

VIBEKE BØRDAHL

*University of Oslo, Norway*

# Professional Storytelling in Modern China

## A Case Study of the *Yangzhou Pinghua* Tradition

### **Abstract**

This paper is based on a study of the Yangzhou storytellers' verbal tradition as performed according to age-old rules and habits, as witnessed by the author during the late 1980s and early 1990s. My concern is the spoken language of the *Yangzhou pinghua* storytelling tradition, which belongs to the vernacular Yangzhou dialect, one of the most southern of the North Chinese dialects. However, the language of the storytellers carries a long historical tradition with special characteristics different from the language of the ordinary townsfolk. The local dialect is modified according to the special demands of the acting and telling technique, and the performance comprises a number of different speaking styles. I discuss various methodological issues relating to the phonological, grammatical, stylistic, and narrative levels of analysis, among them the question of orality versus literacy in the spoken art of storytelling.

**Key words:** storytelling—Yangzhou dialect—speaking styles—vernacular tale

*You have to look like whoever you are impersonating!... For example, in this session of storytelling, in this very short episode, you, the storyteller, alone, have to impersonate a young man, a woman, a clown, and an old man, four persons' every move and turn: the cries of the crying, the laughter of the laughing, the worry of the worried, the fear of the anxious! You must perform in such a way that both their sound and their looks are reflected. Moreover, you must demand from your own art of performance that the audience should feel as if they are seeing these several characters in actual life, are listening to these various persons' conversation here and now!*

Wang Shaotung (1889–1968)

STORYTELLING AS A PROFESSIONAL ART has deep roots in both Western and Eastern culture. The Homeric epics and the Icelandic sagas are representative of the best of such oral traditions in the West, but they have long since been transformed into written works, while the oral transmission has come to an end. The beginning of storytelling in China was approximately contemporaneous with the medieval Icelandic tradition. The Chinese tradition has, however, survived for more than a thousand years in several places. One such place is Yangzhou, a city with a historic and flourishing tradition of professional storytelling known as *Yangzhou pinghua* 揚州評話. Here we still find the traditional storytellers' house (*shuchang* 書場)<sup>1</sup> filled to capacity every afternoon with an audience of elderly people, who come to listen to the storyteller's daily installments. The stories told today are still mainly from the time-honored reservoir of famous stories that storytelling, drama, and fiction in China have been sharing since at least the Ming period (1368-1644): "San guo" 三國 [The three kingdoms], "Shuihu" 水滸 [Outlaws of the marshes], "Xiyou ji" 西遊記 [Journey to the west], and others.<sup>2</sup> Modern works, inspired by events from the last sixty years of China's history, have also been created, but they are generally short, meant to be performed during ad hoc occasions in hotels and schools.

Storytelling has been a vital part of daily life in the Chinese cities at least since the Song dynasty (960–1279), when it was called *shuohua* 說話 (telling tales). During the Ming and Qing dynasties (1644–1911) the art grew even more popular; it changed name and was called *shuoshu* 說書 (telling books, telling texts).<sup>3</sup> In historical sources the oral tradition of Yangzhou storytelling goes back to the late Ming period, and there is witness of hereditary lines of master-apprentice relationships going back about 150 years (table 1).<sup>4</sup>

In China the oral arts not only existed but flourished in a society deeply imbued with writing and with written literature, which seem to have been an inspiration rather than a threat to professional storytelling. Storytelling was never meant only for people who could not read. On the contrary, it was an independent art with enthusiastic followers among not only illiterates but also the more or less well-educated middle-class and even the learned elite. In the twentieth century the art has had periods of flowering and periods of decay. When I undertook research on *Yangzhou pinghua* in 1989 I was much

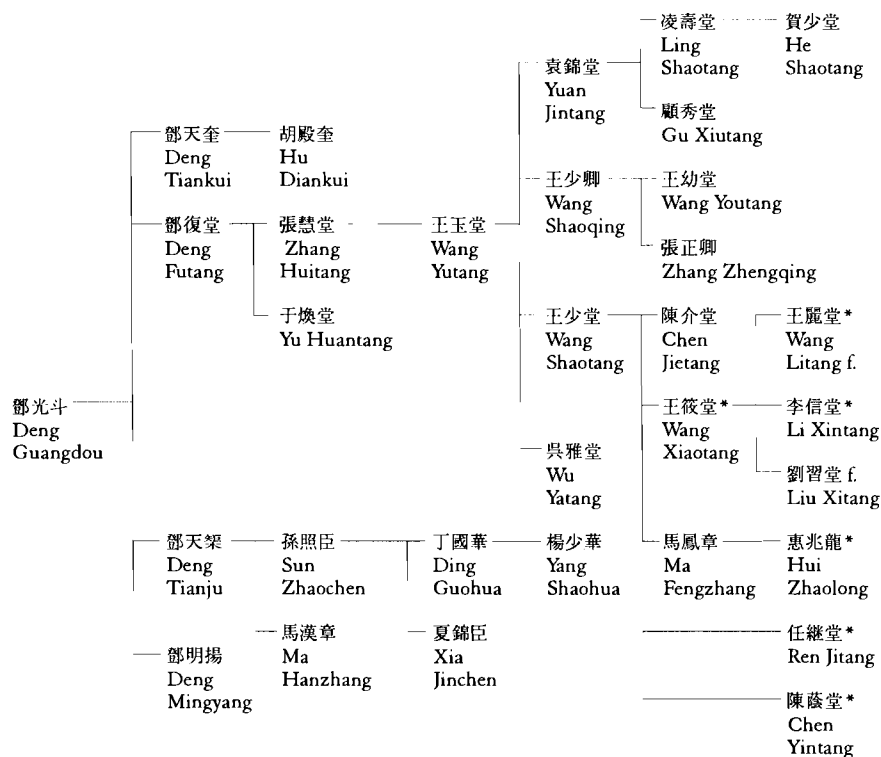


TABLE 1. Deng School of "Shuihu"

more impressed by the vitality of the art than by symptoms of decline. I do, however, think that the situation is changing fast. We now seem to be in a critical period where the future of the art is at stake.

#### MOUTH, HAND, BODY, STEP, AND LOOK

The storytellers' narrative art, performed according to age-old rules and habits, still has a place in the daily life of many inhabitants of Yangzhou. New forms of storytelling, new themes, and new performance techniques are also experimented with by the younger generation of storytellers. Traditional *Yangzhou pinghua* is performed on a stage (*shutai* 書台), where the storyteller sits before a square wooden table on a chair that is somewhat higher than normal. The artiste not only tells a story but also impersonates the various characters of his tale, animals as well as humans. He even impersonates natural phenomena like "a streaming wind" and "billowing waves." In the storytellers' own terminology, the various elements constituting the art of telling are summed up as mouth (*kou* 口), hand (*shou* 手), body (*shen* 身), step (*bu* 步), and look (*shen* 神) (WANG 1979, 300). While talking ("mouth") is first and foremost, gestures ("hand"), movements of the upper body ("body"), movements of the lower body ("step"), and facial expressions and head movements ("look") are all indispensable ingredients in the performance. The extralinguistic aspects of the art—the acting and miming technique—deserve special attention in future research. The scope of the present article is more narrow, focusing on the spoken language of *Yangzhou pinghua*, i.e., the "mouth" aspect.

The language used in this tradition is the Yangzhou dialect, in the broad sense of the term. However, the language of the storytellers, with its long historical tradition, shows special characteristics that distinguish it from the language of ordinary townsfolk. The local dialect is modified according to the special demands of the acting and telling technique to form a number of different "speaking styles" (*shuokou* 說口).

In order to investigate the orality of the art it is essential to access primary sources that reflect the art as an oral activity, that is, to observe live performances and obtain reliable "imprints" of such performances. A basic assumption underlying the collection of source materials is that every performance is an "original," that every performed "version" or "instance" of a story is a living example of the "skeleton of the narrative":

Each performance is the specific song, and at the same time it is the generic song. The song we are listening to is "the song"; for each performance is more than a performance; it is a re-creation.... Both synchronically and historically there would be numerous creations and re-creations of the song. This concept of the relationship between

“songs” (performances of the same specific or generic song) is closer to the truth than the concept of an “original” and “variants”. In a sense each performance is “an” original, if not “the” original. (LORD 1960, 101)

Albert Lord’s words seem just as true for the kind of oral prose studied here as for the oral epic poetry of the Balkan region.

#### STORYTELLERS’ SPOKEN TEXTS

In China there has been an enormous effort in this century to collect and save the oral traditions in written form. Sifting and refining the oral materials, the Chinese folklorists have given us a gold mine of popular culture. The idea of spreading this culture has been primary, while scholarly or antiquarian concerns have been of secondary importance. Nevertheless, the worth of the editions to scholarship has been tremendous, and they have served in most studies of the oral traditions as primary material and as a source of examples.

Editions of *Yangzhou pinghua* published since the 1950s have striven to adapt the spoken form to a nationwide reading audience. With this in mind, the editors have sought to remove vocabulary considered too dialectal, and have generally brought the texts more in the direction of Modern Standard Chinese. They are expected to “clean” the materials of anything considered “low taste” (erotic passages, scatological jokes, etc.) or incompatible with political correctness. They also remove what they consider redundant or faulty, and rewrite the spoken texts so that they may show the “logic” expected by the reading public. A large-scale abbreviation is considered inevitable, since publishing the enormous repertoires of the storytellers in toto would exceed all bounds. Chapter headings, beginnings, and endings are added by the editors according to their own concept of “new folk books of storytelling” (*xin huaben* 新話本), and not according to the actual wording of the storyteller.

In my studies I have chosen a different approach. The basic questions in my investigation of the spoken language and the spoken narrative tradition of *Yangzhou pinghua* can be summarized as follows:

- 1) What are the phonological features specific to Yangzhou storytelling?
- 2) What role does the grammar and vocabulary of the Yangzhou dialect play in the spoken performances of the storytellers?
- 3) What stylistic features typify the oral texts?
- 4) What is the narrative structure of the oral performances?

Such questions are likely to find very different answers depending upon the kind of material one is using as a point of departure—that is, upon whether the material is close to the oral tradition or more distant from it. From the written and printed editions mentioned above next to nothing can be said

about pronunciation. The features of grammar, style, and narration—features that reflect the orality of the art—are exactly the features most likely to be changed by the Chinese editors of the *huaben*. For my purposes these published materials can therefore serve only as secondary sources. I thus base my research primarily on tape recordings of actual performances by Yangzhou storytellers. When publishing texts of *Yangzhou pinghua*, I strive—unlike the *huaben* editors—to render the texts in a form as close as possible to the original sound-recordings. The aim is to furnish documentation of the original oral form of storytelling.<sup>5</sup>

Because of this different attitude to the worth of the storyteller's word as spoken during live performances—reflecting perhaps a basically different concept of orality and literacy—I tried to apply the method of “close listening” to a limited corpus of spoken texts (a counterpart to “close reading” in textual analysis). The study focuses on the “Shuihu” [Outlaws of the marshes] tradition, one of the major schools of *Yangzhou pinghua*. The main part of the corpus consists of spoken versions of the first cycle<sup>6</sup> of stories in the tradition known as “Wu shi hui” 武十回 [Ten chapters on Wu Song], as handed down by the successors of Wang Shaotang (1889–1968), the famous master of the Wang school (*Wang pai* 王派). Singled out for special analysis was “Wu Song da hu” 武松打虎 [Wu Song fights the tiger], the opening story of the “Wu Song” saga and one of the most beloved tales in Chinese folklore, drama, and fiction.

The tale was studied in five versions, each by a different storyteller. One of the versions,<sup>7</sup> told in 1992 by Wang Xiaotang 王筱堂, the adopted son of Wang Shaotang and the oldest living representative of the Wang school, was chosen as the key story, for detailed scrutiny and comparison with the other versions. Also included in the investigation were spoken texts from other schools of *Yangzhou pinghua*, such as the Wu school (*Wu pai* 吳派) of “San guo” [The three kingdoms] and the Dai school (*Dai pai* 戴派) of “Xiyou ji” [Journey to the west].

#### DIALECTOLOGY AND STORYTELLING

The fundamental approach of the project was to utilize methods from both the linguistic and the literary domains, and to combine “universalistic” theory with concrete experience from the milieu of the storytellers. By applying the linguistic methods of phonological and grammatical analysis to spoken materials we obtain new insights into the linguistic competence of the storytellers and the way they play their linguistic instrument. Of equal significance for the analysis, however, is the storytellers' own “inside” terminology (*hanghua shuyu* 行話術語), which expresses in striking metaphors the narrative elements of performance.<sup>8</sup>

The storytellers describe two types of traditional “speaking style” or “mouths”: *fangkou* 方口 (square mouth), using a forceful, over-distinct, steady pronunciation; and *yuankou* 圓口 (round mouth), using a smooth, quick, and continuous pronunciation. Furthermore, they divide the performance into two types of *bai* 白 (talks): *guanbai* 官白 (public talk), dialogues between the impersonated protagonists of the story; and *sibai* 私白 (private talk), everything else, such as description, narration (summary), comment, and the inner monologues of the protagonists.<sup>9</sup>

Comparing the phonemic and phonetic characteristics of the storytellers’ spoken texts to those of the ordinary Yangzhou dialect (Y), I found that regular deviations from the phonological system of Y are related to the storytellers’ concepts of “mouth” and “talk.” The following features are particularly notable:

- 1) the differentiation of the initials /l/n/r/, which are not commutable in ordinary Y, where we have only /l/;
- 2) the diphthongization of certain finals that are monophthongal in Y;
- 3) the pronunciation as /er/ or /ar/ of certain morphemes that are pronounced /a/ in Y;
- 4) the loss of the fifth tone (*rusheng* 入聲), which is part of the tone system of Y;
- 5) the use of colloquial forms of morphemes with double pronunciations, literary and colloquial (*wen bai yi du* 文白異讀).

The first four features above represent a tendency towards pronunciations that follow earlier and/or contemporary high-style normative standards. The use of colloquial forms (5),<sup>10</sup> on the contrary, reflects an earthiness, at times with a certain “low-style” flavor.

In *square-mouth* passages we find at least three types of variation in the phonological system. One type is used for the impersonation of certain heroic characters, such as Wu Song, who supposedly speaks *Beifanghua* 北方話 (“northern language”) or *Jinghua* 京話 (“capital language”). For the impersonation of this language, the dialect is modified according to the above first four criteria, while colloquial forms (in the above sense) are completely absent. Another type of variation, used for the impersonation of heroes and high-ups in general, is called *Yangzhou guanhua* 揚州官話 (Yangzhou officials’ language); in this variation the first three criteria are applied, especially in emphatic passages, while the *rusheng* is kept as in ordinary Y. The third variation is used for more solemn passages of description and narration; here we find the phonological system of Y generally intact, apart from criterion 3, but in emphatic passages the first two modifications are also applied. Colloquial forms are absent in all three kinds of square-mouth.

*Round-mouth* represents a phonological variant different from the square-mouth variants above, but homogeneous as such and almost completely in agreement with the phonological system of ordinary Y. (One deviation is 3, i.e., the storytellers' pronunciation of the morphemes 兒, 而, 耳, 爾, 二; MSC: er + tone; Y: /a/ + tone; storytellers' pronunciation: /ar/ or /er/, applied even in round-mouth. Only a few storytellers in the project pronounced these morphemes as /a/, in certain passages.) In round-mouth, colloquial forms are frequent. This style is used for the impersonation of "small persons" (*xiao renwu* 小人物), for the inner monologue of protagonists, for narrator's comments, and for less solemn description and narration.

The grammatical analysis, focusing on the dialectal features of morphology and syntax, showed that dialectal forms are much more frequent in round-mouth; indeed, many such forms are found exclusively in round-mouth. Some dialect forms (e.g., the disjunctive question form 可V? /kw V?/ corresponding to MSC: V *bu* V? V不 V?) are, however, found in square-mouth passages, especially in passages where major persons speak Yangzhou officials' language. For example,

“爾等服中可飢餒?” /er-den fo'-zon kw zilue/ (Are you hungry in your stomachs?). (Cao Cao speaking Yangzhou officials' language in a performance of Fei Zhengliang 費正良 from "San Guo")

The occurrence in round-mouth of the colloquial counterparts of the paired morphemes *wen bai yi du* and their absence in square-mouth is especially conspicuous (see also BØRDAHL 1992).

It has been suggested that the special language habits of the storytellers are the result of their traveling about in an attempt to sell their art to a wider audience, in that the normative style would be more intelligible to people speaking other dialects. From my investigation I tend to draw other conclusions. The storytellers' use of normative variants of the dialect in square-mouth versus their use of the homely dialect in round-mouth must be understood as a method to emphasize the personality of the characters and create a variety of atmospheres for the various parts of the presentation, rather than as a way to bring the art to people outside the local milieu.

#### STYLE AND NARRATION

The analysis of style focused on features of the spoken texts that are generally considered typical of orally transmitted traditions. The oral-formulaic theory, proposed initially by Millman Parry and Albert Lord, is closely related to ideas about how the oral poet remembers and creates during performance. The "formula" was conceived as his basic mnemonic tool; formulaic patterns



were characterized by regular features of prosody, parallelism, and repetition. Although formulaic features were in due time shown to be far from exclusive to oral literature, the question of the amount and character of formulaic entities in any given oral tradition continues to attract interest. Rhetorical figures of mnemonic impact seem to play a special role in oral traditions, whether they are part of a “primary oral culture” or exist alongside a literary culture.

Based on the method of “close listening” (and the close reading of transcriptions) of the above-mentioned five versions of the *Wu Song da hu* story, I mapped out the occurrences of prosodic features, such as rhyme, tonal counterpoint, alliteration, assonance, and rhythm. Also registered were patterns of grammatical and semantical parallelism, as well as patterns of repetition on the morphologic, syntactic, and macro-syntactic levels. This part of the investigation showed, among other things, how some prosodic forms and figures of speech are more frequent in certain kinds of narration. It became possible to establish a correlation between such frequency figures and the different speaking styles. Poems and four-syllable phrases, for example, occur more densely in square-mouth, especially in square-mouth private talk (*fangkou sibi*), a style characterized as high-style on phonological and grammatical grounds. Wordings in marked forms of prosodic, parallel, and/or repetitive ornamentation are among the vocabulary and expressions repeated over and over again by the storytellers of the Wang school, and constitute part of their reservoir of formulaic inheritance.

While my investigation of the recorded corpus of texts overwhelmingly demonstrated the dialectal character of the phonology and grammar, the same is not true for the features of prosody, parallelism, and repetition. Dialectal forms play a very marginal role on this level of analysis.<sup>11</sup> On the contrary, the majority of forms have a clear Chinese stamp (e.g., tonal counterpoint, reduplicated expressions, four-syllable phrases, etc.), while on a more abstract level most of the stylistic patterns and figures of speech have universal application (repetition and parallelism, including phenomena like rhyme, alliteration, simulated question, the magical character of the number three, etc.).

The narrative devices of *Yangzhou pinghua* were investigated primarily from the aspect of the narrative communicatory situation. The questions of authorship/audience, narrator/narratee, narrator/impersonator, etc. were considered on the basis of modern Western narrative theory (see CHATMAN 1978, 1990; GENETTE 1980, 1988; and RIMMON-KENAN 1983). In view of the fact that these theories were developed for the analysis of written literature (taking mainly the Western novel and short story of the nineteenth century as their empirical basis), they were here applied in a selective and creative way adapted to the oral material of the present investigation. The text-immanent voice of the entire spoken text was defined as the storyteller-narrator. This

narrative agent was divided into the voice of the narrator, i.e., the voice telling the narrative passages of the performance, contra the voices of the *dramatis personae*, i.e., the voices impersonating the various characters of the story in dialogue passages. The shortcomings of the Western narrative models vis-à-vis a literature from a non-Indo-European language were considered, such as the tense-related conceptions of drama versus narration.

The storytellers' terms "public talk" (*guanbai*) and "private talk" (*sibai*) express their consciousness of the interplay between "showing" and "telling"—drama and narration. The different speaking styles of square- and round-mouth are used for the impersonation of the major versus the minor characters and for the differentiation of dignified passages versus passages of everyday flavor. The speech of heroic persons is rendered in square-mouth, but their inner monologues are in round-mouth. The schism between the outward appearance of these characters—their high and mighty exterior and their lofty phrases spoken in square-mouth—and their inner feelings, expressed in humble round-mouth, often results in a humorous effect.

The stance of the storyteller-narrator, judged mainly on narrator's comments and digressive passages, is close to the so-called "middle distance" of the storyteller found in Chinese vernacular fiction before *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 [A dream of red mansions]. The narrator lets us look through an

optic which neither brings us too close to the object nor lifts us too far above it but views it precisely the way we ordinarily do in the daily business of living.... We are supposed to take it for granted that the storyteller is one of us and speaking for the publicly endorsed moral and social assumption. (WANG 1983, 137)

In the version of the tiger story told by Wang Xiaotang we are, however, tempted to speak of a "lower middle distance" because of the special ironic combination of aristocratic diction and airs with low-comedy features. The endeavor to bring the heroic tale of Wu Song down to a human level runs like a red thread through the whole performance. For example, when Wu Song for the first time stands face to face with the tiger, its awe-inspiring appearance is described in a most impressive poem. The effect is, however, somewhat undermined by a small anecdote about the tiger's private life told in advance (see Appendix 1, selections 2 [anecdote] and 3 [poem]). In this way the poem is not simply straightforward praise of power and manliness, but is presented with irony. Not only Wu Song but even the majestic tiger are shown in a clownish light foreign to the atmosphere of the Ming novel, in which everything is taken far more seriously. In Wang Xiaotang's performance the confrontation between heroic and antiheroic characteristics in both Wu Song and the tiger is played out with a stroke of carnivalistic wit.

## ORALITY AND LITERACY

The question of orality and literacy in *Yangzhou pinghua* was analyzed in light of the three concepts of composition, transmission, and communication (or performance).<sup>12</sup>

In composition and transmission, the oral aspects of education and composition-in-performance are fairly easy to determine. Education has traditionally involved oral transmission from master to disciple, a pedagogy based on a situation of mutual oral communication. The master teaches daily lessons by telling and performing a passage from a story, “transmitting from the mouth and teaching from the heart” (*kou chuan xin shou* 口傳心授), while his disciple listens and afterwards ponders the passage. The next day the disciple, more or less free to choose his own words, attempts to retell the passage to his master; this is called “returning the text” (*huan shu* 還書) (e.g., WANG 1992, 30–34). The same relative freedom applies to the composition-in-performance situation—the performed story is always a new instance or version of the “skeleton of narrative,” and no two performances are the same. Although many expressions and set pieces are learned by heart, the artist is to a considerable degree free to choose his own words, free to incorporate digressions and add episodes. There exists no “fixed text,” either written or oral.

The question of orality and literacy in composition has a definite historical aspect as well. Most stories in *Yangzhou pinghua* have a long history of transmission from generation to generation. Who should be considered the author and what place have books and other written documents in this process? The diachronic influence of written sources, such as the Ming novel *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳 [Outlaws of the marshes], is generally recognized, but our materials lead us to question the idea of massive borrowings from novels by the modern storytelling tradition. The common framework of plot and development may suggest a strong link, but the fact that so little of the “filling” is carried over from the novel to the oral tradition raises doubts about the actual closeness of the connection.

The situation of communication—that is, performance—is clearly oral. No written materials are ever used during performance (a prompter with a promptbook is a notion completely foreign to Chinese storytelling). Written versions or scripts (*jiaoben* 腳本), which are kept as secret documents in certain storyteller families, seem to function mainly as objects of status and/or ritual fetish, being handed over during ceremonies of graduation in the profession. There is no evidence that such documents were actually used in the transmission of the art, but we do know that storytellers with some schooling sometimes made personal notes of difficult phrases, poems, etc.

When we begin to scrutinize what the storyteller actually communicates—his spoken text—the contagion of the written and spoken word, of

literacy and orality, becomes apparent. We find that we have to arrange the oral and literary features in a hierarchical “Chinese nest of boxes,” where something that is oral on one level may be literary on the next, then once again oral on the next, and so on. As we enter into a kind of archaeology of style and language, trying to reveal layer after layer, we come across a most complicated but no less interesting mosaic of linguistic, narrative, and genre-related features:

- 1) *Genres of Chinese literature.* In the big box of Chinese literature, both oral and written, *Yangzhou pinghua* belongs as a genre to the “folksy,” low-style group of oral literature, related to the “vernacular literature” (*baihua wenxue* 白話文學) of Chinese written literature, which has traditionally been low in status.
- 2) *Subgenres of storytelling.* Within *Yangzhou pinghua*, the “Shuihu” of the Wang school belongs to the so-called “major texts” (*da shu* 大書), characterized by extensive use of the square-mouth style (*fangkou shu* 方口書) with its high style and strong literary flavor.
- 3) *Shifting of style in narration.* In the performances of “Wu Song Fights the Tiger” from the Wang school we have seen that the storyteller deliberately plays with the encounter between high and low style during impersonation of the various dramatis personae and also during description and commentary. There is a continuous shifting between square-mouth and round-mouth passages (see Appendix 1, selection 1).
- 4) *Shifting of style in grammar and phraseology.* The square-mouth passages are recognized not only by special high-style pronunciation features but also by their grammar and phrasing, which contain a certain number of expressions in literary Chinese form (*wenyan* 文言)—a literary characteristic—along with the more prevalent plain conversational style (*kouyu* 口語 or *baihua* 白話)—an oral characteristic. The round-mouth passages are pronounced in homely dialectal style (*jiaxianghua* 家鄉話)—a definitely oral characteristic—and *wenyan* expressions are extremely few.
- 5) *Shifting of style in word formation.* While the so-called “literary” forms of the morphemes with double pronunciation (*wen bai yi du*) are found in both square-mouth and round-mouth passages and seem to be neutral, with neither high- nor low-style connotations, the corresponding “colloquial” forms of these morphemes are exclusively found in round-mouth. They are highly indicative of an earthy and low-style flavor.

#### THE STORYTELLERS’ MANNER

The written legacy of Ming and Qing fiction shows strong connections with folklore and professional storytelling. The most striking indication of this

connection is believed to be the so-called “storytellers’ manner” of narration seen in this fiction, where the rhetoric of the storyteller is simulated in the narrator’s comments and in the set of obligatory stock phrases that bind the narrative together. In the Ming novel *Shuihu zhuan*, for example, chapters are regularly introduced by the phrase “it is told...” (*hua shuo* 話說), and concluded by the sentence “[If you want to know] who it really was, please listen to the explanation in the next session” (*Zheng shi shen ren, qie ting xia hui fenjie* 正是甚人, 且聽下回分解). Paragraphs are connected by the expressions “we’ll divide our story in two” (*hua fen liang tou* 話分兩頭); “meanwhile let’s tell...” (*qie shuo* 且說); “let us talk rather of...” (*que shuo* 卻說); etc. Ellipses are marked by “we’ll talk not of...but rather of...” (*hua zhong bu shuo...zhi shuo... 話中不說...只說...*); “but enough of petty details” (*hua xiu xu fan* 話休絮煩); etc. Paragraphs are concluded by such phrases as “Of that we’ll say no more” (*bu zai hua xia* 不在話下). In Chinese literature these expressions signalize that the discourse belongs to the genre of traditional fiction in the storyteller’s mode, just as our expression “once upon a time” signalizes the fairy-tale genre. These stock phrases all play on the oral communication situations of “telling” and “listening,” but they have developed into literary conventions for a certain genre of written literature: vernacular long and short fiction.

In the living oral tradition of *Yangzhou pinghua* the convention of the narrator’s comment remains very important, while the convention of stock phrases of introduction, connection, and conclusion is absent. In the performances of my corpus these conventional phrases were never used, and they no longer form part of Modern Standard Chinese usage nor of the modern Yangzhou dialect. If such stock phrases comprised a pertinent feature of traditional Chinese storytelling, however, we might have expected modernized variations to have replaced the old stock phrases in the course of time. As it is, it is only when introducing poems that the storyteller occasionally uses phrases reminiscent of the vernacular literature: “Indeed...” (*zheng shi* 正是).<sup>13</sup>

It is puzzling that the former stock phrases, which are supposed to be among the most evident features of orality in the written novels, have left so little trace in present-day storytelling from Yangzhou. One may wonder if these expressions were ever part of the oral tradition, or if they were rather a literary convention of simulated storytelling from the very beginning.

#### AN ORAL ART IN A MODERN SOCIETY

Is *Yangzhou pinghua* a “genuine oral tradition” or is it a “pseudo-oral” tradition? Some have responded that Chinese storytelling, taking *Yangzhou pinghua* as a typical example, should be classified as the latter (see WIVELL 1975).

By “genuine oral” is meant a tradition in which the performer “creates in performance.” By “pseudo-oral” is meant a tradition in which the performer learns a written text by heart and only performs it orally, but does not create it orally. Rosalind THOMAS, who is especially concerned with orality and literacy in early Greek literature, points out how important it is to regard such questions from a culture-specific background (1992, 107). Although the above concepts of “genuine” and “pseudo” are not well suited to storytelling in China, I believe that if we look at the traditional education of storytellers from the mouth of the master; the learning by heart of orally transmitted wordings, plots, gesture, and mime; and the degree of free improvisation that goes into every performance, then there can be little doubt that storytelling like *Yangzhou pinghua* is far nearer to a “genuine oral tradition.” This situation will not necessarily continue. There are already signs of a change in the direction of the “pseudo-oral”: the new generation of aspiring young storytellers, educated in the classrooms of the Yangzhou Drama School, is learning written texts by heart (the above-mentioned modern *huaben* editions) and performing them in memorized form with no improvisation, as I have personally witnessed.<sup>14</sup>

Today we still have among us storytellers of the older generation who were educated according to the traditional master-apprentice system and are able to perform enormous repertoires according to memory. But these storytellers have not been in a position to let the next generation receive the same basic training. Our generation is privileged to be able to listen to the old masters, but if their art is not orally taught to the next generation there will be a gap that can never be filled.

Another problem concerns the audience. Modern lifestyles and communications media have changed the basic economic and social foundation for oral arts such as storytelling. If the art is transferred to the modern media of radio and television/video, fundamental changes seem inevitable. Of the two I believe that radio was at first much more successful in preserving certain fundamental qualities of the oral arts; although television enables simultaneous listening and watching, this medium has developed its own rules that are in many aspects diametrically opposed to those of the traditional arts.<sup>15</sup> But with both radio and TV the direct contact between audience and performer is lost, and the concentrated but relaxed event of a two-hour performance is distorted when a session is broken up into short flickering cuttings. An even more fundamental problem seems to be the differing expectations of the traditional audience and the modern TV audience (and of the producers for this audience). The delicate humor of storytelling is badly suited to the action-oriented medium of TV.

The oral art of storytelling has been able to coexist for centuries with the

written and printed word. The challenge from the highly orally oriented media of radio and television seems to represent a much greater threat.

#### NOTES

\* This article is a revised version of a paper presented at The Symposium of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research in Beijing, 1996. It is a survey of the methods used in and results obtained from my recent project on Yangzhou storytelling (see BØRDAHL 1996; this study focuses on the “Shuihu” [Outlaws of the marshes] tradition as handed down by the successors of the great master Wang Shaotang 王少堂) (for a chart of the storytellers in this tradition see table 1). Chinese expressions are rendered in the pinyin transcription of Modern Standard Chinese (MSC) as well as in Chinese characters. Several examples from Yangzhou storytellers’ spoken texts are written in phonemic transcription of the Yangzhou dialect, within oblique bars /.../; sometimes phonetic transcription in IPA is added, within square bars [...] (cf. BØRDAHL 1996, 70–76).

1. *Shuchang* is a term currently used in the Lower Yangzi area to designate the place where professional storytelling and other variety arts (*quyi* 曲藝) are performed. In former times the *shuchang* were found in teahouses or wineshops, equipped with tables and benches for the audience; the better places often had a special stage for the performer. Tea and snacks were served during performances. Yangzhou had more than twenty *shuchang* in the early years of the Republic (1911–49). During the 1950s and 1960s most of these privately owned places had to close down, but a few publicly owned *shuchang*, larger and more theater-like, were built and have been maintained until the present time, though activity was very limited during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Since the mid-1980s performances of storytelling and story-singing (*tanci* 彈詞) were again given regularly in the Great Enlightenment Storytellers’ House (*Da guangming shuchang* 大光明書場) in the center of the old storytellers’ quarter of Yangzhou. While the audience among the common townspeople has been dwindling during the 1990s, there seems to be a growing interest among intellectuals. The town presently has a handful of *shuchang*; the two most recently opened places are situated in elegant old-style teahouses.

2. Works of oral tradition are enclosed in quotation marks, while book titles are given in italics.

3. LÉVY suggests that the later term, *shuoshu*, reflects a new attitude towards the profession: the Ming and Qing storyteller, *shuoshude*, is conceived as “vulgarisateur de biens culturels consacrés par le prestige de l’imprimerie qui a popularisé le livre” (1981, 191).

4. The major schools of Yangzhou storytelling are: The Deng school of “Shuihu,” the Song school of “Shuihu,” the Li school of “San guo,” the Lan school of “San guo,” and the Dai school of “Xiyou ji.” In this century the Wang school of “Shuihu” has grown out of the Deng and Song schools. In table 1 the storytellers of my project who belong to the Wang school are marked with an asterisk. Although a certain style of performance is implied by the idea of a “school” of storytelling, the various schools are differentiated more directly by their repertoires, their ability to tell one or several cycles of stories around a common theme (called “book” [*shu* 書], e.g., “San guo” [Three kingdoms]). The affiliation of storytellers to various schools is often a matter of family relationship (father-son-grandson; uncle-nephew, etc.), but it is just as often a purely professional relationship of master-disciple.

5. Tape and video recordings from the project are currently being incorporated in the collections of the Danish Folklore Archives, Birketinget 6, Copenhagen S, Denmark, making the *Yangzhou pinghua* collection accessible for future research.

6. In the *shuchang*, the “themes” or “books” are told in a continued succession of sections

(*duanzi* 段子), each session (*yichang shu* 一場書) lasting about two hours. One season (*dang* 檔) of storytelling involves two to three months of daily performances. During one season the storyteller will usually tell one cycle of tales, forming a chronological and thematic unit. In the Wang school, the “Shuihu” theme is organized into four cycles of tales, each taking one season of performances. The cycle on Wu Song is considered the first among these four cycles. It is also the first cycle of tales that a young novice of storytelling is taught by his master.

7. Three excerpts from this version are appended to the present article.

8. There exists a wealth of specific vocabulary used in the education of disciples and in the interactions of the storytellers, the managers of the *shuchang*, the aficionados of the art, and others, but in the following I shall only mention some of the expressions that have been most important for my analysis. See also the list “Storytellers’ Terms,” with Yangzhou dialect pronunciation of the various expressions, in BØRDAHL 1996 (441–66). For the present article only the MSC pronunciation of the terminology is given.

9. See Appendix 1 of the present article, where speaking styles are indicated by the orthography.

10. The term “colloquial” is here used in a narrow sense. In Y there is vocabulary that has two different pronunciations: a so-called “literary” (*wen* 文) and a so-called “colloquial” (*bai* 白). For example, *jiā* 家 (family, home) is pronounced in the literary form as /ziā/ [dʒiā:] and in the colloquial form as /gā/ [gā:].

11. For example, the poetry found in my corpus of storytellers’ tales does not reveal any special forms dependent on the phonological or grammatical specifics of the dialect. The forms registered are all current forms of Chinese poetry. It is, however, not unlikely that a detailed study of sentence contours would reveal specific dialectal prose-prosody. For the Beijing dialect we have this kind of investigation (see ŠVARNÝ and RUSKOVÁ 1991), but such a study has not been attempted here.

12. This division is inspired by the studies of FINNEGAN 1977, 1992 and THOMAS 1992.

13. See also the introductory remark to the poem in selection 3 of Appendix 1.

14. I was allowed in 1989 to participate in the storytelling classes given by Mr. Yang Mingkun at the Yangzhou Drama School. The eight students in his class were learning by heart from the Wang Shaotang 1959 edition of *Wu Song*. They would take turns in reciting for their teacher and for each other exactly according to the book (*bei shu* 背書). Every student had the book in front of him/her during the rehearsal.

15. Although radio is able to reproduce only the aural aspect of storytelling, I think this medium used to adopt a more humble and conservative attitude towards the genres being transferred, thus limiting distortions of the art. Television, while in principle capable of realizing most aspects of the storytellers’ art, has, however, developed in a much more globally oriented time, one in which the dominant Western attitudes to entertainment mean that more than ever before the “medium becomes the message.” Chinese performed narrative arts that I have had occasion to observe on Chinese TV have been fundamentally changed by their transference to this medium.

#### REFERENCES CITED

BØRDAHL, Vibeke

1992 *Wen bai yi du*: Literary and colloquial forms in Yangzhou storytelling. *CHINOPERL Papers* 16: 29–63.

1996 *The oral tradition of Yangzhou storytelling*. Richmond, U.K.: Curzon Press.

CHATMAN, Seymour

1978 *Story and discourse: Narrative structure in fiction and film*. Ithaca: Cornell



- University Press.
- 1990 *Coming to terms: The rhetoric of narrative in fiction and film*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- FINNEGAN, Ruth
- 1977 *Oral poetry: Its nature, significance, and social content*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 1992 *Oral traditions and the verbal arts: A guide to research practices*. London: Routledge.
- GENETTE, Gérard
- 1980 *Narrative discourse: An essay in method*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- 1988 *Narrative discourse revisited*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- LÉVY, André
- 1981 *Le Conte en langue vulgaire du XVIIe siècle*. Paris: Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises.
- LORD, Albert B.
- 1960 *The singer of tales*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- RIMMON-KENAN, Shlomith
- 1983 *Narrative fiction: Contemporary poetics*. New York: Routledge, Chapman, and Hall.
- ŠVARNÝ, O. and T. Y. RUSKOVÁ
- 1991 Prosodic features in Chinese (Pekinese). *Archiv Orientální* 59: 234–54.
- THOMAS, Rosalind
- 1992 *Literacy and orality in ancient Greece*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- WANG, David Teh-wei
- 1983 Storytelling context in Chinese fiction: A preliminary examination of it as a mode of narrative discourse. *Tamkang Review* 15: 133–50.
- WANG Shaotang 王少堂
- n.d. Wu Song shi hui (Jiefang qian gao) 武松十回(解放前稿) [Ten chapters on Wu Song (preliberation edition)], I–III, stencil. 1,267 pages.
- 1959 *Wu Song* 武松 [Wu Song], I–II. Huaiyin: Jiangsu Renmin Chubanshe.
- 1979 Wode xueyi jingguo he biao'yan jingyan 私的學藝經過和表演經驗 [My experience in the study and performance of my art]. In *Shuo xin shu* 說新書 [New storytelling], Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Chubanshe. (originally published in 1961)
- WANG Xiaotang 王筱堂
- 1992 *Yi hai ku hang lu* 藝海苦航錄 [Memoires of the difficult sailing on the sea of art]. Zhenjiang: Jiangsu Wen Shi Ziliao Bianjibu.
- WIVELL, Charles
- 1975 The Chinese oral and pseudo-oral narrative traditions. *CHINOPERL Papers* 5: 117–25.

## APPENDIX 1

*A dialogue, a digression, and a poem from "Wu Song Fights the Tiger," told by Wang Xiaotang, Zhenjiang, November 1992*

The first fragment is from the depiction of Wu Song's trip to Jingyang Town on his way to visit his brother. We enter the story in the middle of a conversation between Wu Song and the servant Xiao'er 小二 at the inn of Jingyang Town, where Wu Song

is taking a rest and drinks heavily of the famous wine known as “Three Bowls and You Cannot Cross the Ridge.” The dialogue is here given in translation, with notation of speaking style (*shuokou*).

After the drinking episode, Wu Song continues on his journey, climbs the Jingyang Ridge, and falls asleep on a flat stone near the top. During his sleep a man-eating tiger appears. The second fragment is a small anecdote about this tiger’s private life, a sad “love story.” This passage was already part of the performance of Wang Xiaotang’s father, Wang Shaotang, as can be seen from the stenciled pre-1949 edition of his Wu Song repertoire (never published). It was deliberately removed from Wang Shaotang’s 1959 edition of *Wu Song*, probably because of its slightly risqué flavor. It is an example of round-mouth digression, revealing the inner life of the tiger, as opposed to its awe-inspiring outward appearance, rendered in the third fragment, a square-mouth poem.

Key:

Square-mouth (*fangkou*): **bold lettering**

Northern language in square-mouth (*Beifanghua fangkou*): *italics bold*

Round-mouth (*yuankou*): normal

#### Selection 1

[dialogue between Xiao'er and Wu Song; *guanbai*]

*“Oh! Sure, Sir! In our humble inn, we wouldn't boast about other things, but the quality of the wine is amazingly good. People from afar have given our humble inn eight verse lines in praise.”*

*“What eight lines?”*

[poem recited by Xiao'er]

*“It is like jade nectar and rosy clouds,  
its sweet bouquet and wonderful taste are worth boasting.  
When a wine jug is opened, the flavor will make people tipsy three houses away.  
Bypassing guests will pull up their carts and rein in their horses.  
Lu Dongbin once paid with his famous sword,  
Li Bai, he pawned his black gauze hat,  
the immortal loved the wine so much he never went home”*

[interruption by Wu Song:]

*“Where did he go then?”*

[poem continued:]

*“Drunken he tumbled into that West River embracing the moon!”*

[dialogue continued, *guanbai*:]

*"Good wine!"*

[narrator's commentary, *sibai*:]

My goodness, how Wu Song was comforted in his heart!

[thought of narrator or Wu Song or generalized thought including the narratee:]

The wine of that inn must have been extremely good. When they opened a jug, the fragrance of the wine would make people tipsy three houses away. Those people didn't even need to drink the wine, just by smelling the fragrance of the wine they would become drunk. Don't you think the wine of that inn was good? The immortals loved the wine so much, one lost his famous sword as a pledge, another pawned away his black gauze hat. Oh, that wine must have been good.

[summary:]

Wu Song followed Xiao'er into the inn. They went through the front wing, passed the half-door, and came to the next wing.

[narrator's description with commentary (or Wu Song's perceptions?)]

Oh, the roof of the hall was thatched. The tables and stools of the hall were neatly arranged, the whole place fresh and cool. But there was not a single customer. Quite right, it was already long past the lunchtime rush.

[summary:]

Wu Song took down his bundle, placed it on a bench beside him, and seated himself at a table right in the middle. Xiao'er wrung out a hot napkin for Wu Song to wipe his hands and face, and brewed a pot of tea for him. Then Xiao'er stepped over besides Wu Song:

[dialogue, *guanbai*:]

"Master, what do you want to eat with the wine?"

*"Bring me some good wine and good food, and be sure there is enough, too!"*

"Ow!—Yes!"

[summary, *sibai*:]

Xiao'er turned round and off he ran.

[commentary:]

Strange! Didn't that waiter use a fine Beijing accent a moment ago at the gate? Why does he afterwards begin to speak in local dialect? Oh, that was just because his inn was situated in the area of Shandong. Because there was a lot of traffic in front of

the gate, people traveling from south to north, people speaking in all the southern and northern idioms. Suppose you were standing at the gate of the inn, then if you were speaking the local dialect and wanted to do some business, some people would not be able to understand. Therefore he had studied a few sentences of Beijing accent, he had studied a few Beijing dialect sentences. But he had only learned these few sentences. If you asked him to continue speaking, he couldn't produce any more of them. In that moment his fox tail would show and he would betray himself

[summary:]

Xiao'er went out in front to cut some beef, then put steamed rolls on a plate, poured wine, and at the same time arranged cup and chopsticks on a tray and carried it back to the rear wing. When he stepped into the rear wing, he placed the tray on a table beside Wu Song. Then he arranged the wine and food on the table in front of Wu Song and took away the tray. Xiao'er took up a position ready to serve his guest.

When Wu Song saw that the wine and food had arrived, he placed the wine cup in front of him, lifted the wine mug and—"Sh-sh-sh ..."—poured himself a cup. Then he put down the wine mug while he gave some clicks of dissatisfaction and shook his head.

[inner monologue of Wu Song:]

'According to Xiao'er, his house wine should be very good. But I think that when I poured it, the color didn't look right and it didn't have any flavor. Hm, perhaps it is no use looking at it, maybe one absolutely must taste it. Let me try and have a sip!'

[summary:]

Our hero lifted his wine cup.

[commentary:]

My! When he had a mouthful, it didn't have any strength at all.

[inner monologue of Wu Song:]

'Oh, that must be a joke! I must ask that waiter, Xiao'er, about it.'

[dialogue, *guanbai*:]

**"Xiao'er!"**

"Yes, Master!"

**"Is this the good house wine?"**

"Oh, no, no, no! This is only a medium good wine of our inn!"

**"Don't you serve me the good wine?"**

"Master, if Your Honor actually wants to drink our good wine, then that is the one called 'Three bowls and you cannot cross the ridge' ..."

*Selection 2*

Where was the tiger? South of the Jingyang Ridge. South of the Jingyang Ridge the tiger had its den. The tiger was waiting in the opening of its tiger's den. Propping itself up on its forepaws and squatting on its hind legs, it raised its tiger's head and stared at the bright moon in the sky. This tiger, you see, earlier there was no tiger there. Why suddenly this autumn had there arrived a fierce tiger? Had that tiger fallen from heaven? Or had it sprung from the earth? Tigers cannot fall from heaven, and neither can they spring from the earth. This tiger had met with misfortune at home, and so it had sneaked away. What kind of misfortune had it met with? Misfortune in tiger mating. When one day a tiger has grown up and begins to feel lust, and it wants to mate, then it does not hunt for food, it only roars. For instance, the male tiger roars to attract a female tiger, and the female tiger roars to attract a male tiger, and then they mate, don't they? No, they do not mate. They stand face to face and take turns at roaring, "Ma-a-a-a....."

What for? They talk and have fun! They like to get friendly! And then by and by they begin to roar louder and louder, and are filled with lust, and then they mate. But on this day of mating our tiger was not very successful, because this male tiger—or man-tiger—had a thorn on his male member. For the tigress, in her female opening, it felt like a furnace, as if she had caught fire. One of them was aching like being burned, and the other was aching like being stabbed, and they both gave a roar! When finally the lust had passed, one of them ran straight east, and the other ran straight west. After running so far, all his lust had worn off, and our tiger had hollowed out a cave and hidden himself here. So this tiger had been thrown out because of tiger mating.....

*Selection 3*

How could one imagine that just as Wu Song was standing on the very top of the ridge, and exactly when he was about to look around, just preparing to look for the tiger, something would suddenly leap out nearby—plop! It leapt onto the road and landed there. In the light of the moon he now saw this tiger.

"Ugh!"

Why did he say "Ugh!"? Hm, Wu Song had another look. "Damn it! Such a tiger!" No wonder, it had killed quite a few travelers. My God! This tiger must be one of the largest. It was as big as a bull, and its mouth when wide open looked like a pail of blood. Its teeth were as sharp as swords and its tail was like a steel whip. Under the eyes of Wu Song the tiger looked up at him. At this moment Wu Song felt a little—well, he became a little afraid. In fact I have a few verse-lines to praise the tiger.

**Seen from afar it looked like a bull ox with one horn.**

**Seen from nearby it was a mottled wild beast.**

The left ear was spotted with red color, like the sun,  
the right ear was spotted with blue color, like the moon,  
between its brows a "king's" character,  
like a prefect inspecting the mountains.  
Its twenty-four straws of whiskers  
were like needles and barbed wire.  
Four big teeth, eight small teeth  
were like iron clamps and steel nails.  
Its eyes were like bronze bells, their light like lightning.  
The tiger's tail was like a bamboo whip.  
In front were the paws, behind were the legs.  
When it put its paws to the ground, it could climb the mountains  
and bounce from hill to hill.  
When it thrust its hind legs, it could jump over gullies  
and cross rivers.  
When it lifted its head and roared in the wind,  
the winged game in heaven all lost courage.  
When it lowered its head and drank of the water,  
the fish and shrimps of the stream all lost their mind.  
Among the four-footed beasts he alone stands out.  
Deep mountains and desolate moors are his home.  
When he has not eaten human meat for three days  
he will swing his tail and sway his head and grind his teeth....

## APPENDIX 2

The photographs below show Wang Xiaotang (b. 1918) performing “Wu Song Fights the Tiger” during the International Workshop on Oral Literature in Modern China, held at the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, University of Copenhagen, 30 August 1996. The photographs were taken by Jette Ross.

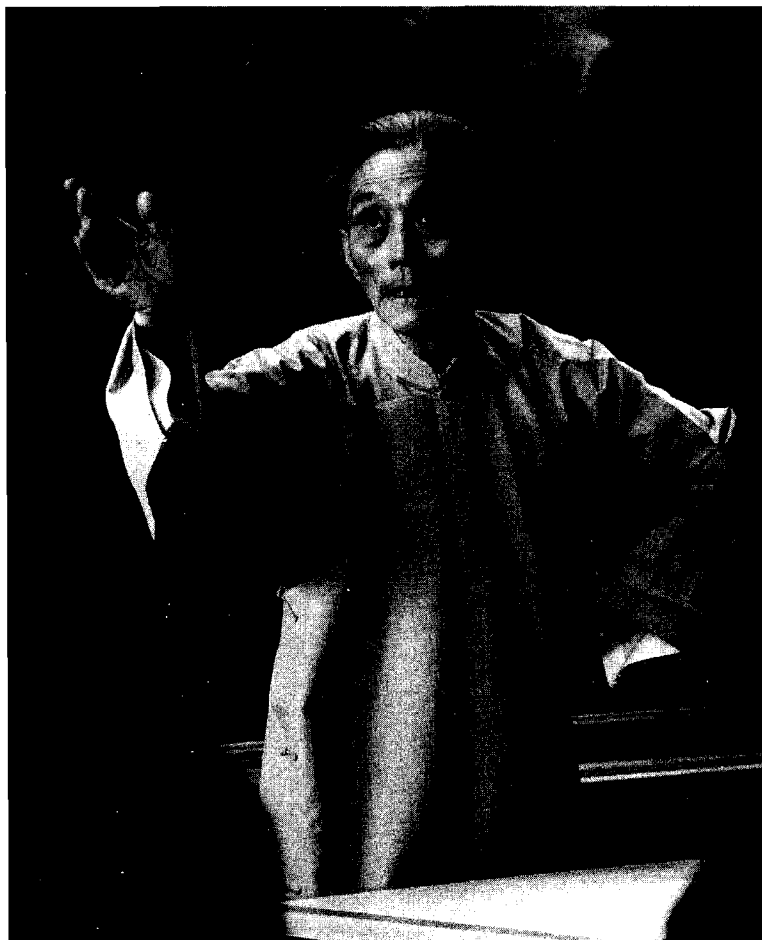


FIGURE 1. Wang Xiaotang begins his performance



FIGURE 2. Wang relates how Wu Song, on his trip to visit his brother, passes the inn of Jingyang Town

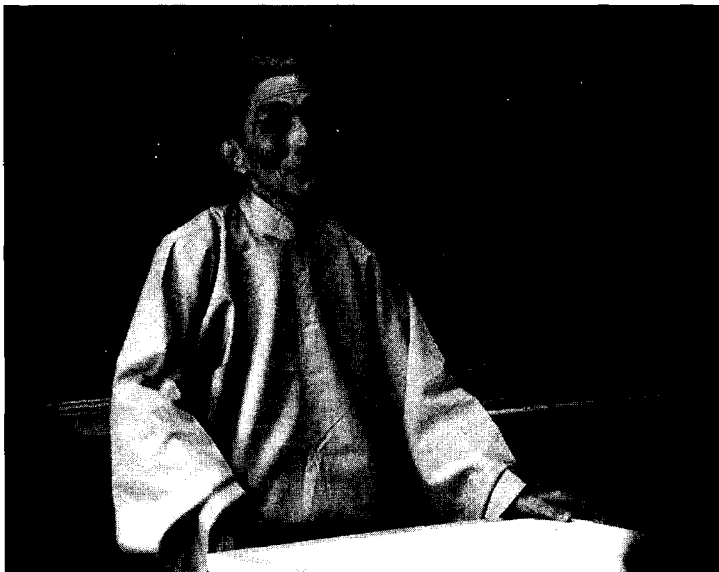


FIGURE 3. Here Wu Song tastes the strong wine called "Three bowls and you cannot cross the ridge"





FIGURE 4. After drinking thirty bowls of the wine, Wu Song is drunk and the innkeeper tries to cheat him

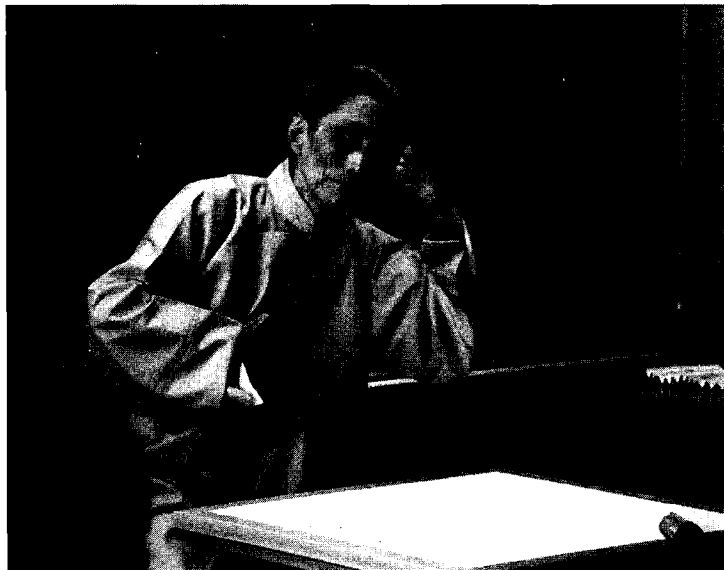


FIGURE 5. In spite of being quite drunk, Wu Song climbs the mountain ridge, where he finds a flat stone to rest on

FIGURE 7. The tiger appears



FIGURE 6. Wu Song is awakened by a strange wind

