

REVIEW ARTICLE

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EPIC AND ASIAN FOLKLORE

HONKO, LAURI, Editor. *Textualization of Oral Epics*. Trends in Linguistics, Studies and Monographs 128. Series editor, Werner Winter. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2000. viii + 390 pages. Index. Hardcover. ISBN 3-11-016928-2.

OVERMYER, L. DANIEL, Editor. *Ethnography in China Today. A Critical Assessment of Methods and Results*. Edited with the assistance of Shin-Yi Chao. Taipei: Yuan-Liou Publishing, 2002. 382 pages. Hardcover. ISBN 957-32-4604-X.

THE TWO BOOKS UNDER review are both concerned with Asian folklore, but the first, *Textualization of Oral Epics*, is global in scope and treats Asian epics as only one part of a larger group. Although both books deal with Asia, they have widely different aims and orientations. Reviewing them together, however, is valuable because they both address two main questions: (1) How do scholars today engage in preserving oral traditions in Asia and elsewhere? (2) Is there a Chinese epic tradition?

Textualization of Oral Epics, edited by Professor Lauri Honko, is an anthology of articles, based on a conference with the same title, hosted by the University of Turku, Finland, in June 1996. The contributors are internationally distinguished scholars who have carried out interdisciplinary research in the field of oral literature in general and epic poetry in particular. The intellectual climate among the scholars in the field, as reflected in the book, is characterized by an open-mindedness and deep inquiry into the subject, as well as a willing and playful engagement in the cross-examination of concepts, attitudes, and research practice. The focus is on oral manifestations of verbal art and the problematics of oral and written form, here of course from the perspective of textualization. The book is packed with very interesting discussions and observations. It offers arguments from many perspectives and invites discussion; it is an eye-opener for anyone who is engaged in the study of oral art, not only the oral epic. I recommend it highly as a fieldwork companion, handbook, and for classroom instruction.

The book contains five parts. Oral epics are treated according to regions: Europe (with contributions by Minna Skafte Jensen, John Miles Foley, Joseph Harris); Turkey and Siberia (Karl Reichl, Arthur T. Hatto, Juha Pentikäinen); India (John Brockington, Lauri Honko); Africa (John William Johnson, Jan Knappert, Dwight F. Reynolds, Dan Ben-Amos); and North America and Oceania (Dell Hymes, Anna-Leena Siikala). Together the fourteen articles provide an extensive overview of studies of oral epic as a global phenomenon.

From the perspective of time, it is interesting to observe the distribution

of scholarly interest and approach. Of ancient traditions, only archaic Greek and Indian epics are treated in detail, while the rest of the articles are concerned with epic traditions that cannot be traced back more than three hundred years, most of them only brought to the attention of scholars and “textualized” in written form during the twentieth century. Joseph Harris’s article is an exception, in so far as he treats a genre of Old Norse elegy from around 1100 AD; but he himself states in the preamble to his article that the term “epic” has to be understood in its widest sense (including prose epic, saga, narrative poetry, and edda) in order to accommodate his research for the conference volume.

Why do the studies leave a gap of almost two thousand years of oral epic tradition? The obvious reason might be that the conference (and therefore the book) in no way claimed to cover oral epic through time and space; it could be just a matter of coincidence that no papers on, for example, medieval epic were presented.

This split between ancient and modern, however, seems not to be merely accidental; it reflects to a certain degree the long-lasting impact of the research tradition of Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord. They had based their research on the same bipolar approach: the archaic legacy of oral performance traceable in the Homeric epics versus the modern testimony of living oral epic in the Balkan region. The original aim of Parry and Lord, as summed up by John Foley, was their interest in “a living analogy for the manuscript poems of Homer, a laboratory proof of the phenomenon of composition in performance” (77). In his introduction Lauri Honko also points to this common ground:

The problems of textualization are not regional but global in the sense that the same list of questions is valid regardless of the period or culture from which a particular epic under study derives. That is why Homerists, or some Homerists at least, are interested in African, Indian or Central Asian epics: empirical findings about the textual process through which the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* came to us. On the other hand, the scholars assessing the nature of oral epic traditions in Africa, India or Central Asia are very much, some say too much, dominated by the impact that the Homeric epics have made upon the comparative research on epics. (38)

On the one hand, we have then the preoccupation with oral features of archaic epic and the textualization of these great works that arose in societies where writing was only slowly being established as a medium for literature. These long metric works represent some of the oldest documents of verbal

art that have come down to the present, such as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (Greece) and the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* (India). In this case we have a kind of pure and pristine oral beginning as a basis for the later textualizing process. The discussion centers on vestiges of orality in the transmitted works and the aims and methods of the first epic textualizers in history: patrons, scribes, priests, and teachers who had purposes very different from the modern scholar. (When medieval epics are touched upon *en passant*, those are likewise “early” traditions arising from pre-literate cultures of Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic [Old Norse] origin.)

On the other hand, we have the research into living and recent traditions of oral epic where the oral manifestation in performance is either directly observable by the researcher or can be traced on the background of evidence left by textualizers that are at least less distant. Most of these epic traditions are found in societies or sectors of society where writing has a marginal status, and from this particular aspect there is a certain similarity with the situation of the archaic epics. The urge to define and isolate oral art vis-à-vis written art, implies a centrifugal tendency to go either back in time to the earliest forms of verbal performance preceding writing, or out into “peripheral” cultures, where oral tradition has or recently had its place in common life and was fairly isolated from literary interference. Most of the contributions belong to the latter category (i.e., studies of contemporary oral epic traditions that the researchers themselves have been able to witness during fieldwork), and the written textualizations were often created by researchers in collaboration with performers and assistants.

The present volume is by definition a book about how to perceive and transmit perceptions of verbal art (from oral performance to written page) in the twentieth century, often with support from audio and video recordings. The theoretical cognition, function, and effect of the research methods and textualization processes are hence in some cases foregrounded to such an extent that the object of research glides into the half-light. Maybe the attitude of Parry, quoted by John Foley, that “it was least of all for the material itself” (77), is more characteristic for present-day research traditions than we would want to admit. In our data epoch, there is the possibility that documenting oral arts on paper becomes more or less superfluous, since we can now record and publish “everything” from the “oral event” on video-CD. What cannot be preserved, as pointed out by Karl Reichl (106), is the open, unique, and never completely pre-determined situation of a living performance. The motives for recording in print will change, and the paradigm for making texts will perhaps shift once more in the direction of our forefathers who aspired to produce works worthy to be cut in stone.

The editor’s introduction is much more than a framework for the arti-

cles. It is nothing less than a comprehensive guide into the “multifaceted processes of oral and written textualization” (3). Lauri Honko’s thorough and thought-provoking presentation is a welcome summary of his theories and views from his work on the Siri epic, one of the living oral traditions in India (HONKO 1998; see *Asian Folklore Studies* vol. 59/1 [2000]). However, it might be problematic in so far as it seems to suggest a consensus on a definition of “epic” as a genre that is not worth elaborating on since we know fairly well what we are talking about. In particular, if we want to treat epic as a universal term, we must allow much room for cultural-specific characteristics. Among the “texts”—oral and written—studied in the present book, some are easily situated within the boundaries of the term epic, but more than a few of the traditions seem to have been forced into the epic genre. Why? Is it not possible for an oral tradition not to be an epic, but represent something else instead? It is significant that the entire introduction treats “oral texts” in general rather than epic as a genre; and it is difficult to find any statement that is specific for oral epic even in the table “The making of oral epics” (17).

In the individual studies, we find frequent hesitation in applying the term *epic* and in discussing in-depth generic problems. Minna Skafte Jensen points to the possibility of a “gigantic logic circularity”:

In a way, it might even be maintained that if the ancient Greeks had not recorded the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* for us, we should not have had the idea that it is an integral aspect of an epic poem proper to be very long, nor would Lönnrot have felt inspired to compose his *Kalevala* out of the much briefer folksongs he collected, nor would fieldworkers of the 20th century have asked singers to perform for days on end to accomplish something different from the songs of their normal repertory in order that it might truly be called an epic. In an intriguing way, not only scholarship but the very epic form as we find it documented in editions came to appear as a gigantic logic circularity. (61)

At this point the issue of epic in China might be raised. It has been a common view that although many of the minority cultures of China have oral epic traditions, the Han majority lacks this genre (see, for example, MAIR and WEINSTEIN 1986, 77; RIFTIN 1997, 2 and 372). The Mongol, Tibetan, and other groups of non-Han people had at least until recently proud traditions of oral singers of long heroic poems. Why not the Han people? If we reconsider the issue in the light of Lauri Honko’s anthology of epics from all over the world, we shall have to reformulate the question: What kind of oral tradition will qualify as epic?

If we agree to keep the term wide and elastic, what should then be left out? The literary epic (*Textualization*, 7) is set apart, although the line of demarcation is often precariously difficult to draw (e.g., the *Kalevala*). There is also a tendency to exclude or just overlook oral traditions (epic or epic-like) existing in civilizations deeply imbued with literary culture. In Han-Chinese culture, with more than 2500 years of developed literature (writing going back much further), we find a wealth of living oral traditions, not confined to the secluded valleys and hamlets, but existing both in the countryside and city. We do not have to go back in time nor out of our way to find them, although the existence of some is precarious in the world of modern media. Whatever their format—metric, prosimetric, prose—whether lengthy narrative songs (e.g., “mountain songs” of the Wu area, *shan’ge*, [see SCHIMMELPENNINCK 1997]), multiformat song and drama in ritual performances (e.g., Nuo-drama, *nuoxi*, [TUO 1995]), “telling scriptures” (*jiangjing* [BENDER 2001]), or professional storytelling (e.g., *pinghua*, [BLADER 1993, 1998; BØRDAHL 1996]) and chantefable (e.g., *tanci*, [BENDER 1995]); *dagu*, [STEVENS 1972; IGUCHI 1995]), it would not be a problem to find epic-like traditions. Heroic sagas in prose or prosimetrum, told as long connected tales in installments of several hours a day, lasting for two to three months or even longer, seem to offer the most ideal examples of “composition in performance.” The long format is usually considered one of the defining characteristics of epic. In her study of “mountain songs” from the Wu area, Antoinet SCHIMMELPENNINCK (1997) treats both the verbal and musical elements of the songs with a view to their themes, formularity, improvisation (versus fixed form), and, not least, their length. Chinese folklorists already in the mid-1980s explored Wu songs in the long format (ZHU 1987 and JIANG 1989). In Schimmelpenninck’s study, the question is, however, treated from another point of view. Fieldwork experience taught her something that could not be seen from any anthology of printed folk songs, namely, that the *shan’ge* songs of this region are basically characterized by having no end, forming “unfinished symphonies” (see also SCHIMMELPENNINCK 1999):

Closely related verbal structures in the *shan’ge* offer a framework amenable to endless variation. This goes some way toward satisfying singers’ needs for variation and, more specifically, for continuation.... The need to continue is not only dictated by the fact that a singer wants to produce a coherent and complete text which will satisfy himself and his audience. Actually, continuation—the maintenance of an uninterrupted flow of sound—may become a goal in its own right, to the point where singers are basically unhappy to finish a song, because it marks

the end of their performance.... In Wu songs the drive for continuation is clearly vital for the creation of the more expanded forms (the long narrative songs), but, interestingly, it is also evident in the shorter forms.
(SCHIMMELPENNINCK 1997, 209–10)

To record long narrative songs takes weeks or months, because the singers cannot be expected to perform an entire song in a single session (they would “spit blood” if they had to), and there is “always more” (SCHIMMELPENNINCK 1997, 221). The songs only end because of circumstance and belong to a continuum of interdependent texts in the realm of the collective folk song repertoire of the region. Individual songs are difficult to fit into subgenres, because they are more like “stages in a continuing process,” “defying rigid labels precisely because they change and take on different aspects all the time” (SCHIMMELPENNINCK 1997, 184).

If Chinese researchers of oral tradition hardly find epic traditions among the Han people, is it because they are not particularly concerned with Western categories? Or are they, on the contrary, taking the term “epic” much too literally? Have Western researchers of Chinese traditions tended to take over Chinese categories?

Ethnography in China Today, edited by Professor Daniel L. Overmyer, is dedicated to the eminent sinologist Piet van der Loon. It is the most recent publication surveying several large projects of ethnographic research that have taken place in cooperation between Chinese, Taiwanese, and Western research teams during the last decade. Resulting from a conference of the same title (hosted by the University of Hong Kong in 1998), the book is introduced by the editor and with two opening articles: one by Wang Ch’iu-kuei (“Chinese Ritual and Ritual Theatre”) and the other by Hou Jie (“Mulian Drama: A Commentary on Current Research and Source Materials”). The rest of the volume contains evaluative reports on studies in Chinese ritual, theater, and folklore, mainly among Han-Chinese in southwest China (contributions by Chen Yi-yuan, Hsu Li-ling, John Lagerwey, and David Holm), eastern China (Kenneth Dean, Paul R. Katz, Zhu Qiuhua, Brigitte Baptander, Li Feng-mao, and Poul Andersen) and north China (David Johnson and Fan Lizhu), but also among some of the minorities of southwest China (Ho Ts’ui-p’ing, Liu Tik-sang, and David Holm). There is also a special section on traditional Hakka society (Daniel Overmyer, Dong Xiaoping, and Tam Wai-lun).

The book offers plenty of new insights into recent fieldwork, especially fieldwork done under the supervision of Professor Wang Ch’iu-kuei (Tsing Hua University, Taiwan), Professor John Lagerwey (École Pratique des Hautes Études, France), and Professor Daniel L. Overmyer (University of

British Columbia, Canada). The book makes for very interesting reading for folklorists, anthropologists, and scholars in the history of religions. It serves primarily as an English-language guide into the impressive body of publications in Chinese of the last decade (especially between 1995 and 1998). The bibliographies attached to each report contain, however, mostly Western language references that open the view to the field worldwide.

What is of special relevance in connection with the above discussion of epic in China, is the fact that I could not find this term even once in the book (which unfortunately does not include an index). But if we take as a point of departure Lauri Honko's list of performative forms and the variety of performance contexts of the epic in India (*Textualization*, 221–26), embracing longer and shorter narrative poems (worksongs, ritual songs, dance songs, ancestor worship songs, wedding and funeral ceremonies, recitations during theatrical performances, etc.) all understood as “oral epic in action” (*Textualization*, 226), then the ethnographic materials from present-day China would suggest the existence of oral traditions of highly similar format, context, and performance traditions.

The studies of Chinese theater as ritual and ritual as theater (*Ethnography*, 11) describe some dramatic forms as living traditions of chantefable (*shuochang cihua*) with distant historical sources (*Ethnography*, 14 and 184). Prosimetric form seems to be widespread with shifts between narration in metric verse and dialogue in prose: “Most of the description of actions is done in the seven-character lines which seem to characterize popular ritual throughout southern China, but there is also dialogue between the priest and the musicians” (*Ethnography*, 84). There is often a master-apprentice relationship between the ritual specialists “who either inherit the profession from their fathers or learn the skill from a ritual master” (142). The performance of exorcistic Nuo theatre of Anhui and Jiangxi is described as follows: “the lanterns prepared for the festival, the offerings, the procession (including masked figures), the incense heads, the dancers, the musicians, the performance of the plays (*with the xiansheng [master] sitting backstage singing and reciting much of the text*), the martial arts choreography, the procession to the ruins of the temple, and the ritual masks” (186; emphasis added). There often seems to be only one ritual Master of Ceremony in charge of the rite, who conducts the play and tells the story while leading the role figures onto the stage as if they were puppets. In some subgenres he recites the “play” in third person narration (221–24 [see also TUO 1995, 312; MCLAREN 1998, 86–89; BENDER 2001]). The focus of the research projects is on ethnographic and religious aspects, while the linguistic and narratological aspects are perhaps given less attention. There is no doubt that the source materials collected during the investigations will be invaluable for future

research on the links between shamanism, ritual, drama, and the performing arts of China.

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