

*Royal Army. Temperance Association - 1. Sherwood Foresters -1905, XLV Serie A, G. R. Lambert & Co., Singapore. Lim Kheng Chye Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore*

# Precarious Racial Superiority: Imperial Prestige and Deviance in Colonial Asia, ca. 1800-1940

International Workshop

1-2 February 2024

Villa Hatt, ETH Zürich

Organisers: Harald Fischer-Tiné (ETH Zürich)  
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# DESCRIPTION

The rhetoric of racial and/or civilizational superiority was unequivocally the basis on which imperialism and colonial rule were legitimised in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Difference between 'colonisers' and the 'colonised', and the incapability of the latter to rule themselves evidently provided the justification for colonial rule. Such difference was, however, unfixed, thus Ann Laura Stoler posited in her formative essay, to examine the 'coloniser' and the 'colonised' as "an historically shifting pair of social categories".

In colonial societies, concepts of whiteness intersected with not least ideas of race, class, gender, age, and respectability to determine membership in the colonising group. In British India for example, racial prestige could be tarnished, when 'low and licentious Europeans', exposed themselves to the colonised population, thus colonial authorities and social movement organisations took reactive measures to keep them in line or out of sight. While a focus on subalterns of the colonising group is instructive in delineating the internal boundaries within said community, an investigation into the processes underlying anxieties surrounding the presence of colonial subalterns in the colonies could prove useful in explaining seemingly contradictory narratives about 'problematic' behaviour.

Will Jackson and Emily J. Manktelow have shown how the approach of 'thinking with deviance' allows historians to re-evaluate the dynamics of colonial rule. Behaviours, situations or persons labelled as 'deviant' reiterated colonial expectations of what was considered acceptable while seemingly undermining them. Deviance as a lens, thus, allows the historian to examine how the proscription of some behaviours and persons was designed to reinforce the boundaries of the 'coloniser' category while revealing the fissures within which. It furthermore illustrates the precarity of imperial rhetoric; episodes of moral panic over 'deviant' behaviour or persons were reflective of a sense of insecurity that prompted vigilant maintenance of ostensible racial superiority.

The transimperial approach, according to Daniel Hedinger and Nadin Heé, brings together multiple empires and focuses on "imperial competition, cooperation and connectivity" as "entangled processes". Informed by this approach, this workshop invites scholars to consider how the interplay of concepts of deviance and whiteness reinforced and/or challenged the rhetoric of racial superiority in colonies across Asia, specifically East, South, and Southeast Asia, ca. 1800-1940. More broadly, the workshop aims to address the use of 'deviance' as a lens to understand imperial/colonial socio-political hierarchies.

# PROGRAM

1 February

Day 1

12:00-13:00    Welcome  
                  Lunch

13:00-13:45    **Mikko Toivanen (Freie Universität Berlin)**  
                  Nuisances & Norm-setting: Transgressive Behaviours  
                  and the Invention of Colonial Public Space in Singapore  
                  in the 1850s

*Discussant:*    *Mark R. Frost (UCL)*

13:45-14:30    **Zhi Qing Denise Lim (ETH Zürich)**  
                  The Strange Death of Frederik Short: Intoxication, Sex  
                  and Race in colonial Singapore

*Discussant:*    *Mark R. Frost (UCL)*

15-Minute Break

14:45-15:30    **Erica Wald (Goldsmiths, University of London)**  
                  Managing (the) Mess: Military Commensality in India,  
                  c. 1820-1900

*Discussant:*    *Harald Fischer-Tiné (ETH Zürich)*

15:30-16:15    **Fidellithy Tan (Cornell University)**  
                  Krishnamurti's Case: Deviance in Child Guardianship

*Discussant:*    *Harald Fischer-Tiné (ETH Zürich)*

15-Minute Break

16:30-17:15    **Harry Yi-Jui Wu (National Cheng Kung University)**  
                  How Did Physical Anthropologists Construct  
                  Knowledge of Racial Qualities through Inter-imperial  
                  Networks? A Case Study of Botans' Skulls at the  
                  University of Edinburgh

*Discussant:*    *Monique Ligtenberg (ETH Zürich)*

17:15-18:00    **Maarten Manse (Linnaeus University)**  
                  'Threats of Tropes': Colonial Self-legitimization and  
                  the Aims of 'Otherness' in Colonial Indonesia, c. 1870-  
                  1920

*Discussant:*    *Monique Ligtenberg (ETH Zürich)*

18:30            Dinner

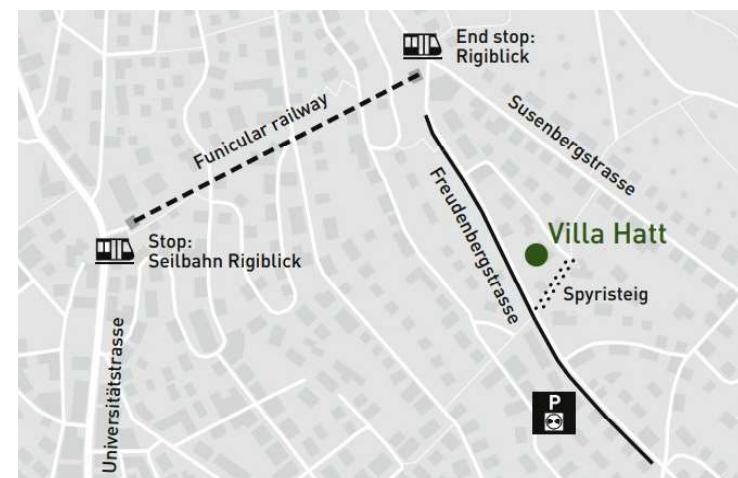
# PROGRAM

2 February  
Day 2

- 10:00-10:45 **Tessa Winkelmann (University of Nevada, Las Vegas)**  
Marriage, Deviance and the Gendered National Imaginary
- Discussant:* *Jialin Christina Wu (Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne)*
- 10:45-11:30 **Christian Jones (Freie Universität Berlin)**  
Vice, Masculinity, and Citizenship in the Straits Chinese Reform Movement, c. 1890-1910
- Discussant:* *Jialin Christina Wu (Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne)*
- 11:30-12:30 Lunch
- 12:30-13:30 **Satoshi Mizutani (Doshisha University)**  
Concluding Remarks
- Closing Discussion/Further Comments

# DIRECTIONS

Villa Hatt



Please use public transport; there are no parking spaces on the villa premises.

## Arriving by public transport

From Royal Hotel Zürich:

- Tram 10 to «Seilbahn Rigiblick» stop ([www.zvv.ch](http://www.zvv.ch) › timetable)
- Funicular railway to the «Rigiblick» end stop
- Walking distance ca. 4 minutes

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