

CHINA

BØRDAHL, VIBEKE, FEI LI, and HUANG YING, Editors. *Four Masters of Chinese Storytelling: Full-Length Repertoires of Yangzhou Storytelling on Video* (揚州評評話四家藝人). Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS), 2004. xix + 197 pages (English text); xix + 174 pages (Chinese text). Numerous illustrations and photographs, bibliography, VCD. Hardcover £48.00; ISBN 87-91114-64-0.

The Four Masters of Chinese Storytelling is an innovative work that introduces one of the great Chinese oral traditions to audiences around the world. The uniqueness of this book is immediately apparent from glancing at the book's covers. This book emerges from a large-scale project of Børdahl and the book's contributors, "Large-scale Registration of Chinese Storytelling," and is written in a bilingual format with double covers, one in English and the flip-side in Chinese. This book and the accompanying VCD are a part of a collaborative work between scholars and performers from China and the West that resulted in the collection of performances of four Yangzhou storytelling masters of their entire repertoires. The book's accompanying VCD is a sample of the larger VCD collections of Yangzhou storytelling.¹

The book is divided into three main sections, the last part being the recorded performances of four Yangzhou storytelling masters on VCD. The first section begins with a straightforward statement defining the purposes and intentions behind the project as a “preservation of the living art of the Yangzhou storytellers for later generations” and as an attempt to raise interest from scholars, future audiences, and students around the world. The Yangzhou storytelling tradition has been introduced and discussed in Børdahl’s previous works, such as her article in *The Eternal Storyteller* (1999) and in her recent book *Chinese Storytellers* (2003). However, the intimate and insightful knowledge shared by the performers and the autobiographies of the four Yangzhou performers, combined with the recorded performances, make this work exceptionally useful in developing a deeper understanding of the tradition.

In the article following the Preface and Introduction, Fei Li (費力) discusses and explains various performance techniques and the historical background of the Yangzhou storytelling schools. His article provides the reader a rare opportunity to read a performer-scholar’s insider testimony on the mechanics and history of the tradition. His ability as a performer and a scholar to integrate and contextualize the performance techniques in storytelling not only shows the complexity in mastering skills of storytelling, but also reveals the performer’s recognition of the hierarchical order among the different techniques involved in the genre. Additionally, his concise statement on artistic techniques helps to illuminate the aesthetics behind Yangzhou storytelling for the reader.

Børdahl, building upon Fei Li’s discussion, further explores the art in the context of staging storytelling performances by skillfully incorporating the terms, ideas, and sayings in the professional Yangzhou storytelling frame of reference. Her brief yet panoramic introduction of the art begins with the place of the performance, including not only a mere description of the setting but also the historical and social inner workings of managing and arranging performances. She introduces the props, gestures, and the technical jargon employed by storytellers before taking the readers through a step-by-step description of how a typical storytelling performance would be staged, starting with the performer getting ready to go on the stage. Børdahl’s use of extensive Chinese terminology in describing the performance tradition and detailed orientation may appeal to specialists in the field, yet may hinder non-specialists’ interest in learning the tradition. However, her direct and descriptive, rather than theoretical, approach with the recorded performances in the VCD makes it easy for non-specialist readers to understand and follow the performance process. Børdahl’s article shares similarities with her other works on Yangzhou storytelling mentioned above, but in this article, the author presents the tradition through the perspective of the performers of the tradition as seen and studied by a scholar from outside of the Yangzhou storytelling culture.

The autobiographical testimonies of the four masters representing different Yangzhou schools in the second part of the book open the door to a very intriguing and private part of the tradition. In the past, ethnographic works, especially in China, have had a propensity to emphasize the end product—the story performed—rather than examining the intimacy between the performers’ lives and their art. Therefore, the four masters’ life stories in Chinese, and their English translations, bring this performance tradition much closer to the readers by revealing the scenes behind the stage. Furthermore, as these stories were originally told rather than written by the performers, they induce a conversational atmosphere, helping readers connect with the performers and their life experiences. Each of the four masters’ autobiographies is followed by a chronologically-catalogued short entry of the day’s performance by the performer. *The Four Masters of Chinese Storytelling* is chiefly composed of these catalogues, serving as a guide to the VCD collections of the project.

The sample VCD begins with a brief documentary introduction of Yangzhou's culture and history in Chinese, and ties the area to the storytelling art, as regionalism is an essential factor in this performance tradition. After the introduction to the city, the VCD presents each master with his name and story title. The stories are performed in the Yangzhou dialect with sporadic use of standard Chinese, making the stories difficult to understand for non-speakers of the local dialect. However, the visible stylistic differences between the four masters of the Yangzhou storytelling schools keep the audience enticed and intrigued. The segments of the storytelling performances grant the readers the aural and visual experiences of the Yangzhou storytelling performance. One regretful aspect of the VCD is that it would have been more in-line with the book's title if selected scenes of the four masters' tellings of their life stories, as well as the masters' interactions with their students (in both formal and private settings) were included in order to provide a richer illustration of the on-and-off stage lives of the storytellers. Nevertheless, the sample VCD recordings of the storytelling performances bring new possibilities in studying and representing oral traditions in today's modern technological times.

The Four Masters of Chinese Storytelling is a multi-dimensional book that introduces the living Yangzhou storytelling tradition, offering a rare opportunity to hear directly from the performers and share in their knowledge. The book also serves as a catalogue to the full VCD collections of the masters' performances in their full repertoires, which are available at the aforementioned libraries and institutions. In addition to the study of Yangzhou storytelling, Børdahl brings forth to the table issues such as preservation of living tradition and its ramifications, authenticity, dynamics of tradition, and the role of technology in the study of contemporary oral traditions. Presenting a dynamic oral performance tradition in a written format is a dilemma all students of oral tradition must face. Børdahl and her co-authors attempt to resolve this problem through the use of direct and clear language, with numerous illustrations and an instructive and entertaining VCD. *Four Masters of Chinese Storytelling* offers a compelling and rich illustration of the Yangzhou storytelling tradition, and will appeal to specialists and non-specialists alike. However, it would probably be best viewed as part of a broader mosaic of Børdahl's (and her various co-authors') previous works on the subject —each work representing a piece, each a step forward in gaining a deeper understanding of the Yangzhou performance tradition.

NOTE

1. The full VCD collections are archived in the Library of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing; Fu Ssu-nien Library in Taipei; Danish Folklore Archives in Copenhagen; and in the Library of Congress in Washington, D. C.

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