

Creating the Houseboy: Early Asian Influences on European Cultures of Domestic Service

Anne Elwood, wife of Colonel Elwood, writing of her stay in India in the 1820s that head servants were ‘always termed “Boy”’, added that the professor of Hindustani Dr Gilchrist ‘somewhat fancifully conceives [that Boy] may be derived from the Indian word Bhaee or Brother’.¹ This is one of the earliest published references to the ubiquitous designation of male servants in colonial households. By the late nineteenth century the ‘houseboy’ was an iconic figure that drew inspiration from domestic service experiences across the globe, extending back to the earliest years of colonial expansion. Newspapers, handbooks and memoirs increasingly transmitted orientalist accounts of male domestic workers for their European readership. These typically glib narratives did little to hint at the complex history of colonial male domestic service.

While there is no conclusive evidence to suggest a pre-colonial origin for the term ‘boy’, it is undoubtedly the case that much of what were later understood as colonial cultures of domestic service drew inspiration from various pre-colonial Asian cultures. Even if European colonizers arrived with their own notions of domestic service, they were obliged to adapt to pre-existing local traditions of servitude. As Elsbeth Locher-Scholten remarked in the context of colonial Java, domestic service was ‘hardly a Western invention’.² Victoria Haskins and Claire Lowrie have emphasized the importance of tracing pre-colonial Asian

¹ Mrs Colonel Elwood Anne Katharine, *Narrative of a Journey Overland from England, by the Continent of Europe, Egypt, and the Red Sea, to India, Including a Residence There, and Voyage Home, in the Years 1825, 26, 27, and 28*, vol. II (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1830), letter XLV, 2–3.

² Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, ‘So Close and Yet So Far: The Ambivalence of Dutch Colonial Rhetoric of Javanese Servants in Indonesia, 1900–1942’, in *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism*, ed. Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 134.

influences in order to avoid Eurocentric readings of colonial history.³ Swapna Banerjee, writing on colonial Bengal, similarly highlights the importance of local cultures of domestic service and explains how Indian traditions were themselves a mix of diverse Persian, Arabic and Hindu influences.⁴ Over several centuries Europeans' notions of domestic service were profoundly influenced by their experiences in India, China and Southeast Asia. European and Asian cultures interacted from the seventeenth century, at which time male Asian servants first began to be brought to Europe so that elite families might enjoy the cultural cachet associated with the 'exotic orient'.

Colonial understandings of male servitude developed over time to reflect the increasingly powerful self-image of European colonizers. Accepted wisdom was passed on from colony to colony, whether by word of mouth or through published guides for would-be colonists. Within each colony slightly different variations developed, depending on the era and the nature of the colonial presence. While the first colonists, typically young bachelors, had reason to value the knowledge of indigenous servants, particularly as guides and intermediaries, the use of imported domestic servants to supplement indigenous labour was the predominant pattern across Asia and the Pacific. This was often in aid of continuity of service, but in other instances, it reflected colonists' anxieties about indigenous populations. Not all local peoples were willing to work for Europeans. Colonial incursions often evoked resistance, and during periods of hostilities the employment of local labour was necessarily fraught. Some colonial authorities sought to limit such employment in order to 'protect' indigenous peoples from labour abuses. By importing servants from elsewhere, colonists hoped to maintain control over the master–servant relationship.

Regardless of the ethnicity of employers or employees, a shared culture of domestic service prevailed in the colonial Asia Pacific by the turn of the twentieth century. What is striking is the way in which local cultures of domestic service came to be spread by mobile colonizers and servants. Together, they transplanted new cultural practices, moving, for example, from British India to East and Southeast Asia and into the Pacific. Male domestic labour was the mainstay of that culture. Prior studies have not sought to explain the early origins of male servitude in the Asia Pacific region and the ways in which those

³ Victoria Haskins and Claire Lowrie, 'Introduction: Decolonizing Domestic Service: Introducing a New Agenda', in *Colonization and Domestic Service: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Victoria K. Haskins and Claire Lowrie (New York: Routledge, 2014), 8.

⁴ Swapna Banerjee, *Men, Women and Domesticity: Articulating Middle-Class Identity in Colonial Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 40.

labour patterns and preferences spread. In this chapter we outline early domestic service practices in search of evidence of cross-cultural adaptation that might help to explain how this came about.

African, Indian and Chinese servants in England

While this chapter will focus on the cultural influences upon Europeans as they travelled and lived in Asia, it is important to acknowledge that early European cultures of domestic service had already been subject to diverse cultural influences at home. Across Europe the nobility displayed their social status and prestige in the form of large households of lackeys. One medieval Earl of Northumberland, for example, had a household of 175 servants, only nine of whom were women.⁵ In her study of French *ancient regime* domestic service, Cissie Fairchilds explained how the category of ‘servant’ became more specialized over time. Servants in seventeenth-century French noble households included occupations such as soldiers, goldsmiths and furriers. Only after 1700 was the term confined to those performing more menial household tasks. This change coincided with an increase in the proportion of female servants, with the employment of male servants restricted to the nobility. Fairchilds suggests that one could assess the ‘social rank and aspirations of a man’ by the number and gender of his servants. Middle-class families, who typically employed a single female servant, rarely employed men in order to protect themselves from perceptions of social climbing.⁶ From 1669 to 1752 in London the percentage of male domestic workers rose slightly from about 20 per cent to 30 per cent.⁷ In England, a luxury tax of a guinea a head on male domestics was imposed in 1777, both reflecting and reifying the association between privilege and male servants.⁸

If the employment of male servants was regarded as the privilege of the nobility, the employment of non-European men appears to have been largely

⁵ Cissie Fairchilds, *Domestic Enemies: Servants and Their Masters in Old Regime France* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 9, 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 9, 11, 181–8.

⁷ Tim Meldrum, *Domestic Service and Gender, 1660–1750: Life and Work in the London Household* (London: Routledge, 2014), 16. See also Carolyn Steedman, *Labours Lost: Domestic Service and the Making of Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁸ J. Jean Hecht, *Continental and Colonial Servants in Eighteenth Century England* (Northampton, MA: Department of History, Smith College, 1954), 18; see also Susan Brown, ‘Assessing Men and Maids: The Female Servant Tax and the Meanings of Productive Labour in Late-Eighteenth-Century Britain’, *Left History* 12, no. 2 (2007): 12, 17.

the privilege of property-owners who returned from exotic overseas locations. African slaves were brought to England from the 1570s, the majority of whom were used as household servants. In the first half of the seventeenth century the number of African male servants was limited to 'a handful of black pages', with a distinct preference for young boys. Brought back to be pets and playthings, these child slaves were compelled to wear collars inscribed with their owner's name, and were typically dressed in expensive costumes or colourful livery as a statement of wealth and status. Indeed, it became a convention of aristocratic portraiture to include a black child so dressed. From the mid-seventeenth century African male servants increased in number as it became fashionable for titled and propertied English families to have one or two slaves. Historian Peter Fryer ties this directly to colonialism, noting that the sons of West Indian planters who were sent to England for their education were attended by African servants who soon gained an iconic status as 'Black Boys'.⁹ In later years, popular novels such as William Makepeace Thackeray's 1847 *Vanity Fair* would depict 'Mr Sambo' as the affable and trusted servant.¹⁰

In India in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, an African slave, especially imported from Bourbon or Mauritius, or purchased in Calcutta, was the 'ultimate in luxury' for a European gentleman of fashion.¹¹ After the 1789 Proclamation prohibited such importation, slave traders in Calcutta turned instead to the profitable business of breeding African slaves.¹² As an African slave cost about ten times more than an Indian servant, most English preferred the latter.¹³ Judging from the regular advertisements concerning missing slave boys, they were frequently mistreated.¹⁴

Indian male servants were also fashionable in England from the late seventeenth century, imported for similar reasons and under similar circumstances to those from the West Indies.¹⁵ Rozina Visram identifies a painting from 1672 as the first portrait of an 'Indian page' in England.¹⁶ With the fashion for orientalism, Indian domestics were 'much prized for their exotic charm, with

⁹ Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), 8, 9, 19, 21–3, 25, 31; for African servants in Britain in the eighteenth century and before, see Hecht, *Continental and Colonial Servants*, 33–49.

¹⁰ Fryer, *Staying Power*, 8, 9, 19, 21–3, 25, 31; William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (London: Punch, 1847).

¹¹ Rozina Visram, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 4.

¹² Visram, *Asians in Britain*, 361; Fryer, *Staying Power*, 77–8.

¹³ Visram, *Asians in Britain*, 78.

¹⁴ Thomas G. P. Spear, *The Nabobs: The Study of Social Life of the English in Eighteenth Century India* (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), 53.

¹⁵ Hecht, *Continental and Colonial Servants*, 50.

¹⁶ Visram, *Asians in Britain*, 5–7.

all its associations of luxury and splendour'. In England before 1772 they were legally chattels belonging to their masters.¹⁷ Some 'rare advertisements' also depict Indian domestics wearing slave collars.¹⁸ Following the Somerset Ruling of 1772, which determined that employers had no right to forcibly remove slaves from Britain, the importation of African slaves as servants declined, but Indian servants remained popular.¹⁹ Famously, Warren Hastings, Governor-General in Bengal, returned to England with his family in 1785 accompanied by two Indian boys, aged thirteen or fourteen, and four maidservants, his wife dismissing the latter shortly after arrival.²⁰ British families traditionally repatriated their Indian servants at their expense. However, by the middle of the eighteenth century, employers discharged their servants on arrival in England, leaving them to fend for themselves – a practice encouraged by the constant demand for servants to accompany people heading out to India.²¹ Historian J. Jean Hecht concluded that only small numbers of Indian servants (male and female) entered Britain. Those who did were almost exclusively employed by returning 'Nabobs', who occupied a rather precarious parvenu status among the upper class, but the Indian servants themselves were not despised.²²

Chinese servants also found their way to England during the eighteenth century, albeit only for a relatively brief period. In the 1760s and 1770s the *chinoiserie* trend emerged – a fashion for Asian art and design inspired by the new trade with East Asia and China. It became fashionable for upper-class English households to engage Chinese boy servants, a practice possibly encouraged by British women who were in Macau from the 1750s.²³ Unlike many Indian servants, Chinese male servants were not chattel slaves, but in debt-bondage, which was prevalent in China during this period.²⁴ The *chinoiserie* fashion in

¹⁷ Hecht, *Continental and Colonial Servants*, 51–2.

¹⁸ Visram, *Asians in Britain*, 12–13. The newspaper reports of runaway Indian servants recorded by Visram seem to deal exclusively with young male servants described as 'boys'.

¹⁹ Hecht, *Continental and Colonial Servants*, 52.

²⁰ Fryer, *Staying Power*, 78. Also in Visram, *Asians in Britain*, 7.

²¹ Hecht, *Continental and Colonial Servants*, 51; Visram, *Asians in Britain*, 10–11. The East India Company directors ordered that security bonds for servants' maintenance and repatriation had to be provided before any servants left India, but regulations proved ineffective: see Michael H. Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600–1857* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), 216–21.

²² Hecht, *Continental and Colonial Servants*, 54.

²³ Fryer, *Staying Power*, 72, 500, quoting Victoria Sackville-West, *Knole and the Sackvilles* (New York: George H. Doran, 1922), 191. Cf. John Steegman, *The Rule of Taste from George I to George IV* (London: Macmillan, 1936), 39: 'Chinese boys, for a time, were almost more in demand than Negroes'; Austin Coates, *Macao and the British 1637–1842, Prelude to Hong Kong* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 131–6.

²⁴ Angela Schottenhammer, 'Slaves and Forms of Slavery in Late Imperial China (Seventeenth to Early Twentieth Centuries)', *Slavery and Abolition* 24, no. 2 (2003): 144.

Europe had passed its peak by the 1790s.²⁵ In the lead up to the French Revolution the European admiration for the ‘wonderous Cathay’ declined as more negative views of Chinese – ‘lazy, unproductive, indulgent, exotic as well as alluring and promiscuous, despotic, corrupt, childlike and immature, backward, derivative, passive, dependant, stagnant and unchanging’ – began to appear.²⁶

European Orientalism in Asia: Indian, Javanese and Chinese servants

Writing in 1920, historian W. H. Moreland noted how Europeans in India had enthusiastically adopted local customs from the time of the Mughal Emperor, Akbar the Great, who ruled from 1556. Moreland emphasized that ‘the profusion of servants, which attracts attention in India in the present day, is no modern phenomenon, but is in fact an attenuated survival of the fashions prevailing in the time of Akbar’.²⁷ In Goa, he wrote, the Portuguese had ‘imitated the social life of their neighbours’ with ‘men of quality attended through the streets by pages, lacqueys, and slaves in great number’. He claimed that slavery was ‘a Hindu institution’, which the Portuguese followed as ‘the custom of the country’, pointing out that the majority of the population of Goa were slaves and that this status was hereditary under Hindu and Muslim systems of law.²⁸ More recently Swapna Banerjee has argued that the custom of keeping large households of servants originated with Muslim *nawabi* (royal) culture, dating from Ottoman rule in the medieval period. It was then taken up by wealthy Hindu households, and later adopted by the British as the new nabobs of India.²⁹ Banerjee found that male servants predominated in Indian and British households only after British colonization, the increase a direct consequence of colonial labour polices and the resulting surplus of male labour in urban centres.³⁰

But male servants were not employed merely because they were available: British men, the majority of early arrivals, actively sought them out. Historian Elizabeth Collingham describes the British use ‘of magnificent

²⁵ Fryer, *Staying Power*, 73.

²⁶ John M. Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 197.

²⁷ W. H. Moreland, *India at the Death of Akbar: An Economic Study* (London: Macmillan, 1920), 89.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 91–3.

²⁹ Banerjee, *Men, Women, and Domestics*, 40; Salim Kidwai, ‘Sultans, Eunuchs and Domestics: New Forms of Bondage in Medieval India’, in *Chains of Servitude, Bondage and Slavery in India*, ed. Utsa Patnaik and Manjari Dingwaney (Madras: Sangam Books, 1985), 85.

³⁰ Banerjee, *Men, Women, and Domestics*, 30.

ceremony' in eighteenth-century India. The British had observed how the Mughal princes asserted their 'independent political legitimacy' in not unfamiliar ways 'through flamboyant displays of wealth and power'.³¹ With the establishment of the Governor-General office in India in 1773, whose powers were increased in 1784, the pomp of early British rule had reached its height. Lord Valentia defended the expenditure on Government House, stating:

The sums expended upon it have been considered as extravagant by those who carry European ideas and European economy into Asia; but they ought to remember, that India is a country of splendor, of extravagance, and of outward appearances: that the Head of a mighty empire ought to conform himself to the prejudices of the country he rules over.³²

The British were aware that they lacked local legitimacy as rulers, being mere merchants and administrators, not noblemen, and marked as 'impure' in religious terms. Keeping large numbers of servants provided the outward appearance of high rank as well as creating bonds of patronage with the local community.³³ As early as the 1620s, as an Italian traveller, Pietro della Valle, remarked, even a very ordinary European in India might employ numerous servants in a manner reserved only for the aristocracy at home. The Dutch and English kept either slaves or servants paid as little as three *rupià* a month 'so that everybody, even of mean fortune, keeps a great family and is splendidly attended'.³⁴

In Figure 1.1, John Wombwell, the Yorkshire paymaster to the East India Company in the late eighteenth century, is depicted in Indian dress, smoking a hookah on a Lucknow terrace. Behind him stands a young male Indian servant, wearing a red turban and sash and holding a white feather fan. This type of cultural adaptation was not uncommon among the so-called White Mughals.³⁵ In later years this degree of overt luxury would be extended to civilian and military officers, whose company salaries allowed them to maintain a lifestyle to which they could not have aspired in Britain.³⁶

³¹ Elizabeth M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies: The Physical Experience of the Raj, c. 1800–1947* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 15.

³² *Ibid.*, 16, quoting Viscount George Valentia, *Voyages and Travels to India, Ceylon, the Red Sea, Abyssinia, and Egypt* (London: William Miller, 1809), I, 235–6.

³³ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁴ Edward Gray, ed., *The Travels of Pietro Della Valle in India*. From the Old English Translation of 1664, by G. Havers (London: Hakluyt Society, [1892] 2010, two volumes), 42, 157.

³⁵ William Dalrymple, *White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India* (London: Penguin Books, 2004).

³⁶ Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, 15.



Figure 1.1 Portrait of John Wombwell with an Indian servant, artist unknown, India, c. 1790. Frits Lugt Collection, Fondation Custodia, Paris.

In the Netherlands East Indies, Dutch traders and officials were also influenced by local cultures of domestic service. From the 1640s onward Dutch Governor-Generals in Batavia (now Jakarta) were said to have adopted a life of ‘worldly pomp’ quite unlike the austere culture of the Netherlands. Historian Jean Gelman Taylor describes how the Dutch East India Company (*Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, or VOC) directors took on a ‘variety of attendants when waiting on Asian rulers’ and observes that men ‘who spent thirty or more years in Asia could not fail to be influenced by their immediate surroundings.’ They replaced their traditional Dutch maidservants with mostly male slaves of diverse origins. In Dutch artist Aelbert Cuyp’s depiction of a merchant of Batavia



Figure 1.2 'A VOC Senior Merchant and His Wife', Aelbert Cuyp, c. 1641. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Netherlands, SK-A-2350.

(Figure 1.2) the male slave dressed in Dutch silk clothing holds a golden parasol, or *pajong*, over the merchant and his wife. The *pajong* was usually reserved for the highest-ranking Javanese nobility.³⁷

The Dutch were also subject to Chinese influences in the early colonial period. Like the British they were active slave traders and roughly half of Batavia's population in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were said to be slaves from 'Malabar, Bengal, Sumatra, Bali and above all Sulawesi'.³⁸ But for most of that period the largest ethnic population in Batavia was Chinese, well outnumbering Europeans.³⁹ When the British captured Java in 1811, Stamford Raffles wrote that the 30,000 slaves working in Java were mostly from Bali and the Celebes (Sulawesi) and were 'the property of the Europeans and Chinese alone'. The Dutch, Raffles claimed, had created a class of domestic servants by

³⁷ E. M. Beekman, *Fugitive Dreams: An Anthology of Dutch Colonial Literature* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 282.

³⁸ Hans Hägerdal, 'The Slaves of Timor: Life and Death on the Fringes of Early Colonial Society', *Itinerario* 34, no. 2 (2010): 21; Jean Gelman Taylor, *The Social World of Batavia: European and Eurasian in Dutch Asia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 70; James William B. Money, *Java; or, How to Manage a Colony, Showing a Practical Solution to the Problems Now Affecting British India*, vol. 2 (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1861), 250. Slavery was not abolished in the Netherlands East Indies until 1860.

³⁹ Leonard Blussé, *Strange Company: Chinese Settlers, Mestizo Women, and the Dutch in VOC Batavia* (Dordrecht: Foris, 1986), 19.

rearing child-slaves from outside of Java, in preference to local Javanese whom they believed to be unreliable.⁴⁰

Europeans in mainland China and in Portuguese Macau and British Hong Kong also employed Chinese domestic servants in the early period, although the practice in mainland China was attended with considerable obstacles. Both male and female servants were part of traditional Chinese society, and just as in Europe, male servants were more often associated with elite households. The wealthiest families were able to purchase adolescent boys as servants, called *sai man* (or *hsi min* in Mandarin) meaning 'little people'. A master who paid for the marriage of a *sai man* would also retain his servant's wife and children in the family as hereditary servants.⁴¹ Male stewards, responsible for managing the domestic staff and greeting guests, were a common presence in wealthy Chinese homes. Other male servants were employed to provide one-on-one care to male members of the household in a similar manner to that of the European valet.⁴² Eunuchs, who were generally castrated as young boys, typically served as palace servants, including attending to palace women. During the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), eunuchs became more common beyond the palace, with nobles and wealthy landlords requiring men to be castrated before they took them on as servants. Eunuchs remained part of the imperial household until the Chinese Revolution of 1911.⁴³ It may be that the eunuch servant tradition influenced the later colonial representation of Chinese male servants as feminized or desexualized figures.⁴⁴

Europeans in China, however, were not encouraged to imitate Chinese traditions of domestic service. In 1684 the Qing government lifted a ban on

⁴⁰ Thomas Stamford Raffles, *The History of Java* (London: Black, Parbury, and Allen, 1817), 86.

⁴¹ James L. Watson, 'Transactions in People: The Chinese Market in Slaves, Servants, and Heirs', in *Asian and African Systems of Slavery*, ed. James L. Watson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 236.

⁴² Johanna Menzel Meskill, *A Chinese Pioneer Family: The Lins of Wu-Feng, Taiwan, 1729–1895* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 219, 29; Carl Crow, *The Travelers' Handbook for China, Including Hong Kong* (Shanghai: Dodd, Mead, 1921), 14–15; Rubie S. Watson, 'Wives, Concubines and Maids: Servitude and Kinship in the Hong Kong Region, 1900–1940', in *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society*, ed. Rubie S. Watson and Patricia Buckley Ebrey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 231–2.

⁴³ Shih-shan Henry Tsai, *The Eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 18; Mary Anderson, *Hidden Power: The Palace Eunuchs of Imperial China* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1990), 13.

⁴⁴ Claire Lowrie, *Masters and Servants: Cultures of Empire in the Tropics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 60–61, 78–9; Frank Proschan, 'Eunuch Mandarins, Soldats Mammelles, Effeminate Boys and Graceless Women', *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 8, no. 4 (2002): 447.

overseas trade with Europeans, and the English East India Company, which was still unwelcome in the southern Chinese trading port of Canton (Guangzhou), began operating from trading headquarters in the Portuguese settlement of Macau, an island located ten miles from Canton. The British remained in Portuguese Macau for almost a century, where European merchants lived in sumptuous style with numerous servants, many of whom were slaves imported from Africa, India, Malacca, the Dutch East Indies, and China.⁴⁵ The British were finally permitted to establish themselves in Canton in 1771.⁴⁶ Foreign traders, known as ‘supercargoes’, who did business in Canton in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, did no domestic work for themselves. They depended entirely upon Chinese house servants hired for them by assigned Chinese compradors, with the most senior supercargoes often having their own servants or slaves to assist them as well.⁴⁷ In 1831, however, the Imperial Commissioner of Duties in Canton, Hoppo Chung, banned foreign merchants from employing Chinese in ‘menial’ positions and from using sedan chairs carried by Chinese porters. Europeans, mere traders, were perceived as ‘overstepping their station’ and also considered a corrupting influence. The edict advised that Chinese ‘must not be the companions of foreigners, who are crafty and deceitful, and not to be trusted’.⁴⁸

The domestic service relationship was inevitably caught up in a deteriorating political situation. In 1835 Lord Napier complained that the viceroy of Canton had interfered with his servants and tried to cut off his food supply to induce him to leave Canton.⁴⁹ The collapse of the Canton factory system soon followed (1839–40) along with the start of the first Opium War in 1839. In the same year merchant James Matheson took steps to replace his Chinese servants with Indian servants, explaining that ‘we wish to be entirely independent of the Chinese.’⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Jonathon Porter, *Macau, the Imaginary City: Culture and Society, 1557 to the Present* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 130.

⁴⁶ John M. Carroll, *Edge of Empires, Chinese Elites and British Colonials in Hong Kong* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 19–20.

⁴⁷ Paul A. Van Dyke and Maria Kar-Wing Mok, *Images of the Canton Factory 1760–1822: Reading History in Art* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2015), xvi.

⁴⁸ Diary of Harriet Low Hillard, 25 May 1831, in Katherine Hillard, ed., *My Mother’s Journal: A Young Lady’s Diary of Five Years Spent in Manila, Macao, and the Cape of Good Hope from 1829–1834* (Boston: G. H. Ellis, 1900), 97.

⁴⁹ Alexander Michie, *The Englishman in China during the Victorian Era: As Illustrated in the Career of Sir Rutherford Alcock, vol. 1* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1900), 39.

⁵⁰ Letter by James Matheson in Toon Koo to Charles Lyall in Calcutta, 1 December 1839, cited in *China Trade and Empire, Jardine, Matheson & Co. and the Origins of British Rule in Hong Kong 1827–1843*, ed. Alain Le Pichon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 406.

It was not until the close of the second Opium War in 1859 that the British in Canton reported with some confidence the resolution of their difficulties in obtaining servants.⁵¹ By the 1870s British households employed around ten servants. This was far less than wealthy Chinese households, as Mrs John Henry Gray, wife of the Consular Chaplain in Canton, observed after visiting a Howqua house with at least a hundred retainers.⁵² In Portuguese Macau, however, in contrast to Canton, Europeans remained free to enjoy the luxury of servants throughout this period of political turmoil.⁵³

The British acquisition of Hong Kong (in 1841) was to have a profound effect on British domestic service culture: in fact, historian Christopher Munn commented that Hong Kong may well have been founded 'because of a shortage of servants'.⁵⁴ British employers addressed servants in Canton pidgin English, a trading language that reflected trans-colonial influences, comprising English and Portuguese with some Hindi and Malay words, 'all fitted into a Cantonese syntax'.⁵⁵ Chinese servants in Hong Kong behaved somewhat differently to those in Canton, making concessions to colonial cultural preferences, and serving food in the English or Anglo-Indian style. But otherwise, notes Munn, 'their dress and manners remained Chinese'.⁵⁶

By the early nineteenth century the kitchen appears to have become a key site of transfer for Asian cultural practices of domestic work. With Anglo-Indian cookery established in Hong Kong and Singapore, there is evidence that it had also acquired some cachet in the Netherlands East Indies. British traveller James Money praised the Dutch colonial system in his 1861 publication *How to Manage a Colony*, but he was less than complimentary about Javanese cooks. Travellers, he recommended, would be well advised to bring a French-speaking Indian cook with them. Money claimed that even the Dutch preferred Indian to Javanese cooks and would pay good wages to any Indian cook willing to stay on in the Dutch East Indies.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Intelligence published in *Overland Friend of China*, 24 August 1859, cited in 'China', *Illawarra Mercury*, 24 November 1859, 4.

⁵² John Henry Gray, *Fourteen Months in Canton* (London: Macmillan, 1880), letter XV, 14 July 1877, 173.

⁵³ Porter, *Macau*, 136, 137.

⁵⁴ Christopher Munn, 'Hong Kong, 1841–1870: All the Servants in Prison and Nobody to Take Care of the House', in *Masters, Servants, and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire, 1562–1955*, ed. Douglas Hay and Paul Craven (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 366.

⁵⁵ Christopher Munn, *Anglo-China, Chinese People and British Rule in Hong Kong 1841–1880* (Richmond: Curzon, 2001), 66.

⁵⁶ Munn, 'Hong Kong, 1841–1870', 366.

⁵⁷ J. W. B. Money, *Java or How to Manage a Colony, vol. 1* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1861), 18.

Power and hierarchy among domestic servants

British control over domestic servants in India in the early nineteenth century was always less secure than they liked to imagine, and certainly servants themselves exerted a notable degree of influence. This can be gauged in the large retinues and elaborate servant hierarchies that the British felt they were obliged to accept, and in the power and self-assertiveness displayed particularly by the male servants who headed these households.

In both India and China, British colonial publications described in detail the complicated hierarchy of domestic servants and their respective positions of authority within the household. British guides to India offered extensive lists of servants, along with their local titles and responsibilities, and advice to newcomers to follow these ‘rules’ to the letter. Yet, as Collingham suggests, servants might have invoked this tradition in order to ensure that the British employed more workers.⁵⁸ Living in India in the 1830s, Julia Maitland, for instance, employed twenty-seven servants in total – aiming to be economical. They included ‘one butler, one dress-boy [valet], one matee [kitchen-hand], two ayahs, one amah [wet-nurse], one cook, one “tunnicutchy” [housemaid], two gardeners, six bearers, one water-carrier, two horse-keepers, two grass-cutters, one dog-boy, one poultry-man, one washerman, one tailor, one hunter, and one’s amah’s cook.’⁵⁹ Even a single British man in Bengal, according to a guide for newly arriving Cavalry and Infantry cadets in 1844, was advised to employ thirteen servants.⁶⁰

Male employment was distinctive and characteristic of this period. In India, the cook was ‘always a man.’⁶¹ But most importantly for the public display of status, the British were required to employ their own personal footman. Termed a *khidmatgar* (also spelt as *khitmutgar* or *kitmatgar*), this liveried servant prepared the table for meals, and stood behind his employer’s chair, waiting exclusively on him when dining out.⁶² Lined up behind the dining table, ‘dressed in liveries of Eastern fashion, or more commonly in pure white linen with white turbans, which among the higher classes are sometimes decorated with a narrow

⁵⁸ Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, 18–19.

⁵⁹ J. C. Julia Maitland, *Letters from Madras during the years 1836–1839: By a Lady* (London: John Murray, 1843), letter XII, Rajahmundry, 3 October 1837, 51.

⁶⁰ Robert Crowther, *A Practical East India Guide* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1844), 84.

⁶¹ George W. Johnson, *The Stranger in India, or Three Years in Calcutta, Volume One* (London: Henry Colburn, 1843), 45.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 40.

gold or silver band, surmounted by the crest of the family', these servants, as Colesworthey Grant observed in the 1840s, 'present a very extraordinary and imposing array'.⁶³ The term *khidmatgar* was Arabic in origin, from *khidmah* meaning service, but the status of these servants was not necessarily menial.⁶⁴ Nor were their services restricted to the British, even within British homes. As Lady Maria Nugent recorded in her journal in the 1810s, 'every servant has a servant' and that even her maid's *khidmatgar* had an old man to wait upon him.⁶⁵

On arriving in India, many British were surprised that servants asserted their independence and status. Anne Katherine Elwood, wife of Colonel Elwood, wrote in the 1820s that head servants held a role similar to that of an English butler, adding: 'They are, however, sometimes such fine gentlemen that they will scarcely do any thing but perhaps wait at table, and they occasionally give themselves great airs.'⁶⁶ Advising her readers not to attempt to manage the servants, as the mistress was 'much in the power of one's domestics', Elwood also wrote of the need to abide by Indian customs, insisting that, 'In India, no domestic will perform any act which is supposed to be inconsistent with his caste, and "*upna dustoor nuheen*" (it is not our custom) is the invariable answer upon such occasions.'⁶⁷ In Bombay she found that servants expected 'to provide themselves with everything, food, clothing, even habitation.' She continued, 'In fact, it is difficult to induce them to sleep at your house at all, and it was necessary to enter into a sort of arrangement that only a certain number were to be absent at a time.'⁶⁸ George W. Johnson similarly encouraged newcomers to surrender power to the *khansamah*, whom he described as combining 'in one person the English house-steward, butler, and house-keeper'. This personage was literally the 'lord' of the household goods, the Hindi term *khansamah* deriving from the Persian *khān* for lord and *sāmān* meaning household stores.⁶⁹ Johnson advised that he should be 'well recommended, and past the middle age' and employers would then 'leave the hiring of other servants to him, rendering him responsible for their conduct'.⁷⁰

⁶³ Colesworthey Grant, *Anglo-Indian Domestic Life. A Letter from an Artist in India to His Mother in England* (Calcutta: W. Thacker, 1849), 80–81.

⁶⁴ Banerjee, *Men, Women and Domestics*, 40.

⁶⁵ Lady Maria Nugent, *A Journal from the Year 1811 Till the Year 1815, Including a Voyage to and Residence in India* (London, 1839), 218.

⁶⁶ Elwood, *Narrative of a Journey*, letter XLV, 2–3.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, letter XLV, 4, 12.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, letter XLV, 13.

⁶⁹ Garland Cannon and Alan S. Kaye, *The Persian Contributions to the English Language, An Historical Dictionary* (Weisbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2001), 99.

⁷⁰ Johnson, *The Stranger in India*, 37–8.

Recognition of the head servant's power and authority also applied in French India. Captain Louis-François de Paille de Mautort, who arrived in Pondicherry in 1780, employed twenty servants who lived in his house with their families. Mautort relinquished the responsibility of his household to his broker, or *dubash*, who hired and organized the servants. The *dubash* acquired considerable autonomy, using his authority to hire his own family, including his brother and his wife's twelve-year-old brother.⁷¹ A century later in Canton in the 1870s, the Consular Chaplain's wife noted that several of their 'boys' and 'coolies' were relations of the comprador they employed, who was responsible for hiring other servants.⁷² Mrs Gray suspected that the comprador had a hand in encouraging the notion that a new servant was required for every individual task, writing, 'An English lady told me the other day, that her parrot was very ill, her compradore advised her to engage a bird coolie to take it to the White Cloud Mountains for change of air and scene.'⁷³ In the Dutch East Indies in 1860, however, James Money observed that colonial employers had banned personal servants from acting as *dubash*. He wrote,

The abominable Dustoree habit formerly existed in Java, as it still does in India. It consists in every Native, through whom any payment is made to another, levying toll on the money passing through his hands. The Dutch resisted it and by making every instance of it punishable as a petty theft . . . at last succeeded in abolishing it.⁷⁴

In British India the handling of money did not lie solely with the *khansamah*. In some cases it devolved to the *sirdah* (or chief bearer) who would dust, make the bed, and assist the master to dress, acting as a personal valet.⁷⁵ The power of the *sirdah* was undoubtedly enhanced by their more intimate relationship with their master, although the British sources are silent on that point. Grant described the house-bearer in opulent houses as 'a very important personage' who

ranks as confidential body-servant, – attends his master when dressing – possesses a degree of control over the other servants – has charge, probably, of the silver and the stores (in preference to the khansaman) and the entire responsibility of the whole of his master's property, – acting in short . . . as *valet de chambre*.⁷⁶

⁷¹ Danna Agmon, 'The Currency of Kinship: Trading Families and Trading on Family in Colonial French India', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 47, no. 2 (2014): 147–8.

⁷² Gray, *Fourteen Months in Canton*, letter VII, 4 May 1877, 77.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, letter IV, 15 April 1877, 35.

⁷⁴ Money, *Java*, 24.

⁷⁵ Johnson, *The Stranger in India*, 41.

⁷⁶ Grant, *Anglo-Indian Domestic Life*, 83.

He also had his own assistant (like the *khitmadgar* and the *khansamah*) who would take care of the cleaning, the shoes, lamps, and beds.

With very few exceptions, the head servant was male, and strictly so in late nineteenth-century India, China and Hong Kong.⁷⁷ Writing of the Hong Kong comprador 'or major domo' (the latter term having Spanish roots, also meaning steward or head butler), George Wingrove Cooke described this employee as 'a long-tailed, sleek Chinaman, who is his general agent, keeps his money, pays his bills, does all his marketing, hires his servants, and stands security for their honesty, and of course cheats him unmercifully'.⁷⁸ When Baltimore merchant Osmond Tiffany Jr. visited Canton in 1844 he came to the conclusion that Chinese servants respected the comprador far more than they did their European employers:

Every person in the establishment . . . has one of these saucy, puffed up youngsters to attend his pleasure. They have a horror of offending the compradore . . . but they fear no one else. They are tolerably obedient to the person employing them, and as supercilious as possible to other people.⁷⁹

This assessment was written shortly after the end of the first Opium War. The port of Hong Kong had been ceded to Britain, and the British Superintendency of Trade was moved there from Macau. The determination to elicit respect was now a key theme in British writings, as demonstrated by an 1851 diary entry by Hong Kong Post Office clerk John Wright. Wright recorded that 'Chinese servants were far too impudent', writing, 'I had the pleasure of giving them good thrashing, not to do them any serious harm, but just a lashing with a cane that made them servile again.'⁸⁰

As Munn observed for the early years of British Hong Kong, the role of the servant was crucial to British success, acting to bridge the gulf between Europeans and the local community, while simultaneously insulating the British 'from the strange and difficult world that lay outside the home.'⁸¹ In emphasizing European dependence, Munn argues that Chinese servants in return worked

⁷⁷ In colonial Saigon, the capital of Cochinchina from 1862, the role of the *khansamah* was often taken by a woman. The French colonial house was usually organized by a Vietnamese concubine or *congai* who hired and supervised the mostly male household servants, including 'a cook, a boy, a gardener, a coachman and a stable help'. See Gregor Muller, *Colonial Cambodia's 'Bad Frenchmen': The Rise of French Rule and the Life of Thomas Caraman, 1840–87* (London: Routledge, 2006).

⁷⁸ Cooke cited in Munn, 'Hong Kong, 1841–1870', 373.

⁷⁹ Osmond Tiffany, Jr, *The Canton Chinese or the American's Sojourn in the Celestial Empire* (Cambridge, MA: James Munroe, 1849), 216.

⁸⁰ Munn, *Anglo-China*, 144.

⁸¹ Munn, 'Hong Kong, 1841–1870', 366.

‘very much on their own terms’. They were ‘quick to assert their interests and resist impositions,’ demonstrating attitudes that had ‘developed during the precolonial Canton system, when Europeans rather than Chinese had been the subordinate class.’⁸²

Servants, women, intimacy and distance

In his 1843 advice book on India, George Johnson pondered British women’s responses to Indian servants, writing that ‘ladies, who would fly dismayed from a naked footman in England, here, with perfect *nonchalance*, allow themselves to be fanned by naked bearers . . . and do not feel delicacy outraged by finding the sirdar-bearer and his mates in a similar state of nudity, performing all the household work of the bed-chamber.’⁸³ Collingham suggests that the ‘semi-nudity’ of servants was ‘negated by the European trick of adjusting their perception of brown skin.’⁸⁴ An alternative explanation might be that British women only ever feigned delicacy in order to satisfy the strictures of Victorian-era etiquette, and like their male counterparts in India were willing to adjust to the new cultural forms that emerged in this period.

The employment of men as personal servants to women went against the customs of both countries, in fact. Neither in India nor in England, as Collingham comments, would women have allowed male servants inside their bedrooms.⁸⁵ Likewise in China, the personal servant to elite women, a necessity given their bound feet, was always female.⁸⁶ The custom of Chinese men waiting on European women was not a local one, but a carry-over from the habits of European bachelors. The usual social mores were set aside in the face of more practical considerations. For example, in order to allay the heat, the British came to rely on the presence of men close to or within their bedrooms to work the cooling *punkah* fans (see Figure 4.10), with the servant designated the *punkah wallah*. This mechanical innovation replaced the traditional feather fan (see Figure 1.1) and was introduced by the end of the eighteenth century in an adaptation on Arabic technology.⁸⁷ In mid-nineteenth-century British Indian

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Johnson, *The Stranger in India*, 28–9.

⁸⁴ Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, 108.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 105.

⁸⁶ Gray, *Fourteen Months in Canton*, letter XIV, 8 July 1877, 165.

⁸⁷ Henry Yule and A. C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson, The Definitive Glossary of British India*, ed. Kate Teltscher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 433.

households, fans were to be found installed 'not only in every sitting room, but in the sleeping apartments, suspended over the beds.'⁸⁸ This position of *punkah wallah* would be transferred to the tropical colonies of the Asia Pacific, even to far-flung north Australia (see Chapter 2).

The presence of servants in the bedroom raises the question of whether these intimate spaces were also sites of sexual encounters between employers and employees. If rumours were rife about romances between mistresses, masters and their servants in the European context,⁸⁹ there does not appear to have been a similar pattern in India. Rosemary Raza observed that up until the mid-nineteenth century, British women could mix freely with Indian men, and they gave 'virtually no indication that they considered themselves [sexually] threatened' by them. Raza also points out that 'almost all' of the servants in Anglo-Indian homes were men 'who also attended in bedrooms, performing the functions of maids in Britain'. While newcomers and Indians were shocked, neither Anglo-Indian women nor men saw it as cause for alarm.⁹⁰

Controversy swirled more readily around gendered responsibilities for childcare. In the 1830s Julia Maitland, as we have seen, employed four females in her complement of twenty-seven servants – two ayahs and one amah (wet-nurse) to look after the children, along with one housemaid.⁹¹ Before that time in India, male servants were often employed to look after both female and male children. Male servants also played a role in childcare in colonial Southeast Asia as we discuss in Chapter 4. Indian men were thought to be more reliable than Indian women, and less likely to corrupt their charges. That attitude changed, however, with commentators soon raising the impropriety of men attending to young girls. 'Yes – even little girls are entrusted to native *men!*' wrote an outraged Honoria Lawrence in the *Calcutta Review* in 1844, 'It would be hard to believe this, if custom had not familiarised us with the evil.'⁹² This new attention to the spectre of European–Indian intimacy marked a decided shift in colonial culture. By the mid-nineteenth century, as William Dalrymple describes it, 'three hundred years of fusion and hybridity' was brought to a conclusion and 'later delicately erased from embarrassed Victorian history books.'⁹³

⁸⁸ Grant, *Anglo-Indian Domestic Life*, 21.

⁸⁹ Fairchilds, *Domestic Enemies*, 20.

⁹⁰ Rosemary Raza, *In Their Own Words: British Women Writers and India 1740–1857* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 165–6.

⁹¹ Maitland, *Letters from Madras*, 52.

⁹² Raza, *In Their Own Words*, 54, quoting Honoria Lawrence, 'Review of *The Child's Wreath of Hymns and Songs; Selected by Mrs C. J. Simons*', *Calcutta Review* 1, no. 2 (1844): 568.

⁹³ Dalrymple, *White Mughals*, 395.

The so-called Indian Mutiny of 1857–8, now described as the First War of Independence, marked an important turning point in British views of Asian male domestic service.⁹⁴ British newspaper reports obsessively focused upon the murders of English women and children, representing British vulnerability at the hands of Indian men. In deliberate contrast, the *Chambers' Journal* in London published an unnamed English woman's story of her time in Parel, the location of the official residence of the Governor of Bombay since 1771. Acknowledging the 'horror of the terrible revolt', the anonymous writer nevertheless sought to remind readers of Indian 'fidelity and humanity' even towards their 'alien rulers', by offering a vignette of an intimate domestic encounter.⁹⁵ Finding herself ill with a fever, she had sent her European maid and ayah away so that she could sleep. On waking she found she was alone with a male servant:

On a mat on the ground, at the foot of the sofa, sat the tall figure of a very handsome native, his arms crossed on his bosom, and his large black eyes fixed earnestly on my face. He was dressed in a peon's attire – that is a sort of short white blouse girt round the waist by a sash; a turban on his head, and a sword beside him. That he was devout, a short strip of paint between his eyebrows testified. I felt at first a little uneasy at finding myself the object of that fixed stare; but it was only a significant of the watchfulness of a careful attendant.⁹⁶

The man stayed by her side to nurse her, helping her to drink, fanning her and smoothing her pillow. He was, she concluded, a kind nurse and 'a civil, quiet, amiable man', and she extended the recognition of his humanity by naming him (Juan). The writer was careful to avoid any hint of sexual impropriety, noting how he held the drink to her lips 'very respectfully'. He carried a sword, being employed to guard the chambers of the 'young ladies'.⁹⁷ This romanticized portrayal of the servant in the traditional masculine role of protector is striking. Similar responses to Chinese male servants by American, Australian and British women in Southeast Asia and northern Australia later in the century are discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. But this was an exceptional and unusual account, in the context of war.

⁹⁴ Alison Blunt, 'Embodying War: British Women and Domestic Defilement in the Indian "Mutiny", 1857–8', *Journal of Historical Geography* 26, no. 3 (2000): 403–5. See also Fae Dussart, "'That Unit of Civilisation" and "The Talent Peculiar to Women": British Employers and Their Servants in the Nineteenth-Century Indian Empire', *Identities* 22, no. 6 (2015): 706–21.

⁹⁵ 'Indian Servants', *Ovens and Murray Advertiser*, 9 February 1858, republished from *Chambers' Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Art*.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

Others regarded the domestic relationship as part of the problem. Writing around the same period, Grant had been struck by the ‘great gulf between master and man in India’ where ‘servitude is the only connecting bond’. He argued that given Europeans were ‘regarded as birds of passage: the domestic in India, therefore, can never, as in England, look upon himself in a place of permanency, – as forming part and portion of the family’. Even those British who arrived with favourable dispositions towards Indians became indifferent, careless and severe. The problem was exacerbated by the language barrier that led the British to view servants as devoid of feeling, or motivated only by self-interest. In a criticism that extended to the broader colonial project he concluded, ‘The feelings thus engendered toward the servants extend themselves to the people at large.’⁹⁸

Fear and mistrust were prevalent emotions in much mid-century colonial writing, as news of the ‘Mutiny’ spread to Southeast Asia. In Singapore, according to historian Rajesh Rai, Indians, hitherto viewed favourably by the British as ‘useful to the security and development of the colony’, came to be viewed ‘as a “menace”’.⁹⁹ Singapore’s population in this period was already predominantly Chinese,¹⁰⁰ and Chinese servants were viewed as a safer option. They were mostly from Hainan Island, well known for its role in supplying labour for the ‘coolie’ trade.¹⁰¹ In Hong Kong, Alfred Weatherhead, a government clerk, compared the ‘dignified gravity’ of Chinese servants to the supposed ‘fawning, cringing servile deportment of Bengali servants.’¹⁰² Even as he was writing in a period when the politics of violent Indian resistance was widely discussed, his insistence upon the stereotype of Bengali ‘servility’ masked the potent British fear of their Indian servants.

In China, British military aggression limited their capacity to employ servants. The onset of the second Opium War in 1857 coincided with a decline in the number of Chinese servants employed in Canton. One newspaper article suggested that Europeans had divested themselves ‘of the nuisance of large retinues, one Chinese servant of all work being enough for the most self-indulgent bachelor.’¹⁰³ No mention was made of the war that might have explained this reduction. Just months after the article was published, British

⁹⁸ Grant, *Anglo-Indian Domestic Life*, 67.

⁹⁹ Rajesh Rai, ‘The 1857 Panic and the Fabrication of an Indian “Menace” in Singapore’, *Modern Asian Studies* 37, no. 2 (2013): 365.

¹⁰⁰ In 1860 there were 2,445 Europeans, 10,888 Malays, 12,971 Indians and 50,043 Chinese. See Carl A. Trocki, *Singapore, Wealth, Power and the Culture of Control* (London: Routledge, 2006), 42.

¹⁰¹ George William Skinner, *Report on the Chinese in Southeast Asia, December 1950* (Ithaca, NY: Department of Far Eastern Studies, Cornell University, 1951), 16.

¹⁰² Weatherhead cited in Munn, ‘Hong Kong, 1841–1870’, 375.

¹⁰³ ‘A Picture of Canton’, *South Australian Register*, 8 June 1857, 3.

Admiral Seymour's naval forces bombarded Canton. In that same year the British government in Hong Kong introduced registration of Chinese servants employed by Europeans, a move intended to increase British control.¹⁰⁴

By the 1870s, however, as we have seen, the situation in Canton had reverted to old customs with large households of staff under the control of a Chinese comprador.¹⁰⁵ In Hong Kong in 1881 there were nearly 22,000 Chinese domestic servants, of whom 5,529 worked for the 3,040 resident Europeans and Americans, while the rest worked for Chinese masters. According to Jung-Fang Tsai, by the turn of the century the British elite employed from twelve to fifteen Chinese servants.¹⁰⁶ In India in 1871 large households of servants remained part of British life, with a new emphasis on racial hierarchy that cut across more intimate connections between master and servant. Scottish chaplain Macleod described the house of his host in Bombay who employed some forty male servants:

The servants wore turbans and white cotton garments. They went barefooted, moved about like ghosts, and salaamed or stood in that respectful silence so becoming towards our superior race. By day or by night, so far as I could judge, they replied with equal readiness to the shout of 'Boy!' or 'Bhai!' which, they tell me, means 'brother' . . . and their response of 'Sahib!' was as quick as a near Irish echo.¹⁰⁷

Echoing Anne Elwood's 1820s account that opened this chapter, what is most striking here is Macleod's casual allusion to racial superiority. By the high imperial age from the 1880s, when we commence our Asia Pacific case studies in the following chapters, European colonists readily express themselves with a confidence bolstered by their belief in white racial superiority.

Conclusion

By the second half of the nineteenth century, the employment of male domestic workers was already steeped in the history of European encounters with Asian societies stretching back some two hundred years. In the following chapters we

¹⁰⁴ 'China', *Colonial Times*, 14 July 1857, 3.

¹⁰⁵ Gray, *Fourteen Months in Canton*, letter IV, 15 April 1877, 35.

¹⁰⁶ Jung-Fang Tsai, *Hong Kong in Chinese History: Community and Social Unrest in the British Colony, 1842–1913* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 105–6.

¹⁰⁷ Norman Macleod, *Peeps at the Far East: A Familiar Account of a Visit to India* (London: Strahan, 1871), 22–3.

explore the trans-colonial development of a broad regional culture of domestic service in the period of high imperialism. As we shall see, the employment of male servants would remain, for at least the first three decades of the twentieth century, a potent symbol of colonial power in the Asia Pacific region. At the same time, as new political challenges unsettled European imperialism, anti-colonial resistance was driven in various forms by the domestic servants themselves. But it is important to recognize that these male domestic workers and their masters were the inheritors of earlier traditions of household service that had developed over a long period of time. As we have seen, a hybrid and evolving culture emerged out of the engagement between European and Asian cultures, and it would provide a rich, complex, and fertile ground for the colonial domestic encounters to come.