Coffee-shops in Colonial Singapore: Domains of Contentious Publics
by Khairudin Aljunied

This article is situated within the expanding literature on the role played by sites of sociability such as coffee-houses in the growth of publics and the public sphere. In the last few decades, historians of Europe, North America, the Arab World and South Asia have shown that coffee-houses served multiple functions in their respective historical contexts. They were places where people coming from different backgrounds gathered to socialize and to discuss about issues of their time, thereby gaining clarity about what was at stake for themselves and their societies. Coffee-houses were also spaces in which stories and slander about the state and its avatars were exchanged, just as they were sites where talk might be translated into popular protests. With coffee-houses and the introduction of coffee-drinking culture thus came new versions of publics and of subaltern politics, and the strengthening of old ones. These developments had a determining impact on ordinary people's lives as state and citizenry struggled for influence not least through the use and, in some instances, abuse of coffee-houses.[1]

Historians and social scientists of Southeast Asia have lagged somewhat behind in the analysis of coffee-houses and the public sphere. The few works that have taken account of such sites use them to focus on consumption patterns, entrepreneurial strategies, business networks and everyday multiculturalism, as well as architectural make-up and migration flows. They are mainly written within the framework of what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls a 'transition narrative, of which the over-riding (if often implicit) themes are those of development, modernization and capitalism'.[2] One result is the failure to register the ways in which these places provided the arenas for the articulation of the aspirations, frustrations and demands of historical actors. To put it differently, in adopting the transition narrative analysts have failed to take into account the discourses and actions of the diverse social groups in the coffee-houses which fashioned the public domains.[3]

Indeed coffee-houses, or 'coffee-shops' as they are generally known in Southeast Asia, were hubs for a myriad of activities which transformed the sensibilities of the masses. This was particularly so during the age of decolonization from the 1940s to the 1960s, a period when anti-colonial

National University of Singapore   *mlsasmk@nus.edu.sg*

Fig. 1. Indian coffee-shop at Bussorah Street in 1970s Singapore.

Fig. 2. Chinese coffee-shop at Joo Chiat Road in 1960s Singapore.

politics, social movements and nationalist activisms flourished, along with underground movements of all sorts. Besides functioning as meeting-places for persons from all classes, coffee-shops in decolonizing Southeast Asia morphed into arenas of struggle and power play. Evidence for this can be found in the colonial history of what is now Indonesia, when it was still the Dutch East Indies: seeking information on the anti-colonial activities that had been brewing up from the 1920s, the Dutch authorities established 'listening posts' in coffee-shops.[4] The Indonesian playwright Utuy T. Sontani, who lived through the postwar Indonesian Revolution, dramatized the central role played by coffee-shops in the struggle for independence and the period of decolonization in *Bunga Rumah Makan* (Flower of the Coffee-shop, 1948), his most famous play, and in *Awal dan Mira* (Awal and Mira, 1952). These plays narrate intertwining stories of heroes and social outcasts and the yearning of the Indonesian *rakyat* (masses) for freedom from the shackles of colonialism. The coffee-shop is portrayed as a microcosm of the nascent nation-state, with 'people who control our society today – people who want to dominate others through continuous chatter, who are oblivious that their own souls are dry and dusty – their worlds so narrow, far narrower than this coffee-shop!' (*Orang-orang semacam itulah yang menguasai masyarakat kita sekarang–orang-orang yang maunya mengatasi orang lain dengan bicara terus bicara, tak tahu jiwanya sendiri kering-dangkal, dunianya sendiri sempit. Lebih sempit dari ini kedai kopi!*).[5]

In Malaya during the tumultuous weeks before the surrender of the Japanese in August 1945, coffee-shops became havens for guerrillas from the Malayan Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) seeking food and shelter. In the town of Pusing in Perak, for example, coffee-shop owners gave free food to guerillas for an entire month to support their efforts in resisting the Japanese.[6] In Indochina the coffee-shop could be a place where white superiority was challenged and, in turn, enforced. French soldiers reportedly reprimanded local men at coffee-shops who failed to salute or greet them, much to the chagrin of the Vietnamese.[7] In the Philippines, under American rule, coffee-shops (like university classrooms) were places where the country's sovereignty was debated and discussed, and the image of the 'humane colonizer' undermined.[8] Such scenes were duplicated in colonial Burma, Cambodia and other parts of Southeast Asia, where spies and intelligence officers could be found sitting side by side with anti-colonialists and expert criminals – each harbouring their own aims and ideas about the colonial situation and generating their own distinctive publics.

How then should we characterize coffee-shops in colonial Southeast Asia during this era? It is tempting to construe them as 'third places', in Ray Oldenburg's phrase for settings beyond the home and the workplace. In this formulation, coffee-shops would be spaces for dynamic civic engagement which the home and the workplace could not easily provide, given the conventions governing them.[9] While coffee-shops in Southeast Asia did become arenas for the growth of civil society, their characterization as 'third places'

to be differentiated from the home and the workplace is, to my mind, problematic. As will be shown later, many coffee-shops were actually the homes of their respective owners and workers, and also places where they could derive income, that is, do 'work'. The home/workplace/third place distinction subscribed to by Oldenburg and his followers collapses in the face of the multiple functions performed by coffee-shops in Southeast Asia.

I propose instead that coffee-shops in colonial Southeast Asia should be regarded as 'domains of contentious publics'. I use the word 'domain' here because it captures the physical boundaries, private proprietorship and discursive activities that defined the coffee-shops. A domain connotes an area that is owned by a particular person or group of persons. And yet, colonial-era coffee-shops were liberal spaces where outsiders could congregate and which they could identify with, though not claim as their own. These domains were therefore both open and closed, with rules of sociability and social exchange determined by the proprietors who nonetheless would allow a certain degree of freedom. This ensured that the domains of which they were the guardians remained relevant and compelling for all social actors involved.

Meanings of the term 'publics' vary according to the context in which it is used. In this essay it refers to groups of individuals or a set of social actors who interacted and had an impact upon, or were affected by, the operations of a given institution, specifically, the coffee-shops. These individuals – as Markman Ellis rightly observes in the case of Britain which bears striking relevance to the Southeast Asian context from the 1940s up until the 1960s – were a blend of the 'rich and the poor, migrants and metropoles, women and men'.[10] One could add to that list illiterates and the learned, rogues and rebels, the old and the young, who, as collectivities, experienced common constraints within particular environments while being 'exposed to the same stimuli and having something in common even without being in persisting interaction with one another'.[11] These publics were 'contentious' because the views and ideas which they shared posed a direct or indirect challenge to the structures of colonialism and its avatars. They made their contentions apparent in varied ways – through talk, oppositional politics or social actions – all of which would have a bearing on the social institution that they saw themselves as having a stake in or that they identified themselves with. More crucially, these publics played important roles in making more and more people aware of their predicament. In the moments when talk turned into action, the day-to-day running of the colonies could be disturbed or even disrupted.

It follows then that, as domains of contentious publics, coffee-shops helped to expand the boundaries of the 'counter public sphere' in Southeast Asian societies during the years after World War Two. The counter public sphere as defined by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge is an arena in which members of the working class from varying occupations and modes of thought may gather to release emotional and practical tensions arising

from the exigencies and contradictions of capitalism. The counter public sphere, then, was an autonomous space where the collective experiences of the working class were shared and discussed. It was also a showground for the exploration of ideas and a platform for the organization of collective action by the working class against the bourgeois class.[12] Along with coffee-shops, the counter public sphere in colonial Southeast Asia included markets, religious institutions, union offices, clan associations, ethnically based clubs, publishing houses, street corners and other open spaces such as gardens and parks where working-class Southeast Asians met and where they deliberated and agitated for the reform of their national status in relation to the colonial regimes.[13] It is nevertheless important to adapt Negt and Kluge's concept to the unique circumstances of Southeast Asia. The working-class patrons of the coffee-shops, as I shall show, were not the only group to express and act upon their grievance against the bourgeois class. Even members of the petty bourgeoisie – the shop-owners – sometimes protested against the bourgeois colonial state as it sought to regulate the daily operations of their businesses. That is to say, in analysing the counter public sphere in colonial Southeast Asian societies through the particular prism of coffee-shops, one must recognize that parts of the bourgeois class can, at times, be pitched against one another in a race for influence over the instruments, modes and means of production.

Two main (but not exhaustive) types of contentious publics, I argue here, emerged from the coffee-shops in colonial Southeast Asia and formed an integral part of the counter public sphere: the 'lobby publics' and the 'grapevine publics'. These two publics existed in a continuum and were not necessarily distinct from one another. Because they co-existed within a context that was limiting and authoritarian, their discourses and actions were often monitored – not always effectively – but were potent enough to provoke some unease on the part of the colonizers. In many instances, the growing influence of each of these contentious publics led to swift measures, such as arrests and the closure of coffee-shops that were seen as launch pads for radical anti-colonialism.

The case of coffee-shops in colonial Singapore from 1945 to 1957 illustrates my point. Colonial Singapore during these defining years shared a number of features with other colonial cities in Southeast Asia at that time.[14] Aside from having a transcultural and hybridized civil society where people from different class, status and power positions colluded, clashed, competed, co-operated and combined to form their own pulsating counter public sphere, the colony had a vibrant print culture in the form of newspapers, periodicals and magazines of all sorts. Seismic shifts in the global economy as a result of World War Two and the waves of anti-colonial euphoria the world over posed numerous challenges and difficulties for colonial states in consolidating their technologies of rule. Due to the subsequent outbreak of violent insurgencies and the cycle of protests associated with the mushrooming of leftist movements, the colonial

administration in Singapore suffered overstretched resources and a strained economy. Administration of many aspects of Singaporean life proved to be onerous.[15]

To make matters even more complicated, these twelve defining years witnessed a large migration to Singapore of people from different parts of the archipelago and beyond. These migrants contributed, in some measure, to the heightening of political consciousness and social activism in the local population.[16] It is no surprise that, because of these and other developments coupled with the colony's strategic location, Singapore became a conduit and interchange for economics, culture and politics, bridging Europe and Asia Pacific.[17] Coffee-shops in colonial Singapore were inevitably influenced and shaped by the vicissitudes of international politics, anti-colonialism, self-assertion and nationalist sentiments. Coffee-shops became an indispensable part of the lives of most working adults in Singapore, particularly men, because these domains provided them with somewhere to relax and gather, to update each other on the latest happenings and to disseminate information on various possible activities. But before turning to a discussion of the types of contentious publics that intersected in and populated these coffee-shops, it is worth examining the nature and composition of these domains and their geographical spread.

MAPPING THE DOMAINS – THE NATURE OF COFFEE-SHOPS IN COLONIAL SINGAPORE

As domains of contentious publics, coffee-shops in Singapore (called *kopi tiam* in Hokkien and *kedai-kopi* in Malay) displayed a few general characteristics. They were, by and large, small-scale enterprises owned by families of specific sub-ethnic groups, which indirectly reflected the prevailing demography of Singapore in the postwar period. More than eighty per cent of the coffee-shops in Singapore were owned by Hainanese and Foochows. Both were migrant Chinese groups from mainland China, who entered the coffee-shop business as a response to difficulties in obtaining employment. By the 1950s there were reportedly more than 2,000 Hainanese and Foochow coffee-shops throughout Singapore.[18] Although distinctly 'Chinese' in terms of their names and the fact that they were owned by Chinese families and clans, these coffee-shops were often patronized by Malays, Indians and members of other communities on a day-to-day basis.

Said Zahari, a prominent Malay journalist and political activist who later became one of Singapore's longest-serving political detainees, recalled that meetings and discussions among journalists of the *Utusan Melayu* newspaper were often held in Chinese coffee-shops. The daily staple for patrons was cakes, toast with kaya and butter, eggs and black coffee.[19] Similarly, in a speech delivered on 14 October 1950 on the occasion of the opening of a

new office, the Secretary of the Kheng Keow Coffeeshops Association stressed their advantages:

> To the majority of the working classes, they find the coffee-shops are so serviceable and indispensable in solving their food problem. To the local authorities, they are serving one of the main arteries in the internal economy of Malaya [and Singapore], and last but not the least, employment is found to thousands and thousands of people in connection with the coffee-shop trade directly and indirectly.[20]

Hainanese, Foochow and other Chinese coffee-shop owners did not have a total monopoly of this business in Singapore. Indian and Malay coffee-shops were interspersed among the Chinese ones. Despite their relatively small numbers, these coffee-shops – known by many Malays and Indians as 'warong' (shop), 'kedai kopi' (eatery) or 'kedai sarabat mamak' (Indian tea shop) – attracted customers from across class, ethnic and linguistic lines.[21] The main attractions of these Malay and Indian coffee-shops were 'teh tarik' (tea with sweetened condensed milk) and Malay delicacies not found in Chinese eating places. These coffee-shops were so appealing and important in the everyday lives of different communities that they were regularly featured in vernacular films. The best-known films made for the Malay community were those produced by P. Ramlee in 1950s Singapore. Many of them feature dialogues set in coffee-shops. *Seniman Bujang Lapok* (*Old Bachelor Actors*, released in 1961), for example, begins with three men, Sudin, Aziz and Ramli, sitting in a Malay coffee-shop called 'Kedai Kita' (Our Shop), discussing the travails of life and possible sources of employment amidst the dire straits of the immediate postwar period.[22]

Generally, coffee-shops in Singapore had no more than ten small tables, arranged in close proximity to one another. There were usually four chairs for each table, and customers were allowed to merge tables if large groups decided to dine together. The front counter was usually in the middle of the shop, with the kitchen, the washing area and the toilets relegated to the back. This typical plan provided an open and inclusive atmosphere where people from different backgrounds could enter and leave easily without obstruction from other customers or from furniture. Both the exterior and interior parts of the coffee-shops were, by and large, sloppy and dirty. They were manned by male waiters wearing singlets and old slippers. Waitresses were found mostly in Chinese coffee-shops and less so in those owned by Indian-Muslims and Malays. In Hainanese coffee-shops, waitresses were employed both to serve customers and also to sit and talk with them, to ensure that they become regular patrons of a particular coffee-shop. Some women might offer sexual services to male patrons in exchange for money.[23] Partly because of this, Muslims in Singapore saw the taking of a job as a waitress in a coffee-shop as 'the first step in the road to prostitution'.[24] The gendered approach of Muslim shop owners affected customers as well as

staff, for Muslim women rarely sat and ate in Indian and Malay coffee-shops unless they were accompanied by their families and friends. Male waiters in Malay, Indian and Chinese coffee-shops, however, although seldom prim and proper, interacted well with customers. Hence, even though coffee-shops in colonial Singapore were generally filthy and ramshackle establishments, their inclusive spatial arrangements and their aura of sociability and charm, were important determinants in the formation of different publics.[25]

Coffee-shops in various parts of Singapore usually had back doors exiting into back lanes and stairways leading to an upper level, and were often part of a row of shop houses. The back lanes served several functions. Aside from being places where goods were stored and where rubbish was placed, collected and hauled away, back lanes were sites for informal businesses and illegal activities. Prostitution, gambling, the sale of contraband items and illicit meetings among secret society members were rampant in the back lanes behind coffee-shops, giving rise to an informal economy.[26] The upper floor of the coffee-shops fulfilled these same roles, although owners and workers often lived in these small upstairs spaces to ease the running of the coffee-shops and to save the time and cost of daily travel. Taken together, both the back lanes and the upper floors of coffee-shops constituted what Erving Goffman termed the 'back regions' of social and everyday life. These were spaces where informality prevailed and the moral conventions were contravened.[27]

Coffee-shops were concentrated in the municipal area of Singapore island. This is not surprising given that seventy percent of the island's population of one million lived in the area, with an average of 2,000 persons sharing each hectare of land area. More than 20,000 families stayed in over-crowded slums, in huts made out of attap palm, old boxes and rusty iron.[28] The coffee-shops provided space where people could relax and at the same time look for work, since these were places where they might meet potential employers or hear of jobs. Many also relied on the newspapers, radios, telephones and jukeboxes in the coffee-shops for news, communication and entertainment.[29] During breakfast and lunch hours customers came from nearby offices, government buildings, markets and shopping outlets. In 1951, a local newspaper, the *Singapore Free Press*, published a detailed and perceptive analysis of the pride of place that coffee-shops had in the hearts and minds of the local population:

> Patrons of coffee-shops range from high office executives to trishaw riders. There is no class or social distinction, each one enjoys equal privileges as long as he pays for his drinks. To every section of the people coffee-shops serve a different but definite purpose. To office workers, they are indispensable eating houses where they go for their midday lunch. To many day labourers, coffee-shops are what clubrooms are to the educated. Here they gather for friendly discussions of topics ranging from a local birth to world politics . . . Little wonder then that behind the

façades of every coffee-shop lie tales of romance, comedy, and tragedy ... But say what you like, coffee-shops are *indispensable* establishments, and who would grudge paying 15 cents for a cup of tea, considering that one can sit there indefinitely, read the local dailies and often enjoy free music as well.[30] (italics mine)

Indeed, the overwhelming number of coffee-shops in the municipal area and beyond and their large clientele meant that coffee-shops were not only 'indispensable' but also efficacious in generating a diverse array of publics with different interests.

CONTENTIOUS PUBLICS 1: LOBBY PUBLICS

Lobby publics were perhaps the most prominent form of contentious publics that emerged from coffee-shops in Singapore. I use the term 'lobby public' here in a restrictive sense to refer to various groups of people with agendas that did not necessarily destabilize or fundamentally challenge the entrenched structures of colonial rule. Lobby publics sought to improve existential and material conditions which were directly or indirectly affected by the political, economic and social constellations of the day. The people active in this form of contentious public were often coffee-shop owners and workers, who were sensitive to shifts in governmental policies, drastic transformations in the economy and feedback from members of the public about the running of the coffee-shops. In reaction to and anticipation of a multitude of challenges, coffee-shop owners and workers engaged in lobbying to reform the existing order of things and to sustain their relevance and operations.

To be sure, the coffee-shop owners were a formidable lobby public in post-World War Two Singapore. Conscious that the newly reinstalled colonial government was progressively trying to regain its control of the colony, attentive to the fragile economy and cognizant of the constant public scrutiny of the services provided by the colonial government, coffee-shop owners tended to work together to publicize their concerns and grievances and to promote their mutual business interests. High on their list of concerns was the set of regulations imposed and enforced by the colonial state. Coffee-shops were required by law to maintain a certain standard of cleanliness, sanitation and ventilation to avoid the outbreak of infectious diseases and to allow for easy evacuation and rescue in the event of disasters. Renovations had to be done once every three or four years and the coffee-shops had to close for cleaning for several days each year.[31]

Coffee-shop owners were also expected to serve beverages in accordance with acceptable standards. Proper quantities were to be used and owners were required to avoid adulterated ingredients, with violations resulting in fines.[32] Closely connected to the standards imposed by the colonial state were the price limits required by members of the public. On many occasions during the postwar years, complaints were made in the newspapers and

letters were sent to the governmental bodies about how expensive coffee and tea had become in comparison to the period prior to the Japanese invasion in 1942. One such complaint came from a writer under the pseudonym of 'Mana Boleh' ('How can this be') who protested that the increase in the prices of beverages was unfair to regulars of coffee-shops. The Price Control Department, 'Mana Boleh' reasoned, should take a serious look at the matter and revoke the licences of coffee-shop owners if they increased prices at the expense of the customers.[33] This complaint was echoed by a member of the Singapore Legislative Council, Lim Yew Hock, who insisted that the price of 'a cup of black coffee was too high and allowed the coffee-shopkeepers a large margin of profit'.[34] The responses by the colonial state on such issues were usually supportive of the demands of the general public. In the late 1940s, prices of beverages were regulated and capped at five cents for plain coffee and tea and ten cents for coffee and tea with milk. These prices doubled in the 1950s due to the worldwide increase in the prices of sugar and milk as well as the decrease in coffee production. British subjects in Singapore were thus not the only ones who fought against the increase in coffee prices. In Britain, the escalating price of coffee was debated during Parliament sittings.[35]

Coffee-shop owners also faced competition from street hawkers selling foodstuffs near the coffee-shops. This seriously affected profit margins because customers would bring food bought from street hawkers into the coffee-shops to eat. Another consequence of this was that diseases from food sold at the roadside could find their way into the coffee-shops. However attentive to cleanliness coffee-shop owners thus ran the risk of fines and even closure of their shops when there were outbreaks of food poisoning, which they blamed on the unhealthy foods which their customers bought from roadside hawkers.[36]

How did the coffee-shop owners react to these issues? One response was to involve the press, writing letters to the editors of mainstream newspapers and inviting journalists for press conferences or focused interviews on issues affecting the coffee-shops. In these ways, the coffee-shop owners made themselves visible as lobby publics in their own right. Of course, coffee-shop owners were not great writers, nor were they skilled in dealing with the questions posed by reporters. They normally enlisted the help of lawyers, journalists, teachers and members of the educated class among their customers, to write or translate their views to reporters. Responding to complaints about the increase in the price of coffee, one coffee-shop owner explained at length that the price increase was necessary because coffee beans and powdered tea had become more expensive. 'These increases, with the rise in water and light rates, rent, license fee, high cost of health maintenance and repairs, and the introduction of the Weekly Holiday Ordinance, help to step up the overhead charges in running a coffee-shop'.[37] Another coffee-shop owner, named Lee Kok Beng, asserted that the complaints about filthy coffee-shops were either unfounded or naïve.

The majority of customers, according to Kok Beng, wanted these places to look rustic and simple. Dirtiness was tolerated and most would not visit coffee-shops 'if they looked shining and charged high prices'.[38]

Another strategy of this lobby public was to organize petitions and send them to the colonial government, at the same time making them known to the public via newspapers and radio broadcasts.[39] While petitions were not as frequent as one might imagine, on the occasions when they were sent hundreds and sometimes thousands of coffee-shop owners participated in the process, encouraging a lively public discussion about coffee-shops. The visibility of the coffee-shops became heightened just as public concern about food prices and the management of coffee-shops pushed the limits of the Singaporean counter public sphere. Altogether, debates over coffee-shops and the beverages they served did much also to put the colonial government on a tightrope between the devil of acceding to the demands of the coffee-shop owners and the deep blue sea of intense criticism from the literate masses. On October 1947, for example, a petition was sent by coffee-shop owners to the colonial government to increase the controlled price of coffee and tea.[40] This met with a swift response from the authorities, who abolished the price control, but coffee-shop regulars were not pleased. One person, who identified himself as representing the working-class population of Singapore, wrote to the *Straits Times* in reaction to an increase in coffee prices in 1950:

> On the behalf of the workers and the poor, including myself, I protest against the rise in price of any commodity, and I sincerely ask the Government to take a serious view of the living costs in the Colony, to prevent more unrest from the working-class people.[41]

Public resentment did not stop the flow of petitions from Singapore coffee-shop owners. In 1948, the Hainan Coffee-shop Association and the Foochow Coffee-shop Association petitioned the Municipal Authorities to relax the many regulations on coffee-shops.[42] In January 1953, 2,000 coffee-shop owners petitioned against hawkers' selling food near the coffee-shops. The spokesman of the Singapore Hawkers' Union argued in return that such a ban would deprive hawkers of their livelihood.[43]

The third type of lobbying tactic used by coffee-shop owners was to stage peaceful protests and attract media attention. The coffee-shop owners were wary of strikes and picketing, fearing that such measures would be badly received by the colonial state, and could lead to censure and possibly closure. Erring on the side of caution, they made use of respectable platforms, such as the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, to register their unhappiness with policies and the ways in which they were implemented. In 1953, an increase in water prices resulted in a large gathering of coffee-shop owners called to deliberate and eventually stage a widely-publicized peaceful protest. Imposed only on hotels and coffee-shops, the increase in water prices

was meant to increase the revenue of the Water Department. The colonial government explained that hotels and coffee-shops were two of the largest users of water and that raising water prices would not have a great impact on these businesses. This was not well received by coffee-shop owners, who counter-argued that: 'Business is bad at present. If the Council insists on the 20-cent increase, certain shops might put up coffee and tea prices'.[44]

Coffee-shop workers (also referred to as 'coffee-shop assistants') were equally active in lobbying, much like their employers. To use the conceptual framework developed by the political theorist Nancy Fraser, refined for this context, these coffee-shop workers constituted part of the 'subaltern' lobby publics 'formed under conditions of dominance and subordination'.[45] They were 'subaltern' because they had no control or ownership of the means of production, had little or no share of the profits and surplus gained from the places where they worked, were subjected to strictly defined working hours, and were dependent on daily, weekly or monthly wages. The subalternity of coffee-shop workers was especially obvious in the late 1940s.

Scarcity of jobs coupled with the exploitative practices of coffee-shop owners meant that these workers endured long hours of work (more than ten hours a day) with no prospect of increase in pay or bonuses. The usual salary was between $40 and $120 a month, depending on the generosity of the coffee-shop owners and the size of their operations. Meals were free for workers and, if the coffee-shop had upper floors, they were sometimes allowed a room upstairs for little or no rent. But the conditions in these shop houses were unhygienic and the workers who lived in them risked their health. There were no fringe benefits for coffee-shop workers. Getting extra cash to maintain a decent family life and pay medical bills meant workers had to take on night jobs, borrow money from loan sharks, or engage in illegal businesses, usually in the back lanes, which could land them in trouble with the police. Some who were unable to cope with the stresses of their life and work ended up taking their own lives.[46]

Coffee-shop workers were also expected to do other jobs for their employers, such as cleaning their cars and running errands, and they would face immediate termination if their employers felt unsatisfied with their performance and attitude.[47] On top of this, they were exposed to violence and verbal abuse from their bosses and customers, especially in coffee-shops that were strongholds, meeting places, or places of negotiation for secret society members. In such situations, coffee-shop workers were sometimes the victims of gang fights and intimidation. To be a worker in that milieu was to be in a position of peril and difficulty; a position that many felt could be changed through lobbying for their rights.[48]

Hence, from 1945 to 1957, more than 4,000 coffee-shop workers lobbied for the improvement of their status, and thus formed a public of their own making. This public was made possible not only through their own efforts in expressing and staging their demands but also through the help of unions that flourished in postwar Singapore. The unions in postwar Singapore,

according to Christopher Bayly and Timothy Harper, 'were formidable combinations of workers, and stoppages in one sector could easily escalate to become general strikes'.[49] So highly charged were the unions during the 1940s and 1950s that it was recorded that more that a million man days were lost because of industrial action in Singapore. All of this took place despite the declaration of Emergency in late 1948 which restricted meetings and strikes. Strikes were however the last resort for the coffee-shop workers. They first put forward demands that, more often than not, were simple yet layered. Coffee-shop workers regularly asked for better pay in view of the rising cost of living. In 1951 the Singapore Coffee Employees Union demanded a ten percent increase for coffee-shop workers receiving $60 a month and fifteen percent for those paid less.[50] Another demand was for fair conditions of service, with the requirement that employers could dismiss workers only on justifiable grounds.

Through the unions, coffee-shop workers requested for bonuses to be given to employees who worked for six months or more. They also asked for workplaces to be made safe for workers, for sick leave, and for double pay for work done during holidays.[51] But they did not get much of what they asked, even though their demands came into public view and their protests created considerable tension between them and employers during working hours. Negotiating for better working conditions and employment benefits was often a protracted affair, with strikes organized by hundreds of coffee-shop workers and petitions sent to employers and the colonial government. Protests drained the energies of the workers and reduced their employers' profits. But that was the price that coffee-shop employers and workers had to pay in a setting where two lobby publics co-existed and clashed with one another.

CONTENTIOUS PUBLICS 2: GRAPEVINE PUBLICS

> We have to remember that the public in Malaya does not spend its rest hours in reading but rather conversation, with the result that the most startling rumours, usually without foundation of any kind, are spread from mouth to mouth and from coffee-shop to coffee-shop and may easily, if given any colour by too much reticence, result in panic.[52]

This comment, published in the *Singapore Free Press* in 1939, conveys the prevalence of rumour and gossip in coffee-shops throughout Malaya (including Singapore) in the late 1930s. It continued in the postwar decades. High levels of illiteracy before and after the war meant that many Singaporeans depended upon word of mouth for the latest news. Since conversation was the main activity in the coffee-shops, and since Singaporeans 'enjoyed gossiping'[53] and passing hours each day in coffee-shops in 'talk over the day's gossip',[54] it is not surprising that the coffee-shops produced yet another contentious public – 'grapevine publics'.

The grapevine publics born out of coffee-shops in Singapore were by no means contentious or inflammatory. People talked about the humdrum demands of daily life, such as family disputes, husbands misbehaving in clubs, the causes of deaths, the possibility that a certain person might be promoted to a higher rank, and the existence of supernatural beings hunting for virgin girls or haunting office buildings.[55] Such talk achieved no more than to lead to more dubious and malicious gossip with the overriding purpose of maintaining intimacy between people. They were politically harmless but useful in that they bound particular collectives together through shared conversations and, more crucially, reinforced attachments to the places where the gossip took place – the coffee-shops.[56]

Grapevine publics can become contentious and dangerous when they manufacture and circulate rumours and gossip that poison reputations – of the state, its institutions, and its policies, or of persons in positions of power who may not be part of the state apparatus but are also still affected by stories told about them, whether fact or fiction. The potency of grapevine publics is enhanced when the rumours and gossip they circulate gain widespread reception and, in extreme cases, are used to help bring about outbreaks of violence. Worse still for those implicated in the stories is the fact that the identities of the rumour-mongers – of the grapevine publics – are seldom known. In the case of colonial Singapore, the 'improvised news' of anonymous coffee-shop patrons[57] undermined persons and structures of authority while creating uncertainty and anger that led to conflicts and loss of confidence among the masses.

Before examining the types of rumours and gossip generated by the grapevine publics, a few qualifications are in order here. First, rumours and gossip were inter-related and interchangeable in the Singaporean colonial context. This was of course not unique to Singapore. As subaltern-studies scholars have noted in their studies of colonial India, rumours, gossip and other forms of scandalous talk on the streets and in villages were mutable and porous, easily shifting in the course of their transmission from person to person, from one locality to another. Yet both gossip and rumour had much in common. Spoken utterance par excellence, they functioned as subaltern means of communication. As autonomous types of popular discourse they provided mobilizing tools of the disenfranchised class against the people in power.[58] Grapevine publics, as we shall see, tended to incorporate rumour and gossip in the substance of their talk, and such discourses often involve the amalgamation of fact and supposition about figures, events or situations. To this must be added that grapevine publics may or may not be the originators of rumour and gossip. They may function as carriers and transmitters of already-circulating rumour and gossip received from friends, relatives, newspapers, radio and daily encounters in everyday life. Coffee-shops, from this vantage point, served as both points of origin and also clearing houses in the process of spreading rumour and gossip.

Above all, the ripple effects of rumour and gossip churned by grapevine publics might not be limited to the neighbourhood where a coffee-shop was located. Rumour and gossip could travel beyond specific districts and reach wider audiences even in an age when telecommunications were generally limited and the word of mouth reigned supreme. Here the work of the French historian Georges Lefebvre is significant for our understanding of the role of coffee-shop rumours. In his analysis of the power of the word of mouth and of oral traditions in revolutionary France he showed that rumours often spread more quickly because their content caused alarm. The more people feared some looming calamity or the potential effects of certain practices, the faster rumour would travel, even to a point of mass panic. 'Indeed, what was the Great Fear if not one gigantic rumour.'[59]

Sometimes the rumour and gossip that grew out of grapevine publics was anti-systemic in nature, posing a threat by exposing the weaknesses, inadequacies, excesses, imbalances and discriminatory practices of the status quo. Such 'weapons of the weak', in James C. Scott's phrase,[60] offered passive and everyday resistance to forms of power acting upon the subjugated masses. They constituted, as Michael Warner has reminded us, the 'weak-group politics of women, peasants and others'.[61] The desired outcomes of anti-systemic grapevine publics in Singapore's coffee-shops were twofold: to undermine and demolish ruling structures and to encourage people to boycott the campaigns and institutions of the state that ruled them.

Subversive groups were often behind anti-systemic rumours and gossip, in particular the communists, who were influential in postwar Singapore and had sympathizers among coffee-shop owners and regulars.[62] In 1948 the British security services saw communism as 'the greatest single factor' 'likely to aggravate the internal Security of Malaya during the next few years, in peace or in war'.[63] Of course, this hyperbolic fear was not without foundation. To spread awareness about their movement and recruit more members, communists infiltrated unions and made friends with coffee-shop owners. Since communists who came to Singapore were often seamen from Hainan Island they shared affinities with Hainanese coffee-shop owners and workers, and found ready support among them. Communists infiltrated the Singapore Coffeeshop Employees Union and used it as a front to spread word-of-mouth disparagement of the colonial state and to organize strikes.[64] Communists and their ideology were influential in local coffee-shops, as a writer in the *Straits Times* observed: 'many people, when they meet daily in offices, factories and coffee-shops talk very highly of Communism'.[65]

Another contributor to the *Straits Times*, the pseudonymous Cynicus, blamed coffee-houses for disseminating communist rumours and called on the Governor of Singapore to take lessons from history. To keep a check both on communism and on the concomitant rumours and gossip, Cynicus suggested, the Governor should be like Harun Al-Rashid, the medieval

Ummayad king who would 'walk the streets of his chief city disguised and used to talk with frequenters of coffee houses and gossipers in the streets in order to gauge the state of public feeling'.[66] The rumours and gossip which these communists spread were straightforward and effective at a time when colonialism was unpopular the world over. They asserted that the British government was spreading lies about wanting to make life better for its subjects when its real objective was to control and exploit the labouring masses. The communists claimed, according to the *Straits Times* in 1950, that only they were capable of defending the rights of the people, and 'that it is a matter of time before they will be liberated from the clutches of British imperialism'.[67]

Anti-systemic rumours also dwelt on corruption and other abuses in government and elite circles. Grapevine publics in coffee-shops talked about rampant bribery in the civil service. Stories were told of how certain influential personalities stopped government employees from voting in the occasional elections held to allow the British and the Anglophone elites to stay in power.[68] We can surmise that these rumours and gossip were created more often than not by the government employees themselves who visited the coffee-shops on a daily basis. Unable to get access to exclusive information kept by the upper echelons of government service and perhaps frustrated with the ways in which they were treated as lower-rung workers, the tales and speculations of aggrieved government employees contributed to the undermining of the government's reputation through grapevine publics in coffee-shops. The range of anti-systemic rumours and gossip is too extensive for detailed discussion here. One of the more sensational rumours told of children who went missing when a government health-inspection team came to local schools. This was purportedly part of a government population-control scheme.[69] Another grapevine invention was that the government planned to collect three years of income tax at one go to increase its shrinking revenue.[70]

The second category of rumours and gossip which grapevine publics in coffee-shops triggered, sustained or magnified concerns that generated fear. These created such general insecurity that panic would set in, driving people to hoarding, boycotts and price ramps. In the most acute situations, when such rumours made people feel that the livelihood of their communities, their cherished beliefs and their institutions were threatened, mass protest and violence broke out.

Escalating prices of basic necessities, especially rice and sugar, were usually at the heart of such fear-generating rumours and gossip. In May 1947, for example, rumours spread throughout Singapore that the colonial government intended to cut rations of staples amidst the shortages that were already plaguing the colony in the wake of the war. Inevitably a hot topic of conversation in coffee-shops, such rumours did much to raise not only the price not only of rice but also of coffee and tea.[71] In the years that followed recurrent rumours about expected changes in the prices of rice and other

necessities caused retailers and members of the public to buy from the black market and to hoard as much as they could.[72]

The mishandling of colonial justice was another topic discussed in coffee-houses and beyond which had the potential to heighten fear in the community and provoke reactions. Riots broke out in December 1950 and brought the island to a standstill for nearly three days, when some members of the Muslim community attacked Europeans and Eurasians in the colony in the course of a legal battle for a Dutch Muslim child, Maria Hertogh. Among the many causes of the riots were rumours and gossip in many Malay and Indian coffee-shops, for example in the Indian-owned Jubilee restaurant – one of the many coffee-shop cum restaurants where grapevine publics were anchored. Damaging rumours circulating there as Muslims converged to discuss the Hertogh case fuelled the sentiments of potential rioters.[73] As the American Consul General based in Singapore, William Langdon, had observed in a report written a few weeks before the outbreak of the riots:

> Feeling among Malays runs high and at each session, unprecedented crowds gathered around the entrance to the Singapore Court for a glimpse of the child [Maria Hertogh]. The Malays feel strongly that Maria should be restored to her mother and the case is widely discussed in the streets and coffee-shops.[74]

The situation was made even graver when a Eurasian volunteer policeman accidentally shot some Malays outside the Supreme Court on 11 December 1950. Tamby bin Osman, who was later charged for committing murder during the riots recalled that he was in the Geylang neighbourhood, loitering at nearby coffee-shops with his friends, when he heard rumours that Eurasians were murdering Malays at the Supreme Court. This sparked a riot. 'We were told by the older folks there to join the riots and to beat up any European and Eurasian person at sight...We felt that Singapore was ours. We wanted to confront the police because we saw many youths joining in the crowd.'[75] Another eyewitness, Khatijun Nissa Siraj, recounted that rumours about Maria Hertogh and British policy against the Muslims were 'going on like wild fire...Because of word of mouth, sometimes people exaggerate. Sometimes people make up the stories...the Police went after (them), trying to break off the riots, the gathering and all that'.[76] The upshot of the work of grapevine publics in coffee-shops, the irresponsible press and the inefficiency of the colonial government was the outbreak of one of the most deadly ethnic riots in Singapore, that claimed eighteen lives with more than 170 people injured. Nearly 2,000 persons were arrested in the aftermath of the riots, dozens of them rumour and gossip-mongers who continued to incite hatred against the Europeans.[77]

CONCLUSION

Coffee-shops in colonial Singapore gave birth to publics that proved troublesome for the colonial state and the ruling classes. This was possible not only because coffee-shops were in themselves hotbeds of controversy but also because Singapore at that time was a vortex of multiple activisms. In such a highly-charged setting, where trade unionists, political dissidents, progressive intellectuals and anarchists converged and discussed their conditions and their future, sites such as coffee-shops were 'domains of contentious publics'. They became places where groups of politically and socially active persons not only came together, to chat, to debate, to gossip and tattle but also might go on to protest in the streets against the existing order. One outcome of the deeds and words of such publics was that coffee-shops came to be a contributive force in the expansion of the Singaporean counter public sphere.

How can this story of contentious publics in coffee-shops in Singapore further the frontiers of research on Southeast Asian pasts? Clearly, it suggests the need to look again at sites which have been seen merely as places for idling, escapist preoccupations and cheap dining.[78] Coffee-shops, cafes, bars and other hangouts at the heart of communities in Singapore and the Southeast Asian region did of course fulfil those leisure functions. But these domains did much more than to extend a warm welcome towards all men and women with money to spend, ranging from those took pleasure in having a simple meal with friends, to those who were merely passing the time of an afternoon. They played a big part in the making of civil societies and in democratizing the relationship between the state and the people.

Looking at these sites differently requires us to readjust our assumptions of how and where politics and activisms were played out, and by which historical actors. We need to sensitize ourselves to those neglected areas where the common folk acted out their oppositional personae and, at the same time, bring to the fore their strategies of resistance and opposition to the ills of oppressive systems. These 'politics by other means' or 'subaltern activisms', without a doubt, permeated coffee-shops, cafes and the like in Singapore and the rest of Southeast Asia, especially in an age of decolonization where the battles for self-determination and social justice were fought on many fronts. A cross-comparative study of these sites could further illuminate our understanding of contentious publics that evolved from and within them in as much as it would enable us to recover the 'small voices of history'.[79]

Khairudin Aljunied is an Associate Professor at the National University of Singapore. He is the author or editor of six books, which include *Colonialism, Violence and Muslims in Southeast Asia* (London: Routledge, 2009) and *Malay Radicals: Resistance and Mobilization in Colonial Malaya* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University, forthcoming in 2014).

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 Cengiz Kırlı, 'The Struggle over Space: Coffeehouses of Ottoman Istanbul, 1780–1845', Ph. D. Thesis, State University of New York, Binghamton, 2000; Ralph S. Hattox, *Coffee and Coffeehouses: the Origins of a Social Beverage in the Medieval Near East*, Seattle, 1985, and M. N. Srivinas, *Social Change in Modern India*, London, 1966, p. 123. For a good summary of contemporary literature of coffee-shops in Europe, North America, India and the Arab World, see Konstantinos Chadios, 'The Urban Coffee-shop', Unpublished Dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Department of Architecture, 2005.

2 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, 2000, p. 31.

3 The literature on coffee-shops is too vast to list here. One of the more illuminating works is an essay by Khoo Gaik Cheng on coffee-shops in Malaysia: 'Kopitiam: Discursive Cosmopolitan Spaces and National Identity in Malaysian Culture and Media', in *Everyday Multiculturalism*, ed. Amanda Wise and Selvaraj Velayutham, Basingstoke, 2009.

4 *Japanese Empire in the Tropics: Selected Documents and Reports of the Japanese Period in Sarawak, Northwest Borneo, 1941–1945*, ed. Ooi Keat Gin, Ohio, 1997, p. 21.

5 Cited in Harry Aveling, *Man and Society in the Works of the Indonesian Playwright Utuy Tatang Sontani*, Honolulu, 1979, p. 22.

6 Christopher Bayly and Timothy Harper, *Forgotten Wars: Freedom and Revolution in Southeast Asia*, Cambridge MA, 2007, p. 39.

7 Truong Buu Lam, *Colonialism Experienced: Vietnamese Writings on Colonialism, 1900–1931*, Ann Arbor, 2000, p. 60.

8 Teodoro A. Agoncillo, *A Short History of the Philippines*, New York, 1969, p. 290.

9 Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee-shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*, New York, 1999. See also Ray Oldenburg, 'Introduction', in *Celebrating the Third Place: Inspiring Stories About the 'Great Good Places' at the Heart of Our Communities*, ed. Oldenburg, New York, 2001, p. 2.

10 Markman Ellis, *The Coffee-house: a Cultural History*, London, 2004, p. 345.

11 Alvin Gouldner, *The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology*, London, 1976, p. 95.

12 Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Towards an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, Minneapolis, 1993, pp. 7, 66, 77, 106–8, 113, 143, 223, 310 and 346ff.

13 Timothy N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya*, Cambridge, 1998, p. 337.

14 Hans-Dieter Evers and Rüdiger Korff, *Southeast Asian Urbanism: the Meaning and Power of Social Space*, New York, 2000, pp. 31–45.

15 See 'Reports on the Singapore Situation, 1949–1951', CO 717/199.

16 'Indonesian influence in the Malay Peninsula among the Malays', CO 537/2177.

17 *Singapore from Temasek to the 21st Century: Reinventing the Global City*, ed. Karl Hack and Jean-Louis Margolin with Karine Delaye, Singapore, 2010, and A. Samad Ismail, *Memoir A. Samad Ismail di Singapura*, Bangi, 1993, pp. 205–14.

18 'They Fear these Hawkers', *Singapore Free Press*, 22 Jan. 1953.

19 Said Zahari, *Dark Clouds at Dawn: a Political Memoir*, Kuala Lumpur, 2001, p. 39.

20 'Speech made by Secretary, Lim Hong Suan, of Kheng Keow Coffee Merchant Restaurant and Bar-Owners Association', National Archives of Singapore, NA 638.

21 'Interview with Mydeen Kutty Mydeen', 7 Feb. 1990, National Archives of Singapore, A001117; and Lai Ah Eng, 'The Kopitiam in Singapore: an Evolving Story about Migration and Diversity', Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series No. 132, Singapore, 2010, p. 10.

22 For an illuminating and incisive analysis of food and places in Malay films, see Timothy P. Barnard, 'Chicken, Cakes and Kitchens: Food and Modernity in Malay Films of the 1950s and 1960s', in *Reel Food: Essays on Food and Film*, ed. Anne Bower, London, 2004, pp. 77–87.

23 'Interview with Tan Eng Heng', National Archives of Singapore, A000506; 'Interview with Anthony Teo Tiong Guan', National Archives of Singapore, A 002479; 'Interview with Poh Lian Hueh', National Archives of Singapore, A003565.

24 'Ban Girls from Cafe Jobs: Hot Topic for Muslim Talks', *Straits Times*, 28 Nov. 1956. See also 'Waitresses in Cafes', *Straits Times*, 21 April 1949.

25 Kurt Iveson, *Publics and the City*, Oxford, 2007, p. 10. See also 'Sloppy Coffee-shops', *Singapore Free Press*, 17 Jan. 1957, and 'Drastic Clean-Up for Coffee-shops', *Straits Times*, 25 Aug. 1948.

26 Ho Kong Chong and Valerie Lim Nyuk Eun, 'Construction and Control of Physical Space', in *Public Space: Design, Use and Management*, ed. Chua Beng Huat and Norman Edwards, Singapore, 1992, p. 50.

27 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Harmondsworth, 1959, pp. 109–40.

28 Department of Social Welfare, *A Social Survey of Singapore: a preliminary study of some aspects of social conditions in the municipal area of Singapore*, Singapore, 1947, pp. 7, 81.

29 'Interview with Wong Kai Tow', National Archives of Singapore, A003540; 'Interview with Barbara Lee', National Archives of Singapore, A002829. The most popular radio channel in many coffee-shops was Rediffusion.

30 'Singapore People are Thirsty', *Singapore Free Press*, 7 July 1951.

31 'Coffee-shop Appeals', *Straits Times*, 8 Dec. 1948.

32 'Sold Bad Coffee', *Straits Times*, 27 July 1955.

33 '17 cents per Coffee Cup', *Straits Times*, 9 May 1950.

34 *Proceedings of the First Singapore Legislative Council, 2nd Session, 1949*, Government Printing Office, Singapore, 1951, p. B217.

35 Ellis, *The Coffee-house*, p. 226; 'Coffee Prices to be Revised', *Straits Times*, 11 Dec. 1947; 'Fewer People take Milk with Coffee and Tea Now', *Singapore Free Press*, 29 May 1951.

36 *Proceedings of the First Singapore Legislative Council, 2nd Session, 1949*, Government Printing Office, Singapore, 1951, p. B510.

37 'Prices in the Coffee-shop', *Straits Times*, 11 Sept. 1950.

38 'Foodmen Refute a Complainant', *Singapore Free Press*, 9 Nov. 1957.

39 'Interview with Chew Kim Seng', National Archives of Singapore, A 002552.

40 'Coffee Too Cheap', *Straits Times*, 3 Oct. 1947.

41 'The Rise in Prices', *Straits Times*, 7 Sept. 1950.

42 'Coffee-shops' Appeal', *Singapore Free Press*, 7 Dec. 1948.

43 'They Fear these Hawkers', *Singapore Free Press*, 22 Jan. 1953.

44 '1,500 Coffee-shop Owners to Protest', *Straits Times*, 28 Sept. 1953.

45 Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the 'Postsocialist' Condition*, New York, 1997, p. 85.

46 'A Man and Two Wives in a Cubicle', *Straits Times*, 23 May 1948.

47 'Interview with Lo Gong Wa', National Archives of Singapore, A003395.

48 'Interview with Yit Shue Kee', National Archives of Singapore, A002451; 'Interview with Foong Lai Kum', A002226; 'Gang of 30 Attack Four Men in Shop', *Singapore Free Press*, 18 Jan. 1956,

49 Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Wars*, p. 123.

50 'Coffee-shop Assistants Want Higher Wages', *Singapore Free Press*, 31 March 1951.

51 'Coffee-shop Union Men Want Yearly Bonus', *Straits Times*, 20 July 1955; 'Over Coffee', *Straits Times*, 10 Sept. 1955.

52 'Preventing the Harmful Spread of Rumours', *Singapore Free Press*, 1 Sept. 1939.

53 'Love in Singapore', *Straits Times*, 4 June 1948.

54 'Some Go to the Barber's to Read', *Singapore Free Press*, 23 Feb. 1952.

55 'Head-hunters of Singapore', *Straits Times*, 4 Nov. 1949.

56 Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, 'The Vindication of Gossip', in *Good Gossip*, ed. Robert F. Goodman and Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, Kansas, 1994, p. 15.

57 Tamotsu Shibutani, *Improvised News: a Sociological Study of Rumor*, Indianapolis, 1966.

58 Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nation and its Peasants', in *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, ed. Vinayak Chaturvedi, London, 2000, p. 13; Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak, *In Other Worlds*, London, 1998, pp. 291–4 and Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Durham NC, 1999, pp. 251–77.

59 Georges Lefebvre, *The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France*, transl. Joan White, New York, 1973, p. 74.

60 James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven, 1985.

61 Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, New York, 2002, p. 78.

62 See for example Lee Ting Hui, *The Communist Organization in Singapore, 1948–1966*, Singapore, 1976

63 Internal Security Malaya, 14 June 1948, CO 537/6006, The National Archive (TNA), London.

64 Charles E. Shumaker, *The Formative Years of Malaysian Politics*, ebook, 2010, p. 14; Lee Ting Hui, *Communist Organization in Singapore*, p. 27 and p. 122.

65 'Subversive Talk in Coffee-shops', *Straits Times*, 1 Aug. 1950.

66 'As I was saying', *Straits Times*, 23 April 1955.

67 'Counter–offensive in Propaganda', *Straits Times*, 16 July 1950.

68 'The Way to End Graft', *Straits Times*, 28 July 1952; 'Elections Chief Scotches Rumour', *Straits Times*, 20 Dec. 1957.

69 'Now Vicious Gossip Poisons Balestier', *Singapore Free Press*, 29 April 1953.

70 'Tax Query in Council', *Singapore Free Press*, 15 Aug. 1949.

71 'Rice Prices Increase', *Straits Times*, 10 May 1947.

72 'Bid to Check Rice Hoarders', *Straits Times*, 4 June 1946; 'Rice Racket is Under Attack', *Straits Times*, 1 March 1949; 'Sugar Hoarders Charged', *Straits Times*, 25 July 1950; 'Gravest Blunders', *Straits Times*, 7 Sept. 1950 and 'Rice Ban Rumour Leads to Ramp', *Straits Times*, 25 July 1950.

73 *Utusan Melayu* [Singapore daily paper], 24 July 1952.

74 'Transmitting the General Conditions Report for the Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Penang Consular Districts for the period November 1–November 15', National Archives and Records Administration, NARA, RG 59/797.00/11.1650.

75 'Interview with Tamby bin Osman', National Archives of Singapore, A000641.

76 'Interview with Mrs Khatijun Nissa Siraj', 4 August 1995, National Archives of Singapore, A001663.

77 Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, *Colonialism, Violence and Muslims in Southeast Asia: the Maria Hertogh Controversy and its Aftermath*, London, 2009, p. 27.

78 Chua Beng Huat, 'That Imagined Space: Nostalgia for Kampungs', in *Portraits of Places: History, Community and Identity in Singapore*, ed. Brenda S. A. Yeoh and Lily Kong, Singapore, 1995, pp. 229–30.

79 Ranajit Guha, 'The Small Voice of History', in, *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society* 9, ed. Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty, 1996, Delhi, pp. 1–12.