Drum ballad texts form a large corpus of popular literature in the Qing dynasty. Recorded in a format that invokes oral performance, these prosimetric ballads circulated in manuscript, woodblock, and lithographic editions. By the early twentieth century, more than 2,300 known titles existed. Despite their great numbers, drum ballad texts have garnered little scholarly attention. What are these texts? Who reads them? More specifically, what can the material texts of these drum ballads tell us about their audiences? How much do these Qing drum ballad texts rely on knowledge of the conventions of the living oral performance tradition? Have they become purely "desktop" entertainment?

This presentation will focus on martial arts stories in Qing dynasty drum ballads from Beijing, Hebei, and Shenyang. The material texts hold clues to how these drum ballads were circulated and read. For example, shops in Beijing rented long works by dividing them into independent volumes intended as daily installments, and other texts suggest similar use. Readers ran the gamut of society, crossing class, ethnic and gender lines, from women and merchants to Manchus and denizens of the palace. This physical format also reveals clues to whether each text was organized to appeal to the eye or the ear. Examining these clues suggests different reading practices or different degrees of familiarity with performance in each of the drum ballad texts.

While discussing these ballads’ respective places on the spectrum of orality and literacy, she examines how these popular texts are tailored for specific audiences. Understanding how these popular stories circulated in drum ballads as well as novels, with potentially different audiences and different effects, will help paint a fuller picture of the range of fictional practices available in late imperial China and their relationships to each other, their audiences, and the broader culture.


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