

# Communications

December 6, 1971

Editor, *Journal of Asian Studies*:

Professor C. T. Hsia's review of my book *The Hsi-yu chi: a study of antecedents to the sixteenth-century Chinese novel* (XXX/4, pp. 887-88) makes some generous comments on this work, for which I am grateful. I must also thank him for pointing out an error in copying. The second half of the review, however, comments rather scornfully on my application of the findings of Parry and Lord to the study of Chinese vernacular literature and oral tradition. I ask your leave to take up the question here again, partly in order to set the record straight, but also because there is at stake an important issue in the study of Chinese narrative art. Faced with Professor Hsia's criticism, I stand by the arguments and evidence presented on pp. 2-9 of the book, to which his review pays practically no attention, and venture to hope that readers will judge the book by what it actually says, rather than by what this review attributes to it.

Whether or not the reviewer welcomes the introduction of the Parry/Lord discoveries into the study of early Chinese fiction is not clear. This book represents them as a "pertinent warning" which has rarely been heeded by students of Chinese oral art. If the discoveries raise important questions we must be prepared to answer them in the Chinese field too, and the first step must be to look, as Parry and Lord did, at storytellers in action. The book makes it clear that I regard such observation as more like first-hand evidence than the old literary references which for Professor Hsia are primary sources on the art and profession of storytelling in China. No source is significant until we have assessed its context and authority, and even Sung and Yüan sources (*pace* Professor Hsia) must submit to this scrutiny. I am content for readers of the book to judge my assessment on the strength of the arguments and Chinese evidence on which it is based. Such readers will see for themselves that I did not "profess to be astonished" at the implications of Lo Yeh's comments, but rather the opposite; also that I attributed "alienation from the written tradition" not, as the review alleges, to "the oral artist," but to "oral transmission." The reviewer has ignored or failed to notice the explanatory paragraph which glossed "written tradition" in this context as "the written text, with its inexorable implications of definitive form and wording . . . written vernacular fiction" (p. 8), as distinct from a free and live oral tradition. Hardly the written tradition which preoccupies the closing sentences of this review. He has also missed the reason for citing concepts from the Parry/Lord analysis here: not a provincial and uncritical enthusiasm on my part, but the discovery (documented on pp. 3-5 of the book, ignored in the review) that modern Chinese storytellers have been found to share some of the working habits and techniques of the Yugoslav performers.

My book ventures no comment on the educational standards of the Yangchow, Soochow or Shantung performers whose art it discusses. And it nowhere maintains that a storyteller must be uneducated or that an educated person cannot excel in this profession. I do not, however, accept that "an uneducated storyteller is a clear contradiction in terms," and wonder if Professor Hsia really does. The point is surely that formal literary education or the lack of it have no essential bearing on the art of oral performance as such, as it has been observed in China. The crucial question is rather—what creative use do performers make of the material which reaches them from different quarters? Real professionals, literate or not, preserve their artistic independence and freedom from textual constraint even when famous written versions exist: compare the more accomplished oral poets studied by Lord (*The Singer of Tales*, Cambridge, Mass., 1960, p. 79), the modern Chinese performers cited in my book, and Liu Ching-t'ing himself (Ch'en Ju-heng, *Shuo-shu shih-hua*, Peking, 1958, p. 168).

At the same time, this book is at pains to stress that our application of the Parry/Lord concepts is severely limited by the material at our disposal (p. 7), that the growth of Chinese vernacular fiction took place in a "complex, evolving situation" in which street entertainers, actors, commercial publishers and serious authors were all involved (p. 10), and it takes note (p. 210) that new research has found published fiction making serious encroachments upon the art of the storyteller. But in exploring the earliest stages of a medieval narrative cycle it seems cardinaly important not to accept the artificial restriction of seeing everything in terms of a text-based tradition. If there is evidence to suggest that truly oral traditions may have been at work, then we are surely bound to keep that option open.

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G. DUDBRIDGE  
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Editor, *Journal of Asian Studies*:

In his rejoinder Dr. Dudbridge does not contest the main point of my criticism regarding his willingness "to distrust all primary sources on the art and profession of storytelling in China . . . whenever their observations contradict those of [Parry and Lord] on the rural Yugoslav scene." I believe it is "rather unfortunate and regrettably uncharacteristic of Dr. Dudbridge" to be so disposed; this careful

and polite formulation of my regret certainly cannot be called "scornful." And since I make a point of calling attention to the "immense prestige" of Parry and Lord among students of comparative and oral literature today, I cannot have faulted Dr. Dudbridge for provinciality when referring to his "admiration" for these two scholars. But, unfortunately, his admiration is "uncritical."

I don't suppose Dr. Dudbridge seriously wants me to defend the importance of such "old literary references" as *Tu-ch'eng chi-sheng* and *Tsui-weng 'an-lu* since their utility is generally recognized by all modern students of Chinese vernacular literature and oral tradition. Rather, it should be my task to spell out the achievement of Parry and Lord in the clearly defined area of their research since it is in the light of their "first-hand" information on "storytellers in action" that Dr. Dudbridge is willing to challenge the reliability of these old sources. Primarily a Greek scholar, Parry set out in the 1930's to prove that the Homeric epics were oral rather than written compositions. They belong to the category of "oral epic song," which is defined by Lord as "narrative poetry composed in a manner evolved over many generations by singers of tales who did not know how to write; it consists of the building of metrical lines and half lines by means of formulas and formulaic expressions and of the building of songs by the use of themes" (*The Singer of Tales*, p. 4). Since the folk singers of the modern West have all been exposed to the written word, Parry had to travel to the villages and small towns of Yugoslavia to watch a dwindling number of oral epic singers who composed a song afresh each time they sang it. They could do so because of their Homeric reliance on standard formulas and themes.

According to Parry and Lord, these singers are all illiterate and they are all non-professional, with the exception of beggars. With his clearly defined characteristics, we may well question whether the oral epic singer ever walked the land of China even in times of antiquity since even in the *Shih ching* the epic impulse was clearly smothered by the lyric. But since in that collection and in the anonymous *yüeh-fu* poetry of the Han and after we do observe the persistence of formulas, formulaic expressions, and themes, we may hypothesize the orality of this body of poetry and some recent scholars have already fruitfully applied the findings of Parry and Lord to its study. But with regard to the professional singers and storytellers of medieval China, we are first of all struck by the great diversity of their oral modes of delivery in contrast to the monotony of the "oral epic song" with its standard meter and simple musical accompaniment. Secondly, these singers and storytellers were a product of urban culture of marked literacy, again in signal contrast to the pre-literate age of Homeric Greece or the benighted conditions of modern rural Yugoslavia. I agree with Dr. Dudbridge that the literacy or illiteracy of the average Chinese performer is not an issue; what matters is that, even in modern China, every apprentice singer or storyteller studied under a master and underwent a rigorous period of training which involved, in the words of Věna Hrdličková, a scholar cited by Dr. Dudbridge, "memorizing, listening and reciting." And of these disciplines, memorizing a repertoire of songs or stories would appear to be the most fundamental. Thus, with the exception of a few types (the *shu-lai-pao* specialist, for one) who are trained to make up songs on the spur of the moment, we can say that all variety of popular Chinese singers are performers rather than oral poets. According to Lord (*The Singer of Tales*, pp. 13-14, 99), a performer is one who carries in his head a song in more or less the exact form in which he has learned it.

The storyteller who does not resort to singing or who adopts a mixed mode of song and colloquial discourse is, of course, a figure even farther removed from the singer of tales studied by Parry and Lord. Thus, not discounting the enormous amount of memorizing a *p'ing-hua* artist has done to enable him to narrate a story for months on end, the kind of invention and improvising he regularly does during a session cannot be equated with the oral poet's kind of "rapid spontaneous composition" (p. 8; Dr. Dudbridge seems to forget that with Parry and Lord "composition" means strictly "metrical composition"); he is simply about his business as a storyteller. The *'an-tz'u* artist also improvises a good deal, but in so far as his rendition of the main story is concerned, he sings and recites a memorized text of verse and prose in much the same fashion, I would gather, as the *chu-kung-tiao* performers of long ago sang and recited Tung Chieh-yuan's *Hsi-hsiang chi*.

Dr. Dudbridge complains that I have misrepresented him on two counts in the passage "The oral artist's 'alienation from the written tradition' being one of Parry and Lord's major concepts." According to his text, what is alienated from the written tradition is "oral transmission." While a reviewer should quote an author as accurately as possible, it is also his duty to write clearly and elegantly. With all due deference to Dr. Dudbridge in matters of style, I simply could not bring myself to attribute "alienation" to a process rather than a person. But since the "oral transmission" of a story requires the agency of oral artists, the author's quarrel with me in this instance is a purely linguistic one. Dr. Dudbridge further maintains, however, that "the written tradition" in question strictly refers to "the written text" of a novel or story. But it is Parry and Lord who oppose oral tradition to the tradition of writing, and Dr. Dudbridge has followed them all along in his introductory section on "The Oral Artist." Thus, on p. 2, he speaks of the "folk epic singers of modern Yugoslavia" as composing "a living creative tradition totally at odds with the written word," and of "the total contrast in habits of mind" between the oral artists in China and "members of the fully literate educated class" who have written about them in times past.

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