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The story of the Samsui women is an oft-told tale in Singapore. Hardy workers from the Cantonese region of China, these women are often embedded within the trope of national pioneers who endured painstaking work in the construction industry to help build up Singapore. Remembering the Samsui Women is an attempt to rescue the history and memories of these women from the nation, to use Prasenjit Duara’s turn of phrase.

The book skillfully demonstrates how the life stories of Samsui women, filtered through narratives of frugality, hard work and independence, are consonant with Singapore’s national “narrative of survival” and thereby appropriated by the state as “pioneers” and heritage objects. Through the texts of state memory, such as ministerial speeches, school textbooks and newspaper reports, these “pioneers” are articulated as moral exemplars to younger generations of Singaporeans of an ethic befitting a migrant nation with scarce natural resources. Such romanticism is also apparent in popular memory texts, such as art, film and literature, where the authors of these texts as memory-makers valorise their memory subjects. But it is in reading the texts of what Kelvin Low calls “ground memory”, that is, interviews with the Samsui women, their kin and people who have come into contact with them, as well as the memory makers, that the reader begins to recover a sense of the subjectivity of these Samsui women.

Through unravelling entangled histories and memories of the Samsui women, the plurality of the past and its entanglement in multiple contexts and vantage points are represented through the women’s stories of why they left their hometown, the travails of the journey, their initial impressions of Singapore, and the challenges of settling down, finding work and making a living. Their narratives evince a very pragmatic logic of practice. Their iconic red headscarves did not hold special symbolic value for them, but rather acted as protective headgear adopted out of habit. Their thriftiness and work ethic were born out of the necessity to survive, while remitting as much money as possible to their needy kinsfolk back in China, not because they had some grandiose sense of being pioneers that were involved in building up a new nation. Their choice of Singapore as home is not articulated as the outcome of some emotional attachment to this island in the South Seas where they have lived most of their lives, but rather as a result of practical considerations of where they
can retire and live out the rest of their lives. These narratives allow us to distill the monotone of the bare lives of these Samsui women from the colourful canvases that others have painted to beautify their stories. We get to hear one of them say “I have nothing”—an abject declaration that she has achieved nothing over a lifetime of toil. Not the kind of ending we want at the conclusion of a heroine’s rousing tale, but this is the voice of a Samsui woman, nevertheless.

The book also has the merit of representing these women as gendered subjects beyond the discourse of celebrating them as early Chinese feminists. It notes, for example, the gendered division of labour in the construction industry then, where men were involved in skilled labour, such as carpentry work, while women were relegated to arduous manual work, such as excavating, clearing and digging. The latter was labelled “loose ends”, which constituted a discursive devaluation of the women’s work even if the job was masculine in nature. Thus, although these women, through migration and eking out an independent living in what is often considered a masculine industry, were able to gain freedom from the patriarchal system back home, this freedom was gained at the expense of gendered domination at the worksite where they became mere units of manual labour. The presentation of these dynamics allows us a more nuanced reading of the gendered position of the Samsui women.

The book’s scope is significantly expanded through comparative frames that cross geographical and temporal boundaries. With respect to the former, it examines state memory of the Samsui women back in China and finds, surprisingly, that like in Singapore, these women are celebrated as heritage objects and pioneers with a model work ethic. In terms of the latter, it draws a comparison between the Samsui women and current-day foreign workers in Singapore. While both are migrant workers in different historical eras, the contrast in their reception is stark when we consider how Samsui women have become part of Singapore’s national imaginary, while foreign workers remain an “other” that is repulsed.

The strength of the book clearly lies in how it lets us hear multiple voices. In fact, we also hear traces of different languages—kepala (Malay), samseng (Hokkien), Tua Peh Gong (Hokkien/Teochew)—that suggest to us that the Samsui women were embedded in a multicultural society. Although I would personally like to read more of the multicultural script, the vast amount of theoretical and primary materials presented already gives plenty for scholars and students of memory, heritage and migration to chew on. More importantly, the book recognises that the appropriation of the Samsui women as heritage objects, however well-intentioned, constitutes a form of symbolic violence, and