

MCLAREN, ANNE E. *Chinese Popular Culture and Ming Chantefables*. Sinica Leidensia, vol. 41. Leiden: Brill, 1998. viii + 340 pages. Appendix (list of chantefables), bibliography, glossary of Chinese terms, index, 10 plates of chantefable illustrations. Cloth Nlg. 176.00/US\$103.75. ISBN 90-04-10998-6. ISSN 0169-9563.

The study of oral versus written composition, of orality/literacy, of oral culture versus written culture, etc., has gained ground in Western philology ever since “the Homeric question”

became a question, and has now become a major discipline of research. The incitement to study the oral perspectives of verbal culture (not denying the global influence of the studies of M. Parry and A. Lord, of Walter Ong, and others) has different points of departure in different cultures. In Chinese cultural history a major point of departure for studies of the oral traditions has been the masterpieces of Chinese written culture in the late imperial period: the great Chinese novels. The interest for the “oral origins” of these works, apparently reflected in their narrative mode of the “storyteller’s manner,” has been an inherent ingredient of the research on Chinese vernacular literature, beginning from the New Culture movement early in this century.¹

Anne McLaren’s monograph is largely motivated by the same urge to close in on a vanished oral culture: “to trace the performance and textual context of ‘oral-traditional’ texts in the early phase of vernacular print in China” (13). Her interest for the link between “oral-traditional” texts and the Chinese novel was already apparent in her Ph.D. dissertation, entitled “Ming Chantefable and the Early Chinese Novel: A Study of the Chenghua Period *Cihua*” (MCLAREN 1983). The present book represents the culmination, so far, of the author’s research in this field.

Chinese Popular Culture and Ming Chantefables is a multifaceted work, treating in the most detailed way a special corpus of Chinese “performance texts,” so-called *shuochang cihua* (tell-and-sing song stories or chantefables) that were found in a tomb not far from Shanghai in 1967. The fate of the texts after the tomb was opened represents a detective story, reflecting the chaotic situation in China at the time of the Cultural Revolution, and it seems no little miracle that they survived. These funeral objects were after some time recognized as rare specimens of Chinese prosimetric literature in print from the Chenghua period (1465–1488) of the Ming dynasty. They were described first by the Chinese veteran scholar of Chinese oral and performing literature, Zhao Jingshen (1972), soon followed by studies by Wang Qingzheng, Luo Jintang, Zhou Qifu, and others. In 1973 the collection of texts was published in a facsimile edition by Shanghai Museum, a prerequisite for the further scientific research. Japanese and Western scholars have also contributed essentially to the research on these texts: ONOE Kanehide (1978), SAWADA Mizuho (1978), David T. ROY (1981), Gail Oman KING (1982, 1985, 1989), and Anne MCLAREN (1983, 1985, 1990). More than two decades have elapsed since the texts were first attracting the interest of scholars in China and abroad. Anne McLaren’s monograph is the first to present in English a thorough investigation of the entire corpus of chantefables from the Ming tomb in Jiading County.

The literary or artistic value of the anonymous “tell-and-sing” (*shuochang*) prints, edited with illustrations in picture book or cartoon fashion, is not of crucial interest for the undertaking. What concerns the author and what she tries to do is “reconstruct an emerging reading public amongst the less educated, the likely reading practices associated with these texts” (13). She also attempts to evaluate “the contribution of chantefable texts to an emerging written vernacular shared by the general population, and the role played by this ‘popular culture in print’ in bridging learned and unlearned domains” (13). The task is “not so much a literary aesthetics as a ‘literary anthropology’ whose goal is to place orally derived or modeled texts within their ‘oral traditional context’ and to situate them in their ‘relationship between social, political and kinship structure and oral traditions’” (40–41). In chapters one through eight, the author raises many questions related to the “anthropology” of the texts.

The contents of the book can be summarized as follows: (Chapter 1) the circumstances of the discovery of the texts and the archaeological/historical evidence for their ownership; (Chapter 2) the printing culture, publishers, readers and reading practices for “tell-and-sing” texts; (Chapter 3) the pre-Ming and Ming period performance culture of storytelling, including prosimetric performance, and drama, as well as the link to present-day ritual drama

as represented in *nuo* plays from Anhui; (Chapters 4 and 5) analyses of the stock contents of selected chantefables in the light of kinship and class norms; (Chapters 6 and 7) the textual relationship between chantefables and earlier as well as later popular and elite texts, and their contribution to the emerging conventions of vernacular fiction; (Chapter 8) analysis of the narrative discourse of the chantefables, the “storyteller rhetoric,” and comparison with the later “storyteller’s manner” of the seventeenth-century short story, *huaben*; (Chapter 9) the main ideas and results of the investigation are summarized.

The volume appears as number forty-one in the prestigious series *Sinica Leidensia* from the Brill publishing house. As is usually the case with Brill editions, the book’s illustrations, cover, style of layout, and printing are beautifully done. It is, therefore, a little annoying that such a book should be edited hastily: the list of contents that is left in an unfinished state and with entries that do not correspond to the actual chapter titles (v), the rather untidy arrangement of the tables of storyteller rhetoric (271–78), and the many typos bear witness to the manner in which the book was edited. The author may not have delivered completely copy-ready pages for everything, but doesn’t the publisher still carry some of the responsibility for the final product? Only the insiders know whom to blame, and all considered it is of course a mere triviality.

The fascination of this study lies in the inquisitive and informed treatment of text and context. The author was the first person from the West allowed to scrutinize the original texts stored in Shanghai Museum. She also carried out personal field research in the site of the tomb and among the inhabitants of the village, and as a result was able to raise important new questions concerning the ownership and printing details of the chantefables. Handling a wealth of sources external to the Jiading chantefables, and covering disciplines as diverse as anthropology, archeology, folklore, history (not least the history of printing), literary theory, philosophy, and religion, she manages to throw light on the context in the widest sense of the word. The book is filled with detailed observation and lively discussion of the issues implied.

One aspect of “context” to the chantefables is repeatedly emphasized—the way they were presumably read and enjoyed in their own time. This question is central to the understanding of the texts vis-à-vis the oral culture of their time. The “performability” or “recitability” was perhaps their most important attraction for their owners who, rather than sitting in solitude and reading silently for themselves, would participate in an oral reading of the text among family, who would sing and perform for each other. Even though the layout of the texts does by no means indicate the function as “promptbook” for professional entertainers, the printed versions would seem to be created to be “vocalized” and performed by the readers. Among other things, the author offers many new insights into the various printing techniques that were used for the differing purposes by the printers of popular texts.

The way of “vocalizing,” the diction and voice-production, the musical accompaniment, the probable playfulness in mimic and gesture, the possible shifting of register between prose and verse portions or various role categories, etc., are lost to us. The “performance part” of the performance, rather than the naked text, may very well have been the essential aesthetic component, as is often the case in folk entertainment as well as in musical genres at large. One way of reconstructing former oral features is to look out for similar phenomena in our own time, hibernating traditions that may represent “fossilized” remnants of former oral and other evanescent culture. In this study, the surviving tradition of *nuo* drama as found in today’s Anhui is brought to bear on ritual performance aspects of the early chantefable texts. There are many interesting points of similarity between the *nuo* drama texts and the chantefables that precede them by five hundred years, in regards to both the contents of the texts and the prosimetric form. The master of ceremonies of the *nuo* play recites the entire “drama,” text in hand, and tells it in both first and third person, while the actors only mime the actions.

The author argues that this is the kind of setting in which we should visualize the Ming chantefables (82–89); or perhaps the idea is to see this fossilized drama and its Ming chantefable counterpart as a “missing link” between storytelling and drama? To handle a text (promptbook) during a performance of prosimetric art is interesting in itself, because such procedure is not associated with present-day professional storytelling, and amateur “reading as performance” is little documented. While the *nuo* ritual plays have opened up certain tracks for the investigation of early performance culture, one might expect to find similar kinds of evidence in present-day performance practices of plain storytelling (*pinghua*, *ping-shu*) and particularly with drumtale (*dagu*), clappertale (*kuaishu*) and lute ballad (*tanci*). The latter genres, generally considered to be the most likely continuation of the prosimetric chantefable genre from Ming, are, however, given scanty attention. Is it a deliberate delimitation of the scope of the study for practical reasons?

“The more one has, the more one wants,” so the saying goes, but it is really out of place to ask for more here. Anne McLAREN has given us an extremely well-researched, extensive, and stimulating study of early Chinese “tell-and-sing” literature.

NOTE

1. It has been proposed that Chinese professional storytelling and oral-derived texts related to storytelling (including the *yanyi* [romances, novels]) are the genres that have taken the place of the oral and written *epos*, serving in an equivalent function since Han-Chinese culture “lacked” this genre (see RIFTIN 1997, 65–91). Maybe it is no coincidence that Chinese oral literature studies are tied up with the “equivalent” question?

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