

# Interpreting Media Constructions of Samsui Women in Singapore<sup>1</sup>



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## INTRODUCTION

Migrating from southern China to Singapore in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *samsui* women have been routinely portrayed throughout Singapore’s history as among its pioneers who played a part in the building of the nation. In many avenues of social memory production based on *samsui* women, they have, more often than not, been presented in various ways as “pioneers”, “feminists” and “Cantonese women” who are set apart from other Chinese females in relation to their qualities of thrift, resilience and independence.



Samsui women on their way to their cleaning job at the Empress Place Building  
Source: Singapore Tourist Promotion Board Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

This paper discusses the different means through which these women are remembered vis-à-vis media constructions found in such examples as newspaper reports and popular history books. These constructions of *samsui* women’s experiences are limited in view of their neglect of other dimensions in their everyday life experiences. Further issues are raised with regard to the need to reflect upon other avenues of memory-making in which we receive knowledge about these women, as well as how they are being remembered in both past and present contexts.

## SAMSUI WOMEN – A BRIEF BACKGROUND

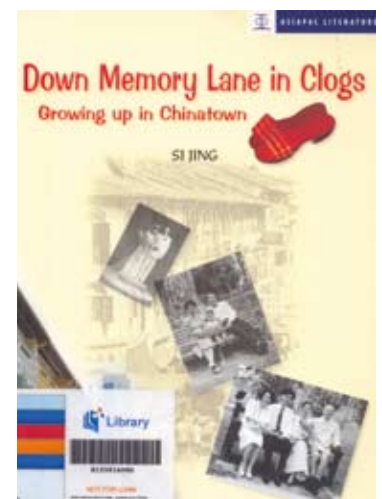
*Samsui* women, or *hong tou jin* – translated literally as “red headscarf” (Lim, 2002) – came from peasant families in the *Samsui* area of the coastal province of Canton (Guangdong today) in

China (Tang, 1960). These women often helped out and toiled in the fields at a very young age, and hence were able to find work at construction sites in Singapore when they left their homeland. This was primarily a result of the Alien Ordinance imposed on Singapore (then part of the Straits Settlements) by the British, which saw many *samsui* women migrating to Singapore in the 1930s (Lim, 2002). A quota was imposed on the numbers of male migrants entering Malaya, whereas no restrictions were enforced upon female migrants.

*Samsui* women went through a *sui haak* (middlemen) before securing a job in the building and construction industry overseas. One *samsui* woman for instance, paid 30 dollars to a *sui haak* to help her make the necessary arrangements to work overseas, which covered the fare for her journey, food and other migration procedures (Lim, 2002, p. 231). Tang (1960) estimates that between 1934 and 1938, about 190,000 women from China migrated to Malaya, and *samsui* women formed part of this wave of female migrants.

The *samsui* female labourer was easily recognised and singled out by her distinctive red cloth headgear, black tunics and black pants (*samfoo*) which she wore to work every day (Lim, 2002, p. 230). Although the exact reason for donning the headgear is hitherto debatable, it is surmised that the first woman to wear it was Su Tong Po’s mistress in the Hakka district of China, by the name of Chao Yun (Lim, 2002). Through the passing of time, the headgear was adopted as the traditional headgear of Hakka women, who took along this tradition with them as they migrated south from China. Working alongside these Hakka women, *samsui* women also began to put on the red headgear to work. However, Lim (2002) points out that this account remains contested, and that the real reason and motivation for wearing the headgear is still not known.

*Samsui* women migrated to Singapore in the 1920s and 1930s. Some of them remained



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in Singapore, while others either passed on or returned to *Samsui*. In order to interpret media constructions of *samsui* women, the ensuing section will elucidate upon the ways through which these women are remembered vis-à-vis media memory-making channels.

### CANTONESE/SAMSUI WOMEN

Hailing from the *Samsui* province located in southern China, the women who typically worked in the construction industry are usually termed as *samsui* women, although some writers have pointed out that not all women who worked on construction sites came from *Samsui*. For instance, Chin and Singam note:

“Indeed, it has become common for English speakers to refer to all still-surviving, old, single, immigrant Cantonese women as *Samsui* women. This lumps together, quite incorrectly, women from many districts – each distinct in sub-dialect and self-image.”  
(2004, p.106)

A similar observation is also made by Yip:

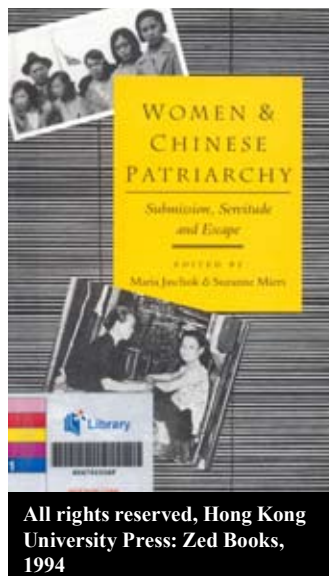
“Not all *Samsui* women came from the *Samsui* village in the Guangdong Province in China. But because of the preponderance of these women from *Samsui*, the term *Samsui* women has been used to describe all the Chinese women in similar occupations.”  
(2006, p. 40)

A more interesting point to note with regard to *samsui* women is their membership in the dialect group of the Cantonese. Framed as a “different and markedly independent category of Chinese women from the south” (Chin & Singam 2004, p. 105), Cantonese women were known to be highly independent and feisty, and refused to, or rarely married (Chiang, 1994; Gaw, 1988; Samuel, 1991; Stockard, 1989; Tan, 1990; Topley, 1959).

Along the lines of highlighting their Cantonese origin (see also, Kong *et al.*, 1996), *samsui* women are also typically presented as emerging triumphant from hardships back in China, toiling in the fields, dealing with useless, opium-addicted husbands who were match-made to them in their teens, and



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being singled out as “strong-willed” (Lim, 2005, p. 141) or resilient (Chin & Singam, 2004). Having framed *samsui* women as a group of independent Cantonese womenfolk, this approach becomes a useful resource for another level of representation, that of presenting them as “pioneers” and “feminists”, which I address next.

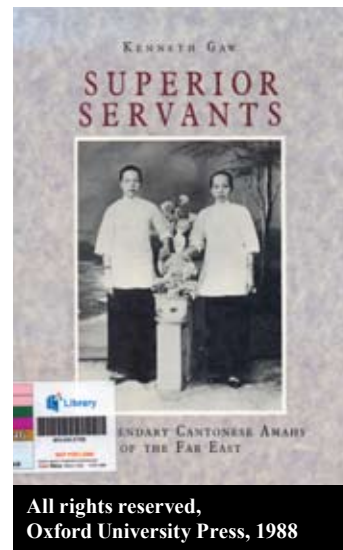
### “PIONEERS” AND “FEMINISTS”

Given the atypical work position of *samsui* women who toiled alongside men in the construction industry (and in other occupations), these women are often lauded and highlighted for their contributions to the physical infrastructure of Singapore’s

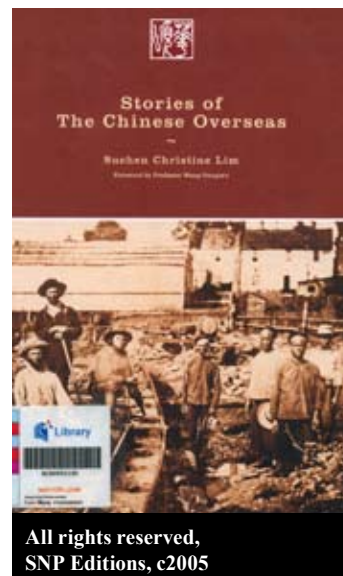
built-up environment, so that “they are not forgotten as the early builders of our nation” (Chan, 2005, p. 59). Their roles in construction work see them involved in constructing landmark buildings such as, among others, Alexandra Hospital (Partridge, 1998), Meritus Mandarin Hotel, and Singapore Conference Hall, the last of which “is a site they helped erect way back in the 1960s” (Tan, 2003). Related to their pioneer status is that of claiming them as “Singapore’s first Asian feminist” (Tan, 2003), or “alpha women of yesteryear” (Yip, 2006, p. 41). Tan notes:

“It is not just the obvious role she has played in the building of Singapore’s physical history, as testified by school textbooks and local soap operas. It is what she has come to stand for, as Singapore’s first Asian feminist.” (2003)

Their link to feminism has also received a nod from former Nominated Member of Parliament, Dr Kanwaljit



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Soin, who praised *samsui* women at a Lunar New Year lunch:

“Singaporean women like to think we’ve achieved much in the past 30 years. But the *samsui* women set our direction when they came here 100 years ago (sic). I salute them as the original Asian feminists.”

(*The Straits Times*, 5 February 2002)

Similarly, *samsui* women have also been mentioned by another former Nominated Member of Parliament, Braema

Mathiapparanam, who urged that some form of commemoration of these women should be carried out on National Day in order to remember their contributions.<sup>2</sup>

Apparently, the term “*samsui* women” hangs easily with those who talk about them as “pioneers” or “feminists”. Yet, such passing reverence or remembrances of these women are but limited glimpses of what we know about them and their life experiences. I discuss this further below, where I point out the utilisation of these terms upon the women by both the state and other institutions in furthering certain aims and goals.

### ELDERLY WOMEN

Koo’s article, written based on two *samsui* women, tells of the women’s current position in their later years. Their frailty, vulnerability and helplessness are highlighted. The first *samsui* woman is Gui Jie, who was 92 at the time of the interview with Koo. She describes Gui Jie:

“Dressed in a grey blouse with flowers printed and black pants, her grey hair was short and tidy; her small frame somehow made the wheelchair appear to have plenty of room.” (2006, p. 56)

The other *samsui* woman is Di Jie, who was three years younger:

“Di Jie was temporarily staying at the Old People’s Home. As her application to the subsidy from the government and the daughter of her sister could no longer support her lodging fee of S\$300 per month, Di Jie was trapped in a situation where no one could take care of her anymore...” (2006, p. 57)

It is clear from Koo’s description of these two *samsui* ladies that she frames their current situation in a helpless and hapless manner, iterating their transition from being sturdy female construction workers to physically challenged elderly with little or no support.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, in a local newspaper article, another *samsui* woman was mentioned as a recipient of home care help from a local organisation:

“She was once a robust *samsui* woman who could carry heavy loads effortlessly. But at the age of 89, just moving from her bed to her wheelchair is a challenge for Madam Heun Lin Yow.” (Chan, 2003)

Additionally, *samsui* women have often been highlighted in the media as recipients of aid in various forms from charitable associations, receiving free medical checkups, being treated to Lunar New Year dinners and other special functions, among others (see Kee, 1996; Luo, 2005; Ramesh, 2006).<sup>4</sup> In spite of their frailty, which is clearly a marked contrast from their earlier years, these women have often been presented as always incorporated into and remembered or noted and honoured for their contributions by society through such events as the Lunar New Year festivities, when special meals were provided for them.

### OVERLAPPING IDENTITIES

In the preceding three sections, I have demonstrated how *samsui* women are presented through the categories of Cantonese

migrant women, pioneers and feminists, and elderly in need of help. I indicate here a combination of some if not all of these categories to illustrate how their identity has been presented in the media as a kind of template which has been developed and put together from the previous three categories of identity production.

In a chapter on “Older Women: Planning for the Golden Years” included in *A Woman’s Place: The Story of Singapore Women* (Wong & Leong, 1993), *samsui* women have been described as follows:

“These women worked hard and were regarded to be almost as good as the men, not just in the way they worked, but also in their ability to save and send money home. Working women in those days might have worked in humble jobs that younger workers today shun, but they remained fiercely independent and took great pride in the fact that, not only did they support themselves, they even supported their families back in their homeland.” (1993, p. 61-62)



Similar descriptions can be found in another piece of writing produced by the *Singapore Contractors Association Ltd* (SCAL), titled “Tribute to our History”:

“As restrictions were once imposed on male immigrants from poverty-stricken China, the women came instead to take on the heavy work. The women, clothed in black *samfoo* and a headgear, worked at construction sites from dawn to dusk seven days a week, moving from project to project, chipping stones, mixing cement mortar, carrying heavy loads, sweeping and cleaning.” (1997, p. 17)

After having been praised for the work that they did, these women were further described as elderly in need and receipt of social assistance in contemporary times:

“The three ‘*samsui por*’ are now too old to work and receive \$90 each per month from the Social Welfare

Department. But Madam Fong and her two friends are happy with what little they have and have saved enough to buy a place in an old folks' home." (ibid.)

Finally, in the conclusion of the article, the women are recognised for their contribution and position in the history of Singapore's construction:

"SCAL members who remember the yesteryear of construction in Singapore will acknowledge that the labour provided by these *samsui* women was instrumental in their success, allowing them to compete with British contractors for projects." (ibid.)

These quotes point to a combination of varying identities of *samsui* women in media memory-making. Similar issues concerning their reasons for migrating, struggling against a series of hardships, eking out a living in Singapore as construction workers and, finally, retiring on social welfare, become generalisations of how the history and memory of *samsui* women as a collective are remembered. However, many other experiences of *samsui* women are left unheard.

My research, which includes volunteer work with *samsui* women and other elderly, archival research, as well as speaking with (the adopted) kin of these women (see Low, 2007b), indicate that they were more than just Chinese female migrants who toiled at construction sites and either went back to China to retire, or remained in Singapore. Some *samsui* women also worked in other occupations, as rubber factory workers and domestic helpers, while others also adopted children, or got married. Other experiences of the women – including difficult times during the Japanese occupation of Singapore in the early 1940s, travelling back to *Samsui* for a visit after a few decades (Lim, 1996), among others – remain untapped and allocated to the background of popular memorialisation processes. Similar experiences and narratives of a few *samsui* women<sup>5</sup> may be gleaned below:

"Tough, but of course! Knee-deep high water also must go in. Now got machines to use. At that time, we carried [cement and bricks] by ourselves. Four, five storeys, seven storeys also carry up like that.

Just a few cents only! We had to endure from morning till night. Even if our shoulders were bruised, we still had to climb up twelve storeys high.

My life was not good. Had to remit money to brothers and sisters. Eat less lor, I only spend one cent on food a day. One cent worth of food to eat for a day. Ate peanuts, salted turnip, string beans...ate these kind of stuff! You think got fish and meat to eat ah? Don't have ah, don't even get to eat chicken on festive occasions at that time. Also couldn't afford salted fish. Sometimes we ate pig's blood fried with beansprouts, to eat for a day.

[Was] expensive, would set us back by two cents.

Our lives went by like that. What can we hope for?

No family here. Cannot regret...already came here.

No regrets, once we made up our minds to come."

Other than these varied experiences which have not been substantively interpreted, it is also pertinent to probe into the various aims that motivate selective identity-representations

of *samsui* women. For example, state remembrance of *samsui* women as pioneers and feminists reveal "claims" over these women in order to produce a heritage that Singaporeans can relate to. I discuss elsewhere, how *samsui* women have been appropriated in various ways through what I term "pioneer narratives":

"Dissemination of knowledge concerning these Chinese female migrants framed within the discourse of *samsui* women as pioneers, can be better understood within what I refer to as 'pioneer narratives' - a form of 'historical recall script' employed by the state in order to manage and perpetuate a sense of heritage and therefore collective identity. More importantly, virtues of hard work, thrift, resilience and perseverance are often highlighted in accounts of the *samsui* women, adding on to the list of 'desirable values' which the state often emphasises upon for its citizens. These pioneer narratives therefore form as media of heritage for purposes of instilling collective identities and therefore a sense of belonging to a 'common past'."

(Low, 2007a, p. 6)

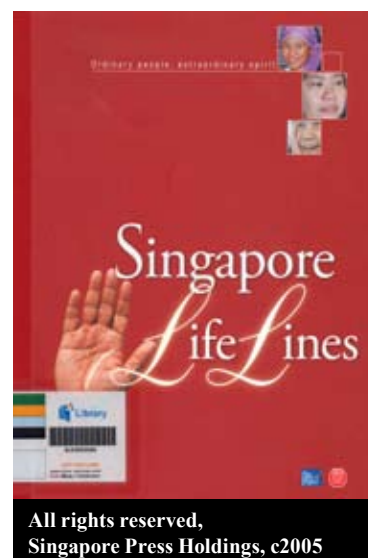
Such selective presentation of *samsui* women brings about limiting representations of their experiences, as Chang and Huang contend:

"Nostalgia for images of...*samsui* women are certainly romanticised and shorn of the painful realities that usually attend real events...Most of the lives of the *samsui* women were also very painful, marked by backbreaking labour, meagre salaries and exploitative employers. (2005, p. 278)

Presenting *samsui* women as pioneers is one issue. But framing them as feminists then becomes an appropriation of them as icons of female independence, hence adding favourably towards championing women's rights and causes. I would also propose that such framing does not necessarily reflect upon all experiences of the women. As I have mentioned earlier, some of these women, for instance, were married and had children and grandchildren in Singapore.<sup>6</sup>

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

It may be right to suggest that the direction of media constructions of *samsui* women has, as its template, the four identity-categories which appear to be presented as unchanging and permanent. In other words, the production of knowledge on *samsui* women seems to centre mainly on their pioneering contributions, right up to their present situation as elderly women in



need of help. Beyond these constructions, it is important to consider other ways in which we remember or know about their experiences. Were there other points in their lives which brought about relocation or permanent settlement in Singapore? For example, the opportunity to return to *Samsui* at various points of their lives may have been a good or less desirable awakening, either in the form of a desire to return to their country of origin, or to realise, upon their return, that they no longer fit in with their familial members back in China. Keeping in mind these

varying queries, it is thus crucial to manoeuvre ourselves beyond the four identity-categories and not to regard them as ideal representations of *samsui* women.

While some writings have emerged in recent years which provide a more in-depth engagement with the everyday life experiences of *samsui* women (for example, Low, 2005; Koo, 2006), more work of this nature needs to be produced in order to expand our knowledge concerning the life trajectories and experiences of *samsui* women.

## ENDNOTES

1. This paper forms a part of my ongoing Ph.D. research on social memory and historiography of *samsui* women in Singapore, and is a preliminary article written for general readership. I would like to thank Kevin Blackburn for his constructive comments on an earlier draft of the paper
2. Parliamentary Debates, 2004.
3. In an article on Singapore's greying community, *samsui* women were also described as "shrivelled and grey" (see *The Straits Times*, 1995, May 3).
4. See also, *The Straits Times*, 1997, February 3 and *The Straits Times*, 1997, January 31, in which *samsui* women were reported to have received red packets and food parcels from voluntary welfare associations, and been invited to a Lunar New Year *Yusheng* lunch hosted by the American International Assurance.
5. These quotes are taken from a documentary produced in 1995 titled "An immigrant's story: With sweat, tears and toil - The *Samsui* Women" (Mediacorp News and Channel News Asia, Singapore).
6. A filmlet based on a *samsui* woman has recently been produced in conjunction with the 2007 National Day celebrations of Singapore's 42<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of independence. In that clip, *samsui* woman Loke Tai Hoe was featured as having come from China in 1936, and after having worked for 42 years, her "efforts have finally paid off", and she was seen sitting in the centre of a family portrait with her children and grandchildren. See <http://www.ndp.org.sg/multimedia/video/filmlets/samsui.html>.

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