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The Many Lives of the “European Vagrant” in Colonial Singapore, c. 1890–1940

Zhi Qing Denise Lim

Abstract

Amidst mounting anxieties surrounding European vagrancy across Asian port cities, a murder in Hong Kong constituted a tipping point in the push for vagrancy legislation in colonial Singapore, resulting in the enactment of the 1906 Vagrancy Ordinance. This chapter examines the ways in which the “European vagrant” in Singapore was constructed in relation to notions of work, cleanliness, and space, by law and in the English-language press. The imagined European vagrant body thus given corporeality, was contested by alleged vagrants and used, in times of economic downturn, by commentators and impoverished Europeans alike to make claims to respectability. Using newspapers, colonial records, letters, memoirs, and fiction, this chapter shows how discourses on the European vagrant body exemplified the relational character of seemingly dichotomous categories, not least that of respectable-disreputable, that were simultaneously ascribed to and juxtaposed against it.

Keywords: vagrancy; whiteness; colonial Singapore; British Empire; Hong Kong; racial prestige

These haunt the grogshops with eye alert for Tommy Atkins, or Jack Ashore with pockets flush. They toil not, neither do they spin. They lower the status of Europeans in Oriental eyes. They stop people on the streets to beg for money which, if forthcoming, they spend in drink and, in some places, they terrorise women into giving them money for the same purpose. The terrible event at Hongkong shows to what an extent some of them are capable of going.

—“The Beachcomber,” *Straits Times*, 12 January 1905.

On 11 January 1905, three young “European” beachcombers, Charles Smith, Erik Hogman, and William Nason, were executed in the British colony of Hong Kong. During an attempt to steal a sampan to travel to Singapore in November 1904, the unemployed seamen had, “willfully and maliciously with aforethought,” killed

a Chinese boatwoman in Victoria Harbour.¹ In Singapore, the murder trial, the sentence, and the execution were extensively covered in leading English-language newspapers.² The murder, apparently illustrative of an Asia-wide European vagrancy crisis, set off a slew of commentaries in the Singapore press decrying white beachcombers in the “Far East”, whose presence, as argued in these pieces, was injurious to racial prestige. Legislation to deter such “undesirable” Europeans from the shores of “Far Eastern” ports seemed more urgent than ever. Accordingly, the Vagrancy Ordinance was enacted in the Straits Settlements in 1906.³

Amidst anxieties surrounding the potential diminution of racial prestige as a result of European beachcombers in the colony, the figure of the “European vagrant” came to life through stereotypes promulgated in the press and given credence by legislation. According to the prevalent cliché, the “white” vagrant was typically an out-of-work seaman or soldier, penniless and idle. He evidently consumed in excess cheap, dubious alcohol one could find in predominantly Asian-run grog shops whenever he got his hands on money and lounged in public spaces that Asians could freely access. Perceived to be drunk and disorderly, the vagrant European threatened to subvert colonial hierarchies and physically endangered both Europeans and Asians. Notably, his frequent appearance at the Esplanade—a location favored by European women for leisure strolls and gossip—“frighten[ed] the ladies to whom [he applied] for alms.”⁴

The debates about vagrant Europeans consisted of a somatic dimension, which lends itself to examining the designation of European vagrancy as deviant, as attempts by the colonial authorities at subduing the apparent disorder of European vagrancy reflected expectations of how Europeans should behave in colonial settings. Such examination reveals the construction of the European vagrant as a response to a range of concerns and anxieties, from racial prestige to Asian vagrancy, and its embodiment of a stereotype, a site of contestation, and articulation of colonial expectations. The analytical approach of “body-as-contact-zone”, posited by Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, “allows us to navigate the dynamic relationship between representation and ‘reality’ and to see the work of mediation that embodied subjects perform between the domestic and the foreign, the quotidian

¹ “Murder at Hongkong,” *Straits Times*, January 4, 1905, 7.

² “Murder at Hongkong,” 7; “The Hongkong Harbour Murders,” *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, January 10, 1905, 5; “Triple Execution at Hongkong,” *Straits Times*, January 19, 1905, 8.

³ Singapore served as the seat of government of the Straits Settlements from 1832. The Straits Settlements originally consisted of Penang, Singapore, Malacca, and Dindings. Christmas Island, Cocos Islands, and Labuan were added subsequently.

⁴ *Straits Times*, March 30, 1905, 4.

and cyclical, the dynamic and the static.”⁵ As such, the discourses on European vagrancy in Singapore and other Asian ports pointed at its purported gravity, and reflected acute European anxieties surrounding the diminution of racial prestige in the eyes of the colonized, and its threat to colonial legitimacy. Yet, such discourses also illustrated colonial authorities’ wider attempts at regulating European dress and behavior vis-à-vis respectability and “deviance”, as well as how such efforts at times backfired, or were co-opted by Europeans for other agendas. Seemingly dichotomous categories were simultaneously ascribed to and juxtaposed against the European vagrant, such as those of respectable-disreputable; industrious-idle; clean-dirty; sober-drunk, etc. What seemed to be a straightforward narrative of colonial discipline towards “errant” Europeans in the name of prestige and legitimacy is hence complicated by the agency and the very instability of the European vagrant construct that at once stabilized and destabilized colonial structures of rule.

The purported contradiction of colonial middle-class expectations of industriousness, cleanliness, and self-discipline by vagrant Europeans put the precarity of imperial respectability and prestige in stark relief. Idle, begging, and indulging in excessive drinking, they evidently posed a danger to women, honest soldiers, and seamen. They were, according to the press, “men who have lost all their sense of decency and respectability as white men, who are a danger to themselves, a reproach to the Colony, and a menace to the safety of life and property.”⁶ Their exposure of alleged European weakness to the colonized evidently posed potential existential threats to the Empire at its zenith by calling into question the rhetoric of racial and/or civilizational superiority that undergirded colonial rule.⁷

The emphasis on “respectability” delineated the “interior frontiers” within the European population by marking those who fell short of performing respectability as deviant.⁸ If “deviance” articulated colonial expectations ex negativo, then the problematization of European vagrancy reiterated the lines between the acceptable and the unacceptable, even as it appeared to undermine them.⁹

⁵ Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, “Postscript: Bodies, Genders, Empires: Reimagining World Histories,” in *Bodies in Contact: Rethinking Colonial Encounters in World History*, eds. Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 407.

⁶ “The Beachcomber,” *Straits Times*, January 12, 1905, 8.

⁷ See, in the South Asian context: Harald Fischer-Tiné, *Low and Licentious Europeans: Race, Caste and “White Subalternity” in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Orient Black Swan, 2009), 183; David Arnold, “European Orphans and Vagrants in India in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 7, no. 2 (1979): 104–27.

⁸ Ann Laura Stoler, “Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-Century Colonial Cultures,” *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4 (1989): 651.

⁹ Will Jackson and Emily J. Manktelow posited that the analytical approach of “thinking with deviance” allows us to examine how colonial expectations were articulated or subverted. Will Jackson and Emily J. Manktelow, “Introduction: Thinking with Deviance,” in *Subverting Empire: Deviance and*

Press representation of European vagrants, undergirded by the law, cautioned against non-conformity to middle-class notions of respectability and industriousness, condemning the deviant vagrant as dishonest and immoral.¹⁰ It called into question the very Europeanness of supposed vagrants; they were nominally so, yet, as deviant, disreputable bodies, insufficiently so. Tracing its emergence and materialization in the wake of the Hong Kong murder and the enactment of the Vagrancy Ordinance, this chapter looks at the ways in which the *European* vagrant in Singapore was constructed, in relation to notions of work, cleanliness, and space, in the English-language press and legislation. Although the Summary Criminal Jurisdiction Ordinance 1872, and later the Minor Offences Ordinance 1906, also contained provisions for vagrancy, the first part of this chapter focuses on the Vagrancy Ordinance 1906 as it was crucial in delineating the European vagrant figure and codes of conduct expected of Europeans in a colonial setting. Equally, if not more, anxiety-inducing was “respectable” Europeans seemingly in danger of drifting into deviance in times of economic depression. The last section of the chapter discusses how the *European* vagrant figure was evoked in published appeals, newspaper reports and commentaries in the Depression years of 1930s to portray out-of-work Europeans as distinct from the vagrant and as morally impeccable and worthy of financial help. Most of the newspapers cited in this chapter, especially the *Straits Times* and the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, were edited by Europeans. The *Straits Times*, in particular, was regarded in Singapore as a “European paper” in terms of readership and perspective.¹¹ Yet, while the construction of the European vagrant in the press as discussed in this chapter could be regarded as being from a European perspective, it is unclear the extent to which such a perspective could be considered as representative of the European population in Singapore, as the identities of those who spoke out on this issue could not always be clearly distinguished.

Vagrancy Across Asian Ports in the Nineteenth Century

Since the early nineteenth century, Singapore had struggled with managing large numbers of destitute and sick Asians. In 1848, the *Straits Times* reported having received several complaints regarding the “unsightly and diseased vagrants that

Disorder in the British Colonial World, ed. Will Jackson and Emily J. Manktelow (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 8.

¹⁰ Susanne Elizabeth Davies, “Vagrancy and the Victorians: The Social Construction of the Vagrant in Melbourne, 1880–1907” (PhD diss., University of Melbourne, 1990), 451.

¹¹ George L. Peet, *Rickshaw Reporter* (Selangor: Eastern University Press, 1985), 26.

infest the town." Europeans' charity to these vagrant Asians, supposedly, supported "idleness and imposition", as the alms they received were allegedly spent on opium smoking. The *Straits Times* thus posited that unless a legislation was passed to curb the "constant influx" of the destitute and diseased, there could be "no chance of effectually checking an evil which duly becomes more serious."¹² Newspaper reports on destitute Chinese and other Asians in other parts of the Straits Settlements, the Federated Malay States, and neighboring Philippines, Batavia, and Deli reflected an apparent crisis of Asian vagrancy in southeast Asia by the end of the century.¹³ Comparable tropes of idleness, vice, and need for government intervention would reappear in the discourse on vagrant Europeans. Similar dehumanizing and derogatory language was also used to refer to European beachcombers, who were described in several newspaper articles as "parasites"¹⁴, thereby delineating the undesirability of their destitution and differentiating them from those who had fallen on hard times through "no fault of their own".

While in nearby British India a marked increase in the number of European vagrants, coinciding with an apparent spike in incidents of crime and "disorderly behavior" from the 1860s, engendered a notion that these Europeans could no longer be tolerated,¹⁵ in Singapore, as the "white" seamen population significantly increased in the 1860s, so did concerns surrounding their drunkenness and destitution. According to Roland St. John Braddell, a prominent lawyer in Singapore, there was no suitable accommodation for European seamen in Singapore at that time, hence they spent their time ashore in "the gin-shop and the tavern, so that liquor wrought havoc amongst the sailors."¹⁶ Though a temperance campaign reportedly started "in real earnest" in the 1860s,¹⁷ in 1890, the *Straits Times* reported that there had been an "appreciable increase in the number of charges brought against

¹² *Straits Times*, July 22, 1848, 2.

¹³ See, on Deli, *Straits Times*, October 14, 1886, 3; *Straits Times Weekly Issue*, October 24, 1887, 12; on Batavia, *Straits Times*, June 4, 1884, 3; on Penang, *Straits Independent and Penang Chronicle*, May 8, 1889, 4; on Malacca, *Malacca Weekly Chronicle and Mercantile Advertiser*, November 24, 1888, 2; on the Philippines, *Straits Times Weekly Issue*, September 3, 1890, 11; on Perak, "Crime in Perak," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, May 19, 1897, 3.

¹⁴ See for example, *Straits Times*, February 8, 1905, 4; "Beggars Banished," *Eastern Daily Mail and Straits Morning Advertiser*, October 31, 1905, 2.

¹⁵ Fischer-Tiné, *Low and Licentious Europeans*, 141.

¹⁶ Roland St. J. Braddell, "The Good Old Days," in *One Hundred Years of Singapore, Being some Account of the Capital of the Straits Settlements from its Foundation by Sir Stamford Raffles on the 6th February 1819 to the 6th February 1919, Volume II*, eds. Walter Makepeace, Gilbert E. Brooke, Roland St. J. Braddell (London: John Murray, 1921), 501.

¹⁷ Braddell, "The Good Old Days," 501.

Europeans, particularly sailors of the loafer type.”¹⁸ Many of these charges were of vagrancy or being “drunk and disorderly”.¹⁹

In their calls for action against European seamen’s drunkenness and destitution, the papers looked to other British colonies in the region for solutions and suggested similar actions to be taken in Singapore. For one, the *Daily Advertiser* in 1891 urged the establishment of a Charitable Society modelled after one that operated in Rangoon, which accommodated seamen at the Seamen’s Rest before their removal from the city.²⁰ Neighboring Asian ports were attributed in press commentaries as the source of vagrant Europeans; in addition to those having arrived in Singapore on British, American or German sailing ships, they were “ex-soldiers from the Philippines, ne’er-do-wells from the new China railways, and broken men from every quarter”.²¹ The undesirability of itinerant Europeans was emphasized in one newspaper leader; according to the editor, the majority of “these beach combers spend their time fluctuating between Shanghai and India ... being moved on from port to port, each time at the expense of the last community plagued by their presence.”²² In an account by John Cameron, the editor of the *Straits Times* from 1861–7, Australian grooms, who were contracted to care for horses onboard ships headed for Singapore, added to the numbers of destitute Europeans as they could not find jobs after coming ashore.²³ Three things can be observed: First, the discussion of European vagrancy and the characterization of vagrant Europeans in the press mirrored the established tropes of “Asian vagrancy”. Second, the same discussion was also informed by the controversy around “low and licentious Europeans” occurring elsewhere in Asia, information of which was circulated through imperial networks. Third, the movement of vagrant Europeans, facilitated by the very imperial networks that undergirded the functioning of the British Empire, illustrates the undesirability of the mobility of *certain* Europeans as well as the valiant attempts to keep them out of the colonies for fear of tarnishing racial prestige.

¹⁸ “Vagrant Seamen,” *Straits Times*, August 25, 1890, 2.

¹⁹ *Straits Times Weekly Issue*, October 15, 1890, 3; *Daily Advertiser*, May 16, 1893, 3.

²⁰ “A Charitable Society,” *Daily Advertiser*, January 5, 1891, 2.

²¹ “The Beachcomber,” 8.

²² “Beggars Banished,” 2.

²³ John Cameron, *Our Tropical Possessions in Malayan India: Being a Descriptive Account of Singapore, Penang, Province Wellesley, and Malacca; Their Peoples, Products, Commerce, and Government* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1865), 281. On the perception of vagrant European grooms in India and Australia, see: Arunima Datta, “‘Pony Up!’ Managing Destitution among Grooms from Australia in British India,” *Labour History*, no. 122 (2022): 155–79.

The Making of the European Vagrant: Vagrancy Ordinance 1906

While by the end of the nineteenth century the first laws against vagrancy had been enacted in the Straits Settlements, the lobbying for authorities' intervention against European vagrancy following the murder in Hong Kong in 1904 clearly reflected press commentators' stance that these laws were wholly insufficient. Pertinently, the existing laws were considered insufficient, not because of the large numbers of vagrant Asians, but particularly because of the presence of destitute Europeans in Singapore and the surrounding region. Even as existing laws were evidently ineffectual in managing the multitude of Asian vagrants by the end of the nineteenth century, no decisive legislative action was undertaken to remedy the situation until the Vagrancy Ordinance was legislated in 1906, about fifteen months after the murder.

Evidently problematic was the prospect of destitute Europeans in British colonies in Asia and the dangers they could pose to lives, order, and crucially, racial prestige. Though the beachcomber-murderers in Hong Kong were of American and Finnish nationalities, their death sentence was hailed in Singapore press as being "an unprecedented incident, as regards to *European* criminals, in the Far East."²⁴ Commentators who had already been pushing for official measures to curb European vagrancy in Singapore capitalized on the furore over the murder, with one newspaper editor proclaiming, "Hongkong, like Singapore is the center of gravitation for the wandering beach-comber who fluctuates from port to port in the Far East, but unlike Singapore, Hongkong is making a serious attempt to banish, or rather, discourage, the white waster from its shores."²⁵ That the Vagrancy Ordinance in the Straits covered persons of all nationalities, whereas the Hong Kong legislation was intended only for "beach-combers of European and American origin",²⁶ underscores the perceived urgency in the aftermath of the Hong Kong murder to address the "problem" of vagrant Europeans.

The first vagrancy laws, commonly known as those provided by the Summary Criminal Jurisdiction Ordinance 1872,²⁷ generally defined the vagrant as someone who engaged in fortune-telling, had no means of subsistence and fixed abode, solicited donations through either exposure of injuries or deceptive means, or was

²⁴ *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (Weekly)*, January 5, 1905, 12. Emphasis is my own.

²⁵ "The White Waster," *Eastern Daily Mail and Straits Morning Advertiser*, November 11, 1905, 2.

²⁶ Short-Hand Report of the Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements, 1905, B 227, The National Archives (TNA), CO 275/71.

²⁷ Harry Tan, "'We Are Not Like Them': Stigma and the Destitute Persons Act of Singapore," *International Journal of Law in Context*, 17 no. 3 (2021): 318–35.

in possession of house-breaking tools or weapons.²⁸ Thus, vagrancy, under the 1872 Ordinance, and later the Minor Offences Ordinance 1906, could be seen more as a miscellaneous set of behaviors and actions. In contrast, the Vagrancy Ordinance 1906 defined the “vagrant” as someone who begged or was “not being physically able to earn, or being unwilling to work for, his own livelihood and having no visible means of subsistence.”²⁹ Vagrancy, then, was critically conceptualized in terms of work in addition to indigence, and the vagrant, under the Vagrancy Ordinance, was either the disabled or the able-bodied work-shy.

Specifically, for press commentators and legislators, the supposed (un)productivity and work-shyness of the able-bodied vagrant was central in their construction of the European vagrant figure. That such idleness was perceived to be characteristic of the destitute European was reflected in the praise for an amendment made to the vagrancy law in Hong Kong following the murder, which obligated vagrants in the House of Detention to perform manual labor: “Hongkong appears at last to have hit upon an efficacious expedient for dealing with the skulking, able bodied, white vagrants who pester her shores no less than is the case in Singapore”.³⁰ According to the newspaper article, being made to work was “just what such fellows most dread and no doubt many will prefer to clear out of the Colony rather than to work in prison or in the House of Detention.”³¹ Similarly, the Vagrancy Ordinance in the Straits—modelled after the one in Hong Kong—provided for the committal of vagrants into Houses of Detention, where they were made to work until suitable employment could be found, repatriation, or discharge.³²

Even though persons physically unable to earn their own livelihood were considered as vagrants under the Vagrancy Ordinance, the main objective of the Ordinance was, as published in the Government Gazette, “to get rid so far as possible of useless members of society, to help so far as possible, blameless decrepitude, and in cases where the decrepitude or the inability to work is of a temporary nature, to restore to health and enable the patient to regain the habit of self-support.”³³ Thus the Ordinance distinguished between “deserving” and “undeserving” poor, reminiscent of the 1834 English Poor Law. In the climate of the nineteenth century

²⁸ Charles Goodricke Garrard, *The Acts and Ordinances of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements, from the 1st April 1867 to the 7th March 1898, Vol. I* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1898), 284.

²⁹ *Straits Settlements Government Gazette*, vol. 41, no. 17, March 9, 1906, 655.

³⁰ *Straits Times*, July 26, 1905, 4.

³¹ *Straits Times*, July 26, 1905, 4.

³² *The Laws of the Straits Settlements (Revised Edition), Volume II, 1901–1907, Revised up to and Including the 31st Day of December, 1919, but Exclusive of War and Emergency Legislation* (London: Waterloo and Sons, 1920), 235.

³³ *Straits Settlements Government Gazette*, vol. 41, no. 1, January 5, 1906, 45. Houses of Detention were established in Singapore, Malacca, and Penang.

when work became central to life and its meaning, engagement in civil society was contingent on one’s capability and willingness to provide labor. Not doing so was seen as being non-compliant to the social contract, and the “deservingness” of the poor to receive assistance was differentiated by their perceived willingness and ability to work.³⁴ The disabled, aged, and sick, for example, were recognized as being unable to earn a livelihood through no fault of their own and hence deserving of help, whereas the able-bodied “undeserving poor” was characterized as irresponsible and idle for willfully refusing work. Under the Poor Law, workhouses were established, offering subsistence to the poor in appalling conditions, to avoid disincentivizing work.³⁵ The Houses of Detention in the Straits Settlements established under the Vagrancy Ordinance were neither prisons nor workhouses.³⁶ Yet, that admitted vagrants were put to work during their time in the institution and were expected to work afterwards illustrates the centrality of work in the authorities’ definition and management of vagrancy.

Another feature of the Vagrancy Ordinance was its provision for the removal of vagrants from the Straits Settlements. The vagrant could enter into an agreement with the relevant colonial authority to obtain a passage out of the Straits Settlements, with the condition of not returning within five years. Vagrants, for whom employment could not be found within “reasonable time” after admission into the House of Detention, were repatriated and liable to imprisonment should they return to the Straits. According to the Attorney-General, these clauses ideally “enable many persons of the vagrant class to leave the Colony, and we should not see them again, because if they came back, contrary to their agreement, they would be banished.”³⁷ Thus the Ordinance emphasized the undesirability of the unproductive vagrant, who evidently needed to be forced back to work or be removed from the sight of the colonized.

In official statistics, Europeans were typically enumerated in the same category as Eurasians of “mixed” European and Asian descent. It is therefore difficult to determine the exact number of Europeans who were admitted into the House of Detention as vagrants and repatriated for much of the duration under study. We can infer from Tables 11.1 and 11.2, however, that the number of Europeans convicted as vagrants and admitted into the House of Detention was exceedingly small,

³⁴ Andrew King, “Introduction: Living Work,” in *Work and the Nineteenth-Century Press: Living Work for Living People*, ed. Andrew King (Oxon: Routledge, 2023), 3–5.

³⁵ Susie L. Steinbach, *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, Culture and Society in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Oxon: Routledge, 2017), 46.

³⁶ Short-Hand Report of the Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements, 1905, B 227.

³⁷ Short-Hand Report of the Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements, 1905, B 227.

and they were more likely than not repatriated. The minute numbers of European vagrants, in comparison to those of Chinese, Malay, and Indian ethnicities, reflect in part the proportion of their populations in Singapore. According to the 1911 census, of a total population of 311,985, there were 5,803 Europeans; 4,712 Eurasians; 222,655 Chinese; 46,952 Malays; and 27,990 Indians.³⁸

Table 11.1. Number of persons admitted into the House of Detention in Singapore, 1907–1910

Year (x) (1 July, x–30 June, x+1)	Europeans and Eurasians	Chinese	Malays	Indians/ Tamils	Total
1907	7	270 ^a	1	15 ^b	293
1909	6	415	4	85	510
1910	6	179	4	38	227 ^c

Sources: Compiled from “Ordinances 6, 7, and 9 of 1906: Vagrancy; Banishment Amendment; Exclusion”, 5 November 1908, TNA, CO 273/338/43620; “Working of Vagrancy and Banishment Ordinances”, 31 August 1910, TNA, CO 273/358/29572; “Working of Vagrancy, Exclusion and Banishment Ordinances of 1906”, 14 September 1911, TNA, CO 273/371/32510.

^a including 35 men transferred from Malacca

^b including 1 man transferred from Malacca

^c including 13 transferred from Malacca

Table 11.2. Number of Europeans and Eurasians admitted into the House of Detention in Singapore, 1907–1910

Year (x) (1 July, x–30 June, x+1)	Admitted	Repatriated	Employment Obtained	Released by order of the Governor	Died
1907	7	0	2	4	0
1909	6	5	1	0	0
1910	6	0	3	2	1

Sources: Compiled from “Ordinances 6, 7, and 9 of 1906: Vagrancy; Banishment Amendment; Exclusion”, 5 November 1908, TNA, CO 273/338/43620; “Working of Vagrancy and Banishment Ordinances”, 31 August 1910, TNA, CO 273/358/29572; “Working of Vagrancy, Exclusion and Banishment Ordinances of 1906”, 14 September 1911, TNA, CO 273/371/32510.

³⁸ The figures are for the Settlement of Singapore, which includes the districts Singapore Municipality; Singapore Country; Labuan; Christmas Island; Coco-Keeling Islands. H. Marriot, *Report on the Census of the Colony of the Straits Settlements, Taken on the 10th March, 1911* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1911).

The juxtaposition of the few Europeans sent to the House of Detention against the number of Chinese vagrants is made starker when we consider that large numbers of destitute Chinese, who would have otherwise appeared in the figures above, were repatriated by Chinese charitable organizations.³⁹ The year 1909 stands out. It is shown in Table 11.2 that between 1 July 1909 to 30 June 1910, six “Europeans and Eurasians” were admitted into the House of Detention in Singapore, and five of them were repatriated. Additionally, it was notably mentioned in the annual report of the Prisons for that year that, between 1 January and 31 December 1909, “several” *European* vagrants had been committed into the House of Detention in Singapore.⁴⁰ That five out of the six “European and Eurasian” vagrants admitted into the House of Detention were repatriated attests to the tendency to repatriate these vagrants despite costs. This is not least because Europeans typically came out to the Straits only after having secured employment, as it was notoriously difficult for one to obtain “suitable” employment after arrival.⁴¹

The vagrant was identified not just by a lack of means of livelihood, but also by his/her “lack of *visible* means of subsistence.”⁴² This raises questions surrounding what sort of employment was considered to provide sufficient means, for whom, and crucially, what did a vagrant *look* like? This process of identification, arrest, charge, and conviction of a vagrant was thus to criminalize a certain set of socio-economic circumstances, which arguably varied depending on one’s “race”.⁴³ For the European, sufficient means of subsistence typically meant financial resources to appear respectable, which was an essential criterion to being accorded “European” status.⁴⁴ Considering the colonial aversion towards the visibility of

³⁹ “Ordinances 6, 7, and 9 of 1906: Vagrancy; Banishment Amendment; Exclusion”, 5 November 1908, TNA, CO 273/338/43620.

⁴⁰ *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements for the Year 1909* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1910), 61, TNA, CO 275/81.

⁴¹ According to one account, there existed no temporary employment in Singapore which the “tramp” could be engaged in, “unless he happened upon a vacancy at the top and was capable of filling it, and such vacancies were scarce.” Harry L. Foster, *A Beachcomber in the Orient* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1923), 216.

⁴² *Straits Settlements Government Gazette*, vol. 41, no. 17, March 9, 1906, 655. Emphasis is my own.

⁴³ Paul Ocobock, “Introduction: Vagrancy and Homelessness in Global and Historical Perspective,” in *Cast Out: Vagrancy and Homelessness in Global and Historical Perspective*, ed. A. L. Beier and Paul Ocobock (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2008), 1.

⁴⁴ In the context of colonial India, Satoshi Mizutani has explored how “domiciled Europeans” demanded employment with greater remuneration that would allow them to finance a “European” way of life, by making claims of “Europeanness.” Satoshi Mizutani, “Contested Boundaries of Whiteness: Public Service Recruitment and the Eurasian and Anglo-Indian Association, 1876–1901,” in *Empires and Boundaries: Rethinking Race, Class, and Gender in Colonial Settings*, eds. Harald Fischer-Tiné and Susanne Gehrman (New York: Routledge, 2009), 91.

vagrant Europeans to the Asian population, destitute Europeans who could not maintain a façade of possessing a certain amount of means expected of a European in colonial settings, especially in non-“European” spaces, constituted an embarrassment. Hence, an out-of-work Englishman, who had sold his belongings in exchange for some money until he was left with “a few chairs and a couple of tables,” had to move with his family from a “respectable quarter of the town” to a so-called “hovel among Chinese squatters” during the night because he was evidently “too ashamed to let his neighbours see to what quantity his furniture had been reduced.”⁴⁵

Defining the European Vagrant

It is undoubtedly clear from newspaper reports rejoicing the enactment of the vagrancy legislation that cleanliness, industriousness, and respectability were criteria of Europeaness that vagrant Europeans ostensibly did not possess. Vagrant Europeans were typically portrayed in the press as being untidy and dirty, or disabled. For example, Charles Stirling, a former marine engineer who was sent to the House of Detention after serving a sentence for “being drunk and incapable,” was described in the press as “looking very much the worse for wear and very much in need of a bath” when he appeared before a magistrate.⁴⁶ In another instance, Frederick Crawley, a destitute Latvian whose body was found in the river, was described in a newspaper article as “a familiar figure in the streets and in public houses always shabbily clad.”⁴⁷ David Moore, a former railway worker in Bangkok who lost sight in his right eye from a locomotive spark, appeared in the dock for vagrancy as he could not find employment following surgery to remove his eye. Moore, however, was not convicted; the judge released him in evident “hope that he might get work.”⁴⁸

Harry L. Foster, writing about his experience as a beachcomber in Asia in the early 1920s, detailed the reactions of the denizens of the pre-eminent Raffles Hotel to his unkempt appearance. Foster had arrived in Singapore looking “like a wreck”; he “needed a shave,” was “yellow with fever,” and his clothes were “stained and wrinkled.”⁴⁹ “Even my sun-helmet and my camera failed to give me any semblance to respectability,” Foster lamented.⁵⁰ Upon arriving at the Raffles Hotel, he was barred from entering by a Sikh gateman, who did not salute him as he did other

⁴⁵ “Malaya’s Renewed Prosperity Mocks the Unemployed,” *Straits Times*, August 25, 1935, 17.

⁴⁶ *Straits Times*, December 17, 1915, 6.

⁴⁷ “European Found in River,” *Malaya Tribune*, June 16, 1928, 10.

⁴⁸ *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, November 12, 1909, 5.

⁴⁹ Foster, *A Beachcomber in the Orient*, 192.

⁵⁰ Foster, *A Beachcomber in the Orient*, 192.

Europeans and “demanded” to know what Foster wanted. Foster bristled at being stopped, a reaction that he attributed to “the pride of the white race” but reckoned that “coming from one so unkempt it must have sounded ridiculous.”⁵¹ Foster described the reactions of Europeans on the veranda to his appearance:

A lady on the veranda surveyed me amusedly through her lorgnette. Another lady giggled. A young man stepped to the veranda rail to obtain a better view of me, and said “Ha!”—just one brief “Ha!” delivered as the English comedian might deliver it in a Broadway musical comedy, as though I were not quite deserving of a complete, “Ha! Ha!” ...

I reddened through my sallow coat of tan. I could feel my ears burning. My blood boiled.⁵²

Evidently, Foster’s unkempt appearance had earned him the derision of the Europeans and deprecation of the Sikh gateman at the Raffles; the latter being illustrative of an inversion of colonial hierarchy. Foster’s embarrassment and anger at the Europeans’ mirth towards him further reflected the typecasting of the disheveled as stripped of the respectability expected of a European in colonial settings and as a subject of ridicule.

Such a stereotype of the dirty and ill-dressed vagrant was so ingrained that it baffled other Europeans when destitute Europeans presented themselves otherwise. In such a manner, vagrant Europeans could leverage on the perceived characteristics of the vagrant to contest their alleged deviancy, and hence Europeanness, though the efficacy of such an attempt is debatable. For example, Christian Novi, a Norwegian who was charged with vagrancy in 1909, reportedly appeared in court with “no infirmity ... cleareyed, erect, and well-dressed.” Such an appearance was evidently so far removed from the popular image of a European vagrant that a reporter remarked that “it was hard to make anything of him.”⁵³ At another court hearing, an administrative cadet noted that an Englishman, who was allegedly in arrears, had seemed close to becoming a beachcomber, yet he appeared well-dressed in court.⁵⁴ That the European vagrant was associated with a certain look and whose deviation from it flummoxed Europeans suggests that the unkempt vagrant body served as a juxtaposition to the clean, well-dressed, respectable European body that was expected in colonial settings. Simultaneously,

⁵¹ Foster, *A Beachcomber in the Orient*, 193.

⁵² Foster, *A Beachcomber in the Orient*, 194.

⁵³ *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, November 12, 1909, 5.

⁵⁴ Frank Kershaw Wilson, “Letters Home, January 1915–December 1916, while as Administrative Cadet, Singapore,” Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MSS. Ind. Ocn. s. 162.

the vagrant body became a site on which claims to Europeanness could be made by “vagrants” themselves.

The Spaces of European Vagrancy and Drunkenness

Allegedly someone whose “moral fibre is not particularly strong”, the vagrant European was typically portrayed as a person who lacked restraint and spent whatever small sums he possessed on drink.⁵⁵ Additionally, he was often reported in the press as being disruptive, harassing passers-by and exerting violence against Asians.⁵⁶ Whereas “respectable” middle-class European men were given the opportunity to “rehabilitate” their “character” when they were found intoxicated in places where drunkenness was frowned upon, the perceived weakness of the drunken, working-class vagrant European instead marked them as marginal bodies in need of discipline and removal.⁵⁷ This class-biased trope was echoed in other parts of the British Empire. An article printed in the Singapore press, first published by the Calcutta-based *Empire*, attributed European vagrancy exclusively to excessive alcohol consumption among the lower classes, which allegedly reflected their weak character.⁵⁸

Examining the presence of itinerant Europeans in the very spaces they were evidently active in deepens our understanding of how class-biased anxieties surrounding their presence in a colonial setting shaped the construction of the European vagrant. Considering vagrancy as a state of being and its members commonly perceived to be former seamen and soldiers, anxieties surrounding vagrant Europeans overlapped to a great extent with those surrounding European seamen and rank-and-file soldiers’ behavior. For one, the spotlight was cast on the grog shops where vagrant Europeans, seamen, and soldiers purchased and consumed cheap alcohol, which were predominantly run by the Chinese, Indians, and a handful by “low-class” Europeans.⁵⁹ The patrons of one such grog shop was

⁵⁵ “A Charitable Society,” 2.

⁵⁶ “Vagrant Seamen,” 2.

⁵⁷ In 1909, E. Edwards, a Senior Boarding Officer of the Marine Department, was found by his colleagues to be intoxicated at work. He was liable to dismissal because he had been found drunk at work twice before and was cautioned by the Master Attendant two years prior. An enquiry was opened to investigate the charge of drunkenness. Despite being found guilty, Edwards’ reinstatement rather than dismissal was recommended by the enquiry committee as an “opportunity of re-establishing his character.” “Charges against E. Edwards,” 13 May 1909, TNA, CO 273/347/18874.

⁵⁸ “The Beachcomber in India,” *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, August 28, 1914, 2.

⁵⁹ W. H. M. Read, *Play and Politics: Recollections of Malaya by an Old Resident* (London: Wells Gardner, Darton & Co., 1901), 126.

described by Harry Foster as "hard-faced men in clothing as disreputable as [his] own, professional vagabonds all of them, who made their living by telling hard-luck stories to passing tourists, and who wouldn't have accepted employment if they could have found it."⁶⁰

The alcohol sold in grog shops and public houses was perceived by Europeans as dubious and deleterious to the European body; the effects were regarded as especially pernicious for soldiers and seamen. A prominent European businessman proclaimed: "The liquids which were sold in these places were, most of them, of the vilest description. Brandy was defiled with tobacco juice, and red chillies were inserted to give the spirit pungency. I know the case of the boatswain of a man-of-war, who drank only one glass of one of these concoctions, and was rendered mad-drunk, it being more than a week before he was again fit for duty."⁶¹ The imbibition of questionable alcohol prepared by Asians and other "disreputable" Europeans evidently endangered the European body and impacted his capacity for labor. Yet, such risk posed to the European's ability to work was arguably because these Europeans were excluded from "white" spaces such as hotels and clubs, which imposed entry restrictions based on profession, and by extension, class.⁶²

In addition to the alleged harmful effects of grog-shop alcohol on vagrant Europeans' health, interactions between intoxicated vagrant Europeans and Asians elicited concerns over an inversion of colonial hierarchies. This was exemplified in John Cameron's mid-nineteenth century account of an Australian groom, whose search for employment in Singapore had proven futile; the date of the account illustrates the long-standing concerns surrounding an inversion of colonial hierarchies.

I heard a disturbance proceeding from one of the low native toddy or arrack shops that are scattered through the town. I stopped to ascertain the cause, and with some difficulty obtained access to the den, where in a corner sitting up on a filthy mattress with some remnants of bedding around him, evidently unable of himself to move, was the same man who two months before had come before me with all the indications of robust health. I stooped over him, and it was a time before I could recognize him; the sunken eyes, hollow

⁶⁰ Foster, *A Beachcomber in the Orient*, 200.

⁶¹ Read, *Play and Politics*, 126.

⁶² There were "four main white clubs" in Singapore, which served exclusively European clientele. Exclusionary practices were in place in the clubs; for example, the Tanglin Club, exclusively frequented by colonial officials, excluded businessmen from membership. R. C. H. Mckie, *This Was Singapore* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1942), 65; Peet, *Rickshaw Reporter*, 82.

Hotels similarly had in place exclusionary practices along class divisions. The Raffles Hotel, for instance, was considered by elite Europeans as a "second-rate place" as "all sorts of people went there." In contrast, the Europe Hotel was regarded as the "exclusive one for the best people in the European community" because it enforced strict social barriers. Peet, *Rickshaw Reporter*, 83.

cheeks, and sallow hue of fever were there. Perhaps dissipation had had something to do with it, but the climate and the state in which he had lived had had more. ... The poor fellow had from the first taken up his abode in that house, and at the beginning he must have been a most desirable lodger; it seems too that here he had exhausted, whether in drink or in the simple necessities of life I could not ascertain for certain, the funds which had been liberally given him in town. But his money was now done, and disease had overtaken him to the extent that prevented his seeking for more. The brutal Kling lodging-keepers who had at first been his slaves had turned upon him, and fearful lest the expenses of burial might have to be added to an already unsatisfied boarding account, they wished to turn him out into the streets. ... The scene and the circumstances were humiliating enough to any European.⁶³

As Cameron described, the former groom had stayed at a spirit shop ran by Indians and imbibed “native” drink allegedly unsuitable for the European body, which, in combination with the tropical environment and living conditions, had caused him to become weak and ill. Worryingly, the Australian, slumped on a “filthy mattress,” was at the mercy of his Indian hosts and his unkempt, exhausted figure exposed the weak, incapable European body to all who visited the shop. Racial prestige was thus tarnished, and the colonial order subverted.

Apart from grog shops, vagrant Europeans reportedly lounged in busy public spaces. The Esplanade (or the Padang, as it is called today) was one public space in which the presence of vagrant Europeans caused consternation. This was especially so, as the Esplanade was an open, rectilinear, manicured field designed to demonstrate to the colonized population how nature could be domesticated, and with the erection of several imposing buildings along its periphery—such as the Parliament House, the Cricket Club, City Hall, and the Supreme Court—the Esplanade had “deliberately evoked colonial power and discipline.”⁶⁴ It was publicly accessible and served various uses, ranging from being the playing field for cricket, to hosting royal celebrations and band performances.

The aforementioned Christian Novi, being penniless, was reported in the press as having spent his nights asleep on the grounds of the Singapore Recreation Club (SRC) on the Esplanade. According to one article, Novi refused to leave Singapore on a free passage to Penang offered by the Norwegian Consul and a ship captain. He then demanded a refund for the passage ticket, which was refused, and “went on a bender” before returning to slumber at the SRC.⁶⁵ That Novi was intoxicated

⁶³ Cameron, *Our Tropical Possessions in Malayan India*, 282–3.

⁶⁴ Chee-Kien Lai, “Maidan to Padang: Reinventions of Urban Fields in Malaysia and Singapore,” *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 21, no. 2 (2010): 58.

⁶⁵ *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, November 12, 1909, 5; *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (Weekly)*, November 18, 1909, 7.

and slept on the grounds of the SRC would have particularly perturbed the colonial authorities and other Europeans, considering the SRC comprised of Eurasian members and shared the Esplanade with the Singapore Cricket Club, whose members were elite Europeans. Not only was Novi's drunken and sleeping form visible to both colonizing and colonized populations, but his slumped figure also powerfully contradicted the colonial rhetoric of respectability, self-restraint, and racial superiority that the Esplanade was designed to evoke. Besides constituting a potential loss of racial prestige, vagrant Europeans sleeping in open space undermined the colonial authorities' efforts to exert control over public spaces; the authorities considered the regulation of behavior in public spaces to be essential in maintaining public order.⁶⁶ Whereas under the Minor Offences Ordinance persons convicted of being "drunk and incapable" or disorderly in public were typically fined or imprisoned for no more than fourteen days, Novi, who appeared in the dock for vagrancy, was sentenced to six weeks' imprisonment in order to, as the press put it, "sober up."⁶⁷

The European Vagrant as an Articulation of Colonial Expectations *ex negativo*

As a significant portion of European businesses in Singapore were involved in the management of rubber estates in Malaya, the falling prices in rubber during the 1921–1922 rubber slump and the 1929 Depression saw many Europeans lose their jobs or have their wages cut.⁶⁸ Scores of Europeans employed on Malayan plantations were dismissed after rubber prices fell at the end of 1920.⁶⁹ Between 1930 and 1933, 40 percent of the European planters in Malaya were laid off and a significant number of Europeans employed in the tin industry were put out of work.⁷⁰ Some planters' salaries were evidently "down to subsistence level" and many took a one-third pay cut to avoid being sent back to Europe.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment*, 1996, reprint. (Singapore: NUS Press, 2018), 269.

⁶⁷ *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (Weekly)*, November 18, 1909, 7. It is unclear under which Ordinance Christian Novi had been charged for being a vagrant, but it is most likely the Minor Offences Ordinance, which carried a penalty of a maximum two months' imprisonment or a fine of a maximum \$25 on first conviction. *The Laws of the Straits Settlements (Revised Edition)*, 246.

⁶⁸ J. G. Butcher, *The British in Malaya, 1880–1941: The Social History of a European Community in Colonial South-east Asia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1979), 127. W. G. Huff, "Entitlements, Destitution, and Emigration in the 1930s Singapore Great Depression," *Economic History Review* 54, no. 2 (2001): 300–301. "British Malaya" referred to the Federated and Unfederated Malay States, as well as the Straits Settlements.

⁶⁹ Butcher, *The British in Malaya*, 127.

⁷⁰ Huff, "Entitlements, Destitution, and Emigration," 301.

⁷¹ "Padres and the Press," *Straits Times*, March 22, 1933, 10; Butcher, *The British in Malaya*, 132.

According to a planter in Malaya, while it was always “degrading” to be out of work, “it is a thousand times worse for a white man in a tropical country.”⁷² The annual reports of the Straits Settlements recorded a decrease in the European standard cost of living between the years 1920 and 1922, and the years 1929 to 1933, reflecting decreasing amounts of disposable income among Europeans during these periods.⁷³ Slight compared to that of the Asian standard, the decreases in the European standard can be attributed to the expenditure on items with “relatively inflexible downward prices,” such as education in Europe, club membership, and clothing.⁷⁴ Such expenditure, considered essential for Europeans in colonial settings, illustrates the societal expectation to maintain a façade of “respectability” even during periods of economic downturn.

That out-of-work Europeans were unable to maintain their respectability and required help to do so was a central trope in published appeals for financial donations. A *Straits Times* article published in 1933 urged its European readers to contribute monetarily to European relief, positing “the fact that its recipients are stricken with poverty in a strange land, and one in which their racial self-respect compels them to maintain certain standards, makes their cases peculiarly distressing.”⁷⁵ In the same year, the European Unemployment Committee published urgent appeals in newspapers for monetary donations, contending that it was “a personal as well as a collective responsibility that our own people should be looked after when they have fallen on evil times through no fault of their own and helped until conditions improve and they are once more able to help themselves.” As these appeals show, it was considered imperative that laid-off Europeans “not be allowed to sink below that standard of living in which they can retain their self-respect and maintain their pride in their own race.”⁷⁶ Unlike work-shy vagrant Europeans, Europeans thrown out of work in times of economic depression were characterized in various appeals, letters to editors, and articles as unfortunate and deserving of financial assistance to maintain some semblance of respectability expected of Europeans in colonial settings. The unfortunate plight of these Europeans and their deservingness of help were further emphasized by evoking the looming threat of vagrancy. Unemployed Europeans increasingly turned to vagrancy, claimed in a letter to the editor, with some evidently “in a hopeless state with no respectable

⁷² “Planter” to *The Financier* (London), reprinted in *Planter*, 1, No. 9 (April 1921), 35, quoted in Butcher, *The British in Malaya*, 127.

⁷³ *Annual Report on the Social and Economic Progress of the People of the Straits Settlements, 1931* (London: His Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1932), 56–57; *Annual Report on the Social and Economic Progress of the People of the Straits Settlements, 1933* (London: His Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1934), 36.

⁷⁴ Huff, “Entitlements, Destitution, and Emigration,” 304.

⁷⁵ “Down—But not Out,” *Straits Times*, March 15, 1933, 10.

⁷⁶ “A Call for Help,” *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, March 10, 1933, 8.

clothes—old and worn out.”⁷⁷ Their “desperate and heroic fight to keep up appearances” was noted in an editorial.⁷⁸

Even as they became impoverished, out-of-work Europeans apparently embodied the “acceptable” characteristics Europeans in colonial settings ought to possess. For one, cleanliness was evidently essential to appearing respectable. A reporter, after visiting the Katong residence of a recipient of the monthly grant disbursed by the European Unemployment Committee⁷⁹, remarked that the couple “guard jealously this outward evidence of their respectability. Neat rooms, scrupulously clean...”⁸⁰ This was affirmed by J. E. Cookson, the chairman of the Committee in Singapore, who noted that “the families cannot be living too well on the amount they get a month from us, but the one thing I have noticed is that they manage to keep their homes clean.”⁸¹ The representation of impoverished Europeans in the press as stretching their “limited” means to maintain cleanliness and respectability stood in stark contrast with the aforementioned portrayal of unkempt vagrant Europeans. It furthermore exemplifies the deservingness of out-of-work Europeans to receive help, by illustrating their abilities to spend money wisely, as opposed to vagrant Europeans’ perceived inclination to splurge on alcohol.

The implications of an empty purse went further than keeping clean. One newspaper article remarked upon “the miseries ... of job-seeking when one is without the wherewithal to purchase razor blades, soap or a toothbrush ... and when the dhoby has declined ... to return the last white suit.”⁸² The financial constraint in keeping up appearances expected of a European in colonial settings evidently undermined the search for employment, while simultaneously emphasizing the industriousness of able-bodied Europeans who had been thrown out of work. To make matters worse, according to the article, water, gas and electrical supplies were cut off when payments were not made timely, and the situation was “made all the worse when a European ... has to fetch water for bathing and household purposes from a roadside stand-pipe”.⁸³ Evidently, having to retrieve water from a public stand-pipe in

⁷⁷ Public. “The Unemployed,” letter to the editor, *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, December 9, 1930, 19.

⁷⁸ “Padres and the Press,” 10.

⁷⁹ By the 1930s, European families with less means moved to areas on the outskirts of the Singapore town, such as Katong, where rents were reportedly cheaper and more affordable. “Malaya Must Save 300 Europeans,” *Straits Times*, March 12, 1933, 9.

⁸⁰ “Keenest Sympathy Aroused,” *Straits Times*, March 13, 1933, 12.

⁸¹ “Malaya Must Save 300 Europeans,” 9.

⁸² “Malaya’s Renewed Prosperity Mocks the Unemployed,” 17. “Dhoby” is a Hindi word for “washerwoman.” Henry Yule and A. C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases, and of Kindred Terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical and Discursive*, new ed., ed. William Crooke (Calcutta: Rupa, 1986), 312.

⁸³ “Malaya’s Renewed Prosperity Mocks the Unemployed,” 17.

order to keep clean constituted an embarrassment for Europeans, for it was an evident testament to their lack of means to afford necessities like running water. Such embarrassment was exacerbated, considering that the colonized laboring classes, to whom Europeans were supposedly superior to per colonial rhetoric, had access to piped water at home.⁸⁴

The discourse on European destitution during periods of economic downturn tended to represent European unemployment as “nothing more than a grave misfortune” that warranted sympathy.⁸⁵ Gaze, a policeman in W. Somerset Maugham’s *Footprints in the Jungle* (1927) described the experiences of unemployed planters, many of whom went to Singapore in search of employment that was practically non-existent: “They all go there when there’s a slump, you know. It’s awful then, I’ve seen it; I’ve known of planters sleeping in the street because they hadn’t the price of a night’s lodging. I’ve known them to stop strangers outside the ‘Europe’ and ask for a dollar to get a meal.”⁸⁶ Yet, money-making ventures were impeded by colonial imperatives of maintaining racial hierarchies; a bootblack stand operated by two Englishmen was ordered to close by the authorities, reportedly because “shoes were not shined by white men in the Orient.”⁸⁷ Seemingly straightforward differentiation between deserving and undeserving European poor based on their willingness to earn a livelihood was thus in fact complicated; categories of work-shyness and industriousness cannot be applied without taking into consideration the inherent demands of the Empire to uphold the façade of racial prestige and superiority.

The policy of the Straits Government was to repatriate destitute persons who did not have any prospects of gaining employment. While the Government contributed monetarily to unemployment relief bodies, it was done so on the condition that such contribution was used for the sole purpose of repatriation.⁸⁸ Coupled with a seemingly lack of vacant positions for unemployed Europeans, the Government’s preferred approach of repatriation was, for these Europeans, akin to being treated as a “vagrant.”⁸⁹ In one instance, an Australian man, who had been living in Malaya for 28 years, was dismissed from his position in the mining industry because of the economic slump and surrendered himself to the police. He was thereafter sent to the House of Detention until communication could be established with his

⁸⁴ “Municipal Commission,” *Straits Times Weekly Issue*, February 18, 1890, 4.

⁸⁵ “A False Step,” *Straits Times*, October 7, 1930, 12.

⁸⁶ W. Somerset Maugham, *Far Eastern Tales* (London: Vintage, 2000), 13. The “Europe” refers to the Europe Hotel.

⁸⁷ Foster, *A Beachcomber in the Orient*, 216–7.

⁸⁸ “Unemployed,” *Straits Times*, September 28, 1931, 12.

⁸⁹ “The Unemployed,” *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, December 9, 1930, 19.

former company or friends in Australia.⁹⁰ The aversion towards the repatriation of some unemployed Europeans exemplifies middle-class European derision towards vagrancy. The author of a letter to the editor derided the lack of assistance by the authorities and the proposed repatriation of out-of-work Europeans, who apparently after years in Malaya, could no longer attempt to start anew in England: "when they do go and ask for a post, or for some temporary relief, they are told that nothing can be done. But if they like, a passage can be arranged for them, and they can be sent Home as 'vagrants.' What a filthy attitude for anyone to take up, treating poverty and distress with such insolence!"⁹¹ Evidently, European "vagrants," perceived to embody undesirable traits of idleness, uncleanliness, and lack of self-restraint, were considered to be at the bottom of the barrel, and to be treated as one, even figuratively, was considered by "respectable" Europeans as abhorrent. The repatriation of out-of-work Europeans and the disapproval towards it furthermore exemplify the unsteadiness of the construct of the European vagrant and the relational character of the binary attributes that supposedly differentiated the vagrant European from the respectable.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the characterization of vagrant Europeans in the Singapore press as oft-drunk, disorderly, unkempt, and work-shy. Particularly, the able-bodied European's perceived disinclination to work was central to the colonial authorities' conceptualization and management of vagrants in the Straits Settlements. In both press discourse and criminalization of vagrancy we see the circulation of knowledge and people through imperial networks at play; destitute, itinerant Europeans in Singapore evidently came from neighboring port cities, and the Vagrancy Ordinance of 1906 was modeled after the vagrancy law in Hong Kong. Crucially, the murder of a Chinese boatwoman in Hong Kong in 1904 by "European" beachcombers prompted a furor in Singapore surrounding itinerant Europeans, leading to the enactment of the Vagrancy Ordinance in the Straits. With legislation reinforcing contemporary tropes of the vagrant in relation to their inability and/or disinclination to work, the deviant body of the European vagrant embodied colonial expectations *ex negativo*. Yet, the category of the European vagrant was an unstable and performative one: vagrant Europeans' modification of their appearance stupefied other Europeans; "respectable" Europeans evidently needed financial

⁹⁰ "A Slump Victim," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, December 5, 1930, 10.

⁹¹ "European Fighting Against Destitution," *Straits Times*, September 10, 1935, 12.

help to keep clean and could procure passage out of Singapore by surrendering themselves as “vagrants.”

Considering the spatial dimensions of European vagrancy affords us a deeper understanding of how colonial imperatives of racial prestige shaped the characterization of the European vagrant and its undesirability. The anxieties surrounding European vagrant bodies’ potential diminution of racial prestige premised on their presence in public spaces, where interactions with the Asian population took place. Vagrant Europeans were portrayed to be active in seemingly culturally and physically contaminating spaces such as Asian-run grog shops and bars, as well as in open spaces like the Esplanade, which were accessible to persons of all ethnicities. The exposure of the evident idle, weak body of the European vagrant to Asian gaze, as colonial logic went, risked the destabilization and inversion of colonial hierarchies, prompting the removal of these Europeans, even if, in reality, the number of (convicted) European vagrants was exceedingly small.

Out-of-work Europeans’ claims to respectability in appeals for financial help appear to reiterate the binary attributes assigned to vagrant Europeans and impoverished, unemployed Europeans of the ‘30s. In contrast to vagrant Europeans who were deemed as dirty, work-shy, thriftless, and thus undeserving of help, out-of-work Europeans were presented in the press as clean, industrious, frugal, and deserving of aid. Yet, the very evocation of the European vagrant figure to make such claims against exemplifies how these sets of binary attributes were relationally defined; that is, these labels lose their meanings outside the binary. To understand the European vagrant construct “beyond binaries” thus, is to understand the relational character of the binary attributes that were ascribed to and juxtaposed against it, as well as how the employment of such dichotomous categories simultaneously reiterated and undermined colonial structures of power.

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