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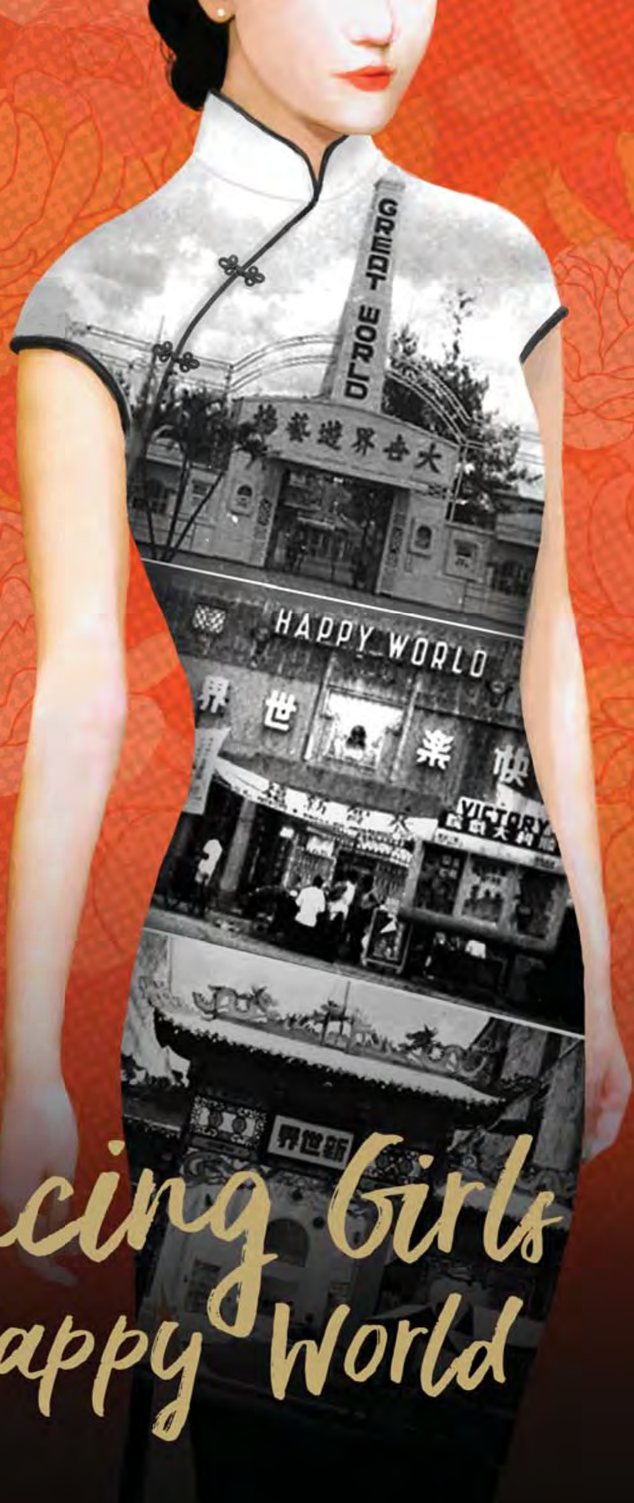

Adeline Foo

Dancing Girls of a Happy World

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LANCING GIRLS OF A HAPPY WORLD
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“Lancing” girls

A local mispronunciation of “dancing girls”,
a term for the glamorous cabaret dance hostesses
in Singapore from the 1920s to 1960s

Introduction

My first impression of the "lancing" girls, the glamorous dance hostesses from the cabarets of the "Big Three" worlds of entertainment in Singapore—New World, Great World and Happy World, came from an account my mother once told me of these women. "Their body was the first thing you noticed," she said. "They had beautiful figures, and such tiny waists! They danced to keep themselves slim."

My mother's comment was made in reference to a neighbour she knew, an adopted daughter of two elderly Cantonese sisters who lived in Chinatown and were part of a group of women sworn to celibacy. This girl, when she was old enough to work, was pushed into the cabaret to

earn money as a dance hostess. The story stuck with me. The girl eventually ran away from home, and was never heard of again.

The second time I came across a reference to the dance hostesses was a story in the newspaper about a school in Geylang set up after World War Two by two women from the Happy World Cabaret. I was intrigued. I never imagined that women who made a career dancing in the company of men would find time, or the money, to do charity. These two women probably yearned to get married and have children of their own. But they couldn't, because the moment they stepped into the cabaret world, they had entered a life that would be looked down on. Marriage and having children weren't something they could take for granted. Perhaps setting up the school satisfied their wish to nurture children.

This book started as a research paper when I was a Lee Kong Chian Research Fellow at the National Library Board of Singapore in 2016. My early research into the cabaret world was fraught with difficulty. There weren't many books that had

been published on this topic. Most of what I had gleaned was from archived newspaper and oral records of men and women who had had similar backgrounds working in bars and entertainment. When I started looking for former dance hostesses who were willing to share their stories with me, I was led to two women and two men who were generous with their time. A big question on my mind meeting the women was: Why did they do it? Were they not worried about its stigma and the associated risks?

It would be simple to suggest the lure of and need for money as reasons. It was that, but more. One former cabaret woman shared that she had little education—only "good looks" and a talent for dancing. Many of her peers in the cabaret also naively believed that they were too smart to get hurt and could stay out of vice. But in an environment where money was easy, and alcohol plentiful, and where men outnumbered women, it was rare for a "lancing" girl to not get sucked into trouble. That said, the more grounded women

would leave the cabaret once they found jobs that were more respectable, or when they got engaged to be married. Many of those who stayed in the job eventually got "too old" and lost their appeal. A news report based on a study of a sizeable poll of cabaret women presents the harsh reality: "Age is a hard fact of a cabaret girl's life. The older she gets, the less marketable she is. The old and unsuccessful usually turn to full-time prostitution. Only about five per cent marry and settle down to security and a home of their own."[1]

I worked on this book for a further four months in 2017 after my six-month research fellowship ended. I started out seeking to recreate the special world in which these women inhabited, and this is what this book is—the culmination of all the published records I could lay my hands on. But I know my research barely plumbed the depth of this topic!

Hopefully, this book will present a good start for more researchers and writers to find alternative perspectives in tracing the stories of the cabaret

women. Like others in their time, many “lancing” girls had struggled through hardship, survived the war and rebuilt their lives. Let this book be remembered as the *first* publication attempting to recover the lives of these women, they who had been cast to the sidelines of society, they who had also lived lives on their own terms.

BACKDROP TO THE CABARET WORLD

"I'm one of those lady teachers, a beautiful hostess, you know, the kind the Palace features for only a dime a throw."[2]

"Lancing" was a local mispronunciation of "dancing". Women who worked in the cabaret were called "lancing" girls, a direct translation of 舞女, or mou luei in Cantonese. These girls were sometimes also known as taxi-dancers. The term taxi-dancers was imported from American culture around the 1920s. It was a name given to women who worked in a dance hall as professional dance partners. In hailing a taxi, customers would pay for time travelled in the cab; similarly, in the dance hall, customers paid for accompanied dances with women, measured by the duration or time taken for a song.

In early 20th century, in cities as far as Paris or New York, people could escape the humdrum of

everyday life through dancing, and for a small price of a dollar for a few dances, they could indulge in the pleasure of beautiful women and debauchery. The most famous dance couple before World War One was Vernon and Irene Castle. He was a tall, slim Englishman, and she, a beautiful New York fashion icon. Together, the Castles took societies from London to Paris to New York by storm, dancing the trot and the one-step. In 1914, the Castles opened a nightclub called Castles Of The Sea in Long Beach, New York, as well as a restaurant, Sans Souci. Teaching patrons how to dance by day while at the same time welcoming them at night at their club and café, the Castles, one half English and one half American, can truly claim to have fanned Western society's dance craze.[3]

A movie review of *Ten Cents a Dance* published in *The Straits Times* on 5 October 1931 posed the question of who created the first dance hall in history. Was it the British with the Hammersmith Palais de Danse of West London, which opened its doors in 1919, or the Americans with their "dime

halls"? If you trace the origin of jazz, played on keyboards, brass, wind and stringed instruments and accompanied by upbeat lyrics, America of the pre-war 1900s could claim jazz as part of a music culture created by descendants of African slaves, which included the gospel, ragtime and the blues. So yes, it was probably the Americans who started the dance hall as jazz was what fuelled its music. The Europeans, on the other hand, could lay claim to having popularised the stately dances of the ballroom.[4] What is noteworthy is that from the West, the custom of dancing with hired girls had spread to Shanghai, Manila and Singapore.[5]

The Shanghai Connection

In the late 1920s, the treaty port of Shanghai had three million Chinese residents, but power wasn't with the Chinese, it was in the hands of the governing bodies of two foreign settlements—the International Settlement and the French Concession. Against this background, China's Jazz Age blossomed, with the Westerners introducing

the foxtrot, the Charleston, and the rumba to glitzy nightclubs and glamorous ballrooms.

The jazz cabarets and nightclubs that appeared in Shanghai were first set up by jazz orchestras which were hired straight out of America for performances within the International Settlement and the French Concession. Social boundaries and racial lines were forgotten when the Chinese and Westerners came together to cavort and dance. Russian, Japanese, Eurasian as well as Chinese women joined the cabarets and nightclubs as dance hostesses. They offered their services as dancing partners to unaccompanied men.[6] The rising popularity of gramophone records gave the city's social dancing scene a huge shot in the arm. Both men and women turned to jazz recordings to learn the foxtrot and one-step. In the cabarets, dance schools or home gatherings, there was a wild and passionate desire to dance; people just couldn't stop dancing!

In 1924, an American journalist by the name of Frank Carpenter visited Shanghai and described

the New World cabaret in the International Settlement as “a great three-storey building which at night blazes as brightly as the Great White Way of New York. It is frequented by Chinese girls in foreign costume, sometimes even to the bobbed-hair of the flapper, whirling about in the arms of their sweethearts”.[7] This firsthand account gave a vivid insight into the lives of women who had caught the dance craze. It also showed that the Chinese identified these dances as being Western, going so far as to dress as “flappers” like New Yorkers and Parisians.[8]

By the early 1930s, the Shanghai cabaret scene could be described as entering its golden age. Whitey Smith, an American jazz musician and band leader who came from San Francisco to play at the Carlton Cafe, claimed in his memoir, *I Didn't Make a Million*, “I believe there were more night clubs in the International Settlement of Shanghai in that period than in any other city of comparable size in the world!”[9] The tea dance, a practice that had begun in posh hotels in Shanghai, also became a

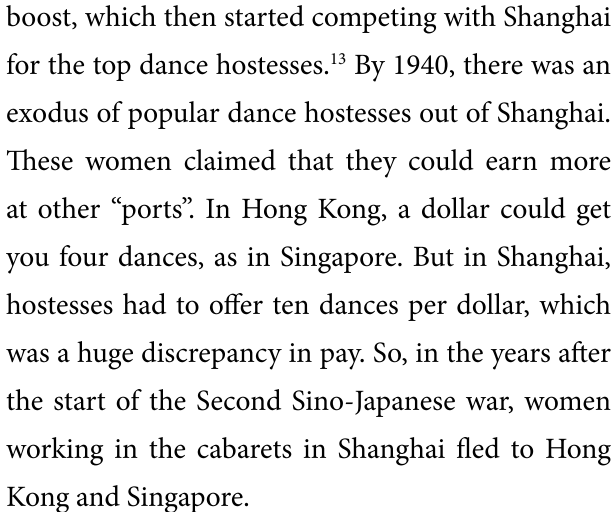
popular institution in the cabarets.[10] These were held in the day, allowing the cabarets to bring in more profit, and they also became platforms to advertise products like cigarettes.[11]

The association of cigarettes with beautiful women was immortalised in the Shanghai posters of that era. Depicting exquisite details set in a dreamy setting, the posters portrayed women, presumably from the dance halls or working in the entertainment industry, holding a cigarette, setting them up to be assertive and "modern" by subtly handing control to them. These vintage posters have become an icon of Shanghai's cultural past, influenced by the style of Western Art Nouveau and Art Deco from the late 19th century through to the 1930s.

From Shanghai to Singapore

When the Second Sino-Japanese War[12] broke out in 1937, Chinese businessmen and gangland heads fled Shanghai to seek refuge in Hong Kong. This gave the cabaret industry in Hong Kong a

An icon of the golden age of the cabaret, the “Shanghai woman” is illustrated with a dreamy and feminine appeal.



boost, which then started competing with Shanghai for the top dance hostesses.[13] By 1940, there was an exodus of popular dance hostesses out of Shanghai. These women claimed that they could earn more at other "ports". In Hong Kong, a dollar could get you four dances, as in Singapore. But in Shanghai, hostesses had to offer ten dances per dollar, which was a huge discrepancy in pay. So, in the years after the start of the Second Sino-Japanese war, women working in the cabarets in Shanghai fled to Hong Kong and Singapore.

Based on my research and interviews, the early batches of girls working in the cabarets in Singapore were simply called "Shanghainese women". In an article in the *Malaya Tribune* dated 23 August 1939, Shanghainese "glamour girls" were reported to have arrived to join the Happy World Cabaret; one of them was a popular Shanghai cinema actress, Perh Lu or "White Dew", who had starred in four films.[14]

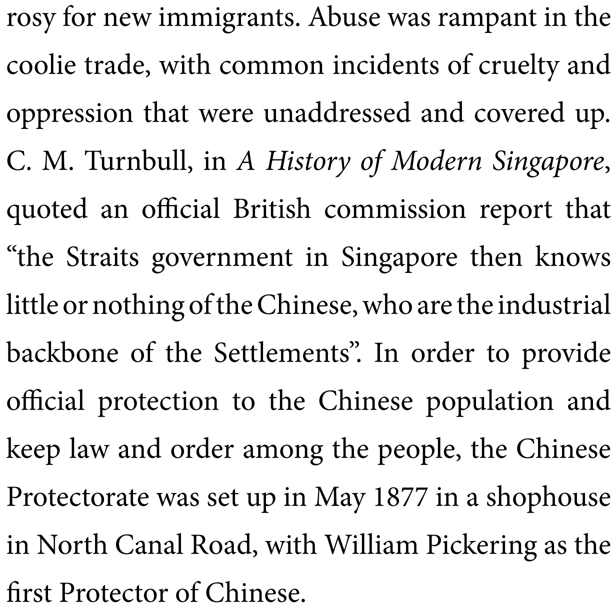
A second wave of women fleeing Shanghai came about with the Communist Revolution of

1949, which resulted in the diaspora of tens, if not, hundreds of thousands of Chinese.[15] Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and many parts of Asia and the world received these women who had worked, performed, sung or danced in Shanghai's cabarets. These women were instrumental in lending their glamour and expertise when they joined the cabarets in their new homes.

The Mui Tsai and the Pipa Tsai

How did the cabarets in Singapore come to offer employment to scores of women in the 1930s? This requires the understanding of events in Singapore's history that often compromised the position of women.

The late 19th century was a time of rapid labour migration into Singapore, as workers came to seek out new fortunes in Nanyang. The number of Chinese immigrants who came to Singapore is estimated to have risen from 34,000 in 1878 to 103,000 in 1888, a threefold increase over a mere 10 years![16] But the situation in Singapore was far from



rosy for new immigrants. Abuse was rampant in the coolie trade, with common incidents of cruelty and oppression that were unaddressed and covered up. C. M. Turnbull, in *A History of Modern Singapore*, quoted an official British commission report that "the Straits government in Singapore then knows little or nothing of the Chinese, who are the industrial backbone of the Settlements". In order to provide official protection to the Chinese population and keep law and order among the people, the Chinese Protectorate was set up in May 1877 in a shophouse in North Canal Road, with William Pickering as the first Protector of Chinese.

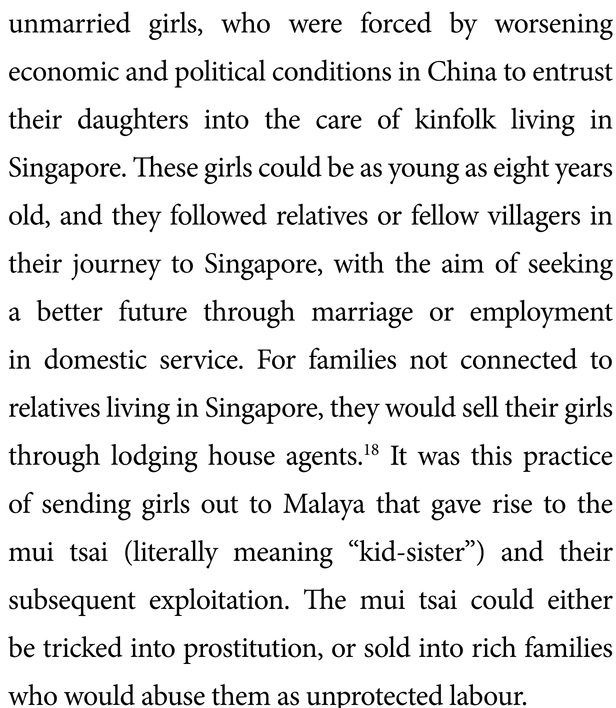
If men found it tough to eke out a living, the problems facing women were worse. In 1884, the ratio of men to women was 60,000 to 6,600! Out of these 6,600 women, 2,000 were estimated to be working as prostitutes.[17] Although it would be easy to claim that there were few alternative employment opportunities available to women then, the reality was that many women were tricked or coerced into prostitution when they arrived in Singapore.

Although there were shocking disclosures about the brutal and degrading conditions in brothels, the authorities did not seek to ban prostitution or regulate the inflow of women.

In 1881, the Chinese Protectorate took over the administration of the Contagious Diseases Ordinance, which had been passed in 1870 to provide for the registration of brothels. The Protectorate proceeded to register prostitutes and founded Po Leung Kuk in 1888, or the "Office to Protect Virtue", which offered protection to girls such as the mui tsai and the pipa tsai, and women who had been sold or unknowingly tricked into prostitution.

The Mui Tsai

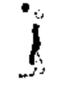
Of the small trickle of young girls who came to Singapore, most were betrothed females or wives with children joining their husbands who were working and had settled down. It was common for men to leave behind their brides until they could send for them to come to Singapore when they had earned enough money. There were also families with young,



unmarried girls, who were forced by worsening economic and political conditions in China to entrust their daughters into the care of kinfolk living in Singapore. These girls could be as young as eight years old, and they followed relatives or fellow villagers in their journey to Singapore, with the aim of seeking a better future through marriage or employment in domestic service. For families not connected to relatives living in Singapore, they would sell their girls through lodging house agents.[18] It was this practice of sending girls out to Malaya that gave rise to the mui tsai (literally meaning "kid-sister") and their subsequent exploitation. The mui tsai could either be tricked into prostitution, or sold into rich families who would abuse them as unprotected labour.

As the mui tsai grew into her teens, her situation could worsen: If she was pretty, she would find herself in a deplorable position of servicing the sexual needs of the male members in the household. If she were to bear children, she would not be allowed to claim or acknowledge them, until her mistress passed away.

Po Leung Kuk served to rescue these girls, giving them a safe place to be trained in useful skills, like cooking, sewing and hair trimming, that could help them find decent men to marry or a useful job when they left Po Leung Kuk.



The Pipa Tsai

Referring to the young girl who played the pipa, a short-necked wooden lute, the pipa tsai was trained to play and sing to the accompaniment of the pipa. In brothels and gatherings where men got together, these girls entertained their clients by reciting Chinese poetry and bantering with them. The older among the pipa tsai could be made to sit at tables to accompany men, paid hourly for their time and company, or to prostitute themselves.

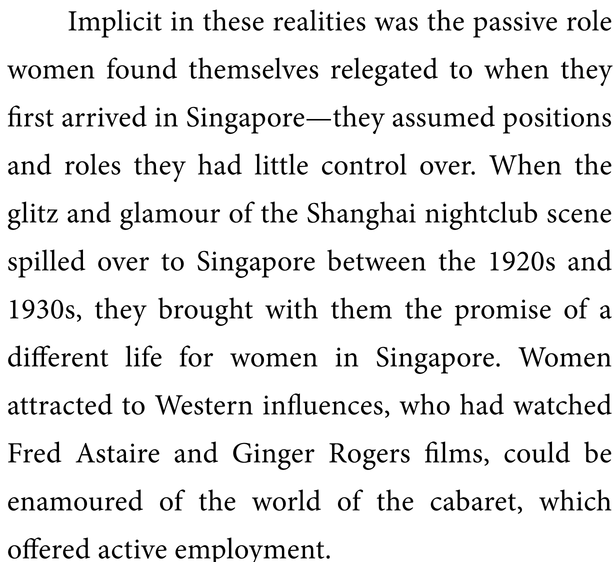
How did these women enter such employment? Like the mui tsai, they had been entrusted by their parents in China to the care of distant relatives in Singapore, the so-called "third or sixth paternal aunt"—sum gu or luk gu—some of whom worked in or even owned entertainment establishments

The pipa tsai embodies a subservient Chinese woman whose job was to entertain.

themselves. The pipa tsais could also have been identified when these "aunts" visited destitute women housed in shelters such as temples to procure their daughters.

Girls who had been forcibly controlled and detained by these aunts could get out of their bondage, but only when they had outlived their popularity. This would be when they married men who were willing to buy them out of their pipa-playing employment, or sadly, after they had grown old.

Girls who were luckier were rescued by the authorities and taken in by Po Leung Kuk. Their future depended on their resilience in retraining themselves, to learn a skill relevant to an alternative job after leaving Po Leung Kuk. There were also girls who turned to Christianity, serving in Sunday School and becoming full-time workers in the church. Others trained as beauticians, and they were considered fortunate if they married men who sponsored the setting up of their salons.



Implicit in these realities was the passive role women found themselves relegated to when they first arrived in Singapore—they assumed positions and roles they had little control over. When the glitz and glamour of the Shanghai nightclub scene spilled over to Singapore between the 1920s and 1930s, they brought with them the promise of a different life for women in Singapore. Women attracted to Western influences, who had watched Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers films, could be enamoured of the world of the cabaret, which offered active employment.

Working in the cabaret could thus be seen as a form of liberation. Dancing was viewed as a professional job, one that paid very well. Women who chose to step into the cabaret world could exercise a measure of control over their lives. They could doll up, look good and use their feminine wiles to manipulate men, unlike their subservient mui tsai and pipa tsai sisters who had to endure servitude, slavehood or prostitution, and served as objects and playthings for men.

Women who had worked as pipa tsais also joined the cabarets when they grew old. They became "mummies" who took up supervisory positions looking after the girls. Many women, in order to provide for themselves in retirement, also adopted little girls, typically grooming them to become cabaret girls.[19]

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"Dancing was fun; it didn't seem like a job but a party every day."

"They practised dancing seriously; it was their life!"

"It is an ugly profession; to prostitute oneself ... is a commonly accepted practice."

Glitz, glamour, and sleaze is what people may remember of the cabaret girls of yesteryear. With curiosity and an open mind, the author sets out to uncover the lives of the "lancing" girls. Even with few dreams and hopes to strive for, and with society's disapproving eye, these women lived with much heart and courage. The music of the dance hall may have faded away, but this book carries the echoes of their dance steps, connecting us with a forgotten past that was inspired by faith, hope and charity.

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Adeline has three grandmothers: two maternal grandmothers from China, and her paternal Peranakan mama from Malacca. Between them, these remarkable women bore and raised ten children.

She is herself a mother of three, and an author of fiction books for young readers. With her children in their teens, Adeline figures that now is a good time to return to her first love: history and research.

Lancing Girls of a Happy World is Adeline's first non-fiction book for adults, which marks a big shift in her writing career. This book draws on the special bond between a woman and a child, as deep-rooted in her as in the "lancing" girls: Adeline's attention was transfixed when she read about two cabaret girls starting a school for children they could never have as their own.

For more information, visit www.adelinefoo.com