

Can a photograph show what is absent, what has been erased?

In **Mute**, photographer Chia Aik Beng lets us "see", through his camera, a part of Singapore's history that has been all but forgotten: Little Japan, a once-flourishing enclave in Singapore, complete with a red-light district – right where Bugis Junction stands today. The enigmatic images evoke a world beyond our knowledge, leaving us to wonder, *Why didn't we know this before?*

Alongside the photographs, this volume documents the responses of over 80 viewers from all walks of life, including many current Japanese residents of Singapore. Their thoughts on the mutability of history make this a uniquely moving as well as thought-provoking work.

Chia Aik Beng, also known as ABC, has been a prolific photographer since 2008. He is the author of *Tonight the Streets are Ours*, a monograph on Singapore's Little India district after dusk, and the *Singkarpor* project (2011–ongoing), which comprises thousands of photographs of Singaporeans' daily lives, including a special feature on the unprecedented outpouring of public mourning over Lee Kuan Yew's death. Aik Beng's vivid, gritty images of people on Singapore streets have garnered him a huge following. In 2015, he helmed the UK *Guardian* newspaper's Travel Instagram account for a three-day special feature on Singapore.

Kenneth Tay, a Singapore-based writer and independent curator, contributes a keynote essay to this volume. Formerly an assistant curator at NUS Museum, he has published many monograph essays on artists and was co-editor of *Left to Right (L–R)* 2016.

Exactly Foundation is a not-for-profit, trademarked registered label established by Li Li Chung to commission photographers to create works that stimulate discussion of social concerns in Singapore. Its goal is to produce new knowledge by having viewers engage with the photographs and share them with friends and family over a 2–3-month period.

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 Exactly
Foundation

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MUTE

Thoughts about Forgotten History in Singapore
Photographs by Chia Aik Beng

EDITED BY Li Li Chung
WITH AN ESSAY BY Kenneth Tay

For Review only CONTENTS

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FOREWORD

Word from the 'Wart'¹

Li Li Chung

www.exactlyfoundation.com

I am delighted to support this publication of *Mute* by Chia Aik Beng, which documents Aik Beng's nearly impossible take on Little Japan, the pre-war Japanese enclave in the Middle Road/Bugis area of Singapore. Aik Beng's portfolio-making and the extensive viewer discussions occurred during his residency at Exactly Foundation in October 2015 – Exactly's fourth artist residency since its inception in early 2015.

I would also like to thank all involved in *Mute* – the many viewers and fellow photographers who actively participated. Special thanks as well to Kenneth Tay for his thoughtful and whimsically cunning keynote essay "Groundings", to

Objectifs for helping to stage the exhibition and book launch, to Jan Chen for this book's design and layout, and to Yoshie Osawa who introduced Japanese friends to us, took us to the Japanese Cemetery Park and ever so patiently helped with the translation and editing of this book's Japanese text.

I must have seen photographs like the one below a dozen times in the National Museum's former Photography Gallery, but it didn't hit me until Exactly's first resident-photographer Kevin WY Lee and I had a tutorial on Bras Basah's history with a local historian, Mr. Ng, in April 2015 that I realized I was not looking or thinking properly.

Our chat went like this:

Mr. Ng: *...and these were the Japanese prostitutes, karayuki-san in Bugis.*

Me: *When?*

Mr. Ng: *1920s and earlier.*

Me: *What?! Who owned the brothels?*

Mr. Ng: *Many Japanese-owned.*

Me: *What? Bugis? Bugis Junction? Really?!*



Source: Royal Tropical Institute Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Chia Aik Beng's *Mute* project is not just about documenting Bugis' history or reviving forgotten history. That's just a starting point. Exactly's projects are always transformative gestures, aimed at viewers, in the hope that change in a person comes from change in thinking. Photography is Exactly's chosen medium, with the photographer helping us to see differently, helping us to land on an issue worth discussing.

We roughly know that Singapore's Bugis area was home to Bugis-Malays from Sulawesi in the 17th to 18th centuries, and a popular meeting place for transvestites in the 1960s. But what was going on in Bugis in the 100 years in between?

There in Bugis 1860s–1945 was Little Japan. The issue then is "Why do we *not* know this?" Have we forgotten? Were we *not* paying attention? Were we *not* told? Or do we just *not* care?

I went into a tailspin of "What's?".

What are we really looking at? Aik Beng's *Mute* references Singapore's Little Japan, which included a red-light district (1870–1920) of more than 100 Japanese-owned brothels and some 1000 Japanese prostitutes. The women were mostly impoverished young Japanese women trafficked into Singapore to serve the low-cost, unaccompanied male labour. One angle for segregating this business in the Bugis area was the

British colonial government's decision to control diseases and maintain law and order among a predominantly male community where the male-female ratio is said to have been as high as 6:1. Another story is the Japanese women being told that they were performing an important duty – allegiance to the Japanese Emperor – as their pillow talk and walkabouts helping to gather military intelligence for Japan's expansionist plans! It is estimated that these women's repatriated funds were the third-largest foreign exchange earner for the Meiji government. Another tidbit: as early as 1880, the Japanese introduced to Singapore the *jinricksha*, a two-wheeled passenger cart pulled by a person on foot; soon a Jinricksha Station sprouted up in the Middle Road area to support the growing demand for this new form of transportation. By the start of the 20th century, the number of Japanese residents had increased substantially to 6,950.²

So what has changed in Singapore today? We still have unaccompanied, low-cost male labour, as well as prostitutes from desperate countries and red-light areas like Geylang, except the nationalities are different now: temporary

¹ 'Wart is short for Stalwart – Exactly Foundation's Stalwart – which Kevin WY Lee suggested I write as.

² Mikami, K. *Pre-war Japanese Community in Singapore: Picture and Record*. Singapore: The Japanese Association, 1998. pp 26-27.

workers from South Asia and China, and women from Southeast Asia and China. The point is, Little Japan was a vibrant economy before the end of WWII, with flower/fruit/sundry shops, department stores, printing presses, dentists, and major textile shop Echigoya, which even the non-Japanese regarded as destination sites. Middle Road was *Chuo Dori* or “Central Street”³ at a time when Orchard Road was still “in the sticks”. Today’s Geylang is more than a red-light district: it’s food, Buddhist amulets, fortune-telling, durians! Yet, so few of us Singaporeans know or think about these “foreign” men and women, especially those “invisible” to us, much less even acknowledge their contributions to Singapore’s economic success – then and now.

What’s missing? There could well be among us descendants of the Japanese *karayuki-sans*, but their ancestors’ names and identities have been obliterated. The women not repatriated to Japan after WWII “disappeared” by marrying Malay or Indian men, not likely Chinese men (given the Chinese WWII animosity towards the Japanese). We hear that these women became dark-skinned from the tropical sun, wore sarongs, just to blend in. This is like a new type of Peranakan, no? When I mention this, I get quizzical looks. Why are we so sensitive? I said to an Australian friend, a long-time resident of Singapore, that this was related to the extreme difficulty in documenting the descendants of the Indian convict

labourers that the British brought in to build our many major monuments (e.g. Istana, Parliament House/Supreme Court, now the National Gallery, and yes, St. Andrews Cathedral), because it’s so “embarrassing”. He laughed: “Well, we don’t have that problem in Australia. If we don’t own up to our convict past, many of us won’t have a thing to say about our family tree!”

Finally, I landed on “**So what?**” On Bugis as an area – or rather Bugis Junction and today’s Middle Road – I learned a new phrase from reading about post-WWII acknowledgement and compensation to Korean comfort women: *spatial politics of resistance*.⁴ That monuments in Seoul commemorating the plight of these women are also sites of knowledge production as well as protest. That space in and of itself is contestable. However, the obliteration of signs of injustice in a place such as Bugis makes it so much harder to figure out just what our discomfort and disagreement are supposed to be.

³ Lai Chee Kien. “Multi-ethnic Enclaves Around Middle Road: An Examination of Early Urban Settlement in Singapore”. *Biblioasia* (Vol 2, Issue 2, 2006). Singapore: National Library Board.

⁴ Lee, Yeo-Hyeok. “Towards ‘Translocal’ Solidarities: the ‘Comfort Women’ Issue and the Spatial Politics of Resistance”. *Localities*. November 2015, Volume 5: 159-169. Korean Studies Institute, Pusan National University.

I also learned another new word recently: *self-agency*.⁵ One should take a position, take action, without regard to political or institutional affiliation, because it is the right thing to do. Like agency, which is something’s effect on something or someone, except this self-agency is self-generated. Exactly’s projects will always ask you to authorize yourself to assemble the

knowledge. Because all that information is readily available.⁶ We just haven’t engaged. I would like to think that *Mute* confronts you to be curious, and not “de-curious” after leaving the viewing. In short, *Mute* invites you “to take your ignorance seriously”⁷. I regard *Mute* as coaxing us to taste self-agency. Isn’t it time we feed ourselves?

⁵ Ho, Kwon Ping. *Ocean in a Drop*. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Pte. Ltd. 2016. pp 23-24. Ho referred to the 400 young parents who gathered at the National Library Singapore in 2014 to read to their children the banned *And Tango Makes Three* (“gay penguins” children’s book about two male penguins who adopt a baby); and the 26,000 at Pink Dot 2015 who gathered “not to oppose the government but to celebrate the increasing diversity and self-agency of civil society”.

⁶ Suggested resources:

- Photographs online, in the Singapore National Archives and National Museum, as well as websites from Japan.
- Lam Pin Foo. “Whatever Happens to the Pre-war Japanese Community in Singapore?” December 31, 2012. Longer version of “The Japanese Were Here Before the War”, published in *The Straits Times*, on 25th February 1998. <https://lampinfoo.com/2012/12/31/whatever-happens-to-the-pre-war-japanese-community-in-singapore/>
- Re-enactment video <https://vimeo.com/54590408> *Singapore, 1891. The Karayuki-san* (“women who went overseas”). *Japanese prostitute*. Produced by M’GO Films for the National Museum Singapore, 2006. Adapted from historical source. Agency: gsmprjct°. Accessed: 28 February 2016.
- *Broken Birds*, a musical by Theatreworks, performed at Fort Canning Green, Singapore, 1–18th March

1995. Short version: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qMCnWbGrZ_A. Longer version and explanation: http://www.theatreworks.org.sg/archive/broken_birds/index.htm

- *Prewar Japanese Community in Singapore: Picture and Record* (1998), Singapore: Japanese Association, pp. 36-41, 64-65, 82-91. And many other books at the Japanese Association, Singapore.
- The seminal book by James Warren, *Ah Ku and Karayuki-san: Prostitution in Singapore, 1870-1940* (<http://nuspress.nus.edu.sg/collections/singapore/products/ah-ku-and-karayuki-san?variant=1245097780>).
- Edmund Yeo. *Karayuki-san: The Forgotten Japanese Prostitution Era*. 6th October 2011. <http://www.edmundyeo.com/2011/10/karayuki-san-forgotten-japanese.html>
- Takehiko Kajita. “Singapore’s Japanese prostitute era paved over.” In *Japan Times* 18th June 2005. Updated: 20th June 2005. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-06/20/content_452908.htm
- Japanese documentary, *Karayuki-san, the Making of a Prostitute* (1975), by Shohei Imamura.

⁷ Quote from Kodwo Eshun (The Otolith Collective), who curated *The Chimurenga Library*, a travelling exhibition from South Africa about self-acquiring knowledge on Africa (<http://www.theshowroom.org/exhibitions/the-chimurenga-library>).

Groundings: Chia Aik Beng's *Mute*¹

Kenneth Tay

1

There is deathly silence in the photograph that begins Chia Aik Beng's *Mute* portfolio. It is an image of stepping stones found in the Japanese Cemetery Park here in Singapore. The photograph is muted in its banality; it doesn't tell us anything other than the location indicated in its caption. Nothing, it would seem, is out of the ordinary here, other than perhaps the realization that Singapore has an entire plot of land dedicated to the recording of Japanese who came and left their mark here on this land – soldiers, war criminals, traders, spies and *karayuki-sans* (the latter being the subject of Aik Beng's series).

Yet, the stepping stones that begin the series become significant once we consider their function in Japanese landscaping. Rather than coursing through the land with our collective desire lines, stepping stones are a technology designed to control our pathways and, perhaps more importantly, to take us out of our everyday rhythms, to slow down, and to consider the ground on which we walk. Through the stones, ground becomes figure, the figure of our contemplation. That is, through the stones, we become more acutely attuned to that which is typically “invisible”, stuff that is so mundane in our everyday lives that it goes unnoticed and gets absorbed into the background, running on mute. It could be the actual ground upon which

we walk and upon which we think, the complex transport system that got you where you are, or even the community of migrant workers labouring behind the scenes in Singapore.

Here in the cemetery, we return to the grounded remains of the *karayuki-sans* – Japanese overseas prostitutes who came to Singapore in the late 19th century by way of cargo ships and illegal trafficking – to what is left of a community of labouring bodies silenced by history.

2

Caricatures of Japan's history tend to paint the image that it was the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry's black warships, in 1853 and again in 1854, that force-opened an isolationist Japan to international trade, and pushed it into the modern world. While it is certainly true that the gunboat diplomacy of Commodore Perry did provide a rude awakening for the central shogunate in Edo (present-day Tokyo), these accounts tend also to exaggerate the isolation of Edo Japan. In reality, Japan was never exclusively isolationist, but merely limited trading activities with the outside world to areas far away from its centre.

¹ I would like to thank Li Li Chung and Exactly Foundation for the generosity and invitation to write an essay for the *Mute* project. And my thanks too to Chia Aik Beng for the beers and conversations about his work.

Many of these were ports located on the southwestern end, in Kyushu, with the most famous example being Dejima, Nagasaki. So while it was certainly true that the bulk of 19th-century Japan was ruled under an isolationist policy as imposed by the Tokugawa shogunate in central Edo, its peripheries were always much more susceptible to influences and opportunities from the outside world.²

To that extent, it should hardly come as a surprise that when Japan sought to modernize its economy, in the last quarter of the 19th century, many young Japanese women from these peripheral provinces were encouraged by the central government to look elsewhere for better economic opportunities. As Japan embarked on its process of modernization, this sudden manoeuvre led to an increasing wealth gap between those who lived in the larger port cities and the rural poor who lived on the outskirts of Japan. It was this combination of mounting taxes, grievous inequalities, increased abortions and female infanticides that contributed to the first wave of young Japanese women leaving their impoverished farmlands behind to seek better opportunities overseas as *karayuki-sans*.³ Therefore, the history of 19th-century migrations between Japan and Singapore began with the wave of young Japanese women coming to Singapore as young “exotic” prostitutes in order to earn a livelihood

and send money back home in order to contribute to the national economy.

Correspondingly, the history of labour in 19th-century Singapore is often grounded only through the male figures of Chinese *coolies*, remembered for their backbreaking work building our roads, railways, public works, government buildings, and working in factories. But, as James Francis Warren reminds us, such a history is produced only through a concerted repression by historians who refuse to see the *karayuki-san* as anything other than the “socially unassimilated,” focusing on their deviant social behaviours. Warren acknowledges them as part of the larger wave of migrant labourers who contributed to the growth of Singapore at the end

² For a succinct overview of the history and reasons behind Japan's isolationist policies, right up to the fateful 1868 Meiji Restoration, see Christopher Goto-Jones, *Modern Japan: a very short introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), chapter 1 “Japan's encounter with the modern world”.

³ James Francis Warren, *Ah Ku and Karayuki-San: Prostitution in Singapore, 1870-1940* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003), 7-10.

⁴ Another story is told of Fujita Toshiro, then consul-general at Singapore, who, during an inspection tour of Java, Indonesia, in March 1897, lamented that it was rather unfortunate that out of the 125 Japanese living in Java as many as 100 women were *karayukis*. See Kenichi Goto, *Tensions of Empire: Japan and Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003), 8.

of the 19th century.⁴ In fact, he goes as far as to suggest that the *karayuki-sans* were “indispensable” in that they supported the “dynamic urban life” of a city populated by labouring bachelors.⁵ In other words, the “figure” of the male *coolie* labourer must give way to the “ground” of the female *karayuki-san* labourer.

3

What, then, might it mean for a photographer to return to Bugis, the area where the *karayuki-sans* used to congregate in Singapore? Would there even be anything left on the ground for us to trace such a history? In a place like Singapore, caricatured for its constant change and historical amnesia, as if it is mopped up by its unbelievable cleanliness, would such an unsavoury past even be allowed to remain in the background of things, caked under shiny new developments?

It is painful to watch Aik Beng attempt to “squeeze” something out with his shutter. He struggles a lot in this series, essentially because there is hardly anything left in the strips of shopping malls that now line the area. The only parades of bodies that he finds today are the mannequins lined up in the display windows. The only entertainer from Japan he finds is a lone Japanese busker singing nearby on Waterloo Street. Definitely nothing kinky going on there. There is, in the muted quality of his images, a

quiet sense of failure. A failure that recalls into its frame a past of other failures: the embarrassing failure on the part of the British to anticipate the pathways of Japanese soldiers entering Singapore, the spectacular failure of Japan’s grand plan to unite Asia under a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, and even the sad failure on the part of the Singapore government to reanimate the loud bustling days of Bugis Street by building one new shopping mall after another.⁶

The failure to find traces of the past can perhaps be explained by the sheer lack of historical documentation and materials left by the *karayuki-sans* about their own lives and experiences:

⁵ James Francis Warren, 11.

⁶ The *karayuki-sans* who populated the area surrounding Bugis Street from the 1870s to the 1940s were followed by the emergence of transvestites in the area between the 1950s and the 1970s. In fact, the transvestites of Bugis Street were famed for their beauty and were a well-known tourist attraction, especially for foreigners looking to score an “exotic” sexual experience – not all that different from the situation with the *karayukis* of the past. Yet, when redevelopment began in the mid 1980s, what returned was an impeccably sanitized version of Bugis Street, with all the accumulated traces of the area’s colourful past completely removed. Today Bugis remains a pale example of its past, lined with fairly characterless shopping malls. On Bugis Street’s transvestite past, see *Bugis Street*, dir. Yonfan (1995; Hong Kong: Jaytex Productions), film; and also, Audrey Yue and Jun Zubillaga-Pow, eds., *Queer Singapore: Illiberal Citizenship and Mediated Cultures* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012).

The prostitutes who poured out of Japan into Southeast Asia from the last quarter of the nineteenth century to the second and third decades of the next were probably 90 per cent illiterate and unable to write hiragana. Naturally enough, they could not themselves take up the pen to describe the circumstances and griefs of their lives or to make any appeal with regard to them. But who knows, even if they had been able to put together a sentence, they might have maintained silence and written not a line ... [T]he greatest obstacle by far to their divulging such detail was the conviction that it would bring shame upon their families and upon their ancestors.⁷

This situation explains why Warren, in his monographic study on the *karayuki-sans* in Singapore, championed the need for oral histories. But not before noting too that there are remaining photographs of *karayuki-sans* in Singapore. Many of these photographs were taken by the young Japanese women as a means of documenting and registering themselves upon arrival.⁸ Even so, few of these portraits exist today; and even when displayed in prominent spaces such as the National Museum of Singapore, they are at best fleetingly glanced at without so much as a pause in the hurried steps of visitors.⁹

4

But this isn’t to suggest that Aik Beng’s camera, a sophisticated machine compared to the contraptions of the past, could fare any better. This is an issue with photography’s limitation as a medium. While a photograph may turn a present moment into a fossil of light to be called into the future, it is hardly the tool of choice when it comes down to a present-day excavation of the past – especially if this past has been violently exploded and demolished from the ground up.¹⁰

What happens instead, in the images of *Mute*, are moments where chance coincidences happen,

⁷ Tomoko Yamazaki, “Sandakan No. 8 Brothel,” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 7.4 (1975): 53-54.

⁸ James Francis Warren, 16-17, 250-253.

⁹ My sincere gratitude to Li Li Chung for pointing this out to me, that there were photographs of *karayuki-sans* in the old photo gallery of the National Museum of Singapore.

¹⁰ Kenneth Koh describes this urban issue in Singapore as one caused by the tension between “ground” (understood as space embellished with complex symbolic meanings) and “land” (understood as mere commodity by the state in Singapore to be optimized for profits). See his essay “Unearthed: Surveys of ‘Ground’ in Singapore’s Chinese Burial Grounds,” in *Home + Bound: Narratives of Domesticity in Singapore and Beyond*, eds. Lilian Chee and Melany Sun-Min Park (Singapore: Centre for Advance Studies in Architecture, 2013), 22-54.

or moments where, through sheer dumb luck, the right symbols coalesce into view and Aik Beng takes the opportunity. Moments such as the chance meeting of a certain Mrs. Takahashi visiting the burial grounds of the *karayuki-sans* during Aik Beng's impromptu visit to the Japanese Cemetery Park, all the while unaware that the day coincided with the Bon Festival when Japanese pay their respects to their ancestors. Or, for instance, the moment when Aik Beng happened to be at the scene of a fight on Bugis Street that broke out between two young men over a lady, the blood spilling reminding Aik Beng of the blood spilled between men over *karayuki-sans* in the past. Aik Beng took whatever opportunities Lady Luck was willing to throw in his direction. He runs the camera on its automatic programme, but there is nothing automatic or programmatic with Aik Beng's images. Instead, what happened (as with most of Aik Beng's photographic work) is a process of chasing the unpredictable, a game of chance encounters.¹¹

Dumb luck. The muted ground upon which all our schedules, prescriptions, structures and systems run, and hope to outrun. Beyond a future managed by programmatic developments, optimized by logistical schedules and risk assessments, there is always lurking there, beneath the machines, an element of luck. Sometimes we know this as an unfortunate "accident"; on better days we give thanks for our good "fortune". Luck is the invisible and unpredictable force that influences our everyday life, even if we do not think often or much of it, even if we do not bet on it when building complex systems and infrastructures. It is always there.

The history of the *karayuki-sans* could be understood and rewritten as a history of luck, from the time these young women were born in rural Japan to the moment they passed on in Singapore. And perhaps it remains the only thing that Aik Beng's camera can ever hope to capture, and only ever in those fleeting moments. Contemplations are, after all, only ever fleeting moments.

Chia Aik Beng, 19th March 2016

In 1973, when I was five years old, my mother was a nanny to a Japanese family. I recalled there were many Japanese expatriates living in the west of Singapore, mainly along Pasir Panjang Road and West Coast Road.

For a year, I spent most of my time with the Japanese family. During that time, I was attracted to Japanese popular culture, mainly manga or anime like Ultraman, Godzilla, Gatchamen, Astro Boy, etc. Cartoons and popular culture were pretty much all I knew about Japan for a long time.

Fast-forward to late 2015, I read James Francis Warren's *Ah Ku and Karayuki-San: Prostitution In Singapore* and came to know that there used to be a Little Japan in Singapore, from the late 19th century until the end of World War II. What caught my attention about Little Japan was the presence of Japanese prostitutes known as *karayuki-san*. They worked in mostly Japanese-owned brothels in the area of Middle Road, Hylam Street and Malay Street – where Bugis Junction now stands.

I was very curious to find out more about how the *karayuki-sans* lived. After reading Warren's book, I was overwhelmed by the fact that these *karayuki-sans* have been forgotten, erased from history. These questions lingered in my mind: "Why are we not told?" "What happened to them

after World War II?" These questions led me to want to discover not only more about them but also more about Little Japan and all that disappeared from Singapore's cityscape after World War II.

At the Japanese Cemetery Park on Chuan Hoe Avenue, where I started to spend most of my time for this Exactly project, I immersed myself in imagining a *karayuki-san's* journey from the beginning to the end. Forgotten by society and especially now by us present-day Singaporeans, I felt sad as I walked and sat around at the cemetery.

My meetings with Mrs. Sato and Mrs. Yuko Gan were the most memorable encounters. I was filled with joy and sadness when they shared their stories with me. It was clear there was a strong sense of loss as well as belonging. Mrs. Sato so missed her childhood home on Mount Emily that even touching the wall was done with great tenderness. Mrs. Gan recounted that while feeling homesick for Japan during her first year in Singapore in 1967, she was filled with joy when she met an elderly lady, dressed in a sarong, who spoke her language; she found out later that the lady was one of the few remaining *karayuki-sans* in Singapore. In our West Coast area! My grandmother lived in that area! I grew up in that area!

¹¹ Chia Aik Beng, personal conversation with author, March 2, 2017.

For Review only

PHOTOGRAPHS

My biggest challenge was dealing with Bugis Junction. Knowing its past as a major red-light district until the 1930s, my question was: how am I going to capture images that represent its past history? There is nothing left to show that. All these shoppers, do they know the history of Bugis Junction?

There was one photo-shoot when I stood at Bugis Junction, thinking: *the past has disappeared*. I thought about the blood spilled in that part of Little Japan, where men fought over *karayuki-sans*, *karayuki-sans* committed suicide, many died of illness.

And right at that moment, a fight broke out in front of me and blood was spilled ... again ... today!

So maybe it hasn't all disappeared.

Being a street photographer, I have spent most of my practice capturing moments at an instant. Sometimes I don't even know the subjects I photograph or the stories behind the subjects.

But making *Mute* was different. It wasn't about capturing moments in an instant. Instead, *Mute* gave me moments of being alone – to reflect, to think, to question, to seek, and to understand.

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#2: Japanese busker in Waterloo Street

© Chia Aik Beng at Exactly Foundation Residency, December 2015



#3: Japanese busker in Waterloo Street

© Chia Aik Beng at Exactly Foundation Residency, December 2015

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#10: Mrs Gan, Site of West Coast where she met a Karayuki-San

© Chia Aik Beng at Exactly Foundation Residency, December 2015



#11: Mrs Gan, Site of West Coast where she met a Karayuki-San

© Chia Aik Beng at Exactly Foundation Residency, December 2015

Chua Ai Lin

President of Singapore Heritage Society

Response (audio transcript)

My first thought about the guiding questions is that for me as a historian, my response would be very different from the general public looking at these photographs because I do know a considerable bit about the Japanese community before WWII, just from my reading and general knowledge about Singapore. The first time I heard about it (*karayuki-san*) could have been when I first heard learnt of James Warren's research and later on read his book.

I think the general question behind this project – about why the history is so invisible, so forgotten – isn't limited to the history of the *karayuki-san*, the Japanese community or other so-called dark history topics of Singapore. It's across the board in so many dimensions of Singapore history simply because the landscape has changed so dramatically such that in many places, what was there before leaves absolutely no trace today. And secondly, of course, because Singapore society has changed so quickly in the course of a few decades, lifestyles and practices and trades, modes of livelihood have changed dramatically. So I think that question is relevant to the entire experience about Singapore's past.

Looking at the photographs, one thing they do capture is how much the past is invisible to us in the modern day. When Aik Beng talked about how difficult it was to represent the history of the *karayuki-san* by walking around Bugis today, I think that's true about so many aspects of Singapore history and about so many places. When he explained the story behind each photograph, it became much clearer what he was trying to express in each of them. And I think without his presentation we had at the dinner, it would be hard to understand the story behind the photographs and also the sequencing of the photographs.

I would like to talk about the broader history of the Japanese community at the time when *karayuki-sans* were there, just to place them in a broader context, which Li Li does refer briefly to in her statement, to think of the Japanese community as about more than just the *karayuki-san*.

The community had all kinds of tradesmen and professions. We know from studies that the Japanese community then included dentists, photo studios and, from Lai Chee Kien's research, Japanese department stores including the precursor of Mitsukoshi Department Store, which had a branch in Singapore, with large showcases selling fabrics. When we look at the population census 1932 and its "Others" category, the largest sub-group were the Arabs, followed by the Japanese.

I also read about Japanese consumer products. Tan Kah Kee's biggest competitor for manufactured rubber goods was Japanese rubber products; they were much cheaper than his products – things like shoes, etc. There were also Japanese versions of European products like clocks, bicycles, crockery and those decorative tiles we see on shophouses. Initially, such tiles were made in Europe, but by the 30s, many were produced in Japan.

Also, in the early days of cinema in Singapore, there were Japanese-run cinemas, Japanese cinematic travelling shows. So, they had a presence here in a much wider sense.

I even read in an ACS commemorative book about a Japanese family before the war who had three generations educated in ACS. There were the Ando family who were dentists. There were also Japanese who went to Raffles College in 1930s. The Japanese were just one of the many different ethnic groups who were here and integrated into life in the big city.

We now have a very over-simplified idea of Singapore society because we have been pushed into this narrow CMIO (Chinese/Malay/Indian/Others) framework. But if you look at the first colonial census in 19th century, it didn't have this CMIO. It just had dozens of ethnic groups, arranged in alphabetical order. In post-independence Singapore, it's been narrowed and simplified down to the big categories of CMIO, so we have lost an awareness of finer distinctions.

I'd now like to refer to the guiding questions given by Li Li. I've already talked about why it is that we do not know. It's just that so much of it has changed. There are no traces as so many aspects of Singapore history are lost. There is just no physical evidence. The stories are not formally transmitted through our education system.

So, what's happened to popular (informal) social memory? I think the older generation, who went through the massive changes, have taken a more future-oriented, forward-looking perspective, and feel that the past is not as important. I remember my driving instructor used to tell me stories of the War and the Japanese Occupation because he knew I was interested in history. When I asked him whether he told these stories to his children, he said that there was no point in transmitting these stories; he didn't feel that it was important to tell them; he felt that they weren't interested, that it wouldn't even be relevant to them to know.

So I think that could be the mindset that's holding back the transmission of stories across generations. And if you look at studies of oral history, people often internalize an official narrative – and the official narrative here is so strong – so this might also be at work here, holding people back from passing on their stories from generation to generation.

Then there is Li Li's question: do we just not care? I rather think that "not caring" has become more prevalent over time. I have seen evidence of this. I have had undergraduates say to me: why is it important for us to remember our parents' and grandparents' memories; we have our own memories. And recently I had an undergraduate tell me that her contemporaries ask why should we remember WWII and the Japanese Occupation at all – it was all so long ago. So, it seems that young people find it difficult to see how the past can be relevant at all. Maybe it's what I talked about earlier, that the official narrative is so future-oriented, so strong and so internalized for everyone. For the generation with stories to tell, they withhold telling them, which has resulted in young generations having no sense of the past as gleaned from stories that have so much richness, human experience and human emotion. They just can't see that at all.

This is compounded by the fact there is a lack of emotional literacy. We have all been trained to be so pragmatic and practical. For example, why should we learn Mandarin? So we can do business in China. We are not taught how to truly express ourselves in Mandarin, how to talk about thoughts and feelings in Mandarin, rather just perform functional tasks. The same with English, and the dramatic fall in the number of students taking English Literature for 'O'-Levels is a reflection of this. So, without a language to describe what one feels inside, we don't have the words to describe what it is that we really feel. We can't identify, can't process, can't articulate, can't convey what's beyond the physical and tangible.

I think one of the most interesting things that came out of the dinner is what Li Li talked about: what happened to the descendants of the *karayuki-san*, some of whom married into the local community (especially to Malays and Indians)? Where are they? That's a story that has been silenced. It parallels all the silences in Singapore history – all those things people feel they can't talk about. I suppose one of the most dramatic examples of this is what happened to the leftists from the 50s–60s. Because of the many crackdowns, such as Operation Cold Store, many in the Chinese-educated community continue to feel inhibited even today about revealing that they were part of any kind of student movement or connected to any leftist activities in their youth.

There are so many silences in our history. Silences that people are too scared to talk about. In the case of *karayuki-san*, it is not because of direct political suppression but the response of the wider Singapore community after the Japanese Occupation.

Family/Friends' responses

Lim Jen Erh

21st March 2016

Owner of Grassroots Book Room

I showed the photographs, statements and questions to my friend Lim Jen Erh two days after the dinner.

He had read a lot about the Japanese community, including James Warren's book (*Ah Ku and Karayuki-san: Prostitution in Singapore, 1870-1940*) back in the 90s. There is a photo in Warren's book that shows the name of a Japanese photo studio, 容方影相 (Yong Fong Photographer), which would be transliterated as *Rong Fang Yin Xiang* in Chinese. He was very taken by the name Rong Fang; he found it very evocative. It inspired him and his friends to start working on a play. At that time, he was part of a theatre group called Page to Stage Theatre.

The play was to be about a photographer setting up a photographic installation in a disused shophouse. During the process of setting up the installation, he encounters the spirit of a lady who might have been a *karayuki-san*. But that was as far as they got in conceptualizing that play. They didn't even get around to figuring out who the spirit was, because the next day, Jen Erh had a heart attack and they had to stop work on the play. But he did come up with the name of that fictional photographic installation, 无人地带 *Wu Ren Di Dai* ("Place with No People"),

and photographs would have been of places with no people in them, including some old places.

The second idea that Jen Erh shared with me was about a film called 《望鄉》, a 1974 Japanese film about a *karayuki-san* in Sabah, in a town called Sandakan. (The film, directed by Kei Kumai, was nominated for the 1975 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film.) He said this movie was quite well known and many people in the Chinese community watched it. So, he feels that among the Chinese-educated, there was definitely more of an awareness of *karayuki-san* in Southeast Asia, if not in Singapore specifically.

He also talked to me about the Hainanese community, who lived around the Beach Road area, close to Middle Road. Older Hainanese would have been familiar with the presence of Japanese in the area, so we wondered whether amongst the Hainanese community or Hainanese families, more would have heard about the presence of the Japanese community and the *karayuki-san*.

Jen Erh also pointed out one more interesting thing which is about Kuo Pao Kun's play, *The Spirits*. This play is about the Japanese Occupation and features five characters who are ghosts. Kuo Pao Kun rehearsed this play at Waterloo Centre, which is in the same area, Middle Road.

Mrs. Yuko Gan 顔夕子

Response

1967年7月初めて海外へ

JALで新加坡へ着く間、スチュワーデスの方々は振袖姿でお茶、お食事のサービスをされてとてもきれいなお着物姿でした。

パヤレバー空港はヤシの林で何かしら不安を感じましたが、街に入ると美しい道路と緑の木々、ビルの形的美し姿にほっとしたのを覚えます。

市政庁広場の一角は広々とした公園ですぐ前にエリザベス公園になり、海水が打ちよせていました。

公園の一角に真白い四本の塔がテーブルの上に箸を立てたように聳え立ってる柱を見ました。運転している夫となる人に「あの柱は何ですか」と聞くと「メモリアル」と一言。「何の・・・」と聞き返しますと返事なくずっと無言のまま。聞いてはまずいのだと思い私も海面に目をそらしました。

ガイドするようになり「メモリアル」の事が残っていましたので足を向けてみよう公園に行きました。

そして四ヶ国語で示されている中の漢字文に心が凍りつく思いで動けませんでした。

何の心の準備もなく唯夫となる人の国に身を置いた自分がたまらなく嫌になりました。

そして決意、新加坡と日本の関係、歴史的事実を勉強してみよう。そしてツアーに来る日本人にも出来るかぎり語っていろいろ・・・と。

その当時日本人との出会いはなく、母国語を聞こうにも話すにも相手はなく、パセルパンジャンの海岸で国の歌を歌っては泣いてました。遠くで吠える犬の声に「何と日本語のうまい犬だろう」本気で思ったりしてました。

そんなある日、海岸で、歌を口ずさんでいますと「日本にもどれよ」と…日本語が耳に・・・とうとう私は気が狂ってしまった。どうしよう…と、又そこで「日本はどこかね？もどれよ」と。近くの浜にすんでいるマレー人部落の一人の老婦人が立っておられました。無我夢中でその婦人にすがり泣きました。

ずっと後になって知ったのですが、その方が当時生き残りの一人「からゆきさん」だったので。

July 1967 – first trip overseas

On the way to Singapore by JAL, I was served tea and food by stewardesses who wore beautiful *furisode* (kimono).

Singapore's Paya Lebar Airport was surrounded by palm trees. This made me feel uneasy at first. We drove to the city and I was amazed by the clean roads, lined by greenery and trees. Such greenery captivated me. The towering office buildings and structures were just as beautiful. I felt at ease.

At the corner of City Hall was a big park, connected to Elizabeth Park facing the sea.

I saw a tower (Civilian War Memorial), which was constructed with four white pillars that looked like chopsticks in the park. I asked the driver who eventually became my husband, “What is this tower?” He only said one word: “Memorial?”. I went on to ask what kind but he just kept quiet. I felt that I should not ask any further. So I turned my face to the sea.

When I started guiding in Singapore. I felt that I should go to the tower. When I went to the Civilian War Memorial, I felt there was more to it. I froze when I read what was written on the wall. It was written in Singapore's four national languages. I was never prepared to see this. Suddenly I felt hatred for myself and wondered why I was in this country. Determination to study the relationship and history between Singapore and Japan propelled me. I decided then to tell Japanese tourists about the history of Singapore and Japan.

I hardly saw any Japanese in Singapore at all at that time. I longed to speak and hear my mother tongue but nobody spoke the language. I went to the seaside along Pasir Panjang to sing Japanese songs. As I sang, I cried. I heard a dog barking and for a moment I thought – it spoke such good Japanese.

One day I was walking along the seaside, singing a Japanese song. Someone spoke to me in Japanese. “Go back to Japan!!” I thought my ears and mind were playing tricks on me.

Then, again, I heard Japanese. “Which part of Japan do you come from? Go back to Japan,” said a Malay woman who lived near the sea and was standing behind me. Without thinking, I ran to the woman and clung to her and cried.

Much later, I found out that the woman was a *karayuki-san*, who had survived through the decades.

Family/Friends' responses

S. 14th March 2016

数年前に 3 回程、日本人墓地の清掃に参加させて頂いたことがあります。その時に“からゆきさん”の説明を聞き、私には想像することすら出来ない位の苦労をされた方々が沢山いた現実を知りました。

その後、私はシンガポールを離れると、すっかり頭からスボッと過去のことを忘れて、今に至るのです。

私は縁があり 1 年半前に再びシンガポールに来星し、そこで顔さんと出会い、顔さんのお宅に住まわせて頂いておりました。毎日のたわいもない会話から、私のグチなど思いを聞いてもらっていましたが、そこで、シンガポールの歴史や“からゆきさん”の話聞かせてもらうことができました。再び、“からゆきさん”の話聞き、今私が悩んだり苦しいと思う内容が恥ずかしくなるようなこ「自分の欲というものなんだな」と気付かされました。もし、私とその時代の人間であったとしたら自決しているだろうと心の弱さを感じました。

またこの 3 月末シンガポールを離れますが、今度は“からゆきさん”の存在を思い出し、手を合わせていきたいと思いました。

A few years ago, I went to the Japanese Cemetery several times to help with its cleaning. At that time, I heard about *karayuki-san* and I realized that many Japanese women had suffered here in Singapore – it was beyond my imagination.

When I left Singapore, I forgot all about my visit to the cemetery and *karayuki-san*.

When I came back to Singapore about one and a half years ago, I met Mrs. Yuko Gan and I stayed at her place for a while. Every day I would sit and chat idly with her for hours. She just listened to my grievances. Then I heard about the history of Singapore and *karayuki-san* again from Mrs. Gan. I felt ashamed as my suffering and bitterness were such trivial matters. I realized that it was my greed. If I had lived during the time of the *karayuki-san*, I would have committed suicide as I am a weak person.

I am leaving Singapore again but this time I will remember *karayuki-san* and keep her in my prayers with my hands clasped together.

H.

私が初めてからゆきさんのことを知ったのは、日本人会で定期的に行ってくださいる “顔さんツアー”に参加した時です。ツアーバスの中でからゆきさんの話を聞き、実際にからゆきさんたちが眠っているお墓をおまいりさせていただきました。

家族を楽にしたくて貧しい家の娘が仕事をしなかったのに、売られて、知らない国につれてこられて、どんなにつらかったであろうか。働いたお金を家族に送ることも出来ず、自分の墓の為のお金になるなんて、どんなに悲しくくやしかっただろうかと考えると胸がいっぱいになります。

今を生きる私たちに出来ることはからゆきさんと呼ばれた娘さんたちがこのシンガポールの地にいたことを忘れず日本人墓地、あるいは心の中で手を合わせ、出来るかぎり多くの方に語りついで行くことだと思います。

シンガポールの地で、それを伝え続けてくださっている顔さんには、これからも元気で、1人でも多くの人々に伝えていっていただけたらと願っています。

When I first joined the regular tour organized by the Japanese Association in Singapore (called “Gan-san Tour”), I came to know about *karayuki-san*. On the tour bus, I heard about *karayuki-san* and I went to pay my respect at the cemetery where *karayuki-sans* are buried.

A *karayuki-san* wanted to support her family by working overseas but she was sold and taken to other countries. I wonder how much *karayuki-san* must have suffered. She could not send the money that she earned and this money was used for building her own tomb.

When I think about *karayuki-san*'s sadness and her disappointment, I am overwhelmed with emotion.

What we can do now is not to forget about *karayuki-san* and other ladies who once stayed here in Singapore. We can join hands and hearts to pass these stories on to the next generation.

Mrs. Gan is continuing to tell the story about *karayuki-sans*. I wish for Mrs. Gan to be always healthy so that she can continue to tell as many people as possible in Singapore about *karayuki-sans*.

T.

私が初めて“からゆきさん”の事を知ったのは、4年前に来星して、3ヶ月程たった時のことです。

日本人墓地にお参りにつれていってもらった時に、顔さんより、昔、日本からたくさんの人たちがシンガポールに来て、暮らしていたという事実を知りました。

もちろん、シンガポールのために一生懸命にご尽力をつくされて貢献された方もいらっしゃる、日本人墓地には立派なお墓がたてられています。

しかし、もうお墓がどこかもわからなく、長い年月が経って朽ち果てた石や木もあります。

「ここに眠っている人も、シンガポールでたいへんな苦勞をして、日本に帰りたい、帰りたい、と願って亡くなった人がたくさんいるんだよ。」と顔さんは涙ながらに教えてくれました。

実は、私の祖父も第二次世界大戦で、南方の地で戦死しています。“からゆきさん”同様、日本の家族の事をいつも思い出していたにちがいません。いつの世も、家族は大切なものです。家族のため



All new buildings now, so much is invisible



Continuity and Change

Two things attracted me to the peer dialogue: an opportunity to practice photography and also a chance to learn more about the history of Japan and the Japanese in Singapore. My interest in Japan and Japanese things began in childhood, and for the past five years I have been making annual visits to the country.

This was my second time visiting the Japanese Cemetery Park in less than six months. I explored the place with a friend in December 2015 but this time it felt more guided and purposeful with Li Li and Aik Beng's explanations before we started the session. For me what stuck out most is the evolving relationship between Japan and Singapore. At a micro-level, it is my discovery of Japan through my Japanese friends when I visit the country; and when they visit, I try to explain what Singapore and being Singaporean means.

At a macro or more historical level, the cemetery symbolizes a long relationship with between Japan and Singapore dating back to the late 1800s when the *karayuki-sans* came over in search of better living opportunities. Naturally it is easy for many older Singaporeans such as those from my grandparents' generation to recall the atrocities by the Japanese during the Japanese Occupation from 1942 to 1945. However, I think it maybe better to view the whole Japan-Singapore relationship from a broader perspective, both the historical aspects of it and also how this relationship is viewed in today's context. Commentary at tea: history as one continuous thread over time, not pieces of, whenever convenient.

The photos I selected represent the relationship between the two countries in today's context: Japanese visitors to the cemetery leaving their particulars in the memo book; fresh flowers that are slowly fading at one of the tombstones; and to our pleasant surprise, a Japanese busker performing some rather familiar tunes at Waterloo Street.