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**CELESTIALS IN TOUCH
THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPORT AND
EXERCISE IN COLONIAL SINGAPORE**

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Celestials in Touch: The Development of Sport and Exercise in Colonial Singapore.

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The Singapore Cricket Club, once a symbol of imperial dominance, and the Singapore Recreation Club, the traditional home of Eurasian sportsmen, share the stretch of grass that simultaneously links and divides them. The 'padang' extends its reach, somewhat defiantly in the face of modern expansion, between the Supreme Court on St. Andrew's Road and Esplanade Park on the far side of Connaught Drive, down where the waves used to lap up against the beach. Identified as an enduring landmark, the 'padang'¹ has strong symbolic meaning, particularly when considering its function as a site for connecting and disconnecting people. Revisiting Singapore in 1935, the former British agent, Sir Robert Bruce Lockhart hit the mark with his observation:

Here on the right was the old 'padang' with the British Singapore Cricket Club at one end and the Eurasian Recreation Club at the other, a striking symbol of the British attitude towards the colour question and of the fact that the field of sport is the one place where British and Eurasians meet as equals.²

Today this meeting place still witnesses the ultimate imperial sporting transgression. A solitary individual ambling in reflective mood, across the rope, then moving unerringly past deep extra cover, between third man and the slips, and out past fine leg to the shade of the angsanans beyond. This is no subtle field readjustment, this is taking a short-cut to dinner at the Satay Club. Oblivious of the possibility of intrusion, one reality glides ghostlike through the boundary of another.

This paper adopts a perspective that examines these transitory connections and the relations of dominance and interdependence between the 'colonizing' British and the 'intervening' Chinese in the period up to the Second World War. Without discarding totally the involvement of the indigenous 'colonized' Malays, the migrant 'Klings' or Indians, the Eurasians, and other smaller groups that comprised this colonial city, the current view focuses its attention on the interface between 'imperialists' and 'celestials'. Side by side but segregated.

II

Singapore has always been a plural society, but the sons of various constellations of the 'Celestial Empire' represent the most numerous and motivated migrants. Driven out, or escaping from the turmoil and deprivation of the decaying Qing Dynasty in China migrants from many dialect groups came to Singapore. The Chinese accounted for 56 % of the population of Singapore by 1871 and 75 % by 1931.³ The Chinese cannot be represented as a homogeneous group of settlers. The Straits-born Chinese, who had settled around the region for generations before the early nineteenth century, had assimilated many characteristics of the Malay culture. Being somewhat removed from China they were familiar with the British style of trading and empire building, and thus amenable to the laissez-faire approach of the

British. The China-born settlers were much more unpredictable and difficult to accommodate. The presence of clans, dialect groups, secret societies – known as ‘kongsi’ or ‘hoey’ – served to create a varied pattern of humanity.⁴ In the light of extreme hardship, many Chinese sought to escape temporarily from the lifestyle that prevailed in China. The clear goal for these, predominantly male workers, was always to return to China with sufficient material wealth to escape poverty and to establish themselves and their families more securely.

There were strata or tiers in the Chinese community: at the top were the wealthy ‘Towkays’, and then the traders, shopkeepers, and artisans, last and most numerous were the coolies. ‘Laukhehs’ (old hands) helped to cultivate a system of organization based on loyalty. Traditional use of martial arts skills to ensure compliance may have been one application of sporting practices that ‘samsengs’ (fighting men) used to deal out justice or retribution. One further distinctive characteristic concerned the gender balance amongst the Chinese. Men outnumbered women by as much as 12 to 1, in 1850, approximately 4 to 1 in 1901, and even 1.7 to 1 in 1931.⁵ The general environment was one of work, disorder, instability, prostitution, and often violence. The 1850s and the 1870s were particularly turbulent – with riots between the main dialect groups – the Hokkiens and the Teochews.⁶ Set in this context it is understood that sport and exercise existed only for a tiny minority; perhaps an adjunct for the towkay and his sons. The mass of workers had no time for sport, in the western sense, even the traders and shopkeepers were inactive.

...in Singapore John Chinaman is both master and man: he is capital and labour: and the shops and warehouses are for the most part owned by sons of the Celestial Empire. The Chinese seem to be always working or eating, smoking or sleeping – but never playing.⁷

The British and other Europeans, who accounted for 2% of the population in 1871 and only 1.5% in 1931, created their own small replica of society at Home. They brought a strong work-ethic, games for recreation, a dedication to exercise, and a deference for sporting and, by implication, team skills. The Chinese countered, or complemented this love of athleticism, with their own devotion to education and the life of business. The experiences of the majority of the Chinese migrants in sports activities and exercise were very limited and the cause of continual concern.⁸ The inflow of people interested in capitalizing materially on the development of a new settlement quickly created a polyglot society. Singapore therefore evolved into a highly materialistic society framed by a pluralistic structure.⁹

The earliest sporting activities provide a picture of limited active participation and segregation of the racial groups. The pioneer settlement of Singapore had few sporting facilities for its expanding population. Most sporting activities were privately arranged, and reserved for the higher echelons of a ragged but dynamic society. In the earliest days, life was fundamentally rugged and threatening. The perception of what constituted sport, therefore, also included tiger shooting in the forests and the plantations. This excitement represented not just an opportunity to escape from the drudgery of commercial business but also an important means of preserving the lives of itinerant workers.

British sport was an unknown quantity to most of the population. If it was a mystery and a source of either disdain or wonder to the Asian people, it was a panacea and the object of devotion to the Europeans. Some activities were publicly accessible, and designed specifically to provide entertainment via the incentive of token rewards for successful participation. At the New Year Sea and Land Sports, the first large-scale sporting event to be introduced, there was a carnival atmosphere, where universal emotions could be expressed through the fun-fare

types of activities. The New Year Sports were held on the Padang. These were inaugurated in 1839, and probably a development of the New Year Sea-Sports which had been introduced in 1834. All types of festivities including races and games were there: horse-racing, wrestling, eating ship's biscuits, running, ducking for coins in molasses, greasy-boom walking, tug-of-war, sack races and three-legged races and even a goose hunt or pig race, which 'amused the local bystanders beyond all bounds and elicited uncontrolled bursts of laughter on all sides', said one contemporary chronicler. These demonstrations of spontaneous frivolity were amusing and entertaining but there was also a sense of exploitation. A feeling grew that indigenous and migrant population were being manipulated more for the amusement of young civil service cadets or mercantile assistants than for the basic enjoyment of the local participants.¹⁰ The sailing that took place was more serious.¹¹

The basic pattern of events remained unchanged until the turn of the century. The motivation for these sports however, did change with time. Initially the day was set apart by the mercantile community to amuse the 'natives' only. By the 1870s, there were separate programmes for Europeans and Natives alike. The award of monetary prizes, and presumably opportunities to bet, were reasons why the sports became so popular and attracted large numbers of spectators.¹² Gradually, the amusement of the native population and migrants was subordinated to the need for competitive sport and entertainment of the Europeans and the Military. For other skeptics, there was a need for more rigorous exercise and less frivolity.¹³

Later organized sport, in the form of games, became the preserve of a tiny minority, who sought to promote imperial goals and objectives. Formalizing and segregating sport was a good way of achieving two objectives. First, the demonstration of values associated with activities restricted to an elite few would uphold the prestige of the ruling colonialist.¹⁴ In this way respect accorded to the imperial minority by the Asian population would be translated into deference, respect for authority, discipline and therefore increased productivity. Second, in the protected confines of club it was possible for the male-dominated colonial society to let down its hair, to suspend the constraints of everyday rules, and to feel a temporary sense of liberation. This escape to the private seclusion of the club, whilst beneficial to the Europeans, was also a stark reminder to the rest of the population that apparently immutable divisions existed within the society.

The imperial system insisted that the privileged would dictate the pattern of life. The system of law, the economy, class and gender status, and the language that provided the official means of communication with the Colonial Office in London were all shaped and guided by values inherent in the British way of doing things. In terms of social and cultural development, this meant that some elements of the lifestyle adopted by the rapidly expanding population were rigidly British. Many non-Europeans were excluded from the private arrangements of the Cricket Club or the Swimming Club, and so they had to create their own alternative system or copy the British.

A wide range of responses to the colonial dominance emerged. Resistance, avoidance, tolerance, and acceptance of the British system of sport were all demonstrated amongst the people who flooded into the island during the nineteenth century. Some demonstrated indifference but some aspired to be accepted more fully and therefore sought to emulate the Europeans. The resistance that existed came largely from the burgeoning migrant Chinese population. It was largely of a passive nature, as sport essentially did not exist for them as an option. Those, who did imitate British tastes for sport were also the ones who adopted the

whole spectrum of empire-building values and beliefs associated with all social and economic activities.

The development of organized games and 'field sports' such as horse racing brought the focus of attention first to the Esplanade and then, additionally, to the racecourse. The first cricket match, a sure sign of incipient colonialism, was held on the Esplanade before 1837. The sport of kings followed shortly after, when in 1842 the Singapore Sporting Club was founded to promote horse racing and trading. Horses were very important as a means of transport and as a source of recreation and entertainment. The first racecourse was originally a wide stretch of swampland – an area that was also dedicated to rifle practice. The Sporting Club thus became the first institution to promote sporting ideals.¹⁵ Significantly, the constitution of the Sporting Club also permitted the involvement in club events of the more wealthy Chinese animal owners.¹⁶ Young horses called 'griffins' were brought in from Java, Australia, China, and Burma, some were suited to the setting and the demands of racing, some were troublesome. Riders and trainers likewise made their way to the Sporting Club from around the region. Racing events held in Calcutta were attractive to the owners of some of the better horses. Men of material wealth or social standing, including Chinese towkays, dictated the scale and nature of the activities. The only people with regular opportunities to participate actively were the Europeans and the wealthy Chinese. Seasonal Race meetings organized by the Sporting Club featured the "Governor's Cup", the "Celestial Plate" or the "Singapore St. Leger". In Hong Kong, Manila, and Saigon the pattern was similar. The wealthier and more influential Chinese such as Hoo Ah Kay (better known as Whampoa) became involved through ownership of horses. "Iron Duke" – Whampoa's own favourite racer in 1869 – was entered in seven races during a three-day 'autumn' festival. "Vanitas" – a horse owned by Tan Boo Liat – won the Viceroy's Cup in Calcutta and reportedly won \$100,000 for his owner.

The influential citizens and officials decided who should be included within the convivial confines of the early clubs. They created their own rules, and administered their own events. For many individuals the motivation for involvement in sport lay in its ability to ease the passage of time in what could be claustrophobic environment. The tedium and monotony of existence that developed in the nineteenth century colony sorely tested the creativity of European settlers in Singapore.

Here was a fundamental difference in the respective approaches to sport and exercise of the British and Chinese. For the Chinese, who had been educated in China, the emphasis was placed on physical activities, which developed a sense of harmonious, coherent, cohesive, and essentially non-competitive movement.¹⁷ Western culture placed a far greater value on exercise and sport as a means of personal and social development. The British were quite happy to promote vigorous physical contact and the overt competitiveness of team games. The Straits-born Chinese, notably those who had accumulated considerable wealth, either attempted to emulate the British by adopting similar values and practices associated with sport and physical pastimes, or they discounted the activities entirely to pursue other forms self-enhancement or social engagement. The range of activities that was adopted did not correspond exactly with the British selection, as the Chinese largely avoided any excessive body contact, such as might be found in rugby.

A number of key events were to change the nature of society in Singapore during the second half of the nineteenth century. The extinction of the East India Company in 1858 and the subsequent transfer of the Straits Settlements to the Colonial Office in London occurred in April 1867. This, combined with the opening of the Suez Canal two years later, served to

accelerate the rate of economic growth, and to bring a new face to the social environment. These changes, in turn, helped to nurture the growth of organized sports and pastimes. From 1867, Singapore flourished as an entrepôt port centrally located on the main trading routes that linked China and the East with Europe and North America. However, if the day-to-day governing of the island rested with the British, it was the Chinese who proved to be the industrial backbone – or the ‘bone and sinew’ of Malaya as one-time Governor of the Straits Settlements, Sir Frank Swettenham reflected. Singapore’s progress rested on the twin pillars of British capital and Chinese endeavour. The relationship between the British and the Chinese was often mutually beneficial. Chinese and British were often drawn together by their sense of adventurousness, their partiality to gambling, a collective work ethic, and an ability to provide what the other might be lacking. The latter referring to the possession of power associated with the British and the ability to make financial profit associated with the Chinese.¹⁸

The private clubs became the main location for sport, although the surrounding natural environment did provide some scope for recreation. Sailing, normally a means for local trading, could be adapted into a competitive form during the time devoted for leisure. The rainforest and the jungle were not places for frivolous recreation, unless it took the form of snipe shooting close to the boundaries of the town. Tigers lurked in the jungle, so shooting parties were organized with particular care and concern for safety.

III

After the arrival of Raffles, it took ten years for the first sporting club to be established in Singapore. The first organization devoted exclusively to games was the Billiard Club.¹⁹ Its short-lived existence was attributed to the excessive temperance of its Scottish members. Not surprisingly, the initiative to establish recreation was slow, as the colony had a very small population and the main priorities were to quickly construct a viable port with trading facilities, complemented by formal institutions for regulating and controlling business. The question of exercise was a more pressing issue, with many European settlers, anxious not to be weakened by a strange and sapping environment, reserving the very early hours of the morning for walking before the heat and humidity enveloped the island.²⁰ Thus fortified they were able to ward off the perils of disease and debilitation.

In 1836, a Fives court was built, representing the first sport-specific facility to be enjoyed.²¹ Much pride was taken in the introduction of English sports, even though they may not always have appeared to be suited to the climate. The adaptation of school sports, in particular team games was one of the trademarks of the male colonial settler. The perceived benefits of games initially revolved around the notion of healthy activity. Unspoken was the belief that participation was restricted to the privileged few European males. These were the first signs of elitism and the establishment of a distinctive hierarchy of privilege.²² However, social life could become boring, repetitive, and dull, especially in a male dominated society, thus it was only commonsense to recreate the pastimes of ‘Home’ in Britain.²³

The Esplanade became best known for the establishment of the Singapore Cricket Club (SCC) in 1852. There were few active players early on, so it was difficult to field a full eleven on a regular basis. There was a need for imaginative and creative selection procedures. Cricket fixtures were organized to include teams from the SCC, Lawyers and Civil Service, Singapore Voluntary Artillery, and Officers of the Garrison. Additional variety was provided by

selecting teams on the basis of nationality, marital status, employment, nationality, and age. It must have been sheer delight for the cricketing faithful and the purists to entertain a visiting team from the region.

Cricket, naturally, became the most significant sporting symbol of perceived colonial superiority. It was identifiable but not easily understood. The sacred domain of the privileged few rested a mere stones throw from the busy river and the grim-faced coolies who toiled in sweltering heat from dawn to dusk. However, there were amusing moments, for example when a doughty gentleman was struck on the head by a cricket ball whilst passing the Esplanade in his carriage.²⁴

However, the esoteric nature of the game, which still confounds most foreign visitors to Singapore, proved difficult to handle. The 'flannelled fools' preserved most of the action for themselves. The SCC became synonymous with snobbery. Asians were kept at the boundary until a more welcoming generation took over in the 1880s, at which stage the Straits Chinese also decided it would enhance their standing in colonial society to pursue a path of emulation.

The ongoing presence of the military contributed to the development of sport in Singapore. Regiments undertaking garrison duties and visiting Royal Navy ships provided a breath of fresh air. The men were posted for periods of months or years but always created much interest, particularly in team games such as soccer and rugby. The East Kent Regiment of Foot – otherwise known as the Buffs – and the Inniskillings – known as the 'Skins' – were typical examples. They were active supporters of the annual sports that were held on the Esplanade.²⁵ The high moral tone of the gentlemen and officers was not always reflected in the actions of Tommy Atkins. The players in league and cup matches were not averse to fixing the result between themselves if it meant that they could gain additional time off military duties, with pay, under the pretext of playing an important replay. Repeated draws in competitions littered the scene.

Officers, troops, and the children of the military, who might live for part of their overseas assignments in Singapore, did have an advantage over the more elite ranks of civil servants and higher order administrators in the way that their contact the Asian population was often more down-to-earth. Some were able to join in with the Malays in learning how to kick a ball with bare feet.²⁶

Fort Canning, perched on the hill a kilometre behind the Esplanade, provided a lofty location for sightseeing and the 'gay' festivities organized by the troops. How divorced from the warrens in China Town to the south, where the population was rapidly occupying all the available spaces. The ridiculous antics of the high and mighty were in stark contrast to the endeavours of the lowly coolie.²⁷

Sport at a recreational level spread increasingly through the suburban areas of Singapore.²⁸ At first tennis was considered a 'niminy-piminy' game in Singapore, in other words, a game for women and unathletic men. The absence of European men from the competitive scene can better be explained by the fact that they were simply not as good as the Chinese.

The issue of the importance of vigorous, regular exercise and the importance of sporting activities provide early focal points for an assessment of the development of colonial values associated with sport. Notwithstanding some unfortunate representations of the perceived attitudes of the indigenous population towards exercise, many concerns were dealt with in utmost seriousness. Yet, there were also examples of public utterances, which provided a

humorous angle to the colonial dilemma of how much exercise to take, which activities were appropriate and what time of the day was best for physical exertion.²⁹

Of all the symbols of colonial ascendancy, the languid immersion of the European into the social balm of conviviality and self-indulgence contrasts the most with the wrenching image of the coolie rickshaw puller or the dockside worker straining to earn a measly cent to pay for rice. And yet, there were surprises particularly relating to the recreational activities of the fairer sex – not all of whom were somnolent. Whilst some were satisfied with polite conversation, bezique or piquet, the majority were increasingly driven by the threat of boredom and discomfort to emulate their husbands in more combative activities.³⁰

The population of Singapore in 1881 was approximately 138,000.³¹ A critical mass of people now existed for sport to expand more rapidly. Lawn tennis championships were first contested at the SCC in 1875, whilst the Recreation Club for Eurasians was formed in 1883 at the other end of the Esplanade. European ladies, who were excluded from the SCC, had their own domain for lawn tennis by 1884. Association Football was introduced in 1889 and a Golf Club was located inside the racecourse in 1891. Most significantly, this period marked the entry of the Chinese into the competitive arena.

IV

The Chinese section of the population experienced important initiatives in sport between 1885 and 1905. The Straits Chinese Recreation Club (S.C.R.C.) was formed in 1885, with The Straits Times making the public announcement of the momentous occasion.

We are glad to learn that the Straits-born Chinese having started a club called the “Straits Chinese Recreation Club”, for the purpose of playing Lawn Tennis, Cricket and practising English athletic sports. The Government has cordially encouraged the movement and supported the Club’s application to the Municipal Commissioners for the use of Hong Lim Green, which the Commissioners have readily granted. This is the first club adopting English sports ever established by our Chinese friends, and is therefore a new departure for which they should be highly commended; for hitherto the amusements and recreation of the Chinese young men have been of a rather objectionable nature and it is possible that this club will prove the nucleus of a network of Tennis and Cricket Clubs among the Chinese youth of the Straits. We are sure that the Singapore Cricket Club will be only too glad to give the Chinese youth instruction in the intricacies of Cricket and tennis, so that these games may be played in all their integrity.³²

At the official opening, Mr. Tso Ping Lung, the Chinese Consul, reflected on the golden opportunity, as yet unattainable in China, that presented itself to develop sport as a complement to academic education. He said:

Whilst in China, I am sorry to say, no play whatever is allowed to students in the school. Those who study too hard very often suffer from consumption or other diseases merely on account of not having sufficient exercise. It is a pity that they do not understand what the proverb says: ‘All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.’³³

The members of the S.C.R.C. became the pioneers of active participation in physical activity and sport amongst the Straits Chinese. More organized events, some on a larger scale, and involving other ethnic groups, were introduced to the sporting calendar. In style, most of these events were clearly based on, and possibly evaluated against, the British model. The Chinese New Year Sports, including athletic events, were organized by the Straits Chinese Football Association and were almost a replica of the sports arranged by the Cricket Club, not just in the range of activities, the decorations – just like Lilly Bridge at ‘Home’ – but even down to the segregation of ‘native’ and ‘Chinese’ events.³⁴ Two important associations soon followed. The Straits Chinese National Football Association was founded in 1894, and the Chinese Swimming Club was founded under the name of the Tanjong Katong Swimming Party in 1905.

As the Straits Chinese took the initiative to become further involved – largely adopting a smaller scale approach than the British – there arose some interesting alternative philosophies towards physical activity or physical culture. The ‘athleticism’ propounded by the British and to a lesser degree the Straits Chinese was now confronted with a more pragmatic and sometimes intellectual approach to life and the necessity for physical involvement.

The gradual decline of the Chinese Empire after the Opium Wars of the 1840s, the Tai Ping Rebellion of the 1850s and 1860s, the humiliation of defeat by Japan in 1895, and the Boxer Rebellion at the turn of the century brought an overwhelming despondency to China. The radical thinkers found inspiration and plotted the reform of an ailing empire. Likewise, there was an awakening for the Chinese in Singapore. While many despaired at the defeats, for some the response was to seek reform, motivated by the tenets of an English education, sometimes grudgingly bestowed by the British. The need to enhance female education was a new major concern for Lim Boon Keng (1869-1957) and Song Ong Siang (1871-1941), two pioneers of better education, who together created intellectual circles fuelled by western thought, and published their concerns in the Straits Chinese Magazine in 1897. They took every opportunity to express the need for change. Others took up the call in different ways. The removal of the ‘queue’ (long pigtail) was one symbol of reform that was widely publicized. Sport would also play its part in creating a new awareness. High jumpers could now excel without the fear of dislodging the bar with a queue.³⁵

Loyalty to the British flag did not necessarily mean a denial of Chinese heritage amongst the Straits-born. Throughout their open display of emulation there remained an underlying resistance to adopting, exclusively, all things British. In terms of the orientation towards physical activity it seems possible that the brazen athleticism of the British, which set higher store on physical fitness than on intellectual practice was often in stark contrast to the approach of the gentlemen of Cathay who prized the gains of study and a protracted education in the life of business.

In 1889, 23-year-old Lim Koon Tye read a paper at a meeting of the Presbyterian Young Men’s Society on “The Recreations of the Straits Chinese”. He appealed to Christians to take a special interest in the Straits Chinese community. He made the remark: “He who would bring about a reform in the physical, mental, and moral constitution of a Chinaman must begin that work in the Chinaman’s home, and with the assistance of the Chinaman’s wife and mother”. The ‘physic’ or physique represented an important outward representation of healthy living and exercise. There was much emphasis on the need for exercise and healthy activity.³⁶ In 1905, the Chinese Swimming Club was founded with the object of promoting interest among the Singapore Chinese in the useful art of swimming, life-saving and physical culture generally.³⁷

The condition of Straits Chinese women in general was of growing concern. Song Ong Siang, was very critical of a situation that had been of the Chinese population's own making:

Straits-born Chinese women of that generation are often illiterate and uneducated. They are selfish, careless, lethargic and ignorant with a propensity for gambling and drinking for the sake of excitement. They are products of a system for which men are responsible.³⁸

The consequent lack of social intercourse represented a serious limitation in the development of females, particularly when custom prohibited even 'walking out', something which would have been most beneficial. Referring again to the Straits-born Chinese women, Ong expounded on the value of exercise:

... we must not neglect their physical training. It is not necessary for them to indulge in violent forms of exercise, such as cricket or football, but they can develop their muscles in gymnastic exercises, which will induce gracefulness in their figure, as well as give strength and grit to their muscles. They ought to be taken out of the house as often as possible for a walk and for a blow of fresh air, especially in the morning, and live an open and more open-air life. These and other forms of exercise would keep them in good health, and drive away that unhealthy paleness, which is seen on the features of so many Chinese girls, and fit them to perform more satisfactorily their duties of maternity, and enable them to preserve their youthful appearance for a longer space of time.³⁹

Public opinions on physical culture and comparisons drawn between the extremes of activity levels of Chinese ('indolent and garrulous nyonyas' especially) and European females highlighted the prevailing values amongst Straits Chinese readers. Letters to the 'Editor' usually bemoaned the general lack of awareness of 'exercise as one of the primary essentials of life' but also urged caution on the point of intensity of activity.

While the Europeans indulge in too many sports (healthy and magnificent no doubt to the male, but at what cost to the conformity with the true meaning of real beauty in womanhood, – gentle, soft, supple and bashful – I mean of course such mannish sports as are being participated in public by some European ladies as hockey, cycling, horse-riding, and even weight-lifting, jiu-jitsu, and other kindred games), while one people I say go to extremes in their modes of life and in their ways, habits and customs, the Chinese and other Asiatics exclude such sports to a ridiculous extent as to entirely debar themselves from taking up health giving exercises which, by their simple nature, can be taken by them privately in their own homes, and in their own private rooms where no one can intrude upon their privacy.⁴⁰

The laissez-fair attitude of government towards education, in general, resulted in the slow development of physical education in schools. The games and activities were based on the English system, with team games, house competitions, and leagues. Initiatives by the various schools to develop a life long attachment to sport and rigorous exercise were supported more by word than by deed. At the same time, the Chinese schools were left to their own devices. Physical education (PE) for the Chinese-educated pupils was an expression of Chinese nationalism and communal identity.⁴¹ Some principals were more proactive than others, and very often girls schools took the lead.

Nanyang Girls' High School was typical of Chinese institutions in that the PE teachers came from China and coached the girls in volleyball and basketball. In 1931, six athletes from Nanyang even represented the Malayan Chinese at the China Games.⁴² The history of sport at the English schools started earlier. St. Andrew's School, founded as early as 1862, began its traditions in 1912 with the introduction of football, athletics and volleyball. The Rev. R.K.S. Adams, an Australian, advocated boxing and organized an inter-school competition in the early 1920s.⁴³

V

The ebb and flow of the world economy during the inter-War period had a direct impact on sport. Increasing wealth served to introduce and nurture new sports and accessibility to different types of activity increased. With more people becoming active, standards of performance evolved and generally, participation reflected a buoyant perspective on life. The ways that sport was portrayed within society also widened, and with this expansion came new concerns and issues that had to be dealt with. The inter-War years heralded a major leap of progress for the Chinese. Inter-club competitions were flourishing. During the 1920s and 1930s, in Singapore and up-country in Malaya, the whole community was seized by an intense interest in sport and exercise. Gone were the days when the Europeans were the only community to play games, and to sweep the board at athletics. Gone were the days when Asians gathered on the touch-line to roar with laughter at the antics of those in the scrum.

Today the Asiatic, be he Chinese, Indian, Malay or any other nationality, plays an important part in the sport of the country. He has learnt to play the game in the ethical as well as the technical sense of that phrase, and he has also learnt that a healthy body means a healthier, saner, cleaner and more straightforward outlook on life.⁴⁴

Progress was dramatic, and even the British were quick to recognize that remarkable steps had been made by their Chinese counterparts. In a wide range of essentially British sports and games the Chinese made their mark and even overturned the superiority of the men from Britain and the Dominions.

Not even in China itself, had the Chinese aptitude for sport been better illustrated than in Malaya. The Chinese had reached the stage of beating the Europeans regularly at their own games. Even in the face of strong military opposition, the Chinese were able to win both the Singapore Football Cup and the Singapore League.⁴⁵

Association football was the first team game to really catch on with the Asian population to the extent that they gradually monopolised state representative matches. One-time director of Education, Sir R. Winstedt, once reflected that Malaya's greatest cultural influences had been football and the cinema.⁴⁶ The Football League began in 1904 and inter-state games sporadically from 1901. The local population also established their own league and there were many hard-fought games between the Malays and the Chinese. The exchange of visits between Malayan (mainly Chinese) teams and teams from China and Hong Kong, which began in the late 1920s, became one of the main features of Malayan soccer.

The Chinese were considered amongst the most skilful and enthusiastic footballers. They experienced very successful period against both the civilian and the military sides during the

late 1920s. Not only were the teams and clubs affiliated to the State and Settlement Associations, but they also formed their own Malayan Chinese F.A.⁴⁷

The Singapore Amateur Football Association declared twenty members of the local Malay football club professionals, with disqualification of their President and Hon. Treasurer from holding office in amateur football, the former permanently, the latter for five years. The trouble arose over a tour in Java in 1933, in connection with which payments were made, which are held to have contravened the laws of amateurism. For years, there had been allegations of “shamateurism” in Malayan football, and this is the first case in which there has been full investigation.⁴⁸ Two years later, there was another incident that shook the foundations of British amateur values. An unauthorized visit of a Singapore football team to Saigon in 1935 led to the Council of the Singapore Amateur Football Association declaring five locals to be ‘professionals’ and passed sentences on them which were to keep them out of amateur soccer for up to three years.⁴⁹

Betting was not confined to the Turf. There was discussion of the betting evil in connection with Singapore football also. It has certainly reached unfortunate proportions, though as yet there has been no instance of players being “got at.” The danger, however, is obvious, especially when bets running into four figures are made on some of the matches. There have also been instances of disorderliness among the crowds, which, incidentally, continue to grow.⁵⁰

The Malayan Chinese soccer team undertook sanctioned tours to Hong Kong, with the return visits likewise creating much interest. Although news from England featured regularly in the English language press, it was clear that the affiliations of the Chinese were still directed towards the motherland – an empire that was suffering the ravages of conflict with Japan. However, the most overwhelming expression of fidelity and attachment to China occurred during the visit to Singapore by the All-China soccer team in 1936. Comparisons were made with the scenes at the first English Cup Final to be played at Wembley in 1923. The crowd swarmed all over the pitch at the Anson Road Stadium last week after the China Olympic soccer team defeated Singapore’s probable Malaya Cup XI. The attendance constituted a record for any football match played in Malaya. The official figures of the crowd were “just over 26,000” in a stadium designed to hold 10,000.⁵¹

Perhaps even more than Association Football, tennis became Malaya’s “national” game. Lawn tennis had arrived in Singapore very rapidly after the formalization of the game in England. In the mid-1870s and 1880s, the Singapore Championships had been held on a quarterly basis amongst privileged class only. The game took its place as a multi-racial activity in Singapore after 1921, when the Malayan championships were first instituted. By 1929, tennis was considered by many to be the national game, and there were eight affiliated clubs.⁵² The Malayan and local state championships were almost unique in their way, attracting participants from more than half-a-dozen races – European, Malay, Chinese, Eurasian, Japanese and Indian. The first winner of the Malayan championship was a Japanese player, Nakamura, who defeated the best European players sensationally. Then the Chinese took over. First Khoo Hooi Hye, then Lim Bong Soo proved superior to European opposition. Male Chinese lawn tennis players had successfully ousted the Japanese and the Europeans.

Khoo Hooi Hye, was the Singapore title holder from 1925 to 1929 and Malayan Champion from 1925-1927 and again in 1929. He spent much of his time in China playing in tournaments and winning the singles event at the Far Eastern Olympic Games at Shanghai in

1927. Lim Bong Soo, had two claims to fame, the first as a successor to Khoo Hooi Hye as the leading tennis player in the 1930s, the second as the victim of a passage of personally demeaning and discriminatory descriptions by writers in the monthly journal 'British Malaya'. 'Diminutive', 'midget player', 'tiny left-hander', 'our clever little left-hander' were the typical epithets used at the time to describe Lim. The two clubmates played on the China coast, and later appeared in Shanghai, Peiping and Tientsin, winning most of their games against the best players. Selection for China's Davis Cup team was suggested for the two.⁵³

Exhibition games were featured regularly. Two of the best lady players in the world, Miss Akhurst (ranked third in the world, behind only Helen Wills and Senorita de Alvarez) and Miss Bickerton from Australia graced the scene in 1928.⁵⁴ The French stars Cochet, Brugnon, Landry and Rodel, gave enthusiasts a treat in 1930. Japan's top player Harada, and his young compatriot Satoh, whilst on their way to Europe for Davis Cup matches, also played exhibition games.⁵⁵ Dorothy Round gave further impetus to the women's game when she played in Singapore in 1935.

Boxing did not figure in the early sporting calendar. Its development as an amateur pastime originated in the post-World War One period, with the professional form emerging strongly during the early 1920s. The sport appealed particularly to the Chinese and the Eurasian sectors of the population. Judging by the coverage of boxing in the newspapers of the time, it is fair to assume that it was a major spectator sport driven by betting. This popularity led to the establishment of a Boxing Association in 1929 and a Board of Control in 1932 to monitor matters inside and outside the ring. By the mid-1920s, local professional boxers were travelling abroad to Manila, Batavia, Saigon and cities in Australia in order to make their fortunes. Battling Key, a Chinese light-weight, was for years the idol of the Chinese crowds, and in his heyday attracted an immense following.⁵⁶

In athletics, a tradition grew amongst the Chinese during the late 1920s and 1930s that capitalized on the connections with China. The All-China Games and the Far East Olympics drew competitors from Malaya, the Philippines as well as cities in China itself. An elaborate system of competition starting with school meetings all the way up to regional championships provided attraction for males and females alike.⁵⁷

The build of troops in the Far East during the 1930s in response to tension and conflict involving China and Japan had a direct impact on the competitiveness of many sports. The Singapore Chinese Amateur Athletic Association and the Police Sports Association – often represented by Sikhs – were often leading contenders in the athletic scene, but they were almost outnumbered by sportsmen from the incoming regiments. In order to reduce the likelihood of dominance by the British steps were taken to divide the Armed Forces into their component services. A combined team in 1936 would have included athletes from the Inniskilling Fusiliers, the Royal Artillery, the Royal Air Force, and the Middlesex Royal Engineers Regiment.

The coastline to the east of the city has always represented a popular area of retreat. At one time largely inaccessible except by boat, certainly a stretch much prized as a location for a weekend home, Tanjong Katong was and continues to be home to the main swimming clubs. The Europeans in 1894 and the Straits Chinese in 1905 staked their claims to sections of the idyllic waterfront. Escape for the drudgery of work, and an opportunity to socialize were the main motivations. Swimming and tennis were to share an interesting characteristic within sporting circles particularly during the 1930s. They were the sports in which the Chinese

came to dominate the Europeans on a competitive basis. Within the Chinese Swimming Club, which was first conceived as the Tanjong Katong Swimming Party in 1905, there grew a passion first for fun, relaxation, and exercise, and then for competition. Initially, as with the Singapore Swimming Club, the gathering was male-only. Water-polo became a popular team game and an important source of pride and achievement for the Chinese.⁵⁸ An unbeaten record against the European Swimming Club extended until 1932, it was lost only because of a misunderstanding of new rules.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, the Chinese Swimming Club was capable enough to shock the returning Japanese Olympic team by winning the water polo match 9-5 in 1936.⁶⁰

Bruce Lockhart's personal impressions of sport in Singapore pinpointed the major changes that had taken place. How the gradual emancipation of Chinese women had given them freedom to explore, to participate, and to keep in touch with trends and fashions around the world. Describing a mixed basketball match between the Shanghai Tung Ah Girls School and a team of Singaporean men, the returning Bruce Lockhart was witnessing a new world of opportunity.

The place was packed to capacity with Chinese. The Chinese girls dressed in white shirts and the shortest of black shorts, and with sturdy, muscular thighs showing almost up to their buttocks, were the finest physical specimens that I have seen outside of Nazi Germany. Presently out came a young Chinese in cricket shirt and white trousers. He was the referee and, as such, fully conscious of his importance. I have seen less fuss and less ceremony at an English Cup Final or at the biggest American baseball game. The skill of the players thrilled me. Their speed was only less marvellous than their accuracy. The Shanghai girls won easily. They would have beaten any team in Europe. Although they thrashed the local favourites, they were cheered tumultuously by the Chinese spectators. To me, who in the days of my Malayan career had hardly ever seen a Chinese woman outside of the coolie or the easy virtue class, here was a change indeed.⁶¹

The outsiders' perceptions of Asian women did not change as quickly as the reality. Europeans and Americans were slow to keep up with the rate of change that was embracing Singapore and the East.⁶² And yet, a dilemma existed for the Straits Chinese, in particular. Many had been educated in the English system, and they had been both exposed to the revolution in sport and were welcoming of its liberation. But at the same time, they were still influenced by the more conservative values of their parents, which were associated with a Confucian background of restraint.⁶³

With the boom came the less pleasant aspects of wide involvement. An enduring element of life in Singapore was the propensity of men and women alike to gamble. This tendency was nurtured with the spread of sport and access to racecourse and spectator events. Betting represented a unifying bond between the many peoples of Singapore – the British included.⁶⁴ Regardless of the false impression that all the world was swinging a racket or at the beach, the passive involvement in sport through betting was more appealing and was indeed deep-seated.⁶⁵ It was claimed that racing seemed to have grown out of all proportion to the size of the population and wealth of the country. Races were held in Malaya every week and millions of dollars were spent. The poorer people more often than not were the losers.⁶⁶

A critical weakness in the development of physical activity in Singapore, and one that became more apparent as the population increased, was the lack of available space. Initially to provide

a healthy living environment and to avoid overcrowding, space was later urgently required for recreation and sport.⁶⁷ As the growth of population spiralled upwards and sport became a more enticing activity the old facilities for sport in Singapore no longer sufficed. The 'padangs' were overworked because of widespread interest in games. There was a regrettable shortage of playing grounds for physical culturists, club athletes and children alike. Unfortunately, sport was not seen as an important government priority. The Legislative Council were happy for the traditional amateur/volunteer approach to prevail. Whilst the elite could be guaranteed their convivial gatherings, the average enthusiast had fewer options.

Political commentators were quick to seize on the limitations of space afforded to the youth of Singapore. It was argued that physical activity was a sound antidote to revolutionary impulses that might be generated amongst the discontented poor. Idle hands were a dangerous sign, and if young impressionable people could be directed towards wholesome engagement in physical activities and sports then there was less danger of subversion. To provide the appropriate facilities that permitted general interest in sport it was necessary to encourage government administrators to commit funds to the provision of facilities. Thus sport could be enlisted in the fight against the world-wide spread of communism.⁶⁸

The construction of new facilities did not really keep pace with the formation of new sports associations. A new Municipal sports ground was built at Jalan Besar in 1930, to take the place of the M.B.E. Stadium on Anson Road, which was due for demolition.⁶⁹ The new Singapore Swimming Club pool, built in 1931, and fenced off from the sea was said to be one of the largest in the world.⁷⁰ But these were limited in their ability to satisfy the wide range of needs.

The sports clubs, an enduring feature of British social imperialism, created an image of decadence and detachment. Yet, the club was an important location for relaxation and provided a sheltered retreat from public gaze and offered the means for catharsis. It was said by such as Bruce Lockhart that the visitor would never be bored, for the amenities of life were amazingly varied. Sport was seen as the mainspring of the social life. The illogicality was that the Singapore Englishman who would hardly deign even to undress himself without the aid of a Chinese servant would spend the afternoon hitting or kicking a ball with a vigour that defied both the climate and common sense.⁷¹ The image of the club member as somewhat eccentric, sometimes indolent, often arrogant was one that lingered in the memories of many Asians.

Horse racing was initially for amateur riders exclusively, but very quickly it took on a professional tone that has existed ever since. Makepeace, et al. (1922) devoted considerable space to the escapades of the Turf, but little was made of the betting that went hand in hand with the racing. Being a member of the Racing Club automatically bestowed the privilege of betting, however there was an increasing outcry when it was discovered that these members were also placing bets for friends and business acquaintances. The money generated by the Turf during the inter-War years was so considerable that racing assumed the mantle of the Third Industry of Malaya – behind Tin Mining and Rubber production. Legislation to tax the returns on betting was always a bone of contention particularly during the years of the Depression.⁷² For some time there was a campaign against race-course betting, which was perceived as evil amongst those who indulged excessively. In representing gambling as 'in the Asiatic blood', and accusing the Chinese of 'a lack of proportion', The British neatly deflected the blame away from themselves, yet simultaneously were happy to exact a betting tax on supporters of Malaya's 'third industry'.

Inter-racial sport emerged more fully during the wars, with golf leading the way with the establishment of the multi-racial Island Club.⁷³ Though later on the scene the pioneer members of the Flying Club followed suit – somewhat reluctantly.⁷⁴

Olympic connections were more pronounced with China than with Britain. Local ‘Olympiads’ featured the Malayan Chinese starting in 1931, they were organized on a biennial rather than a four-year basis. The Fourth Olympiad held at Jalan Besar Stadium in Singapore featured a remarkable display of allegiance. The eight hundred athletes and officials from the Malaya peninsula bowed three times before the portrait of the Father of the Chinese Republic Dr. Sun Yat-Sen during the Opening Ceremony.

Barely six weeks after the tumultuous reception for the All-China soccer team it was the turn of the Chinese Olympic team on its way to Berlin to enjoy demonstrations of national solidarity. The delegation comprised track and field athletes, boxers, a cyclist, weightlifters, basketball players, and swimmers.

Chinese republican flags waved by hundreds of hands were part of a scene of great enthusiasm at the Singapore Wharf on July 2, when the liner *Conte Verde* berthed with the main body of China’s star athletes on board bound for the Olympic Games in Berlin. A bright yellow silken banner inscribed with Chinese characters “Bring Glory to China Abroad” subscribed by the Overseas Chinese was unfurled when the liner hove into sight and the crowd shouted greetings from the wharfside. Dr. Philip K.C. Tyau, Consul-General at Singapore, and Mrs. Tyau were among the first to rush aboard. The athletes, grouped in teams, were mustered on deck and almost overwhelmed by the reception. There are 76 athletes and 42 officials on the *Conte Verde*. One of the most popular members is pretty 19-year-old Miss Yeung Sau-King, Hong Kong and China champion swimmer who is called the “Chinese Venus.” Miss Yeung is the only girl swimmer and one of five girl athletes among them and has recorded good times in the 100 metres backstroke and 400 metres freestyle.⁷⁵

Table tennis was popular with the Chinese but the game, which ultimately brought the Malayan Chinese to the world stage was badminton. It had been introduced as a recreational sport by the British, but it was the Asian contingent, who formed hundreds of badminton parties and played regular competitions. J. F. Devlin, a former All-England champion toured Malaya was defeated by the leading local players in exhibition matches. This provided one of the sparks that ignited the burning passion for the game. Reporting of badminton in British journals was very sparse. Only dual-language pictorials, such as the *Malayan Sports Pictorial*, really catered to all tastes. By 1928, state championships were introduced in Singapore. The development of Badminton was rapid. In 1931, Singapore was involved in the first interstate matches – along with Penang and Selangor. In 1934, the Badminton Association of Malaya (B.A.M) had been formed and, the following year, an annual triangular tournament for Singapore, Perak, and Selangor was introduced for both men and women. It was only in the 1930s that any suggestion of Malaya’s relatively high standing in the game became clear. The efforts of Singaporean and Malayan students at British universities, who participated in European tournaments like the All-England championships set the benchmark for players who were to become world champions themselves immediately after the Second World War.⁷⁶

VI

Singapore has become acknowledged as a great commercial centre, with first-world economic status – a ‘tiger’ of the East. This status has been most obviously created by the dynamic efforts of ambitious individuals and determined groups of settlers and immigrants. The foundation of success has been found in the efforts and drive of important individuals and groups of people, who were prepared to interact for individual and collective benefit. The commercial energy that emanates from within its sea-lined borders today is a testimony to the endeavours of successive generations of highly motivated, disciplined and essentially materially driven people.

For all its ability to impress itself on the world of business, manufacturing and commerce, Singapore has never possessed the resources to challenge the rest of the world in high-level international sport. Even the success achieved in badminton after the Second World War, were not sustainable. Some of the reasons for the limited successes that have, nonetheless, been achieved have lain in factors that were and still are simply beyond the absolute control of the nation. Sport has always required extended periods for play, expansive stretches of land for games, away from the place of work, and forgivingly moderate climates for prolonged exertion. Not all these characteristics have merged seamlessly in the Lion City.

Singapore is a small island – from east to west, the widest physical dimension is the same as the length of marathon race. The population size has always been relatively small, but more important than sheer numbers has been the erratic yet dramatic rate of demographic increase over the years, which at one time led to dangerously high population densities in the city. The lack of permanently serviceable open spaces, and the heat and humidity of the tropical latitudes, have never provided a truly ideal location for sport. Even the marine environment does not provide ideal year-round sailing conditions. Furthermore, at no stage during the year does Singapore benefit from long, balmy days, when twilight of temperate proportions could offer a welcome extension to the active day.

Other, more human, reasons for the limited success are found in the motivations and beliefs of the dominant groups within the society as it has developed since 1819. In a country that expanded its population dramatically through migration – as late as 1931, 64% of the population was foreign-born – and created a predominantly urban environment, the people have until recently found it difficult to come fully to terms with sport as an intrinsically vibrant cultural activity that additionally helps to define the identity of the nation. The prioritization of values associated, not only with the provision of time and space for the pursuit of sport and recreation, but also with a sets of attitudes towards physical activity that reflects it in its many forms, has yet to be fully nurtured. A utilitarian approach to sport is still the one than tends to be adopted, rather than an expressive one. If the British were concerned with the Chinese adopting sporting systems that supported the control of imperial possessions, the Chinese used sport to maintain important links with China.

A summary of the development of sport and exercise before 1939 suggests a loose form of symbiotic relationship existed between the British and the Chinese as far as sport was concerned. Entertainment, education, emulation, exercise, and emancipation all figured in the equation. In the final analysis, the sporting culture that accommodated the British and the Chinese, together with the other racial groups in Singapore was not based on the factor of shared national identity.

Today, as the Government steers its people along the path of nation building the relationship between sport and society is one of more elaborate interdependencies and trade-offs. Sport has been integrated more successfully into the lives of the population, and yet there remain demarcations, notably in terms of the value attached to the activities and the access afforded to limited resources. The main thrust of policies involving sport focus on the contribution to a healthy lifestyle that is afforded by regular participation in physical activities. A healthy lifestyle is seen as an important predeterminant of productivity and social progress. There is a delicate balancing act between sets of competing ideals, and in the case of sport, it has gravitated strongly in one particular direction. The promotion of education as a path to employment is a familiar motivation that was recognized in the colonial period. The provision of opportunities for personal expression in the form of play and sporting endeavour is a new issue.

Notes.

¹ The 'padang', also known as the Plain or the Esplanade, has been the traditional home of many recreational pursuits in Singapore. It represents a meeting place for cultures, a parade ground, a playing field, a stage for politicians, a site for National Day Parades, an icon for Japanese tourists, and a symbol of British cultural imperialism.

² R. Bruce Lockhart, *Return to Malaya* (Putnam: London, 1936), p.81.

³ Saw Swee Hock, *Singapore Population in Transition*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p.57.

⁴ The secret societies provided protection and mutual aid, in particular to the poor and destitute 'sinkhehs' or newly arrived workers.

⁵ Saw Swee Hock, *The Population of Singapore*, (Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies, 1999), p.50.

⁶ E.Lee, *The British as Rulers: Governing Multiracial Singapore*, (Singapore: Singapore University Press), p.35-38.

⁷ F. Riley, 'A Trip round the World: Being Jottings made on a Tour from London to Liverpool via Africa, Asia, Australia and America', in G.Bastin, *Travellers' Singapore: An Anthology*, (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.160.

⁸ S.M. Middlebrook, *Pioneers of Chinese Reform in Malaya*, *The Straits Times Annual*, 1941, p.87.

"In 1904, Mr Choo Kia Peng made an appeal for more recreation amongst the Chinese. He pointed out that the Chinese paid little attention to physical exercise and that the only national sports were boat-racing at the time of the Dragon Boat festival in the fifth moon, kite flying during the Autumn festival, and archery on foot or on horseback."

⁹ C.M.Turnbull, *A History of Singapore: 1819-1988*, (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.31.

¹⁰ Charles Burton Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore*, (University of Malaya Press, 1902), p.781.

¹¹ See C.A.Gibson-Hill, 'New Year Sea Sports', *The Straits Times Annual*, (Singapore: Straits Times, 1953), pp. 34-38.

¹² *Singapore Free Press*, 3 January 1839.

¹³ *The Straits Times: Overland Summary*, 14 January, 1865, p.1. "On each recurrence of this holiday, a motley crowd of Malays, Klings, Chinese, and other Native races gather on the public Esplanade, and are there entertained by a series of competitions among themselves at athletic and other feats for the various money prizes which the Europeans give. It is a mercenary affair on the part of the Natives, and a somewhat absurd and tiresome spectacle to the European. It was a very dismal day this year, and the sports were somewhat in keeping."

¹⁴ J.G. Butcher, 'European Teams and the Selangor Football League', *The British in Malaya, 1880-194*, (Publisher: 1979), p.117.

¹⁵ W. Makepeace, G. E. Brooke, R. St. J. Braddell (eds.) *One Hundred Years of Singapore*, 2 Vols. (Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 348. In a preface to the Singapore Sporting Club Rules of 1896 the following account is given of the origin of the Club: "The Singapore Sporting Club was founded in 1842, with the object of encouraging the importation and improvement of horses in the Colony by giving away prizes."

¹⁶ Song Ong Siang., *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*, (University of Malaya Press, 1967), pp. 154-155.

“For the Spring Race meeting held in April 1869 the Chinese merchants presented the “Confucius” Cup, value \$250 – which was won by Capt. Moysey’s “Bismarck.” The first race-meeting was in 1843, and for the first twenty-five years or so racing was confined to gentlemen riders exclusively. The first record of any interest taken by Chinese in this form of sport was the ball given in May 1861 during Race Week by Mr. Tan Kim Seng. In 1867 Mr. Cheang Hong Lim presented a cup, which was called by his name, and at several race-meetings in later years the ‘Cheang Hong Lim’ Cup was one of the prizes competed for. Nor did the Chinese merchants confine themselves to that one effort already mentioned, for at the Autumn Race meeting of 1869 they came forward again and presented the “Celestial Plate.” Mr. Tan Keng Swee (son of Mr. Tan Seng Poh) was the first Chinese to own race-horses, and his horse won the Maharajah of Johore’s Cup at the Spring meeting in 1879.”

¹⁷ F.Hong, *Footbinding, Feminism and Freedom: The Liberation of Women’s Bodies in Modern China*, (London: Cass, 1997), p.20.

¹⁸ C.M.Turnbull, *A History of Singapore: 1819-1988*, (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.39.

¹⁹ C.B. Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1965) pp. 206-207.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p.207.

²¹ Fives is a game similar to squash, but one which uses the hand instead of a racket to hit the ball against the walls of the court. It had its origins in the public schools of England.

²² *The Straits Times*, 17 August, 1861, p.1.

“The old English sports and pastimes preserve their vitality, even in this distant and tropical part of the world. We are to have two race meetings a year: a few days since we had occasion to notice the first of a series of friendly scratch matches at Cricket, and today we describe a capital match at Fives. The Fives court was founded in 1835, and has been an “institution” and a valuable one, ever since. As a sport, after the fatigue and confinement of office hours, it is unsurpassed, and has at the same time the advantage of not requiring the players to stand in the sun, no small recommendation in this climate. We are the healthiest community in the East, and attribute no small share to our activity and love of outdoor sports, so that, long life we say to Fives and Cricket, and other exercises that make us so.”

²³ I. Sharp, *The Singapore Cricket Club: Established 1852* (Singapore: the Singapore Cricket Club, 1993, 2nd edition) p. 13-17.

²⁴ *The Straits Times*, 28th September 1872.

²⁵ *Daily Times*, 3 January 1882.

²⁶ F. Stephen Clark, ‘Pulau Brani’, *British Malaya*, 5, 4, (1930), 119-121.

“It was rather surprising how the Malays took up football. Their notions of the game were sometimes hazy, but they played with great enthusiasm, and often with skill. They were swift and strong, and, although they never wore boots or any form of foot covering, they kicked with great force. This was a source of great wonder to many of the whites, but it is easy enough to understand. The feet of these people are hardened by sun and rocks, and they use them in many ways: a Malay can pick up a coin with his toes, and he can give one a painful nip (this was one of their favourite practical jokes). When they kicked a ball, they simply curled the toes in, much as one would clench one’s fist to punch. I did a little of this myself. I never wore shoes, except on ceremonial occasions, and my feet became like leather, so that I could scramble over sharp rocks in my bare feet without feeling anything. I also learned to pick up coins with my toes, and I have often kicked a football with my bare feet in the way, that the Malays do. I really believe that one can give a more powerful kick with the toes bent under in this way.”

²⁷ *The Straits Budget*, 12 February 1895, p.3.

“But the most attractive and remarkable event was that open to the animal kingdom – dogs, horses, and elephants excluded. It was appropriately called a “menagerie race” for when the competitors arrived on the scene of action the collection of miscellaneous creatures at the starting post reminded us of nothing else than a menagerie. There were about half-a-dozen monkeys of as many shapes, sizes and colours, who evidently took a lively and mischievous interest in the proceedings. We thought we heard one young ape telling a severe looking black brother to make the pace hot at the start while another seemed to be encouraging him to “go for the duck.” The duck certainly looked excited, the hens were evidently undecided whether it was a tea fight or a laying match, the goose patronised the rest of the company, the jackdaw, the cat, and the young black goat were eager to get out of it as quickly as possible. When the word was given, the monkeys were off like winking and three came past the post to collar the prizes. Nothing else really finished. The goose was too sedate, the duck too excited, the hens too indifferent to the issue, and the cat too nervous.”

²⁸ N. Edwards, *The Singapore House and Residential Life*, (Oxford University Press, 1991), p.101. “As in England and India, recreation in Singapore was an important part of the suburban ideal. Attitudes to recreation were brought to Singapore by the British, both directly and indirectly via India, as part of the general transfer of cultural ideas between Europe and South East Asia. In both India and Singapore, English attitudes were adopted

and adapted to colonial circumstances and often extended to influence the recreational habits of the indigenous population.”

²⁹ *The Straits Budget*, 6th February 1894, p.12.

³⁰ See M. Shennan, *Out in the Midday Sun: The British in Malaya 1880-1960*, (John Murray: London, 2000), pp. 58-59, also H. Romney, ‘Ladies at the Butts’, *The Straits Times Annual*, (Singapore, 1956), p.66-67.

³¹ Saw Swee Hock, *The Population of Singapore*, (Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies, 1999), p.10.

³² *The Straits Times*, 14 January 1885, p.2.

³³ Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Years History of the Chinese in Singapore* (University of Malaya Press, 1922), pp.226-227.

³⁴ *The Straits Budget*, 13 February 1894, p.4.

³⁵ Kolatch, J., *Sport: Politics and Ideology of China*, (New York: Jonathan David, 1972), p.12-13.

³⁶ See ‘Physical Religion’, *Straits Chinese Magazine*, 1 (1897), 8-10. ‘Chinese Athleticism’, *Straits Chinese Magazine*, 1 (1897), 29.

³⁷ Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Years History of the Chinese in Singapore*, (University of Malaya Press, 1922), p.380-381.

³⁸ Song Ong Siang, ‘The Position of Chinese Women’, *Straits Chinese Magazine*, 1 (1897), 17.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 22-23.

⁴⁰ See *The Straits Times*, 29 May 1912, p.3; and *The Straits Times*, 6 June 1912, p.4.

⁴¹ E. Teo Hoe Aik, ‘A History of Physical Education in Singapore since 1819, (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, (Nanyang Technological University, 2001), Ch.2.

⁴² *Nanyang in Celebration* (Singapore: Nanyang Girls’ School, 1997), pp.28-30.

“Be it athletics, basketball or volleyball, Nanyang was the name that resounded incessantly in the Malayan Chinese sporting events. In 1931, the school took part in the inaugural Singapore-Chinese sports meet and Singapore-Chinese basketball league, sweeping the women’s athletics, basketball and volleyball titles. Nanyang’s prowess in the sporting arena was further attested by the Malayan-Chinese sports association’s recommendation of Principal Liu as leader of the delegation of sportswomen sent to the National Games in China. Of the participants, six were Nanyang girls.”

⁴³ Kiong Woon Kew, ‘Reminiscences of a Sportsmaster’, *Up and On: St. Andrew’s School, Centenary 1862-1962*, 13, (1962), 62-65.

⁴⁴ R.H.C. Laverton, ‘Malaya becomes Sport-minded’, *The Straits Times Annual*, (Singapore: Straits Times, 1936), pp.104-107.

⁴⁵ H.L. Hopkin, ‘A Malayan Sporting Causerie’, *British Malaya*, 4 (1929), 7, 207-211.

⁴⁶ Sir R. Winstedt, ‘Singapore, Past and Present: Zest for Education’, *British Malaya*, 12 (1938), 11, 267.

⁴⁷ *British Malaya*, 3 (1928), 6, 149-150.

⁴⁸ *British Malaya*, 9 (1934), 1, 216.

⁴⁹ *The Straits Budget*, 9 April 1936, p.32.

⁵⁰ *British Malaya*, 3 (1928), 4, 95.

⁵¹ *The Straits Budget*, 21 May 1936, p.12.

⁵² The affiliated clubs were the S.C.C., the Tanglin Club, the Garrison Lawn Tennis Association, the Dutch Club, the Straits Chinese Recreation Club, the Singapore Recreation Club, the Y.M.C.A., and the Singapore Japanese Club.

⁵³ *British Malaya*, 4 (1929), 8, 250.

⁵⁴ *British Malaya*, 3 (1928), 8, 202.

⁵⁵ *British Malaya*, 4 (1930), 12, 380.

⁵⁶ *British Malaya*, 1 (1927), 10, 272.

⁵⁷ *British Malaya*, 10 (1935), 4, 98.

⁵⁸ *Singapore Chinese Swimming Club: 88 years and Beyond*, (Singapore: Singapore Chinese Swimming Club, 1998), p.50-51.

“Swimming, both as recreation and competitive sport, was growing in popularity. At that time (1920s) the Physical Director of the YMCA was Mr. J.W. Jefferson. A keen swimmer, he demonstrated the newly developed crawl stroke to the Chinese Swimming Club members who took to it like the proverbial duck to water. Jefferson taught the lifeguards and members of the Club’s water polo team and it was at his instigation that a water polo league was formed with three main clubs as the nucleus – the Chinese Swimming Club, the Tiger Swimming Club, which broke away from the Chinese Swimming Club and was sponsored by the Aw family of the Tiger Balm fame, located at Pasir Panjang across West Coast Road, opposite Haw Par Villa, and the all-European Singapore Swimming Club at Tanjong Rhu.

“Swimming and water polo still took place in the open sea at high tide. According to the late Teo Siew Sun, “We played in the sea with goal posts stuck in the sand at each end of the pitch. The sea was rough with strong current to swim against.”

⁵⁹ 'Water Polo: Chinese Lose to Europeans for First Time', *Malayan Sports Pictorial*, 3, (1932), 40.

"The excellent record of the Chinese Swimming Club of not being beaten at water polo by the Singapore (European) Swimming Club ever since the Clubs began to play against one another a long time ago, was broken on May 8 when in the new swimming pool of the S.S.C., the Chinese lost an exciting game by four goals to three."

⁶⁰ Khoo Kay Kim, 'The Historical Development of Sports in Malaysia', *Geschichte der Liebesübungen*, (Bartels and Wernitz Sportverlag, 1989), p.695.

⁶¹ Sir R. Bruce Lockhart, *Return to Malaya*, (London: Putnam, 1936), p.140.

⁶² Cheah Cheong Lin, 'Boy Meets Girl: Straits Chinese Youth and its Elders', *The Straits Times Annual*, (Singapore: Straits Times, 1938), p.149.

"There are still people in Europe and America who persist in picturing the Chinese girl as toddling about on tiny bound feet. They will be surprised to learn that Chinese girls are taking as much interest in sports as Western maidens. Swimming is a sport they love, and they are keenly competing with their brothers in it, as in tennis, badminton, volleyball and hockey, and also in cycling and motoring. They are equally at home in the field and track games. The 'lily feet' of old China have given way to fleeting feet, and shyness to agility and suppleness."

⁶³ "Straits-Born", 'The British in Us: A Colonial Paradox', *The Straits Times Annual*, (Singapore Straits Times, 1940), p.169.

"In sport, the British in us has conquered our Chinese apathy towards exertion. Our youth are aquatic aces, badminton champions, athletes, footballers, and we are proud of them. Once the Chinese in us would frown upon our girls revealing their comely figures in swimming suits. Once too, we thought that sweating was only for coolies, but now we sweat ourselves in our efforts to keep fit – our girls to keep slim. Health is more important than wealth, we declare."

⁶⁴ See E.Lee, 'The Problem of Gambling', *The British as Rulers: Governing Multiracial Singapore 1867-1914*, (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1991), pp.117-133.

⁶⁵ G.T. Hare, 'The Game of Chap-Ji-Ki', *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 31, (1898) p.63-71.

"Gambling is perhaps the commonest form of amusement known to the Chinese. Its speculative character, its prospects of loss or profit, appeal irresistibly to his genius. Out-door sports have little attraction for him. A wild kick at the flying shuttle cock, a languid dallying with a struggling kite is quite enough for him; when heavy physical exertion is indulged in, he sure there is some utilitarian object in view – a prize in the gymnastic ring or perhaps honours in the military school. From the Chinese point of view, as with us, gambling (whether it be in the form of cards, dominoes, fan-tan, or dice) is *per se* no vice. It is only the abuse and misuse of gambling that, to a Chinese mind, constitutes an offence. One's length of days here, is to his mind, but a long game where the cards are always changing. Gambling seems to clear his mind and brace his nerves. It is training ground to him for the real gamble of life."

⁶⁶ M.Shennan, *Out in the Midday Sun: The British in Malaya 1880-1960*, (London: John Murray, 2000), pp.121-126.

"Horse racing also had its keen European following, and was massively popular with the Chinese (though most of the horses and jockeys came from Australia). Race week drew crowds to the race-courses at Penang, Kuala Lumpur and Ipoh, but it was the magnificent new course at Bukit Timah in Singapore which attracted the largest numbers, with its modern stand and tote. Some judged it the finest in the East, race meetings being regarded as social occasions and fashion parades almost as much as sporting events."

⁶⁷ Brenda Yeoh, *Contesting Space: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment in Colonial Singapore*, (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.165.

⁶⁸ *The Straits Times*, 1 June 1927, p.8.

⁶⁹ *British Malaya*, 4 (1930), 10, 298.

⁷⁰ *Singapore Swimming Club: First 100 Years*, (Singapore: YJTJ Total Communications, 1994), p.29.

⁷¹ Sir R. Bruce Lockhart, *Return to Malaya*, (London: Putnam, 1936), p.113.

⁷² *British Malaya*, 5 (1930), 2, 39.

⁷³ *British Malaya*, 7 (1932), 6, 132.

"On August 27th His Excellency performed an interesting ceremony in formally declaring open the Island Club, Singapore (which has actually been open for some months). It is at present merely a golf club, with an excellent 18-hole course, which in time will rank with the best in Malaya. It is intended later to have tennis courts and a swimming pool. The important feature of the club is its inter-racial membership, which now comprises: 40 Europeans, 20 Eurasians, 40 Japanese, 50 Chinese, and 20 Malays and Indians."

⁷⁴ *British Malaya*, 11 (1938), 11, 266.

"There has been much heartburning among non-Europeans with the urge to take up aviation over the 'exclusiveness' maintained by the Royal Singapore Flying Club, membership of which they have found to be denied to them – though Asiatics have been admitted to the clubs elsewhere in Malaya. This led to questions in

Council recently, and the answers revealed that membership of the club is under the rule certainly not restricted to Europeans. In view of the very substantial subsidies paid to the club by the Government this pronouncement was an important one. However, some of those concerned felt that they could not seek admission where they were obviously not wanted, and they have now got together and formed the Island Flying Club, membership of which is open to all nationalities, whether British subjects or not.”

⁷⁵ ‘Singapore’s Warm Welcome to Olympic Team’, *The Straits Budget*, 9 July 1936.

⁷⁶ Ong Kah Kuan, *We were Great: The Thomas Cup: How it all Began*, (Kuala Lumpur: Federal Publications, 1984), p.1.