

Migrants past and present

Samsui women and migrant workers in Singapore

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Samsui women have a small but distinct niche in Singapore's history.

Their broad red hats and blue-black *samfoo* marked them out as they went back and forth to work on the island's building sites. Since the last working Samsui women retired, their image has become a fixture in Singapore's perception of how it transformed itself into a modern city. The shrinking group of living Samsui women are invited to be guests at various events, where they are expected to turn up in their popularly recognised clothing, as if, when they don't wear it, they cease to be Samsui women.¹ They are eulogised in drama serials; there are Samsui women T-shirts, collectible figures and dolls on sale at the Chinatown Heritage Centre;² when the Dim Sum Dollies performed The History Of Singapore at the Esplanade in July 2007, one segment was devoted to Samsui women.³

The Samsui women are seen to represent values that present-day Singaporean society regards highly. With their reputation for resilience and hard work, they embody the spirit that has gone into the making of modern Singapore, and are sometimes held up as an inspiring example for younger generations accustomed to a less arduous life.

These women, who worked alongside men in construction sites from the 1930s to the 1980s, have become icons of independence. They are regarded as builders of the nation, honoured in speech and welcomed as guests on special occasions.⁴

Samsui women themselves have had little say in how their contemporary image was shaped; some, in their old age, recall times when, as manual labourers, they felt less respected by the general public. Now in her 90s, Wong Ah Tai said she felt that people used to look down on them "because, after all, we carry mud".⁵

The women's social circumstances have meant that they recorded little of their own views and experiences. Few could read or write and, until recently, other people took no great interest in their lives and memories. As time passes, it seems that the Samsui women of flesh and blood may fade from the world and all that will be left is a two-dimensional idealised figure, with a ready smile on her face.

That should not be allowed to happen.

Samsui women worked hard because they had to. Nation-building was not on

their minds when they first set out to work in Singapore's construction industry; making a living was. Many who came were in their teens. Most came alone. As they stepped onto the Singapore pier in the 1930s, after months at sea in grim and sometimes perilous conditions, the road ahead must have seemed daunting indeed.

Decades later, thousands of women continue to brave a similar journey, leaving their families behind to seek jobs in Singapore. Many are employed as domestic workers. Like the Samsui women of yesteryear, they do what they have to – cope as best as they can with circumstances that are not of their own making.⁶

Samsui women and modern domestic workers

There are similarities as well as significant differences between the Samsui women and the foreign domestic workers of today.

Like most migrants who came to Singapore before 1950, Samsui women were from southern China, so they found some familiar institutions and customs when they arrived and lived among people who, like themselves, mostly spoke Cantonese. Many of their immediate neighbours were also from the Samsui district.

Foreign domestic workers, by contrast, come mostly from Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand and Burma. They number about 170,000 in Singapore today, and are among the country's 650,000 migrant workers.

Both groups have faced the consequences of doing work that the better-off regarded as lowly and unskilled. While respected by employers as dependable workers, Samsui women were not regarded so positively by society at large in the 1930s and 1940s; likewise, foreign workers today face varying attitudes, with some people crediting them for their hard work and dedication, and some denigrating their intelligence, honesty and other values.

In both cases, the "pull" factor of jobs in Singapore drew in people subjected to the "push" factor of poor economic conditions in their places of origin. They could not earn very much where they lived, and so their families wanted them to go to work elsewhere, in lands where they could earn money to support their relatives.

The experience of going into debt to pay for the journey to Singapore and of repaying it from their earnings is a common one: the main difference is that the Samsui women often had to work for over a year to pay off their debt, while modern domestic workers usually repay their debt in six to nine

months.⁷ On the other hand, once she was in Singapore, a Samsui woman went from one employer to another without penalty, but a modern domestic worker who wishes to transfer to another employer needs the consent of her existing one in most circumstances and ends up paying the equivalent of one-and-a-half to four months' salary to her agency to make the change.⁸

The most fundamental similarity between the two groups of women is in the commitment that both have made towards their families. Most Samsui women gave up the prospect of marriage and children and lived very simply in order to save money to support relatives who they might never see again after they left home. Modern domestic workers are careful in their spending when they go out, and sometimes endure unreasonable and exploitative treatment simply because they do not want to risk losing their source of income. Young single women who come to Singapore as domestic workers may see their chances of finding a husband and having children slip away with the passing years; married women miss seeing their children grow up and may not be there when they are needed. Many mothers lavish love and care on other people's children during their years in Singapore while their own children miss them and feel emotionally deprived.⁹ The personal sacrifice is enormous.¹⁰

Much has changed over the years, and that has made a considerable difference to the conditions experienced by the two groups of migrant women. Singapore was still under British rule when the original Samsui women came and it was expected that most migrants who were admitted would settle here. The authorities were not much concerned with what they did once they had passed quarantine. Restrictive policies towards migrant labour were a relatively recent development.

At independence, Singapore was hard-pressed to create jobs for all its citizens who needed them, so it operated a very restrictive policy towards foreign unskilled and semi-skilled workers. Only after the economic take-off of the 1970s transformed the country's prospects did it open the doors to foreign migrant workers,¹¹ but sensitivities about community relations in Singapore prompted the government to want their presence to be temporary. Male construction workers and female domestic workers are therefore allowed into Singapore on work passes that must be renewed every two years: they are not permitted to marry locals or raise families here, nor to settle permanently.¹²

Samsui women took on work every day that it was available because of economic necessity, not because they were compelled to work by contract. They had days or part-days off when work was not available. They usually laboured for around nine hours a day, not the fifteen or so that is quite common for domestic workers today. They came and went as they chose outside working hours: there was no one to lock them up in case they "fell into bad company".¹³ Their ability to reject a bad employer and the presence of fellow workers on-site no doubt protected them from physical and sexual abuse.

Working together and sharing accommodation, Samsui women provided support for each other, though living in close quarters and sometimes competing for work could also lead to friction. Conversation, sympathy in difficult times and the chance for young women to learn from the more experienced – all made it a little easier to cope with difficult circumstances; whatever else they had to bear, Samsui women were not forced to endure the debilitating, morale-rotting isolation of those modern domestic workers whose employers try to isolate them from the outside world and deny them the right to go out, meet friends and know a few hours when their lives are their own.

Perhaps a recognition that the motivations of foreign domestic workers and the sacrifices that they make are similar to those of the now-respected Samsui women could help to bring about greater consideration for these modern migrants.

A Place in Time

Samsui women originated in a relatively small area of southern China. The great majority came to Singapore over a period of less than 20 years that ended in 1949, with the Communist victory in China.

Chinese women had never led the way in emigration. A patriarchal order governed where they lived and how they spent their days. It was not intended that a young woman should go out into the world by herself to make a living. Girls from all but the wealthier homes helped their families by working around the house and often, in rural areas, out in the fields. That is, unless their families were so desperate that they sold them off to become the lifelong domestic servants of wealthier families (known as *mui tsais*) or prostitutes.¹⁴

A girl could usually expect to be married and experience her first pregnancy by her mid-teens. Marriage meant moving from the parental home to that of her husband's family, where she worked under the watchful eye of her mother-in-law. In short, she lived under the direct authority and supervision of her own family or those of her husband's family throughout her life.

In the course of the 19th century, worsening economic distress and social conflicts led a growing number of men to seek a living overseas. Singapore was one of their destinations. For the century after the establishment of the modern city, its Chinese population was overwhelmingly male. Gradually, men who made successful careers arranged for their wives or would-be brides in China to join them, and the number of women in the population grew. The warfare and dislocation in China in the years following the overthrow of the Qing dynasty in 1911 produced a flood of destitute women, thousands of whom came to Singapore, but it was only in the 1930s that the ratio of men to women became roughly one to one.¹⁵

The economic growth of Singapore attracted a steady flow of men from southern China until the early 1930s, when the Depression hit Singapore hard. Demand for labour contracted drastically and some unemployed men were even deported back to China. In 1933, the colonial administration introduced the Aliens Ordinance, with the intention of restricting further Chinese immigration.¹⁶ It limited male entry, but left the door open to female migrants, and it was through this doorway that the Samsui women walked.

They came from a rural area to the west of Guangzhou (Canton), where three rivers, or "three waters" (Samsui in Cantonese) flowed into one. It was a region of grinding poverty, where life was made more wretched by natural disasters, such as the catastrophic flood that washed away many homes and livelihoods in 1915.

"Our Samsui in China was very sad (*cham*¹⁷), very poor. There was hardly any

rice to eat," said Lee Gan Ling. "It's not like now. In those days, there were a lot of restrictions. It didn't mean that because you had the land and you farmed it, you had enough to eat. It was because there wasn't enough to eat that we came to Singapore."¹⁸

The habit of migrating to earn money abroad and sending money back to support families was well established by the early 20th century. Men from the Samsui area had started to leave for work in Singapore by the mid-19th century at the latest, and, 120 years ago, a Samsui community association (Sam Sui Wui Kun) was formed in Singapore. It still exists today.¹⁹

Altogether, the association estimates that 40,000 to 50,000 people migrated from the Samsui area to Singapore. They were all Cantonese-speakers. Men also went to Penang, Kuala Lumpur, Malacca and Ipoh, "*wai joi sik fan, yao leong chan sik*" (because they needed to make a living: literally, the two phrases mean "to eat rice, for the sake of two meals a day").²⁰

Although early immigration from Samsui was overwhelmingly male, a few women travelled to Singapore, as spouses, labourers or both. "My parents came in 1915; that was when the flood happened. Men went to Ipoh to do engineering and the women came here to be coolies," said Ho Mun Chong, at 88, the oldest Sam Sui Wui Kun committee member.²¹

Woo Yun Sum recalled: "My grandfather died early, so my grandmother came to Singapore, leaving two sons behind. She sent money back to support them in school. When my father was 10, she sent money for him to come to Singapore. He was apprenticed as a plumber. Then she took him back to China when he was 20 to get married. It was easier to look for a wife in China. My mother was 18 then, and already known as old: it was a late age for a woman to marry in those days. My maternal grandmother only had two daughters and she couldn't bear to marry them earlier. They came back together (to Singapore) after one month." As Woo Yun Sum was born in Singapore in February 1931, this would place her grandmother's initial move to Singapore at least a few years before 1920.²²

For young women in the Samsui district, a hard life of working in the fields was normal. Girls had no opportunity to go to school and to learn to read and write.

Woo Yun Sum said: "In all of China, the poorest people were from Samsui. The women were made to work at 12 or 13 – they had to cut wood, cook and till the land. They were the very worst off."²³

In most of China, the practice of binding women's feet to make them look dainty was widespread. There was no place for such a custom among the Samsui villagers, as that would have left their womenfolk unable to shoulder the heavy farmwork they performed. Had Samsui women undergone footbinding, their story would have been different: there would have been no prospect of them

coming to work in Singapore's construction industry when the opportunity presented itself.²⁴

With their families in need of money and fewer chances for men to find work abroad, hundreds of young women left behind all that they had known to come to labour in Singapore's construction industry. Most arrived between 1934 and 1938, the year Japanese forces occupied Guangzhou, making travel more difficult. All Chinese migration to Singapore halted from 1942 to 1945, during the Japanese occupation, but some Samsui women came after 1945. They ceased to arrive only after the Communist victory in China in 1949.

Eventually, well over 1,000, perhaps as many as 2,000, women came to Singapore to work in the construction industry in these years.²⁵ When Samsui women are written and spoken about, these are the women who are meant.

Some qualifications need to be made. As already mentioned, there were women who came to Singapore from the Samsui area, sometimes as a result of marriage, sometimes to take on other work, who never laboured in the construction industry or wore the "Samsui woman clothing", and so they were never recognised by the public as Samsui women, despite their origins. In some cases, the daughters of Samsui female construction workers followed in their footsteps. Though not born in China, these second-generation Samsui women shared many of the experiences of their mothers, but are sometimes not regarded as "real" Samsui women.²⁶

The initiative for women to migrate could come from their own families, or from recruiters who presented the women's families with a favourable account of the prospects for their daughters to earn good money in Singapore.

The Samsui people "heard that it was easy to *wan chien* (make a living; literally, "look for money") in Singapore... The *sui hak* went to their villages to bring people to Singapore. They said that Singapore was an easy place to make a living," said Lee Gan Ling.

The *sui hak* (literally, "water guest") was the recruiter or agent.²⁷ He helped to make the women's travel arrangements. This had to be paid for. Sometimes, a widow had money that she could put towards these costs, but the general practice was to go into debt and pay it off from later earnings. It was quite normal for a woman to spend the first year or so of her new working life paying off her debt. Wong Ah Tai related that she paid over 20 Chinese dollars to her recruiter. She paid half the money in advance, and then paid off the rest while working in Singapore. It took her over a year to pay what she owed. Loh Ah Kwai paid 30 dollars, borrowing 10 dollars each from three friends. She paid them back from her earnings in Singapore. That also took her over a year.²⁸

Samsui migrants to Singapore travelled by ship, generally from Hong Kong.

Early male migrants were sometimes smuggled into Singapore and men travelling on cargo ships could sometimes offset the cost of their voyage by working on board. Tighter supervision of entry to Singapore and the customary restriction of shipboard work to men meant this possibility was not available to women. There is little record now of their experiences, but it would seem that they could be quite frightening. Loh Ah Kwai said: "I didn't know anyone when I boarded the ship in Guangdong. Everyone was from a different village. I slept in the lower deck for seven days and nights and couldn't eat because I was seasick." ²⁹

Some children died during the voyage and the deckhands threw their bodies into the sea. Loh Ah Kwai recalled the fate of one particular girl who was being sent to Penang. She developed a fever and was thrown overboard. "It was so pitiful," she said. "The girl was so young and she was still alive." ³⁰

Life in Singapore

Entering Singapore was not simply a matter of showing valid travel documents. The authorities wanted to avoid the introduction of infectious diseases to the territory and quarantined new arrivals. The sick were denied entry; the rest were given inoculations and waited out the one-week standard period of quarantine. ³¹

Another preoccupation of the authorities was the influx of young women to Singapore to work as prostitutes, so it was normal for a Samsui woman to be questioned about whether she was coming to Singapore voluntarily, what her purpose was and about her marital status. Traffickers carefully coached women who were destined to work as prostitutes about what they should say in order to be allowed into Singapore, and so, if they were suspicious, immigration officials sought to counter their efforts by interviewing women alone and at length. Wong Ah Tai said that she had problems on her arrival because the authorities were sceptical of her claim that she had come to work as a labourer. She was questioned thoroughly before they were convinced that she was not being brought to Singapore against her will. ³²

There was an assumption that a widow was less likely than an unmarried woman to become a prostitute. Many female migrants in the 1930s professed to be widows, and some in authority thought this was a way of allaying suspicions about their intentions in coming to Singapore. But, given the mortality rates in China at that time, there seems little reason to doubt that, often, those who claimed to be widows were telling the truth.

Low Sum Kiu was 19 when she first came to Singapore with her husband, but he was unable to adjust to the tropical climate, and they returned to China, where he died a few years later. She then came back to Singapore to find work. ³³ Ho Yuet Kam said: "I was widowed at 20 soon after I got married but I knew that my parents and brothers depended on me. So I put away my sackcloth in China

and came here and put on my blue and red.”³⁴ Loh Ah Kwai was married in China when she was 15, but her husband died of illness and, in 1931 at the age of 19, she came to Singapore. Wong Ah Tai was not a widow, but she had nevertheless lost her husband. She was married to him at 15 and he left her when she was 17. She came to Singapore in 1936, when she was 19.³⁵ Likewise, Chan Swee Hoe came to Singapore with her son when she was 25, after separating from her husband.³⁶

If these examples are representative, it would seem that there was a strong element of prejudice in the authorities’ suspicions of the women’s honesty.

Having cleared immigration formalities, including quarantine, a woman would make her way to the neighbourhood between South Bridge Road and New Bridge Road where many Samsui migrants already lived. It is now known as part of Chinatown, but the area was not so called then.

Most Samsui women lived near each other, in an area of a few streets centred on Upper Chin Chew Street. These streets had official names, but locals called them by their own terms, often determined by the trades carried on in them. Sago Street, to the west of the main concentration of Samsui migrants, was variously known to Cantonese-speakers as Coffin Street and Dead Body Street, because of the undertakers’ shops there. The Samsui community knew Mosque Street as “Indian Street”; travelling from west to east, the following thoroughfares were known as Hai San Street (Upper Cross Street), To Fu Street (Upper Chin Chew Street), Cheong Bak Street (Upper Nankin Street), and Cheong Tai Street (Upper Hokkien Street).³⁷ Hai San and Cheong Bak were named after secret societies. Adjacent Eu Tong Sen Street, where some women lived, appears to have had no alternative Samsui title, probably because it was named after a prominent Chinese businessman.

To Fu Street was so named after a Samsui male immigrant of an earlier generation had set up the first tofu shop in Upper Chin Chew Street. Woo Yun Sum recalled that in the 1940s, a block of tofu could be bought for a cent, and two blocks, with sesame oil and soy sauce, would make a meal.³⁸

Accommodation was available in rooms above the shops that lined the streets. Rooms in the upper storeys were divided into cubicles: normally, there would be around six women to a room. Woo Yun Sum said she lived in a house that had 10 rooms and each room had seven women in it; Lee Gan Ling remembered there were a minimum of three to four women in a room. There could be little privacy. There was no electricity; at best, kerosene lamps shed a little light on the corridors and staircases inside the buildings. Gan Ling remembered there was no light in the room where she stayed, but in the corridor outside was a light “as tiny as a peanut”.³⁹

The going rent for a woman alone in the 1930s to 1940s was between 80 cents and

\$1.20 a month, said Lee Gan Ling. Rent was collected by the *ee fong tung* (small house master) who lived on the premises; she took her portion and handed the rest over to the *dai fong tung* (big house master), who lived elsewhere but came by to pick up the money. It would seem that the latter was the property's owner or agent and the former leased the property and then rented it out. Lucky tenants had an *ee fong tung* who was content to collect the set rent, but less fortunate tenants lived in households where she tried to raise the rent and squeeze more money out of the women. The difference stood out if a woman had a baby; the more easygoing *ee fong tung* would let the woman pay her existing rent for a while, but grasping ones would immediately charge rent for an extra person.⁴⁰

Meals were very simple. Boiled rice was their staple food, for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Some women cooked their rice for the whole day, including dinner, in the morning, but it seems to have been more usual for them to come back from work and cook again. Sometimes a little tofu might be added to the rice, and usually some green vegetables. Lee Gan Ling spoke of *choy sum*, which she described as the head or the older stems of the vegetable, which could be gathered for one cent a bundle at the market place and pickled.⁴¹ The women's diet was almost meatless.

"In those days, (women with children) ate chicken maybe four or five times a year. Those who had no children ate chicken maybe once a year, because they were saving money. They ate ducks' eggs, not chicken eggs. Now you can get sick of eating chicken and it is the opposite with eggs: salted eggs are in demand, more than chicken eggs," Gan Ling said.⁴²

Working Life

Adjusting to the new life was easier for women who could count on others' help from the start. Loh Ah Kwai said that she was fortunate to have met a returnee during her voyage to Singapore. That woman had worked in Singapore and had gone back to China in order to bring back her son. Ah Kwai's new friend helped her to find work quickly. In contrast, Wong Ah Tai said she had no one to look out for her when she arrived, and was often bullied; she had a tough time finding work at first.⁴³

New arrivals quickly learned the routine of the working day. The women got up between four and five in the morning and cooked rice to take out with them for their lunch break. Breakfast was a hasty business; Guan Kwei Sim recalled starting out for work at 5am and eating as she walked.⁴⁴

Women went to To Fu Street to find work.⁴⁵ Hires were usually done daily, though there were occasions when an employer would need workers for a few days or even weeks at a time. Hiring was not necessarily immediate, so there could be some waiting around before the last workers were hired or disappointed women gave up hope of a day's work and dispersed. Lee Gan Ling

recalled that in her time, while they were waiting, some women would buy a huge packet of low-grade peanuts for one cent and then share them out. Some were inedible and they threw them away. "We ate a lot of peanuts," she said. If they wanted to drink, they went to the public tap; by this time, each street was provided with one.⁴⁶

Acts of kindness and consideration by other women were remembered by many, but when it came to finding employment at To Fu Street, they could be competitors for the same jobs.

In the 1930s, women generally made their way to work on foot to save money, even though their worksites might be a few miles away.⁴⁷ Loh Ah Kwai said: "I used to walk from my home in Chinatown to Alexandra Hospital. It took me one hour."⁴⁸

In later years, as Singapore grew and the worksites tended to be further away, it became normal for the women to be transported in the back of a truck.⁴⁹

When it rained heavily, there was no work and so no pay. As Cheong Choy Yin said: "One had to depend on the sky for rice to eat, because every day that (it) rained meant that a Samsui woman would have no money to earn."⁵⁰ If rain stopped work after a few hours, that was what they were paid for.

Work began at eight in the morning and finished at five or six in the afternoon, with a break for lunch.⁵¹ It was arduous. The women dug soil and carried earth, water, sand, concrete, bricks and rubble in buckets dangling from shoulder poles. For their lunch break, they would find a shady spot and sit there to eat, maybe using a brick to raise themselves off the ground; sometimes in the minutes after they had finished eating they might gather up wood fallen from trees or offcuts from timber to bring home as fuel for cooking.⁵² Woo Yun Sum remembered collecting small branches that had fallen from trees and durian husks while working outside the city during the Japanese occupation.⁵³

The Samsui women's distinctive clothes were a very practical adaptation to their work in Singapore's construction industry. The blue-black *samfoo* (jacket and trousers) was lightweight and did not start to look stained and shabby as quickly as a more lightly coloured outfit would. Of the women's headgear, Ho Mun Chong said:

"In those days, materials were not easily available. There were very few hats. So they used cloth and starched it very stiff. They made it into a square and put it on their heads and it became a hat. On the one hand, it gave them shade from the sun and kept their hair clean. On the other, they used red (material). In those days in construction, there occurred very few accidents because the red colour was eye-catching. Before they built a house, when they were knocking the old house down, they threw down rubble. If you wore black or blue clothes, they

might not see you. That hat also had tens of uses. For holding her cigarettes, matches and money: her whole life's fortune was on her head. It was wrapped very tightly."⁵⁴

On their feet, Samsui women fastened sandals cut from old car tyres, with straps made from folded and stitched scraps of cloth; they were cheap, durable and had a good grip on slippery ground.⁵⁵

Once the working day was over, a Samsui woman's time was her own. She would go home and prepare and eat her evening meal. Afterwards, she might sit and talk with other women outside the houses where they stayed. There was enough space on the five-foot way outside the shophouses for other people to walk past them. The traffic of the working day had thinned out, and the air had cooled a little. Many smoked cigarettes as they whiled away an hour or so before going up to bed.⁵⁶

Most employers came to appreciate Samsui women as hard-working and dependable; they had a good reputation.⁵⁷ Occasionally, though, women fell prey to unscrupulous employers who cheated them by not paying them what they were due. More often, they were victimised by brokers or supervisors who found work for them, allocated them jobs and then took their pay from the employer and disappeared with it. Wong Ah Tai remembered two occasions when she worked for a month but wasn't paid because "the headman" ran off with the workers' money. One time, she was among over 20 women who were cheated in this way. "I cried myself to sleep at night," she said.⁵⁸ It was a bitter experience to work hard and be left with nothing to show for it.

The primary purpose of the women in coming to Singapore was to earn money that they could send back to support their families in China, and so frugality was a practical virtue of the Samsui women. Shared accommodation and simple food served to keep down expenses. Whether it meant walking to or from work, gathering around building sites the wood for cooking, or repairing their clothes themselves, their lives were marked by their determination to save every cent they could. The women were ready to work seven days a week when the jobs were available, but they often had time off (against their wishes, because it was without pay) when it rained or in slack periods in the construction industry.⁵⁹

Pay rates in the 1930s were in the region of 50-60 cents a day. Loh Ah Kwai remembered starting work on 60 cents a day, while Wong Ah Tai said her first pay was 55 cents.⁶⁰ Yap Say Mui said she was paid 50 cents a day.⁶¹

Rates improved in later years. Woo Yun Sum said women who worked on construction projects for the Japanese during the war were paid \$1 a day, while children could earn 80 cents (although it should be remembered that this was a time of currency depreciation). Her friend Lee Gan Ling added that as a child, "if you could use the big hammer, you could get adult pay".⁶² Referring to the 1930s,

Ho Yuet Kam recalled: "Initially we were paid 60 cents a day till after the war when we got \$5 a day."⁶³ Wong Ah Tai received her highest pay just before she stopped work in 1989 at the age of 72: \$13 for a day's work. Loh Ah Kwai's highest pay was \$20 a day.⁶⁴

The women lived in an area that was full of workshops, shops and "coolie houses" that were much the same as the buildings where they stayed, but housing mostly men.⁶⁵ There were brothels in the neighbourhood, and nearby Hokkien Street (called "900 Hong" by the Samsui people⁶⁶) was a busy wholesale centre for all manner of goods. All who lived or worked in the area had their own times of business, their own comings and goings and would have been part of the observed world of the Samsui women.

The women had little money to spend, but from time to time, when they needed to be in touch with their families in China, they turned to one of the professional letter-writers who used to be a fixture of Chinese communities everywhere. They sent money back to their families through gold shops or herbal medicine shops that worked with trusted partners in China.⁶⁷

Most Samsui women did not marry while in Singapore. There were various reasons. They gave up their youth in working to support their families, and that ended their chances of marriage at a time when girls were customarily wedded in their early or mid-teens. Indeed the women were usually 18-20 when they arrived and already considered to be past the ideal age for marriage.

Ho Mun Chong said: "There were those who came when they were younger. If they found someone suitable, they got married. In Singapore, there were other Samsui people. Some of them were your relatives or friends and some made introductions. If they were right, you could get along... (Someone) would say, 'I know this girl, I can introduce you...'. They hardly married outside their community, because they did not mix; their life interactions were in that small area, among themselves. They were illiterate; even many of the men were illiterate."

Mun Chong added that dialect made a difference; even between Samsui and the adjacent districts, there were different words and expressions.⁶⁸ Whether a woman who married in the circumstances described by her would later be regarded as a Samsui woman would depend on her spending time working in the construction industry along with other Samsui women and wearing their distinctive clothing;⁶⁹ if marriage removed her entirely from the world of her construction worker sisters, even her Samsui origin would not make others see her as a Samsui woman, in the sense that the term came to have in Singapore.

Many of the Samsui women had some experience of married life. Some were brought to the desperate circumstances that led to their migration from China after an early marriage ended in their husbands dying or abandoning them.⁷⁰

This would have been an additional reason for not seeking husbands in Singapore; by tradition, women did not remarry. Some, in old age, spoke positively of being free from a husband's demands,⁷¹ but it seems hard to avoid the sense that forfeiting a chance for marital happiness was one of the heavier prices that most paid.

Women who became pregnant worked as long as they could before giving birth, and returned to work quickly. Sometimes they carried their babies to their worksites. They did not breastfeed them for very long, as they needed to work, and sooner or later, they had to leave their children in someone else's care. Their babies were then given congee and salted fish.

A Changing Environment

The conditions of life for Samsui women changed over the years; what has been described so far largely portrays their lives in the 1930s, unless otherwise stated.

The Japanese occupation of Singapore in 1942 brought big upheavals. The change of authority, the screening of the Chinese community and execution of thousands by the occupiers, the disruption of trade, and food shortages inevitably had their impact on the women. There was little money for non-war related construction, but some building work continued.

Woo Yun Sum said proudly: "We built from the fourth mile to the ninth mile of Bukit Timah Road. When the Japanese left, they actually thanked us: after the surrender, they gave us rice, money and a few yards of cloth." Her friend, Lee Gan Ling, added: "The Japanese soldiers were not all bad; it was their bosses who were horrible."⁷²

The girls improvised. "In addition to pay, we got three catties of rice every 10 days. Then we could make some side income: we could put wood cut down in the forest as a by-product of our work into bundles and sell it. That's how we got by, with rice, money and wood."⁷³

Besides working on the Bukit Timah Road, the women recalled working on levelling ground at Bukit Merah, "where the car show rooms are now".⁷⁴

When Samsui women were unable to find construction jobs, they made do with whatever paid employment they could find, including agricultural work: food was in short supply, and the Japanese wanted to increase the self-sufficiency of a region that could no longer count on its former patterns of trade.

Despite the political troubles of the post-war years, economic conditions improved under the returned British colonial administration.

Four years after the Second World War and the return of British rule to

Singapore, the Communists won victory in China. The flow of emigrants came to a halt.⁷⁵ There would be no more Samsui women travelling from their original homeland to replenish their numbers in later years, and so, as the century wore on, their numbers thinned.

For those already living in Singapore, conditions improved. With construction expanding, there was no shortage of work for the Samsui women in the 1950s. Pay crept up. The streets where they stayed were busier than ever.

Then came the break with Malaysia. The first years after Singapore's independence in 1965 were difficult. Unemployment was high and job openings for Samsui women were fewer⁷⁶, but once the economy began to take off, there was steady employment for them for the rest of their working lives. The women were ready to turn their hands to whatever would earn them money: they needed to, as they grew older and some of the heavy work they had once performed became mechanised.

Loh Ah Kwai remembered construction jobs drying up for the shrinking band of Samsui women in the 1980s: "When tiles needed to be chipped away, we would do it manually – *tok, tok, tok*. Now it's done by machine – boom, boom, boom. They had no need for us any more."⁷⁷

A casualty of the country's accelerating development was the old heartland of Samsui Singapore: To Fu Street and Cheong Bak Street were demolished; eventually, Hong Lim Centre rose in their place. Yap Say Mui recalled that after the tenants had left, the authorities quickly tore down the internal staircases to prevent tenants from going back up to their former rooms, but she was "young" then and climbed up for a last visit. Like many other former residents, she was re-housed in Bukit Merah. "I sent my things over, but in my heart I was reluctant to leave," she said.⁷⁸

Most of the women felt the same way: they had more space and better facilities, but they did not want to leave behind the companionship and the familiar sights and sounds of Chinatown.

The women generally worked as long as they could, often into their 70s. They still sent money back to China. Some managed to save up for their old age, and between that and late retirement, they had something to live off. But it was not much. "Even those who were very thrifty, after several decades, might be able to save just a few thousand dollars. Today, if you had only a few thousand dollars of savings, you'd cry," said Lee Gan Ling.⁷⁹

After retirement, some were able to visit China, but the country they found was very different from that of their childhood, and many had become used to amenities and conditions in Singapore that were more developed than those in their villages of origin. Some did settle down in China. Others opted for

Singapore.

Wong Ah Tai last visited China when she was 80. After staying for a month, she decided to come back to Singapore. "I am used to life here. It was difficult to depend on others. I would rather come back here," she said.⁸⁰

Samsui women tended to live longer than the average life expectancy, and be in better health than their contemporaries in old age.⁸¹ They often retained a stolid independence and maintained habits of work and frugality into their 80s and 90s. Most of those who are still alive live in the Tiong Bahru and Bukit Merah areas, in an environment radically different from the Singapore of their youth.

At times, they look back on lives spent in toil and think of the things that they did not have, but rarely voice complaints: it is not really acceptance, but a feeling that this was just how things turned out and there was nothing they could have done beyond what they did do.

When they recall the places where they worked, the description of them as "builders of Singapore" seems well justified. Loh Ah Kwai casually listed British army barracks at Changi, Alexandra Hospital, Nanyang University, Merdeka Bridge and the Housing and Development Board's old headquarters in Bukit Merah as projects on which she worked: no doubt there was much else in between. All the other women could have described buildings and roads on which they worked that make up a significant proportion of what Singaporeans see around them today. Their achievement was considerable, both in what they helped to create and the support they gave to needy relatives – support that kept people alive and helped some obtain an education – but it was bought at a high cost to the women themselves. Certainly, they deserve the admiration and respect of a modern generation, but it would be well to express those feelings, not only in a caring attitude towards those women who still live on, but, in part, by giving due consideration to all whose labour makes possible the prosperity and conveniences of our own times.

.....

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The Workers from Samsui by Sim Chi Yin is one of the Festival Highlights of the M1 Singapore Fringe Festival 2008: Art and History. Catch the exhibition at various bus stop shelters islandwide from 19 December 2007 to 29 January 2008.

For more information about the Fringe, visit www.singaporefringe.com or email info@singaporefringe.com

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Cheong Choy Ying

Samuel Wong

JCDecaux

Soup Restaurant

Melissa Lim

Alvin Tan

Haresh Sharma

& the army of "foreign workers" who keep Singapore going, every day

Appendix

In May 2005, an illegal migrant worker in Singapore fell to his death while working on a housing project. His employers, fearing legal penalties, dumped his body at a nearby carpark. The case outraged many people, and raised questions about the treatment of migrant workers here. Two NGOs held a public memorial for the worker, who was later identified as 24-year-old Maung Soe Thein from Myanmar. His body was cremated and interred here, after his family said they did not want the body sent back because it was bad luck. In October that year, three men were convicted and jailed for the offence.

A version of this open letter by Sim Chi Yin appeared in The New Paper, on May 15, 2005.

To the mother of the unknown worker:

Dear Madam,

We regret to inform you... No, I'm not a civil servant and I will not hide behind tidy, detached formulas.

There's no easy way of putting this... We're sorry. Deeply sorry. The money that you were expecting from your son will not be coming at the end of this month. Or next month.

Your beloved son is dead.

He is now lying on a slab in a large freezer in one of Singapore's government hospitals. We don't know his full name – he's known to us by only a number.

He lies with others who have recently died one way or another. But unlike those other bodies, his will remain there until you, or maybe someone from the Myanmar embassy here claims his body.

For now, however, he is nameless. A faceless foreign worker who sought work in Singapore illegally.

One week ago, he was found in a deserted carpark in the north-east of Singapore, his lifeless body coloured by dried blood and white paint. He was barefoot and wore a white long-sleeved shirt and dark green trousers, with nothing to his name but a penknife and cap. He lay just a five-minute drive from where he was thought to have been working.

In recent weeks, he had been, with some of his fellow migrant workers mostly from Bangladesh, helping to “upgrade” a block of flats.

Like you, we're anxious to know how he died. And who put him in that carpark? We have only questions and no real answers. The truth might be too cruel to hear.

The police think he fell to his death while painting the block, and was then bundled into a vehicle and dumped. We can only hope the police find out what actually happened.

Still, I can't help thinking about your son - the boy you struggled to raise, only to lose him in a strange land. Will you ever see him again?

I remember another worker. Mr Mohamad Bashar was hit by a worksite lift 10 years ago. Seriously hurt, he'd been dumped in a drain in 1996. It left him paralysed.

We reported his plight. And Singaporeans flooded him with gifts and care afterwards. Still, his name comes up whenever a migrant worker is mistreated here. Now, your son's death puts another albatross around our necks.

I'm not sure if he told you where he got the money he's been sending you. I wonder how much you know about the latest – and last – chapter of his life. Maybe you heard he was borrowing money from friends and relatives to go to a neighbouring country called Singapore. Maybe he told you about his dream of coming home with a pot of gold – just so you can have a nice house.

Perhaps you didn't know he was working here without the right papers.

Unlike the other 500,000 low- or unskilled migrant workers here – legal because they hold a card called a “work permit” – your son does not exist in our book of statistics. And we don't know how many more like him are out there.

But, like his “legal” brothers and sisters from India, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Myanmar, your boy was doing jobs that many Singaporeans shun. And he was willing to do them for a far lower wage than a local would get.

We don't know why he didn't have the right papers. Maybe he came here secretly and had to find work to keep going. Perhaps, like some we hear about, he was promised a job and paid an agent to come here on a social visit pass, but was later stuck with debts when there was no job and no money.

Or maybe his last job ended without enough money to pay off the loans he took to come. Maybe he needed to stay on to earn just a bit more. And since Singapore's laws say that when your work permit ends, you no longer have the right to be in the country, maybe he...

What we do know is there are employers who want workers like your son. They provide what your son would have known as “Ali Baba work”.

It's no mirage. Such workers are cheap. Employers don't have to pay for insurance, or government levies or proper housing. They would not feel liable if their “illegals” get hurt on the job. And the “Ali Baba” workers, should they be hurt or mistreated, would often not dare to seek help.

How could they? Officially, they don't exist. If found out, the authorities would punish both employer and worker.

But this is an underground world; one we like to pretend does not exist.

Like the 86 million migrant workers worldwide, your son was already vulnerable when he left your side to be “stateless” in another country. He had joined the army that forms the underbelly of this real-time story of our time – globalisation.

He was so much more vulnerable because he lived in the dark realm of what academics and policy-makers call the “undocumented” – not even a faceless statistic.

We know little about him and his compatriots. We know a little more about his “legal” counterparts. Even for them, the picture is not pretty.

Perhaps you've heard about the skyscrapers, green esplanades and legendary efficiency of Singapore. Then it will shock you that this First World nation still has traces of Third World practices.

Low or un-skilled workers here – both local and migrant (except the 150,000 migrant

domestic workers) – are covered by the Employment Act. The Ministry of Manpower runs helplines, conciliation services and prosecutes errant employers. There are non-governmental and religious groups which offer recreational activities, soup kitchens, shelters and counselling for migrants who run into problems here.

But, if you read our newspapers today and compare them with the reports in the archives, you might think the debate on migrant workers has been stagnant for as long as we've had them – the past 25 years or so.

These days, we're still talking about unpaid wages, days off, and physical or psychological abuse – some of which appall even seasoned social workers and embassy labour attaches.

You might wonder if the mentality of some in this First World state has changed much with material progress.

Every now and then, we hear of workers who are summarily sent home without their full pay after a dispute with their employers. Workplace accidents happen, at times perhaps because employers cut corners. And there is talk on the ground that “private security” are hired by companies to rough up “trouble-maker” migrant workers, sometimes escorting them to the airport – withholding their passports – to make sure they board their planes home and don't make their employers lose the \$5,000 security bond posted with the Government.

There are, of course, good employers who house their migrant workers in spacious apartments, employers who paid for emergency visits home after the tsunami last year.

But it's the “bad employer” stories that stay in our minds and make us look at ourselves in the mirror.

And I hate to tell you this: I fear some mentalities might be intractable, given that this is a place where the language of rights is alien or feared, and where employers worry that their maids “get too smart”.

Of course, these problems are by no means peculiar to Singapore. Tales of abuse – physical, emotional, sexual – come from all parts of the world, East and West.

Migrant labour is an international issue increasingly on the agenda of governments and groups like the International Labour Organisation. More countries are slowly looking at the United Nations International Convention on the Protection of Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, which came into force in 2003. It calls for protection and respect for human rights of all migrants, “legal” or “illegal”.

You might think that since Singapore has the highest proportion of foreign workers in Asia (skilled and unskilled), there would be extensive welfare provisions for them and a more informed debate on the issue.

A transient workforce, made up of migrants, helps maintain a country's economic competitiveness – even in Singapore, which itself was built by migrants. In fact, one in 35 people today are migrants – the bulk of them unskilled – who have to move to make a living because there are no jobs where they live.

Workers, especially unskilled ones like your son, pawn possessions to pay an agent for a ticket to a – they think – better life. They leave their families behind to eke out a living in a strange land.

They deserve better. Whatever the circumstances that led to his death, your son

deserved better.

We're sorry for your loss.

**Yours sincerely,
A Singaporean**

A point noted by Sim Chi Yin in comments on her photographs of Samsui women. The photographs are being displayed at bus stops across Singapore in December 2007-January 2008.

² Two designs of T-shirt, to be exact. Noted by the author while visiting the centre in September 2007. As a recognisable professional group within Chinatown's population, Samsui women were more represented in saleable goods than any other group. Inside the exhibition, there is a Samsui women's room and testimony about the women's experiences comes in the shape of printed excerpts from an interview with Loh Ah Kwai and a video recording of excerpts from an interview with Yap Say Mui.

³ The Dim Sum Dollies are Selena Tan, Pam Oei and Emma Yong; their representation of the Samsui women was light-hearted but respectful. Dream Academy Productions Pte Ltd's *The History Of Singapore* was a comedy cabaret written by Selena Tan and Elaine Chan and directed by Glen Goei.

⁴ As well as being commemorated by a sculpture placed outside the Urban Redevelopment Authority. By Liu Jilin, it represents three women carrying loads on shoulder poles. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong recently spoke of a Samsui woman as one example (out of three) of the active elderly in Singapore: "I also met Madam Loke Tai Hoe, the Samsui lady. She's chatting here with Lui Tuck Yew, who dressed to match! She came to Singapore— she is now 89 years old. She came to Singapore when she was 18. Her husband came first, brought her over. She started working as a Samsui woman, finished at about 60-plus, carried on working until she was 79. She brought up ten children. Husband has died now, so, she lives with four of her unmarried children in Radin Mas." (Transcript of Prime Minister Lee's National Day Rally speech in English on Aug 19, 2007 at NUS University Cultural Centre. Singapore Government press release, Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts)

⁵ Wong Ah Tai, during an interview by Chan Tse Chueen and John Gee with her and Loh Ah Kwai on July 26, 2007 (hereafter, Wong Ah Tai/Loh Ah Kwai interview). Cheong Choy Yin helps take care of the two women. When asked what she thought people's attitudes towards the Samsui women were when she was growing up, she said: "Like the Indians working here now, it's a lowly job. The work is rough and dirty." It should be added that during the same interview, Loh Ah Kwai said that she did not feel there was any discrimination.

⁶ The image of the stoic old women was one that I found persistently coming to mind as I wrote this essay. I had to keep reminding myself that when they took their first paid work in Singapore, they were young women. The tendency to forget this is reinforced by the photographic record: most of it comes from times when the women were no longer young. If their youth is overlooked, it is harder to imagine what it meant for most of the women to leave behind their families and start work in an unfamiliar environment.

For the experiences of present-day domestic workers, see pp. 10-18, *Debt, Delays, Deductions: Wage Issues Faced By Foreign Domestic Workers in Singapore* (Delia Paul, Ricky Wang and Stephanie Chok, Transient Workers Count Too, September 2006). The "going rate" of pay for domestic workers differs according to nationality and the costs involved in coming vary slightly. TWC2 found that Filipina workers generally repaid their debt in six months or so, Indonesian workers in six to eight months, and the few Sri Lankan women interviewed for the report gave widely varying figures of between one and nine months.

Ibid, p. 19, and subsequent findings reported in "Localcivic group wants cap on maid transfer fee", Amelia Tan, *The Straits Times*, 25/5/2007. Workers told TWC2 that, although the standard fee charged for transfers equalled one to two months' pay, some agencies charged the equivalent of three or four months' salary. The job conditions of the Samsui women and domestic workers are very different, of course. But it should be noted that when it comes to repaying debt, a domestic worker

who changes employers once or twice is likely to find herself with a burden of debt that takes as long to repay as the Samsui women's did.

⁹ See "The Care Crisis in the Philippines: Children and Transnational Families in the New Global Economy", Rhacel Salazar Parrenas, pp. 39-54, in *Global Woman* (Eds. Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild, Granta Books, 2003).

¹⁰ This holds true for those migrant workers— past and present – who said coming to Singapore for work saved them from being pressed into marriages they did not want. It should be noted that when the Samsui women came to Singapore, a single migrant woman faced no legal obstacle to marrying and having children; whether she did or not was a matter of choice, opportunity and the limits imposed by social conventions. By contrast, single foreign domestic workers who are allowed out by their employers may find boyfriends, but the conditions of their work permits forbid them from marrying or bearing a child in Singapore. This is due to the desire of Singapore's government to enforce their temporary status and prevent the settlement of semi-skilled or unskilled foreigners in the country. For some women, the regulation denies them the chance for a normal family life, particularly those who stay for a decade and more as domestic workers.

¹¹

The context is described in "Negotiating Public Space: Strategies and Styles of Migrant Female Domestic Workers in Singapore", Brenda S. A. Yeoh and Shirlena Huang, *Urban Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 3, pp. 583-602, 1998. The recruitment of foreign domestic workers was authorised in 1978, after a rapid increase in the numbers of Singaporean women taking paid work outside the domestic sphere. Women from low-income families found jobs in manufacturing that paid much better than domestic service and so they no longer went to work in other people's homes; women with strong educational qualifications could find work in a range of professions, but that posed difficulties with raising a family and taking care of housework, which men generally continued to see as primarily women's work.

¹² How Singapore's government regulates the flow of foreign domestic labour is outlined in pp. 238-241 of " 'Dignity Overdue': Transnational Domestic Workers in Singapore", Noor Abdul Rahman, Brenda S. A. Yeoh and Shirlena Huang, pp. 233-261, *Asian Women As Transnational Domestic Workers* (eds by Shirlena Huang, Brenda S. A. Yeoh and Noor Abdul Rahman, Marshall Cavendish, Singapore 2005).

¹³ A reason commonly offered by employers for not allowing their domestic workers out. It generally coincides with a wish to keep the worker fully occupied with domestic chores.

¹⁴ Pp. 29-32, *Ah Ku And Karayuki San: Prostitution In Singapore, 1870-1940*, James Francis Warren (Singapore University Press edition, 2003). Warren describes both the desperate social conditions and the patriarchal values that led to some daughters being sold into prostitution by parents. His account is mainly of conditions in the late 19th and early 20th century.

¹⁵ "Between 1930 and the end of the Second World War, the sex ratio was steeply restored to almost normal on account of restrictions on male immigration but no such restrictions on female immigration. The wave of female immigrants between 1931 and 1937 comprised large numbers of unaccompanied women, mostly Cantonese, who came in search of work." Pp. 16-17, *Women In Modern Singapore*, Aline K. Wong (University Education Press, Singapore 1975).

¹⁶

P.7, *Chinese Women In Southeast Asia*, Joyce Lebra and Joy Paulson (Times Books International, Singapore 1980).

¹⁷

Some words and expressions in Cantonese seemed particularly vivid or embodied what the

speaker wished to say in a way that an English translation does not capture. I have included them here. I hope that there may be an opportunity to improve the phonetic representation of these words in a later edition.

18

Interview with Woo Yun Sum and Lee Gan Ling by Siow Li Sen and John Gee, Sept 10, 2007 (hereafter Woo Yun Sum/Lee Gan Ling interview). From the context, I take the restrictions mentioned to be those encountered by farmers who rented land from its owners and either paid in kind or from the proceeds of the sale of a portion of their produce: hence, the farmers were not able to consume what they produced, which would otherwise have been adequate for a basic living.

This interview was conducted at Lee Gan Ling's HDB flat in Bukit Merah. Both women were born in Singapore of mothers who came from Samsui, Woo on Feb 20, 1931 and Lee on Jan 13, 1932. Their comments on life in China were necessarily second-hand, based on what their parents told them, but they tally with other descriptions of conditions at this time. They grew up with first-generation Samsui women and spent most of their lives working in the construction industry.

19

Interview with Sam Sui Wui Kun committee members by Siow Li Sen and John Gee, Sept 9, 2007 (hereafter, SSWK interview). Those present were Choy Kum Wah (president), Siew Weng Kay (secretary), Lee Chong Wan (treasurer) and Ho Mun Chong (committee member and membership secretary). The committee members reckoned that the first migrants from their home area must have come over about 30 years before the association was set up. They thought that it would have taken this time for their community to put down roots in Singapore, to become more organised, and for some members to have prospered enough for them to commit resources to the association's establishment. The association's membership has declined in recent times as the community has dispersed and young people have not been interested in taking part. It now has around 400 members. The date of the association's foundation is uncertain. According to its website (www.sanshui.org.sg), it began as an informal group, and later moved into premises in To Fu Lane in 1886. It was at this time that it adopted its present name.

20

SSWK interview.

21

SSWK interview. The flow of female migrants seems to have been small at first and to have grown in the 1920s. Without the distinctive costume of the later construction workers, these women from Samsui have never had the epithet of "Samsui women". Ipoh attracted tens of thousands of Chinese labourers to its tin mines.

22

Woo Yun Sum/Lee Gan Ling interview.

23

Woo Yun Sum/Lee Gan Ling interview.

24

Female footbinding was primarily a custom of town-dwellers and the relatively wealthy of the countryside: it was incompatible with hard labour on the land throughout China and the "big feet" of most rural women were a sign of their families' poverty. Only when a peasant family thought that they might have a chance of "marrying up" a pretty daughter and could spare her from the fields were they likely to bind a girl's feet. Samsui woman employed in the building trade almost invariably wore sandals and none of them had bound feet, as both oral accounts and photographic evidence indicate.

25

SSWK interview. The numbers they gave were "1,000 plus" and "2,000 might be the right figure". No one ever did a count, so no exact figure can be given, though it would seem to tally with the relatively small geographical area in which the women lived.

26

Sim Chi Yin tackled this issue of definition in "Will the real Samsui women stand up?", The

New Paper, 6/10/2003. Cheong Choy Yin said to her: “Strictly speaking, only those who worked in construction sites here from their youth to their old age can be said to be ‘proper’ or ‘real’ Samsui women. Not those who worked in construction for a while and then switched to rubber plantations and factories, and perhaps changed lines a few times. So, it would be those who are now 85 and above who are ‘proper’ Samsui women.”

A hint that Loh Ah Kwai, one of those women, shared something of her outlook was given by her comment: “When people invite us to dinner, the others dress up too.” – a reference to the younger women who went with Loh and her contemporary Yip Say Mui to some events.

A further complication is that any woman who worked in the construction industry tends to be remembered as a Samsui woman, as if the term simply denotes “female building worker”.

²⁷ The term was used by Wong Ah Tai (Wong Ah Tai/Loh Ah Kwai interview) and by committee members during the SSWK interview. It is a fairly flexible Cantonese expression, referring to people who travel for their living, including sailors.

²⁸ Wong Ah Tai/Loh Ah Kwai interview.

²⁹

“On National Day, listen to a 91-year-old foreign worker pioneer...”, SimChi Yin, *The New Paper*, 10/8/2003.

³⁰ Wong Ah Tai/Loh Ah Kwai interview. I suspect that in this case, from the youth and destination of the girl, she was either being sent into prostitution or domestic service. Nevertheless, such an experience could not fail to impress on other young women a feeling of their own vulnerability.

³¹ SSWK interview. In the 1930s, matters concerning the Chinese communities in Singapore were still largely handled by the colonial authorities through the Chinese Protectorate. Its area of competence included interviewing new arrivals and managing their quarantine. Loh Ah Kwai said workers were quarantined for over a week.

³² Wong Ah Tai/Loh Ah Kwai interview.

³³

“7 Samsui women get free trip to China”, Wong Chee Meng, *The Straits Times*, 4/5/1996. Low Sum Kiu was 88 when this article was published, suggesting that her first journey to Singapore was in 1927 or 1928.

³⁴

“Samsui Women, China’s gift to the Singapore spirit”, Ananda Chen, *Senior Life*, January/February, 2001. Ho Yuet Kam was 86 when she was interviewed.

³⁵

Wong Ah Tai/Loh Ah Kwai interview.

³⁶

Ananda Chen, op.cit. Chan Swee Hoe was 90 when interviewed, and so probably came to Singapore in 1935.

³⁷

Woo Yun Sum/Lee Gan Ling interview.

³⁸

Woo Yun Sum/Lee Gan Ling interview.

³⁹

During the interview, Lee said that if a room had been as big as her living/bedroom in her HDB flat, there would have been 10 women in it, and if it had been the size of her kitchen, there would have been at least four or five people there.

Woo Yun Sum/Lee Gan Ling interview. Gan Ling's estimate of rent levels sounded low to me, so I asked her to confirm what she said, which she did, saying that this was right throughout the period we were discussing – from just before the Second World War until the late 1940s. Ho Yuet Kum recalled a rent of “a mere \$3 per month” paid by each woman in a flat shared by 20, which is perhaps a post-war figure. (Ananda Chen, op.cit)

41

Woo Yun Sum/Lee Gan Ling interview. The *choy sum* found in Chinese restaurants and on modern dinner tables is evidently made with choicer parts of the vegetable.

42

Woo Yun Sum/Lee Gan Ling interview.

43

Wong Ah Tai/Loh Ah Kwai interview.

44

Guan Kwei Sim, National Archives of Singapore Oral History Centre, Accession No. 001267, “Vanishing Trades” project.

45

Wong Ah Tai/Loh Ah Kwai interview, Woo Yun Sum/Lee Gan Ling interview and others.

46

Woo Yun Sum/Lee Gan Ling interview.

47

Guan Kwei Sim, *ibid.* Also Yap Say Mui, National Archives of Singapore Oral History Centre, Accession No. 002445, Special Project (Chinatown) project.

⁴⁸ “On National Day, listen to a 91-year-old foreign worker pioneer...”, SimChi Yin, *The New Paper*, 10/8/2003. Alexandra Hospital was built in 1935 as a military hospital for the British.

⁴⁹ Chan Kwee Sung wrote that a younger woman of supervisory status would assign jobs to the eager workers, who would then head for the appropriate lorry to be transported to their worksites. “Multiple storeys their story”, Chan Kwee Sung, *The Straits Times*, 6/11/1999. This would appear to describe post-Second World War conditions, possibly even those of the 1950s. Later, wrote Chan, the Samsui women would “straggle back to Upper Chin Chew Street when the day was done”, suggesting that lorries were not necessarily provided for return journeys.

⁵⁰ Wong Chee Meng, op. cit.

51

SSWK interview.

52

Chan Kwee Sung, op. cit. Yap Say Mui, op cit, for the reference to sitting on bricks.

53

Woo Yun Sum/Lee Gan Ling interview.

54

SSWK interview.

55

The SSWK has a Samsui construction worker's costume on display in its Geylang premises. After the Singapore Contractors' Association Ltd (SCAL) heard of the plight of one needy old Samsui woman, and offered her help, she insisted on giving them something in return. All she could offer was one of her old shoes, which is now displayed in the association's Bukit Merah Lane building.

Some women wore blue headgear, rather than red, but it was a striking light blue that would also stand out relatively well against a dark background.

Samsui women did not necessarily keep all their valuables on their heads. Their clothes had pockets; Loh Ah Kwai said, when talking of the post-war years: "I had to carry the little money I had with me in my pockets or tuck it into the waistband of my trousers." ("On National Day, listen to a 91-year-old foreign worker pioneer...", Sim Chi Yin, *The New Paper*, 10/8/2003)

56

Chan Kwee Sung, op. cit. Smoking was one of the few indulgences many Samsui women allowed themselves; the lunch break was another opportunity for a cigarette. Today, the women are often seen as having had long lives because of their healthy habits (primarily a simple, almost meatless, diet), but this practice was clearly an exception.

57

Hence the attitude of SCAL (See note 58).

58

Wong Ah Tai/Loh Ah Kwai interview.

59

Ho Yuet Kum said the women worked "seven days a week unless it rained". (Ananda Chen, op.cit.) Lee Gan Ling said they worked six days a week "if they were lucky". (Woo Yun Sum/Lee Gan Ling interview.)

60

Wong Ah Tai/Loh Ah Kwai interview.

61

Yap Say Mui, op. cit.

62

Woo Yun Sum/Lee Gan Ling interview. As children, they laboured on road construction, which among other heavy work involved breaking rock with sledge hammers, which is probably what these "big hammers" were.

63

Ananda Chen, op. cit.

⁶⁴ Wong Ah Tai/Loh Ah Kwai interview. Her final job before she retired in 1991, aged 79, was at a factory where pepper and dried coconut was processed; she was paid \$15 a day for that. "On National Day, listen to a 91-year-old foreign worker pioneer...", Sim Chi Yin, *The New Paper*, 10/8/2003.

65

The Samsui women's residences themselves were and are referred to as "coolie houses", but I think that it is at least worth questioning whether this unisex term obscures more than it reveals.

66

"900 Lane" or "900 Street": the understanding behind the name was that there were a lot of businesses there. Lee Gan Ling and Woo Yun Sum remembered going there as children and collecting rotten fruit and scraps of vegetables from which something edible could be salvaged. Woo Yun Sum/Lee Gan Ling interview.

67

SSWK interview.

⁶⁸ SSWK interview.

⁶⁹ Tan Sai Siong recalled "Granny Mei", "a first-generation Samsui woman who fulfils that description by descent and because she was a construction worker when young". She had been married and lived with her husband in Singapore until he died. "The lure of the gritty Samsui woman", Tan Sai Siong, *The Straits Times*, 4/7/1997.

⁷⁰ The statements made in this paragraph are supported by examples in the foregoing pages. See, in particular, the discussion of the women's arrival in Singapore.

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Ah Moi told Cheryl Sim that she left home when she was 16 when her parents asked a matchmaker to find a husband for her. She had seen her elder sister marry a man she didn't like and recounted how she died from complications while delivering her baby. "I didn't want to share her fate. I wanted to be completely in control of my own life, which was why I decided to come to Singapore before they could find me a husband." She spoke of her elation at arriving in Singapore and feeling that she could earn money and use it: "Nobody can control me." Two other Samsui women interviewed, Siew Yin and Mui Fong, saw single life as happy and giving them independence – specifically, freedom from being expected to look after in-laws for the rest of their lives. ("Strong as Mountains, Free as Water: The Samsui Women", Cheryl Sim, <http://geocities.com/Wellesley/3321/win9b.htm>)

⁷² Woo Yun Sum/Lee Gan Ling interview. Recalling the extraordinary conditions created by the war, Lee Gan Ling said that, while working on Bukit Timah Road, "we came upon scores of skeletons of people killed by the Japanese, but we just picked them up and threw them away. I was only 11 then, and wasn't scared of them." The bodies were buried close to buildings in the countryside that they demolished to build the road.

Both women were children at the beginning of the occupation, but they had worked illegally since before the war. Under the British, children under 13 years of age were officially prohibited from working, but law enforcement was not strict.

⁷³ Woo Yun Sum/Lee Gan Ling interview.

⁷⁴

Ibid.

⁷⁵

P. 43, *Singapore Memento*, S. C. Yeo (FEP International, 1984).

⁷⁶

Wong Ah Tai said there was no work after Singapore became independent "so for one to three months, some workers, including myself, worked for free to build the Clifford Pier for the government. We hoped to get into its good books so that we'd get paid work later on". Wong Ah Tai/Loh Ah Kwai interview. The pier itself was originally completed in 1933, and I have yet to clarify exactly what Wong Ah Tai was doing: there was certainly construction work going on close to the pier.

⁷⁷

"On National Day, listen to a 91-year-old foreign worker pioneer...", SimChi Yin, *The New Paper*, 10/8/2003.

⁷⁸ Video of interview with Yap Sai Mui in Chinatown Heritage Centre.

⁷⁹

SSWK interview.

⁸⁰ Wong Ah Tai/Loh Ah Kwai interview.

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A study of elderly Chinese Singaporeans in the Henderson (1985) and Toa Payoh (2000) areas found that Samsui women compared well with others their age. Professor Kua EeHeok picked them out for special mention, saying: "They are very healthy. Maybe it is because they worked a lot." Their rate of depression was four per cent, compared to an average of eight per cent for elderly Singapore-born people. "Hardy immigrants: It's no myth", Cindy Lim, *The Straits Times*, 4/9/2000.