of the phonograph in the region, see Surya Suryadi, 'The "talking machine" comes to the Dutch East Indies: The arrival of Western media technology in Southeast Asia', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde (BKI)* 162, 2/3 (2006): 269–305; Nadi Tofighian, 'Watching the astonishment of the native: Early audio-visual technology and colonial discourse', *Early Popular Visual Culture* 15, 1 (2017): 26–43.

71 Dafna Ruppin and Nadi Tofighian, 'Moving pictures across colonial boundaries: The multiple nationalities of the American Biograph in Southeast Asia', *Early Popular Visual Culture* 14, 2 (2016): 188–207. For a more detailed history of early cinema in Southeast Asia, particularly Dutch East Indies and British Malaya, see Dafna Ruppin, *The Komedii Bioscoop: Early cinema in colonial Indonesia* (New Barnet: John Libbey, 2016) and Tofighian, 'Blurring the colonial binary'.

72 Notice, *Straits Times*, 22 Oct. 1902, p. 4; Advertisement, *Straits Echo*, 4 Aug. 1905, p. 5; 'The Moving Pictures Exhibition Company', *Straits Echo*, 17 Aug. 1905, p. 4; 'Au Chronomegaphone Gaumont', *Le Courrier d'Haiphong*, 22 May 1908, p. 2.

73 'Beresford-Pettitt Surprise Party', *Singapore Free Press*, 22 Aug. 1899, p. 3.

piano at the Town Hall in Singapore, and by a phonograph when they moved to a tent on Beach Road.⁷⁴ The American Bioscope in Penang had a harmonium with 'sweet music at intervals'. One night, a grand piano replaced the harmonium to the subdued excitement of the reviewer: 'the music was not unenjoyable'.⁷⁵ The Gaiety Stars performed 'illustrated songs' where a singer accompanied the films with suitable songs, described by the local press as a 'novel experience'.⁷⁶

Many orchestras and bands were created in British Malaya around the turn of the century. The Selangor State Band was formed in 1894, and the Penang Band in 1904, with most musicians being Malay.⁷⁷ These bands played at balls, parties, dinners, dances, and funerals. The Penang Band reportedly charged \$60 for a five-hour performance (dances and funerals), and \$30 for two or three-hour dinners and garden parties, excluding transportation costs.⁷⁸ The arrival of cinema gave the bands more venues to perform. The Volunteer Band accompanied the film programme of the London Chronograph in Singapore in 1906.⁷⁹ The Japanese Cinematograph in Singapore had 'appropriate music' accompanying their films.⁸⁰ Later it advertised new live musical accompaniments, 'imported at great expense'. During a five-week period, a Manila band, the Batavian Troupe Orchestra, and the Santa Cecilia orchestra accompanied their films.⁸¹ When the new Alhambra Cinematograph opened in Singapore in 1907, it had its own orchestra, the Alhambra Band, consisting of twelve musicians.⁸² A year later, it brought an orchestra from Calcutta (see [fig. 3](#)), 'to provide really good music, which visitors to local cinematograph shows ought to consider a long-felt want'.⁸³ The Japanese Cinematograph at Harima Hall immediately replied with an advertisement that read: 'Our Orchestra The BEST in Singapore.'⁸⁴

Most orchestras in the region accompanied cinematic exhibitions at some point. In Kuala Lumpur, the Selangor Band supplied musical accompaniment to the Grand Parisian Cinematograph and London Chronograph, and a string band accompanied the French Cinematograph on Saturdays.⁸⁵ In Manila, the Pasig band played during the intermission at Gran Cinematografo del Oriente, and an orchestra played with

74 'The Royal Bioscope', *Straits Times*, 1 Oct. 1902, p. 4; 'The Bioscope', *Straits Times*, 15 Oct. 1902, p. 5.

75 'American Bioscope Co', *Straits Echo*, 7 July 1905, p. 4; 'American Bioscope Co', *Straits Echo*, 8 July 1905, p. 4.

76 'The Gaiety Stars', *Straits Echo*, 2 Nov. 1905, p. 4.

77 J.M. Gullick, *Kuala Lumpur 1880–1895: A city in the making* (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk, 1988 [1955]), p. 39; Tan, *Bangsawan*, pp. 74–5.

78 *Straits Echo*, 30 Aug. 1906. The Surabaya-based Italian Quintet charged 85 guilders per night (equivalent to \$58). In 1891, Komedi Stamboel engaged them for 50 guilders (\$34) per night (Cohen, *Komedi Stamboel*, p. 53).

79 'The chronograph', *Eastern Daily Mail*, 23 May 1906, p. 3.

80 'Japanese cinematograph: The sign of the cross', *Eastern Daily Mail*, 6 June 1906, p. 5.

81 Advertisement, *Eastern Daily Mail*, 18 Jan. 1907, p. 3; 'Japanese Cinematograph', *Eastern Daily Mail*, 21 Jan. 1907, p. 3; Advertisement, *Eastern Daily Mail*, 22 Feb. 1907, p. 3.

82 Advertisement, *Eastern Daily Mail*, 30 Nov. 1907, p. 2.

83 Notice, *Straits Times*, 16 Nov. 1908, p. 6; Advertisement, *Straits Times*, 16 Nov. 1908, p. 6; Advertisement, *Straits Times*, 17 Nov. 1908, p. 6.

84 Advertisement, *Straits Times*, 21 Nov. 1908, p. 1.

85 Advertisement, *Malay Mail*, 7 Aug. 1906, p. 3; Advertisement, *Malay Mail*, 1 Sept. 1906, p. 3; Advertisement, *Malay Mail*, 7 June 1907, p. 3.

Cinematografo Parisien.⁸⁶ In Medan, the Andalusian String Orchestra accompanied the General Bioscope.⁸⁷ In Batavia, the London Cinematograph claimed to have its own string orchestra.⁸⁸ The orchestras became so entwined with cinematic exhibitions that by 1910 one was reported to hear music familiar from cinematic venues at Chinese funerals and Tamil weddings in British Malaya.⁸⁹

The profitability of entertainment

Many itinerant entertainment troupes were successful as they focused on markets with a shortage of amusements. When Warren's Circus performed in Taiping in 1901, a review stated that 'any entertainment, however poor, would be accepted as a welcome relief'.⁹⁰ Not all itinerant entertainment companies were successful, however. The London Lyric Company, for instance, only filled 25 per cent of the seats at the Penang Town Hall in 1894.⁹¹ An editorial in *Perak Pioneer* in 1906 made the unverified claim that the majority of entertainment companies touring Asia the past 25 years 'invariably wind up by hopelessly coming to grief financially, in plain words being properly "stranded," with the usual result of many of the members having to be assisted by the community'.⁹² Large troupes had considerable costs for transportation, accommodation, salaries, equipment, permits, and marketing. Profits were not guaranteed, and transporting personnel, animals, and equipment across oceans was difficult.

Costs for salaries and travelling were significant considering that troupes often had more than forty performers. The monthly salaries of local artists varied depending on their role, and were reported to be between \$8 and \$40.⁹³ Western artists made substantially more. As a comparison, the daily wage of a manual labourer in Singapore was around 50 cents, depending on their work.⁹⁴ Transportation costs in Southeast Asia were quite high, a third-class ticket by ship between Batavia and Singapore costing 15 guilders (\$10).⁹⁵ Tickets between destinations further apart were more expensive, but troupes often received group discounts. Itinerant companies also incurred additional costs for renting venues and for advertising. The cost of renting the Town Hall in Singapore was \$55 a night for international troupes and \$30 for local groups.⁹⁶ Singapore charging more for international troupes is an additional illustration of its significance in the entertainment circuit. In the Dutch East Indies,

86 Advertisement, *El Progreso*, 30 Aug. 1903, p. 4; Notice, *El Mercantil*, 13 Oct. 1903, p. 4.

87 Advertisement, *De Sumatra Post*, 11 Oct. 1906, p. 7.

88 Advertisement, *Perniagaan*, 16 Nov. 1907, p. 3.

89 Notice, *Perak Pioneer*, 10 June 1910, p. 4; Notice, *Perak Pioneer*, 27 Sept. 1910, p. 4.

90 'Warren's Circus', *Perak Pioneer*, 28 Nov. 1901, p. 2.

91 'The London Lyric Company', *Pinang Gazette*, 3 July 1894, p. 2.

92 Editorial, *Perak Pioneer*, 25 Oct. 1906, p. 2.

93 The dollar (\$) refers to the Mexican dollar or the equally valued Straits dollar (depending on year). The exchange rate between the Mexican or Straits dollar and the guilder fluctuated during this period, and I use \$0.68 per guilder as the exchange rate for the period. See Wright and Cartwright, *Twentieth century impressions of British Malaya*, p. 939; Scidmore, *Java*, p. 7.

94 James Francis Warren, *Rickshaw coolie: A people's history of Singapore, 1880–1940* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2003 [1986]), chaps. 3 and 4; Belfield, *Handbook of the Federated Malay States*, p. 21.

95 Van Bemmelen and Hooyer, *Guide through Netherlands India*, pp. 204–5. Third-class tickets between Singapore and Surabaya cost 20 guilders, and Batavia–Surabaya 10 guilders. First-class tickets were five times as expensive, and there were also fourth-class tickets.

96 Prices exclude the cost of gas (Notice, *Straits Times*, 23 Mar. 1903, p. 4).



Figure 3. New Orchestra at Alhambra Cinematograph in Singapore (advertisement, *Straits Times*, 16 Nov. 1908, p. 6 © Singapore Press Holdings Ltd. Reprinted with permission)

the policy was the opposite to attract international troupes; local entertainments had to pay a permit fee, whereas it was free for European companies. The fees varied depending on entertainment form and gender: 80 guilders (\$54) for female troupes, f60 (\$41) for male troupes, f50 (\$34) for puppet companies, and f20 (\$14) for Chinese shadow puppetry shows.⁹⁷ Putting up a tent, rather than renting a hall, also entailed costs. In Singapore, the Land Office was responsible for granting the land area; rents, as well as the necessary police charges, were higher than elsewhere in Asia.⁹⁸

97 Cohen, *Komedie Stamboel*, pp. 172–4.

98 Notice, *Straits Times*, 6 Apr. 1893, p. 2.

Climate also affected touring routes and provided difficulties for the entertainment companies, as it could be excessively hot or raining torrentially. Paper and electric fans were provided in most venues to cope with the heat, and the sides of the tents were often raised to provide additional respite.⁹⁹ The large companies had high daily maintenance costs, and lost earnings when bad weather resulted in cancelled performances. The rainy season varied from country to country too, which impacted the companies' chosen routes. Most entertainment troupes avoided Southeast Asia during the rainy season; itinerant companies performing in tents were, therefore, initially seasonal. Around 1905 many entertainment companies advertised rainproof tents, indicating performances would take place regardless of weather.¹⁰⁰ Challenging the weather still entailed risks, something the London Chronograph in Taiping experienced: 'The wild weather of the last few days completely wrecked the large tent which was brought, and compelled it to seek shelter in a more substantial erection [the Chinese Theatre].'¹⁰¹

The entertainment companies' income varied depending on the location of the venue and size of the audience. Three principal ways existed for an itinerant company to arrange performances: being hired for a fixed sum for a certain number of performances by a local agent or theatre owner; making all the arrangements itself; or a combination of the two, where profits or losses were shared with the venue-provider. In the first instance, the local agent or theatre owner took the financial risk and profit. The Filipino Circus was hired to perform for a week in Ipoh for \$1,000, and after one performance the local agent had recouped half the money.¹⁰² Wayang Kassim received \$1,000 for a one-week contract in Taiping, a sum cleared in two days. For Saturday night the box-office was \$600, despite competition from Chinese and Tamil plays performed elsewhere.¹⁰³ Four years later, a Chinese merchant offered Wayang Kassim \$3,000 for a month in Taiping, whereas they demanded \$4,000.¹⁰⁴ The Zig-Zag Variety Company received 5,000 ticals (\$3,000) for ten performances in Bangkok, and 3,900 ticals (\$2,400) for another series of performances, of which 1,000 ticals (\$600) was an advance payment.¹⁰⁵ Many itinerant companies used different practices in different places: Komedi Stamboel received a fixed fee for some performances, and an income-based one for others.¹⁰⁶ Contracts that depended fully on the proceeds collected for income could be risky, given the possibility of dishonesty and deceit among organisers. When the entertainment company made all the

99 'The London Chronograph Show', *Malay Mail*, 28 Aug. 1906, p. 3.

100 'Le biographe parisien', *La France d'Asie*, 19 Apr. 1906, p. 2; 'The Grand Cinematograph', *Perak Pioneer*, 20 July 1906, p. 2; Advertisement, *Eastern Daily Mail*, 15 Dec. 1906, p. 3; Advertisement, *Eastern Daily Mail*, 21 Mar. 1907, p. 3.

101 'The Cinematograph', *Perak Pioneer*, 27 Dec. 1906, p. 4.

102 Notice, *Perak Pioneer*, 25 Aug. 1906, p. 2. It is not clear whether the \$1,000 included the travel expenditure.

103 'Wayang Kassim', *Perak Pioneer*, 5 Oct. 1906, p. 3.

104 Notice, *Perak Pioneer*, 8 Jan. 1910, p. 4.

105 'The Zig-Zag Co.'s visit: Contract enforced', *Bangkok Times*, 16 Mar. 1907, p. 2. The exchange rate of the tical or baht was fixed at \$0.60 during the second half of the 1800s, although the rates became more volatile around the turn of the century; see James C. Ingram, *Economic change in Thailand 1850–1970* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1971), pp. 149–54; Compton Mackenzie, *Realms of silver: One hundred years of banking in the East* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954), p. 196.

106 Cohen, *Komedi Stamboel*, pp. 82, 93, 111, 131, 174, 204.

arrangements themselves, their potential profits were larger, but so were the risks. Harmston's Circus made its own arrangements, and reportedly brought in more than \$2,000 per night in Kuala Lumpur, Malacca, and Ipoh.¹⁰⁷ The financial stakes were high. When the circus arrived in Surabaya by ship, the Royal Dutch Packet Company (Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij) dropped part of the loop used for their famous bicycle trick into the sea, and Harmston's Circus demanded 2,000 guilders (\$1,360) for every night they could not perform the trick.¹⁰⁸

Cinema, circus, theatre, street opera, music, and other entertainment forms prospered side by side during the first decade of cinema. Matsuo's Cinematograph Show and Spampani's Circus both drew good houses every night in 1907 in two spacious tents opposite each other in Ipoh.¹⁰⁹ Many new theatres were built and renovated in British Malaya in the early 1900s. In Singapore, the Town Hall was renovated and a new theatre, the Victoria Theatre, was built next to it. In Penang, the King Street Theatre renovated its hall to provide electric lights, fans, and new seats.¹¹⁰ Many renovations were likely due to increased competition from travelling entertainments providing up-to-date and sophisticated tents. Several theatre buildings, however, were gradually taken over by cinematographic exhibitions in the early 1900s. Wayang Kassim and another *bangsawan* group could not perform in Taiping in 1910 as all theatres were leased by cinematograph shows, which prompted the *Perak Pioneer* to suggest that they should lease the cinematograph and combine the theatre with cinema.¹¹¹

Conclusion

In this article I have demonstrated the transnational nature of the Southeast Asian entertainment circuit and mapped the movement of more than a hundred different troupes travelling across oceans and transcending national borders. The communication infrastructure and interconnectedness of Southeast Asia developed during the late 1800s with new shipping, railway, and telegraph lines, compressing time and space. Southeast Asia was a site for multicultural exchange with regional and global influences. Entertainment companies from around the world viewed the whole region as their stage, and travelled by ship and rail back and forth between cities and countries. Most troupes consisted of people with different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, and performers continually moved between companies, thereby blurring the latter's national labels. Borders did not impede itinerant entertainment troupes and cinematic exhibitors in Southeast Asia; their very practice is an illustration of their transnational nature, and of the colonially constructed nature of national borders.

The advent of cinematographic exhibitions and its development in its first two decades changed the way people spent their evenings, however, particularly in places

107 'Harmston's Circus', *Straits Times*, 8 Aug. 1910, p. 6; 'Harmston's Circus: A bumper house', *Malay Mail*, 8 Aug. 1910, p. 7; 'Harmston's Circus', *Malay Mail*, 10 Aug. 1910, p. 7. In Kuala Lumpur, they reportedly had a gross income of \$2,763.40 for one night.

108 Notice, *Malay Mail*, 8 July 1907, p. 3.

109 Notice, *Times of Malaya*, 16 Feb. 1907, p. 4.

110 Advertisement, *Straits Echo*, 30 Oct. 1905, p. 5.

111 Notice, *Perak Pioneer*, 7 Jan. 1910, p. 4.

too small for the larger international entertainment companies, resulting in a decreasing number of the latter. Moreover, the cinematograph was not dependent on a large troupe of entertainers, but rather on a steady supply of film reels and a single camera operator. With the arrival of the cinematograph, the nature of the transnational entertainment circuit gradually transformed from troupes travelling from one place to the next, to the importing and distribution of film reels.