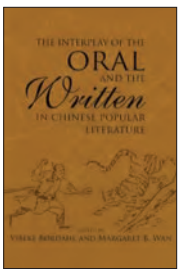
China



Vibeke Børdahl and Margaret B. Wan, eds., *The Interplay of the Oral and the Written in Chinese Popular Literature*

Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press, 2010. NIAS Studies in Asian Topics, no. 46. 269 pages, color photos, maps, index. Hardback, £45.00; paperback, £16.99. ISBN 978-87-7694-054-6 (hardback); ISBN 978-87-7694-055-3 (paperback).

THE SIX articles in this volume treat the topic of the relation between works of Chinese vernacular fiction and Chinese oral storytelling. Much premodern Chinese vernacular fiction is presented in a style that mimics traditional oral storytelling. However, the supposed relations between these written texts and actual styles of oral performance are problematic, not in small part due to the lack of transcriptions or recordings of live performances from before the mid-twentieth century. The authors, drawn from four continents, were all participants in an invitee-only conference held in Copenhagen in 2007. Each in their own way has made significant contributions to the study of Chinese vernacular fiction and storytelling.

The editors have chosen to limit the discussion of orality and writing to written texts that have appeared since the twelfth century, though they note the roots of both vernacular fiction and storytelling are certainly earlier. The introduction provides a succinct overview, situating readers within decades-old debates sparked by literary scholars such as Patrick Hanan, Wilt Idema, and Andrew Plaks that have problematized, emphasized, or downplayed relations between written texts and oral performances in the Chinese context. Scholars who have brought actual research on living oral performance traditions to the table include Susan Blader and Vibeke Børdahl. The content of the six chapters is summarized as follows.

In Chapter I Andre Levy presents an overview of scholarship on the work of erotic vernacular fiction entitled *Jin ping mei* (*The Plum in the Golden Vase* 金瓶梅), beginning with a history of translation, which includes early Manchu versions.

In a lively, rambling manner he discusses various versions in prose and prosimetric form. While no direct links to specific local styles of oral performance can be established it seems clear that due to form, point of view, and the tendency towards "verbose" language (23), oral versions had some sort of an impact (direct or indirect) on the textual traditions—though such impact varies by case. The author cautions that versions of *Jin ping mei* must be taken on their own merits within the context of the Chinese tradition of fiction.

The question of whether pseudo-oral conventions in Chinese vernacular fiction originated from what Hanan has called a "common storehouse" of tradition (31) is explored in Chapter 2 by Liangyan Ge. Comparing a cluster of prosimetric texts about the sagely Judge Bao (Bao Gong 包公) and versions of the full-length work of vernacular fiction *Shui hu zhuan* (Water Margin 水浒传), his research suggests that both were influenced by elements of earlier oral tales about Judge Bao. While not fully answering Hanan's query, the findings supply evidence of the dynamics of intertextuality between oral and written sources in discrete instances.

Margaret B. Wan, author of Chapter 3, discusses audiences and reading practices regarding a style of prosimetric narrative known as drum ballads (*guci* 鼓词) that became popular in northeast China in the late Qing dynasty (1644–1911) and was still evolving in the early Republican era. The author argues that these relatively little-known texts must be approached in a nuanced manner, since texts and the ways audiences engaged them varied. As an example, this rich chapter includes interesting speculation on the difficulties different audiences had in comprehending verse or prose sections in both oral performances and writing.

In Chapter 4, Vibeke Børdahl tackles head-on the question of the construct of the "storyteller's manner," a common convention in Chinese vernacular fiction that is framed and conveyed with stock phrases and formulas as if told by a live professional storyteller. In a meticulous examination, Børdahl assesses sample written texts and compares occurrences of meta-narrative conventions with transcribed performances of contemporary Yangzhou storytellers of the Wu Song (武松) story. Her findings suggest that the actual storytelling performances make relatively small use of so-called storytelling conventions in the vernacular texts, suggesting that care be taken in making broad statements about this aspect of the relation between the oral and written in the Chinese context.

Anne McLaren, author of Chapter 5, has contributed greatly to studies of verbal art in the Lower Yangtze delta, publishing on written Ming *chantefables* and bridal laments in the living folk context. While studies of short mountain songs—*shange* 山歌—have been well researched since the 1920s, her chapter introduces a body of lengthy narratives, some sung in Wu dialect, others in manuscript form. She refers to the prosimetric songs as "folk epics" (157), furthering a recent trend to identify certain styles of Han Chinese narratives as epics, a category once considered missing from the Chinese literary repertoire.

In Chapter 6 Boris Riftin, a longtime student of Chinese folklore and vernacular literature, introduces a series of prints from the late imperial era related to storytelling themes or situations. Several of the images from Suzhou seem to be rare depictions of female performers playing styles of lutes still in use in the area today.

In all, the volume is a valuable beacon on the evolving path of traditional Chinese narrative studies and should prove useful for both scholars and the graduate classroom.

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