

Humanitarianism and the overseas aid ‘craze’ in Britain’s colonial Straits Settlements, 1870-1920

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Is the history of modern humanitarianism primarily a European one? Let us begin to answer this question by considering a letter which appeared in the *Singapore Free Press* in 1900 from a correspondent who wrote under the pseudonym ‘Protestant’. ‘Protestant’ desired ‘to give expression to a feeling’ he believed he shared with ‘a large proportion of the European public of the Straits’: namely, ‘the protest most of us would like to make against the Charitable Funds craze’. He had been prompted to write by his irritation with the ‘Indian Famine Fund idea’, which he claimed had become ‘comfortably installed among us on the familiar cuckoo-egg principle’ (the cuckoo being a bird that lays its eggs in the nests of other birds). As ‘Protestant’ saw things, the high cost of Tamil ‘native labour’ in the Straits Settlements and Malayan Peninsula allowed him to feel little sympathy for the starving masses of India. Instead, he confessed to ‘no false sentiment in the matter and to a great deal of what I shall frankly call selfishness’.¹

Yet a striking feature of life in the Straits Settlements of Singapore, Penang and Melaka at this time was the number of people who felt otherwise. The ‘craze’ ‘Protestant’ objected to had,

¹ ‘Charitable Funds and Private Means’, *Singapore Free Press*, 2 Apr. 1900.

over the previous three decades, included relief funds for the victims of famines in Persia, India, China and Ireland, for those displaced by the eruption of Krakatoa in 1883, and for those afflicted by the South African War of 1899–1902. Nor, in the two decades which followed his complaint, did this enthusiasm for aid-giving abate. In 1906, the Straits responded generously to the San Francisco earthquake and to famine in Japan, as they did when news arrived of more famine and further earthquakes in Japan eight years later. China, practically every year until its 1911 Revolution, received contributions of disaster relief from the colony. The outbreak of World War One resulted in a frenzy of international relief efforts as no less than seven separate funds were started to alleviate the distress of civilians, refugees and sailors, soldiers and their dependents.²

A further defining characteristic of this phenomenon was the widespread participation of Britain's Asian subjects. Repeatedly, the individual and collective largesse of Chinese, Arab, Indian and Malay contributors in the Straits dwarfed that of their European counterparts. What is more, the social circumstances of these Asian donors ranged from rich to very poor. Local fundraisers, to increase the flow of relief, tapped into new forms of popular urban culture such as concerts, theatrical performances and (later) cinema screenings, outdoor fêtes and sports matches. These events, many of which became staples of the local social calendar, not only mobilized the colony's emergent Asian bourgeoisie, but workers, women and children. So too, did the humble collection box, which first appeared in Singapore around 1900 — in or outside temples, theatres,

² These efforts were reported in *The Straits Times*, *The Singapore Free Press*, *The Eastern Daily Mail* and the Chinese newspaper *Le Bao*, all of which will be discussed further below. On Singapore's Krakatoa relief committee, see Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* (Singapore, 1984; first published in 1923), 215. On the regularity of aid sent to China, see Yen Ching-Hwang, 'Ch'ing's Sale of Honours and the Chinese Leadership in Singapore and Malaya, 1877–1912', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 1, 2 (1970), 20–32.

rickshaw stations and wharves. Donations poured in from school children, shop-employees, electric tramway workers, foreman, harbour coolies and 'Jinricksha Peons'.³

Yet perhaps the most important aspect of this overseas aid 'craze' was its cosmopolitan nature. Outpourings of transnational compassion might not appear surprising in a colony comprised largely of transients. Singapore, the hub of the 'craze', was in 1901 home to a China-born migrant community of more than one hundred and sixty thousand that constituted over seventy per cent of its entire population. (By comparison, its local-born Chinese community, known as Straits Chinese, numbered less than sixteen thousand). That same year, over twelve thousand migrants from various parts of the Dutch East Indies resided in the city, as did roughly a thousand Arabs of Hadhrami descent, small and mostly middle-class communities of Sinhalese and south Indians, and a larger community of Tamil labourers (whose rising cost so vexed 'Protestant').⁴ The amounts of relief sent from the Straits Settlements might therefore be construed as the direct result of the colony's diasporic demography, as its migrant communities responded to pleas for assistance sent out across the seas from their homelands.

However, such international relief efforts became from their outset much more than this. Penang and especially Singapore became places where Chinese, Arabs and Malays raised funds for starving India; from where Arabs, Malays and Indians sent relief to flood and drought victims in China; and from where, irrespective of any colonial racial divide, all these communities gave to

³ See 'China Famine Relief Fund', *Eastern Daily Mail*, 19 Jan. and 27 Feb. 1907; 'War Relief Funds', *Straits Times*, 23 Jan. 1915.

⁴ These estimates, based on the colonial census of 1901, are taken from C. F. Yong, *Chinese Leadership and Power in Colonial Singapore* (Singapore, 1992), p. xv.; Lee Poh Ping, *Chinese Society in Nineteenth Century Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur, 1978), 87; C. M. Turnbull, *A History of Singapore, 1819–1975* (Singapore, 1977), 98–9.

the European sufferers from famine, war and other man-made calamities. The giving of overseas aid was an activity that surmounted communal barriers.

This essay examines the roots and the ramifications of such boundary-crossing benevolence. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to a growing literature on the history of modern humanitarianism that has frequently gazed through a decidedly Eurocentric lens.⁵ Of course, how we define ‘humanitarian’ will determine the scope of our historical enquiry: the term has certainly acquired a range of meanings since it first appeared in the debates of European theologians and philosophers in the early 1800s. The first European chroniclers of ‘modern humanitarianism’ writing in the early twentieth century included in their discussions education, penal reform, temperance and trade unionism as humanitarian endeavours that had all improved the human condition.⁶

We shall not cast our net quite so wide. Nevertheless, histories of the specific form of humanitarian action that this essay explores — the giving of aid to geographically and often culturally distant strangers — have only tended to reinforce a Eurocentric master-narrative. The anthropologist Didier Fassin, an accomplished critic of modern-day ‘humanitarian reason’, is not alone in his assumption that humanitarianism’s ‘key episodes — from the abolitionist movement in Britain two centuries ago to the U.S. interventionism of the past two decades, from the founding of Red Cross to the birth of the Médecins Sans Frontières — *belong to the history of Europe and*

⁵ See, *inter alia*, Thomas Haskell, ‘Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, part one’, *American Historical Review*, 90, 2 (1985); Craig Calhoun, ‘The Imperative to Reduce Suffering: Charities, Progress and Emergencies in the Field of Humanitarian Action’ in Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss (eds.), *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics* (Ithaca, 2008); also, Norman S. Fiering, ‘Irresistible Compassion: an Aspect of Eighteenth Century Sympathy and Humanitarianism’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 37, 2 (1976).

⁶ Katherine Davies, ‘Continuity, Change and Contest: Meanings of “Humanitarian” from the “Religion of Humanity” to the Kosova War’, HPG Working Paper (Aug. 2012).

North America'.⁷ Other recent studies, despite their purportedly global perspectives, present a similar model of Western diffusion, whereby the flow of humanitarian aid, practice and thinking originates in European minds and actions, before spreading out to impact on the rest of the world's inhabitants. Some authors acknowledge (as Fassin does) that benevolence towards strangers existed beyond the Western-Christian world, in Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist and Confucian contexts. Yet their studies say little about any long-distance compassion these traditions may have inspired simultaneous to, or even before, the rise of a modern European humanitarian sensibility. Despite their many insights, these studies reinforce a powerful assumption of geographic hierarchy that has shaped the way the history of international humanitarianism has been told — a narrative in which the West too easily assumes the role of principal actor-creator-giver, with 'the rest' assigned the role of its passive, often helpless, mendicant.⁸

This essay challenges the distortion of that particular Eurocentric lens through its examination of a part of the British Empire where any presumed geographic hierarchy of international humanitarianism must be reversed. It contributes to a growing literature that by examining the multi-directional movement of peoples, practices, goods and ideas across European colonial empires reveals new histories of capitalism, liberalism and civil society as they were each constituted globally *from the other side*.⁹ This study also attempts, through its focus on non-

⁷ Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, trans. R. Gomme (Berkeley, 2012), 248. Italics added.

⁸ See Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: a History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca, 2011); Bruno Cabanes, *The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism, 1918–24* (Cambridge, 2014); and Peter Stamatov, *The Origins of Global Humanitarianism: Religion, Empires and Advocacy* (Cambridge, 2013). In contrast, Peter Walker and Daniel G. Maxwell refer to Islamic practices of long-distance welfare, noting that humanitarian systems are 'not the prerogative of any one religious or philosophical tradition'. See their *Shaping the Humanitarian World* (London; New York, 2009), 15–16.

⁹ See, *inter alia*, C. A. Bayly, *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire* (Cambridge, 2011); Andrew Arsan, Su-lin Lewis and Anne-Isabelle Richard, 'Editorial – the Roots of Global Civil Society and the Interwar Movement', *Journal of Global History* 7, 2 (2012), 157–65; Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena* (Berkeley, 2007); Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006).

European aid-givers in a colonial centre of international relief, to add a further dimension to our understanding of the complex relationship between modern humanitarianism and imperialism.

It is now recognized that humanitarianism functioned as a tool of European empire-building and colonial control. Severe famine-relief measures in late nineteenth century India, which included tests aimed to weed out the indigent from the allegedly indolent, became formalized into codes that were eventually exported across the British Empire.¹⁰ Achievements in imperial humanitarian governance, such as Britain's alleged conquest of famine in India in the early 1900s, were publicized as a legitimization of European rule and expansion. European observers tended to blame the failure of non-European states in the international battle against starvation on their resistance to such benefits of Western influence as the hunger-busting railway. When they perceived such states, nevertheless, to achieve an efficient distribution of aid, as was the case of China in the late 1800s, they attributed it to the presence of Western missionaries.¹¹

A less well-known story concerns how the governed in Britain's Asian empire appropriated international humanitarianism for their own ends. Overseas aid-efforts allowed many of those subjugated to display their loyalty to the British as an aspiring colonial bourgeoisie. In the process, many explored rival ideas of belonging — to nations, to religious ecumenes, and to wider cosmopolitan fraternities — all of which required complex political allegiances. It has been suggested that the 'moral communities' (or what we might call here, the 'communities of sympathy') thus formed through humanitarian relief-efforts produce only fleeting solidarities: a brief 'illusion' of some shared 'common human condition' that masks fundamental inequalities

¹⁰ Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London, 2001), 33–41; Walker and Maxwell, *Shaping the Humanitarian World*, 16–21.

¹¹ These views circulated in the colonial newspapers of Singapore. See 'Lord Curzon's Eulogy of British Rule in India', *Singapore Free Press*, 23 Mar. 1907; 'Famines in India', *ibid.*, 15 Apr. 1914; Editorial, *Straits Times*, 21 Dec. 1906.

that divide societies.¹² The example of the Straits Settlements reveals how humanitarian activism in a multi-ethnic colonial context contributed to the formation of real and rooted local solidarities, which eventually stimulated political demands for a community of genuine imperial equals.

I. The roots of an international humanitarian sensibility: capitalism, communications and Asian universalism

Being a meeting place for Buddhists, Daoists, Confucians, Hindus, Muslim, Jews and Christians, with sometimes parallel but often very distinctive philosophies of benevolence, Britain's colonial Straits Settlements became a centre of philanthropic activity from the outset. The laissez-faire attitude of colonial officials, combined with the penury of their administrations, meant municipal budgets never stretched far in the direction of public welfare. Local charity was expected to fill the gap, and did so. Prosperous Asian merchants established free hospitals and schools for their respective communities, in the same way as they built temples, churches, mosques — and graveyards.

That their benevolence became internationalized from 1870, to the extent that the Straits emerged as a new nexus of global aid-efforts, calls to mind Thomas Haskell's arguments concerning the intimate connection between modern international capitalism and the humanitarian sensibility.¹³ The history of the Straits' overseas aid 'craze' is, indeed, in part the history of what Sugata Bose has called Asian 'intermediary capital'.¹⁴ From 1870, Singapore's markedly enhanced importance within the burgeoning world economy generated greater fortunes for its Chinese, Indian and Arab businessmen. Industrial communications that stimulated the expansion

¹² Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, pp. ix-xii, 3.

¹³ Haskell, 'Capitalism and the Origins, part one'.

¹⁴ Bose, *Hundred Horizons*, 74–5.

of the port of Singapore — the Suez Canal and the screw-propeller steamship — strengthened the commercial links of these merchants with ports located as far distant as the Red Sea and Persian Gulf in the west, and coastal China and Japan in the east. Some local wealthy Arabs and Chinese, in collaboration with European investors, even established their own Southeast Asian, and sometimes trans-oceanic, shipping lines.

However, it was two other methods of communication — one new and one revitalized — that together played a decisive role in giving a transnational direction to Straits Settlements' philanthropy. The older method, the newspaper, had existed in the colony since the mid-1820s, yet it only became a profitable tool of long-distance interconnection after 1850, when improved maritime transport and cheaper colonial postage made print into an increasingly accessible and mobile commodity. Moreover, it was not until the 1870s that the first non-missionary vernacular newspapers appeared in the Straits, to thus break the European monopoly on local journalism. In terms of size of audience, the most significant of these vernacular journals was the Chinese newspaper *Le Bao* ['Straits Paper', also known locally as *Lat Pau*] which was founded in Singapore in 1881 by Straits Chinese businessmen who had dealings with Amoy [Xiamen] and Hong Kong. For the next twenty years, *Le Bao* was the most widely distributed and influential *Nanyang* [Southeast Asia, literally 'southern seas'] Chinese newspaper, with a readership that consisted of literates, as well as semi-literates and illiterates who gathered together in public to hear it read aloud.¹⁵

The enhanced social and geographic reach of these journals allowed local fundraisers to dramatically widen their donor-base. *Le Bao* reminded its readers that 'every contribution of a

¹⁵ Chen Mong Hock, *The Early Chinese Newspapers of Singapore, 1881-1912* (Singapore, 1967), 24–53.

single penny saves an additional life'.¹⁶ The copious subscription lists featured in European-owned newspapers meticulously recorded the humbler contributions made by the less wealthy alongside the larger donations of the rich and famous. In a context in which charity remained a very public act, donors whose names circulated in this way received multiple social benefits. An appearance by Asian contributors in the lists published by local Anglophone newspapers signified their membership of a respectable community of fellow bourgeoisie. When European editors neglected to print these donors' names and contributions individually, protests and demands for an immediate rectification followed.¹⁷ Meanwhile, the lists printed by *Le Bao* enabled *Nanyang* Chinese to maintain a centuries-old tradition from the motherland, whereby the deeds of the generous were recorded in local annals such as official gazetteers, bringing credit to themselves, their families and their descendants.¹⁸ On occasion, Chinese newspapers in the Middle Kingdom reprinted the names of those in the Straits who had aided their ancestral homeland, bringing these individuals an even wider renown.¹⁹

The other method of communication that globalized philanthropy in the Straits served as midwife to the birth of the modern humanitarian emergency. Before submarine telegraphy arrived in Singapore and Penang in January 1871, local newspapers carried terrible tales of human agonies abroad, such as the 'sad intelligence' in 1848 of a famine in China so devastating that 'the people are eating one another'.²⁰ These reports, sent by post and typically a week or more old when they arrived, were as likely to rouse feelings of helplessness as much as of sympathy. From 1871,

¹⁶ *Le Bao* 4 Dec. 1890, p. 2. 'Duo juan yi fen zhi cai ji duo jiu yi ren zhi ming.'

¹⁷ 'Chinese Subscriptions', *Straits Times*, 13 Jan. 1912. For one such protest, see the letter from 'A Cantonese' in *ibid*. The names of Asian subscribers were sometimes published concurrently in the English and Chinese press.

¹⁸ Glen Peterson, 'Overseas Chinese and Merchant Philanthropy in China: From Culturalism to Nationalism', *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 1, 1 (2005), 89–90.

¹⁹ National Archives of Singapore, Sng Choon Yee, Oral history interview transcript, 19–20.

²⁰ 'Famine in China,' *Straits Times*, 12 Jan. 1848.

however, the Straits became integrated into an international, telegraphically-mediated, disaster news network. ‘Sad intelligence’ of far-away calamities now generated immediate mobilization. Cables that carried warnings of impending catastrophes and those already underway were read aloud at hastily convened crisis-meetings of the Straits’ official, business and professional classes.²¹ The news was then relayed to the wider public through local newspapers, whose editors stressed the urgency of a response. *Le Bao* in 1890, for example, having received a telegram regarding floods in Hubei, urged its readers to immediate action with the familiar cry: ‘each contribution sent one day earlier saves an additional life’.²²

In addition, by facilitating the birth of international banking, telegraphic communication made the whole business of transferring financial aid across vast distances speedier and more reliable. By the late 1880s, *Le Bao* had undertaken to act as a collecting agency, assuring its readers that it would directly cable their contributions to China’s official authorities.²³ By 1900, the majority of international relief funds raised in the Straits were held with local branches of either the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank or the Chartered Bank of India, Australia and China.²⁴ The telegraph also appeared to enhance the efficacy of international relief efforts by simulating a more rationalized disaster knowledge. Colonial officials responded to the initial disaster telegrams they received from abroad by cabling back immediate requests for verification. Such verification took the form of quickly-produced statistical estimates as to the size of the area affected or the number of homeless and starving at risk, which then provided copy for local colonial and vernacular newspapers. Floods, earthquakes, droughts and famines became quantifiable and comparable

²¹ ‘Famine in China — Meeting at the Council Chamber’, *Eastern Daily Mail*, 24 Dec. 1906.

²² *Le Bao*, 4 Dec. 1890, p. 2. ‘Neng zao juan yi ri ji duo jiu yi ren.’

²³ *Le Bao*, 12 Mar. 1890, p. 6.

²⁴ As the subscription lists published in the local press regularly indicated. See, for example, ‘Armenian Relief Fund’, *Straits Times*, 14 Jan. 1916.

tragedies, to which the organizers and contributors of overseas aid might respond (or not) on what they considered an appropriate scale.²⁵

Those who had direct access to this new disaster-knowledge — officials, diplomats, newspaper-owners and their editors and journalists — became powerful humanitarian brokers. The staff of *Le Bao* were frequently approached by Qing imperial Chinese officials in Singapore to publicize the latest aid appeals for the Middle Kingdom. The same paper, as we have seen, sometimes took responsibility for collecting and transferring locally-raised relief to China, on at least one occasion informing its readers that it would also monitor how their contributions were spent.²⁶ For their part, colonial newspaper editors became masters at engineering humanitarian ‘competition’. For instance, during the famine relief campaigns for Japan and China in 1906, the *Straits Times* called on Singapore not to fall behind the efforts of other imperial cities such as Hong Kong and London; it challenged Penang to match the compassion of the ‘junior Settlement’ Singapore; and it exhorted Hokkien Chinese in the latter city to show a greater generosity by highlighting the large amount of aid already pledged by their Teochew-speaking countrymen.²⁷

Finally, the rise of an international humanitarian sensibility in the Straits Settlements can be attributed to changes in local religious life that were also a product of this era of global connection. The intensified mobility of printed matter and written correspondence brought the colony’s Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Confucian literati into closer contact with their co-religionists abroad. The non-Christians among them, even as they joined forces with

²⁵ ‘Famine in China — Meeting at the Council Chamber’; ‘The Famine in India, *Straits Times*, 10 Mar. 1900; *Le Bao*, 1 Sep. 1888, p. 2.

²⁶ *Le Bao*, 24 May 1892, p. 6.

²⁷ ‘Pity the starving Japanese’, *Eastern Daily Mail*, 13 Jan. 1906; ‘Famine in China — Singapore’s support to the relief fund’, *Straits Times*, 31 Dec. 1906.

missionaries on ventures such as Singapore's anti-opium crusade, began to dream that they themselves might influence a wider imperial and international plane. By the start of the twentieth century, a few such individuals had begun to challenge Christianity's aspirations across the colonized world — by mounting their own local philanthropic projects and international evangelical efforts, and by articulating their own belief in a common world-humanity, generally in need of saving.

Emblematic of this new Asian universalism was an Edinburgh-educated, Straits Chinese doctor called Lim Boon Keng. Between the mid-1890s and 1920, Lim emerged as one of Singapore's most energetic aid-organizers. Not only did he lead local relief efforts for his ancestral Chinese homeland, he was as heavily involved in appeals for famine relief in India, and in one major instance, for disaster victims in Nova Scotia.²⁸ All this time, as a proselytizing Confucian zealot, Lim hoped to see his reformed faith in China's sage of sages adopted by the world. During World War One, in what proved an intense period of overseas aid-giving in the Straits, he commenced a series of public lectures, before audiences of Asian elites and colonial officials, on the Confucian principle of the *da tong* [the great union], the realisation of which, he believed, would bring forth a Confucian millennium. Lim's humanitarian involvements (which we shall return to discuss later) were the practical manifestation of his professed faith in 'the essential unity of the races of mankind' and a coming 'era of universal peace, in which law and morality are both superseded by love'.²⁹

²⁸ 'Indian Famine Fund — First Committee Meeting', *Straits Times*, 14 Mar. 1900; 'Famine in China — Meeting at the Council Chamber'; 'The China Famine Relief Fund', *Eastern Daily Mail*, 7 Jan. 1907; Song, *One Hundred Years*, 550–51.

²⁹ Lim Boon Keng, *The Great War from a Confucian Point of View and Kindred Topics, Being Lectures Delivered during 1914–17* (Singapore, 1917), 7; see also, 'Peace of the World — Eloquent lecture by Dr. Lim Boon Keng — Dreams of a new humanity', *Straits Times*, 26 Oct. 1915.

II. Tears of the motherland: the rise of overseas Chinese compassion

The first overseas aid campaign in the Straits to be launched in an era of telegraphic communication was Singapore's 1871 appeal for famine relief in Persia. It was organized by the city's small but wealthy Armenian community, who traced their descent back to the Persian city of Isfahan, and was led by the Vicar of the city's Armenian church of Saint Gregory, who successfully petitioned King Chulalongkorn of Siam for a hefty contribution.³⁰ Three years later, Chinese leaders in Singapore joined the city's Bengal Famine Relief committee (of which more shortly). However, the most significant relief effort of the decade came towards its end, prompted by reports of a devastating famine in northern China.

China's 'Incredible Famine' [*Dingwu Qihuang*] of 1876-79 ultimately cost between nine and thirteen million lives.³¹ In a number of ways, the relief measures launched in response were a departure from previous efforts in China. They were the first to become internationalized. In 1877, Western missionaries, diplomats and businessmen established the Shandong Famine Relief Committee in Shanghai which eventually drew contributions from Britain, the United States, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, India and Japan.³² They were also the first relief activities organized by Chinese activists within China at a national level across provincial boundaries — partly in response to the challenge posed by philanthropic foreigners at a time of officially-led patriotic

³⁰ 'Persian Famine Relief Fund', *Straits Times*, 6 Jan. 1872. Chulalongkorn's regent at this time was a member of a powerful Siamese family who also claimed Persian origins.

³¹ Davis, *Victorian Holocausts*, 7.

³² *The Great Famine: Report of the Committee of the China Famine Relief Fund* (Shanghai, 1879), 29–30.

‘self-strengthening’. In addition, the Incredible Famine proved a key moment in the history of the modern spectacle of humanitarian suffering. Moved by the scale of the catastrophe, two Chinese philanthropists published a booklet entitled *Famine in Henan, Pictures to Draw Tears From Iron*, a series of twelve woodblock prints accompanied by poetic laments that depicted the human horrors that were occurring. By the end of 1878, this booklet had been translated into English and re-published in London, from whence its contents circulated across the British Empire and beyond through missionary publications and illustrated newspapers.³³

By this time, the aid appeal in the Straits Settlements was well underway, organized by the naturalized British subject and Cantonese dialect group leader Hoo Ah Kay (commonly known as Whampoa) who had also been appointed Singapore’s first Qing consul. Hoo was tasked by both the British governor, who passed on details of a communication sent to him by Shanghai’s Shandong Relief Committee, and by the Qing government to organize local fundraising efforts. He was joined by two other Chinese community leaders who by reason of their local birth were also British subjects, the Hokkien, Tan Beng Swee and the Teochew, Tan Seng Poh. Together, the three leaders helped raise funds that in April 1877 totalled \$17,178 and by the end of the year amounted to an estimated one-fifth of all overseas contributions sent to the relief committee in Shanghai. The following January, with the crisis far from over, Hoo relaunched the Incredible Famine appeal and over a two-day period collected a further \$11,000 in contributions.³⁴

³³ Katherine Edgerton-Tarpley, *Tears from Iron: Cultural Responses to Famine in Nineteenth Century China* (Berkeley, 2008), 2, 131–155.

³⁴ Editorial, *Straits Times*, 12 May 1877; ‘Famine in China’, *Straits Times*, 22 Dec. 1877. Song, *One Hundred Years*’ 193; Peterson, ‘Overseas Chinese’, 94. Here, and after, ‘\$’ indicates Spanish Dollars before 1898, and Straits Dollars afterwards. In the 1920s, the average daily earnings of a rickshaw driver were around \$1; see James Francis Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie: a People’s History of Singapore, 1880–1940* (Singapore, 2003), 246.

From this point, Qing officials targeted the Straits Settlements for donations of aid to China practically every year for the next two decades. One of their principal strategies was to reward generous donors with official imperial honours, a practice that in the Middle Kingdom dated back to the second century BC. Official fundraising agents sent to the Straits from China eventually did not simply wait for donations to be pledged. In the late-1880s, the notices they placed in *Le Bao* included details of the imperial titles they carried with them and the price-tag of each in terms of relief contribution. Honours purchased in this manner became popular not only with wealthier Chinese in the Straits but with a second tier of less prosperous merchants and shop owners. Adding to the prestige that accrued even to humbler donors, in 1889 the Qing consul in Singapore endeavoured to forward lists to the imperial authorities in Beijing containing the names of all *Nanyang* Chinese who had assisted the motherland.³⁵

As local organizers and publicists pioneered new fundraising methods, the number of humbler donors multiplied. It remains unclear whether, during China's Incredible Famine or after, illustrations of the horrors shown in *Pictures to Draw Tears from Iron* were pasted across the Straits Settlements, as they were in Shanghai. What is certain is that local fundraisers, employing a practice that had earlier been used to incite popular riots, put up placards across the colony to appeal for aid from the widest possible Chinese audience. An issue of placards that was distributed across Singapore in late-1906 described some of the same horrors that *Pictures to Draw Tears from Iron* had depicted. Under the title 'An appeal to save the lives of four million people', Chinese readers were informed: 'The roads were strewn with corpses of persons who had died of starvation.

³⁵ *Le Bao*, 4 Dec. 1890, p. 2; Yen, 'Ch'ing Sale of Honours', 23; Peterson, 'Overseas Chinese', 94–5; 'China Famine Fund Committee', *Straits Times*, 15 Jun. 1889.

Those who had not died were homeless and had to sell their children. Such distressing news causes pain in one's heart and brings tears into one's eyes'.³⁶

During the same campaign, collection boxes emblazoned in blue Chinese characters that read 'China's great famine, give money to save life' appeared across Singapore, in the civic spaces frequented by both its elites and the less prosperous. The Straits Chinese Tan Kheam Hock, labour contractor for the Singapore Harbour Board, was reported to have made at least three collections 'from his coolies at the Tanjong Pagar coolie lines' and 'Borneo Wharf coolie lines', the second and third of which raised over \$250.³⁷ The first ever relief fund committee managed solely by Chinese women in the Straits subsequently organized an appeal for women and children displaced by China's 1911 Revolution. The 1917–18 fundraising activities for the relief of flood victims in Tianjin included a 'Children's Grand Fête' and charity screenings at the Alhambra Theatre.³⁸ For colonial observers, the famine-fund lottery proved the most controversial of these new popular methods. When tickets first went on sale in Singapore in 1912, the *Straits Times* declared that such gambling was 'unlawful', it alleged that the local agents selling the tickets retained a seventeen per cent commission, and it warned that the names of the Europeans in Shanghai allegedly behind the scheme had yet to be confirmed as genuine.³⁹

The clearly transactional nature of several of these practices should come as no great surprise. In the Buddhist-influenced ethical context in which most Chinese donors operated,

³⁶ The contents of these placards were translated into English and published in the *Straits Times* on 31 Dec. 1906. See 'Famine in China — Singapore's support to the relief fund'. Placards inciting Chinese to violent action had appeared in Singapore on the eve of the Post Office Riots of 1876.

³⁷ *Ibid.*; 'China Famine Relief Fund', *Eastern Daily Mail*, 19 Jan. and 27 Feb. 1907.

³⁸ Song, *One Hundred Years*, 472–3; 'The Tientsin Flood Relief Fund', *Singapore Free Press*, 3 Jan. 1918; 'The Tientsin Flood Relief Fund', *Straits Times*, 9 Jan 1918; 'Tientsin Flood Relief Fête', *Singapore Free Press*, 24 Dec. 1917.

³⁹ 'Swindling Lotteries', *Straits Times*, 30 July 1912.

altruism and self-interest had long been intimate bedfellows. Saving lives threatened by natural disaster or starvation was understood as one of the most efficacious means of earning merit.⁴⁰ When *Le Bao* encouraged its readers to buy Qing honours through acts of expansive aid-giving, it assured them that each such purchase was a ‘virtuous act’ which ‘in one go’ produced multiple karmic returns.⁴¹ Elsewhere, in the same paper, the heavens were invoked to bless both the victims of floods, droughts and famines, and the open-hearted who attempted to rescue them. More generally, *Le Bao* praised donors who personified the key Confucian virtues of public-mindedness [*gong*] and humaneness [*ren*], and who showed their deep feeling for their ‘native place’ [*sang zi*].⁴²

For overseas Chinese in the Straits Settlements, this concern for the ancestral homeland – for relatives who resided there and for departed ancestors buried there – became the long-distance fulfilment of sacred Confucian dictates regarding filial piety. It motivated coolies to send home remittances to their families, villages, clans, and fellow dialect speakers; it inspired merchants to establish overseas native place associations to funnel funds back home for the building of temples and schools. Love of native place might therefore be considered as the primary force that drove overseas Chinese acts of aid-giving. For local-born and China-born merchants in the Straits, the philanthropic donations they sent back to China, along the same routes as blazed by their capital, might be considered to have also served a more pragmatic purpose: the nurturing of local good feeling for themselves and their Middle Kingdom enterprises.⁴³ However, while donations of relief

⁴⁰ Andrea Janku, ‘Sowing Happiness: Spiritual Competition in Famine Relief Activities in late nineteenth century China’, *Min Su Qu Yi/ Journal of Chinese Ritual, Theatre and Folklore*, 143 (2004).

⁴¹ *Le Bao*, 17 Oct. 1889, p. 6. ‘Yi ju er shu shan bu shi qi wei shan zhi.’

⁴² *Le Bao*, 4 Jan. 1888, p. 2 and 1 Sep. 1888, p. 2.

⁴³ Peterson, ‘Overseas Chinese’, 92–3, 100–102. On *Nanyang* enterprise in China see Michael Godley, *The Mandarin Capitalists from Nanyang: Overseas Chinese Enterprise in the Modernization of China, 1893–1911* (Cambridge, 1981).

as a form of Chinese devotion to native place played a definite role in the overseas aid ‘craze’, the full reality, as we shall now consider, was more complex and more interesting.

III. Aid-giving solidarities: the diverse community of patriotic Chinese sympathy

We have now begun to appreciate that several of the most important organizers of relief campaigns for China during our period were local-born Straits Chinese, also known as *Baba*, whose settler-ancestors in the *Nanyang* had centuries before married non-Chinese wives. By the time the Straits’ overseas aid ‘craze’ commenced in earnest, few *Baba* read or wrote Chinese, nor had any great competence in speaking their ancestral Chinese dialects. They were known instead for their distinct *Peranakan* [local-born] domestic customs, cuisine and entertainments, and their Malay-influenced patois.⁴⁴ Their attachment to their ancestral native lands in China had declined to a largely symbolic realm of ceremony and ritual.

However, as more China-born migrants had arrived in the Straits Settlements from the 1840s, this symbolic realm had assumed a renewed significance. Wealthy Straits Chinese who desired to establish their influence amongst new Chinese arrivals spent considerable amounts on building and maintaining the temples, graveyards, hospices and welfare associations that this growing population demanded. Typically organized by clan or speech group, these institutions allowed *Baba* to preside over traditional Chinese rites of belonging, such as those performed

⁴⁴ In Singapore and Melaka, most *Baba* spoke *Baba* Malay, which served as the trading lingua franca of the Straits. Those from Penang continued to speak a distinct version of the Hokkien Chinese dialect which contained a heavy admixture of Malay words.

during festivals, burials and marriages. When *Baba* oversaw and participated in these rites, having typically dressed for the occasion in mandarin robes, they affirmed their ancestral dialect-identities in the eyes of the wider Chinese community, notwithstanding the obvious evidence elsewhere of their local acculturation.⁴⁵

Aid-giving to China functioned as a further such rite of belonging. Moreover, it emerged as a widespread activity amongst *Baba* in the very years when outside pressures had made their hybrid identities more complex and the subject of public scrutiny. From 1898, our Confucian zealot Lim Boon Keng exhorted his fellow *Baba* to learn Mandarin Chinese and then travel to the Celestial Empire. He argued that a Straits Chinese ought to take his ‘fair share of the heritage that belongs to the son of Han’ by serving as a cosmopolitan intermediary in the ancestral motherland for modernizing European and ‘Straits enterprise’.⁴⁶ Lim’s plan received support from the Qing consulate in Singapore, which had for some time worked to draw the loyalty and capital of *Nanyang* Chinese back to the Middle Kingdom, and which had specifically focused its efforts on returning prominent local *Baba* to the path of Chinese cultural orthodoxy. As part of this policy, Qing diplomats, China-born journalists associated with the consulate, and Lim himself, denigrated *Peranakan* customs. In particular, they blamed Straits Chinese women and their domestic habits for having made *Baba* forsake their ancestral Chinese traditions and obligations.⁴⁷

Simultaneously, however, aid-giving to China, as a rite of belonging that was independent of the old customs and rituals, afforded *Baba* a new stage on which to display their authentic ethnic

⁴⁵ Mark R. Frost, ‘Emporium in Imperio: Nanyang Networks and the Straits Chinese in Singapore, 1819–1914’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 36, 1 (2005).

⁴⁶ Lim Boon Keng, ‘The Role of the *Baba* in the Development of China’, *Straits Chinese Magazine*, 7, 3 (1903), 94–100; ‘China — a new field for Straits Enterprise: an interview with Mr Lew Yuk Lin (Acting Consul for China at Singapore)’, *ibid.*, 2, 7 (1898), 102–4.

⁴⁷ See Mark R. Frost ‘Transcultural Diaspora: The Straits Chinese in Singapore, 1819–1918’, Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series, 10 (2003), 10–20, 28–30; and Chen, *Early Chinese Newspapers*, 60.

credentials while retaining their localized identities. Straits Chinese donors included Christians who had been converted by British and American evangelicals, and who responded to appeals for aid circulated by missionaries and by their fellow Chinese converts in China. Other Straits Chinese contributors became involved in relief efforts for China that clearly promoted their allegedly ‘heterodox’ cultural identities. In 1920, a further famine emergency in northern China prompted Straits Chinese in Penang to organize a series of fundraising performances of their Malay-influenced musical theatre known as ‘Penang *Baba Bangsawan*’. Such a visible display of patriotic solidarity served equally as a celebration of the community’s local distinctiveness.⁴⁸

Complicating this picture as much as the diverse origins of Straits-based relief for China were the destinations in the country that received it. From the time of the Incredible Famine a major portion of this aid was distributed to provinces where most Chinese in the *Nanyang* neither had relatives, nor buried ancestors, nor business interests, nor fellow dialect-speakers. The seven major aid-appeals for China launched between 1888 and 1897 were all for provinces — Henan (1888), Shandong (1889), Jiangsu and Zhejiang (1890), Hebei (1891), Hubei (1892 and 1894) and Sichuan (1897) — that were located at a distance culturally (if not in most cases geographically) from Fujian and Guangdong, the two southern provinces from which most Chinese in Southeast Asia had migrated.⁴⁹ What the majority of these aid-efforts in fact reveal is a rise in transnational compassion for the Chinese motherland that transcended native place and province, making needy compatriots of former distant strangers.

⁴⁸ See ‘Food and famine in China — an appeal’, *Singapore Free Press*, 22 Sep. 1911; and the notice advertising ‘Penang *Baba Bangsawan*’ in the *Straits Times*, 26 Oct. 1920, p. 8.

⁴⁹ On the major relief campaigns recorded in *Le Bao* and *Tian Nan Xin Bao* from 1888 to 1900 see Yen, ‘Ch’ing’s Sale of Honours’, 23, n. 40.

Furthermore, as this wave of patriotic sympathy swept across the Straits Settlements, it began to break down deeply-felt sectarian divisions within local Chinese society. Major riots had erupted between various Chinese dialect groups as recently as 1867 in Penang, and before that in 1854 in Singapore. In the late nineteenth century, Singapore's Chinatown district continued to be segregated into Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese and Hakka neighbourhoods. Nevertheless, in 1877–8, in 1889 and again in 1906–7, members of these various groups joined forces to contribute relief funds for central and northern China. Their collective generosity during the city's 1889 appeal for Shandong helped raise more than \$109,000 in just four months.⁵⁰

In effect, relief campaigns for China played a more central role in the emergence of overseas Chinese nationalism in the Straits than scholars have recognized. Through the almost annual act of aid-giving, rich and poor Chinese united — at first on paper, but then through public meetings, outdoor fêtes, lotteries and other charity entertainments — so as to form an imagined community of nationalist sentiment that extended well beyond the literate.⁵¹ Indeed, they began to act nationally in this manner ahead of those key developments to which their nationalist transformation has typically been attributed: the arrival of China-born Qing diplomats (from the early-1880s), then exiled reformers and revolutionaries (from the late-1890s), who strove to rouse local patriotism; then the establishment of elite organizations, such as the Chinese Chamber of Commerce (established in 1906), which brought dialect-group leaders together; and, finally, the spread of modern Chinese education (especially after 1911) which provided instruction in a common national language.⁵²

⁵⁰ Song, *One Hundred Years*, 193; *Le Bao*, 21 May 1889, p. 2; 'China Famine Fund Committee', *Straits Times*, 15 Jun. 1889; 'The China Famine Relief Fund', *Eastern Daily Mail*, 7 Jan. 1907.

⁵¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983).

⁵² Following Yen Ching-Hwang, 'Overseas Chinese Nationalism in Singapore and Malaya, 1877–1912', *Modern Asian Studies*, 16, 3 (1982), 397–425. C. F. Yong mistakenly reinforces the view that a non-sectarian spirit in Chinese

Yet even the surge in Chinese patriotic sentiment does not fully capture the complex origins of such compassion, for participation in this local community of sympathy extended further. Chinese fundraisers for the motherland frequently highlighted the contributions of Arabs, Malays, Indians and Europeans to their appeals.⁵³ Writing in the pages of *Le Bao* in 1889, one such fundraiser explained why he had begged assistance from foreigners: the millions of victims in China were ‘all innocent people’, he wrote, and ‘all within the four seas one family’ — a universalistic Confucian rationale that recalled the claim in the *Analects* that the gentleman who acted well made ‘all within the four seas’ his ‘brothers’, not to mention the role of the sage, as set out in the *Book of Rites*, as one who took ‘all under heaven as one family’.⁵⁴

In the instance of the Chinese placards distributed across Singapore in 1906, foreign involvement in local relief efforts for China was used to shame *Nanyang* Chinese into a greater display of compassion:

Now the sufferers at Hua, Hai and Hsu are all Chinese, and yet his Excellency [the Governor] and the merchants of other countries are doing all they can for their relief.

aid-giving occurred only after China’s 1911 Revolution. He bases this assumption on the recollections of Tan Kah Kee, Singapore’s most famous interwar philanthropist, who claimed that the Tianjin flood relief campaign he led from 1917 was the first in which various Chinese dialect groups in the Straits combined their efforts. However, Tan was not yet in Singapore in 1889, nor born in 1877, when such collaboration had previously occurred, and he seems to have missed the community-wide fundraising efforts of 1906–7. See, C. F. Yong, *Tan Kah Kee: The Making of an Overseas Legend* (Singapore, 1987) 107; and Tan Kah Kee, *The Memoirs of Tan Kah-Kee*, ed. and trans. by A. H. C. Ward, Raymond W. Chu and Janet Salaff (Singapore, 1994), 172.

⁵³ ‘China Famine Relief Fund’, *Straits Times*, 17 May 1889; *Le Bao*, 9 Feb. 1889, p. 5 and 21 May 1889, p. 2.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 2 Jan. 1889, p. 2. ‘Li ben jie chi zi si hai jie you shi yi jia, te wei qiang bo zhi hu qi jie ta shan zhi zhu’; see also Burton Watson (trans.), *The Analects of Confucius* (New York, 2007), 81; and Michael Puett, ‘Constructions of Reality: Metaphysics in the Ritual Traditions of Classical China’ in Chenyang Li and Franklin Perkins (eds.), *Chinese Metaphysics and its Problems* (Cambridge, 2015), 123.

In view of this should not the Chinese community of Singapore exert its utmost strength to raise a large sum of money as a mark of appreciation and gratitude for His Excellency and the foreign merchants' great kindness?

Nor did the challenge of these placards end there:

Moreover, the Chinese community of Singapore is noted for its liberality and its charity. It is ever ready to subscribe money to relieve distress in foreign countries such as earthquake in St. Francisco and the typhoon in Hong Kong; and for the famine in Japan, the amount subscribed was over \$17,000. On this occasion, it is China herself that wants relief; should not the Chinese community then exert itself for its own country? Another fact that must not be lost sight of is that the area covered by the distress this time is greater than that affected by the earthquake and typhoon while the number of people in distress is larger than those who suffered in San Francisco, Hong Kong and Japan combined.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ 'Famine in China — Singapore's support to the relief fund', *Straits Times*, 31 Dec. 1906.

The audience appealed to in these placards was certainly patriotic. Yet it was also much more: a patriotic community that transcended itself so as to view all the world's people across the 'four seas' as one. Subsequently, it proved a community capable of simultaneous national and international sympathy. In December 1917, Lim Boon Keng received news of the Halifax Disaster in Canada, which occurred when a French ship carrying explosives collided with another vessel in the city's harbour. Parts of the town were obliterated, almost 2,000 people were killed and 9,000 injured. Immediately, Lim summoned an emergency meeting at the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce to appeal for aid from prominent Chinese businessmen. In addition, he requested assistance from the Chinese-dominated committee of the concurrently-running Tientsin Relief Fund, on which he also sat. The outcome was a day and night outdoor fête, held (after several delays caused by weather) the following February, that raised a reported sum of 'over five figures'. The *Straits Times* listed the highlights of the event as including a visit from the Governor and his wife, one from the Chinese Consul-General, a 'parade by over 900 pupils of Chinese schools', and a 'new feature in Le Cabaret à la Singapore, where twenty five young ladies entertained'.⁵⁶

IV. Other humanitarian fraternities: overseas aid as local trust-building

In addition to patriotic communities of sympathy, overseas aid activities in the Straits helped fashion new intra-religious solidarities. In 1912, Singapore's reformist Young Men's Moslem Association (established in 1907, and hereafter YMMA) mounted a fundraising campaign for the

⁵⁶ 'Halifax Relief Fund', *Singapore Free Press*, 29 Dec. 1917; Song, *One Hundred Years*, 550–51; 'Halifax Fête', *Straits Times*, 25 Feb. 1918.

Ottoman Red Crescent aimed at the relief of Muslims in Tripoli affected by the Italo-Turkish War. Their effort paralleled previous Chinese appeals in that it emerged out of a diverse social context that was similarly, though much less violently, fragmented. On the one hand, the links of Straits' Muslims to the wider Islamic world had been intensified from 1870 by the steamers that carried *hajjis* from Southeast Asia, via Singapore, to the Hijaz, and by the newspapers that brought the city's Muslim literati into contact with reformist Islamic thinkers located as far away as Cairo.⁵⁷ On the other hand, local Muslim society comprised a variety of communal groups — Malay, Bugis, Javanese, Arab, and Chulia [south Indian] — each with their own language, customs and separate ethnic mosques. The YMMA strove to overcome these divisions through its programme for the 'Advancement of Muhammadans and Unity of Islam'. At a public meeting it hosted in early 1912, its leaders warned that 'Muhamedans in Singapore would not improve unless they put aside their prejudices and factional feelings.'⁵⁸

International relief efforts took centre stage in this drive for unity a few months later. To aid the 'poverty-stricken and wounded brethren at Tripoli', the YMMA organized a charity performance of Hamlet at Singapore's Theatre Royal by the Straits Chinese-owned Star Opera Company joined by 'Dutch and Malay variety entertainers'.⁵⁹ Hamlet for Tripoli, as a new setting for the expression of Muslim confraternity, proved a great success. The attendance, according to one report, comprised 'a great crowd, including leading Arabs, Malays and Indians.' Such solidarity came in the same year that the Board of Trustees of the Sultan Mosque, Singapore's oldest mosque, was reconstituted so it became representative of all of the city's Muslim ethnic

⁵⁷ Michael Laffan, *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia* (London, 2003), 148–51.

⁵⁸ 'Young Men's Moslem Association', *Singapore Free Press*, 2 Feb. 1912.

⁵⁹ Notice in *Singapore Free Press*, 23 Apr. 1912, p. 1; 'Young Men's Muslim Association', *Singapore Free Press*, 27 Apr. 1912.

groups. As further evidence of this local shift towards pan-Islamic unity, in 1916 the management committee of Singapore's previously Chulia-dominated Jamae Mosque was similarly reorganized on inclusive lines.⁶⁰

Other local humanitarian appeals encouraged solidarities that rapidly transcended religious boundaries. The wartime campaign in Singapore for the relief of Armenian refugees commenced at the Church of Saint Gregory in April 1915, with an Eastertime plea from the Armenian Catholicos that was read out to the congregation. Initially, donations were sought from within the city's Armenian community.⁶¹ However, as news of Ottoman atrocities flowed in to the Straits, the Trustees of Saint Gregory's widened their appeal through the colonial press. Support from other Christian denominations quickly arrived, and then from the local representatives of other religions, including prominent Buddhist-Daoist Chinese leaders, the Confucian reformer Lim Boon Keng, and the Calcutta-born Jewish entrepreneur J. A. Elias. Most conspicuous was the donation of \$100, listed in the *Straits Times* in January 1916, contributed by Syed Omar Alsagoff, a member of one of Singapore's most influential Hadhrami Arab families.⁶²

Syed Omar's uncle, Syed Mahomed Alsagoff, had earlier made his name as a humanitarian activist, having sat alongside the Qing consul on the China Relief Fund Committee established in 1889, and having also organized the local Arab community's \$4,321 contribution to the Indian Famine Relief Fund of a decade later (\$1,000 of which was his own).⁶³ What made Syed Omar's

⁶⁰ 'Young Men's Muslim Association', *Singapore Free Press*, 27 Apr. 1912; Gretchen Liu, *In Granite and Chunan: the National Monuments of Singapore* (Singapore, 1996), 108; see also the notices in the *Straits Times*, 13 Mar. 1916, p. 8, and *Singapore Free Press*, 14 Mar. 1916, p. 4.

⁶¹ 'Armenian Refugees' Relief Fund', *Straits Times*, 10 Apr. 1915.

⁶² 'Armenian Relief Fund', *Singapore Free Press*, 18 Oct. and 2 Nov. 1915; 'Armenian Relief Fund', *Straits Times*, 21 Oct. 1915, 14 Jan. and 5 May 1916; 'Where are the Armenians?', *Singapore Free Press*, 11 Mar. 1916; notice in *Straits Times*, 27 July 1916, p. 6; 'Armenian Horrors', *Straits Times*, 26 Sept. 1916; 'The Armenian Horror', *Singapore Free Press*, 18 Dec. 1916; 'Armenian Relief Fund', *Straits Times*, 14 Jan. 1916.

⁶³ 'China Famine Fund Committee', *Straits Times*, 15 Jun. 1889; notice in *Straits Times*, 5 Apr. 1900, p. 2.

donation to the Armenian Relief Fund stand out was his family's long connection with the Ottomans. During the 1880s, his uncle had served as the Ottoman Consul in Singapore, while Syed Omar himself had later worked for his family's business in Egypt, Arabia and Turkey, and earned (as his Singapore obituary later put it) 'several Turkish decorations of a high order'.⁶⁴ By showing his compassion for Christian Armenians, Syed Omar reinforced the reputation of the Alsagoffs for open-minded charity. At the same time, he signalled their refusal to endorse the inhumane policy of an overseas government with which Britain had gone to war.

Such acts of international benevolence were in one sense an extension of practices of local trust-building through philanthropy that had existed for some time. In the 1840s, Syed Omar Aljunied, the Hadhrami Arab merchant and real-estate pioneer, foreshadowed the Alsagoffs' cosmopolitan liberality when he donated land for the construction of a Chinese pauper's hospital in Singapore and for its Anglican cathedral. In the following decade, the same hospital also received donations from Aljunied's son, Syed Ali bin Mohamed Aljunied, and from local Indian Parsees.⁶⁵ In a multi-ethnic entrepôt which relied so heavily on diasporic flows of commerce, gift exchanges between local ethnic leaders emerged as a strategy designed to ensure the capitalist peace. That overseas aid campaigns became part of this existing strategy is evidenced by the case of the Sultan of Johor, the British-backed Malay ruler of the state adjacent to Singapore. In late 1893, so the *Baba* chronicler Song Ong Siang related, the Sultan held at an 'At Home' at his new Singapore mansion attended by 'one of the largest gatherings of *towkays* assembled'. His Chinese guests had come to witness him receive 'the 'first grade of the of the First Class of the Order of

⁶⁴ 'Syed Omar Alsagoff', *Straits Times*, 18 May 1927.

⁶⁵ Charles Burton Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore* (Singapore, 1902), ii, 563–4; K. D. Doraisingam and S. S. Doraisingam, *Tan Tock Seng, Pioneer: his Life, Times, Contributions and Legacy* (Sabah, 2003), 32–5, 55–6.

the Double Dragon' in appreciation of his government's treatment of the Chinese in Johor and his 'sympathy and goodwill ... in sending aid to China for sufferers in the famine-stricken districts devastated by the recent great floods.' In reply, the Sultan remarked that 'it was no exaggeration to say that, without the Chinese, Johore would never have become what it was and might even have ceased to exist'. The Chinese, he went on, were 'his best friends and his people's best friends, and, so long as they remained here, he would never have occasion to entertain any anxiety for its continued welfare and prosperity'.⁶⁶

But cases of cosmopolitan aid-giving were also linked to intercommunal alliances of a more confrontational nature. Arab and Chinese support for Armenian refugees came after a decade of unpopular British policies had united leaders from these communities with their Eurasian, Malay, Sinhalese and Indian counterparts in protest. Singapore's small Armenian community did not play much part in the earlier phase of these agitations, against the exclusion of Asians from Malaya's first class railway carriages. (It was never quite clear whether Armenians were considered 'Asiatic' or not). However, representatives from the community participated in the local campaign organized in 1912 against Britain's officially-sanctioned 'colour bar' in its colonial government services. Their decision to enter the fray on the side of local Asian leaders was likely to have played some part in determining the range of support they later received for their oppressed overseas compatriots.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Song, *One Hundred Years*, 272–3.

⁶⁷ John G. Butcher, *The British in Malaya, 1880–1941: the Social History of a European Community in Colonial South-East Asia* (Kuala Lumpur, 1979), 98–112.

V. Forging imperial compassion: aid as expectation

Unlike the campaigns for the relief of Turkey's Armenians, Tripoli's Muslims, or China's drought and flood victims, fundraising for Ireland and India in the Straits Settlements reveals a stronger official British involvement. The first such appeal came in 1874, for the victims of famine in Bengal, after the Governor General in India relayed details of this disaster to his counterpart in Singapore.⁶⁸ Of just over \$9,000 raised, a large proportion was collected by the same Chinese dialect group leaders — Hoo Ah Kay, Tan Kim Ching and Tan Seng Poh — who three years later orchestrated the Incredible Famine appeal.⁶⁹ At the time, the *Straits Times* compared the generosity of 'well-to-do Chinese residents, those whom commercial relationships or other intercourse has rendered familiar with European notions of practical good-will to men' with the 'inability of the balance of our inhabitants either to realize suffering which does not come under their immediate observation, or to sympathize with distress which does not concern themselves'.⁷⁰ Six years later, Chinese and Indians subscribed large donations to Singapore's Irish Famine Relief Fund, with Straits Chinese leaders again serving on its organizing committee.⁷¹ Chinese in the city also gave \$12,000 to another Indian famine relief appeal in 1897. Three years later, as we have noted, Lim Boon Keng and Syed Mahomed Alsagoff joined the committee tasked to raise contributions when a further plea for Indians facing starvation reached the Straits.⁷² That same year, local Chinese and

⁶⁸ Successful appeals for intra-imperial aid had been launched in the Straits before this, for widows and orphans of the Crimean War, for European refugees displaced by the Indian Rebellion of 1857, and for Lancashire and Cheshire cotton workers affected by the American Civil War. However, the donations of the Singapore fund for the Irish victims of the Great Famine of 1846–52 did not appear to involve Asian contributors and came to a paltry £31. See Buckley, *Anecdotal History*, ii, 606, 666, 692; Christine Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine: Impact, Ideology and Rebellion* (Basingstoke, 2002), 72, and her *Charity and the Great Hunger in Ireland: the Kindness of Strangers* (London, 2013), 41–6.

⁶⁹ 'Bengal Famine Fund', *Straits Times Overland Journal*, 16 May 1874.

⁷⁰ 'The Bengal Famine', *Straits Times*, 2 May 1874.

⁷¹ 'The Distress in Ireland', *Straits Times*, 3 Apr. 1880. Baba Tan Beng Swee and Baba Koh Cheang Hooi sat on the committee formed with European merchants.

⁷² Godley, *Mandarin Capitalists*, 38–9; 'Indian Famine Fund — First Committee Meeting', *Straits Times*, 14 Mar 1900; 'Indian Famine Relief Fund', *Singapore Free Press*, 21 Apr. 1900; notice in *Straits Times*, 16 Apr. 1900, p. 2.

Indians revealed the geographic breadth of their imperial compassion when they subscribed to the Straits and Malayan South Africa War Relief Fund, organized for the benefit of disabled colonial soldiers and their dependents.⁷³

European officials seized on these appeals as opportunities to rouse their colonial subjects to expressions of imperial brotherhood. In 1880, at the first meeting of the Irish Famine Relief Fund committee of Singapore, the elected chairman Sir Thomas Sidgreaves, the Chief Justice of the Straits Settlements, told his mixed audience of European and Chinese of the ‘sad distress from which our fellow countrymen in Ireland suffer’ and (to ‘cheers’) explained why the gathering had been called: ‘It is natural that we, in this Colony should contribute for our own; they are our brethren ... surely all who speak the English language should be energetic to come to their rescue.’⁷⁴ Similar language had been used in India in the late 1840s, when the appeal to aid starving ‘Irish fellow subjects’ was extended to ‘native communities’. Both here and later in the Straits, Irish famine relief campaigns drew contributions from rich and poor Asian subjects. In Singapore, in 1880, the individual subscriptions ranged from the \$1000 donations of wealthy Chinese merchants to the \$5 contributions of their shop employees.⁷⁵ Earlier, donations in India, as Christine Kinealy has shown, had arrived from Indian soldiers, book-keepers, office boys, policeman, unskilled labourers, water carriers and even carpet sweepers.⁷⁶

Kinealy does not consider the pressure that may have been exerted on these subaltern donors by their colonial and class superiors. In the case of the Straits Settlements half a century later, however, the evidence is clearer. A letter in the *Straits Times* authored by ‘A Chinese

⁷³ ‘Straits and Malayan South Africa War Relief Fund’, *Straits Times*, 17 Mar. 1900.

⁷⁴ ‘The Distress in Ireland’, *Straits Times*, 3 Apr. 1880.

⁷⁵ ‘The Irish Famine Relief Fund’, *Straits Times*, 17 Apr. 1880.

⁷⁶ Kinealy, *Charity and the Great Hunger*, 42–4.

Resident' in 1880 alleged that the government had forced the Bengal and then Irish famine appeals on his community. Tan Kim Ching, the Hokkien *Baba* organizer of both these campaigns, denied this claim: the contributions in question, he responded, were 'organized by public meetings' and had 'nothing to do with the Government'.⁷⁷ Nonetheless, senior colonial officials had by the end of the century made their expectation of aid explicit. In 1897, Chinese merchants in Penang were summoned by the Chinese Protectorate to a meeting of its Chinese Advisory Board, at which, it was reported, 'particulars' as to the urgent need for famine relief in India were presented and 'the Chinese gentlemen present decided to contribute to the fund'.⁷⁸ Three years later, these merchants were singled out again to provide famine relief for India, and generously did so, perhaps persuaded by a *Straits Times* editorial that declared it was their 'moral obligation' to help, since Indian coolies had contributed so greatly to their enormous fortunes.⁷⁹

In Singapore, as part of the same appeal, the Deputy Governor summoned a meeting of European and Asian elites, over which he presided like a hawk-eyed British schoolmaster marking the class roll. Having noted the pleasingly 'representative' turn-out of prominent Indians, Arabs and Chinese, he added: 'I trust that those who are not present will add something to their subscriptions just to show that it was from no lack of sympathy with the objects of the meeting that they kept away'.⁸⁰ Such demands were partly what provoked 'Protestant' to attack the overseas aid 'craze' a few weeks later. His letter denounced the practice of "rushing" contributions under authority for the Famine Fund' as well as the 'indirect pressure brought to bear on those whose willingness to please or whose worldly caution bids them bow with the King in the House

⁷⁷ 'Chinese Temple at Teluk Ayer', *Straits Times*, 17 Apr. 1880. Italics added.

⁷⁸ 'The Indian Famine — Relief Measures', *Straits Times*, 30 Jan. 1897.

⁷⁹ Editorial note in *Straits Times*, 8 Mar. 1900; see also notice in *Straits Times* 26 March 1900, p. 2; 'Straits Indian Famine Relief Fund', *Singapore Free Press*, 21 July 1900. Chinese in Penang subscribed over \$13,000 to the fund.

⁸⁰ 'The Famine in India', *Straits Times*, 10 Mar. 1900.

of Rimmon' — a reference to the Old Testament Syrian general who kept his new faith in the Hebrew god a secret from his royal master in order to appease him.⁸¹

It would be a mistake, nevertheless, to assume that Asians in the Straits remained passive in the face of such pressure. Some clearly understood their imperial compassion as part of a more complex transaction between the rulers and the ruled, as the full complaint of 'A Chinese resident' in 1880 indicates:

You will find the Chinese community of Singapore have always readily responded with a free hand and liberal mind to the demand of the Government for subscriptions in the case of any distress, such as the late famine in India, and the present one in Ireland, when appealed to though the sad events occurred in distant lands far away from them. Now, what may they expect in return from Government for their such ever ready pecuniary co-operation and assistance?

'A Chinese Resident' then explained the current grievance of his community: the government's plan, so he believed, to reclaim a plot of land in front of the main Chinese temple in Singapore that had long been used for rituals and opera performances.

⁸¹ 'Charitable Funds and Private Means'.

Is this an appropriate return for their [the Chinese community's] such acts of liberality which seem to vanish into oblivion? It is said that many of my countrymen feel disinclined to contribute towards the subscriptions for the Irish distress for the above reasons, as they say that as Government are illiberal hearted why should we be liberal with our money?⁸²

For this author, aid-giving to fellow imperial subjects 'in distant lands far away' had engendered a social contract between the Chinese community and the colonial administration — the build-up of what most local Chinese would have understood as *guanxi*, that is to say, relations and obligations.

Rarely were such expectations expressed so openly. Nonetheless, the involvement of rulers and ruled in overseas aid appeals over the remainder of our period became marked by a discernible pattern of reciprocity. Chinese support for the Bengal and then Irish famine appeals was followed by an official vote in 1889 of \$25,000 for the famine relief fund for northern China. Explaining the government's decision to contribute, the Acting Colonial Secretary stated: 'This Colony and the Council as representing it, resting so much as it does on the Chinese portion of the community, would be wanting in its duty, if it did not.'⁸³ The involvement of Chinese leaders as committee members for subsequent India famine funds in 1897 and 1900 was matched by the efforts of British

⁸² 'Chinese Temple at Teluk Ayer'.

⁸³ Quoted in Song, *One Hundred Years*, 251.

businessmen enlisted to ‘invite subscriptions from Europeans and non-Chinese’ for the China famine appeal of 1906–7.⁸⁴ Cooperation was also evident in more popular fundraising settings. Charity film screenings in aid of Tianjin flood victims in early 1918 drew a mixed audience of Chinese and Europeans to Singapore’s Alhambra Theatre. Two years later, as part of a subsequent appeal for famine victims in China, the Straits Chinese Football Club and the European-dominated Singapore Cricket Club organized an Anglo-Chinese charity football match.⁸⁵

For Straits Chinese in particular, imperial aid-giving became part of what proved a delicate political balancing-act. In the 1890s, the proximity of the Qing consul to prominent *Baba* raised official British anxiety over the local emergence of a ‘sentimental imperium in imperio’.⁸⁶ It would have been natural if these fears had then intensified when Straits Chinese hosted the reformer Kang Youwei in Singapore in 1900, and then the anti-Manchu revolutionary Sun Yat Sen in the following decade, for in both cases *Baba* became directly embroiled in these exiles’ overseas plots to mount uprisings in China. That the colonial authorities did not grow more concerned had much to do with the very public displays of British allegiance that *Baba* leaders simultaneously orchestrated. Straits Chinese-led celebrations for Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in 1897 were followed by those for the British capture of Pretoria three years later. In 1900, Lim Boon Keng and Song Ong Siang founded the Straits Chinese British Association (from hence SCBA), after

⁸⁴ ‘China Famine Fund Committee’, *Straits Times Weekly Issue*, 20 June 1889; ‘China Famine Relief Fund’, *Straits Times*, 23 Apr. 1907; ‘China Famine Relief Fund: First Meeting of the Committee’, *Eastern Daily Mail*, 25 Dec. 1906.

⁸⁵ ‘Tientsin Flood Relief Fund’, *Singapore Free Press*, 3 Jan. 1918; ‘Charity Football’, *Singapore Free Press*, 17 and 24 Dec. 1920.

⁸⁶ See Godley, *Mandarin Capitalists*, 76–7; Edwin Lee, *The British as Rulers: Governing Multicultural Singapore* (Singapore, 1991), 185–6; and Song, *One Hundred Years*, 281–3. The official memorandum on the ‘sentimental imperium in imperio’ was written by G. T. Hare, Assistant Protector of the Chinese, in 1896.

which they both attended Edward VII's coronation in 1902 as loyal 'King's Chinese', having the previous year established a *Baba* company of the Singapore Volunteer Infantry.⁸⁷

Liberal donations of imperial aid served as the vital financial lubricant in this anxiety-easing performance. Yet *Baba* leaders also expected a return from their British rulers for their political allegiance. That expectation, as expressed in the founding discussions of the SCBA, was for the Straits Chinese to enjoy the full protection of the British crown as its imperial subjects, especially in their dealings with China.⁸⁸ How far *Baba* went in pursuit of this aim was revealed in 1906, when a number of them became willing agents of a new form of humanitarian diplomacy. In that year, famine struck the north of Japan, then Britain's formal international ally. At once, colonial newspapers in the Straits, seeing an opportunity to foster a 'sympathetic spirit' between Britain and Japan that rested on more than 'the selfish ends of war or commerce alone', proposed a relief fund 'to assist the unfortunate northern peasants of the England of the East'. Because of their supposed admiration for the Japanese, Straits Chinese were identified as the key donors to this fund and proved very forthcoming. Notably, their generosity came just over a decade after the war of 1894–5, in which Japan had handed China a humiliating defeat.⁸⁹

Its occasional diplomatic function aside, the question that surrounds such aid-giving is why it received such a degree of British endorsement. Making Asians into munificent benefactors, and colonial governments, and sometimes entire European peoples, into needy supplicants, clearly upended the dominant racial hierarchies of Western imperialism. 'Protestant' was probably not alone when he objected to 'the race humiliation' of subscription lists that were forced around

⁸⁷ See Song, *One Hundred Years' History*, 249, 296, 313, 319, 333–4; and Frost, 'Transcultural Diaspora', 17–18.

⁸⁸ Frost, 'Emporium in Imperio', 61–2; and 'Transcultural Diaspora', 27–33.

⁸⁹ 'A Japanese Famine Fund', *Eastern Daily Mail*, 4 Jan. 1906; 'Pity the Starving Japanese', *ibid.*, 13 Jan. 1906; 'Japanese Famine Relief Fund', *Singapore Free Press*, 27 Mar. 1906; 'Straits Chinese Contribute to Japanese Relief Fund', *Eastern Daily Mail*, 27 Mar. 1906; 'Japanese Relief Fund', *ibid.*, 10 May 1906.

‘among the more uncomprehending Asiatics’, or when he questioned the right of the imperial state to expect ‘assistance in its embarrassments’.⁹⁰ Nevertheless, European officials and newspaper editors continued to encourage, and sometimes, in effect, to demand Asian contributions — more appreciative of the material and political benefits that were on offer. In so doing, they have left us with evidence of the way the colonial presence became absorbed into an indigenous system of reciprocal gift-giving, in which Britain’s Asian subjects made clear their expectations of their imperial masters.

VI. The wartime apogee of the overseas aid ‘craze’: reciprocity under strain

Ironically, it was at the very height of the Straits’ overseas aid ‘craze’ when this local system of reciprocal benevolence began to unravel. During World War One, Asians in the Straits Settlements became the leading contributors to relief funds for French, Belgian, Serbian and (as we have noted) Armenian civilians and refugees. They also organized assistance for Indian soldiers who fought in the conflict and for their dependents.⁹¹ However, their greatest generosity was reserved for their British fellow-imperial subjects. In Singapore, in October 1914, the Governor of the Straits Settlements launched the Prince of Wales’s War Relief Fund, two months after its establishment in Britain. Intended to provide ‘Home’ relief for the imperial mother country and ‘Local’ relief for Straits’ inhabitants, the fund drew an estimated \$270,000 in contributions within two months of

⁹⁰ ‘Charitable Funds and Private Means’.

⁹¹ See, all in the *Straits times*, ‘Belgium Relief Fund’, 12 Oct. 1914; ‘Serbian Relief Fund’, 13 Feb. 1915 and 1 Mar. 1915; ‘The French Relief Fund’, 26 Nov. 1915 and 17 Dec. 1914; ‘Imperial Indian War Relief Fund’, 5 Dec. 1914.

its announcement. Once again, most of this total, of which \$54,000 was reserved for local distribution, came from Chinese, Indian, Arab and Malay donors.⁹²

Ultimately, the fund that had been given the royal seal of approval became the most contentious in our entire period. Asian contributors of imperial aid had by 1914 become accustomed to mixed relief fund committees, on which their community leaders worked alongside European fundraisers. The Governor had promised the same for the Prince of Wales Fund, but its committee, when formed, lacked any Asian representatives.⁹³ Stories appeared in the *Straits Times* of distressed Tamil plantation workers who, faced by wartime unemployment and hunger, had been turned away by the committee and instructed to go and find jobs. Other applicants, it was alleged, were forced to fill in forms in English when they could neither read nor write the language, and then, if they somehow managed to complete their applications, told there was nothing for them. The paper lambasted the committee for neither having the ‘time nor the requisite knowledge to deal with the cases of native local distress’ and for a lack of transparency such that ‘nobody knows whether a cent of [the fund] has been spent’. Angry correspondents demanded the committee release more details of its activities and distribute more local relief, or face a ‘serious decrease of donations’.⁹⁴

The most strident criticism came from the fund’s ‘Indian and Chinese contributors’ in a protest letter to the government that was published in May 1915. Together, these donors declared:

⁹² ‘Local Relief Fund’, *Straits Times*, 16 Dec. 1914.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ In the *Straits Times* see, ‘Local War Distress and the Relief Fund’, 8 Dec. 1914; the letter from ‘Pastor’ in ‘Local Relief Fund’, 16 Dec. 1914; ‘War Relief’, 11 Dec. 1914; ‘Local Relief Fund’, 25 Nov. 1914, 16 and 21 Dec. 1914, and 25 May 1915.

We are loyal — intensely loyal ... But we are not going to tolerate the “bossing” manner in which the relief fund committee deals with Asiatics when appeal is made to them ... [A]ny government which is opposed to allowing the will of the people to prevail is no Government. Much more should the will of the people prevail here, as this is not the affair of the Government in a sense. The subscribers are mostly Asiatic and they ought to be consulted. We trust that His Excellency will display as much enthusiasm in carrying out our wish as he did in calling for subscriptions.⁹⁵

In response, the Prince of Wales War Relief Fund committee convened a meeting at which it opened its account books and, at the suggestion of Lim Boon Keng, agreed to extend its grant of local relief to Chinese businesses and families affected by the Singapore Mutiny of earlier that year. However, the meeting was poorly attended by Indian and Chinese subscribers, who, it appears, had already become disillusioned.⁹⁶ Contributions dwindled over the remainder of the war.⁹⁷ In Penang, meanwhile, where the Singapore Mutiny had caused relatively little disruption, local hostility to the fund climaxed with the symbolic dethronement of its royal figurehead and the dispersal of his representatives. Asian subscribers held a public meeting at which they voted to

⁹⁵ ‘Local Relief Fund’, *ibid.*, 29 May 1915.

⁹⁶ Notice in *Straits Times*, 6 July 1915, p. 6; ‘Prince of Wales Fund: Scheme for Local Relief’, *Singapore Free Press* 13 July 1915; Song, *One Hundred Years*, 510–11. At the meeting it was revealed that \$46,789 of the fund was still available for local relief, and that only \$1,770 had thus far been spent.

⁹⁷ In mid-December 1914, the fund was estimated to have reached \$270,000; see ‘Local Relief Fund’, *Straits Times*, 16 Dec. 1914. Its accounts show that in mid-June 1917 it totalled \$302,000, of which \$500 had been earmarked for the Red Cross and just over \$61,000 for ‘local relief’ (of which £9,500 had been distributed); see ‘Prince of Wales War Relief Fund’, *Singapore Free Press*, 13 June 1917.

replace the Prince of Wales Fund with a ‘General Relief Fund’, overseen by a new management committee that included Chinese, Indian and Malay representatives.⁹⁸

These Asian donors did not stop giving to the British Empire in her time of need. It was where they chose to do so that is illuminating. The most subscribed wartime appeal in the Straits Settlements commenced in October 1916, for the ‘Our Day’ fund in support of the British Red Cross and Saint John’s Ambulance. By the start of 1918, ‘nearly a million’ Straits dollars had been received from the inhabitants of the colony and the wider Malayan Peninsula. Undoubtedly, this was a consequence of the different way, when compared with the Prince of Wales Fund, that the ‘Our Day’ appeal was managed. What the local press called a ‘representative general committee’, one that included prominent Asian leaders, oversaw the distribution of collection boxes, the organization of community-based fundraising events, and the publication of subscription lists in various vernaculars. In addition, senior colonial officials held separate meetings with the colony’s Hindu, Muslim and Chinese communities, in order ‘to explain the purposes of this Fund as widely as possible to the Asiatic population’.⁹⁹

The contrasting fates of these two funds reveal that imperial aid-giving had emerged as a political act through which Asian elites challenged the colonial order which their generous donations were called on to support. This challenge became even more pronounced as the war continued and the government made further demands on the pockets of its Asian subjects — demands that now extended beyond their supposedly ‘voluntary’ contributions of wartime relief. In 1916, having introduced a war loan to the Straits Settlements, touting it as ‘an opportunity for all to help’, the government mooted the idea of a wartime income tax. The response of one meeting

⁹⁸ ‘Penang Prince of Wales’s Fund’, *Straits Times*, 8 Dec. 1915.

⁹⁹ Song, *One Hundred Years*, 537–8; ‘Our Day Result’ *Singapore Free Press*, 1 Jan. 1918. The total amount raised was \$969,294 which at the time converted into £111,341.

of ‘Asiatics’, the *Straits Times* noted, was the categorical declaration: ‘This is expert commercial opinion: it is our duty to resist taxation. The Colony has done enough’. The Chinese Chambers of Commerce in Penang and Singapore united in their opposition to the proposal, their fear of prying assessors being a primary concern. Endeavouring to explain their attitude, the prominent Straits Chinese Tan Chew Kim warned readers of the colonial press: ‘In a Colony like ours, where the Government is not run on the principle of the British Constitution, “No taxation without representation”, the advisability of foisting irritating laws upon the cosmopolitan public is highly questionable.’¹⁰⁰

Other Chinese elites supported the government’s war loan and then income tax measures, in the same loyal manner as they had its relief appeals. Lim Boon Keng, along with several hundred members of the SCBA, backed the Straits Settlements War Tax Bill of 1917 while serving as a member of the colony’s Legislative Council.¹⁰¹ However, such allegiance was hardly unconditional. In the same chamber where Lim pledged his support for wartime taxation, he stood up to demand greater non-European representation in the imperial government. If the British were fighting to free the peoples of Europe from tyranny, he reasoned, ‘surely the sons of the Empire, men brought up under the flag and trained in the great ideals and aspirations of Englishmen, have the right to expect that under the flag they will have liberty and that they will not be denied “the rights and privileges of free men”’.¹⁰²

For Lim, fundraising for the British Empire formed part of his bid to negotiate a new imperial citizenship. In this regard, he left the Straits Settlements for China in 1921 a disappointed

¹⁰⁰ See, in *Straits Times*, ‘F.M.S. War Loan’, 31 Mar 1916; ‘War Loans Trust’, 26 Oct. 1916; ‘Straits War Loan’, 1 Nov. 1916; ‘The War Tax’, 12 May 1917.

¹⁰¹ Song, *One Hundred Years*, 535–7.

¹⁰² Proceedings of the Straits Settlements Legislative Council 1917, B122; also quoted in Butcher, *British in Malaya*, 125.

man. Nevertheless, as a fund-raiser extraordinaire he had played a major part in the emergence of a more assertive local politics. Prior to World War One, international relief campaigns had enabled Asians in the Straits to contest imperial power-relations, and even articulate their notions of a social contract between themselves and the colonial authorities. During the conflict, aid appeals allowed Lim and his fellow Asian leaders to make a more explicit affirmation of the duties of the imperial state and of their own imperial rights. When European officials once again came to their Asian subjects cap in hand, what these subjects expected in return was now obvious. Asian elites in the Straits Settlements demanded representation — first, on the committees which managed their wartime largesse, and then, if the government's policy was to raise an official tax, within the colonial administration.

The wartime apogee of overseas aid-giving in the Straits might also be argued to mark a turning-point within the history of local humanitarianism itself. When Lim departed Singapore after the war, his mantle as the leading Chinese organizer of international relief-funds passed to the millionaire rubber baron Tan Kah Kee. As his memoirs reveal, Tan was more singularly patriotic in his overseas aid-raising activities than the Confucian-universalist Lim. Indeed, his interwar career as a relief fund manager illustrates the way heightened Chinese nationalist sentiments in the Straits reconfigured the business of overseas aid-giving entirely.¹⁰³

Following two wartime natural disaster appeals for Guangdong and Tianjin, the next major campaign Tan led was for the Shandong Relief Fund in 1928. In a few months, this appeal raised a staggering one and a third million Straits dollars. Yet the fund's intended beneficiaries were no longer the victims of environmental calamities, but rather Chinese who had suffered at the hands

¹⁰³ Tan, *Memoirs of Tan Kah-Kee*. Tan worked alongside Lim as chair of the Tientsin Flood Relief Fund of 1917–18. He also bankrolled the construction of the university in Amoy (Xiamen) where Lim left Singapore to work.

of the Japanese occupation of the province. Tan himself observed that local Chinese contributions for this cause had completely outstripped those for a parallel fund established to assist drought victims in northern China. The results of this latter appeal, he noted, had been ‘negligible’.¹⁰⁴

It became further apparent that overseas aid-giving was morphing into a highly-charged patriotic act, increasingly directed against human foes rather than the forces of Mother Nature, after Japan invaded China in 1937. Tan, in response, established the Singapore China Relief Fund, which then expanded across the *Nanyang* to become the most popularly-subscribed Chinese overseas aid effort yet. Before he launched it, Tan assured the British that it would not function to buy weapons or engage in trade boycotts. Its ostensible mission was to assist ‘wounded soldiers’ and ‘injured civilians’. Very quickly, however, and owing to what he referred to as the ‘lenient’ attitude of colonial officials, the fund emerged as the *Nanyang* conduit for a host of anti-Japanese activities: the organization of trade boycotts (which the British had expressly forbidden), the recruitment of drivers to supply Nationalist forces in China via the Burma Road, the public shaming of Japanese collaborators, the promotion of Chinese war bonds, the sourcing and supply of army medical supplies, and the funding of military hospitals.¹⁰⁵

Overseas aid-giving had become overseas war-making. Yet if we are looking for the origins of this transition then the earlier conflagration of our period presents an apt starting point. For as Asians in the Straits rushed to assist the Empire during World War One, and so (for some) clamour for their rights as imperial citizens, the line between relief for the conflict’s victims and aid for its perpetrators started to blur. Colonial accountants commenced their tallying-up of wartime donations across the Straits and Malaya for a Whitehall ‘blue book’ that was intended to document

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 59–60.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 60–66, 103–8, 142–6, 150.

the scale of the territory's loyalty. In the local press, where updated summaries of these accounts appeared, the list of 'War charities' included the Red Cross and various civilian and prisoner of war relief funds, as well as collections for the 'Malayan air squadron' and 'Kedah battle plane'.¹⁰⁶ Subsumed by the politics of imperial allegiance, humanitarianism in the Straits had begun to lose its humaneness. Long-distance philanthropy across the British Empire now included the gift of modern warplanes.

VII. Conclusion

In part, the Straits Settlements' overseas aid 'craze' sheds new light on themes in the history of Western imperialism with which many scholars have become familiar. In particular, it reveals an alternative public sphere which though linked to the world of print capitalism extended well beyond it. Within this sphere, an emergent class of ostensibly British-loyal Asian bourgeoisie mobilized national and religious communities, raised patriotic feelings, and united to claim rights for the colonized and challenge the political dominance of the colonizer.

Yet the deeper historical significance of this study lies not merely in what it tells us about the mounting nationalist contest of this era, but about the international context in which this contest commenced. The humanitarianism from the other side we have endeavoured to explore emerged during a period of intensified global interconnection which brought colonial subjects into heightened contact with 'Others'. Fundraising for international relief helped mediate these

¹⁰⁶ 'War Charities: Contributions from the Malay Peninsula', *Straits Times*, 16 Nov. 1916.

encounters, surmounting barriers of religion, language and ethnicity to generate new solidarities. The local formation and solidification of new national communities was certainly one significant outcome. Nonetheless, overseas aid-giving repeatedly drew these nascent national communities back into a cosmopolitan arena that encouraged their benevolence towards other nations and that emphasised their participation as equal members in a wider community of humanity. Until the end of World War One in the Straits Settlements (and perhaps elsewhere in Britain's Asian Empire) patriotism and universalism not only co-existed, they mutually sustained each other.