LIVES OF THE AH KU AND KARAYUKI-SAN OF SINGAPORE: THEIR LIVES, SOURCES, METHOD AND A HISTORIAN’S REPRESENTATION*

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Introduction: on space and time

*Ah ku* is a general term of address in Cantonese for a woman or lady irrespective of age. Ah ku was the polite way to address a Chinese prostitute in colonial Singapore. *Loi ku* or "whore" was the opposite denigrating term in Cantonese. *Karayuki-san* was the word used traditionally by the Japanese of Amakusa Island and the Shimabara Peninsula, northwest Kyushu, to describe rural women who emigrated to Southeast Asia and the Pacific in search of a livelihood. The ideographs comprising karayuki-san literally mean "going to China," as Kyushu, the place where most of the women were from, was the part of Japan closest to China. Karayuki-san in common parlance nowadays has become a popular term to describe women from the poorest sectors of society during the Meiji/Taisho periods who lived and worked abroad as prostitutes. In this paper, I attempt to explore sources, a method and an approach to analyse and explain the life and circumstance of the ah ku and karayuki-san, and portray their roles and the subject of brothel prostitution in Singapore, between 1870 and 1940, in a broader regional context. There have been few studies of prostitution in Southeast Asia that recognise that prostitutes, as a marginal group in society, have a history of their own (Foster and Ranum 1978, vii; Warren 1990, 96-122). Examinations of prostitution have primarily focused on the social, psychological and sexual services which women like the ah ku and karayuki-san traditionally provide for men. In this context, brothel prostitution in colonial Singapore has been viewed primarily in relation to another person, the male, often a coolie, and its effects on him or Singapore, rather than on the prostitute herself and her reaction to a particular situation and place in society.

The tidewater colonial capitals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries created new modes of human experience for immigrant Asians, but especially for prostitutes and coolies. The rapid development of Singapore at the end of the nineteenth century as a commercial centre and entrepot port, dominated by import and export firms and banks, for

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Britain's imperial expansion and trade-oriented economy in Southeast Asia had a profound impact upon every aspect of economic and social relationships. It was most marked in the labour nexus and spatial segregation of the ah ku and karayuki-san and the lower class Chinese who, as rickshaw pullers, coal-heavers, stevedores and hawkers helped shape the expansion of Singapore (Warren 1984, 80-91). The historian of society must concentrate on a particular place—the port-city of Singapore—though what is uncovered in this tide-water colonial capital resonates beyond its confined space and has relevance to many such ports of monsoon Asia and all sites of Chinese and Japanese brothel prostitution overseas. This history would describe and analyse brothel prostitution in the urban areas of turn of the century Singapore, situating the sexually repressive, exploitative institution in its proper social-historical context. The attempt here is to shape a conceptual and analytical framework for a social history of brothel prostitution based upon links between large-scale processes and small-scale experience occurring in Singapore and in rural China and Japan in the years between 1879 and 1940. Broader issues of social change, and manners and morals in China and Japan, were mirrored in the actual circumstance of the women’s lives as a strictly sexual commodity — beautiful merchandise. The environmental setting of Singapore as a port-city and “coolie town,” the geographical focus of such a social history, had a direct impact on the daily existence of the prostitutes and their clients. The traumas attached to the life of this Chinese city — emotionally demanding and physically brutal—acutely affected the lives of the ah ku and karayuki-san. As the urban economy continued to expand in the 1890s and as immigration became increasingly critical, the number of male migrant clients seeking marginal employment swelled. The problems of prostitutes inevitably intensified. And only those Chinese and Japanese women who possessed balance and strength had any chance of surviving the paradoxes of the city’s emerging economic and political developments. A central argument of this paper is that brothel prostitution in Singapore, as a particular type of the city and social setting, represented the development of a process of labour regulation and segregation in which the structure and ideology of British, Chinese and Japanese societies combined to confine prostitutes to a profession typified by hazardous conditions, low wages and monotonous work. The insistent linkage of the individual fate of Chinese and Japanese prostitutes with Singapore’s fate permits the social historian to avoid presenting the superficial past, by merely exploring the city’s surface. The rhythms of this history and a particular vision tell the social historian what one understands as possible. The narrative ought to move between China, Japan and Singapore as it presents its evidence on the long-term forces, the structures which determined individual actions and everyday life and recounts the testimonies of the ah ku and karayuki-san.
A social history of the ah ku and karayuki-san would be organised chronologically-thematically emphasising large scale processes and small scale experience. This research begins by insistently linking the big events in the Asian region to the lives of the ah ku and karayuki-san: tracing traditional patterns of work and family in rural societies torn apart by natural catastrophe, warlordism, a market economy or industrialisation, defining who there were, moving on to their experiences as prostitutes and migrant women in Singapore, and finally focussing on the other significant people in their lives, notably, members of the fictive brothel “family”, who looked after their routine existence, and clients. As a portrait of Singapore set at the beginning of this century, this history would explore how prostitutes viewed their profession, working conditions and changing social attitudes, during a critical period in the port-city’s development (See Hershatter 1989, 464 and Gronewold 1982, 74). Throughout this part of the study there would run a keen awareness that, in describing and analysing the life and circumstance of the prostitutes, the historian must place appropriate emphasis upon those issues and values that were important to them. A careful examination of what forces made women and girls choose prostitution as a way of life would also reflect the wider social, economic and political conditions of their particular time and place. There is a need here to capture the sense of time. As a social history, there would be telling insights into how grinding was the poverty and degradation of life in rural China and Japan just one hundred years ago. While Britain’s imperialist administrators and merchants were establishing a nerve centre of trade and empire which made Singapore “great”, the ordinary women in areas such as Amakusa Island the Pearl River delta were crammed into poverty stricken villages. Their wretched inhabitants, often malnourished and riddled with diseases, attempted to scratch a living as best they could. Local changes and subsequent events in the existence of these women would be placed repeatedly in the context of phenomena occurring in Singapore, Britain and northeast Asia, as well as other parts of the world. A distinguishing feature of this social history should be the leaps in time and space when examining the causes and impact of poverty in the lives of the prostitutes and the nature of their interaction with the growth of the city, and changes in colonial and local social policies with respect to prostitution. The social historian should compare something that happened in the life of a karayuki-san like Osaki or Oyoshi late in the nineteenth century in Japan, for instance, with a connected occurrence in their careers or that of another woman in the twentieth century in Singapore - so that one understands both more clearly (Yamazaki 1975, 52-60; Singapore Coroners Inquest [SCII], Oyoshi). At the Singapore end one should try to emphasise those factors which brought prostitutes and coolies into the developing life of the city, those which involved maintaining ties with family, village and homeland, as well as the pursuit of brothel prostitution within the
framework of colonial capitalism. The task of developing the relationship between history and theory to understand the dynamics of change and to situate social structure within a larger temporal framework, in order to deal more effectively with questions of prostitution, labour and colonial capitalism, need not be left to the geographers, demographers and anthropologists.

**On sources**

Anthropology has provided significant insights into patterns of thought and behaviour as revealed in ritual, symbol and myth, but the social historian has to rely sometimes on far more oblique evidence of what went on in the minds of these Chinese and Japanese women to clarify the meaning of choice, motive and intent. Many factors remain unknown about the phenomenon of emigration and brothel prostitution in Singapore, as faceless and nameless as the women and girls were who were sent there from China and Japan. To resurrect the lives of the ah ku and karayuki-san from obscurity, the historian's findings must be based on a wide array of documents often used by political, economic and institutional historians, but seldom in a single study. The historian of society should draw upon a variety of primary source materials to reconstruct the careers of the Chinese and Japanese prostitutes who inhabited Singapore in this seventy year period in order to give them a voice. Much of the evidence about the economic and social life of the ah ku and karayuki-san is fragmentary. But surviving sources, which only provide a point of entry into their lives, deal with issues that were very much a part of Singapore's sensibility in the early twentieth century, issues of gender and labour and sexuality and physicality. The evidentiary skeleton of a history of the ah ku and karayuki-san should be quantitative, comprising names, dates, places of birth and employment, mined from obscure records of the Coroner's and Magistrate's courts, hospitals and asylums. These sources are fleshed out with other materials, including oral history accounts and photographs, to analyse both intentions and outcomes and to grasp the sometimes subtle changes in aspiration and belief, as to how the daily experience of Chinese and Japanese prostitutes fitted into the life and work of Singapore.

The social historian finds within the Coroner's records vivid, rich testimony to the ah ku and karayuki-san's lived experience, evoking a milieu and sentiment whose details were recognisably real and which were often clouded by an atmosphere of unease, irony and danger: of Loh Sai Soh's fatal objections to Lam Loh Su exiting from the brothel; of Otoyo and her penalised client of two years, Lance Corporal Albert Chacksfield, whom she called "Checks"; of the beautiful Duya Hadachi, her experiences of a relationship strained beyond endurance, and of the deadly struggle between her paramours and of many, many, others (SCII Loh;SCII Chacksfield;SCII Hadachi). Such ordinary people tumble from
the pages of the record; they talk about choice of partners, love and betrayal, desperation and alienation drawing us into their lives. In an effort to reconstruct the lives of the ah ku and karayuki-san, from small and not-so-small fragments of their collective biography and the history of their times, the unrecognised names of women like Oichi, Li Chin Ho and Ng Ah Weh also leap from the pages of the Coroner’s Inquests and Inquiries (Certificate Coroners View Singapore, Oichi and Li; SCII, Ng). Not necessarily accustomed to taking up courageous positions, sometimes unwilling to make rash sacrifices or large gestures, these young prostitutes—like so many before and after them—daily coped with a harsh “fate” about which they felt perplexed and against which they bridled. In the course of the historian’s search for their complexity of point of view Oichi’s inability to live up to her brothel-keeper’s expectations, the impossibility of Li Chin Ho repaying her debt, and the determined practicality of Ng Ah Weh to leave a Trengannu Street brothel emerge. The depositions command respect at every stage for their frankly confessional nature and make fascinating reading even for those historians whose predispositions tend to devalue the conclusions that can be gleaned from them, as an unusually rich and compelling source. Despite some apparent difficulties, it is clear that sources like the Coroner’s records can give us knowledge of both large matters of regional significance (a central concern of nomethically driven economists and political scientists preoccupied with the recent past), as well as make visible the micro-case experience of marginalised women like the ah ku and karayuki-san. I have argued that the details of material life, workplace and working conditions as well as “family” activities recorded in them are incidental to the main purpose of the records, and hence unlikely to be distorted. As so often when dealing with official colonial records, they are at their most useful when employed for purposes that their compilers would never have dreamt of.

In terms of sources, there is also a wealth of material to be collected on prostitution in the oral tradition and folklore of the Smith Street and Malay Street quarters of Singapore. Much of this tradition is held in the minds of an older generation with only a limited period before the grave buries their local knowledge with them. Yamazaki, Morisake and Imamura have traced and interviewed elderly Japanese women who were sold into prostitution by their destitute farming families and worked in Japanese brothels in Singapore before the war (Yamazaki 1975 and 1977; Morisake 1976). Their information, which brings a human element to this social history, comes from listening to the testimony of the veterans themselves, albeit decades after their careers ended, telling it how it really was — mostly pain, shame, passion, horror and luck. Because almost all ah ku and karayuki-san were illiterate, there are few written accounts of their personal experience and thoughts. And had they been literate, Yamazaki and others believe ingrained cultural constraints would have prevented them from committing themselves in
writing for fear of disgracing their families. Yamazaki concluded that only through oral testimony from a surviving karayuki-san herself would the inner life of the overseas prostitute become known and understood. To help recover the life history of the ah ku and karayuki-san there are some remarkable elderly survivors of that era in Singapore who are formidable bearers of memories, but they are fast disappearing. In 1987, the author interviewed, with the assistance of Ms. Tan Beng Luan, over a dozen Chinese women and men who had lived and worked in the brothel areas where Lam Loh Su and Otoyo and others spent their days and nights. They remembered the exact location of particular brothels, just how and when some prostitutes began work, and rich detail about observations on their personal life and people around them. Most of the informants were in the mid-seventies or eighties, several even in their late nineties, but some of them recalled, in a clear, wonderfully expressive language, a variety of experiences dealing with their earlier lives and work. These transcribed interviews run from several paragraphs to a few dozen pages. The authentic voices of elderly women and men have been captured vividly, remembering themselves as young people coming to terms with fear, a “borrowed place”, a way of life only dimly understood, friendship and death. But this evidence consists not just of remarkable recollections and fragments of the life histories of these women; it is also, in part, a slice of the social history of pre-war Singapore. These reflections and floods of memories of elderly Chinese and Japanese informants should be used to recreate the social-cultural setting in Singapore’s brothel districts. The social historian should attempt to faithfully record the “sense of place,” especially the particulars of what life was like for the ah ku and karayuki-san, who were definitely a part of, yet were never fully accepted into, Singapore society. There should be certain cautionary juxtapositions of Colonial evidence and interviews of women at eighty or more, from all these areas — China, Japan and Singapore— who vividly recall their childhood experiences as peasant daughters, with the later images of their working world — stationed in brothels in Singapore from 1915 to 1941. They were, after all, both as individuals and members of a particular social group, products of the same economic and social processes, sensibility and regional variation in standards and patterns.

The explication of evidence of prostitution in Singapore’s past should also foreground questions about what non-verbal clues and three-dimensional documents of material culture, such as women’s clothing, accessories and buildings, can tell historians about how to re-interpret and re-present the larger reality and hidden meanings of the history of Chinese and Japanese prostitutes in the city and brothel. Inferences gleaned from seemingly unimportant detail in building facades, kimonos, photographs and postcards capture otherwise unrecorded moments and aspects of culture. Photographs of the karayuki-san and the brothels which sprang up around Singapore during the years
following peak migration were both functional and symbolic objects which can make us gasp, grimace or smile. The black and white images, from the hard-edged arrival and registration portraits to the poignant and personal ones, are priceless snatches of Singapore life itself, each telling its own story. Innumerable turn-of-the-century photographs of the women have not been saved, the glass-plate negatives, especially of Japanese photographers, sadly, also lost or destroyed (Falconer 1987). However, among those rare portraits of the karayuki-san that have survived, there are photographs which were a gift or memento meant to join the karayuki-san and loved ones or friends in Japan, a kind of talisman against the prostitute’s fear that people at home would not remember them. Such photographs not only became tangible threads between a prostitute and the people who were important to her, which in turn could inspire, sadden, intrigue and amuse them, they also invariably became physical extensions of the woman’s joy, sorrow and pain. The methods employed by historians and social anthropologists of reading, inference, observation and listening in the interpretation of literary, visual and oral sources are the key points of departure in the analysis of historical evidence for such a social history.

On method: life span and collective biography

Based on Coroner’s Inquests and Inquiries, and other records and interviews, the historian of society should attempt to reconstruct the life cycle of Chinese and Japanese prostitutes and their day to day experience between 1870 and 1940. A life-span approach takes into account matters of personality and chance and how prostitutes at varying stages in their careers experienced historical change and the role of larger events differently. The historian is immediately drawn into the ah ku and karayuki-san’s world from early childhood to old age based largely on changes in biology and kinship (Gronewold 1982, 2). One should, in reconstructing the life cycle of a substantial minority of prostitutes, argue that brothel prostitution in Singapore was not a phase through which most Chinese and Japanese women passed. Relative life chances were affected directly by the hazards of a life of prostitution — alcoholism, drug abuse, indebtedness and disease — which formed almost insurmountable obstacles towards achieving a more conventional place in society. Starting with the village backgrounds, the hazards of the trade in women and an emigrant voyage, the historian should follow the ah ku and karayuki-san through their encounters with brothel life in general and with madams, pimps and clients in particular into the routines and crises of earning, spending, social relations, leisure, mobility, disease and death. This gender-conscious perspective does not just enrich the urban, social history of Singapore. It is also an historical account of human nature, of human relationships compelled by the pride and prejudice of the human spirit. In this social history oppression, affectionate joy, utopia
and desolation occurred together in real life for many of these women of negligible social origins. At the same time, a sense of filial responsibility, and the necessity of being emotionally strong and nourishing the opposite sex still mattered culturally to these women, despite their being forsaken by life. Furthermore, there was a real link with crime and criminality which must be recognised in forming a true picture of the exploitation and injustice of brothel prostitution. The narrative should also portray a darker side of the lives of the ah ku and karayuki-san and the dangerous, disillusioned universe of extreme violence and drug addition of an underworld of flesh traders and brothel owners.

This social history also employs prosopography, a collective-biographical approach, to develop a social-cultural understanding of the life cycle and careers of these women. The lives and circumstances of the ah ku and karayuki-san are too complicated to be kept within the bounds of the stereotyped image of the prostitute as simply poor, weak humanity thrust into the sordid conditions of a Singapore brothel. Complexity characterised their struggle to survive, personal associations with clients, friends and family and how they fought, sometimes with indomitable courage, to empower their lives, despite the structural constraints imposed on their existence. So one is often forced back to a view of their activity as a complex groping towards ends which vary, conflict and to a certain extent remain undefined. It is the task of the social historian to grasp that complexity. Combining a life-span approach with prosopography should allow the historian to reconstruct a complex “inner history” based on the lived experience of the ah ku and karayuki-san. It should enable the author not only to learn how these women were perceived by the society in which they worked, but also to know how they viewed themselves and their daily experience. The second half of this history would be essentially a collective-biographical portrait, a historical drama that engages us at the social, political, psychological, and emotional-human level. It is an ethnohistory in the fullest sense: accounts focussed on particular tragedies of innocents forced into prostitution, individual stories of love, vengeance, sex and violence set against the backdrop of the social ills and squalor of colonial Singapore.

Clarity, balance and the sifting of history is required in piecing together scraps of information about events, reactions and influences in order to shed light on the past of such a group of women, usually inarticulate and rarely documented as individuals. The effort to recover their story from abstruse sources, the raw material for both history and anthropology, is based on the capacity of a creative imagination to evoke the daily patterns of a type of people like prostitutes and the conviction that carefully accumulated detail or “thick description,” emphasising both experience and explanation, is the best way to take the true measure of their times. This social history, as ethnography, would be peppered with jarring anecdotes and terse tales from the Coroner’s and police records. These short vignettes turn out to have remarkable implications
for the pace and texture of collective biography, and for stitching together a tapestry of poverty, sexual antagonisms, subordination and conflict in the social history of prostitutes' and coolies' experiences. The historian, in building up a prosopography from statistical evidence and individual illustrative cases, with its broad social sweep, stumbles onto dissonances and long-hidden aspects of the ah ku and karayuki-san's lives characterised by physical hardship, tormented images, addiction, debilitating and often fatal diseases and, frequently, extreme loneliness. Collective biography is critical in creating a much needed non-institutional thematic framework for part of this social history, focussing on women at work, demonstrating interdependence and impermanence between China, Japan and Singapore, and encompassing dynamic elements in that history. Schematically, we can represent the social history of the ah ku and karayuki-san as follows:

![Diagram](attachment://diagram.png)

It is in light of this historical method that the notion of women's choice and control or lack thereof over life and circumstance is a critical issue, in reconstructing and interpreting both the shaping of achievement and the discovery and growth of purpose in historical situations of brothel prostitution. This is a choice, not of private citizens, but of prostitutes both individually and collectively, a choice as an enabling condition either to fully participate in or exit from the social and communal life of the brothel world. The framework of traditional historical analysis that regards these choices and distinct actions such as going abroad, shifting
brothels, a willingness to experience the disturbance of passion, refusing to accept a client, and suicide, as less relevant or irrelevant ignores the fact that women matter. It disregards the persisting power of the ah ku and karayuki-san despite the constraints imposed upon them, as well as the role of chance in human choice. The balance between a specific choice and act and all its social and cultural significance can be superbly revealed by a careful analysis of the pattern of actions in the cases listed in the Coroner’s records. Admittedly, in instances of suicide, judgements were made, however the ironies of the scene and decision were often left to speak for themselves. In a sustained, detailed and extraordinary list in the Appendix, “Chinese and Japanese Prostitutes: Suicide”, what appears to have been passive acceptance and painful resignation to a dangerous oppressive situation ending in suicide may have been a rational choice — a way to autonomy and peace, or, perhaps, a haunting, defiant, vengeful statement about a harsh struggle to survive in a distant land. The ah ku and karayuki-san’s hard earned wisdom, knowledge of life and knowing humour were not essentially conservative. The true history of the prostitutes’ choices, on their own terms, in the male-defined world of Singapore, was often all about survival and mobility. In managing social change some prostitutes responded positively to outside influences and adapted to these in dynamic ways that maintained both their communal and individual integrity. The historian must not lose sight of the fact that there were many ah ku and karayuki-san who were functioning well. Not all Chinese and Japanese prostitutes’ lives inevitably led to misery and premature death (Best 1982, 598). For some of these women, especially among the karayuki-san, prostitution constituted a transitional stage in their lives, eventually leading to marriage or respectable employment. Turning to prostitution had been a calculated decision for some of them. They chose to work in offshore brothels with the hope of obtaining, after several years, some windfall capital. But money to assist a family wasn’t the only motive. Some were catching up with life. The karayuki-san were often better fed and clothed in a Singapore brothel than in their farm village or working for a thread mill. If the choice was back-breaking agriculture, factory sweatshop or a brothel overseas, it is not difficult to envision why the latter alternative was felt to be more lucrative and less physically demanding by some. For a few prostitutes, who were upwardly mobile and had managed to achieve self-sufficiency, it was possible to finish up with an aura of respectability, running a hotel, cafe or bar. But the vast majority remained destitute.

What the historical record should show the historian, and he or she should find awesome, is the strength and resiliency of the human personality of particular prostitutes. Here is quite a different focus, a willingness, in view and method, to perceive the ah ku and karayuki-san as women with power to affect their destiny, not simply as the oppressed “victims” of undeniable social, political and legal injustices. Such a view does not deny the significance of imposed constraints, but enables us
## Appendix Chinese and Japanese prostitutes: suicide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sub Communal Group</th>
<th>Address of Brothel</th>
<th>Period of Residence</th>
<th>Name of Brothel Keeper</th>
<th>State of Deceased’s Health</th>
<th>Opium Smoker</th>
<th>Date of Suicide</th>
<th>Cause of Suicide</th>
<th>Place of Suicide</th>
<th>Suicide Due To</th>
<th>Inquest No.</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lee Chong Fong</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Cantonese</td>
<td>121 Hong Kong Street</td>
<td>5 months</td>
<td>Leong Guan</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>22/12/82</td>
<td>Cubicle/brothel</td>
<td>Overdose of opium</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>1883</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ng Ah Weh</td>
<td></td>
<td>Cantonese</td>
<td>36 Trengannu Street</td>
<td>More than 8 months</td>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>2/10/87</td>
<td></td>
<td>Cubicle/brothel</td>
<td>Overdose of opium</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>1887</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chan Sye Kaw</td>
<td></td>
<td>Cantonese</td>
<td>60 Upper Hokkien Street</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td></td>
<td>Occasional</td>
<td>6/9/98</td>
<td></td>
<td>Cubicle/brothel</td>
<td>Overdose of opium</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>1898</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liong Chai Ha</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Cantonese</td>
<td>40 Trengannu Street</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>Chan Ah See</td>
<td>26/10/07</td>
<td>Cubicle/brothel</td>
<td></td>
<td>Overdose of opium</td>
<td></td>
<td>170</td>
<td>1907</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Li Chia Ho</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Cantonese</td>
<td>5 Tan Quee Lan Street</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Complaining of headaches</td>
<td>6/5/08</td>
<td>Debt</td>
<td>Cubicle/brothel</td>
<td>Overdose of opium</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1908</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sin Chow</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Cantonese</td>
<td>4 Trengannu Street</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td></td>
<td>13/7/08</td>
<td>Gambling</td>
<td></td>
<td>Cubicle/brothel</td>
<td>Overdose of opium</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1908</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee Ah Cho</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Cantonese</td>
<td>61 Upper Hokkien Street</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Chan Ah Ng</td>
<td>9/9/08</td>
<td>Gambling(?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Cubicle/brothel</td>
<td>Overdose of opium</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>1908</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Yip Mui Chai</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Cantonese</td>
<td>9-6 Canal Road (unlicensed)</td>
<td>4 months</td>
<td>Chan Ah Yee</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Wanted to leave the brothel</td>
<td>Cubicle/No. 12, Sago St</td>
<td>Overdose of opium</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>1908</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Chow Chat Hui</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Cantonese</td>
<td>64 Upper Hokkien Street</td>
<td></td>
<td>Wong Ah Yee</td>
<td>21/7/19</td>
<td>Gambling</td>
<td></td>
<td>Cubicle/brothel</td>
<td>Overdose of opium</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>1909</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Wong Mau Tan</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Cantonese</td>
<td>15 Sago Street</td>
<td>8 days</td>
<td>Chu Ah Thai</td>
<td>11/10/17</td>
<td>Persistent Ill Health</td>
<td>Cubicle/brothel</td>
<td>Overdose of opium</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>1912</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leong Tong Fook</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Cantonese</td>
<td>67 Smith Street (unlicensed)</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Syphilis</td>
<td>5-6/5/21</td>
<td>Persistent Ill Health</td>
<td>Master Attendant's pier</td>
<td>Master Attendant's Pier - Floating in the sea</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>1921</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tan Moh Tan</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Cantonese</td>
<td>77 Pagoda Street (unlicensed)</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td></td>
<td>2/11/24</td>
<td>Fear of losing lover</td>
<td>Sea off the Esplanade</td>
<td>Asphyxia from drowning</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>1924</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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Warren The Ah Ku and Karynhi-san of Singapore
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Case Details</th>
<th>Age at Death</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Wong Ah Yeck</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Cantonese</td>
<td>Pregnant</td>
<td>10/2/34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Six months pregnant was worried</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Jumped from second floor</td>
<td>61 1934</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ho Hong Min</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Hokkien</td>
<td>Syphilis</td>
<td>13/2/33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Debt/ill health</td>
<td>105 1937</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chan Ah Kuan</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Cantonese</td>
<td>Gonorrhea</td>
<td>4/2/38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Debt/ill health</td>
<td>68 1938</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**JAPANESE PROSTITUTES: SUICIDE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Street</th>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Symptom</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Cause</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Otomu</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>24 Malay St</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Headaches/nightmares</td>
<td>5/6/1900</td>
<td>Post Traumatic stress</td>
<td>Cutting her own throat 59 1900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onatsu</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>11-1 Malay St</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pale, thin, depressed</td>
<td>17/12/02</td>
<td>Debt(?</td>
<td>Strangulation 184 1902</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oshiki</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>26 Kylam St</td>
<td>More than 3</td>
<td>Depressed</td>
<td>27/5/03</td>
<td>Debt</td>
<td>Asphyxia from drowning 58 1903</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohichi</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>55 Malabar St</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Debit/problem with mistress</td>
<td>17/2/06</td>
<td>Cubicle/broth</td>
<td>Asphyxia from hanging 82 1906 (CCV)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oyoshi</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>6-2 McPherson Road (private residence)</td>
<td>17/11/16</td>
<td>Depressed/ill health</td>
<td>Persistent ill health</td>
<td>Small house - set fire to herself 229 1916</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**PAGAR ROAD**

- Chan Ah Kuan: Cantonese, second Door. Lodging room, window.
- Ho Hong Min:跳楼.
rather to see the Chinese and Japanese women making history, or at least struggling to cope with the flow of life. This, to me, is the essence of Southeast Asian social history. The historiographical thrust is on the recovery of subjective experience in a female marginal community; consequently, an equally fundamental change occurs in the way Singapore's past is described, in the shift in emphasis from "places" to "faces," in being able to see the society of the prostitutes from within, and in a related concern with the quality of life. This historical writing would present historical issues as they appeared to the actors, who have so often been hidden from history, and in such a way that reality can no longer be kept at bay.

On retrieving prostitute's lives

This detailed historical account of the "texture of experience" of the prostitutes' lives should necessarily be comparative, requiring both analysis of Chinese and Japanese women separately, and a comparison between their two worlds; it should also involve an examination of the social relations between the women and clients, and what happened among the ah ku and karayuki-san when they were by themselves. In a sense, this ethnography created by the historian of society not only can, but must, analyse and argue from the clues in documents and other cultural artefacts to social realities. The historian, by pursuing this line of inquiry in depth into the records, can fashion an inner history of women which overcomes the public/private split, challenges the long-standing division of the history of Singapore into separate components - race, gender and class - and yet is not cut off from mainstream chronological and geographical connections. But in amassing the life-like detail to fit together the pieces of the ethno-historical mosaic mirroring the careers of these silent and forgotten women, the social historian must comprehend the fact that for many areas, conceptually speaking, the historical record is silent. Singapore life in the demi-monde was chaotic, fragmented, random and discontinuous: in a word, absurd, if not silent. Here the historian's concern reaches the limits of innovative investigative work, in that it touches on absences and the role chance plays in life. The historian finds that certain details and moments of the women's past, often coloured by irony and outrage, will remain unknowable and that the history that one can recover and write is based only on innumerable fragments of past lives. The conventional wisdom of social history and anthropology must recognise such lacunae or great silences, as well as areas where the historian holds no more than a "thin shrivelled tissue in the hand" (Samuel 1988, 47).

It is important to reiterate that such a social history takes the prevalent structures and experiences of the prostitutes' lives seriously. This interdisciplinary approach, rich, contextual, close to the ground,
attempts to establish a methodological and conceptual framework of historical analysis acceptable to Gayatri Spivak’s challenge:

...There has to be a simultaneous...focus; not merely who am I? But who is the other woman? How am I naming her?...Is this part of the problematic I discuss? (Spivak 1981, 179)

As in Spivak’s case, the historian will discover in this approach and evidence the “power of the powerless” and the actual forces which animated their lives. Socio-historical phenomena previously considered to be sufficiently described and understood in the city assume completely new meanings because of the altered scale of observation. A medley of characters, situations and reflections will pass before the historian about the real nature of turn-of-the-century Singapore in all its starkness and joy. By organising the illustrative case material around themes relating to workplace and working conditions, the social historian can convert a mass of detailed depositions into an “inner history” — an ethnographic image of what actually happened in the lives of the prostitutes of Singapore. The freshness and immediacy of the testimony of the ah ku and karayuki-san echoes down the corridor of time to inform us what it was like to live and work in a brothel in Malay Street or Smith Street. This highly detailed and personal view, “the texture of experience,” firmly situates these women in the port-city circa 1900. The picture shocks, for it removes forever the idea of Singapore as a pleasant place, an economic showcase, “the Clapham junction of the Eastern Seas,” and replaces it with an image of harshness, full of outrages and injustices, but also of stubborn persistence of courage and hope when these should have disappeared; it makes ordinary women — prostitutes — three dimensional, not simply cardboard cut-outs.

What the social historian should attempt to create is a personal history of the prostitute’s times closely based on intimate experience, while still paying careful attention to the larger historical influences — the institutions, processes and interactions — which determined their fates. The author has already stressed the methodological desirability of working outward and upward, from the categories of the ah ku and karayuki-san and events in their lives, to illustrate underlying social processes. Our need, then, is to build facts about the overseas Chinese and Japanese past in Singapore into a new historical analysis of what ought to be studied in a “coolie town” — the life cycle of prostitutes, the material deprivation under which they worked, and transactions of everyday life — in order to understand the ah ku and karayuki-san, as far as the social historian is able, in light of their own experience and their own reactions to this experience.
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