

curators, collectors and dealers – and, indeed, anyone interested more generally in Chinese art and collecting.

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Passion, Poverty and Travel: Traditional Hakka Songs and Ballads

WILT L. IDEMA

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In *Passion, Poverty and Travel*, Wilt Idema presents us with the first substantial anthology of the oral traditions of the Chinese Hakka people in English translation. The Hakka originated in the mountainous regions of China's southern provinces. Considered to be "guest people," they often met with violent resistance from other ethnic groups such as the Punti people of the Pearl [Zhu] River delta. The Hakka played a significant role in the Taiping rebellion of the mid-19th century and in the later Chinese revolutionary movement. Forced by poverty to emigrate, large Hakka populations can now be found in Taiwan, South-east Asia and the United States. The history and migration of the Hakka have been studied by Sow-Theng Leong and Nicole Constable, inter alia; however, there are very few works in Western languages on the literature of the Hakka. This volume is the latest in a series of scholarly translations of China's vernacular theatrical and oral culture completed by the author, who is a research professor at Harvard University.

The "mountain songs" (songs sung in the open air), narrative ballads and bamboo-clapper songs translated here provide an unrivalled opportunity to gain insight into how the Hakka dealt with the rigours of their existence and transmitted a deep sense of Hakka identity. Hakka songs share many subjects in common with folkloric traditions throughout China, if not the world, such as love, morality, comic tales, satirical songs and so on. What makes them particularly "Hakka" is the preoccupation with separation from loved ones and the lure of migration in pursuit of wealth in foreign lands.

The oral material has been selected from a heterogeneous range of earlier Chinese-language collections, many dating back to the late Qing era. Chinese intellectuals who collected songs were often intrigued by their frank expression of love and desire: "I'll happily leave my wife to walk to you/ Will you leave your man to come to me?" (p. 34). Mountain-songs deploy homely imagery: "You, boy, resemble dried bamboo sprouts/ Put them in the wok, have them fried by me" (p. 55). Women inveigh against men who gamble, drink and whore around, while the men condemn the women for hypocrisy: "My dear girl, there is no need for you to act so coy/You have been with half of the men of this district" (p. 57). The songs reflect popular courting and marriage customs, including child-bride marriage, which involved a form of adoption of the girl by her prospective parents-in-law. The young girl contributed to the family labour and could well serve as nanny to her future husband: "She's a grown-up girl of eighteen, he's a husband of three/Weeping and crying, she takes him to bed in her arms" (p. 70). The songs encode popular notions of propriety and morality. In "Ten-mile pavilion," the lust-stricken young man enters the girl's chamber at night only to be met by her injunction to not dare rape her. He then seduces her with erudite allusions to lovers of the past. Won over by his eloquence

she declares “Moved by your affection, I cannot refuse your love!” (p. 95). After love-making, she accompanies him on departure, urging him all the while to act honestly, not engage in fights, do good deeds, bring honour to his family, and so on. This section also includes a section which appears misogynistic in the codes of contemporary feminism, all the more powerful because it comes from the voice of a woman. She bids him be aware of prostitutes who “carry a heart of disaster at their waist” and other ladies of easy virtue: “These lascivious women have hearts like a scorpion/ And with feigned devotion they’ll seduce your heart” (pp. 100, 102). Section four deals specifically with songs of emigration. These songs contain detail about boat travel, life in Nanyang, and the role of the middlemen who transported the migrants to their destinations for a hefty fee. The songs conjure up the allure of incredible wealth. An impoverished man can readily become a hegemon-King with concubines “who each in turn scratch his itching back” (p. 427).

In this brief review it is not possible to do justice to the richness of this volume. Suffice it to say that it provides the most comprehensive translation of Hakka oral traditions available in English. It opens up for the reader the preoccupations and intimate concerns of this impoverished and migratory population. The volume contains a scholarly introduction which provides essential contextual information together with separate notes on each individual song category. Cultural allusions are carefully annotated and a bibliography of scholarly sources is appended. The songs are very enjoyable to read. The translator is not loath to add the odd obscenity when the pungent language of the original warrants it. There are relatively few examples of Chinese regional cultures in translation and certainly very few representing the Hakka people. This volume will be welcomed by scholars and students of Chinese literature, anthropologists, ethnologists, social historians and those with an interest in regional identities and global mobility. Educators will find a rich trove of primary sources to interest classes in oral and folk traditions, Chinese culture, and social history. Hakka descendants around the globe will no doubt rejoice in the rich culture of their forebears.

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