

Gleanings from Chinese Folklore. By Nellie N. Russell.

Pp. 169, no index or bibliography.

Detroit: Singing Tree Press, 1972 (Reprint of 1915 edition). No price indication, cloth.

Review note by Sandra Brown Eminov.

The recent upsurge of interest in Things Chinese must account for the decision by the Singing Tree Press to reprint this slim volume, originally published in 1915 by the London-based firm of Fleming H. Revell Company. The folklorist, ever wary of pseudofolklore, fakelore, and plain old trash masquerading as scholarship, at once is put on his guard by the subtitle: "with some of her stories of life in China, to which are added Memorial Sketches of the Author from Associates and Friends." Indeed, wariness is well-warranted, for Gleanings is more a posthumous tribute to a "fervent missionary and social reformer" than a collection of Chinese oral narratives. The table of contents suggests the real intent of Gleanings. Almost one-third of the book is devoted to short items with titles such as "An Appreciation of Nellie N. Russell," "Miss Nellie N. Russell's Unique Work," "Miss Russell's Funeral Service." In fact, the narratives were published for the sake of her many friends, "who will prize them as coming from her hands..."

What, then, of Miss Russell as folklorist, and what about the narratives themselves? One essay informs us that she jotted down names and important details of the stories as her informants spoke. Later, she would write an outline of each tale. In typical nineteenth-century fashion, she had planned to edit and polish the tales before publishing them, but this work was never accomplished. After her death, friends gathered these twelve tales and published them in unedited form, for "every attempt [] to edit the tales seemed to take from the stories that which made them hers. Characteristic phrases and little turns of expression were her very own."

The twelve tales included in Gleanings are mainly well-known Chinese historical legends, although a brief, inferior version of the famous folk novel Hsi Yu Chi (Journey to the West, translated by Arthur Waley with the title Monkey) is included. As one might expect, no informant information is given, and while Miss Russell's friends speak of "editing," it might be more correct to term these "retellings." As such, they are of little interest to the folklorist.