



Karayuki-san

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From the 1860s, as Japan surfaced from 200 years of self-isolation and closed borders, successive waves of young men were sent to the West to be educated before returning to assume elite political and technocratic positions at the dawn of the Meiji era.

Contemporaneously, another figure of mobility and modernity was also coming into being – the *karayuki-san* ('Ms. Gone Abroad'). Young Japanese women primarily from poverty-stricken Amakusa and Shimabara were trafficked as sex workers to many parts of Asia. Initially acknowledging the economic contributions of this diasporic 'female army', Japan's growing international reputation by the 1920s precipitated a disavowal of the *karayuki-san*.

Most were repatriated to Japan but the remains of *karayuki-san* who chose not to return can be found in cemeteries across Southeast Asia, and it has been suggested by some researchers that most of their graves are often positioned facing away from Japan. The *karayuki-san* is a precursor of the modern foreign worker and the vulnerable, exploited underclass who 'go abroad' in uncertainty – a figure who also reappears as the migrant, the displaced, the refugee, and the undocumented.



Karayuki-san in Singapore, circa 1900s.

Source: <https://www.nst.com.my/lifestyle/sunday-vibes/2017/12/315387/ladies-night>



Graves thought to belong to *karayuki-san*, Singapore.

Source: <https://thelongwindingroad.wordpress.com/2012/12/18/voices-from-a-forgotten-past/>



Japanese cemetery in Penang, where most of the graves belong to *karayuki-san*.

Source: https://gogo-kyorochan.official.jp/volume_005/0541_penang-jpn-cemetery/index-english.html

Related Links

Books, Videos & Websites

1. Website on *karayuki-san*, with bibliography of related books and films.
<https://karayuki-san.wixsite.com/karayuki-san>
2. Nishio Kaori, *Why I am here, why she is there – Journeys around Karayuki-san* (2018) lecture performance. <https://youtu.be/00yC222tDI0>
3. James F. Warren, *Ah Ku and Karayuki-san: Prostitution in Singapore 1870-1940* (2003). <https://nuspress.nus.edu.sg/products/ah-ku-and-karayuki-san>
4. Yamazaki Tomoko, *Sandakan Brothel No.8: Journey into the History of Lower-class Japanese Women* (1999).
<https://www.routledge.com/Sandakan-Brothel-No8-Journey-into-the-History-of-Lower-class-Japanese/Yamazaki-Colligan-Taylor-Colligan-Taylor/p/book/9780765603548>
5. Kumai Kei, trailer for *Sandakan No. 8* (1974).
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oG1PLEFu0vY>

6. Imamura Shohei, *Karayuki-san, the Making of a Prostitute* (1973) documentary.
<https://www.idfa.nl/en/film/7ec9fb30-d26b-48ce-b7f6-29d507f94863/the-making-of-a-prostitute>
7. Homma Mei, *My note about Maiko's country -Catatanku tentang negeri Maiko-* (2016).
<https://en.meihomma.com/my-note-about-maiko-s-country>
8. Nipan Oranniwesna interview about *Hope Brings Us Here* (2013).
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68UjhbWsPZU>
9. Nuraini Juliastuti (KUNCI Study Forum and Collective), "Indonesian Migrant Workers' Writings as a Performance of Self-Care and Embodied Archives", essay.
<https://parsejournal.com/article/indonesian-migrant-workers-writings-as-a-performance-of-self-care-and-embodied-archives/>
10. Para Site & KUNCI Study Forum and Collective, *Afterwork Readings* (2016).
An anthology of migrant and domestic worker literature, containing short stories, poems, and excerpts from novels and plays, written by classical literary figures of the region, established contemporary authors, as well as domestic workers themselves.
<https://www.para-site.art/publications/afterwork-readings/>
11. Chen Chih-jen, *Empire's Borders I* (2008-2009). <https://vimeo.com/149784421>
12. Tuan Andrew Nguyen, trailer for *The Boat People* (2020).
<https://vimeo.com/402251635>
13. Lucy Davis, trailer for *Migrant Ecologies Project: Jalan Jati (Teak Road) 23* (2012).
<https://vimeo.com/149145689>
14. Minamishimabara City Kuchinotsu Historical Folklore Museum
Kuchinotsu was a major port from which many *Karayuki-sans* went abroad. Most of them was done as secret passages on colliers. This museum shows history around Kuchinotsu port with coal industry.
<https://www.city.minamishimabara.lg.jp/page1594.html>
15. Benten Mt. Taishi Hall Tennyo Tower Tennyo Tower was built by a monk, HIROTA Gensho for the repose of *Karayuki-san*. Gensho walked around Southeast Asia and visited the places *Karayuki-san* died, then collected donation.
<https://www.city.shimabara.lg.jp/page2919.html>
16. A Lullaby of Shimabara This song describes the scene around Kuchinotsu port and *Karayuki-san*. <https://www.city.shimabara.lg.jp/page944.html>
17. Inasa Oei Oei is a *Karayuki-san* who was born in Kumamoto, went to Russia and came back to Japan after ten years. She succeeded in running a restaurant and hotels in Nagasaki. [https://nagasaki.jp/publics/index/321/#googtrans\(jalzh-CN\)](https://nagasaki.jp/publics/index/321/#googtrans(jalzh-CN)) &
<https://kumamoto.guide/look/terakoya/087.html>