

## Taiwan

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**Wilt L. Idema, *Passion, Poverty and Travel: Traditional Hakka Songs and Ballads***

Hackensack, NJ: World Century Publishing Companies, 2015. viii+453 pages. Notes, 4 appendixes, bibliography, index. Hardcover, \$75.00. ISBN 978-1938134654 (hardcover).

Professor Wilt L. Idema is a well-established sinologist who excels at integrating the translation of Chinese vernacular literature with cultural-historical contextualization. Such academic style is on display in this book, *Passion, Poverty and Travel*—a translation of traditional Hakka folklore that both introduces and illustrates related historical and cultural contexts. From the selection, translation and interpretation of these stories of Hakka folklore, the author presents his unique sense of the vernacular genre, its ethnicity, historicity, emotions and humanity. Overall, this book can be considered not only as a valuable resource in its extensive English translation of Hakka folklore, but also as a demonstration of how the poetic and vernacular genre carries a way of understating Hakka cultures and Hakka-ness.

The Introduction provides important background information that sets the stage for readers to delve deeply into the other chapters of the book. In addition to familiarizing readers with the complicated relationship between orality and literacy in Hakka folklore, the introduction demonstrates how the authorship of stories has been made by selecting, translating, and even editing or remodeling the lines of songs.

The first part of the book explores Hakka Mountain Songs. The author exhibits the vivid lyrics of mountain songs collected throughout the Kuangdong area between the early and mid-twentieth century. At the same time, the author presents the biographies of four distinguished Hakka elites—Huang Zunxian, Zhong Jingwen, Luo Xianglin and Li Jinfa—and describes how their personal experiences related to their collection, transcription, and translations of traditional Hakka mountain songs. From this, we find that all four of these elites lived in urban cities, earned college educations, and studied or worked abroad, making them pioneers of collecting, transcribing, and translating mountain songs from rural areas in Kuangdong. To read the first part is not just to read the translations of many pieces of mountain songs but is also to understand these scholar's viewpoints on them. In this, the author shows us that the

collection and compilation of Hakka mountain songs was not only about classification but, since the early twentieth century, has also been an attempt to integrate songs into understandings of broader social, cultural, and historical backgrounds and relate them to the convention of Hakka-logy.

The second part focuses on another kind of vernacular genre of Hakka folklore: narrative ballads. Written in rhyming seven-syllable lines, these ballads are lengthy narratives composed of more lines, with more content, and containing more complicated plots than the mountain songs discussed in part one. First, the author describes how folklore was “a common feature of popular culture in many areas of late-imperial China and the Hakka communities were no exception” (77), situating Hakka folklore in its broader context. Second, he explains that narrative ballads were circulated in oral and written formats, and that for Hakka communities Sibao in Western Fujian was especially significant as it was the center of printing vernacular Chinese folklore. Third, the author explores the various terms for narrative ballads among Hakka communities of different areas: such as *zhuanben* (story books) in Kuangdong or western Fujian, *guwen* (old texts) in southeastern Jiangxi, and *zhuangzai* (stories) in Taiwan. The author elaborates how this diversity of terms for narrative ballads presents the various associations between orality and literacy in the vernacular literature of Hakka communities (78–79).

To explore these themes, the author selects long pieces of three narrative ballads: Ten-Mile Pavilion, the Tale of Tang Xian, and Selling Lanterns. The stories of narrative ballads may include tales of historical characters. They may also include descriptions of events which have also been recounted in both oral and written histories and literature, like in the sixteenth century novel *Romance of the Three Kingdom* (*Sanguo Yanyi*) (93). Therefore, in certain parts of the narrative ballads, the author adds lengthy details as footnotes to explain or describe the cultural and historical context.

The third part of the book explores bamboo-clappers songs. Bamboo-clappers songs are built on a formal five-line stanza, a feature which distinguishes these songs from folklore songs in other parts of mainland China. In contrast with the mountain songs, which could be sung by anyone, bamboo-clappers songs were usually sung only by professional or semi-professional singers. Bamboo-clappers songs are also called “beggars’ songs” or “begging songs,” because some performers would sing these songs while begging for food or money.

Four pieces of bamboo-clappers songs are selected and translated in the third part: Gao Wenju, Liang Sizhen and Zhao Yulin; Second-Hand Zhang Rents out His Wife; and Morals and More. Some of these songs were circulated among the Hakka and other dialectic-speaking societies, while others were only circulated among Hakka communities. According to the author, the repertoire of bamboo-clappers songs includes a broad variety of themes, from risqué materials to long moral ballads, and come from diverse sources. Yet, with regards to the origin of bamboo-clappers songs, the author disagrees that the subjects of songs were taken exclusively from the ballad singers of southeastern Jiangxi because, he argues, there was a “wide availability of narrative ballads in both oral and written form in traditional society” (188–189).

The fourth part is entitled “Migration and Emigration,” which refers to the contents or themes present in Hakka folklore rather than to their forms or genre. There are three chapters in this part: “Push and Pull,” “Destination Taiwan,” and “Destination to Singapore and Beyond.” On the one hand, the author introduces and inter-

prets traditional Hakka folklore based on contemporary historical and sociological theoretical concepts regarding migration and emigration. On the other hand, I believe that these poetic vernacular texts may also represent social and historical situations of the Hakka and their experiences of migration, and this subjectivity captured in the text may provide a pathway to re-define or rethink this related theory.

There are at least three pairs of the theoretical concepts that can be highlighted as the main contributions of this book: the relationship between written texts and social texts, the relationship between poetics and politics, and the relationship between orality and literacy. Among them, the relationship between orality and literacy is illustrated especially well and discussed most thoroughly. Based on his long-term study of Chinese vernacular literature, the author has expertise in analyzing how oral texts may hybridize with historical heroes, heroines, events, or legends from written histories or literature. He also tells us that the interplay, complexity, and ambivalence between orality and literacy already existed in the mind of the scholars or literary persons who were interested in inscribing, transcribing, and translating vernacular folklores from when these texts first appeared and began circulating among areas that had been influenced by written systems of language.

In the Introduction, the author also lays down the limitations of the book, acknowledging that—because he does not have any first-hand experience of studying the social and cultural situations of the Hakka—the performance of these traditional Hakka folklore will not be discussed. This still raises the question of what would our understanding or interpretation of Hakka be if we asked about the emergence or the constitution of Hakka folklores through practice or performance? And how would the presentation of Haka folklore differ if the transcription of Hakka dialect were possible rather than translation?

Another undisclosed limitation, I would argue, is that the contemporary theoretical definitions of performance from the social sciences are also not considered. Furthermore, the concept of historicity the author utilizes and the definition of what constitutes Hakka ethnicity he describes both belong to early paradigms that have been dismissed in Hakka research circles. Instead, I would use the rich materials the author offers to ask anew: what is the “Hakka” that we can define and describe from traditional folklore, songs or ballads? According to the materials and illustrative analysis included in this book, the author follows the hypothesis that Lo Xianglin has made: Hakka culture is affiliated with Han Chinese cultures and the Hakka people originated in the north and migrated south. However, how would this interpretation change if the author responded to the alternative hypothesis that Hakka verbal arts was associated with peripheral ethnic cultures, such as the She and Yao? However, these critiques do not lessen what we may learn of the fruitfulness and richness of Hakka folklore, as Idema offers a new understanding of the features and meanings of traditional Hakka stories. As a whole, this book opens the opportunity for readers to explore Hakka cultures through its extensive translation of traditional Hakka vernacular folklore that circulated among Hakka dialect speaking communities in Taiwan, South China, and Southeast Asia. Therefore, we can say that the value of this book also lies in its ability to present the poetic point of view on the construction of Hakalogy, the study of Hakka.

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