

MALAYSIA

THOMAS, PHILIP L. *Like Tigers Around a Piece of Meat. The Baba Style of Dondang Sayang*. Local History and Memoirs. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1986. x+83 pages. Plates, appendices, bibliography. Soft cover S\$16.00 / US\$9.00; ISBN 9971-988-28-3. Hard cover S\$24.00/US\$14.00; ISBN 9971-988-50-X.

Although this book is very short, containing only thirty five pages of main text, it is to the best of my knowledge the only one which attempts a theoretical analysis of the Baba style of Dondang Sayang, a form of Malay oral poetry. It discusses Dondang Sayang on the basis of its cultural and historical background. It also offers a great deal of stimulating suggestions for other fields of Malay studies besides those of literature and art.

Dondang Sayang is a form of verbal art in which the singers, accompanied by violins, drums and gongs, engage in a kind of debate around a central theme in a series of impromptu exchanges. For this song they use the traditional Malay Pantun (a four-line poem), but add repetitions and fillers.

The book is composed of three main parts: a description 1) of the historical background, 2) of the poetic art together with an analysis, and 3) of the difference between Malay and Baba styles. As a whole it is a ripe fruit from the author's longtime study of Malay oral poetry.

The historical account is brief, because the book is intended to be a study of aesthetic expressions, but it is essential order to understand and appreciate Dondang Sayang. The author takes the rhymed poems (*panton seleka*) of the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, a text of the 17th or 18th century, and the music used for the "joget dance" as recorded in the *Tufat al-Nafis* of 1866, to be the source of the Dondang Sayang. He says that these songs became settled in the Straits Colony around the end of the 19th century and that the clubs which sprung up among the Baba Chinese of Singapore and Penang became the force which in recent years supported Dondang Sayang singing. "Although the music and poetry of Dondang Sayang are purely Malay, Dondang Sayang only achieved popularity in communities with rich ethnic mixture" (6), while "where Malays live with fewer non-Malays, Dondang Sayang is at most a minor part of their poetic and musical forms" (6). For the Baba however, "Malay Dondang Sayang and a small corpus of songs associated with it became a cherished and respected pastime which they studied in the hope of gaining full mastery" (6). As the author points out, this is an interesting case "where a single art form is seen through multiple aesthetic standards" (11). He is also interesting because it is reminiscent of another phenomenon, the popularity of Baba translations into Malay of Chinese popular literature and the increase of Malay readers. It provides valuable material to study different values in ethnic aesthetics, which is in fact what the author tries to do.

Subsequently he analyses the poetic art of a Dondang Sayang performance, effectively using figures in order to demonstrate its structure. He explains the three levels of the *tajuk* system which expresses theme, mode, and event, and analyses the rich basic structure of Dondang Sayang, which e.g. may use a high level theme and a middle level metaphor in order to compose a "deep meaning Pangon." In chapter 3 he uses Malay Dondang Sayang as a contrast in order to demonstrate the structure and sequences of a "deep meaning Pantun," and in chapter 4 he illustrates a Baba Dondang Sayang Pantun sequence. The examples for these are taken from appendix A and B, and others in appendix C and E illustrate the "old style."

The system of Dondang Sayang poetic art is the same for both Malay and Baba

Chinese, but there is a marked difference in the use of it by the two groups. Here is where the author sees the difference in aesthetic values between the two groups. He presents his argument in the concluding chapter 5. In a Baba poem "both lines of the first couplet must be meaningful and make sense as a pair of lines" (28). It is important that the connection of thoughts be clear and the story line harmonious. Then a drama and a debate unfolds which abounds with rich knowledge of Malay culture and nature (29). The singing develops into explosive bursts and phrasings of tone.

On the other hand, the Malay Pantun refrains from directly addressing a given point. Although it has a consistent theme, this is only suggested in the first poem and then hidden, and only at the end the initially concealed allusion is made explicit. Further, by "scintillating and artful variation in the metaphoric and modal levels" (24) the listener is purposely misled. The singing is smooth, and there is no burst of sound interrupting the flow of words. Neither voice nor movement are affected by the subject matter. Emphasis is specially given to the discontinuity between the poem's covert meaning and the singing's overt image. It is a disjointed performance of musicians, singers and dancers, and as a result a direct understanding of its theme becomes blurred. All this creates an image of disorder, but such disorder can only exist in an art form where an underlying order is strong, as the author emphasizes. He says that Malays have no tradition of discussing poetry, whereas Baba Chinese not only do discuss it, they also transfer an attitude towards literature which was formed from the old Chinese education system into the Malayan context. Their contests of wit and verse recall these former scholastic exchanges. Similar exchanges are also well known from the *shan-ke* 山歌 of southern China, but there is no conclusive evidence as to an influence of this tradition on the Baba Chinese's poems.

Since Baba Chinese are ordinarily regarded as not speaking Chinese, it is difficult to evaluate the influence of Chinese literature on them in terms of sense or aesthetic value. This problem cannot possibly be approached only through the study of literature. In fact, the author's arguments suggest further approaches to such a comparison of cultures. One of them could be a study of the social history of the cultural intercourse between Malays and Baba Chinese. For any of such attempts it is important to arrive at a definition of the term "Baba Chinese," something that proves to be difficult. Further examination of this concept is needed, but the author has taken an important step in the right direction.

Arai Shigeo
Mie University
Tsu, Japan

INDONESIA

FOX, JAMES J., Editor. *To Speak in Pairs. Essays on the Ritual Languages of Eastern Indonesia.* Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture, 15. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. xi+338 pages. Photographs, figures, bibliography, index. Cloth £30.00; ISBN 0-521-34332-1.

Much work on eastern Indonesia over the past fifteen years or so has shifted from the formal study of models initiated by Van Wouden to "the linguistic study of metaphors for living" (Fox 1980, 330-331; 1981, 483). This research has established that a number of metaphors and social categories more or less decidedly compose "the common