

*Western Han: A Yangzhou Storyteller's Script*. Edited by VIBEKE BØRDAHL and LIANGYAN GE. Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Monographs, vol. 139. Copenhagen: NIAS PRESS, 2017. Pp. x + 742. £150, \$200.

As inheritors of China's great written tradition, modern China's literary historians have quite naturally focused their attention on texts. Their efforts produced a spate of bibliographies and textual histories as these scholars surveyed collections of texts at home and abroad. A predilection for texts also informed early studies of China's great and diffuse oral traditions of stories told and performed over the centuries: parallels in story material led to the conclusion that the novels (*zhanghui xiaoshuo* 章回小說) and short stories (*huaben xiaoshuo* 話本小說) of the Ming period were intimately connected to the storytellers of marketplace and teahouse and itinerant groups of players. The nature of this connection was debated: were the printed versions of these narratives transcriptions of performance? Were they the scripts used by oral performers or modified versions of the same? Did the term *huaben* actually mean "prompt book"? And were the great Ming vernacular short stories simply "imitation prompt books," or *ni huaben* 擬話本?

Political and intellectual preconceptions often intruded upon these debates, which were not put to rest by modern storytellers who claimed to use no scripts at all, and indeed, professionals performed with no text in front of them. References to storytelling in the writings of literati confirmed this practice historically as well. Western theories were brought to bear on the question, with the result that the idea of composing extemporaneously using standard formulae and stock phrases inspired scholars to look for just such elements in existing stories and novels as a way to prove the connection. Subsequent research demonstrating that much of Ming-Qing vernacular fiction was adapted from earlier *textual* sources—in the literary language—has still not silenced the idea that storytellers from the lower classes produced all "popular literature."

But there were suggestions that schools of storytellers (often a hereditary profession), like fortune-tellers and physicians, did in fact have written texts that were carefully preserved and transmitted from generation to generation as training material. However, none had been subjected to scholarly scrutiny. Starting in the 1950s efforts were made to transcribe the oral tales of living raconteurs, but then these were edited to make the printed versions read like novels, for an audience of modern non-specialist readers, not for the scholars who might want to study the language and style of performance.<sup>1</sup> Thus throughout most of the twentieth century, ramifications of the complex relationship between the oral and the written traditions of popular literature remained largely mysterious to all but a handful of scholars.

A leader of this small group was Vibeke Børdahl, Senior Research Fellow at the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies at Copenhagen University. Starting in the 1990s she, together with several colleagues, began producing groundbreaking studies of storytelling in the Yangzhou *pinghua* 揚州評話 tradition. She interviewed practitioners, while Jette Ross photographed them in performance; Børdahl transcribed, analyzed, and translated key scenes from their narratives. And she carried out extensive historical research, often working with younger scholars including Ge Liangyan and Margaret B. Wan in the United States and European colleagues to publish studies that form the cornerstones of this area of research. Yet in several ways, the present publication outshines all her previous work in the degree to which it provides clear insights into the storytelling tradition and its complex relationship with the textual traditions of narrative literature, both fiction and history. Here Børdahl presents a complete text that she refers to as a "script" (*jiaoben* 腳本) for lack of a better term, although it is a bit misleading in both languages.

The document was entrusted to Børdahl by the family of the distinguished Yangzhou storyteller Dai Buzhang 戴步章 (1925–2003) at some time after his death, by which time it had ceased to be the basis for specialists in his school of performers. Jette Ross (1936–2001) had photographed Dai at work in 1998 and 2000; Børdahl had recorded and translated short passages from his performances for analysis

1. The introduction (p. 34) describes editorial changes made in a segment of the Western Han saga that purports to record Dai Buzhang's narration of an episode in the life of Zhang Liang not occurring in the "Dai Script": rewriting in Yangzhou dialect, mostly prose (not prosimetric) with little verse. Compared to the "Dai Script," the printed version is far richer in detail and includes monologues that represent the mental activities of its characters. Børdahl and Ge characterize this as "post-performance" representation, compared to the "pre-performance" "Dai Script."

and publication in her earlier monographs. She had interviewed him on several occasions, the last time shortly before his death. On the basis of their long collaboration and friendship, Dai's family sought her assistance in preserving this rare text. And so she has, as a truly unique and irreplaceable contribution to the study of storytelling in China.

The document at issue (hereafter the "Dai Script") is a series of five handwritten volumes sewn together using newspaper as covers. These booklets date from the late Qing, probably 1889–1910, and were originally penned anonymously in a fair hand. The text also has extensive additions and corrections introduced by Dai Buzhang himself. In *Western Han*, Børdahl and her collaborator Professor Ge Liangyan present a photograph of every page of the entire work along with a printed transcription and an annotated translation. They preface this work with translated excerpts from all extant Ming novel versions of the adventures narrated here. What they find is that in addition to being many times longer, the storyteller's version is quite different in content from the novels, some of which are more closely tied to recorded history. Børdahl and Ge speculate that this text might well have been closer to a no longer extant "plain tale" or *pinghua* that was part of the series published in the 1320s (a *xuji* 續集 or "continuation" exists; it takes up Han events after this story has been concluded). Curiously, in their analysis, the latest Ming novel on the Han, *Xi Han tongshu yanyi* 西漢通俗演義 by Zhen Wei 甄偉 (fl. 1570–1600), published in 1612, seems to reflect a closer relationship to the oral tradition than the others. Or was it that the oral tradition borrowed from this novel? The observations presented here (pp. 22–33) are characteristically thorough and thoughtful. However, the text under consideration, "Western Han," differs from both the oral performance and all printed versions of similar episodes, foreclosing any definitive connection to the latter in particular.

"Western Han," the editors observe, is written primarily in a classical language style, which is used rather like a shorthand; it records the story in outline. Dai Buzhang's annotations tend to be in a more colloquial style; often they seek to make sense of the original. Both contain Yangzhou dialect terms. Dai himself claimed that he used it to memorize the verse sections and disregarded the rest altogether, although his additions would suggest that he must have studied the whole thing very carefully. Thus the "Dai Script" is a source of inspiration and story material for performance rather than a script to be performed as is: Dai Buzhang's oral presentation was, of course, in spoken language and not the condensed classical version recorded here, much of which would be difficult to comprehend if read aloud at storytelling speed. It makes perfect sense that the formal requirements of verse should require memorization in advance, leaving the narrative prose sections up to the creative inspiration of the narrator during performance. (This appears to have been the practice of performers in the *zaju* 雜劇 form of plays during the Yuan period as well: actors memorized their arias, but may well have ad-libbed most of their spoken lines. Then, too, the oldest extant play scripts seem to be outlines of what a performance might have been rather than a textual recording of what any one actually was; those dating from the Ming were all edited to one degree or another for enjoyable reading.) Neither did Dai Buzhang, nor presumably other storytellers, use such a script as a "prompt book" during his performance. What it records, then, is the fullest version of the story as it existed late in the Qing, presumably to have been a source of inspiration by several generations in this school of Yangzhou *pinghua* storytelling. Dai's annotations indicate that he, and again presumably his predecessors, found it insufficient, and added their own variations and amplifications. Moreover, because Dai's generation seemed to value their masters' instruction on the craft of narration and the content of stories rather than any text, these annotations may conceivably all have been added during one reading—Dai Buzhang's first (see p. 26).

The introduction also discusses various elements of narrative previously identified as evidence of oral performance. This includes the phrases (*taoyu* 套語) and the narrative stance generally termed "the storyteller's manner" in English. In the "Dai Script," Børdahl and Ge find none of the conversations with the audience that characterize oral presentations and only a few of the rhetorical tags, most of which appeared already in the 1320s *pinghua* texts. But since twentieth-century raconteurs rarely used such terms in performance, this text confirms the conclusion that the "storyteller's manner" was a function of literate writers' efforts to simulate storytelling as a deliberate narrative stance, rather than a limping reliance on their professional counterparts' notebooks.<sup>2</sup> In the translators' succinct conclusion,

2. The "prompt book" theory seems to have begun with Lu Xun 魯迅, *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilüe* 中國小說史略 (1930; rpt. Hong Kong: Sanlian, 1958), Chapters 12–13; trans. Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang as Lu Hsun,

“It was meant to be an *aide-mémoire* for the storytellers of the oral tradition of the School of Western Han” (p. 34, meaning the “Western Han” saga). More specifically, the “Dai Script” provides “a relatively bare narrative plot and ‘catchwords’ for performance” (p. 38).

As the tremendously informative introduction here points out, this “Dai Script” is really not about the Western (or Former) Han, 206 BCE–23 CE, but about the events that led up to the founding of the Han. Nor does its narrative even cover that entire period; instead it focuses on a few years in the life of Han Xin 韓信, a minor Chu officer who becomes commander of the Han forces after he defects to Liu Bang’s side. When this text begins, the First Qin Emperor is dead, and the struggle for dominance and the throne of empire between Xiang Yu 項羽 and Liu Bang 劉邦 is proceeding in earnest. The editors provide a useful synopsis (pp. 9–13). Its first page missing, the saga begins with Zhang Liang’s 張良 arrival in Xianyang, erstwhile capital of the Qin empire now in ruins but occupied by Xiang Yu.

There Zhang notices the talented Han Xin, whom Xiang Yu has failed to promote. He persuades Han Xin to defect to the Han side, which requires traversing a secret path through the mountains to safety. Fearful that he might be betrayed, Han makes the fateful decision to murder his benefactor who guided him along the way. Han also refuses to present Liu Bang with Zhang Liang’s letter of introduction, wanting to earn a position there by his own merits. But the Han ruler looks down on him for his humble status, and Han leaves (Book 1). Not wanting to lose a man of such great talents, Xiao He chases after Han Xin in the moonlight. With this backing, Han Xin presents the letter of introduction and is at once appointed commander of the Han armies. Han Xin creates a distraction while leading the Han army along the secret path to attack Xiang Yu (Book 2). With a series of brilliant stratagems, Han Xin succeeds in conquering the old state of Qin. By infiltrating Xiang Yu’s cities, Han takes one after the other as Liu Bang tricks Xiang Yu into sending Liu’s father, currently being held as hostage, off to another fastness. Liu’s forces intercept the detachment and liberate his father. Liu Bang now wants to make a direct assault on Xiang Yu’s forces, against the advice of Han Xin. The campaign fails, of course, and his father is recaptured while Liu Bang himself barely escapes (Book 3). Now reinstated as Han commander, Han Xin plots another brilliant subterfuge that succeeds in a resounding victory over Xiang Yu, who escapes through the treachery of a turncoat Han military officer. But Han Xin is himself tricked: Xiang Yu manages to attack Liu Bang who has temporarily occupied a city that is not easily defensible. Liu’s father is recaptured, and Liu Bang himself must flee under cover. Later Liu recovers some military strength, but he undercuts Han Xin’s authority in negotiating a peace treaty with the state of Qi. Because he does not know about the deal, Han Xin attacks Qi, ruining the relationship (Book 4). Han Xin, successful in his conquest, wishes to be made Prince of Qi. Once he succeeds he refuses Xiang Yu’s efforts to render him neutral in the struggle for the empire. But for his part, Liu Bang offers a peace agreement that Xiang Yu accepts, even as Han prepares for a final conflict with Xiang’s armies. A Han official feigns defection in order to lead Xiang Yu into an ambush. Before long, Xiang Yu realizes that his cause is hopeless. He bids farewell to his consort, the Beautiful Yu 虞美人, who slits her throat and dies; his Chu armies mostly desert, and the script ends with Xiang Yu riding off toward the river where he will commit suicide (Book 5). Clearly this is a stirring tale throughout, with numerous acts of heroism, villainous deeds, and climactic battles, all narrated with great urgency and

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*A Brief History of Chinese Fiction* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1959). But this theory has not withstood later research. In addition to Børdahl’s own numerous publications on storytelling, see Rüdiger W. Breuer, “Early Chinese Vernacular Literature and the Oral-Literary Continuum: The Example of Song and Yuan Dynasties *Pinghua*” (Ph.D. diss., Washington University, 2001), Ge Liangyan, *Out of the Margins: The Rise of Chinese Vernacular Fiction* (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawaii Press, 2001), the several works by Patrick Hanan on the vernacular short story, and Wilt L. Idema, *Chinese Vernacular Fiction: The Formative Period* (Leiden: Brill, 1974). Chen Dakang 陳大康 continues the “imitation prompt book” theory in his massive *Mingdai xiaoshuo shi* 明代小說史 (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi, 2000), Chapter 16, as do major textbooks used in Chinese colleges. However, Fu Chengzhou 傅承洲, *Ming Qing wenren huaben yanjiu* 明清文人話本研究 (Beijing: Renmin wenzue, 2008), pp. 1–15, succinctly summarizes the counter argument first articulated by Masuda Wataru 増田渉 in 1965 that *huaben* always just meant “story,” never a “prompt book,” with many textual references to support that interpretation. Thus “imitation prompt book” becomes a misleading term. Fu traces the spread of this realization among China’s scholars, positing two new terms: for the storytellers’ tales “artists’ *yiren* 藝人 *huaben*” and for the popular short stories “literati *wenren* 文人 *huaben*,” with *huaben* meaning vernacular story in both.

ending with the death of the losing contender for the empire, an event well known from Sima Qian's immortal version in *Shiji*. This outline must have produced powerful performances when amplified by a seasoned professional such as Dai Buzhang.

Quite apart from its tremendous value to scholarship, this imprint is itself designed for maximum usefulness as a scholarly source. First, it includes a photographic facsimile of every page of the original five slim volumes, a total of 330 images. Alongside it provides an easy-to-read typescript of everything on those pages: the crossed-out passages, Dai Buzhang's marginal and interlineal comments, and even what is written on the scraps of paper Dai had pasted in to accommodate his more extensive substitutions and additions. The typescript includes *fantizi* 繁體字, *jiantizi* 简体字, *cuozi* 錯字, and *suzi* 俗字 as they appear in both original text and Dai's annotations. Both of these original texts include a certain number of substandard homophonic loan characters (*tongyinzi* 同音字), which Børdahl and Ge have endeavored to sort out and replace in the transcript. Because the original script is not easy to read, in both transcription and translation the additions by Dai Buzhang are printed in blue ink, to distinguish these passages from the original manuscript which is printed in black. Finally, the volume includes a complete, annotated translation of both script and annotations. The editors' and translators' scheme to separate these textual elements is successful; their efforts to preserve this rare manuscript were heroic, and they succeeded in producing an everlasting tribute to the artist Dai Buzhang, to his school of storytelling, and to his family, for their trust in the friendship of these foreign scholars to preserve and protect their treasured heirloom.

In order to accommodate the photographic facsimiles of the original pages, the publisher has utilized especially heavy paper throughout. The area needed for text, transcription, and translation has dictated printing the book in a large format: its pages measure 275 x 188 mm (10.8 x 7.4 in.). At over 750 pages, the entire volume weighs a bit more than five pounds. Indeed, this is a weighty tome in all senses of that term, truly a signal contribution to studies of China's oral narrative tradition.

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*Classical Chinese Poetry in Singapore: Witnesses to Social and Cultural Transformations in the Chinese Community.* By BING WANG. Lanham, Md.: LEXINGTON BOOKS, 2018. Pp. xii + 189. \$90 (cloth); \$85.50 (e-book).

This study aims to uncover “a neglected treasure trove in Nanyang [i.e., Southeast Asian] culture” and “render a special cultural heritage accessible [to the people in Singapore and Southeast Asia at large]” (p. 7). The treasure trove the author is referring to are the classical Chinese poems produced by the poets of Singapore from the late nineteenth century to contemporary time, the history of which he outlines in three main chapters (in addition to an introduction and a conclusion). The first main chapter, “Identity: Whose Nanyang Is it?,” focuses on delineating the poets' identification with Singapore (as opposed to China, especially among the Chinese immigrant poets who lived through the late 1800s to the pre-WWII period, whom the author calls “the first-generation” poets), touching on issues such as “acculturation” and “localization.” The next main chapter, “Community: How to Shape Cultural Space?,” traces the formation of groups, clubs, societies, and organizations of classical Chinese poetry, highlighting the close-knit relationship among poets in Singapore as well as between them and the “visiting literati” from China. The last main chapter, “Medium: What Are the Influences on Classical Poetry?,” contends that three types of media—newspaper, anthology, and the internet—have each played the role of creating a “classical Chinese poetry scene” in Singapore at different historical times. Conceptually, the author attempts to situate his study within “diasporic literature and Sinophone literature,” announcing that he will “set aside the Sino-centric title ‘Overseas Chinese/Chinese-Language Literature’ (*haiwai Huaren/wen wenxue*) and the all-encompassing view of ‘World Literature in Chinese/by Chinese’ (*shijie Huawen/ren wenxue*)” (p. 135). Although this is not the first focused study of classical Chinese poetry in Singapore, it is, as far as I am aware, the first book-length study of