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Whiteness, Imperial Anxiety, and the "Global 1930s": the White British League debate in Hong Kong --Manuscript Draft--

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Abstract:	<p>What is a British colony for, and who is it for? These questions were at the crux of a heated public debate in 1933 in Hong Kong sparked when a British resident claimed to have formed an organization for the "protection and advancement" of the "British white race." This article explores how anxieties about fascism, white privilege, and "others" in the empire allowed the very idea of such a political movement to be elevated to the subject of a heated debate. The discussion on British unemployment, poor whites, and European "intruders" in the colony tells us less about the actual socio-economic conditions that Hong Kong Britons faced, than their subjective experience of being "British" in an imperial context. The articulation of imperial anxiety also shows us how the fluid, ambiguous borders of whiteness and Britishness were negotiated at the intersection of nationalism, ethnicity, class, and race. In highlighting the global perspectives demonstrated in the debate, and the various transnational networks sat across Hong Kong, I argue that the debate was as much about global socio-political circumstances as what was happening in Hong Kong. The article therefore provides us a timely opportunity to rethink how the local, "national," regional, and global was interwoven in the "global 1930s," even amongst the English reading public in the British colony of Hong Kong.</p>

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What is a British colony for, and who is it for? These questions were at the crux of a heated debate in 1933 in Hong Kong sparked when a British resident, Major Louis Cassel, claimed to have formed an organization for the “protection and advancement” of the “British white race.” The “White British League” advocated the creation of jobs in the colony for native Britons and urged the introduction of an autonomous self-government, so that British residents in Hong Kong could enact laws to protect their “own kith and kin.”¹ This call prompted a public debate that occupied much of the correspondence columns of English-language newspapers in the colony for some weeks. What began as a response towards the rise of fascism and diminishing British interests in China later became intertwined with discussion on European “intruders,” poor whites, and “coloured Britishers,” reflecting a wider anxiety about losing control of the empire.

To understand this episode, I will draw on the emerging literature that focuses on colonial anxiety. In his study of the mud-daubing panic in 1894, Kim A. Wagner has demonstrated that “structural” and “systemic” anxieties often characterized the experience of British administrators in India.² This idea has been further explored in Robert Peckham’s edited volume *Empire of Panics*, which examines how new communication circuits often intensified – rather than alleviated – anxieties that officials in the metropole had about their imperial frontiers.³ Harald Fischer-Tiné’s recent edited volume extends the discussion to

¹ “White British League: New Society Establishing a Branch in Hong Kong, Empire-wide Ramifications,” *South China Morning Post* (hereafter *SCMP*), 5 August 1933, 9; “Major L. Cassel’s Secret Society: Remarkable List of Aims and Objectives,” *Hongkong Telegraph*, 5 August 1933, 13.

² Kim A. Wagner, “‘Treading Upon Fires’: The ‘Mutiny’-Motif and Colonial Anxieties in British India,” *Past & Present*, 218, 1 (2013): 159-97.

³ Robert Peckham, “Panic: Reading the Signs,” in *Empire of Panic: Epidemics and Colonial Anxieties*, ed. Robert Peckham (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2015), 1-22.

examine how different actors across the colonial divide shared such “structural anxieties.”⁴ Using the findings of this scholarship to understand the White British League debate, this article reveals how such “structural” anxiety characterized the lives of some Hong Kong-Britons – and, more widely, British treaty port settlers – in the 1930s.

Whilst building upon the scholarship of colonial anxiety, this article also sharpens our understanding of the contending notions of “whiteness” and Britishness. A vast literature has explored the social construction of whiteness. As an unstable racial category, it was understood dialectically with class, gender, nationality, and ethnicity.⁵ Significant attention has been devoted to interrogating the construction of whiteness through the lens of imperial policies. Scholars have explored how European colonizers constituted whiteness and “otherness” through categorizing and differentiating peoples to construct hierarchy and command authority.⁶ Catherine Hall has also proposed understanding the making of notions of Britishness through Britain’s imperial experience.⁷ This article focuses on a particular moment when some Britons in Hong Kong articulated their subjective experience of being “British” in a colonial society and the insecurities that they felt they faced. In projecting their anxieties onto poor whites and other Europeans, their writings provide us with a lens to see how perceptions of whiteness stood between class, ethnicity, and nationality. Whilst existing work focuses much on how officials constructed and maintained a “respectability” for

⁴ Harald Fischer-Tiné and Christine Whyte, “Introduction: Empires and Emotions,” in *Anxieties, Fear, and Panic in Colonial Settings: Empires on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, edited by Harald Fischer-Tiné (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 1-24.

⁵ On whiteness as a social construction, see, for example, Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women: Race Matters: The Social Construction of White Women* (London: Routledge, 1993).

⁶ See Ann Laura Stoler, “Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of rule,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 31, 1 (1989): 134-61; Ann Laura Stoler, “Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers: European Identities and the Cultural Politics of Exclusion in Colonial Southeast Asia,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 34, 3 (1992): 514-51.

⁷ See Catherine Hall, *Civilizing Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination 1830-1867* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002); Catherine Hall and Keith McClelland, “Introduction,” in *Race, Nation and Empire: Making Histories, 1750 to Present*, eds. Catherine Hall and Keith McClelland (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 1-12.

Britons in the empire, this article shows how Britons outside the colonial polity actively attempted to preserve such “respectability.”⁸ Through illuminating the voice of those recognizing people of color as “Britishers,” this article also answers the call to understand Britishness as a complex, hyphenated form of belonging.⁹

Furthermore, this article uses mobilities as a conceptual tool to understand how the British White League debate came about. Inspired by Tony Ballantyne’s networked conception of empire, scholars writing “new imperial history” have explored the transnational networks that connected disparate colonial dominions.¹⁰ Employing an enlarged understanding of “mobility” – one that looks beyond migration – they highlighted the different forms of cultural traffic that enabled people, information, and objects to move across different parts of the British Empire, facilitating colonial governance and the forging of identities.¹¹ Recent scholarship on transnational Asian studies has uncovered how diasporic, professional, and press networks connected Southeast Asian port cities together.¹²

⁸ Elizabeth Buettner, “Problematic Spaces, Problematic Races: Defining ‘Europeans’ in Late Colonial India,” *Women’s History Review*, 9:2 (2006): 277-98; Rebecca Swartz, “‘Britishness’, Colonial Governance and Education: St Helenian Children in Colonial Natal in the 1870s,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 44, 6 (2016): 881-99; Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class: Imperial attitudes and policies and their critics, 1793-1905* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980); Will Jackson, “Dangers to the Colony: Loose Women and the ‘Poor White’ Problem in Kenya,” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 14, 2 (2013).

⁹ Saul Dubow, “How British was the British World? The Case of South Africa,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 37:1 (2009): 1-27.

¹⁰ Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001); Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, “Introduction: The Politics of Intimacy,” in *Moving Subjects: Gender, Mobility, and Intimacy in an Age of Global Empire*, eds. Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 1-30.

¹¹ Examples include: Alan Lester, “Imperial Circuits and Networks: Geographies of the British Empire,” *History Compass*, 4, 1 (2006): 124-41; Gary B. Magee and Andrew S. Thompson, *Empire and Globalization: Networks of People, Goods and Capital in the British World, c. 1850-1914*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹² Su Lin Lewis, *Cities in Motion: Urban Life and Cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia, 1920-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Sunil S. Amrith, *Migration and Diaspora in Modern Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Tim Harper and Sunil Amrith, “Introduction,” in *Sites of Asian Interaction: Ideas, Network and Mobility*, eds. Tim Harper and Sunil Amrith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 1-9; Mark Ravinder Frost, “Emporium in Imperio: Nanyan Networks and the Straits Chinese in Singapore, 1819-1914,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 36,1 (2005): 29-66.

Those interested in Chinese treaty ports have also explored how similar networks connected ports in China together.¹³ If we ground the White British League debate within these discussions, we can see the fact that Hong Kong sits within multiple networks is crucial. A former British Crown Colony on the South China coast, Hong Kong was the center of a nexus of different mobilities – of trade, migration, and communication – that set across not only the British Empire, but also Chinese treaty ports and the Asia-Pacific. Known personalities involved in the debate – Cassel and the two newspapers editors, a Briton and an Australian Chinese respectively – operated within the imperial career networks that Alan Lester and David Lambert have discussed.¹⁴ The wider networks of trade, migration, and communication also provided Hong Kong’s reading public with global perspectives. When readers and editors wrote in response to the apparent formation of the White British League they were in fact also seizing the opportunity the debate provided to respond to anti-imperialism in treaty ports in China, to the Russian refugee diaspora, and to global debates about the rise of fascism, economic nationalism, and internationalism.

In focusing on a local manifestation of debates more routinely associated with metropolitan Europe and North America, this article reinforces calls to think about the 1930s more globally. Responding to scholarship that seemed to place an overwhelming focus on the socio-political upheavals in the West in the 1930s, Marc Matera and Susan Kingsley Kent seek to rethink the 1930s by taking a truly global approach – one that decenters from the West and considers the histories of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.¹⁵ They argued that the

¹³ See Hoi-to Wong, “Interport rinting enterprise: Macanese printing networks in Chinese treaty ports,” in *Treaty ports in modern China: law, land and power*, eds. Robert Bickers and Isabella Jackson (Abrington: Routledge, 2016), 139-57; Douglas Fix, “The global entanglements of a marginal man in treaty port Xiamen,” in *Treaty ports in modern China*, 158-78.

¹⁴ David Lambert and Alan Lester, “Introduction: Imperial Spaces, Imperial Subjects,” in *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the long nineteenth century*, eds. David Lambert and Alan Lester (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1-31.

¹⁵ Marc Matera and Susan Kingsley Kent, *The Global 1930s: The International Decade* (London: Routledge 2017).

1930s was in fact a decade of internationalist impulses and transnational connections. Here I build on this discussion and argue that the imperial anxieties demonstrated in the debate tells us as much about global socio-political circumstances as what was happening in Hong Kong. This article reinforces Matera and Kent's argument by showing that even a local debate was in fact connected with transnational socio-political developments.

I open the article by providing an overview of the debate in August 1933. While it seems clear that Cassel's proposals never materialized, the idea of this political movement still prompted an immediate and heated response from readers and editors in Hong Kong. In the following sections, as I explore the debates' various thematic strands, I demonstrate how anxieties about fascism, white privilege, and "others" prompted the colony's reading public to react to Cassel's alleged formation of the League in such an amplified way. The claim that a British White League had been established in Hong Kong prompted journalistic concern over fascist movements and generated a debate on whether fascism would spread to the wider British Empire. Through discussing Cassel's life and career, the third section introduces the wider treaty port settler community that he represented. Situating the debate in the context of Britain's diminishing informal empire in China since the 1920s allows us to understand how Cassel's economic misfortunes shaped his political views, and why some found his views appealing. The fourth and fifth sections uncover readers' concerns about white pauperism and the intrusion of non-Britishers, behind which were a desire to preserve the fading privileges of thousands of Britons living in China. Highlighting the inclusivity demonstrated in discussion about non-white British subjects, the sixth section illuminates how internationalist ideas enriched notions of Britishness in the interwar period.

The White British League Debate

A British Crown Colony on the coast of South China Sea, Hong Kong was home to a multiethnic population. Since the British occupied it in 1841, its colonial regime and thriving economy had attracted not only white Britons, but also many residing in neighboring regions. Its population grew from 7,450 in 1841 to 840,473 in 1931.¹⁶ While the Chinese comprised the majority (96.7%) of the population, the 1931 census recorded 27,000 non-Chinese, including 6,684 British civilians, 4,745 Indians, 3,197 “local Portuguese” (today termed Macanese), 2,036 “other Europeans and Americans,” and 837 Eurasians.¹⁷ Despite its reputation as a “sleepy colonial backwater,” interwar Hong Kong was in fact quite the opposite.¹⁸ Its geographical and political position made it a place where different geopolitical shifts converged. Rooted in Chinese nationalism, strikes and boycotts had paralyzed Hong Kong’s economy in much of the 1920s. Only just recovering from the economic aftermath of the strikes and boycotts, 1930s Hong Kong was confronted with various crises – the effects of the Great Depression, the rise of nationalism and anti-imperialist movements in China, and the spread of extreme nationalism in Asia and Europe.¹⁹ The colony’s fate was never more intertwined with not only the socio-political upheavals in China and the British Empire, but also the world economy.

Thanks to the thriving press industry there, readers in Hong Kong were well informed about political and economic crises taking place outside the colony. Hong Kong was often seen as the hub of journalism in modern China.²⁰ By the turn of the 1930s, it was home to at least eleven Chinese-language and four English-language newspapers. Notably, even though

¹⁶ Fan Shuh Ching, *The Population of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: The Committee for International Coordination of National Research in Demography, 1974), 1.

¹⁷ William James Carrie, “Report on the census of the Colony of Hong Kong taken on the night of March 7, 1931,” (Hong Kong: Census Department, 1931), 111.

¹⁸ John M. Carroll, *A Concise History of Hong Kong* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 89.

¹⁹ See Carroll, *A Concise History of Hong Kong*, 89-115.

²⁰ Ding Jie, *Huaqiao ribao yu xianggang huaren shehui* 《華僑日報》與香港華人社會 [Huaqiao ribao and the Chinese society in Hong Kong] (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2014), 9.

the British dominated the readership of English-language newspapers, Chinese and other communities played an increasing role in these papers in the twentieth century.²¹ In 1901, for instance, a group of Chinese investors, including the Eurasian tycoon Robert Hotung, purchased one of the major English language newspapers, *The Hongkong Telegraph*, and in the following year appointed a local Portuguese J. P. Braga as the manager, who would hold the post for eight years.²² Although its advertisers were mainly British, the *Telegraph* was known to be sympathetic to non-Britons there.²³ The *Telegraph*'s major competitor was *The South China Morning Post*, founded in 1903 with Chinese capital to "project the viewpoint of the British colonial regime."²⁴ The appointment of Henry Ching as its editor in 1924, however, altered *the Post*'s stance. An Australian Chinese, Ching would lead the *Post* for thirty-three years with his "often trenchant editorials" that had more than once provoked its advertisers to withdraw their business from the *Post*.²⁵

It was in such an atmosphere that the debate about the White British League took place in August 1933. The League (sometimes also termed as The League of British Whites) first became known to the Hong Kong public when *the South China Morning Post* and *the Hongkong Telegraph* reported a joint interview with Major Louis Cassel on 5 August. The reports of the interview in the two papers were completely identical, hinting that Cassel placed this article in the papers. The reports opened by stating that there were rumors across town about a secret society formed for the "protection and advancement" of British "whites." This led, the reports claimed, the two newspapers' representatives to visit Cassel's office,

²¹ Frank H. H. King, *A Research Guide to China-Coast Newspapers, 1822-1911* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 1965), 27.

²² Stuart Braga, "Making Impressions: The Adaptation of a Portuguese Family to Hong Kong, 1700-1950," (PhD thesis, Australian National University, 2012), xxv.

²³ MS 4300/7.3/7, J. M. Braga to Dr. Frank H. H. King, 15 February 1963, National Library of Australia.

²⁴ King, *A Research Guide to China-Coast Newspapers*, 27; Robin Hutcheon, "In the Editor's Chair... Fearless Stalwart," *SCMP*, 6 November 2003.

²⁵ Robin Hutcheon, "In the Editor's Chair... Fearless Stalwart," *SCMP*, 6 November 2003.

where he confirmed the existence of the League. However, he denied that it was a secret organization formed in Hong Kong. “The Society has its headquarters in the heart of the empire, London, and, far from being secret, it invites publicity,” he claimed. “The movement now under way not only concerns Hongkong, but the whole Empire. Its primary object is to look after the interest of the British white race, and its headquarters are in London.” When asked why he was its Hong Kong representative, Cassel’s “fairly shrewd guess at the reason” was:

A great part of my life has been spent in the Colonies, and though I do not arrogate to myself that I have been so much as a cog in the wheels of forging the links of Empire, I may have been a little breath of the air used in the bellows to heat the links. ... His Majesty and the British Empire have no more loyal subjects than the members of the League of British Whites, otherwise I would on no account be connected with it.²⁶

The League promoted economic protectionism. Cassel stated that it aimed to make “the British Empire for the British White People, who made it and intend to keep it ‘white.’” The major aims of the League therefore clearly targeted at fostering British employment: “to enact laws to provide jobs for ‘white’ British subjects”; “to do away with unemployed ‘white’ British subjects”; “to create employment for time-expired Service men who wish to remain in the Colony”; “to enact laws forbidding public utility companies from employing foreigners in key positions”; and “to enact laws compelling British registered companies to employ a percentage of ‘white’ British employees in proportion to their capital, turnover, or profits.” In the interview, Cassel particularly criticized the Hong Kong Peak Tramway Company for not employing enough Britons despite having the financial capacity to do so.

The League’s objectives appeared to ensure British trading and political advantage in the colony. Cassel claimed that:

²⁶ “White British League: New Society Establishing a Branch in Hong Kong, Empire-wide Ramifications,” *SCMP*, 5 August 1933, 9.

This does not necessarily mean the exclusion of the other races. Let them all come. But it means that where there are jobs going which are suitable for British “whites,” men or women, those jobs must be offered to them first.²⁷

What the League advocated, however, reflected a much less inclusive attitude towards the other “races” and communities in the colony. The League’s plan “to abolish Chinese Justices of the Peace”; “to prevent the exploitation of the Empire Preferential Tariff, either by exporters or importers”; “to abolish the abuse of aliens including Chinese, trading under foreign, and, more especially, bogus British names” and “to compel private firms to register and publish the names of their partners” displayed a strong determination to exclude other communities from enjoying trading advantages in the empire.

Cassel admitted that it would be hard to compel the government to enact such forceful laws, and he believed the only way to do so was to have an autonomous government. In his eyes, the colonial government, which he called “the old order,” was “effete” and too autocratic. He blamed the Cadet system - through which a cadre of British administrative officers was trained for service in Hong Kong - for making officials “inclined to look on affairs of State more from the Chinese point of view than from ours”: “when cadets come out from Home they are immediately sidetracked into the *yamens* of Canton and Macao, [...], inoculated with the ancient thoughts of China.”²⁸ As the Executive and Legislative Councils in Hong Kong always had an official majority, he complained that members all had to vote “as they were told.” He therefore thought the “only remedy” for Hong Kong was to have self-government. In the meantime, Cassel suggested “methods of persuasion” to “bring the

²⁷ “Major L. Cassel’s Secret Society: Remarkable List of Aims and Objectives,” *Hongkong Telegraph*, 5 August 1933, 13.

²⁸ For more on cadet officers in the Hong Kong Government Service, see Henry J. Lethbridge, “Hong Kong Cadets, 1862-1941,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch*, 10 (1970): 36-56.

recalcitrant into line,” which included boycotting businesses that employed other nationals instead of white Britons.²⁹

As the *South China Morning Post* and the *Hongkong Telegraph* published the interview with Cassel on 5 August, it stimulated a debate in the correspondence column of these two newspapers.³⁰ Despite short-lived – it lasted less than three weeks – this debate provides us with a case study to understand 1930s-Hong Kong and the “global 1930s.” As readers wrote letters to newspapers debating whether the colony needed such a radical organization, their writings revealed a fear about losing control of the empire – to the rise of fascism, to the undesirable European “intruders,” and to the anti-imperialist movements in China. Although such fear predated the debate, Hong Kong Britons talked about it during these three weeks more directly than ever. Their powerfully evocative writings provoked heated discussion on issues such as the rise of fascism, white pauperism and British prestige, alien “intrusion” into the empire, and the rights of “coloured Britishers.” The letters’ anonymity – a convention in the Hong Kong press – makes it difficult for us to determine the writers’ identities. On the other hand, that it allowed writers to be blunt makes them valuable sources for issues that were sensitive and thus otherwise obscure.³¹ In the case of this debate, the different nuances of the views demonstrated in the letters hint at a multiplicity of writers, suggesting the debate drew heated responses from across Hong Kong’s reading public.

It should be noted that no records can be found in archives or British newspapers confirming the existence of any such organization in either London or Hong Kong. The interview and several letters to the editor written by Cassel in the following two weeks were

²⁹ “White British League: New Society Establishing a Branch in Hong Kong, Empire-wide Ramifications,” *SCMP*, 5 August 1933, 9.

³⁰ It should be noted that the Chinese press in Hong Kong appeared to be uninterested in the British White League debate – no Chinese newspapers mentioned Cassel’s interview or the debate happening in English press.

³¹ Stephanie Newell, “Something to Hide? Anonymity and Pseudonyms in the Colonial West African Press,” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 45:1 (2010): 9-22.

the only indications that support his alleged formation of the organization. He was also the only person that spoke for it in public. The interview of 5 August was the sole source of the debate that lasted for more than two weeks in Hong Kong. This prompts a further question: why did the news receive such an immediate and heated response, when there might not even have been such a political movement after all?

The Rise of Fascism

We need first to understand the debate in the context of the rise of fascism in the 1930s. The colony's English-speaking community had been well informed about fascist movements across the globe, including those in Britain. Notably, only a year before the White British League's apparent formation in Hong Kong, Sir Oswald Mosley formed the British Union of Fascists.³² Although other groups such as the British Fascisti and the Imperial Fascist League had started in Britain in the 1920s, they were overshadowed by the British Union of Fascists, which acquired a level of limited success in its early years.³³ At a more local level, journalists in Hong Kong also followed very closely the formation of organizations against the spread of Communism in 1920s-Shanghai, such as "Constitutional Defence League" and "Shanghai Fascisti."³⁴ Only months before Cassel's announcement about the White British League, local

³² A few examples were "British Fascists: Sir Oswald Mosley as a Mussolini, Offer of Aid to Bolivia," *SCMP*, 19 August 1932, 8; "Fascist March: Mosley Leads Blackshirt Through London, Dreams of Power," *SCMP*, 22 July 1933, 9;

³³ Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: From Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts to the National Front* (London: I. B. Taurus, 1998).

³⁴ "Saving Shanghai: Formation of the Fascisti, Objects and Reasons", *SCMP*, 5 October 1927, 11; "The Shanghai Fascisti: Scope of Their Possible Services Discussed But Not Clearly Defined, A Suggested Programme," *SCMP*, 11 October 1927, 9; "Constitutional Defence League," *SCMP*, 4 February 1926, 8; "The Red Menace: Constitutional Defence League Achieved Aims, Being Dissolved," *SCMP*, 30 July 1928, 12. Also see Robert A. Bickers, *Britain in China: Community, Culture and Colonialism, 1900-49* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 146-150. Also see Frederick Wakeman Jr., *Spymaster: Dai Li and the Chinese Secret Service* (Berkeley, Cali.: University of California Press, 2003), 87-97.

news reported discussions on whether China would adopt fascism and the Chinese Marshal Zhang Xueliang's visit to Italy to study fascism.³⁵

Highly cognizant of global fascist movements, journalists in Hong Kong quickly associated Cassel's views with fascism. The August 5 report in fact mentioned that Cassel was asked whether he and his organization were running along fascist or Nazi lines.³⁶ *Hong Kong Telegraph's* editor, Alfred Hicks, associated Cassel's statement with the British Fascists, formerly known as the British Fascisti when it was formed in 1923:

“Our attitude towards the non-British section of the Empire's population is that the interests of the British nation come first and the other Empire peoples should have rights proportionate to their loyalty and usefulness to the British nation.”
This reads amazingly like a resume of the gallant Major's announcements, but is nothing of the kind. It consists of an extra from the officially authorised statement of policy of the British Fascists.³⁷

As he devoted his editorials in the following days to criticizing Cassel's League, Hicks argued that fascism was not the political regime for Hong Kong. “We trust and believe that Hongkong is definitely the wrong place in which to attempt to implant the narrow aggressive type of Nationalism which the promoter of the organization preaches”; “Fascism merely means the substitution of a benevolent type of autocracy by something far more alarming,” he wrote, “if fascism and a puerile spirit of nationalism is the alternative, we have no hesitation in our choice.”³⁸

³⁵ “News from Shanghai: Speculation Concerning the Abolition of the Tael, Banks' Position, a Disastrous Trading Year,” *SCMP*, 12 April 1933, 14; “Shanghai News: Fascist Organization Alleged, the Blue Shirts,” *SCMP*, 19 July 1933, 15; “Studying Fascism: Chang Hsueh-liang in Italy, to Meet Mussolini,” *SCMP*, 8 May 1933, 14.

³⁶ “White British League: New Society Establishing a Branch in Hongkong, Empire-wide Ramifications,” *SCMP*, 5 August 1933, 9.

³⁷ “League of British Whites,” *Hongkong Telegraph*, 9 August 1933, 6.

³⁸ “League of British Whites,” *Hongkong Telegraph*, 9 August 1933, 6; “Notes of the Day,” *Hongkong Telegraph*, 11 August 1933, 6; “Secret Society,” *Hongkong Telegraph*, 11 August 1933, 6.

Cassel continuously denied himself as working along fascist or Nazi lines: “there is nothing compulsory about it, and the Society is not subversive in any way.”³⁹ On the other hand, he showed sympathy for Hitler’s racial supremacism: “on that point, and that point only, I agree with Herr Hitler. I am a Briton and proud of it and I believe we Britons are superior to any race on earth.”⁴⁰ The limited surviving records of Cassel’s writings and speeches makes it hard for us to have a closer examination of his ideological framework, but rhetoric contained in his statements and writings suggests how the global movement of fascism precipitated his views.⁴¹ The pride Cassel took in the empire, his endorsement of the “biological” superiority of the “British race,” his open sympathy for Nazism and his wish to uphold British privilege against alien intrusion echo with generic traits of fascist ideologies.

The debate on the White British League soon became intertwined with a discussion of whether fascism could apply to the British Empire. An “Empire Crusader” argued that “many would like to see fascism established under the British Flag.” This writer believed that British fascism was “the only one under which Imperial Government should work.” They denied being a fascist or member of the League, for they did not deem such an organization as needing to exist in Hong Kong at present. “But I do,” they wrote, “however believe that such organizations will become necessary later. Then many who are not at present will become fascists.”⁴²

Journalists of the *Hongkong Telegraph* and *South China Morning Post*, however, believed that fascism would harm an empire that was international and multi-ethnic. Hicks

³⁹ “White British League: New Society Establishing a Branch in Hongkong, Empire-wide Ramifications,” *SCMP*, 5 August 1933, 9.

⁴⁰ L. Cassel, “Correspondence: Anent the League of British Whites,” *Hongkong Telegraph*, 10 August 1933, 7.

⁴¹ “White British League: New Society Establishing a Branch in Hongkong, Empire-wide Ramifications,” *SCMP*, 5 August 1933, 9.

⁴² Empire Crusader, “Fascism in the Future: A Correspondent’s Views,” *Hongkong Telegraph*, 12 August 1933, 11.

believed that under the current political circumstances, “most peoples will have to make a choice between Fascism and Democracy”; and his choice was clear:

In our view, Capitalism is doomed and the only hope for the future is the gradual development of a new world order of society with an international outlook. Socialism is arid. Communism of the Moscow type is against human nature. Fascism means an end to liberty. Another solution is necessary, and it must be based on the proposition that the true aim of the society is the good life of every individual.⁴³

While Henry Ching, the Australian Chinese editor of *South China Morning Post*, expressed it in a subtler way, his view that fascism would not suit the British Empire was still obvious. In his editorial on 22 August, he decided to analyze the origins of fascism because “in recent controversy Fascist rule has been hotly discussed.” Arguing that fascism meant a “constant threat of war,” he concluded that:

Internationally considered, the “Fascist” is no friend of humanity: he is too much his own friend. Nationally considered, he is only tolerable if he consents not to live too long.⁴⁴

This response is interesting, especially if we compare it with contemporary responses to fascism in Britain. Scholars have pointed out that fascism had appealed to those in the metropole in the 1920s and the early 1930s.⁴⁵ In 1933 the British Union of Fascists (BUF) was steadily expanding, and would reach a membership of no less than 30,000 by the following year. The BUF was gaining increasing support until the Olympia rally in 1934, in which violent scenes badly hurt the party’s public image.⁴⁶ Thanks to the personal fame of its founder Oswald Mosley, the BUF received more press coverage than previous British fascist organizations. But prior to the rally, most press attention was on Mosley’s family, rather than

⁴³ Editor, “Reply,” *Hongkong Telegraph*, 12 August 1933, 11.

⁴⁴ “Fascist Rule,” *SCMP*, 22 August 1933, 12.

⁴⁵ Dan Stone, *Responses to Nazism in Britain, 1933-1939: Before War and Holocaust* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Richard Griffiths, *An Intelligent Person’s Guide to Fascism* (London: Duckworth, 2000).

⁴⁶ Webber, “Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, 19, 4 (1984): 575-606.

on his political beliefs. Even when the press in Britain expressed its opposition to the BUF after the Olympia rally, such criticisms seldom extended to other forms of fascism. Although their views varied according to their party lines, the British mainstream press in the early 1930s generally showed tolerance for – if not admiration of – fascist regimes in Italy and Germany, with the exception of the *Daily Herald*.⁴⁷

In the British colony of Hong Kong in 1933, on the other hand, the press did not only pay attention to fascist regimes across the globe, but also actively voiced its opinion regarding such trend. As Bryna Goodman and Su Lin Lewis have argued, by linking a reading public of different perspectives across borders, the press in Asian port cities provided a platform for overlapping “print-worlds” to discuss identities and modern ideas of citizenship and society.⁴⁸ While expressing the firm belief that fascism was not what the empire needed, the language Hicks and Ching used echoed with the discourses on modernity and liberalism that was common in the press in the 1930s Asian port cities.

Articulating their distrust of fascism, readers also explicitly disapproved of racial nationalism, an important aspect of not only fascism but also Cassel’s political views. A reader, “Blonde Beast,” stated firmly that “fascism simply means tyranny, a dictatorship by a group.” While this letter seemed solely to be a condemnation of fascism at first glance, it was also a response to racial nationalism. “Blonde Beast” questioned the white nationalist view of Cassel – whom they called sarcastically “the new saviour of the white race”:

But what is it, or who is it, that the Major feels superior to? And can he produce any evidence to show that in his life and career he has demonstrated such superiority? Handsome is as handsome does.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Janet Dack, “It Certainly Isn’t Cricket! – Media Responses to Mosley and the BUF,” in *Varieties of Anti-Fascism: Britain in the Inter-war Period*, eds. Nigel Copsey and Andrzej Olechnowicz (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 140-61.

⁴⁸ Lewis, *Cities in Motion*, 139; Bryna Goodman, “Networks of News: Power, Language and Transnational Dimensions of the Chinese Press, 1850-1949,” *China Review*, 4, 1 (2004): 1-10.

⁴⁹ Blonde Beast, “Fascism in the Future,” *Hongkong Telegraph*, 14 August 1933, 7.

Opposing racial nationalism, this letter brings a sharp contrast to the narrow, racially exclusive mindset that Cassel had demonstrated in his interview. As the later sections will show, the debate throws light on an increasing recognition of the British status held by non-white subjects.

Such rhetoric about fascism and racial nationalism hints at a colonial perspective that existing literature on fascism and empire overlooks. Fascism in interwar Britain is a much-explored topic, and increasing attention has been put on the role that the empire played in the rise of fascism in Britain.⁵⁰ Paul Stocker, for instance, has examined how Britain's imperial culture made British fascist ideologies differ from those in other European countries.⁵¹ Other scholars have explored the influences of fascism in the empire – especially in the Dominions.⁵² But less – if any – has been said about fascism in the wider empire.

Despite Cassel's continuous denial of following fascist ideologies, there was no doubt that fascism affected the debate profoundly. Not only were his political views parallel to generic traits of fascist ideologies, but the fear of having fascism in the empire was the prime generator of editors' and readers' radical reactions to the claim that a British Whites League had started in the colony. While contemporary mainstream press in the metropole was relatively lenient towards fascist movements in Britain and Europe, readers and journalists in

⁵⁰ On literature on fascism in interwar Britain, see Robert Benewick, *Political Violence and Public Order: A Study of British Fascism* (London: Allen Lane, 1969); Julie Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism: Women in the British Fascist Movement, 1923–1945* (London: I.B. Taurus & Co. Ltd, 2003); Martin Pugh, *“Hurrah for the Blackshirts!”: Fascists and Fascism in Britain Between the Wars* (London: Pimlico, 2006); Stephen Dorril, *Blackshirt: Sir Oswald Mosley and British Fascism* (London: Penguin Books, 2007).

⁵¹ Paul Stocker, “‘The Imperial Spirit’: British Fascism and Empire, 1919-1940,” *Religion Compass*, 9, 2 (2015): 45-54; Paul Stocker, “Importing Fascism: Reappraising the British Fascisti, 1923-1926,” *Contemporary British History*, 30:3 (2016): 326-48.

⁵² Lita-Rose Betcherman, *The Swastika and the Maple Leaf: Fascist Movements in Canada in the Thirties* (Don Mills, Ont.: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1975); Martin Robin, *Shades of Right: Nativist and Fascist Policies in Canada, 1920-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Andrew Moore, *The Right Road: A History of Right-Wing Politics in Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1995); Keith Amos, *The New Guard Movement, 1931-1935* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1976).

Hong Kong spoke otherwise. Along with a discussion on rights of “coloured” British subjects which later sections will examine, this debate allows us to understand how a colonial experience allowed some in Hong Kong to foreground and applaud the potential for cross-cultural interactions in the empire.

Cassel and Treaty Port Settlers

Cassel’s economic protectionist rhetoric was another reason why he successfully generated such a vibrant public discussion. His conscious usage of inflammatory language in the press prompted Hong Kong Britons to discuss the economic threats they faced and debate whether the colony and the wider empire needed to protect British interests through such extreme calls. We cannot fully understand this debate and Cassel’s underlying desire to protect British interests in China without understanding the man who started these claims, and the colonial society that he came from.

Who, then, was Major Louis Cassel? In fact we know very little about him. The adjective that people – his colleagues, his friends, and even writers – frequently used to describe him was “mysterious.”⁵³ Even his wife was self-admittedly puzzled about the life of the man she was married to for more than ten years: “there was no doubt,” she wrote in a memoir forty years after his death, “that he was a very mysterious person.”⁵⁴

And mysterious he was. No records about him before 1915 can be found in archives and newspapers. From scattered records and a biography written by his wife, we know that he claimed to be born in England in 1872 (although no birth record can be identified). He served in the military in Hong Kong briefly between 1915 and 1920, but it was not a regular

⁵³ Gwendolyn Bovill, *Knight or Knave? A Soldier of Fortune in China* (London: privately printed, 1976), 114; Charles Drage, *Taikoo* (London: Constable, 1970), 229.

⁵⁴ Bovill, *Knight or Knave*, 63.

appointment – he joined as a Staff Officer (Deputy Assistant Adjutant) in 1915, worked his way up to the Press Censor, and received an O.B.E. on the ‘special list’ in 1919 for his work for the Army’s South China Command.⁵⁵ He later “retired” from the army, and obtained a coal concession agreement in 1920 as a representative of a syndicate with the Guangdong province government, then controlled by one of the Guangxi “warlords.”⁵⁶ The agreement was profitable: Cassel held the right to a monopoly over railway building and mine development, and he received a £5,000 royalty every year from Jardine Matheson & Co. for a share of the coal output. Cassel was a member of the Committee of the Hongkong Automobile Association. He could even purchase the rented house that his wife’s parents lived in, a new Cadillac, and pay off all her debt at a stroke without difficulties shortly before they got married in 1923 in the United States.⁵⁷

Cassel’s private circumstances however soon went downhill as Chinese nationalists began to act to force foreigners “out of China.” The Guomindang’s Nationalist revolution of 1926-28 was indeed an unfinished revolution. For a start, although accepting the authority of the Nationalist government in Nanjing on paper, warlords such as Zhang Xueliang, Yan Xishan, and Feng Yuxiang in fact still retained much control of their regions and armies. Secondly, although after 1927 the National government had launched a programme to drive the foreigners out of China to restore the country’s sovereignty and pride, this too was incomplete. Almost all treaties with foreign powers and extraterritoriality still remained intact. But this does not mean foreign interests in China were unaffected; the Chinese

⁵⁵ *London Gazette*, 3 June 1919, 6985; “Former Resident Dies at Home: Major L. Cassel,” *SCMP*, 19 February 1935, 12.

⁵⁶ “The Cassel Agreement – Its Text,” *The Weekly Review of the Far East*, 2 July 1921, 225. On the complex politics of Guangdong in this period, see Roberta A Dayer, *Finance and Empire: Sir Charles Addis, 1861-1945* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 129.

⁵⁷ *Knight or Knave*, 24-5; “Former Resident Dies at Home: Major L. Cassel,” *SCMP*, 19 February 1935, 12.

successfully regained sovereignty in various areas.⁵⁸ Sir Cecil Clementi, then governor of Hong Kong, admitted in 1926 that, “the old order in China is changing, and the times are sadly out of joint.”⁵⁹ The British retreat from their concession in Hankou was an obvious manifestation of this changing order, and Cassel’s loss of his coal concession was another.

By 1928, the Guangdong government was refusing to recognize the Cassel Agreement, putting the once rich and influential Major in financial hardship. In a letter to his wife, he summarized how this happened almost overnight:

I had obtained the Cassel Concession in South China and floated it into a company in 1920. My profit was £20,000 and I had retained seven-thirtieths of the entire company, giving me a permanent income of £5,000 a year. Then Sun Yat Sen got into power and knocked the whole darned appplecart into smithereens and the Jardine Group discontinued my five thousand. I have stayed on out here [in Hongkong] expecting some government would in time recognize my concession. It has been very near a few times, but not yet eventuated!⁶⁰

It never did, and he was more or less stranded afterwards: he ceased his remittance to his wife and his overdue bills were so high that the Hong Kong Club terminated his seventeen-year-long membership. In 1931, the Major wrote to his wife that “China has gone from bad to worse and, as far as I can see, I with it. Unemployment is rife all over the world.”⁶¹ Although in 1932 he started a weekly journal *The Critic*, which he claimed to have a wide readership, it only brought him “very little in the way of money.” Friends had to pay for his passage back to England in 1934 for cancer treatment, and he only had about £10 in cash with extensive debts when he died in 1935.⁶²

⁵⁸ On Guomindang’s Nationalist revolution of 1926-28 and its impacts on foreign interests in China, see Robert Bickers, *Out of China: How the Chinese Ended the Era of Western Domination* (London: Allen Lane, 2017); Edmond S. K. Fung, *The Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat: Britain’s South China Policy, 1924-1931* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁵⁹ “Hongkong And Appeal for Friendship: His Excellency the Governor Asks for Co-operation, Council Meeting Speech,” *SCMP*, 16 October 1926, 11.

⁶⁰ Cassel to Bovill, dated 1929, in *Knight or Knave*, 77.

⁶¹ *Knight or Knave*, 77.

⁶² Wilkinson & Grist, Solicitors to Mrs. Louis Cassel, 25 April 1935, in *Knight or Knave*, 113.

While it was the change of political leadership in China that led to the change in his fortunes, Cassel clearly thought the Hong Kong government could – and should – have helped him more in gaining recognition for his concession. In a letter in 1932, he wrote resentfully about how the Colonial Secretary once promised to provide official support for his concession – “even to the use of force” – but never provided him such support when needed. “The Government, once they had got the financial group in power, ignored me, and even then I never said a word or even hinted that it would be wiser if they helped me. I subordinated my own interests to those of the State, and I always have.”⁶³

In many ways, Cassel was not only a Hong Kong Briton – he was a treaty port settler. Cassel’s circumstances resembled greatly those of the Shanghailanders, a group of treaty port settlers that Robert Bickers has studied. As Bickers has argued, treaty port settlers were not temporary sojourners in a foreign land – they saw themselves as settlers. They identified themselves with, firstly, their local community, and secondly, to the wider British presence in China. Whilst their primary identity was local, their British and imperialist identities persisted and became more obvious at moments of crisis. Their livelihood depended entirely on the existence of a foreign-controlled society in the Chinese treaty ports.⁶⁴ Similarly, Cassel’s livelihood was tied to China, and China was all he had – he refused to move to the United States, where his wife was working: “with no friends, no work and no club to go to! No.”⁶⁵ Like the Shanghailanders, he was completely dependent of the privileges that Britons enjoyed through the treaty port system. When such privileges came under threat as anti-

⁶³ *Knight or Knave*, 85-6.

⁶⁴ Robert Bickers, “Shanghailanders: The Formation and Identity of the British Settler Community in Shanghai 1843-1937,” *Past & Present*, 159 (May, 1998): 161-211; Robert Bickers, “Shanghailanders and Others,” in Robert Bickers (ed.), *Settlers and Expatriates: Britons over the Seas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 269-301.

⁶⁵ Cassel to Bovill, dated 1929, in *Knight or Knave*, 74.

imperialism developed in mid-1920s China, he – just like the Shanghailanders – faced the end of his livelihood.

Understanding Cassel as a Shanghaileander is important, because it explains his claimed formation of the White British League. When Cassel realized that the British state was not going to preserve his privilege, he sought to use the press. Through talking about threats facing Britons in China, he incited disquiet amongst the English reading public in the colony, as the Shanghailanders did when they formed the British Residents' Association during the crisis over treaty reforms in 1931.⁶⁶ His weekly publication of *The Critic* as a platform to “discuss politics” was one example, and his alleged formation of the White British League was just another. Cassel might have meant it when he said only an autonomous government could help Britons in Hong Kong protect their own “kith and kin,” but what was more likely was that he was trying to use the press to mobilize the Hong Kong reading public to help British settlers in China, whose interests were threatened by the rise of Chinese nationalism and the Great Depression.

He succeeded, in the sense that he evoked a vibrant discussion by articulating the supposed economic threats facing Britons in the colony, and in China more widely. Britons in Hong Kong who felt that their assumed rights were not prioritized wrote to newspapers to echo Cassel's initiatives. Journalists and readers debated frantically what was best for the economic interests of the colony. Worried about unemployed Britons and other European “intruders,” their discussion reflected not only economic anxieties that preoccupied the Hong Kong Britons, but also how Britons in the colonial periphery defined Britishness as a racial and class identity against other Europeans.

⁶⁶ Bickers, *Britain in China*, 149.

Poor Whites and British Prestige

Much of the 1933 debate centered around an anxiety about British unemployment in Hong Kong. Although some were doubtful of whether the local British population actually suffered from unemployment, all those who wrote on the issue showed a concern about having “poor whites” in the colony. As colonial authorities consciously constructed colonial hierarchies, they ensured that whiteness was never simply about appearances and ancestry, but also a social status that placed Europeans above “coloured” subjects.⁶⁷ Were Europeans in the empire aware that to be a European, they should not only be white, but also not poor? Did they accept such a definition? Following their discussion about poor whites, this section explores how Britons overseas consciously constructed respectability.

We should note that such anxiety had been looming over the local English reading public since the 1920s. Before the founding of the White British League in 1933, letters had appeared in the correspondence column of the *South China Morning Post* discussing British unemployment in Hong Kong. A “Britisher’s Grievance” in 1928, for instance, revealed how a British resident “with excellent references, and a wife and family to support” was unable to find employment for two months.⁶⁸ A reader in 1931 also observed that “there are at present a number of Britishers out of employment.”⁶⁹ Only months before the White British League’s apparent formation in 1933, newspapers reported three white Britons being charged with the Vagrancy Act, which empowered the Governor to send any non-Chinese without a “visible

⁶⁷ David Arnold, “European Orphans and Vagrants in India in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 7, 2 (1979): 104-27; Satoshi Mizutani, *The Meaning of White: Race, Class and the ‘Domiciled Community’ in British India 1858-1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Harald Fischer-Tiné, *Low and Licentious Europeans: Race, Class and “White Subalternity” in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2009); Marie-Paule Ha, *French Women and the Empire: The Case of Indochina* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Elizabeth Buettner, “Problematic Spaces, Problematic Races: Defining ‘Europeans’ in Late Colonial India,” *Women’s History Review*, 9, 2 (2000): 277-98.

⁶⁸ Britisher, “Britisher’s Grievance,” *SCMP*, 1 August 1928, 8.

⁶⁹ Interested, “Russians in Hongkong,” *SCMP*, 17 December 1931, 11.

means of subsistence” to the House of Detention.⁷⁰ The House of Detention was practically a prison – inhabitants were only allowed to go out to look for employment if they had completed work prescribed by the Superintendent of Police – and it was actually located in one.⁷¹ In August 1933, Cassel’s journal *The Critic* also published an article featuring a “local Ex-Policeman’s Terrible Ordeal,” which appeared to discuss an unemployed Briton there in detail.⁷²

Along with such press coverage was a discourse of the need to prioritize British job-seekers that existed in the colony. An “unemployed” Briton wrote in 1932 that he was “more than a little disgusted” at the practice where “opportunities in government departments and reputable British firms are given in preference to people of any but British nationality.”⁷³ In July 1933, only one month before Cassel’s formation of the League, a local businessman Sylvester Firth-Bernard wrote to the *South China Morning Post*, recruiting members for his Association of British Traders. Despite being mainly formed for the “promotion and protection of British business interests in the Colony,” it aimed to “open up every possible avenue for the employment of Britishers in Hong Kong.” Interestingly, he acknowledged that “others had been working on this problem for some time,” and that “Major Cassel [had] an extraordinarily sound grip of the position.”⁷⁴

As such, when newspapers reported the apparent formation of the League, many welcomed such initiatives. A “Briton,” for instance, wrote, “Yes! It is high time a White

⁷⁰ No. 9 of 1897, “Vagrancy Ordinance, 1897,” in *The Ordinances of Hong Kong, prepared under authority of Ordinance No. 51 of 1936*, ed. John Alexander Fraser (Hong Kong: Noronha, 1938-40), 537; “Article 24 – No Title,” *SCMP*, 1 April 1933, 21; “Out-of-Work Briton: Committed to the House of Detention,” *SCMP*, 25 April 1933, 14; “Unemployed Briton: Young Man Sent to the House of Detention to be Repatriated,” *SCMP*, 8 July 1933, 8.

⁷¹ “Reform Introduced: Conditions in the House of Detention,” *SCMP*, 1 January 1934, 10.

⁷² Cast Off, “British, But:,” *SCMP*, 8 August 1933, 11.

⁷³ Unemployed, “Employ British,” *SCMP*, 19 February 1932, 10.

⁷⁴ B. S. Firth-Bernard, “British Business Men,” *SCMP*, 20 July 1933, 11; Onlooker, “City Lights,” *SCMP*, 3 August 1933, 12.

Britons Society was formed.” “Briton” believed that this would help the unemployed Britons in Hong Kong:

There is, unfortunately, a large number of Britons here, who have absolutely no niche in the Colony. ... A couple of years ago, I met an Englishman who was so illiterate that – incredible as it may seem – he could do barely more than write his own name; he had been “sacked” [...], and was loudly complaining because he could not find another [job].

Possibly a government employee, “Briton” criticized the government for only sending a circular within the government inviting already-employed staff to fill a vacancy in the Post Office, instead of allowing unemployed Britons there to apply. “Briton” considered such practice “decidedly exasperating”: “they allow a man to reach a state of penury, then calmly ‘pinch’ him for vagrancy and lodge him in the ‘House.’”⁷⁵

Rhetoric supporting Cassel’s calls often implied that white British subjects should have a better social status than others in the colony. “Briton,” for instance, believed that, “strictly speaking, every Briton in Hong Kong should be holding a responsible position.” Referring to a parliamentary meeting during which a Member of Parliament asked whether unemployed Britons in Singapore received any official assistance, “Briton” complained that the British government did not assist unemployed Britons overseas. “Hong Kong, [...] was originally intended as an outlet for British trade, not for disposal of surplus population.”⁷⁶ Another reader “Cast Off” agreed with “Briton” that “a ‘poor white’ British class has been existing for years in Hong Kong”:

If we go just a step into “class gymnastics” we will find many married Britishers with deplorable remuneration, not to mention married British “Tommyes” with much less, struggling along in this Colony and faring worse than second class Chinese clerks and their concubines.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Briton, “British Unemployed in Hong Kong,” *SCMP*, 10 August 1933, 11.

⁷⁶ Briton, “British Unemployed in Hong Kong,” *SCMP*, 10 August 1933, 11.

⁷⁷ Cast Off, “The British Colony,” *SCMP*, 11 August 1933, 11.

Grumbling about some Britons' worse living conditions than the Chinese there, this writing underlines a "colonial myth" that simply associates whiteness with economic superiority, an axiom that was not uncommon in the empire, but far from the historical reality, as Harald Fischer-Tiné has pointed out.⁷⁸

While others argued that British unemployment was an exaggerated fear, they appeared to share this colonial myth. Henry Ching, the Australian Chinese editor of *South China Morning Post*, argued that Major Cassel and his supporters' discussion of British unemployment in Hong Kong was deceptive – because "most British adults in the colony were in fact in employment." The 1931 census supported Ching's view, as it recorded that the majority of the "European" population – who were predominantly British – were in Professional Occupations.⁷⁹ Therefore, Ching dismissed Cassel's and his supporters' discussion of British unemployment as "a few people in unfortunate circumstances [making] a lot of noise." He condemned the fallacy of using compulsion to enable British employment:

The total population, according to the census, is about 900,000, and, in view of the fact that the Briton requires a certain standard of living, the question is whether the body economic can support many more. In different ways it would be excellent could we increase the number of British residents. Any effort, however, to force the pace of absorption must result in reducing the living standard – perhaps in creating a "poor white" class largely British.⁸⁰

While explaining his opposition to fostering British employment through compulsion, Ching shows an explicit concern about having poor white British subjects in the colony.

From this debate, we see a determination to maintain the respectability of Britons in the colonial periphery. Colonial authorities may have constructed a notion of "respectable" Britons, but as the debate shows, such notion was not only unilaterally posed on Britons travelling, living, and working in the colonial periphery. Overseas Britons internalized such

⁷⁸ Fischer-Tiné, *Low and Licentious Europeans*, 2.

⁷⁹ Carrie, "Report on the census of the Colony of Hong Kong taken on the night of March 7, 1931," 146.

⁸⁰ "The British Colony," *SCMP*, 9 August 1933, 12.

notion, and were in fact active in preserving such “respectability.” Whether or not they believed in economic protectionism, they attempted to ensure the economic standing of Britons there to maintain British prestige and racial hierarchy in a colony like Hong Kong.

“Intrusion” of other Europeans

As unemployment hit the global economy, many blamed migrants for “stealing” jobs that were already scarce. Britons in treaty ports in China were not immune from this mentality. Scholars have explored the experience of white “latecomers” who left their home countries for jobs and opportunities in Shanghai during the Depression years as well as the “White Russians” (referring to Russians who left their homeland for their opposition to “the Reds”).⁸¹ Nevertheless, we know little about the interactions between Britons and the wider European population in the empire. Did the British welcome the arrival of their white counterparts? Or, did they, like those in the metropole, see the white newcomers as the cause of the hardships they were facing?

An economic commission formed in 1934 by Governor William Peel to study the local effects of the Great Depression noted that Hong Kong, compared to neighboring regions, suffered much less from its effects – “one does not see processions of unemployed or an undue number of empty premises and shops.” It argued that the population’s “standard of well being” was “well maintained.”⁸² Whilst annual reports on social and economic conditions in 1932 and 1933 noted that a European was more inclined to have suffered from the fluctuating exchange values as they bought more imported goods, “no noticeable effect

⁸¹ Sophie Loy-Wilson, *Australians in Shanghai: Race, Rights and Nation in Treaty Port China* (London: Routledge, 2017); Marcia Reynders Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort: The Diaspora Communities of Shanghai* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

⁸² “Report of the Commission appointed by His Excellency the Governor of Hong Kong to enquire into The Causes and Effects of the Present Trade Depression in Hong Kong and Make Recommendations for the Amelioration of the Existing Position and for the Improvement of the Trade of the Colony” (Hong Kong: Noronha & Co., 1935), 71.

was apparent in the local prices of articles imported from England.”⁸³ While the lives of Britons in Hong Kong were generally no worse off than before, they felt that their prestige was likely to be affected – if it had not happened already. As discussed above, unemployment was a pressing concern shared by Cassel and his supporters. As they discussed the threat that other Europeans posed to Britons in the colony, their debate highlights the precarious relationship amongst the European population in Hong Kong. They defined their Britishness against other Europeans, especially those whom they deemed would potentially undermine their prestige – or even worse, presage their possible future.

Some of Cassel’s proposed initiatives – such as the abolition of Chinese Justices of Peace and the prosecution of Chinese aliens trading under bogus British names – appear to demonstrate distrust of, and hostility towards, Chinese in the colony. As in British India, which underwent “Indianisation,” the Hong Kong government intended to adopt a policy of localization to promote more Chinese within the colonial administration in the 1930s.⁸⁴ Could such practice be the reason why Cassel proposed to adopt protectionist measures to guard British interests in the colony? Did he mostly want to ensure Chinese inferiority in the colonial hierarchy?

However, if we look at his suggested “methods of persuasion” to be undertaken before Hong Kong could have an autonomous government, we could see that the Chinese were not whom he worried the most about:

Supposing a member of the League takes a party of friends to dine at a hotel.... If that member of the League is waited upon by a Russian waiter or *maitre d’hôtel*,

⁸³ “Annual Report on the Social and Economic Progress of the People of the Colony of Hong Kong During the Year 1932,” 19; “Annual Report on the Social and Economic Progress of the People of the Colony of Hong Kong During the Year 1933,” 19-21.

⁸⁴ On Indianisation, see J. D. Shukla, *Indianisation of all-India services and its impact on administration 1834-1947* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1982). On the localization policy that the Hong Kong government formally adopted in 1936, see Steve Tsang, *Governing Hong Kong: Administrative Officers from the Nineteenth century to the handover to China, 1862-1997* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 114-38.

he will just walk out and take his custom elsewhere. ... Take another instance – the anti-piracy guards, where Russians are given preference. British steamship companies employing foreigners should be made to substitute ex-Service men, plenty of whom are unemployed and capable of doing this work. If the companies refuse to employ British “whites,” people should travel on other lines.⁸⁵

His particular reference to Russians reflects how Cassel perceived other Europeans in the colony as a threat to working class Britons there. This view was apparent in another letter he wrote a week later:

Let us for a moment recall what happened between 1899 and 1902 – the South African War, more generally known as the Boer War. Before 1899 there were three British Colonies in Africa south of the Zambesi, ... the Cape Colony, Natal and Rhodesia. All three were administered by British Whites, with a small percentage of Dutch Colonials. Today only Rhodesia remains in that category. Natal and Cape Colony have come under Dutch domination and one can practically say “no Englishman need apply.” [...] The League of British Whites will see to it that this sort of thing, peaceful penetration some people call it, shall not happen in Hongkong.⁸⁶

Cassel was not the only person in the colony holding an ambivalence towards other Europeans. Soon after the report of Cassel’s interview, some wrote to the newspapers in support of his view. “Cast Off,” for instance, believed that “this Colony is fast being choked up with other nations’ job seekers” – “particularly noticeable of late is the influx of Russians (both sexes) and Germans.” “Cast Off” believed that Britons had suffered much from competing with these newcomers: “Britishers in Hong Kong strongly deprecate the all too frequent practice of giving preferential treatment to foreigners because they are cheaper to employ and easier to get rid of.”⁸⁷ Another reader regarded Cast Off’s opinion to be “very close to all Britons in the Colony.”⁸⁸ Writing to support Cassel’s call, “Briton” elaborated on the threat that a growing Russian community put on the colony’s job market:

Within the last three years Russians have been arriving in such numbers, that the district round and about Hankow Road is known to Kowloon residents as “Little

⁸⁵ “White British League: New Society Establishing a Branch in Hong Kong, Empire-wide Ramifications,” *SCMP*, 5 August 1933, 9.

⁸⁶ Major Cassel, “The League of British Whites,” *Hongkong Telegraph*, 12 August 1933, 11.

⁸⁷ Cast Off, “British, But-,” *SCMP*, 8 August 1933, 11.

⁸⁸ T. S. S., “Local Grievances,” *SCMP*, 14 August 1933, 11.

Moscow,” and I am surprised that a Russian newspaper has not yet made its appearance. These Russians are not living on pre-Revolution wealth: they’ve all got jobs here.⁸⁹

“Another Briton” also agreed that “now is not the time to have any foreigners intruding our premises, Russians in particular.” Stating that “no one can deny the fact that the above-mentioned are occupying positions which should have been filled by Britishers,” this comment clearly perceived other Europeans as intruders in the Hong Kong job market.⁹⁰

Their particular reference to Russians relates to a more deep-rooted apprehension about the Russian diaspora in China. The Russian October Revolution and subsequent civil war drove many Russians to leave their homeland. Their population in China (outside Manchuria) numbered about 30,000 by the mid-1930s.⁹¹ They, however, soon found themselves unwelcomed by the other foreigners there. Britons and other Europeans considered these White Russians an embarrassment to their “white prestige” – “these impoverished refugees were white and yet willing to do menial labour alongside Chinese.”⁹²

While they were seen as a threat to working class Britons’ livelihood in Hong Kong, Russians and Germans were in fact only an insignificant portion of the population there. Since the turn of the twentieth century, Britons had always formed a majority of the colony’s non-Chinese population. Amongst the 5,629 residents of “pure European descent” in 1921, 3,183 were British. The two European communities that appeared to yield most concern, Russians and Germans, in fact comprised only a small part of the non-Chinese population. The 1921 census recorded only thirty-six Russians and three Germans in town.⁹³ The 1931 Census recorded 127 Russians. Although the German community in Hong Kong recovered from the aftermath of First World War and its population started growing again, they

⁸⁹ Briton, “British Unemployed in Hong Kong,” *SCMP*, 10 August 1933, 11.

⁹⁰ Another Briton, “The White British League,” *SCMP*, 11 August 1933, 11.

⁹¹ Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 3.

⁹² Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 14-15; Bickers, *Britain in China*, 72-3.

⁹³ J. D. Lloyd, “Report on the Census of the Colony for 1921,” 176-7.

numbered 179 in the 1931 Census. If we compare the figures with the fact that there were 6,684 British civilians in the colony, it is hard to imagine these 306 people (only 15% of the non-British European population) would pose a great threat to the livelihood of Britons in Hong Kong.⁹⁴

However irrational this fear about “alien penetration” may sound, the fact was that it overwhelmed Hong Kong Britons throughout much of the interwar era. A concern about other white migrants in fact had appeared in local newspapers since the 1920s. A heated discussion about “the increasing numbers of Russians who are flocking into the Colony” occurred in the *South China Morning Post* in September 1925.⁹⁵ A “Britisher’s Grievance” in 1928 complained how he lost out in the job market to other Europeans:

At one leading British firm I was informed that there was no vacancy at present, but my name was taken for the first vacancy which might occur. Judge, then, my surprise when I found, three days later, that a Russian who was absolutely inexperienced at the work had been given the vacancy. At many other firms I found Belgians, Russians, Germans, in fact every nationality other than British, were employed.⁹⁶

Three years later, another reader complained that “British firms are employing so called White Russians, to a certain extent because they are cheaper than the Britishers.”⁹⁷ The Hong Kong Britons did not only bring such concern to the attention of newspapers editors, but also colonial administrators and even authorities in London. In 1934, a Member of Parliament Sir Alfred Knox asked the Secretary of State for the Colonies about the employment of Russians

⁹⁴ “Report on the census of the Colony of Hong Kong taken on the night of March 7, 1931,” 111-2.

⁹⁵ J. C., “Timely Urgings: policy and the Need for Action,” *SCMP*, 11 September 1925, 9; Ex-Serviceman, “The Employment of Russians,” *SCMP*, 14 September 1925, 10; J. C., “Russians in Hongkong,” 16 September 1925, 8; An Inquisitive Canadian, “Russians in Hongkong,” *SCMP*, 17 September 1925, 9; A. Aiken, “Russians in Hongkong,” *SCMP*, 18 September 1925, 8; Ralph A. Cooper, “Russians in Hongkong,” *SCMP*, 19 September 1925, 3; British, “Russians in Hongkong,” *SCMP*, 19 September 1925, 3; White Russian, “Russians in Hongkong,” *SCMP*, 22 September 1925, 11.

⁹⁶ Britisher, “Britisher’s Grievance,” *SCMP*, 1 August 1928, 8.

⁹⁷ Interested, “Russians in Hongkong,” *SCMP*, 17 December 1931, 11.

in the Hong Kong police force.⁹⁸ Works on immigrants and minorities in Britain have pointed out that the presence of “other” Europeans in Britain shaped British national identities.⁹⁹ As the Hong Kong Britons drew the line between themselves and European “aliens” in Hong Kong, their discussion enhances our understanding about British encounters with other whites in the wider empire. While on one hand Hong Kong Britons usually referred to themselves as “Europeans,” they did not always regard other Europeans as part of their community. Just as Britons in China started in 1917-18 to define themselves against White Russians, Hong Kong Britons began to see other Europeans in the colony as intruders in their imperial territory.¹⁰⁰

While drawing the line between the British and European “aliens” in Hong Kong, Hong Kong Britons also discussed whose interests a British colony should serve. Those worried about Russian and German “intruders” clearly believed that Hong Kong, a British colony, should prioritize the interests of the British Whites. Cassel stated openly in his interview that the British Empire should be “for the British White People, who made it and intend to keep it ‘white.’”¹⁰¹ His supporter, “Briton,” criticized the practice that “local concerns give preference to anybody but a Briton” and stated that it was “an indisputable fact that any Briton has a prior right over any other nationality to employment in this Colony.”¹⁰² Some argued that a British colony like Hong Kong should prioritize British interests, justifying this through comparison with policies in other empires. “Another Briton,” for instance, wrote, “take for example the Dutch Colonies, the French Colonies and also the

⁹⁸ “Common Questions: Russians in Hongkong Police Force, Mui-tsai Problem,” *SCMP*, 2 March 1934, 16; Service, “Employment in Local Police Force,” *SCMP*, 5 March 1934, 11.

⁹⁹ Tony Kushner, *The Battle of Britishness* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012); Tony Kushner, *We Europeans? Mass-Observation, ‘Race’ and British Identity in the Twentieth Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

¹⁰⁰ Bickers, *Britain in China*, 72.

¹⁰¹ “White British League: New Society Establishing a Branch in Hong Kong, Empire-wide Ramifications,” *SCMP*, 5 August 1933, 9.

¹⁰² Briton, “British Unemployed in Hong Kong,” *SCMP*, 10 August 1933, 11.

Portuguese Colonies, and I venture to say there are no Britishers employed in any of them.”¹⁰³ “Cast Off” also agreed:

If a Britisher desires to land in the Dutch East Indies to sell his firm’s manufactures, in addition to the heavy tax levied on the goods, he has to cough up a head tax of about 260 guilders before he can land for any length of time and that’s not the end of it. This is but one instance of what goes on in other colonies.

“Cast Off” condemned the Hong Kong government for not following similar practice, causing the influx of aliens. “So long as passport is in order, and the foreigner has a few dollars in his pocket, anybody can land free and unmolested in HK and almost do as he likes, for this Colony in the foreigners’ eyes, is simply a ‘walk on velvet.’” They ended the letter with a telling comment implying that Hong Kong failed its mission as a British colony: “this British Colony: how British is it? Almost.”¹⁰⁴

The underlying anxiety behind the question “how British is it” in fact concerns not only Hong Kong, but the fading British interests in China more widely. Henry Ching joined the discussion by asking: “This British Colony: how British is it? ‘Not at all,’ some Britons will reply, nor observe that the answer condemns them too.” He also agreed that the colony was inadequately British: “as to real estate, the Colony is now almost entirely ‘owned’ by Chinese, and, as to public companies, Britain seems to retain only the narrowest margin of control.” He added, “as a naval and military station purely, the Colony can be all British. As a trading entrepot it can only be as British as British capital can make it, and as competition permits.”¹⁰⁵ We should note that this “problem” – of Cassel’s criticism of “Chinese trading under bogus British names,” and of insufficiently British capital – was not unique to Hong Kong, but a more deep-rooted feature of the wider British presence in China.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Another Briton, “The White British League,” *SCMP*, 11 August 1933, 11.

¹⁰⁴ Cast Off, “This British Colony,” *SCMP*, 11 August 1933, 11.

¹⁰⁵ “This British Colony,” *SCMP*, 9 August 1933, 12.

¹⁰⁶ Bickers, *Britain in China*, 173.

It was equally important to not provoke other imperial powers in neighboring regions. A “Peace Lover” worried that introducing economic nationalism into Hong Kong would leave negative repercussions to the wider British interests in China:

My point is, if in the British colony of Hongkong, the British Government enforce that British occupy outstanding positions in all big concerns with Chinese or American or French capital, what will the American Government do in American territories and the French Government, in the French possessions? The result will be revenge and retaliation which are enemies to peace.¹⁰⁷

Such references to other European empires are revealing. While discussion of “European intruders” undoubtedly relates to racism, it also points to an awareness of competing imperialisms. While not everyone agreed that the government should prioritize British interests through compulsion, they reached the consensus that a British colony like Hong Kong should do its best to serve British interests, as to advance in this competition of European imperialism. But what exactly were British interests, when they were in an empire where those of “non-white” ancestries could also be British?

Rights of other British subjects

While the previous sections show how some Britons in Hong Kong articulated a notion of Britishness as a racial identity exclusive to the “British Whites,” the 1933 debate in fact also highlights the increasing recognition of the British status held by non-white subjects in the empire. Prior to 1948, all who owed allegiance to the Crown through being born in the empire were entitled to the status of British subject.¹⁰⁸ Hundreds of thousands of those born in Hong Kong were – legally speaking – as British as those from the British Isles could be, regardless of their ancestry. While Cassel and his supporters advocated protection and

¹⁰⁷ Peace Lover, “Local Employment,” *SCMP*, 11 August 1933, 11.

¹⁰⁸ Ian A. Macdonald QC and Webber Frances, *Macdonald’s Immigration Law & Practice* (Bath: Reed Elsevier, 2001), 44.

advancement of only those they considered “British whites,” many questioned whether such a narrow definition of Britishness could apply in the multi-ethnic empire in which they resided.

These sceptics include some “coloured Britishers.” Possibly due to the government’s censorship of Chinese newspapers before their publication – empowered by the Emergency Regulations Ordinance, a legacy of the strikes in the 1920s – Chinese newspapers in Hong Kong did not report the League’s formation.¹⁰⁹ It is therefore hard to know whether the wider Chinese population was aware of the League’s existence, let alone their views towards such a scheme. We can, however, still explore the reaction of those who could – and would – read English newspapers in Hong Kong.

Amongst them, a “British Chinese” was clearly disappointed with Cassel’s calls, which they interpreted as a rejection of non-white subjects as British. “Have the coloured British ever failed the Empire in any manner of way, in peace or in war, that a sharp line is to be drawn dividing Whites and non-Whites?” they asked, “couldn’t the League of British Whites spread its Fascist-like wings without too much flutter and flapping and without injecting the serum of race hatred and prejudice?”¹¹⁰ A presumably Portuguese reader, “Lusimania,” deprecated the notion of providing only distinct protection for “British Whites,” although “coloured Britishers” had contributed just as much to the empire:

When the whole world was fighting Germany, why wasn’t a White British League formed? When the Gurkhas and Eurasian Britishers were fighting side by side with the White Britishers why wasn’t a league formed? There was no discrimination between white or coloured Britishers, so why now?¹¹¹

Even some ‘British whites’ wrote to the press to advocate for “coloured Britishers.”

Having spoken against Russian intrusion in the colony, “Another Briton” in fact considered the League infeasible as it neglected the rights of the local-born British subjects:

¹⁰⁹ Michael Ng, “When Silence Speaks: Press Censorship and Rule of Law in British Hong Kong, 1850s-1940s,” *Law & Literature* (July 2017), 1-32.

¹¹⁰ A British Chinese, “Nordic Superiority,” *Hongkong Telegraph*, 14 August 1933, 7.

¹¹¹ Lusimania, “The White British League,” *SCMP*, 11 August 1933, 11.

Though appreciating his scheme for fostering employment for the British Whites in Hongkong, the majority of British Whites in Hongkong would never tolerate the idea of cutting out the Hongkong-born British subjects, which of course is unthinkable, and as far as one can gather the Hongkong born Eurasians and Chinese are as proud of the Colony as we Britishers are, and such a scheme could only be workable for British subjects only, and might be given the name “British League” instead of “White British League.”¹¹²

“Proud of their Hongkong-born British subjects,” “Another Briton” believed that “it is just as important for the British Whites to be in perfect harmony with the British-born subjects of Hongkong as it is for them to be in harmony with us.” Another reader “Peace Lover” asked newspapers not to publish letters with similar views as Cassel’s in the future, because it would “kill the Chinese love for the British and the British love for the Chinese.”¹¹³

Notably, those sharing a similar view did not necessarily do so as they believed the non-white British subjects deserved equal treatment in their own right, but more for the sake of political stability and economic prosperity. A presumably British reader under the pseudonym “Goodwill” wrote:

Besides the Chinese the rights of the coloured British subjects are involved. We do not want any “race-wars” inside the Empire at this time, when so much depends on the white and coloured British subjects working together for mutual benefit. The idea that the Empire is a white man’s Empire can only be described as ridiculous. No place in the world is so dependent on international goodwill for its commercial prosperity as this Colony; and I hope that the authorities will take care that a few flag-wagging Leaguers, with their penny-wise-pound-foolish policy, are not allowed to jeopardise the interests of the whole British community.¹¹⁴

He worried that the League might provoke the Chinese to start movements that would harm British interests, such as a boycott of British goods, and therefore called the League “dangerously provocative.”

If we consider these letters alongside the writings examined in the earlier section on fascism, we can see how an internationalist view enriched notions of Britishness in the

¹¹² Another Briton, “The White British League,” *SCMP*, 11 August 1933, 11.

¹¹³ Peace Lover, “Local Employment,” *SCMP*, 11 August 1933, 11.

¹¹⁴ Goodwill, “The White British League,” *SCMP*, 9 August 1933, 11.

interwar period. A growing literature sees colonial-era port cities as sites of cosmopolitanism where regional and racial boundaries broke down.¹¹⁵ Although colonialism intensified – and often generated – ethnic divide through constructing racial hierarchies, increasing flows of ideas and people encouraged some to appreciate multiethnic interaction and an international outlook. Using the case study of overseas Chinese community in Penang¹¹⁶, scholars have noted that English press became a tool for many to seek reforms of the colonial order so that the hierarchy of ‘race’ and nationality would break down.¹¹⁷

The White British League debate shows how such discourse emerged not only amongst the “indigenous” communities, but also subjects of different diasporic communities coexisting in the empire. One of the two identifiable contributors to this discussion was Henry Ching. Born in Queensland to a Chinese storekeeper from Hong Kong and his wife, Ching had – as his obituary on the *Post* stated – “learned a great deal about the ways of the world” since his childhood.¹¹⁸ Like many Australian Chinese at the time, the White Australian policy turned his world upside down: the policy forced his father out of business, which led to the premature end of his education at the age of fifteen.¹¹⁹ Ching, much like the Straits Chinese, pleaded his loyalty to the British Empire: he had intended to go to Egypt to

¹¹⁵ Glenda Sluga and Julia Horne, “Cosmopolitanism: Its Past and Practices,” *Journal of World History*, 21, 3 (2010): 369-73; McPherson, “Port Cities as Nodal Points of Change,” 83; Sunil S. Amrith, “Mobile City and the Coromandel Coast: Tamil Journeys to Singapore, 1920-1960,” *Mobilities* 5, 2 (2010): 237-55; Chua Ai Lin, “Nation, Race, and Language: Discussing Transnational Identities in Colonial Singapore, circa 1930,” *Modern Asian Studies*, 46, 2 (2012): 283-302; Lewis, *Cities in Motion*.

¹¹⁶ Chua Ai Lin, “Imperial Subjects, Straits Citizen: Anglophone Asians and the Struggle for Political Rights in Inter-war Singapore,” in *Paths Not Taken: Political Pluralism in Post-War Singapore*, eds. Michael D. Barr and Carl A. Trocki (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2008), 1-36; Frost, “Emporium in Imperio”; Clive J. Christie, *A Modern History of South East Asia: Decolonization, Nationalism and Separatism* (London: Tauris, 1996), 34-7.

¹¹⁷ Su Lin Lewis, “Echoes of Cosmopolitanism: Colonial Penang’s ‘Indigenous’ English Press,” in *Media and the British Empire*, ed. Chandrika Kaul (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 233-49.

¹¹⁸ “Death of Distinguished Retired H.K. Editor,” *SCMP*, 1 April 1968, 1.

¹¹⁹ On lives of Chinese Australians’ lives under the White Australia policy, see John Fitzgerald, *Big White Lie: Chinese Australians in White Australia* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2007); Loy-Wilson, *Australians in Shanghai*.

join the British Army to fight in the First World War before he took his bed-ridden father to see Hong Kong once more before death. This supposedly short visit, however, became a long-term residence: Ching began working for the *Post* in 1916, and from 1924 would be the editor of the paper for more than three decades.¹²⁰ Ching, along with other “coloured Britishers” who contributed to the 1933 debate – “Another Chinese” and “Lusimania” – envisaged an empire that was liberal and international, and articulated such vision as they debated with those who suggested otherwise. Also sharing similar vision were Britons like “Another Briton,” “Blonde Beast,” and Alfred Hicks, the editor of *Hongkong Telegraph*. Born in Cornwall, Hicks came to Hong Kong in 1908 and lived there until his death in 1937. Much like “Another Briton” and “Blonde Beast,” Hicks’ editorials articulated strong opposition to fascist and ethno-centric discourses. Not only believing that interracial harmony was crucial for imperial interests, they also affirmed that others in the empire were as British as the “British whites” could be. They were keen to protect these “coloured” subjects’ rights as British subjects – at least keen enough to write extensively to oppose initiatives that suggested otherwise.

As Hong Kong-Britons articulated a desire to protect their own ‘kith and kin’ through economic protectionism, they defined what exactly were British interests, and more importantly, who was British. Given our previous understanding of the 1930s as a decade full of nationalist expression, not many would be surprised by the exclusivity demonstrated by Cassel’s views and those supporting economic protectionism. But what is striking about the White British League debate is that it uncovers the voice of those contesting such ideals. As Britons in Hong Kong debated about the boundary of being ‘British’, their discussion reveals

¹²⁰ “Death of Distinguished Retired H.K. Editor,” *SCMP*, 1 April 1968, 1.

how Britishness was understood as not only an ethno-national identity, but an inclusive national belonging available to people of color.

Conclusion

Traces of the White British League disappeared from surviving records after 14 August 1933, less than two weeks after the report of its formation. Three months later in November 1933, local newspapers reported Cassel's retirement from *The Critic*. The next time he was in Hong Kong news was when his death made it to the front page of the *Hong Kong Telegraph*.¹²¹ In February 1935, the once influential and controversial Major Louis Cassel, O.B.E., died of cancer at the Mount Vernon Hospital in north London, leaving the goals of the League unachieved.¹²²

Cassel and his alleged formation of the White British League tells us little – if any – about actual economic and social conditions of white Britons in Hong Kong. Only a few out of thousands of Britons in Hong Kong were jobless. The point of this article however is not to examine whether white Britons' social and economic status was in jeopardy, but to reflect on why their subjective experience seemed to be so. My interest here has been in understanding how anxiety about declining British privilege allowed the very idea of such a political movement to be elevated to the subject of a heated debate. Cassel had lost his concessions in strife-torn China, and blamed a weak British policy that did not support the interests of its nationals; but other Britons in colonial Hong Kong felt that even in a colony that supposedly existed to further British interests, their assumed rights were not prioritized.

¹²¹ "Maj. L. Cassel Passes: Former Resident of Hongkong," *Hongkong Telegraph*, 18 February 1933, 1.

¹²² "Obituary: Former Resident Dies at Home," *SCMP*, 19 February 1935, 12; "Obituary: Major L. Cassel," *Hongkong Daily Press*, 19 February 1935, 7; "News in Brief," *The Times*, 19 February 1935, 11.

Such anxiety did not only overwhelm Hong Kong Britons in 1933 – it in fact predated the League’s formation, and continued to haunt the English-reading public there in much of the 1930s, as evidenced in the correspondence column of the colony’s English paper.

As they articulated such anxiety, this debate provides us with a case study of how the fluid, ambiguous borders of whiteness and Britishness were negotiated at the intersection of nationalism, ethnicity, class, and race in an imperial context. For Cassel and some others, their primary concern was to ensure that the British Empire functioned to serve the interest of British whites, so as to maintain their status and privilege. In their eyes, the colonial authorities ought to foster mandatory British employment in the colony, because having poor white Britons in Hong Kong would endanger the basis of an assumed British supremacy. Having non-British Europeans there was also not ideal, partly because some of them were “poor whites,” but more so because they were not British. Their obvious ambivalence towards other Europeans was certainly related to a longer history of racism; but it also had to do with an awareness of the imperial competition taking place between Britain and other European empires. Whilst some sought to protect the rights of “coloured Britishers,” none of the comments published in the press spoke for the Germans and Russians whom Cassel and others had labelled as “intruders.” The debate then also illuminates how Britishness as a non-European identity translated to a colonial setting, a question that previous literature has rarely touched on.¹²³

The protest that Cassel’s exclusionary proposals prompted is also revealing. It is obvious that some readers and journalists took the debate as a chance to battle against notions of exclusivity, which they considered to be symptoms of wider trends that were jeopardizing

¹²³ On Britishness as a ‘non-European identity in the context of Britain, see Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Linda Colley, “Britishness and Otherness: An Argument,” *Journal of British Studies*, 31, 4 (1992): 309-29; Kushner, *We Europeans?*.

world peace. Recent studies have focused on the prominence that cosmopolitan sensibilities and civic culture played in the public sphere of Asian port cities in the interwar era. The White British League debate suggests that such cosmopolitanism had its limits.¹²⁴ It is apparent that participants of the debate were essentially debating exclusivity and inclusivity, but it is also hard to assert which view was in the ascendance in this debate. The correspondence generated its own momentum, each argument prompted ripostes and rejections. Opinions seem to have played out fairly evenly across the course of the debate, but clearly editorial selection is likely to have produced this picture as well.

What is most striking about this debate was the global perspectives of the English-language reading public in the British colony of Hong Kong. Taking place in local newspapers, this debate in fact tells us as much about the “global 1930s,” as it does about 1930s-Hong Kong. Kim Wagner’s pioneering study of the mud-daubing panic of 1894 shows that colonial societies often panicked not because they lacked information, but ironically because they “knew” too much.¹²⁵ Likewise, readers and editors only responded to the British White League debate so strongly because of their anxieties – anxieties fueled by reports of political, social, and economic developments across the globe. The White British League debate provides us with a timely opportunity to rethink how the local, ‘national’, regional, and global was interwoven, even amongst the English reading public in the British colony of Hong Kong in 1933.

¹²⁴ Lewis, *Cities in Motion*.

¹²⁵ Wagner, “‘Treading Upon Fires.’”