Shopping in Colonial Southeast Asia: Modernity and the Emergence of Consumer Culture in Surabaya, Penang, and Singapore 1920s-1930s

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Abstract

This thesis explores the dynamic interplay of consumer culture, colonialism, and modernity in Southeast Asia during the pivotal decades of the 1920s and 1930s, focusing specifically on Singapore, Penang, and Surabaya. It argues that consumer culture within these colonial urban centres was not merely an economic phenomenon but a critical arena for negotiating identities, modernities, and power relations between the colonial powers and the colonised. Through an in-depth analysis of advertising, urban consumer spaces, and the politicisation of consumer choices, this study demonstrates how consumerism became both a symbol of colonial modernity and a medium for expressing nationalist sentiments and anti-colonial resistance.

Employing a diverse array of archival materials, contemporary newspapers and periodicals, official reports, and secondary sources, the thesis uncovers the complexities of the emergence and evolution of consumer culture in a colonial context. It reveals how advertising emerged as a key tool for both colonial businesses and local enterprises in shaping consumer desires, illustrating the global and local negotiations that defined Southeast Asia's consumer landscape. The study also highlights the transformative role of urban spaces in mediating these interactions, showcasing how colonial fairs, commercial districts, and the proliferation of consumer goods facilitated the spread and localisation of global consumer trends.

Furthermore, the thesis addresses significant scholarly gaps by offering a nuanced understanding of the political dimensions of consumer choices in colonial Southeast Asia. Through case studies of “Buy Local” campaigns and boycott movements, it articulates how consumer practices were mobilised for political ends, serving as expressions of emerging nationalist movements and strategies of anti-colonial resistance. By situating consumer culture at the heart of colonial and post-colonial transformations, this thesis makes essential contributions to Southeast Asian history, consumer culture studies, and modernity. It challenges Eurocentric narratives of modernisation and provides a unique lens to view the complexities of identity formation, social change, and negotiating power in the colonial era. Ultimately, the study underscores the significance of consumer culture in shaping the contours of Southeast Asian modernity, revealing the active role of Southeast Asian societies in crafting their narratives of modernisation amidst the pressures of colonialism and globalisation.

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Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references.

Introduction

In December 1933, amidst global economic turmoil, *The Penang Monthly Advertiser* painted a surprising picture of Penang Road, one of the city's busiest commercial centres: "Business of every description is being carried out tremendously."[1] This scene of vibrant commerce, where pharmacies, theatres, and the luminous "Penang Bazaar" thrived, acts as a microcosm of the complexities and contradictions of colonial Southeast Asia.[2] More than a geographic locale, Penang Road reveals a space where colonial ambitions and local entrepreneurial spirit clashed and intertwined. This bustling scene challenges prevailing narratives of economic despair, hinting at a deeper story. Focusing on Surabaya, Singapore, and Penang, this thesis argues that the emergence of consumer culture in the 1920s and 1930s was a pivotal force shaping colonial Southeast Asia, serving as a space for colonial dominance and local resistance. By analysing acts of consumption and aspirations of the urban middle classes, this study challenges existing understandings of modernity in the Southeast Asian colonial context, demonstrating that consumerism was as central as nationalism in shaping how colonised populations negotiated their place in a changing world. This approach reveals how seemingly mundane acts of consumption, like patronising local markets, participating in boycotts of colonial goods, or embracing hybrid styles that blended local traditions with Western fashions, became subtle yet powerful forms of resistance and identity-making.

Thesis Statement

This thesis explores the multifaceted interplay between consumer culture, colonialism, and modernity in Southeast Asia during the transformative decades of the 1920s and 1930s. Through a focused lens on the urban landscapes of Surabaya, Singapore, and Penang, it confronts and challenges the prevailing historiographical narratives that have traditionally emphasised political movements and nationalist struggles as the primary drivers of change during this period. In contrast, this study posits that the emergence and evolution of consumer culture served not only as a backdrop to these political developments but as a pivotal arena of social and political engagement.

Central to this argument is the assertion that a vibrant consumer culture emerged within these cities, serving simultaneously as a domain for colonial dominance and a platform for anti-colonial resistance. This duality reveals the complex negotiations of identity, power, and modernity that were at play in the colonial context, where acts of consumption transcended mere economic transactions to become charged with political significance. By placing consumption and consumerism at the forefront of its analysis, the thesis sheds light

[1] "One of Penang's Busiest Business Thoroughfare", *The Penang Monthly Advertiser* Dec, 1933, 23.
[2] *Ibid*.

on how these practices were intricately woven into the fabric of daily life, influencing and reflecting the broader socio-political transformations of the time.

At the heart of this narrative are the urban middle classes of Surabaya, Singapore, and Penang, whose engagement with consumer culture was instrumental in shaping their aspirations for modernity and everyday lives. This thesis expands upon existing narratives that focus predominantly on socio-political transformations, demonstrating how consumer culture—encompassing advertising, shopping spaces, and consumer campaigns—was deeply entwined with anti-colonial movements. A thorough examination of these consumer practices reveals how they became alternative spaces for contesting and negotiating colonial rule, highlighting the agency of the urban middle classes in navigating the complexities of colonial modernity.

Drawing inspiration from studies like Victoria de Grazia's *Irresistible Empire*, which explores the impact of U.S. consumer culture on post-war Europe, this work examines how colonial powers in Southeast Asia utilised commercial spaces and promoted specific forms of consumption to not only reshape urban landscapes but also to mould identities according to their colonial agendas.[3] Yet, this thesis moves beyond the framework of colonial imposition to focus on the diverse shopping landscapes within Surabaya, Singapore, and Penang, from state-sanctioned department stores to vibrant marketplaces and informal street vending. These varied sites emerge as economic hubs and critical battlegrounds for cultural control and identity formation, revealing the extent of colonial influence and the enduring power of local traditions. This detailed exploration aims to unravel the inherent conflict between the colonial drive to impose idealised "modern" consumption patterns and the resilience of alternative trade networks and practices within these port cities. The thesis illuminates consumerism's transformative impact on Southeast Asia's urban identity by delving into these dynamics. It underscores the critical role of consumer culture as a domain of contestation and agency within colonial cities.

Southeast Asia Amidst Global Change

The early twentieth century was a period of profound transformation, fuelled by rapid technological advancements, expanding global capitalism, and shifting social and political ideas.[4] These changes did not leave Southeast Asia untouched. Intensified trade networks, spurred by the opening of the Suez Canal, brought a vast influx of new goods and ideas to the region, accelerating economic development and driving colonial ambitions. New technologies

[3] Victoria De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, Mass; London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005).
[4] Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), 907–918.

like steamships, railways, and communication systems created a globalised sense of time and space, facilitating the movement of people and products.[5]

Importantly, the forces shaping this development were not purely Western. Japan, for example, emerged as a powerful non-Western actor, demonstrating the potential for alternate models of modernisation.[6] New philosophies advocating for individual freedoms, equality, and national self-determination challenged traditional hierarchies and inspired a spirit of "awakening" among Southeast Asia's burgeoning urban populations.[7] This awakening reverberated throughout the region, influencing political discourse and reshaping daily life and consumption patterns. Yet, as historian Peter Boomgaard notes, the impact of events like the Great Depression was complex and uneven across Southeast Asia, demonstrating the region's unique place within the evolving global economic order.[8] Amidst this global upheaval, Southeast Asian port cities like Surabaya, Singapore, and Penang emerged as critical sites where global and local forces intersected.[9] These commercial hubs witnessed the rise of a consumer culture shaped by both colonial ambitions and local responses, leading to the complex dynamics of colonial modernity that lie at the heart of this study.

Colonial Cities and the Birthplace of Consumer Culture

Throughout Southeast Asia, the early twentieth century witnessed a significant transformation of urban landscapes.[10] Colonial powers, driven by the pursuit of "modernity," reshaped Southeast Asian cities to reflect their commercial ideals in port cities like Surabaya, Singapore, and Penang, new districts showcasing wide avenues and imposing structures sought to replace what colonisers perceived as chaotic and "traditional" local markets.[11] The rise of grand department stores epitomised the introduction of Western consumer models, marking a

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[5] Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World*, 907–918.
[6] *Ibid*.
[7] Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London; New York: Verso, 1998). See also, Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (First published in 1983) (London: Verso, 2016).
[8] Peter Boomgaard and Ian Brown, "The Economies of Southeast Asia in the 1930s Depression. An Introduction," in *Weathering the Storm: The Economies of Southeast Asia in the 1930s Depression*, ed., Peter Boomgaard and Ian Brown (Singapore: ISEAS, 2000), 5–9; See also W. G. Huff, "Entitlements, Destitution, and Emigration in the 1930s Singapore Great Depression", *Economic History Review*, 54, 2 (2001): 290–323; Loh Kah Seng, "*Beyond "Rubber Prices" History: Life in Singapore during the Great Depression Years*," (master's dissertation, National University of Singapore, 2004); John H. Drabble, *An Economic History of Malaysia, c. 1800–1990: The Transition to Modern Economic Growth,* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000); John Ingleson, "Urban Java during the Depression," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies,* (1988): 292– 309.
[9] Howard W. Dick and Peter J. Rimmer, "Beyond the Third World City: The New Urban Geography of South-east Asia," *Urban Studies* 35, no. 12 (1998): 2306; See also Anthony D. King, *Urbanism, Colonialism, and the World-Economy: Cultural and Spatial Foundations of the World Urban System* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).
[10] Howard W. Dick and Peter J. Rimmer, "Beyond the Third World City".
[11] Marc Askew and William S. Logan, ed., *Cultural Identity and Urban Change in South-east Asia: Interpretive Essays* (Geelong: Deakin University Press, 1994); Tim Bunnell and Daniel P. S. Goh, ed., *Urban Asias: Essays on Futurity Past and Present* (Berlin: Jovis, 2018); Oki Akira, "The Transformation of the Southeast Asian City: The Evolution of Surabaya as a Colonial City," *East Asian Cultural Studies* 27 (1988); Avila, Eric, and Mark H. Rose. "Race, Culture, Politics, and Urban Renewal: An Introduction," *Journal of Urban History* 35, no. 3 (2009): 335–347; See also Richard E. Foglesong, *Planning the Capitalist City: The Colonial Era to the 1920s* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

shift in economic organisation and social practice. Yet, despite efforts to erase them, traditional markets and street vendors persisted, demonstrating an enduring resilience.[12]

This transformation of urban spaces became an arena where colonialism, capitalism, and complex notions of "modernity" converged.[13] Shopping and consumption experiences were inherently intertwined with class, ethnicity, and gender distinctions.[14] For the emergent middle class, embracing Western consumption patterns marked a path toward achieving a "modern" lifestyle.[15] Yet, for many, participation in this new consumer culture did not necessitate a complete abandonment of tradition, fuelling a continuous negotiation of identity shaped by global consumer trends and local realities.[16] The transformation of Southeast Asia's cities thus reflects the dynamic interaction between imposed colonial structures and the agency of local populations in shaping their own responses to the forces of consumerism and modernisation.[17] This focus on the impact of industrial production, however, should not obscure the transformative influence of consumer culture on these same landscapes, social structures, and political power. Historians like E.P. Thompson have demonstrated how industrial capitalism reshaped the urban landscape to facilitate production, but consumer culture, fuelled by advertising and individual desires, holds a similarly transformative power.[18] Surabaya, Penang, and Singapore are selected as case studies for their distinct yet representative colonial experiences and their significant roles in the region's consumer culture during the early twentieth century. Each city provides a unique lens through which to examine the relationship between colonialism, modernity, and consumer culture.

Surabaya, strategically located on the northeastern coast of Java, developed as a significant urban centre long before the Dutch colonial period. Its geographical position at the mouth of the Kali Mas, a branch of the Brantas River, made it a natural stopping point for traders and a site of confluence for various cultural and economic influences. The city's early history is marked by its role as a military and administrative hub rather than a commercial port like other coastal cities such as Tuban or Gresik.[19] This distinction shaped Surabaya's

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[12] Purnawan Basundoro, *Merebut Ruang Kota: Aksi Rakyat Miskin Kota Surabaya 1900–1960an* [Seizing Urban Space: the Action of the Poor People of Surabaya 1900–1960s] (Tangerang: Marjin Kiri, 2018).

[13] Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2003).

[14] Chua Beng-Huat, ed. *Consumption in Asia: Lifestyle and identities* (Routledge, 2002).

[15] Henk Schulte Nordholt, "New Urban Middle Classes in Colonial Java: Children of the Colonial State and Ancestors of a Future Nation", *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land-en volkenkunde/Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia*, 173, (4), (2017): 439–441.

[16] Donna J. Amoroso, *Traditionalism and the Ascendancy of the Malay Ruling Class in Malaya* (NUS Press, 2014).

[17] Similarly, China has comparable experience, see Karl Gerth, *China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Nation* (Cambridge (Massachusetts): Harvard University Asia Center, 2003).

[18] Edward Palmer Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968).

[19] William Hayward Frederick, *Indonesian Urban Society in Transition: Surabaya, 1926–1946* (PhD diss., University of Hawai'i, 1976), 5–7. See also H.J. de Graaf, *Geschiedenis van Indonesië* (Bandung and The Hague: Van Hoeve, 1949), 87-88; H.J. de Graaf and Th. Pigeaud, *Moslimse Vorstendommen op Java* ('s-Gravenhage: M. Nijhoff, 1974), 159.

character as a city controlled by Javanese and Javanese-Madurese ruling houses, which sought to maintain political and military dominance in the region.

The significance of Surabaya in the political landscape of Java became evident as it emerged as a coveted prize for power-seekers due to its control over large areas of land and sea. By the late sixteenth century, Surabaya had established itself as a regional capital, commanding loyalty from several surrounding regions and engaging in a protracted struggle for independence from both the Mataram Sultanate and Madurese hegemony.[20] Although the city ultimately fell under the control of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in the early seventeenth century, it continued to resist Central Javanese influence and nurtured its distinct cultural identity, particularly under the leadership of Pangeran Pekik.[21] Surabaya's transformation under Dutch colonial rule in the nineteenth century was profound, marking a shift from a primarily indigenous-controlled city to a colonial urban centre deeply influenced by European interests. The introduction of military and naval installations, such as those ordered by Governor-General Daendels (1762–1818) in the early 1800s, initiated significant physical changes in the city.[22] These developments were further accelerated by the construction of a larger military citadel in 1835, which led to the displacement of indigenous populations and the establishment of a European-dominated urban core.[23]

The economic importance of Surabaya grew alongside these military expansions, particularly with the launch of the Cultivation System (*Cultuurstelsel*) in 1830, which integrated the city into the broader colonial economy.[24] Surabaya's role as a major port and commercial centre was solidified by the late nineteenth century, with the establishment of extensive warehousing facilities and the Marine Establishment, a large ship- and machine-works complex that symbolised the city's strategic and economic significance.[25] Despite these developments, Surabaya retained many of its traditional elements, particularly in the kampung

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[20] Frederick, *Indonesian Urban Society in Transition*, 5–7.
[21] *Ibid*.
[22] Herman Willem Daendels was the Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies from 1808 to 1811. Appointed during the Napoleonic Wars, Daendels was tasked with strengthening the colony's defenses against potential British invasions. His administration is most noted for its military reforms, including the construction of the Great Post Road (*De Grote Postweg*) across Java, and the establishment of various military and naval installations. These initiatives, while aimed at securing Dutch colonial interests, also led to significant infrastructural developments across the region. For further details, see Merle Calvin Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia Since c.1200, 4th ed.*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), 145.
[23] Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia*, 145. See also Gottfried Hariowald von Faber, *Oud Soerabaia: De geschiedenis van Indië's eerste koopstad van de oudste tijden tot de instelling van den Gemeenteraad (1906) [Old Surabaya: The History of the First Trading City in the Indies from Ancient Times until the Establishment of the Municipal Council (1906)]*, (Soerabaja: Gemeente Soerabaia, 1931).
[24] The Cultivation System (*Cultuurstelsel*) was a colonial economic policy implemented by the Dutch in the East Indies from 1830 to 1870. This system required Indonesian farmers to allocate a portion of their land for the cultivation of cash crops like coffee and sugar which were then sold to the Dutch government at set prices. While this system generated significant profits for the Dutch, it placed heavy burdens on the local population, leading to widespread suffering. For a more in-depth discussion, see Robert Van Niel, *Java under the Cultivation System: Collected Writings* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1992); Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia*, 154–158.
[25] Frederick, *Indonesian Urban Society in Transition*, 20.

(neighbourhood) structure that characterised much of the city's indigenous population.[26] The kampung were not mere imitations of rural villages but evolved into urban communities that reflected the unique social and economic dynamics of the city. By the turn of the twentieth century, Surabaya's kampung inhabitants, known as *arek Surabaya*, had developed a distinct identity marked by industriousness, pragmatism, and a strong sense of local pride, despite their relative lack of economic power compared to the European and Chinese elites.[27]

As Surabaya entered the early twentieth century, it had firmly established itself as a major port city and the second largest urban centre in the Dutch East Indies after Batavia.[28] The city had become a crucial site for the Dutch colonial project aimed at "civilising" the local population through the promotion of Western consumerism and lifestyles. Surabaya's diverse population–comprising Europeans, Chinese, Arabs, and indigenous Javanese–created a vibrant mosaic of cultural interactions and consumer practices. This period witnessed the rise of modern infrastructure, including broad boulevards, shopping areas, and European-style clubhouses, which catered to the tastes and needs of the small but influential European minority. However, these developments also exacerbated the existing social and ethnic divisions within the city, as colonial authorities sought to maintain a strict separation between European and indigenous populations.

Surabaya's experience under Dutch colonial rule thus provides a critical lens through which to examine the intersections of colonialism, modernity, and consumer culture. The city's historical trajectory, shaped by its strategic importance, military expansions, and economic integration into the colonial system, offers valuable insights into how colonial urban centres were both sites of cultural exchange and arenas of social tension. Surabaya's case underscores the complexities of colonial modernity, where the imposition of Western values and practices coexisted with, and often intensified, the diverse and dynamic realities of the indigenous population.

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[26] *Kampung* (or sometimes *kampong*) was originally translated as "compound" in Malay, but it has taken on several different meanings over the centuries. It usually refers to a rural or village settlement in Malaysia, but it is more commonly associated with urban areas and a form of community-driven, affordable residential areas commonly seen throughout Southeast Asia. Characterised by their organic development, these neighbourhoods are constructed through grassroots efforts, a practice known as "incremental housing" initiated by the residents themselves. Over time, they expand and become more densely populated, serving as the foundational elements of Indonesian urban landscape. Initially emerging as either rural hamlets or urban enclaves, kampungs are recognised not as informal squatter homes but as integral components of the city's housing network. Urban authorities generally do not pursue their demolition or forced removal. In the city of Surabaya, for instance, kampungs occupy a mere 7 percent of the city's land yet provide housing for a staggering 63 percent of its population. While predominantly accommodating lower-income families, these neighbourhoods are also home to a diverse range of economic backgrounds, where both low and middle-income residents coexist, underscoring the inclusive nature of kampung communities. See also Dick, *Surabaya*, 192–193; John Sullivan, "Kampung and State: The Role of Government in the Development of Urban Community in Yogyakarta," *Indonesia*, no. 41 (1986): 63–88.

[27] Frederick, *Indonesian Urban Society in Transition*, 20–21. For Chinese community, see Claudine Salmon, "The Chinese Community of Surabaya, from its Origins to the 1930s Crisis," *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies* 3 (2009): 22–60.

[28] Howard W. Dick, *Surabaya, City of work: A Socioeconomic History, 1900–2000* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2002), 2.

Penang, under British colonial rule, emerged as a key strategic location in Southeast Asia, reflecting broader patterns of British imperial expansion during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Established as a free port in 1786 when it was ceded to the English East India Company (EIC), Penang quickly became a bustling *entrepôt*, facilitating trade between India, China, and the wider region.[29] The island's strategic importance was evident in its geographical position—15 miles long and 10 miles wide—situated at the northern end of the Straits of Melaka, covering an area of 108 square miles.[30] The establishment of Georgetown by Francis Light (1740-1794) marked the creation of the first English colonial town in Southeast Asia, located on a triangular plain that extended towards the hills, which later became an essential agricultural area.[31]

In 1800, the British expanded their control by annexing the territory of Prai from the Sultan of Kedah, renaming it Province Wellesley.[32] This territory, strategically located on the mainland opposite Penang Island, was intended to serve as an agricultural hinterland, providing essential resources like rice to support Penang's growing population. Additionally, the annexation was driven by the need to bolster Penang's defences, acting as a buffer against potential invasions from Kedah and ensuring that Penang's trade dominance was not challenged by local competitors. The British saw this control as crucial for maintaining law and order and curbing piracy and smuggling activities in the narrow strait between Penang and the mainland.[33] During the early years of British occupation, Penang faced significant challenges. Controversy arose over the terms of cession, particularly regarding the EIC's obligations to defend the Sultan of Kedah against Siamese threats. Despite these disputes, Penang's population and trade expanded rapidly, leading to heightened expectations about its potential as a commercial hub. However, the lack of legally constituted courts on the island initially hampered the administration's ability to maintain law and order, a problem only resolved with the establishment of the Recorder's Court in 1807.[34]

While trade remained the primary focus, there were early discussions about Penang's potential as a naval base. The EIC hoped to leverage the island's strategic location to establish a naval defence centre in the East, particularly to protect the eastern coast of India during the

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[29] The original name of Penang, Pulau Pinang, derived from the "pinang" or areca-nut palm, was largely replaced in official use by "Prince of Wales Island" after the island was ceded to the English East India Company in 1786. Georgetown, the main town, was named after King George III. See Nordin Hussin, "A Tale of Two Colonial Port-Towns in the Straits of Melaka: Dutch Melaka and English Penang," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 75, no. 2 (283) (2002): 87; Drabble, *An Economic History of Malaysia,* 28; See also Ooi Keat Gin, "Disparate Identities: Penang From a Historical Perspective, 1780-1941," *Kajian Malaysia - Journal of Malaysian Studies* 33, Supp. 2 (2015): 27–52.

[30] K. G. Tregonning, "The Early Land Administration and Agricultural Development of Penang," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 39, no. 2 (1966): 34.

[31] L. A. Mills, "British Malaya 1824-67: Penang 1786-1830," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 33, no. 3 (1960): 36–59.

[32] Hussin, "A Tale of Two Colonial Port-Towns", 87.

[33] *Ibid*.

[34] *Ibid*.

Napoleonic Wars.[35] However, this ambition faltered due to logistical challenges, including a shortage of skilled artisans, suitable building materials, and essential supplies from Europe. Consequently, the plan to develop Penang as a naval base was eventually abandoned, especially after the Battle of Trafalgar, which secured Britain's naval supremacy in Europe and diminished the perceived necessity of such a base in the region.[36] Despite the failure of Penang to become a major shipbuilding and naval centre, the British administration persisted in its efforts to develop the colony economically. They encouraged migration to Penang, particularly from the Chinese, Indian, and Malay communities, as well as other ethnic groups from the Indonesian archipelago. These immigrants were instrumental in transforming Penang into an important agricultural and spice-producing region. The cultivation of crops such as rice, pepper, nutmeg, and cloves became central to Penang's economy, with pepper production reaching 2,000 tons by 1805, making it the island's staple product for over a decade.[37]

Georgetown, the capital town of Penang, was established on the site known as Tanjong Penaigre, without a formal blueprint for its layout. Francis Light, the first Lieutenant-Governor, named key commercial streets, and the town expanded as the population grew, leading to the construction of new roads and infrastructure. By 1800, the town's boundaries were defined by a river to the south and a canal to the west, separating the urban area from the surrounding hinterland.[38] As Georgetown continued to expand physically, Penang's political landscape also began to reflect the island's increasingly diverse and dynamic population. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Penang's municipal governance became more inclusive, marking a significant shift towards Asian representation.[39] This transition was initially gradual, with the establishment of a Committee of Assessors that included representatives from the Chinese, Indian, and Malay communities, whose primary role was to aid in tax collection and provide a token form of public consultation.[40] However, by 1923, Penang had made substantial progress, boasting an Asian majority within its municipal government. This was a pioneering model in the region, setting a precedent for elected municipal governance that would become more common across Southeast Asia by the 1930s.[41]

The increasing involvement of Asian representatives in Penang's governance was emblematic of broader socio-economic changes. A new class of affluent, English-speaking Asians, particularly the Straits-Chinese, began to assert their influence in both the public and

[35] M. Stubbs Brown, "The Failure of Penang as a Naval Base and Shipbuilding Centre," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 32, no. 1 (1959): 30–31.
[36] *Ibid*.
[37] Hussin, "A Tale of Two Colonial Port-Towns", 88.
[38] *Ibid*.
[39] Su Lin Lewis, *Cities in Motion: Urban Life and Cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia, 1920–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 74–76.
[40] *Ibid*., 75.
[41] *Ibid*. See also Yeoh, *Contesting Space*, 51.

private spheres.[42] These developments underscored the island's evolving identity as a cosmopolitan hub where different cultures and social classes interacted, negotiated, and coexisted within the colonial framework. Penang's cosmopolitan nature, characterised by its multicultural population and diverse consumer culture, became increasingly pronounced as the island integrated more deeply into the global economy. The history of commodity production and trade on the island highlights the dynamic interchange between local and global forces, illustrating how Penang functioned not just as a local centre of commerce but as a significant node in the broader British imperial network. The rise of an Asian-dominated municipal government, coupled with the growing prominence of wealthy Asian elites, reflects the complex intersections of colonialism, commerce, and cultural exchange that shaped Penang's development. This historical trajectory of Penang offers valuable insights into the interaction between colonial rule and the local population's responses to it. The island's development into a bustling entrepôt and its rich social fabric highlight the dynamic exchanges between different cultural identities and social classes within the colonial context. Penang's role as a centre of trade and its extensive archival records provides fertile ground for exploring the complexities of consumer culture and the impact of colonialism in Southeast Asia during this period.

Singapore, under British colonial rule, developed into a crucial strategic and commercial hub in Southeast Asia, reflecting the broader trends of British imperial expansion during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Established as a trading post in 1819 by Sir Stamford Raffles, Singapore quickly evolved into a major port city. Its geographic location, at the crossroads between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, made it an ideal site for the British to control regional trade routes, particularly those passing through the Straits of Melaka.[43] The port's establishment was a strategic move to counter Dutch influence in the region and to ensure British dominance over the lucrative trade between India, China, and the wider region.[44] The rapid growth of Singapore was driven by its status as a free port, which attracted merchants, labourers, and entrepreneurs from across Asia and beyond. This diverse influx of people transformed Singapore into a cosmopolitan hub, with a population that included Chinese, Malays, Indians, Eurasians, and Europeans.[45] By the mid-nineteenth century, Singapore, along with Penang and Malacca, was grouped under the Straits Settlements, which came under direct control of the British Colonial Office in 1867. This

[42] Lewis, *Cities in Motion*, 77.
[43] Constance Mary Turnbull, *A History of Singapore, 1819*-1988 (Singapore; New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 1.
[44] Wong Lin Ken, "The Strategic Significance of Singapore in Modern History," in *A History of Singapore*, ed. Ernest Chin Tiong Chew and Edwin Lee (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991), 17–35; See also Ernest C. T. Chew, "The Foundation of a British Settlement," in *A History of Singapore*, ed. Ernest Chin Tiong Chew and Edwin Lee (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991), 36–40.
[45] Chew, "The Foundation of a British Settlement," 36–40; See also Ai Lin Chua, *Modernity, Popular Culture and Urban Life: Anglophone Asians in Colonial Singapore, 1920–1940*, (PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2008), 16–17.

change marked the beginning of more formalized British administrative control, which was critical in shaping Singapore's development as a colonial city.[46] During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Singapore's significance grew, both as an economic and administrative centre of British Malaya. The city became a thriving international port, handling a vast array of goods from rubber and tin to textiles and manufactured products. By 1925, Singapore's foreign trade was valued at nearly $1.9 billion, reflecting its role as a key node in the global trade network.[47] The city's infrastructure developed rapidly during this period, with significant investments in roads, railways, and public buildings, further cementing its position as the economic heart of the region.

The interwar period saw continued growth in Singapore's commercial and urban landscape. The city's urban development during this time was marked by the construction of key buildings such as the City Hall, the Supreme Court, and the General Post Office, which still stand today as symbols of the colonial era. The retail and commercial sectors also expanded, with new shopping areas emerging alongside residential suburbs like Geylang and Katong, which catered to the city's growing middle class.[48] Singapore's socio-economic fabric during the interwar years was also characterised by the rise of a new class of English-speaking Asians, particularly the Straits-Chinese, who played a significant role in the city's commercial and social life.[49] These Anglophone Asians, educated in English schools and often involved in white-collar professions or entrepreneurial activities, became prominent figures in both the private and public spheres. Their influence was indicative of Singapore's evolving identity as a cosmopolitan city where various cultures and social classes interacted within the colonial framework.[50] The city's role as a major entrepôt in Southeast Asia was underpinned by its ability to function as a hub for the redistribution of goods between the East and West. This entrepôt trade, which was essential to Singapore's economy, involved the collection, processing, and re-export of goods from across the region.[51] Western merchants, in partnership with local Chinese middlemen, played a central role in this trade, which was facilitated by Singapore's strategic location and the infrastructure developed by the colonial administration. However, the Great Depression of the 1930s brought significant challenges to Singapore's economy. The global economic downturn led to a sharp decline in trade, and the imposition of trade barriers by other Southeast Asian countries further strained the city's

[46] Turnbull, *A History of Singapore*, xiii.
[47] Chua, *Modernity, Popular Culture and Urban Life*, 16–17.
[48] *Ibid*.; See also Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2003).
[49] Chua, *Modernity, Popular Culture and Urban Life*, 16; Wong Lin Ken, "Commercial Growth before the Second World War," in *A History of Singapore*, ed. Ernest Chin Tiong Chew and Edwin Lee (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991), 41–65.
[50] Chua, *Modernity, Popular Culture and Urban Life*, 16–19.
[51] Lin Ken, "Commercial Growth before the Second World War", 60–61.

commercial activities.[52] Despite these difficulties, Singapore remained a critical part of the British Empire's economic strategy in the region, with the British government reinforcing its importance by maintaining a strong naval presence to protect its interests.

The historical trajectory of Singapore offers valuable insights into the intersection of colonialism, commerce, and cultural exchange. The city's development as a thriving entrepôt and its diverse social fabric highlight the dynamic interactions between different cultural identities and social classes within the colonial context. Singapore's extensive archival resources, including government records, newspapers, and visual materials, provide a comprehensive view of its consumer practices and social transformations during this period. Singapore's growth from a small trading post into a major colonial port city was shaped by its strategic geographical location, its role as a free port, and the diverse population that it attracted. The city's historical development, marked by significant urban and commercial growth, underscores its importance as a key hub in the British Empire and offers a rich field for exploring the complexities of colonial urbanism and consumer culture in Southeast Asia.

The choice of Surabaya, Penang, and Singapore as case studies is grounded in their representativeness, availability of sources, and research feasibility. These cities represent major colonial powers in Southeast Asia: Dutch (Surabaya) and British (Singapore and Penang). This allows for a comparative analysis of how different colonial regimes shaped and responded to consumer culture. All three cities were major port cities and commercial hubs during the interwar period, making them ideal for studying the rise of consumerism and the interaction of local and global economic forces. Each city had diverse populations, allowing for an examination of how consumer culture intersected with various cultural identities and social classes.

The colonial archives for all three cities are relatively well-preserved, offering a rich source of information on government policies, economic data, and social trends related to consumerism. Additionally, these cities boasted thriving print cultures, with newspapers and magazines that featured advertisements, articles on consumer goods, and discussions of modernity. These provide valuable insights into the everyday lives and aspirations of the middle class, as well as the consumer aspirations and social dynamics of the time. Photographs, postcards, and other visual materials offer a glimpse into the physical spaces of consumption, such as department stores, markets, and colonial exhibitions. While each city is complex, focusing on three allows for in-depth analysis while maintaining a manageable scope for a thesis. The cities share enough similarities (port city status, emerging middle class, exposure to Western goods) to make comparisons meaningful, while also having distinct colonial histories and cultural contexts to highlight differences.

[52] Lin Ken, "Commercial Growth before the Second World War", 62–63.

While Bangkok, Batavia (Jakarta), and Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) are significant, the choice of Singapore, Surabaya, and Penang offers unique advantages aligned with the research focus. These three cities were major trading hubs, making them ideal for studying the emergence of consumer culture. In contrast, Bangkok had a different economic structure, Batavia was primarily administrative, and Saigon operated under a distinct colonial context with French rule. Singapore, Surabaya, and Penang, however, had vibrant middle classes with well-documented consumer practices, aligning perfectly with the emphasis on the everyday experiences of consumption.

Adopting a comparative-connective approach within the Malay World (*Dunia Melayu*) provides a nuanced understanding of colonial influences on consumer culture.[53] The British and Dutch had distinct approaches to governance, economic policies, and social engineering, which significantly impacted the development of consumer culture in their respective colonies. By examining and connecting these differences, one can discern how various colonial strategies influenced consumer habits, access to goods, and the integration of local traditions within the broader framework of colonial modernity. This approach not only highlights the diversity and complexity of colonial consumer cultures but also elucidates the interconnectedness and mutual influences between different colonial regimes and local populations. It reveals the varying degrees of resistance, adaptation, and cross-cultural exchanges that shaped the consumer landscapes of these cities.

This thesis employs the "spatial turn" in historical research to analyse these transformations. This approach, inspired by critical geography, conceptualises space as a physical stage and a dynamic social construct.[54] Following theorists like David Harvey, we can understand how colonial and local forces shaped both the physical and social realities of the era.[55] Building on this, the work of scholars like Henri Lefebvre and Charles Withers underscores the interplay of space with power, knowledge, and mental mapping.[56] Lefebvre, in *The Production of Space*, argues that capitalist societies produce space in particular ways to serve their interests, including the design of cities, the organisation of workplaces, and even the construction of social hierarchies.[57] Colonial powers used urban planning to achieve

[53] The Malay World (*Dunia Melayu* or *Alam Melayu*) refers to a cultural and historical concept that encompasses the Malay-speaking regions of Southeast Asia, including parts of modern-day Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Singapore, and Southern Thailand. The term has been used to describe a cultural and linguistic unity based on the spread of Malay language and culture. Historically, the concept gained prominence in the early 20th century alongside the rise of Malay nationalism. See Anthony Milner, *The Malays* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), 1–17.

[54] John A. Agnew, *Place and Politics: The Geographical Mediation of State and Society* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987): 28. In his study, Agnew termed place as locale as one of the fundamental aspects of place, besides place as location and the sense of place; See also Ralph Kingston, "Mind Over Matter? History and the Spatial Turn", *Cultural and Social History* 7, no. 1 (2010): 111–121.

[55] David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 261.

[56] Charles W. J. Withers, "Place and the 'Spatial Turn' in Geography and in History", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 70, no. 4 (2009): 638–639.

[57] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

segregation, control, and an image of modernity.[58] Withers highlights how mapping was a tool of control during the Enlightenment, allowing Europeans to shape their understanding of the world to justify colonialism.[59] Applying these insights to Southeast Asia allows us to see how colonial powers reshaped physical landscapes and attempted to control the flow of knowledge, people, and goods.

While Southeast Asian cities and urban histories have been a rich subject of research, the "spatial turn" offers a new theoretical lens.[60] It allows for a deeper analysis of the region's open and outward-oriented urban corridors in the 1920s and 1930s. Specifically, it helps us understand the complex ways transnational flows, the power of the middle class, and colonial systems interacted within urban spaces. Focusing on port cities provides a particularly insightful lens for examining these dynamics. Maritime historians have demonstrated that Southeast Asian port cities functioned as sites of complex interactions within a dynamic political and economic landscape.[61] Cities like Singapore, Penang, and Surabaya, with their multicultural communities, fostered intercultural exchange and a unique openness to the world.[62] This outward orientation sets them apart from predominantly inland-focused cities found in other parts of Asia. While cities like Angkor and Hanoi were historically important, port cities gained prominence as conduits of global trade.[63] Scholars like Hans-Dieter Evers and Rüdiger Korff's categorisation – identifying commercial cities, sacred cities, and intermediate cities – provides a framework for understanding how Southeast Asian urban spaces function.[64]

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[58] Liora Bigon, *A History of Urban Planning in Two West African Colonial Capitals* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2009); Ambe J. Njoh, "Urban Planning as a Tool of Power and Social Control in Colonial Africa," *Planning Perspectives* 24, no. 3 (2009): 301–317; Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore*; Robert Home, "Global Systems Foundations of the Discipline: Colonial, Postcolonial, and Other Power Structures," in *The Routledge Handbook of Planning History*, ed. Carola Hein (New York: Routledge, 2017): 91–106.

[59] Charles W. J. Withers, *Placing the Enlightenment: Thinking Geographically about the Age of Reason* (University of Chicago Press, 2008).

[60] See for example, Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore*; Terence Gary McGee, *The Southeast Asian City: A Social Geography of the Primate Cities of Southeast Asia* (London: G. Bell, 1967); Hans-Dieter Evers and Rüdiger Korff, *Southeast Asian Urbanism: the Meaning and Power of Social Space*, Vol. 7. LIT Verlag Münster, (2000); Howard Dick, Beyond the Third World City: the New Urban Geography of South-east Asia", *Urban Studies* 35, no. 12 (1998): 2301–2321; Paul H. Kratoska, Remco Raben, and Henk Schulte Nordholt, ed., *Locating Southeast Asia: Geographies of Knowledge and Politics of Space* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2005).

[61] Craig A. Lockard, "'The Sea Common to All': Maritime Frontiers, Port Cities, and Chinese Traders in the Southeast Asian Age of Commerce, Ca. 1400-1750", *Journal of World History* 21, no. 2 (2010): 221–222; See also César Ducruet, "Asian Cities in the Global Maritime Network since the Late Nineteenth Century," in *Asian Cities: Colonial to Global*, ed. Gregory Bracken (Amsterdam University Press, 2015): 173–186.

[62] Rhoads Murphey, "On the Evolution of the Port City," in *Brides of the Sea: Port Cities of Asia from the 16th–20th Centuries*, ed. Frank Broeze (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), 225; See also Lewis, *Cities in Motion*.

[63] Eric Tagliacozzo, "An Urban Ocean: Notes on the Historical Evolution of Coastal Cities in Greater Southeast Asia", *Journal of Urban History* 33, no. 6 (2007): 913–914; For information on these religious and agricultural cities, see Kenneth Hall and John Whitmore, ed., *Explorations in Early Southeast Asian History: The Origins of Southeast Asian Statecraft* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1976); Georges Coedes, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1968); D. G. E. Hall. *A History of South-East Asia* (London: Palgrave, 1981); for the old city in Java, see Soemarsaid Moertono, *Negara dan Usaha Bina-negara di Jawa Masa Lampau: Studi tentang masa Mataram II, abad XVI sampai XIX* [State and Statecraft in Old Java: A study of the later Mataram period, 16th to 19th century] (Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia, 1985);

[64] Hans-Dieter Evers and Rüdiger Korff, *Southeast Asian Urbanism: the Meaning and Power of Social Space*, (LIT Verlag Münster, 2000), 30.

Metropolises like Singapore and Surabaya, driven by commercial activity, developed an outward focus, actively engaging with international networks. In the early twentieth century, entrepôts like Penang became sites where European and Asian influences intersected, leading to adaptation, contestation, and assimilation.[65]

This focus on port cities builds upon a rich tradition of spatial analysis of Southeast Asian cities extending back to the 1940s. Pioneering studies by Ernest Dobby, Charles Fisher, Pierre Gourou, and others examined cities within the context of colonialism, land use, and economic geography.[66] While early studies may have painted Southeast Asian cities with broad strokes, scholars like Terence McGee identified common elements shaped by colonialism. For example, McGee noted how European planning left an imprint on the residential segregation within cities like Singapore.[67] This tradition of spatial analysis continued with subsequent work focusing on demographic shifts, migration patterns, and the unique challenges faced by these growing urban centres.[68]

Subsequent decades saw a broadening focus, with attention turning to themes like the informal economy, the influence of global finance, and the impact of globalisation on urban spaces.[69] Despite this rich body of scholarship, studies of interwar Southeast Asian cities often centre on their function as economic hubs, emphasising resource distribution and transport.[70] This leaves a crucial gap: the emergence of consumer culture and its impact on urban life. Therefore, this study aims to broaden our understanding of interwar Southeast Asian urbanism by examining cities like Surabaya, Singapore, and Penang through the lens of consumption

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[65] Constance Mary Turnbull, "Penang's Changing Role in the Straits Settlements, 1826–1946," in *Penang and Its Region: the Story of an Asian Entrepôt*, edited by Neil Khor, Khoo Salma Nasution, Loh Wei Leng, and Yeoh Seng Guan (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009); See also Turnbull, *A History of Singapore*.

[66] Ernest H. G. Dobby, *Southeast Asia* (London: University of London Press, 1950); Charles A. Fisher, *Southeast Asia: A Social, Economic and Political Geography* (London: Methuen, 1964); Pierre Gourou, *Land Utilisation in French Indochina* (New York: Institute of Pacic Relations, 1940); Charles Robequain, *L' Indochine* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1952); Joseph Earle Spencer, *Land and People in the Philippines: Geographic Problems in Rural Economy* (University of California Press, 1952); Frederick L. Wernstedt and Joseph Earle Spencer, *The Philippine island world: A physical, cultural, and regional geography* (University of California Press, 1967).

[67] McGee, *Southeast Asian City*, 72.

[68] Nathan Keyfitz, "The population of Indonesia", *Economics and Finance in Indonesia* (1953): 641–653; Norton S Ginsburg, "The great city in Southeast Asia", *American Journal of Sociology* 60, no. 5 (1955): 455–462; Gerald Breese, *Urbanisation in Newly Developing Economies* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1966). For discussion on concepts of urban-rural relations, see also Bert F. Hoselitz, "Generative and parasitic cities", *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 3, no. 3, (1955): 278–294; Dennis John Dwyer, "The Problem of In-migration and Squatter Settlement in Asian Cities: Two Case Studies, Manila and Victoria-Kowloon", *Asian Studies*, no. 2, (1962): 145–169; Terence Gary McGee, *The Southeast Asian City: A Social Geography of the Primate Cities of Southeast Asia* (London: G. Bell, 1967).

[69] Salem V. Sethuraman, "Urbanisation and Employment: a Case Study of Djakarta", *International Labour Review*, 112, (1975): 119–205; Howard W. Dick and Peter J. Rimmer, "Beyond the Informal/Formal Dichotomy: Towards an Integrated Approach," *Pacific Viewpoint*, 21, (1980): 26–41; John Friedmann and Goetz Wolff, "World City Formation: an Agenda for Research and Action," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 6, no. 3 (1982): 309–344; Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991); Paul Leslie Knox and Peter J. Taylor, *World Cities in a World System* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995); Marc Askew and William S. Logan, ed., *Cultural Identity and Urban Change in South-east Asia: Interpretive Essays* (Geelong: Deakin University Press, 1994); Fu-Chen Lo and Yue-man Yeung, ed., *Emerging World Cities in Pacific Asia* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 1995).

[70] Peter J. Rimmer and Howard W. Dick, *The City in Southeast Asia: Patterns, Processes and Policy* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), 3.

and shopping spaces. This perspective, as Lizabeth Cohen reminds us, highlights the overlooked social dynamics and the connection between colonialism and consumerism that many historians have neglected.[71] By exploring shopping and consumption spaces, I propose a social dynamic and connection between colonialism and consumerism in these periods that many historians still need to recognise. This analysis will specifically focus on the role of the urban middle class as key actors in shaping these dynamics.

Urban Middle Classes and Modernity

The early twentieth century witnessed the rise of a dynamic new social stratum in colonial Southeast Asia, often broadly categorised as the "middle class". Born from shifting colonial governance, economic opportunities, and the expansion of Western-style education, they did not mirror European definitions.[72] This class emerged alongside changes outlined by Robert Elson, as colonial powers centralised and bureaucratised, needing an educated local workforce.[73] To meet this need, they expanded educational institutions, though access remained limited.[74] While justified as an ethical mission, like the Dutch Ethical Policy (*Ethische Politiek*) to "uplift" people, the primary goals were a cost-effective, compliant, educated indigenous workforce.[75] This education, however, had unintended consequences. In places like Java, the new *priyayi*, traditionally the administrative elite, found themselves both side-lined and given new opportunities within the colonial system.[76] It inadvertently fuelled

[71] Lizabeth Cohen, "Is there an urban history of consumption?", *Journal of Urban History* 29, no. 2 (2003): 87–106; See also Xavier Costa, "Spaces of Consumption," in *Enhancing the City: New Perspectives for Tourism and Leisure*, ed. Giovanni Maciocco and Silvia Serreli (Springer, Dordrecht, 2009).

[72] Clive John Christie, *Southeast Asia in the Twentieth Century: A Reader* (London: IB Tauris, 1998), 12–15; See also Wendy Mee and Joel S. Kahn, ed., *Questioning Modernity in Indonesia and Malaysia* (Kyoto CSEAS Series on Asian Studies 5) (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012).

[73] Robert Elson, "International Commerce, the State and Society in Southeast Asia," in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia: Volume 2, The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Nicholas Tarling (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 131–196.

[74] Adrian Vickers, *A History of Modern Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 17; Donna J. Amoroso, *Traditionalism and the Ascendancy* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2014), 13; See also Anne Booth, "Colonial Revenue Policies and the Impact of the Transition to Independence in South East Asia", *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land-en volkenkunde/Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 169, no. 1 (2013): 40; Anne Booth, *The Indonesian Economy in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: A History of Missed Opportunities* (Basingstoke: Macmillan in association with The Australian National University, Canberra, 1998).

[75] Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia*, 189; See also Adrian Vickers, *A History of Modern Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 17–18, 23, 41, 45; Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, *Ethiek in Fragmenten: Vijf Studies over Koloniaal Denken en Doen van Nederlanders in de Indonesische Archipel, 1877–1942* [Ethics in Fragments: Five Studies on Colonial Thinking and Actions of the Dutch in the Indonesian Archipelago, 1877–1942] (Utrecht: Hes, 1981): 176–208; Jacobus Adrianus Antonius van Doorn, *De Laatste Eeuw van Indië: Ontwikkeling en Ondergang van een Koloniaal Project* [The Last Century of the Indies: Development and Decline of a Colonial Project] (B. Bakker, 1994); On the need of Civil Service in Malaya, see Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia* (2nd edition) (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 161.

[76] Heather Sutherland, "The priyayi", *Indonesia* 19 (1975); Heather Sutherland, *The Making of a Bureaucratic Elite: The Colonial Transformation of the Javanese Priyayi*, (Singapore: Heineman Educational Books, 1979); Takashi Shiraishi, *An age in motion: Popular radicalism in Java, 1912-1926*, (Cornell University Press, 1990); Robert van Niel, *The Emergence of the Modern Indonesian Elite*, (Leiden: Brill, 1960).

aspirations rooted in Western concepts of progress and individual freedoms, disrupting traditional hierarchies where titles often signified power.[77]

Importantly, while the term "middle class" might seem tied to recent developments, Southeast Asia boasts a complex history of mercantile communities. Early modern trading hubs reveal a class engaged in commerce, operating with some independence from traditional social hierarchies based on lineage or birth.[78] While these kingdoms often relied on systems of slavery and other exploitative labor practices, they demonstrated that the concept of a class positioned between traditional elites and the masses was not entirely foreign.[79] This complex history underscores the challenges of a single, universal definition of "middle class" in Southeast Asia. It suggests that the modern form of this class is an evolving blend of historical influences and the unique circumstances of the colonial era.

For Southeast Asia's burgeoning middle class, "modernity" held profound allure.[80] Unlike the European ideal emphasising a break from the past, their concept involved a complex negotiation of Western influences and local traditions.[81] This quest for "modernity" was inherently tied to participation in the new consumer culture. Embracing Western fashion, frequenting department stores, and furnishing homes with imported goods took on symbolic weight, signalling progress and rejecting what was perceived as outdated.[82] This blending of influences was not a rejection of tradition but a continuous personal and communal navigation of an evolving cultural landscape. Importantly, while this pursuit of consumer-driven modernity could align with colonial goals, it could also subtly challenge colonial authority by showcasing the economic agency and sophistication of this emerging group.

This complex expression of modernity, shaped by consumer culture, forms the crux of debates surrounding the middle class and nationalist movements. While nationalism played a significant role, overemphasizing this aspect obscures the multifaceted ways in which a

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[77] Heather Sutherland, *The Making of a Bureaucratic Elite* (Singapore: Heinemann, 1979); See also Syed Husein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and Its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism* (London: Frank CASS, 1977).

[78] Sutherland, *The Making of a Bureaucratic Elite*, 7; James Francis Warren, *The Sulu Zone, 1768-1898: The Dynamics of External Trade, Slavery, and Ethnicity in the Transformation of a Southeast Asian Maritime State* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007), xxxii, 183.

[79] Marie Antoinette Petronella Meilink-Roelofsz, *Asian Trade and European Influence in the Indonesian Archipelago Between 1500 and about 1630* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1962), 30, 53.

[80] Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

[81] Frederick Cooper, "Modernity," in *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 113–152; See also Daniel Goh, "States of Ethnography: Colonialism, Resistance, and Cultural Transcription in Malaya and the Philippines, 1890s–1930s", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (2007): 109–142; Syed Hussein Alatas, *Modernization and Social Change: Studies in Modernization, Religion, Social Change and Development in South-East Asia*, (London: Angus & Robertson Publishers, 1972); For the male-ness character of Southeast Asian modernity, see Anthony Reid, "Urban Respectability and the Maleness of (Southeast) Asian Modernity." *Asian Review of World Histories* 2, no. 2, (2014): 147–167.

[82] Henk Schulte Nordholt, "The State on the Skin: Clothes, Shoes, and Neatness in (Colonial) Indonesia", *Asian Studies Review* 21, no. 1 (1997): 19–39; Tom Hoogervorst and Henk Schulte Nordholt, "Urban Middle Classes in Colonial Java (1900–1942): Images and Language", *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land-en volkenkunde/Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 173, no. 4 (2017): 442–474.

modern lifestyle - influenced by both colonial and local forces - shaped identities within this group. As William O'Malley has critiqued, nationalist historiography can overlook these complexities, a limitation highlighted by those who held anti-colonial views but did not always embrace overt activism.[83] Expanding on this, Joel Kahn's analysis of the Malay world reveals nationalism's dynamism, often existing alongside cosmopolitanism.[84] His framework of "hybrid" identities, blending local traditions and global outlooks, challenges simplified narratives and offers a more nuanced understanding of both nationalism and cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia, particularly for the middle class.

The new middle class embodied the complexities of the colonial experience. Their desire for "modernity" did not automatically translate into overt nationalist sentiment. A spectrum of responses emerged, from those advocating for collaboration or gradual reform within the existing colonial system to those embracing outright resistance. Scholars like Takashi Shiraishi and Abdul Rahman Embong highlight their role in diverse social movements.[85] Some sought to harness the power of pan-religious or pan-Asian movements for empowerment.[86] This diversity reflects the inherent instability of the colonial project, revealing a class with the desire for change but diverse visions for achieving it. Like their counterparts in colonial India, Southeast Asia's new middle class navigated a fractured modernity.[87] British rule in India similarly introduced Western institutions like education and the civil service, producing an educated class that adopted aspects of Western culture while maintaining tradition. This complex mix of influences demonstrates the potential for conflict embedded within colonial modernity itself.

To fully understand the middle class's experience, a more nuanced approach is needed that moves beyond a sole focus on nationalism.[88] This narrow emphasis on nationalism overlooks a crucial element: the concept of "cultural citizenship," coined by anthropologist Renato Rosaldo and applied to the Southeast Asian context by historian Henk

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[83] William O'Malley, "Second Thoughts on Indonesian Nationalism." In *Indonesia: Australian Perspectives*, ed. J. J. Fox, R. G. Garnaut, P. T. McCawley, and J. A. C. Mackie (Canberra: ANU, 1980), 601–613.

[84] Joel S. Kahn, *Other Malays: Nationalism and cosmopolitanism in the modern Malay world*, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2006).

[85] Takashi Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion: Popular Radicalism in Java 1912-1926* (Ithaca N.Y., Cornell University Press, 1990); Abdul Rahman Embong, "Malaysian Middle-class Studies: A Critical Review," in *Rethinking Malaysia*, ed. Jomo Kwame Sundaram (Hong Kong: Asia Press, 1999).

[86] William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967): 56–90; William J. Duiker, "Phan Boi Chau: Asian Revolutionary in a Changing World", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 31, no. 1 (1971): 79.

[87] Sanjay Joshi, *Fractured Modernity: Making of a Middle Class in Colonial North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2.

[88] Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*; Akira Nagazumi, *The Dawn of Indonesian Nationalism: The Early Years of the Budi Utomo, 1908–1918* (Tokyo: Institute of Developing Economies, 1972); John Ingleson, *Road to Exile: the Indonesian Nationalist Movement 1927–1934* (Singapore, etc.: Heinemann Educational Asia, 1979); Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion*; Timothy Norman Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Safrizal Rambe, *Sarekat Islam: Pelopor Nasionalisme Indonesia, 1905–1942* [Sarekat Islam: Pioneers of Indonesian Nationalism, 1905–1942] (Jakarta: Yayasan Kebangkitan Insan Cendekia, 2008); See also Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons*.

Schulte Nordholt.[89] This concept offers a different way to conceptualise the middle-class experience. It emphasises their desire to participate in the modern world by adopting its cultural markers and social practices. As explored in Chapter 2, this participation extended beyond political activism and included consuming modern goods, embracing Western leisure activities, and adopting fashion trends. To them, modernisation was not simply a means towards independence but a path towards achieving a modern lifestyle within a shifting global landscape.

By examining their role as consumers, we can investigate their agency in shaping consumer culture and identity formation and how these practices reflected and interacted with colonial power structures. As Hans van Miert highlights regarding Indonesian history, focusing solely on dominant narratives, like those centred on secular nationalism, obscures a fuller understanding of people's lived experiences.[90] Organisations like the Sundanese Pasundan Association, with their less radical stance and focus on education and regional traditions, often had a broader and deeper influence within the middle class.[91] My research positions itself to go beyond the established focus on nationalism within studies of the colonial middle class by examining how cultural citizenship was enacted through consumption and lifestyle choices. I argue that these practices were essential to how the middle class expressed and claimed their participation in modernity, offering a more concrete understanding of lived experiences. This analysis reveals a complex and paradoxical understanding of modernity. While cultural citizenship emphasises agency, a focus on consumption demonstrates how aspirations for a modern lifestyle could inadvertently reinforce existing colonial power structures.

This nuanced approach, focused on consumption and lifestyle, reveals how the middle class' embrace of multifaceted modernity extended far beyond the political realm. The pursuit of a "modern" lifestyle was intimately tied to the rise of consumer culture and the allure of Western goods. This perspective challenges conventional narratives that primarily view the middle class through a lens of anti-colonial resistance. Instead, it emphasises their complex position as active participants in a new consumer landscape shaped by colonial power and global influences. Colonial fairs were a concrete manifestation of this shift towards consumption. These fairs reflected the interplay of globalised commodities, colonial influence, and emerging nationalist sentiment. Showcasing imported and locally produced goods, they

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[89] Renato Rosaldo, "Introduction: The Borders of Belonging: Nation and citizen in the hinterlands," in *Cultural Citizenship in Island Southeast Asia: Nation and Belonging in the Hinterlands*, ed. Renato Rosaldo (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 1-15. See also Gerard Delanty, "Two Conceptions of Cultural Citizenship: A Review of Recent Literature on Culture and Citizenship," *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics* 1:3 (2002): 60–66; Henk Schulte Nordholt, "Modernity and Cultural Citizenship in the Netherlands Indies: An illustrated hypothesis," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 42, (3), 2011: 435–457.

[90] Hans van Miert, *Een Koel Hoofd en Een Warm Hart: Nationalisme, Javanisme en Jeugdbeweging in Nederlands-Indië 1918–1930 [A Cool Head and a Warm Heart: Nationalism, Javanese and Youth Movement in the Dutch East Indies 1918–1930]* (Amsterdam: De Bataafsche Leeuw, 1995).

[91] *Ibid*.

became arenas for negotiating meaning and identity. The concept of "modernity" was packaged uniquely in each location. As discussed in Chapter 5, the fair in Penang emphasised technological innovation to promote the superiority of Western goods. Surabaya's annual market highlighted contrasts between imported and local products, serving as a tool for the colonial project of civilisation. By showcasing a more comprehensive array of (often superior) Western goods, the aim was to encourage the adoption of Western lifestyles and consumption patterns, thereby reinforcing colonial dominance. Singapore's Empire Shopping Week offers the starkest example, intrinsically linking modernity to imperial loyalty and framing consumption choices as acts of political allegiance.

While sharing similarities with World's Fairs held in Western metropoles, colonial fairs, like those in Hanoi and Manila had a distinct focus.[92] Unlike their metropolitan counterparts, they primarily targeted colonised populations.[93] Additionally, the emphasis shifted from showcasing ethnographic displays to presenting a colonial-centric vision of "modernity".[94] However, these fairs also unintentionally provided a space for public expression. Within these fairs, visitors could voice anxieties and frustrations arising from the colonial experience, albeit indirectly, through their engagement with the exhibits and the narratives they presented.[95] This engagement allowed visitors to shape their identities and negotiate the meaning of "modernity" in a context where overt resistance was often restricted.

These annual fairs served as powerful tools for the colonial state's twentieth-century project of instilling ideas of "modernisation" and "civilisation".[96] These fairs demonstrate the attempt at colonial control not simply through force but by actively shaping the desires and outlooks of the colonised population.[97] Material culture played a central role in this endeavour. From the selection of exhibited goods to the architecture of the fairgrounds and even the way

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[92] Arnout H. C. van der Meer, "Performing Colonial Modernity: Fairs, Consumerism, and the Emergence of the Indonesian Middle Classes", *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land-en volkenkunde/Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 173, (4), (2017): 505; See also, Frances Gouda, *Dutch Culture Overseas: Colonial Practice in the Netherlands Indies 1900–1942* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995).

[93] van der Meer, "Performing Colonial Modernity", 504; See also Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Marieke Bloembergen, *Colonial Spectacles: The Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies at the World Exhibitions, 1880–1931*, trans. Beverly Jackson (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006); Patricia A. Morton, *Hybrid Modernities: Architecture and Representation at the 1931 Colonial Exposition, Paris* (Cambridge, M.A.: MIT Press, 2000).

[94] Joost Coté, "Staging Modernity: The Semarang International Colonial Exhibition, 1914," *RIMA: Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 40, (1), 2006): 1–44; See also Joost Coté, "'To See is to Know': The Pedagogy of the Colonial Exhibition, Semarang, 1914," *Paedagogica Historica* 36, no. 1 (2000): 340–366.

[95] Setha M. Low, *On The Plaza: The Politics of Public Space and Culture* (University of Texas Press, 2000), 201.

[96] van der Meer, "Performing Colonial Modernity", 506; See also Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, *Ethiek in Fragmenten: Vijf Studies over Koloniaal Denken en Doen van Nederlanders in de Indonesische Archipel, 1877–1942* [Ethics in Fragments: Five Studies on Colonial Thinking and Actions of the Dutch in the Indonesian Archipelago, 1877–1942] (Utrecht: Hes, 1981), 176–208; Jacobus Adrianus Antonius van Doorn, *De Laatste Eeuw van Indië: Ontwikkeling en Ondergang van Een Koloniaal Project* [The Last Century of the Indies: Development and Decline of a Colonial Project] (B. Bakker, 1994); Vincent Houben, "Representations of Modernity in Colonial Indonesia", in *Figurations of Modernity: Global and Local Representations in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Mona Schrempf and Vincent Houben (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2008), 23–40.

[97] van der Meer, "Performing Colonial Modernity", 506.

visitors presented themselves, each detail was meticulously crafted to shape impressions and reinforce the colonial narrative.

This emphasis on instilling a colonial vision of "modernisation" must be understood within a Southeast Asian context, where alternative models of modernity existed. Historian Elsbeth Locher-Scholten emphasises that Southeast Asians had multiple models of modernity. Japan offered a potent alternative to Western examples. Miriam Silverberg and Harry Harootunian demonstrate how the Japanese middle class embraced modernity prior to the war.[98] Harootunian highlights the pervasiveness of modernity – found in fashion, media, transportation, work, leisure, and family life. This focus on the everyday experience of modernity is crucial for understanding its impact. While Japanese scholars have extensively researched this topic, similar studies in Southeast Asia are limited.[99]

This unique historical context deeply influenced how class identity was expressed in modern Southeast Asia. While still associated with modernity, social hierarchy, education, profession, and purchasing power, the middle class here displayed nuances that set them apart.[100] Ideas of modernity became intertwined with consumer choices; however, consumers were not simply passive recipients but active creators of meaning within a system shaped by both global trends and local realities.[101] Consumerism became a way to express identity and even engage in political action.[102] Crucially, this process was deeply gendered. Women played vital roles shaping lifestyles and influencing the social values of this emerging class.[103] This emphasis on consumption as an expression of identity offers a crucial lens for understanding the everyday acts of resistance explored by scholars like Arnout van der Meer and Bart

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[98] Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, *Women and the Colonial State: Essays on Gender and Modernity in the Netherlands Indies 1900-1942* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2000); Miriam Silverberg, "Constructing the Japanese ethnography of modernity", *Journal of Asian Studies* 51 (1992): 30–54; Harry Harootunian, *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

[99] For example, Kathleen M. Adams and Kathleen A. Gillogly, *Everyday Life in Southeast Asia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

[100] Seung-Kuk Kim, "Changing Lifestyles and Consumption Patterns of the South Korean Middle Class and New Generations," in *Consumption in Asia*, ed. Chua Beng-Huat (London: Routledge, 2000), 77–97; Chengze Simon Fan, "Economic Development and the Changing Patterns of Consumption in Urban China," in *Consumption in Asia*, ed. Chua Beng-Huat (London: Routledge, 2000), 98–113; Annie Hau-nung Chan. "Middle-class Formation and Consumption in Hong Kong," in *Consumption in Asia*, ed. Chua Beng-Huat (London: Routledge, 2000), 114–150.

[101] Beng-Huat, ed., *Consumption in Asia*; Joel S. Kahn, "Constructing Culture: Towards an Anthropology of the Middle Classes in Southeast Asia," *Asian Studies Review* 15, no. 2 (1991): 50–56. See also Joel S. Khan, "Class, Ethnicity and Diversity: Some remarks on Malay culture in Malaysia", in *Fragmented vision: Culture and Politics in Contemporary Malaysia*, ed. Joel S. Kahn and Francis Loh Kok Wah (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, Asian Studies Association of Australia, Southeast Asia Publications Series, 22, 1992), 158–178; See also Frank Trentmann (Ed.), *The Making of the Consumer: Knowledge, Power and Identity in the Modern World* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2006).

[102] Ariel Heryanto, "The Years of Living Luxuriously: Identity Politics of Indonesia's New Rich", in *Culture and Privilege in capitalist Asia*, ed. M. Pinches (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 178–179.

[103] Maila Stivens, "Theorising Gender, Power and Modernity in Affluent Southeast Asia", in *Gender and Power in Affluent Southeast Asia*, ed. Krishna Sen and Maila Stivens (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 2–9; Maila Stivens, "Sex, Gender and the Making of the New Malay Middle Classes, in *Gender and Power in Affluent Southeast Asia*, ed. Krishna Sen and Maila Stivens (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 87–126.

Luttikhuis.[104] By analysing seemingly ordinary actions within their broader context, I can examine how the struggle against colonialism was woven into daily life. Consumer choices, for example, became powerful tools for expressing dissent and shaping a collective identity that both embraced modernity and challenged colonial authority.

Consumer Culture and the World of Commodities

Consumer culture is a central aspect of modern society, and its origins are deeply intertwined with processes like industrialisation, urbanisation, and globalisation.[105] Scholars like Zygmunt Bauman argue that consumer culture is a hallmark of modernity itself, offering identity and meaning in a world where traditional structures are weakening.[106] Jean Baudrillard presents a more cynical view, seeing consumerism as a response to existential emptiness within modern life.[107] He believes that individuals attempt to fill this void by pursuing goods and experiences that provide status and a semblance of purpose.

These views lead to critical perspectives on the role of consumer culture in maintaining existing power structures. David Harvey emphasises consumerism as a distraction from political action, a way for those in power to keep people focused on acquisition rather than challenging the prevailing capitalist system.[108] Louis Althusser suggests that consumer society is a potent "ideological state apparatus." He argues that advertising, in particular, serves as a tool to instil beliefs about the attainability of happiness through material goods, keeping people passive and obedient to existing power structures.[109] Despite these critical views, there is an undeniable, complex relationship between modernity and consumer culture that highlights the evolving values of contemporary society. Consumer culture, a distinct feature of modernity, undeniably shapes the experience of individuals. It plays a significant role in status, image, identity formation, and everyday life. Therefore, consumption practices serve both as a means of individual expression and a tool potentially utilised for social control.[110]

Consumption, as a facet of daily life, became a medium through which individuals expressed their political leanings and their stance towards modernity and the evolving

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[104] Bart Luttikhuis and Arnout H. C. van der Meer, "1913 in Indonesian History: Demanding Equality, Changing Mentality," *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and-National Studies of Southeast Asia* 8, no. 2 (2020): 115–33.

[105] Douglas J. Goodman, "Globalization and Consumer Culture", in *The Blackwell Companion to Globalization*, edited by G. Ritzer (ed.), (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007): 330–351; See also Susan Strasser, "The alien past: Consumer culture in historical perspective", *Journal of Consumer Policy* 26, no. 4 (2003): 375–393; Mary Douglas and Baron C. Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption: with a New Introduction*. [Rev. ed], (London; New York: Routledge, 1996).

[106] Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

[107] Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (New York: Sage, 2016).

[108] David Harvey, "Labor, Capital, and Class Struggle around the Built Environment in Advanced Capitalist Societies", *Politics & Society,* Vol. 6, No.3 (1976): 275.

[109] Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (London: Verso, 2014).

[110] Antonio L. Rappa, *Modernity and Consumption Theory. Politics and the Public in Singapore and Malaysia* (New Jersey: World Scientific, 2002), 2.

consumer culture.[111] The objects people bought, used, and displayed reflected their relationship with the forces of change. The awakening was not just a call to political action but a shift in mindset, encouraging individuals to exercise autonomy and assert their identity in all areas of life, including consumption. This resulted in a unique dynamic wherein consumption practices became both a mirror and a tool of resistance. The things people chose to consume (or not consume) conveyed their responses to the pressures of modernity, globalisation, and cultural change. In essence, the "awakening" was a catalytic force that permeated every facet of life in Southeast Asia during this period. It ignited a spirit of resistance and critique that shaped the region's response to the encroaching forces of modernity and consumerism.

The idea of "modernity," in its broadest sense, signifies more than a political movement towards independence. It encapsulates the essence of resistance as not merely a political process but one encompassing personal and social change. This perspective resonates with the work of Henri Lefebvre, a French Marxist philosopher and sociologist, and his critique of everyday life.[112] Lefebvre emphasised the "everyday" as a space where societal transformation is both experienced and enacted. He stressed the interconnectedness between everyday practices and larger socio-political structures. In his analysis, everyday life is not a passive backdrop to socio-political change; rather, it is an active site of resistance and transformation.

Applying a similar lens to the "awakening" in colonial Indonesia and Malaya, the process of social transformation extended beyond institutional or political shifts. It was a lived experience that transformed the "everyday", disrupting colonial norms and replacing them with practices reflecting the aspirations of an emerging nation. Individual choices and habits – the desire to dress better, eat better, or have better entertainment – were acts of reclaiming identity, asserting autonomy, and carving out a sense of place in a changing socio-political landscape. My work offers a nuanced understanding of these seemingly mundane aspirations. I argue that they were not simply expressions of a desire for improved quality of life but also powerful acts of resistance that directly challenged the colonial order. This perspective highlights the everyday as a critical site of social change, per Lefebvre's conception.

This shift towards the "everyday" as a locus of resistance has economic implications as well. In his study "*Monsoon Marketplace*", Fernando (Elmo) Gonzaga examines consumer capitalism, Singapore, and Manila.[113] While his work offers valuable insights into the rhetoric of consumerism and its link to urban modernity, his post-colonial focus offers a different lens on these dynamics compared to the colonial era. My work complements this by providing a historically grounded analysis of consumer culture specifically within the colonial context,

[111] David Graeber, "Consumption," *Current Anthropology* 52, no. 4 (2011): 489–511.
[112] Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, trans. John Moore and Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2005).
[113] Fernando Gonzaga, "*Monsoon Marketplace: Inscriptions and Trajectories of Consumer Capitalism and Urban Modernity in Singapore and Manila*," (PhD dissertation, University of California Berkeley, 2014).

delving into the unique power dynamics and social structures of that period. Importantly, this analysis draws upon Jean Baudrillard's observation that the crisis of 1929 revealed a key shift: capitalist societies had to transition from a focus on production to stimulating consumption.[114] This led to cultural forces, including advertising, encouraging consumerism as a mark of success. While Baudrillard primarily focused on Western societies, the underlying shift he describes is crucial for understanding transformations in colonial Southeast Asia. Here, colonial economies became increasingly dependent on expanding consumption among local populations, particularly in growing urban centres.

Notes on Sources

This study is underpinned by a diverse array of sources, including archival documents, contemporary newspapers and periodicals, official reports, and photographs where available. These sources offer rich insights into the everyday practices of consumption, the strategies of advertisers and merchants, and the responses of colonial authorities and local populations. Through a critical analysis of these materials, the thesis employs a multidisciplinary approach that intersects history, cultural studies, and urban geography, providing a comprehensive understanding of consumer culture in colonial Southeast Asia. This approach is particularly valuable when examining advertisements, which, as Slater suggests, acted as "maps of modernity," guiding individuals through the complex world of commercialism.[115]

To explore the perspectives of the middle class in the three cities under study, I analyse a broad range of contemporary periodicals in Jawi, Malay, English, and Dutch. These diverse publications offered not only news but also valuable debates and commentary from their readership. Key English-language periodicals include *Penang Shopping Corner*, *Straits Echo*, *The Malayan Saturday Post Illustrated*, and *Straits Times*. Significant Dutch-language sources include *Middenstandsnieuws*, *D'Orient*, *De Indische Courant*, and *Soerabaiasch Handelsblad*, while important Indonesian-language sources include *Doenia Dagang*, *Bintang Soerabaja*, and *Soeara Oemoem*. Additionally, regional publications like the *Hong Kong Daily Press* and *South China Morning Post* contribute valuable perspectives from the broader colonial context. Given that most sources are drawn from newspapers and magazines, it is essential for the reader to appreciate the varied editorial positions and target audiences of these periodicals. Newspapers such as the *Straits Times* did more than simply report events; they actively shaped public opinion and influenced government policy through editorial stances and the issues they highlighted. This interaction between the press, public opinion, and colonial authorities was a defining feature of the print landscape in Southeast Asia, playing a crucial role in the development of consumer culture.

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[114] Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, trans. with 'Introduction' by Mark Poster (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975), 144.

[115] Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 86–87.

The print media landscape in colonial Southeast Asia was dynamic and multifaceted, with newspapers and periodicals significantly shaping public discourse and reflecting the region's socio-economic transformations. In Singapore, the *Straits Times* stood as the leading English-language newspaper, primarily catering to the European elite but gradually expanding its readership to include the growing middle class, which encompassed both European and Asian professionals. Under the editorship of figures like George Seabridge in the late 1920s and 1930s, the paper modernised its format and strategically adjusted its pricing to remain competitive with rival publications like the *Malaya Tribune*.[116] This competition highlighted the shifting demands of an increasingly diverse readership that included servicemen, professionals, and the English-educated Asian middle class.

Between 1930 and 1941, despite the economic challenges of the Great Depression, the newspaper industry across the region witnessed a remarkable surge. This period was characterised by significant shifts in newspaper content and structure, particularly in the Malay press, which transitioned from being primarily conveyors of news to becoming platforms for public discourse. Rising literacy rates and changing social dynamics drove greater participation in the media, with Malay newspapers increasingly focusing on editorials, letters to the editor, and opinion pieces—transforming into what Mark Emmanuel refers to as "viewspapers," where public opinion was formed and debated.[117]

Participation in the Malay press during this period extended beyond the bourgeoisie, as a wider range of Malays, including those from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, engaged with the press as readers, writers, and listeners. This engagement reflected their response to the shifting realities of life in Malaya, including demographic changes that threatened the Malay majority and increased concerns over their economic and political vulnerability, particularly in relation to Chinese and Indian communities.[118] The economic pressures of the Great Depression heightened these concerns, bringing economic issues to the forefront of public discourse. Malay newspapers like *Warta Malaya*, with its detailed reports on declining commodity prices, became critical platforms for discussions about the community's economic condition and broader role within the colonial economy.[119] The periodicals in circulation during this time were far from monolithic, varying significantly in their editorial stances, target audiences, and content priorities. While the *Straits Times* was known for its comprehensive coverage of international and local news, financial reports, and features, the *Malaya Tribune*, launched in 1914, sought to represent the interests of the locally domiciled

[116] Constance Mary Turnbull, *Dateline Singapore: 150 Years of The Straits Times* (Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 1995), 80–102.
[117] Mark Emmanuel, "Viewspapers: The Malay Press of the 1930s," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 41, no. 1 (2010): 1.
[118] *Ibid*., 2.
[119] *Ibid*.

communities, particularly English-educated Asians.[120] With its more affordable pricing and focus on local Malayan issues, the *Tribune* challenged the dominance of the *Straits Times* in the English-language press.

In Penang, the print landscape was shaped by the city's role as both a commercial hub and cultural crossroads. Newspapers like the *Straits Echo* and the *Pinang Gazette* were key players in this dynamic environment, particularly for the Chinese and Eurasian communities. The *Straits Echo*, under the editorship of Manicasothy Saravanamuttu, or "Sara," evolved into a highly influential paper that reflected Penang's cosmopolitan identity in the 1930s.[121] An Oxford-educated Fabian, Sara transformed the *Straits Echo* into a progressive, left-leaning platform advocating for political reform and greater Asian representation.[122] His leadership helped make the *Echo* a vibrant source of debate on social and political issues, resonating deeply with Penang's diverse populace, which included Chinese, Malays, Indians, and Eurasians—many of whom viewed themselves as British subjects with the right to participate in colonial governance.

Although the *Pinang Gazette* saw a decline in circulation by the 1930s, it retained a loyal following among the older European and Eurasian elite. Eventually absorbed by the *Straits Echo*, the Gazette's absorption underscored the growing dominance of the *Echo* in Penang's print media. Under Sara's stewardship, the *Straits Echo* promoted a vision of a cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic society, reflecting local concerns and fostering a sense of collective identity. This was particularly significant given the competition from larger Singapore-based publications like the *Straits Times*. Sara's editorial stance emphasised both reformist ideals and the commercial realities of Penang, balancing these two to maintain the *Echo*'s relevance and influence.[123]

Alongside these major newspapers, Penang's print culture was further enriched by smaller commercial magazines like *Penang Shopping Corner*. This monthly magazine, distributed free to over 2,000 residents of Penang, Province Wellesley, and Kedah, catered to practical needs by offering advertisements, household tips, beauty advice, cooking notes, short stories, and tourist information.[124] Endorsed by prominent figures such as H. H. Abdoolcader, a member of the Legislative Council, *Penang Shopping Corner* became a vital resource for both residents and merchants, reflecting Penang's role as a commercial centre.[125] The coexistence of politically engaged newspapers like *The Straits Echo* and commercially

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[120] Turnbull, *Dateline Singapore*, 78–79.
[121] For the autobiography of Sara, see Manicosothy Saravanamuttu, *The Sara Saga* (Penang: Cathay Printers, 1970).
[122] Su Lin Lewis, "Print and Colonial Port Cultures of the Indian Ocean Littoral: Penang and Rangoon," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 82, no. 2 (297) [Peranakan Chinese in Penang and the Region] (December 2009): 9–24; See also Lin Lewis, "Print Culture and the New Maritime Frontier in Rangoon and Penang," *Moussons: Social Science Research on Southeast Asia* 17 (2011): 127–144.
[123] Lewis, "Print and Colonial Port Cultures", 20.
[124] *Penang Shopping Corner* Sep 1, 1939, 2.
[125] *Ibid*., 3.

oriented publications like *Penang Shopping Corner* exemplifies the diversity of Penang's print media landscape, where political engagement, intellectual discourse, and consumerism intersected.

Similarly, the print landscape of colonial Indonesia, particularly in Surabaya, reflected the intersection of Dutch colonialism and the region's diverse socio-economic fabric. As a major port city, Surabaya's significance as a commercial and urban centre shaped its early newspaper industry, much like in Batavia and Semarang. Initially driven by Dutch colonial administrative needs and evangelical efforts, the press gradually evolved into a medium that reflected the commercial and political realities of a rapidly changing colonial society.[126] By the second quarter of the nineteenth century, privately owned printing presses emerged, marking a new chapter in Indonesia's newspaper history. Surabaya, Batavia, and Semarang became key centres for newspaper production, catering to the needs of merchants and traders engaged in the region's growing trade and commerce. Newspapers served as crucial conduits for advertising and market information, reflecting the increasing role of print media in facilitating economic activity.[127] However, these early publications, such as *Soerabaijasch Courant*, *Bataviaasch Advertentieblad*, and the *Nederlandsch Indisch Handelsblad* were largely confined to the European and Eurasian communities, with widespread illiteracy among the indigenous population limiting their broader reach.[128]

The rise of the vernacular press in the late nineteenth century, however, transformed the print landscape in cities like Surabaya. Educated peranakan Chinese and Indo journalists played a critical role in this shift, using the Malay-language press to articulate the concerns and aspirations of a more diverse readership.[129] These publications, though often short-lived, became essential platforms for expressing social and political issues facing the colony's inhabitants. The rapid social and economic changes occurring in urban Indonesia during this period led to the proliferation of Malay, Javanese, and Chinese-language newspapers, shaping public opinion and fostering a sense of communal identity.[130] The press in Surabaya, as in other colonial cities, acted as a barometer of social change. Newspapers not only documented the commercial and political developments of the day but also served as platforms for debate and dissent. As newspapers became more accessible to a wider audience, they played a key role in shaping early Indonesian nationalist sentiments, reflecting the growing sense of identity and self-awareness among Indonesians.

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[126] Ahmat B. Adam, *The Vernacular Press and the Emergence of Modern Indonesian Consciousness (1855-1913)* (Ithaca, New York: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1995), 1–5
[127] *Ibid*., 7.
[128] Nobuto Yamamoto, *Censorship in Colonial Indonesia, 1901–1942* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 23, 27; Adam, *The Vernacular Press*, 19.
[129] Adam, *The Vernacular Press*, 10–14.
[130] *Ibid*., 9.

The development of the vernacular press thus laid the groundwork for the nationalist movements that would later challenge colonial rule, turning the printed word into a powerful tool for social and political change across the archipelago. Print culture in these cities played a key role in shaping public opinion and sparking debate. Newspapers and periodicals went beyond merely reporting events; they actively influenced social and political conversations. In urban centres across the region, print media captured the various aspects of colonial life, from the commercial activities of traders to the growing political awareness among different groups. As the press developed, it became a vital platform for engaging with issues of identity, governance, and reform, reflecting the shifting dynamics of colonial rule. Many newspapers initially focused on business needs and commercial interests, but they soon became spaces for the rising middle class to engage with current events and discuss broader societal concerns. The rise of the vernacular press enabled more inclusive participation in these discussions, giving voice to a wider audience that spanned across different social and ethnic groups. This allowed the print media to speak not only to the European elite but also to local populations. As the press evolved, it provided a snapshot of both the everyday experiences and the political aspirations of the people, revealing how societies in colonial Southeast Asia engaged with the forces of modernity and colonialism. The study of these print sources thus provides crucial insights into how print media became a driving force for change, reflecting and shaping the social, economic, and political life of the region.

In addition to newspapers and periodicals, fiction also serves as an important source for understanding the cultural and social dynamics of the middle class in colonial Southeast Asia and Indonesia. Literary works of this period, such as *Student Hidjo* by Marco Kartodikromo (1919), *Salah Asoehan* by Abdoel Moeis (1928), and *Student Indonesia di Eropa* by Abdul Rivai (1926–1928), provide valuable insights into the everyday concerns, aspirations, and anxieties of the rising middle class.[131] These works, often framed around themes of modernity, education, and social mobility, reflect the lived experiences of individuals navigating the tensions between traditional values and the influence of colonialism.

Among these, *Tjinta Boeta* (1931), a lesser-known but significant work, offers a unique glimpse into the mindset of Penang's evolving society.[132] Written by Nona Nanci and published by The United Press, *Tjinta Boeta* has largely been overlooked in historiography despite its relevance to understanding the literary and cultural landscape of the time. The novel deals with the complexities of love and personal relationships within the context of colonial society, providing a literary vision of the middle class that mirrors broader societal issues, such as the negotiation between modernity and tradition, as well as gender roles. Its use as a source is

[131] Marco Kartodikromo, *Student Hidjo* (Semarang: Masman en Stroink, 1919); Abdoel Moeis, *Salah Asuhan* (Balai Pustaka, 1928); Abdul Rivai, *Student Indonesia di Europa* (Weltevreden: Bintang Hindia, 1928).
[132] Nona Nanci, *Tjinta Boeta* (Penang: The United Press, 1931).

particularly valuable because it represents voices and perspectives that are often missing from official records or public discourse.

These literary works collectively serve as critical commentaries on the experiences of the middle class, reflecting both their struggles with identity and their attempts to navigate a rapidly changing social order. By examining these texts alongside other sources, such as newspapers and periodicals, it becomes clear that fiction was not just a form of entertainment, but also a medium through which writers critiqued society and explored the aspirations of a class in flux. In doing so, these works contribute to a richer understanding of the intellectual and cultural currents that shaped colonial Southeast Asia.

Thesis Structure

The thesis considers three key aspects of consumer culture in colonial Southeast Asia: the spaces of consumption, the consumers themselves, and the commodities they engaged with. These themes are explored across five chapters. Chapter 1 examines the transformation of shopping landscapes in Penang, Singapore, and Surabaya during the 1920s and 1930s. It argues that colonial powers used urban planning, the rise of department stores, and marketing to impose a Western model of consumption to control local economies and shape identities. However, traditional markets and street vendors persisted, demonstrating colonial power's limits and local economic practices' resilience. Ultimately, the chapter reveals how spaces of consumption became sites where colonialism and capitalism intersected, shaping anxieties about control and notions of "progress". This historical analysis highlights how this period's legacy influences consumer culture in these cities.

Chapter 2 challenges narratives that oversimplify the middle class in colonial Southeast Asia as solely focused on nationalism. It argues that their pursuit of a modern identity was deeply intertwined with consumerism. While participation in the colonial system might seem apolitical, this focus on consumption ultimately reinforced existing power structures. Western education, intended for colonial control, inadvertently opened pathways to a consumer lifestyle central to their identity formation. The chapter emphasises their agency, showing how they actively shaped "modernity" in Southeast Asia, creating a shared sense of cosmopolitan urbanism. Yet, consumerism was a complex landscape, serving as both a tool of conformity and a potential site of subtle resistance, setting the stage for future analysis of overt consumer resistance.

Chapter 3 examines how consumer resistance, boycotts, and selective consumption were used to shape a localised form of modernity in colonial Southeast Asia. It demonstrates how consumption became a tool for exerting economic pressure, challenging colonial exploitation, and expressing local values. Specific boycotts against American and Japanese goods highlight the diverse motivations and tactics employed. The chapter highlights how

several groups adopted certain Western elements while remaining rooted in local traditions, illustrating that Southeast Asian modernity was a negotiation between global and regional influences. Crucially, the chapter also analyses the limitations and complexities of consumer activism, including potential elitism and questions about its effectiveness in dismantling colonial power structures.

Chapter 4 explores the power of advertising during colonial Southeast Asia's age of advertising. Advertisements are analysed as promotional tools and active agents that reshaped desires and cultural practices. By targeting diverse audiences, exploiting anxieties, and skilfully blending tradition and Western-defined "modernity," advertisers sought to transform Southeast Asian consumers. These created visions of progress linked to consumerism, fuelling new inequalities. Advertisements became spaces where struggles over identity played out between colonisers and the colonised, as well as within Southeast Asian communities. Ultimately, the chapter argues that understanding seemingly mundane objects like advertisements is essential for grasping the influence of commercialism on the lived experiences and cultural landscape of colonial Southeast Asia.

Chapter 5 examines how colonial fairs in Southeast Asia, such as Surabaya's Jaarmarkt, Penang's Trade Fairs, and Singapore's Empire Shopping Week, were tools used by colonial powers to impose a Western-centric vision of modernity linked to consumption. By analysing how objects were presented, the chapter reveals that goods were not neutral but tools to shape desires and identities. Different strategies were employed – from the Dutch emphasis on civilising influence in Surabaya to the British focus on technological progress in Penang. Singapore's Empire Shopping Week offers the most overt example, connecting consumerism directly to imperial loyalty. Importantly, the chapter emphasises that the colonised populations were not passive; their choices of goods reveal agency and resistance. Ultimately, the chapter shows how consumption was intertwined with national identities, the enduring power of consumer culture, and the ways colonial legacies continue to shape how we understand goods.

Significance of Study

This thesis ventures into relatively uncharted territories of historical inquiry by illuminating the intricate dynamics of consumer culture in colonial Southeast Asia. This topic has hitherto received scant attention in the broader historiography of the region. By examining the transformation of shopping landscapes, the role of the middle class in shaping consumer identities, and the nuanced politics of consumption, it transcends traditional narratives that predominantly focus on political and economic histories. This research uncovers how consumer practices were not merely by-products of colonial economies but active fields of negotiation and resistance, offering a fresh perspective that bridges the gap between everyday

life and macro-historical transformations. The study's findings are particularly relevant in the modern context, where the legacies of colonialism continue to influence consumer culture, economic nationalism, and resistance movements across Southeast Asia. By tracing the roots of these contemporary phenomena to their historical antecedents, the thesis not only enriches our understanding of the past but also provides insights into current debates around globalisation and identity. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper comprehension of how consumer culture serves as a potent arena for expressing, contesting, and reshaping social and political identities, thereby offering broader insights into the mechanisms through which power and resistance are articulated in everyday practices.

Chapter I. Shopping Landscapes and Contested Modernity in Colonial Southeast Asia: Surabaya, Singapore, and Penang in the 1920s and 1930s

Introduction

Figure 1. Gemblongan Area in Surabaya in the 1900s and the 1930s.[1]

Gottfried Hariowald von Faber, in his book *Nieuw Soerabaia* (New Surabaya) (1936), chronicles the drastic changes in Surabaya's Gemblongan area during the early twentieth century (See Figure 1 above). He mourns the passing of a quieter, greener Surabaya as rapid urban growth mirrored Singapore's trajectory. This sense of loss for felled trees and vanished lanes reveals the tensions inherent in colonial urban development. While colonial powers touted progress and modernisation, voices like Von Faber expose the hidden cost to the natural environment and pre-existing communities.

Like Singapore and Penang, Western authors often described Surabaya as a mere collection of villages before its transformation into a cosmopolitan port city.[2] However, this narrative obscure pre-existing local networks of commerce, cultural exchange, and political power that shaped the city's character. Its subsequent rapid transformation into a "modern" city was inextricably linked to broader urbanisation and modernisation projects across colonial Southeast Asia. This imposed transformation raises key research questions: How did colonisers, through urban planning and propaganda, portray "ideal" shopping behaviours to

[1] Gottfried Hariowald von Faber, *Nieuw Soerabaia: de geschiedenis van Indië's voornaamste koopstad in de eerste kwarteeuw sedert hare instelling, 1906-1931* [New Surabaya: The history of the Indie's leading commercial city in the first quarter century since her inauguration] (Surabaya: Van Ingen, 1936), 2. Many historians consider the book, *Nieuw Soerabaia*, to be a reliable source of historical information on the city and use it as a secondary source for information about its economy and history. Throughout the book, von Faber incorporated a large number of photographs from the period around 1900.

[2] For early European reports, see source Donald Frederick Lach, *Southeast Asia in the Eyes of Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965). See also Adriaan Jacob Barnouw, *A Trip through the Dutch East Indies* (Koch & Knuttel, 1927), 54.

attempt control over local populations and attract wider commercial interests? How did colonial authorities attempt to define "proper" shopping spaces and consumers, and to what extent did urban populations subvert or adapt to these efforts? Furthermore, how did contrasting perceptions of the city – reflecting Western anxieties about control and local economies' enduring vibrancy– manifest in these contested spaces? These questions underscore the conflict between narratives of progress and the lived realities of those who experienced the disruption of colonial urban restructuring.

Urban historians examining Southeast Asian port cities have already illuminated the complexities of economic transformation and modernisation programs implemented under colonial rule. This study builds upon that work by examining shopping practices within Surabaya, Singapore, and Penang to expose how changing exchange patterns were deeply entangled with attempts to reconfigure urban space. These sites became social engineering laboratories, from street vendors to grand department stores. Su Lin Lewis's work provides a valuable framework for understanding the transformation of cities in Southeast Asia.[3] Her work highlights the potential for cross-ethnic exchange and the emergence of a globalised middle-class lifestyle within urban spaces.

However, this analysis invites a deeper exploration of the complex and often contradictory relationship between cosmopolitanism and consumerism. While Lewis focuses on the potential for fluidity and interaction within urban spaces, this chapter reveals a tension: the rise of consumer culture, fuelled by colonial policies and economic shifts, simultaneously created new divisions and inequalities within these cities. Even as shared consumer practices - visiting department stores and adopting Western fashions - might suggest cosmopolitanism, they often occurred alongside social stratification and economic exclusion. This reveals how consumerism could simultaneously promote a sense of inclusion in a "modern" middle class while reinforcing divisions between those who could participate and those who remained outside this model. Essentially, the concept of "modernity" itself was inherently colonial. The focus on imported goods, Westernised shopping spaces, and the promotion of specific models of progress shaped what people bought and their aspirations and sense of self. This form of cosmopolitan consumerism, while potentially opening some interactions, was fundamentally linked to the assertion of colonial power and contributed to the marginalisation of those whose economic practices did not align with this imported ideal.

This chapter examines how urban policies, the built environment, and the promotion of a consumer culture shaped everyday life in these cities. While interactions in marketplaces, department stores, and other commercial spaces could challenge some communal divisions, they also perpetuated a hierarchy with Western consumerism at the apex. This form of cosmopolitanism, shaped by the colonial system, was often more aspirational than fully

[3] Lewis, *Cities in Motion*.

realised, contributing to social tensions and the uneven distribution of the supposed benefits of “modernisation.” Importantly, this analysis moves beyond simply examining who benefited from modernisation projects. We can expose evolving social hierarchies by studying consumer behaviours at various sites. Did new modes of shopping reinforce class divides or blur them? Moreover, by looking beyond what these cities sold and examining how products were presented, this chapter attempts to redefine consumer desires and what constituted a “desirable” urban lifestyle. Understanding the persistence of traditional marketplaces, alongside imposed transformations, reveals conflicts in practice and complex cultural self-definition.

To fully understand this period, we must go beyond official pronouncements of urban modernisation and interrogate the marketing materials meticulously designed to reshape purchasing habits and entire modes of being within these spaces. These materials become rich historical texts, from elaborate newspaper advertisements promoting newly erected department stores to pictorial enticements for imported luxury items. They offer crucial evidence as we unravel the competing visions of “desirable” behaviour and aspirations cultivated within each unique urban context. Analysing how notions of “progress” and “proper” consumption are visually communicated reveals deeper tensions. Who was positioned as the ideal shopper: European elites, an emerging local middle class, or urban women breaking with tradition? Did visual portrayals seek to enforce Western expectations of shopping as refined leisure, or were there attempts to integrate local traditions within these depictions? Examining these questions across these three cities illuminates the nuances and anxieties within attempts to use consumer culture to influence identity and power relations within rapidly evolving environments.

This chapter argues that evolving consumer landscapes in Penang, Surabaya, and Singapore reveal attempts by colonial powers to reshape local economies and identities through a standardised ideal of “modern” consumption. These diverse cities serve as lenses to examine the clash between colonial ambitions and the realities of diverse populations. Marketing materials, regulations, and the persistence of traditional markets expose the tensions inherent in these imposed models. Consumer choices and the contested depictions of desirable urban lifestyles emerged as battlegrounds where anxieties about economic control and shifting social hierarchies played out. This analysis underscores the deep intertwining of colonialism and capitalism, shaping economic behaviours and influencing power dynamics and individual identities. This focus on shopping spaces reveals their enduring impact – they served as the birthplace of a consumer culture that continues to influence Southeast Asian cities and their inhabitants today.

To analyse this complex transformation, this chapter is structured into four sections. It begins by examining how the drive for colonial “modernity” influenced urban landscapes and

consumer behaviour. Next, it explores how colonial administrations sought to create commercial spaces and infrastructure to instil new consumption patterns. The third section focuses on the rise of department stores, analysing their role as symbols of Western-influenced retail that were simultaneously adapted to local contexts. Finally, the analysis examines how the persistence and adaptability of traditional marketplaces and street vendors reveal ongoing economic practices amidst attempts to reshape urban life. The chapter demonstrates how shopping experiences became intertwined with social identities, class, ethnicity, and gender. In conclusion, the chapter argues that these changing landscapes powerfully depict the complex interplay of colonialism, capitalism, and the pursuit of "modernity," leaving an enduring legacy in these Southeast Asian port cities.

Transformation of the Cities in the Twentieth Century

Most Southeast Asian port cities, including Singapore, Surabaya, and Penang, adopted European architectural styles in public buildings and infrastructure such as roads, bridges, railways, and docks. Following the Suez Canal's opening, colonial governments often employed professional European architects to design buildings that showcased advancements meant to reflect a focus on progress.[4] These included modern office buildings, electric tramways, *godowns* (warehouses), and the renowned Tanjong Pagar docks in Singapore.[5] Such infrastructure facilitated the influx of goods and solidified the city's image as a thriving commercial hub.

[4] Hideo Izumida, "A Study on British Architects in East and Southeast Asia: 1830 – 1940", *Journal of Asian Architecture and Building Engineering*, 2:2, (2003): 131; See also Handinoto, *Perkembangan Kota dan Arsitektur Kolonial Belanda di Surabaya 1870-1940* [City Development and Dutch Colonial Architecture in Surabaya 1870-1940], (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Andi and Universitas Kristen Petra, 1996); Abidin Kusno, *Behind the Postcolonial: Architecture, Urban Space, and Political Cultures in Indonesia*, (New York: Routledge, 2000).
[5] Howard W. Dick and Peter J. Rimmer, "Beyond the Third World City", 2307.

Figure 2. Weld Quay in the Port of Penang, George Town in the 1900s.[6]

Penang faced similar pressures to modernise. A 1926 article in the *Straits Echo* reveals a deep concern about the port's capacity to handle growing trade volumes.[7] The article criticises Penang's port, particularly Weld Quay Port (See Figure 2 above), for its "antiquated and expensive" reliance on "unwieldy tongkangs, propelled by coolie power and long wooden spoons." This description reflects a common colonial perception of local trade methods as inefficient and outmoded within an era of increasing globalisation and steamship reliance. The calls for "up-to-date labour-saving appliances", "neutral warehouses", and "cheap landing, re-shipping and storage facilities" underscore the desire to integrate Penang into standardized trade networks. This push for efficiency and alignment with global practices reveals how colonial visions of "modern" commerce were linked not only to transforming consumption patterns but also to reconfiguring the infrastructure upon which those patterns depended.[8]

The call for a Port Trust modelled after the successful example of Bombay underscores the belief that centralised management was key to efficiency and competitiveness.[9] While the colonial administration at the time resisted this change, the article exemplifies the wider understanding that streamlined port operations were crucial for Penang to remain a vital trade hub. These issues are directly linked to evolving ideas of shopping. The drive to transform Penang's port was not simply about trade but about ensuring the steady flow of goods that would supply the demands of a growing consumer base. Modernisation was not just for appearances – it sought to facilitate the increased volume and diversity of products reshaping

[6] Carl Josef Kleingrothe, *Weld kade, George Town in de haven van Penang, Port of Penang. Het gebouw van de firma Behn, Meyer & Co. [Photograph]* (Leiden: Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde (KITLV) / Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies, 1910).
[7] "Port of Penang", *The Straits Echo* August 4, 1926, 6.
[8] *Ibid*.
[9] *Ibid*.

what shopping meant and who could participate in urban commercial spaces. However, the drive for "progress" often concealed darker motivations.

In Surabaya, the erasure of pre-existing communities was central to colonial restructuring, revealing the hidden cost of imposed progress. Programs like the *Kampung* improvement hint at how the rhetoric of "modernisation" masked concerns within the colonial government.[10] In Surabaya, fears of informal settlements spreading disease to wealthier districts justified expansive intervention, demonstrating how public health became a tool for reshaping the cityscape, often displacing traditional communities in the process.[11]

Figure 3. An aerial view of Surabaya in the 1930s.[12]

This desire for control is also visually evident in the transformation of Surabaya's landscape, highlighting how colonial powers imposed their ideals upon the physical environment. The aerial photograph showcases the proliferation of tropical-colonial architectural buildings and carefully planned housing developments (See Figure 3 above). These structures served as markers of boundaries and an attempt to impose a colonial vision of modernity, defined by order and the control of nature. This focus on imposing aesthetic values reveals an assumption that existing environments were "chaotic" and needed reshaping.

However, efforts to control and reshape landscapes weren't unique to the physical realm. Singapore's economic trajectory during the interwar period reveals a similarly complex interplay between intended progress and unintended consequences. While economic historian Wong Lin Ken highlights the undeniable impact of the global recession, with trade

[10] *Cities of the Future Successful Housing Solutions in Singapore and Surabaya* (Building and Social Housing Foundation, 1933), 48–49.
[11] *Ibid*.
[12] von Faber, *Nieuw Soerabaia*, 19.

plummeting by 1933, a closer look challenges the simplistic narrative of decline.[13] Statistics, showing Singapore's trade drop from its 1926 peak, illustrate the vulnerability of an economy tightly linked to global markets.[14] Yet, data from the Singapore Harbour Board indicates a steady increase in cargo volume from 1920 to 1929, suggesting a period of expanding trade before the downturn.[15] Similarly, the Singapore Chamber of Commerce records point to a significant increase in imports and exports during this period.[16] These sources reveal a less linear trajectory of growth and decline, highlighting how economic progress within colonial systems was often fragile and subject to forces beyond direct control.

Despite the recession's undeniable impact, evidence suggests a shift towards a more moderate and stable economy. The sentiment that "gone are the days of booms and fat dividends" suggests a move away from volatile economic cycles, yet tangible signs of renewed activity were present. Reports indicate a bustling port where "about a dozen vessels are always to be seen loading and unloading," and key commodities like rubber and tin are experiencing rising prices due to global demand. Growing purchasing power, with reports of "more money... circulating" and debtors taking steps to repay old balances, adds to the evidence of improving economic conditions. Even the Malayan Information Agency acknowledges the "exceedingly gratifying increase in the purchasing power of Malaya," hinting at the potential for a significant economic rebound.[17] However, these positive economic trends must be understood within the context of profound shifts in global trade during the interwar period. The ideal of free trade, championed by Britain, faced increasing pressure as nations moved towards economic self-sufficiency.[18] Even Britain began to transition towards an imperial preference system. Singapore, as a signatory of the Ottawa Agreement of 1932, faced the possibility of its long-established entrepôt role being compromised by potential tariffs and trade restrictions.[19]

While Singapore's prosperity initially withstood the direct trade emerging between the West and its Southeast Asian colonies, the combined forces of rising economic nationalism and the lingering impact of the Great Depression began to have a more pronounced effect by the late 1930s.[20] Changes like the 1928 revision of colonial tariffs imposed by France in its Southeast Asian territories were early indicators of this shift. The Dutch focus on food production and manufacturing within the Netherlands Indies posed an even greater threat to Singapore's thriving trade networks.[21] Ironically, the war effort temporarily increased demand

[13] Lin Ken, "Commercial Growth", 54.
[14] *Ibid*.
[15] "Signs of Prosperity in Malaya", *The Singapore Journal of Commerce* Jan, 1935, 4–5.
[16] *Ibid*., 4.
[17] *Ibid*.
[18] "Editorial", *The Singapore Journal of Commerce* Jan, 1935, 3.
[19] Lin Ken, "Commercial Growth", 55–56.
[20] "Editorial", *The Singapore Journal of Commerce* Jan, 1935, 3.
[21] *Ibid*.

for essential raw materials, masking Singapore's longer-term economic challenges. However, the outbreak of war in 1939 and its expansion to Southeast Asia in 1941 signalled a definitive end to this era, as Singapore's economic foundation as an entrepôt was fundamentally shaken.[22]

The experience of Penang, while sharing some commonalities, offers a distinct perspective on the region's economic evolution. Despite being eclipsed by Singapore, Penang thrived as a popular destination for immigrants, political exiles, and religious reformers as well as European travellers, referring to the island—with its beaches and lush natural surroundings—as the "Pearl of the Orient" or "The Brightest Gem of the East".[23] Unlike Singapore, Penang's early success as a trading port was fuelled by several factors, including its status as a free port, offering an attractive alternative to the monopolistic Dutch East India Company, where traders flocked to this free port city beginning in the eighteenth century. This fostered a thriving entrepôt model, where Penang played a crucial role in the triangular trade routes connecting Southeast Asia with East Asia, South and West Asia, and Europe. The development of George Town was dependent on both Asian and European traders, creating a diverse commercial environment.[24]

Interestingly, the interwar period brought new players to Penang's landscape. The boom years of tin and rubber attracted Japanese entrepreneurs, who carved out a niche as brokers and financiers.[25] While their community remained small, it reflects a further diversification of Penang's economic networks. This period also saw continuity in George Town's spatial layout, with the port area and Beach Street remaining the vibrant heart of commercial activity, reflecting the enduring importance of trade to Penang's identity. Penang's evolving economic landscape aligns with a broader trend across Southeast Asia, where increased consumption powered the development of urban shopping scenes in the early twentieth century. Colonial cities like Surabaya, Singapore, and Penang saw the rise of department stores, local shops, marketplaces, and annual fairs. Supported by vibrant print media – newspapers, magazines, and periodicals – these new shopping destinations became powerful symbols of modernity, introducing the latest trends and technologies to a growing urban middle class. Alongside the Western-style central business districts, comprised of banks, trading houses, and shipping offices, these shopping spaces transformed these cities' physical and cultural heart.

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[22] Frederick Victor Meyer, *Britain's Colonies in World Trade: Issued Under the Auspices of the Royal Institute of International Affairs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), 225; See also Jacob van Gelderen, *The Recent Development of Economic Foreign Policy in the Netherlands East Indies* (London: Longmans, 1939).

[23] Su Lin Lewis, "Cosmopolitanism and the Modern Girl: A Cross-Cultural Discourse in 1930s Penang", *Modern Asian Studies* 43, no. 6 (2009): 1389–1390; See also David Laing, *Penang The Brightest Gem of the Eastern East* (The Tourist Agency – Information Bureau, 1926); For female immigrants, see S. M. Lee, "Female Immigrants and Labor in Colonial Malaya: 1860-1947", *The International Migration Review* 23, no. 2 (1989): 309–331.

[24] Gin, "Disparate Identities", 39.

[25] *Ibid*., 29–30.

The Spectacle of Shopping

Figure 4. The Aloen-aloen street in Surabaya, 1925.[26]

> "The whole aspect of this part of the city has been completely changed. All peace and rurality have completely disappeared. The trees have been felled, the connecting ditch filled in, the overhead telephone lines laid underground. The old steam tram had to make way for the 'electric'. The gas lanterns were replaced by brilliant electric street lighting. A modern shopping street was created, through which the fast traffic of car, motorcycle and tram rages."[27] (See Figure 4 above)

Surabaya's transformation must be understood within its historical context as a commercial hub. As early as 1930, it was hailed as the "The First Commercial City of the Netherlands Indies".[28] However, this emphasis on economic gain came at a cost. Gottfried Hariowald von Faber, in his book *Nieuw Soerabaia* (New Surabaya), chronicles the drastic changes that occurred in the early twentieth century. He mourns the loss of a quieter, greener Surabaya, as rapid urban growth mirrored the trajectory of Singapore. Von Faber's lament for felled trees and vanished lanes reveals a fundamental shift in the relationship between the city, its natural environment, and communal life. Colonial restructuring erased pre-existing communities and transformed the urban landscape, exposing the hidden cost of imposed progress.

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[26] "De Aloen-aloenstraat te Soerabaja" Accessed 19 February 2024. https://colonialarchitecture.eu/obj?sq=id%3Auuid%3A93881ff8-ea16-4d94-8d1a-49ab6c40ef16

[27] von Faber, *Nieuw Soerabaia*, 2. "Het geheele aspect van dit stadsdeel is totaal gewijzigd. Alle rust en landelijkheid zijn geheel verdwenen. De boomen zijn gekapt, de verbindingssloot gedempt, de bovengrondsche telefoonleidingen onder den grond gelegd. De oude stoomtram moest plaats maken voor de „electrische". De gaslantaarns werden vervangen dooreen brillante electrische straatverlichting. Er ontstond een moderne winkelstraat, door welke het snelle verkeer van auto, motorfiets en tram raast."

[28] "The First Commercial City of the Netherlands Indies", *The Malayan Traveller's Gazette* Jan-Mar, 1933, 9.

Figure 5. Pabean Market in Surabaya 1920.[29]

Figure 6. Pabean Market in Surabaya, 1920.[30]

[29] "Gemeentemarkt Pabean, 1920". Accessed 19 February 2024. https://colonialarchitecture.eu/obj?sq=id%3Abt%3A487 .

[30] "Pasar Pabean te Soerabaja, 1920". Accessed 19 February 2024. https://colonialarchitecture.eu/obj?sq=id%3Auuid%3Aa3373341-5929-4747-9a67-1d71468cad39

Figure 7. Peneleh Market in Surabaya, 1920.[31]

This transformation was not just about physical changes; it redefined the desired rhythm of urban life. The potential for relaxed social exchanges and the strong sense of community that characterised traditional markets faded. Von Faber alludes to an emerging "shopping street" with altered priorities, where traditional markets, such as the Pabean and Peneleh Markets (See Figures 5, 6, and 7 above), which were once bustling centre of communal life, may have lost some of their prominence amidst this rapid urbanisation. These markets were not merely places of transaction; they were multifunctional spaces fulfilling a wide range of community needs. They were sites of social gathering, cultural exchange, and even political discourse, not just economic activity.

This shift in the role of markets mirrors a broader transformation occurring across Southeast Asia. In bustling port cities like Singapore, colonial influence and the pursuit of "modernity" led to the remodelling of commercial spaces, promoting a vision of a consumer paradise.[32] During the 1920s and 1930s, Singapore's reputation as a gateway to the East made it a popular tourist destination, attracting visitors from around the world who arrived via modern transportation like ships and aeroplanes.[33] Guidebooks like *Willis's Singapore Guide* (1936) explicitly highlight the experience of modernity, emphasising the city's well-developed shopping districts.[34]

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[31] "Passar Peneleh Soerabaja, 1920". Accessed 19 February 2024. https://colonialarchitecture.eu/obj?sq=id%3Auuid%3Ae5b411e9-c256-4418-8952-14af23904a6d

[32] Alfred Charles Willis, *Willis's Singapore Guide* (Singapore: Advertising and Publicity Bureau Limited, 1936).

[33] One example of travel guidebook is Willis, *Willis's Singapore Guide*. "Aerial Travel", *The Malayan Traveller's Gazette* Jan-Mar, 1923, 4; For the discussion of the British Empire air travel in the 1930s, see Gordon Pirie, "Incidental tourism: British imperial air travel in the 1930s", *Journal of Tourism History* 1, no. 1 (2009): 49–66.

[34] Thomas Cook (Firm), *Guide to Singapore: showing the principal places of amusement, hotels, wharves, shops, banks, shipping offices, tram lines, R.R. stations, clubs, churches, etc.: town map island, with a directory to the finest scenic motor routes* (Singapore: Methodist Publishing House, 1922); Passengers' Information Buraeau, *Illustrated Guide to Penang* (The Criterion Press, 1924).

Figure 8. John Little in Singapore, 1930.[35]

Promoting an image of refined leisure, Willis gushes over "modern department stores" like John Little's (See Figure 8 above), promising shoppers "the latest Parisian fashions" in an environment of "cool and restful ease".[36] This emphasis on Singapore as a safe and accessible environment for international visitors further reinforced its status as a key node in the global network of trade and consumption. These promotional materials, while aimed at enticing tourists, also contributed to creating a particular vision of the city as a space where "modern" consumption was defined by specific locations and practices. The emphasis on Western fashion and the department store experience subtly positioned them as superior to other forms of shopping.

This use of the term "modern" as a marker of progress becomes even more apparent in market regulations of the 1930s.[37] These regulations, by meticulously defining "public markets" as distinct from shops, reveal a complex agenda. On one hand, this might reflect attempts to modernise sanitation and food safety within established marketplaces. However, such strict definitions open up possibilities for the targeted restriction and control of informal vendors who did not fit within the imposed categories. This highlights how seemingly neutral regulations become tools for shaping the urban landscape, influencing who has the right to sell and where, potentially excluding those operating outside this "modern" ideal.

[35] "John Little". Accessed 19 February 2024. https://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/places-and-buildings/2023/10/john-little-raffles-place-department-store/
[36] Thomas Cook (Firm), *Guide to Singapore*, 85, 87.
[37] *The Municipal Ordinance of the Straits Settlements* (Singapore Government Printing Office, 1937), 269.

Figure 9. Street in Singapore, 1925.[38]

The power to label certain practices as "unfit for human food or drink" was used to justify the seizure of goods, essentially criminalising traditional commerce that did not fit the new "modern" ideal.[39] While such restrictions might sometimes have reflected genuine health concerns, they also became tools to reshape notions of progress. Diverse spaces like Change Alley, dismissed by the guide as a mere "Petticoat Lane" even while featured on promotional postcards, reveal a complex tension. The postcards might cater to tourists' desire for the exotic, while the drive for new regulations reflects a push towards a uniform commercial landscape.[40] This highlights how postcards (See Figure 9 above) can be simultaneously a record of traditional practices and an object consumed within the evolving "modern" tourist gaze. Their popularity is indicative of a fascination with difference, even as colonial powers sought to erase those same practices from the urban landscape in the name of progress. It is important to understand that this contradiction often lies at the heart of colonial projects, where the desire to control and modernise coexists with the impulse to document and commodify the very traditions seen as barriers to that modernisation.

This tension between commodification and control is evident in the ways different cities were promoted within the colonial context. While Surabaya and Singapore showcase overt attempts to control and modernise urban commerce through regulations and the creation of "modern" retail spaces, Penang reveals a subtler strategy. *The Illustrated Guide to Penang* weaves a seductive narrative focused on curated consumption and the allure of European-affiliated businesses.[41] This approach similarly underscores the widespread colonial project of

[38] "Straat te Singapore". Accessed 19 February 2024. https://colonialarchitecture.eu/obj?sq=id%3Auuid%3Ab4a202da-b663-42c7-af55-664cdaed3739 ().
[39] *The Municipal Ordinance of the Straits Settlements*, 280–281.
[40] Willis, *Willis's Singapore Guide*, 87.
[41] *The Illustrated Guide to Penang*, (Passengers' Information Bureau, 1924), 49–61.

redefining “modernity” on their terms, marginalising the vibrancy of local markets in the process. The guide’s seemingly helpful advice for visitors is a carefully curated narrative designed to promote specific businesses and shape consumer behaviour. Establishments with European names and affiliations, like Caldbeck MacGregor & Co., purveyors of “the best Wines and Spirits”, are positioned as sophisticated and desirable leisure emblems, implicitly linking “modern” consumption with participation in an exclusive lifestyle.[42] This emphasis on imported goods and curated spaces subtly equates Penang with the cosmopolitanism of its colonial counterparts.

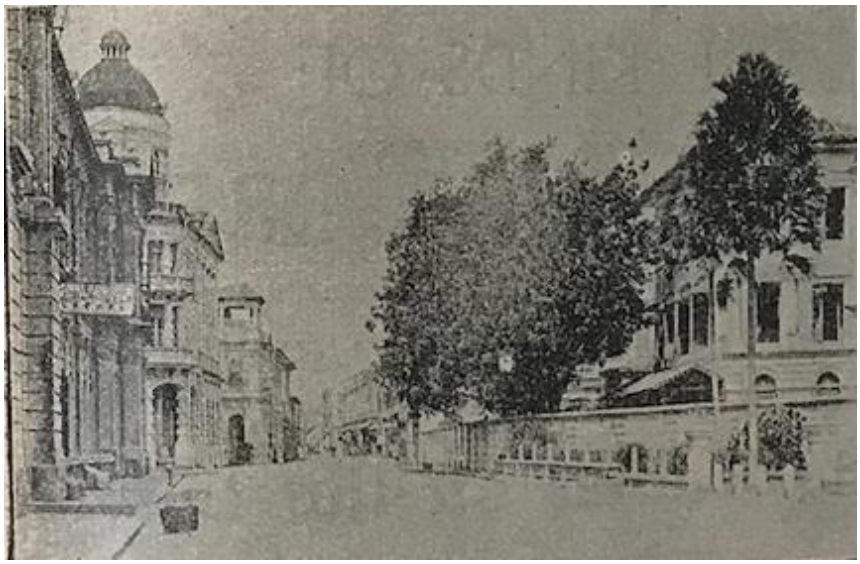

Figure 10. Beach Street, Penang, 1920s.[43]

However, the guide does more than list desirable stores – it seeks to engineer comfort and control over the act of shopping. It links colonial infrastructure with standardised, predictable commerce by promoting the “Federal Rubber Stamp Co.” with its branches along railway lines.[44] This soothes anxieties for the visitor who might fear navigating an unfamiliar landscape, implying that “proper” shopping conveniently occurs only within the familiar, clean, safe and comfortable structures of European colonial cities, such as Beach Street (See Figure 10 above).

[42] *The Illustrated Guide to Penang*, (Passengers’ Information Bureau, 1924), 49.
[43] *Ibid*.
[44] *Ibid*., 51.

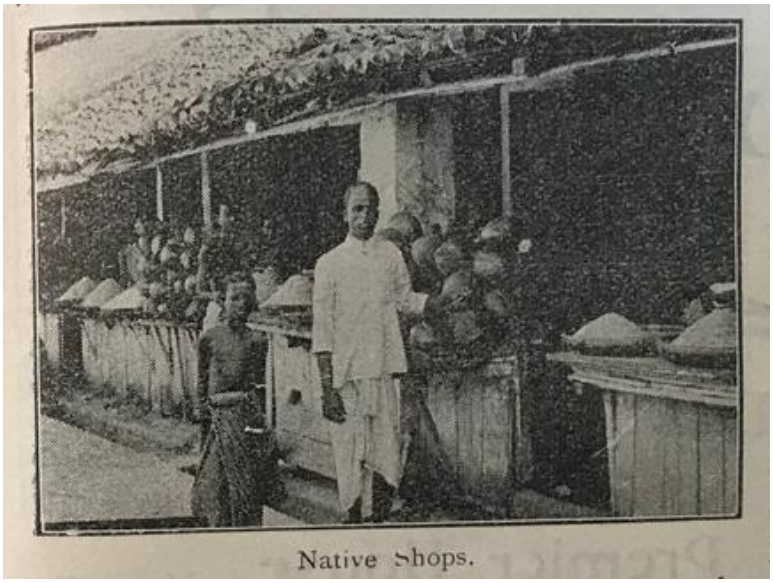

Figure 11. Native Shops in Penang. [45]

This calculated shaping becomes even more overt when the guide addresses "native shops" in Penang (See Figure 11 above). Relegated to vague mentions devoid of specifics, these sites starkly contrast the detailed endorsements of European-linked firms. The sudden warning that "visitors...are advised to take a guide" reinforces an image of these spaces as operating outside the colonial economic order, potentially dangerous and requiring external intervention for the visitor's protection.[46]

These contrasting portrayals reveal that the Guide is not a neutral source but reflects a vision that prioritises certain commercial spaces and potentially influences how they are physically developed. It attempts to erase or marginalise pre-existing markets and local craftsmanship, promoting instead a vision of "modernity" defined by consumption patterns that ultimately reaffirm colonial power structures. This calculated transformation finds its physical manifestation in the city itself. Display windows now flaunt imported textiles or enticements manufactured abroad, shifting the space from fulfilling basic needs to cultivating new desires. This prompts us to question whose vision of the cities is taking shape: Are these symbols of "progress" a mere mimicry of Western tastes, or do they reflect an evolving interplay between indigenous status symbols and imported trends? Ultimately, we must examine whose ideal image of progressive Surabaya, Singapore, and Penang gains material form as these redesigned spaces push forward the frontiers of consumer culture.

[45] *The Illustrated Guide to Penang*, (Passengers' Information Bureau, 1924), 53.
[46] *Ibid*.

Figure 12. Chinese district, Pangoeng, in Surabaya, 1929.[47]

Figure 13. Rickshaw Coolie Quarter Singapore, 1932.[48]

This emphasis on selectively modernising specific commercial zones aligns with the stark physical divisions in many Southeast Asian cities in the 1920s. Surabaya and Singapore exhibited a segregated structure: densely populated Chinese quarters bordered the business district, with many working as rickshaw coolies, while indigenous populations resided in the surrounding areas (See Figure 12 and Figure 13 above).[49] This division deepened in the 1930s, with cities frequently split into "upper" and "lower" sections.[50] Surabaya exemplifies this, with the lower part dominated by the Chinese quarter and central business district, while

[47] "Chinese wijk, Pangoeng, te Soerabaja, 1929". Accessed 19 February 2024. https://colonialarchitecture.eu/obj?sq=id%3Auuid%3A18cc41f8-8395-45c6-bcae-4c134f924a0b

[48] "Rickshaw Coolie Quarter Singapore, 1932". Accessed 19 February 2024. https://colonialarchitecture.eu/obj?sq=id%3Auuid%3A14ee0c81-ffb1-4c45-8f41-7f8841141709

[49] James Francis Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore, 1880–1940* (Oxford University Press, 1986).

[50] Howard W. Dick and Peter J. Rimmer, "Beyond the Third World City", 2308.

the upper part housed European amenities like hotels and exclusive shopping centres. Colonial bureaucracy, legislation, and policing enforced this separation, with planning and zoning regulations designed to exclude "petty" trading and local markets from designated "European" zones. Separation was one of the main features of colonial urbanism.

Urban scholars like Singaporean geographer Brenda Yeoh offer valuable frameworks for understanding this phenomenon. Yeoh outlines four schools of thought on colonial urbanism. One key model envisions the colonial city as two coexisting but separate cities: a modern, formal one aligned with colonial interests and a traditional indigenous one. Furthermore, Yeoh highlights distinctive features of colonial cities, including "racial-cultural, social and religious pluralism," a social hierarchy that mirrors neither pre-industrial nor industrial models, and the concentration of power in the hands of the colonisers.[51] These dynamics fundamentally shaped urban development – not as a force of structural change, but rather as a means to solidify and amplify colonial control. It is important to note that this pattern of segregated urban planning and social engineering was not unique to Southeast Asia but duplicated in nineteenth-century colonial cities around the world, such as Rio de Janeiro and Kingston.[52]

Figure 14. Chinatown in Singapore with Shophouses, 1930.[53]

While Yeoh's analysis provides a broad understanding of colonial urbanism, a closer examination of specific architectural forms reveals how these power dynamics played out in the everyday spaces of Southeast Asian cities. As Yeoh points out in her analysis of

[51] Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore*, 1–2. See also: Norton S. Ginsburg, Urban Geography and 'Non-Western' Areas, in *The Study of Urbanization*, ed. Philip M. Hauser and Leo F. Schnore (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1965).

[52] Mary Karasch, "Rio de Janeiro: From Colonial Town to Imperial Capital (1808-1850)" and Corin G. Clarke, "A Caribbean Creole Capital: Kingston, Jamaica (1692-1938)", in *Colonial Cities: Essays on Urbanism in a Colonial Context*, ed. Robert J. Ross and Gerard J. Telkamp (Springer Netherlands, 1985).

[53] "Chinatown, Tan Kok Kheng Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore". Accessed 19 February 2024. https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/photographs/record-details/5aecdc16-1162-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad

Singapore, the traditional Chinese shophouse defies simple categorisation.[54] These multifunctional spaces are illustrated in this image of China Street in Singapore (See Figure 14 above). The image depicts a bustling streetscape lined with shophouses. Notably, the prominent shophouse on the right, number 48 China Street, functioned as a seafood distribution business specialising in crabs. The image showcases baskets used to hold live crabs stacked in front of the shop alongside a trishaw, a common mode of transportation used for delivering these crabs. This image encapsulates how shophouses blended commercial and residential functions: the shopfront served as a workspace, while the upper floors likely housed the occupants.

This characteristic of shophouses challenges the Western-centric concept of "third spaces." Sociologist Ray Oldenburg defines "third spaces" as sites for public engagement beyond the home and the workplace.[55] These spaces allow for a degree of social interaction and identity expression. However, as the shophouse example illustrates, the rigid distinction between "home," "workplace," and "third place" may not fully capture the realities of colonial Southeast Asia.[56] The very act of shopping in spaces like shophouses potentially offered opportunities for social interaction, fostering community and cultural exchange. Therefore, the multiple functions of local shops/shophouses in colonial Southeast Asia challenge Oldenburg's "third places" distinction. Urban shopping places in colonial Southeast Asia, hence, should be considered sites where publics could negotiate and exercise their identities. These sites were unique because there were no clear boundaries between living and working places. In shopping places, individuals were determining and choosing what commodities to buy and what to reject, influenced by various aspects such as tastes, price, and origin of the commodity. Apart from providing commodities, shopping places offered a place for sociability, where people with multicultural backgrounds could gather, leading to becoming informal places for learning and exchanging information.

While Yeoh's framework helps us understand the broader colonial project of urban control, it is essential to avoid an overly simplistic view that focuses solely on segregation. Although official policies might have designated ethnic quarters, historical evidence reveals a more complex reality with instances of integration. In Surabaya, despite ethnicity-based zoning (*Wijkenstelsel*) and travel restrictions (*Passenstelsel*), practices like intermarriage and mixed-ethnicity neighbourhoods show that everyday life could challenge these rigid divisions.[57] This gap between official policy and lived experience demonstrates that people asserted their agency even within a system designed to exert control. This agency sometimes manifested in

[54] Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore*, 143–144.
[55] Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (Da Capo Press, 1999), 20.
[56] For coffee shops, see Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, "Coffee-shops in Colonial Singapore: Domains of Contentious Public," *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 77, no. 1, (2014): 65–85.
[57] Heather Sutherland, "Notes on Java's regent families: Part II". *Indonesia* 17, (1974): 1–42.

outright resistance, such as the Chinese business strike in Singapore.[58] While colonial powers undoubtedly influenced urban development, it is important to recognise that this influence was often negotiated and contested, revealing a dynamic interaction of power and local responses. These tensions between official policies and the diversity of lived experience continue to shape urban development in Southeast Asia today.[59]

This tension between imposed divisions and the lived experience of a diverse population becomes even more pronounced when examining not only the social spaces but also the consumer landscape of colonial Southeast Asia. The bustling and diverse crowds frequenting shopping destinations reflected the region's multi-ethnic makeup, encompassing men and women from various generations and differing educational backgrounds. However, these individuals navigated a consumer landscape deeply fractured by colonial segregation, which also extended to institutions of leisure and exclusivity like colonial clubs. Surabaya's historical evolution illustrates this tension acutely.[60]

Figure 15. Concordia Club in Surabaya.[61]

[58] Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore*, 32–33.
[59] Rita Padawangi, "Urban Development in Southeast Asia," in *Elements in Politics and Society in Southeast Asia*, ed. Edward Aspinall and Meredith L. Weiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 10.
[60] H. C. Rutgers, *Wat ik op mijn Indische reis zag* (Kampen: Kok, 1928), 107–108.
[61] "Sociëteit Concordia Soerabaja". Accessed 27 February 2024. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:COLLECTIE_TROPENMUSEUM_Soci%C3%ABteit_Concordia_Soerabaja_TMnr_60011838.jpg

Figure 16. The billiard room of the Concordia club in Surabaya.[62]

Figure 17. Simpang Club, Surabaya between 1925-1928.[63]

Institutions such as *soos* (colloquial for *sociëteit* or club) like the Concordia (founded in 1843, see Figure 15 and Figure 16 above) and the ultra-exclusive Simpang Sociëteit (established in 1887, see Figure 17 above) played a critical role in defining the rigid social hierarchy of

[62] "De biljartzaal van sociëteit Concordia te Soerabaja". Accessed 27 February 2024. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:De_biljartzaal_van_soci%C3%ABteit_Concordia_te_Soerabaja,_KITLV_5141.tiff

[63] "Simpang Club, Surabaya between 1925–1928". Accessed 27 February 2024. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Simpang_Club,_Soerabaja,_KITLV_1404845.tiff .

colonial-era Surabaya.[64] The Simpang Sociëteit, in particular, with its emphasis on English styles, fostered an elitist European aesthetic that extended beyond the club's walls – shaping segregated spaces and even influencing notions of "good taste".[65] However, the exclusivity of these clubs did more than simply reinforce colonial social divides; it highlighted how membership, through paying subscriptions, became a mark of elite status, tied to both social and economic capital. Membership in these prestigious colonial clubs acted as a form of consumption itself, with the ability to pay for subscriptions signalling a person's wealth, status, and access to specific privileges within the colonial hierarchy. This relationship between membership and consumption extended beyond the clubs' physical spaces. Those who could afford membership—primarily the European elite and wealthy Asian elites—were often the same individuals who shopped in exclusive marketplaces or accessed luxury goods unavailable to the broader population. In this sense, club membership did not only reflect social standing but shaped one's broader consumer habits and access to goods, contributing to a stratified consumer landscape.

While members of colonial clubs represented the top-tier elite, the Asian middle class had a different experience in accessing modern consumption. Their ability to partake in the modern consumer culture was often more limited and defined by economic constraints. Yet, even within this middle class, there were distinctions. Some, particularly those who could afford club memberships, enjoyed a higher degree of access to modern spaces and commodities. In contrast, others—though part of the emerging middle class—navigated a more restricted consumer landscape, accessing goods that reflected their social aspirations but not necessarily the luxuries enjoyed by the elite.

Institutions like Surabaya's Concordia and Simpang Sociëteit symbolised a rigid colonial hierarchy, prioritising European influence and maintaining strict social divides. However, the situation in Penang was more nuanced. The *Straits Echo* reader's letter reveals tensions surrounding Chinese participation in club life, exposing competing visions of who could claim membership in a modern colonial city.[66] Y. Hoon Huan, the writer, challenges the *Straits Echo*'s call for a Chinese club mirroring the Garden Club of Singapore. He counters the notion that modern Straits Chinese women need such spaces, stating: "I think the local Straits Chinese ladies are quite emancipated and it is not right to say or assume that, because they do not mingle in society, they are leading a secluded life". This directly challenges assumptions that women's participation in modernity depended on access to traditional club settings.

Furthermore, Hoon Huan envisions Penang's clubs as fostering equality, insisting that "...every member who has the money for his subscription should be given access to his Club

[64] Frederick, *Indonesian Urban Society in Transition*, 16–18.
[65] *Ibid*., 18.
[66] "Chinese and Club Life in Penang", *The Straits Echo*, (27 July 1928): 8.

and be properly treated and respected so long as he is respectable."[67] This argument illustrates the connection between the ability to pay for club membership and broader social equality, revealing how economic capital could potentially reshape power structures. In Hoon Huan's view, "modern" clubs could become sites of social change rather than simply mirroring existing inequalities. His emphasis on "common sense," "reasonableness," and "independent ideas" as qualities that should be valued within the Chinese community further positions clubs as potential incubators for progressive civic engagement.[68]

However, the writer also exposes implicit biases within this discourse of modernity. He notes "...we do not want [people in Singapore] to look down on us," highlighting sensitivities to condescension within the Southeast Asian Chinese diaspora.[69] By referencing Mr. Tan Cheng Lock's speech, he links his arguments to broader efforts advocating for increased Chinese influence within the colonial system. However, he perpetuates gendered limitations. His focus on male-led community progress and silence about Straits Chinese women reinforces the notion that participation in modernity was largely a male domain. This limited view contrasts with the reality of spaces like the Garden Club of Singapore, where tycoon Lim Chong Kuo to socialite Tan Lay Ho held a grand wedding at Tanah Merah's Garden Club with many distinguished guests invited in 1923.[70] Such clubs symbolised the power and wealth concentrated among a privileged few, demonstrating how "access" to colonial modernity depended not only on ethnicity but also on class and gender.

The letter illustrates how colonial modernity was fraught with contestation. Competing visions existed, shaped by a complex interplay of class, ethnicity, and individual aspirations. Even within seemingly open societies, colonial hierarchies deeply affected possibilities for participation. Though meant to foster a sense of community, social spaces like clubs ultimately became sites where exclusion, power, and social inequalities were reinforced and reproduced. The Garden Club in Singapore epitomises this, serving as a space where the privileged elite could showcase their wealth and status, further emphasising the limitations placed on most others who sought to shape their own "modern" experiences.

While this dynamic played out in social circles, Penang manifested a different facet of modernity. The fascination with the night-time bustle, Campbell Street's transformation, and the vibrant mix of shoppers highlights the allure of a new consumer culture. This emphasis on low prices, competition, and the abundance of local and imported goods speaks to a growing consumer class shaped by the possibilities of modernity. The multifaceted entertainment hubs in Penang, blending amusements with commerce, further demonstrate how shopping

[67] "Chinese and Club Life in Penang", *The Straits Echo*, (27 July 1928): 8.
[68] *Ibid*.
[69] *Ibid*.
[70] "Chong Kuo Road". Accessed 27 February 2024. https://remembersingapore.org/2014/01/09/pioneer-names-in-singapore-streets/

transcended mere transactions in some colonial spaces. The potential blurring of class lines suggests that these sites could subtly reshape social interactions, offering a fleeting glimpse of a more egalitarian urban sphere within a colonial context.

This spectacle comes alive in an evocative description of Penang published in *Happy Homes* monthly magazine.[71] Edited by Ong Joo Sun, a champion of social reform and "useful citizenship," the magazine's modest price of just 10 cents a copy suggests its aim to reach a broad audience.[72] An observer known only as "Mr. X" writes of how, as the business houses of Beach Street close with the setting sun, Penang Road and Campbell Street shops blaze to life, staying open "right up to midnight".[73] This transformation signifies a shift not just in the hour but in the character of shopping in Penang. Once known as a "centre of immorality," Campbell Street has been remade, offering shoppers "articles of European manufacture ... at very low prices".[74] The description abounds with the buzz of commerce: Cantonese goldsmiths fill their storefronts, and shoppers throng Penang Road seeking fresh fruits and "cloth and silk of the latest design at the most competitive prices imaginable".[75]

Mr X's fascination with the night-time bustle highlights the allure of a new shopping culture emerging in Penang. He marvels at the transformation of Campbell Street, implying that its revitalised commercial landscape signals a turn away from its seedier past. This emphasis on low prices and competition speaks to a growing consumer class eager to access both locally produced and imported goods. The abundance of choices, from fresh produce to the latest fashions, underscores the growing availability of products from varied origins. The night-time landscape reveals how shopping transcends mere transactions. Amusement parks transform the marketplace into a multifaceted entertainment hub. Their eclectic mix of "Chinese Wayangs, Malay operas, open-air cinemas, games stalls, eating shops and many other side shows" caters to diverse tastes and budgets.[76] This fusion of consumption and leisure creates a dynamic social arena. Mr X's observation that people "of high and low positions rub shoulders with one another without any feeling at all" suggests a blurring of traditional class lines, hinting at how shopping spaces could reshape social interactions, offering a glimpse of a more egalitarian urban sphere.[77]

Mr. X's evocative description invites us not only to consider the reshaping of Penang's spaces and the rise of a new consumer culture but also to question the limits of this transformation. The emphasis on accessibility through low prices and competition reminds us that this consumer society remains rooted in economic inequality, fuelling the allure with the

[71] "Penang By Night", *Happy Homes* Jan, 1933, 5–6.
[72] "Editorial", *Happy Homes* Jan, 1933, 1.
[73] "Penang By Night", *Happy Homes* Jan, 1933, 5.
[74] *Ibid*.
[75] *Ibid*.
[76] *Ibid*.
[77] *Ibid*.

promise of participation. While Mr X hints at a potential social levelling in these spaces, it is crucial to ask if this blurring is genuine or merely performative in nature. Can the spectacle of the marketplace truly shift entrenched power dynamics within the broader colonial context?

By focusing on sites like Penang's bustling streets, we gain a richer understanding of colonial modernity as a dynamic process, not merely a top-down imposition. We see individuals actively navigating its possibilities within a system rife with constraints and contradictions. Their engagement with modernity is shaped by by economic realities, social hierarchies, and emerging aspirations, all of which are reflected in the changing cityscape. This understanding aligns with the work of Jon Stobart, Andrew Hann, and Victoria Morgan who emphasise the nuanced dynamics of urban spaces, but extend it to the unique complexities of colonial power structures.[78] Understanding these dynamics is crucial as we turn our attention to the department store. It emerges as a uniquely powerful symbol of colonial consumer modernity – a site where desires, dreams, and the limitations of the colonial order intersect.

[78] Jon Stobart, Andrew Hann, and Victoria Morgan, *Spaces of Consumption: Leisure and Shopping in the English town, c. 1680–1830* (Routledge, 2013), 4.

Department Stores: Urban Landmarks and Symbols of Modernity

Figure 18. View of Raffles Place, Formerly Known and Raffles Square, 1930s.[79]

> In Singapore, the name of Raffles is seen all over Singapore, but nowhere is the name of the Colony more aptly applied than in Raffles Place, since it was his intention to make of Singapore a great Emporium…Tories [sic; tourist] who wish to do any shopping should certainly visit this centre, since they will be able to produce practically all their requirements in the shops…"[80]

In the commercial heart of cities like Singapore and Surabaya, department stores emerged as more than just places to buy goods. Their rise paralleled the growth of these cities themselves, driven by trade, populations seeking new experiences, and a burgeoning passion for consumption. Their imposing buildings, often showcasing modern architectural styles, became conspicuous landmarks that attracted residents and tourists alike. In Willis's *Singapore Guide* (1936), a popular guidebook of the time, tourists were explicitly encouraged to visit areas like Raffles Place for shopping. This advice underscores the symbolic link between these grand stores and the very identity of the bustling colonial city, positioning them as essential destinations for anyone seeking to experience the allure of modern, cosmopolitan life.

The photograph of the view of Raffles Place (See Figure 18 above), with John Little and Robinsons flanking the Chartered Bank Building, reinforces the symbolism. Situated in

[79] "View of Raffles Place, Formerly Known as Raffles Square, 1930s". Accessed 27 February 2024. https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/photographs/record-details/2469be1d-1162-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad
[80] Willis, *Willis's Singapore Guide*, 86.

the central commercial district amidst the bustle of shops, department stores commanded prime locations. However, the tension between tradition and emerging modernity is evident. While easily accessible by car, trolley bus, or tram, horse carriages remained a mode of transportation, even as the popularity of automobiles increased during the 1930s. This detail hints at a society in flux, where the symbols of "modern" consumption coexisted with older practices, reflecting the uneven nature of urban transformation.

Figure 19. John Little & Co., Ltd. Advert.[81]

This vision of modernity was actively promoted by the stores themselves. The 1923 John Little & Co. advertisement exemplifies this, proclaiming itself "The Finest Store East of Suez" (See Figure 19 above). Boasting "Twenty Shops Under One Roof," it offered a seemingly boundless array of goods – from clothing and jewellery to motor cars and sporting equipment. The emphasis on luxurious tea rooms, reading and writing spaces, and separate restroom facilities for ladies and gentlemen transformed the store into a social destination. This positioning of John Little's as a site of convenience, comfort, and cosmopolitan consumption directly linked consumer experiences with an aspiration towards a modern lifestyle.

[81] *The Malayan Traveller's Gazette* Jan–Mar 1923, 31.

The guide explicitly invited visitors to experience Singapore's "modern progress" through the spectacle of shopping in places like Raffles Place.[82] Department stores thus became intertwined with colonial narratives of advancement, offering a tangible and enticing symbol of the possibilities promised by modernity, even within a system built on inequalities. However, the ad's vision of modernity reinforces its limitations. The phrase "Godown John Littles" hints at the store's historical roots in the godown (warehouse) trade, a reminder of the colonial economy upon which its promises are built. The focus on imported goods and European-style amenities reinforces an elitist notion of modern consumption, potentially excluding segments of society who lack the economic means to participate fully as consumers in this space.

Department stores carefully crafted this alluring vision of modernity. Their appealing architecture drew customers in while also serving as a form of advertising within the colonial urban landscape. Inside, commodities were meticulously arranged and categorised to create a sense of abundance and ease. Visitors found themselves immersed in shopping and the multifaceted entertainment options, like hotels and restaurants, built into the premises. Alfred Willis' guidebook underscores this appeal, describing stores like Robinson's and John Little's as places where "one can buy anything from a proverbial pin to an elephant".[83] These stores captivated visitors by offering expertly curated goods specifically designed for the demands of tropical households.[84] This focus on localised modernity, tailored to the unique needs of colonial life, reveals how department stores adapted to their setting while still promoting a vision of aspirational, luxurious modern living in the colony.[85] The specific dynamics of how modernity was localised will be explored in later chapters of this thesis.

The allure of department stores extended far beyond mere retail transactions. Lounge cafes within these stores offered respite and refreshments in the form of luncheons, teas, coffees, ices, and other beverages. Recognised apothecaries, such as the British Pharmacy and the Federal Dispensary, operated within these spaces offering pills, potions, lotions, and more.[86] The presence of these medical establishments within the department store environment highlights an important shift in how health was perceived in 1930s Singapore. It marked the increasing popularity of European medical goods and the positioning of patients as consumers within the medical services industry.

This variety extended beyond medicine. Department stores like Raffles became destinations for a wide range of European products. Books, periodicals, and stationery were staples at Kelly & Walsh's, a chain with locations across Asia (such as Shanghai, Hong Kong,

[82] Willis, *Willis's Singapore Guide*, 86.
[83] *Ibid*., 87.
[84] *Ibid*.
[85] Farabi Fakih, "Colonial Domesticity and the Modern City: Bandung in the Early Twentieth-Century Netherlands Indies", *Journal of Urban History* (2021): 2.
[86] Willis, *Willis's Singapore Guide*, 87.

and Tokyo) from the late nineteenth century.[87] Those seeking jewelry, watches, and the latest Parisian fashions found them at Rene Ullmann's and Frankel's. Opticians like John Duke and Ezekiel offered new spectacles or repair services. Even entertainment needs were met at stores like Moutrie's, where one could purchase gramophones and a selection of records, including Malay recordings.[88] The presence of Malay records is especially interesting, as they demonstrate how the department store became a site where commercialism, evolving musical tastes, and Malay cultural nationalism intersected.[89] By embracing hybrid musical forms and incorporating themes of progress into their lyrics, Malay singers used these records as a means of expressing a modern cultural identity that was uniquely their own within the colonial context.[90]

This transformation in the retail experience marked a fundamental shift from traditional shopping places. Unlike markets where interaction with shopkeepers was central, department stores allowed customers to browse goods displayed on open counters casually. This fostered a more individualised and intimate shopping experience. It facilitated conspicuous consumption by the growing middle class, fuelling a budding consumer culture intertwined with ideas of individualism within the colonial urban landscape. The popularity of places like Raffles aligns with Tony Bennett's concept of the "exhibitionary complex," where the presentation of goods becomes inseparable from the experience of urban modernity itself.[91] However, it is crucial to note that the allure of this consumer experience was inherently tied to colonial power structures, which shaped who could fully participate and whose cultural expressions received space within these seemingly inclusive commercial environments.

[87] "At Kelly & Walsh's", *Malaya Tribune* Dec 21, 1921, 1; Ray K. Tyers and Jin Hua Siow, *Ray Tyers' Singapore, Then & Now* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 1993), 116.
[88] Willis, *Willis's Singapore Guide*, 88–89.
[89] Tan Sooi Beng, "Negotiating 'His Master's Voice': Gramophone music and cosmopolitan modernity in British Malaya in the 1930s and Early 1940s", *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land-en volkenkunde/Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia*, 169, no. 4 (2013): 458.
[90] *Ibid*., 459.
[91] Tony Bennett, "The Exhibitionary Complex", in *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, ed. Nicholas B. Dirks and Geoff Eley (Princeton University Press, 1994): 521–547. For other institutions, including national memorials, industrial exhibitions, and museums, see also Max Ward, "Displaying the Worldview of Japanese Fascism: The Tokyo Thought War Exhibition of 1938", *Critical Asian Studies* 47, no. 3 (2015): 414–439.

Figure 20. The opening of a Japanese department store in Surabaya in 1933.[92]

The allure of gleaming department stores and the consumer culture they fostered was not solely a Western import in colonial Southeast Asia. The success of Japanese-owned establishments like Tjijoda in Surabaya demonstrates how ideas of modernity and its commercial expression took on diverse forms (See Figure 20 above). The opulence surrounding Tjijoda's opening, as witnessed in the 1930s account, reveals its popularity: "I have seldom seen such a great rush... all walks of life, all nationalities, were represented".[93] The blend of Japanese cultural displays, like the geisha dance, and the promise of "bargains" highlights how Tjijoda catered to a wide audience, potentially unsettling existing class and ethnic divisions within the retail landscape.[94]

Tjijoda was not an isolated phenomenon. It formed part of the Daishin and Co. network, a powerful Japanese trading corporation with deep ties to indigenous Javanese networks. This underscores the growing economic influence of Japanese businesses in the region. Figures

[92] von Faber, *Nieuw Soerabaia*, 40.

[93] *Ibid*. "I have seldom seen such a great rush at the opening of a business; all walks of life, all nationalities, were represented among the huge crowds of the curious and the "bargain-hungry" public. The department store has many divisions... As a public attraction, graceful geishas performed in the cherry blossom dance. Whereas in the past, except for a few banking institutions and importers, there were almost exclusively, and only Japanese photographers and hairdressers located here, in recent years the Japanese are increasingly pushing forward here and trying to drive a wedge in the European and Chinese bloc of middle class and brokering; *Ik heb bij de opening van een zaak nog zelden zoo'n geweldigen toeloop gezien; alle rangen en standen, alle nationaliteiten waren onder de enorme menigte nieuwsgierigen en het op 'koopjes' beluste publiek vertegenwoordigd. Het warenhuis telt talrijke afdeelingen. (Zie de bordjes met opschriften.) Als attractie voor het publiek traden bevallige geisha's inden Cherry blossom-dans op. Waren hier vroeger, behalve enkele bankinstellingen en import zaken, bijna uitsluitend en alleen Japansche fotografen en kappers gevestigd, in de laatste jaren dringen de Japanners zich hier hoe langer hoe meer naar voren en trachten een wig te drijven in het Europeesche en Chineesche blok van middenstand en tusschenhandel."*

[94] *Ibid*.

like Okano Shigezo, known as the "grocery king of the Nanyo" capitalised on their prior experience within the Dutch East Indies and connections to Chinese traders to expand their interests across industries.[95] Shigezo's decision to establish Tjijoda in Surabaya's Chinese business quarter reveals a strategy of leveraging existing commercial hubs, rather than directly displacing them. At its peak in 1937, Tjijoda employed a diverse staff of Japanese, Javanese, and Chinese workers, hinting at complex cross-cultural interactions within this Japanese-owned "modern" space.[96] While the success of businesses like Tjijoda disrupts the Western-centric view of modernity, it does not negate the colonial power structures it operated within. Japanese businesses often filled niches between European and indigenous ones, leading to competition and tensions. It is also worth examining if Tjijoda's "bargains" were accessible to all, or if its modernity reinforced economic disparities. Additionally, questions remain about the internal experiences of its Javanese and Chinese employees and how their own aspirations for a modern life may have interacted with Japanese business interests.

This complex interaction of economic expansion and opportunity within a colonial context was shaped by the ideology of *Nanshin-ron* (Southern Advance Theory). From the late nineteenth century, Japanese investment began to flow into Southeast Asia under the *Nanshin-ron* framework. This ideology held that Japan should lead economic development in the "Southern Areas" (Southeast Asia) to both expand Japanese imperial influence and, ostensibly, liberate colonised societies from exploitative Western colonial powers.[97] Figures like Takekoshi Yosaburo advocated that loyal Japanese businesses had a duty to improve the lives of indigenous populations, creating a sense of shared progress under Japanese leadership, which opposed Western colonial practices. This increased a surge of Japanese investment into colonial Indonesia during the late 1920s, with businesses expanding into diverse sectors.[98] This expansion brought Indonesians and Japanese closer to the marketplace, leading to potential collaborations and likely fuelling competition and potentially reinforcing existing power imbalances.

This shift in the retail landscape continued in the late 1930s with the rise of department stores across Java. With their cosmopolitan atmosphere, these stores seemingly blurred the racial and ethnic divides that structured colonial society. As reported by the *De Indische Courant*:

> "With the opening of the new department store "De Bijenkorf", Soerabaia [Surabaya] has gained a large and modern furnished department store… However, the store had

[95] Peter Post, "Indonesianisasi and Japanization: The Japanese and the Shifting Fortunes of Pribumi Entrepreneurship," in *Indonesian Economic Decolonization in Regional and International Perspective*, ed. J. Th Lindblad and Peter Post (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 66.
[96] *Ibid*.
[97] *Ibid*., 59–86.
[98] *Ibid*., 63.

not yet opened. The guests were only allowed to visit the department store for sightseeing. They were very well welcomed with a cold drink and sandwiches."[99]

The grand opening, with its focus on "sightseeing" and hospitality, hints at a space where social barriers might temporarily dissolve. However, this inclusivity was illusory. True participation in the department store experience, through purchasing goods, would still be determined by one's economic means. The emphasis on modernity and the curated atmosphere catered primarily to an emerging middle class, potentially excluding those without the necessary purchasing power. This underscores a fundamental tension within colonial consumerism: the promise of accessible modernity was often undermined by economic realities, reinforcing social hierarchies even within spaces that appeared open to all.

This paradoxical nature of the department store aligns with Marshall Berman's famous assertion about modernity: "To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, the transformation of ourselves and the world and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are".[100] Department stores in colonial cities offered a novel shopping experience that cut across traditional boundaries. The allure of these spaces united diverse consumers in the pursuit of goods and entertainment, potentially hinting at a shared desire for a modern lifestyle. However, underlying inequalities likely persisted, with access to the full experience of modernity remaining tied to one's position within colonial hierarchies and economic ability. In this sense, the department store becomes a site where individuals from various backgrounds might temporarily participate in a consumerist expression of identity, even as structural inequalities limit the depth of that participation.

The power of these consumer spaces to shape aspirations extended beyond individual experience to the realm of urban planning. In the late 1930s, cities like Surabaya and Singapore promoted themselves as modern shopping destinations. Department stores filled with European goods became symbols of progress, used to "sell the city" itself. However, this vision of modernity was deeply intertwined with colonial power dynamics. As Madame Brugman-Frankfort's observations in Bandung reveal, European-style shopping was seen as

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[99] "Warenhuis 'Bijenkorf' Vandaag geopend", *De Indische courant* Oct 11, 1939, 2. "*Met de opening van het nieuwe warenhuis "De Bijenkorf", is Soerabaia een grootsch en modern ingericht warenhuis rijker geworden. Gisteravond werd het warenhuis voor genodigden en belangstellenden ter bezichtiging gesteld. Het was de officiële avond, waarbij men den manager van het nieuwe warenhuis, den heer Hiroki Suzuki kon gelukwenschen. Velen zijn met dit doel gekomen, doch ook om kennis te maken met het nieuwe warenhuis, gelegen in het pand Toendjoengan 10, waar neonverlichting's avonds de plaats aanduidt. Er is veel werk gemaakt van de etalering der winkelpuien. In de midden pui was gisteren de naam van het warenhuis in bloemenletters aanstebracht, een attentie van de Yokohama Specie Bank Fijn porselein en glaswerk zijn daar te bewonderen; links is heerenkleeding uitgestald, w.o. de bekende Kanebo-overhemden, terwijl rechts de aandacht wordt gevestigd op Sphinx-tennisschoenen. In de zeer grote ruimte binnen het gebouw, zacht verlicht door plafondlampen van grote lichtsterkte bevinden zich de overige étalages, o.a. van goederen, die aangeboden worden tegen speciale-prijzen. Gisteren was de verkoop echter nog niet opengesteld. De gasten kregen slechts gelegenheid het warenhuis te bezichtigen. Daarbij werd men zeer ruim onthaald op een koele dronk en sandwiches. Vele gasten werden vereerd met een bloempje in het knoopsgat."*

[100] Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1983), 15.

a desirable hallmark of European life in the Indies. The longing expressed by women in cities like Surabaya, "to relish a European lifestyle" with activities like leisurely window shopping and afternoon teas, highlights how department stores helped construct aspirational images of colonial life.[101]

Yet, it is vital to ask the question: for whom was this imagined modernity intended? The emphasis on European goods and leisure practices implies this vision was primarily accessible to the colonial elite. This supposed domesticity of colonial rule depended heavily on the labour of the Indonesian urban population, who remained largely invisible within these gleaming consumption spaces. Thus, while department stores might have temporarily blurred some social lines, they simultaneously reinforced colonial power structures. The very focus on the "European-ness" of this modernity underscores the exclusion of indigenous populations. The Dutch segregation policy contributed further to this process of rendering Indonesians invisible within spaces that purported to offer a taste of urban progress and cosmopolitan living. The contrast between these gleaming symbols of progress and the reality of exclusion points to a fundamental tension within colonial urban spaces. Alongside the curated modernity of department stores existed traditional marketplaces, likely subject to increasing colonial control and surveillance. This raises questions about how colonial authorities sought to regulate these spaces, potentially leading to confrontations, contestations, or adaptations by those who relied on markets for economic survival and cultural practices.

Beyond the Imposed Order: Street Sellers, Hawkers, and Traditional Marketplaces

While colonial authorities focused on imposing their vision of urban order, a vibrant and often less-controlled world of commerce existed on the streets and in traditional marketplaces across Malaya. The *Straits Echo* article of 1926 vividly depicts this tension, offering a window into colonial perceptions of street life.[102] The writer, clearly influenced by British standards, expresses a sense of bewilderment and frustration at the perceived chaos. Cars, carts, pedestrians, food stalls, and wandering artisans create a scene that, to the writer, signals a

[101] J. Brugman-Frankfort, "Bandoeng—het dorado voor de vrouw [Bandung – the Dorado of the woman]," *Mooi Bandoeng* 2, no. 1, (July, 1934): 5. As cited in Fakih, "Colonial Domesticity and the Modern City", 15. "Vraag een vrouw uit Batavia, uit Soerabaja, uit Semarang, wat ze hier in Indie eigenlijk het meest mist; bijna altijd zal haar antwoord zijn: dat echt- gezellige winkelen zoaals wij dat in Europa deden, zoo'n beetje rondwandelen en op ons gemak eens de etalages bekijken, en koopen wat we noodig—en soms ook niet noodig—hadden; end an, als we klaar waren met onze 'shopping', uitrusten bij een kopje thee of koffie ergens in een gezellige lunch- room, zie, dat we missen hier." —Welnu, ook dit biedt Bandoeng haar woonsfeers, en we kunnen rust zeggen dat in geen andere groote Indische stad zoovel gewandeld wordt als hier in Bandoeng! Geen wonders trouwens: het heerlijk-koele klimaat, de keurige winkelstraten met hunne breede trotoirs, de mooie winkels met hun dikwijls smaakvolle etalages, maken hier een wandeling tot een genot, en zelfs in uren, waarop men in de warmere plaatsen 'geen kip' op straat ziet, is hier altijd nog een flink aantal dames aan 't winkelen, of laaft zich op het terras van de Soos, bij Bogerijen, of elders aan een verfrisschen dronk of een geurig kopje koffie."

[102] "Street Nuisances", *Straits Echo* Aug 30, 1926, 8.

"slackness of control" that would be unthinkable in Britain.[103] However, this perspective obscures these streets' vital role as economic lifelines for vendors and working-class residents.

The article's litany of complaints reveals a clash of expectations about how streets should function. To the colonial gaze, the mixing of traffic types and encroachment of commercial activity onto sidewalks was an affront to proper urban order. This expectation ignored the long history of streets as multi-purpose spaces for trade, exchange, and socialisation within Southeast Asia. The focus on sanitation – "general expectoration" and the need for vigorous cleaning – reflects anxieties about hygiene common to the colonial mindset, often disproportionately targeting the practices of colonised populations. Underlying the frustration in "Street Nuisances" is a sense of futility. The author acknowledges the municipality's challenges but laments the "obstinacy" of Chinese groups, who primarily cling to their ways. This view casts blame for disorder onto the colonised, neglecting how colonial regulations might have disrupted existing economic and spatial practices. The focus on "objectionable postcards" underscores a complex mix of moral policing and the desire to curate public spaces. The author expresses disgust, claiming that these displays are "all over the place," implying an uncontrolled proliferation that offends his sensibilities. He claims, "nothing would be simpler than an order banning their sale altogether."[104] This reveals not just a desire for censorship but a belief in the absolute power of colonial authority to reshape the visual landscape of the city.

While he frames his objection in terms of propriety, his focus on postcards featuring "the feminine form attired in varieties of bathing costumes" suggests that it's the defiance of colonial norms of modesty that truly concerns him. This reveals an anxiety about the disruption of social control and the perceived intrusion of images that challenge European expectations of the "exotic" East. His claim that these postcards are "wares which any public authority in an Eastern town would be justified in banning altogether" further underscores the deep desire for control, extending beyond moral policing to imposing a specific vision of what can be seen and consumed within the city.[105] The article highlights the need to ask critical questions. Whose needs and experiences were omitted from this vision of "proper" streets? Were street vendors and hawkers truly obstacles to progress, or were they adapting to economic and spatial constraints imposed by colonialism? And beyond mere inconvenience, could these informal marketplaces have been sites of cultural resilience and community survival, representing a way of maintaining economic practices and social bonds in the face of colonial disruption?

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[103] "Street Nuisances", *Straits Echo* Aug 30, 1926, 8.
[104] *Ibid*.
[105] *Ibid*.

This tension between street vendors' economic necessity and their perceived incompatibility with colonial order is vividly illustrated in the case of Singapore. The presence of street sellers, particularly the ubiquitous hawkers, formed a distinct and dynamic part of the urban landscape. Moving through the streets, clustering around markets, offering diverse wares, and adding their vibrant calls to the cityscape, hawkers played a vital role in the everyday economic life of both residents and visitors. Yet, to many colonial administrators, they were primarily seen as obstacles to efficient urban function. Hawkers were blamed for street congestion, health and sanitation concerns, and disruption to vehicle traffic. These concerns guided attempts to regulate the informal marketplace, often portraying it as needing modernisation. While grand department stores and modern shopping centres symbolised colonial visions of progress, the persistence of hawkers and street markets reveals the limitations of this imposed "order". It highlights a fundamental tension within the concept of "shopping" in colonial Southeast Asia. The anxieties expressed in the 1932 Hawker Report underscore that beyond mere economic transactions, the ways in which goods were sold and acquired carried profound social and symbolic meaning.[106]

Figure 21. Chinese Cake Seller in Singapore, between 1912-1920.[107]

Colonial authorities grappled with managing an informal marketplace that remained indispensable to portions of the population. Despite the focus on hygiene and traffic concerns, *The Malayan Saturday Post* article "Ousting the Hawkers" reveals a deeper anxiety.[108] It reports that the decision to ban food hawkers is necessary because "the open street is the wrong place to sell food," blaming them for congestion and the spread of disease.[109] This language hints at an underlying fear that the hawker system was fundamentally incompatible

[106] *Report of the Committee appointed to Investigate the Hawker Question in Singapore* (Singapore, 1932).
[107] "Chinese Cake Seller in Singapore, between 1912–1920". Accessed 27 February 2024. https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/photographs/record-details/d542650b-1161-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad
[108] "Ousting the Hawkers", *The Malayan Saturday Post* May 31, 1924, 11.
[109] *Ibid*.

with the image of a sanitised, controlled, "modern" city (for example, See Figure 21 above). Hawkers likely offered affordability, convenience, and perhaps a sense of personal interaction lacking in the impersonal atmosphere of department stores. As the article admits, this decision seems "harsh on the hosts of hawkers" who depended on street-selling for their livelihood.[110] Their very existence highlighted the gap between the aspirations of colonial urbanity and the economic realities most residents faced – a reality the colonial administration seemed willing to sacrifice in the name of a selective vision of progress.

The Hawker Report also underscores the uneven application of regulations. While colonial officials expressed concerns about the food hygiene of hawkers, there was recognition that similar issues existed within licensed establishments.[111] This prompts questions about who the intended audience for these reforms was. Were they genuinely about public health, or more focused on removing a class of entrepreneurs from visible spaces to conform to an idealised image? Cities like Singapore, Surabaya, and Penang – while outposts of modernity – maintained sizable traditional sectors where economic practices were distinct from those of colonial enterprise. Colonial administrations, often prioritising a vision of urban "efficiency" that aligned with European models, viewed these traditional practices as obstacles.[112] The push to regulate hawkers, despite acknowledged issues within the "modern" sector, suggests the reforms were less about genuine health concerns than about reshaping the urban landscape to conform to a selective vision of progress. Moreover, the persistence and even growth of hawking activity highlights the limits of colonial control. While regulations and licensing aimed to restrict the informal market, they also created a cycle where unlicensed activity flourished, revealing the system's inadequacies. In this sense, street sellers can be seen as engaging in quiet resistance, adapting to restrictions and finding ways to meet a need that the colonial economic structure neglected to address. This resilience underscores that the traditional sector was not merely a passive relic but a dynamic response to the constraints and disruptions imposed by colonialism.

The 1930s in Singapore illustrate how internal divisions within the colonial apparatus itself exacerbated the limitations of attempted regulation. Early attempts to control hawkers through licensing stalled due to disagreements between the Chinese Protectorate and the municipality.[113] This lack of coordination highlights a fundamental fracture within colonial governance, perhaps distinguishing Singapore from cities with stricter or more tolerant approaches. The inconsistent policies that followed further illuminate this lack of resolve. In

[110] "Ousting the Hawkers", *The Malayan Saturday Post* May 31, 1924, 11.
[111] *Report of the Committee appointed to Investigate the Hawker Question in Singapore* (Singapore, 1932), 1
[112] Terence Gary McGee and Yue-man Yeung, *Hawkers in Southeast Asian cities: Planning for the bazaar economy* (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 1977); Terence Gary McGee, "Dualism in the Asian City: The implications for city and regional planning" in *The Third International Symposium on Regional Development* (Tokyo: United Nations Centre for Area Development, 1970), 34–47.
[113] *Report of the Committee*, 1.

1905, a proposal to register and control food hawkers was rejected by the Governor. A 1906 committee report suggested localised regulation, with potential outright bans in certain areas, but this resulted only in limited bylaws focused on night-time stallholders. The 1908 decision to involve police in enforcement reveals a shift towards a more punitive approach.[114] This pattern reveals a cycle of concern, followed by limited action that shifted the burden of enforcement rather than addressing the root causes for the persistence of hawking. The focus on night-time stallholders hints at an aesthetic concern – the desire to remove hawkers from visible spaces during particular hours, potentially catering to a European audience. However, the failure to fully implement either registration or geographically targeted bans meant that most hawkers continued to operate, albeit under heightened threat. This underscores the gap between the desire for a sanitised, controlled cityscape and the economic realities that kept the informal market thriving.

This disconnect is evident in the events of 1913. The Municipal Health Officer raised legitimate concerns about obstruction, sanitation, and food contamination, suggesting both licensing and the provision of free shelters as potential solutions.[115] However, the delayed introduction of licensing bylaws reveals this was not an urgent priority. Meanwhile, while addressing health standards, the crackdown on eating shops and coffee shops had the unintended consequence of driving even more vendors into the streets as affordable alternatives were eliminated.[116] It highlights how regulations aimed at one part of the informal market system often had ripple effects. Calls to remove hawkers entirely by the 1920s and proposals to cap their numbers show a hardening stance. This focus on elimination, rather than addressing the core needs of affordable food and places to purchase it, reveals the tension between the aesthetics of colonial "modernity" and the economic realities a large portion of the urban population faces.[117] Removing hawkers without addressing these issues carried the severe risk of heightening inequality and economic hardship by disrupting a key source of affordable goods for many residents.

The persistence of hawkers and their continued role in filling these affordability gaps underscores the complex legacy of how colonial policies reshaped urban marketplaces. Historically, marketplaces served as vibrant hubs of both local and long-distance trade.[118] However, the imposition of colonial economic structures often undermined these traditional systems and marginalised local traders. Despite this disruption, remnants of the "old market economy" persisted, with women traders playing a crucial role in their maintenance. Hawkers, as a more informal extension, represented an adaptation and continuation of these local

[114] *Report of the Committee*, 1.
[115] *Ibid*., 2.
[116] *Ibid*.
[117] McGee and Yue-man Yeung, *Hawkers in Southeast Asian Cities*, 47.
[118] Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450–1680 Volume Two: Expansion and Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 91.

economic practices. Their persistence highlights how the needs of many urban residents remained unmet by the colonial emphasis on large-scale, externally oriented trade, making them dependent on informal market spaces for accessible and affordable goods.

This dependency on informal market systems arose partly due to the colonial government's contradictory approach to markets more broadly. Seeking to increase revenue, they maintained a strong interest in them. However, administrative burdens frequently clashed with profit aims. In the nineteenth century, market management was often outsourced to Chinese companies, obtaining tax revenues through a "farming" system rather than direct oversight. However, in 1851, the governor-general used broad emergency powers to unilaterally abolish these market farms, citing abuses and exploitation of traders. Yet, even after removing this layer of exploitation, the focus remained squarely on maximising revenue.[119] Responsibility shifted to regional authorities, with minimal investment in infrastructure or the enforcement of sanitation practices.[120] This resulted in a system where markets, vital to both colonial revenue streams and the everyday needs of the populace, remained largely unregulated and often underfunded.[121]

However, the case of Surabaya after 1914 provides a stark contrast to this overarching pattern. While municipalities typically had responsibility for markets, in Surabaya, the central government maintained control until 1914. The newly-formed Market Authority (*Pasarbedrijf*) took a proactive approach, investing in paving, replacing private sheds, providing free water access, improving waste management, and constructing hygienically designed meat stalls.[122] The inclusion of these details underscores the exceptional nature of these efforts, particularly the focus on features like gauze screens to reduce contamination.[123] Interestingly, even this investment was not entirely altruistic, as the improved markets served European households as well.

[119] F. W. Diehl, "Revenue farming and colonial finances in the Netherlands East Indies, 1816–1925", in *The Rise and Fall of Revenue Farming*, ed. J. Butcher and Howard Dick (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993), 220–221.
[120] von Faber, *Nieuw Soerabaia*, 178; Dick, *Surabaya*, 193.
[121] Dick, *Surabaya*, 193.
[122] E.C. Neyndorff, "Het gemeentelijk pasarbedrijf, Soerabaja 1915–1938 [The Municipal Pasar Company, Surabaya 1915–1938]" *Locale Techniek*, (1939).
[123] Dick, *Surabaya*, 194.

Figure 22. Genteng Market in Surabaya. [124]

This initial focus on practical and hygienic improvements led to a more ambitious architectural shift in the mid-1920s. The *Pasarbedrijf* began constructing permanent structures, like the rebuilt Pasar Wonokromo and Pasar Turi.[125] Importantly, even these early projects maintained traditional designs with wooden framing and tiled roofs. However, a turning point occurred in 1932 with Pasar Genteng's reconstruction (See Figure 22 above). Its use of reinforced concrete marked a decisive move towards a modern aesthetic. This change accelerated with Pasar Blauran (1934) and Pasar Pabean (1938-39), where grand designs seemed to not merely incorporate indigenous markets, but intentionally mask them behind facades meant to signal urban modernity.

This architectural shift in the 1930s coincided with the *Pasarbedrijf*'s expanding control over market spaces. New regulations (*pasarverordeningen*) in 1926 focused on licensing, hygiene, and inspections, aiming to extend control to remaining private markets.[126] When these regulations proved difficult to enforce, the *Pasarbedrijf* took direct charge, likely under the guise of improving standards. Further consolidation included prohibiting markets within kampungs, justified by hygiene concerns. To replace them, larger markets were built along kampung perimeters or smaller neighbourhood markets (*buurzpasar*) were established. By 1938, the number of administered markets reached forty-one – a significant expansion since 1928.[127]

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[124] "Markt 'Genteng' te Surabaya, Oost-Java", (photograph, Tropenmuseum: Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, 1932).
[125] Soerabaja Stadsgemeente, *Gemeenteblad* [Municipal Gazette], (Surabaya, 1929): 364; Soerabaja Stadsgemeente, *Gemeenteblad* [Municipal Gazette], (Surabaya, 1927): 245.
[126] von Faber, *Nieuw Soerabaia*, 179.
[127] Neyndorff, "Het gemeentelijk pasarbedrijf", 57.

This drive to control clashed with persistent, traditional trading practices. The economic hardship of the Great Depression exacerbated the issue, with many turning to unregulated street selling (*straatverkoopers*) alongside other informal economic activities. This search for income opportunities challenged the *Pasarbedrijf*'s vision of a tightly controlled market system.[128] However, important to note is that Javanese practices of selling directly along roadsides predate the colonial concept of centralised, regulated markets.[129] While viewed as disruptive by colonial authorities, these practices were deeply rooted in local customs, with the street long serving as a marketplace. This contrast highlights the limitations of colonial attempts to impose a rigid, modern market system on a population accustomed to a more fluid and adaptable trade model.

Figure 23. Tjantian, Surabaya, 1925.[130]

[128] Dick, *Surabaya*, 195.
[129] Uka Tjandrasasmita, *Growth and Development of Muslim Cities in Indonesia* (Kudus: Menara Kudus, 2000).
[130] "Tjantian, Soerabaia". Accessed 27 February 2024. https://colonialarchitecture.eu/obj?sq=id%3Auuid%3Abddcb21e-fcb1-44f6-94de-e65097fb3e61

Figure 24. Tunjungan Street, Surabaya, 1925.[131]

This class-based divide within the urban landscape is evident in the very development of pavements in Surabaya. They initially appeared in areas like Handelstraat, Heerenstraat, Pasar Besar, Tjantian (See Figure 23 above) and Tunjunganstraat (See Figure 24 above) – all centres of modern commerce.[132] Pavements were extensions of existing shops, with the shop's roof often extending to provide shelter. This design suggests that pavements were primarily built for the convenience of upper-middle-class residents.[133] This urban planning did not consider lower-income groups who frequented less formal markets or roadside sellers. This physical segregation mirrors the broader attempt to marginalise traditional street sellers and impose a market hierarchy that catered to colonial elites and a select portion of the local population.

[131] "*Soerabaja, Toendjoengan*". Accessed 27 February 2024. https://colonialarchitecture.eu/obj?sq=id%3Auuid%3A517584d2-6700-4efc-8dd5-ec2b61c2ee4e
[132] von Faber, *Nieuw Soerabaia*.
[133] Purnawan Basundoro, *Merebut Ruang Kota: Aksi Rakyat Miskin Kota Surabaya 1900-1960an* [Seizing Urban Space: The Actions of the Poor in the City of Surabaya in the 1900-1960s] (Jakarta: Marjin Kiri, 2018): 222.

Figure 25. De Roode Brug en de Handelstraat in Soerabaja.[134]

Figure 26. Handelstraat or Kembang Djepoon, 1925.[135]

This social function of pavements becomes further evident through the account of van der AA. As dusk fell, European women from exclusive neighbourhoods, west of the *Jembatan Merah* (Red Bridge, See Figure 25 above) would descend to shop in areas like *Handelstraat*

[134] "De Roode Brug en de Handelstraat in Soerabaja". Accessed 19 February 2024. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:COLLECTIE_TROPENMUSEUM_De_Roode_Brug_en_de_Handelstraat_in_Soerabaja_TMnr_60028087.jpg

[135] "Kembang Djepoon". Accessed 27 February 2024. https://colonialarchitecture.eu/obj?sq=id%3Auuid%3A30098299-8d21-4420-a927-f64f254322ca

(*Kembang Jepun* or *Djepoon*) (See Figure 26 above). The very act of strolling along the pavement became a form of display, with elegant dress and jewellery transforming them into public spectacles. This highlights how pavements became spaces for the wealthy to consume and reinforce social hierarchies. The contrast is stark – while traditional street vendors were increasingly marginalised, the pavement offered a stage for the privileged. Van der AA's observation that Europeans in Surabaya often appeared even more meticulously groomed than those in European cities underscores the performative nature of colonialism itself within this urban setting.[136]

This emphasis on appearances and the use of public spaces to enact social divisions reveals a fundamental contradiction within the colonial approach to markets. While recognizing their economic importance, the colonial government focused on creating a network of safe, clean, and convenient markets. The increase from 8 markets in 1915 to 41 by 1938, including small markets (*buurtpassers*) strategically placed within kampung villages, suggests an attempt to formalise commerce and extend accessibility.[137] Alongside new construction, older markets saw infrastructural improvements – better roads, stalls, ventilation – all aimed at enhancing their functionality and appeal.[138] However, this desire for order extended beyond infrastructure. The municipality took on regulatory roles, setting prices, ensuring quality, and mediating disputes. Efforts to limit street vending, viewed as competition, highlight a desire to impose control over the entire market system.[139] Yet, this emphasis on orderly and visually "acceptable" market spaces clashed with the economic realities that kept informal trade thriving. The very existence of street vendors, pushed to the margins while the privileged performed wealth on pavements, reveals the persistent limitations of colonial efforts to control urban commerce fully.

Market development undoubtedly impacted Surabaya, boosting the economy and providing jobs. However, it is crucial to remember that beneath the image of progress the colonial administration sought to project lingered the unmet needs of those reliant on the very informal markets the system aimed to suppress. This tension became evident in the 1939 conference on street selling hosted by Surabaya's municipality.[140] While a stated concern centred around loss of revenue due to competition with formal markets, anxieties regarding public hygiene were also prominent. A closer look reveals that much public attention appears to have been driven by fears of price increases and market destabilisation should the formal market network weaken. While thinly grounded in economic logic, these fears suggest a narrative deliberately crafted by those interested in maintaining monopolies and revenue

[136] Neyndorff, "Het gemeentelijk pasarbedrijf", 55–56.
[137] "Oesaha Pasar dari Gementee Soerabaja, 1915-1938", *Locale Techniek* Mar-Apr, 1939, 58.
[138] *Ibid*.
[139] *Ibid*.
[140] Dick, *Surabaya*, 195–196.

streams. Whenever local market authorities convened, it stands to reason that a defence of their existing power and profit would be prioritised, employing any argument likely to stoke fear and discourage potential reforms.

This focus on suppressing street selling aligns with a broader colonial mindset regarding urban development. Street selling appears to have been kept to a minimum in Surabaya due to a dense network of neighbourhood markets. Street selling was much less prevalent in Surabaya than in other Indonesian cities. This emphasis on regulated markets underscores the colonial paradigm that improvements in the built environment measured progress. Thomas Karsten, a leading town planner, epitomised this view, planning the city in the Dutch East Indies as a centre of order (*ordening*). Marketplaces became "necessary elements" in a vision of economic transformation meant to shift the population from a "primitive agrarian" mentality to a modern "urban-ordered" one.[141] This mindset echoes the approach found in *kampung* improvement, revealing a consistent paternalistic attitude among "enlightened but arrogant" colonial planners. Whether focusing on markets or housing, this "improvement" reflected Ethical Policy ideals - aiming to mould "modernity" within an imposed structure of economic life. Regardless of potential benefits, these programs created political and cultural friction, clashing with the local pride and traditions.

A similar pattern of anxiety and control emerges in Penang, evidenced by an article highlighting growing concerns about the perceived increase in itinerant hawkers and the potential threats they pose to public health and order.[142] The article focuses specifically on the hygiene practices of food vendors, noting the lack of washing facilities and the potential for disease transmission through "*makan*-carts" (food carts) and satay sellers. The condescending tone – describing hawkers as lacking in cleanliness and the food they sell as "concoctions" – reveals a deep-seated distrust and a sense of cultural superiority.[143] This insistence on regulation under the guise of health concerns mirrors the Surabaya example, where strict market systems were justified as necessary for progress.

This disdain for informal market activity is further expressed in the description of house-to-house pedlars as a "positive nuisance," invading private spaces and offering goods of "doubtful value." While acknowledging their economic hardship, the article primarily focuses on the inconvenience they cause colonial residents. It calls for increased licensing and regulation as a means to limit the presence of hawkers and impose order on the informal marketplace. The article even touches upon fortune-tellers, suggesting a broader concern with regulating those deemed "unsophisticated" and protecting a "superstitious population," revealing a paternalistic desire to dictate acceptable economic activity.[144]

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[141] A. H. P. van der Put, "De Straatverkoop" [Street Selling], *Lokale Techniek*, No. 8, Vol. 4, (1939): 111.
[142] "Itinerant Hawkers", *The Straits Echo Mail Edition*, (11 June 1928): 359.
[143] *Ibid*.
[144] *Ibid*.

Another article reveals how efforts to clear Penang Road of stalls faced resistance, even from within the Municipal Commission.[145] The issue of awnings projecting onto the road and the use of pavement for selling highlights the struggle between colonial ideals of unobstructed thoroughfares and the realities of hawkers needing space to operate their businesses. The brief nature of the exchange suggests that enforcement might be selective and influenced by personal connections, hinting at potential corruption within the regulatory system. Contrasting these concerns about street vendors another article enthusiastic about the Municipality's large investments in road infrastructure. It celebrates the introduction of modern asphalt and street-washing machines, framing these improvements as critical for transforming Penang's roads into "the finest in any part of the East".[146] This vision of progress is driven by European standards and likely to serve the interests of colonial elites who relied on cars for transportation. The emphasis on longevity and cost-effectiveness suggests that these improvements are motivated by fiscal concerns rather than a broader commitment to enhancing lives across Penang's diverse population.

This focus on road improvement is further discussed in an article, which acknowledges a growing awareness of the limitations of Penang's existing infrastructure.[147] However, it highlights the significant challenges and costs posed by densely built-up areas: "Here the shops and houses are built right up to the edge of the road, and any question of widening involves the purchase not only of a strip of land but of the buildings upon it".[148] The economic burden of demolition and the displacement of residents in a time of housing shortage underscore the disruptive consequences of this modernisation effort. The article expresses concern about the Municipal Engineer's approach to urban planning. It questions whether pressing problems are being addressed "without one thought of the future."[149] The observation that "towns have an awkward habit of expanding" highlights the author's perception that a lack of foresight in establishing building lines could lead to even higher costs later. While the Municipal Engineer is credited with making improvements, the article questions whether they are being done strategically to address long-term needs or as responses to immediate issues.

This concern expressed in the article reflects a broader pattern within colonial urban development across Southeast Asia. In cities like Surabaya, Penang, and Singapore, the emphasis on regulated marketplaces and infrastructure reveals a desire for order and modernity. However, this vision often clashed with existing economic practices and urban growth realities. The targeting of street sellers and vendors, despite their affordability, accessibility, and cultural significance, highlights the tension between colonial ideals and the

[145] "Penang Road and Stalls", *The Straits Echo Mail Edition* May, 1928, 279.
[146] "Penang's Progress", *The Straits Echo Mail Edition* Mar, 1928, 179.
[147] "Wider Roads", *Straits Echo* Aug 20, 1926, 6.
[148] *Ibid*.
[149] *Ibid*.

needs of a diverse urban population. The Penang Road example mirrored this disconnect between colonial ideals and practical needs. Just as building without consideration for future expansion creates costly obstacles, so do attempts to suppress informal markets. In both cases, focusing solely on immediate control ignores the persistent needs these practices serve, potentially leading to unintended consequences. Promoting regulated marketplaces as the sole model of "modern" commerce similarly reveals anxieties about competition and control rather than a genuine commitment to equitable economic development. Ultimately, the critiques surrounding the road and the persistence of traditional markets expose limitations in the colonial approach. This demonstrates a failure to anticipate the consequences of their imposed interventions and a fundamental misunderstanding of the complex and dynamic communities they sought to transform.

Conclusion

This chapter has illuminated the multifaceted transformation of Southeast Asia's urban shopping landscape in the early twentieth century. In Surabaya, Singapore, and Penang, the rise of department stores, revitalised markets, and the persistence of street vendors reveal the profound impact of both colonial modernisation projects and local economic resilience. This study has examined how shopping spaces became more than just sites of exchange; they evolved into crucibles of consumer desire, class aspiration, and contested notions of "progress" within the colonial context.

This chapter reveals the emergence of a powerful consumer culture by examining the transformation of urban landscapes, the spectacle of shopping spaces, and the significance of department stores. Colonial policies and urban restructuring created new economic opportunities while instilling Western consumer models. Attempts to regulate spaces and everyday acts like shopping highlight how the colonial state sought to control, even in seemingly mundane realms. However, the chapter also explores the complexities and contradictions inherent in colonial attempts to modernise commerce. Beyond imposed regulations, the enduring adaptability of traditional marketplaces and street vendors speaks to their ongoing significance. They offered affordability, convenience, and cultural connection, filling gaps created by a focus on a European-derived model of commerce. This tension highlights anxieties about competition and the limitations of colonial attempts to redefine urban economic behaviour. The colonial city and its shopping spaces emerge not simply as centres of economic exchange, but as battlegrounds where identities, consumer aspirations, and power dynamics collided.

Importantly, this analysis reveals how deeply capitalism and colonialism intertwine within these Southeast Asian cities. Moving forward, a close examination of shoppers themselves – their motivations, choices, and experiences – offers a crucial next step. Ultimately,

these cities stand as early examples of modern consumer cities. The shopping spaces analysed in this chapter laid the foundation for the continued evolution of consumer culture – an enduring legacy of the colonial period that continues to shape these cities and their inhabitants in the present day.

Chapter II. Shared Tastes, Shared Dreams: Southeast Asia's Middle Class in the 1920s and the 1930s

Introduction

American traveller Herman Norden captures the dynamism of Southeast Asia's urban centres in the early decades of the twentieth century. During his Singapore visit, he observed a bustling marketplace: "On the [Raffles] quay...diverse traders included those of Chinese origin, along with Hindus, Malays, Javanese, Tamils, Anamneses, Cambodians..."[1] This marketplace highlights the economic opportunities that fuelled the rise of the urban middle class, whose increasing affluence impacted colonial Southeast Asia's economic, social, and cultural life. Their rising wealth led to new consumption patterns, driving economic diversification and defining their unique identities.

Norden's observations extend beyond the marketplace. His description – "Sunset finds many strollers on the Esplanade, watching the ball and tennis games on the green lawns set aside for sports" – hints at the complex social changes underway.[2] This scene of Western-influenced leisure raises questions about the composition of this group. Were these strollers primarily Europeans, members of the local elite adopting Western practices, or a blend of both? The answer likely lies in the emergence of a middle class embracing such activities as markers of their status. This shift in leisure practices reflects a broader societal transformation, driven both by passive exposure to Western trends and the active desire to shape the cultural landscape. In these spaces, they sought a distinctly modern lifestyle, one that blended local and Western influences and signalled their newfound position within the colonial system.

[1] Hermann Norden, *From Golden Gate to Golden Sun: A Record of Travel, Sport and Observation in Siam and Malaya* (London, L H. F. & G. Witherby, 1923), 62.
[2] *Ibid*.

Figure 27. The Modernised Javanese. "De Gemoderniseerde Javaan". [3]

This shift from marketplace to leisure activities foreshadows the complexities of identity and consumption evident in contemporary accounts of events like the 1907 Surabaya fair. One Dutch journalist writing for a popular weekly expressed confusion and discomfort when encountering individuals who defied traditional expectations.[4] He mocked those he dubbed "modernised Javanese," their dress juxtaposed with traditional Javanese garments like the sarong with Western-style shirts, jackets, and accessories (See Figure 27 above). This unease hints at the emerging urban middle-class challenge to the colonial order. Clothing and appearance became sites of contestation in pursuing modernity, signalling aspirations for a different way of life. This unease hints at the implicit challenge to colonial norms embodied by the emerging urban middle class, whose pursuit of modernity subtly destabilised the social structures of the colonial system.

This sartorial defiance was a precursor to a broader shift. What was a jarring novelty in 1907 would become commonplace decades later. By the 1930s, fairs, exhibitions, and *pasar malam* (night market) had proliferated throughout the Dutch East Indies.[5] These events, held

[3] von Faber, *Nieuw Soerabaia*, 259.
[4] Hoogervorst and Nordholt. "Urban middle classes in colonial Java", 443.
[5] *Pasar malam*, also found throughout colonial Malaya, served a similar purpose: as focal points for Britain's global empire, they linked consumers to a vast network of goods and ideas. See Frank Chua, "A History of the Singapore pasar Malam: A market experience in pre-modern Singapore", *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (2002): 114; See also Yulia Nurliani Lukito, "Colonial Exhibitions, Hybrid Architecture, and the Interpretation of Modernity in the Dutch East Indies." *Journal of Cultural Geography* 36, no. 3 (2019): 291–316; Yulina Nurliani Lukito, *Exhibiting Modernity and Indonesian Vernacular Architecture: Hybrid Architecture at Pasar Gambir of Batavia, the 1931 Paris International Colonial Exhibition and Taman Mini Indonesia Indah* (Springer, 2015).

in virtually every major city and town, were not just sites of cultural exchange but fundamentally spaces of consumption. This transformation highlights a central theme in understanding the urban middle class in colonial Southeast Asia: how consumption became essential to their aspirations for modernity. The "modernised Javanese" and the broader middle class they represented were key participants – no longer as objects of curiosity but as active consumers shaping these places.

This focus on consumption as a driving force of middle-class identity formation requires a broader perspective within historical scholarship. Historian Hans van Miert critiques teleological approaches that focus only on radical movements or seemingly inevitable outcomes, obscuring the complexity of social and political movements within colonial Indonesian contexts.[6] Building upon the insightful critique of previous scholars who call for a more nuanced examination of the middle-class experience beyond simplified nationalist narratives, this chapter shifts the focus. While the role of the middle class in nationalist movements has been well-documented, this research emphasises a different facet of their search for a modern identity: the centrality of consumption. I argue that for many, the primary goal was not solely the creation of a nation but the attainment of a lifestyle made possible by participation in the colonial system. However, this focus on material consumption needs to be broadened to encompass how the middle class also "consumed" experiences and ideas. These "intangible" aspects of consumption were equally important in shaping their sense of identity within the colonial context. The focus on consumption, while seemingly apolitical, reveals how middle-class aspirations ultimately reinforced existing power dynamics. Paradoxically, the pursuit of European education, intended by the colonial system to produce loyal subjects, opened pathways to the very consumerist lifestyle at the heart of this identity formation. While not explicitly aimed at political revolution, this phenomenon reveals how the ambitions of the middle class could subtly challenge the goals of the colonial system by implicitly questioning its social hierarchies.

To truly grasp the dynamics shaping this phenomenon, we must first examine the fluidity of "middle-class" identity within the context of colonial Southeast Asia. Factors like education, employment, and lifestyle choices shaped how social status was defined within each colonial system. By comparing and contrasting the experiences of urbanites in Surabaya, Singapore, and Penang, we will uncover both the variations caused by colonial governance and the commonalities faced by this emerging group across all three cities. While colonial boundaries existed, it is equally important to uncover how this middle class developed shared tastes and identities across different cities, even empires. The inhabitants of these cities lived

[6] Hans van Miert, *Een Koel Hoofd en Een Warm Hart: Nationalisme, Javanisme en jeugdbeweging in Nederlands-Indië 1918–1930 [A Cool Head and a Warm Heart: Nationalism, Javanese and Youth Movement in the Dutch East Indies 1918–1930]*, (Amsterdam: De Bataafsche Leeuw, 1995).

in multilingual environments and were exposed to a vast array of reading materials in Dutch, English, Malay, Chinese, Arabic, and other languages. This chapter will explore whether common consumption patterns existed, revealing the complex ways in which a shared sense of modernity was negotiated across traditional divides.

The rise of this transregional middle-class identity can only be fully understood by considering the broader context of the period. Globally, new consumer cultures were booming across the United States and Europe, and their influence extended into Southeast Asian cities.[7] Ideas and images of this lifestyle were transmitted via travellers and various forms of media. As historian Su Lin Lewis argues, the late colonial era in port cities like Singapore, Penang, Bangkok, Batavia, Rangoon, and Manila saw the rise of urban professionals with modern, outward-looking perspectives who participated in new kinds of modernity.[8] This expanding urban middle class, composed of local, migrant, and hybrid communities, was pivotal in shaping a unique and cosmopolitan popular culture. Their ambitions and aspirations for a modern lifestyle made them key drivers of a burgeoning consumer society. This inextricably linked their shopping activities to forming and expressing a distinct "popular modernity" within the context of colonial society.[9]

A significant part of this transformation was the role of external influences, particularly from the West, in shaping local consumer desires and practices. The influence of American consumer products became a crucial aspect of this process. As Anne Foster argues, American goods were seen by U.S. observers as tools for Southeast Asians to transition into modernity and self-governance.[10] However, this was not necessarily driven by an ideological commitment to ending colonialism but was instead rooted in the belief that proper consumption of these products would signal the readiness of Southeast Asians for eventual autonomy. American cultural influence, through goods, films, and even missionaries, promoted an American way of life that was meant to cultivate "modern, responsible" behaviours that aligned with capitalist values.[11] Hollywood films, in particular, were seen as vehicles for promoting independent thinking and consumerism, both essential for fostering the modernity required for eventual self-rule.

This influx of American culture and consumerism did not replace European colonial rule but operated alongside it. By the 1920s, the United States had become a partner in sustaining colonial systems, often positioning its own methods as superior to those of

[7] Anne L. Foster, *Projections of Power: The United States and Europe in Colonial Southeast Asia, 1919–1941* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), xi; See also Stefan Schwarzkopf, "Introduction to Ernest Dichter and Motivation Research", *Market Research & American Business, 1935-1965*, (2014).
[8] Lewis, *Cities in Motion,* 12–13.
[9] Peter Keppy, *Tales of Southeast Asia's Jazz Age: Filipinos, Indonesian and Popular culture, 1920-1936* (Singapore: NUS: 2019), 13.
[10] Foster, *Projections of Power*, xi.
[11] *Ibid*., 74.

European powers.[12] In fact, American participation in Southeast Asia's economic landscape often reinforced European imperial structures, as both American and European powers saw the encouragement of consumer culture and industrial capitalism as essential to maintaining control over the region. The consumption of American products, such as foodstuffs and manufactured goods, was promoted as a means of improving the economic position of Southeast Asians, encouraging them to specialise in export-driven agriculture like rubber cultivation, further entrenching them in the global capitalist system.[13]

In this way, consumer culture in Southeast Asia was not simply a matter of individual or class aspirations. It was part of a larger colonial project, wherein both American and European powers encouraged consumption as a marker of modernity, while ensuring that economic structures remained advantageous to imperial interests. This dual role of consumer goods—both as tools of modernisation and instruments of control—illustrates the complex relationship between consumer culture and colonialism. While the urban middle class in Southeast Asia may have viewed their participation in consumer culture as a means of asserting modern identities, it also bound them to a system that reinforced colonial hierarchies and global capitalist networks.

This intricate relationship between consumer culture and colonial power is perhaps best illustrated by the cultural icons that emerged during this period. The ubiquity of the "Modern Girl" figure in the 1920s and 1930s offers a powerful example of how globalised consumer culture shaped a transnational modern feminine identity. As demonstrated by the Modern Girl Around the World Research Group, she embodied specific commodities, aesthetics, and behaviours that challenged traditional norms.[14] Her instantly recognisable visual markers – bobbed hair, painted lips, fashionable dress, and a confident demeanour – signified a break from the past and signalled participation in global trends.[15] This visibility and her association with consumer culture made her a potent symbol connecting middle-class women's experiences across different cities, fostering a shared understanding of what it meant to be modern, even as local realities shaped that understanding. In colonial Malaya, as Mahani Musa points out, this modern identity was the subject of debate in periodicals, where Malay female writers began to contribute to discussions about women's roles in society, modernity, and national development.[16] These debates reflected both the opportunities and tensions surrounding women's engagement with modernity in a rapidly changing society.

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[12] Foster, *Projections of Power*, 90.
[13] *Ibid*., 1–2, 90.
[14] Alys Eve Weinbaum, Lynn M. Thomas, Priti Ramamurthy, Uta G. Poiger, Madeleine Yue Dong, and Tani Barlow, ed., *The Modern Girl around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 2; See also Tani E. Barlow, ed., *Formations of Colonial Modernity in East Asia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).
[15] *Ibid*.
[16] Mahani Musa, "The 'Woman Question' in Malayan Periodicals, 1920–1945," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 38, no. 111 (2010): 247–271.

The Modern Girl's emergence as a consumerist icon underscores the power of shared experiences and tastes in creating a sense of belonging. Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" sheds light on this phenomenon, offering a useful framework to understand how shared consumer practices fostered a sense of identity that transcended local and national boundaries. However, in the context of colonial Southeast Asia, this comparison requires qualification. Unlike Anderson's concept, where print capitalism fostered national consciousness, consumer culture in colonial Southeast Asia created a transnational modern identity linked to a cosmopolitan, rather than national, sense of belonging.[17] Participation in shared consumer experiences—whether through browsing fashionable stores, wearing certain clothing styles, or attending exhibitions—cultivated collective interests and similar tastes that connected the middle class across cities like Surabaya, Singapore, and Penang. This sense of community, built through consumption, was not merely about localised or national identity but reflected a broader, transnational modernity driven by global trends and colonial dynamics.

This theoretical framework finds grounding in the important work of scholars like Tom Hoogervorst and Henk Schulte Nordholt, whose analysis of advertisements in colonial Java demonstrates how consumer culture shaped urban middle-class lifestyles.[18] They reveal how the use of language (mainly Malay) and the incorporation of global visual imagery in advertising promoted new ways of dressing, working, and consuming. While their work primarily focuses on the local dynamics of Java, it provides a crucial foundation for understanding how colonial policies and consumer culture intersected to form new identities. However, where Hoogervorst and Nordholt focus on the localised Javanese context, this study expands the analysis to consider a larger transnational dynamic. It explores how global consumer trends, moving through interconnected colonial cities like Singapore and Penang, facilitated the emergence of a shared sense of modernity across Southeast Asia. By placing Java within this broader context, this study builds on their insights, arguing that the cosmopolitan aspirations of the urban middle class were a driving force behind the embrace of transnational consumer culture. Rather than merely adopting foreign goods passively, this emerging middle class actively sought out global tastes and commodities as a way to express their modern identities. In this way, consumer culture became a reflection of their desire to align themselves with global modernity, transcending local and national boundaries. It was through this engagement with goods, ideas, and trends from across the world that a pan-Southeast Asian middle-class identity emerged—one that reflected both the hybrid and dynamic nature of modernity in the region.

The chapter begins by challenging rigid definitions of the "middle class", acknowledging regional variations and the fluid social status within the colonial context. It then

[17] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.
[18] Hoogervorst and Nordholt, "Urban Middle Classes in Colonial Java".

explores the pivotal role of education in shaping this group's identity. While colonial systems differed, they all transformed opportunities and instilled Western values. Across Southeast Asian cities, education opened new professions and fostered aspirations for material goods and lifestyles perceived as modern. This created a shared foundation for middle-class identity, even while introducing regional nuances and potential points of difference. The first section attempts to quantify this group within selected cities. The second section analyses literary sources to reveal their aspirations, anxieties, and evolving understanding of modernity amidst significant social change. The third section examines how consumer choices became central to the expression of middle-class identity. The kebaya and Terang Bulan motif illustrate the negotiation of tradition and global influences within the marketplace. Their shared popularity underscores the emergence of a transnational consumer culture, highlighting how local actors actively shaped regional trends. Finally, the fourth section explores the complex relationship between middle-class aspirations and national agendas, raising the question of whether the pursuit of modernity might implicitly challenge certain nationalist goals.

Education, Language, and the New Middle Class

In a 1931 interview published in the monthly magazine of the *Middenstandsvereeniging Soerabaia* (Surabaya Middle Class Association), Ed. G. Schuurman, President of the *Koninklijke Nederlandsche Middenstandsbond* (the Royal Dutch Middle Class Association), was asked an important question: "Wie is middenstander?" or, "Who are the middle class?" Schuurman replied that there are limited interpretations to understand the so-called "middle class."[19] He said that merchants can be classified as industrial middle class. However, he also mentioned that other professionals affiliating with certain organisations, such as notaries, doctors, lawyers, engineers, or government employees, are part of the intellectual middle class.[20] This emphasis on organisation resonates with the arguments in "Middenstandsbelangen".[21] Mr. Korte, in his address, highlights the importance of organised association for the middle class to achieve recognition and influence.[22] Both sources underscore the fluidity of the "middle class" label in the Dutch East Indies and demonstrate how individuals used their professional roles and organisational belonging to navigate colonial society and improve their economic standing.

Expanding upon this understanding, Soeroso, a prominent local politician (and later the first governor of Central Java in independent Indonesia), offers a critical perspective in his article "Soal Kaoem Menengah di Indonesia" (The Problem of Middle Class in Indonesia).[23]

[19] "Middenstandsproblemen", *Middenstandsvereeniging Soerabaia* Jan, 1930, 8.
[20] *Ibid*.
[21] "Middenstandsbelangen", *De Vakbeweging* Jul 31,1926, 1.
[22] *Ibid*.
[23] "Soal Kaoem Menengah di Indonesia", *Doenia Dagang* Jan 15, 1939, 8.

He challenges the direct application of European class labels, calling for a more nuanced understanding grounded in the diverse occupational roles within Indonesia and a deep historical analysis of the Indonesian middle-class experience.[24] Soeroso traces a complex trajectory for Indonesia's middle class, contrasting its marginalisation in the twentieth century with a past where skilled crafts and seafaring commerce flourished. He attributes this decline to factors such as European dominance of trade, the erosion of traditional skills, and the suppression of entrepreneurial spirit.[25] This historical perspective positions the struggles of the present-day middle class within a lineage of structural disadvantage rather than as a natural or inevitable state.

While Soeroso critiqued the European class structure, the rise of a professional class in Indonesia was also shaped by the Dutch Ethical Policy, introduced in 1901. This policy marked a turning point in colonial governance, as it sought to improve the welfare of the indigenous population by expanding access to Western-style education. The policy aimed to "uplift" the indigenous population by expanding access to education, healthcare, and infrastructure, with an emphasis on creating an educated native elite to assist in colonial governance.[26] This policy established government-sponsored schools, which contrasted with missionary-led schools more common in Malaya. These government initiatives increased access to Western education for indigenous Indonesians, particularly in urban areas like Batavia and Surabaya.Schools established under the Ethical Policy, such as the *Hollandsch-Inlandsche School* (HIS) and the *Meer Uitgebreid Lager Onderwijs* (MULO), were key in creating an educated class capable of serving the colonial bureaucracy.[27] These government-sponsored schools, which contrasted with the missionary-led schools more common in British Malaya, aimed to develop a Western-educated indigenous elite.

The Ethical Policy opened new opportunities for Indonesians, particularly in terms of employment in the civil service, teaching, and other professions that required a Dutch education. However, it also created a paradox: while the Dutch intended to mould a loyal, Western-educated elite, they inadvertently equipped this middle class with the tools to critique colonial rule. Graduates of these schools were exposed to European ideas, modern consumer goods, and Western lifestyles, which both integrated them into and distanced them from the colonial system. This access to education provided a path for upward mobility but also planted the seeds for political dissent, as the newly educated middle class began to challenge the socio-economic hierarchies of colonial rule.

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[24] "Soal Kaoem Menengah di Indonesia", *Doenia Dagang* Jan 15, 1939, 8.
[25] *Ibid*.
[26] Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia,* 189; See also Vickers, *A History of Modern Indonesia*, 17–18, 23, 41, 45; Locher-Scholten, *Ethiek in fragmenten* [Ethics in Fragments], 176–208; van Doorn, *De laatste eeuw van Indië* [The Last Century of the Indies].
[27] Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia*, 196–198.

Moreover, the Ethical Policy contrasts sharply with the mission schools in British Malaya, where education was primarily divided along ethnic lines, reinforcing colonial hierarchies.[28] In the Dutch East Indies, education under the Ethical Policy aimed to cultivate a modernised, multi-ethnic elite, bound together by Dutch-language schooling. However, this attempt to create a unified class of bureaucrats also fostered a growing sense of national consciousness, as these educated Indonesians began to question their roles within a colonial society that offered them limited social and political power. The rise of this educated middle class did more than just offer pathways into the colonial bureaucracy. It also created a new group of consumers, equipped with both the financial means and cultural exposure to participate in new forms of consumerism. Access to Western education not only led to upward mobility but also exposed the middle class to modern consumer goods and leisure activities, which became integral to the formation of a modern identity within the colonial context. However, this consumerism also highlighted divisions within the middle class, as not all members had equal access to these new opportunities or the wealth required to partake fully in this lifestyle.

Soeroso challenges the assumption that the Indonesian middle class was a monolithic group, emphasising that their experiences were shaped by regional variations and occupational diversity. While some middle-class individuals benefitted from access to education and consumer goods, others faced significant barriers.[29] His critique underscores that, although Western education and consumption patterns were central to middle-class identity formation, structural barriers—such as unequal access to education and capital—often hindered large sections of the middle class from reaching their full potential. Soeroso's call for government-supported empowerment measures highlights the need for more inclusive policies that address these disparities and ensure broader access to education and economic opportunities.

A complex and dynamic relationship existed between the colonial powers and the indigenous middle class, which often occupied a precarious position between the colonial elites and the lower classes. While colonial administrations relied on a stable, educated workforce and the growing consumer market the middle-class represented, they also feared potential challenges to their authority. This led to "divide-and-conquer" tactics aimed at undermining middle-class autonomy. By offering limited economic and political privileges, colonial powers attempted to co-opt portions of the middle class while suppressing broader political and cultural expression. This highlights the contradictions inherent within the colonial system and its impact on middle-class formation. These attempts at control and co-option underscore why it is crucial to recognise that modernisation unfolded differently in Asian

[28] Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 222–230.
[29] "Soal Kaoem Menengah di Indonesia", *Doenia Dagang* Jan 15, 1939, 9.

contexts.[30] Unlike in the West, as Soeroso asserts, modernisation in the Dutch East Indies was often driven by external forces like colonialism.[31] This external imposition shaped the resulting middle classes in Asia, leading to characteristics distinct from their Western counterparts. To understand them, we must discard assumptions of a singular path and focus on the specific circumstances that shaped their development.

Colonialism's unique impact in Southeast Asia had profound implications for the political aspirations of the emerging middle class, as evident in the case of Surabaya. In the mid-nineteenth century, the urban middle class in Surabaya—referred to as "*orang-orang pertikeli*"—sought municipal autonomy and established a city council.[32] This reflected their desire for self-governance, stemming from their position within a system where modernisation was largely imposed from outside. This societal layer comprised professionals such as lawyers, doctors, accountants, merchants, journalists, insurance agents, teachers, artists, and other modern professions, including retirees who chose to settle in the colony.[33] While the central government initially resisted, societal shifts led by an increasingly influential professional class (the "*middenstand*") ultimately drove urban change.[34]

The changing dynamics of power between the colonial government and the middle class are further revealed in an anonymous article published in Dutch-language newspaper *Middenstandsvereeniging Soerabaia* in 1931, entitled "De Positie van den Middenstand".[35] It illustrates a shift in the middle class's tactics over time. While earlier resistance aimed for direct municipal autonomy, they later emphasised their economic indispensability. This group sought to solidify its position, stressing its role in restoring order after wartime upheavals and presenting itself as "...indispensable for the proper and healthy functioning of society..."[36] By linking themselves with social order and progress, they suggest that genuine change requires their partnership, not opposition. Additionally, the article conveys a deep consciousness of their evolving social position and the necessity for adjustment, "...the middle class itself must be aware of its task..." it urges, recognising the fluidity of society and encouraging greater intellectual development among its members.[37] Pleading to retain talented youth within their ranks further reveals this understanding of themselves as a dynamic group in a state of flux.

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[30] Tamio Hattori, Tsuruyo Funatsu, and Takashi Torii, "Introduction: The Emergence of the Asian Middle Classes and their Characteristics," *The Developing Economies* 41, no. 2 (2003): 129–139.
[31] "Soal Kaoem Menengah di Indonesia", *Doenia Dagang* Jan 15, 1939, 9.
[32] Andi Achdian, "*Kaum Pergerakan dan Politik Kota: Perkembangan Politik Kewargaan di Kota Kolonial Surabaya, 1906–1942*" [The Movements and Urban Politics: The Development of Civic Politics in the Colonial City of Surabaya, 1906–1942] (PhD diss., University of Indonesia, 2018), 66; See also William H. Frederick, *Pandangan dan Gejolak: Masyarakat Kota dan Lahirnya Revolusi Indonesia (Surabaya 1926–1946)* [Visions and Heat: The Making of the Indonesian Revolution (Surabaya 1926–1946)] (Jakarta: Gramedia, 1989).
[33] Achdian, *Kaum Pergerakan dan Politik Kota*, 66.
[34] von Faber, *Nieuw Soerabaia*.
[35] "De Positie van den Middendstand", *Middenstandsvereeniging Soerabaia* Mar, 1931, 1–5.
[36] *Ibid*., "*...onmisbaar voor een goed en gezond functionneeren der maatschappelijke krachten...*".
[37] *Ibid*., "*...de middenstand zèlf dient zich...bewust te zin van de taak...*".

This emphasis on intellectual growth and economic development as tools for preserving their position highlights the complex tightrope this class walked – seeking greater agency and influence in the modern world, yet simultaneously desiring a secure, established place within the colonial system.

The embrace of necessary reforms, balanced with pleas for stability, further illustrates the predicament of the colonial Southeast Asian middle class. Recognising the need to change and "...cooperate with necessary reforms...," they remain acutely aware of the destabilising potential inherent in challenging the status quo too drastically.[38] This need for calculated adaptation within the existing power structures – not a radical break – mirrors the broader struggle middle classes face within colonial systems. This dilemma is sharply illustrated in an article in the same periodical, entitled ""De Economische Positie van den Middendstand", which offers a stark analysis of the Dutch middle class's struggles in Surabaya during the Great Depression.[39] While diagnoses of their situation might vary, the author pinpoints a central issue: escalating business costs within the colonial context. Similar challenges were mirrored in other colonial systems globally.[40] The article further highlights a lack of modern business skills as a vulnerability for the Dutch middle class in Surabaya.[41] The author believes drastic adaptation is the key. "The middle class needs to adapt..." emphasises the urgency.[42] This requires individual action – lowering costs and acquiring modern business knowledge – and structural changes such as increased cooperation and trade organisations. These prescriptions highlight the need for middle classes across colonial settings to balance progress with maintaining their position within inherently unequal power structures.

This call for adaptation resonates with changes witnessed in the Southeast Asian middle class during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The economic downturn forced a reassessment of priorities. As the economic situation improved in Southeast Asia, the middle class increasingly recognise the importance of financial education. This is evident in "Commercial Education," an article published in *The Penang Monthly Advertiser* (January 1934), which emphasises the need for "...young men to turn their directions to commercial studies".[43] Economic hardship drove a need for better financial management, prompting this shift. The rise of commercial schools, offering accounting, bookkeeping, and investment courses, reflects this focus on practical financial skills. Simultaneously, colonial governments often supported this trend, publishing financial guides and promoting greater financial

[38] "De Positie van den Middendstand", *Middenstandsvereeniging Soerabaia* Mar, 1931, 1–5, "*...mede te werken ann nood-zakelike hervormingen*...".
[39] "De Economische Positie van den Middendstand", *Middenstandsvereeniging Soerabaia* Jul, 1931, 1–5
[40] "De Wereldcrisis en de Middenstand", *Middenstandsvereeniging Soerabaia* Nov 1931, 1–6; "Middenstand en Malaise", *Middenstandsvereeniging Soerabaia*, Dec 1931, 3–4.
[41] *Ibid*., "De Economische Positie van den Middendstand"
[42] *Ibid*., "*De middenstand dient zich aan te passen...*"
[43] "Commercial Education", *The Penang Monthly Advertiser* Jan, 1934, 5.

literacy.[44] This attention to financial education reveals an effort by the middle class to adapt and navigate the complexities of the colonial economy, seeking to secure their economic position even within an unequal system.

The emphasis on financial literacy extended beyond formal education. Newspapers and magazines also played a role in publishing articles on financial matters and raising awareness of the importance of financial planning. The article touted the benefits: "The modern youths realised the benefits they can derive by spending a few hours in the evening classes, or in the Commercial Day School."[45] This multi-faceted push for financial knowledge within the Southeast Asian middle class likely helped them manage their assets more effectively and make informed financial decisions. Yet, as an editorial in *Doenia Dagang* highlights, it is important to note their limitations and lack of knowledge of the current economic situation have caused the progress of Indonesian merchants to lag behind.[46] This approach, advocating for both practical skills and greater awareness of economic contexts, suggests a broader regional response to the economic challenges of the time. This call for financial education echoes similar trends seen in sources from Penang, such as the previously mentioned 1934 article in *The Penang Monthly Advertiser* that urged young men to pursue commercial studies. However, even with "sound training" and financial knowledge, the middle class still wrestled with systemic challenges and "must be able to adjust to the current progress of trade with themselves".[47]

This struggle with adaptation reflects the evolving nature of the Southeast Asian middle class. While the term is often associated with traders and merchants, the stories of urban middle classes in Southeast Asia were also intertwined with the region's professionalisation. This process, occurring in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was a direct consequence of European colonial rule and the influence of Western modernity. As cities grew, a demand arose for new professions and occupational identities. The urban middle class was often at the forefront of these changes, embracing new roles and ways of life that set them apart from both traditional elites and the working masses.

However, while the rise of new professions offered opportunities for advancement, it also created an internal struggle within the urban middle class. They embraced the status and possibilities offered by their newly adopted Western-style professional identities, yet they also grappled with the tension between these roles and their traditional cultural backgrounds. This conflict became evident as they navigated their relationship with the colonial powers and their position within the broader social landscape. In Penang, as exemplified before, newspaper

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[44] "Commercial Education", *The Penang Monthly Advertiser* Jan, 1934, 5.
[45] *Ibid*.
[46] "Saudagar Indonesia", *Doenia Dagang* Mar 15, 1939, 21. ""Koerangnja pengetahoean dalam kedoedoekan perekonomian jang sekarang mendjadikan kemadjoean soedagar Indonesia ketinggalan"; "Middenstand Indonesia di Soerabaja", *Doenia Dagang* Mar 15, 1939, 23.
[47] Saudagar Indonesia", *Doenia Dagang* Mar 15, 1939, 21.

articles and editorials frequently discussed the challenges faced by young professionals trying to balance their Western education and careers with traditional family expectations and cultural values. This experience within Southeast Asian colonial societies reflects a broader global process of modernisation, highlighting the impact of Western influence on the development of professional classes. As historian Harold Perkin demonstrated, professions like medicine, law, and engineering played a crucial role in shaping modern society.[48] By providing specialised services and knowledge, these emerging classes challenged traditional elites' power and influence, such as the aristocracy and clergy. Similarly, the professionalisation of Southeast Asia's urban middle classes fuelled societal change while simultaneously creating a dynamic interplay between traditional and Western-influenced advancement models.

Figure 28. A group of students at Surabaya Medical College (NIAS) in their spare time.[49]

The Indonesian medical community offers a compelling example of these tensions and transformations. During the colonial era, they were among the first to be exposed to Western notions of modernity.[50] This exposure extended beyond medicine, as medical professionals embraced broader trends, reading newspapers, participating in youth movements, and even adopting European dress styles (See Figure 28 above). Notably, publications like *Jong Java*, the periodical of the prominent Javanese youth organisation of the same name, played a crucial role in this cultural transformation. Jong Java, through emphasising cultural activities like promoting Javanese music and dances, establishing study funds, and building a boy scout movement, indirectly contributed to the burgeoning sense of cultural citizenship among young

[48] Harold James Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England Since 1880* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1989).
[49] Hans Pols, *Nurturing Indonesia: Medicine and Decolonisation in the Dutch East Indies* (Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 84.
[50] Pols, *Nurturing Indonesia*.

Indonesians.[51] While the exact nature and extent of consumerism within *Jong Java* remains a topic for further investigation, the periodical's emphasis on cultural expression and education suggests its broader significance in shaping the aspirations and identities of the emerging middle class and reflects a broader trend of hybridisation within colonial professions. The medical field, for instance, saw a fusion of Western medicine with indigenous knowledge, resulting in unique practices and marketing strategies.[52] Similarly, education in colonial societies was not merely a transplantation of Western models but a complex negotiation of influences.[53]

The 1923 Teachers' Association meeting offers a revealing glimpse into the complex relationship between education, language, and power within the colonial system. Consider this excerpt, where the speaker praises the British Empire's cosmopolitanism that "...will decide whether anyone of the different races should have a bigger share in commerce, or in the affairs of the state."[54] This seemingly meritocratic perspective, however, belies the underlying power dynamics of colonial rule. The emphasis on education and ability as determinants of success reveals the central role of English language acquisition within the colonial project. By positioning English as the key to advancement in both commerce and governance, the colonial system reinforced its own cultural dominance while seemingly offering a path to upward mobility. This strategy subtly encouraged the adoption of Western values and reinforced existing hierarchies, all under the guise of a supposedly fair and cosmopolitan empire.

This emphasis on English was particularly evident in Singapore, a city renowned for its linguistic diversity. To address these communication barriers and further their imperial agenda, the British colonial government focused on English as a unifying force. This established a power dynamic where English fluency became associated with access to opportunity within the colonial system. For the aspiring middle class, English education was therefore crucial not only for communication but also for navigating the colonial world of commerce and governance, ultimately reinforcing the link between education and consumerism.

Non-Europeans who could afford it often sent their children to English-medium schools, many run by Christian missionaries.[55] English became a marker of privilege, facilitating interactions with European merchants and the colonial administration. In Singapore, education through these mission schools was seen as the path to social mobility and integration into the modern colonial economy. This focus on English-medium education

[51] Leo Suryadinata, "Indonesian Nationalism and the Pre-war Youth Movement: A Reexamination," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 9, no. 1 (1978): 102.
[52] For traditional healers, see Liesbeth Hesselink, *Healers on the Colonial Market; Native Doctors and Midwives in the Dutch East Indies* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).
[53] Omar Haji Khalid, "The Education System of Brunei Darussalam" in *Education in South-East Asia*, ed. Colin Brock and Lorraine Pe Symaco (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 18.
[54] *The Malayan Chronicle* Vol. 1, No. 1, Jul–Aug, 1923, 18.
[55] Chua, *Modernity, Popular Culture and Urban Life*, 16–17.

contrasts with the Dutch Ethical Policy's investment in government-sponsored schools in the East Indies, where the goal was to produce an educated native bureaucracy. However, in both colonial contexts, education served a dual purpose: while preparing a loyal middle class for colonial service, it also introduced them to Western consumer goods, lifestyles, and ideas, shaping a new middle class attuned to modern consumerism. The willingness of middle-class families to invest in education, whether in mission schools or government institutions, underscores how education was perceived as the key to both upward mobility and access to the modern consumer world. Even in the Dutch East Indies, where education was more government-controlled, students were nevertheless equipped to engage with the consumer culture emerging around them, despite the colonial administration's restrictive goals.

In Singapore, despite the emphasis on English as a tool for advancement, the middle class remained embedded within a diverse linguistic landscape where Bazaar Malay and other dialects were still prevalent. Notably, the Straits Chinese, with their longer history in the region and multilingualism, held a particularly advantageous position. This complex relationship with language highlights that while English facilitated social and economic mobility, it did not completely erase other forms of communication or cultural identity, especially among groups that had long navigated multilingual environments. This focus on English-language education connects to colonial narratives of responsibility and self-improvement. As stated in the *Chronicle*, "...what they had to do was to educate the people to a sense of their responsibility in the matter of education, and to render them willing to devote money for the purpose..."[56] While this appears to encourage personal investment in education, it subtly reveals colonial strategies aimed at reducing the financial burden on the government while promoting Western-style education as the preferred model. By encouraging the colonised to take responsibility for their own education, colonial authorities both reinforced existing power structures and ensured the spread of consumerism, with Western education becoming an integral part of middle-class identity and modernity.

Similar dynamics played out in the realm of law. The introduction of English law in the nineteenth century transformed the legal system. While replacing traditional justice systems with a centralised, written system based on English common law could be seen as a form of "modernisation," it is crucial to examine the implications.[57] This change created a demand for lawyers and judges specifically trained in the colonial legal system. These professionals, fluent in both English and its associated legal concepts, became essential intermediaries. This dependence on a select group of professionals with specialised knowledge reinforced colonial power structures and generated new opportunities for economic advancement. Access to legal

[56] *The Malayan Chronicle* Vol. 1, No. 1, Jul–Aug, 1923, 19.
[57] E. Ann Black and Gary F. Bell, ed., *Law and Legal Institutions of Asia: Traditions, Adaptations and Innovations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 7.

services, framed by the colonial system, became a commodity for a specific segment of the middle class.

This transformation had direct implications for the commercial landscape of colonial Singapore. The growth of commerce and trade led to increased demand for legal services, further contributing to the expansion of the legal profession.[58] Increased legal expertise fuelled the growth of law firms and the establishment of professional associations, which both regulated the profession and promoted its members' interests. This emphasis on commercial activity underscored a broader shift in legal philosophy within the colony. The influence of modernity extended beyond the adoption of modern legal concepts; it also encompassed the increased protection of property rights and the promotion of individual freedoms and rights. Colonial authorities championed these concepts, which were previously less emphasised in traditional legal systems. This focus on individual rights and property was instrumental in shaping the legal profession in colonial Singapore, creating new areas of specialisation, and framing legal disputes. The modern legal profession that emerged was deeply intertwined with the colonial expansion of commercial activity and the focus on individual rights within this context.

While professions like law and education were shaped primarily by the imposition of Western systems, the engineering profession in colonial Indonesia occupied a more nuanced position. This difference stemmed from the unique practical challenges of infrastructure development in the archipelago, which required a deep understanding of local conditions and a blending of Western and indigenous knowledge. Engineers played a central role in building the physical foundations of modernity within the colony, making them crucial figures in its technological transformation. The establishment of the *Technische Hoogeschool te Bandung* (THS, now Institut Teknologi Bandung) in 1920 was a response to the growing demand for engineers who could navigate these challenges. This initiative was part of the broader framework of the Dutch Ethical Policy, which sought to create an educated native elite to support colonial development projects. The Dutch government's emphasis on technical education reflected a pragmatic approach to the challenges of infrastructure development in the East Indies. By creating an educated class of engineers, they hoped to ensure the colony's economic progress while maintaining control over its technological transformation.

While initially conceived as a "second Delft" – a university equivalent to the prestigious Dutch institution – the reality of the colonial context necessitated a different approach. There was debate about the appropriate level of education, with some advocating for a "*middelbaar technisch onderwijs*" (Dutch, meaning "secondary technical education") institution while others

[58] Andrew Phang, "The Singapore Legal System", *Singapore Law Review*, No, 21 (2000): 28.

pushed for "*hoger technisch onderwijs*" (Dutch, meaning "higher technical education").[59] Ultimately, the curriculum, while based on the Delft model, was adapted to prioritise practical training and local knowledge. This shift recognised that building infrastructure in Indonesia required a unique set of skills beyond Western theoretical frameworks. The curriculum emphasised local materials, labor practices, and even cultural sensitivities, reflecting the understanding that effective engineering solutions must consider the specific social and environmental context.[60]

This focus on infrastructure fundamentally shaped the development of the engineering profession in the colony. Unlike legal codes or educational models, infrastructure projects were inextricably linked to geography, existing communities, and material realities. Therefore, engineers in the colony had to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and the practical challenges on the ground, forging a distinct professional identity shaped by the unique needs of the local environment.[61] Despite initially relying heavily on Dutch engineers, the colonial system gradually recognised the need to train Indonesians in engineering. The growing number of native engineers – 150 graduates from a higher-level institution by 1935 and a remarkable 13,500 students in lower- and middle-level technical schools just three years later – reveals a deliberate shift and an understanding that local knowledge was essential for effective infrastructure development. The emergence of a professional class like engineering was crucial to the success of colonial development projects.[62] Crucially, as engineers participated in building the physical infrastructure of the colony, they were also consumers within its urban settings. Their education, their need for housing, and participation in modern leisure activities connected them to the broader consumer culture shaping the middle-class experience.

Defining the "Middle" in Colonial Southeast Asia

The rise of a professional class, like that of engineers, fundamentally shaped the dynamics of colonial Southeast Asia. To fully grasp the importance of the middle classes, it is crucial to recognise the challenges of defining and quantifying this group. Traditional colonial statistics often lack a clear definition of "middle class," and the concept is fluid.[63] An individual's class

[59] J. Klopper, "De Technische Hogeschool te Bandung en de eerste jaren van haar bestaan" [The Technical University in Bandung and the first years of its existence], *De Ingenieur in Indonesie*, Vol. 4, (December 1955): 22.
[60] *Ibid*.
[61] Suzanne Moon, *Technology and Ethical Idealism: A History of Development in the Netherlands East Indies* (Leiden: CNWS Publications, 2007).
[62] *Jaarboek TH Lustrum* 1935 (Bandoeng: THS, 1935), 138; *Kritiek en Opbouw,* vol. 1, no. 12 (August 1, 1938), 181 (As cited in Rudolf Mrázek, *Engineers of Happy Land: Technology and Nationalism in a Colony* (Princeton, N.J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002): 28.
[63] For example, *The Straits Settlements Blue Book*; *Annual Report on the Social and Economic Progress of the People of the Straits Settlements*; *Indisch Verslag*; *Statistisch Jaaroverzicht van Nederlandsch-Indië*; *Hollandsch-Inlandsch Onderwijs Commissie*.

status could shift based on changes in spending power or other factors. While spending power alone does not fully determine class, it undeniably influences access to resources and choices that shape one's lifestyle. To understand the significance of the colonial middle class, we need a multifaceted approach, one that goes beyond simple income thresholds. Hoogervorst and Schulte Nordholt suggest examining factors like education and urban residency, recognising that these were often linked.[64] In many colonial cities, socioeconomic status, influenced by both income and education, determined access to housing and shaped social networks. This had a powerful impact on the physical structure of these cities and the types of tensions that emerged in response to modernisation.[65] It is also important to acknowledge that the relationship between education and class could be complex. The existence of different school systems, catering to diverse groups and reflecting variations in ideology or language of instruction, reminds us that education was not just a path to upward mobility but a tool that could both reinforce and blur class lines.[66]

The fluidity of social class makes accurately estimating the size of the colonial middle class a complex task. A previous estimate for Java suggests approximately half a million individuals belonged to the non-European middle class in 1930.[67] However, Hoogervorst and Nordholt propose a different approach based on annual income. They define the middle class as earning between 200 and 1,000 guilders, recognising a distinction between those with a lower-middle-class lifestyle and the more affluent indigenous elite.[68] This income-based definition allows for a nuanced understanding of how economic factors shape class identity. Furthermore, it is important to consider how this economic definition of "middle class" interacts with other social and cultural capital forms. While colonial policies deliberately limited Western education to a select group of male elites, aiming for "cultural citizenship," the broader urban middle class in Java still engaged with Western ideas and products.[69] This often occurred through the filter of popular culture consumed in Malay, offering an alternative, perhaps less controlled, mode of engagement with modernity. The middle class in colonial Java reveals how access to economic resources, education, and cultural products intertwined to create a complex and dynamic sense of identity. Despite their relatively small numbers, this group

[64] Hoogervorst and Nordholt, "Urban Middle Classes in Colonial Java", 450.
[65] Freek Colombijn, *Under Construction: The Politics of Urban Space and Housing during the Decolonization of Indonesia, 1930–1960* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014); Freek Colombijn and Joost Coté, ed., *Cars, Conduits, and Kampongs: The Modernization of the Indonesian City, 1920–1960* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).
[66] Hoogervorst and Nordholt, "Urban Middle Classes in Colonial Java", 450; See also Agus Suwignyo, "*The Breach in the Dike: Regime Change and the Standardization of Public Primary-school Teacher Training in Indonesia, 1893–1969*," (PhD dissertation, Leiden University, 2012); Luttikhuis, *Negotiating Modernity*.
[67] Henk Schulte Nordholt, "Modernity and Middle Classes in the Netherlands Indies" in *Photography, Modernity and the Governed in Late-colonial Indonesia*, ed. Susie Protschky (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 226.
[68] Hoogervorst and Nordholt, "Urban Middle Classes in Colonial Java", 450–451.
[69] *Ibid*., 451. See also Robert van Niel, *The Emergence of the Modern Indonesian Elite* (Dordrecht: Foris, 1984); Nordholt, "Modernity and Middle Classes".

played a vital role in the colonial system.[70] Yet, determining the precise size of this middle class remains a point of scholarly debate. Earlier estimations, positing a figure of approximately 500,000, have since been challenged.[71]

A more recent, income-based analysis suggests a significantly larger middle class.[72] Focusing on those earning between 200 and 1,000 guilders annually and incorporating estimates for unregistered skilled laborers, the study posits a total exceeding 600,000. With the additional consideration of spouses and dependents, the study arrives at an estimate of nearly 2 million individuals, or around 5% of the Javanese population, belonging to the lower and "middle" middle classes in 1930.[73] These calculations highlight the value of an income-based methodology in understanding the middle class's size. However, it is important to note that income, while a significant factor, is only one piece of the puzzle. The complex interplay of cultural capital, education levels, and social networks also played significant roles in shaping middle-class identity and their position within the colonial system. This position was particularly crucial within the context of the Dutch colonial project. Despite the archipelago's population exceeding 60 million in 1930, only a small fraction of the governing force was European. This highlights how the colonial system relied extensively on this native middle class to function. Their roles in the civil service or colonial-linked institutions, often facilitated by their education and cultural fluency, made them vital to the machinery of colonial rule.[74]

This reliance on the middle class was not unique to Java. Similar to the situation on Java, the concept of a distinct middle class remained blurred in colonial statistics for Singapore. To gain insight into social stratification, we can look at various demographic factors, including access to essential services. For example, the poorer classes of Europeans, Eurasians, and Asians would be admitted free of charge to get medical services if they were deemed unable to pay anything.[75] Those earning less than a certain threshold qualified for free services, while others were charged on a sliding scale. These medical care regulations offer a stark reminder of the economic disparities and class distinctions within Singaporean society. They highlight how even within broader racial or ethnic categories, financial means played a significant role in determining access to basic healthcare. This differentiation indirectly hints at the existence of a middle class – a group possessing enough resources for limited access, yet not enough to secure the same privileges as those at the top of the colonial hierarchy.

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[70] Nordholt, "Modernity and Middle Classes", 2015: 226. See also Kees Groeneboer, *Weg tot het westen: Het Nederlands voor Indië 1660-1950* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1993).
[71] *Volkstelling 1930,* vol. VIII*: Overzicht voor Nederlandsch-Indië* (Batavia: Landsdrukkerij, 1936).
[72] Hoogervorst and Nordholt, "Urban Middle Classes in Colonial Java", 450–451
[73] *Ibid*.
[74] Nordholt, "Modernity and Middle Classes", 226.
[75] *The Straits Settlements Blue Book*, 1922, 821.

This class-based differentiation is further underscored by the population census of the Straits Settlements in 1921. Singapore's population stood at 433,398, with significant workforce participation in the commerce sector (40,857 people).[76] A similar trend was observed in Penang, with a population of 164,298 and 16,408 people working in commerce.[77] This dominance of the commerce sector suggests the presence of a growing group, likely including merchants, clerks, and other professionals, who fuelled the colonial economy and may have formed the basis of a nascent middle class in these urban centres. However, it is important to note that concerns were raised about the accuracy of census data during this period. For instance, as reported in contemporary newspapers, a postcard written in 1926 by a resident of Orchard Road, Singapore, expressed doubts about the completeness of the population count.[78]

In light of these potential census inaccuracies, wage data provides a crucial alternative for understanding class differentiation. The 1924 Blue Book reveals variations in earning potential across occupations.[79] For example, while predial labourers earned relatively low wages, domestic servants and tradespeople like carpenters or masons commanded higher daily rates in 1924.[80] This disparity suggests that specific skills and occupations within the broad "commerce" sector offered varying financial security. Those likely associated with a nascent middle class would have earned wages, allowing for a lifestyle distinct from the working class's. Those likely associated with a nascent middle class would have earned wages, allowing for a lifestyle distinct from that of the working class. However, it is important to consider the article "The Cost of Living" from 1928, which underscores the complexities in determining the true purchasing power of these wages.[81] The article criticises the overemphasis on individual commodity prices, arguing that factors like rent, transportation, and imported goods significantly impact the overall cost of living but are often not adequately considered.

While the middle class may have aimed for a distinct lifestyle, the census data provides additional insights into this potential middle-class composition. Approximately 10.2 per cent of Singapore's non-European population, or 57,251 individuals, could read and write English.[82] Significantly, this literacy was unevenly distributed across ethnic groups.[83] Indians and Eurasians were overrepresented among the English-literate population due to factors like the quality of English education available in India and the Eurasians' traditional access to English

[76] *The Straits Settlements Blue Book*, 1922: 448–449.
[77] *Ibid*.
[78] "The Singapore Census", *Straits Echo* Jul 12, 1926, 11; *Straits Times* Jul 11,1926.
[79] *The Straits Settlements Blue Book*, 1924, 2 (Section 23).
[80] *Ibid*.
[81] "The Cost of Living", *Straits Echo Weekly Edition* Apr 11, 1928, 218.
[82] *Census of British Malaya 1931*, 182–185.
[83] For more analysis on ethnicity, see Charles Hirschman, "The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia: An Analysis of Census Classifications", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 46, no. 3 (1987): 555–582.

education.[84] Additionally, smaller groups, such as the English-educated Ceylonese, who often held government clerical or technical positions, further contributed to the English-literate population.[85] This English proficiency suggests a link between language skills and specific occupations, many of which would likely have been associated with a developing middle class.

However, this observation about English proficiency and potential middle-class occupations needs to be tempered with the understanding that even with desirable skills, the actual cost of living could erode the purchasing power of a middle-class salary. The article suggests that the economic environment was complex and potentially volatile, highlighting an element of financial precarity that even those with seemingly higher-earning jobs may have experienced. This underscores the importance of considering factors like inflation – if prices rose significantly between 1924 (Blue Book) and 1928 (the article), it would diminish the real value of wages. Furthermore, certain middle-class occupations might require additional expenses, such as clothing or professional memberships, further impacting disposable income.

Despite these potential constraints, the Singaporean middle class generally consisted of professionals, white-collar salaried employees, and entrepreneurs. Their relative financial stability allowed them to pursue a lifestyle appropriate to their social standing. Fixed working hours granted white-collar workers leisure time and disposable income, which could be spent on consumer goods and entertainment as expressions of their desired identity. This tension between the aspirational image of the middle class and the potential impact of economic uncertainty highlights the complexities of their experience. Even those with the skills and positions associated with middle-class status may have struggled to fully realize their lifestyle aspirations due to the unpredictable economic environment and the hidden costs of maintaining a middle-class identity.

This embrace of consumerism and pursuit of a "modern" lifestyle aligns with global trends observed during the interwar period, as highlighted by Don Slater.[86] Mass production, market expansion, and a focus on rationality characterised this period both in the West and Southeast Asia. Singapore, a cosmopolitan urban centre, was a major hub for modern products and technologies, attracting consumers from across the Southeast Asian region and those travelling between Europe and Asia. However, even as they embraced this modern, consumerist lifestyle, the middle class faced constraints within the colonial economic system. The article "The Problems of the Wage-Earner" highlights a significant tension: discontent among wage earners who felt exploited and underpaid.[87] The example of Mr. Jones, a clerk

[84] Charles Archibald Vlieland, *British Malaya: A Report on the 1931 Census and on Certain Problems of Vital Statistics* (London: Crown Agents for the Colonies, 1932): 94; See also Rai Rajesh, *Indians in Singapore, 1819–1945: Diaspora in the Colonial Port-City* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014).
[85] Chua, *Modernity, Popular Culture and Urban Life*, 18.
[86] Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 13.
[87] "The Problems of the Wage Earner", *The Penang Monthly Advertiser*, (March 1934): 25.

facing a significant pay cut despite his company's success, illustrates the power imbalance between employers and many working within the middle class.[88] This dissatisfaction and perceived lack of fairness could have created limitations and anxieties for the middle class, making it difficult to embrace their desired consumerist lifestyle fully.

Furthermore, the article suggests that unpredictable wages and employer actions might have destabilised the financial security that often characterised the middle class.[89] This uncertainty could have impacted their ability to maintain the lifestyle markers associated with their status consistently. It is crucial to acknowledge that the article presents a specific viewpoint and may not reflect the experiences of all wage earners in colonial Malaya. The middle class was not a monolith; their financial experiences and job security likely varied depending on their profession and employer. This economic unpredictability casts doubt on the assumption of consistent financial stability. Despite their aspirations towards consumerism and a "modern" lifestyle, the wage issues highlighted in the article suggest potential constraints that could have limited their ability to consistently engage in the consumption patterns associated with their desired identity.

Literary Visions of the Modern Middle Class

The limitations and anxieties surrounding the middle-class experience in colonial settings find echoes in the literary imagination of the time. Several Indonesian novels from the 1910s depict the city as a colonial construct, where some characters find the prestige of government service appealing and exhibit a fascination with European culture. Meanwhile, others struggle to reconcile their aspirations with the enduring influence of tradition. This ambivalence towards Western modernity is a central theme in novels like Abdul Rivai's *Student Indonesia di Eropa*, Abdoel Moeis' *Salah Asoehan*, and Marco Kartodikromo's *Student Hidjo*.[90]

In particular, Rivai's *Student Indonesia di Eropa*, a collection of essays originally published in the 1920s in the journal *Bintang Hindia*, offers a nuanced exploration of these themes. The work recounts the experiences of young Indonesian students studying in Europe, highlighting the challenges they faced in reconciling their traditional identities with the allure of Western modernity. As Klaas Stutje's research has shown, the number of Indonesian students studying abroad increased significantly during this period, exposing them to new ideas, consumer goods, and social practices.[91] Rivai's text captures this encounter with Western consumer culture, as the protagonist grapples with the temptations and anxieties of a new way

[88] "The Problems of the Wage Earner", *The Penang Monthly Advertiser*, (March 1934): 25.
[89] *Ibid*.
[90] Rivai, *Student Indonesia di Europa*; Kartodikromo, *Student Hidjo*; Moeis, *Salah Asuhan*; On cities as colonial construct, see Tsuyoshi Kato, "Images of Colonial Cities in Early Indonesian Novels" in *Southeast Asia over Three Generations: Essays Presented to Benedict R. O. G. Anderson*, ed. James T. Siegel and Audrey R. Kahin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 91–123.
[91] Klaas Stutje, *Campaigning in Europe for a Free Indonesia: Indonesian Nationalists and the Worldwide Anticolonial Movement, 1917–1931,* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2019).

of life. He faces the challenge of reconciling his traditional identity with the new and modern values he encounters in Europe. The novel delves into issues of consumer culture as the protagonist is introduced to new ways of consuming goods and experiences in Europe.

The urban environment fostered a sense of freedom, individuality, and a shift away from traditional practices. This can be seen in the very language used for self-expression. People in the city used the word "*saya*" to refer to themselves, which is a more democratic and individualistic term than "*aku*" or "*hamba*." The word "*aku*" is often used to refer to oneself in a subordinate or inferior position, while "*hamba*" refers to oneself as a servant or slave. The use of the word "*saya*" by urban individuals in colonial Indonesia suggests they adopted a more modern and egalitarian view of themselves.[92] Similarly, Sundays replaced Friday prayers as the observed rest day, punctuated by striking clocks and the adoption of Western time.[93] This shift from a communal religious observance to a schedule dictated by striking clocks underscored the profound influence of colonial power and its concept of timekeeping.

Rivai's own experiences informed his novel. Having completed his education in the Netherlands and worked as an editor for *Bintang Timoer*, he was uniquely positioned within the emerging middle class, acutely aware of its complexities and the dilemmas its members faced. This exposure to Western ideas and ways of life inevitably influenced his thinking, making him acutely aware of the tensions between tradition and modernity. His novel likely reflects his own process of reconciling these conflicting influences. His writings, composed between 1926 and 1928, document his daily life and those of other Indonesian students abroad, adopting a distinctly modern style employing a first-person "I" perspective.

Although Rivai adopts this modern voice, his novel explores characters struggling with the allure of European consumerism. This reveals that modernity, even for those who benefited from it the most, was not a monolithic concept passively accepted. Rather, his writing highlights the contradictions inherent in being "modern" within a colonial context. This internal conflict is further expressed in the views of figures like Raden Kamil, a Javanese man employed by the Dutch Indies school inspectorate. He reveals the deep entanglement of modernisation with colonial power by proclaiming, "A domestic education such as exists among civilised Europeans is lacking among the large majority of the Natives. [...] Luckily, there are signs that some improvements have occurred in this family life, mostly among those who have attended good schools. In this matter, European influence can be discerned".[94]

While advocating for Western-style education, Kamil's statement reveals an underlying belief that European domestic life is inherently superior to Indonesian traditions. This reflects

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[92] Gerry van Klinken, *The Making of Middle Indonesia: Middle classes in Kupang Town, 1930s-1980s* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 8.

[93] *Ibid*.

[94] *Handelingen van de Volksraad*, 1st session 1918, p. 460; cf. Geschiere, 'De meningsvorming', p. 63 (as cited in Bart Luttikhuis, "*Negotiating Modernity: Europeanness in Late Colonial Indonesia*, 1910–1942," (PhD dissertation, European University Institute, 2014), 177.

the complex relationship between the pursuit of modernity and the colonial power structure. The desire to adopt a European-style education, driven not solely by the hope of material gain but also by a belief in the cultural superiority of the West, underscores this point.[95] For some, embracing "modernity" involved, often subconsciously, accepting a devaluation of their own cultural heritage. This attempt to become "civilised Europeans" manifested through internal beliefs and external markers, such as adopting European dress. The case of Abdul Rivai, the author himself, illustrates the importance placed on outward signs of "modernity." His wearing of trousers, shoes, a jacket, and a tie symbolised his aspirations and his desire to be perceived as a modern individual within the colonial context. Importantly, Rivai's own writings, as discussed earlier, also grapple with the tensions and contradictions inherent in this pursuit of "modernity." These examples show that the desire to be "modern" involved more than access to education or job opportunities. It often entailed complex, even contradictory, feelings about tradition, a desire to participate in the power structure of the coloniser, and the potential for alienation from one's own culture. Additionally, it involved a form of consumption, not just of material goods, but also of cultural practices and social codes– emphasising European dress, domestic life, and the Dutch language as essential for upward mobility.

Marco Kartodikromo's novel *Student Hidjo* delves into this complexity, exploring how the middle class navigates the conflicting forces of aspiration, resistance, and identity shaped by colonial power structures.[96] Kartodikromo, a prominent Indonesian journalist and writer, published this novel in 1918 while imprisoned for *persdelict* (press crimes). This term, used by Dutch colonial authorities, referred to offenses like inciting rebellion or spreading anti-colonial sentiment through writing.[97] The novel's very creation, under the shadow of imprisonment, suggests a subtle act of resistance embedded within its narrative.

The story of Hidjo, a curious and quiet young Javanese man from the town of Solo (now Surakarta), Central Java, sent to the Netherlands to gain a Western education, highlights the seductive power of the "modern" and the potential for alienation it created. Hidjo's father, a wealthy merchant, aspires for his son to become a member of the Javanese upper class, which is closely aligned with the Dutch colonial administration. He believes that acquiring Western markers of "modernity" – education, language skills, and even dress – is the path to achieving this goal. This ambition drives his decision to send Hidjo to study engineering in Holland and arrange for him to live with a Dutch family, presumably in the hope that immersion in European life will facilitate his son's acculturation. However, upon arrival in Holland, despite his arranged engagement with his cousin, Raden Adjeng Biroe (Dame Blue), Hidjo becomes entangled in a passionate affair with Betje, his landlord's daughter. He throws himself

[95] Suzanne April Brenner, *The Domestication of Desire: Women, Wealth, and Modernity in Java* (Princeton University Press, 1998).
[96] Kartodikromo, *Student Hidjo*, 1918.
[97] Yamamoto, *Censorship in Colonial Indonesia*, 24–27.

wholeheartedly into this new life, neglecting his studies and embracing his new social circle's social activities and leisure pursuits. This highlights a key tension at the heart of the novel: the allure of Western culture, promising liberation and social mobility, clashing with the expectations placed on Hidjo by his family and community back in Java.[98] Biroe, his fiancée, becomes close friends with Raden Adjeng Woengoe and Wardojo, Woengoe's brother, during this time. They convince Hidjo that life in Holland is unsuitable for him by writing letters about their pleasant lives in Java.

His path, therefore, seems poised to diverge permanently from the one his parents envisioned. However, they determine that Woengoe is a more suitable partner than Biroe and call him back to Solo, where he becomes actively engaged in Sarekat Islam activities. The Sarekat Islam organisation was founded in 1912. The name evoking Islam was little more than a way for its members to communicate that they were Indonesians (and therefore Muslims) while the colonial authorities were not, but over time, its influence shifted to Modernist politicians. Most of its followers were motivated by their animosity toward the *priyayi* elite and Chinese, rather than by other concerns.[99] Islamic groups were the focal point of the early nationalist movement in colonial Indonesia. During the 1910s and 1920s, Sarekat Islam played a significant role in driving the movement, presenting itself as "a group of Muslims working for progress".[100] This unexpected turn highlights the unpredictable ways in which the complex forces of colonialism shaped individual lives.

Following his parents' orders, Hidjo leaves Betje and returns to Java. There, he attends the Sarekat Islam rally in Solo and marries Woengoe. Interestingly, this storyline is greatly enriched – and further complicated – by the experiences of Willem Walter, a Dutch civil servant in Java who is engaged to Jet Roos, a schoolteacher. The situation gets more complicated when Willem confesses his love for Woengoe but is rejected. At the same time, Miss Roos writes to inform him that she is expecting a child. Miss Roos decides to have an abortion, whereas Willem Walter leaves Java and travels to The Hague, where he meets Hidjo and Betje. The newly acquainted Willem and Betje get married and reside in Java.

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[98] Henk Maier, "Phew! Europeesche beschaving! Marco Kartodikromo's Student Hidjo", *Southeast Asian Studies*, 34, (1), (1996): 198.

[99] Merle Calvin Ricklefs, *Islamisation and its Opponents in Java: A Political, Social, Cultural and Religious History, c. 1930 to the Present* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012), 19; The priyayi were a Javanese aristocratic class who often formed the upper echelons of the colonial civil service. Their traditional role as intermediaries between the Dutch rulers and the local population created tensions, sometimes fueling anti-colonial sentiment. See Heather Sutherland, "The Priyayi", *Indonesia* 19 (1975): 57–77.

[100] Chiara Formichi, *Islam and the Making of the Nation: Kartosuwiryo and Political Islam in Twentieth-century Indonesia*, (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Sarekat Islam was an Indonesian socio-political organization founded during Dutch colonialism. One of the early publications that has been devoted to the study the Sarekat Islam, see Timur Jaylani, "*The Sarekat Islam Movement: Its Contribution to Indonesian Nationalism*" [MA Theses] (McGill University, 1959); To compete with Chinese-Indonesian traders, SI was originally a cooperative of Muslim Javanese batik traders, see Rambe, *Sarekat Islam*.

Kartodikromo's novel underscores how broader historical forces profoundly shape these seemingly personal choices. Hidjo's return and subsequent marriage to Woengoe, alongside Willem's unexpected journey, highlight the complex and often unpredictable pathways individuals navigated within the colonial system. Importantly, this conflict unfolds through their "consumption" of experiences. He is seduced not just by a woman but by an entire way of life that seems to offer freedom and liberation from the social constraints of his Javanese identity. However, this "modern" path proves unsustainable, as letters from his fiancée and her family encourage him to return. The novel ultimately portrays how the middle class navigated conflicting desires for integration into the colonial system and preserving ties to tradition. Kartodikromo's work, therefore, reinforces the importance of examining how "modernity" became both a performance and a site of inner conflict.

This tension between embracing Western ideals of "modernity" and preserving traditional values finds further expression in the broader societal context. The allure of the modernity introduced by Westerners was potent for educated people in Java at the turn of the twentieth century. Four Dutch words exemplified this: *vooruitgang* (progress), *opheffing* (elevation), *ontwikkeling* (development), and *opvoeding* (education).[101] Javanese culture even had a specific term for this phenomenon: *kawruh Eropah* (European knowledge), signifying its power.[102] Mastering Dutch, in particular, became a signifier of a "civilised" individual, as it granted access to the economic and intellectual possibilities of the colonial world.[103] However, this embrace of Western ideals generated tension with traditional values, exposing the contradictions inherent in the colonial system. The legitimacy of European colonialism in Indonesia faced growing scrutiny. In response, some "ethical" Dutch administrators, such as Snouck Hurgronje, argued for a modern colonial state that aimed to create a Westernised Indonesian elite through Dutch education. This strategy, they believed, would foster a loyal and cost-effective native bureaucracy while reducing perceived Islamic threats. However, limited resources and differing priorities hindered this plan's full implementation.[104] Yet, conservative forces resisted, clinging to traditional power structures rooted in Javanese displays of respect. This battle played out in debates over dress, language, and social codes.[105] Meanwhile, the rigid racial hierarchy of "Europeans" and "Natives" gradually eroded, replaced by a system where education, class, and appearance increasingly determined social

[101] Shiraishi, *An Age of Motion*, 27.
[102] Merle Calvin Ricklefs, *Polarising Javanese Society: Islamic and Other Visions c. 1830–1930*, (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2007), 136.
[103] Shiraishi, *An Age of Motion*, 30.
[104] Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje was a Dutch scholar specialising in Islamic studies and the Malay and Arabic languages. He advised the colonial government on strategies for managing relations with its Muslim subjects. See Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia*, 194–195; Harry J. Benda, "Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje and the foundations of Dutch Islamic policy in Indonesia", *The Journal of Modern History* 30, no. 4 (1958): 338–347.
[105] Hoogervorst and Nordholt, "Urban Middle Classes in Colonial Java", 448–449.

status.[106] These shifts intensified following the First World War, which isolated Java from the Netherlands.[107] Despite the rise of a modern middle class with its aspirational lifestyle, Europeans, Indonesians, and Chinese increasingly lived in separate social spheres.

Abdoel Moeis's novel *Salah Asuhan*, written during this same period, offers a poignant illustration of these complex dynamics.[108] His novel explores how Western influences erode traditional values and norms, creating a deep conflict and uncertainty within colonial society. This conflict is further exacerbated by lingering anxieties surrounding racial legislation enacted during the colonial era. These anxieties are evident in the very concept of "race," which contrasts with indigenous terms like "*bangsa*" that emphasise shared language, customs, and cultural identity. Furthermore, the enduring influence of colonial racial categorisations is evident in the portrayal of the Eurasian, or "Indo," community. Moeis confronts these issues directly in the novel, exploring the tragic consequences of colonial racial hierarchies on the lives of its characters. The novel highlights the rigid societal barriers these hierarchies created by depicting the tragic love story between Hanafi, an indigenous man, and Corrie, a Eurasian woman. Their potential union is rendered nearly impossible, highlighting the nearly insurmountable challenges faced by interracial couples in this context.[109] Their intertwined fates serve as a powerful critique of the colonial system's rigid racial hierarchies that ultimately rendered their potential union nearly impossible.

In contrast, colonial Penang appears to have fostered a more open environment for discussions surrounding interracial love and marriage.[110] Public debate, as reflected in the *Straits Echo*, shows a willingness to openly critique traditional marriage practices and consider the potential benefits of love-based unions.[111] While some voices echoed concerns about the potential excesses of Western liberalism, a more moderate perspective emerges. This suggests that interracial marriages, while likely still facing social barriers, were less taboo within Penang's society.

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[106] *Ibid*., 449; See also Mrázek, *Engineers of Happy Land*; Luttikhuis, *Negotiating Modernity*.
[107] Kees van Dijk, "Pedal Power in Southeast Asia", in *Lost Times and Untold Tales from the Malay World*, ed. Jan van der Putten and Cody Mary Kilcline (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), 268–282
[108] Abdoel Moeis, *Salah Asuhan* (Balai Pustaka, 1928); See also, Keith Foulcher, "Biography, History and the Indonesian Novel: Reading Salah Asuhan." *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde* 161, no. 2/3 (2005): 247–268.
[109] Moeis, *Salah Asuhan*.
[110] Lewis, *Cities in Motion*, 258.
[111] *Straits Echo* Mar 19, 1938, 13.

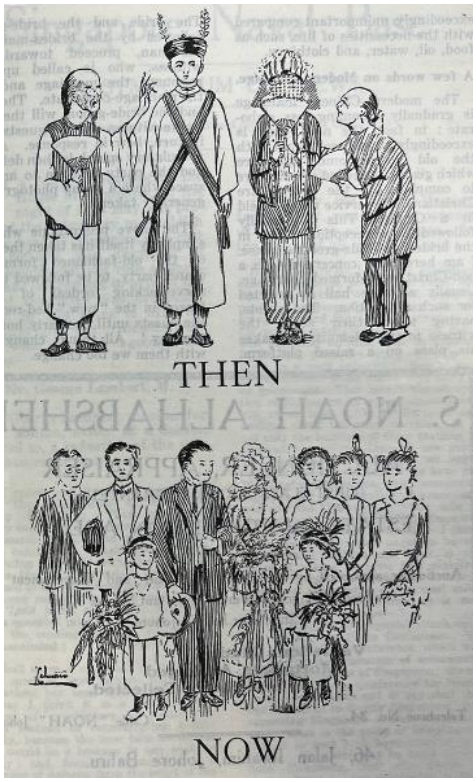

Figure 29. Chinese Marriage Then and Now.[112]

Mr. Ong Thye Ghee's 1923 article, "Chinese Courtship and Marriage," exemplifies this moderate view.[113] He acknowledges the influence of Western ideas on Chinese marriage practices in the Straits Settlements, noting the rise of "free love" as a "battle cry" but also cautioning against extremes.[114] Ong Thye Ghee sees value in the traditional emphasis on family harmony but also advocates for flexibility. He supports allowing young people some choice within a structure where parental consultation remains vital, highlighting the search for "a better method of combining the old and the new - the East and the West."[115]

The accompanying caricature humorously depicts the changing dynamics of Chinese marriage (See Figure 29 above). This light-hearted portrayal underscores the broader societal discussions where tradition and modernity were being negotiated. The image's emphasis on Western-style clothing, the use of flowers, and the overall setting of the ceremony suggest a shift towards more elaborate and visually rich wedding celebrations. These new elements point towards the incorporation of Western consumer goods and practices into traditional Chinese rituals, reflecting the growing influence of consumer culture on social practices and identity formation. While traditional weddings undoubtedly also involved consumption, this

[112] *The Malayan Chronicle* Jul-Aug, 1923, 33.
[113] "Chinese Courtship and Marriage", *The Malayan Chronicle* Jul-Aug, 1923, 31–34.
[114] *Ibid*., 31.
[115] *Ibid*., 34.

shift points toward a growing emphasis on material displays and a blending of Western and Chinese traditions within a consumerist framework.

Ong Thye Ghee's views embody the complex negotiations within the emerging middle class. His desire to preserve elements of Chinese marriage traditions while acknowledging shifts towards Western-influenced values reflects the wider embrace of Westernisation in everyday life. The middle class, with greater access to Western education and ideas, often straddled this line between tradition and modernity. The focus on individual choice within a framework of family harmony echoes a broader desire for autonomy and self-expression that characterised elements of Penang's middle class. Ultimately, Ong Thye Ghee's article illuminates the influence of Western ideas on even the most personal aspects of life, such as love and marriage.

Nona Nanci's *Tjinta Boeta* (Blind Love) portrays the complex forces at play within the evolving middle class of Penang in the 1930s.[116] The story resonates with the observations of Mr. Ong Thye Ghee, who highlighted the growing influence of Western ideas on traditional Chinese marriage practices. Within *Tjinta Boeta*, the central character of Alimah embodies the tension between tradition and modernity. Her background in rural Marbau clashes with her embrace of a cosmopolitan lifestyle in Penang. Her romantic entanglements with Hok Lim, a man straddling Chinese custom and Western influence, and Amat, a more traditionally rooted figure, mirror this conflict. Like Ong Thye Ghee, *Tjinta Boeta* acknowledges the middle class's increasing emphasis on individual choice within marriage. Alimah's decisions are often driven by personal desire, showcasing a shift from strict adherence to familial and societal obligations. However, the story departs from Ong Thye Ghee's moderate perspective. The characters' attempts to reconcile tradition with Westernised ideals are difficult. Their impulsive choices highlight the challenges of harmonising these opposing forces, ultimately leading to troubled outcomes.

Significantly, *Tjinta Boeta* offers a distinctly female perspective that is absent in Ong Thye Ghee's writing. Alimah's agency as a young woman is central to the narrative, and her choices—however flawed—reveal a burgeoning sense of female autonomy within Penang's middle-class landscape. The story not only showcases the evolving role of women but also reflects the growing wealth and access to Western experiences among the middle class. This is evident in the characters' use of modern amenities such as hotels, European attire, and cars.[117] These symbols of modernity align with the broader societal shifts towards Westernisation, which had become deeply embedded in everyday life by the 1930s. Penang's vibrant identity as a multicultural port city is fundamental to the narratives explored in *Tjinta Boeta*. This cosmopolitan environment, characterised by fluid cultural boundaries and the

[116] Nanci, *Tjinta Boeta*.
[117] *Ibid*., 2–3.

constant influx of new ideas, directly shapes the characters' choices and experiences. The novel captures the transformative tensions rippling through Penang's society during the 1930s, making it a compelling case study of middle-class aspirations and anxieties. Unlike other works of the period, *Tjinta Boeta* stands out for its decidedly female-centric perspective, offering a critical and often less optimistic view of the socio-cultural changes taking place.

The roots of these narratives can be traced back to earlier intellectual and cultural developments, notably those fostered by publications like *The Straits Chinese Magazine*. Although it ran from 1897 to 1907, *The Straits Chinese Magazine* played a crucial role in shaping the hybrid identities of the Straits Chinese community. Its diverse content—stories, poems, and articles—reflected an environment where multiple cultures and ideas intermingled, helping to cultivate a sense of modernity that was neither wholly traditional nor fully Western.[118] Scholars like Neil Khor, Mark Frost, and Tim Harper have demonstrated how the Straits Chinese cultivated a cosmopolitan, globalised outlook through their interactions with both Western and Eastern influences.[119] This global perspective shaped their navigation of modernity within the British colonial framework, blending traditional values with new ideas from abroad. This broader Straits Chinese experience of negotiating identity in a globalised context is reflected in later works like *Tjinta Boeta*, which captures the complexities of cultural hybridity and social change in the 1930s.

Short stories like "Lost and Found" by Lew See Fah and "Is Revenge Sweet?" by Wee Tong Poh exemplify this complex interaction.[120] They depict Straits Chinese characters grappling for recognition within a colonial society, using legal arguments or professional expertise to assert themselves. These narratives suggest a growing self-awareness and agency within the middle class, nurtured by their position within a dynamic multicultural landscape. Their interactions with the incompetent European Inspector Catspaw underscore how multiculturalism could destabilise traditional power structures, creating space for new voices and perspectives to emerge.[121] Yet, it is essential to remember that such agency was still operating within a colonial context. This complexity finds echoes in the shifts in middle class behaviour during this period, where local desires intertwined with globalised trends and the lingering power dynamics of colonialism. This is exemplified in advertisements, which reveals an evolving middle class drawn to Western commodities and the promise of a modern lifestyle.

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[118] Nanci, *Tjinta Boeta*, 47.

[119] Neil Jin Keong Khor and Khoo Keat Siew, *The Penang Po Leung Kuk: Chinese Women, Prostitution & a Welfare Organisation*, with research assistance by Izrin Muaz Md. Adnan (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 2004); Mark Ravinder Frost, "Emporium in Imperio: Nanyang Networks and the Straits Chinese in Singapore, 1819-1914," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36, no. 1 (2005): 29–66; Tim Harper, *Forgotten Wars: Freedom and Revolution in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

[120] Nanci, *Tjinta Boeta*, 45.

[121] *Ibid*.

Transnational Tastes and a Shared Sense of Modernity

In the rapidly modernising world of colonial Southeast Asia, consumer culture played a pivotal role in shaping how individuals and communities defined their place within the broader global landscape. The rise of consumer goods and the spread of advertising signalled a new era where participation in modernity became not just a matter of politics or ideology but also of consumption. Advertisements, both local and foreign, began to flood the market, promoting a lifestyle associated with progress, sophistication, and Western ideals. Through the strategic deployment of language, imagery, and branding, these advertisements targeted an emerging urban middle class, increasingly drawn to the allure of modernity and the prestige of Western commodities.

At the heart of this consumer transformation lay the power of advertising. Advertising agencies and brands sought to capitalise on Southeast Asia's growing consumer market, employing sophisticated strategies to appeal to local desires for progress and modern lifestyles. By offering not only goods but also a vision of what it meant to be "modern," these campaigns went beyond mere commerce, shaping cultural and social aspirations. Advertising in the region created transnational connections, uniting Southeast Asian consumers with global markets and modern ideologies.

Figure 30. Western Advertising Service Advertisement.[122]

Western advertising played a pivotal role in shaping consumer desires in colonial Southeast Asia, presenting European products and lifestyles as the pinnacle of modernity and sophistication. Companies like Western Advertising Service were instrumental in creating this narrative, aligning their services with Western methods and progress (See Figure 30 above). Located on Bishop Street, in the heart of Georgetown's commercial district, this firm deliberately capitalised on its association with Western business practices and prestigious clientele. Their focus on cinema slides, a powerful and popular medium of the time,

[122] *Penang Shopping Corner* Sep 1, 1939, 17.

underscored their strategic use of visual storytelling to project Western superiority.[123] Cinema, as scholars like Dafna Ruppin and Nadi Tofighian note, became a transnational vehicle through which global and local influences converged, contributing to a reimagined modernity in colonial Southeast Asia. By positioning themselves as experts in this technology, Western Advertising Service became a key player in shaping the region's consumer landscape.[124]

The advertisements employed by Western Advertising Service often invoked imperial symbols like the British flag and lion, subtly reinforcing Western ideals of modernity and trust. These symbols appealed to colonial consumers' aspirations while simultaneously legitimising Western dominance in the local market. Interestingly, the mirrored presentation of the British flag in certain ads reflects how these symbols, while designed to project authority, were occasionally adapted for local consumption. This adaptation illustrates the flexible yet pervasive nature of imperial imagery within the colonial marketplace, serving both as a mark of quality and a tool of cultural dominance. Advertisements like those of Western Advertising Service were not merely promoting products but selling an ideology of Western modernity. The use of cinema as a vehicle for these messages reveals a broader phenomenon in which colonial powers utilised both cutting-edge technology and cultural symbols to mould the desires and aspirations of Southeast Asia's emerging middle class. As the consumer landscape became more competitive and complex, advertisers were forced to develop increasingly sophisticated strategies, ensuring that the ideal of Western progress remained deeply embedded in local consumer consciousness.

This influence can be further observed in advertisements like the 1933 S&W Food campaign, which, with its detailed illustration and sophisticated presentation, directly targeted the same emerging urban middle class increasingly drawn to European tastes and a lifestyle associated with modernity (See Figure 31 below).[125] It visually represents quality and convenience, aligning with the aspirations of this group, who sought to participate in a globalised consumer culture. The ad's focus on canned goods highlights a significant shift in Southeast Asian markets. Canned foods, initially imported as luxury items, were becoming

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[123] Cinema was a popular leisure place among the Western-educated indigenous middle class in Southeast Asia, for example see Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion*, 27. It was an influential conduit for Western modernity and a powerful symbol of the modern age that permeated the colonial societies; See also Ai Lin Chua, "Singapore's 'Cinema-Age' of the 1930s: Hollywood and the shaping of Singapore modernity." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 13, no. 4 (2012): 592–604.

[124] Nadi Tofighian, "*Blurring the Colonial Binary: Turn-of-the-century Transnational Entertainment in Southeast Asia*," (PhD dissertation, Stockholm University, 2013), 90–93. For a comprehensive investigation of the diverse composition and experiences of early cinema audiences in colonial Java, highlighting how the medium of film, coupled with its presentation and the spaces it occupied, educated viewers on aspects of modernisation and progress, see Dafna Ruppin, "The Emergence of a Modern Audience for Cinema in colonial Java", *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land-en volkenkunde/Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 173, no. 4 (2017): 475–502; See also Thomas Alexander Charles Barker, "The Early Years 1926-1945", in *A Brief Cultural History of Indonesian Cinema*, ed. Sulistyo Tirtokusumo, Slamet Rahardjo Djarot, Diana Darling (Jakarta: Ministry of Education and Culture, 2012), 18–53.

[125] S&W Fine Foods was founded in San Francisco in 1896 by Samuel Sussman and the Wormser brothers, Gustav and Samuel. Originally named Sussman, Wormser & Co., the company built its reputation on providing premium food products. It became internationally recognised and was acquired by Del Monte Pacific Limited in 2007. See S&W Fine Foods. Accessed 6 March 2024. https://swpremiumfood.com/who-we-are/

more accessible.[126] This accessibility fuelled broader participation in a consumer culture shaped by Western notions of convenience and modernity.

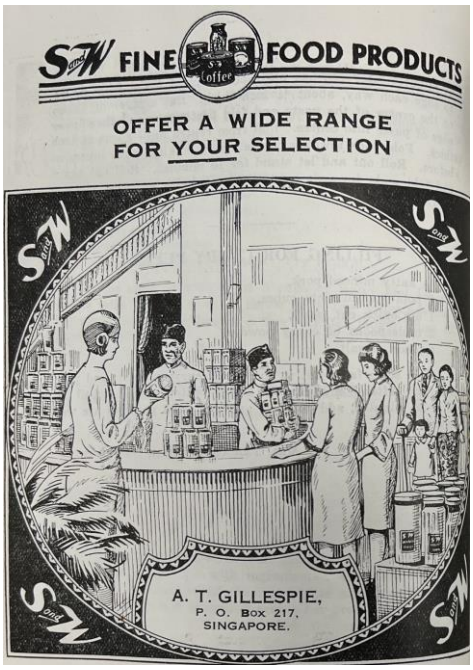

Figure 31. S&W Food Advertising.[127]

While this advertisement suggests colonial enterprises were responding to a shift in consumer preferences, it is important not to oversimplify this relationship. While this middle class might have some agency in choosing European products, it is crucial to ask to what extent systemic colonial power structures shaped their preference for imported goods. The prestige associated with Western commodities, combined with the potential for enhanced social status they offered, could create a demand not born from purely personal preference but influenced by the hierarchies within the colonial system. Additionally, while the advertisement suggests "shared desires," it is worth considering whether those desires were uniform within this diverse group. Aspirations might differ based on ethnicity, gender, or even where they fell on the income spectrum within the "middle class."

In this context, European languages, like English and Dutch, functioned as a gateway to educational opportunities, government positions, and professional careers. Fluency not only equipped individuals with the practical skills necessary to navigate the colonial system but also

[126] For a detailed exploration of how this dynamic played out in colonial Indonesia, see Elsbeth Locher-Scholten's short study of colonial consumption and modernity, "Summer dresses and canned food: European women and western lifestyles in the Indies, 1900-1942" in *Outward Appearances: Dressing State and Society in Indonesia*, ed. Henk Schulte Nordholt (Leiden, 1997), 151–180.

[127] R. E. Holttum, and Hinch T. W., ed., *The Y. W. C. A Cookery Book of Malaya: A Book of Recipes Collected in Malaya* (Singapore: Y. W. C. A. Singapore, 1933), 86.

marked them as belonging to a select group with a certain level of cultural sophistication. This association between language and social status influenced consumer behaviour. A preference for European goods advertised in the same language they used for education and professional advancement could be seen as a way for the middle class to acquire desired products and signal their membership in this privileged linguistic community.

While ethnically diverse, Singapore's English-speaking population (or Dutch-speaking population in colonial Indonesia) formed a linguistic community through their shared use of a European language. This formed a distinct public sphere where publications like *The Malaya Tribune* played a pivotal role in shaping a shared identity and reflecting the aspirations of this English-literate Asian demographic. Unlike publications like the *Straits Times* or *Singapore Free Press*, which catered to the European elite, *The Malaya Tribune* emerged to serve the interests of a growing middle class seeking a voice and a platform.[128] This suggests their consumer preferences were not solely focused on acquiring Western goods but were interconnected with their participation in a specific discourse shaped by the English language.

The Malaya Tribune's rapid rise underscores the demand for a platform that reflects the identities and aspirations of the emerging English-literate Asian middle class. Founded in 1914, it directly addressed this demographic, underserved by mainstream publications like the *Straits Times* and *Singapore Free Press*, written by and for elite white communities. By mid-1934, *The Malaya Tribune* was the best-selling daily in Malaya, its popularity demonstrating the strength of its agenda. The "People's Paper," as it was called, offered a lower price point (five cents compared to the others' ten). The paper expanded into a group of publications in the thirties: a *Sunday Tribune* that was published across Malaya in 1933, a Federated Malay States edition in 1935, a *Morning Tribune* that was published in Singapore in 1936, and a Penang edition that was published in 1938.[129] This growth reflects a desire for a public sphere that actively resonated with their lived experiences. The *Tribune's* success, including its wide readership and expansion into various editions, underscores this desire for a public sphere that actively reflected their lived experiences. The ability to speak English was vital for social mobility within the colonial context, opening doors to employment in government, law, and business. *The Malaya Tribune* thus became more than just a news source; it served as a tool for this group to gain information, shape their identities, and aspire to navigate the complexities of the colonial system.

[128] Chua, *Modernity, Popular Culture and Urban Life*, 19.
[129] *Malaya Tribune* Jan 16, 1939, 2.

Figure 32. Modern Kabaya Tailoring Co. Penang Advertisement.[130]

The 1939 "Modern Kabaya Tailoring Co." advertisement in *Penang Shopping Corner*, promoting its "Terang Bulan" kebaya, offers a fascinating glimpse into the complex negotiation of identity and modernity within the Malay community of colonial Penang (See Figure 32 above). This advertisement, a deep dive into the cultural complexities of the era, serves as a rich case study of how consumerism and fashion intertwined with language and aspirations for social mobility.

Its multilingual format – featuring English and Malay, with a Jawi transliteration of the company name Modern Kabaya Tailoring Company (موردن كبايا تلاريع كمفني) indicates a strategy to appeal to a culturally diverse clientele. While it directly targets the local Malay-speaking

[130] *Penang Shopping Corner* Oct 6, 1939, 19; [Jawi reads: *Permaisuri kepada kebaya-kebaya; Terang Bulan; Diperbuat oleh "Modern Kebaya Tailoring Company.", iaitu tukang kebaya fesyen baru yang dipuji-puji oleh segala orang-orang di tanjung dan yang biasa oleh sebab kepandaian membuat fesyen bunga-bunga dan potongan yang disukai. Janganlah beli baju yang sudah siap oleh sebab tak sama sukatan badan; Jika enci-enci hendak buat baju yang cukup puas hati sila-lah datang ke kedai kita dengan menurut enci-enci punya hitungan dengan puas hati diperbuat oleh seorang perempuan Melayu yang baru datang dari Singapura karenanya dengan sepuas-puas hati enci-enci; Jangan lagi lali akan menjatakan peluang ini seperti yang tersebut dan upahnya sehabis-habis murah tak payah enci-enci hendak tawar lagi; Datanglah di tempat yang tersebut di bawah ini supaya boleh enci-enci dapat pakai baju kebaya yang boleh dipuji orang apabila dipakai, enci-enci sila-lah datang dengan seberapa segera sebab hari raya sudah dekat jangan tunggu lama lagi; Apabila sekali datang di tempat kita supaya menjadi tetap tempat enci-enci membeli baju-baju selama-lama masa dan boleh pilih dengan sepuas-puas hati: Alamat "Modern Tailoring Company" Nomor 33 Dato Kramat Road Pulau Penang.*]

population, it simultaneously signals inclusivity within British Malayan society. This reflects the commercial acumen of the advertiser, carefully navigating a cosmopolitan marketplace where multiple languages intersect. The choice to highlight "Terang Bulan" is particularly significant. Contrary to popular belief that the "Terang Bulan" (Moonlight) motif emerged in the 1950s, this pattern and its associated cultural significance predate this era. Its links to a popular song, cinema, and broader discussions of national identity and trans-cultural exchange offer a rich context. The popularity of "Terang Bulan", a Malay folk song with a French melody, and its use as a major 1937 Dutch East Indies film title cemented the term's association with modern entertainment and constructions of female identity.[131] By referencing "Terang Bulan," the advertisement cleverly taps into this cultural resonance, promising not just a garment but the embodiment of a modern, desirable Malay identity.

The advertisement's language and imagery further illustrate this complex negotiation of tradition and modernity. Phrases like "...*tukang kebaya fesyen baru yang dipuji-puji oleh segala orang-orang di tanjung*..." ("...the maker of the latest kebaya fashion, praised by all on the peninsula...") showcases an awareness of consumer aspirations within the Malay community, promising not just stylish clothing but elevated social status and recognition within their cultural context. Similarly, the Jawi text strategically constructs inclusivity and aspiration through phrases like "*fesyen baru*" فيشين بارو (new fashions) and "*yang dipuji-puji oleh segala orang-orang*" يڠ دفوجي٢ اوله سكل اورڠ٢ (popular and admired). This positions the kebaya as essential for the modern, fashionable woman, emphasising the garment's ability to grant status through newness and social approval.

The advertisement's focus on customisation reinforces this aspirational message. Phrases like "*Buat baju yang cocok puas hati sila lah datang ke kedai kita dengan menurut enci-enci punya hitungan* ..." (create a bespoke, satisfying garment - please come to our shop) cater to the desire for individuality and personal expression, while the urgency of the call to action – "...*jangan lagi lali akan menjatakan peluang ini*" ("...do not miss out on this opportunity...") – subtly taps into fears of missing out on the latest trends because of the limited-time offer. This strategy reveals the complex consumer choices – a blend of desire for fashionable modernity, respect for tradition, and social ambition – embedded in marketing goods like the kebaya. It highlights how advertisers skillfully used cultural symbols and aspirations to shape consumer desire within the colonial marketplace.

The phrase "*Permaisuri kepada kebaya-kebaya; Terang Bulan*..." ("Queen of the Kebayas, Terang Bulan...") further reinforces this interplay of tradition and modernity, positioning the kebaya as a symbol of both cultural heritage and contemporary fashion. The emphasis on the kebaya maker's origin – "...*diperbuat oleh seorang perempuan Melayu yang*

[131] Karl G. Heider, *Indonesian Cinema: National Culture on Screen* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1991): 16; Beng, "Negotiating 'His Master's Voice', 485.

baru datang dari Singapura karenanya dengan sepuas-puas hati enci-enci..." ("...made by a Malay woman recently arrived from Singapore, therefore entirely to your satisfaction..."), highlights the perceived value of localised craftsmanship and identity. The reference to Singapore hints at an aspiration towards regional leadership in fashion as it taps into Malay-speaking populations beyond Penang. It even caters simultaneously to local pride and aspirations towards cosmopolitan sophistication.

Beyond this focus on craftsmanship, the ad further emphasises the importance of a customised fit with phrases like "...*janganlah beli baju yang sudah siap oleh sebab tak sama sukatan badan*..." ("...do not buy ready-made clothes because they do not have the right measurements..."). This aligns with the idea that true modernity, and perhaps social distinction, are attainable through unique personalisation, not mass-produced goods. In this light, the kebaya is not merely attire but evidence of individuality and status alongside changing notions of modern womanhood. Interestingly, despite showcasing elements of cultural tradition, this advertisement actively shapes consumer behaviour by emphasising exclusivity and a limited-time offer. This strategy taps into desires for trendsetting and social standing among its target audience, revealing how advertisements subtly influenced buying habits within colonial societies.

The "Terang Bulan" reference and the interplay of English and Jawi scripts invite us to reconsider the advertisement's intended audience. While explicitly designed for the Malay-speaking population, its imagery and themes may resonate beyond this group. Popular cinema and music often held transnational influence throughout colonial Southeast Asia, even if those influences were uneven and multifaceted. Perhaps the advertiser intended this kebaya to appeal to broader aspirations for the "modern" and "cosmopolitan," transcending linguistic or regional boundaries. This positions the garment as an increasingly potent symbol within the marketplace, appealing to those navigating currents of both local culture and trans-regional cosmopolitanism. These currents were often driven by popular entertainment trends that, much like Singapore itself, blended various influences, reflecting the unique position of Singapore as a "melting pot" within colonial Southeast Asia.

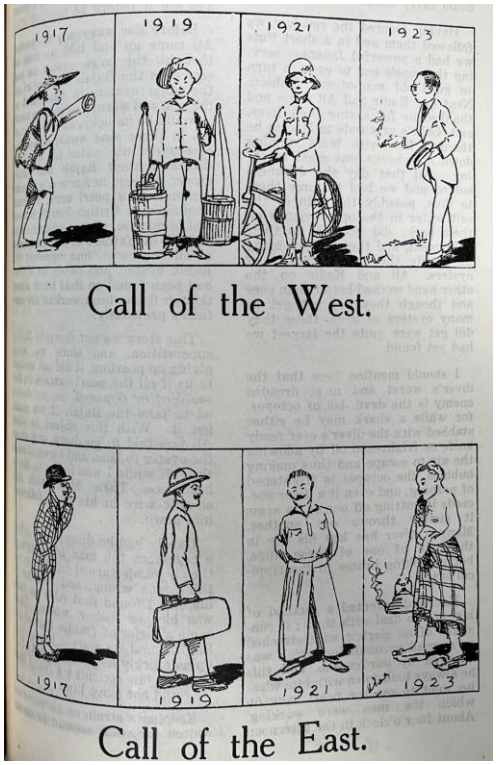

Figure 33. Call of the West – Call of the East.[132]

F.M. Luscombe's work, *Singapore 1819-1930*, reflects Singapore's unique position within colonial Southeast Asia as a "melting pot" of cultures and its potential for East-West "amalgamation".[133] This view of intercultural fusion, however, must be examined alongside the satirical representations of the period, such as the "Call of the West - Call of the East" caricature (See Figure 33 above). The caricature presents a narrative of cultural exchange, showcasing how both Eastern and Western individuals adapted their attire and, potentially, tastes to different cultural contexts. The top set, "Call of the West," shows an individual gradually adopting Western styles, potentially signalling upward mobility or changing aspirations. Conversely, the bottom set, "Call of the East," depicts a Westerner adopting Eastern attire, suggesting a willingness to adapt to local customs.

This caricature, while humorous, reveals the nuances of cultural exchange and adaptation within the colonial context. It challenges simplistic notions of cultural dominance, suggesting a more reciprocal process, albeit one still shaped by unequal power dynamics. Luscombe's further notes on the potential for "the necessary true amalgamation between East and West in Singapore" offer a more nuanced view.[134] The caricature reminds us to question the nature of this "amalgamation," considering whether it was truly reciprocal or influenced by the prevailing colonial hierarchy.

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[132] *The Malayan Chronicle* Aug–Sep, 1923, 39.
[133] F. M. Luscombe, *Singapore 1819-1930* (Singapore: C.A. Ribeiro & Co. Ltd, 1930).
[134] *Ibid*., 70.

Returning to our discussion of the kebaya, the "Modern Kabaya Tailoring Co." advertisement subtly challenges any notion of one-sided cultural assimilation. By specifying that the Kebayas were tailored by "An Experienced Malay Lady from Singapore," the advertisement subtly challenges any notion of one-sided cultural assimilation. It positions a Malay woman as a skilled artisan at the forefront of fashion, showcasing how individuals within the "East" were actively engaging with and shaping global trends. Singapore's unique "melting pot" status exemplifies a broader trend in colonial Southeast Asia where consumers navigated cross-cultural dynamics while expressing evolving identities. Yet, it is crucial to remember that these dynamics were often uneven and shaped by the power structures of colonialism, a complexity that the Terang Bulan kebaya advertisement reflects in its strategic positioning.

Analysing consumer behaviour in colonial Southeast Asia reveals that commodities like the Terang Bulan kebaya were more than mere objects of exchange; they were tools for navigating complex social and cultural landscapes. The intersection of local creativity and international influences reflects the broader consumer culture of the era, a space where the dialogue between colonial and indigenous cultures played out. Frances Gouda's work on white women in the Dutch East Indies further illuminates this dynamic. Gouda argues that Europeans in the colonies sought to maintain an image of racial and cultural superiority through their consumption patterns, a strategy that often transcended class differences.[135] This highlights how consumerism in the colonies was not just about acquiring goods, but also about reinforcing social hierarchies and projecting power.

This insight into the multifaceted role of consumerism underscores the fluid nature of cultural definitions in colonial Southeast Asia. Consumer culture and commodities were pivotal in both expressing existing identities and shaping new ones. For instance, Konstantinos Retsikas's analysis of ethnic identity in East Java demonstrates this fluidity. He examines how the consumption of certain goods and participation in specific cultural practices could transcend traditional ethnic boundaries, allowing individuals to negotiate and even redefine their ethnic identities within the colonial context.[136] Similarly, the exploration of the role of physical education in colonial Malaya demonstrates the dual role of Western practices; they could be tools for both assimilation and empowerment, control and emancipation.[137] These insights assert that the dialogue between colonial and indigenous worlds was often mediated through the commodities bought, sold, and exchanged. This dynamic illustrates the complex ways racial, class, and gender dimensions intertwined within colonial marketplaces in Singapore, Penang, Surabaya, and beyond.

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[135] Frances Gouda, "Nyonyas on the Colonial Divide: White Women in the Dutch East Indies, 1900–1942", *Gender & History* 5, no. 3 (1993): 321.

[136] Konstantinos Retsikas, "The Power of The Senses: Ethnicity, History and Embodiment in East Java, Indonesia", *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 35:102 (2007): 184.

[137] Janice N. Brownfoot, "Emancipation, exercise and imperialism: girls and the games ethic in colonial Malaya," in *The Cultural Bond: Sport, Empire, Society*, ed. J. A. Mangan (London: Routledge, 1993), 85–86.

The dynamism of Singapore as a colonial entrepôt mirrors the multifaceted trade environment that preceded it, particularly in regions like early modern India. Here, a melting pot of cultures fostered a diverse textile industry long before European arrival. The rich influence of Indo-Persian, Moorish, Persian, Rajput, and Armenian traders shaped the region's commerce, suggesting European traders adapted to a pre-existing, sophisticated market rather than dominating it. This points to a narrative that challenges the traditional focus on colonial dominance. Even linguistic evidence, like the term "kebaya" and its complex etymology, possibly stemming from a confluence of Portuguese, Arabic, and Indian traditions, further complicates this simplistic model.[138] It indicates that the colonial narrative of modernity in Southeast Asia must consider the region's active participation and influence in a global context that pre-dates, and continued alongside, Western expansion.

The "Modern Kabaya" advert illustrates how commodities like clothing played multifaceted roles within this shifting cultural landscape of the colonial market. Beyond mere matters of taste and fashion choices, the Modern Kabaya advert demonstrates how a fashion commodity can become a canvas for expressing and negotiating identity. Garments like the kebaya embodied local heritage and the influences of colonial presence. The evolution of the kebaya in colonial Southeast Asia epitomises the complex cultural shifts of the era. Originally a simple blouse, the kebaya transformed through the incorporation of European lace, embroidery techniques, and tailored fits, while still retaining traditional elements like the batik sarong. This transition into a national or trans-local garment during the 1920s highlights the fusion of local traditions with emerging national identities, showcasing how the kebaya became an emblem of a distinctly hybridised modernity. Its journey from a traditional to a modern item exemplifies blending colonial influence with indigenous fashion sense, positioning the kebaya as a unique sartorial expression of this cultural interaction.

This multifaceted background is pivotal in deconstructing the traditional narrative of European dominance in globalisation. The craftsmanship of the kebaya and other traditional garments highlights the agency of local artisans and traders. These garments, woven with threads from multiple cultural influences, present a compelling argument against the notion that European powers were the sole architects of globalisation. Instead, they reveal that indigenous participants in regions like India, Japan, or Southeast Asia were not merely passive recipients of Westernisation but active shapers of global exchange. They operated within and contributed to societies with dynamic cultural, sartorial, and economic systems independently of European influence. The "from Singapore" label on the kebaya advert encapsulates this synthesis, elevating local craftsmanship to a symbol of cosmopolitan modernity. This label is

[138] Ariane Fennetaux, "Behind the Seams: Global Circulations in a Group of Japanese-Inspired Cotton Nightgowns c. 1700", *Textile History* 52, no. 1-2 (2021): 71–72.

a statement of participation in the global dialogue of fashion and trade, where the East and West met and interlaced to create a new, hybrid modernity.

Batik offers another profound example of how commodities and cultural exchange complicate the narrative of European dominance. This art and craft, involving wax and dye to decorate textiles, has roots in Java but is also found in China, India, Japan, and South America, highlighting its trans-regional existence long before Western colonialism. Within the colonial era, batik symbolised a unique form of "otherness" admired by Western observers for its perceived exotic and artistic qualities. This fascination with Eastern aesthetics, exemplified in the appreciation for batik's colour, design, and the "feeling" expressed by the craftsperson, underscores a deeper layer of cultural exchange. It led to batik being adopted and adapted by European women, though often with changes to suit their market and sensibilities.[139]

This adoption of batik into Western practices illuminates the dialogic nature of colonial culture, where influences flowed in multiple directions. Western artisans consumed, integrated, and transformed Eastern practices, blurring the lines between "originator" and "adopter." Moreover, the reverence for the "feeling" or instinct in the work of indigenous artists underlines a gendered aspect of craft and creation that transcends geographic and cultural boundaries. The kebaya, especially those incorporating batik, symbolizes this cross-cultural conversation. It blends local artisanal heritage with global fashion trends, creating a unique synthesis. This is evident in kebayas tagged as originating from Singapore, showcasing regional skill and resonance with broader, international stylistic fashions.

[139] Marjan Groot, "Crossing the Borderlines and Moving the Boundaries: 'High'Arts and Crafts, Cross-culturalism, Folk Art and Gender" *Journal of Design History* 19, no. 2 (2006): 126.

Figure 34. Tiger Beer Advertisement.[140]

Figure 35. Robert Porter & Co. Ltd. Advertisement.[141]

The Modern Kebaya advertisement's multilingual and multi-script nature further highlights the nuanced use of language in colonial commerce. Jawi, an adapted form of the Perso-Arabic script for writing the Malay language, offers a fascinating case study. Initially associated with Islamic texts, Jawi transcended these origins to become a medium for various

[140] "Tiger Beer Advertisement". Accessed 31 January 2024. https://www.malaysiadesignarchive.org/advertisement-tiger-beer/ ; Jawi Transcription: "*Bir Cap Harimau; Beli dan minum ini bir yang paling baik dengan harga yang murah*" [Tiger Brand Beer Buy and drink this beer that is very good and comes at a cheap price].

[141] *Warta Malaya* Feb 28, 1933, 13; "The beer is very good for you. It is to be consumed continuously every day throughout the year."

genres, including commercial advertising.[142] This demonstrates how language, like fashion, was fluid and adaptable within the colonial market.

The script's broad use in lithographic printing, even by non-Muslim Malay speakers like Peranakan Chinese writer Yap Goan Ho, underscores the region's diverse publication landscape.[143] This diversity is further highlighted in Jawi advertisements promoting products like Tiger Beer in 1934 and Robert Porter Beer in 1933 (See Figure 34 and Figure 35 above), demonstrating the script's non-exclusive Islamic association.[144] These examples reveal how language became a tool for both cultural expression and commercial strategy. They highlight the ability of advertisers to navigate the complex linguistic terrain of colonial Southeast Asia, tapping into local linguistic traditions while promoting products with a global appeal. Interestingly, it is worth noting that the term "Jawi" itself has enigmatic origins. Likely an exonym imposed by outsiders, it inaccurately suggests a primarily Javanese connection while its modern Indonesian designation, "*huruf Arab-Melayu*" ("Arabic-Malay letters"), better reflects its broad application within diverse Malay-speaking populations. This historical discrepancy adds another layer of complexity to how we understand linguistic identity in colonial Southeast Asia. The use of Jawi to advertise alcoholic beverages in publications with significant Muslim readership introduces an intriguing paradox. This underscores Jawi's role beyond strictly Islamic contexts, inviting a deeper examination of the tensions between traditional religious sensibilities and the changing consumer landscape within colonial-era Muslim societies. It reveals the complexities of marketing within a context where both religious values and the desire for modernity played a role.

This strategic use of the term "modern" in the company name and advertisement reflects a broader trend among businesses within the colonial context. The desire to be seen as current, progressive, and in step with the times was prevalent across various industries, as evident in advertising agencies, opticians, engravers, business schools, hairdressers, dancing schools, hotels, office supplies, antique shops, photographers' studios, camera stores, and even breakfast cereals.[145] This widespread adoption of the term signalled a commitment to

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[142] Mulaika Hijjas, "Is Jawi Islamic?" In *Malay-Indonesian Islamic Studies A Festschrift in Honor of Peter G. Riddell*, ed. Majid Daneshgar and Ervan Nurtawab (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 274; Adrian Vickers, "'Malay Identity': Modernity, invented tradition, and forms of knowledge", *RIMA: Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 31, no. 1 (1997): 173–211.

[143] Claudine Salmon, "Malay Translations of Chinese Fictions in Indonesia," in *Literary Migrations: Traditional Chinese Fiction in Asia (17th–20th Centuries)*, ed. Claudine Salmon (Singapore: ISEAS, 2013), 252.

[144] Hijjas, "Is Jawi Islamic?", 269–271. On the fluctuating distinction between Malay and Javanese see also Adrian Vickers, "'Malay Identity': Modernity, invented tradition, and forms of knowledge", *RIMA: Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 31, no. 1 (1997): 173–211; Ian Proudfoot, *Early Malay Printed Books* (Kuala Lumpur: Universiti Malaya Press, 1993), 22.

[145] "*Penang Shopping Corner* Oct 6, 1939, 6; "New China Optical Co.", *News of Malaya and Singapore Market*, Vol. 1, No. 2 Nov, 1931): 7; "Modern Engraving Co", *News of Malaya and Singapore Market*, Vol. 1, No. 2 Nov, 1931, 30; "Oriental Hotel", *News of Malaya and Singapore Market*, Vol. 1, No. 2 Nov, 1931, 48; "The S. B. A. Institute", *News of Malaya and Singapore Market*, Vol. 1, No. 1 Oct, 1931, 8; "The Modern Hair Dressing Saloon", *News of Malaya and Singapore Market*, Vol. 2, No. 2 Mar, 1932, 12; "Vyner Gomez School of Dancing & Music", *News of Malaya and Singapore Market*, Vol. 2, No. 3 Apr, 1932, 1; "Eastern & Oriental Hotel", *The Penang Monthly Advertiser*, Vol. 1 No. 4 Mar, 1934, 1; "Roneo Ltd. Office Supplier", *The Singapore Journal of Commerce*, Vol. 1, No. 1 Jan 1935, 45; "Curios Modern and Antique

contemporary styles and standards, aligning with the larger, global movement towards modernisation. Companies across diverse sectors embraced "modern" as a powerful marketing tool, promising consumers access to the latest trends and innovations. This signalled a commitment to contemporary styles and standards, aligning with the larger, global movement towards modernisation.

The evolution of traditional attire, such as the kebaya, into a symbol of contemporary elegance, mirrors this trend. This garment's history is deeply rooted in the archipelago culture, yet its adaptation over time exemplifies the region's ability to blend global influences with its heritage. Peter Lee's comprehensive study in "Sarong Kebaya" posits that the kebaya outfit transcends ethnic boundaries, making it a pan-archipelago garment rather than one exclusive to any specific group.[146] Lee's work holistically views the Peranakan community of the Malay Archipelago, transcending historical and contemporary national boundaries. This approach emphasises cultural continuity and shared heritage across geopolitical divides, underscoring the outfit's widespread cultural adoption across Southeast Asia and challenging the notion that it is solely associated with the "Nyonya".[147]

However, to fully understand the cultural significance of the kebaya, it is crucial to examine the terminology surrounding its wearers. The terms "Nyonya", "Peranakan", and also "Baba" have distinct origins, reflecting the complex cultural and historical context of the Straits Settlements. "Baba" refers specifically to Straits-born Chinese men, while "Nyonya" denotes their female counterparts. However, the term "Nyonya" has a broader application beyond its association with Straits Chinese women. Meanwhile, "Peranakan," meaning "locally-born" in Malay, is a more inclusive term used interchangeably with "Straits Chinese." It reflects the hybrid culture of local-born Chinese in the former Straits Settlements, emphasising the blended identities that emerged within this colonial setting.[148] These terms, taken together, illustrate the evolution of language and how terms with specific origins can acquire broader meanings, reflecting the dynamic and fluid nature of cultural identity within the region. The term "Nyonya" itself offers a fascinating case study in linguistic and cultural evolution, particularly as it relates to the kebaya's significance. Originally, it likely evolved from the

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Shops", *The Malayan Traveller's Gazette* Jan 1923, 32; "Adelphi Hotel", *The Malayan Traveller's Gazette* Jan 1933, 79; "Raffles Hotel", *The Malayan Traveller's Gazette*, Jan 1933, 80; "Hotel Majestic", *The Malayan Traveller's Gazette* Jan 1933, 82; "Runnymede Hotel Penang", *The Malayan Traveller's Gazette* Apr, 1934, 82; "Light Studio", *The Malayan Traveller's Gazette* Jan, 1934, 89; "Modern & Co." The Modern Camera, *Malayan Saturday Post* Feb 20, 1932, 26; "Borneo Motors Ltd.", *Malaya Tribune* Apr 22, 1939, 19; "Kellogg's Corn Flakes", *Malaya Tribune* Apr 22, 1939, 14.

[146] Peter Lee, *Sarong Kebaya: Peranakan Fashion in an Interconnected World 1500-1950* (Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2014).

[147] *Nyonyas* are women from the Peranakan community, which emerged from the historical intermarriages between Chinese immigrants and local Malays in regions like Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, known for their unique blend of cultural practices; For the discussion on intermarriage in colonial Malaya and Singapore, see Marc Rerceretnam, "Intermarriage in Colonial Malaya and Singapore: A Case Study of Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Roman Catholic and Methodist Asian Communities", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies (Singapore)* 43, no. 2 (2012): 302–323.

[148] Thienny Lee, "*Dress and Visual Identities of the Nyonyas in the British Straits Settlements; Mid-Nineteenth to Early-Twentieth Century*," (PhD dissertation, University of Sydney, 2016), 6–10.

Portuguese “Dona,” signifying a respectable woman. Its use was broad, denoting married women of various backgrounds. Over time, it came to be more specifically associated with Peranakan Chinese women. This term highlights the fluid nature of cultural identity within colonial Southeast Asia and underscores the complexities of influences shaping the kebaya’s meaning and adoption.

Interestingly, the term “Nyonya” has also historically been used in colonial Indonesia since the seventeenth century, influenced by Portuguese culture, to denote “free, married women”. This usage underlines the transition of indigenous women from slavery to freedom upon marriage, enhancing their social status. The term’s evolution through Portuguese and Dutch influence (Melaka, 1641-1825) further integrated it into other Dutch colonies. The Dutch spelling “Njonja” or “Nj” was prevalent among Peranakan Chinese, distinguishing them in signatures on many garment products into the early twentieth century.[149]

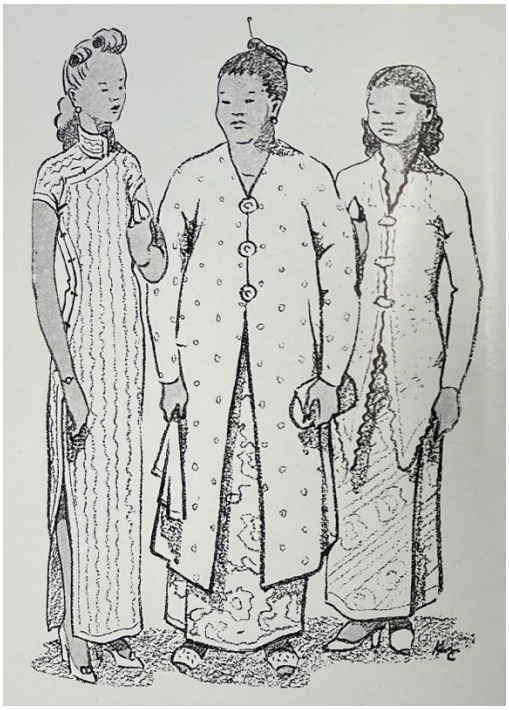

Figure 36. Straits Born Chinese Ladies.[150]

The caricature “Straits Born Chinese Ladies” (See Figure 36 above) visually illustrates the evolving styles of Peranakan Chinese women. While the accompanying description attempts to categorise their fashion into distinct influences, the reality was likely far more fluid. This fluidity is inherent in the nyonya kebaya itself, an outfit that combines a tailored blouse with a sarong characterised by intricate batik patterns. Stemming from the Malay *baju panjang* (long

[149] Lee, *Dress and Visual Identities of the Nyonyas*, 8.
[150] Kathleen M. Chasen, *Who Are They? A Sketchy Review of Singapore’s Asiatic Population* (Singapore, 1940), 18.

dress), the nyonya kebaya is a form-fitting, translucent blouse, usually accompanied by a sarong adorned with batik motifs. The batik sarong, valued for its artisanal quality, especially from Java, often displays elaborate motifs like flora and fauna or adopts geometric patterns. These design elements, particularly hand-drawn Javanese batiks, are prised for their craftsmanship and favoured patterns, reflecting the intricate and evolving cultural identity of Peranakan Nyonyas.[151]

The caricature underscores this dynamic evolution by depicting three women of different generations, revealing the diverse fashion choices available within the evolving identities of Straits-born Chinese women. The elderly "Nyonya" (middle) retains elements of Chinese tradition in her hairstyle. Yet, her dress, while similar to that of Malay women, lacks a "*slendang*" (headscarf) and is made of distinct fabric, suggesting a selective blending of cultural influences. The younger woman's (right) attire draws even more heavily from Malay fashion while incorporating a Javanese jacket, highlighting the broader range of influences shaping her style. However, her modern hairstyle and choice of fabrics diverge from traditional Malay patterns, demonstrating individual expression. Meanwhile, the third woman (left) fully embraces a contemporary Chinese "Shanghai gown," perhaps inspired by dance hostesses.[152]

This fascinating evolution of the nyonya kebaya continued into the early twentieth century. Originating in Java, it incorporated European design elements, marking yet another layer of foreign influence on this traditional attire. The adoption of European motifs, particularly floral, led to a novel appearance embraced by younger nyonyas in the Straits Settlements. European floral motifs first emerged in Eurasian batik workshops and were subsequently replicated in Peranakan workshops, giving rise to "Batik Nyonya", named for its popularity among nyonyas. This trend extended to white lace kebayas, incorporating European styles.[153] The Modern Kebaya Tailoring advertisement, featuring floral designs, exemplifies this blend of local and European influences. Its use of the term "modern" subtly equates modernity with European styles and aesthetics in colonial Malaya, highlighting the ways "modernity" was often perceived within the colonial context. This transition from traditional to European-influenced designs in kebaya fashion reflects a broader trend of colonial mimicry, where adopting European aesthetics signified a move towards this elusive modernity.[154]

The concept of "mimicry," as analysed in post-colonial studies, highlights how colonised societies often imitated their colonisers' language, dress, and cultural attitudes.[155] This phenomenon reveals a complex form of imitation where the colonised sought to replicate

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[151] Kiat Neo Ong, *Nyonya Kebaya: Intricacies of the Peranakan heritage* (Singapore: Christine Ong Kiat Neo, 2011), 16.
[152] Chasen, *Who Are They?*, 19.
[153] Ong, *Nyonya Kebaya*, 186–187.
[154] Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 122.
[155] Sanjiv Kumar, "Bhabha's Notion of 'Mimicry' and 'Ambivalence' in V.S. Naipaul's a Bend in the River." *Journal of Arts, Science & Commerce* Vol. II, no. 4 (October 2011): 119.

the power dynamics of the coloniser, often leading to a "blurred copy" that could unsettle colonial authority.[156] This imitation was not simply about gaining power but also involved a nuanced negotiation of identity. The act of mimicry could both affirm colonial dominance while simultaneously challenging it through the very act of imperfect replication. This phenomenon is strikingly observable in the Dutch East Indies, particularly in the evolution of the "Kebaya Encim".[157] This hybrid garment symbolizes the complex cultural exchanges and adaptations among the Peranakan (Chinese Peranakan), Dutch colonial authorities, and local Indonesian communities.

The Dutch East Indies' colonial authorities were acutely conscious of the role of clothing as a marker of ethnic and social distinction. In 1872 they mandated that all residents adhere to wearing traditional ethnic attire in public spaces. However, exceptions were made for Dutch, Indo-Dutch, Peranakan Chinese, and indigenous women, who were instead required to don the kebaya and batik sarong. [158] This mandate underscores the kebaya's transition from a traditional Indonesian garment into one the Peranakan Chinese and Indo-Dutch communities adopted. Dutch women, recognising the garment's suitability for the tropical climate, also adopted the kebaya domestically until 1920, often opting for kebayas crafted from premium fabrics adorned with European-inspired soft-coloured batik designs. This signifies their elite status and highlights how mimicry could operate as both an act of adaptation and a subtle assertion of power.

A significant shift occurred with the 1910 "Act on Dutch Nationality" or *Wet op het Nederlandsch Onderdaan* which aimed to equalize (*gelijkgesteld*) the status of affluent Peranakan Chinese women.[159] This led them to initially emulate Dutch style - a white cotton and lace kebaya. Over time, these Peranakan Chinese women began to adapt this style into the "kebaya kerancang", incorporating their cultural preferences for vivid colours and intricate embroidery.[160] This evolution culminated in the "kebaya encim", which is distinguished by its vibrant colours and embroidery that incorporates Chinese motifs. It departed from the initial emulation of Dutch fashion, instead becoming a distinct expression of Peranakan identity. This transition reflects the cultural hybridisation process and illustrates how colonial policies and social stratification influenced the adaptation and innovation within Peranakan attire. This evolution led to a garment that embodies a unique blend of Indonesian, Chinese, and European aesthetic influences.

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[156] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. "Part VI: Hybridity – Introduction," in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London: Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003), 139

[157] Christine C. Lukman, Yasraf A. Piliang, and Priyanto Sunarto, "Kebaya Encim as the Phenomenon of Mimicry in East Indies Dutch Colonial's Culture," *Arts and Design Studies* 13, no. 1 (2013): 15–22.

[158] Jean Gelman Taylor, *The Social World of Batavia: European and Eurasian in Dutch Asia* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 116.

[159] Lukman, Piliang, and Sunarto, "Kebaya Encim", 16.

[160] *Ibid*., 19.

The “Kebaya Encim,” more broadly, reflects a form of mimicry where colonised communities adopted and adapted the fashion styles of their colonisers to create something uniquely their own, reflecting a complex narrative of hybridity. Clothing becomes a canvas for the interaction of diverse cultural influences, ultimately leading to a cosmopolitan expression uniquely suited to the colonial milieu. This evolution is anchored in the cosmopolitan essence of Singapore, reflected in the advertising language that positions the city at the heart of modern, cross-cultural exchanges. The “from Singapore” notation in advertisements underscores its significance as a modern, intercultural hub within the British Empire.

The “Terang Bulan” motif exemplifies this blend, linking Malaya and Indonesia in a complex colonial and post-colonial narrative. Contrary to popular belief that the “Terang Bulan” motif emerged in the 1950s, this pattern and its associated cultural significances predate this era. Its connection to the 1937 film “Terang Bulan” is significant. The film, which brought together renowned early Indonesian screen stars Miss Roekiah and Raden Mochtar, set a precedent for popular Indonesian cinema.[161] Its commercial success, not only in the Dutch East Indies but also in British Malaya, underscored the appeal of films in local languages and marked a shift towards a flourishing regional film production industry.[162] “Terang Bulan” was heralded as the first film made in Bahasa Indonesia and became a cultural sensation, contributing to establishing a stable Malay film production industry in pre-war Singapore.

Roekiah, the film’s leading lady, became an iconic figure in Indonesian cinema, embodying evolving Indonesian ideals of womanhood. Her roles and public image were instrumental in shaping the narrative of the Indonesian woman during this period.[163] Her prominence, alongside the film’s themes, align with broader colonial era themes of national identity, modernity, and cultural exchange. This highlights how figures like Roekiah and their work served as powerful forces in shaping identity and fostering a sense of shared cultural experience across colonial borders. Furthermore, “Terang Bulan” juxtaposed urban modernity, represented by cities like Batavia and Malacca, with traditional village life. This portrayal of modernity’s transformative aspects aligns with advertisements’ narratives, where traditional elements are woven into a modern urban identity.[164] The film reflects the awe-inspiring modernity introduced by Europeans, echoing how advertisements often depicted this influence. In this context, the advertisement for the “Terang Bulan” kebaya symbolises cultural

[161] Heider, *Indonesian Cinema*, 16.
[162] Timothy P. Barnard, “Film Melayu: Nationalism, Modernity and Film in a pre-World War Two Malay Magazine”, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 41, no. 1 (2010): 51–52; See also William Van der Heide, *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film: Border Crossings and National Cultures* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2002).
[163] Christopher Allen Woodrich, “Negotiating the Path of Fame: Tradition and Modernity in the Public Persona of Roekiah (1917–1945),” *International Journal of Humanity Studies (IJHS)* 1, no. 1 (2017): 20.
[164] Christopher Allen Woodrich, “Between the Village and the City: Representing Colonial Indonesia in the Films of Saeroen”, *International Indonesia Forum, 2014 Working Paper Series* 1, (2014): 11–12.

negotiation and identity formation, reflecting the complex dynamics of modernity, tradition, and identity in colonial Southeast Asia.

The reference to Singapore in the ad provides an understanding of how modernity was perceived and propagated in colonial Southeast Asia. It challenges the traditional view of colonial modernity as a Western export imposed upon passive indigenous populations. Instead, it highlights the active role of local actors like the Malay tailor. These individuals were not just recipients of modern influences but also participants in shaping them. The "from Singapore" tag adds a layer of sophistication and perhaps even prestige to the kebayas. It suggests a level of craftsmanship and fashion consciousness that resonates with the cosmopolitan ethos of Singapore, emphasising the city's unique role as a melting pot of cultures and a centre for disseminating new ideas and styles.

Moreover, this line disrupts the simplistic dichotomy often drawn between the "modern" West and the "traditional" East. It showcases a more complex picture where modernity in colonial Southeast Asia is a dynamic, multi-faceted phenomenon. Here, the indigenous agency, embodied by the Malay tailor, interacts with global trends, resulting in a unique hybridity that defies straightforward categorisation. Therefore, the seemingly simple addition of "from Singapore" deepens our understanding of how colonial consumer culture facilitated the emergence of a globally connected middle class. It highlights how local identities, practices, and products actively shaped a shared cosmopolitan lifestyle across national borders.

Figure 37. Listerine Toothpaste Advertisement.[165]

This connection between consumerism and the construction of modern beauty ideals is further evident in the "Listerine Toothpaste" advertisement from a 1937 issue of *D'Orient* (See Figure 37 above). It demonstrates the enduring appeal of Western products and their narratives linking them to modernity, beauty, and health. The ad's promise, "Listerine Toothpaste makes the teeth pearly white again in a remarkably short time", emphasises not just efficacy but a transformation aligned with Western beauty standards.[166]

The advertisement's strategic choices reinforce the power of images to shape consumption and ideals. At the top, we see the smiling face of a European woman, her bright teeth serving as a testament to the promise of the product. Her image is both an embodiment of the perceived benefits of toothpaste and a strategic marketing choice that aligns the whiteness of teeth with broader notions of purity, health, and beauty. Using a Western woman as the face of the campaign underscores how Western beauty standards were often presented as the ideal towards which the colonial consumer should aspire. Listerine Toothpaste offered a way to participate in this globalised vision of modernity.

[165] *D'Orient* Oct 23, 1937, 50.
[166] *Ibid*.; [translation: *Listerine Tandpasta maakt binnen merkwaardig korten tijd de tanden opnieuw paarlwit*]

Her presence in the advertisement further taps into the gendered notion that women should embody and uphold health and beauty standards within the domestic sphere. Her bright smile and sparkling teeth sell an aspiration to a particular form of femininity aligned with Western ideals of the time, steeped in cleanliness and charm. The text below her image reinforces this connection between product use and attaining desirable attributes often associated with modernity, such as whiter teeth and fresher breath. These are touted as direct results of the toothpaste's efficacy, suggesting a swift transformation made possible by embracing Western products and practices.

This emphasis on a European beauty ideal is not unique to the Listerine advertisement and reflects broader trends within colonial consumer culture. Periodicals published under colonial rule provide ample evidence that Caucasian women were represented as the dominant beauty ideal, with beauty and skin products explicitly marketed as a means to whiten one's skin.[167] This conflation of whiteness with beauty and desirability was accompanied by a shift in meaning as "white" became increasingly synonymous with Caucasian. Products like "medicated" skin powders or Snow cold cream frequently included claims that they would make the skin "*putih*" (white).[168] This emphasis on a Caucasian standard of beauty reinforced colonial power structures and likely influenced the self-image of consumers within the Dutch East Indies.

The woman's presence in the Listerine advertisement taps into the gendered notion that women should embody and uphold health and beauty standards within the domestic sphere. Her appearance sells an aspiration to a femininity aligned with Western ideals, linking pearly white teeth and fresh breath to desirability within this construct. The ad's promise of swift results positions Listerine as a key tool for achieving this vision of modern womanhood. Moreover, the advertisement hints at the scientific backing behind the product, a strategy likely to instil confidence in its modernity and effectiveness. This subtle nod to science aligns with the broader "civilising mission" narrative within colonial discourse, which often positioned Western products and practices as superior to traditional oral hygiene methods.[169] The ad continues, "It contains an ingredient specially designed to clean and polish, harder than tartar and yet softer than tooth enamel, that quickly and safely removes tartar, stains, and discolouration."[170] Here, the text navigates between scientific assurance and consumer safety, suggesting that modern science can be both effective and gentle. This emphasis on both

[167] L. Ayu Saraswati, *Seeing Beauty, Sensing Race in Transnational Indonesia* (University of Hawaii Press, 2013), 51; See also Philomena Essed and Sandra Trienekens, "'Who Wants to Feel White?' Race, Dutch Culture and Contested Identities," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31, no. 1 (2008): 52–72.
[168] Saraswati, *Seeing Beauty, Sensing Race*, 51.
[169] Andrew Goss, "Decent Colonialism? Pure science and colonial ideology in the Netherlands East Indies, 1910–1929." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40, no. 1 (2009): 187–214; See also Andrew Goss, *The Floracrats: State-Sponsored Science and the Failure of the Enlightenment in Indonesia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011).
[170] *D'Orient* Oct 23, 1937, 50; *Het bevat een bestanddeel, speciaal om te reinigen en te polijsten, harder dan tandsteen en toch zachter dan tandglazuur, dat snel en veilig tandaanslag, vlekken en verkleuringen verwijdert*.

efficacy and safety reinforces the perception of Western knowledge and technology as inherently superior. Further, the advertisement claims, “No taste of soap, just the healthy and refreshing taste of Listerine antiseptic.”[171] While not explicitly referencing traditional oral care, this statement subtly implies that existing methods might be unpleasant or less effective. This positioning works to distance Listerine from potential competitors or homemade remedies that a consumer might already be familiar with. By associating itself with health and a pleasant experience, Listerine implicitly casts other options as less desirable, making it seem like a necessary upgrade for the modern individual. This emphasis on the benefits of the modern product continues with the ad’s call to action: “Take the test yourself with Listerine Toothpaste. Buy a tube today; brush your teeth with it, evening and morning, for 30 days - Notice how much whiter and shinier your teeth become.”[172] This invitation encourages purchasing and the adoption of a new hygiene ritual that promises visible transformation. It goes beyond abstract promises; modernity becomes achievable and verifiable through personal consumption.

Considering the broader context of the Dutch East Indies in the 1930s, this advertisement likely targets those within colonial society with disposable income and aspirations of a Westernised lifestyle. Figures such as higher-ranking Dutch and indigenous officials or entrepreneurs likely formed the target demographic, drawn to symbols of progress and international cosmopolitanism. In publications like *D’Orient*, advertisements capitalised on these desires for advancement, promising that Western products provided tangible gateways to a future defined by cleanliness, success, and an alignment with global trends. The advertisement intertwines modernity with colonial values of advancement and social standing, positioning the brand as a facilitator of this desired transformation.

[171] *D’Orient* Oct 23, 1937, 50; *Geen zeepsmaak, juist de gezonde en verkwikkende smaak van het Listerine antiseptic*.
[172] “*Neem zelf een proef met Listerine Tandpasta. Koop vandaag nog een tube; poets er Uw tanden mee, “s avonds en “s morgens, 30 dagen lang - Merk op, hoe veel witter en glanzender Uw tanden worden*.”

Figure 38. Pepsodent Advertisement.[173]

The influence of Western consumer culture, particularly American, is undeniable in the Pepsodent advertisement featuring Hollywood stars (See Figure 38 above).[174] Its presence in both the Dutch East Indies publication *D'Orient* and the Dutch newspaper *De Telegraaf* reveals a standardised global advertising strategy that relies on the perceived universality of American celebrity as a symbol of beauty, sophistication, and modern living. This hints at an emerging form of globalised modernity, where audiences across borders encounter shared aspirations shaped by disjunctive flows of images and ideas (scapes), as theorised by Arjun Appadurai.[175] Yet, as Ulf Hannerz emphasises, this is not simply cultural homogenisation but a complex network of exchange influencing understandings of progress and personal transformation.[176]

The Pepsodent advertisement exemplifies this dynamic. It illustrates how the burgeoning field of advertising was shifting from simply selling a product to an entire lifestyle, where modernity, sophistication, and social success were attainable through Western goods.

[173] *D'Orient* Oct 9, 1937, 55.
[174] *De Telegraaf*, Apr 8,1937, 16.
[175] Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy", *Theory, culture & society* 7, no. 2-3 (1990): 295–310; See also Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, ed., *The Cultures of Globalization* (Duke University Press, 1998); Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
[176] Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

The presence of cinema icons like June Travis, a Warner Bros and National Pictures star, bridges the gap between the everyday consumer and the seemingly unattainable celebrity world. This makes the modern lifestyle promoted by Pepsodent feel within reach. The ad claims Pepsodent is a cutting-edge product offering unparalleled benefits—a claim underscored by the significant investment cited in the ad. By leveraging the image of a Hollywood actress, the ad aligns Pepsodent with glamour and allure, suggesting that using the product could bring consumers a step closer to the lifestyle of the rich and famous.

However, the reach of American consumer goods, such as Pepsodent, must also be understood within the broader cultural and political context of the time. As Ann Foster highlights, Hollywood movies and American consumer products were not merely commercial enterprises; they were vehicles for transmitting an American vision of modernity. This vision encouraged Southeast Asians to engage with American ideals of progress, success, and consumerism.[177] The appeal of products like Pepsodent, promoted by glamorous Hollywood stars, was part of a broader American cultural influence that sought to reshape notions of leisure, consumption, and even self-identity in the region. Hollywood, in particular, was seen as a transformative force that had the power to shape lifestyles and consumer habits, especially as Southeast Asians increasingly participated in the emerging global consumer culture.

At the same time, American officials and businesses believed that their products and methods would "Americanise" the world, including "backward areas" like Southeast Asia. As Foster notes, American products were perceived not only as commodities but also as tools for spreading American enterprise and ideals.[178] This is reflected in the advertising of consumer goods, such as Pepsodent, where the emphasis was not only on the practical benefits of the product but also on the aspirational qualities associated with a modern, Western lifestyle. In this way, the Pepsodent advertisement did more than just sell toothpaste—it sold an image of American modernity, promising Southeast Asian consumers that by embracing Western goods, they could participate in a global vision of progress and sophistication.

Yet this transformation was not without its complexities. While the introduction of American consumer goods like Pepsodent seemed to offer a path toward modernity, it also served to reinforce existing colonial hierarchies and power dynamics. The advertisement's promise of an ideal lifestyle, symbolised by Hollywood stars, subtly reinforced the idea that true modernity and sophistication could only be achieved through Western, particularly American, products. This underscores how American cultural influence in Southeast Asia was as much about shaping desires and identities as it was about selling goods. In the end, the spread of American consumer culture in the region helped to deepen the connections between

[177] Foster, *Projections of Power*, 7.
[178] *Ibid*., 46.

consumption and modernity, while simultaneously positioning the West as the arbiter of progress.

Both the Listerine and Pepsodent advertisements tap into a broader societal fascination with transformation and improvement, themes central to colonial narratives of progress and modernity. Listerine emphasises "pearly white teeth" and "fresh breath" as transformative results achievable through its product. Similarly, Pepsodent uses the phrase "beautifully polishing, once so brilliant," implying that the product both restores and enhances natural beauty.[179] This focus on visible, lasting improvements aligns with the idea that Western products could facilitate a transformation into a more desirable, "modern" self. Whether Listerine's promise of swift results or Pepsodent's emphasis on keeping "teeth so white for so long", the call to action in both ads reinforces this desire for enduring improvement.[180] However, the ads diverge in their strategies. Listerine focuses on sensory experience and hints at a break from less palatable "old ways" of oral care, while Pepsodent leverages the glamour of Hollywood. This suggests a nuanced approach by advertisers, tailoring their messaging to appeal to different aspects of the colonial consumer's desire for modernity. The strategy was to capitalise on the aspirational qualities associated with movie stars of the era, who embodied the glamour and allure of modernity. Their radiant smiles, promoted by Pepsodent, are presented as ideals of beauty and attainable results of using the product. This suggests that consumers can achieve the same attractiveness and social success.

But who were these ads aimed at? The presence of Pepsodent in both the Dutch East Indies and the Netherlands suggests a target audience with disposable income and a desire to align themselves with Western standards of beauty and lifestyle. In colonial contexts like the Dutch East Indies, this likely included Europeans, wealthier segments of the indigenous population, and those aspiring to upward social mobility. Considering the readership of *D'Orient*, which included an urban, educated middle-class with access to the Dutch language, the advertisement likely targeted both Europeans and those within the Dutch East Indies, regardless of ethnicity, who had embraced elements of European culture and aspired to a cosmopolitan lifestyle. To appeal to this audience, the ad highlights both the product's effectiveness and its association with exclusivity. It claims that Pepsodent spent US$200,000 on a unique ingredient that polishes teeth to an unprecedented shine while being gentle.[181] The emphasis on novelty, high investment, and a formula that is both effective and gentle are all elements designed to bolster the perception of value and build consumer trust. By claiming that the product leads to teeth being "whiter than ever," the ad further appeals to aesthetic desires and anxieties about health and safety in personal care.[182]

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[179] *De Telegraaf* Apr 8, 1937): 16; (*prachtig polistend, eens zoo schitterend*)
[180] *Ibid*. (*houdt uw tanden eens zoo lang blank*).
[181] *De Telegraaf* Apr 8, 1937): 16.
[182] *Ibid*.

The ad constructs an appealing narrative through smiling, successful actors and bold text proclaiming its benefits. This narrative positions Pepsodent as essential to a fashionable, contemporary lifestyle. It taps into the broader modern hygiene movement that links personal care with societal ideals of health and cleanliness. The strategic placement of film actors suggests a deliberate blurring of the lines between everyday consumer culture and the elite world of cinema. This implies that the glamour of Hollywood and the promise of modern hygiene are within reach of the average consumer. This connection between celebrity culture and consumer products reflects broader trends of the period, where the commercialisation of personal care items was intertwined with emerging ideals of beauty and modernity, often mediated through the glamorous lens of the film industry.

This approach reflects a dynamic already seen in the American oral hygiene market during the interwar period. Advertisements for toothpaste and toothbrushes shaped public perception and behaviour as they promised health benefits, beauty, success, and modernity. This led to a new cultural norm around daily toothbrushing, particularly among middle and upper-class Americans, marking a significant shift in consumer culture where products were linked to broader societal aspirations and ideals.[183] This transformation in American society parallels a larger global trend where Western products and practices, including oral hygiene, were promoted as emblems of modernity and progress. However, while advertisements certainly played a role in educating people about modern hygiene practices, the impact within Southeast Asia was particularly complex. Advertisements simultaneously reshaped local aspirations and lifestyles in colonial settings while reflecting and possibly reinforcing existing power dynamics. The emphasis on hygiene became deeply entangled with notions of racial superiority and "civilising" efforts associated with colonial rule.

Global hygiene advertising campaigns served not only as education but as potent tools for shaping aspirations and behaviours. They offered visions tied to Western lifestyles and beauty standards, transforming routines like toothbrushing into performances of modernity. Within Southeast Asia's colonial context, these advertisements both intersected with local notions of beauty and reinforced power disparities by promoting ideals often unattainable for many. This duality demands a nuanced analysis that exposes the tensions between progress and underlying inequality.

[183] Catherine Carstairs, "Science, Beauty and Health: the Explosion of Toothpaste and Toothbrush Advertising in Interwar America," in *Cultures of Oral Health: Discourses, Practices and Theory*, ed. Claire L. Jones and Barry J. Gibson (New York: Routledge, 2023).

Figure 39. Cutex Liquid Polish Advertisement.[184]

This phenomenon is evident in gendered advertisements like the Cutex nail polish ad, which appeared in the Dutch East Indies (See Figure 39 above). By emphasising meticulous grooming and "*zacht en glanzend*" (soft and shiny) polish, the ad reinforces an ideal of feminine beauty built on a polished appearance.[185] The ad's language, promising to "keep your fingertips neatly maintained," further suggests an expectation placed on women to uphold this specific aesthetic standard.[186] This reflects how products and their marketing messages played into both consumer desires and the complex societal expectations surrounding gender within the colonial context.

Cutex's strategy extends beyond promoting an individual product. Choosing a reputable name like Northam Warren (creator of Cutex) and mentioning cosmopolitan cities like New York, London, and Paris lends an air of international sophistication, reinforcing the idea that using it is an entry point into a more glamorous, worldly lifestyle.[187] This approach

[184] *D'Orient* Oct 30, 1937, 40.
[185] *Ibid*.
[186] *Ibid*. (Translation: *Gebruikt de nieuwe Cutex Oily Cuticle Remover om Uw vingertoppen keurig verzorgd te houden*).
[187] M. Kane, "Northam Warren, Pioneer in Manicure Field", *The American Perfumer & Essential Oil Review*, (February 1946): 43–44.

aligns with Northam Warren's own reflections on the power of advertising. In *The American Perfumer and Essential Oil Review*, he discusses the challenges of introducing a new product and the innovative strategies used to cultivate demand.[188] His emphasis on educating consumers about nail care reflects a broader trend during the interwar period when advertising began to play a crucial role in shaping consumer habits and preferences. Initially facing resistance from retailers, Warren's persistence in advertising and educating the public paid off.[189] This led to a shift in consumer behaviour and created a new market for manicure products, illustrating how personal care products were increasingly marketed as essentials for modern living. The Cutex advertisement thus sells both a product and an idealised vision of femininity that was pervasive in the colonial era. It exemplifies how gender roles were communicated and perpetuated through the marketing of everyday commodities, offering insight into the complex relationship between colonialism, consumerism, and constructions of beauty.

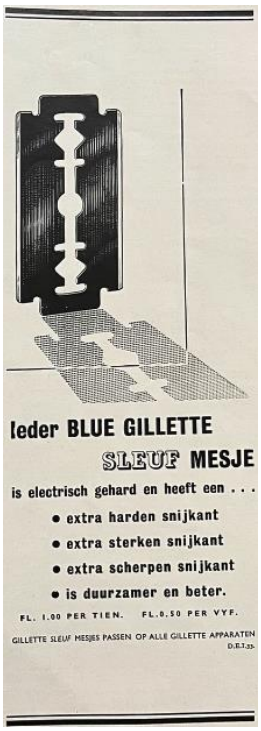

Figure 40. Gilette Advertisement.[190]

While advertisements like Cutex focus on aesthetics and social ideals, marketing strategies for personal care often adapt to target male consumers as well. Advertisements like the one for Gillette blades underscore that men are equally invested in products that enhance their

[188] "How a Great Toilet Goods Business was Built", *The American Perfumer and Essential Oil Review*, (Vol. 17, No. 9, November 1922): 393–394.
[189] *Ibid*., 393.
[190] *D'Orient* Oct 23, 1937, 51.

routines and self-presentation (See Figure 40 above).[191] This Gillette advertisement focuses on the technological prowess of the shaving blade, presenting it as an indispensable tool for the modern man. The focus shifts away from aspirational beauty and towards features like "electrically hardened" and an "extra sharp cutting edge," constructing an ideal of masculine efficiency and precision in personal grooming. The emphasis on durability and compatibility reinforces this image through its connotations of reliability and long-term value. Using terms like "*duurzamer en beter*" (more durable and better) directly communicates value and longevity, appealing to the notion of rationality and pragmatism often associated with male purchasing decisions.[192] Moreover, the prominent image of the blade itself serves as a visual confirmation of the product's features – qualities likely to appeal to a male audience seeking reliability. The straightforward price listing underscores the economic aspect. This contrasts with the Cutex ad, which emphasises idealised beauty and the allure of cosmopolitan sophistication.

By highlighting innovation, durability, and value, the Gillette ad constructs an image of modern masculinity aligning with technological advancement and practical efficiency. It suggests that the modern man, through his choice of a simple yet essential tool like the Gillette blade, can embody the progress and sophistication of the era. However, the absence of a male figure in the Gillette ad is a deliberate strategy. This shifts the focus entirely to the product's features, suggesting their qualities stand independently, appealing to a diverse male audience regardless of physical appearance. Without promoting a specific archetype of masculinity, the ad encourages consumers to project themselves onto the product and envision the benefits they might personally experience.

Advertisements for personal care products in the colonial era mirrored the prevailing social norms within the context. The Gillette ad, devoid of a male model, focuses on technical qualities and value. This approach acknowledges male interest in grooming products while navigating the potentially restrictive gender roles of the period. It positions the product as a practical, essential tool with broad appeal – implying functionality as the core reason for purchase, regardless of a man's social standing or other individual characteristics. Conversely, the Bedak Dingin (cold cream) advertisement in the *Keng Po* newspaper presents a more complex understanding of consumer behaviour. While ostensibly targeting a male audience, L.A. Saraswati's research on beauty products within colonial Indonesia suggests that women were the primary users of such products.[193] This disconnect is underscored by the inclusion of a testimonial from Raden Mas Soedarsono, an elite Javanese man, who describes the product's positive effects on his wife's skin.[194] The advertisement hints at the ways that gender

[191] *D'Orient* Oct 23, 1937, 51.
[192] *Ibid*.
[193] L. Ayu Saraswati, *Seeing Beauty Sensing Race*, 51–52.
[194] *Ibid*.

roles, consumption patterns, and social expectations could intersect in unexpected ways. Even within the confines of traditional power structures, consumer choices could reflect a subtle negotiation of identity and aspirations.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the complex and multifaceted nature of middle-class identity formation within colonial Southeast Asia. While nationalism played a role, it was not the only defining factor shaping their aspirations and choices. For many, the pursuit of consumer goods and a lifestyle informed by global trends was intrinsically linked to their understanding of modernity. This emphasis on consumption facilitated a shared sense of identity across colonial boundaries and paradoxically reinforced existing power structures, even while challenging them in subtle ways.

The focus on education, multilingualism, and emerging professions has illuminated how this transnational middle class developed a distinct identity. Education instilled Western values and a sense of cosmopolitanism, shaping aspirations and consumer desires. This complex interplay of colonial systems, global trends, and local opportunities created shared experiences and nuances in expressing middle-class identity across cities like Surabaya, Singapore, and Penang. The exploration of consumption patterns, exemplified by the kebaya and the shared taste for the Terang Bulan motif, reveals how objects and their associated meanings became central to this modern identity. The negotiation of tradition and global influences in the kebaya's evolution highlights this group's agency, showcasing their ability to participate in shaping both local and regional fashion trends. Similarly, the widespread popularity of the Terang Bulan motif underscores the emergence of a shared taste across distinct colonial systems, revealing a complex interplay of local traditions, regional cultural exchange, and an aspiration towards a modern lifestyle.

While colonial powers intended to maintain strict boundaries and hierarchies between cities, this analysis demonstrates the emergence of a transnational middle-class identity in Southeast Asia. This identity, shaped by shared aspirations and consumer practices, transcended the confines of individual cities and colonial borders. However, it is important to acknowledge that hierarchies undoubtedly existed among cities. Singapore, for example, might have been perceived as a trendsetter, exerting influence on fashion and other aspects of consumer culture within the region.

These individuals were not passive recipients of Westernisation but active agents in defining what it meant to be modern in their context. Their choices, influenced by diverse factors, ultimately shaped a distinct and cosmopolitan urban identity within Southeast Asia, fundamentally altering the dynamics of colonial societies. However, this process was far from uncontested. Consumerism became both a tool of conformity and a site of resistance. The

following chapter investigates how consumer resistance emerged as a critical tool for socio-cultural critique and a catalyst for alternative visions of modernity. Examining Surabaya, Singapore, and Penang, it will explore the multifaceted dimensions of this resistance and its political and cultural implications for Southeast Asia, paying attention to how the relative position of these cities might have shaped the nature and direction of consumer resistance.

Chapter III. "Buy Local", Boycotts, and Beyond: Consumer Choices in the Colonial Era

Introduction

> "We should not simply see the competition as a pure struggle, but there must also be cooperation to ward off the overwhelming power of foreign trade... And since we here form the largest number as a population group, as consumers, we make up a significant part of the trade. The Indonesian trade will certainly not look dark in the future when every Indonesian imposes the duty of supporting Indonesian businesses; the power of the masses will ultimately be of the greatest weight here. But on the other hand, our people also have to beware not to support 'so-called Indonesian' businesses that are financed by foreign capital."[1]

The above excerpt captures the essence of a dynamic struggle between foreign and local influences in the region's evolving attitude towards foreign products. It hails the power of consumers and invites them to play an active role in supporting their local businesses against the potent tide of globalisation. This call for economic solidarity and prudent consumerism embodies the spirit of resistance that marked a time of significant change in the colony. The writer warns against the overpowering influence of foreign capital, but also an invitation to native Indonesian consumers, a plea for their help to uplift and support their local businesses in the face of daunting globalisation. It illustrates the complex interaction of consumerism, cultural identity, and resistance during a period of rapid modernisation in the colonial society.

The phrase "Indonesian businesses supported by foreign money" unveils layers of complexity beyond its face value. Rather than just pinpointing the economic dynamics, it echoes the deeper socio-political and cultural anxieties that punctuated the Indonesian societal landscape during the colonial era. Moving past the immediate interpretation of a boycott, the deeper connotations suggest a nuanced examination. The phrase suggests that one reflect on the broader implications surrounding local businesses that are financially intertwined with foreign entities. A crucial question arises: when a business is deeply rooted in the local Indonesian milieu, but receives sustenance from foreign capital, whose interests

[1] "Retail trade and business for us Indonesians", *Soeara Indonesia Moeda Soerabaia*, 2(1) Aug, 1930, 4. "*De concurrentie strijd moeten wij niet zonder meer als een zuivere strijd beschouwen, maar er moet ook samenwerking bestaan om de overweldigende macht van den uitheemschen handel te kunnen weren. En waar wij hier als bevolkingsgroep 't grootste getal vormen, dus als afnemers, van de handel ook een niet te onderschatten deel uitmaken zoo zal de Indonesische handel zeker de toekomst niet donker inzien, wanner iedere Indonesier zich, als plicht oplegt, Indonesische zaken te steunen; de macht der massa zal hierin per slot van rekening van het grootste gewicht zijn. Maar aan den anderen kant hebben onze menschen zich ook te waken om niet"z.g. Indonesische" zaken, die gefinancieerd zijn door uitheemsche kapitaal, te steunen.*"

does it truly serve? While outwardly aligned with local communities, could its reliance on foreign investment lead to decisions that ultimately benefit external forces?

Figure 41. Advertisement by T. Tjhiang Siong & Co., Surabaya.[2]

This dilemma is further heightened in the context of Indonesian-Chinese businesses. Historically fraught with tension, the relationship between native Indonesians, especially Muslims, and the Indonesian-Chinese community adds another dimension to calls for economic self-determination.[3] When businesses carry the "Indonesian-Chinese" name, they must navigate ethnic divisions while establishing their authenticity and relevance. This struggle is evident in a 1923 advertisement from Tjhiang Siong & Co. (See Figure 41 above). While promoting European-made products, the company consciously uses the local language and references, revealing a complex balancing act. Here is a partial translation to highlight this:

> "Trading in Brands European-made items of brass that are neat and well-suited for offices, homes, and hotels… We also offer beautifully renowned name cards…Packets of envelopes, covers, and more..."[4]

This strategy reveals their desire to embrace global trends for market appeal yet strive to emphasise their rootedness in Indonesia. This duality highlights the identity crisis such businesses faced, as economic success risked fuelling suspicion about their true place in a society divided along colonial and ethnic lines. Do boycotts address the core issue, or is there a deeper resistance against these businesses' presence and influence within the colonial landscape?

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[2] *Sin Po* Mar, 17, 1923, vi.
[3] Azyumardi Azra, "The Indies Chinese and the Sarekat Islam: An Account of the Anti-Chinese Riots in Colonial Indonesia", *Studia Islamika*, 1(1), 1994: 25–53; See also Salmon, "The Chinese Community of Surabaya."
[4] *Sin Po* Mar, 17, 1923, vi.

The term "so-called" reflects this profound scepticism, challenging the authenticity of businesses claiming the "Indonesian" label while relying on foreign capital. It was not just about the money – there was a fear that these businesses, however much they contribute economically, might never fully embody the Indonesian spirit. The underlying concern is economic competition and the potential erosion of indigenous culture and values. As foreign money flows in, so does the potential for foreign ways of doing business, decision-making, and social interactions to take precedence, diluting the local essence that Indonesian consumers might seek to protect.

This seemingly simple phrase is a powerful reflection of the complex economic, cultural, and political anxieties shaping the Indonesian experience in the colonial era. The very act of questioning what makes a business "Indonesian" goes beyond purely economic concerns. It speaks to the struggle for self-definition, to worries about the boundaries of identity, and to the broader impact of globalisation within a society grappling with colonial rule. This tension played out in publications like *Soeara Indonesia Moeda Soerabaia*, which emerged as a crucial voice during the 1930s. As a platform for progressive and nationalist views, the newspaper provided a space to critique colonial influence and grapple with the implications of rapid modernisation. Within this context, the call to action by the author, T. T., urging consumer activism, was more than just an economic strategy. It was a plea for Indonesians to see their everyday choices as tools to shape the cultural character of their nation in the face of external pressures. The author presents the seemingly mundane act of buying local products as a revolutionary proposition. This reflects the escalating tide of nationalism and desire for self-determination within colonial Indonesia. Their words are not just a call to arms but an invitation to a shift in consciousness, especially during a profound socio-economic transformation for indigenous and immigrant communities.[5]

While overt forms of resistance like boycotts, strikes, and political movements are essential parts of the Indonesian independence struggle, they offer only a partial picture.[6] Historians often focus on these dramatic events, potentially overshadowing how resistance manifested subtly in daily life.[7] Seemingly ordinary actions, from consumer choices to subtle contestations within the workplace, reflected a broader shift in mentality. Though less structured than organised political protest, these everyday practices were still powerful indicators of dissatisfaction with the colonial status quo and a growing desire for change.

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[5] Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion,* 35–36.

[6] Ingleson, *Road to Exile*; For Malaya, See Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, *Radicals: Resistance and Protest in Colonial Malaya* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2015); See also, Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, "Against Multiple Hegemonies: Radical Malay Women in Colonial Malaya," *Journal of Social History* 47, no. 1 (2013): 153–175; See also Timothy Norman Harper, *Underground Asia: Global Revolutionaries and the Overthrow of Europe's Empires in the East* (London: Allen Lane, 2020).

[7] Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion*; Nagazumi, *The Dawn of Indonesian Nationalism*; Ruth McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1965); Ingleson, *Road to Exile*; Ingleson, *Workers, Unions and Politics*.

In this context, T.T.'s call for consumer activism has an even deeper significance. Rather than simply encouraging people to buy Indonesian products, his appeal challenges Indonesians to see themselves as more than passive market participants. By framing consumer choices as resistance against foreign economic influence, T.T. positions the seemingly mundane act of buying locally as a subtle yet powerful tool to challenge the colonial power structure on its own terms. His discourse urges people to become active agents of economic change, potentially shifting the traditional understanding of resistance beyond boycotts or strikes. This focus on consumer activism as a nuanced form of resistance reflects the broader forces shaping Indonesian society during this period. This chapter will delve into the complex tangle of nationalist movements, religious institutions, anxieties about cultural erosion, and fears of forced modernisation fuelling a multifaceted rejection of Western influence. We must go beyond simply analysing boycotts of foreign goods. Examining how this resistance manifested in attempts to revive traditional customs and values as a bulwark against the flood of Westernised market forces is essential. Did consumer resistance take similar forms across Southeast Asia, or were responses shaped by local history, demographics, and colonial policies? By examining consumer resistance as a means of socio-cultural critique and a catalyst for alternative visions of modernity, we can better understand its political implications and how it reshaped consumer culture within the broader process of modernisation in the region.

This chapter's first section will explore how the "awakening" in colonial Southeast Asia had roots far deeper than mere economic concerns. While nationalist movements are often highlighted, we must also consider the role of religious institutions and other forms of collective action in amplifying consumer resistance and giving it broader political meaning. The focus here is shifting away from seeing people only reacting to outside forces. Instead, we will examine how social and political movements actively shaped this wave of consciousness, using consumer choices, alongside other tactics, as a form of agency and critique. Additionally, this section will analyse how consumer resistance fuelled efforts to imagine alternative paths towards modernity, which sought to reconcile seemingly opposing forces: tradition and progress, collective identity and individual expression.

The second section will examine the specific forms of this resistance across Southeast Asia. We will move beyond simply labelling the actions as "rejection" of the West. Instead, the focus will be on the spectrum of responses, from reviving traditional customs as a bulwark against cultural erosion to selective embrace of aspects of modernity. A crucial question emerges: What motivated these varied tactics? Did fears of social change primarily drive them, or did they represent an active effort to shape modernity on local terms, navigating concerns about cultural identity within a rapidly changing world?

The chapter's final section turns to the lasting consequences of these acts of consumer resistance. Moving beyond the immediate moment, we will examine how these choices, fuelled by the anxieties and agency of the colonial era, had long-term implications for how modernity took shape in Southeast Asia. Did these movements succeed in slowing the tide of globalisation, or did they force it to take new forms? How did consumer culture evolve, with businesses adapting to local values and concerns? This exploration reveals that modernity in Southeast Asia was not simply imposed from above but a product of ongoing negotiation between global forces and local resistance, shaped by a complex history of consumer activism.

This chapter focuses on the agency of Southeast Asians in navigating the complex forces of colonialism and globalisation. Rather than solely analysing boycotts or anti-colonial movements, we will explore how Surabaya, Singapore, and Penang people used their consumer choices to navigate complex forces. This analysis will move beyond a binary of "resistance" versus "acceptance". Instead, we will see how Southeast Asians actively shaped the evolution of consumer culture in their region, influenced by political movements, concerns about cultural identity, and the desire to create a modernity that resonated with their own values and aspirations. This historical perspective offers crucial insights, highlighting the power of everyday choices and shedding light on the ongoing complexities of consumer identities amidst globalisation, issues as relevant today as they were during the colonial era.

This chapter argues that acts of consumer resistance within colonial Southeast Asia went far beyond isolated displays of defiance. We will uncover how seemingly mundane choices about what to buy, wear, or read were, in fact, powerful expressions of social and political change. By examining the diverse motivations and forms of consumer resistance across Surabaya, Singapore, and Penang, we will discover a vibrant network of connection where everyday actions were woven into the fabric of nationalist movements, religious debates, and the very struggle to define what "modernity" should mean in these contexts. This process, fuelled by anxiety and agency, was an ongoing negotiation between global trends and local values, ultimately leading to pluralistic, hybrid ideas of modernity uniquely Southeast Asian. Therefore, this chapter is not simply a descriptive history but rather a critical intervention, calling for rethinking traditional historical narratives that often overlook the transformative power of consumer activism in shaping societies and recalibrating power balances, a lesson with enduring relevance.

In the concluding segment of this chapter, I argue that consumer resistance and critique function as more than isolated acts of defiance; they coalesce into potent forms of socio-political expression that critically influence the development of modernity in Southeast Asia. By dissecting the various modes and motivations of consumer resistance in Surabaya, Singapore, and Penang, this chapter aims to reveal how these actions are inextricably linked

with the broader nationalist, religious, and collective movements. These movements actively reshape local identities while pushing back against dominant Western narratives of consumer culture. In doing so, they engage in a dynamic negotiation between global forces and localised contexts, thereby shaping an alternative, more pluralistic understanding of modernity tailored to the unique socio-cultural landscapes of Southeast Asia. This chapter, therefore, provides an analysis and a substantive critique of the standard paradigms, emphasising the role of consumer resistance as a transformative force that continually recalibrates the balance between tradition and modernity, collective values, and individual interests.

The Awakening: Everyday Resistance and Colonial Critique

In September 1930, a powerful voice emerged from *Soeara Indonesia Moeda Soerabaia*, a prominent Surabaya newspaper.[8] An article titled "Het Ontwakend Oosten" or "The Awakening East" captured the profound transformation sweeping Southeast Asia and beyond. This is more than just a journalistic observation; it is a manifesto proclaiming those nations from "China to Egypt" were rejecting their supposed position of inferiority and demanding self-determination.[9] The author's evocative words illustrate this shift:

> "From China to Egypt, people have awakened, rubbed their eyes, looked around, and, to their horror, they perceive the abuses that occur in their immediate vicinity, abuses that were previously considered normal, but now are combated as a malignant cancer, for the salvation of the Fatherland."[10]

This stirring passage does not merely describe events; it exposes the profound link between the awakening of consciousness and the emergence of anti-colonial resistance. The article portrays a shift from a mentality of resigned acceptance of Western dominance to a growing awareness of its injustices. The language itself is infused with urgency, using the word "horror" to describe what was once seen as normal. This metaphorical awakening is akin to pulling back a veil, revealing the exploitation that had been hidden in plain sight. The act of "awakening" itself is a form of resistance - a realisation that the status quo is neither normal nor inevitable. More importantly, this article suggests that the struggle against colonialism was as much about changing mindsets as it was about political change. The fight for self-respect and autonomy was waged on both external and internal battlegrounds, transforming how people understood their place in the world.

This article reflects a profound shift in the global order, going beyond simply documenting anti-colonial sentiment. It boldly suggests that the "Awakening East" poses a

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[8] "Het Ontwakend Oosten", *Soeara Indonesia Moeda Soerabaia*, 3(1) Sep, 1930, 1–3.
[9] *Ibid*., 1.
[10] *Ibid*., "*Overal, vanaf China tot Egypte is men ontwaakt, heeft zich de oogen uitgewreven, kijkt, rond en tot schrik ontwaardt men de wantoestanden die zich in de onmiddellijke omgeving voordoen, wantoestanden die men vroeger als iets gewoons was gaan beschouwen, doch nu als een kwaadaardig kanker, is gaan bestrijden, ter redding van 't Vaderland.*"

fundamental challenge to Western hegemony. The author cleverly frames this not just as a struggle for freedom but as a threat to the West's own sense of security and economic dominance. Even the use of the word "danger" underscores how this shift was perceived as a potential disruption, not merely a plea for equality. Significantly, the article not only addresses the political awakening of the East but also suggests that the broader global trends of economic instability in the West were, in part, a direct result of their own colonial exploitation. The internal economic troubles of Western powers—fragile due to their dependence on colonial resources—were now being exacerbated by the very forces they sought to dominate. This paradox is clearly highlighted in the article's final statement:

> "The whole East has awakened, the Asian danger threatens, "the East shows its teeth," the West says, and indeed, one can call this revival of the Eastern movement nothing better than 'the Asian danger, because the West, as time progresses, can no longer feel as safe in these countries."[11]

The author skilfully subverts the colonial narrative. Rather than the East being a source of danger, the article suggests that Western power itself rests on unstable ground. This exposes a key paradox: colonial exploitation may have sown the seeds of its own demise, fostering the very resistance that would ultimately challenge Western hegemony. This perspective forces us to reconsider how we understand anti-colonial movements; they were not simply about gaining independence but were part of a broader struggle to reshape the global power balance.

This resistance, while unfolding across various parts of Asia, found one of its most potent expressions in the 1911 Chinese Revolution, which symbolised a new kind of awakening—one that not only challenged Western dominance but also reshaped the political consciousness across the Chinese diaspora. The revolution, led by Sun Yat-sen, not only marked the collapse of the Qing Dynasty but also triggered waves of political consciousness and anti-colonial sentiment among Chinese communities throughout Southeast Asia.[12] Sun Yat-sen's influence in the Nanyang, particularly in cities like Singapore and Penang, was not limited to his direct presence; his revolutionary network extended beyond his physical reach, mobilising local Chinese merchants, intellectuals, and activists to support the cause.[13] This

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[11] "Het Ontwakend Oosten", *Soeara Indonesia Moeda Soerabaia*, 3(1) Sep, 1930, 2; "*Het geheele Oosten is ontwaakt, 't Aziatisch gevaar dreigt, 't Oosten laat zijn tanden zien, zegt men in 't Westen, en welja, men kan deze opleving van de Oostersche beweging niet beter noemen dan 't Aziatisch gevaar, omdat 't Westen naarmate de tijd voortschrijdt, zich niet meer zoo veilig in deze landen kan tronen men begint overal nattigheid te voelen, hoewel men deze vrees meestal tracht te bedekken door geringschatting der Oostersche opleving.*"

[12] Stephen Leong, "The Chinese in Malaya and China's Politics 1895–1911," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 50, no. 2 (232) (1977): 10–12.

[13] Wu Xiao An, "Historical Linkage and Political Connection: Commemoration and Representation of Sun Yat-sen and the 1911 Revolution in China and Southeast Asia, 1946–2010," in *Sun Yat-sen, Nanyang and the 1911 Revolution*, ed. Lee Lai To and Lee Hock Guan (Singapore: ISEAS - Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011), 245–269.

mobilisation was part of a wider transnational wave of resistance sweeping the region, reflecting the larger trend of Asian nationalism challenging Western hegemony.

Just as the article in *Soeara Indonesia Moeda Soerabaia* highlighted the awakening of the East, Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary networks demonstrated how this awakening was being organised into concrete political movements. Penang, in particular, became a crucial hub for revolutionary activity, with many local Chinese merchants and intellectuals throwing their support behind Sun Yat-sen's efforts to modernise China and liberate it from foreign domination.[14] Sun's emphasis on both Chinese nationalism and broader Asianism facilitated a network of solidarity that united Southeast Asian Chinese with non-Chinese nationalists, such as Phan Boi Chau in Vietnam and Sukarno in Indonesia, in their collective anti-colonial struggles.[15] This growing sense of unity was evident as the Chinese diaspora, often divided by dialect groups and regional identities, began to rally around a shared sense of national destiny. In places like Penang and Singapore, this mobilisation was reflected in the civic engagement dedicated to the revolutionary cause.[16] The newfound Chinese nationalism, while rooted in the Chinese revolutionary struggle, reverberated beyond the diaspora and contributed to broader discussions on modernity and resistance to colonialism throughout Southeast Asia. Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary networks not only facilitated these local activities but also turned them into part of a wider transnational movement. As his Pan-Asian vision spread, the revolution became a reality that overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia actively engaged with, bringing them to the forefront of political movements challenging colonial rule.

The Chinese Revolution was not merely a distant event; it had tangible implications for the Chinese communities in places like Singapore and Penang.[17] These overseas Chinese, who had often been viewed with suspicion by both the colonial powers and indigenous populations, suddenly found themselves at the forefront of political movements that sought to challenge the existing order. The revolution fuelled the growth of Chinese vernacular schools, reading clubs, and newspapers that disseminated revolutionary ideas, such as *Sin Chew* in Malaya and *Soeara Poeblik* in Indonesia.[18] Sun's ability to build a transnational revolutionary network across Nanyang Chinese communities ensured the rapid dissemination of nationalist ideas, as seen in the establishment of around 130 branches and reading clubs across

[14] Leong, "The Chinese in Malaya", 12–15; For a detailed discussion of Sun Yat-sen's activities in Penang, particularly his efforts to mobilise support for the Chinese Revolution, see Khoo Salma Nasution, *Sun Yat Sen in Penang* (Penang: Areca Books, 2010).
[15] Xiao An, "Historical Linkage and Political Connection", 246.
[16] Kwee Hui Kian, "Chinese Economic Predominance in Southeast Asia: A Long-Term Perspective," in *Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian History*, ed. Norman G. Owen (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 296–297.
[17] For Chinese nationalism in Singapore, see Ching Fatt Yong, "An Historical Turning Point: The 1911 Revolution and Its Impact on Singapore's Chinese Society," in *Sun Yat-sen, Nanyang and the 1911 Revolution*, ed. Lee Lai To and Lee Hock Guan (Singapore: ISEAS - Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011), 148–170.
[18] Ming Guang Han, "Chinese Reading Rooms, Print Culture, and Overseas Chinese Nationalism in Colonial Singapore and Malaya," *Library & Information History* 35, no. 4 (2019): 218–219.

Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, Singapore, and British Malaya.[19] It also fostered a pan-Chinese identity that transcended local loyalties to dialect groups or regional provinces in China, urging overseas Chinese to see themselves as part of a larger national project. While many had previously seen their futures tied to their ancestral villages in Fujian or Guangdong, the revolution encouraged a more cohesive identification with the Chinese nation-state, positioning China as a modernising force on par with Japan and the West.

However, this Chinese nationalism also introduced new complexities into Southeast Asia's political landscape. As some scholars have noted, the overseas Chinese community's loyalty to China rather than their places of residence posed challenges for regional politics, especially as emerging nationalist movements sought to define who "belonged" to these new nations.[20] The Chinese community's growing sense of national pride, spurred by the revolution, sometimes clashed with the nationalist aspirations of indigenous populations, leading to tensions. This was particularly evident in British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies, where Chinese economic dominance and cultural distinctiveness were met with both admiration and resentment by other ethnic groups. In the Malay Peninsula, for instance, Malay journalists began advocating for pan-Malay unity in response to what they perceived as the disproportionate influence of Chinese merchants and intellectuals.

The Chinese Revolution also reflected the larger forces of modernity and resistance to colonialism that were sweeping across Asia during this period. It paralleled Japan's rise as a modern power following its victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, and it inspired new forms of activism that were both local and transnational in scope. Overseas Chinese communities played an active role in supporting the revolutionary cause, particularly through fundraising and propagating nationalist ideas. In Penang, for example, prominent Chinese merchants, inspired by Sun Yat-sen's vision, raised significant funds to support revolutionary uprisings in China, illustrating how interconnected Southeast Asia's Chinese communities were with political developments on the mainland.[21] At the same time, the revolution sparked debates about the future of China and its overseas populations, with reformists advocating for constitutional monarchy and gradual change, while revolutionaries pushed for a more radical transformation of Chinese society.

These revolutionary activities also intersected with the broader global moment of the interwar period, during which Chinese migrant communists in Malaya played a crucial role in anti-colonial movements across Southeast Asia. This era saw the emergence of Chinese communist networks that built upon pre-existing diasporic ties and became key players in the

[19] Xiao An, "Historical Linkage and Political Connection", 247.
[20] Kwee, "Chinese Economic Predominance in Southeast Asia", 296–297; See also Huang Jianli, "Umbilical Ties: The Framing of Overseas Chinese as the Mother of Revolution," in *Sun Yat-sen, Nanyang and the 1911 Revolution*, ed. Lee Lai To and Lee Hock Guan (Singapore: ISEAS - Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011), 75–97.
[21] Leong, "The Chinese in Malaya", 15–17.

regional struggle against colonialism.[22] While these networks initially formed to advance the Chinese revolution, they soon evolved into mechanisms for advancing the rights of overseas Chinese and, more broadly, for mediating between the Chinese and local populations. Notably, many Chinese intellectuals in Malaya—journalists, schoolteachers, and communists—took on the role of civilising and politicising the local Chinese, aiming to strengthen their ties with China and resist British imperialism simultaneously.[23]

For many overseas Chinese, the revolution was not just about changing the political regime in China but about asserting their identity and rights within the colonial frameworks of Southeast Asia. This became especially apparent during the Surabaya Event of 1912, in which the suppression of Chinese celebrations of the newly established Republic of China by Dutch authorities led to diplomatic action from Sun Yat-sen's newly formed government, marking an early diplomatic victory for the Republic and further consolidating his legacy among the overseas Chinese.[24] As Chinese political leaders like Kang Yu-wei and Sun Yat-sen visited Malaya and Singapore, they galvanised the Chinese community, highlighting the need for political reform and national solidarity. Sun Yat-sen's speeches, delivered in places like Penang and Kuala Lumpur, emphasised the importance of collective action and the moral duty of the overseas Chinese to contribute to China's transformation.[25] This appeal resonated with many Chinese merchants and intellectuals in the region, leading to the establishment of branches of the *Tongmenghui* (Chinese Revolutionary Alliance) in cities across Malaya. These branches served as hubs for revolutionary activity, facilitating the spread of anti-Manchu and nationalist sentiments through social clubs, reading rooms, and newspapers.[26]

The Chinese Revolution's impact extended beyond the Chinese diaspora, influencing wider discussions on modernity and national identity in Southeast Asia. The revolution demonstrated that an Asian nation could overthrow a centuries-old imperial system and modernise without relying on Western colonial powers. This achievement resonated with other Asian intellectuals and political activists who saw parallels between China's struggle and their own efforts to resist colonialism. The revolution also raised important questions about the role of ethnicity in the emerging nation-states of Southeast Asia. While the overseas Chinese were seen as crucial contributors to modernisation, their growing nationalism complicated their relationships with indigenous populations and the colonial authorities, creating a dynamic where they were both admired and feared.

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[22] Anna Belogurova, *The Nanyang Revolution: The Comintern and Chinese Networks in Southeast Asia, 1890–1957* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 3–7.
[23] *Ibid*.
[24] Xiao An, "Historical Linkage and Political Connection", 249.
[25] Leong, "The Chinese in Malaya", 15–18.
[26] Han, "Chinese Reading Rooms", 218–219.

This transnational exchange of ideas and resources was further intensified by the growth of Chinese schools in Malaya and Singapore.[27] These schools, often supported by local merchants, played a pivotal role in shaping the political consciousness of the younger generation, exposing them to nationalist ideas and fostering a sense of solidarity with China. As the number of Chinese-born children increased in Southeast Asia, these institutions became critical spaces for the dissemination of revolutionary ideals. By the 1920s, many Chinese schools were using textbooks published in China, which reinforced a pan-Chinese identity and encouraged students to see themselves as part of a global Chinese diaspora.[28] This education system not only nurtured loyalty to China but also contributed to a broader pan-Asian consciousness that saw China's revolution as part of a wider movement for Asian resurgence. The 1911 Chinese Revolution, therefore, played a crucial role in shaping the political landscape of Southeast Asia, particularly among the Chinese diaspora. It became both a symbol of Asian modernity and a catalyst for the growing political consciousness of overseas Chinese communities, who in turn influenced broader nationalist movements across the region, contributing to ongoing debates about identity, modernity, and resistance to colonialism.

Yet, while the influence of these movements and institutions shaped much of Southeast Asia's anti-colonial discourse, the powerful vision offered by *Soeara Indonesia Moeda Soerabaia* prompts us to ask critical questions: Whose voices fuelled this notion of an empowered East? Given the newspaper's urban readership, it is possible this perspective primarily reflects the concerns of an educated, middle-class audience. Did rural peasants share this oppositional stance, or were their priorities different? Importantly, did the framing of an "East" versus "West" struggle overlook diversity within the region itself? Were there those in Southeast Asia who favoured cooperation with the West, or who envisioned a post-colonial future rooted in localised traditions rather than broad pan-Asian unity? Furthermore, we must consider whether the end of formal colonialism gave rise to new forms of economic and political dependency. While the "Asian danger" may have undermined old empires, did nations in the region truly achieve self-determination, or did they merely trade one set of foreign masters for another?

The author links the East's defiance to the economic woes of the West, stating: "The economic condition of Europe is so shocked by the war that people sit in despair, hands in their hair, and are bursting with thought about how to restore the situation."[29] This bold claim suggests that the internal struggles within Western powers were, in part, a consequence of

[27] Han, "Chinese Reading Rooms", 218–219.
[28] *Ibid*.
[29] "Het Ontwakend Oosten", *Soeara Indonesia Moeda Soerabaia*, 3(1) Sep, 1930, 2; "*De economische toestand van Europa is door de oorlog dermate geschokt dat men van wanhoop met de handen in 't haar zit, en tot berstens toe zit te peinzen over 't vraagstuk hoe de toestand te herstel*len."

their own actions abroad, fuelling the very forces that challenged their dominance. However, this analysis risks oversimplifying a complex picture. A glaring omission here is the role of Japan. As a rising Asian power during this period, Japan offers a crucial counterpoint to the article's focus on European decline. Having defeated Russia in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), Japan inspired movements across Asia seeking independence and offered a compelling example of how modernisation could occur without total Westernisation.[30] Its influence complicates the idea of a monolithic "Awakening East" unified solely by anti-Western sentiment. Perhaps some looked to Japan as a model, while others saw its expansionist tendencies as a new threat, further complicating visions of regional solidarity.

To fully grasp the impact of Japan's rise on this "awakening" in Southeast Asia, we must step back and examine the profound disruption of traditional power structures brought about by Western colonialism. Prior to the nineteenth century, much of the region operated within a Sino-centric tributary system.[31] The arrival of European empires shattered this order, forcibly integrating these nations into a global economy where they held little power.[32] It is within this context that Japan's emergence takes on a double-edged significance. On the one hand, it represented the possibility of an Asian nation achieving modernisation and military might on par with the West. On the other hand, Japan's own expansionist ambitions made it a new form of potential coloniser, not a liberator. This historical context is crucial for understanding how Southeast Asian responses to the "awakening" were likely shaped by conflicting anxieties and aspirations.

Japan's rise held the dual promise of proving Asian nations could modernise without becoming Western and the very real threat of becoming subject to a new form of imperialism. This ambiguous position made popular perceptions of Japan complex. For many Indonesians, local Japanese residents – shopkeepers like Togashi Takeomi in Cianjur, traders, and prostitutes – were likely seen as simply another part of the diverse colonial landscape.[33] Their economic power might provoke resentment, but the connection to a larger imperial ambition was likely obscured. However, with the outbreak of the Second World War and the Japanese invasion, this perception changed dramatically. Ordinary Indonesians witnessed those same

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[30] Yongle Zhang, "The Clash of Empires, The Rise of Nationalism, and The Vicissitude of Pan-Asianism in East Asia and Southeast Asia", in *The Routledge Handbook of Nationalism in East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Lu Zhouxiang (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2023), 60–73.

[31] Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680: Volume One: The Lands below the Winds* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1988); Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450–1680 Volume Two*; Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Vol. 1, Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Meilink-Roelofsz, *Asian Trade and European Influence*; Philip A. Kuhn, Chinese among Others: Emigration in Modern Times (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008); Oliver William Wolters, *Early Indonesian Commerce: A Study of the Origins of Srivijaya* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970).

[32] Charles Donald Cowan, *Nineteenth-Century Malaya: The Origins of British Political Control* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961); C. Northcote Parkinson, *British Intervention in Malaya 1867–1877* (Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1960); Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia*.

[33] Saya Shiraishi and Takashi Shiraishi, "The Japanese in Colonial Southeast Asia: An Overview", in *The Japanese in Colonial Southeast Asia*, ed. Saya Shiraishi and Takashi Shiraishi (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 6.

Japanese individuals suddenly transform into agents of the military. The connection between seemingly benign economic activity and state-sanctioned violence was made brutally clear. This shift is poignantly captured in Togashi's recollection as his former customers greet his return as an interpreter for the Japanese army with a shocked "Ow [*Aduh*], it's Togashi!"[34] That single expression reveals a painful "awakening" within the awakening – the realisation that the fight against colonialism might not lead to true liberation but merely a changing of foreign masters.

This disillusionment has profound implications for our understanding of the Eastern "awakening". Firstly, it forces us to move beyond simplistic narratives of East versus West. Japan's rise, parallel to China's internal struggles and eventual resurgence, reveals a far more complex geopolitical landscape. This landscape was shaped by resistance to Western dominance, but it also saw the rise of new empires closer to home. Japan's nationalism, while ostensibly anti-colonial, ultimately served its own desire for regional dominance. The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, framed as a vision of unity, became a thinly veiled justification for Japanese conquest.[35] Furthermore, Japan's ambitions directly challenge the ideals of Pan-Asianism. While the movement sought solidarity against Western powers, Japan's actions exposed the potential for "Asian" solidarity to mask a new form of imperialism. The Co-Prosperity Sphere, ostensibly promoting cooperation between Asian nations, ultimately envisioned a Japanese-dominated hierarchy.[36] This directly contradicted the vision of horizontal solidarity that many anti-colonial thinkers in Southeast Asia likely desired, exposing the potential for even movements rooted in liberation to replicate old patterns of domination.

However, it is crucial to remember that nations in Southeast Asia were not simply pawns in this geopolitical power struggle. The rise of Japanese imperialism gave new impetus to alternative visions of resistance and liberation. The adoption of anti-capitalist and communist ideologies by many independence movements reflects this dynamism. These movements challenged not just Western colonialism but also the potential for new forms of oppression, whether from Japan or their own emerging elites. The enduring legacy of these leftist, internationalist movements suggests that out of this complex and often contradictory struggle, a desire for genuine cooperation, rooted in shared ideals of equality, potentially emerged. Interestingly, even within Japanese society, there was a similar tension between expansionist nationalism and leftist currents promoting internationalism.[37]

This crucial insight underscores that movements for liberation were far from unified. While many in Southeast Asia adopted anti-capitalist and communist ideologies to resist both

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[34] Saya Shiraishi and Takashi Shiraishi, "The Japanese in Colonial Southeast Asia, 6

[35] Yongzhe Lang, "*The Clash of Empires*", 66.

[36] Jeremy A. Yellen, *The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere: When Total Empire Met Total War* (Cornell University Press, 2019).

[37] Oleg Benesch, *Inventing the Way of the Samurai: Nationalism, Internationalism, and Bushidō in Modern Japan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 112.

Western colonialism and Japanese expansion, divisions within Japanese society offer a counterpoint. The existence of leftist, internationalist Japanese movements hints at alternative paths not taken, reminding us of the potential for solidarity that transcended nationalist ambitions. This complexity forces us to reevaluate Japan's role within the so-called "Eastern awakening". Rather than a simple foil to the West, Japan emerges as a multifaceted actor. Its initial inspiration for some in Southeast Asia ultimately gave way to destabilisation, as Japan's expansionist actions ignited new forms of resistance. Within this context, Pan-Asianism itself is revealed as a contested ideal. It was not a guaranteed outcome of "awakening", but an aspiration that struggled against the harsh realities of ambition and power.

This realisation forces us to broaden our focus beyond purely East versus West dynamics. Just as Pan-Asianism faced internal contradictions, Pan-Islamism emerged as another potential axis of solidarity. The decline of the Ottoman Empire, traditionally a major Muslim power, coincided with growing anti-colonial sentiment and a longing for a restored caliphate.[38] The powerful symbolism of the Ottoman Empire, as the historic centre of the Islamic world, seems inherently at odds with the often secular or nationalist visions embodied in Pan-Asianism. Furthermore, leaders like Japan and the Ottoman Empire had vastly different geopolitical goals, raising serious questions about the ability to unite such a diverse set of cultures and peoples under a single banner. These unresolved tensions are crucial to understanding the multi-faceted and frequently contradictory nature of resistance movements within the global context of this period.

While Pan-Asianism and Pan-Islamism critiqued Western dominance, it is important to understand that these movements were not monolithic. A broader intellectual shift was underway, with thinkers challenging the idea of a single, European-defined "universal civilisation". Instead, they appropriated and redefined concepts like progress and modernity to serve their own anti-colonial goals.[39] This strategy reveals a fundamental paradox: even as the West's claims to moral superiority were undermined by its imperialism and racism, many Asian elites, like Indonesian revolutionary Tan Malaka, were themselves products of Western education systems.[40] His experiences in the Netherlands shaped his later anti-colonial activism. This entanglement of resistance with European thought underscores the complex and often contradictory nature of these intellectual movements. Furthermore, it is vital to recognise that this intellectual landscape was not about a single, unified movement, but rather a constellation of individuals and ideas.[41] Figures like Abani Mukherjee and M.N. Roy, despite sharing common goals, might have rarely interacted directly. Similarly, even individuals like

[38] Cemil Aydın, "Beyond Civilization: Pan-Islamism, Pan-Asianism and the Revolt against the West", *Journal of Modern European History* 4, no. 2 (2006), 204–223.
[39] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1962), 123.
[40] Oliver Crawford, "*The Political Thought of Tan Malaka*," (PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2019).
[41] Timothy Norman Harper, "Singapore, 1915, and the Birth of the Asian Underground", in *Sites of Asian Interaction: Ideas, Networks and Mobility*, ed. Tim Harper and Sunil Amrith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 32–33.

Abdul Selam in Java, less prominent on the global stage, were part of a broader "age in motion" where ideas of overturning old hierarchies circulated within local communities.[42] This reminds us that while broad concepts like Pan-Asianism are essential, understanding the lived realities of resistance requires a focus on specific neighbourhoods, chance encounters, and the ways in which individuals experienced and adapted global intellectual currents to their local contexts.

This nuanced understanding is crucial when examining "The Awakening East". Rather than a simple struggle between East and West, we see a complex interplay where anti-colonial thought navigated multiple power centres. Pan-Islamism and Pan-Asianism presented visions of modernity that were both a response to the West and distinct from it. Emerging anti-Western movements, therefore, faced not merely Europe's domination but also the challenge of reconciling competing ideas of progress, tradition, and identity rooted closer to home. This highlights a key point: even movements born of similar experiences could develop in radically different directions, depending on local conditions and the specific intellectual currents individuals encountered.

The economic realm became a key battleground for these competing visions. Consumption and boycotts were not merely economic actions but took on a symbolic role as political statements manifesting these distinct visions of modernity. Boycotts, especially, transcended mere economic manoeuvres to support local production; they became symbolic actions loaded with political intent. This corresponds to what Lisa A. Neilson describes as "political consumerism", which goes beyond economic calculations to represent a form of social capital and altruistic action.[43] The boycotting of Western goods and the parallel adoption of Japanese or other non-Western goods were not just changes in consumer preference but radical reconfigurations of economic landscapes that mirrored and reinforced larger geopolitical shifts like Pan-Islamic or Pan-Asian ideals.

This active reconfiguration of economic landscapes finds direct parallels in the story of Southeast Asia during the 1920s and 1930s. Publications like "The Awakening East" exemplified the critique of Western influence, often through calls for boycotting Western goods and supporting local production. This economic resistance was a key element in the broader struggle for autonomy, the assertion of national identity, and the pushback against imposed norms. It reflected societal responses to the introduction of modernity. This textual evidence points to the region's early attempts to reconcile the tensions between tradition and progress and collective and individual interests. Ultimately, it provides a contextual backdrop for

[42] Harper, "Singapore", 32–33.
[43] Lisa A. Neilson, 'Boycott or Buycott? Understanding Political Consumerism', *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 9, no. 3 (2010): 214–227.

exploring the ways in which consumer resistance, including boycotts, contributed to the evolution of modernity and consumer culture in Southeast Asia.

Examining the case of Java, particularly Surabaya, reveals a complex dynamic between power and identity construction. Amidst evolving colonial dynamics, policy changes, technological advancements, and global shifts, the sweeping sentiment of self-awareness across Southeast Asia significantly moulded individual behaviours, especially in consumption.[44] The Dutch and the Javanese were caught in mutual influence and response as they redefined their identities in light of the emerging colonial discourse. A pivotal concern was striking a balance between embracing aspects of Western modernity while simultaneously preserving their perceived "innate essence". As Indonesians sought to refine their image by shedding perceived negative traits and cultivating empowering ones, they found themselves unexpectedly aligned with the colonial objective of creating "modern" identities. However, it is crucial to note that their perspectives and aspirations differed significantly from the colonisers.

Boycotts and Consumer Resistance

In the midst of growing anti-colonial sentiment, economic resistance took many forms. An intriguing example emerges from the newspaper *De Indische Courant*. The article, titled "De Boycott-Actie, Klacht van den Engelschen Consul-Generaal" (The Boycott Action: Complaint from the British Consul-General), reveals a specific instance of economic tension within the colonial context.[45] It reports a complaint by the British Consul-General regarding a boycott targeting British goods. While the article mentions rumours of a sugar boycott by some Chinese merchants, it emphasises no evidence of a widespread boycott in Surabaya.[46] This suggests the possibility of a localised movement or even internal disagreement within the Chinese business community.

Japanese products were also targeted, as evidenced by subsequent reports from *De Locomotief*. On June 15th, 1928, the article "Boycott van Japansche goederen" ("Boycott of Japanese Goods") details the boycott of Japanese groceries and textiles by Chinese middlemen, which directly impacted existing contracts.[47] Then, on September 8th, 1928, "De boycott-Terreur te Soerabaia" ("The Boycott Terror in Surabaya") describes a wave of arrests, including Tjong Poo Liong under suspicion of murder, along with extensive house searches – actions explicitly connected to suppressing the boycott movement.[48] These articles offer a

[44] The nationalist movement has been the subject of several notable works, although the focus on consumers has been limited, for example Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion*; Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*; See also Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons*.
[45] "De Boycott-Actie. Klacht van den Engelschen consul-generaal.", *De Indische courant* Aug 22, 1925, 2.
[46] *Ibid*.
[47] "Boycott van Japansche Goederen", *De Locomotief* Jun 15, 1928, 1.
[48] "De Boycott-terreur te Soerabaia" *De Locomotief* Sep 8, 1928, 1.

valuable glimpse into the complex power dynamics of the era, revealing the tension between economic resistance and the colonial government's determination to crush it.

Importantly, the impact of such economic resistance was not limited to Surabaya. A June 13th, 1928 article from the *Straits Echo Weekly Edition*, titled "Japanese boycott in Singapore," reports significant losses for Japanese steamers due to a parallel boycott movement in Singapore.[49] This interconnectedness highlights how anti-colonial economic actions rippled through Southeast Asia, demonstrating a far-reaching dissatisfaction with colonial rule. However, it is crucial to remember that the sources documenting these boycotts were often generated by the colonial powers. The language used in the phrase "boycott terror" from the colonial newspaper is indicative of the European perception of resistance as a threat to be neutralised. Despite their limitations, these articles offer a glimpse into the evolving tactics of anti-colonial economic resistance in Surabaya. Importantly, they highlight potential division and dissent within communities targeted by boycotts, such as the Surabaya Chinese business sector, while also underscoring the escalating tension between boycott movements and the colonial government's determination to crush them.

To fully grasp the significance of these events, it is essential to contextualize them within the broader landscape of the 1920s and 1930s in Southeast Asia. Anti-colonial sentiment, fuelled by pan-Asianists and pan-Islamic movements, encouraged a revaluation of cultural identities and economic dependence. Boycotts emerged as potent weapons against colonial economies, offering avenues to forge new alliances and strengthen local production. Understanding the intricate landscape of these political awakenings, shifting cultural identities, and the rise of organised resistance movements requires taking a step back and considering the early twentieth century as a pivotal turning point. This period laid the groundwork for various forms of collective action, from nationalist and religious movements to the seeds of economic and social boycotts. While indigenous populations have understandably been the subject of extensive study, the focus here will first be on the Chinese community in the Dutch East Indies. Their role is particularly compelling due to their far-reaching transnational connections and the multifaceted influence they wielded locally and in shaping broader Asian geopolitical and cultural currents. Exploring the Chinese community in the Dutch East Indies also opens the door to intriguing parallels with the Chinese community in colonial Singapore. While operating within different colonial structures, these two communities engaged in similar forms of economic and social resistance. They navigated the tensions between colonial expectations and their community aspirations, drawing on traditional values and modern ideologies.[50] Understanding their strategies and their impact helps us to appreciate the

[49] "The Japanese Boycott", *Straits Echo Weekly Edition* May 23, 1928, 306.
[50] The Siauw Giap, "Religion and Overseas Chinese Assimilation in Southeast Asian Countries", *Revue du Sud-Est Asiatique*, (1965): 67–83.

nuanced and interconnected nature of resistance and social movements, and it provides us with a broader lens to evaluate the transformation of Asian societies in the context of colonialism and emerging modernity.

A key element of this transformation is visible in the shifting economic activities of the Chinese community within the Dutch East Indies during the early twentieth century. Historical events like the collapse of opium farms in the 1880s and the Great Depression in the 1920s significantly influenced these changes. Additionally, Indonesia saw a rapid increase in the Chinese population, with many indentured laborers arriving to work in the Sumatran plantation industries. This period was marked by a widening rift within Chinese society between the *peranakan* (mixed ancestry) and *totok* ("full-blooded") communities.[51] The Dutch-dominated plantation economy also underwent a significant expansion, impacting Chinese businesses in complex ways. While this expansion opened up new trading avenues for some Chinese entrepreneurs, it simultaneously restricted the scope of existing Chinese planters in the sugar and tobacco industries.[52] However, this period also witnessed a surge in small Chinese *warung* owners spread across the archipelago, highlighting the adaptability of Chinese economic strategies in the face of shifting colonial policies. Yet, even as some Chinese merchants found niches within the Dutch-dominated economy, tensions simmered below the surface. The relationship between wealthy Chinese businessmen and colonial officials grew increasingly fraught, driven not only by the collapse of opium kings but also by the Dutch authorities targeting the Chinese as exploiters of native people. This complex and strained dynamic would continue to shape interactions in Indonesia throughout the remainder of colonial rule, the Japanese occupation, the Indonesian revolution, and even the early years of independence.

In the 1920s, the economic landscape became more difficult for Chinese people, especially entrepreneurs. A pivotal factor was the fundamental shift in tax collection methods, which had long been an economic pillar for many Chinese businessmen. Specifically, the Dutch colonial government replaced the "*pachtstelsel*" (revenue farming), where private parties, often ethnic Chinese, collected taxes, with the "*regiestelsel*" system of direct state control. This transition was not limited to Java but profoundly impacted Sumatra and other islands, significantly changing how revenue flowed to the state from 1816 to 1942.[53] The shift disrupted traditional economic networks and avenues of market access for Chinese traders. Coupled with increasingly stringent regulations, this drastically limited their ability to conduct business freely. Consequently, Chinese traders found themselves with fewer goods to trade

[51] Jamie Mackie, "Towkays and Tycoons: The Chinese in Indonesian Economic Life in the 1920s and 1980s," *Indonesia* (1991): 83–96.
[52] Peter Post and May Ling Thio, *The Kwee Family of Ciledug: Family, Status and Modernity in Colonial Java: Visualising the Private Life of the Peranakan Chinese Sugar Elite* (Volendam, The Netherlands: LM Publishers, 2019).
[53] Abdul Wahid, "*From Revenue Farming to State Monopoly: The Political Economy of Taxation in Colonial Indonesia, Java c. 1816-1942*," (PhD dissertation, Utrecht University, 2013).

and were left grappling with unpaid debts from local residents – debts which, under the previous system, could have been settled in kind. This economic disruption is directly linked to the colonial government's earlier decision to overhaul their tax collection methods.

Throughout the nineteenth century, revenue farming, which included taxes on opium and numerous smaller tax farms, reliably contributed over 10% of the government's total revenue each decade. However, official investigations in the early 1890s exposed the system's weaknesses, revealing that it had become increasingly difficult to control and had granted excessive power to ethnic Chinese tax farmers.[54] These Chinese revenue farmers wielded considerable influence under this fiscal system, becoming what anti-opium activist Souterwoude referred to as "*eenmacht in denstaat*" (a power within the state). They operated with virtual autonomy, building up "*een imperium in imperio*" (empire within empire) within the colony.[55] Alarmed by this concentration of power, the colonial government initiated tax reform in the mid-1890s, eliminating the revenue farming model and replacing it with the "*regiestelsel*." This system established a state monopoly where the government's formal bureaucracy directly managed tax collection. While touted as a solution to the societal ills of the previous system, the move to direct state control carried its own complexities and contradictions.

Despite its financial benefits, revenue farming had severe societal repercussions, including draining resources, encouraging corruption, exploiting the populace, promoting opium addiction, and inciting violence. The move to a government-controlled system aimed to curb these negative effects, potentially reducing illegal trade, corruption, and violence.[56] However, the claim that opium consumption remained largely unchanged under the "*regiestelsel*" seems questionable, especially considering the extensive scale and profitability of state-run operations.[57] This apparent contradiction is further highlighted by comparing the situation to Singapore, where revenue from similar government-controlled opium stores consistently increased year-over-year.[58] This suggests a parallel trajectory in both Java and Singapore, where the shift to state control did not necessarily curb opium consumption.

Much like in Java, revenue farming and the opium trade were key elements of the Chinese economy in Singapore. In both regions, these practices served multiple stakeholders: shopkeepers, secret societies, revenue farmers, and colonial governments. Opium became a

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[54] Wahid, *From Revenue Farming to State Monopoly*, 139.
[55] W. E. Souterwoude, *De Opium-vloek op Java: Tijdschrift van den Anti-opiumbond* [The Opium Curse on Java: Journal of the Anti-Opium Association] ('s-Gravehage: Anti- opiumbond, 1890), 43.
[56] *Ibid*. 133, 201–2, 296. See also James Rush, *Opium to Java: Revenue Farming and Chinese Enterprise in Colonial Indonesia, 1860–1910* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990). In Singapore, see Carl Trocki, *Opium and Empire: Chinese Society in Colonial Singapore, 1800–1910* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); See also Warren Bailey and Lan Truong, "Opium and Empire: Some Evidence from Colonial-Era Asian Stock and Commodity Markets", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies (Singapore)* 32, no. 2 (2001): 173–193.
[57] Rush, *Opium to Java*, 200.
[58] *Straits Settlements Blue Books: Annual Department Reports*, 1915.

sort of unifying factor among these diverse interests, especially within the Anglo-Chinese elite of Singapore.[59] While claims that opium use did not rise in Java under government control seem dubious, especially given the extensive scale and profitability of the operations, the situation appeared no better in Singapore. Rising revenue suggests that state control was not an effective deterrent to opium use. Therefore, although the transition to government oversight might have offered some superficial benefits like minimising black markets, the deep-rooted societal implications, such as addiction and exploitation of labourers, remained largely unaddressed. These lingering issues unfolded against a backdrop of shifting power dynamics and emerging nationalism within the Dutch East Indies.

The rise of Japan as a formidable competitor, enjoying equal legal status with Europeans since 1899, had a ripple effect throughout the region. This landmark decision inspired other ethnic groups, notably the Chinese and Arabs, to establish organisations advocating for equal treatment.[60] Inspired by this example, the Javanese community soon followed suit. These collective movements would go on to play a crucial role in the birth of Indonesian nationalism, commonly traced back to the formation of either Budi Oetomo in 1908 or Sarekat Islam in 1912.[61] Therefore, the rise of an imperial and modern Japan, though indirect, had a profound impact on the burgeoning national consciousness in the Dutch East Indies.

The Chinese community observed this shift with keen interest, noting the difference in treatment afforded to Japanese citizens due to their nation's strength. For the Chinese, this disparity highlighted the advantages of a strong, modernised nation-state in protecting the interests of its citizen overseas, something China was still struggling to achieve. Propelled by these challenges and a desire for progress, the Chinese community embraced the establishment of organisations with a pan-Chinese focus, like the Tjong Hoa Hwe Koan (THHK, Chinese Association) in 1900, and the propagation of Western-style THHK schools across the Dutch East Indies. Though situated in Indonesia, the THHK was not an Indonesian nationalist entity but rather a platform for the Chinese community to affirm their Chinese national identity, drawing a distinction from both the Dutch colonisers and the local populace.[62] The Chinese community actively sought support from their home government, resulting in annual visits by Qing dignitaries from 1906 onward and the establishment of Siang-hwee

[59] Trocki, *Opium and Empire*, 67.

[60] Barbara Watson Andaya, "From Rūm to Tokyo: The Search for Anticolonial Allies by the Rulers of Riau, 1899–1914," *Indonesia*, 24(24), 1977: 133–135; Michael Laffan, "Tokyo as a Shared Mecca of Modernity: War Echoes in the Colonial Malay World", in Rotem Kowner, *The Impact of the Russo-Japanese War*, (New York: Routledge, 2007), 221–224.

[61] Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion*; John Thayer Sidel, *Republicanism, Communism, Islam: Cosmopolitan Origins of Revolution in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 72–202.

[62] A more detailed explanation of the emergence of the pan-Chinese movement can be found in, see, Lea E. Williams, *Overseas Chinese Nationalism: The Genesis of Pan-Chinese Movement in Indonesia, 1900–1916* (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1960); Kwee Tek Hoay, *The Origins of the Modern Chinese Movement in Indonesia*, trans. Lea A. Williams (Ithaca: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, 1969).

(Chinese Chambers of Commerce).[63] These efforts marked an aggressive push towards modernity, self-assertion, and protection of commercial interests, even including boycotts of European firms.

This growing influence and self-confidence became even more apparent with the highly publicised visits of two Chinese warships to Dutch East Indies ports in 1907 and 1909.[64] The Chinese community's jubilant welcome of these warships served as a bold demonstration of their solidarity and burgeoning power, a display that the Dutch could not ignore. Recognising this shift, the Dutch, despite their imperial ambitions, found themselves in a position of relative weakness. They were compelled to respond to the Chinese community's demands, ultimately leading to significant policy changes. These concessions served as an evidence to the Chinese community's expanding influence within the socio-economic dynamics of the Dutch East Indies. A prime example of these concessions was the establishment of *Hollandsch-Chineesche Scholen* (Dutch Chinese schools) in 1907, acknowledging the growing prominence of the Chinese community and its aspirations for modern education. Additionally, the previously restrictive pass system, which had long limited the Chinese community's mobility and economic activities, was significantly relaxed. In 1904, the validity of passes was extended to a year, up from a single journey. This relaxation culminated in 1910 when the Dutch authorities granted free passage along the main highways without requiring any permits.[65] These changes represented a welcome shift for the Chinese community, removing constraints that had previously hampered their commercial activity. Now with greater freedom of movement and access to education, the Chinese community, which by this point included not just farm owners but a broader section of society, saw an opportunity to diversify their economic interests. Investments poured into local industries such as sugar plantations, kretek cigarettes, and batik production, as well as small shops and commerce, further bolstering Chinese influence on the local economy.[66]

This growing economic influence and self-assertion within the Dutch East Indies was echoed by a similar pattern of events in other parts of Southeast Asia. A critical moment in 1905 exemplifies this trend. In June, two prominent public assemblies transpired in Singapore and Penang. On June 20, around 200 Chinese convened at Singapore's Thong Chai Hospital, resolving to boycott American goods.[67] A mere six days later, Chinese merchants in Penang echoed this sentiment at the Pingzhang Huiguan, the Chinese Town Hall. These events

[63] Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion*, 36.
[64] Lea E. Williams, *Overseas Chinese Nationalism* (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1960), 162.
[65] John Sydenham Furnivall, *Netherlands India: A Study of Plural Economy*, (Cambridge University Press, 1939): 240–241; See also John Sydenham Furnivall. "Some Problems of Tropical Economy", in *Fabian Colonial Essays*, ed. Rita Hinden (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1945).
[66] Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion*, 37.
[67] United States National Archives, *Despatches from United States Consuls in Singapore* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1883 – 1906): 23 June 1905.

marked the inception of anti-American activities in colonial Malaya.[68] This unified response stemmed directly from the United States' hostile stance on Chinese immigration in the late nineteenth century. Moreover, it was a direct response to an anti-American boycott that had commenced in China just a month earlier. Anti-Chinese sentiments in the United States had been simmering for decades, driven by a combination of socio-economic fears and racial prejudice. The mid-nineteenth century had seen a surge of Chinese immigrants, propelled to the U.S. by upheavals like the Opium War and the Taping Rebellion in China, and drawn by the promise of gold in California and employment opportunities in railroad construction.[69] However, most of these immigrants found it hard to amass wealth and returned home, leading to their permanent settlement. As the U.S. experienced an economic depression in the 1870s, white American labourers began to view Chinese immigrants, who retained their unique cultural practices and often lived in segregated "Chinese quarters," as economic threats and social menaces.[70] This sentiment was manipulated and amplified by politicians, leading to racial tensions and culminating in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. This act was the first of several that aimed to curtail Chinese immigration to the U.S.

Despite the severity of these measures, the discriminatory treatment of Chinese in the U.S. continued unabated. Stories of violence and mistreatment, such as the horrific Rock Spring massacre of 1885, further inflamed indignation.[71] By the early twentieth century, this resentment was coupled with a rising tide of political and nationalistic sentiment in China. In 1904, while the discontinuation of the Gresham-Yang Treaty removed some barriers, many exclusionary laws remained in place.[72] Chinese merchants and nationalists, seeking a more favourable treaty and leverage against the U.S. and their own government, threatened a boycott of American goods. This threat was realised in 1905 when the U.S. failed to revise its discriminatory immigration policies. Using modern communication methods of the time, the boycott garnered international support, notably among Chinese communities across Southeast Asia.

Fearing that U.S. immigration policies might influence similar restrictions in British colonies, Chinese communities in Singapore and Malaya were quick to join the anti-American boycott. This swift reaction reflected their longstanding presence in the region. Even before the 1849 gold rush drew Chinese immigrants to North America, many had settled in Nanyang (Southeast Asia), drawn by the founding of British settlements in Penang (1786) and

[68] United States National Archives, *Despatches from United States Consuls in Singapore* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1883 – 1906): 4 July 1905.
[69] Donald Bogue, "Internal Migration" in *The Study of Population: An Inventory and Appraisal*, ed. Philip M. Hauser and Otis Dudley Duncan (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1959), 486–509.
[70] Kiong, "The Chinese boycott", 231.
[71] Shih-Shan Henry Tsai, *China and the Overseas Chinese in the United States* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1983), 72–73.
[72] Mary Roberts Coolidge, *Chinese Immigration* (New York: Henry Holt, 1909), 236–238.

Singapore (1819). The establishment of British political dominance in Malay states post-1874 further bolstered Chinese immigration, making them the majority in places like Singapore, where they made up 70% of the population.[73]

This influx of immigrants added to the already diverse social landscape of Chinese communities in Singapore and Malaya. Here, society revolved around strong family and clan systems, where individuals could rely on extended family for various types of support. Additionally, significant community bonds were formed around shared dialects, leading to five primary linguistic groups: Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, Teochew, and Hainanese. These dialect groups often had specific occupations associated with them, contributing to both social stratification and, at times, conflicts within the Chinese community itself. The British colonialists, generally more focused on economic and political control, typically allowed the Chinese a degree of internal autonomy as long as it did not challenge British interests.[74] However, this autonomy did not shield them from growing anxieties about their future within Southeast Asia.

News of the mistreatment of their kin in the U.S. stirred deep apprehension among Chinese communities in Nanyang, igniting fears of potential exclusionary policies in their own adopted homelands. Chinese merchants in Singapore and Penang, encouraged by their counterparts in China, took the lead in organizing the boycott, giving it significant traction and attention. The *Lat Pau*, a prominent Chinese newspaper in Singapore, played a crucial role in amplifying the boycott movement. The newspaper consistently reported on the boycott and anti-American activities, emphasizing national dignity, the shared experiences of immigrants, and upholding Chinese sovereignty against the detrimental influence of Western powers. Prior to the first boycott meeting in Singapore, the *Lat Pau* published at least seven pieces of commentary and news reports on the issue, including articles on May 19, May 27, June 13, June 15, June 17, and June 19, 1905.[75]

The media coverage helped mobilise support and create a sense of urgency within the Chinese community. Frustrated by their government's perceived inaction in the face of the U.S.'s discriminatory policies, the Chinese in Singapore took matters into their own hands. Joining the anti-American boycott, they hoped not only to exert pressure on the U.S. but also to send a message to the British, dissuading them from adopting similar exclusionary policies. A pivotal meeting on June 20, led by the educated Lim Boon Keng, resulted in a unanimous resolution to halt trade with American goods. Notably, a committee representing Singapore's main dialect groups was formed, demonstrating unprecedented cooperation among these

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[73] Ching Hwang Yen, *A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya, 1800–1911* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986), 3.
[74] Ching Hwang Yen, *The Overseas Chinese and the 1911 Revolution: With Special Reference to Singapore and Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press. 1976), 6–7. Ching Hwang Yen, "Chinese Revolutionary Propaganda Organizations in Singapore and Malaya, 1906–1911", *Journal of the South Seas Society*, 29, 1-2, (1974): 47–67.
[75] Kiong, "The Chinese Boycott", 235.

often-divided groups in the face of a common threat.[76] The boycott fervour was further escalated by You Lie, a Chinese revolutionary, who declared the support of Chinese Christians and even urged American missionaries to depart. Having previously leveraged his medical practice to gain support for his political beliefs, You Lie amplified the anti-American sentiment. Following the rally, many Singaporean Chinese took action, going beyond the official boycott to target services they mistakenly believed to be American, such as the tramway. These actions had a noticeable impact on the local economy.[77]

The wave of boycotts swiftly spread across Southeast Asia. In Penang, a city with a substantial Chinese immigrant population, the call for a boycott against American goods resonated deeply with the community. On June 27, spurred by a letter from Lim Boon Keng of Singapore, Penang's Chinese merchants convened at the Chinese Town Hall. Lim Kek Chuan, president of the Penang Chinese Chamber of Commerce, led the meeting, passionately condemning the treatment of Chinese by Americans.[78] Gnoh Lean Tuck, a prominent English-speaking community leader with connections to Lim, emphasised the importance of this Pan-Asian boycott in striking a blow to the American market and highlighting Chinese grievances on a global stage.

Mirroring the actions in Singapore, the Penang community passed resolutions demonstrating their commitment: to boycott American goods, to communicate this decision to official Chinese entities, and to form a committee to oversee the boycott.[79] The Penang Chamber of Commerce adopted strict penalties for those trading in American goods, with escalating fines for repeated violations. This commitment was further underscored through public notices and delisting firms that continued their American trade from the Chamber's registry.[80] Importantly, the boycott fervour was not limited to major cities. In Ipoh, another region with a significant Chinese immigrant population, similar boycott meetings highlighted a sense of shared Chinese identity and outrage at the unjust treatment in America. The Ipoh community demonstrated solidarity by dedicating half of the funds they raised to support the Shanghai boycott committee, while the other half facilitated local boycott activities.[81] Similar sentiments and actions were echoed in other Malayan cities, highlighting a broad and united front across multiple regions.

This unified response makes the boycott movement one of the earliest and most impactful social movements in Singapore and Malaya. Two key characteristics define this agitation: widespread anti-American sentiment that cut across social classes and proactive

[76] Yen, "*The Overseas Chinese*", 64.
[77] *Hong Kong Daily Press* Jun 29, 1905.
[78] Kiong, "The Chinese Boycott", 237.
[79] United States National Archives, *Despatches from United States Consuls in Singapore*, 19 September 1905.
[80] Michael R. Godley, *The Mandarin-Capitalists from Nanyang: Overseas Chinese Enterprise in the Modernization of China, 1893–1911* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 123–124.
[81] *Straits Times* Jul 18, 1905; Dec 16, 1905.

participation from a broad spectrum of society. While Chinese merchants in Singapore and Penang spearheaded the boycott, its effects permeated through all levels, with shopkeepers, labourers, drama performers, and prostitutes joining the chorus of support. Even traditions surrounding the Mid-Autumn Festival were impacted, as moon cakes, typically sourced from Guangzhou and made with American flour, saw cancelled orders in a powerful act of defiance.[82]

The boycott's impact extended decisively into the economic sphere. Some shopkeepers, demonstrating adaptability, pivoted to importing Chinese textiles to mitigate their business losses. However, not everyone embraced the boycott with equal enthusiasm. Some, driven by self-interest, covertly continued to sell American goods. Such actions, if discovered, were met with swift public condemnation and ostracisation. The intensity of the movement was such that culprits were derogatorily labelled as "cold-blooded animals" (*liangxue dongwu*), a term borrowed from China.[83] In one such incident, a retailer faced significant public backlash for importing American flour.[84] Concerned about potential repercussions, certain merchants felt compelled to take preventative measures to avoid being associated with American goods.

The boycott movement was not limited to the merchant class; it extended to the lower strata of society as well. The Chinese coolies in Tanjong Pagar dock made a powerful statement by holding a significant strike against repairing an American ship. Their actions prompted intervention from the British colonial government, highlighting the intersection of economic interests and political anxieties.[85] While historical documentation offers differing explanations for the strike's resolution, potentially showcasing variations in perspectives between Chinese and English accounts, it is undeniable that the coolies' strike emphatically endorsed the anti-American boycott.[86] Remarkably, those often marginalised in society, such as prostitutes, actively championed the boycott. One account details a prostitute named Xiaotao admonishing a client for using American cigarettes, demonstrating how deeply the boycott sentiment had permeated all societal layers.[87] Wong Sin Kiong's observations reinforce this point, as he notes that prostitutes across regions like Macau and Guangzhou echoed similar sentiments.[88] The anti-American boycott movement in Singapore and Malaya in the early twentieth century was a truly all-encompassing social upheaval, transcending socio-economic boundaries. This broad-based participation underscores the deep-rooted anti-

[82] *Straits Times* Sep 13, 1905.
[83] Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom and Wong Sin Kiong, "Taunting the Turtles and Damning the Dogs: Animal Epithets and Political Conflict in Modern China", *Indiana East Asian Working Paper Series on Language and Politics in Modern China*, 9, (1996): 54.
[84] Kiong, "The Chinese Boycott", 240.
[85] *South China Morning Post* Dec 15, 1905.
[86] Ong Siang Song, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 375–376.
[87] Kiong, "The Chinese Boycott", 241.
[88] *Ibid*.

American sentiments of the time, showcases the complex societal dynamics within the Chinese communities, and highlights their adaptability in the face of larger geopolitical forces.

The widespread support for the boycott was further strengthened by a well-organised fundraising effort that reached across various societal strata. While the movement's precise popularity might be difficult to gauge due to limited documentation, its diverse participation firmly qualifies it as a social movement. Crucially, this unity was fostered through carefully tailored propaganda strategies. Printed materials catered to the literate, while oral presentations effectively reached the illiterate population. This period of anti-American sentiment coincided with a significant rise in Chinese newspapers across Singapore and Malaya, echoing a similar boom in China's press industry.[89] Many of these local newspapers were founded and operated by Chinese immigrants, who sought to both inform and politically awaken their communities. Two prominent newspapers, the Singapore-based *Lat pau* and the Penang-based *Penang sin poe*, played a crucial role in amplifying the boycott movement. The *Penang sin poe*, in particular, provided extensive coverage, with 248 reports on the boycott between May 1905 and April 1906.[90] This regular reporting helped to galvanise support, maintaining focus on the movement's importance, and strengthening ties between Chinese communities in the region and their homeland.

This series of events highlights the complex relationship between global politics and local resistance movements. They also underscore the Chinese community's pivotal role in shaping the socio-economic dynamics of the region. The rise of the vernacular press became a powerful tool, providing a platform for exchanging ideas among the elite and disseminating information to wider audiences. This new power of the press enabled and sustained the boycott movement. Importantly, the Chinese diaspora across Southeast Asia demonstrated resourcefulness and adaptability in the face of colonial rule, leveraging various forms of activism to assert their agency and challenge the status quo.

The celebration of the Nationalist troops' entry into Beijing in Penang underscores the evolution of both Chinese communities' strategies and their relationship with their homeland.[91] While the display of flags and celebratory processions demonstrate continued transnational solidarity, they mark a departure from the past's politically charged boycotts and fundraising efforts. This suggests that the rise of a stronger Chinese government may have influenced the way in which diaspora communities expressed their political views and navigated their position within colonial Southeast Asia. The relatively quiet nature of the celebration could reflect evolving priorities within the Penang Chinese community, differing degrees of support for the Nationalist movement, or a more cautious response within the colonial context of the 1920s.[92]

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[89] Yutang Lin, *A History of the Press and Public Opinion in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936), 94.
[90] Kiong, "The Chinese Boycott", 244.
[91] "Penang Chinese Celebrations", *Straits Echo Weekly Edition* Jun 13, 1928, 354.
[92] "Penang Chinese Celebrations", *Straits Echo Weekly Edition* Jun 13, 1928, 354.

Despite potential shifts in tactics, the Penang events demonstrate that newspapers remained a vital tool for Chinese communities - informing, connecting, and mobilising communities across the region.

While the Penang celebration might appear more muted, Chinese communities continued to express their solidarity and resistance in other ways. However, these expressions increasingly collided with colonial anxieties. In May 1928, the *Straits Echo Weekly Edition* reported the arrest of a schoolmaster and students for distributing pamphlets supporting an anti-Japanese boycott.[93] While conceding that the literature might not be seditious, the newspaper states, "the police have to guard very carefully against anything calculated to inflame national passions."[94] This reveals a deep-seated fear that Chinese activism could disrupt the balance of colonial power in Malaya. The article even warns against the actions of Chinese newspapers, stating, "Such acts cannot possibly do any good to the cause that is supposed to be served, but may, indeed, do a great deal of harm among the more uneducated sections of the Chinese population here."[95] This exposes a colonial distrust of the Chinese press and the belief that it had the power to incite unrest.

This tension between Chinese communities' desire to express their views and colonial anxieties about unrest is further exemplified by the "Anti-Japanese Posters" incident.[96] Three young Chinese men were arrested for placing posters condemning Japanese actions in China throughout Penang, directly targeting Japanese shops and dispensaries.[97] The posters used strong language to denounce Japan's actions. This defiance demonstrates that some within the Chinese community were willing to take a more confrontational stance, despite potential consequences. The newspaper's dismissive coverage of the incident, portraying the young men as foolish, suggests an effort to minimise the significance of these actions and discourage further public displays of resistance.

The colonial perspective on the boycott, as exposed in "The Anti-Japanese Boycott" article, reveals deep-seated anxieties and a blatant attempt to undermine its legitimacy.[98] The article emphasizes the absence of violence, yet it paints the boycott as a product of "intimidatory measures adopted by zealous but ill-advised 'politicians'" who are preying on the "less thinking portion of the Chinese."[99] This language attempts to delegitimize the boycott by suggesting it is based on fear and manipulation rather than genuine political convictions. The article takes a condescending tone, criticizing Chinese residents in Malaya for "seeking to penalise individual Japanese for the alleged misdemeanours of the Japanese government." It

[93] "Anti-Japanese Feeling", *The Straits Echo Weekly Edition* May 10, 1928, 294.
[94] *Ibid*.
[95] *Ibid*.
[96] "Anti-Japanese Posters", *The Straits Echo Weekly Edition* May 10, 1928, 301.
[97] *Ibid*.
[98] "The Anti-Japanese Boycott", *Straits Echo Weekly Edition* May 23, 1928, 306.
[99] *Ibid*.

even admits that these actions are "manifest unfairness," but then attempts to justify it by highlighting the "tangible security" that the Chinese community enjoys under British protection. This argument seeks to portray the boycott as illogical and misdirected, suggesting that any grievances should be directed towards the Chinese government instead. Furthermore, the newspaper dismisses the boycott as a meaningless measure, stating it is "likely to prove worse than useless" as Japan is preoccupied with its own issues.[100] The article even claims that the real victims of the boycott will be the various sections of the community as a whole, ignoring the potential impact it might have on Japanese businesses and influence. The article concludes with a thinly veiled threat, implying that continuing the boycott or disorder could lead to harsh consequences.[101]

Tan Hock, a newspaper reader from Kedah, wrote a letter to the editor, directly challenging the *Straits Echo*'s condescending assessment of the boycott.[102] The fact that his letter is published suggests he was familiar with the newspaper, likely supportive of the boycott, and strategically minded. He reframes it, stating, "Everybody knows how much the revenue of a government depends on trade... the Chinese point of view in severing economic connection with Japan is just to avoid either directly or indirectly supplying the Japanese government with the necessary finance for their aggressive plans on China."[103] This shifts the focus from individual Japanese businesses to the political objective of undercutting the Japanese government's resources for their actions in China. Furthermore, Tan Hock addresses the claim that the boycott unfairly targets innocent Japanese residents in Malaya. He argues, "The boycott is a purely Chinese question if it does not cause any disturbance in Malaya..." This statement is two-fold - it reiterates Chinese solidarity across borders and emphasizes the intention to use non-violent resistance within Malaya.

Interestingly, Tan Hock concludes by suggesting a potential economic benefit for the British. He states, "...this tendency will increase the consumption of all British goods, the greater portion of which has been unfairly ousted from the market, both here and elsewhere, by unscrupulous Japanese manufacturers with false trade-marks and misleading representations."[104] This statement subtly shifts the focus from political resistance to economic competition, potentially reframing the boycott in a way that would resonate with the colonial government, highlighting the Japanese as commercial rivals rather than simply an aggrieved party targeted for aggression. This pragmatic angle underscores the potential for boycotts to have long-term consequences not only for the targeted country, but for colonial economic interests as well. The events of 1928 and the years following suggest that boycotts could

[100] "The Anti-Japanese Boycott", *Straits Echo Weekly Edition* May 23, 1928, 306.
[101] *Ibid*.
[102] "Letters to the Editor: The Japanese Boycott", *Straits Echo Weekly Edition* May 23, 1928, 311.
[103] *Ibid*.
[104] *Ibid*.

reshape trade relations, with businesses facing difficulties long after the initial boycott movement.[105] However, it is important to consider that other evolving economic factors could also influence these challenges.

While some proponents of the boycott movement might have sought to frame it in a way that aligned with colonial economic interests, the colonial authorities were often far less receptive. In Surabaya in 1928, the Dutch police decisively cracked down on a boycott targeting Japanese goods. The police arrested the entire executive committee and twelve other individuals associated with the movement, highlighting a fundamental distrust of Chinese activism, regardless of its framing.[106] All those arrested were identified as Chinese nationalists, emphasising colonial anxieties about any form of organised resistance that might disrupt the existing power structures. Despite their involvement in this movement, the motivations behind the activists' actions were deeply personal and rooted in their identity. Many confessed to participating in the boycott movement, stating they acted "*uit liefde voor China*" (out of love for China) and believed their actions were a duty as good patriots.[107] This reveals a sentiment that connects local actions in the Dutch East Indies with broader geopolitical tensions, highlighting a sense of transnational solidarity with China.

While the article notes the absence of direct evidence linking the movement in the Dutch East Indies with mainland China, it suggests a prevailing belief among colonial authorities that such links existed. The article speculates that continued police investigations could unearth these connections, painting a broader picture of the interaction between local actions in Surabaya and the global geopolitical landscape. This underscores how colonial powers were acutely aware of the potential for transnational movements to challenge their authority and disrupt the carefully constructed colonial order. The deep-seated anxieties of the colonial government were not unfounded. The Dutch East Indies, like many parts of Southeast Asia, were experiencing a period of rapid social and cultural change. The rise of indigenous nationalist movements, the influence of global events like the Chinese Revolution, and the growing presence of transnational ideologies like Pan-Islamism all contributed to a sense of flux. Within this context, boycotts of foreign goods became both a form of resistance against colonial control and a way of expressing a shifting sense of identity. This dynamic of resistance and self-determination sparked a growing critique of Western influence and its associated consumer culture.

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[105] *The Malayan Mercantile Journal* Sep 1, 1932, 12.

[106] "Gemengd. Het Boycot-Comité Gearresteerd. Te Soerabaya", *Algemeen Handelsblad* Oct 16, 1928, 14; Uit Onze Oost, "Nieuwe Haarlemsche courant" Oct 17, 1928, 6; De anti-Japansche Boycot, "Het Vaderland: staaten letterkundig nieuwsblad" Oct 2, 1928, 2.

[107] De anti-Japansche Boycot, "Het Vaderland: staaten letterkundig nieuwsblad" Oct 2, 1928, 2.

Critique of the West and Consumer Culture

The rise of boycotts throughout Southeast Asia must be understood as a multifaceted act of resistance against colonial control. In cities like Surabaya, Singapore, and Penang, a growing critique emerged that challenged the blind acceptance of Western consumer culture and its potential to perpetuate colonial power imbalances. This critique challenged the West's dominance as the sole model of modernity. Within this context, a key question arose: How could diverse Southeast Asian communities embrace the benefits of progress while safeguarding their unique cultural identities and resisting a new form of Western dominance through consumerism?

The rise of an urban middle class, particularly in colonial Indonesia, offers a fascinating case study in navigating this complex question. Shaped by Western education and their roles in colonial bureaucracy, this emerging class became agents of a uniquely localised form of modernity. They selectively incorporated Western ideas and practices, demonstrating that Western models were not the sole path toward progress. Organisations like Boedi Oetomo (an early indigenous nationalist political society in colonial Indonesia), inspired by Japan's Meiji Restoration, embraced Western scientific and technological advancements while remaining grounded in their own cultural and religious traditions. This selective embrace was also evident in the wave of transnational Islamic modernism, with movements like Sarekat Islam and Muhammadiyah seeking to reconcile Western advancements with their deeply held faith. Originally founded as a cooperative of Muslim Javanese *batik* traders to counter competition from Chinese-Indonesian businesses, Sarekat Islam evolved into a major socio-political force advocating for greater self-determination and social reforms alongside economic empowerment.[108] Alongside these developments, a growing emphasis on civil rights, as seen in various political movements, further shaped this redefinition of modernity.[109]

Importantly, the desire to be "modern" did not necessitate completely embracing Western consumer culture. A growing critique challenged the uncritical adoption of Western lifestyles and the potential for a new form of dominance through consumption. This critique underscored the importance of defining modernity in a way that resonated with local values and aspirations, an ongoing and multifaceted process across Southeast Asia. The debates surrounding Western assimilation and cultural identity found a vibrant platform in the

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[108] Rambe, *Sarekat Islam*.

[109] Michael Francis Laffan, *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia: The Umma Below the Winds* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 47–76,165–69; Sartono Kartodirdjo, *Pengantar Sejarah Indonesia Baru: Sejarah Pergerakan Nasional dari Kolonialisme Sampai Nasionalisme. Vol. 2* [Introduction to the History of New Indonesia: History of the National Movement from Colonialism to Nationalism. Vol. 2] (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 1992), 106–111; A. P. E. Korver, *Sarekat Islam, 1912–1916: Opkomst, Bloei en Structuur van Indonesië's Eerste Massabeweging* [Sarekat Islam, 1912–1916: Rise, Flowering and Structure of Indonesia's First Mass Movement] (Amsterdam: Historisch Seminarium van de Universiteit van Amsterdam, 1982), 5–13; Ricklefs, *Polarizing Javanese Society*, 214–250; Deliar Noer, *The Modernist Muslim Movement in Indonesia, 1900–1942* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1973), 1–29; Chiara Formichi, *Islam and the Making of the Nation: Kartosuwiryo and Political Islam in Twentieth-Century Indonesia* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2012), 1–14.

vernacular press. These publications ignited discussions about the appropriate degree of Western influence, with some advocating for selective adoption and others pushing for a return to traditional values.[110] A particularly strong concern was that excessive imitation of the Dutch would threaten both societal and individual identities.[111] This fear prompted a widespread examination of all facets of Westernisation – from fashion and language to technology and artistic expression. Essentially, these debates did not lead to a single, unified national identity. Instead, they fostered a range of distinct identities within Indonesia and across Southeast Asia. Each of these distinct expressions of identity was shaped by ongoing dialogues about the role of the West, creating a dynamic and diverse cultural landscape.

The "seven M's" or "*mim pitu*" exemplify how concerns about Western influence translated into concrete action in Java. This moral code, emphasising the dangers of gambling (*main*), promiscuity (*madon*), alcoholism (*minum*), opium use (*madat*), thievery (*maling*), lying (*mada*), and gluttony (*mangani*), became a powerful symbol of resistance against colonial modernity.[112] These vices were seen as morally corrupting and tools that benefited the colonisers financially. Thus, the argument against the "seven M's" was two-pronged, highlighting both their threat to individual morality and their role in perpetuating colonial power structures. The "seven M's" became a rallying cry for nationalist movements across Indonesia. Organisations like Boedi Oetomo and Sarekat Islam used this moral code to mobilise support, emphasising self-improvement as a form of resistance and a way to forge a distinct Indonesian identity that rejected the negative aspects of Western influence.[113]

The widespread appeal of the "seven M's" led to the creation of numerous self-help associations, such as Mim Pitu and Insulinde's Dageraad, further reinforcing the rejection of these vices.[114] Their popularity stemmed from their adaptability; the list of vices could be expanded or contracted, ensuring relevance across diverse communities.[115] Among these vices, the question of alcohol consumption sparked particularly heated debate. Historically, alcohol consumption in Java was limited. However, the trend towards Westernisation among the Javanese aristocracy in the nineteenth century, particularly in Surabaya, led to an increase in alcohol use.[116] This shift was met with staunch criticism from groups like Sarekat Islam, who condemned alcohol as a symbol of Western moral decay. The critique went beyond traditional

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[110] For example, *Sinar Hindia* Nov 30, 1918, *IPO*, no. 48 (1918); *Neratja* Dec 13, 1920, May 28, 1921.
[111] *Hindia Dipa* Sep 5, 1921.
[112] van der Meer, *Performing Power*, 159.
[113] "De Theosophie en Boedi-Oetomo," *De Indische Gids*, 31, no. 1 (1909): 534–35; "Toestanden in de Vorstenlanden," *De Indische Gids*, 34, no. 1 (1912): 797–800; S. S. J. Ratu Langie, *Serikat Islam* (Baarn: Hollandia, 1913), 20; Korver, *Sarekat Islam*: 49–78.
[114] *Sinar Djawa*, no. 172, *KT* 3 1913, 1398.
[115] J. F. H. A. Later, "De Inlandsche beweging," *De Indische Gids*, 38, no. 2 (1916): 922.
[116] Jiří Jákl, "An Unholy Brew: Alcohol in Pre-Islamic Java," *The Newsletter*, no. 77 (2017); Ricklefs, *Polarizing Javanese Society*, 254; John Pemberton, *On the Subject of "Java"* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 68–101; *Bintang Soerabaja* May 31, 1912, *KT* 1 (1912): 833–34; A. H. J. G. Walbeehm, "Een drankverbod voor Nederlandsch-Indië," *Indisch Genootschap* Jan 16, 1912, 119–147; Chiara Formichi, "Bouillon for His Majesty", 388–389.

Islamic values, highlighting the physical degradation caused by alcohol abuse and its potential for social disruption. This concern stands in stark contrast to the portrayal of alcohol in popular advertising of the time, which often emphasised its association with Western sophistication and modernity (as discussed in Chapter 4).

This opposition to alcohol consumption exposed blatant colonial hypocrisy. As one observer cynically noted, the Dutch government both facilitated the introduction of alcohol to the Indies and profited from its sale, while simultaneously organizing campaigns to discourage its use.[117] This contradiction revealed the government's true priorities – profit over the wellbeing of the local population. The pushback against alcohol, therefore, became another symbol of resistance against colonial manipulation and exploitation. This pattern of exploitation and resistance extended to the issue of opium. While rarely consumed by the Dutch themselves, opium was introduced into the region by colonial powers and primarily targeted indigenous and Chinese populations. The colonial government profited immensely from the opium trade, even as attempts to reform it under the guise of the Ethical Policy had little real impact on the ground.[118] This hypocrisy and continued exploitation drew widespread criticism from various groups within Indonesian society. Much like the pushback against alcohol, local movements and cultural associations ultimately drove a decline in opium consumption. These anti-opium campaigns, alongside campaigns against other vices, became crucial components of Indonesian resistance. They exposed colonial exploitation and challenged the imposition of harmful products that were morally degrading and served the colonisers financially.

The anti-opium movement in Indonesia highlights the failure of the colonial government to effectively address addiction, despite the devastating social and economic consequences. While the *Opiumregie* (opium agency) was intended to regulate the opium trade and generate revenue, it prioritised profits over the health and well-being of the population.[119] It was largely nongovernmental organisations that stepped in to address the opium crisis, establishing medical facilities and launching anti-opium campaigns. Grassroots anti-opium campaigns played a crucial role in driving change. These movements, often led by a rising middle class engaged in "cultural citizenship", aimed to shape a modern Indonesian society free from harmful colonial influences.[120] By targeting the opium trade, they challenged not only the moral decay it caused but also the economic system that perpetuated colonial power.

A similar dynamic of resistance and exploitation was evident in the opium trade in Singapore. There, the colonial government relied heavily on the opium "revenue farms," a system where wealthy Chinese merchants held monopolies on the processing and sale of

[117] Ardjoena [pseud.], "Ook dat nog," *De Indiër* 1, no. 6 (1913): 65–66.
[118] *Bintang Soerabaja*, no. 154, *KT* 2 1913, 1485–1486.
[119] Abdul Wahid, "'Madat Makan Orang' Opium Eats People: Opium Addiction as a Public Health Issue in Late Colonial Java, 1900–1940," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 51, no. 1–2 (2020): 3–5.
[120] Hoogervorst and Nordholt, "Urban Middle Classes in Colonial Java", 442–474.

opium.[121] This system generated significant revenue for the government, often at the expense of public health and well-being. Opium dens, often connected to brothels, became centres of addiction, particularly for young, single Chinese men who had recently immigrated. While the British government instituted some reforms in response to the 1894 Royal Opium Commission, these were largely motivated by a desire to protect revenue rather than genuinely address the opium problem.[122] The dependence on opium income made the colonial administration hesitant to abolish the revenue farms fully. It was not until the early twentieth century, due to rising anti-opium sentiment in Singapore, that more significant changes occurred. A government monopoly on opium was established, along with restrictions on sales and use, gradually diminishing the power of the opium farms.[123] The critique of Western influence extended far beyond the issue of opium. It encompassed a broader rejection of the materialistic consumer culture seen as emblematic of European colonialism. Figures like Tjokroaminoto, the leader of Sarekat Islam, were particularly vocal in this critique. He exposed the hypocrisy of European powers, who, despite their claims of cultural superiority, were driven by greed and material excess. Tjokroaminoto contrasted this Western materialism with the spiritual traditions of the East, emphasising the latter's moral strength.[124]

Tjokroaminoto's stance against the wholesale adoption of Western lifestyles exemplifies Sarekat Islam's broader push for a calibrated approach to modernisation. Rather than blindly accepting Western influences, SI advocated for adopting aspects of Westernisation that furthered Indonesian self-determination and progress. This included a critical stance towards consumerism - Western goods and entertainment were seen as potentially undermining indigenous values while also strengthening colonial control through economic dependence. [125] To counteract this perceived danger, Tjokroaminoto envisioned a grander economic project with the founding of Al Islamijah in 1913.[126] This export-import company would facilitate direct trade of Javanese products to Europe while also making European goods accessible to Indonesians. By placing control of this venture within the Sarekat Islam the aim was to promote both economic empowerment and participation in the international trade system. While rejecting a full embrace of Western ways, it also sought to harness aspects of it for progress. This underscores the movement's focus on independence and economic autonomy.

This drive toward self-determination and the anxieties brought about by modernisation were felt well beyond urban centres. The central Java town of Delanggu offers a prime

[121] Keen Meng Choy and Ichiro Sugimoto, "Opium Consumption and Living Standards in Singapore, 1900 to 1939," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 54, no. 1 (2023): 119.
[122] *Ibid*. 121.
[123] *Ibid*.
[124] Tjipto Mangoenkoesoemo, "Het Binnenlandsch Bestuur," *De Indiër* 2, no. 154 (1918).
[125] "Wat het Oosten van het Westen noodig heeft," *De Indiër* 1, no. 18 (1914): 205–6.
[126] Achdian, *Kaum Pergerakan dan Politik Kota*, 178.

example. Haji Misbach, a returned pilgrim from Mecca and an ardent communist, embodied these sentiments in a speech he gave on February 29, 1920.[127] Misbach's words in Delanggu vividly evoked the changing times using the Javanese expression "*djaman balik boeono*", an ancient folk saying which translates to "age of the world-turned-upside-down". His speech reflected the era's profound social and economic disruptions driven by modernity's arrival. To underscore the magnitude of these changes, Misbach cited the example of Austro-Hungary, a monarchy that had recently transformed into a republic. The former elite – rulers and government officials – were now endangered, threatened by the tides of revolution. This vivid picture of a world in transition painted by Misbach was more than just an observation; it served as a rallying cry. His message implied that the people should seize the opportunities presented by these changing times, empowering them to take charge of their own destiny. His concluding remarks, "The land belongs to no one other than ourselves", encapsulated the spirit of resistance and the demand for autonomy that echoed throughout Southeast Asia.[128] This sentiment was deeply intertwined with resistance against Western-imposed modernity. For many, the struggle for ownership extended beyond land to safeguard cultural identity, traditional customs, and the right to shape their consumption patterns.

These reactions underscore the complex dynamics of the period. The spread of modern consumer culture in Southeast Asia sparked a complex mix of resistance, critique, and strategic adaptation. Local contexts and global forces intertwined, shaping unique paths towards modernity in the region. Figures like Haji Misbach played a crucial role in this process. Their words and actions reveal the power of individual and collective agency in navigating modernisation and the pursuit of self-determination, ultimately influencing the direction of these transformative forces. The struggle against colonialism, however, was not confined within national borders. Indonesian students studying abroad became conduits for the exchange of anti-colonial ideas. Those venturing to the Netherlands in the 1920s forged connections with Indian nationalists based in Berlin, Paris, or Moscow.[129] These interactions exposed them to the Swadeshi movement, a pivotal chapter in India's struggle against British rule. The Swadeshi movement's emphasis on self-reliance and the boycott of British goods strongly resonated with Indonesia's own growing desire for autonomy and self-determination. This highlights the transnational nature of anti-colonial movements and the ways in which ideas and strategies were shared across borders.

The intellectual cross-pollination among young Indonesian scholars in Europe, sparked by their interactions with Indian nationalists, was one crucial avenue through which anti-colonial ideas flowed back to Indonesia. However, it was not the only one. Seemingly

[127] Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion,* 193; See also Hongxuan Lin, *Ummah yet Proletariat: Islam, Marxism and the Making of the Indonesian Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).
[128] Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion,* 193.
[129] Ingleson, *Workers, Unions and Politics*, 184.

removed from the political sphere, the Indies Theosophical Society subtly became an ideological incubator. While few of its thousands of graduates would openly embrace Theosophical doctrines, the society's influence is evident in the evolving ideas of Indonesia's emerging nationalist leaders.[130] This reminds us that sources of influence on anti-colonial movements were diverse, ranging from organised political resistance to less overtly political spiritual or philosophical organisations. These two channels—transnational dialogues and local theosophical education—contributed to the development of an ideological framework that challenged the colonial status quo. This framework encouraged Indonesians to reclaim political, economic, and cultural spaces, moving beyond simply imitating Western ideas of governance and progress. This awakening underscored the understanding that liberation demanded a comprehensive societal shift, one that would involve confronting entrenched biases, norms, and dependencies. The emerging vision was not about adopting a Western idea of modernity, but crafting one responsive to the unique histories, cultures, and aspirations of the Indonesian people.

The later part of the 1920s witnessed a deepening fascination with India's anti-colonial struggle among Indonesian political and labor leaders. They looked to India's National Congress and its labor movements, seeing them as models of effective political organisation. Indonesia's media played a crucial role in amplifying this interest. Journals, newspapers, and magazines closely followed India's struggle, drawing contrasts between the comparatively more liberal laws in British India and the far more restrictive policies in the Dutch-controlled Indies. Key Indian figures like Rabindranath Tagore, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Mahatma Gandhi were frequently profiled, their ideas analysed and debated. Sukarno's influential writing "*Soeloeh Indonesia Moeda*" even included an in-depth analysis of India's passive resistance movement, with particular focus on Gandhi's civil disobedience campaign against the salt tax and the Indian National Congress's manifesto on developing passive resistance strategies.[131] Concepts like 'passive resistance' or 'swadeshi' became firmly embedded in Indonesian political discourse, a clear sign of how closely Indonesians followed India's struggle.

Indonesian publications played a pivotal role in disseminating information and shaping the narrative around India's independence movement. Publications like *Soeara Oemoem* and *Oetoesan Indonesia* provided in-depth coverage of developments in India. For example, *Soeara Oemoem* published a comprehensive article on Gandhi's civil disobedience movement and his 1933 release from imprisonment. The significance of Gandhi's work was underscored by the publication of the first Indonesian-authored biography about him in April of that same

[130] Iskandar P. Nugroho, "*The Theosophical Education Movement in Colonial Indonesia (1900–1947)*" (MA dissertation, University of New South Wales, 1995).
[131] Ingleson, *Workers, Unions and Politics*, 185.

year, also appearing in *Soeara Oemoem*.[132] These efforts by Indonesian publications highlight the profound interest in, and influence of, India's struggle within the archipelago.

A similar fascination with the Swadeshi movement existed in Singapore—though with a markedly different tone. An article titled "Swadeshi" published in *The Straits Times* offers a scathing critique of Gandhi's self-reliance program. The article says a prominent Singaporean who went to Bombay sees the burning of foreign-made clothes as a "blind frenzy", symbolic of a broader push to sever India completely from the outside world.[133] They question if those supporting the movement truly understand the implications. The article warns India risks losing its entire foreign trade and the associated profits if it isolates itself. The author uses China as an example of a self-sufficient nation plagued by poverty and famine, hinting at a similar fate for India. They acknowledge Britain's policy of minimal interference in India but assert a limit exists. *The Straits Times* suggests the Swadeshi movement could spark internal conflict if those who favour foreign trade are prevented from doing so.[134]

The Straits Times article, likely reflecting the anxieties of the British colonial government and those benefiting from the status quo, condemns Gandhi's agitation. This criticism underscores the fears surrounding India's industrial development and the potential for self-governance. The focus on the Swadeshi movement as economically unviable and a threat to internal stability highlights how, even within Southeast Asia where India's struggle found sympathisers, the potential disruption to the economic and power structures tempered support for more radical strategies.[135] This reveals a complex spectrum of reactions to Indias independence movement, shaped by a nuanced interplay of inspiration and self-interest within the constraints of colonial rule.

Despite the *Straits Times*' critique, the Swadeshi movement's call for economic self-reliance reverberated across the region. The persistence of this sentiment is evident in the late 1932 *Bulletin of the Penang Indian Association*. Exhorting Indians in Peninsular Malaysia to support Swadeshi products, the Bulletin demonstrates how Gandhi's ideals retained their persuasive power even a decade after the *Straits Times* article was published. This underscores that the Swadeshi movement was not a fleeting impulse but shaped anti-colonial thinking well into the 1930s. Interestingly, Penang seems to have embraced the Swadeshi spirit earlier than Indonesia and Singapore. Evidence suggests a strong sense of solidarity with the Indian nationalists. Records show that as early as 1892, Indian communities in

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[132] See, for example, "Gerakan Hindia-Inggris. Bagaimana Gandhi?", *Oetoesan Indonesia* Oct 7, 1933, "Dr Annie Besant dengan Sosialisme", *Soeara Oemoem* Dec 9 , Dec 15, 1933, "Soerat-soerat dari India", *Soeara Oemoem* Dec 23, 1933, Jan 4, 6, 8 and 13, 1934, "Servants of India Society", *Soeloeh Indonesia*, Oct 1926, and "De non-cooperatie idee een uiting van en Tijdgeest", *Soeloeh Indonesia*, Jul 1926. A lengthy article is also included on the Gandhian civil disobedience movement and Gandhi's release from jail in *Soeara Oemoem* May 10, 1933. The first biography of Gandhi published in Indonesia was written by an Indonesian in April 1933. See, *Soeara Oemoem* Apr 22, 1933.
[133] "Swadeshi", *The Straits Times* Aug 26, 1921, 8.
[134] *Ibid*.
[135] *Ibid*.

Penang formed their first Indian Association, dedicated to pursuing mental, moral, and social improvement.[136] Reports from the era indicate that local Indian leaders, like Rev. Raju Naidu, passionately advocated for the Swadeshi movement.[137] This enthusiasm extended to Penang's Muslim merchants, who openly declared their support of Indian figures like Surendranath Banerjea.[138] This early adoption of Swadeshi principles in Penang suggests a potential divergence in attitude compared to the scepticism seen later in Singapore's *Straits Times* article. It highlights that even within the Southeast Asian region, the reception and adaptation of India's anti-colonial strategies varied, shaped by local dynamics and leadership.

The Dutch colonial government was acutely aware of such transnational influences. Unlike the seemingly tolerant stance of the British, they viewed India's civil disobedience movements as a potential threat to their own rule. This stiffened their resolve in suppressing any signs of Gandhi-inspired non-cooperation within Indonesia. Yet, Indonesian leaders did not simply abandon the Swadeshi model; they adapted it. Amidst widespread urban unemployment and rural poverty, the call for economic self-reliance resonated deeply.[139] Swadeshi ideals, symbolised by Gandhi's spinning wheel, aligned with Indonesia's own desire for grassroots economic revitalisation. This further strengthened the conviction among Indonesian labor unions that economic autonomy and a robust civil society were essential in their struggle against colonialism. With their rigid policies, the Dutch needed help to grasp the profound exchange of ideas between India and Indonesia. Blending Swadeshi principles with Indonesia's specific socio-political realities produced a powerful narrative. It was not a simple act of borrowing foreign concepts but a transformative process resonating with local needs and aspirations. Indonesians, through their interaction with the wider Asian anti-colonial landscape, crafted a hybrid ideology. This ideology informed their independence struggle and enriched and expanded the global conversation on resisting colonial rule.

The power of this adapted Swadeshi model found a vibrant expression in Surabaya's Pasar Malam Nasional (National Night Market). [140] Established by the Indonesian Study Club, a Surabaya-based organisation later evolving into the broader Persatuan Bangsa Indonesia (PBI or Union of the Indonesian Nation) in 1930, this annual event showcased local products, culture, and organisations – an embodiment of the economic self-reliance central to the Swadeshi movement.[141] The 1932 event, held during a severe economic depression, was a testament to its resonance. Drawing an impressive 96,619 attendees over 16 nights, it

[136] *The Pinang Gazette* Aug 17, 1894.
[137] Khoo Kay Kim, "The 'Indian Association Movement' in Peninsular Malaysia: The Early Years", *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 65, no. 2 (263) (1992): 4.
[138] *Ibid*., 15.
[139] John Ingleson, "Fear of the Kampung, Fear of Unrest: Urban Unemployment and Colonial Policy in 1930s Java," *Modern Asian Studies* (2012): 1633–1671.
[140] *Soeara Oemoem* Jul 1–11, 1932.
[141] For further discussion of the PBI, see Ingleson, *Workers, Unions and Politics*, 43-44.

generated over 17,000 guilders in ticket sales.[142] More than a commercial endeavour, the Pasar Malam Nasional was a celebration of Indonesian culture, featuring Wayang, Ketoprak, and Gamelan performances. Alongside 20 stalls selling locally-made crafts and batik, the Dieng cigarette company, a major employer, actively participated.[143] Their substantial sales, amounting to 1,333 guilders, were donated to support unemployed Chinese communities in Surabaya.[144] This philanthropic gesture highlight how the market went beyond promoting local goods; it fostered a sense of community and civic engagement aligned with the Swadeshi ideal of a strong, self-reliant society.

The Study Club's role in establishing the market underscores its wider engagement with labour and economic activism. Unlike more established unions for public sector workers, unions for private sector workers led a precarious existence. They were often created by "outsiders" like the Indonesian Study Club who struggled to develop workplace linkages and nurture worker leadership. However, the Study Club's sponsorship provided crucial organisational support, allowing some of these unions to survive longer and advocate for the rights and welfare of private sector workers.[145] Supporting unions for private sector workers—a precarious endeavour at the time—demonstrates the Study Club's multifaceted approach to promoting economic self-reliance and social justice, further solidifying the link between consumer activism and broader anti-colonial efforts. While undeniably successful, it is important to note that the Pasar Malam Nasional was likely not universally accessible. Ticket prices and certain products may have remained beyond the reach of the most marginalised, revealing potential class limitations. Nevertheless, the Pasar Malam Nasional remains a striking example of how Indonesians adapted and localised the Swadeshi movement, creating a unique platform for economic and cultural empowerment.

The Pasar Malam Nasional's evolution mirrored the multifaceted nature of Indonesian nationalism and its growing civil society. In 1933, the addition of a photography stall selling framed images of national figures like Tjipto Mangunkusumo and Ki Hadjar Dewantara emphasised the event's role in cultivating a sense of national identity.[146] The introduction of a media stall by *Soeara Oemoem* further reinforced the market's connection to progressive political ideas.[147] Most strikingly, the inclusion of a healthcare component, run by the PKVI Perhimpunan Kaum Verplegers (sters) dan Vroedvrouwen Indonesia (Union of Indonesian Nurses and Midwives) nurses' union, transformed the market into a holistic social event.[148] For a small fee, individuals could access medical advice, with profits going back into the

[142] *Soeara Oemoem* Jul 1–11, 1932.
[143] *Ibid*.
[144] *Ibid*.
[145] Ingleson, *Workers, Unions and Politics*, 43-44.
[146] *Soeara Oemoem* Jul 1–18, 1933.
[147] *Ibid*.
[148] Ingleson, *Workers, Unions and Politics*, 186.

community through local charities. This success inspired similar events across Java, supporting local unemployed groups and charitable causes.[149] The Pasar Malam Nasional, in its blend of commerce, culture, and political awareness, exemplifies Indonesia's push for a modern, inclusive society grounded in self-reliance. These elements resonate deeply with the core principles of the Swadeshi movement, demonstrating how a foreign-born concept was reshaped to address Indonesia's unique needs and aspirations.

Similar attempts to revitalise traditional crafts occurred in British Malaya, though with a notably different undercurrent and outcome. The colonial government, ostensibly motivated by a desire to preserve Malay craft skills, established exhibitions and training programs.[150] Groups like the Malayan Arts and Crafts Society (MACS) emerged, spearheaded by wives of colonial officials, and sought to preserve and commercialise selected crafts. However, this intervention was not purely altruistic. As Maznah Mohamad argues, British tariff policies on products like handwoven textiles prioritised their own economic interests, not necessarily the protection of local industries.[151] Furthermore, the focus on generating income for rural Malays often led to a downplaying of the inherent artistic and heritage value of traditional crafts.[152] This tension between commercial viability and cultural preservation mirrored debates within the College of Handicrafts founded by O.T. Dussek. While aiming to uplift rural communities, these initiatives often reinforced the idea of craft as simple "village work" rather than a skilled trade.[153]

Exhibitions became a key tool in this project. Agricultural shows, a fixture in Malaya since the 1880s, prominently featured "Native Industries," positioning Malay products alongside the technical achievements of European planters.[154] The MACS further mediated the process as its "Ladies Selection Committee" shaped products tailored for a largely European clientele.[155] This colonial intervention shifted patronage patterns, emphasising a foreign market's tastes and potentially influencing the crafts' evolution. In contrast, Indonesia's Pasar Malam Nasional, though also a commercial-cultural-political space, represented a push towards a modern, inclusive, and self-reliant society. It is important, however, to remember that even within this seemingly empowering framework, nuanced forms of resistance likely existed. Consumption in colonial Indonesia was not simply a passive act dictated by the capitalist system. It was a contested political arena where ideas of social change were debated

[149] *Soeara Oemoem* Jul 1–18, 1933.
[150] Hwei-Fen Cheah, "Promoting Craft in British Malaya, 1900–1940", *The Journal of Modern Craft* 6, (2), (2013): 165–185.
[151] Maznah Mohamad, *The Malay Handloom Weavers: A Study of the Rise and Decline of Traditional Manufactures*, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1996), 261.
[152] Cheah, "Promoting Craft in British Malaya", 172.
[153] *Ibid*.
[154] G. E. Hall, "Third Joint Annual Agri-Horticultural Show of the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States, 1906", *Agricultural Bulletin of the Straits and Federated Malay States* 8(9), (1906): 307–354.
[155] Cheah, "Promoting Craft in British Malaya", 178.

and enacted. Consider the potential for subtle subversion: while purchasing local batik, a visitor to the Pasar Malam Nasional might consciously reject European imports as a show of support for Swadeshi principles. Similarly, attending an event championing traditional arts and culture could be interpreted as asserting Indonesian identity against colonial cultural dominance. While these acts may not be overt rebellion, they reflect how spaces created for one purpose can be subverted and reimagined by those seeking to reclaim agency within a colonial system. This underscores the complexity of consumerism under oppressive regimes. It reminds us that even seemingly "safe" spaces devised by those in power can become grounds for subtle resistance or alternative expressions of identity.

The dynamic between traditional Indonesian businesses and the rise of department stores is particularly evident in the way Indonesian labor unions went beyond advocating for fair wages and working conditions. By establishing Indonesian-owned shops, pharmacies, and small-scale industries, they sought to create miniature visions of an economically independent Indonesia.[156] An advertisement like the one for "Toko Budi Oetomo", urging people to support Indonesian industry, highlights the deeper meaning behind seemingly ordinary acts of commerce. The simple act of buying an umbrella became a symbol of readiness for a self-reliant future, a symbolic preparation for the day when independence would arrive.[157]

Prominent figures like Sartono (the Dutch-educated lawyer), Raden Panji Soeroso (an advocate for Indonesian labour), and Sutomo (a doctor and social activist) recognised the inherent power of consumerism. They utilised public platforms, such as the Partai Indonesia (Indonesia Party) Congress and the Indonesian Raya Congress, to charge consumer activism with political meaning.[158] Sartono's swadeshi show, promoting traditional batik, signalled a rejection of dependence on imported goods. Likewise, Suroso's critique of imported clothing was not just about trade deficits; he underscored the link between supporting local industries and addressing the unemployment deliberately perpetuated by the colonial economic structure.[159]

The Doenia Dagang article "Sedikit tentang Soal Distribusi" provides a critical lens on this struggle, highlighting the uneven playing field Indonesian merchants face. Department stores (*warenhuis*) held significant advantages like buying in bulk, streamlining operations, and ultimately offering lower prices.[160] "Department stores can sell goods much more cheaply than independent retailers), the article bluntly states."[161] Large department stores were in all

[156] Ingleson, *Workers, Unions and Politics*, 187–188.
[157] *Ibid*., 187; On parasols or umbrella as a symbol status, see Liesbeth Hesselink, "The Unbearable Absence of Parasols: the Formidable Weight of a Colonial Java Status Symbol". *IIAS Newsletter* 45, (Autumn 2007): 26
[158] *Ibid*., 188.
[159] *Ibid*.
[160] "Sedikit tentang Soal Distribusi", *Doenia Dagang* Jan 15, 1939, 1–2.
[161] "Sedikit tentang Soal Distribusi", *Doenia Dagang* Jan 15, 1939, 1. "*Warenhuis jang demikian dapat mendjoealkan barang-barangnja djaoeh lebih moerah dari seorang saudagar etjeran jang berdiri sendiri*."

major cities. They offered a wide variety of goods, from "*tjita Paris*" (Parisian chintz) to "*sajoer dalam kaleng*" (canned vegetables) to "*barang-barang besi*" (iron goods) to "*rokok dan tembakaunja*" (cigarettes and tobacco) at lower prices.[162] Beyond prices, department stores revolutionised the customer experience, offering conveniences like vast product selection under one roof and attentive service that made shoppers feel "treated like royalty".[163] The article draws parallels between the challenges faced by Indonesian businesses and those faced by businesses in other countries, particularly the Netherlands and the United States. It underscores that this struggle was not unique to a colonised society: "In independent countries, this competition is even more intense than in our country."[164] In all three contexts, the rise of department stores (or "big business") posed a significant threat to smaller, traditional businesses.

In the Netherlands, for example, the article notes that the "*middenstand*" (middle class) of merchants faced stiff competition from large department stores. Like their Indonesian counterparts, these Dutch merchants "came from self-made merchants who have no education and no large capital or merchants who are only because of inheritance."[165] As a result, many smaller businesses in the Netherlands were forced to close their doors as they faced pressure from the "*grootdistributie-bedrijf*" who were "increasingly squeezing their position."[166] However, the author highlights a crucial difference: "The old-style merchants are not willing to sit back; they are also changing their position".[167] Dutch and American governments took steps to mitigate the negative effects of department store dominance. Graduated "anti-chain tax bills" aimed to curb the expansion of chain stores and provide an advantage to independent businesses.[168] The article advocates for similar interventions in the Dutch East Indies, understanding the need for outside support to create more equitable opportunities for Indonesian-owned businesses.

Importantly, the article pinpoints a significant weakness among Indonesian merchants: "These qualities are often not found among our nation's sellers/merchants because they generally lack organisation within their businesses."[169] This lack of structure, training, and capital made it difficult to compete on price and match the customer service standards set by department stores. The article highlights the potential for learning from nations like the U.S. and the Netherlands, where shopkeeper associations, cooperatives, and increased training

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[162] *Ibid*.
[163] *Ibid*. "*dihormati sebagai menghormati radja-radja*."
[164] *Ibid*., 2. "*Di negeri-negeri jang merdeka persaingan ini lebih hebat lagi djikalau dibandingkan dengan negeri kita*..."
[165] *Ibid*., 1–2. "*...berasal dari saudagar 'self-made man' jang tidak bersekolah dan tidak bermodal besar atau saudagar tjoema karena poesaka dari orang toeanja.*"
[166] *Ibid*. "*semakin lama semangkin menggentjet kedoedoekan mereka.*"
[167] *Ibid*. "*...akan tetapi saudagar-saudagar model lama itoe tidak maoe tinggal diam, mereka lantas meroebah kedoedoekannja poela*"
[168] *Ibid*.
[169] *Ibid*. "*Sifat-sifat ini atjapkali tidak kedapatan di antara pendjoeal-pendjoeal bangsa kita karena saudagar-saudagar bangsa kita oemoemnya tidak mempoenjai organisasi di dalam pendjoealan*".

access could enhance small Indonesian retailers' competitiveness. This hints at a broader challenge, while the efforts of labour unions and nationalist leaders were commendable, it is important to acknowledge the limits of consumer activism alone in dismantling colonial power structures. For true economic self-reliance, the very foundations of the oppressive colonial system would need to be addressed, including issues like land ownership, access to capital, and the development of technical expertise.

An article, "Kepandaian Mendjoeal" (The Art of Selling) dissects the skills required for successful salesmanship.[170] The author argues that it goes far beyond simply stating prices; it involves influencing and persuading customers: "true salesmanship is present only when the seller can influence the buyer. An unwitting person ends up becoming a buyer."[171] The article emphasises that a skilled salesperson understands psychology, builds rapport, and knows how to handle rejection: "a salesperson must also possess thick ears and a thick face. An inexperienced seller will not be patient if they hear negative comments from customers."[172] The article goes on to contrast European merchants with their Indonesian counterparts. European merchants are noted for their superior training, focus on customer service, and use of sales representatives. "These commercial travellers," the text observes, "found amongst European businesses, are not ordinary people as most assume. Many of them are former high school graduates from Europe with a wealth of experience."[173] The article concludes by advocating for improved salesmanship training within Indonesian businesses to enhance their competitiveness. Recognising this need for enhanced salesmanship and market access, the article "Barang-Barang Producten Anak Negeri" (Products of the Natives) outlines proactive steps to promote Indonesian goods.[174] It focuses on several key areas to address the challenges identified, starting with visibility. The proposed "*monster-kamer*" (permanent exhibition space) in Singapore would be a crucial step, offering a physical space where Chinese intermediaries could experience the range of Indonesian products first-hand: "... a monster-kamer there so that Chinese middlemen can better understand the condition and quality of Indonesian products."[175]

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[170] "Kepandaian Mendjoeal", *Doenia Dagang*, (15 January 1939): 14.

[171] *Ibid*., "*Pandai mendjoeal baroe diseboetkan bilamana si pembeli dapat dipengaroehi oleh pendjoeal. Orang jang tidak sengadja membeli achirnja mendjadi pembeli*."

[172] "Sedikit tentang Soal Distribusi", *Doenia Dagang* Jan 15, 1939, 1–2. "*...haroes poela orang mempoenjai telinga dan moeka jang 'tebal'. Seorang pendjoeal jang beloem memmpoenjai pengalaman tidak akan sabar djikalau ia mendengar perkataan jang koerang baik dari pembeli.*"

[173] *Ibid*., "*Handelsreizigers jang terdapat dikalangan perniagaan orang Eropah, boekanlah orang sembarangan sebagai pengiraan kebanjakan orang. Kebanjakan mereka itoe bekas moerid sekolah tinggi di Eropah dan banjak pola pengalaman*."

[174] "Barang-Barang Producten Anak Negeri", *Doenia Dagang* Jan 15, 1939, 17.

[175] "Barang-Barang Producten Anak Negeri", *Doenia Dagang* Jan 15, 1939, 17., "*...seboeah monster-kamer disana soepaja saudagar-saudagar pertengahan bangsa Tionghoa disana lebih mengetahui keadaan dan kwaliteitnja barang-barang producten dari Indonesia*."

Beyond visibility, the article highlights the importance of building relationships and facilitating smoother transactions. Appointing Chinese-speaking "*adjunct-consulents*" (deputy consultant) would create points of contact who understand the specific needs and preferences of buyers.[176] This initiative directly supports the development of the strong salesmanship skills advocated for in "Kepandaian Mendjoeal", demonstrating a practical application of those principles. The proposed expansion to Batavia and Surabaya recognises the importance of reaching out to major trade hubs within Indonesia. These cities have large populations and are important economic activity centres. By establishing a presence in these cities, Indonesian businesses can gain access to a wider range of potential customers and partners. The emphasis on collaboration with various government agencies demonstrates a holistic approach to promoting Indonesian goods. This is because the government can play a vital role in providing support and resources to businesses. For example, the government can provide financial assistance, training, and market research.[177]

However, the resistance movement's focus on consumer culture was not universally celebrated. This call to "buy Indonesian" did not address systemic economic issues that perpetuated inequalities, creating tension between those who saw consumer activism as a form of resistance and those who, like Sukarno and Hatta, were sceptical of this approach. They cautioned that prioritising consumer-based resistance could overshadow the fight against broader issues like capitalism and imperialism.[178] This underscores a fundamental point of contention within the nationalist movement. While collaboration with government agencies offered practical support, some argued that the very structure of the colonial economy needed dismantling. Consumer choices, even patriotic ones, were seen as potentially insufficient if the root causes of poverty and foreign exploitation remained entrenched.

This critical view highlights how resistance in colonial Indonesia extended beyond the marketplace. While figures like Sukarno and Hatta were sceptical of prioritizing consumer-based resistance, leaders like Sutomo envisioned a form of resistance rooted in civil society and self-reliance.[179] Under Sutomo's leadership, entities like the Indonesian Study Club and its successor, the Persatuan Bangsa Indonesia (Union of the Indonesian Nation), worked towards creating not just labor unions but also socio-economic institutions like the Indonesian National Bank, charities, cooperatives, and schools. This focus, particularly in Surabaya,

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[176] *Ibid*. "*...lebih djaoeh nanti Batavia dan Soerabaja djoega akan mendapat gilirannja. Boeat kedoea tempat itoe akan, dikerdjakan 2 orang adjunct-consulent bangsa Tionghoa ontoek mempropagandakan barang-barang producten dari bangsa kita didalam kalangan saudagar-saudagar bangsa Tionghoa.*"

[177] "Barang-Barang Producten Anak Negeri", *Doenia Dagang* Jan 15, 1939, 17.

[178] "Swadeshi dan Massa-Actie di Indonesia", *Soeloeh Indonesia Moeda* May 6–26, 1932, and Jun, 43–55, 1932. See also Sunario's rejection of swadeshi as applicable to Indonesia in *Persatoean Indonesia* May 10, 20, 30, 1933, 16–25.

[179] John Ingleson, "Sutomo, the Indonesian Study Club and Organised Labour in Late Colonial Surabaya", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies,* (2008): 31–57.

aimed to build parallel structures that could both uplift Indonesian communities and lessen dependence on a colonial economic system viewed as inherently exploitative.[180]

Sutomo's view of resistance took on a unique dimension in the backdrop of the Depression of the 1930s. Unlike those promoting consumer activism as a form of resistance, he argued that crises like the Depression could serve as catalysts for alternative kinds of national activity. This was not simply about buying local products but was instead part of a wider socio-economic development project. In his view, the collapse of the sugar industry and the government's reduction in education spending were not setbacks but opportunities for restructuring society. Here, the crisis became, to use his words, a "kind of fertiliser," an avenue for Indonesians to "spread our wings."[181] This shift in perspective raises critical questions about the nature of resistance itself. While labour unions and entities like the Budi Oetomo shop may have focused primarily on supporting the Indonesian economy, Sutomo and others envisioned fundamental structural changes. They were not just fighting against foreign economic domination; they were also laying the groundwork for a society that was both self-reliant and socially equitable. These initiatives targeted multiple layers of society, including the poor, the widowed, the orphaned, and the unemployed. This multifaceted approach recognised that the fight against colonialism was not solely about economic emancipation but also intertwined with the pursuit of broader social justice.

This divergent focus exposed the limitations of solely employing consumer activism as a tactic for resistance. While such activism was commendable, it risked becoming elitist, neglecting the broader socio-economic transformations that were needed. Figures like Sukarno, Hatta, and Sjahrir were skeptical of a simplistic understanding of resistance, worried it might simply replace one form of economic subjugation—colonialism—with another, such as local capitalism. For instance, *Oetoesan Indonesia* highlighted a critical dilemma: the public's preference for imported Japanese cotton over local batik, despite the latter's cultural significance. This reflects not just economic considerations but also an aspirational quality attached to "modern" and "foreign" goods.[182]

The perspectives of Sjahrir and Sunario further illuminate the multi-layered debates and nuances within resistance movements. Sunario's argument that swadeshi stood for the "creative power of the people themselves" and its role in protecting young industries appears, at first glance, as an extension of a pro-people, grassroots initiative. However, Sjahrir's critique exposes the potential limitations of this view. Sjahrir's dismissal of Sunario's swadeshi as "bourgeois economics" and his criticism of what he perceived as Sukarno's protectionist stance against "Japanese imperialism" through tariffs on cheap imports, get to the heart of a

[180] Ingleson, *Workers, Unions and Politics*, 187.
[181] "Lagi: Malaise kawan kita", *Soeara Oemoem* Oct 17, 1933.
[182] "Pergerakan Swadeshi. Hilang sama sekali", *Oetoesan Indonesia* Jan 19, 1934.

wider debate: who exactly benefits from this form of economic resistance? Sjahrir argued that Sukarno's focus on protecting local industries from foreign competition, while well-intentioned, could inadvertently harm consumers, particularly the working class, by limiting access to affordable goods. This critique exposes the risk of confining resistance to consumer activism, which might serve only a capitalist elite while overlooking the concerns of the average worker or consumer. From the eyes of the consumer, as Sjahrir pointed out, the issue is not about Indonesian versus foreign capitalism but rather about affordability and quality. For the economically disadvantaged, the ideological underpinnings of consumer choices may be a luxury they cannot afford. In that sense, advocating for local industries without addressing the core economic challenges faced by the population could be construed as out of touch or even elitist.[183]

Moreover, Sjahrir's critique adds another layer of complexity by challenging the binary opposition of foreign versus local capitalism. He questioned the nationalist movement's partiality toward local capitalism while condemning its foreign counterpart, revealing the contradictions inherent in this form of resistance. In his view, either form of capitalism could be exploitative. Without a broader socio-economic reform agenda, local capitalism was no better than its foreign counterpart.[184] His critique points to an even deeper issue: the political alignment of resistance movements. The fact that right-wing Dutch colonists' organisations, like the Vaderlandsche Club, also supported swadeshi speaks to the malleability of "resistance" as a concept, susceptible to appropriation by differing ideological camps. Here, the issue was not about consumer activism but how different groups could use the idea of resistance to serve their own ends. In Sjahrir's terms, it was the "mental affinity of the bourgeoisie" that connected seemingly disparate entities, raising questions about the very nature and purpose of anti-colonial resistance.[185]

The cultural ethos of consumption here demonstrates another paradox: resistance through consumer activism could inadvertently perpetuate other forms of inequality and economic dependence, like an overreliance on imports. While activists championed local batik as a symbol of national identity, the irony was that this advocacy seemed disconnected from the economic realities and preferences of the average Indonesian worker. This contradiction underlined the complex relationship between nationalism, consumerism, and resistance in colonial Indonesia. Similarly, the patronage of Chinese-owned shops, even at higher prices, presented another complex layer to the consumer culture in colonial Indonesia. The concern was not just that these shops were not Indonesian-owned but that they perpetuated a form of intra-community capitalism by preferring Chinese products and services.[186] This highlight how

[183] Ingleson, *Workers, Unions and Politics*, 189.
[184] *Ibid*.
[185] "Vaderlandsche Club – Swadeshi – Soekarno", *Daulat Ra'jat* Jul 10, 1933.
[186] "Pergerakan Swadeshi. Hilang sama sekali", *Oetoesan Indonesia* Jan 19, 1934.

what appears to be a straightforward act of resistance against colonialism—supporting local shops—becomes much more complex when one delves into the actual dynamics of the market and consumer preferences. It reveals internal tensions and competing interests within the broader anti-colonial movement. These examples exemplify that resistance in colonial Indonesia cannot be reduced merely to "buy Indonesian" slogans or "support local cooperatives." Such forms of resistance, while important, could unintentionally reinforce economic and social divisions, ranging from class inequalities to ethnically segmented capitalism. Thus, while consumer choices can offer a platform for resistance, they are only one piece of a larger puzzle in Indonesia's path towards self-determination and social transformation. A truly transformative resistance movement would also require thoroughly re-evaluating cultural norms and lifestyle choices to ensure they align with national aspirations.

This emphasis on cultural transformation underscores the potential for everyday actions to impact anti-colonial movements significantly. It challenges colonial norms and ideologies that had become deeply ingrained in society, calling for a reshaping of these norms in accordance with local and indigenous values. In the context of colonial Indonesia and especially Javanese society, this may involve actively redefining one's lifestyle to ensure that personal choices align with national aspirations. It is about reshaping habits to mirror the growing sense of national pride and identity, moving away from aspirational attachment to colonial ways of life. One particularly illustrative example of this transformation can be found in the Dutch-language article "Ter Aanschouwing," published in the *Soeara Indonesia Moeda Soerabaia*.[187] This piece offers a critical examination of everyday life in colonial Java, reflecting the underlying societal shifts and the evolving aspirations of the local population. It underscores the idea that personal aspirations and lifestyle changes are not merely individual acts; rather, they can signify broader societal transformations. The author of the article emphasizes this, stating: "And the most important thing is that not wanting or daring to face one's own defects can be called weak, which can never form a solid basis for the construction of a great nation."[188] This statement, positioned within the context of profound societal change, serves as a call for introspection and self-improvement. Individuals are urged to face their weaknesses – both personal and communal – as a necessary step in constructing a stronger society. It suggests that within this period of transition, there's a need for a deeper reckoning with ingrained habits and attitudes that may impede national development.

Desire and habits such as dressing well or seeking better food and entertainment can be viewed as expressions of a society in transition. These shifting aspirations may also be interpreted as people's attempts to claim a better quality of life within the new socio-political

[187] "Ter Aanschouwing", *Soeara Indonesia Moeda Soerabaya*, 2(1), Aug, 1930, 2–3.
[188] *Ibid*., 2. "*En 't voornaamste is nog wel die, dat het niet onder oogen willen of durven zien van' eigen gebreken zwak genoemd kan worden, dat nooit en te nimmer een degelijke basis kan vormen voor de opbouw van een groote natie.*"

context they find themselves in. However, the author warns about the potential dangers of these aspirations becoming purely materialistic or rooted in economic prosperity without proper regulation of income and expenditure: "So from the above division, I cannot call the good dressing and the well-to-do life of the *baboes* (servant) and chauffeurs, a striving for economic prosperity, when all this is not the result of a good arrangement of income and expenditure."[189] This perspective highlights a critical point: while striving for a better life is important within this changing society, this pursuit should not lead to economic disparity or imbalance. It underscores the complex intersection between individual aspirations and the need for collective well-being.

The article "Mengirit" from *Berita Soerabaja* offers another layer to this conversation, focusing on the importance of mindful frugality within the context of Indonesian economic development.[190] Focused on saving, it emphasizes caution: "Saving or reducing expenses as much as possible has become common for housewives, especially in these times of Depression".[191] However, it underscores the dangers of misguided attempts at saving money: "But many who have already practiced frugality do it in the wrong way ...so that expenses and losses become even greater than before they practiced this economy".[192] This emphasises the importance of finding a sustainable balance between individual financial goals and the broader economic needs of the developing nation. The article's focus on misguided frugality provides a tangible example of the complexities facing individuals within a society undergoing economic and social transformation. One particularly vivid example is a housewife who buys discounted ham: "One housewife has become so frugal, if she previously bought new ham at the store, now she buys discounted ham from a butcher for 75% less than if she bought it at the store. Seventy-five percent saved, that's not a small amount! That's what she thinks".[193] The consequences are dire: "After six months of buying this discount ham, she has gotten a digestive illness, so she had to pay for doctors and medicine, the total of which is more than those seventy-five percent."[194] This example serves as a stark reminder that short-sighted economic decisions can backfire, creating further hardships rather than alleviating them. It

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[189] "Ter Aanschouwing", *Soeara Indonesia Moeda Soerabaya*, 2(1), Aug, 1930, 2. "*Dus haar aanleiding van bovenstaande indeeling kan ik, het goed kleeden en het welgesteldleven van de baboes en chauffeurs pro van br. H., geen strevren naar economisch welvaart noemen, wanner dit alles niet de resultante is van een goede regeling van inkomsten en uitgaven.*"

[190] "Mengirit", *Berita Soerabaja* Sep 15, 1936, 2–3.

[191] *Ibid*., 1, "*Mengirit atawa mengetjilkan ongkos sebisanja soedah mendjadi oemoem bagi sesoeatoe njonja roemah, teroetama dalem ini djaman Malaise*."

[192] *Ibid*. "*Tetapi banjak jang soedah melakoeken bezuiniging itoe dengen tjara jang kliroe...sehingga pengloearan ongkos keroegian mendjadi terlebih besar dari pada sebeloennja marika melakoeken itoe bezuiniging*."

[193] *Ibid*., 2. "*Satoe njonja soedah berlakoe begitoe irit, kaloe tadinja ia beli ham baroe di toko, adalah sekarang ia bell ham afkeuran dari welidjo dengen harga 75 pCt. lebih moerah dari harga kaloe ia beli-ham di toko. Toedjoe poeloe lima percent irit, Itoe boekan satoe djoemblah jang ketjil! Begitoelah ado pikirannja itoe njonj.a*"

[194] "Ter Aanschouwing", *Soeara Indonesia Moeda Soerabaya*, 2(1), Aug, 1930, 2. "*Anem boelan selama ta bell itoe ham afkeuran, la telah dapet penjakit di tempat makannja, schingga ia mesti keloearken ongkos boeat dokter dan obatnja, jang djoemblahnja lebih dari itoe toedjoe poeloe lima percent.*"

underscores the need for informed choices within an evolving and often challenging economic landscape. The article further warns about the hidden time and money costs associated with overly aggressive attempts at saving, suggesting that moderation is key.[195] They expose how economic anxieties can influence behaviour unexpectedly, underscoring the need for a well-thought-out approach to resource management that aligns with broader societal transformation.

As reflected in this discussion, the societal transformation process in Southeast Asia was a complex intertwining of political, social, economic, and personal transformations. As people across the region grappled with their new identity and future, they had to navigate the path between their personal aspirations, societal norms, and national priorities. This journey involved political independence and a revaluation of consumer habits and economic practices in a post-colonial context. For many, this meant a shift away from colonial patterns of consumption, which often privileged imported goods and local elites. People began looking for ways to support domestic industries and express their national identity through consumption choices.

Conclusion

This examination of consumer resistance across Surabaya, Singapore, and Penang reveals how Southeast Asia actively shaped the evolution of consumer culture within the region. Far from mere passive recipients, individuals in these societies engaged in critical negotiation, blending local preferences with global trends to forge a distinctively Southeast Asian consumer identity. Nationalist movements and religious institutions often provided a framework for this resistance, demonstrating the complex intersection of politics, economics, and cultural identity.

It is essential to remember that consumer resistance was not monolithic. While important, movements prioritising slogans like “buy local” had potential limitations. They risked elitism, overlooking broader issues of inequality or inadvertently reinforcing social divisions. More importantly, consumer activism must engage with and challenge deeper systemic issues such as capitalism and imperialism. The complexities highlighted here serve as a vital foundation for the next chapter’s exploration of specific commodities and trade networks shaping this region in the 1920s and 1930s. Understanding the cultural significance embedded within commodities deepens our analysis of consumer choices beyond mere resistance. It offers insights into how global commodities were adapted and interpreted, further contributing to the unique hybrid nature of Southeast Asia’s evolving modern landscape.

The negotiation between resistance, adaptation, and global forces remains an ongoing dynamic within Southeast Asia. This study offers a lens to reconsider the complexities of

[195] *Ibid*.

identity, nationalism, and consumer culture within the region. Analysing this historical moment has lasting implications. Perhaps the legacies of internationalism in the region may provide a buffer against extreme forms of nationalism, suggesting a potential for genuine international cooperation. It highlights that consumer choices are never merely a personal matter; they are embedded in broader power structures and evolving notions of what it means to be modern.

Chapter IV. Advertising and the Shaping of Consumer Desire in Colonial Southeast Asia

Introduction

In 1929, an Indonesian journalist from *Pandji Poestaka* highlighted the term "*zaman reclame!*" or "the age of advertising".[1] While Takashi Shiraishi, in his 1990 publication, described the early twentieth century as "*zaman bergerak*" or "the age in motion," emphasising the rise of nationalist movements, there is an alternative narrative that deserves attention.[2] Political upheavals did not exclusively characterise the 1920s and 1930s in colonial Southeast Asia. There was a concurrent trend: the urban middle class's fervent aspiration towards modernity, with advertising influencing their everyday lives. This era represented a significant transformation in the region's commercial and cultural dynamics, a phenomenon apparent not only in the Dutch East Indies and British Malaya but also in French Indochina, where a Vietnamese novelist echoed the sentiment of the transformative influence of advertising.[3] In this light, Shiraishi's "age in motion" could be more comprehensively understood when juxtaposed against the "age of advertising", offering a multi-faceted view of the era's socio-cultural shifts.

The dynamics between advertising, commodities, shopping, and consumer culture in colonial settings were complex and shaped by the colonial agendas, social hierarchies, and racial distinctions prevalent at the time. This multifaceted relationship is exemplified in Sir Charles Higham's 1924 statement on "advertising," originally delivered at the Tomorrow Club, Caxton Hall, Westminster, and quoted by *The Malayan Saturday Post*, where he lauded advertising as "the greatest power in the world".[4] Higham was a significant figure in this context as a renowned British advertising consultant and author, known for his influential perspectives on advertising's societal impact.[5] His commentary, republished in the *Post*, possibly an editorial or a dedicated article, reflected his professional stance, emphasising advertising's role in shaping public opinion, driving consumption habits, and endorsing a specific "modern" lifestyle aligned with colonial objectives. Including his views was likely a strategic choice by the *Post*, leveraging his expertise to lend credibility to the advertising narrative as a pivotal force in the colonial era.

Additionally, a 1929 article from *The Business Advertiser*, a newspaper in Singapore, proclaims, "Advertisement is the life light and secret of permanent success in every business."[6]

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[1] "Pasar Gambir", *Pandji Poestaka* Aug 30, 1929.
[2] Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion*.
[3] Vu Trong Phung, *Dumb Luck*, trans. N. N. Cam & P. Zinoman (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 14.
[4] "Value of Advertising", *The Malayan Saturday Post* Apr 5, 1924, 13.
[5] Tom Hulme, ""A Nation of Town Criers": Civic Publicity and Historical Pageantry in Inter-war Britain", *Urban History* 44, no. 2 (2017): 275.
[6] "Secret of Advertising", *The Business Advertiser* Aug 1, 1929, 5.

This assertion captures the essence of the era's commercial philosophy, recognising advertising as a fundamental instrument for enduring success. The article's author uses an analogy comparing advertisement to "petroleum" for cars to illustrate its perceived indispensability for the machinery of commerce, paralleling Sir Charles Higham's sentiments on advertising's unparalleled influence. Furthermore, the article's emphasis on advertising as a "great insurance" against setbacks and its ability to function as the "only modern equipment to help every salesman" underlines the critical role of advertising in mitigating the uncertainties of the marketplace.[7] In the colonial market, advertising was more than a mere business tool; it was a strategic medium through which the colonial and capitalist ethos were disseminated, shaping the socio-economic landscape of Southeast Asia. By advocating that "the more you spend for it the better result will follow," the article reflects a commitment to investment in advertising, reinforcing Higham's perspective on its power to mould public opinion and consumer habits. This statement underscores the burgeoning appreciation for advertising in creating a "modern" consumer culture, intertwined with the colonial vision of progress. It resonates with the strategies employed by businesses in Singapore and beyond during that period.

The advent of newspapers in colonial societies since the nineteenth century signified the circulation of ideas and the birth of a "marketplace" in the most literal sense. The emergence of the "public sphere" in the case of Vietnam, for example, was notably catalysed by print media, which concurrently acted as a commercial forum to support the growth of urban consumer culture.[8] From the late 1910s to the mid-1930s, newspapers became crucial vectors for advertising European goods, shaping modern lifestyles radically diverging from pre-existing consumption patterns. The transformation was not unique to Vietnam but a phenomenon across colonial Southeast Asia. This chapter examines how advertising, driven by the growth of print media, played a central role in shaping consumer perceptions and desires across the region. It will investigate the emergence of new forms of leisure and entertainment influenced by an evolving consumer culture. This analysis will be divided into three sections, focusing on how everyday household consumption patterns became sites of contestation as individuals and communities adapted, resisted, and reinterpreted the messages designed to mould their economic behaviours and self-image.

The first section delves into the mechanisms of colonial advertising and the ideologies they promoted. It demonstrates how advertising was not simply selling goods, but an entire worldview aligned with Western notions of progress and often reinforcing colonial hierarchies.

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[7] *Ibid*.

[8] George Dutton, "Advertising, Modernity, and Consumer Culture in Colonial Vietnam,"in *The Reinvention of Distinction: Modernity and the Middle Class in Urban Vietnam*, Vol. 2, ed. Van Nguyen-Marshall, Lisa B. Welch Drummond, and Danièle Bélanger (Dordrecht: Springer Science & Business Media, 2011), 21. See also, Shawn McHale, *Print and Power* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2004).

The focus will be on how imagery, language, and targeted marketing were employed to persuade and manipulate not just specific demographics but the broader public. This included regional elites, seen as potential opinion leaders and tastemakers, and the general population exposed to these messages through print media and other channels. It will expose the contradictions within these messages, which often promised "empowerment" through consumption but ultimately reinforced existing power imbalances.

The second section builds upon this foundation, focusing on advertisers' specific marketing strategies to link products to pre-existing desires and routines. This section will examine how businesses created ads that appealed to the complex needs of those navigating colonial Southeast Asia. Strategies might include appeals to local traditions alongside images of Western luxury, creating new "needs", or using local figures to endorse products. The analysis will reveal how advertisers often exploited anxieties about social status or navigated tensions between tradition and modernity to make their products seem essential. The third section explores how advertising exploited cultural and religious moments to promote consumerism. Advertisements targeting holidays, celebrations, and religious festivals (like Christmas, Hari Raya, Deepavali, and Chinese New Year) will be analysed to reveal the strategic reshaping of traditions. It will demonstrate how consumer goods became infused with cultural significance, sometimes supplementing and sometimes undermining the original meanings associated with these festivals. This analysis will highlight the transformative power of advertising to link seemingly unrelated products to deeply held traditions and exploit the desire for both celebration and modernity to drive consumption.

This chapter argues that, within the colonial context, advertising went beyond simply promoting goods. It deliberately cultivated a longing for a Western-defined notion of "modernity" – a vision inseparable from consumption and its power to reshape cultural and religious identity. Advertising became a powerful weapon, strategically distorting Southeast Asian traditions and celebrations into opportunities to promote consumerist aspirations. This strategy reinforced colonial hierarchies, aiming to reshape local identities into those of eager consumers. However, it is crucial to note that the impact of these campaigns is complex to trace. While the ubiquity of such ads suggests a powerful influence, we might lack sources revealing how everyday people respond to these messages. It is here that this analysis must be cautious but investigative. Did targeted consumers fully embrace the commercialised vision of "modernity"? Likely not. But the absence of direct evidence of resistance does not mean it was not there. This analysis reveals that advertising in colonial Southeast Asia was far more than simple economic messaging. It became a contested arena where the struggle over identity, agency, and cultural meaning was waged, even as colonial forces sought control.

Zaman Reclame: Advertising and the Construction of "Modernity"

Figure 42. Advertisements on De Indische Courant.[9]

The proliferation of advertisements in a colonial-era newspaper such as *De Indische Courant* indicates a burgeoning consumer culture (See Figure 42 above). The sheer volume of adverts on a single page, often taking up to 80% of the space, transformed the newspapers into a de facto marketplace, presenting readers with many consumer choices at their fingertips. Despite the economic downturn following the 1929 crisis, the continued presence and even expansion of advertising suggests that while the broader economy struggled, certain industries – like publishing and entertainment – found ways to adapt.[10] The introduction of various new periodicals and greater accessibility to entertainment in urban centres further underscores this. However, to fully grasp the cultural shifts of this period, a deeper analysis of advertisements is needed. Beyond providing a list of goods, advertisements in newspapers like *De Indische Courant* served as crucial platforms for businesses to shape desires and disseminate ideas

[9] *De Indische Courant* Oct 29, 1929.
[10] Jan van der Putten, "Negotiating the Great Depression: The Rise of Popular Culture and Consumerism in Early-1930s Malaya", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 41, (1), (2010): 22.

about modernity and consumerism. This reveals a complex interplay between global economic forces and local cultural responses. Despite economic hardship, the period saw a diversification of leisure activities and consumer goods, demonstrating a persistent, evolving desire for consumption and entertainment, fuelled and shaped by these commercial messages.

The resilience of consumer culture in Southeast Asia during economic hardship mirrors a similar phenomenon in 1930s America. Despite the Depression, the US entertainment industry innovated to survive, with film studios introducing sound films and new genres, while radio networks saw a rise in advertising revenue.[11] This American experience, where commercial messaging thrives even amidst economic downturn, provides an insightful reference point for analysing developments within colonial Southeast Asia. Did similar strategies – the use of advertising and the evolution of entertainment options – help shape responses to economic hardship in Malaya (Singapore and Penang)? However, it is crucial to remember that the specific dynamics of this process in Malaya (Singapore and Penang) differed significantly from those in the U.S. The smaller market size, cultural diversity, and the power structures of colonialism created unique conditions that shaped how these commercial messages were received.[12] The very concept of "mass culture" must be understood within the limitations of its development in Southeast Asia compared to the US. Despite these differences, the broader trend – the use of advertising and emerging entertainment industries to fuel desires and circulate capital – did find echoes in the colonial context. Understanding how these global economic and cultural shifts were adapted and localised is key to grasping the evolving nature of consumerism under colonial influence in Southeast Asia.

This analysis becomes even more complex when considering the region's unique demographics. Unlike in the United States, where the dynamics of immigration drove societal change, Malaya's colonial structure created different outcomes. The region's diverse populations – primarily Malay, with significant Chinese and Indian immigrant communities – were maintained as distinct groups, often with the expectation of eventual repatriation.[13] This approach, designed partly to mitigate the socio-economic pressures of unemployment during the Depression, had profound implications for how consumer culture developed. Advertisements might target specific ethnic groups or tap into anxieties about social mobility

[11] van der Putten, "Negotiating the Great Depression", 23.
[12] *Ibid*., 25.
[13] Huff, 'Entitlements, destitution, and emigration', 295; The classification of ethnic groups in the colonial era, including "Chinese", "Indians", and "Malays", did not reflect the internal diversity of these populations. Terms like "Chinese" and "Indians" were broad and failed to distinguish between distinct sub-groups, such as Hokkiens and Teochews, or Tamil and Gujarati individuals, respectively. Similarly, the "Malays" category included people from diverse backgrounds within the Malay Archipelago, like Bugis and Acehnese. This is mirrored in colonial Indonesia's classifications, which included Javanese, Sundanese, Bataknese, among others, under the "indigenous" umbrella, pointing towards a broader pattern of colonial classification that often blurred the rich diversity of regional identities.

within those groups. Still, they would not have the same potential to create a sense of unified, national "mass culture" that existed in the US.

These dynamics played out starkly in the Straits Settlements (Singapore, Penang, and Melaka). By 1931, migration trends had significantly transformed these territories, with Malays increasingly outnumbered, a reality that heightened anxieties about the influence and visibility of "foreign races" (*bangsa asing*) within the colonial system. The Chinese emerged as the dominant ethnic group, comprising 59.6% of the population.[14] This demographic shift had profound consequences for consumer culture. Advertising had to target diverse communities with different tastes and purchasing power while also navigating tensions around ethnic identity and the perceived threat of non-Malay economic dominance. Singapore mirrored these complexities. Like the larger region, colonial Singapore grappled with the challenges of a multi-ethnic society where cultural integration was limited. Similar patterns could be found in colonial Indonesia, with cities like Surabaya featuring a mix of indigenous and other Asian ethnic populations, such as Arabs and Chinese. However, it is crucial to remember that, in each case, colonial power structures shaped who had access to consumer goods and how those goods became tied to expressions of cultural belonging. This control over the economy heightened pre-existing tensions and anxieties, fuelling economic nationalism among marginalised groups.

This backdrop of immigration and ethnic separation set the stage for the locals' rising political consciousness and economic aspirations. Malay newspapers of the time played a pivotal role in fostering these sentiments, encouraging self-education and vigilance against economic domination by immigrants. As demographic shifts made Malays a minority within their own territories, tensions escalated. Publications like Penang's prominent newspaper *Saudara* reflected this reality, expressing fears of diminishing Malay influence in political and economic spheres. This awakening to economic disadvantages, particularly during the post-1931 Depression, sparked calls for independence from foreign dominance.[15] It is important to note that while these publications often reinforced stereotypes about Malay vulnerability, they acted as commercial enterprises. Their narratives were shaped by the need to attract readers and, thus, reflected both genuine anxieties and strategic attempts to build a loyal audience within a competitive media landscape.[16] This tension between genuine concerns and the

[14] C. A. Vlieland, *British Malaya (the Colony of the Straits Settlements and the Malay states under British Protection, namely the Federated Malay States of Perak, Selangor, Negri Semhilan and Pahang and the States of Johore, Kedah, Kelantan, Trengganu, Perils and Brunei: A Report on the 1931 Census and on Certain Problems of Vital Statistics)* (London: Crown Agents for the Colonies, 1932), 36; See also Joel S. Kahn, *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World*, (Singapore: Asian Studies Association of Australia in association with Singapore University Press, 2006), 37–43.

[15] Emmanuel, "Viewspapers", 5.

[16] van der Putten, "Negotiating the Great Depression", 25–27.

commercial realities of the press becomes even clearer when examining a pivotal shift within the Malay vernacular press towards the end of the 1920s.

As scholar William Roff noted, this period saw the rise of Malay-Muslim entrepreneurs who recognised the potential profitability of periodical publications.[17] This shift is embodied by figures like Syed Syekh Al-Hadi, who launched the secular weekly *Saudara* in 1928. *Saudara*, a contrast to Al-Hadi's earlier, religiously focused *Al-Ikhwan*, marked a significant change in strategy.[18] This diversification in content signalled a desire to appeal to a broader audience, illustrating how the very definition of "Malay news" evolved alongside economic and cultural shifts in colonial Malaya. It underscores that while the press played a crucial role in voicing anxieties and aspirations, it was also fundamentally shaped by the desire for commercial success. This new breed of newspapers took a proactive stance in fostering political consciousness amongst Malays. They called for education and vigilance and promoted entrepreneurship as a defence against the encroachment of "aliens"—a term used to describe non-Malay influences and entities seen as pervading all sectors of life. While playing into the trope of Malays besieged by external threats, these narratives served a dual purpose. They rallied readers to a cause while aligning with the periodicals' commercial interests. In this way, we see how the media acted as both an instrument of influence and a for-profit business. Such content catered to the day's anxieties, potentially driving strong readership and advertising revenue.

This complex relationship between media influence and commercial interests takes an intriguing turn when examining the presence of advertisements for potentially controversial products, especially those seen as conflicting with Islamic values. The appearance of ads in Malay-language newspapers for products such as Tiger Beer and other alcoholic beverages highlights a curious aspect of "modernity" during the colonial era. This juxtaposition reveals a tension within the push toward cosmopolitan consumerism. Did publishers justify these commercial choices by catering to the desires of a minority of more secular readers, or did they deem this a necessary contradiction of a "modern" media landscape operating within colonial constraints? The absence of sources on public reaction makes this dynamic challenging to understand fully. However, the very existence of these ads points to the complexities of navigating cultural values, consumer desires, and commercial ambition within the Malay media of the time.

Advertisements for Tiger Beer from 1934 and Robert Porter Co. from 1933, featured in *Majlis* and *Warta Malaya*, respectively, reveal the nuanced approach to consumerism during the economic downturn (As discussed in Chapter 2).[19] These examples highlight the tensions

[17] Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, 166.
[18] William R. Roff, *Bibliography of Malay and Arabic Periodicals Published in the Straits Settlements and Peninsular Malay States, 1876–1941*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 8.
[19] *Warta Malaya* Feb 28, 1933, 13.

and contradictions we've been discussing. As we have seen, newspapers played a role in promoting nationalism and economic self-determination for Malays. Yet, they were also commercial enterprises that relied on advertising revenue. Therefore, we see intriguing strategies at play within these same publications. The Fraser and Neave Company's campaign for Tiger Beer utilises the Jawi script, which is indicative of targeting the Malay-speaking audience of the *Majlis*. The advertisement portrays a man in traditional attire, raising a glass of beer, which aligns with the celebratory nature often associated with alcoholic beverages. However, using the Jawi script and the cultural attire of the figure in the image can be seen as a strategic juxtaposition of a "modern" consumer product within a traditional context. This might have been a deliberate attempt to bridge cultural divides, promoting the product across different segments of colonial society while attempting to sidestep seeming to violate religious norms.

The advertisement for Robert Porter Co., displayed in *Warta Malaya*, takes a different approach, depicting the iconic "Bulldog" brand imagery alongside the Jawi script. This suggests an appeal to both the colonial English heritage of the brand and the local population familiar with the script. This strategy imbues the product with a sense of cosmopolitan sophistication, a common colonial-era marketing tactic. By associating the product with Britishness and the local language, this ad aimed to attract Malay consumers by linking beer consumption to worldly status. Both advertisements demonstrate the complexity of "modernity" in colonial-era marketing strategies. Amidst the economic struggles, they highlight a commercial duality: leveraging local cultural elements to promote products intrinsically linked with Western lifestyles and leisure. These tactics reflect the ongoing ambiguity in defining and appropriating modernity within the consumer culture of colonial Southeast Asia. Yet, while highlighting this tension is crucial, it is equally important to acknowledge who was consuming these messages.

While the literate bourgeois class was indeed pivotal in newspaper and periodical publishing, the 1930s saw an expansion in the Malay press's audience to include a broader demographic across the Malay Peninsula. This diversification facilitated the development of new public opinion forms, with newspapers becoming a platform for communal views and dialogues in Malaya, including Penang and Singapore.[20] The advertisements for Western goods, enjoyed by Malays, Chinese, and Indians, point to a consumer market that is not limited to a single religious or ethnic group. Additionally, the longevity of publications in Jawi, well into the independence era, suggests the limits of assuming a simple replacement of "traditional" culture by wholesale Westernisation. Instead, these publications point to a more complex process of adaptation, where elements of "tradition" and "modern consumerism" became intertwined.

[20] Emmanuel, "Viewspapers", 2.

Marketing Strategies and the Manipulation of Consumer Desire

The article "The Meaning of the Brand for the Consumer", published in *Middenstandsnieuws* in 1932, provides a fascinating glimpse into the sophisticated marketing strategies employed to promote consumer goods in the early twentieth century.[21] The author highlights how marketing shifted from merely informing consumers about existing products to actively manipulating their desires. This was achieved by tapping into subconscious motivations to make branded goods seem indispensable to the modern consumer. The author describes this strategy, observing that "advertising for branded goods is no longer a promotion of what is offered for sale; it has become a means of gaining prominence in the consciousness and even the buyer's subconscious."[22]

This shift is particularly relevant within the colonial context. Marketing campaigns could exploit the desire for modernity and the perceived association between Western brands and a sophisticated lifestyle. The author recognises the power of this approach, noting that the perceived quality of branded goods often allowed for significantly higher prices, even when the actual physical product did not justify this premium. This reveals how marketing drove aspirational consumption, with consumers often willing to pay more for goods that promised status and belonging in the modern world. The article provides concrete instances of this strategy. The author notes the linguistic shift from common names to brand names in everyday speech, with products like Aspirin, Salarine, Lysol, and Odol becoming ubiquitous.[23] This phenomenon shows "the brand name then becomes a generic name in colloquial use, and people find it so common in a relatively short period of time that they no longer even know that the actual generic name is or was different."[24] This illustrates how successful marketing blurred the lines between a specific product and a whole category of goods, demonstrating the power of branding to shape consumer behaviour.

This transformation in consumer language reflects a broader shift in the advertising industry. The modern advertising agency, which emerged in the nineteenth century, introduced specialised services, including copywriting, artwork, and campaigns tailored to new media like radio and cinema.[25] This global shift in advertising was not limited to Southeast Asia but manifested distinct characteristics in the region due to colonial power dynamics. For instance, European-owned agencies in Southeast Asia used their colonial connections to establish dominance. Agencies such as Masters, founded in 1928, focused on serving

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[21] "The Meaning of the Brand for the Consumer", *Middenstandsnieuws* Jul, 1932, 127–130.

[22] *Ibid*., 127. "*de reclame voor merkartikelen is niet meer een aanprijzing van het te koop gebodene, zij is een middel geworden tot verkriging van den voorrang in het bewustzijn en zelfs het ondedewustzijn van den kooper."*

[23] *Ibid*. 128.

[24] *Ibid*. "*de merknaam wordt dan in het praakgebruik een soortnaam en men vindt dit nen betrekkelijk korte periode zoo gewoon, dat I niet eens meer weet, dat de feitelijke soortnaam i andere is of was*."

[25] Robert Crawford, "'But Nobody Talks to Accountants': the Growing Influence of the Finance Department in the Advertising Agency", *Accounting History Review* 30, no. 1 (2020): 93.

Western clients and leveraging networks that reinforced European legitimacy in the marketplace.[26] This manipulation of consumer desires through advertising not only encouraged the consumption of goods but also solidified racial and social hierarchies within the colonies.

In British Malaya, for instance, the establishment of formal advertising structures, such as the Association of Accredited Advertising Agents of Malaya (AAAAM) in 1948, further entrenched European dominance by excluding Chinese-owned agencies from key networks.[27] This limited competition and reinforced perceptions of European superiority within the marketplace. The role of these advertising agencies in shaping modern consumer culture was not simply a passive transmission of Western ideals but an active adaptation that capitalised on existing colonial structures. The strategies used by advertising agencies, discussed in Chapter 2, provide important context for understanding how modernity and consumer desire were carefully crafted in colonial settings.

The development of advertising in the Dutch East Indies mirrored some of these trends, but also displayed unique features. As in British Malaya, European-owned agencies dominated the top tier of the industry, catering primarily to affluent colonial consumers or businesses selling imported Western goods. This clientele influenced the design of advertisements, with many focusing on prestige and status, assuming familiarity with brands among European consumers.[28]

[26] Crawford, "But Nobody Talks to Accountants", 56.
[27] Robert Crawford, "Relocating Centers and Peripheries: Transnational Advertising Agencies and Singapore in the 1950s and 1960s," *Enterprise & Society* 16, no. 1 (2015): 56.
[28] Lucia Sumarijanto, "*In Search of a Style, The Issue of Cultural Identity and Graphic Design in Indonesia*," Master's dissertation, Pratt Insititute School of Art and Design, 2003), 35.

Figure 43. Bier Itam Tjap Ayam Advertisement.[29]

In contrast, advertisements aimed at less affluent or non-European audiences often took a different approach, relying on detailed illustrations or cultural references to resonate with local tastes. This strategy is exemplified by the *Bier Itam Tjap Ayam* advertisement (See Figure 43 above). Instead of relying on brand recognition, this ad uses visual elements designed to appeal to an Indonesian working-class audience. Instead of relying on brand recognition, this ad used visual elements designed to appeal to an Indonesian working-class audience. Its depiction of an Asian figure immersed in a hectic work setting, signified by the word "Senen" ("Monday"), highlights the product as a source of relaxation or reward after a long day.[30] This approach contrasts with ads for imported beer brands, which often relied on European imagery and appeals to prestige. This contrasts with ads for imported beer brands, which often relied on European imagery and appeals to prestige. The Bier Itam ad reveals the hierarchical nature of the colonial consumer marketplace, where advertisers tailored their strategies to different segments of society based on race, class, and cultural background.

The complexity of advertising in colonial Southeast Asia extended beyond the visual elements of the ads themselves. The structure of the advertising industry, with its racial and social divisions, was just as crucial in shaping consumer experiences. European agencies like Albrecht & Co. and Excelsior catered primarily to colonial elites, while significant Chinese-owned agencies, such as N.V. Tjong Hok Long and Yap Goan Ho, also played an essential role in the local market. Indigenous entrepreneurs were not absent either, with agencies like N.V. Hardjo Soediro and N.V. Soesman catering to local consumers. The brief foray of the American agency J. Walter Thompson into the region highlights the international dimension of this competitive and racially segmented advertising landscape.[31]

This diversity within the advertising industry did not diminish the broader colonial hierarchies. Instead, advertising played an active role in reinforcing racial and class divisions. By promoting Western products as symbols of modernity and success, advertisements reinforced the notion that progress and modernity were inherently linked to the consumption of European goods. Furthermore, advertising strategies that manipulated consumer desires based on racial and social status perpetuated the power imbalances within the colonies. The relentless promotion of a "modern" lifestyle—framed through the lens of Western consumption—helped deepen the existing inequalities within colonial society. These dynamics reveal a crucial similarity between the Dutch East Indies and British Malaya: the power of advertising to both reflect and actively

[29] Sumarijanto, "In Search of a Style", 66–68.
[30] *Ibid*.
[31] Maartje Brattinga, "Advertising in the Dutch East Indies in Search of the Tropical Style", *Wimba, Jurnal Komunikasi Visual & Multimedia* 6, no. 2 (2014): 3.

reinforce colonial hierarchies. The structure of the advertising industry mirrored existing racial and social divisions. But beyond that, whether through visual storytelling in cinema slides or detailed illustrations in print advertisements, the content of advertisements themselves deliberately targeted specific demographics based on race and class, perpetuating these divisions. Additionally, by relentlessly promoting a vision of "modern" lifestyles inseparable from Western products and consumption, advertising exploited anxieties about progress and status, potentially deepening existing power imbalances within the colonies.


DRUKKERIJ & COPIEERINRICHTING
„HANNY"
Kramat Gantoeng 111, Soerabaja. Tel. 4648 Z.

AFDEELING DRUKKERIJ

Terima segala pesenan pertjitakan (drukwerken) jang netjis dan harga moerah.

AFDEELING COPIEERINRICHTING

Terima segala pesenan pertjitakan (copieerwerken) jang netjis dan tjepet. Pesenan moelai dari 25 sampe 100 lembar. Teroetama boeat pertjitakan spoed.

Pesenan besar atawa ketjil bisa diambil dan dianter sampe di toko atawa kantoor, dengen zonder tambah ongkos apa-apa.

Figure 44. Hanny Drukkerij Advertisement.[32]

This market segmentation is evident in advertisements like the "Hanny" ad in the *Berita Soerabaja* (See Figure 44 above). By using Malay, focusing on practical services like printing and copying, and emphasising affordability, Hanny clearly targets a local Indonesian-speaking clientele. This provides a sharp contrast with firms like "Western Advertising Service," which used English and emphasised "sophistication" to appeal to the European elite. This juxtaposition highlights how advertisers deliberately tailored their messages based on assumptions about both the language and socioeconomic class of their target audience, ultimately reinforcing existing social hierarchies.

[32] *Berita Soerabaja* Jan 30, 1936, 4.

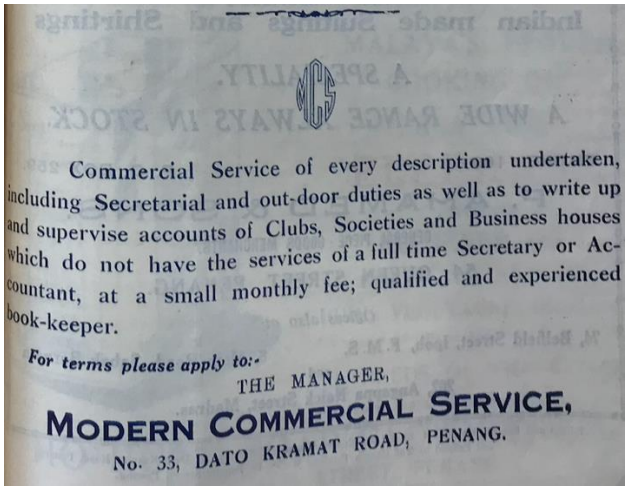

Figure 45. Modern Commercial Service Advertisement.[33]

However, the impact of the consumer goods market extended beyond the design and placement of ads. The ad for the "Modern Commercial Service" illustrates how it fuelled the growth of new specialised services (See Figure 45 above). The focus on secretarial and accountancy work suggests a shift toward more sophisticated business practices likely linked to the expanding advertising industry and the complex commercial landscape of the colony. This highlights a key point: the changes driven by consumer culture did not just impact what people bought but transformed the structure of economic activity in places like Penang.

This transformation is underscored by the emergence of companies like "Modern Commercial Service" and "Western Advertising Service," demonstrating how the "*zaman reclame*" involved more than just selling goods. It marked the adoption of advertising as a key component of everyday economic life. This period saw sophisticated advertising techniques alongside the rise of commercial services catering to these modernising trends. Advertising became ubiquitous, permeating magazines and cinema halls, reflecting the shift towards a complex, integrated consumer culture within the colonies. The success of these businesses highlights both the adaptability of local entrepreneurs and the eagerness of consumers to participate in the "modern" lifestyle promised through advertising. Instead of merely receiving Western goods, colonial society was reshaped around consumption itself.

[33] *Penang Shopping Corner* Nov 3, 1939, 19.

Figure 46. Nestle Food Advertisement on Singapore Electric Tramcar 1914.[34]

This transformation went beyond traditional forms of advertising. The decision by the Pinang Gazette Press, Ltd. to secure exclusive advertising rights on Penang's tramcars as early as 1920, signals a strategic shift (See Figure 46 above).[35] This move reflects the growing recognition of commercial messaging's potential power in public spaces. This foray into public transport advertising underscores how advertising ceased to be a passive encounter in print media, instead seeping into the everyday lives of colonial society and transforming into an inescapable part of the urban experience.

Tramcars played a vital role in this evolution, as relatively new forms of transportation at the time allowed city dwellers to experience the excitement of modern technology alongside their counterparts in other parts of the world.[36] Tramcar ads combined the medium's novelty with modernity's excitement, creating a powerful and immersive experience. This move highlights a period when advertising's omnipresence began to crystallise. By repeatedly exposing commuters to advertising messages, the continuous movement of tramcars mirrored the unceasing flow of commercial influence, ensuring these messages were widespread and ingrained in the rhythm of daily life. This strategic decision suggests an understanding that visibility and repetition in high-traffic public spaces could significantly amplify advertising's impact.

This historical insight into tramcar advertisements enriches our comprehension of the "*zaman reclame*". It reveals how advertisers actively sought to integrate commercial messages

[34] https://www.roots.gov.sg/Collection-Landing/listing/1158921 (Accessed, 25 March 2024).
[35] *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 2 January 1920: 2.
[36] Lewis, *Cities in Motion*, 49.

within the shared spaces of the colonial city, going beyond traditional print media. This underscores the evolution of advertising strategies within Southeast Asia – even in the 1920s, advertisers understood the power of making their messages omnipresent in daily life. The progression from static print ads to dynamic transportation displays highlights a transformative period. Advertising saturated the urban landscape, becoming an inescapable element of these cities and reflecting a profound societal shift towards both modernity and commercialism.

This shift was not merely a passive consequence of commercial development, but actively debated in places like Penang. The writings of H.G. Sarwar in the *Penang Shopping Corner* magazine demonstrate that there was a critical commentary on advertising within the colony.[37] Sarwar's diverse background, including his education and positions in the Malayan Civil Service, likely shaped his perspective, providing insights that combine local understanding with a broader global awareness of this emerging phenomenon.[38] Sarwar critically observes, "Advertising has become an art of which our civilisation is proud. It depicts our state of culture."[39] This statement acknowledges the pervasive influence of advertising in shaping cultural norms and societal values. Sarwar's commentary suggests that advertising, far from being a mere commercial tool, had evolved into a significant cultural force, reflecting and shaping the era's collective consciousness.

He further articulates the manipulative power of advertising, stating, "We have developed the art of mixing truth and ultra-truth in a manner that even Satan himself may sit at our feet to learn." Sarwar's critique here is sharp and emotional. He implies that the blending of truth with exaggeration in advertising could mislead consumers, raising ethical questions about the responsibility of advertisers and the gullibility of the public. Delving into the realm of cinema advertisements, Sarwar's critique becomes even more pointed. He says, "Not even angels could design the pictures and wordings of our cinema announcements." This statement highlights the hyperbolic nature of cinema advertising, where the grandiosity of the visual and textual content often bordered on fantasy, potentially distorting public perception of reality.

Sarwar also addresses the impact of advertising on youth, mainly through cinema, pointing out the aspirational but potentially misleading narratives that films present: "The films also educate us in the way we can open iron-safes; break windows, jump into bed-rooms, and a lot of other useful means of getting the sinews of war for enjoying life." Here, Sarwar critically examines how cinema, as a medium popularised through advertising, not only entertained but subtly influenced young viewers' behaviours and aspirations, blurring the lines between entertainment and moral instruction. Furthermore, Sarwar's insights into the advertising of health tonics and elixirs warn of the darker side of consumer culture: "What does it matter if

[37] "The Fascination of Advertisements", *Penang Shopping Corner* Dec, 1939, 10–11.
[38] Wazir Jahan Karim, *Hafiz Ghulam Sarwar (1873-1954): A Biographical Review* (George Town, Penang: Straits G.T. Intersocietal and Scientific (INAS), 2008).
[39] "The Fascination of Advertisements", *Penang Shopping Corner* Dec, 1939, 11.

the reaction leaves him debilitated? He has only to try some more pills and potions till he is ripe for his grave many years earlier than he would have been otherwise." This critique reflects concerns about the misleading nature of health-related advertisements and the potential harm they could inflict on gullible consumers.

In Sarwar's critical examination, the era of "*zaman reclame*" emerges not merely as a period of growing advertising and consumer culture but also as a time marked by complex social and ethical dilemmas. As a well-educated and multilingual intellectual in colonial Southeast Asia, Sarwar's insights provide an invaluable perspective on the multifaceted impacts of advertising. His critique reveals the double-edged sword of advertising: while it promoted modernity and consumerism, it also raised pressing questions about cultural authenticity, ethical responsibility, and the societal consequences of persuasive commercial messaging. Sarwar's critique reveals that colonial Southeast Asia's "*zaman reclame*" had significant social and ethical challenges. His insights lead us to reflect on how advertising influenced societal norms and personal desires, positioning it as a key player in shaping the era's modernity. This perspective allows us to explore advertising's dual role in reflecting and moulding contemporary cultural trends.

The article "Secret of Advertisement" exemplifies the bold promises and anxieties that coexisted during this era.[40] The text's insistent tone – "OH! WHAT A PITY! How could the poor Salesmen perform their duties without the help of Advertisement" – and its near-religious fervour about the power of advertising highlights the relentless pressure placed on businesses to embrace advertising or risk failure.[41] However, while the excerpt frames advertising as indispensable to success, its focus on "a wider circle of business men" suggests the limitations of who, strictly, was intended to benefit from this modern approach.[42] This hints that even within the celebratory world of advertisement, there were undercurrents of inequality and manipulation.

This tension between idealistic visions of progress and the realities of who could profit is likely a point of focus for critics like Sarwar. By examining his work alongside these exuberant advertisements, we gain a nuanced understanding of the "*zaman reclame*." It was not merely about selling new goods, but about transforming society itself, creating both hopes for a better future and fertile ground for exploiting anxieties and desires. This tension was likely heightened by economic conditions like the slump mentioned in "The Value of Advertising".[43] This sense of urgency persists in the *Penang Monthly Advertiser* excerpt. It emphasises that advertising has evolved from a luxury into a perceived necessity for struggling businesses. The focus on reaching "the heart of every home" highlights a shift from merely informing

[40] "Secret of Advertisement", *The Business Advertiser* Aug 1, 1929, 5.
[41] *Ibid*.
[42] *Ibid*.
[43] "The Value of Advertising", *The Penang Monthly Advertiser* Dec, 1933, 24.

customers about products to cultivating specific desires. This reveals the core of the advertising industry's power: its ability not just to reflect changing consumer preferences but actively shape what people see as essential for modern life.

This manipulative power extended beyond traditional product ads. The notion that personal images acted as "advertisements" for modernity suggests how seemingly private choices became linked to public displays of status and "progress." As Henk Schulte Nordholt argues, the increased availability of print media caused this phenomenon. Advertisements did not just sell physical goods; they sold the idea of a modern lifestyle.[44] This likely created intense pressure within the indigenous middle class to cultivate an external image that aligned with aspirational norms, highlighting how consumption itself could become a performance of modernity.

Figure 47. Philips Advertising.[45]

The Philips lightbulb advertisement in *Pandji Poestaka*, vividly demonstrates the power of these images (See Figure 47 above). The depiction of a Javanese family bathed in the product's soft glow promises better lighting and deeper. By carefully blending domesticity with symbols of progress - the book, the embroidery, the cigarette and the newspaper - the ad weaves a narrative where modernity and traditional family life are inseparable. Including a

[44] Henk Schulte Nordholt, "Modernity and Middle Classes", 223–255.
[45] Henk Maier, "Maelstrom and electricity," in *Outward Appearances: Dressing State and Society in Indonesia*, ed. Henk Schulte Nordholt (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1997), 184.

newspaper is incredibly clever, hinting at access to broader knowledge and highlighting how the media reflected and shaped ideas of what constituted a desirable modern life.

This carefully constructed image suggests that purchasing a Philips lightbulb signified not just improving one's home, but participating in a grander narrative of advancement and self-improvement. This image highlights how advertisers exploited the complexities of navigating modernity within a colonial context, particularly for those who sought to reconcile tradition and aspirations for social mobility. The ad's focus on domestic life and modernity subtly reflects the broader role of advertising. The inclusion of the newspaper hints at global progress, but its depiction of another lightbulb advertisement reveals a self-referential quality. This emphasises the cyclical nature of consumer influence: ads create desires, those desires lead to purchases, and new ads are created to entice further consumption.

This strategy marks a significant shift from earlier Philips ads like the classic "Farmer and Wife" poster, which targeted a Dutch audience with images of rural tradition.[46] The contrast between Philips's earlier focus on European nostalgia and the "modernised domesticity" of the Javanese family ad reveals how companies actively manipulated notions of modernity to promote products within the complex social landscape of the colony. This underscores a central theme of the "*zaman reclame*": advertising did not just sell products, it sold an aspirational vision of progress that could be tailored to diverse audiences.

[46] "Eyecatchers: the heyday of graphic design in Philips advertising" Accessed 16 February 2024. https://www.philips.nl/en/a-w/philips-museum/stories/eyecatchers.html

Holidays for Sale: Reshaping Traditions Through Advertising

Figure 48. Jewellery, B. P. De Silva Ltd. Advertisement.[47]

B.P. De Silva's Christmas advertising strategy (See Figure 48 above) exemplifies how advertisers actively reshaped cultural practices to generate new forms of consumer desire. While referencing Christmas, the ad's focus on Santa Claus and wreaths reflects a secularised version of the holiday. This choice suggests a strategic effort to make the appeal broader, reaching beyond the Christian community within colonial Southeast Asia. By promoting the exchange of jewellery as gifts, the ad links the celebration to material goods and notions of "success" and "taste." This reveals how the concept of "progress" became intertwined with globalised consumption under commercial influence.[48] This strategy raises critical questions

[47] *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* Dec 19, 1938, 4.
[48] *Ibid*.

about whether this commercially driven "modernity" created new forms of inequality and potentially diluted the deeper meaning of traditional celebrations within Southeast Asia.

It is crucial to consider that even where localised elements persist, the overall context irrevocably shifts as new holiday rituals are promoted through ads like these. As Christmas becomes increasingly tied to store-bought gifts, this could potentially displace more personal forms of gift-giving or de-emphasise the importance of communal celebration. Similarly, the rise of credit systems and the focus on expensive items could erode traditional understandings of budgeting and self-sufficiency.[49] Therefore, while ads celebrate modernity as a matter of greater access and choice, there are subtle implications of losing unique customs and alternative understandings of time and celebration that are deeply rooted in local traditions. This transformation underscores a broader trend visible in ads like B.P. De Silva's; it was not only Christmas that was secularised for commercial gain. The extension of similar tactics to Hari Raya, Deepavali, and Chinese New Year reveals how local businesses saw the potential to align diverse festive periods with mass consumerism and a standardised "modern" celebration. This suggests a cynical strategy where holidays, regardless of their origins, became viewed less as opportunities for communal ritual and more as drivers of economic activity. It highlights how profit motives could override respect for the multifaceted nature of cultural traditions.

The *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* article provides a snapshot of this commercialisation.[50] The headline, "Festival Shopping", sets the tone, framing the upcoming holidays not as religious or cultural observances but as commercial events. The article details the surge in economic activity, noting that "Money is circulating freely" and that "local cloth merchants have been inundated with orders of late."[51] This language underscores how these holidays became occasions for people to spend money and businesses to profit. The focus on specific goods throughout the excerpt reinforces this notion. Details about "shoe dealers, provision and fruit vendors" and tailors experiencing a sudden influx of work ("great pressure of work") create a vivid image of a consumerist frenzy.[52] This emphasis on acquiring new clothes and festive foods suggests a shift in how people celebrate. Traditionally, holidays might have been a time to wear one's best existing garments or prepare special dishes from family recipes. The rise of "Festival Shopping" suggests a new emphasis on acquiring new items, potentially linked to the idea that such purchases were a sign of progress or participation in a modern way of celebrating. The closing sentence about the Hari Raya festival further strengthens this connection between commerce and celebration. By noting that "the Malays have placed orders with traders by the score," the excerpt highlights how this

[49] *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* Dec 19, 1938, 4.
[50] *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* Jan 17, 1934, 8.
[51] *Ibid*.
[52] *Ibid*.

commercialisation of holidays transcended religious or ethnic backgrounds.[53] It suggests a growing acceptance, or perhaps even expectation, that festive periods were appropriate for increased consumer spending.

Figure 49. Whiteaways Hari Raya Advertisement.[54]

The Whiteaway ad provides further evidence of the commercialisation of Hari Raya (See Figure 49 above). By specifically promoting the holiday as a time for special deals and discounts, the ad reframes the religious celebration as an occasion for shopping. This reflects the broader trend discussed earlier, where holidays became less about tradition and more about consumption, driven by businesses eager to capitalise on these festive times. The emphasis on specific goods within the ad highlights changing consumer patterns. Details like shoes ("Saxone Shoes... Bally's Shoes"), clothing ("Tennis Shirts...Tunic Shirts"), and even household items ("Crockery and Glass") paint a picture of what was deemed necessary for proper Hari Raya celebrations.[55] It underscores the notion that these holidays were not just about religious observance but also about presenting oneself and one's home in a way that signalled participation in a particular type of "modern" lifestyle.

The language employed within the ad is also significant. Phrases like "Special Holiday Attraction" and "Selected Bargains" blur the line between religious tradition and a shopping festival.[56] This focus on enticing shoppers with discounts reinforces the idea that Hari Raya Puasa, like other holidays, had become primarily an opportunity for businesses to increase

[53] *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* Jan 17, 1934, 8.
[54] *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* Jan 18, 1934, 3.
[55] *Ibid*.
[56] *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* Jan 18, 1934, 3.

revenue and for consumers to acquire new possessions. This trend is not unique to Hari Raya. A *Pinang Gazette* article about Deepavali (Diwali) reveals a similar shift.[57] References to Hindus appearing in their "best dresses" and enjoying leisure destinations like the Botanical Gardens hint at a commercial dimension to the celebration.[58] While ads from that era specifically targeting Deepavali are difficult to find, we can understand how the rise of advertising likely encouraged people to associate "modern" celebrations with new outfits, gifts, and participation in public consumption. Additionally, the government's practice of paying Hindu workers early, while criticised within the article itself, further fuels this pattern.[59] It suggests a recognition of the increased economic activity surrounding the holiday, with businesses and the government both benefiting from a population primed to spend their wages during the festivities.

The commercial transformation of holidays reveals a central theme of the "*zaman reclame*": religious festivals and cultural traditions became targets for commercial exploitation. Businesses and advertisers recognised that by linking their products to beloved holidays, they could tap into existing patterns of celebration and generate new forms of consumer desire. This strategy extended beyond any single religious group, as evidenced by the rise of commercialised Chinese New Year celebrations. This focus on consumption marked a significant transformation in local customs and societal values. Holidays that once centred on religious observance or established traditions became entwined with a Western-influenced notion of "progress" defined by acquisition and participation in a globalised market. The pervasive commercial messages during holidays suggest a deliberate attempt to redefine what it meant to be "modern" within the context of colonial Southeast Asia, potentially disrupting traditional practices and reshaping how Southeast Asians celebrated. This underscores the complex and often manipulative ways that consumer culture infiltrated even the most cherished aspects of life within the colonies, highlighting the insidious power of advertising to reshape not only consumption patterns but traditional practices themselves, driven by a relentless focus on economic expansion and shaped by Western-defined notions of modernity.

Uncle Wang, a regular columnist for Happy Homes, offers a revealing perspective on the changing dynamics of Chinese New Year celebrations. This magazine, emphasising citizenship, character, and home life, targeted those embracing "modern" values while valuing tradition.[60] In the February 1933 issue, Uncle Wang highlights how consumerism was subtly normalised within the celebration of Chinese New Year.[61] This reveals the insidious nature of change; rather than outright replacing tradition, consumerism became intertwined with existing

[57] *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* Oct 25, 1927, 6.
[58] *Ibid*.
[59] *Ibid*.
[60] "Editorial", *Happy Homes* Jan, 1933, 1.
[61] "Chinese New Year Holidays", *Happy Homes*, Feb 1933, 9.

customs like ancestor worship. Even the poorest households embraced these new spending patterns, demonstrating the pervasive influence of the "*zaman reclame*". This underscores how participation in this commercialised holiday version likely became seen as a necessary, even morally virtuous, way to honour ancestors and uphold traditions.

This transformation extends beyond the purchase of items. The rise of leisure activities during Chinese New Year – seaside visits, temple trips, and amusement parks – signifies a broader cultural shift.[62] Resources like time and money, once devoted solely to traditional practices, are now divided between honouring ancestors and partaking in commercially driven forms of "modern" entertainment. This introduces a potential conflict: individuals might question whether these newer activities are genuinely compatible with traditional values, raising concerns about a loss of meaning within the holiday. This shift is especially starkly visible in the changing role of gifts, revealing its impact on deeper values. Traditional concepts like generosity and community become intertwined with displays of material wealth. Red packets ("Ang Pow"), originally meant as good luck symbols, increasingly carry a subtext of social and financial status. This contradiction is evident even within "Uncle Wang's" perspective. While he criticises materialism, his words also subtly reveal the allure of a consumer society - the promise of joy and a temporary easing of economic hardship.[63]

This underscores a fundamental tension within colonial Southeast Asia. While advertisements promoted a vision of modernity defined by Western consumption standards, many still valued traditional practices and social hierarchies. This complex interplay likely resulted in individuals actively negotiating these conflicts, adapting traditions in ways shaped by both commercial forces and their own aspirations for a better life. It is vital to note that these changes do not represent a wholesale abandonment of tradition. Ancestor worship remains a central practice – a point Uncle Wang himself emphasises when he writes about buying new clothes and other items specifically for this ritual. However, consumerism did not erase heritage; instead, it subtly reshaped existing customs, often intertwining them with a materialistic economy. The ability to participate in modern leisure activities became a marker of "progress," a potent concept under colonialism. Uncle Wang describes visiting amusement parks or attending the cinema with family, highlighting an emerging link between celebration and commercialised entertainment. This reveals how holidays became entangled with complex class and social mobility issues.

While Uncle Wang celebrates the changing nature of Chinese New Year, there is a hint of a double-edged sword: he remarks on how poorer families might struggle to keep up with these new expectations. This reveals a growing potential for increasing inequality under the guise of shared aspiration. As participation in the newly commercialised holiday became

[62] "Chinese New Year Holidays", *Happy Homes*, Feb 1933, 9.
[63] *Ibid*.

essential for social acceptance, those without the financial means could face significant pressure and potential exclusion. "The Chinese New Year" from *The Penang Monthly Advertiser* further underscores this connection between celebration and economic anxieties.[64] The palpable sense of relief surrounding the prospect of "a period of brisk business" emphasises a yearning for material gains and a desire to overcome hardships often exacerbated by the colonial system.[65] This economic focus reveals that "progress" was not solely a cultural shift; it was motivated by a profound desire for collective economic stability and a way to navigate the complexities of colonial life.

However, even during this festive period, complex power dynamics remain visible. Japanese goods in Penang during Chinese New Year celebrations subtly disrupt existing power structures.[66] This shift reveals how global trade patterns loosened Britain's economic dominance, creating opportunities for individuals to subtly reshape power structures through seemingly mundane choices about where to spend their money. Consumer choices during Chinese New Year became more than a reflection of tradition; they offered a way to exert agency within a more extensive economic system. Therefore, the celebration becomes a microcosm of the complex and shifting economic realities under colonialism, where consumer decisions could have real-world impact. This influence of global economics is mirrored in the evolving definitions of "modernity". Concepts of progress become intrinsically linked to conspicuous consumption. Images like "lovely ladies... parading... with illuminated motor-cars" reveal how visible wealth and status symbols were increasingly crucial to being perceived as a "modern" Chinese woman.[67] This shift contrasts with Uncle Wang's focus on domestic leisure, highlighting the diversity of understandings about "progress."

This focus on material acquisition extends into courtship rituals, highlighting how even love became commodified. Young men flock to amusement parks less for genuine connection and more to appear modern through "charming clothes".[68] This marks replacing some community-centred practices with rituals focused on commercial spaces and displays of wealth. This shift suggests the influence of both Western ideals of romance and the pervasive reach of advertising, which promoted these spaces as essential for a proper celebration. While the article paints Chinese New Year as a festive occasion for celebrating economic recovery and changing power relations, a closer reading reveals an undercurrent of anxiety. The celebratory tone does not entirely obscure concerns about inequality. The implication that prosperity may not reach all reveals how tradition could contribute to financial strain for some individuals. This highlights how, according to this article, a "period of progress" was not merely

[64] *The Penang Monthly Advertiser*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Jan, 1934, 3.
[65] *Ibid*.
[66] *Ibid*.
[67] *Ibid*.
[68] *Ibid*.

a cultural shift but a transformation with real consequences: uneven economic benefits, the commodification of previously non-commercial aspects of life, and constant pressure to "keep up" within a new system of values shaped by both local desires for a better life and external colonial forces. Even if the article does not explicitly critique this commercialisation, the undercurrent of anxiety suggests that its potential negative impacts were at least subtly recognised.

Conclusion

Within the "*zaman reclame*", advertising transcended its seemingly simple role of showcasing products. Ads became mirrors, both reflecting and actively shaping the very act of consumption.[69] They invited audiences to participate in a carefully constructed vision of "modernity." Like Benedict Anderson's notion that acts like reading a newspaper can forge a sense of belonging to a larger community, advertisements did the same, creating the illusion of shared participation in a lifestyle defined by consumerism.[70]

However, these advertisements were more than just economic promotions in the complex context of colonial Southeast Asia. They became powerful tools, shaping desires and aspirations within a fraught power system. These carefully crafted cultural texts moulded the very concept of a "modern" lifestyle, aligning it with consumption. This process was deeply manipulative, often exploiting the complexities of navigating colonial Southeast Asia. By offering tempting glimpses of a future where Western-defined notions of "progress" promised empowerment and belonging, advertisements became the architects of consumerist desire. Yet, this vision was fundamentally intertwined with a desire to uphold existing power structures within the colony, aiming to transform Southeast Asians into eager consumers rather than challenging those hierarchies.

Despite the overwhelming presence of these messages, it is crucial to remember that their impact on individuals within colonial Southeast Asia was likely complex and contested. While the lack of direct evidence detailing how everyday people responded might suggest widespread acceptance of this consumerist vision, it is equally possible that resistance existed in subtle or hidden forms. Advertisements may have provoked diverse reactions, prompting some to fully embrace the new "modernity", while others pushed back, determined to preserve their traditions, identities, and agency. This analysis reveals a critical point: advertising in colonial Southeast Asia was a battleground where the very meaning of "modernity" was contested. Even amidst relentless pressure to conform, individuals actively navigated the changing landscape, their choices shaping struggles over identity, agency, and the preservation of cultural traditions.

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[69] James T. Siegel, *Fetish, Recognition, Revolution* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 88.
[70] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

The next chapter will delve deeper into this contested terrain. It will unpack how specific commodities, the everyday objects of a consumer society, became entangled with issues of identity, power, and the complex negotiation between tradition and modernity under colonial rule. By examining individual products and the ways they were marketed, we can further unravel the complex ways that consumer culture shaped and was shaped by the unique context of colonial Southeast Asia.

Chapter V. Commodities as Contested Objects: Colonial Fairs and the Display of Modernity

Introduction

The 4th Surabaya Jaarmarkt (Annual Fair) opening in 1908 marked a significant moment in the colonial city's history.[1] Organised by the "Soerabaiasche Jaarmarkt-Vereeniging" (Surabaya Fair Association), which included prominent Dutch architect Cosman Citroen as a board member, the event promised a dazzling display of goods and entertainment, drawing visitors from across the region.[2] However, the Jaarmarkt was far more than a simple marketplace; it was a carefully orchestrated spectacle showcasing visions of modernity, progress, and colonial power.

The Jaarmarkt's exhibits reflected the complex interplay of local and global forces within the colonial context. The juxtaposition of European-manufactured goods, locally-produced handicrafts, and agricultural products created a visual hierarchy. This deliberate arrangement reinforced colonial narratives of Western superiority and the supposed "backwardness" of indigenous cultures. Yet, the Jaarmarkt was more than merely a site of passive consumption. Visitors actively engaged with the exhibits, negotiating their identities and desires in relation to the displayed goods. For some, the fair likely presented an enticing opportunity to embrace Western lifestyles and commodities. Others may have viewed it with ambivalence or even resistance, recognising the underlying power structures embedded in the event. While the Jaarmarkt aimed to promote a particular vision of modernity, it also inadvertently revealed the limits of colonial power. The fair's organisers faced numerous challenges, including financial constraints, political instability, and social unrest. These challenges highlight the complex dynamics of colonial rule and local populations' agency in shaping their destinies, even within seemingly controlled environments like the Jaarmarkt.

The Surabaya Jaarmarkt offers a unique lens to examine the broader themes of modernity, consumption, and identity in colonial Indonesia. By analysing the fair's exhibits, advertisements, and visitor experiences, we can better understand how these forces shaped the lives of individuals and communities during this transformative period. Understanding the tensions between spectacle, consumer desire, and colonial realities offers a nuanced understanding of how the Jaarmarkt cemented and challenged colonial power structures. While Arnout van der Meer's work offers essential insights into these fairs as sites of ideological control, further understanding hinges on closely examining the specific

[1] von Faber, *Nieuw Soerabaia*, 257.
[2] *Ibid*. For the works of Cosman Citroen, see Joko Triwinarto Santoso, *Cosman Citroen (1881-1935): Architect in 'booming' Soerabaja* (Uitgeverij Verloren, 2018).

commodities displayed – a focus largely absent in prior research.[3] Through this meticulous spectacle, the colonial power sought to justify its presence as a necessary catalyst for a desirable future, thereby consolidating its control. Analysing the precise mechanisms by which colonial authorities sought to influence desires and solidify their rule through consumption promises to offer new insights. Moreover, these dynamics played out not only in Indonesia but across colonial Southeast Asia, underscoring the importance of a comparative approach in understanding how similar strategies manifested in different contexts.

This chapter dissects three Southeast Asian events – Surabaya's Jaarmarkt, Penang's Trade Fairs, and Singapore's Empire Shopping Week – revealing how colonial powers used them to shape visions of progress and control. These colonial fairs were deliberately curated to showcase unique visions of "modernity," reflecting the distinct ways colonial powers employed consumption to maintain control. Surabaya's Jaarmarkt highlighted the contrast between imported and local goods, a tool for the Dutch colonial project of "civilisation". Penang Trade Fairs emphasised technological innovation and the allure of "newness" to promote the superiority of Western goods. Finally, Singapore's Empire Shopping Week presents the bluntest attempt to manipulate consumers, explicitly connecting the ideal of modernity with loyalty to the British Empire.

The chapter delves deeper into how these events functioned as attempts to impose a specific vision of "modernity", serving as arenas where meanings were negotiated and identities shaped. To examine these dynamics, I analyse the "commodity" as a multifaceted object imbued with social, cultural, and political significance, moving beyond its purely economic function. The meanings attached to objects are neither fixed nor neutral; they emerge from power structures and undergo constant contestation and redefinition. Advertisements, exhibitions, and the idea of "modernity" were all tools deployed to shape desirable narratives around commodities, explicitly linking them to colonial notions of superiority and Western ideas of progress. Yet, these commodities and the meanings surrounding them shaped the built environment and influenced how colonial societies constructed their identities. While these fairs sought to impose specific meanings and behaviours, examining how individuals and communities engaged with the displayed commodities is crucial. This analysis goes beyond simple acceptance or rejection, delving into the interplay between consumer choices, colonial influence, and the evolving sense of national identity amidst the showcased spectacles of progress.

Drawing on Walter Benjamin's ideas of the *flâneur* and commodity fetishism, we can see how consumers at colonial fairs were immersed in a dazzling spectacle of goods.[4] Yet,

[3] van der Meer, "Performing Colonial Modernity", 503–538; See also Arnout H. C. van der Meer, "*Ambivalent Hegemony: Culture and Power in Late Colonial Java, 1808–1927*," (PhD dissertation, Rutgers University, 2014), 335–344.
[4] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 2002).

Benjamin would remind us that this display obscures the labour processes and exploitative power relations behind these commodities, masking the true nature of these exchanges within the colonial system. Importantly, local populations could still subvert intended meanings by reframing imported goods through nationalist lenses, rejecting certain products due to ethical or religious considerations, or creatively adapting ideas of the "modern" to better align with local traditions. Inspired by Benjamin, this approach allows for a more nuanced exploration of power dynamics, agency, and the fluid, contested nature of cultural meanings embedded within seemingly mere objects of consumption.

This chapter argues that commodities in these colonial fairs were not just objects of trade but crucibles where meanings were contested and identities were shaped. Fairs served as platforms where colonial powers and local populations engaged in a complex struggle over the significance of these goods. Using the metaphors of "crucibles" and "platforms," we emphasise these fairs' active, transformative nature. They were not simply showcases but sites of active contestation and negotiation. As Benjamin suggests, examining "modernity" through the lens of commodity fetishism reveals that the struggle over meaning transcends the physical objects themselves. It centres on the social, cultural, and political narratives commodities carry. Shaped by globalisation, colonial influence, and emerging nationalist sentiment, these fairs became microcosms of the transformative yet conflicted colonial experience. Colonial powers actively promoted Western consumption patterns to solidify their superiority and reshape local desires. They attempted to fix a particular meaning to commodities, equating modernity with Westernisation through trade events, advertisements, and the idea of the "modern" household. However, local populations did not passively accept this framing. Their choices around commodities were inseparable from how they defined themselves in relation to nationalism, tradition, and evolving ideas of the "modern". By embracing, adapting, or rejecting goods, individuals and communities actively shaped their identities, asserting agency even within the constraints of the colonial project. This highlights the contested nature of "modernity" and how consumer culture became a dynamic battleground within the colonial context.

This interchange between imposed narratives and acts of resistance resulted in "hybrid" forms of consumer culture, reflecting a blend of influences, neither wholly Western nor wholly traditional. This underscores the complex nature of identity formation under colonialism. While colonial powers attempted to impose a singular vision of modernity and corresponding consumer desires, the reality was a more nuanced and negotiated process. It involved acts of adaptation and resistance, demonstrating the evolving sense of self among colonised populations who crafted identities amidst competing forces.

The "Civilising" Marketplace: Surabaya's Jaarmarkt

In 1927, the Soerabaiasche Jaarmarkt, with its grand opening ceremonies and boasts of economic prowess, functioned as a dazzling advertisement for the colonial project itself. The *Indische Courant* proclaims, "The Soerabaiasche Jaarmarkt has proven to be an institution that has its reason for existence".[5] Yet, this existence served a purpose far beyond simple commerce. The emphasis on "various forms of industry" and, notably, the prominence of the automobile industry reveals the Jaarmarkt as a key site for shaping consumer desires and promoting Western technological superiority.[6]

Despite facing "*moeilijkheden*" (difficulties) from rival fairs, the Jaarmarkt persevered, driven by an understanding of its value to the colonial enterprise. It was, as described, "the compact expression of [Surabaya's] activity in many fields" – but this "activity" was inextricably linked to Western economic dominance.[7] The establishment of an "*Vereeniging tot Bevordering van het Jaarmarktwezen*" (Association for the Promotion of Annual Markets) further reveals the orchestrated nature of these events, aiming to standardise and solidify their role in promoting a particular vision of progress aligned with colonial interests.[8] The Jaarmarkt's allure extended beyond goods; it peddled a lifestyle. "A series of sporting events… a car exhibition worthy of its name" – these spectacles promised excitement and a connection to modernity, reinforcing the idea that participation in the colonial marketplace offered not just material goods, but social and cultural capital as well.[9] The emphasis on entertainment and competition further underscores how the Jaarmarkt manipulated desires, positioning Western-styled consumption as the key to a fulfilling and desirable life.

While the Jaarmarkt acknowledged local contributions, such as the "*kampoeng pertoekangan*" (craftsmen's village), these inclusions often felt tokenistic. This is exemplified by the patronising description of the space as "*ons troetelkind*" (our little darling) within the Jaarmarkt guidebook. This language underscores a colonial mindset that viewed local crafts as quaint relics overshadowed by the dominant displays of Western industrial might.[10] This strategic showcasing of indigenous craftsmanship served the broader colonial project. It created an illusion of inclusivity and respect for existing traditions while simultaneously reinforcing the narrative of Western technological and cultural superiority. The Jaarmarkt carefully positioned Indonesian crafts as charming yet obsolete, contrasting them with the latest Western innovations presented as the key to a modern, desirable future.

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[5] "De Soerabaiasche Jaarmartkt", *De Indische Courant* Sep 24, 1927, 5. (*De Soerabaiasche Jaarmarkt heeft bewezen een instelling te zijn, welke haar reden van bestaan heft*).
[6] *Ibid*. (*verschillende vormen van bedrijvigheid*).
[7] *Ibid*. (*de compacte uitdrukking van [Surabaya's] activiteit op velerlei gebied*).
[8] *Ibid*.
[9] *Ibid*. (*Een reeks sportsfeesten…een tentoonstelling op automobielgebied, die er wezen mag*).
[10] *Ibid*.

Furthermore, the detailed schedule of events underscores the colonial desire for order and spectacle. The official opening ceremony for an exclusive audience emphasises a hierarchy, with the general public admitted later. The "Ladies Jury" at the bicycle competition suggests the inclusion of women in colonial leisure activities, albeit in a segregated and gendered manner. The presence of a "dancing hall" and other Western-style leisure activities reflects the colonial project's influence on local cultures and values.[11] The emphasis on the "*kennistenten*" (knowledge tents) alongside the entertainment suggests an attempt to balance leisure with education, albeit within a colonial framework. The transformation of the dancing hall into an imitation of the Parisian "Enfer" reflects the desire to emulate Western cultural sophistication while also presenting a sanitised and exoticised version of "*Indische*" culture.[12]

The article also describes the 1927 Jaarmarkt as a "*revanche*" (revenge or rather a recovery) following the challenges of the previous year. This drive for success, fuelled by economic and political imperatives, aimed to showcase colonial power and solidify Surabaya as the "most suitable location" for a "*Groote Indische Jaarmarkt*" (Great Annual Market).[13] This ambition aligns with the 1925 decision by Surabaya's City Council to enter into a long-term contract with the Jaarmarkt, demonstrating a strategic investment in the event's growth and its potential to solidify the city's economic dominance within the region.[14] While initially focused on promoting local agriculture, industry, and crafts, the Jaarmarkt quickly evolved into a significant event with a broader social and economic impact.[15] Its reach extended beyond Surabaya, attracting visitors from across the Indies and beyond. This expanding influence is mirrored in the shifting locations of the Jaarmarkt – from the Stadstuin to the Missigitplein, finally settling in Ketabang-Noord in 1923.[16] This move accommodated the growing crowds and signalled a desire for permanence. Increased professionalisation followed, with permanent structures and improved infrastructure solidifying the Jaarmarkt's place in the city.

The focus of the Jaarmarkt also broadened beyond its original scope. Traditional displays of local products were joined by showcases of trade, technology, and tourism, reflecting the evolving economic landscape of the Dutch East Indies. As the Jaarmarkt gained international recognition, exemplified by the arrival of an official Japanese delegation in 1926, it became more than a local event.[17] Importantly, the Jaarmarkt reflected the dynamic nature of Surabaya and the Dutch East Indies. It transcended its role as a commercial venture, becoming a platform for cultural exchange and, likely, the shaping of national identity, albeit within colonial power structures.

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[11] "De Soerabaiasche Jaarmartkt", *De Indische Courant* Sep 24, 1927, 5.
[12] *Ibid*.
[13] *Ibid*.
[14] "De Soerabaiasche Jaarmarkt" *De Locomotief* Sep 18, 1925, 1.
[15] von Faber, *Nieuw Soerabaia*, 257.
[16] *Ibid*., 258.
[17] *Ibid*.

Mayor Dijkerman's opening speech at the 1926 event highlights the tensions within the Jaarmarkt as a site of colonial consumer culture. On the one hand, he expresses disappointment at the loss of lottery revenue, a key source of funding for the event: "The preparations for this 12th Jaarmarkt brought us... many difficulties". This suggests a shift in Jaarmarkt's financial model, with the city likely investing directly rather than simply profiting from it. On the other hand, he boasts of its growing international appeal, evidenced by Japan's first official foreign entry.[18] This duality underscores the Jaarmarkt's complex position: it was both a tool to generate revenue for the colonial project while also becoming an increasingly elaborate showcase designed to attract international attention and consolidate the city's prestige.

Dijkerman's repeated expressions of gratitude towards the Surabaya municipality and the Java Instituut, an organisation established by the colonial government to promote the study and preservation of Javanese culture and arts, further emphasise the Jaarmarkt's reliance on both colonial and local Javanese support. Figures like Resident Hardeman, as the representative of the Governor-General, embody direct colonial government support, potentially including financial backing. The Regent of Surabaya R.A.A. Nitiadiningrat and the former Major of the Chinese Han Tjiong Khing represent local elites whose participation likely benefited them economically and socially.[19] This suggests the interplay of power was complex – the Jaarmarkt was not simply a top-down colonial imposition; it served the interests of certain local elites as well, potentially in exchange for their financial support and the legitimacy their presence granted the event.

This focus on the market function of the Jaarmarkt is further reinforced by Dijkerman's emphasis on the growth in stand rentals, "…The stand rental this time went particularly well".[20] Commodities – from imported goods to Javanese handicrafts – took centre stage. The Jaarmarkt facilitated not just the exchange of goods but also ideas about what modernity and desirable consumption meant within the colonial context. However, while Dijkerman speaks of the Jaarmarkt showcasing Javanese culture and industry, it's essential to question whose culture, through what lens, and for whose benefit, was being presented. The Jaarmarkt was not merely a display of Javanese craftsmanship; it likely presented commodified aspects carefully selected to align with colonial sensibilities and burgeoning nationalist aspirations within Java. Figures like Prof. R.A. Hoesein Djajadiningrat and S. Koperberg from the Java Instituut may have shaped this selective portrayal of culture.[21] Dijkerman's speech, while

[18] *Souvenir aan de 12de Jaarmarkt te Soerabaia, 25 Sept.-10 Oct. 1926* (Reclame & Advertentie Bureau Java, 1926), 2–4. (*De voorbereiding voor deze 12de Jaarmarkt bracht ons... weder voor zeer veel moeilijkheden.*; *...de eerste officiele buitenlandsche inzending, die der Japansche afdeeling.*)
[19] *Ibid*.
[20] *Ibid*. (*De standverhuur ditmaal bijzonder bevredigend verliep*)
[21] *Ibid*., 3.

primarily ceremonial, offers glimpses into how the Jaarmarkt embodied colonial consumer culture.

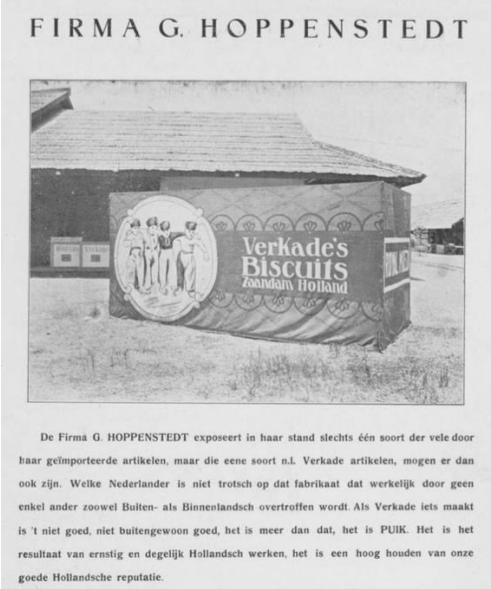

Figure 50. Verkade's Biscuit Advertisement.[22]

Figure 51. N.V. Kwik Hoo Tong Handel Maatschappij Booth.[23]

This emphasis on selective representation is evident in the prominent display of European (Dutch) manufactured products like Verkade's biscuits (See Figure 50 above). The focus on Verkade, a well-known Dutch brand, could imply that the best quality products originate from Europe, subtly undermining locally produced or imported goods from other regions. This aligns with broader strategies of the Jaarmarkt to promote Western goods as superior. The booth

[22] *Souvenir aan de 12de Jaarmarkt te Soerabaia*, 22.
[23] *Ibid.*, 15.

belonging to the N.V. Kwik Hoo Tong Handel Maatschappij, a Solo-based importer of the increasingly popular "Sien Kwie Kie" brand of Chinese tea, exemplifies this tension (See Figure 51 above). While the text on Verkade's sign employs typical advertising hyperbole ("…not good, not extraordinary good, it's more than that, it's SUPERB"), within the colonial context, this language takes on a deeper significance.[24] It reinforces existing narratives of European product superiority, potentially influencing consumer perceptions even when confronted with equally desirable goods from other origins.

However, the presence of a booth promoting imported Chinese tea, the use of free samples to entice visitors, and the partnerships with local agents in Surabaya highlight that the Jaarmarkt was both a marketplace for goods and a space for circulating ideas about consumption. While the emphasis was on Western imports, the tea's positive reception reflects the complex, and often contradictory, nature of the Jaarmarkt. Tea, while widely consumed in the colony, was indeed an imported product with its own history of trade and colonial exploitation. Its presence suggests that the Jaarmarkt functioned as a site where diverse cultural influences could intersect, even while promoting narratives of Western dominance.[25] This dynamic and influences shaping consumer desires were amplified by large commercial events such as the Penang Trade Fairs, which we will explore in the next section.

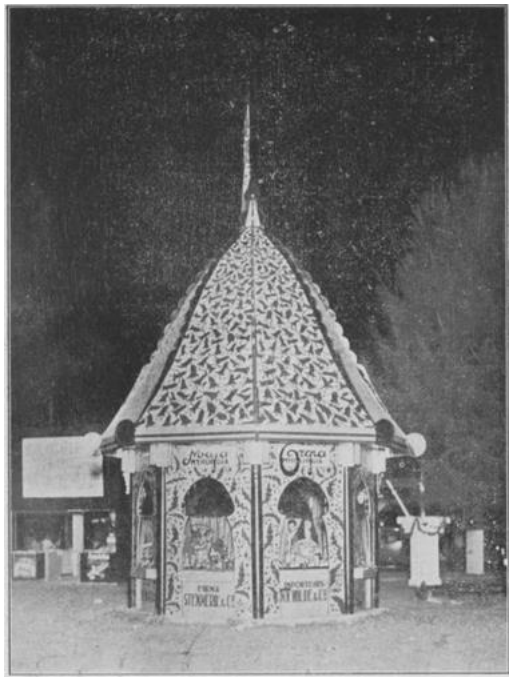

Figure 52. Myrurgia Perfume Booth. [26]

[24] *Niet goed, niet buitengewoon goed, het is meer dan dat, het is PUIK*
[25] *Souvenir aan de 12de Jaarmarkt te Soerabaia*, 15.
[26] *Ibid.,* 13.

Figure 53. Pebeco Toiletries.[27]

This emphasis on imported goods extended to luxury and personal care items as well. The Myrurgia perfume booth at the 1926 Soerabaja Jaarmarkt (See Figure 52 above) showcases the role of the event in introducing European luxury brands.[28] The presence of a Spanish perfume and soap brand, promoted by the Dutch importers "de Wildet & Co.", underscores how the Jaarmarkt fostered a market for European products within the Dutch East Indies. This aligns with colonial narratives positioning European goods as superior and desirable. The Myrurgia booth likely targeted a clientele that included European expatriates and wealthy Javanese consumers. Similarly, the Pebeco stand at the Jaarmarkt (See Figure 53 above) highlights how the event served as a platform for introducing and promoting European health and beauty products.[29] Pebeco, a German brand, underscores the global reach of consumer goods within the colonial context. The Dutch text, emphasising "Tandenpoeders" (toothpowder) and "Tandenborstel" (toothbrush), suggests an alignment with European ideals of hygiene and health. The display further reinforces how the Jaarmarkt showcased these imported products, influencing colonial attitudes towards personal care and modernity.

Innovation as Seduction: Luring Consumers at Penang Trade Fairs

The power of advertising to shape consumer behaviour and preferences extended beyond individual products and found a vibrant platform in events like the Penang Trade Fair. These annual fairs, much like Surabaya's Jaarmarkt, emphasised the vital role of advertising in commercial success. Illuminated by burgeoning electrical lighting and conceptualised by nascent advertising agencies, these fairs embodied the prevailing spirit of the times. They

[27] *Souvenir aan de 12de Jaarmarkt te Soerabaia*, 7.
[28] *Ibid.*, 13.
[29] *Ibid.*, 7.

showcased commerce's new spatial and visual language, significantly influencing consumer choices and desires.

Figure 54. The 4th Penang Trade Fair Advertisement.[30]

This dynamic is exemplified by the 4th Penang Trade Fair advertisement featured in the Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle (See Figures 54 above). The ad encapsulates the burgeoning consumer culture within colonial territories. Its depictions of a festive, communal atmosphere with diverse entertainment options – "Cabaret" and "Operas" – suggest a society with both the means and desire for leisure activities.[31] The emphasis on the event as "not to be missed" highlights its social significance. Visually, the ad's portrayal of people in both formal and casual attire reflects a society at the intersection of tradition and modernity, where Western influences were increasingly prevalent.

The inclusion of elements like "Entertainment," "Dancing & Music," "Bangsawan" (traditional Malay opera), and "Sideshows" alongside product exhibitions from "China, Europe & America" paints the Fair as a microcosm of global interconnectivity and exchange. This underscores the cosmopolitan nature of the period, where local and international businesses converged, offering products and experiences catering to the eclectic tastes of the colonial population. These diverse offerings are reflected in the call to "Bring the Family to the Fair" – an open invitation highlighting the event's role in family and community life, promising "Fun and Frolic" for all ages. The wish for a "Merry Christmas and Prosperous New Year" reinforces this sentiment, linking the Fair's commercial aspirations with personal and communal well-being.[32]

[30] *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* Dec 19, 1938, 3.
[31] *Ibid*.
[32] *Ibid*.

The advertisers' list further emphasises this blend of local and global. It ranges from local businesses such as "Messrs. Lim Kim Heng" to international entities like "Singer Co.," illustrating a vibrant commercial landscape where enterprises of varying scales compete for patronage.[33] This Fair was not merely a marketplace but a grand exhibition of the latest and most desirable products, reflecting the dynamic nature of consumerism at the time. Bathed in the glow of "varicoloured electric lights," it symbolises modernity and progress, inviting visitors into a spectacle fuelled by colonial capitalism.[34] The Fair is a vivid illustration of how colonial society rapidly adapted to and embraced the consumerist ethos, with advertising playing a pivotal role in shaping the desires and consumption patterns of the populace.

This dynamic is illustrated by the prominence of the Frigidaire Air Conditioner advertisement. Its headline placement and accompanying advertorial offer a fascinating case study of how new technologies were introduced and promoted to the colonial market.[35] The focus on technology within the advertisement underscores the Fair's role as a platform for showcasing innovation. The Frigidaire represents the dawn of modern home comfort technology becoming more accessible. This hints at the aspirational nature of such products and how they embodied technological progress within the colonial context. Applying Marshall Berman's concepts, we can further understand the complex intertwining of these technological advancements, cultural aspirations, and social contradictions within the colonial fair space. As Berman emphasises in his work, modernity is characterised by constant change and upheaval.[36] The air conditioner itself embodies this transformative spirit, disrupting traditional methods of temperature control with a novel, engineered solution to tropical heat. The advertorial reinforces this with phrases like "latest air conditioning plant" and "engineering triumph," positioning the air conditioner as a marker of progress within the broader context of modernity.[37]

However, as Berman also warns, modernity's technological advancements have inherent contradictions.[38] The advertisement exemplifies this duality. While it emphasises features like "comfort control" and "better circulation," promising a more enjoyable experience at the fair, there's a subtle but significant undercurrent.[39] The mention of directing airflow "above the breathing line" hints at a potential concern for maintaining social etiquette and potentially reinforcing racial boundaries within the air-conditioned space.[40] This detail

[33] *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* Dec 19, 1938, 3.
[34] *Ibid*.
[35] *Ibid*., 1.
[36] Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air,* 15.
[37] *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* Dec 19, 1938, 1.
[38] Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, 183.
[39] *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, Dec 19, 1938, 1.
[40] *Ibid*.

underscores how such technologies could improve conditions and reinforce existing social hierarchies and cultural divides – a key contradiction Berman highlights.

Analysing the advertisement within the context of a colonial fair adds another layer of complexity. These fairs often functioned as microcosms of modernity, showcasing technological wonders and new lifestyles while implicitly promoting Western cultural values and economic dominance. The ad's emphasis on the "engineering triumph" of a Western brand like Frigidaire reinforces this dynamic, subtly aligning the product with a broader narrative of progress under colonial rule.[41] This aligns with Berman's call for critical reflection on the potential power imbalances and cultural homogenisation embedded within the project of modernity.[42] However, it is important to remember that the advertisement's primary goal is to sell air conditioners and shape perceptions and aspirations. The portrayal of the "air-conditioned room" as a "pleasant place" suggests a desire for escape from the potentially hot and crowded fairground, offering a temporary haven of comfort and modernity.[43] This speaks to Berman's argument that individuals within modernity negotiate anxieties and uncertainties by seeking out new experiences and spaces where they might exert a sense of control.[44]

Figure 55. Eveready Advertisement.[45]

The promise of respite and control offered by the air conditioner ad smoothly transitions us to another embodiment of modernity found within the fair: Eveready torchlights and batteries exhibited by Messrs. L. E. Telles & Co. (See Figure 55 above). While less ostentatious than the Frigidaire's "engineering triumph," Eveready products offer a different facet of the modern

[41] *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, Dec 19, 1938, 1.
[42] Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, 18.
[43] *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, Dec 19, 1938, 1.
[44] Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, 15.
[45] *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, Dec 19, 1938, 3.

experience. Modernity is strongly associated with light as a metaphor for progress, reason, and overcoming limitations. Eveready's products offer a literal manifestation of this ideal, promising the ability to pierce through darkness and extend one's activities beyond daylight hours. Unlike the room-bound luxuries of air conditioning, batteries and flashlights represent a portable form of self-empowerment. An individual armed with one of these tools could embark on independent ventures, navigate unfamiliar environments, and potentially disrupt routines dictated by natural cycles. In this sense, these products resonate with Berman's portrayal of modern individuals seeking agency and the capacity to reshape their realities, however modestly.[46]

Yet, just as Berman cautions against a romanticized view of progress, a deeper analysis demands we question the boundaries of this newfound personal freedom. In a colonial context, portable light could just as easily serve as a means of enhanced surveillance and control by those in power, extending authority beyond traditional settlements. Moreover, the affordability and accessibility of these Eveready products within the social hierarchy become essential points of inquiry. Were these symbols of independent exploration available to the broader population or mere emblems of privilege restricted to the colonial elite? Examining these seemingly simple commodities unveils the potential for both liberation and domination inherent within the forces of modernity.

Figure 56. Kee Huat Radio Company Advertisement.[47]

This interplay between technology and power is evident in another advertisement from the Fair – the promotion of Kee Huat Radio Company (See Figure 56 above). The advert begins with "Meet us at Stalls Nos. 16, 17, 18 & 19", positioning Kee Huat prominently and suggesting confidence and an established presence. Phrases like "At Your Service" and "Foremost Radio

[46] Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, 15.
[47] *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, Dec 19, 1938, 2.

Organisation in Malaya" project an image of reliability and leadership. The strategic placement of "The Leaders in Radio" above "His Master's Voice" likely highlights specific brands, possibly indicating partnerships or exclusive offerings.[48]

The heavy dominance of Western brands like "His Master's Voice", "Kelvinator", and "Rudge-Whitworth" reflects both the allure of Western technology and its association with a desirable "modern" lifestyle.[49] However, the inclusion of "American Models" alongside these dominant brands acknowledges diversification and competition. The array of products – radios, refrigerators, bicycles, and gramophones – suggests an attempt to cater to diverse needs and budgets, potentially attracting a broader customer base. The tagline "Britain's Best Bicycles" explicitly targets consumers seeking both quality and the status associated with British goods. Additionally, the phrase "Specialists in Radio & Sound Amplification" emphasises local technical knowledge, subtly reassuring customers. Interestingly, the advert remains silent on pricing, likely reflecting significant economic disparities within colonial Malaya.

It is essential to recognise the potential contradictions and tensions within this advertisement. On the one hand, the focus on technical specifications, varied price points, and inviting taglines suggest an attempt to appeal broadly. However, the mere existence of items like the "$975 de-luxe Model U134" radio raises questions about affordability for much of the Malayan population.[50] The advertorial subtly reinforces this tension by touting both a commitment to "widest sales" and an extensive post-purchase service network spanning from "Alor Star to Singapore".[51] This hints at an underlying understanding of economic disparities and a strategy to cater to elite customers who might require the most maintenance and support.

This optimistic marketing seems at odds with the economic realities of the time. The Straits Settlements Annual Report reveals a challenging 1938, with declining trade figures, particularly impacting luxury commodities.[52] Alongside reports of decreasing commodity prices, this context shapes the potential reception of goods displayed at the Penang Trade Fair. While advertisements promoted notions of progress and advancement, the broader population may have had limited purchasing power. This suggests the Fair potentially functioned more as a symbolic spectacle of aspirations for many, with truly "modern" lifestyles attainable only for a privileged few. This tension between economic limitations and ideals of a better life likely informed public reactions to the technological innovations on display.

Understanding these reactions requires considering the multifaceted demographics of Penang. With major populations of Chinese, Malay, and Indian residents alongside

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[48] *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, Dec 19, 1938, 2.
[49] *Ibid*.
[50] *Ibid*.
[51] *Ibid*.
[52] *Colonial Reports—Annual No. 1931 Report on the Social and Economic Progress of the People of the Straits Settlements 1938* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1939), 42–43.

Europeans, responses to "modernity" cannot be homogenised.[53] Economic class divisions certainly influence access to the new products promoted at the Fair. While air conditioning advertisements might cater primarily to European comfort, others showcasing communication advancements could appeal to specific Chinese mercantile communities. This suggests that differing experiences of modernisation, based on cultural backgrounds and social positions, likely existed side by side. This complexity enriches the analysis of the Fair beyond simple notions of technological embrace or rejection.

Furthermore, import regulations outlined in the Report are telling. Quotas, particularly those aimed at Japanese goods, indicate potential limits on the availability of certain advertised goods and possibly even inflated prices.[54] These restrictions speak to the complex interplay between modernisation narratives and the broader geopolitical and economic forces shaping everyday experiences in colonial Penang. Promoting a "modern" image at the Fair might have clashed with tangible restrictions impacting daily consumption choices. However, the increased postal activity, development of telegraphs and telephones, and investment in radio broadcasting reveal a growing infrastructure capable of reaching diverse audiences.[55] The potential for this to enhance the buzz surrounding the event should not be ignored. These communication networks may be how aspirations were fuelled, highlighting a further contradiction – while showcasing progress, they simultaneously facilitated awareness of luxuries that might be beyond most residents' reach.

Figure 57. Kuam Yim Hoon Gourmet Powder Advertisement.[56]

[53] *Colonial Reports—Annual No. 1931 Report on the Social and Economic Progress of the People of the Straits Settlements 1938* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1939), 9.
[54] *Ibid*., 36.
[55] *Ibid*., 56–58.
[56] *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, Dec 19, 1938, 1.

Figure 58. Three Star Brand Soap Advertisement.[57]

Shifting from technological marvel to tangible commodities, the visual advertisements and textual descriptions of goods like "Kuan Yim Hoon - The Best Gourmet Powder" and "Three Star Brand Golden Pheasant Toilet Soap" reveal a different dimension of how "modernity" was marketed and consumed in colonial Malaya (See Figures 57 and Figure 58 above). These items, unlike radios and bicycles, represent smaller-scale yet potentially widely accessible luxuries or conveniences meant to enhance everyday life. They suggest that alongside the grand spectacle of technological marvels, modernity was also instilled in the realm of individual consumption and sensory experiences.

Figure 59. Chin Lee & Co. Advertisement.[58]

[57] *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, Dec 19, 1938, 1.
[58] *Ibid*., 2.

These advertisements offer a glimpse into how the concept of "improvement," a key component of the modern ethos, manifested differently. In contrast to the culinary promise of Kuan Yim Hoon, Three Star Brand Golden Pheasant Toilet Soap promotes the ideal of cleanliness and personal hygiene. The prominence of Chinese-owned companies like Nie Joo & Co. as sole agents and Chin Lee & Co. as manufacturers (See Figure 59 above) suggests a localisation of modernity within trade networks.[59] These products might have resonated particularly within Chinese or possibly Peranakan communities.

Furthermore, the "Kuan Yim Hoon" advert's use of a woman in traditional Chinese dress (Cheongsam) juxtaposed with modern short hair reflects this complex cultural intersection (See Figure 57 above).[60] It appeals to traditional tastes while hinting at changing beauty and lifestyle aspirations. The depiction of a well-dressed woman adorned with traditional and modern elements suggests that a "modern" individual could retain aspects of their cultural heritage while still prioritising progress and the benefits implied by imported goods. Similarly, the reference to scientific research associated with the product aligns it with advancements in knowledge, bolstering the association between these consumables and a new form of empowered, knowledgeable womanhood. Beyond these visual depictions, the language associated with these goods further illuminates how modernity was constructed and sold. Phrases like "scientifically prepared condiment" associate "Kuan Yim Hoon" with modern advancements in chemistry and the notion of improved, standardised flavour through manufactured, rather than traditionally grown, ingredients.[61] It implies a shift from valuing fresh-sourced flavours towards convenience and intensification.

The description of "Three Star Brand Golden Pheasant" as a "disinfectant soap" highlights how the product was positioned as more than a basic cleaning agent.[62] Its emphasis on disinfecting properties tapped into colonial anxieties about hygiene and tropical diseases, strategically positioning the soap as a luxury good and a means of protection. This type of advertising actively contributed to an environment where cleanliness became both an individual responsibility and a signifier of belonging to a more "advanced" or civilised community. By linking cleanliness to ideas of health and modernity, this marketing angle likely held particular appeal in the context of colonial anxieties about disease and the perceived superiority of Western hygienic practices. However, it is important to note that colonial Southeast Asian audiences likely engaged with hygiene-focused advertising in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. While advertisers certainly aimed to capitalise on ideas of modernity and protection from disease, colonial consumers may have embraced and interpreted these messages differently. For some, adopting these "modern" hygienic practices

[59] *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, Dec 19, 1938, 2.
[60] *Ibid*., 1.
[61] *Ibid*.
[62] *Ibid*.

may have signified genuine hope for health improvement, while for others, it could have represented a desire to navigate power hierarchies imposed by colonial structures. The relationship between cleanliness, modernity, and consumerism was not a one-way street, but a dynamic process shaped by both advertisers and the agency of local consumers.

This dynamic between commercial narratives and consumer response is not unique to colonial Malaya. Chieko Nakajima's study on early twentieth-century Shanghai reveals a strikingly similar pattern.[63] Shanghai's burgeoning household chemical industry relentlessly marketed soap, toothpaste, and other toiletries as vital to individual well-being. Entrepreneurs harnessed the blurred lines between traditional Chinese and Western medical concepts, marketing products styled as health-improving. Advertisements in periodicals of the 1920s and 1930s frequently featured items as diverse as toiletries, clothes, food, drinks, and even tobacco, emphasising their "hygienic" (衛生 *weisheng*), "healthful" (健康 *jiankang*), and "clean" (清潔 *qingjie*) attributes.[64] It is important to note that this marketing narrative transcended pharmaceuticals, promoting everyday chemical products as essential for personal hygiene. Shanghai's status as a cosmopolitan centre likely made these narratives particularly persuasive. Advertisers played upon anxieties about its rapid urbanisation and population density, framing their products as essential protections against unseen threats.

Similar dynamics between hygiene narratives, colonial control, and anxieties about modernisation were at play in the Dutch East Indies. Here, colonial authorities played a key role in constructing the narrative of hygiene as a pathway to modernity. Health campaigns promoting Western ideas of cleanliness were intertwined with social control and economic motivations. Gani Jaelani shows Dutch Colonial authorities strategically incorporated Islamic teachings that aligned with hygienic objectives, employing them within health propaganda.[65] This was not mere convenience, but a deliberate act to render colonial health directives more palatable and effective in altering practices deemed "backwards" by the colonizers. Such campaigns often posited Western cleanliness standards as a benchmark, subtly insinuating the superiority of colonial culture and knowledge, using "hygiene" as a vehicle for both social and economic control.

These efforts were multifaceted. The colonial health service's "*Adviseur voor de Propaganda*" under Lucien Sophie Albert Marie von Römer utilized diverse media, including books, illustrations, and even films, to disseminate these hygienic principles. The section's dissolution due to budgetary constraints does not diminish the intent to entrench Western

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[63] Chieko Nakajima, ""Healthful goods": Health, Hygiene, and Commercial Culture in Early Twentieth-century Shanghai," *Twentieth-Century China* 37, no. 3 (2012): 250–274.
[64] *Ibid*., 252.
[65] Gani Jaelani, "Islam dan Persoalan Higiene di Hindia Belanda" [trans. Islam and Hygiene Issues in the Dutch East Indies], *Jurnal Sejarah* 1, no. 1 (2017): 82–104; See also Chiara Formichi, "Bouillon for His Majesty: Healthy halal Modernity in Colonial Java." *History of Religions* 62, no. 4 (2023): 385–388.

hygienic norms.[66] Further, John Hydrick's arrival in Java in 1924 as a representative of the Rockefeller Foundation's international health division brings external influences onto the scene.[67] Jaelani highlights the Foundation's aim to research and combat diseases and model superior American public health systems.[68] The resistance encountered from figures like Dr van Lonkhuijzen, who doubted the applicability of American health methodologies to the context colonial Indonesia, underscores the tensions inherent in transplanting Western health strategies into colonial environments with their complex social and cultural landscapes.[69]

These works illustrate how health and hygiene functioned as tools of both progress and control. Western concepts of cleanliness were frequently framed as superior to existing indigenous practices. This implied that the colonised society could only achieve an elevated health status – and by extension, modernity – through adopting European practices, often embodied through commercially available products. Advertisements like those for "Kuan Yim Hoon" gourmet powder and "Three Star Brand" disinfectant soap demonstrate how everyday products were imbued with symbolic meaning. Through a skilful blend of marketing, scientific language, and the invocation of modernity, purchasing these items became associated with a sense of advancement, improved well-being, and a more sophisticated lifestyle. The emphasis on "cleanliness" as paramount to "health" in these advertisements reflects broader societal narratives in colonial settings.

Interestingly, both the "Kuan Yim Hoon" and "Three Star" ads emphasize Shanghai as the Chinese manufacturing hub. This aligns with broader narratives of Shanghai as a cosmopolitan urban centre embodying progress and perhaps signifying, for some consumers, a sense of "authentic" modernity compared to goods manufactured in more overtly colonial settings. Additionally, the description of "Three Star" as a "toilet soap" hints at notions of refinement and self-care, moving beyond mere utilitarian cleaning. In contrast, the Chin Lee & Co. advertisement for 555-soap, while still emphasizing quality and value, is visually less dynamic. The advertorial text, despite mentions of free gifts and lower prices, seems less sophisticated than those promoting "Kuan Yim Hoon" and "Three Star" products. However, Chin Lee & Co.'s use of both English and Chinese in the packaging caters to a potentially broader, even multilingual consumer base.[70] Moreover, the promise of free van delivery hints at localized strategies specific to Penang's geography. This suggests different hierarchies of modernity operating between urban centres and outlying areas.

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[66] Jaelani, "Islam dan Persoalan Higiene di Hindia Belanda", 89.
[67] Eric Andrew Stein, "Vital times: Power, Public Health, and Memory in Rural Java," (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2005), 53.
[68] Jaelani, "Islam dan Persoalan Higiene di Hindia Belanda", 90. For more on the Foundation's international health division, see John Farley, *To Cast Out Disease: A History of the International Health Division of the Rockefeller Foundation (1913-1951)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 323.
[69] Jaelani, "Islam dan Persoalan Higiene di Hindia Belanda", 90.
[70] *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* Dec 19, 1938, 2.

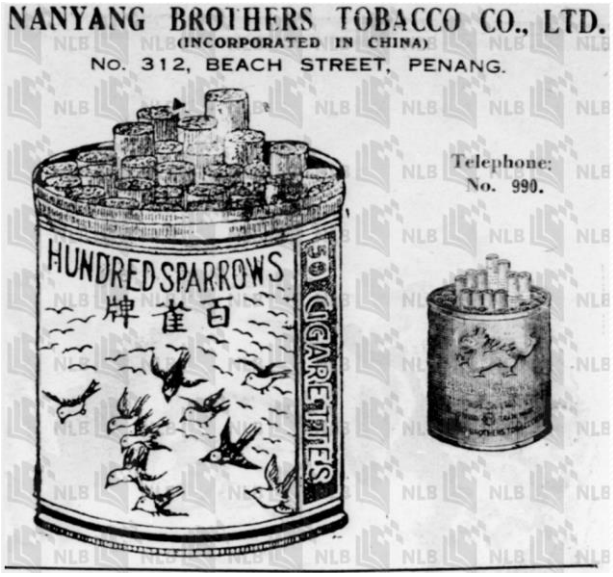

Figure 60. Nanyang Brothers Tobacco Advertisement.[71]

Shifting from hygiene products, the "Hundred Sparrows" cigarette advertisement by the Nanyang Brothers Tobacco Co. offers another intriguing example of how businesses capitalised on the complex dynamics of modernity and identity politics within colonial Malaya (See Figure 60 above). The advertisement's minimalist design and prominent display of the company's Chinese origins project a sense of sophistication and credibility, aligning it with growing Chinese nationalism. Its use of English, however, suggests a desire to reach a broader, multilingual consumer base.

The advertorial strategically pitches "Hundred Sparrows" cigarettes as a way for consumers to express support for Chinese enterprise and national identity within Malaya's rising tide of Chinese patriotism. While this tactic likely resonated with some, it's important to note that not all members of the Chinese community based their consumer choices solely on nationalism. The "Hundred Sparrows" advertisement nonetheless highlights how businesses strategically utilised ideas of modernisation, cultural identity, and nationalism to shape consumer desires in colonial Malaya. Understanding this dynamic requires recognising that Chinese nationalism in colonial Malaya was a complex and evolving phenomenon influenced by events in China and the unique circumstances of the Malayan Chinese community. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a surge in interest among overseas Chinese in political developments in their ancestral homeland, as detailed by Yen Ching-hwang.[72] Events like the 1911 Revolution ignited fundraising efforts and even motivated some to return

[71] *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* Dec 19, 1938, 3.
[72] Yen Ching-Hwang, "Overseas Chinese Nationalism in Singapore and Malaya 1877–1912", *Modern Asian Studies* 16, no. 3 (1982): 397–425.

to China to fight for the new Republic. This sense of shared heritage and the potential for Chinese political progress contributed to a heightened sense of nationalism. Yet, Chinese nationalism in Malaya was not uniform. Figures like Tan Kah Kee, a major businessman and philanthropist in Singapore, offer a clear example. His support for Chinese education and reform – alongside his shifting alignment between the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party – highlights the nuanced and fluid ways ethnic identity could interact with national politics.[73]

Studies by Wu Xiao An further illuminate the complex interaction of nationalism, identity, and economic activity. His work highlights how while some aspects of nationalism fostered cooperation within Chinese business networks, internal divides could also emerge as individuals navigated economic realities within a politically volatile landscape.[74]

Figure 61. Tai Aik Furnishing Co. Advertisement.[75]

Understanding this historical backdrop is crucial when interpreting the "Hundred Sparrows" cigarette advertisement. While the advertisement provides evidence of how national identity intertwined with the commercial sphere, viewing it as a monolithic representation of the entire Malayan Chinese population would be simplistic. Furthermore, advertisements like those produced by Tai Aik Furnishing Co. (See Figure 61 above) offer insights into how individual motivations and aspirations could both reflect and deviate from these broader trends within the colonial context.

Tai Aik's ad balances economic appeals with hints of subtle local pride. While foregrounding competitiveness ("Moderate Prices") and appealing to contemporary tastes ("newest designs of modern furniture"), its positioning of "Penang" directly beneath the

[73] C.F. Yong, *Tan Kah-kee: The Making of an Overseas Chinese Legend* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1987).
[74] Xiao An Wu, *Chinese Business in the Making of a Malay State, 1882-1941: Kedah and Penang* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003).
[75] *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* Dec 19, 1938, 1.

company name is notable.[76] This could be a strategic decision to cultivate local loyalty and differentiate themselves from imported goods. Given the rising nationalist movements at the time, it might even suggest a subtle form of economic nationalism, framing consumption choices as a way to support the local community. Furthermore, Tai Aik's placement in an advertorial promoting several furniture makers hints less at direct competition and more at potential cooperation fuelled by the desire to position themselves as viable alternatives to imports. While not overtly nationalistic, this advertorial exemplifies how economic self-sufficiency and community solidarity could be intertwined within the colonial context.

Figure 62. Cheng Lee Co. Advertisement.[77]

This emphasis on collaboration and local identity within the marketplace is particularly interesting when considering how other advertisements targeted the Malayan Chinese community. The emphasis on sport within the colonial project provides another lens to understand advertisements such as Cheng Lee & Co's (See Figure 62 above). As colonial powers actively promoted sports as part of their "civilising mission" in Southeast Asia, certain activities came to be associated with specific ideals.[78] Participation in the range of activities Cheng Lee emphasises – from musical instruments to sporting goods – becomes not merely leisure but a way to demonstrate alignment with modern, Western values of discipline and rationality, concepts highlighted in analyses such as Huebner's. This desire for a cosmopolitan identity likely reflects acceptance of certain aspects of Western cultural influence. The idea of a "healthy body, healthy mind," central to colonial conceptions of sport, as noted by Brownfoot, likely informs Cheng Lee's advertising strategy.[79] Their appeal to customers is rooted in the desire for refined leisure and practical concerns with well-being.

[76] *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* Dec 19, 1938, 1.
[77] Ibid., 3.
[78] Stefan Huebner, *Pan-Asian Sports and the Emergence of Modern Asia, 1913–1974* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2016), 2.
[79] Janice N. Brownfoot, "'Healthy Bodies, Healthy Minds': Sport and Society in Colonial Malaya", *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 19 (2), 2002: 129–156.

Notably, within the context of colonial Southeast Asia, the concept of "leisure" was transformed. It became another tool employed in the European "civilising mission." The shift towards emphasising Western "rationalised" leisure profoundly impacted daily life patterns. Industrialisation cemented the separation of "work" and "leisure" into distinct spheres unfamiliar to many traditional cultures in the region.[80] Crucially, while certain European pastimes were promoted, they were not blindly absorbed. Activities such as badminton underwent local adaptations – sometimes played outside standard rules within social settings like festive night markets – showing that hybridisation occurred as often as the complete replacement of existing recreation customs.[81]

This colonial framework makes the transformation embodied by Cheng Lee's advert even more striking. Sports transcend mere hobbies to align with "ideal" behaviour defined by Western concepts of progress. Products like musical instruments and those aimed at "youth development" reflect more than casual pleasure; they tap into aspirations tied to a specific vision of advancement. This evolution to modern forms of leisure was not driven solely by force. Penang Trade fairs and marketing campaigns exerted "soft power" that shaped public desires. However, while rules, schedules, and even designated sports spaces (clubs, parks) became increasingly standardised, localised forms of recreational activity persisted, challenging complete conformity. Pre-colonial leisure often held deep roots within community gatherings, spiritual themes, and agricultural rhythms with flexible or adaptable rules.[82] Thus, when analysing advertisements like these, it's essential to consider the changes enforced by external influences and the resilience of localised recreational practices. This hints at a complex interplay of agency, tradition, and adaptation as individuals negotiated encroaching new "modern" norms. This leads us to consider how the promotion of British goods through events like Singapore's Empire Shopping Week further complicated the landscape of consumption and identity in colonial Southeast Asia.

"Buy British, Be Modern": Singapore's Empire Shopping Week

In 1932, Singapore hosted Empire Shopping Week, a week-long campaign promoting British and Empire-produced goods.[83] First introduced in the 1920s and led by the local branch of the Overseas League, a group promoting ties within the British Empire, the initiative sought to boost consumption of products sourced from its territories.[84] To persuade consumers, the organisers strategically distanced themselves from outdated notions of blind loyalty. They

[80] Brownfoot, "Healthy Bodies, Healthy Minds," 113.
[81] Colin Brown, "Playing the game: Ethnicity and politics in Indonesian badminton", *Indonesia* 81 (2006): 74.
[82] Sarah Moser, Esther Clinton, and Jeremy Wallach, "Leisure Activities in Southeast Asia, from Pre-colonial Times to the Present", in *The Palgrave Handbook of Leisure Theory*, ed. Karl Spracklen, Brett Lashua, Erin Sharpe, Spencer Swain (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 114.
[83] "For the Empire", *The Straits Times* May 18, 1932, 10.
[84] David Thackeray, "Buying for Britain, China, or India? Patriotic Trade, Ethnicity, and Market in the 1930s British Empire/Commonwealth," *Journal of Global History*, 12, no. 3 (2017): 390.

stated that the event was not about "closing the Malayan market to non-British producers," nor was it suggesting consumers pay a premium "for an inferior article simply because it is of Empire origin."[85] This marked a calculated shift, acknowledging the need to compete on merit and cater to a more discerning consumer. However, this newfound respect for consumer choice concealed the core agenda. The focus on economic competitiveness underscores the centrality of commodities in constructing a sense of imperial unity. The decline of the gold standard was strategically highlighted as a key advantage for British manufacturers, suggesting a belief that Empire goods could now outdo foreign rivals on price.[86] Empire Shopping Week was not simply a commercial endeavour; it actively harnessed market forces to forge a shared economic identity within the British world.

This strategy reflects a subtle evolution in marketing tactics. While the event acknowledges the shortcomings of past practices – critiquing the "disastrous habit among British manufacturers of seeking to persuade a man that what he says he wants is not good for him" – it simultaneously reveals a deeper understanding of how to manipulate consumer desires.[87] The promise of greater choice and responsiveness to consumer preferences masks the calculated effort to shape those very desires through appeals to economic competitiveness and imperial loyalty. This suggests a shift from overt dominance to strategic persuasion, recognizing that colonial markets were no longer guaranteed and needed to be actively cultivated. This shift is coupled with a clever emphasis on economic self-interest as a persuasive tool. As reported in *The Straits Times*, "the prosperity of Malaya depends in some measure on the prosperity of the Empire as a whole."[88] This framed argument positions Empire goods not merely as a patriotic choice but as an economically prudent one. The argument emphasises a sense of interconnectedness within the imperial market. Prosperity in the periphery, like Malaya, is tied to the health of the core – the British Empire. By supporting British goods, consumers were not merely bolstering British industries but their own future well-being as part of a reciprocal, self-sustaining system.

The *Straits Times* editorial hints at a subtle unease about consumer behaviour within the Empire Shopping Week campaign. It warns against stock shortages, fearing consumers might try a new Empire product "only to find they can no longer procure it."[89] This exposes a deep-seated concern about the potential fickleness of consumer trends and the challenges of fostering lasting loyalty to Empire goods. Ultimately, the event highlights the complex, evolving relationship between consumer culture, imperial identity, and the strategic use of commodities. While aiming to cultivate a sense of shared economic destiny within the Empire, it reveals an

[85] "For the Empire", *The Straits Times* May 18, 1932, 10.
[86] *Ibid*.
[87] *Ibid*.
[88] *Ibid*.
[89] *Ibid*.

undercurrent of uncertainty about the reliability of consumer behaviour within an increasingly competitive marketplace.

Figure 63. Joseph Travers & Sons Ltd Advertisement for Empire Shopping Week.[90]

The Joseph Travers & Sons, Ltd. advertisement exemplifies this tension between persuasive rhetoric and underlying anxieties (See Figure 63 above). On the surface, it's a stirring call to action for residents of British Malaya – part of the campaign to promote intra-Empire trade. Focusing on detailed illustrations of British-associated products like Worthington Beer, HP Sauce, Scrubbs Ammonia, and others emphasises their "Empire Produce" status.[91] The appeal to "Shop Within the Empire" frames consumption as both patriotic and economically pragmatic. Its claim that supporting Empire goods is "sheer common sense" attempts to shift the focus from blind loyalty towards a sense of mutual economic benefit.[92]

However, the ad, just like the *Straits Times* editorial, hints at a deeper concern about ensuring a consistent supply of these goods and the potential for fleeting consumer interest. This highlights the potential fragility of the idealised vision of a self-sustaining imperial economy and underscores the complexities of navigating consumer desires within a colonial context. This anxiety is subtly echoed in the advertisement's insistence that everyone, from housewives to businessmen, plays a role in the economic success of Empire Shopping

[90] *The Straits Times* May 18, 1932, 1.
[91] *Ibid*.
[92] *Ibid*.

Week.[93] Choosing products with the "mark of Empire produce," no matter how large or small the purchase, is framed as an act of "faith in British Empire Products."[94] This rhetoric transforms consumerism into economic participation within the grander imperial project.

To address potential hesitation, the advertisement emphasizes the "typical high-quality products" of the Empire.[95] The promise that a single trial would convince consumers suggests confidence in the superiority of these goods. However, the explicit targeting of women – framing their choices as critical to Malaya's success – reveals a deeper layer. Yes, it recognises women's purchasing power, but it also underscores a potential anxiety about cultivating and maintaining consumer loyalty. This anxiety is intertwined with a broader sense of shared responsibility and a hint of urgency. The ad stresses that the people of British Malaya must contribute to the Empire's economic revival through their consumer choices. This reflects the interwar period's complex currents of consumerism, imperial identity-building, and notions of economic interdependence within the Empire. The language used aims to galvanise the population by invoking a shared heritage and the need for a collective effort to restore prosperity. It encapsulates a vision of the British Empire as an interconnected economic entity where solidarity and active participation from its subjects are crucial in ensuring its survival and future success.

Figure 64. United Engineers Limited Advertisement.[96]

[93] *The Straits Times* May 18, 1932, 1.
[94] *Ibid*.
[95] *Ibid*.
[96] *The Straits Times* May 18, 1932, 6.

The inclusion of the "Buy Empire Products" (B.E.P.) slogan in the United Engineers Limited advertisement highlights its participation in a broader, multifaceted campaign focused on shaping imperial consumer habits (See Figure 64 above). David Thackeray's insightful analyses of patriotic trade campaigns offer a framework to understand the complexities surrounding this effort.[97] His focus on the often-competing initiatives promoting the purchase of Indian, Chinese, and "British" goods illuminates the push for regionalised integration within the Empire amidst a period of economic challenges.

Like the campaigns Thackeray explores, the slogan in the advertisement above attempts to create networks of trade based on ethnic ties and a constructed sense of shared identity. However, it is crucial to recognise the "hybridity of colonial subjects' identities" – a concept Thackeray highlights.[98] This hybridity significantly impacted the potential success of such initiatives, leading them to evolve differently across various regions of the Empire. Furthermore, the language, reach, and limits of these campaigns, as Thackeray emphasises, are key to understanding why the advertisement might resonate differently depending on the viewer's location and identity.[99] For those with stronger ties to Britain, it might tap into a sense of economic obligation to the "mother country." For others within Malaya, the appeal might centre more on a localised form of economic participation and the promise of quality goods. Thackeray's later work, focusing on "Selling the Empire", offers another lens.[100] It allows us to see this advertisement as a case study in the evolving politics of marketing and advertising within the context of the British World. The advertisement reflects the Empire Marketing Board's interwar efforts to build "Buying British" or "Buy Empire Products" habits.[101] However, Thackeray suggests the evolution of the advertising industry might undermine this goal. While reliance on market research allowed for more targeted campaigns, it also meant consumers were less likely to be swayed by purely sentimental appeals.

This tension plays out within the campaign's own messaging. High-level support from figures like J.H. Thomas, Secretary of State for the Dominions, and Sir James Lithgow, President of the Federation of British Industries, aims to create a sense of duty and shared purpose.[102] The emphasis on "reciprocal trade" speaks to anxieties about economic instability. It paints a comforting picture of a self-sustaining system beneficial to everyone within the Empire. However, Sir Cecil Clementi, the Colonial Secretary of the Straits Settlements at the

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[97] Thackeray, "Buying for Britain, China, or India?", 386–409.
[98] *Ibid*., 389.
[99] *Ibid*., 388.
[100] David Thackeray, "Selling the Empire?: Marketing and the Demise of the British World, c.1920–1960," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 48:4, (2020): 679–705.
[101] *Ibid*.; *The Straits Times* May 18, 1932, 6; On the establishment of Empire Marketing Board, see Felicity Barnes, "Bringing Another Empire Alive? The Empire Marketing Board and the Construction of Dominion Identity, 1926–33", *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 42:1, (2014): 61–85.
[102] "Practical Effort to Promote Reciprocal Trade", *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* May 10, 1932, 7.

time, injects a dose of realism with his message. His caution against expecting immediate results reveals a potential gap between the idealised vision and the complexities of the Malayan market.[103] This suggests that Empire Shopping Week faced challenges beyond simple competition from non-Empire goods. It hints at the potential for conflicting priorities and anxieties within the colonial context, highlighting the fundamental limitations of a campaign relying primarily on imperial sentiment in the face of economic uncertainty.

Clementi's focus on fostering Malayan self-sufficiency adds a complex dimension to Empire Shopping Week. His emphasis on localised economic contributions could initially seem to align with the event's message of strengthening the Empire as a whole. However, his push for self-sufficiency also implies a potential reduction in reliance on imports, including those from Britain.[104] This reveals a fundamental tension: Empire Shopping Week's focus on promoting British goods might, paradoxically, contribute to a future where colonies like Malaya develop industries that rival Britain's own. While superficially positive for the campaign, the responses from retailers and businesses featured in *The Straits Times* underscores this potential contradiction.[105] The article highlights the success of outreach efforts and the planned series of events designed to generate excitement for Empire products. However, this enthusiasm for promoting a broader range of Empire goods, originating from various territories within the British domain, could inadvertently fuel the very competition that Clementi's vision of self-sufficiency implicitly anticipates..

Figure 65. John Little's Stand at the Empire Shopping Week.[106]

[103] "Practical Effort to Promote Reciprocal Trade", *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* May 10, 1932, 7.
[104] *Ibid*.
[105] "Encouraging Response from Traders", *The Straits Times* Apr 12, 1932, 11.
[106] *The Straits Times* May 18, 1932, 20.

Figure 66. Lux Stand at the Empire Shopping Week.[107]

Responses from traders in *The Straits Times* underscore the strategic efforts underway to build momentum for Empire Shopping Week in Singapore. The large number of replies to the initial outreach campaign demonstrates initial success, allowing the subcommittee to move forward with an ambitious program of events.[108] The planned Empire exhibition at the New World, a fancy dress ball, and a decorated motor lorry parade promise to generate excitement and create a grand, highly visible showcase for Empire products (See Figure 65 and Figure 66 above).[109]

Despite being hosted at the New World, a venue owned by Straits Chinese businessmen Ong Boon Tat and Ong Peng Hock, the Empire Shopping Week was a distinctly colonial project, organised by the colonial government.[110] The focus on securing the participation of local firms in the exhibition suggests a desire to not only showcase British goods but also cultivate an image of a vast, profitable Empire network. Additionally, *The Straits Times'* commitment to publishing a special "Empire Shopping Week" supplement with reduced advertising rates aims to increase the campaign's reach and entice a wide array of businesses, contributing to a diverse selection of products designed to appeal to a broad consumer base.[111]

While the specific business model of the New World – profiting from stall rentals and concession fees – was established during its earlier incarnation as a temporary entertainment venue in 1923, it proved to be a perfect fit for the Empire Shopping Week.[112] This convergence of capitalist and colonial interests, where generating revenue and projecting imperial power

[107] *The Straits Times* May 18, 1932, 20.
[108] *"Encouraging Response from Traders", The Straits Times*, April 12, 1932, 11.
[109] "Empire Shopping Week Display at New World", *The Straits Times* May 18, 1932, 20.
[110] Wong Yunn Chii and Tan Kar Lin, "Emergence of a Cosmopolitan Space for Culture and Consumption: The New World Amusement Park-Singapore (1923–70) in the Inter-war Years," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 5, (2), (2004): 281.
[111] "Encouraging Response from Traders", *The Straits Times* April 12, 1932, 11.
[112] Chii and Lin, "Emergence of a Cosmopolitan Space", 288–289.

were intertwined, shaped the event's ambitions. This enthusiasm and extensive preparation are reflected in The Straits Times' report on the upcoming Empire Shopping Week, beginning on 18 May 1932. The report states, "judging by the keen interest and enthusiasm displayed by the various retail firms in Singapore, the project promises to succeed."[113] The report highlights that the event extends beyond mere commerce, offering a festive atmosphere. "It should not be thought that the Empire Shopping Week is taking the dreary form of selling and buying only, for the promoters have made every endeavour to make "The Week" a regular fair well worth the patronage of the public."[114] To further engage the public, the promoters have introduced an open billiards championship tournament in Malaya, a picturesque lorry parade, and a gala fancy dress ball.

The work of arranging the stalls, decorating a whole flat of lorries, making up fancy dresses, and other preparations were entered into with a will that augurs well for success. The extensive list of participating businesses underscores the widespread support for the initiative, solidifying its potential success and guaranteeing an exciting array of goods for shoppers. Companies like John Little and Co., Caldbeck Macgregor, Lipton Tea, Fraser and Neaves, United Engineers, Wilts United Dairies and Singer Sewing Machine, alongside local enterprises such as Wah Heng, Tan Kah See, and Ban Choy Seng, all contribute to the diverse offerings.[115] The vibrant atmosphere and the broad selection of Empire products highlight the strength of the Empire's economic network while offering a lively and entertaining experience for the community.

Despite this optimistic outlook, hints of potential challenges emerge. The limited exhibition space at the New World could lead to frustration among businesses unable to participate in this central event.[116] Furthermore, the broad focus on "Empire produce and manufacture" might blur the lines between goods manufactured in Britain and those produced within its colonies. This raises a question: Will consumers feel misled or disappointed if they discover that the advertised Empire products do not always align with their expectations of British origin? These potential issues add a layer of complexity to the otherwise celebratory nature of Empire Shopping Week. This connects to the concept of commodity discursivity. The campaign relies on the idea of the "Empire" as a singular entity, eliding the vast differences in economic development and industrial capabilities between Britain and its colonies. By promoting a homogenous category of "Empire products," the campaign risks obscuring the actual origins and qualities of the goods. This lack of transparency could undermine consumer trust and limit the campaign's long-term effectiveness.

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[113] "Show at the New World", *The Straits Times* May 18, 1932, 2.
[114] *Ibid*.
[115] *Ibid*.
[116] "Encouraging Response from Traders", *The Straits Times* Apr 12, 1932, 11; "Buy British and Benefit", *Malaya Tribune* May 26, 1932, 7.

Singapore's Empire Shopping Week showcases the vast range of commodities available within the Empire's economic network. The diverse list of participating businesses, from established British firms to local enterprises, reflects the variety of goods flowing throughout the system. However, the emphasis on "Empire produce and manufacture" raises potential questions about the true origins of these commodities. Shoppers expecting a strictly British origin for all "Empire" goods might be surprised to find a wider range of products, including those manufactured within colonies. This could lead to confusion or even disappointment, highlighting a potential tension between the image the Empire wants to project and the reality of its complex trade network.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined how colonial powers in Southeast Asia strategically used trade fairs and exhibitions to influence consumption patterns and impose specific visions of "modernity." Through a close analysis of Surabaya's Jaarmarkt, Penang's Trade Fairs, and Singapore's Empire Shopping Week, the chapter reveals how Dutch, British, and other European colonizers used these events and the commodities displayed within them to reinforce their dominance. These fairs involved complex logistical networks and funding structures that often-blended government support with a growing reliance on private investment. This further highlight how colonial control was intertwined with economic interests. These events sought to frame Western goods as superior, link notions of "modern" living to consumption, and ultimately reshape the desires and identities of colonised populations.

This analysis reveals that each colonial power adopted distinct strategies to influence consumption and shape visions of "modernity." Surabaya's Jaarmarkt, under Dutch rule, emphasised the contrast between imported and local goods, a tactic serving the colonial mission of "civilisation" by framing Western products as the path to advancement. Penang Trade Fairs, orchestrated by the British, focused on technological innovation and the allure of "newness" to promote the superiority of Western goods, emphasising the idea that progress was intrinsically linked to Western-style consumption. Finally, Singapore's Empire Shopping Week, initiated by the Overseas League and backed by colonial authorities, presents the most overt attempt to manipulate consumption by explicitly connecting the ideal of modernity with loyalty to the British Empire. This event sought to cultivate a desire for Western goods and a sense of political allegiance enacted through the marketplace.

This analysis of Southeast Asian colonial fairs offers insights that extend beyond their historical context. Firstly, it highlights the enduring power of consumer culture to shape identities and the ways commodities become linked to specific lifestyles and aspirations. This strategy continues to echo in contemporary advertising and marketing. Secondly, the chapter reveals the complexity of identity formation under colonialism. While choices were

constrained, colonised populations were not merely passive consumers. Their agency is evident in acts of adaptation, rejection, and the use of consumption as a means of self-expression, particularly as local elites became increasingly involved in the organisation of these events. Finally, this study invites us to examine the relationship between consumerism and power structures today. Legacies of colonialism continue to shape global markets and how we understand the meanings attached to commodities. By examining these historical roots, we can better question the narratives shaping our own consumption choices.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined the interconnected forces of consumer culture, colonialism, and the formation of a modern, middle-class identity in colonial Southeast Asia. Analysing shopping landscapes, consumer choices, advertising, and colonial fairs explores how pursuing a "modern" lifestyle shaped individual aspirations, economic systems, and power dynamics within colonial cities like Surabaya, Singapore, and Penang. The thesis underscores the contradictory nature of consumer culture within colonial settings, highlighting how the concept of "modernity" itself was commodified. Consumption offered a means of expressing individual desires and participating in a seemingly attainable, globalised modernity – but one that could also inadvertently reinforce existing power structures. The negotiation between local traditions, global influences, and the realities of life within a colonial system shaped the formation of middle-class identities. It fuelled aspirations for both self-determination and social advancement.

Individual chapters delved into specific aspects of this complex dynamic. Chapter One, "Shopping Landscapes and Contested Modernity in Colonial Southeast Asia: Surabaya, Singapore, and Penang in the 1920s and 1930s", argued that the evolving shopping landscapes of Penang, Surabaya, and Singapore during those decades were contested spaces. Colonial attempts to impose a standardised ideal of "modern" consumption clashed with the realities of diverse populations and localised economic systems. Urban planning, infrastructure development, and the creation of new retail environments like department stores became tools to reshape consumption patterns and assert control over urban space. This focus on "modernity" often masked anxieties about economic competition and a deep-seated desire to redefine social hierarchies within these cities. However, the persistence of traditional marketplaces and street vendors, despite attempts at suppression, reveals the incomplete nature of this imposed transformation.

Chapter One demonstrates how the rhetoric of progress and the material changes to the landscape reflected colonial priorities. The emphasis on order and regulation aimed to erase the perceived disorder of informal markets, reflecting a view of local practices as inherently incompatible with colonial modernism. Additionally, these changes exposed contradictions, with concerns about sanitation and public health often justifying interventions that simultaneously served the control and commercial expansion project. Ultimately, these evolving shopping landscapes reveal a complex interplay of colonial ambition, the resilience of local economic practices, and how consumer choices intertwine with expressions of identity and social change.

Chapter Two, "Shared Tastes, Shared Dreams: Southeast Asia's Middle Class in the 1920s and the 1930s", delved into the complex ways middle-class identity was formed in

colonial Southeast Asia. It challenges simplistic narratives about Westernisation and nationalism, demonstrating that the pursuit of modernity was multifaceted. Central to this pursuit was the role of consumption. The desire for Western goods and lifestyles became a way for the middle class to express their modern identity and social aspirations. However, this emphasis on consumption could also inadvertently reinforce existing power structures, underscoring the contradictions inherent in their colonial position. The interconnectedness of education, language, and the emergence of new professions further shaped middle-class identity. Colonial education systems, while instilling Western values, also created pathways for advancement and fuelled aspirations within the class. Multilingualism allowed them to navigate colonial hierarchies, highlighting the complex interplay of local and global influences within their lives. The rise of professions like law, engineering, and teaching reflected both opportunities created by colonialism and how power systems ultimately dictated the terms of advancement within those fields. Importantly, Chapter Two emphasises the transnational dimension of the middle-class experience. Shared aspirations and consumer practices connected individuals across colonial borders, fostering a sense of shared identity across the cities.

Chapter Three, "'Buy Local', Boycotts, and Beyond: Consumer Choices in the Colonial Era", offered a nuanced exploration of consumer resistance within colonial Southeast Asia, challenging simplistic narratives that downplay local agency in shaping consumer culture. While focusing on boycotts, support for local goods, and critiques of Westernisation, it is essential to acknowledge that these acts of resistance existed within complex power structures. Considering how social and economic inequalities within the colonial system might have limited the potential for transformative change through consumer activism alone is vital. This chapter highlights the tensions between promoting local products and the potential for reinforcing existing hierarchies that limit inclusivity. Chapter Four, "Advertising and the Shaping of Consumer Desire in Colonial Southeast Asia", examined how advertising became a powerful tool for reshaping cultural practices, notions of progress, and desires within colonial Southeast Asia. Far from being neutral, advertisements during the "*zaman reclame*" actively constructed a vision of "modernity" linked to Western-defined consumption. This strategy often exploited anxieties about economic stability and social mobility, transforming beloved holidays and traditions into opportunities to promote new forms of consumerism. The consequences of this transformation were profound and often uneven – contributing to potential inequality while simultaneously fuelling desires for participation in a commercialised society.

Chapter Five, "Commodities as Contested Objects: Colonial Fairs and the Display of Modernity", examined how colonial powers weaponised trade fairs and exhibitions in Southeast Asia to manipulate consumption patterns and impose visions of "modernity." These events, including Surabaya's Jaarmarkt, Penang's Trade Fairs, and Singapore's Empire

Shopping Week, functioned as meticulously orchestrated spectacles designed to frame Western goods as superior and inextricably linked to progress. Dutch, British, and other colonisers strategically leveraged these events to solidify their dominance and reshape local desires by using displays, advertisements, and the concept of the "modern" household to further their agenda. Chapter Five argues that colonised populations were not merely passive recipients of these narratives. Their choices around commodities reveal acts of agency, resistance, and self-expression. They might embrace, adapt, or reject specific products, selectively integrating elements of Western consumption while maintaining their traditions and identities. This highlights the complex interplay between consumerism, colonial power, and local identity formation, demonstrating how consumer culture became a contested battleground within the colonial context.

Historians have called for a more nuanced exploration of consumption within the context of colonialism, emphasising the need to understand how diverse historical actors experienced and navigated evolving economic structures.[1] This analysis invites further research into several critical areas. Firstly, while understanding colonial strategies is crucial, deeper investigations into how specific populations experienced these transformations are needed. How did factors like class, gender, and ethnicity shape individual and community responses within the evolving commercial landscapes of colonial cities? Understanding these diverse experiences is essential for building a nuanced view of the limitations of colonial power, the strategies of resistance employed, and the complex interplay of identity formation within these spaces. Secondly, while consumer resistance has been explored, examining its direct ties to broader anti-colonial movements can further illuminate the role of economic agency in the fight for independence. Did boycotts and support for local goods galvanise larger political action? How did critiques of "imposed modernity" evolve alongside calls for self-governance? A detailed study of these connections would enrich our understanding of how seemingly everyday choices contributed to the struggle against colonialism.

Finally, the decisions and aspirations of the colonial middle class continue to shape Southeast Asia today. Investigating how their experiences influenced post-colonial class structures, evolving relationships between consumerism and identity, and the ongoing legacies of colonialism offers a critical opportunity to dismantle simplistic narratives. As Els Bogaert and Remco Raben highlight, colonisation and its subsequent decolonisation processes were not merely about power relationships but a wide-ranging series of interventions. These interventions shaped administrative structures, businesses, educational systems, and even everyday lifestyles.[2] This line of inquiry can help trace the continued impact

[1] Frank Trentmann, "Beyond Consumerism: New Historical Perspectives on Consumption." *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, (3), (2004): 401.
[2] Els Bogaerts and Remco Raben, ed., *Beyond Empire and Nation: The Decolonization of African and Asian Societies, 1930s-1960s* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2012), 18.

of historical power structures and how contemporary societies navigate the ongoing processes of decolonisation.

The consumerist drive born during the colonial era has spiralled into a global crisis of overconsumption. Developed nations, fuelled by aggressive marketing and the principle of planned obsolescence, consume resources at an unsustainable rate. This leads to severe environmental consequences such as pollution, deforestation, and climate change.[3] Ironically, the brunt of these costs is often borne by developing nations – frequently former colonies – where environmental protections may be less stringent or where waste from the developed world is exported.[4] Along with overconsumption comes a push towards a homogenised global consumer culture. Western brands and their associated ideals create immense pressure to adopt a standardised consumption, risking local traditions and cultural diversity.[5] Sociologist George Ritzer coined the term "McDonaldization" to describe how principles of efficiency, predictability, and control, embodied by fast-food chains, colonise other aspects of life globally.[6]

A significant movement of conscious consumerism is emerging in response to these issues. People make deliberate choices based on their purchases' ethical, environmental, and social impact. This involves supporting fair trade, sustainable practices, and a move towards less wasteful consumption patterns. Consumer activism also utilises tools like boycotts (refusing to buy from unethical companies) and buycotts (supporting companies with responsible practices). Initiatives like Fashion Revolution and Ethical Consumer actively promote and guide this consumer-driven change.[7]

How we consume has become deeply intertwined with personal identity and social positioning. We no longer buy things simply for their use-value; they have become expressions of who we are or aspire to be. Advertising and social media bombard us with messages designed to create a never-ending cycle of wanting more, newer things. This constant pursuit can have negative mental health consequences, fostering feelings of inadequacy and anxiety. Furthermore, consumerism and the unequal access to goods it fosters can amplify social divisions and create feelings of exclusion within communities and across the globe.

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[3] Annie Leonard, "*The Story of Stuff*", Directed by Louis Fox (Free Range Studios, 2007). https://storyofstuff.org/ (Accessed 29 March 2024).

[4] Aja Barber, *Consumed: The Need for Collective Change: Colonialism, Climate Change, and Consumerism* (North Atlantic Books, 2021).

[5] Scott Lash and Celia Lury, *Global Culture Industry: The Mediation of Things* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007); John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

[6] George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* (Pine Forge Press, 1993).

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