1. Introduction

In the modern history of West Malaysia, people from four of the world's major cultural traditions—Malay, Chinese, Indian, and British—have met, settled, clashed and sought to co-exist. Although the British who came as colonizers have now gone, the complex relationship between the formal educational system of the colonial era and the divisive pluralism of contemporary West Malaysian society continues to attract considerable academic and political attention. (1) Recently published monographic studies on aspects of West Malaysian educational history have focused on the period following British “Intervention” in the Peninsular Malay States of Perak and Selangor in 1874, and one of these studies explicitly attributes the “seeds of separatism” in contemporary West Malaysian society to the educational policies implemented under British colonial auspices during the period between 1874 and 1940. (2) Since this article is concerned with an earlier period than the recent monographic studies, it cannot be employed to test or disprove the arguments of these works. The article does, however, examine the origins of West Malaysia's cultural pluralism in the century prior to 1874 and portrays this pluralism as the consequence of a multiplicity of circumstances, not merely British educational policies.

It was in 1786 that Britain obtained a colonial toe-hold in West Malaysia, when Francis Light took possession of the island of Penang on
behalf of the British East India Company and with the consent of its nominal suzerain, the Sultan of Kedah. During the ensuing four decades, British rule was extended to embrace two other small coastal areas along the Straits of Malacca, namely the town and hinterland of Malacca itself and the island of Singapore. Together these coastal areas under British control became known as the Straits Settlements. Relatively scant attention has hitherto been paid to the formal educational initiatives taken during this foundational period of British rule. Yet the possibilities of a comprehensive synthesis of West Malaysian educational history depend upon an awareness and an appraisal of these initiatives. It was from the Straits Settlements that the later British “Forward Movement” was launched. Formal educational development during British rule in the Straits Settlements provided crucial guiding precedents for educational decision-making when British rule was transformed into a comprehensive, firmly-entrenched colonial administration over the Malay Peninsula in the years after 1874. A primary purpose of this paper, then, is to trace the development of formal educational provision in the early years of the Straits Settlements. The analysis also significantly qualifies conventional images of British colonial responsibility for West Malaysia’s chronic communal ills.

2. The Social Context of Education.

From the occupation of Penang in 1786 until the early 1870’s, the official British presence in West Malaysia was essentially a limited commercial and strategic one. The Directors of the East India Company, as the initial colonial agents in this case, intended that the Straits Settlements would serve as convenient entrepots and replenishing stations on the India-China maritime trading route. A recent account has more aptly described the Settlements as the East India Company’s “most incongruous offspring,” (3) principally because their dramatic economic and social growth on the principles of free trade contrasted so sharply with the enfeebling monopolistic practices of a parent organization in decline. In the Company’s eyes, the Settlements were a scattered “distant Indian station,” (4) difficult to communicate with and between, impossible to administer efficiently, and especially when the Company lost its monopoly of the China trade in 1833, expensive to administer at all. In her biographical study of that outstanding Company officer, Thomas Stamford Raffles, Emily Hahn observes that the “chief function” of the Company’s Court of Directors in London was apparently “to find fault with their agents in the colonies, and mechanically to refuse all requests from places like Penang,” (5) particularly financial requests. Nor were the Company officials at regional headquarters in Calcutta any more sympathetic. One British Indian official noted apologetically in 1837 that “. . . everything connected with these Settlements is petty, except their an-
annual surplus cost to the Government of India.” (6) Indeed, the primary
tasks of the Governor of the Straits Settlements were “to balance the
budget and to insulate the settlements from complications in the
hinterland.” (7)

It was thus often despite rather than because of policies emanating
from London and Calcutta that the Straits Settlements prospered. Owing
to industrious immigrant labour, individual capitalistic initiative, and
their free-port status, Penang and Singapore in particular grew within
the space of half a century from sparsely inhabited islands into thriving,
polyglot, mercantile metropolises, drawing people from Europe, China,
India, the Middle East, and the Malay States. John Cameron, Editor of
the Straits Times from 1861 to 1867, was fascinated by the social
dynamism and ethnic mosaic of mid-nineteenth century Singapore. He
wrote in vivid terms of the town’s “bustle and activity, heightened by the
motley character of those who compose the crowd . . . a constant stream
of Chinese, Malays, Klings, Parsees, and Mussulmen, pouring one way
and another.” (8)

The growth of population in the Settlements was phenomenal. Penang, which had no permanent inhabitants in 1786, grew to a popula-
tion of 58,000 in 1858; Penang’s peninsular component, Province
Wellesley, grew from 6,000 in 1820 to 61,000 in 1850; Malacca grew from
31,000 in 1826 to 68,000 in 1860; and Singapore from 10,000 in 1824 to
81,000 in 1860. Overall, by 1860, the Straits Settlements contained nearly
273,000 people. (9) As Cameron observed, the ethnic diversity of this
population was also remarkable. The most numerous racial groups in the
Settlements in 1860 were Malays (of whom there were an estimated
136,165), Chinese (96,306), Indians (28,129), and Europeans (7,164).
Moreover, the non-Malays significantly outnumbered the Malays in the
towns of Singapore and Penang. (10)

Two aspects of this demographic explosion had significant implications
for formal education. First, the population of the Settlements was
unusually transient in character and initially dominated by adult males.
This transiency did not assist the development of balanced and com-
prehensive social institutions. Second, since the Settlements contained
such large numbers of non-Malays, it is probable that their rapid growth,
social composition and competitive, urban character served to strengthen
negative, even xenophobic, attitudes towards “aliens” amongst those
Peninsular Malay communities who were aware of their existence. Cer-
tainly, the vigorous, cosmopolitan nature of Settlement life provided a
stark and potentially unsettling contrast to the traditional Islamic peasant
society which then predominated in the neighbouring Malay States. (11)

Despite their rapid development, the Straits Settlements remained ter-
itorially and culturally peripheral elements in the Malay world. Ad-
ministered by a small number of East India Company officials with
minimal funds available for public expenditure, the Settlements' economic and social dynamism rested in private, individual European, Chinese and Indian hands. According to J. D. Vaughan, a European observer residing in Singapore during the 1870s, "not a single Malay can be pointed out as having raised himself by perseverance and diligence, as a merchant or otherwise, to a prominent position in the Colony." (12)

3. The Bases of Educational Policy
The contrast between central administrative stringency and local economic prosperity on a basis of private enterprise was a crucial element in the emergence of formal educational systems in the Straits Settlements. For it meant that educational development came primarily from the local efforts of dedicated individuals both within and outside of the East India Company and that the role of public authority in the educational sphere was tightly circumscribed. In colonial Malaya, writes Ruth Wong, "the initiative in education was generally not taken by government but rather by religious missions and independent groups, or even by public-spirited individuals." (13)

There was, of course, nothing remarkable about this pattern, when it is considered that the idea of education as a State-supported mass enterprise developed only very slowly in Britain itself during the nineteenth century. When the Straits Settlements were founded, formal education in Britain was confined to a privileged elite of upper and middle class children whose parents could afford to send them to privately-operated, usually religiously-based schools, whilst the education of the poorer classes, was, if carried out at all, regarded as a limited charitable and religious duty involving a curriculum of basic skills (the 3Rs) and the inculcation of Christian moral virtues. Given this domestic British situation, what was perhaps remarkable in the "distant station" of the Straits Settlements was the vision and energy with which certain dedicated men, in notably unsupportive conditions, collected funds, hired teachers, and set up rudimentary schools. (14)

"Education in the Western sense of the word came with the British," (15) write Wong and Gwee in their historical survey. But, with this Western type of education came not only presuppositions about differential elite and mass instruction but also a serious ideological debate which polarized educational policymakers in India for decades. On the one hand, there were those British scholars and officials dubbed "Orientalists" who emphasized the conservation of native customs and languages in any educational programmes for colonial subjects. In particular, the Orientalist group advocated the use of indigenous languages as the media of instruction in Western-style colonial elementary schools. During the 1830's, however, several administrators began to argue for the use of English as the linguistic medium of instruction, as part of the liberal pro-
gramme for social change in India based on scientific and utilitarian principles. This group, the so-called “Anglicizers”, drew inspiration from Thomas Macaulay's famous Minute on Education of 1835 in which he argued that:

... English is better worth knowing than Sanskrit or Arabic; that the natives are desirous to be taught English, and are not desirous to be taught Sanskrit or Arabic; that neither as the languages of law, nor as the languages of religion have the Sanskrit and Arabic any peculiar claim to our encouragement; that it is possible to make natives of this country throughly good English scholars; and that to this end our efforts ought to be directed. (16)

As spokesman for the liberal position, Macaulay argued for the use of the English language in schools on the assumption that those Indians who were Western-educated could then “diffuse” their Western knowledge to the remainder of their countrymen over time. Echoes of this ideological debate reverberated throughout the Straits Settlements, where many European merchants, supported by the English-language press, argued that English should be promoted as the *lingua franca* (and medium of school instruction), but many East India Company officials came to prefer that Asian children should become literate in their vernacular tongue.

4. Kinds of Schools

Two broad kinds of educational institution emerged in the Straits Settlements during the first half of the nineteenth century. The first kind of institution owed its existence to the British, and especially the Protestant missionary, presence. These were Western elementary schools established in urban centres by groups of dedicated individuals, both religious and lay. They were funded by private subscriptions, fees and Company grants and were intended to provide instruction for European and Asian pupils in both English and vernacular languages. The second kind of institution owed its existence essentially to local initiative. These were the traditional indigenous and immigrant schools, established in both rural and urban centres by the different Asian communities themselves and shaped in a communal mould.

A. The Western Schools—Penang

The earliest formal Western school founded in the Straits Settlements was at Penang in 1816. In a report to the Governor-in-Council of the East India Company (Penang) dated 10th January, 1816, a voluntary Committee comprising the Colonial Chaplain, the Reverend R. S. Hutchins and six other British gentlemen proposed the immediate establishment of an educational institution in Penang, which would comprise two elementary schools, one for boys, the other for girls. (17) The Committee estimated
the cost of the institution as 245 Spanish dollars* per month, together
with an additional monthly sum of 150 dollars to cover the expenses
of poorer students, less the amount of fees that would be charged to
"wealthy and respectable" parents. On 15th January, 1816, the
Governor-in-Council replied to the Hutchins' Committee "highly approv-
ing of the zealous and judicious arrangements you have submitted," (18)
but somewhat less approving in terms of the funds it was prepared to
commit to such an educational undertaking. The East India Company
was prepared to make an additional donation of 1,500 dollars, plus a per-
manent monthly allowance of 200 dollars.

The Hutchins' Committee then appealed to the general populace of
Penang for both additional funds and pupils. In their "Address to the
Public on behalf of a School to be established in Prince of Wales Island,"
the Committee expressed the objective of the School in highly moralistic
terms reminiscent of an English context. "To form a quiet, diligent and
virtuous people is an undertaking of the highest interest and
importance," they wrote, for with the proper schooling "the character of
the people may gradually be changed, and industry and good order may
succeed to idleness and vice." (19) Amongst the more specific features of
the project were that the school be "open to the reception of all the
children of this island," that small fees be charged from "such parents as
are capable of supporting the expense" of their children's education, that
the children be instructed in "reading and writing English and in the
common rules of arithmetic," and that "great care be taken that the pre-
judice of parents to the Christian religion be not by any means
violated." (20) Although later scholars such as Mary Turnbull have seen
the Penang Free School as having the rather more practical objective of
"training a race of intelligent and honest servants for the
government" (21) (and indeed this was one of its outcomes), nevertheless
the Hutchins' school plan remains significant because of its proclaimed
openness to all races and classes, indigenous and immigrant, and its
remarkable comprehension of local religious sensitivities. As a recent ap-
praisal expressed it, "although the school was founded by Christians it has
never, from the start, imposed Christianity on any one who did not want
to be exposed to it." (22)

On 21st October, 1816, nine months after their public appeal, the
Hutchins' Committee was able to open its proposed day-school for boys,
and the day-school for girls followed on 1st July, 1817. By October, 1817,
a total of 49 boys and 11 girls were registered on the School's
payroll. (23) The girls' school had an especially checkered early career,
though, for it was suspended in January, 1821, because of what a later

*Five Spanish dollars were approximately equal in value to one English pound.
Colonial Chaplain termed "the want of a suitable Mistress." (24) The School as a whole had another burst of life in the late 1820s. On 1st January, 1827, a boarding house for boys was opened; on 1st September, 1828, the day-school for girls was re-opened; and on 8th April 1829, another 12 girls were admitted as boarders. By 1820, the Penang Free School had a population of over 100 pupils. (25) The girls' school continued to experience problems of tiny numbers, high costs, and what were described inexplicably as "sundry vicissitudes," (26) and was finally shut down in July, 1851. Nor was the boarding section of the boys' school any more successful, for it was closed down on 1st September, 1865. The Acting Colonial Chaplain of Penang, Reverend James Mackay, told the British Colonial Office in February, 1868, that "the number of day-scholars on the roll, all boys, is now 228, of whom three-quarters are Chinese." (27)

The demonstrably greater responsiveness of the Chinese community to the Western education provided by the Penang Free School was also reflected in the pioneering British educational experiments carried out in Malacca and Singapore.

Malacca

The arrival of the Reverend William Milne of the London Missionary Society's Ultra-Gangetic Mission in Malacca on 21st May 1815 signalled the beginnings of Western education within a Protestant framework in that Settlement. Like their secular counterparts in the British East India Company, the London Missionary Society's leaders were primarily interested in China (though naturally for different ends) and had sent the Reverend Dr. Robert Morrison to Canton in 1807. Temporarily thwarted in his missionary endeavours there by official Chinese restrictions on foreign proselytization, Morrison decided upon a more indirect approach through the Nanyang Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. As a contemporary American observer noted, "while China remains inaccessible, missionaries for that country must prepare themselves in other places." (28)

Exploratory investigations revealed that Malacca would be an ideal base for this strategy, and Morrison sent his colleague, Milne, to "open the door". (29)

Immediately after his arrival, Milne "lived in the Fort and kept a school where children learned English . . . taking no fees or money even for his purposes." (30) Then, in his house on a piece of land at St. John's Hill donated by Resident William Farquhar of the East India Company, Milne conducted Bible classes for Chinese children, and in August, 1815 he opened the first Christian school in Malacca. This school was attended by a few Chinese and Eurasian children. To help raise funds for missionary and educational work Milne started a printing press and pub-
lished many religious tracts in Chinese and Malay. Another L.M.S. missionary, Reverend G. H. Thomsen, joined Milne in 1816 and directed his activities toward Malacca’s Malay community by opening a small Malay-language school.

Both these clergymen had a grander object in view than rudimentary attempts at vernacular education. In October, 1815, their mentor, Dr. Morrison, had addressed a “rather high-pitched prospectus” from Canton to “the benevolent Christians of Great Britain and Ireland; proposals for establishing by voluntary subscription an English and Chinese College at Malacca.” The immediate objective of the college would be “to facilitate an amicable literary intercourse betwixt England and the nations in which the Chinese written language is employed,” but the ultimate aim was to further the process by which “the light of Science and of Revelation” might “peacefully and gradually shed their lustre on the eastern limits of Asia and the Islands of the rising sun.” Captain Newbold expressed these objectives in somewhat plainer terms as “the reciprocal cultivation of Chinese and European literature, and the diffusion of Christianity.”

As Morrison envisaged it, the initial teaching staff of the institution would include a European professor of English and Chinese and two assistant professors (one Chinese and one European) with provision for 6 Asian and 6 European students. Morrison himself gave the project a practical boost with an anonymous donation of 4,000 Spanish dollars towards the cost of building and a promise of an additional 100 dollars per annum for five years towards recurrent costs. As the person on the spot, Milne obtained from the East India Company a new and more suitable piece of land “in the Tranquerah district, facing the shore,” as well as an annual Company subsidy of 1,200 dollars. The foundation-stone of the Anglo-Chinese College at Malacca was laid on 11th November, 1818.

After a lengthy, difficult and expensive period of construction (according to an eye-witness, Munshi Abdullah, “many thousands of dollars” were spent), the College first opened its doors to students in August, 1820. The management of the institution was vested in a President, with five patrons (including Dr. Morrison) and a board of five trustees (including two locally-based members of the London Missionary Society). An English visitor, Captain Peter Begbie, described the College at the height of its influence in 1834 in the following terms:

The lower part of the building is appropriated to schools, etc.; one apartment being reserved as a library, in which are to be found several thousand volumes, many of them scarce and valuable works which have been presented to the college by different individuals... the upper apartments are occupied by the Missionaries connected with the College.

Financial support for the College was derived from student fees, voluntary subscriptions, profits from the printing press and a Company subsidy.
until 1830. During the late 1830s an American visitor found that the College had "ample buildings, and highly improved grounds, with about ten thousand dollars at interest... The whole cost of an in-door student, including food, apparel, washing, etc. is four dollars per month." (39)

Indeed, from its humble Anglo-Chinese missionary origins, the College had become a cosmopolitan centre of learning, symbolized by the organization of religious worship in the Mission chapel, "a plain, but neat building" (40) erected by voluntary contribution during 1826:

Here, every Sabbath, four services are performed, viz, a Chinese service at half past 10 a.m.; a Portuguese one at 2 p.m.; a Malay one at 5 p.m.; and an English one at 7 p.m. thus affording the pleasing spectacle of the worship of the true God in four different languages on the same day in the same place. (41)

It is highly doubtful, however, whether the Anglo-Chinese College ever achieved all the grander objectives which Morrison and Milne had initially envisioned for it. "Like other 'colleges' in the East," Howard Malcolm observed in 1839, "it is rather an elementary school. The pupils are taught from the alphabet upward, and retire from a full course, with a decent knowledge of English, and the common rudiments of science. About sixty or seventy thus educated have left the institution, who generally reside in the Straits, employed as porters, runners, and under-clerks. . . ." (42) Likewise, there is no other evidence available to corroborate Abdullah's seemingly exaggerated assessment that, as a result of the College's work, "for the first time in Malacca the majority of the people know how to speak English." (43)

The College had lost its East India Company subsidy of 1,200 dollars per annum in 1830 during a period of central budgetary cuts and had to be rescued by a donation from the British factory in Canton. (44) In 1834 control of the College passed fully into the hands of the London Missionary Society. Despite the revival of the College's fortunes during the late 1830s the missionaries did not forget that Malacca was merely a preparatory launching-site for the mission to China. In 1843, following the first Opium War and the "opening" of China to Christian influence, the College was moved from Malacca to Hong Kong.

Its relatively brief and marginal appearance in West Malaysian educational history does not detract from the significance of the Anglo-Chinese College at its particular time and place. Brian Harrison judiciously points out that "as a group, the men associated with the Anglo-Chinese College was outstanding for their energy and ability, character and intellect. While seeking wider aims, they also worked for a time and after their own fashion for the good of the people around them." (45) Moreover, their Christian missionary commitment did not inhibit them from assisting to pioneer the scientific study of the languages and cultures of the region. There was one sphere in particular where the Anglo-Chinese College and its associated schools were unable to make much headway, namely