

AcPrac Case Study

Colonising the 'Home' in British Malaya/Malaysia: Lessons for Academic- Practitioner Collaborations

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FOR SOCIAL AND
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About AFSEE

[The Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity \(AFSEE\)](#) at the LSE International Inequalities Institute is an innovative fellowship programme that is funded through a landmark grant from Atlantic Philanthropies.

AFSEE aims to build a community of changemakers whose work addresses social and economic inequalities across the globe, while supporting them in developing imaginative approaches to their work. Adopting an ethos of collective action, the programme encourages collaborations between a range of stakeholders, including academics, activists, artists, development practitioners, and policymakers.

About the AcPrac Project

This case study is published as part of the '[Exploring the Potential of Academic-Practitioner Collaborations for Social Change \(AcPrac\)](#)' project. The AcPrac project has two key objectives: 1) to contribute to AFSEE's theory of change by exploring the conditions that are conducive to developing generative processes of knowledge exchange between academics and practitioners; and 2) to examine the methodological and epistemological challenges of researching inequalities, and particularly how the latter might be reproduced through the research process itself.

The project also makes theoretical contributions by reflecting on the drivers behind the collaborations that different stakeholders pursue and it explores the potential of collaborative research, as a methodology, in challenging knowledge inequalities and in decolonising research.

Colonising the 'Home' in British Malaya/Malaysia: Lessons for Academic-Practitioner Collaborations

Abstract

Academic-practitioner collaborations carry the potential for social change, but their perils must be critically reflected upon. This paper interrogates a form of collaboration that was rooted in the colonial logic of bringing civility to the homes of the colonised through the practices of 'domestic science' (or 'home economics'). Colonial state and non-state actors colluded, directly and indirectly, to elevate a specific gendered vision of the 'good', a vision which took on notably nationalist expressions within postcolonial Malaysia. The paper draws reflections from Malaysia's colonial and postcolonial encounters with domestic science/home economics to engage with questions of coloniality and power underpinning academic-practitioner collaborations today.

Introduction

Academic-practitioner collaborations are double-edged swords. They carry the potential for social change, can contribute to the fight against inequality, but also come with their own set of perils. Disentangling the 'good' and 'bad' from such collaborations is a difficult political project, as these distinctions are not always easy to identify. Yet, this endeavour must be attempted, no matter how delicate and incomplete. In this paper, I take a critical view on academic-practitioner collaborations, suggesting that drawing lessons from the 'messiness of the past' (Noor, 2022) is one way to do so, in order to make sense of our present.

The paper interrogates a form of academic-practitioner collaboration that was rooted in the colonial logic of bringing civility to the homes of the colonised in British Malaya, through the teaching of 'domestic science' (a subject more popularly known as 'home economics' today). By legitimising the subject as 'science,' colonial state and non-state actors colluded, both directly and indirectly, to elevate a specific gendered vision of the 'good' -one that mirrored the values and lifeworld of the coloniser. Malaya obtained its independence from the British in 1957, and was merged with Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore in 1963 to form the Federation of Malaysia. Singapore left the Federation in 1965, thus resulting in the current national configuration known as Malaysia. The civilising mission of the 'home' took on notably nationalist gendered expressions within postcolonial Malaysia, while also sustaining a colonial logic in similar ways.

In the following section, I look at how domestic science was introduced to, and entrenched in British Malaya, situating the role of academic-practitioner collaborations in the process. Then, I examine how domestic science was replaced by home economics in

postcolonial Malaysia, alongside changing forms of collaborations. Drawing on reflections from Malaysia's colonial and postcolonial encounters with domestic science/home economics, I derive lessons for academic-practitioner collaborations today, with a view of engaging critically with questions of coloniality and power.

My case study suggests that academic-practitioner collaborations tend to cohere around sets of dominant ideologies, establishing and harnessing distinct visions of the 'civilised' from dominant and gendered standpoints. Hence, decolonial and counter-hegemonic collaborations must take into account that it is insufficient to focus on the *forms* and *functions* of collaborations without locating them within these broader, contested ideological terrains. I also argue that there are strategies, both intentional and unintentional, that can be learned from these dominant forms of collaborations, turning these strategies on their head in our ambition to build solidarities around marginalised values and visions. Finally, I question the conception of 'academic-practitioner' collaborations, contending that the roles: 'knowledge producers' and 'practitioners,' do not overlap with the actors: 'academics' and 'non-academics,' -as far as the colonial history of the 'home' in British Malaya/Malaysia is concerned. It is important to note that the terminology 'non-academics' used here to denote 'all actors *outside* academia' has the tendency of conflating groups with starkly different characteristics, thus reinforcing prevailing academic/non-academic hierarchies. I return to this discussion later in the paper.

Domestic Science in British Malaya

Colonial attitude towards education in British Malaya was exemplified by the views of Frank Swettenham, the high-ranking colonial officer who became the first Resident-General of the Federated Malay States from 1896 to 1901, summed up as follows: English language and higher-order ideas were to be taught to a select group of local elites, especially those who would be incorporated into the colonial administration, while the masses would be given practical education, where boys were taught 'useful industries' and girls 'weaving, embroidery and mat-making' (Lim, 1980, p.140).

By applying the gender binary of colonial capitalism to Malay households that were predominantly involved in peasant production (mainly farming and fishing), Swettenham artificially carved out the *domestic sphere* for Malay women, and expressed doubt over the idea that Malay women needed education and emancipation (Teoh, 2018). This is not to say that gender roles did not exist in Malay peasant households, but rather that the distinctions were not as sharp and hierarchically ordered as under colonial capitalism (Hirschman, 2016).

However, domestic science did not appear as a subject in schools until the early decades of the 20th century. Instead, cooking, sewing, handicraft and household management

were taught as individual components to girls in English schools.¹ These subjects were sometimes collectively referred to as 'mothercraft' (Teoh, 2018, p.48). Yvonne Taylor, a former domestic science teacher, recalled that the subject was first introduced in Malay schools in 1929 (Taylor, 2006), while Teoh (2018) notes that domestic science was first mentioned as a subject in the Infant Jesus schools² in 1931.

At this point, it is perhaps instructive to turn briefly to the development of domestic science, which took place at the heart of the Empire in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In England, several domestic science teachers' training colleges had already been established by the end of the 19th century (Esdaile, 1937). At the turn of the 20th century, a Professor of Chemistry at the University of Leeds, named Arthur Smithells, played a leading and influential role in escalating these efforts, repackaging these disparate subjects under the rubric of 'domestic science' (Manthorpe, 1986). This was motivated by a pedagogical concern to make science more appealing to girls, while providing a scientific foundation for domestic subjects, in order to teach them housekeeping and 'motherhood' more effectively. Such efforts were reinforced by the British administration's drive to halt the 'degeneracy of British society and the British race,' which was perceived as a result of the deterioration of working-class homes (Manthorpe, 1986, p.195).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to address the intricacies of the debate surrounding Smithell's advocacy, but suffice it to say that other than some early influence over the Board of Education, and the launch of a domestic science course at King's College for Women (subsequently upgraded to King's College of Household and Social Science) and Bristol University (developed together with the Gloucester Training College of Domestic Science), Smithells and his allies had not been successful in establishing domestic science as a subject for girls' education in schools (Manthorpe, 1986).

Notwithstanding this 'defeat' and the contested nature of domestic science as a subject in England, Dr Philippa Esdaile, the Head of Biology Department at the King's College for Women and a member of the Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies, drafted a memorandum -endorsed by the committee- advising the colonies that domestic science be expanded, with more training provisions for female colonial officers, female workers in missionary societies, as well as for the wives of male colonial officers. The intention was to equip these women to teach domestic science to 'native women' (Esdaile, 1937; Chew, 2011).

¹There were generally four types of schools in British Malaya: English schools aimed at the Malay nobility and three types of vernacular schools i.e., Malay, Chinese and Tamil, which were delineated along racial and linguistic lines.

²These refer to English schools for girls, which were established by nuns from the Order of the Charitable Mistresses of the Holy Infant Jesus.

The memorandum reached the colonial authorities in British Malaya, who responded by saying that the subject was already being taught at a small scale (Chew, 2011). Nonetheless, the notion that domestic subjects could be given a scientific foundation was reinforced, and proved to be useful in furthering the civilising mission. The scientific presentation of domestic subjects worked to the advantage of the colonial authorities, as the aim of providing education for girls was to prepare them to be the 'intellectual peers' of their elite husbands (Teoh, 2018, p.30). The demand for elite girls' education was reflected in the request of the Malay rulers (of the Federated Malay States in 1939) for a boarding school dedicated to Malay girls, modelled after the Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK) for boys,³ but different in that it would teach 'domestic economy' to Malay girls of 'good birth' ('Malay girls' education', 1940; Thomas, 1941). Formal schooling then was largely reserved for a small group of elite Malays that the British had co-opted into its colonial administration.

On the other hand, non-elite Malay girls would find subjects like cooking and needlework irrelevant, since they could learn them at home (Taylor, 2006; Teoh, 2018). There was also very little interest in domestic science among Chinese girls' schools, as their curriculum was not gender delineated; it was underpinned by an educational philosophy that was markedly different from Western education (Teoh, 2018). However, in acknowledging that domestic science must be made more relevant to local residents, the Lady Supervisor of Malay Girls' Schools in the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States said: 'We cannot give another race our schemes of instruction which do not fulfil the requirements of their stage of development' (Chew, 2011, p.163), providing a justification based on racial backwardness.

After the Japanese Occupation of 1941–45, domestic science had to restart from scratch when the British returned to Malaya, as the pre-war lesson materials and equipment were all destroyed in the war (Taylor, 2006). However, two important changes set the conditions for how domestic science was subsequently reintroduced. First, there was discernibly more interest in formal education, especially among Malay girls, due to perceived changes in economic opportunities (Taylor, 2006). Second, there was a rise in Malay nationalism, fuelled by the memory of how the once-invincible British were defeated by the Japanese -a script that the British had to reverse through their counterinsurgency efforts (Wong, 2001).

Therefore, the post-World War II Malayan context was marked by an increase in girls' enrolment in schools, and domestic science was reintroduced, although confined to English schools. The Cambridge domestic science syllabus was adopted in upper secondary schools and local women were sent to England for training as domestic science teachers -the most

³ MCKK was, in turn, modelled after Eton College in England (Lim, 1980).

renowned training centre being the Malayan Teachers' Training College Kirkby, which was established as a model for teachers' training colleges in Malaya (Chew, 2011).⁴

In addition, there was keen interest in providing adult education, particularly to rural communities. One of the key actors was the Women's Institute (WI) branch in Malaya, established by Lady Templer⁵ in 1951, with the aim of teaching domestic science to rural Malay women. Lady Templer was the wife of Sir Gerald Templer, the British High Commissioner of Malaya tasked with implementing the Briggs Plan in the fight against communist insurgency during the Malayan Emergency.



A member of the Women's Institute branch in Malaya showing Malay women how good cooking could be achieved on a kerosene stove (Used with permission from The National Archives INF10/200/2)

However, the war against communist insurgency was not only driven by the need to safeguard internal security, but strategically contrived as an ideological offensive to win back the 'hearts

⁴ Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first Prime Minister of the Federation of Malaya, announced the date of Malaya's independence when he visited the Malayan Teachers' Training College Kirkby in 1956 (Izharuddin, 2018).

⁵ Ethel 'Peggie' Margery Davie Templer.

and minds' of the 'natives' and reverse the script that 'the British had failed to defend Malaya,' this time by liberating them from the predominantly Chinese 'terrorists' (Wong, 2001). The role of the WI in teaching domestic science, discursively constructed as being autonomous from military and counterinsurgency efforts, played a strategic role in influencing the direction of the 'hearts and minds' campaign—a role labelled as 'embedded humanitarianism' (West, 2021). In addition, the WI cultivated 'British lifestyle' among the first generation of Malay female administrators who had helped out with WI's work (Mizokami-Okamoto, 2014). It is perhaps in this sense that women were referred to as 'a vital component in the fabric of the Empire' by the public relations machinery of the colonial administration (Malayan Information Agency, 1932).

In sum, colonial authorities in British Malaya and local elites found convergence in promoting domestic science for girls' education, a partial -and perhaps selective- reflection of a broader academic debate in England. After the Japanese Occupation, British colonial administrators worked closely with 'autonomous' organisations like the WI, which cohered around the counterinsurgency 'hearts and minds' campaign, but underpinned by an orientalist gender ideology which sought to civilise women and their homes by teaching domestic science to rural Malay women. By the time Malaya attained its independence in 1957, domestic science was firmly re-established in girls' and mixed-secondary English schools, and well incorporated into adult education, primarily carried out by voluntary organisations (International Bureau of Education, 1959). A former student of domestic science recalled (Chew, 2011, p.206):

'Domestic science was then introduced by the British when the British came here, starting from primary schools as well as secondary schools specifically, for girls only. The girls' only subject and they wanted the girls to be good a housewife. Basically sewing your own clothes and also making your own food.'

By then, the gender binary of colonial capitalism was even embraced by anti-colonial leaders, as penetratingly evident in the statement made in 1959 by Onn Jaafar, the founder and first President of UMNO (United Malays National Organisation)⁶ (Teoh, 2018, p.151):

'There should be education in child welfare and homecrafts for women. As the main contribution of women in this country is the running of homes... they must

⁶ When this statement was made, Onn Jaafar had already left UMNO (in 1951) over the question of multiracial membership for the party.

therefore be educated to fit them for the duty of making their homes happy and healthy.'

Home Economics⁷ in Malaysia

The transition from domestic science to home economics in the independent Federation of Malaya/Malaysia was facilitated by the confluence of two factors: the modernisation of the agricultural sector and the growing influence of the United States (US)-Japan alliance in Southeast Asia. I elaborate below on these processes.

Not only was agriculture the most important economic sector in Malaysia up until the mid-1980s, but it was notably characterised by a dualistic structure: a 'modern' sector, comprised of large rubber estates, owned and controlled by foreign capital, and a 'traditional' sector with smaller estates, paddy farming, and fishing, which mainly involved the Malay peasantry. Thus, modernising the traditional agricultural sector, and integrating it into the national and global capitalist economy, was understood by the Alliance/National Front⁸ coalition government to be a key strategy for improving productivity and income of the Malay masses -which by then were an important voter base, but also the group with the highest poverty rate.

In this regard, adult education, integrated into agricultural extension programmes, played a complementary role in the broader effort to transform Malay peasant production into modern agricultural producers. While adult education had non-agricultural components, the agricultural sector remained its major preoccupation (Azman & Ahmad, 2006). Hence, the Adult Education Division was set up under the important Ministry of Rural Development⁹ in 1961 (Azman & Ahmad, 2006), and played a pivotal role in implementing extension programmes alongside the Department of Agriculture.

At the same time, extension programmes were beginning to see the imprints of the US-Japan alliance in Southeast Asia, set against the backdrop of receding British influence, and sprouting Cold War dynamics (Tomaru, 2000). For example, the remarks of Malaya's

⁷ I use the terms 'home economics' to encapsulate 'home science' in the paper. To be more precise, domestic science was gradually changed to home science in Malaysia in the 1960s, and then home economics in 1989.

⁸ The Alliance government was a coalition made up principally of race-based parties, but broadened to include more political parties and renamed as the National Front in 1973. The Alliance/National Front coalition held political power at the federal level from independence until the general election of 2018.

⁹ The ministry was helmed by the Deputy Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak, at the time. It was renamed as the Ministry of Rural and National Development when Tun Abdul Razak became the Prime Minister in 1970.

Minister of Agriculture, Abdul Aziz Ishak, in 1958, was telling; upon his return from Japan, he expressed his regret for learning only from British agricultural experts and was keen to see more cooperation with Japan in the agricultural sector (Tomaru, 2000, p.178). However, considering the scope of this paper, the American imprint on the Malaysian agricultural sector is of greater interest.

Indeed, US influence in Malaysia, particularly in the agricultural sector, could be seen through the role played by the Ford Foundation, a private foundation whose links to the US government during the Cold War were well established (e.g., Petras, 2001; Parmar, 2015; Kumbamu, 2020). The foundation began its operations in Malaya in 1962, one year before the formation of Malaysia, but its funding for agriculture was only noted in 1965 when it provided a grant to send Malaysian agricultural officers to undertake 'advanced training' in the US. The foundation further supported doctoral training of Malaysian agricultural officers in 1968, through grants provided to the Institute of International Education (Ford Foundation, 1962, 1965, 1968).

In 1966, the foundation gave a generous grant to help with the expansion of the College of Agriculture at Serdang,¹⁰ but the grant was channelled through the Louisiana State University, a land-grant¹¹ university in the US. It was further mentioned in 1968 that the grant given to the Louisiana State University 'had helped the College of Agriculture at Serdang recast its curriculum and research program along modern lines' (Ford Foundation, 1966, 1968). Home economics was placed under the Extension Education Department at the Faculty of Agriculture (Chew, 2011) -course meant to produce civil servants responsible for extension programmes.

At this point, it is worth noting that the land-grant universities and colleges have had a history of working closely with the extension programmes in the US in their aspiration to compel peasant farmers to adopt the capitalist mode of production (Berry, 2003). To achieve their objectives, these extension programmes 'assigned agriculture to the male sphere and home economics to the female sphere' (Fink, 1986, p. 39), whereby women were streamlined as 'home managers' or 'housewives,' as a key part of the strategy (Berry, 2003). The land-grant universities and colleges served the interests of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), through arguably skewed surveys and analyses, as well as by contributing

¹⁰It was upgraded to university status in 1971 but changed its name from Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Agricultural University of Malaysia) to Universiti Putra Malaysia in 1997.

¹¹Land-grant colleges and universities are higher education institutions in the US created by, and receive public benefits from, the Morrill Land-Grant Act first enacted in 1865 and later expanded in 1890.

to advocacy efforts of the government (Jellison, 1993). In fact, the extension programmes were called as such because,

'... it was an *extension* (my emphasis) of the expertise of the USDA through the land grant colleges and universities to county agents and through these agents to local township leaders who disseminated the information to all local farm families.' (Fink, 1986, p.96)

The Ford Foundation then exported this model of extension programmes, with an embedded home economics component, as part of shoring up US foreign policy in different parts of the world, advancing its geopolitical influence amid an unfolding Cold War (Berry, 2003). It is my contention that the transition from domestic science to home economics in Malaysia must be understood in this light: the export of a specifically gendered configuration of US extension programmes, reflecting growing US geopolitical influence in Southeast Asia, which coalesced with the Malaysian nationalist imperative of modernising the agricultural sector. The spillover effects of the US-based extension programmes must be understood within the Ford Foundation's more pervasive influence in the Malaysian government's central planning apparatus, but this subject lies outside the parameters of this paper.¹²

¹²See for example the role of Milton Esman, funded by the Ford Foundation, in modernising Malaysia's development administration (Esman, 1972).



The Federation of Malaya College of Agriculture at Serdang (Used with permission from The National Archives INF10/201/37)

In 1970, the Adult Education Division in Malaysia was restructured and renamed as the Community Development Department (better known as KEMAS) in line with the New Economic Policy (NEP) implemented in 1971. KEMAS became the key agency in the teaching of home economics to rural women as part of the intensification of agricultural modernisation under the NEP, its implementation interwoven with client-patron networks which linked state/political machineries with the daily lives of the rural communities (e.g., Ong, 1987). The intertwined relationship between home economics, rural women and agricultural modernisation could be seen in Malaysia's national development plans up until the mid-1990s (the 6th Malaysia Plan).

In the mid-to-late 1960s, around the same time as the rebranding of KEMAS, schools also started to change the name of domestic science to home economics, reflecting broader shifts in approaches to how the subject was taught (Arifin, 1998; Teoh, 2018).¹³ The role of

¹³ Ironically, the home economics movement was falling out of fashion in the US around the same time it was picking up in Malaysia. See Swedberg (2011) for a broader discussion on home economics in the US beyond the agricultural sector.

academics from Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (UPM) in affecting these changes must not go unrecognised, as reflected by Professor Atan Long -an educational psychologist from UPM who advocated for home economics to be taught in upper secondary schools (Chew, 2011). Chinese schools, previously disinterested in the subject, had also started to embrace home economics by then (Teoh, 2018).

Although home economics has been incorporated into other subjects since the late 1980s (starting with the Living Skills subject in 1989), and agriculture is no longer the dominant economic sector today, one of its enduring legacies is the discursive construction of the home, and women's place in it, as the space where 'civilising' needs to take place, building upon the colonial logic of domestic science. Despite the increase in women's participation in the labour force, the home is still the space where negative cultural influences from work can be deflected (Ong, 1991), and poorer women are trained to be 'domestic servants' for 'working mothers' and middle-class households (Ariffin, 1984, p.65; Elias and Louth, 2016). Even though home economics was not restricted to girls, most teachers and students were female (Ariffin, 1998).

The development of home economics in postcolonial Malaysia points to the role of academic institutions like land-grant universities and colleges, which collaborated with the USDA to promote a specifically gendered configuration of extension programmes, in which home economics was included and designated for women. The Ford Foundation then exported this model of extension programmes, alongside its home economics component, to the College of Agriculture at Serdang in Malaysia, which impacted adult education and schools in the country, and reinforced US geopolitical influence in the region. As in the case of India (Berry, 2003), the Ford Foundation's role was arguably made feasible and easier by the fact that there was a pre-established gender ideology through the teaching of domestic science during British colonial rule. These collaborations pivoted around the capitalist imperative to transform the agricultural sector, and were underpinned by changing (but no less different) patriarchal gender ideologies.

Academic-Practitioner Collaborations

I have demonstrated above how academic-practitioner collaborations tend to cohere around different sets of dominant ideologies: the nexus of British colonial capitalism-counterinsurgency, for domestic science; and the intersection of agricultural modernisation-US Cold War imperialist politics, for home economics. These collaborations elevated distinct gendered visions which *domesticated* women's roles at home, especially those in subordinate positions (i.e., colonised, rural and racialised women), and were instrumental to colonial capitalist accumulation and postcolonial capitalist transformation.

Therefore, we must reflect on the dominant ideology that has steered many contemporary academic-practitioner collaborations of our time. I posit that the ethos of 'doing

more with less,' which sits within a neoliberal governing rationality (i.e., the production of the *economic man* who venerates market-based values in the organisation of socio-economic life (Hamann, 2009)), has produced and infiltrated many forms of collaborations today. To invoke neoliberalism, however, risks repeating platitudes, and asserting dogmatic conclusions about the problems that face academic-practitioner collaborations. Hence, addressing this issue is also necessary.

By the neoliberal ethos of 'doing more with less,' I mean the compulsion to demonstrate *impact* from and through collaborations, amid an environment of depleting resources for research and community-oriented endeavours. Impact, on the other hand, has the function of regulating access to these depleting resources and legitimising selected recipients as 'deserving.' Hence, collaborations not only serve as a mechanism for academic and practitioners to exercise their leverage over each other for resources they do not -or no longer- have, but can also be used as an insidious means, at least from a research standpoint, to inflate evidence of research impact on actors outside academia (and policy research -a space that I am affiliated with).

While such collaborations can be motivated by social change at the individual level, they are nonetheless concessions to more systemic forms of capitalist surveillance and discipline, casting their shadows over academic/community lives. In academia, capitalist surveillance and discipline manifest more concretely through country-specific research evaluation and accountability systems (Torrance, 2020), which often include reference to global university rankings (Wan, 2021), and consequently structure certain rationales for why and how collaborations are pursued.

Collaborations taking place under such conditions are detrimental to the people involved. In writing about the neoliberal university, McGiffin (2021) highlights how the emotional labour involved in academic-practitioner collaborations are often neglected. The neoliberal ethos results in casualised and gendered academic staff being disproportionately assigned to take part in collaborative projects, labouring under precarious working conditions to amplify the 'real-world' impact of institutional research (McGiffin, 2021). This precarity can also be extended to community, civil society and NGO workers who have to spend many unpaid hours to secure grants, implement projects and conduct evaluations in realising collaborative projects, governed by the punishing regimes of audits and assessments.

When collaborators are burnt out and depleted, a state of being exacerbated by the neglect of their emotional labour, this means that the mental space for thinking through the impact and unintended consequences of collaborations can be restrained, and the integrity of the subject matter compromised. Such 'thinking through' is important, as without it our collaborations risk advancing racialised, gendered and classed conceptions of the 'good' from the standpoints of dominant ideologies, as my case study has suggested.

Hence, the first lesson drawn here is that it is necessary to cultivate a mode of collaboration that is antithetical to the neoliberal ethos; we must move beyond deliberating the *forms* and *functions* of collaborations to the contestations of *paradigms* within these ideological terrains. Certainly, securing enough resources to address the emotional, casualised and unpaid labour of collaborators, and etching out sufficient space for the thinking through process must remain key elements—but they are not enough.

Instead, I suggest that collaborations must be grounded in the notions of counter-hegemony (disrupting dominant ideologies) and decoloniality (shifting colonial/modernist structures of knowledge)¹⁴ as pillars of the alternative mode of working together. This entails foregrounding these notions in our collaborative practices and directing our collaborations at challenging dominant paradigms and knowledge constructions. To phrase it in terms of my case study, it is not just about designing *better* collaborations to teach women how to cook and sew, but having collaborations that are aimed at unsettling dominant patriarchal gender ideologies of demarcating labour and non-labour.

The other observation here is that the kinds of collaborations demonstrated in my case study usually encompassed informal collaborations that were closely tied to the formal ones in significantly non-linear ways. In fact, for the WI branch in British Malaya, it was precisely the *distance* from formal collaborations that made the working together with counterinsurgency efforts effective. There was also the exporting of academically inspired debates and models, which involved informally drawing from broader discourses to facilitate more structured forms of collaborations. The point here is that these collaborations were effective simply because they were less concerned with establishing formal collaborative projects with predetermined start and end dates, but more oriented towards fostering a community of shared values (of maintaining dominant ideologies) which adapted to different ways of working together as long as they tended towards their shared visions.

¹⁴While this suggests a critical attitude towards problematic aspects of Western, Eurocentric knowledge, it should not be conflated with a form of de-Westernisation premised on the binary of us (West) vs them (rest)—the latter can also be used to further parochial agendas.



The High Commissioner, Sir Gerald Templer (husband of Lady Templer who established the Women's Institute branch in Malaya), visiting the Ampang New Village Chinese School (The National Archives INF10/201/32)

If non-linearity and adaptability are the strategies of collaborations that have underpinned the perpetuation of dominant ideologies, then my second lesson derived here is that counter-hegemonic and decolonial collaborations cannot afford to be trapped in linear and bureaucratic modes of working together. This means moving beyond formal project-centric collaborations, preoccupied with static outputs that do not resonate across project cycles, to building communities of counter-hegemonic and decolonial values, whose forms and functions of collaborations can be adapted across the formal/informal continuum insofar as they contribute to the shared goal of resisting dominant ideologies.

More concretely, and in opposition to the culture of measurement and tangibility, experimental collaborative spaces not indexed to predetermined outputs can be nurtured. For example, this can take the form of exchange schemes that allow for a more grounded and immersive understanding of each other's work. The idea is that even if there is no immediate and tangible outputs that come out of such exchanges, the shared experiences formed may lead to unanticipated forms of working together, whether formally or informally, instantaneously or in the future. Even for formal, project-based collaborations, they can be

moored to broader objectives, while allowing for more trial-and-error in outputs and activities that do not depend on demonstrating quick and premature results.

For funding providers, the orientation should not be the mere compulsion of co-working via formal projects, but one of investing in individuals, movements and institutions in a diverse range of areas,¹⁵ while concurrently creating spaces of connections, conversations and solidarities. My case study, in a way, is a submission that dominant ideologies are rooted in the totality of histories, bound together by coloniality, patriarchy, racism, classism and imperialism—hence, decolonising academic-practitioner collaborations means countering these ideologies not as isolated events, but as the weight of histories bearing upon counter-hegemonic movements. The response to hegemony requires solidarity at all levels, including collaborations among funding organisations, not only among the more well-endowed Global North institutions, but also *with* Global South foundations, philanthropists, donors, development banks, social investors, and so on.

Finally, my case study raises some conceptual issues with the terminology 'academic-practitioner' itself. The academic-practitioner distinction implies that academia lies *outside* of practice, and that practitioners are *external* to academic processes (a less favourable interpretation is perhaps 'external to knowledge production'). Neither of which are true. Fund providers like the USDA and Ford Foundation were deeply lodged in the knowledge production cycles of academic institutions like land-grant universities in the US and the College of Agriculture at Serdang—thus, these academic institutions were similarly embroiled in hegemonic practices. Colonial authorities, local elite rulers and the WI branch in Malaya were not just "practitioners" per se, but also "knowledge producers" in how they adapted and extended the notion of domestic science to schools and adult education in British Malaya.

¹⁵ See Vu (2018) for a discussion on the lessons progressive funders can learn from conservative ones.



Inauguration ceremony at the new University of Malaya in Singapore during British colonial rule, giving a glimpse of the power hierarchy embedded within an academic institution (The National Archives INF10/201/17)

The third lesson then is that the discursive construction of academics = knowledge producers, and non-academics = practitioners, must be dismantled in how we visualise collaborations. The neoliberal university discussed by McGiffin (2021) reinforces the point that academia can be grounded in a set of unequal practices like casualisation, surveillance and ranking. On the other hand, lumping all non-academics under the umbrella category of 'practitioners' not only homogenises groups with starkly different characteristics (e.g., policy makers, civil society, funding institutions, development organisations), but also hides the distinct ways in which these groups are embedded in the knowledge production process, particularly academic research. In fact, one could even argue that academic research has always been a collaborative endeavour involving these groups, but the discursive construction of the latter as the *academic other* perhaps speaks to the need to amplify certain types of collaborations more than provide a confirmation of these distinctions.

Conclusion

I have articulated the case of domestic science/home economics in British Malaya/Malaysia as a way of unpacking the perils of academic-practitioner collaborations, pointing to the colonial logic enacted by multiple actors, and subsequently modified in postcolonial Malaysia, to sustain a string of patriarchal gender ideologies which affix women's position to the 'home' (or the 'domestic'). Reflecting on the dominant ideologies underpinning these collaborations, I have argued for an alternative collaborative paradigm centred on counter-hegemony and decoloniality, and called for a mode of collaboration that is more attuned to the character and weight of the issues being addressed. While I have maintained the use of 'academic-practitioner' throughout this paper (mainly to be consistent with the language used in the broader project in which the paper is situated) I have also raised questions pertaining to such binary conception and hinted at the untenability of the roles suggested by these binary terms. My personal preference is for collaborators to be named more specifically (for example: academic-civil society collaborations). However, where broader categories are used for reasons of brevity, I would suggest adding a disclaimer in the footnotes, or for the terminology to be marked with inverted commas, to signal a critical view of the terms adopted.

I was informed by a personal contact in the teaching profession that home economics is now an 'obsolete' subject in Malaysian schools. It has been subsumed under the new subject called Design and Technology, which has replaced the Living Skills subject since 2017.¹⁶ Although the new subject may be critically viewed as a manifestation of productivist tendencies that underpin the country's narrative of progress, it also suggests a certain degree of delinking of women's roles from the 'home,' which cannot be wholly attributed to structural change in the economy. For many years, feminist activists and women's organisations in Malaysia have fought against confining women to the domestic sphere, culminating in the recognition of women's position in the labour force in Malaysia's national development plans (Nagaraj & Yahya, 1992). 'Academic-practitioner' collaborations, advocated in the manner described above, unwittingly formed part of the contestations against the domestication of women in Malaysia, and created a broader repertoire of women's role which has helped to distance the latter from the patriarchal gender ideology underlying home economics. It suggests that, despite the weight of hegemony, resistance is not always futile.

To conclude, it is perhaps worth noting that the contours of this paper are not only shaped by a literature review and document analysis, but also patterned by my own multi-situated background as a male academic and policy researcher. I constantly turn to my own experiences in collaborative work, and use them iteratively with the research materials to

¹⁶ The Design and Technology subject is for upper primary/lower secondary schools. While home science (a rebranding of home economics) still exists in upper secondary schools, it is not a core subject.

decide what to include or exclude in the write-up, how to organise the paper, as well as the examples I chose to put forward. Hence, this paper foregrounded the standpoint of a researcher straddling between academic and policy research, but it is not difficult to imagine a more comprehensive level of engagement with the topic at hand -one that would include a rich array of arguments and reflections, if other standpoints are included. I have also not been able to set out more practical examples than I would like, but I hope the lessons articulated above serve to further these conversations. Nonetheless, drawing on my own collaborative experiences also helps me realise that I have gained as much, if not more, from my 'failed' collaborations than the purportedly more 'successful' ones. It taught me the importance of not pegging collaborations to narrowly construed notions of 'impact' as the sole parameter of their success, but rather to make more room for accommodating failures, for learning and growing from our missteps so that we can be more compassionate allies to one another.

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