

Vibeke Børdahl and Liangyan Ge, eds., and trs., with editorial assistance by Wang Yalong, *Western Han: A Yangzhou Storyteller's Script*

Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2017. x + 742 pp. 672 illustrations. Hardback, \$200.00. ISBN 9788776942144 (hardback).

The relationship between oral tradition and written texts in China has been a major focus of attention and research since at least the beginning of the twentieth century. In recent decades, Vibeke Børdahl has been the single scholar who has published the most interesting work in English on this general question, taking as her main object of research the long-lived and influential example of *Yangzhou pinghua*, an oral storytelling tradition dominated by prose narratives without musical accompaniment. It has been known for some time that *Yangzhou pinghua* storytellers do sometimes possess written “scripts” (*jiaoben*) for some of the stories that they tell, but the book under review represents, among other things, the first scholarly publication of such a script “in its original and complete form” (1). These scripts were passed down from master to disciple and did not circulate publicly.

Western Han presents one lengthy storyteller script in three different forms. From pages 44–711, each pair of pair of pages has, with rare exceptions, this format: the top two-thirds of each even-numbered page contains a photo-reprint of a page from the original manuscript, the top two-thirds of the following odd numbered page contains a photo-reprint of an electronic transcription of the original page, while an English translation (lightly annotated with endnotes) runs across the bottom of both pages.

Original emendations and annotations to the manuscript are set off in the electronic transcription and translation by printing them in blue. Emendations are privileged in the translation over the text that they emend; when the emendations have been pasted over the original text, the text that is emended is not visible in the photo-reprint of that page. An almost forty-page introduction, along with a note to the reader, appears in the front matter, and a list of the main characters that separately includes all of their epithets and alternate names appears in the back matter. The volume is clearly a labor of love. The publisher is to be commended for its willingness to invest the necessary resources and expertise to produce such a complicated volume.

Ordinarily, “Western Han” would refer to the dynasty of that name (206 BCE–8 CE), but the story told in the script—consisting of five separately bound “books” (*ce*)—begins (after some missing or damaged pages) after the future founder of the dynasty, Liu Bang, has made it to the capital of the previous dynasty (the Qin) and received the surrender of its last ruler only to be forced to yield to his rival Xiang Yu. The manuscript focuses on the rivalry between these two men and stops with the defeat and imminent death of the latter by Han Xin. The end of the manuscript is also damaged, as are the beginnings of the fourth and fifth books.

The story of this contest between Xiang Yu—an aristocratic general who refuses to listen to advice and thinks his forces are enough to sustain victory—and Liu Bang—a low-class scoundrel good at employing talented much such as Han Xin and who knows better than to meet Xiang Yu in battle, has been treated in a variety of narrative and dramatic genres and has been very influential. There is evidence that indicates that the script does not cover the entire story, as told in the *Yangzhou pinghua* tradition, but it does cover the most dramatic sections.

The manuscript was owned by Dai Bufang (1925–2003), a storyteller who figures prominently in Børdahl’s work, but for telling a different story, that of the Monkey King and the journey to India to get scripture from the Buddha. In interviews that Dai gave to Børdahl, he claims that written versions (either the novel or anything like a storyteller’s script) played much part in his telling of that story.

Børdahl first saw the *Western Han* script in 2000 (1). Dai was the last performer of the story and with his death the tradition came to an end. Being of no use to them or to other storytellers, the script was given to Børdahl by Dai’s wife and daughter (vii). The annotations and emendations in it are all in one hand: Dai’s (4, 26; some of these notes are signed and some contain material that could be used to update what Børdahl has elsewhere written about Dai). The original script might have been written out by Dai’s father’s teacher’s teacher, who lived 1847–1905 (2). The script seems to have first been bound in 1912–1913 (judging from the dates of the newspapers used) and rebound or repaired in 1929 and 1954 (3).

All we know about how Dai himself made use of the script all comes from the aforementioned interviews. In them, he says that having access to the script and the ability to read it before studying with a colleague of his father helped him learn the tradition in only three months, but thereafter he only used it mainly to help him refresh his memory of poems in the text. He also says that the writing down of a story helped one remember it (perhaps this also applies to the “editorial” work he did on the script). Dai does not himself address the question of what kind of differences exist between the “Western Han” script and how he would perform it beyond the idea that if he did not consult the script he would forget some of the poems, as happened when he performed a section that Børdahl recorded in 2003 (in a 2005 article Børdahl published a transcription and translation and concluded that this oral version was twelve times as long as the corresponding section in the manuscript). An earlier and quite different transcription of an oral performance by Dai of material from the “Western Han” tradition but from before the manuscript begins is summarized and discussed in the introduction (33–34). The preface to this particular transcription—first published in 1982, rather than 1990—lists the titles of sixteen major segments (*huimu*) of the complete story of “Western Han” that would have been good to discuss in the introduction (two of the sixteen occur before the manuscript begins).

Unfortunately, by the time the script became available for publication, Dai Buzhang was dead and unable to answer more detailed questions about the role of the script in performance. The original fair copy of the script does not show any direct relationship to performance. The script is written in a simple form of classical Chinese embellished with poems and set pieces (typically set off in the script by indentation) as can commonly found in traditional Chinese historical novels. With but a few exceptions, the only places where phrases associated with “the storyteller’s manner” appear is in text added by Dai Bufang (32–33). The comments that he added to the script also contain some that are addressed to the storyteller (himself); unfortunately, this category of added text is not distinguished in the electronic transcription from text intended to expand or correct the story itself; this makes them stand out less than they do in the photo-reprints of the manuscript.

It will disappoint many, of course, to find out that what is presented as a “storyteller’s script” has so few explicit links to performance and instead seems so similar to a traditional popular historical narrative aimed at readers (13–25 of the introduction

compares the script to such narratives). Familiarity with the kinds of extant texts connected with the early development of professional oral storytelling in China should prepare us both for the perhaps not very exciting reality of the “Western Han” script and what we do know about how it was used. As was surely the case for the “Western Han” script translated in the volume under review, it was up to skilled storytellers to enliven such stories for their audiences. Since the *Yangzhou pinghua* “Western Han” tradition has become extinct, and Dai Buzhang is dead and did not make many recordings while alive, getting a more comprehensive idea of how the script in *Western Han* was realized in performance will be very difficult indeed. But we should all be grateful for the tremendous effort that Børdahl and her collaborators have put into this publication in order to make available to a number of separate audiences this very rare text.

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