

TAN SOOI BENG. *Bangsawan: A Social and Stylistic History of Popular Malay Opera*. South-East Asian Social Science Monographs. Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1993. xxiv+261 pages. Map, figures, plates, tables, musical examples, appendices (musical transcriptions, synopses of plays, categories of *lagu* and their uses), glossary, bibliography, index. Hardcover, n.p.; ISBN 0-19-588599-6.

Works written in the 1970s on the Malaysian musical-theatrical form known as *bangsawan* generally represent it as a type of "traditional" theater (MUSTAPHA 1974; RAHMAH 1975). These works suggest that *bangsawan* has been in existence for many generations, and that it strongly reflects indigenous elements. This view is still today held by the Malaysian government agencies involved in cultural activities.

A quite different picture is presented by Tan Sooi Beng, who sees the *bangsawan* as having originated and developed in the hundred-year span from the late nineteenth century to the present. In her study of this form of Malay opera (a form employing spoken dialogue, stock characters, costumes, scenery on a proscenium stage, orchestral music, song, dances, and pantomime) the author subjects it to a diachronic analysis, focusing on the processes involved in its development and change. She ascertains that the theatrical fabric of the *bangsawan* as well as its musical form and texture have been influenced by social and political events and changes in Malaya from the 1880s up until the present.

Tan begins with a personal account of how she studied *bangsawan* at a workshop sponsored by the Malaysian Ministry of Culture and Tourism. The workshop attempted to teach students the rudiments and basic characteristics of what the sponsors said was a traditional form of Malay theater; their desire was to revive a nearly extinct theatrical form that highlighted historical and mythical stories rooted in the Malay court world. The author, however, abruptly transports the reader back to the 1880s to view the origins and early characteristics of the *bangsawan* and the development of the related musical, theatrical, social, and political events as they unfolded during its heyday as a form of popular, commercial theater in the Malay Peninsula.

The main body of this study is an in-depth account of the characteristics of the *bangsawan* as it flourished from about the 1880s through the 1930s. With chapters devoted to urban commercial theater, the elements of variety and the spectacular in *bangsawan* productions, the promotion of star performers, the development of the *Orkes Melayu* (Malay orchestra), the stock scenes and character types used, the characteristics and classification of musical pieces, the dramatic uses of music, and the socio-political forces that influenced these elements, the book portrays a type of theater quite different from a "traditional" Malay form. It becomes evident that the *bangsawan* was eclectic in nature, a commercial theater highly popular in the early twentieth century with the country's urban and suburban population. From its original form as *wayang Parsi* (Persian theater), which reached peninsular Malaya in the late nineteenth century, it developed as a mixture of Malay, Indian, Arabic, Western, and other elements, combining as necessary all the diverse elements that would appeal to a heterogeneous public.

The liberal inclusion, in the text and appendices, of transcriptions of musical pieces recorded in the 1930s and 1980s provides the music specialist in particular with a clear view of early *bangsawan* music and of the way in which the style and instrumentation changed up until the late twentieth century as the original Malay *ronggeng* ensembles, Indian tables, and Indian harmoniums were later supplemented with pianos,

violins, and other Western instruments. The synopses of six *bangsawan* plays, also in the appendices, support the author's observations regarding the use of specific types of stock characters and scenes, while a summary outline of four different versions of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* shows how the stock characters and conventions of *bangsawan* were adapted to allow the inclusion of foreign plays (*cerita klasik*, or "classical stories") into the standard repertory during the 1920s and 1930s. Although exhibiting some conventions of traditional Malay theater, the *bangsawan* was a form that drew upon many different sources for its musical and theatrical style until the Japanese occupation of Malaya during World War II.

The author points to four main factors that underlie the development of the *bangsawan* in Malaysia. With many references to 78-rpm recordings, radio programs, and early newspaper advertisements for *bangsawan* productions, the author confirms that *bangsawan* was a highly commercial and innovative theater (similar to the Philippine *zarzuela*, and to the *komedie stambul*, *ketoprak*, *sandiwara* and other forms emerging in Indonesia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). It was theater created by local people for local consumption, showing the continued use of many traditional conventions but also displaying a high degree of adaptability and change.

Another important thread woven throughout this work is the influence of contemporary social and political factors on the *bangsawan*. Particular attention is given to the socioeconomic and demographic elements important in the Malay Peninsula during the twentieth century, such as colonialism, urbanization, the pluralization of society, the spread of formal education, and the emergence of new forms of mass media and entertainment such as film, sound recording, and theater (notably the *sandiwara*). The hardships of World War II and the postwar years played a part in the critical decline experienced by the *bangsawan* until the late 1960s and early 1970s. Finally, in the mid-1970s and 1980s a revival began, and Tan describes the influence of the government and the National Culture Policy¹ in shaping the characteristics of a revived *bangsawan*. By the 1980s *bangsawan* had been Malayized and reshaped to look traditional, and cultural syncretism had essentially ceased. The author asserts that in the late twentieth century the *bangsawan* had "lost its creativity, flexibility and adaptability as a consequence of government sponsorship. The present-day *bangsawan* is artificial."

As Tan's critical analysis of the development of this theatrical form unfolds, an awareness emerges of the fragile nature of performing art forms and of the possible consequences when governments and other organizations artificially intervene in their development. This very interesting, well-written, and entertaining work is published as part of the South-East Asian Social Science Monographs (Oxford University Press) and constitutes an excellent contribution to the literature on Malaysian performing arts. It also provides a clear, critical view of continuity, syncretism, and change. The extensive bibliography includes books, theses, and articles as well as a substantial discography of 78-rpm recordings of *bangsawan* pieces recorded in the 1930s. It is an especially important work for Southeast Asianists specializing in music and theater.

NOTE

1. The National Culture Policy was generated by government agencies in mid-1971 to help promote a common culture and a national identity in Malaysia. This policy stipulated three main principles: 1) the national culture is based on the cultures of the indigenous peoples of the Peninsula; 2) elements from other cultures that

are suitable and reasonable may be incorporated into the national culture; and 3) Islam is an important aspect of the national culture (KEMENTERIAAN KEBUDAYAAN, BELIA DAN SUKAN 1973, vii).

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INDONESIA

SEVIN, OLIVIER. *L'Indonésie*. Que sais-je? 801. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1993. 127 pages. Maps, bibliography. Paper, n.p.; ISBN 2 13 045537 9. (In French)

Travel stories, diaries of travel, guidebooks, and books describing other lands have gained a permanent place on the bookshelves of the so-called rich countries over the past few decades. Until recently the genre was the domain of novelists, journalists, and adventurers; now more and more scholars have entered the field. Lovers of travel and readers interested in other cultures are no longer content with stories, impressions, itineraries, and travel advice—increasingly, they want to go into the history and culture of other societies. It is thus not surprising that historians, anthropologists and social geographers have leapt into this market. They are the ones with the data and ideas that the general public desires.

The French anthropologist Olivier Sevin's *L'Indonésie* fits this development well. Having authored and co-authored two scholarly studies on, respectively, the Dayak in central Kalimantan (1983) and transmigration in South Sumatra, he has now produced a brief, general study of Indonesia. The book contains no new data or insights for specialists on Indonesia; for them its only importance is the indirect but interesting picture it provides of the state of affairs of Indonesian studies in France. For the general reader, however, the book gives in a nutshell a quite gripping survey of the nature and development of Indonesian society as well as of the aspirations and frustrations of the populace.

The book is part of the encyclopedic series *Que sais-je?* [What do I know?]. Its size is so small that it might better be called a *livre de pochette* than a *livre de poche* (pocket-book). The size is, however, not representative of its content. The author deserves praise for having been able to discuss so many relevant matters within the restrictions that such a series imposes.