

**A Strong Stomach and Flawed Material :**  
**Towards the Making of a Trilogy, Singapore, 1870–1940**

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**Introduction**

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 decade. 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-century Singapore, wedged between British Malaya and the Netherlands Indies, with its own startling tough "history from below" and ideosyncracies 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, if with somewhat different emphases, given my particular historiographical and thematic concerns in the respective volumes.

I have attempted in these histories to conjure up an image of the atomospheric truth and drama surrounding the portrayal of ordinary Chinese people like the rickshawman Kow Wuh and the brothel keeper Loh Sai Soh, relying on courage and a spirit of decency to transcend a "traumatic event" or hard circumstance, as colonial Singapore with its rapidly developing economy, attracted tens of thousands of Chinese immigrant labourers<sup>1)</sup> [SCII, Kow Wuh, 220, 7/5/30 ; Loh Sai Soh, 10, 24/1/03]. Such individuals and

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1) 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 pre-occupation running through the author's work. This social history has been part of an individual project: an envisaged trilogy fourteen years in the making. *Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore*, the initial volume, is about the life and circumstance of the rickshawmen of Singapore. It examines the origin and development of the rickshaw trade in Singapore; its control and regulation from the standpoint of the Chinese and British; the method of earning a livelihood in rickshaw pulling, and the character of a rickshaw coolie's life.

*Ah Ku and Karayuki-san*, focusing as it does on the Chinese and Japanese prostitutes ↗

“events” told me about the larger reality and hidden meanings in my endeavours to re-interpret and re-present the history of rickshaw coolies and prostitutes in the city streets and brothels. Here the intertwining lives and fragmentary careers of ordinary men and women serve as lesser known turning points to chart the pace of a developing city and the speed of a new century by reconciling “social forces with individual passions” [Burke 1990 : 14]. It is in this context, especially, that these histories are noted for their sense of place linking characters such as Kow Wuh and Loh Sai Soh to the vast regional-urban landscape that surrounded them. Both works are multi-layered anthropological-historical studies that evoke the complexity of the bottom end of an urban Chinese reality under the British.

In telling the story about the rickshaw pullers and prostitutes in their local setting, what were the inescapable contingencies of their condition: the environment, market

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of Singapore, provides the feminine companion volume to the author's *Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore*. Both explore the world of immigrant labour during Singapore's period of rapid development in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Together they provide a powerful corrective to the romantic image of colonial Singapore as a city of excitement, sophistication and exotic charm.

*Ah Ku and Karayuki-san* describes and analyses brothel prostitution in Singapore between 1870 and 1940. The role of Chinese and Japanese prostitutes in sustaining Singapore's pre-war economy and society has not been fully recognised. Starting with village backgrounds in rural China and Japan, and the hazards of the trade in women and children, the author follows the prostitutes through their encounters with brothel life in general, and in particular explores their routines and crises of earning, spending, social relations, leisure, mobility, disease and death. A rare portrait of the *ah ku* and *karayuki-san* emerges. The author has used Coroners Inquest and Inquiries, statistical and other records, as well as photographs and oral reminiscences to resurrect the lives of the *ah ku* and *karayuki-san*. A combination of collective biography and ethnographic methodology has been used to explore the most intimate realities of prostitute's personal and working lives. By organising the case material around themes relating to the workplace and working conditions, the author has converted a mass of depositions into an “inner history,” evoking a milieu and sentiment, which throws light on a surprising array of ordinary, everyday details about brothel life.

The author hopes that both these studies will help to illuminate the complex mechanisms through which race, gender and sexualities were refracted and shaped by migration, colonialism and the city. He envisages the first and second volumes in the trilogy making a contribution to working-class history, women's history and the social history of sexuality, colonialism and urbanism.

The third volume of the trilogy, still to be fully researched and written, *Suicide and Singapore Chinese Society, 1880-1940*, concerns a way of dying in a particular community in Singapore in the period covered by the trilogy, as a whole. There is a lack of theoretical background for understanding suicide in comparative terms, and historically. The empirical evidence and case studies that will be presented in the third volume along with a particular cultural-ecological history of the Chinese and the city, will be of concern to all those interested in social history, the development of cross-cultural understanding and explanations of suicide.

forces, cultural attitudes and colonial policy and practice. Yet, my territory as a social historian extended beyond these basic considerations to the back streets and brothels so vividly brought to life in these histories. More than twelve years ago, I was one of several who called for works of Southeast Asian modern history in which facts, anthropological and sociological ideas, and literary style and images fused to restore to appropriated people their past worlds, and, to make that “place” become their possession and manifest in time [Warren 1987 : xiv–xviii, 73–81]. Again, it was the most intimate social relationships, that seemed to have vanished or disappeared, that became an integral part of these histories; while those “dominant others” administering and peopling the municipal authorities, the banks and the markets tended to recede into the background of the Singapore urban colonial experience. Both these books were set entirely in the period from the early 1880s to the late 1930s, and to make them gel, I have used the device of temporal slippage, chronologically-thematically moving toward the ethnographic present of the displayed institutional social world—the overside—and, then, looking back into the multiplicity of lives led in the private emotional world of rickshaw coolies and prostitutes. The linking of that “oscillation” between present and past, with what might be described as “macro” and “micro” narratives, made it possible for me to deal with that reality which characterised the urban colonial experience, and at a most intimate level. However, it is, I think a necessary step to attempt to also connect such ordinary city life and association of sensibility to that larger dominant world of elites and inescapable contingencies. This too is an essential task and territory for writing the recent urban social history of Southeast Asia.

### **Discovery : Singapore Return**

But, let me pause for a moment here, in order to travel back in time, to consider, albeit 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 unique 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 [*loc. cit.*]. 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 parent’s and grandparent’s generation in a meaningful historical context. The old 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 store room just two floors above the following day.

When the door was unlocked for me, after several months of fruitless searching, to a



Photo 1



Photo 2



Photo 3



Photo 4

J. F. WARREN : A Strong Stomach and Flawed Material

**Photo 1** One can actually experience at close up the day break activity of owners tending their rickshaws by “reading” a picture postcard entitled “Jinrikisha Station.” The scene is Sago Lane in Chinatown, circa 1910. It has rained and the area is relatively deserted. The rainhoods have been put up on the rickshaws flanking both sides of the street. As one puller draws away on the puddle-soaked street with shafts held high, others stand or squat nearby chatting. In the left foreground a puller leans down to clean the mudguard of his rickshaw. Its rainsoaked hood lies on the ground in a heap beside the shafts. Further down the street a man bends over to check a wheel, while across the road, on the upper right hand side of the street, a coolie wearing a conical-shaped straw hat inspects the hood on a rickshaw.

Source : Courtesy of the Singapore National Archives and Record Centre.

**Photo 2** A rickshaw coolie sitting on the floorboard of his rickshaw, naked from the waist up, smoking an opium pipe. The photograph was taken prior to 1910. Attached to the floorboard was the mount for the large box shaped coconut-oil lamps. Stamped on the tarpaulin flap was the rickshaw’s registration number.

Source : the same as Photo 1.

**Photo 3** The work of the Lambert Photographic Studio in turn of the century Singapore was widely known, and its photographers had the time and desire to apply their cameras with artistic ambition. This 1890’s studio portrait of four *karayuki-san* and others like it were remarkable for the degree of artistic conviction held by the photographers then working in the city. The portrait suggests that, beneath the photographer’s work, a metaphor for the *karayuki-san*’s daily life and existence always remained.

Source : National University of Singapore Library.

**Photo 4** Brothel prostitution played a significant economic role in providing the capital for the growth of Japanese enterprises in Singapore. Restaurants, drugstores, medical clinics, florists, motor car rentals, and many other ventures were soon bound up with the fate of the *karayuki-san*. The retail shops and businesses that developed around the brothels of Malay Street in the early twentieth century were economically important because of the *karayuki-san*.

Source : the same as Photo 1.

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 the size of my office ! These records had been moved several times from one repository to another under British rule and again as late as 1975, and this had resulted in a certain amount of loss or damage on each occasion. Most of the volumes of Inquests and Inquiries and bundles of Coroners Views wedged beneath a stack or lying at the bottom of a heap had invariably suffered damage due to dampness and the ravages of white ants. Over the decades the record keepers had developed a habit of throwing things in piles and boxes just to get them out of the way—the Court officials had a different sense of the past and priorities and for years had just put things aside, and forgot about them.

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 check list 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 “visitable 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 points towards the making of the trilogy. Initially, I randomly picked up and excitedly read the Coroners View of the suicide of the *karayuki-san*, Oichi<sup>2)</sup> [CCVS of Oichi, 82, 17/2/06]. 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.

It was at that moment that the lives of these men and women in both histories became real, stood out in stark contrast to the one dimensioned thumb nail sketches or throw away lines of the modern day works of most nomothetically driven economists and social scientists preoccupied with the recent Singapore past. 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

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2) Osuji, another prostitute in the brothel at No. 55 Malabar Street, was sent as usual at 2 a. m. on February 17, 1906 to collect the money from the other women. When she came to Oichi’s cubicle, Osuji found the door fastened on the inside and could get no answer to her call. She looked under the partition and saw Oichi hanging from her bedpost. On Oichi’s table was found a suicide letter to Ofuku, the mistress of the house, which as translated by the authorities, thanked her for her kindness, told her not to worry about her death, and asked her to send a photo of herself to her sister in Japan. See Warren [1993 : 251, 286, 313–314, 363, 372].

as if to eat or pointing eerily in the direction of the vanished cook, or mention of an old rickshaw wheel, that had been stored above a beam across the top of a latrine, where a rickshaw puller breathed his last. 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 rickshawmen 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 Courts library in Singapore and my own University office, reading, analyzing 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. The emphasis in terms of sheer volume was on the 1920s and 1930s in which there was a steep increase in the number of persons who died under circumstances warranting a Coronial investigation ; this intensification of the Coroner's work was reflected by the addition of two to three thick quarto-size volumes to record the rise which swelled to over 700 cases per annum during the 1930s. There were lacunae in the series for both the "Certificate of Coroners Views" and "Inquests and Inquiries" in the 1890s and partial or discontinuous returns for several years in this century. Chronologically the earliest case pertaining to a rickshaw puller, which involved an altercation with a drunken European passenger, was contained in a slim volume in poor condition for 1895. Thereafter cases of rickshaw pullers, of their wives and kindred, of owners and clansmen, and of prostitutes and clients who met natural, accidental, or violent deaths began to build up [Warren 1986 : 5]. Those men and women who were summoned to identify the deceased, who were either involved in brawls or strikes, or witnessed the suicide of fellow tenants, traffic deaths, and brothel crimes, provided the primary source for my exploration of the other side of Chinese society and history.

As I took meticulous notes over the next five years the Singapore past as revealed in these cases, evoking a milieu and sentiment whose details were often clouded by an atmosphere of unease, irony and danger, became at once strange and familiar to me : of Loh Sai Soh's fatal objection to Lam Loh Suh leaving the brothel ; of the rickshaw puller Kow Wuh courageously coming to the aid of his fallen comrade ; of the beautiful Duya Hadachi, her experiences of a relationship strained beyond endurance, and the deadly struggle between her paramours ; and many, many others [SCII, Loh Sai Soh, 10, 24/1/03 ; Kow Wuh, 220, 7/5/30 ; Duya Hadachi, 452, 8 /11/24]. Such ordinary people tumbled from

the pages of the records; they talked about choice of partners, love and betrayal, desperation and alienation, drawing me into their lives. These short vignettes turned out to have remarkable implications for the pace and texture of *Rickshaw Coolie* and *Ah Ku and Karayuki-san*, and for stitching together a tapestry of poverty, social and sexual antagonisms, subordination, and conflict in the social history of coolies' and prostitutes' experiences.

### Life Framed in Death

I have already mentioned the 1978 discovery in the court storeroom of the sort of evidence which would help me recreate the dramatic sense of immediacy in the lives of the rickshaw pullers and prostitutes and place them in a credible cultural-ecological context. The problem with much of the historical and other diverse sort of texts pertaining to Chinese society in nineteenth century Singapore is that the overall slant is quite insidious. Many of the documents and texts including books, buildings and bodies have had certain mythic meanings and contexts assigned to them that had the same tilt, presenting a dominant historical point of view and identity [Comaroff and Comaroff 1992 : 11]. On the other hand, some of what I refer to as "history" in those early documents still survived that involved the protagonists and the events described in both books, but, all too frequently, it had been inadvertently "concealed, forgotten or mutilated."<sup>3)</sup>

The Coroners records had the advantage of presenting events that could be fairly described from more than just one point of view. 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]. However, some of the material in these volumes was about cases that, individually, didn't seem quite good enough on their own. But, my strongest belief was and still is clearly with that collective set of biographical accounts for resurrecting the historical sensibility and concerns of the protagonists' world. Unarguably, writing up the stories of the "little people" embodied in the Inquests and Inquiries—a minor contribution to the historical saga of the Chinese in Singapore—was something not all Coroners could do very well. Obviously, it was far more difficult to do than it appeared, and well crafted Inquests seemed like little gems. The initial enormously painstaking empirical research yielded a mass of information about the demographic, social and economic opportunities and hazards which confronted the rickshaw coolies and prostitutes in colonial Singapore. For almost all the thousands of pages that followed the first scrutiny of Oichi's suicide note, several generations of Coroners unpacked the rich and terrible secrets of Singapore's past; of young men and women in Southeast China and Japan growing up amidst social

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3) This observation about sources, "invisibility" and the relationship between literature and history is attributed to the Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes.



and ecological catastrophes and a plague of sorrows ; how their own parents abandoned them and they were sold off or forced to migrate out of necessity into the Nanyang ; how hard they worked for a pittance in a city made famous for its trade and wealth as the British built their empire in Southeast Asia ; how somehow some endured the Depression, losing family and friends along the way ; and how, in the end, time suddenly stopped, their dramatically different deaths having provided serielle evidence for the analysis of trends and writing an alternative account of past events and human activities in Singapore.

This source about the presence of death by homicide, suicide or misadventure was a terrific attraction to me as the doorway to a world of sensory knowledge and activity in which these men and women lived. My aim in writing these volumes was to illuminate the human condition of ordinary Chinese men and women in Singapore. The Coroners Inquests and Inquiries impressed upon me the vital importance of death, as a reported “event,” as the key to understanding neglected or suppressed questions about aspects of Chinese labourer’s experience and culture, and, not least, the massive growth of the population and city over a seventy year period. I knew as a historian that I would need a strong stomach to handle such things. There was the knowledge and fear associated with what the rickshaw coolies and prostitutes knew from the beginning about self and life that burst out of these situations where sudden traumatic death had either happened, as in the case of Kow Wuh or Oichi, or where people feared it was about to happen, for example, as in Loh Sai Soh’s case [SCII, Kow Wuh, 220, 7/5/30 ; CCVS, Oichi, 82, 17/2/06 ; SCII, Loh Sai Soh, 10, 24/1/03]. *Ah Ku and Karayuki-san*, like *Rickshaw Coolie*, drew on the statements of the Coroner’s Inquests and Inquiries to examine the relationship between the deceased and the next of kin—fictive or otherwise—the assailant, and the city. It was the testimony—at times mean, tough, or smelling of fear—about this relationship which provided unique insight into the prostitutes’ and coolies’ environment and the profoundly threatening “humaneness” of the *ah ku* or rickshawmen.

### 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 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. I started out with a basic idea in both

histories of trying to communicate to as wide an audience as possible about what it was like to be a rickshaw puller or prostitute, what happened to them, how their lives developed within the city and beyond, and that was a very complex process. I have spoken as naturally and compassionately as possible of the individual and collective characters and how they developed within my histories—as if Kow Wuh, Oichi and Loh Sai Soh and many, many others were old friends. In some ways, many of the individuals in both books were deeply flawed, a tightly tangled knot of desire and despair, of hopes and dreams gone to ruin. I have also written with complete respect and acceptance about their lives. I realised too only some of the superb, enormously moving material in the Coroner's records could enable me to do it.

All the fundamentally great themes of power and innocence, friendship and loyalty, goodness and evil, love and betrayal in all its forms and fathomless complexities were found in the Coroner's cases about the lives of these very ordinary, sometimes dangerous 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 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 verandah 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 was potentially rewarding but, that left the majority 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 tried to do this historical writing structured around a whole range of human activities and a chronological-thematic narrative of events, primarily through the inner doorway of the written texts of the Coroner's court as well as those points of entry provided by oral memory. I can also say that it was an attempt to make the commonplace in Singapore Chinese society memorable, to communicate through these cases of essentially uninflected lives, until that moment of death, all the spontaneous pleasures and unanticipated tragedies of the kind of living that most coolies and prostitutes experienced. There were no soft embellishments, no nostalgia, no romantic finery. My focus concentrated on the pain, anguish, confusion, accomplishments, affection and sacrifice of the more vulnerable and needy Chinese men and women amidst a harsh, developing landscape of a colonial city and port.

### The "Event"

As in *Rickshaw Coolie*, *Ah Ku* and *Karayuki-san* focussed at times on the lives of troubled

spirits, the darker side of the psyche and colonial urbanisation. The reality was often bleak and laced with irony and many of the characters in the Coroner's records touched the dark side, struggling within an "event" or against latent conflicts which laid bare social structures and revealed their identity [Burke 1991 : 242]. In early twentieth century Singapore such incredibly twisted "knots" or "traumatic events" were commonplace, but for me as an innovative historian in the 1980s trying to convey as many levels of the social drama as possible when an individual such as a rickshaw puller or prostitute faced a crisis, they were a revelation.<sup>4)</sup> Some "events" buried in the Coroners inquests acted like a litmus test revealing the otherwise hidden dynamic and structures of a culture and society at a particular moment in time. While they all dealt with nuances, illuminations and metaphors about the values and habits of Singapore Chinese urban life, ultimately it was about winning and losing in the course of living the meaning of that life. Invariably, I realised, that in attempting to bring the threads together to convey the total human condition somebody won and somebody lost. For example, because Ah Sow was her friend and a valued customer, Lee Tai How gave him a pair of gold mounted rattan bangles worth \$80 to pawn in 1903. But she was horrified to learn towards the end of the year that her trusted lover refused to return her gold bangles as she wanted to wear them for the New Year's celebration. Distraught, Ah Sow was unable to strike a bargain with Lee Tai How as he had not yet amassed enough cash to redeem them from hock. One thing led to another and gradually the two became embroiled in a heated argument, creating a highly charged atmosphere. Had he known about the course his feelings would run before he first visited the brothel, the place might not have seemed so inviting. Lee selected him as her man but made him into her child instead. Ah Sow was emotionally dependent on her, but to be economically dependent too was terrible. When there was so much money involved each month to pay for the ah ku's services, someone was bound to become a statistic. Her throat was cut and he did it quickly [SCII, Lee Tai How, 176, 7/12/03]. Often there was a resolution, sometimes violently sudden, as in the above case, sometimes too, as in the case of Oyoshi, as gradual as a slow dawn [Warren 1993 : 341-342, 372-374]. Sometimes, much to my chagrin, the "events" embedded in the cases under scrutiny in the Coroner's inquests did not end at all, but simply unravelled away, disappearing out of the record as I struggled in vain to recover them.

Here was a paradox I had to reconcile myself to about catching the life of Chinese labourers in ways that had not been experienced before in a city like colonial Singapore. I was forced into an awareness of their making fundamental sharp choices that could haunt and/or drop from sight without a trace. Consequently, I also had to consider making basic choices about different approaches to innovative historical writing. At that characteristically frustrating pale moment of the disappearance of the "event" the

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4) For a brief discussion of the importance of various types of "events" in the historical writing of Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, see Burke [1990 : 91].

significance of aspects of the remarkable spectrum of their lives, showing us choice and contingency in Singapore and the age of Imperialism was lost, except to coflate the history of these real persons and emotionally charged events with fiction—this was not entirely supportable. I knew in such moments that the answer was not to leave the rude beast or “event,” the extant material, also known as the life around the coolies and prostitutes to the novelists or playwrights, but to do what social historians do, or are supposed to do, which was to confront the deepest concerns of humanity, wrestling the beast of human life and bringing it to terms in an original, lasting and illuminating way. So I have turned my practice in these two volumes about historiographical problems and questions concerning the tension and relationship between social structure and human agency into an unassuming exhortation. I have maintained in both volumes that these resurrected “events” or “knots” yield stories and images that not only provided truths about the nature of coolies and prostitutes and their world, but also enabled me to “waken the ghosts” and bring the discipline to life.

### Life and Death

I have already mentioned the necessity of a strong stomach in researching and writing this history as I was seriously interested in addressing the great themes of life and work, love and death. Writing about sex, love and death can be most effective and artful in the hands of the right historian with the right sources and circumstances, and when informed by struggle and passion for the subject matter. These were themes in the history of the city that had to be tackled. 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 physical life of previously unknown worlds is hardly novel territory for social history over the past several decades. In recent years some of the most significant popular history books, themselves making history—*Montaigne*, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, *The Cheese and the Worms*, and *The Death of Woman Wang*—have worked on that premise [Le Roy Ladurie 1980; Davis 1986; Ginzburg 1982; Spence 1978]. Similarly my exploration of Singapore rickshaw street life, prostitution, the romantic—erotic impulse and death in Chinese society in early twentieth century Singapore is as complex, powerful and poetic. 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” mentioned that triggered an ending were not always part of a sensible life, and last minute winnings and losings over loss 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].

One of my unconventional heroines Loh Sai Soh was short, stocky, up in her years, and, a *mamasan*. Like so many other spur of the moment decisions, it was a daring choice. Loh Sai Soh moved in front of Lam Loh Suh and refused to budge : a standoff. But the act enabled the brothel-keeper to highlight her strong attachment to a treasured possession—her ah ku. Wong Ah Wong had become her commodity, her fictive “daughter” and somebody she would do anything to protect or get back. Such “traumatic events” took me back into a sensual, dangerous and, at times, evil world rather than a thinking one replete with individuals who had more than a “touch of evil” in them. Evil existed. Loh Sai Soh met it, according to the servant Kok Ah Men. The *mamasan* swore at the half-crazed attacker and shouted at him to let go of her ah ku, Wong Ah Wong. Lam, an obsessed sailor who had threatened to take Wong from the house, inched her carefully towards the brothel exit, and away from the keeper. Loh grabbed the ah ku’s arm and pulled the prostitute back towards her. He then struck the side of the *mamasan*’s chest, twisting the knife out. By this time nearly everyone in the brothel reception hall was on their feet, unsure what to expect next. It was ugly. In the end it was Kok Ah Men, a *tai pang po* (servant) to Wong, and several others among the dozen present, who tried to restrain Lam from stabbing the *mamasan*, again. But the servant had neither a gun nor knife and watched Loh Sai Soh die. Her image of that horrific event haunted the faithful *tai pang po* long after the murder [Warren 1993 : 304].

And hidden behind such horrific backdrops in pre-war Singapore were many other cases terrible enough to mount a powerful indictment against a patriarchal world in which defenceless Chinese and Japanese women were taught that sex and love meant always smiling and having to say you’re sorry. For example, two young men met during the Depression in N. 24 Malay Street, Singapore. One, Yukichi Nonaka, was rich, well endowed, owning a hotel in Sumatra, well connected, and ambitious. The other, Shindo, was poor, unconnected, and a carpenter’s apprentice. The two men of different social status faced an identical problem, an identical crisis of falling in love with an extraordinarily beautiful karayuki-san by the name of Duya Hadachi. Over the course of a month in October 1924, both these men visited the astonishing woman more than a dozen times, experiencing the disturbance of passion, getting by, putting one foot after the other, existing, but Shindo had become bent if not broken by their mutual experience. It was exhilarating but draining. Very different in their personalities they became close friends of sorts as some people do, on that fateful day when they accidentally met for the first time in the karayuki-san’s room. They didn’t necessarily approve of one another—in fact, Nonaka had difficulty in accepting the dominating personality of Shindo—but his

friendship appeared to outlast disapproval and irritation. Perhaps, the psychology of the moment demanded it. A gentleman was expected to rise to an occasion like this and that Yukichi Nonaka did so must have been partially out of deference to Duya's wishes. And as this story all but told itself—so effortlessly it felt as if I were there in the room observing through her eyes—it bestowed on me several dark surprises. The first was that this gorgeous, pinchpenny young woman had a past as glamorous as a film idol, but far sadder. The second was that in light of her trials, there were people not necessarily in powerful positions who were totally manipulative and two-faced and whose dominant interest was personal power, disguised as concern for the social welfare of another human being. Shindo was such a person. The real life themes of this tangled "event" were love, friendship, and betrayal. But, evil was present too. The villain was willful possession of a whole human being and blind chance. The tensions were those between and among people in a triangular affair who loved each other as much as they resisted each other. What was so striking, despite clearly describing his intention to give up Duya, was just how badly Yukichi Nonaka misunderstood Shindo's real intention with its tragic outcome. The carpenter's apprentice stabbed the woman he loved, and then killed himself as the ultimate gesture of owning another person. The alluring karayuki-san had broken the fundamental rule of the demi-monde; play and reality had become blurred in her life and work. She had refused to acknowledge the fact that love was forbidden in the houses of the suteretsu<sup>5)</sup> [*ibid.* : 296–298].

### Formulating an Approach

Manuel Castells has argued "cities are made by people" [Castells 1979 : x]. The first two volumes of the trilogy attempt to describe and analyse the urban social history of Singapore through the experience of some of those people; of all the Chinese workers who symbolised colonial Singapore the rickshawmen and prostitutes were, perhaps, in the best position to know the real nature of the city. Using almost two hundred featured individuals and a literary, anthropological-historical technique reminiscent of Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and Jonathan Spence, *Rickshaw Coolie* and *Ah Ku and Karayuki-san* are in depth historical ethnographies.<sup>6)</sup> They describe and analyse the vital role of rickshaw pullers and Chinese and Japanese prostitutes in sustaining Singapore's pre-war society and economy, as well as the despair, disease and death that had wormed its way, eaten its way to the very core of Singapore under British rule. Here, again, as for historiography : there hasn't been sufficient imaginative reflection on the significance of particular sources pertaining to death for reconstructing such worlds in Southeast Asian modern

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5) Suteretsu was a colloquial term in Amakusa dialect, referring to the Malay Street brothel area of Singapore, which was a corruption of the word "street."

6) See Le Roy Ladurie [1979] and Spence [1978 ; 1989].

history. Indeed, we lag behind our colleagues in countries like France and the United States very considerably and very clearly in recognising the historiographical importance of a source like the Coroners Records of Singapore to facilitate the reliving of the past and the fact, too, that there were a vast number of people for whom death had become an ever-present reality, for themselves, their kindred and their community in the life of the city.<sup>7)</sup> I have talked in both volumes about trying to write a thematic-oriented analytical “inner history” around such deaths and related “events” as revealed in the Coroner’s depositions [Warren 1986 : 3–11, 323–327 ; 1993 : 3–21, 386–390]. They are works of social history based on the cultural constraints and reflections of ordinary people and the rhythm of what was normal in the patterns and social networks of their day to day life, and, particularly, how one side saw the city from its own characteristic vantage point.

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 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 rickshawmen 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 rickshawmen and ah ku.<sup>8)</sup>

One thing this methodological approach has taught me about “experience” is that the

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7) A notable exception is Owen [1987].

8) The data is often drawn from a wide variety of sources that can complement one another. On the method and examples of this research technique, see Stone [1981], Lockhart [1972], and Escott [1979] on the significance of prosopography as a technique for writing South-east Asian social history, see Warren [1981 : 237–251 ; 1986 : 7–8 ; 1987 : xvii].

historian should try, whenever possible, to read the lives of the “little people” or the defeated positively, instead of reducing them to mythic-tragic categories like “the oppressed” or “the down-trodden.” Once the a-priori mythology of hierarchical inversion was removed, the lines of experience and power within their society and culture appeared more complicated and interesting. *Rickshaw Coolie* and *Ah Ku and Karayuki-san* show traces of this lesson by looking at the puller’s and prostitute’s lives in terms of the potentials embodied in the fullness of their experience, that is of their history of struggle and failure, and, the optimism, albeit desperate at times, of these men and women contending with changing fortunes—a world that was dying in China, a new one being born in Singapore, and cultural values that no longer functioned for survival among poverty stricken Chinese and Japanese families. The role and life experiences of the Chinese rickshawmen and prostitutes in the face of adversity and oppression as portrayed in these works, have an inherent historical significance for helping to establish and consolidate a reworking of Singapore’s history, and, equally important, in the context of present day Singapore and Japan, for re-defining the notion of what is historical. There is something more: time has a way of correcting society’s past distortions in the historical record. These studies not only involved an extension of the content and meaning of history, they also implied a revision of that content. What I have suggested in these volumes is that in a new history of Singapore the little people—Chinese labourers—both, men and women, should be visibly present, part of the changing environment and landscape of a “coolie town” under British rule. The fundamental problems encountered in the daily lives of these ordinary urbanites—making their livings and losing them—is the real stuff of Southeast Asian urban social history.

I have searched for significance in the city’s life and the history of consciousness of a people, trying to impose meaning on seemingly insignificant, confusing and often messy experiences, by painstakingly attempting to create their collective biographies. By combining a life-span approach with collective biography, I have fashioned a personal history of the rickshaw puller’s and 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 in Singapore. Mastery of the archival sources and secondary literature enabled me to flesh out their skeletal careers and what they could tell us about the paradoxes of life in a colonial city. Singapore urban culture did not promise autonomy but it was still an open city in certain respects. I have argued that the richly textured collective portrait of the variety of lives being led around the city confronted me with the unmediated contingency of choice, and, control or lack thereof over life and circumstance, in historical situations and human schemes involving rickshaw pulling, brothel prostitution and the underworld. Bluntly put, autonomy and alienation came to the protagonists of these two works of history packaged as both product and fate in the life of the city.

Much of this evidence about the social and economic life of prostitutes and rickshaw-



men was fragmentary. But surviving sources, which only provided a point of entry into their lives, dealt with issues that were very much a part of Singapore's sensibilities in the early twentieth century, issues of gender and labour and sexuality and physicality. The gaps in the records highlighted the necessity for the historian to catch the voices of these illiterate men and women with imagination. Innovative use of the Coroner's records not only helped to fill large gaps in the sources, but also provided clues for reconstructing the framework of an entire social-cultural system, the overall ethno-historical mosaic into which the jig-saw bits of evidence could be creatively fitted, that captured much that was unusual and compelling—physically, emotionally and spiritually—about their lives. Yet the end, and point—of both my volumes—was revisionist understanding, and the way in which apprehending the life and circumstance of Loh Sai Soh, Duya Hadachi, Koh Wuh and many others made it more difficult to be hard on them.

### **Silence and Memory**

As for silence : consider how until quite recently the celebration of Singapore's past and memory were situated squarely within the historical confines of studies of nationalism and rule from above. Not surprisingly, finding a place for the "little people" in the history of the city has been a contested domain. Because coolies and prostitutes have not controlled the historical record and their own stories have been largely neglected or forgotten, their voices for all intensive purposes were silenced—bound and gagged. The vast majority of these men and women in both books, who viewed the world from the bottom up, had been unable to speak out or answer back. Their past and future had been appropriated by an intellectual elite concerned in part with suppressing vital elements in the social and economic history of the Chinese community in Singapore. It seemed to me incredible to present a history of Singapore without the coolie and prostitute. Yet historians and social scientists, who have dealt with the economic, social and political history of Singapore, have, by tracing its progress in terms of development and modernization from colonial past to city-state present, accomplished just that. They have gone astray by not attempting in their analyses to demonstrate the profound effects of Singapore's economic growth and political influence on the "little people." More importantly, this form of historical explanation of Singapore's past has led to little attempt having been made to understand the contribution of the coolie and prostitute to Singapore society. I had to focus on the unanswered questions and silences surrounding rickshaw pulling and prostitution in Singapore's past. The current histories had not provided an adequate explanation of the social and cultural aspects of the coolies and prostitute's existences that placed them outside the mainstream of life and history. The socially constructed silence—the neglect of their outlook and position—could not be ignored. A primary tenet of my approach was a belief that the experience of such individuals could be creatively written about to fill the lacuna.

These men and women and their professions can no longer be considered peripheral to the central concerns of historical study in Singapore. The memory of ordinary Singaporeans has been dominated by those who have political, economic and ideological sway. Most of the historical records available tend to reflect the overbearing presence of the male: educated, privileged and powerful. Hence, it was crucial that I navigate skillfully through these perilous channels of systematic bias. I had to critically examine arguments leading to discontinuities, challenge others concerning the intimate relation of history to the mediation of power and “invisibility,” and demonstrate throughout sensitivity to gender, a careful rendering of the sources, and a wide knowledge of work in the field. The consequence of both volumes was the emergence of an alternative memory: a framework of balanced arguments, based on the felt realities of these men and women, which was fashioned to analyse the history of their past. Stress has been placed on the similarities and differences in the lives and circumstance of the rickshaw pullers and prostitutes, in the variety and complexity of their basic social relations, human condition, and on changes over time, as mirrored in the actual limits of their mobility. I have selected the social and cultural boundaries that best reflected the transitions taking place in the life and work of these men and women, as well as in the structure of Singapore society, along with their reciprocal influence and impact on one another. Such an interdisciplinary approach “rich, contextual, close to the ground” advocates a fairer, more balanced, and realistic account of the past. The historical memory of Singaporean society is constituted not of one single strand, but of a tangled skein. There is a dominant memory, carefully and often selectively recorded for posterity of the articulate and powerful, and there are the numerous alternative memories of the past from the testimony of the “under-classes, the under-privileged, and the defeated”—the history of the “little people.”

### **Towards a Synthesis**

*Rickshaw Coolie* and *Ah Ku and Karayuki-san*, part history and part ethnography, remained faithful not only to my methodological approach to retrieve coolies and prostitute’s lives but also to the interpretative fabric of the texts—the mass of startling incongruities of character and circumstance, the black humour and terrible ironies of rickshaw pulling and brothel prostitution, the frailty and tragedy of the human condition in China, Japan and Singapore. But in amassing the life-like detail to fit together the pieces of this ethno-historical mosaic, mirroring the careers of these silent and forgotten men and women I recognised the fact that in many areas, conceptually speaking, the historical record was silent. Singapore life in the demi-monde was chaotic, fragmented, random, and discontinuous: in a word, absurd, if not silent. Here my concerns reached the limits of innovative investigative work, as it touched on absences and the role chance played in life. I found that certain details and moments of the men and women’s pasts

remained unknowable and that the history that I could recover and write was based only on innumerable fragments of past lives. The conventional wisdom of social history and anthropology must recognise such lacuna or great silences, as well as other areas where I held no more than a "thin shrivelled tissue" in my hand [Samuel 1988 : 47].

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 prostitute's lives speak to us, as individuals at the other end of the West's modern century and ebbing fortunes, of 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.

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