

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book began as a dissertation under the guidance of Patrick Hanan, Stephen Owen, and Rulan Chao Pian, to whom I am deeply grateful. The initial aim of this study was deceptively simple: to show that Ming-dynasty song-texts that have long been regarded as “folk songs” are, in fact, an urban and decidedly urbane literature. The book remains, in a sense, a study of simplicity and its particular appeal in times of dramatic social and economic change.

The methodology of the book, to trace the corpus of Ming popular songs and to piece together an understanding of the peculiar formats in which they circulated, took me far afield and beyond the familiar territory of literary studies and social history. The process of constructing the significance of these songs from primary sources and memoirs led me to investigate how song-texts were reproduced and to discover the compelling interest that copying and imitation and the changing technologies of reading and writing (as well as publishing) generated in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century China. Another goal of this study is to show that popular songs are not a marginal form or a novelty but a central form of cultural production and consumption. The process of unearthing evidence to that effect has taken me deeper into the terrain of song forms performed and published throughout the Ming dynasty, chiefly non-operatic songs (*sanqu* 散曲) but also song-lyric (*ci* 詞) and staged opera that generated reams of commentary. Songs mattered a great deal, as the focus for parties, anthologies, and an array of other writings that debate the nuances of prosody and presentation of the emotions in performance.

To Patrick Hanan I owe special thanks for the example he has set in his work and for his keen attention to the lives behind writings. The late Guan Dedong gave me invaluable help over more than two decades not only in locating rare sources but in sharing his immense learning and unveiling the concerns that guided the scholarship of his teacher Xie Guozhen, and peers Ye Dejun, Jiang Bin, and others concerning memoirs, regional drama, and dialect literature.

This work draws on the growing body of work on the history of the book in China. With this, my thanks to Cynthia Brokaw, Katherine Carlitz, Lucille Chia, and Kai-wing Chow, who generously shared

their work in progress or extended invitations to participate in conferences which made a critical difference to this book. Friends and colleagues made valuable suggestions and shared their work: James Cahill, Ronald Egan, Paize Keulemans, Dorothy Ko, Wai-yee Li, Pauline Lin, Keith McMahon, Tobie Meyer-Fong, John Nathan, Willard Peterson, Andrew Plaks, Shang Wei, Catherine Swatek, Nancy Norton Tomasko, C. K. Wang, Bell Yung, and Judith Zeitlin. Bai Qianshen, Francesca Bray, Kate Saltzman-Li, and Miriam Wattles kindly helped to steer various and sundry images and ideas to completion. My sincere thanks to Kang-i Sun Chang, Wilt L. Idema, and Stephen West, whose contributions to my work are evident in large and small ways. I have incurred many other pleasant debts to Chum Shum (Shen Jin), Sidney Tai, Chia-yang (Daisy) Itu, and the staff of the Harvard-Yenching Library; Sören Edgren; Martin Heijdra of the Gest Oriental Collection at Princeton University; Wu Ge at the Fudan University Library; Liang Yi and Wang Hong at the Shanghai Municipal Library; and Yu Yifang and the staff of the Rare Books Collection at Peking University Library, where I spent countless hours. Cathy Chiu and Peter Pang of the East Asian Collection at the University of California at Santa Barbara have been resourceful and unstinting in their support.

During a period of two years of research in Shanghai, 1994–1996, I was fortunate to have been affiliated with the Classics Research Institute of Fudan University, under the direction of Zhang Peiheng, and most lucky to have had sound advice from Li Ping. For many years, my colleagues Chen Guanghong, Chen Zhenghong, Tan Beifang, and Zheng Lihua, of the Center for Classical Literature Research at Fudan, have helped to sustain my interest in this project and to put it in perspective. I happily acknowledge debts as well to Okayama Hajime, Sakamoto Hiroko, and Yamaguchi Mamoru for practical assistance, good talk, and sustenance during several short but intensive research trips to use rare Chinese manuscripts located in collections in Japan. I offer my humble thanks to Ōki Yasushi for his kind assistance and collegiality. His work on Ming publishing culture and related topics have been an invaluable point of reference for the present study and for my work and an ongoing source of pleasure. The period of dissertation research and writing was generously supported by the American Council of Learned Societies and the Committee for Scholarly Communication with China.

I gratefully acknowledge financial support from the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange, the Academic Senate of the University of California at Santa Barbara, and the Regents of the University of California Junior Faculty Humanities Fellowships that made additional research on Ming-dynasty reading materials, letter-writing guides, and the writing of the book itself possible.

I thank my editor, Victoria Scott, and want to give her due credit for adding flesh to my translations and clarity to the organization of this book. I am also grateful to Patricia Radder and John Ziemer for their generous assistance and timely advice. Any remaining errors are my own. Finally, my thanks to David Marshall, Dean of the Division of Humanities and Fine Arts at the University of California at Santa Barbara, for helping to arrange a period of sabbatical leave necessary for the completion of the book.

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