

Portland State University

PDXScholar

---

Anthropology Faculty Publications and  
Presentations

Anthropology

---

1994

## Ah Ku and Karayuki-san: Prostitution in Singapore, 1870-1940. By James Francis Warren

Sharon A. Carstens

Portland State University, carstesa@pdx.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/anth\\_fac](https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/anth_fac)



Part of the [Chinese Studies Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

---

### Citation Details

Carstens, Sharon. "Ah Ku and Karayuki-san: Prostitution in Singapore, 1870–1940. By James Francis Warren." Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1993. xvi, 434 pp. *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53.02 (1994): 522-523.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Anthropology Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: [pdxscholar@pdx.edu](mailto:pdxscholar@pdx.edu).

*Ah Ku and Karayuki-san: Prostitution in Singapore, 1870–1940.* By JAMES FRANCIS WARREN. Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1993. xvi, 434 pp. \$65.00.

Social historians of organized female prostitution find themselves faced with at least two dilemmas. First, how to identify and indict the more oppressive aspects of prostitution without making the women appear as mere pawns of the system. Second, how to portray the daily lives and worlds of the people involved from their own perspectives while also delineating the contextual macro-issues such as changing political economies, state structures, and gender ideologies that shaped these lives. James Warren addresses these problems by dividing his book in two. The first half offers a macrohistory of brothel prostitution in Singapore; the second focuses on details in the actual lives of the Japanese and Chinese prostitutes, known, respectively, as *karayuki-san* and *ah ku*.

Beginning with a chapter titled “Patriarchy, Poverty, and Prosperity,” Warren identifies underlying causes behind the procurement of Chinese and Japanese women for prostitution in China and Japan and their shipment to Singapore. He then describes the geography, demography, and organization of Singapore’s brothels; the agents and agencies who supplied and controlled the women; and the shifting colonial policies of the British government as it attempted to manage what was seen as a necessary social evil. The book’s second half focuses on the actual lives of the *ah ku* and *karayuki-san*, drawing on a variety of oral history accounts, coroner’s reports, and other observer’s records. Beginning the narratives back in the villages of China and Japan, Warren describes the journeys of the young women to Singapore; the routines of their daily lives as brothel inhabitants; the male clients whom they served; the opportunities to leave the trade by marriage or buying themselves out; and their prospects in old age.

As with his previous book, *Rickshaw Coolie* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986), Warren aspires to write an alternative history of Singapore. He notes that “the historical memory of Singaporean society is constituted not of one single strand, but of a tangled skein. There is a dominant memory, carefully and often selectively recorded for posterity, of the articulate and powerful, and there are the numerous alternative memories of the past from the testimony of ‘the under-classes, the underprivileged, and the defeated’—the history of the powerless” (p. 388). Certainly the subject matter he has chosen and his stated goals are important, yet his attempt to give voice to the memories of these “women of the night” is not entirely successful. His prose style varies from competent historical description to passages that attempt to be evocative, yet strike this reader as melodramatic. For example, in discussing use of the coroner’s documents, we read, “this source and approach involves the historian in the intimate contemplation of important, almost unmentionable, subjects in Singapore’s past—prostitution, the status and subordination of women, sex and love, and death” (p. 14). Similarly, the difficulties of using oral history “are more than offset by the awesome power and wonder of language lifting the veil of silence from around the lives of these prostitutes” (p. 15). And “photographs of the *karayuki-san* and the brothels . . . were both functional and symbolic objects which can make one gasp, grimace, or smile; the black-and-white images are priceless snatches of Singapore life itself, each telling its own story” (p. 17).

This book is also too long; the division into two distinct parts leads to redundancy and some confusion, and in the second half of the book, stories of the same prostitutes

are retold chapter after chapter as different aspects of their lives are discussed. Warren also does not keep the different social and sexual mores of Chinese and Japanese women sufficiently distinct, often lumping his explanations under the not terribly illuminating term of "patriarchy." Surprisingly, though claiming ethnographic inspiration, he makes no reference to John Embree's classic, *Suye Mura* (University of Chicago Press, 1939), which deals with the very region and Japanese women whose oral histories he purports to tell.

Despite these shortcomings, Warren's book is rich in data on aspects of Singapore history too often neglected by other historians. We find here, too, lessons and admonitions for the social historian who attempts the difficult job of speaking for heretofore silent underclasses. Such writing requires a delicate and sophisticated approach that is not easily mastered.

SHARON CARSTENS  
*Portland State University*

*The Rising Tide of Cultural Pluralism: The Nation-State at Bay.* Edited by CRAWFORD YOUNG. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1993. xi, 305 pp.

The contributors to this impressive volume show how relevant Crawford Young's concept of "cultural pluralism" is in the study of ethnicity and nationalism across the globe. It is, therefore, a pity that his original work, *The Politics of Cultural Pluralism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), has apparently not received the attention it might deserve in the Third World. This reviewer, while researching on his *Culture and the Politics of Third World Nationalism* (New York: Routledge, 1992) in the mid-1980s, did not come across it in major Indian libraries. Nor does Young provide an outline of his idea of cultural pluralism in his long introductory essay to this volume. After a masterly survey of global instances of ethnic conflict, he concludes that his concept of cultural pluralism embraces all the existing approaches to ethnicity: "instrumentalist," "primordialist," and "constructivist" (pp. 21–22). However, in the absence of an objective argument in this volume, his notion of cultural pluralism seems to be that of a catch-all phrase and a synonym for ethnic nationalism for those who dislike the term "nationalism."

While the contributors frequently use "cultural pluralism" as a catch-all phrase in this volume, what apparently influenced them most are Benedict Anderson's concept of nation as an "imagined community" and E. J. Hobsbawm's concept of tradition as one of "creation." Such concepts make a lot of sense to scholars coming from strong individualist traditions, but to those immersed in the study of traditional yet complex societies, those concepts appear ahistorical and asociological. Members of a complex society, such as Hans, Hindus, or Arabs, may not know each other by name but they share a number of fundamental commonalities that constitute their respective societies. It is not the work of "imagination" or "invention," but a product of social unity inherent in any complex society that is activated, politicized, and mobilized for the production of nationalism by the dominant or majority ethnic group.