

# FROM ORAL HISTORY TO DOCUMENTARY FILM TO BIOGRAPHICAL MONOGRAPH: THREE STAGES IN TELLING A MUSICAL LIFE STORY

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## Abstract

In August 2008, I undertook a 36-hour oral history with renowned Shanghai-based bamboo flute master Dai Shuhong (b.1937), with whom I had studied since 1987. His almost photographic memory and skills as a raconteur opened up for me not only the story of a remarkable life lived at a time of rapid musical transformation in socialist China's most cosmopolitan city, but also an unprecedentedly granular view-from-the-ground of how major aesthetic, social, pedagogical and policy changes came about, and what it was like as an individual musician to witness, experience, and contribute to them. My path to writing a biographical monograph based on our oral history took a detour when a filmmaker colleague, inspired by the oral history, proposed a documentary on Dai's life. We filmed for two weeks in September 2016, and the film, *Playing the Flute in Shanghai: The Musical Life of Dai Shuhong*, was completed in 2019. This article describes how the originally unanticipated film project transformed the in-progress monograph, in particular how photovoice techniques, emphasis on the visual, and creative ways of capturing interviews and conversations created new types of firsthand materials and fresh ways of conceptualizing the entire book project.

## Keywords

China, Chinese music history, flute playing, Dai Shuhong, biographical methods

## INTRODUCTION

In September 1987, I arrived at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music as a British Council postgraduate exchange student. Information on Chinese music had been sparse in England, so I eagerly signed up for classes on Chinese music history alongside one-on-one lessons on my main instrument, the bamboo transverse flute dizi. The lecture class on Chinese musical history provided a survey from pre-historical times to the twentieth century, delineating major developments while dwelling briefly on such luminaries as Nie Er ([聂耳], 1912–1935), composer of today's national anthem, and Xian Xinghai ([冼星海], 1905–1945), composer of the patriotic *Yellow River Cantata* (黄河大合唱).<sup>2</sup> Several other academic classes offered an excellent grounding in traditional vocal and instrumental genres, with much attention paid to musical analysis. There were also occasional opportunities to hear rare historical recordings and thus learn how aesthetics, tuning systems, and performance techniques had changed over time.

Unofficially and imperceptibly, however, I began to learn another type of musical history, one that came primarily during my dizi lessons and on visits to the home of my kind, hospitable dizi teacher, Dai Shuhong (戴树红老师). This was a history composed of a myriad personal memories, of beguiling anecdotes that gradually, one by one, added layers of flesh onto the bare historical bones learned in class. These were stories that introduced me to the personalities, social networks, and institutions overlooked by the grand narratives of the textbooks, yet which formed the bedrock of quotidian human experience. And I could not have had a better instructor in this than Dai.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I still retain the original mimeographed textbook for the period from prehistory to 1949, liberally marked up for both content and language learning purposes (Dai Jiafang, n.d.). Nie Er's career is described on pages 55–57, Xian Xinghai's on pages 64–68.

<sup>3</sup> In what follows, I adopt the Western custom of omitting the honorific *laoshi* (teacher) that should be applied in Chinese after the surname, although it feels uncomfortably disrespectful to do so.

Born in 1937 in the small city of Taizhou (泰州), 230 kilometres northwest of Shanghai, in 1956 Dai Shuhong had been swept from life as a factory worker and amateur musician into the first dedicated Chinese musical instrument cohort at the Shanghai Conservatory; he worked for the next six decades as a professional performer and teacher of the transverse and end-blown bamboo flutes (dizi and xiao), primarily at the Shanghai Conservatory and its attached middle school, and experienced firsthand the seismic shifts in cultural and musical life in China's most cosmopolitan city (Dai Shuhong, 2008a). By the 1980s, Dai had become one of the most renowned xiao players of his generation, developing particular skill in the delicate art of accompanying the elegant seven-string zither qin, and performing and recording with many of China's top qin artists (Figure 1);<sup>4</sup> he also sank thousands of hours into learning qin himself, becoming deeply knowledgeable about qin culture. A gifted raconteur with an almost photographic memory, Dai entertained and educated me for years with his inexhaustible fund of stories about every conceivable aspect of musical life in China since the 1940s—tales that interrogated and refined the broad-brush narrative I had learned in academic lectures. Moreover, his vast personal collection of historical photographs added a unique visual angle, inviting me to immerse myself in scenes I could otherwise barely have imagined.



**Figure 1: Dai Shuhong (xiao) and Dai Wei (qin), Shanghai, September 2016. Photo by the author, Helen Rees.**

Twenty years into our friendship, inspired by Bell Yung's vivid and touching biography of his famous qin teacher Tsar Teh-yun ([蔡德允], 1905–2007) (Yung, 2008),<sup>5</sup> I approached Dai to ask whether he would consent to our collaborating on writing his life story, to which he enthusiastically agreed. The question, then, was how to go about it.

Yung had developed a technique that accommodated the frailties of a woman already in her nineties by the time he began to document her life, a project that had started quite informally:

During those early sessions, in which we chatted about her life, I would rush home and jot down from memory as much as possible on my computer. Later, when I decided to document her life properly and to place all the stories in their correct sequence for the sake of coherency, . . . I would bring my laptop computer and start telling the stories back to her by reading my notes. She would then correct or elaborate on some details, or move tangentially to other stories, at which point I would frantically click away at the keyboard. In this way I wove the stories

<sup>4</sup> For an admiring assessment of Dai's xiao style by another fine bamboo flute artist, see Zhang Weiliang 2011:324. Dai became especially famous for his qin-xiao partnership with legendary qin player Zhang Ziqian ([张子谦], 1899–1991). He has performed and recorded extensively with several other major qin musicians, including Lin Youren ([林友仁], 1938–2013), Gong Yi ([龚一], 1941–), and his own daughter, Dai Wei ([戴微], 1971–). The qin tradition is widely discussed in both Chinese- and Western-language sources (see Yung, 1997:1–6 for a clear English-language introduction). By contrast, the qin-xiao duo tradition has attracted minimal scholarly attention (see Lin Chen & Chen Chen, 2022 for an excellent overview).

<sup>5</sup> This romanisation of Tsar's name is the one she herself used, and that is used in all English-language writing about her (e.g., Yung, 2008). The pinyin romanisation of the Mandarin pronunciation of her name would be Cai Deyun.

together into a narrative that formed a larger picture. Later, I relied very much on her son George to fill in with details and factual information (ibid.:15).

This method worked well with a very elderly subject of a retiring nature who might have been uncomfortable with audio or video recording of formal interviews, but it had the disadvantage of constructing the narrative purely in the third person, with Tsar's own voice heard directly only through her poems and other writings. In the literature on Chinese music, I had recently come across Xiao Mei's essay *Three Women in Chinese Music: Traditional and Contemporary* (2000), in which she artfully deploys extensive direct quotes from interviews with renowned researcher Cao Anhe ([曹安和], 1905–2004) and two famous erhu (two-string fiddle) performers, Min Huifen ([闵惠芬], 1945–2014) and Song Fei ([宋飞], 1969–), allowing each interviewee to express herself in her own words and thus communicate more directly to the reader—something I felt would work especially well for Dai, with his lively delivery and extraordinary eye for detail.<sup>6</sup> I proposed, therefore, that we structure our joint venture around an extensive videotaped oral history that would take us from Dai's birth to the present day. Once again, he happily assented. We both assumed we would move directly from the oral history to a monograph, but in the end that did not happen; instead, we took an unexpected but most productive detour.

## STAGE ONE: ORAL HISTORY

On the morning of 4<sup>th</sup> August 2008, I set up the video camera in the living room of the Dais' Shanghai flat, and we sat down for the first hour of the oral history interview. Dai had resisted my suggestion that we rough out a written timeline of his life to provide a mnemonic anchoring dates and major events, instead sitting quietly for half an hour in order to marshal his thoughts before we began. Over the course of ten days, finishing on the evening of 13 August, the night before I had to return to Los Angeles, we recorded thirty-six hours of interviews. The first thirty-two covered his life up to 2008 (Dai Shuhong, 2008a), while the last four, recorded between the evenings of 12 and 13 August, dealt with one of his favourite topics, the history and technique of the endblown flute xiao and its role accompanying the qin zither (Dai Shuhong, 2008b). During his stay in Los Angeles in January 2009, we recorded eleven more hours that discussed his many students, his dizi teacher Jin Zuli ([金祖礼], 1906–2000), and his two visits to England in 2000 and 2008—the second for a high-profile concert tour with qin player Gong Yi [龚一], which featured a meeting with then-Prince Charles (Dai Shuhong, 2009). In subsequent years we filled in a few gaps.

Collaborating on Dai's oral history was an eye-opener even for me as his long-time student, accustomed as I was to his extraordinary memory and powers of visual recall. Before each session, he would sit quietly to gather his thoughts and, in some cases, check names in an address book before speaking continuously for two or more hours at a time. Re-reading the transcripts of our interviews, I am constantly struck both by the organization and clarity of his narrative and by how little I say, beyond the occasional expression of surprise or agreement, or a few requests for minor elucidation. We kept a notebook on the table for him to write down characters for personal and place names, dialectal expressions, and any vocabulary I was unfamiliar with; he also used it to draw diagrams, for example of temple layouts. This proved invaluable for transcribing the interviews and writing the book. Dai's visual recall and talent for vivid description drew me in immediately to his world; for example, the oral history begins with a systematic, detailed, and utterly beguiling description of Tai-zhou in the 1940s—its rivers, bridges, boats, streets, houses, temples, commercial activities, and musical life, all interwoven with the larger narrative of war, inflation and poverty that characterised the era. By the time we got to Dai's own story, I could vividly picture the world of his childhood and almost see the scenes play out in front of me. The decision to base his life story on the oral history and to present it in the first person, getting as close as possible in English to the clarity, elegance, and rhythm of his oral delivery, was entirely vindicated. It took several years to complete the word-by-

<sup>6</sup> Outside the field of Chinese music, a major inspiration for this approach was the autobiography of Navajo Blessingway singer Ólta'í Tsoh (Mitchell, 1978), although that project had to be accomplished via interpreters, which would not be the case here. Both Yung (2008:15) and the interviewers in the Ólta'í Tsoh project (Mitchell, 1978:2–9) explain their methodology in meticulous detail. This is often not the case with life stories, where one may be left wondering how the information was elicited and how much it was elaborated on by the interviewer/editor, especially when it is presented in the first person (see, for example, comments by Rulan Chao Pian (1985:9–10) prefacing her translation of the autobiography of Peking drum singer Zhang Cui Feng [张翠凤]).

word transcription of the many hours of interviews and to undertake the necessary historical and contextual research, but by 2015 I was ready to write the book.<sup>7</sup> At that point, however, our project took its lengthy unplanned detour.

## STAGE TWO: THE FILM

The detour originated over lunch at UCLA with my colleague Aparna Sharma, a professional documentary filmmaker and film scholar, who listened to my tales of the oral history with increasing fascination and finally asked, “Do you think Mr. Dai would be interested in making a documentary film about his life?” The answer was a resounding “yes” on the part of the entire Dai family, and the bulk of the filming took place in Shanghai over two weeks in September 2016, with a few extra scenes shot in January and April 2017. From the outset, it was a collaborative endeavour: Dai, Aparna and I discussed what to include and how to film it, participants watched each scene immediately after it was shot to check the content and offer comments, and feedback elicited during three rough cut screenings from almost thirty participants and family members strongly shaped the final product (Rees & Sharma, 2024). Titled *Playing the Flute in Shanghai: The Musical Life of Dai Shuhong* / 沪上箫声：戴树红先生的音乐人生, the 84-minute Chinese-language film was premiered at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music in March 2018, drawing an enthusiastic audience of over two hundred people, some of whom had come from over two hundred kilometres away. The following year it won the Biographical Documentary Award (优秀人物传记奖) at the First Chinese Music Ethnographic Film Festival (第一届华语音乐影像志展映), held at the Shanghai Grand Theatre, and in 2021 it was distributed as a DVD by the Dutch company Pan Records, with English subtitles (Figure 2; *ibid.*).

Informed as it was by the oral history, the documentary naturally took on a life of its own, driven by the profound differences between static footage generated by a video camera placed on a tripod to capture interviews that would later form the basis for a monograph; and the creatively conceived, dynamically shot, and dialogically edited film designed as an aesthetic end in itself for presentation to an audience.<sup>8</sup>

For me as a researcher accustomed to the linear logic of academic prose, in which sound recordings, still photographs, and “research film” appeared largely in supporting roles,<sup>9</sup> it was a new experience to grapple with an avowedly subjective medium in which the moving image dominates and shapes the way information is juxtaposed and narratives are formed. Thanks to their sensory qualities, documentaries, suggests film scholar Bill Nichols, “possess an expressive power that equals or exceeds [that of] the printed word” (2017:73); this is achieved in part through “play[ing] with time, place, and context, manipulating reality using a diffuse audiovisual language” (Ballengee, 2024:187). It soon became evident to me that our documentary enterprise not only entailed a qualitatively different way of telling Dai’s compelling life story and sharing his world, but also offered a potent means for gathering new information for the monograph.

*Playing the Flute in Shanghai* consists of twenty-two scenes (plus the title scene and closing credits), only one of which exceeds seven minutes in length.<sup>10</sup> Following an opening voice-over in which I

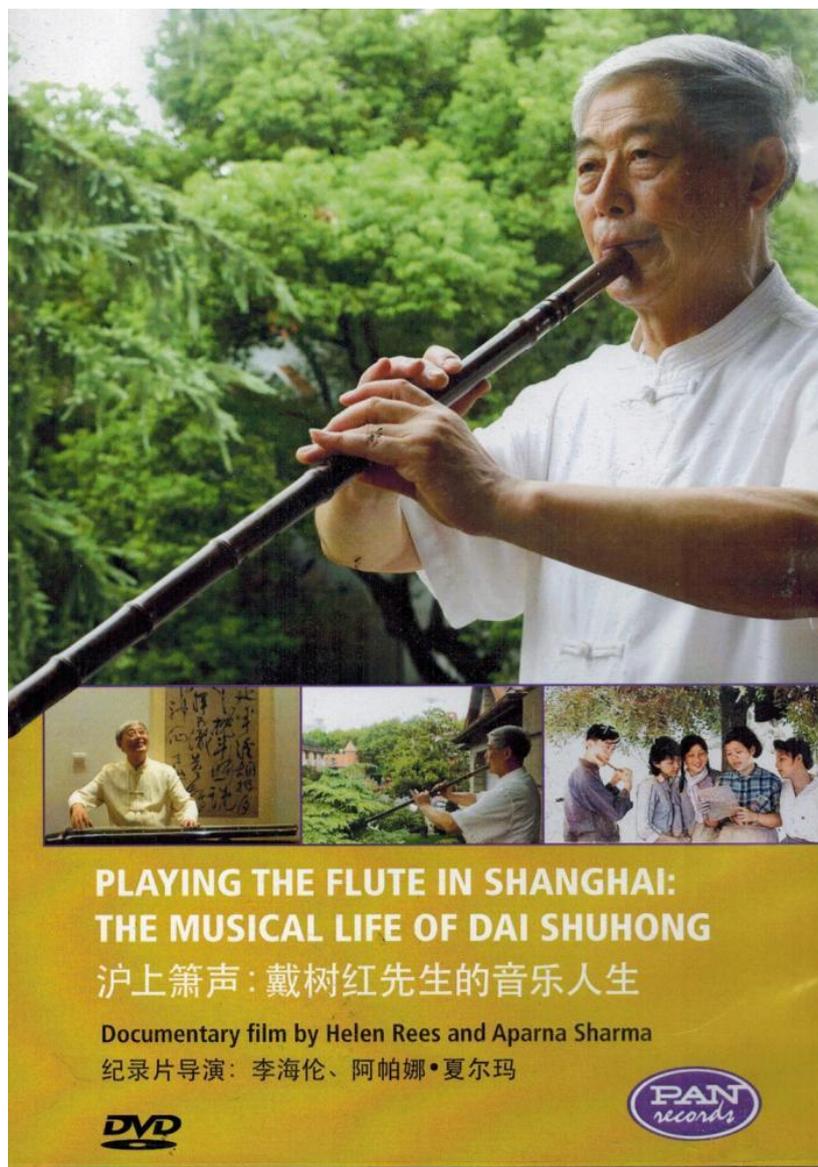
<sup>7</sup> It is not unusual nowadays for oral histories to be documented solely by audio recording and logs, but I knew that for the project I had in mind, it was essential to have word-by-word transcripts of the thirty-six hours of interviews from 2008, and for parts of the 2009 and later materials. Most of the transcription was completed with great care by Wang Pingping [王乒乓], then a student at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, with several undertaken by Dai’s daughter, Dai Wei [戴微]; my US-based colleagues and friends Chi Li [李琦], Guangming Li [李光明], and Da Lin [林达]; and myself. I then read through and annotated the hundreds of transcribed pages to create a detailed bilingual log to guide my structuring and writing of the book.

<sup>8</sup> Leonardo D’Amico, in his magisterial survey of the use of film in ethnomusicology, usefully emphasizes the difference between “research film”, “a gathering of audiovisual data collected with a...camcorder during fieldwork, with the purpose of being used as...data for research”, and documentary film, an “edited product” that is a “structured work made for presentation to an audience” (2020:41).

<sup>9</sup> My primary encounter up to this point with the foregrounding of a non-textual medium lay in the numerous ethnographic CDs on which I had collaborated since 1995 with musicians and scholars from southwest China. Here the audio recordings were of course paramount, with text and photographs as supporting elements (Rees 2020). While very different from documentary film, these projects had given me experience of prioritizing a non-textual component, making the switch to film easier.

<sup>10</sup> Here I define a scene as a self-contained segment of the film based in a single locale. Thus, for example, one four-minute scene that starts at 00:16:41 shows Dai walking down Huaihai Road into a qin studio, climbing the stairs, and giving qin lessons to two different

walk down a Shanghai street and explain the goals of the film, the scenes intertwine five informal performances, one of which is rare archival footage from 1984, showcasing Dai's partnership with renowned qin player Zhang Ziqian ([张子谦], 1899–1991); three lessons (in one of which Dai teaches the xiao, while in the other two he teaches qin); five photovoice segments, in which photograph albums elicit spontaneous conversations and reminiscences; four interviews; and one informal chat between Dai and two of his 1950s classmates reminiscing about their student days. These focal scenes are placed so that one leads organically into the next, often linked via street scenes and shots of the visual culture of Dai's home (photographs and calligraphy displayed on the walls and sideboards, for example). Furthermore, eleven of the scenes take place in Dai's small study (Figure 3), providing a locational anchor to which the film repeatedly returns.<sup>11</sup>



**Figure 2: Cover of DVD for film *Playing the Flute in Shanghai*. Pan Records, Leiden, 2021. Used by permission given by the owner of the film company, Bernard Kleikamp.**

Unlike the oral history, the film does not move chronologically through Dai's life story; instead, it allows themes to develop naturally, juxtaposing different types of scenes to illuminate a topic. Thus,

adult students in an interior room. (Timings are given as in the DVD version of the film listed under Audio-Visual Sources.) The longest scene is the last, incorporating an interview with Dai's daughter, Dai Wei, and a duo performance of a short qin piece (with her on qin and her father on xiao). With its length (7'27") and the calm, long-drawn-out phrases of the piece, this scene has the effect of bringing the film gently down towards its conclusion.

<sup>11</sup> For more extensive discussion of different scenes and the editing process see Rees & Sharma, 2024. An important characteristic of the film is that, aside from my brief opening walk through the backstreets of Shanghai to Dai's tower block on Huashan Road, there is no voice-over: everything after that unfolds through the voices of the participants.

for example, one of the scenes most enthusiastically received by qin and xiao aficionados, the archival footage from 1984 of Zhang Ziqian and Dai performing the iconic piece *Wild Geese Landing on the Sandbank* (平沙落雁) on qin and xiao (00:32:43–00:39:19), is preceded by a photovoice segment in which Dai describes the Shanghai qin world of the early 1960s (with Zhang Ziqian visible in one of the photos); it is followed by a photovoice segment in which Dai tells of his own learning of the qin under Zhang’s guidance from 1980 on. That in turn leads into Dai’s performance on qin during our 2016 shoot of the piece *Spring Dawn* (春晓吟), which becomes the background music to a shot of his applying his elegant brush calligraphy to a favourite Tang poem, *Early Spring* (早春). He comments that this poem by Han Yu ([韩愈], 768–824) is one he often thinks of when playing this piece (Rees & Sharma, 2024:176–177).

Creative editing subtly underlines the close connection in traditional literatus culture among poetry, calligraphy, and the qin, and Dai’s interest in all these arts. That connection has been commented on in many textual publications (e.g., Yung, 2008), but Nichols is right that the viewer’s audiovisual experience of this is far more powerful than any linguistic exposition is likely to be. And indeed it was achieved by “manipulating reality” (Ballengee, 2024:187), since obviously Dai could not be simultaneously playing the qin and doing calligraphy, although both activities did occur on the same night. Yet if the editing manipulated objective time, it pointed to another kind of reality—the conceptual linking of musical piece and poem. The second-longest scene in the film (00:41:45–00:48:32), this became the climax of a multi-scene segment revolving around Dai’s experience of the qin. It proved extremely popular with the qin enthusiasts among our viewers, who told us how much they liked the juxtaposition of music and calligraphy. Placed exactly half-way through the film, the scene also serves a structural role, bookending this facet of Dai’s musical life before a pivot to stories about other musical genres.



**Figure 3:** The interior of Dai Shuhong’s home study, Shanghai, September 2016. Film still from *Playing the Flute in Shanghai*.

My colleague Aparna Sharma makes an important point about the type of knowledge documentary film can provide:

Film is a sensory medium, and the knowledge it offers is distinct from written analysis. As an audiovisual medium, film can render a viewer present to the worlds it depicts, in a quite immediate way. A film sequence can reflect a whole setting, the placement of people and objects within it, their spatial and symbolic relationships, the actions they perform in it, the aural atmosphere of that setting, and its ambient and specific sounds like speech or music (Rees & Sharma, 2024:163).

It is that “whole setting”, with the simultaneous visual and audio input, that offers a more multidimensional sense of the world Dai inhabits than can be obtained from the oral history alone—even as the oral history does of course provide an infinitely greater wealth of data and detail over its forty-plus hours than the film can over eighty-four minutes.

Thus, it is only from the film that one can get a visceral sense of the “social aesthetics” of Dai’s community and environment (MacDougall, 2006:98)—the “culturally patterned sensory experience” of his study and the qin studios he visits, the generally subdued colour schemes of décor and clothing, the ubiquitous presence of a culture of tea-drinking, and the body language of social interactions. His small study is notable for the brown wooden furniture, the shelves of books and musical scores, the many brown and black qin hanging from the bookshelves, the numerous long brown bamboo xiao, and, prominently placed on the windowsill, a kettle and tea set, alongside a splendid yellow orchid, a rare dash of bright colour in the room—an aesthetic ambience that a written text and still photos can only hint at. Similarly, it is the film that reminds us of the extraneous sounds the oral history and monograph don’t touch upon that nevertheless fill out the auditory environment—the noise of the traffic far below Dai’s flat as he plays the xiao on a balcony in the title scene, the birdsong audible in the 1984 footage, and the deafening cicadas that provide the backdrop to the evening stroll he and his wife take around the grounds of their tower block just before the final scene.

## STAGE THREE: THE MONOGRAPH

The final stage of the biographical project, an English-language monograph, is currently in progress, with completion of the manuscript anticipated in 2026. Titled *Playing the Flute in Shanghai: The Life of Dai Shuhong*, it adapts the title of the film to suit its broader subject matter. After an introduction outlining the research methods and the broader Chinese historical and musical context, Dai’s life story, based primarily on the oral history and told in his own voice, constitutes the first five chapters of the book. The oral history materials are supplemented by historical photographs, photovoice and other segments from the film, other interviews and social media exchanges, and numerous further primary and secondary sources. These include publications of and about the Jinyu Qin Society (今虞琴社), in which Dai has participated for over sixty years, eventually becoming the chairperson; publications of and about the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, with which he has been associated since 1956; biographies of other musicians with whom he is connected; commercial and online audio and video recordings;<sup>12</sup> musical scores and pedagogical materials for dizi, xiao, and qin; my own recordings of lessons over the years; newspaper articles, concert programmes, blog postings, and other ephemera; county gazetteers and online historical sources for his hometown of Taizhou; scholarly publications on relevant musical genres and instruments; and publications that illuminate the broader musical and social history of China since the early 20th century.

Chapter six, which analyzes Dai’s unique xiao performance style and compares it with that of other renowned xiao specialists, relies on audio recordings, performances and interviews in the film, other interviews, the oral history, and secondary sources. In particular, it focuses on the 1984 archival footage of Dai’s performance with Zhang Ziqian of *Wild Geese Landing on the Sandbank*. The video allows for a note-by-note analysis of their performance of the piece, in which one can see the minute hand movements of the qin player and thus appreciate all the more Dai’s skill in imitating the subtle, almost inaudible ornaments that characterize the genre. Chapter seven highlights Dai’s pedagogical style. It is based on lessons and interviews in the film, other interviews, and my recordings of xiao lessons with him over the years. Chapter eight discusses the audio-visual elements of Dai’s world and how the interrelation of the audio, textual, and visual elements in that world has contributed to the overall biographical project. These chapters are told in my voice. The book that results will be accompanied by a website that provides readers with the entire film, selected excerpts of the oral history video tapes, and links to online sources. I am aiming for the two of us to be listed as co-authors.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Online platforms have of course opened up a treasure trove of historical recordings. Rare footage from 1960 of Dai’s accompaniment on dizi of Tibetan singer Tseten Dolma appears on the Chinese platform Bilibili: [https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1wT411x7j7/?spm\\_id\\_from=333.788.recommend\\_more\\_video.3](https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1wT411x7j7/?spm_id_from=333.788.recommend_more_video.3), last accessed 6th November 2025. Several recordings of his ensemble performances with qin players are also available, for example Gong Yi: <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1jT4y1u7D6/>, last accessed 6th November 2025.

<sup>13</sup> Since Dai does not read English, a family member is reading each chapter to him in Chinese translation as it is finished, for him to approve and insert any changes he wants.

## WHAT THE ORAL HISTORY BRINGS TO THE BIOGRAPHICAL MONOGRAPH

As noted at the beginning of this article, it was through the years of listening to Dai's personal recollections that I began to see the nuances absent from what one might term the "master narrative" of musical history presented in formal textbooks, and to appreciate their importance for understanding quotidian musical experience and agency among individuals and groups at all levels. An oral history account of the last eighty-plus years provides an invaluable sense of community and of local and national networks—of who knew whom, or corresponded with whom, or worked with which institutions. It often fills in factual gaps, bringing to the fore small but significant events and actions that are left out of broad-brush narratives but may explain puzzling anomalies or new departures. It also offers an insider-guided "feel" for events, aesthetic trends, and social developments (both musical and non-musical), and an understanding of how the speaker remembers and reflects on these later in life. This is still more the case where the resulting life story is told in the first person. An oral history approach is especially adept at illuminating the experiences and views of people who haven't become household names, whose lives, actions, thoughts, and enthusiasms constitute the tapestry of social life, yet who are frequently passed over in conventional publications on an era, a locale, a genre, or a superstar artist (Thompson & Bornat, 2017:186).

Furthermore, the style of information delivery is unique in oral history, and that in itself also conveys extra meaning. As pioneering oral historian Luigi Portelli (1991:47) emphasizes, "The tone and volume range and the rhythm of popular speech carry implicit meaning and social connotations which are not reproducible in writing", and of course this is still more the case with a videorecorded oral history, in which gesture and body language contribute to the message being conveyed. An awareness of this certainly informs my decisions as to how to translate and put across the feel of certain phrasings and emphases in the first five chapters, but also drove the decision to place selected portions of the oral history tapes approved by Dai onto the website accompanying the book, so that at least some unfiltered original oral history material is accessible, documenting Dai's lively, performative delivery.

## WHAT THE DOCUMENTARY FILM BRINGS TO THE BIOGRAPHICAL MONOGRAPH

As touched on above, the biggest single contribution of the documentary film to my re-envisioning of the monograph has been my increased awareness of the visual and sensorily multi-dimensional aspects of the world being described. Film emphasizes the sense of space and place, together with colour, texture, and small gestures—those things that tend to get lost in conventional textual biography. In the first five chapters, that has caused me to pay greater attention than I might have done before to the vivid visual pictures and soundscapes conjured up by Dai's almost photographic recall and storytelling skills. This awareness has also led to the creation of the eighth chapter, which was not originally planned when the project was conceived as a simple progression from oral history to monograph.

Specific techniques used in the shooting also opened up fresh approaches to biographical and historical writing. In particular, the four photovoice segments conducted with Dai placed historical photographs front and centre, prompting a flood of memories some of which replicated what is in the oral history, while others added new material and nuance, such as the detailed account of visits to his family by renowned Tibetan singer Tseten Dolma [才旦卓玛], whom he often accompanied on the transverse dizi flute, and who gave his toddler son a toy car in the early 1970s, a gift captured in a charming photo.<sup>14</sup> The photovoice segment with two adult amateur students, who chat while looking over a book of photographs from a trip Dai and several of his students took to a temple in Wuxi, solved one of the most intractable problems of the monograph: how to elicit commentary naturally from his students on Dai's teaching and the sense of community he builds, without simply asking leading questions in a formal interview setting. A similarly natural effect was achieved as Dai talked in a relaxed fashion with his two 1950s classmates while sitting in front of their old dormitory at the

<sup>14</sup> This research technique has been surprisingly little used in ethnomusicological writing until recently, but seems especially appropriate to biographies. A pioneering example occurs in the biography of Trinidadian band leader Roy Cape (Guilbault & Cape, 2014).

Shanghai Conservatory—a setting that inevitably brought to the fore anecdotes of their shared experience sixty years previously, which added new details to the one-person retelling of the era in the oral history.

Perhaps most unexpected was an insight that grew out of the discipline required in documentary film: it is both time-limited and sensitive to rhythm, so that in editing, one must pay close attention to the rhythm of speech, movement, and gesture. This alerted me to how energetically rhythmic Dai's speech patterns and movements are, something demonstrated especially clearly in the scene in which he recalls encouraging his young dizi students to learn from the inimitable grasp of rhythm exhibited by Peking opera percussionists. In this scene, he not only orally mimics the percussion patterns to perfection while physically imitating the playing motions, but also uses decisively rhythmic hand gestures to emphasize his point, finishing the scene with an energetic nod that stays “in rhythm” with the rest of the utterance (01:04:47–01:05:57). This minute of footage provoked an epiphany: I realized that the speech and gestural rhythms chime with Dai's subtle sense of timing in his highly distinctive flute style, in which breath and fingering are used in rhythmically creative ways that, try as I might, I have never fully managed to emulate.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

The oral history and the documentary film each bring unique materials and insights to this biographical project. Each has had a part to play in my goal of crafting an English translation of Dai's words that evokes the visual and aural—and, where appropriate, other senses too—as much as his own vivid recall does. Indeed, the visual and the aural play a central role in the project, rather than being peripheral or merely illustrative, and the ultimate package of book+film+website aims to present a holistic sense of Dai's life and world that goes far beyond an academic text. From my collaboration on the film, I have also come to view the monograph as benefitting from an approach that borrows from the fluid creativity of film editing, inviting a more conscious and imaginative melding of content and aesthetics.

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