

ASIA'S MARITIME NETWORKS AND THE COLONIAL PUBLIC SPHERE, 1840-1920

MARK RAVINDER FROST¹
National University of Singapore

The idea that the sea unites rather than segregates territories and regions, through the linkages created by maritime networks, has been a feature of modern history writing since Fernand Braudel's magnificent *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World*. Braudel himself wrote that the sea was 'the great divider, the obstacle that had to be overcome'.² By the end of the nineteenth century, it must have seemed to many in Britain and its colonies in Asia that the sea was an obstacle that had been largely tamed by imperial endeavour and the new technologies it wielded. Steam navigation, underwater telegraphy and the Suez Canal functioned as the industrial arteries of the British Empire and the expanding world economy. Rather than the great 'divider', the sea had become the great unifier of British imperial possessions.

Such mastery of the ocean space was as crucial a feature in the development of the British Empire as were its successful conquests on land and studies devoted to the means by which this dominance was achieved now form an important element in our understanding of European expansion. At the same time, this line of research signals a shift away from discussions of the colonial encounter that are limited largely to the territorial boundaries of modern nation-states. The development of improved communications across the Atlantic Ocean from 1685 to 1750, for instance, is now seen to have been of fundamental significance in the emergence of the First British Empire. Ian Steele has argued that the Atlantic during this period came to constitute a 'functional, economic, political and social universe' in its own right. Increases

¹ Mark Ravinder Frost (arimrf@nus.edu.sg) is a Postdoctoral Fellow with the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. He is currently completing a manuscript for publication in 2005 entitled 'Asian Enlightenment: Colonial port-cities and the new empire of letters, 1870-c.1920'.

² F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II*, 2nd English ed., abridged (London: Harper Collins, 1992), p. 201.

in shipping, the diasporic movement of settlers, frequent and more extensive mail services and, finally, the establishment of newspapers, facilitated greater integration between North American settlements and Atlantic-facing European ports. In Steele's view, improved maritime communications were instrumental in creating an 'economic, political and social community bound together by the sea'.³

As for the Indian Ocean and China Seas, investigations of maritime linkages and their impact on trade, politics and cultural transmission have been extensive.⁴ However, perhaps because of the extent to which these linkages have been studied in the pre-colonial period – a period in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries which to several historians represents a 'golden age' of commerce and even 'enlightenment' – an assumption has crept into this historiography that such interaction was irreparably disrupted by European intrusion into the region. For example, Kenneth McPherson in his history of the Indian Ocean writes:

In addition to altering human patterns of movement across the Indian Ocean, colonial rule destroyed old processes of cultural interaction. New patterns of economic activity and colonial boundaries drawn to suit European rather than local interests disrupted ancient patterns of communication and exchange, ending various processes of cultural interaction ... Colonial rule had destroyed ancient economic and cultural relationships, replacing them with extra-regional economic, political and cultural alliances and dependencies.⁵

³ I. Steele, *The English Atlantic: An exploration of communications and community, 1685-1740* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 273-78.

⁴ Two of the classic works in this respect are Anthony Reid's *Southeast Asia in the age of commerce, 1450-1680: Volume 1, The lands beneath the winds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) and K.N. Chaudhuri's *Trade and civilization in the Indian ocean: an economic history from the rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

⁵ K. McPherson, *The Indian Ocean, a history of people and the sea* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1993) p. 200; see also pp. 240-41. Such sentiments are echoed by D. Headrick who argues that a nineteenth-century technological revolution 'shattered traditional trade, technology and political relationships and in their place laid the foundations for a new global civilization based on Western technology' (see Headrick, *Tools of Empire: Technology and European imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 177. Reid's seminal work on the seventeenth century 'crisis' in Southeast Asia, in which he argues that international commerce foundered and Southeast Asian states exhibited an increasing isolationism, has also contributed to the primacy of what might be called the 'disruption' thesis (although Reid attributes the decline of maritime trade and regional interaction to many factors other than European expansion alone). See, A. Reid, 'The seventeenth century crisis in Southeast Asia', *Modern Asian Studies*, 24, 4 (1990), 639-59; also A. Reid (ed.), *Southeast Asia in the early modern era: Trade, power and belief* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), and especially essays by Victor Leiberman and Dhiravat na Pombejra which challenge Reid's findings. For Reid's recent

This assumption is challenged by certain historians who have examined Asia's maritime linkages during the colonial epoch, especially during what has been termed the 'age of global empire'.⁶ Sugata Bose, in particular, prefers to view the period after 1750 as one that witnessed the re-ordering of oceanic networks, rather than the complete disruption of modes of exchange that had previously engendered and represented some kind of 'organic' unity. In his discussion of the Indian Ocean rim he notes that many indigenous systems of trade and communication that operated in this arena adjusted, resisted or emerged restructured in response to European expansion.⁷ One might concede that certain engines of maritime interconnection during this period, such as the opium trade from India to China and the international movement of migrant labour, were undoubtedly causes of enormous social and political trauma. However, contributing as they did to an even greater degree of regional interaction in the form of transoceanic communication, they can hardly be characterized as sources of isolationism.

The present discussion explores this thesis further and suggests that from 1840 to 1920 the reordering of maritime networks meant that cultural exchange between Asia's coastlines intensified rather than dissolved, even as colonial powers fixed borders and brought newly defined territories into 'extra-regional' alliances and dependencies. But it should be noted from the outset that writing about maritime networks and the cultural flows they facilitated presents certain problems. Defining and justifying the spatial limits of any enquiry remains difficult. It seems that not long after a discrete arena such as the Indian Ocean rim or the 'lands beneath the winds' is defined for study its segregated identity becomes compromised by the discovery of linkages that go beyond its littorals, integrating it into broader maritime systems. A further problem inherent in writing a meaningful history of peoples by the sea is identifying those unities of experience round which a study might be framed.⁸ Most studies take seaborne trade as their starting

response, see 'Global and local in Southeast Asian history', *International Journal of Asian Studies* 1, 1 (2004): 5-21.

⁶ See Sugata Bose, 'Space and time on the Indian Ocean rim: Theory and History' in *Modernity and culture from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean*, ed. C. A. Bayly and L. T. Fawaz (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2002), pp. 365-86 and his *Empire and culture on the Indian Ocean rim* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, forthcoming). See also, Mark Ravinder Frost, "'Wider opportunities": Religious revival, nationalist awakening and the global dimension in Colombo, 1870-1920', *Modern Asian Studies* 36, 4 (2002): 937-67.

⁷ Bose, 'Space and time', p. 372. I use the term 'region' loosely throughout this essay to refer to maritime Asia, roughly speaking a corridor linking the coasts of modern Pakistan and India with China and Japan through the Bay of Bengal and the China Seas. Bose, however, when he refers to the Indian Ocean rim describes it as an 'inter-regional arena', one that linked smaller 'regions' such as Africa, the Middle East, South Asia and Southeast Asia. The main focus of the present discussion, however, is to examine migrations of peoples, cultures and ideas across a region that today and in the past constituted 'Asia'. This focus requires shifting the arena further east and viewing the oceanic space as an open-ended corridor rather than a self-contained circle – a concept I have borrowed from Haydon Cherry.

⁸ For a discussion of historiographical approaches to ocean systems see Bose, 'Space and Time'.

point and some venture into discussions of the cultural diffusion that mercantile contact encouraged; but in the nineteenth century the dominant experience shared by many parts of Asia was that of European colonization. If the European presence overshadows the history of Asia's maritime networks during this period, do we end up merely 're-inventing the wheel', repeating much research that has already been undertaken into techno-imperialism and its political, cultural and economic impact on the region? On the other hand, even if we conveniently push Europeans to one side, and turn the spotlight onto Asians as regional actors, does such a history remain a sideshow to the main event (or, if you will, the 'meta-narrative') of the birth of the modern nation-state? Does too great an emphasis on seaborne commerce and cultural exchange across maritime Asia after 1750 neglect the deep trauma generated by colonization and turn the story of peoples by the sea into some historical justification for unimpeded global capitalism – a celebration of the joys of convergence?⁹

This essay does not claim to present answers to all these questions. But it does propose one solution to the dilemma of how to write a regional history of maritime networks during the colonial period that engages with narratives of state formation yet at the same time is more than a comparative study of techno-imperialism's impact on Asian nations-in-waiting. Echoing recent approaches to the formation of colonial knowledge, it takes for its starting point the view that the British Empire, as it spread out across the ocean space, functioned as a 'web' for information exchange that depended on oceanic communications. Especially after 1869, this web facilitated the emergence of a colonial public sphere that was 'transnational' (as it might be termed in modern parlance), one where non-Europeans played leading roles.¹⁰ The discursive habits developed by these literati were not bound to any particular national space under colonial domination, even if they impacted on several of them. In a period of Asian history that has been understood largely in terms of the emergence of modern nationalisms, this shift of focus away from a landlocked historiography opens up a means to explore debates, agitations and ultimately the formation of an identity and consciousness that transcended the modern nation-state and yet helped to shape it.¹¹

⁹ Bose answers these dilemmas, to a large extent, by calling for a greater focus on the role of non-Europeans in the movement of 'intermediary capital' across the Indian Ocean rim. The transoceanic migrations of educated personnel and labour connected (but in the latter case not always directly) to such flows in many places resulted in 'deep tensions' with 'local peasants and laborers'. Bose is surely right to argue that these tensions constitute 'one of the more important subplots' in the story of anti-colonial and post-colonial nationalisms across the Indian Ocean world, one that in the case of modern states such as Sri Lanka, Burma, Malaysia and Indonesia deserves further study; see 'Time and Space', pp. 378-80.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the British empire as a 'web' see Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and race: Aryanism and the British Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave 2002). On the idea of the public sphere see J. Habermas, *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An enquiry into a category of bourgeois society* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989).

¹¹ Both the flow of intermediary capital Bose speaks of and the flow of intermediary knowledge that this essay addresses were, in a sense, global phenomena in no way confined

Mapping the communications revolution

Contemporary European accounts, from the early sixteenth century and after, detail the highly commercialized nature of the coastal regions in India, of what is now modern-day Indonesia and of southern China. Indo-Arab fleets of large, lateen-rigged sailing vessels operated between the Gulf and western India, while *prahus* and *sampans* linked the Indo-Malay world and Burma. Junks that traded throughout the Nanyang (or Southern Ocean) connected the coastlines of China, modern-day Taiwan, Vietnam and Thailand, while from the late seventeenth century Indian shipbuilders along the Coromandel coast (around Mausilipatam) began mastering European techniques of ship-building which made possible lengthy passages across both the eastern and western Indian Ocean. In most places the trade was in luxuries: in precious metals and stones, silks, spices, ivory, horses and elephants to name but a few; but there is also some evidence of the shipment of bulk goods such as edible grains and pulses.¹²

As European expansion overland cemented the power of colonial states in the region, European merchant-houses began to exert a stronger influence over maritime commerce. The East India Company, by its conquest of Bengal in 1757, gained control over the Bengal textile market as well as control of Indian opium-poppy cultivation. Opium was exported to China at first through 'country traders' and then directly, the company using its profits from the trade to purchase Chinese tea and pay off its debts in Britain. Possession of both these markets reflected Britain's shifting status in Asia from that of a competing maritime power to master of the seas.

That this mastery was secured and a major portion of the future British Empire in Asia subjugated prior to the development and implementation of key technological advances in the following century should make us wary of too technologically determinist a reading of British expansion. Nonetheless, the intensification of steam-shipping from 1840, the development of submarine telegraphy in the 1860s, and the opening in 1869 of the Suez Canal so transformed maritime communications, and became so symbolic of the 'new imperialism' of the 1870s and onward, that this point is often less than clear. The 'tools of Empire', as these new technologies have been called, are easily understood as state-led advances – the fundamental means by which British strategic dominance in the region was made possible and achieved.¹³ A closer inspection reveals that such tools were as much instruments of global capitalism and a revolutionary new information order as they were means of imperial coercion. Often the vulnerability of the strategic networks to which

to an Indian Ocean or Asian context. However, this does not preclude analyzing their impact in regional terms.

¹² See Chaudhuri, *Trade and civilization*, pp. 139-50; Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the age of commerce, Volume two: Expansion and crisis* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1993), pp. 36-53; McPherson, *Indian Ocean*, pp. 143-57.

¹³ See Headrick, *Tools of empire*, and also his later volume, *The invisible weapon: Telecommunications and international politics, 1851-1943* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

ocean-crossing technologies gave rise to in the nineteenth century has been underestimated. At the same time, the desire and capacity of colonial authorities to control access to new means of communication and transportation (they were, after all, sources of revenue) has been exaggerated. In particular, an examination of the motives behind the development of new communications in the region reveals that commercial concerns often predominated over considerations of dominion and defence, with mercantile communities regularly providing the incentive for technological transfer ahead of officials in Whitehall.

In Calcutta, Bombay, Madras and Singapore the primary concern of European merchants who agitated for steam navigation in the first half of the nineteenth century was that it should secure them more frequent correspondence and better information, rather than enable a greater traffic in people and bulk goods. Mercantile communities in India wanted a regular postal system utilizing steamers that would challenge the near-monopoly held on mail services from India by the East India Company. In Singapore the main motive behind similar campaigns was to find a more reliable mail service linking the Straits Settlements than that offered by government steamers that had originally been brought to the Straits to suppress piracy. The cause of 'steam communication', as it was called, was promoted in the colonial press and through agents in London who lobbied Parliament with petitions and kept up a stream of letters to the metropolitan newspapers. In 1825, the Anglo-Indian community of Calcutta offered a prize to the first steamer to complete the voyage from Britain in seventy days or less; that same year Straits merchants circulated a subscription list around the Settlements to put on a steam vessel running from Penang via Singapore to Batavia.¹⁴ However, competition between colonial ports, especially over the proposed routes by which these mails should travel, bedevilled the initial stages of these campaigns.¹⁵ Public opinion was roused but often divided, and in 1834 a House of Commons Select Committee on Steam Navigation was convened to discuss the matter. A decision from a subsequent committee in 1837 gave precedence to the Red Sea or 'overland' route across the Isthmus of Suez, which soon prompted merchants in Madras and Singapore to agitate for the extension of this service to Ceylon, the Straits and China. In 1842 the Peninsular and Orient Steam Navigation Company saw off rival bids to secure the mail contract from Suez to Calcutta via Galle and Madras. In 1855, the same company took over the London to Bombay mail service, which had

¹⁴ G.S. Graham, 'By steam to India' in *History Today*, 14, 5 (May 1964): 301-12; C. B. Buckley *An anecdotal history of old times in Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur: Univ. of Malaya Press, 1965; originally published 1902) p. 183, 204. The Straits Settlement list failed to raise sufficient capital but prompted a lively 'editorial combat' between the *Malacca Observer* and the *Singapore Chronicle* over the commercial value of the new technology.

¹⁵ Bombay merchants and their representatives favoured a passage through the Red Sea, but this involved an overland crossing of the Isthmus of Suez. On the other side, the Calcutta community doubted the reliability of such a route, despite its directness, and feared that its rival might achieve an enhanced status as an entrepôt if such a route were introduced. Calcutta, therefore, pressured for an all-sea passage via the Cape of Good Hope.

previously employed Indian Navy steamers, and so placed Bombay within a month's distance of the imperial metropolis, integrating the major colonial ports of Ceylon and India into a single mail system.¹⁶

Before the advent of steam packets, letters to India travelling on an East Indiaman around Africa, took between five to eight months to reach their destination, and because of the monsoon there might often be a two-year wait for a reply. By the middle of the century, however, steamship transit-times between London and Calcutta via Suez had been reduced to between thirty and forty-five days.¹⁷ Further agitation from mercantile parties in 1857 prompted the P. & O. to provide a weekly mail service from Bombay to London. In 1870, the company was guaranteeing a transit-time of no more than twenty-six days between the two cities. By the turn of the century, it had reduced this by half, promising customers a transit-time of no more than thirteen and a half days.¹⁸

The India to China passage was similarly transformed. A sail-driven clipper bound for China with a cargo of opium and sailing against the northeast monsoon usually made a maximum of three voyages a year. Steamships, however, could make monthly runs from India to China with a transit-time usually of no more than twenty days; in 1852 one of the earliest steamers to make such a trip, the *Ganges*, sailed from Bombay with a reported 2,500 chests of opium as cargo.¹⁹ Improved maritime communications thus facilitated the expansion of the opium trade; but conversely, it was the opium trade that gave a powerful impetus to such developments, creating heightened interconnection within Asia and allowing for a greater movement of people and information between its coasts. Following the First Opium War, P. & O. again succeeded in securing the greater portion of the lucrative mail contracts between Indian and Chinese ports. In 1845, the company began a once-monthly service by paddle steamer between Bombay and Hong Kong (it became a fortnightly service in 1853) that ran via Galle, Penang and Singapore, with mails from London initially taking around forty-one days.²⁰

It should be noted that P. & O. did not hold an outright monopoly on mail services across the Bay of Bengal and China Seas and that in this respect consumer demand once again played its part. In Calcutta, Anglo-Indian dissatisfaction with the company's service to Burma resulted in the founding

¹⁶ Graham, 'By Steam'; Buckley, *Anecdotal history*, pp. 330-33; *The gazetteer of Bombay City and Island*, Vol. 1 (Bombay: Supdt. of Govt. Printing, 1909), pp. 380-81; see also Headrick, *Tools of empire*, pp. 129-41.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

¹⁸ *Gazetteer of Bombay*, vol. 1, pp. 380-1.

¹⁹ C. A. Trocki, *Opium and the global political economy* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 107.

²⁰ When in 1853 two P. & O. steamers began to make the voyage from London to China each month, the first went via Galle, Penang and Singapore with a transit time of no more than thirty-eight days and the second stopped at Calcutta, giving a transit time of forty-seven days. T.A. Melville, 'The Post Office and its history', *One hundred years of Singapore*, 2 vols., ed. W. Makepeace *et al* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991, first published 1920), chapter 14; C.A. Gibson Hall, 'Notes on the administration of the Singapore Post Office, 1819-1867' in *Journal of the Malay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 31 (1958): 145-62.

of the rival Calcutta and Burmah Steam Navigation Company which in 1857 succeeded in winning the Calcutta to Rangoon mail contract and began operating a fortnightly service. The Calcutta and Burmah became the British India Steam Navigation Company in 1862 and it was subsequently joined with the Asiatic Steam Navigation Company, so further connecting Burma with the Indian ports. By 1904 three direct mail steamers to Calcutta served Rangoon every week. In the same decade, daily British India steamers, alongside those of P. & O., linked Ceylon to India, China, and Australia and ships bound for Rangoon ran on to Penang and Singapore.²¹

The development of submarine telegraphy in Asia similarly depended on private-sector investment and demand. The importance of telegraphic communication to imperial defence was clear, following its role in the Indian Mutiny of 1857-58, during which the British authorities laid new cables between Calcutta and Madras and in other strategic areas, and it appears that this event reinforced the British government's desire for an imperial cable network. However, the security of overland telegraphy remained a problem throughout the century, since relay stations on foreign soil were often unreliable whilst continuing to represent a strategic risk, and overland lines were vulnerable to disruption by cable-cutting rebels.²² Submarine telegraphy offered a solution but its application in the region initially faltered. Though by 1860 most of India had been opened up by overland telegraph lines, an attempt (heavily financed by the British government) to connect Bombay with London in 1859 via the Red Sea failed, largely because of depredations by local marine-life, and the experiment was considered costly and futile.²³ The same year, an attempt by the Dutch Government to lay a cable from the Netherlands to Batavia via Singapore ended in similar disappointment.²⁴ The success of a new Atlantic cable in 1866, however, led to a revived interest in similar cables across maritime Asia from private financiers. After further research and investment, a submarine cable was laid from Bombay to Suez in 1869 and in 1870 Britain was connected to India through British stations at Alexandria, Suez, Malta and Gibraltar – a route reliant on just one foreign relay station near Lisbon and which ran overland only between Suez and Alexandria. The man behind these initiatives (including the Atlantic cable) was the wealthy Scottish textile manufacturer turned telecommunications pioneer, John Pender. By the end of 1872, Pender's Eastern Telegraph Company had extended submarine telegraphy across the Malacca Straits and established efficient contact with Penang, Singapore, Saigon and Hong Kong. Initially, Ceylon was connected to India by a telegraph service jointly the property of

²¹ *Imperial gazetteer of India, provincial series: Burma* (Calcutta: Supdt. of Govt Printing, 1908) vol. 1, p. 94; see also Headrick, *Tools of empire*, pp. 172-73.

²² K.C. Baglehole, *A century of service: a brief history of Cable and Wireless Ltd., 1868-1968* (London: Routledge; Cable and Wireless Ltd., 1969), pp. 1-10.

²³ 'In places teredo bore-worms ate through the insulation, and in other places the cable got so heavily encrusted with growths that it broke under their weight'. Headrick, *Tools of empire*, p. 159.

²⁴ Buckley, *Anecdotal history*, pp. 674-5.

the Indian and Ceylonese governments, but by 1920 the Eastern Telegraph Company had established submarine cables from Colombo to Suez, and from Colombo to Penang.²⁵

Although the Colonial Office remained wary of depending on this new service too heavily,²⁶ demand for it from both European and non-European mercantile parties was enormous, since it made possible prompt market enquiries, orders, settlements and led to faster commercial transactions in general. In India the number of telegraph offices and post offices that provided a telegraph service rose from 145 in 1861 to 1,939 in 1901. The *Gazeteer of Bombay City and Island* recorded:

In 1880 a reduction in the traffic rates and the introduction of a deferred class of telegram stimulated the commercial requirements of the city so greatly that local offices were opened for the benefit of native merchants in Masji and around Dhaidhori. The dealers in opium, grain, gold and precious stones made such good use of these new offices that similar relief was accorded to the merchants at the Cotton Green in Colaba, who had previously been obliged to send all messages from the Fort. A further measure for the public benefit was the combined office system, whereby in some Post Offices telegraph and postal work was conjointly performed.

By the end of the century over ten times the number of telegrams were being sent in and from India than had been sent in the decade after 1857 and on average it took some thirty-five minutes for a message to reach Bombay from London.²⁷

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 resulted in further reductions in the transit time of knowledge and information sent between colonial ports and the imperial metropolis. Compared with the Cape route, the distance in nautical miles between Bombay and London through Suez was reduced by forty-one per cent, and between Singapore and London by twenty-nine per cent.²⁸ When Whitehall eventually gave permission to use the Canal for mails, the P. & O. Company was able to cut the duration of their voyages between Bombay and London by ten days and consequently times to the Straits Settlements were also reduced. The fastest passage from Britain to Singapore, for example, came down from 116 days in 1867 to 42 days three years later in

²⁵ Baglehole, *Century of service*, pp. 1-10; *Ceylon Blue Book* 1920.

²⁶ See R. Kubicek, 'British expansion, Empire and technological change', *The Oxford History of the British Empire: The nineteenth century*, vol. 3, ed. A. Porter (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), chapter 12, pp. 260-61.

²⁷ Figures compiled from the *Imperial gazetteer of India: The Indian Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), vol. 4, p. 445; the average duration of transmission is cited from Headrick, *Invisible Weapon*, p. 33; the quotation comes from *Gazeteer of Bombay*, vol. 1, p. 386.

²⁸ 'The formation of a world economy' in *The Times atlas of world history*, 3rd ed. (London: B.C.A., 1992), pp. 256-57.

1870.²⁹ However, an important by-product of the West's intensifying centripetal hold on its colonial territories in Asia was the increased velocity of exchange that the Suez Canal stimulated intra-regionally. Other colonial powers did not yet maintain coaling stations and port facilities sufficient for long-haul voyages, so heightened demand for extra-regional mails and transportation from 1869 to 1914 meant a growth in steamer traffic that still depended on connections with major British ports. For example, direct long-haul voyages to and from the Dutch East Indies that bypassed Singapore did not become much in evidence until after 1920, when port facilities elsewhere improved and various commercial firms opened regional branch offices. Even after this, Singapore continued to maintain its status as a regional hub because of the demand from non-Europeans for access to its regional and international markets, much to the chagrin of the Dutch administration. As late as 1928 steamships of the Royal Packet Company (Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij) departed Pontianak in West Kalimantan for Singapore every four days but left for Batavia only once a fortnight, mainly because of the demand for this service from Borneo's Chinese traders and smallholder farmers.³⁰

By the time the Suez Canal was opened, however, the rise of rival European shipping companies had begun to challenge Britain's regional monopoly on the traffic of news and views. From the 1860s, the *Compagnie des Services des Messageries Imperiales* began operating a monthly mail service from Europe to Cochin China via Suez and Singapore, and from 1864 it ran a regular service between Singapore and Batavia. In 1886, the first German ship arrived in Singapore and from then on operated a monthly service to and from Europe.³¹ Early in the 1900s, the *Gazetteer of Bombay City* recorded that, in addition to *Messageries Imperiales*, the 'Austrian-Lloyd' and 'Rubattino' companies took mails to Europe, 'certain German companies' conveyed mails to East and South Africa, and Austrian-Lloyd, *Messageries Imperiales*, Rubattino and even 'Japanese steamers' all carried mails to the Straits, Australia and the 'Far East'.³² From the turn of the century Japan's commercial presence in Singapore was beginning to rival that of European countries. By 1914, Japanese shipping companies such as Osaka Shosen Kaisha and Nippon Yusen Kaisha had established branches in the city and were operating routes from Japan to Bombay via Singapore and Hong Kong. In particular, the frequency of international liners to Singapore turned

²⁹ G. Bogaars, 'The effect of the opening of the Suez Canal on the trade and development of Singapore', *Journal of the Malay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 28 (1955): 99-143. In 1880, mail had a transit-time between London and Singapore via Suez of roughly twenty eight days, which came down to twenty one and a half days on the outward journey by 1905; Melville, 'Post Office', p. 117.

³⁰ For a discussion of Singapore's importance as a regional centre see Mary Somers Heidhues, *Golddiggers, farmers and traders in the 'Chinese districts' of West Kalimantan, Indonesia* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Programme, Cornell Univ., 2003), pp. 78-9, 114, 141-61, 188.

³¹ Melville, 'Post Office', pp. 110-111.

³² *Gazetteer of Bombay City*, vol. 1, p. 379.

the port into an ever-expanding entrepôt situated 'at the centre of a radiating network of mail services'.³³ As early as 1872, the Post Master General of the Singapore Post Office could report that, in addition to contract steamers, 'the average number of *private* steamers bringing mail to, and taking mail from this office is fifty a month'.³⁴

The British Empire's development into a maritime chain of coaling and relay stations allowed for a circulation of knowledge and information that serviced other commercial interests than those that were directly its own. The more extended this web became, the more it relied for its defence on good lines of communication. However, new communications were tools that were themselves vulnerable and demanded an escalating application of resources and manpower for their protection. In the 1820s and 1830s Britain's commercial trading bases and the routes that connected them required that the navy police them and in places such as the Malacca Straits suppress 'piracy'.³⁵ A strong naval presence, in turn, necessitated the creation of a network of harbours and later of telegraphic relay stations across the Indian Ocean and China Seas. If the Empire were to maintain its maritime supremacy the supply of materials located in its colonial possessions required further exploitation and protection. In provinces such as Bengal and Borneo, Britain controlled some of the world's best deposits of steamer coal while in Malaya it controlled gutta-percha which was vital to submarine telegraphy and so necessitated a deeper involvement with the indigenous forest economy.³⁶ Indeed, though concern for security and defence had first prompted the development of submarine telegraphy following the Indian Mutiny, by the late 19th century we find that the resulting networks had become a matter of strategic anxiety in themselves. As late as 1894, for instance, the Admiralty succeeded in pressing for a new Singapore to Hong Kong line via Labuan on the ground that this would avoid the security risk posed by French Saigon.³⁷ Once the Suez Canal was opened, the maintenance of maritime power in Asia appeared to involve a self-perpetuating cycle of territorial commitment and further expansion. It was no wonder that by the end of the century some officials in Whitehall believed the imperial web to be already 'overextended'.³⁸

At the same time, communications were making a significant contribution to imperial solvency. British shipping, railways, postal services and telegraphy in Asia increasingly relied on non-Britons for business. Demand stimulated by an expansion of empire in Burma and Malaya helped

³³ S. Hiroshi and H. Hitoshi, *Japan and Singapore in the world economy: Japan's advance into Singapore, 1870-1965* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 16, 72-73.

³⁴ Bogaars, 'The effect of the opening of the Suez Canal'.

³⁵ See C.A. Trocki, *Prince of pirates: the temenggongs and the development of Johor and Singapore, 1784-1885* (Singapore: Singapore Univ. Press, 1979).

³⁶ Gutta percha was a natural plastic formed from the sap of a Malay tree, used from 1850 to insulate copper wire.

³⁷ P.M. Kennedy, 'Imperial cable communications and strategy, 1870-1914', *English Historical Review*, 86 (1971): 728-52.

³⁸ R. Hyam, *Britain's imperial century, 1815-1914, a study of empire and expansion*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1993), p. 257.

sustain exports in transport equipment in a period after 1880 when Britain's manufacturing sector was slowing down as the consequence of greater competition from industrial powers such as Germany and the U.S.A. In more recent imperial acquisitions, colonial authorities (and former colonial officials, in particular) acted as commercial agents securing contracts for British suppliers. At times, diplomatic pressure was exerted to see off foreign competitors, as was the case of the Anglo-Siam agreement of 1909, which included a provision for a loan for the construction of a railway linking Siam to the Malay States.³⁹ In order to compete with its younger industrial rivals, Britain's 'tools of Empire' had to be put up for sale on the global market.

Reshaping the maritime world: the role of non-Europeans

Taken together, developments in ocean-crossing technology transformed maritime Asia. Improvements in steamship design and the opening of the Suez Canal meant reduced freight costs and larger bulk consignments. Telegraphic communication allowed for the development of international banking operations and the rapid movement of finances. As the rich resources of the region were drawn into global markets, local economies increasingly became suppliers of commodities to the industrialized nations of Europe, the U.S.A and Japan. International demand encouraged the development of cotton cultivation in India; of coffee and then tea plantations in Ceylon; of rice and teak exports from Burma; and of the tin (and later rubber) markets of Malaya.

However, the increasing extra-regional dependency of local economies in Asia, though it locked them into international cycles of recession and growth, did not result in the severing of regional ties and the shattering of networks of commercial and cultural exchange. Throughout the nineteenth century, the success of the British Empire as a global capitalist system also depended on non-European demand, as we are beginning to appreciate, and on the capacity of non-Europeans to sustain maritime linkages within it. Merchant diasporas of Gujaratis, Parsees, Jews, Hadrami Arabs and Armenians, not to mention mercantile indigenes, continued to trade in ports linking India with the Persian Gulf and Red Sea, and in the opposite direction with the Malay Peninsula, the Indonesian Archipelago and coastal China. According to Rajat Kanta Ray, Indian and Chinese trade networks, stretching from Zanzibar to Singapore, represented 'a distinct international system that never lost its identity in the larger dominant world system of the West'.⁴⁰ Especially after

³⁹ D. Sardesai, *British trade and expansion in Southeast Asia, 1830-1914* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1977), pp. 17-18.

⁴⁰ R.K. Ray, 'Asian capital in the age of European expansion: The rise of the bazaar, 1800-1914', *Modern Asian Studies*, 29, 3 (1995), 449-554. For another discussion of 'indigenous' capitalism see *Asian merchants and businessmen in the Indian Ocean and China Sea*, ed. D. Lombard and J. Aubin (Oxford; New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000) especially articles by Hans-Dieter Evers, Claude Markovits and Claudine Salmon.

1870, western education helped create a new generation of itinerant Asian professionals: minor government officials, engineers, doctors, teachers, journalists and lawyers who increasingly sought out employment in colonial ports and towns at a great distance from home, over land and sea. Nearer the century's end, Muslim and Buddhist co-religionists began to re-discover global mission and to re-invigorate pan-Asian pilgrimage routes, using postal services to disseminate information about sacred sites and providing an important market for ocean-crossing liners. Even the most unlikely classes seemed capable of travelling across Asia's seaways on cut-price fares. In a remarkable session of the Burmese Legislative Council in 1914, Burmese representatives pushed for a resolution to prohibit the immigration to Rangoon of 'deformed, crippled and diseased persons and other professional mendicants' from India. Their British associates informed them that these new arrivals, not being 'foreigners' but 'fellow-Indian subjects', could not be expelled from the city since it would be impossible to legislate to 'exclude them from any single province of the Indian Empire'. The only solution was to use the Rangoon Police Act to deter them from coming and to 'obtain the cooperation of the shipping companies in excluding these undesirables.' The session was even more remarkable for being noticed and reported in detail by the editor of a Calcutta-Colombo Buddhist journal who assured his readers in India and Ceylon that 'we do not believe that this law applies to pilgrims or Buddhist priests.'⁴¹

Of course, the increased velocity of non-European migration across maritime Asia was most visibly evidenced by the thousands of labourers from India and southern China who left their homelands to man the region's plantations, mines and paddy fields overseas. These dispersions created a whole set of new social relationships in the region and, in particular, they dramatically altered the demography of those port-cities that acted as receiving depots, such as Rangoon, Colombo and Singapore. However, as Tim Harper has suggested, the function of indenture as a 'new system of slavery' applies more to the earlier rather than the later nineteenth century and to areas where the institutions of slavery were slow to disappear. For parts of Asia it would therefore be wrong to see 'migratory networks as orchestrated solely by imperial interests; in the age of indenture, the passage of those outside European systems of labour recruitment far exceeded those within and this created new pioneering communities on old models'.⁴² Moreover, remittance and the borrowing requirements of migrant traders, artisans, miners and peasants provided a spur to the accumulation and flow of Asian capital, generating a large and geographically dispersed financial sector that did not depend directly on Europeans.⁴³ Madras-city, for example, became the

⁴¹ See *Maha Bodhi Journal and the United Buddhist World*, vol. 22, no. 5 (May 1914): 128.

⁴² T.N. Harper, 'Empire, diaspora and the languages of globalism, 1850-1914', *Globalization in world history*, ed. A. G. Hopkins (London: Pimlico, 2002), p. 147. See also, H. Tinker, *A new system of slavery: the export of Indian labour overseas, 1830-1920*, 2nd ed. (London: Hansib, 1993).

⁴³ For this reason, our archival knowledge of it is often quite sketchy.

regional headquarters for Chettiar money-lending firms that, having established themselves in the South Indian hinterland, extended their operations in the late nineteenth century to Ceylon, Burma, and Malaya, following in the footsteps of and capitalizing on regional population movements.⁴⁴ Concurrently, both local-born and newly settled Chinese merchants in Singapore also exploited labour migration and remittance to generate their own extensive networks of capital. As Carl Trocki has shown, many Chinese merchant houses, insurance companies and banks based in Singapore and operating across the Nanyang owed their existence to revenue accumulated through the opium trade, a trade that capitalized on the despair of the Chinese 'coolie'. Although it continued to be the financial prop of the Singapore administration, by the 1870s 'opium had ceased to be a major concern of European trading houses in Asia' and by the end of the century profits from this trade largely passed into the hands of non-Europeans.⁴⁵ The trauma and exploitation associated with both opium and the regional translocation of skilled and unskilled labour were undoubtedly legacies of European expansion but, as with other sources of interconnection in the region, greater numbers of non-Europeans had come to oversee the expeditious flow of such traffic. Across the Bay of Bengal and China Seas, Asian capital sustained a system of local specialization and inter-dependence that, from the second half of the nineteenth century until the depression of the 1930s, linked agrarian zones, rice frontiers and the plantation and mining sectors.⁴⁶

It is also worth noting that some Asian merchants were quick to acquire the new ocean-crossing technologies that Europeans brought with them rather than acting merely as consignees to European liners. After Britain seized Chinese treaty-ports, several Straits Chinese firms based in the maritime hub of Singapore used new European-style vessels to trade with traditional out-ports in the Nanyang, centres such as Bangkok, Saigon and later Nagasaki and ports in the Dutch East Indies. In 1866, out of 178 'schooners, barques, brigs, junks and ships' registered under Act of Parliament as belonging to the port only fifty-eight were in the possession of Europeans, Indians and Malays; the local Chinese owned the remaining 120.⁴⁷ Chinese involvement in regional shipping

⁴⁴ Hans-Dieter Evers, 'Chettiar moneylenders in Southeast Asia' in *Asian merchants and businessmen in the Indian Ocean and China Sea*, ed. Lombard and Aubin, pp. 197-221; Rajeswary Ampalavanar Brown, *Capital and entrepreneurship in Southeast Asia* (London: Macmillan, 1994), pp. 173-88.

⁴⁵ Trocki, *Opium and the global*, pp. 109-111. For a discussion of remittance, see below.

⁴⁶ C. J. Baker, 'Economic re-organization and the slump in South and Southeast Asia' in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 23, 3 (July, 1981): 325-49.

⁴⁷ Voyages to ports in Siam and Vietnam were made by schooners such as the *Patah Salam* and *Kong Kek*, belonging to Ang Choon Seng of 'chop Chin Seng', or junks and clippers belonging to Ho Chong Lay, a merchant from Amoy who settled in the Straits in 1844. Over the latter half of the nineteenth century the firm of Wee Bin and co. became the greatest importer of goods from Bali and of all kinds of earthenware, later building up a fleet of over twenty vessels for the Dutch East Indies and China trade. Another Straits Chinese owned firm, Lim Kon Wan and Son, owned several schooners and later the steamers *Flintshire* and *Goh Kuan Sia*. Teo Hoo Lye, who eventually became a naturalized British subject, owned the

continued after the opening of Suez since the main European shipping lines concerned themselves mostly with long-haul transports. From 1907 to 1922 the Eastern Shipping Company, owned by the Straits Chinese Khaw family, dominated the coastal traffic between Malaya, Burma, Siam, Sumatra, Singapore and southern China. In the 1920s, it was bought out by its major competitor, the Straits Steamship Company, which itself had been founded in the 1880s through the joint efforts of Straits-born Chinese entrepreneurs and their European counterparts.⁴⁸

The communications revolution was far from universally imposed on maritime Asia and nor was its progress unimpeded. Where steamers did not operate, indigenous craft continued to function, often as servants of the new technology, distributing products for domestic inland markets upriver and assisting in the extraction of raw materials.⁴⁹ Sometimes the vitality of pre-existing transport networks was such that the application of new technologies made little headway. In 1859, for instance, locally-owned sailing vessels that provided passages between Tuticorin in South India and Jaffna and Colombo in Ceylon were so popular that an attempt to introduce a regular steamer route between these ports was a failure.⁵⁰ Elsewhere, the disruption caused by new maritime technology was offset by the capacity of existing transportation to reorganize itself and exploit new markets. During the first half of the nineteenth century, as several historians have noted, the Chinese junk trade in the Nanyang was challenged by the arrival of square-rigged sailing ships and then of steam-driven clippers which displaced junks from certain existing trade routes, such as that between Singapore and Siam.⁵¹ Nonetheless, what is often not mentioned is the fact that Chinese junks continued to be involved in transshipment across the China Seas in the later part of the century, despite the advent of direct steamer routes to and from Chinese treaty-ports. This survival was achieved largely because junk captains switched to human cargoes of migrant labour on their outward voyages and goods on the return leg.⁵² By the 1870s, the annual junk fleet that arrived in Singapore after November with the northeast monsoon was once again flourishing, this time

steamships *Aing Hong*, *Flevo*, *Batavier* and *Benuit*. For details see Song Ong Siang, *One hundred year's history of the Chinese in Singapore* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984, first published 1923), pp. 119, 80-81, 100-1, 114-15, 44, 67, 207, 350-52.

⁴⁸ Loh Wei Leng, 'A historical perspective in merchant shipping: From the colonial to the post-independence era, from the region to the nation state'. Paper given at the 8th Malaysia-Singapore Forum, October 19-20th, 2000. I am grateful to T.N. Harper for this reference.

⁴⁹ McPherson, *Indian Ocean*, pp. 233-34.

⁵⁰ Tinker, *New system*, p. 143.

⁵¹ See Trocki, *Opium and empire: Chinese society in colonial Singapore* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press), pp. 33-4; see also Jennifer Cushman, *Fields from the sea: Chinese junk trade with Siam during the late 18th and early 19th centuries* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Programme, Cornell Univ).

⁵² 'Notes on the Chinese in the Straits', *Journal of the Indian Archipelago*, vol. 9 (1855): 109-24, 113.

bringing a cargo of roughly 30,000 migrant labourers a year to work the tin mines and plantations of Malaya and beyond.⁵³

Singapore, in fact, provides us with an excellent example of the resilience of existing networks of social communication across maritime Asia and of their capacity to adjust themselves to imperial impositions. From the 1820s to the 1870s, the yearly junk season allowed Chinese migrants in the vicinity of Singapore, especially those working the gambier and pepper plantations of the island and of Johor, to send letters and remittances home.⁵⁴ Public letter-writers in the city were usually employed and money was often passed by means of a trusted relative or acquaintance from the same port or locality of Southern China. Many migrants, however, relied on the services of an agent, or '*Seu Pe Ke*'. The '*Seu Pe Ke*' normally took a ten per cent commission on remittances handed over by him in specie, or he invested the money in goods and paid over in China the exact equivalent of the sum that had been entrusted to him whatever profits or losses his investment made. With the yearly migration of Chinese labourers into Singapore and the Malay Peninsula increasing substantially in the second half of the century, demand for the services of these agents escalated and remittance became the lucrative monopoly of a few merchant syndicates. The situation prompted the colonial authorities to intervene and create what they promised would be a safer, more reliable system (one that, no doubt, also increased their public revenues). Following discussions with Whitehall, with the British Minister at Peking, and with Consuls in China and Hong Kong, the colonial government in Singapore opened (by 'British Imperial appointment') a Chinese Post Office in December 1876, and established 'a money letter business, at a fixed rate of charges'. It was made compulsory for all Chinese to go through this office which had its premises in the Chinese district on Market Street.

The response to such a development was initially hostile, particularly among Chinese letter-collectors who saw in it a conspiracy between the government and certain merchants to 'farm' out a Post Office monopoly. Inflammatory placards denouncing the new institution were posted around the city, one of which announced:

As for you who wish to establish this Post Office, may your wife and daughter, dressed in their finery, be placed at the door for men to buy and deride, and for the use of every lustful person. If not this then let them die at once ... If any honest virtuous man will cut off the heads of the Post Office Farmers, he will be rewarded with taels 100.

⁵³ This figure is taken from Mary Turnbull, *A history of Singapore, 1819-1975* (Kuala Lumpur, Oxford Univ. Press), p. 82.

⁵⁴ The use of Chinese junks to circulate letters between settlements in the Nanyang was a practice that dated back to the seventeenth century. See James Chin, 'Merchants and sojourners: The Hokkiens overseas, 1570-1760' (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Hong Kong, 1998), p. 342-3.

The opening of the Chinese Post Office was greeted by a riot and it was quickly forced to move out of Market Street to the General Post Office, where it was placed under the direct control of the Post Master General.

Gradually, though, confidence in the system grew, demand escalated and within a decade other Chinese dialect offices were added to those already established for Hokkiens and Teochews. But what is interesting is that throughout the following decades more than a semblance of the old Chinese letter-system remained in place. In 1891, forty-nine Chinese letter shops in Singapore, most of which maintained branches in China, were still doing business, employing the services of sixteen itinerant collectors. Three to four times a year a collector went around the colony gathering letters and monies. Making the letters into a bundle, he then used the government post to send the correspondence to himself in China and drew a bank draft in Singapore before travelling. Once in China, he picked up his package and cashed the bank draft before making his rounds, obtaining from each recipient an acknowledgement of payment that on his return to the colony he presented to the sender. By such means existing face-to-face practices of social communication were retained, but with appropriate use of the services now available.⁵⁵

The information economy

The shifts in commercial activity and migration outlined above, the application of new maritime technologies and the adjustment of existing systems of transport and regional communication, all contributed to a massive increase in the exchange of information across Asian waters. The extension of imperial postal services and developments in printing facilitated an escalating traffic in printed books, letters, pamphlets and (especially) periodicals. By the outbreak of World War One, the growth in this traffic had amounted to an information expansion which was perhaps as significant a feature of the period under discussion as was the colonial state's attempt to gather knowledge and information and control it. Much of this material was 'extra-regional', in the sense that it was destined for the imperial centre or originated from there; but, as with other forms of commerce, the volume of correspondence, literature and news being exchanged *between* colonial territories within Asia was equally significant. Despite the sheer diversity to be found in such a large region, improved maritime communications made possible the emergence of far-reaching scholarly, ethnic and religious networks – of ecumenes and 'communities of text', as one might call them, that spanned the ocean space.

The transformation of the information economy can be measured in detail through a study of postal returns. In 1854, the Indian Postal Act opened up access to mail services by introducing a uniform postal rate and postage stamps, instead of postage levied by distance, and reduced charges on

⁵⁵ This account of the Chinese Post Office in Singapore is drawn from Melville, 'Post Office', written in 1920. Much interesting work remains to be done on this subject and on social communication in the Nanyang in general.

newspapers and other printed material under a certain weight to one *anna*. Demand for these services was enormous. From 1861 to 1901, the number of post offices in India alone rose from 889 to 12,970.⁵⁶ Following the annexation of Upper Burma in 1886 (officially under the administration of the Indian government) the British authorities proved equally attentive in providing mail services for the country as a whole. In 1881, the number of post offices in Burma amounted to 30; by 1901, the figure was 298.⁵⁷ Between 1861 and 1901, the number of letters handled by Indian post offices rose from approximately 43 million at the beginning of this period to over 250 million at its end.⁵⁸ In Burma the number of letters handled by its post offices in 1881 was 1,778,411 which rose to 8,726,523 a year by 1891 and to over 12,500,000 letters a year a decade later.⁵⁹ Demand was largely met by the extension of railways through the sub-continent, especially in India in the 1880s and 1890s; but the success of the system in many parts of the *mofussil* was still dependent on the famous ‘mail runners’ and on a continuing use of informal systems. In rural areas, postmen fulfilled functions ancillary to delivering the mail: they sold stamps and quinine, and read news and correspondence aloud.⁶⁰

Between the urban centres of British territories in Asia an increase in volume of correspondence circulating through the imperial post was paralleled by an increase in the exchange of books, newspapers and pamphlets. In the case of the newspapers and pamphlets, this was largely attributable to further reductions in postal rates after 1870. All-India returns show that from 1880, when district post office figures were first incorporated, the number of newspapers handled annually increased by roughly ten million per decade, rising from 11,942,034 in the year ending 1881 to 32,091,400 by the year ending 1901.⁶¹ In the case of books, a flourishing Asian trade in bound volumes was facilitated after 1870 by the development of a parcel post system. A parcel post had been introduced in India in 1854 but it was not until 1885 that it began operating between India and Singapore, though a system had been introduced connecting India with Britain in 1875, with Hong Kong, China and Japan in 1878, and with Ceylon in 1881.⁶²

⁵⁶ *Gazetteer of India: Indian Empire*, vol. 3, p. 427.

⁵⁷ *Gazetteer of India: Provincial Series – Burma*, vol. 1, p. 95.

⁵⁸ *Gazetteer of India: Indian Empire*, vol. 3, pp. 427.

⁵⁹ *Gazetteer of India: Provincial Series – Burma*, vol. 1, p. 95.

⁶⁰ In addition, postmen were entrusted with carrying money orders. From 1880 (some years after an Act of 1866 instituted it in principle) the Imperial Post Office introduced a formal money-order system, parallel to that in Singapore. For the poorer classes of the region, and indentured labourers especially, this became one of the most reliable means of remitting money. See G.R. Clarke, ‘Post and telegraphic work in India’, *Asiatic Review*, New Series 23 (1927): 79-108.

⁶¹ *Gazetteer of India: Indian Empire*, vol. 3, p. 427. Although earlier statistics do not take account of district post office figures, in 1855 the number of newspapers handled by post offices situated in the major provincial capitals of India was only 1,516,644.

⁶² Melville, ‘Post Office’, p. 130.

Colonial port-cities situated on the region's main steamer routes became especially busy centres for this new international traffic. Most correspondence destined for Britain from India passed through the Central Bombay Post Office, which recorded that the number of letters sent in a year to Britain in the 1880s was over 2,500,000, climbing to over 3,500,000 by the turn of the century.⁶³ The Colombo Post Office saw the volume of letters it dealt with expand dramatically between 1900 and 1910: the total number of letters it handled rose from 14,787,000 in 1900 to 36,124,123 between January 1910 and June 1911.⁶⁴ During the 1880s, the number of letters received by the Singapore Post Office almost quadrupled: from around 450,000 a year at the beginning of the decade to over 1,500,000 at its end.⁶⁵ In 1886, 180,000 Chinese letters were dispatched by the city's 'Chinese Post Office', a figure that rose to 280,000 by 1889.⁶⁶ In many places these figures reflected closely the increased movement of migrant labour across the region.

The diffusion of news, views and ideologies between colonial territories in British Asia is highlighted by figures from the Colombo Post Office. *Ceylon Blue Books* from 1900 to 1920 show that between three and five times as many letters were sent to, and received from, other colonial territories as were directly exchanged between Ceylon and Britain. While the traffic with other colonies in books, newspapers and pamphlets did not increase by quite such proportions during these years, it was always equal to, if not greater than, the exchange of such material with Britain directly. Further afield in the Straits Settlements, the increase in regional book trading and exchange was dramatic. In 1876, the post offices of Penang, Melaka and Singapore received 21,241 books and dispatched 5,481. In 1891, they were receiving 137,500 books and dispatching 59,000.⁶⁷ As well as being a trading post for Arab, Bugis, Chinese, Malay, British and Indian merchants, Singapore had emerged as a thriving emporium for textual knowledge. From the 1880s, the city established itself as a printing centre for Islamic texts aimed at the Indo-Malay Muslim population, and also served as a distribution-point for Malay-Muslim publications printed in Bombay, Cairo and Mecca. It functioned too as a base for printing Christian missionary texts in Malay and other Southeast Asian languages and also as a centre for distribution of literature published in both Chinese and Romanized Malay that was aimed at Nanyang Chinese throughout Peninsular Malaya and the Dutch East Indies.⁶⁸

⁶³ *Gazetteer of Bombay*, vol. 1, p. 380.

⁶⁴ *Ceylon Blue Books* 1900, 1911.

⁶⁵ *Straits Settlements Blue Books* 1876 – 1891.

⁶⁶ Melville, 'Post Office', pp. 135-39.

⁶⁷ *Straits Settlements Blue Books* 1876 – 1891.

⁶⁸ See the introduction to I. Proudfoot, *Early Malay printed books: A provisional account of materials published in the Singapore-Malaysia area up to 1920, noting holdings in major public collections* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya, 1993); and Mark Ravinder Frost, 'Emporium in imperio: Nanyang networks and the Straits Chinese in Singapore, 1819-1914', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, forthcoming, 2005.

The empire of letters

A survey of the facts and figures associated with the information expansion reveals that knowledge in Asia, which had been ‘embedded’ in individuals and then institutionalized by indigenous and especially colonial states, was emerging as a global, market-driven commodity. Increasingly, this commodity arrived through the post in cheaper, smaller, more consumer-friendly packages. The Madras *Athenaeum* in 1878 claimed that: ‘The age may be called the age of newspapers ... For every person that read a newspaper twenty years ago, one hundred read them now’,⁶⁹ but the period after 1870 might equally be seen as the age of the periodical in general and of the inexpensive pamphlet. These were media far easier of access for non-European readers and contributors alike than bound books, which remained a vehicle for sacred scripture and a mode of self-expression for Europeans and a few privileged Asian authors (who often had to self-finance their published volumes). To an aspiring generation of western-educated, multilingual but as yet untested Asian literati, periodicals were the easiest way to emerge onto the scene and reach out to a like-minded public. In 1884, the Sinhalese editor of *The Orientalist* (a Ceylonese monthly) announced that his journal was intended for the numerous local scholars ‘who are both able and willing to produce works and essays on some of the multifarious topics connected with the Island, but who are not able or disposed to incur the expense, or undergo the trouble, of getting their works published’.⁷⁰ For regional book publishers and distributors periodicals had the special advantage that they moved through the imperial post cheaply; they served to get publicity to a select, geographically-dispersed audience who could afford bound volumes, by providing them with summaries and instalments of larger works as well as advertisements. Especially popular contributions or collections of articles in periodicals were often re-printed in pamphlet form.

Though journalism continued to be a risky business, in the region’s centres for commercial exchange it was one that grew rapidly in popularity. Newspapers and magazines in the vernacular languages would eventually claim the highest readerships, as had already happened in parts of India. But in several British entrepôts the growth in the number of English language periodicals was more immediately apparent and reflected the rise of Anglophone professional classes. The number of English papers in Calcutta, for example, rose from nine in 1831 to fifty-two in 1859 and eighty-six by 1900.⁷¹ Records from the Imperial Gazetteers show that in 1900, sixty periodicals in English were published in Madras, whilst by 1903, Rangoon had twenty-six newspapers, sixteen of which were in English, eight in Burmese, one in Tamil and one in Gujarati. Colombo in 1901 accommodated nine major newspapers in English, seven English-Sinhala or Sinhala organs and two

⁶⁹ *Athenaeum and Daily news*, 1 May 1878.

⁷⁰ *Orientalist*, vol. 1 pt. 1 (Jan. 1884).

⁷¹ D. Datta, ‘The Europeans of Calcutta 1858-1883’ (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Cambridge, 1996), pp. 82-84.

periodicals published in both English and Tamil.⁷² The number of presses operating in port-cities was also on the rise. In Bombay the number of presses increased from twenty-five in 1867 to 120 in 1909 and by the end of 1908 the city had at least sixteen factories where printing presses were manufactured.⁷³

Indirectly, the expansion of journalism during this period was attributable to certain technological advances. In 1865, one of Asia's first paper mills was established outside Calcutta and other mechanical innovations such as the steam-operated press and the use of wood-cuts, copper-plate and lithography followed subsequently. These latter changes meant that newspapers and magazines could be increasingly filled with advertisements, the income raised from this source making them less reliant on reader subscriptions alone for their survival.⁷⁴ The growth of advertising in English language periodicals particularly reveals the importance of western-educated Asian readerships. In addition to discovering what was happening in the wider world, these new readers had a growing desire, in pace with their growing incomes, to be kept abreast of what they could now purchase within it. Some European advertisers, for their part, saw themselves as 'empire-builders' engaged on a 'historic imperial mission' to bring unity to the globe through domestic consensus.⁷⁵ But once again Europeans were hardly alone in exploiting the new markets (or 'demographics' as they are now called in modern advertising) that Asian readerships represented. For example, advertisements in Indian and Ceylonese newspapers from this time reveal the continuing popularity of ayurvedic therapeutics. One long running advertisement placed in the *Ceylonese* newspaper by N.C. Sarkar of Calcutta peddled a more doubtful cure:

The wonderful researchers of the West have been blended with
 Psychic [sic] power of the East to produce the world renowned

“HINDU TALISMAN”
 OR
 JOGAMAYA RAKSHAY KABACHA

The redeemer of all dangers and difficulties – eradicator of all
 poisons and diseases – bestower of Happiness and victory – giver
 of external health and wealth.

⁷² *Gazetteer of India: Provincial series – Madras*, (Calcutta: Supdt. of Govt. Printing, 1908), p. 125; *Gazetteer of India: Provincial series – Burma*, vol. 1, pp. 141. *Ceylon Handbook and Directory*, 1901 (Colombo: Ferguson, 1901).

⁷³ *Gazetteer of Bombay*, vol. 3, p. 146 and vol. 1, p. 485. The total number of registered printing presses in India rose from 1,649 in 1890 to 2,193 in 1902; see *Gazetteer of India: The Indian Empire*, vol. 3, p. 206.

⁷⁴ The amount of column space taken up in the *Englishman*, for example, increased from 9-10% in 1858 to 50% in 1883. Datta, 'Europeans of Calcutta', p. 88.

⁷⁵ A. McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, gender and sexuality in the colonial context* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 211.

Week after week, Sarkar's full page notice went on to warn customers of imitations and to list the testimonials of satisfied users in London, Calcutta, Colombo, Benares and other parts of India and Ceylon. It finished with a flourish that perhaps heralds the birth of pan-Asian consumerism:

The most wonderful and world-renowned Talisman can safely be used by the Hindus, Mahommedans, Buddhas, Christians and all the other nations of the world and similar effects will be received by one and all irrespective of caste and creed.⁷⁶

Circulation figures for newspapers during this period are in general incomplete and frequently unreliable. It was usually a journal's responsibility to supply details of print-runs to the colonial authorities, if and when information was requested, which meant that in the face of competition for advertising such figures may well have been inflated. *The Imperial Gazetteer of India* estimated that in 1900 most Indian newspapers did not have a print-run greater than 2,000⁷⁷, while other sources indicate that the two major papers of the Straits Settlements reached only half that figure by the same year, despite the acknowledged boost to their circulation provided by western-educated Straits Chinese.⁷⁸ A clearer indication of a paper's growth in popularity and financial success, was its capacity to turn itself from a weekly or twice-weekly into a daily. In cosmopolitan Colombo, where rates of literacy were high, the *Ceylon Observer's* print-run increased only from around 1,000 in 1871 to between 1,500 and 2,000 by the end of the century, but in the same period the paper turned from being a tri-weekly to a daily. By 1900, it had been joined by three more dailies: *The Ceylon Independent*, *The Times of Ceylon* and *The Ceylon Examiner*. All three papers experienced an increase in circulation but it was the *Examiner*, a Eurasian-run organ that claimed to speak for all 'Ceylonese' whether Tamil, Sinhalese or Burgher, which flourished most dramatically. Published originally as a biweekly with a print-run of 400 in 1880, in 1910 it was estimated to circulate amongst 6,000 readers daily. In comparison, the Sinhalese daily *Sinhala Samaya* some five years later (on the eve of communal riots that it was said to have partly instigated) was estimated to have a maximum circulation of 3,000.⁷⁹

Although these figures may seem unremarkable, especially when they are compared to the millions of newspapers being handled by imperial post offices, contemporaries generally understood that a periodical's reported circulation rarely reflected its actual readership. In 1861, the *Hindoo Patriot*

⁷⁶ *Ceylonese*, 8 Apr. 1914.

⁷⁷ *Gazetteer of India: The Indian Empire*, vol. 3, p. 206. According to other colonial records, Madras-city in 1900 had two main dailies read by Europeans and Eurasians with a daily circulation of between 3,000 and 4,000 and was home to *The Hindu*, the first Indian-owned English-language daily, which had a circulation of 1,800. See *Gazetteer of India: Provincial series – Madras*, p. 125.

⁷⁸ *Straits Settlement Blue Books 1867-1901*.

⁷⁹ *Ceylon Blue Books 1871-1920*.

estimated that the English-reading public in India, including the non-official community and the native readers of the English press, numbered around 52,000. The combined subscription lists for that year only tallied to half that number, but it was thought that 'by means of clubs, reading societies and libraries everyone sees a paper'.⁸⁰ In 1875, *The Friend of India* in Calcutta, for example, listed reading clubs, book societies, church institutes, libraries, and legal and other firms as amongst its most regular subscribers.⁸¹

Reading and the discussion of periodicals in a social context was one of the central preoccupations of British life overseas, but non-Europeans found it an equally congenial pastime. In colonial port-cities the greater number of Asian readers began both to congregate and flex their intellectual muscle. Especially from 1870, western-educated Asian professionals established debating clubs and literary societies, which maintained reading rooms and kept up subscriptions to the region's major journals, so generating a new print-dominated political culture. In various places, the colonial authorities greeted the advent of such societies with downright suspicion. In Colombo, following the communal riots of 1915, the government believed mistakenly that the city's Buddhist societies had acted as hotbeds of sedition and rounded up and imprisoned their leading organizers, while in Singapore (at roughly the same time) Chinese reading rooms were in fact subverted for revolutionary ends. Libraries sprang up regularly in the region's major centres of commercial exchange. By 1900, Bombay had fifteen public libraries as well as other society libraries such as those belonging to the Royal Asiatic Society and to the Sassoon Mechanics' Institute. That same year, libraries were operating in Penang, Melaka and, of course, Singapore. By 1883, the Bernard Free Library had opened in Rangoon and by the turn of the century the Royal Asiatic Society Library and the Pettah Library were serving Colombo. In 1901, two of the oldest Bombay libraries, the Native General Library and the J.N. Petit Institute, had memberships of 1,600 and 2,600 respectively, while in 1891 the Raffles Library claimed to have 73,117 visitors each year and the Penang Library 20,000.⁸²

The reality is many of these institutions were far from 'public', because borrowing and reading rights for Asians were only available to government employees or on the payment of a subscription. Nevertheless, several libraries did allow a more open access to their periodical reading rooms and some opened up their prize collections. In Colombo, according to Bishop Reginald Coplestone, Europeans who entered the city's Oriental Library at the Museum would find 'yellow-robed students at work with pen and note-book on Pali manuscripts in Sinhalese or Burmese characters; they are students at the Buddhist college'. On the tables they might see copies of the *Buddhist*,

⁸⁰ *The Hindoo Patriot*, 5 Jun. 1861.

⁸¹ *The Friend of India*, 8 Jan. 1875.

⁸² *Gazetteer of Bombay City*, vol. 3, p. 160; *Straits Settlement Blue Book* 1891. In Bombay, the society libraries usually held more volumes than government funded libraries: the Bombay Branch of the Asiatic Society, for example, had 90,000, and the Sassoon Mechanics' Institute 14,000.

‘an English newspaper as modern in tone as the *Daily News*, full of reports of Buddhist schools, meetings, cremations and conversions, mingled here and there with a paragraph of abuse of Christianity’.⁸³ Elsewhere, from cities such as Bombay, ‘circulating libraries’ recycled and distributed periodicals across the country. One contemporary recorded that these libraries ‘took up between them one-third of the daily output at reduced rates’, delivering papers to, and collecting papers from, subscribers throughout the day, before ironing them and mailing them up-country.⁸⁴ The Bombay Circulating Library claimed in an advertisement of 1890 to have ‘upwards of three thousand subscribers’ and branches in Allahabad, Calcutta, Karachi, Lahore, Madras and Poona. It is not therefore surprising that an advertisement for the *Bombay Times of India* in the same year could insist that:

The circulation of this journal is almost universal amongst the English-speaking population of Western-India, Sind, the Deccan, Central Provinces and Berar. It is believed that its diffusion throughout India is more general than that of any other Newspaper.⁸⁵

From Bombay to Hong Kong ‘overland’ and weekly editions of English language newspapers circulated between regional ports.⁸⁶ In the days before copyright or syndication it was commonplace for articles and editorials from these papers that were deemed of particular relevance or interest to be reproduced in local dailies. On occasions, such dissemination led to intra-imperial editorial battles, as occurred between the *Rangoon Gazette* and the *Hong Kong Daily Press* in 1887 over the issue of Chinese disloyalty.⁸⁷ The amount and extent of this kind of exchange was determined by the prevalence of steamer routes as well as by traditional cultural affiliations. Thus, Colombo readers were kept up to date with Madras and especially Rangoon news, while the Singapore press relayed comment and events from mainland China via Hong Kong and from places closer to home such as Batavia. Out of Bombay,

⁸³ Reginald S. Coplestone, *Buddhism: primitive and present in Magadha and in Ceylon* (London: Longmans, Green and co., 1908), 2nd edition, p. 275.

⁸⁴ S. Natarajan in *A history of the press in India* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1962), p. 123.

⁸⁵ Both advertisements are from *Times of India Directory*, 1890 (Bombay: Times of India Press, 1890).

⁸⁶ Among these were the *Times of India Overland Summary and Overland Weekly* from Bombay, the *Overland Summary of the Indian Daily News, Bengal Hurkuru and India Gazette* from Calcutta, the *Madras Times Overland Edition*, the *Overland Ceylon Times and Commercial and Planting Chronicle* from Colombo, the *Weekly Rangoon Times and Overland Summary*, the *Straits Times Overland Journal* from Singapore and, from Hong Kong, the *Overland China Mail*.

⁸⁷ *Rangoon Gazette*, 21 Jan. 1887 (and after). The *Gazette* took issue with the claim of its counterpart in Hong Kong that Chinese disloyalty was caused by the ‘dread’ of British commercial competition, by pointing to the freedom to trade Chinese merchants enjoyed under British ‘law and order’ in Lower Burma. The *Rangoon Gazette* also ran news from Batavia’s *Dayblad* newspaper.

commercial news circulated throughout the region and the introduction of the telegraph heralded the establishment of more formal news agencies in the city. By 1859 Reuters had ties with Bombay and the *Bombay Times*, and by 1864 it had extended its connections to Calcutta newspapers. Soon all English-language papers in the region could carry terse headlines with news from around the world.

Asian 'enlightenment'

The value of these transoceanic press networks was clear to European editors when they sought to encourage further British intervention in the region from the 1870s. Newspapers in Singapore and Calcutta campaigning for the annexation of Upper Burma filled their editions with lurid and sensational accounts of the decadent court of King Thibaw (the 'modern Nero' as the *Indian Statesman* called him) which were intended to catch the eye of respectable London opinion.⁸⁸ In 1883, the Anglo-Indian press used its links with the colonial metropolis to pressure for the rejection of the Ilbert Bill, a measure that would have allowed Europeans to be tried in front of non-European judges. But non-European editors and publicists were equally well skilled in using these networks to capture the attention of audiences in the metropolis and to pressure Whitehall.⁸⁹ Moreover, Asian literati who operated from port-cities could now address their own region-wide publics of like-minded scholars, progressives or co-religionists, usually (though not always) through the use of English as their lingua franca. The circulation of print between readers who were scattered across and yet united by the seas created transoceanic communities of text, where periodicals, in particular, provided the means by which such ecumenes could be kept together and consolidated.

These ecumenes represent the cultural efflorescence of a colonial public sphere. For Asian literati, the exchange of letters, books, periodicals and pamphlets through the imperial post broadened the context of their public debates, facilitated transnational contact and imbued their readers with a more cosmopolitan outlook and greater sensitivity to international concerns. The Buddhist reformer and anti-colonial agitator Anagarika Dharmapala, for example, recalled that in Colombo at the age of sixteen he began reading the Bombay-Madras published *Theosophist*, a magazine that featured writings in English translation of the Arya Samajist, Swami Dayanand Sarasvati, alongside those of the Sinhalese-Buddhist monk and activist, Sumangala. Dharmapala admitted that once he had left school he spent most days in the Pettah Library opposite his father's place of business, 'in a worldly sense doing nothing – just reading and musing and studying the Theosophists, whom I regarded as the

⁸⁸ See editorials in the *Straits Observer*, *Friend of India* and *India Statesman* from 1875-1883.

⁸⁹ See C.A. Bayly, 'Representing Copts and Muhammadans: Empire, nation and community in Egypt and India, 1880-1914', *Modernity and culture*, ed. Bayly and Fawaz, pp. 158-203.

exponents of Buddhism to the Western world'.⁹⁰ The Theosophical Society of which Dharmapala spoke, and to which he devoted much of his early public career, was a global Hindu-Buddhist revivalist founded by the American Henry Steele Olcott and later presided over by the Irishwoman Annie Besant. Especially popular with the Indian middle classes, the Society established its international headquarters in Madras in 1882, where it published numerous journals and scholarly works and distributed them through local and regional lodges, bringing together a literary public from India, Burma, Ceylon and Java.

Dharmapala's Colombo became in his early adult life the centre for a pan-Asian Buddhist movement that depended heavily on print to revitalize lines of communication within the ancient Theravada world.⁹¹ In 1870, the city's Oriental Library undertook to collect and translate Pali works, a project that required the retrieval of manuscripts from temples not just in Ceylon but also in Burma and Siam. Significantly, the project was overseen by Sinhalese literati rather than by European orientalists and resulted in a heightened scholarly contact between Theravada countries.⁹² Initially encouraged by Theosophists, migrations of text had by the 1890s been consolidated by the emergence of an informal Theravada 'news syndicate' linking Ceylon, India and Burma. Periodicals in English, such as *The Buddhist*, *The Burman Buddhist*, *The Sun*, *Buddhism* and *The Maha Bodhi Journal and United World Buddhist*, provided readers in Colombo, Rangoon and beyond with international forums for discursive activity. Newspapers and journals were exchanged by mail packet, tracts and sermons were translated, articles reprinted, correspondence swapped and publications announced. Buddhist educational reform and temperance were key topics of public debate. Along with such discussions, advertisements in these periodicals promoted a developing regional trade in Theravada fine art wares, while news of British excavations of ancient sites in Ceylon, Burma and India stimulated pilgrimages which if not feasible for English-speaking Buddhists in the region to undertake they could nevertheless read about in pious travelogues. Several periodicals dedicated themselves to highlighting the dilapidated state of Buddhist sacred sites in India, most notably Bodh Gaya in Bengal. These journals became the platform for transnational campaigns of fundraising.⁹³

⁹⁰ *Return to righteousness: a collection of speeches, essays and letters of the Anagarika Dharmapala*, ed. Ananda Guruge (Colombo: Govt. Press, 1965), pp. 685-6. The *Theosophist* was later published from Madras when the Theosophical Society moved its international headquarters there.

⁹¹ Dharmapala himself may have been far from cosmopolitan in his outlook, once he broke with the Theosophists. Nevertheless, though he is credited with being one of Sri Lanka's anti-colonial heroes and a Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist, from an early age his energies were drawn out and away from the nation and directed towards the region and the globe.

⁹² See 'Preface', *A descriptive catalogue of Sanskrit, Pali and Sinhalese works*, vol. 1, ed. James D'Alwis (Colombo: Govt. Printer, 1870), pp. ix-xxiv.

⁹³ Copies of the Burmese journals *The Sun* and *Burmese Buddhist*, although referred to by other periodicals in Colombo as a source of regional news, seem no longer extant. The Rangoon quarterly *Buddhism*, established in 1903 as a mouthpiece for Maung Shwe Oh's 'International Buddhist Society' featured regular reports from Ceylon; see vol. 1, no. 1 (Sep. 1903); vol. 1, no. 2 (Dec. 1903); vol. 1 no 4 (Nov. 1904). On one occasion, the magazine

Some reading publics in the region, as well as being geographically dispersed, were strikingly cosmopolitan and transethnic. In this respect the Theosophical Publishing House was undoubtedly the region's prime mover, bringing together a readership of Buddhists, Hindus, Zoroastrians, Confucianists and at times even Muslims and Christians. *The Indo-Chinese Patriot*, a Penang monthly magazine, is another, more modest, example. It aimed to provide 'a lucid view of the antiquities, literature, philosophy and politics of India and China with a summary of important local and foreign news' but, more surprisingly, its subscription list indicates a readership of both Chinese and Indians in the Straits Settlements, Malaya, Ceylon and India.⁹⁴ Nor was access to such transoceanic ecumenes necessarily dependent on a mastery of English or confined to the borders marked out by European empires. In the late 1890s, for example, polyglot exchanges in print by self-styled 'progressive' Nanyang literati resulted in the spread of the Confucian revival and of overseas Chinese nationalist movements from a Singapore hub to other Straits Settlements and to the Dutch East Indies. The multilingual talents of Nanyang editors, who could often operate in a combination of Chinese, Malay, English or Dutch, meant that news and comment from China and the diaspora was translated and then circulated both among local-born readers who could only read Malay and among Chinese-proficient arrivals who had been educated on the mainland.⁹⁵

Regional exchanges of print also stimulated a growing culture of criticism directed at colonial regimes. In the 1890s, for example, Chinese correspondence from Singapore to the Malay press in Batavia publicized the educational and financial achievements of local-born Straits Chinese under a British government, attacked the Dutch for their failure to provide parallel opportunities, and exhorted Indies Chinese readers to demand immediate

complained that Burmese pilgrims to the Temple of the Tooth Relic in Kandy did not receive the same hospitality Sinhalese enjoyed in Rangoon at the entrance to the Shwe Dagon Pagoda; rather, they were hounded by so-called 'monks' and Sinhalese laymen for donations amounting to an entrance fee; see vol. 1., no. 3 (Mar. 1904). The magazine also featured adverts for the firms of A. Beato Ltd., 'pioneer exporters of Burmese Art Wares' with branches in Rangoon, Mandalay, Colombo and London, and of Messrs. Watts and Skeen, distributors of 'photographs, lantern slides, etchings and engravings' of pagodas and 'Kyaungs' (Buddhist monasteries). Another carrier of pan-Buddhist news to Burmese readers was the *Message of Theosophy*, which began in 1904 and ran at least until 1916. The *Maha Bodhi Journal*, started in 1891 by Anagarika Dharmapala and published from Calcutta initially and then Colombo (and right through the twentieth century) was the leading forum that publicized pan-Buddhist fundraising activities and related Buddhist news from around the region; see 'Our Twenty Year's Work', vol. 9 no. 1 (Jan 1911): 1-9. The *Buddhist* newspaper in Colombo also featured regular Buddhist news from Burma and India, reprinted lectures and sermons, provided news of pilgrimages and of pilgrimage sites. It was begun in 1889 by the Colombo Theosophical Society then became a literary supplement to the popular Sinhala newspaper *Sarasavi Sanderesa*, when it was briefly edited by Dharmapala. After an apparent hiatus in the early 1910s, it was re-established before the communal riots of 1915 as the organ of the Young Men's Buddhist Association and continued to provide regional news from India and Burma until at least 1920.

⁹⁴ *Indo-Chinese Patriot*, Aug. 1900; Jan. 1901.

⁹⁵ See Frost, 'Emporium in imperio'.

change.⁹⁶ Two decades later, the Buddhist press in Colombo compared the sympathetic attitude of colonial authorities in Burma towards the temperance campaign with the actions of their counterparts in their own country, highlighting the inconsistencies in imperial policy.⁹⁷ Meanwhile, news of the success of the Philippines Revolution in 1898 and of Russia's defeat by Japan in 1905 was picked up and spread by Asian editors throughout the region. Such events were in several cases depicted as the victories of a modern, enlightened Asia over a bankrupt western civilization and were used to incite readers to continue resisting colonial claims to superiority.⁹⁸

Ecumenical dreams of empire: federation in Asia

By this time, British contemporaries had begun to speak of their Empire as an international network of dialogue, information and stability, sustained by trade and the spirit of 'free enterprise', a platform for the diffusion of 'progress' and the civilizing attributes of 'Britishness' through what some termed the 'industrial arts of peace'.⁹⁹ In London, public interest from around the time that Suez was opened centred on the capacity of technological change to bring the Empire together as a unified political and economic entity and spawned societies and pressure groups dedicated to the cause of imperial federation. Though it must be conceded that such ideas had been around for some while, their rejuvenation in the capital was a direct consequence of the possibilities that new technology appeared to offer.¹⁰⁰ To Joseph Chamberlain, political federation of the Empire was 'within the limits of possibility and 'a practical object of aspiration'.¹⁰¹ Before the century's end the imperial metropolis witnessed several intra-imperial conferences and the founding of societies such as the Royal Colonial Institute in 1868, the Imperial Federation League in 1884 and the United Empire Trade League in 1891, each with its own monthly journal.¹⁰²

A study of these periodicals, which monitored and reprinted news from the colonial press, reveals a near-obsession with the progress of

⁹⁶ See for e.g., articles by Kalam Langit (Na Tian Piet) in *Pembrita Betawi*: 'Perkabaran dari Singapore', 'Dinjatakan apa Sebabnya maka ...', 'Dari Hal Sekola Inggris di Singapore', 'Baba Lie Teng-hei', *Pembrita*, 5, 11 & 19 Dec. 1893.

⁹⁷ *Buddhist*, 5 Jun. 1920.

⁹⁸ See, for e.g., articles by Indies Chinese in Java newspapers such as *Li Po*, 19 Nov. 1904, and *Ik Po*, 24 Jan. 1905 and 6 Jun. 1905.

⁹⁹ See H. Boyd-Carpenter, 'The influence of commerce on the development of colonial empire', *Journal of the Royal Colonial Institute*, 24 (Jun. 1893): 475-491, as well as several other articles from the same journal.

¹⁰⁰ R. Hyam, 'The idea of "Imperial Federation"', R. Hyam and G. Martin, *Reappraisals in British imperial history* (London: Macmillan, 1975), chapter 6.

¹⁰¹ R. Hyam, *Britain's imperial century*, p. 250.

¹⁰² These initiatives formed part of a wider movement for 'constructive imperialism', a concept discussed by E. H. H. Green in 'The political economy of empire, 1880-1914', *The Oxford history*, ed. A. Porter, vol. 3, chapter 16.

communications and their impact on trade and defence, and with possibilities for the expansion of 'British citizenship'.¹⁰³ But with the late arrival on the scene of other colonial powers, attention began to focus on protecting the Empire and bringing it into an even closer formal unity. The theme of 'unity' as opposed to 'disintegration' became paramount.¹⁰⁴ Arguments were put forward at the second Colonial Conference in Ottawa in 1893 for an 'All Red Route', a British cable system that would run throughout the Empire and, in particular, connect Canada with Australia. Agitation began for 'Imperial penny postage', the issue warranting an inter-colonial postage conference in Brisbane in 1893, and from 1898 its adoption was agreed. Various lobby groups sought to create duties and taxes that would favour colonial over 'foreign' products. Finally, the possible creation of an Imperial Council or Colonial Parliament was adumbrated, a parliament in which the colonies would have some form of self-representation. Supporters of federation often envisaged a 'Greater Britain' that stretched beyond the cliffs of Dover to encompass the four ends of the earth, an Empire that would extend notions of 'Britishness' and the moral and political qualities embodied in British citizenship, and thus be able to compete with the enormous resources in manpower and materials commanded by Russia, by the United States or even by Germany.

Contradictions and inconsistencies weakened the federation movement as a political force and despite its unifying rhetoric its proponents in Britain failed to settle on agreed political aims. Nevertheless, while the impact of the movement on Whitehall policy-makers may have been negligible, in British Asia (where some of the Empire's subjects had started to explore regional and intra-imperial possibilities) the idea of federation exerted a significant but little researched influence. Frequently, historians who have studied this period in search of the paternity of the modern Asian nation-state have dismissed Asian proponents of federation as moderate 'loyalists', irrelevant to the main narrative of the region's liberation from colonial rule. The global, usually religious, aspirations in which such loyalty was grounded, however, reveal a fascinating new side to the political culture of the day.

Support for a federated empire was particularly strong among Asian intelligentsia accustomed to the cosmopolitan milieu found in colonial port-cities. Leading politicians in Colombo, for instance, agitated for the creation of the Ceylon National Congress and the unity of Tamil and Sinhalese as one people in the expectation that when a federation was announced their transethnic nation would take its rightful place in the cosmopolitan super-

¹⁰³ See, *inter alia*, *The Imperial Argus* (Jun. 1901); C.E. Howard Vincent, 'Inter-British Trade and its influence on the unity of empire' in the *JRCI*, vol. 22 (Jun. 1891): 385-408; also articles in *United Empire*, *The Anglo-Colonial* and *The Imperial and Colonial Magazine Review*, all published in London.

¹⁰⁴ The arguments of Benjamin Kidd in his *Control of the Tropics* (London: 1898) are, for example, echoed in the Imperial Federation journals of the period.

state that would follow.¹⁰⁵ Publicists for the pan-Buddhist movement from Colombo and Rangoon invested the existing Empire and its future evolution with millenarian significance. Some argued that the spread of western-education across Asia and the ‘federalization of all Buddhist work’ would lead to the awakening of the ‘Sleeper of the Ages’. Others felt that the Empire represented a vehicle for the realization of their role as a ‘chosen people’ for the Buddhist ‘evangelical mission’ and exhorted their readers to remain loyal.¹⁰⁶ Lim Boon Keng, the ‘sage of Singapore’ as he has been called, spoke in similar terms during a series of public lectures aimed at securing Chinese support for the British war effort. To Lim, the Empire represented the embodiment of the Confucian principle of *da tong* or ‘great unity’; its present and future (federated) manifestations were evolutionary stages in mankind’s progress towards a Confucian millennium of harmony and peace.¹⁰⁷

In Madras, Annie Besant and Indian Theosophists involved in the war-time Home Rule Campaign used their formidable publicity machine at the Society’s headquarters in Madras to invest the ideal of *swaraj* with an internationalist meaning, redefining it to mean self-government within Empire. Besant’s 1915 scheme for Home Rule involved the creation of a system of representation that began at the bottom with village councils in rural areas and ward councils in towns, and extended right up to Provincial Parliaments and a National Parliament from which members of an Imperial Parliament would be drawn. In one nationalist leader’s opinion Besant’s reworking of the *swaraj* ideal reconciled Indian nationalism with the ‘overpowering sense of unity or universality’ which was an ‘original sense’ in Hindu ‘race-consciousness’ and distinguished it from independence movements that promoted ‘a gospel of isolation’.¹⁰⁸ Besant herself saw self-government within a federated empire in millenarian terms, as part of the ‘great plan’ of her Theosophist ‘Masters’ to bring about a New World Order. She publicly described Gandhi’s *satyagraha* (non-cooperation) campaign in 1920, which signalled the end of her career as a popular nationalist leader, as the ‘great disruptive movement’ engineered by the ‘Lords of Darkness’, at a time when an Indo-British political arrangement was imminent that would be ‘the model of the World Commonwealth of the future’.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ ‘President’s Address – Ceylon National Association, April 2nd 1917’, *The year book of the Ceylon Reform League, 1917-1918* (Colombo, 1918), pp. 28-29.

¹⁰⁶ ‘The Awakening’, *Buddhism*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Sep. 1903): 140-44; ‘March 2nd, 1815’, *MBJ*, vol. 23, no. 3 (Mar. 1915): 74-75

¹⁰⁷ Lim Boon Keng, *The Great War from a Confucian point of view and kindred topics, being lectures delivered during 1914-17* (Singapore: Straits Albion Press, 1917).

¹⁰⁸ The words were those of the nationalist leader Bipin Chandra Pal, writing in the Madras newspaper *The Commonweal*, 28 Apr. 1916.

¹⁰⁹ *Theosophist*, vol. 42, no. 3 (Dec. 1920): 209.

Conclusion

The enormous economic repercussions of Asia's maritime transformation have only been outlined in this essay. Debates as to the extent to which international capital 'de-industrialized' local economies of the region and brought them into a global economic system where they were subservient to the requirements of economies in the industrializing West and (as is becoming increasingly apparent) in Japan, have been entered upon in detail elsewhere.¹¹⁰ The main aim of this discussion has been to address some of the cultural and political consequences of this transformation and to understand the extent to which changes in Asia's maritime networks intensified rather than diminished regional interaction across the ocean space.

Historians, concentrating mainly on the pre-European period, have made much of the disruption of maritime linkages within Asia during the colonial epoch and of the destruction of 'traditional mechanisms of cultural diffusion and interaction.' It is certainly true that several forms of maritime transport and communication were superseded in the nineteenth century by the technologies deployed by European powers. Yet it is easy to underestimate the resilience of indigenous systems as well as the capacity of non-European peoples to adjust to the new technologies and to appropriate them. To argue that cultural interaction across the Indian Ocean and China Seas suffered as a consequence of the decline of traditional maritime networks and the communities of sea-faring merchants who had acted as 'intermediaries' between the region's various peoples is to ignore the continuing vitality of intra-regional commerce, migration and social communication. To assume that the transformation of Asia's maritime networks turned colonial powers into the sole intermediaries and arbiters of intra-regional interaction is to overestimate grossly their ability (and their desire) to control and restrict non-European access to these networks. To assume that they were, likewise, the sole beneficiaries of these networks in economic, social and cultural terms is also misleading. By the end of this period, it became clear that it was increasingly Asians who were utilizing maritime networks to pursue their own commercial, literary and political projects.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ For a good survey of this debate see B.R. Tomlinson, *The economy of modern India, 1860-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993).

¹¹¹ McPherson has argued: 'More significantly, the creation of the centralized colonial state undermined the ancient function of foreign merchant communities as possible intermediaries between different cultures. The new type of state interrupted traditional processes of cultural and religious interaction with its intervention in indigenous social and economic life. For its own purposes, the colonial state now became the intermediary between cultures, as the foreign rulers defined and moulded colonial societies to suit their own economic, political and cultural objectives ... In all European communities indigenous groups were influenced by the cultural mores of their foreign rulers, leading to a disruption of ancient cultural interaction within the Indian Ocean region. In this process, the linkage between merchants, trade and cultural interaction was broken, to be replaced by a linkage between colonizers and the colonized', *Indian Ocean*, pp. 241-2.

One of the most significant outcomes of the re-ordering of Asia's maritime networks through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the emergence of those port-cities that were positioned directly on its main shipping routes and telegraph lines. Regional commerce and transportation made British ports such as Calcutta, Madras, Colombo, Rangoon and Singapore the successors to the great entrepôts of Goa, Galle and Malacca. While international capital, labour migration and other features of this earlier period of globalization may have affected them to different degrees and in different ways, all these cities developed into thriving cosmopolitan centres for cultural exchange and intellectual debate.¹¹² More often than not, it was non-European, multilingual literati (among them luminaries such as Ananda Coomaraswamy, Okakura Kakuzo [Tenshin] and Rabindranath Tagore) who orchestrated this activity. Increasingly, they found that their cosmopolitan habits of intellectual sociability could be extended across the ocean space and that they themselves represented the region's new cultural intermediaries.

A further study of the colonial public sphere would reveal the impact of transoceanic discursive practices on the formulation of the very idea of 'Asia' itself. While this is a history still largely unwritten, it seems fair to say for now that 'Asia' as a cultural as well as geographic entity was not merely a European orientalist fantasy, impressed on and swallowed wholesale by the region's intellectually colonized intelligentsia. Rather, it was an entity that the region's inhabitants, utilizing modern maritime networks and methods of social communication, themselves began to explore, to imagine and to define.

¹¹² This is not to say that these environments were not also centres for communalism. The tension between bourgeois cosmopolitanism and sectarian feeling in colonial port-cities needs further discussion, particularly in light of the fact that the periodic emergence of one did not necessarily mean the disappearance of the other; see Frost, "Wider opportunities".