

First Meeting of the Conference on Chinese Oral and Performing Literature

On 31 March and 1 April 1969 a conference was held at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, to consider the possibility of initiating some type of organized activity in the field of the oral and performing literature of China. Attending this meeting were scholars working on China and specializing in music, drama, folklore, sociology, anthropology, literature, and linguistics. One result of the discussions was to organize a permanent Conference on Chinese Oral and Performing Literature.

Since the Conference was in effect breaking new ground, the first task was to define the field. The consensus was that the attention of the group should be concentrated on the audio-visual aspects of those literary forms normally intended for presentation to some sort of audience, and on the historical traditions of these forms. This was restated more simply as "that literature in which performance makes the difference." Rather than formulate a definitive statement of scope, it was decided to be inclusive rather than exclusive. As examples of pertinent areas of interest the Conference listed popular and folk poetry, street plays, storytellers' performances, drum songs, operatic performances, puppet plays, ceremonial chanting and singing, religious rites, the recitation of classical texts, work and vendors' songs.

The group sees itself as expanding work on Chinese literature in three major areas. First, it will add a new perspective to classical studies by adding the dimension of performance to the textual materials. Second, it will encourage interest in the non-classical and popular forms which tend to be neglected by the traditional scholar. Third, it will work to preserve those forms which, for any number of reasons, are in danger of extinction or significant transformation.

It is hoped that future work of the Conference will stimulate a type of study making increased use of modern recording techniques and equipment. As suggested by the title there are two broad divisions which, although overlapping to a certain degree, form two natural categories distinguished by the type of recording most important to their collection and preservation. One of these is the oral material collected on magnetic tape or disks. These will of course be supplemented by written texts including lyrics, librettos, and musical notations. The other category includes the performed materials differing from the oral simply by adding the elements of action, gesture, and movement.

This material must be recorded on film -- either still, movie, or video-tape. Here again the filmed records must be supplemented by texts containing detailed analysis of choreography, kinesics, stage directions, etc. Both of these major divisions have important historical foundations and call for documentary study. The Conference will encourage work in collection, reconstruction, and preservation of any materials antecedent to the living modern forms.

The Conference expressed a strong interest in the re-performance of the materials studied and in making these materials available to interested scholars and to the broader academic community. To this end it was decided to establish a textual and audio-visual repository with the responsibility of cataloging, reproducing, publicizing, and distributing the materials collected in the course of future work sponsored by the Conference. The Cornell University Library has agreed, with the concurrence of those present at the spring meeting, to serve as central repository for the Conference and has indicated its willingness and ability to handle all the various forms of recorded material which the Conference is likely to collect. As this is accumulated, it will be catalogued and the acquisitions will be announced in the usual library publications. As funds become available the Cornell University Library will expand its present holdings in pertinent materials. The hope is that these holdings and future acquisitions in the name of the Conference will function as a research archive where any interested scholar can have convenient access to a unique collection. The repository is not set up to compete with existing archives and will duplicate only that part of other collections which is concerned with the specific interests of this Conference.

It is obvious that bibliography, cataloguing, and locating of existing materials will be a major task. Professor Alan Kagan of the University of Minnesota has contributed information on his project to computerize retrieval of data on Asian performing arts. It is hoped that his work may help us move toward a solution of the problems of standardized descriptions for diverse genres and their content, plus a practicable way of publishing bibliographies of widely scattered collections. Even so, this enormous task will require long-term expenditure of funds and energy.

Although the range of interest is broad, the Conference felt that priorities should be placed on the type of work for which funding will be sought and to which future encouragement will be given. The most important area of investigation is seen to include those genres in danger of being

totally lost or qualitatively changed in the immediate future. Changes on the Chinese mainland and modernization throughout the world are already affecting the field, and the Conference is anxious both to preserve what is disappearing and to record the progress of the changes.

An important problem at this point is, of course, financial. Every effort will be made to contact possible sources of funds, but it is felt that the most realistic approach is to encourage projects which can be tacked onto already funded field work. Small-scale supplemental grants for recording expenses and the like seem easier to find at this time than the amounts necessary to support all aspects of a full field proposal. Students going to the field may be able to make minor modifications in present work plans and expand their operations enough to include recordings. It would be appreciated if any persons planning field research related to our interests would contact the Conference. The main purpose would be to give us a chance to publicize the type of work being carried on, but it is also important to set up the kind of communication needed if more concrete types of support become available in the future. In the beginning the Conference will function as a clearing house for news of the areas of its interests and as a voice for the encouragement of expanded activity and investments in the field. It is hoped that this function will serve to draw together a larger group of scholars for a coordinated approach to a fascinating and sadly neglected type of literature.

To further these aims we would like to draw the attention of all interested parties to the fact that this Conference has been created and that there is every intention of making it a continuing and growing operation. Any person interested in Chinese oral and performing literature is invited to write CHINOPERL at the address given on our title page.

It is important to know what others are doing in this field in the way of research proposed or under way, details about courses planned or offered, students being prepared, problems of field work, etc. We are anxious to know about material which could go into the repository at Cornell. At present all such material will have to be donated, but we are making efforts to secure funds to support a major program of acquisitions. As information and material accumulate it will all be reported in the newsletter of the Conference distributed to any interested person or organization. It is important for us to find out what other libraries around the world contain. This task will take years and much money before a full cataloguing can be expected but even gen-

eral descriptions of private or institutional holdings will give us all some idea of where to start working and of where to check before designing expensive projects for the collection of new materials.

At the end of the Cornell meeting the Conference agreed to hold another meeting in the spring of 1970 in San Francisco to coincide roughly with the meetings of the Association for Asian Studies. At that time we want to review a year's progress and to hear informal reports on the research of individual members. Professor John McCoy of Cornell was elected chairman pro tem of the Conference and Cornell was given the responsibility of compiling the Newsletters and of handling the correspondence of the organization. Any specific questions or names for the Newsletter mailing list will reach him through the CHINOPERL address.

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