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 Kui or ‘whore’ was the opposite denigrating term in Cantonese. Karayuki-san was the word used traditionally by the Japanese of the 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. 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 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. 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 1870 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 "cooler 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 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 tells 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 emphasizing 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 they 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