

My friend Vibeke

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When Vibeke Børdahl had her seventieth birthday, I was asked to write a medallion about her. It is a pleasure and a commitment, too. I hope I will not overly confuse facts, for most of the things I will write about are based on my memory.

We first met in Autumn 1992, where else but in Yangzhou. Vibeke was based at Yangzhou University, carrying out a project on storytelling. I was based in Nanjing, and came over to Yangzhou libraries in search of some old books. It must have been somewhere on the campus that we met, I do not remember exactly. Yangzhou University did not take on foreigners at that time, with a few exceptions. She was one. There also was a couple of native English lecturers, disguised missionaries, in fact. And a technician from Siemens, a brilliant young man with no knowledge of Chinese. We had our lunches together in the canteen, at the table reserved for foreigners. What I do remember is that Vibeke generously offered that I could stay with her in her room, which was too spacy for one person. The next day, she took me to a performance of *pinghua*, we had a dish of the famous local dumplings, and we visited Chen Wulou, a scholar in the field of storytelling, to whom, she said, she was greatly indebted, a tiny, lively elderly man – as he seemed to me then.

Vibeke is Danish in origin. She lives in Høvik, a small woody place near Oslo, as she married a Norwegian and raised her family there. She studied sinology in France, with André Lévy among others. At first, she specialized in the Yangzhou dialect, and thereby got on to the topic of storytelling. It so happened that we kept meeting. At the EACS conference in 1994, briefly. In Taipei, the Center of Chinese Studies, in 1997. Together we went to Hsin-chu and called on Boris Riftin, another scholar whom she greatly admired. I knew Riftin from his visits to Prague. He was a folklorist, and lectured on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms at Ch'ing Hua University at that time. A month later, Vibeke asked me to join her for a trip to Tainan. It was on Guanyin's birthday, and at the Kaiyuan Monastery, splendid celebrations and feasts took place. Accidentally, the festival coincided with my birthday, too. I always think of that happening as of an omen of things to come.

Vibeke was interested in the chapter on Yangzhou storytelling from my dissertation. She read an abstract in English, and invited me to present it at a conference at the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS) at Copenhagen, in 1996. She organized the conference and notably invited five storytellers from Yangzhou to perform. This was an enormous task. They were elderly men, all of them for their first time abroad, and they came with their caprices and mutual professional rivalry. An ordinary person might have invited two at the most, but Vibeke invited no less

Vibeke Børdahl with her guest, dr. Hrdličková, in Oslo
2013. (Photo: Per E. Børdahl.)



five, and turned it into a success! She made it, although she had plenty of other things to take care of as well during the conference. It was amazing. She eventually also edited the proceedings of that conference, a volume published by Curzon, and dedicated to Chen Wulou and B. Riftin. She was infinitely patient when she guided me through my manuscript, my first scholarly article of an international scope, which needed a lot of advice and corrections. It was at this point that she became my guru, and that is how I have regarded her since.

We met again in Prague in 1999, at the CHIME conference. I think it was there that we first planned a conference in Yangzhou. But it was her idea, in the first place. As much as she had the courage to bring a group of storytellers to Copenhagen, she did not hesitate to organize a conference about Yangzhou in the town proper. She was very strong in her commitment, whereas I was doubtful. Be that as it may, the funding had been gained and the conference did take place. We addressed scholars 'from the four regions' and most of them came. The programme was conceived as 'tasting Yangzhou', each topical panel took place at an appropriate surroundings: papers on performing arts in a once private garden theatre, papers about books in the printing workshops, etc., the participants enjoyed famous local dishes in various restaurants, pleasure boats carried them to the Levelled Mountain, they met with local scholars, visited museums, and of course there were the performances by storytellers. To arrange all of this would have been impossible without the help of local people, such as Ms. Huang Yin from the university, and others.

Above all, there was Vibeke's strong motivation and energy, her decisions to take a giant stride and her vigour and ability to make it all happen. This is the point that has to be made about her character – she herself regards her attitude as being stubborn. A handful of her books came out in the following years, in English, in Chinese, in Danish, all on the topic of Yangzhou storytelling, with lengthy transcripts of the recorded texts and insightful theoretical essays. In my view, storytelling is not a mass entertainment anymore. Many feared that it would die out. Vibeke has managed to lift Yangzhou storytelling up from the bier and recover it. It seems that she contributed more to its recovery than the locals did, who perhaps did not have favourable conditions for the task. Vibeke has been awarded many prizes in China for her contribution to the research on storytelling, and rightfully so.

On a personal note, she is fond of music. She plays cello within a quartet of musical friends every week. This is what keeps me going, as she told me. Is this the secret formula, then? Besides, she is quite a social person, too. Some years back, in January, I visited her in Ribe. It is a charming medieval town in Denmark, with a stupendous Gothic church dominating the encircling narrow streets. In one such street, she showed me the house No 23 where she grew up. She took me and a Taiwanese colleague to the local middle school (Gymnasium), and showed us the natural sciences artefacts, collected by her dearly remembered father. A teacher of reputation, he had stayed in Afghanistan, and published several writings about that country. Her mother Margot was a distinguished old lady, fluent both in English and at the piano. On one evening, she played a Schubert's Impromptu. 'As a teenager', Vibeke once told me, 'I did not go through the generational conflict with my parents, and so I always remained a child'.

I am looking at a photograph as I write these lines. It was taken two years ago, on a summer morning in Høvik. Vibeke and her guest, dr. Hrdličková, enjoy their breakfast on a terrace, talking about storytelling – or perhaps about something else? (See photo p. 11).

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