

## **Singing Dead Tales to Life: Rhetorical Strategies in Shandong Fast Tales**

**Eric Shepherd**

### **Introduction**

Shandong *kuaishu*, literally “fast tales,” is a northern Chinese narrative performance<sup>1</sup> tradition with more than one hundred years of documented history. This tradition involves a single performer who integrates rhymed and rhythmic narration, character dialogue, various dramatic techniques, rhythmic musical accompaniment, humor, and exaggeration to bring to life stories and characters in a form of popular entertainment. Performers describe the genre as a folk art that combines the artistic telling of stories with rhyme and rhythm. Fast tales are performed throughout northern and central China for a wide range of audiences and occasions. Performers appear on and off proscenium stages, on television, radio, and the Internet as well as during rural bazaars, as part of holiday variety shows, and for celebratory banquets (Shepherd 2005). Story scripts, or *jiaoben*, are also regularly appreciated as a form of popular literature in various written and electronic formats.

Enjoyed by young and old speakers of northern Mandarin dialects, Shandong fast tales are indigenous to and often representative of Shandong Province, a coastal region of northeastern China known also as the home of Confucius and the cradle of traditional Chinese thought. Shandong, literally “east (of) mountains,”<sup>2</sup> refers to a geographic, political, and cultural region located on the eastern edge of the north China plain and extending outward to form a peninsula that appears on the map to point directly at the center of the Korean Peninsula. It is bordered to the north by Hebei Province, to the west by Henan Province, and to the south by Jiangsu Province. Jinan, situated in the heart of Shandong’s agricultural west, is the provincial political capital, while Qingdao, located on the southeast coast, is the provincial economic center. Covering an area of more than 156,000 square kilometers (slightly smaller than the state of

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper I use an idea of performance similar to the one used by proponents of performance theory such as Richard Bauman (1977). A performance is a staged display of artistic skill to be shared with an audience that is informed by special communicative registers and a shared aesthetic code and that derives enjoyment from the performance. According to Bauman, performance involves a transformation of the basic referential uses of language, which sets up an interpretive frame that situates all behavior and speech by and for the participants.

<sup>2</sup> The name originates from the area’s location east of the Xiao, Hua, or Taihang mountains, although there is historical disagreement about which mountains were the original referent.

Florida), the Shandong peninsula is made up of mostly flat plains bounded on the north by the Bohai Gulf and to the east and south by the Yellow Sea.

In pre-imperial China (roughly sixth century to third century BCE), Shandong was divided into two states: Qi in the north and east and Lu in the south and west. The area occupied by the State of Lu was the home of Confucius and his disciple Mencius, two of China's most influential philosophers, as well as Sunzi, the military strategist who wrote *The Art of War*. The State of Qi was home to renowned strategist Jiang Ziya and the philosopher Xunzi, whose followers became influential legalists. Contemporary regional differences within Shandong can be traced to the culture of these two kingdoms of the Warring States period, and the ideas of these iconic figures have deeply influenced Chinese culture.

Shandong modern history was turbulent and marked by repeated foreign occupation and war. Germany occupied the region from 1887 to 1914, extracting natural resources, building modern infrastructure such as railroads and wharves, and officially making Shandong a colonial territory from 1898 to 1914. Following the Germans, Britain colonized the Shandong port city of Weihai, located on the eastern tip of the peninsula, and in November of 1914, the Japanese replaced the Germans as the colonial occupants of the area. The post-World War I handover led to Japanese-style military rule in much of Shandong that lasted until 1922, when the China North Sea Government finally gained administrative control over Shandong. In 1938 Japan once again forcibly occupied the region, turning the province into a key strategic location in their military operations in northern China during World War II. At the end of World War II, the Nationalists—aided by the US military—and the Communists struggled to gain control of the area. Qingdao was finally “liberated” from Nationalist (and American imperialist) occupation in 1949.

Since economic reforms began in the area in 1981, Shandong has been a major source of the natural resources that have driven China's rapid development. Today, Shandong is the second largest provincial economy in China and is ranked at or near the top in terms of the production of cotton, wheat, gold, diamonds, and petroleum. Shandong is also known for its seafood, textile production, and large brand-name conglomerates such as Haier (electronics and home appliances), Tsing-*tao* beer, Aucama (electronics), Hisense (electronics), and Double Star (shoes). With more than 92,000,000 people, Shandong has the second largest population among all of China's provinces, a figure that is larger than the population of several European nations, including Germany, France, and Italy. Over ninety-nine percent of the people living in Shandong are members of the Han ethnic group.

This article explores the tradition of Shandong fast tales as a performance art with particular emphasis on the rhetorical strategies used by performers to bring their tales to life in various performance contexts. It starts with a survey of the genre of Shandong fast tales intended to serve as background and contextual information for the discussion of rhetorical strategies used in performance that follows in the second half of the paper. The beginning section is intended to fill a void in English language materials about this relatively unexplored northern Chinese

storytelling tradition.<sup>3</sup> The focus of the article then shifts to a discussion of rhetorical and narrative devices used by fast tale performers to bring their tales to life. The research presented in this section is based on interviews with performers and researchers conducted between 2000 and 2010, participant observation in live performance contexts over the same period, and extensive participatory experience as a fast tale performer in Shandong between 2004 and the summer of 2010.

## Rural Origins

Fast tales are one form of Chinese narrative and performed art, known as *quyi*,<sup>4</sup> regularly performed in northern and central China on stage in theaters, in city squares, on military posts, in teahouses, in banquet rooms in restaurants, and in storytelling houses as well as for holiday and cultural events. Emic accounts of fast tale origins indicate the tradition began as a form of storytelling among peasant farmers in rural areas of western Shandong near the city of Linqing toward the end of the Ming Dynasty (Liu 2001).<sup>5</sup> This early rural precursor to modern fast tales was known colloquially as *chang da gezi* (singing the big guy) and *shuo wu lao er* (telling second brother Wu). These labels were used because traditional stories revolved around the cultural hero Wu Song who was the younger of two male siblings and a man of physically imposing stature.

*Shuo wu lao er* was a form of spontaneous storytelling shared among bored peasant farmers that involved telling stories to a beat kept with metal ploughshares. The beat, pitch, and

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<sup>3</sup> Extensive research has been published on Shandong fast tales in Chinese, most notably by Liu Hongbin et al. (1959), Gao Yuanjun (1960, 1980, and 1987), Zhang Jun (1981), Gao Yuanjun et al. (1982), Wang Jingshou (1985), Liu Sichang and Wang Jingshou (1989), and Liu Hongbin (2001). Many researchers have published on Chinese storytelling traditions in English, including Susan Blader (1977), Catherine Stevens (1975), Mark Bender (1996, 1998, 1999a, 1999b, 2003a, and 2003b), Vibeke Børdahl (1991, 1993, 1995a, 1995b, 1996, 1997, 1999a, 1999b, 2000, and 2003), and Børdahl and Jette Ross (2002). However, few have dealt with the fast tale tradition.

<sup>4</sup> Independently, *qu* means “melody,” while *yi* is used to refer to either “arts” or “skills.” Since 1949, this combination has been used by Chinese researchers to refer to a range of folk performance arts that include ballad singing, plain storytelling, prosimetric storytelling, comedic dialogues, rhythmic storytelling, lyrical rhymes, comedic skits, and genres that combine elements of some or all of these traditions. *Quyi* genres vary widely in origins, form, style, language, content, aesthetic appeal, patronage, performance context, and process (Bender 2003a:3). Each tradition provides a different lens through which to understand the values and beliefs of a specific locale since each reflects a unique local culture, way of life, mode of thought, worldview, and language. Because of their local nature, *quyi* forms are intimately intertwined with local identities. *Quyi* genres also take on different shapes in different places (Von Sydow 1999:138). The manner in which they are performed and appreciated varies greatly from locale to locale. *Quyi* has been translated into English variously as “minor dramatic art” (Hrdlicka 1957:83), “the art of melodies” (Børdahl 1996:2 and Bender 2003a:3), “storytelling (in a broad sense)” (Børdahl 1999a:2), “folk art forms including ballad singing, storytelling, comic dialogues, and the like” (OCD 1999), and “performed narrative arts” (Bender 2003a:3).

<sup>5</sup> Emic here refers to the tales performers share about the origins of their art rather than accounts by scholars or researchers, although academic and emic discourses about fast tales certainly overlap and interact. Three periods of time are commonly cited by different groups of performers and researchers as the beginning of fast tales. They include the reign of the Ming Wan Li emperor (1573-1620), the year 1826, and the reign of the Qing Xianfeng emperor (1851-61). Most scholars believe these to be three early appearances in the written record of an older, well-developed rural tradition (Liu 2001).

rhythm-keeping device were later picked up and refined by itinerant performers who reportedly sang for subsistence in and around markets, rural bazaars, temple fairs, and wharves along the Grand Canal. As the genre spread and developed, rhythm-keeping devices were added and abandoned, with clay roofing tiles and bamboo castanets both serving as primary instruments for periods of time. Performance techniques were further refined, repertoires were expanded, and representative master performers began to appear by the early years of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup>

As the *shuo wu lao er* tradition evolved, performers borrowed from several sister traditions that were already popular in the Shandong region, in particular, *dagu* (big drum ballads), from which the pitch, rhyme scheme, and story repertoire were taken. Although held and played in a slightly different manner than in drum ballad performances, the primary rhythm-keeping device, two half-moon-shaped brass plates called the *ban*<sup>7</sup> were borrowed from the drum ballad tradition and came into widespread use by fast tale performers by the 1920s.



*Yuanyangban*, the primary brass rhythm-keeping device used in Shandong fast tales. Photo: Eric Shepherd.

Early performance venues were connected with activities at rural temple fairs, rural bazaars, and marketplaces. Other early performances were associated with festivals, fairs, and holiday events. By the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) and early years of the Republic (1920s), performers had migrated into urban areas where they performed in the streets, at makeshift performance sites in squares and marketplaces, in out-of-town associations called *huiguan*, and in theaters, taverns, teahouses, and storytelling halls called *shuchang* (Liu 2001).

In 1949 the *shuo wu lao er* tradition was given the name Shandong *kuai shu* (fast tales) by Gao Yuanjun, the most widely known fast tale performer at the time. While performing with cultural workers in Shanghai, Gao selected this “official” name for the genre when they recorded his performance of *Lu Da Disposes of the Tyrant*, a tale that did not revolve around the hero Wu Song. He attempted to create a name that reflected more about the genre than just the single protagonist Wu Song. He chose *Shandong kuai shu* to reflect the genre’s local *Shandong* nature (the dialect spoken), its storytelling format (*shu*), and its rhythmic nature (*kuai*) (Liu 2001). According to Gao et al. (1982:4), *kuai* (fast) refers to smooth, unbroken language that flows to a

<sup>6</sup> Gao 1980; Gao et al. 1982; Liu 2001; Zhang 1981; and Wang 1985 and 1994.

<sup>7</sup> The standard rhythm-keeping device is known as the *yuanyangban* (Mandarin plates) in performer jargon because the two unconnected 4 x 1.25-inch half-moon-shaped pieces of brass are both needed to produce the appropriate sound and beat. As Mandarin ducks are viewed in Chinese culture, they are an inseparable pair. In 2010 a *ban* could be obtained for 140 *yuan* or just over twenty dollars.

rhythm rather than the rate of speech, while *shu* (book) means “story.”<sup>8</sup> As Gao described them at the time, fast tales are stories that involve characters and events.

Fast tales continued to be a popular form of local entertainment in Shandong until after World War II. After China entered the War to Resist America and Aid Korea in October of 1950, Gao Yuanjun (1916-93) became a performer for the People’s Liberation Army General Political Department *Quyí* Corps, where he utilized the institutional and political power afforded by the Political Department to develop a large corps of fast tale performers in the military. Gao’s high-profile military status also afforded him the opportunity to travel with an initial troupe of military performers to entertain the troops on the front lines in Korea.

By the 1930s the Communist Party had begun viewing traditional art forms such as *quyí* as ideally efficient means to get their socialist message to the illiterate masses across China, so model performers were trained to tell politically correct new tales in a wide range of traditional genres (Hung 1993). Gao, who was well-liked by audiences and had gained a large following, became the model performer for Shandong fast tales. While in Korea, he gained widespread notoriety and popularity (beyond merely Shandong) by performing tales from the traditional fast tale repertoire as well as *new* politically correct tales about war and military life.

From the early 1950s through his death in 1993, Gao continued to exert his influence in promoting fast tales nationally as well as in developing a cadre of young performers. Gao conducted a series of fast tale study classes in the military and through local and national government culture bureaus. He is said to have trained more than two hundred performers. These military performers were assigned to posts all over China, a pattern that spread fast tales to places as far as Xinjiang in the west, Heilongjiang in the north, and Hangzhou in the south, creating small fast tale pockets as they took on their own students and trained apprentices. It was through this process that fast tales were transformed from a local form of entertainment into a national phenomenon and that Gao’s name became synonymous with the art form.

## Audiences

Audience composition at contemporary fast tale performances varies depending on location and type of event. When fast tale performances are subcomponents of variety shows conducted for holiday and cultural events, audiences are large and diverse. For example, at one rural bazaar in May 2005, 30,000 people crammed into an outdoor compound in Penglai, Shandong to see a fourteen-act variety show that included Wu Yanguo’s performance of the two modern tales *Schlocky* and *Playing Poker*. For another May holiday performance just days later, 35,000 people filled an open field in Jimo, Shandong to see a variety show that included two fast tale performers. For these large-scale performances, audiences are made up of people from all

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<sup>8</sup> In the *Broad Records of Heavenly Peace* (*taiping guangji*) written during the Sui Dynasty (581-618) the character *hua*—now meaning “speech”—was used to refer to stories or tales. As time passed the character *shu*—now “book”—came to refer to long, orally narrated tales, and *shuo shu ren*, literally “tell tale person,” was used to refer to professional tellers of tales. See among others Liu 1987:87, Li and Yu 1993:58, and Børdhal 1999b and Børdhal and Ross 2002.

walks of life and all social strata. The holiday variety show is one of the most common contemporary settings in which fast tales can be found.

There are also performances that involve only fast tales. These often take place at smaller venues such as theaters, teahouses, out-of-town association compounds, and storytelling houses. In the city of Qingdao, the center of most fast tale activity is the *Jiangning hui guan* (out-of-town association compound).<sup>9</sup> The outdoor compound is located in a famous tourist district known as Woodcutter's Alley (*pichaiyuan*). *Jiangning huiguan* is simultaneously a restaurant, theater, tourist attraction, and site for storytelling aficionados. Daily fast tale performances take place on one of the two small stages found in the compound. Performances are scheduled for weekday afternoons between two and four o'clock, weekday evenings between six and eight o'clock, and weekends during the same two time blocks.

Audiences for weekday afternoon performances are typically the smallest, with between twenty and fifty people being the norm. Attendees are typically older local men who come to socialize and take in traditional performances. There is no charge for the performance itself, but to secure a seat audience members must order something from the menu, so many of these daytime audience members pay the five-*yuan* cost of a cup of tea, the water for which can be refilled repeatedly. They sip tea, smoke, fan themselves, and sometimes doze off during the performances.

On weekday evenings, the audience is usually comprised of tourists of all ages and from all areas of China. These performances are typically variety shows that include fast tales, since it is assumed that tourists may not completely understand local performance genres. The size of these evening performance



Master fast tale performer Wu Yanguo performs *Cimao* (*Schlocky*) before an audience of 30,000 people in Penglai, Shandong, May 2005. Video: Eric Shepherd.

[http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/26i/shepherd#myGallery-picture\(2\)](http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/26i/shepherd#myGallery-picture(2))



Master fast tale performer Wu Yanguo performs *Da puke* (*Playing Poker*) during a holiday variety show in Dongying, Shandong, May 2005. Video: Lori Shepherd.

[http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/26i/shepherd#myGallery-picture\(3\)](http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/26i/shepherd#myGallery-picture(3))

<sup>9</sup> *Jiangning huiguan* is the primary performance venue in Qingdao. In Jinan, an area in western Shandong where a large number of fast tale performers are concentrated, the Wu Song Theater is a locale with daily fast tale performances. The performances at Wu Song Theater are always part of a variety show that includes a range of Shandong *quyi* genres such as Shandong big drum ballads, Shandong zither tales, crosstalk, and fast clapper tales.



Afternoon crowd at *Jiangning huiguan*, July 2010. Photo: Eric Shepherd.



The audience on a weekday evening at *Jiangning huiguan*, July 2010. Photo: Eric Shepherd.



The audience at a weekend evening performance at *Jiangning huiguan*, July 17, 2010. Photo: Eric Shepherd.



Evening performance, *Jiangning huiguan*, July 2, 2009. Photo: Du Minghua.

audiences ranges between fifty and two hundred people who enjoy dinner in the traditional performance setting. Dinner is the focus of activity on these occasions, so fast tale performances sometimes fade into the background of the larger event, especially when young or inexperienced performers are on the bill. Thus it is not uncommon to hear the sounds of toasting and loud laughing mixed in with the sounds of the performance.

Friday and Saturday evening performances and weekend afternoon performances in the summer months attract the largest crowds, with as many as three hundred people attending special events and occasions that involve well-known performers. At these large events, private banquet rooms that line the second floor of the courtyard-style compound are filled with customers. The rooms are always booked well in advance and are all equipped with windows that open up to the stage area and closed circuit television on which to view the performances. Audience members begin filling the tables in the open courtyard area in front of the main stage about thirty minutes prior to the first act. Latecomers line the second floor balconies or stand on their toes in the area beyond the tables and in the doorways. Some of the most famous Qingdao fast tale performers refuse invitations to perform at *Jiangning huiguan* unless it is for one of these weekend evening performances.

## Tale Length

In terms of length, fast tales range from the longest *dashu* (great tales), which are collections of smaller related episodic tales, to the shortest *shumao* (story hats), which can be as short as a few lines. Each performer's repertoire is unique. Some specialize in a single story. Some specialize in shorter tales, while others specialize in longer ones. Three stories, called *lao san duan* (three old tales), are basic to most performers' repertoires: *Wu Song Fights the Tiger*, *East Mountain Temple*, and *Lu Da Disposes of the Tyrant*. The two former stories are episodes from *The Tale of Wu Song*.

The fifteen-*huimu* (-episode) *Tale of Wu Song* is the most famous example of a great tale and serves as the core of the traditional fast tale repertoire. Each *huimu* is comprised of one to four episodic *duanzi* (segments), a term now used colloquially to refer to any single story. Fast tales made up of two or more episodes are called "middle length great tales," while single episode fast tales are called *dan duan* (single segments) because they are independent stories that are not part of a larger cycle. *Dan duan* typically are three to four hundred lines in length and last around fifteen minutes when performed. Famous examples of *dan duan* include *Lu Da Disposes of the Tyrant*, *Li Kui Steals Fish*, and *Creating a Big Ruckus at the Ma Family Store*.

Fast tales can be further divided into small, medium, and large segments.<sup>10</sup> Large segments range from one hundred to four hundred lines and last up to thirty minutes in performance. The stories *Wu Song Fights the Tiger* and *East Mountain Temple* are examples of big segments.<sup>11</sup> Medium segments are around one hundred lines in length and range from four to seven minutes in performance. *The Beat Patrolman* is one famous example. It is small segments, however, that comprise the bulk of the fast tale repertoire outside of *The Tale of Wu Song*. Examples of small segments included here are *Auntie Wee*, *Fear*, *Knucklehead Wants a Tot*, and *An Old Man Pulling a Lamb*. Performances of small segments typically last less than seven minutes.

Since the mid-1990s, fast tale performances have become increasingly shorter in order to adapt to modern contexts and audiences. Most performances are now limited to small segments or particularly famous excerpts of larger tales that last five to seven minutes because they are often part of a larger program of entertainment.

## Repertoire

Roughly speaking, fast tales can be divided into two broad categories. Traditional tales were composed prior to the Japanese invasion in the 1930s, while modern tales were composed after the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. Some storylines, such as those in *The Tale of*

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<sup>10</sup> Vibeke Børdahl (1996:25) notes similar divisions and terminology in the Yangzhou storytelling tradition. Mark Bender (2003a) has found them in the Suzhou *tanci* tradition.

<sup>11</sup> Longer stories can be further divided at natural break points. Performers occasionally extract short segments that they are particularly adept at in order to perform in situations in which they have time constraints. This is called *zhaichang* (extracted singing).

*Wu Song* and *Lu Da Disposes of the Tyrant*, have been drawn from the larger cultural and literary traditions. These fast tales are culturally shared stories whose authorship is generally assumed to be collective (Finnegan 1977). Others have been adapted from folk songs and stories, such as Wu Yanguo's tale *The Legend of Split Rock Mouth*, which was converted to the fast tale format from a written version of a local Qingdao folk story about the origins of the place named Split Rock Mouth.

Themes of traditional small segments revolve around cultural scripts, such as the traditional calendar, the major events of a typical person's life, or commonly occurring social events. Traditional small segments are characterized by humorous twists on cultural values such as social or family hierarchy, filial piety, or carefully managing interpersonal relationships during daily life. Traditional big segments are episodic in nature and deal with the exploits of individual cultural heroes such as Wu Song and Lu Da. Themes include social injustice, battles between good and evil, and defeating corrupt officials. These tales always involve a hero, described as a *hao han* (real man), who is starkly contrasted with one or more evil protagonists—generally corrupt government officials or members of the rich gentry class.<sup>12</sup>

*Hao han*, who generally have been forced to the fringe of society by some gross injustice, always encounter one or more weaker members of society who are bullied or oppressed by an evil antagonist. What makes the heroes *hao han*, in addition to their considerable fighting skills (either in martial arts or with various traditional weapons) and ability to consume prodigious amounts of food and wine, is that they always fight to defend the downtrodden from the abuse of societal bullies. When *hao han* encounter an unjust situation, they are moved by their strong will and sense of justice to fight for the weak and topple evil. This Robin Hood-esque characteristic is described in the tales themselves as *lu da bu ping* (fighting inequality along the road) and *hao han* are said to *ai da bao bu ping* (like fighting to right inequality).

One type of traditional tale, called *shumao* (story hats), are not narratives so much as collections of cultural information organized around familiar scripts touched up with a few humorous twists and wordplay. Story hats are short but lively numbers intended to amuse and catch the interest of audiences. Many are simply tongue-twisters that performers learn in their initial stages of training and are used to open a performance. They have the dual purposes of allowing the audience to settle in and enabling the performer to warm up before the *zhengshu* (main tale). Thus, many story hats last less than two minutes when performed and merely involve third person description in the narrator role and register. The fast tale *Fear* is an example of a traditional story hat. There are no characters or action, only a series of cultural givens.

*Fear*<sup>13</sup>

- 1        Eyes fear blindness, ears fear deafness,  
           Noses only fear clogging up.  
           Chicks only fear weasels, mice fear cats,

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<sup>12</sup> Traditional tales were deemed to have feudal ideas during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) and thus were banned from public performances. They quickly returned to popularity after the Reform and Opening Up policies began in the early 1980s.

<sup>13</sup> This textualization is based on the oral tale I learned from master fast tale performer Wu Yanguo during our rehearsal sessions while I was his apprentice in 2004-05.

- Rabbits fear hawks.
- 5     Loafers fear work,  
Farmers just fear no harvest.  
Lazy students fear exams,  
Teachers just fear unfocused students.  
Ice cream men fear cold weather,
- 10    Blistered feet fear jumping rope.  
Toads just fear dry weather,  
Flies and mosquitoes fear being clean.  
Leaky homes just fear big rains,  
Ships at sea fear big storms.
- 15    Driving cars, (we) fear flat tires,  
Riding bikes, (we) just fear hitting muddy ditches.  
Pens just fear running out of ink,  
Books just fear unclear print.  
Liberalism fears discipline,
- 20    Bureaucratism fears rectification.  
Grafters fear audits,  
Selfish people fear public service.  
Reactionaries just fear the P.L.A.,  
Warmongers fear peace.
- 25    Children just fear having no mom and pop,  
Parents just fear unfilial children.  
Watching movies, (we) fear power outages,  
Telling stories, I just fear you won't listen.

Modern tales revolve around a broader range of themes including daily life, politics, society, military life, local customs, human relationships, and encounters with foreigners. The fast tales produced in the 1950s were called *xin* (new) tales as they dealt with aspects of life in modern socialist China rather than traditional heroic themes that had become politically incorrect. The socialist heroes of new tales come from one of the three classes of society valued at the time—workers, peasants, or soldiers—and do not necessarily fight for injustice, although they sometimes do fight against rightists, corrupt officials, and imperialist invaders. Instead, they are models of socialist society who give up their seats on the bus to the elderly, go out of their way to help others in need, and sacrifice themselves for the good of the nation. Those modern stories written prior to Reform and Opening Up (1978) tend to reflect a life rooted in agricultural production, while those written since the early 1990s often reflect aspects of urban life.

Contemporary fast tales can be about nearly any subject. Stories are performed about the people, places, and events in the world of the performers. Story composers draw on every aspect of daily life in Shandong as well as the broader Chinese cultural tradition. They select stock characters and recurrent everyday happenings that a wide range of people can readily identify with and relate to, such as getting an injection, having teeth pulled, visiting relatives, or shaving.

Many modern tales were written by cultural workers tasked with specific political goals in mind as well, and thus have political themes such as attacking the *falungong* movement, promoting reunification with Taiwan, and glorifying the Olympics. Official influence on fast tale writing has also generated a large number of tales that are designed to promote didactic meanings. This type of tale typically ends with a lesson or moral for the listener to ponder. Examples include *A Dialogue between Two Pigs* and *There Was a Young Guy Like This*. In the former, two pigs complain that the food they are being served is not as high in quality as in previous times. The two ultimately vow to eat as much and as well as possible so that they can be canned and exported to a foreign country. The tale is both a metaphor for the waste and extravagance associated with banquets and a critique of the 1980s craze to go abroad.

In the latter tale, a young man sees a pretty girl walking down the street. He goes out of his way to pick her up, telling her that he would do anything for her including devoting his life to her, donating all of his blood to her if she were to have leukemia, and throwing himself in front of an oncoming car to save her. The entire time the young man is trying to seduce the girl, she remains silent. Finally, when the young man thinks he has won her over, she opens her mouth and mumbles unintelligibly as if she were mute. When the young man discovers she is a mute, he immediately changes his tune, hurriedly leaving the scene. As he walks away, the girl sighs in relief and chuckles, “Hm, when dealing with this kind of person, you have to use measures like these.” The narrator then ends the tale by explicitly pointing out the moral of the tale, “I’ve finished telling this little story. For the young women present, it’s worth studying. If you run into this kind of situation, don’t avoid trying this trick.”

In addition to politically correct fast tales, there are fast tales that have been created since 1978 that offer social commentary, include explicit or implicit critiques of the state, deal with *huangse* (yellow, meaning “vulgar” or “pornographic”) themes, or detail alternatives to the official socialist version of reality. Examples include *Going through the Back Door*, *Schlocky*, *The Prowler*, and *The Banquet* (Shepherd 2005). Politically incorrect fast tales have proliferated in cyberspace, where authorship is sometimes difficult to associate with a particular individual.

*Wu Song Fights the Tiger* is the single most widely recognized and performed fast tale episode (Børdahl 2007). It was made the standard measuring stick for performers by Gao Yuanjun. Variations of the story are regularly performed by local dramatic troupes, storytellers, and *quyi* performers around China, while the most famous versions of the tale appear in chapter twenty-three of the novel *The Water Margin* and the introductory section of the novel *Plum in the Golden Vase*. Set in the Song Dynasty, *Fights the Tiger* recounts the legendary tale of Wu Song encountering a man-eating tiger on the slopes of Sun View Ridge, a real location in western Shandong. In the tale Wu Song is on a long journey home to visit his elder brother, Wu Dalang, when he comes across a small inn at the base the ridge. He enters the inn to quench his thirst with fine spirits and fill his stomach with fresh beef.

An excerpt from master fast tale performer Wu Yanguo’s performance of *Wu Song Fights the Tiger* is included here as an example from the traditional repertoire. Italics are used to indicate the narrator register of speech, which is characterized in Chinese by a pitch slightly higher than normal speech, end rhyme, and a distinct rhythm that follows a beat pattern of *dang di ge dang*. The beat is kept with the brass *ban*. Character speech is marked in bold here to highlight shifts from the narrator register into character roles, which are accompanied by changes

in speech register to any of a range of normal speech registers associated with the particular social class, education level, age, and hometown of the characters in the tale (Bender 2003a). Shifts in body position, line of sight, posture, voice, and facial expressions accompany these changes in linguistic register.

*Wu Song Fights the Tiger*<sup>14</sup>

- 1 *Idle talk and aimless chatter, I'll tell you no more,  
I'm here to tell the story of the hero Second Brother Wu.  
That Wu Song went off to Shao Lin Temple to learn martial arts,  
For eight years and more he studied kung fu.*
- 5 *Arriving back home he caused a ruckus at East Mountain Temple,  
Doing a number on the Li family five tyrants.  
Back home he snuffed out the Li's five tigers, those tyrants,  
Feeling that raising the matter with the magistrate would be too troublesome, he fled to the countryside.  
He stayed at the Chai family manor for one full year,*
- 10 *Where he came to know the Shandong hero named Song Jiang.  
He declared Song Jiang his blood uncle,  
Filling the place of his father and mother.  
One day, the hero Wu Song was thinking of home,  
In his heart he could think only of going home to visit family.*
- 15 *He took leave of Song Jiang and Chai Jin, the two heroes,  
And hoisted his bundle on his shoulders.  
In his hand, carrying a staff,  
His steps following the main road, off he hurried.  
Day after day only looking forward to the next,*
- 20 *One day he arrived at the border of Yanggu County.  
Yanggu County oversees Zhangqiu Town,  
To the west of Zhangqiu Town there is a Sun View Ridge.  
Wu Song arriving at Zhangqiu Town,  
Looked to the north of the road sizing things up.*
- 25 *He looked to the north of the road and carefully scanned,  
Shwoosh! The wind blew and the scent of liquor wafted all around.  
On this side was written, "Smell the liquor, you're one-third drunk."  
On that side was written, "Open the keg, the aroma carries for ten li."  
Right in the center hung a large sign,*
- 30 *On it was written, "Three bowls and you can't cross the ridge."  
**"Huh?" Wu Song thought, "What does 'Three bowls and you can't cross the ridge' mean?"**  
**"Oh!" This little wine seller talks brashly,**  
**"I, Wu Song, was born a drinker,***

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<sup>14</sup> The textualization presented here comes from Wu Yanguo's January 2005 performance that took place during a training session in his home in Qingdao.

- 35 **I'll go inside and give their good wine a taste."**  
*The hero Wu Song walked inside,  
 Looking inside, he sized things up.  
 A lone table was placed in the center,  
 Two chairs set to each side.*
- 40 *The hero Wu Song looking to both sides, carefully scanned,  
 Hey! A whole row of nothing but wine kegs!  
 A whole row of nothing but wine kegs!  
 Wu Song placed his bundle on the tabletop,  
 Then leaned his staff against the wall:*
- 45 **"Innkeeper, bring some wine."**  
**"Innkeeper, bring some wine."**  
**"Innkeeper, bring some wine!"**  
*Wu Song three times in a row called without anyone coming to reply,  
 Wu Song three times in a row called without anyone speaking a sound.*
- 50 *At that time of day business was slow,  
 The innkeeper was busy in the rear.  
 There was also a young server who wasn't around,  
 Oooh! His stomach hurting, he had the runs, had went to the outhouse!  
 Wu Song three times in a row called without anyone coming to reply,*
- 55 *He pounded the table and began to cry:*  
**"INNKEEPER! BRIIIIIHING SOME WINE!"**  
*Whoa! Bellowing like this is no problem at all,  
 Oh dear mother! It shook so hard the building began to sway!  
 Huala! Huala! Dirt sifted down from rafters,*
- 60 *The place shook so hard that the sound of those wine-filled kegs—  
 "Weng la!" "Weng le!"—reverberated in his ears.  
 The innkeeper coming out, carefully scanned:*  
**"What was that? Frightening, what's all the ruckus? Is it raining?  
 No, it's not raining. Was it thunder? No, that wasn't thunder.**
- 65 **What was tha...Oh! My mother, how did this brute grow so big?"**  
*He looked at Wu Song, a body so tall it reached seven feet two,  
 His shoulders spread wide, exuding power,  
 His noggin bigger than a rice scoop,  
 Those eyes when he glared resembled cowbells,*
- 70 *His arms seemed like the rafters of a house,  
 His leathery fists when clenched like the head of a steel hammer,  
 The palm of his hand when extended as big as a winnow,  
 His fingers as long as wooden clubs. As long as wooden clubs!*  
**"Hero, my sire, what will you drink? What will you eat?**
- 75 **Command and I'll fulfill it at once."**  
**"What wines do you have? What foods do you have? One by one, from the top say them in detail."**

“Yes, Hero, my sire, you want to drink wine!  
 If you want to drink wine, we have Scholar Red and Grape Dew,  
 80 Then there’s one called Roasted Yellow,  
 Then there’s one called Hit the Floor When You Go Out the Door,  
 Then there’s one called Bottle Penetrating Aroma;  
 If you want to eat food, there’s beef,  
 The taste of our beef is really top-notch;  
 90 If you want to eat something dry, there’s baked dough,  
 If you want to eat something wet, there’s noodles and soup.”  
 “Cut me five kilos of beef! Bring lots of your good wine.”  
 “Yes, sire!”

Following this excerpt, two starkly contrasted characters—the physically imposing and strong-willed Wu Song and a diminutive, easily frightened innkeeper—engage in a humorous exchange in which Wu Song repeatedly demands more wine despite the innkeeper’s warnings of the wine’s potency. After drinking his fill (eighteen bowls in the fast tale version), Wu Song starts on his way to cross the mountain when a second exchange with the innkeeper ensues. The innkeeper repeatedly warns of the ferocious man-eating tiger on the loose on the mountain and urges Wu Song to spend the night in the inn. Wu Song thinks he is being swindled, so he brashly claims that he is not afraid of any tiger before heading up the mountain where he ultimately encounters, battles, and kills the Chinese king of beasts. The actual battle with the tiger comprises less than one-fourth of the fast tale version of the story.

Although it involves only three characters (Wu Song, the innkeeper, and the personified tiger), the fast tale version of this episode embodies the ideal traditional fast tale packed with action, suspense, drinking, and fighting. A strong-willed, filial hero (Wu Song’s elder brother has replaced their deceased father as the head of the family) exhibits tremendous bravery and courage in the face of the evil, violent antagonist (the tiger). In the end, the hero overcomes the evil and saves the helpless common folk from disaster.

### Singing Dead Tales to Life

Singing dead tales to life (*si shu chang huo*) is a phrase used by Shandong fast tale<sup>15</sup> performers to describe the process involved in assembling their full-blown narrative performances (Gao 1980). According to performers, this description reflects the fundamentally dual nature of fast tales as works intended to be appreciated as a form of literature by reading audiences at the same time that they are a form of oral performance poetry to be sung for and appreciated by live audiences (Foley 2002). Textual versions of fast tales are written for publication in journals and magazines and are read as folk literature. More recently, they have begun appearing on Internet bulletin boards and in chat rooms as a form of humorous electronic

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<sup>15</sup> Variants of the idea, including *si shu shuo huo* (narrating dead tales to life) and *jia xi zhen zuo* (fictitious plays made real), circle among performers and people who discuss the tradition.

text.<sup>16</sup> This duality of intended audience and purpose is also reflected in emic jargon about how fast tale performances are created. Performers refer to their written story scripts as *ban chengpin* (half-finished products) that can only *li zai tai shang* (stand up on stage) in performance.

Although the primary mode of transmission for fast tales is mimetic learning—apprentices imitate the performances of their masters and masters pass the tales on “mouth to mouth”—contemporary performers begin with a story script that is most often in written form and is created by someone other than the performer.<sup>17</sup> Modern fast tale writers, many of whom never perform what they write, are called *chuangzuo jia* (creators), and performers, most of whom never write what they perform, are called *biaoyan yishu jia* (performance artists).

In a long-term process of refinement and calibration, performers breathe life into flat story scripts by injecting the tales with feelings and transform them into multimodal performance experiences through what is called *zhuang huo* (packing life) or *zhuang duanzi* (assembling a story).<sup>18</sup> Packing life into a story refers to beginning with a verbal script and gradually enlivening it through a range of rhetorical techniques to create a full-blown performance that comes to life in front of an audience (Bender 2003a). The process of packing life into a story involves engaging in repeated cycles of rehearsal, performance, directed feedback, and reperformance at a higher level. Writing about Siri epic, Lauri Honko (1996) postulated that multiforms breathe life into oral epics. Fast tale performers, on the other hand, argue that although the tales serve as the core of a fast tale performance, it is the performer who injects life into the *si shu* (dead tales—dead because they have no feelings) through a range of techniques.

During a period between the summers of 2004 and 2005, several of the master fast tale performer Wu Yanguo’s inexperienced students performed what experienced performers and aficionados described as *gan shuo* (dry tellings) and *sha chang* (muddleheaded singings) because they merely presented their stories and were following a generic set of rules. Their performances were described as unsuccessful because they had failed to inject feelings into the tales or engage the audience, both of which are viewed as keys to creating the desired mirthful atmosphere associated with fast tale performances. In performer parlance, a “good” performance is *qi fen huo, san fen zuo* (seven parts alive, three parts the work). Thus, for them, performance is the key. They believe that without a good script successful performance is not possible, but without the performer even a great script will not lead to a successful performance (Gao 1980:605-18).

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<sup>16</sup> The most active and specialized website where fast tales appear is the Shandong fast tale net at: <http://www.shandongkuaishu.com/bbs/index.php>

<sup>17</sup> The performance and writing of fast tales are two distinct acts. The verbs *biaoyan*—to perform—and *chuangzuo*—to create—are used to describe the two processes. Performers perform. Creators write. These are two distinct professions, with separate *biaoyan* and *chuangzuo* award categories included in most competitions. A very small number of individuals can and do engage in both. Also, performers regularly make alterations to stories in a process known as “making a story one’s own.”

<sup>18</sup> *Zhuang* can mean “to load (as in a truck),” “to install (as in lights),” “to pretend,” “to act as,” “a costume or uniform,” “to pack,” “to assemble,” or “to decorate,” depending on context.

### Expressive Mode of Presentation

In fast tales, there is a distinction between telling and showing similar to the distinction between diegesis and mimesis in Western narrative scholarship (Bauman 1986:65). Many *quyi* genres, including fast tales, involve both modes of presentation in a single performance. While in character role, the fast tale performer is in the mimetic mode, enacting his version of well-known stock characters and events. In the narrator and performer roles, he is in a diegetic mode, telling the audience about those events. Individual performers and various schools of fast tale performers place differing amounts of emphasis on the two modes of presentation, with some (Gao School) valuing the mimetic aspect of performances more and others (Yang School) affording greater importance to the diegetic aspect.<sup>19</sup> Regardless of emphasis, fast tale performers engage in both modes of presentation, alternating between telling and showing, and shifting between narrating and acting, within any single performance.

This style of dramatic performance is described as *biaoxian* (expressive).<sup>20</sup> The term is used in contrast with the term *zaixian* (representational). In *biaoxian* performances, the artist assumes multiple roles—narrator, performer, and various character roles within the fictional world of the story—in front of the audience, while in *zaixian* performances, as in most theater and movies, characters do not come out of role. *Zaixian* performances involve acting where the emphasis is on the realistic reflection of life in stage space and the realistic portrayal of characters in that space. Thus there is a divide between the performer and his or her audience. In China, *zaixian* arts include most theatrical performances, many local dramatic operas, and movies.

In the *biaoxian* format characteristic of fast tales, performance is understood both as a process of bringing something to life to put it on display for an audience *and* as a process of sharing the performance experience with an audience. There is the expectation for realistic portrayal of characters within the story frame as in *zaixian* performances, but also for conventionalized movements, gestures, facial expressions, and verbal formulas that are symbolic rather than realistic. It is further understood that the performer will create a unique, shared experience by bridging the divide with the audience. Performers accomplish this goal by stepping out of the story to engage the audience as the performer. Fast tale performers create a frame of performance within which the frame of the story exists, and they freely move among these frames without causing confusion for informed audiences because they share an aesthetic code (Bateson 1972, Goffman 1974, Bauman 1977, Babcock 1977, and Turner 1988).

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<sup>19</sup> The Gao School, named for Gao Yuanjun, is the most widely known school of performers. The Yang School takes its name from its most famous performer, Yang Lide, and is known for its strong local flavor. In addition to these two major schools, there is a small school of performers who use a four-leaf bamboo castanet as their rhythm-keeping device. Known as *zhu ban kuai shu* (bamboo clapper fast tales), the Yu School is named for Yu Chuanbin. Because there are so few performers trained in this style of fast tales, many performers do not recognize them as a formal school.

<sup>20</sup> *Biaoxian* literally means “to show,” “to manifest,” or “to externalize.”

After opening a performance by engaging the audience in what is called *dianhua* (padded speech)<sup>21</sup> as the performer in the here and now of the performance context, a fast tale performer keys the story frame with the *ban* and the narrative register (Hymes 1974 and Foley 2002). Once the story frame has been established, the narrator builds a fictional world by invoking a shared aesthetic code. As storyteller he invites the audience to come along on a narrative journey, to “make believe.”<sup>22</sup> Conventionalized language, stylized movements, and stock facial expressions then quickly transport “fluent listeners” into the story realm (Foley 2002). During the journey, the performer then shifts back and forth between diegetic and mimetic modes, depending on the conditions of the performance.

At any point along the narrative journey, the narrator can *tiaochu* (jump out) of the story frame back into the performer role to enhance the performance. With fluid transitions easily recognizable to informed audiences, performers deftly jump out to offer commentary on the action or characters in the story, provide important background information, foreshadow important events, enhance dramatic effects, build or prime jokes, introduce new characters, clarify easily misunderstood language, appeal to the group’s collective sense of humor, draw the audience into the performance, focus audience attention, cover up mistakes, link the tale with the audience or context of performance, or engage the audience in what is described as an *ganqing jiaoliu* (exchange of feelings). Performers then *tiaojin* (jump back into) the story frame to continue the narrative journey. Although there is no limit to the number of times one can jump in or out of the story frame, fast tale performances typically begin and end in the performer role rather than the narrator role.

Fast tale performers spend significant amounts of time rehearsing this ability to *sui jin sui chu* (enter and exit [the story frame] anytime). Gao Yuanjun (1980:632) used the phrase *jia xi zhen zuo, si shu shuo huo* (fictitious plays performed real, dead tales narrated alive) to describe the mix of the mimetic and diegetic modes of performance associated with fast tales as well as to capture the dual nature—as both literature and performance art—of fast tales. The following proverb sums up the expressive goals of an ideal fast tale performance of the tale *Wu Song Fights the Tiger*:

<i>zui shang shuo hu,</i>	the mouth describes a tiger,
<i>yan li you hu,</i>	in the eyes there is a tiger,
<i>ban shang zai hu,</i>	the <i>ban</i> carries a tiger,
<i>kou qiang xiang hu,</i>	the voice and pitch resemble a tiger,
<i>shenti zhuang hu.</i>	the body acts like a tiger.

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<sup>21</sup> Padded speech includes the greeting and explanation of what will be performed, as well as interaction with the audience that takes place between stories in a performance involving multiple independent stories. Although designed to appear spontaneous, padded speech is a carefully crafted and rehearsed component of a performer’s routine that is honed with experience.

<sup>22</sup> Mark Bender (2003a:72-75) has noted that many Chinese storytellers conceptualize the nature of their narratives as movement down a *shulu* (story road).



Gao Hongsheng, son of the renowned performer Gao Yuanjun, in character role at *Jiangning huiguan*, July 2010. Photo: Eric Shepherd.



Liu Liwu in narrator role, *Jiangning huiguan*, July 2010. Photo: Eric Shepherd.



Master fast tale performer Wu Yanguo in narrator role, Qingdao Shanfo Hotel, July 2010. Photo: Eric Shepherd.



Li Hongmin in character role, *Jiangning huiguan*, July 2010. Photo: Eric Shepherd.

### Formulaic Language

In fast tales, although no two performances are the same, performers do not compose the bulk of their tales in performance. End rhyme, set beat patterns, and fixed line length make composition in the performance of fast tales extremely difficult. Rather, performers work from a memorized script and improvise based upon that script as well as in response to the conditions of performance. Even the improvisation based on the set script is planned and rehearsed until it is internalized, so that it follows fast tale conventions but appears to be off the cuff. Thus fast tales fall into Foley's "voiced texts" category

(2002:40-45) of oral poetry, although they sometimes straddle the boundary with the "oral performance" category.

Fast tale performances are packed with different types of formulaic language.<sup>23</sup> For example, because the big segments of *The Tale of Wu Song* were traditionally the main event that followed shorter warm-up acts, most begin with stock phrases that were transitions from the story hats or padded speech that opened performances. They include both *hua xiao shuo, lun gang qiang* (say few words, discuss staunch will) and *xian yan sui yu bu duo jiang, biao yi biao hao han wu er lang* (Idle talk and aimless chatter, I'll tell no more. I'm telling of the hero Second Brother Wu). Such formulaic openers distinguish big from small and traditional from modern segments.

Some traditional big segments were extracted from the middle of the *Tale of Wu Song*. As a result, they begin and end with stock phrases that originally linked internal segments of the larger tale.<sup>24</sup> Examples of opening formulas from big segments in the *Tale of Wu Song* include the following:

- “Picking up the tale from last time, telling the next episode”
- “The last time in the tale (I) told . . . (episode name, ending action, hero involved)”
- “Again, telling of the hero Second Brother Wu”
- “Again, performing the hero Second Brother Wu”
- “Picking up the tale from the last time and telling on”
- “In last time’s story, I performed . . . (episode name or ending action)”
- “Linking up with the last time and telling the next episode”
- “Continuing, (I’ll) again tell of Second Brother Wu”
- “The last time what the story told was . . . (main action)”
- “The last time the story told up to . . . (ending action)”
- “Once again returning to . . . (ending action or location)”
- “Quickly picking up from last time and telling the next episode”

Examples of ending formulas from big segments in the *Tale of Wu Song* include the following:

- “Come next time and (I’ll) again pick up (the story)”
- “In the next time (I) tell the tale, (I’ll) again pick up (the story)”
- “This time Wu Song . . . (main action or episode name). The next time, Wu Song . . . (upcoming main action or episode name)”
- “If you listen on, you’ll know . . . .”
- “The next time . . . (action or episode name)”
- “In the next segment, (I’ll) again pick up (the story)”

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<sup>23</sup> According to Albert Lord (1960:30), a formula is “a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea.” Lord suggests that formulas help audiences to follow along and aid in singers’ rapid composition in performance.

<sup>24</sup> Exceptions include the opening and closing *huimu* of the *Tale of Wu Song*. *East Mountain Temple*, the opening *huimu*, begins by linking *The Tale of Wu Song* to the larger Water Margin story cycle. *Double Dragon Mountain* begins with an announcement that it is the final *huimu* in *The Tale of Wu Song*: “*The Tale of Wu Song* isn’t really long, telling this segment we’ve arrived at the end. The tale at the end is even livelier, what we’re performing is the great battle between Wu Song and the Flowery Monk.”

“Rest a bit and catch (our) breath, (we’ll) again pick up (the story)”

“Again pick up when . . . (action or location name)”

“We’ll again tell (the rest) of the story in the next time”

“If you want to see Wu Song . . . (action), (I’ll) pick up next time”

Fast tale formulas are not limited to openings and closings. The inventory of basic building blocks that writers and performers use to create and perform fast tales includes repetitive words, phrases, characters, scenes, and themes (Foley 2002). At the smallest building block level, there are special fast tale formulas that informed audiences immediately recognize, so they allow the performer to efficiently communicate ideas and emotions. For example, when fast tale characters see something that evokes a particular emotion, performers utilize the set formula “When character name heard/saw this, he/she was as emotion as can be.” Thus, in *Fights the Tiger*, we find, “When the tiger saw this, he was as happy as can be” and “When Wu Song saw this, he was as nervous as can be,” while from *Knucklehead Wants a Tot* there is “When Knucklehead heard this, he was as happy as can be.” In a similar convenient formula for indicating that a character quickly reacts to the unfolding events, performers use “When character name heard/saw this, he/she didn’t delay.”

Some formulas mark fast tale speech as a special register because they are archaisms. An example is found in the structure of the previous happy-as-can-be example. The Chinese follows the pattern “adjective + *de huang*.” This formula is used as an intensifier meaning “extremely” and has the sense of “as \_\_\_\_ as possible.” The structure is frequently used with a wide range of adjectives in fast tales, but is no longer used in colloquial speech in either Mandarin or most Shandong dialects. Typically, the adverb *hen* (very) is used in place of the *de huang* structure, and the adjective follows *hen* rather than coming before the intensifier as in the adjective + *de huang* pattern.

An example of a formula that has shifted over time is the phrase *dao gong qiang* (swords, bows, and weapons). Traditionally, it was used whenever performers were describing groups of people who had armed themselves, regardless of the type of weapons they were using. Most contemporary performers have dropped “bows” from the formula, changing it to “swords and weapons.” When asked about this modification, one young performer laughed as he said, “No one uses bows anymore.” Older performers argue that bows must be retained in order for the story to be realistic.

### **Repetition, Variation, and Memory**

Fast tale performers and audiences alike depend on formulas and formulaic repetition to follow the continuously flowing language of performance as well as to keep up with changing scenes and rapid action. Thus examples of all types of repetition can be found in longer fast tale performances, including instances in which narrative description repeats in slightly altered word form. For example, in the opening segment of *Fights the Tiger*, the following lines are repeated in this rephrased manner:

Doing a number on the Li family five tyrants.  
Back home he snuffed out the Li's five tigers, those tyrants . . . .

Wu Song three times in a row called without anyone coming to reply,  
Wu Song three times in a row called without anyone speaking a sound.

Later in the same tale, during the rapid action of a fight scene, the movements of the two participants, Wu Song and the tiger, are repeated continuously. The structure of the repetition follows the pattern of stating the action in the final line of a couplet before repeating (in a slightly rephrased form) the same action in the first line of the next couplet. When the tiger first charges Wu Song, he dodges to one side with the tiger landing next to him. The action of dodging and landing is repeated in back-to-back lines.

That Wu Song shouted, "How fierce!"  
**As he quickly dodged to one side.**  
**Wu Song dodged to the side,**  
**As the tiger landed in the middle of the ground.**  
**That tiger pounced without landing on Second Brother Wu,**  
And could only think to itself . . . .

This form of rephrased repetition frequently occurs after a character's thoughts and feelings or minor action breaks the overall flow of the action. The final line of narrated action is then repeated in order to return to the main action of the story. The following is an example of this practice:

**That tiger three times was unable to catch Second Brother Wu,**  
Then the tiger got scared.  
"Trouble. Today, I've got a problem!"  
Wu Song's mouth said he wasn't scared,  
But in his heart he was a little worried:  
He raised up his staff about to strike,  
He just forgot he was tall and his arms were long;  
He raised the staff and swung to strike,  
CRACK! The staff hit a tree branch;  
CRACK! It snapped in two,  
The piece left in his hand only a foot long.  
Angered, Wu Song stomped his foot:  
I told you not to get scared and you had to get scared!  
What are you afraid of?  
**That tiger three times in a row was unable to catch Second Brother Wu,**  
It just heard the sound CRACK! ringing in its ears.

This type of repetition helps both performer and audience follow the quickly unfolding action, which is particularly important in a genre like fast tales in which the beat and rhythm do not stop, action and language are constantly flowing from beginning to end, and the rate of delivery is rapid. However, the variation in this type of repetition is sometimes intentionally built into fast tales to aid performer memory rather than being a result of composition in performance.

Fast tale performers must learn the verbal scripts of their tales to the degree that they do not have to consciously think about individual words or lines. They must internalize them in order to perform demanding physical movements, keep the beat with their *ban*, time their facial expressions and role-shifting, and deliver the words in an integrated performance. When internalized to this extent, performers are not thinking about the words as they perform but rather are monitoring the overall performance on a metacognitive level. The individual words of the traditional formulas that make up their verbal scripts cue entire formulas—sometimes hundreds of lines in length—in memory as well as a specific larger portion of the story. Particular variants function like mile markers on the story road. Because a single word at the beginning of a formula triggers the entire formula, the storyteller can easily get lost in his own story if identical words are used to initiate formulas that occur at different points in the story. Thus, in rehearsal, fast tale performers intentionally change the phrases slightly to distinguish the various points in the story that involve similar action.

For example, in the *Tale of Wu Song*, where Wu Song is the protagonist in fifteen lengthy episodes, we find “That Wu Song,” “This Wu Song,” “The hero,” “Wu Song,” “Second Brother Wu,” “The hero Wu Song,” and “hero Second Brother Wu” as subtle variations that begin otherwise identical lines. Each variant refers to the same hero doing the same action but marks a specific point in the larger tale in the performer’s memory. “That Wu Song” cues the larger segment of the story that contains description of the hero’s past. “This Wu Song” marks the portion of the story when he comes across a small inn. “The hero Wu Song” initiates Wu Song’s entry into the inn and the subsequent action.

These subtle alterations to formulaic phrases mark larger formulaic units that are critical resources for the fast tale performer. Foley (2002:111) has described such units as “words,” or “ready-made bytes of traditional language” that are “systematically similar to other instances, but adjusted to harmonize with [their] immediate surroundings.” Foley’s examples of larger “words” include the arming of a hero, assembly, caparisoning a horse, and traveling to a destination. The most frequently occurring larger “word” found throughout *The Tale of Wu Song* is a set description of the hero. In every instance in which any character first sees the hero Wu Song, the following description ensues:

He looked at Wu Song, a body so tall it reached seven feet two,  
 His shoulders spread wide exuding power,  
 His noggin bigger than a rice scoop,  
 Those eyes when he glared resembled cowbells,  
 His arms seemed like the rafters of a house,  
 His leathery fists when clenched like the head of a steel hammer,  
 The palm of his hand when extended as big as a winnow,  
 His fingers as long as wooden clubs.

To illustrate how performers build variation into their performances to aid memory, I offer the following two “words.” Both are lines attributed to the innkeeper. Both “words” begin with the formula “Hero, listen to what I have to say to you.” In between the two words, fast tale performers shift back to the voice, direction, line of sight, and body language of Wu Song to ask a question, so they they are distinct units within the story.

Word 1

“Hero, my sire, listen as I tell you:  
 A ferocious tiger has appeared on Sun View Ridge,  
 This tiger’s the king of beasts.  
 He eats travelers as they pass by,  
 And throws their leftover bones along the roadside.  
 Since this tiger appeared,  
 The common folk of this area have met disaster:  
 He ate until even in threes and fives we don’t dare go out,  
 He ate until in eights or tens we carry swords, bows, and weapons,  
 He ate until those outside the fort all ran inside,  
 He ate until those living in small villages raced for big ones,  
 The Yanggu County magistrate dispatched people to kill the tiger!  
 But many people were all killed by the tiger.  
 Now, in all four directions, notices have been posted,  
 Morning, noon, and afternoon,  
 During these three time slots it’s permitted to cross the ridge.  
 Morning, noon, and afternoon,  
 Within these three time slots you must cross the ridge,  
 Ten people make a team,  
 All must carry swords, bows, and weapons.  
 If you cross the ridge all alone,  
 When you get there, you are certain to be eaten by the tiger!  
 Now, it’s already after three in the afternoon,  
 If you ask me, you should just stay in my inn.”

Word 2

“Hero, my sire, listen as I tell you:  
 In our town, there are more than twenty young lads,  
 By day they sleep until the sun goes down;  
 As soon as it’s dark, they patrol around the outskirts of town,  
 Every one of them carrying swords, bows, and weapons;  
 If they hear a sound outside,  
 The deafening sound of gongs and drums fills the air.  
 The tiger doesn’t dare come into our town,  
 He doesn’t dare kill anyone here.”

During rehearsal performances in Qingdao in April 2005, several of master fast tale performer Wu Yanguo's apprentices were having trouble distinguishing these two "words." They had memorized the complete verbal script but as soon as they began saying, "Hero, my sire, listen as I tell you" in the second "word," the first "word" was cued in memory and they mistakenly repeated the first "word" because the first lines of the two "words" were identical in their written scripts. This type of mistake would be a critical error in live performance for an audience and would be equivalent to getting lost in one's own story. Master Wu instructed them to distinguish the two sections of the story in memory by dropping one syllable from *hao han yeye* (Hero, my sire). Thus, the former began with *hao han ye*, so that the cue in memory was different from the latter occurrence of *hao han yeye* but the meaning remained unchanged. Later, he further distinguished the two words by altering the first line in "word one" by adding "in detail" after "listen as I tell you." None of the young performers got lost on this part of the story road after making these subtle adjustments.

While helping his apprentices enliven other tales, Master Wu frequently injected similar types of variation by using other parts of speech such as verbs and adjectives that begin lines, especially when dealing with longer segments in which similar actions occurred frequently. Slight variations to formulas thus evolve as a conscious memory tool and means for the performers to distinguish between similar "words" that occur at different points in the story. Variation develops in beat patterns with the *ban*, which also cues movements, facial expressions, voices, and verbal formulas for the same reason. Slight changes to the beat pattern are utilized by the performers to mark larger "words" in memory even when the verbal script remains the same.

The large amount of repetition and frequent occurrence of formulas and larger "words" in fast tales should not foster the impression that fast tales are mechanical and boring. Repetition often only becomes repetition when performances are flattened into the textual format (Bender 2003a). That is, many lines that appear to be mere repetition once they are confined to a textual format are actually quite different when they come to life in performance (Honko 2000). For example, when Wu Song enters the inn in *Fights the Tiger*, he calls out four times for the innkeeper to bring him some wine. In most textual versions, all four lines are identical: *jiujia na jiu lai* (Innkeeper, bring some wine). In performance, however, all four are delivered with distinct intonation, volume, rate of speech, facial expressions, and movements that indicate four distinct mood shifts through which the hero Wu Song passes.

At first, Wu Song politely says, "Innkeeper, bring some wine." He is tired from his long journey and is in a good mood, knowing that in a matter of moments he will be able to quench his thirst with fine wine. When there is no response, Wu Song repeats the phrase, "Innkeeper, bring some wine?" This time, Wu Song does so in a questioning tone and at a slightly higher volume. He has a questioning look on his face because he does not understand why no one has responded to his initial request. When there is no response to his second request, Wu Song begins to become perturbed. With an annoyed look on his face, he then repeats the line again, "**Innkeeper, bring some wine!**" This third time, Wu Song shouts his request loudly enough to be heard anywhere in the inn.

The narrator then interjects to explain that the innkeeper is busy in the rear and the server boy has gone out back to the outhouse. This interjection serves to build the suspense as Wu Song's mood shifts from annoyance to outright anger. When there is no response to his third

request, he pounds his fist on the table as he bellows at the top of his lungs, “**INNKEEPER! BRIIIIIIING SOME WINE!**” As Wu Song bellows, the inn’s rafters shake and the innkeeper thinks a thunderstorm has moved into the area. When delivering this line, fast tale performers borrow a Beijing opera technique in drawing the word “bring” out in an almost songlike bellow.

Although these four instances of the line “Innkeeper, bring some wine” are textually identical, they are rendered distinct as they are brought to life in performance through various expressive means, including voice alteration, speech register, volume, facial expressions, line of sight, onomatopoeia, and body movements. While teaching his students this section of the story, Wu Yanguo spent several two-hour classes on just these four sentences, coaching his students to develop the subtle distinctions and to evoke the appropriate mood for each emotional shift. He taught his students that if the lines were the same in performance, they had failed to bring them to life.

A similar example occurs later in the same story when Wu Song asks twice for more wine and the innkeeper asks twice if Wu Song can still drink more. During this exchange in performance, Wu Song’s speech and behavior increasingly show the effects of the alcohol he has consumed and the innkeeper becomes increasingly amazed at the amount his guest can consume. Again, performer intonation, volume, rate and quality of speech (slurred vs. normal speech), facial expressions, and movements distinguish what in textualized form appear to be two identical lines.



Master fast tale performer Wu Yanguo demonstrates a segment from the famous tale *Wu Song Fights the Tiger* during a class for five apprentices in his home in Qingdao, January 2005. Video by Eric Shepherd. [http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/26i/shepherd#myGallery-picture\(12\)](http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/26i/shepherd#myGallery-picture(12))

### Telling *in* Singing

The primary mode of delivery in fast tale performances is known in performer parlance as *shuo jian you chang* (telling *in* singing) because the main register of speech blends normal singing and speaking registers.<sup>25</sup> Although fast tale performers shift among a wide range of speech registers during any single performance, they are known for and associated with this telling in singing register.<sup>26</sup> Such storysinging, described simply as *chang* (singing) by performers, is a form of

<sup>25</sup> This family of *quyi* genres is sometimes described as *yunsongti* (chant-rhyme form) (Wang 1985 and 1994). *Quyi* genres that are spoken in plain speaking registers fall into a *shuo* (telling) group. Genres that are sung—in the sense of singing a song—make up a *chang* (singing) group, and traditions characterized by alternation between periods of spoken and sung narration (known in the West as prosimetrum) make up the *shuochang* (telling and singing) subgroup (Harris and Reichl 1997:1-16). This distinction is regularly pointed out by fast tale performers in discussions about the tradition as well as in asides in some tales.

<sup>26</sup> Mark Bender (1999a) has written extensively about the role of shifting in Suzhou *tanci* performances.

rhymed and rhythmic chanting that rests somewhere between pure singing and plain speaking. While in the narrator role, performers deliver all lines in this register to a steady beat and rhythm that work together to integrate various elements of performance and draw in audiences. Narration follows this steady rhythm and beat so that performances are characterized by language that flows smoothly, without pauses or breaks in the seven- or ten-syllable lines.

When combined in the storysinging register, the features of rhythm, beat, end rhyme, and rapid shifting among roles with different voices, the smooth, melodic style of narration gives Chinese audiences the impression that the performer is speaking quickly and causes some Westerners to think of rap. In emic terms, singing fast tales is compared to dancing while shouldering a pole from which two buckets full of water are suspended on opposite sides. When done well, no water spills from the buckets. The musical sound created in the synthesis of the beat of the *ban*, the storysinging register, and end rhyme are defining characteristics of fast tales.

### **Performing a One-Person Play**

Fast tales are a form of performative storytelling in which artists build narrative worlds for their audiences through a combination of dramatic techniques, conventionalized movements and facial expressions, the sound and rhythm of their *ban*, carefully crafted verbal scripts, and a range of expressive techniques (Bruner 2002). A fast tale performance may involve narration, the expression of feelings, recitation about life events, explanations of things found in the performers' everyday experience, character dialogue, or descriptions of characters or scenery, all of which may be intended to entertain or educate audiences. Some fast tales are yarns from the traditional repertoire recast in humorous ways. Others are sketches of the people, places, and events in the everyday world that surrounds the writers and performers.

Stock scenes and characters that are immediately recognizable to people from Shandong are selected to set up a narrative frame before subtle alterations based on cultural expectations are made that initiate action and render the tales humorous. Specific stories, scenes, and characters are carefully selected by performers based on the expected age, class, and background of the audience of each event. Jerome Bruner (2002:15) has argued that narrative is a dialectic between what is expected and what comes to pass. Fast tales rely on this dialectic to draw listeners in, initiate new action, transition to new scenes, generate suspense, and create humor. Verbal script, body language, and facial expressions are employed to construct a believable character or scene that can then be transformed into a story by tweaking culturally shaped audience expectations.

The tales are brought to life in performance by a single performer who rapidly shifts among several roles.<sup>27</sup> The fast tale performer is simultaneously an actor, raconteur, and entertainer. He is at once an omniscient narrator, any and all characters that appear in the story—regardless of age, social class, gender, nationality, or species—and a performer who offers commentary on the story and interacts with the audience. Because fast tale performers assume all

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<sup>27</sup> On occasion two or more performers will collaborate in performance, but the single-performer format is the norm.

of the roles of the various *dramatis personae* that appear in their stories, they describe what they are doing as *yi ren yi tai xi* (a one-person play).



Wu Yanguo performs *Ma Erha* at Haimengyuan Hotel, July 2002. Photo: Eric Shepherd.



Dong Jiancheng performs *Shazi yao wawa* (*Knucklehead Wants a Tot*) at Haimengyuan Hotel, July 2002. Photo: Eric Shepherd.

### Strong Local Flavor

One of the most salient characteristics of fast tale performances is a strong local flavor. Listening to fast tales without the rural Shandong accent would be similar to listening to American country music that did not have the requisite twang or like hearing Larry the Cable Guy do his comedy act with a Brooklyn accent. It would be a different type of experience that would not meet audience expectations. Critical in creating this Shandong flavor is the language spoken in performance. The primary speech of fast tales is an artistic language that is immediately recognized by all Chinese audiences as “Shandong dialect.”

Because of its vast geographical area and substantial population, the region of Shandong is characterized by a very complex linguistic situation in which hundreds of local versions of “the Shandong dialect”<sup>28</sup> coexist with standard Mandarin. These local versions of Shandong speech can be grouped into three major subdialects, based on geographical region, each of which is intimately linked with local identities. The language of fast tales most closely resembles the version found in western Shandong due to the fact that early performers were from the Linqing region. Fast tale language, though, has evolved into a unique, artistic register called Shandong *dahua* (big speech), easily identified as representative of this area because performers draw stereotypical characteristics from the entire family of local Shandong languages. Thus, the “Shandong dialect” spoken by fast tale performers does not match any single local dialect, and no one walks around Shandong communicating in the fast tale register for everyday purposes.

<sup>28</sup> The linguist Li Xingjie (1997) has found seven distinct subdialects roughly corresponding to each of the seven city districts in the city of Qingdao.

Accent, tone, pitch, stress, rate of speech, grammatical structure, rhyme, and word choice are all factors that distinguish the fast tale version of Shandong speech from other versions. Another marked characteristic of the traditional fast tale repertoire is the presence of archaic language and expressions from an earlier stage in the evolution of the Chinese language that are no longer used in either modern Mandarin or Shandong dialect. The resulting mix of modern local dialect and archaic language makes comprehension difficult for some young audience members even if they are natives of Shandong.

As performers from other regions of China were trained in the fast tale tradition beginning in the 1950s and performances moved to areas outside of Shandong, the language of fast tales began to undergo a process of standardization. Aspects of Shandong speech that were difficult to understand for native speakers of other dialects were dropped in favor of an easily comprehensible version of Shandong speech. When fast tales moved onto the proscenium stage and into new media formats such as radio and television, this standardization process was intensified. Later, in the 1980s, one component of a movement to “save fast tales” led by the Shandong Fast Tale Research Association—a leading performer organization—was a conscious drive to further standardize fast tale language. Language reform was part of a range of measures designed to retain shrinking audiences and attract younger fans being drawn to Western movies and television. This long-term standardization process has had the result of creating a range in the depth of Shandong speech used in performances that varies depending on performer, location of performance, and audience composition. Many experienced performers consciously adjust the thickness of their Shandong accent based on the age and background of their audiences.

In addition to a Shandong accent and the storysinging mode of delivery mentioned earlier, the primary fast tale register is marked by rhymed speech. Performers maintain a single end rhyme from the beginning to the end of a tale with either the last word in every line or every other line rhyming, depending on story length and performer/writer preference. Writers draw on a repertoire of thirteen basic rhyme groups while creating tales. Rhymed speech combines with a question-answer or topic-comment structure and unique stress patterns that follow the beat kept with the *ban* to contribute to a rhythmic cadence.<sup>29</sup> Performers describe the blend of rhyme and rhythm with the phrase *he zhe ya yun* (literally, “fit groove retain rhyme”). Performances characterized by this rhythmic cadence are said to *you ban* (have *ban*). Even on the rare occasion when someone performs without the accompaniment of the *ban*, he is judged on whether his performance has a *xin ban* (heart *ban*), meaning he maintains the beat and rhythm internally despite not having the *ban*. Performances that are missing any of the aural elements associated with fast tales—register, accent, beat, rhythm, rhyme—are said to *meiyou kuaishu weir* (not have fast tale flavor).

Fast tale language is particularly rich and varied in terms of content because performers draw extensively on the entire repertoire of classicisms, proverbs, rhymes, jokes, metaphors, allusions, poetry, onomatopoeia, and humor available in all Shandong languages. Performers

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<sup>29</sup> Seven-syllable lines are broken down into subunits in a two-two-three stress pattern. For example, the opening line of the tale *Wu Song Fights the Tiger* is “Idle talk and aimless chatter, I’ll tell you no more.” The first two syllables *xian yan* (idle, words) become a stress unit followed by a brief pause. The second two syllables *sui yu* (superfluous, language) then form a separate stress unit that is followed by another pause before the final stress unit *bu duo jiang* (verb negation marker, much, tell).

frequently engage in both speech play and word play, so fast tales typically contain humor and exaggeration.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, they are expected to be able to accurately imitate regional dialects, speech registers, and sounds appropriate to any character or action that appears in their stories. The following idiom reflects the complex range of roles that fast tale performers must create through the process of *shengying huazhuang* (voice makeovers):

*sheng dan jing mo chou*, (*sheng, dan, jing, mo, chou*)<sup>31</sup>  
*shen xian long hu gou*, (spirits, fairies, dragons, tigers, dogs)  
*quan ping yi zhang kou*. (all rely on a single mouth)

Thus linguistic prowess, described by performers as *zuipizi gongfu* (lip skill), is associated with the role of fast tale performer. New performers begin their training by memorizing and rehearsing a repertoire of tongue-twisters to prepare for the linguistic challenges of telling fast tales. This type of practice helps performers achieve the ideal sound of fast tale language, which is described by experienced performers as *ganjing* (clean) and *lisuo* (tidy).



Gao Hongsheng performs at *Jiangning huiguan*, July 2010. Photo: Eric Shepherd.



Head of the Shandong Fast Tale Research Association, Sun Zhenye, performs at *Jiangning huiguan*, July 2010. Photo: Eric Shepherd.

### Formal Components of a Fast Tale

One famous fast tale describes the fundamental components that make up any fast tale story. It goes as follows:

<sup>30</sup> John McDowell (1992:139-44) defines speech play as “the creative disposition of language resources or the manipulation of formal features and processes of language to achieve a striking restructuring of familiar discourse alignments.” Fast tale performances are characterized by extensive use of elements of speech play such as puns, plays on words, allusion, and hyperbole. Word play refers to isolated, discrete moments of speech play such as puns, speech metaphor, antistasis, hyperbaton, synecdoche, wellerisms, conundrums, spoonerisms, and malapropism. See also Sherzer 2002.

<sup>31</sup> *Sheng, dan, jing, mo,* and *chou* are the five role categories associated with traditional Chinese operas and dramas.

*An Old Man Pulling a Lamb*<sup>32</sup>

This time I'm going to tell a really short story. It'll live up to its name as a short story. Although I say it's a short story, it has a head. It has a tail. It has characters. It has content. This is a small story that I don't lightly give in and sing.

Listen:

*I'm telling of an old man pulling a lamb,  
A one-sentence short story, just this long.*

It's over.

Most fast tales are more thoroughly developed but *Pulling a Lamb* serves as a convenient example to illustrate some fundamental components. The padded speech that is used to set up the story explicitly lists: head, tail, characters, and content. The head, or beginning, of the story is "I'm telling of an old man pulling a lamb." This opening follows a common fast tale introductory formula "I'm telling of + character name/type + comment about character." The tail refers to the story's ending. Here it is also the punch line: "A one-sentence short story, just this long." A fast tale must also involve at least one character, here the old man. Content, known in storyteller jargon as the *yao* (waist) or *du* (stomach), refers to the middle or action of the story. In this case it is also part of the head: "pulling a lamb." In addition to a head, stomach, and tail, a fast tale may have *yan* (eyes), *gebo* (arms), and *tui* (legs), which refer to the internal conflicts that drive story action. The eye is the central conflict of a story while arms and legs are smaller subconflicts that build suspense or facilitate internal transitions (Gao 1980:628-33).

Two additional structural components are typically needed to make a story work as a fast tale. First, there must be a punch line, called a *baofu* (bundle) because the audience cannot see what is inside until it is *dou* (shaken out) or revealed by the performer. Bundles can be *xi* (fastened or tied) in the language chosen to tell the story, appear in narrator or performer commentary, or be embedded in the speech, behavior, or actions of the narrator, characters, or performer. The manner in which story action is arranged can also generate a bundle, as can any combination of these elements. In line two of *Pulling a Lamb*, "A one sentence short story, just this long" functions as a bundle. It works only when combined with the final major component of fast tales, *kouzi* (buttons or hooks). Here the plain speech functions as a button, setting up audience expectations up for a short story involving more action than just an old man pulling a lamb. Fast tales always include at least one *da kou* (big button) and may involve an unlimited number of *xiao kou* (small buttons) (Liu 2001).

According to Liu (154-60), "button" has two levels of meaning. First, it is like a string of buttons that keeps audiences tied to their seats. Every story ends at the point when an old conflict is resolved (or known problem is solved) and a new conflict arises (or problem is presented to the audience). This creates an element of suspense that ensnares the audience's attention so that they want to keep listening. In Chinese storyteller parlance, this state is described as "without chance, it cannot be a story" (*wu qiao bu cheng shu*). This notion of chance and the role of

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<sup>32</sup> I heard this story numerous times while studying as an apprentice storyteller in Shandong. The version presented here comes from *The Complete Anthology of Traditional Shandong Fast Tales* (Liu and Zhao 1997:610). (Speech delivered as the performer in a normal speaking register appears in regular font while that delivered in the narrator register is italicized.)

buttons in fast tales mirrors Bruner's description (2002:5) of Aristotle's *peripeteia*, a sudden reversal in circumstances that swiftly turns a routine sequence of events into a story. The second level of meaning, *kouzi*, refers to the storyteller's ability to snare the "strings of the listeners' hearts." By strategically arranging buttons, the storyteller creates a situation in which the audience cannot figure out exactly what will happen next. Thus the story develops in a way so that events outside of their expectations but within the realm of story logic continue to occur, so that the suspense of wanting to know what will happen next draws them further into the story. The process of setting up both buttons and bundles is called *pudian* (laying out a mat/pad). Finally, the humor in *Pulling a Lamb* is generated by the incongruity created between the expectations set up in the introduction for a good story and what is actually revealed in the bundle—that the story is really only one sentence long. This is an example of what Elliot Oring (2003) has described as the humor of incongruity.

The following traditional fast tale provides further examples of salient characteristics. Knucklehead is a stock character who frequently appears in traditional tales and who often struggles in his handling of everyday family matters.

*Knucklehead Wants a Tot*<sup>33</sup>

- 1     *Let's first tell the story of a girl named Shuhua,*  
        *This year . . .*  
        Let me first ask if any of the ladies here are named Shuhua?  
        *Let's first tell the story of a girl named Shuhua,*
- 5     *This year just eighteen, either old nor young she's not.*  
        *To marry her off her ma and pa planned a colorful gala,*  
        *They found her a husband who was a big idiot.*  
        *The two of them had just been married three days on the dot,*  
        *When Knucklehead came to Shuhua demanding a tot.*
- 10    **"Hey, give me a tot. I must have a tot."**  
        *Asking this embarrassed Shuhua until she was in knots,*  
        **"Whoa, we're just married three days on the dot,**  
        **Where should I go to get you a tot?"**  
        *When Knucklehead heard her say she didn't have one,*
- 15    **"If I don't have a tot, I'll kill you on the spot!"**  
        *He grabbed the butcher knife in his hand,*  
        *To chop off Shuhua's noggin he did plot.*  
        **"Whoa, in that case, how about this,**  
        **You go outside and play in the lot,**
- 20    **And I'll get you that tot."**  
        *Out through the front gate Knucklehead did go,*  
        *And Shuhua went to their backyard lot,*

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<sup>33</sup> This is my textualization of a September 20, 2000 oral performance by Dong Jiancheng that took place during a dinner banquet at the Blue Ocean Bay Restaurant in Qingdao. In this textualization, a conscious effort was made to retain end rhyme, which influenced word choice. The narrator register is marked by italics, while the plain speech of the performer is in normal font and that of characters appears in bold type.

- Where a big ol' duck she quickly got,  
She took it into the house and put in on the bed,*
- 25 *Where she wrapped it in red and tied it in green,  
And before long it was bundled tightly with a knot.  
Coming in through the door, Knucklehead picked it up with a laugh, "Ha, ha . . .  
**My, you had him so really fast!**  
**Why does the kid have such a flat mouth?***
- 30 ***He's grown a mouth full of beady little teeth,  
He grew a pair of bean-like eyes, black as a pot,  
A long skinny neck and a feathery head.  
His baby hair still hasn't fallen off,  
And his toes still haven't spread."***
- 35 *Knucklehead laughed all day, about to kiss his lips with a smack,  
He scared that duck, "Quack, Quack, Quack!"  
When Knucklehead saw this, he was happy as could be,  
**"This little baby of ours is really quite smart,  
Just out of the womb and he can already say 'Pa!'  
This little kid just called me 'Pa!'"***

The big button in *Wants a Tot* comes in lines 14 and 15. A very common scene in China is first set up with newlyweds talking about having children. What does not fit traditional cultural expectations is that Shuhua could have had Knucklehead's child after only having been married for three days. The story gets rolling with the story "eye" when Knucklehead tells Shuhua that he will kill her if she does not immediately give him a child. The remainder of the story revolves around how Shuhua will handle this critical problem. Another button (an example of a story arm/leg) in lines 18-26 adds a twist that keeps the action moving when she solves the initial crisis by bundling a duck up like a baby to fool Knucklehead. Will he notice that it is a duck? How could he not? This is putting out the mat on which the later bundle will rest.

Line 2 is an example of a performer jumping out of the narrator role into the here-and-now of the event in order to ask if any of the female participants have the same name as the female protagonist in the story. This technique links the story to the performance at hand and is seen as a way to exchange feelings with the audience by personalizing the performance. This is also an instance of a bundle embedded in the behavior, actions, and speech of the performer.

Lines 8 and 9 contain a bundle created by the structure of the narrative and cultural expectations. The narrator first sets up the bundle in the diegetic mode by telling the audience "The two of them had just been married three days on the dot, when Knucklehead came to Shuhua demanding a tot." Then, shifting to the mimetic mode, Knucklehead the performer shows the audience what he has just described by acting it out in line 10. Although all types of third person narrative can be found in fast tales, the most common form follows this pattern of telling and then showing without the use of "Knucklehead said" or "Shuhua replied" as transitions between the diegetic and mimetic modes.

Line 13 has an example of a small bundle in character speech as Shuhua asks "Where should I go to get you a tot?"—as if babies could be obtained from some local proprietor.

Beginning in line 28, a series of bundles is embedded in Knucklehead's reaction to and description of his new child. These are followed by a bundle that is pulled off with a combination of narration, onomatopoeia, and physical humor when Knucklehead tries to kiss the duck but instead scares it. The tale climaxes with the major bundle of the story in the final couplet, as Knucklehead says that his child is smart because he can say "Pa" rather than realizing that the sounds he heard were the quack of the duck.

### Creating Vivid Images and Distinct Personalities

Most fast tales involve characters and action that follow a plotline, called a *shu liangzi*, developed with vivid description offered by an omniscient narrator. One commonly occurring type of fast tale is episodic in nature and tends to revolve around one (or a few) central character(s) and one central event or conflict, as was the case in *Wants a Tot* (Gao et al. 1982). Another recurring type of tale focuses on developing the personality or image of one central character rather than placing emphasis on fully developing a plotline. *Auntie Wee*, the traditional fast tale below, is an example.

#### *Auntie Wee*<sup>34</sup>

- 1 *I'm telling of a woman who's really wee.*  
 This comrade asked, **"What does 'wee' mean?"** Wee means short,  
 Short means low, low means not high.  
*I'm telling of a woman who's really wee,*
- 5 *Half a yard of silk wouldn't cover her knee.*  
*She can't even wear half a yard of silk,*  
*She uses a thread as a scarf.*  
*Mother-in-law sent her to make dinner,*  
*Wow, on her tippy-toes by the stove,*
- 10 *She still can't reach the pots.*  
*When Ma saw this she really got mad,*  
*"Wham!" One blow knocked her on the floor nowhere to be had.*  
*Posted a letter to her Ma,*  
*Whoa! Over came Big Brother, Second Brother, Brother Shubai.*
- 15 *The brothers entered the gate and glared:*  
**"We're looking for Granny, our little sis's Ma-in-law.**  
**Find our wee little sister in three days,**  
**We'll write it off complaint free.**

<sup>34</sup> The textualization presented here comes from Wu Yanguo's oral performance in Qingdao on September 20, 2000. The mix of rural Shandong dialect with the shift from narrator register to hick peasant, end rhyme, and fixed line length creates language that is particularly structurally awkward in the original Chinese. In the translation I have attempted to retain the end rhyme and the rural feel of the language where possible. For the interested reader, a Romanized version of the original Chinese may be found in the appendix. The narrator register is indicated with italics and performer plain speech register is in Roman font. Character speech is in bold to indicate another shift in register and voice.

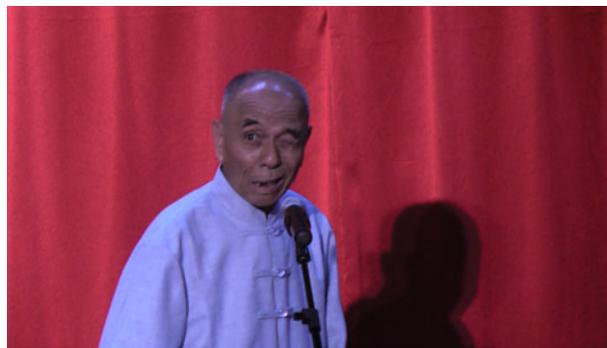
- Don't find our little sis in three days,**  
 20 **We're going right to the courthouse to solve this melee."**  
*Pop was scared til' his knees was a-knockin',*  
*Ma was so scared she was a-shakin'.*  
*The whole family waited with fear,*  
*Then rushed off to find their dear.*  
 25 *They used the sifter to sift, the winnow to winnow,*  
*Everything passed through a thick sieve, then through the thin one,*  
*And yet she was still nowhere to be.*  
*You ask where's little Auntie Wee?*  
*She's in that seed shell a-playin' poker!*

The prominent role that imagery plays in fast tales should be evident even from reading a textualized version of *Auntie Wee* (Honko 2000). In performance, fast tale performers combine realistic and conventionalized symbolic movements with facial expressions, voices, onomatopoeia, and the verbal script to create a series of exaggerated images in the minds of the audience members (Rubin 1995:39). In *Auntie Wee*, each of the lines—"half a yard of silk wouldn't cover her knee," "uses a thread as a scarf," "on her tippy-toes by the stove, she still can't reach the pots," "used a sifter to sift, the winnow to winnow," and "in that seed shell a-playin' poker"—are imageable actions drawn from everyday life in rural Shandong that are viewed through the lens of hyperbole (*ibid.*:55).

When combined together and supplemented by movements, voices, sounds, and facial expressions, they create a vivid image of just *how* short Auntie Wee really is. The lines, "older brother was scared til' his knees were a-knockin'" and "ma was so scared she was a-shakin'," work in a similar way to show the audience just how scared the family was by the threat made by Auntie Wee's older brother. The goal for performers is to leave a series of exaggerated, and thus humorous, images in the minds of the audience members after this type of fast tale rather than leaving them with the memory of a sequence of actions. The major bundle of the tale works in part because the image of a woman small enough to play poker in a melon seed does not fit expectations.



Wu Yanguo performs *Dazhen (Getting an Injection)*, at Haimengyuan Hotel, October 2004. Photo: Eric Shepherd.



Gao Jingzuo performs *Wu Song Gan Hui (Wu Song Goes to the Fair)* at Jiangning huiguan, July 2010. Photo: Eric Shepherd.



Bamboo clapper fast tale performer Li Dongfeng performs at *Jiangning huiguan*, July 2010. Photo: Eric Shepherd.



Qin Yongchao performs *Wu Song Fights the Tiger* at *Jiangning huiguan*, July 2010. Photo: Eric Shepherd.

### Narrative Pattern

Longer fast tales, such as *Wu Song Fights the Tiger*, may contain several of these smaller types of fast tales and thus are more complex. Regardless of which type of structural arrangement is utilized, fast tale narratives tend to be constructed following a particular pattern. There may first be descriptions of story time, location, and setting, but the initial major section of a developed fast tale is the appearance of the primary character. Through metaphor, irony, exaggeration, or comparison, performers create a vivid image of their protagonist. Then performers leave deep impressions of this initial image in the minds of audience members by displaying to them—using all available expressive means—what that character looks and sounds like. The goal is to enable audiences to see, feel, and hear the individual as if that individual were living and present. For example, after Auntie Wee appears in the first line of the tale, lines 2-4 are exaggerated comparisons that construct a vivid image of a woman so small she uses a piece of thread for a scarf. This process of introducing the main character is called *kai lianr* (opening face) (Wang 2009). The process involves language, speech register, facial expressions, physical humor, movements, and any other means available to the performer in a given performance environment.

Once the protagonist has been introduced, a series of foils typically enhances the image of the character (the number depends on story length). In the case of *Auntie Wee*, she is sent to the kitchen to make dinner but cannot reach the pots on the stove even when standing on her toes. Then a central conflict, the big button of the story, initiates all subsequent action. In *Auntie Wee*, we are given the ordinary situation of a mother-in-law telling her daughter-in-law to make



Wu Yanguo performs *Dazhen (Getting an Injection)* at Haimengyuan Hotel, July 2002. Video: Eric Shepherd. [http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/26i/shepherd#myGallery-picture\(22\)](http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/26i/shepherd#myGallery-picture(22))

dinner. When she does not have dinner ready quickly enough, the mother-in-law becomes angry and backhands her, again part of an ordinary cultural script. Then there is a sudden, unexpected twist and the story is underway. When the mother-in-law hits Auntie Wee, she knocks her on the floor where no one can find her because she is so small.

Following the big button, the story action flows in a series of attempts to resolve the problem. With each failure to solve the problem—additional small buttons—the tension increases. The result is that fast tale plots rarely develop in a straight line. Instead, the story develops in waves, rising with each attempt to resolve the conflict and dipping as the attempt fails (Gao et al. 1982, Wang 1985, and Liu 2001). In *Auntie Wee*, the family first sends a letter to Auntie Wee's family, but that results in the males in her family making a trip to the in-laws' home where they give the three-days-or-else ultimatum. The tension in the story builds to a climax during the subsequent search for Auntie Wee, which along the way produces hilarious images of the family using sifters and winnows to go through everything on the family floor while trying to find her. Just when it seems that she will not be found, the major bundle is delivered. Auntie Wee was not lost at all. She was in a melon seed playing poker all along.

Fast tale plot lines must have a logical flow to the sequence of actions to retain audience interest. The general pattern of fast tales is as follows: appearance of the protagonist, enhancing the image of the protagonist, a big button, a series of small buttons (attempts to resolve the conflict), waves of increasing tension building to a climax, and a major bundle.

## Conclusion

In sum, this article has presented a brief ecology of the Shandong fast tale tradition that provided a background for the discussion of expressive and rhetorical devices used by performers as they sing their dead tales to life in performance on stage. Working from verbal scripts that are marked by formulaic language and extensive repetition, fast tale performers pack variation into these tales, often drawn from a shared tradition as they personalize them over time. These performers alternate between narrating and performing traditional and modern tales in a one-person play format. In performance, they jump into character roles using shifts in speech register, body language, body position, line of sight, and facial expressions to create believable characters. Jumping out of character into narrator and performer frames, they narrate their tales in a specialized artistic register characterized by a strong local flavor, end rhyme, and a powerful rhythmic cadence kept with a brass *ban*. In a blend of narrative and expressive modes, they draw on an extensive repertoire of rhetorical devices such as onomatopoeia, physical humor, hyperbolic language, speech registers, facial expressions, and physical humor to create vivid images and distinct personalities with whom their audiences can easily identify and relate. They then generate humor through the use of buttons and bundles. In performance the rhythm, beat, and a unique singtelling register combine to create the distinct musical feel and flow for which the genre is well known in northern China.

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## APPENDIX

In order to give the reader a feeling for the fundamental linguistic structure of fast tales, a Romanized version of *Auntie Wee* is provided here using the Hanyu Pinyin system. Tones indicate the patterns used in the fast tale narrative register rather than those used in Mandarin Chinese.

- 1      shuǒ    liao                      wèi                      dà      sāo      shìzài    cuò,  
          zhèi    wèi                      tòngzhi wèn    le,  
          “cuò    shì      shènme yisi?”  
          cuò    jiushi                      āi      āi      jiushi                      dǐ  
          dǐ      jiushi                      bù      gǎo(r).  
          shuǒ    liao                      wèi                      dà      sāo      shìzài    cuò,  
 5      hùn    shěn    chuǎn    bú      shàng    bàn      fēn    de                      lùo.  
          bàn    fēn    de                      lùoqùn(r)      chǔan    bú      shàng,  
          nà    le                      gēn(r)                      tòushèng(r)      dǎng    wèibò.  
          zhè    yì      tiǎn, pòmūniàng    jiào    tǎ      qù      zuò      fàn,  
          huò!                      tǎ      cì                      zhe                      nà      guǒtài  
          gòu    bu      zhāo      guǒ.  
 10    pòmūniàng                      yí      kàn      yōu      le                      qì,  
          bào(r)!                      yì      bǎzhāng,  
          dā      dào    liao                      dì                      xia  
          zhāo                      bu      zhuò      le.  
          gēi    tǎ      niàng    jiǎ      sòng    le                      gè                      xìn(r),  
          huò!                      lài      liao                      tǎ,      dàgě,                      èrgě,  
          shǔbai gěge,

- gě gě jin mèn(r) bá yān dēng,  
 15 “jiào liao shěng dànàng mèimei de pòpo,  
 nī sán tiǎn zhāo zhuò cuò mèimei,  
 yì bī góu xiǎo, mèi huà shuǒ.  
 sán tiǎn zhāo bu zhuò cuò mèimei,  
 ān gēn nī fāyuàn qù jiējuè.”
- 20 gōnggong xià dì gè déde zhàn,  
 pòpo xià dì gè zhàn duòsuǒ.  
 yì jiǎ rènjiǎ dǒu hàipà,  
 jì mànq qù zhāo nù jiāo è.  
 shǎizi líbiǎn(r) shǎi, bòqi bò,
- 25 guò wàn cǔ luò guò xì luò.  
 hài mèi zhāo zhuò.  
 nīmen yào wèn cuò dàsāo nǎli qù,  
 tā zài nà guǎzi(r) kè lǐ dā pūkè.