Book Review. "Beyond 'Innocence"

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Beyond “Innocence” focuses on music among the Amis, Taiwan’s largest indigenous group. Chapter one briefly traces historical records of Taiwan’s aboriginal song from early Chinese written records (220–280AD), through the Dutch and Japanese colonial periods, to the contemporary era. Shzr Ee Tan highlights the constructed nature of indigenous categories in Taiwan, in that the Amis are arguably several distinct groups of people who were placed in one group during Japanese colonial rule (p. 37). Today, the definition of “Amis” is coming unravelled as factions fight for the political recognition of smaller subgroups (p. 37). Tan deftly situates herself in the story, providing an account of her initial days of ethnographic fieldwork in contemporary Amis society.

In the second chapter, Tan addresses culturally bound dialogues about music. She begins by comparing and contrasting the Amis term laidhiw with the Chinese term for music (yinyue). Tan then proceeds to investigate the range of languages that are used in discussing indigenous music. This includes the use of Chinese and the Amis dialect to describe different elements of song. The issue is further complicated when she must use Japanese to converse with elderly people who do not speak Chinese because they were schooled in the Japanese colonial era. Tan points out that music is therefore part of a multilingual discourse that is filled with varied nuances embedded in the languages being spoken.

Chapter three addresses the roles of music in Amis rituals and festivals. She also explores music in local churches. As but one example of the cultural intricacies of her study, church hymns frequently feature traditional Amis tunes that have been adapted with new lyrics to fit the Christian context (pp. 109–110).

The fourth chapter shifts to Amis performances and audiences. There is not enough space to discuss this chapter in depth here, but many of the headings and subheadings speak for themselves: “church choirs” (p. 129), “inter-village and inter-city events” (p. 132), “pan-Amis festivals” (p. 135), “wedding bands and indie rockers” (p. 143), “tourist troupes” (p. 145), “Han audiences” (p. 156) and “overseas performances” (p. 158).

Chapter five is entitled “Aboriginal pop” but in many ways this is a misnomer. Tan points out that the music might better be aligned with Japanese enka for its decidedly nostalgic ethos. One should also remember that very few indigenous songs come close to competing in Taiwan’s Chinese-language pop music market.

In this chapter, Tan provides a compelling history of mass produced indigenous song. She addresses the ways that new technologies have influenced music, including tape cassettes in the 1960s (p. 192) and karaoke in the 1980s (p. 202). These new technologies introduced the slippery issue of who owns a tribal song in relation to copyrights and royalties (p. 195), as well as in marketing and distribution (p. 208).

Beyond “Innocence” is remarkably comprehensive so I hesitate to criticize it for not covering even more. Yet one area that could have been developed more fully is the ways that Mandopop artists of indigenous descent sell their ethnicity as image while divesting their music of indigenous culture and melodies. Tan touches on this very briefly in relation to the performer A-mei (p. 213) but she does not really delve into the issue. Investigating this in more depth would help to better understand the malleability of social identity formation, which Tan explores so well in other contexts.
The book comes with a CD containing the author’s aural recordings of 16 songs and four brief videos. The videos are uncut documentary footage of Amis dance and song. This CD is a wonderful complement to an already excellent book. The material on the CD allows the viewer to feel that he or she is there and thereby makes many of the abstract theoretical issues of the book come vibrantly alive. Tan clearly references these recordings in a table at the front of the book and as parenthesized notations in the text when talking about a particular song or performance. *Beyond “Innocence”* provides an important examination of constructions of social identity and the ways in which people within those groups actively create images of their own. More often than not, these issues are fraught with ambiguity. Is rejecting traditional group orientation an act of forgetting one’s past or rejecting the narrowly defined identities placed on the Amis by Taiwan’s government and tourist agencies? For those who do embrace traditional lifestyles, are they fighting to preserve their heritage against these power structures or succumbing to the narrow role that Taiwan has ascribed to them?

Tan should be commended for not treating Amis culture as if it were in a cultural vacuum with no external forces from Taiwan’s political economy – a shortcoming that can be seen in a surprising amount of the anthropological studies of Taiwan’s indigenous cultures. Nor does she ignore traditional worldviews or music in addressing the contemporary context. The result is a complex and fascinating account of Amis life that should be required reading for anyone interested in Taiwan’s indigenous cultures or music.

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Mary Tiffen, a researcher into the social and economic issues arising from agricultural change in Africa and the Middle East, here explores, in print, her family history. In the process of researching this volume, she delved deep into the life of Sir Robert Hart (1835–1911), who served China as the Inspector General of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service (CMCS) for almost 50 years. However, bringing an intriguing perspective on Hart’s life, Tiffen sets out a larger ambition than telling a straightforward family story. Rather, she seeks to examine the nature of the Victorian family and its associated social expectations and conventions.

In the English-speaking world, Hart is little known – a name in a long list of distinguished Victorian expatriates who made an impact across the world but who are largely forgotten. There are only a few books published about Hart, in the main written by individuals who had direct contact with the man himself. A volume written by Juliet Bredon, Hart’s niece, attempted as much as possible to present a positive family perspective. By contrast, Paul King, a former Commissioner of the CMCS, was less favourable in his assessment. Stanley Wright, also a CMCS Commissioner as well as an expert on the Chinese economy, who while in office maintained a strong interest in the CMCS archives and is regarded by posterity as an important figure in preserving and recording the CMCS’s history, held Hart in very high regard. Besides these