

In Memory of
Wang Xiaotang (1918–2000)



Wang Xiaotang performs in Copenhagen, 1996

Photo by Jette Ross

Do not imagine the Chinese storyteller as an old peasant woman who sits down in the evening at bedtime.... That would be far off the mark. We are speaking about an artist who may become a celebrity and attract admirers from all walks of society. There is rich evidence of the antiquity, diversity, and refinements of this art that sparkles still today with a last glimmer.

—André Lévy, *Aujourd'hui la Chine*

THE WORLD OF CHINESE storytelling has lost a great master. Wang Xiaotang 王篠堂 from the Wang School of Yangzhou storytelling passed away in February of this year.

Wang Xiaotang's fame was based on his sober and elegant style, his subdued humor, and his radiating power. He was thoroughly dedicated to the family storytelling tradition of the Wang School of Water Margin in Yangzhou Storytelling (*Yangzhou pinghua Wangpai Shuihu* 揚州平話王派水滸), which was founded by his nationally renowned father, Wang Shaotang 王少堂 (1889–1968). Wang Xiaotang not only continued his father's exclusive standard of performance but he also brought the art outside of China.

Wang Xiaotang was born into one of the most famous storytelling families of China in the twentieth century. As a small boy, he was adopted as a son by the great master Wang Shaotang, who was Wang Xiaotang's biological father's brother. His education in the family tradition was no picnic: he suffered and struggled daily to live up to the demands of his elders. The pedagogy was characterized by stern and strict discipline that left little room for play and relaxation. As a young newly "graduated" storyteller, it was not always an easy role to be the son of the much-admired master, but his audience gave him the well-intentioned nickname: "Wang the Little Tang" 王小堂, showing him their fondness and high expectations. Soon he began to teach his own daughter, Wang Litang 王麗堂 (b. 1940); as she showed talent, she was also "taken in" by her grandfather. Now the family could boast of "four generations of storytellers" counting from Wang Shaotang's father,

Wang Yutang 王玉堂 and his brother who were the first storytellers in the family.

Wang Xiaotang has left a unique document based on his own childhood and youth about the life and education of Chinese storytellers during the first half of the twentieth century. Encouraged by the Chinese Association of Quyi Artists, he gave around 1990 a tape-recorded account of his reminiscences, which was edited into book form and published as *Yihai kùhàng lù* 藝海苦航錄 (Difficult Navigation on the Sea of Art) (Zhenjiang, Jiangsu, 1992). This is the most detailed autobiography of a Yangzhou storyteller that we have, giving unusual insight into the life conditions of the storytellers of his time.

The Wang family prospered during the early years of the People's Republic. The political climate was favorable to the oral arts that were seen as true exponents for the leftist ideas about "national forms" and Mao Zedong's "literature that the people love to see and hear." The government organizations made sure not only to publish written versions of Wang Shaotang's performances but also to secure the transmission of the art to a future generation of storytellers; a group of young aspiring storytellers from Yangzhou were educated in class and private by father, son, and daughter. During the 1950s, newspapers and periodicals often featured articles in praise of the "four generations of the Wang School." But times were changing.

The Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976 brought catastrophe in most spheres of China's cultural life, and for the professional storytellers those years meant disaster. The artists were no longer allowed to perform their traditional repertoires; all the regular storytellers' houses and teahouses offering storytelling were closed down. Nobody was educated in the tradition, and most storytellers had to find other occupations. That the storytellers of Yangzhou were able to re-establish a storytellers' house in the 1980s and begin daily performances as before, is to me a sign of the imperishable character of an art that has been with the Chinese for more than a thousand years.

Wang Xiaotang's personal life was deeply influenced by these circumstances: the cultural draught had taken his mature years. In the evening of his life, however, he was able to bear witness to the excellence of the Wang School. Even though he was already retired, he was often called upon to give special performances during the conferences and festivities arranged by the storytellers during the 1980s.

In 1989 I was introduced to Wang Xiaotang for the first time; during this and following visits, he was kind enough to allow me to record several hours of his repertoire for my research. His performances from the "Wu Song saga," *Wu shi hui* 武十回 (Ten chapters on Wu Song), formed the core

of the primary material for my book *The Oral Tradition of Yangzhou Storytelling* (Curzon Press, 1996).¹ During the 1990s, Wang Xiaotang's performances were noticed and subsequently recorded during repeated visits by others, particularly Japanese scholars.

In August 1996 he visited Denmark as the senior of a small group of Yangzhou storytellers. They were specially invited for the "International Workshop on Oral Literature in Modern China," hosted by the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS), Copenhagen. This was the first time that Yangzhou storytelling was staged outside of China. Wang Xiaotang's performances were highly appreciated by the international audience at the workshop and later praised in several reports. The sessions were recorded on cassette and video, and the materials were stored for research in the Danish Folklore Archives, Copenhagen. In the conference volume *The Eternal Storyteller: Oral Literature in Modern China* (Curzon Press, 1999), his performance of "Wu Song Fights the Tiger" on 30 August 1996 in Copenhagen is rendered in text and photo.

When I saw Wang Xiaotang in 1997 for the last time, he was still up to his best, giving a wonderful private performance of the episode "The Triumphal Procession" when Wu Song is feasted and carried triumphantly through the streets after killing the tiger. He let us experience once more the concentrated atmosphere of his great art.

His death fills me with sorrow and gratitude.

NOTE

1. See also my survey article "Professional Storytelling in Modern China" in *Asian Folklore Studies* 56, 1997, pp. 7–32, which features three short extracts from a performance by Wang Xiaotang in 1992 and photos of Wang Xiaotang by Jette Ross.

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