



The Intimate and the Local: The Influence of the Oral Tradition on the Vernacular Songs of Feng Menglong (1574-1646)

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Venue: Room 730, Run Run Shaw Tower, Centennial Campus, HKU

Time: 4:30pm, Wednesday, June 6th, 2018

Abstract: In Chinese literature of the pre-modern era it is the writings in classical Chinese or in the literary vernacular that predominate. Unlike European nations during the Renaissance, China did not undergo a period where regional spoken languages became the cherished language of polished literary production. However, in China's late imperial era, one does find greater use of regional languages in play scripts, novels, short stories, and collected songs. In his song and story collections, literati Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574-1646) made an outstanding contribution to the popularisation of the language and culture of his home region of Suzhou. His collection of "mountain songs", *Shange*, 山歌, is particularly famous. However, the derivation of the songs and the extent of Feng's revision remains a topic of hot contention today. Did the songs derive primarily from the illiterate rural classes or were they mostly the songs of the courtesans who plied their trade across the waterways of Suzhou? Or perhaps they were the common songs of both the urban and rural classes? How should we best interpret the frank language of love and passion found in this song collection? As yet largely unexamined is the extent to which Feng's *Shange* collection reflects the oral traditions of *shange* lyricism and story-telling. This study will draw from both historical sources and the rich trove of *shange* that have been recorded in the contemporary period to offer fresh insight into how the oral tradition of the late Ming shaped Feng's remarkable sense of both "the intimate" and "the local" in these songs of passion.



Anne E. McLaren is Professor of Chinese Studies at the Asia Institute, University of Melbourne. Her research specialty is the intersection of oral, written and printed traditions in late imperial China. Her earlier work, *Chinese Popular Culture & Ming Chantefables* (Brill, 1998) dealt with an early storytelling genre and its adaptation in Ming novels, especially the *Sanguo yanyi* (三國演義). She is also the author of a book on the bridal laments (*kujia* 哭嫁) of the coastal Shanghai region (*Performing Grief: Bridal Laments in Rural China* (University of Hawaii Press, 2008). In 2017 she edited a special issue of *Asian Ethnology* (76-1) "Intepreting Sinitic Heritage: Ethnography and Identity in China and Southeast Asia". In recent years she has completed numerous studies on the long *shange* song-cycles of the lower Yangzi delta, including a co-authored paper with Emily Yu Zhang, "Recreating 'Traditional' Folk Epics in Contemporary China: The Politics of Textual Transmission", in *Asian Ethnology* (2017, 76-1).

All Welcome