Please allow me to confess at the outset that I am neither a folklorist nor an anthropologist. In 1971, after completing my PhD courses and exams in the Oriental Studies Department of the University of Pennsylvania, off I went to Taiwan to begin research on my dissertation topic on two Tang poets, Li Bai and Du Fu. Had I stayed with that topic, I would probably still be trying to finish the thesis! After visiting bookstores in Taipei in search of a new topic, one that could be completed in my lifetime, I serendipitously happened upon an interesting-looking novel, *Sanxia wuyi* 三俠五义 [Three Heroes and Five Gallants, hereafter, *Three Heroes*], published in 1879. The novel was "attributed to" Shi Yukun 石玉昆 , a famous 19th century performer, most likely Manchu, of the alternating sung and spoken genre. Although completely ignorant about storytellers, storytelling, and the oral tradition, I providentially decided, on the spot, that a study of *Three Heroes* would be my new thesis topic. After reading several books about the oral tradition, suggested by a dissertation advisor, I gradually began to understand what it meant that *Three Heroes* was attributed to a storyteller, that its provenance was the oral tradition. I would never look at "literature" in the same way again. My research and my life were changed dramatically--and the rest is history!

Included in the introduction to *Three Heroes* were three prefaces that were written by literary men to explain how they revised a song book manuscript version: they removed the sung sections, which shortened the narrative enormously, and change some of the language to be less "vulgar," more literary, i.e., they removed most of the characteristics that demonstrated its oral provenance. It was Kate Stevens, Professor at the University of Toronto, who urged me to visit Academia Sinica, on the outskirts of Taipei, to search, among their huge collection of handwritten manuscripts brought from the mainland, for an early version of the narrative. Academia Sinica generously allowed me to view, in their Fu Sinian Rare Book Library, a handwritten manuscript titled *Longtu gongan* [Courtroom Cases of Magistrate Bao], a song-book (*changben*) designated a Shipai shu [Shi (Yukun) School Narrative]. This manuscript was written down by scribes, hired by a "publishing house," to listen to and transcribe a storyteller's performance, what Albert Lord called a "command performance."

In 1977, I completed my dissertation, "A Critical Study of *San-hsia wu-yi* and (Its) Relationship to the *Lung-t'u kung-an* Song-Book," without ever having seen any performance by

any storytelling artist! It was not until the fall of 1981, under the auspices of the National Academy of Sciences' Committee for Scholarly Communication with the PRC, that I was finally able to visit China in search of any storytelling artists who still performed Magistrate Bao narratives. My host at Beijing University (Beida) was Prof. Wang, who was a Visiting Professor at Stanford University when I arrived in October, 1981, and did not return until January, 1982. But, as soon as returned, doors that had previously been closed suddenly opened up. Prof. Wang was, I discovered, unique: even when it was quite dangerous to cooperate with foreigners, he was fearless in finding ways to help the scholars he hosted—while acting always within the bounds of correct behavior. He made everything possible for me and Kate Stevens, a passionate student of *Quyi* since the 1950s, who was already acquainted with some performing artists and ethnomusicologists. Thus, Prof. Wang and Kate, the best possible mentors and friends, smoothed my entry into the fascinating world of Chinese storytelling.

My experiences working with Chinese performing artists over these 35 years have been the most meaningful and exciting times of my life. The storytelling artists I was privileged to meet and interview spoke sincerely and freely about their lives and their art. The most generous among them were: Sun Shujun, Beijing Drumsong; Chong Yujie (Sun's disciple); Cao Baolu, Tamborine Drumsong; Ma Zenghui, Tamborine Drumsong and Bai Huiqian, *sanxian*; Liu Sichang, Shandong Fast Clappertales; Li Jindou and Chen Yongquan, Comic Dialog; Li Boxiang and Du Guozhi, Comic Dialog. Among the Southern artists were: Jin Shengbo, Suzhou Straight Narrative; Tang Gengliang, Suzhou Straight Narrative; Jiang Yunxian, Tanci [alternating sung and spoken]. They helped me understand what was such a mystery to me when I first arrived.

The stories live in the minds/hearts of the tellers; it is their consummate skill that allows us to thrill to the stories-- using only their mouths--they dramatize before us on stage. Most Chinese storytellers are unable to explain their art; they simply say "*kouchuan xinshou*" ([master's] mouth transmits, [their] heart/mind receives), then they transmit the stories "unchanged." However, we know that the greatest narrative artists have been able to work creatively within the tradition, to make appropriate changes to keep their stories vital, relevant, and comprehensible to their ever-changing audiences in their ever-changing times and environments.

My first experience experiences in the field, from October, 1981 to August, 1982, were primarily in Beijing. Subsequently, I returned to China several times; my last visit, in November, 2000, was at the invitation of Prof. Wang to participate in an "International Storytelling Festival." There were presentations by international scholars and daily evening performances by storytellers as well as by "amateur" international performers. During the years before 2000, through generous funding from Dartmouth's Dickey Endowment for International Understanding, I hosted the visits of several Chinese storytelling artists and organized lecture/demonstration/performances for them at well-known American colleges and universities. Most recently, a large gift from David Martin, a Dartmouth alum, made possible a four-month visit—from March through end of June, 2016--of Cai Yuanli and Bao Chengjie, two Chinese ethnomusicologists from China's Academy of Theater and Performing Arts. They worked intensively with me to complete *Zhongguo shuochang yishu jilu* [Documentary on the Art of Chinese Storytelling], a 30-hour-long repository of videotaped storyteller performances from 1981-2000. This Documentary will be available on line soon.

In the past, the main work of researchers/scholars of "folklore," the "oral tradition" or "oral narrative performance," was collecting texts, categorizing them, and, if in foreign languages, translating them. I readily admit guilt on that score. Of course, before going to China, meeting storytellers, and attending performances, there was no way that I could discuss anything but the texts. However, my interest in the "texts" of oral narrative has been to learn how cultural values are expressed by the characters, their actions, and the storyteller persona, commenting on the narrative's characters and actions—the *ping* of *pinghua* and *pingshu*; what kinds of changes, *bian*, in the story's events and characters--from era to era, from context to context--affect the story significantly; and at what point, because of *bian*, does the story become a different story, expressing different values.

Although I understood that, in the oral tradition, the concept of "original" or "authentic" version does not exist. But, in my many discussions with Jin Shengbo, the Suzhou *pinghua* artist who performed *Three Heroes*, I always came back to the issue of change, *bian*. In a discussion about *bian* in May 1982, Mr. Jin told me that he allows himself to make only two kinds of change in his narratives: 1. elaboration or enrichment (*fengfu*) of the story and 2. making the

story make sense, be logical, reasonable (*gaizao*). However, when I then asked him whether or not these kinds of *bian* actually transform the story into a different one, he insisted, like many other documented storytellers, that he would never change the *shu* (the story itself; the events), that there are things that can be changed and those that cannot, that he makes his changes on the basis of Shi Yukun's story, and that none of his changes affect/change the story in a meaningful or significant way. Yet, in November, 1983, in an interview with Mr. Jin in the presence of his Performing Arts Troupe Leader (as though he needed her protection), he looked at me mischievously and said: "If you had to use only one word to characterize my storytelling, it would be *bian*!"

I conclude, therefore, with two excerpts from a discussion between a brilliant oral narrative artist and a very naïve researcher. These two excerpts, I believe, capture what is at the very heart of the art of storytelling. At the very least, they will make you laugh!

Jin: I make changes on the basis of Shi Yukun's narrative (*shu,* here, book, i.e., the 19th Century published version that underwent three major revisions from a song-book). There must be changes. He didn't really say very much in [the book]. So, I feel that I must add things. That's not because I am very bold. But it's because there isn't much in the book; he left little for us. So, I must add to it. Adding is actually adding thoughts and small details. If he had one thing, I might consider it not enough, so I add the second and third things …

Bai: But, in terms of character, is the final Bai Yutang, still the same as the one in the Book?

Jin: Sure. So, after he fell into the Death Trap, there was nothing in the book about what was going on in his mind. None of the versions took care of that. There must be a lot of thought behind that "Aiya!" [what he cried out when he felt into the trap, a common expression when something goes wrong]. What was he thinking? Where did that "Aiya!" come from? What we do is take these two words and imagine, project. The first "Aiya": "Aiya, I've fallen into the trap!"; "Aiya, I can't get out of here!"; "Aiya, from the way it looks, it's all over with me!"; "Aiya, I really regret

having come. I didn't listen to Zhi Hua or Elder Bother!"; "Aiya, I will die before I have accomplished what I came to do." And there's another "Aiya": "Aiya, I will die with my eyes open [when one has unavenged grievance] because I haven't retrieved the [Magistrate's] official seal!" In general, you could say that this would be just about enough. If you consider the actual situation, then it would be just about right. But, because it's art, we can exaggerate, we can still go on "aiya"ing. Right? What can we "aiya" about now? "Since I became your sworn brother, Yan Renmin [Jin changed the name], you have been so good to me, but today I cannot see you one more time"; "Elder Brother Liu, you too have been so good to me, but I can't see you once more either"; "My wife is at home and I haven't been back to see her in such a long time"; "My children are still so young…"

It was at this point that my astonished reaction to the mention of a wife and children put a premature end to the "aiya"s:

Bai: I never knew that Bai Yutang was married.

Jin: He is. It's true. It's not in the book [*Three Heroes*]. It's in Five Young Gallants [the first continuation of *Three Heroes*].

Bai: It wasn't mentioned in *Three Heroes*.

Jin: But this can be imagined easily.

Bai: No! I think that Bai Yutang's being married is a very big difference. What I mean is that, when he dies, he has no wife and no children.

Jin: But, having told it that way, it makes sense, because, according to our Chinese customs, one could marry at 16.

Bai: They are gallants!

Jin: Gallants aren't monks, you know.

Bai: Gallants should, perhaps, marry later in life.

Jin: You must be joking! Right? When you think about it like this, then it's all right. It's reasonable, it *must be reasonable* [for him to be married].

Bai: I don't want him to be married then. I don't like it!

Jin: If you don't like it, then just forget it. Next time, when *you* tell the story, just say that He isn't married, right?

Bai: I don't think he should be married.

Jin: Fine. That's all right. If you say he's not married, then he's not married. After all, it's just stuff that comes out of our mouths.

And this is the perfect time to end my story.