

AMBIVALENT ORIENTALISM:
VICTOR PURCELL'S REPRESENTATIONS OF CHINESE SUBJECTS IN
INTER-WAR BRITISH MALAYA, HONG KONG, AND CHINA

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A thesis submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of History in the College of Arts & Science.

Chapel Hill
2017

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ABSTRACT

Shuk-man Lee: Ambivalent Orientalism:
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Inter-war British Malaya, Hong Hong, and China

(Under the direction of Michael Tsin)

This thesis explores how Victor Purcell, the Protector of Chinese in inter-war British Malaya, portrayed Chinese subjects. The knowledge production happened across British Malaya, Hong Kong, and Republican China. This thesis is divided into three sections. The first section explains the presupposition of Purcell to consider himself different from typical Orientalists. I argue that the setup of Colonial Administrative Service and the encounter between Purcell and the Chinese were essential in shaping his hierarchical mode of thinking, outlier mentality, and a sense of agency. The second section analyzes what being a British colonial official meant for Purcell. I argue that Purcell actively created meanings and lessons from book learning and his encounter with the Chinese, which he then used to educate English reader. The last section discusses how far Purcell could transcend the structures of Orientalism and colonialism.

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INTRODUCTION

In a foggy morning in October 1920, a twenty-four-year old British veteran took a train from Cambridge, rushing to London to attend an examination. It was the first examination after the First World War to be held by the Civil Service Commission for ex-servicemen, aiming to reconstruct administrative units across the British Empire. The examination had begun for half an hour, but the young Cambridge University student had not arrived yet. Although he was allowed to attend the examination despite being late, he could not finish his essay on time. For the remaining few days, he lost hope of landing a job. Yet, surprisingly, he passed—his score was slightly higher than the minimum requirement. Only the interview was left. “Are you...related to the Purcell who wrote the *Life of Cardinal Manning*?” one examiner asked. “Sir...all genuine Purcells are related, and if the Purcell who wrote the *Life of Cardinal Manning* was a genuine Purcell, he and I are undoubtedly related.” In reality, Victor Purcell and the writer Edmund Purcell did not know each other. Nevertheless, Victor Purcell was offered a Far Eastern cadetship in British Malaya.¹ Twenty years later, during the Second World War, Purcell served as the Director General of Information and Publicity for Malaya. He once delivered a speech in Cantonese language in November 1940, which acknowledged the support for the war fund from

¹ Victor W.W.S. Purcell, *The Memoirs of a Malayan Official* (London: Cassell, 1965), 87-9; On the recruitment of civil servants after the First World War, see also Richard A. Chapman, *The Civil Service Commission, 1855-1991: A Bureau Biography* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 41.

three thousand Malayan-Chinese in Kuala Lumpur.² After the war, Purcell became the Principal Adviser on Chinese Affairs in the military administration of Malaya. When the civil administration resumed in 1946, he became the Acting Secretary for Chinese Affairs.³

Purcell was an authority of Chinese affairs in Malayan government and later in academia. Malaya represented different geographical and political entities across time. By April 1946, “Malaya” was an umbrella term comprising the Straits Settlements (Penang, Malacca, and Singapore), Federated Malay States (Pahang, Perak, Selangor, and Negeri Sembilan), and Unfederated Malay States (Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, Trengganu, and Johor).⁴ During the inter-war period, as an official under Malayan Civil Service, Purcell took up various positions related to Chinese affairs, for instance, the Inspector of Chinese Schools in Singapore, Assistant Protector of Chinese in Penang, Assistant Director of Education (Chinese) in the Straits Settlements, Protector of Chinese in Penang, Kedah, Selangor, and Pahang.⁵ Summarizing his first decade in Malayan government, Purcell wrote in his *Early Penang* in 1928: “To some extent we in Malaya are in like plight. Ours is a new country and ours is a workday world.”⁶ That

² *Malay Tribune*, 11 November 1940; *Nanyang Siang Pau*, 11 November 1940.

³ Sybille Van Der Sprenkel, “V.W.W.S. Purcell: A Memoir,” in *Studies in the Social History of China and South-East Asia: Essays in Memory of Victor Purcell*, eds. Jerome Chen and Nicholas Taring (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 6.

⁴ Wong Sin Kiong 黃賢強, *Kuayu shixue: Jindai Zhongguo yu Nanyang huaren yanjiu de xinshiyue* 跨域史學：近代中國與南洋華人研究的新視野 [Trans-regional and Cross-disciplinary History: New Perspectives on Modern China and Nanyang Chinese Studies] (Taipei: Longshijie, 2015), 95.

⁵ See Purcell, *The Memoirs of a Malayan Official*.

⁶ Victor W.W.S. Purcell, *Early Penang* (Penang: Pingan Gazette Press, 1928), 140.

statement might not be an exaggeration since the duties Purcell carried out were diversified: he inspected schools, examined immigrants, conducted census, supervised prisons, acted as a magistrate, and so on.⁷

During his colonial career, Purcell developed an interest towards Chinese subjects. He published *The Spirit of Chinese Poetry: An Original Essay* in 1929, his doctoral research of *Problems of Chinese Education* in 1936, and *Chinese Evergreen*, a travel writing, in 1938. After he retired from Malayan Civil Service, Purcell became a History faculty in Cambridge University in 1949. He offered courses on the “Far East,” the Opium Wars, and the Boxer Uprising in Qing Dynasty.⁸ Before he passed away in 1965, Purcell published prolifically on the Chinese in Malaya. His works, particularly *The Chinese in Southeast Asia*, are still widely cited nowadays.⁹

One would hardly be surprised if Purcell—a British colonial official—had portrayed Chinese subjects as inferior to British or European ones in his writings. Yet, in the opening of *Chinese Evergreen*, Purcell urged the ignorant “foreign equestrian die-hards” who ridiculed the Chinese “as funny, vicious, quaint, or idiotic” to “be disabused and die.” He also reminded his reader that the “Hollywood-Ascot civilization” was not better than Chinese history and culture,

⁷ Van Der Sprenkel, “V.W.W.S. Purcell,” 5. See also Victor W.W.S. Purcell, *Chinese Evergreen* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1938) and Purcell, *The Memoirs of a Malayan Official*.

⁸ Van Der Sprenkel, “V.W.W.S. Purcell,” 7-8.

⁹ See https://scholar.google.com/scholar?cites=14898742812780055878&as_sdt=5,33&scioldt=0,33&hl=en, Google Scholar, accessed 26 October 2016.

which was represented by “the Hans, T’angs, and Sungs” and Confucianism.”¹⁰

In other words, Purcell distanced himself from typical Orientalists. According to Edward Said, an influential critic against European imperialism, anyone who teaches, makes statements, authorizes views, and rules over the Orient are Orientalists. Orientalism is a “collective notion” that identifies Europeans as culturally superior to non-Europeans. It is a discourse sustained through “supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles.” The ensuing cultural hegemony of Europe over the Orient usually overrides “the possibility that a more independent, more skeptical thinker might have had different views on the matter.”¹¹

Since Purcell self-positioned himself away from typical Orientalists, this thesis first explores two related issues: What enabled him to think that he could be different from Orientalists before and during his time? What did it mean for Purcell to be a colonial official in British Malaya? By answering these questions, one could understand further how the knowledge towards Chinese subjects was produced and presented. In the third section, this thesis will address the issue whether Purcell was immune from Orientalism.

¹⁰ Purcell, *Chinese Evergreen*, 5-6.

¹¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 2, 3, and 7.

PREMISE OF VICTOR PURCELL'S BELIEF

In his writings during the inter-war era, Victor Purcell presented himself as different from Orientalists who tended to demean Chinese subjects. The first section of this thesis will show that Purcell's belief emerged in relation to the setup of Colonial Administrative Service that gave birth to hierarchical mode of thinking and outlier mentality. Along with Purcell's performance as an official and a writer, these elements added up to a sense of agency that constituted the core of Purcell's thoughts.

Hierarchy existed within Colonial Administrative Service at different levels. In terms of academic qualification, for instance, graduates from Cambridge University and University of Oxford enjoyed privileges over the others. For example, Malayan Civil Service requested the Colonial Office in 1919 for a nominee with a degree from either Oxford or Cambridge. As J. de Vere Allen's research on Malayan Civil Service shows, between 1895 and 1935, Malayan Civil Service consistently recruited graduates from four universities in Britain, namely Oxford, Cambridge, Dublin, and Trinity College.¹² Similar to civil services across the British Empire, Allen argues, the members of Malayan Civil Service readily shared the "values and prejudices of a very small sector of British society," namely that of the "Public School-Oxbridge Class."¹³

¹² J. de Vere Allen, "Malayan Civil Service, 1874-1941: Colonial Bureaucracy/Malayan Elite," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 12 (1970): 163-4.

¹³ Allen, "Malayan Civil Service," 159.

Prejudices also existed when applicants chose which civil service system they preferred to serve. Referring to memoirs of former colonial administrative service members, Anthony Kirk-Greene finds that the Indian Civil Service was the top choice for applicants and the staffing of Africa was the largest and “most prominent.”¹⁴ Far Eastern Cadetship was by no means applicant’s favorite option, as Allen shows. In the “Far East,” Ceylon and Hong Kong attracted most applicants; Malaya was way down in the list.¹⁵ The marginalization of Malaya in Colonial Service system could contribute to an outlier mentality among Malayan Civil Service members.

Hierarchy and division persisted even within Malayan Civil Service that would reinforce the outlier mentality of the officials who worked on Chinese affairs, such as Purcell. According to Purcell, although the Chinese was a majority in Malayan population by 1940, the British colonial government perpetuated a “fiction” that Malaya belonged to the Malays, and the Chinese and Indians were “aliens.” Such fiction led more than eighty per cent of the cadets in Malayan Civil Service to study the Malay language, ten per cent to learn Chinese, and five per cent Tamil or Telegu.¹⁶ The number given by Purcell was not the same as the official Civil Lists suggested, but he was right that more members in Malayan Civil Service studied the Malay language than other languages.¹⁷ Language training, Purcell implied, was responsible for shaping

¹⁴ Anthony Kirk-Greene, *Britain’s Imperial Administrators, 1858-1966* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 128.

¹⁵ Allen, “Malayan Civil Service,” 164.

¹⁶ Purcell, *The Memoirs of a Malayan Official*, 96-7.

¹⁷ See Allen, “Malayan Civil Service,” 174. Allen assembled the data derived from the civil lists in 1895, 1905, 1915, 1925, and 1935 in a table. The table shows that consistently sixty-five per cent of the Malayan Civil Service members learnt the Malay language, nearly twenty per cent the

the cadets' affections and their alignments with certain population.¹⁸

Such pro-Malay attitude could also be found in the Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, which was renamed in 1923 as the Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society. From 1920 to 1930, the journal published slightly more than ten articles on Chinese subjects, for example, wedding, temples, and secret societies. Six articles were contributed by one writer: William Stirling the Assistant Protector of Chinese in Singapore from 1921 to 1931. Throughout twenty years, only two articles were about Indians. In a stark contrast, on the Malay language alone, thirty articles were published.¹⁹ Purcell was one of the few officials in Malayan Civil Service, perhaps along with Stirling only, who showed more interests and concern with Chinese subjects.

Against the backdrop that cultivated the outlier mentality, Purcell developed a sense of agency within the broader structure of Malayan Civil Service. His decision to study Chinese language could serve as an example. As Purcell later recalled, in his batch of cadets, no one but himself volunteered to learn Chinese. When Purcell told the Under-Secretary A.S. Jelf about his decision, Jelf responded solemnly, "*You-have-ruined-your-career!* You will never become a governor, or even a resident. You will merely a *specialist!*" Reflecting for a moment, Purcell

Chinese language, and about ten per cent the "Indian" languages.

¹⁸ Purcell, *The Memoirs of a Malayan Official*, 293.

¹⁹ Huck Tee Lim, *Index Malaysiana: An Index to the Journal of the Straits Branch Royal Asiatic Society and the Journal of the Malayan Branch Royal Asiatic Society, 1878-1963* (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Branch, Royal Asiatic Society, 1970), 14-118, 253-4, 284-9.

insisted, “I—er—wish to learn Chinese all the same.”²⁰ Even before he performed any duty as an official of Chinese affairs, Purcell had already showed that he was different from the majority, at least in Malayan Civil Service.

Purcell was not a high-rank official or a policy maker in inter-war Malaya, but that did not prevent him from developing confidence with his capability. Purcell was the first Inspector of Chinese Schools in Singapore in the early 1920s.²¹ Right before that, Purcell was attached to Hong Kong Civil Service for three months to learn how the Department of Education inspected and controlled Chinese schools.²² Inspector of Chinese Schools was an important position. The colonial governments in Hong Kong and Malaya established the position due to political concerns. In Malaya, since the late 1910s, Chinese schools had increasingly become the sites for political parties from China to spread propaganda against British colonial rule. The teachers were new migrants and “nearly all China-born.” They received very low salaries and “often held revolutionary views” even before communism took root in Malaya.²³ Therefore, Malayan government imposed control over Chinese schools in order to curb Chinese nationalist and communist intrusion. Purcell, an inspector of Chinese Schools, was part of the front-line to maintain political stability.

Purcell’s confidence could be shown in his writings on written Chinese language and

²⁰ Purcell, *The Memoirs of a Malayan Official*, 95-6.

²¹ Purcell, *The Memoirs of a Malayan Official*, 157.

²² Purcell, *The Memoirs of a Malayan Official*, 150.

²³ Purcell, *The Memoirs of a Malayan Official*, 154-5.

spoken Cantonese. As mentioned above, Purcell was one of the few officials in Malaya who published on Chinese subjects. His first book specifically on Chinese subjects, *The Spirit of Chinese Poetry*, analyzed Chinese written characters in Tang poetry. Purcell argued that ideographical Chinese characters possessed strong associative power and could express etymology more clearly than any European word could.²⁴ One of the numerous examples Purcell offered was the character of Yun (雲). He suggested that the radical on the left side implied water and the right side represented clouds. He then asked the reader to picture that “the ‘clouds’ character combined with the ‘water’ radical would tend to make the ‘high wave’ (the known meaning) each as high as the clouds.”²⁵ Purcell later expanded his analysis of written Chinese characters in his doctoral research, which was published in 1936 under the title *Problems of Chinese Education*.

Purcell was also confident with his judgment over Cantonese. In *Problems of Chinese Education*, Purcell declared to “speak Cantonese fluently.”²⁶ He then proceeded to detail a scenario happened in British Hong Kong in the early 1920s. Once, as an administrative officer, Purcell heard a civil suit in which most people spoke Cantonese. A person (A) sued another (B) for not paying for the faulty wall built by A. The solicitor raised a question to B in English, “If he had promised to put the wall right, would you have paid him the money?” An interpreter,

²⁴ Victor W.W.S. Purcell, *The Spirit of Chinese Poetry: An Original Essay* (Singapore: Kelly & Walsh, 1929), 20-1, 25.

²⁵ Purcell, *The Spirit of Chinese Poetry*, 26.

²⁶ Victor W.W.S. Purcell, *Problems of Chinese Education* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1936), 158.

whom Purcell did not explain whether or not he was a native speaker, then translated the question in Cantonese for B: “K’u hai ying shing sau ching ho ko fuk ts’eung nei hang ch’ut ts’in ni?” In written Chinese, the question can be put as “佢係應承修正好個幅牆你肯出錢呢?”. B understood the question in two parts. First, “Did he promise to repair the wall?” and second, “Did you pay him?”. When B was asked the question again, he heard it as “if he promises to repair the wall now, will you pay him?” Since B could not comprehend the solicitor’s original message, Purcell reasoned that Cantonese was defective in explaining tempo and condition.²⁷ However, if Purcell had referred to the books on Cantonese by J. Dyer Ball, whose works were on the syllabi of cadet language examination, he could have spotted the grammatical mistakes made by the court interpreter. Missing were the corresponding character of “if” (若) and a signifier (個陣時) indicating the time if A had promised to put the wall right.²⁸

The last factor that Purcell might differentiate himself from typical Orientalists was his extensive experience in encounter with “Chinese” people. The encounter happened not on one site, but in British Malaya (including Singapore), Hong Kong, and Republican China, within and beyond the British Empire. It occurred not only in his office in Penang, but also in piers, schools, villages, and so on. The second part of this thesis analyzes further Purcell’s encounter with Chinese people. Suffice it to say that Purcell witnessed the living of poor Chinese migrants.

²⁷ Purcell, *Problems of Chinese Education*, 158.

²⁸ See examples in J. Dyer Ball, *Cantonese Made Easy: A Book of Simple Sentences in the Cantonese Language, with Free and Literal Translations, and Directions for the Rendering of English Grammatical Forms in Chinese* (Singapore; Hong Kong; Shanghai; Yokohama: Kelly & Walsh, 1907), Third Edition, 12, 22, 24, and 67; The National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, 1957/0074853, G.T. Hare, Secretary for Chinese Affairs, F.M.S., Scheme for Cadets Studying in China, 22 March 1897.

Meanwhile, he seemed to mingle well with influential locally-born Malayan Chinese who were usually identified as *perenakans*. For example, Purcell described Ong Chong-Keng, a medical practitioner in Penang, as his “close friend.” In his memoir, Purcell commemorated Tan Cheng-Lock, whom he had known since his arrival as a cadet in Malaya.²⁹

The encounter between Purcell and Malayan Chinese influenced his writings during inter-war, especially about “overseas Chinese.”³⁰ “Overseas Chinese” accounted for nearly eleven million people across the world by the late 1930s.³¹ Many of them came from the southern provinces of Guangdong, Fujian, and Guangxi. Purcell had been a sitting magistrate in Penang to handle cases of *sinkehs*, or new immigrants, who were locked on ships until being bailed out by local merchants. Some *sinkehs* were not fortunate enough to be hired. Purcell would then allow them to sign a bond and repay it afterwards. Recalling those episodes, Purcell expressed, “Who can deny that in some essential respects the Chinese have what is familiarly known as ‘guts’?”³² This kind of compliment could be found throughout Purcell’s writings. However, what is remarkable and needs further analysis here is a related comment by Purcell: millions of overseas Chinese “have made their permanent home in the Netherlands, in Malaya,

²⁹ Purcell, *The Memoirs of a Malayan Official*, 273-4.

³⁰ The category of “overseas Chinese” is subject to extensive debates and this thesis does not intend to delve into details. For discussion of “Chinese sojourners” or *Huaqiao*, see for example, Gungwu Wang, *China and Chinese Overseas* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1991), 243 and Philip A. Kuhn, *Chinese among Others: Emigration in Modern Times* (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 2008), 159-60, 186, and 243.

³¹ Purcell, *Chinese Evergreen*, 208.

³² Purcell, *Chinese Evergreen*, 214.

and in Siam, and to them China is scarcely more than a legend and a sentiment.”³³ In other words, many Chinese became a part of Malayan population and had minimal sense of belonging to China.

Purcell’s comment reflected a concern closely related to Malayan politics of his time, for instance, the competition between Chinese Nationalist and Communist Parties, and the intertwining ethnic and economic conflicts. The colonial government’s effort of dividing people in Malaya into different groups could be dated from the early nineteenth century.³⁴ The government had conducted census since 1871 and had categorized people more systematically since 1911 as “Malay race,” “Chinese race,” “Indian race,” and so on.³⁵ The establishment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of the Chinese Protectorate, the Malay Reservations Act, and toddy shops specifically for Indians differentiated people further.³⁶ When economic recession and depression hit Malaya in the early 1920s and 1930s, ethnic tensions were fueled.³⁷ Take for example the world depression and the revised Malay Reservations Enactment of 1933. During the economic depression, the government and capitalists in Malaya were alarmed by the

³³ Purcell, *Chinese Evergreen*, 208.

³⁴ Anthony Milner, *The Malays* (Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 119.

³⁵ Charles Hirschman, “The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia: An Analysis of Census Classification,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 46 (1987): 561 and 574.

³⁶ A.B. Shamsul, “Debating about Identity in Malaysia: A Discourse Analysis,” *Southeast Asian Studies* 34 (1996): 14.

³⁷ For ethnic tensions between “Chinese” and “Malays,” see Khoo Kay Kim, “Sino-Malay Relations in Peninsular Malaysia before 1942,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 12 (1981), especially page 100.

drop of export revenues and feared the supply of rice from Thailand and Burma insufficient for the labor. Consequently, the government expanded the area of land in reservations and relegated rural Malays to there for padi cultivation. The policy also implied that “non-Malays” were forbidden to plant padi.³⁸ It was a double-edged sword against different groups of people in Malaya. On one hand, rural Malays suffered since the government limited their choices of career and controlled the price of their products.³⁹ On the other hand, “non-Malays” saw the government’s measure as another clear evidence of its overall “pro-Malay” attitude.⁴⁰

Following the government’s “pro-Malay” schemes was the opposition from Tan Cheng-Lock, a Chinese-*peranakan* unofficial member in the Straits Legislative Council, whose voice was echoed in Purcell’s writings. Along with his “Chinese” counterparts in the Legislative Council, in December 1932, Tan demanded the government for devising policies based on the idea that “Malaya for the Malays,” and not for one section only.”⁴¹ Tan also appealed to the Under-Secretary of State Samuel Wilson in the same month regarding the government’s discrimination against “non-Malays” in education, economy, and admission to the Malayan Civil Service. Tan’s note to Wilson was published in local newspapers, in which Tan asserted, “[M]any of them [Malayan Chinese] have lost all touch with China.” They had been strengthening attachment to Malaya, but if they continued to be distrusted, “they will lose hope

³⁸ Donald M. Nonini, *British Colonial Rule and the Resistance of the Malay Peasantry, 1900-1957* (New Haven: Yale University South East Asian Studies, 1992), 98-9, and 101.

³⁹ Nonini, *British Colonial Rule*, 102.

⁴⁰ *The Straits Times*, 23 December 1932.

⁴¹ *The Straits Times*, 6 December 1932.

in this country and in their despair will naturally turn their eyes to China.”⁴² Tan had an audience, as similarly Purcell reflected in his writing of 1938 that the Chinese in Malaya “made their permanent home” in the colony. Underlying the short statement of Purcell and the longer speech of Tan were their shared concern towards complex political, economic, and ethnic tensions in Malaya.

⁴² *The Straits Times*, 23 December 1932.

WHAT IT MEANT TO BE A BRITISH COLONIAL OFFICIAL

The mentality of being an outlier with agency and confidence, as discussed in the previous section, was the foundation for Purcell to constitute his meaning of being a British colonial official. Being an official first meant that he had to study the subjects related to the people he governed, for example, through cadet language training. In Malayan Civil Service, all cadets had to learn at least one “native” language, or dialect, to communicate with the colonized.⁴³ The cadets studying Cantonese and Hokkien, for example, were accessed through six rounds of general, colloquial, and translation tests. The general section of the final two examinations was “a paper to test knowledge of Chinese *manners, habits of thoughts*, laws and customs.”⁴⁴ Given this background, it did not seem coincidental that Purcell was keen to analyze how Chinese people thought and its relationship with the language.

Purcell argued that learning written Chinese language could lead people to gradually understand the Chinese mind. Purcell proclaimed in the opening of *The Spirit of Chinese Poetry*, “The genius of China is in its written language, in the curves and squares and dashes of its

⁴³ Colonial Secretary’s Office, *The Straits Settlements Civil Service List (as on March 1st, 1918)* (Singapore: Government Printer, 1918), 220; Government Printing Office, *The Malayan Civil List 1938* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1938), 7-19.

⁴⁴ Colonial Secretary’s Office, *The Straits Settlements Civil Service List (as on March 1st, 1919)* (Singapore: Government Printer, 1919), 305. Emphasis added.

mystic signs. And the purest spirit of the language, as in all languages, is in its poetry.”⁴⁵ After analyzing the construction of Chinese written characters, Purcell suggested the reader to copy Tang poems with a brush. Throughout practices, the reader ought to consider each stroke carefully and speculate about “how the idea grew within the mind of the Black-Haired Race.”⁴⁶

Understanding the Chinese mind might help Purcell to be an arbiter among Chinese people in inter-war Malaya. The former section in this thesis has already shown that Purcell, as a magistrate in Penang, had to manage the issues of *sinkeh*s who could not afford to bail themselves out when they arrived from China. When he was a Protector of Chinese in Penang, Purcell had to settle family disputes among Malayan Chinese, such as whether a father or mother could have custody of their children.⁴⁷ He also occasionally visited Po Leung Kuk, a home accommodating children who were ill-treated or forced to be prostitutes and *mui tsais* (girls who were household servants), and communicated with those who suffered.⁴⁸

As a Protector of Chinese, Purcell observed the people he governed, created meaning out of the encounter, and presented it to his reader. Take for example Purcell’s conversation with a Tan ah Kwui in Penang who hoped to secure the guardianship of children:

Me [Purcell]: ‘Why don’t you let your wife have custody of the children?’

Tan ah Kwui: ‘Because I don’t want my wife to have the custody of the children.’

Me: ‘Yes, I know, but what are your other reasons?’

Tan ah Kwui: (surprised but doing his best to adapt himself to the unexpected turn of events): ‘Oh, Your Honour wants to know why I don’t want my wife to have the custody of the children?’

Me: ‘Yes, tell me.’

Tan ah Kwui: ‘Well, it’s like this, you see, Your Worship. My wife was born in the Dog

⁴⁵ Purcell, *The Spirit of Chinese Poetry*, Author’s note, no page number.

⁴⁶ Purcell, *The Spirit of Chinese Poetry*, Exercise, no page number.

⁴⁷ Purcell, *Chinese Evergreen*, 280-1.

⁴⁸ Purcell, *Chinese Evergreen*, 141.

Year. My wife's father was born in the Tiger Year. I used to be a vegetable gardener in Kapala [Kepala] Batas. Then many years ago...'

(After five minutes of this sort of thing it is found to have no bearing on the point whatever and Tah ah Kwui is reminded of the questions.)

Tan ah Kwui...: 'Well, Your Honor, if my wife had the custody of the children it would mean that she would be able to say whether ah Kau should go to school and whether Ewe Wing should go to All Souls Festival. That would mean that my wife would have complete control of what all my children did, this would mean that there would be nothing they did without she had a say in it. In fact, what it amounts to, Your Worship, is that if this happened the children would be in her custody, don't you see?'⁴⁹

Purcell added that conversations similar to the above happened frequently between him and Chinese in Malaya.⁵⁰ He was aware that the English reader might burst out laughing after reading the convoluted way of Tan ah Kwui in responding to his questions. Thus, Purcell commented further, "[A]s I grow older I laugh less at the queer methods of thought of other peoples—our own respected systems have only a comparative validity."⁵¹ For Purcell, the Chinese simply thought in a different manner that could be attributed to their languages and mind. From his encounter with Tan ah Kwui and other Malayan Chinese, Purcell created and presented a lesson to his reader: do not judge the other cultures at the first sight and with a single standard.

When Purcell introduced Chinese subjects to English reader, he created an image that China was different from but not inferior to Europe. Purcell had been reluctant to compare Chinese and European philosophy, but he did so briefly in his doctoral research, *Problems of Chinese Education*. Purcell first mentioned what philosophy meant for three European thinkers.

⁴⁹ Purcell, *Chinese Evergreen*, 280-1.

⁵⁰ Purcell, *Chinese Evergreen*, 280.

⁵¹ Purcell, *Chinese Evergreen*, 281.

To Plato, philosophy was concerned with “the ideal alone.” Immanuel Kant treated it as “knowledge through conceptions.” Johann Herbart divided philosophy into logic, aesthetics, and metaphysics. Unlike European philosophy, Purcell wrote, “Chinese philosophy was concerned almost entirely with morals, with little metaphysics and less logic.”⁵² Then he paired the Chinese thinkers up with the European ones. Purcell called Yang Chu (楊朱) “Chinese Nietzsche” for Yang and Nietzsche both displayed egoism. Sun Zi (孫子) was similar to Thomas Hobbes: they believed that human nature was evil and advocated for “physical force in government.” Zhuang Zi (莊子), the proponent of “primordial ether and supreme ultimate,” might find Spinoza as his counterpart. Purcell repeatedly warned his reader that the comparison of Chinese and European thinkers was doomed to be futile and superficial since China had a different philosophical system.⁵³

According to Purcell, Chinese women were also different from their European counterparts but in a more positive way. Purcell, as a Protector of Chinese, had to cooperate with other Protectors, District Officers, the Police, and British and foreign consuls to stop children and prostitutes from being smuggled in for sale in Malaya.⁵⁴ Every time Purcell raised routine questions to female immigrants from China, he continued to be surprised by how long the women were separated from their husbands. Many of them had not seen their spouses, who had been working in Malaya, for ten to fifteen years since it took years for the men to financially

⁵² Purcell, *Problems of Chinese Education*, 119-120.

⁵³ Purcell, *Problems of Chinese Education*, 119; Purcell, *Chinese Evergreen*, 276.

⁵⁴ Purcell, *Chinese Evergreen*, 201-2.

support the migration or that the couples preferred their children to be raised in China. Some Chinese girls were forced to leave their hometowns since their parents arranged them to be prospective daughters-in-law in local families in Malaya.⁵⁵ In their journeys departing China, Purcell described, the immigrants were “closely packed together between the decks of a ship” for ten to fifteen days. They were dirty and suffered from skin diseases. “Their hair was caked with sweat, their clothes soiled, the babies were not properly washed.” Purcell then made a turn and asserted, “I am confident that a shipload of European women and children impounded under like conditions would have been infinitely dirtier and smellier.”⁵⁶ This kind of comparison on people between China and Europe was rhetorical. Purcell employed such rhetoric frequently throughout his inter-war writings in order to elevate the status of Chinese subjects.

Purcell refuted the Orientalist writings to strengthen his view that Chinese subjects were valuable. When writing about Chinese poetry and education, Purcell frequently cited the works he read for cadet language examinations. As early as 1897, Herbert Giles’ books and J. Dyer Ball’s *Things Chinese* were in the syllabi given to the cadets in Malaya.⁵⁷ Before Giles became the Chair of Chinese at Cambridge University in 1897, stationing in China as a British consul, he had already published more than ten books on Chinese subjects and even developed the “Wade-Giles” transliteration system that had remained in use until the 1990s.⁵⁸ From 1905 onward, the

⁵⁵ Purcell, *Chinese Evergreen*, 202-3.

⁵⁶ Purcell, *Chinese Evergreen*, 201.

⁵⁷ The National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, 1957/0074853, G.T. Hare, Secretary for Chinese Affairs, F.M.S., Scheme for Cadets Studying in China, 22 March 1897.

⁵⁸ Janette Ryan, “Giles, Herbert Allen (1845–1935),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004,

cadets were expected to read these six works by him: *Chinese Literature*, *Historical China*, *Civilization in China*, *Chinese-English Dictionary*, *Synoptical Studies in Chinese Character*, and his translation of *Three Character Classic*.⁵⁹ Purcell would be familiar with the above writings when he passed the examination in 1924.⁶⁰ It then became clear why in *The Spirit of Chinese Poetry* and *Problems of Chinese Education*, Purcell cited Ball's and Giles' works often. He referred to Giles' *Three Character Classic*, *Civilization in China*, and *Chinese-English Dictionary* more than one hundred times in his 236-page *Problems of Chinese Education*.⁶¹

However, Purcell remained critical towards Giles' views on Chinese subjects. Purcell argued in *Problems of Chinese Education* that the public examination system in the late Qing era was corrupted and could not guarantee the employment of candidates. He remarked, "Giles combats this allegation, but the facts appear to be against him."⁶² Purcell rebutted Giles more substantially as Giles proclaimed that the Chinese language had no grammar for twenty and thirty centuries. Purcell contended, "if the relationship to one another words in a sentence is part

<http://www.oxforddnb.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/view/article/33401>, accessed 3 October 2016; Cambridge University Library, "Herbert Allen Giles," <http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/mulu/gilesbio.html>, accessed 3 October 2016.

⁵⁹ Colonial Secretary's Office, *The Straits Settlements Civil Service List (as on March 1st, 1919)*, 307.

⁶⁰ Government Printing Office, *The Malayan Civil List 1938*, 186; Purcell, *Chinese Evergreen*, 9-10.

⁶¹ Purcell, *The Spirit of Chinese Poetry*, 31, 32, 37, and 39; Purcell, *Problems of Chinese Education*, vii-234.

⁶² Purcell, *Problems of Chinese Education*, 36-7.

of grammar then there is a grammar of Chinese.” He also stated that since 1798 the Chinese people had been studying Chinese grammars.⁶³ Although Purcell did not specify what the 1798 work was, it was likely Wang Yinzi’s *Jingchuan Shici* (經傳釋詞), a study of syntactic expletives in Chinese classics.

Giles was not the only well-known Sinologist Purcell opposed. Purcell also disagreed with philologist Bernhard Karlgren who argued that formal parts of speech did not exist in Chinese. To rebut Karlgren, Purcell gave an example from *Analects* of Confucianism: 己所不欲勿施於人 (*Jisuobuyu wushiyuren*), which meant, “do unto others as you would be done by.” According to Purcell, the Chinese sentence showed the same order of cause and effect relationship, as the English one would do. He thus concluded that Chinese sentences generally expressed “sequence of idea” in a way similar to English.⁶⁴ Here, Purcell was on the same line with an influential philologist in the Netherlands: Jozef Mullie. Mullie, who became a professor of Chinese Language and Literature in 1939 at University of Utrecht, stated in 1929 and 1940 explicitly that Chinese sentences were randomly structured was “absolutely contrary to the fact.”⁶⁵

⁶³ Purcell, *Problems of Chinese Education*, 92-3.

⁶⁴ Purcell, *Problems of Chinese Education*, 95-6.

⁶⁵ Rint Sybesma, “A History of Chinese Linguistics in the Netherlands,” in *Chinese Studies in the Netherlands: Past, Present and Future*, ed. Wilt L. Idema (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 150-1.

TRANSCENDENCE OVER ORIENTALISM?

It is clear by now that Purcell was acutely aware of the problem with what was later called Orientalism. Take one more example from *The Spirit of Chinese Poetry*. Purcell argued that the Chinese mind was fundamentally different from the European one. He did not portray the European mind as superior to the Chinese one, which would have legitimized the Europeans to conquer the Chinese. Rather, Purcell's premise was that no idea was universal. The so-called universal ideas were originated and spread from Europe.⁶⁶ According to Purcell, since the relationships between two sexes were disparate in Chinese and European societies, the Chinese and Europeans could not comprehend "love," a seemingly universal idea, in the same way. In short, Purcell attacked European domination in the spread and interpretation of ideas.

It remains doubtful, however, how far Purcell—and indeed anyone—could transcend the structures of Orientalism. For instance, while Purcell claimed that Chinese subjects were different but not inferior to European ones, the effect he created was still the division of Europe and China. Such division of the Self and Other was the foundation of Orientalism in knowledge production. Another effect that Purcell's writings created was that "Europe" and "China" were monolithic categories. Far from Purcell's original intention of critiquing Eurocentrism, his writings reinforced the great divergence of Europe and China and in turn Orientalism.

⁶⁶ Purcell, *The Spirit of Chinese Poetry*, 2.

This thesis does not intend to fault Purcell for the inaccuracies in his writings. However, one issue must be brought up since it can show more clearly that Purcell solidified the category of “Chinese” people.⁶⁷ From each encounter with people in Hong Kong, Malaya, and China, Purcell generalized and simplified the qualities of “Chinese” people as a whole—as if people in those three places were the same. After Purcell arrived in China in 1937 via Hong Kong from Malaya, a vice minister of the Republican Chinese government, whose name was unrevealed, welcomed Purcell and his friends. The vice minister generously offered them a car for travel, the best accommodation, and “everything in his power to entertain” them. Purcell thus remarked, “[T]he Chinese are a less disinterested race than we are.”⁶⁸ In Guangxi province, Purcell observed an old woman doing needlework on a congested and narrow street. He appreciated the woman’s physical strength: “If you were to change places with her and sit as she does so that your knees prevent your lungs working properly you would gasp and break into a sweat.”⁶⁹ Later, a handcart was crashed near to the workplace of the woman. She “turned her head only for an instant” and continued her needlework. Watching how the woman behaved, Purcell reasoned that Chinese people could adapt into difficult living environment, even in northern Alaska and near the Equator.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ For more discussion of how the Qing court, Qing reformers, and revolutionaries, such as Sun Yat-sen and Liang Qi-chao, capitalized racial taxonomy and later promoted “Chinese race,” see Frank Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 3, 51, and 73.

⁶⁸ Purcell, *Chinese Evergreen*, 74.

⁶⁹ Purcell, *Chinese Evergreen*, 178.

⁷⁰ Purcell, *Chinese Evergreen*, 178.

Occasionally, the generalization might reflect Purcell's humor more than what he seriously considered as the characters of "Chinese" people. One example was related to electronic appliances. Electric torches were popular commodity in Liuzhou in Guangxi province because, as Purcell explained, they were useful, and equally importantly, their surface was shiny. Purcell then recounted that a Chinese he knew kept a vacuum cleaner in the drawing room since it was shiny and good to look at. Purcell thus concluded, "The Chinese love shining objects."⁷¹ Another example came from Purcell's travel with Nationalist Party members and affiliates. Mr. Hung a former general was medium-sized, "dressed in a smartish Western suit," and "nearly always" wore a hat. Two other Chinese men Purcell ran into also wore hats often. Purcell then deduced, "Chinese usually regard their hats—if any—as part of their anatomy."⁷² Regardless of Purcell's intention, his writings created and strengthened the cultural markers of "Chinese."

⁷¹ Purcell, *Chinese Evergreen*, 192.

⁷² Purcell, *Chinese Evergreen*, 101.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, in the first two sections of this thesis, I step back from judging whether Victor Purcell was immune from Orientalism. Instead, I first explain what was the presupposition of Purcell to consider himself different from typical Orientalists. I suggest that the comparison of himself and other writers, and his comparison between China and Europe, could not be made possible unless Purcell upheld a hierarchical mode of thinking, outlier mentality, and a sense of agency. The setup of Colonial Administrative Service across the British Empire and that of Malayan Civil Service were important in shaping Purcell's way of thinking. Equally important was his extensive experience in the encounter with "Chinese" people within and beyond the British Empire. Therefore, both the broader structure of colonial administration as well as historical contingency, as shown in the Purcell's encounter with the Chinese, determined how Purcell attempted to understand and portray "Chinese" subjects.

In the second section, this thesis analyzes what it meant for Purcell to be a British colonial official. It first shows that Purcell learnt about "Chinese" subjects through different means, for example, cadet language training, encounter with the Chinese, the study of poetry and Chinese education systems, and so on. I then argue that Purcell actively created meanings out of his book learning on Chinese subjects and encounter with the Chinese. He then presented the lessons to English reader, trying to convince the reader that China was different from but not inferior to Europe.

Overall, I remain doubtful how or how far anyone can transcend the structures of Orientalism and colonialism. On one hand, Orientalism is hard to be overcome perhaps due to its broad definition. Many scholars have pointed out the methodological weaknesses of Saidian Orientalism and have questioned who are not Orientalists if one strictly follows the overarching definition offered by Edward Said. If everyone is Orientalist, then how useful is Orientalism in analyzing the nuances of knowledge production?⁷³ On the other hand, as this thesis has shown, although Purcell was reflective and critical of condescending scholarships against China, he did reinforce the effect that China and Europe were divided monolithically, which was a defining feature of Orientalism.

⁷³ Daniel Martin Varisco assiduously summarizes many scholars' criticism towards Edward Said's *Orientalism, Culture and Imperialism*, and the readings of Said's works. See Daniel Martin Varisco, *Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2007). On Said's methodological weakness of defining who were and were not Orientalists, see for example, Fedwa Malti-Douglas, "In the Eyes of Others: The Middle Eastern Response and Reaction to Western Scholarship," *Comparative Civilizations Review* 13-4 (1985): 36-55; Nasrin Rahimieh, *Oriental Responses to the West: Comparative Essays in Select Writers from the Muslim World* (Leiden: Brill, 1990); Mohammed Sharafuddin, *Islam and Romantic Orientalism: Literary Encounters with the Orient* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1996); Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001); Masao Miyoshi and Harry Harootunian, eds., *Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002). On the critiques towards Said's notion of power/knowledge, see Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave, 2002); Abdirahman Hussein, *Edward Said: Criticism and Society* (London: Verso, 2002); Jerrold Siegel, *Between Cultures: Europe and its Others in Five Exemplary Lives* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

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