

Sentiments of Childhood: Oral Histories and the Study of Colonial Youth Movements

In an interview with a researcher at Singapore's Oral History Centre in 2004, Chan Siok Fong (b. 1933), a former Chinese Malayan Girl Guide from Kuala Lumpur, recalled her childhood awe at being permitted to hike the grounds of the Royal Lake Club, an exclusively-European social clubhouse during the colonial era. "It made me think at that time," mused Chan, "*wow* – as Guides you really get special privileges – to be able to walk on the fields of this posh Lake Gardens." While acknowledging that the Girl Guide movement had granted her the exceptional opportunity of being on equal terms with "the colonialists... [who] were so used to being the superiors," Chan was nonetheless also critical of the movement during her interview. Reflecting on Guiding's lack of consideration for the need to adapt its program to the equatorial environment of British Malaya, Chan explained:

During the British time [era], we had to do 'their' program. Things like tea-making, bed-making – ah, and the bed-making – you have to know how to put so many layers. You know, in the tropics, why [do] you need [this]?...Our local people just sleep on a mat – why would they need to have a top sheet, over the mattress, over the bedsheet, and all the blankets, all this fuss?...And the making of tea, with a teapot, with a tea cozy, cups –all that– fuss! (Laughs) [Guides] can make Chinese tea, to serve the guests too, you know?"¹

Oral histories such as the above constitute a rich mine of knowledge for historians seeking non-Western perspectives on the global experiences of childhood and youth. On the one hand, these sources provide us with information and viewpoints directly obtained from non-Western actors, thus allowing them a voice and an active role in the way their historical experiences are recorded and narrated. By the same measure, the very medium of oral interviews can also offer the historian a more intimate or personal perspective from the interviewee. As case in point, Chan's spontaneous

remark on her “special privileges” to hike the grounds of “this posh Lake Gardens”—accompanied by the interjection “*wow*”—indicates the extent to which her Guiding experiences mattered to her as a young girl growing up in British Malaya. Concurrently, her dissatisfaction at having “to do ‘*their*’ [British] program” adds nuance to her account by revealing a more critical facet of her childhood experiences under colonial rule. Considered altogether, such insights gleaned from oral histories illustrate the richness and complexities of human experiences. They invariably provide us with a better understanding and a deeper appreciation of the historical context at-large.

In the field of the history of childhood and youth, where the challenge to integrate non-Western perspectives to remedy its “disproportionately Western” focus remains important,² oral histories represent a particularly precious resource and opportunity for the researcher. First, oral accounts permit scholars to overcome the oft-cited problem of the scarcity of primary source material on non-Western viewpoints. Second, by offering researchers the chance to analyze how non-Western individuals and communities experienced, understood and reflected on changing ideas and norms on childhood, oral histories can allow scholars to develop novel non-Western-centric approaches and methodologies in this growing field of study. Furthermore, as Chan’s oral interview reveals, oral histories can also yield valuable information on the lived experiences of colonized children under colonial rule. As this article demonstrates, oral histories illustrate how colonized children experienced upward social mobility and challenged parental control. They also reveal the unexpected meanings that interviewees gave their childhoods. In these ways and more, this article argues that oral histories have the potential to help de-center Western perspectives and lead us towards new horizons and reflections in this field of research.

However, notwithstanding the value of oral history, it is essential to recognize the methodological challenges inherent in using these sources. One such challenge lies in determining the accuracy of the interviewee’s account. Consider, for instance, the recollections of the former Malayan Scout Albert Lim Kok Ann (1920-2003). While reflecting upon his childhood experiences during his interview at the Oral History Centre in 1993, Lim was recounting the formative impact of Scouting when he spontaneously remarked: “curiously enough, I did not understand the colonial overtones of the Boy Scout movement.”³ On reflection, this comment should alert us to question the degree to his memories was free from hindsight bias. Concretely, to what extent did his knowledge of the post-colonial present, or the process of decolonization in Malaya impact his recollections of colonial institutions such as Scouting? We might also ask the same question of Chan Siok Fong’s oral recollections. To what extent were her views on the inadequacies of the British Guide program, or the “bossiness” of British Guides, colored by her present-day knowledge that the Malayan Girl Guide Association had obtained its independence from Imperial Headquarters after decolonization?⁴

By the same token, this question on the possible biases embedded within oral histories of Malayan (former) children leads us to the observation that these oral interviews might be more accurately understood as “*adults* speaking about their childhood” rather than “*children* speaking about their childhood.” For historians of childhood and youth, this raises yet another question concerning the capacity of these oral histories to offer us an undistilled perspective of the child’s voice. Lim, for instance, was speaking about his childhood experiences as a 73-year-old at the time of his interview. Likewise, Chan was a 71-year-old woman recounting her experiences as a 12-year-old. Since these sources were derived from “adults speaking about their childhood,” to what extent can we claim to have an “unadulterated” voice of the child?

In considering these challenges, it bears reminding that the voices and agencies of children are difficult for the historian to locate and utilize in the first place. As the historian Mary Jo Maynes has explained, “historians have trouble conceptualizing children and youth as historical actors because so few of the sources speak directly from their experiences.”⁵ In a sense, oral histories are not exceptions to the rule. Yet oral histories may offer other valuable perspectives on childhood instead. Indeed, as Maynes has argued, the retrospective accounts of childhood “can be very telling indeed – not as direct evidence of the experience of children, of course, but rather as sources of insights into the impact and meanings of childhood, and of childhood as a phase of the construction of agency and subjectivity.”⁶ In other words, the oral recollections of “adults speaking about their childhood” may serve as useful tools to the researcher seeking to analyze the significance of childhood over time. The ways in which we describe our childhood experiences (albeit as adults), as well as the way we comprehend how these experiences impacted our lives and development as adults provide vital information about how we consider and imagine childhood to be over time.

Such insights may further help historians reassess criticisms that some scholars have made on the propensity of oral histories to depict childhood through rose-tinted glasses. In his book *Race, Resistance and the Boy Scout Movement in British Colonial Africa*, the historian Timothy Parsons has asserted that “the oral histories of African Scouting are usually romanticized and often frustratingly vague.”⁷ Affirming that “older informants often recalled even the most difficult childhoods with a certain degree of nostalgia,” and that “many men dwelt on warm recollections of friends, parents and youthful accomplishments” during their oral interviews, Parsons noted that African Scouts “often scathingly recalled their mistreatment by the colonial authorities but had little negative to say about their Scout experiences.”⁸ Yet, if we follow Maynes’ argument, we may draw upon these oral histories with a different approach instead. Indeed, it may be instructive to ask *why* these informants would speak with nostalgia about “even the most difficult childhoods.” What does this tell us about how these former African Scouts considered childhood, or the topic of challenges, hardships and obstacles growing up, for instance? In what ways can they reveal how these former

Scouts felt about the idea or sentiment of childhood under colonial rule? And what can these sentiments in turn reveal about colonial rule?

In my own work on Scouting and Guiding in British Malaya, I have likewise found expressions of nostalgia embedded within the oral histories of former members of these movements. Much like the examples cited by Parsons, many of the oral history interviews I have consulted reflect “warm recollections” of the informant’s colonial Scout or Guide experiences along with critical (or even bitter) remarks about their experiences as “colonial subjects” in the same breath.⁹ Given that both youth movements were initially created to serve the needs of empire, this may seem incongruous or disconcerting. However, in the case of British Malaya, questioning why the interviewees would speak with nostalgia or fondness of their experiences as Scouts and Guides has allowed for fruitful analysis of these colonial youth movements. Using this as a starting point, this article suggests that the oral histories of Malayan Scouts and Guides contain such “warm recollections” because these former members were able to appropriate and use Scouting and Guiding for their own purposes of climbing the colonial social ladder or circumventing parental objections to certain activities which were deemed inappropriate for their age or gender. Colonized but not mere bystanders or “subjects” within these movements, Malayan members were thus full participants in the development of both Malayan Scouting and Guiding. The oral accounts of former Malayan Scouts and Guides utilized in this article illustrate just how this was the case. In putting forth these perspectives, this argument resonates with those of other scholars, such as Kristine Alexander, who has shown how girls and young women were able to adapt and use the Guide movement for their own ends in the context of England, Canada, and India.¹⁰ Building upon these insights, this article harnesses oral interviews to illustrate this very point in the case of Malayan Scouting and Guiding. In this endeavor, the main aim of this article resides in demonstrating how oral histories can deepen our understanding of non-Western experiences and histories of childhood and youth.

At first glance, it may seem paradoxical to discuss non-Western experiences of childhood and youth by focusing on Western youth organizations such as the Scout and Guide movements. Indeed, Scouting and Guiding were both initially established in England by Lord Robert Baden-Powell (in 1907 and 1909 respectively) for the purpose of training British boys and girls to serve the empire as future “*homo imperialis*.” Both movements were swiftly introduced in British Malaya by 1910, where they were officially under the aegis of the British Imperial Headquarters in Gilwell Park (England) well into the 1960s. For much of this period, the British held tight control of Malaya.¹¹ Even at the end of World War II, when confidence in British imperial authority had declined, the scholar Raymond Kennedy remarked that “Malaya approached more closely than any other country in Southeast Asia the classic imperialistic status of a subject land ruled completely by an oligarchy of colonial officers sent from the mother country.”¹²

Considering that Malayan society was one in which social boundaries and racial hierarchies existed, it is noteworthy that Scouting and Guiding did not exclude members on account of their race. Indeed, this ran contrary to policies adopted in other territories within the British Empire, such as South Africa and Hong Kong.¹³ In explaining this difference, it is helpful to understand that the early leaders of both these movements in Malaya resolutely adhered to the fourth Scout Law, which stipulated that members were to be “a friend to all, and a brother to every other Scout.”¹⁴ Furthermore, since Malayan Scouts and Guides were mostly recruited from English-medium schools (which were ethnically inclusive), both movements were non-sectarian from their earliest inception.¹⁵ In hindsight, since Malayan Scouts and Guides had first-hand experience of these non-sectarian policies in a colonial context where social and racial distinctions certainly existed, their oral accounts can offer valuable insights on issues such as race relations in colonial contexts.¹⁶



Image 1: The National Archives of Singapore. Image used under provisions of license at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:National_Archives_of_Singapore,_Jan_06.JPG.

Central to this discussion of oral histories and their utility in studying indigenous or non-Western experiences of childhood and youth in British Malaya, are the provenance and characteristics of the oral accounts cited in this article. First, these interviews were conducted by researchers at the Oral History Centre of the National Archives of Singapore. Established in 1979 with the aim of “collecting stories and building up the nation’s treasure trove of memories,” the Oral History Centre currently contains more than 4,000 interviews of men and women from all walks of life, “from politicians to street hawkers, medical professionals to prisoners-of-war, artists to

entrepreneurs.”¹⁷ Second, the Centre’s approach and aims consist of documenting aspects (social, cultural, political...) of Singapore’s history through specific projects or topical issues. As case in point, previous oral history projects have included topics such “The Japanese Occupation of Singapore,” “Vanishing Trades,” and “Traditional Chinese Medicine in Singapore,” just to name a few. In pursuing these projects, researchers employ a semi-structured method to oral history, in which the interviewer asks open-ended questions on a pre-defined theme.¹⁸ Since the Centre’s researchers carry out interviews with a specific goal in mind (i.e., to solicit interviewees for their recollections on a specific subject, usually concerning national histories), little information on the interviewee’s former Scout or Guide experiences have been recorded, with a few notable exceptions. Third, while the topic of childhood has never been an official project pursued by the Centre, most of the oral interviews begin with the researcher asking questions concerning the interviewee’s family, childhood, or earliest recollections. It bears reminding that since neither the Scout nor Guide movement were identified as oral history projects to be undertaken at the Oral History Centre, the recollections of former Malayan Scouts and Guides cited in this article are mostly—if not entirely—spontaneously offered by the interviewee. In hindsight, this observation reveals the degree to which both youth movements played key roles in the childhood experiences of men and women in colonial Malaya.

For the purposes of this article, I have identified and utilized a total of 90 oral interviews of men and women of the major ethnic communities of Singapore and Malaysia (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Eurasian...), all of whom were former Scouts and Guides born between the 1900s and 1940s. While not all will be cited in this article, they are nonetheless useful for cross-referencing and determining the accuracy of certain historical facts. The duration of each of these interviews varies widely and is highly dependent on factors such as the interviewee, the nature of the project in which the oral interview was conducted, as well as the goals of the researcher. Indeed, some of them may span a period of several days or months. Furthermore, since both movements mainly attracted children who attended English-medium schools (as opposed to “vernacular” schools where Chinese, Malay, or Tamil were the mediums of instruction), most of the interviewees cited in this article expressed themselves in English. On this point, it bears reminding that even though the movements drew members from across classes (not to mention ethnic) lines, many former Scouts and Guides were urbanized, educated, Anglophones from privileged backgrounds. At the same time, since many Malaysians spoke more than one language, some of the oral accounts contain a *mélange* of local languages (e.g. Chinese, Malay...). Finally, with the intention of demonstrating how oral histories may serve as useful tools in unravelling the agency, perspectives, and voices of former Malayan Scouts and Guides on their childhood experiences, I have cited verbatim extracts of these oral histories and chosen to include only minor edits (where necessary) to aid with comprehension and contextualization.

Raising Childhood: Indigenous Experiences of Childhood and Youth in British Malaya

In our study of the oral histories of former Malayan Scouts and Guides, the interviewees' memories of the egalitarian principles of Scouting and Guiding remain one of the most frequently occurring observations. For instance, when first asked about her earliest recollections of her school in Singapore, Elizabeth Choy (1910-2006), a Guide originally from Sabah (British North Borneo) in the 1920s, was quick to cite the Guide Law on equality between Guides by heart, shortly after giving the name of her school:

When I came to Singapore, there was a school called C.E.Z.M.S. It's, uh, Church – Church of England, Zenana Mission School. And now it's called St. Margaret's School. Then, Guiding had already been started...The Girl Guide rule [is] very good, I remember only a few... I remember, 'A Guide is a friend to all and a sister to every other Guide.' 'A Guide smiles and sings under all difficulties.'"¹⁹

In the Guide movement, asserted Choy, “we’re all like sisters, you know.” Likewise, Scouting’s emphasis on equality between its members was also raised in the oral interview of the Scout Mohd Amin bin Abdul Wahab (b. 1920). Speaking in Malay, he similarly quoted the Scout Law spontaneously to explain how Scouts were all brothers (*besaudara*) regardless of their ethnicity (*walaupun bangsa*). When questioned about how he was able to be on equal grounds with his English-speaking “brother Scouts” despite being only fluent in his native Malay, Mohd Amin simply explained that they spoke “in broken English and Malay (*dalam broken inggeris... cakap melayu*),” without judgement or prejudice.²⁰

As alluded to earlier, given that the social world of colonial Malaya was one in which a “viciously insidious form of apartheid” governed and divided communities along ethnic and class lines, the “warm recollections” cited above may seem surprising at first sight.²¹ Indeed, Scouting and Guiding were imperial youth movements which aimed to instruct their members to be a “brick” in the wall of empire by playing their allotted roles instead of challenging the status quo where others were “higher up or lower down than ourselves.”²² However, as the oral histories of Malayan Scouts and Guides reveal, members of both movements were able to draw upon their status as Scouts and Guides to climb the colonial social ladder and gain certain “special privileges,” as the Guide Chan Siok Fong pointed out in our opening anecdote. This was likewise the experience of the Scout Goh Lye Choon (b. 1941), who spoke glowingly of his Scouting days in his interview. In particular, Goh revealed: “one thing good about the British, if you are a Queen’s Scout, they will acknowledge you.” When asked about the manner in which the British “acknowledged” his status as a Queen’s Scout, Goh

explained how he obtained a position in the military and climbed its echelons rapidly. He eventually retired with the rank of Colonel. Goh recounted:

*I received my Queen Scout Certificate and Badge from [Sir William Goode]... And I think it was really something, that I treasured until now... Then Brigadier Haddon, the Commander of Singapore Military Force... found out that I was also a Queen's Scout. And this is very important. The British when they know you are [a] Queen's Scout, they will look for you because you have identified yourself with a certain character suitable for officers."*²³

Goh's experiences on how Scouting opened job opportunities to him during the colonial era is not an isolated example. Indeed, archival sources reveal that the advantages of being a Scout were so apparent that non-Scouts coveted elements of the Scout uniform (such as Scout hats, badges, or belts) to pass as Scouts and obtain job interviews, free train tickets and other privileges.²⁴ These "abuses of the Scout uniform" became so frequent that the Legislative Council of the Colony eventually promulgated a Bill in 1926 to "protect the Scout uniform from improper use."²⁵ Offenders were "liable to a fine not exceeding one hundred dollars" – a sum equivalent to more than five times the average monthly salary of a domestic worker.²⁶

The privileges accorded by the Scout and Guide movements also help us to understand why their former members treasured their "colonial" uniforms to such a great extent. Indeed, as Goh asserted,

*[In] those days we were very proud of our uniform. Today's uniform looks so different. Those days, of course, we were the colonial kind of Boy Scouts with long stockings – with garters. Today they don't wear [it], they all wear slacks, you see.... [Our] [b]adges [were] the British kind, I still have some of my British Queen Scout badges – I kept them."*²⁷

For the Scout Richard Woon (b. 1938), Scouting was undeniably "the most popular [activity]... because of the uniforms – [they were] more attractive." In Woon's case, he took pride in "show[ing] off our Scout knife."²⁸ As the color of the Scout and Guide uniforms was khaki – a color which "in the minds of the people is associated with the Police and the Army"²⁹ – some Scouts also admitted that they "looked forward to the day when [they] could swagger like a Police Inspector, who wore something similar."³⁰ Goh, for one, recalled in his interview that as a child, wearing his Scout uniform made him feel "so hero-like."³¹

Goh's remark on how the Scout uniform made him feel important as a child resonates with other oral histories, such as that of the Guide Myra Isabelle Cresson (1904-2005). During her interview, she reminisced:

When we had this Girl Guide uniform, this Brownie uniform, we thought it was fantastic: Oh, we were Somebody Grand, we were always looking forward to be dressed up... When you come to think about it, you'll laugh instead – these big shore hats turned up one side – we had stockings and we had these big sandshoes. When we came home it [our feet were] all stuck to this rubber, oh it was horrible. Ah! Sure, we loved our uniform, we thought we were grand!³²

Such was also the opinion of Rani Arumugam (b. 1929), who did not have the chance to join the movement as a young girl growing up in Johore Bahru. Speaking of her childhood envy of her sister, who was a Guide, she admitted: “I used to follow her sometimes and envy her secretly. I wished – *one day* – that I too, would be a Guide.... Though I was not in the Guides, I was so keen to have a copy of the photo [of Guides in their uniform] that I ordered it.... I was very impressed by the uniform and the activities they had.”³³ Later in life, Arumugam became a Guider. As these oral histories reveal, Malaysians recognized how Scouting and Guiding could offer them opportunities. They thus had their reasons and logic for joining these “imperial” movements.

Yet another way in which oral histories can serve as useful tools to researchers working on the histories of childhood and youth lies in its capacity to allow us to better understand and trace the negotiations and transitions of differing perspectives on childhood in the colonial era. One striking example is that of the Singapore Chinese Guide Eileen Aw (b. 1938), who explained how she was able to convince her father, a “real autocratic, stiff-upper lip ‘English’ gentleman,” of whom she was “dead scared,” to allow her to join the movement at the age of eleven.³⁴ “Father wasn’t so happy about Guiding,” recalled Aw about her parents’ initial reluctance at her becoming a Guide, “they were a bit nervous, but in the end, they accepted it.” Shortly after joining Guiding, Aw seized the opportunities offered by the movement to push parental boundaries and to develop her personal interests. While describing the types of activities she chose to engage in as a Guide, Aw confided:

Of course, I would choose a topic that nobody had ever chosen before – astronomy – and then of course I had to go for training and nobody in my Guide company knew anything about astronomy. So myself and Anna Tham got a teacher [to instruct us]. And, of course, when you do astronomy, [you] must go out late at night – if not – no stars to see! So, we would go late at night, and we would come back late at night too. And, on the veranda, my grandmother and mother would be waiting there for me, and I would be walking back in the middle of the night.³⁵

Camp cooking was another Guide activity Aw enjoyed as a child. She recounted:

My mother is a good cook at home, but I never wanted to cook with her, because she's always telling me I'm doing this or that wrong – everything must be done in a certain way... So, when the Girl Guides went to camp, or when we had cook outs, I would be the chief cook – I would cook for the whole Girl Guides camp. I enjoyed that a lot...but I didn't want to cook at home because of too much criticism. So, when I went out [to camp], I could cook my own way.

In these many ways, Aw's oral history unravels how Malayan children managed to gain freedom and circumvent parental objections through the movements.

A third and final example of the utility of oral histories in this field of study resides in its capacity to challenge established opinions or *a priori* assumptions on children and childhood. For instance, as the following discussion of Guide activities among British and Malayan girls reveals, the latter sometimes had different opinions on what exactly constituted “fun” activities. To understand these differences, it is necessary to bear in mind that contemporary historiographies on the Guide movement in Britain underline that British girls were initially attracted to Scouting as they relished the chance of being able to “copy what the boys were doing.”³⁶ According to Rose Kerr, one of the pioneering members of the British Guide movement, girls “formed themselves into patrols, calling themselves Nighthawks, Wild Cats, or other fierce names....They dressed themselves as much like the boys as they could, at first with garments concocted at home; later they managed to obtain Scout hats, jerseys, haversacks, belts, knives, from Boy Scout Headquarters by the subterfuge of giving initials only.” Having thrown themselves “wholeheartedly into the fascinating game of Scouting,” many girls were thus disappointed when told by Baden-Powell himself that “that's impossible, this is only for the boys.”³⁷ Their disappointment grew when Baden-Powell decided to create a separate movement for girls—Guiding—with a “more appropriately ‘womanly’ ethos.”³⁸ The importance of inculcating “womanliness” through “gender appropriate” activities was central to Guiding, as Baden-Powell explained in the first *Handbook for Girl Guides* (1912): “the chief difference in the training...is that Scouting for boys makes for manliness, but the training for Guides makes for womanliness, and enables the girls the better to help in the battle of life.”³⁹ In response, early Girl Scouts such as Evelyn Goshawk asserted: “one can still remember the feeling of anti-climax, of being let-down, almost insulted. Who wanted to be womanly at our age?”⁴⁰ Echoing these views, one of the first Girl Scouts of Birmingham, Gladys N. Commander, stated simply in an interview: “the ideal of womanliness had no appeal for us at that age.”⁴¹

In contrast to the oral accounts of British girls who “wanted adventure, not ‘home training,’”⁴² the oral histories of Malayan Guides reveal that the “womanly” activities of Guiding had a real appeal. As the Guide Myna Ruth Segeram (1920-2011) explained in her interview in 1985, “being from a fairly middle-class family, I didn't necessarily have

to go to the kitchen in our home and help with the housework. But it was *grand* that in Guides, we were taught how to sweep and how to dust, how to wash clothes. That's all part of our *training*, for our proficiency badges."⁴³ When her interviewer interrupted her to ask if these Guide activities were indications that the movement had advocated "very much a traditional concept of women" since Segeram had to conform to "female subordinate stereotypes," Segeram was quick to retort: "*that* wasn't the idea in our minds, as girls, when we joined – you *got* that badge, and that *other* badge, so you were *efficient* in that. It's a *proficiency* badge. That means you're *proficient* in it." In Segeram's opinion, the act of earning a Guide proficiency badge (whether it connoted a "feminine" stereotype or not) was an empowering one. Her insistence on having "gained a lot of experience" as well as her belief that Guide training had allowed her to be "proud to be a woman, for you are able to look after yourself and others," is particularly striking. Guides such as Elizabeth Choy also shared Segeram's view on the attractiveness of "feminine" activities. According to Choy, the most popular and coveted badges included "Child Nursing, Cook, Needlewoman, Child Nurse and Domestic Science."⁴⁴ The importance of being "womanlike" and "feminine" were likewise reiterated in several of the oral histories consulted for this article. As the Guide Christabelle Alvis (b. 1931) emphasized in her interview, it was vital that outdoor activities such as hiking or camping were "not rugged in the sense that [Guides] lose their femininity."⁴⁵ As these oral histories illustrate, "womanliness" and "femininity" had an appeal and represented very different ideas to Guides in British Malaya.

In retrospect, one of the reasons which can help explain the contrasting attitudes between British and Malayan girls on Guiding's emphasis on "womanliness" or "femininity" may be attributed to cultural differences or practices. As case in point, the oral histories of Malayan Guides reveal that certain Guide activities such as cooking resembled the game of "*masak-masak*" (literally meaning "cooking" in Malay, it colloquially refers to "toys" or children's games of "make-believe").⁴⁶ The "novelty" and importance of concepts such as "Mothercraft" and "Domestic Science" in Malaya may also aid in our understanding. As the historian Janice Brownfoot has asserted, "Mothercraft" in Malaya had helped to "emancipate local girls within a traditional framework by schooling them to be competent, healthy future wives and mothers, able to run hygienic homes."⁴⁷ Additionally, a girl's competency in these subjects were skills considered socially desirable.⁴⁸ On another register, some of the Guide activities which fell within the category of "Domestic Science" were novel and even "radical" to some Malayans. Sewing amongst the Guides, for instance, was deemed by some Malayan parents as inappropriate for girls. As Myna Segeram explained in her oral interview, the sewing machines used by Guides could "excite" or over stimulate a girl's pelvis: "conservative parents would say... 'No more jumping around, it's bad for the girl.' We were discouraged from using treadle [sewing] machines, for instance. Because apparently the pelvis – *the pelvic region* – shouldn't be all, 'excited.' That was

discouraged too. [Some parents were] saying: ‘It’s very bad for the girls. That’s for *men* to use.’ Tailors were *men*.’⁴⁹ Segeram’s oral interview, which reveals the discrepancies between the cultural perspectives of the Girl Guides and non-Western parents, also draws our attention to the necessity of being attentive to our potential biases in interpretation, as well as any preconceived notions which may be founded upon Western norms and perspectives. An example of how we should be alert to our assumptions or potential biases may be found in Segeram’s interview, when her interviewer unhesitatingly suggested that Guide activities such as sewing or housekeeping had reinforced “female subordinate stereotypes” because they went against the grain of feminist expectations widely accepted in Western society. Segeram’s comments on how these same activities had, in fact, empowered her as she was able to earn proficiency badges reminds us that Malayan children could associate very different meanings to their childhood experiences. In these many ways, oral histories thus open new horizons and alternative avenues for reflection in the field of the history of childhood and youth.

Conclusion

In our earlier discussion of the methodological challenges in using oral histories, I have suggested that the “warm recollections” of childhood may serve as a starting point for a better understanding of the experiences of former Malayan Scouts and Guides growing up under colonial rule. Instead of interpreting the “nostalgic” character of these oral histories as indications of their unreliability as historical sources, I have found it helpful to consider why many of these oral histories feature positive recollections of colonial youth movements. This, in turn, has led to fresh perspectives on the capacity of indigenous children and youth to appropriate colonial movements for their own needs in the case of Malayan Scouting and Guiding. Recent scholarship at the nexus of the history of emotions and childhood histories can also offer us new avenues of research in this direction. While it is not the aim of this article, it is suggested here that expressions of nostalgia and “warm recollections” of childhood through the oral histories of interviewees might also help in thinking about the “emotional formations” of those who experienced childhood under colonial rule.⁵⁰

The sentiment of “nostalgia” or the “warm recollections” embedded within oral histories of childhood may also be helpful in the process of historical reconstruction. As the scholar Sarah Mills remarked in her analysis of the oral interview of Sybil Cannadine, one of the first Girl Scouts in England: “to imagine from these accounts the adventures these Girl Scouts had on Saturdays, and to hear the child-like passion in Sybil’s now elderly voice, is to gain a sense of how inspiring the original messages of Scouting would have been.”⁵¹ Indeed, the tone and expressions of the informant during their interviews may also aid and nourish our historical imagination. The oral history of

the Scout Paul Cheah Thye Hong (b. 1930) is in this sense particularly instructive. Speaking about his camp experiences in Singapore's Purdy Camp, Cheah reminisced: "there was one area for campfire – very interesting. Because at the campfire, *where you burn – the rocks – start the fire* – then all the Scouts will sit around the fire...Then we'd sing – along – and enjoy ourselves. Then the Scoutmaster would come... and then, come like a Red Indian! [sic] (Laughs) Ha, *that Scoutmaster – Scouts* – always associated with Red Indians [sic]. And then – 'woo, woo!' – all the songs, (laughs) and enjoy ourselves."⁵² Here, the sudden and uneven rhythm of Cheah's speech, particularly during his description of the making of the campfire, provides us with a vivid impression of his childhood excitement at going to camp – even at the age of 82.

Finally, in my experience of teaching colonial history and the history of childhood, I have likewise found oral histories an invaluable tool. On the one hand, these sources offer students the opportunity to engage with non-Western perspectives and to learn about the experiences of colonized children in a concrete way. These oral histories are all the more valuable given the scarcity of sources on this topic. On the other hand, in a "text-centered" discipline such as history, the medium of oral history offers a different approach to the study of history and may in some instances be more effective than the written word in communicating certain historical insights. For instance, I have often used Cheah's recollection of his childhood excitement in going to camp to get students thinking about the impact of colonial Scouting in Malaya. Its pedagogical impact is such that students can recall and refer to this particular oral history well after the end of term. Almost invariably, students are surprised to learn through Cheah's oral history that colonized children could have positive experiences growing up under colonial rule. I have found it useful to ask them why they think it is the case, and to lead classroom discussions to deepen their understanding on related topics, such as colonial education. Furthermore, as many of the adult leaders in Malayan Scouting and Guiding were Europeans (as in Cheah's case), students are also curious to find out more about how colonized children interacted with Europeans during the colonial era. This can further serve as an entry point for students to delve deeper into thinking more broadly about social and race relations in colonial societies.⁵³

In the same vein, the oral histories cited in this article may be helpful for teachers seeking resources for their classes on colonial history. While this article has focused on using these oral histories to demonstrate how colonized children were able to adapt and appropriate colonial youth movements for their own ends, these interviews can also be utilized to show how colonial society itself was not as Manichean as one might have assumed. They may also reveal insights into subjects such as social mobility in the colonial era. The oral history of the Scout Lee Liang Hye (b. 1924) is in this case instructive. In his interview, Lee commented on how members of his community, the Peranakans (people of mixed Chinese and Malay or Indonesian heritage) had "acquired a loyalty to the British crown." Emphasizing that the Peranakans "[knew] on which side

the bread is buttered,” Lee explained that “they took to English education, realizing that living in a British colony, one of the ways to rise up would be to know the language of the colonial masters.”⁵⁴ In my experience, students’ reactions to this oral account have included surprise at how some colonized subjects could be genuinely loyal to their colonial masters, as well as curiosity at how Peranakans sought to rise up in colonial society. For instructors interested in including in their courses the subject of the lives of immigrants in a colonial society such as Singapore, there is much potential in the collections of the Oral History Center, which houses more than 300 oral interviews under the three-part project “Communities of Singapore”.

Taken altogether, oral histories are precious sources for historians both in the field and in the classroom. By allowing scholars a deeper and richer understanding of human experiences and the complexities involved in restituting the past, oral histories are vital and fascinating sources which fully deserve greater attention in our pursuit of the study of the past.

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Notes

¹ Interview with Chan Siok Fong by Jason Chan, February 21, 2004, Oral History Centre, National Archives, Singapore (hereafter OHC-NAS), A/N: 0002842, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/0002842.

² Peter N. Stearns, “Challenges in the History of Childhood,” *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 1, no. 1 (2008): 38.

³ Interview with Lim Kok Ann by Tan Beng Luan, March 9, 1993, OHC-NAS, A/N: 001385, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/001385.

⁴ Interview with Chan Siok Fong by Jason Chan, February 21, 2004, OHC-NAS, A/N: 0002842. According to her: “British girls, they were so used to being superior, the boss of them [all] because they were the colonialists. Asians, somehow, [were] second grade to them.”

⁵ Mary Jo Maynes, “Age as a Category of Historical Analysis: History, Agency, and Narratives of Childhood,” *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 1, no. 1 (2008): 117.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁷ Timothy Parsons, *Race, Resistance, and the Boy Scout Movement in British Colonial Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2004): 27-28.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ See, for instance: interview with Chengara Veetil Devan Nair by Audrey Lee-Koh Mei Chen, 9 January 1981, OHC-NAS, A/N: 000049, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/000049 and interview with Lee Liang Hye by Tan Beng Luan, 15 April 1985, OHC-NAS, A/N: 000548, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/000548.

¹⁰ Kristine Alexander, *Guiding Modern Girls: Girlhood, Empire, and Internationalism in the 1920s and 1930s* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017): 7. A complementary argument focusing on the ways in which Malayan Scouts understood and negotiated gendered concepts can also be found in Jialin Christina Wu, “‘A Life of Make-Believe’: Being Boy Scouts and ‘Playing Indian’ in British Malaya (1910 – 1942),” *Gender & History* 26, no. 3 (November 2014): 589-61. The capacity of Scouting in allowing for multiple interpretations (and uses) of its ideas has also been noted in Nelson R. Block and Tammy M. Proctor (eds.), *Scouting Frontiers: Youth and the Scout Movement’s First Century* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009); see notably Chapter 9.

¹¹ See the following analyses: Keith Watson, “Rulers and Ruled: Racial Perceptions, Curriculum and Schooling in Colonial Malaya and Singapore,” in *The Imperial Curriculum: Racial Images and Education in the British Colonial Experience*, ed. J.A. Mangan (New York: Routledge, 2012): 150, and Philip Loh Fook Seng, *Seeds of Separatism: Educational Policy in Malaya 1874-1940* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1975): 72.

¹² Raymond Kennedy, “Malaya: Colony Without Plan,” *Far Eastern Survey* 14, no. 16 (1945): 225.

¹³ A “nationality based exclusion policy” was in place in Hong Kong. See Paul Kua, *Scouting in Hong Kong, 1910-2010* (Hong Kong: Scout Association of Hong Kong, 2011), 78 and Parsons, *Race, Resistance*, 77.

¹⁴ Concrete examples of this egalitarian attitude of former European Scoutmasters can be found in the following work: Kevin Tan and Wan Meng Hao, *Scouting in Singapore, 1910-2000* (Singapore: Singapore Scout Association and National Archives of Singapore), 59 and 111-112.

¹⁵ Wu, “A Life of Make-Believe,” 598.

¹⁶ While this is not the subject of the present article, it is worth pointing out that studying colonial history *through* children (as opposed to studying the history of colonized children) may, as Sarah Maza has pointed out, lead towards “fresh approaches to classic issues in the historical repertoire.” See Sarah Maza, “The Kids Aren’t All Right: Historians and the Problem of Childhood,” *American Historical Review* 125, no. 4 (October 2020): 1281.

¹⁷ Ministry of Communications and Information, Singapore, accessed December 27, 2021, <https://www.mci.gov.sg/portfolios/libraries/initiatives/nas/oral-history>. For information on the projects carried out at the Oral History Centre, see Fiona Hu, ed., *Reflections & Interpretations: Oral History Centre 25th Anniversary Publication* (Singapore: National Heritage Board, 2005).

¹⁸ The Oral History Centre has produced several manuals detailing its methodology. See, for instance Daniel Chew, ed., *Memories & Reflections: The Singapore Experience: Documenting a Nation’s History Through Oral History* (Singapore: Oral History Centre, 2nd ed., 2007). Organised along the process of conducting oral history, the chapters of this volume include subjects such as “Planning an Oral History Project,” “Ethics,” etc.

¹⁹ Interview with Elizabeth Choy (Yong Su Moi) by Samuel Sng, March 1, 2008, OHC-NAS, A/N: 002827. https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/002827.

²⁰ Interview with Mohd Amin bin Abdul Wahab (Haji) by Ruzita Zaki (in Malay), February 20, 1995, OHC-NAS, A/N: 001597, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/001597.

²¹ Chris Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941-1945* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004): 62.

²² Robert Baden-Powell, *Yarns for Boy Scouts: Told Round the Camp Fire* (London: C.A. Pearson Ltd., 1910), 182.

²³ Interview with Goh Lye Choon by Jason Lim, March 20, 2008, OHC-NAS, A/N: 003275.

²⁴ *Scouting in Malaya* 2, no. 1 (May 1926): 4.

²⁵ “Bill Before the Legislative Council of the Colony on the Protection of the Registered Scout Uniform From Improper Use,” *Scouting in Malaya* 1, no. 12 (April 1926): 166-167.

²⁶ Interview with Joseph Henry Chopard by Daniel Chew, May 16, 1985, OHC-NAS, A/N: 000561, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/000561.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Interview with Richard Woon Kai Yin by Samuel Sng, January 14, 2005, OHC-NAS, A/N: 002908, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/002908.

²⁹ Stan Windsor, “The Boy Scout Association of Malaya: Report Written Following a Two Months Visit From July 30th 1956 - September 28th 1956”, *TC/15*, The Scout Association, Gilwell Park, Chingford, UK.

³⁰ Ooi Boon Teck, “Remembering Scouting in 1951-1957,” accessed April 16, 2012, <http://www.viweb.freehosting.net/ScoutOBT.htm>.

³¹ Interview with Goh Lye Choon by Jason Lim, March 20, 2008, OHC-NAS, A/N: 003275.

³² Interview with Myra Isabelle Cresson by Claire Chiang, August 20, 1984, OHC-NAS, A/N: 000594, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/000594.

³³ Interview with Rani Arumugam by Samuel Sng, March 15, 2004, OHC-NAS, A/N: 002837, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/002837.

³⁴ Interview with Eileen Aw by Patricia Lee, September 25, 2004, OHC-NAS, A/N: 002882, OHC-NAS, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/002882.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Rose Kerr, *The Story of a Million Girls: Guiding and Girl Scouting Round the World* (Rochester, Kent: The Stanhope Press Ltd, 1937), 9.

³⁷ Cited in Tammy Proctor, “Something for the Girls’: Organized Leisure in Europe, 1890-1939,” in *Secret Gardens, Satanic Mills: Placing Girls in European History, 1750 – 1960*, eds. Mary Jo Maynes, Brigitte Søland and Christina Benninghaus (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 244.

³⁸ Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 110.

³⁹ Robert Baden-Powell and Agnes Baden-Powell, *The Handbook for Girl Guides, Or, How Girls Can Help Build the Empire, The Original 1912 Edition* (Glasgow: Bell & Bain Ltd., 1993), 22.

- ⁴⁰ Evelyn Goshawk, “Early Days of Guiding,” Box, Girl Guides Association. Cited in Proctor, “Something for the Girls,” 245.
- ⁴¹ Rosie Kennedy, *The Children’s War: Britain, 1914-1918* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 111.
- ⁴² Proctor, “Something for the Girls,” 245.
- ⁴³ Interview with Myna Ruth Segeram by Claire Chiang, July 16-30, 1985, OHC-NAS, A/N: 000586. For a more extensive discussion, see Jialin Christina Wu, “A Malayan Girlhood on Parade’: Colonial Femininities, Transnational Mobilities, and the Girl Guide Movement in British Malaya,” in *Transnational Histories of Youth in the Twentieth Century*, ed. R. Jobs and D. Pomfret (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015): 102-3.
- ⁴⁴ Interview with Choy (Yong Su Moi) by Samuel Sng, March 1, 2008, OHC-NAS, A/N: 002827.
- ⁴⁵ Interview with Christabelle Alvis by Samuel Sng, February 7 – August 26, 2004, OHC-NAS, A/N: 002828. https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/002828.
- ⁴⁶ Interview with Noel Evelyn Norris by Liana Tan, October 19, 1982, OHC-NAS, A/N: 000221, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/000221; interview with Molly Chan Hong Lian by Bonny Tan, May 17, 1995, OHC-NAS, A/N: 001639, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/001639; interview with Lucy Chen (Lim Seok Hui) by Patricia Lee, March 9, 2007, OHC-NAS, A/N: 003130, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/003130.
- ⁴⁷ Janice Brownfoot, “Sisters Under the Skin: Imperialism and the Emancipation of Women in Malaya, c. 1891-1941,” in *Making Imperial Mentalities: Socialisation and British Imperialism*, ed. J.A. Mangan (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 53.
- ⁴⁸ Interview with Florence Soundra Leela Raj by Ruzita Zaki, August 11, 1994, OHC-NAS, A/N: 001536, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/001536.
- ⁴⁹ Interview with Myna Ruth Segeram by Claire Chiang, July 16-30, 1985, OHC-NAS, A/N: 000586.
- ⁵⁰ Stephanie Olsen, “The History of Childhood and the Emotional,” *History Compass* 15, no. 11 (November 2017): 1-10. Also see Stephanie Olsen, ed., *Childhood, Youth and Emotions in Modern History: National, Colonial and Global Perspectives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). “Emotional formation” refers to both the emotional codes which structure a given society or culture, as well as the process by which people learn and adapt these codes.

⁵¹ “Sybil Cannadine, 1977, Oral History Recording, Girl Guiding UK Archive,” cited in Sarah Mills, “Scouting for Girls? Gender and the Scout Movement in Britain,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 18, no. 4 (2011): 543.

⁵² Interview with Paul Cheah Thye Hong by Jesley Chua Chee Huan, February 20, 2012, OHC-NAS, A/N: 003719, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/003719.

⁵³ Indeed, I have often used oral histories to complement readings on colonial society. For an example of such readings, see John G. Butcher, *The British in Malaya 1880 – 1941: The Social History of a European Community in Colonial South-East Asia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1979).

⁵⁴ Interview with Lee Liang Hye by Tan Beng Luan, 15 April 1985, OHC-NAS, A/N: 000548, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/000548.