

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Nudity, obscenity, and the rule of colonial difference in Singapore, 1900s–1930s

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## Abstract

This article examines how the British colonial administration and the local Chinese population interacted around the issue of obscene prints in 1900s–1930s Singapore, with a particular focus on the policing of the female nude. The notion of obscenity acquired different meanings as prints crossed geographical, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. What was deemed ‘obscene’ in Republican Shanghai or Edwardian London was not necessarily viewed the same way in colonial Singapore, and vice versa. By tracing the contradictory assumptions about the relationship between nudity and obscenity in a multiracial and multicultural colonial context, this article demonstrates that obscenity regulation in Singapore was intimately tied to what Partha Chatterjee has termed ‘the rule of colonial difference’,<sup>1</sup> with race being the most obvious marker of difference. On an institutional level, the rule of colonial difference led to a division of regulatory labour that ultimately rendered Chinese salacious materials invisible to the British colonial government in the early twentieth century. In terms of definitions of nudity and obscenity, perceived racial–cultural differences—central to the rule of colonial difference—were used both to justify and to contest the public display of naked female bodies to non-Western audiences. This situates the Singapore case within the broader scholarship on obscenity regulation and colonialism, and offers fresh insights into the difference in imperial models of obscenity regulation. By exploring how obscenity regulation was premised on the process of racial ‘othering’, this article also highlights race as an underexplored factor in existing scholarship on obscenity regulation.

**Keywords:** Colonial Singapore; obscenity; nudity; print culture; censorship

## Introduction

What is obscenity? Despite shifts in the legal standard for obscenity in the past two centuries, the issue of the audience remains central to its definition. As Deana Heath

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<sup>1</sup>Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 10.

points out, an object only becomes obscene ‘by virtue of the responses of the viewing subject’.<sup>2</sup> The existing scholarship on obscenity regulation has long acknowledged the importance of the viewing subject in shaping the definition of obscenity, with a particular focus on obscenity regulation as a form of social control over specific groups of viewing subjects. Surveying a broadly defined European culture, Walter Kendrick argues that the democratization of print culture in the early nineteenth century triggered anxiety among upper-class white men, who then sought to prevent women, children, and the poor from viewing sexual images.<sup>3</sup> The nineteenth-century democratization of print culture and the subsequent expansion of the audience for obscenity occurred not just in Europe but also in the United States, the British empire, the Russian empire, and China, leading to new challenges to the established socio-cultural norms, new ways to assert agency, and new attempts at control across the globe.<sup>4</sup> There are some scholarly disagreements regarding who the primary target of social control was in obscenity regulation. In the context of the United States in the nineteenth century, some scholars suggest that the goal of obscenity regulation was to protect middle-class children, thereby maintaining the class boundary between elite and popular culture,<sup>5</sup> while others argue that the goal was to suppress women’s increasing sexual freedom and transgressive femininity.<sup>6</sup> Obscenity regulation also plays a role in reinventing religious identities: by defining proper and improper sexualities, early twentieth-century Hindu elites constructed a binary between the pristine Hindu community and the ‘lustful Muslim’.<sup>7</sup> Despite such disagreements, the scholarship on obscenity regulation concurs that, across different geographical settings and time periods, obscenity regulation was fundamentally premised on the process of ‘othering’.

Compared to the extensive studies on how class and gender dynamics shaped the process of ‘othering’ in obscenity regulation, race remains a relatively underexplored lens of analysis. Beyond the niche field of obscenity regulation, scholars have already

<sup>2</sup>Deana Heath, *Purifying Empire: Obscenity and the Politics of Moral Regulation in Britain, India and Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 41.

<sup>3</sup>Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (New York: Viking, 1987).

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, Lisa Z. Sigel, *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815–1914* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002); Jamie Stoops, ‘Class and Gender Dynamics of the Pornography Trade in Late Nineteenth-Century Britain’, *The Historical Journal*, vol. 58, no. 1, 2015, pp. 137–156; Siobhán Hearne, ‘An Erotic Revolution? Pornography in the Russian Empire, 1905–1914’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2021, pp. 195–224; Christopher Hillard, *A Matter of Obscenity: The Politics of Censorship in Modern England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021); Yvon Wang, *Reinventing Licentiousness: Pornography and Modern China* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021).

<sup>5</sup>Nicola Beisel, *Imperiled Innocents: Anthony Comstock and Family Reproduction in Victorian America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

<sup>6</sup>Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Knopf, 1985); Anna Louise Bates, *Weeder in the Garden of the Lord: Anthony Comstock’s Life and Career* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1995); Amy Werbel, *Lust on Trial: Censorship and the Rise of American Obscenity in the Age of Anthony Comstock* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018). Parker, on the other hand, showed that middle-class women actively participated in obscenity regulation and that pro-censorship movements did not specifically target women’s independence: Alison M. Parker, *Purifying America: Women, Cultural Reform, and Pro-censorship Activism, 1873–1933* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

<sup>7</sup>Chara Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001).

pointed out the centrality of gendered and racialized sexuality to the power structure of colonial society. In particular, they highlight how various forms of sexual control, such as the regulation of prostitution, concubinage, and migration of women, functioned as a 'fundamental racial marker implicated in a wider set of relations of power'.<sup>8</sup> Yet this perspective has not been widely incorporated into most studies of obscenity regulation, which typically fall within the nation-state framework, focusing primarily on Anglo-European perspectives and often glossing over racial/ethnic diversity. While they do acknowledge—often in passing and occasionally in detail, as in Philippa Levine's work on nakedness and colonialism—that people of colour and/or colonial subjects were generally considered unsuitable viewing subjects for nude images, they tell us more about how white colonizers conceptualized the naked non-white body (as symbols of primitiveness and fundamentally different from the white body), rather than how people of colour or colonial subjects themselves understood the meaning of the nude.<sup>9</sup> One exception was Heath's work on obscenity regulation across the British empire. By placing obscenity within a framework larger than the nation-state, Heath offers the most detailed study to date of obscenity regulation as a colonial project that aimed to enforce racial hierarchies. According to Heath, colonial India had 'the most liberal obscenity law in the empire' due to the development of 'a dual conception of obscenity, namely subject matter that might be deemed offensive to Indians and material that Europeans might find offensive'.<sup>10</sup> Images of nude white women, for example, were allowed to circulate freely in India, provided they claimed to be artistic or scientific, for banning such images, which were also circulated in Britain without being deemed obscene, would have exposed the colonial anxiety over Britain's self-proclaimed moral superiority, thereby undermining the moral logic of colonialism.<sup>11</sup> This British leniency in obscenity regulation in India, Heath maintains, was because British colonizers needed India to 'remain unhygienic in order to ensure both their own bodily and moral superiority'.<sup>12</sup>

Building on the existing scholarship on obscenity regulation, this article examines how the British colonial administration and the local Chinese population interacted over the issue of obscene prints in 1900s–1930s Singapore, with a particular focus on the female nude. Singapore offers a particularly compelling site for exploring obscenity regulation beyond the nation-state framework, as it does not fit neatly into any ethno-national-institutional history but connects specifically to tensions inherent to the multiracial and polyglot colonial situation. In 1867, Singapore became a part of the Straits Settlements Crown Colony of the British empire. Long before the British arrived, the Chinese had already begun settling in Singapore. Most of them came from

<sup>8</sup>Ann L. Stoler, 'Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-century Colonial Cultures', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1989, p. 636. On gendered sexuality as the mark of 'otherness', see also Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>9</sup>Philippa Levine, 'States of Undress: Nakedness and the Colonial Imagination', *Victorian Studies*, vol. 50, no. 2, 2008, pp. 189–219; Philippa Levine, 'Naked Truths: Bodies, Knowledge, and the Erotics of Colonial Power', *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2013, pp. 5–25.

<sup>10</sup>Heath, *Purifying Empire*, pp. 172, 180.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 177–180.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 203.

coastal regions in southern China, including Guangdong (Canton), Fujian, and Hainan. Some had been living in Southeast Asia since the fifteenth century and had married indigenous people, the descendants of whom were commonly known as Straits-born Chinese/Peranakan Chinese. Many Straits-born Chinese, who were committed to their lives in British Malaya and sought to 'distinguish themselves from the China-oriented Chinese', opted for an English education.<sup>13</sup> Others spoke a blend of Hokkien, Malay, and English (Baba Malay).<sup>14</sup> The early twentieth century witnessed new waves of Chinese immigration to Singapore. In 1911, 72.4 per cent of the total population in Singapore was Chinese, and this figure rose to 75.1 per cent in 1931.<sup>15</sup> Within the local Chinese population, Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew, and Hakka were all popular spoken languages, which differed from each other to the extent of being mutually unintelligible. Although Chinese characters constituted a shared writing system that sufficiently transcended the diversity in spoken Sinitic languages, the socioeconomically, culturally, and linguistically diverse ethnic Chinese community had varying affiliations to the British colonial state, China, and Sinitic scripts.<sup>16</sup> These diversities posed a significant challenge for obscenity regulation in Singapore, since much of the obscene material was written in the Sinitic forms that many of the British colonial administrators had yet to master. Even the meaning of the female nude, which was ostensibly 'readable' by everyone, remained highly contested, making the nude figure neither unproblematically modern nor unproblematically obscene. Similar to the situation in colonial India, there was the crucial question of 'obscenity per whose eye?'.<sup>17</sup>

In colonial Singapore, obscenity was not a single 'problem' that was regulated with defined objectives or even a shared understanding of what counted as obscene. In this article, I will address two principal themes. First, I demonstrate that the mechanisms of obscenity regulation in Singapore were part and parcel of what Partha Chatterjee has termed 'the rule of colonial difference', namely, 'the preservation of the alienness of the ruling group' with race functioning as the most obvious marker of difference.<sup>18</sup> As in the case of India, the workings of the rule of colonial difference prevented the British colonial government in Singapore from launching a vigorous campaign against obscene publications. Drawing on governmental files from The National Archives in London and the United Nations Archives, I argue that the colonial government did not treat obscenity as an urgent or serious 'problem' during the first four decades of the twentieth century. It certainly regulated the trade in obscene prints during this period—as evidenced by continuous police prosecutions for obscenity—but obscenity only became a real 'problem' for the colonial government in the post-war era, when local Chinese anti-vice activists began associating obscenity with the perils of colonialism, thus prompting the colonial state to frame obscenity as a security, rather

<sup>13</sup>Chua Ai Lin, 'Nation, Race and Language: Discussing Transnational Identities in Colonial Singapore, circa 1930', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2012, p. 289.

<sup>14</sup>David L. Kenley, *New Culture in a New World: The May Fourth Movement and the Chinese Diaspora in Singapore, 1919–1932* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), p. 30; Tom G. Hoogervorst, *Language Ungoverned: Indonesia's Chinese Print Entrepreneurs, 1911–1949* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), p. 84.

<sup>15</sup>Cited from Saw Swee-Hock, 'Population Trends in Singapore, 1819–1967', *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1969, p. 41.

<sup>16</sup>I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for alerting me to this point.

<sup>17</sup>I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for this phrase.

<sup>18</sup>Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*, pp. 10, 20.

than a moral, problem.<sup>19</sup> In the early twentieth century, the colonial government, preoccupied with other perceived threats to the security of its rule, paid little attention to the potential effects of obscene prints on society, or the broader moral cultivation of the local Chinese population. This situates the Singapore case within the broader scholarship on obscenity regulation and colonialism, and offers further insights into the difference in imperial models of obscenity regulation.

Nor was the local Chinese community heavily invested in obscenity regulation. Fewer than five petitions against obscene publications appeared in local Chinese-language newspapers in the early twentieth century. In local English-language newspapers, while some Straits-born Chinese called attention to the imperial oversight in moral regulation, their call for strict censorship of English-language sensational prints did not map onto the concerns of the colonial state and never materialized. The sporadic nature of these petitions makes it difficult to generalize the views of one or two individuals to broader Chinese public opinion. Moreover, the colonial government's reliance on Chinese censors for regulating Chinese-language prints, including obscene ones, complicates the boundary between the colonial state's stance and that of the Chinese community. As the colonial government did not provide specific guidelines on what counted as obscene, the censorship of obscene prints largely depended on the individual judgement of censors. This raises the question of whether the Chinese censor's standard for obscenity reflected the colonial state's perspective or the views of the Chinese community. The aforementioned linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity among the Chinese adds a further layer of complexity.

This leads to the second theme of this article, namely, how the rule of colonial difference shaped the definition of obscenity. I contend that while community standards for obscenity matter, it is essential to move beyond the binary of 'British' versus 'Chinese' views on obscenity to gain a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which obscenity regulation functioned as a process of racial 'othering' in colonial Singapore. Neither the Chinese nor the British communities in Singapore had homogenous definitions of obscenity. Framing the history of obscenity regulation in Singapore in strictly communal terms only reinforces the 'bounded logic of seriality' that both colonial states and later nation-states depended on, which obscures the fact that imaginations of racial-cultural differences were constantly negotiated through debates over the definition of obscenity.<sup>20</sup> In the case of the female nude, the conflicting ways of defining its relation to obscenity tell us less about racialized community standards and more about how the rule of colonial difference mediated the discourses of nudity, obscenity, and modernity, and contributed to the creation and maintenance of a racialized hierarchy of nakedness in and beyond colonial Singapore.

In what follows, I start with an overview of the colonial state's mechanisms of administration and law enforcement, highlighting how the rule of colonial difference

<sup>19</sup>Lau Yu Ching, 'The Anti-Yellow Culture Movement, 1953–1961: Morality and the Language of Decolonising Singapore', Master's thesis, National University of Singapore, 2016, p. 59.

<sup>20</sup>Here I am inspired by Siew-min Sai's critique of approaching migration as components of racialized diasporas. Siew-min Sai, 'Benevolent Technocracy: The Chinese Protectorate, Migration Control and Racialised Governmentality in Colonised Malaya', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 52, no. 3, 2021, pp. 441–463.

led to the division of regulatory labour and the colonial government's relative indifference towards the circulation of obscene prints among the Chinese population in Singapore. I then explore a series of moments when imaginations of racial and cultural differences took centre stage in the debates over the meanings of nudity and obscenity. These moments include the controversies surrounding photos of naked 'native' women, which became increasingly accessible to the 'native' audience in the early twentieth century. By highlighting the colonial authorities' contradictory assumptions about nudity, I demonstrate that these contradictions were integral to the rule of colonial difference in a multiracial and multicultural colony. Female nudes also frequently appeared in Chinese-language books and periodicals in colonial Singapore, including those produced locally and imported from China. In the final section of this article, I explore how these Chinese periodicals and books contextualized and justified the public display of female nudes, and how these justifications were contested within the framework of the rule of colonial difference. Ironically, even when the notion of Western superiority in art—and in every other aspect—was challenged, this rejection of Western standards was often grounded in the acceptance of fundamental racial-cultural differences, which formed the core logic of the rule of colonial difference.

### Law, censorship, and division of labour in state obscenity regulation

Singapore emerged as a centre of the transregional trade of printed matter in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By 1930, the annual value of books and printed matter imported from Britain, British India and Burma, and China to British Malaya amounted to 393,000, 170,000, and 238,000 Singapore dollars, respectively.<sup>21</sup> Singapore also became a publishing hub with a flourishing local printing industry producing and distributing Chinese, Malay, English, and Tamil publications to Southeast Asia at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup> The value of books and maps exported from the Straits Settlements to the Dutch East Indies increased from 110,000 Singapore dollars in 1911 to 279,000 Singapore dollars in 1929.<sup>23</sup> Following the growth of the international trade of prints, obscene literature and images also became increasingly mobile. In 1935, for instance, one local Chinese reader grimly complained that entertainment-oriented Chinese publications were more popular than 'proper literature'.<sup>24</sup>

The circulation of obscene prints did not fall outside the purview of the law. According to Sections 292 and 293 of the Straits Settlements Penal Code, the sale and possession of obscene prints for sale were criminal offences punishable by fines and maximum imprisonment of three months.<sup>25</sup> Other legal measures against obscene publications included the Post Office Ordinance of 1923, and regulations made by the

<sup>21</sup>The National Archives UK (hereafter TNA): CO 275/126, *The foreign trade of Malaya* (1930), pp. 634, 637, 645.

<sup>22</sup>Lee Geok Boi, *Pages from Yesteryear: A Look at the Printed Works of Singapore, 1819-1959* (Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society, 1989).

<sup>23</sup>TNA: CO 275/87, Report on the trade of the Straits Settlements (1911), p. 348; TNA: CO 275/126, *The foreign trade of Malaya* (1930), p. 647.

<sup>24</sup>Rui Yuan, 'Dushujie de e qingxiang' [The Bad Trend in the Reading Public], *Nanyang Siang Pau* (hereafter NYSB), 5 June 1935.

<sup>25</sup>Penal Code, Ordinance 14, *The Laws of the Straits Settlements* (London, 1926), vol. 1, p. 157.

governor of the Straits Settlements in 1924 and 1926 to further refine the ordinance. Transmission by post of anything indecent was prohibited, and the Post Office had the legal power to open any postal articles suspected of being sent in contravention of the provisions of the ordinance. Penalties for contravention included maximum imprisonment of one year and fines.<sup>26</sup>

The inter-war period also witnessed the League of Nations' efforts to establish an international system for regulating the increasingly global trade in obscene publications. Thirty-six states attended the conference on the suppression of the circulation of obscene publications in Geneva in 1923, and by 1929, 28 had ratified the treaty agreed upon during the convention. The treaty not only made the production, distribution, possession, and advertising of obscene objects a punishable offence, but also created rogatory commissions in member states to regulate transregional offences.<sup>27</sup> The principal regions that traded prints with the Straits Settlements, including China, Britain, British India, and the Dutch East Indies, all ratified the treaty; however, according to Heath, the actual implementation of this international law was less than satisfactory.<sup>28</sup> Nor did it produce clear guidelines regarding the definition of obscenity. The League of Nations most likely recognized that the lack of a conclusive definition of 'obscene' could make the enforcement of the treaty difficult. In 1930, it sent out a questionnaire to its member states, asking if they had legal measures for suppressing the traffic in obscene publications and whether there was any definition of the word 'obscene' in their local laws.<sup>29</sup> The responses from various British colonies, protectorates, and mandated territories to the questionnaire suggest that 'obscene' was not defined in any of the laws across the British empire.<sup>30</sup> But legal tests for obscenity did exist. In the Straits Settlements, it was specified that while there was no legal definition of 'obscene', the courts accepted 'the tests of obscenity as laid down in England and India', which referred to the Hicklin test established in the English case *Regina v. Hicklin* (1868).<sup>31</sup> According to the Hicklin test, obscenity was determined by 'whether the tendency of the matter charged with as obscenity is to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influence'.<sup>32</sup>

The local police force in Singapore assumed primary responsibility for enforcing laws against obscene publications, including searching for obscene prints, arresting those suspected of selling and producing them, and prosecuting them in court. This means that, in practice, definitions of obscenity did exist; based on cases of police arrests and prosecutions, images of nude women (both white and non-white) were generally deemed obscene by the police force in the early twentieth century. Nonetheless, as we shall see in the next two sections of this article, this police standard for obscenity was contestable.

<sup>26</sup>UN Archives Geneva (hereafter UNA): R3016-11A-23390-605, Replies to the questionnaire on obscene publications (Straits Settlements), 8 October 1930.

<sup>27</sup>TNA: CO 323/960/7, International convention for the suppression of the circulation of and traffic in obscene publications (1926).

<sup>28</sup>Britain ratified on behalf of its colonies. Heath, *Purifying Empire*, p. 91.

<sup>29</sup>UNA: R3016-11A-23390-605, Questionnaire on obscene publications.

<sup>30</sup>UNA: R3016-11A-23390-605, Dossier no. 11a/23390/605, 5 May 1931.

<sup>31</sup>UNA: R3016-11A-23390-605, Replies to the questionnaire on obscene publications.

<sup>32</sup>Cited from Heath, *Purifying Empire*, p. 51.

The colonial government of the Straits Settlements, on the other hand, did not perceive this contested nature of obscenity as a challenge to the regulation of obscene publications. While we lack evidence from the earlier periods, it is clear that throughout the 1930s, the colonial state believed there was no general difficulty in regulating obscenity. In 1930, the colonial government claimed in its replies to the League of Nations' questionnaire that the colony had no difficulty in dealing with obscene publications originating locally, as 'there is practically no form of obscene publication originating in Malaya'.<sup>33</sup> It noted that while local photographers reproduced obscene photographs from outside Malaya, no one created obscene prints featuring local subjects. In 1933, the colonial government further stated, optimistically, that the traffic in obscene prints in the Straits Settlements was not 'rife' and that 'the activities conducted in previous years against Japanese and Chinese photographers who were caught printing grossly obscene post cards from negatives imported from France, appears to have checked the traffic effectively'.<sup>34</sup> In 1936, it again announced that 'there is nothing to indicate an organised traffic in obscene literature' in the Straits Settlements.<sup>35</sup> Whether the reality was truly as sanguine as the colonial government portrayed is open to debate. Police prosecution cases, for example, indicate that there were a few instances where obscene photos featuring Chinese, Malays, and Indians were taken locally.<sup>36</sup> The local police force also expressed that it was difficult to pin down the persons responsible for the trade in obscene prints and remarked in 1934 that 'a big trade [in obscene pictures] was being carried on by local producers of picture'.<sup>37</sup>

The colonial government maintained instead that the main difficulty in obscenity regulation was preventing obscene materials from Europe from entering the colony via the postal system.<sup>38</sup> It was undoubtedly more concerned with materials from Europe—France, in particular—and in European languages. The colonial government claimed in its replies to the League of Nations that after the sale of French magazines such as *Fantasio*, *Eros*, *Night Life*, and *Le Sourire* was restricted, the importation of obscene publications 'automatically decreased'.<sup>39</sup> The rationale was that these magazines, which contained advertisements for 'curious or rare photographs and books', were responsible for '95 per cent of the importation of obscene publications'; therefore, eliminating these publications would naturally lead to a decrease in the import of obscene materials.<sup>40</sup> The reality, again, was probably not as optimistic as the colonial government believed, given that local residents continued to complain that Malaya

<sup>33</sup>UNA: R3016-11A-23390-605, Replies to the questionnaire on obscene publications.

<sup>34</sup>UNA: R4686-11B-11724-10068, Annual report for 1933 on the traffic in women and children and obscene publication, 6 June 1934.

<sup>35</sup>TNA: FO 371/22522, Traffic in women and children and obscene publications, summary of annual reports for 1936/37.

<sup>36</sup>'Alleged Obscene Photos', *Straits Times* (hereafter *ST*), 9 January 1907; 'Three Months and Fine', *ST*, 3 January 1930; 'Obscene Post Cards Sold Wholesale', *ST*, 26 February 1931; 'Obscene Pictures. Exemplary Sentence on Chinese', *ST*, 21 April 1931; 'Obscene Postcards', *Malaya Tribune*, 15 February 1934.

<sup>37</sup>'Untitled', *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* (hereafter *SFP*), 13 June 1925; 'Obscene Pictures', *Sunday Tribune (Singapore)*, 22 April 1934.

<sup>38</sup>UNA: R3016-11A-23390-605, Replies to the questionnaire on obscene publications.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*



was 'subjected to a flood of advertising pamphlets of a grossly indecent nature' well into the mid-1930s.<sup>41</sup>

*Eros* and *Night Life* were ruled 'obscene' by the Singapore Criminal District Court in 1930, and an undertaking was given to cease their importation.<sup>42</sup> The Post Office most likely managed this by intercepting the magazines in the post before destroying them or returning them to sender. Since the Post Office only had the legal authority to open parcels suspected of containing obscene materials, rather than examine all incoming mail, the colonial government sought to assist the Post Office by issuing a list in 1924 of addresses of persons, firms, and societies deemed to be suspicious. Parcels from these addresses required special attention from the Post Office and could be opened for examination.<sup>43</sup> The list was published for public knowledge in the *Straits Settlements Government Gazette* as an addition to the Post Office Ordinance, with a few more addresses added in 1926.<sup>44</sup> There is certainly the chance that the public in the Straits Settlements used the list as a guide to locate potential sources of obscene prints. Yet the fact that the list was not confidential also reflected the colonial government's confidence in the Post Office's ability to intercept such materials. Not surprisingly, the majority of the addresses were European addresses: out of the 43 addresses listed, one was in Spain, 11 in Germany, 30 in France, and one in Shanghai, China.

The inclusion of one Chinese address on the list indicates that the colonial government was not entirely oblivious to China's role in the global circulation of obscene prints. However, the regulation of salacious texts and images from China, as well as Chinese-language texts, was soon handled separately by the Chinese Protectorate, rather than being integrated into the Post Office regulatory system. Established in 1877 in Singapore to oversee matters related to the local Chinese community, the responsibilities of the Chinese Protectorate included documenting immigration, suppressing Chinese secret societies, protecting women and girls, and conducting surveillance. After April 1930, it began the systematic censorship of the importation of Chinese-language publications, under the then Secretary for Chinese Affairs, A. M. Goodman.<sup>45</sup> Chinese mail, including both mail from China and mail containing Chinese-language materials, was sorted as it entered the Straits Settlements and then censored in secrecy at the Chinese Protectorate. As the Postmaster-General claimed in the 1930s, 'China mails haven't been brought up to my office, it is quickly put into a van and quickly go to your Chinese Protectorate'.<sup>46</sup> Chinese-speaking censors employed at the Chinese Protectorate would search for objectionable content, ranging from communist literature and anti-imperial writings to indecent stories and nude pictures. The colonial government, however, did not provide guidelines on what counted as obscene to these censors, leaving them to decide for themselves the nature of obscenity. It is worth

<sup>41</sup>'Insults by Post', *ST*, 3 June 1936.

<sup>42</sup>'Objectionable Books', *ST*, 10 July 1930.

<sup>43</sup>TNA: CO 276/96, 'No. 565 The Post Office Ordinance, 1923', *Straits Settlements Government Gazette*, vol. 59, no. 24, 28 March 1924, pp. 459–460.

<sup>44</sup>UNA: R3016-11A-23390-605, Replies to the questionnaire on obscene publications.

<sup>45</sup>TNA: FCO 141/7594, Censor's report, *Monthly Review of Chinese Affairs* (hereafter MRCA) no. 19, March 1932, p. 64.

<sup>46</sup>Sng Choon Yee, interviewed by Lim How Seng (hereafter the Sng interview), Singapore, 5 May 1981, National Archives of Singapore, Oral History Interviews, Accession number 000064, Reel/Disc 29/48. Sng was the Chinese assistant to the Secretary for Chinese Affairs from 1932 to 1942.

noting that censors sometimes permitted the importation of periodicals containing images of female nudes into Singapore, while at other times, they prohibited them—an inconsistency in the standards for obscenity that I will revisit in the third section of this article. The censor's report was included in the *Monthly Review of Chinese Affairs*, a serialized intelligence report covering current events in China and the activities of the local Chinese community. Like the Post Office staff, censors at the Chinese Protectorate could either detain objectionable publications for destruction or return them to the sender. However, they lacked the legal authority to arrest and prosecute offenders, a power that resided with the police.

In practice, this division of labour in obscenity regulation concealed the presence of the circulation of Chinese salacious materials in Singapore from the colonial government, leading to its belief that Europe was the primary source of the trade in obscene publications. It also complicated the process of regulation, as each regulatory agency had different definitions of obscenity. In theory, this division of labour might have worked if the different regulatory agents had communicated with one another. In the context of Britain, where the campaign against obscene publications was coordinated between the Home Office, Customs, and the Postal Office, Sigel observes that the use of overlapping offices for censorship worked well.<sup>47</sup> Yet in reality, there was little coordination among the various regulatory agents in colonial Singapore, who frequently disagreed on the definition of obscenity. For instance, in 1930, when the police prosecuted the proprietor of the Shanghai Book Co. for selling Chinese magazines containing female nudes, the proprietor argued in court that these magazines had been deemed unobjectionable by the censors at the Chinese Protectorate.<sup>48</sup>

This division of labour in obscenity regulation was part and parcel of the 'racialized governmentality' applied to the Chinese population in colonial Singapore.<sup>49</sup> As Siew-min Sai succinctly argues, the British colonial government approached the 'problem' and 'solution' of governing the Chinese in the Straits Settlements through a racialized lens, which not only resulted in the establishment of the Chinese Protectorate but also informed its operations thereafter.<sup>50</sup> To the colonial state, the Chinese population became a racialized category—an 'un-governable' alien presence that occupied autonomous social spaces, whose interests were to be managed by their own community rather than by the colonial government, yet nonetheless required constant governmental surveillance and control.<sup>51</sup> Just as the colonial government in the late nineteenth century insisted on treating the regulation of Indian and Chinese migration separately, European-language and Chinese-language prints—whether obscene or

<sup>47</sup>Lisa Sigel, 'Censorship in Inter-war Britain: Obscenity, Spectacle, and the Workings of the Liberal State', *Journal of Social History*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2011, pp. 63–64.

<sup>48</sup>Shidai huabao luotihua lei Shanghai Zhongguo liang shuju laoban chi guansi' [The Modern Miscellany Brought Prosecution Against the Two Proprietors of the Shanghai Book Co. and the China Book Co.], *NYSP*, 28 October 1930.

<sup>49</sup>On the notion of racialized governmentality, see Sai, 'Benevolent Technocracy'.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 456.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 463; Rachel Leow, *Taming Babel: Language in the Making of Malaysia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 23–56; on British perception of the Chinese community as an intermediate and sojourning population, see Karen Teoh, *Schooling Diaspora: Women, Education and the Overseas Chinese in British Malaya and Singapore, 1850s–1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 18–39, 65–90.

not—were subjected to different regulatory mechanisms in the early twentieth century. Chinese prints were delegated to the Chinese Protectorate partly for practical reasons: its staff possessed the language skills necessary for censorship. Nonetheless, racialized governmentality ultimately rendered Chinese obscene prints a ‘Chinese’ problem rather than a general issue of obscenity.

Within this framing of the Chinese population as simultaneously being ‘outside state-space’ and in need of intense state supervision, law and order problems remained the top priorities of the colonial state. It is thus unsurprising that the censorship regime targeted different topics with varying intensity: it was preoccupied with censoring political matters, namely, potential threats to the political and social order of the British rule in the colony, whereas moral matters were side-lined. In fact, the whole censorship regime was arguably established to combat the perceived dangers of rising Chinese nationalism in early twentieth-century Singapore. While there were few censorship measures before the First World War, the war gave the colonial government an opportunity to significantly expand its legal control over the local press to ensure wartime information security.<sup>52</sup> This wartime censorship regime persisted after the war, driven by growing colonial interest in suppressing Chinese nationalism surging among the local Chinese community. The 1920 Printing Presses Ordinance introduced the licensing system for the press as a means to curb Chinese nationalistic sentiments in print, which exploded among the local Chinese population following the May Fourth demonstrations in China in 1919.<sup>53</sup> It was amended in 1930, allowing the government to issue annual instead of permanent licences for presses, and to withdraw licences should any printing presses publish objectionable material. In principle these ordinances applied to both English and vernacular presses: both were scrutinized after publication by officers scattered in different governmental departments, including the Chinese Protectorate and the Special Branch of the Police.<sup>54</sup> Any undesirable matter in the newspapers would then be flagged; and in the most severe cases, the Colonial Secretary might suspend the publication of the newspaper in question. Yet in reality, it was the vernacular press, especially the Chinese press, that faced the most stringent censorship. Cecil Clementi, the governor from 1930 to 1934, remarked that ‘there is not in law any difference made between the English and the vernacular press; but, in point of fact, the troubles that arise are almost always confined to the vernacular press’.<sup>55</sup> In 1930, the editor of *Nanyang Siang Pau* received a warning from the Chinese Protectorate for publishing articles influenced by proletarian literature while the sub-editor of *Sin Chew Jit Poh* was banished from Singapore for publishing an article that depicted the oppression of labourers.<sup>56</sup>

In practice, the censorship of obscene prints (whether originating from China or written in Chinese) became a pet project for the Chinese-speaking censors. Almost

<sup>52</sup>For an overview of censorship-related ordinances, see Yong Ching Fatt, ‘The British Colonial Rule and the Chinese Press in Singapore, 1900–1941’, *Asian Culture*, no. 15, 1991, pp. 30–37.

<sup>53</sup>On the impact of the May Fourth demonstration on the local Chinese community, see Kenley, *New Culture in a New World*, pp. 49–80.

<sup>54</sup>TNA: CO 273/567/14, letter from Clementi to Lord Passfield, 15 September 1930, p. 2.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 3. On Clementi’s deep suspicion of the Chinese press, see Leow, *Taming Babel*, pp. 51–52.

<sup>56</sup>TNA: FCO 141/7588, ‘Effect of proletarian literature on local Chinese papers’, MRCA no. 2, October 1930, pp. 25–26.

every month, censors at the Chinese Protectorate prohibited the importation of certain Chinese books and periodicals on the grounds that they contained ‘indecent stories’ or ‘objectionable nude pictures’.<sup>57</sup> This list of Chinese obscene prints, however, never alarmed the higher-ranking officials of the colonial government. In contrast, the censorship of Chinese textbooks containing politically subversive messages (for example, anti-imperialism) not only led to more detailed reports in a separate section titled ‘Education’ in the *Monthly Review of Chinese Affairs*, but also prompted Governor Clementi to communicate anxiously with the Colonial Office and the Foreign Office in London about the urgent need for tighter control over local Chinese schools.<sup>58</sup> In short, the colonial state in the early twentieth century did not consider obscene materials to be a particular problem within the Chinese community. More broadly, it showed little interest in the moral cultivation of the local Chinese population. In the eyes of the colonial state, obscene publications were never regarded as a ‘problem’: those in European languages could be effectively managed, while those in Chinese (including images originating from China) were deemed nearly non-existent.

### Colonial nakedness: What would happen when the object of representation becomes the viewing subject?

The rule of colonial difference in obscenity regulation operated on different levels. At the institutional level, it led to a division of regulatory labour among different governmental institutions: the Chinese Protectorate was responsible for censoring Chinese prints, while the censorship of prints from elsewhere was delegated to the Post Office. Once the prints passed border censorship and entered Singapore, it became the responsibility of the police to detect obscene materials and prosecute those involved in their sale. At the level of day-to-day operation and law enforcement, the logic of the rule of colonial difference also permeated the judicial process, affecting how obscenity was legally defined—and contested—in court. In the case of the female nude, scholars have already noted that whether one could legitimately view a representation of the naked female body depended on the racial identity of the subject being viewed. The non-white body had long served as a site for the ‘legitimate’ consumption of nudity among European/white audiences. In the mid-nineteenth-century United States, daguerreotypes of naked enslaved Africans were displayed as scientific, objective evidence for theories like polygenesis.<sup>59</sup> In Victorian Britain, as Levine observes, the non-Western body created a ‘safe space’ for observing naked bodies, ‘displacing attention away from bodies closer to home’.<sup>60</sup> This colonial gaze rendered the naked ‘natives’—an umbrella term for ‘non-Western’ (meaning ‘non-white’)—epistemologically different from the white body, a difference that underlined

<sup>57</sup>See, for example, TNA: FO 371/19295, Censor’s report, MRCA no. 56, April 1935, p. 52.

<sup>58</sup>TNA: FCO 141/7645, Education, MRCA no. 14, November 1931, pp. 31–32; TNA: FCO 141/7735, Education: Textbooks, MRCA no. 53, January 1935, p. 56.

<sup>59</sup>Molly Rogers, ‘The Slave Daguerreotypes of the Peabody Museum: Scientific Meaning and Utility’, *History of Photography*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2006, pp. 39–54.

<sup>60</sup>Levine, ‘Naked Truths’, p. 25. See also Philippa Levine, ‘Naked Natives and Noble Savages: The Cultural Work of Nakedness in Imperial Britain’, in *The Cultural Construction of the British World*, (eds) Barry Crosbie and Mark Hampton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), pp. 17–38.

the distinction between colonial nakedness and nudity. Images of the naked 'native' body represented primitiveness and the absence of civilization, thus becoming a legible object of scientific study for the Western audience, whereas the nude white women in Victorian art epitomized 'an ideal of pure femininity'.<sup>61</sup> As we shall see in this section, this distinction between colonial nakedness and nudity came under intense scrutiny in early twentieth-century Singapore as the 'natives' began to have greater access to representations of both naked white and non-white female bodies.

The controversy surrounding female nudes produced by G. R. Lambert and Co. (hereafter Lambert and Co.) in 1907 reveals much about how the definition of obscenity was shaped by the racially determined relationship of the viewer and the viewed. Lambert and Co., a local photo studio established by Gustave Richard Lambert in 1867, quickly assumed a leading position in the photography industry in Singapore during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Photos taken by European studios in the colonies often possessed the quality of 'visual propaganda', highlighting either the benefits of colonial rule or the exoticism and sometimes barbarism of the Oriental 'other', while ignoring aspects of life that did not conform to such imaginations.<sup>62</sup> It was not uncommon, for instance, for photographers to document naked 'native' women, even though the 'naturalness' of naked 'natives' was more often than not an invention of the colonizers.<sup>63</sup> Portraiture of racial types and customs became a popular photographic genre among European consumers, and Lambert and Co. certainly produced photos catering to this market. [Figure 1](#) is one of the very few surviving examples: using a plain background, this portrait depicts two topless Malay women whose breasts were fully exposed, although their genitalia are concealed by pieces of cloth wrapped around their waists.<sup>64</sup> The visual language here is in line with contemporary norms of racial portraiture, in which the female breast took centre stage while female genitalia were generally concealed.<sup>65</sup>

This kind of racial portraiture, however, got Lambert and Co. into trouble. On 9 January 1907, Mr H. Th. Jensen, the then manager of Lambert and Co., was charged by the police with the possession and sale of obscene photos. The photos in question depicted naked Malay and Indian women, and were priced at 50 cents each. Jensen was initially convicted in the Magistrate's Court and fined 50 Straits dollars but later successfully appealed to the Supreme Court. No evidence of the three photos survives—the photos and negatives were confiscated, but [Figure 1](#) gives us a rough idea of what they might have looked like.<sup>66</sup> Mr Gaunt, Jensen's defending counsel, employed a variety of strategies in court to establish the innocent nature of the photos in question. He first stressed the scientific end these photos served by stating that Jensen took them at the request of European 'scientific and medical men passing through

<sup>61</sup>Levine, 'States of Undress', p. 196.

<sup>62</sup>Gretchen Liu, 'Introduction', in *From the Family Album: Portraits from the Lee Brothers Studio, Singapore 1910–1925* (Singapore: National Heritage Board, 1995), p. 31.

<sup>63</sup>Lisa Sigel, 'Filth in the Wrong People's Hands: Postcards and the Expansion of Pornography in Britain and the Atlantic World, 1880–1914', *Journal of Social History*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2000, p. 862.

<sup>64</sup>Cited from John Falconer, *A Vision of the Past: A History of Early Photography in Singapore and Malaya, the Photographs of G. R. Lambert & Co., 1880–1910* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1987), p. 160.

<sup>65</sup>Levine, 'Naked Truths', p. 17.

<sup>66</sup>'The Art of the Age', *Eastern Daily Mail and Straits Morning Advertiser* (hereafter EDM), 11 January 1907.



Figure 1. G. R. Lambert and Co.'s photo of half-naked Malay women, 1890s. Source: Reproduced with permission of Special Collections, National University of Singapore Libraries.

Singapore' who 'frequently asked him for studies of nude native women'.<sup>67</sup> Gaunt then contended that Jensen had retouched his negatives and removed all traces of crudeness or 'indecenty', going so far as to paint a sarong on one of the figures; as for those

<sup>67</sup>'Alleged Obscene Photos'.

unclothed figures, Jensen explained that he did not drape them because ‘it would spoil them of anatomical measurements’.<sup>68</sup>

Gaunt’s other defence strategy was to highlight the artistic value of Jensen’s photos. He submitted to the court pictures from the Royal Academy and other European galleries, including the *Judgement of Paris*.<sup>69</sup> It was unclear which artist’s version of this work Gaunt was referring to, as it was a popular subject in art and had been depicted by multiple artists. Regardless of the version, the convention of this subject matter was to portray three nude Greek goddesses, which was the point Gaunt aimed to emphasize: that the photos in question depicted a rather common artistic subject—the female nude—and that Jensen was aligned with established artistic ideals. Gaunt also submitted to the court the cover photo of the Christmas issue of *The Sketch* (Figure 2), a British illustrated weekly journal that focused on high society, as further proof that photos of naked Malay and Indian women were not obscene. This cover photo featured Gaby Deslys (1881–1920), a French actress known for her portrayal of erotic feminine sexuality.<sup>70</sup> In this cover photo, a smiling Deslys, attired in contemporary boy’s clothes, sat cross-legged on a snow-covered fence, nonchalantly lifting a cigarette to her lips, inviting the spectator to peek behind the stage curtains framing the photo. Arguing that ‘anything with clothing was more suggestive than those that were nude’, Gaunt aimed to show that the unclothed female body was not necessarily more ‘obscene’ than a clothed one.<sup>71</sup> The reputation of the figure being portrayed mattered: images of a cross-dressing French actress with a reputation for indecency could be seen as more sexually charged and, therefore, more morally corrupting than racial portraiture featuring anonymous naked ‘natives’. Jensen’s photos, Gaunt insisted, should be regarded as scientific and artistic—both of which are the antithesis of obscenity.

The notion that Jensen’s photos were both scientific and artistic, however, posed a challenge to the established boundary between nakedness and nudity in Victorian art. Ultimately, this challenge undermined Gaunt’s own argument. As Levine observes, the art nude in Victorian Britain was ‘overwhelmingly female and white’, whereas the naked body, as a subject of scientific study displayed outside the art gallery, was ‘only occasionally white’.<sup>72</sup> Gaunt’s argument that Jensen followed artistic models in creating the photos of naked Malay and Indian women was, in a sense, an attempt to relocate the naked ‘native’ body into the art gallery. By the early twentieth century, the idea that the naked ‘native’ body could have artistic merit, though not the prevailing view, was not entirely inconceivable. Although still uncommon in British art, French painters such as Paul Gauguin had already produced non-white nudes since the late nineteenth century.<sup>73</sup> Yet, arguing that the naked ‘native’ female body held artistic value comparable to that of the naked white female body undermined Gaunt’s

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>‘Were They Works of Art?’, *ST*, 10 January 1907.

<sup>70</sup>Margaret Bocking, ‘Performers and the Erotic in Four Interviews by Djuana Barnes’, *The Centennial Review*, vol. 41, no. 1, 1997, p. 186.

<sup>71</sup>‘Were They Works of Art?’.

<sup>72</sup>Levine, ‘States of Undress’, p. 209.

<sup>73</sup>As Levine has noted, French painters were indeed ‘regarded with deep suspicion by the British establishment’; my point here is that non-white nudes in art was not entirely out of the question. Ibid.



Figure 2. Cover page of *The Sketch* featuring Gaby Deslys. Source: *The Sketch*, vol. LVI, no. 725, 19 December 1906. © Illustrated London News/Mary Evans Picture Library.

other line of argument—namely, that photos of naked ‘native’ women served neutral scientific ends. Within the contemporary framework of the relationship between nudity, science, and art, the ‘native’ body could be viewed as either different from



the white body (and thus scientifically valuable) or, in a less common view, the same as the white body (and thus artistically valuable), but not both. In other words, the naked 'native' body cannot represent colonial nakedness and artistic nudity simultaneously. The prosecutor certainly did not overlook this tension, pointing out that 'the accused first said that the photographs were scientific. If so, what reason could there be for retouching them?'<sup>74</sup> From the prosecutor's perspective, the argument that Jensen's photos were both artistic and scientific rendered them neither sufficiently scientific nor artistic, leaving them to be perceived as the only other possibility—obscene.

Simply demonstrating that the photos lacked titillation value was not sufficient, as the Hicklin test dictated that the nature of the viewing subject must also be considered. An object, which was not obscene in itself, could be deemed obscene if it fell into the 'wrong' hands. Jensen thus further maintained that these photos were 'not to be sold indiscriminately', and that 'the Malay would not have been able to purchase them if he had been present'.<sup>75</sup> He insinuated that the local police had used entrapment to bring charges against him. According to Jensen, the Inspector-General of Police had demanded that the chief police officer investigate the circulation of this kind of photo, who then deliberately sent a Malay man to purchase them from the studio. Jensen was absent from the studio at the time, and his unsuspecting employee sold three photos to the Malay customer at his request. The Malay man presented these photos to the police, who then acquired two warrants: one to search the studio and another to arrest Jensen.<sup>76</sup> By stressing that he did not consider Malays to be suitable purchasers for his photos of naked 'native' women, Jensen seems to have agreed with the Hicklin test. This, however, was merely his defence strategy in court. A few months after the trial, Jensen published an eloquent critique of the Hicklin test's reliance on the audience's moral standard, arguing that 'it is extreme and obvious sophistry to render an individual responsible for the corrupt or objectionable state of mind of somebody else'.<sup>77</sup> I will revisit this critique at the end of this section. For now, the key point is that, in a multiracial and multicultural colonial setting, the application of the Hicklin test made the perceived racial difference between Europeans and 'natives' a crucial factor in determining susceptibility to 'immoral influence'.

Gaunt did not convince Mr Colman, the third magistrate, that Jensen was not guilty. Colman stated that although he did not consider the pictures to be obscene in themselves, he found Jensen guilty as these pictures had fallen into the hands of 'undesirable persons'.<sup>78</sup> Colman explained that obscenity was to be determined after considering both the image and the class of person to whom it was intended to be sold, and that 'such pictures might be kept for sale and sold for a scientific object, and in that case they would not be obscene, and in that sense it may be said they are not "obscene in themselves"'.<sup>79</sup> It is not difficult to understand why Colman made such a claim.

<sup>74</sup>'Two Important Appeals', *EDM*, 31 January 1931.

<sup>75</sup>'Alleged Obscene Photos'.

<sup>76</sup>'Alleged Improper Photographs', *SFP*, 10 January 1907.

<sup>77</sup>H. Th. Jensen, 'Art and Morality', *EDM*, 29 May 1907.

<sup>78</sup>'The Photograph Case', *ST*, 11 January 1907.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*

Labelling these photos of naked Malay and Indian women ‘obscene’ in themselves would have challenged the long-established imperial perception linking nakedness with nativeness, the legitimacy of ethnological photography, and the very foundation of the British empire’s claims to progress, civilization, and modernity, which only made sense in contrast to the backwardness, primitiveness, and unmodernity of the ‘other’.<sup>80</sup>

This conviction had an immediate impact on the business of Lambert and Co., resulting in cancelled jobs.<sup>81</sup> Fortunately for Jensen, Justice Fisher squashed his conviction. In the Supreme Court, Fisher reiterated that ‘there must be something more than nudity in the representation of the female form to justify its being stigmatised as obscene’.<sup>82</sup> The key issue at stake thus became whether Jensen sold photos of naked ‘native’ women indiscriminately—essentially, who constituted a suitable versus an unsuitable audience. For Colman, Jensen’s photos ‘might have been perfectly proper if sold in Paris but not in the Far East, where [...] different ideas prevailed regarding female nudity’.<sup>83</sup> They failed the Hicklin test because they were sold to ‘unsuitable purchasers’—namely, the non-white population, whom he presumed held a different view of the female nude. This was also the stance of the prosecutor, who similarly argued that the perceived racial-cultural differences between Europeans and the ‘natives’ in Singapore made the latter unsuitable audiences for Jensen’s photos of naked ‘native’ women:

It was a question whether a Chinese krani or a Malay tamby would have his mind improperly affected. The Malay is not allowed to wear a pair of trousers because they show his figure. The natives in this part of the world are extremely sensitive on the question of nudity. This is true of the Chinese as well as the Malays. The first law of Chinese morality for a woman, however depraved, is that she shall show no part of her figure at all.<sup>84</sup>

Both Colman and the prosecutor deemed the ‘natives’ to be unsuitable viewing subjects for female nudity due to their perceived ‘otherness’—a classic example of how colonialism operated by cultivating racially differentiated relationships with different groups and justifying itself on the grounds of respecting and preserving indigenous conventions. Gaunt, on the other hand, maintained that the non-white population in Singapore did not hold a different set of moral standards.<sup>85</sup> In his view, the low number of cases of illegitimacy and indecent assaults in Singapore was indicative of the community’s high moral standards. He further contended that female nudity was neither obscene nor unfamiliar to the diverse communities in Singapore, stating: ‘We have many classes of people here, Chinese, Malays, Klings [Indians], Europeans, [...] and in every case I think, you will find that it is not female nudity that is obscene to them.’<sup>86</sup>

<sup>80</sup>Levine, ‘States of Undress’; Levine, ‘Naked Truths’.

<sup>81</sup>‘Magistrates’ Appeals’, *ST*, 28 January 1907.

<sup>82</sup>‘Education and the Altogether’, *SFP*, 21 February 1907.

<sup>83</sup>‘The Nude in Art’, *ST*, 18 February 1907; ‘Scientific Photography’, *The Straits Budget*, 31 January 1907.

<sup>84</sup>‘Scientific Photography’.

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup>‘Art and Obscenity’, *SFP*, 31 January 1907.

'People of Asia,' claimed Gaunt, 'see more of the nude than in any other part of the world.'<sup>87</sup>

Fisher ultimately overturned Colman's conviction, as he believed the evidence presented by the prosecutor did not sufficiently prove that Jensen had the intention to sell these photos to an unsuitable audience. Fisher, however, carefully sidestepped making any conclusive judgement on the moral standards of the 'natives' in Singapore. He claimed instead that he had 'no evidence at all as to the views on the representation of female nudity of the heterogenous collection of peoples that inhabit Singapore' and that the issue of the moral standard of the natives was not relevant to Jensen's case, as 'the pictures were not exposed to be bought by the first comer, but kept shut up'.<sup>88</sup> In other words, Fisher side-lined the questions of what kind of naked body set the standard for artistic and scientific nudity, and what distinguished the appropriate from the inappropriate audience for nudity and colonial nakedness, for these questions were too fraught. Scholars have noted how British colonialism justified its racially differentiated relationship with its diverse subjects by 'creating and normalising exceptions to liberal governmentality' and 'resorting to arguments about the need to preserve indigenous and local culture'.<sup>89</sup> Here, I propose that racialized governmentality also justified itself by concealing the rule of colonial difference. As Sigel observes, 'being able to view representations of bodies, rather than be represented as bodies, transformed the meaning of these representations and undermined the basis of social control which remained implicit in them'.<sup>90</sup> By not addressing the real issue in the Lambert and Co. case—namely, whether 'natives' could legitimately view representations of naked 'native' women—colonial authorities evaded confronting and potentially disrupting the power of the colonial gaze, which had justified not only the display of colonial nakedness to a European audience but also the broader framework of colonial governance.

Following the Lambert and Co. case, some British residents in Singapore took it as a triumph for artistic freedom over narrow-minded moralist censorship. The *Eastern Daily Mail* soon published an article praising the Supreme Court's decision in the Lambert and Co. case for setting a precedent that would curtail moralist efforts to censor artistic nudes.<sup>91</sup> Nudity in art should be celebrated, maintained this author in flowery language: 'the old Greek slatues [sic], frankly, proudly nude, whose free and perfect limbs have never known the sacrilege of clothes, were, and are as free from taint, as pure, as stainless, as the image of the morning star trembling in a drop of perfumed dew'.<sup>92</sup> *The Straits Budget* made a similar comment:

There is nothing in Messrs. Lambert's pictures to suggest evil thoughts to the pure mind, neither in pose nor in reproduction. If these pictures are to be condemned, then half the pictures in most of our European art galleries come under

<sup>87</sup>Ibid.

<sup>88</sup>'Education and the Altogether'.

<sup>89</sup>Sai, 'Benevolent Technocrats', p. 444.

<sup>90</sup>Sigel, 'Filth in the Wrong People's Hands', p. 876.

<sup>91</sup>'Art and Morality', *EDM*, 22 May 1907.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid.

the same category—the Pitti Palace in Florence, the Louvre and Luxembourg in Paris and the Tate Gallery in London would all be robbed of some of their choicest classic works of art. The Venus of Velasquez now attracting its thousands to the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square, would most certainly come under the scope of the Singapore Ordinance.<sup>93</sup>

Like those involved in the case, both writers conveniently ignored the fact that the photos in question in the Lambert and Co. case depicted a very different subject: colonial nakedness, rather than white female nudes displayed in European art galleries. The nude was supposed to be universally artistic, but ultimately it was the white female body that set the normative standard for artistic nudity. By conflating colonial nakedness with nudity in discussions of artistic nudes, non-white bodies were relegated to ‘scientific observation’, whereas the white female body served as the primary object of the artistic gaze. Such a binary was essential for upholding, and was inseparable from the broader framework of the rule of colonial difference that underpinned the colonial project.<sup>94</sup>

No one expressed confidence in the artistic superiority of the ‘white races’—and their superiority in every other aspect—more explicitly than Jensen himself.<sup>95</sup> As mentioned earlier, Jensen strongly disagreed with the Hicklin test as the legal standard for obscenity. Insisting that ‘what is in itself harmless cannot become harmful in itself by anything outside of it in the whole world’, Jensen asked:

Are we going to be ruled by the stupidity of a herd of inferior thinking and fanatically prejudiced human automats? [...] We would soon be the slaves of race fanaticism and prejudice if we would consider their opinions about Art, the nude, about beauty and grace and its expression in dress and dance, about eating pork and drinking whisky; and all those numerous ‘pecadilloes’ which render our weary existence a little happier and give use some satisfaction for our efforts and our work, but which some class of silly natives brand as vicious [...].

[...] Now it cannot be denied that in questions of Art, the creating Art, the white races are leading in every respect. [...] If we have vaster horizon of the conception of beauty in the nude we are logical if we demand that our superiority should assert itself, despite a class which is still so crude as to be unable but to experience anything else as an instinctive sensation at the contemplation of the same.<sup>96</sup>

Essentially, Jensen argued that the standards of ‘silly natives’ should be disregarded in favour of the more ‘superior’ standards of Europeans. If necessary, Jensen not so subtly suggested that this epistemological violence could—and should—be reinforced by other forms of coercive force that had previously aided the colonial project: ‘the

<sup>93</sup>‘Question of Taste’, *The Straits Budget*, 31 January 1907.

<sup>94</sup>I am thankful to the anonymous reviewer for their comments on this point, which helped sharpen the focus of my argument.

<sup>95</sup>Jensen, ‘Art and Morality’.

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

natives are successfully forced to submit to all kinds of vexatious regulations, there is no reason why they should not be brought to behave properly in the presence of a representation of the nude'.<sup>97</sup> The irony is that while Jensen argued that considering 'native' standards would turn 'white races' into slaves to 'race fanaticism and prejudice', he seemed oblivious to—or unconcerned with—the fact that his call for imposing 'superior' European standards was itself premised on the invention and subjugation of 'native' 'others'.

It is intriguing that Jensen concluded his critique of the Hicklin test by emphasizing the importance of equality before the law. He argued that if the racial identity of the viewer of nude representations had to be considered in the legal test for obscenity, then:

[...] the equality of all persons before the law would be abolished, a native would be presumed to be unsuitable to buy or sell representations, which a European may readily be permitted to do, or will enlightened Natives be treated as equals of their white co-Citizens? [...] It is perfectly ridiculous!<sup>98</sup>

Yet, the claim that both 'natives' and Europeans should be equally entitled to consume nude representations is not an advocacy for equal rights. Rather, it asserts European racial superiority—reflected in their 'superior' art—and the belief that European standards should be universal, with 'silly natives' expected to conform. When the object of representation becomes the viewing subject, it inevitably disrupts certain social orders. However, Jensen, by asserting that 'there is no reason why they should not be brought to behave properly in the presence of a representation of the nude', displayed remarkable confidence that such disruptions could be easily suppressed. Here we see another facet of the rule of colonial difference: the creation and imposition of ostensibly 'race-neutral' and universalizing narratives and standards, which were based on European superiority. These standards were imposed on racialized groups, who, despite adopting them, could never be considered equal to the 'white races' due to their race.

### Female nudes in Chinese periodicals and books: The symbol of modernity or obscenity?

The Lambert and Co. case was the only case involving the female nude that generated significant media sensation in Singapore during the first four decades of the twentieth century. While some expressed hope that the outcome of the case would 'act as a deterrent to similar ill-considered prosecutions [of nude representations]', it did not settle the debate over the relationship between nudity and obscenity once and for all.<sup>99</sup> Police prosecutions demonstrate that the possession and sale of nudes continued to get people into trouble. On the other hand, it seems that Jensen might have predicted something correctly. When it comes to nude representations, he believed that 'the tendency all over the world is in the direction of greater leniency rather

<sup>97</sup>Ibid.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid.

<sup>99</sup>'Question of Taste'.

than towards increasingly “tight-laced’ ideas”.<sup>100</sup> It turns out that white European residents in Singapore, such as Jensen, were not the only ones who asserted the universal and artistic value of the white female body. A considerable number of Chinese prints circulating in Singapore, especially from the 1920s onwards, readily embraced the association between the naked white female body and modernity.<sup>101</sup>

Most of these Chinese prints were imported into Singapore from China. Within China, as Liying Sun observes, while before the mid-1910s nudes were often condemned as obscene, by the mid-1920s nudes, especially Western nudes, increasingly came to be seen as the symbol of Western civilization and modernity by Chinese artists and intellectuals, who characterized the ability to appreciate nudes as a benchmark for measuring an individual’s and a society’s level of civilization and enlightenment.<sup>102</sup> Popular Chinese periodicals in the 1920s and 1930s, such as *Shidai huabao* (*Modern Miscellany*) and *Shanghai manhua* (*Shanghai Sketch*), frequently featured photos of naked European, African, Aboriginal Australian, Malay, Japanese, and Chinese women. Nude representations in these periodicals were often accompanied by texts that reinforced a hierarchy of racialized beauty and health, with the white female body often described as the highest standard of physical beauty, while Asian (excluding Chinese), African, and Australian Aboriginal women were associated with primitiveness.<sup>103</sup> Although these periodicals did not categorize Chinese women as ‘primitive’, they still regarded them as falling short of the standards set by the white female body. For example, the textual commentaries accompanying the photos of naked Chinese women in Figure 3, part of a series titled ‘A Comparison of Female Bodies Throughout the World’ published in *Modern Miscellany* in 1930, stated that Chinese women, as part of the ‘overly delicate (*rouruo*) Oriental culture’, rarely attained a healthy (*jianquan*) physique.<sup>104</sup> They further stressed that the Chinese female models featured here were ‘rare examples of fit women’, carefully selected from among the generally unfit Chinese women, and that the ‘racially neutral’ (*wuse renzhong*, literal translation: ‘people of no colour’) ideal evolved from the Greek archetype epitomized the highest standard for a beautiful, healthy, and well-rounded female physique.<sup>105</sup> In this sense, whiteness was ‘de-racialized’ and the bodies of these ‘people of no colour’ became the normative standard of health and beauty against which all other races were measured. Such narratives also reinforced the dichotomy between beauty and health

<sup>100</sup>Jensen, ‘Art and Morality’.

<sup>101</sup>Liying Sun, ‘Engendering a Journal: Editors and Nudes in Linloon Magazine and its Global Context’, in *Women and the Periodical Press in China’s Long Twentieth Century: A Space of Their Own?*, (eds) Michel Hockx, Joan Judge and Barbara Mittler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 57–73.

<sup>102</sup>Liying Sun, ‘An Exotic Self? Tracing Cultural Flows of Western Nudes in *Pei-yang Pictorial News* (1926–1933)’, in *Transcultural Turbulences: Towards a Multi-Sited Reading of Image Flows*, (eds) Christianne Brosius and Roland Wenzlhuemer (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2011), p. 272.

<sup>103</sup>Paul Bailey, ‘Chinese Women Go Global: Discursive and Visual Representations of the Foreign “Other” in the Early Chinese Women’s Press and Media’, *Nan Nü*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2017, pp. 257–258.

<sup>104</sup>‘Shijie nüxing renti zhi bijiao’ (no. 38) [A Comparison of Female Bodies Throughout the World no. 38], *Shidai*, no. 4, 1930, p. 9.

<sup>105</sup>It was published in Shanghai in 1929 under the name *Shidai huabao*. After the third issue, it merged with *Shanghai manhua* and changed its Chinese name to *Shidai* while keeping its English name *Modern Miscellany*. For a detailed study of *Modern Miscellany*, see Kuiyi Shen, ‘A Modern Showcase: *Shidai* (*Modern Miscellany*) in 1930s Shanghai’, *Yishuxue yanjiu*, no. 12, 2013, pp. 129–170.



Figure 3. Photos of naked Chinese women from the series 'A Comparison of Female Bodies Throughout the World no. 38'. Source: *Shidai*, no. 4, 1930, p. 9. Courtesy of the Shanghai Library.

versus ugly and illness, as well as the notion that beauty signalled the healthiness of a race—both of which were popular views in late nineteenth-century European medical culture.<sup>106</sup>

Figure 3 certainly reached readers in Singapore, as *Modern Miscellany*, the pictorial in which it was published, was widely available in local Chinese bookstores.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>106</sup>Sander L. Gilman, *Picturing Health and illness: Images of Identity and Difference* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 51–66.

<sup>107</sup>'Shidai huabao luotihua'.

From the late 1920s onwards, the nude figure and articles valorizing the beauty of the female nude also appeared in locally produced Chinese-language publications in Singapore.<sup>108</sup> Figure 4, a nude photo titled ‘The Beauty of Nudity’ published in the local journal *Xinbao yuekan* (*The New Press Monthly*) in 1929, is one such example. In this photo, a naked white woman, adorned only with two necklaces, is partially veiled by satin, though her breasts remain fully visible to the audience. She lowers her head, eyes closed, and smiles bashfully, avoiding eye contact with the camera and potential viewers. The attire of the female model and the composition of this photo in fact closely resemble the visual language of contemporary French erotic postcards. It was not uncommon for Chinese editors to reprint nude representations from erotic postcards and rebrand them as Western fine art in their periodicals: the popular pictorial *Pei-yang Pictorial News* did just that.<sup>109</sup> Whether or not Figure 4 was a refashioning of European erotic postcards, it demonstrates how the presumed link between the white female body and modernity, progress, and civilization helped to downplay the erotic dimension of nudity in Chinese periodicals. While colonial nakedness created a ‘safe space’ for surveying nudity in Victorian Britain, by the early twentieth century, the white female body emerged as a site for the legitimate display of nudity among global Chinese audiences.

The internalization of the superiority of the naked white female body among Chinese audiences allowed them to legitimately view naked bodies from other races, including their own. This freedom to view nudity across all races, on the other hand, was deeply intertwined with social Darwinist interpretations of racial progression, with a particular focus on the female body as a site where progression and degeneration could be observed. As mentioned earlier, the nakedness of non-white races was often perceived as a lack—of muscles, strength, and beauty comparable to the white female body.<sup>110</sup> Figure 5, also from the ‘A Comparison of Female Bodies Throughout the World’ series, for example, featured a series of photos of naked Chinese women with the title ‘The Feeling of Deformity’ (*jixing de ganjue*).<sup>111</sup> These Chinese women were described as having flat chests due to breast-binding, prominent spinal bones from lack of exercise, and excess upper arm fat.<sup>112</sup> This ‘deformity’, however, was not viewed as a permanent condition. It was noted that, under the influence of modernity, Chinese women who began to recognize the importance of physical exercise and ‘artistic cultivation’ (*yishu hua de xiuyang*) had already achieved healthier and more beautiful physiques.<sup>113</sup> Within this discourse, Japan was portrayed as a model for racial progression through body cultivation. For example, *Modern Miscellany* published a report on a ‘Japanese girls’ fitness competition’ that featured several photos of a half-naked Japanese girl (see Figure 6). These photos adhered to the conventions of

<sup>108</sup>Yu Jifan, ‘Dongfang ren yu rentimei zhi sixiang’ [The Orientals and the Ideas of the Beauty of Nudes], *NYSP*, 16–25 August 1924.

<sup>109</sup>Sun, ‘An Exotic Self?’, pp. 271–300.

<sup>110</sup>On the construction of colonial nakedness as a lack, see also Levine, ‘States of Undress’, pp. 194–196.

<sup>111</sup>‘Shijie nüxing renti zhi bijiao’ (no. 40) [A Comparison of Female Bodies Throughout the World no. 40], *Shidai*, no. 6, 1930, p. 15.

<sup>112</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup>‘Shijie nüxing renti zhi bijiao’ [A Comparison of Female Bodies Throughout the World], *Shidai*, no. 8, 1930, p. 14.



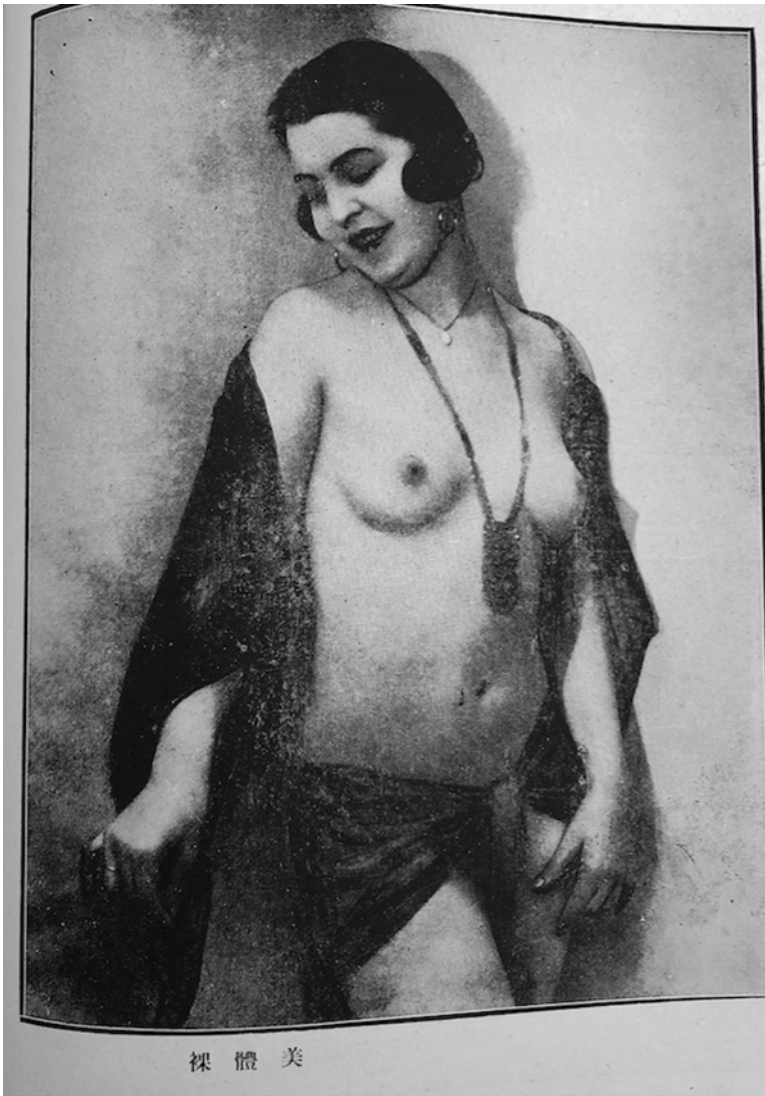


Figure 4. Photograph of a naked white woman featured in a Chinese periodical published in Singapore. Source: 'The Beauty of Nudity', *Xinbao yuekan*, no. 4, 1929, p. 3. From the British Library Collection: BL 15399.e.4.

nineteenth-century anthropometric photography: the girl was photographed full face, in profile, and from behind against a grid that measured her height. Her body measurements, including height, weight, chest circumference, sitting height, as well as how far she could jump and how quickly she could run, were recorded next to the photos. Completely overlooking the colonial roots of this type of anthropometric photography, the accompanying texts treated this set of photos as a sign of Japanese accomplishment, praising Japan for rapidly improving its international standing by learning from



Figure 5. Photos of naked Chinese women from the series 'A Comparison of Female Bodies Throughout the World no. 40'. Source: *Shidai*, no. 6, 1930, p. 15. Courtesy of the Shanghai Library.

Western civilization, and urging Chinese educators to follow the Japanese example.<sup>114</sup> During the 1930s, the valorization of a healthy physique in China further evolved into public promotions of *jianmei* (robust beauty), which emphasized that physical fitness

<sup>114</sup>'Japan's Girls' Fitness Contest', *Shidai*, no. 6, 1930, p. 16.



figures—except in *chungong* (spring palace) paintings, which was often equated with obscene imagery—the introduction of nude representations to the Chinese public was quite tumultuous. A considerable portion of the Chinese public still regarded nudes as obscene. As Fang-cheng Wu states, the line between legitimate artistic nudes and obscene nudes remained a subject of public debate in early twentieth-century China.<sup>116</sup> Similarly, while the *jianmei* ideal desexualized the naked female body and justified the display of nudity on artistic grounds, the Nationalist government of China, which had sought tighter control over women's bodies since the mid-1930s, often equated *jianmei* with morally threatening bare female skin in its official discourse on morality.<sup>117</sup>

Although nude representations remained controversial, periodicals like *Modern Miscellany*, which frequently featured female nudes, generally did not face legal issues in China, as there are no records of them being prosecuted by Chinese authorities. However, upon entering Singapore, the depiction of nudity in these periodicals was subjected to tighter scrutiny. In 1930, Koh Ho, the proprietor of Shanghai Book Co., was charged by the police with importing and selling obscene prints.<sup>118</sup> The publication deemed obscene was none other than *Modern Miscellany*, and it was precisely the 'pictures of modern Chinese bathing girls' from the series 'A Comparison of Female Bodies Throughout the World' that alarmed the police.<sup>119</sup> Koh Ho admitted to importing and selling *Modern Miscellany* but argued that it was difficult to determine if it was truly obscene, and that it had been 'passed by the censor at the Chinese Protectorate'.<sup>120</sup> Mr E. Tongue, head of the Singapore Detective Branch, responded that the censors at the Chinese Protectorate were not concerned with obscenity but only with other types of Chinese literature. Tongue's statement holds certain truth: as explained earlier in this article, the Chinese Protectorate was preoccupied with the censorship of communist literature, anti-colonial literature, and anything advocating Chinese nationalism. Koh Ho then argued that the reading matter in the periodical was good even though it might contain some obscene pictures. However, Tongue insisted that anything that appealed to the lower passions or senses of a man or woman was obscene.

Unable to read Chinese, both the judge and the police judged the nature of *Modern Miscellany* on its visual content. After browsing through *Modern Miscellany*, the Singapore Criminal District Judge remarked that the pictures the police had deemed to be obscene were 'merely copies of European pictures' and he had 'seen worse pictures in some of the leading illustrated journals'.<sup>121</sup> He also commented on the changes in the Chinese mentality, noting that the trend of portraying nudity, which began in

<sup>116</sup>Fang-cheng Wu, 'The Reason for the Nude: Questions Concerning Nude Figure Drawing in China at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century', *Xinshixue*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2004, pp. 55–113.

<sup>117</sup>Gao, 'Nationalist and Feminist Discourses on *jianmei*', pp. 565–566.

<sup>118</sup>The Shanghai Book Co. was established in 1925 by Chen Yueshu, a China-born entrepreneur, to satisfy the rising local demand for Chinese-language books, particularly May Fourth inspired literature.

<sup>119</sup>'Shidai huabao luotihua'; 'Published in Shanghai. What Constitutes Questionable Literature?', *ST*, 28 October 1930.

<sup>120</sup>'Published in Shanghai'.

<sup>121</sup>*Ibid.*

France, had now reached China.<sup>122</sup> Neither the police nor the judge was mistaken: the issues of *Modern Miscellany* examined in court contained photos of both naked European and Chinese women. Yet it is interesting that the police emphasized the Chinese pictures, while the judge focused on the European ones, stating that these photos were no worse than those in other pictorials, presumably in European languages. In doing so, much like Fisher in the Lambert and Co. case, the judge avoided addressing the question of whether the Chinese could legitimately view images of naked Chinese women. In the end, the judge showed tremendous leniency, sentencing Koh Ho to merely give an undertaking to stop importing *Modern Miscellany* and to pay a meagre 50 cents as the cost of the summons.<sup>123</sup> This leniency reveals not only the conflicting views on the relationship between nudity and obscenity held by the local police, the censors at the Chinese Protectorate, and the colonial judge, but also a deeper reluctance on the part of the colonial judge to challenge the artistic value attributed to the naked white female body.

Despite the court order to cease importation, *Modern Miscellany* continued to be imported into Singapore with the approval of Chinese censors at the Chinese Protectorate, further demonstrating the lack of communication and cooperation between various colonial departments. Issues no. 12, vol. 1, and no. 4 and no. 5, vol. 2 of *Modern Miscellany* were on the list of books permitted for import into Singapore between December 1930 and May 1931.<sup>124</sup> It is worth noting that these issues contained advertisements for the book version of the 'A Comparison of Female Bodies Throughout the World' series, which featured drawings of naked women as part of their advertising design.

In practice, censorship of nude representations by the Chinese Protectorate was rather inconsistent.<sup>125</sup> On the one hand, many nudes were approved by the censors: the aforementioned issues of *Modern Miscellany* are one example. In 1935, the censors also allowed the importation of *Chunse*, a Shanghai-based pictorial, whose cover photo featured a naked young woman with her genital area, though artistically touched up, fully visible (see [Figure 7](#)).<sup>126</sup> On the other hand, *jianmei*-themed books, pictorials, and other entertainment-oriented periodicals were routinely denied entry by the censors for containing images of naked women, whether white or non-white.<sup>127</sup> Consider, for example, the advertisement for a certain Dr Lu Shifu, a specialist in brain and venereal diseases, in issue 4 of *Wuban (Dance Partner)*. The advertisement ([Figure 8](#)) portrayed a naked Chinese woman adorned with a pearl necklace and floral anklets, partially veiled by translucent gauze, with her breasts fully exposed. The upper half of her face is obscured by the advertising tagline. The visual style—the pearl necklace, the

<sup>122</sup>'Shidai huabao buneng nan lai yin luoti zhaopian de guanxi' [Modern Miscellany Could Not Come to the South Because it Contained Nudes], *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, 28 October 1930.

<sup>123</sup>'Shidai huabao luotihua'.

<sup>124</sup>TNA: FCO 141/7588, Censor's report, MRCA no. 4, December 1930, p. 67; TNA: FCO 141/7590, Censor's report, MRCA no. 9, May 1931.

<sup>125</sup>This inconsistency is evident in both the censorship of obscene images and texts; there is no evidence to suggest that one form of obscene print received significantly more scrutiny than the other.

<sup>126</sup>TNA: FCO 141/7606, Censor's report, MRCA no. 56, April 1935, p. 52.

<sup>127</sup>See, for example, TNA: CO 273/580/1, Censor's report, MRCA no. 24, August 1932, p. 68; TNA: CO 273/586/1, Censor's report, MRCA no. 36, August 1933, p. 70; TNA: FCO 141/7606, Censor's report, MRCA no. 56, April 1935, p. 54.



Figure 7. Cover photo of *Chunse* featuring a naked young woman. Source: *Chunse*, no. 7, 1935. Courtesy of the Shanghai Library.

thin fabric that partially veils the female body but always ensures the breasts are visible—mirrors Figure 4. Yet, since Figure 4 was produced locally, it escaped the censors' notice. The connection to a doctor specializing in venereal diseases in Figure 8 most likely diminished any perceived artistic value of the nude as it was recorded in the June 1935 censor's report as an 'objectionable nude picture'.<sup>128</sup> Nor did the censors tolerate images of white nudes. In February 1935, the censors banned the

<sup>128</sup>TNA: FCO 141/7606, Censor's report, MRCA no. 58, June 1935, p. 59.



Figure 8. Advertisement featuring a naked Chinese woman. Source: Advertisement for Dr Lu Fushi, in *Wuban*, no. 4, 1935, p. 127. Courtesy of the Shanghai Library.

importation of *Robust Beauty Training (jianmei de xunlian)*, a book published by the Shanghai-based Young Companion Book Co.<sup>129</sup> The preface of the book discussed at

<sup>129</sup>TNA: FO 371/19297, Censor's report, MRCA no. 54, February 1935, p. 46.



Figure 9. Photos of naked white women exercising outdoor. Source: 'Limb Exercise I and II', *Robust Beauty Training* (Shanghai, 1934). Courtesy of the Shanghai Library.

length the scientifically proven benefits of *jianmei* training for one's lungs, hearts, kidneys, and digestive system, and urged Chinese women to improve their physical fitness as a crucial step to 'save China'.<sup>130</sup> The book then included a series of exercise instructions accompanied by photos of completely naked white women performing the

<sup>130</sup>*Jianmei de xunlian* [*Robust Beauty Training*] (Shanghai: Liangyou tushu gongsi, 1934), pp. 1–14.



exercises (see Figure 9). Nonetheless, the white nudes associated with *jianmei*, scientific exercise, and even the rejuvenation of China were also labelled ‘indecent’ by the censors.

The Chinese censors did not leave any records of their musings over the line between legitimate and obscene nudes. However, we do have an intriguing remark on the relationship between nudity and modernity from Lim Boon Keng (1869–1957), a prominent figure in the Straits-born Chinese community. Educated in Edinburgh and Cambridge before pursuing a career in China, Lim’s self-fashioning as someone well versed in both Chinese and British cultures lent him authority and credibility in speaking critically of both.<sup>131</sup> Lamenting the dreadful impact of European and American values on China, Lim wrote in a 1928 article published in the *Malaya Tribune* that:

None is of more far-reaching implications than the new erotic movement at first introduced tentatively in essays and novels but now spreading as a cult on behalf of the agitation for the absolute freedom of women. It has come from Paris principally. Free love and everything that panders to the emotions are described in a realistic and florid style, the language often bordering upon the obscene. The practical effects of this New Woman movement are the production of nude figures in art, new dances, new modes of dress with free exposure of the body—free intercourse with males anywhere [...] This is the greatest change that Europe and America have caused in China.<sup>132</sup>

Founded in 1914 in Singapore, the *Malaya Tribune* was a platform for Anglophone middle-class Asians to articulate their views and aspirations.<sup>133</sup> Unlike many of his contemporary Chinese and British counterparts, who often unproblematically linked (de-racialized) nudity to (Western-derived) modernity, Lim saw nudity not as the embodiment of the sublime value of art but as the contaminating impact of Europe and the United States. In the rest of his article, Lim presented himself as a supporter of ‘progressive’ ideas such as female education, but also specifically highlighted the importance for Chinese women to be ‘modern and moderate’.<sup>134</sup> This feminine ideal had its roots in a particular strand of understanding of Confucian gender norms, which was visible in the early twentieth-century Straits Chinese Reform Movement, in which Lim was a leader.<sup>135</sup> The movement aimed simultaneously to revive certain elements of Confucianism and to purge Chinese culture of its supposedly retrogressive traits to better accommodate the challenges of colonial modernity—in other words, to make the Straits-born Chinese simultaneously modern and Chinese. Lim’s critique of nude figures in art, understood in this context, attested not just to one’s impeccable morality,

<sup>131</sup>Tim Harper, ‘Globalism and the Pursuit of Authenticity: The Making of a Diasporic Public Sphere in Singapore’, *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1997, p. 276.

<sup>132</sup>L. M. (Lim Boon Keng), ‘The New China—XVI’, *Malaya Tribune*, 26 November 1928.

<sup>133</sup>Chua Ai Lin, ‘Imperial Subjects, Straits Citizens: Anglophone Asians and the Struggle for Political Rights in Inter-war Singapore’, in *Paths not Taken: Political Pluralism in Post-war Singapore*, (eds) M. D. Barr and C. A. Trocki (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008), pp. 16–36.

<sup>134</sup>L. M., ‘The New China’.

<sup>135</sup>Lim’s ideal womanhood was also commensurate with a Victorian mentality that placed much emphasis on discipline and morality, and the cult of the domesticity.

but also to one's commitment to authentic Chineseness embodied by the 'modern and moderate' ideal woman.<sup>136</sup>

By the late 1920s and 1930s, Lim's conception of ideal Chinese womanhood faced increasing competition from various feminine ideals, such as the Chinese New Woman, who was expected to be a good thinker with high morals, and the glamorous, sexy, and Westernized Modern Girl depicted in Chinese New Sensationalist fiction and advertising.<sup>137</sup> While the Chinese New Culture/May Fourth intellectuals, in their fierce critique of Confucianism, championed free love and a scientific understanding of sexuality as markers of modernity, Lim's scepticism towards 'free love' contrasted sharply with them.<sup>138</sup> Hence for May Fourth intellectuals such as Lu Xun, Lim was a 'British Chinese' whose views on China were outdated: 'whenever he [Lim] opens his mouth, he would not stray away from Confucius'.<sup>139</sup>

Ironically, it was Lim's 'conservative' stance that sheds light on both the contested link between nudity and modernity and the inherent contradictions underpinning the colonial project. Not intentionally challenging such contradictions, Lim's rejection of viewing the naked white female body as the benchmark of artistic modernity called into question the universalizing narratives imposed by white colonizers, which were soon embraced by a considerable number of 'progressive' Chinese intellectuals in the early twentieth century. On this front, Lim was joined by the Chinese censors at the Chinese Protectorate in policing nude representations of both white and non-white female bodies. In doing so, they addressed the question that colonial judges avoided: namely, whether non-white audiences could legitimately consume images of the non-white female body, and their answer was 'no'. Yet here lies the second irony: the rejection of Western standards—namely, the view of nudes as universally artistic and the white female body as the benchmark for such artistic nudes—was itself based on an acceptance of deeply entrenched racial-cultural differences, which reflected the very logic of colonial governance.

## Conclusion

What makes nude representations obscene? The question remains unanswered to this day. However, as this article has demonstrated, it is crucial to remember that

<sup>136</sup>Similar notions could be found in the nineteenth-century Hindu community. See Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question', in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, (eds) Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1999), pp. 238–239.

<sup>137</sup>There is a vast literature on the Chinese New Woman and Modern Girl; see, for example, Louise Edwards, 'Policing the Modern Woman in Republican China', *Modern China*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2000, pp. 115–147; Alys Eve Weinbaum, Lynn M. Thomas, Priti Ramamurthy, Uta G. Poiger, Madaleine Yue Dong and Tani E. Barlow (eds), *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Globalisation and Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>138</sup>On early twentieth-century discourses of love and sexuality in China, see Haiyan Lee, *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China, 1900–1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), especially Chapters 4 and 5.

<sup>139</sup>Cited from Wayne Soon, 'Science, Medicine, and Confucianism in the Making of China and Southeast Asia—Lim Boon Keng and the Oversea Chinese, 1897–1937', *Twentieth-Century China*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2014, p. 39.

racial-cultural differences were precisely constructed through the deliberations over the boundary between legitimate and obscene nudes. The rule of colonial difference profoundly impacted on the conceptualization and regulation of nudity and obscenity in early twentieth-century Singapore. On an institutional level, it led to the division of labour in obscenity regulation and subsequently the colonial government's oversight of Chinese salacious materials. On a conceptual level, the rule of colonial difference deeply permeated the discourses of nudity, obscenity, and modernity, contributing to the constant invention and reinvention of racial imaginaries both within and beyond colonial Singapore. While Sigel argues that the definition of obscenity occurred in 'the socially determined relationship of viewer to viewed', this article further contends that the definition of obscenity was also shaped by the racially determined relationship of viewer to viewed, along with other factors such as gender, class, and age.<sup>140</sup> In doing so, it makes an important intervention in the historiography of obscenity regulation that has not sufficiently addressed the relationship between obscenity and the process of racial 'othering'.

The legacy of colonial obscenity regulation in early twentieth-century Singapore is perhaps more far-reaching than previously anticipated. While existing studies of post-war anti-obscenity movements seldom trace back to this earlier episode of obscenity regulation,<sup>141</sup> the division of regulator labour within the framework of racialized governmentality persisted well into the post-war era. This continued to render Chinese salacious materials—and the broader question of the moral cultivation of the local Chinese population—invisible to the colonial government. Thus, when the colonial government, under pressure from Chinese grassroots anti-obscenity activists, was forced to confront the issue of obscenity in the early 1950s, it refused to see it as a moral problem, viewing it instead as a 'communist plot'. Cold War mentality certainly influenced the colonial state's stance, but its indifference to the moral cultivation of the Chinese community also has deeper historical roots in the early twentieth century.

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**Competing interests.** The author declares none.

<sup>140</sup>Sigel, 'Filth in the Wrong People's Hands', p. 876.

<sup>141</sup>See Lau, 'The Anti-Yellow Culture Movement'; Cheng Tju Lim, 'The Anti-Yellow Culture Campaign in Singapore: 1953–1979', in *The State and the Arts in Singapore: Policies and Institutions*, (ed.) Terence Chong (New Jersey: World Scientific, 2018), pp. 31–48.

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