

only to run into each other. The union resulted often in a big ball of flesh, out of which emerged infants who were to become the founders of different races, again as in the Kammu. Then there sometimes follow the exploits of a culture hero, the ways in which his people learned farming, hunting, husbandry, etc., their migrations to strange lands, and so forth. Before the Cultural Revolution, more than twenty versions of this type were recorded in Chinese. In the last few years, so many other versions in verse and prose have been appearing in China that this reviewer has not been able to keep track of them. That the Kammu flood stories belong with this group of quasi-national epics appears indisputable. The above examples, this reviewer hopes, are enough to show the relationship between the narratives of the Kammu and those of the minorities in South and West China.

In conclusion, the Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies deserves commendation for its investigation of Asian folklore. Whereas most of the graduate programs in Asian studies in the other lands have concentrated on political problems and economic developments in East and Southeast Asia, the Scandinavian Institute has gone *inter alia* into a more basic, and therefore more permanent aspect—the folklore. These collections of the narratives of one segment of the racial complex in Southeast Asia will surely benefit not only Asian folklorists, but also folklorists of other parts of the world as well, because of the comparative approach and the adoption of generally accepted AT type numbers and Thompson's motif numbers.

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TAN SOOI BENG. Ko-tai: *A new form of Chinese urban street theatre in Malaysia* (Research Notes and Discussions Paper No. 40). Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1984. V+69 pp. Glossary and appendices. Paper US \$4.50 ISBN 9971-902-67-2, ISSN 0129-8828.

Tan Sooi Beng's work on Ko-tai is a timely study of a modern Chinese street theatre in Penang. Ko-tai, literally "song stage" is a combination of popular songs and comic sketches. It emerged at the time when the traditional forms of street theatre, such as opera and puppet shows, had decreased in popularity among the younger generations of Chinese in Malaysia. In 1970, Ko-tai was included in the religious programs to be part of the "entertainment of the gods" and has since been successfully attracting large

audiences, particularly from the lower socioeconomic sectors, to the religious festivities.

Tan's book is divided into three sections. The first describes Ko-tai's origins and setting and the organization of Ko-tai troupes, the second illustrates its content, and the last deals with the reasons for its popularity.

Ko-tai originally consisted of popular songs and serious plays, and was imported to Malaysia by the amusement-park owners from Hong Kong and China prior to World War II. When the amusement parks closed, Ko-tai also went into eclipse. But it was revived singlehandedly by singer Lau Ping, who got it incorporated into the religious festivities and altered its format to include comic sketches in order to attract audiences. Ko-tai is usually performed at night on an open-air stage which is set up opposite either a temple or an altar of a particular deity. The sides of the stage are generally lined by food and drink hawker stalls. The atmosphere is one of a relaxed, informal family outing. Most members of Ko-tai troupes hold regular day-time jobs and perform "for enjoyment and as a hobby." The day-to-day affairs and the finances of the troupe are managed by a manager employed by a private owner.

The second section on the content of Ko-tai is a thematic analysis of the comic sketches which the performers act and improvise on stage without any rehearsals. Much of this section is devoted to the analysis and illustrations of three core themes: social ills in the city, conflicts between the young and the old, and social stratification and mobility.

Tan explains Ko-tai's popularity in the final section by listing four qualities of mainly the comic sketches, paying little attention to the popular songs. She suggests that the reason Ko-tai is appealing is because its format and content are current, relevant, and flexible enough to suit the taste of the audience, and because the nature of the comic performances enables the audience to participate actively and to laugh off their frustrations with their social circumstances.

Only twenty-nine pages of this book are text and the rest (forty pages) are the appendices which include an English translation of a lengthy transcript of one of the comic sketches, a calendar of Ko-tai performances in 1980, some statistics on the social backgrounds of the performers of a particular troupe, and a glossary.

Ko-tai literally means "song stage," and although popular songs take up more than half of the show time, the author gives an unequal treatment to comic sketches because she feels that comic sketches are "the highlights of the evening." Concentrating on the comic text, although the analysis of the core themes tends to be brief and oversimplified, Tan has successfully demonstrated how thematic analysis can be employed in studying popular culture. As a result of this approach, she helps readers gain some insights into the Chinese Malaysian urban social life. Had there been more in-depth analysis of the core themes and how they are reflective of interpersonal relationships and social circumstances among Chinese in Penang, this book would be even more valuable in understanding modern Chinese communities in Malaysia.

Those who are interested in the performing art aspects of Ko-tai may be disappointed that there is little description of the actual performances. What is missed most that is normally included in books on theatre are perhaps photographs or sketches to help give readers visual impressions of the lively performances and the general settings. But those who are interested in the social aspects of the modern Chinese theatre and those who are interested in understanding Chinese in Malaysia in general will find this book useful.

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