

From “Chinese Colonist” to “Yellow Peril”: Capitalist Racialization in the British Empire

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The literature on “racial capitalism” exhibits a tension between the term’s evocative power and its conceptual imprecision. This article navigates this tension by developing the mid-level concept of “capitalist racialization,” which specifies the role of capitalist abstractions in the construction of racial hierarchies. I elaborate this notion around the racialization of Chinese migration in nineteenth-century Southeast Asia. I focalize the figure of the “Chinese colonist” as an index of the capitalist standards by which British observers ordered colonial populations in their reflections on imperial political economy. I argue that the racial stereotype of “the Chinese” as commercial, industrious, and “colonizing” people emerged from the subsumption of colonial land and labor under capital. Their “colonizing” capacity rendered Chinese migrants simultaneously an economic asset to the British Empire and a potential threat to the white world order. “Capitalist racialization” therefore highlights new inroads into the entwined histories of capitalism, racism, and empire.

INTRODUCTION

The last decade has witnessed an explosion of scholarly interest in “racial capitalism” across the social sciences and humanities. Predictably, such wide-ranging appeal has raised doubts about conceptual rigor. Critics have queried whether one can discern a coherent understanding of “racial capitalism” across its manifold deployments and what is captured by the conjunction of “race” and “capitalism” that eludes the grasp of either concept taken in isolation (Go 2021; Hall 2022; Omstedt 2021; Ralph and Singhal 2019; Subrahmanyam 2023; Wacquant 2023b). Particularly controversial has been the oft-cited maxim that “all capitalism is racial capitalism,” leading some sceptics to question the soundness of a concept that lacks an inverse (qua “non-racial capitalism”) (Walzer 2020) and prompting others to dismiss the qualifier “racial” as redundant (Post 2020).¹ Even sympathetic commentators have expressed concern over the term’s imprecision, one baldly declaring, “[t]he problem is that the term racial capitalism does not refer to a ‘theory.’ ... Nor does the literature offer uniform concepts or a shared conceptual apparatus” (Go 2021, 38–9). It is now clear that the disciplinary and thematic pluralism of the literature, not to mention the polysemy of “capitalism” and “race,” vitiates an exact definition of “racial capitalism.” At the same time, the latter’s generative potential has proven too obvious to abandon on account of definitional difficulties. The result has been

a marked tension between theoretical innovation and conceptual clarity.

To address this tension, the present article proposes constructing mid-level concepts that mediate between “racial capitalism” as a general research agenda and historically specific configurations of capitalism and racism.² In this vein, the following discussion introduces the notion of “capitalist racialization.” As a mid-level concept, capitalist racialization denotes the elaboration of social difference into racial categories through civilizational hierarchies that are predicated on the dominance of capitalist social relations. The qualifier *capitalist* highlights the role of political economic arguments and capitalist abstractions (commodity, value, labor) in the construction of racial difference. It stresses above all how the semantic content and the ordering principle of racial hierarchies are shaped by capitalist agendas of commanding land, labor, and resources. Such mid-level concepts, I submit, promise greater explanatory traction on the “co-constitution” of racism and capitalism in their historical specificity, as “racial capitalism” itself originally did for South African apartheid’s political economy prior to its reinvention as a general concept. A key contribution of this approach is to retain and reroute, in a dialectical fashion, the theoretical energy generated by the generalization of “racial capitalism” back to the level of concrete analysis.³

Instead of an abstract discussion, I develop this notion by examining the racialization of Chinese migration under British colonial capitalism in nineteenth-century Southeast Asia. My analysis pivots around the racial stereotype of “the Chinese” as uniquely commercial, industrious, and acquisitive people. This

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¹ See responses by Táiwò and Bright (2020) and Virdee (2021).

² For a kindred methodological orientation, see Wacquant (2023a).

³ Two recent examples are Hall (2022) and Johnson (2022).

stereotype has widely featured in critical studies of indentured labor in the post-emancipation Caribbean (Jung 2009; Kale 1996; 1998; Look Lai 1993; Northrup 1995; Wilson 2004), anti-Asian racism in white settler colonies (Day 2016; Lake 2004; Lake and Reynolds 2008; Ngai 2021), and British colonial expansion into Southeast Asia (Bright 2013; Look Lai 2010; Neal 2019).

I contend that the perceived Chinese traits of enterprise and industry explored in this scholarship were not contingent cultural attributes but indexed the priorities of British capital to extract commodifiable surplus from colonial production. These priorities surfaced in comparison of economic productivity across various ethnic groups in Southeast Asia. British colonial officials and merchants construed the purported productivity differentials between the Chinese, the Indians, and the Malays as reflecting their unequal degrees of “civilization,” thereby crafting the ideational precursors of racial classifications. The hierarchy that they projected drew much of its semantic content from the intersecting discourses of political economy and civilization and savagery. Together, these discourses informed a system of capitalist ordering, which differentiated colonial populations by coding them as unequal yet commensurable units of an imperial political economic matrix. The particularizing categories of “race,” I argue, crystallized *within* a totalizing theory of capitalist civilization that arbitrated colonial populations based on a logic of differentiation-in-commensurability. Colonial capitalism in Southeast Asia, in other words, was not so much racialized as racializing.

Judged by the capitalist standard of civilization, the Chinese diaspora’s perceived labor discipline and commercial acumen placed them above other non-European populations, presenting them as an ideal solution to colonial labor shortages across the British Empire. By the same token, it rendered them uncomfortably similar (if not superior) to the Europeans in their capacity for economic enterprise and competition, thereby endowing “the Chinese” with an expansionist character that anticipated the fears of an Asiatic threat to the white world order.

The resulting ambivalence, I argue, instantiated in the peculiar figure of the “Chinese colonist” that recurred in the writings of British colonial officials, merchants, and publicists. For British observers, the Chinese demographic and economic prominence in Southeast Asia was the proof of a “colonizing” capacity that the Europeans had hitherto reserved for themselves. The core of this colonizing capacity was relentless commercial energy and industrious character that drove the Chinese, much like the Europeans, to settle in distant lands and marginalize their native incumbents. Half a century before Anglo-Saxon triumphalism gave way to the trope of “white man under siege” (Lake 2004), the ideological kernel of the “Asiatic hordes” had already been planted in the image of the “Chinese colonist.” The analysis thus suggests that even though the panic over the “yellow peril” was coded in the language of insurmountable difference,

that is, *race*, the social logic of that threat was one of equivalence, that is, *capital*.

The article makes three contributions to the study of capitalism and race. First, “capitalist racialization” highlights the processual and recombinant mechanisms of racially coding social difference according to capital’s way of viewing and ordering the world. By explicating the semantic content of racial categories as an index of capitalist social relations that render these categories intelligible, capitalist racialization moves beyond an instrumental conceptualization of the race–capital nexus and illuminates its internal constitution. Second, capitalist expansion and racial stratification in Southeast Asia widen the sociohistorical aperture beyond the Atlantic settler–slave formation that continues to frame much of the scholarship on racial capitalism. The workings of capitalist racialization in an imperial economic project that explicitly rejected native dispossession and bonded labor, such as examined here, invites comparative and connected histories of capitalism, colonialism, and racism. Finally, the study’s emphasis on political economy and Enlightenment ethnography draws attention to the historically specific political languages that mediate capitalist racialization, thereby introducing an irreducible historical element to the study of racial capitalism.

In developing these arguments, the article combines an analysis of primary texts, including nineteenth-century colonial correspondence, pamphlets, and monographs, with insights from secondary literature on British imperial history, political economy, and intellectual history. Of the primary texts, the practical political theorizing of colonial officials, travelers, and publicists familiar with colonial Southeast Asia is accorded particular weight.

The article proceeds in four parts. The first section defines “capitalist racialization” and situates it in a transimperial frame of analysis. “Capitalist racialization” highlights the constitutive role of capitalist categories (labor, value, commodity) in racial stratification, critically complementing the recent theorizations of racism as a sociopolitical infrastructure of capital accumulation. The second section contextualizes the racialization of Chinese migration within British colonial capitalism in Southeast Asia, which was shaped by the nineteenth-century project of transforming Britain’s imperial peripheries into commercial agrarian satellites. This capitalist project generated various pressures and possibilities for ordering colonial populations, from which “the Chinese” emerged as a salient racial type. The third section reconstructs the commercial and expansionist attributes of this racial type from British observations on the Chinese capacity to “colonize” foreign lands. From the endorsements of Chinese migration across the empire to warnings about the ascendancy of the “yellow races,” this section traces the figure of the “Chinese colonist” and its vicissitudes across the nineteenth century. The final section returns to the discussion of capitalist racialization to interpret these observations. It shows that although the favorable comparisons of the “Chinese” to the “Malay” or the “Hindoo” ostensibly started from a priori ethno-cultural

categories, the effective lines of racialization materialized in the colonial agenda of pressing land and labor into the service of commodity and capital. The article concludes on the merits of expanding the scope of analysis beyond “methodological Atlanticism” and placing the study of colonialism, capitalism, and race in a transimperial framework. The conclusion also highlights the productive potential of cross-fertilization between the study of racial capitalism and the political theory of empire.

RECONSIDERING RACIAL CAPITALISM: TOWARD A TRANSIMPERIAL FRAME

The ecumenical appeal of “racial capitalism” derives largely from Robinson’s (2000) generalization of the term, which unmoored it from South African apartheid and rendered it coterminous with capitalism as such.⁴ While Robinson’s intervention has inspired an outpouring of scholarship, his particular way of elaborating it has introduced its own methodological problems. Most immediately for our analysis, his civilizational critique of racism envisions an external and instrumental relationship between racism and capitalism, which bypasses their internal configuration that the notion of capitalist racialization here aims to elucidate.

Pivotal to Robinson’s generalizing move was his reconceptualization of capitalist expansion as a socially differentiating, rather than homogenizing, process. In contrast to the Eurocentric Marxist proclivity to posit capital as a universalizing force that dissolved social difference into class antagonism, Robinson recast capitalism as a project that reified ethnic, religious, and regional disparities into racial ones (Robinson 2000, 26). In reclaiming “race” from class reductionism, he posited “racialism” as a mode of domination that historically preceded capitalism.⁵ In *Black Marxism*, he averred that racialism had its roots in the feudal relations of premodern Europe and stamped “European civilization” from its very beginnings (Robinson 2000, 2, 9, 10, 28).⁶ Initially an affliction confined to medieval Europe, racialism was unleashed upon the rest of the planet by the European agents of colonial and capitalist expansion (soldiers, settlers, planters), who drew upon a pre-Columbian ideological inventory for justifying their conquest, slavery and depredation overseas.⁷

The theoretical implication of viewing racialism as a feudal phenomenon with a *post factum* colonial career is to cast the race–capital nexus in an ultimately external and instrumental mold. On this account, while

capitalism has always been racial, this racial character has little to do with capitalism’s internal dynamics and instead follows from its contingent origins in an already racialized social order. The historical and lexical priority of racialism suggests that one can grasp its ontology independent of an analysis of capitalism, whereas to invoke capitalism without racialism (“non-racial capitalism”) amounts to a category error. The analytic purchase flows one way from racialism to capitalism, thereby obscuring the “inherently racializing capacities of capitalism” (Virdee 2019, 9).

A corrective elucidation of the reciprocal relationship between racism and capitalism has been to conceive of racial stratification as a structuring principle of capitalist exploitation and expropriation. Du Bois (2022) had flagged early on the modernity of racism as a distinct system of domination conditioned by capitalism and imperialism. Contemporary scholars have expanded on this line of argument with considerable ingenuity, locating racialized difference squarely in processes of capitalist reproduction and accumulation (Burden-Stelly 2018; Dawson 2016; Fraser 2016; Gorup 2023; Issar 2021; Jenkins and Leroy 2021; Moore 2017; Roediger 2017; Singh 2016; Virdee 2014).⁸ Racialism in these accounts derives its theoretical significance from its indispensable sociopolitical functions under capitalism, above all, from underwriting the uneven distribution of wealth, power, vulnerability, and violence. In Melamed’s (2015, 77) exemplary formulation, “antinomies of accumulation require loss, disposability, and the unequal differentiation of human value, and racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires.”

While these contributions repudiate the analytic priority of racialism, they do not entirely dispense with its instrumental conceptualization.⁹ Put simply, establishing racism’s enabling and justificatory functions for capitalism is necessary but not sufficient to open the black box of “racialization” itself. It does not elucidate how the concrete content and the ordering principle of racial hierarchies are structured in and through capitalist strategies for commanding land, labor, and resources. In other words, an account of the *function* of racial hierarchies under capitalism remains to be complemented by an account of their *constitution*. Addressing this lacuna requires unpacking the ways in which racialization is not only *for* capitalism but also *of* capitalism: that is, how the specific terms of classifying and racially encoding social difference derive from capital’s way of viewing and ordering the world. *Capitalist racialization*, as a process of differentiation-incommensurability, sails into this gap.

The notion of capitalist racialization proposed here builds on Wolfe’s (2006, 10) definition of “racialization” as a colonial ordering principle, “an assortment of local attempts to impose classificatory grids on a variety of

⁴ For critical appraisals, see Al-Bulushi (2022), Hudson (2018), Johnson (2022), Omstedt (2021) and White (2020).

⁵ Here, I use the “racialism” and “racism” interchangeably since the essentialization of social difference in imperial discourse (racialism) was almost always accompanied by its deployment for political and economic purposes (racism).

⁶ The feudal racialism thesis has since been amplified by Gilmore (2017; 2021), Robin Kelley (2000; 2017), and Virdee (2023).

⁷ For an incisive critique of Robinson’s civilizational argument, see Subrahmanyam (2023).

⁸ For an overview of the main arguments in this literature, see the note “Debating the capital-race nexus” in the Supplementary material.

⁹ Critics have treated this instrumental bent under the rubric of “functionalism” (Go 2021; Johnson 2022).

colonized populations, to particular though coordinated ends.” The arbitration of colonial populations for purposes of political control, social stability, and economic exploitation was the mainstay of five centuries of European imperialism. Devised to govern social multiplicities, colonial classificatory schemes variously leveraged and repurposed existing lines of differentiation or fabricated entirely new categories that called into being the objects they purported to describe—from mestizos, mulattos, and quarterons under blood quanta laws in the Americas to the brahmins, martial races, and hill tribes under the British rule in South Asia. Racism as a colonial modality of power took shape in these classificatory projects that borrowed metaphors, concepts, theories, and techniques from each other across imperial spaces. The term “racialization” captures the processual-recursive nature of this modality, offering greater room for analyzing, on the one hand, the iterations, erasures, and exaggerations of social difference in the making of racial categories, and on the other, the social conditions and political economic agendas that overdetermined them (Winant and Omi 2014, 109–10; Wolfe 2001).

By further conceptual refinement, *capitalist* racialization highlights the process whereby racial classificatory grids receive their semantic content and evaluative standards from the degree of subordination of social production to capital accumulation. Its key methodological premise is to grasp the colonial empire as the political and institutional framework within which capitalist relations historically developed (Ince 2018b). This perspective focalizes the emergence of capitalist relations through imperial webs of commodities, people, and practices that connected heterogeneous sites of production into a global archipelago of accumulation. Subsuming colonial land, labor, and resources into circuits of capital often involved violently restructuring local property, exchange, and work regimes, coalescing into a global process of primitive accumulation that proceeded through settler colonialism, plantation slavery, and commercial imperialism (Ince 2018a). What united these heterogeneous systems of production and appropriation was their mediation by the capitalist forms of commodity, labor, and value. Their integration to the world market brought ostensibly noncapitalist (i.e., unfree and/or unwaged) laboring processes, such as enslaved or peasant labor, under the abstract dynamics of surplus value extraction, thereby transforming their social character by rendering them an organic moment of capitalist valorization.¹⁰

The same process also introduced a corresponding system of signification for categorizing and ordering different places, populations, institutions, and practices. In Quijano’s (2000, 540) words, “the incorporation of such diverse and heterogeneous cultural histories into a single world dominated by Europe signified a cultural and intellectual intersubjective configuration equivalent to the articulation of all forms of

labor control around capital, a configuration that established world capitalism.” Central to this configuration was the translation of social difference into deficit whereby various property and labor regimes were recoded as unequal yet commensurate units of a single evaluative matrix. The translation of societal plurality into hierarchy took place in multiple, intersecting, and shifting political languages. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, “civilization” and later “race” emerged as the principal ideological paradigms for ordering and judging human diversity.¹¹

The British Empire in this period offers a propitious context for studying the capitalist ordering of colonial difference and its civilizational and racial articulations. First, as the first “self-conscious commercial society” (Pincus 1998, 707), Britain was the *locus classicus* of the language of political economy and the correlate understanding of civilization and empire in economic terms (Armitage 1998; 2000; Hont 2005). By the early nineteenth century, “the British authorities defined civilization” according to a “[value] system honed over the past century as Britons shaped and were shaped by a capitalist political economy” (Holt 1992, 76). Second, the unrivaled geographic expanse and heterogeneity of the British Empire rendered the question of governing social difference integral to the imperial economic project. Emigration to settler colonies, commercial development of tropical possessions, and imperial labor allocation all called for classificatory grids for mapping and matching empire’s subjects to political and economic ends, rendering the “[e]veryday administration of the British Empire ... completely saturated with racial differentiation” (Lester, Boehme, and Mitchell 2021, 10).

The ethnographic paradigm of civilization and savagery proved critical in mediating between the discourses of political economy and race science. It did so by historicizing political economy’s universal tenets on the division of labor, market exchange, and capital accumulation into particularist and gradated categories of savage, barbarous, agricultural, and commercial societies (Berry 1997; Pocock 2005; Skinner 1965; 1967). While the ethnographic paradigm reached its intellectual consummation in eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment stadial theory (O’Brien 1997; Whelan 2009), it found a practical field of application in nineteenth-century colonial knowledge production, as imperial administrators, missionaries, and merchants trained the taxonomical frame of savagery and civilization on the British Empire’s non-European subjects in the Asia-Pacific (Bayly 1998; Moloney 2001). Over the Victorian period, the analytic nuance and fluidity of late-Enlightenment classifications yielded to more rigid and imperious assessments of the non-Europeans, inspired in part by renewed imperial confidence during Britain’s political and economic ascendancy and in part by the perceived recalcitrance of the “natives” to the empire’s

¹⁰ For a detailed overview, see the note “Capital, race, and difference” in the Supplementary material.

¹¹ See Sebastiani (2013) on civilization and Barder (2019) on race, who nonetheless accord capitalism a perfunctory position in their analyses.

civilizing mission (Cannadine 2017; Hall 2002; Mantena 2010; Pitts 2005). Especially in the latter half of the century, explanations of “savagery” and “oriental despotism” increasingly moved away from historical and environmental factors to innate and hereditary properties, and “Eurocentric institutionalism” hardened into “scientific racism” (Hobson 2012). As ethnographic categories increasingly came to represent inherent and immutable capacities for civilization, the capitalist standards of commodity, labor, and value that shaped their semantic and normative freight sedimented into emphatically racial hierarchies.

Following this thread, the next two sections contend that the British notions of an innate “Chinese character” grew out of the capitalist racialization of colonial populations in British Southeast Asia.¹² Before they assumed a racial valence, the attributes of industry and commercial energy that rendered the Chinese “colonizing” people were articulated in the language of civilization and savagery. These attributes sharpened the image of the industrious Chinese against the “lazy native” in the Malay Archipelago (Alatas 1977) and explained why “Chinese colonists” were “displacing the natives” in the region.

COLONIAL SOUTHEAST ASIA: CHINESE MIGRATION AND BRITISH EXPANSION

The favorable reputation of the Chinese among British colonial officials dated back to the eighteenth century (Allen 2014, 333–4). However, it was Lt. William Layman’s proposal to replace Trinidad’s enslaved labor force with Chinese emigrants that set in motion a growing web of colonial exchanges through which the trope of “Chinese colonization” materialized. Motivated by the impending abolition of the slave trade and submitted to the Colonial Office in Layman 1802, Layman’s proposal directly informed the Trinidadian experiment in 1806 (Layman 1802; 1807). The Trinidadian experiment failed, as did several others, but Layman’s portrayal of the Chinese as ideal colonists not only survived but flourished in the British imperial imaginary (Bischof 2016; Higman 1972). In defending the singular suitability of the Chinese to colonial plantation economies, Layman drew his proof from Southeast Asia: “The Islands of Java and Luconia [Luzon] are in great measure indebted to their [Chinese] industry for the superior production of sugar, Indigo, Cotton, Coffee &c and Pulo Penang or Prince of Wales’s Island has in a short period been converted from a jungle or wood into valuable plantations of Pepper, Beetlenut, Nutmegs & other Spices, by Chinese who from the strong motive of acquiring property have been induced to colonize there” (Layman 1802 in Look Lai 1998, 24). The passage condenses several themes that will be

examined later: the capitalist agenda of turning British Asia into cash crop plantations, the modern conception of colonization as the settlement and improvement of “waste” lands, and the leitmotif of industry and acquisitiveness as the driver of Chinese colonization. An investigation of these themes in colonial discourse must be prefaced by an overview of the social and economic positions of the Chinese in maritime Southeast Asia and its inflection of British colonial capitalism in the region.

Historians of Southeast Asia have drawn attention to the region’s longstanding migration patterns and the resulting demographic, economic, and geopolitical structures that conditioned European colonialism. Look Lai (2010, 37) reminds that “much of the seasonal and long-term migration within South and Southeast Asia was not new, and indeed its origins preceded the arrival of the West in the region by several centuries.” The infrastructure of intra-Asian migration comprised the mercantile networks stretching from China to the Indian Ocean and onward to the Red Sea, with the Nanyang (“South Sea”) and especially the Melaka Straits representing a critical trading hub and waypoint between East and South Asia (Frost 2005; Lockard 2009; Reid 1988; 1993). “Between the 11th and the 15th century,” Lockard (2013, 766) writes, “China-based private traders were among those who developed a complex maritime system, allowing many Chinese to sojourn or settle abroad.” The majority of emigrants set out as sojourners hoping to build wealth before returning home; many ended up settling permanently in Southeast Asia and forming distinct local identities like *Baba* and *Peranakan*.

Whether they settled or sojourned, the Chinese in Southeast Asia stood out by their prominence in commercial sectors, having already established trading houses in Batavia, Saigon, and Bangkok as early as the fifteenth century (Lockard 2013, 767). The arrival of the Europeans and the articulation of regional trade circuits with the Atlantic economy gave fresh stimulus to Chinese mercantile activity. “In response to this early regional stimulus, spontaneous Chinese migrations of traders and artisans to Thailand and the Philippines, and to Indonesia and Malaya gave rise to a Chinese middleman sector within these local economies well before the century of the industrial revolution” (Look Lai 2010, 37). Chinese commercial ventures usually took place under the institutional umbrella of the “*kongsi*,” a lineage-based communal organization. In addition to their strong presence in maritime trade, the *kongsi* managed much of the mining and plantation operations in the region, producing the tin, gold, sugar, pepper, gambier, and rice destined for local and overseas markets. The British perceptions of Chinese business acumen and entrepreneurial energy would reflect the specialized commercial position of the Straits Chinese in Southeast Asian economies.

Chinese-managed mines and plantations employed a nominally free but structurally captive labor force recruited from China. The centerpiece of the labor regime was the “credit-ticket system,” whereby labor brokers contracted out migrant workers to local

¹² Neal (2019) convincingly demonstrates the incubation of the Chinese racial type in the British Straits Settlements. However, his analysis misses the trope of the “Chinese colonist” as the crux of anti-Asian racism and the distinctly capitalist logic behind it.

employers in return for the costs of passage. The arrangement was vital for the plantation and mining economy, given the extreme difficulty of securing cheap and reliable labor locally (Alatas 1977). The indentured Chinese migrants, in Trocki's (2002, 300) words, represented the "first real source of wage labor in Southeast Asia" powering the "mining and planting operations ... in Malaya, Sumatra, southern Siam, Tonkin, and Borneo." Not incidentally, the arrangement frequently descended into debt peonage. As most employers also supplied food, shelter, and opium to laborers against their wages, they could extend the term of the contract beyond its original term, minimize production costs by intensifying exploitation, and turn a profit at low price levels (Trocki 1999). The provenance of the fabled Chinese industriousness that would at once excite colonial planters and haunt white settlers lay in an indigenous system of debt bondage.

The economics of British expansion into Southeast Asia was preceded by British capital's insertion into the existing trade, migration, and production networks. The key agents of capitalist expansion were the Anglo-Indian merchant community organized in "agency houses" in Calcutta and later Singapore. In addition to finance, shipping, and trade, these agencies invested in commercial agriculture and mining ventures, articulating the economy of Southeast Asia to global circuits of capital as a primary-commodity exporting region (Cain and Hopkins 2015; Chaudhuri 1966; Webster 1998). Crucially, the agency houses themselves did not directly own the land or recruit the labor needed to produce the commodities they exported. For productive functions, British capital depended on the intermediation of the *kongsi* to whom they extended credit and commissioned exports (Frost 2005, 35–6; Trocki 2002, 299). The same British merchant interests also nudged the East India Company to extend its political clout across the Melaka Straits (Webster 1998, 127–8, 154–5, 259). The decisive moments were the establishment of Singapore in 1819 as a free British port and the consolidation of the British Straits Settlements in 1826, giving merchant capital a territorial foothold in the region.¹³

The Straits Settlements in the 1830s and 1840s formed the stage where the scattered though consonant remarks about Chinese industry and enterprise that had been circulating in colonial papers and correspondence coalesced into a coherent notion of the "Chinese character." Like Layman, figures active in the construction and dissemination of this notion through the print medium were colonial officials, merchants, missionaries, and travelers with direct experience of the Southeast Asian contact zone. Their self-avowed regional expertise gave their representations of the Chinese character an air of objectivity, while couching their arguments in the Victorian language of civilization rendered the knowledge of the exotic intelligible to their metropolitan audiences. Crucially, as Bischoff

(2016, 143) and Neal (2019, 24) and have argued, these figures increasingly distinguished between the Manchu state established by nomadic northern invaders and the authentic Han Chinese. The Chinese state/society distinction enabled ethnographers like Crawford (1820, 169, 185–6) to represent the Straits Chinese as manifesting the true Chinese character that came into its own under British institutions. The combination of British rule and Chinese enterprise in turn evolved into an "Anglo-Chinese model" that administrators hoped to transplant across the British Empire, from Assam to Ceylon to Australia (Liu 2020; Neal 2019; Sharma 2009). The Chinese diaspora was thereby released from the odium of oriental despotism and stagnation that came to epitomize mainland China in nineteenth-century European narratives of progress (Blue 1999a).

The transvaluation of the Chinese character into a commercial, energetic, and relentless type, however, would eventually render it much more menacing in the Western imaginary than other allegedly less civilized and more pusillanimous Asian peoples. Once again, the dynamics of imperial political economy, and especially the transformation of Britain's settler colonies, provide a useful perspective for assessing the ambivalence of the Chinese stereotype. In the early-nineteenth century, high land/labor ratios and high wages in settler colonies were the bane of colonial capitalists who decried the expense and irregularity of labor supply. In this context, many observers looked favorably upon Chinese migration as a solution to the colonial labor problem, not only in the tropical plantation belt but also in the temperate zone. Even a stalwart of white settler colonization such as Edward Gibbon Wakefield eventually conceded to importing Chinese indentured labor into Australia and New Zealand (Prichard 1968, 67), thus upholding the priority of low wages over racial homogeneity in the colonies. However, the "Chinese solution" would morph into the "Chinese question" in the last third of the century when massive British emigration to settler colonies and the consolidation of "settler capitalist" economies tightened competition in colonial land and labor markets (Beilharz and Cox 2007; Denoon 1983; McMichael 1984).¹⁴ Against this backdrop, the perceived industry and enterprise of the Chinese migrant turned from an asset to the empire into a threat to the colonists, engendering racially inflected arguments on Chinese economic competition that would feed into the panic over the "yellow peril."

THE "CHINESE COLONIST": FROM IMPERIAL PANACEA TO IMMIGRATION PANIC

By the time Layman revised his 1802 memorandum into a publication in 1807, he could draw for empirical

¹³ For a more detailed discussion, see the note "British expansion in Southeast Asia" in the Supplementary material.

¹⁴ Especially relevant here are the economic patterns of "boom, bust, and export rescue" that correlated with the fluctuating demand, tolerance, and antipathy for Chinese migrant labor (Belich 2009, 308).

evidence on a growing body of writings by diplomats, naval officers, and colonial administrators who served in Southeast Asia. In Batavia, “every manufacture is managed by the Chinese,” remarked one observer, “what land is tilled is owing to the industry and perseverance of the Chinese who are settled there.” Commenting on Java, another wrote, “These people are skilled in almost every handicraft business, carry on an extensive commerce, cultivate the sugar cane, coffee, and indigo” (Layman 1807, 24, 25). William Marsden, the Company secretary in Bencoolen, noted the failure of sugar cultivation there until the work was delegated to Chinese superintendents, while George Leith, the Lt. Governor of Penang, admitted that “without them [the Chinese] it [Penang] would have little or no cultivation” (Layman 1807, 25, 30). The consensus was unambiguous. The Chinese had transformed the tropical wastes of the Malay Archipelago into commercially valuable settlements, thanks to a deep-seated “hope of gain” and “temperance and regular manner of living” (Layman 1807, 23, 25, 30, 61). Layman’s (1807, 79–80) proposal to adopt the “system of the East in the West Indies” by “the introduction of Chinese colonists” thus grew directly out of the Southeast Asian commercial and migratory patterns outlined earlier.

Layman’s routine reference to the Chinese in Southeast Asia as “colonists” was neither fortuitous nor anomalous, though it might puzzle the contemporary scholarship’s habitual equation of “colonization” with white settler colonialism (Arneil 2023). In fact, many nineteenth-century commentators invoked “colonization” to describe Chinese settlement overseas. To unravel this puzzle, one has to cut through the layered semantic composition of the term in nineteenth-century British political discourse.

The modern understanding of colonization had its roots in the seventeenth-century notion of settlement and agricultural “improvement” of sparsely populated lands, as famously codified by John Locke’s theory of property (Tully 1993). This hard core of the definition endured into the nineteenth century but accrued two additional thematic layers based on the historical experience of colonialism and capitalism. First, the record of American and Australian settler colonialism added to the conceptual definition of colonization the extirpation or extreme marginalization of native inhabitants of colonized territories. The demographic replacement or resilience of the indigenous peoples would give rise to the discourse of the “dying races” (Brantlinger 2003) and the influential if fraught distinction between “colony” and “dependency” (Bell 2016, 32–47). Second, the consolidation of capitalist relations in Britain, along with the newfound aspiration to become the “workshop of the world,” redefined colonization proper as not only settlement and cultivation but export-oriented commercial agriculture. Colonial reformers like Wakefield and Charles Buller pressed for the active creation a capitalist division of labor in Australia and New Zealand, while Indian reformers like Crawford and James Silk Buckingham stretched the definition of colonization to encompass the export of British capital and capitalists to India (Ince 2022).

Albeit from different angles, both positions pursued the colonial capitalist agenda of “the great specialization” (Findlay and O’Rourke 2009, 365–428), namely, transforming empire’s peripheries into specialized pools of raw materials and foodstuffs to feed the industrializing metropole. In these visions, the term “colonization” occupied the center of a powerful semantic constellation comprising settlement, improvement, commerce, and capital.

The perceived alignment of the Straits Chinese with this constellation cast them as quintessential colonists in nineteenth-century British colonial discourse. Particularly illustrative are the arguments of colonial administrator-historians like Stamford Raffles, the founder of colonial Singapore, and Crawford, the colony’s second resident. Both Raffles and Crawford openly analogized the Chinese in Southeast Asia to the European colonists in North America. Under the liberal British rule, Raffles averred in 1823, “Borneo and the Eastern Islands may become to China what America is already to the nations of Europe. The superabundant and overflowing population of China affords an almost inexhaustible source of colonization, while the new and fertile soil of these Islands offers the means of immediate and plentiful subsistence to any numbers who may settle in them” (quoted in Neal 2019, 40).¹⁵ Crawford emphatically grounded the parallel in the political economy of colonization. In an 1833 essay, he wrote “[t]he sugar manufacture of Siam, of Cochinchina and Tonquin, of Java, and of the Philippines, is entirely conducted by the Chinese colonists of those countries. ... The natives of these countries furnish nothing by cheap labour. The Chinese supply the place of the European colonists in America;—the natives, the place of the negroes of the west, without stripes or bondage” (Crawford and Thompson 1833, 251–2). Central to Crawford’s analogy was his assignment of the Chinese to an advanced position in the stadial schema of savagery and civilization, which had placed them ahead of other peoples of South and Southeast Asia (Crawford 1830, 390; also see Bischof 2016). Their status exempted them from the paternalism that colonial officials, and indeed Crawford himself, readily reserved for the Malays or the Indians. In a memorandum to the Colonial Land and Emigration Committee in 1843, Crawford advised that the “Chinese colonists” to be recruited to the West Indies “must be treated with the same consideration as any class of British labourers ... must be paid the full value of their labour ... [and] must be left at perfect liberty” (in Look Lai 1998, 54).

The concatenation of colonization with commerce, industry, and civilization also surfaced in the correspondence of James White, a labor recruitment agent for British Guiana, who “consider[ed] the Chinese as being very superior to the Bengalese in every point of view

¹⁵ Even though China’s population density routinely appeared as an explanatory variable in these accounts, it was secondary to the Chinese character. Contemporaries also frequently noted India’s “teeming” population without tying it to colonization, despite substantial long- and short-term migration from South Asia to the Straits.

with reference to colonization.” Like others, White took his cue from the Straits Settlements. “Of the three races who form the principal inhabitants of Singapore,” he reported in 1851, “the Chinese are the most numerous, and are beyond all comparison the most laborious and industrious. They are here the pioneers of civilization ... I think it very probable that in time they will, by their superior industry and energy, entirely displace the other races” (quoted in Neal 2019, 141). White’s report is notable for insinuating the trope of indigenous displacement into the conception of Chinese colonization, thus leveling it fully with the understanding of European settler colonialism elsewhere. It also indicates the shifting modes of theorizing social difference in the mid-nineteenth century, when the relatively fluid ethnographic categories of Scottish social theory began hardening into theories of race war and racial extinction (Barder 2021; Brantlinger 2003).

White would not be the last to view Southeast Asia as the testing grounds of the Chinese capacity to colonize and displace. John Bowring, free trader and erstwhile governor of Hong Kong, struck a similar note in his autobiography when he reminisced about his 1849 visit to Singapore. Though not employing the language of scientific racism, his depiction of the population dynamics in the region forecast an impending race war. “Immigration of the black-haired races is changing the whole character of society, the Indian Archipelago being the field where the battle of the nationalities is constantly fought, and where the expulsion of the less civilised by the more civilised may be studied” (Bowring 1877, 213–4). In Bowring’s estimation, the Chinese were commercially and demographically dominating the Archipelago because they were “far more industrious and economical, and with far more temperate habits than their predecessors.” Second only to the English, their ascendancy reflected the maxim that “in proportion to the civilization is the growth of wealth and influence” (Bowring 1877, 214). Echoing Bowring, Meadows ([1856] 2015, 41), British Sinologist and diplomat to Hong Kong and Shanghai, observed that “by force of superior moral civilization and industrial energy, [the Chinese] are gradually ousting the savage Malays from the Indian Archipelago.” Such statements are significant for encapsulating the nineteenth-century opinion that national power and civilizational superiority manifested itself not only or even primarily in martial prowess but in the capacity for commercial and industrial development. Over the course of the century, the idea of historical progress assumed distinctly capitalist standards (Bowden 2007), giving shape to civilizational hierarchies that would eventually be essentialized by scientific racism.

The scientific racist and conservative thinker Arthur de Gobineau’s writings opens a brighter window to the association of capitalism and civilization, not least because Gobineau despised this association as a feature of the Chinese racial character. Drawing an explicit parallel between the Chinese and the Swiss, he wrote, “[Chinese] religion is a résumé of practices and maxims strongly reminiscent of what the moralists of Geneva and their educational books are pleased to recommend

as the *nec plus ultra* of the good: economy, moderation, prudence, the art of making a profit and never a loss” (quoted in Blue 1999b, 109–10). Gobineau’s disdain of commercial character led him to avow what other thinkers mostly intimated, namely that the Chinese and the modern Europeans were alike in their commercial disposition. Such social affinity underpinned the aforementioned analogy between the Chinese and the Europeans as colonists, but it also complicated the claims about the Europeans’ civilizational and racial superiority over the Asiatic races.¹⁶

The second notable point in Gobineau’s position is the racialization of Chinese traits such that they remained constant irrespective of social context. “Chinaman, though far from his native land, has become the object of horror and fear in all these countries because people do not know how to answer the industry, application, persistence, and, ultimately, the unparalleled cheapness of his labor” (Gobineau 1971, 242). The idea of unvarying character traits implicit in this passage contrasted with eighteenth-century theories of national character as a function of environmental and institutional variation (Sebastiani 2013). As Blue (1999a, 91) notes, while the antiquity of the Chinese civilization was a fixture of eighteenth-century European thought, China could still find a place in the universalist stadial theory that located it at the agrarian stage of historical development. The Chinese state/society distinction that emerged in the Southeast Asian contact zone opened the way for the decontextualization and racialization of the features of “the Chinaman.” The perceived resilience of Chinese skill, enterprise, and industry exhibited in as diverse places as Penang, Siam, Australia, Calcutta, and California bore witness to an immutable, racial character.

These thematic threads entwined in the writings of Henry Charles Pearson, British-born Australian settler, historian, and politician. Pearson made a name for himself with his *National Life and Character* (Pearson [1893] 1915), which shook the public opinion in settler colonies around the Pacific rim. The book is often cited as *the* ideological manifesto of defensive white supremacy, a wake-up call for closing white ranks against the Asian hordes (Lake 2014). Much has been made of Pearson’s ([1893] 1915, 89–90) disquieting premonition that “The day will come, and perhaps is not far distant, when the European observer will look round to see the globe girdled with a continuous zone of black and yellow races, no longer too weak for aggression or under tutelage, but independent, or practically so, in government, monopolising the trade of their own regions, and circumscribing the industry of the Europeans.” Less attention has been paid to the rationale behind this prognosis, especially as regards the “yellow races.” A closer look reveals all the ideological antecedents examined so far to converge in Pearson’s work, disclosing the more complicated lineage of *National Life’s* main argument.

¹⁶ See Hirschman (1986) for a discussion.

First, Pearson supported his observations about the impending Chinese expansion with reference to the Straits Settlements. “The history of our Straits Settlements will afford a familiar instance how the Chinese are spreading. They already form half the population predominating in Singapore and Perak, and the best observers are agreed that the Malay cannot hold his own against them. They are beginning to settle in Borneo and Sumatra, and they are supplanting the natives in some of the small islands of the Pacific, such as Hawaii” (Pearson [1893] 1915, 50). The leitmotif of indigenous elimination was thus integral to Pearson’s depiction of Chinese settlement. After noting that the “natives are giving way to the Chinese in the Malay Peninsula,” he surmised that the Chinese in Borneo “may not destroy the early settlers, but they will reduce them to the position of the Hill tribes in India, or of the Ainos in Japan” (Pearson [1893] 1915, 51).

Second, that demographic inundation and racial replacement was driven by a socioeconomic thrust was also evident. Southeast Asia attracted the Chinese “because the circumstances are specially favourable: administrations guided by commercial principles, and population too weak to resist immigration” (Pearson [1893] 1915, 53). It was not difficult to divine that the commercial principles of white settler colonies similarly attracted the Chinese. As for the relative strength of contending races, the Chinese had the economic upper hand over the Europeans. “No one in California or Australia, where the effects of Chinese competition have been studied, has, I believe, the smallest doubt that Chinese labourers, if allowed to come in freely, could starve all the white men in either country out of it, or force them to submit to harder work and a much lower standard of wages” (Pearson [1893] 1915, 132). The competitive edge was not only the cheapness of Chinese laborers (which they had in common with Indian laborers) but their commercial energy and potential for industrial development. Echoing Bowring’s argument about the economic basis of geopolitical power, Pearson wrote, “[t]he military aggrandisement of the [Chinese] Empire, which would provoke general resistance, is, in fact, less to be dreaded than its industrial growth, which other nations will be, to some extent, interested in maintaining” (Pearson [1893] 1915, 141). When the Chinese “have borrowed the science of Europe, and developed their still virgin worlds, the pressure of their competition upon the white man will be irresistible” (Pearson [1893] 1915, 137).

Since Western economic superiority could no longer be presumed, the bulwark against Chinese expansion had to be political in nature and defensive in posture. Pearson’s example came from his adopted homeland. “Nothing but the vigilant opposition of the Australian democracies has kept the Chinese from becoming a power on that more remote continent” (Pearson [1893] 1915, 53; cf. Meadows 2015, 41). The anti-Asian exclusion acts around the Pacific rim might have given the “white man under siege” provisional respite, but they also signaled a major loss of faith in nineteenth-century Anglo-

Saxon triumphalism that had confidently claimed for the Anglo-Saxon race the exclusive capacity of “making and taking worlds” (Bell 2013; 2016, 182–210). Notwithstanding the popular iconography of barbarous hordes, the fear of the Chinese grew out of their purported ability to outcompete the Europeans in their own game of commerce and industry. Even though the perceived existential threat was coded in the language of insurmountable difference, that is, *race*, the social logic of that threat was one of equivalence, that is, *capital*.

“ONE CHINESE THAN TWO COOLIES”: CAPITALIST RACIALIZATION

Grasping the Chinese stereotype as an outcome of capitalist racialization reveals the particularizing thrust of racialism to be continuous, rather than at odds with the universal horizon of capital. A key theoretical insight here comes from Sartori’s (2014; 2021) investigations into the embeddedness of political languages in historically determinate socioeconomic formations that furnish those languages with the grounds of their circulation and resonance. Of special import here is the discourse of political economy, understood as at once the self-styled science of commercial society and a language of imperial administration (Travers 2009), which found its conditions of possibility in the generalization of the capitalist forms of commodity, value, and abstract labor. On this account, abstract political economic categories applied to colonial social practices were not entirely alien impositions but corresponded to the existing or emergent “real abstractions” generated by capitalist social relations. “If political economy has emerged into epistemic significance in different places at different points in time, then it might well serve as an index of a much broader set of practical transformations in the constitution of collective life” (Sartori 2021, 3).

The epistemic significance of political economy in Southeast Asia has been extensively demonstrated by Quilty’s (2001) study of British colonial arguments on land, labor, population, trade, money, taxation, colonization, and improvement. I argue that political economic concepts lent themselves to reflecting on Southeast Asian societies in part because of the ongoing transformation of social and economic life in the region with the advent of Dutch and then British colonial capitalism. It has already been noted that the subsumption of the preexisting production, labor, and commodity networks into global circuits of capital effected a major change in the character of these networks: acceleration of commodity production, consolidation of a regime of migrant wage labor, diversion of land to plantations and mines, and the pressures of merchant capital on the regional economy. With the generalization of commodity production and wage labor in an increasingly export-oriented economy, one would expect the value form and abstract labor time to increasingly mediate relations of social interdependence. While it is impossible to conclusively

demonstrate this point in the span of an article, the recurrence of an abstract labor calculus in colonial writings on Southeast Asia allows for a symptomatic identification of the capitalist abstractions that shaped racial categories.

An early indication of this social and conceptual transformation can be found in the controversy over the labor force of the Company's Bencoolen factory. In 1786, Calcutta's concern with the expense of maintaining slaves there "prompted a proposal to sell these slaves at public auction and then hire them back as "coolies" because such a measure would allow the company to "pay 'for real Labour only'" (Allen 2014, 338). During his brief reign in Java, Raffles would observe with disapproval the "liberal allowance" lavished on slaves by their Dutch masters and suggest the economy of freeing the slaves immediately and "paying the local coolies more" (Allen 2014, 338). In these proposals, one can see the equation of "real labor" to wage-labor ("paid labor"), even though the wage relation was mediated by local forms of indenture ("coolies") (cf. Banaji 2003). From the perspective of merchant capital, the measure of "real labor" emerged by its abstraction from its bearer and his concrete needs and by rendering the reproduction of the laborer conditional upon his profitable employment.

A second expression of the value form in mapping colonial Southeast Asia took the form of comparing and ranking different populations based on their average labor productivities. These comparisons were formulated with varying degrees of theoretical sophistication. Cruder accounts attached differences in labor productivity to physical strength and work habits; more rarefied explanations referred to division of labor, skill, and civilization. The common assumption, however, remained the commensurability of laborers with different regional and ethnic backgrounds based on abstract labor time, allowing the crude and the refined judgments alike to strike numerical ratios between these groups' relative economic values. In these comparisons, the workings of capitalist racialization (qua differentiation-in-commensurability) crystallize with remarkable clarity.

Gordon Forbes Davidson, an Australian settler and planter who unsuccessfully attempted to recruit Chinese laborers in the 1840s, advised against the allure of cheap labor pools in India. "Many gentlemen have turned their attention to Bengal for a supply of labour. The men procurable from that country, are not equal in physical strength to the Chinamen, nor are they to be had for lower pay. I had six Bengal Coolies in my employ in the Bush, and have no hesitation in saying, that three China-men would have done their work" (Davidson 1846, 205). In an 1854 article published in Trinidad's *Royal Gazette*, Trinidadian planters struck the same ratio when they declared that they would "rather have one Chinese than two Coolies, as they consider their physical strength greater" (Lee-Loy 2003, 211). James White, whom we encountered earlier, followed suit. "They [the Chinese] are hardworking and industrious; and in physical ability for labour,

and the endurance of toil, I should consider one Chinese equal to two of the inhabitants of Bengal" (quoted in Neal 2019, 141). In his report to British Guiana's governor, White quantified the superiority of Chinese labor by conveying an account he had read in the liberal Calcutta paper, *Bengal Hurkaru*. While a little convoluted, the passage is worth quoting at length:

"[A local planter] employed a number of labourers from different parts of the country, Bengalees, Dangars, and Chamars, in addition to whom he had a gang of 20 Chinese. The rate at which each of these classes were employed was Rs 2.12 per month to the Bengalees, Rs 2 to the Dangars, and Rs 4 to the Chamars, the Chinese being engaged at Rs 8 each.... he began to make comparisons, the land and labour generally that was allotted to each being precisely similar; and the result showed more exactly than he could have well conceived that the Dangars did as much as 2 Bengalees, the Chamars equal to the Dangars, and the Chinese overran 2 Chamars; the result fully proving the greater economy of the higher paid [Chinese] labourer, his 8 rupees a month being equivalent to 12 rupees to the Dangars, or 38 rupees to the Bengalee" (quoted in Kale 1995, 79–80).

White's account is notable for several reasons. The first is the a priori classification of laborers by caste (Dhangar, Chamar), region (Bengali), and racial identity (Chinese) and the presumed validity of these categories irrespective of social context. The second is the systematic method of uncovering labor productivities by holding everything but the identity of the laborer constant, thereby explaining variation in output exclusively by the laborer's inherent qualities. The third is the designation of the market as the medium in which one uncovers the essential knowledge about each category of laborer, as it is the interplay of wages and output that enables the measurement and comparison of unit labor productivity across diverse groups. Even if the story is apocryphal, White's citation of it to advocate the superiority of the Chinese over other colonial groups signals credence in the ability of these categories to capture something essential about these groups that can be objectively revealed, verified, and quantified through the market. The upshot is the lexical weight of capitalist abstractions in establishing the essential characteristics of differentiating categories. Although ethnic and caste identities are the ostensible starting point of analysis, the concrete determination of these categories is revealed *post factum* as a function of their position in an abstract matrix of average labor productivities. In other words, the substantive elaboration of social difference into proto-racial qualities follows the universalizing logic of capital, rather than deviates from it.

Crawford's writings on political economy and ethnography offer an even clearer illustration of the logic of capitalist racialization (Ince 2022). Crawford, too, viewed differential wages paid to various colonial groups for the same work as reflecting differential

labor productivities. The real sources of enhancing productivity were the division of labor, labor-saving technology, and economies of scale. Continuous with the Scottish theory of commercial society, Crawford (himself a Scot trained at the University of Edinburgh) predicated civilizational progress on the attainment of these forms of socioeconomic organization. The resulting productivity gains to labor were captured by what he called “skill.” High value-added commodities, Crawford wrote, “cannot be produced in any perfection considerable civilization, or which is one and the same thing, considerable skill and ingenuity” (Crawford and Thompson 1833, 251). The laborer’s “skill” thus gauged the civilizational standing of the society to which he belonged, creating a correspondence between individual and collective indicators of development.

Collectively, Chinese preeminence in Southeast Asian plantation agriculture, mining, and commerce indicated their civilizational superiority over the Indians and the Malays. Individually, the effects of capitalist civilization manifested in the higher wages paid to the Chinese labor for the same type of work. Crawford estimated the “... average value of the labour, skill, and intelligence of a Chinese to be in the proportion of three to one to those of native of the continent of India.” Accordingly, in the Straits Settlement, “the wages of other classes of inhabitants are much lower than those of the Chinese, being proportionate to the value of their labour” (Crawford 1834, 384–5). In his 1843 memo, he reported that “[i]n Singapore a Chinese labourer will earn as much as two natives of Coromandel, as three Bengalese, and as four Malays” (in Look Lai 1998, 55). Elsewhere, he expressed his “so high an opinion of the industry, skill and capacity of consumption of the Chinese, that I consider one Chinaman equal in value to the state to two natives of the Coromandel coast and to four Malays at least” (quoted in Neal 2019, 85).

The foregoing discussion throws into relief the *modus operandi* of capitalist racialization, qua differentiation-in-commensurability, whereby civilizational and racial striations derived their benchmarks from capitalist social forms. In the arc of the arguments examined earlier, one can detect the growth of particularizing categories out of the cosmopolitan framework of political economy, whereby capitalist civilization shaded from a dynamic historical process into an essentializing grid that assigned different “races” to different levels of development. The taxonomical categories of the “Chinese,” the “Hindoo,” and the “Malay” were therefore not arbitrary artifacts of a colonial will to knowledge but emerged from real abstractions of colonial capitalism at work in Southeast Asia. The capitalist standards that ranked the non-Europeans among themselves were continuous with those that ranked them below the Europeans, and it was this continuity that would eventually render the Chinese threatening to the white world order. From imperial panacea to immigration panic, one can follow the thread of capitalist racialization across the vicissitudes of the “Chinese colonist” in the nineteenth century.

CONCLUSION: COMPARATIVE AND CONNECTED HISTORIES

The arguments developed here hold broader implications for theorizing the historical articulations of capitalism, colonialism, and race. The first concerns concept formation in the study of racial capitalism, which stands to benefit from mid-level concepts that connect overarching questions about the capital–race nexus to detailed investigations of concrete social formations. In this spirit, the notion of “capitalist racialization” has reconstructed the ideological mechanism between the universal horizon of capitalist abstractions and the particularizing categories of race in the Victorian languages of political economy and ethnography. While space constraints allowed only a passing reference in the final section, this theoretical approach could potentially contribute to analyzing if, how, and to what extent other lexicons of differentiation such as caste or ethnicity in colonial and postcolonial formations have obtained their semantic content from capitalist standards (Cheng 2013; Chhabria 2023; Khan 2021; Koshy 2001; Lowe 2001).¹⁷ The point of foregrounding the political economy of social stratification is not to understate other (post)colonial agendas and contingencies that have conditioned social hierarchies but instead to delineate the specifically capitalist logics that interlace them.

The second implication is the prospect of writing comparative and connected histories of capitalism and race by tracing the circulation of institutional and ideological forms across imperial connections. To revisit our historical study, European assumptions about agricultural productivity in Southeast Asia were no doubt modeled on the capitalist plantation that had assumed its defining features in the seventeenth-century Caribbean. Yet, the direction of influence was not one way. Excepting an early and brief experiment with indenture, the notion of unenslaved labor was alien to the Atlantic plantation. The inspiration for reimagining the plantation as an economic unit powered by free labor came from Asia, specifically from the Chinese-managed plantations of cash crops cultivated by indentured migrants. Layman’s proposal to adopt the “system of the East in the West Indies” or Crawford’s designation of the Southeast Asian plantation as the free-labor version of the American model evidences the insights to be gained from placing the Atlantic and Indo-Pacific littorals within the same analytic frame (Bowen, Mancke, and Reid 2015; Hofmeyr 2007). Although the transimperial approach sketched here has no quarrel with the attention to modalities of racial capitalism rooted in the Atlantic, it does caution against the *methodological* Atlanticist tendency to frame the study of racial capitalism *as such* with the experience of the Atlantic settler–slave complex (Jenkins and Leroy 2021;

¹⁷ For a brief summary, see the note on “capital, race, and difference” in the Supplementary material.

Koshy et al. 2022; cf. Subrahmanyam 2023; Wacquant 2023b).

Thirdly, the construction of the Chinese as a “colonizing” people invites a reconsideration of the notion of “settler colonialism.” As a contemporary analytic, settler colonialism critically dissects nineteenth-century projects of “colonization” and their afterlives, focalizing the invasive structures of eliminativism and settler contract underwritten by a white supremacist ideology (Veracini 2010). The figure of the “Chinese colonist” complicates this understanding by reaffirming its invasive and eliminative aspects but historicizing its association with white supremacy. As we have seen, British observers invoked “Chinese colonization” as neither a metaphor nor a copy of an authentic (i.e., white, European, or Anglo-Saxon) original. The term instead expressed an instance of the general phenomenon of expansion and displacement driven by commercial energy. The recognition of the Chinese as an essentially colonizing (because essentially commercial and industrious) people suggests that the racial categories of settler/native could cut across the white/non-white binary.¹⁸ Expressed in terms of political economy of race, while settler colonialism proceeded by the invention and elaboration of social difference, the terms of difference did not derive from *a priori* racial categories but crystallized in the colonial projects of pressing land and labor into the service of capital. Contemporary settler colonial studies, with its fixation on white supremacist eliminativism in North America and South Pacific, looks past the “Chinese colonist” in Southeast Asia and its theoretical implications for the study of race and capital (cf. Davies 2023). Recovering this figure opens up a new window to the institutional and ideological terrain of colonial capitalism on which the hierarchies of race were configured.

Finally, the theoretical dividends of placing racial capitalism in an imperial framework do not exclusively accrue to studying racial capitalism. One scholarly field where the racial capitalism paradigm can make a timely and singular methodological contribution is the political theory of empire and imperialism (Marwah et al. 2020). Primarily concerned with imperial ideologies of expansion and rule, this scholarship has adopted a largely culturalist perspective that views the politics of empire through the representational asymmetries between the colonizer and the colonized. Demoted, if not overlooked, in these analyses are the imperial political economic agendas that modulated the ordering of colonial difference into civilizational hierarchies (Ince 2018b). Insofar as “racial capitalism” presents an openly materialist research agenda, preoccupied as much with economic exploitation and expropriation as with cultural degradation and political subjugation, its insights can be harnessed for theorizing the imperial context of political ideas in a socioeconomic register.

¹⁸ For a discussion, see the note “colonists and immigrants in the empire” in the Supplementary material.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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