
Narratives of Servitude

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What is Narrative?



A **narrative** is a report of connected events, **real** or **imaginary**, presented in a sequence of written or spoken words, or still or moving images, or both.

Why use Narrative?

Humans **understand** the world **through stories**.

Stories tell us **who we are** and **what we value**.

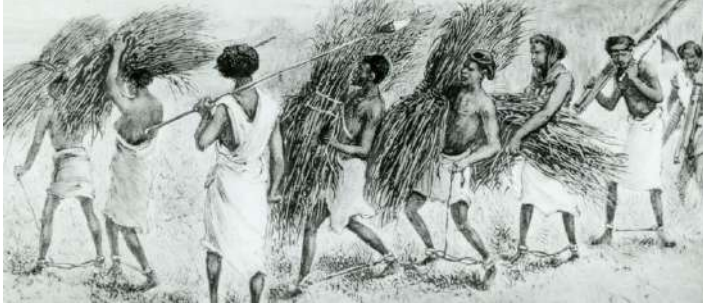
Stories can appear in **multiple forms**.

What is Servitude?



1. The **state of a person** who is subjected, **voluntarily** or **involuntarily**, to another person as a **servant**.
2. The **state of being** a **slave** or **completely subject** to someone more powerful.
3. It is a **relationship between two people** in which one person, the servant, has to work for the **benefit of another person**, the master, **without the right to quit** and **seek other employment freely**.

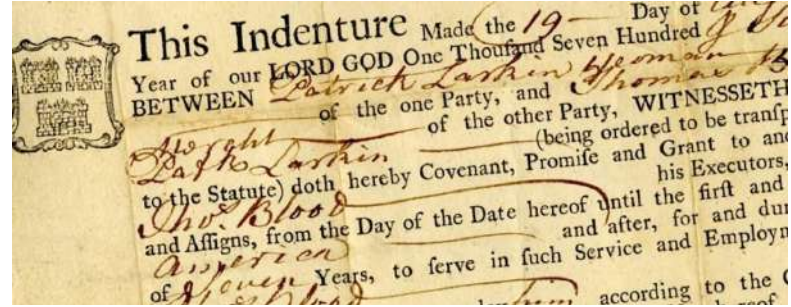
Types of Servitude



Source: antislavery.org

Slavery

Slavery is distinguished from other forms of servitude by **being lifelong and heritable**. In Western traditions, the children of an enslaved woman are usually slaves regardless of the status of the father.



Source: thiscruelwar.com

Indenture

An indentured servant is an employee within a system of unfree labor who is **bound by a signed or forced contract** to work for a particular employer **for a fixed time**. The contract often lets the employer sell the labor of an indenturee to a third party.

Types of Servitude



Source: Iowa Agri Business

Debt Servitude

It is the pledge of a **person's services as security** for the **repayment** for a debt or other obligation, where the terms of the **repayment are not clearly or reasonably stated**, and the person who is holding the debt and thus has some control over the laborer.



Source: Aguilar Digital

Serfdom

Serfs were servants **tied to the land** under a **feudal system**. Serfs worked for the owner of the land under conditions typically fairly tightly regulated by law and tradition. The serf **could not be bought or sold without the land** to which he or she was attached.

Types of Servitude



Source: Umass.edu

Prison Labour

Property rights to servants are owned **not by an individual** but by the government. The servitude is **a punishment** for a real or pretended crime, is **limited in time** by the prisoner's sentence, and **is not heritable**.



Source: IstanbulClues

Ethnic or Lineage Servitude

The owner is a **group**: an ethnic group, a **powerful family**, or a **government**. The servants generally **owe their labor collectively** as well. A particular ethnic group, defeated nation, or other collective entity will be required to furnish a certain amount of labor to their masters under conditions set by custom or law.

Types of Servitude



Source: The Straits Time

Conscription

In conscription, **free individuals** are **required to work** for their government for a **certain period of time** as a **condition of citizenship or residence**.

*The relationship between master and servant is **both economic** and **personal**. Masters and servants have an unequal relationship.*

*Servants may see their masters as **patrons** as well as **employers**.*

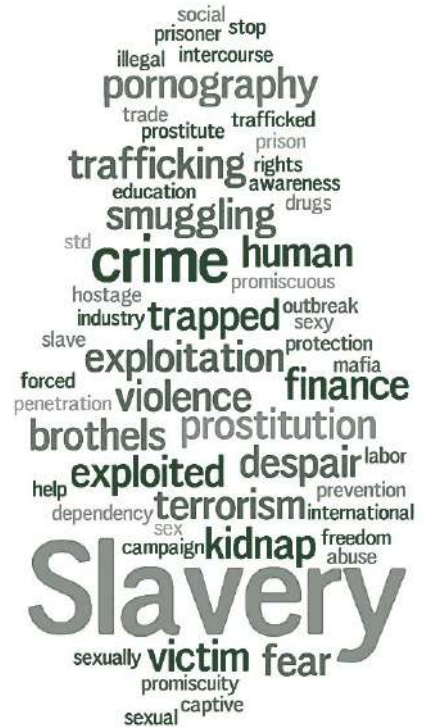
Colonial Southeast Asia



Servitude in Colonial South East Asia

Types of common servitude that exist in Southeast Asia:

- *Slavery*
- *Forced Labour*
- *Forced Sexual Exploitation*



Source Countries



Source: ASEAN UP

1. **Philippines**
- source and transit countries of forced labor and sexual exploitation.
2. **Thailand**
- biggest supplier of forced labor.
3. **Laos**
- forced labour and sex slave industry.
4. **Cambodia**
- trafficked to sexual/labour industries.
5. **Myanmar**
- labour exploitation.

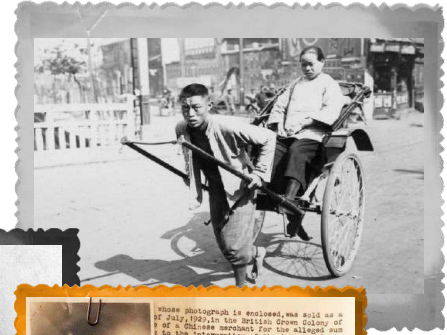
Colonial Singapore



Servitude in Colonial Singapore

Types of common example of servitude that exist in Singapore:

- *Coolies*
- *Karayuki-san*
- *Indian Convicts*
- *Mui Tsai*
- *Ahma/Majie*
- *Samsui Women*



Karayuki-san



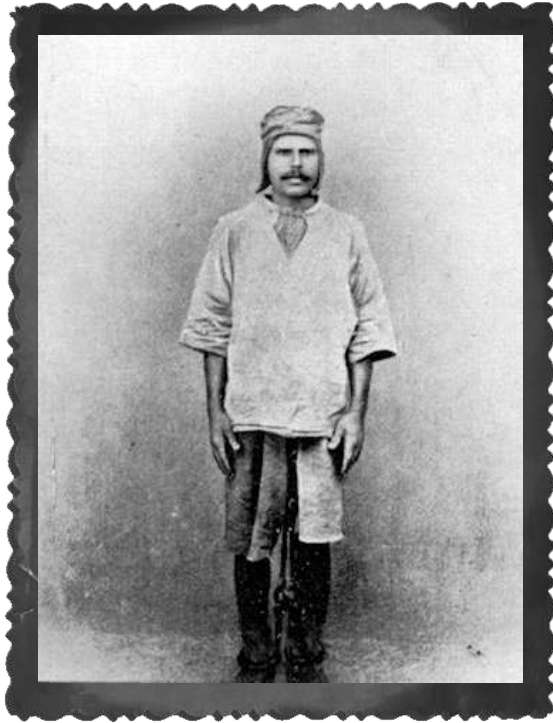
Source: edmundyeo.com

Japan's economy back then isn't doing really well.

They are the residents of Little Japan, **prostitutes trafficked** into Singapore to 'serve' the numerous low-cost male labourers brought into Singapore to work at plantation.

They are said to **possess 3rd biggest currency earner** for Japan.

Indian Convicts



Source: gutenberg.org

Singapore began receiving **Indian convicts** from **British India** to **serve out their sentences**, and assist with the labour shortage and development requirements in the colony.

The **convict labour** to Singapore **ceased in 1873**. Convicts were sent to colonies, **given freedom to settle** in Singapore or repatriated.

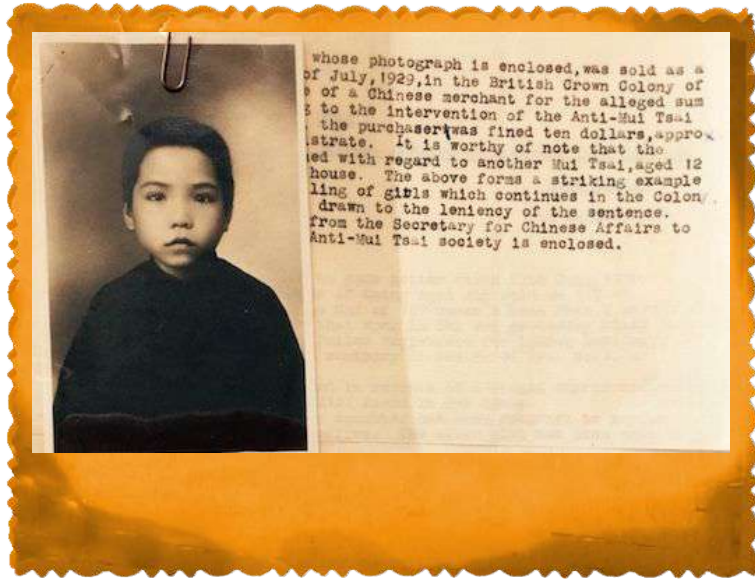
Coolies



Source: rickshaw.mobi

Chinese Coolies, who mostly **were engaged in unskilled, hard labour**, formed the early backbone of Singapore's Labour force. Such **as constructions, shipping, mining and rickshaw puller**. It was a common sight to see Coolies in the early Singapore **carrying either gunny sacks or passengers** near the Singapore River.

Mui Tsai



Source: histproj.org

‘Mui tsai’ means ‘Little sister in Cantonese, practiced whereby **little girls from poor families** were **bought by wealthy families** for domestic labourers with provision that the girl was freed from bondage on marriage. **Upon their adulthood**, however, **girls could be sold** by the wealthy families **to brothels**.

Ahma/Majie



Majie worked as domestic servants, but not all **Ahmas** are **Majie**. Thought both are domestic helpers but **Majie, this particular group vows to not get married**. But **only deployed** to the **wealthy families**. They were employed as domestic helpers. They worked as cooks, housekeepers or nannies for these families children.

Source: eresources.nlb.gov.sg

Samsui Women



Source: wordpress.com

The iron ladies from **Sam Sui 三水** district who came to Singapore seeking jobs, and the **very builder of Singapore's infrastructures.**

They are often seen in the construction site in the early **1930s until 1980s** wearing a bright red head gear.

Thesis



Although numerous types of female servitude existed in the country's colonial past, an independent Singapore has decided to make Samsui women the nation's grand narrative, unfairly pushing the memory of these other forms of servitude to the fringe.



Majie





Majie

The baby *amah*, Singapore 1941

Courtesy

Joanna Wormald

Source

Kenneth Gaw, *Superior Servants: The Legendary Cantonese Amahs of the Far East*

Call No.

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Plate No.

Plate 25

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Visual Analysis

Some observations of the woman in the picture:

- Hair was tied back.
- Wearing a white blouse, black loose pants / skirt and covered shoes.
- Posed and smiling for the camera.
- Carrying a Caucasian child.
- Photo taken with a backdrop of a baby pram / stroller in a garden setting.

Context

Origins of the term 'Amah'

- A vague term Anglicised from a variety of possible sources. Used predominantly by English-speaking European families. In Singapore, Malaya and Hong Kong, the term became **synonymous with Cantonese domestic servants**.
- More specific terms exist:
 - **湊仔** (*còuyú* or *chow tsai* in dialect) – Baby *amah* or *amah* who looks after children
 - **煮飯** (*zhǔ fàn* or *chi fun* in dialect) – Cook
 - **打雜** (*dǎzá* or *ta chup* in dialect) – *Amah* who does the laundry and cleaning
 - **洗燙** (*xǐtàng* or *sai tong* in dialect) – *Amah* who only does laundry
 - **一脚踢** (*yī jiǎo tī* or *yat keok tek* in dialect) – *Amah* who does all the household jobs

Context

Origins of the term ‘Majie’ (媽姐)

- Often incorrectly thought to be synonymous to ‘black-and-white’ *amahs* although they do make up the bulk of these *amahs*.
- Term is actually far more specific: A specific subcategory of ‘black-and-white’ *amahs* hailing from Shunde (順德) who have taken vows of celibacy.
 - They enjoyed a slightly better status in their society, being **important breadwinner** in families due to their importance in the silk industry.
 - Much more **independent**, and thus more **averse towards marriage** — something they equate as a loss of freedom — compared to women from other parts of China.
 - Took the *sor hei* (梳起) ritual as a rite-of-passage to be an adult without marrying.



The hair-bun of a majie

Kouo Shang-Wei Collection (郭尚慰收集). Family of Kouo Shang-Wei and National Library Board, Singapore.

Source: nlb.gov.sg

Context

The sor hei

- Plaiting and bunning up of the hair
- Done in a ceremony not unlike a traditional marriage but with a few marked differences:
 - **Vows to not marry** was taken before an altar.
 - Parents would not be present.
 - Only female friends and relatives are invited.

Context

Attached values to the majie

1. Association with European / British expatriates

- Often **employed by rich European households** (though not always the case), *majies* became a sort of symbol / **token of prestige** for the family:
 - Their black-and-white **clothes were made of pricier material** such as lawn fabric and satin and **they would wear shoes** instead of slippers.
 - They would often be asked by their mistresses to sit with her to entertain guests and family friends. *Majies* are thus more **sophisticated and elegant** personality-wise.
 - Some European household saw *majies* and *amahs* as **luxurious novelties**.
 - Many *majies* themselves **prefer working under European employers**.

2. Ambiguous position among family members and servants

- The *majies* themselves **took pride of their status** and sometimes saw themselves as superior.
 - Very often employed as a baby *amah*
 - Having to tend to the children around-the-clock, **they mingle more with the family members** and are present even in leisurely activities like shopping, recreational trips and parties.
 - They are thus the **most public of the *amahs***, sometimes seen gathering / chatting in parks.
 - Grows very attached with the family, especially the children under their charge.



***An amah with her mistress and charge
at the Singapore Swimming Club in 1942***

Photo by Gavin G. Wallace

Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington

Source: nlb.gov.sg

Revisiting the Visual Analysis

- **Hair was tied back.**
 - Possibly tied in a plait or a bun, characteristics of a *majje*.
- **Wearing a white blouse, black loose pants / skirt and covered shoes.**
 - Indicative of her status as a token of prestige as she was dressed up elegantly.
- **Carrying a Caucasian child.**
 - A baby *amah* employed by a European family.
 - Child looks comfortable carried by her, showing a close relationship between them.

Revisiting the Visual Analysis

- **Posed and smiling for the camera.**
 - Picture was purposely taken as a family photo.
 - The *majie* was a significant member of the family to be remembered.
- **Photo taken with a backdrop of a baby pram / stroller in a garden setting.**
 - Indicative of the higher degree of mobility granted to the *majie*.
 - Not confined to indoor chores like other types of *amahs*.

Significance of this Narrative

- **A contentment under the rule of European / British powers.**
 - In extension, contentment in subservience. But why?
 - Biased as visual narratives focus on the more favoured baby *amahs*.
- **Two sides of colonialism.**
 - The antagonising of colonialism is a state-level narrative with good reason.
 - However, we must not forget that at an individual level, genuine friendships and exchange of culture did happen.
- **Inadvertent nurturers of the next generation.**
 - Children are sometimes closer and learn more things from their *majies*.
 - Children grew up with values taught by these *majies*.

Samsui



Samsui

**A 'Samsui' woman working at
a construction yard, 1938-1939,
Singapore**

Dimension

Object size: 11.3 x 8.1 cm

Collection of

National Museum of Singapore

Category

Photographs and Negatives



Source: Roots.SG

Visual Analysis

- A construction site.
- A lady, fairly young, walking while balancing two pails tied to a long stick over her shoulders.
- Eye contact with the photographer. There's a look of focus in her eyes. Clearly not posing for the picture.
- She is also being centralised in this photo, main focus.
- Clothes that are dirty, crumpled and old looking. Headgear and handmade shoes. Uncovered foot.
- One hand is resting on the stick balancing it, and the other relaxed.



Source: Roots.SG

Context

Who are the Samsui Women?

Samsui (红头巾 - Red Head Gear in Mandarin)
or “Three Waters” (in cantonese)

- These districts were **relatively poorer than the rest** of the country. Samsui women **left their hometown in search of employment** to bring back money back home.
- In order to find employment and make travel arrangements, they relied on recruiters called **Sui Hak** (“Water Guest” in Cantonese). They **took on a debt to pay for the services** of the **Sui Hak**, which took **a year to pay off**.



Source: China Highlights

They were female immigrants mainly from the **Sanshui District of Canton** (Guangdong today) province in **Southern China**. Other districts they came from were **Dongguan** and **Shunde**.

Context

Who are the Samsui Women?

- In Singapore, the sex **ratio of Chinese female to male were very low**. It was much harder to get in a male rather than female. **Many female immigrants** including Samsui women **were welcomed** to Singapore.
- They arrived in Singapore mostly in the **mid 1930s (1934-1938)**. Many were **aged 18 to 20** when they arrived, so **chances of marrying were very slim**. Others left their husbands and children in China to work in Singapore. Some even adopted children here.



Source: Roots.SG

Context

Lifestyle

- They made their home in **Chinatown neighbourhood**, in rooms above shophouses.
- Each room was further divided into cubicles where **at least 4 women shared one single room. Rent** ranged from **80 cents to \$1.20 a month.**
- To **find extra work**, they would go to the Beancurd street, and get paid **50 to 60 cents per day.**



*Waking up before dawn > Prepare breakfast & lunch
> Assemble together > Work : 8am > Lunch Break
> Work Ends at 5-6pm > Go Home > Prepare Dinner
> Chit Chat & Relax > Bed*



Context

The Red Headdress

- A square piece of **cloth starched stiff** and folded into a square-shaped hat.
- **Eye-catching** and thus **reduced the chances of accidents** occurring at the construction site.
- Besides **sheltering the women** from the sun, the hat was also **used to store items** such as cigarettes, matches and money.
- Those who wore the **blue version** were usually from the **Sun Yap area** in China.



Source: PictureSG

Context

Being Thrifty

- The **footwear** they typically wore **were pieces of rubber cut out from used tyres**, which they **made into sandals** by adding straps.
- **Sharing accommodation** and **repairing damaged clothes** themselves.
- They mostly **travelled to work on foot** to save money. In **later years**, they **were taken in lorries to construction sites** that were situated further away.
- One of few things they spent on was **hiring professional letter writers** to communicate with their families in China.



Source: National Archives of Singapore (left) & National Library Board (right)

Context

Moving Forward

*They worked as long as they could, well into their 70s.
Even then they sent money back home and saved
what they could for their retirement.*

1965, Singapore's Independence

Allowed steady
stream of employment

1980s, Most of Samsui jobs
were replaced by machinery

Stayed in Chinatown shophouses

Urban Development,
demolished

HDBs, Tiong Bahru and Bukit Merah

Revisiting the Visual Analysis

- Relaxed posture while working
>> her body language shows that she has been doing this job for a long time, a sense of familiarity
- Rubber tyre slippers at a construction site
>> Her foot is dangerously uncovered. Too poor to afford proper and safe footwear for her job
- Not posed
>> Probably was working at a site on an average day and got documented into a photo but why did the photographer want to capture in this light?



Source: Roots.SG

Significance of this Narrative

Narrative of **struggle** and **selflessness** being highlighted

- Young, away from family, poor, hard work
- Unkempt outlook
- Photographer never asked her to pose
- Wanted to remember samsui women as an icon of struggle that built Singapore from the ground

It's **hard to see samsui women** depicted **as happy individuals**

- What was their life beyond work? Where are the pictures of them smoking and talking at their own version of comfort?

Narrative of Samui in a Different Light



Comparison

Majie & Samsui Women



Similarities

Uniform[ity]

Indicates group identity, homogeneity

Overshadows individual identity

Uniform as part of state qualifiers of what makes a Samsui women - “hardworking and resilient women in **red headgear** who toiled at the work sites”

Tensions between state and individual

Samsui women - Uniform suggests they are a homogeneous group of labourers from the same geographical location, and same economic status. Individual narratives unaccounted for.



Source: hk.appledaily (left) & root.sg (right)

Differences

Differences arise from nature of work

Private

vs

Public



Source: william wan (left) & blog to express (right)

Majies - Domestic: Gardens, Backyards
Samsui Women - Public

Individual

vs

Group



*Source: Reddit (left)
& National Archives of Singapore (right)*

Majies - Individually, or with children
Samsui Women - Groups

Privileging Samsui over Majies

In line with state narrative

*“... both groups of women are recognised
in social memory ... [just] a **marked difference**
in the prominence with which they
are remembered.”*

Privileging Samsui over Majies

In line with state narrative

1. Conceptualisation of Heritage

Characteristic artefacts, traditions and records that can be processed and marketed into a tangible **commodity**

2. Overwhelming no. of Samsui Women memorabilia and souvenirs.

3. Visual distinctiveness

Iconic red headdress of Samsui women.

4. Reduced to a marketable iconography

Problematic?



Source: LEGO SG (top) & McDonald's SG (down)



Lim Tze Peng, *Untitled (Samsui Women)*, 1976

This painting shows 'samsui' women, in their characteristic red hats, panning for raw materials. Born in 1923, Lim Tze Peng is largely a self-taught artist. He created a unique style of ink painting using rich brush and tonal details, and this approach is often regarded as a manifestation of the Nanyang Style in the ink medium.



Mural at Mohamed Ali Lane

Privileging Samsui over Majies

In line with state narrative

Spatial demarcations led to gendered notions of work



Source: Nostalgic Singapore

Samsui women's job
deemed as **productive**

Physical exertion connotes
masculinity

Public

vs

Private



Source: National Library Board

Majies' job deemed
as **unproductive**

Domestic sphere

Privileging Samsui over Majies

In line with state narrative

Living quarters suggest interactions

Kongsi Fong

- Place to live and gather
- Partaking in feminine activities
- “Closely-knit social institution amongst [...] immigrant women”
- Can’t talk about one without the other
- Forgotten individual narratives



Source: National Library Board

Amahs pooled their wages to rent accommodations, known as Kongsi Fong (公司房), which ranged in size from a cubicle to a shophouse with a number of rooms.

Privileging Samsui over Majies

In line with state narrative

Productivity of Samsui women fits into state narrative

A

50s to 60s:
[literal] nation-building

B

“It was through this that the seeds were sown for the beginnings of a state narrative based on an idealised “construction-worker rhetoric” of **nation-builders** embodying **virtues of hard work** and **patriotism.**”

C

Article from The Singapore Press

- Posits them as “revolutionary patriots ... who regarded Singapore as [their] home and country”.
- Personal accounts by Samsui women reveal otherwise - they prioritized economic benefits more than anything.
- Red headdress of Samsui women became **symbol of independence.**



Source: Singapore Press Holding

Privileging Samsui over Majies

In line with state narrative

Different ethnicity and economic background

Both Chinese, but from different parts of China

Samsui women

- from Samsui district, a rural area west of Guangzhou marked by poverty, physical calamities

Majies

- from Shunde, better off. Worked for Sericulture industry with little to no physical labour

Samsui women as epitome of “tenacious, resilient, and industrious workers” (8).

“It would be thus for these very factors that the state would choose to highlight one group over the other in decades to come—not the comfortable black-and-white servant of the British that had “lived well”, but instead, the **poor, yet resolute** and **dignified Samsui woman**, an **ideal embodiment** of **Singapore’s favourite narrative** as the archetypal **rags-to-riches economic triumph.**” (31-32)

Privileging Samsui over Majies

In line with state narrative

*“... compared to the Samsui woman, the Majie’s occupational niche renders her as a figure that presents a more **problematic subject** of memory. Specifically, it contends that whilst the Samsui labourer embodies much of Singapore’s nationalist discourse centred on a hardworking and economic-centric rhetoric, the Majie, in comparison, is instead uncomfortably **synonymous with British imperialism**, and that her **spinsterhood** resists state efforts in promoting female procreation, thereby making her an **ambivalent figure** in Singapore’s social memory.”*

Privileging Samsui over Majies

In line with state narrative

Spinsterhood differ from state's gender expectations



Source: Anne Baird

1. Contentions on “Amah” and “Majie”.
2. To be called “Majie” is a batch of honour, signified and believed spinsters as **“symbol of purity”**.

Privileging Samsui over Majies

In line with state narrative

Post-colonialism

- Majies as reminders of Singapore's past



Source: National Library Board

1. “Amah” is frowned upon as it is anglicised - makes them a “cultural byproduct of colonisation” (20)
2. Majies bear the “baggage of linguistic imperialism”, therefore less remembered.
3. Preference to work for Europeans bounds them to colonisation
4. They represent the “desire to assimilate and be accepted within the social codes of a gentrified British system” (31)

Privileging Samsui over Majies

In line with state narrative

“Working in predominantly British households, they were significant reminders of a conquered people living amongst white imperialists ... there is virtually nothing of the Majie that can be reduced into a memorabilia or a light-hearted souvenir. Not her **black-and-white attire**, the uniform of servitude and colonial supremacy. Nor the comb accessory used to bun up her hair, signifying a rejection of the institution of marriage and procreation, in a country whose population is already rapidly aging. In short, the Majie makes for a truly difficult product in the marketplace; she is not a concept that can be readily sold, packaged, or accepted in a postcolonial state.”

Stance

- Problematic state narrative
 - Privilege one over another
 - Reduction of Samsui women to aesthetic, commodity - for mass consumption?
 - Strips away personal, individual narratives
 - Reflects postcolonial anxieties
- Have to consider individual, alternative narratives
- Represents influx of first-generation Chinese immigrants.
- Both represents an extinct breed of female workers, independent historical female figures (8-9)
 - A generation that reversed gender dynamics
- Icons of Singapore's economic transformation.

Conclusion & Take-aways

1. **“Narratives” - representations, and story**
 - Deconstructing the master-narrative
 - Who determines what is privileged and forgotten?
2. **“Servitude” - particularly in a colonial context**
3. **Issues of gender, class, race, ethnicity**
 - Chinese people, but from different areas
 - Defies gender expectations, but also under fire for it
 - A time where the nation is shaping herself culturally, socially, politically.



Q&A & Discussion - *Contemporary Narratives of Servitude*

1. What **similarities** and/or **differences** can we draw from the narratives of **domestic workers** and **construction workers**, with those of the Samsui women and Majies?
2. How should we make sense of this **disparity** between the treatment of these narratives?



Source: ThoughtsMoments



Source: NUS Blog



Source: Elizabeth Liew



Source: The Business Times

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