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Mu-yü Shu and the Cantonese Popular Singing Arts

SAI-SHING YUNG

Mu-yü shu, or "Wooden-fish book," is used as a collective term for the song books of various popular narratives in Cantonese, particularly the *nan-yin* (southern tone) and *lung-chou* (dragon boat) types. Usually appearing in engraved wooden booklets, many such works were mass-produced at a low price in Canton and nearby areas like Tung-kuan and Fo-shan. They were widely circulated at least since early Ch'ing times. In describing the popularity of *Mu-yü shu*, Fu Kung-wang says:

Books printed from woodblocks available in the market numbered a few hundred in kind. Unengraved texts numbered over a thousand. . . . This kind of song book is very popular, available even in the "Three-family Village," where books and newspapers are inaccessible. You can find them in the small stands selling *p'ao-hua* and *ch'a-tsai* (hair detergents used by village women).¹

From this we can assume that the oral performances themselves were also popular.

Nan-yin, *lung-chou*, *mu-yü*, *pan-yen*, *yüeh-ou* (chants in Cantonese), and *chieh-hsin* (relief of emotion) all are song forms once popular in the Pearl River delta region of Kuang-tung. They declined only after the middle of this century. These folk arts share quite a few common characteristics, the most conspicuous of which being the use of the Cantonese dialect. They differ from each other, however, in the degree of colloquialism, the literary and musical style, as well as the performing convention and milieu. *Yüeh-ou* has the most refined language; sometimes it was used by the literati as a

means of self-expression. *Lung-chou* was performed by street players who were on a par with beggars, but not blind, as most of the *nan-yin* players were.

Lung-chou does not use musical instruments, except for a small drum and a small gong hung on the neck of the player. *Nan-yin* is usually accompanied by music during the performance. Except for the beginning part, technically called *ying-t'ou*, "shadow head," where three-character sentences are found, a typical work of *nan-yin* is composed of seven-character sentences. *Nan-yin* works were often written by learned men. Consequently, their language is artistic and their form fixed. This feature, according to Professor Bell Yung, distinguishes *nan-yin* from *mu-yü*, which is chiefly improvisational.²

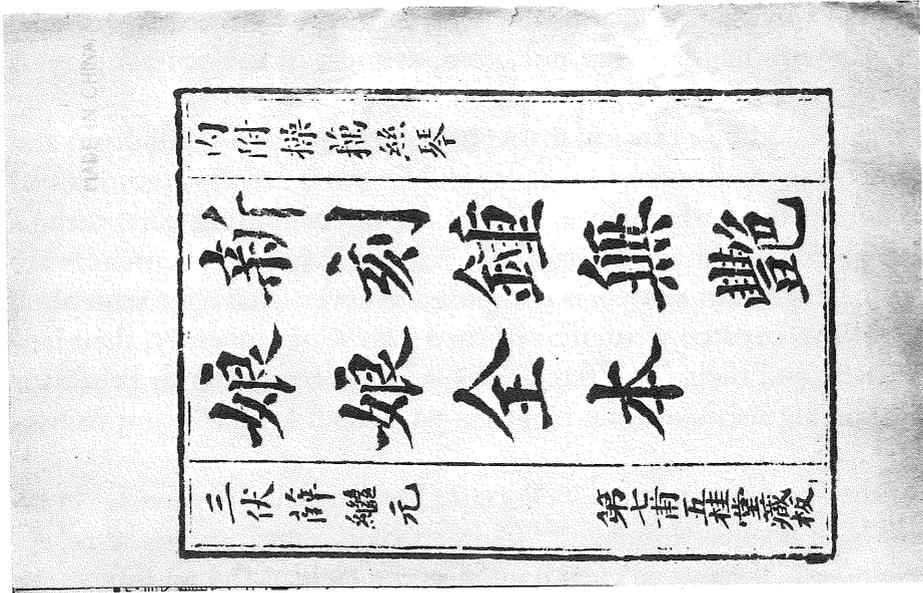
Some of the *nan-yin* works are well-crafted and artistically sound. "Hua-chien chi," "Erh ho-hua shih," and "Chin-so yüan-yang" are noted representatives. In fact, they were even named as the eighth, the ninth and the tenth among "talent books," following Chin Sheng-t'an's (1619-1661) scheme in evaluating literary Chinese classics. "Hua-chien chi" was even translated into English in 1824 and into German in 1836 by Peter Perring Thoms and Heinrich Kurz respectively.³ Other popular *nan-yin* songs include "K'o-t'u ch'iu-hen,"⁴ "Nan shao-i," "Ho Hui-ch'ün t'an wu-keng," and "Ch'u ch'üeh liao A-Chiu."⁵

Mu-yü is considered a sub-category of *nan-yin*.⁶ But because improvisation plays such a major part, *mu-yü* works may not always have a fixed text. Moreover, *mu-yü* is usually longer than *nan-yin*. It may have a story, usually adapted from official history, myth and folklore, which can take sometimes tens or hundreds of hours to finish.

The names of these singing arts could be used interchangeably and also the same song might be presented in the *nan-yin*, *mu-yü*, and *lung-chou* genres. Furthermore, some of the songs do not have stable texts. Thus, *Mu-yü shu* represent only the printed form of the song in any time and place.

Ch'ü Ta-chün (1630-1696) wrote the following about singing in Kuang-tung:

The Cantonese customarily like songs . . . (These songs) may be up to a hundred or a thousand words long. They are accompanied by *san-hsien*. The tune is that of *t'ai-ts'ou*, and the middle chord is seldom struck at the beginning and the end. This kind of song is



1. The *Mu-yü shu* "Hua-chien chi" has been much printed since early Ch'ing and has attracted international attention. The volume illustrated here (on the left) was published in the early 1900s. "Chung Wu-yen miang-miang" (at the right) is one of the longest *Mu-yü shu*. It was issued in 64 volumes, comprising 6 sets.

called *mo-yü* song. When women gather together during festivals, blind singers are employed to perform these songs.⁷

Ch'ü here brings out two interesting facts about the singing of *Mu-yü shu*. First, women were the main audience in private performance; second, blind people were the performers.

Women in fact constituted an important reading group of *Mu-yü shu*; they were the main consumers. In a society where only men were highly educated, *Mu-yü shu* served the function of educating women. The female audience learned characters, history, folklore and other things from the performances.

Many of the main characters in *Mu-yü shu* are commonplace women, and their theme often emphasizes sisterly love. In some cases, as in "Shih-erh shih-ch'en," lesbian love is suggested. Some *Mu-yü shu* directly relate to the rituals and customs of women. For example, "San-ku hui-men" describes, in a story form, the whole ritual process of a young woman during her marriage. The background of "Ch'i-hsi tsan-hua" is set on the seventh day of the seventh month, the festival of *Ch'i-hsi*. The song provides an account of the custom of *ch'i-ch'iao* as practised in that festival.

Textual evidence indicates that women were the intended readers of the *Mu-yü shu*. In the ending of *Meng Jih-hung mai-hsien K'uei-hua chi*, printed by Ch'in-hsiang ko, we read:

The whole set of "K'uei-hua chi" having been performed,
Men and women are in high spirits,
Although the lines are made up by colloquial words,
They would be kept in the lady's quarter to be talked about.

In *Wu Yüan kuo-kuan*, printed by I-wen t'ang, we also find:

In leisure, I adapt the official history into songs,
To present them to the ladies for reading after their embroidery work.
Although the expressions are nothing new or crafted,
They help to kill time and relieve one's sadness.

Similar expressions are found in *Wu-se ho-hua*:

I copy *Wu-se ho-hua*, not only because I have an affection for the ancients.
It is an unusual romance in our county,
Yet who knows even a bit of it.

I better put the whole event into words, spreading it to the ladies in the pavilion.⁸

Blind men and women are a group who specialized in these songs. In old China, fortune telling and popular song narratives were two professions almost exclusively for the blind. In chapter 54 of *Ju-lin wai-shih*, a blind man is invited to tell the ailing P'in-niang her fortune. One can tell from Wu Ching-tzu's description that the fortuneteller on that occasion also performs an oral narrative. The vehicle for that was probably *t'an-tz'u*, since the setting of the chapter is Nanking.⁹ Wu Ching-tzu's depiction is also in accord with this description by Juan K'uei-sheng (1727-1789):

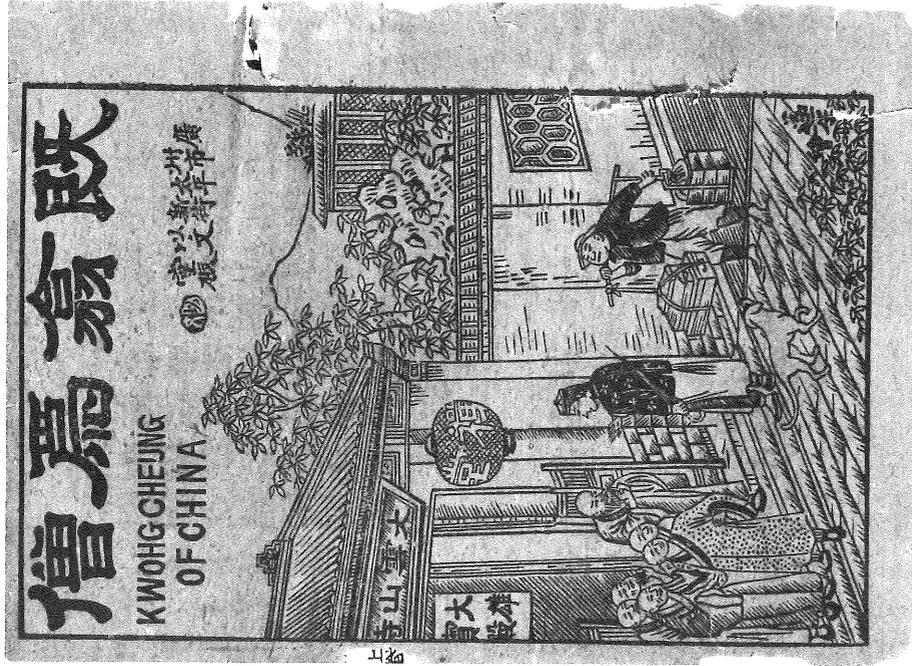
Blind girls performed *p'i-p'a* (here meaning popular narrative) already in Yüan times and now this flourishes especially in the Chiang-Huai area. Recently there are also many such performances in the capital.¹⁰

In Cantonese, the male blind singer is called *ku-shih*, or colloquially *mang-kung*, whereas the female blind performer is called *shih-niang*. The musical instruments used by the male singers are *cheng* and *san-hsien*.¹¹ The instrument used by the female singer is usually a *yang-ch'in*.

According to the recollection of some blind singers, *mang-kung* practised fortune telling for their customers during the day. In the evening they put a *cheng* on their left front arm. Using the same hand to control a pair of wooden clappers, the *p'ai-pan*, they played the *cheng* with their right fingers and walked on the street to attract customers. They would be called to sing in their houses, or before the customers' tables in a restaurant. Some of the more skillful and reputed singers did not have to perform in public, but were often invited to the individual's house to give private performances.¹² In *Ch'ing-pai lei-ch'ao*, in the entry on "blind girl singing narratives," we read:

In Canton there are blind girls, *mang-mei*, who perform narrative. The songs they sing are *mo-yü* songs, which are accompanied by *yang-ch'in* and are melodious and pleasant to listen to. These girls are invited to play in family quarters for celebrations. Girls led along the streets by old women and who wait to be called are not the better performers.¹³

Among the clientele were amateur musicians who enjoyed blind singers'



既翁為僧上卷
 執葶子香談家世
 閨秀女締結姻緣
 愁自苦 淚汪汪
 今生無望坐苦怨
 小生本是風流客
 芳名既翁有家當
 布政揚名親哥哥
 國學鄉紳係我輩
 從學屢負為業師
 幾個秀才我同怨
 人品想來勝第二
 娶妻石坑身姓貴
 名喚久聞瓊花女
 去年九月結鸞鴛
 宴爾新婚歌式舞
 葛之覃兮詩亦云

紙卷上卷 (二)

2. "Chi-hsi wei seng" is an item in the Gest Library collection not mentioned in the *Mu-yi shu* catalogues. Printed by I-wen t'ang, the printing format is distinctive in that the columns are split by a central margin. Leung Pui-chee in his book mentions a personal copy published presumably in the U. S. in 1919 by the Mei-kuo Chiu-chin shan hsing-ta-lu t' u-shu-kuan (San Francisco New Continent Library of the United States).

performances at their private music gatherings. At such gatherings their musically inclined friends would come for sheer enjoyment or to learn music from each other. During the break, they would have congee and fried noodles as snacks. After the night snack, the performance continued into the morning. This kind of performance was called *teng-lung chü* (lantern gathering).¹⁴

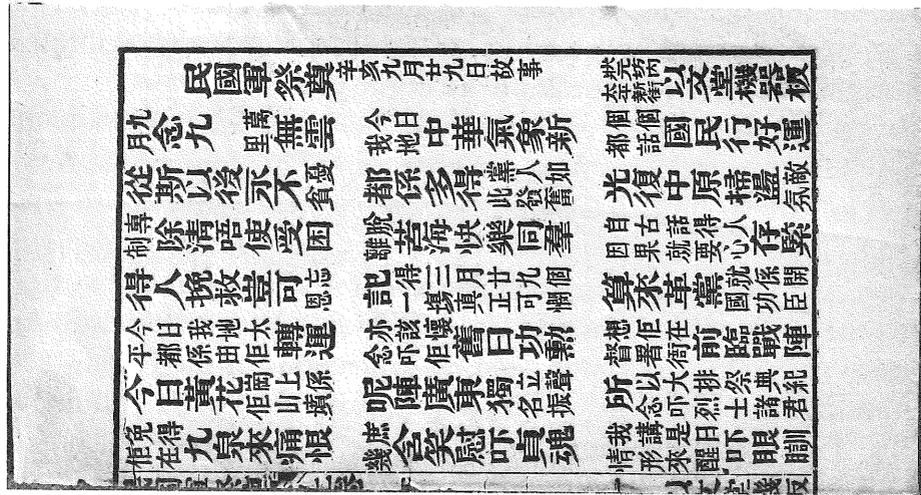
The history of *Mu-yü shu* can be traced back to the latter part of the Ming (1368-1644).¹⁵ One of earliest extant *Mu-yü shu* texts, "Hua-chien chi," was printed in 1713, during the Ch'ing dynasty K'ang-hsi era. (See Illustration 1.) The printing of *Mu-yü shu* stopped only after the middle of the twentieth century, when the traditional singing arts were gradually replaced by modern entertainment. Before that, at least some 400 titles were published and widely circulated in south China and Southeast Asia.¹⁶

So far at least four important scholarly catalogues of *Mu-yü shu* have been produced. Because they have been compiled in different regions we get a general sense of the writing and marketing of *Mu-yü shu* in different areas.

The first catalogue was compiled by Wolfram Eberhard. It is an annotated catalogue of thirty-eight items based on the *Mu-yü shu* collection in the Munich State Library. It was published in Taipei under the title *Cantonese Ballads* by the Orient Cultural Service in 1972. This catalogue also includes a xerox copy of "Wan-su liang-hsiao," one of the earliest *Mu-yü shu*, printed in 1778.

The catalogue of *Mu-yü shu* in Hong Kong University was compiled by Leung Pui-chee, a specialist in this field.¹⁷ It is titled *Wooden-Fish Books: Critical Essays and an Annotated Catalogue Based on the Collections in the University of Hong Kong*, and was published by the University of Hong Kong in 1978. It is based on materials in the Fung Ping Shan Library and the Centre of Asian Studies of the University of Hong Kong. The first part is a detailed annotation of 207 items of *nan-yin* and *lung-chou*; the second part consists of an analytical study of the *Mu-yü shu* as a genre. It includes the contents of several types of *Mu-yü shu*, and discusses their spread and influence, their engraving and publishing, and a bibliography of *Mu-yü shu* studies. Leung's work is critical for the study of Cantonese folk culture.

In 1982 the Shu-mu wen-hsien ch'u-pan-she in Peking published an annotated catalogue of *Mu-yü shu* under the title *Mu-yü ko Ch'ao-chou ko hsü-lu*. The compilers, T'an Cheng-pi and T'an Hsün, included 154 items of *nan-yin* and 126 items of *lung-chou*, exceeding in quantity the two mentioned



3. "Min-Kuo chün chi-tien" is an example of *Mu-yü shu* which deals with revolution and thus reflects the political consciousness of Cantonese in the early years of this century.

above. (The authors make no mention of their bibliographic sources.) The catalogue proper is prefaced with a critical study of *Mu-yü shu* that skillfully traces the origin and historical development of the genre.

There is yet another larger collection, the well-known collection of Chinese oral literature in the Institute of History and Philology of the Academia Sinica in Taiwan entitled *Chung-yang yen-chiu-yüan li-shih yü-yen yen-chiu-so so ts'ang su-ch'ü tsung-mu mu-lu*. It lists more than 350 items of *nan-yin* and *lung-chou*, and may be the largest collection of *Mu-yü shu* in the world. It is built on the work of Liu Fu and Li Chia-jui,¹⁸ who drew materials from the *Ch'e wang fu ch'ü-pen* collection, and the collections of the Peking Library, National Palace Museum, and the Institute of History and Philology in the 1930s. The entire collection was shipped to Taiwan in 1949, and in 1965 it was opened to the public at the suggestion of Professor Rulan Chao Pian. A catalogue was prepared by Professor Tseng Yung-i and his assistants in the early 1970s.¹⁹

The Gest Library has a special collection of *Mu-yü shu*, comprising more than 130 items of *nan-yin* and 60 of *lung-chou*.²⁰ Most of the texts were printed by Wu-kuei t'ang and I-wen t'ang. These books, I believe, were bought from Hong Kong and include many valuable items not to be found in the collection of the University of Hong Kong. Some items are also not available in the other three catalogues. (See Illustration 2.)

Like many other texts of popular literature, *Mu-yü shu* are not just song books, but are a record of Cantonese colloquial expressions and aspects of Cantonese marriage and death rituals that are now rarely observed. Besides, since Kuang-tung was closely tied to China's revolutions early in this century, *Mu-yü shu*, a popular and sometimes even propagandistic literature, reflect the contemporary political situation and political consciousness of Cantonese people. (See Illustration 3.) Thus, they are not only good research material for scholars of popular literature and folklore, but are also valuable documents for linguists, social and political historians, anthropologists, and sociologists. They have already attracted the attention of a number of scholars, and more comprehensive and intensive research is expected.²¹

NOTES

1. Fu Kung-wang, "Lung-chou ho Nan-yin," in *Fang-yen wen-hsüeh*, ed. *Chung-hua ch'üan-kuo wen-i hsieh-hui Hsiangkang fen-hui fang-yen wen-hsüeh yen-chiu-hui* (Hong Kong: Hsin-min-chu, 1949), p. 42.
2. Bell Yung, "Reconstructing a Lost Performance Context: A Field Work Experiment," *Chinoperl Papers*, 6, pp. 124-126. Improvisation is not the only characteristic of *mu-yü* performance. Ch'en T'ieh-erh recalls that there was a rich man who used to be a *lung-chou* singer in Canton. As he walked and sang he was able to link up hundreds of names of stores and their goods along many streets into one song. See Ch'en T'ieh-erh, "Yüeh-chü ko-yüeh chin pai nien lai ti ch'ien-pien," *Kuang-tung wen hsien*, 14.2 (1984), p. 71.
3. See Ch'en Ju-heng, *Hua-chien chi* (Kuang-chou: Kuang-tung Jen-min ch'u pan she, 1958), Foreword, pp. 2-3; Leung Pui-chee (Liang P'ei-ch'ih), *Wooden-Fish Books: Critical Essays and an Annotated Catalogue based on the Collections in the University of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong, 1978), chapter 4, pp. 228-33.
4. As far as I know, there are at least five recordings of "K'o-t'u ch'iu-hen" available in Hong Kong. They are performed by (1) Pai Chü-jung, (2) Hsin Ma Shih-tseng, (3) Tu Huan, (4) Yeh Hang, and (5) Juan Chao-hui. The third one is recorded by Professor Bell Yung and is kept in the Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong.
5. K.P.K. Whitaker has studied and compared different versions of "Ch'u ch'üeh liao A-chiu." See her "A Cantonese Song Entitled 'Creoy Keok Lrio Aa Gao,'" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London, 36.2 (1973), pp. 446-459. For an introduction to the anecdotal contents of these songs, see Chien Yu-wen, "Kuang-tung ti min-chien wen-hsüeh," *Kuang-tung wen hsien*, 1.3 (1971), pp. 22-31.
6. See Bell Yung, "Reconstructing a Lost Performance Context," p. 120, footnote.
7. *Kuang-tung hsün-yü* (Hong Kong: Chung-hua, 1974), pp. 358-59. Some scholars assert that *mo-yü* means *mu-yü*. Leung Pui-chee, however, does not. See Leung Pui-chee, *op.cit.*, p. 261.
8. Some *pan-yan* songs, on the contrary, were not supposed to be played before regular women because of their extreme vulgarity. Instead they were only to be performed in brothels. In 1985 I listened to a recording of *pan-yan* made by Professor Bell Yung. The performer is a famous Hong Kong blind singer named Tu Huan. The song, called "Ch'en Erh Shu," describes in very erotic language a sexual encounter between a young woman and Ch'en. For details of this performance, see Bell Yung, "Popular Narrative in the Pleasure Houses of the South," *Chinoperl Papers*, 11 (1982), pp. 126-49.
9. *Ju-lin wai-shih* (Hong Kong: Chung-hua, 1972), pp. 524-25.

10. Juan K'uei-sheng, *Ch'a-yü k'o-hua* (Peking: Chung-hua, 1959), vol. 2, p. 670.
11. Although nowadays *nan-yin* is mostly accompanied by *cheng*, especially *nan cheng*, it is believed that in Ch'ing times *san-hsien* was also a common accompaniment. In an exhibition entitled "Yüeh-chü Yüeh-yüeh li-shih tzu-liao chan-lan" (Historical Materials of Cantonese Opera and Cantonese Music) organized by the Chung-hua wen-hua ts'u-chin chung-hsin of Hong Kong, there was a recording of a *mu-yü* performance by a professional blind singer with an accompanying *san-hsien*. See Li Chien-chih, "Yüeh-yüeh chan-lan chung ti Yüeh-tiao shuo-ch'ang" (Cantonese Chantefables in an Exhibition on Cantonese Music), *Hsin Pao*, July 1, 1987, p. 6. Moreover, Ch'ü Ta-chün's words also make it clear that *san-hsien*, instead of *cheng*, was used in the Ch'ing period. In the occurrence in *Ju-lin wai-shih*, although the genre was probably not Kuang-tung narratives, the instrument was, nevertheless, a *san-hsien*.
12. See Ch'en Cho-ying, "Shih-t'an Kuang-tung ch'ü-i i-shu yüan-liu," *Hsi-chü yen-chiu tzu-liao*, 4 (1981), p. 29.
13. Hsü K'o, comp., *Ch'ing-pai lei-ch'ao* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1971), vol. 36, p. 28.
14. For the above descriptions of the performing contexts of *Mu-yü shu*, see Ch'en T'ieh-erh, "Yüeh-chü," pp. 71-76; Bell Yung, "Reconstructing a Lost Performance Context," pp. 120-43; Ch'en Cho-ying, "Shih-t'an Kuang-tung ch'ü-i," pp. 29-37.
15. See Leung Pui-chee, *op.cit.*, p. 246.
16. Both Fu Kung-wang and Leung Pui-chee mentioned this number. See Fu Kung-wang, *op.cit.*, p. 42; Leung Pui-chee, *op.cit.*, p. 206.
17. Mr. Leung's master thesis (Hong Kong Chu Hai College, 1972) "Yüeh-tiao shuo-ch'ang wen-hsüeh yen-chiu," appears to be research on the Cantonese popular narrative art. However, it is not accessible to me. Leung has also written a series of papers on *Mu-yü shu*, for example, "Mu-yü shu ti nei-yung yü liu-ch'uan chi ch'i yen-chiu ti kuo-ch'u yü hsien-tsai," *Journal of Oriental Studies*, 14.1 (1976), pp. 65-82.
18. See Liu Fu and Li Chia-jui, *Chung-Kuo su-ch'ü tsung-mu kao* (Taipei: Wen Hai, 1973), Foreword, p. 2.
19. On this collection, see Tseng Yung-i, "Chung-yang yen-chiu-yüan so ts'ang su-wen-hsüeh tzu-liao ti fen-lei cheng-li ho pien-mu," in his *Shuo su-wen-hsüeh*, (Taipei: Lien Ching, 1980), pp. 1-10.
20. The books are uncatalogued; hence these numbers are only approximate.
21. Besides the above mentioned works, Professor Hatano Taro's informative article "Dojo danshi mokugyo sho," in his *Chügoku bungaku shi kenkyü* (Tokyo: Ofusha, 1974), is also important. It mentions at least two more catalogues of Cantonese popular song books in Japan, one compiled by Professor van der Loon of Cambridge University, based on the private collection of Professor Sawada Mizuho, and the other prepared by Professor Torii Hisayasu. See Hatano Taro, *op.cit.* pp. 423-549, especially p. 530.

GLOSSARY

ch'a-tsai	茶仔
Ch'a-yü k'o-hua	茶餘客話
Ch'e wang fu ch'ü-pen	車王府曲本
Ch'en Cho-yin	陳卓瑩
Ch'en Erh Shu	陳二叔
Ch'en Ju-heng	陳汝衡
Ch'en T'ieh-erh	陳鐵兒
cheng	箏
ch'i-ch'iao	乞巧
Ch'i-hsi tsan-hua	七夕燈花
Chi-hsi wei seng	既翁為僧
Chien Yu-wen	簡又文
Ch'in-hsiang ko	芥香閣
Chin Sheng-t'an	金聖嘆
Chin-so yüan-yang	金鎖鴛鴦
Ch'ing-pai lei-ch'ao	清稗類鈔
Ch'u ch'üeh liao A-Chiu	除却了阿九
Ch'ü Ta-chün	屈大均
Chugoku bungaku shi kenkyü	中國文學史研究
Chung-hua wen-hua ts'u-chin chung-hsin	中華文化促進中心
Chung-kuo su-ch'ü tsung-mu kao	中國俗曲總目稿
Chung Wu-yen niang-niang	鍾無艷娘娘
Chung-yang yen-chiu-yüan li-shih yü-yen yen-chiu-so so ts'ang su-ch'ü tsung-mu mu- lu	中央研究院歷史語言研究所 藏俗曲總目目錄
Chung-yang yen-chiu-yüan so ts'ang su- wen-hsüeh tzu-liao ti fen-lei cheng-li ho pien-mu	中央研究院所藏俗文學資料 的分類整理和編目
Dojo danshi mokugyo sho	道情彈詞木魚書
Erh ho-hua shih	二荷花史
Fang-yen wen-hsüeh	方言文學

MU-YÜ SHU

Fo-shan	佛山
Fu Kung-wang	符公望
Hatano Taro	波多野太郎
Ho Hui-ch'ün t'an wu-keng	何惠群嘆五更
<i>Hsi-chü yen-chiu tzu-liao</i>	戲劇研究資料
Hsin Ma Shih-tseng	新馬師曾
<i>Hsin Pao</i>	信報
Hsü K'o	徐珂
Hua-chien chi	花邊記
I-wen t'ang	以文堂
<i>Ju-lin wai-shih</i>	儒林外史
Juan Chao-hui	阮兆輝
Juan K'uei-sheng	阮養生
K'o-t'u ch'iu-hen	客途秋恨
ku-shih	瞽師
<i>Kuang-tung hsün-yü</i>	廣東新語
Kuang-tung ti min-chien wen-hsüeh	廣東的民間文學
<i>Kuang-tung wen-hsien</i>	廣東文獻
K'uei-hua chi	葵花記
Leung Pui-chee	梁培熾
Li Chia-jui	李家瑞
Li Chien-chih	李健之
Liang P'ei-ch'ih	梁培熾
Liu Fu	劉復
lung-chou	龍舟
<i>Lung-chou ho nan-yin</i>	龍舟和南音
mang-kung	盲公
mang-mei	盲妹
Mei-kuo Chiu-chin-shan hsün-ta-lu t'u-shu-kuan	美國舊金山新大陸圖書館
<i>Meng Jih-hung mai-hsien K'uei-hua chi</i>	孟日紅賣線葵花記
Min-Kuo chün chi-tien	民國軍然奠
mo-yü	摸魚

SAI-SHING YUNG

<i>Mu-yü ko Ch'ao-chou ko hsü-lu</i>	木魚歌潮州歌叙錄
mu-yü shu	木魚書
<i>Mu-yü shu ti nei-yung yü liu-ch'uan chi ch'i yen-chiu ti kuo-ch'ü yü hsien-tsai</i>	木魚書的內容與流傳及其研究的過去與現在
Nan-shao-i	男燒衣
nan-yin	南音
Pai Chü-jung	白駒榮
p'ai-pan	拍板
pan-yen	板眼
p'ao-hua	刨花
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