

# Khó-ài ê Siû-jîn, *the Lot of Woman and Other Matters*

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*Khó-ài ê Siû-jîn* is a Taioanese novel with a twisting, turning plot. The characters encounter all manner of trials, mistreatment, betrayal, and ruin. You're not done reading till you reach The End.

*Khó-ài ê Siû-jîn* is a religious tragicomedy about the ethics of the family. As far as the art of writing novels goes, teachings are best expressed through the words and actions and behaviors of the characters, leaving the rest to the reader to judge. Breaking into sermon is not a good look for the storyteller. In this sense, the first eleven chapters of *Khó-ài* are richer than the rest of it.

As the ancient Roman poet Horace put it in “Ars Poetica”: “Poets wish either to profit or to delight; or to deliver at once both the pleasures and the necessities of life.... He who joins the instructive with the agreeable, carries off every vote, by delighting and at the same time admonishing the reader.”<sup>1</sup> Good writing turns pages and delights readers and stays in mind day and night, lifting lives and elevating society — it kiam jī kō: bong lâ-á kiam sé-khō,<sup>2</sup> as we might say.

Different folks are bound to take to a work differently, for some favor booze, and others tofu. As for me, my understanding is limited, and I like what I see. I have but one point to raise, which is that what befell Lân-hiong 蘭香 showcases the male chauvinism of Sino-Formosan society — the callousness and cruelty toward females, the male dominion over women's bodies, the asymmetric expectation of female chastity. Tân Chheng-chôa<sup>3</sup> 陳清泉 wantonly ruined a woman and never got his just deserts, instead in time returning to Formosa all high and mighty with Overseas Chinese status, and a son waiting for him to boot<sup>3</sup> — truly ka-lēng khioh piān khang.<sup>4</sup>

The women of *Khó-ài* lack agency. As a professional, Lân-hiong made her own living and had the right to pursue her own happiness. Constrained by the times and by the social environment, though, she just couldn't let things go. She

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<sup>1</sup> This is Christopher Smart's translation.

<sup>2</sup> Literally *washing the pants while clamming* — something like killing two birds with one stone, with more upside.

<sup>3</sup> Translator's note: His son was grown when he returned. In East Asian terms, he showed up just in time to reap a lifetime supply of filial piety from a son he hadn't been there to raise.

<sup>4</sup> Literally *a crested myna bagging a ready-made nest*. The author annotated this with khít-chhiān kóa<sup>n</sup> biō-kong, literally *a beggar ousting the temple keeper*.

became a victim of the traditional feudal paradigm. And there is no poetic justice in the attempt to bring closure to her life of misfortune with just one line — “Lân, kiû lí sià-bián góa” (*Please forgive me, Lân*). There is only a dogma of forgiveness, pressed into service of sexism.

A work of fiction may portray a world where blessed are the wicked and nice guys finish last, but what does that do for the soul? Women have been destined to hardship since early times. Men have more or less ruled the world. Isn't it time we gave more thought to treating each other more fairly?

Formosa has not lacked literature. But little of it has ever been published. There have been great efforts in various parts, but no integration. There have been “as many frying pans as there have been eggs,” while a concept of cultural Formosanness, or Formosannesses, has failed to emerge; but the publication of *Khó-ài ê Siû-jîn* — which today shows us the reality of the Formosan society of the past — was a great start.

Âng-khî hó chiáh; tùi toh khî tì?<sup>5</sup> An anthology of the Formosan literature of the past — poetry, novels, plays, and essays spanning the full four hundred years — would be a boon to the Formosan literature of the present as it grows and unfolds. It could serve as a reference book of Formosan orthographies, a base for discussion and — eventually — standard written forms. Such an anthology would bring nothing but benefit, for only by studying our cultural inheritance can we hope to know yam from taro,<sup>6</sup> and understand the whys and hows of han-chî m̄ kia<sup>n</sup> lóh thō nōa, chí kiû ki-hiòh tãi-tãi thòa<sup>n</sup>.<sup>7</sup>

The *Norton Anthology of English Literature* and the *Oxford Anthology of English Literature* examine life as lived by the various classes in English society, from the humanistic viewpoint that sprang from the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution; the *American Tradition in Literature* celebrates the founding of Anglo-American culture by Puritan settlers and their New World offspring. Key aspects of the evolving nature of Formosan society would be revealed in the compiling of an anthology of Formosan works spanning the ages. We have the *Chhian-kim-phó* 千金譜. We have the *Tâi-oân Sam-jū-keng* 台灣三字經 and the *Thu*

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<sup>5</sup> *The persimmon is good to eat; where was it grown?* In the context, this means we should remember where we're coming from.

<sup>6</sup> Translator's note: In Taioanese, to *not know taro from yam* is to not know a thing. On another level, Ō-á (Taros) is an etymologically unflattering label for the settlers that arrived under the Chinese Nationalist aegis, while Han-chî (Yams) refers to the Formosan Hakka and the Taioanese.

<sup>7</sup> *The yam fears not being cast aside to rot, so long as its offspring may grow, and their offspring, and theirs.* Yams, the saying goes, do not fear adverse conditions; they seek to outlast them intergenerationally if all else fails, which it has at times.

*Thòi Pî-kô* 渡台悲歌.<sup>8</sup> We have the plays and novels from the 1930s of the Formosan New Literature Movement, and the *koa-á-phō* 歌仔簿,<sup>9</sup> and folk ballads (*bîn-iâu* 民謠); and of late we have new poems and novels in Taioanese, such as “*Khòng-pō ê Táⁿ-niau Chhī*” (抗暴 ê 打貓市) by Sòng Tèk-lâi 宋澤萊, and “*Lí Chiòh-thâu ê Ku-koài Pēⁿ*” (李石頭 ê 古怪病) by Tân Lûi 陳雷 — both a lot of fun to read.

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<sup>8</sup> Translator’s note: A sorrowful saga, in Hakka verse, describing the dangers and difficulties of working or settling in Formosa.

<sup>9</sup> Also known as *koa-á chheh* 歌仔冊.