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The Magic Lotus Lantern and Other Tales from the Han Chinese

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The Magic Lotus Lantern and Other Tales from the Han Chinese

Haiwang Yuan

Foreword by Michael Ann Williams

World Folklore Series

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Part 1

A General Introduction to China

LAND

Located on the west coast of the Pacific Ocean in East Asia, China has an area of 9.6 million square kilometers (3.7 million square miles), about the same area as the United States. The total length of its border is over 22,000 kilometers (13,671 miles). To the east lies North Korea; to the north, Mongolia; to the northeast and northwest, Russia; to the west and northwest, Afghanistan and several Central Asian countries; to the southwest, Pakistan, India, and other South Asian countries. Directly to the south lie Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar. Across the seas to the east and southeast lie South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, and Indonesia. To China's east and south are the Bohai, Yellow, East China, and South China Seas. They form a 14,500-kilometer (9,010-mile) coastline and embrace about 5,400 islands, the largest being Hainan and Taiwan.

More than 1,500 rivers run through China. The Yangtze, Yellow, Heilongjiang, Pearl, Liaohe, Haihe, Huaihe, Lancang, and Yarlungzangbo are among the longest. Most flow from west to east into the Pacific Ocean. The Yangtze, 6,300 kilometers (3,915 miles) long, is a few dozen miles short of the distance from Los Angeles, California, to Washington, D.C. It is the third longest river in the world, after the Nile (4,160 miles) in northeast Africa and the Amazon (4,000 miles) in South America.

Mountains abound in China. Only 15.4 percent of its land is fit for farming (CIA 2004). A bird's-eye view of the land surface shows that China descends in four steps from west to east. The first step is the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. Averaging 4,000 meters (about 13,123 feet) above sea level, it is known as "the roof of the world." The tallest part of the plateau, the Himalayas, is famous for the 8,844.43-meter (about 29,017-foot)-high Mt. Qomolangma. The second step includes the Yunnan-Guizhou plateaus and the Sichuan basins, with an average elevation of 1,000 to 2,000 meters (3,281 to 6,562 feet). The third step rises about 500 to 1,000 meters (1,640 to 3,281 feet) above sea level. It covers a series of mountain ranges and plains in Northeast, North, and South China, reaching all the way to the east coast. The fourth step is the continental shelf, spreading out into the ocean floor to a depth of about 200 meters (650 feet) (Permanent Mission of China to the United Nations 2004).

China extends 5,500 kilometers (3,417.6 miles) from north to south, mostly in the temperate zone. As a result, the majority of Chinese experience four distinct seasons and varied climate conditions. The cold and dry winds from Siberia and Mongolia in the north are in a constant tug-of-war with the warm and moist monsoonal winds from the south, resulting in cold, dry winters and hot, rainy summers.

China spans four time zones from east to west in the Eastern Hemisphere. When the Chinese in the far west are still asleep, those on the Pacific Ocean are already bathed in sunshine. Nevertheless, the Chinese are accustomed to a single Beijing Standard Time. That is, they do not observe the four distinct time zones, and even when it is dark at 8:00 A.M. in the west and bright and sunny in the east, it is still considered 8:00 A.M. in both places.

Additional Reading

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PEOPLE

Population

China is by far the most populous country in the world. Two minutes after midnight on January 6, 2005, China's official news agency, Xinhua, announced that the country's 1.3 billionth baby had been born in the Beijing Gynecology and Obstetrics Hospital ("China Welcomes 1.3 Billionth Citizen in Mixed Mood" 2005). China's population is about 4.4 times that of the United States, which, according to the 2000 U.S. census, has 281,421,906 people. To use another frame of reference, one out of every five people in the world is Chinese. This number includes the 6,882,600 residents in Hong Kong ("Hong Kong in Figures" 2005), 448,500 in Macao ("2004 Macao in Figures" 2005), and 22,703,295 in Taiwan ("Registered Population" 2005).

Historically, China has been an agrarian country. Since its economic reform in 1978, however, the pace of its urbanization has accelerated. The 2000 census revealed that China's urban population had reached about 456 million, accounting for slightly more than 36 percent of the total population. That number did not include another 100 million *liudong renkou* (floating population), who are mostly farmers seeking job opportunities in cities.

During the early 1950s, China followed the then Soviet Union's example and encouraged larger families, despite some experts' warning of imminent overpopulation. Then, starting in the late 1960s, China began to enforce a stringent, unpopular family-planning policy among the Han Chinese, which encourages mostly city residents to have only one child, excepting families with handicapped children. Economic and administrative penalties have never been effective, while overzealous local administrators and social workers sometimes go beyond the law to fulfill self-imposed quotas. With the growth of China's economy, however, there have been more voices calling for the reexamination of this policy and its social impact on the country.

Ethnicity

China is a multi-ethnic nation. Officially, it has fifty-six ethnic groups. Each has a distinct culture of its own, ranging from languages, customs, and artifacts to clothing, architecture, and food. The Han nationality is the largest, accounting for 91.5 percent of the country's total population. Therefore, the rest of the ethnic groups are referred to as *shaoshu minzu*, meaning "national minority" or "minority nationality."

Most of the *shaoshu minzu* live in the border regions of China. There are twenty-five minority ethnic groups in the remote southern province of Yunnan alone. Some of the *shaoshu minzu* in China, like the Hui and Manchu, have largely merged with the Han Chinese. Seven of the *shaoshu minzu* each have a population of over five million. Zhuang, with its 15,489,630 people, is the largest minority group. Loba is the smallest; the 1990 census showed that it has only 2,312 people. Large or small, *shaoshu minzu* in China have generally enjoyed a peaceful and harmonious relationship among themselves and with the Han Chinese.

Definition of Han Chinese

All Chinese, despite their citizenship, claim a common ancestry known as Huaxia. The word *Huaxia* represents the ancient Hua and Xia tribes, who cohabited throughout their histories. Hence, Huaren (people of Hua) has become a general term for people of Chinese origin all over the world. A Chinese citizen is specifically referred to as Zhongguoren (a person of China or

Chinese). Chinese citizens refer to their compatriots residing in foreign countries as Huaqiao and those who became American citizens as Meiji Huaren.

The Chinese call their country *Zhongguo* (Middle Kingdom) while the English-speaking world refers to it as “China.” The origin of the term “China” for “*Zhongguo*” is somewhat of a mystery. Some argue that it stems from the name of the Qin dynasty (221 B.C.–206 B.C.), because it is pronounced as “chin.” Another argument, however, attributes the term “China” to *cha* (tea), a favorite Chinese beverage exported to the West via the Silk Road. Still others view it as a derivative of the word “Cina,” a name that ancient India gave to its northern neighbor.

The term “Han” came into use much later in Chinese history. In 1644, the Manchus from Northeast China conquered the rest of the country and ruled over it for more than two and a half centuries. In the nineteenth century, the Chinese, bent on overthrowing the rule of a minority nationality that they considered to be barbarous, began to call themselves Hanren (Han Chinese). The word “Han” was borrowed from the Han dynasty (206 B.C.–200 B.C.), which was a successor of the Qin Empire.

Additional Reading

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LANGUAGES

Putonghua (Common Speech of the Chinese Language), known to Westerners as Mandarin, is the official language of China. It is taught in most Chinese schools; in ethnic regions like Tibet, *Putonghua* and local ethnic languages are taught concurrently. Chinese students start to learn a foreign language, usually English, from an early age—some in kindergarten, some in elementary school, and most in middle school. Although spoken Chinese has many dialects with varied pronunciations, the written system is the standard *hanzi* (Chinese characters), hieroglyphics rather than an alphabet to represent words or syllables. Unlike other Romanized languages (such as French and Italian), which have several hundred pronunciations, *Putonghua* has slightly more than 400. There could have been a tremendous number of homophones (words with the same pronunciations) but for a system of four distinct tones for each syllable—level, rising, falling-rising, and falling—marked respectively by the symbols “ˉ,” “ˊ,” “ˋ,” and “ˊˋ.” A different tone given to the same syllable may produce an entirely different meaning, represented by a different *hanzi* or Chinese character. For instance, the syllable “fei” means “fly” in the level tone, but “fat” in the rising tone. The ideas of “machine” and “chicken” share a homophone, “ji.” Combining these two syllables while changing the tones of “fei” results in very different meanings. A level-toned “fei” plus “ji” means “flying machine,” which is “an airplane,” but a rising-toned “fei” combined with “ji” (a different word with the same tone) refers to “a heavy chicken.” There are more examples of these subtle variations in language in the “Customs” chapter.

While the second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* contains full entries for 171,476 English words in current use (“How Many Words Are There in the English Language?” 2004), the *Zhonghua zi hai* (*China’s Sea of Words*), the largest Chinese dictionary, registers only 85,000 characters, and most of them have become outdated. In 1998, the Chinese government issued a table of 2,500 most frequently used Chinese characters plus an additional 1,000 less frequently used characters. Armed with a vocabulary of about 8,000 words formed by these 3,500 characters, one can conduct fluent conversations with native Chinese and read Chinese newspapers and magazines with the help of a collegiate Chinese-English dictionary.

A language with its written system and spoken tongue independent of each other is very difficult to learn. For that reason, the Chinese have created an auxiliary phonetic system called *Hanyu Pinyin* (Chinese Phonetic Alphabet) to help the Chinese as well as foreigners learn *hanzi* and to facilitate printing Chinese in foreign publications such as this book.

Computers initially presented a great challenge to inputting and displaying Chinese characters and thereby gave rise to sporadic calls for alphabetizing the Chinese language. In 1983, however, Wang Yongmin, a computer science professor from Beijing University, resolved the crisis by inventing *wubi shuma* (five-stroke *hanzi* input and display method), making it possible for the oldest writing system in the world to marry with the latest information technology.

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HISTORY

Like Egypt, Greece, and India, China has a very ancient history. Archeological finds from the cultural sites of Cishan and Peiligang in the Yellow River Basin reveal 7,900-year-old early Neolithic civilizations (An 1984). However, before Chinese historians knew better, they could only trace a documented history of 2,800 years. Between 1996 and 2000, the government-sponsored Xia-shang-zhou Chronology Project added another 1,200 years (from 2100 B.C. to 771 B.C.) to China's recorded history, making it a total of 5,000 years.

The Chinese believe that they all came from the common ancestors *Sanhuang wudi* (three primordial sovereigns and five legendary emperors), namely, Taihao (Fuxishi); Yandi (Shennongshi); Huangdi (Yellow Emperor); and Shaohao, Zhuanxu (Gaoyangshi), Diku (Gaoxinshi), Yao, and Shun, referring to themselves as *Yanhuang zisun* (descendants of Yandi and Huangdi).

According to Chinese legends, before *Sanhuang wudi* there lived another two mythical leaders named Youchaoshi (The Nest Builder) and Suireshi (The Fire Builder). Prior to them were the alleged creators of universe and mankind, Pangu and Nüwa, whose stories are retold in this book.

From the first Xia monarch to the last Qing emperor in a span of 4,018 years, numerous dynasties and a total of 419 kings and emperors came and went in China. Notable in history were the following dynasties, under which China was largely unified:

@Ulist = Xia (2200 B.C.–1750 B.C.)

@Ulist = Shang (1750 B.C.–1040 B.C.)

@Ulist = Zhou (1100 B.C.–256 B.C.)

@Ulist = Qin (221 B.C.–206 B.C.)

@Ulist = Han (206 B.C.–A.D. 220)

@Ulist = Sui (A.D. 581–618)

@Ulist = Tang (A.D. 618–907)

@Ulist = Song (A.D. 960–1279)

@Ulist = Yuan (A.D. 1279–1368)

@Ulist = Ming (A.D. 1368–1644)

@Ulist = Qing (A.D. 1644–1911)

The Zhou dynasty was particularly important to the development of China. During its middle phase (772 B.C.–481 B.C.), known as the Spring and Autumn Period, Confucius and a multitude of other thinkers were free to express themselves. Laozi, also known as Lao Tzu, whose legend is recounted in this book, also lived during this period.

Eventually the state of Qin established China's first centralized imperial government, in 221 B.C. Its monarch, Ying Zheng, gave himself the name *Shihuangdi* (The First Emperor). Although he was deemed cruel, he left such monumental legacies as the Great Wall, a unified system of currency and measurement, and a standardized writing system that is still in use today.

The next prominent empire in Chinese history was the Tang dynasty (A.D. 618–907). Its influence is still visible today, for example, in the name of overseas Chinese communities known as *Tangrenjie* (Chinatown), meaning "Streets of the Tang People."

Emperors Kangxi (1662–1723), Yongzheng (1723–1736), and Qianlong (1736–1796) are remembered as the best of the Qing monarchs; they oversaw a unified and prosperous China. Beginning in the nineteenth century, however, Qing began to spiral into decline and experienced

invasions from a coalition of foreign powers, including Britain, France, Germany, Austria, Italy, Japan, Russia, and the United States. As a result of the Opium War in 1840, China ceded Hong Kong to Britain (reclaimed in 1997). Threatened with wars, China also ceded Macao to Portugal in 1887 (reclaimed in 1998), large pieces of land to Russia in 1858, and the island of Taiwan to Japan in 1895 (reclaimed in 1945).

In 1911, Dr. Sun Yat-sen's Nationalist Revolution overthrew the Qing government and founded the Republic of China. At the time, warlords rampant in north China posed a serious threat to the new republic. As its first president, Dr. Sun led a coalition of Nationalists and Communists in a military campaign against the warlords, known as the North Expedition. Unfortunately, Sun's untimely death in 1925 brought the expedition to an abrupt end. The First Civil War broke out between the Nationalists, now led by Chiang Kai-shek (or Jiang Jieshi), and the Communists, eventually led by Mao Zedong (or Mao Tse-tung). Japan's all-out invasion of China in 1939 led to a temporary Nationalist-Communist united front to fight the aggressors. In the wake of Japan's surrender in 1945, however, the Second Civil War ensued. Defeated in 1949, the Nationalists retreated to Taiwan, where they continued to claim the Republic of China, established by Dr. Sun Yat-sen. In the meantime, the Communists on the mainland renamed China the People's Republic of China and claimed Taiwan as a renegade province.

During its first three decades, the People's Republic of China made great achievements. Land reform ended the feudal land system, water conservation efforts helped build thousands of reservoirs, a call to serve the people brought basic health care to millions in rural areas, and scientific and technological research sent China's first satellite into orbit around the earth. At the same time, however, China suffered a great deal from Mao Zedong's obsession with mass movements and class struggles. For example, the irrational Great Leap Forward from 1958 to 1960 was a mad dash toward socialist industrialization, aimed at catching up with, if not surpassing, capitalist Great Britain and United States, through collective labor in communes and state-owned enterprises. The Great Leap Forward was notorious for such absurdities as killing off pest-eating sparrows, which were mistakenly thought to deprive farmers of their crops; producing tons of useless iron from shoddy furnaces that melted household utensils as raw materials; and inflating agricultural output figures by transplanting harvested crops to designated fields. China suffered grave consequences, and a protracted drought was the straw that broke the camel's back, for it caused a famine that soon killed tens of millions of Chinese. In 1966, before China had fully recovered from the catastrophe, Mao led the country into another disaster by initiating the "Great Cultural Revolution." Intended to cleanse China of "capitalist evils" and their "kingpin" Liu Shaoqi, then president of the country, the revolution got out of hand when it was placed under the leadership of Lin Biao, Mao's hand-picked successor, who later betrayed him, and "the Gang of Four," namely Mao's wife Jiang Qing and three political associates. The Cultural Revolution further isolated China from the rest of the world and played havoc with every aspect of the Chinese people's lives. By 1976, when the Cultural Revolution was brought to an end with the death of Mao and the arrest of the Gang of Four, China had experienced horrendous human rights violations: Tens of thousands of its people, particularly intellectuals and entrepreneurs, perished due to persecution, as did President Liu Shaoqi. The country was literally on the brink of bankruptcy, with every daily necessity—from salt and eggs to matches and bicycles—rationed. China's legal system had been shattered, its social order disrupted, and its cultural legacies nearly destroyed.

Beginning in 1978, China, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, took on the monumental task of reforming its economy and opening it to the outside world. He first

abolished the “communes,” a Soviet system of farming that collectivized all modes of production and consequently smothered individual initiative. He then allowed private ownership of property and capital and invited foreign investment into the country. The reform was not without its difficulties. High inflation and complaints about government corruption culminated in students’ and urban residents’ protests in 1989; these were suppressed by the government for fear of another period of chaos such as that of the “Cultural Revolution. The apparent harsh treatment of the protesters at Tiananmen Square brought international condemnation and temporary economic sanctions.

Nevertheless, Deng Xiaoping did not stop the pace of reform, but instead accelerated it. As a result, remarkable changes have taken place over the past two decades. Today, China’s economy has become one of the largest in the world. Only a quarter of a century ago, the dream of average Chinese was to own “three machines with wheels and one with sound,” namely, a bicycle, watch, sewing machine, and radio. Today, however, their goal has become the possession of an automobile, a furnished house, and high-yielding stocks. Awed spectators of foreign tourists have become tourists themselves in almost all the Asian and European countries. Over ten million privately owned cars travel on some 20,000 kilometers (12,500 miles) of superhighways, a road system second in length only to that of the United States. China may still have a long way to go before it becomes a democratic, prosperous, and powerful nation like those in Europe and North America, but its people are definitely enjoying more political, social, and financial freedom than ever before.

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RELIGION

Religious belief is a constitutional right in China, although separation of religious activities from political life and independence of churches from foreign decrees have been the official position since the establishment of New China in 1949. Today, there are an estimated 17 to 75 million professed Protestants and Catholics, around 25 million Muslims, and countless followers of Buddhism and Taoism in China (Ji 2003, 123). In addition, many more Chinese are, to a lesser or greater degree, believers in the Chinese popular religion, explained below.

Confucianism and Taoism are indigenous Chinese beliefs. More a code of ethical, social, and political behaviors than a religious denomination, Confucianism originated from a collection of sayings and works allegedly compiled by Confucius, who advocated the individual's self-cultivation and the government's benevolent rule. Contributing to Confucianism were Mencius (372 B.C.–287 B.C.), Zhu Xi (1130–1200), and several other Confucian scholars. Mencius taught that men were all originally good but subject to the environment in which they lived. Zhu Xi promoted *Sangang wuchang* (Three Cardinal Guides and Five Constant Virtues). *Sangang* means “a ruler guides his subjects; a father, his children; and a husband, his wife”; *wuchang* indicates *ren* (benevolence), *yi* (righteousness), *li* (propriety), *zhi* (wisdom), and *xin* (fidelity).

Confucian temples are called *wenmiao* (temple of literati), and they look very much like Buddhist temples. The Confucian Festival takes place annually from September 26 through October 10 in Qufu, Shangdong province, Confucius's birthplace. Elaborate rituals of paying homage to the sage are part of the event.

The original philosophy of Taoism owed its existence to a book, *Tao Te Ching* (*The Book of Tao*), attributed to Laozi (or Lao Tzu), a deified Chinese thinker of the sixth century B.C. Laozi believed that everything in the universe consisted of two opposite elements, the *yin* and the *yang*. The *Tao* was the invisible hand that held the *yin* and *yang* together as an organic whole. If *yin* and *yang* were unbalanced, all troubles would follow. Therefore, the pursuit of a Taoist was to seek harmony with the universe. However, this obsession with a quest for integrating humanity with nature eventually gave rise to the belief in immortality and the establishment of the Church of Tao by a Taoist named Zhang Daoling (A.D. 34–156). He promised his followers they could become immortals by doing good deeds. Various superstitious sects and secret societies under the guise of the Taoist church ran rampant until 1949, when the new communist government suppressed them. Taoist priests wear quiet costumes and do not shave their heads as the Buddhist monks do. They call their temples *guan*, while Buddhists and Confucians call theirs *miao*.

Buddhism entered China around the first century A.D. and became popular two centuries later, when protracted warfare among rival states inflicted great misery upon the people. Buddhism became a source of comfort by preaching that desires were the cause of all pains, and that meditation could help a person reach nirvana, or the end of sufferings. Today, Han Chinese generally subscribe to the *Xiaocheng* (Hinayana) sect of Buddhism, while Tibetans and Inner Mongolians believe in Lamaism, a branch of Buddhism mingled with elements of indigenous religions.

Catholicism and Islam came to China around the seventh century A.D., and Protestantism arrived in the early nineteenth century along with foreign missionaries and business interests. While numerous Hui (Muslim) people mingle with the Han Chinese in other parts of the country, there are still two enclaves of Muslims in Northwest China: the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region and the Xinjiang Uigur Autonomous Region.

Chinese popular religion is a catchall term for a medley of inherent Chinese beliefs bordering on religion and superstition. The influence of these beliefs on the Chinese is particularly apparent in their observance of traditional festivals and occasions such as weddings and funerals. For example, before and during the Chinese New Year season, the Chinese observe a series of rituals and conventions. One in particular is to bribe Zao Wangye (Kitchen God) so that he can put in a favorable word for the family when he pays his annual visit to the Jade Emperor of Heaven. “The Origin of Kitchen God and the *Jizao* Festival” is included in Part 3 of this book.

Popular religion permeates Chinese legends and folktales, which you may notice in many tales retold here. Classical fantasies—such as *Shan hai jing* (*The Book of Mountains and Seas*), *Fengshen yanyi* (*A Historical Romance of Apotheosization*), *Liaozhai zhiyi* (*Strange Stories from a Make-do Studio*), *Xi you ji* (*Journey to the West*)—and a myriad of oral traditions have helped establish a polytheistic hierarchy. This hierarchy, in many ways, copies that of the mundane world: There are kings, ministers, generals, and maids of honor in both Heaven and the Netherworld. Gods and goddesses are omnipresent. Like the deities in the Greek mythology, they have human desires and weaknesses. Some marry earthlings, as does *qixiannü* (the seventh fairy) in “Cowherd and Weaving Girl”; some are deified human beings, like the immortal Lü Dongbin in “A Dancing Crane”; some are exiles to Earth from heaven, like the couple in “The Origin of Mid-Autumn Festival”; and others are reborn to different beings, such as Piggy in “Monkey King Strikes at the White-bone Demon Three Times.” The concept of immortality is taken from Taoism and the idea of reincarnation from Buddhism.

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CUSTOMS

As mentioned in the “Languages” chapter, Chinese characters are first created as hieroglyphs, or pictorial symbols that represent meanings. A great number of *hanzi*, or Chinese characters, are homophones, having different meanings but sharing the same pronunciations and intonations. For these reasons, the Chinese are expert in playing on words and symbols. Following are a few examples.

Unlike cultures that associate bats with darkness and evil, the Chinese use the symbol of bats for decoration because the Chinese word for bat, pronounced “fu,” sounds the same as the word for “happiness”! Another example is a very popular Chinese New Year painting motif, which involves a combination of sounds and symbols: a chubby boy riding on a fish in a pond full of lotus leaves and flowers. Every Chinese knows that this mosaic means “*liannian youyu*” (more than sufficiently provided for years running) because the pronunciation of lotus, “lian,” sounds like “for years running,” and the fish, “yu,” sounds the same as “more than sufficient.”

The most popular words on which to play are *fu* (happiness), *xi* (good marriage), *lu* (official salary), *shou* (longevity), and *ning* (peace). One of the symbols for *xi* is a coined double-character word representing a happily married couple, who can also be embodied by a pair of butterflies or mandarin ducks. The symbol of *lu* is often a figure in traditional official costume. The symbols for longevity include peaches, pines, cranes, and *laoshouxing* (a gray-haired old saint with a bulging forehead).

When you see a motorcade parading along a city street in China, do not mistake it for a funeral. In fact, it is a wedding procession! Chinese brides prefer being chauffeured to the bridegroom’s home, as their grandmothers were in a sedan chair in the old days. Traditionally, the costume of the bride must be red, as this is the color of celebration and happiness. Young brides today, however, are fond of white wedding gowns, a custom they have learned from the West. Their grandmothers would never have worn white wedding clothes, because white and black were, and still are, the colors of a funeral. Attending upon a dying senior relative and handling his or her funeral affairs are acts of *songzhong*. Unfortunately, *songzhong* sounds the same as the act of giving a clock to someone as a present. So *never* choose a clock as a present for Chinese people, no matter where they live in the world. Watches are fine because the Chinese word for them is “*biao*,” which is an entirely different pronunciation.

There are so many customs and taboos in Chinese culture that it would take an entire book to discuss them all. Here we just cover how to be a host and guest in China. The Chinese often find Americans rather direct upon first meeting them. That is because the Chinese themselves often say things in a roundabout way. For example, even though the great poet Li Bai (A.D. 701–762) knew he was very famous, he said humbly to a governor, “I have assembled some scrolls with which I would wish to soil your sight and sully your hearing, though I fear my minuscule talent of writing poetry is unworthy of attention from such a great man as yourself” (Birch 1967, 234). A modern counterpart of this story is a cultural misunderstanding between a visiting Chinese professor and his American students. The professor opened his first lecture with a traditionally modest statement that he had used in front of his Chinese audience, something like, “I don’t know much about the topic. Please put up with my ignorance,” although in fact he was an expert in the field. The American students, however, took what he said at face value. One exasperated student stood up and said bluntly, “If you don’t know much, why do you have to waste our time?” The moral is, you cannot take what the Chinese say literally, as they tend to be over-modest and courteous, a way to show their respect. If you ask a Chinese person to stay for

dinner, he or she will say “no” the first, second, or even third time you ask, even if he or she wishes to accept the invitation.

You may notice how some of your Chinese friends respond when they are served a cup of tea. Instead of expressing their gratitude verbally, some may choose to make a low-profile gesture with their fingers. Hooking up their middle and forefingers, they gently and quietly tap their knuckles on the table a few times. The gesture used to be a custom of the Cantonese but has spread all over China in recent decades. This custom stems from a legend about Emperor Qianlong of the Qing dynasty, who liked to tour South China to get firsthand knowledge of his people’s living conditions. To avoid being detected, he and his small group of accompanying servants were dressed like ordinary folks. One day Qianlong took his servants by surprise when he served them tea at dinner instead of asking them to serve him, as he had always done in the imperial palace. Stunned, the servants were at a loss what to do. At court in the capital, they would have wasted no time kneeling down and kowtowing to him in gratitude. If they had done so in this situation, they would have betrayed the emperor’s identity. Finally, a smart servant came up with the idea of using his knuckles to serve as his knees. Try this with your Chinese friends and see how they react.

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MUSIC AND PERFORMING ARTS

The magazine *Nature* reported in 1999 that Chinese archeologists had excavated a 9,000-year-old musical instrument, a playable flute carved out of a large bird's wing bone (Zhang et al. 1999). The ancient Chinese used music as part of their rituals to enforce the political and social order. Some 3,000 years ago, Confucius worked hard to persuade rulers of his time to restore the rituals practiced by their ancestors, thus unwittingly contributing to the development of a complete musical theory and a set of sophisticated musical instruments.

Ancient Chinese music used a five-scale system, corresponding to the black keys on a modern keyboard. Musical instruments were largely made of *jin* (metal), *shi* (stone), *si* (string), *zhu* (bamboo), *pao* (gourd), *tu* (earth), *ge* (leather), and *mu* (wood). During the Tang dynasty (A.D. 618–907), as commercial contact with Central Asia increased, musical instruments such as *pipa*, a guitarlike plucking instrument, and *erhu*, a violinlike string instrument, were introduced to China. Chinese today have not only adopted the seven-scale system but have also invented a numerical musical note system based on the Western staff, so that beginners of music will find it easier to learn. They call this numbered system *jianpu* (simplified notation).

In contemporary Chinese music, *xiyangyueqi* (Western musical instruments) and *minyueqi* (traditional Chinese musical instruments) complement each other. Vocals fall roughly into three categories: *meishengchangfa* (Western singing), *minzuchangfa* (Chinese singing, with regional and ethnic varieties), and *tongsuchangfa* (popular singing). The younger generation is particularly receptive to new trends, such as rap, hip-hop, and street dances. Foreign and domestic record companies find China a booming market. China's increasingly relaxed social control and intensified commercialization have encouraged idolization of singing stars. The long-standing *Tong yi shou ge* (*Sing Together*), a Central TV–sponsored concert that takes place regularly in different places in China and around the world, provides a second chance for pop singers who have passed the prime of their singing careers, and the extremely popular *Chao ji nüsheng* (*Super Girl*) singing contest churns out new stars through fan voting using mobile phone short text messages, as the *American Idol* show does.

Chinese performing arts largely took the form of singing and dancing until about A.D. 960, when *xiqu* (operas) and *shuochang* (talking and singing) became increasingly popular. Today, China boasts more than 300 types of operas with different regional flavors, of which Beijing Opera is of national significance, and Kunqu Opera is on the United Nations' list of "oral masterpiece[s] and intangible heritage of humanity."

All Chinese operas have several things in common. Their stylized performance consists of *chang* (singing), *nian* (speaking), *zuo* (acting), and *da* (fighting), assisted by the techniques of acrobatics, martial arts, and pantomimes. The majority of the opera performers use painted faces instead of masks. The colors of the paint are symbolic. Generally, white suggests treacherousness, but red indicates devotion, courage, and loyalty. Chinese operas have fixed roles, namely *sheng* (men), *dan* (women), *jing* (men with painted faces), and *chou* (clowns) and their relative subsets. Unlike their Western counterparts, confined to the concept of "three unities," namely "one plot, one location, and one time," Chinese operas engage the audience's imagination to create infinite time and space. For instance, if an actor or actress walks a few steps on the stage and tells the audience that he or she has covered a hundred miles, then, by tacit agreement, the audience will accept that distance in their mind's eye. Chinese operas use symbolic, rather than realistic, props. For example, a tasseled whip is understood to be a horse. An oar and a well-choreographed dance make a rocking boat on wavy waters come to life, as in

the famed opera *Qiu jiang* (*Autumn on the River*). Finally, there are different schools in each of the Chinese operas. The *dan* (women) role of the Beijing Opera alone boasts the schools of Mei Lanfang, Cheng Yanqiu, Shang Xiaoyun, and Xun Huisheng.

With *caizhiaren* (gifted scholars and pretty women) as their main characters, and legends and historical events as their themes, Chinese operas have been an important means of preserving and disseminating folklore and folktales, some of which are retold in this book, such as the story of Qin Xianglian, retold here in “A Forsaken Wife and Her Unfaithful Husband” and of Mu Guiying *guashuai*, retold in “The Women Generals of the Yang Family and Commander-in-Chief Mu Guiying.”

Huaju (plays) came to China in the early twentieth century. Some famous Chinese playwrights are Tian Han (1898–1968), Xia Yan (1900–1995), and Cao Yu (1910–1996). *Leiyu* (*Thunderstorm*) and *Chaguan* (*Teahouse*) are two of the most famous *huaju*.

Chinese movies emerged in Shanghai in the early 1930s and enjoyed their heyday in the 1930s, 1950s, and early 1960s. Many, such as *Yi jiang chun shui xiang dong liu* (*Spring River Flows East*), *Liu sanjie* (*Sister Liu*), *Wu-duo jinhua* (*Five Golden Flowers*), and the animated film *Sun wukong da nao tiankong* (*Monkey King Plays Havoc in Heaven*), have become classics. Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, and Feng Xiaogang are some of the most prominent contemporary directors. Chen Kaige is known for his experimental movies, like *Huangtudi* (*Yellow Earth*) and *Bawang bie ji* (*Farewell My Concubine*). Feng Xiaogang is good at using comedy to tackle serious social issues, and his recent *Shou ji* (*Cell Phone*) lashes out at unfaithful husbands. Zhang Yimou first exposed the rustic nature of China in a series of international award winners, including *Lao jing* (*Old Well*) and *Yi-ge dou bushao* (*Not One Less*). He also directed one of the first Chinese movies to be distributed in the United States, *Hong gaoliang* (*Red Sorghum*), and the critically acclaimed *Da hong denglong gao gao gua* (*Raise the Red Lantern*). More recently he has produced martial arts movies like the big box-office hits *Yingxiong* (*Hero*) and *Shi-mian maifu* (*House of Flying Daggers*), apparently encouraged by Western audiences’ reception of *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*, a masterpiece by the famed Taiwan director Li An.

China’s television industry is much younger. It began with a nine-episode TV play series, *Di ying shiba nian* (*A Secret Agent of Eighteen Years*), on February 5, 1980. Soap operas, imported mainly from Brazil, captivated Chinese audiences in subsequent years, before China began producing its own soap in 1990, called *Ke wang* (*Yearnings*). Production of Chinese TV plays reached its climax in the last years of the twentieth century with such great hits as *Si shi tong tang* (*Four Generations Under One Roof*), based on a modern classic by the renowned writer Lao She, and *Huanzhu gege* (*A Defiant Fake Princess*), adapted from a romantic novel by the famous Taiwanese writer Qiong Yao. Two trends dominate current Chinese TV production: plays that recast “revolutionary” movies or novels authored in the 1950s–1960s and plays that recount the romances and secret lives of monarchs. Among the latter, *Yong zheng wangchao* (*The Reign of Yongzheng Emperor*) and the multi-sequenced *Kangxi weifu sifang ji* (*Kangxi Emperor Tours the Country in Plain Clothes*) excel in content and presentation.

Chinese traditional dances vary among regions and peoples. Well-known traditional dances of the Han Chinese include those using red ribbons, peacocks, and lotus blooms. *Baoliandeng* (*The Magic Lotus Lantern*), based on a tale retold in this book, is China’s first attempt to present an opera using traditional Chinese dances. The ballet called *Hongse niangzi jun* (*The Red Women Army Regiment*) has been a successful initiative to present a Chinese theme in a Western art form. Various kinds of folk dances are performed in the streets during festival

celebrations, such as the dragon dance, lion dance, *yangge* dance (rural folk dance), *hanchuan* (folk dance with model boat and other props), *gaoqiao* (stilt), and various types of drum dances.

Today, China embraces all genres of music and performing arts. There are also efforts to bring the West and the East together, such as the famed *Nüzi Shi-er Yuefang* (Twelve Girls Band), who have won fame worldwide, and sporadic experiments in marrying the art form of Beijing Opera with Shakespearean themes.

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FINE ARTS AND ARCHITECTURE

The history of Chinese fine arts can be traced back to cliff paintings 20,000 years ago (Chang 2004). Chinese pictographic characters are artworks in and of themselves. It is no wonder that calligraphy has been an important part of Chinese art. In fact, a typical Chinese painting scroll must have three indispensable elements: a picture, a complementary script, and a seal that usually serves as the signature of the artist. A Chinese painter must be both a good calligrapher and a good seal cutter.

The spread of Buddhism starting in the second century A.D. had a tremendous impact on Chinese artistic creation, evident in the Buddhist murals and statues in the Mogao Grotto (A.D. 366) and the stone carvings in Yungang (A.D. 450) and Longmen Grottos (A.D. 494). Around the same period, artists began to flee the Central Plains to escape pillaging by nomadic invaders. Awed by the natural beauty of South China, these exiled artists began to paint what they saw; creating what is known as the *shanshuihua* (paintings of mountains and waters). For the first time in Chinese history, paintings were created for esthetic instead of moral purposes.

Traditional Chinese artists do not portray models, instead painting from memory. Their works are supposed to catch the spirit, rather than the exact form, of an object, as in the image of *feitian* (flying angels or fairies) found in the murals of the Mogao Grotto. Unlike their counterparts in Western paintings, *feitian* do not have wings. Instead, their flying posture is hinted at by long, flowing ribbons, which are part of their beautiful costumes.

It does not follow, however, that Chinese artists did not pay attention to forms. The lifelike *Terra-Cotta Soldiers and Horses* guarding the tomb of the First Emperor of Qin, for example, are as vividly detailed as Michelangelo's *David*.

Traditional Chinese artists paint on *xuanzhi* (rice paper), or silk, with brushes, ink, and pigments. There are two basic painting techniques: *xiayi* (a freehand style that highlights contrasts of colors and bold outlines with simple brush strokes) and *gongbi* (a precise style that emphasizes minute details).

Some of the modern masters of Chinese painting are Zhang Daqian, Qi Baishi, Xu Beihong, Fu Baoshi, Pan Tianshou, Guan Shanyue, Li Keran, Fan Zeng, and Luo Zhongli. New generations of Chinese artists tend to be overwhelmed by the various postmodern Western concepts and are faced with many choices. Nevertheless, the tradition of Chinese painting is far from being in danger. On the one hand, Chen Yifei, an American Chinese, has made a bold attempt to mingle Western oil painting techniques with Chinese themes. On the other hand, some native Chinese painters are using Western concepts such as perspective and shades of colors to complement traditional Chinese techniques. Some young Chinese artists are creating cutting-edge contemporary art in the Western style, as evidenced at the Chinese Biennale in Beijing in 2003. At the same time, numerous farmers are using their untrained talents to paint their rich and colorful country lives, creating a new genre known as the *nongminhua* (peasant paintings), the most famous of which are from Huxian County, Shaanxi Province (Chinese Folk Art 2003). Folk art in various regions is still going strong. The famed *Niren Zhang* (*Clay Figures of the Zhang Family*) and *Yangliuqing nianhua* (*Yangliuqing New Year Paintings*) in the author's hometown, Tianjin, are only two of innumerable examples.

The Chinese *yuanlin* (garden) is a Chinese *shanshuihua* in real life. With careful, artistic layout of *jiashan* (rockery), woods, buildings, and artificial bodies of water, a garden of this nature is an embodiment of the Chinese ideal that people and nature are an organic whole.

Traditional Chinese architecture is also an art. A raised foundation of stone, a body frame of wood, and a roof of pottery tiles are the basic elements of a traditional Chinese building. The frame, formed by columns and beams, carries the weight of the roof. Built like the wings of a big bird, the roof extends its curving ridges as far as it can in the four directions. Supporting this super-heavy roof are brackets called *dougong*, which don't use a nails and are peculiar to ancient Chinese architecture. Sculptured mythical figures and animals line up on the tip of the ridges. They act as nails as well as ornaments, serving the dual purposes of holding the tiles onto the ridges and protecting the house from artificial and natural disasters, as talismans. Traditional Chinese buildings always have elaborate *louhua* (ornamental engravings) on the windows and doors. Sculptured bricks and colored drawings are also integral parts of the building facade.

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LITERATURE

China has a wealth of literary collections, “from the four-syllable epigram to the hundred-chapter novel and the hundred-volume history. In between lie folk ballads and metaphysical odes, epitaphs and commemorations of the siting [sic] of pavilions, love lyrics and shamanistic hymns, travel diaries and sermons, memorials to the emperor and letters to friends” (Birch 1967).

Shijing (Book of Songs), a collection of 305 lyrics created 3,000 years ago, is the first Chinese anthology of poetry. Qu Yuan (339 B.C.–277 B.C.) wrote the first full-length poem, *Lisao (The Lament)*. The *Yuefu* (Royal Conservatory) of the Eastern Han dynasty (A.D. 25–220) collected and preserved a great number of lyrics created largely by common people in the vernacular. About 50,000 poems written by over 2,200 poets during the Tang dynasty (A.D. 618–906) have survived. Li Bai (Li Po), Du Fu, and Bai Juyi were the greatest of the Tang poets. A new type of poetry called *ci* thrived during the Song era (960–1279). Su Shi, Xin Qiji, and Li Qingzhao were among the most famous *ci* poets.

The tradition of prose dates back to the Spring and Autumn Period (770 B.C.–476 B.C.), when various schools of thought flourished. Representative works are *The Analects*, a collection of Confucius’s sayings, and *Tao Te Ching (The Book of Tao)*. Legendary stories began to develop in the Tang dynasty, paving the way for full-blown fiction in the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1645–1911) dynasties. Outstanding among the Ming-Qing novels are the four great classics: *Shuihu zhuan (Water Margin)*, *Sanguo yanyi (Romance of Three Kingdoms)*, *Xi you ji (Journey to the West, known to Westerners as Monkey King)*, and *Honglou meng (The Dream of the Red Mansion)*.

Water Margin (or *Outlaws of the Marsh*) is a saga of 108 rebel heroes. Wu Song, in particular, has become a household name in China due to his single-handed fight with a man-eating tiger and his vengeance against his adulterous sister-in-law, who had killed his brother. *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* is based on the history of the three rival states at the end of the Han dynasty (A.D. 220–265). The blood brothers Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei, founders of the state of Shu, have set an example of true fraternity. Their chief of staff, Zhuge Liang, has become a synonym for wisdom and devotion. Today, people all over the country still worship Guan Yu and Zhuge Liang as gods. *The Dream of the Red Mansion* depicts over 400 named characters from all walks of life. Using allegory, it tells of a tragic platonic love between two rebellious youths: the boy Baoyu, the family heir, and the girl Daiyu, his orphaned cousin. As a backdrop, the novel documents the rise and fall of the traditional families that raised and ruined these innocent young people.

Journey to the West is the most popular of the four classics. The fantasy is based on the true story of a monk in the Tang dynasty, who went to India to seek copies of original Buddhist scriptures. Bringing them back to China, he translated them into Chinese and helped spread the religion. *Journey to the West* is an allegorical account of the monk’s adventures, set in a land of fantasy full of demons and monsters threatening his and mission. Every step of the way, the monk’s disciple, Monkey King, led three fellow disciples in subduing their adversaries and helped the monk come closer to the holy destination. Born from a rock, the Monkey King had learned magic tricks and martial arts from a Taoist. He could transform himself into seventy-two images and could travel 108,000 *li* at a single somersault. The story is packed with action and adventures that fascinate both children and adults. Monkey King is as well known to the Chinese as Mickey Mouse is to Americans. Readers of this book will find two of the best-known monkey

escapades, “Monkey King Strikes the White-bone Demon Three Times” and “Monkey King and the Iron Fan Princess.”

The Chinese have a long tradition of documenting their history. The most famous Chinese historian, Sima Qian, compiled the first official history of China, *Shiji* (*Historical Records*), which covers from the prehistoric *Huangdi* (Yellow Emperor) to his own time (135 B.C.–86 B.C.). Sima Qian set an example for later historians.

In modern China, literary creation is often tied closely to political and social upheavals, producing such prominent writers as Lin Yutang, renowned for his *Wuguo yu wumin* (*We Chinese*); Ba Jin, known for his trilogy *Jia* (*Family*), *Chun* (*Spring*), and *Qiu* (*Fall*); Lao She, famous for his *Si shi tong tang* (*Four Generations Under One Roof*); Mao Dun, celebrated for his *Ziye* (*Midnight*); and Lu Xun, noted for his pungent essays, such as *Nahan* (*A Call for Help*). With the establishment of New China in 1949, a number of novels depicting the Anti-Japanese War and the Civil Wars were produced, including *Dihou wugongdui* (*Armed Working Team Behind the Enemy Line*), *Pingyuan qiangsheng* (*Gun Shots on the Plain*), *Yehuo chunfeng dou gucheng* (*Fight in an Ancient Town Amidst Wild Fire and Spring Wind*), and *Hongyan* (*Red Crag*).

Well-known contemporary poets include He Jingzhi, Zang Kejia, Ai Qing, and Bei Dao. Yu Qiuyu, Wei Minglun, and Yu Guangzhong (Taiwan) are among the most favored prose writers. The martial arts novels of Jin Yong (Hong Kong), such as *Tianlongbabu* (*Eight Heavenly Gods*), and the love stories of Qiong Yao (Taiwan), such as *Huanzhu gege* (*The Defiant Fake Princess*), have been adapted into hit movies and TV series.

The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976)—an anarchic campaign initiated by Mao Zedong to rid the country of anything he deemed capitalist and bourgeois—effectively ended almost all genuine literary creations on the mainland of China. Only a few writings survived, because of their political correctness, such as Hao Ran’s *Jinguang dadao* (*The Golden Path*), an account of a struggle between socialist farmers and capitalist landowners, and Yao Xueyin’s historical novel *Li Zicheng*, a saga of a peasant rebel leader. Immediately after the Cultural Revolution ended, a *shanghen wenxue* (Scar Literature) movement appeared, led by Liu Xinwu and Zhang Kangkang; it was a movement of literary creation that recalled and castigated the brutality of the catastrophic revolution.

In the past three decades, however, Chinese literature has thrived as the country has experienced tremendous changes due to its economic reform and opening to the outside world. At the same time, it has had to meet the challenge of preserving its own tradition while embracing mushrooming popular cultures, both indigenous and foreign.

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STORYTELLING IN CHINA

There is no doubt that storytelling in China, as elsewhere, is as old as its civilization. People have been telling stories for millennia to educate and entertain. Chinese parents and grandparents have been using storytelling to make their children and grandchildren aware of the importance of academic advancement and filial piety (Pearson and Rao 2003, 131–146). A Qing author, Pu Songling (1640–1715), collected 431 stories about ghosts, phantoms, spirits, and fairies from storytellers on the roadside and in teahouses and compiled *Liaozhai zhiyi* (*Strange Tales from the Make-do Studio*).

The profession of storytelling, known as *shuochang* (speak and sing), did not appear until the Tang (A.D. 618–906) and Song (960–1275) periods. During the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), forms of *shuochang* diversified, and the term *quyi* (literally, art of melodies), a generic term for all forms of storytelling, came to encompass them. *Quyi* fell into four major categories: *xiangsheng* (comic dialogues), *kuaiban* (rapid clappers) and *kuaishu* (Shandong clappers), *guqu* (drum storytelling), and *pingshu* (storytelling with commentary). Each had a great number of variants. A 1982 survey showed that there were 341 of them throughout the country (Børdahl 1999).

Storytelling in China has evolved over centuries, and it lives on to this day in many forms. *Quyi* storytelling is characteristic of minimal theatrical performance. The Han Chinese generally are reserved and sophisticated and therefore can be difficult to amuse. To entertain them, storytellers cannot rely on witty jokes alone. They have to be expert in facial expressions and ventriloquism or mimicking sounds and voices. This is particularly true for the *pingshu* storyteller, who has no device other than his or her mouth to galvanize the audience. Of the contemporary *pingshu* storytellers, Yuan Kuocheng, Shan Tianfang, Liu Jinglin, and Liu Lanfang are the most prominent.

Famous *xiangsheng* performers of the older generation include Hou Baolin, Guo Qiru, Guo Quanbao, Ma Sanli, and Yu Baolin, as well as Chang Baohua, Chang Baoting, Gao Yingpei, Li Jindou, Fan Zhenyu, Tang Jiezhong, and Ma Ji. Among the younger generation are Jiang Kun, Feng Gong, Shi Shengjie, Niu Qun, Qi Zhi, and Da Bing.

Some regional variants of *quyi* are still popular today: *erren zhuan* (two-performer storytelling with singing and dancing) in Northeast China and Yangzhou *pingtan* (storytelling accompanied with comments and plucking instruments) in South China. Zhao Benshan, Gao Xiumin, Fan Wei, and Pan Changjiang are some of the best known *erren zhuan* performers; they also have made a name initiating a new form of entertainment known as *xiaopin* (comic skits), along with Chen Peisi, Gong Hanlin, and many others. There are at present five prominent Yangzhou *pingtan* performers: Wang Xiatang, Li Xintang, Fei Zhengliang, Hui Zhaolong, and Dai Buzhang.

Quyi did not enjoy a status equal to the various Chinese operas and therefore has had a hard time getting into formal venues like theaters. The *shuchang* (place of storytelling), often a temporary space in a market or a teahouse, used to be the only place where *quyi* could be performed. The irony today is that theaters are open to *quyi*, but many types of *quyi* are close to extinction, losing their battle with such media as movies, TV shows, concerts, cartoons, and computer and video games. At present, only *xiangsheng* and *pingshu* are still holding their ground, but their audiences are getting increasingly older.

Traditional storytelling is trying its best to survive by making use of multimedia technology. Television has brought *xiangsheng* and *xiaopin* to millions of households; a record

company in Guangdong has produced a video CD series with a collection of about 200 Chinese tales. In fact, media storytelling has a longer history. Chinese people growing up in the 1960 and 1970s will never forget the name of Sun Jingxiu, the beloved radio storyteller for children, and those growing up in the 1980s cherish his successor, Ju Ping, who was one of the first to tell stories on television.

Particular forms of *quyi* may decline and disappear, but storytelling among the people continues. It takes place at school and at home every day. There are even communities where almost everyone, man and woman, old and young, is a good storyteller. The Geng Village of Gaocheng City, Hebei Province—300 miles from Beijing—has earned national fame for its storytelling tradition. A villager, Jin Zhengxin, is able to tell more than 500 tales. Fifty-five of his fellow villagers can each tell at least a hundred. Six of the tales in this book were collected from two of the Geng Village storytellers.

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