

# Remembering the Samsui Women

## Migration and Social Memory in Singapore and China

Kelvin E.Y. Low



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# Introduction

This book is about the Samsui women and the politics of social memory, remembering, and forgetting. Samsui women, or *hong tou jin* (红头巾), translated literally as “red head scarf,” came from peasant families in the Samsui (Sanshui) area of the coastal Chinese province of Guangdong. They immigrated to Singapore in the early twentieth century during a period of economic and natural calamities in China. Tang (1960) estimates that between 1934 and 1938, about 190,000 women migrated from China to Malaya, and Samsui women formed part of this wave. Although most of them worked in the construction industry as unskilled labourers – in the 1970s, approximately 700 Samsui female construction workers were still employed in Singapore (Boey 1975) – others took up occupations that included domestic help, sewing, and factory and rubber plantation work. Most of them had been married off in China at a young age, ranging from twelve to fifteen years. These women, however, made the decision to seek a livelihood in Singapore and left their families behind.

The Samsui women’s migration was facilitated in part by the implementation of the Aliens Ordinance of January 1933, which was imposed on Singapore (then part of British Malaya) by the British and which resulted in many Chinese women migrating to Singapore in the 1930s.<sup>1</sup> This ordinance was preceded by the Immigration Restriction Ordinance of 1928, which, as Kok (1972) suggests, was a watershed in British immigration policy. The Immigration Restriction Ordinance was promulgated during the Great Depression. One aspect of its rationale was an attempt to improve the sex ratio in Singapore (Chu 1960). Quotas were imposed on Chinese male migrants beginning in 1930 (Loh 1989). In 1929, the last year of free migration, there were 195,613 Chinese male migrants. The number fell to 151,693 in 1930 and 49,723 in 1931. From January to September 1931, the quota imposed on male migrants was 5,238 per month, and from October to December it was 2,500 per month. Emigration from China to the Federated Malay States was halted altogether. At this point, however, no restrictions were imposed on the immigration of women and children to British Malaya (Purcell 1967).

Samsui women went through a *tsui haak* (middleman) in their native villages to procure jobs in the building and construction industry and other occupational niches overseas. These middlemen were familiar with the regions where the women wanted to go. They were people with whom the women were acquainted, and who had been introduced to them by neighbours, siblings, or relatives. One Samsui woman, for instance, paid S\$30 (approximately US\$24) to a *tsui haak* to help her make the necessary arrangements to work overseas, including the fare for her journey, food, and so on (Lim 2002).

The Samsui female labourer was easily recognized through her distinctive red headgear, black tunic, and black pants (*samfoo*), which she wore to work every day (Lim 2002). Tang (1960) mentions that before they migrated to Singapore, they would wear straw hats to protect their heads against the scorching sun as they toiled in the fields and farms of China. The headgear began to surface only when they worked at construction sites in Singapore. Measuring fourteen by eighteen inches, the red headgear is oblong in shape, protrudes slightly from the forehead, and covers a portion of the forehead, the entire head, both ears, and a substantial part of the back of the neck. It has been surmised that the first woman to wear this type of headgear was Chao Yun, the mistress of Su Tong Po in the Hakka district of China (Lim 2002). With the passage of time, it was adopted as the traditional headgear of Hakka women, who carried this tradition with them as they migrated south from China. Working alongside these Hakka women, the Samsui women began donning the red headgear at work. To the layperson, Samsui women “normally evoke the image of a woman clad in blue top and trousers and the invariable headgear.” Lim points out, however, that this account remains contested and the real reason and motivation for wearing the headgear is not known.

Over the past few decades, these women have formed the subject of a plethora of social memory texts, ranging from art, literature, and popular history books to media outlets (such as documentaries and television series) and community exhibitions. More often than not, they have been presented as paramount figures in Singapore’s built-up infrastructure and as paragons of thrift and resilience. Lauded for the work they have done, Samsui women have been inscribed in the broader memory canvas of Singapore’s historical development in its pre- and post-independence contexts. In the case of China, Samsui women have also been remembered as exemplary icons who sacrificed for their families and endured many hardships. Media reports on them also highlight their strength, frugality, and tenacity.

Social memory and historiographical texts of these women are selective and limited, however, given that attention has often been directed towards their distinct livery (with the red head scarf becoming iconic and synonymous with them) and their involvement in the construction industry. At the same time, they have been remembered as never-married female migrants who assumed the breadwinner's role in supporting their families in China. These limited characterizations neglect the women's everyday life experiences, including their marital background prior to migrating, their decisions to seek a livelihood in Singapore (as well as trips made to China after migration), or their varied roles as (adoptive) mothers and as daughters-in-law. Even if these issues are covered in passing, they require further contextualization so as to provide an appraisal of how the women's individual biographies are embedded within the larger social milieu.

This book explores how Samsui women are remembered and instrumentalized as pioneering figures in Singapore and China. It examines in greater detail the lives of these women through analytical lenses located within the fields of social memory and migration studies. Who are the Samsui women? Why did they migrate from China to Singapore? How do they reconstruct memories of their migrant experiences? How have they been remembered by different social actors and institutions? Furthermore, how are they recruited as pioneers in discourses of Singapore and of China's history, and for what reasons? What do the memory productions of these women tell us about the politics of memory making in local and transnational contexts? These inquiries are undergirded by two main theoretical queries that situate this book within the wider literature on memory scholarship: How does one evaluate categories of "social memory," "history," and "heritage" with Samsui women as a case? How can we assess the traversing of national boundaries towards analyzing social memory and migration in transnational contexts?

In its engagement with these theoretical trajectories, this study is anchored on four interconnected analytic domains. The first domain relates to both historical and historiographical analyses. An attempt is made to broaden the contours of Chinese migratory historiography in historical periods (the eighteenth to twentieth centuries) through the perspective of *histoire croisée*. This approach examines the intersections of migratory paths, colonial governance, and other local and transnational conditions. Second, in order to assess the perspectives of memory makers, I analyze the myriad ways in which Samsui women have been appropriated by different social actors. These include the state, social institutions such as schools and media agencies, individual actors such as artists, filmmakers, volunteers, and Samsui women

themselves along with their kin networks. The analyses thereby elucidate the relevance of social memory constructions and also bring to light interpretive motivations of memory makers in the employment of Samsui women's life experiences. The third domain addresses the cross-national contexts of Samsui women's memory making manifested in both Singapore and China. This domain illuminates the borrowing and malleability of social memory narratives, which I will discuss using the concept of *entangled memories*. The final domain has to do with comparing temporalities and the boundaries of memory making. Through temporal comparisons between Samsui women, their female migrant contemporaries, and present-day migrant workers, I delineate the fluid parameters of memory selectivity and the dynamics of remembering and forgetting. These comparisons provide further evaluations of memory making where socio-political dimensions that are inherent within memory processes are subsequently critiqued. Collectively, these four domains weave together an analysis of Chinese migration and social memory that sheds light on varying socio-cultural processes taking place at the global, transnational, local, and temporal levels. As a framework, these domains therefore provide an important engagement with different scales of memory making.

### **Memory, Migration, and the Nation**

Of particular interest in this study is the connection between memory and the nation, a nexus that has been identified as a central theme in various intellectual endeavours in the last two decades (Bell 2003; Olick 1998; Olick and Robbins 1998; White 1999), given the importance of both social and emotional processes deemed crucial in understanding nations. Memory making, analyzed as socio-political processes, sheds light on national and transnational instrumentalization of the past for present-day motivations in relation to a range of memory actors and memory "texts." Through the perspective of entangled histories, interrogating memory appropriation offers a reconstitution of the "nation" in terms of its migratory past and present, as well as conceptions of national identity with Samsui women as a case study.

As White (1999, 506) has argued, stories of the past, "when repeated and conventionalized," translate into "national histories" that throw light on the constructed and symbolic nature of national identities. Ultimately, uses of the past boil down to a problem of how national selves should be construed (Brubaker 1998). Similarly, Hong and Huang (2008, 1) contend that "the history that the state tells of itself, and the degree of its success in getting its citizens to embrace that history as their own, are thus central to the process



of its nation-building.” This thereby reflects on the connection between history, memory, and the nation in nation-building and in creating and maintaining a national identity (Bell 2003; Kansteiner 2002; Olick and Robbins 1998). By definition, then, memory work is inevitably political.

Anderson’s proposal (1983) on the spread of print literacy, as exemplified through his notion of “imagined communities,” is instructive in explaining how national identities are historicized in defining the nation as an imagined political entity. In this sense, the idea of the nation requires continual processes of identification through which one can then account for the construction of nationhood, not as a “collectivity” but as what Brubaker (1996, 16) calls a “practical category,” one that importunes a reconceptualization of the “reality” of nationhood. This is where social memory enters the picture as a dimension of national identity constitution (Bell 2003). Processes of national identification, including nation-building, are contingent on how memories are harnessed and instrumentalized. This can be seen in Confino’s study (1997) of the amalgamation of regional memories into a cohesive national identity in German nation-building in the nineteenth century, or in how commemorations, symbols, and a host of mnemonic sites and practices are also pertinent towards establishing and maintaining national identities. These arguments are found in the works of Hunt (1984) on material items as markers of identity, in Zerubavel’s take (1995) on how national mythologies and places structure national memory, and in the various ways that museums enact and embody ideas of the nation, as explicated by Bennett (1995) and Kavanagh (2000), among many others.

National identity, according to Kelly (1995), is also contingent on narratives. Narratives bring about a sense of belonging and assume emotional significance through processes of identification. Such processes involve an interpolation of personal narrative and national history (White 1999). In other words, White (1999, 507) suggests that personal stories are employed as “allegories [in order] to embody and emotionalize national histories.” The next issue to consider, then, would be what kinds of stories or narratives are appropriated, as well as “who is telling what stories to whom” and under what circumstances (*ibid.*)? I suggest that this is where the experiences of Samsui women come in: the many reconstructions of their past are utilized by the state, other institutions, and stakeholders towards achieving vested interests in the promotion and maintenance of a national identity. In Singapore, the idea of a national memory is usually articulated through “dominant discourses [that are] imposed from the ruling elite down to the general population through private or public means” (Low 2001, 435). Apart from analyzing how the Singaporean state employs the social memory of Samsui women to

advance national identification, I also expound on various other sources of social memory making at different levels. I show how processes of social memory making and heritage production have been undertaken in Singapore and China. This is done in order to deliberate on interpretations of the nation as a construct that is intertwined with memory and migration.

Works that articulate the connection between social memory and migration have addressed issues revolving around how migrants reconstruct their childhood memories (Zembrzycki 2007), as well as narratives on family ties (Chamberlain and Leydesdorff 2004; Hammerton 2004), experiences of dislocation (Gardner 2002; Zinn 1994), gendered memories of migration (Crespo 1994; Friedman-Kasaba 1996; Nguyen 2009; Ryan 2006), selective remembering and migratory policies (Glynn and Kleist 2012; Low 2012), and metaphors and materialities of home and belonging (Abdullah 2010; Hage 2010; Leonard 2008), among other analytical directions and substantive issues. The main impetus underlying this range of studies points to the utility and importance of memory making for comprehending migration through various levels of analysis. These comprise individual acts of agency, networks of migratory organization that facilitate transnational mobility, and state policies and other structural and socio-cultural factors that all play crucial roles in the migratory schema and the dynamics of incorporation, marginalization, and exclusion. It is within these debates that I wish to situate my analyses of how migration is remembered in relation to the Samsui women, including the politics of nationhood linked to memory-making and migratory processes. Furthermore, such memories of migration also expand on how referencing the past in order to project a sense of national continuity is accomplished in both sending and receiving countries.

### **Memory Studies: Analytical Contours**

Contemporary scholarly interest in memory may be outlined through four broad principles. First, social memory comprises remembering at both the individual and group or collective levels. While Durkheim (1995 [1912]) and Halbwachs (1992) might have obscured the individual in favour of collective consciousness and collective memory, respectively, we cannot deny that the past does hold meanings for individuals as much as it does for the collective. At the same time, it is not always easy to divorce personal memories from official histories (Sarkar 2006). It follows that attention ought to be placed on how individual and collective memories intertwine, through which the argument for how individual memory constitutes a part of social memory can then stand (Cattell and Climo 2002). One way in which to explicate this relationship is through the method of life story. I employ life stories to attempt

an integration of *oral history* and *life history*. Oral history, according to Bornat (2004, 34), “draws on memory and testimony to gain a more complete or different understanding of a past experienced both individually and collectively.” On the other hand, life history “takes the individual life and its told history with a view to understanding social processes determined by class, culture and gender, for example drawing on other sources of data, survey-based, documentary, personal, public and private to elaborate the analysis” (ibid.). By amalgamating these two forms of personal narratives, one is in a more informed position to begin locating and understanding the lives of social actors, as well as to arrive at the possibility of positioning, through an individual life, the experiences of living in different socio-cultural climates, as life stories are also a source of personal perspectives on historical events (Waterson 2007b). In a similar vein, Jedlowski (2001) suggests that life stories are not merely about individual accounts or testimonies that act as a documentary source. An individual’s membership within wider social circles unfolds through the processes of recounting and constructing one’s life story. This makes the life story a suitable example for illustrating the social dimensions of individual memory. Through a narration of one’s past that is organized around temporal references (with reference to different biographical phases that link up to social context), interpretations of one’s experiences connect with “social ties” (Jedlowski 2001, 32). Second, and connected to the first point, social memory and the processes of recollection are contingent on what Nora (1989) calls *lieux de mémoire*, to which life story may be added as part of the inventory.

By focusing on the aforementioned texts of memory, one can begin to decipher how memories are produced, represented, and disseminated through these channels of remembrance. In both literate and non-literate societies, memories appear everywhere and are intimately tied to inanimate objects, including souvenirs (Billig 1990), paintings (Jewsiewicki 1990), household items (Pink 2004), buildings (Koshar 1998), oral traditions such as songs, stories, and poetry (Tonkin 1992; Waterson 2009), and food (Abdullah 2010; Sutton 2001). This diverse range of sites or realms of memory then begs the question posed by Olick (1999): What is not a *lieux de mémoire*? While Nora’s answer to this lies within discerning commemorative vigilance or the will to remember, he also proposes that *lieux de mémoire* “thrive only because of their capacity for change, their ability to resurrect old meanings and generate new ones along with new and unforeseeable connections” (Nora 1996 [1984-92], 15). The challenge for social memory studies, therefore, is to seek a way of analyzing processes of social remembering, addressing the abundance of memory practices and avenues “in such a way that does not oppose individual

and collective memory to each other” (Olick 2007, 10). Olick suggests that by studying practices, specifically mnemonic practices, one begins to acknowledge that remembering is multiple. In relation to Olick’s admonition, I employ the perspective of entanglement – bearing in mind both different dimensions of inquiry as well as how different social memory texts interpolate – in my analyses, as explained below.

Embedded within Olick’s reminder is the relationship between remembering and forgetting, which forms the third point. As much as the discussion hitherto centres on remembering, forgetting plays a crucial role in memory studies. Carsten (1995), for instance, argues for the importance of forgetting in the process of identity construction among Malay villagers of Langkawi. By studying migration histories, she demonstrates how kinship is constructed and how the creation of shared identity in kinship is contingent on “forgetting details of the past” (Carsten 1995, 318). Through her data, which implies genealogical amnesia comprising minimal or no recollection of one’s ancestors or of other kinship ties, Carsten concludes that absent knowledge shores up the pertinence of siblingship over filiation in kinship. Such absences also throw light on how the obliteration of select memories ties in with a forward projection of connecting to place and people instead of relying on past ties.

Thus, the politics of remembering also requires taking a closer look at memories that are forgotten or deliberately omitted. Waterson and Kwok (2001, 367) pose important questions in relation to amnesia: “What exactly happens at the social level when incidences of forgetting, amnesia or oblivion occur? Do popular memories serve individuals or smaller groupings in part as a defence against being swallowed up by larger structures, with their (too often sanitized and manipulated) ‘official versions’ of the past?” Historical examples of the Holocaust and of comfort women in the context of the Second World War remind us that forgetting is hardly fortuitous. Instead, forgetting can be interpreted as a political act, as a means of rewriting history in order to support extant or new power relationships.

Two points may be derived from this brief consideration of forgetting. First, the dynamics of recollection and amnesia, taken as symbiotic instead of mutually exclusive, demonstrate the malleability and selective nature of how social memory is employed. Second, such transformations or changes made to the past alert us to the salience of memory for present purposes, a point that Nora has taken up. Thus, the duality of remembering and forgetting actually forms a part of the politics of representing the past in select ways for purposes that are required in the present. As a corollary, selective memory-making processes also bring about a situation in which memories can be

questioned, contested, or qualified, raising queries over what “truths” or claims are put forward and how they are indicative of issues pertaining to resistance and reparation.<sup>3</sup> Following these processes of inclusion and exclusion, and to widen the scope of inquiry, parts of my study will therefore not only attend to how and why Samsui women are remembered but also include what is being left out in terms of their experiences and why, and who else is made “invisible” through pioneer remembrances.

The fourth and final point concerns the state of terminological profusion that has plagued social memory studies. Terms range from collective memory (Fine and Beim 2007; Halbwachs 1992; Irwin-Zarecka 1994; Jewsiewicki 1990), social memory (Fentress and Wickham 1992), cultural memory (Assmann and Czaplicka 1995), historical memory (Giesen and Junge 2003; Kiliánová 2003), national memory (Gray 2007), local memory (Eidson 2000), and official memory (Epstein 1999; Olick 1998) to popular memory (Hancock 2001; Smith 1996), public memory (Norkunas 1993; Phillips 2004), shared memory (Ashuri 2005; Margalit 2002), custom, heritage, myth, and many more. Scholars of history and memory either utilize one of these terms, use a couple of them interchangeably (Cattell and Climo 2002), or employ one as a subset of another (Eidson 2000). Although some scholars offer analytical distinctions between these terms,<sup>4</sup> others do not make explicit the conceptual underpinnings or theoretical interests that accompany this range of terminology, as Cattell and Climo (2002) and Wood (1999) observe.

In this study, I propose that the term “social memory” is a more encompassing notion to work with to evaluate how memory occurs at the individual, group, and collective levels and how these levels come to impinge on one another. This relates to the argument that Fentress and Wickham (1992) offered in response to the term “collective memory” put forward by Halbwachs. They point out that when one employs the concept of collective consciousness, memories of the individual appear to be either omitted or rendered “a sort of automaton” that obeys the collective. By harnessing the concept of “social memory,” then, Fentress and Wickham are interested in locating the social aspects of memory – in other words, to comprehend memory as a social fact in the Durkheimian sense – ranging from its being spontaneous and private to the other end of the spectrum, which includes more formalized public ceremonies or commemorations. Through this continuum, the authors suggest that one needs to investigate different aspects of social memory, including memory as an act and as representation, the different styles and genres of remembering, and how particular contexts of recollection bring about particular meanings for a group (Fentress and Wickham

1992). These two strands therefore indicate that our memories have both personal and social aspects (Cubitt 2007; Fentress and Wickham 1992).

In relation to this book, the first strand will be explored in terms of how remembering takes place, as well as the purpose of remembering, with regard to Samsui women. In the second strand, which extends the first, I analyze the varied texts of social memory and historiographies based on the women, and convey the nuances of recollections that I thematize and critique accordingly. In extending the notion of “social memory,” I also employ related terms comprising official “state memory,” “popular memory,” and “ground memory” (defined both empirically and conceptually in Chapters 2 and 3) in order to appraise the different sources of data. I now move on to yet another semantic quandary by deliberating on the relationship between “history” and “memory.”

### **“History” and “Memory”**

More often than not, “history” is defined in opposition to its counterpart, “memory,” where the history/memory relationship is fraught with tension and ambiguity (Aymard 2004; Sturken 1997). Halbwachs (1992), for instance, draws a distinction between history and collective memory by arguing that whereas the former is to be understood as an objective and universalizing narrative that demarcates the past from the present quite clearly, the latter points towards subjectivity and continuities of consciousness that connect the past and the present. In other words, history implies “an intellectual system premised on discontinuity,” whereas memory persists as long as a group sustains it (Cubitt 2007, 43). Similarly, Nora is another proponent of the dichotomy between history and memory. In tandem with Halbwachs, history Nora sees (1989, 8) as a “representation of the past,” while memory is susceptible to the “dialectic of remembering and forgetting” and serves as a “bond [that ties] us to the eternal present.”

Nora (1989, 9) elaborates further on the multiplicity and concreteness of memory as opposed to history:

There are as many memories as there are groups, that memory is by nature multiple and yet specific; collective, plural, and yet individual. History, on the other hand, belongs to everyone and to no one, whence its claim to universal authority. Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects; history binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things. Memory is absolute, while history can only conceive the relative.

For both Halbwachs and Nora, then, memory is to be perceived as a “distorted version of history” (Miszta 2003, 104).<sup>5</sup> Further differentiation between these two terms is located in an understanding of memory as knowledge about past experiences of ordinary people. This stands in contrast to history, which is regarded as a product of power, “written from the perspectives of cultural elites, colonists, and other members of the ruling classes” (Yoneyama 1999, 27). By distinguishing them as such, scholars such as Yoneyama (1999) and Cubitt (2007) contend that memory texts are subjective and hence subordinated to history and its objectivity and verifiability. The distancing that history provides, or so it seems, thus accords it more impartiality and superiority compared with memory.<sup>6</sup> One major factor that explains why schisms are made of these two notions lies within the two poles of objectivity and subjectivity, as Cubitt (2007) has identified. Although history claims objectivity, Burke (1989) is right to point out that both memory and history can no longer claim to be objective, as interpretation, distortion, and selection may be found in both (Carr 1961; Miszta 2003). The claims to universalism in history may also be contested by the existence of different histories that stem from different viewpoints (Aymard 2004; Le Goff 1992). As an extension, Aymard (2004) proposes that memory does contest “official” versions of history by questioning a “dominant” viewpoint that seems to be “neutral” or “objective.”

While some scholars have worked at emphasizing the divide between history and memory (Bentley 1999; Collingwood 1948; Lowenthal 1985; Spiegel 2002), others have attempted to conceptualize them as imbricative notions (Hamilton 1994; Hutton 1993; Zamponi 2003). The general sentiment arising from the latter camp demonstrates that it is, in practice, not possible to work with clearly demarcated boundaries or to arrive at a “neat conceptual resolution” (Cubitt 2007, 20) for these two homologous notions as they are employed and reproduced in society (Sturken 1997; Wertsch 2002). Both memory and history are forms of knowledge. The history/memory relationship is clearly defined by Cubitt (2007, 30): “Where the discourse of history poses the question of how the present can achieve knowledge of a past from which it is separated, the discourse of memory posits a more intimate or continuous connection between past experience and present consciousness.” The key point to take away from Cubitt’s proposal is that of *intimacy*.<sup>7</sup> I suggest that memory is more personal and intimate, given the consciousness of acts of remembering one’s experiences in light of a history of the past. This transpires through personal recollections such as narratives. It follows that whereas history is a field of knowledge about the past, memory goes a step further by connecting the past to the present through both personal and collective acts



of remembering (Smith 2006).<sup>8</sup> Following Cubitt (2007), I employ the term “memory” throughout this book to refer to both practices and processes that produce and invoke the past at various social levels. Zamponi (2003, 51) states that “failure to recognize the affinity between history and memory leads to naturalizing the process of remembrance and to discounting, in the permeability of memory, the diverse interventions that determine whose concerns come to be represented each time.” Therefore, one ought to examine further the links between these two notions, and place more emphasis on the processes of remembering and engaging with the past through social constructions than on demarcating history and memory too readily and without conceptual utility. This is because both constitute narrativizations of past experiences that inform our comprehension of the shaping of identities and the past at both individual and collective levels. Instead of polarizing the two notions where “it is not a matter of a simple opposition” (Megill 1998, 38), it would be conceptually more profitable to critique boundary making of these two terms by considering the points of overlap and how they operate in particular social contexts.

With reference to my data, I propose that processes of borrowing between history and memory, and at different levels, furnish each camp with materials that may be recorded and represented – that is, when social memory media become more and more formulaic in their representation of Samsui women (based on the themes that I will identify later), memory can be perceived as history, a history of Samsui women. This is of course subject to who or which institutions disseminate memory as history, which points to the need for authority before memory translates as history. Yoneyama’s argument (1999) concerning power relations in social memory making is therefore to be pursued substantially in studies of social memory and history. On another level, borrowings between different spheres of memory (which I address in Chapter 3) also attest to a comprehension of social memory not as an end product in itself but as a process or sets of processes (Cubitt 2007) towards revisiting and reproducing history. These concerns illustrate how any distinction between history and memory becomes arbitrary and conceptually futile. The objective, then, is not so much to advance either a dichotomy or a convenient merger of these two terms. Instead, one needs to pay careful attention to the dialogical meanings that have been invested in them, as well as to how they have been deployed in structuring our knowledge of the past in entangled ways, for memory renders history meaningful.

The wider significance of this study lies in my employment of *entangled histories* or *Verflechtungsgeschichte* (Kocka 2003a; Werner and Zimmermann



2006) as a perspective for assessing the interpolation of socio-historical vicissitudes beyond historiographical particularism. The evaluation of social memory and historiography pertaining to migrant groups such as the Samsui women requires a rethinking of history and memory not only in terms of national or regional frameworks. Instead, evaluations through an entangled scale that considers the confluence of local, regional, and global dimensions that bear out how and why Samsui women have migrated to Singapore should be attempted. This would include how they have been remembered both in their country of settlement and in their country of origin. In other words, the frame of reference employed in explicating how the women are memorialized departs from state-centric approaches or analyses rooted in the principles of methodological nationalism. Alternatively, I consider their historiography in broader terms that accord a multi-angled perspective to the analysis of their life experiences. These experiences are further contextualized within global and regional events and political changes occurring between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries.

Entangled histories as a perspective stresses processes of intercrossings and intersections.<sup>9</sup> While the comparative method focuses on synchrony and largely concerns itself with similarities and differences between nations or other units of comparison (Cohen and O'Connor 2004; Kocka 2003a), transfer studies emphasize a diachronic logic. Scholars have identified some methodological problems of the comparative perspective. For example, the focus on similarities and differences between two or more cases presupposes that these cases are regarded as independent units and can therefore be separated for analysis. By treating the cases as independent units, comparativists do not sufficiently address historical continuities, nor do they consider entanglements (Kocka 2003a). Consequently, comparative history has been charged with reproducing “static conceptions of nation” through emphases on national differences (Cohen and O'Connor 2004, xiv).

Transfer studies, in departing from static units of analysis found in comparative studies, focus instead on “processes of transformation” (Werner and Zimmermann 2006, 36). Examples of transfer studies or *Transfergeschichte* include analyses of how knowledge has travelled across national boundaries, such as through the French and German educational systems and their reciprocal influences (Cohen and O'Connor 2004), and transfers of ideas and strategies across national borders in the women's movement in European history (Jonsson and Neunsinger 2007). By looking into the interrelationships between two entities – be they nations, regions, towns, or institutions – transfer history “aims to relativize the meaning of the nation-state” (Haupt

and Kocka 2004, 32), thereby de-emphasizing the significance of the nation featured by comparativists.

The transfer studies approach is not without weaknesses, however. One problem identified by Werner and Zimmermann (2006, 36) relates to “frames of reference,” such as transfers between two national units. They argue that “a transfer implies a fixed frame of reference including points of departure and arrival” (ibid.). Contained within this direction is an assumption of linear processes that neglect “movements between various points in at least two and sometimes several directions” (37). Consequently, overlaps or criss-crosses of various types of interrelationships are not comprehensively addressed. These are configurations that require moving away from linear progressions towards explaining the multidirectional processes that take place, for example, in the context of migration within Chinese history and socio-political governance.

*Histoire croisée* conjoins the above two approaches in renewing the frameworks of analysis that would be more comprehensive and robust in engaging with historical change and continuity (Jonsson and Neunsinger 2007; Werner and Zimmermann 2006). Central to the entangled histories perspective is the principle of intersection (Werner and Zimmermann 2006). By considering this axiom, the perspective departs from mono-dimensional viewpoints and instead utilizes a multidimensional approach that “acknowledge[s] plurality and the complex configurations that result from it” (Werner and Zimmermann 2006, 38). By employing the concept of entangled histories, I extend my deliberations through the notion of *entangled memories*. Conrad (2003b, 86) uses the term “entangled memories” to suggest that memory production not only rests on “an attempt to connect to the individual or collective past, but also [focuses on] the effect of a multitude of complex impulses in the present.” In his endeavour then, Conrad advocates moving beyond “consensual interpretations of the past” through the notion of a “shared history” (ibid.), and instead chooses to focus on *entanglement*, which would therefore help to unseat dominant narratives and add different ways of interpreting the past. Where entangled histories aid in overcoming historiographical particularism by transcending the national paradigm or methodological nationalism (Chernilo 2007) in deliberating on historical and historiographical processes, entangled memories further develop the argument by focusing on localized entanglements, paying attention to the multiple narratives and frames of remembrance of the Samsui women. In combination, the perspectives of entangled histories and entangled memories engender a decentering of monolithic historical narratives by adding on to a pluralization of the past. Such pluralization is achieved vis-à-vis the articulation of several vantage points.

### Studying the Samsui Women

In order to seek an appraisal of historiography in the case of Singapore, as well as to reconsider the everyday life experiences of migrants such as the Samsui women, this study locates the multiple experiences and encounters of these women through reconstruction of their life stories. This is complemented by other methods, including participant observation (among volunteer groups who are in contact with the women), events-based analyses, and a critique of social “texts” comprising media reports, artistic works, archival materials, ministerial speeches, and anecdotal sources. A multi-perspective stance is adopted in connection with grounded theory building (Strauss 1987) in order to present and analyze different discourses on how the Samsui women are remembered. This is done by paying attention to variegated strands of social memory production. The interest lies not merely in analyzing how they are being remembered through the various media of social memory sites or texts. Instead, the ways in which the women have led their lives is also addressed in greater detail by deliberating on narratives of their own as women who have left their country of origin to seek a livelihood in Singapore.

Research was conducted between 2006 and 2010.<sup>10</sup> I approached this study by taking up the position of a volunteer with elderly residents of a housing estate located in the central part of Singapore. As I have discussed in detail elsewhere (Low 2010), my entry into the field necessitated the starting position of a volunteer, given the (at times) unwelcome popular and state attention paid to these women over the past few decades (see, for example, Ho Lee Ling 2006; Lowe-Ismail 1998). I also attempted to avoid what is commonly known as “interviewee fatigue,” and to eschew “hit-and-run” (Reinharz 1983, 1992; Vincent and Warren 2001) or “grab-and-run” research (Stevens 2001, 72) in favour of getting to know the women personally instead of appropriating them as merely “memory subjects/objects,” as transient researchers or interested individuals such as reporters have done.

My volunteer visits took place on a weekly basis over a period of eleven months between 2006 and 2007. Some Samsui women formed part of this elderly group, and I was introduced to them by one of the volunteers. My research interest in their experiences was made known to them as well as the other volunteers right from the beginning. Volunteers were involved in distributing rations, going through a simple set of upper-body exercises, and keeping the elderly updated on any events reported in the news. These included issues pertaining to pensions and retirement funds as well as other matters related to the health and safety of the elderly in general.

I was also introduced to other Samsui women (beyond the volunteer network) through the help of individuals such as local artists and Samsui kin. A

local artist, for instance, put me in touch with Samsui women who were residing in an old folks' home. Similar to volunteer work, I visited them on a regular basis and learned about their past and current experiences through narrative interviews and informal conversations. Apart from volunteer work, fieldwork for this study was supplemented by archival research conducted at the National Archives of Singapore (NAS) and the Hong Kong Oral History Archives (HKOHA) at the University of Hong Kong, where I scrutinized materials such as oral history records in audio and microfiche forms, newspaper reports, and other related documents.<sup>11</sup> Media reports dating from the 1930s to the present from both English and Mandarin local dailies circulated in Singapore were retrieved from the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library, National Library Board, Singapore.<sup>12</sup>

Documentaries, art works, events, and various other related sources on the Samsui women were also analyzed. I share a common epistemological stance with Flick and colleagues (2004) that qualitative data – which may include interview transcripts, documentaries, photographs, artwork, events, and reports – are to be regarded as *texts* that have to be interpreted in qualitative research.<sup>13</sup> From a very small group of surviving Samsui women in Singapore, nine were contacted together with seven Samsui kin. I carried out both continual interviews and informal chats with these respondents over the span of a year. In addition, oral histories of Samsui women were procured from the NAS, together with thirty-one other oral histories, including those of other Chinese migrants and residents of Chinatown.<sup>14</sup> The remaining pool of respondents consisted of individuals such as artists whose works were based on Samsui women, volunteers who had had experiences working alongside Samsui women, schoolteachers, local popular history writers, museum staff, and many others. A total of eighty-two respondents contributed to this study. Depending on the preferences of individual informants, I conducted the interviews in English, Mandarin, or Cantonese. Mandarin and Cantonese interviews were then translated into English.<sup>15</sup>

### **Directions**

Memory making, analyzed as socio-political processes, sheds light on national and transnational instrumentalization of the past for vested interests in the present-day context in relation to a range of memory actors and memory “texts.” Through the perspective of entanglement, interrogating memory appropriation offers a reconstitution of the “nation” in terms of its migratory past and present, as well as conceptions of national identity in trans-historiographical contexts, with Samsui women as a case study. In order to expound on this argument, this book is structured as follows.

Chapter 1 provides an overarching context of migration in select historical time frames, with the aim of illuminating how migration flows have occurred in the past few centuries. These migratory trajectories are analyzed using the perspective of entangled histories. I discuss how migration involves not only flows between the country of origin and the destination country but also a plethora of social events and processes occurring vis-à-vis local, regional, and international dimensions that impinge on these migratory dynamics and therefore warrant closer inspection. I deliver a broad overview of Chinese migration through which Chinese contacts with Western powers and Southeast Asia elucidate the interlacement of varying factors that in turn influenced different flows of Chinese emigration. This is followed by an exposition of the entanglement of female migration with broader socio-structural processes that took place between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, with specific attention paid to Samsui women and other categories of Chinese female emigrants. The core of the chapter then deals with the entangled histories perspective through my evaluation of three historical intersections: (1) British expansionism and Chinese immigration; (2) migratory legislation that not only brought about Chinese female migration but also gave rise to issues concerning anti-Chinese discrimination intermingled with other demographic and political issues; and (3) the links between the decline of the silk industry in China, anti-marriage practices, and the resultant influence on the historiographies of the Samsui women.

Chapters 2 to 6, where primary and secondary data are examined, form the empirical core of this study. Chapter 2 addresses the ways through which Singapore as a young nation-state harnesses memory and history as instruments geared towards the production of heritage of and for the nation. Apart from providing a synoptic insight into how Singapore has consistently generated heritage projects through schools, community activities, and other avenues of heritage dissemination in the last few decades, I raise examples of how the Samsui women are routinely highlighted – albeit in fragments – in conjunction with the landscape of heritage attention and production. Such inchoate attention cast on the women is analyzed using four identity categories – “Chinese migrant women,” “pioneers,” “feminists,” and “elderly women” – so as to systematically critique the social memory production of Samsui women, including the lacunae that can be addressed.

In Chapter 3, I deliberate on entangled memories as an extension of the entangled histories approach by employing examples drawn from popular memory media. My assessment of this sphere of memory advances a proposal for comprehending popular memory as comprising thematic elements borrowed from both state and ground memories. The discussion in the first part

of the chapter illustrates not only different media of remembrance but that affective and emotive aspects of remembering operate mainly through popular and ground memory. The second part of the chapter evaluates entangled memories beyond the context of Singapore by looking at how the Samsui women are memorialized in China. Drawing on media reports from China, including my summary of the activities that were organized by the Samsui Association (Singapore), I contend that the manner in which the Samsui women are remembered in both Singapore and China is similar. This argument is substantiated through the use of three motifs – pioneerhood, issues of longevity, and the women residing in elderly homes in China – in deliberating on historiographical portraits of the Samsui women constructed in these two countries.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I present personal narratives drawn from six sources (including those of my own Samsui women respondents, their kin, oral histories, and other media sources) that elucidate the everyday life experiences of Samsui women and other respondents. Chapter 4 is organized in a chronological manner, tracing different phases of the women's lives from the time they exited China to work in Singapore. The chapter acts in dialogue with Chapter 2, which also follows a linear mode of remembrance by analyzing more closely the varied life experiences of Samsui women at different points. These life stories provide valuable insights into individual subjectivities that are both more diverse than and considerably different from official state versions of the same lives. In Chapter 5, I thematize the spectrum of personal narratives in order to identify conceptual issues in relation to memory discourses and the shaping of identity. The chapter discusses in greater detail the kin networks and conjugal relations of the Samsui women. This is followed in Chapter 6 by an extension of earlier discussions comparing them with other migrant workers. The comparison focuses on why the Samsui women are remembered more prominently than others, such as the *ma cheh* (Cantonese female domestic workers from other parts of South China) and present-day foreign construction workers. I postulate a range of possible reasons for differences in the extent to which these various categories of migrant workers are venerated or otherwise, in relation to both inclusionary and exclusionary approaches to remembering. This is useful in questioning boundary-making processes and in critiquing social memory constructions. In other words, who are recruited as candidates for memory and heritage discourses, and, conversely, who are left out or “forgotten” in the process, and for what reasons?

To conclude this book, I reiterate the conceptual and substantive issues presented, and provide a broader engagement with notions of memory,

history, and knowledge production. I expand on my critique of social memory, history, and historiography by appraising the connections between these notions with the politics of knowledge production and dissemination. The case of the Samsui women is employed to prompt further deliberations in the fields of social memory and sociology of knowledge. Broadly, this book explores the various interpellations of history, memory, historiography, and heritage within processes of knowledge production and the politics of remembering. Who are the ones involved in memory-making processes? What vested interests or socio-political agenda might they pursue in appropriating the past? Further reflections on the spheres of memory, history, and historiography are then presented in considering (1) the locus of popular memory that intersects with both state and personal memory making; (2) the overlapping of memory with heritage and merchandization; (3) the notion of entangled memories within transnational reconstructions of the past; and (4) inclusionary and exclusionary dynamics of memory-making processes vis-à-vis other migrant categories. Overall, these avenues of interrogation form the basis on which reconstructions of the “nation” can be further evaluated in two ways. First, how can the nation be historiographically reproduced to reflect boundary intercrossings within the context of Chinese migration in history? Second, how do the different instrumentalizations of migratory histories and memories engender further conceptions of the nation and national identity with regard to representations of the past in contemporaneous contexts? Building on these broader inquiries, this book attends to renewed conceptions of how to analyze migrant trajectories and memories through the perspective of entanglement, and how to assess the different spheres and motivations of memory reconstruction in relation to national and transnational dynamics.