

Changing Architectural Styles and their Importance in British Malayan Society

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Abstract:

This research examines the cultural diffusion represented by 19th- and early 20th-century British colonial architecture in British Malaya (modern-day Malaysia and Singapore). It highlights the manifestations of imperialism and colonial dominance focusing on three key aspects: the use of architectural symbols to project power and authority over local cultures, the integration of local design elements (namely the fusion of Tudor and Mughal styles), and shared construction techniques with other British colonies and mainland Britain. Utilizing primary sources, including journals from British officers and architects, secondary analyses from experts in architecture, anthropology, and history, and accounts from local Malays, this study examines the nature of imperialism and the potential for reverse cultural transmission. Analysis of these elements demonstrates that colonial architecture functioned as both a tool of imperialism and a method of cultural exchange.

Keywords: Cultural colonialism, Malaysian Architectures, Power dynamics, Reverse cultural transmission

Introduction

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, in his speech to the House of Lords, October 28, 1943, said, “We shape our buildings; thereafter, they shape us.”¹ When people see mosques standing beside neo-Gothic cathedrals,² and colonial administrative buildings borrowed from both Palladian³ and indigenous styles flanking Penang’s old streets in Malaysia, colonialism adds “flavor” to the existing culture. Aboriginal architectural styles have been altered and developed by cultural transmission and assimilation. Nevertheless, during any investigation into the cultural impacts of imperialism, it is possible to see suppressed native religions, forbidden cultural

practices, and forced assimilation to the colonists’ cultures. For instance, examples which demonstrate the full range of cultural assimilation include the construction of churches by the Spanish in newly colonized Latin America;⁴ Napoleon implemented the “Napoleonic Codes” to reinforce French culture’s domination across Europe;⁵ the “Scramble for Africa” divided the borders of African nations artificially without considering the different cultures that existed in Africa,⁶ leading to drawn-out conflicts among ethnic tribes; the construction of Al Aqsa in Jerusalem by the Umayyad Caliphate after the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem⁷; highways built in indigenous areas of Australia during the 19th century by the British government.⁸ Indeed, imperialism and assimilation have

caused irreparable damage to the diversity of cultures across the world.

However, is it true that cultural assimilation only happens in a single direction, from the mother country to the colonized country? The different levels of cultural uniformity in colonised areas can be attributed to different forms of imperialism and colonialism. European countries, the primary colonizers during the 18th to 19th centuries, often implemented divergent administration methods in colonized nations or regions. The British Empire, the main focus of this essay, utilized various forms of governing in its multiple colonies. Categories of administration included direct rule, which was a “system in which a central government ruled an area which has had its parliament or law-making organization in the past,”⁹ and indirect rule, which was the “practices by which an imperial power exercised effective control over other peoples by means of indigenous political institutions.”¹⁰ Different forms of governance resulted in varying degrees of cultural transmissions. While direct rule may have caused great calamities on indigenous cultural trends and practices such as religion, art, and architecture, indirect rule may have resulted in more diversified, syncretic cultures, which include both colonial and indigenous influences.

Two-way cultural dissemination was sometimes sparked by the political conviction that it was the duty of a more developed nation to civilise peripheral nations, a concept known as “the white man’s burden.”¹¹ Cultural degradation and assimilation, indeed, were among the many detrimental effects of imperialism. While it is more than evident that colonialism and imperialism should be held responsible for the tragedy of ethnic cleansing and forced religious conversion, cultural interactions and the struggle for independence also led to formation of distinct, syncretic cultures throughout the imperial sphere. For example, the Rastafarian culture that was formed in Jamaica was a response to the legacy of slavery and systemic racism faced by the African diaspora in the Caribbean, blending Christianity with Pan-Africanism, and emphasizing a peaceful lifestyle and a distinct Rasta dialect.¹²

British architectural designs in Malaysia and Singapore during the 1800s symbolised both British colonial dominance, as well as the influence of indigenous culture on the British. Despite incorporating indigenous customs into its design, British colonial architecture respected local political institutions and rulers while symbolising authority and control over neighbouring native communities. Similar colonial architectures can be found in both the British Malaya and Great Britain, demonstrating that colonialism

could facilitate a two-way cultural exchange.

British Motivations

The motivations of the British occupying the Malay Peninsula have encouraged scholarly debates, particularly about the reason for early British indirect rule, particularly its economic motivations. However, it is widely agreed that the possibility of securing a monopolistic position on tin and rubber production was one of the major motivations of the establishment of British influence in the Malay peninsula.¹³ K. G. Tregonning, an Australian historian, journalist, and Raffles Professor of History at the University of Malaya in Singapore, described the changing global atmosphere, stating that “[d]uring the eighteenth century two great developments had occurred among the British in the East.”¹⁴ Indeed, the British foresaw the capability of economic and political success of dominating Southeast Asia. The transformation of the British East India Company¹⁵ from a commercial company to a political body and the increase of imports of Chinese tea into England catalyzed a “need to secure a base for the collection of tin and pepper for the country trade.”¹⁶ Later, Francis Light¹⁷ was appointed by the British East India Company to occupy and manage Penang, the first British settlement in Malaysia. A commercial base in Southeast Asia showed the strong strategic outlook of the British: Malaysia was in a great military position during wartime and an excellent trading post in time of peace.

By the end of the 1860s, a number of geopolitical developments caused significant turbulence in global politics, from the establishment of the Indian Empire by the British and their control of Hong Kong and the Suez Canal (1869), to the unification of Germany and the US post-Civil War. Facing the rise of emergent global powers, Great Britain behoved to secure economic and political strength. These events indirectly made the occupation of the Straits of Malacca extremely important for the British to project and maintain their global dominance. In 1874, Britain intervened in the affairs in Perak, Selangor, and Sungei Ujong, three principal tin-producing states in Malaya. The recognition of the British Resident System signified the establishment of British protectorates (direct rule), and as a result, British Malaya was separated into three political regions: Federated Malay States, Unfederated Malay States, and Strait Settlements. While the British employed indirect rule in Federated and Unfederated Malay States, the Strait Settlements belonged directly to the Crown of England.¹⁸

Background Information

Prevalent British architecture styles that flourished in British Malaya are Neo-Gothic¹⁹ and Palladianism.²⁰ Their attributions are essential to discuss before analyzing their modified form in the Malay Peninsula because these architectural styles signified the British architectural ideals, and therefore one cannot fully understand the communication between the native culture and European culture without knowing the basic features that were prevalent in British architectural styles. The Neo-Gothic style emerged in the mid-18th century in England when the development of Romanticism²¹ influenced the crowds' longing for the aesthetic of the Middle Ages. The style thrived during a period called Gothic Revival, which "coincided with the religious revivals of the 19th century and that manifested itself in a spate of church buildings in the Gothic style."²² This means that the Neo-Gothic style contains Christian elements such as stained glass and images of saints, an ancient and glorious aspect of European culture. More importantly, the incorporation of the Neo-Gothic style in British colonial architecture signified both a tribute to Europe's rich religious history and its enshrinement outside the realm of Christendom.

An example of Neo-Gothic building in England is the Fonthill Abbey. Designed by James Wyatt, an famous English architect at his time who returned from Italy,²³ Fonthill Abbey was built as a landscape feature and a home for the arch-Romantic William Beckford.²⁴ In his book *Delin-eations of Fonthill and Its Abbey*, John Rutter describes the North Western Arcade as "part of the beautiful series, which entirely surrounds the Octagon at this height" and that the stained glass of the windows "throws in a brilliant golden shade." The "enormous height of the central tower is reduced into proportion by the lofty erections about its base," and "rises the Central Tower in five successive stories" in the near side. The plan is "octangular, angle-buttressed."²⁵ The luxurious interior and magnificent exterior of Fonthill Abbey demonstrated the brilliance of Neo-Gothic architecture, as well as the outstanding technical advancement and era-leading fantasy of British architects.

Another leading British architectural style is the Palladian style. It is a "Style of architecture based on the writings and buildings of the humanist and theorist from Vicenza, Andrea Palladio (1508-80)."²⁶ It emphasizes rationality, clarity, order, and symmetry, while incorporating classical forms and decorative elements.²⁷ It also symbolizes the importance of harmony through its rigorous decoration and building plan. In England, two examples of Palla-

dian buildings are Queen's House at Greenwich and the Banqueting House at Whitehall.²⁸ Cultural transmission was thus quite common, with politically and culturally dominant England nonetheless borrowing architectural elements from Italy. When combined with flamboyant Neo-Gothic features in the Malay colonial buildings, these buildings became both prestigious and stately.

Native Malay housing is also important to analyze in order to generate a more thorough understanding of how native attributes were incorporated into colonial buildings. Malay houses were derived from coastal piled tree dwellings or raft dwellings that were prevalent among Melanesians²⁹ and Polynesians.³⁰ In general, they have a steeply pitched roof with overhangs and slatted floors. Nipa palm (*atap*), bamboo, jungle sticks, bundled rotan, and Malay feather palm (*nibong*) stems and bark are all common materials used to build a Malay house. Generally built on piles and reached by ladders, Malay houses have three parts: the main body (*ibu rumah*), a kitchen (*dapor*), and a reception room.³¹ In addition, these houses are open to adding extra rooms or being dismantled according to the owner's needs. Therefore, these houses are straightforward to build and perfectly suited to the humid and hot climate of the Malay Peninsula.

Accommodations to weather are also observed in their architectural designs. In a Kampong, "a hamlet or village in a Malay-speaking country,"³² dwellers accommodated climate needs with native cultural lifestyle.³³ For example, there is ventilated roof space to let the wind in and cool down the house and *atap* roofs with low heat capacity that insulates heat. Air can also pass through the roof joints and is aided by fully openable windows that encourage ventilation.³⁴ These features accommodated the tropical climate well. After the British arrived, the colonizers would realize the necessity of incorporating native Malay elements in their colonial buildings to accommodate for the new weather. However, the climate is not the only cause of the coalescence of Malay architectural elements in British buildings, but the local raw materials also influenced the architecture. For example, the British would not have imported oak trees to Malaysia when palm trees were readily available.

The fusion of British and Malay elements is common in Malay-occupied architecture, which showcases the diffusion of colonial culture to indigenous regions. For example, in Kampong Bharu, a Malay settlement built by the British in 1899 aimed to protect the Malay agricultural settlement, there are the "earliest conditions of collision between traditional Malay architecture and modern ver-

nacular architecture”.³⁵ In the settlement, bungalows or similar buildings housed indigenous Malaysians. Bungalows are suitable examples that showcase the integration of Western colonial architectural features into local buildings.³⁶ They are “single-storied houses with a sloping roof, usually small and often surrounded by a veranda.”³⁷ Originating from British Raj, the Bungalows gained some modifications and additions in order to suit the local Malaysian needs and desires.

One of the examples is Haji Abdullah Bin Mohamad Amin House. It contains two stories with both having a *serambi* and *rumah ibu*, which are traditional Malay features. It also has colorful geometric tiles of Melaka decorating the main staircase, a traditional *limas* roof, and a *Perak* roof. The main floor is the upper floor, made from wooden planks, a traditional Malay material. This differs from Western bungalows, which have the ground floor as the main floor. Nevertheless, British influence is also prevalent in this building. The staircase is a colonial innovation in the interior since local Malay houses do not have an interior staircase leading to another floor (except attics). A fanlight in Georgian style lunettes is above the *Jendela* (window). On the outside, the balanced symmetrical façade is in the Palladian villa style, and there are six Tuscan order columns on the porch. Some of these features integrated both cultures, for example, the staircase mentioned earlier. Although it is covered in Melaka tiles, the balustrade of the main stairs is composed of pot-shaped balusters standard in the Baroque period.³⁸ The integration and architectural acculturation of both local and colonial cultures in a house owned by a local Malay shows a discretionary choice of applying British culture. This phenomenon might be caused by the unlikeliness between British and Malay culture, which fostered the curiosity of local Malays to explore and utilize British architectural features. It could also be an effect of a showcase of political power of local administrators, as the owner, a local officer, incorporated the Tuscan order columns that were in British Malaya governmental buildings.³⁹

Power Dynamics

Most of the British colonial buildings employed an artistic style called Indo-Saracenic style. It resulted from the combination of contemporary Indian and British art styles.⁴⁰ Native Indian art, Indo-Islamic art, Gothic Revival, and Neoclassical art attributes combined to form this unique architecture. Typical Indo-Saracenic architecture may include domes, domed-Chhatra, pinnacles, onion domes, pointed arches, miniature domes, towers or minarets,

harem windows, overhanging eaves, open pavilions and horseshoe and ogee arches.⁴¹ In British Malaya, the Indo-Saracenic dome was abstracted from its standard form and adapted to local Mosques with slight modification. This was noteworthy because it showed the willingness of the British to embrace characteristics of different architectural styles. Specifically, domes help heat escape to the top of the building, which is why it was common in Rome/Greece and Mediterranean cultures in general. The name “Onion Domes” became prevalent in describing the unique form of Indo-Saracenic domes of the time.⁴² By absorbing native Malay and Indian culture into their administrative buildings while largely excluding the locals from the political sphere, the British signified their political dominance over both Malay society and culture. In addition, borrowing Malay architecture allowed the British to appease the locals rather than provoke them. Overall, it would appear less harsh to see that foreigners run your country when they run it out of a building that has local architectural elements.

Indeed, Indo-Saracenic architecture “legitimises British rule by presenting an image of continuity with the past.”⁴³ With help from up-to-date European Engineering techniques, the British were able to fuse Hindu and Islamic culture into their colonial buildings. This was significant because it demonstrated that the British were already open to new architectural styles before they arrived in Malaysia. The Hindu and Islamic style was introduced to British Malaya from the British Raj in the late 19th century, with the belief that pro-Islamic aesthetics would suit the sizable Muslim population in Malaysia and Singapore.⁴⁴ Basically, the British answered the question: “Why make the locals even more upset and angry about losing their sovereignty?” The British practiced artistic style integrating local architectural preferences out of necessity. These artistic styles, therefore, may have created emotional awe in the subjects and legitimized their reign. However, Malaysia did not have such architectural traditions as other Muslim communities and countries. For example, the oldest existing native architecture in Malaysia, described by *Sejarah Melayu*⁴⁵, was an administrative building for the Malay Sultanate built in around 1465.⁴⁶ It had a completely different form from administrative buildings in other Muslim countries. The use of timber pillars and the form of the local bungalow, which is a “single-storied house with a sloping roof, usually small and often surrounded by a veranda,”⁴⁷ differed from the extravagant domes and minarets that were used in other Islamic architectures. In this manner, the Indo-Saracenic style legitimized British

rule; however, it did not appeal much to the Malaysians as there was no similar artistic tradition in Malaya.

Nevertheless, recombinations of Indo-Saracenic and local elements exist in British Malayan buildings. It is not completely accurate to assume that the Indo-Saracenic Style in Malaya mosques was a suppressive act from the British on regional communities. In fact, local Muslim communities embraced the style for their reasons and purposes, which will be discussed in later paragraphs. This interaction eventually formed a special architectural tradition in British Malaya.

In the Federated Malay States⁴⁸ (Selangor, Perak, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang),⁴⁹ religious and cultural traditional matters were governed by their own Malay rulers or Sultans. However, the Malay ruling class was assisted by British personnel. The administration structure was similar in the Unfederated Malay States, except the British officer was only an advisor.⁵⁰ Colonial rule decreased the political power of the Malay rulers. Although many Malay sultans still had their special status, the indirect rule took away the absolute power of governing. In this period, there was a diminished traditional political system.

In the Unfederated Malay States, the culture and administration were greatly influenced by patron-client relationships. According to James C. Scott, an American political scientist and anthropologist specializing in comparative politics:

The patron-client relationship – an exchange relationship between roles – may be defined as a special case of dyadic (two-person) ties involving a largely instrumental friendship in which an individual of higher socioeconomic status (patron) uses his own influence and resources to provide protection or benefits, or both, for a person of lower status (client) who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services, to the patron.⁵¹

The essence of Scott's argument is that the patron-client relationship involves an imbalance of power, but the extent of the power divergence is not able to deviate the relationship into a fully command relationship. This means that the British relied on Malay rulers for local governing. In return, this gave the British economic power to obtain raw materials. For example, the Sultan Mosque exemplifies the unbalanced power relationship between the British and the local sultan. As an amalgam of native practices and British Indo-Saracenic elements that is located in the Kampong Glam area, Singapore, the mosque is located in a strategically important place,⁵² as it could be used to strengthen the control of the whole Singapore. This

pushed the British to appeal to the local ruler's demands and desires.

Politically, the Sultans exerted pressure on the British administrators. With regard to local architectural tastes, the political structure was essentially established so that the residents technically had the last word. Ruling the Kampong Glam area, the Sultan built a place that signified his importance in the area.⁵³ The Sultan Mosque was built in 1824 in native Malay style and was renovated in 1932 into a combination of Mughal and European elements. During the construction of the palace in 1932, the local architectural supervision board, led by Mahmood bin Haji Dawood, a community leader of Bombay origins,⁵⁴ collaborated with two Irish architects. One of the Irish architects is Denis Santry, who pioneered architecture and cartoon in South Africa and Singapore.⁵⁵ Various local Muslim ethnic communities participated in the fundraising to build this palace that symbolized the region's glorious past and honorable culture.

Moreover, features in the design show a client-architect relationship between the local community and the Irish architects.⁵⁶ For example, Sultan Alauddin Alam Shah's grave was separated by a wall from the praying hall, an Islamic practice, although they were connected from the outside.⁵⁷ This shows an accommodation for Islamic practices and acts of demand from the clients, for the architect, a Christian Irish, would not know this specific practice in the first place. Moreover, a dark band made from glass discs accentuated the division between each dome and its drum support. It is believed that the architects were given soya bottles and asked to utilize it in the building,⁵⁸ an act of sadaqah jariyah, meaning "a good deed for which the doer receives continuous bounties, even after death."⁵⁹ This shows the complete absorbance of local beliefs and practices into the palace, not only in the product but also in the process. Besides local elements, the palace's facade remains largely in the Indo-Saracenic style. The onion-shaped domes and chhatris⁶⁰ show Mughal artistic taste, and the trefoil arches are common in Arabian mosques.⁶¹ The assimilation of the two styles, local and Indo-Saracenic, shows the localization of Indo-Saracenic style in British Malaya. Some criticize that the new style hindered the growth or existence of the indigenous style; however, the new style received the acceptance of the local Muslim community and the style had a closer architectural similarity to the Ummah. In this sense, Indo-Saracenic architecture was not entirely rejected by the local communities. Instead, they were modified and accentuated by local elements, resulting in distinct architectures of the

colonial world.

The Patron-Client relationship is not unique in the Unfederated Malay States. In fact, this kind of relationship was ubiquitous in many empires and local regions. However, it was in the states governed by indirect ruling policies that the Patron-Client relationship was most evident. Local patrons (chiefs, local leaders) were likely to be empowered by colonial power through sanction and resources. Due to the great distance between Great Britain and Malaya, the colonizers had to rely on local leaders to govern detailed internal affairs. For example, the Sultan of Perak was persuaded to have a British resident advise him on administration duties because of threats on commercial trade from Lanun, Dyak, and Malay pirates. Although he was still accountable for overseeing Islamic religion and local customs, he shared political power with the British advisor.⁶² However, with the strengthened patron-client relationship between local rulers and British colonizers, the relationship between local rulers and farmers diminished on a local scale. The improved economic position of the landowners due to the commercialization of agriculture and the support of colonial power led to the degradation of farmers' social status in rural Malaya. The widening gap in power between landowners and farmers nearly altered the Patron-client relationship into a pure command relationship. The rise of power and influence of local Sultans, or patrons, greatly impacted the formation of a unique culture in the following decades.

Architectural Integration and Assimilation

British architecture in Malaya integrated and assimilated the local traditions into the architecture. First, all of these indigenous buildings belong to "the indigenous built environment," which is the "built environment of the rural areas, the older traditional sections of the cities, and to an extent the unofficial settlements of the newly urbanizing areas."⁶³ It means the indigenous buildings were built in places with little communication with distant countries such as Great Britain. However, the domination of British colonizers in Malaya altered this environment by presenting an architectural ideal that was achieved by their industrial material success.⁶⁴ This means that there was a sense of superiority in the eyes of the British when comparing their own architecture to the architecture of the indigenous system. Nevertheless, the fusion of local traditions into British colonial architecture proves wrong this arbitrary conclusion gained from an incomplete analysis of

economic, physical, social, esthetic, and cultural needs.⁶⁵ While it is true that the indigenous systems have been "replaced by Western methods often inappropriate to local conditions and needs,"⁶⁶ the reverse absorption of native elements into British architecture shows the nuance of the two-way cultural transmission.

As mentioned earlier, Malay usage of Palladianism began with the Portuguese but flourished under the British. This trend coincided with the flourishing of Georgian⁶⁷ and Regency⁶⁸ architecture in England,⁶⁹ which are styles based on similar principles.⁷⁰ It shows that architectural trends in British Malaya align with the popular trend in contemporary England. One example is the Suffolk House, which is a "Splendid mansion built in a mixed style of English and Anglo-Indian architecture."⁷¹ It contains fourteen pairs of Doric free columns and is covered by a balustraded⁷² parapet⁷³. Another example is the Killiecrankie and Scotland house. While it is also a Malayan Anglo-Indian house, its attributes are much more complex than the Suffolk House. It is

Two stories high, with a central hall from front to back on each floor; deep wings on each side with verandahs; a front porch supported on four columns; a floor paved with marble or brick slabs; a pyramidal shaped roof covered with tiles of local Chinese manufacture; and high ceiling allowing for the installation of large overhead fans known as *punkahs*.⁷⁴

Punkahs, in Indian culture, is "a fan used especially in India that consists of a canvas-covered frame suspended from the ceiling and ... operated by a cord."⁷⁵ It is a crucial architectural feature that aids air circulation to suit the Malay climate. In this sense, the British colonizer integrated an Indian cultural feature to fit the Malay geographic climate. There is an interchanging of culture between India and Malaysia facilitated by their common colonizer, the British. Similar to the *Punkahs*, the British also used unglazed windows covered by jalousies and blinds made of grass or bamboo to keep out light and flies.⁷⁶ Using local materials such as bamboo in a British colonial building symbolizes integrating local traditions into the architecture. The specific similarity between the Malaysian "Neoclassical-indigenous amalgam"⁷⁷ and other cultural architecture will be discussed in later paragraphs.

Another example in Kampong Bharu is Haji Mohamed Amin House, a two-story house with *anjung*, *serambi*, *rumah ibu*, and *dapur*, which are all traditional Malay elements. It also contains raised floors due to the climate. The facade shows characteristics of western bungalows while having *Anjung* at its center, which reflects the im-

portance of local Malay culture in the eyes of the natives when encountering foreign influence. Colonial elements include sturdy brick posts, concrete staircases, glass windows, and latticeworks of the balustrade and fanlight.⁷⁸ Different from the previous example, colonial elements in this house are not as numerous as the Haji Abdullah Bin Mohamad Amin House. The variation in the number of British elements while maintaining a lot of native features represents the status of local culture within the belief of Malays. Although British influence was prevalent, native culture was still likely unshakable.

Interactions between Malaysians and colonial culture are also visible from a linguistic perspective in the architectural realm. “Compound” (Derived from *Kampung*) and “godown” are examples of hybrid terms from Malaya—these terms are central to Compound House and the associated *Rumah Gudang* (warehouse-dwelling) form.⁷⁹ Although the word “Compound” originated in 1530,⁸⁰ its secondary meaning of “in the East, an enclosure within which a (European) residence or factory stands,” was derived from Malay *Kampung*.⁸¹ The similarity in typology shows the exchange of architectural language between indigenous and colonial architecture in the formation of vernacular dwelling types. Two of the crucial features of the compound houses are *Surong* and *Anjung*, which are front sitting room vestibules and side sitting room vestibules, respectively.⁸² While these features are similar to the front porch facade of the Georgian and Neo-Palladian Houses, *Surong* and *Anjung* are “Integrated with indigenous ideas about house construction and expansion,”⁸³ which means that the traditional Malay system of house addition is incorporated into these vestibules. Moreover, from the artistic perspective, there are forms of Malay vestibule significantly different from the Palladian Greek temple-front facsimile.

The trend of reverse transmission is undeniable in the form of front vestibules in Compound houses built for non-Malay clients. Roof forms in many examples no longer include a pediment, a feature of European facades. In addition, these Compound houses may have open balconies and full-length windows with internal balustrades. For example, the Archbishop’s House (1859) of the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd⁸⁴ utilized a traditional form of two-storey bungalow with no pediment. However, the portico of the main building of the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd is in Palladian style and the facade facing Victoria Street is in the neoclassical style.⁸⁵ Including European and native styles exemplified the cultural assimilation between the colonizers and the Malays. More importantly,

the inclusion of the Malay tradition of *Surong* and *Anjung* showed reverse transmission of culture and stressed the existence of two-way cultural communication between the colonizers and the natives.

Chinese architecture in Malaysia also received Malay and British influence. During the late 19th to early 10th century, a “distinct wave of Chinese architectural modernity emerged.”⁸⁶ The following factors mostly influenced Chinese architecture in Malaysia. First was the modernization process in China. The Xinhai Revolution in 1911, which marked the end of the Qing dynasty, caused an outward flow of Chinese culture and an inward flow of modernization measures. Second was China’s commercial desire in British Malaya, which interrupted the colonial economic structures and power dynamics. Although Chinese habitations in Malaysia had been long established before the British occupation, it was on the brink of the 20th century that the traditional economic practices of Chinese in British Malaya changed to industrial activities.

One example of Chinese architecture in British Malaysia is Chung Ling High School, built in 1950 in Penang. Similar to the Forbidden City in Beijing, China, it employed a traditional Chinese imperial layout design, which is an outward radiation of central buildings that function as ceremonies and ritual activities. However, it also has characteristics of a modern British school, possessing living facilities outside the educational building complex and spaces arranged from large to small. According to Liu Yiming, a scholar at Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London,

The architectural layout of the high school reflects a distinct response to its contemporary era, accommodating the implementation of a modern Western educational framework and curriculum. These structures feature an abundance of pitched roofs, external verandas, and windows, characterised by simplified lines that prioritise symbolic significance over meticulous details.⁸⁷

These features show the interculturality between Chinese, British, and Malay during the British occupation. There is an exchange of values between cultures, and these values are symbolized in the form of the school and the lessons taught in the curriculum. While combining British and Chinese building forms, the curriculum, remaining predominantly Chinese, focused on Confucianism. Interestingly enough, Confucianism emphasizes *Ren*, *Yi*, *Li*, *Zhi*, and *Xin*. *Ren* means being compassionate about concepts and people.⁸⁸ The willingness to accept different or opposing cultures, as stated in Confucian ideals, is best represented by the combination of forms and transcultural-

ality embedded in Chung Ling High School. In addition, such schools created a mixed cultural atmosphere for the students. Those who studied in these schools will be more willing to accept various cultures when they grow up, therefore enhancing the trend of cultural transmission and assimilation.

Reverse Cultural Transmission

Reverse cultural transmission also affected architectural design in the UK. One great example of reverse transmission of culture is the Royal Pavilion located in Brighton, Sussex, England.⁸⁹ The royal building was commissioned by King George as a royal seaside retreat. Built as a neo-classical style villa in 1787, it was later transformed into Indo-Saracenic style⁹⁰ by John Nash, an English architect and city planner.⁹¹ Nash utilized Indian minarets and domes and decorated the Great Kitchen with cast iron palm trees.⁹² The interior was designed by Frederick Crace and Robert Jones, two decorative artists who worked for King George IV.⁹³ Inspired by “Humphrey Repton’s published but unexecuted designs for the Pavilion and its gardens (1808) as well as William and Thomas Daniell’s four volumes entitled, *Oriental Scenery*,”⁹⁴ the interior space showed the prince’s love of Asian art. *Chinoiserie*, a style inspired by imitation and adaptation of oriental motifs, was prevalent in the interior of the pavilion.⁹⁵ As a culture that emerged from the arrival of the British at the Mughal empire, the Indo-Saracenic style diffused back to England as an art style that seemed unique from the mainstream European art styles such as the Georgian and Regency style. The Pavilion included an Eastern art style that corresponds with Orientalism in contemporary society, triggering British people’s curiosity about the mysterious and unique art style. However, Indo-Saracenic was a product of British colonial rule, which means there were modifications to Indian art tradition, making the art style conform more closely to the stereotypes toward Eastern art. This shows the complex relationship between the origin and the receiver of culture, which in this case is ambivalent, under a colonial context. England and its colonies are both givers and receivers of cultures.

The display of Malaysian architectural features also demonstrated a sense of British superiority. In the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924 and 1925, the Palace of Arts included artwork from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, India and Burma to reflect the “sense of unity in postwar Britain” and emphasize “hierarchy, hybridity, and diversity.”⁹⁶ Since the British dominion art exhibits only had about one-fifth of the

space of the showroom,⁹⁷ British administration exhibited the advancement of British art compared to artwork from the aforementioned countries while acknowledging the aesthetic value of this art. This exemplified the dominating sentiment that the British had over its colonies, which is resembled through the display of the colonies’ artwork with little possible space.

In the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley, 1924, the Malaya pavilion was built to portray Malay lifestyle and culture to the British citizens:⁹⁸

They used the royal colours red, yellow and black on banners hung from the gallery ceilings and to paint the exhibition furniture, they installed attap roofs on the exhibition cabinets, adopted the kris (Malay dagger) as imagery and as sculptural finials on bannisters, and filled the galleries and courtyards with rattan chairs.⁹⁹

Unlike the Royal Pavilion in Brighton, the Malaya pavilion was built so that British citizens could gain an understanding of Malayan artworks and traditions. Combined with the fact that there were also Pavilions for South Africa, Canada, India, and Australia,¹⁰⁰ it is safe to assume that the British incorporated local styles to amuse the European viewers. It might not be genuine praise for the quality of Malayan architectural work, but it was a method to demonstrate British economic and military superiority over its colonies and protectorates.

Not only between the Malays and the British, there were also similarities between adjacent cultures and the Malay culture. The parallels between the typical plan and interior layout of *Indische woonhuis*, the Compound House/*Rumah Limas*¹⁰¹, and the customary vernacular houses of Peninsular and Sumatran Malays, Sundanese (West Java), and Javanese are worth noting. This phenomenon shows a processual development in the forms of the houses and that there were indeed architectural interactions between the Javanese and Malaysians in the colonial setting. Similarly, the “Malay Plan”, which is that one room to one side of the interior while a raised platform takes the place of the second room has similar resemblance on the North Coast of Java (Pessir).¹⁰² Hipped roofs are omnipresent in Compound House, *Rumah Limas*, and *Indische woonhuis*. While traditional Malay houses use gable roofs, the inclusion of hip roofs, a Javanese architectural feature, shows the intertwined architectural practice between the Malays and the Javanese.¹⁰³ These examples indicate a contact zone between Malay and Javanese culture and language, which was in existence since at least the seventh century.¹⁰⁴

These architectural similarities between the Malays,

Sundanese, Sumatran Malays, and Javanese are not coincidence. Instead, they are forms of architectural translation,¹⁰⁵ which is “a change to a different substance, form, or appearance” of architecture.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, there was an act of referencing between the Malays, Javanese and British architecture. British elements, in this sense, might have influenced not only the Malays but also the Javanese, since there was an active transmission between architectural practice of Malaysia and Java. In a similar manner, Dutch culture that used to influence Javanese architecture¹⁰⁷ may also be apparent in British-Malay architectures. Therefore, the cultural diffusion from multiple sources and reverse transmission during the colonial setting was prevalent and complex.

Conclusion

During the 1800s, British colonial architectures in British Malaya were vital symbols of colonialism and imperialism. British architecture, although representing authority and dominance over the colonized civilisations, experienced reversal of cultural transmission, which is shown through the incorporation of local customs into the design. The two-way exchange of Southeast Asian culture and British colonial customs is significant because of the lasting cultural impact on the two countries. While colonialism degrades or ruins some aspects of the native cultures, it modifies and makes addition to indigenous cultures and results in a unique and cherishable amalgam of cultural interaction. Colonialism is not only a one-way route of cultural assimilation. Rather, it is a complex and nuanced cultural communication and transmission process.

Therefore, while the reverse cultural transmission between British and Malaya seems distant and unique, as people normally view colonialism as a one-direction spread of culture, the public are actually experiencing a larger fusion of many more cultures today. Interactions between different ethnic groups, people with contrasting beliefs, or people from different states are most likely to incorporate two-way cultural transmissions.

The world is tilting toward a more homogenous global culture, which might silence regional or native culture while producing new amalgams. Today, colonialism and imperialism are no longer accepted as legitimate foreign government policies. However, similar effects on culture still happen often through music, travel, and social media. When people from different backgrounds interact, they might have a similar astonished feeling as seeing mosques flanking a neo-gothic cathedral or a colonial administrative buildings borrowed from both Palladian¹⁰⁸ and local

styles. Cultures are not static. They continue to evolve.

Endnotes

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