

Tang Ah Thye: The Life of an Amah and World History

It is unclear what year Tang Ah Thye was born. She came from the silk-producing district in the Pearl River Delta, Guangdong province in China. During the 1930s, she was among the thousands of amahs who had left home to work overseas in Singapore and Malaya as domestic servants. It is suggested that the name “amah” may have Portuguese origins. Also known as “black-and-whites” because many wore white shirts and black pants at work, the amahs were often described as “superior servants” who were the most loyal and hardworking.¹ The word “superior” is intriguing – “superior” to whom? To the servants who came before or later? To those in a colonizing society or a colonized world? Tang’s life intersected with global historical events and processes such as industrialization, the Great Depression, the gendered diaspora from South China as well as colonialism in Asia. While European and Chinese employers often discussed their relationships with the amahs in a master-servant framework of “loyalty” and “devotion,” Tang and those like her felt proud of their own “independence.” Unafraid to speak about bitterness, Tang insisted that she did not owe anyone anything in her life.

Tang’s home village was likely to be in the counties of Dongguan, Shunde, Panyu or the adjacent counties of the Pearl River Delta, a place of market towns, fish ponds, silk filatures and rice paddies where the majority of amahs originated. Known for non-marrying and delayed transfer marriage practices, this area in Guangdong province defied many conventional assumptions about Chinese labour, marriage and family. A study conducted in Panyu during the 1930s found that women and men commonly worked together in agriculture. In many cases, women outnumbered men among the day-labourers in agriculture throughout Guangdong.² Such a high rate of female labour participation contrasted with the traditional assumption that Chinese women were confined to the household and perhaps indicated the effects of massive outmigration of Guangdong men in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Female dominance in farm labour gave rise to a particular set of gender dynamics in the delta area.

Despite the presence of strong lineages, many women in the delta traditionally enjoyed a relatively high degree of freedom and autonomy. Young, unmarried girls lived away from home in “girl’s houses” where they formed sisterhoods and lifelong friendships with other lodgers. They also learnt about handicraft skills and religious rites. After marriage, they maintained a separate residence from their husbands for

¹ See Kenneth Gaw, *Superior Servants: The Legendary Cantonese Amahs of the Far East* (Singapore: Oxford University Press: 1988)

² Rubie S. Watson, “Girls’ Houses and Working Women: Expressive Culture in the Pearl River Delta, 1900-41” in Jaschok, Maria and Suzanne Miers, ed. *Women and Chinese Patriarchy: Submission, Servitude and Escape* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press 1994), 32-33

years until there was a pregnancy. An “early” pregnancy or a shortened period of marriage transfer would often cause one to be ridiculed or despised by her “sisters.” Some would refuse consummation and instead offer monetary compensations to their husbands who would marry concubines to take their places.³

Amahs like Tang were spinsters who had taken vows of celibacy following a special hair-dressing ceremony (*sor hei*) to signify adulthood and renounce marriage. She would have been in a sisterhood and supported herself and her natal family by taking up wage-earning jobs. A Panyu gazetteer compiled in the eighteenth century records that the trend of non-marriage among local women had been popular, suggesting a long local tradition of marriage resistance. Rather than submitting herself to suffering at the hands of strangers, Tang was determined to stay unmarried: “I had heard about unhappy marriages.”⁴ In old age, sworn spinsters often lived in vegetarian halls or spinsters’ homes, a common feature of local life.

The prevalence and prosperity of sericulture in Guangdong supported the economic independence of women such as Tang. At the turn of the twentieth century, silk reeling became rapidly mechanized when industrialization came to China beginning in the 1880s. The introduction of steam-powered machinery created an enormous demand for factory workers among women and children to produce for the world market. As reeling had traditionally been considered as “women’s work,” Guangdong women were increasingly incorporated into the global economy during the early twentieth century. Prior to the 1930s, the Pearl River delta was one of China’s major silk-producing regions. A study in the 1920s showed that more than two million were employed in sericulture and silk reeling in the counties of Shunde, Nanhai, Zhongshan and Panyu.⁵ Abundant job opportunities and relatively high wages for women meant that many could stay unmarried and enjoy greater economic autonomy, which helped intensify the non-marrying tradition.

During the 1930s, Guangdong province was badly hit by the Great Depression, which caused a worldwide collapse of silk prices. In 1932, there were only 58 filatures operating in Guangdong, compared with the height of over 200 in 1926. By 1935, only 21 factories were still in production and more than 90 per cent of the original total had ceased operation. As a result, over 36,000 women were thrown out of work.⁶ Tang was among these unemployed women who became the domestics that migrated to Hong Kong and Southeast Asia in the decade before the Second World

³ See Marjorie Topley, “Marriage Resistance in Rural Kwangtung,” *Women in Chinese Society*, ed. by Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975) and Janice, E. Stockard, *Daughters of the Canton Delta: Marriage Patterns and Economic Strategies in South China, 1860-1930*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989.

⁴ Gaw, 42

⁵ Watson, 32

⁶ Watson, 32-33

War.

Like many of her counterparts, Tang was attracted to the job opportunities in Singapore and Malaya during the hard times of the Depression years. It was of course untrue that these two places were untouched by the world economic crisis. Unemployment was very high among the rubber, tin and construction industries where the majority of Chinese male workers concentrated. In 1929, the first immigration restriction ordinance went into effect in British Malaya and Singapore in order to regulate specifically the immigration of Chinese men. A quota system was later introduced to keep the number of entering Chinese men to a minimal level. However, no similar restrictions were placed on the entry of Chinese women until 1938. Between 1933 and 1938, it was estimated that 190,000 women migrated to Singapore and Malaya from the Pearl River Delta to work in domestic service, agriculture, rubber-tapping and tin mining. Most of them were single. The influx of women dramatically altered the gender ratio of Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, which had previously been dominated by men. According to the 1947 census in British Malaya, there were 12 Cantonese females to every 10 Cantonese males, which had increased two-fold from 1931.⁷ Domestic service seemed to be relatively unaffected in the prewar years, if it was not in fact spurred by the low wages enabled by the large, continuing supply of Chinese female labour force. Throughout the 1930s, boatloads of Guangdong women continued to arrive in search of work.

Upon arrival in Singapore, Tang stayed in a “coolie fong.” She had sought out the assistance of a “water guest” (sui haak) who was familiar with travel arrangements, immigration regulations and local conditions to help her enter the country. A “coolie fong,” the common term for amah accommodation, was usually a room located in a two- or three-storey building. It was a home and a gathering place shared by all its residents. Tang would have occupied a bunk bed or a cubicle. It was the place to stay when an amah was unemployed, between jobs, returned each day after work or on days off. There would have been an altar dedicated to Kwan Yin, a goddess commonly worshipped by sworn spinsters. In the event of death, an amah’s “sisters” would take care of the funeral arrangements. In other words, a “coolie fong” functioned as a network of mutual help and support.

Employment opportunities were often circulated in “coolie fongs.” It took Tang about twenty days until she was finally employed as an amah for \$5 a month. She described her considerations when finding work:

How many in the family and what I had to do. Did I shop as well as cook?
Did I do all the washing? How much could I spend on food each day?
Where do I sleep and so on. I liked to make it all clear. Most important –

⁷ Gaw, 77-78

salary. Working hours were never discussed as that depended on how fast you worked.

She also disliked working for Europeans:

You'd have to bring your pots and pans along to do your own cooking.

Also rice, oil, etc. It's like a major move. Also, I didn't understand their language. I just didn't like working for them in spite of higher salaries.

In Singapore and Malaya, the wearing of the black and white "uniform" was required by most expatriate employers while Chinese employers were less concerned about dress. It was said that the British liked their servants to "look neat and to have a recognizable uniform – to be identifiably 'servants.'"⁸ Except for very wealthy households who could afford several servants, an amah was often expected to be "all-purpose" (*yat keok tak*), known in Victorian England as "maid-of-all-work."

Tang worked for Chinese families as a *yat keok tek* which included cleaning, washing, ironing and cooking. Most of the families she worked for had around six to seven members. A typical work day began when she woke up early in the morning around 5 a.m. and after getting herself ready, she would start cooking breakfast. The master would leave for work after breakfast. After doing the dishes, she swept and tidied up the house. When that was done, she washed the clothes and prepared lunch, which the master would come back for. After cleaning up, she did the ironing. When that was done, she took a bath. It would then be time to cook again. By the time dinner was over and she had cleaned up and finished the dishes, it would be about 9 p.m.⁹ She worked seven days a week with an occasional half-day off:

I had very little time off. I didn't go to the wayang (street opera) or visit chi mui ("sisters"). I didn't have many chi mui anyway. I never rest. Sometimes I'd take a bus to my *coolie fong* to see if I had any letters. If there were any, I would have them read by a letter writer. I would then head home and cook the next meal. Sometimes I would finish the day's work before going off.¹⁰

Lauded for their "loyalty" and "hard work" – "qualities hardly the characteristics of the exploited" – the amahs were often seen as the bearers of "Chinese" virtues and relationships with them were elucidated in terms of a master-servant hierarchy.¹¹ As a Chinese mistress commented on her *amah*, "she did not do well in any type of work, nor could she cook. She was not too intelligent. But she was loyal."¹² Stories about the admirable devotion of the *amahs* were widely circulated. An amah was said to

⁸ Gaw, 105.

⁹ Gaw, 112

¹⁰ Gaw, 133

¹¹ Gaw, 166

¹² Gaw, 160.

have jumped into the ocean to follow her English charge who accidentally fell from a ship. Others dutifully remained to work even when their employers lost their jobs and were unable to pay them any wages during the war.

Because of a “Chinese” upbringing, the reputation of amahs was considered by writer Kenneth Gaw as not transferable to the Filipina maids who came later but “none of whom have come even remotely close to offering the same equality of service or commitment.”¹³ These positive memories about the Cantonese *amahs* were not only conjured up with a strong distaste for the “less superior” Filipina maids but also with a profound sense of nostalgia for a “bygone age” when European colonialism was at its height in Southeast Asia. Those were the golden days when all the world seemed perfect and even domestic servants were graceful, virtuous and respectable people. As Gaw recalls:

While [the amahs] may well have been the finest of servants, I only remember them as friends and my memories of them are probably tinged with sentiment for a bygone age – when there were rubber trees to be tapped; when catapults made from *tembusu* trees were painstakingly seasoned over fires; when there were kite fights in the bluest of skies; when there were crystal-clear seas to swim in and unpolluted beaches to lie on – most of all, when there were hawkers selling the most delicious foods passing by. Those were indeed the days!¹⁴

The *amah* was remembered as a legendary figure from a lost world where relationships between masters and servants, colonizers and the colonized, were held in harmony and mutual respect. The employers that Gaw interviewed showed a similar kind of nostalgic sentiment because being foreigners living in a colony afforded them a rare opportunity to have domestic servants in the house. They often described the goodwill, peace and harmony in their relationships with the amahs, emphasizing that they did not exploit them but treated them like members of the family.

The accounts from the amahs themselves often reveal a different kind of story. Though different from a *mui tsai* who was a bonded servant and a figure of Chinese cruelty and oppression, an amah received low wages and had to toil for long hours. But Tang explained why she preferred to working long periods of time for the same employer:

I [have] always thought it better to put up with what I know than to make changes. I hate changing jobs. You can never tell if your next job wouldn't be worse. I also thought that if you only did one job, you'd have to work with other servants and [that] might lead to quarrels and

¹³ Gaw, 166.

¹⁴Gaw, Preface, vii

other difficulties – better to do it all my myself. I am independent that way. I'd rather do it all, despite the hardship.¹⁵

In other words, loyalty was a less obvious character trait with which Tang identified herself. Rather, “independence” seemed to be her determined vision in life. As she spoke of her a cherished wish:

I would have liked to have been able to read and write as I would not have to rely on a letter-writer and I would be able to find my way around and read road signs, notices, etc.¹⁶

The phenomenon of female migrant labour such as the amahs points towards the value of pursuing a gendered mapping of the Chinese diaspora in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the need to tell the experiences of these women without having to resort to colonial nostalgia. Both Guangdong and Fujian provinces have long been recognized as the home of overseas Chinese, known as *qiaoxiang*. A changing political climate has recently allowed Chinese scholars to uncover and celebrate this particular past.¹⁷ But the grand story is about men from South China leaving home and venturing overseas. They went to the U.S., Canada, Australia, Cuba, South Africa, Peru or Trinidad as gold-seekers, coolies, farmers, cooks, houseboys, laundrymen, merchants, diplomats, missionaries, teachers and students. Most women, in contrast, went as wives and children. A small number of women went to study in the U.S., but those who entered the written record were mainly “slave girls” (*mui tsai*) and prostitutes.¹⁸ Historical literature written about Chinese communities in nineteenth- and twentieth-century North America often emphasizes the gross gender imbalance, citing factors such as Chinese culture and patriarchy for immobilizing women.¹⁹

Such an elucidation of “culture” should be placed in a broader and more complicated context. As political, social and economic beings, women face different opportunities and obstacles from those of men in employment and education. Their

¹⁵ Gaw, 113

¹⁶ Gaw, 136

¹⁷ As Madeline Hsu has shown, there has been a fascination with local histories of overseas connections in post-Mao China. In Taishan, local leaders celebrated the achievements of an overseas Chinese merchant, Chen Yixi, for bringing back wealth and expertise to benefit his native place. One of Chen's great visions, which ended in failure, was to build a railroad system that would eventually connect Taishan with the rest of the world. See Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and migration between the United States and South China, 1882-1943*, (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000), 1-2.

¹⁸ The American Boxer Indemnity Fund, for example, provided funds to support Chinese youth to study in the U.S during the early twentieth century. May Fourth-era writer Ling Shuhua was one of the Cantonese women who received the scholarship and went to study in the U.S.

¹⁹ Both Adam McKeown and Judy Yung have argued that Chinese patriarchy was a main factor behind the gender imbalance in the Chinese communities in the U.S. before the 1960s. See McKeown, “Transnational Chinese Families and Chinese Exclusion, 1875-1943,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* (Winter 1999), 73-110 and Yung, *Unbound Feet*.

differences in interests, responses and strategies cannot be fully understood as merely stemming from “culture.” Rather, they should also be analyzed with regard to the effects of power relationships, politics and changes in the world economy. The international Chinese prostitute (*zhuhua*) trade is a phenomenon that demands this sort of understanding. The Chinese diaspora also needs to be gendered and remapped in order to locate and consider the experiences of migrant women. As Joan Judge has pointed out, Tokyo in the early twentieth century was a centre of political and intellectual activities among Chinese female students, revolutionaries and radicals during a high moment of imperialism and nationalism that called for female education.²⁰ Many amahs in Singapore, Malaya and Hong Kong were former silk workers who had been thrown out of work by a world-wide collapse of the silk market during the 1930s. They were mostly from Shunde, one of the well-known *qiaoxiang* of overseas Chinese men. Therefore, it would be over-simplifying to say that “culture” kept women home – it depends upon the location and historical moment in which one is looking for evidence.

²⁰ See Joan Judge, “Talent, virtue, and the nation: Chinese nationalisms and female subjectivities in the early twentieth century,” *American Historical Review* 106.2 (June 2001): 765-803

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