The colonial legacy of English

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The language of the colonial state

When Raffles founded the British settlement in 1819, English was the language of a handful of officials and merchants. The great majority of the inhabitants spoke Malay, the trading language of the archipelago, or one of the southern Chinese languages or Indian languages that the immigrants brought with them. Malay served as the common language of the bazaar and of the port. English was the language of power: of the East India Company's correspondence, of the government's regulations and, from 1826, of the court.

The Second Charter of Justice of 27 November 1826 gave the court of the Straits Settlements jurisdiction and, as later interpreted, introduced English law into the colony as it stood at that date.[1] Chapters A.III and B.I describe this reception of English law in detail. Its linguistic consequence is easily overlooked. The common law was argued, recorded and reported in English, so that every litigant who came before the court had to work through interpreters. Every lawyer who wanted to practise there needed command of English. Over the following century the language of the court became the language of every legal relation that mattered for commerce: contracts, mortgages, partnerships, companies and wills.

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The same applied to the administration. The Legislative Council created after the transfer of the Straits Settlements to the Colonial Office in 1867 debated in English and drafted its ordinances in the same language. Chinese, Malay and Indian community leaders who wanted to take part in public life had to master the language of government or work through intermediaries who had.[2] Command of English thus became a form of capital in its own right.

Schools and scholarships

Raffles had planned an institution that would teach the children of the Malay rulers, of Company employees and of others who wished to learn the local languages. He laid its foundation stone on 5 June 1823, a few days before he left Singapore for the last time.[3] The college he envisaged was never built in that form. On 1 August 1834 the Reverend F.J. Darrah opened the Singapore Free School with 46 boys, an elementary school that taught Malay, Chinese and English at first. After the Malay classes closed in 1842 for lack of pupils, the school, renamed Raffles Institution in 1868, eventually became an English-medium school.[4]

The history of the school illustrates a pattern. Parents in a commercial port judged languages by their usefulness. English was the language that led to clerical posts in government, to employment in the European houses and to the professions. Mission schools followed the same demand. The Anglo-Chinese School, founded by the Methodist missionary William Oldham on 1 March 1886 in a shophouse in Amoy Street with thirteen pupils, took its name from its practice of teaching in Chinese in the morning and in English in the afternoon.[5] Catholic, Anglican and Methodist schools, together with the government's own English schools, formed the English stream of colonial education.

At the top of this system stood the Queen's Scholarship, founded in 1885 on the initiative of Governor Cecil Clementi Smith and awarded to the best student of the year by a special selection board. It was abolished in 1959 and replaced by the Singapore State Scholarship.[6] The scholarship took a small number of English-

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educated pupils to British universities, from which they returned as doctors, lawyers and administrators. Its successor scholarships remain one of the main channels through which the Singapore state recruits its elite.

Higher education followed in English. A medical school opened on 3 July 1905 and was renamed King Edward VII College of Medicine in 1921. Raffles College for the arts and sciences followed in 1928. The two colleges merged on 8 October 1949 to form the University of Malaya, whose Singapore division became the University of Singapore on 1 January 1962.[7] Every stage of this ladder was conducted in English.

An English-educated elite and its limits

By the middle of the twentieth century English had produced a distinct social group: the English-educated, who staffed the civil service, the professions and the offices of the European firms. Among them were many Straits Chinese, Eurasians and Indians, whose families had attended English schools for generations. Chapter A.V described how the Straits Chinese acted as intermediaries between the European houses and the Chinese merchant networks. Their command of English was a large part of that role.

The English-educated were nevertheless a minority. Most Chinese children who went to school at all attended Chinese-medium schools financed by clan associations, merchants and community organisations, which taught in Mandarin and looked to China for their curriculum. Malay and Tamil schools served the other communities. The colonial government did little for these vernacular schools and much for the English ones. The result was a society divided by its schooling as much as by its ethnicity: an English-educated group that held the posts of power and a much larger Chinese-educated group that dominated trade and small business. That second group felt excluded from government.[8]

The founding of Nanyang University shows the strength of this second world. Financed largely by donations from Chinese merchants and ordinary Chinese Singaporeans, the university raised its flag on 15 March 1956 and began classes on 30 March of that year.[9] It taught in Chinese and was meant to give the graduates of

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Chinese schools the higher education that the English-medium University of Malaya did not offer them. The politics of independent Singapore were shaped by the tension between these two educated classes. The decision on the working language of the new state had to settle it.

Notes

1. Wikipedia, "Law of Singapore" (accessed November 2026): the Charter was issued on 27 November 1826 and has been understood to make "all English statutes and principles of English common law and equity in force as at 27 November 1826 applicable", subject to exceptions for unsuitability and injustice. ↩
2. On English as the language of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements and of colonial legislation after 1867, see C.M. Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819–2005*, Singapore, NUS Press, 2009, chapters 3–4. ↩
3. Wikipedia, "Raffles Institution" (accessed November 2026): Raffles laid the foundation stone on 5 June 1823, a few days before leaving Singapore on 9 June; the institution was intended for the children of Malay rulers, Company employees and others "who wished to learn the local languages". ↩
4. Wikipedia, "Raffles Institution" (accessed November 2026): the Singapore Free School opened on 1 August 1834 "with 46 boys"; Malay classes closed in 1842 because of low enrolment; renamed Raffles Institution in 1868; "it would eventually become an English-medium school". ↩
5. Wikipedia, "Anglo-Chinese School" (accessed November 2026): founded on 1 March 1886 by Bishop William Fitzjames Oldham; a shophouse at 70 Amoy Street "with 13 pupils"; the name reflected teaching in Chinese in the morning and English in the afternoon. ↩
6. Wikipedia, "Queen's Scholarship" (accessed November 2026): founded in 1885, initiated by Governor Cecil Clementi Smith, awarded to the year's top student by a special selection board, abolished in 1959 and replaced by the Singapore State Scholarship. ↩

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7. Wikipedia, "National University of Singapore" (accessed November 2026): medical school founded on 3 July 1905, renamed King Edward VII College of Medicine in 1921; Raffles College set up in 1928; merger to form the University of Malaya on 8 October 1949; Singapore division renamed University of Singapore on 1 January 1962. ↩

8. On the division between the English-educated and the Chinese-educated in colonial and post-war Singapore, see Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819–2005*, chapters 6–7, and S. Gopinathan, "Language Policy Changes 1979–1997: Politics and Pedagogy", in S. Gopinathan et al. (eds), *Language, Society and Education in Singapore*, 2nd edition, Singapore, Times Academic Press, 1998. ↩

9. Wikipedia, "Nanyang University" (accessed November 2026): "Nanyang University conducted a flag-raising on 15 March 1956 and started classes on the 30th of that month", citing National Library Board, *Singapore Infopedia*. ↩

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