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Beyond a Racialized Representation of Colonial Quarantine: Recollecting the Many Pasts of St. John's Island, Singapore

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The COVID-19 pandemic has revived the interest in quarantine, a worldwide-adopted measure to tackle the disease. 'Quarantine' refers to the spatial segregation and restriction of the movement of those people (suspected to be) exposed to infection (Cetron et al. 2004; Peckham 2016; Yip 2012). In the COVID-19 pandemic, we have witnessed practices similar to maritime quarantine in the past, including 'keeping the disease at bay' and using offshore islands as institutionalized quarantine facilities. In Singapore, an outdoor education camp on Pulau Ubin, an island off the northeast of Singapore Island, was chosen to be a quarantine facility (Cheow 2020). Some returnees were housed in luxury hotels on Sentosa, a military-base-turned-resort-island (Mokhtar and Mookerjee 2020). Historically, the colonial government designated another island south of Singapore Island, St. John's Island (Pulau Sekijang Bendera in Malay), as the territory's principal quarantine station.

Similar to many of Singapore's offshore islands, St. John's Island[1] is often branded as a destination for ecotourism and as a 'rustic' 'getaway' (Fang 2016; Zaccheus and Ee 2013; Ng 2018). Historically, together with Pulau Jerejak off Penang, St. John's Island was designated as a quarantine station, or lazaretto, mainly for migrants to and returning Hajj pilgrims of the Straits Settlements and wider British Malaya. St. John's quarantine station was once coined the largest quarantine station in the British Empire. Later, the colonial and postcolonial governments also used the island to intern prisoners of war (POWs) and political detainees, for drug rehabilitation, and to accommodate Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s. The quarantine station was formally closed in 1976. Some of the quarantine station's foundations and structures are still there today, and some dormitories are currently used as holiday chalets.

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This chapter repositions St. John's Island in the context of the commemoration of quarantine. In some settler colonies, former quarantine stations such as New York's Ellis Island, San Francisco's Angel Island, and Sydney's North Head have been (partially) preserved and transformed from 'places of pain and shame' into museums, sites of commemoration, or destinations of ('dark') tourism (Logan and Reeves 2009; Desforges and Maddern 2004; Bashford et al. 2016; Bashford 2016). Yet, in

[1] St. John's Island is now connected via a causeway with Lazarus Island (Pulau Sekijang Pelepah) and Seringat Island (Pulau Renget).

Singapore, the history and experience of quarantine is virtually non-existent in the official narrative of the country and in mainstream public memory, except a few mentions on the island's trail markings and on some guided tours. Unlike how the Singaporean postcolonial state appropriates war memories and related sites for nation building, the memory of quarantine is generally untouched in Singapore's official narrative, even though there are remaining quarantine structures (Blackburn and Hack 2012). That being said, an underlying memory of being quarantined on St. John's Island (known as *Kî-chiun-san* 棋樟山/淇漳山 [pinyin: *Qizhangshan*] by Hokkien speakers), or colloquially *kìm Ku-sū* 禁龜嶼 (pinyin: *jin Guiyu*; 'detained at Tortoise Island'),[2] is found in both oral history conducted in the 1980s and popular history written in Chinese and published in recent years. Though recorded in different periods of time, these oral and popular histories in Chinese often racialize the quarantine experience as a shared experience of 'Chinese' suffering (Ho 2013; Loo 2018; Yu 2019), with little mention of other ethnic groups' experiences.

It was true that many ethnic Chinese migrants were subjected to poor quarantine experiences. It was also true that the Chinese consuls-general and local Chinese elites in Singapore played important roles in improving the quarantine situation (Wong 2009). However, I argue that quarantine in Singapore was not a racialized practice per se that singled out the Chinese; class rather than race often determined the different treatments in the quarantine process. This class-based differentiation in treatment, unfortunately, is still found in twenty-first-century disease control. To represent quarantine on St. John's Island as a racialized suffering and humiliation is, at best, unfair, and overlooks other ethnic groups' experiences locally. Even worse, transnationally, China easily manipulates the racialized representation to reinforce their nationalistic narrative of humiliation and victimhood (Edwards 2019). To rescue the memory of the island from racialized politics (see the editors' introduction to this volume), it is necessary to better understand St. John's Island's operational logic by looking beyond quarantine. Through archival materials, old newspapers, and other available materials, this chapter recollects the many pasts of St. John's Island.[3] I will illustrate how both the colonial and postcolonial states have been using the island to incarcerate various 'problem populations', similar to prisons and internment camps (see also Lachlan Barber's and Tomoko Ako's chapters in this volume).

Positioning Singapore's Quarantine Island in the Global Context of Commemoration

[2] Kusu Island (Pulau Kusu) is another island near St. John's Island. Quarantine did not take place on Kusu per se. Yet the process of quarantine on St. John's was (and somehow has still been) colloquially referred to as *kìm Ku-sū* (Yu 2019).

[3] Stories of former residents of St. John's and nearby islands have been recorded and documented in the Island Nation project, accessible at: http://islandnation.sg/.

By the late nineteenth century, many places had adopted various quarantine measures for goods and/or people. Yet quarantine was not adopted in a universal manner (Bashford 2016; Yip 2012). The modern history of quarantine often intertwined with the history of migration. As a place of segregation, confinement, and containment, quarantine facilities were set up to regulate the movements of people and goods, particularly the former. Arriving populations were regarded as potential 'problem populations' and were 'subjected to and subjectified by treatments that spanned correction, care and control' when in isolation (Strange and Bashford 2003, 1). For the quarantined, islands were often chosen as sites 'for reception into a society as well as target[s] for expulsion from it' (Tunbridge 2005, 22) because of their locations (Mountz 2011); in the case of St. John's Island, it was chosen for its distance from Singapore Island and the town proper. Samantha Muller et al. (2009, 782) suggest that quarantine practices 'are a key way in which borders are constructed as exclusionary markers', in defining inclusion and exclusion of a community, which often reinforces particular sets of perception and prejudices. In settler societies such as Australia and the US, quarantine allowed the imagination of a 'clean' and 'white' settlement. It policed a border determining internal and external, clean and dirty, often conflated with race. Accordingly, the 'clean' and 'white' settlers/settlement needed to be protected from the 'contamination' of infectious diseases brought by 'inferior' and 'filthy' Asiatic races (Bashford 1998; Muller et al. 2009; Markel and Stern 2002; Dolmage 2011).

Due to their similarity in terms of isolation, quarantine sites are easily transformed from sites of preventive measures to facilities of punishment (prisons, penal colonies) or 'benevolent' protective asylum (sanatoria, leprosy colonies); or the other way around (Strange and Bashford 2003; Bashford 2016; Gibby 2018; Por 2017). In the contemporary commemoration of quarantine and heritagization of decommissioned quarantine facilities, exemplified by settler societies such as Australia and the US, histories and experiences of migration and detention are common themes. The sites where immigrants were once detained and even buried become the places to commemorate the history of migration and rectify past injustice, be it through either official commemoration or bottom-up appropriation of the preserved sites (Bashford et al. 2016; Desforges and Maddern 2004). Scholars have also recognized that the preserved sites of former quarantine facilities allow visitors to discover untold stories and diversify the narratives of the sites themselves, for instance, through inscriptions on the remaining structures or grave markers or oral history collections (Bashford and Hobbins 2015).

The modern nation-state of Singapore has been accustomed to reappropriating difficult memories and heritage. The Fall of Singapore and the Japanese occupation have been pressed into a narrative of self-reliance and mobilized for nation building. War-related sites are also heritagized to

ensure remembrance (Blackburn and Hack 2012; Muzaini and Yeoh 2016). Similarly, the 'racial riots' in 1964 are transmitted by the state as a reminder of the importance of racial harmony and tolerance in Singapore (Cheng 2001). Yet despite Singapore's immigration history, quarantine experiences do not enter into the official narrative. There is a lack of official commemoration of quarantine or any attempts to heritagize the former quarantine station on St. John's Island. Yet while the St. John's Island station is not heritagized, neither does the government deliberately leave the site in a state of disrepair to demonstrate a 'triumph' over a 'tragic chapter' in its history (Leineweber 2009, 234). Unlike how other former quarantine stations have been mobilized to create a platform of inter-minority solidarity (Bashford et al. 2016) or to arouse empathy towards refugees and asylum-seekers in the present (Nethery 2009), the underlying racialized representation of the St. John's Island quarantine station reinforces a sense of Chinese victimhood and exceptionalism rather than creating possibilities for interracial solidarity and the rectification of past injustice. The racialized representation of quarantine in Singapore does not contribute much to understanding if there is a continuation of colonial prejudice in the postcolonial era, either.

St. John's Island as a Quarantine Station

As colonial port cities, the Straits Settlements' prosperity relied on the contributions and migratory flows of different ethnic groups (Sham 2017). The colonial government in the Straits Settlements/Singapore was not interested in building a white settler colony but was much concerned about the possibility of epidemic in the region. They were afraid that migrants and travellers circulating in the region and returning Hajj pilgrims might carry and spread contagious diseases. Thus, potentially infected ships and passengers were quarantined on offshore islands of Singapore (St. John's Island) and Penang (Pulau Jerejak).

The St. John's Island quarantine station was opened in 1874, one year after severe cholera broke out in Singapore, allegedly imported from Bangkok (*Straits Observer* 1875; Ng 2018). The colonial authority chose St. John's Island and nearby Lazarus Island as the sites for quarantine stations because they were isolated and 'outside the limit of the port' (*Straits Times Overland Journal* 1879). It was also claimed that the two islands could respectively house the sick and those under observation. In the long run, St. John's Island would eventually be fully developed into a quarantine island, with multiple camps and other facilities to screen and accommodate more than 6,000 people. It was used to quarantine those suspected of being infected or exposed to contagious diseases including smallpox, cholera, chickenpox, measles, leprosy, and beriberi (which was believed to be contagious at the time). Meanwhile, Lazarus Island would be the burial ground for those who did not survive the quarantine (*Nanyang siang pau* 1924; *Straits Times* 1935; *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* 1914). Yet, back in 1874, the lazaretto on St. John's Island was barely

completed in time to accommodate passengers from an infected ship that had departed from the Chinese port city of Swatow (Shantou) (Ng 2018). Despite early scepticism of the quarantine station's usefulness, in the long run, many incoming ships were inspected or quarantined there before entering the port of Singapore (*Straits Observer* 1875; *Straits Times Overland Journal* 1879).

The quarantine station on St. John's Island screened immigrants mainly from China and India and Muslim pilgrims returning from Hajj. European, Siamese, and Japanese passengers were also quarantined there. Occasionally, people from Singapore Island were sent to quarantine there. Initially, different wards were set up for Europeans and non-Europeans, but in the long run, class, as indicated by the class of an individual's travel, rather than race, determined treatment in the quarantine (Ng 2018). This class-based differentiation of treatment was also rooted in the Straits Settlements' legislation. The legal definition of a 'Chinese immigrant' did not refer to any person migrated from China. Instead, the determination was class-based, explicitly referring to someone brought from China and 'not being the first or second class passengers' (*Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* 1894). Passengers travelling on first- and second-class tickets, even though they travelled from an infected port, were often subjected to faster screening. Many of them were free to leave after inspection and vaccination (*Nanyang siang pau* 1935a, 1935b). If quarantine was required, they were often housed in better accommodation: a room with a bed, desk, lamp, seat, and wardrobe (*Nanyang siang pau* 1938a, 1939b). One record of a luxurious quarantine arrangement comes from January 1939. The Siamese king was quarantined on St. John's Island as he was travelling on a ship infected with smallpox. Unlike ordinary folks, he stayed at the medical officer's official residence and could use the swimming pool (*Nanyang siang pau* 1939a).

In contrast, passengers on the lower decks were often subjected to a long quarantines, taking anywhere from a few days up to even a week, usually in crowded and humiliating conditions. New arrivals were collectively sprayed with disinfectants. Newspaper articles from the 1920s and 1930s and later oral history accounts from both the Chinese and Indian communities in Singapore recorded the poor conditions of migrants and their quarantine experiences: poorly-constructed jetties, a lack of lampposts along the path between the jetty and the quarantine station, limited water supply, and overcrowded dormitories and disinfection facilities, among other hygiene issues (*Nanyang siang pau* 1927).[4] As many Chinese immigrants (*sinkeh*) were in steerage and subjected to extended quarantine processes, both local Chinese elites and Chinese consul-generals inspected the quarantine facilities. They also petitioned to the colonial government to improve the conditions. The

[4] 'Interviews of Saravana Perumal', interview by Daniel Chew, 1983, accession number 000335, Communities of Singapore (Part 2), Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore; 'Interview with Teo Choon Hong', interview by Tan Beng Luan, 1983, accession number 000328, Japanese Occupation of Singapore, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore.

conditions were gradually improved by 1940 (*Nanyang siang pau* 1940a). Unfortunately, in the immediate post-World War II years, complaints of the quarantine station's poor conditions, made by the quarantined communities and foreign consulates, re-emerged (*Nanyang siang pau* 1947a, 1947b, 1947c).[5] Likewise, in his oral history account of the 'bad impression' he had of St. John's Island quarantine station, Saravana Perumal, a Tamil migrant from Sri Lanka, narrated that he and his fellow passengers were 'locked up' in a crowded camp, infested with centipedes and cockroaches.[6]

Despite all the criticisms, the St. John's Island and Pulau Jerejak quarantine stations contributed significantly to preventing major infectious disease from reaching British Malaya. The colonial government even regarded the St. John's Island quarantine station with pride, as a success of the colony and the empire. A model and annotated photographs of the quarantine station, then the largest in the British Empire, were displayed at the Malay Pavilion of the British Empire Exhibition in 1924, after a short period of display locally at a department store in Singapore (*Nanyang siang pau* 1924; *Straits Times* 1924). The *Lancet* noted how the quarantine station helped 'to localize epidemics likely to be spread by sea-borne traffic' ('British Empire Exhibition' 1924, 1022). Due to the quarantine system, British Malaya was generally free from serious outbreaks of disease even as the rest of the East Asia was facing serious epidemics (*Nanyang siang pau* 1936). In contrast to Chinese-language newspapers' repeating of stories of the questionable conditions and deaths in Singapore quarantine facilities, English-language newspapers published articles praising the quarantine station. Besides the achievements in public health, these articles also implied that the 'immigrants' in the quarantine were well treated. The author of a 1926 article praised the quarantine system in Singapore as 'an achievement of which every resident in this country [Britain] may be proud', and as one which kept the colony 'practically free from' smallpox and cholera. The author even suggested that the colony's port health authority could 'teach our American friends some lessons in the matters of good manners, consideration of strangers, and simple commonsense', implying that the people in the quarantine were well treated (*Singapore Free Press* 1926). Similarly, another article published in the *Straits Times* in 1935 praised the St. John's Island quarantine station as 'a miniature world of beauty'. The author even suggested that a medical officer had referred to St. John's Island as 'Singapore's natural health resort' ('Our Shipping Correspondent' 1935). In addition to its scientific success, the colonialist description of the island's 'beauty' generally referred to its natural environment, which was quite often far from the experience of the poorer quarantined immigrants. The author attempted to create an image of a

[5] When St. John's Island was once again used as a quarantine station after World War II, there were other residents living on the island.
[6] 'Interviews of Saravana Perumal', p. 95.

humane, benevolent, and pleasant quarantine for the better-off, English-speaking communities, who were unlikely to have travelled in steerage and thus were unlikely to have been quarantined in the island's crowded dormitories.

By understanding the differentiation in treatment in the St. John's Island quarantine station in terms of class, it is also possible to locate how disease control in twenty-first-century Singapore has been uncannily similar to the colonial practice. During the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003, low-wage foreign workers were subjected to a mandatory fourteen-day quarantine in an isolated location, while foreign professionals ('expats') were asked to undertake a ten-day voluntary (home) quarantine (Teo, Yeoh, and Ong 2005). During the COVID-19 pandemic, while Singaporean returnees and returning professional 'expats' from overseas were quarantined in luxury resort hotels (Mokhtar and Mookerjee 2020), low-wage migrant workers were confined in overcrowded dormitories, which became hotbeds for infection (Sim and Kok 2020). Such examples indicate that while there is no longer a maritime quarantine station on St. John's Island, colonial class-based quarantine practices have found a way to sustain themselves in twenty-first-century Singapore.

The Racialization of Victimhood and Humiliation

As discussed earlier, class played a significant role in determining how people were treated in the St. John's Island quarantine station. As many immigrants from China arrived at Singapore on lower decks or in steerage, many were subjected to extended quarantines and housed in dormitories of poor conditions. It is understandable that the quarantined people would feel that the system was oppressive, inhumane, and humiliating, and show distrust in the medical reasons for their containment. It is also undeniable that there were some cases conflating quarantine regulation and race-based immigration restriction, due to a connection 'between Chinese movement and disease anxieties' in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries (Bashford 2020), both within and beyond British Malaya. The Prevention of Disease Ordinance, 1894, for instance, enacted a class-based restriction on arrivals of the 'Chinese immigrants' or 'Chinese coolies' brought by 'Chinese immigrant ships' from China, French Indochina, Borneo, and Siam, due to the outbreak of plague in Hong Kong and some parts of China (*Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* 1894; *The Straits Times* 1894). According to the report of the Chinese ambassador to London, after the legislation, Chinese males and females arriving at Singapore were ordered to strip themselves for medical examination during the quarantine.[7] After the petition of the Chinese consul-general in Singapore, the colonial government ordered that passengers arriving from epidemic ports would no

[7] It is unclear about the origin of this legal power. I am unable to find any description from the said ordinance.

longer be required to do so (Wong 2009; Kwa and Kua 2019). In this specific case, in which class-specific 'Chinese immigrants' were specifically targeted, it was reasonable for Chinese intellectuals and officials to criticize the colonial humiliation towards the Chinese. Yet, it is also important to point out that in Hong Kong and ports in China there were frequent outbreaks of infectious disease (Ee 1961). Thus it is ill-defined as to whether such measures were predominantly targeting the diseases or the race, when the geographies of outbreaks aligned as such, especially Singapore had a comparatively laissez-faire policy towards Chinese immigration under normal circumstances (Ee 1961; Bashford 2020). Yet, the general quarantine requirements that Chinese travellers faced, especially those in steerage, would further reinforce the impression of racialized victimhood and humiliation.

However, there were circumstances in which poor treatment and particularly outrageous cases of mistreatment in the quarantine station were weaponized to make a case for racialized victimhood, suffering, and humiliation, and even for different versions of Chinese nationalism, both then and now, from within Singapore and from China. In the first decade of the twentieth century, there were a few accusations of Chinese women suffering sexual harassment and assault at the quarantine station. In one case, a Sikh police officer was convicted and sentenced for assaulting a Chinese girl, but later his conviction was quashed on appeal. In the judicial process, an unnamed Chinese newspaper was accused of searching out sensations and outrages related to the quarantine station (*Straits Times* 1906; *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* 1906; *Lat pau* 1906a, 1906b). After the incident, some people manipulated the situation to call for Chinese *towkays* to dismiss and not to employ Sikh ('Bengali') employees. Even the General Chinese Trade Affairs Association (GCTAA, now the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry) made a statement that their guards were Turkish, not 'Bengali' (*Lat pau* 1906c). Local Chinese elites attempted to pacify the situation. The GCTAA distanced itself from the call for a boycott and declared that they would fully support the colonial government's measures to improve the quarantine station's conditions (*Lat pau* 1906d). Members of the Singapore Chinese Advisory Board published a statement to oppose the racial boycott and condemned the rumours. They also reminded the Chinese population that, as foreigners, they should not discriminate against British subjects (Indians) on British land. Meanwhile, they also negotiated with the colonial authority to inspect the quarantine station and proposed to employ Chinese-speaking staff on the island for better communication with Chinese immigrants (Song 1923).

Throughout the history of St. John's Island quarantine station, local Chinese elites performed the role of pacifying Chinese discontent so as to avoid any escalation of incidents and rumours related to the quarantine station, especially when this appeared to be headed in the direction of

racial victimhood or nationalism. Besides inspecting the general condition of the quarantine station, they also clarified misunderstandings and rumours related to the quarantine station. For instance, Ching Kee Sun曾紀辰 clarified that the inspection measures for leprosy were not Chinese-exclusive but performed across different races. He also clarified that the rumour that male doctors were examining naked female passengers was inaccurate (*Nanyang siang pau* 1938b, 1940c). As Wong Sin Kiong (2009) remarks, there were political tensions among the colonial government, local Chinese elites, and Chinese consuls-general. The colonial government would rather let local Chinese elites, their conventional collaborators (Law 2009), than the Chinese consul-general be credited among the Chinese population. In other words, by actively pacifying the situation, local Chinese elites were preventing other political forces from politicizing the poor conditions in the quarantine station.

Although the Singapore state-sponsored oral history project (the Oral History Centre at the National Archives of Singapore) did not commission the collection of the memory of quarantine per se, memories and stories of St. John's Island quarantine station were touched upon by interviewees across different races in their oral history accounts commissioned for other projects. Some interviewees were either those who had been quarantined on St. John's Island or personnel related to the quarantine station. In oral history accounts by both migrants from China and India, interviewees accounted that poor migrants travelling on bunks and decks were subjected to extended quarantines on St. John's Island, but not those better-off, first- and second-class passengers.[8] While many of them described their experiences and emotional feelings ,[9] some took a racialized approach. Speaking in Hokkien, prominent businessman Ng Aik Huan recalled 'the history of blood and tears of Chinese immigration to Singapore'. Ng criticized the humiliating quarantine process as an abuse to the Chinese. He said,

> In name, it was about hygiene. In reality, it was to abuse us Chinese nationals [*Tiong-kok-lâng / Zhongguo ren* 中國人]. In particular, to abuse the ethnic Chinese [*Hôa-jîn* / *huaren* 華人]. Because China did not have diplomacy or politics. . . . Overseas Chinese [*Hôa-kiâu* /

[8] 'Interview with Jaswant Singh Gill (Lieutenant-Colonel) (Retired)', interview by Jason Lim, 2001, accession number 002532, The Public Service, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore; 'Interview with Maria Ng Boon Kheng', interview by Ang Siew Ghim, 1985, accession number 000525, Women through the Years: Economic & Family Lives, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore.

[9] See, for example: 'Interview with Ng Lee Kar', interview by Choo Beng Hiang, 1982, accession number 000165, Chinese Dialect Groups, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore; 'Interview with Heng Siew Hiok', interview by Ang Siew Ghim, 1984, accession Number 000442, Chinese Dialect Groups, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore; 'Interview with Jaswant Singh Gill'; 'Interviews of Saravana Perumal'.

huaqiao 華僑] were like orphans living under another's roof, without parents to whom to complain.[10]

A more obvious narrative of racialized suffering and humiliation can be found in popular history writings. In these writings, authors often imply or create an impression that quarantine on St. John's Island was a 'Chinese' experience, with little mention that other races were also quarantined there and underwent similar sufferings (e.g., Leung 1987; Ho 2013; Lee 2017; Loo 2018; Yu 2019). They often neglect that quarantine measures also took place in Chinese ports before embarkation (Chung 2014). The circulation of popular history of a racialized quarantine experience ignores the experiences of other races in the quarantine station, which might not have been any better than those of the Chinese, as narrated in the oral history accounts by migrants from India.

The racialized representation of quarantine, perhaps unsurprisingly, also comes from the contemporary Chinese state. The People's Republic of China is no stranger to 'victimhood nationalism', i.e., building a strong sense of national solidarity through the position of victimhood, which often turns into a competition over which nation has suffered most (Lim 2010, 2011). War memories have been enshrined into a narrative of national humiliation and manipulated to justify the party-state's nationalistic agenda (Wang 2008). Recently, China has further attempted to exploit past injustices faced by ethnic Chinese outside China for its own benefit (Shih 2011; Edwards 2019). In short, China is more than willing to transnationally weaponize Southeast Asian Chinese 'victimhood' to justify its own victimhood nationalism.

The St. John's Island quarantine station is mentioned in *South of the Ocean* (*Xia Nanyang* 下南洋), a documentary series on Chinese migration to Southeast Asia (the '*Nanyang*') broadcast on state-controlled China Central Television (CCTV). The quarantine station is presented as part of the hardship and suffering of ethnic Chinese who migrated to Southeast Asia (Zhou and Zhu 2013). In episode 3, blending photos of the St. John's Island quarantine station's remaining structures with animated illustrations, the narrator describes the disinfection process in detail, emphasising disinfection, sickness, and death: 'They were driven to a shed, and showered with sulphur water. Whoever had a fever would be brought away. Cholera and malaria patients were cramped in a prison-like room. On a daily basis, they brought in new patients and brought out the death.' After two interviews on the quarantine and vaccination experiences, the narrator continues, 'Quarantine on St. John's Island was not medical welfare as we understand today. The result is a crude judgment

[10] 'Interview with Ng Aik Huan', interview by Tan Ban Huat and Tan Beng Luan, 1981, accession number 000035, Japanese Occupation of Singapore, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, pp. 3–4. Author's translation.

of permission or rejection to enter. Those who survived would receive a landing permit, but this is not the end. This is the beginning of new suffering.'[11] The documentary creates an impression for the audience, many of them in China, that quarantine was an exclusively Chinese experience. It also exaggerates the horror and death. Overall, the narrative is that the story of Chinese migrants to Southeast Asia was full of pain, humiliation, and horror, of which the suffering in the quarantine was merely one aspect. Through the documentary series, the racialized connection of Southeast Asian Chinese and modern China is emphasized. The trauma and suffering of Southeast Asian Chinese are understood in racialized terms. This racialized notion of common Chinese suffering reinforces China's claim on victimhood nationalism and diminishes spaces for local nuance to be heard (Edwards 2019). When ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia racialize difficult memories of pain and shame, contemporary China takes it as a further example of the suffering and humiliation of 'our nation' and 'our people', which further fuels China's narrative of victimhood nationalism. The localness of Southeast Asia becomes merely a backdrop.

St. John's Island as a Site of Isolation and Screening

Rather than singling out the quarantine station and Chinese immigrants, bringing in the other compatible pasts of St. John's Island helps us to better understand its operational logic. Developing from Strange and Bashford (2003) and Tunbridge (2005), I argue that St. John's Island was a site of isolation, where 'problem populations' were confined and 'subjected to and subjectified by treatment that spanned correct, care and control' (Strange and Bashford 2003, 1), so as to determine inclusion or exclusion. If the memory of St. John's Island is considered difficult, it is probably not only the poor condition of the quarantine but also that the island was a site to isolate and screen various kinds of 'problem populations' to determine whether they would be included or excluded. St. John's Island has also been used as a POW camp, a prison for political detainees, a drug rehabilitation centre, and a refugee camp over a period spanning colonial Singapore and its independence as a nation-state. The case of St. John's Island case is complicated by the fact that there were other residents living side by side with these facilities from time to time. In other words, it gradually transformed from an isolation site per se to a site for a more specific, confined form of isolation.

After the outbreak of World War II and before Japanese occupation, German, Italian, Russian, and, later, Japanese civilians were transferred to intern on St. John's Island, either behind the quarantine station or at some of the barracks established for quarantine purpose (*Nanyang siang pau* 1939c, 1940b; Ng 2018). By interning civilian POWs side by side with people exposed to

[11] Zhou Bing 周兵 and Zhu Jie 祝捷, *Xia Nanyang* 下南洋 [South of the ocean] (television series), 2013, episode 3. Quotations are based on the author's own transcription of the broadcast.

infectious disease, the British colonial government effectively regarded both as 'problem populations' that could be confined and isolated side by side, even though the POWs were not exposed to infectious disease. The difference was that people exposed to disease would be released when they were no longer regarded as disease carriers, while the enemies would only be 'corrected' after the war was over. After Japan occupied Singapore, the civilian POWs were released. Ironically, compatible with the Chinese racialized representation of suffering in the quarantine, the Japanese propaganda also weaponized the 'inhumane' 'horror' stories of POWs' internment on St. John's Island as an 'evidence' of the enemy's cruelty. *Syonan shimbun*, a Japanese propaganda newspaper, published reports of Japanese civilians interned by the British which stated that the Japanese civilian internees on St. John's Island were given maggot-filled and 'half-rotten salted fish' that was 'barely sufficient to sustain life' (Kaite 1942).

After World War II, despite a noticeable number of local residents on St. John's Island, the quarantine station continued to operate. Some parts were transformed for prison use. After the British colonial government declared an 'Emergency' in Malaya and Singapore in 1948, many anti-colonists, radicals, leftists, and those accused of being 'communists' were imprisoned there as political prisoners (*Singapore Free Press* 1948; Aljunied 2012). Parts of the quarantine station were converted into a prison, stationed with armed guards (*The Straits Times* 1948). St. John's Island's equivalent in Penang, Pulau Jerejak, also underwent a similar transformation. Many detainees on St. John's Island were transferred from other prisons on Singapore Island. Detainees were also transferred between places in British Malaya (Aljunied 2012; Gibby 2018). One can argue that in viewing St. John's Island as a place to exile dissidents, the colonial government was if treating St. John's Island as the British once had Singapore, where British India exiled their convicts, or Australia, where Britain banished their undesired subjects (Pieris 2009; Tunbridge 2005). The detainees on St. John's Island during the 'Emergency' included left-wing students, trade unionists, and journalists. Some became important figures in the later ruling People's Action Party (PAP) (Aljunied 2012).[12] During Operation Coldstore in 1963, many arrestees were also detained on St. John's Island (*The Straits Times* 1963). Imprisonment and detention on islands was not uncommon in the region at that time. Pulau Jerejak was transformed into a high-security prison after 1969 (Gibby 2018). A failed experiment of transforming an offshore island, Pulau Senang, into a penal settlement took place in the late 1950s and 1960s (Josey 2020). As an island of detention for 'problem populations', political dissidents or 'communists' were separated from the major population and confined in isolation for

[12] 'Interview with Chengara Veetil Devan Nair', interview by Audrey Lee-Koh Mei Chen and Tan Kay Chee, 1981, accession number 000049, Political History of Singapore, 1945–1965, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore; 'Interview with Sidney Woodhull', interview by How Seng Lim, 1985, accession number 000572, Political History of Singapore, 1945–1965, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore.

screening. They would face either a further expulsion or 'treatments' and 'corrections' before they would once again be allowed back into society.

Another prison-like use of St. John's Island, yet once again with a medical turn, was as an opium treatment centre (and later general drug rehabilitation centre) which opened in the 1950s (Leong, Poh, and Gandevia 1970). The centre was a facility of both imprisonment and treatment. After receiving primary treatment in prison hospitals on Singapore Island, internees were transferred to St. John's Island for further treatment and rehabilitation. St. John's Island was chosen in particular because it was a 'quiet and restful' place isolated from Singapore Island, 'away from it all' (*Straits Times* 1953). Through confinement on an offshore island, the centre not only aimed at weaning the internees' off their addictions but also training them with skills for their future reintegration into society. They were assigned and instructed in trades and encouraged to participate in various recreational activities. Through the 'rehabilitation and re-education' scheme, medical doctors hoped that internees would learn how to deal with their problems and reintegrate into society without drugs (Glatt and Koon 1961; Perumal 1983). In short, the 'problem population' was confined and isolated so that medical treatment and rehabilitation could take place. The expectation here was that they would once again be integrated into society, although the effectiveness remained a question (Reutens and Wang 1976; Perumal 1983).

In the 1970s, another wave of migrants was screened on St. John's Island. This time, Singapore had little intention of integrating them after their isolation on St. John's Island. Following the final stage of the Second Indochina War, refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia fled to other Southeast Asian countries, acting as a 'first asylum'. Between May and October 1975, St. John's Island was used to temporarily accommodate the Vietnamese refugees.[13] For the Singaporean government, the country was small and had limited capacity to receive refugees. Thus Singapore capped the number of refugees that they would temporarily accommodate, while asylum was sought for them in other countries (*New York Times* 1978; Frost 1980; Yuen 1990). In the late 1990s, a similar plan took place on St. John's Island (by then an island mainly for recreational use) in anticipation of potential refugees from Indonesia after the turmoil in 1998. The Singaporean government planned to house the potential refugees in the houses on the St. John's Island and constructed a new row of toilets. Although the exodus of Indonesians did not happen, the newly constructed toilets remained, as a marker that St. John's Island was once again chosen as the site to screen another wave of potential 'problem populations'. That said, many holidaying island-hoppers do not know why these structures were built.

[13] In 1978, Singapore opened another Vietnamese refugee camp in a former naval base in Sembawang in northern Singapore (Yuen 1990).

Conclusion

Due to the decline of sea-borne mass immigration and the improving hygiene conditions of ships, there were calls for reviewing the necessity of quarantine in the early 1970s (*Nanyang siang pau* 1971). Amid the increasing popularity of offshore islands as getaway destinations for Singaporeans living on Singapore Island, the government planned to develop St. John's Island and nearby islands for tourism and recreational use (*Straits Times* 1976a, 1976b; *Sin chew jit pao* 1975, 1976). The quarantine station and other detention facilities on St. John's Island were eventually closed in 1976, while the villagers of St. John's, Lazarus, and Seringat islands were relocated to Singapore Island between 1976 and 1977. Even though St. John's Island and the nearby islands were not developed as a resort as the 1970s and 1980s plans had proposed, the now-connected islands are still a popular destination for weekend getaways and yacht parties. They are also the location marine laboratory. Nevertheless, the history of the islands is disconnected from their current use, apart from texts on a few boards and the ongoing use of some remaining structures of the former quarantine station for recreational camping.

As illustrated in this chapter, unlike some settler societies, Singapore does not incorporate its quarantine history into its official nation-building narrative, and former quarantine sites have not been heritagized into sites of commemoration. While acknowledging the quarantine station's contribution to disease control, there was certainly injustice in the colonial quarantine system in Singapore. The class-based differentiation of treatment in the colonial quarantine station on St. John's Island was definitely an injustice that needs to be addressed, especially when, unfortunately, there are uncanny similarities found in twenty-first-century disease control in Singapore. Yet the racialization of class-based injustice as a form of suffering and humiliation particular to ethnic Chinese, as represented in the undercurrents of popular history, is unproductive. At the local level, it ignores the similarly poor situations faced by other ethnic groups and does not help to rectify past wrongdoings. At the transnational level, it provides room for the Chinese state's narrative of victimhood nationalism, which turns Singapore and Southeast Asia into merely a backdrop and the ethnic Chinese living there into a pawn of China's political interests.

By bringing in other isolation and detention uses beyond quarantine, I visualize the colonial logic of confining 'problem populations' to determine the inclusion and exclusion. The many pasts of the St. John's Island actually have a regional context and regional comparisons. Recent development plans for Pulau Jerejak, Penang's counterpart to St. John's Island, triggered a preservation movement which uncovered the island's multiple layers of untold pasts from the colonial to the postcolonial eras, as was the case for St. John's Island (Por 2017; Gibby 2018). Meanwhile, the oral history accounts and other historical materials related to the many pasts of St. John's Island are

available and some of the structures still remain on the island. Thus it is possible and desirable for future reflections on the St. John's Island stories to go beyond a racialized representation. In times of the COVID-19 pandemic, a more critical understanding of the St John's Island stories can be very relevant for people looking to better understand quarantine, migration, and the politics of isolation and confinement.

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