

From Chinese Men to Chinese “Boys”: Unearthing Masculinities and Intimate Labour in  
Colonial Singapore

By

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my maternal grandparents, John and Margaret Yong. My first storytellers who taught me that a good story could touch anyone's heart. Whose story of being Overseas Chinese in Brunei inspires me to believe in myself and be strong in the real way.

公公,婆婆,我愛你。

## Note to Readers

All terms in Chinese (Mandarin, Cantonese, Hakka, Hokkien, Hainanese, etc.) or Malay will have *fanti zi* or Traditional Chinese characters (繁體字) provided in parenthesis for reference. All Chinese names, terms, phrases, and places will be Romanised in Hanyu Pinyin, except for when the names are more distinctly recognizable in previously Romanised forms. For example, *kopitiam* (咖啡店) will be kept Romanised in its popularized Hokkien form.

Translations (and errors in translations), unless otherwise noted or cited, are translated by the author.

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## Introduction – *Bodies Unearthed*

Fragrant clothes, shadows of the hairdos, invite everyone to stay.

Before the flower that can speak, the dust from the road is cleansed.

Meandering, the singing voice, whence does it come?

Standing tall in Chinatown are the labyrinths.

夜香鬢影每人留，解語花前滌客愁。宛轉歌聲何處起？牛車水矗是迷樓。

— Mei Songbo 梅宋博, *Zonghui xinbao*, 26 June 1909: 3; Li 2012: 22<sup>1</sup>

The above Bamboo Branch Verse poem by Mei Songbo (梅宋博) in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century snapshots what lured people to Singapore, and also alludes to the entrappings of the island as one raptured in phantasmagoria: fragrant flowers and clothes with streets lively with foreign words and flavours, yet what keeps the city running is lost in the labyrinthian Chinatown.<sup>2</sup> Who kept the roads and houses clean? Who created the fragrances that allured the tourist and travellers? Who were the entertainers? Hiding just between the lines of Mei's poem is the labour that went into creating Singapore. While the muting of labouring voices was an essential characteristic of all the British Strait Settlements, nowhere was it more evident than in Singapore.<sup>3</sup> On the island of Singapore, people flocked to find work and wealth in its business. Many Chinese migrant men in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries arrived on the island to find work and novel opportunities, only to end up as domestic servants or “houseboys” for White elite men. Others ended up in the sex trade as sex workers. Abused and effeminized by their overlords and treated as exotic servants by

<sup>1</sup> Translation found in Lap Lam (林立), ‘Poetic Record of Local Customs: Bamboo Branch Verses of Singapore (1888-1941)’, *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 15;2019;., no. 1 (2019): 15, <https://doi.org/10.1163/17932548-12341391>.

<sup>2</sup> Bamboo Branch Verse (竹枝詞) poems were a style of poetry adopted by many Chinese literati and writers in Southeast Asia during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Stylistically, it is stream of consciousness poetry that has its origins in Southern Chinese folksong tradition. The goal of Bamboo Branch Verse poems was to describe local folkways and secular love in exotic or foreign places while tying it to a nostalgia for the homeland.

<sup>3</sup> The British Strait Settlements were a group of British territories located in Southeast Asia from 1826 to its final dissolution in 1946. It originally consisted of the four settlements of Penang, Singapore, Malacca, and Dinding.



women, Chinese men were placed in a position of flux where they were not afforded a seat at the table as men yet also not treated as women. These houseboys occupied a third space built around exoticism. They acted as a tool to further exoticize Singapore as a place of pleasure within the “porno-tropics” motif first coined by literary critic Anne McClintock.<sup>4</sup> It was a space where exotic desires could be acquired, and power could be amassed. Due to survival, the colonial frontier was also a space in which White men and their subordinates needed to work intimately together – this is most apparent within the household in domestic labour and in sex work, which I move towards calling *intimate labour*.<sup>5</sup> It is under this guise that gender becomes a vital component of understanding the running and maintaining of the colony and for understanding the vestigial effects of colonialism.

This thesis attempts to “unearth” bodies of labour and intimacy to understand the colonial everyday as experienced by Chinese migrant men. It is also an attempt to illustrate colonial power through the vantage point of gender, intimacy, and masculinities. The colonial experience at its core is the development of power through forms of surveillance and oppression. As such, my writing explores the metahistorical question regarding the reach of colonial power in the way people exist with each other. Critically, I am interested in constructing the body as an arena of power. The legacy of intimate labourers remains largely outside of the Chinese migration story in Singapore, yet its impact and reverberations have ramifications for bodies and people in the

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<sup>4</sup> Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, Book, Whole (New York: Routledge, 1995), <https://go.exlibris.link/tXwnDXR9>. 124.

<sup>5</sup> See: Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vintage Books, Book, Whole (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 103, <https://go.exlibris.link/71ZV0GQH>.

The term *intimate labour* is a deliberate choice to homogenize sex work and domestic work into a broader category of work that involved the close cooperation between across race, class, gender, and other social categories which become blurred through continued interaction. It also incorporates the idea that this labour formed a “contact point” in which power and colonialism can be subverted, interpreted, and critiqued. This is an extension of Foucault’s ideas of intimacy being a “transfer point of power” and commentary on sexuality as panoptic in nature as found in *The History of Sexuality*. I seek to understand intimate labour as panoptic of the master and labourer relationship and personal identity.

present day. *Are these bodies we forget? Or are these bodies unremember?* To illuminate this question, I draw my framework chiefly from the scholarship of Judith Butler, Ann Stoler, and Sharalyn Orbaugh to develop an interdisciplinary conversation around the value of masculinity within the colonies.

The concept of gender performance, as well as gender performativity from Butler's work *Gender Trouble*, informs the way I approach gender identity not just as an act that one does to affirm one's existence, but also how such a coordinated act produces a series of effects within the entanglement of power. Butler's writing opens the field to considering labour and the dynamics of the master and servant as performative roles in reaction to each other. Ann Stoler's work operates on the premise that power and the colony are constructions defined by social categories being erased and remade.<sup>6</sup> This is undoubtedly the case with colonial masculinities, where White men erase notions of identity and agency to hold power for themselves to create the colony. Moreover, this display of power was also a demonstration of mastery over Chinese men and a display of masculinity targeted at other White men. From Orbaugh's writing about bodies and agency within literary theory, dynamics of intimacy within the sexual also exist within the colonial framework. That is, "performing" the passive role in any relationship – sexual or otherwise should not be seen as simply an absence of power but that it is an active use of restraint to accomplish a specific goal or task.<sup>7</sup>

Chapter 1 will explore how Chinese men migrating into Singapore were transformed from men into "boys" for their White masters. Key to this discussion will be the idea that masculinity in the colonies was a construction of power that required "buy-in" from Chinese men

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<sup>6</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*, Book, Whole (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 10, <https://go.exlibris.link/YhQhCmBs>.

<sup>7</sup> Orbaugh, 'The Body in Contemporary Japanese Women's Fiction,' 122.

and White men. The Chinese arriving for labour needed to submit a part of their own cultural notions of masculinity and “Chineseness” in order to find work, and White men were operating on a competitive basis to display masculinity through colonial dominance of people and material goods. The chapter will highlight the foundations and posturing of colonial masculinity within Singapore and how it is sustained through images of masculinity. The following chapters will illustrate touchstones in which the configurations of powers describe in Chapter 1 are used to police aspects of Chinese men and bodies.

Chapter 2 illustrates how Chinese men were also oppressed by the White mistresses, furthering their infantilization. Chinese workers began to band together in order to fight off abuse by the mistresses and masters. As they consolidated their power and identity, so too did the colonial elite gather their own power, leading to the enacting of the Domestic Servant’s Ordinance in 1888 to police Chinese labour and organization against their employers.

Chapter 3 offers a different paradigm of intimacy in the colonies – one of sex and “male” sex work. Looking through the lens of Chinese bodies as threats to hierarchy, I will chart how Chinese male and transgender sex workers’ bodies were made to be policed. Intimate labour and services offered by sex workers are grafted into a larger narrative of a gendered and racial threat caused by partaking in same-sex activities. The body became a political apparatus in which colonial power was subverted and questioned. As such, policing of bodies not just in the unhygienic sense, but also in a racial sense will be used to explain the creation of Section 377A of the Penal Code forbidding same sex between two consenting men. Through this exploration of sex work and the people who partook in it, I will illustrate the development of the “unmemorable body,” or the bodies that were made to be forgotten.

At its core, this thesis is an exploration into the bodies and people who formed the basis of colonial Singapore – Chinese men who crossed the sea to find work and opportunity: unremembered bodies. It is also the story of masculinity and its power to move people and shape society. The story of Chinese men within the tapestry of Singapore was diminished into them being “boys” and as labour for white masters and mistresses. Labouring bodies which provided the backbone for the colonial every day are in an active state of “unremembering” – acknowledging the colonial legacy and its effects on the Chinese community as it relates to nation-building, but purposefully forgetting the intricate labour that textualizes the colonial experience. In this regard, my work and its findings have their echoes in the present state of domestic work in Singapore and across Southeast Asia, in the sustaining of Penal Code Section 377A forbidding same-sex acts between men, and in the sexual underground that exists in Singapore through the form of “Gentleman’s Clubs” which all serve to sustain the colonial legacy of masculinity as something that must be acquired, maintained, and replicated.

## Chapter 1 – *Boys will be Boys: The Genesis of Power Dynamics Between White Men and Chinese “Boys”*

A braided queue, long and hanging, after all he’s a worthy man.

Though illiterate, he’s staunch and loyal.

Better than he who forgets his origin, his forebears,

And boasts himself a British subject.

辮髮垂垂畢竟賢，雖無知識也貞堅。勝他數典竟忘祖，自侈臣於不列顛。

— Wen Daheng 文大衡, *Lat Pau*, 30 June 1924: 16; Li 2012: 101<sup>8</sup>

Throughout colonies across the world, the term “boy” became synonymous with male servants and subjects under the control of European masters. This is in spite of the fact that by and large, all of these male servants were adult men. The infantilization of male servants and male subjects by colonists acted to categorize those who were colonized within a strict set of boundaries and provide individuals in power the assurance of domination. These “boys” were not a physical threat to colonial rule within this dichotomy of manhood. Neither were these “boys” given the opportunity to turn from boys to men. Regardless of age, they were known as “boys.” Moreover, these “boys” needed real “men” to control and establish dominion over them.

On the other side of the spectrum while the Chinese were turned into “boys,” White men were elevated to the status above a man – they were transformed into masters. Although the position of being a “man” denoted gender supremacy, the idea of the “master” expands this supremacy into mastery and ownership of individuals as property and, at least at face value, a relationship based on domination. To the master, the boy servant is an item of prestige and a

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<sup>8</sup> Translation found in Lam (林立), ‘Poetic Record of Local Customs: Bamboo Branch Verses of Singapore (1888-1941)’, 13.

status symbol. To turn a man into a boy required the feminization and infantilization of character. To turn a man into a master, however, a system needed to be in place that discursively put all White men into competition with each other over manly dominance. This fight for masculinity and control thus is conceived as a result of these two forces.

In looking at the phenomenon and the creation of the Chinese “boy,” we must draw our attention to the way this identity was forced upon Chinese men as well as how such an identity was maintained. The focus of this Chapter will be an examination of the creation of the “boy,” development of the system of White masculinity, as well as photography and descriptions of men as provided in newspapers and other documents. Drawing from Judith Butler’s seminal work *Gender Trouble*, I consider gender as performance (an act perpetuated by a group or identity to affirm existence) as well as performative (the repeat performance of gender that produces a series of effects on the larger society).<sup>9</sup> The “call” to perform the role of the Chinese “boy” as pushed by White elites for work and the echoes or reverberations as a result of this performance take centerstage as part of this exploration. Within this asymmetrical power structure of master and servant, every instance of interaction between these two groups offers us a contact point in which to further explore gender, race, and empire. This chapter will look at how “boys” became “boys” as well as discuss within this narrative in relation to gender, masculinity, and labour.

### **Arriving in Singapura: Becoming the Chinese “Boy”**

—it is very largely a matter of chance whether [a White master] gets a capable intelligent boy or a lazy, dishonest one.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Book, Whole (New York: Routledge, 2006), 34, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203824979>.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Registration of Chinese Servants’, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (Weekly)*, 9 May 1901.

Along the southern coastal regions of China, Chinese were looking to migrate out of the country in search of jobs and new opportunities. Many of these sojourners were looking for contract work in Malaya and Singapore for a fleeting period of time and expected to return home after a few years. After returning home for a few months, they would venture back out to Southeast Asia to complete the cycle again.<sup>11</sup> There were also many single men who left China in search of wealth, adventure, or were simply looking to find novel places to settle. Once they landed a job and found love, they often stopped identifying as Chinese from their hometown and began to adopt the more hybrid identity of *Overseas Chinese*, or *Huaqiao* (華僑).<sup>12</sup> Regardless of their personal plans, Chinese men formed the backbone of Singaporean society and were essential to the daily running and upkeep of the colony throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Water carriers such as those illustrated in Figure 1 were responsible for delivering water up and down the streets of Singapore with the help of oxen. This daily delivery of water by Chinese water carriers is where the Singaporean name for Chinatown (牛車水) comes from. Translating to “water cart oxen,” water carriers and their oxen built the idea of Chinese labourers as dutiful servants. It allowed for the conflation of human with beast – that the Chinese men who worked alongside the oxen to carry water were one and the same. Both animal and servant required a master to demonstrate mastery over them.

It is important to note that the notion of *Huaqiao* is vital to understanding the liminality of the Chinese identity as well as Chinese cultural understandings of masculinity. “Chinese” as a

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<sup>11</sup> Claire Lowrie, *Masters and Servants: Cultures of Empire in the Tropics* (Manchester University Press, 2016), 42, <https://doi.org/10.7228/manchester/9780719095337.001.0001>.

<sup>12</sup> Ming Guang Han, ‘External and Internal Perceptions of the Hainanese Community and Identity, Past and Present’ (Masters Thesis, Singapore, National University of Singapore, 2012), 41–43.

broad identity encapsulated more than just shared language or culture, but also an internal positioning of oneself relative to the world and society. As scholar Kam Louie demonstrates in his work *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China*, notions of Chinese masculinity existed within the framework of Chinese culture and the Chinese homeland, but that these notions are negotiated and changed in migration, leading to a crisis of identity. What constitutes and affirms one's Chinese identity are carried into the diaspora where they are shaped by the lived experiences upon arrival.<sup>13</sup> The framework of Chinese masculinity becomes a core component of one's "Chineseness" in diaspora. Louie deviates from traditional scholarship about Chinese gender history, which has focused on the relationship between men and women through the paradigm of *yin* and *yang* (陰陽), and instead offers an analysis of masculinity that is built upon the relationship that men had with each other. *Yin* and *yang* would not form a pliable framework for understanding the largely male dominated colony of Singapore. Instead, it is better to view masculinity through what Louie calls *wen* and *wu* (文武): *wen* is translated into "cultural attainment of civility and scholarly pursuits" and *wu* is transliterated into "martial and physical prowess."<sup>14</sup> The concept of *wen* and *wu* are complimentary and form the foundation of Chinese cultural understandings of manhood. A proper Chinese man should demonstrate cultural attainment in the form of civilized and scholarly pursuits as well as physical prowess. Detached

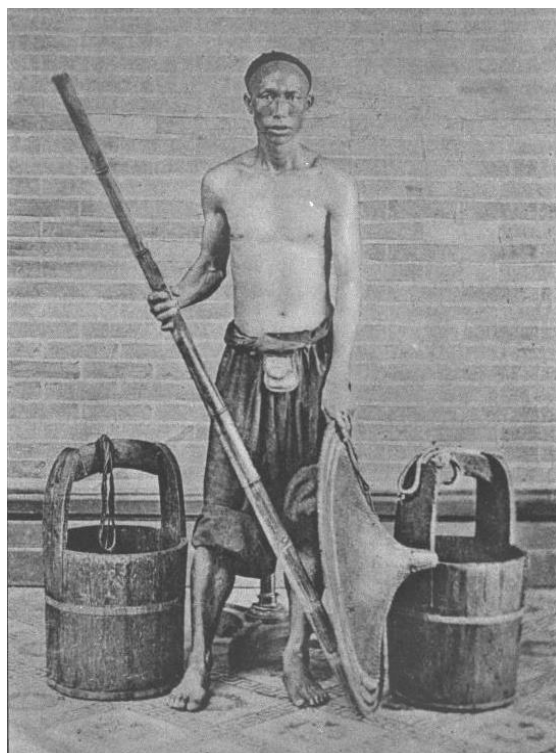
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<sup>13</sup> Kam Louie, *Changing Chinese Masculinities: From Imperial Pillars of State to Global Real Men*, 1st ed., vol. 1;1., Book, Whole (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016), 2, <https://go.exlibris.link/Zn54JnQX>.

<sup>14</sup> Kam Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China*, Book, Whole (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 11–12, [http://ubc.summon.serialssolutions.com/2.0.0/link/0/eLvHCXMwhV1La8MwDBZrdymD0aUdS9cFn\\_Y4dLj2\\_Mi5LOwH7B6SWoEemh1yyr-v7LqjK4EdLbCxBbIIWZ8-ACne-eriTpCubjSn0\\_bytq1bpwTEq3Jq1rVRuK\\_pTqXULvB3xmKBrTK8xGMpFG\\_bAYenmq5FmsdG-6cxvIP1N6\\_J8UUxh5jcAdX2CZwc0ZW0CcwP3bu6Nkz821hK4zy9IikZdEaO\\_YaW0a\\_JXAbiChfOhbLAmeQBdD9zmcCmOfIxg7ZPlSd7siI-zksis\\_vzdeKdlbGFE4ZDybuYdz-tPgATG1NjuS6UXjnPgyn69PxfJMRIJXtVQpJAMLpLA8155UWFLYRH4NXwxOeoRJoEAJeYclXDdkF\\_gUVJcFHR8AGseJ7Q](http://ubc.summon.serialssolutions.com/2.0.0/link/0/eLvHCXMwhV1La8MwDBZrdymD0aUdS9cFn_Y4dLj2_Mi5LOwH7B6SWoEemh1yyr-v7LqjK4EdLbCxBbIIWZ8-ACne-eriTpCubjSn0_bytq1bpwTEq3Jq1rVRuK_pTqXULvB3xmKBrTK8xGMpFG_bAYenmq5FmsdG-6cxvIP1N6_J8UUxh5jcAdX2CZwc0ZW0CcwP3bu6Nkz821hK4zy9IikZdEaO_YaW0a_JXAbiChfOhbLAmeQBdD9zmcCmOfIxg7ZPlSd7siI-zksis_vzdeKdlbGFE4ZDybuYdz-tPgATG1NjuS6UXjnPgyn69PxfJMRIJXtVQpJAMLpLA8155UWFLYRH4NXwxOeoRJoEAJeYclXDdkF_gUVJcFHR8AGseJ7Q).



from the homeland, masculinity within this Chinese cultural context captures the essence of home.<sup>15</sup> Yet for so many Chinese migrant men, the colonial system forced them to forfeit intellectual and cultural cultivation for the sake of enduring labour. In this regard, Chinese men embodied *wu*, and left *wen* for their colonial masters. The process of migrating and finding work resulted in losing a cultural sense of manhood. This led many Chinese men to adopt European notions and systems of masculinity to survive the colonial frontier.



*Figure 1.1 A Chinese water carrier. Photograph circa 1890 courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Well before the Chinese left their home ports back in China, Chinese men were labelled and indexed before departure for the sake of ensuring that there were no stowaways. This was also done so that the officers receiving the steamer in Singapore would have some idea of what

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<sup>15</sup> Debbie G. E. Ho and Hannah M. Y. Ho, 'Ethnic Identity and the Southeast Asian Chinese: Voices from Brunei', in *Contesting Chineseness: Ethnicity, Identity, and Nation in China and Southeast Asia*, ed. Chang-Yau Hoon and Ying-kit Chan (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2021), 112, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-33-6096-9\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-33-6096-9_8).

kind of people were entering the port. Listed in these indexes of passengers are the associated attributes of these Chinese men. Common descriptors for Chinese men included “dirty” and “unkept.”<sup>16</sup> Considered to be carriers of venereal diseases, all Chinese were “disinfected” through medical examination as well as a mandatory cleaning upon arriving in Singapore. Chinese men were also described by their physical stature – as if pre-emptively preparing them for sale in the labour markets of Chinatown. Chinese who were deemed as suitable for the heavy demands of physical labour were described as “giants” or “lumbering.”<sup>17</sup> Otherwise, the term “boy” was denoted to suggest their suitability for the work within a household.

How then does the Chinese male labourer become the “boy” for the White master? How does this depiction of the dirty and unsanitary Chinese man become the proper, clean, and obedient “boy?” The notion of the non-threatening feminised man to elite classes was not a new notion specific to the colonies and European masculinity. It was already a practiced system within the Chinese elites in Qing China, who already had a culture and history of employing eunuchs and men for domestic labour.<sup>18</sup> What was added within the colonial experience was the stratification of suitability for labour in relation to race. For White masters there were differences between the types of Chinese labourers they could hire. Newspaper op-eds during the colonial period frequently discussed whether Chinese men from the North or from the South of China made better servants. The common stereotype being that Northern Chinese were much more obedient and loyal to masters, while those from the South had a stronger tendency to be vocal about working conditions as well as rebel in the form of theft or assault. Much of this portrayal

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<sup>16</sup> ‘Passengers. Straits Times Overland Journal, 4 May 1878, Page 1’, *Straits Times Overland Journal*, 4 May 1878, Newspaper SG, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/stoverland18780504-1.2.4?ST=1&AT=search&k=Chinese,%20servant,%20boy&QT=chinese,servant,boy&oref=article>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Lowrie, *Masters and Servants*, 44.

comes about as a result of many Northern Chinese domestic workers having experience working in courts or state manors of the Chinese elite back in China. There was also the stereotype of Southern Chinese men forming relationships with the White women of the colonies.<sup>19</sup>

Newspaper articles offered masters tips on how to control their servants – many of which treated Chinese men in a bestial manner. These tips included ideal times to feed them, how to house and clothe them, and warnings about the fast rate in which the Chinese “breed.” The reproduction in newspapers included not just sexual reproduction, but also that the Chinese would often refer their friends into the household for other jobs. It may have also extended to a fear that the Chinese would make advances on the few European women who did live in the colony while working in the household.<sup>20</sup> These stereotypes only served to enhance and justify European mastery and surveillance over their servants.

In spite of newspapers discussing how Northern Chinese were usually better servants, the most popular Chinese servants were the Hainanese, who were reported among all the Chinese to be the “best adapted for domestic service” as well as plentiful given the frequent ships traveling to and from Hainan Island.<sup>21</sup> Many of these Hainanese migrants who arrived in Singapore did not

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<sup>19</sup> ‘Dishonest Servants. The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (Weekly), 5 September 1907, Page 10’, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (Weekly)*, 5 September 1907, Newspaper SG, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/singfreepresswk19070905-1.2.68?ST=1&AT=search&K=Chinese%2c+servant%2c+boy&P=2&Display=0&filterS=0&QT=chinese,servant,boy&oref=article>; ‘The Chinese Servant. The Straits Times, 18 September 1915, Page 10’, *The Strait Times*, 18 September 1915, Newspaper SG, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19150918-1.2.63?ST=1&AT=search&K=Chinese%2c+servant%2c+boy&P=2&Display=0&filterS=0&QT=chinese,servant,boy&oref=article>.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Chinese Servants. The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser, 6 January 1925, Page 1’, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 6 January 1925, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/singfreepressb19250106-1.2.3?ST=1&AT=search&K=Chinese%2c+servant%2c+boy&P=3&Display=0&filterS=0&QT=chinese,servant,boy&oref=article>.

<sup>21</sup> ‘The Power of the Hylam. Straits Echo, 31 December 1917, Page 8’, *Straits Echo*, 31 December 1917; C. M. Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore, 1819-2005*, Book, Whole (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), 101, [http://ubc.summon.serialssolutions.com/2.0.0/link/0/eLvHCXMwhR3LDsIgrNF58eYzvsPJEFADA9w4GuPiXe\\_L2Fi8qGf\\_3nZOo2aJx9IAoaH0RVsA6a\\_56udNyGy4cZvAiEynKk144qTy05QyI7XKnPj7Vvec31a4yOqNIuTdownNdlo](http://ubc.summon.serialssolutions.com/2.0.0/link/0/eLvHCXMwhR3LDsIgrNF58eYzvsPJEFADA9w4GuPiXe_L2Fi8qGf_3nZOo2aJx9IAoaH0RVsA6a_56udNyGy4cZvAiEynKk144qTy05QyI7XKnPj7Vvec31a4yOqNIuTdownNdlo)

arrive with the inherent skills needed for domestic work but were nonetheless considered optimal for the job as a result of the colonial perception of Hainanese culture. It was thought that Hainanese culture cultivated men that were well suited for domestic labour since men were known to be the cooks.<sup>22</sup> Given that so many Hainanese men were looking to leave the island to find labour, they became part of the largest pool of domestic workers.

Chinese labourers arriving into Singapore found themselves objectified by their attributes far before they even saw the port of Singapore. For European employers, Chinese domestic workers were appealing to them as many were considered much better suited for the labour demands than indigenous Malay populations.<sup>23</sup> The Chinese were considered, among other attributes, to be the most obedient and efficient of the peoples of Asia and willing workers. It was thought that the Malay and other indigenous groups were ill-suited for the physical labour required to maintain a household such as operating a kitchen, tending a garden, as well as general obedience and cooperation with their masters.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, the hiring of male workers ensured that women of other racial groups would not be in intimate proximity to White men, thus reducing the risk of sexual intimacy across racial lines at least theoretically. Nonetheless, the ranking of ethnic groups to deduce the optimal servant provided the pretext required to develop the image of the Chinese “boy.”

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F\_dDMi5YahQkpGoGnzCSnIy1N7I4A0gRnzl4ZOwiVrgUQJCG2ru2oHes47Hnc0ZFYINika89y4stuxcYm45uxQdzdiR-lujQu2WDEWqobupezCK9qfdYYXbxKWzJi6P4PfbQ\_PfDYBZ5DhUgXmI1FZG5ChhXWCFTYzWuZXZEDoV Cwxh8jn6llasNEUm1ahy0hiaz2AJeRgm0MiRA9y0oMOsoOYD53J8AQ.

For geographical context, the island of Hainan is the southernmost island in China. It served as a port and area for migration of Chinese into Southeast Asia.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Hylam v. European. Straits Times Weekly Issue, 1 September 1891, Page 3’, *Straits Times Weekly*, 1 September 1891, Newspaper SG; ‘The Hylam Servants and Ice’, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 7 May 1908, Newspaper SG.

<sup>23</sup> Lowrie, *Masters and Servants*, 43.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

Upon arrival, Chinese men would try to attain employment through labour markets and auctions conducted along Chinatown. An auctioneer would line up Chinese men in front of a stand and bidders would announce their offering prices for the men. All the while, the auctioneer, who themselves wanted to make a profit off the sales, would list out the attributes of the men. Common descriptors included the “fair, pale skin” of the men as well as their soft hands which were optimal for the labours demanded of them in the home.<sup>25</sup> Also included were calls about how obedient Chinese boys were and how their cooking was suitable for European palates. When the highest bidder eventually won, the chosen Chinese man would be taken off the makeshift stage where they would sign a contract consigning them to servitude to the master for a set period of time. Starting immediately, they were contracted servants for a master. Given a new set of work attire and their set duties, Chinese men became “boys” to serve their masters wishes (see fig. 1.2), a prim and proper product made to order and serve.

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<sup>25</sup> Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore, 1819-2005*, 105.



Figure 1.2 “Chinese Boy on duty.” Photograph circa 1900 courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

The contract signing of a Chinese man, while significant because it marks the transition of a man into a “boy,” is also significant because it contractually made these “boys” an object within the empire of the master or a “possession” of the master. The servant was considered an extension of the master, and thus the master needed to take great care in keeping order within his household.<sup>26</sup> In one court case, a Chinese servant by the name of Mr. Chong Tong was accused of being in possession of 2,825 packets of chandu (a heavily concentrated variant of opium) while trying to board a railway station.<sup>27</sup> Mr. Chong Tong, who was contracted to a White

<sup>26</sup> By “household,” I am referring to the physical home of the Master as well as all the staff that he hired for upkeep of the home.

<sup>27</sup> ‘What Is “Possession”?’ Malayan Saturday Post, 2 February 1924, Page 17’, *Malayan Saturday*, n.d., Newspaper SG, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/malayansatpost19240202-1.2.38?ST=1&AT=search&k=Chinese,%20servant,%20boy&QT=chinese,servant,boy&oref=article>.

master, debated who was at fault as a result of this crime: the servant or the master. The court ruled that the “possession of the servant was possession of the master,” and subsequently the accused Mr. Chong Tong was discharged, and the master was fined for not professionally training his boy to be obedient to the law.<sup>28</sup> This complicated the matter within the master and servant relationship. The servant could act out of line and the master would be on the line for not ensuring his household was orderly. The position and reputation of the master was thus something that was constantly surveilled and a continued effort was required in order to uphold order and face in society.

While their occupation designated them as “boys,” their lives outside of work and labour were used as evidence of their feminine nature that made them different from Europeans. As a result of few Chinese women migrating into Singapore, Chinatown became a space dominated by Chinese men. Living within the buildings of Chinatown in homosocial environments, Chinese men built a community and working relationship with each other. While such relationships are largely platonic in nature, this did not stop rumours that the men of Chinatown were involved in relationships that were more homosexual in nature. This further fed into the notion that Chinese men were cut from a different cloth than White men and that these Chinese men were not just theorized to be more feminine, but rather that Chinese men were socialized this way (see fig. 1.3).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*, Book, Whole (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020), 56, <https://go.exlibris.link/bT6rPzPR>.



Figure 1.3 Chinese men having a meal. Hand coloured photograph circa 1900 courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

### Lord of the House: White Colonial Manhood

The position he found himself in flattered his vanity; he was no longer the sycophant craving the smiles of the great, he was the master whose word was law.<sup>30</sup>

Before the introduction of White wives or *memsahib* (commonly truncated as “mems”) as mistresses of the household, it was White men that acted as masters of the household.<sup>31</sup> Like many other instances of colonialism across the world, the justification of conquest was founded upon the principles of racial superiority. The dynamics of the household, however, suggest more specifically that there was also the added superiority (and specificity) of White manhood. In the years leading up to the First World War, the population of Singapore was dominated by the

<sup>30</sup> Lowrie, *Masters and Servants*, 72; W. Somerset Maugham, *The Casuarina Tree: Six Stories*, Book, Whole (London: William Heinemann, 1928), 117, <https://go.exlibris.link/mkh7FNPk>.

<sup>31</sup> Janice Loo, ‘Mem, Don’t Mess with the Cook’, *BiblioAsia* (blog), 10 July 2016, <https://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/vol-12/issue-2/jul-sep-2016/dontmesswiththecook#fn:5>.

The term *memsahib* translates directly from Hindi-Urdu into “Madame Boss.” It is likely that *mem* is a corruption of “Madam” and *sahib* was the term of respect used to address European men in Colonial India.



Chinese. Census data at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century notes that of 229,000 people living in Singapore at the time, those of European descent only accounted for 3% of the population.<sup>32</sup> Overwhelmingly, the Chinese comprised the largest ethnic enclave in Singapore, accounting for nearly 72% of the total population of the island. To have a small minority in control of the majority power needed to be exerted and felt by the populace in all matters of daily affairs. This included the labour that was done within the home.

Within the colonial framework, White men held the mantle of superior masculinity over the other races, and that there was a stratification in society based around perceived masculinity of the races. At the bottom of the hierarchy were the Malay and the indigenous peoples of the area, whom the Europeans had the newest developing relationship within comparison to the Indians, with whom the Europeans had a working relationship as a result of trading and setting up colonial governance in India. Just below White men, and above Indian men, were the Chinese, who were considered the least offensive of the other races and considered more civilized because of their desire to work with Europeans.<sup>33</sup> The Chinese were praised for their willingness to work for White men as servants and by extension, their willingness to comply with this masculine hierarchy. Figure 1.4 below illustrates how Chinese, Indian, and Malay races were servants to the White elite of Singapore. While the roles of each of the individuals is not easily apparent, each of the men in the background held a different position in the household that correlated with their race. The Chinese men were the cooks and houseboy cleaners. The Malay were the drivers. Indians were the footman and laundrymen.

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<sup>32</sup> Nathan, *The Census of British Malaya: (The Straits Settlements, Federated Malay States and Protected States of Johore, Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, Trengganu, and Brunei)*, 1921, 83.

<sup>33</sup> Lowrie, *Masters and Servants*, 45.



*Figure 1.4 Englishmen with their servants. Photograph circa 1890s courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

By exercising control over Chinese labourers and servants in the household, White masters were effectively keeping racial and masculine supremacy over their subjects. Scholar Ann Stoler points out that the household also becomes a space and place in which colonial hierarchies strained under tension as a result of intimacy of labour and lives.<sup>34</sup> Such work therefore enabled the potential for power to be challenged as well as negotiated. While the records and writings of Chinese domestic servants are considerably less than the sources available from their masters, what material does exist in the form of court hearings suggests that Chinese domestic workers advocated for high wages and good working conditions. This calls into question White men's belief in the supremacy of authority over their subordinates. As much as the White masters wanted to depict their servants as eunuch-like beings devoid of masculine

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<sup>34</sup> Claire Lowrie, "'What a Picture Can Do': Contests of Colonial Mastery in Photographs of Asian 'Houseboys' from Southeast Asia and Northern Australia, 1880s–1920s', *Modern Asian Studies* 52, no. 4 (2018): 1284, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X16000871>.

assertions or as feminized, cunning individuals, the household found itself as the space in which both servants and masters intermingled on an intimate basis out of the need for survival (see fig. 1.5): the master needed servants to run the household and the servants needed the wages. This mutual agreement is what sets the stage for labour to become intimate and for lines to be blurred between master and servant.



*Figure 1.5 "Chinese boy serving his master," Photograph circa 1890 courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

Racial supremacy went hand in hand with masculine supremacy to entice European men into the tropics and into Singapore. Many of the men that arrived in Singapore from Europe belonged to the middle and working-class back home. Being installed in the colonies gave them an injection of power that was unseen and unheard of in Europe, and greatly enhanced

perceptions of European manly supremacy over the Asiatic.<sup>35</sup> This promise of power and authority allured people to Singapore and many other colonies. In the colonies, an ordinary white man could be elevated to become a “master whose word was law.”<sup>36</sup> The story and construction of hierarchy however was never as simple as just White men dominating over their Chinese servants, as the intimacy of their labour illuminated a dependency on the Chinese in order to survive in the tropics. They were vulnerable to their expertise in the local region, to their exploitation, assault, and theft. It became necessary to therefore depict Chinese men as feminised and servile “boys” to draw the line between these two groups of men. Likening the Chinese to women fabricated a barrier in even the most intimate of labours. Chinese houseboys were expected to fulfill the traditional roles of female servants, including waking the master up every morning, collecting dirty clothing for cleaning, waiting on their masters, and preparing baths. The intimacy of such labour, coupled with the fact that all these roles were fulfilled by men, resulted in a high degree of suspicion regarding “homosexual vices” and became a common topic of contention because of the colonies lacked women and relied so heavily on Chinese men for labour.

The expansion of power offered in the colonies to White men perhaps can best be illustrated as concentric rings of power. Based around a central figure of authority and supremacy who has an expanding sphere of influence, this power system offers a pliable way of understanding how masculinities are constructed and maintained within the colonies. At the center of the sphere of influence is the White master, who amasses servants and workers to build power and this in turn expands a man’s power and reach of influence (see fig. 1.6). Since each

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<sup>35</sup> Lowrie, *Masters and Servants*, 73.

<sup>36</sup> Maugham, *The Casuarina Tree: Six Stories*, 117.

man is in competition to exert their own masculine supremacy over the population and with each other, these spheres of influence expand, and contract as White men compete for servants and masculine control. The household in this metaphor becomes yet again a microcosm in which White men exert and flex their power over other men in an effort to perform masculinity. This system of masculinity held considerable sway over European men, who considered it one of their highest financial priorities. Even when faced with financial troubles and demotion in their government position, many European men would much rather enter financial debt than relinquish their male servants and the prestige they brought to the table. One Straits Settlements official, when given a significant pay cut as a result of demotion, still kept all seven of his Chinese servants.<sup>37</sup> Irrespective of rising living costs or a change in financial situation, Chinese “boys” were considered essential to living in the colonies. According to one edition of the *Malay Mail*, the ownership of Chinese “boys” was less of a suggestion and more of a mandatory requirement by conventions of social coercion and pressure. This “masculine” living was what made the White man different from the Asiatic. It is what made the master different from the average man or a servant. The *Malay Mail* article writes, “unless a European can earn a wage on which he is able to live decently as a European ... he merely brings [sic] discredit and contempt upon the British community.”<sup>38</sup> To claim the position of master as well as to be considered White, a European man needed to have his Chinese boys.

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<sup>37</sup> Han, ‘External and Internal Perceptions of the Hainanese Community and Identity, Past and Present’, 42.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.



*Figure 1.6 Diagram of the system of colonial masculinity. The innermost circle represents the master or the colonial elite, with the surrounding sphere of influence being mutable and expanding and contracting depending on the master's control. Diagram made by the author.*

### **The Eye of the Beholder: Posturing Class and Masculinity through Visuals**

The process of creating the Chinese “boy,” as well as a culture of controlling and dominating Chinese men into servitude, thus far has been established as part of an intricate system of masculinity where one is pushed into a specific “posture” of masculinity based on race and class. However, while the system and its effects on Chinese and White men have been highlighted, the sustainability of this system within the colonial project required buy-in from all parties. Chinese and White men both needed to subscribe to the supremacy of White masculinity. The illustration of gender and class are coloured through photography and can be seen within the physical posturing of bodies for the camera. It is in posture that the body and mind are prepared to act and mirror colonial ideals of masculinity.<sup>39</sup> While photography was a curated attempt to capture the colonial every day, it also subversively demonstrated control over the subjects in the

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<sup>39</sup> Christopher B. Patterson, *Open World Empire: Race, Erotics, and the Global Rise of Video Games*, Book, Whole (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 175, <https://go.exlibris.link/LhQgPDpQ>.

I draw on the scholarship of Christopher Patterson in his monograph to consider “plunge posture,” or the idea that the body is both the receiver of ideas and a doer of said actions as illustrated by their physical posture. It prepares the body to expect/channel a specific set of experiences and to embody and react to them appropriately. While Patterson’s scholarship is in relation to players of video games getting into posture for play, I think that “plunge posture” has its merits when we consider photography and “playing” into masculine ideals and labour.

photos. The aspects and process in which a photo is created which include the photographer, the subject, and the viewer work in tandem to create a physical product.<sup>40</sup> However, the relationship between photographer, subject, and the viewer is not one that is equal. A photo is given meaning when its pose, its lighting, and subject attire is analyzed. These aspects are controlled by the photographer and the photographer alone, as the subject is not able to see outside of oneself. The message of the photographer is then interpreted by the viewer, who has the most vital role of relaying and sustaining the physical image as well as the subconscious image it tattoos. The subconscious bias and stereotyping are then popularized by consistent messaging and propagation through other visual artifacts until it spreads as common knowledge. What results is a transnational phenomenon that can paint images of the colonial tropics to those within the colony as well as those abroad.

Common motifs within photos build upon each other to assert a dominant narrative of existence and servitude. The more the viewer sees them, the more one becomes accustomed to seeing themselves in them. The viewers in question are both Chinese and White men. In the case of figure 1.7, the Chinese man, who is the caretaker for the two young White children, is depicted in a feminized way, sitting down with a baby on his lap and with a child to his left. His queue is on display and there is a level of care done to ensure that the photo depicts his feminized and maternal position to these children. He stands out in the photo as a result of his clothing being of Qing style rather than of the European stylings the children are wearing. Moreover, as a Chinese “boy” he is privy to the children’s every concern and wishes. The power dynamics in this photo, with two White children being attended to by one Chinese servant, also

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<sup>40</sup> Lowrie, “‘What a Picture Can Do’: Contests of Colonial Mastery in Photographs of Asian ‘Houseboys’ from Southeast Asia and Northern Australia, 1880s–1920s”, 1280.

shows that the children are the masters and that the Chinese man is outranked, not just White men, but also by their children. A common motif in photos of Chinese servants with White children is that the children are always seated on the lap of the Chinese servant as if to suggest they are a weight and a burden that the Chinese “boy” must accommodate.



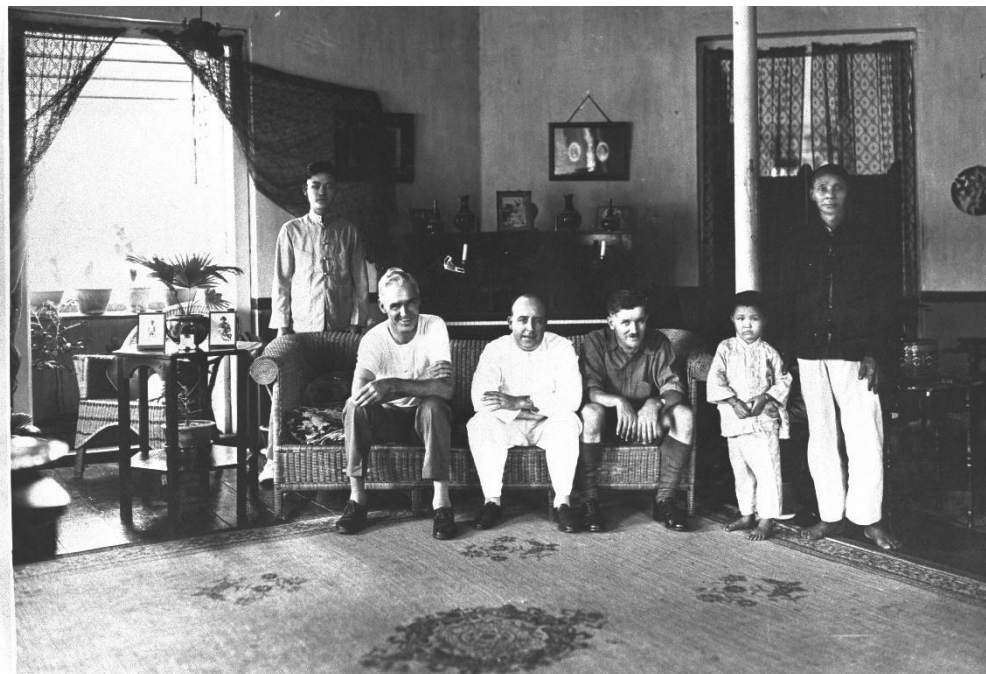
*Figure 1.7 Studio photograph of Chinese servant together with two European children. Photograph circa 1880 courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.*





*Figure 1.8 European child with his Chinese servant. Photograph circa 1930 courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.*

In images where White masters and Chinese servants are shot, Chinese servants are almost always positioned towards the side of the photo and away from the centre (see fig. 1.9). Masters are always depicted sitting in chairs. Interestingly, as I have noted above, White children are often portrayed sitting on the laps of their Chinese servants. While the children were too small and too young to be sitting in a chair alone, the Chinese servant may have acted as an extension of a chair, or an object to help the children. In figure 1.7, the White infant may have been positioned to sit on the lap of the Chinese servant to emulate the older White men sitting in chairs and asserting mastery over the servant.



*Figure 1.9 European men with their Chinese servants. Photograph circa 1930 courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.*

The hierarchy of masculinity was pervasive enough that idealized masculinity was cultivated optically as a result of visual culture and print. In emulation of the posturing and clothing of their White masters in photography, Chinese men when given the chance and opportunity to have their photos taken would also try to imitate that in which they perceived to be the masculine ideal as portrayed by their masters (compare fig. 1.10 and fig. 1.11). Specific care was done to ensure that the poses and framing remained near identical to those of their masters.



*Figure 1.10 Studio photo of two European men. Photograph circa 1910s-1920s courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.*

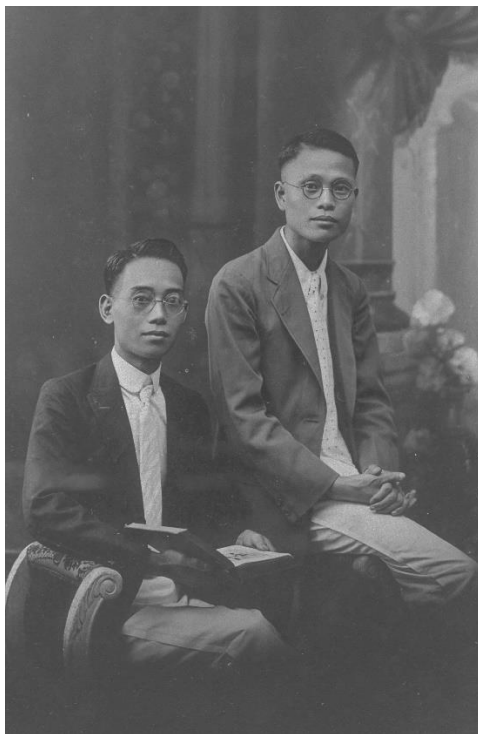


Figure 1.11 A studio photo of two Straits Chinese men. Photograph circa 1920 courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.<sup>41</sup>

Closely emulating the masculine posture and framing of their masters was considered to be the ideal for what a true man would be.<sup>42</sup> On the whole, in order to prove themselves closer to White men and distance themselves from the other races within Singapore, Chinese men would go as far as to over exaggerate the posing in an attempt to be seen as the White male ideal (see fig. 1.12). This was often expressed by taking up more space as a subject in photos as well as also dressing in Western attire instead of the traditional Qing *magua* (馬褂) jacket. If we return to the idea of *wen* and *wu*, with White men now holding the position of *wen*, then the posturing of Chinese men like their White masters suggests an attempt to emulate this new *wen*. However, as much as Chinese men wanted to present themselves in line with this “civilized” visual, they

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<sup>41</sup> I note here that this is an image of two Chinese men not belonging to the migratory Chinese population looking for labour, but to the wealthier class of Straits Settlement born Chinese that oftentimes worked as collaborators with European elite. Nonetheless, this image illustrates how Chinese were trying to move towards the illustrations and postures of masculinity as illustrated by European men.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 1282.

were denied acceptance as masculine figures and infantilized as boys trying to emulate men. The civilized can also be denied a seat at the table due to a lack of masculinity.<sup>43</sup>



Figure 1.12 Group studio photo of Straits Chinese men. Photograph circa 1920 courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusions

The cascading results that affected the Chinese servants also served to engender the Europeans to perform their own part of the play within the colonial stage. The psychosexual effects of gender performance and gender performativity, therefore, is better illustrated as an effort instigated by Europeans but upheld by both parties for the upkeep of the colony. While this chapter offers a broad genesis of masculinity in the colonies, the following chapters will explore

<sup>43</sup> I would like to acknowledge that this is one reading and one interpretation of the posturing of Chinese men relative to colonial masculinity. Another reading and pathway of analysis into this would be into how Overseas Chinese men were heavily influenced by the rise of Dr. Sun Yat Sen (孫中山) and the Republican period of China which sought modernity during the New Culture Movement (新文化運動).

<sup>44</sup> Similar to figure 1.11, this photo is also a picture of Strait Chinese men trying to posture European masculinity.

how this system was challenged. Starting with the infantilization and creation of the Chinese “boy” and a system of colonial masculinities, it is possible to understand how the system of masculinity places stress on White men to perform White masculinity to uphold colonial order. Masculinity within the Straits Settlements and Singapore is thus a phenomenon of perceived nature and compliant nurture because of continued exposure to White masculinity and racial inferiority of Chinese and other ethnic groups via visual culture. As this chapter has illustrated, the issue of masculinity and power within the colonies is closely tied to master and servant dynamics between men. More importantly, the sustaining of masculinity and notions of masculinity are porous – colonial masculinity requires that power dynamics are in negotiation and flux in order to have structure. Performing gender stabilizes and establishes the master and servant dynamic within the colonies. It is under this backdrop that intimate labour develops as an area of contention and a viable pathway to further explore gender and sexuality in the colonies.

## Chapter 2 – *Not the Men, but the Memes: Domestic Mastery of Chinese “Boys” in the Colonial Household by Memesahib*

On one afternoon in February 1907, a European woman by the name of Ms. Muddit was caught dragging a Chinese servant by his queue across the street. Her nose was bloody, and she claimed that she had been attacked by her Chinese cook, Lim Ah Kwi. The offence that initiated the violent confrontation between Ah Kwi and Ms. Muddit was one most peculiar: Ah Kwi testified in court that Ms. Muddit had tasked him to make a pudding without the use of eggs, to which he proclaimed that to be an impossible feat.<sup>45</sup> Angered with this challenge to her authority, Ms. Muddit told him to leave the household and threatened to call the police. Ah Kwi claimed that she had struck him with a log of firewood. Accepting his termination, Ah Kwi was willing to look past angry Ms. Muddit’s abuse towards him if she was willing to pay him his wages. He had not been paid \$15 for his work over the previous month. In the court hearings, Ms. Muddit denied allegations of abuse and instead insisted that it was she who was hit with firewood and threatened with a knife. She also denied withholding pay from Ah Kwi. The court’s judgement of the case in the end resulted with Ms. Muddit paying a fine as well as paying off Ah Kwi’s missing wages. The verdict went against her because the other “boys” in the household testified in defence of Ah Kwi.<sup>46</sup>

The curious case of Ah Kwi and Ms. Muddit illustrates struggle for power within the home between the European elite and the servants. It illustrates a key dynamic in colonial power: that passivity is an active restraint on power.<sup>47</sup> Thus, Ah Kwi did not immediately resist Ms.

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<sup>45</sup> ‘Pudding without Eggs’, *The Strait Times*, 22 February 1907, Newspaper SG.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Orbaugh, ‘The Body in Contemporary Japanese Women’s Fiction’, 122.

Muddit's abuse. He preferred to gather his energy to build a network with the other workers at her home – kindred spirits who could advocate for one another in times of need.

At the top of the hierarchy of the household servants were the Chinese cooks like Ah Kwi, who developed an intimate relationship with their masters as they needed to understand their tastes and preferences. They also held dominion over the kitchen and had the power to order other servants to do their bidding, such as purchasing ingredients and assisting in the preparation of the food.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, the proximity that the cooks had to the masters also allowed for them to advocate for the other servants. Cooks thus held the position of being at the top of the hierarchy with the power to assist the master in enforcing household rules, as well as acting to protect the boys under their stead.<sup>49</sup> The arrival of European wives, also known as *memsahib* or “mems” marks a switch from a White male master to a White mistress, which further complicated the power dynamics of the household. With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the increase in steamship travel, more European women made the trip to Asia. Suddenly, women who may not have had much power back in Europe found themselves in Singapore in charge of a household with Asian male servants. From the perspective of the servants, the former male-only linear chain of power found a new dynamic – one that did not only see them as lesser because of their race, but additionally because of the emasculation engendered by being subservient to a woman.

As Chapter 1 has illustrated the image of Chinese “boys” within the social fabric of colonial Singapore and their development within the scope of masculinities, this chapter will expand and explore how these Chinese boys experienced power while working within the gender

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<sup>48</sup> ‘The Servants Question’, *Straits Independent and Penang Chronicle*, 12 September 1891, Newspaper SG.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*



dynamics of the household of female masters. I have painted the image of the Chinese boy, and now I shift my focus towards divergent strands of authority in the form of the female master. Judith Butler's theory on gender performativity can apply to the intimate arena of the household.<sup>50</sup> Gender roles, as well as occupational roles are performed in intersection with each other. Ms. Muddit's gender as a *woman* and her role as a *mem* is both a *performance* and *performative*. Her insecurity in her power and position creates the incessant need to continue the performance to maximize power, which lead to the attack on Ah Kwi.<sup>51</sup> Acting as a microcosm for understanding how power dynamics work between master and servant, as well as between genders, this chapter will look at the reverberations of gender and power as demonstrated by different power nodes within the household: the cooks or "cookies" (the Anglicized pronunciation of the Malay word *koki*) and their relationship with their White masters, mistresses and other servants. Moreover, we shall see that as the line between master and servant grew, so too did the collaboration and association between those who identified as servants as well as the masters and mistresses. This ultimately leads to governmental measures on the part of the masters to control and regulate the organization of Chinese servants.

### **The Arrival of the Mem: The New Master of the Household**

As a result of improvements to colonial living conditions by the 1920's, the prospect of travel to the colonies became something not just left to the working men in government. Women began to arrive in larger numbers to be reunited with their husbands who had already settled in

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<sup>50</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 34.

<sup>51</sup> It may be useful to consider the parallels this has with modern notions of "toxic masculinity" and the pressures as well as demands that are made upon people to uphold their perceived gender roles within an increasingly stratified society. In much the same way, gender performance as well as society's fixation on it is a result of our own insecurity about gender.

colonies within Malaya and the Strait Settlements (see fig. 1).<sup>52</sup> As these women began to settle and recreate European domestic life within the household, the role of Chinese boys as domestic servants came in conflict with the ideals the European women held. Taking back the roles of homemakers and mothers, the “mems” were confronted with new dynamics of power where they were not the sole individual within the household. Without technological conventions such as gas stoves and electricity, the upkeep of a house could not solely be done by European women.<sup>53</sup> One mem pointed out that doing the housework without the use of servants was simply below the status of Europeans and that such labours would amount to a loss of prestige as well as health and physical appearances of Europeans.<sup>54</sup> Positioned as a civilizing force within the colonial community as well as within the household, European women into the colonies carried an underlying agenda: collective identity and power of the ruling elite within the household would further reinforce the divide between masters and slaves. Women became the new masters of the home and family. Memes were expected to rule over the domain of the colonial household and the everyday running of staff.

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<sup>52</sup> Butcher, *The British in Malaya, 1880-1941: The Social History of a European Community in Colonial South-East Asia*, 23–24.

<sup>53</sup> Arunima Datta, ‘Negotiating Gendered Spaces in Colonial Press: Wives of European Planters in British Malaya’, *Journal of Colonialism & Colonial History* 18, no. 3 (2017): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cch.2017.0041>.

<sup>54</sup> John H. MacCallum Scott, *Eastern Journey* (Singapore, 1939), 14, [https://eservice.nlb.gov.sg/item\\_holding.aspx?bid=4316240](https://eservice.nlb.gov.sg/item_holding.aspx?bid=4316240).



Figure 2.1 Studio Portrait of Two Women. Photograph circa 1910s-1920s courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

European men by and large were more than happy to hand over the duties of running a household to their wives. Servants on the other hand, found it difficult to adjust from a lax male employer to a mem who was nearly always in the house. As the household became the only way for women to exert their own power and agency in society, many took to their station with a zeal. The struggle to reign in the household staff was often likened to a military conquest.<sup>55</sup> From language divides to lifestyle changes, mem's had to learn to navigate and control the household largely without the support of their husbands. Maye Wood's *Malay for Mem's* first published in 1927 became a popular tool for mems to learn important terms and commands in order to control the household servants, such as "Call the cook", "Follow mem", as well as "Wait for master." Wood's manual also noted the inability of the Chinese to pronounce Malay, such as the blending

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<sup>55</sup> Loo, 'Mem, Don't Mess with the Cook'.

of “R” and “L” sounds so that “roti” became “loti.”<sup>56</sup> Instructional books such as *Malay for Memes* were thus employed not just to teach mems how to communicate with their Chinese servants, but also to further reinforce the image of Chinese servants as uneducated and unrefined workers who required a stern hand to get the job done properly.

While the role of the mem was thought to be a rather simple one – the management of a household and the occasional meeting with servants, the level of distrust that mems had regarding their servants was apparent based on the plethora of accounts of servants misbehaving in newspapers. This led to expanding sentiment about how Chinese servants were liars and dishonest in conduct.<sup>57</sup> In many cases, this was because Chinese servants almost never gave their real names to their employers and thus it was nearly impossible to trace the background of a servant. Servants who underperformed or committed a crime could easily have their name and identification be unknown to a new employer and could always find new work. They could also have letters of recommendations borrowed, stolen, or forged because of not having a track record.<sup>58</sup>

As simple as the role of the mem could appear from the outside, mems walked a thin line between being extensions of power from their husbands and also garnering the respect of her employees in the household. A newspaper article notes the condition that mems found themselves in:

Men usually have the sense not to bother as long as they get what they want whereas women must, on top of that, get it in their own way. I suspect that a good deal of the “unbelievable

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> ‘The Domestic Servants Ordinance’, *Straits Eurasian Advocate*, 31 March 1888, Newspaper SG.

<sup>58</sup> ‘The Labour Contracts Amendment Bill’, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 30 August 1889, Newspaper SG.

stupidity” that women always “have to put up with” from perfectly good servants, is simply “put on” to get even with the mistress for treatment received that was lacking in appreciation of service rendered.<sup>59</sup>

The constant challenge at hand for mems was when to exert power over their employees in balance with a more sympathetic approach to gain their trust. In the case of Ms. Muddit, her violence towards her servant could not easily be considered as an act of self-defence given the circumstances. She was just as much at fault as a result of her instructions and misconduct towards Ah Kwi. Memes were aware that within the social hierarchy, they were not men themselves and thus did not have the power to demand servants to do their bidding in the same way as the male master. A mem with a bad temper risked earning a bad reputation throughout the colonies. Tales of the dramatic rage of mems like Ms. Muddit spread through workplaces and the Chinese community.<sup>60</sup> Unlike the masters and mems who could spread news of their troubles through newspapers and publications, the Chinese would tell their stories of angry mems within the confines of the coffeehouse, where stories could be acted out in dramatic theater to the amusement of the audience.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> ‘The Value of the “Boy” Depends upon the Master’, *The Strait Times*, 29 April 1934, Newspaper SG.

<sup>60</sup> Margaret C. Wilson, *Malaya: The Land of Enchantment* (ISBN, n.d.), [https://eservice.nlb.gov.sg/item\\_holding.aspx?bid=5621363](https://eservice.nlb.gov.sg/item_holding.aspx?bid=5621363).

<sup>61</sup> ‘Servants Have Only One Pair Of Hands’, *The Strait Times*, 8 August 1940, Newspaper SG.



Figure 2.2 House in Tanjong Katong. Photograph circa 1900 courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

### The Kitchen: Dominion of the “Cookies”

[The Cook is] the head of the hierarchy... presides in the kitchen, does the marketing, keeps order amongst the servants [...] He is the household tyrant...<sup>62</sup>

The idea of the cook as a tyrant was shared by servants as well as by mems. Cookies were the primary target for mems because of their ranking within the household. They were the ones most considered suspect for crimes as well as the orchestrator of mischief. Given that their position made them interact with all the other workers in the house, they also were able to act as the intermediary between all the other servants.<sup>63</sup> To the servants, the kitchen was the center of their communication and their gathering place to socialize. As they were at the top of the hierarchy, they also were sometimes considered another set of eyes for the mems. Often, cooks

<sup>62</sup> MacCallum Scott, *Eastern Journey*, 14.

<sup>63</sup> Loo, ‘Mem, Don’t Mess with the Cook’.

sided with their Chinese comrades against the mems as a result of also being on the tail end of abuse by mems.<sup>64</sup>

Mems for their part in the mistress-servant dynamic sought to “civilize” their unruly servants. Seeing this as a fault of the masters for not controlling the servants before their arrival, mems went to work trying to shape servants to accord with their ideals. One avenue was by cracking into the domain of the cooks – the kitchen. Many mems were disgusted with the cooking practices of Chinese cooks and frequently claimed its unhealthy usage of pig fat was a symbol of unrefined and unhygienic practices. The common advice spread from household to household was to “never to enter or look into a kitchen where food is being prepared by a Chinaman if you would preserve your peace of mind and enjoy your meals.” *The “Mems” Own Cookery Book* by Mrs. W. E. Kinsey became another tool at the disposal of mems in order to combat their servants.<sup>65</sup> More than just a simple cookbook, the book included information about how to observe the servants as they prepared food, how many portions of food could be made with each recipe, as well as how much the ingredients would cost. This was all done to monitor the cook and to ensure that he was unable to lie to the mem about how much the food would cost and pocket the remaining allowance for himself when preparing the meal.

### **Communicating and Organizing Power:**

Considering the relationship between master and servant, there was also a conscious effort on the part of servants to communicate with future employees about the state of power within the household. This forms part of a larger movement among Chinese labourers to band together to face their colonial masters. Additionally, the organization of Chinese workers in

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<sup>64</sup> ‘Our Domestic Servants’, *Straits Times Weekly Issue*, 4 August 1891, Newspaper SG.

<sup>65</sup> Loo, ‘Mem, Don’t Mess with the Cook’.

reaction to their masters and mistresses suggests that the master-servant dynamic was not just all in favour of the master.

Cookies, as with many of the other servant groups, developed a unique and subtle way of communication between each other to avoid the gaze of the all-seeing mems. This communication system was also valuable because former employees of mems could also discreetly signal to new hires of the attributes of the mistress as well as how to succeed at their posting. This “language” between servants was slowly discovered and explained in a newspaper article in consultation with Chinese workers. When a new cook is hired, the first thing he checks is the saucepans. If the work conditions were favourable to the former cookie, then the saucepan would be left on the ground with the lid put on properly. Other signs of favourable conditions within the house included when there was a clump of rice left inside the saucepan, which denoted that the previous servant was very satisfied with his treatment from his master and mistress.<sup>66</sup> When the lid of the saucepan was covering only half of the pan, it meant that the other servants and conditions of the household were good, but that the master was stingy. If the household is unruly and the master and mistress are known to be abusive or not pay wages on time or well, then a large white mark would be made at the bottom of the saucepan.<sup>67</sup>

In a few cases, there were also notes and signs left by the exiting cookie to alert the new hire of the particular tastes of the master and mistress. In one instance, the former cook placed

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<sup>66</sup> ‘Chinese Servants’ Signs. *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (Weekly)*, 28 August 1902, Page 140’, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 28 August 1902, Newspaper SG, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/singfreepresswk19020828-1.2.102?ST=1&AT=search&k=Chinese,%20servant,%20boy&QT=chinese,servant,boy&oref=article>; ‘The Hylam Servants and Ice’; ‘Chinese Servants. *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 6 January 1925, Page 1’.

<sup>67</sup> ‘A Chinese Cooks Certificate. *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (Weekly)*, 1 February 1897, Page 6’, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 1 February 1897, Newspaper SG, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/singfreepresswk18970201-1.2.48?ST=1&AT=search&k=Chinese,%20servant,%20boy&QT=chinese,servant,boy&oref=article>.



red cloth with writing in Chinese to note the temperament of the master. The new cookie managed to seamlessly integrate into the household and served the master and mistress their favorite dishes. To the surprise of the mistress when she asked the cook how he understood the household so well, he showed her the red pieces of paper stuck to the bottom of cabinets from previous employees on what he should do if he wanted to succeed at his job.<sup>68</sup>

As the story of Ah Kwi illustrates, the Chinese servants would also band together in order to fight back against oppressive rules and abuse that they would face from masters and mistresses. One such organization can be seen as a form of progenitor to a labour union. Chinese secret societies, guilds, or *kongsi* (公司) were where most masters and mistresses recruited their domestic labour. The *kongsi* were the organizing body of Chinese labour in Singapore and thus held considerable sway over the labour market.<sup>69</sup> Servants also understood this and were not afraid to let their masters and mistresses know that if they were mistreated, that the *kongsi* would be sure not to assist in the hiring of future servants as well as spreading throughout the Chinese community of the poor state of the household, ensuring no job offers would come their way. *Kongsi* were not wholly similar to a labour union in that they were also outspoken members of the community. The *kongsi* pressured Chinese community members at large into following their directives. Often, this came in the form of a threat to punish those who chose to work for a household who the *kongsi* had deemed unworthy of service.<sup>70</sup> This threat of not having servant labour was a real one, as illustrated in one Straits Time article, where one British official remarked:

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> 'The Servant Problem', *Malayan Saturday Post*, 24 April 1926, Newspaper SG; 'The Servant Problem', *Straits Echo*, 1 October 1918, Newspaper SG.

<sup>70</sup> 'Untitled', *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 3 May 1901, Newspaper SG.

— how many of us have not been obliged to do without servants for days, and were candidly told by those whom we at last managed to secure that they were in mortal fear of being beaten by members of the [*kongsi* for being employed by us?] [... the *kongsi*] have completely succeeded in becoming the masters and dictators of those whom they are supposed to serve.<sup>71</sup>

These *kongsi* in the eyes of the masters and mistresses were considered less an organization of workers and more a crime syndicate. The power and influence that came because of this organization were seen yet another avenue that masters were less in control of the master-servant dynamic than appeared on paper. One letter to the press says as much:

— the steady mysterious leakage of jewellery, cash, cutlery, under-linen, and minor domestic articles – the difficulty of getting new servants, under the open institution of a boycott – the constant assumption of false names and the use of borrowed or forged characters – must be well aware that the house-holder is, necessarily, for want of protection, the passive victim of organised [Chinese] exploitation.<sup>72</sup>

Increasingly, the bodies of labour that were once considered something that a master could easily control were crumbling, and the scale of power was slowly shifting in favour of servants. Thus begins the fight to regain domination over the unruly servant.

### **Controlling Labour: The Domestic Servants Ordinance**

Feeling “under the thumb and at the mercy of the ungrateful ‘boys’” the masters and mistresses and sought to consolidate their own power to fight back against the Chinese servants.

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<sup>71</sup> ‘Our Hylam Servants’, *Straits Times Weekly Issue*, 1 September 1891, Newspaper SG.

<sup>72</sup> ‘Wednesday May 1, 1901’, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 1 May 1901, Newspaper SG.

The original passage used the term “Hylam” which is an older variant of “Hainan” in reference to the Hainanese Chinese populations that made a bulk of the Chinese domestic worker workforce. However, the sentiment was widespread and applied to all Chinese, hence “Hylam” has been redacted to “Chinese” for the sake of clarity and refinement.

This culminated with the passing of the Domestic Servants Ordinance in 1888. The Ordinance mandated that all servants be required to hold a pocket register signed by the Registrar of Servants to work in Singapore. The Domestic Servants Ordinance was designed to increase a master or mistresses' control over all bodies of labour within a household through strict registration of workers as well as rigorous examination by the Registrar of Servants after two months of employment. Servants were expected to hand over information pertaining to their age, country of origin, place of residence, as well as all previous employment. Servants who were discovered to have had criminal pasts or had bad references from previous employers were not given a pocket registered and had to discontinue working as domestic servants. Failure to do so could amount to three years in jail, a fine of \$10, or both a fine and jail time.<sup>73</sup>

The increased scrutiny as provided by the Ordinance theoretically made it so that the colonial elite could control who was employed within the households of White masters. It also highlighted servants and other worker within the household upon employment were under suspicion and were treated as if considered guilty. The Registrar of Servants data collecting could be seen as a foil for evidence collecting to ensure that masters had a pool of evidence available to them in the event of an unruly servant or group of servants decided to act out of line. It should have empowered masters by giving them the ability to terminate employment without any notice and with out remuneration. I note how the Ordinance theoretically should have done this to highlight that in practice and actuality, many masters did not actively enforce the

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<sup>73</sup> 'Servants' Registration.', *Strait Times Weekly*, 22 November 1886, Newspaper SG, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/stweekly18861122-1.2.26?ST=1&AT=search&k=Domestic%20Servants%20Ordinance&QT=domestic,servants,ordinance&oref=article>; 'Saturday, 31st March 1888. The Domestic Servants Ordinance', *The Straits Eurasian Advocate*, 31 March 1888, Newspaper SG, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitseurasian18880331-1.2.6?ST=1&AT=search&k=Domestic%20Servants%20ordinance&QT=domestic,servants,ordinance&oref=article>; 'Our Hylam Servants'.

Ordinance as a result of pushback from the servants who threatened to leave if their masters forced them to do documentation.<sup>74</sup>

## Conclusions

The servant question would, at present, seem to be one of the most wearisome little things in Singapore. Go where you will, and when you will, the subject is ever and always being discussed. From a man's point of view it is a little question, out of all proportion to the amount of time and anxiety wasted upon it. And yet is it so insignificant after all? Are not whole households, in Singapore, more or less dependent on their servants for their comforts?<sup>75</sup>

The Domestic Servants Ordinance did not last long. Enacted on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1888, it was abolished in October of the same year, comically because the *kongsi* mounted a strike against all domestic labour.<sup>76</sup> This led to widespread crisis in households where there were no servants and the masters needed to “abandon” their houses and live in hotels in order to keep up their way of living. At one point, the Chinese *kongsi* demanded a system in which Europeans were registered – with their names, age, country of origin listed. Demanded was also a list of previous servants and reasons for termination, list of abuses done upon servants, and their own record of criminal activity.<sup>77</sup> This push and pull of power between master and servant would continue its strange dance into the 20<sup>th</sup> century with master occasionally having more power as a result of a weakening *kongsi*, or with servants within a household banding together and overpowering the masters and mistress. This is what we see in the story of Ah Kwi and Ms. Muddit. Around the

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<sup>74</sup> ‘The Servants Question. Straits Independent and Penang Chronicle, 12 September 1891, Page 2’, *Straits Independent and Penang Chronicle*, 12 September 1891, Newspaper SG, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitsindependent18910912-1.2.3?ST=1&AT=search&K=Chinese%2c+servant%2c+boy&P=2&Display=0&filterS=0&QT=chinese,servant,boy&oref=article>.

<sup>75</sup> ‘The Little Things of Life’, *The Strait Times*, 13 July 1906, Newspaper SG.

<sup>76</sup> Loo, ‘Mem, Don’t Mess with the Cook’.

<sup>77</sup> ‘The Servant Problem’, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 19 April 1905, Newspaper SG.

time of the Ah Kwi and Ms. Muddit incident, newspaper polling of White employers in Singapore suggested strongly that they wanted to reinstate the Domestic Servants Ordinance. However, this never came to be.

This dance around power, as illustrated by masters and mistresses trying to regain power over their own households paints a completely different story than that of complete domination over their servants. It offers another vantage point and counterpoint on how colonial politics of power and control have their arena within the household as well as in attempts to control bodies of labour. We also see that within the relationship of mem and servant, that the mem actively sought power for themselves and used the opportunity to go from mem to man of the house.

### **Chapter 3 – *Ill Lit by Moonlight*: Chinese “Male” Sex Workers and their European Male Patrons**

In the early hours of one day in January 25<sup>th</sup> 1938, Mr. D.W. Macintosh, the Assistant Superintendent of Police of the Strait Settlements entered a Japanese hotel on Prinsep Street.<sup>78</sup> He ascended to the first floor where they heard voices coming from a room. Macintosh heard the creaking of the bed and the sound of footsteps pacing across the wooden floor. With the door being slightly ajar, he entered the room. Dimly lit by an oil lamp, the room presented a shocking scene. A man stirred and illuminated two boys also in the room: a boy was sitting on the man’s stomach with his back to the man’s face, the other boy was lying beside the man to the right caressing the man’s face with his left hand.

“As we entered the boy on top slipped off and squatted on the left side of the bed; the man thus being between the two boys, lying naked on his back. His penis was not erect.” When the man was asked for identification, he resigned that “[you] will find it out anyway, so I might as well give it to you.”<sup>79</sup> An arrest was made on the man in violation of Section 377 of the Strait Settlement Penal Code, which forbade “carnal intercourse against the order of nature,” particularly sodomy.<sup>80</sup> Macintosh did not know that he had just arrested Mr. H. Moses, one of the lead jailers of the Straits Settlements Prisons located to the east of the island in what was later called Changi Prison. Moses argued that nothing abnormal of the sort was happening prior to Macintosh entering the room – that it was just three consensual adults offering each other company without clothing. He used the fact that his penis was not erect as his defence, which

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<sup>78</sup> D.W. Macintosh, ‘Discipline Under Colonial Regulations, H. Moses Malaya.’ (Singapore, 24 March 1938), 3, National Library of Singapore.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

was unconvincingly discredited as Macintosh argued that something indecent would have happened moments later if he had not interrupted them. He was charged with attempted sodomy on the spot. Lamenting that he was just another government servant with a ruined career, Moses complied and went along with Macintosh to the Central Police Station where he was released on bail for \$5,000. Three months later, Moses resigned and returned to his native Australia.<sup>81</sup>

Earlier chapters focused on the quotidian lives of Chinese houseboys in colonial Singapore, yet there still existed an underground of Chinese, male, sex workers that only in recent years has come into focus through the declassification of documents. The relationship between European clients and Chinese sex workers forms the flipside of interactions between master and servant that this thesis is critical of in intimate labours, albeit within different places and spaces of intimacy. By the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, colonial Singapore had close to 300 brothels, the vast majority run and staffed by Chinese women.<sup>82</sup> Chinese brothels were located on the upper levels of buildings in Chinatown or along its outskirts, clustered around major streets such as North Bridge Road, Temple Street, and famously on Geylang Road (See fig. 3.1). Chinese sex workers existed in part because there were many men living in a colonial outpost. In colonial society, there were few women who could provide comforts after a day's work. These Chinese men had three viable options available to them: to practice celibacy, to engage in homosexual acts, or to frequent female prostitutes, which were high in demand and low in

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>82</sup> Ronald Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience*, Book, Whole (Manchester; New York, NY, USA; New York; Manchester University Press, 1990), 145, [http://ubc.summon.serialssolutions.com/2.0.0/link/0/eLvHCXMwbV07b8IwED5BWLqVQNUARZ4qGKiwHechsVVE\\_IDukYkvG2klpv77nh23tQKjX7J8su\\_h8\\_cZQIq3\\_W6gExQ2FN1ijlpT5ENhkSHDUaSo9TnvYPGhE91DjdPdYZQu7vZmVxZZOQYxjJX0f-nbrS1JHnFWZDwSgUpCF5kLpDnpSPySoOCEp6cJ2gMyzavGcD0rS2qHiGy-IQpjLCLienhtcwf0SvbeB7pbQyLPzAKe2W-X88K8j2D2fHyRdqO6c6wq6NdJnd8Dk11\\_Hg\\_7WjO2l\\_s1P1yxRNE3WeHz8CUTrmxhH0ibcjRajUWuixMdhZl22JuEpjek9gGVb-irUuLM-MWNwbsoQHTlasv4IYwaSlk4IvTiBrJ\\_YfgA-Hgw](http://ubc.summon.serialssolutions.com/2.0.0/link/0/eLvHCXMwbV07b8IwED5BWLqVQNUARZ4qGKiwHechsVVE_IDukYkvG2klpv77nh23tQKjX7J8su_h8_cZQIq3_W6gExQ2FN1ijlpT5ENhkSHDUaSo9TnvYPGhE91DjdPdYZQu7vZmVxZZOQYxjJX0f-nbrS1JHnFWZDwSgUpCF5kLpDnpSPySoOCEp6cJ2gMyzavGcD0rS2qHiGy-IQpjLCLienhtcwf0SvbeB7pbQyLPzAKe2W-X88K8j2D2fHyRdqO6c6wq6NdJnd8Dk11_Hg_7WjO2l_s1P1yxRNE3WeHz8CUTrmxhH0ibcjRajUWuixMdhZl22JuEpjek9gGVb-irUuLM-MWNwbsoQHTlasv4IYwaSlk4IvTiBrJ_YfgA-Hgw).

supply.<sup>83</sup> These choices did not just apply to the Chinese men who left their families back in China, but also the many colonial officers who worked to maintain the overseas territories. The few female clientele who existed would frequent Chinese brothels and pay exorbitant prices for their services and massages.<sup>84</sup>

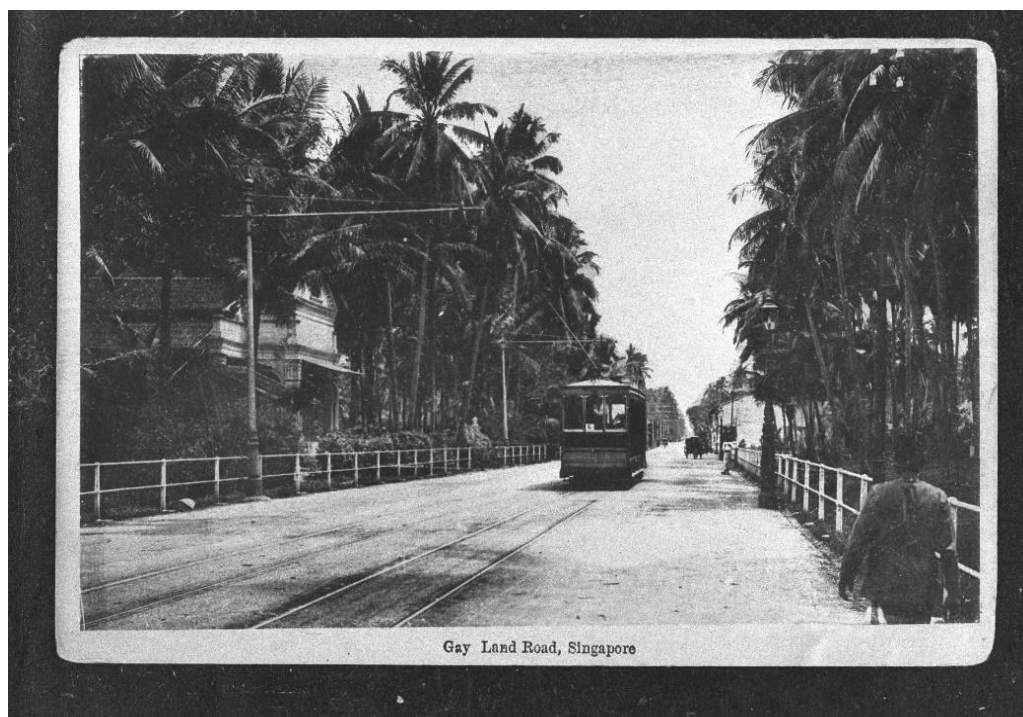


Figure 3.1 Gay Land (Geylang) Road, Singapore circa 1920. Postcard, from the National Archives of Singapore.

The focus of this chapter will be on the Chinese male sex workers (henceforth noted simply as sex workers) who provided homosexual services. I seek to illustrate some social and cultural dynamics of Chinese male sex work through aspects of Mr. Moses' story. His story is not an outlier, but rather part of a larger interwoven history around intimate labour in the

<sup>83</sup> Ben Chapman-Schmidt, 'Sex in the Shadow of the Law: Regulating Sex Work and Human Trafficking in Singapore', *Asian Journal of Comparative Law* 10, no. 1 (July 2015): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1017/asjcl.2015.1>; J. Y. Chua, 'The Strange Career of Gross Indecency: Race, Sex, and Law in Colonial Singapore', *Law and History Review* 38, no. 4 (November 2020): 703, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S073824801900052X>.

<sup>84</sup> Magaly Rodriguez Garcia et al., *Selling Sex in the City: A Global History of Prostitution, 1600s-2000s*, vol. 31.; 31.; Book, Whole (Leiden; Boston; Brill, 2017), 617, <https://go.exlibris.link/C8HNF8rC>.



colonies. A story that pits sex workers as paradoxically the object of pleasure as well as bodies that should not be memorialized. Seeking company from someone of the same sex appeared to have its appeals, as Strait Settlement Reports and Chinese secret society documents note during this period of at least six known Chinese male brothels. These documents also note of at least a dozen men working in total across these brothels, mainly catering to male clientele.<sup>85</sup> The appeal of said Chinese brothel workers tied to their perceived feminine attributes which illustrated them as excellent caretakers and domestic workers (as described in Chapter 1).<sup>86</sup> Coupled with their known skills as domestic workers in the home, European clients could be confident that the services of Chinese male sex workers would also fit sexual fantasies around submissive and obedient sexual roles.

Historian Claire Lowrie identifies that European males in Singapore exploited the homosocial intimacy of the master-servant relationship to seek sexual fulfilment from their mainly Chinese servants.<sup>87</sup> Lowrie's motifs are center stage in Henri Fauconnier's *The Soul of Malaya*, a French novel translated into English in 1931. Fauconnier, who himself was a rubber planter in Malaya, authored an autobiographical novel in which the European narrator forms an intimate relationship with his Malay servant. At one point in the novel, Fauconnier cited the prominent ancient-Greek homoerotic writer Theocritus, writing that he does not "see any difference between loving a dog, a mother, a friend, or a mistress," and that his chosen lifestyle is peculiar in the tropics.<sup>88</sup> This motif of the tropics being a sexually inviting space is best described as part of a larger "porno-tropics" motif. First coined by writer Anne McClintock, the

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<sup>85</sup> Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience*, 145.

<sup>86</sup> Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore, 1819-2005*, 101.

<sup>87</sup> Lowrie, *Masters and Servants*, 75..

<sup>88</sup> Chua, 'The Strange Career of Gross Indecency', 705.

“porno-tropics” describes the romanticization and sexualization in European colonial discourses regarding gender, race, sexuality, and colonial expansion into lands and territories.<sup>89</sup> While commonly used to look at macro-scale spaces such as a colony, this chapter will now move into using micro-spaces to elucidate how colonialism, power, and control are enacted within the most intimate of locations: the bedroom. Sex between sex workers and their European clients illuminate something beyond mere existence in the colonial tapestry – brothels and desire for companionship illustrate the tensions and intersections between power, sexuality, and race under the guise of health, disease control, and Christian morals. These factors come together to create bodies that are unmemorable by nature of their existence within the colonial apparatus.

### ***Kopitiams* and Theatre Troupes: Weaving the Threads of Sex Work**

While the background information about how Mr. Moses solicited the two boys for sexual services or where they came from is unknown, it is possible to chart some of the common threads and histories of sex work in Singapore to provide context to their circumstances. The existence and the development of sex work in Singapore begins by looking at how Chinese men and women entered sex work in the Strait Settlements. It is vital to discuss the spaces and places in which sex work was cultivated, negotiated, as well as enacted. From a cultural standpoint, cisgender-men who found themselves as sex workers from within the Chinese community were within their own category of gender and deemed “less than” in relation to men in the community. With sex work considered to be a *fei nan xing* or “non-male” (非男性) profession in nature, their identities made them outcasts within the Chinese community.<sup>90</sup> This kind of description – of

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<sup>89</sup> McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, 21.

<sup>90</sup> 宋明順, 社會的另一面: 新加坡娼妓調查 (Singapore: Singapore Yunan Bookstore, 1970), 50, <https://catalogue.nlb.gov.sg/cgi-bin/spydus.exe/ENQ/WPAC/BIBENQ?SETLVL=&BRN=84563902>.

Chinese male sex workers as not cut from the same cloth as other Chinese men – reinforces the lack of agency afforded to these sex workers, albeit for the wrong reason. Many of the men who ended up in sex work arrived in brothels not by their own choice. Faced with poverty and too many mouths to feed in China, parents would give up their children to human traffickers looking for labour in Southeast Asia in exchange for monthly payments deducted from their children's earnings.

Children sold to traffickers were between the ages of 8-18 years of age (see Fig. 3). This correlated the age in which parents decided that their children were developing into an economic burden in relation to the amount of labour they could provide within the family structure. Children too young to conduct sex work would spend years assisting the theatre troupes or working in the coffee shops – popularly called *kopitiam*s (咖啡店) in Hokkien (see fig. 3.2). In these spaces, children learned the crafts of costume making, cross-dressing, and singing for those in the theatre troupes, and mastering the art of making “pulled tea” or *teh tarik* (拉茶) if they worked at a *kopitiam*.<sup>91</sup> On the side, they also learned the subtle arts of pleasuring clients including massaging and sexually pleasing their clients. Once they reached the age of 15, they began work as sex workers.<sup>92</sup> Eventually, as these children got older (or as the traffickers got caught), these young men and women would be forced out of theatre tropes and *kopitiam*s. With no other skills and no way home, many continued sex work in hotels and brothels to make a living.

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<sup>91</sup> S.E Nicoll-Jones, ‘Report on the Problem of Prostitution in Singapore’ (Microfilm, Singapore, May 1940), 27, Private Collection, National Library of Singapore.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

While scholars such as Rachel Leow have focused much of their analysis on the girls and young women who were involved in this trade, also known as the *mui tsai* or “little sister” (妹子) system, there are records that also indicate that young boys and intersex individuals (that parents believed could not properly integrate into society or the family structure) were sold.<sup>93</sup> This system by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had developed into a lucrative multi-million-dollar trade.<sup>94</sup> Children were encouraged to comply under the guise of filial piety or *xiao dao* (孝道) – the overarching Confucian belief that obedience to one’s parents was part of one’s obligation to the family and society. To enter the Strait Settlements, parents needed to write a letter of approval allowing for their children to enter the country under the “guardianship” of another individual and plans for their stay. The usual premise used was that the children were employed in theatre troupes or in *kopitiam*<sup>95</sup> In one letter recorded by the colonial government of the Strait Settlements, a mother writes:

“I am going to borrow a little money from the Troupe -- a sum of fifty dollars. I have a blind son in China, and I need money. The money will be paid back from my son’s wages at the rate of one dollar a month.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> The term *mui tsai* comes from the Cantonese language. This does not reflect who was being trafficked as it was not just Cantonese children that were trafficked, but also Hakka, Hokkien, Hainanese, and many other children from many other groups. Within prevailing scholarship about colonial sex trade of Chinese girls and children in Southeast Asia, the Cantonese term has stood as the standard.

<sup>94</sup> Rachel Leow, ‘Age as a Category of Gender Analysis: Servant Girls, Modern Girls, and Gender in Southeast Asia’, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 71, no. 4 (2012): 977, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911812001258>.

<sup>95</sup> Nicoll-Jones, ‘Report on the Problem of Prostitution in Singapore’, 11.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

It was noted by Nicoll-Jones that in many cases, any money made by children was confiscated by traffickers and then split between the parents. The money that was sent back to the parents was oftentimes not actually given to the children back home and misused by parents. In this example, Nicoll-Jones suspects that the “blind child” did not actually exist and was just a prop to justify the selling of the other child that was sent to Singapore for “work.” However, there is probable reason to also suspect that Nicoll-Jones was dramatizing the status of children in the colony in order to appeal to the political leaders for policy change.

Theatre troupes and *kopitiams* became the preferred fronts for this movement of people into Singapore. Theatre troupe actors often allured their clients after shows, and those who worked in *kopitiams* stalls would use the upper floors of stall buildings for their services and clients, using codes and signals to catch the eyes of clients.<sup>97</sup>



Figure 3.2 Coffee Shop at Junction of Selegie Road and Mackenzie Road (Tekka), Singapore 1937. Photograph, from the National Archives of Singapore.

Theatre troupes as an art and form of entertainment became less and less popular in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century due to the development of the movie theatre and movies. *Kopitiams* became the preferred nexus for sex work as they developed into thriving community areas and were integrated into the daily morning ritual of breakfast. A central area in which one could meet with friends, eat breakfast, and get information on local happenings, *kopitiams* were positioned as the perfect place to lure customers in for coffee and to return, in the evening, to meet clients who

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 48.

remembered the sweet smile from that morning.<sup>98</sup> From here, sex workers would invite their morning coffee-drinkers to brothels and hotels for a night of comfort and intimacy.



Figure 3.3 'Ah Moy, a child slave of Hong Kong, Hong Kong circa 1930. Photograph by Clara Haslewood.<sup>99</sup>

### **Hotels and Brothels: Spaces of Passion and “Diseases”**

As sex work moved into establishments such as hotels and brothels, there also developed increased scrutinization for diseases. In the mind of many colonial officers such as Governor Shenton as well as S.E Niccol-Jones, the bodies of sex workers were considered conduits for venereal diseases to spread between the races. Sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis spread rapidly within brothels and efforts to control it, such as mandating examinations of brothels and their staff, proved to be ineffective since many workers continued working despite

<sup>98</sup> K. Aljunied, 'Coffee-Shops in Colonial Singapore: Domains of Contentious Publics', *History Workshop Journal* 77, no. 1 (1 April 2014): 71, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbt011>.

<sup>99</sup> Clara Haslewood was a wife of a commander stationed in Hong Kong during the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Her advocacy for anti-slavery led her to becoming one of the founding members of the Hong Kong Anti-Mui Tsai Society in 1921. For more information, see: John M Carroll's, *A Concise History of Hong Kong*, 110. Also see Rachel Lowe's "'Do You Own Non-Chinese Mui Tsai?'" Re-Examining Race and Female Servitude in Malaya and Hong Kong, 1919–1939'.

infection. Unless the physical symptoms of the diseases were severe enough to dissuade/push away clients, very few sex workers would report or seek medical attention for venereal diseases.<sup>100</sup> Since many cases of diseases were reported as coming from Chinese brothels, the resounding sentiment was that Chinese sex workers were more inclined to contracting and spreading them. In some cases, those who participated in sex work were written in journals of medical and police officers as “non-human” or “beasts.”<sup>101</sup> Despite attempts to control sex work, it continued to develop and thrive as the government preferred that people catch these physical diseases from female sex workers over the “other disease,” which would spread if there was a total shutdown of the sex industry and the loss of female prostitutes.

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<sup>100</sup> Philippa Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire*, Book, Whole (New York: Routledge, 2003), 379, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203881941>.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 381.



Figure 3.4 Great Southern Hotel located at the junction of Eu Tong Sen Street (余東旋街) and Upper Cross Street, Chinatown circa 1930. Photograph courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.

The other disease in question was not a physical one, but the “disease” of homosexuality and sodomy. Homosexuality, as well as other forms of sexuality and gender identity, was a phenomenon that existed not just in Singapore, but also in all colonies. As Albert Aldrich illustrates in *Colonialism and Homosexuality*, the colonies were an inviting place for officers to travel to act out their sexual fantasies. Locales such as Bali and Singapore attracted the most attention as spaces for homosexual exploration.<sup>102</sup> Colonial spaces are illustrated areas where European men are away from the harsh social life back home while also being bestowed powers by privilege of their race. The power mobility afforded to colonizers therefore empowered them to act out their sexual desires in this space where they were the masters. This is reflected in the

<sup>102</sup> Robert F. Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality*, Book, Whole (London; New York, NY; Routledge, 2003), 215, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203930175>.



many cases of sodomy and other “indecent acts” that were recorded by officers between European men and Chinese men. The government of the Strait Settlement had a rising issue of disease as well as an ever-increasing number of Europeans who were partaking in sodomy. A scapegoat was needed to justify new policy which would control certain people and maintain colonial order. The response was to associate venereal diseases more closely with Chinese male sex workers who were increasingly characterized as “ladyboys” and belonging to a group of sexual deviants.<sup>103</sup>

What we would now consider as transgender identities, as well as intersex individuals, became the focus of vilification and thus considered to be the most “unclean” of sex workers. However, there does exist a small set of interviews and data that suggest within hotels and brothels, ostracized identities were able to find some sense of meaning and belonging in spite of the difficulties and stigma placed against them. As noted above, there existed a small group that entered sex work and Singapore because of the *mui tsai* system that were intersex or transgender.<sup>104</sup> While making up a small minority of all male sex workers, those that demonstrated “female gestures” or *nüxing de zitai* (女性的姿態) during childhood often ended up as sex workers because of not being able to fit into traditionally male roles such as domestic labour in the home or physical labour by the docks.<sup>105</sup> This included men who demonstrated “feminine” traits as well as intersex and what we would now call transgender individuals. Many transgender and intersex sex workers clustered within the brothels located along Bugis Street,

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<sup>103</sup> Chua, ‘The Strange Career of Gross Indecency’, 703; 宋, 社會的另一面: 新加坡娼妓調查, 55.

<sup>104</sup> 宋, 社會的另一面: 新加坡娼妓調查, 83.

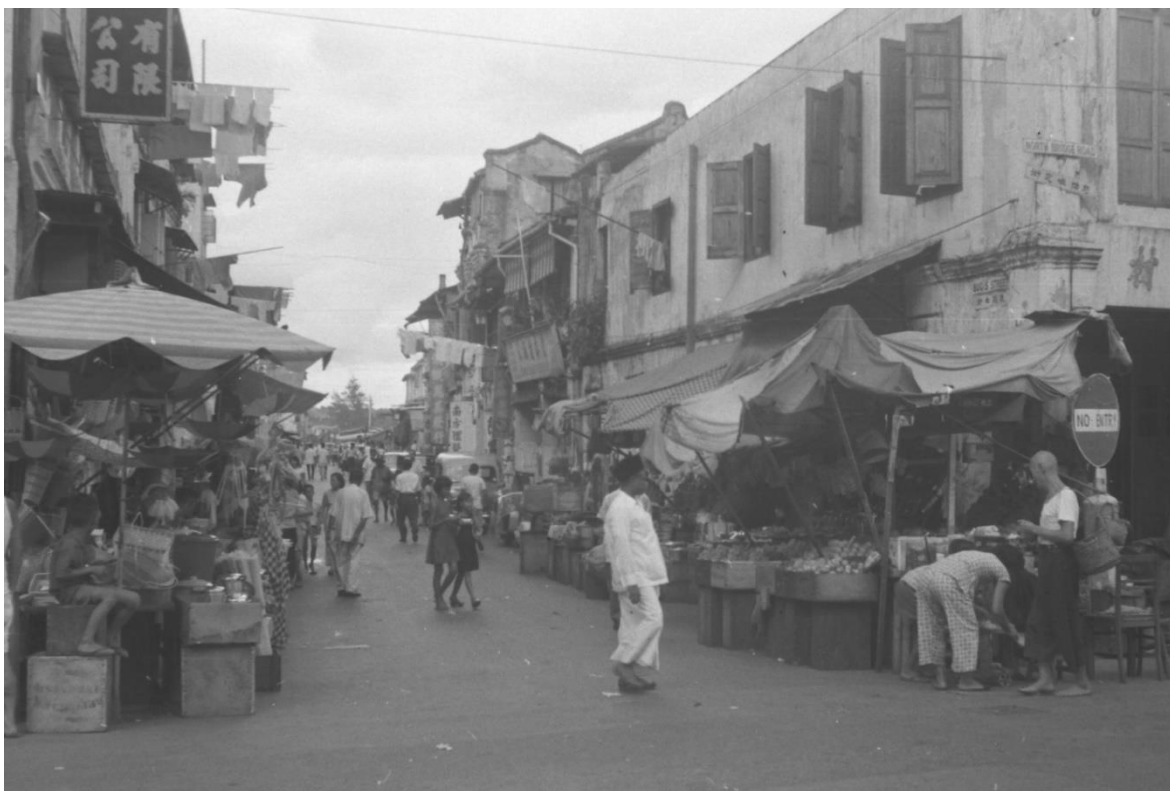
I use the term *intersex* and *transgender* rather than the terminology used in 宋’s documents *nan jie* or “male sisters” (男姐) to better provide agency for the individuals interviewed within the manuscript. Moving away from *nan jie* provides more flexibility and reorients the stories of intersex and transgender peoples away from masculinity and manhood which may misrepresent their experiences.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

finding companionship and comradery while working together (see fig 3.5). In 1970, sociologist Song Mingshun (宋明順) from Nanyang University conducted interviews with sex workers who worked during the earlier 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Particularly, he interviewed a sex worker who identified as a woman named “Lady” (小姐) and noted how her perceived biological “defects” which made her not a man allowed for her to become a novelty for her clientele. In reflection of her abusive childhood and her issues around her own gender identity, her occupation as a sex worker provided her with a sense of completeness and meaning. “With love, all I expect is the comfort of men. With men, I feel satisfied spiritually, otherwise, I feel abnormally empty.”<sup>106</sup> The “abnormal” feeling of emptiness felt by Lady was shared with many the other brothel workers and those who were left abandoned to find purpose within its halls. Within the rooms of hotels and brothels, there was a possibility to find meaning and belonging even if for a fleeting moment.

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 84.



*Figure 3.5 Bugis Street Bazaar became known as an area with transgender and intersex sex workers. A crackdown of brothels who employed these workers began in earnest in 1985 with the construction of the Bugis MRT station. Photograph circa 1960s courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.*

### ***Burning Away the Night Oil: Illuminating The “Crisis” of Gross Indecency***

As the colonial government discovered more officers and European individuals caught in the act of sodomy, they realized that it was impossible to police the actions of those in power. Stories of police raids of hotels and brothels such as in the case of Mr. Moses were commonplace during the later colonial period of Singapore’s history. Officers such as Macintosh would have done weekly rounds raiding hotels and brothels looking for “persons committing offences.” This was part of a wider crackdown of indecent behaviours that Governor Shenton was determined to rip out root and branch. Prior to arriving in Singapore, Shenton was instructed to read a dispatch from the London chapter of the Straits Settlement’s Association detailing how the officers and

local men of Singapore had a predisposition for “unnatural vices.”<sup>107</sup> The only additional detail given to Shenton was that such “vices” were perhaps a result of the tropical climate and “uncivilized culture of the Asiatics.”<sup>108</sup> Deviancy was theorized to be endemic to the tropics. It was not until arriving in Singapore and gaining experience in the running of the everyday colony of Singapore that Shenton realised the “vice” in question was sodomy. Prior to his arrival, he heard reports of Singapore’s male brothels, many of whom were staffed by the Chinese. What he discovered in Singapore was a vast underground system of Asian catamites and European officers’ willingness to partake and purchase sexual services from workers. While homosexuality and solicitation of sex was an issue of colonial misconduct and a violation of Christian morals, Shenton also felt that another “vice” was in play: one of intimate, pleasurable intermingling between the races.

As the “casualties” of these raids started to come in and the list lengthened to include some high-ranking officials, the issue not only encompassed the fact that the “vice” of sodomy was unchristian, and against Shenton’s belief of racial hygiene, but also a deep-seated fear regarding power and order. If European men consorted with Asian men, colonial officers would be emasculated and be a point of weakness in colonial enforcement of the Strait Settlements.<sup>109</sup> Herein lies Shenton’s critical concern: that British colonial rule would be undermined by homosexual acts with “lesser” races. British colonial rule relied on the heavy-handed stratification of the races. Within the bedroom, such distinctions were ignored by lust and passion. How could European officers claim dominance and rule over the colony if they were

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<sup>107</sup> Saunders, ‘Discipline Under Colonial Regulations, H. Gerhold Malaya’ (Singapore, 20 March 1939), 4, National Library of Singapore.

<sup>108</sup> Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience*, 145.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

sleeping with the “unruly” Malays, the “womanlike” Chinese, or the “seductive” Tamils and possibly being penetrated by them?<sup>110</sup> The thought of having a European officer fall for the allure of a male sex worker not of the European race would prove a scandal capable of eroding the power the British exerted over the population as well as the trust that the British government had in those who ran the colonies. The capsulation of Shenton’s concerns resulted in the implementation of British Indian Penal Code policies around sexual offences. Just after Mr. Moses’ incident, under the revised and amended Penal Code of 1938, Section 377A was put into law, which stated:

“Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or abets the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 2 years.”<sup>111</sup>

The true objective of Section 377A as a racial stratification law created to preserve the respectability of the European race is brought forth by evidence of how Shenton kept the power to order enquiry in lieu of prosecution. In effect, this meant that no individual officer could be prosecuted under Section 377A without Shenton’s authority.<sup>112</sup> Shenton offered offending officers two options: be prosecuted and have the public be aware of their shame, or to resign and leave Malaya and the Strait Settlements. Of course, secrets die hard, and the offences travelled with officers well after their postings in the Strait Settlements ended. Mr. H. Gerhold, who was the Assistant Commissioner of Police, was caught in the act of sodomy at a hotel in 1938. In a

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>111</sup> ‘Penal Code (Cap. 224, 1985 Rev. Ed.)’, in *Outrages on Decency*, n.d., <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/PC1871?ProvIds=pr377A-#>.

<sup>112</sup> T.K Loyd, ‘Discipline Under Colonial Regulations’ (Singapore, 19 April 1940), 13, National Library of Singapore.

police raid of his home, journals and evidence was found that he has “experimented” with many of the other “Asiatic races” frequenting the brothels. During a police questioning, he protested his innocence by placing the blame and the lure of temptation on the men that he had slept with, citing that:

“— this vice [of sodomy] is peculiarly prevalent amongst both Europeans and Asiatics and is not regarded with the disapproval accorded to it in Western countries. [...] The Asiatic, by virtue of some religions which teach the segregation of women, regards this vice as no less natural than womanizing and conveying no greater stigma. It is in this peculiar atmosphere of this country that, under a certain set of circumstances, a person may become a victim of this vice.”<sup>113</sup>

Gerhold was eventually sent to a new assignment in Palestine. Even when installed in other colonial governments, Shenton received requests from other Governors questioning why relocated officers left the Straits to resettle in another locale, to which he remained tight-lipped on the subject and would redirect any intrigue. When Gerhold’s new colleagues in Palestine requested letters regarding his dismissal from Singapore and relocation to Palestine, Shenton denied the request and made a note to tell all his commanding officers to approach all similar cases the same way. Gerhold’s letters and statements during questioning were kept in Singapore, hidden for only Shenton to see.<sup>114</sup> However, what Gerhold said regarding the “Asiatic vice” propelled Shenton to act against this rising crisis of gross indecency. Shenton took Gerhold’s statement as the final justification needed to press forward Section 377A and turn it into law. Gerhold provided Shenton with the perfect rationale in order to preserve European authorial integrity in the colonies and further justification for the stratification of society.

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<sup>113</sup> Saunders, ‘Discipline Under Colonial Regulations, H. Gerhold Malaya’, 14–15.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

## Conclusions

Charting the development of sex work through the story of Mr. Moses in Singapore's liminal spaces of the *kopitiams*, brothels, and hotels allows for us to consider how sex work came to be a reality for some of the many Chinese men in Singapore as well as how spaces of intimacy are developed and sustained. Whether by choice, through no other means of finding work, or company, some men came to work in brothels, and some men would find themselves in brothels looking for simple pleasures and company to make colonial life less lonely. In seeking the company of men, European clients were not just going against Christian morals as well as hygiene, but also colonial power and order. Moreover, the policing of bodies through hygiene created the "unmemorable body": the body that is made to be unworthy of memory and dignity.

When we discuss the colonial everyday, the scope of research has often focused on every *day* and less on every *night*. Unlike daylight domestic work, the hidden, discreet, and nocturnal work of sex workers is by nature something that challenged the very fabric of colonial society. As much as one may want to hide from its reality, the truth is that homosexual exploration in the colonies was quite widespread. The overarching issue was the fact that two individuals of different races, both of whom operated within different castes of society could, for at least one night, be enveloped in passions that would bring to question the distinctions between gender, race, and class. This deviancy was further stigmatized by sex workers who may or may not have identified as male personally which trivialized further the supposed rigidity of the law and society. Efforts to control this small flame ill-lit by moonlight resulted in the revision of Section 377 and the development of Section 377A. Despite the law, however, sex between those of the same gender as well as those who identify as transgender, or intersex continued to find work in Singapore.

## Conclusion – *Bodies Unremembered*

Memory is like patches of sunlight in an overcast valley, shifting with the movement of the clouds. Now and then the light will fall on a particular point in time, illuminating it for a moment before the wind seals up the gap, and the world is in shadows again.

– Tan Twan Eng, *The Garden of Evening Mists* (2012).<sup>115</sup>

Bukit Brown Cemetery is just a bit off Lornie highway. Even as I arrived near the gates of the now abandoned cemetery, the roaring of cars from the highway was just out of earshot. The air was hot and sticky even at 7:00 in the morning, and there was a thin veil of mist in the divots of the topography within the cemetery. The name of the cemetery harkens not to the colour of the landscape, which is far from brown, but to its colonial history. *Bukit* means “hill” in Malay and Brown is in reference to George Henry Brown, a well-known ship owner and trader whose residence was located nearby. The cemetery was established to address the need for burial space for the Chinese population in Singapore in the early 1920’s. It was developed in stark contrast to other Chinese gravesites, being the first open to all of those from different Chinese ethnic backgrounds and clans.<sup>116</sup> While hesitant at first due to the small size of the lots, Chinese of all backgrounds slowly began buy burial plots there. By the time of its closure in 1973, it held over 100,000 graves – making it one of the largest Chinese cemeteries outside of China proper.<sup>117</sup> Highway construction now erodes the cemetery but remains a space for dog walkers,

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<sup>115</sup> Twan Eng Tan, *The Garden of Evening Mists*, First, Book, Whole (New York: Hachette Books, 2012), 294, <https://go.exlibris.link/xc4qwrwq>.

<sup>116</sup> Traditional Chinese culture dictated that graves should be clustered around those of the same ethnic background and for those with the same clan heritage. For example, gravesites in Singapore, such as Yin Foh Kuan (应和馆) were designated just for Hakka Chinese. See: ‘Past and Present Cemeteries of Singapore (Part 1) – Old Chinese Graveyards’, Blogspot, *Remember Singapore* (blog), 7 April 2019, <https://remembersingapore.org/2019/04/07/singapore-past-present-cemeteries-part-1/>.

<sup>117</sup> Jianli Huang, ‘Resurgent Spirits of Civil Society Activism: Rediscovering the Bukit Brown Cemetery in Singapore’, *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 87, no. 2 (307) (2014): 21, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ras.2014.0016>.



history enthusiasts, and perhaps those who wish to feel closer to the spiritual. Since its abandonment, maintenance of the cemetery has been conducted by caretakers, volunteers, and the occasional family members who come to visit the graves during the Qing Ming Festival (清明節) or Tomb Sweeping Day.



*Figure 4.1 The gates of Bukit Brown Cemetery. Photograph taken in 2021 by author.*

As I passed the gates of the cemetery, there was a small shrine where one can honour their ancestors. There was a lighter as well as a stack of incense. I prayed and lit a stick incense. This small ritual comes second nature to me and felt familiar – before leaving for Singapore, I made a stop at my paternal grandfather and grandmother’s grave to do the exact same ritual. Just as I finished, a truck with two caretakers stops and proceeded to pray and light incense at the shrine. The caretakers got back on the truck and drove off. Once they cleared off the road, I

walked past the gate into Bukit Brown. It is a lush space where it feels like time and nature have started to regain their dominion over the dirt roads and granite gravestones. Many small shrines, like the first one I encountered, dot the cemetery. Up ahead I saw that the caretaker truck had stopped at the next shrine and that the staff were praying again, just before resuming their tour throughout the cemetery, making stops at each of these shrines in pilgrimage. I follow suit as I walked through the cemetery. Apart from the cry of birds and the screaming of cicadas, the cemetery is quiet.



*Figure 4.2 Shrine by the gate of Bukit Brown Cemetery. Photograph taken in 2021 by author.*

My objective of visiting Bukit Brown was not to see the elaborate and intricate graves of the Chinese elite such as the famous gravesite of Mr. Chew Geok Leong (周玉龍), who

established a successful medical practice in Singapore and famously had two statues of Sikh guards erected to keep watch over his grave.<sup>118</sup> Rather, I wanted to look at the graves of the paupers: the poor and common folk who comprised most of the Chinese population of Singapore during the later colonial period.



Figure 4.3 The tomb of Mr. Chew Geok Leong. Photograph taken in 2017 courtesy of Singapore Heritage Society

The information posts throughout the cemetery noted that many of the pauper graves belonged to everyday labourers and those with "undesirable" professions – such as domestic workers and (potentially) sex workers. These pauper plots were free of charge, and thus were also given to unclaimed bodies and babies.<sup>119</sup> Outside of a small sign that described the existence of pauper graves, many of the pauper graves were hidden deep in the woods and off the beaten path. Looking to examine and understand how the stories of domestic workers ends, I walked off the dirt path and into a small clearing where there were small pauper graves with no names on them. No incense was at the offering cup, and no evidence that these graves had been recently

<sup>118</sup> 'Bukit Brown Wayfinder Guide' (Singapore Heritage Society, n.d.), 75, <https://www.singaporeheritage.org/bukitbrownwayfinder/Bukit-Brown-Wayfinder-Guide.pdf>.

<sup>119</sup> The average plot in Bukit Brown costed \$50 and the average burial fee was \$15. Ibid., 72.

visited. All that was there soft mud and the growing of vines and plants over the graves, making the top of the gravesite cave in and become a bed of grass. In another area, there are other pauper graves that are so overgrown with vegetation that it was impossible to get a close look at them.



*Figure 4.4 Pauper gravesites. Photograph taken in 2021 by author.*



*Figure 4.5 "Hidden" pauper gravesite. Photograph taken in 2021 by author.*



Figure 4.6 Rows of pauper graves. Photograph taken in 2017 from Flickr.<sup>120</sup>

It is in being able to see the state of these pauper graves that I arrived at an answer for the question I started my thesis with. *Are these bodies we forget, or bodies we unremember?* With the well-kept tombs of the Chinese elite clansmen behind me as I looked at these pauper graves, I found myself leaning into the latter. Death and history demarcate bodies and memories into two days: *yesterday*, when the body was alive, and *today*, when the body is no longer.<sup>121</sup> The bodies of the labourers who built Singapore *yesterday* continue to have their legacy slowly eroded away physically with nature taking back Bukit Brown. Construction and demolition projects also threaten to destroy Bukit Brown Cemetery in its entirety by 2030.<sup>122</sup> With each new urban

<sup>120</sup> 'Bukit Brown Cemetery', *Taking5* (blog), 27 December 2011, fig. 11, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/taking5/6650752607/>.

<sup>121</sup> 'PBS NewsHour for April 5, 2022 - Ocean Vuong's Brief But Spectacular Take on Grief and Language', *The Charlie Rose Show: Transcripts*, no. Generic (2022): 13.

<sup>122</sup> Huang, 'Resurgent Spirits of Civil Society Activism: Rediscovering the Bukit Brown Cemetery in Singapore', 21. Rina Chandran, 'No Rest for the Dead: Singapore Digs up Graves for Highways', *Reuters*, 3 January 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-singapore-landrights-cemetery-idUSKCN1OX0MM>.

development, the bodies of the cemetery have been unearthed to make space for the new and the modern. Throughout this thesis, I have grappled with the body as the apparatus for power and how bodies can become unmemorable. This was explored in three phases: the development of the master-servant relationship, the attempt to police labour through Domestic Servants Ordinance of 1886, and finally in the policing of the body through Section 377A of the Penal Code. In life, the stories of domestic workers and sex workers were considered unmemorable, and in death their existence is also diminished in the same vein. Their bodies as the proof of their existence are ground into dust by the cogs in the machine of historical progress leading up to the present day. This thesis is an answer to *unremembering*. It is a statement that these bodies *did matter*, and that their influence holds great sway over Singapore's present-day reality.

The vestiges of my discussion around colonial masculinity and intimate labour as discussed in this thesis still exist in Singapore *today*. Historic intimate labour is relegated to tears in the rain – something that has been but is now lost in the background of the everyday.<sup>123</sup> Many Singaporeans are accustomed to having domestic workers at home doing largely the same tasks that those in my thesis also had to do: the cooking, the cleaning, as well as the caring of children. With many of these domestic workers coming from abroad, the ability to hire a domestic worker still holds some degree of wealth and prestige. It may be worth considering as I have in Chapter 1 whether domestic workers today are also object extensions of a master's power and masculinity.<sup>124</sup> With little ability to unionize and band together, their resistance and advocacy is

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<sup>123</sup> Hampton Fancher et al., *Blade runner* (Burbank, California: Warner Brothers, 1982), <https://go.exlibris.link/HRxtnnHh>. 1:46:23 – 1:47:12

Inspired in part by Rutger Hauer famous monologue in the film as Roy Batty “*All those moments will be lost in time, like... tears in rain.*”

<sup>124</sup> For more commentary and analysis on modern social stratification within modern Singapore, see: Anthony Chen's 2013 film *Ilo Ilo* as well as Carlos M. Picos, ‘At Home with Strangers: Social Exclusion and Intimate Labor in Anthony Chen's *Ilo Ilo* (2013)’, *Feminist Media Studies* 19, no. 5 (2019): 717–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1513411>.

also limited, which bears similarity with the controversy around Chinese servants banding together in Chapter 2. Perhaps most apparent in the mind of many Singaporeans is Section 377A from Chapter 3 which still exists in the Penal Code. However, as Foucault noted in *The History of Sexuality*, it would be incorrect to believe that since the law forbids something, that it does not exist.<sup>125</sup> Same-sex relations between men thrives in the sexual underground, in gay saunas known as “Gentleman’s Clubs,” on online apps for sex, as well as in the newsroom and television. It still echoes to this day in the alleys of Geylang where sex workers continue to work, calling out “–would you like a massage?” (“–你要按摩嗎?”) as the sun goes down – an offer of intimacy in a bustling city. With the Singaporean Court of Appeal recently noting that Section 377A was in fact “unenforceable” under the law, a debate has been set in motion on the validity of a law that is unable to be enforced.<sup>126</sup> In such a debate, the scholarship presented in this thesis as well as from a handful of other scholars can shine a light on the history of colonial masculinity and oppression of bodies as a source of evidence for the need to repeal Section 377A.

More importantly than an exploration of colonial masculinity and the power of intimacy, this thesis is a culmination of thoughts on the value of sex, gender, and sexuality as a category of analysis. It serves to offer a new vantage point into the legacy of masculinity, colonialism, and intimacy and how it interacts with our everyday existence. I started this conclusion with an excerpt from Tan Twan Eng’s book, *The Garden of Evening Mists* about memory being like patches of light in a valley. In the cemetery of morning mist, I witnessed memory fading in and out of light over the pauper graves. Memories of the unmemorable body hidden underneath the

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<sup>125</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 81.

<sup>126</sup> Selina Lum, ‘Court of Appeal Rules Section 377A Stays but Cannot Be Used to Prosecute Men for Having Gay Sex’, *Strait Times*, 22 February 2022, <https://www.straittimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/court-of-appeal-rules-section-377a-stays-but-cannot-be-used-to-prosecute-men-for-having-gay-sex>.



soil illuminated by the sun for a brief transient moment only to fade again. The fate of Bukit Brown Cemetery remains to be seen, but this thesis acts as one way to preserve the memory of Chinese migrant men, domestic workers, and sex workers even if the leaves of the trees hide their stories or if the land they rest within no longer exists.

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