

# EAST ASIA INSTITUTE LECTURE SERIES

October 5, 2009

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Living quarters of the Samsui Women



Samsui women statues made of pink marble

Photos: courtesy Andria Crosson

## The Samsui Women of Singapore

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On September 29, 2009, Professor Andria Crosson, of UTSA's department of History, presented a lecture over the Samsui women of Singapore.

The Samsui women were a group of women sojourners who migrated to Singapore for jobs that would allow them to support their families back home. They are known for their frugality, their work ethic, and their distinctive red cloth hats. The women left because of the political battles that ensued after the fall of the Chinese dynasty. The women chose Singapore for its proximity and its established colonial government run by Great Britain. Because the women paid their own ways to Singapore (a rarity in those days) they were able to immediately start seeking out jobs and shelter.

The Samsui women would usually find shelter in a shop house, where they were given small, windowless cubicles that would have to suffice for four women. During the night the women would sleep in hammocks. Although the living conditions were poor, the women were

known for being extremely clean. To find work the women would congregated in groups right outside their building in an area called the "five foot way". There the contractors would seek out workers to negotiate jobs and wages. Often the women were given transportation money, but would walk to the work site instead and pocket the difference. Most of the jobs in Singapore were very labor intensive, mainly in construction. The Samsui women were known as unskilled workers and were paid smaller wages than their male counterparts, despite often being much more productive and precise with their work. The Samsui women were known to have the ability to exactly measure the correct amount of concrete needed, never wasting the materials that they were given. In moving the concrete they were also known to pour the concrete into bags held on a pole and carry them on their back while climbing thin wooden planks up to three stories high. Every day for their lunch the women brought rice that they had either purchased the day before or had collected from the ground after it had fallen from

shipping crates. They would spend the rest of their working day collecting fallen rice in the ship yards or procuring work for the next day. Once work had been found, the women would save on oil needed to light their rooms by congregating in the five foot way to talk and pass the time. They would also use that time to speak with scribes that could help them send news home to their families, or address packages meant for back home.

During the 1970's Singapore became industrialized and the Samsui women were forced into an early retirement. The women were moved from the Chinatown area and given flats not far from Chinatown to live in. They are now considered national icons of Singapore, although their life stories have been greatly romanticized and streamlined.



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