Broken Birds
An Epic Longing
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An Epic Longing

Conceived and directed by
Ong Keng Sen

Text by
Robin Loon and Ong Keng Sen

Music composed by
John Sharpley

Libretto by
Robin Loon

Movement and Choreography by
Lim Fei Shen

Video by
Johnson Choo

Inspired by
"Ah Ku and the Karayuki-san: Prostitution in Singapore 1870-1940"
by Dr James Francis Warren

A TheatreWorks Production
March 1 - 18 1995
Fort Canning Green
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<td>Tay Tong</td>
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<td>Jose Enrique Soriano of Alaya Photos</td>
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<td>Juliana Yeh</td>
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Performers
(in alphabetical order)

Jeremiah Choy
Norayesah Ismail
K Rajagopal
Koh Joo Kim
Janice Koh
Wendy Kweh
Casey Lim
Lim Fei Shen
Lim How Ngean
Lim Kay Tong
Sharon Lim
Lim Yu-Beng
Loong Seng Onn
Rosita Ng
Pamela Oei
Karen Tan
Tan Kheng Hua
Tang Fu Kuen
Wong Kwang Han
Sheila Wyatt

Singers
Gani
Hawk Liu

Musicians
John Sharpley
Tan Peng Tow
Dominic Wan

Video Performers
Lok Meng Chue
Claire Wong

Four months of pursuing the karayuki-san in New York. A totally incongruous location. A race against time - no, I need this before I leave New York on Jan 2nd. Courier it, fax it - I need it.

Often, I felt the loneliness and excitement of an investigative journalist. No, not fictitious accounts but I want their voices, real oral interviews (whatever that means!). Scuttling between Japanese academics who gave freely of their time and my translator who worked through Christmas Eve and spent New Year's Eve simultaneously translating an entire Japanese book to me ... Remapping the journey the karayukis took to our country, I felt the responsibility that no Singaporean had traced this journey extensively before. Long distance conversations with Robin, John and Tay Tong. Panic stricken messages on phone machines. Obsession. Desperation.

Was I a karayuki in my past life perhaps?!

Ultimately, this performance reflects the present's guilt with respect to the past. Am I exploiting the karayukis, in simply wanting to talk about them? A guilt which is irrational as we were not there in the past. We are not responsible. But perhaps, if we listened to history more, events would not be repeated in time - the genocide in Cambodia; Bosnia would not carry with it echoes of the Jewish extermination. The collective memories and tears of humanity ..."

Ong Keng Sen
February 1995

Fulbright scholar, Singapore Young Artist 1993, recipient of British Council and USIS fellowships. Keng Sen is recognised for his Singaporean and Asian theatre work in Singapore, South East Asia, Japan and the United States. Since 1992, he has taught theatre in the NUS, struggling to maintain a balance between sharing and creating. Last year, he was awarded a grant by the Asian Cultural Council based in New York for his achievements in Singaporean theatre.

Next month, Keng Sen makes his directorial debut at the prestigious Public Theatre in New York City.

"In many ways Broken Birds is about us with strong Faustian implications, Broken Birds dives into the ultimate commodity .....ourselves.

So what is the connection of body, mind and soul? Does one exist without the other? Is the desecration of one instantly a rape of the whole? ...are we all not part of the whole? Is there healing? Healing of what and of whom?

Broken Birds is ritual; cathartic and purging, disturbing, yet soulfully restoring. This is my message."

John Sharpley
February 1995

John Sharpley gave his first public performance at the age of four. In Singapore he is known for his many collaborations with such groups like the Singapore Youth Orchestra, the Singapore Youth Orchestra, the Singapore Dance Theatre, the Singapore Guitar Quartet and the National University of Singapore. This is his first collaboration with TheatreWorks.
"I am constantly amazed at how fragile our reality is - how it disintegrates as we uncover events in our past that were hitherto hidden from us. This is my greatest realisation in Broken Birds. But the task now is not to lament the atrocities of history but to rebuild ourselves with this knowledge of the past. Being a student of literature and history, I found great satisfaction in merging the two seemingly disparate disciplines into one form - fact and fiction fusing into theatre. Scripting for Broken Birds has been both inspiring and painful; inspiring because I am once again reminded of the tenacity of the human spirit in the face of adversity; painful because I realised that I am ultimately detached from the Karayuki-sans even though they are part of my history. I am thankful for the chance to excavate and reconstruct a moment sunk in time; and being a participant in the magic of what is theatre."

Robin Loon
February 1995

Robin Loon is a 27-year-old post graduate student at the National University of Singapore. His past works for TheatreWorks include Absence Makes The Heart Grow Fonder (1992) and Watching The Clouds Go By (1994)

"How many ways can the body be moved, be shaped, so as to speak the desired effect? Body parts cannot be separated any more than we can separate time from the space or energy of a dancing figure.

My contribution to Broken Birds is the extensive body knowledge and the process of transforming choreography into a comprehensive theatre movement. I seek innovative interaction between theatre and dance. This is a new journey."

Lim Fei Shen
February 1995

Lim Fei Shen is a dancer/choreographer/movement director. She was awarded the prestigious Cultural Medallion in Dance in 1998. This is her first collaboration with TheatreWorks.
Prologue

Kamome, Kamome (Seagull, seagull)
Tobashite, Kamome (Seagull, soar)
Namini sagashite (In the waves, searching)
Furusato no kareimichi (The path home)
U ... u ... u ... shiroi Tsubasa (u ... wings of white)
Yoru no naka no mayoi dori (A bird lost in the night)
Karayuki no Kamome (Seagull, towards China)
Kaeranai no Kamome (Never to return, seagull)

Illustrations by Geraldine Lau and Dahlia Osman
Part 1 - The Auction

It all began as a hope, a wish
A desire
A need for a better life, a better tomorrow
For the family, for the country
To seek work, to find a way out
South, south — everyone said
Leave your home and go south
With this money, you can
Pay all your debts and
Become decent citizens
With this money, you can
Give to your country

This is all for the Emperor, the Emperor, they thought

Promises that led them into the darkened pits of steamers
Packed among coals and cargo for weeks
Living on a crust of bread a day
Never seeing the daylight
Never seeing each other
Then they arrived

Colliers gurgling in the dead of the night
Docking into a distant shore
The rancid odour of coal and sweat
Brimming in the rising heat
It was not Amakusa
It was not Shimabara
Singapore, can this be
The land where
Children used pearls and corals as
Toys on the beaches of
Singapore
But it is cold, rank, damp
Winds piercing through their hollow faces
They cannot believe it
But this is not the truth

By and by the girls disappear
Where are you going
Where are you going
With the money, you can
Pay all your debts and
Become decent citizens
With this money, you can
Give to your country
This is all for the Emperor
The Emperor

Such newness, such a change
Glittering neon signs
White rice three times a day
Enough water
She was only 8 years old
She was only 8 years old
They will never see their hometown, their family
It is cold, rank, damp
Winds piercing through their hollow faces
Can this be
Singapore

Colliers gurgling in the break of dawn
Sailing into the distant sea
The rancid odour of coal and sweat
Drying in the mist of the morning sun
With the money, you can
Pay all your debts and
Become decent citizens
With this money, you can
Give to your country
This is all for the Emperor
The Emperor
Imagine if you will
Far away in time, Singapore
A place where these women's voices do not
Reach beyond the walls
Prisoners - kept from the light of day
From the world
Suteretsu - where the Karayuki-sans lived
They were flowers locked within the
Walls
Sisters, young and old floating
along doorways and corridors
Spy if you will with your eyes
In the late morning sun
Karayuki-sans rising from their rooms
Weathered faces, pale and ashen
Hair matted, uncombed, flowing
From the shoulders in a strange way
Never seen by their customers

Feet dragging the grounds as they enter
The bath halls - pouring water from head to toe
Warmth of their skin percolating
Water as it trickles down their
Soft bodies
Pasty thighs rippling from the cold
Waxen lips spitting out water
Drying themselves
Slipping on their kimonos carelessly
Looking coarse with their breast exposed

Some sitting either just inside
The latticed doors of the brothel
Or just on long
cane chairs under the verandah
Leaning, smoking, sleeping
A few in brightly decorated kimonos
Staring as they await their day
Customers
Passers-by who stare
Under the sun, they have too much
Rouge, too much
Powder, too little
Life.
Still as porcelain dolls
Fragile and glowing
Beauty and Mystery

Gaze if you will, with a camera's eye
Into their stares
Sometime noble
Frequently withdrawn but
Sadly forlorn
Sisters, young and old floating
along doorways and corridors
Spy if you will with your eyes
In the late morning sun
Karayuki-sans rising from their rooms
Weathered faces, pale and ashen
Hair matted, uncombed, flowing
From the shoulders in a strange way
Karayuki-sans, rising from their rooms,
Karayuki-sans.
Part 3 - The Carnival

Bouncing coloured lanterns under
Brothel verandahs
The shamisen resonating
Marisini, Monsieur
Swung open and inviting
The louvered doors of Malay Street
Clamouring ladies ready to
Satisfy your every fantasy
Satisfy your every fantasy
Ready to satisfy
Your every
Desire
Desire
Desire
Desire
Desire
The lovely creatures lie there
in rooms of carnal comforts
like bales of silk

Make them
Touch you
Feel you
Soothe you
Make them beg you
Make them need you

Roll them in your mouth
Their juices still spilling from your lips
Your pleasure oozing from their pores
Smoke them like opium
Their sweetest smell excite you

Gnaw them
Chew them
Lick them
Eat them
Show them you are a man
They have no power
You have the power
Over and over
Over and over
Over and over

The search is for a haven
A place with no rejection
Tell them your troubles
They will give you delight
They will give you power
Part 4 - Geraniums

Touches of geranium to define the lips
Swelling curves
Astonished eyebrows
Her transformation is complete
Youthful beauty glowed on
Cheeks and brow
Black eyes shone alluringly under
Long curving
Lashes
That was the sole mission
Prepare yourself, girls
For the Carnival of the night
Their hair
Long and silky
Caressed with special oils
A glowing
Constellation
Amid the night blue
Shadows of the
Hair, colourful kimonos
Gentle invitation
Gentle invitation
They practice their laughter
Perfecting their smiles
The pretence of modesty
Let them beguile
Let them be goddesses
Let them be goddesses
Be the men's only reason to live
Be the men's every pleasure
Be their only relief
Smother them with comfort
Enchant them with your touch
To be desirable always
Beautiful
Men who come, men who need,
That was the sole mission
Prepare yourself, girls
For the Carnival of the night
Ichiban Bijin (The most beautiful girl)
Part 5 - The Desecration

He never wanted to hurt her
He only wanted to be with her
But thirty minutes was not enough
And one dollar was just too much

Could she understand
His need to be
Touched
His craving, yearning
Longing
To behold something so
Beautiful
So fragile his only
The only illusion left in
His life

But thirty minutes was not enough
And one dollar was just too much
He would do anything for her
She must do everything for him
He wanted all of her
She had to be his
She must be taught a lesson
No one else must touch her
No one else

Desecrating the very
Temple of his
Worship
As he stole the breath from his Goddess
Out of his every
Desire
Desire
You are mine
Even as she yelled
Even as her blood splattered
Even as she hobbled towards the door
Even as he stabbed her
More and more
his need
More and more
His property, his right.
Mothers and daughters
Sisters, young and old
Together in bondage
Linked together
Under the buoyant faces
Lies a reign of terror
Lies a reign of terror
Mother and keeper
Offering no solace
Kin and oppressor
Kin and oppressor
In the name of profit
In the name of profit
In the name of profit
In the name of profit

I can't stop the monthly flow
I can't stop it, Mamasan
With the slant of a smile
With the twist of an eyelid
Mamasans remind them what they owed
To whom they belong
There was no room for thinking
There was no room for loving
Everything is business

It was my fault
You tend to my wounds
You tend to my needs
You take care of me
I love you
I love you
Mamasan

In that place
A Karayuki dreams
Of disease that leaves no mark
Of lust that wears no price
Of beauty that never fades
Of bodies that feels no pain
In that place a Karayuki dreams
Of Amakusa
Of Shimabara
I know you never meant to kill my babies
I know you never meant to send them away
In that place, a Karayuki sings her song

"You are too young to sleep for ever
Let fallen leaves gather
All shall lose themselves in time
You are too young to sleep forever"
Interviewer: If the zegen who brought you to Singapore suddenly came here right now, would you hate him?
Karayuki: If he came here now, no, I don’t think so.
Interviewer: What would you feel? Pleased to see him?
Karayuki: No, but I wouldn’t hate....

Interviewer: It had been a long time since you left. What about Japan? How do you feel?
Karayuki: Japan is nice after all. I miss it. I always thought I’d like to go back there if I had some money. But I’m too old now.
Interviewer: Did Japan do anything for you?
Karayuki: No, nothing.

Karayuki: We never had any luck. Fate was against us from the time we were born.
Interviewer: But if you had money....
Karayuki: Then we wouldn’t have been fooled.
Interviewer: Has it been unfair?
Karayuki: We’ve been unlucky, what can we do? It’s our fault.

We weren’t smart enough.
Interviewer: You think it’s your own fault?
Karayuki: Yes, I do.
Interviewer: What is your greatest fear now?
Karayuki: That I would end up as street rubbish in someone else’s country.
Interviewer: To the end, they were proud of being Japanese but not always proud of Japan.

Karayuki: There are so many graves. All these have no names, completely forgotten. Buried in Singapore, far from relatives. All these unknown karayuki-san have become just so many stones.
Some graves do not even have stones. Just wooden stakes. When the wood rots, that’s the end.
Jeremiah Choy, 32, practicing solicitor

"The most physical and emotional three-in-one play I have ever been directed in!"
Norayesah Ismail, 24, graphic artist

"I joined the production on the strength of my ignorance,
I am slowly learning."
K Rajagopal, 29, art gallery executive

"Compared with the karayuki-sans, women in Singapore have that much more power
and choice; yet in many ways we continue to retain attitude
not unlike those of women in bondage."
Janice Koh, 21, undergraduate

"Can this be...Singapore?"
Lim Yu-Beng, 29, actor

"It makes me feel extremely sad and angry
that these women’s lives were completely in the hands of others."
Lim Kay Tong, 40s, actor

"Broken Birds taking flight across the green.
Moving.
Haunting.
Remembering.
Learning.
I wanted to know the voice of the voiceless.
To remember the forgotten."
Koh Joo Kim, 32, radio broadcaster

"Broken Birds has been a challenge
requiring a lot of sensitivity."
Wendy Kweh, 19, actress

"Tracing the journey of the karayuki-san has been a
personal journey of discovering inner strengths and chasing ideals."
Lim How Ngean, 26, writer for a food and beverage magazine

"Like the opening of a floodgate of discovery and learning, emotions and
desires, friendships and opportunities."
Gani, 25, artiste

"I am very privileged to be involved in this epic.
It was the first time I learned about the plight of the karayuki-san.
I hope people will learn to respect their fellow human beings from these women."
Hawk Liu, 31, school teacher

Sharon Lim, 26, lawyer
"The thought that some of them never went home really saddens me."
Tang Fu Kuen, 22, undergraduate

"Perspiration...Pain...Pleasure?"
Loong Seng Onn, 36, civil servant

"What price to pay in selling their souls to materialism."
Casey Lim, 31, actor

"I hope the karayuki-sans who died and were buried here will rest better after we tell their story."
Pamela Oei, 23, Architectural undergraduate

"Working on Broken Birds has been excellent - it's hard work, but the good thing is that I will soon be able to do one push-up. I think I learnt quite a bit about the resilience and strength from the lives of the karayuki-sans, which I won't forget too soon."
Karen Tun, 28, actress, fashion merchandiser and housewife

"When I first learnt about the karayuki-sans, I was initially shocked and filled with a deep sadness. How many more of these people, ordinary but yet significant, have been missed or swept under the carpet of our selective documented memory called history?"
Lok Meng Chue, 40, actress

"It has been a privilege for a brief moment, we stepped into another time, another place and another life. The Karayuki's story weaves a bleak, fragile, often horrific and ironic carpet of fate and circumstance. There is something there for all of us to learn from. Life is "a journey with no particular destination". We think we have arrived, but there is always somewhere else to go. Our lot in life is set - we need only learn to live it through as best we can."
Tan Kheng Hua, 31, actress

"I think it is good to remember."
Wong Kwang Han, 24, undergraduate

"A flight in search of core."
Rosita Ng, 26, lawyer

"Broken Birds is a tale of human endurance in the face of hopelessness, where the choices of the karayuki-san was one of existence without dignity, rights or love and death."
Sheila Wyatt, 32, wife, mother and actress

"It is too easy for me to romanticise the sufferings of the karayuki-san. The reality is that women continue to be used and abused all around us today. I hope our experience with the karayuki-sans will spur us to stop history from repeating itself."
Claire Wong, 30, lawyer and actress
"Ah Ku and Karayuki-san", focusing as it does on the Japanese prostitutes of Singapore, provides the feminine companion volume to James Warren's earlier "Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore". Both explore the world of immigrant labour during Singapore's period of rapid economic development in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Together they provide a powerful corrective to the romantic image of colonial Singapore as a city of excitement, sophistication and exotic charm. Here James Warren provides a personal account of his research process and some of the thoughts that went through his mind while writing the book that inspired this production.

"I have attempted in Ah Ku and Karayuki-san to conjure up an image of the atmospheric truth and drama surrounding the portrayal of ordinary Japanese women like the Karayuki-san Oyoshi and the brothel keeper Kwana Muta, relying on courage and a spirit of decency to transcend a "traumatic event" or hard circumstance, as colonial Singapore with its rapidly developing economy, attracted thousands of Japanese women and immigrant labourers. Such individuals and "events" told me about the larger reality and hidden meanings in my endeavours to re-interpret and re-present the history of prostitutes and coolies in the brothels and city streets. Here the intertwining lives and fragmentary careers of ordinary women and men serve as lesser known turning points to chart the pace of a developing city and the speed of a new century by reconciling social forces with individual passions.

But, let me pause for a moment here, to consider, albeit briefly, the "context of discovery" of the most important source for writing this history - the Coroners Records for Colonial Singapore. It is late January 1978 in Singapore. I am stymied. I was fast running out of Government repositories and libraries in a desperate search for documents that would provide insight into the unique identity and sociability of Japanese women. Perhaps, I asked, in a race against the clock, does the elderly clerk know of the whereabouts of records which would help me place the lives of his parent's and grandparent's generation in a meaningful historical context. The old man did not think he could be of any real assistance but said that he still remembered the location of "some old things" in the huge modern building. The two of us arranged to visit the Subordinate Court store room just two floors above the following day.

When the door was unlocked for me, after several months of fruitless searching, to a still largely empty storeroom in the new Subordinate Courts Building, I gained entry to a collection of several hundred unclassified quarto-size volumes stacked high against a wall, to a height of four feet. The floor itself in several spots was also covered with piles of unsorted Certificate of Coroners Views and miscellaneous documents into which everything has been dumped, higgledy-piggledy - a horizontal load filling an area the size of my office! Most of the volumes of Inquests and Inquiries and bundles of Coroners Views wedged beneath a stack or lying at the bottom of a heap had invariably suffered damage due to dampness and the ravages of white ants. Over the decades the record keepers had developed a habit of throwing things in piles and boxes just to get them out of the way - the Court officials had a different sense of the past and priorities and for years had just put things aside, and forgot about them.

I can still remember my surprise when the mindful clerk standing in the open door pointed across the large room. Not sure where to start without a check list or guide of some sort, I began to rummage among the stacks closest to me. I started to dig in and there was just about everything - Coroners Inquests, Coroners Views, suicide notes, drafts of letters, even recipes and household bills! The first two hours or so were both thrilling and somewhat confusing. Without stopping for a rest over the entire day, I was introduced to the beginning of an absolutely enormous cast of ordinary men and women whose life experiences were situated at a point in time in a "visitatable past" - prostitutes, construction workers, the homeless, parents, addicts, rickshaw pullers, petty criminals, and many others - and, I immediately wondered how they all might fit together. Sensing the historiographical possibilities these documents offered for the study of Japanese women and the fact that they all might fit together, as I gradually learned, was one of the major points towards the making of Ah Ku and Karayuki-san. Initially, I randomly picked up and excitedly read the Coroners View on the suicide of the Karayuki-san, Oichi. My first encounter with this extraordinary source. I shall never forget it. In a very real sense, Oichi's way of dying was the thread I pulled to begin to untangle the whole fabric of that change occurring in the underside of Singapore society.

The material I found was breathtakingly exciting, not only for the light it threw on Singapore's pre-war society and economy, but for the way it illuminated in sharp detail the dramatic changes that occurred in Japanese
culture and history, yet within the memory of a visitable generation, still close enough to be grasped, especially, the period from the early 1900s to the late 1930s. I then set to work, travelling back and forth for several years, between a tiny corner of the Subordinate Courts library in Singapore and my own University office, reading, analysing and getting the material in order. I realised that the contents of this repository would yield up with skill and patience, the living testimony of women and men who did not know how to express themselves in print and have access to people in power.

I wanted to write a history of the Karayuki-san in Singapore full of "imaginative drama and narrative sweep", and primarily about ordinary individuals who had the incautiousness of life, stories based on the Inquests and Inquiries with plot and dialogue that were deeply impressive and the Coroner's work stunning yet thoroughly purposeful, cases with ironic intent and powerful feelings. It seemed to me writing about these cases of death from the point of view of social history was a way of re-framing what had actually happened in life to these Japanese prostitutes and their voices - preferably their own voices or voices of family and friends, and enemies or strangers in association with them, or, if they were dead, another or a lot of other voices - a client, lover, samaritan or assailant. I started out with a basic idea in my history of trying to communicate to as wide an audience as possible about what it was like to be a Japanese prostitute, what happened to them, how their lives developed within the city and beyond, and that was a very complex process. I have spoken as naturally and as compassionately as possible of the individual and collective characters and how they developed within my book - as if Oyoshi, Oichi and Duya Hadachi and many, many others were old friends. In some ways, many of the individuals in Ah Ku and Karayuki-san were deeply flawed, a tightly tangled knot of desire and despair, of hopes and dreams gone to ruin. There was also a paradox. I had to reconcile myself to about catching the lives of Japanese prostitutes in ways that we had not experienced before in a city like colonial Singapore. I was forced into an awareness of these women making fundamental sharp choices that could haunt and/or drop from sight without a trace. Consequently, I also had to consider making basic choices about different approaches to innovative historical writing. I knew in such moments that the answer was not to leave the rude beast or "event", the extant material, also known as the life around the prostitutes to the novelists or playwrights, but to do what social historians do, or are supposed to do, which was to confront the deepest concerns of humanity, wrestling the beast of human life and bringing it to terms in an original, lasting and illuminating way.

All the fundamentally great themes of power and innocence, friendship and loyalty, goodness and evil, love and betrayal in all its forms and fathomless complexities are found in the Coroner's cases about the lives of these very ordinary, sometimes dangerous and inarticulate women. Until that moment of "discovery" of the Coroner's Records in a court basement in 1978, there was no knowledge of such vanished feelings and 'events' to speak of whatsoever. And I have tried to recreate such emotions and moments through the complex voices which the Coroner and others spoke of the dead and by travelling back in time in his imagination, not just along the busy thoroughfares lined with rickshaws, but onto the brothel verandah and beyond. Ah Ku and Karayuki-san attempts to understand the character of a colonial city and experiences in the lives of prostitutes linking behavioural codes, cultural attitudes and work that was potentially rewarding but, that left many fumbling for a livelihood and unsure of their emotional ground in the face of grief, loss of employment, or resentment of the failure of love.

It is also an attempt to make the commonplace in Singapore society memorable, to communicate through these cases of essentially uninflected lives, until that moment of death, all the spontaneous pleasures and unanticipated tragedies of the kind of living that most prostitutes experienced. There are no soft embellishments, no nostalgia, no romantic finery. My focus concentrated on the pain, anguish, confusion, accomplishments, affection and sacrifice of these Japanese women amidst the harsh, developing "modern" landscape of a colonial city and port. Through this social history, these Japanese prostitutes of the past speak to present generations of the things which concerned them then and which concern us now as the twenty-first century approaches. The excruciatingly personal record of the Karayuki-san's lives in Singapore speak to us, as individuals on the other side of the curtain, of the traditional virtues of humility and endurance, of poverty, work and family, of sexual inequality and social repression, of hurt, grief and passion and of loneliness and death."

James F. Warren
February 1996

Dr James Francis Warren is the Head of Asian Studies and Associate Professor of Southeast Asian Modern History at Murdoch University in Perth, Australia. He is the author of the book, Ah Ku and Karayuki-san: Prostitution in Singapore 1870 - 1940.
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