

# Encountering the archival research 'field'

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*The research 'field' is not a clearly defined, Cartesian geographical space or place, nor is it restricted to places where ethnographic work is conducted. Instead, one's research 'fields' are: firstly, subjective and open to interpretations; and secondly, simultaneously existing in parallel to an ongoing understanding of one's research and epistemology, writes **Sin Yee Koh**.*

My PhD project examined migration geographies of mobile Malaysians who are tertiary-educated professionals with transnational migration experiences. One would naturally assume that the research 'field' is where ethnographic work is conducted through interviews, focus groups, or participant observation. While that is true to some extent, my research 'field' extended to archives. In fact, Malaysia's colonial history played significant roles in my research journey and subsequent research findings. In this contribution, I reflect upon my encounters with the archival research 'field', particularly in terms of how the experience shaped how I interpreted my research, and contributed towards developing my broader research agenda as an academic.

## Malaysia: A brief history

Before gaining independence in August 1957, Malaysia was under British colonial influence for about 150 years. Under the British colonial administration, various territories were governed under different arrangements. In Peninsula Malaysia, these included the Straits Settlements (Penang, Dindings, Malacca, Singapore), the Federated Malay States (Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan, Pahang), and the Unfederated Malay States (Kedah, Kelantan, Trengganu, Johor). In 1946, these various arrangements were established as the Malayan Union, a centralized British protectorate. This was dissolved in 1948, when the Federation of Malaya (all the Malay states except Singapore) was formed. In 1963, Singapore and the states of Sabah and Sarawak in East Malaysia joined the federation to form the Federation of Malaysia. In 1965, Singapore became an independent country.



The complex geopolitical history during the British colonial administration period has significant and long-lasting effects on all aspects of Malaysian social life. However, at the onset of my research, I had not anticipated the importance of this colonial history and its legacies on mobile Malaysians' migration. When I started my empirical data collection in September 2012 by visiting the 'fields' in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and London, I focused on interviewing mobile Malaysians. I collected stories and thoughts, and recorded my reflections in a research diary and [research blog](#).

## Confusion and questions

After [initial analysis of the interview transcripts](#), I found myself stuck in trying to explain why certain narrative themes persist. First, when asked about citizenship, people immediately launched into narratives of national identity, nostalgic emotions and belonging, without little mention of civic and political rights or obligations. Second, when asked about how and why they ended up where they are, the fundamental, first-move reason would by default, to pursue overseas education. Crucially, this was not only limited to tertiary education, but stretched earlier to

secondary and primary stages. Furthermore, overseas education appears to have turned into a taken-for-granted natural step people take without questioning or understanding the reasons and implications of their early-age overseas education. This is what I call a 'culture of migration' (Koh, 2014) amongst my respondents. Two important questions thus emerged: (1) Why do mobile Malaysians conceptualise citizenship primarily as (national) identity, and not as civic/political rights? (2) How and why did education become such an important factor institutionalising mobile Malaysians' migration?

### **Turning to the archival research**

It is then that I found myself entering the archival research 'field', where I found pointers to my questions. I had earlier consulted archival documents in [The National Archive in London \(TNA\)](#) before going to the field in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. My first visit to the archival 'field' was purposefully delimited – I was only searching for documents relating to 'citizenship', 'national identity' and 'nation-building' in Malaya and Singapore. Not surprisingly, I primarily encountered colonial documents relating to the Malayan Union, discussions leading towards the drafting of the Federation of Malaya constitution, and citizenship issues following the entry and exit of Singapore from the Federation of Malaysia.

The visit to TNA was followed by visits to [the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies \(ISEAS\) Library](#), [the National Archives of Singapore](#), and [the National Archives of Malaysia](#) concurrently with my 'real' fieldwork. While the collections in these archives had some overlaps with those in TNA – especially British colonial documents – they also contained other materials not found in TNA. For example, at ISEAS I looked at [private papers of H. S. Lee and David Marshall](#); at the National Archives of Singapore I listened to oral histories in the 'Communities of Singapore' project; at the National Archives of Malaysia I found documents pertaining to citizenship and brain drain.

Looking back, when I visited these archival 'fields' at the first instance, I was not explicitly thinking of using archival materials as primary data sources. I was not trained as a historian, nor was it my task to produce a systematic historiography of colonial Malaya. Instead, I went to these archival 'fields' because I wanted to read widely and expansively – to construct a landscape of contextual background upon which to situate my contemporary research findings. Little did I know that these personal encounters with archival documents would eventually shape my epistemological, theoretical, and political stance towards my research findings and broader research agenda.

My second round of visits to TNA followed the [Foreign and Commonwealth Office \(FCO\) announcements of sequential release of the 'migrated archives'](#) from April 2012 onwards. Records on Malaya were released in April 2012, while those on Singapore were released in April, September, and November 2013. My interest was piqued: would there be any new materials to shed light on colonial Malaya and Singapore? This interest was also in parallel to my awareness that I needed a more in-depth understanding of colonial history in Malaya and Singapore in order to analyse the interview data I had collected, in line with the two questions I raised above. In these subsequent visits, I consulted files relating to education, the Malayan Emergency, intelligence, electoral voting, etc. Reading these archival documents in parallel with published academic and popular literature on colonial Malayan history gave me a broader, nuanced, and critical understanding of Malaysia's history vis-à-vis what was taught in the Malaysian curriculum.

### **Why archival research 'fields' matter**

In a roundabout manner, I came to understand that my research was about using history (through archival research) as a lens to understand contemporary migration in Malaysia (through interview conversations). My usage of primary archival sources, as opposed to complete reliance on secondary historical research, is methodologically important. This is because encountering archival documents firsthand accords a more intimate understanding of history at the personal level. For example, my reading of British colonial officers' reports in the archives inspired feelings of anger and injustice about the long-lasting effects of colonialism on Malaysia's contemporary migration. The concurrent insights to this historical context and the contemporary state of affairs (e.g. a culture of migration that perpetuates certain beliefs and practices; the structural obstacles preventing return and smooth transitions into the Malaysian

workforce and economy) left me [deeply angered and at an impasse](#). In the context of my PhD thesis, this steered me to interpret my respondents' culture of migration as a consequence of British colonial legacies inherited and exacerbated by the postcolonial Malaysian state.

More importantly, the feeling of injustice compelled me to theorise mobile Malaysians' migration through a postcolonial analysis, which enabled me to speak to the literature about colonialism, race, and migration. This approach, which I decided to take after [drafting my thesis three times](#), is my deliberate attempt to speak about the long-lasting effects of colonialism, beyond what we already know about the construction of race (Manickam, 2009, 2012), political systems and the uneven distribution of political power (Mamdani, 2001; Nasr, 2001), the international development industry (Kothari, 2006), etc.

## Conclusion

My encounters with the archival 'field' led me to become an ['accidental historian'](#). Multiple-crossings between the archival and ethnographic 'fields' enabled me to [draw connections between the past, present, and future](#). Through this process, I have gained a cross-temporal perspective in understanding the legacies of colonialism, specifically in the context of contemporary migration. This was an unexpected outcome of my research journey, yet one that has been instrumental in formulating my research approach in my PhD project specifically, as well as my broader research agenda more generally.

Drawing from my experiences, I would like to suggest that the research 'field' is not a clearly defined, Cartesian geographical space or place, nor is it restricted to places where ethnographic work is conducted. Instead, one's research 'fields' are: firstly, subjective and open to interpretations; and secondly, simultaneously existing in parallel to an ongoing understanding of one's research and epistemology.

Ultimately, there is no one objective and conclusive explanation to social phenomena. As social science researchers, all that we can do is to discover alternative and multiple positional approaches, in contributing collectively towards a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of our changing worlds.

## References

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Nasr, S. V. R. (2001) *The Islamic leviathan: Islam and the making of state power*. New York: Oxford University Press

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Science (LSE) in January 2014.

## Related Publications

I am in the process of publishing from this project. I started a [research blog](#) when I went to the field in September 2012. Writings emerging from this project include:

- Koh, S. Y. (forthcoming) Diasporic 'Unbelonging' to Malaysia and Singapore: Second-Generation Malaysian-Chinese Migrants in Singapore. In Y. W. Chan, D. Haines, J. H. X. Lee (Eds.) *The Age of Asian Migration: Continuity, Diversity, and Susceptibility*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing;
- Koh, S. Y. (2012) Brain Drain or Banal Everyday Lives: Malaysians (and Ex-Malaysians) Negotiating Emotional Geographies of Diasporic Citizenship and Mobilities. In M. H. Shah & S. Hassan (Eds.) *MSC8 Proceedings: Selected Full Papers* (pp. 141–158). Kajang: Malaysian Social Science Association;
- Koh, S. Y. (2012) [Numbers Matter, Don't They?](#) Outstation: For Malaysians Abroad, Returnees and Everyone In-Between. 25 April;
- Koh, S. Y. (2012). [Everyday Lives of the Malaysian Diaspora](#). New Mandala: New Perspectives on Mainland Southeast Asia. College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University (ANU). 11 January