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***Seen From a Distance:***  
***Malayan Reporting on the***  
***Empire Exhibition Scotland 1938***

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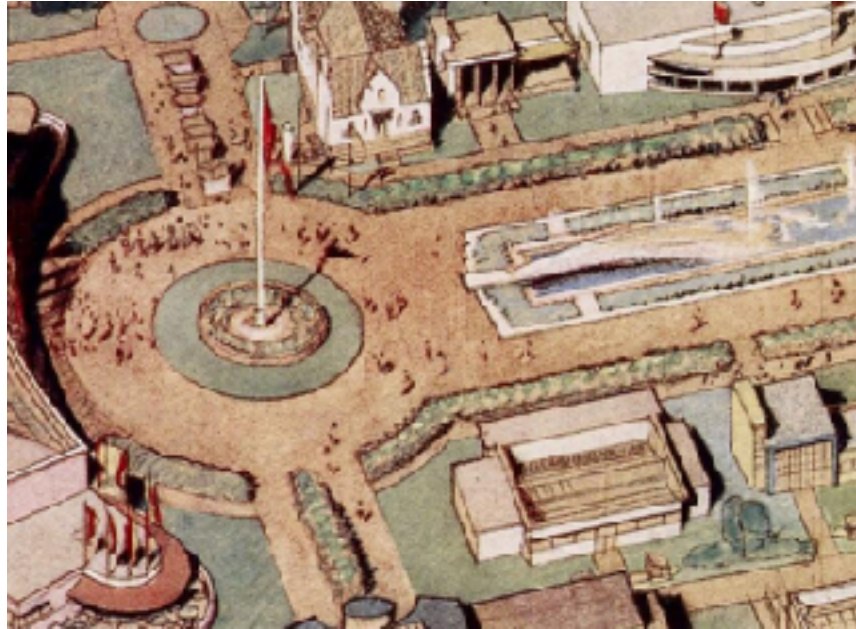
Keywords: British Malaya; Empire Exhibition, Scotland; Media representation

***Abstract:***

In its design, the Empire Exhibition, Scotland of 1938 embraced a decidedly more modern image than its 1924 predecessor at Wembley. However, its narratives of inter-imperial community and inter-cultural understanding show that the two events were very similar, placing the nations of the British Empire on display and shaping their identity as imperial subjects. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, as honorary president of the Empire Exhibition, Scotland, described its value as allowing the people of other countries to see and understand each other, and align themselves with British values in order to “strengthen their power of common effort.” But these matters of visibility raise questions of distance. How were the peoples of the many countries of the British Empire – who were supposedly to benefit from it – expected to see this exhibition when few had the luxury to visit Glasgow and enter it themselves? From a colonial perspective, could one ever engage with an imperial exhibition located in Britain?

This paper takes the Empire Exhibition’s Malayan Exhibit, which formed part of the Colonial Pavilion, as a case study to consider how people in British Malaya were encouraged to view the exhibition at a distance. Using archival and promotional material I discuss the exhibition’s design, which was initially displayed for local audiences in Kuala Lumpur, before being shipped to Scotland (and later to New York for the 1939 World’s Fair). I then focus on popular media sources from the period to understand how impressions of the Malayan Exhibit and the Colonial Pavilion were transmitted back to Southeast Asia to provide people in British Malaya with a way of seeing the Glasgow exhibition from afar. I show that from the viewpoint of the British colonies of Southeast Asia, the Empire Exhibition, Scotland was visible as a mediated event, a ‘second space’ in Edward Soja’s terminology. It was selectively represented through the colonial press, which extended the broader exhibition narrative to offer local audiences a mental image of their position within the British Empire and within the pageantry of Glasgow. Through this case study, the paper contributes to more detailed

understanding of colonial displays at the Empire Exhibition, Scotland. The paper also develops an expanded idea of the 'visitorship' of imperial exhibitions, through its understanding of the exhibition as a media event that was relayed back to the colonial contexts that it put on display.



Aerial view illustration of the Colonial and Dominion Avenues, showing the Composite Colonial Pavilion from behind, in the lower right.

### ***Presentation:***

In my presentation today, I will be discussing some research that I have been conducting into the exhibition of British Malaya at the Empire Exhibition Scotland, in Glasgow, 1938. This is a project that I began some years ago – but have recently neglected for other projects – that has looked into how Malaya was represented on the world stage and what impact this had on its national formation under decolonisation policies after the Second World War. Previously I have looked at the Empire Exhibition in Wembley, and the Malaya-Borneo Exhibition in Singapore, both in the 1920s, and this project on the 1938 exhibit is about continuing that trajectory of display.

In the 1930s, most promotions and popular discussion of the Empire Exhibition Scotland emphasised the comparisons to its predecessor, the 1924–25 Empire Exhibition at Wembley. The far more stylistically *moderne* exhibition in Glasgow was imagined as Wembley for a new generation. As such, the aims of the new exhibition were much the same as the old – to show Britain's technical progress, its economic potential, foster inter-colonial commerce, and allow the parts of the empire to better know each other. There was one additional new aim in 1938, and this was to show Britain's supposedly peaceful role in world politics, remembering that this exhibition

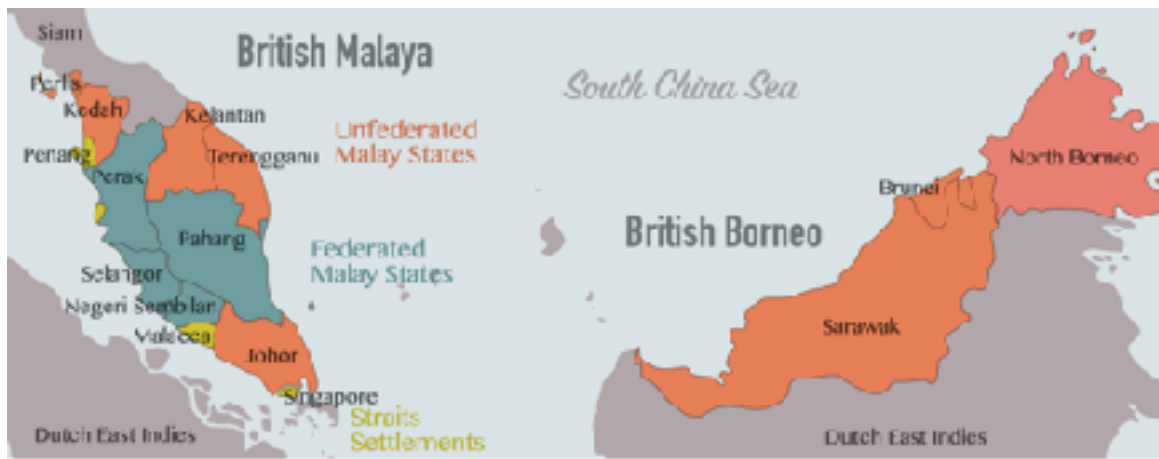
was just in advance of the start of the Second World War, and a sense of conflict in Europe was already growing.



Exterior view of the Colonial Pavilion, which housed the Malayan Court, as well as the exhibits of other British colonies in Asia, the Pacific, South America and the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, and the Indian Ocean.

Malaya had taken part in both of the empire exhibitions. In Wembley in 1924 they occupied a building made to resemble a Perak mosque, which they filled with a simulated jungle landscape that I have discussed previously ('Reorienting Identities at the Imperial Fairground', 2019). But in 1938 they decided to exhibit in a hall inside the Composite Colonial Pavilion, a building they shared with Kong Kong, Malta, St. Helena, the Falklands, and other colonies.

Malaya invested 150,000 Straits Dollars into their 1938 showcase, taking the pavilion's central hall. This gave them about 500 square metres for display – it was the largest of the colonial exhibits in Glasgow. The 'Malayan Court', as it was called in the Malayan press (perhaps in an attempt to mask the fact that they were no longer in their own dedicated building), included representation of all of the states of the Malay peninsula, as well as Brunei and Labuan in Borneo. The Bornean states of Sarawak and North Borneo (now Sabah), which would later join the federation of Malaysia, decide to exhibit separately within the same building, not wanting to be seen as joined to the other Malay States.



Map of the states in British Malaya and North Borneo

The Malayan Court wasn't the only way that Malaya was exhibited in Glasgow, however. They showed rubber products in the Rubber Pavilion, regional crafts in the Women of Empire Pavilion, and Malay fabrics in the daily fashion shows. But the Malayan Court was the core of their presentation, where the governments of the Malay states and Straits Settlements could decide how they most wanted to be seen by the rest of the British Empire.

On entering the Colonial Pavilion, past the smaller stands for other states (which included Sarawak), one entered the central Malayan court. The outer walls of the room were in pale green, adorned with the flags and crests of fourteen Malayan states, which were interspersed with photographs of natural scenery. Left of the entrance was an information bureau, with its walls covered in maps and stamp specimens, and containing a small library of official literature.

The centre of the court was dominated by large models that showed the new Singapore harbour and airport, and models of the major station buildings of the FMS Railways, each of which were fitted with internal lights and buttons that could be used to identify key features. Behind these were two life-size dioramas, with a third to be added later. One showed a rubber estate, and the other a pineapple factory. This was a major point of Malayan trade policy at the time, which was attempting to diversify the economy by moving away from its reliance on rubber and tin, and moving into the pineapple business. The third diorama that afterwards added showed a woman at a loom in an east coast cottage industry scene.

Beyond these was a living room display promoting Malay textiles, particularly *songket* fabrics that incorporate gold thread into the base *tenun* weave of the silk cloths. The room was decorated with furniture upholstered in *songket*, on which there were reclining mannequins dressed in gowns made from Malay fabrics that had been tailored into western dresses by a London dressmaker.



Headlines from the Malayan press reporting on the Empire Exhibition in 1938

I expect at this point you would like to see an image of this interior display, and so would I. But as best I can tell at this stage of the research there is no existing photographic or illustrated record of the final installation of the exhibition, though we do have some pictures of individual display objects shown in other places. This, I think, relates to one of the points that has been made across several presentations at this conference, which is that in studying exhibitions we are often looking at environments that, in being ephemeral, were often quite poorly documented, and as such we are left with a shallow understanding of their experiential qualities.

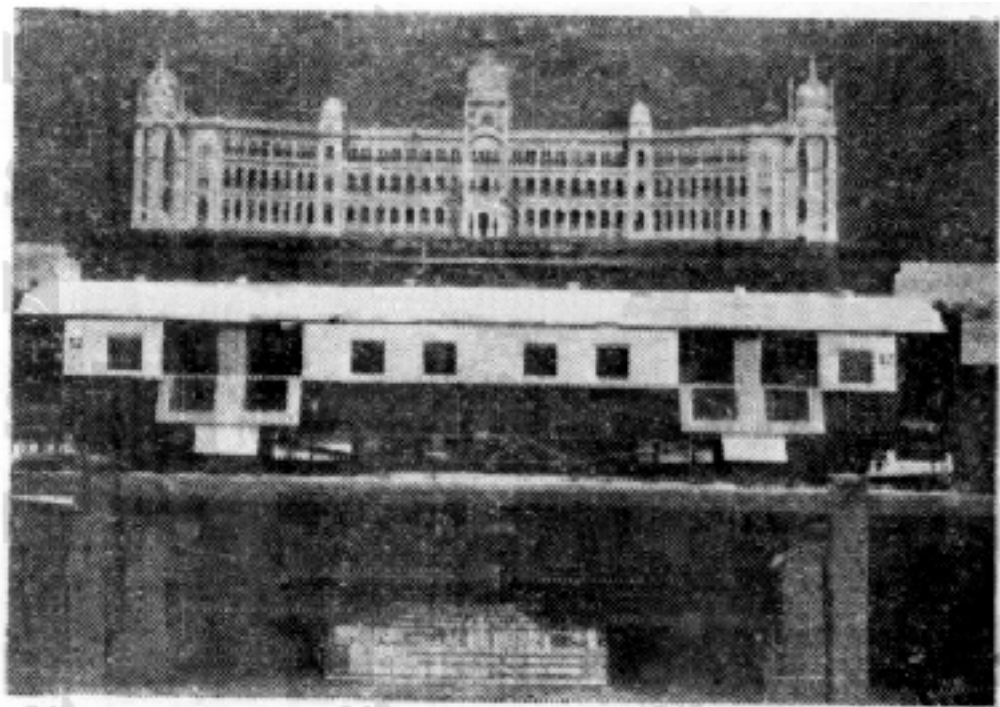
What I have pieced together so far about the Malayan Court comes primarily through reporting in Malayan newspapers (with some additional details coming from catalogues and correspondence from the Malayan Information Agency in London). And thinking about this aspect of my methods has led me to consider how the people of Malaya in the 1930s who read these newspapers saw this exhibition – that is, what they were told about it, and what impressions this created for them.

The consideration of an audience who didn't actually attend an exhibition is not without cause in the context of such a globally involved event. Some historians of international exhibitions present them as having been a means of socialising national identities within imperial frameworks, where people and states could understand themselves in relation to the world. Also, exhibition promotions suggested a global visitorship, which misleadingly suggested that all peoples of empire could converge on these miniature representations of empire. However the travel, time, and expense that was required for colonial subjects to actually see themselves represented clearly wasn't a possibility for most. Additionally, limitations on hotel accommodation, and the often racist policies of British hoteliers made it difficult for non-white guests who were able to travel to secure lodgings.

For the majority of people in Malaya who were interested in the exhibition, the only way to 'see' it, so to speak, was by listening to BBC overseas transmissions, or reading newspapers. And so, their experience of the exhibition was much the same

as my own in researching the show as a historical event. And this, I think, leads to two considerations that come from a question of access. One is how Malaysians could understand the exhibit of their own country and therefore how they imagined they would be seen across the empire, and the other is how they experienced the spectacle of the Empire Exhibition as a whole. For the sake of time, I am going to focus here on the press images of the Malayan Court specifically, rather than the wider exhibition.

When it came to understanding the Malayan Court, there was also one other way that people could experience the exhibition that I, as a researcher, don't have access to. This was through short local exhibits that displayed portions of the Malayan Court before they were shipped to Glasgow. These were piecemeal displays of the exhibits and never a full preview. Commuters in Kuala Lumpur were shown models of FMSR stations, and a new air-conditioned sleeper car that was locally-made and would be in service by the end of 1938. Singapore residents could visit the Harbour Board to see a model of the New Harbour, completed in 1936, and they could see models of the new airport and the landscape of mangroves that it replaced. And residents of Kuala Lumpur could visit the Agro-Horticultural Association's Hall to see the main exhibition dioramas in preparation. As such, aspects of the show were seen in person, and to a wider audience they were reported by the newspapers, who provided examples of the only photographic evidence of the exhibition that I've found so far.



FMS Railways display at Kuala Lumpur station

But it would seem that the most compelling public narrative of the exhibition, what most readers would have known about the Malayan Court, focused on the work of two artists, since the press offered regular updates on their progress. These were the artists who made the three dioramas for the exhibition – Tina and Julius Wentscher. They were German Jewish artists, which I think now seems like quite a prescient choice on the behalf of the Malay states. Tina Wentscher was a sculptor who had exhibited in the Berlin Secession, and her husband was a painter who was the son of a well-known 19th century German landscape painter, also Julius Wentscher. While on a study trip in Indonesia in 1932, they were advised by a fellow artist in Berlin not to come home at the end of their trip, due to the way public attitudes towards Jews in Germany was changing. From this they decided to stay in the region, moving between Indonesia, China and Indochina, and eventually settling in Kuala Lumpur.

While in Malaya, the couple found a way to collaborate on commercial display projects, and they were hired to create exhibits for the Malayan Court. In their dioramas of the rubber plantation, pineapple factory, and *kampong* weaving scene, Tina Wentscher prepared sculptures of the key figures, which she made from aluminium frames, concrete body work, and plaster facades, which were then painted for realism. Julius Wentscher painted large canvas backdrops for these sculptures, creating a sense of scenery and depth in the display.



Tina Wentscher creating the figure of a Tamil rubber plantation worker



Julius Wnetscher working on the backdrop of a pineapple factory in Johore, with physical props in the foreground

The Malayan press featured photographs of their work, and the developing dioramas were visible in the Wentschers' studio at the Agro-Horticultural Association Hall in Kuala Lumpur. Smaller articles traced the progress of their work – as they moved from Johore to Kuala Lumpur, as they moved from the pineapple factory display to the rubber plantation, and as the Sultan of Selangor found them a model for their Malay weaver. The Wentschers' names became more associated with the exhibition than those of the FMS Director of Agriculture or the Agent of Malayan Information Agency in London, who were the actual curators and designers of the Malayan Court.

In addition to this display of planning, the public was also aware of some controversies. Among these, one newspaper began an attack on the organising committee for the limitations of the proposed display, claiming that the show was being brought down by bureaucrat-curators who didn't understand the real beauty of the country. The curators had made it clear from the beginning of planning for the show that they planned to limit the display – not to try to present all aspects of Malayan life, but to focus on key aspects of it that were viewed as most important to Malaya's economic development. Such criticisms seem to have merged with other concerns, which in turn became a key complaint that the Malayan Court was avoiding what would now be considered the clichés of Malay culture, craft, and rural lifestyle – which had been a very popular element in the Wembley exhibit (in which the idea of the 'human zoo' had been applied to Malaya, something that was too old-fashioned by 1938 to have been considered).

It seems that the planners of the exhibition were trying to move the image of the country to a more limited focus on industrial advancement (perhaps more in keeping with the modern image of the Glasgow exhibition), while the Malayan public insisted on a ruralised display of traditional Malay culture (perhaps more in keeping



with the traditional image of occupation and ownership that came with British colonialism in the region). Following public opinion, the High Commissioner stepped in to ensure that a greater display of Malay crafts was included in the show. This is why the Wentschers' were asked to make their third diorama, and to focus it on traditional Malay weaving with an East Coast village backdrop. It was essentially an afterthought, and a response to a divergence in view between the exhibition planners and the public, in terms of what kind of image they considered suitable for Malaya to have. Thus ultimately led to to a colonial exhibition display that drew upon a mythology of the region as a pre-colonial tropical paradise.



Tina Wentscher creating her Malay weaver



A part of Julius Wentscher's rural backdrop for the Malay weaving scene

Exhibits like the Wentschers' were somewhat visible in Malaya, and could be discussed publicly, but there were other parts of the Malayan Court that seem to have been cut off for regional reporters and their audiences. For example, the Malayan Information Agency's work in London work on the exhibition went unreported and therefore unknown. They had significant responsibility for the textile displays once the raw fabrics were shipped to Britain. Therefore this part of the exhibit wasn't really made in Malaya, and as such couldn't be recorded by the local press. The London Agent had the fabrics turned into western-styled dresses by the west London dressmaker Roland Morrell, and furniture by London upholsterers. As such, news on these developments was minimal, and the public did not receive a picture of these elements.

Of course, of what the Malayan press could see at this time they were largely supportive. The press acted primarily as a government mouthpiece, and while some minor criticisms were accepted, it wasn't going to say anything that irreparably damaged the impression of the exhibition, and so it was primarily presented as positive and exciting. It was shown as a chance to let the centre of empire know what Malaya was (to understand that it was not part of India or China, as the regional postal service so often saw). This, of course, missed the fact that the exhibition at Wembley was meant to do exactly the same thing but apparently hadn't. Yet, still, they were optimistic.

The Malayan press took a very positive view of the exhibition, largely following the official propaganda of the exhibiting coming from Glasgow. And of course, after putting so much public money and effort in putting the exhibition together, the public were mostly told how spectacularly their own national display was being received. A highlight being how the King showed a significant interest in their model of a tin mine dredge, which is surely the highest of praise.

But while this is probably a side-note in terms of the larger project to which this paper belongs, I do think it is worth considering how there is an overlap between the historical methods of working with this kind of limited (and highly skewed) set of primary sources, and the way that the people who were reading these very same set of sources would have experienced such a major event as the Empire Exhibition Scotland when they couldn't actually attend it, and receive it second hand in the press. Clearly the aims of reading are different, and the scope, but both the current historian and the distant yet contemporary colonial subject access an understanding of the event through the same forms of media, although the cultural mentality that is applied in reading this material is extremely different. I suppose my thought in the end relates to questions of the historian's empathy, and how this thinking should point to the idea global exhibitions were not only experienced as physical environments, which is quite different from the way many historians (including myself) inherently try to conceive of such historical events.

From the colonial perspective, they were instead more often experienced, and took conceptually tangible image forms, as impressions that could be experienced on the other side of the world. Which is essentially to say that one might more typically view such an exhibition from afar as a mediated event.