

HOM, MALON K. *Songs of Gold Mountain: Cantonese Rhymes From San Francisco Chinatown*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987. x+322 pages, maps. Hardcover US \$35.00; ISBN 0-520-05607-8.

Despite efforts by the *Amerasia Journal*, *MELUS*, the University of Washington Press, and some San Francisco and Los Angeles study centers, Asian American literature remains unknown to a large reading audience. Part of the problem, as also in the case of European immigrants, is that a number of the early writers did not use English. Thus it was often erroneously assumed that there was no literary activity among these people. Yet creative efforts have appeared even in the most unlikely place of a detention center. In 1980 *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island* presented translations of poems found on the walls of the barracks at Angel Island, the less well-known immigrant processing center near San Francisco in operation from 1910 to 1940. Equally surprising, the present collection, *Songs of Gold Mountain*, gives evidence of a large amount of literary activity by the Chinese in San Francisco in the early 1900s.

*Songs of Gold Mountain* contains 200 songs of the Chinese American experience, selected from 1640 songs in two collections published in 1911 and 1915. These 1640 songs were the result of some thirty literary events and represent the work of a hundred writers. Marlon Hom has divided the chosen 200 songs into eleven categories, each introduced, and given an introduction to the whole collection which describes the history of the Chinese in San Francisco (including four pages of helpful maps), the three vices of the largely bachelor society which appear frequently in the poems (opium, gambling, prostitution), and characteristics of Cantonese folk songs. Finally Hom relates the historical situations to the general themes of the collection, such as hardships in the new land, desire to return to China, and attitudes toward women and American-born children. This introduction of over sixty pages gives a fine setting for the reading of the songs.

The remaining 250 pages comprise the songs, one to a page, and introductions of several pages each to the eleven categories of songs, among them "Immigration Blues," "Lamentations of Stranded Sojourners," and "Lamentations of Estranged Wives." The latter group, Hom suggests, were written not by women as the contents indicate, but by men because the songs contain English-based words (hence not by someone in the homeland) and because so many women would not have participated in the male literary clubs of San Francisco in those days. Each song is presented in its translation, and beneath is the original Chinese, followed sometimes by notes explaining symbols and allusions to classical poetry or historical events. (These notes would have been useful for other Chinese literary studies if they had also been gathered in a glossary at the end.)

One is not particularly moved by the poetry of the songs—as Robert Frost has said: "Poetry is what is lost in translation"—but interest is carried along by the evident expression of deep feeling and concern. Through the combination of the well-considered general introduction (it was written with an eye on the songs to be presented) and the various reiterations of the themes, the reader comes away with a sense of having become part of the sufferings of a people trying to forge a life in the new country that they had looked forward to so much and called "Gold Mountain."

*Songs of Gold Mountain*, in brief, is a good introduction to the Chinese American experience and literature through the songs of a particular area, San Francisco. It is definitely a book for libraries since there is so little on this subject in print. In paperback it would make an exciting text, especially if the majority of the students could read Chinese and share their observations as they reflect on this yet another example of the

"American Dream." Those teaching American Literature in Taiwan or in countries where there are a number of Overseas Chinese should consider this book.

REFERENCE CITED:

LAI, Him Mark et al.

1980 *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island*. San Francisco. Hoc Doi.

David R. Mayer  
Nanzan University  
Nagoya / Japan

LIU, MAU-TSAI. *Der Tiger mit dem Rosenkranz: Rätsel aus China* [The tiger with the rosary. Chinese riddles]. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1986. viii+87 pages. Notes, riddle answers, list of Chinese characters, short bibliography. Paper DM 19.80; ISBN 3-11-010595-0. (In German)

This collection of nearly five hundred Chinese riddles ranges in type from "Volksrätsel" to literary riddles. The analysis is primarily a linguistic one, rather than a folkloristic attempt. Nevertheless, it will be of limited interest to folklorists, literary critics, and students of Chinese studies. The collection is outfitted with an introduction to the riddle and to the essential features of various kinds of riddle. The collection is indexed by the Chinese characters used and closes with a short bibliography and answers to all the riddles.

The collection is a sound one. The riddles represent a broad spectrum of types and forms, from nature riddles (some well known in Western languages: e.g., "In winter it grows, in summer it doesn't grow, it grows long and its roots are at the top." Answer: an icicle), a category that Liu calls "material things" which includes riddles on the abacus, beds, chopsticks, and the like. (The riddles in this section are listed alphabetically *by solution* in German!). The 490 riddles are discussed by category (e.g. "nature," "edibles," "animals," and the like) as well as by type ("literary riddles," "folk riddles" [*miyu* 謎語] and "riddling verses" ("Rätselsprüche" [xiehouyu 歇後語]) And there is one final category that runs all through the text: those that depend upon some feature of a Chinese character or group of characters, generally relying upon a pun for its effect.

The book is rather lean on the scholarly end, it is certainly not "up to date" with current scholarship. One might have wished for a more thorough discussion of Chinese riddles and riddling processes: something about the *Volksrätsel* in context, for example, which Liu does give us in outline for the literary riddle. Mathilde Hain, for instance, is cited in the bibliography, but little of her theoretical apparatus is to be found. Still, Liu's intent as expressed in the introduction is to give German readers a sample of Chinese proverbs, especially the "Volksratsel," and in that limited way, this book succeeds. The one thing this little book does indeed have is a good selection of Chinese riddles.

Pack Carnes  
Lake Forest College,  
Lake Forest, Illinois