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2nd MBRAS Lecture 2014**“The Raffles Paradox: Liberal, Autocrat, or something else? “**

by Ng Tze Shiung

The Pod, National Library of Singapore,
100 Victoria Street,
Singapore
Saturday, 4 October 2014, 5 p.m.

Abstract

Sir Stamford Raffles's administration in the East Indies (1811-24) presents a perennial paradox to historians who have attempted to generalize British policy prior to the commercial success of Singapore.

Raffles is celebrated as the liberator of trade and the native serf, but it has been next to impossible to reconcile this idea with equally valid impressions of him as an exacting monopolist, a suppressor of dissent, zealous proselytiser, and rigorous enforcer of rules and controls.

How can Raffles have been both liberal and autocratic? In my talk, I suggest that the paradox is the result of an ideology present in Raffles's thinking, which cannot be reduced to modern notions of liberalism or authoritarianism, but which originates in eighteenth-century concerns about the ethical conduct of man in society.

The Lecture

The subject of Tze Shiung's talk derives from his PhD thesis. It concerns British conceptions of wealth and property during the crucial period in the East Indies between 1807 and 1824, and how they had influenced the governance and constitution of society there. In his thesis, Tze Shiung looks at texts in context. He analyses modes of speech in texts. He tries to understand what historical actors were thinking, and qualify their writings as actions performed in history by their thoughts. In adopting this methodology, Tze Shiung follows a tradition generally known as the Cambridge school of the history of political thought.

In his talk, Tze Shiung focuses on the thoughts of the principal actor in the early history of British Malaya: Sir Stamford Raffles - in particular how Raffles had conceived of liberty. Raffles's liberalness is the focus of a longstanding problem in historiography, contradicted as it is by Raffles's authoritarianism. The problem is not so much a problem of Raffles, as it is a problem of ours. It originates, suggests Tze Shiung,

"in the inconsistency in our reading of Raffles. Raffles's liberalness is explained in terms of Political Philosophy, but Political Philosophy has not been able to explain his authoritarianism. Raffles authoritarianism is explained in terms of High Politics, but High Politics has not been able to explain his liberalness. And it is incorrect to think that Political Philosophy and High Politics, and therefore Raffles's liberalness and authoritarianism, are two separate spheres of action."

In his thesis, Tze Shiung argues that how the British viewed the people whom they encountered in the East Indies, was deeply influenced by how they viewed themselves in Britain. But at the turn of the nineteenth century, this was not by any means a finished or coherent view. In fact, the British were still contesting their identity. How they viewed the East Indies, therefore, related to this discourse about what it means to be British. Thus, Tze Shiung sets out to try and show that Raffles's authoritarianism can be related to his liberalness, by looking at how the context in British political thinking changed during his time in the East Indies.

Tze Shiung opens by demonstrating how the British idea of *liberalism*, which manifests in a Liberal Discourse about Free Trade and the Emancipation of Man, was (1) deeply wound up with the concept of empire in the nineteenth century, but (2) not coherently formed until around 1830, when Britain constitutionalized a series of liberating laws. Liberalism operated (and still operates) through a sense of progress, one by which man measured himself and other people in terms of civilization. Tze Shiung suggests that how we perceive of Raffles is deeply influenced by the values of this liberal ethos, or milieu, or 'world':

"Everything which we know about Raffles, is told us first by his Obituarist and his Widow, and then enlarged by Hugh Egerton and DGE Hall;" all of which took place from 1830 onwards. Given that Raffles died in 1826, a juncture when liberalism was only just becoming a tangible political creed, there is clearly an anachronism as to how he has been interpreted for posterity. What we want to know, therefore, is what Raffles's text describes in the context of its own time, i.e. between 1810 and 1823.

Tze Shiung then briefly describes how post-war historians seem to have been confounded when, on extricating the liberal narratives of liberty and empire from the narrative of Raffles, they were confronted by the reality of Raffles's monopolies and un-emancipatory treatment of the native people. The conundrum was made all the more complicated by the revelation that many British officials had held the Dutch-French republican reformers of Java in great admiration. This tantalizing Dutch-French connection may have spelled the end of the road for this line of enquiry in the 1950s, but Tze Shiung believes it offers an important clue. He says that

"British officials had praised the successful policies of the Dutch Radicals not because they had become Revolutionaries and Bonapartists, but because they had understood the arguments on which these policies were based. In the early-1800s, British, Dutch, and French men still shared the same age-old concerns of Man, Society, and State. They understood each other because they all came from

the same milieu, or 'world', and used the same 'mode of language', or 'idiom', which was the idiom of the eighteenth century."

Tze Shiung consequently proceeds to distinguish and identify this idiom by taking us through four sets of texts. The first is a passage from Raffles's obituary from 1826. It contains the idiom that depicts the nineteenth century liberal scheme which we know: where freedom begets commerce, wealth, industry, prosperity, philanthropy, so on. Underlying this scheme is the idea of the right of the individual to do what he wants in his own self-interest.

The two subsequent texts are taken from Raffles's speeches and letters in 1823 and 1820. They exhibit the same liberal scheme and context of the freedom to do what one wants. But a fourth text by Raffles from 1815 shows none of these. Instead, Raffles describes freedom in terms of one's *self-consciousness* and *self-dependence*. Tze Shiung distinguishes from these texts two kinds of liberty: *negative* liberty, and *positive* liberty. He shows how Raffles had experienced a change in his conceptualization of liberty around 1820, from one of positive liberty (self-dependence) to one of negative liberty (right of property).

Armed with the context of positive liberty, Tze Shiung introduces more texts to show how 'slavery' and 'monopoly', which are anathema to liberalism, can actually describe two ethical and benevolent conditions. He traces this paradigm to the discourse of the Scottish Enlightenment, which addressed a moral crisis about how men could live virtuously with each other in society or under the state. Tze Shiung calls this the Ethical Discourse. What the British officials were doing in the East Indies, therefore, was to put Scottish moral philosophy into action. Tze Shiung suggests that they had envisaged an empire whereby all men were rendered independent because they were, through British policy, able to restore their virtue in themselves and in their society.

This theory naturally raises questions as to Raffles's intentions as governor between 1811 and 1824. Tze Shiung considers the founding of Singapore in 1819 - just prior to the change in Raffles's understanding of liberty - and offers that the island was not initially desired by Raffles to provide a free port on the China trade route. Rather, Raffles had followed the instruction of John Leyden, for a virtuous city to be founded, upon which would converge all the values of the commonwealth of the Malay Archipelago.

This alternative narrative of Singapore's history obviously interested some members from the audience, and elicited some animated questions. Tze Shiung was equally animated in his responses, but the general message that should be put across is for the reader to lay aside all the ideals and prejudices by which his liberal framework has conditioned him to apprehend the world, and instead to try to put himself in the shoes of the moral philosopher in eighteenth-century Scotland.

A more detailed paper on the subject is in the pipeline and will be submitted to the JMBRAS, in which his arguments may be elaborated in greater detail.

* The MBRAS wishes to acknowledge Mr Ng's kindness in preparing this report to be uploaded on to the Society's webpage.

Ng Tze Shiung received his mechanical engineering degree from the Imperial College in 1995. His continued interest in history led him to undertake an MA with the University of Leeds. He currently researches part-time for a PhD with the Australian National University, under the supervision of Professors Anthony Milner and Robert Cribb, as well as Dr Alex Cook. He is still employed full-time in the building industry.



