A lifelong fascination with storytelling

‘We don’t know how to preserve old art forms. Some art forms preserve themselves, some don’t. It has always been like that. Some things continue, some things die. So many, many things do die.’ The words are spoken softly, in a blend of mild regret and quiet resignation. I am interviewing the Danish scholar of Chinese language and literature, Vibeke Børødahl, in the wooden house she occupies with her Norwegian husband Per on a hillside in Høvik just outside Oslo. We are sitting opposite one another in a study packed with books and photos. It’s April 2018, we’re experiencing what has been called Norway’s severest winter in many years.

The dark sets in early and makes it virtually impossible for me to continue filming. The landscape outdoors is covered in snow. Fir trees, gardens, meadows, rooftops of wooden houses, everything disappears under a thick white layer or is crusted with icicles. The outside walls of the house are painted bright red, but the dusk obscures the colours, except for the yellow of brightly lit windows and lamp posts.

We’re discussing Chinese storytelling, a rich and ancient realm of art, now ailing but still surviving with difficulty in many parts of the People’s Republic. Vibeke: ‘I wanted to find out: what is storytelling? Are these performers learning some books by heart? What is it exactly they are doing? How can I do research on this art, and find out what kind of language they are using, and how they build up their performances?’

It is partly through my acquaintance with Vibeke Børødahl that I began to take an interest in Chinese storytelling myself, and eventually did some marginal research on it. Chinese anthologies list up to some 600 different genres of storytelling which exist, or existed at one time, in the People’s Republic. At some point in 2017, with the help of a research student (Zhu Tengjiao from Shanghai) I did a count of all those genres, and drew up an extended table, indicating specific names and locations. It is hard to know for some of these genres whether they still exist or are mere names from the past. In other cases, we know that they are on-going traditions, but exactly in what shape is not always clear. And exploring even one single genre can be a task for a lifetime. Indeed, Vibeke has spent much of her life studying storytelling and oral literature in China, with a specific focus on traditions in Yangzhou, and her work is on-going today. Getting on in age, she can no longer do the sort of extensive fieldwork that she used to undertake, but her archives of recordings, films and written remains of Yangzhou storytelling are inexhaustible. For her it is mainly a matter of priority how to spend the years left …

Her books on Yangzhou Storytelling and on oral literature in China have earned her a devoted international readership, and her on-going productivity is truly prolific. At present she is completing a translation into Danish of the monumental late-16th century novel Jin Ping Mei, a kaleidoscopic tale about a merchant-military man and his family clan during the last decades of the Song Dynasty. The work is notorious for its bold sexual imagery and depictions of domestic intrigue, small-town decadence and corruption, but Vibeke strikes a note of caution: ‘I believe people have a tendency to overemphasize and maybe even misinterpret the erotic aspects of the book. Danish media all shouted out about the ‘dirty sex’ in Jin Ping Mei when the first volumes came out. This was probably in a misplaced effort to help the sales of the book. But the content is so rich and diverse, and the erotic passages are part of the general probing into life in all its holes and corners. No stone is left untouched. Apart from that, I also think it is important to understand the erotic descriptions as part of
the beauty of the novel, infusing the novel with a lust for life and a playfulness balanced against the hardships and right out evilness that is unveiled throughout society.'

The subject matter of the *Jin Ping Mei* (named after three main bondmaid-concubines who feature prominently in the novel) is so sensitive that its distribution was prohibited several times in China, and until recently it was viewed as *neibu* material, meaning that only limited numbers of readers in Communist China had access to full versions of it. At present it is, however, accessible in original full-length form in China on the internet. The book is an extraordinarily detailed and imaginative evocation of the life of a wealthy family in medieval times, and a veritable compendium of poems, operatic songs, descriptions of small-town trade, small-town gossip, exchanges between wives, mistresses and servants, and more. In some ways one might even call it a blueprint of Chinese culture throughout the ages, for there are striking similarities with certain characteristics of life, social behaviour and politics in modern Chinese society. So far, six sturdy volumes have appeared in Vibeke’s Danish translation, with four more to follow.¹

A translation project like this could easily be a person’s occupation for a lifetime, but Vibeke is undertaking a good deal more. In 2017, together with her colleague and friend Liangyan Ge, [*see his article in this volume*] she produced a 742-page annotated English translation of ‘Western Han’, a storyteller’s script from the late Qing period. This was followed in 2019 by a version in English only (496 pp) of the same text, intended to make the story more accessible for the general reader.²

‘Now I just plod on, trying to finish my few pages a day’, says Vibeke about her on-going work on *Jin Ping Mei*. Certain episodes and many of the elements in the book also turn up in other epic tales, and in certain genres of Chinese oral performance. For example, the beginning of *Jin Ping Mei* is a spin-off from another classical novel, *Water Margin*. Essentially, the entire territory of narrative art and classical tales in China can be viewed as a continuum, where certain tales or isolated episodes travel from one novel or one region to the next, or from one genre to another. The same can be said about oral performances versus printed sources and literature: certain episodes or even overall structures of classical novels either started life or found pendants in oral narration.
Vibeke’s Danish translation of *Jin Ping Mei* emphasizes the presence of ‘the eternal storyteller’ in the novel by printing in capital letters all the phrases in the story which appear to present an oral narrator’s direct comments. ‘I see my work of translation also as a way of doing research’, says Vibeke, ‘of testing certain ideas about the nature of the story. If there is time and energy left, I might write something about this after I finish the translation.’

She has done research and published numerous writings on Chinese storytelling, but she has also organized international meetings, inviting storytellers from China to share their views and art with scholars and students. The first time I remember her doing that was in Copenhagen in 1996. I attended the event and was deeply moved by the contributions of senior master narrators like Wang Xiaotang, Li Xintang and others, famous masters of the Wang-school of Yangzhou storytelling, inheriting the art of the legendary Wang Shaotang. They offered masterly and unforgettable performances of their age-old repertoires. There was also room for some splendid mockery of scholars’ petty ‘learned’ comments about such things as performers’ gestures or verbal twists! These artists evidently did not have their eyes in their pockets, and could observe scholars with the same explorative gusto as the scholars observed them!

Bringing artists and researchers together in one space sounds like an obvious thing to do, but is less common in academic circles than one might think. However, it is the model followed also at CHIME conferences, where we have always aimed at bringing together theoreticians, fieldworkers, practicing artists and aficionados, in the hope of reaching out to one another, and breaking new ground in the realms of music and musical understanding. So perhaps it was not such a big step to take up the challenge and to ponder the idea of a CHIME meeting specifically devoted to storytelling.

Nearly all the papers on storytelling and storysinging in this volume of the CHIME journal were initially presented at a special workshop organized jointly by Vibeke Børdahl and myself in Venice in October 2014. It was announced as a CHIME workshop, but with very generous financial and logistic support from the Cini Foundation, Venice University and other organizations. We managed to bring together eight performers and some twenty scholars from China, USA, Europe, Australia and elsewhere in what became a wonderful series of encounters.

The performances in Venice ranged from *nanyin* (classical southern love ballads) to *Suzhou tanci* (storytelling and -singing from Suzhou), from spoken and sung forms of Yangzhou storytelling to narrative music played instrumentally on *guqin* (classical seven-stringed zither). The academic papers presented went a good deal beyond that, covering a wider-ranging spectrum of historical or contemporary oral narrative genres. It was a wonderful event, helped very much by the congenial venue – the San Giorgio Monastery, on a little island not far from San Marco’s Square – and by the good vibrations between all those who participated. The content of this volume gives a good indication of what was being offered. The great
performances, too, kept everyone alert and happy. Virtually no one could escape feeling impressed by the delicate quasi-meditative nanyin ballads sung and played by Cai Yayi. For contrast, there were vivid, country-and-western-like narrative ballads from Suzhou and Yangzhou with plucked strings as accompaniment, fine performances by Shen Zhifeng, Gao Bowen and Lu Jinhua. These were more folksy in character, but with many subtle twists. Then we had masterful spoken tales by senior storyteller Ren Dekun and his younger colleague Ma Wei from Yangzhou, evocative even for people who could not follow along with the Chinese dialect (which I’m sure included many of us!).

One evening we presented a programme at the Auditorium Santa Margherita in the centre of Venice. There was no subtitling, and very little explanation for each item, but a few hundred Italians were listening spellbound a whole evening to stories told mostly in local Chinese dialect! It speaks for the qualities of the performers that they managed to reach out to the audience, though it must have felt mainly like ‘music’ for those who came to listen. The energetic Ma Wei’s contribution provoked frequent laughter. He is now considered by many to be ‘the last of Mohicans’ among Yangzhou storytellers. I interviewed him for the present issue of the CHIME Journal, as I became quite a fan of his performances (but who hasn’t?) Other fine artists in Venice included qin player Dai Xiaolian from Shanghai, who added another dimensions by playing instrumental pieces inspired by Chinese tales, and – as an intriguing counterpoint – the French storyteller Abbi Patrix, who did some splendid acts in English. I am not sure what sort of impression Abbi made on his Chinese colleagues, but when he proposed to do a little joint project he found nanyin performer Cai Yayi more than ready to join him. Their collective improvisation found its way onto the stage of Santa Margherita and was very well received by the Venetians.

During a different moment in the conference, Abbi’s tale (beautifully supported with hand-held drum) about his career and development as a storyteller in the Paris of the revolutionary late 1960s did not fail to impress all who attended it, and gave ample food for comparison with the backgrounds of Chinese storytellers. He pointed at the classical sources that have survived of great storytelling traditions in the West, from Homer to the Edda, from the Bible to the Nibelungenlied and beyond. These sources mostly refer to oral performances that are long dead, so it was a fascinating discovery for Abbi Patrix that a country like China still fostered living, on-going traditions of oral performance, with close ties to China’s classical literature. He said that he himself had been compelled to build his own repertoire of tales and his own career largely from a void, by inventing his own stories, style and idiom, since there was nothing much in terms of existing, living performances to go on. Abbi Patrix became one of the pioneers of a revival in storytelling in Western Europe. And now he was here in Venice, at
the invitation of Vibeke, to meet with major representants of oral narrative art from a very different part of the globe... However, it was not really his first encounter. On an earlier occasion Vibeke had already taken him along on one field trip to Yangzhou, and he had loved it.

Abbi Patrix’s art emerged from a world of political turmoil, spontaneous speeches in theatres and public spaces in the Paris in the late 1960s. It was a revolutionary era, when people suddenly felt no need for conventional entertainment anymore, and climbed onto stages and platforms to give out calls for action! This discovery, of a new kind of spontaneous stage ‘art’, that was not pre-scripted, not based on theatrical or musical conventions, but which came straight from the heart, inspired Patrix to become a storyteller. He strove for the very same capacities that gifted speakers at political rallies tend to demonstrate: powerful immediacy, intense contact with the audience, constant reference to things that directly matter to the listeners! One might be telling an old and familiar tale, perhaps something relating to strange and remote places, but in one way or another, the audience will need to feel involved, to get a sense that what they hear is actually about \textit{them, about us, about ourselves}.

I had to think again of the wonderful mockery on the part of Li Xintang and his colleagues in Copenhagen, back in 1996, when (in \textit{Yangzhou pinghua} style) they poked fun at the schoolish dry theoretical attitudes of the scholars who were present. They possessed that wonderful gift to provoke the audience and to connect with them, no less than Abbi Patrix demonstrates it today. But this talent also lives on, I believe, in the powerful ‘presence’ of such later performers as Ren Dekun and Ma Wei, in their special alertness and sense of timing, their abilities to crack profound jokes and to keep their audiences spellbound.

Sadly, I feel that these aspects are losing ground in many other present-day performances in the People’s Republic: there is a great deal of petrification, now that storytelling has become an ‘official’ occupation, mostly developed on the basis of institutional professional training in art academies. It may have increased the number of trainees, but it has failed to reach new audiences or to stop the gradual decline of the art. I suspect that the institutes, though founded with the best of intentions, have contributed in no small degree to the decline of storytelling, rather than its sustenance. They have facilitated the implementation of censorship and control, particularly since the 1950s. There have been numerous measures and tendencies to abridge, rewrite, change and reduce repertoires, to
throw away stories which were considered vulgar or anti-Communist, and to standardize the entire field, to put it under state control and strict supervision to the point where it might become hard for artists to develop their own individual voices. Some artists have refused to comply, and some have spent time in jail or decided to leave China. Sadly, this is a little documented part of history.  

Storytellers of the past – during certain more relaxed periods – and certainly as late as in the 1920s and 30s – would have been able to take more risks, to make frequent bawdy jokes and direct references to politics and to public figures. Some of them were so popular and so successful that they constantly attracted full houses, earned loads of money and became local superstars, not unlike major pop stars today. A number of storytellers in Suzhou managed to buy a house with the earnings of a mere single month of performing. They wove vulgar jokes or political mockery into their tales and triggered considerable enthusiasm from their listeners.

Vibeke, during the interview in wintertime Høvik: ‘Well, there was always a dialogue between history and present times. In the way they were telling their stories there would always be references to the present. You needed to keep the humour in, you needed to maintain the direct contact with what was going on in your own society.’ But she is skeptical about the causes often given for the decline of storytelling in China, although she was able to witness many of the changes at first hand, in the years since she started her explorations in Yangzhou in 1986:

‘I don’t think political control has anything much to do with it. Society is changing, and the art is becoming something for elderly people. The young don’t see the point of listening to it anymore. But why? Ultimately, I think nobody can give you the answer. The Yangzhou storytellers themselves have been speculating about the decline of public interest for their art, they have already been discussing this for a long time. Nobody knows why it has gone this way, nobody knows. It used to be the daily entertainment of a great many people – children, youngsters, grown-ups of any age – but things have changed. Work conditions and time for leisure are different, and there are so many new avenues for entertainment, radio, TV, computers, mobiles. Maybe storytelling in China is turning into some kind of festival business, which it wasn’t before. And there are so many factors. At some point storytellers began to be heard on radio, and later television. They were very much appreciated on radio. But the media always influence the art. I don’t know where the idea comes from, but on television items must never be “boring”, “longish”. So, if you get storytelling on screen, the stories are never allowed to be longer than twenty minutes, that’s already considered lo-o-ong! But traditional storytelling used to be for two or three hours every day! The ability of the audience to listen and concentrate is different, so it seems. And this, of course, is also connected to the difference between a truly oral – face-to-face – performance, created on the spot, unique and never to be repeated again in the same form, and a recorded performance, forever fixed in the medium.’

Vibeke grew up in Ribe in South-Western Jutland, a picture-postcard place known as ‘the oldest town in Denmark’ (it was established in the early eighth century). Her father was a teacher of geography and natural sciences and an explorer who made extended trips as a botanist to Afghanistan. He was away for months and years, in 1947-49 for two years. Upon his return the family home would always entertain many guests who shared his interests in Afghanistan and Asia at large. Vibeke’s mother, a very good pianist, had no wish to follow a career in this field, but opted instead to become a teacher and use music in her work with children. The house was always full of music.

As a teenager, Vibeke sometimes acted as her father’s ‘secretary’: ‘I was reading aloud in English for him so he could type out his things without having to look at his manuscripts. I liked to do this, but at the same time I realized that I did not want to follow in his track. She explains, laughing: ‘I had a wonderful childhood, I loved my parents very much. But I knew very early that I wanted to live a man’s life, not a woman’s. Perhaps I wouldn’t have been able to formulate it like this at that time. But I had no wish to do all the things that women were supposed to do. Like many girls of my generation, I read all the children’s books about boys, and identified with the heroes of Mark Twain, Jules Verne,
Kipling and Jack London.

In middle school she acquired solid knowledge of the ancient languages, ‘Greek, Latin, and all that’, and she loved it, but she was not clear how to take life further from there. In 1963, as a young girl, she went off to Germany to work as a caretaker of children at a Rudolf Steiner School, and then after six months moved on to Paris to work as an au pair. She studied some French, and then, one day, she noticed an advertisement on the wall of one of the corridors of Sorbonne University.

‘I saw, at Sorbonne, it was possible to... My! They were having CHINESE here! I saw their advertisement, and I was startled! I immediately wrote about it to my father. But at the very same time I received a letter from him, in which he told me that there was a new institute in Copenhagen where one could study Chinese! I had never thought of studying Chinese, but now, both of us arrived at this idea at the same time! Our letters had crossed, and it shows how close we were. It simply seemed to be a kind of ordained fate!’

Vibeke had not wanted to go on with Greek and Latin: ‘The idea of spending my life in libraries with dead languages did not appeal to me. But Chinese, a language even more distant and different than Greek and Latin, was another matter because it would be alive, and it would give access to an enormous culture.’

She embarked on the study of Chinese in 1964. She spent time studying in France with many famous professors of sinology and linguistics, but first in Copenhagen, where Søren Egerod had founded the University’s East Asian Institute in 1959. Egerod had followed in the footsteps of the great Bernhard Karlgren (1898-1978), the founding father of Chinese studies as a scholarly discipline in Scandinavia. Sadly, the Cultural Revolution in China made it virtually impossible for Westerners to travel to China for a number of years, but in 1972, after she finished her studies, Vibeke was able to join a group of Norwegians of the China Friendship Association on a trip to the People’s Republic. It led from Hong Kong to Liaoning. ‘It was a marvelous journey. We saw how peasants were living in the countryside, we visited factories, children’s gardens, schools...Of course, everything we saw was selected by the authorities as examples of well-functioning units. People we met were telling us that the Cultural Revolution was over, and that they had benefited so much from it. Perhaps it didn’t sound quite trustworthy. But what I got from that trip was that a lot of old culture in China still happened to be very much alive. Many things I had previously come across only in novels or short stories suddenly appeared in front of my eyes!’

During her study she had discovered linguistics as a field of particular interest. She focused on dialect studies and while in Paris she encountered a Chinese restaurant worker who spoke the Yangzhou dialect. She began to visit him every afternoon, studied his Yangzhou dialect, and eventually wrote her ‘big thesis’ – the rough equivalent of what later became a PhD – about the historical situation of the Yangzhou dialect, the sound system of the Yangzhou dialect vis-a-vis the old sound systems that could be reconstructed for ancient Chinese.

‘For Karlgren and Egerod, linguistic studies were the essence of sinology, and I had always been attracted most by the linguistic aspects. So, I became a disciple of the Karlgren ‘school’. As it turned out, there were not many who followed in their tracks at that time.’ Next, she got a position as an Assistant Professor of Chinese at the University of Aarhus. The late 1960s and early 1970s were a time of ‘revolutionary’ fervour not only in China but also in Europe: ‘The 68-movement came to my institute just when I started there. And the idea to study the phonology of a certain Chinese dialect now did no longer seem the right thing to do. One had a tendency to blame oneself as an ‘eccentric’ or even ‘feudal’ personality if one had such interests. Among my other interests were literature (I published several anthologies of Chinese short stories in the early 1970s), and so I turned to modern Chinese literature and literary theory and published a big anthology of Marxist literary theory in China.’

‘That’s still a far cry from Chinese storytelling?’ I commented to Vibeke’s tale, as we were sipping our tea in the now practically dark room.
She replied that, back then, she had slowly discovered that this particular work left her cold and tired, and exhausted both her body and soul. ‘In that same period I discovered a different realm of literature that did catch my passion: I found that when I read the old literature from the novels of the Ming and Qing period and other kinds of classical literature it made me feel so happy! So then, as a next project, I compiled a little volume about the great Chinese novels to present to the Nordic readership. While I was working on that volume, selecting one or two chapters for translation from each of the most famous novels, I found out that there was always a storyteller’s voice in those novels. This set me onto a very different trail of investigation. I found out that Yangzhou had a rich tradition of storytelling. I thought it had to be a thing of the past, something that had died out a long ago. For during all those years that I had been occupied with Chinese studies, I had never heard anybody talk about storytellers there! But then, in 1986, I travelled to Yangzhou for a brief visit, initially with the aim to investigate local jokes, since I thought jokes might be the only left-over from the oral arts of former times. But storytelling was still at the back of my mind, of course, and then I actually met with a storyteller, almost immediately when I got there! So, then I realized that they were still there, there was an on-going performance tradition in Yangzhou… in my dialect!’

The storyteller whom she had met, the popular Li Xintang, sent her a tape with the tale of Wu Song defeating the Tiger. ‘So, my first study was a tale on a tape. I had never seen him perform it. He had performed only some very short jokes when I met him.’

The tape was the beginning of Vibeke’s lifelong passion and fascination with Yangzhou storytelling. She was able to return to Yangzhou in 1989 for three months, to study the art more systematically. ‘I did not study it because I thought that it might disappear. I just studied it because it was there and it was so wonderfully alive. In the beginning storytelling took place in a big storytellers’ house in Yangzhou. A big theatre, and full of people! It has become smaller and smaller through the years, but it was a big theatre at that time. And the Yangzhou storytellers were really telling their tales for everybody, on a regular basis. And it cost so little, one or two fen (cents) only, to enter, and you’d bring your own tea leaves, and they’d pour you hot water, that was actually what you’d pay these few fen for, just to have hot water and drink your own tea. Nobody was dressed up, people were coming in their daily clothes, which were nothing fancy at that time.’

‘And I wanted to find out: what is storytelling? I started with the tale of “Wu Song and the Tiger” – not yet realizing that for storytellers in the Water Margin tradition this episode is really their ABC – and then my project aimed at getting as many storytellers as possible to tell this same story, so that I could make comparisons. I also wanted to have other, different stories, so that my material could be compared with other stories, and how they were told. Some storytellers would tell episodes from The Journey to the West, others from The Three Kingdoms, or from The Water Margin... these were the three major stories, connected to the three most important ‘storytelling schools’ in Yangzhou.’ [‘A school of storytelling does not point to a building, but to a hereditary art, orally transmitted from master to disciple through centuries and boasting a specific style.] What became decisive for my studies were the friendships I established with not only storytellers, but also local scholars from Yangzhou who shared this interest, in particular Chen Wulou and Fei Li who gave me unstintingly of their knowledge and time.’

‘“Wu Song and the Tiger”, although it is not the first episode in Water Margin, is always the story with which Yangzhou storytellers begin to learn the oral Water Margin repertoire, when they start on it as children or as youngsters. So, whenever I asked a new storyteller to tell it, I found that the beginning of the story would be amazingly similar, but after some minutes, they would begin to diverge. The disciples learned the beginning part by heart from their teacher, so there the formulaic part would be very tight. Once they got further into the story, you would get what is actually their art, which is the ability to tell a story on the spot. Not to recite something. To create something. But creation based on a lot of practice and imitation of oral performance.’

Vibeke has published her findings in a number of eminently readable and meticulously documented
books. What started off as a new passion became a lifetime occupation. The Venice workshop was a step along the way. I feel proud to be able to present the current collection of papers from that event as a special issue of the CHIME journal.

It is now five years since we came together on the island of San Giorgio. But this volume, too, is nothing more but another step, hopefully leading up to new projects.

This issue of CHIME is happily dedicated to the work and person of Vibeke Børdahl, who is such an inspiring scholar and heartwarming personality, and a friend to so many of us. The volume contains a further little vignette about Vibeke written by Lucie Olivova, who has cooperated a lot with her, and who shares her great interest in Yangzhou. Together they decided to establish a network of scholars working on different aspects of Yangzhou. This became the ‘Yangzhou Club’, a productive platform that triggered various conferences and resulted in several fine books, which are currently re-published in Chinese by the famous old Yangzhou publishing house, Quangling shushe.

And, to end on yet another productive note: academics never stop making plans. Several of the people who met in Venice are now brooding on plans to organize a follow-up meeting on the subject of Storytellers and Storytelling. All we need is a place as beautiful as Venice, and a new line-up of inspired masters and researchers to carry on the torch!

Frank Kouwenhoven

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1 For a review, see page 203 of this volume of CHIME.
2 This version, illuminated with fine artwork, is appearing under the title Han Xin’s Challenge, published (like its predecessor) by the NIAS Press in Copenhagen.
3 I got this impression from my interviews with many senior performers and researchers of Suzhou Tanci, including such distinguished scholars as Tang Lixin and Peng Benle (Shanghai). See also Stephanie J. Webster-Cheng – Composing, Revising, and Performing Suzhou Ballads: A Study of Political Control and Artistic Freedom in Tanci, 1949-1964, PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2008.
4 It took place under the auspices of the Fondazione Giorgio Cini, CHIME, the University Ca’Foscari in Venice (Department of Asian and African Mediterranean Studies) and the Confucius Institute at Venice University. We set up a wonderful cooperation with our Italian colleagues Giovanni Giuriati, Nicoletta Pesaro, Sabrina Marenco and Chiara Picardi, without whose help the meeting could never have materialized.