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CHAPTER 3

THE MISSION SCHOOL IN SINGAPORE

COLONIALISM, MORAL TRAINING, PEDAGOGY, AND THE CREATION OF MODERNITY

Mission schools in Singapore's history have played a significant role as a *tertium quid* between the Victorian imperium and its impulse to transform the colonial other into a serviceable tool of its project, on the one hand; and, on the other hand, the perpetuation of a purely vernacular and local culture with its tendency towards social stasis and its problematic relationship with the modern commercial state. At the historical and political interstices of the colonial government in India (to which Singapore, as one of the Straits Settlements, initially reported), and the Islamic culture of its neighboring Malay states, Singapore was left to develop a hybrid social ideology in which Chinese mercantilism was reconciled with English colonial pragmatism, ethnicity with English as a national and imperial language, and economic individualism with the moral values and historical consciousness of the colonial masters.

At the heart of this development was the mission school, which in the Singapore context arrived at an expansionist strategy and pedagogy which appealed to and placated the sensibilities and ambitions of the immigrant races, while insinuating a modified version of Victorian cultural progressivism into the school's everyday rituals and organs, as much as in the curriculum itself. Initially viewed with skepticism by some elements of the immigrant communities, and to an extent an elitist organization with necessarily limited reach, the mission schools in Singapore flourished by playing a central role in the creation and reiteration of a flexible and adaptable modernist ideology which has been imparted to the generations of top civil servants, successful businessmen and professionals which they have produced, and continue to produce even up to the present time.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF EDUCATION IN SINGAPORE

Systematic education in Singapore can be dated from 1867, when the Straits Settlements (comprising Singapore, Malacca, and Penang) became a colony

answering directly to the Colonial Office, thus removing the intermediary authority of India, under whose regime education in the Settlements proceeded in an ad hoc manner, with limited funding. From this point on, the Settlements could systematize their educational policies, with their own Inspector of Schools, budget, and, above all, a pedagogical and infrastructural framework to suit the specific conditions of the Settlements.

At around the middle of the nineteenth century, the different racial communities in Singapore and the Malay States to the north had their own vernacular schools, which were run more or less independently of any central control. There were also the so-called "Free" schools (meaning they were established on principles of acceptance regardless of the student's race, class etc) which began in Penang and Singapore, started by individuals with government connections, on the basis of private subscriptions, and which taught in English. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the colonial government devoted more resources to education, both by providing trained teachers and funding for the Free Schools, but also by establishing so-called "Branch schools" of English education in order to decentralize English schools and to cater to more students, particularly in the rural areas farther from the urban centers.

By 1903, the system of "government schools" had been established in Singapore: the original Singapore Free school had become the government school Raffles Institution in 1903, and a number of new schools were established around this period to take the place of the three English Branch schools whose importance was declining. As Chelliah (1947, 57) points out, these new government schools attempted "with great success . . . to discard the use of the vernacular as far as possible even in the lowest standards, and to teach the children . . . English" at the most fundamental level.

Thus, from the turn of the century, English education takes its place as a central social, economic and political force in Singapore. While in the Malay states up north the Malay language maintained its preeminent position both in the rural elementary schools and (from the 1920s onwards) in institutes of higher education meant to train a governing elite (Chai 1977, 27-28), in Singapore English education was a lynchpin of the government school system. This took place initially in two significant stages or steps: firstly, through the original "branch English schools" which provided an elementary education in English (1875-1902); next, in the establishment of the new-model government schools from 1902 onwards, which would provide both primary and secondary education in English. With the exception of Malay schools, vernacular education in government schools was confined to the "lower departments" of schools (Chelliah 1947, 50). Chinese and Tamil schools did not receive systematic government support after 1876 (Chelliah 1947, 80).

The history of education in Malaya may thus be summed up as a tension between an English-biased and elitist philosophy, and an emphasis on broad-based vernacular education (Loh 1975, 3). The English-biased position, introduced into colonial policy by Macaulay in his 1835 *Minute on Education*, advocated the use of English in schools in place of vernacular languages, particularly to create a native elite which would thus be equipped both to play a part in the colonial government, as well as to "diffuse" and "filtrate" European ideas and values through their

communities (Loh 1975, 2). Opponents to this form of education criticized its high costs and limited reach, in comparison with elementary vernacular education that could provide basic literacy and numeracy to larger numbers, especially in rural areas.

Implicit in the colonial policy represented by Macaulay's *Minute* is a utilitarian and rationalized progressivism that sought to bring the potentially unruly colonial subject to a tractable and serviceable order through appropriate methods of training. Within this colonial progressivism, education became a means, not of fulfilling liberal Enlightenment goals of cultivating individual reason among the lower orders (and thus fitting them for a greater participation in social justice – the goal of thinkers like William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, David Hartley, and others), but of subordinating the native to the functional machinery of colonial administration. In the case of Macaulay, colonial progressivism was part of a Whig theory of history that associated the rise of modern civilization in England with the infrastructural improvements (in education, transportation, commerce and related areas) from the latter part of the eighteenth century onwards. His *History of England*, which celebrates the rapid improvement in English manners, social life and economic power which accompanied the Whig dominance and constitutional monarchy since 1688, traces a social evolution in which “barbarous” confusion gives way to a rationalized and orderly society brought about in part by improvements in education, training and methodology. Thus, England's recent military and naval successes can be attributed to the government's practice lately (following the example of the French) to “educate young men . . . from a very early age specially for the sea service” (Macaulay 1849, 296). This specialization and systematic training represents an advance from the older tradition of allowing land officers indiscriminately to take naval commands. The advances of civilization, for Macaulay, are also measured by improvements in communications and transportation that tend “to remove national and provincial antipathies, and to bind together all the branches of the great human family” (Macaulay 1849, 365). National unity and conformity to a common purpose is power, both in the sense that it harnesses the combined resources of the nation, but also in the sense that it requires an act of power to enforce and maintain this collectivity and conformity. Macaulay acknowledges that language is one of the chief means by which this power of collectivity is created and maintained, when he analyzes the imperial and military ascendancy of France together with the rise of the French language and literature (Macaulay 1849, 390-391). In this context, the 1835 *Minute* can be seen as an attempt to impose a similar rational organization onto the diversity which is India, through the similar instrument of linguistic conformity and control.

The recognition that the colonial endeavor brought with it a certain cultural cost – not only in the need to bring the native to conformity with the language, values, and the organizational methodology and structure of the colonial master, but also in the special training which was required by the English colonizer prior to going abroad – is reflected in Thomas Malthus' reply to criticisms of the educational system of the East India College of which he was Professor of History and Political Economy. Responding to criticisms that the College took boys away from their families at too early an age, that a college in India might be more suited to the task,

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