

Gengcun: The Story Village of China
(China, 2005)

Once upon a time, forty-one storytellers from across the United States traveled to the other side of the world to the storytelling village of Gengcun in China. These storytellers called their group, “The Nu Wa Storytelling Delegation,” in honor of the Chinese goddess of creation.

In this group were African-American, Chinese-American, Filipino-American, Jewish, Irish, Muslim, and Native American storytellers. Artists, educators, librarians, accountants, filmmakers, a retired Boeing airplane employee, musicians, a stand-up comedian, dancers, mothers, therapists, and a talented fourteen-year old storyteller. They had journeyed some 6,000 miles to share stories and bring aid to the tiny village and its people.

Long ago, before Europeans settled in North America, the Ming emperor established the village of Gengcun. The emperor assigned members of the Jin family to care for the tomb of the emperor’s adopted father, King Geng. The village was therefore named after “Geng” with “cun” added, the suffix for “village.”

The village soon developed into a major merchant and trading crossroads. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, people traveled from many lands seeking Chinese silk, jade and other goods to bring back to the West. Marco Polo used such a trade route to reach Cathay (China). Along the way, travelers would share tales from their peoples, and the villagers of Gengcun remembered many of them, retelling them in their own way over and over again for hundreds of years.

For over three hundred years, Gengcun gained fame for its great fairs and temple festivals – especially the four-day King Geng Temple Fair in April. The

residents of the village worked mostly as jewelers, merchants, innkeepers, and apothecaries. Merchants and spectators from other towns came to the village to celebrate each year.

When World War II broke out, the Japanese invaded China, as well as this village, killing countless villagers, and destroying businesses and property. China was finally liberated in 1949. Two decades later, the great Cultural Revolution of Mao swept through this village and the rest of China. Mao ordered that the merchants and the professional class be retrained to become farmers, even though the village people had no farming experience. In the morning, each worker would have to specify what he or she would do that day to an official. In the evening, each person would have to report what he or she had actually accomplished.

The village plummeted into poverty.

Today, the tall corn in the fields stretch for miles and miles. We traveled down the long narrow road to the village. Gengcun is located on the Jizhong Plain in Central China. This village of twelve hundred people still fosters its six-hundred-year-old tradition of storytelling, and is recognized for preserving Chinese culture and history through folklore and traditional stories.

In 1997, Jimmy Neil-Smith, the founder and long-time director of the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee, learned of this village and its storytelling heritage. He led a “People-to-People” tour as the first storytelling visit to Gengcun. At the beginning of September 2006, our Nu Wa Storytelling Delegation represented the fourth official storytelling visit to the village. During the three trips made over the past ten years, storytellers had raised donations of \$15,000 to help build a new wing for the school, pave the main road into the village, build a library, and repair the community’s “Hall of Stories.” Tellers also brought books and school supplies over the years.

The village included about 280 households. The historic families that reside here bear the surname of Jin, Gong, Zhang, Wang, Liu, and Hao. The Jin family name was held by almost 67% of the residents. A 1991 survey stated that there were 134 storytellers in the village. Twenty-one of these could tell between 50 and 99 stories, 15 could tell more than 100 stories, and three were counted to have the capacity to retell between 300 and 500 stories. There were 55 “master tellers,” including the oldest member of this prestigious group, who was 86 years-old. The types of stories told range from popular legends to urban lore, mythology, religion, and other folklore. Until the late 1980s, few of the stories told were recorded or published. However, starting in the 1980s, Chinese scholars began to take a genuine interest in the folklore and stories preserved by these village tellers. They found a treasure trove of tales in the village, collecting over 4,362 stories.

A police escort led us on the half-hour drive from the town of Gaocheng. The village people lined the one narrow paved road that led into the community. The officials of Gaocheng had brought in bands to play, costumed dance troupes to perform, and very large drums to boom. The celebration seemed overwhelming, as if we were coming home to friends whom we had not visited for years. Faces of elderly women and men, parents holding young children, school children in uniforms smiled and waved to us, and we waved back. The mayor, master tellers, and the school principal greeted us as we exited the bus.

The villagers of all ages, men, women, children, tell stories on the way to and from work as they walk along the narrow mud roads, or as they labor in the cornfields. They share tales at meals, on visits to neighbors, and in their “Hall of Stories.” The students in grades two to six practice storytelling as part of the school curriculum. Many of the elders do not read or write, so stories become a major way of communicating experiences, values, and history from one generation to another.

On most days, we visited two or three homes where master tellers, two to four in a home, told their stories to us, and we shared a few of our stories with them. Most of these homes had one main room with one large bed, a bench along the window, and small stools to sit on. There would also be one or two small rooms off the main one. The room was clean, but much of the furniture was worn. One wall usually had a large painting or photo of a wedded couple, and bright posters or cloths hung on the other walls. The rooms radiated a warm, informal, and very gracious atmosphere.

While we were accustomed to a more formal storytelling performance – with a seated, quiet audience – village storytelling was quite different in the homes. The master teller would begin the tale but might be interrupted with relatives or neighbors dropping by to see the foreign storytellers. The master tellers would often get up and greet the visitors, chatting for several minutes, and then resume the story. No one became upset by the interruptions. Children of all ages entered and left during the telling sessions. In the midst of one telling, a middle-aged woman from the village walked up to our teller, put her arm around her, and asked her friend to take a picture.

Since the tellers spoke in a dialect different from Mandarin, we had two translators: one to translate from the local dialect into Mandarin, and a second person to translate from Mandarin into English. When we told, the reverse process happened. On several occasions, the story was suspended while the teller, both translators, and others listening, discussed the proper translation. It was wonderful to see how our translators became better and better storytellers, interpreting the tales by adding facial expressions and body movements.

We visited classrooms to perform and also to listen to the students tell stories. One member of our group had expertise in making balloon animals, and gave those as presents to some of the students. We distributed pencils, crayons,

paper, books and candy. A dentist donated toothbrushes and toothpaste. Since the village has such a small population, students in kindergarten through sixth grade attended the same school.

At the end of each day, the villagers joined us in the “Hall of Stories,” where we listened to everything ranging from excerpts from the Peking Opera to traditional folksongs. Members of our group told stories, sang songs, and even demonstrated how to dance to the Virginia Reel. On another day, we prepared a bubble mix and made bubble blowing wands of wire frames, leading the whole village in their first bubble blowing event. We watched one two-year-old spend over an hour learning to blow bubbles, laughing wildly as he finally succeeded with the bubbles rising into the air. Later, one of our members taught the villagers the moves to the Israeli folkdance, the Hora.

Two of the stories told to us gave accounts of the villagers’ encounters with the Japanese invaders who had killed over 75% of the village population during World War II. One elderly teller told us that when the nurses in the village hospital learned that the Japanese army was only a few miles outside of the town, they realized that there was not enough time to flee with their fifteen patients. So, the nurses hid the patients in the woods under piles of leaves. The last patient, however, could not be hidden in the woods, so he was buried under a pile of manure in the pigsty. The fumes caused the man to choke, and the Japanese found him. Though they tortured him, he would not reveal the hiding place of the others. The Japanese then drove a truck over him, crushing him to death.

The invading army forced the village men to dig a trench around the village to keep out the Chinese resistance fighters, and to keep the villagers as prisoners. They stockpiled weapons inside the village and forced the village men to stand guard at the gates. However, on one night, these men who stood guard opened the gates to the Chinese fighters who helped themselves to the stockpile of Japanese

weapons and ammunition. Another villager betrayed the men. The Japanese tortured and burned two men. Finally, though, the Japanese were forced to release the men because the villagers had banded together in rebellion. The one who told us of this incredible story was one of the men at the gate that night.

Gencun Village has only one main well for the entire village for drinking water. Ninety-five percent of China's water is undrinkable. At the time of our visit, only half of the people in the village could have water from the well each day. This meant that when we visited homes to share stories, they could not welcome us with the traditional tea and felt embarrassed about this. The fact that we brought our own bottled water – and were told to drink at least three bottles a day due to the heat – became a matter of consternation. Since the village had no restaurants or food to spare, we would board the bus each noon and travel the thirty miles back to Gaocheng for lunch, returning to the village two hours later. Self-control was important: no one wanted to use the outhouse in the village!

On the afternoon of our last day, Joyce, who is a French and Native American storyteller, donned her deer-hide dress, her traditionally braided hair, and led a ceremony at the village shrine to the creation and storytelling goddess, Nu Wa. Soon, we heard chanting, drums beating, cymbals, and gongs ringing, as the women elders of the village, most in their seventies and eighties, enthusiastically danced down the mud street to the shrine.

As Joyce reflected:

“When the elder women of Gengcun came down the road just as we had finished our second ceremony, gongs agonging, and cymbals cymbaling, as they danced their way into their sacred space. And I felt that they accepted our being in their space, and that they knew we were in ceremony and had come to join us, to allow us to participate

in their spiritual way. I felt that we, as foreigners, had not only been accepted, but also honored, and I felt joy and peace...I felt the lines of 'other' disappearing. Shy or bold, dancing or watching, Chinese or American, we were together in song, in dance, and in nurturing each other.”

So ended our visit to Gengcun Village. As we boarded the bus, villagers grasped our hands, smiled, and waved at their American friends who came with the spirit of Nu Wa.