

## Suzhou *Tanci* Storytelling in China: Contexts of Performance

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### Introduction

Suzhou *tanci*, or Suzhou chantefable, is a style of Chinese professional storytelling that combines singing, instrumental music, and a complex mixture of narrative registers and dialogue.<sup>1</sup> Popular in towns and cities in Wu-dialect-speaking regions of the prosperous lower Yangzi (Yangtze) delta, the art is associated with the ancient city of Suzhou (Soochow).<sup>2</sup> Capital of the kingdom of Wu in the sixth century, the city afterward became a center of commerce and culture in the late imperial period, or fourteenth to nineteenth centuries A.D. (Marme 1993:17; Santangelo 1993:81-83). Suzhou was once noted for its great number of successful candidates in the imperial examinations, its colorful literati, flourishing entertainment quarters, and an endless landscape of temples, gardens, and canals lined with whitewashed cottages. The city's opulence faded by the late nineteenth century with the rise of the nearby megalopolis, Shanghai.

Today the lower Yangzi delta is deeply involved in the most recent wave of cultural changes set in motion by the PRC government. In the wake of the massive, often tumultuous programs of social experimentation in the 1949-76 period have come the new challenges of "modernization" and opening to the outside, centering on a state-led plan that entails far-reaching capitalistic market reforms reaching every aspect of society.

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<sup>1</sup> English equivalents for Suzhou *tanci* are many. Among them are Schmidt's (1986) literal rendering, "plucking rhymes" and "strum lyric" (see Mair 1989 and 1997), Tsao's (1988) "southern singing narrative," and Stevens' (1974) and Hodes' (1991) "story-singing." If an English equivalent is desirable, I prefer Hanan's (1973:209) use of the term "chantefable," in the sense that both singing and speaking are used to relate a narrative. See Mair (1997) for more on the history of prosimetric literature in China.

<sup>2</sup> According to Ramsey (1987:87) there are nearly 80 million speakers of Wu dialects. Of these, Ye (1988:2) claims there are approximately 1,820,000 speakers of Suzhou dialect.

As for Suzhou, tourism is presently an important part of its economy, and portions of the city have been set aside for experimentation with modern, Singapore-style apartment complexes.

This paper is a survey of the contexts in which Suzhou *tanci* is presently performed and re-formed throughout the lower Yangzi delta.<sup>3</sup> In emphasizing shifting performance contexts, emergent aspects of form, performance, and reception will be made apparent (cf. Bauman 1977:37), suggesting ways in which Suzhou *tanci* is in several senses a continuing source of meaning for local audiences and an index of social, economic, and political change. Beginning with a survey of the conventions of Suzhou *tanci*, the focus of the paper will shift to form, presentation, patronage, repertoire, performers, loci of performance, and audiences. These sections provide several layers of context for the final section, which describes the process of a representative *tanci* performance in one of Suzhou's most popular story houses.

### **Suzhou *Tanci*: Aspects of the Art**

#### **Basic Conceptualizations**

Suzhou *tanci* belongs to a family of related styles of local dialect storytelling that have at one time or another had some degree of currency in the Yangzi delta.<sup>4</sup> These include styles that are today identified locally as

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<sup>3</sup> The approach to context and performance in this paper has been strongly influenced by the works of Richard Bauman (1977; 1986) and other theorists of the so-called "performance" or "contextual" school of folkloristics (Fine 1989) as well as Foley (1995). In this discussion of Suzhou *tanci*, I have drawn on both Chinese and English sources, though I have attempted to keep the former to a minimum in the interest of appeal to a wider audience. For more extensive bibliographies of Chinese sources, see Zhou and Suzhou 1988; Tsao 1988; Wu et al. 1996; Børdahl 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Zhou and Suzhou 1988 and the more comprehensive Wu et al. 1996 offer the most comprehensive introductions to Suzhou *pingtan* in Chinese. The texts cover history, artistic aspects, repertoire (with extensive listings), aspects of performance, and traditional criticism. See also Chen 1958:133-218. Though brief, Tsao (1988:1-18) is a good general description of Suzhou *tanci* in English, albeit much of the information is derived from earlier Chinese and English sources, particularly Chen 1958 and Hrdlickova 1965. See Blader 1983 for information on the other major form of Suzhou storytelling, *pinghua* (described below). In her dissertation, Hodes (1991:3-7) makes some useful observations on contemporary storytelling in Suzhou. Vibeke Børdahl's excellent study of Yangzhou storytelling (1996) is a thorough examination of a related storytelling context, although

Suzhou *tanci*, Yangzhou *tanci* (an alternate name is Yangzhou *xianci*), and Hangzhou *nanci*.<sup>5</sup> Of these styles of storytelling that combine speech and instrumentally accompanied song, Suzhou *tanci* is by far the most vital, with Yangzhou *tanci* trailing a distant second in popularity. Like Suzhou *tanci*, some of these styles have related genres in written vernacular fiction.<sup>6</sup>

The Suzhou chantefable tradition is often associated with another style of storytelling called Suzhou *pinghua* (which Blader [1983] terms “straight storytelling”). *Pinghua* performances, given in the same contexts as *tanci*, usually feature one performer, concern exploits of heroes, and do not include instrumental music or any but incidental singing. The two arts are often referred to by the syncretic term, Suzhou *pingtan*.

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there is some variation between the traditions, especially in terms of language dialect and performer jargon. In the present section I have by necessity covered some of the same ground as these sources. My approach, however, brings the dimension of extensive fieldwork that included the viewing of over one hundred Suzhou *tanci* and *pinghua* performances, visiting sixteen story houses in Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces, interviewing (formally and informally) over two dozen performers, and traveling for several weeks with nine storytellers from the Suzhou troupe who were performing a middle-length *tanci* story. Some of the observations I made on context and performance conventions in my thesis, “Suzhou *Tanci*: Keys to Performance” (1989b), were revised in my 1995 doctoral dissertation, “*Zaisheng Yuan* and *Meng Lijun*: Performance, Context, and Form of Two *Tanci*.” The main interviewees were the storytellers Gong Huasheng (and his partner Cai Xiaojuan), Yuan Xiaoliang, and Wang Jin. Scholars included Sun Jingyao of the Comparative Literature Center at Suzhou University (who accompanied me during much of my fieldwork); Zhou Liang, of the local cultural bureau of Suzhou; and Wu Zongxi (Zuo Xian), of the Shanghai Municipal Cultural Bureau. I was graciously awarded a fieldwork grant by the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People’s Republic of China, the U.S. Information Agency, and the Department of Education.

<sup>5</sup> These and other terms in this paper are given here in standard Chinese, although all have different pronunciations in Suzhou dialect. See Tsao 1988, Ye 1988, and Bender 1995 for excerpts of *tanci* performances in Suzhou dialect. Historically, the term *nanci* (“southern lyrics”) has been used as a term to describe all of these stylistically similar storytelling styles (Chen 1958:182-83). For a history and description of Hangzhou storytelling, see Yang 1989 and Simmons 1992. While some commentators (Zheng Z. 1938:348, for instance) include Cantonese *muk’yu* (*muyü*, “wooden fish”) traditions in studies of *tanci*, I feel that the traditions in the Yangzi delta are distinct enough to be easily differentiated from these other traditions in terms of form, audience, performers, and contexts of performance. See Zheng S. 1992 for a description of the oral and written traditions of *muk’yu*.

<sup>6</sup> See Hodes 1991 for a study of a late imperial written version of a well-known Suzhou *tanci* story.

The essence of the *pingtan* storytelling styles is described in formulaic terms by storytellers themselves.<sup>7</sup> During an interview in Shanghai in 1992, Yao Yinmei, the innovative 85-year-old performer of the *tanci* story *Tixiao yinyuan* (*Fate in Laughter and Tears*),<sup>8</sup> explained to me that *tanci* involves four aspects: speaking (*shuo*), humor (*xue*), instrumental playing (*tan*), and singing (*chang*). He further observed that it is called *xiaoshu* or “small story” because it involves smaller, more intimate settings than *pinghua*, or “big story” (*dashu*), which depicts battles and martial heroes.<sup>9</sup> These examples can only hint at the wealth of emic terminology concerning Suzhou storytelling.

### Constellations of Performance

Documented changes in the manner in which *tanci* stories are presented have occurred over the last hundred or so years. Most male storytellers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries performed solo (*dandang*), playing the *sanxian*-banjo, though some male performers also had another male (often a brother) to accompany them on the *pipa*-lute. Such duos are termed *shuangdang*. By the 1920s (there seems to be no exact record of the first instance), some male storytellers began performing with their wives or daughters, who took the role of assistant on the *pipa*.<sup>10</sup> Today most *tanci* storytellers perform as duos: usually a male

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<sup>7</sup> Chen 1958, Zuo 1981, Blader 1983, Tsao 1988, and other sources have noted these commonly expressed descriptive categories (see Yao 1986). See Bender 1989a for a discussion of the traditional aesthetics of Suzhou storytelling as formulated by performers in the late imperial period.

<sup>8</sup> Yao’s orally performed version is one of the most famous *tanci* adaptations of Zhang Henshui’s famous novel, serialized 1927-30 (see Zhang H. 1985).

<sup>9</sup> See Gu 1991 for a biography of Yao. For more detailed comments on the act of performance, see Yao 1986.

<sup>10</sup> Though increasingly common in the 1930s, the practice of mixed-gender performances was not accepted by the Guangyu Guild until the 1940s and was never wholly legitimate in some people’s eyes until after 1949. Gong Huasheng claims that a relative of his was the first to introduce this innovation in the twenties. Yao Yinmei (as noted above) also believes that the custom started then, with the increase in women’s freedom after the 1911 revolution. Even today mixed-gender pairs are encouraged to marry, and long-term affairs between unmarried performers working together are not unknown. (Pairs with such a relation are known among performers as *matou fuqi*—literally, “husband and wife of the river ports.” The term *matou* figuratively means a

lead (*shangshou*, literally “upper-hand”) and a female assistant (*xiashou*, or “lower-hand”) (Chen 1958:172). Pairs of men, once the rule seventy years ago, are uncommon today, though pairs of women are on the increase, largely due to a lack of younger male performers.<sup>11</sup> A few men and women perform solo, and in some situations three storytellers (*sange dang*) or even more may perform together.

Both the solo and duo *tanci* forms have strengths and weaknesses.<sup>12</sup> In *dandang*, the single performer is in complete control of the story and, in the words of performer Yuan Xiaoliang, “can take it anywhere he likes.” However, the musical appeal of *shuangdang tanci*, with the mixture of the *sanxian*-banjo and *pipa*-lute music, is greater than that of the *sanxian*-banjo alone.<sup>13</sup> *Shuangdang* performers must work together, the *shangshou* literally “leading the way” and the *xiashou* following his or her cues. Thus the *shuangdang* performers are more reliant on written scripts (despite the ability to improvise when necessary) than *dandang* performers, since it is easy to “get lost” if cues are not met. *Shuangdang* performers speak of “tossing” (*diu*) the story back and forth between them, and in rehearsal they emphasize the lyrical passages and those points where the roles of character and narrator are exchanged between them.<sup>14</sup>

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storytelling venue.)

<sup>11</sup> In a mixed-gender pair a woman is almost never the lead, except when the positions are momentarily switched for effect. I was told by several performers that men were simply unwilling to be the *xiashou* for women. In special performances, however, a younger man may accompany a woman on the *sanxian* as she sings a *kaipian* (“opening ballad”).

<sup>12</sup> I am particularly indebted to Gong Huasheng, Cai Xiaojuan, Yuan Xiaoliang, and Wang Jin for many of the following remarks. Cai’s remarks on the role of the *xiashou* (assistant) in performance were especially enlightening. For a written source on *shuangdang*, see the 1986 article by the well-known *tanci* performer Zhang Jianting in which he stresses the difficulties in finding a suitable partner; see also Zuo 1981:34.

<sup>13</sup> Yuan Xiaoliang feels that many audience members find the music of the single *sanxian* to be dull.

<sup>14</sup> I was able to observe Yuan and Wang rehearse on a number of occasions. Such rehearsals were usually done in very low voices, with the pair seated very close to each other.



Audience in an old folks' center in Wuxi, a special performance context.



Well-known “amateur” performers Dong Yaokun and wife, Ni Huaiyu, performing an excerpt from the story *Jade Dragonfly* at the old folks' center in Wuxi on Old Folks' Day (Autumn, 1991). This is an example of the duo (*shuangdang*) constellation.



An old curmudgeon and a spunky maidservant spar in a scene from *Jade Dragonfly*. Performers often gesture and sometimes stand, but will never touch each other in the course of a performance.



Acting in character, Ni Huaiyu (daughter of the accomplished *Pearl Pagoda* performer, Ni Qingping) holds her hand to her hip in a conventional posture denoting a maidservant.



The brilliant Li Renzhen, winner of several national storytelling awards. A performer of Yangzhou chantefable, Ms. Li spends several months a year performing solo in the areas around Yangzhou, which lies north of the Yangzi River from Suzhou. When performing the speaking roles, the *pipa*-lute is often laid on the table in front of the storyteller, a different configuration from duo storytelling. This was a private performance given in 1991 for the interviewer.

In *shuangdang* it is usually the lead who does most of the narration, though the narrator's role may sometimes be taken up by the *xiashou*, who customarily plays female roles and roles of minor characters. According to performer Cai Xiaojuan, a good *xiashou* should be poised, attentive, and, if necessary, able to help out the lead if he or she gets lost or confused.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> I was told many stories about performers becoming confused or forgetting cues. Experienced *tanci* storytellers—especially those who work well together—can often cover (*mibu*) these mistakes, though it may take considerable imagination. Factors contributing to this confusion would include familiarity with the story, state of mind, and health. Even though a contemporary performer is very likely working from a written script, such aids have never been allowed onstage. Thus, performers who “get lost” must be resourceful to avoid embarrassment.



## Story Length

The duo form is most often the vehicle for performing the popular full-length *tanci* (*changpian tanci*)—the stories told daily in story houses. In the past, most full-length *tanci* took up to three months to tell, with two episodes constituting a two-hour set told each day. Since the late 1970s, the length has been cut to two weeks, though occasionally performances may run up to a month. In the post-1949 period, when official governing bodies called for increased experimentation in form, a new style called *zhongpian tanci* (middle-length *tanci*) was developed. Performances of these stories last about three hours. Each middle-length group is called a *sange dang* (three-person group). The form is attributed to an earlier leader of the Suzhou Pingtan Troupe, Pan Boying. Stories may be written just for this form or adapted from full-length stories. Middle-length stories are performed by up to three trios of storytellers, usually in the context of a theater or as a special performance in a story house.<sup>16</sup> A short form (*duanpian*) that lasts less than an hour has also been popular since 1949. It is featured at contests and special performances and may include any number of performers.

## Registers of Performance

*Tanci* performances involve shifting among a number of language and kinesic registers.<sup>17</sup> These include narration, dialogue between characters, and singing. Performances of traditional stories set in feudal times are given in an obsolescent form of Suzhou dialect called “old style,” or *jiupai* (Ye 1988:78). Speeches of certain elite characters, such as

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<sup>16</sup> One of the better known *zhongpian tanci* is *Jen qing jia yi* (*True Love, False Meaning*) written by Xu Mengdan in the early 1980s (1998). Set in contemporary times, the story involves a love affair between an honest worker, temporarily blinded while stopping a thief, and twin sisters, one nice and the other nasty. In the spring of 1992, I toured throughout the Jiangnan region with nine storytellers in the Suzhou Pingtan Troupe as they performed a *zhongpian* called *Yang Naiwu yu Xiao Baicai Xin Bian* (*A New Version of the Yang Naiwu and Little Cabbage Story*), written by Gong Huasheng. Performances, which lasted three hours, were given in story houses, opera houses, and cultural arts theaters. Three performers were on stage for each of the three parts of the story.

<sup>17</sup> See Zuo 1981 for a discussion of these registers. Interpretations of the registers vary somewhat among Suzhou storytellers, and Yangzhou storytellers have a different (though in some cases similar) jargon for identifying them (Børdahl 1996).

scholars, officials, and upper-class women are presented in a form of old Mandarin known as *Zhongzhouyun*, common as a sort of official's lingua franca in the Yangzi delta since the tenth century. Borrowed from Kunju opera (a local predecessor of Peking opera), *Zhongzhouyun* is also the medium for many song lyrics. Stories set in modern times use contemporary Suzhou dialect and do not normally include *Zhongzhouyun*.

There are a number of divisions in speaking style recognized by the performers. These categories are basically divided into *biao*, the narrative voices of the narrators, and *bai*, the dialogue of the characters. One of the most engaging aspects of some Suzhou *tanci* performances is the deployment of certain conventional registers to allow the audience private entry into a character's thoughts. In many cases a character may say only a few words, but the implied thoughts are many, and often in ironic counterpoint to what is actually said. In some instances, when the "inner" registers are used, only the character's thoughts are given. In other instances, through the use of the narrative *biao*, both the thoughts of the characters and comments (often interpretive and or evaluative) are related by the narrator. Among the devices most effective for stirring audience emotion are the "silent" songs sung by characters in expressing inner grief or sorrow, often during a crisis in the story. In some instances, a sort of antiphonal inner-dialogue may be presented. The "spoken" or "sung" thoughts of two characters are presented in turns, sometimes interspaced by short lines of audible dialogue. This movement between what is thought and what is spoken also proves very useful in situations involving trickery and deceit, in cases when information—which the audience may already know—is being hidden from another character. In some instances, performers may devote whole episodes to such determinations in order to fill the time.<sup>18</sup> Interesting twists and turns in action are enhanced by the manipulation of the characters' access to knowledge. A brief example from the story *Meng Lijun* can only hint at the complexity of such situations.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Storytellers must be very time-conscious, since they work within a strict two-hour frame.

<sup>19</sup> The story of *Meng Lijun* was created by a female author, Chen Duansheng, in the eighteenth century. Originally a lengthy prosimetric written work, the story was adapted into Suzhou *tanci* in the 1940s by Qin Jiwen and again in the 1960s by Pan Boying. Pan's version was revived and embellished by Gong Huasheng in the late 1970s. The present excerpt is from a performance by Yuan Xiaoliang and Wang Jin at the Guangyu Story House, Suzhou, on December 9, 1991. In the story, a maiden genius, *Meng Lijun*, runs away from a marriage with an evil young man. Her maidservant and friend, *Su Yingxue*, is forced to marry in her stead. *Su* stabs the groom with a pair of scissors and jumps out a window into a lake. She is later rescued by the wife of a prime

Here, Meng Lijun, disguised as a groom, ponders how to deal with “his” suspicious bride, “his” former maidservant Su Yingxue, now masquerading as a prime minister’s daughter and slowly catching on to who her groom really is:

(Wang Jin, the assistant storyteller, adopts the role of Su Yingxue, singing in a narrative *biao* mode used while in character)

In a moment,  
As things quiet down inside the “green window,”  
I want you to remove your shoes,  
To reveal the tiny embroidered slippers.  
This strategy is called, “First show you courtesy,  
Then slowly get even with you.”

(Wang shifts to narrator singing mode)

She lowers her head, acting very shy.  
Now Maiden Su is a good actor.

(shifts to narrative *biao* mode used while in character)

Today your acting ability is good, but I absolutely cannot lose to you.  
So, thinking thus far, she makes up her mind to sweet-talk her. She takes a sideways glance and, her lips slightly parted, emits a tiny giggle, “*ge le*.”  
But today that doesn’t matter!

(shift to lead Yuan Xiaoliang, the lead performer, who speaks as Meng Lijun in an “inner voice” mode)

Looking at it this way, a while later I will be able to reveal myself to you.

(shift to assistant Wang Jin as Su Yingxue, in an “inner voice” mode)

You think that this is so easy to resolve? Just wait, and I’ll give you a taste of my own stuff. I will make you squirm.

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minister in the imperial capital. Meanwhile, Meng Lijun, disguised as a young scholar, sits for the imperial examinations, placing first. Soon afterward, “he” is engaged to the daughter of a high minister. On the wedding night, both parties suspect they may know the true identity of their new “spouse.” This scene is part of the process of revelation and discovery that occurs in the wedding suite, as Meng and Su confront each other on much different terms than when they last met. See Bender 1995:281-339 for a complete transcript.

(shift to lead Yuan Xiaoliang in narrator *biao* mode)

The two persons then looked repeatedly at each other, their mutual perceptions wholly opposite. They ate awhile. When they had pretty much finished eating the “Meal of Harmony,” maids young and old came from the sides and the bowls and chopsticks on the table were all picked up and put away. . . .

Though fewer than in Chinese opera, specific gestures are associated with each character role-type. Lower-class characters may speak Suzhou dialect and, in some cases, dialects from other areas. In late imperial stories set before the 1912 Revolution (such as *Yang Naiwu yu Xiao Baicai*), eunuchs speak Mandarin, which some performers refer to by the current term *Putonghua* (“the common language”). In stories set after 1912, storytellers often wear formal western dress when performing, and the characters they portray speak in either modern Suzhou dialect, Standard Mandarin, or in special cases other regional dialects. In performing his version of *Tixiao yinyuan*, for example, Yao Yinmei employed eighteen different Chinese dialects. In late imperial and modern stories, foreigners speak in heavily accented Standard Mandarin.

### Singing and Music

According to veteran performer Huang Yi’an, the music of *tanci* was once known simply as *tanci diao* (1992:pers. comm.). There are about twenty popular *liupai*, or schools of music/singing, all named after their originators, a few who can be traced to the latter nineteenth century. One of the best known is the Jiang *diao*, created by Jiang Yuequan in the 1930s. There are also many *diao* (tunes) developed by lesser known performers, sometimes within a particular geographical area. The most influential tunes among young performers today are the Yu *diao*, which is a basic tune presently taught for female singing roles in the Pingtan School, and the above-mentioned Jiang *diao*, commonly used for male singing roles.<sup>20</sup>

Line lengths of lyrics vary, and singing passages may be performed in either the Suzhou dialect or *Zhongzhouyun*, depending on the story context. The “opening ballads” that precede the main story, known as *kaipian*, tend to have a somewhat stricter form and “tighter” lyrics than sung passages in the main stories. Tsao states that “in performance the

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<sup>20</sup> See Tsao 1988 for the most intensive study of Suzhou *tanci* music to date.

7-syllable line-stanzas are usually sung in divisions of 2+5 or 4+3” (1988:12).

Besides the *diao*, there are also a number of special, conventionalized “minor” tunes known as *xiaoqu* or *xiaodiao*. These have names such as *meipo diao* (go-between tune), *mihun diao* (dazed spirit tune), or *luanjiti* (wild cock crowing) and are used in scenes that employ stereotyped character roles and may be used to excite audiences by a display of singing prowess. Thus, *meipo diao* is used in scenes involving matchmakers, *mihun diao* is employed when a character has fainted or been knocked unconscious, and *luanjiti* appears in swift descriptions of miscellaneous things (as in a market) or in the songs of verbose lower characters (often accompanied by very fast-paced vocalization and played on the *sanxian*-banjo). One of these *xiaodiao* is called *shange diao* (hill song, or folksong tune). This tune can be introduced in concert with minor characters, such as boat people, to pass time. The *ling-ling diao* is used with very evil characters, and is sometimes employed to take up time due to its casual pace. Certain melodies, such as the *nuomiqiang* (sticky-rice melody), can add variation to tunes and help create special effects. Flourishes in singing are known as *huaqiang* and are added to performances as storytellers mature.<sup>21</sup>

### Types of Episode

The most common of the performance contexts, which will be elaborated upon below, is that of the story house. Performances in these halls usually last for two hours, beginning with an opening ballad. The actual story is divided into two sections, with a break about halfway through (there is no strictly set moment).

Episodes of *pingtan* stories are described as being either *guanzi shu* (crisis episodes) or *nongtang shu* (elaboration episodes).<sup>22</sup> *Guanzi shu* are episodes in which there is a great deal of rising action and excitement.

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<sup>21</sup> Most of the information on the lesser known tunes and melodies was supplied to me in interviews with Yuan Xiaoliang in June, 1992. Certainly there is much more to be documented about these aspects of *tanci* music. See Zhou 1988:20 for comments on some of these phenomena, which he terms *paiziqu* (standard tunes).

<sup>22</sup> Wu et al. 1996:34-35; Zhou and Suzhou 1988:136-37; Tsao 1988:11. Børdahl (1996:449) translates *guanzi* as “crisis,” which I follow here. This is a typical instance where Yangzhou and Suzhou storytelling share terminology.

Performers speak of *shangle da guanzi*—the development of a big crisis.<sup>23</sup> Since *tanci* performances move in a wavelike action over the two-week engagement, a typical story will have many small and large *guanzi*, or crises. Interwoven amidst the *guanzi shu*, the *nongtang shu* are characterized by detail and numerous inserted narratives (and often humor), rather than by action. The first episode of an engagement is usually a *nongtang shu*, in which scenes are set and characters introduced. An especially well crafted *nongtang shu* is sometimes termed a *penjing shu*, or “bonsai episode” (Gong 1982; Fang 1986:32-33), reflecting the idea that while some *nongtang shu* include many elements that function on one level to pass time, others may be true masterpieces of entertainment.<sup>24</sup> The division between *nongtang shu* and *guanzi shu* is not always clear-cut, and particular episodes of a given story may have elements of both. Also, the first episode of the day may be a *nongtang shu*, yet the second may involve a *guanzi*.<sup>25</sup>

Overall, the frame of a Suzhou *tanci* episode allows for the insertion of meta-narratives (personal anecdotes, anecdotes of other people, legends, historical references, and so on), songs, jokes, and the introduction of minor characters who are used to maintain interest and pass the time, though not necessarily to move the story forward. In many cases, such insertions are planned beforehand, but storytellers sometimes feel the need to improvise. Stuck in a situation in which he or she “has no story” (*meiyou shu*)—that is, if the action is related too quickly and the lead runs out of planned material—the performers must call on all resources to fill in the time or risk grave censure by the patrons. Thus songs can be lengthened—even improvised—jokes cracked (sometimes at the assistant’s expense) or a short narrative told, whether it quite fits or not. Introducing a minor character or two, usually a couple involved in something ridiculous or even off-color, is also a way of passing time. In some cases, performers may be known for the unique diversions that make up certain of these episodes (usually in the

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<sup>23</sup> Some of these very commonly heard observations on *guanzi* made here were expressed by Gong Huasheng and Yuan Xiaoliang in various interviews, 1991-92.

<sup>24</sup> In efforts to make *tanci* appeal to younger audiences, it has been suggested that *nongtang shu* be “eliminated.” *Pingtán* researcher Fu Jurong feels that to do so would be to eliminate the real essence of *pingtan*, since some of the most interesting aspects of the art appear in such episodes (1992: pers. comm.).

<sup>25</sup> See Zhou 1988:57-64 for a detailed discussion of *guanzi* and the structure of *tanci* episodes.

*nongtangshu*). One device, attributed to more than one performer, is a review of the five-thousand-year history of China in only one minute.

In some instances, performers may feel that they *lack* time and, in order to advance the plot to a certain stage that day, must delete or abridge some part of the performance. In such situations, a song may be left unsung, or trivial dialogue left unspoken. Though built of traditional and sometimes rigid conventions, the “open” frame of Suzhou *tanci* performances allows complex interaction and manipulation of frames and registers, giving performers various means for enlivening their performances.<sup>26</sup>

### Repertoire

Stories are called *shu* (literally “books,” though the term seems to mean “stories”). The designation is sometimes applied to episodes usually known as *hui*. Zhou lists 68 titles of *tanci* stories that have been performed in the last 150 years (1988:150-52). Following categories devised in the fifties, the list is divided into three categories: *chuantong shu* (traditional stories), defined as any story performed before 1949; *erlei shu* (second category stories), stories on traditional themes created or performed after 1949; and *xiandai tici* (contemporary subjects), or works dealing with contemporary society. Stories in the first category, dating from at least as early as the mid-nineteenth century, include *Zhenzhu ta* (Pearl Pagoda), *Yu qingting* (Jade Dragonfly), *Baishe zhuan* (Legend of the White Snake), *Miaojin feng* (Engraved Gold Phoenix), *Wopao* (Japanese Cloak), *San xiao yinyuan* (Three Smiles), *Luo jin shan* (Dropped Gold Fan), *Shuang zhu feng* (Matching Pearl Phoenixes), and *Shuang jin ding* (Pair of Gold Vessels). Stories made popular in the earlier half of the twentieth century include *Yang Naiwu yu Xiao Baicai* (Yang Naiwu and Little Cabbage), *Ti xiao yinyuan* (Fate in Laughter and Tears), *Xixiang ji* (The Story of the West Wing), and in the late 1940s *Zaisheng yuan* (Love Reincarnate).

Second category stories include *Meng Lijun* and *Qin Xianglian* (both named after the lead character), *Mei hua meng* (Plum Blossom Dream), *Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai* (Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai), *Pipa ji* (The Story of the Lute), *Hudie bei* (Butterfly Quilt), *Fei Long Zhuan* (The Legend of Flying Dragon), and *Xiao Meng Lijun* (Little Meng Lijun). Many other stories were adapted from older stories or written from scratch

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<sup>26</sup> See Bender 1999 for a discussion of how the shifts between various elements of performance arouse and hold audience attention.

on traditional themes and performed throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Some, such as *Xiao Meng Lijun*, do not appear in Zhou's bibliography.<sup>27</sup> Stories in the third category, usually comparatively short, include *Jiu long kou* (Nine Dragon Mouth), *Xiao Dangui zhi si* (The Death of Xiao Dangui), and *Hongsede zhongzi* (The Red Sprouts).<sup>28</sup> Such stories, dating from the 1950s and 1970s, often have an explicit political dimension. *Xiao Dangui zhi si*, for instance, concerns an undercover Red agent in the thirties who at one point must masquerade as a traditional opera singer. Most *tanci* stories in the first and second categories follow the "talented scholar meets beautiful young lady" (*caizi jiaren*) love-story theme common in Chinese fiction. Others, such as *Tixiao yinyuan* (adapted from Zhang Henshui's serialized novel), have more modern settings or depart variously from traditional themes. Since the mid-1990s, stories set in urban Shanghai in the 1930s and 1940s have become popular.

There are hundreds of the short ballads (*kaipian*) that are sung before the beginning of the main narrative in story houses or in a variety of situations discussed below. *Kaipian* exist either as lyrical ballads complete in themselves or as excerpts from longer stories.<sup>29</sup> An example of the first type is "Du Shiniang," dating from the 1930s, which concerns a courtesan by that name in the collections known as the *Sanyan*, edited by Feng Monglong in the late Ming dynasty.<sup>30</sup> Another famous *kaipian* is "Who on earth has no mother?" (*Shijie, nage meiyou niangqin?*), based on a scene in performer Jiang Yuequan's version of *Jade Dragonfly*, which he performed from the thirties until the early sixties.

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<sup>27</sup> I had the pleasure of recording and interviewing the young performers Lu Shixiao and Yan Wenwu at Wuxi and Suzhou while they performed *Xiao Meng Lijun* in 1991 and 1992.

<sup>28</sup> *Jiu long ko* is a term from traditional opera associated with an area of the stage where high-ranking characters make an entrance. See Zhou and Suzhou 1988 and Wu et al. 1996 for synopses of a number of traditional and modern *pingtan* stories.

<sup>29</sup> Ma Rufei, a famous innovator on the story *Pearl Pagoda*, compiled a collection of over three hundred *kaipian* (termed *nanci* in that text) in the late nineteenth century (Chen 1958:200-05). Many collections of *kaipian* were published in the twentieth century, particularly during the thirties. Thirty *kaipian*, popular in recent years, are included in *Pingtán zhishi shouche* (Zhou and Suzhou 1988). Mao 1991 includes the texts of 157 *kaipian* popular since 1949.

<sup>30</sup> Tsao 1988 includes transcriptions of several *kaipian*, including "Du Shiniang." Also, see Pian 1986 for a transcription/translation of the *kaipian*, "Birthday Wishes from the Eight Immortals" (*Ba xian shang shou*).



## Patronage

As early as the reign of emperor Qianlong in the Qing dynasty (1736-96), storytellers in Suzhou were organized into guilds.<sup>31</sup> The most famous of these was the *Guangyu gongsuo* (Brilliant Abundance Guild), started in 1776 by the famous performer Wang Zhoushi.<sup>32</sup> The function of the guilds was to give the profession an official status and to protect the economic situation of its members by attempting to exert control over regional teahouses and later over story houses.<sup>33</sup> The organization also worked as a kind of cooperative for member performers, who until the 1940s were all male. After a court battle with the conservative *Guangyu she* over mixed-gender performances, the *Puyushe* (Universal Abundance Guild), which ran a school for performers of both sexes, was chartered in 1935 (Yi 1988:218). After 1949, the old guilds were disbanded and performers (including the many who were not guild members) were reorganized into *pingtan* troupes or more general performing arts troupes. The Shanghai Municipal *Pingtan* Troupe (*Shanghai shi pingtan tuan*) was established in 1951, followed by the Suzhou Municipal *Pingtan* Troupe (*Suzhou shi pingtan tuan*) organized in 1951-52. Troupes were established at provincial, county, and municipal levels throughout the Wu-speaking areas of the Lower Yangzi delta (Zhou and Suzhou 1988:293-337). In Jiangsu province, *pingtan* is overseen on the provincial level by the cultural bureau in Nanjing and locally by the Suzhou City Cultural Bureau. Presently, troupes help members arrange performance engagements, distribute earnings, provide retirement benefits, organize meetings and events, and act as an in-house vehicle for government propaganda. Though post-1949 troupes once supplied members with regular salaries and other benefits, by the late 1980s and early 1990s troupes were working out their

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<sup>31</sup> See Chen 1958:173-74.

<sup>32</sup> Chen 1958:180-81; Zhou 1983:44-45; Hrdlickova 1965; Tsao 1988. The name *Guangyu gongsuo* was later changed to *Guangyu she* in 1912. A ceremony commemorating the one hundred fiftieth anniversary of its establishment was held in 1926 (Chen 1958:181). A stone column commemorating the event stands in the courtyard of the Suzhou Kunju Opera Museum.

<sup>33</sup> See Santangelo 1993:93-95 for information on the historical presence of various professional guilds in Suzhou.

own economic systems and doing away with the “iron rice-bowl” of previous decades.<sup>34</sup>

As of early 1992, the Suzhou troupe consisted of over sixty members, about half of them in retirement. Fifteen percent of an active performer’s earnings was garnered by the troupe (though the figure was lowered to ten percent in July, 1992) and used towards retirement benefits (for those already retired!) and other expenses. Performers and troupe representatives attempt to negotiate for daily minimum salaries with individual story houses, with performers receiving a cut of ticket sales (usually twenty percent) above that amount.<sup>35</sup> Thus there is incentive for the performers to do well, as the daily minimum was about 35 *yuan* for the better pairs of performers. In general, however, performers do not regard their salaries as high, especially when travel and food expenses are taken into account.<sup>36</sup> Occasionally story houses provide meals; lodging, though often poor, is free. Some storytellers can earn extra money by performing ballads in high-class restaurants and resorts that have sprung up in the economic boom of the 1990s.

Since neither of the Suzhou troupe’s two story houses could survive on proceeds from *pingtan* performances alone, videos are shown daily, largely to audiences of idle young males. The guesthouse behind the Guangyu Story House is also a source of income. Plans were in the works in mid-1992 to expand the troupe’s money-making activities. Thus, the troupe is primarily self-supporting, though local government funding and funding from private interests, such as factories, is sometimes obtained when sponsorship for special activities is needed (for instance, the Fortieth

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<sup>34</sup> Information in these paragraphs on the economic and administrative aspects of the story houses and troupes was supplied largely by Gong Huasheng and Cai Xiaojuan in interviews held in early 1992. Gong noted that numerous changes in systems of the various *pingtan* troupes (there are differences in administration) were expected in coming years. Wu Zongxi (1999:pers. comm.) relates that the biggest change has been that storytellers now keep most of their earnings.

<sup>35</sup> Some houses routinely underreport the number of tickets sold each day, thus affecting a performer’s wages. According to Yuan Xiaoliang, this practice is known as *qiepiao* (slicing off tickets). While on stage, some performers actually count audience members if they suspect they are being cheated (Yuan claims it takes him only a minute to count, adding up the heads five at a time).

<sup>36</sup> In early 1992 a radio show in Shanghai reported on the poor living conditions and low salaries of performers. Some commentators, however, felt that thirty-five *yuan* a day was quite a decent wage. By the late 1990s, some performers have done quite well financially, though some smaller troupes have been forced to disband due to poor business.

Anniversary of the Suzhou *Pingtán* Troupe held in late 1991). Besides a troupe leader, there are several vice-leaders, a Party secretary, an accountant, and several office staff, nearly all of whom (including the Party secretary) were once active storytellers themselves. Most of the lobby and maintenance help are middle-aged females.<sup>37</sup>

## Performers

Performers once came to the trade of storytelling as a result of family tradition, out of personal interest, or from economic necessity.<sup>38</sup> Better performers were members of the guilds, enjoying the title of *xiansheng* (“master”—a term more dignified than that of *shifu*, or “craftsman”), and some made considerable amounts of money.<sup>39</sup> However, the profession has long been associated with the *jianghu* (itinerant entertainer) trades of fortunetelling, quack medicine, animal shows, gymnastics, martial arts, and other performances given in marketplaces and temple fairs by persons of sometimes dubious repute.<sup>40</sup> After 1949, the status of performers of traditional arts was officially raised from one of debasement to one of respected artists.

In the past, a prospective student—often only a youngster—would hold a special *bai shi* (literally, “reverencing a master”) ceremony to officially apprentice with a master. The student had to proffer a fee and sometimes lived in the master’s home as a sort of servant.<sup>41</sup> A young storyteller might take several masters, some officially and some unofficially. Whatever the case, there was great competition to find

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<sup>37</sup> Gong Huasheng noted in an interview in the fall of 1991 that many story houses had problems finding younger staff members because of low pay.

<sup>38</sup> See Hrdlickova 1965 and Tsao 1988:16-18.

<sup>39</sup> The term *xiansheng* was once reserved for males, though in some contexts today, including that of professional storytelling, the term may be applied to females.

<sup>40</sup> In the Confucian view, entertainers were not among the four classes of respectable occupations, which in order of merit were the gentry-officials, farmers, craftsmen, and merchants (Grasso et al. 1991:10-15).

<sup>41</sup> The life stories of several *pingtan* performers appear in *Pingtán yishujia pingzhuan lu* (Shanghai quyī 1991) and in numerous volumes of the Suzhou storytelling journal *Pingtán yishu* (Jiangsu 1982-98). These accounts often have descriptions of how performers apprenticed with a series of masters.

reputable masters and improve one's art and income. If one could not afford a master, the only alternative was to *toushu* (steal stories). According to this practice, a youngster would listen outside (or if lucky, inside) a story house and remember the story, practicing it later on his or her own.<sup>42</sup>

After the establishment of official schools in the 1950s, the old master/apprentice relationship was modified, though not wholly abandoned. The *bai shi* ceremony ended by the 1960s when the whole *pingtan* world was turned upside down by the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). As early as the Anti-Rightist Movement in 1957, some performers had been singled out as reactionary and imprisoned.<sup>43</sup> *Pingtan* performances on revolutionary themes, sometimes with large groups of performers on stage at once, were typical of the Cultural Revolution. Performers who were still considered politically fit to teach were addressed by students as "aunt" or "uncle," rather than as "master."

In the early 1980s, on a wave of enthusiasm over the revival of *pingtan*, the Suzhou *Pingtan* School reopened. A new building was constructed in 1986 with encouragement from elderly economist Chen Yun, a powerful figure in the Chinese Communist Party and a well-known *tanci* aficionado. In the present regimen, students are trained for three years in the classroom, learning the rudiments of singing, playing the *pipa*-lute and *sanxian*-banjo, and speaking. Students memorize scripts, then perform portions of them in class during tests. Music is taught using a combination of basic Western music theory and traditional methods. The curriculum includes a number of courses on subjects such as Chinese literature, history, and politics, leading to a *zhongzhuan* (junior college) diploma. After completing coursework, students are assigned to apprentice with an established master for three to six months, usually "receiving" the master's story. During the apprenticeship the student sits in on each performance, then is gradually asked to take part.

In the advent of this apprenticeship, the student participates in a *bai shi* ceremony sponsored by the school. In the early and mid-1980s, this was often a group event involving several students and masters. However, in

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<sup>42</sup> This was how Suzhou troupe leader Gong Huasheng learned his art. As a child, his partner and wife, Cai Xiaojuan, was sent to story houses to steal stories for her uncle (he would have been driven away if recognized), who then wrote down the contents. Cai's memory was so sharp that she began to join her uncle on stage at age nine.

<sup>43</sup> For example, one well-known *pinghua* performer was capped a "rightist" and sent to Qinghai for several years of education through labor. Several performers in Suzhou have told me of being held in makeshift prisons for several years.

recent years the tendency has been towards individual ceremonies, since some students must now find their own masters. The school typically helps defray some of the costs for the *bai shi* banquet. Performers wishing to take another master later in their careers, either to improve artistically or to increase social connections, are responsible for paying for the ceremony, which may cost hundreds or even thousands of *yuan*, depending on the requirements of the master.<sup>44</sup>

In 1992, only one performer in the Suzhou troupe aged thirty or younger was trained in a traditional manner outside the Pingtan School.<sup>45</sup> Due to a decline in interest in the popular performing arts among young people, few students in the late 1980s and 1990s have been recruited to the *pingtan* school from Suzhou. Almost all come from small towns and rural areas in the Wu dialect area, and nearly all require preliminary training in the standard Suzhou dialect of speech.<sup>46</sup> Reasons why students audition for the school include a general interest in performing, the promise of a *zhongzhuan* diploma, and the possibility of an urban residency permit. Students sign a contract under which they agree to return to their own local troupes (if their area has one), though such agreements are not always honored. Few younger students have a good understanding of professional storytelling before enrollment, and many now change professions after graduation, despite the fact that some troupes have residency requirements of up to six years that can be broken only by payments of sums of up to several thousand *yuan*.

Amateur or “avocational” storytellers (*piaoyou*) regularly perform at factories and old folks’ homes, and sometimes hold gatherings in story houses (cf. Mark 1990). A number of very active amateurs hold regular meetings in the cities of Suzhou, Shanghai, Wuxi, and Changzhou. Some

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<sup>44</sup> In the summer of 1992, I was invited to attend a *bai shi* ceremony (this rendering is a common shortened form of the term *bai laoshi*) in which a young woman in the Suzhou troupe, Zhou Xiaojun, took the famous Shanghai troupe *tanci* performer Yu Hongxian as a second master. In doing so she changed her name to Zhou Hong. At nearly the same time, I witnessed Jin Lisheng of the Suzhou troupe take Yang Zijiang as a master in order to receive a famous story from him.

<sup>45</sup> This was Yuan Xiaoliang; see Bender 1993 for detailed information on his training.

<sup>46</sup> A typical student, whom I interviewed at the school in late 1991, is Tao Qing, aged nineteen. I later visited her home in a small village ten miles outside of Wuxi. Her father is a farmer and her mother works in a local office. The village is well-to-do, though it did not have a story house until 1992. Older people in her family were interested in *tanci*, but she knew little about it before enrolling in the school.

of the oldest and most beautifully crafted musical instruments are in the hands of amateurs.<sup>47</sup>

### Performance Situations

Before 1949 Suzhou *tanci* was performed in a number of contexts, some of which are similar to current situations (Zuo 1981:112-21; Zhou 1988:160-69). The oldest locations for performances were in marketplaces or temple fairs. Open air performances in such contexts (often by less accomplished storytellers) continued into the mid-twentieth century.

By the late nineteenth century, many storytellers worked on a commission basis in *chaguan* (teahouses) that offered a variety of entertainments. In the early decades of this century, *shuchang* (story houses), establishments that existed primarily for the telling of stories, became common.<sup>48</sup>

Another performance context was the *tanghui*, in which storytellers were invited to perform for a specified period of time (ranging from one day to several weeks) in a private home or other institution.<sup>49</sup> *Huishu* (sometimes *shuhui*) were gatherings held at the end of the year in which, over a period of days, a number of storytellers told their best episodes. Since many storytellers moved around most of the year, these events gave them a chance to view each other's performances and size up new talents

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<sup>47</sup> For information on avocational groups before 1949, see Ni 1988.

<sup>48</sup> There were several types of *shuchang* (story houses), and the term was sometimes used interchangeably with *chaguan* (or teahouse) (Zhou 1988:162). In some *shuchang*, stories were told along with opening ballads (*kaipian*). In others, women sang songs and ballads, there being no actual storytelling. These *shuchang* featuring only singing were sometimes described by the term *qingchang* (pure singing). In the late Qing fictional narrative *Jiu wei gui* (The Nine-Tailed Turtle), the narrator relates his visit to such a *shuchang* in Suzhou, describing how patrons wrote their requests on slips of paper (*tiaozi*) to be given by waiters to the performers, some of whom were prostitutes. Today, notes are sometimes used by audience members to request favorite *kaipian*, though an improperly made request can be considered insulting to performers. See Feng 1988 for an overview of *shuchang* in the last one hundred years. Ni 1986 details the development of story houses in Shanghai.

<sup>49</sup> A Mr. Yang, the third-generation manager of the only story house in the town of Puyuan, Zhejiang province, told me that during the 1930s Japanese soldiers sometimes came to the story house to recruit *tanci* storytellers for *tanghui* performances.

who might qualify for guild membership.<sup>50</sup> In the 1930s and 1940s, radio broadcasts of *pingtan* became popular, creating a vehicle for the rapid popularization of *tanci* among a vast audience of Wu-dialect speakers. Innovative talents like Jiang Yuequan used the Shanghai airwaves to introduce new styles of singing and music to urban audiences, swiftly gaining fame via the new medium.<sup>51</sup>

Throughout the 1990s, the contexts of Suzhou *tanci* have expanded, despite the perceived decline of interest in the art. Traditional story house performances, described in detail below, are given on a daily basis in dozens of story houses in the Wu-speaking area.<sup>52</sup> Depending on their fame, troupe standing, and connections, storytellers may also have opportunities to perform at *zhaodai yanqu*, special performances given at receptions for businesses, banquets, and local government functions. These occasions are similar to the old *tanghui* performances, though storytellers demand to be treated with respect and will usually not perform while guests are actually eating, as was once the custom. Some tourist spots, such as Suzhou Street in the Summer Palace in Beijing and the Wangshi Yuan (Master of Nets Garden) in Suzhou, regularly feature performances of the short opening ballads called *kaipian*. Select performers in the Suzhou and Shanghai troupes and accomplished amateurs are sometimes invited by various organizations to sing *kaipian* and relate episodes of famous stories.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> The term *huishu* can act as a noun or a verb (for example, “We will *huishu* at the Suzhou Story House this weekend”), while a similar term *shuhui* seems only to act as a noun and is less often heard than *huishu*. Hrdlickova (1965:238-39) briefly discusses *huishu* and similar events in other Chinese narrative traditions.

<sup>51</sup> Li 1998:127-29.

<sup>52</sup> The exact number of houses is not constant. Many have closed in recent years due to lack of business, but new ones occasionally still open. In 1992 one trend was for modern housing developments to include a storytelling place for older residents. Zhou and Suzhou 1988 includes a list of over two hundred story houses operating in the late 1980s, the largest percentage being in Shanghai and surrounding suburbs. See Yamaguchi 1992 for a short introduction to several story houses in Suzhou and Shanghai.

<sup>53</sup> For instance, in November of 1991 Gong Huasheng and Cai Xiaojuan of the Suzhou *Pingtán* Troupe performed an episode of *Meng Lijun* in the Suzhou Opera Museum to an audience of “outstanding” elderly people on Old Folks’ Day. Amateur performers Dong Yaokun and his wife Ni Huaiyu (daughter of *Pearl Pagoda* performer Ni Pingqing) make feature performances about eighty times a year in factories and other local settings (1991:pers. comm.).

*Huishu*, now sponsored by various troupes and nominally overseen by local cultural bureaus, are still situations in which professional or amateur storytellers gather to compete and show off their skills in performing their favorite set pieces. They are held at the end of the year and in early spring, often for a variety of occasions.<sup>54</sup> Special *huishu* may also be held to honor performers, particularly older ones.<sup>55</sup> Contests such as the Suzhou *Pingtán* Troupe Great Prize Contest, in which younger professionals tell abridged 20-minute episodes, have been held sporadically since the early 1980s.<sup>56</sup> Radio shows, featuring taped performances of accomplished storytellers, are aired in Shanghai, Suzhou, and Wuxi. Only retired performers allow entire stories (lasting two or more weeks) to be taped, though shorter selections (such as contest performances) by younger performers are broadcast regularly.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Both professional and amateur performances were held in the spring of 1992 on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Mao Zedong's famous talks on art and literature, originally given at the communist base in Yanan in the early forties. It is interesting to note that the subject matter at most of the *tanci* performances was traditional stories. Efforts by cultural bureau workers to organize events with a more political content met with resistance (by non-participation) from most storytellers. Those who did participate took advantage of the lack of competition to win prizes they normally could not—or at least that is the opinion of some who chose not to participate.

<sup>55</sup> In the spring of 1992, a number of elder *tanci* performers gathered to perform at a story house in Changshu (the event was officially termed a *shuhui*, though sometimes referred to as a *huishu* event) to celebrate the eightieth birthday of Huang Yi'an. Among the oldest living *tanci* performers, the retired Huang is noted for his skill at seal-cutting and calligraphy, and is the originator of the modern Suzhou *tanci* version of *Story of the Western Wing* (*Xixiang ji*), made famous by his student, Yang Zhenxiong. Huang performed for over a half hour at the event.

<sup>56</sup> In late 1991 the Suzhou *Pingtán* Troupe Great Prize Contest was held, featuring younger professionals. Stories that won had some political overtones and themes were from either the pre-1911 or the post-1911 period. Though audiences generally prefer the older stories, themes set in the thirties and forties (or more recently) are more suitable as “politically correct” offerings to the judges, who include troupe leaders, officials from the cultural bureau, and representatives from the *Pingtán* School. One of the winning numbers was a selection from a KMT-Red intrigue set in the thirties.

<sup>57</sup> Working performers do not want their entire stories aired because they fear attendance will suffer at story houses. On the other hand, younger performers relish the exposure gained from the airing of selections of their stories and specialty pieces.





This is a special performance for a group of amateur Japanese folklorists held in the Suzhou Kunju Opera Museum (Spring, 1992). The storytelling performance was part of a traditional variety show, which included classical Chinese music, local *kunju* opera, and other performances. Yuan Xiaoliang, although sitting in the lead's chair, is acting as an assistant for a more senior female performer, Zhao Huilan, as she sings an opening ballad about the star-crossed lovers Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai.

In recent years, *Pingtán* performances have been aired regularly on Shanghai television stations, though rarely in Suzhou (Li 1998:130-31). At least two television dramas featuring *tanci* artists were filmed in the 1980s. The first *pingtan* music video was issued in 1992.<sup>58</sup> Tape-recordings, CD's, and videos of well-known performers are available at music counters in stores in Suzhou, Shanghai, and other regional cities.

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<sup>58</sup> The tape features Qin Jianguo, a 35-year-old performer in the Shanghai troupe, singing a selection from *Jade Dragonfly*, surrounded by a chorus of lovely women playing *pipa*. The music is electronically enhanced, and an initial showing at a *pingtan* hobbyist club in Suzhou in early 1992 was not met with enthusiasm.

## Story Houses

The sixteen story houses in the Jiangnan region that I visited during my fieldwork differed in terms of age, size, upkeep, structure, management, reputation, and audience. Possibly the oldest one in continuous use is the Puyuan Story house (*Puyuan shuchang*), located in the small town of Puyuan in northern Zhejiang Province. Under the fourth generation of management by the Yang family, it is over ninety years old. In Suzhou there are presently five story houses, down from over a dozen in the early 1980s. The Guangyu Story House (*Guangyu shuting*) is one of two run by the Suzhou *Pingtán* Troupe, the other being the Peaceful Story House (*Heping shuchang*) in the eastern side of the city.<sup>59</sup> The largest such establishment within the city limits is the Suzhou Story House (*Suzhou shuchang*). A small, plain story house exists in the Cultural Palace in the Nanmen district.



Typical audience members in the Guangyu Story House, one of the nicer Suzhou story houses.

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<sup>59</sup> In 1989 the Guangyu Story House changed its name from *Guangyu shuchang* (Guangyu Story House) to *Guangyu shuting* (Guangyu Story Concert Hall). I have used “story house” to translate both *ting* and *chang* because both terms refer to exactly the same sort of venues. Other more wordy names of story houses I have translated below as “hall” or “center,” though they also mean “story house.”



Yuan Xiaoliang (left) and Wang Jin performing *Meng Lijun* in a story house located in a public park in the Nanmen district of Suzhou.

The only story house on the cultural bureau register is the Official's Hat Story Hall (*Shaomao tingshu chang*), located near the Guanqianjie district in a Qing dynasty mansion that was once the local headquarters for Taiping rebel commanders.<sup>60</sup> This edifice, shaped roughly like an ancient official's hat, has an arching tile roof supported by carved mahogany beams. It became a story house only in recent decades and doubles as a meeting place for older performers who gather early in the morning to drink tea and chat. Most storytellers who perform there are young unestablished performers, older ones nearing retirement, or *getihu* (privately employed) performers from rural areas. The admission price is the lowest in Suzhou, and for that reason few ambitious performers wish to appear there. Most audience members are older males of mixed urban backgrounds. *Tanci* performances, featuring retired or amateur performers, are also held regularly in several cultural centers throughout the city.

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<sup>60</sup> The Taiping Rebellion, which began in rural areas of south China, raged throughout the country in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. This massive uprising of peasants was fomented by a visionary leader who followed a doctrine that combined elements of traditional Chinese thought with Christianity. The Taipings sought to bring down the Manchu imperial government and replace it with their own "heavenly kingdom of great peace" (Grasso et al. 1991:45-52).

Suzhou's best story house, the Guangyu Story House, is located on a side street in the old quarters of the city near the bustling Guanqian Street. Nearby is a square with several movie theaters, famous restaurants, a large department store, and the Suzhou Story House. A Ming dynasty temple, Xuan Miao Guan, is a short walk away. Located in an older building, in 1992 the Guangyu Story House stood directly across from a grain store. Outside the house are signs advertising the daily videotaped films and the featured *pingtan* performers. Inside is a small lobby in which guests purchase tickets (one *yuan* each), buy seeds and other small snacks, and receive a glass holding a serving of dry green tea leaves (hot water is supplied in thermos bottles on tiny tables between seats). On the walls of the lobby are samples of calligraphy from powerful *tanci* supporters in the central government, such as the late Chen Yun and Hu Qiaomu, alongside ancient carved inscriptions.

The storytelling room holds approximately 120 guests. The seating area consists of a long narrow rectangle in which padded chairs are arranged with two narrow aisles running from back to front. The stage is approximately two and one-half feet high and about twelve feet across. A screen decorated with images of court ladies stands in back of the storytellers' table and chairs. There is a microphone in front of each chair and loudspeakers on each side of the stage, and performers enter from a small anteroom on stage left. There is air-conditioning in summer, and thus smoking is not allowed, a source of displeasure to some guests. Though the majority of listeners are men, more women attend the Guangyu than any other story house in Suzhou. They number sometimes as high as eighteen or twenty (or about one-sixth of the audience).<sup>61</sup> Upstairs are the offices of the Suzhou Pingtan Troupe, quarters for the visiting performers (a small bedroom with cooking facilities), and a small, troupe-run hotel.

The most prestigious story house in the Jiangnan region is the Xiangyin Storytelling Center (*Xiangyin shuyuan*), run by the Shanghai Municipal Pingtan Troupe in downtown Shanghai.<sup>62</sup> Audiences consist of a high proportion of "hardcore" fans, overseas Chinese, and performers from other professions (such as film actors) who wish to observe *pingtan* to improve their own skills. There is usually a high percentage of women in

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<sup>61</sup> Audience members are called *tingzhongmen* (listeners) rather than *guanzhongmen* (viewers), suggesting that the oral dimensions of *pingtan* performance are more basic than the visual dimensions.

<sup>62</sup> See Yamaguchi 1992 for an alternate description. The house is an area subject to urban renewal, so its future location is in question.

the audience. It is a difficult house for performers to gain booking in because of the high standards of the enthusiastic crowd; thus younger performers seldom appear there.

Xiangyin has the most unusual schedule of any story house today. Two pairs of *tanci* performers are booked for a period of about three months. Each pair performs one hour per day, repeating the same episode each day for a week at a time. Due to the prestige of the house, which seats only eighty persons, and in an effort to allow more persons a chance to enjoy the art, audience members must make advance reservations and can attend no more than one performance per week.<sup>63</sup> Like the Guangyu Story House in Suzhou, Xiangyin has air-conditioning and does not allow smoking—additional benefits for performers tired of the hot, humid summers and the smoke-clouded rooms of the average story house.

A story house in the village of Changqiao near Suzhou is typical of rural establishments of that sort. The house itself is located in the village cultural bureau. Tickets are taken at a table by the door in a large anteroom, where tea for the guests is boiled behind a low cement wall. Cardplayers fill the tables in this area. The story room holds nearly two hundred guests, with the overflow sitting on benches and stools in the rear. The stage is a low, wide, wooden platform, behind which hangs a large, faded landscape painting. Unlike some rural story houses, there are microphones and speakers. The audience members are usually all male, ranging in age from late twenties to extreme old age, with most being around fifty. They are mostly farmers and factory workers, some of them out of work. On rainy days, which performers love, the place is filled with farmers who do not wish to work the fields.<sup>64</sup>

## Audiences

Audiences for live *tanci* vary according to the performance situation. Attendance depends on a combination of factors, including site, weather and season, day of the week, time of the performances, rural or urban setting, reputation and competence of the performers, ticket price, availability of

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<sup>63</sup> Since audience members can attend only once each week, they fill their afternoons with other diversions, including opera performances, visits to parks, and films.

<sup>64</sup> According to Yuan Xiaoliang, performers prefer rain in the countryside—“when it rains, it rains money”—since audiences are larger. In cities, however, rain means smaller audiences and less income.



The entrance to the Official's Hat Story Hall. During the mid-nineteenth century, the compound was the headquarters of local Taiping rebels. A narrow passageway leads back to the actual storytelling room and courtyard. Handwritten signs by the entrance ways are typical of many story houses.



Fledgling storytellers Lu Shixiao (left) and Yan Wenwu performing *Little Meng Lijun* in the Official's Hat Story Hall, the only Suzhou story house on the historic register. The performance lasts for two weeks, two hours a day. The audience sits very close to the stage in this traditional story house context.



Lu and Yan backstage in the storyteller's quarters. This was the site of several interviews with the team. Several months after this engagement, they found new storytelling partners.

competing attractions (including other *tanci* performances), comfort level of the story house or theater, and, in some cases, advertising or dialect region.<sup>65</sup>

Daily audiences in urban story houses often consist of a mixture of middle-aged to elderly male and female guests.<sup>66</sup> Except for the Xiangyin Storytelling Center, where often half the audience is female, the ratio is seldom less than five to one in favor of males. The usual reason given for this imbalance is that “women have more housework.” Of the half dozen middle-aged women with whom I spoke in the Guangyu Story House

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<sup>65</sup> While touring parts of Jiangsu and Zhejiang with nine *tanci* storytellers from the Suzhou troupe in the spring of 1992, I realized that audiences in marginal or non-Wu-speaking areas simply could not follow the story. Thus dialect is a tremendous limitation on appreciation of the *pingtan* arts in the national context.

<sup>66</sup> See Mullen 1992 for folkloristic profiles of the elderly and the relation of folklore to personal identity among older people.

audience during one two-week engagement and at performances of other stories in the Official's Hat Story Hall (where most guests were between the ages of forty and sixty-five), all reported that regular attendance at such events was a pastime they had adopted after retirement. One woman stated that she had had little interest in storytelling before, but that now it gave her something to do each day. Some older women said they had enjoyed it as children, and several younger women said older relatives introduced them to it. Most of the men I talked with also became interested in *pingtan* when taken to performances as children. A few older people occasionally bring grandchildren to listen.

Sunday afternoon sessions, which usually draw the largest crowds, are sometimes attended by teenage girls and boys, though usually only at the best story houses in Suzhou. Most houses have regulars who come each day, rain or shine. They know each other and in some houses, such as the one in the Cultural Palace in south Suzhou and the Official's Hat Story Hall, guests gather each morning to play cards and chat.<sup>67</sup> Some listeners carry books and magazines to performances, but they usually do not read while a performer is present. While Suzhou audiences consist mostly of retired office and shop personnel, factory workers, and teachers (sometimes university-level), others occasionally attend. Some audiences also include young traveling businessmen and a few persons with obvious emotional or mental problems. A main requirement of any audience member is sufficient free time to attend afternoon performances. Another is enough income to afford daily performances that, in early 1992 in Suzhou, cost from a low of four *mao* to a high of one *yuan*.

Though audiences are usually of average or above-average education, many performers (and *pingtan* scholars and audience members) speak of a decline not only in the quality of performers, but in the attention of audiences as well. Many performers claim that fewer and fewer people come to listen to "art" (*yishu*), and more and more come just to hear the story. Thus storytellers in the late 1980s and early 1990s have been faced with a situation in which the older, well-known stories are regarded as boring by many of their listeners. This situation has forced the development of new stories, drawn usually from vernacular literature or simply invented, following traditional themes. Another audience complaint

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<sup>67</sup> Storytellers perform only in the afternoons in Suzhou. Cardplaying and chatting may continue in rooms adjacent to the story room during performances in the Official's Hat Story Hall and in the Cultural Center. No such activities take place in the Guangyu Story House or the Suzhou Story House.



is that the pace of the stories is too slow, that more action—and less of the detail that has traditionally been so characteristic of *tanci*—is desired.

These attitudes favoring freshness in repertoire and speed in narrative development have probably been influenced by the quickening pace of life in modern China and the different sense of performance time introduced by television, videos, and movies. Also, the lengthy interruptions in performance in the years since the Anti-Rightist Movement of the late 1950s and the Cultural Revolution disrupted the natural training of audience members and performers alike. Another factor affecting lack of audience interest is the set of transparent restrictions still in force on what performers can say. Controversial performers were silenced as early as the late 1950s. In the early 1980s, Yang Zijiang, a former capitalist turned *pinghua* storyteller, was forbidden to perform for several years after his story about the Emperor Qianlong—laden with remarks on the contemporary political situation—drew huge crowds in Wuxi. References to politics and sex have been continually repressed by cultural bureaus at all levels, creating a situation in which performers and audience members alike participate in the monitoring of what is said during a performance.<sup>68</sup>

Performers feel that rural audience members do not like excessive singing and that they prefer more humor and action than urban audiences. During my recording of a version of *Meng Lijun* at the rural Changqiao story house, the *xiashou* (assistant performer), Wang Jin, had to leave early one day in order to participate in a pop song contest in Suzhou, forty minutes away by bus. Alone on the *shutai* (storytelling stage), the lead performer (*shangshou*), Yuan Xiaoliang, turned the table around lengthwise (as in solo *tanci* or *pinghua*) and laid his *sanxian* banjo before him, never touching it for the entire forty-minute episode. He felt that he could not inflict unappreciated singing on the audience because the performance was already compromised by Wang's early departure. Accordingly, he dropped all the songs from the episode and put on an especially energetic performance, larded with numerous jokes. He later explained that this strategy to please the audience was wholly intentional.

The widest audiences for *tanci* performances are among radio and television listeners. Former storyteller Zhou Jie'an, the radio show host in Shanghai, estimates his regular audience to be in the millions and claims to receive numerous requests each week to play tapes of particular *tanci* performances. Though it can be assumed that most of the radio audience consists of older persons, it is not unusual to see young and middle-aged

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<sup>68</sup> Sex and politics are topics very susceptible to jokes and intrinsically interesting to audiences. Historically this material has been very useful to some storytellers.

shop clerks in Suzhou listening to *tanci*. Because of the afternoon hours, it is impossible for most employed persons to attend daily story house performances. Radio, of course, is free, and can be enjoyed at home, since the visual element is not as crucial in *tanci* as in opera. It is said that in some Suzhou neighborhoods one can ride down a street on bicycle and hear a whole performance on the radios playing through the open windows. This is not far from the truth. Moreover, between 1995 and 1997, a Shanghai-based television show called “Weekly Story House” (*Xinqi shuchang*) featured 75 storytellers performing parts from 45 full-length stories (Li 1998:130-31).

Devoted *tanci* fans have organized into at least two organizations in Shanghai and Suzhou. These fans or “story aficionados” (*shumi*), among whom are a few former professional storytellers, regard Suzhou *tanci* as a major interest in their lives. Though many of them do not regularly visit story houses, performers are aware of the more ardent among them. When such a fan attends three performances in a row, performers feel very much appreciated.<sup>69</sup> Such fans are said to attend for the appreciation of the “art,” not just to listen to the story. Shanghai is home to many *tanci* fans, and a number of performers I interviewed felt that Shanghai audiences in general understand more about *tanci* than those in other places and are more “warmly enthusiastic” (*requing*), especially to well established performers, than audiences elsewhere.<sup>70</sup> Many fans have huge collections of taped performances, both audiotape and, increasingly, videotape.<sup>71</sup> Some collect photographs and signatures of *tanci* celebrities and sometimes send gifts of calligraphy (usually wishes of success) and even food to favorite performers. At a meeting of *pingtan* fans held in a Shanghai recreation hall in April of 1992, participants joined in contests to guess the names of performers, tunes, and stories from brief selections played on a tape-recorder. Guest appearances were made by two well-known older storytellers, and short performances were given by two younger ones. About one thousand photographs of events and performers were on display in the lobby.

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<sup>69</sup> Yuan Xiaoliang has commented to me that the presence of these *neihang* (experts) can stimulate the storytellers to do a better than average job, and that he sometimes feels he performs “just for them.”

<sup>70</sup> Of course, fans in other cities may not agree with this assessment.

<sup>71</sup> The best known fan in Suzhou is probably Yin Dequan, who has over three hundred audiotapes of *tanci* performances (1991). Mao Ruisheng (1991) has privately published a bibliography of his collection of tape-recordings of 115 performers.

### A Performance at the Guangyu Story House

In December of 1991, I taped a two-week storytelling engagement at the Guangyu Story house. The performers were Yuan Xiaoliang (male) and Wang Jin (female), young storytellers in the Suzhou troupe who were performing for the first time at the Guangyu. The story they told was *Meng Lijun*, mentioned above, about a young woman in the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) who escapes an undesired marriage by dressing as a young man and who later becomes prime minister of China. The following description is based largely on performances that took place during the engagement (particularly on December ninth), though I attended many performances there before and after.

Audience members gather in the story house from about one o'clock in the afternoon. These so-called "guests" (*keren*) buy tickets at the window in the anteroom (specific seats can be requested, if available). At the door to the story room, a middle-aged woman gives each guest a glass with a pinch of green tea leaves in the bottom. Music, sometimes Chinese opera, sometimes pop, is played over the loudspeakers beginning about 1:15. Guests chat with friends or sit alone on the padded seats. Small tables, on which staff place thermos bottles, stand among rows of seats. According to common practice, the glasses are first filled halfway with hot water; then the tea is allowed to steep until all the dry leaves settle to the bottom. The glass is then filled to the top and left to continue steeping.<sup>72</sup>

At about 1:30 a young male worker comes out onto the stage (*shutai*) to check the microphones.<sup>73</sup> He also fills the performers' teapot and glasses with hot water.<sup>74</sup> Before the crowd arrives, some performers place their

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<sup>72</sup> Between sips the tea is placed on the table, though in some houses the glasses are placed in wooden trays or in wire holders on the backs of chairs. Many guests drink tea constantly throughout the performances, sometimes pouring each other tea. In a few teahouses (such as at Puyuan in northern Zhejiang), which retain older traditions, workers still fill the patrons' glasses from kettles. The tea served is usually of average quality, though it may be somewhat better in the finer houses.

<sup>73</sup> The *shutai* is a small platform built on the back wall of the room in which stories are told (in some places, such as the Suzhou Story House, an actual stage is present). About two feet high (sometimes a bit more), the platform holds the performers, a small table, chairs, and instruments. A painting or ornamented screen, sometimes hung or placed behind the performers, adds atmosphere.

<sup>74</sup> Many storytellers do not drink tea when performing, feeling that it constricts their throats.

own instruments on the performing table and rest a second pair of instruments against the sides of their chairs; in some cases, workers handle this duty.<sup>75</sup>

At 1:45, a buzzer sounds backstage and the storytellers enter from stage right and take their seats—the lead on stage left, and the assistant on stage right.<sup>76</sup> They settle themselves in their chairs, briefly adjust the microphones (conscientious performers will have done this earlier in the afternoon), and check to be certain that the second set of instruments is leaning steadily and is properly within reach. They will often place their feet correctly upon the footblocks and pick up the instruments on the table, briefly tuning them (too much time spent on tuning, however, is considered distracting by some guests).

The assistant will then greet the audience and engage in mild patter, sometimes announcing coming attractions (such as the singing of a famous *kaipian* ballad) or apologizing for some shortcoming in the performers' behavior (such as ending one minute too early the day before, or having a noticeable cold, or leaving the engagement before the contract expires). Or he/she may simply state the name of the *kaipian* that will open the performance. This number is sung by either the lead or the assistant, though both play their instruments.<sup>77</sup> During the *kaipian*, the performers often make minor adjustments to their instruments.

After the singing, which may last up to fifteen minutes, the performers pause for a few moments, breaking contact with the audience.

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<sup>75</sup> Yuan Xiaoliang always stole out on stage about a half hour before the performance to make sure the instruments were properly aligned. He told of incidents in which workers placed instruments out of reach or upside down. Such misplacements could be embarrassing at the start of a performance. He also takes care in adjusting the microphones, particularly on the first day in a story house.

<sup>76</sup> It is interesting that the presence of the male on the left and the female on the right seems very common crossculturally. American news teams observe the same convention. It was also traditional in parts of America for gravediggers to place the wife to the right of the husband.

<sup>77</sup> Some performers like to vary the style of *kaipian*. For instance, instead of a song, a story shorter than the main narrative and told in only fifteen-minute segments a day may be performed over the two-week engagement. Singing is usually a part of such a form. In some cases, performers may even share the singing of a *kaipian*, each one doing half. Yuan Xiaoliang and Wang Jin often sing parts of three or four *kaipian* each day, drawing on a range of famous episodes from full-length *tanci* and traditional *kaipian*. Urban audiences like the fact that the pair have a large repertoire of *kaipian* tunes; thus their performances of *kaipian* are unusually varied.

They sip water, arrange their fans and handkerchiefs on the table, or continue to fine-tune their instruments. According to Yuan Xiaoliang, this pause is intentional, allowing both the audience and the performers to compose themselves and shift mentally to the main story. During this time, some performers also count the number of guests. Yuan does so in groups of five, the process taking less than a minute.<sup>78</sup> Over the two-week period, audience attendance is an index of how well the performers are doing.<sup>79</sup>

After the pause, the lead lightly raps a tiny woodblock known as the *xingmu* on the table. This act announces the beginning of the main story and focuses audience attention on the performer.<sup>80</sup> He then takes up the main narrative by addressing the audience, often accompanying the initial words with hand gestures. A formulaic recapitulation of the story as told thus far is given first. The lead narrates the action, often accompanied by hand gestures and manipulations of the eyes and face. As the occasion warrants, the performer assumes the roles of various characters, using stylized voice registers, movements, and, when needed, a fan or handkerchief. The narration may shift occasionally to the assistant, who does his or her part in characterization. In some episodes, depending on the attitudes and skills of the performers, the assistant may take up a large percentage of the narration and character utterances.

When singing roles are performed, the storytellers gracefully pick up their instruments just before a speaking role ends and smoothly shift into song. Performers not engaged in a speaking or singing role are expected to appear passively attentive, sitting poised and motionless. Slouching or a distracted gaze reflects badly on both performers.<sup>81</sup> Occasional sips of

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<sup>78</sup> As noted, some houses are said to report fewer customers than actually attend, in hopes of paying the performers less. Thus, wise performers count the audience.

<sup>79</sup> Performers may become quite disheartened if they see the audience gradually slipping away, feeling—as one put it—that they are having their skin slowly peeled off.

<sup>80</sup> This tiny “awakening” block is held on the sides between the tips of index and ring fingers, with the middle finger on top. The tiny blocks used by Suzhou *pingtan* performers are much smaller than those I observed being used by performers of Kunming *pingshu* storytelling (Bender 1996:29).

<sup>81</sup> During my stay in Suzhou an assistant storyteller performing in one of the better story houses became the object of dissatisfaction among audience members and staff alike. Her “crimes” included slouching, not putting enough energy into singing, and constantly “pulling a long face.” There is also the story of an older male performer whose very young—and very bored—assistant would count the rafters of an older story house as the master narrated. After several days of this, the old man suddenly shifted into character and

water, a wipe across the brow with a handkerchief, or a low cough are overlooked by both audience and fellow performer. If the cigarette smoke is too thick, a performer may, while in character, waft the fumes away with a fan.<sup>82</sup> A similar strategy is used for flies if simply ignoring them fails.

Some performers (especially older ones) not trained in the standard regimen of the Pingtan School may display idiosyncratic movements, which sometimes promote rather than distract from audience interest. For instance, one older storyteller who performed in the Guangyu Story House in early 1992 dangled both his hands in front of his chest as he spoke, rather than resting his left hand on the table.<sup>83</sup>

Generally, the first segment of the performance is longer than the second. Many performers take a break after sixty or seventy minutes. During this ten-minute intermission storytellers leave the stage.<sup>84</sup> Many or most audience members go to the restroom, exchanging opinions about the performance on the way.

Backstage the performers rest, consult script books if necessary, and discuss how the story is developing and what might be added, cut, or retained in the next segment. (How much time remains is an important factor in these decisions.) Returning onstage, the performers quiet the

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surprised the assistant, who was playing the role of a maiden, by asking how old she was. Taken off guard, the assistant blurted out something like “sixty-seven,” a response that brought down the house and put an end to the rafter counting. Stories of snoozing or arrogant assistants being prodded off stage by the lead’s *sanxian*-banjo are also told. It is general practice to put off pre-performance tiffs until after the show, though this is not always possible for hotheaded performers. Veiled insults may be directed at the other performer while both are in character, with comments about body shape and temper. In some cases the audience picks up on these intentional affronts, which can add to the amusement (at least on the audience’s part). Skillful intended victims can sometimes sense such attacks in the making and ward them off verbally.

<sup>82</sup> This is a favorite technique of Yangzhou *tanci* performer Li Renzhen, who spends months every year performing by herself in the northern Jiangsu countryside and small towns. Though some performers smoke, many complain of throat problems that result from voice strain aggravated by the dense smoke. In winter, when the story house doors and windows are shut, smoke is at its densest.

<sup>83</sup> A well-known, elderly Shanghai performer is rumored to have fed bits of apple to caged crickets and discreetly picked his nose on stage during the last years of his career.

<sup>84</sup> Some rural story houses do not have a backstage area. Performers thus remain on stage and whisper briefly about the story. In such situations, there is no opportunity to consult a script book if something is forgotten. The break may be a few minutes shorter than usual, since the performers feel awkward “just sitting there.” As in the city, rural audiences usually leave *en masse* for the restroom areas during break.

audience with a few bars of a tune as they judge the number of people who remain. The lead may then again rap his small wooden block lightly on the table, and the story begins once more. The audience members, as in the first half, display a mixture of attentiveness and seeming obliviousness. A few older guests near the stage may even appear to be napping. Some audience members stare fixedly at the performers, sometimes smiling, even laughing, at the jokes and growing teary-eyed as the story turns sentimental. A few may mouth the words of lines they anticipate. Contact between audience and performers is very important to storytellers, and is facilitated by the close proximity of the two parties. According to storyteller Cai Xiaojuan, a major drawback of performing in large auditoriums is the lack of audience feedback due to distance and stage lights. With no awareness of immediate response, performers feel out of touch.

Twenty minutes before the performance ends, two or three middle-aged women begin collecting the thermos bottles and then the glasses, placing the latter in large tin buckets. Though anticipated by the performers, this activity can still be distracting to them. As the performance nears its end, some audience members begin to stir, assembling their bags, canes, private tea cups or jars, umbrellas, and wraps. The storytellers are expected to perform up to the the last minute, but not to exceed the prescribed time (in rural areas, however, a few minutes over is sometimes expected).

As the lead winds up the episode, some people are already out of their seats heading for the door. The performers, especially the lead, usually wait on the platform for a few moments to receive comments (constructive criticism and sometimes praise) from the regulars (*laotingke*). Depending on the house, the performers either leave their instruments on the table or take them away. Then they retreat backstage or, depending on the location of their quarters, wend their way among the slow-moving audience towards the front exit. At the Guangyu Story House, videos follow the *pingtan* performance, so the workers must immediately clear the stage of the storytelling equipment and set up a film screen.

After a storytelling performance, the performers change clothes and remove make-up. If they are on good terms with each other, they may discuss the performance and relax together. After dinner is a time for washing clothes and attending to other chores.<sup>85</sup> To pass idle time, performers can watch videos shown by the house for free, attend movies,

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<sup>85</sup> In my observations women do more of these “household” tasks than men, though there are certainly exceptions.

shop, read, knit, exercise, or engage in whatever leisure activity is available to them.

The next morning the storytellers arise somewhere between five and ten o'clock, depending on personal preference. Some performers exercise regularly, *qigong* exercises being popular among middle-aged performers.<sup>86</sup> After breakfast, they rest or practice basic storytelling skills, and eat lunch by about 11:30. Around noontime they may begin to rehearse, with the length of the rehearsal period varying according to how familiar they are with the story, individual interest, ability, and a sense of how well they must perform that day to sustain audience interest.<sup>87</sup>

In the rehearsals I witnessed by Yuan Xiaoliang and Wang Jin, there was emphasis on reviewing song lyrics (sometimes actually sung with instrumental accompaniment, but more often just murmuring the lines) and on crucial moments when the story is tossed from one performer to another. The performers then tuned their instruments, put on make-up, and donned their performing garb. Yuan wears the same long gown for the entire two weeks of each session—the audience would consider him pretentious if he were to change it. Wang, however, changes her clothing each day, wardrobe being a heavy expense for female performers.

## Summary

This overview of Suzhou chantefable storytelling has described recent contexts of that art in Suzhou, Shanghai, Wuxi, and smaller places in the Wu-dialect areas of the Yangzi delta. The focus on context has revealed that forces at work within the society, even those seemingly far removed from the act of storytelling, can influence locus of performance, content and form of performances, nature of audiences, and availability of performers. Persistent anxieties among performers and aficionados alike

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<sup>86</sup> *Qigong* is a sort of exercise popular in many areas of China that combines yogic breathing and martial arts movements. *Tanci* performer Jin Lisheng claims that *qigong* exercises help in his storytelling. Li Renzhen, a Yangzhou *tanci* performer, does an extensive daily routine of sword-dancing and *qigong* exercises.

<sup>87</sup> Experienced performers know that they cannot give one hundred percent each time; it would be too tiring. Thus on certain days they will make greater efforts (*maili*) than on others. The first day and the following Sunday of an engagement are especially important; on those days the crowds are customarily larger, so a good performance then will attract larger audiences during the week. Also, on some days the intrinsic interest of the story will hold audiences as much as the ability of the performers.



revolve around fears of changes in government patronage and the threatening popularity of other entertainment media. If story houses cannot continue to find alternate means of support (the showing of videos, running hostels, private patronage, and so on) and should recruitment of young performers and audience members fail, it is difficult to foresee in what contexts the art can survive in the coming decades, especially the full-length stories. Though a number of story houses have closed and many younger storytellers have found other professions, new story houses open with regularity in places such as housing projects with many elderly residents, and a few in hotels in smaller cities. With government support the Suzhou Pingtan Storytelling School continues to produce students, recently enrolling considerable numbers of young people.<sup>88</sup> Moreover, some storytellers continue to find markets in the new leisure entertainment world of restaurants, amusement centers, and resorts. Thus, though some fear the *pingtan* storytelling arts will die—and along with them icons of regional tradition—it would seem more optimistic to ask in what contexts and forms the arts will emerge in the process of China’s modernization.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> According to figures (Cao 1998:81) I received just before publication of this article, there was a total of 325 active, troupe-affiliated, *pingtan* storytellers (233 of whom were *tanci* performers) in Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces and the Shanghai municipality. There was also a total of 156 story houses, of which there were 102 in Jiangsu province, 5 in Zhejiang province, and 48 in the Shanghai area. Of the *tanci* stories being told, 17 were traditional ones like *Pearl Pagoda* or *Jade Dragonfly*; 18 were “second category” stories on traditional themes from the 1950s like *Meng Lijun*; 73 were newly written stories on historical themes; and 6 new stories were on urban life in the 1920s-1940s.

<sup>89</sup> Henry Glassie (1982) has noted the persistence of performance traditions in the face of assumptions of extinction.

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