

## Book Review

*Penang: Rites of Belonging in a Malaysian Chinese Community*, by Jean Elizabeth DeBernardi, Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2009, 318 pages (Paperback ISBN 978-9971-69-416-6) ; *Hokkien Nursery Rhymes in Old Penang* 《老檳城•老童謠》 (in Chinese), compiled by Toh Teong Chuan, Kuala Lumpur: Mentor Publishing Sdn. Bhd., 2011, 178 pages (Paperback ISBN 978-983-3941-827).

Penang was the earliest British colonial “bridgehead” that was established in the Malay Peninsula in 1786. British hegemony subsequently penetrated into various other Malay sultanates so that by the early twentieth century the entire peninsula came to be known as British Malaya. An integral part of the colonialization process was the immigration of peoples from surrounding territories notably from China, India, and the islands of present-day Indonesia. The Chinese community grew rather rapidly in number as it sought to claim a stake in the economic future of Penang. This community comprised a diversity of dialect groups from south China of which the most dominant, until today, are the Hokkiens, more correctly known as Minnan or south Fujian.

Despite more than two centuries since the beginning of the “modern” history of Penang, serious studies or documentation of the Chinese or Hokkien have surfaced only in recent decades. Interest among the latest publications on the Chinese of Penang are those on folk beliefs and folk poetry. Representing the former is Jean DeBernardi’s *Penang: Rites of Belonging in a Malaysian Chinese Community* and a sample of the latter is *Hokkien Nursery Rhymes in Old Penang* (in Chinese), compiled by Toh Teong Chuan. One is a serious academic endeavour by a foreign scholar and the other is a labour of love by a native son in his attempt to salvage the disappearing treasure trove of Hokkien folk literature.

DeBernardi’s study is based on anthropological observations and field techniques and skilfully integrated with documentary materials including Colonial Office files, *Straits Settlements Records*, and accounts of nineteenth century Chinese society of Penang by Lieutenant Colonel James Low, James Logan and other British officials. Its intention is to examine the manner by which Penang Chinese established their identity through folk beliefs and rites. She embarked on her field research on Chinese folk beliefs in Penang in 1979. She had learned Mandarin to facilitate her research and, upon arrival in Penang, began to master the local version of the Hokkien dialect. With this special advantage, she was able to employ popular terms and phrases to give local flavour to her analysis. She was also able to decipher words uttered by a medium

in the midst of a trance in her narrative on the collective memory of Penang Chinese. The book is divided into two parts: religion and society in colonial Penang and religions and the politics of ethnic revival in contemporary Penang.

The study is an illuminating account of how the Chinese won the acceptance of colonial authorities in carrying out their religious activities. Conflicts between the colonial administration and Chinese folk beliefs were described. An example was a case in 1857 that involved the Kong Hok Keong (Guan Yin) temple. On one occasion, the temple followers were made to adjust their religious schedule so as not to interfere with the Sunday prayers of the neighbouring St. George's church. The police attempted to regulate the religious procession of the temple when Bruce Roberson, deputy police inspector and son-in-law of Straits Settlement Governor-General Edmund Blundell, rejected the application of the temple to celebrate the birth of the Goddess Guan Yin. The officer ordered that the stage erected by the temple be dismantled on a Saturday and be re-erected the following Monday. When this order was not followed, Roberson personally led the police to dismantle the stage.

The study examines the role of religion in the life of the Chinese and how Chinese identity and rights were exercised through the celebration of specific traditional festivals. The revival of Chinese folk beliefs, according to the study, is an expression of Chinese social coherence and identity as well as the community's attempt to counter the bias in official policies from the colonial period right through to present-day regulations on the practice of Chinese cultural activities. Among the reaction of the community was the establishment of a special committee to hold religious events and which has now taken on the duty of raising funds to support Chinese education in the state.

There are certain misconceptions in the author's discussion of the role of folk beliefs among the Chinese. This role is not entirely confined to what are superstitious practices in the name of religion. As an outsider, the author's over-emphasis of the symbolic meanings of religious activities may have overlooked the deeper meanings and sanctity of religious rites. For example, the perception that the Nine Emperors festival is a sign of the revival of Chinese folk religion is questionable. This festival has indeed been held since the early twentieth century not only in Penang but also in other towns especially Kuala Lumpur. Similarly, to claim that praying to the God of Heaven on the ninth day of the Chinese New Year is practised only by the Hokkiens is not entirely correct. This tradition is also followed by some other dialect groups at least from the 1970s.

These minor misconceptions do not distract recognition from the value of the book in its analysis of the relations between religious practices and identity among the Chinese of Penang. The publication is a serious academic product that deserves close study by all who are interested in folk culture and the Chinese. What is presented in the book is representative of not just Penang but other parts of Malaysia where the Chinese are found in substantial numbers.

The delightful publication on *Hokkien Nursery Rhymes in Old Penang* is in effect a collection of selected folk poems. The compiler's intention is more than to entertain but, more

significantly, to revive the receding memory of a rich cultural past of the Hokkiens of Penang. As the practice of folk religion is an expression of identity of the practitioners, so also the recitation or singing of folk poetry and rhymes. Unlike religious practices which have wide appeal to a large following, the folk rhymes are in danger of slipping into oblivion.

The compiler is a native of Penang who is passionate in his efforts to capture the many fading faces of this old settlement. Through oral history, he has meticulously recorded facets of community life of the past, the origins of road names, the sceneries of old Penang and other subjects. These have helped to preserve the collective memories of the community and to enhance its sense of belonging. Some of these publications have now been used as gifts to official visitors to Penang.

Nursery rhymes are valued not so much as a literary form as in their relevance as a cultural heritage. Despite the relatively short history of settlement of the Chinese in Malaysia, many aspects of the cultural heritage in various forms are being neglected, discarded, or simply forgotten as a result of the onslaught of economic development. Efforts to compile and salvage this art form are highly commendable and should serve as an example to those who appreciate the memories of the past.

The collection consists of 44 Hokkien nursery rhymes compiled between 2001 and 2011. They were sourced from all levels of Chinese society, including the highest as represented by the late Tun Dr. Lim Chong Eu/林苍佑 (1919-2010) who once served as the Chief Minister of Penang. The rhymes deal with children's games, advice to women, daily life, and many others. They reflect the traditional values of Chinese society in an earlier period of history. The piece entitled "The daughter-in-law should know" advises that a daughter-in-law should sleep late and wake up early, tidy up the house, clean the tables and chairs, and the bowls and chopsticks. She is to speak well of her husband's brothers, and of impeccable family upbringing. In effect, it describes what the "good daughter-in-law" should be, namely, hardworking and dutiful in looking after the household and its members. The rhyme also sings the praise of her parents for bringing up the "good daughter-in-law". While fulfilling the social mores of the past, the "good daughter-in-law" then was in reality a "domestic helper" and, from the perspective of gender equality, someone who occupied a subordinate position in the household into which she was supposedly happily married.

Another rhyme compares the background of two grandmothers in the family, one a local-born *nyonya* and the other from China. The local-born grandma did not bind her feet while the grandma from China did not chew betel nuts and *sirih* leaves. This alludes to a bygone age when polygamy was an accepted practice among the Chinese. The male, already married when he left his ancestral village to look for his fortune in Malaya, settled down and married a local woman. Years later, he returned to China to bring back his stranded wife who would then have to co-exist with a local woman.

Some of the rhymes contain a mixture of local language or dialect, presented in colloquial Hokkien style. Each poem is accompanied by international phonetic symbols. In keeping faithfully to the Penang version of the Hokkien dialect, the collection may well serve as a useful reference for academic studies relating to, among other topics, Chinese cultural heritage and localization, philology, and provide clues to sensitive gender issues of old Penang.

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- (iii) Collections: WANG Gungwu 1990. Merchants without empire: the Hokkien sojourning communities. In *The Rise of Merchant Empires: Long-distance Trade in the Early Modern World, 1350- 1750*, edited by James D. Tracy, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press: 400- 421.
- (iv) Theses: TAGLIACOZZO, Eric 1999. *Secret Trades of the Straits: Smuggling and State-Formation Along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1870-1910*, Ph. D. thesis, Yale University.
- (v) Internet sources: DEBERNARDI, Jean 1996. Chinese in Southeast Asia, *Encyclopedia of World Cultures*. <http://www.encyclopedia.com> (assessed on 16 Jan. 2011).
- (vi) Chinese sources: Titles in Chinese are to be shown in simplified characters and accompanied by a translation in English. These are listed separately and in alphabetical order according to the Pinyin system as follows:
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  - Articles: 陈国明1992.〈在美华人家庭价值取向的变迁〉，载《海外华人研究》，第二期：111-121（CHEN Guo Ming 1992. Changing trends in the family values of Chinese Americans, *Journal of Overseas Chinese Studies*, No. 2: 111-121).

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