



Approaching Late Colonial Social Work

ESWRA Seminar, 4 October 2023

Ian Shaw

Outline and Directions

- I worked at the National University of Singapore for much of the time between 2017 and 2021. Through the National Archives, I undertook an archival study of the development of social welfare in Singapore as a British colony, in the late colonial period from the end of Japanese occupation in 1945 through to final independence in 1965. From this:
- How has social work writing dealt with the colonial? (approx 15 minutes)
- I will sketch a case study of *late colonial, welfare-engaged women in Singapore*, in a world of imperial privilege, welfare exceptionalism and late colonial fragmentation. (approx. 30 minutes)
- Break (10 minutes)
- I will depict *late colonial social work practice*, taking child adoption in the ethnically diverse community of Singapore as the anchor for this. By some measures Singapore is the most diverse country in the world (approx. 30 minutes).
- Closing inferences and implications (5-10 minutes)
- Each part will have Q&A and/or exercise tasks.
- I hope to provoke because I take a position that may be thought controversial or even untenable, in that I seek to avoid the assumption that all social workers need to know about colonialism is its horrors (this is a quotation adapted from Cooper, 2005).



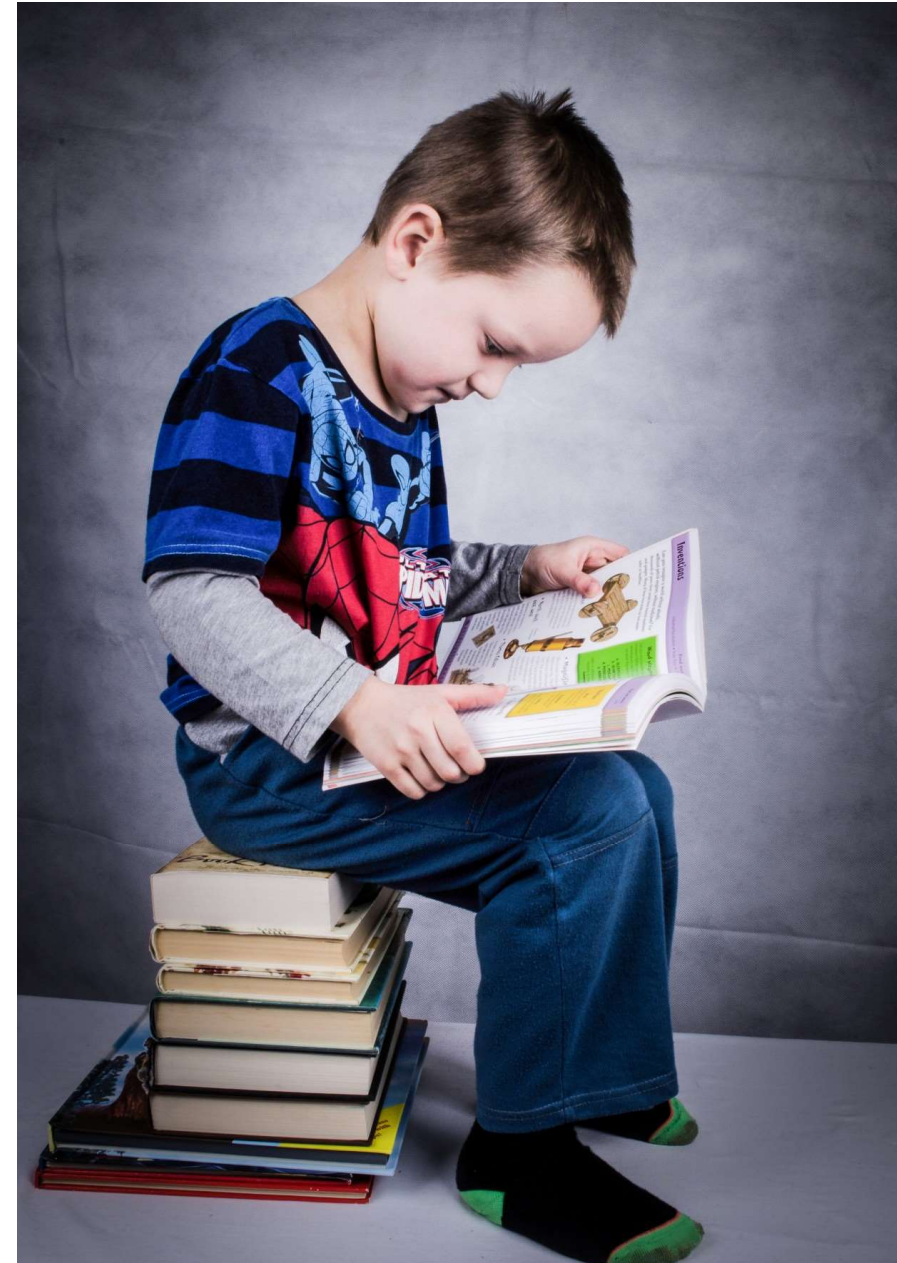
The Colonial in Social Work Writing: my general approach

- Social work writers have, almost universally, been deeply sceptical of and critical towards, the character and impact of colonial rule.
- In many cases this has extended to the part played by social welfare and social work in colonial societies.
- The criticism sometimes has been carried forward in ways that detect a continuation of colonial power following the independence of former colonies.
- I want to assess this position for its tendency to treat colonialism in a homogenous way (when it is and was deeply varied), and for a general failure to bring a serious commitment to historical inquiry.
- I reject essentialism – the idea that there is an essence to what being colonised means independent of what people actually did in colonies. ‘Colonial power, like any other, was an object of struggle and depended on the material, social, and cultural resources of those involved’ (Cooper)



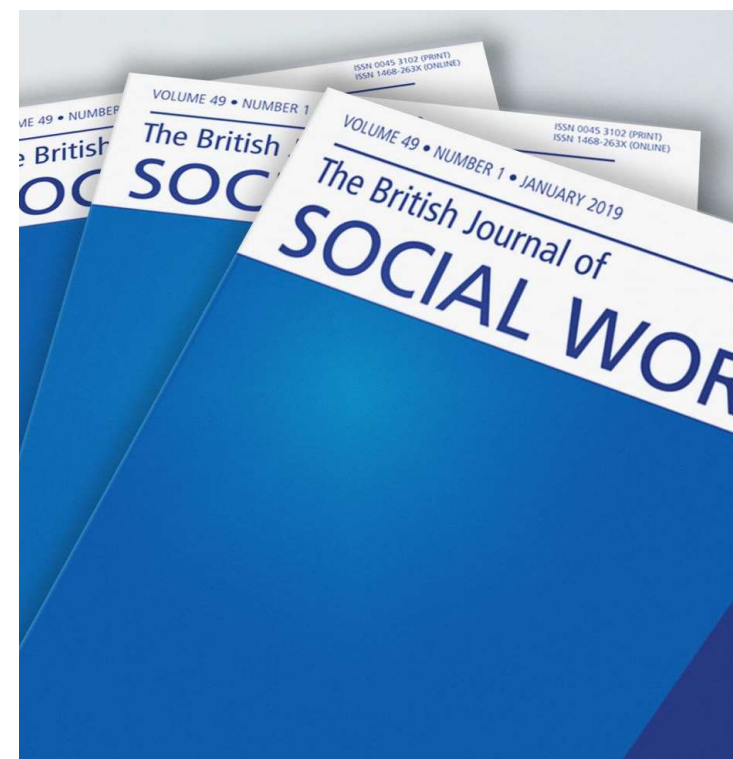
Sources for the Seminar

- Shaw, I. 2023. 'Approaching the colonial.' *British Journal of Social Work*. 53 (1): 637-655
- Shaw, I. 2023. 'Late colonial women in a welfare world.' *Asia Pacific Journal of Social Work and Development*. 33 (2): 114-126
- Shaw, I. 2023. Late colonial social work practice. *Qualitative Social Work*, 22(4), 735–752



'Colonial' in Social Work Writing

- *The British Journal of Social Work* (mainly)
- 'Colonialism is imperialism...it encourages the imposition of one's will over others...making them feel less deserving of freedom, liberty, equality or any of the qualities that makes one human. Just like terrorism, it robbed the colonized of their identity, dignity and sense of humanness. Who in their rightful minds thus can look colonialism in the eye and claim it had its positives?' (<https://www.quora.com/On-the-whole-was-colonialism-a-good-or-bad-thing>).
- i 'Colonial'
- Comparatively little direct social work focus on colonial histories. Choate is a rare exception. He discusses the welfare and education treatment of indigenous peoples in Canada, where '(t)he main goals were not education or care, but shifting children from the 'savage' way of life to the Eurocentric one' (Choate, 2019).
- Anderson's describes colonial medicine in Malaya in that same period as 'a "cultural system" designed to protect the health of the colonizers, ensure a productive "native" labor force, and secure political and social control.' It 'did more to legitimize state authority than to prevent or cure consequent disease'



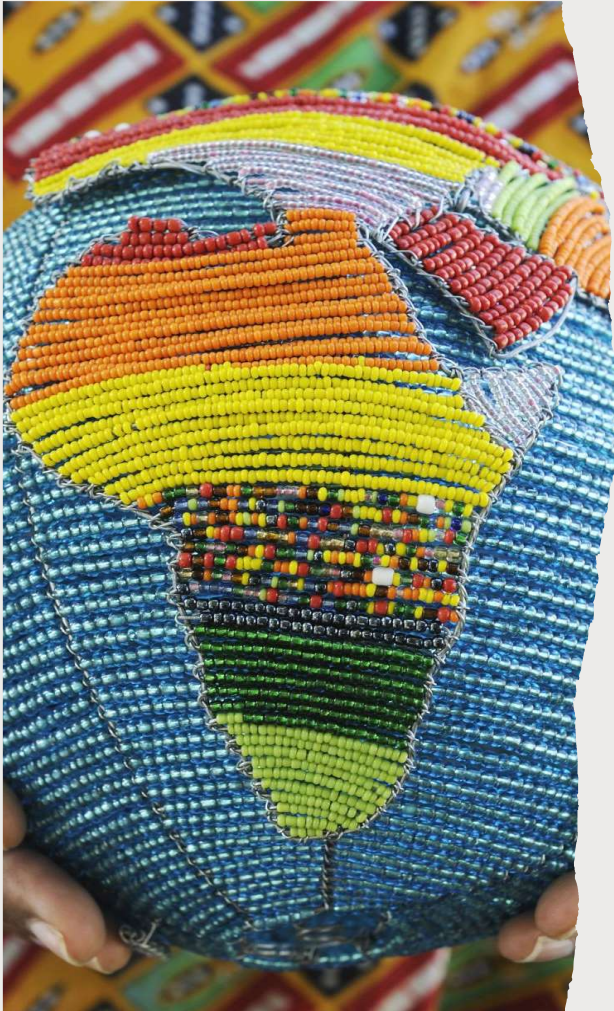
'Colonial' in Social Work Writing



- ii Pre-colonial
- A rarity in social work writing. It acts as a form of historical romanticism, as in the contrast drawn with pre-colonial histories, for example, when Burnette and Renner refer to work 'in direct contrast to the respect and status afforded to Indigenous women prior to colonial historical oppression'
- iii 'Late colonial'
- 'Late colonial' appears nowhere in the titles of the roughly 3500 articles carried by the journal. Perhaps because social work tends to treat the colonial in a homogenous way. Why might this be?
- iv 'Post-colonial'
- Here social work writing takes off, but in several different ways:
 1. The most straightforward – if least frequent - use of the term has been as a way of marking temporal or cultural *discontinuities* between the colonial and post-colonial eras, for example, through arguments regarding 'Asian' as opposed to 'Western' values, or through cultural assumptions regarding the individual and society

‘Post-Colonial’ in Social Work Writing

- ‘The principle of client self-determination is unsuitable for social casework practice in Zambia and Africa as a whole for many reasons. In the first place, African society is characterized by the prevalence of the idea of communalism or community. The individual recedes before the group. The whole of existence from birth to death is organically embodied in a series of associations, and life appears to have its full value only in these close ties’ (Silavwe, 1995)
- Chatterjee, (2015) on social work ‘skills’, suggests that ‘this deceptively simple term, with its implicit measurability, lies at the heart of Western culture’s attempts to determine what is valuable work’



'Post-Colonial' in Social Work Writing

- *2 Western oppression as represented through continued colonialism* - 'Post colonialism' as referring to ways in which imperial powers continue to exercise oppressive influence on post-independent states (e.g. through international agencies, including NGOs):
- 'There can be no doubting that most if not all the people working for NGOs and for the UN in East Timor are doing so from the best of motives, and believe that they are working in the best interests of the East Timorese. However social workers in particular should be alarmed by any claim to be working "in the best interests" of somebody else. This has in the past been the justification for the most oppressive and disempowering practices, and for the denial of the basic rights of dependent populations. Working "in the best interest" of somebody else implies that one knows better than they do what they need, and is at the basis of colonialist practice.' Ife (2007)
- Pyles also warns how 'disaster interventions may perpetuate the values and practices of neo-liberalism, colonialism and oppression' (Pyles, 2017)
- '(W)ith the intensification of globalization and with neo-liberal capitalist expansion, the world itself has shifted to a 'post-colonial' condition ..., with contemporary post-colonialisms taking place within continued imperialist relations' (Sewpaul, 2006: 419), through 'dominant discourses that have their genesis in Euro-American imperial rule' (Sidhu, 2018)



'Post-Colonial' in Social Work Writing

3. Also argued through ways in which colonial regimes are retained or introduced by post-independence nations.
- Silavwe points to this paradox, quoting Khinduka, how 'In Africa today and the rest of the developing world, it has unfortunately become a common practice that "when the advanced nations are in the process of abandoning a tool or amending a technique that does not work, the Third World nations, trying desperately to catch up with the reference society, embrace it and make it their own"' (Silavwe , 1995: 74).
 - Ho Chi Tim and Wee (*image*) remarked of Singapore that:
 - 'The current landscape of social services and related institutions...has roots in institutions established during the late colonial period', for example the Social Welfare Department, the NUS social work programme ... and what now is the Singapore Council of Social Service' (Ho Chi Tim and Wee, 2016: 12).
 - They also observe of Singapore how 21st century 'earnest discussions...also mirror social security concerns that existed before 1965'
 - Cooper says, 'We seem to be living modernization twice, the first time as earnestness, the second time as irony.'



An open book with a heart shape cut out of the center of the pages. The pages are yellowed and the book is bound in a dark red cover. The background is dark and out of focus.

Do you have any responses to this sketch of the literature?

E.g. why do we see little on pre-colonial, colonial and late colonial histories and almost everything being about the post-colonial?

Late Colonial Welfare Engaged Women

- *First a sketch of Singapore*
- The island that later was recognised as Singapore existed as a significant trading settlement from the 14th century. In 1819, the British statesman Stamford Raffles negotiated a treaty with the regional ruler, which allowed the British to locate a trading port on the island, ultimately leading to the establishment of the crown colony of Singapore in 1867.



Singapore

- The island was occupied by the Japanese during the Second World War from 1942 to 1945, during which many were interned, including several key figures who were engaged with welfare concerns.
- Following the war, the British gradually paved the way for independence, leading to Singapore's merger with the Federation of Malaya to form Malaysia in 1963.
- Social unrest and disputes resulted in Singapore's expulsion from Malaysia. Singapore became an independent republic on 9 August 1965.



Exercise 1: Welfare Engaged Women in a Late Colonial World

Two break-out rooms

I have given a number of quotations.

*Please reflect for a couple of
minutes on what you think about
these quotations.*

*Then share your thoughts with
others.*

What themes can you identify?



Imperial privilege

- None of them fits easily into stereotypical notions of imperial privilege. These two quotes show that diversity.
- All but two of the women were born during the two decades prior to the Second World War. Of those two, one was born in the final years of the nineteenth century and the other in 1912. While not all were born in Singapore, they all had made their family home there by early adulthood. Some were white British by background, while others were part of Chinese, Tamil, Singhalese, Malay or Indian families.
- Their fathers' employment had been the reason for moving to Singapore in some cases. They can be seen, if in a slightly stereotypical way, as having grown up in well-to-do, economically secure families for the most part. They described their background – usually that of their fathers - as ‘started plantations...coconut...rubber’, ‘lawyer’, ‘head teacher’, and ‘a community leader and justice of the peace’. But these were leavened by comments such as ‘He never reached his maximum because of his being Asian’, and ‘We were not a wealthy family.’ There is an occasional hint of social progressiveness – ‘my mother was a Froebel trained junior schoolteacher’ and in another case ‘My father was probably a Fabian socialist in spirit.’

The logo for the Fabian Society, consisting of a dark red square with the words 'FABIAN' and 'SOCIETY' in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters stacked vertically.

FABIAN
SOCIETY

Imperial privilege

'I happen to come from a middle-class family and in a sense a privileged one... We had a driver, a male cook, a gardener and two Chinese maids. So...we didn't need to do anything to help in the household. In fact, I can remember my Chinese maid putting on my shoes, tying my shoelaces for me, and I would stand up and put my hands up whilst she put on my dress, my blouse and frock. You know, it was ridiculous but that was the way we were looked after. We were not expected to do anything for ourselves.'



One said her father had wanted a son and taught her how to shoot. 'I had a gun of my own. I used to go out with him hunting... I was considered a good shot at the time.' 'I have great memories of going up-country... He would have his case and then we would go to shoot wild boar, go overnight and then, you know, look for deer and crocodiles and all that sort of thing... We'd go out and stuff crocodiles.'

welfare exceptionalism

- An engagement with welfare unlike the dominant threads of colonial life.
- A woman who said her mother had reached tertiary education level went on to say, ‘her family’s tradition was keen on higher education for women.’
- ‘I see a whole history, both on my mother’s and my father’s side, of very strong women, which I believe have been part of the history of the Eurasian community, if you just think of these men who were peripheral’
- ‘(M)y father had very strong ideological feelings that we should show that there was no task beneath us.’ She set up a shoe cleaning table each weekend, and she had floor scrubbing and rabbit gutting experience before going to university. Her father encouraged her to take mundane jobs while at university. ‘So, we had a very egalitarian kind of upbringing.’ An uncle asked her father if he feared she would become a socialist if he sent her to the London School of Economics, to which he apparently replied, ‘If she is not a communist when she is 18, she will be poisonous by the time she is forty.’



welfare exceptionalism



- ‘My parents were very much into social work, voluntary social work.’ Her mother would clean the sores of the night soil men – the *thoti*. ‘When she died, you’ll be surprised the people who came to her funeral, rickshaw-pullers, all sorts of people came to her funeral.’
- ‘My father took the view that he couldn’t spend a lot of money on one child if he wasn’t going to spend similarly on all four and I don’t really know how that was all worked out in the end... Both my parents felt that access to education should be equal...there should be no discrimination... I remember him saying one day, “There’s no point making jewels for you, because anybody can take that away from you, but nobody can take your education from you.”’
- ‘I think my generation of women did not have the perception of career track that is now taken for granted... The concept of working existed but I think you can see that the concept of working and the concept of having a career track are very different. And I saw myself as working and the career track kind of sort of happened. I have to confess that I had never thought of that until this conversation. But now I have thought of it, it is a very important distinction.’ (Ann Wee, in a conversation with me).

War

- The Second World War and in particular the Japanese occupation of Singapore, threaded through their experience, as children or adults. 'Except in the War' was a spoken and unspoken caveat to much of this history of privilege.
- One woman recalled how after separation during the war her parents divorced, and she stayed with her father. Sent away to boarding school and to live with aunts, she recognised the long-term consequences, as she saw it, of living with women. So 'men were a foreign territory to me. I just didn't know anything about them.' 'Even now I feel more comfortable with women than I do with men. And I key into them much more quickly, understand their thinking. I'm still very uncomfortable with men, probably.'
- One said of her account of her family background, 'I am telling you this because we then had to face the Japanese occupation, when none of these things would be ours... I had to do the washing, the cooking, everything in the household.'



War

Another woman, in an experience no doubt shared by many, learned that her father, working in Malaya, had been killed by the Japanese - by digging their graves and being shot into them.

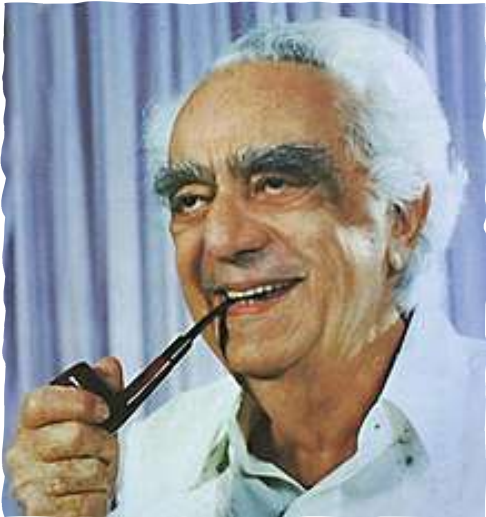
another described how she went to a convent school and had come from a Christian family. '(A)nd all this...brought up to be courageous, to trust in God, and God is almighty, all-powerful. Otherwise without all this background I'd never be able to go through the Japanese period in the occupation and the tortures.'

Late Colonial Awareness

One recalled her wish to complete a graduate social science thesis. But, meeting her Singaporean husband, they married, and the thesis never was finished. She then taught for about four years, English mainly and some history. 'Although it was an appalling syllabus of colonial history ... All sorts of things about the West Indies and things that nobody was really interested in.'

'Back to my LSE (i.e. *London School of Economics*) context. The background is that I was not anti-colonialist in any organized sense. But I had perceived that colonial economies and colonial political structures were very much on the way out. Politically I suppose I was certainly a backer of the Labour Party in the 1945 general election which swept the board in England. But I would say I was an old-fashioned liberal socialist rather than anything near the Marxist ideological wing of the socialist labour movement of the time. I wasn't active...and the political aspects of the job which we were doing didn't really enter my thinking very much.'

Late Colonial Awareness: 'Because I Got Married'



- Following her marriage, she did not work. Her husband (David Marshall – image), politically towards the left as far as such distinctions make sense,
 - ‘said that he felt my obligations and roles had changed and it would probably be as well not to work for a while... But ... I was pregnant straight away and wasn’t very well in that first pregnancy... I had to adjust to running a household. (He) followed the old-fashioned pattern and dismissed the cook and his wife to that the new *mem* could take over – which was the old colonial pattern.’
- ‘Well, I got married, and that did terrible things to my career because I got married in 1963... I was 28, and my daughter was born in the first year of our marriage, ... And so after that it was my role as a wife that got in the way of my career.’
- Another - ‘I think I began to see how the external structure really affects people’s choices and the options that are open to them. My first interest was in the disadvantaged rather than in women. It was only much later when I began to see the parallels between the women and the socially disadvantaged.’

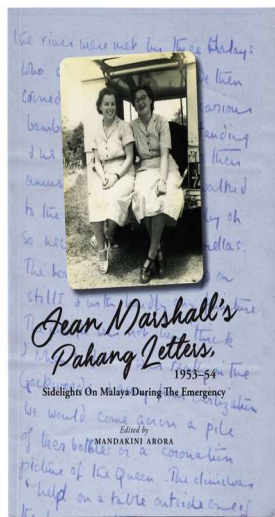
Late Colonial Awareness: 'Because I Got Married'

Another woman recounted meeting someone following a year working in a welfare agency in Malaya. 'We got engaged...1961.' Realising that for an academic career she would need further study she applied to Chicago 'to do ... I think it must have been a master's degree. And I was accepted... I was awarded a scholarship... Chicago seemed the right place to go.' But 'I didn't because I got married.'

'My family sort of inherited my social patterns... I don't know how to put this without sounding negative. I am an old-fashioned person in many ways and X had a public career and I saw my role as a background one, socially... I would not see it as very acceptable to disagree with him in public or on social occasions, though I might do so privately. This sounds very unequal and perhaps it is and was, but I wasn't inhibited from seeing and feeling that the husband was the head of the outfit.'

Another person said of being a mother, 'I enjoyed it. I didn't see it as a big sacrifice. It was a constraint, but I didn't see it as a big sacrifice.' But she also said, when asked if she lived her life again, would she want to be an expatriate wife. 'No, I would not...Not even sure if I want to be a wife, but I think if I wasn't I'd have missed the opportunity of being a mother and I think I'm glad I have that.'

Someone's daughters said, 'Mum, ... You gave it all up. It must have been terrible.' 'But it wasn't. I think this is what one has to get across: that changing one's own professional or personal role to family role isn't necessarily a terrible deprivation. My mother had done the same thing and I didn't think she thought it was a terrible deprivation. If she did, she kept quiet about it... And this isn't shameful... It's another option and society should make it an easier option than the Singapore society does at the moment.'



'Well, it's Difficult to Know.'

- How can these archival records be made to tell a story that will un-silence voices in ways that respect their ambiguity? Writers generally have little of note to say on the role of colonial women, beyond the general acknowledgement that 'women played a significant role in establishing the foundations of the social welfare state in Singapore, and in developing Singapore's post-war society in general' (Ho Chi Tim)
- It was *women* engaged with welfare, rather than men, who were likely to be exposed and therefore sensitive to, for example, local *kampong* (village) lives and culture. As one said, 'We had to learn customs and the beliefs of the people who lived in the rural areas. There were many superstitions that they believed in, and it wasn't my job to make them change their mind about this but to get them to accept the medical treatment that the child needed.'
- Yet one of the women in this cluster, who had in effect ran her own home-based society against cruelty to children, took a position that later would be regarded as unequivocally racist, through a form of ethnic apartheid. She only took in children of Europeans. 'Because their hours of eating are different, and the type of food is different. The ways of living and the hours of getting up and going to bed and that sort of thing vary. It's not a matter of one race looking down on another or anything like that. It's that they go their separate ways.'
- It also was women who on occasion stuck their necks out against colonial governmental practices. A survey of school problems was submitted in 1960 by a woman whose voice we have heard. It provoked S. G. Thong, the Chief Inspector of Schools, to write against the report, in a letter to the Minister for Education, The author of this report also had written a paper after two or three months working in Malaya a few years previously, in which she said she doubted the Red Cross could survive as an independent organization. She observes, with understatement, 'I think my paper was regarded as very uppish and unacceptable.' *Yet it was this same person* who could say 'It is not as easy to define as sometimes feminist literature gives the impression.'

Break time





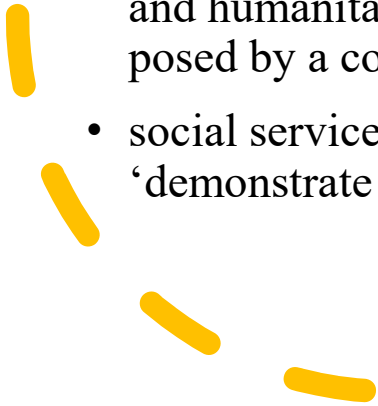
Social Work Practice in Late Colonial Singapore

- ‘In the midst of this exploration over a period of almost one hundred years social workers themselves remain somewhat elusive. We can reconstruct their real world with difficulty. Rarely do we encounter some reference to the pattern and quality of their lives’ (Timms, 1970)
- I am drawing on the article on ‘Late colonial social work practice’, *Qualitative Social Work*, 22(4), 735–752



Welfare Culture in Post-war Singapore

- At the reoccupation of Singapore in 1945, following the sudden Japanese collapse, ‘the town was dirty, neglected and dilapidated, the roads full of potholes, while water, electricity, gas and telephone services had run down. There was chronic overcrowding, poverty and disease’ (Turnbull)
- ‘the corruption of public and private integrity’ was ‘the Occupation’s worst legacy’
- The *laissez faire* free trade culture of Singapore carried over to the kind of society that developed mid-century. ‘the provision of social services would theoretically be difficult and disorganised, as it would have several potential obstacles to negotiate: tension between the economic drive for profit and humanitarian concerns, cultural differences within the plural society, and particular conditions posed by a colonial environment.’ (Ho Chi Tim and Wee, 2016)
- social services remained a low priority such that even when initiatives were taken, they ‘demonstrate not just state reluctance, but also societal ambivalence’



Welfare Culture in Post-war Singapore

- The Singapore Department of Social Welfare was established in June 1946
- by 1951 'Singapore had shed all the obvious scars of war and the city contained one of the most prosperous urban communities in the Orient' (an early Director)
- yet 'behind the façade of real prosperity, the welfare problems of Singapore were, in their way, as large and difficult of solution as ever before'
- In April 1952, the Singapore Children's Society was formed
- Chinese population made up about 75% of the community. Malays accounted for about 13% and people of Indian origin a further 7%. During the period 'Eurasian' also was normally recorded as an ethnic community



Children's
SOCIETY

Caring for the Future

The Social Work Challenge



- Protection problems ‘were aggravated by the period of Japanese occupation and, although the position has since improved, exploitation of women and girls still exists.’ (1951)
- ‘There were lots of children who came in with malnutrition. There were children who came in with different stages of blindness...related to poverty.... Their physical conditions at that time were...terrible. All the rural areas had no running water. Maybe we had a pipe stand somewhere, you know, in the middle of the *kampong* somewhere. No proper toilet facilities. No roads. I can remember going on home visits through mud and pigsties.’
- ‘such terrible overcrowding. Like in say, Chinatown, each cubicle had about eight to ten people living in it. There might be three floors in the house, and there would be one toilet, one bathroom, and one kitchen’
- In the sixties there was ‘a lot of poverty... At that time we did home visits when dark rooms in Chinatown, there is no ventilation, people had nothing more than a bed, children had worms and these terribly infected sores where they have been bitten by sandflies and scratched.’

The Social Work Challenge

- ‘Way out in the *kampungs* there were dirt floors and terrible malnutrition, TB. You know, just incredible life situations, and having had that experience I think you can never forget it. You know, we’d go to home visits, and you’d be frightened by the people who would be looking at you, because they may be gangsters.’
- Speaking of the Chinese community, someone recalled with regard to family patterns,
- ‘in this *kampong* the whole family would live together. So, if you have four sons and they got married, they would bring their wives and all their children will stay in the same house. From my contact with the grandparents...the grandmother had very strong control over the whole family...In those days the problems, I bear [witness] to it, a lot of them were related to problems with the mother-in-law, because...she controlled them. The money her sons earned, they would give her the money. She would make the decisions...’



Adoption in 1950s Singapore

- I want to illustrate the ways in which colonized people sought—not entirely without success—to ‘build lives in the crevices of colonial power, deflecting, appropriating, or reinterpreting the teachings and preachings thrust upon them’ (Cooper). I want to avoid ‘elevating messy histories into a consistent project and underplaying the efforts of colonized people to deflect and appropriate elements of colonizing policies’ (Cooper). The unfolding of adoption practice in 1950s Singapore illustrates the outworking of such late colonial cultural and social dynamics.
- The Society set up an Adoption Sub-Committee in 1955 to coordinate the work of other agencies as ‘an advisory one to assist parents wishing to obtain children for adoption and those wishing to give children away’
- ‘the committee ‘will not consider cases arising from irresponsible parents wishing to avoid the burden of the care of their children.’





Exercise 2: Adoption Practice in a Late Colonial World

I have given you extracts from reports and archival interview evidence, listed in roughly time order. ('AR' refers to the annual reports of the Singapore Children's Society, with the year of the report)

Spend some time reading and reflecting.

Share and develop your thoughts with the group.

WE WILL NOT HAVE TIME TO DISCUSS YOUR THOUGHTS IN THE WHOLE GROUP. SAVE ANY QUESTIONS FOR FINAL MINUTES IN PLENARY

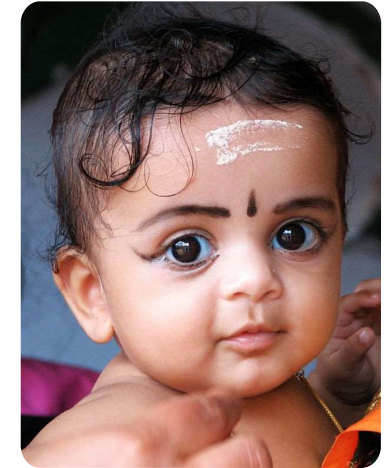
Social Work Practice: Ethnic Sensitivities

- I will work through several points that I think emerge from the evidence.
- Ethnicity an ongoing sensitive issue.
- Cultural and social weight was afforded the Chinese majority community.
- the Children's Society did not make ethnicity a prominent distinguisher in the annual reports until 1960.



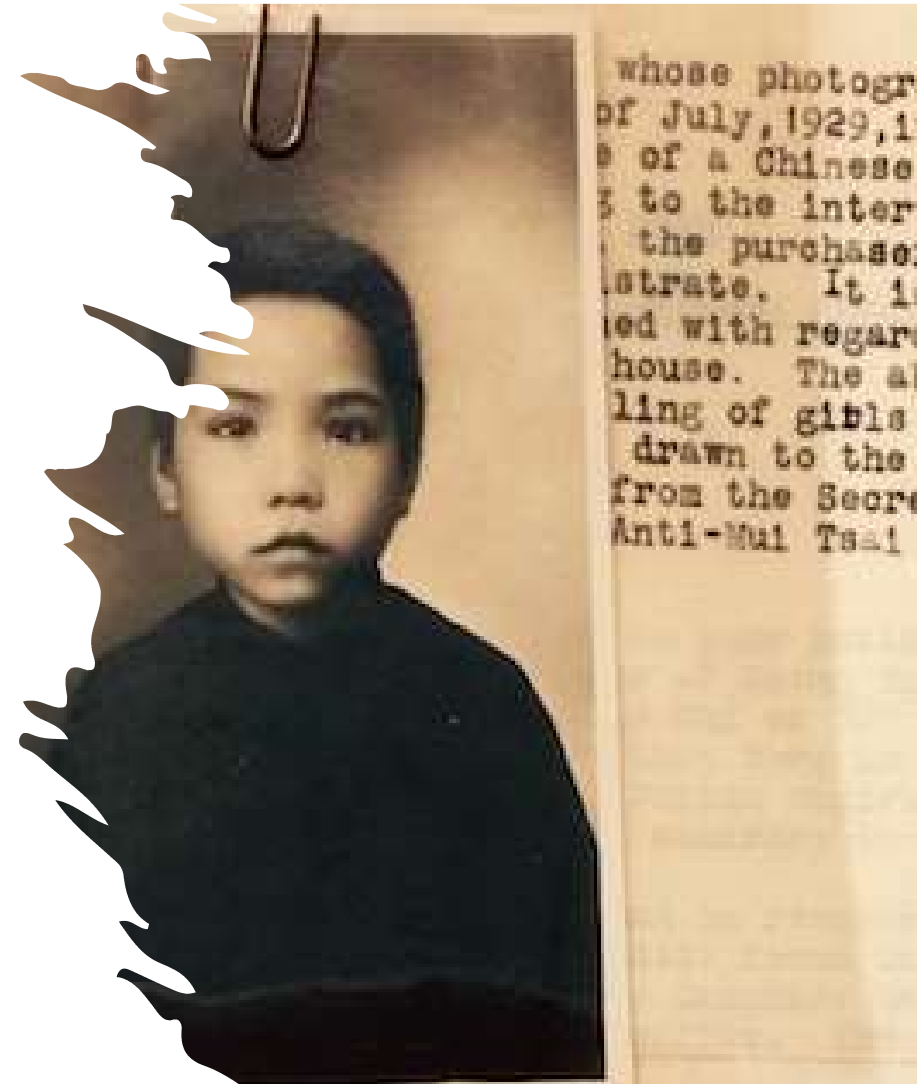
Ethnic Sensitivities

- 'Each couple stated their requirements and preferences and...Malay couples usually wanted Chinese babies, Chinese couples wanted boys rather than girls, whilst Indian couples wanted babies of dark complexion, and so on' (AR1956)
- 1957 - mismatch of supply and demand. Chinese couples seldom wanted girls unless they were over the age of two or three. They wanted boys but they were rarely available. There were no Malay babies available for adoption though demand was highest from Malay couples. There was some demand from Indian couples, but babies were rarely available for adoption.
- '(a) strict conditions laid down by natural parents regarding choice of adopters.
- (b) ill health or disease of parents which prejudice prospective adopters.
- (c) premature birth, which also prejudices prospective adopters' (AR1957).
- adoption of Chinese baby girls into Malay and Indian families. They would be absorbed into the families and not be told they were adopted.
- Wee recalls how adoptions arranged through a midwife were not uncommon prior to around 1970. They did so 'quite unconcerned about the illegality of what they had done' and 'if occasionally a birth certificate labelled a visibly Chinese girl as the birth child of a Tamil or Malay couple, they saw that as a small matter'



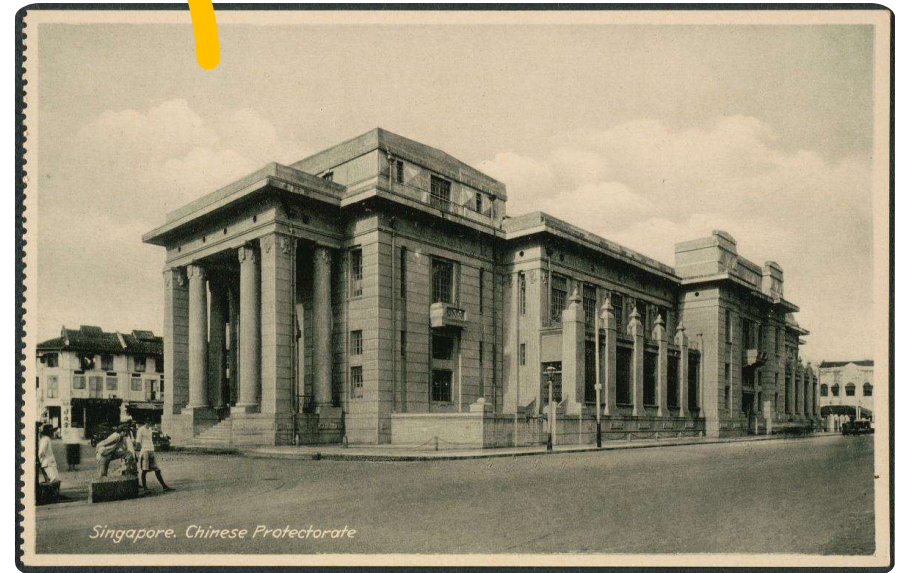
How to Understand

- First, the existence of a private market in adoption.
- Second, the outworking of family culture and kinship systems, especially within the Chinese community, but also how these interacted with Malay and Indian cultural practices.
- Third – perhaps as an aspect of such kinship systems - the relationship between adoption and *mui tsai*. *Mui tsai* means ‘little sister’ in Cantonese and describes young Chinese women who worked as domestic servants in China, or in brothels or affluent Chinese households in traditional Chinese society.
- Fourth, and overarching all others, how late colonial social workers understood the relationship between the culture and practices of the West and those on the colonial country
- *How did these often Western educated social workers understand and respond to these questions?*



1. Private market

- AR1957 records ‘the number of physical transfers which take place unknown to the Protector (i.e. *the Chinese Protectorate – an administrative body*), usually because parents are ignorant of the necessary procedure... (M)any of the natural parents seem to prefer to give away their babies where they fancy, and such is the demand, particularly for boys, that they appear to have no difficulty in doing so’
- ‘The majority of Mothers of unwanted children have no knowledge of procedures available to help them; and dread the investigations that may be carried out some years after the matter has in their minds been dealt with. In addition, many like to know the family the child is going to, and to keep an eye on him for a period. Others also wish for payment which is of course illegal’ (AR1963).



2. Chinese kinship system

- ‘Chinese marriage rites everywhere can be represented by one basic model’ (Freedman). ‘Family’ is accepted as property owning and ‘is composed only of males’ (p. 6). It is when the wife has a son that ‘she shares with her husband the privilege of preventing that son taking out his portion’
- ‘To buy the rights in a boy one must be at least fairly well-to-do. While a baby girl can often be had for the price of its mother’s lying-in expenses, a matter of a few tens of dollars, a boy will change hands at a high price; people quote various figures between a couple of hundred and a thousand dollars.’
- Hence adoption ‘drains off some of the boys of the poorer people.’ As a result:
 1. unlike the West, ‘most of the babies given away in Singapore and Malaya were born to married couples’
 2. ‘there was such a surplus of baby girls given away that the Welfare Department was quite willing for those babies ... they were all Chinese baby girls...to go to families that were not Chinese, rather than they should just lie in a children’s home’

3. Adoption and *mui tsai*

- Young girls purchased to work in a family were seen either as domestic slaves or as prostitutes, or as examples of the Chinese custom of child adoption/purchase where poor families sold off their children so as to lessen their burden.
- interlacing of *mui tsai* with adoption. In a 1955 report one witness said, 'he saw a *mui tsai*'s two fingers cut out by her adopted mother because she took a piece of cake without the permission of the adopted mother.'
- 'They seemed to think nothing of disposing their unwanted babes - by selling them and giving them away. And it was quite easy for such cases at once to get into the hands of bad people. They were very often sold as *mui tsai*, which means child slaves.' Of one child who came to live with her she says 'she remembered that her mother had been paid \$20, a piece of pork and a bag of rice for her. She remembered being sold and she was afraid.'

4. Navigating cultural shoals

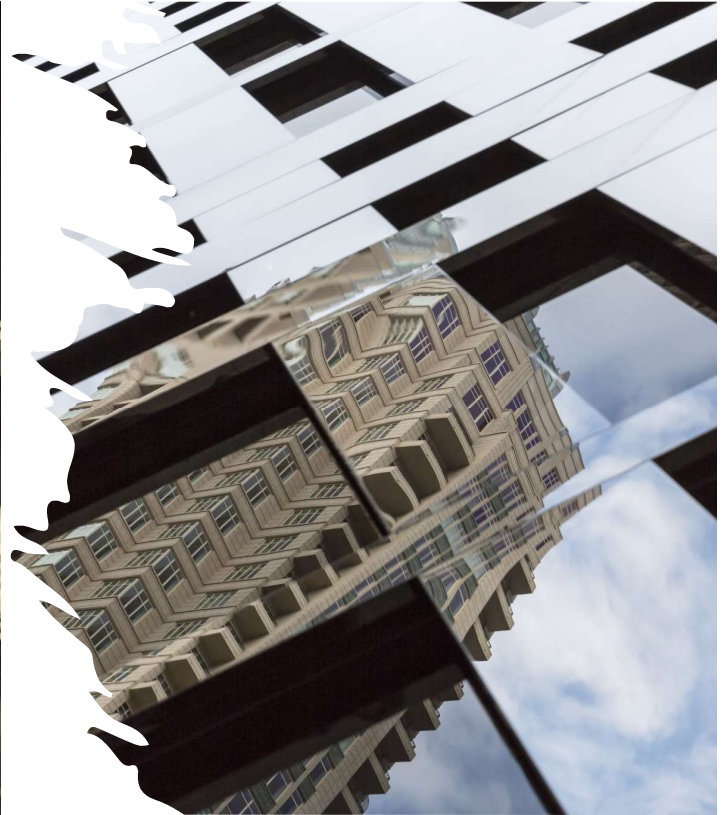
- Someone from the Hong Kong Society for the Protection of Children, in a letter to the Singapore main English language paper, *The Straits Times* (February 13th, 1952). ‘He said Chinese did not regard the idea of parents “selling a child” as cruel but rather the reverse...as it was intended to provide a better chance for the child...After all the main thing is to win the co-operation of the Chinese’
- One Western woman who informally adopted children responded: ‘I pointed out the brutal beatings of children, the terrible cases of children scarred all over, burnt with hot irons and things, that were brought before us,’ and, if you ‘went into the depths of the Chinese slums, and the *kampongs*, Malays and so on. If you really go into those places... There are all kinds of people living in Chinatown. Some people are loving parents, adoring parents. But occasionally there are these bad cases...The cases are...unwanted babies.’
- There were other forms of exploitative relationships, ‘but many of them were genuine and loving. It’s just that they were poor people... Sometimes girls that were rescued out of the brothels would turn out to be adopted’



4. Navigating cultural shoals

- Chinese parents, when a child died in hospital, often would not come to take the body, which social workers found understandably distressing:
- ‘I thought this was a very (cruel is too harsh a word) unusual thing to do. Until it was explained to me that the Chinese couldn’t take to the house somebody who was younger than the parents. If it was an old person who died, they would take the body back. ...This was something I had to explain to my English colleagues who found it very, very unacceptable. So, it then made it clear to me, that you have to understand the different cultures. What do Chinese people do about this? What do the Indians do about this? What do the Malays do? You can’t just take your values and impose it on others.’
- ‘The strong western influences which are felt in Singapore, while they are by no means wholly beneficial, have in many cases caused Chinese women to question the justice of the tradition of subservience and it is possible to trace a strong conflict of will between the older and younger members of the same family’ (*Social Welfare Singapore 1948: 25*). The report refers to the need for the vacuum caused by the loss of tradition to be filled, ‘or else there will be seen in Singapore (it has happened elsewhere) the spectacle of the west destroying without rebuilding... The danger of losing one culture and one ancient set of traditions without embracing another is...very real and the acceptance of even what is good in western ideas must not be allowed to erode the finer points of traditional Chinese culture’
- This stance is a long way from culture-blindness or even oppression that often is assumed in social work critiques of colonialism.

Reflections?





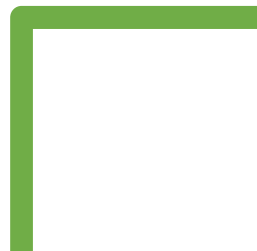
Closing thoughts

This evidence points to several areas about which we know little or nothing:

1. The way in which *war* shapes the emergence and development of welfare
2. The significance of work by imperial *anthropologists* like Freedman
3. To look directly at *social work practice*
4. *Nation-building* in the development of social work
5. To take further the direct practice of *colonial and late colonial women*.
6. The roles of central and colonial *officials*

Closing thoughts

- The historical material points to the need for a form of imperial social work research that avoids the kneejerk assumption of those who believe ‘that all they needed to know about colonialism was its horrors’ (Cooper - image)
- ‘An ahistorical approach to the past reflects and encourages an apolitical approach to the present... Studying colonial history reminds us that in the most oppressive of political systems, people found not just *niches* in which to hide and fend for themselves, but handles by which the system itself could be moved.’ (Cooper)
- In all this, a requirement is ‘to be universalist without being imperialist’ (Trygged, 2010)



References

- Anderson, W. 2018. 'What might be the history of science and technology studies in Southeast Asia?' Unpublished paper
- Burnette, C. E. & Renner, L. M. (2017). 'A Pattern of Cumulative Disadvantage: Risk Factors for Violence across Indigenous Women's Lives.' *The British Journal of Social Work*, 47(4): 1166–1185
- Chatterjee, S. 2015. 'Rethinking Skill in Anti-Opressive Social Work Practice with Skilled Immigrant Professionals.' *The British Journal of Social Work*, 45 (1): 363–377.
- Choate, P. W. 2019. 'The Call to Decolonise: Social Work's Challenge for Working with Indigenous Peoples.' *The British Journal of Social Work*, 49 (4): 1081–1099.
- Cooper, F. 2005. *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History*. Berkeley: University of California Press
- Freedman, M. 1967. *Rites and Duties, or Chinese Marriage*. Inaugural Lecture. London School of Economics. London: G Bell and Sons Ltd.
- Ho Chi Tim, 2016. 'The Origins, Building, and Impact of a Social Welfare State in Late Colonial Singapore.' PhD thesis University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.
- Ho Chi Tim and Wee, A. 2016, *Social Services*. Singapore Chronicles. Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies/Straits Times Press.



References

- Ife, J. 2007. 'The New International Agendas: what role for Social Work?' Inaugural Hokenstad International Social Work Lecture. Council for Social Work Education: San Francisco
- Pyles, L. 2017. 'Decolonising Disaster Social Work: Environmental Justice and Community Participation.' *The British Journal of Social Work*, 47 (3): 630–647.
- Sewpaul, V. 2006 'The Global–Local Dialectic: Challenges for African Scholarship and Social Work in a Post-Colonial World.' *The British Journal of Social Work*, 36 (3): 419–434.
- Silavwe, G. W. 1995. 'The Need for a New Social Work Perspective in an African Setting: The Case of Social Casework in Zambia.' *The British Journal of Social Work*, 25 (1): 71–84.
- Shaw, I. 2023. 'Approaching the colonial.' *British Journal of Social Work*. 53 (1): 637-655
- Shaw, I. 2023. 'Late colonial women in a welfare world.' *Asia Pacific Journal of Social Work and Development*. 33 (2): 114-126
- Shaw, I. 2023. Late colonial social work practice. *Qualitative Social Work*, 22(4), 735–752.
- Sidhu, R. 2018. 'A Post-Colonial Autoethnography of Transnational Adoption.' *The British Journal of Social Work*, 48 (8): 2176–2194.
- Timms, N. 1970. 'Resurgam: the end of a beginning' *Social Work* 27 (4): 3-5.
- Turnbull, C. M. 2009. A History of Singapore. Singapore: Oxford University Press.
- Trygged, S. 2010. 'Balancing the global and the local: some normative reflections on international social work' *International Social Work* 53 (5): 644-655