

*Rickshaw Pullers, Prostitutes and "Pirates":
Researching and Writing about Southeast Asia and
the People without History**

James Francis Warren**

Introduction

The origin of my work began in personal experience rather than with books and formal training. In a very real sense, my interest in studying about Southeast Asian society and history both from interdisciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives, started at the edge. The reason is twofold. First, my introduction to Southeast Asia was based on witnessing the traumatic experience of adjustment of a maritime-nomadic people to a sedentary way of life—a pariah people who, socially and politically, were at the edge, on the margin of society and history. Second, to acquire the socio-historical methodology necessary to investigate problems of cultural-ecological transformation, such as their continuing adjustment to a sedentary way of life, I subsequently chose to study for my doctorate in Southeast Asian modern history at the Australian National University in 1971, rather than Cornell University, at that time arguably the undisputed intellectual centre of the world for the study of Southeast Asia. The choice to opt for Australia, then considered in certain respects to be at the edge of Southeast Asian studies, was deliberate. It allowed me the ultimate practical experience of “passing over” into another culture situated on the rim of Southeast Asia and the chance of studying and working in a different system of education, which at the postgraduate level primarily emphasised research and participation in a variety of intra-university inter-disciplinary seminars. More importantly, the journey was to provide the opportunity, albeit in a modest way, to help re-define where the centre and the edge were located for the formal study of Southeast Asia over the next quarter of a century. I lived for two years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Semporna, on the east coast of Borneo (1967-69). The period from January to November 1969, was spent in Kampong Bangau-Bangau, a Samal Bajau Laut village consisting of a flotilla of boat dwellers and a semi-sedentary population of Bajau Laut in varying stages of adaptation to a house dwelling way of life, was particularly memorable. It was the rapid abandonment of sea nomadism—a life-style which has characterised the Samal Bajau Laut as a people and from which they drew their sense of identity—which first motivated my interest in Southeast Asian history. My experience of attempting to write my Master’s thesis on the Samal Bajau Laut under North Borneo Chartered Company rule, a history involving a non-western people based primarily on written (British) records,

* This paper has been presented at National Chi Nan University, Taiwan, Southeast Asian Conference on May 3-4, 2001.

** The author is currently a Professor of Southeast Asian Modern History at Murdoch University, Perth, West Australia.

pointed out the extreme difficulty of presenting a balanced interpretation, using only traditional historiographical methods. It impressed upon me the vital importance of oral traditions and the ethnohistorical perspective in any future effort to investigate changes in values, social organisation and political patterns of the maritime people of Southeast Asia, stemming from the transition(s) initiated by the world capitalist economy, colonialism, and modernity. There remained the need then to attempt to integrate my small-scale investigation of the problems of cultural ecological adaptation of the Samal Bajau Laut with the study of world historical events and experiences, and to show how they linked together. I felt the necessity too, to expand the temporal reach of analysis to better understand the response of the Sulu world and the rest of Eastern Indonesia to the ascendance of global capital and the colonial state.

The Sulu Zone

In contemporary ethnohistorical studies of Southeast Asia the “zone” and/or “border” have recently become chosen metaphors for theorising the historically complex and contradictory ways in which cultural difference and ethnic diversity have been articulated in social relations and in political and economic practice across time. Twenty-seven years ago my doctoral research aimed to explore global cultural interconnections and interdependencies in the Southeast Asian world of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with particular reference to the “Sulu Zone” (Dick 1993:6; Warren 1981). The thesis aimed to enhance critical understanding and discussion of historiographical methods and models used in the problematising of economic and cultural “border zones” in a changing global-local context. My emphasis was on a “zone” created through the intersections of geography, culture and history centred around the Sulu and Celebes seas, as well as China’s and the West’s complicated place within it. Hence my approach to framing and re-presenting the ethnohistory of the Sulu Zone on its own terms from the late eighteenth century rather than merely as a corollary of the history of Western imperial expansion in Eastern Asia, was to tease out the economic, cultural and ecological interconnections embedded in the world capitalist economy with particular reference to the evolution of the “zone”. This broad conceptual schema aimed to enhance understanding of these global systemic links and interactions between geo-political core areas, notably China and Europe, and strategically positioned “zones” with strong trading bases and thin populations like the Sultanates, which encompass a variety of economic sub-regions and extremely specialised territories.

My initial thinking about how the late eighteenth century global economy created a “borderless world” or “zone”, both spatially and historically, in the area of the Sulu and Celebes seas, owed much to the influence of John Smail’s thought, who, in turn, had been strongly indebted to the hemispheric cross-regional historical orientation of Marshall Hodgson. Templates for the “zone” and possible centre-periphery models were provided by the path-breaking works of E.R. Leach and Fernand Braudel and André

Gunder Frank. The inherent advantages of such a theoretical evolutionary-ecological approach for framing and interpretation in an upland agricultural context were already apparent to me in Leach's pioneering work on the political systems of highland Burma. In the Sulu context, however, Southeast Asia was a region in which the sea served as a major means of communication for a wider inter-regional economy in which national boundaries were fluid and by no means fixed (Dick 1993:1). Following the footsteps of Leach and Braudel, I abandoned the blinkered geographic perspective of earlier historians of the Philippines, Indonesia and Borneo, for a more dynamic definition of the Sulu Sultanate's boundaries. It was based on larger scale processes of social change and a "borderless" history of a global maritime trade network oriented towards China, Europe and North America as part of the same World system. To be released from the conceptual constraints of conventional historical geography, I called this wide-ranging web of economic influence and interpersonal relations that centred on the Sulu Sultanate a "zone".

My framing and interpretation of the "zone" as a spatial system rested on the axiom that it was "inherently unstable and generally dynamic" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992:22). And that it was thrust on the global stage at a specific moment or era in "regional time". Leach's remarkable work on state and community structures in highland Burma aimed at tracing the pattern of the shifting balance between two representations of political order and social phenomena over some 150 years. Similarly, for myself the "zone" was also "a process in time" (Leach 1954:4,212): a recognition that all ethnic groups and communities were being shaped and re-shaped by the interplay between internal social and cultural forms and ongoing, external courses of action. In a very real sense, the peoples of the "zone" were in fact "products" of large-scale processes of global socio-economic change which had made them what they were and continued to make them what they would become in reaction to the uncontrollable and rapid impact of these forces. The holism of the zone as a "spatial system" was posited, both as a model and a necessary analytic fiction, not given. The invisible connections linking the process of structural change and dynamic movement of local systems and networks of this "zone" to the wider economic and political world(s) of which it was becoming part had to be traced and explained in "regional time".

To rectify the errors and pre-suppositions of earlier studies, I developed a methodologically self-conscious ethnohistory utilising a global, cultural-ecological perspective where all states and societies could be seen at once and their inter-connectedness to one another within the framework of the world economic system became clear (Warren 1981: xi-xvi, 252-255). It is crucial to understanding the more flexible inclusive approach required to write *The Sulu Zone* it was based on devising a new explicit conceptual framework. A paradigm of sorts—a broad, loose but nonetheless coherent explanation and model about the nature of a Southeast Asian economic region that grew out of connections and relationships with the "modern" world system from the end of the eighteenth century. Apart from offering

an overall perspective and understanding of these global-regional inter-relationships, the role of the zone configuration provided the major principle of framing and organisation of the narrative; it was the essential background against which to begin unravelling the main elements in the development of these separate but increasingly related inter-regional and local history of society and culture in Eastern Asia.

The Sulu Zone—“Culture”

By arguing for a broader global economic perspective interesting complex questions were raised about what constitutes our conception of “culture”. While thousands of captive people were allocated throughout the zone each year as slaves in the period under consideration, the borderlines of race, “culture”, and ethnicity were increasingly blurred by the practice of incorporation and pluralism. I maintain in *The Sulu Zone* that the Taosug and Samal not only lived in an increasingly interdependent world but that they also lived in an emergent multi-ethnic society, the multicultural inhabitants of which came from many parts of Eastern Asia and elsewhere in the world. How are identities—single or multiple—forged! What symbols, rituals and perceptions create a strong sense of collective identity? The traditional assumption of a “culture” as enduring over time despite outward changes in people’s lives and value orientations is both “empirically misleading and deeply essentialist” (Keesing 1991:46).

As Roger Keesing noted, there is no part of Eastern Asia where both the production and reproduction of “culture” and cultural meaning can be characterised as unproblematic, without glossing over or disguising radical changes in relation to ethnicity, power and hierarchy that have differentially affected states like Sulu and urban-rural settings like the zone (ibid). In terms of not exaggerating the boundedness, discreteness and homogeneity of a way of life taking shape in the zone at the end of the eighteenth century, I increasingly recognised the power of language, memory and commodities as symbols in the construction of new identities and communities. Filling a conspicuous gap in the literature this aspect of my ethnohistorical research explored the reinventing of ethnicity in light of tightening ties to the global-capitalist economy and the wider world of darul Islam. The question of the conditions under which these new identities were formed, the ethnicity accomplished, creating a semblance of cultural homogeneity throughout the zone, especially in the first half of the nineteenth century, has aroused considerable subsequent interest. I stressed in *The Sulu Zone* the inextricable relationship between slave raiding, forced migration, “homeland” and identity as being critical factors that led to the emergence of new communities and diasporas.

This expedient reinvention of ethnicity resulting from the interconnected force of circumstance generated by the China tea trade compelled us to think about related notions of society and “culture” in more processual ways (Wolf 1982:387). Historians of the region need to locate the emergence, maintenance and abrogation of populations and the “cultures” they encom-

pass within the framework of a series of historically changing, imperfectly bounded, multiple and branching integrated sets of local, regional, and global social and economic alignments. This case based discussion of the concept of Asian “cultures” as problematic, and the crucial factors which gave rise, in one common process, to the accomplishment of ethnicity in the Sulu Zone provided the basic building blocks for future comparative and theoretical analysis.

The Sulu Zone—“Evidence”

The chronic problem facing ethnohistorians of Asia, Africa and Latin America is the uneven nature of the source material available for certain people, places and times. How can one provide a well detailed historical reconstruction and measure change if the documents as “instruments of measurement” are scarce, non-existent, or themselves changing? (Burke 1992:38-39). The effort has to be made to bring to bear as wide a range of evidence as possible, on critically specific points, to emphasise the global interconnections and interdependencies of particular societies and regions, in order to fashion a holistic explanation of their mutual interactions and clashes in a contemporary “borderless world”, created by an evolving world capitalist economy. It was necessary to seek out as much evidence wherever it could be obtained because of the accidental generation and destruction of historical records concerning the ethnohistory of the Sulu Zone. I used an extremely varied, in fact eclectic, body of documentation from around the world to resolve the problem of the significance of the China tea trade for the transformation of Taosug society and culture of the late eighteenth century: all forms of evidence—archaeological, anthropological and historical.

In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the population of Sulu was heterogeneous and changing—socially, economically, and ethnically. This was a direct result of global trade. The populating of the Sulu Zone by captives from the Philippines and various parts of the Malay world and their role in the redistributive economy centred at Jolo cannot be underestimated. Previous historical studies of the Sultanate depended largely on published colonial records and accounts to understand the economic and social role played by slaves in the economy rather than on records inadvertently produced by the slaves themselves. Slavery in Sulu was observed through the eyes and preconceptions of European observers and writers who viewed Sulu as the centre of a world fundamentally hostile to their interests—an Islamic world whose activities centred around piracy and slavery.

A unique alternative to this Eurocentric perspective is presented by the scattered statements of fugitive captives from the Sulu Sultanate. Carlo Ginsburg, a gifted Italian historian, whose classic works have challenged us to retrieve social worlds that more conventional history does not record, describes particular types of legal-judicial documentation, as “written records of oral speech” (Ginsburg 1989:156). For instance, according to Ginsburg’s methodology, the written proceedings and statements of the fugitive slaves of the Sulu Zone could be considered comparable in certain respects

to the notebooks of an anthropologist who studied a cultural system where slavery and ethnogenesis were an everyday occurrence; or to put it another way, the Spanish naval officer as anthropologist, performing a type of “fieldwork” in the zone, several centuries ago.

What the direct testimony of the fugitive captives contained was “life”: a freshness and wealth of small-scale detail that could be used to explore the mentalities and material world of several generations of slaves; an exceptionally rich source, containing singularly invaluable textured accounts around which to base on a cultural level case studies and a collective biography. I made extensive use of this neglected source of Southeast Asian social history to reconstruct the social organisation of Sulu slave raiding, slave life in the zone and to make slave voices speak (Warren 1981: 299-315). The trade data and the statements of the fugitive slaves complement one another, and together enabled me to resolve many fundamental questions about the magnitude of the Sulu Zone’s global-regional trade, its flourishing slave population, and how these changed over time as a consequence of the impact of the China tea trade and the world capitalist economy. This search for a way to link individuals and events to larger, impersonal systems was most tenable at the intersections bridging the “narrative space of ethnography” (Marcus 1986:190), the use of quantitative methods for the prosopographer, and the study in depth of the small scale. In this way, I adapted the methods of social anthropology and historical computing to “do” ethnography in the archives, in order to understand the “otherness” of a previous era and place, or as the French social historian, Robert Darnton, phrased it, to do “history in the ethnographic grain” (Darnton 1985:3).

My key problem in focussing on the collective identity of particular social groups—slaves and Samal marauder — was to choose a sample which represented the total regional and social population(s) of the zone. Spanish naval officers, specialists in “contemporary Sulu affairs”, interrogated the fugitive slave informants, and more than a century and a half later, I used the methods of content analysis and analysed these interviews statistically to create a multi-source and integrated database as a prosopographer. The difficulties that attended an analysis of the social and ethnic complexity of the historical situations of the slaves and the Taosug and Samal—perhaps, could only be depicted through a prosopography: a collective biography, resting on a scaffolding of empirically integrated fragments of life histories. 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 and practices of a “little people”, slaves, 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.

The Sulu Zone—Conclusions

My understanding and discussion about global economic-cultural interconnections and interdependencies between the Sulu Zone and the Chi-

na trade was based on the premise that these intersections were governed by particular economic systems and set in a specific chronological era and locality. The Taosug lived in a singular time and time meant change. The zone was a place where borders were becoming ever more porous, less bounded, less fixed, stimulated in large measure by global-regional flows of commodities, people and ideas; a kind of powerful magnet whose force European and Chinese traders were attracted to because that was where a great deal of the exotica for Chinese cuisine and medicine and other commodities for the Canton market were being collected and processed. What then is the importance of the Sulu Zone, as well as the China tea trade's complicated place within its "borderless" history? It has been an argument of my book that we cannot think of societies and cultures in isolation, as self-maintaining, autonomous, enduring systems (Wolf 1982:390).

In the pages of my volume the world has changed through the intersections of the global trade economy centred around the Sulu and Celebes seas, as well as the Sultanate's critical place within it. Here, ordinary Southeast Asian farmers and fishers were traumatically uprooted and forced to live in a distant economic region. This world was comprised of winners responding to new economic opportunities of "globalisation" and losers, who were those forced to live in ways unanticipated before that moment of capture and enslavement. Trade debts in Jolo were paid off by slaves serving Taosug masters in the fisheries and forests of the zone. The point is that tens of thousands of ordinary Southeast Asians lived among maritime peoples completely removed from those with whom they had been born and grew up. They found themselves abroad in the sea/landscape of the zone. Firstly, because advanced technologies and new social alignments made long distance slave raiding relatively easy, and, secondly, because revolutionary economic historical developments forcefully landed them in an unintended place—the zone. European traders joined with Taosug *datus* to spark one of the largest population movements in recent Southeast Asia history with hundreds of thousands of individuals sent into slavery across the zone. By the start of the nineteenth century, slave identities in the zone were being shaped and changed by the forces of "globalisation" as distinctions of ethnicity and culture blurred and were broken down; thousands of "outsiders" were being incorporated into the lower reaches of a rapidly expanding trading society. Sulu provides an outstanding example of how a collective identity was established, made real, and took on a particular cultural content (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992:44).

The Sulu Sultanate was an exceptional case for ethnohistorical investigation because the history of the zone demonstrated clearly the links between large economic and cultural systems and social mechanisms and institutions, on the one hand, and, on the other, the making of collective worlds of more localised smaller communities. In short, as Kenneth Prewitt, Head of the Social Science Research Council, puts it: "The global-local notion is not a metaphor invented by social theorists" (Prewitt 1996:16) rather, it was the lived experience of millions of people in the zone and on several continents, inextricably bound to one another as product and fate. Part of the

challenge for me had been to identify and link broad patterns and variations in interactions of the global economy and macro-historical trends with the autonomous local history of a barely recognised economic region in Southeast Asia. The long-term changes that occurred in these patterns and trends, based on economic interconnections and imperatives of the world capitalist economy could only be perceived through their interdependent effects in the environment, on ideas, on events, and social and cultural transformation in the making of the world of the “zone”.

The patterns I revealed throw up some unavoidable conclusions. The first is that the implications of my analysis of the economy, culture and society of the Sulu Zone perhaps, could be applied in a wider framework not only to elucidate the development of states and the elaboration of ethnic diversity in insular Southeast Asia, but also to develop a comparative framework with mainland states and cultures (Lieberman 1995:796-807). A second conclusion concerns generalisation that can be made about the nature of Southeast Asian history. It is this trans-historical-trans-cultural-trans-disciplinary methodological approach of linking detailed research of a local situation to wider global-regional economic systems and issues, with particular reference to agency or “experience” that underpins my work.

Finally, a third inescapable conclusion of *The Sulu Zone* entails something more: my ethnohistory not only involved an extension of the content and meaning of “culture” and history, it also implied a revision of the content. What I have suggested in this volume is that in a new history of island Southeast Asia, the “little people”—fishers, “raiders”, divers, traders, highlanders, forest dwellers, pioneers, and slaves—both men and women, should be visibly present, as part of the cultural landscape and environment of a series of regional-economic “zones”, enmeshed in the hemispheric framework of the larger changing contemporary world of global cultural flows and economic interactions. The fundamental problems in the everyday lives of such maritime and tribal peoples—making their livings and losing them, entangled in globalising events beyond their own local geographic borders and worlds, is the work of future ethno-historians of Asia, east by south.

Singapore: Towards the Making of a Trilogy

I also became increasingly preoccupied with the local view points and local understandings of ordinary Southeast Asians, past and present. Often, like the Samal Bajau Laut, they were at the edge of history—dispossessed and abandoned. Much of this population—coolie and peasant—was inarticulate and has left less in the way of historical records than the more prominent few. I wanted somehow to resurrect their views, concerns and desire to make their choices a reality. But how does one manage to write a People’s History? Are there new sources to be tapped, or new ways of using the more traditional ones? The search for answers in the soul was to be as systematic as the search for answers in the data and just as difficult. Whereas historians of the past found their images of the Southeast Asian world in the

fates of governors, generals, aristocrats and literati, I sought its images in the daily life of ordinary urban and rural dwellers, in the experience of rickshaw coolies and prostitutes, the working sons and daughters of impoverished Chinese and Japanese peasant farmers. What I wanted to create was a personal history of their times closely based on lived experience, while, at the same time, paying careful attention to the larger historical influences—the institutions, processes and interactions—which determined their fates.

My study of the rickshaw coolies and prostitutes of Singapore in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been an individual project nineteen years in the making. It emerged from a somewhat different historical and political context than *The Sulu Zone*. The books were based on my experience and vocation as a teacher of non-Western history in a post-colonial world. A passion for a forgotten past of people who have stood outside history and recovery of a whole set of social relations have been a central preoccupation running through all my work. This is especially so in the case of *Rickshaw Coolie* and *Ah Ku and Karayuki-san*: the books insist on seeing things relationally using concepts and techniques from sociology and anthropology. The lessons in both of these disciplines for the study of history suggest how to create a total set of social relations—a socio-cultural system—in a historical past. This sociological-historical approach, which also involves elements of an ethnohistorical research strategy, is something I have stressed in my teaching, and tried to put into practice in my writing.

The underside of Singapore Chinese society and the city's development, as a commercial centre and entrepot port from 1870 to 1940, has been the setting of virtually all my work for the past two decades. Both *Rickshaw Coolie* and *Ah Ku and Karayuki-san*, the two recent social histories in an envisaged trilogy, deal with the same part of Southeast Asia—turn-of-the-century Singapore, wedged between British Malaya and the Netherlands Indies—with its own startling tough “history from below” and idiosyncrasies as a Chinese city outside China. These books examine the social conditions that spawned the rickshaw and prostitution industries and the way the rickshaw pullers and prostitutes lived their lives in conjunction with the big changes taking place in the development of colonial Singapore and Asia. Mass migration, rural unrest and change, industrialisation in Japan, high finance and the Depression (the dark side of urbanisation in Singapore)—these topics all receive their due in both works albeit with somewhat different emphases, given my particular historiographical and thematic concerns in the respective volumes.

Discovery—1978

But, let me pause for a moment here, in order to travel back in time, to consider, briefly, the “context of discovery” of the most important source for writing this trilogy, as a social history from below—the Coroners’ Records for Colonial Singapore, 1883-1940. It is late January 1978 in Singapore; I am stymied. I was fast running out of Government repositories

and libraries in a desperate search for documents that would provide insight into the singular identity and sociability of ordinary Chinese men and women. Since completing *The Sulu Zone* two years earlier, I had been thinking seriously of writing a historical survey about labour, migration and social transformation in a colonial city like Singapore. Perhaps, I asked, in a race against the clock, does the elderly clerk know of the whereabouts of records which would help me place the lives of his parents' and grandparents' generation in a meaningful historical context. The old Chinese man did not think he could be of any real assistance but said that he still remembered the location of "some old things" in the huge modern building. The two of us arranged to visit the Subordinate Court storeroom just two floors above the following day. When the door was unlocked for me, after several months of fruitless searching, to a still largely empty storeroom in the new Subordinate Courts building, I gained entry to a collection of several hundred unclassified quarto size volumes stacked high against a wall, to a height of four feet. The floor itself in several spots was also covered with piles of unsorted Certificate of Coroners Views and miscellaneous documents into which everything had been dumped, higgledy-piggledy—a horizontal load filling an area more than twice the size of my office!

I can still remember my surprise when the mindful clerk standing in the open door pointed across the large room. Not sure where to start without a checklist or guide of some sort, I began to rummage among the stacks closest to me. I started to dig in and there was just about everything—Coroners Inquests, Coroners Views, suicide notes, drafts of letters, even recipes and household bills! The first two hours or so were both thrilling and somewhat confusing. Without stopping for a rest over the entire day, I was introduced to the beginning of an absolutely enormous cast of ordinary men and women whose life experiences were situated at a point in time in a "visible past" (Schama 1992a: 319-320)—rickshaw pullers, construction workers, the homeless, parents, addicts, prostitutes, petty criminals, and many others—and, I immediately wondered how they all might fit together. Sensing the historiographical possibilities these documents offered for the study of ordinary Chinese men and women and the fact that they all might fit together, as I gradually learned, was one of the major turning points towards the making of the trilogy. Initially, I randomly picked up, and with great excitement read the Coroner's view of the suicide of the *karayuki-san*, Oichi (CCVS of Oichi, 82, 17/2/06). This was my first encounter with this extraordinary source. I shall never forget it. In a very real sense, Oichi's way of dying was the thread I pulled to begin to untangle the whole fabric of that change occurring in the underside of Singapore society. As I dug deeper, solitarily standing in the storeroom where an elderly clerk had inadvertently revealed this treasure trove, and read the first inquest statements of rickshaw pullers and their kin and of prostitutes and their clients, finding expressions of their personal grief, of pain and frustration, of the misery that colonial rule and the Depression had inflicted upon them, of an extreme structural poverty reflected in the incidence of suicide, and of life's small pleasures like a special meal of chicken, rice wine and noodles shared with

friends, I shelved the idea of merely surveying the “inner history” of the city in a single volume.

Nonetheless, as I explored the documents another sort of reality bore down on me. As with the statements of the fugitive slave accounts of the Sulu Sultanate, I learned there was no substitute for seeing the literal evidence of a life and material circumstance—the carefully penned note, of a forlorn *karayuki-san*, a mid-day account of a ritual meal with the recipe still extant as if to eat or pointing eerily in the direction of the vanished cook, or an ironic mention of an old rickshaw wheel, stored above a beam across the top of a latrine, which a rickshaw puller used to commit suicide. The search for this past reality was my real purpose for having come to Singapore—to resurrect images that would fill out and revise the story in the history books, to mark and memorialise this city as the rickshaw men and prostitutes knew it, and waken the ghosts of Malay and Smith Streets in order to make dead people live again.

The material I found was breathtakingly exciting, not only for the light it threw on Singapore’s pre-war society and economy, but for the way it illuminated in sharp detail the dramatic changes that occurred in Singapore Chinese culture and history, yet within the memory of a visitable generation, still close enough to be grasped, especially the period from the early 1900s to the late 1930s. I then set to work, travelling back and forth for several years, between a tiny corner of the Subordinate Court’s library in Singapore and my own University office, reading, analysing and getting the material in order. I realised that the contents of this repository would yield up with skill and patience, the living testimony of Chinese people who did not know how to express themselves in print and who did not have access to people in power. Obviously, there was a great deal to learn from this great sea of Inquests and Inquiries: “It was when life was framed in death that the picture was really hung up” observed Henry James (Schama 1992a: 322).

Giving Voice

I wanted to write a history of the Chinese in Singapore full of “imaginative drama and narrative sweep” (Schama 1992b: 62), and primarily about ordinary individuals who had the incalculability of life, stories based on the Inquests and Inquiries with plot and dialogue that were deeply impressive and the Coroner’s work stunning yet thoroughly purposeful, cases with ironic intent and powerful feelings. It seemed to me writing about these cases of death from the point of view of anthropological history was a way of framing and re-presenting what had actually happened in life to rickshaw coolies and prostitutes and for giving voice—preferably their own voice or voices of family and friends, and enemies or strangers in association with them, or, if they were dead, another or a lot of other voices—a passenger, client, lover, Samaritan or assailant.

All the fundamentally great themes of power and innocence, friendship and loyalty, goodness and evil, love and betrayal in all its forms and fath-

omless complexities were found in the Coroners' cases about the lives of these very ordinary, sometimes dangerous often inarticulate men and women. Until that moment of "discovery" there was no knowledge of such vanished feelings and "events" to speak of whatsoever. And I think that was very important because, when I was working on both volumes, I tried to recreate such emotions and moments through the complex voices with which the Coroner and others spoke of the dead and by travelling back in time in my imagination, not just along the busy thoroughfares lined with rickshaws, but into the *kongsi* foyers and onto the brothel verandahs and beyond. Both volumes were an attempt to understand the character of a colonial city and important relationships and experiences in the lives of coolies and prostitutes, linking behavioural codes, cultural attitudes and work that left many fumbling for a livelihood and unsure of their emotional ground in the face of grief, loss of employment, or resentment over the failure of love.

I have not mentioned the necessity of a strong stomach in researching and writing this social history, as I was seriously interested in addressing the great themes of life, work, love, and death. The business of life and death in the history of Singapore Chinese society and culture had to be faced. It was one of the weightiest things in the existence of the city—very heavy. Of course, a wide angle, deeply focussed reconstruction of the mental, emotional and material life of previously unknown worlds is hardly novel territory for social history over the past several decades. But I think conflict was still the essence of the social drama of it all no matter how I attenuated or conceptualised these themes. Winning and losing, as cases about the rickshaw and prostitution industries demonstrated, were still endings that people—coolies and prostitutes—passionately cared about, but the "events" or "knots" that triggered an ending were not always part of a sensible life, and last minute winnings and losses of power, face, innocence, trust, and well-being were often the most dramatic and ironic of all. Reversals of expectation about the nature of particular coolies and prostitutes and their choices were not foolproof, rather, it was a well trodden path that generally ended dangerously, as the "events" in the Coroners' Inquests, and oral recollections, proved to me over and over again; but even stories that seemed to embody entirely the calculated manipulation implicit in such reversals could occasionally demonstrate, when I looked more closely, to also be the path of great courage (Warren 1986:177; 1993:304).

To discover the links between the experience of the rickshaw pullers and prostitutes and the larger events in their lives, I have depended on different branches of social inquiry. Micro-sociology and ethnohistory have been critical in showing how empirical research can be shaped and changed. This approach to the history of rickshaw pulling and prostitution has necessarily combined the broader concerns of social and economic transformation with tracing the experiences of these men and women's lives. By expanding the temporal reach of analysis it was possible to provide an account of the typical career pattern of a rickshaw puller or *ah ku* and how they lived the "big changes" in Singapore at the turn of the century. An obvious

result of this approach has been to clarify the process of moving the boundaries in historical methodology and thought, as the questions asked of Singapore history in these volumes changed, and new expectations of the craft were imposed.

The difficulties that attended an analysis of the emotional complexity of the historical situations of the rickshaw men and of the *ah ku* and *Karayuki-san* and the contradictions inherent in their lives—the exact combination of motives, pressures, values and feelings—perhaps, could only be depicted in these volumes through a prosopography or collective biography. This technique compelled me to pay close attention to the disparate experiences, values and motives of a relatively small group of coolies and prostitutes in diverse contexts and sequences of action, in order to piece together in a convincing manner the pattern and meaning of their lives for the majority of rickshaw men and *ah ku*.

Grounded in solid archival research, blending anthropological – historical techniques with literary imagery, both books, in the end, are about the experience of trying to maintain personal and cultural dignity in the face of overwhelming historical assault. It is the story of Chinese men and women and Japanese girls tearing up their roots to work offshore on the streets and in the brothels of colonial Singapore; social histories that relate their life experiences, their instincts for survival and what they knew, and their courage and weakness in a world that often denied them freedom and love, which made many of them very complex characters. The excruciatingly personal record of the rickshaw pullers and prostitutes’ lives speak to us, as individuals in the twenty-first century, about the traditional virtues of humility and endurance, of poverty, work and family, of sexual inequality and social repression, of hurt, grief, and passion, and of loneliness and death.

Singapore Return: Broken Birds

In March of 1994, sitting under the stars with Singapore’s old Fort Canning Centre as a backdrop, I was treated to a two-hour multi-media extravaganza about young Japanese prostitutes broken by the harsh lives they were forced to lead abroad. A century ago, Japan had only a number of major exports—silk, coal and women. In my book, *Ah Ku and Karayuki-san*, young women were either abducted or lured from the villages of Japan to Singapore with promises of abundant wealth. “Broken Birds: An Epic Longing” inspired by my book also tells the story of the Japanese women forced by circumstances to work as prostitutes in Singapore from the 1870s until the 1920s.

“Broken Birds” was a visual spectacle and a different theatrical event than the usual cloistered indoor experience. It was ironic that this avant-garde production about Japanese women of the Meiji-Taisho eras should be re-enacted in Singapore’s oldest cemetery, along Percival Road. The dramatic presentation and the extraordinarily beautiful singing voices set against the backdrop of such a special venue were mesmerising. The outdoor opera-

type production in seven parts with a cast of twenty-four, was played out in dance, drama and music. The action unfolded through evocative one-line statements from my book based on actual oral accounts and coroners' reports because many of the women and girls died violent deaths. There is no attempt to build up proper characters.

Ong Keng Sen, one of Singapore's most creative directors, hoped to have audiences understand intuitively and emotionally what these lives signified. The play was not about characters; it was a collection of voices—a collage that had been fused and reconstructed in time—their time, and our time. Ong felt that the power of the voices, instead of just having specific characters speaking, could not be underestimated. Lines like “I don't think it's wrong to sell our daughters who we raised ourselves” are startling and that's why Ong allowed the words to speak for themselves.

“Broken Birds” provided gripping viewing; it raised profound issues about the human condition, especially when read together with *Ah Ku and Karayuki-san*. Both the production and the book, inadequacies notwithstanding, set the mind to spinning around several of the central questions of our human past. One of the most important issues, so old, yet so current, is the relationship between good and evil. Ong and I confront the viewer and reader with the complexity of the relationship between good and evil, the difficulty of defining either, and the way in which all of us embrace at least some of both. Evil for Ong and myself exists. But it cannot be defined simply. As much as its causes lie in the human heart, they also lie in economic and political systems. Ong was deeply affected by the film, *Schindler's List*, in which he saw the sweep of humanity, and the horror of the holocaust which swept away my mother's family in Lithuania. In the same way, events like that of the *Karayuki-san* that happened in the name of economic and political gain would not be repeated in time if we listened to history more, stated Ong soberly—“the genocide in Cambodia; Bosnia would not carry with it the echoes of the Jewish extermination—the collective memories and tears of humanity. More voices must be heard”.

For a theatre production that was both sometimes quasi operatic but more usually a concert piece, for which a semi-staged production was necessary, there was one element in “Broken Birds” that no audience could miss—the music. It was haunting. “Broken Birds” has elevated the importance of music in productions which are neither musicals nor operas. It has elevated the importance of music from being incidental to crucial. “Broken Birds” also bridged another gap: that between history and the performing arts. Such a venture certainly makes history far more accessible. While historical facts—for example, details from a suicide note—can be overlooked easily in a book like my own, it becomes much more immediate when it is performed with music and movement. Here history has given material about Japanese women abroad for theatre, and theatre has given a wider audience for history. I have learned, because of the immediacy of theatre and its wider reach, that historians should consider collaborating with theatre practi-

tioners as another means to communicate the results of their dialogue with the past.

There is also the question of audience. There are additional audiences to be addressed, and academically trained historians owe it to themselves as well as to the public at large to address those larger audiences. We need to speak not only to our colleagues but also to special interest groups, historical societies, community and civic organisations and young people. If we fail to engage the broader audience while talking only to ourselves, then journalists, filmmakers, and public relation specialists will deliver history to the public and influence the way people create historical memory and meaning.

The Future

Apart from the remaining volume in the trilogy about suicide in Singapore Chinese society and culture and the long-standing project on the Typhoon in the Philippine history, the aim of my new book, *Iranun and Balangingi* is to explore ethnic, cultural and material changes in the transformative history of oceans and seas, commodities and populations, mariners and ships, and raiders and refugees in Southeast Asia, with particular reference to the Sulu-Mindanao region, or the “Sulu Zone”. The oceans and seas of Asia, East by South, from Canton to Makassar, and from Singapore to the Birds Head of New Guinea, crossed by Iranun and Balangingi raiding and slaving ships, Southeast Asian merchant vessels and colonial warships have been the sites of extraordinary conflicts and changes often associated with the formation of ethnic groups and boundaries, political struggles and national histories. Examining the profound changes that were taking place in the Sulu-Mindanao region and elsewhere, this book, the companion volume to *The Sulu Zone*, charts an ethnohistorical framework for understanding the emerging inter-connected patterns of global commerce, long-distance maritime raiding and the formation and maintenance of ethnic identity. I begin by tracing the evolution of Iranun maritime raiding from its late eighteenth century origins to support the English supplies of tea from China, into the nineteenth century’s systematic, regional-based staving and marauding activity. I then draw out the implications of that evolution for colonial systems of domination, development and discourse in the context of trans-oceanic trade, cross-cultural commerce and empire building.

The broader issues of economic integration and identity formation that underpin this book also provide an apt backdrop to the current Muslim contestations and state and ethnic politics in the Philippines. Few other ethnic groups in Southeast Asia have developed such a notorious legacy of “piracy” than the Iranun and Balangingi. This book throws light on the principal fact that these maritime Muslim groups in the Sulu Archipelago and south-western Mindanao have always been very autonomous and led a free-roaring existence in Southeast Asian waters. These Vikings of Asia laid claim to being the true lords of the eastern seas in the age of sail. *Iranun*

and Balangingi clearly demonstrates the economic motivation, geographical realities, cultural nexus and religious impetus to “piracy” in the area. Without that insight, it would be difficult to fully understand why Muslim autonomy remains such a burning issue in the Sulu Archipelago and south-western Mindanao today. While this ethno-history deals with the historical legacy of “piracy” – the book is also a pertinent reminder of how cultures and ethnic identities are embedded in sea-faring lifestyles and political processes that have not, in certain aspects, changed dramatically over the last two centuries. The Iranun and Balangingi remain marginalised from the Filipino nation state and their intractable cause has only emboldened them to fight for ethnic identity, progress and autonomous statehood.

The book comprises the second volume in a newly envisaged trilogy. The first book, *The Sulu Zone*, was published in 1981; the second is *Iranun and Balangingi*, while the final volume will deal with slavery and collective biography in the Sulu world. The impetus for this project stems from some ideas developed in a recently published small book entitled *The Sulu Zone, the World Capitalist Economy and the Historical Imagination*.

The historian, Manning Clark tells us, has to possess a vision that can allow him/her to research, write and teach about the things that really matter. “He/she must not sneer, he/she must not mock.” We have to write with the belief in the possibility that our vision will stir up a response in our audience. Clark goes on, “He/she is like an actor on a revolving stage.” We have a brief time in which to recite our work. We have got to hold the audience. We must also hope that we have used the time on the stage to teach and write about those things that really matter. We must also hope for something more: that we will find the strength to endure with dignity and compassion what we will have to live through if we take the enormous risk in Australia, Taiwan or elsewhere of ever letting people see the child in our heart.

REFERENCES

- Braudel, Fernand. (1972) *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. 2 vols. New York: Harper Row.
- _____. (1979) *Civilisation Materielle, economic et capitalisme, Xve-XVIIIe..* Paris: Siecle.
- _____. (1980) *On History*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Burke, Peter. (1992) *History and Social Theory*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Comaroff, John, and Jean Comaroff. (1992) *Ethnology and the Historical Imagination*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Darton, Robert. (1985) *The Great Cat Massacre and other Episodes in French Cultural History*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Dick, Howard. (1993) “Indonesian Economic History Inside Out.” *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*. 27:1-12.
- Frank, Andre Gunder. (1978) *World Accumulation, 1492-1789*. London: Macmillan Press.

- Ginsburg, Carlo. (1989) *Clues, Myths and the Historical Method*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Hodgson, Marshall G.S. (1974) *The Venture of Islam 3*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- _____. (1995) *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam and World History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Keesing, Roger M. (1991) "Asian Cultures?" *Asian Studies Review* 15(2):43-50.
- Leach, E.R. (1954) *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure*. London: London School of Economic and Political Science.
- Lieberman, Victor. (1995) "An Age of Commerce in Southeast Asia? Problems of Regional Coherence-A Review Article." *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 54(3):796-807.
- Marcus, George. (1986) "Problems of Ethnography in the Modern World System," in James Clifford and George Marcus (eds.) *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Prewitt, Kenneth. (1996) "Presidential Items". *Items Social Science Research Council*. 50(1): 15-18.
- Schama, Simon. (1992a) *Dead Certainties: (Unwarranted Speculations)*. London: Granta Books.
- _____. (1992b) "In Search of History's Muse". *Dialogue* 9(3):62-66.
- Sears, Laurie. (ed.) (1993) *Autonomous Histories Particular Truths Essays in Honor of John Small*. Madison: University of Wisconsin.
- Warren, James Francis. (1981) *The Sulu Zone 1768-1898 The Dynamics of External Trade, Slavery and Ethnicity in the Transformation of a Southeast Asian Maritime State*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.
- _____. (1986) *Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore (1880-1940)*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.
- _____. (1987) *At the Edge of Southeast Asian History*. Quezon City: New Day Press.
- _____. (1993) *Ah Ku Karayuki-san Prostitution in Singapore 1870-1940*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.
- _____. (1998) *The Sulu Zone, the World Capitalist Economy and the Historical Imagination*. Amsterdam: Free University Press.
- Wolf, Eric R. (1982) *Europe and the People without History*. Berkeley: University of California Press.