

Oral and written traditions

Although literary scholars now seldom consider Chinese vernacular novels to be essentially equivalent to real scripts for storytellers, recent scholarship unfortunately tends to go to another extreme, viewing the novels as largely original literati creations and ignoring the relationship they might have with orality. Growing out of the symposium *The Interplay of Oral and Written Traditions in Chinese Fiction, Drama and Performance Literature*, held in Oslo in 2007, this edited volume moves beyond the simple 'oral vs. written' binary approach and explores the complex interactions between orality and writing in China with a focus on vernacular genres from the late imperial to modern periods. Excluding the concisely-written introductory chapter, this volume comprises six chapters authored by scholars well-versed in their subjects, ranging from Ming vernacular fiction to popular prints and contemporary folk ballads.

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DESPITE ITS RATHER RAMBLING STYLE, André Lévy's chapter serves as a good start as it brings out the issue of the inseparability between the oral and the written in vernacular genres, which is further addressed in subsequent chapters in various ways. With the example of the Ming vernacular novel *Jin Ping Mei*, Lévy argues that it is possible for oral and written sources to have co-existed when vernacular novels were produced by single or a group of literati writers; "The one does not preclude the other" (20).

Whereas Lévy briefly touches on some features, such as the storyteller's point of view and verbosity, which show the influence of the oral versions of *Jin Ping Mei* on its textual traditions, Liangye Ge's chapter is a scholarly attempt to find out possible oral sources of another Ming vernacular novel *Water Margin*. Comparing versions of the novel and a cluster of *chantefable* about Judge Bao, Ge's chapter proposes that their similarities in terms of narrative scenes and thematic patterns could be attributed to the early storytelling genre of *gong'an* (court case). This agrees with Patrick Hanan's view that a common storehouse of convention from which early vernacular novels drew initially belonged to oral literature (31).

However, supposedly conspicuous characteristics linking vernacular novels to oral storytelling are not necessarily reliable indicators of the relationship between them. In chapter 4, Vibeke Børdahl argues that the so-called "storytellers' stock phrases" serving meta-narrative functions could be a kind of literary invention to facilitate reading, rather than a mirror of real storytellers' oral habits. As attested in the living oral performances observed in her fieldwork, actual storytellers seldom used those kinds of stock phrases. Their presence in the textual versions of the story of *Wu Song* is genre-dependent: a certain set of phrases intimately associated with genres for reading, of which the novel is an example, only sporadically appears in performance-related genres. Børdahl's findings echo Lévy's note of caution for researchers: "the more skilful the re-appropriation of the storyteller's language, the more likely is it to be an imitation without real oral sources" (22).

Readers' needs, therefore, were in the authors' minds. It is commendable that the impact of readership on the textualization of vernacular stories is addressed in this volume. Margaret Wan's chapter offers interesting speculations on the relationship between fictional practices to readership with the example of Qing drum ballads. For example, frequent omission of dialogue markers and end-of-chapter formulae in drum ballad texts could result from the intended reader's familiarity with the conventions of drum ballad performance. Also, Børdahl relates the education background of readers to textual format. She argues the use of black cartouche setting off the pre-verse formulas would be helpful in guiding semi-literate readers to read *pinghua* (plain tales).

While authors might have adopted or imitated elements of oral storytelling in written versions of vernacular stories, Anne McLaren's chapter informs us that 19th century amateur storytellers with some literacy would also enrich their repertoire with the sung narratives in written form. The findings of her fieldwork in the lower Yangzi delta indicate that depending on the storyteller's choice, a Wu prosimetric folksong could be told in a way close to its *changben* (song text) version, the text of which is both reading matter and an *aide memoire* for performance (175). Here we can see a cycle: an oral story was adapted by a literatus for literary reading;

the story's textual version went back to orality through the storyteller's appropriation.

Hence authors and storytellers rarely felt obliged to adhere strictly to either the oral or written tradition. The same is true for another group of actors of the interplay between the two traditions. Scrupulously analyzing a group of prints portraying storytelling episodes and scenes of stories, Boris Riftin's chapter explains how attributes from novels, dramas and storytelling were amalgamated in a print depicting a particular story through the hands of its creator. Nonetheless, a difficult question arises from this kind of mixing: how can one determine whether an element in a print belongs to written texts of a novel, theatre performance or oral storytelling? Riftin does not answer this question, but highlights where the difficulties in doing so lie, such as shared plot elements and the co-existence of written and oral forms of a story. Such indeterminacy invites further investigations.

Børdahl and McLaren's approach of comparing living oral performance with extant manuscripts and printings of a given story merits special remarks. Both contributors capitalized on the situation that many forms of traditional oral performance are still alive in China, gleaned empirical data other than written sources and thus being able to avoid sole reliance on them. Their findings, despite being suggestive, challenge established views and "have the potential to illuminate significant questions and approaches" (12). Of course, such an approach must be utilized critically. We have to bear in mind that features or practices attested in modern storytelling could be absent at the time when vernacular novels were created. Also, censorship is liable to skewed representation of orality in the transcription of oral performance. Indeed, McLaren shows how modern storytellers self-censored sexually explicit references to conform to the socialist moral norms, which helps explain why the 19th century written version of the romantic story of *Xue Liulang* (Xue Sixth Son) turns out to be more faithful to the oral tradition than the version performed by modern storytellers. This reminds me of André Lefevere's idea of the rewriting of literature: the most accessible version of a literary work could often be a construct that is the result of manipulation.¹ The same applies to oral performance. Nevertheless, given the unavailability of video recordings of oral storytelling activities in late imperial China, we should by no means ignore the value of oral performance in the present as an informant about the relationship between the oral and the written in the past.

On closer examination readers will find some errors and inconsistencies such as erroneous Chinese characters, inconsistent font size, and repeated words. Although 'Notes to the Reader' states that "Chinese characters are rendered in the traditional *fanti* form", simplified Chinese characters occur occasionally in this volume. Yet these annoyances are offset by the colourful illustrations that appear in every chapter but the introduction. In addition to stimulating

ideas and fresh perspectives on how vernacular genres could be both works of art and products of oral inspiration and imitation, the valuable empirical data collated by some contributors will be of valuable service to researchers. A notable example is Børdahl's tables and appendices related to the occurrence of pre-verse phrases and phrases of narrative transition in the vernacular texts about the story of 'Wu Song Fights the Tiger'. The contributors to this volume are not ignorant of the preliminary, exploratory nature of their research and the limitations facing them, of which they frankly remind their readers. However, I agree with Hanan that the value of this volume "is not that it answers all the questions we have but that it will act as a stimulus to new research" (back cover). This volume is highly recommended for both scholars and graduate students interested in not only Chinese literature, but also late imperial Chinese society.

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Notes

¹ Lefevere, André. 1992. *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*. 1st ed. London and New York: Routledge.

Below:
'Wu Song Fights the Tiger', at the Tiger Balm Gardens in Singapore.

