
Kelvin Low’s book examines Samsui women who migrated from the coastal Chinese province of Guangdong to Singapore and the processes whereby they were remembered. Low untangles the complex enterprise of appropriating and co-opting memories of and about Samsui women for political and social exigencies, an enterprise that isolates and overlooks the women themselves. Low remedies this by including lived stories of Samsui women and reveals how previous history and heritage projects served mostly others and not the Samsui women. Low’s book lays bare the constructedness of social memory of a specific group of women and the dynamic changes memory undergoes to become social amnesia. Low successfully dehomogenizes the collective group and reinstates the subjectivity of these women.

Low’s book has six chapters. The historical context for the different waves of migration from Southern China to British Malaya is provided in Chapter 1. Here, Low explains how migration processes and their implications differed for men and women. Cantonese women mostly came from the districts of Samsui, Shunde, Pan Yu, and Nan Hai in Guangdong province, and were referred to as “Samsui women.” They worked on construction sites and were distinct from another group called *ma cheh* (媽姐), who worked as domestic helpers in wealthy families and were not as publicly visible as the Samsui women.

Low deftly lays out the interrelated contexts for different co-optations of the superficial representation of Samsui women as resilient, hardworking and frugal immigrants. In Chapter 2, he examines how the valorization and fêting of Samsui women fitted into Singapore’s quest for and formulation of a modern nation-state identity. This was done through an educational scaffolding process of including Samsui women and their work in history teaching, heritage projects, nation-state myths and “heritage merchandization” (whereby their likeness are sold to tourists) (p. 69). Of particular interest is Low’s description of how the state appropriated Samsui women for specific political exigencies. Because of the pragmatic use of the image of a Samsui woman, contradictory representations have emerged. She is “frail and dependent” as well as “self-reliant and indefatigable” (p. 67). Low argues that these endeavours are “selective remembering and forgetting” that reflects “fragmentation and dismemberment” (p. 77). In fact, he
argues that the consumption of such stories has led to what could be termed “nostalgia pastiche” which ultimately “trivializes history” (p.75). Besides politics and history, Low also explores in Chapter 3 how Samsui women were further appropriated through art, film and literature.

The most compelling part of the book is Low’s introduction of the lived stories and narratives of Samsui women themselves in Chapter 4. Readers get a strong sense that the “real” Samsui women are quite distinct from those described in state histories and popular culture. They are unlike the superficial representations of them as proto-feminists, pioneering elderly women who have worked ceaselessly and disavowed marriage. What instead emerges from their lived stories are women who not only express little desire to be part of the nation’s history but also have benefitted little from the merchandising of their likeness. In Chapter 5, Low’s description of Samsui women as unique individuals trying to survive poverty and hard times is compelling. He introduces the affinal, natal and adopted families of Samsui women, and provides insights into their social relations, thoughts and attitudes. These women have struggled with the guilt of leaving behind children in Southern China, but enjoyed the exhilaration of independence without the pressures of immediate family responsibilities in Singapore. Their differing experiences stand in stark contrast to the homogenous descriptions in heritage projects or history books.

Another interesting aspect of Low’s study is the juxtaposition of Samsui women with contemporary foreign workers in Singapore. In Chapter 6, Low argues that there is an urgent need to reexamine current prejudices and discriminatory attitudes and policies towards foreign workers currently treated as a social nuisance. There is limited public sympathy for the government’s strict treatment of the large numbers of domestic helpers (all women) and construction workers (usually men). Many Singaporeans view these foreign workers in negative light despite their contribution in helping to transform the modern nation-state of Singapore into a global hub and economic powerhouse. Low opines that this workforce now perceived as a social problem will one day be useful as a subject for the study of national memory, much like the Samsui women of the past.

Low’s historical background would have been more cogent if he had made use of recent works on Chinese history instead of Immanuel Hsu’s 1995 survey. The use of dated material might explain why Low refers to the foreign rulers of the Qing dynasty as the “Chinese government” instead of the Qing government or Manchu rulers (p.34). Low has painstakingly
included all the classics on memory studies and this monograph will be useful for students interested in theories on memory and history writing.

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