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CHINOPERL'S METAMORPHOSES—SOME MEMORIES AT HER 50TH BIRTHDAY

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Harold Shadick: There is no other literature in the world in which the oral is more important.

Catherine (Kate) Stevens: … that literature in which performance makes a difference.

John McCoy: "Performance" seems to be the key to this discussion.

Cyril Birch: … instead of giving papers, perhaps we could give reports on our research in the area in a more informal manner.

Jim Crump: … [let] the name for this group be: Conference on Chinese Oral and Performing Literature. (Yuen Ren Chao later coined it CHINOPERL)

(Discussion at the first meeting, on March 31, 1969 [*CHINOPERL News* 1, 9–22], selected quotes.)

My First Conference

I attended my first CHINOPERL meeting on March 24 and 25 1972, its fourth, held in Risley Hall on the Cornell University Campus. As it was during spring break, we were housed in an emptied-out student dormitory. The campus was almost completely deserted, which gave our gathering a magical feeling. In this enchanted environment of quiet, chilly, and exquisite landscape of hills, lakes, gorges, and bridges, parts of which were still covered with snow, I heard two days of reports and discussions on Chinese oral and performing literature.

There were four reports, taking up the four slots of the mornings and afternoons of the two-day conference. First, Rulan Chao Pian (Harvard University) reported on "Word Treatment in Chinese Popular Entertainment," citing as examples *xiangsheng* 相聲 (cross-talk), *Shandong kuaishu* 山東快書 (Shandong fast tales), *Xihe dagu* 西河大鼓 (Xihe drumsinging), *Jingyun dagu* 京韻大鼓 (Peking drumsinging), *Fengdiao dagu* 奉調大鼓 (Fengdiao drumsinging), *Yueju* 越劇 (Zhejiang ballad opera), and

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danxian 單絃 (medley song).[1] Playing specific pieces from recorded performances, and distributing musical notation transcribed from these recordings, she discussed the different musical treatments of words in each genre. In each case, she raised a specific issue, such as the subtleties of timing in *xiangsheng*.

The second report, by Milena Doleželová (University of Toronto), was a review of Boris Riftin's *Istoricheskai͡a ėpopei͡a i fol'klornai͡a tradit͡si͡a v Kitae: ustnye i knizhnye versii* "*Troet͡sarstvii͡a*" (Historical romance and folklore tradition in China: Oral and printed versions of the Three Kingdoms), published in Moscow in 1970. Riftin examined, analyzed, and compared three different texts on the Sanguo 三國 (Three Kingdoms) story: the well-known fourteenth-century novel *Sanguozhi yanyi* 三國志演義 (Elaboration of the Records of the Three Kingdoms) attributed to Luo Guanzhong 羅貫中; the early "folk book" *Quanxiang pinghua Sanguozhi* 全相平話三國志 (Completely Illustrated Records of the Three Kingdoms in Plain Language), which drew on the oral narrative tradition traceable back to at least the Tang dynasty; and three modern *Yangzhou pinghua* 楊州評話 (Yangzhou storytelling) versions, recorded in the 1950s and 60s and subsequently transcribed.

The third presentation by Robert Ruhlmann (University of Paris) also engaged the issue of the relationship between the oral and the written by examining the Wu Song story cycle as performed again in the *Yangzhou pinghua* tradition by the renowned Wang Shaotang 王少堂, recorded in 1953 and transcribed and published in 1959. Ruhlmann made references to another set of orally transmitted versions performed by other performers and transcribed and published in 1962 as well as the Wu Song excerpt from the well-known novel *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳. He noted that, just in terms of the number of words, the novel has 80,000, while Wang Shaotang's version has 800,000!

The last presentation was by Bruce Brooks (Harvard University) on "Comparative Analysis of Arias in *Yuanqu* and Peking Opera," which examined versions of a single tune with the title "Dianjiangchun" 點絳唇 (Ruby Lips) as used in different vocal genres, including *Yuanqu* 元曲 (Yuan opera), *zhugongdiao* 諸宮調 (ballads in "all keys and modes"), *sanqu* 散曲 (independent songs), *Kunqu* 崑曲 (Kun opera) and *Jingju* 京劇 (Peking opera). Musical transcriptions in Western staff notation were distributed to aid the discussion. He pointed out that musical examples from the well-known *Jiugong dacheng nanbei ci gongpu* 九宮大成南北詞宮譜 (Great Compendium of Formularies for Southern and Northern Songs in the Nine Musical Modes; 1747) for the older genres probably do not represent actual performances of some centuries ago and cannot be relied upon. Recordings, where available, were played.

House Parties

Each presentation was given an entire morning or afternoon, with the report followed by free-wheeling and lively discussion among the twenty or so attendees (see CHINOPERL *News* 1 for a list of attendees of the first meeting). The breaks consisted of relaxing and extended lunches and dinners served in the Risley Hall cafeteria. This meeting format was unlike any other scholarly conference: the

[1] The Romanization system used in the original publication is here changed to the pinyin system.

presenter was given nearly all the time he/she needed, and the discussion could go on almost without time restriction. Such a generous format resulted in presentations that were not always well organized and sometimes tended towards improvisation and free association. They were by no means polished "papers," but more like reports on research in progress, and were given, sometimes, rather casually.

Nevertheless, attendees treasured this refreshing and distinctive characteristic, and one can see why. They came from myriad disciplines such as literature, linguistics, history, anthropology, sociology, folklore, theater, and music, where the research interest sometimes touched on oral and performing literature. But these scholars, who heretofore conducted research on similar material, mainly worked alone in their respective fields. The departments they belonged to, in their academic orthodoxy, tended to relegate those interests to the periphery of their disciplines. Hence, the future Chinoperlers appreciated hearing thoughts from diverse fields on the same material. The discussion was therefore particularly fervent and spirited but carried out in a relaxed and friendly environment, clearly relished by all. As Harold Shadick (Cornell University) wrote, these meetings "had the atmosphere of house parties" (*News* 4 [1974], p. 2).

Some of the materials presented were new to me, a graduate student at the time, but the issues raised and discussed were fascinating and deeply intriguing; many of them went over my head, of course. It was only the excellent CHINOPERL *News* (later called *Papers*) No. 4 of 1974, published shortly thereafter, that gave me a chance to review the reports' contents and discussions. Later I learned that the conference was organized by Harold Shadick and John McCoy (Cornell University), two of the founders of the organization. Shadick in particular sustained CHINOPERL through its first decade or so, and personally oversaw and handled the publication of the *News*. *News* 1 mentioned three Cornell graduate students serving as "scribes and rapporteurs" at the 1969 meeting. It is not clear if "scribes and rapporteurs" were also at subsequent meetings, but the detailed discussions documented made the *News* truly valuable.

Performativity

What most impressed me as a musicologist, about a conference with a "literature" focus, was that it dwelled extensively and not surprisingly on the "performing" aspect. During the four reports at the meeting I attended, Pian and Brooks played recordings of the many examples that were being discussed. Several of the participants were accomplished performers in the genre they studied, and they used their talents to illustrate the material when recordings were unavailable. At one point in Ruhlmann's report on the Yangzhou version of the Wu Song story, he performed his own English translation of a few selected segments, stopping to comment from time to time; that was followed by a performance of the original Chinese text by Daniel Yang (University of Colorado), an accomplished Peking Opera performer. Very much impressed, Shadick wrote "These two experienced actors both read as though they were real storytellers before a real audience. It is impossible to convey here the flavor of the entertainment they gave" (*News* 4, p. 62).

This performative aspect was also prominent in the third conference of 1971, which I missed but learned about from reading *News* 4. In the first morning session, Catherine Stevens (University of Toronto), Rulan Chao Pian, Chün-jo Liu

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(University of Minnesota), and John McCoy offered advice on field work. The afternoon session included Dale Johnson (Oberlin College) on the prosody of *Yuanqu*, emphasizing the importance of distinguishing *chenzi* 襯字 ("padding words") from base words, and base forms from variant forms, issues linked to the oral and performing aspects of the genre. He was followed by Liu Ta-Chung, an eminent Professor of econometrics at Cornell University and accomplished Peking Opera performer, demonstrating the technique for performing a *sheng* role (mature male) in Peking Opera, including gestures, movements, singing, and *bazi* 把子 (weapons used on the Peking Opera stage for martial arts display).

In the morning session of the second day, Yuen Ren Chao (University of California, Berkeley) reported on the chanting of classical verse and prose, including passages from *Mengzi* 孟子 (Mencius), *Shijing* 詩經 (The Classic of Poetry), *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (The Zuo Tradition), Han Yu's 韓愈short essays, and the popular songs of *qizichang* 七字唱 (seven-syllable songs) and *tanshizi* 嘆十字 (ten-syllable laments) from Chao's home town of Changzhou 常州, Jiangsu. Chao played tape recordings of his own reading, speaking, and chanting in the Changzhou 常州 dialect. He was followed by Cheng Hsi (University of Iowa), who reported on the chanting of *pianwen* 駢文 (parallel style prose) and explained the techniques of how to do it properly. He used an essay by Yu Xin 庾信 (513–581 CE), renowned for composing *pianwen*, to illustrate his points.

The focus on performativity is also shown in the emphasis on collecting, cataloguing, and preserving original recordings for the study of oral and performing literature. Since China was not accessible to U.S. scholars at the time, such material was particularly treasured. Examples include Alan Kagan (University of Minnesota) on all primary source materials relevant to the study of the Asian musical cultures at his university, as reported in *News* 1 (1969); Wolfram Eberhard (University of California, Berkeley) on collections of Chinese folklore; Rulan Chao Pian on primary source materials, including recordings, of Chinese oral traditions; and Catherine Stevens on recordings of Chinese folk entertainments with matching texts. When Chün-jo Liu published her recordings of Buddhist liturgy, Harold Shadick wrote that "This collection … stands as the best example to date of the range of our interests, the industry and generosity of our individual members, and the sincerity of our desire to build a library research facility for all to use" (*News* 3, p. i); a comment that can be applied to all the collections.

A unique report is that by Pian on "Rewriting of an Act of the Yuan Drama, Li Kuei Fu Jing, in the style of the Peking Opera: A Fieldworker's Experiment" (*News* 2, pp. 19–39). Pian conducted two sessions of conversation in Cambridge, Massachusetts on March 8–9, 1970, interviewing Yang Hsi-mei. The entire conversation, totaling about five hours, was recorded on tape, from which portions were selected, translated, summarized and annotated. Yang, an anthropologist, spent the year 1969–1970 in Cambridge as a Harvard-Yenching Senior Visiting Scholar from Academia Sinica, Taiwan. A native of Peking, Yang grew up in a family of Peking Opera lovers, and, Pian wrote, "one might say that he is a classic example of a *piaoyou*, that is, an amateur of professional quality. He specializes in the *laosheng* (mature male) roles, and has on occasion performed on stage. However, he is probably even better known as a Peking Opera fiddle player. … Perhaps more important even than looking at the form of the structural details is the watching of the process by which an opera writer might put the various parts together.

Yang probably had never even thought of writing an opera before; on this occasion he was simply exercising the ingenuity of someone who is steeped in the tradition of the art." Thus Pian went beyond performativity to explore the creativity from which performativity emerged.

Breaking New Ground

The founders conceived of CHINOPERL's scholarly core as situated between literature and oral performance, and, more broadly, between speech and music. The focus was not merely the study of literature that is orally performed, but specifically the detailed interaction between words and phrases in the literary text and their realization in oral performance. As summarized above, the early years of the organization and its publications reflect this core interest.

This focus is not surprising when one notes that a strong voice among the founding members was the eminent Yuen Ren Chao, who was both a linguist and a composer; he was also a music theorist, having by that time already published extensively on the subject of language and music (see *News* 4). Most participants at the first meeting in 1969 also had a personal interest in, and recognized the importance of, treating music and speech as a unified whole.

It is noteworthy that "The Purpose of CHINOPERL," which first appeared in print in *Papers* 7 (1977), was three-fold: (1) recording, (2) study, and (3) practice. Under "practice" one finds "learning to perform, and making oral literature as an object of study and of skill mastery integral to school and college classes in Chinese language, literature and music" (inside back cover).

As stated in the report on the first meeting, CHINOPERL as a field of study "was in effect breaking new ground," and a working definition of the core of study was first proposed by Stevens: "that literature in which performance makes the difference" (*News* 1, p. 10). Because this approach was so novel at the time, many members were still exploring and experimenting with methods of research and presentation. These factors contributed to the amorphous nature of the research and the seemingly undisciplined manner of presentations. The reports published in the *News* further gave a slapdash impression because of an early decision

> to multilith material as received rather than retype every page. The results may be somewhat unaesthetic but we hide behind the defense of economy and speed. Also, by this move we have extended to all of you a modicum of the editorial responsibility. (*News* 1, p. 1)

An Existential Mini-crisis

As the years went by, even though many enjoyed the gatherings (with their "atmosphere of house parties"), others were concerned that they did not live up to generally accepted standards of research, scholarship, and communication, and the publication would not be taken seriously by the larger academic community. Even though we derived joy among ourselves, the true significance of our intellectual content dwelled on its having an impact beyond us. At one gathering, I cannot remember exactly which, but probably around year ten, several members brought

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this concern into the open, and urged that, in order for CHINOPERL to have a future in the larger scholarly community and be accepted seriously by our peers, the presentation format had to change, and the *Papers* to conform more to commonly observed professional standards. Other members, however, wanted CHINOPERL to continue as it had been; they felt that the study of China's oral and performing literature was itself breaking new ground, and that while still at an exploratory stage, there should be room to grow and freedom for thoughts to roam. They were also proud to have created what they considered a radical method of scholarly communication, one whose emphasis on performance and improvisatory elements reflected the improvisatory nature of China's performing arts themselves. Thus, one side was rational, disciplined, and realistic in their approach; the other side was romantic and idealistic.

It was a friendly discussion. Each side aired their views but also expressed understanding of the other side's sentiment; in fact, both sides shared the same concern, with the difference in the balance of the two specific to each individual. It was up to each member to decide his or her conception of CHINOPERL's identity. At the end, those on the "romantic" side were persuaded to come to the side of the "realists," and a mini-crisis was averted. CHINOPERL and its *Papers* took the first step towards scholarly respectability.

The slow process of maturation culminated in the years 1984–1985, which saw several major changes. In 1983 Rulan Chao Pian was elected President to take over the general responsibility and well-being of the organization, and one of her first acts was to process the paperwork to convert the organization into an Incorporated Association, registered in Massachusetts, where she lived. A Board of Directors replaced the Advisory Committee (as was required by the incorporation), and an Editorial Board was created to transform the *Papers* into a "refereed" journal. The physical appearance of the journal took a giant leap forward, with camera-ready copy provided by contributors being replaced by proper editing and the retyping of the entire volume on a word processor. In 1984 Samuel Hung-nin Cheung (University of California, Berkeley) and Lindy Li Mark (California State University, Hayward) were elected to serve as Associate Editors. Harold Shadick, who for fifteen years had been the tireless helmsman of the organization and the dedicated editor of the *Papers*, finally found in Pian, Cheung, and Mark worthy "youngsters" to share the responsibilities. In 1990 Shadick retired fully and handed over the editorship of the *Papers* to the associate editors, who wrote that they felt "like orphans" (*Papers* 15, p. vii), a sentiment we all felt when Shadick passed away in 1993 at age 91. *Papers* 17 (1994) was dedicated to him, and for those who would like to know more about this extraordinary scholar and ancestor of CHINOPERL, see the Memorial written by his Cornell colleagues.[2]

The rest, as they say, is history. Under the leadership of successive presidents and editors, CHINOPERL grew and now rightfully occupies a place among the top tier of academic constellations. Yet, the "romantics" among us, grateful to the "realists" for pointing out the correct path, continue to harbor the original

[2] "Harold Shadick" https://ecommons.cornell.edu/bitstream/handle/1813/18032/Shadick_Harold_1993.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y

spirit and nurture an adventurous approach befitting the subject matter dear to our hearts.

Notes on contributor

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