

OBITUARY

In Memory of
Dai Buzhang (1925–2003)



Dai Buzhang performs in Copenhagen, 21 August 1996.
Photo by Jette Ross.

ON 8 DECEMBER 2003 the Yangzhou storyteller Dai Buzhang 戴步章 passed away. The world of Chinese storytelling has lost an eminent performer, a great humorist, and a central personality in the organization of cultural events in the storytellers' milieu in the Lower Yangtze area.

Dai Buzhang was a representative of the Dai School of *Journey to the West* (*Dai pai Xiyou ji* 戴派西游記) and he also told from the other repertoires of this family tradition, the sagas of Western Han (*Xi Han* 西漢), and *The Cases of Lord Shi* (*Shi gong'an* 施公案). The Dai School is noted for a special emphasis on humor and social criticism. When the repertoire of *Journey to the West* during the first decades of the twentieth century was recreated on the basis of the sixteenth-century novel *Journey to the West* (*Xiyou ji*) and transformed into Yangzhou storytelling (*Yangzhou pinghua* 揚州評話), the performance was densely interlarded with ironical comment on the contemporary social scene as well as political hints. This might have been at the root of the early demise of this repertoire by the 1950s, although the official reason for the ban was the “superstitious” character of the contents. Dai Buzhang's active years as a storyteller were from the 1940s to 1964, when he was pressed, for political reasons, to change his profession. The revival of the traditional themes of storytelling during the late 1980s made it possible for the elder generation of retired storytellers to appear on stage again and take part in the education of the younger generation. Dai Buzhang was particularly active in both capacities.

He grew up in a Yangzhou storyteller's family. As a child he was adopted by the elder brother of his biological father, Dai Shanzhang 戴善章 (1880–1938), who was the founding father of the Dai School of Yangzhou storytelling. His biological father, Dai Bingzhang 戴秉章 (1899–1972), fifth brother of Dai Shanzhang, was also a storyteller, and so were most of his other uncles. The family has lived for several generations in an old-style four-winged house in the beautiful lane of Biluochun, situated in the traditional “storytellers' quarter” of downtown Yangzhou, the so-called Parade Ground, Jiaochang. The house is only a few steps away from the present Storyteller's House of the city, and during the 1930s there were five Storyteller's Houses in

the neighborhood. It seems like the conditions under which this storyteller grew up were the most ideal for developing the talents of a child gifted for this profession. However, the life of Mr. Dai is also a story about the gradual dismantling of the traditional forms of entertainment in modern society, the witch-hunting for “feudal and superstitious” activities, and the devastating influence of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), something that had already started by 1964 (more about this epoch and its consequences for storytelling is found in “In memory of Wang Xiaotang,” *Asian Folklore Studies*, vol. LIX, 2000, 147–50).

In May 2000 Mr. Dai told the author about his education and life as a storyteller (published in English in BØRDAHL and ROSS 2002). In October 2003, this reminiscence was translated into Chinese (for the first time) and revised by Mr. Dai into a new version, from which the following extracts are selected. This short testament first brings us back to the 1930s and 1940s of his childhood and youth, when he was genuinely educated by the time-honored method of “transmitting by mouth and teaching from the heart” (*kou chuan xin shou* 口傳心授). Then follow glimpses from times of adversity:

As a child, as soon as I began to understand, I listened to storytelling quite a lot. My father, Dai Shanzhang, and three of his four brothers were all storytellers. Only the fourth brother was not a storyteller. Close to our home, in the neighborhood called Jiaochang, there were many storytellers’ houses. The owners of the houses all knew me. It was very easy for me to go and listen to storytelling. I did not have to pay, either. So I listened a lot. [...] When I was thirteen, my father had a disciple who was trained in our home. He lived with us in the family. I listened to his rehearsals every day.

Then in 1938, my first year of middle school, my father died. I was away from school for half-a-year. After that I was sent to an old-style private school to study bookkeeping. In 1940 I got a job as a clerk in a draper’s shop, but in 1944 the draper’s shop had to close and I was out of a job. Then I began to study storytelling with my fifth uncle, Dai Bingzhang. He taught me *Journey to the West* and *The Cases of Lord Shi*. He gave me my artist’s name, Dai Buzhang, when I started studying *Journey to the West* with him.

I travelled around with my uncle on his performance tours. In the mornings I had to ‘return the text’ and rehearse with him. In the afternoons I listened to his performances. Directly after each performance he wanted me to ‘return the text.’ In the evening I was free.

The very first story in my repertoire was *Journey to the West*. I only studied for a short time, less than half a year, because I was so familiar with storytelling. During my whole childhood I had performed for fun in school, in the shops, and streets of the neighborhood. My uncle just had to correct me a little bit here and there. In former times the students were often scolded and even spanked if they did not remember the passage they had to ‘return.’ But it never happened to me. As I grew up, I knew by myself how to study storytelling.

After about six months, in 1945, I wanted to earn my living by storytelling. My uncle agreed to it and let me graduate, 'cross the sea.' I then began my professional career as a storyteller.

During those years there were many small storytellers' houses that dealt in several kinds of trade and only invited storytellers to perform during the Spring Festival. In the countryside this was quite normal. During the Spring Festival such places were open for a month or so, offering storytelling. So I started going to a place in the countryside to perform. [...]

In the 1930s and 1940s there were about twenty storytellers' houses in Yangzhou. The Jiaochang area, where our family's home is, had five renowned houses. Awaken the People's Storytellers' House (*Xingmin shuchang*) had seats for 500 persons. Willow Village Storytellers' House (*Liucun shuchang*) had 400 seats. Cry of the Deer Storytellers' House (*Luming shuchang*), Mutual Happiness Storytellers' House (*Tongle shuchang*), and Eternal Happiness Storytellers' House (*Yongle shuchang*), all had about 300 seats. Outside of the South Gate there were other storytellers' houses. During the 1950s there were about five places in Yangzhou, and from the 1960s two to three. From the 1980s we had the Great Enlightenment Storytellers' House (*Daguangming shuchang*) just around the corner, now with seats for about 140 persons.

During the 1950s one was not allowed to tell the *Journey to the West*. That story was considered superstitious. But in the small towns and hamlets it was still possible to tell it. At that time I was mainly employed by the small houses in the townships.

I lived as a storyteller between the ages of twenty to forty, and performed in many places, including some outside of Yangzhou, in Shanghai, and in Zhenjiang.

We used to hold performances both in the afternoon and evening, which ran about two hours for each performance. But in Shanghai each performance was two-and-a-half hours long. Before 1949 payment was collected from the audience in a big moneybag. The owner of the house or his assistant walked around with the bag and collected the money. The sum for each member of the audience was fixed. After the performance the money was divided between the owner of the house and the storyteller, according to their contract, usually fifty/fifty. After 1949 people had to buy tickets at the entrance.

In 1964 the traditional themes were forbidden and I had to give up storytelling. The authorities suggested I change my profession, and I was given a job as an accountant in a factory.

During the late 1970s and 1980s traditional storytelling was allowed again. At that time we had the Guangling Storyteller's House (*Guangling shuchang*), a cultural centre. Between 1980 to 1982 there was a place for storytelling in the Cultural Palace, too. That was before the Great Enlightenment Storytellers' House was established in the mid-1980s in the Jiaochang area. Late in the 1980s the Guangling Culture Station (*Guangling wenhuazhan*) also opened a place for storytelling, but that was soon closed.

My eldest son studied the Sui and Tang repertoire with me, and my younger sister studied the *Journey to the West* with me. They both graduated and started to perform in public, but they had to give up the storyteller's pro-

fession almost immediately because of the Cultural Revolution. They had to find other occupations. My son has forgotten storytelling. During the 1980s and 1990s I had a few amateur students. [...]

After I left storytelling, I never really returned to my profession. I retired and lived on a pension from the factory. Later, since I was in good health, I decided to give performances in the Storyteller's House again.

One should not be deceived by the humble and low-key tone of this life story. Dai Buzhang's personality did not tend towards self-promotion. His deep-seated confidence in the worth of storytelling, his imperturbable equanimity and broad-minded concern for the storyteller's milieu made him a figure of natural authority. His home was for years the informal meeting place for storytellers, aficionados, and cultural workers of all kinds. He was highly active also in the grass-root organization of "Friends of Yangzhou Storytelling" (*Yangzhou pinghua zhi you* 揚州評話之友), later enlarged and renamed "Friends of Yangzhou Performing Arts" (*Yangzhou quyiy zhi you* 揚州曲藝之友).

I feel personally deeply indebted to Dai Buzhang and his wife, whom I met for the first time in May 1989, coming to his home on an informal and unannounced visit in the company of one of his old friends. Later I saw that this was "the way of the house;" people constantly dropped in and things "happened" in this way. Someone who might be interested in Yangzhou storytelling, would soon find him(her)self sitting with a cup of tea in the atrium courtyard of the Dai home, while people with little errands for Mr. Dai to discuss concerning the activities of the storytellers would be coming and going. Since our first meeting, Dai Buzhang supported my research on Yangzhou storytelling and gave me of his art with great largesse, as readers of my publications cannot fail to note. He also helped me to develop contact with storytellers, and to arrange many of the ensuing activities. It is no coincidence that when Yangzhou Television wanted to contact me in 1997, they first made contact with Mr. Dai and, much to my surprise, came to see me in his home. In fact, he even at some point took me on as his "disciple" and taught me to perform a short passage of storytelling in Yangzhou dialect, although I never aspired towards really learning this art. I only hoped to be able to offer some kind of example when I was lecturing in the West. Nevertheless, he rehearsed with me for many weeks every afternoon, and I had the unique experience of being "trained" by a master of the art. He gave me his father's storyteller's stone, the so-called "talk-stopper" (*zhiyu* 止語), an honor I could not live up to, but kept as a beautiful souvenir.

A few of Dai Buzhang's performances were published in the anthology *Yangzhou pinghua xuan* 揚州評話選 [Selections from Yangzhou storytelling]

(Shanghai 1982). However, in general he did not place much emphasis on the written publication of storytelling. His interest was the oral aspects of the art. This is also evident from the way he spoke of storyteller's scripts (*jiaoben* 脚本), that is, the notational versions of storytellers' repertoires that some storytellers inherit from their forefathers or create personally. His family was in the possession of some old manuscripts of this kind, but although they were kept in a cupboard, they were far from treated with filial piety. When I expressed a wish to see them, Mr. Dai would, generously as always, bring them out and bang them on the table so that dust and flakes of torn paper would fly in the air, saying: "This is no use! Absolutely no use!" The reasons for this utterance may, however, be more complex than what meets the eye, something I would like to return to elsewhere.

In spite of his apparent lack of interest towards "literary" rendering of storytelling, he was always ready to offer help and provide tape-recorded performances for my research. He was one of my most important informants on many aspects of the daily life and special terminology of the storytellers. A number of his performances are found in bilingual editions (Chinese and English) in my studies and edited books (compare website on Chinese Storytelling, www.shuoshu.org>Publications).

In 1996 he was a member of the delegation of storytellers that was invited as special guests to the International Workshop on Oral Literature in Modern China, hosted by the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Copenhagen.

From 2001–2003 he participated in the project "Large-scale Registration of Chinese Storytelling" (compare *Asian Folklore Studies*, vol. LXI, 2002.



Dai Buzhang performs the final episode of *Journey to the West* in one hundred days of storytelling, Yangzhou, 24 October 2003. Photo by Per E. Børdahl.

172–75, and www.shuoshu.org>Research projects). The aim of this project is to preserve the living art of the Yangzhou storytellers on video and VCD for later generations to enjoy and study. Four masters of the elder generation were invited to perform their full-length repertoires in daily sessions with a view to videoing and then storing them on VCD. Four sets of the complete performances, altogether 360 hours of video, have been completed and are presently being donated to research libraries in China, Europe, Taiwan, and USA. A detailed monograph-with-catalogue, *Four Masters of Chinese Storytelling: Full-length Repertoires of Yangzhou Storytelling on Video*, including a demonstration VCD, is in press (NIAS Press, Copenhagen).

The last time I saw Dai Buzhang was in October 2003, during the conclusion of the video project of *Four Masters*. On 24 October I enjoyed once again his special sense of humor as manifested in his performance of the final episode. He was the last transmitter of *Journey to the West* in Yangzhou storytelling, and this performance became not only his very last, but the end of a living tradition.

With sorrow and gratitude

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