Vibeke Børdahl and Margaret B. Wan (eds.). *The Interplay of the Oral and the Written in Chinese Popular Literature*. Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2010.

The complex relationship between China's written literature and its oral storytelling traditions is a fascinating field of research and the contributors to this volume all deal with interesting aspects of it. There are numerous problems confronting the modern scholar delving into this field. The spoken word is of course ephemeral and fleeting—vanishing the instant it is spoken. In modern times, recording equipment has been brought to bear upon this issue and while this certainly helps and provides crucial information, the very presence of the modern scholar with cameras and recorders might alter the nature of the performance delivered. In addition, performance traditions change between different regions as well as over time, reducing our ability to generalize. The written side is hardly fixed either, presenting us with multiple editions of key texts, frequently of murky or unknown provenance. Finally there is the problem of texts and oral performances mutually influencing each other in a criss-crossing relationship that is difficult to unravel and makes it hard to see which preceded the other. Oral performances have clearly influenced writing

practices, but the conventions of the written texts in turn seem to have influenced oral versions so no simple direction of influence can be determined.

While we now have several good studies of late dynastic literature and a gradually increasing amount of scholarship on modern storytelling, the difficult relationship between the oral and the written is all too rarely explored as the main focus. It is perhaps partly because it is so difficult to say anything with absolute certainty in this field, that so few scholars have studied it. The contributors to the volume at hand are aware of the pitfalls in studying this topic and are to be commended for not leaping to facile conclusions. Unfortunately the conclusions that can be drawn are often somewhat speculative and that is perhaps not always as gratifying as one might wish.

The introduction by the editors partly serves as an overview of the field and that is useful. The subsequent articles cover a fairly wide range of material including fiction, popular prints, folk ballads, and contemporary storytelling from the Ming dynasty to the present. André Lévy presents an affable overview of scholarship on the *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅 from the 17th century to the present. He discusses how past and present scholars in both Western and Chinese have focused on appraising the novel's literary and moral value. This focus on literary worth has in turn coloured discussions of the novel and whether or not it was the product of a single author or a refraction of various storyteller materials. Lévy largely argues for a mixed textual provenance with oral elements incorporated, but also a distinct authorial presence, partly due to the prevalence of standard storyteller phrases.

Let us admit it: the more noticeable the presence of the storyteller in a vernacular story, the more likely is its conventional nature; the more skilful the re-appropriation of the storyteller's language, the more likely is it to be an imitation without real oral sources (p. 22).

Liangyan Ge tries to see whether there are meaningful links between *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳 and the prosimetric narratives or *chantefables* (*shuochang cihua* 說唱詞話) about Judge Bao from the 1470s. The premise is that any narrative overlap between such texts might indicate a "common storehouse" of fiction-making material in oral literature. Comparing a lengthy novel with a series of short stories mainly in verse seems initially odd, but some of the commonalities are

indeed striking. For example, the brigands and bandits that stalk hapless travellers also tend to be interested in eating their victims' flesh. One can easily imagine this as a narrative technique to make such threatening encounters appear even more terrifying. Other commonalities are somewhat less convincing, such the frequent occurrence of significant encounters when travellers lodge at inns, manors, or monasteries. It seems to me that such unlikely encounters have been a staple of popular fiction in every age. Other commonalities include the punishing of sexual transgressions and similar descriptions of cities and urban life. In conclusion, Ge suspects that the *gong'an* 公案 story type may have served as a basis for narrative conventions found in both Judge Bao *cihua* 詞話 and *Shuihu zhuan*.

Margaret B. Wan looks at drum ballads (*guci* 鼓詞)—another sort of *chantefables*—from the turn of the 19th century. She is interested in reading practices and the extent to which such texts require the reader to have prior knowledge of the oral performance. Unlike the novels targeting wider audiences, the drum ballads were mostly local productions. They seem to have been printed and circulated in separate volumes with single stories spanning several volumes. One volume might end with an advertisement for the next one. But while these texts were circulated as entertainment reading in their own right, they still often required a familiarity with drum ballad conventions to be understood. Wan studies a number of texts and finds that they seem to span a range of reading and writing practices. While some texts seem to be adapted to reading audiences, others are still very closely tied to the oral tradition, even to the extent of telling the reader the time of the next performance.

Vibeke Børdahl presents a detailed comparison and analysis of various textual and modern recorded oral versions of the famous tale of Wu Song 武松 fighting the tiger. While textual versions tend to be full of “storyteller’s stock phrases” (handily compiled in appendices), it is interesting to note that actual performances have far fewer of these. This of course echoes Lévy’s comment above.

Anne McLaren studies folk epics (*shan’ge* 山歌 or *Wuge* 吳歌) of the lower Yangzi delta. She compares contemporary performances of a specific story with written a manuscript version from 1854. A noteworthy difference between the older manuscript and the modern

performance is that the modern versions seem to drop the more explicit sexual content. This might be due to Cultural Revolution sensibilities and the wish by modern editors and amateur ethnologists to produce more respectable renditions. Other differences are interesting as well and illustrate a variety of song styles and practices, even within a single folk epic tradition. Since the narrative selected for study here deals with illicit love, McLaren also notes how such works departed from Confucian norms at the time.

The volume is rounded off by Boris Riftin's article on Qing dynasty popular prints (*nianhua* 年畫) containing images of performances and storytellers as well as pictures illustrating story events. There are practically no studies on this topic, so Riftin's discussion of this material is welcome and it is accompanied by a number of images that are analysed and put in historical context. It should be noted as well that this volume is nicely produced and contains full colour images throughout.

Despite dealing with quite diverse sources, the various articles come together in a fairly coherent manner. As a whole, this book presents detailed studies of some fascinating material and several articles break new ground in trying to link written texts with performance traditions. Unfortunately this is also inherently a field where solid conclusions are few and far between. As mentioned above, much of the research is quite speculative. But the authors and editors can hardly be blamed for this, and the book is an important contribution to a field which certainly remains in need of further research.

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Wörterbuch der tibetischen Schriftsprache, 16 fascicles (to be continued). Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften/Verlag C. H. Beck, München, 2005–2011. 384 pp. (fascicles 1–6) + 523 pp. (fascicles 7–14) + 128 pp. (fascicles 15–1).

In recent decades, Tibetan lexicography has been enriched by the publication of many dictionaries—from Tibetan to other languages,