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## Abstract

China has many rich traditions of storytelling and story singing, which are deeply rooted oral traditions in their particular geographical areas, carrying the linguistic and cultural flavours of their localities. In Suzhou, the central city of the Yangtze Delta's Wu area, the storytelling genre *pinghua* and the story singing genre *tanci* have become emblematic of regional identity. Since the 1950s, the two genres have been referred to under the hybrid generic name '*Suzhou ping-tan*' after the city, or simply *ping-tan* in abbreviation.

Nowadays typically comprising extended narratives performed over the course of half a month, *ping-tan* has maintained popularity up to the present day. Each afternoon, people go to the unique performance venue of the *shuchang* ('story house'), which combines teahouse, performance venue and social centre, to enjoy solo or duet performances given by *shuoshu xiansheng* ('storytellers'). The sung episodes are set to an accompaniment of *sanxian* banjo and – in duet performance – also *pipa* lute. In the context of face-to-face communication, establishing an empathetic bridge between storyteller and audience is of paramount importance, necessitating storytellers to polish and tailor their artistry efficiently in response to audience feedback. Following the development of radio broadcasting since the 1920s and television since the 1980s, *ping-tan* has also been widely delivered directly into people's homes. Listening to and watching *ping-tan* has become a part of many local people's daily habits.

This thesis seeks to explain how *Suzhou ping-tan* has maintained its vitality in contemporary society. Various oral performance traditions have declined with the range of alternative types of entertainment that have bloomed in recent times, yet a great many Suzhou citizens still take for granted that *ping-tan* represents their local cultural identity. Drawing upon fieldwork conducted since 2011, this thesis explores the interconnectedness between the storyteller and audiences during and outside of performance. It analyses performer/audience 'feed-back loop' communication within a variety of fields of *ping-tan* activity, focusing in particular on the following areas: the role-playing and identity presentation of storytellers and audience members, the different types of *ping-tan* follower

and their respective forms of involvement, the use of gesture in performance to communicate further layers of meaning, the nature of the mutually complementary relationship between words and music in ballad singing, and the effects of television and radio dissemination on *ping-tan* culture. This thesis identifies 'feed-back loop' interplay as being a key factor in *ping-tan's* success, facilitating the multi-faceted involvement of all participants within a flexible and unpredictable shared experience.

# **Performing Local Identity in a Contemporary Urban Society:**

**A Study of *Ping-tan* Narrative Vocal Tradition in  
Suzhou, China**

**Yinyun Shi**

A Thesis presented for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy



Department of Music  
University of Durham  
England

**March 2016**

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## Romanisation

The Romanisation of Chinese in this thesis uses the *pinyin* system. Apart from for scholars who employ the Western order for their own names in publications or use alternative types of Romanisation, the names of Chinese people are given using the standard Chinese order, i.e. surname first, given name second.

## **Declaration**

The content of this doctoral thesis is based on the research work completed at Durham University Music Department, UK. No material contained in the thesis has previously been submitted for a degree in this or any other university.

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The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. Any text, images, notations, information or ideas taken from this work and used in another context must be acknowledged as coming from this source.

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## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to my parents, my family, and the Great tradition

*Suzhou ping-tan*

## Chapter 1. Introduction

滚滚长江东逝水， The rolling waters of the Yangtze River part to the east,  
浪花淘尽英雄。 Countless heroes are cleansed by the spray.  
是非成败转头空。 Rights and wrongs, successes and failures all in vain at the turn of a  
head.  
青山依旧在， The green mountains are there as before,  
几度夕阳红。 Time and again the sunset is red.  
白发渔樵江渚上， The white-haired fisherman stands on a sand barge in the river,  
惯看秋月春风。 He is accustomed to the autumn's moon and the spring's breeze.  
一壶煮酒喜相逢。 A vessel of wine is ready to celebrate a reunion.  
古今多少事， Throughout the ages and in all places,  
都付笑谈中。 Stories are exchanged with chatter and laughter.

[明] 杨慎“临江仙”《江东二十一史弹词》

Yang Shen (1488-1559), 'Lin Jiang Xian'

from *Jiangdong Ershiyi Shi Tanci*

China has great many storytelling and story singing traditions that have played a significant role in bonding an intimate community. They also reflect the particular geography and folklore of their localities, and the linguistic and cultural flavours of these places. *Suzhou ping-tan* (henceforth abbreviated to *ping-tan*), is a compound term widely used since the 1950s. It refers to the hybrid of the genres *pinghua* (storytelling)<sup>2</sup> and *tanci* ('narrative singing') delivered in the Suzhou dialect, which have been the dominant folk genres in the Yangtze Delta since their initial flourishing in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Suzhou is the central city of the Yangtze Delta area, and historically it has been famed for its political, agricultural, economic, cultural and linguistic influence on this delta territory, and even on the rest of China. As the proverb says 'a wealthy Suzhou means a wealthy country'. Living customs, foods, and handicraft production, as well as forms of music, painting, and architecture have spread throughout the region from this city. The richness of urban life has been enhanced by its leading art form *ping-tan*. Nowadays, *ping-tan* permeates many citizens' daily lives as it is encountered through various channels, including in teahouses, restaurants or taxis, and via various radio and television programmes. However, the most iconic way of appreciating *ping-tan* is to go to the unique performance venue, the *shuchang* ('story house') to enjoy solo or duet performances given by *shuoshu xiansheng* ('storytellers'). Performances typically comprise extended narratives performed over the course of a fortnight, and they have maintained popularity up to the present day. Outside of the performance time, the story house is also a teahouse and social centre. However, it is the habit of many followers to visit at certain times each afternoon, paying between one and six *yuan*<sup>3</sup> for the ticket to enjoy a two-hour *ping-tan* performance.

---

<sup>2</sup> I interpret the English translation of interviews and the Chinese resources in this thesis. I take responsibility for any errors.

<sup>3</sup> Equivalent to between 10 and 60 pence. In this thesis, I take one British pound to be equal to ten Chinese *yuan*.



Figure 1-1 Map of the Yangtze Delta area taken from *Google Maps*.



Figure 1-2 The area highlighted in red is the Greater Suzhou region. The red square in the map below shows the territory of Figure 1-1.

Various oral performance traditions have declined with the range of alternative types of entertainment that have bloomed in recent times, yet a great many Suzhou citizens still take for granted that *ping-tan* represents their local cultural identity. Moreover, the dissemination of *ping-tan* around the vast Yangtze Delta region and beyond also suggests

that it has also been a vehicle to share the concepts and values of Suzhou culture throughout the country. The initial task of this research is to explore how *Suzhou ping-tan* has maintained its vitality in contemporary society in the city itself.

The study draws upon an ethnographic methodology that involved filming live performances and interviewing *ping-tan* participants in Suzhou from 2011 to 2015. I interviewed representatives of various types of *ping-tan* participants, such as storytellers, audience members, amateurs from *ping-tan* clubs, radio and television producers of *ping-tan* programmes, and people who work in the Suzhou Ping-tan School, *ping-tan* troupes, and cultural bureaus. I interviewed some people several times over the years to update my information. In order to develop my knowledge and understanding of the Suzhou dialect, I consulted experts on the Suzhou dialect from Suzhou University, University College London, and other institutions including Shanghai Conservatory of Music. During the interviews, I mainly used Mandarin Chinese and the Suzhou dialect. Occasionally, I encountered storytellers or audience members from Shanghai, and since Shanghai dialect is their mother tongue, I used Shanghai dialect to communicate. As a locally-born researcher, *ping-tan* was not unfamiliar to me when I began this project; I sometimes listen to *ping-tan* radio and television programmes featuring the genre as background music in the course of ordinary life. Indeed, some *ping-tan* terms are known to me as they are used as slang in peoples' daily conversation. However, I still knew little about the lore of *ping-tan*, and its cultural meaning to the local people. For the purpose of re-evaluating how *ping-tan* influences local life, first I set my prior knowledge to one side, attending the story houses as if I had never been there before, and asking people very basic questions. I did not directly consult *ping-tan* scholars at the very beginning to ensure I was not unduly influenced by their personal experiences; thus, I gathered my own impressions in the first instance.

This thesis investigates the interconnectedness between the storyteller and audiences during and outside of performances, and attempts to illuminate the intimate link between this traditional oral performance and the local people. In this thesis I will argue that *Suzhou ping-tan* has maintained its vitality to represent the local culture in contemporary society, constantly performing a local cultural identity that is not only taken for granted by a great many Suzhou citizens, but that is also intertwined with local life in many ways.

## 1.1 Literature Review on Traditional Oral Performance Studies

Traditional verbal performance can be found all over the world and can be classified into various genres, including storytelling, story singing, folk song and other chantefable styles. Instrumental and vocal accompaniment is sometimes present. Notable examples include Yugoslavian and Homeric epic singing (Parry, 1971; Lord, 2000 (1960), 1991); Japanese *rakugo* storytelling tradition invented by Buddhist monks in the 9<sup>th</sup> century (Ishii, 1992; Oshima, 2006), and *naniwabushi* tale singing, which appeared in 1917 with the name *rokyoku* derived from street performance costume (Hiromi and Smith, 2006); the Tibetan epic singing tradition since the 12<sup>th</sup> century involving the repertoire *King Gesar* (Ellingson-Waugh, 1974; Li, 2001); various Mongolian oral traditions (Pegg, 2011); as well as abundant African storytelling and story singing traditions (Hale, 1998).

Originally learned by heart, and transmitted orally with only limited historical documentation, narrative singing has in many places been transformed into a literary work. Nonetheless, people's enthusiasm for preserving, performing, developing, and even creating has enabled the oral tradition to live on and to be passed down through the generations. These individual genres then become a tradition or traditionesque (Killick, 1998). Vansina (1985: 26-27) defines oral tradition generally as "verbal messages which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation". These statements can be spoken, sung or played on musical instruments, and are transmitted "by word of mouth over at least a generation".

Lord (2000 (1960)) follows in the footsteps of Parry, a scholar of Homeric epics, noting that in the history of humanity's development, words were heard before they were seen. This highlights the significant role of hearing in folklore transmission (Lord, 1991:15): "Words still are heard rather than seen, and even those who have learned to visualize words as containing particular letters in a particular sequence continue to operate much of the time with the heard, and hence to spoken, word."

We become accustomed to demarcating categories of orally conceived words without visible representation – through utterance rather than spelling. Thus, not only should written texts be viewed as literature, but also oral heritage. Studying traditional oral genres is as important as studying written literature: "words heard, when set in the forms of art, are oral literature; words seen, when set in the forms of art, are written literature" (Lord, 1991: 16). Finnegan points out that storytelling has agreed "conventions about structure, style and

communication”, and that storytelling form is “multiple more than singular” (1998: 13). Performances in oral traditions affect various attributes of local life, and the importance of identity studies within this context has been emphasised (Bauman, 1986; Finnegan, 1992, 1998; Morley, 1993). In particular, Finnegan shows how all the participants in such a communicative activity are bonded as a unity (1998: 12). Thus, the significance of studying oral traditions goes far beyond exploring the presentation of the story content, and delves into “how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold” (Bruner, 1987: 31).

In China, narrative genres are generally thought to be one of the four categories of folk music. The term *minjian gequ* refers to folk song, *minjian qiyue* is folk instrumental music and *xiqu* is opera (Jones, 2003: 292). *Quyí* is an umbrella term, which typically includes the genres of telling and singing stories that aim to cultivate and entertain audiences in presentational settings. This term was fixed at the *Quanguo Diyijie Wenyi Daibiao Dahui* (‘First National Congress of Literary and Art Workers’) held in July 1949 (Hsia, 1999: 511), and was spread widely afterwards (Børdahl and Jette, 2002: 22). Under the *quyi* label, there are about three hundred storytelling, story singing and intermediate genres, and they are spread among the 56 nationalities from all over China (2002: 22-23). The term *quyi* can be mostly found translated into English as ‘narrative arts’ (Børdahl, 1996; Lawson, 2011; He, 2012), or occasionally ‘vocal arts’ (Rebollo-Sborgi, 2011: 245). It is also called ‘storytelling art’ and ‘chantefable’ in Bender’s research (1999, 2003). Because of the prefix syllable *qu*, literally ‘melody’, and the suffix syllable *yi* meaning ‘art’, this term also has been interpreted as ‘the art of melody’ or ‘tuneful art’ (Børdahl, 1996: 2). This term can be translated as ‘folk art forms’ or ‘storytelling’ (ibid.). In addition, Rees (1991: 89) concludes that *shuo shu* has no more standardized translation in Western-language publications. Terms found include ‘narrative arts’, ‘ballads’, ‘storytelling’, ‘popular narrative’, ‘oral recitals’, ‘folk songs’, ‘songs’ and ‘singing-narrative’. Each is applied specifically to individual genres both in Chinese and English translations.

*Suzhou ping-tan* is one of the leading genres in the Yangtze Delta territory and one of the best-known verbal arts in China. The majority of existing *ping-tan* research pays attention to written sources, especially *ping-tan* performance theory. Often this is to explore from a historical perspective what has been written about the genre.<sup>4</sup> Other scholars elaborate

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<sup>4</sup> See Bao (2002), Bender (1984, 1995, 2003), Benson (1996), Cao (1992), Chen (1958), Du (1995), He (2011), Hodes (1990), Hong (2010), Ma (2006), Peng (1992), Riftin (1999), Shen (1998), Sheng (2008), Sung (1993), Tan, (1985), Ts’ao (1976), Wu (2007), Wu (1981, 1982, 1998, 2011), Xu (2009), Yang

upon historical literature from various thematic perspectives, including examination of performers (Zhang & Dong, 2011), gender (Ch'en, 1974; Lei, 2008; Lu, 2010), political influence (Cheng, 2008; He, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014), radio broadcasting (Hong, 2012), and social-cultural influence (Shen, 2007; Sheng, 2003; Tang, 2010; Zhou, 2008).

Following Lord, live *ping-tan* performance might be considered a form of oral literature. However, scholars have tended to detach musical analysis from the performance as a whole (Peng, 1979; Pian, 1986; Tao, 1979; Ts'ao, 1989; Xu, 2008; Zhu, 2009) and from examination of linguistic texts likewise (Ts'ao, 1988; Zhou, 2000). Very little research tackles the performance *context* (Bender, 1998; Chen, 1961) and other factors, such as the audience and the intercommunication between all parties, tend to be overlooked. Studies such as Bender (1993, 2005), Gu (2011), He (2010), Liu (2013), Pan (2011), Ts'ao (1986), Zhang (2011), Zhang (2012), and Zhou (2011) are based on oral accounts from interviewees, and this gives a deeper and more vivid illustration of individual insights. However, often this material is detached from the details of the performance itself. Nevertheless, some non-academic articles by *ping-tan* storytellers and amateurs partially overcome this weakness, although these sources invariably focus on just one or two single issues rather than the broader picture (Jin, 2011; Lu, 2013; Si, 1983; Sui, 1936; Wang, 2003, 2011; Wen, 1983; Wu, 1984; Xu, 2011; Yang, 1985; Yin, 2012; Zhang, 2006). Amongst the above-mentioned literature on *ping-tan*, several scholars and their works should be highlighted.

Bender's specialism is the traditional Chinese performance and performance-connected literature of local Han and ethnic minority cultures in China. His early work (1988) concerns the declining number of story houses since the 1980s, a phenomenon connected to the fate of *tanci*. He addresses the difficulty of recruiting new audiences from among the younger generations. His book *Plum and Bamboo: China's Suzhou Chantefable Tradition* suggests that the usage of dialect in *tanci* performance is one of the reasons why its followers feel the arts of *ping-tan* are 'cultured' (Bender, 2003: 53). In particular, he examines storytellers' strategies, principles, and goals when performing their stories. He also explains the concept of *shu lu* ('story road') (ibid., 68), which refers to the storyteller's attitude towards the unfolding of the story, along with certain other features. In particular, this concept is about the storyteller's credibility, logical narrative ordering and aesthetic sensibilities. The performers' use of linguistic and literary devices attracts and captures the audience's interest and guides

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(2009), Yu (2010), Yu (2008), Zhao (1937), Zhao (2009), Zhou (1983, 1985, 1988 a, 1988 b, 1988 c, 1989, 2003, 2007), and Zuo (1981, 1982).

them, as if they were ‘traveling down a road’. This ‘road’ metaphor is applied widely within other narrative traditions, such as *Yangzhou pinghua* (‘Yangzhou storytelling’), and in this context Børdahl (1996: 460) translates *shu lu* as ‘story line’.

To illustrate how the ‘road’ involves all the components of narration, Bender transcribes a live performance session of an episode of the traditional story *Zaisheng Yuan* (‘Love Reincarnate’), analysing the structure of the story, role-playing, vocal register, gestures, exclamations and onomatopoeic sounds. He also marks the types of speech used in the narration. The main point that is emphasised is that a performance is a matter just as much of live interpretation as it is of text. Dialect, some items of vocabulary, expressions, jargon, and proverbs cannot be fully presented in a written text. Even a Chinese script of a *ping-tan* story showing the narration and lyrics cannot fully represent these expressions and this unusual vocabulary, especially the usage of jargon and proverbs. In a later article (2005), Bender interviews assistant storytellers in duet performance about themselves as artists and their art. Traditionally, *ping-tan* is a male-dominated performance tradition; the male-female *tanci* duos only started to become popular in the 1920s. Bender suggests that many audience members seem to pay at least equal attention to these attractive and talented assistant storytellers as they do to the lead storytellers (ibid., 88).

### **1.1.1 Important Themes in *Ping-tan* Literature: Analysis of Written and Musical Texts**

The first theme that will be expanded upon in this thesis involves the relationship between words and music. A proverb I was told by many storytellers during my fieldwork illuminates how verbal narrative and singing are understood in *ping-tan*: ‘*shuo shi meiyou yinyue de chang, chang shi you yinyue de shuo*’ (‘speaking is singing without music, singing is speaking with music’). This saying perhaps summarises the essential expectation in *pinghua* and *tanci*. There are multiple perspectives from which to interpret the relationship between words and music in story singing genres, and inter-disciplinary scholars both from ethnomusicological and linguistic studies have shed light on this debate (Herzog, 1934; Chao, 1956; Nettl, 1958; Jones, 1959; Rycroft, 1959, 1979; Schneider, 1961; List, 1961, 1963; Merriam, 1964; Ts’ao, 1988; Yung, 1989; Feld and Fox, 1994; Stock, 1999; Lawson, 2011; Qian, 2011, 2012, 2013; Schellenberg, 2012). The reasons for choosing a tonal perspective to approach this debate in the *tanci* context are persuasive. To deliver meaning to listeners with less misunderstanding is the main priority in the *tanci* genre. The phonetic influence from the Suzhou dialect is inevitably central when examining the relationship between the words and music in *tanci*.

The relationship between linguistic and musical elements appears to be more complicated than a matter simply of one accommodating the other. As the vernacular linguistic content of *tanci* is tone-based, the tonal element of the words obviously cannot be ignored. For many decades, both ethnomusicologists and linguists have debated which component has priority in determining pitch content in song forms: musical or linguistic elements. Some earlier studies (Schneider, 1961; Jones, 1959) suggested that linguistic tones strongly inform the song's melody in tonal languages. In particular, the setting of words to music "either places limitations upon melodic freedom... or else makes word selection a more exacting matter" (Rycroft, 1959: 28). When the tonal factor of an utterance is reflected closely in the correspondence between speech articulation and melodic contour, comprehension is enhanced (Schellenberg, 2012: 275). This conclusion can be supported by an early study of Herzog (1934: 465), which suggests that "speech-melody may furnish music with raw material, or with suggestions for further elaboration". Nevertheless, mismatches do often occur, the music 'trumping' the language and linguistic tonal rules (Schellenberg, 2012: 275).

In studies of Chinese narrative genres, the relationship between language and music has been discussed extensively. Vibeke Børdahl's research on *Yangzhou pinghua* and *Yangzhou tanci* (1996, 1999) provides a framework for exploring linguistic structure in verse texts (2002, 2003). Lawson (2011) explores the correlation between the music and language of Tianjin's narrative genres. From these sources, the relationship between words and music can be understood via another dual – but not necessarily polar – distinction between *shuo* ('speaking') and *chang* ('singing'). Although the boundary between telling and singing is ambiguous in this particular context, Lawson (2011: 13) suggests:

The continuum somewhere between the two poles of *shuo* and *chang* depending upon the relative degree of 'speechness' or musicality ... In addition to looking at *Shuochang* genres as a continuum of spoken or sung performance modes, *shuo* and *chang* may also be seen respectively as the more general semantic and aesthetic components of a performance.

Lawson also mentions that considering the balance between *shuo-ness* and *chang-ness* from an aesthetic point of view implies a kind of artistic contradiction (ibid.). Other discussions of the speaking-singing relationship in Chinese-language literature include Rong (1983), Du (1991), Feng (2005), Qian (2011, 2012, 2013) and Shen (2015).

The ethnomusicologist Pen-Yeh Ts'ao has broad interests including Chinese ritual music, narrative music, and the theory and methods of ethnomusicology. Featuring musical analytical studies of *tanci* ballads, his work *The Music of Su-chou T'an-tz'u: Elements of the Chinese Southern Singing Narrative* (1988) investigates various structural elements and the relationship between music notation and phonological features of the Suzhou dialect. His method of analysis includes transcribing the vocal line of twelve ballads into graphical notation. Each analysis features an inventory of melodic intervals, scale and mode, textual structure, instrumental techniques, and musical characteristics, as well as text spelled out in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), with both the Chinese characters and an English translation. In addition, he separately analyses pitch-distribution (ibid., 237), comparing the original speech-tones of the lyrics words in Suzhou dialect with their pitch-occurrences in singing. Besides, Ts'ao also notes the speech-tonal distinction in the Suzhou dialect between the *wen* (literary) pronunciation and the *bai* (vernacular) pronunciation. However, he does not identify how phonemic changes affect linguistic tonal content (ibid., 246). He also does not fully explain the correlation between speech tones and how the verses and melodies are altered to avoid phonological distortion. Ts'ao does, though, shed light onto the possible methods to explore the connection between words and music.

### **1.1.2 Important Themes in *Ping-tan* Literature: Live Performance**

The storyteller's role in a narrative performance is not limited to delivering a story. As Finnegan (1998: 171) describes, a teller presents a story not "as decontextualised text with purely cognitive import"; instead, the story "[carries] overtones beyond a merely 'information' function for their narrators and listeners." A narrative performance holds more elements, which reward both the performer and the listener. Finnegan further concludes (ibid., 172):

Story-telling can act as mythical character, sanctioning and formulating the current order and its history (or a particular view of it) – a relevant context for some of the stories told here. Narrative forms give individuals pathways for existing and for experiencing... Story-tellings are used in the claiming or maintenance of identity, for self-legitimation and the validation of experience. They provide a way of coping with struggle, anxiety or sorrow, if only by setting them within intelligible plots and figures, or of removing the teller from the mundane constraints of the present. They can both shape and

contest social realities, both uphold and challenge power. They can express the underlying preoccupations and symbolisms of both individuals and groups. ... They are used for creation.

To explore the process of delivering a narrative performance that comprises all of these factors mentioned by Finnegan, Lord (2000 (1960)) focuses on comprehending the manner in which the singers compose, learn, and transmit their epics, as well as the process of composition of oral narrative poetry. He insists that we must eliminate from the word 'performer' any notion that this individual merely reproduces what they or someone else has composed. Instead, 'our oral poet is composer. Our singer of tales is a composer of tales' (ibid., 13). Besides, he also argues for using the term *listeners* to replace 'audience' (ibid., 2). The word 'audience' implies a more formal type of event. The performer and *listeners*, on the other hand, form a small and intimate group. Explaining the epic song tradition, Lord proposes that any individual singer inherits the songs from all performances of all the songs they have ever heard, whether considered good or bad. What they perform to people is 'tradition'. They are not 'making use of tradition' but occupying a space inside and as a part of the tradition. That is to say, a tradition is "dynamic and ongoing. It lasts as long as there are singers and listeners" (ibid., 3). In the Suzhou dialect, people use *ting shuoshu* ('listen to the storytelling') instead of 'appreciating' or 'watching' *ping-tan*. They use the expression *tingke* (literally 'listening customers') to refer to the audience. These uses of language perhaps emphasise the action of listening, and the complex relationships between speaking/singing and word/music that have been tackled above. The relationship between the storyteller and the audience is illustrated in an example by Sheng (2003: 83): the distinguished storyteller is able to shift the language style to adapt to different circumstances, both in narration and singing. For instance, if audience members tend towards the genteel, the storyteller must be discreet in employing decent speech and manners; even inappropriate eye contact with the audience could damage his reputation, regardless of whether the storyteller is a master or not.

The process of mastering an oral traditional performing genre is arduous. To become a master of the *ping-tan* art, endurance in training and development is essential, just as it is for musicians all over the world. As Willoughby (2008: 77) suggests in his writing about Korean *p'ansori*, dedication, sacrifice, and incessant practice are required over a matter of years for those who want to master their art. All these efforts are dedicated to the performance as a final show. For *ping-tan* followers, being a sophisticated member of the

audience also takes a long time. The everyday habit of going to the story house to enjoy a *ping-tan* performance enables these people to glean an insightful view of the art. As Berger and del Negro (2004: 9) point out, “‘everyday life’ is often invoked in a casual, programmatic, or polemical manner to critique the approaches and perspectives of others”. In addition, the contribution of the audience members to this show should not be ignored. The reason that this thesis does not follow Lord’s suggestion of replacing ‘audience’ with ‘listener’ is that *ping-tan* receivers are far more than a group communicating on a face-to-face level; rather, they are involved in various ways that extend traditional habits. Therefore, noting the degree of audience members’ participation was one of the main tasks of my fieldwork. The way audiences receive the performance and give feedback and their intercommunication with performers helps storytellers to perfect their skills, and generally contributes to improvements in the *ping-tan* art. The habit of taking in *ping-tan* during leisure time has been extended by means of listening to the radio and watching television. Since E.G. Osborn set up China’s first radio station in Shanghai in 1923, listening to the radio has become a major form of entertainment.<sup>5</sup> *Ping-tan* programmes developed rapidly after they were first introduced and enjoyed periods of remarkable achievement (McDaniel, 2001: 496). Following a pause during the Cultural Revolution period, broadcasting *ping-tan* again became vibrant after 1978 (Hamm, 1991: 2). The first *ping-tan* television programmes in the 1990s began to disseminate *ping-tan* to an even broader territory.

Further bodies of literature have been drawn from throughout this study – specifically, relating to the study of gesture (by both performers and audience members), role-playing (both during and outside of the performance context), the formation and expression of identities, and broadcasting (via radio and television). Further discussion of these and other relevant studies is presented at the start of each of the following chapters, detailing many additional sources that have been consulted.

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<sup>5</sup> The early history of the radio broadcasting sector in China can be found in *The International World of Electronic Media* (edited by Gross, 1995), and *Zhongguo Guangbo Dianshi Nianjian* (‘Year book of Chinese Radio and Television’) published since 1986 by the editing committee. This first radio station was with 50,000 watts of power.

## 1.2 Background of the *Ping-tan* Context



Figure 1-3 *Pingjiang Tu* ('Map of *Pingjiang*').<sup>67</sup>

The first historical account of culture in the region is found in the monumental biographical compilation *Shiji* ('Records of the Grand Historian') written by Sima Qian (c. 145 or 135 – 86 BC). The first chapter under the heading *Shijia* ('Hereditary houses') is called *Taibo Ben Wu* ('Taibo Flees to the Land of Wu') and it records a legend from the 12<sup>th</sup> century BC. Taibo was the eldest son and heir to the Western Zhou dynasty. However, his father abdicated the crown and handed it over to his youngest and more capable brother Jili. Taibo fled to southeast China, far away from the court, where he found a lonely moor full of brambles

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<sup>6</sup> *Pingjiang Tu* is a map of Suzhou created in 1229. At that time, the city was called *Pingjiang* (literally, 'Peaceful River'). This stone is 277 cm high and 142 cm wide. The north-south scale is 1:2500 and covers a distance of 4.5km, and the east-west scale is 1:3000 and covers a distance of 3.5 km. The map depicts 20 canals (with a total length of 82 km) and 359 main bridges crossing them. It displays numerous other features of the city, including the 16 km-long city wall, seven city gates on the water, five city gates on land, 20 avenues, 264 lanes, 61 alleys and 24 small lanes. The hills outside of the city are also shown, along with temples, buildings, neighbourhoods, and various other elements. See Sun (2005: 66-67).

<sup>7</sup> Photograph from <http://www.szbkmuseum.com/view.asp?rid=731>.

and thistles. He escaped to such a desolate corner of the world in order to show his resolute determination to leave the leadership permanently in the hands of his brother. Taibo eventually settled in Wuxi, bringing the etiquette of the Zhou dynasty with him to cultivate the local people. His philanthropic actions won him their great allegiance. He also changed the name of the region to Gouwu. Although Wagner (1993: 102) argues that the description of the barbarian land in *Shiji* is not consistent with archeological evidence, Taibo is widely recognised as the founder of the *Wudi* ('land of Wu') and it has been customary for local people to worship him at the *Taibo Miao* ('Shrine of Taibo') ever since.

The land of Wu enjoyed its first period of advance in 584 BC, when persecuted royal refugees from the Chu court escaped to the region. This helped Wu become more powerful and eventually to defeat Chu. The most identifiable figure from this episode is Wu Zixu, a successor of those refugees. He famously disinterred the body of *Chu Pingwang* ('King Pingwang of Chu') and punished it with 300 lashes (ibid, 103-104). This is also recorded in Wu Zixu's biography in *Shiji*. But it does not mean that Wu Zixu was a brutal and tyrannical person. With his support, He Lü, the King of Wu, established the city 'Helü Dacheng' ('Helü's Giant City'). Founded in 514 BC, this city eventually took on what would become a well-known name, Suzhou. Wagner deems that Wu Zixu's cross-border revenge and the history of Wu in *Shiji* are difficult to verify as anything other than fiction (1993: 104). The heritage of Helü's Kingdom of Wu, though, and Zixu's creative design for the city of Suzhou have long been depicted in the bricks for its restored city walls. The Wu culture has become an identifiable characteristic of the Yangtze Delta. The hazy legends of Taibo settling and exploiting the land of Wu and, seven centuries later, King He Lü reigning over this affluent land with Wu Zixu's assistance give accounts of how the city of Suzhou sprang up. Suzhou's central status in the Wu area has been consolidated by its unique geographic and cultural setting, and the people are denoted as *Wuren* ('The people of Wu') in literature. Its significance is reflected in historical political events, economy, agriculture, handicrafts, education and art. Among these, oral traditions have been deeply rooted in this area through various genres of folk performance, including storytelling, story singing, religious recitation, drama and opera. These folk arts are vehicles for the interpretation of two characteristics of humanity – etiquette and courageousness. The motto of the city often used by local authorities and local media is: '*chong wen shang wu*' ('admire the scholar, advocate the martial').

However, according to the *Zhongguo Quyī Zhi* ('*Anthology of Chinese Drama and Opera*', 1986: 4), Wu folk song and various kinds of storytelling became the dominant forms of folklore in the region. Especially during the Song dynasty (960-1276), the blooming oral performances generated a rhymed storytelling genre *taozhen* for telling tales and legends. In the year 1368 when the Ming dynasty was established in Nanjing, migrants from northern China travelled to this Wu area in large numbers. The language families spreading from the south to the north in this area were the Wu dialect, the Jianghuai dialect, and various northern dialects. This profoundly influenced the further development of performances of local oral traditions (ibid.). After 1380, the immense urbanisation of Nanjing and Suzhou resulted in a growing number of folk artisans disseminating folklore from the city to the villages. The government of this time promulgated laws in the *Yuzhi Daming Lü* ('*The Royal-making Law Book of Ming*') stipulating that entertainers must not disguise themselves as historical emperors, concubines, royal courtiers, martyrs, sages and immortals, and that any immortal characters must exhort people to do good. This law was again emphasised in another government document *Guochu Bangwen* ('*The National Announcement*') in 1411. The first emperor of the Ming dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang, believed that folk storytelling and story singing had the power to move people with its rich language and lucid speech. Even so, the *jiangshi* ('telling histories') folk form was highly popular in the Yangtze Delta from the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) and the storytelling tradition was passed on through the centuries. By the 15<sup>th</sup> century, stories about emperors and royal courtiers were prevalent (ibid., 6-7). Oral performances – *pinghua* ('storytelling', or *shuoshu* 'telling story') and the genre *tanci* ('story singing') – gradually became the dominant folk genres by employing the Wu dialects in performance. Historians have been unable to trace the initial origins of *pinghua*, but records of prestigious local scholar Wen Zhengming's (1470-1559) zeal for storytelling, and those of the great storyteller Liu Jingting's (1587-1670) storytelling career in Suzhou (ibid.) demonstrate that Suzhou attracted lots of *pinghua* performers to seek a living.

The first appearance of *tanci* was much later than that of the *pinghua* genre. *Tanci* derives from the genre *guci* ('drumming speech') performed by blind folk artisans who told historical tales and popular stories accompanied by the *pipa* lute. This form was predominant from the north to the south of China, including in Beijing, Nanjing, and Hangzhou, according to Jiang Nan's *Rongtang Shihua* ('*Rongtang Poem and Speech*', completed before 1519) (ibid., 9). The earliest record of *tanci* can be traced back to the late Ming dynasty. It features a female beggar who was adept at playing the *tanci* repertoire *Ershiyi Shi* ('*Twenty-one Histories*'),

argued to be taken from the prestigious scholar Yang Shen's (1488-1559) long narrative poem *Jiangdong Ershiyi Shi Tanci* ('Tanci of Jiangdong Twenty-one Histories') (ibid.).<sup>8</sup> An excerpt of this poem is quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Other early documentation includes Tian Rucheng's recording of *tanci* in his travel notes *Xihu Youlan Zhiyu* ('A Travel Note of the West Lake') in volume 20, describing the occasion in August 1547 when people assembled to view the tide in Hangzhou (Tan Zhenbi and Tan Xuan, 1985: 435; Zhou Liang, 1983: 84; 1988: 7):

At that time, actors and actresses performed *baixi* (acrobatics) to amuse the people, engaged in *jiqiu* (battling), *guanpu* (a game of throwing hoops for prizes), *yugu* (storytelling or story singing to the accompaniment of a bamboo-made drum), and *tanci*.

In addition, an early transcript of Tao Zhenhuai's version of the *tanci* story *Tian Yu Hua* ('Rain of Flowers'), dating from 1651, exists in two different versions – a 26-episode handwritten transcript and a 30-episode block-printed edition (Tao, 1984: preface). Both Tian Rucheng's description and Tao Zhenhuai's transcripts suggest that *tanci* was involved not only in civilian entertainment, but also in literary composition.

The exact time at which the Suzhou dialect was first used to localise the *pinghua* and *tanci* genres is difficult to pinpoint precisely. However, from documentary evidence it can be gleaned that this occurred around the late Ming dynasty (1368-1644) and the early Qing dynasty (1644-1912). The Suzhou scholar Li Yu's (c. 1611-1677) remarkable work *Qing Zhong Pu*<sup>9</sup> ('The Royal Pedigree of the Qing') describes one particular historical episode: the storyteller Li Haiquan was performing the item of *pinghua* repertoire *Yue Zhuan* ('Yue's Legend') at the *Xuanmiao Guan* ('Xuanmiao Daoist Temple'), which had become the landmark of Suzhou (*Zhongguo Quyi Zhi*, 1986: 11). In addition, Zhang Fu's work *Suzhou Zhuzhi Ci* ('Suzhou Zhuzhi Poem') from 1722 mentions various relevant terms. It explains the term *shuoshu* ('telling a story'), saying: *Wuren cheng tanci yi yue shuoshu* ('The Wu people also refer to *tanci* as *shuoshu*'). It describes the soundscape of the performance as *tandong*

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<sup>8</sup> *Jiangdong* refers to the east of the Yangtze River. It appears frequently in ancient literature, specifically to denote the land of Wu. An alternative term with the same meaning is *jiangzuo* ('the left of the Yangtze River').

<sup>9</sup> The tragedy *Qing Zhong Pu* is a drama script which describes how Suzhou's local royal courtiers and citizens revolted against the great eunuch Wei Zhongxian's authority during Ming *Tianqi's* reign (1621-1627). It reflects the dark and complicated social reality of the time.

*sixian pai dong mu, shashijiman shuoshu chang* ('Plucking the strings slapping the wooden block, the story house is fully sparkling') (ibid., 10). These references indicate several features of *tanci* performance in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. First, it is clear that it had been merged with storytelling *pinghua* under the overarching concept of *shuoshu* oral performance. *Shuoshu* can refer either to storytelling without music or story singing with musical accompaniment. Secondly, *tanci* was performed in the Suzhou dialect by this time. It involved singing, string instruments, and props such as wooden blocks. Thirdly, the genre was performed in a specific venue, the *shuoshu chang* mentioned in the text. Finally, there is evidence that it was very popular with local audiences.

The use of the Suzhou dialect in *pinghua* and *tanci* performance has been maintained since it first took off in 18<sup>th</sup> century Suzhou. The city has gradually expanded geographically into the Yangtze Delta, the home of the Wu culture. *Ping-tan* underwent a radical development after a famous storyteller Wang Zhoushi performed for the emperor *Qianglong* in 1776, becoming even more widely spread and appreciated in late 18<sup>th</sup> century (*Zhongguo Quyi Zhi*, 1986: 61). By that time, the territory of *ping-tan* had expanded roughly as far as Shanghai to the east, to Changshu in the north and west, and in the south to Jiaxing and Huzhou of Zhejiang province (ibid., 62). In the Yangtze Delta area, Wu culture had also bred an abundance of other oral performance genres.<sup>10</sup>

To distinguish these language-centred genres from others, the name of the place (often also the name of the dialect), is usually placed in front of the genre name. Thus, *Suzhou pinghua* and *Suzhou tanci* are the particular genres discussed in this dissertation. As illustrated already, because these two genres share the same features in performance, a unique compound word, *ping-tan*, has been used as an umbrella term to refer to both.<sup>11</sup> After 1949,

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<sup>10</sup> Other oral folk performances include, for instance, the storytelling genres *Yangzhou pinghua*, *Yixing pinghua*, *Changzhou pinghua*, *Qihai pinghua*, *Nanjing baihua*, *Huaian pingshu*, etc. There are story singing genres *Yangzhou tanci* (*Yangzhou xianci*), *Yangzhou qingqu*, *Qihai tanci*, *Subei qinshu*, *Subei dagu*, *Xuzhou qinshu*, *Xuzhou huagu*, *Xuzhou yugu*, *Suzhong daoqing*, *Nanjing baiju*, *Yugu zhui*, etc. See the Jiangsu Volume of *Zhongguo Quyi Zhi* (1986). Most of these genres are rarely performed nowadays, but historically speaking, their existence affirms the rich and competitive oral performances in the land of Wu, where the present Jiangsu province is mainly located. This also supports the fact that the Yangtze Delta area played a crucial role from multi-faceted perspectives – political, economic, agricultural, and cultural – in the history of the whole country especially after the immense urbanisation of Ming dynasty.

<sup>11</sup> Only *Suzhou ping-tan* uses *ping-tan* as a stylistic name. Although other places, such as Yangzhou and Xuzhou both have *pinghua* and *tanci* genres as dominant oral folk arts, the terms '*Yangzhou ping-tan*' or '*Xuzhou ping-tan*' are not used.

at occasions such as the ‘Suzhou Ping-tan Artisans’ Workshop’ held on 14 August 1951, the term *Suzhou ping-tan* was also used, to emphasise the localness of the genre.<sup>12</sup> It should be clarified that as *ping-tan* contains two genres – storytelling both with and without musical engagement – in all of my research I intentionally use a hyphen to link these two words. Other existing studies simply render the term *pingtan* (Bender, 2005, 2003, 1999, 1998, 1995, 1993, 1984; Benson, 1996; Du, 1995; He, 2014; 2012; 2011; 2010; McDaniel, 2001; Riftin, 1999; Shen, 2007; Tang, 2010; Thrasher: 1981; Yung, 1982), as well as *p’ing-t’an* from Pian (1986: 15). Besides, the spelling *t’an-tz’u* (Ch’en, 1974; Tsao, 2002, 1989, 1988, 1986, 1976), and *tarntsy* (Pian, 1986: 15) can also refer to *Suzhou tanci* story singing.

### 1.2.1 *Suzhou Ping-tan*: Live Performance and Components

In the *ping-tan* jargon, *pinghua* storytelling is called *dashu* (literally, ‘big story’). It is only performed in solo form. *Tanci* narrative singing, on the other hand, is called *xiaoshu* (literally, ‘small story’). This is generally performed in both solo and duet. The distinction between ‘big’ and ‘small’ here refers to the scale of the story content. The former is generally employed for martial stories, which focus on historical and fictional figures including military swordsmen, heroes, and chivalrous characters. They often advocate characteristics such as loyalty, filial piety, and righteousness. Typical items of repertoire include *San Guo* (‘The Three Kingdoms’), *Yue Zhuan* (‘Yue’s Legend’) and *Wu Song* (named after a character in the story). Along with the explicit narrative, performers use posture and vocal imitation to portray characters. The latter, with the assistance of ballad singing, is used to tell love stories involving young scholars and beautiful ladies. Repertoire here includes *Du Shiniang* (named after a character in the story), *Yu Qingting* (‘Jade Dragonfly’), *Wenwu Xiangqiu* (‘A Sweet Ball’) and *Xiu Xiangnang* (‘Embroidered Sachet’).

A *ping-tan* proverb concisely denotes the features of both genres: ‘*dashu yigu jin, xiaoshu yiduan qing*’ (‘storytelling is a portion of vigour, story singing is a moment of emotion’). Accordingly, although an individual *ping-tan* exponent is labelled either a *pinghua* performer or a *tanci* performer according to their individual specialties, they all share the same occupation of *shuoshu xiansheng* (‘storyteller’). In a *tanci* duet performance, the leading storyteller *shangshou* (‘upper hand’) sits on the audience’s left hand side and plays the

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<sup>12</sup> The timetable of *Zhongguo Quyi Zhi* (1986: 40) shows that the ‘Suzhou Pinghua, Tanci Workers’ Institute’ was established with 204 people on the 15 December 1949. This splits the *pinghua* and *tanci* genres. However, in records from 1951 onwards, the phrase *Suzhou ping-tan* has been used in most cases, for example in the names of *ping-tan* troupes and *ping-tan* schools.

*sanxian* banjo. The assistant storyteller *xiashou* ('lower hand') sits on the audience's right hand side and specialises in playing the *pipa* lute. The *tanci* master Zhao Xiangzhou (c. mid-19<sup>th</sup> century) gave details of his experience performing solos and duets: '*dandang nanyu bu jimo, shuangdang nanyu tongyu*' (Zhou, 1985: 214). This quotation describes the challenges of finding balance in performance: for the soloist, the difficulty is not to get bored; in a duet, it is difficult to elaborate the performance as if it were one person performing. This also suggests that the forms of solo and duet *tanci* performance had already been established by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Due to the popularity of *tanci* performance, a mixed-sex pair in which the male is the leader and the female is the assistant has been stereotypically recognised as the standard form of *ping-tan* performance. But this mixed-sex duet form only emerged after 1924 (Wu, 2011: 107).

Canals crisscross the Yangtze Delta area, and travelling by boat has historically been the main means of transport used in many parts of daily life. Storytellers would take boats, shuttling between *matou* ('docks') with their instruments. Thus, giving performance tours became known as *pao matou* (literally, 'running between docks'). The storyteller Gao Bowen told me that in the past, rural residents would look forward to seeing the storytellers arriving at the dock, as they knew that this meant hearing the latest news from the outside world in the performances that would follow.<sup>13</sup> In this context, villages, towns, and cities that the storytellers visit are thus called *matou*. Nowadays, storytellers still might describe, for example, a performance at the town of Gaoqiao in Greater Shanghai as going to the 'Gaoqiao *matou*'.

The performance space, the *shuchang* (literally, 'story house'), only serves to host *ping-tan* and no other form of performance, and nowadays this custom still remains. Outside of performance times, traditionally it would double-up as a teahouse for the public, as for instance do the story houses located in the Suzhou Ping-tan Museum, *Wuyuan shen chu* (literally, 'Deep in the garden of Wu'), and the *Daru Xiang* ('Lane of Great Scholar') story house. These two story houses retain the traditional style with dozens of *baxian zhuo* ('square desks') for audiences, surrounded by seats depending on the size of the house. Some members of the audience go to the story house several hours ahead of the performance to enjoy a morning's leisure.

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<sup>13</sup> Personal communication, 7 September 2015.



Figure 1-4 *Wuyuan Shenchu* story house is located in the *Zhongzhangjia Xiang* lane in Suzhou. In front of the building (in the right corner of the photo), there is a set of sculptures showing a *changfang* (story house manager) welcoming an audience member who is arriving in a rickshaw, one of the main means of transport in the past.



Figure 1-5 *Daruxiang* story house photographed from the stage. In this story house, the audience desks are half the size of those in some other houses.



**Figure 1-6 Daruxiang story house from the audience's perspective. On each side of the stage are spaces separated by screens; on the left is a small tea room (see Figure 1-6), and on the right is an area for storytellers to get changed and take a break. The storytellers Gao Bowen and Lu Jinhua give a performance on 7 September 2015.**



**Figure 1-7 The small tea room. The staff of the story house fill these flasks before a performance and place them on the audience desks. Audience members are also allowed to come in to get more water during the performance.**

The *Guangyu*<sup>14</sup> (literally, 'Honour and Abundance') story house and the *Meizhu*<sup>15</sup> ('Plum and Bamboo') story house are prominent examples in Suzhou. These theatre-style story houses emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and these buildings are only used for *ping-tan* performances. These theatre-style story houses also maintain the teahouse function for their habitués, opening early in the morning so people can call in and assemble in its lobby to drink tea, chat with friends, or play Chinese chess. Both traditional and theatre-style story houses are composed of a stage at the height of three steps. On the stage, there is a *ban zhuo* literally meaning 'half desk', which is exactly half the size of the *baxian zhuo*. It is covered with an embroidered tablecloth. A solo storyteller sits behind the desk, with the long side facing the audience. Duo performers sit separately at each side of the desk, with the shorter side facing the audience.



**Figure 1-8 The *Guangyu* story house. Between every two seats, there is a small table for a flask. The performance is a competition for young storytellers held on 30 September 2012. The *ping-tan* troupe is filming the performance, and an audience member takes photos for the performers.**

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<sup>14</sup> The *Guangyu* story house was initially built as the *Guangyu gongsuo* ('Guangyu guild') in 1776 during the reign of Qianlong. Its name implies the meaning of '*guang qian yu hou*' ('honour the predecessors and enrich the successors'). The Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe is also located here.

<sup>15</sup> The *Meizhu* story house was called *Heping* (literary 'Peaceful') story house when it was built in 1942.



**Figure 1-9** The outside of the *Guangyu* story house. The *pipa*-shaped neon light is a typical sign for a story house. In addition to the name of the story house, on the sign is written '*chazuo*' (tea room) and '*ping-tan*'. In front of the story house, there is a board upon which is written '*keman*' ('full house'). The yellow poster behind glass on the wall contains information of the performance.

Nowadays, in addition to the types of story house mentioned above, some teahouses offer the chance to watch *ping-tan* performances as a special selling point. Contemporary story houses have become dedicated spaces for hosting performances, but these teahouses are a reminder of how *ping-tan* was embedded in leisure activity in the past. They employ storytellers to perform during business hours and customers receive the tea menu and the *tanci* opening ballad menu at the same time. Visitors typically order one or two ballads during a stay.



Figure 1-10 A *ping-tan* performance in a contemporary teahouse in a tourist area on 3 May 2015. The storyteller Zhou Mengbai received a request to sing the opening ballad *Du Shiniang*. There is a screen displaying the text for the audience.



Figure 1-11 The audience includes three visitors from Germany.

Before storytellers mount the stage, they usually warm up backstage, immersing themselves in their rehearsals. When the bell rings, the *tanci* performers – holding a *sanxian* banjo for solo performances, and adding a *pipa* lute for the assistant in duo performances – take a seat on the stage and tune their instruments. When everything is ready, they start to sing a *kaipian* (‘opening ballad’), which averages around ten minutes in length. This is a complete

ballad sung at the very start of a performance session, and serves as a warm-up for the performers and a mood-setter for the audience. Some opening ballads also provide a helpful summary of a selected episode from the story due to be told later. The majority of opening ballads are composed in seven-syllable verse form in which all lines share an end rhyme. As this prosodic principle is similar to that employed in Tang poetry, opening ballads are also called *tangshi kaipian* 'Tang poetry opening ballads' (Zhou, 1988: 54). However, some of the more recently composed, modern-themed opening ballads are written with lines of irregular length and in a colloquial style. Sometimes, the storyteller greets the audience in an informal chatty manner, for instance, "It is really hot today, I really appreciate you audience members coming to today's segment"; "I was just talking to the audience members about yesterday's story. One holds his opinion that... But my storyline in today's segment will just follow that point and explain it to you"; "Yesterday, we talked about... [a brief abstract of the plot]. Today, we are going to...." The storyteller can also fiddle around with the instrument while waiting for the audience to settle and be quiet, as well as tuning up the instrument.

For the *pinghua* genre, as there is no music in the performance, storytellers hold nothing as they step onto the stage. Ideally, all performers are expected to reach the kind of performing status recorded in the notes of the storyteller Liu Jingting's (ab. 1587-1670) (Wu, 2011: 167):

My teacher Mo Houguang [lived in late Ming dynasty] is a gentleman. ... [In his performance theory, he suggests:] 'Once you are seated [on the stage], then forget [everything]' ... 'Forget your own business, forget your own appearance, forget that prestigious and authoritative people are sitting there, forget the date and the time, forget your name. Then you are a thousand years of history. All the smiles and tears are one'.

To notify the audience that the main performance is starting, both *tanci* and *pinghua* performers strike a wood block against the desk. They follow this with some background narrative of the story or with a mini review of the episode performed the day before. During the two-hour performance (with a ten-minute interval in the middle), the other available props to assist the performance include a folding fan and a handkerchief. The *tanci* performers also occasionally insert the singing parts of some monologue, dialogue, and narrative according to the plot. Therefore, in a *ping-tan* performance, all parts of the performance are flexibly arranged.

As I will argue in this thesis, however, the performance depends on the audience's unspoken but noticeable reactions. These come from the eyes of audience members, and from their slight physical responses such as tutting, head nodding, musical beat-marking, and so on. These prompt storytellers to instantaneously adjust their performance. Accordingly, the essential skills of '*shuo, xue, tan, chang, yan*' ('speech, inserting humour, singing, playing instruments, and performing') are at the centre of *ping-tan* training, and of the criteria with which to judge a performance. A complete *changpian* ('long-episode story') nowadays typically consists of a fortnight of daily performances. In the past, this period could last from a month to eight months and beyond. This protracted delivery is an essential feature of *Suzhou ping-tan*. A daily performance includes two episodes with a break in between, and an episode lasts for 45 minutes to one hour.

To master a piece of long-episode story can offer a storyteller a gateway to a *ping-tan* career. They should then continue to polish this long-episode story throughout their whole life. Thus, traditionally speaking, the value of a storyteller is not the number of the stories they can perform, but how exquisite the story is. Even the masters have limited repertoires for their entire careers. For this reason, in the past, apart from the students of the performer, storytellers were not allowed to appear at a colleague's performance. This behaviour would be condemned as *toushu* ('stealing stories'), and the performer would be entitled to drive this special customer away. Storyteller Jin Lisheng told me how, on a few occasions, a master storyteller has been known to approve a young storyteller watching their performance, and this prospect has spread amazement among followers.<sup>16</sup>

Most of the long-episode stories that have been passed down through the generations are called *chuantong shu* ('traditional stories'). A storyteller should master at least one piece of long-episode story to be able to give daily performances in the story house. However, after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, *zhongpian* ('medium-length') stories were created to complete a story within three to five episodes for political propaganda. There are now also *duanpian* ('short-length') stories, which involve a performance of only one episode. Following the start of a political movement in 1951 to 'cut off the tail of feudalism, capitalism and revisionism', performing the classic long repertoire was forbidden. As a result, the Suzhou and Shanghai *ping-tan* troupes began to create medium-length stories. By 1966 there were 81 new *tanci* compositions, and 10 *pinghua*

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<sup>16</sup> Personal communication, 25 September 2012.

compositions (Jin, 2014: 55). However, this new repertoire did not arouse the interest of *ping-tan* audiences, and it significantly impacted upon the lives and incomes of storytellers. These new compositions then are categorised as *er lei shu* ('the second category of stories').

However, this does not mean that all newly-composed work from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century is less qualified. As well as new compositions related to contemporary life, there were also revised versions of the traditional classics. For example, the traditional long-episode story *Zhenzhu Ta* ('Pearl Pagoda') was shortened and reedited as '*Er Jian Gu*' ('Second Meeting with Aunt'). Another section of these new compositions originated in the *yang ban xi*, the eight revolutionary model operas, such as *Bai Mao Nü* ('The White-haired Girl'). These new works were conceived as historical productions that were to meet the transient demands of the revolution. However, with careful elaboration, some works such as *Laozi, Zhezi, Xiaozi* ('The Old Father, the Deposit Book, and the Dutiful Son'), were still loved by the audiences in 1970s, and even retain popularity nowadays. To compose these medium-length works, the most outstanding masters of the time were assembled, including Jiang Yuequan, Xu Lixian, Yang Zhenxiong, Yang Zhenyan. The stories composed in the 1980s were of lesser quality than the composition before and after the Cultural Revolution, but are still popular among audiences nowadays.

Presumably, the reason that most of the medium-length stories have disappeared from favour is attributable to the language and – for the *tanci* genre – the music. Language plays the predominant role in *ping-tan* performance, whether the story is of a martial or scholarly theme. Even the casting of character roles by a storyteller is seen as an add-on to the performance; the essence of *ping-tan* is to deliver the main ideas of the story content through the linguistic channels of telling and singing (Cao, 1992: 127-128).

### **1.2.2 Linguistic Characteristics in *Ping-tan* Performance: An Introduction to the Suzhou Dialect**

The Suzhou dialect falls under the Chinese linguistic system, but it is more complicated than Mandarin Chinese. Syllables in Chinese are comprised of an initial (*shengmu*), a final (*yunmu*) and a tone (*shengdiao*). The initial denotes the consonantal element or elements at the beginning of the syllable. The final consists of the remaining segmental and semi-segmental sounds of the syllable which are vowels. The tone indicates the commutable features of the syllable. In the *pinyin* Romanisation system of Mandarin, there are 24 initial consonants, 37

simple or compound vowel and 4 tones. However, as one of the most difficult dialects, the *Suzhou Dialect Dictionary* (1997) states that the contemporary Suzhou dialect constitutes 27 initial consonants, 49 simple or compound vowels and 8 tones. Besides, while females use the vowel sound /æ/, males tend to pronounce the same vowel /e/, and this is a typical feature that differentiates the Suzhou dialect from others in the area, including the Shanghai, Wuxi and Changzhou dialects. Moreover, the linguistic system of *ping-tan* follows an old-fashioned convention of the Suzhou dialect, in which a total of 38 initial consonants are partially preserved from the speech of rural Suzhou. Due to these special linguistic registers, and despite it being widely spread in the Yangtze Delta region, the Suzhou dialect is not easy to master, nor is it easily understood by those from outside of the southern Yangtze Delta region. Occupational storytellers who were not born in Suzhou generally have concerns about their accent, especially when giving a performance in Suzhou. Precise articulation is a crucial point of judgement employed by local audiences. Nevertheless, in order to imitate the other dialects that also abound in characters being portrayed, storytellers should be able to mimic a range of linguistic styles. Besides, the Suzhou dialect is one of the most complicated in the Chinese language. There are seven regular initial tones, and more complexity is added by the variable ‘tone sandhi’ effects (a linguistic phenomenon discussed below) that are common in daily use. It is particularly challenging to incorporate them into linguistic theories (Ye, 1993; Wang, 1996; 2003; Chen, 2000; Lin and Geng, 2004). Although these phonetic effects are significant in altering the tonal contours of everyday speech, they have not been considered in any existing *ping-tan* studies. I will discuss this phenomenon in more detail later in this thesis.

### **1.2.3 Polishing Speaking Skills**

The aural quality of the Suzhou dialect is soft. This softness is often described using the analogy of glutinous rice, and some say that it is preferable to quarrel with a person from Suzhou than to speak normally with someone from another place. Similarly, *ping-tan* is complimented as the most beautiful sound in China, and it seems that the linguistic register at its heart is vital in producing this effect.

Employing spoken language accurately in Suzhou *ping-tan* depends upon two features: the satisfactory usage of literary words and proverbs, and the ability for language to be expressed in a precise way. The master storyteller Zhou Yuquan deems (Zhou, 2000: 153):

‘[If one is] unable to speak appropriately, how can a story be told? ... Doesn’t everyone know how to speak? But that is the spoken language of daily life off the stage. The language spoken on the stage is artistic, and that includes two points: first is accuracy, second is the beauty [of the language]’.

Wang (2011: 31) records that the storyteller Jin Shengbo, who specialised in *pinghua*, gave a lecture at the Suzhong Ping-tan School on 29<sup>th</sup> December 2008. Jin mentioned that the learning process of *pinghua* is slower than that of *tanci* due to the linguistic skills required. Although learning *ping-tan* is easier than learning *tanci* in the early stages of study, it is difficult to polish these skills, and to do so requires great patience and endurance. He suggested that the initial requirement is to enunciate every word explicitly and clearly. The second is to cultivate body movements, such as stretching the body and waving the hands like a cloud. Jin suggested that thirdly, students should learn from the performances of senior masters from multiple perspectives, because self-cultivation and self-discipline are important qualities of being a good storyteller. Being demanding of oneself is also an important ability. Some *ping-tan* followers such as Lu Zhigang<sup>17</sup>, Gu Wenzhong<sup>18</sup>, Liao Yuping<sup>19</sup> mentioned that the older generation of storytellers were very hard on themselves. They always prepared by reciting the story before stepping onto the stage, no matter how acquainted they were with the content. After the performance, they also spent some time reviewing their performance, sometimes in discussion with the audience.

Any superfluous words in narration are also considered to be indicative of a poor performance, and such failings generally annoy audiences. In an interview with an audience member Chen Youcai, he told me that some storytellers use too many conjunctions such as ‘but’, ‘nevertheless’, and ‘then’ during spoken narrative.<sup>20</sup> Once an audience member counted how many times one particular storyteller used these linking words in his performance, before airing his complaints to the storyteller in the form of a poem. This meant that the storyteller was sneered at as an example of bad practice for the rest of his career.

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<sup>17</sup> Personal communication, 2 October 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Personal communication, 15 September 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Personal communication, 30 September 2012.

<sup>20</sup> Personal communication, 30 September 2012.

Regarding the proper ways of telling, some storytellers pay lots of attention to accumulating materials to enrich the spoken narrative. The storyteller Hui Zhongqiu said:<sup>21</sup>

Telling a story is not like acting out a drama. Dramas can set up the stage to enrich the performance, while storytelling relies on speaking. How can you make the audience 'see' what you are describing? You must see it before you tell it. For instance, I tell a story that occurs at the *Xuanmiao Guan* Taoist temple. Where the palace, the temple, the hovel are; how to walk from the palace to the hovel, and from the temple to the *Qiu Yu Tai* ('Rain Prayer Terrace'); what are the other objects along the way? If storytellers have visited these sites, they can interpret them clearly, so the audience can 'see' the scene clearly.

If the plot is about somewhere that you have never been to before, what should you do? I structure a scene in my mind according to my previous touring experience, so that I have an idea of where the hall is, how large the room is. I have a picture in my mind. Then I describe the picture to the audience, so it is as if they are involved in the scene.

In order to transmit an impression of scholarly and literati characters, storytellers employ a special literary way of speaking that is quite unlike colloquial dialect. *Zhongzhou yun* ('zhongzhou rhyme') is an official language based on the Henan dialect that spread over the country in the old imperial bureaucracy and the upper classes in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>22</sup> It is still employed in *ping-tan* performance. Normally, *zhongzhou* rhyme is used by elite characters such as authority figures and the literati. This speaking style is also used in Chinese operas (such as *kunqu* and *Beijing* opera), classical literature, and imperial institutions.<sup>23</sup> This is one

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<sup>21</sup> Personal communication, 25 January 2012.

<sup>22</sup> Henan province is often referred to as *zhongyuan* or *zhongzhou*, literally meaning 'central plains' or 'midland'. Although the name also applies after the fall of the *Tang* dynasty in the year 907, Kaifeng in eastern Henan was the capital of four dynasties in the Period of Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms that followed. The Song Dynasty that reunified China in 982 also had its capital at Kaifeng, and it retained its capital status during the Jurchen period. All the way up until the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Henan was still of great importance in the Ming Dynasty and Qing Dynasty that followed, though its economy slowly deteriorated due to frequent natural disasters affecting the entirety of China proper. Henan is thought of as the cradle of Chinese civilization with over 5,000 years of history, and remained China's cultural, economic, and political centre until approximately 1,000 years ago.

<sup>23</sup> Wu (2011: 50) suggests that *zhongzhou yun* emphasises the narrative in rhyme in a way that resembles the formula narrative in *Kunqu* opera and *Beijing* opera. It is an artistic language used on

of the reasons that *ping-tan* is thought of as a means to cultivate its audiences (Bender, 2003: 53). In *ping-tan*, the usage of *zhongzhou* rhyme has a similar effect as using quasi-Shakespearian English and intonation in historical dramas might have in the English-speaking world.

#### 1.2.4 Various Types of Narration

In *ping-tan*, narration is classified into six types, and the scheme is called *liu bai* ('six narrations') in jargon (Zhou, 1988: 45-46; Wu, 2011: 27). The speaking registers are called *shuo biao*, *shuo bai* or *biao bai*, in which the term *shuo* is speaking; *bai* refers to the dialogue and monologues among characters; and *biao* indicates the narrator's third-person speech. Taking a lead from the *Suzhou Ping-tan Dictionary* and other scholars' explanations, the six types of narration are as follows:

1. *Guan bai* ('official's narration') is generally spoken in *zhongzhou* rhyme. It refers to dialogue and external monologue passages in the story, which are 'audible'. In some cases, especially in the modern repertoire, the *guan bai* also uses Mandarin and other dialects. *Guan bai* is translated as 'public talk' in Børdahl's (1996: 84) writing, or as 'audible speech' in Bender's (2003: 54) work.

2. *Si bai* ('monologue') is 'inaudible' to the other characters in story. It reveals the inner interpretation of an individual character in the first-person, in order to expose the character's thoughts in monologue.

3. *Gu bai* ('murmuring') has two meanings. For the 'audible' kind of murmuring speech, it is delivered as if spoken aloud; in the case of 'inaudible' murmuring, private speech is delivered as if spoken as an inner monologue. Both of these forms of speech can be compared with 'asides' in Western dramatic traditions (Bender, 2003: 56; Zuo, 1981: 2).

4. *Biao bai*, simply called '*biao*' in general, is the storyteller's description of characters and scenes from a third-person perspective. In some cases, it reveals a character's inner thoughts, and thus overlaps with the other speech types. In addition, *biao bai* can also function as the narrator's speech being expressed through a character. The label refers to instances in which the storyteller is occupying a character role, but still continues with the

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the stage in order to distinguish different characters, such as the male role *sheng*, female role *dan*, painted-face male role *jing* and the male clown role *chou*.

narration. The word *biao* may be joined with a character's name, for instance 'Xiao Baicai *biao*', meaning 'Xiao Baicai narrates'. Moreover, when the narrator takes a singing role, *biao bai* is called *biao chang* ('narrator's singing', Bender, 2003: 56). This can either apply when the narrator's words are sung, or when the narrator sings on behalf of a character.

5. *Tuo bai* ('supporting narration') is offered to make direct comments from a character's standpoint, normally as part of an evaluative summary (Zuo, 1981: 210).

6. *Chen bai* ('highlighting narration') is utilised when the narrator gives a direct comment to enhance the real meaning behind a character's words. This kind of revealing comment can occur in either narration or singing, and usually coincides with a satirical voice.

As well as the 'six narrations', there are a further five ways of narrating and describing scenes, and each one has a specific term attached to it (Zhou, 1988: 48). 1. *Xiang tan* ('countryside dialect') describes the usage of local dialect. 2. *Yun bai* ('rhyming speech') is a form of verse with four, five and seven syllables, or stanzas of varying line-lengths. This form is articulated using the vernacular or the *zhongzhou yun* speech manner. It is often used to describe views, sights, objects, character's actions, and common narrative in monologue or dialogue. 3. *Fu zan* ('rhapsody speech') refers to passages of verse either in stanzas of five- or seven-syllable lines, as in classical Chinese poetry;<sup>24</sup> or in the format of *ci* poetry with names such as *Xijiang Yue* ('Western River Moon'). Bender (2003: 57) translates this term as 'rhyme prose' or 'rhapsody'. A piece of *fuzan* may also carry more specific descriptors: *Qiang Fu* is a rhapsody typically describing a spear; *Jindian Fu* is one depicting the 'Golden Imperial Palace'; *Yu Fu* ('rain rhapsody') is used in the plot of 'Praying for Rain', found in an episode called *Qian Dutiao Qiu Yu* ('Qian Dutiao Praying for Rain'). 4. *Yi zi* ('introduction') refers to the general introduction given by the storyteller at the beginning of a story. 5. *Gua kou* ('hooking mouth') serves as an introductory verse narration, in particular recited at a character's first appearance as a means of introducing their personal background, personality or emotions at that moment. For example, in the episode from *Shui Hu*, 'Dousha Ximen Qing' ('Killing Xi Mengqing'), Wu Song's opening *guakou* is as follows: *shou zhi wu qing dao, yao sha Xi Mengqing* ('[I am] handling the unmerciful sword, [and I am] going to kill Xi Mengqing'). Through this monologue, audience can quickly grasp the gist of the story, immersing themselves in the plot that follows.

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<sup>24</sup> The history of poetic form of *fu* can be traced back to the *Han* dynasty (206 BC – AD 220).

Besides, various *xue* or *xuetou* ('jokes') occur in *ping-tan* narrative. *Ping-tan* followers are said to value them highly: 'comic elements are the treasure of the storytelling' (Du Wenwei, 1995: 33). However, the timing with which humour is inserted is the key to amusing audiences, and a storyteller can expect criticism if this skill is not executed perfectly. Thus, for storytellers in the early stages of their careers, it is necessary to prepare these comic elements before giving a performance. More sophisticated storytellers are able to improvise comic elements with good timing, affecting a positive reaction from the audience. Besides, these witty remarks have the function of revealing a reality in an ironic or sarcastic way.

The *xuetou* comic elements can be classified into three types (Wu, 2011: 19). 1. *Rou li xue* ('humour in the meat') is a comic element that is embedded in the plot context. It is also translated as 'inherent comic element' (Du, 1995: 33). 2. *Wai chahua* ('outwardly inserted flowers' or 'stuck-ins') are elements that are extended from the plot in the form of inserted explanations, metaphors and analogies. They are indirectly or partially relevant to the plot. 3. *Xiao mai* ('small sales') refers to brief witticisms or humorous acts inserted as one-offs. These improvised short pieces of humour or wise metaphors are seen as enlivening the language. One of the most widely-known *xiao mai* among *ping-tan* followers, as Hui Zhongqiu told me, is from *Shui Hu Zhuan* ('Water Margin'), although its origin has not been traced:<sup>25</sup>

The character Lu Junyi wonders why so many respectable gentlemen and intellectuals of late have willingly become involved in robbery. The storyteller makes a witty remark here: 'How come the taste for becoming robbers is so strong? How can it even be stronger than Nestle coffee? It is awfully tasty [switching to Mandarin and mimicking an advertisement voice-over]!'

Obviously, these remarks are narrated in a sarcastic voice – the narrator's 'tasty' comment mocks the unusual social situation of a robbery being carried out by respectable gentlemen and intellectuals. By this means, rather than strongly venting negative emotions, the storyteller makes the audience laugh by adding contemporary references. This does not give too much of the upcoming plot away, and successfully tantalizes the audience.

It is very common for *ping-tan* storytellers to shift their third person narrative to the first person at many points throughout a story, a phenomenon which Mark Bender, in his book

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<sup>25</sup> Personal communication, 5 February 2012.

*Plum and Bamboo*, refers to as the 'story road' (*shulu*). Role-playing with frequent shifts of perspective is called *qi jiaose*, or 'bringing out characters' (Bender, 2003: 87), and it is a crucial component of the acting skill, indicating the role shifting as 'jump in (to the cast)' and 'jump out (from the cast)' (Cao, 1992: 128; Zhou, 2007: 68). As Bender (2003: 87) suggests, 'the narrative mode can be evoked momentarily at will to comment on the character's thoughts, words, and actions.'

The various types of narration thus enable the storyteller to either add complexity to the storyline or to simplify it. Individual stories are told by different storytellers on different occasions, but more important than the plots themselves are the personal ways in which they are interpreted. Audiences can explore the same 'story road' with different guides.

#### **1.2.5 Music Characteristics in *Tanci*: *Diao* and *Liupai* Performing Schools, and *Qupai***

The following discussion of the employment of music refers only to the *tanci* context, and solo *pinghua* does not involve any musical components. This does not prevent the public from sometimes holding the mistaken impression that the singing of opening ballads is a feature of all *ping-tan*.

It has already been noted that the musical instruments used in the *tanci* genre are the *sanxian* banjo for soloists and leaders in a duet, and an additional *pipa* lute for the assistant storyteller. This is a convention for daily performances. On special occasions such as large and elaborate festival gala shows in theatres, several additional instruments can accompany a duet performance to bolster the effect. These might include an extra *sanxian* and *pipa*, and a *ruan* banjo. Sometimes, programmes may even feature trio or quartet performances as well as the typical duet setting. In these cases, the extra one or two instruments are chosen from those three just mentioned. According to the *Zhongguo Quyī Zhi* (1986: 304), the *sanxian* used in the *tanci* genre is a comparatively small member of the *sanxian* family. Its body is 90cm long, its head ellipsoidal, and it is covered with snakeskin. The head is about 14cm long and 11cm wide. There are no frets on the neck, which is also the fingerboard. But as implied by its name – literally meaning 'three strings' – this instrument has three strings tuned from low pitch to high pitch in the pattern subdominant-tonic-dominant. It can be tuned to any key to suit to the storyteller's vocal range. The *pipa* has a pear-shaped body, with a plain face and a round back. Its neck is slightly bent backwards, which is neither as straight as the Kazakh *Dombra*, nor as bent as the Japanese *gagaku biwa* or North African oud. In distinction to the *sanxian*, the *pipa* traditionally has three strings with thirteen frets,

although the modern instrument has 29 or 31 frets to play the chromatic scale. Although most *tanci* music has a pentatonic basis, the chromatic pitches do frequently emerge in both singing and accompaniment. Both *sanxian* and *pipa* are played by fingers without using a plastic nail or a plectrum.

The fundamental components of *tanci* music are the *jiben diao* ('basic tunes') and *qupai* ('precomposed labelled melodies') (*Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, Vol. 7, 2001: 1047). The *diao* ('tune') has a dominant role in *tanci* music and will be discussed further below. The *qupai* has a much earlier history to trace than that of the *diao* system. Tao (1979: 3) suggests that the earliest *qupai* model is from *shua haier* ('playing with kids'), which is recorded in *Liu Zhiyuan Zhu Gong Diao* ('Liu Zhiyuan's Zhu Gong Diao') published during the Song dynasty in 1190. Another example is the *shan ge* ('mountain song') model, based on a folk song that spread during the Ming dynasty (Zhou, 1988: 107). There are about twenty melodic models frequently used in *tanci* music (Tao, 1979: 3). Gao (1989: 4) suggests that *qupai* derives from the *cipai* ('labeled poetry'), a specific structure to standardise the number of the characters and the rhymes in folk music practice. The musical tune accompanied by the poetry was thus used to set new texts, while the name of the original poetry was retained. Jones (1989: 21-22) indicates that phrases of *qupai* melodies are irregular, and he mentions several key ways in which *qupai ti* 'labelled melody form' is used. Nevertheless, instrumental *qupai* then developed to meet 'the requirements of instruments and the expressive needs of the music'.

Unlike *qupai* music, which requires that lyrics be composed to conform to pre-existing templates, the identifiable musical component of *tanci* is *diao* ('tune') music. The musical features are summarised by Ts'ao (*Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, Vol. 7, 2001: 263):

The compositional technique is repetition and variation of the *jibendiao*, the fundamental melody, of the *shangju* ('upper phrase', indicating the first phrase) and *xiaju* ('lower phrase', indicating the second phrase). The *jibendiao* consists of two elements, one stable and the other variable. The stable element is the melodic patterns assigned to the *shangju* and *xiaju* – as short as two or three pitches, respectively.

This unit [of *shangju* and *xiaju*] can be repeated as often as necessary, depending on the number of lines in the text. Short instrumental interludes link the text couplets within a song. The melody can be further segmented

according to the caesura pattern of the text or syllable groupings based on syntactic units of the text.

Tao (1979: 17) also suggests that the repeated structure of *shangju* and *xiaju* comprises the basic melodic skeleton called the *shu diao* (literally, 'tune of the story'). *Ping-tan* scholars Sun Ti<sup>26</sup> and Pan Yilin<sup>27</sup> confirm that it is the repetition of this initial tune that develops a piece of ballad. This kind of elaboration is also behind the structural label *jiben diao fanfu ti* ('repetition of the initial tune'). Apart from these structural explanations, additional information about the origins of the *shu diao* melody cannot be traced with certainty. However, it is suggested that it derives from folk and dramatic music, specifically from an early form of *dong diao* (literally, 'eastern tune'). This appears in the transcript of *Xinbian Dong Diao Da Shuang Hudie* ('New Version of Big Double Butterfly in Dong Tune') in 1769. Another possible link is the *song diao* ('song's tune') seen in the *Xinbian Song Diao Quanben Baishe Zhuan* ('Newly Completed Version of Tale of White Snake in Song's Tune') in 1772 (Tao, 1979: 4; Zhou, 1983: 92; 1988: 104). This might imply that the originator's surname is Song.

The key to understanding the *diao* system is to recognise the importance of three basic characteristic tunes of the Qing dynasty, hybrids of which are the basis for many *diao* tunes. *Chen diao* or *Lao Chen diao* (old *Chen diao*) was created by Chen Yuqian in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century; *Yu diao* was generated by Yu Xiushan in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century; and *Ma diao* was sung by Ma Rufeif in the mid- to late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Twenty-two of the twenty-five *tanci* tunes currently recognised are based upon the Chen-Yu-Ma tunes. Apart from the name *Xiaoyang diao*, which refers Yang Xiaoting's falsetto register from the 1920s, the other twenty-four tunes are labelled according to the originator's surname or full name (Zhou, 1988a: 104; Zhou, 1988b: 18-19).

Furthermore, a *diao* contains more facets than merely a skeletal melodic contour. Chen Yuqian's original way of singing the *lao Chen diao* ('old Chen's tune') has overwhelmingly been replaced by the adapted *Chen diao*. This is evident particularly in the storyteller Liu Tianyun's version of *Lin Chong Taxue* ('Lin Chong Walking in the Snow'), Yang ZhenXiong's singing of *Wu Song Da Hu* ('Wu Song Fights The Tiger'), and Jiang Yuequan's *Tingtang Duozi* ('Retake the Son at the Hall') (Zhou, 1988b: 18). *Chen diao* is considered unsuited to

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<sup>26</sup> Personal communication, on 26 March 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Personal communication, on 27 March 2013.

recounting the sequential events of a narrative, and is generally used in conjunction with richly descriptive content (generally of characters), to conjure up particular sentiments and moods. A tonal feature of Chen *diao* is for the second phrase to end on the pitch *shang* of the Chinese pentatonic scale (the second degree of the scale), instead of the standard tonic. Because the originator Chen Yuqian had learned Kunqu opera and sang the role of the *laosheng* ('old man'), the Chen *diao* in *tanci* is suited to portraying older characters with a lower but robust voice (Zhongguo Quyi Zhi, 1986: 289; Zhou, 1988b: 18).

Yu Xiushan's Yu *diao* is generally summed-up by a description offered by Sun Ti<sup>28</sup> and Pan Yilin<sup>29</sup>: "*chang qiang man ban*" ('extended melody in slow tempo'). It is highly reminiscent of the singing style of *Kunqu* opera. The style's representative performers were two sworn brothers who performed together as a duet, Yu Xiaoyun (upper hand) and Yu Xiaoxia (lower hand).<sup>30</sup> The latter was particularly adept at singing Yu *diao* in both its old version, *lao Yu diao*, and a new variant. Their recordings of *Xiao Nigu Si Fan* ('The Little Nun Wondering about the Mundane World') and *Mei Zhu* ('Plum and Bamboo') in 1962 are the earliest preserved versions of ballads in *lao Yu diao*. The recordings demonstrate that the tempo of the old Yu *diao* is much slower than that of the new Yu *diao*. The storyteller Yang Xingcha arranged the Yu *diao* in a shorter and faster way in *Zhenzhu Ta* ('Pearl Pagoda'), and his creation is called *kuai Yu diao* ('fast Yu's tune') (Zhou, 1988b: 19). The old Yu *diao* features long preludes at the beginning of a ballad and the interlude, whose lengths can cover as many as thirty-five beats (Tao, 1979: 26). The melody of the Yu *diao* demands a large vocal range and frequent swapping between standard and falsetto voices. The mellow expression and malleable melodic contours give the Yu *diao* a sentimental characteristic. A storyteller Liu Tianyun describes it: '*jiyao fangshan yueling, youyao yixie qianli*' ('able to tramp hill and dale, as well as to flow down vigorously'). This explains the necessity for use of vocal register to be flexible but at the same time powerful (Zhou, 1988b: 18). Another storyteller Zhu Yaosheng had added further developments to the old Yu *diao* by around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and he was then succeeded by his nephew Zhu Jiesheng, who then transformed it into a so-called *Xin Yu diao* ('new Yu *diao*'), also known as Zhu Jiesheng

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<sup>28</sup> Personal communication, 26 March 2013.

<sup>29</sup> Personal communication, 27 March 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Yu Xiaoxia (1902-1986), real name Wu Xinsheng, was from Suzhou. He and Yu Xiaoyun (1900-1985) became sworn brothers, both learning *tanci* from the storyteller Wang Zihe, and continuing their careers together for several decades.

*diao*.<sup>31</sup> Following the nephew's efforts and those of his followers, the innovative Yu *diao* became popular and spread widely in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while the old Yu *diao* still remained in use (ibid.). Yu *diao* also gave rise to other tunes such as Qi Lianfang's Qi *diao* and Hou Lijun's Hou *diao* (Tao, 1979: 27-28).

Ma Rufei's Ma *diao* features a recitative-like delivery, more akin to poetry recitation than other melodic tunes (Zhou, 1988b: 25). People often describe the style '*zi duo qiang shao*' (literally, 'more words, less tune') to emphasise that it should be considered heightened speech. The Ma *diao* thus focuses on the clear enunciation of text and the neat rhyme of the lyrics. For instance, the traditional repertoire *Zhenzhu Ta* ('Pearl Pagoda') contains a large number of ballads that are difficult to sing. There is a proverb in the *ping-tan* field: '*chang sha Zhengzhu Ta*' ('to die singing *Zhenzhu Ta*'). This shows the unusual demands of singing this work. Thus, the characteristics of recitation-like narration, plain melody, and relatively fast tempo bring out flexibility and other practical advantages in the performing of this repertoire. Texts featuring couplets of three-word lines, five-word lines, and a pattern of three-three-seven are generally used. The Ma *diao* inspired many subsequent artists to develop and create their own representative tunes: Shen Jian'an's Shen *diao* follows the narrative style of singing; while Xue Xiaoqing's Xue *diao* retains explicit articulation in singing. Both the Shen *diao* and the Xue *diao* are also significantly enriched by instrumental accompaniment. They were drawn upon by Zhu Xueqin in the creation of her Qin *diao* in the 1950s. Other relevant tunes whose main influences came from the Ma *diao* include Xia Hesheng's Xia *diao* and later Yang Zhenxiong's Yang *diao* (Tao, 1979: 29-30).

All of the current *diao* are derived and developed from these three tunes, Chen, Yu and Ma. Prominent examples are Jiang Yuequan's Jiang *diao*, Xu Lixian's Li *diao* and Zhang Jianting's Zhang *diao* (Tao, 1979: 31-34; Zhou, 1988b: 18-19). A hybrid of the Yu *diao* and the Ma *diao* is *Xiaoyang diao*. In Chinese, *yin* and *yang* describe the opposite natures of an object.

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<sup>31</sup> Zhu Yaosheng (1883-1950) was from Suzhou. He learnt *ping-tan* from his elder brother Zhu Yaoting (1866-1984), who used to be the leader of the *Guangyu* guild. Zhu Yaosheng began his career at 12 years old with Zhu Yaoting, and the two soon becoming a famous duet. Zhu Yaosheng was adept at singing the Yu *diao* in a light vocal register and was also a skilled narrator, inserting humour and the playing of instruments to punctuate his performances. His singing of the Yu *diao* also drew from the tunes of *Kunqu* opera and *Suzhou Tanhuang*, the local drama, and he also absorbed *qupai ti* music from other genres of drama and opera. His revised version of Yu *diao* was inherited by his nephew Zhu Jiasheng (1903-1985), who was Zhu Yaoting's son, and subsequently labelled '*Xin Yu diao*', to distinguish it from the old Yu *diao* (also called '*Zhu Jiasheng diao*' in the *ping-tan* circle). Zhu Yaosheng specialised in singing ballad *Manzhou Kaipian* ('Manzhou Opening Ballad') (ibid., 177, 184, 201).

Traditionally, vocal registers have been divided into the *yang mian* (literally, ‘yang side’ – the natural register), and *yin mian* (the ‘yin side’ – the falsetto register). The *xiao* of *Xiaoyang diao* means small or less. Hence, the name *Xiaoyang diao* implies singing with less use of the natural register but a greater use of falsetto. Regarding its musical features, *Xiaoyang diao* is the result of an intertwining of the Ma and Yu *diao* during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Sun Ti explained that a well-known proverb to depict the structure of *Xiaoyang diao* is ‘*yu tou ma wei*’ (‘Yu’s head and Ma’s tail’).<sup>32</sup> This saying indicates that, literally, the opening melodic phrase is borrowed from the Yu *diao*, while the ending of the closing line is from the Ma *diao*. Some local people are not aware of this proverb, and instead use another ‘*yu jia xue*’. This literally means ‘sleet’, but is also be interpreted locally within the Suzhou region to mean ‘Yu *diao* and Ma *diao*’. ‘Yu’ meaning rain is a homonym for the Yu of Yu *diao*. ‘Jia’ means ‘plus’, and ‘xue’ meaning ‘snow’ refers to the Ma *diao* in this context. In this way, people transpose local terms for climatological phenomena to the musical features of *ping-tan*. Xu Yunzhi’s Xu *diao* was generated from *Xiaoyang diao*, but drew widely upon local Suzhou folk songs, the calls of hawkers, and other generic features of opera (Tao, 1979: 31).

Once a *diao* forms, it is learned by successors, and the originator’s performing traits are passed down along with musical factors. A *liupai* (‘performing school’) becomes established and it is generally named after the originator. *The Garland Encyclopaedia of World Music* (Volume 7, 2001: 46) gives a brief introduction to the nature of these schools. A *liupai* may involve disciples, a defined repertoire in anthologies of tablature, and a lineage of master performers. *Liupai*, then, is basically a concept that describes a lineage. However, from a broader perspective, it combines all aspects of storytelling and story singing performance: speech, singing, accompanying instrumentation, and all that is involved within these broad categories. Although there are twenty-five *diao* that have been widely recognised by *ping-tan* practitioners and followers, it does not mean these correspond exactly to the *liupai* that they recognise. Perhaps the most frequently mentioned storyteller Jiang Yuequan and his Jiang *pai* is an exceptional example. I found during my fieldwork that if I asked people “What is the Jiang *diao*”, I would generally get the following answer: “the opening ballad *Du*

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<sup>32</sup> Personal communication, 26 March 2013. Sun Ti told me that in the 1970s he interviewed some storytellers who were born in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This information about the origins of the *Xiaoyang diao* comes from what these storytellers remembered hearing from their teachers. This *diao* was widely used among storytellers until the beginning of the Republic of China in 1912. Some of these informants even told Sun that, in the late Qing dynasty, *Xiaoyang diao* was the only tune used in *ping-tan*. Later, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the storyteller Yang Xiaoting became a celebrated exponent of the tune and his name is now closely associated with it.

*Shiniang* is sung in the Jiang *diao*. If you listen to it, the music is Jiang *diao*.” However, if I asked “What is the Jiang *pai*”, the answers would focus on the qualities of Jiang’s performing manner and gestures, the characters he played, his manner of speaking, and so on. The president of the Suzhou Ping-tan School Pan Yilin<sup>33</sup>, the vice-principal of the Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe Lin Jianfang<sup>34</sup>, and the storyteller Zhou Hong<sup>35</sup> all mentioned that no newly composed *diao* has been recognised by *ping-tan* followers since the 1970s. The storyteller Jin Lisheng proposes three indispensable factors in the birth of a *liupai*: the first is for there to be a novel tune and corresponding performing style from an originator.<sup>36</sup> Subsequently, this must not only be acknowledged by *ping-tan* colleagues and audiences, but also be learned by the *ping-tan* amateurs. To explain, he gave the analogy of flowing water: the meaning of the character ‘*liu*’ (‘flow’) in the word *liupai* shows that the lineage should flow down to all of its followers. If a *diao* or *liupai* meets difficulties finding successors, the artistry fades out in time.

### 1.3 Thesis outline

Enlightened by Lord’s fieldwork-based method and his broader understanding of ‘literature’ in folklore performance studies, this dissertation treats *ping-tan* performance as a ‘performance literature’. Ethnographic fieldwork data is the basis from which to illustrate how *ping-tan* is engaged with deeply as part of the daily life of Suzhou citizens. It is a unique life style as well as an art. This conclusion is reached through exploration of six topics that I outline now.

*Ping-tan* performance has evolved out of the essential demands of telling and listening to stories. By engaging a musical element, the genre *tanci* derives from and develops folk tunes and poetry. It employs *qupai* (‘precomposed labelled melodies’), and the *diao* system, in which musical components and words are expected to correspond. However, the Suzhou dialect is linguistically complex, and there are challenges to ensuring that the musicalised text can be understood by the audience. Chapter 2 explores the linguistic/melodic tonal correspondence in the *tanci* genre, particularly from the perspectives of examining tonal

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<sup>33</sup> Personal communication, 27 March 2013.

<sup>34</sup> Personal communication, 25 September 2012.

<sup>35</sup> Personal communication, 15 September 2013.

<sup>36</sup> Personal communication, 26 September 2012.

alignments and melodic contours, and exploring the various factors that may affect the results.

Chapter 3 links the conclusions of Chapter 2 to the live performance context, focusing on how a variety of ways of employing bodily gesture connects the performer and audience in a 'feedback loop'. It uses these principles to illustrate how the verbal information involved in telling and singing is enabled by a non-verbal interaction between the two parties. The chapter also highlights the use of gesture by storytellers as it is associated with delivering the verbal text, and with creating communication with the audience that attracts and maintains its attention. In response, the audience also expresses appreciation or disapproval towards aspects of the performance, and this demonstrates their involvement.

Chapter 4 develops the findings from Chapter 3, examining how storytellers and audiences serve in certain roles within the context of performing and spectating. It extends the discussion of role-playing to off-stage involvement in *ping-tan*-related activities. In particular, it highlights storytellers' techniques for satisfying role-playing demands within the performance, as well as those of their off-stage social roles. These can include being respectful to their teachers, delivering *ping-tan* knowledge to their lineage colleagues, and cultivating the *ping-tan* audience by delivering knowledge and social value through performance. Besides, the requirements of being a member of a *ping-tan* audience are not limited simply to the action of attending performing occasions. The motivation, persistence, and special requirements faced by these members of the *ping-tan* world are also discussed.

As a means of examining the complex factors involved in the roles of *ping-tan* storyteller and audience member, Chapter 5 addresses expressions of identity among these two groups. Also categorising the participants on a finer level within the discrete groups, this chapter shows how multiple levels of affinity with *ping-tan* mean that local residents express themselves in different ways in this context. The chapter illustrates how *ping-tan* offers an artistic platform around which people gather, and which encourages various forms of social engagement.

Focus in Chapters 6 and 7 is transferred from the physical story house to the mass media platforms of radio and television broadcasting. Chapter 6 reviews the historical transformation in *ping-tan* radio programmes from their introduction in 1920s Suzhou. It closely examines the production of prominent *ping-tan* programmes on local channels from 1980 to the present. This chapter aims to demonstrate an effective interplay between the

programme producers, audiences and storytellers that results in this traditional art being promoted through modern means of transmission. Following this discussion, Chapter 7 explains how television broadcasting has influenced *ping-tan* transmission since 1994, and indeed how the *ping-tan* oral tradition has been transformed and reshaped by this broadcasting environment.

This thesis aims to explore how *Suzhou ping-tan* has maintained its vitality in contemporary society. Addressing the six topics that now follow is intended to show how *ping-tan* performance permeates the lives of Suzhou's people through various musical and social processes and different kinds of intercommunication.

## Chapter 2. Words and Music of *Tanci* Story Singing

*Emperor Di said, "Kui, I appoint you to be Director of Music, and to teach our sons, so that the straightforward shall yet be mild; the gentle, dignified; the strong, not tyrannical; and the impetuous, not arrogant. Poetry is the expression of earnest thought; singing is the prolonged utterance of that expression; the notes accompany that utterance, and they are harmonized themselves by the standard tubes. (In this way) the eight different kinds of musical instruments can be adjusted so that one shall not take from or interfere with another; and spirits and men are brought into harmony." Kui said, "I smite the (sounding-) stone, I gently strike it, and the various animals lead on one another to dance."*

Selected from 'Canon of Shun' from the *Shang shu* (772 BC – 476 BC)<sup>37</sup>

The quotation above is taken from the *Shang shu* (*Book of Documents*), a pre-Qin classic collection of documents and speeches written in narrative form. It is considered an archetypal example of early Chinese prose. In this dialogue, the *Di*, Emperor Yu Shun, designated *Kui* as the director of music, and told him the aesthetic rules of making music for the purposes of cultivation and education. Yu Shun stressed that singing is an extension of speech-expression, while the musical accompaniment of the utterance should be in harmony with the words. This is evidence of an association between words and music in a singing genre in which the utterance – the lyrics – should be primary.

Corresponding to the consensus that '*yi zi xing qiang, qiang sui zi zou*' (literally, 'using articulation to produce the tune, the tune should follow the words') in Chinese musical ideology (Wang, Du, 1999: 381), there is no doubt that the tone of Sino-Tibetan languages plays a crucial role in functionally distinguishing the meaning of the words. As Schellenberg (2012: 266) indicates:

Tone in these [tone] languages is *phonemic* [sic], which means that changing the pitch (or pitch contour) of a word can drastically change the meaning of the word. Since pitch is so closely tied to meaning in these languages and pitch is also one of the main components of music, the interaction of speech melody and song melody in tone languages ... [has] seen a variety of methodologies, a variety of conclusions, and significantly, a variety of assumptions.

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<sup>37</sup> Translated by James Legge. See <http://ctext.org/shang-shu/canon-of-shun>.

Linguistic factors therefore significantly impact upon general musical composition. They have a notable and ever-present influence on story singing genres such as *Suzhou ping-tan*. The *tan* from the compound word *ping-tan* refers to the story singing genre *tanci*. Unlike in the pure storytelling genre *pinghua*, in *tanci* the story content is interpreted in a musical way. Thus, the *tanci* genre is generally regarded as more entertaining than *pinghua*, and it is particularly popular among *ping-tan* followers. While considering the nature of storytelling, the focus of this chapter will be on revealing the association between the words and music of *tanci* through both textual and musical analysis. In particular, this involves examining musical and textual formulae that form the essence of *tanci* works.

In a great number of ethnomusicological studies, it has been broadly acknowledged that the relationship between music and language is complex, and that the two areas are inextricably intertwined. On one hand, as Merriam notes, "language clearly affects music in that speech melody sets up certain patterns of sound, which must be followed at least to some extent in music" (1964: 187-188). This is so the listener can understand the music-text fusion. On the other hand, in order to accommodate the requirements of music, certain patterns of normal speech are altered to suit the composition. Furthermore, when language is associated with music, it should be thought of as musically-embodied language, rather than that which only carries standard referential associations. When they are placed together, both the music and language tend to take on special forms in order to create euphonic effects (Merriam, 1964: 188-190). Nettl (1958: 37-41) applies linguistic methods to analyse musical structure. Although he illustrates the similarity between linguistic structure and musical structure, he stresses that linguistic methods can supplement musical analysis. For example, the challenges faced by transcribers of both music and speech include "the decision of what to include, how detailed a transcription should be made, when to consider a note or a sound important enough to be included" (ibid., 38), so that the analysis is sufficient and the transcription is not too complex to comprehend. George List (1963: 1-16) proposes a classification system to describe the grey areas between speech and music. By examining the heightened degree, he developed a chart with an extension upon two divergent modifications of speech intonation to produce four results: recitation, intonational recitation, chant and intonational chant (ibid., 9). However, this chart does not suit tonal languages because tone is another variable for which to control (ibid., 12).

The degrees of correspondence between speech melody and song melody have been discussed within multiple cultural contexts. In the Chinese music domain, Chao (1956)

proposes a scale of correspondence degree. The examples of types of music that he offers descend from high to low correspondence: 'children's songs', 'street vendor's cries', 'the traditional reading style in a chanting style', 'the recitative in traditional Chinese drama', 'traditional stereotyped melodies'<sup>38</sup> and 'contemporary songs'. List (1961) gives a similar sequence of descending correspondence for Thai music traditions: 'mnemonic recitation', 'traditional literary', 'classical songs' and 'popular songs'. This illustrates that as the proportion of musical involvement becomes larger, linguistic factors have less determinant effects. In Nguni musical culture of South Africa, Rycroft (1979) suggests that for 'war cries', 'praise-poetry' and 'personal solo songs', there is a high degree of correspondence between speech melody and song melody, while 'traditional dance-songs' and 'modern church, school and popular music' show lower degrees.

In research into musical genres from cultures with tone languages, for decades both ethnomusicologists and linguists have debated as to whether priority should be dedicated to linguistic or musical factors. In the mid-20th century, a collection of studies (Jones, 1959; Rycroft, 1959; Schneider, 1961) suggested that speech sound greatly informs song melody because "the setting of words to music in a 'tone language' either places limitations upon melodic freedom... or else makes word selection a more exacting matter" (Rycroft, 1959: 28). However, Schellenberg (2012: 266) has argued more recently that "language is not a determinant of music in tone languages, but rather that music accommodates language when it is convenient but is perfectly willing and able to override linguistic requirements". On the one hand, in cases in which the tonal factor reflects the correspondence between speech articulation and melodic contour, matching melodies indeed enhances comprehension (ibid., 275). This conclusion is supported by an early study of Herzog (1934: 465), which illustrates that "speech-melody may furnish music with raw material, or with suggestions for further elaboration". On the other hand, when mismatches occur, the consequences do not follow linguistic rules, but rather the music 'trumps' language (Schellenberg, 2012: 275). More evidence can be found in Stock's research on Beijing Opera, in which he notes that "even in a genre where language is of unquestioned importance, music-structural considerations may, sometimes, challenge the dictates of speech-tone and lyric structure in the production of a finished musical text" (1999: 184). Feld and Fox (1994: 26) review studies exploring music and language, and demonstrate that the relationship extends beyond ethnomusicological and linguistic studies; the disciplines of musicology,

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<sup>38</sup> This refers to the tune fitting in a *qupai ti* musical structure.

acoustics, literary studies, philosophy, psychology, and anthropology have also been useful in gaining a holistic understanding. This chapter will thus apply phonetics, poetic studies and other disciplines as complementary methods to the main music and linguistic discourses. Specialising in the Chinese music domain, these debates on the line between language and music are also complemented by Bell Yung's research on Cantonese opera (1989), and Lawson's study into the narrative arts of Tianjin (2011).

The techniques used to approach the correlation between music and language vary across the disciplines already mentioned. Schellenberg examines the correspondence between the melodic transitions in songs and speech melody in three songs in the Shona language by using PRAAT acoustic analysis software (Schellenberg, 2009: 137). He highlights the transitions between notes in a melody, comparing the directionality of pitch movement between syllables when a text is spoken and sung. He presents the data gathered so as to show the number of instances in which pitch transitions in these two forms of utterance are alike, rather than displaying the correspondences on a transition-by-transition basis (*ibid.*, 143). Qian also (2011: 21; 2012: 10; 2013: 62) draws attention to these correspondences from a phonemic angle, concluding that vernacular dialect influences melodic contours to a high degree in regional folk songs. Although Western staff notation is the initial transcribing method in these studies, other technical approaches are applied in cases where this suits the scholar's specific objectives. These include spectral analysis (List, 1963: 14; Schimmelpenninck, 1997: 227), graphic tonal contour analysis (Ts'ao, 1988: 343), and PRAAT software analysis (Wee, 2007: 6; Schellenberg, 2009: 139). Among these, the most relevant research to the *Suzhou ping-tan* genre is Pen-yeh Ts'ao's work *The music of Su-chou t'an-tz'u: elements of the Chinese southern singing-narrative* (1988). He uses a pioneering and meticulous method of analysis to identify and quantify various musical attributes within *tanci*, but he does not choose to draw any particular conclusions from this data.

Finally, this chapter seeks to make sense of the linguistic/melodic tonal correspondence in *ping-tan*, filling in the blanks that remain after Ts'ao and others' earlier explorations in the area. Before deconstructing the textual and musical materials into components, in the first section, it is necessary to clarify the types of *tanci* music and their structures as a prerequisite of this research. Afterwards, the musical and textual components of each type will be discussed respectively, and this will be followed by sections containing detailed analysis. Enlightened by both phonetic and ethnomusicological studies, analytical

approaches will be explored further, and various related concepts, especially those related to phonemic studies, will be explained in the relevant sections.

## 2.1 Types of *Tanci* Music and Structures

*Diao*, which is thought to be *tanci*'s most representative musical concept, is clearly associated with *liupai* ('schools' or 'lineages'). Historically the Chen *diao*, Yu *diao* and Ma *diao* have been considered the most prominent musical styles of *tanci* since the 18<sup>th</sup> century (the Qing dynasty). However, all of the different *diao* are often collectively referred to using the umbrella term *shu diao* (literally 'tune of story'), and a key defining feature is the typical *jiben diao fanfu ti* ('repetition of initial tune') structure.

*Shu diao* is thought to denote a particular type of musical structure and its concomitant style, as distinct from – and unaffected by – those of other folk tunes. It is not possible to trace back *shu diao* to an original form. However, its defining characteristics are identified by Wu (2011: 82):

Historically, *ping-tan* must have developed from simple to complex. Initially, the narrative style based on lines of poetry with seven syllables determined the structure of poetic chanting (thus influencing the formulae of *tanci* story singing). For instance, the couplet poetic structure indicates a syntax in which there are two lines, the first ascending (*qiju*) and the second falling (*luoju*).<sup>39</sup> The rhyme scheme must be maintained throughout each piece, and in order to emphasise the rhyme, the singing of the sixth syllable is extended and the seventh syllable dropped. This is called *tuo liu dian qi* ('dragging the sixth and dropping the seventh'). All of these factors are integrated within the *shu diao* tune. *Shu diao* had fewer variations in the past; the tempo was either medium or slow... As a feature of narrative singing, linguistic aspects are important, including accurate utterance and an appropriate manner of expression in singing... so that *yiqu baichang* ('one tune can be sung in hundreds [of ways]'). The 'one tune' denotes the basic tune; the 'sung in hundreds of ways' means shaping the music in accordance with the context, by means of singing skills and manners.

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<sup>39</sup> In Ts'ao's research (1988: 239), he translates *qiju* as 'opening line-stanza(s)', and *luoju* as 'closing line-stanza'.

Since 1953, *tanci* and even *Suzhou ping-tan* more generally have been categorised by academics as *banqiang ti*-type music, under the *quyi* (narrative arts) umbrella (Dong, 2009:6). This is largely because of the repetition of certain musical structures in *diao*-based music. The categorisation implies that the music is a subsidiary element to the text. Thus, the *tanci* music type is defined as *banqiang ti* in such as *Zhongguo minzu minjian yinyue jicheng* (Anthology of Folk Music of the Chinese Peoples) and *Zhongguo dabaiké quanshu: xiqu, quyi* (Encyclopaedia Sinica: opera and narrative), both compiled in the early 1980s. *Banqiang ti* involves the use of a basic recurring melodic model and rhythmic formulae as the vehicle for setting couplet lyrics. All of the aesthetic features of linguistic tone, rhythm, and metre of this genre are consistent with this form. Lawson describes *banqiang ti* from the perspective of text setting and metre (2011: 53-54):

*Banqiang ti* is a system for setting texts in which the music is subsidiary to the text. ... Setting the text is accomplished by using recurrent musical formulae at appropriate points in the text; the musical rendition of every textual line preserves the essential pitch structure, characteristic melodic movements, and cadential patterns of the system. ... As a result, no two pieces composed according to the same *banqiang* will sound alike because the different texts demand individual settings.

... *ban* implies formulaic manipulation of metre, rhythm, and tempo, whereas *qiang* refers to every kind of melodic elaboration – from the use of grace notes to the adaptation of entire melodic phrases. ... To complicate matters even further, *ban* and *qiang* are often inextricably connected ... are simply a variety of recurrent rhythmic and melodic techniques or motifs (ibid., 84).

With regard to *tanci* music, rhythmic patterns are manipulated to conform with and accentuate metrical structures. In terms of tune-represented *diao* ballads, stylised recurrent components serve for textual needs. However, the rhythmic and melodic structuring does not actually conform to the concept of *banqiang ti*. In an interview with Sun Ti<sup>40</sup>, vice-president of Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe and researcher from the Suzhou Ping-tan Study Institution, he explained that to attempt to set *tanci* music using *banqiang ti* formulae would not work. *Tanci* ballads can, for example, be metred in 2/4 or 4/4, unlike in typical *banqiang ti* genres. Also, functional marking of beats by a percussion (or other kind of) instrument is

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<sup>40</sup> Personal communication, 26 March 2013.

not prominent among the features of *shu diao* music. In fact, often cultural insiders do not provide clear musical definitions of *shu diao* at all.

While the texts are diverse in form, content and subject matter, the melodies are all intimately related. They might even be considered versions of the same single basic theme, as reflected in the notion of *yiqu baichang* ('one tune, sung in a hundred ways'). Unsurprisingly, this same compositional feature also appears within the folk singing tradition *shan ge* from the same Wu cultural region. Schimmelpenninck (1997: 224-226) describes this phenomenon of 'monothematism' as arising from a 'melodic framework'. It means that a single tune can be sung in hundreds of pieces with lyrics of varying lengths, rhythms and stanza structures, as well as serving to express diverse moods. Here, the notion of *diao* from a compositional perspective in the *tanci* context can be thought of as equivalent to a 'tune' or 'melody' (ibid., 226). However, the *diao* contains more information through which separates *liupai* schools of performance. Following what Sun Ti claimed above, *shu diao* may be considered synonymous with *jiben diao fanfu ti* ('repetition of initial tune'). However, the consensus is that there is a subtle but important distinction: *jiben diao fanfu ti* describes how the music is structured, indicating the recurrence of a tune. *Shu diao*, on the other hand, refers to the original basic tune used in *tanci* story singing, from which the resulting diversity of the tunes used in different singing schools derives.

Ts'ao (1988: 239) illustrates that "*qiju* consists of an instrumental opening and usually one or two sung line-stanza(s) without cadence; and *luoju* consists of an instrumental transition and a sung line-stanza which cadences at its penultimate and last syllables." This suggests that a textual unit contains a minimum of a couplet, with one or two *qiju*, and one *luoju*, which must be the last line. *Tanci* music is thus structured by repeating this basic form. The following illustration is taken from Ts'ao's work:

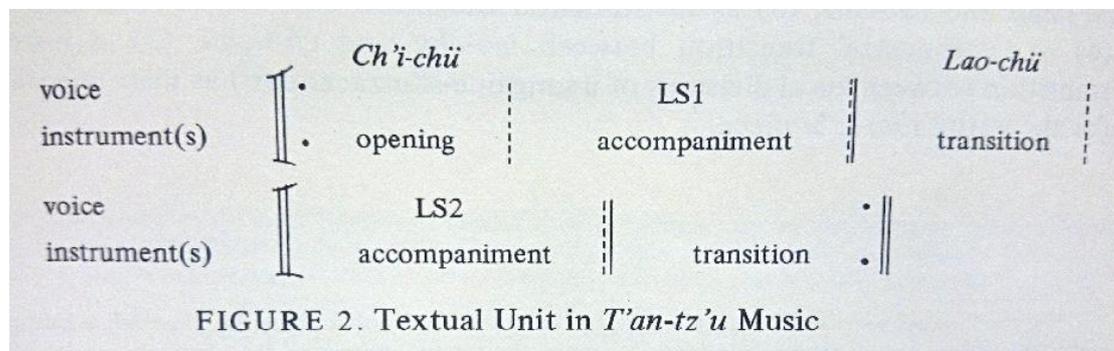


FIGURE 2. Textual Unit in *T'an-tz'u* Music

Figure 2-1 Ts'ao's analysis of *tanci* ballad structure (1988: 239).

Another way of thinking of *tanci*'s musical structure is as *qupai ti* – that is, employing fixed melodic templates as structural formulae. In addition to the *shu diao* type of melodies, which are more distinctive and unique to *ping-tan*, other *tanci* melodies have clearly been borrowed from existing popular tunes. The text setting composition in *qupai* involves fitting a new text into an existing model, which is called *qupai* (literary meaning 'labelled melody') or *paizi* ('standards'). For some genres such as *Yangzhou Qingqu* ('Yangzhou tunes'), these models become the body of the repertoire and still retain the original *qupai* names. However, each *paizi* has its typical principles of textual arrangement, metre, and intonation contour. That is to say, new texts are composed according to the rules demanded by the original texts in model tunes. This process of 'filling the lyrics in' is called *tianci*, and it is much the same as the literary poetic style *Songci* ('Song lyrics') of the Song dynasty (960-1279). Although the composition method relies on the use of modes, it is still possible for details of intonation and phoneme to be adjusted in accordance with the new texts.

Ultimately, the confusion surrounding the classification of *ping-tan* as either *banqiang ti* or *qiupaiti* revolves around the question: is the text or the musical composition of superior importance? In music studies, scholars tend to favour the latter. This is the case for Ts'ao, for example. But indisputably, the ballad melodies are informed to a very significant degree by the words. The length and structure of a musical composition is determined precisely by the length and structure of the text, rather than the process of composition. Two episodes from my fieldwork also served to highlight the importance of texts and encouraged me to reconsider this issue. First, while interviewing the storyteller Hui Zhongqiu<sup>41</sup> and discussing his new compositions of opening ballads, he elaborated on the structure of the lyrics. In particular, he noted the tone of each word and the setting of rhyming poetry in his works. However, he said very little about musical features, simply stating:

As my great-grand teacher explained, the tunes of *tanci* originate from the traditional way of reciting Tang poetry, but rendered in a chanting style.

Hui Zhongqiu did not illustrate further how the internal principles of lyric composition inform the melodic content of *tanci*. Rather, he chanted the Tang poem *fengqiao yepo* ('anchored at night by Maple Bridge') as an example, and simply said "see, it's obvious". Although I was still confused about the 'obvious' relationship, this experience shed new light on the importance of the words in *tanci* composition.

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<sup>41</sup> Personal communication, 26 September 2012.

The other experience that I was constantly puzzled by was my interviewees' recurrent assertions that a piece of *tanci* text can be fitted into any one of the various *diao* belonging to the diverse singing schools, as long as the sentiment embodied in the text is adequately displayed in execution. In interviews with the storyteller Zhou Hong<sup>42</sup>, and with the chairman of the Suzhou Ping-tan School Pan Yilin<sup>43</sup>, both gave demonstrations of how to sing the same lyrics using different tunes. Although they did not sing the full length of a couplet of the text, they affirmed the possibility doing this. For instance, the text of the opening ballad *Yingying Caoqin* ('Yingying Plays Qin') may be accommodated into a variety of tunes such as those named after their originators Jiang, Yu, Xu, and Yang Zhenyan. All of these versions are widely spread and welcomed among *tanci* followers.

The following examination of the interrelationship between lyrics and melody focuses on tonal content, rather than other features such as the rhythms of each. It concentrates on *shu diao* ballad singing, which is found in opening ballads, and in ballads that occur during story episodes. Unlike in fixed-tune *qupai* ballads, the texts and melodies must conform to particular textual arrangements. The marks used within the transcriptions and the accompanying analysis are as follows:

- 1) A red line denotes a perfect accordance between linguistic and melodic tonal movement.
- 2) A red circle marks a linguistic glottal sound.
- 3) A green line indicates a melodic movement that does not exist in the concurrent linguistic syllable.
- 4) A green dotted line indicates where linguistic tonal movement (which would be present in spoken articulation) is not present in the melodic execution.

## 2.2 How Ballad Melodies Are Informed by Word Tones

In general, the words of *tanci* appear to have been arranged before they were combined with the melodies. However, there are several criteria which must be followed when composing *tanci* ballad texts. *Tanci* ballads are typically based on the seven-syllable Tang poetic quatrain pattern, the *lüshi* ('regulated verse'). This poetic form not only defines rhyme scheme, rhythm and metre, but also suggests models for tonal sequences across each of the seven syllables in each line. The *sisheng* ('four tones') tonal movements of *ping*

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<sup>42</sup> Personal communication, 15 September 2013.

<sup>43</sup> Personal communication, 27 September 2013.

(‘level’), *shang* (‘rising’), *qu* (‘departing’), and *ru* (‘entering’) were first set out in the landmark dictionary *Qieyun*, compiled in the Sui dynasty around the year 601 (Chen, 2000: 5). These four tonal movements are subdivided into *yin* (‘dark’) and *yang* (‘bright’), so *yinshang* means ‘dark rising’, *yangshang* means ‘bright rising’, and so on. In poetic forms such as *lüshi*, these tonal movements may be ordered in various ways, all based around the alternation of *ping* (‘level’) and *ze* (‘oblique’) tones, the latter comprising the *shang*, *qu*, and *ru* tones. In the seven-syllable *lüshi* format, the *ping* and *ze* arrangements applied in a quatrain can start from either a *ping* tone syllable or a *ze* tone syllable (*ping* tone is marked by ‘\_’, and *ze* tone is marked by ‘/’), as illustrated in table 2-1 (Downer and Graham, 1963: 145; Wang Li, 1977: 23; Peng Benle, 1979: 68-69):

**Table 2-1 Ping-qi and Ze-qi arrangements of *lüshi* format**

<b>Ping-qi (‘Level start’) arrangement:</b>	<b>Ze-qi (‘Oblique start’) arrangement:</b>
1 2 3 4 5 6 7	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Line 1 _ _ / / / _ _	Line 1 / / _ _ / / _
(Or _ _ / / _ _ / )	(Or / / _ _ _ / / )
Line 2 / / _ _ / / _	Line 2 _ _ / / / _ _
Line 3 / / _ _ _ / /	Line 3 _ _ / / _ _ /
Line 4 _ _ / / / _ _	Line 4 / / _ _ / / _

The arrangement beginning with a *ping* tone syllable is also called *er-wu ju* (‘two-five verse’), while the arrangement starting with a *ze* tone syllable is called *si-san ju* (‘four-three verse’). The 2+5 and 4+3 arrangements are so called because they feature a protraction of the second and fourth syllables of their first lines respectively, which are *ping* level sounds. At that point in the musical performance, a short interlude takes place. Both of these arrangements can be further divided into smaller units, featuring the addition of one or two more short musical interludes: 2+2+3 in an odd numbered line and 2+2+2+1 in an even numbered line (Zhu, 2009: 66). However, in practice, verse writing does not always strictly adhere to the models but rather follows the rule ‘disregard the first, third and fifth syllables, and strictly follow the second, fourth and sixth syllables’ (*yisanwu bulun, ersiliu fenming*) –

with the seventh syllable establishing rhyme. This rule enables greater flexibility in poetic creativity.

To illustrate the tonal contours of Chinese, phoneticians often use tone letters devised by Chao Yuan-reng (Chao, 1930 (1980)), where digits indicate the pitch value on a five-degree scale. In this scale, 1 indicates the lowest and 5 shows the highest – although Coulmas (2003: 106) rightly points out that the numbers do not convey pitch content to the reader as instantaneously as more graphic representations might. Meanwhile, the IPA system has adopted Chao's tone letters exactly – extra low (1), low (2), mid (3), high (4) and extra high (5) – and also an alternative set of suprasegmental symbols – [J], [ɹ], [ɿ], [ʮ], and [ʮ] – which have been widely adopted to convey tonal content in a diverse range of languages. Another system of tone representation is that of pinyin: ā á ǎ à. Thus, for example, the four tones in Mandarin Chinese may each be represented in several ways, as follows: *yinping* – 55 ʮ ā, *yangping* – 35 ʮ á, *shang* – 214 ʮ ǎ, and *qu* – 51 ʮ à. The Suzhou dialect used in *tanci* performance, recognised by Lin Tao and Geng Zhensheng as being the most representative of the Wu languages (*Introduction to Phonology*, 2004: 35), is tonally more complex than standard Mandarin. It has seven tonal movements: *yinping*, *yangping*, *yinshang*, *yingqu*, *yangqu*, *yinru*, and *yangru*. Although different scholars hold their own opinions on the degree and contour of each tone in the Suzhou dialect, the most representative interpretations are those of Ye Xiangling, who compiled the *Suzhou Dialect Dictionary* (Li Rong ed., 1993), and Wang Ping, who published the monograph *Phonetic Studies in Suzhou Dialect* (1996). These academics use both Chao's number symbols and the IPA suprasegmental symbols to mark the tonal contour of syllables in the Suzhou dialect. Although they give different ways to interpret several tones, such as *yinqu* and *yangqu*, the processes and directions of the seven tones are roughly the same. Table 2-2 illustrates the seven tones in Ye, Wang, and Lin and Geng's systems with the IPA suprasegmental symbols:<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> The suprasegmental symbols of tones are produced using <http://westonruter.github.io/ipa-chart/keyboard>.

**Table 2-2 Illustrations of the seven tones of the Suzhou dialect using the main linguistic systems**

Four Categories	Tone name in the Suzhou Dialect	Numeral Degree (Ye)	IPA Mark (Ye)	Numeral Degree (Wang)	IPA Mark (Wang)	Numeral Degree (Lin & Geng)	IPA Mark (Lin & Geng)
<b>Ping</b> (‘level’)	<i>Yinping</i> (‘dark’)	55	˥	44	˥	44	˥
	<i>Yangping</i> (‘bright’)	13	˨	13	˨	24	˨
<b>Shang</b> (‘rising’)	<i>Yinshang</i> (‘dark’)	51	˨˥	51	˨˥	52	˨˥
<b>Qu</b> (‘departing’)	<i>Yinqu</i> (‘dark’)	513	˨˥˨	523	˨˥˨	412	˨˥˨
	<i>Yangqu</i> (‘bright’)	31	˨˥	231	˨˥	31	˨˥
<b>Ru</b> (‘entering’)	<i>Yinru</i> (‘dark’)	5	˥˨	43	˥˨	4	˥˨
	<i>Yangru</i> (‘bright’)	3	˥˨	23	˥˨	23	˥˨

In studies of different kinds of performances using tone languages, in order to examine the correlation between words and music, scholars generally compare the tonal directions in lyrics with the melodic contours in melodies. In relation to *tanci*, Ts’ao Pen-yeh’s *The music of Su-chou t’an-tz’u: elements of the Chinese southern singing-narrative* (1988) explores this correspondence, employing extensive graphic representations and statistical analyses to compare the rising and falling movements in text and melody. However, as others have noted (Rebollo-Sborgi, 1990), Ts’ao does not glean any clear conclusions about the co-relationship between speech tone and melodic contour from his analysis: the relationship remains somewhat mysterious. In addition, Ts’ao overlooks a crucial factor shaping tonal movement in the Suzhou dialect – namely, tone sandhi – which may affect the accuracy of his analysis.

The term 'tone sandhi' refers to the 'phonetically conditioned morphotonemic alternations [which occur] at the junction of words or morphoemes'. It covers a range of linguistic phenomena including 'allotonic variations, intonational effects, and morphologically or syntactically conditioned tone changes' (Chen, 2000: xi). Chen (ibid., xiii) indicates that this linguistic effect happens frequently in Chinese, and identifies recurrent themes in the relevant literature:

The first concerns the internal structure of tone... about the typology of possible tonal processes. Tone sandhi, therefore, serves as an effective diagnostic probe into the anatomy of the complex entity we call tone. The second recurrent theme of tone sandhi studies concerns the scope or domain of sandhi rules. ... There is a third, far less well-developed issue, namely the interplay among sandhi process. ... How exactly the elementary processes interact to produce the ultimate sandhi output is a topic that has not been heretofore explored in depth.

Tone sandhi is a common but extremely complicated effect in Suzhou dialect. According to Wang Ping (2003: 1, 3), although tone sandhi can be understood as a by-product of practical utterance, it nevertheless enhances linguistic expressiveness. While, like many other Chinese dialects, the Suzhou dialect features an abundance of tone sandhi, some syllables rarely appear independently and are always treated in a distorted way via the tone sandhi effect. Tone sandhi practices certainly vary according to dialectic clusters. As Wang suggests (ibid., 4):

In the regions where the tone sandhi effect is complicated, the consonants, vowels and tones of single syllables are usually not very distinctive. However, because the tone sandhi habits profoundly affect accenting, the final character of the dialect appears markedly different.

Both Ye Xiangling and Wang Ping suggest that in the Suzhou dialect, additional tones emerge out of the tone sandhi phenomenon. In particular, Ye Xiangling (1993: 6) suggests that it contributes to the generation of four more tones: 33 [ʔ], 21 [ʨ], 212 [ʨ], and 2 [ʨ]. Wang Ping (2003: 36) suggests that the first syllable in a pair of conjoined syllables may be distorted through tone sandhi to result in the following tonal patterns: 11 [ʨ], 52 [ʨ] and 23 [ʨ], while the latter syllable can become 44 [ʨ], 11 [ʨ], 23 [ʨ] and 32 [ʨ]. From their studies in tone sandhi, one can hypothesise that the correspondence between the tonal content of

words and music in *tanci* story singing may extend to include a reflection of the sandhi effect in musical melodic contour. In order to demonstrate how tonal sequence – including the sandhi effect – affects the music composition, examples will be given as follows. In the first part, the analysis of the ballad ‘Yingying Plays Qin’ examines how the same text corresponds to two different *diao* melodies. In the second part, the focus will be on three opening ballads based on Jiang Yuequan’s Jiang *diao*. This demonstrates how different lyrics are presented within one typical style of music. In the third part, for the *qupai* given as examples, the same analytical path will be followed as for the *diao*-based ballads. This is to examine the extent to which the tonal degree is in accordance with the ballad tune.

### 2.2.1 Accommodating the Same Lyrics to Different *Diao* Music: the Example of ‘Yingying Plays Qin’

In *tanci* ballads, it is common to see that the same passage of written text is sung in different versions (known as *diao*, which are named after their founders). ‘Yingying Plays Qin’ has at least five versions sung within the Jiang Yuequan style, the Zhu Huizhen branch of the Yu style, the Xu Yunzhi style, the Yang Zhenyan style, the Fan Linyuan branch of the Xu style, and Zhou Yuquan’s school. All of these versions share the same lyrics, written in the aforementioned seven-syllable verse format, and are widely known among *ping-tan* followers. In the following analysis of two sample versions of ‘Yingying Plays Qin’, I focus on the first line of text and, following the *Suzhou Dialect Dictionary* compiled by Ye Xiangling, I employ the IPA system of phonetic representation to detail linguistic tonal content.

It is not possible to confirm the author of this opening ballad, but it may well have been Ma Rufei, a prestigious storyteller who lived during the Qing dynasty. The plot is derived from the prestigious literary work *Xi Xiang Ji* (‘Romance of the West Chamber’). The first seven syllables, written in a *ping-qi* verse arrangement are: *xianglian bishui dong fengliang*, literally meaning ‘the fragrant lotus in the green water stirs the wind coolly’. The spelling of this line is illustrated in table 2-3, along with the pitch content and its tone sandhi effect. Transcription 2-1 (CD track 1) relates to Jiang Yuequan’s singing and *sanxian* accompaniment in 1960.

**Table 2-3 The tonal illustration of the first seven syllables of ‘Yingying Plays Qin’**

<b>Syllable</b>	香	莲	碧	水	动	风	凉
<b>IPA Spelling</b>	çiã	lii	piəʔ	sɥ	doŋ	foŋ	liã
<b>Tone</b>	1 (55)	1 (13)	1 (5)	∨ (51)	∨ (31)	1 (55)	1 (13)
<b>Tone Sandhi Effect</b>					∨∨ (3113)	∨ʰ (5513 1321)	

Transcription 2-1<sup>45</sup>

Jiang diao 'Yingying plays qin',  
from *Romance of the West Chamber*

Jiang Yuequan (1960)

♩ = 68

Voice

Sanxian

7

Voice

Sanxian

13

Voice

Sanxian

19

Voice

Sanxian

22

Voice

Sanxian

<sup>45</sup> Transposed from C# for ease of reading.

From transcription 1, it can be seen that apart from for the first two syllables (香蓮) which are sung in a more narrative vocal register, the melodic contour roughly corresponds to the syllabic tonal direction. The tone of the third syllable (碧), which is extra high [5], is enhanced with a grace note. The fourth (水) and fifth (动) syllables both go from a high position to a low position, linked by the connection from the notes D# to E# during the melodic movement of the fourth syllable (水), which goes against the tonal contour of this word. The melodic falling and rising contour of the fifth syllable (动) exactly corresponds to its tone sandhi effect, rather than its original tone delineation. The sixth (风) and seventh (凉) syllables are noticeably heightened with the tone sandhi effect. When these two syllables, pronounced *fengliang* (meaning 'cool'), emerge together as a phrase, the word (凉) is distorted. As Ye's system clearly shows (1993: 6), the original tone in speech, from extra low [1] to mid [3] is supplemented with a final tone 21 [J], and this is clearly reflected in the melody, which concludes with a corresponding downward gliding effect. So, throughout this particular line of performance, which constitutes one of the most stereotypical phrases in the Jiang *diao*, there is clearly a close correspondence between the tone of the words and the melodic content. It also incorporates the tone sandhi effect twice.

Transcription 2-2 (CD track 2) shows a version in the New Yu *diao* recorded in 1961, performed by Zhu Huizhen (singing and playing the *pipa*) and Jiang Yuequan (playing the *sanxian*).

Transcription 2-2

Yu diao 'Yingying Plays Qin'  
from *Romance of the West Chamber*

Zhu Huizhen's singing (1961)

$\text{♩} = 82$

Voice

Sanxian

Pipa

7

香 莲

14

碧 水

21

Voice

(哎) 动 风 (喻) 凉

Sanxian

Pipa

28

Voice

Sanxian

Pipa

The *Yu diao* performing school offers a distinctly different musical style from Jiang's version. In this example, the first (香), third (碧) and fourth (风) syllables start at the extra high tone pitch, reflected in relatively high musical pitches, in bars 11, 18 and 23. Although the melodic contour of the second syllable (莲) takes the opposite falling direction to its original rising speech tone, here, the melody exactly follows the characteristic and symbolic phrase of *Yu diao*. The melodic delineation of the fourth syllable (水) corresponds to its tonal pitch from extra high [5] to extra low [1], with the notes dropping from high F to B $\flat$ , extending to G in bar 22. Following a padding syllable (哎) in bar 22, the composition of the fifth word (动) displays the falling pitch of the natural speech tone. It also reflects the tone sandhi effect; when the verb *dong* (literally meaning 'stirring, touching or moving') is followed by an object, the utterance of *dong* ends with a rising pitch to connect it to the next syllable. Nevertheless, the singing of the sixth syllable (风) starts on the stressed note B, and although it contrasts with the direction of its tonal movement, the starting note is higher than the fifth word *dong*. Unlike in Jiang's version, it is remarkable that Zhu Huizhen extended her singing of this word – after a quaver rest – by means of re-stressing the medial vowel and rhyme nucleus [oŋ] (喻).<sup>46</sup> This expansion provides a natural emphasis on the onset pronunciation of the

<sup>46</sup> See Matthew Y. Chen (2000: 4).

following seventh syllable (涼), as well as a clever downward melodic contour to resemble the tone sandhi shape of this last syllable. Besides, it must be noted that from bar 18 to 28, the green mismatched alignments between tonal and melodic delineations occur more than in the corresponding section in Jiang *diao*. The musical presentation is exactly the identifiably cantabile singing phrase of Yu *diao*.

The analysis of Jiang *diao* and Yu *diao* versions of ‘Yingying Plays Qin’ above show that it is possible to execute one set of lyrics within diverse melodic compositions. Although the *diao* of each performance school can at times be ambiguous for the listeners, manipulating small-scale melodic details to match linguistic tonal contour occurs often within the *tanci* genre. Although the green lines appear more in the Yu *diao* version than in the Jiang *diao* version, the locations are often in the ornamentation parts. In other words, the ornamentation may contrast with the genuine tonal degree of the syllable, and can impact less on tonal distortion that confuses listeners’ understanding of the lyrics. Nevertheless, besides these two examples, there are at least another three versions of ‘Yingying Plays Qin’ sung in Xu Yunzhi’s Xu *diao* (CD track 3), Zhou Yuquan’s Zhou *diao* (CD track 4), and Yang Zhenyan style (CD track 5) (see transcription 2-3). Expectedly, all of these versions share the same lyrics, written in the aforementioned seven-syllable verse format, and are widely known amongst *ping-tan* followers. In all five versions of Jiang *diao*, Yu *diao*, Xu *diao*, Zhou *diao*, and Yang Zhenyan’s style, examination of the first line of text shows a high level of correspondence between the tone content of the words and the pitch contours of the melody. All the accordances and the mismatches have been marked out.

**Transcription 2-3 Comparison of the first line of ‘Yingying Plays Qin’ showing versions in Xu *diao*, Zhou *diao*, and Yang Zhenyan’s style<sup>47</sup>**

Xu Yunzhi  $\text{♩} = 60$   
香 莲 碧水 动 风 凉

Zhou Yuquan  $\text{♩} = 72$   
香 莲 碧水 动 风 凉

Yang Zhenyan  $\text{♩} = 80$   
香 莲 碧水 动 风 凉

**2.2.2 Accommodating Different Lyrics within a *Diao* Music Style: the Example of Jiang**

***Diao***

Despite the characteristic tune of each *liupai* being identifiable, the composition of the tune is not a complete and fixed piece of work. Rather, a relatively flexible order of typical musical components – such as particular melodic phrases, ornamentation of melody, the position of stress in a rhythmic pattern, instrumental accompaniment patterns and special techniques – results in nuances between repertoires. Thus, the representative ballads of Jiang’s *liupai* system, such as ‘*Yingying Caoqin*’ (‘Yingying Plays Qin’), ‘*Mei Zhu*’ (‘Plum and Bamboo’), and ‘*Baoyu Yetan*’ (‘Baoyu’s Night Visit’), tell different stories, but sound similar to each other. In other words, though the musical frameworks are originally drawn from the characteristic tune of a *liupai*, the words should still be explicitly comprehended by listening. That is to say, in this circumstance, the tone of the syllables matches the melodic contour. To exhibit how word tones are informed by ballad melodies, analytical illustrations of Jiang *diao* are given for Jiang Yuequan’s most prominent opening ballads ‘Yingying Plays Qin’ (transcription 2-1, which has been tackled above), ‘Plum and Bamboo’ (transcription 2-4), and ‘Baoyu’s Night

<sup>47</sup> Xu Yunzhi and Yang Zhenyan’s versions are separately transposed from F# and C# for ease of reading.

Visit' (transcription 2-5). The transcriptions of the music score and the tables of IPA syllable spelling of first line-stanza of each ballad will be transcribed before the analytical comparison.

The writer of the opening ballad 'Plum and Bamboo' is unknown. The first seven syllables of the first line-stanza *zaimei zhongzhu jin shengui* literally meaning 'planting the plum and bamboo close to the boudoir' are accommodated in a *ping-qi* verse arrangement. The IPA spelling of each is illustrated in table 2-4. The transcription 2-4 is of Jiang Yuequan's 1962 recording (CD track 6).

**Table 2-4 The tonal illustration of the first seven syllables of 'Plum and Bamboo'**

<b>Syllable</b>	裁	梅	种	竹	近	深	闺
<b>IPA Spelling</b>	tsE	mE	tsoŋ	tsoʔ	dzin	sən	kuE
<b>Tone</b>	1 (55)	1 (13)	1 (51)	1 (5)	1 (31)	1 (55)	1 (55)
<b>Tone Sandhi</b>						1 L (55 11)	

Transcription 2-4

Jiang *diao* 'Plum and Bamboo'

Jiang Yuequan (1962)

$\text{♩} = 78$

Voice

Sanxian

7

Voice

Sanxian

13

Voice

栽梅

Sanxian

19

Voice

种 竹 近 深 围

Sanxian

24

Voice

Sanxian

The content of the opening ballad ‘Baoyu’s Night Visit’ is derived from the classical literary work *Hong Lou Meng* (‘Dream of the Red Chamber’). The first seven syllables of the first line ‘隆冬寒露结成冰’ describes the scene: ‘in the severe winter, the freezing dew has frozen into ice’. The IPA spelling is listed in table 2-5. Transcription 2-5 is of Jiang Yuequan’s 1976 recording (CD track 7).

**Table 2-5 The tonal illustration of the first seven syllables of ‘Baoyu’s Night Visit’**

<b>Syllable</b>	隆	冬	寒	露	结	成	冰
<b>IPA Spelling</b>	loŋ	toŋ	hø	ləu	tɕiəʔ	zən	pin
<b>Tone</b>	˩ (13)	˩ (55)	˩ (13)	˨ (31)	˩ (5)	˩ ˩ (1331)	˩ (55)
<b>Tone Sandhi</b>			˩ ˩ (13 313)		tɕiə pin ˩ ˩ (55 11)		

Transcription 2-5<sup>48</sup>

# Jiang *diao* 'Baoyu's Night Visit'

Jiang Yuequan (1976)

♩ = 62

7

13

19

Voice

Sanxian

隆冬

寒露结成

冰

<sup>48</sup> Transposed from C# for ease of reading.

By comparing the ballads (a) ‘Yingying Plays Qin’ (transcription 2-1), (b) ‘Plum and Bamboo’ (transcription 2-4), and (c) ‘Baoyu’s Night Visit’ (transcription 2-5), it can be gleaned that the melody of the seven syllables in the first line are highly similar to each other under a recognisable composition structure of the Jiang *diao*. The correspondence between the words and music can be observed in all of these ballads, to a certain degree. Examined from the perspective of the accommodation of the words in a specific *liupai* tune, the analysis below will use (a) (b) and (c) to explore these three phrases respectively.

All of these texts are written in a *ping-qi* format, implying a certain distribution of the level and oblique sounds in a phrase. The *ping-qi* arrangement here is the so-called *er-wu ju* (‘two-five verse’), the seven syllables of the line are divided into 2+5 segments, linked by the same instrumental interlude in five and half bars. (a) and (b) share the same level and oblique pattern, while in (c), unlike in the other two pieces, the third syllable is a variable-level sound. This displays the principle to ‘disregard the first, third and fifth syllables, and strictly follow the second, fourth and sixth syllables’.

The first segment – the first two syllables – are all written in ‘level + level’ patterns: in (a) and (b), the tonal sequence can be described as [55 13 V], and in (c), it is [13 55  $\Lambda^{\Gamma}$ ]. All of the pitches of all these first two syllables sung by Jiang Yuequan are articulated in a natural narrative style without musical ornamentation. However, the enunciation quality of the speech is not plain. In a recording of Jiang Yuequan teaching ‘Yingying Plays Qin’ in a radio programme from 1960, he stressed:<sup>49</sup>

When you articulate the words *xiang lian*, you should be able to feel the delicate fragrance and speak it out to arouse the listeners’ synaesthesia of smelling.

In the second segment, the five syllables are separated into two lexical parts, in the format 2+3. The third and fourth syllables in each of these three pieces – 碧水 (‘green water’), 种竹 (‘planting a bamboo’) and 寒露 (‘freezing dew’) – are combined into a phrase. Phrases (a) and (b) begin with a stressed sound, which is displayed in the singing. In (a), the third syllable (碧) is sung with a grace note to emphasise the glottal nature, and the on-going fourth syllable (水) floats subtly downwards and then upwards with the notes E#-D#-E#; while in (b), the tone pitch of the third syllable (种) moves from extra high to extra low. However,

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<sup>49</sup> Jiang Yuequan’s explanation is included in the recording track.

considering that the fourth syllable (竹) starts on a glottal sound, the third syllable (种) only keeps the extra high pitch represented in the high G note, and after a pause which indicates the glottal sound of the fourth syllable, the (竹) is sung at the same note as the third. By doing this, the separation between the third and the fourth syllables is recognisable. In distinction from (a) and (b), in (c), the tone sandhi effect co-ordinates the third and the fourth syllables, by means of adding a pitch unit after the fourth syllable. Thus, the genuine tone of this syllable (露) is extended from [31 √] to [313 ʷ]. The melody reflects how the tonal sequence flows. The third syllable (寒) is emphasised by a scooping sound to embody the pitch of [13 ʌ]. To transit from the third syllable to the fourth one, another stressed rising melody from D# to G# with a scooping sound explicitly distinguishes these two words. Although the D# note belongs to the process of singing the third syllable (寒) in the score, considering the same scooping effect to begin the third syllable, here, the D# should be thought of as a preparation for the G#, which is the initial of the fourth syllable (露). The following note E# extends the breath of the fourth syllable as the tone sandhi effect does, though the melodic orientation is dropping, which is in contrast to the tonal contour.

The last three syllables of the second segment in the first line show how an even more intimate correspondence works between the words and the melody in terms of how the different tone sandhi effects are produced within a stereotyped tune structure. In (a), the last three syllables bring two tone sandhi effects. As a verb, the fifth syllable (动) can be separated from the sixth (风) and the seventh (凉) syllables. When it is followed by the object in a phrase, the genuine tone pitch [31 √] then is extended with two more units as [3113 √ ʷ]. The melody starts from a downward perfect fifth indicating the original tone pitch of the fifth syllable (动). Followed by an upward major third C#-E#, the tone sandhi effect of the fifth syllable then smoothly links to the sixth (风), whose original tone pitch is at an extra high level. The tone sandhi effect also influences the musical composition of the sixth and seventh syllables *feng* (风凉). The initial pitch E# of *feng* is higher than the starting pitch C# of *liang*, reflecting the pitch degree variation between these two syllables. The difference is enhanced by the downwardly melodic progress E#-D#-C#, which is followed by a vertical line centred on the pitch of E#. The melodic contour of the seventh syllable experiences an on-going rise and fall, which matches the tonal sequence of the articulation brought about by the tone sandhi effect. Nevertheless, this effect is further emphasised by a dropping sound at the end. The tonal pitches of the fifth (近) and the sixth syllables (深) in (b) are exactly the same as that in (a). However, without a tone sandhi requirement, the fifth

syllable (近) in (b) is sung with a firmer quality than that in (a) (动). In (b), the genuine tonal degrees of the sixth syllable (深) and the seventh syllable (围) are located at a constant extra high *yinping* level sound. When joining these two extra high-pitched syllables as a phrase, the word (围) is pronounced softly. This soft sound is marked as [11 J] due to the tone sandhi effect. Therefore, the melody presents a similar alignment of these two syllables: in bar 22, the sixth syllable (深) is sung at the pitch G with an ornament; while the last syllable has a clear-cut Eb to C.

The tone sandhi effect of the last three syllables in (c) works in a different way to both of the preceding results. The fifth and the seventh syllables (结冰) can be a phrase pronounced with the same tone sandhi effect as the combination of the last two syllables (深围) in (b). However, it is separated by the sixth syllable (成) (literally meaning 'become') to stress the process of '(dew) becoming ice' from a lexical perspective. At the same time, the word *cheng* also appears with a similar distortion to the seventh syllable (凉) in (a). Thus, the *doit* effect of the C# on the fifth syllable (结), on the one hand denotes the glottal sound of the pronunciation. On the other hand, there is a scooping movement towards the sixth linking word (成), even though this is in contrast to the original tonal sequence that *cheng* should be uttered with a lower tone than the fifth word (结). The seventh syllable (冰) continues the same C# note as the fifth syllable does, but ends with a natural dropping sound. This implies the same quiet sound effect as the final two syllables of (b).

### 2.2.3 Lyric Accommodation in *Qupai Ti* Tunes

In *tanci* story singing, the *qupai ti* tunes (or simply called *qupai*) have an undeniably prominent relationship with traditional folksongs of the Wu area. For instance, the *qupai ti* tunes *Shan Ge diao*, *Fei Jia diao* and *Luan Ji Ti* are straightforwardly derived from popular folk songs. In addition, some *qupai ti* tunes, such as *Dian Jiang Chun*, *Hai Qu*, and *Suo Nan Zhi*, though originally coming from the folksong tradition, are widely recognised as the *qupai* utilised in drama and operatic genres, such as *Kunqu*, *Suzhou wenshu*, *Yangzhou tanci* and *Yangzhou qingqu*. *Qupai ti* music is highly valued as a means to shape the typical small roles in a story using music. There are about twenty *qupai* (Tao, 1979: 3) used in *tanci*. For example, the *shan ge* (literally meaning 'mountain song') has various presentations in the Chinese folk song context (Schimmelpenninck, 1997: 16-19). In the *tanci* context, it denotes the tunes sung by lumberjacks, peasants, fishermen and so on, whose ways of singing during

their work are respectively called *shan ge*, *tian ge* ('field song') and *yu ge* ('fishing song'). Another view is that the music of the *Shan Ge diao* is transformed from the folk song *Yue'er Wanwan Zhao Jiuzhou* ('Quarter Moon Shining Upon the Earth') (Tao, 1979: 19). The *Fei Jia diao* is always sung by servant girls or matchmaker women characters in *tanci*. The *Nan Wu diao*, of which the *nan wu* is an abbreviation for *Namo Amitābha* (a fundamental invocation of the Buddha), is solely used when a nun sings to express herself.

In Tao Moujiong's compilation of *tanci* music (1979), he indicates that these *qupai* tunes are sung in a strophic form, so that one tune can be repeated several times according to the narrative text (*ibid.*). Apart from the padding syllables added to the text which function as particles in some *qupai* – considering that the tunes sharing a *qupai* should sound alike, and less prosodic restriction is required in this style of ballad singing – the accordance between the tonal contour of the lyrics and the melody can be of a lesser degree than that in *diao*-based ballads. Lawson (2011: 54) explains this situation in *Tianjin shidiao* whose music takes a paramount role:

... there will be small variations from piece to piece in the form of slightly different melodic contours and different grace notes added to the textual syllables with a different tonal contour from the corresponding syllables of the prototypical text.

In order to exhibit the degrees of correspondence, two examples will be given as follows. The first *qupai ti* tune example is entitled *Dao Qing diao*, specifically sung by a Taoist priest. An identifiable feature of *pipa* technique *zhai* (artificial harmonic)<sup>50</sup> is used to imitate *yugu* drumming (literally meaning 'fishing drum')<sup>51</sup> that accompanies *Dao Qing* singing in folk songs. Tao Moujiong (1979: 18) explains that a completed strophic form of *Dao Qing diao* is structured as '3 (syllables)+3+7; 7+7+7+7+7'. The transcribed track is selected from Chen Xi'an's singing of '*Fang Qing Chang Dao Qing*' ('Fang Qing Sings Dao Qing', see transcription 2-6, CD track 8) aired on the radio programme *Xingqi Shuhui* ('Weekly Story Meeting') broadcast in the 1980s in Shanghai. This ballad is derived from the widely-spread *tanci* story *Zhenzhu Ta* ('Pearl Pagoda'). The first half of the strophic lyrics *tan Fang Qing, da Ming chao, jia ji pin, nian ji xiao, duo cai ru pan you xiang zao* can be translated as follows: 'sighing Fang Qing ('s life), (who was born) in the Ming dynasty, from a poor family when he was a child;

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<sup>50</sup> By producing this technique, the right hand thumb should press against the string, while the forefinger or middle finger flicks outwardly by nail. The flick sounds in a high-pitched metal quality.

<sup>51</sup> The *yugu* is a Chinese percussion instrument combining a membranophonic and an idiophonic part together.

(he) was talented and secured an official position at an early age'. The IPA spelling of the lyrics is listed in table 6.

**Table 2-6 The tonal illustration of the first seven syllables of 'Fang Qing Sings Dao Qing'**

<b>Syllable</b>	叹	方	卿	大	明	朝
<b>IPA Spelling</b>	t'E	fā	tɕ'	da	min	zæ
<b>Tone</b>	∨ (51)	┘ (55)	┘ (55)	∨ (31)	λ (13)	λ (13)
<b>Tone Sandhi</b>		┘ L (55 11)		∨ ∨ (31 13) ↑ L (33 11)		

<b>Syllable</b>	家	计	贫	年	纪	小
<b>IPA Spelling</b>	tɕia	tɕi	bin	ni	tɕi	siaə
<b>Tone</b>	┘ (55)	∨ (51)	λ (13)	λ (13)	∨ (512)	∨ (51)
<b>Tone Sandhi</b>		∨ ∨ (512 13)		λ (13) ∨ k (513 21)		

<b>Syllable</b>	多	才	入	泮	游	庠	早
<b>IPA Spelling</b>	təu	zE	zəʔ	p'ø	hiy	ziã	tsæ
<b>Tone</b>	┘ (55)	λ (13)	↑ (3)	∨ (512)	λ (13)	λ (13)	∨ (51)

Transcription 2-6<sup>52</sup>

Dao Qing *diao* 'Fang Qing Sings *Dao Qing*'  
from *Pearl Pagoda*

Chen Xi'an's singing (1980s)

$\text{♩} = 60$

7

14

叹 方 卿 大 明

朝 家 计 贫 年 纪 小

<sup>52</sup> Transposed from C# for ease of reading.

19

Voice

多才入洋

Pipa

Sanxian

22

Voice

游岸早

Pipa

Sanxian

The second *qapai ti* example uses the *Luan Ji Ti* format. Tao Moujiong (1979: 18) suggests that the melody of *Luan Ji Ti* is exactly the same as the *shu diao* in *tanci*, apart from the insertion of the *gan ban* narrative section, which is rhythmically narrated by a character as a passage of self-revelation (Rolston, 2014: 81). This section can be extended or shortened according to the content. Thus, the textual format can be structured as 7 (syllables) +7 +*gan ban* +7. The selected ballad entitled ‘Zhu Zhishan Kan Deng’ (‘Zhu Zhishan Watches the Lantern’) is taken from the story *San Xiao* (‘Three Smiles’), and sung by Xu Yunzhi recorded in 1957 (see transcription 2-7, CD track 9). The first two seven-syllable lines *yuan wen de luo gu sheng yin, ke shi qian bian (repeat) lai le deng* are sung by the character Zhu Zhishan. These words describe a festival fair and the character ‘hearing the remote sound of gongs and drums, it could be (repeat) that the lanterns are coming from in front’. The IPA spelling and tonal degree of each syllable is illustrated in table 2-7:

Table 2-7 The tonal illustration of the first seven syllables of ‘Zhu Zhishan Watches the Lantern’

<b>Syllable</b>	远	闻	得	锣	鼓	声	音
<b>IPA Spelling</b>	hiø	vən	təʔ	ləu	kəu	sən	in
<b>Tone</b>	∨ (31)	λ (13)	ɿ (5)	∨ (31)	∨ (51)	ɿ (55)	ɿ (55)
<b>Tone Sandhi</b>	∨↓ (31 13)			∨↓ (31 13)		ɿ L (55 11)	

<b>Syllable</b>	可	是	前	边	来	了	灯
<b>IPA Spelling</b>	k'əu	zi	zil	pi	lɛ	liæ	tən
<b>Tone</b>	∨ (51)	∨ (31)	λ (13)	ɿ (55)	λ (13)	λ (13)	ɿ (55)
<b>Tone Sandhi</b>	∨↑ (513 55) ∨↓ (31 13)						

Transcription 2-7

*Luan Ji Ti diao* 'Zhu Zhishan Watches the Lantern'  
from *The Three Smiles*

Xu Yunzhi's singing (1957)

♩ = 128

Voice

Pipa

Sanxian

9

Voice

Pipa

Sanxian

16

Voice

Pipa

Sanxian

24

Voice

Pipa

Sanxian

远

闻得

锣鼓声

可是前边

可是前边

来了

灯

Comparing these two examples above with the *diao*-based *liupai* ballads, the degree of the correspondence between the tonal alignment and the melodic contour is lower, and this is more obvious in the *Luan Ji Ti*. Examining the *Dao Qing diao*, one of the features of the

music is that the seven-syllable line texts are written in a standard *ping-ze* arrangement. The second feature shows that all the phrases consist of an ending that drops downwards. Even when syllables have an upward tail, such as (朝, bar 14), (贫, bar 16), and (才, bar 19), the tonal influence must give way to the music even without being offset by any kind of ornamentation; while the other syllables mainly display the tonal pitch in accordance with the orientation of the tune. In the *Luan Ji Ti diao*, the tune is simpler than the *Dao Qing diao*. Although its accordance between text and music is exhibited to a lesser degree, the reason for this can be explained. The lyrics in this piece are not written according to a restrictive rhyme scheme, but as is often the case for *qupai ti* tunes, a colloquial style of text is used. Despite each line containing seven syllables as in the other examples, the written format does not follow the verse structure of the rhyming *ping-ze* arrangement. Besides, the rhythmical recitative feature is remarkable in the *Luan Ji Ti diao*. The equalised pulse of the prose style narration endows the tune with a flavour of *kuai ban shu* ('fast clappertales') storytelling, a genre in which a story is recited rapidly, accompanied by two sets of clappers controlled in both of the narrator's hands (Lawson, 2011: 98-99). This impression is more convincingly displayed in the non-musical *gan ban* section within the *Luan Ji Ti* structure, exactly following transcription 7. The regulation of the appearance of the syllables helps the listener to keep track of the words, so that the articulation and meaning are not distorted by the unexpected pause. Therefore, apart from the glottal syllable (得) in bar 9, only one syllable (鼓, bar 13) matches its original tone pitch to the melodic trend in this piece, but the comprehension of the text is not disturbed.

### 2.3 Summary: the Correspondence between Words and Music in *Tanci* Music

This chapter has focused on the correspondence between linguistic and musical interpretations in the *tanci* genre, particularly from the perspectives of examining tonal alignments and melodic contours, and exploring the various factors that may affect the result. By analysing both *jiben diao fanfu ti*, the performance school-based *diao* music, and the *qupai ti* tune music from a phonetic perspective, the correspondence between the genuine articulation of the lyrics syllables and the melodic contour is remarkable in *tanci* story singing. Wu's (2011: 82) explanation '*yiqu baichang*' ('one tune can be sung in hundreds of ways') summarises how performance school-based *diao* works as a setting of musical clichés to suit hundreds, or probably an endless number of ballad texts. There is much to discuss about this interpretation.

In fact, the notion of *yiqu baichang* requires deeper investigation. People generally take *yiqu* to mean a fixed musical tune, but in the *tanci* context it can be explained as a piece of ballad lyrical content. That is to say, in a *diao*-based system, either a piece of text is fitted into the various styles of *diao* performance schools, or a *diao* musical framework is applied to different pieces of ballad lyrics. Both have been demonstrated by the previous examples. In the *qupai ti* system, each *qupai* makes demands upon the musical tune and line-stanza structure. Therefore, the concept of *yiqu baichang*, which is frequently mentioned by the storytellers without a clear explanation, can be illustrated and demonstrated.

All of these demonstrations lead to the core consensus of ‘*yi zi xing qiang, qiang sui zi zou*’ (literally, ‘using articulation to produce the tune, the tune should follow the words’), denoting the prominence of phonetic factors in music composition. More specifically, it raises the question of to what extent these two factors influence each other. The *qupai ti* format is generally considered remote from this debate due to having a fixed tune. However, from the analysis of the *Dao Qing diao* tune, apart from the syllables located at the end of each phrase, which are a sign of the music character of this tune, the other syllables do largely display tonal-pitch in accordance with the musical contour. Thus, the discussion of the correspondence between words, in terms of the tonal degree, and trends in musical melody is relevant beyond the context that distinguishes the performance school-based *diao* music and the *qupai ti* tune music. It is an unconvincing oversimplification that classifies *diao* music as having a textual dominance, while the *qupai ti* shows a musical priority (Schimmelpenninck, 1997: 133). However, admittedly, looking back at the analysis in this chapter, there are certain aspects that can be identified more noticeably either in *diao* music or in *qupai ti* music.

First, seven-syllable verse *ping-ze* arrangements endow performance school-based *diao* music and *qupai ti* tune music with a high correspondence between the tonal alignment and the melodic contour. The correspondence is exceedingly convincing in *diao* music in cases either of the ballads sharing the same lyric text but diverse *diao* performance styles, or of the ballads that are composed in one specific *diao* style, sharing highly similar music, but setting different texts into the *diao* melody. The mismatches mainly appear in melodic ornamentation, which generally come after the initial utterance of the syllable. Therefore, although the mismatched parts distort the tonal pitch of the syllable, the meaning of the words will not be wrongly interpreted. The melodic distortion is more notable in the ballad of Yu *diao*’s ‘Yingying Plays Qin’, since the syllable 水 (in bar 18) can be extended to five bars,

while within the same text, in Jiang Yuequan's *diao* version, the longest duration of a syllable is 风 (in bar 18) lasting for one bar. This is probably the reason that Yu *diao* is generally thought of as the most musical among all of the *liupai* performance schools.

Secondly, there is lot of predictable discordance between tonal sequence and melodic contour in *qupai ti* tunes. The kinds of mismatches have been discussed already. But the consequence might be reconsidered given existing studies, such as Schellenberg's (2012: 275), which assert that the mismatches are triggered not by linguistic rules, but rather the music, which 'trumps' language. A similar idea can also be strongly supported by Stock's study (1999: 184) wherein musical structure challenges the dictates of speech tone in Beijing Opera because linguistic factors are undoubtedly important in this genre. Comparing the two tunes in *qu pai ti*, the most noticeable discordance emerges in the prose for the tune *Luan Ji Ti*. Considering that the rhythmic factor is presented in both word presentation and instrumental accompaniment, it is distinguished from the other two examples. The prominent feature of prose texts in comparison with verse lyrics is that colloquial style provides an easier understanding to listeners. In other words, the accessible and recognisable prose text does not present great challenges in perceiving the meaning from the sung text. The fixed tune is an inevitable parameter to be concerned about, in that it can deliberately distort the speech tone. The speech tone, however, is less prominent in prose, while the correspondence is more demanding in a verse text. Perhaps then, the nature of 'narrative singing' can be described better the other way around, as 'sung-narration'.

Thirdly, the storytellers perceive that faithful representation of genuine speech tones leads to a 'less musical' product, whereas distortion of linguistic tonal content in favour of melodic line renders a 'more musical' result. This attitude and these tendencies can be found in both *diao* and tune-based styles in respect to rhymed textual music. Considering the Yu *diao* and Jiang *diao* versions of 'Yingying Plays Qin', neither of the melodies affects the understanding of the lyrics tremendously, but the Yu *diao* is deemed more musical because of the extensional music phrase of a single syllable. However, three parameters can fundamentally help to keep the words comprehensible. First, the melodic trend goes with the articulation of the syllable, with the melodic contour moving parallel to the tonal pitch. Examining the marks added in the transcription, red lines usually emerge at the beginning of the matched syllable, while the green lines, which show mismatches, often occur at the ornamentation. Besides, before the red circle mark indicating the glottal sound, the rest symbol or a grace note can help to stress the glottal movement. That is to say, the listener can instantly

recognise the syllable when it is correctly articulated. Secondly, the seven-syllable rhyme *ping-ze* structure, though flexible in being filled with level or oblique pitched syllables that go against the *ping-ze* model, to some extent maintains a basic tonal contour as reference to the music composition. Thirdly, the performance school-based *diao*, although representing the musical flavour of diverse *liupai*, have reached a consensus surrounding the *ping-ze* Tang poetic structure: refined musical phrases, which are thought of as the elementary melodic units, reflect the level-oblique contour, so that the identifiable phrases can be repeatedly used, as in the description of *jiben diao fanfu ti*.

Finally, the linguistic feature of tone sandhi is significantly identifiable in musical melodies. This is also a proof of the correspondence between speech tone and melodic contour. Comparing the three Jiang *diao* examples, although they share similar tunes, the details regarding how they register the tone sandhi effect at the same points in the text are distinctly different. For example, the fifth syllable in *Yingying plays qin, Plum and Bamboo*, and *Baoyu's night visiting* are respectively: *dong* with a tone sandhi effect, 近 with a normal oblique falling sound, and 结 with a glottal sound. 动 displays a √↓ (31 13) falling and rising contour, which is reflected in the music with the notes starting from G#-C# then proceeding up to E#. The melodic representation of *Jin* should be conjunct with the previous pitch, so that a falling of G-E implies the dropping sound of the genuine speech tone. Although the syllable 结 is a glottal sound, unlike the previous and following syllables, which are emphasised by a scooping vocal ornamentation, it is sung straightforwardly on the note C#. This makes the glottal sound appear less emphasised.

The analytical work presented in this chapter has hopefully offered a convincing elucidation of the correspondence between the speech tones of the text and the melodic contours of the music. The main purpose of examining the correspondence is not to judge whether the text or the music is more important in *tanci* story singing. The negotiation between the text and the music delivers the stories with less linguistic miscomprehension as a result of melodic factors, and more musical pleasure. All the correspondence, and probably the discordance also, serve this goal. At the same time, they give rise to '*yi qu bai chang*' – diverse renderings of the text – a phenomenon that has proven difficult to explain by storytellers and scholars.

### **Chapter 3. Gesture and Interconnectedness between the Storyteller and Audience in Live Performance**

*Ping-tan* performance employs a great many skills. Like other oral traditions (see Rubin, 1995: 10), the artistry covers various facets, including the organisation of meaning, managing the flow of the narrative, vocal singing, instrumental playing, patterns of sound, rhythm, imagery and so on. Each one acts as a constraint, challenging the storyteller, and thus *ping-tan* is a medium through which empathy between performers and listeners is encouraged as its story texts are interpreted. During training, storytellers must learn spoken narrative from both written texts and transcriptions, tunes in sung narrative, and also the unwritten rules that apply to each. To master all of these is not only to perform well, but also to create a bridge of understanding between the storyteller and the audience. This bridge is manifest in both spoken narrative and sung narrative, relying upon linguistic, musical and gestural means, and obtaining reactions from the audience that in turn stimulate more responses in the performance. This interconnectedness between performer and audience in the *ping-tan* performance space will be discussed in this chapter.

The previous chapter analysed from a theoretical perspective how words and music accommodate each other to produce effective communication. However, a live performance does not merely depend on the performers' efforts on the stage. In addition, the audience's response to the performance immediately influences the storyteller's ongoing adjustments. It is not an exaggeration to say that no matter how qualified the storyteller is, these lively interactions can produce effects that are vital to the success of a performance. Even merely one unsuccessful performance could generate negative judgments that might affect a performer's whole career. In this chapter, I characterise this performer-audience interconnectedness as a 'feedback loop', and use the concept to illustrate how the verbal information of telling and singing is enabled by a non-verbal interaction between the two. Specifically, through an examination of the gestural behaviour of both performer and audience in live performance, this chapter will elucidate the ways in which gestures assist

expression and the experience of story content, as well as how the audience and performers interact through gestures.

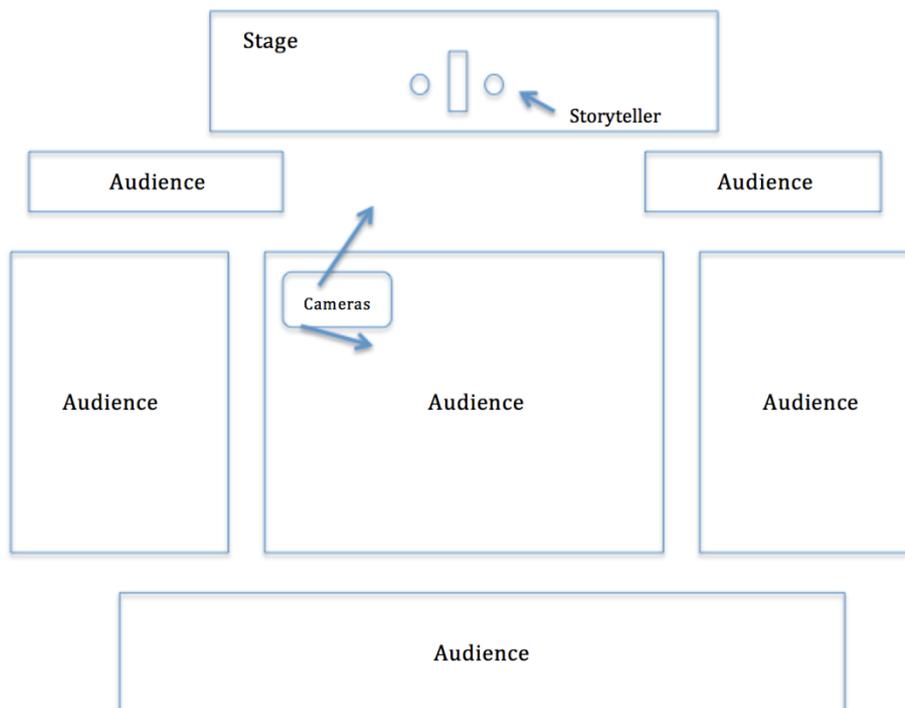
The folklorist Bauman's landmark performance-centred approach (1975) has had a significant influence on ethnomusicological studies, including Tumas-Serna (1992), Bealle (1993), Travassos (2000), and Béhague (2006). Bauman's work illustrates the significance of considering verbal arts in their genuine performance contexts. Treating verbal arts as text-centred products has been taken for granted by scholars in various disciplines, such as the theorist Roman Jakobson in linguistic and literary studies, the linguist Edward Stankiewicz, and the folklorist and anthropologist William Bascom (ibid., 291). Rather, Bauman calls for the development of these approaches, the examination of a culture-specific performance through analysis of performance itself (ibid., 292-294). Berger and del Negro (2002) extract and highlight the reflexivity underlying verbal art performances from Bauman's study. They suggest that the performer's awareness of being a participant in an interaction, and this reflexive effect, can be experienced by the audience. As such, the components of the performer's body, that individual's thoughts, perceptions, memories and the experiences of the other participants during the performance, prove the presence of the reflexive effect (Berger and del Negro, 2002: 63). In a live *ping-tan* performance, although storytellers do initiate the communication with the audiences, the instant feedback of audience members is also determinative in achieving a performance that is whole and united.

Among diverse performance analytical studies, considering performance gesture has served as a novel perspective in recent decades. This approach has been applied notably by Leman and Godøy (2010), Gritten and King (2006), Clayton (2005), and Davidson and Correia (2002). These scholars in turn have built on pioneering work on gesture in verbal communication by Kendon (2004), McNeill (1992, 2005) and others. As an interdisciplinary product, the definition of musical gesture has been bestowed with various meanings that pertain specifically to certain subjects, such as musicology, anthropology, linguistics, psychology, aesthetics, bio-mechanics, and human-computer interaction. The concept of gesture may be encountered in an even greater range of existent studies that prefer to use different terms, for instance, movement, action, body motion (Kendon, 1972), gesticulation (Kendon, 1980;

McNeill, 1992), and visible bodily action (Kendon, 2004). Marc Leman and Rolf Inge Godøy (2010, 5) give a clear description from the point of view of body movement: “[gesture] is a movement of part of the body, for example a hand or the head, to express an idea or meaning”. In the musical performance context, this description encompasses various different categories. In McNeill’s (1992) study, he uses the term gesticulation to describe hand and arm movements, and explores how the idiosyncratic and spontaneous movements of hands and arms accompany stages of producing a verbal utterance (ibid., 40). Leman and Godøy (2010: 36) classify the gestures in performance from a functional perspective: sound-producing gestures are responsible for sounding notes; communicative gestures are intended to communicate with others; sound-facilitating gestures are necessary in carrying out a performance but not in producing sound; and sound-accompanying gestures are made in order to respond to sound. This typology suggests that gestural functions range from either directly or indirectly controlling the sound, to facilitating interaction among participants in a musical performance. Although watching is not always necessary in the experience of receiving music, it may be part of establishing a sense of community that can enrich the audiences’ experience beyond that derived merely through listening. In live *ping-tan* performance, on the one hand, in both spoken and sung sections, storytellers coordinate with audiences and occasionally with assistants in a non-solo performance, not only by linguistic narration, but also by bodily actions of eye contact, head movements, stretching certain fingers, pointing in a specific direction, and so on. All of these gestures assist the storyteller facilitating the performance. On the other hand, the audience may react with their own gestures that are not necessarily deliberate, as they respond to the storytellers’ gestures.

The main data employed here are ethnographic resources collected during fieldwork between 2010 and 2013 in Suzhou, especially recorded live *ping-tan* performances and interviews. This study also draws on materials from the archived video collection of the Suzhou Broadcasting Bureau, the Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe and interviewees’ personal collections. One aim during the gathering of this data was to capture the gestures of both performer and audience simultaneously. This was done by sitting in the audience and

erecting two cameras, which could take in a broader scope of the scene: one camera filmed the storyteller's performances; another was facing the audience. Figure 3-1 shows the scene of how the cameras were placed in the *Guangyu* story house.



**Figure 3-1** The placement of cameras in the *Guangyu* story house.

This is a method widely adopted by ethnomusicologists studying performer-audience interaction. The present chapter derives many of its ideas for data analysis from Martin Clayton's studies (2005, 2007a, 2007b) of the multiple interpretations and engagements among performance participants in North India. Clayton relies heavily on ethnographic film data to explore inter-personal communication, integrating the empirical study of nonverbal behaviour in musical performance (see also Clayton, Dueck and Leante, 2013: 2, 12-14). He and others have shown just how vital gesture can be as a tool for establishing interconnectedness between performers and listeners. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in theatrical types of performance, where numerous tools of communication, including gesture or body movement critically inform the delivery and reception of narrative and dramatic information. Visual aspects are extensively utilised in *Suzhou ping-tan*, and they constantly underlie the relationship between the storyteller and the audience. The

storyteller's gestures support and enhance his or her words and add layers of meaning. Meanwhile, the audience's own vocal and (conscious or unconscious) gestural responses show with great immediacy their approval, disapproval, or other responses. In fact, many audience members are eager to share their judgments and preferences with those around them. By monitoring and responding to such signals, performers can better control the progress of their performances and deal more effectively with the audience's needs.

This chapter argues that *ping-tan* performance, as a verbal art, displays a way of communication between the performers and audience that relies upon culture-specific forms. This extends Bauman's suggestion that performing verbal arts involve genuine human communication rather than simply the presentation of a text (1975: 291). In particular, performers employ gestures to deliver their performance, and to interact with their audiences. As for the audiences, in this context, their gestures are stimulated by the performance, and generally consist of body movements that express the activity of listening. From this perspective, enlightened by Berger and del Negro's focus on the reflexivity that the performer utilises to realise the interaction (2002: 63), this chapter will demonstrate that reflexivity also emerges in the audience's conscious and unconscious responses to the storytellers. By this means, there emerges a 'feedback loop' model of interconnectedness between the performer and the audience in live *ping-tan*.

### **3.1 Gesture Category and Requirements in *Ping-tan***

*Ping-tan* performance goes beyond mere narration and description. The storyteller alternates between providing commentary on the action and enacting the dramatic plot; making the characters' personalities and their behaviour explicit; and speaking and expressing themselves through mimicry, with varying degrees of immersion in the character acting. Accordingly, storytellers possess an impressive array of performance techniques: speech, inserting humour, playing stringed instruments, singing and acting. These are viewed as the formal components of *ping-tan*, conceptualised by generations of performers as the main criteria with which to judge artistry. As Finnegan (2003: 85) stresses, in addition

to 'words', other factors such as "auditory, kinesic, visual, spatial, material, tactile, somatic and olfactory" dimensions are also paid enhanced attention.

Gestures in Suzhou *ping-tan* are customarily divided into two types: *mianfeng*, literally 'facial wind', denoting facial expressions, with the 'wind' possibly referring to the abrupt and transient nature of such expressions; and *shoumian*, literally 'face of the hand', indicating the other gestures, with the 'face' denoting the act of presenting and the 'hand' not specifically referring to the individuals' hands but rather the rest of their bodies. Zhou Liang (1988: 84) has classified seven different objectives underlying the use of gesture:

- to express a positive or negative attitude;
- to indicate spatial orientation;
- to signify particular attributes such as up and down, big and small, tall and short, far and near, and so on;
- to outline the shape of objects, for example circular or square;
- to describe degrees of movement, such as fast or slow
- to indicate numbers;
- to express complimentary or derogatory sentiments.

Evidently, many of the gestures happen to be symbolic in nature. For example, when a storyteller starts acting out a character, instead of making a real bow to the audience, he or she knocks on the table with a fist to symbolize the action. Eye gesture as part of *mianfeng* augments the storyteller's narration; the skilled use of facial expressions centred specifically on the eyes is indispensable to effectively portraying a character's feeling and emotions. A broad and varied employment of gestures enables storytellers to embody a story's action in complex ways.

Zhou (1988: 86) gives an example as follows to explain how gestures help the storyteller simultaneously to embody a character who carries out a certain action, and alternatively to provide comment on this as a narrator. The master storyteller Xu Yunzhi demonstrated how this worked in one episode called *Xie Chunlian* ('Writing Spring Festival Couplets'), where he impersonates Zhu Zhishan, a character engaged in the action of writing some couplets. He

ends by writing his signature as *guwu Zhu Yunming ti* (古吴祝允明题, written by Zhu Yunming, Suzhou<sup>53</sup>):

When I recite the word *guwu*, I mumble it under my breath, adopting the character of Zhu Zhishan who is talking to himself as he is writing, an act that I portray through raising my right hand and mimicking the way of writing. Then, immediately afterwards, I say '*jiushi Suzhou*' ('this means Suzhou city'), to explain the word *guwu* [an ancient term for Suzhou which some listeners may not be familiar with], so I 'jump out' from the acting and temporarily put my hand down. Then, when I recite the following '*Zhu Yunming ti*', it is again the character who is mumbling this, so I am again adopting his role, continuing with the writing behaviour. I change my facial expression, gesture, and vocal register three times just for these ten words of narrative.

The bodily actions of eye contact, head movement, stretching of the little finger, and pointing in a specific direction, can all be used to deliver complex narrative content. But it is one thing to master all these techniques and skills individually, and quite another to control these means effectively to make sure that a proper balance is maintained: if a storyteller fails to restrain his own acting and becomes overwhelmed by it, this is called – in storytellers' jargon – being *sa gouxue* (literary 'sprinkled with dog's blood'). Exaggerated performances are abhorred by the audience. Moments of imbalance certainly occur from time to time, even with well-trained and experienced masters. For example, if a narrator expresses a brief moment of surprise or anger by opening his eyes very wide, and maintains his stare just a fraction too long or too emphatically, or if he brings his woodblock down a bit too loudly to express excitement, all this may be perceived as exaggeration (Zhou, 1988: 84-84).

Employing gesture in *ping-tan* is not merely a matter of putting into practice a set of standard techniques, but – at all times – of finding the right measure in employing them, of

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<sup>53</sup> *Guwu* is an alternative and elegant given name for 'the ancient city of Suzhou'. Zhu Yunming is the literary name of Zhu Zhishan.

staying connected with the audience and closely monitoring and responding to their signals. More generally, storytellers have a constant awareness of the need to keep their audience entertained and involved, by whatever means. Good storytellers use more refined language if the audience is highly educated. Or they insert a humorous episode when people appear to be bored or tired. Storyteller Hui Zhongqiu<sup>54</sup> explained:

You always have to be very sensitive to the audience's reaction when you are performing. It's like you are operating a marionette. A good storyteller should be able to re-attract your attention if you are just about to get up to leave. If a storyteller loses control of the audience, then sometimes people might indeed leave before the performance has even finished.

Before answering the question “how can gesture be employed in the service of keeping listeners alert and involved”, it is necessary to take a glimpse at how storytellers engage various means in the spoken and sung narrative sections.

### **3.2 The Use of Gesture in Storytelling**

The visual element of a performance – the physical movements – can never be separated from the overall effect. Appropriate bodily gestures and gesticulation can make the storytelling more compelling, and explicitly interpret the scene on a level beyond that of merely verbal explanation. However, performing the body movements of *ping-tan* requires special training.

From the moment a storyteller steps onto the stage, their performance must progress fluently. Storytellers can never say “I am wrong” or correct themselves in a real-time performance, although young storytellers do sometimes attract criticism for rigid or underprepared performance. To understand how storytelling materialises – especially focusing upon various gestures employed – the following example illustrates how a storyteller combines all facets of performance to communicate with the audience. The following sections will demonstrate how gestures serve to fuse the verbal text with

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<sup>54</sup> Personal communication, 23 January 2012.

performing methods in a syncretic presentation. I present cases from my fieldwork observations. The first case illustrates in a table how verbal text is made vivid through the employment of gestures, and records the instant verbal and gestural responses from members of the audience. The second and third focus on analysing how the storyteller uses body movement to detail the story content, to facilitate the development of the performance, and most importantly, to communicate with the audience.

### **3.2.1 The Association between Verbal Text and Gesture**

In Case 1, which follows below, I aim to illustrate two dimensions of a live performance excerpt. I explain how a storyteller delivers a verbal text in an artistic presentation by the use of gestures. The first focus will be on how the storyteller performs the dramatic plot in an artful way, which builds up a comprehensive picture of the characters, and then conveys his own values. The second focus is to highlight the interplay between the storyteller and the audience, conducted through the storyteller's manner of performing. Reproducing this excerpt in the form of an ethnographic report is intended to illustrate how real-time interaction is achieved through narrative and body register, in combination with reactions of audience members. The type of the narrative (*liu bai*) being used – see the list of six types on page 31 – is also indicated. Necessary supplementary information is given in round brackets.

#### **Case 1**

Type: Video

Recording Time: 1:30-3:30 pm, 25 January 2012

Recording Location: *Guangyu* story house, Suzhou

Storyteller: Hui Zhongqiu

Repertoire: *Hongding Shangren Hu Xueyan* ('The Official Businessman Hu Xueyan')

Session of the whole story: 4<sup>th</sup> day of 14

Excerpt duration: 34:28 - 37:16

This passage is taken from the storyteller Hui Zhongqiu's lengthy episode *Hongding Shangren Hu Xueyan* ('The Officer-Businessman Hu Xueyan', CD track 10). The content is based on the real-life story of Hu Xueyan (1823-1885). Hui Zhongqiu adapted the plot from Hu's biography so as to make it suit the storytelling genre, and divided the whole story into fourteen day-long segments. The excerpt illustrates Hu establishing connections with the powerful officer Zuo Zongtang, a relationship that would eventually lead to Hu's death. This provides him with the opportunity to achieve success in life and business for the first time. The scene takes place against the background of *Taiping* Rebellion violence. In this fragment, the 'twenty thousand *dan*' is equal to 1530 tonne<sup>55</sup> now. Another character Wang Youling is Hu Xueyan's friend, a leading officer in the Zhejiang Province bureau, who helps Hu achieve his business success. Zuo Zongtang, one of the most famous Chinese statesman and military leaders in the late Qing Dynasty, served with distinction during the Qing Empire's civil war against the *Taiping* Rebellion. '*Chang mao*' ('longhairs') is the nickname of the rebellion used by the people.

### **Background of the story**

*A civil war is spreading in southern China in the period between 1850 and 1864. The Taiping Tianguo Taiping Rebellion is led by heterodox Christian convert Hong Xiuquan, whose visions have convinced him that he is the younger brother of Jesus Christ, and who opposes the ruling Manchu-led Qing Dynasty. The conflict is thought of as one of the deadliest military engagements in history, and most of the approximately 20 million dead are civilians. Here, the Taiping Rebellion annihilates the city of Hangzhou, hounding Wang Youling to death at his post, along with 700,000 (according to the storyteller) Hangzhou citizens. Wang Youling asks a friend Yuan He to deliver a letter and a yinpiao (an ancient form of cheque) to Zuo Zongtang. He asks Zuo to send the yinpiao to the head of the Jiangsu Province Bureau, in order to present it to the Empress Dowager Cixi.*

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<sup>55</sup> For the conversion from *dan* in the Qing dynasty to present-day tons, please see Wu Hui (1985) *Zhongguo lidai liangshi muchan yanjiu* ('A study of the yield per unit area of grains in past dynasties, China), Agriculture Press.

**Table 3-1 Ethnographic Document of Hui Zhongqiu’s live performance**

**Ethnographic Document Table**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Transcription</b>	<b>Category of Speech (<i>Bai</i>)</b>	<b>Storyteller's Gesture</b>	<b>Audience's Reaction</b>
34:28	Yuan He returns to the boat from Hangzhou, handing over the two items to Hu Xueyan.	<i>Biao bai</i>	Thumps on the table at the same time as ‘handing over’.	
34:33	After quickly reading the letter, “ <i>Wa-!</i> ” Hu Xueyan howls for Wang Youlin.		A hoarse onomatopoeia lasts for 4 secs, while hands are thrown from inside to outside. After a pause, he firmly thumps on the table with his hands. A pause before 34:40.	Slight mumbling
34:42	The foreign envoy at the side shouts:	<i>Guan bai, comic element (timbre)</i>	Turns to his left side to indicate that he is taking the role of a foreigner.	
34:43	“Mr. Hu, we are leaving now!” (in a distorted vocal register)		Mimics a foreigner’s odd speech tones. This amusing expression contrasts with the previous emotion of howling.	Laughing and mumbling
34:46	Extremely anxious, the foreigners are about to escape.	<i>Chen bai</i>	Thumps three times on the table to emphasise a beginning; turns to the right to explain to the audience as a third person.	
34:50	What if the <i>Taiping</i> Rebellion comes to rob the grains, they (the foreigners) will lose their lives! I can’t lose my life to get the money.		Explains why the foreigners escaped in a hurry; remains turned to the right to speak to the audience.	

34:54	The other foreigners also yell: “We are leaving! It’s extremely dangerous!”	<i>Guan bai, comic element</i> (timbre)	No pause after the previous sentence; quickly turns to his left side to take the role of foreigners, waving left hand at the word “ <i>weixian de hen na</i> ” (‘extremely dangerous’) as a farewell. A 2-sec pause at the end, while turning to his right to enter the next <i>Biao bai</i> .	Imitate ‘We are leaving’ in the distorted foreign tones. Audience ease up mumbling; a very low voice is heard imitating ‘extremely dangerous’
35:00	Hu Xueyan kneels down, ‘ <i>Ben den ben den</i> ’,	<i>Biao bai</i>	Remains turned to the right; an onomatopoeia of a kowtow; slightly knocks on the table with the fist, like a kowtow.	
35:07	[...] and makes nine kowtows.		Makes ‘9’ gesture and firmly thumps on the table with the fist; a 1-sec pause at the end.	
35:10	In which direction? (He) Towards Hangzhou.	<i>Chen bai</i>	At the word ‘towards’, he moves to the right, spreading out his right palm as if indicating the direction of Hangzhou.	
35:14	Gazing away to the Hangzhou city, he bids farewell to Wang Youling by kowtow.		Smoothly turns to his left side; firmly thumps on the table with the fist at the end.	
35:19	After all, there is no way to rescue him (Wang Youling).	<i>Tuo bai</i>	Draws a diagonal line with right palm several times, emphasising ‘no way’.	Smacking lips
35:22	Your will is very explicit in the letter, as you say ‘Farewell! We will meet again in the next life’.		‘Farewell! We will meet again in the next life’ is in <i>zhongzhou yun</i> .	Exclamation

35:28	I, I will endeavour to the best of my ability to avert the twenty thousand <i>dan</i> of grains being robbed by the 'long hairs'. I, I am going to transport this grain to Ningbo to cash it in, and give the cash to the next head officer of the Zhejiang Province bureau in the future.	<i>Si bai</i>	Thumps on the table with left palm at the end of this statement.	
35:40	Fortune is coming, you habitués pay attention please! Hu Xueyan's fortune is coming! The fortune is coming again.	<i>Tuo bai</i>	Diagonally pointing to the table at the first 'fortune is coming'.	
35:45	Wang Youling is indeed dead. Hu Xueyan escapes through good luck; later his wounds <sup>56</sup> heal, and everything is fine. God knows! It seems that the <i>yinpiao</i> has selected Hu Xueyan and now his fortunes are looking extremely bright.	<i>Biao bai</i>	Acts as if being slashed on the left arm to indicate 'getting a wound'; slaps the table with left palm after 'bringing everything to Hu Xueyan'.	
35:57	He is in fortune's lap! So, why did the <i>yinpiao</i> choose Hu Xueyan?	<i>Tuo bai</i>	Waves right palm at 'in fortune's lap' and turns his body to the left. Beats on 'choose' and leans his body to the right to ask the audience this question.	

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<sup>56</sup> In Chinese proverb, beheading is described as 'merely leaving a scar as big as a bowl'.

36:00	You habitués surely say ‘you intend to keep others guessing. Ha! It is unnecessary to keep us guessing’!	<i>Xiao mai</i>	Turning his body to the left to embody the habitués saying ‘you intend to keep others guessing’; waves right palm while saying ‘unnecessary to keep us guessing’.	Chuckling
36:04	Later, Zuo Zongtang is nominated as the leading officer of the Zhejiang Province bureau!	<i>Tuo bai</i>	Constantly waving and pointing to the table to emphasise his statement.	
36:09	The imperial court has been informed that Wang Youling is dead. Thus, they have nominated Zuo Zongtang to take over this region as the head officer of the Zhejiang Province bureau. Nothing is lacking in Zuo Zongtang’s army except one thing by chance: grain.	<i>Biao bai</i>	Constantly waving and pointing to the table to emphasise his statement; waving in semi-circular shape from outside to inside by right thump to indicate ‘to take over this region’.  ‘Nothing is lacking’ with right palm; stretching out the left arm, pointing straight forward from the left side to the right side at ‘except one thing: grain’; slapping right hand on the table to punctuate.	
36:21	How awful that an army lacks a supply of grain! At that moment, Hu Xueyan meets Zuo Zongtang, and sends Zuo Zongtang twenty thousand <i>dan</i> of rice as a present.		Unfolds his right palm to indicate ‘how awful’ and faces the audience on his left side; moves to the right at ‘At that moment’; faces the audience on his left side when he states ‘Hu Xueyan meets Zuo Zongtang’; gesticulates ‘2’ with left hand at ‘twenty thousand <i>dan</i> ’; punctuates by slapping the wooden clapper on the table.	
36:34	As a result, Wang Youling is dead, while Hu Xueyan is alive (rather than dying).	<i>Tuo bai</i>	Waves right palm at ‘dead’ and ‘dying’.	

36:38	This clasp... <i>za di da</i> ... hooks onto a peg, just as he (Hu Xueyan) reaches heaven in a single bound!	<i>Rou li xue</i>	Gesticulates grabbing hold of the clasp with a ' <i>za di da</i> ' to imitate the sound of the hook.	Chuckling
36:44	What a great man Zuo Zongtang is!	<i>Chen bai</i>	Flings the back cloth of his gown; sits down and behaves like a great man.	
36:48	It is Zuo Zongtang, the only person who handles the great political authority, just after Zeng Guofan's death.		Thumbs up at 'the only person'; slaps on the table with the wooden clapper to punctuate before the next sentence.	
36:51	Then Hu Xueyan later becomes richer and richer (due to this event). During Zuo Zongtang's time, Hu Xueyan is many times as wealthy as he was in Wang Youling's period. It is terrible! Hu Xueyan's end is no doubt actually due to this event.	<i>Biao bai</i>	Briskly waves right palm in a semi-circle to the right side to indicate 'endless wealth' at 'richer and richer'.  Beats at 'It is terrible!' without any pause; knocks three times with fingertips of right hand at the word 'end' and turns to left in a pause.	
37:05	You habitués, a person should not be high-blown. A person should not be jaunty. It is useless to be overconfident. Some people think 'I've been successful'. But, the beginning of success is also the start of failure; heaven is also hell.	<i>Chen bai</i>	Moves to stand to right side, but facing audience on his right side acts as a warning to them at 'You habitués'; horizontally waves a negation at 'high-blown/jaunty', respectively facing towards the audience at his right and left sides.	Snickering

During this performance of 2'48", the storyteller Hui Zhongqiu utilises an abundant array of gestures to assist plot delivery. When Hui has adopted a role and is speaking – in this section, when he acts as the foreigner – he deliberately half turns to his left side. When acting as a storyteller talking to the audience, he half turns to his right side. These obviously contrasting positions help to communicate his current role playing identity, as either the character Hu Xueyan, the storyteller himself, or the live audience members. They account for all of the *guan bai* material and part of the *chen bai*. For the rest of the time, he generally faces to the front to deliver the story to the audience. Hui's punctuation gestures – such as thumping and slapping the wooden clapper on the table – serve as emphasis or to create an onomatopoeic effect. During this theatrical and complicated plot, Hui employs them quite often to signal the beginning or ending of a small section, and as preparation for the next event. Besides, iconic gesticulations and bodily gestures embody real objects or abstract descriptions, for example the clasp hooking onto a peg in the excerpt above. The storyteller describes Hu Xueyan's life being changed by sending the cheque to Zuo Zongtang, following Wang Youlin's last words. This plot is summarised with the analogy of 'reaching heaven in a single bound by grabbing hold of the clasp'. By emphasising with a gesture the metaphor of 'grabbing', the storyteller emphasises how lucky Hu Xueyan is. At the same time, it is also a hint foreshadowing later developments, in which Hu Xueyan meets failure as a result of exactly the same cheque. The storyteller uses typical gesticulations to represent shape and spatial extension, making visual details for an imagined scene to share with the audience.

There are eight instances of clearly discernible audience reactions to the storyteller's artful gestures and telling skills. That is to say, audience members are either consciously or unconsciously stimulated by the performance and give responses indicating emotional reactions an average of every 21 seconds. Although this excerpt pertains to the woeful fate of Wang Youling, and ends with the warning that failure lurks no matter how successful one is, the mood running through the performance is not saturated with melancholy and mournful emotions. Instead, the comic elements *rou li xue* and *xiao mai* serve to enliven the plot, increasing interaction with the audience. In this example of *rou li xue*, the storyteller mimics a foreigner speaking Chinese, inserting this funny element to balance the surrounding seriousness. In addition, the *xiao mai* witticism is explicitly used to keep the audience guessing. In general, the storyteller does not reveal in advance what events will

come later, and here he simply hangs out a question. At 36:04 however, he immediately reveals the answer in an attempt to surprise the audience. More often at points like this, a new perspective is introduced or a new event not directly related to the plot of that particular moment is inserted into the story; the answer to this question can be revealed later or even during another day's session. However, in this case, the storyteller's revelation negates the usual technique of leaving loose ends in the plot. The audience's chuckles reveal that it recognises the storyteller playing with its expectations. They are familiar with mysteries being maintained in order to draw them into the next session of storytelling, just as episodes of TV series pause the narrative at a key moment to tantalise the audience's curiosity. Here, the storyteller uncovering plot outcomes confounds the habitués' expectations. As a result, they not only feel sympathy for the character's fortunes in the story, but also learn from it. By focusing on these interactions between the storyteller and the audience, it can be gleaned how the storyteller delivers the narration and also grabs the audience's attention with his body movements.

### **3.2.2 Attracting Attention through Gestures and Postures**

Effective employment of gestures is even more crucial to *pinghua* storytellers than *tanci* storytellers. The former can rely not only on speech but also on bodily movement, and this considerably increases their freedom of movement and enhances the theatrical potential of their gestures. An apt illustration of this is a segment from the classical story *Yue Zhuan* (Yue's Legend), as performed by seventy-two-year-old storyteller Chen Jingsheng in 2011.<sup>57</sup> The following Case 2 (also see Fig. 3-2, CD track 11) and Case 3 (also see Fig. 3-3, CD track 12) will demonstrate Chen's employment of artful gestures and postures to assist the storytelling. In particular, important gestures are captured from video recording, and assembled into Figures 3-2 and Figure 3-3. The transcription of how Chen Jingsheng narrates this part of the story is associated with these illustrations. In order to analyse the usage of gestures and audience members' reaction, letters have been inserted to correlate the transcription to the pictures.

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<sup>57</sup> The Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe recorded this performance and have allowed me to use it as an example. Storyteller Chen Jingsheng also approved of me using the excerpts. The performance was produced to celebrate the troupe's sixtieth anniversary, which took place at the *Guangyu* story house in 2011.

### **Case 2 and Case 3**

Type: Video

Recording Time: 1:30-3:30 pm, 10 December 2012

Recording Location: *Guangyu* story house, Suzhou

Storyteller: Chen Jingsheng

Repertoire: *Yue Zhuan* (Yue's Legend)

The storyteller describes in great detail the majestic appearance of a famous warrior, General Yue Fei, at the same time impersonating the general's character and elaborately mimicking his movements. His hands and body are almost never at rest; he gesticulates very energetically during much of this performance and highlights numerous details in the general's attire and behaviour.

#### **Transcription of the performance**

*The main character of this story is Yue Fei, wearing: a silver helmet encrusted with jewels; three prongs attached on the top [a]; tightly tied beneath his chin [b]; chain-mail with nine locks and eighteen knots [c]; his chest-protecting mirror is shining and splendid [d]; a lion-headed belt and rib-protector; a metal skirt [e] and golden waist-band [f]; and covering armour with smock and gown [g]. At his back four flags are waving in the wind. He steadily steps down the hall, and settles down in the middle [h].*

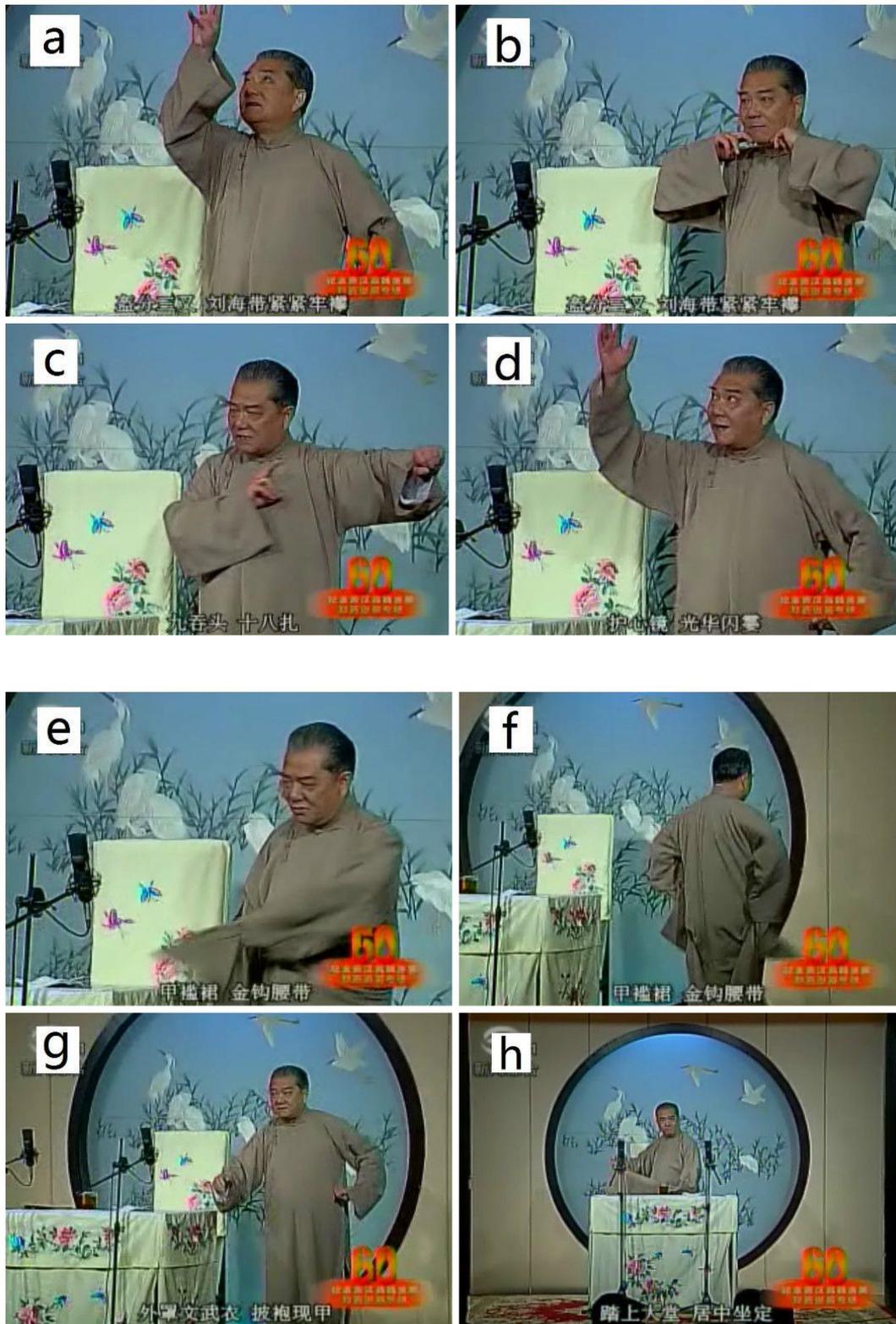


Figure 3-2 Chen Jinsheng's performance of Yue Zhan, filmed by the Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe.

From the storyteller's motions and gestures, the audience can more easily imagine the warrior's appearance and manners: first he lifts his arms to indicate the size of the helmet and then uses numeral gesticulation to indicate the number of prongs on the helmet [a]; his energetic motion during 'tightly tying' [b], 'splendidly flashing' [c], 'steadily stepping' and 'settling down' [h] portrays the young general's outwardly sophisticated behaviour and inwardly steady character. At one point he turns his back to the audience [e, f], lifts his robe and strikes a pose [f], and it is almost as if the real general Yue Fei here materialises on stage. He lifts up his arm and briefly shakes his body to indicate the virtual flags behind him 'flying in the wind'. When the general is described as stepping down the hall and taking a seat in the middle, this action is carried out by the storyteller (he moves over to the table and sits down behind it) [h]. His bodily movements during this entire sequence closely mimic the typical movements of a warrior character in Chinese opera. His final pose is a 'freeze' of the kind that occurs frequently in Chinese opera at salient moments. When the audience members show their approval via applause and cheers he relaxes his body (briefly becoming himself, Chen Jingshen, summarily acknowledging the listeners' approval) and then resumes a more active pose to continue his narration.

In this entire performance, Chen almost effortlessly shifts to and fro between his various roles, as the narrator, as a performer impersonating a general, and as Chen Jingshen, the artist. He continuously shifts his roles to portray different characters in turn, freely inserting comments (as narrators or as spectators) about the characters, and involving – directly reflecting on – their own position as storytellers. How this is realised in *ping-tan* can be seen in the continuation of Chen Jingshen's performance in Case 3. He starts describing a military officer, Gao Chong, who receives an order and mounts his horse. Chen portrays this action by stepping onto a chair, even putting one foot on the storyteller's table, which clearly surprises his audience: it's an action rather beyond the normal scope of a *ping-tan* performer's behaviour. Chen cleverly jumps on this opportunity and confronts his audience's amazement by briefly commenting on himself, Chen Jingshen, as a storyteller and praising – with a keen sense of humour and self-mockery – his skills as a narrator before resuming his tale. The highlights of the illustration are presented in Figure 3-3.

### **Transcription of the performance**

One officer brings a signal flag. The military officer Gao Chong steps on the ‘white dragon’ horse, holding an iron pike in his hand [a]. You might well ask why Chen Jingsheng is stepping onto a chair today? To judge someone’s role play (jiao se 角色) properly, you should observe their feet (jiao 脚) [b]. Taking advantage of my ability to perform, I demonstrate: Chen Jingsheng’s artistic life is not over yet [c]! And I’m also testing if my body still works. So that’s one reason for doing it. The other is: Chen Jingsheng is very excited today! As I already told you, I learnt from Mr. Cao Hanchang all that I have learnt, and made no personal alterations and added no improvisations of my own, but adhered to the correct inheritance of tradition. I am doing my best to demonstrate to you, audience members, you habitués, as you listen and watch, what pinghua [storytelling] really should be like [d]! Thank you all!

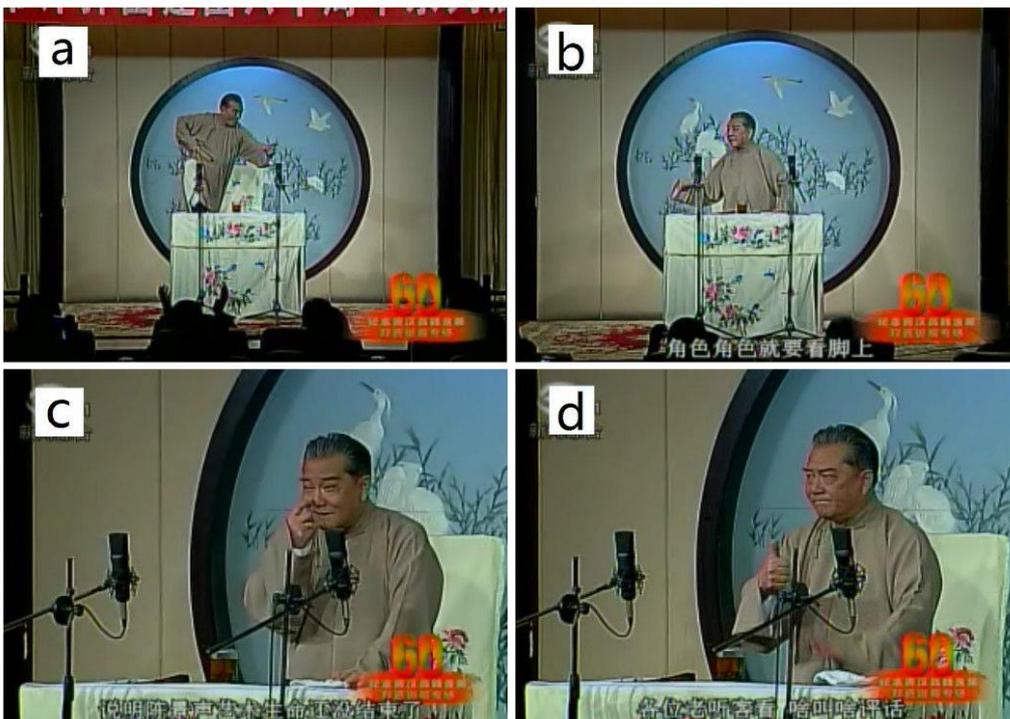


Figure 3-3 Chen Jingsheng’s performance of *Yue Zhuan*, filmed by the Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe.

In this excerpt, Chen clearly starts out acting the part of the military officer Gao Chong. The fan in his right hand – in combination with left hand gesticulations – is used as a representation of a pike. What follows is the rare act of stepping onto the chair to depict Gao mounting a horse [a], an action which triggers some anxiety and surprise on the part of the audience. When Chen strikes his pose he earns his spectators' respect and praise, but he turns this moment into gold by changing perspective, beginning to speak as the artist Chen Jingsheng. He explains his over-the-top stage behaviour by making a wise joke based on a homonym about role-playing skill: "To judge someone's role play, you should look at their feet". Here he points his right foot to the audiences [b]. Then he basically mocks himself by saying that this performance is evidence of his continued abilities as a professional storyteller [c] – his turn of phrase suggesting that he is getting old and that not everyone may have continued faith in his talents. Yet at the same time he hints at still having enough energy to tell a story convincingly and creatively, with full employment of his bodily skills. But then there is a further abrupt shift, with Chen moving from triumph to sudden introspection: he exposes his 'inner voice' – his true feelings – when he says that his excitement derives not only from the demonstration of his abilities at an advanced age, but also from being given an opportunity to perform, in pure and authentic ways, what he has learnt from his teacher, master Cao Hanchang. With the accompanying 'thumbs up' gesture [d] he pays homage to his teacher and to the important idea of continuity in tradition and raises the performance to its peak before seamlessly resuming his narrative. He knows the process will bring approval and may make his audience think even more highly of him.

The entire sequence is a fine example of intricate shifts of perspective and also of how simple props such as a fan or a chair are used to enhance dramatic impact. The sequence is also a splendid demonstration of effective timing and how a skilful narrator may manage to anticipate the audience's response, always staying one step ahead of his spectators.

### **3.3 Gestural Employment in Story Singing**

The storytellers within the musical performance context are best known outside *ping-tan* live performance for their sung narrative accompanied by plucked instruments. In this respect, the sung narrative singing in *ping-tan* is more malleable. In addition, in the sung narrative section, the music – both singing and instrumental playing – and the narrative –

the sung-lyrics – cannot be separated entirely. For this reason, I further turn my attention towards the interactions within a musical performance rather than analysing the extracted verbal syntax alone.

### **3.3.1 Associating Ballad Singing with Gestures**

The movements in ballad singing are limited to singing and plucking a string instrument, which are sound-producing gestures. The communicative gestures in spoken narrative, on the other hand, are numerous in their functions. Among theoretical studies of musical gestures, some scholars approach and define the gestures of musical performance from a functional perspective. François Delalande (1988) describes musical gestures as ‘the intersection of observable actions and mental images’. He offers a spectrum ranging from the purely functional to the purely symbolic, and categorizes them as effective gestures, accompanying gestures or figurative gestures (Leman and Godøy, 2010: 18). In music-making contexts, effective gestures are sound-producing in nature, and these gestures consist of prefix, excitation and succeeding suffix (ibid., 22). This kind of sound-producing gesture is referred to as instrumental gesture in Cadoz’s research in 1988 (ibid., 23). Undoubtedly, the excitatory ‘plucking’ of an instrument’s strings is an example in which ‘real physical objects that we play with our bodies’ are involved in sound-producing gesture (Leman and Godøy, 2009: 207). However, as a musical performance gesture, this plucking does not merely signify the process by which the storyteller plays music to the audience. According to my observations, this gesture has functions to both storyteller and audience beyond merely establishing an interaction with the instrument, and this will be illustrated in Case 4 (also see Fig. 3-4, CD track 13) below. The method of transcription and analysis follows the example of Cases 2 and 3.

#### Case 4

Type: Video<sup>58</sup>

Recording Time: Around 2004 according to Sheng Xiaoyun

Recording Location: *Tianchan Yifu wutai* ('*Tianchan Yifu* stage/theatre'), Shanghai

Storyteller: Sheng Xiaoyun and Yuan Xiaoliang

Repertoire: *Yingying Shao Yexiang* ('*Yingying Burns Incense at Night*')

Excerpt duration: From 0:15 to 0:35

Ballad lyrics: 玉宇[a]无尘[b]月一轮[c]

*yu yu wu chen yue yi lun* ('jade universe without dust - moon shining')

This renowned *tanci* opening ballad describes the plot in which lady Yingying, who is accompanied by her servant Hongniang, says three prayers to the god of the moon and to the god of flowers in the garden at night. The ballad starts with the following lines to introduce the general information of the plot and the characters: 玉宇无尘月一轮，俏红娘相请女东名 ('A moon shining in the beautiful and dust free universe / The pretty servant Hongniang comes to invite the lady [to go downstairs]'). The following analysis will only focus on the first seven syllables, *yu yu wu chen yue yi lun*, which literally means 'jade universe without dust - moon shining'.



Figure 3-4 玉宇[a]无尘[b]月一轮[c].

Before Sheng Xiaoyun begins to sing, she takes a two second-long deep inhalation. Then she gently exhales the first four syllables [a] of the first line. This part lasts for eleven seconds. It is sung in a mellow vocal register, but it starts at the high-pitched e<sup>2</sup> (the highest pitch in the

<sup>58</sup> The full video can be seen from [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJECi\\_NNcxM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJECi_NNcxM). The section analysed begins with the singing at 0:15 and ends at 00:35. Sheng Xiaoyun cannot recall the accurate year of this performance.

entire piece being  $f\#^2$ ) and then gently meanders downward (see transcription 3-1). This is a broad-sweeping vocal gesture which gets free reign in this performance: both plucked instruments stop playing and – so to speak – hold their breath for several seconds while the ‘the beautiful and dust free universe’ is evoked in this expansive vocal line. It earns her immediate cheers and applause from the audience. As a response to this, while resuming her *pipa* playing, she slightly bows to the audience to express her thanks [b]. When singing the final three syllables of the line (‘moon shining’), the plucking accompaniment is once again interrupted. It enables the singer to rest her left hand on the *pipa* fingerboard, to slightly tilt her body to the left side, and make a brief pointing gesture with her right hand whilst simultaneously moving her gaze outward to indicate the moon hanging in the sky [c]. The importance of this moment is enhanced by the accompanying music once again ‘holding its breath’.

**Transcription 3-1 The first line of ‘Yingying Burns Incense at Night’ performed by Sheng Xiaoyun**

玉宇 无 尘 月 一 轮

*molto rubato* *a tempo*

Sheng takes a two second-long deep inhalation before singing      Sheng gently exhales      Audiences cheer and applause, and Sheng bows to the audience to express her thanks      Sheng makes a brief pointing gesture with her right hand whilst simultaneously moving her gaze outward to indicate the moon hanging in the sky

This first phrase takes twenty seconds to perform, but the density of events is high: singing, *pipa* accompaniment and gesture all come together to elucidate and reinforce the meaning of the lyrics; there is also room for a spontaneous reaction from the audience and the singer's response in turn, and towards the end the music subtly enhances the dramatic effect of the gesture and the narration. Likewise, a *ping-tan* aficionado Wang Gongqi<sup>59</sup> told me his experience of witnessing the storyteller Cheng Yanqiu's performance of the *Xue diao* opening ballad *Zijuan Ye Tan* (‘Zijuan's Sigh at Night’) at the *Guangyu* story house many years ago. The audience whispered to each other ‘This girl sings quite well.’ Wang further explained his view that the key of this opening ballad is to ‘sigh’. It is difficult to hold such

<sup>59</sup> Personal communication, 24 January 2012.

exquisite emotional expression in singing, while also presenting it through facial expressions and other hand gestures. One enthusiast even sent her a pennant to praise her excellent performance, evidence that her artistic elaborations are appreciated.

### 3.3.2 Tuning Motions Before and During Ballad Singing

Tuning the instrument before and during *ping-tan* performance on the stage is very often seen both in daily story house performance, and in theatrical-style gala performances. Storytellers pretend to accidentally pluck a string while narrating the story as normal before starting to sing, or even during the singing. This process may be concealed by plucking very lightly, but it cannot be hidden entirely: the storyteller turns tuning keys, a gesture that looks like the player is simply putting a hand on the headstock of the instrument. However, this tuning action may be confused for a petty or excessive action by the audience. Nonetheless, if the instrument is not well-tuned, audience members immediately whisper: “his/her *sanxian/pipa* is not in tune”.

How does the storyteller cope when a string of the *sanxian* banjo or the *pipa* lute snaps? This can happen at any moment during a performance. One instance emerged when I filmed the storyteller Hui Zhongqiu and his assistant Dai Xiaoli giving a performance at the *Wuyuan Shenchu* story house.<sup>60</sup> Their duo performance immediately followed the old lady’s fortnight of sessions. To begin that day’s performance, they sang the opening ballad *Baoyu Yetan* (‘Baoyu’s Night Visit’). At first, everything went smoothly and the audience quickly became immersed in the music. Some of them closed their eyes while enjoying the opening ballad. Suddenly, a string on Hui’s *sanxian* snapped. These spectators opened their eyes and began to whisper to each other: “Hui Zhongqiu’s *sanxian* has snapped!” However, as an experienced storyteller, Hui accomplished all of the sung narrative sections in the first one-hour performance by using the remaining two strings. Although the pitches sometimes were not perfectly positioned, the audience displayed tolerance, as well as their admiration for Hui’s performance.

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<sup>60</sup> Fieldwork, 5 February 2012.

### 3.4 Audiences' Gestural Reactions

My grandfather is not a loyal follower of *ping-tan*, but when I asked him to recall his personal experiences, he was still able to tell me many stories of attending live performances in the story house as a school boy in the 1940s<sup>61</sup>:

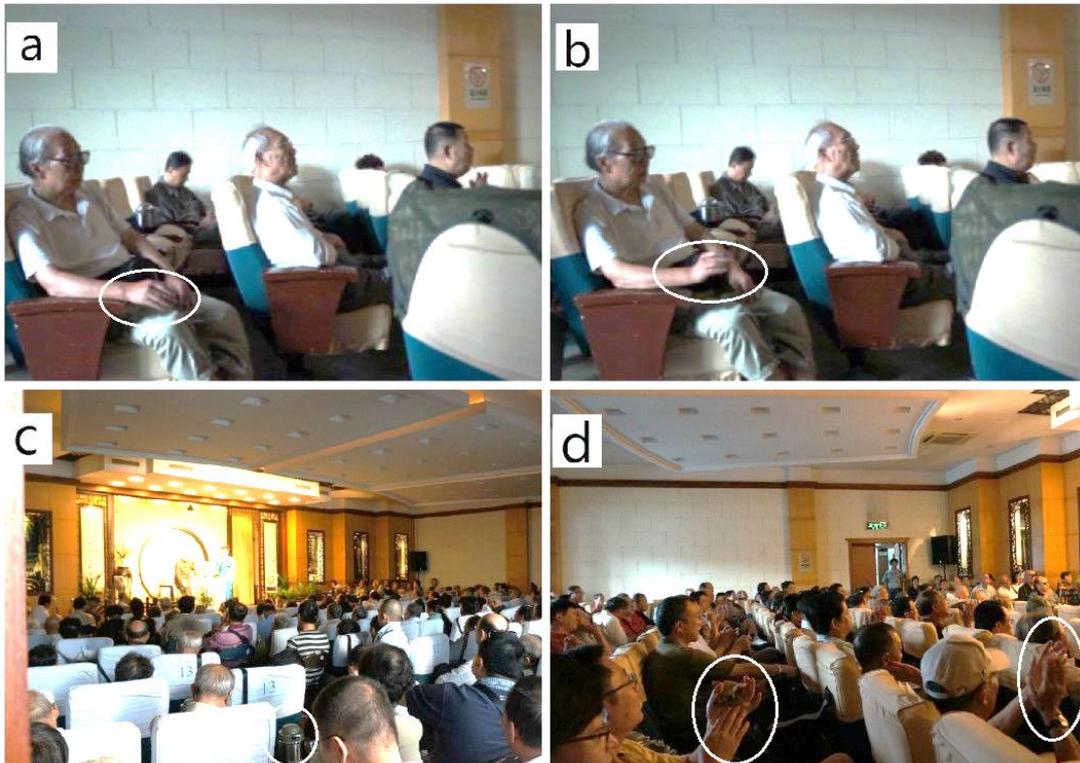
When I returned home from school, I always glided into the story house near my home. Children could watch the *ping-tan* for free if you stood in the corner next to the back wall. This is called '*ting bi jiao shu*' ('listening to a back-corner story'). It's very funny! If I couldn't find the chance to enter the story house, I watched the performance through the window of our kitchen, which was just opposite one side of the stage. I stood on a chair so that I could see the storyteller's figure.

I can still remember Yan Xueting's performance of *San Xiao* ('Three Smiles'). One section was '*Zhu Zhishan Shuo Dahua*' 'Zhu Zhishan's Boast'. The audience were crowded into the story house. There were even a lot of people standing in the yard.

My grandfather did not explain much about Yan Xueting's performance, nor the audience's reaction. Nonetheless, this recollection shows that the scenes from live *ping-tan* performances in the story house can be fascinating. It also raises the question of audience behaviour and gestural feedback during performances. To illustrate precisely, Case 5 (Fig. 3-5) shows some of the ways in which audience members typically register their involvement through gesture during story singing episodes. I took these pictures during Sima Wei and Cheng Yanqiu's performance at the *Guangyu* story house on 3 October 2012.

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<sup>61</sup> Personal communication, 30 September 2012.



**Figure 3-5 Audience behaviour and gestural feedback during performances.**

It is common for audience members to drink tea while watching live performances, placing a flask by their side on the small table typically located between chairs (c). They can sip the tea whenever they want during the performance. Although the story house provides a cup of tea and a flask at the door, some attendees prefer to bring their own. In the summer, people also bring fans to help them cool down.

In photos (a) and (b) in Case 5, it can be observed that an old man is using his right hand to mark out the music's beats, employing gesture to demarcate aspects of musical rhythmic structure – a commonly-observed form of gestural contribution identified by Clayton (2007: 75). Meanwhile, in contrast, the performers on the stage are never allowed to mark beats during ballad singing. Some attendees also subtly tap out beats using their fingers. These possibly unwitting gestures not only indicate a level of engagement with the music; they also serve as an active means of promoting further deeper involvement. When the ballad singing finishes, the audience members may raise their arms to register their approval in a more conspicuous manner, both visibly and audibly, through applause (d).

### 3.5 The Unique Experience of Enjoying *Ping-tan* in the Story House: Exploring the 'Feedback Loop'

Advances in broadcasting technology and changes in modern life have resulted in a considerable decrease in live *ping-tan* performance at the story house – certainly far fewer than were taking place in Suzhou during the genre's heyday periods in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the 1980s, when there were also far more story houses in operation. For a large number of listeners, the mass media have taken over the role of forging tight connections between people within this classical tradition. At the same time, however, Suzhou *ping-tan* and the lifestyle it typically represents – in which *ping-tan* followers regularly go to the story house, watch performances and socialise with others in the audience – are consistently recognised as a traditional defining characteristic of local culture. This is partly due to the fact that, within the traditional live performance context, a 'feedback loop' is built up between performers and audience members, which cannot be directly replicated in the more recently established contexts that involve mediation by radio or television.

As mentioned in the Introduction, in order to gain the audience members' full attention and to warm them up before embarking on the ensuing narrative episode, storytellers always sing an opening ballad. In very rare cases, the audience's vigorous applause successfully encourages the performer to sing a second opening ballad. During my fieldwork, I filmed the popular duo Xu Huixin and Zhou Hong telling the story *Qiu Haitang* (named after a character in the story) at the *Meizhu* story house on 9 September 2013. After Zhou Hong had finished singing her first opening ballad, the audience exploded into rapturous applause. Xu and Zhou then whispered to each other and agreed to perform one more ballad to reward the audience.

Holding the audience's constant attention throughout live performances is always a challenge, and yet it is essential to achieve success in the business. In live performance, unexpected accidents or interruptions can sometimes benefit the atmosphere, if the storyteller is able to handle the emergency effectively, swiftly and creatively. During my

interview with the husband-and-wife couple Ma Zhiwei and Zhang Jianzheng<sup>62</sup>, they told me that once, when Ma was describing a certain character's sudden shock, the audience was concentrating on his narrative so intently that someone broke his glass of tea, producing a vivid sound that frightened everyone else. Ma took advantage of the incident, explicitly alluding to the breakage during his narrative commentary: "... just like this old gentleman who carelessly broke his glass". This additional utterance not only evoked grins and chuckles but also alleviated the old man's embarrassment.

There is evidently a degree of expectation, held by all present, that audience members will become visibly and audibly involved in the unfolding of the performance, rather than remaining wholly passive recipients. This echoes Clayton's observations about the roles played by audience members in classical Indian musical performance (2007: 82-83), where it is similarly apparent that the guise of 'audience member' holds certain performative responsibilities. In the story house, certain audience seating positions come with greater expectations for more pronounced involvement. For example, in a traditional-style story house with square tables seating eight people each, the table just opposite the stage in the middle of the first row is called *zhuangyuan zhuo* (literary 'number one scholar's table'). The term *zhuangyuan* elucidates to those people who, in past centuries, achieved the highest results in civil service exams, and in the *ping-tan* context, *zhuangyuan zhuo* refers to the fact that the individuals sitting at that table (*zhuo*) have particularly extensive knowledge, being true connoisseurs of the art. Traditionally, less experienced audience members would not dare sit at that table. In my interview with the storyteller Zhou Hong<sup>63</sup>, she explained more about the importance of reading and responding to gestures within the performer-audience two-way feedback loop, particularly alluding to the input of the *zhuangyuan zhuo* experts:

Storytellers pay great attention to peoples' reactions, especially the reactions of those sitting around the *zhuangyuan zhuo*, as well as other recognised experienced audience members. Sometimes, just from glimpsing the way they send a subtle glance in your direction, you can immediately sense their

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<sup>62</sup> Personal communication, 30 August 2013.

<sup>63</sup> Personal communication, 1 September 2013.

judgement of your performance. The audience is like a mirror: all your merits and faults are reflected immediately through their physical movements.

The performers' intensive and continuous scrutiny of audience members' non-verbal reactions stimulates and sustains a productive and engaging feedback loop throughout the performance time within the story house context. Accordingly, *ping-tan* storytellers tend to prefer the live experience over audience-less recording studio renditions. In an interview with Hui Zhongqiu<sup>64</sup>, he told me: "the bigger the audience, the better I perform". Describing his experience of recording for the television programme '*Dianshi Shuchang*' ('Television Story House'), which does not involve a live audience, he said:

I am facing three cameras and I feel like I am reciting the story rather than telling it. Because the listeners aren't right there, I can't see their facial expressions, make eye contact, and feel the interaction! Rather, I have to keep my eye on the time limit.

My fieldwork observation revealed a wide range of unwitting gestures employed by story house audience members: foot tapping, finger tapping, tut-tutting, nodding, cheering, laughing, weeping, applause, various facial responses, moving fans in time with the music, and changes of bodily posture indicating excitement, surprise, expectation, puzzlement, and so on. While these actions indicate engagement and display approval, disapproval or other responses with the utmost immediacy to the performers, they also serve to communicate judgments and preferences with surrounding audience members. Nowadays, the exclusivity of the *zhuangyuan zhuo* position has been somewhat eroded; sometimes, those seats are occupied by people who are not recognised as experts but who are willing to pay the extra cost in order to get a premium view of the stage and receive a special covered teacup.

From the audience's perspective, live performances provide quite a different experience from the broadcast performance. I attended a performance at the *Wuyuan Shenchu* story house on 23 January 2012 – the second day of Chinese lunar calendar. The story house was full of listeners, with some even having to use additional chairs. After the performance, I

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<sup>64</sup> Fieldwork, 25 January 2012.

encountered a connoisseur audience member Lu Kai<sup>65</sup>, who is the former head of the Culture and Broadcasting Bureau in Suzhou. He told me why he still preferred to watch *ping-tan* at the story house, rather than experience it through television or radio:

Watching *ping-tan* live in the story house is much more fun. You can share your opinions with others right away. But if you are listening to the radio, you can't see the storyteller's gestures. Sometimes, the storyteller's facial expressions and body movements are brilliant and unforgettable! When you keenly watch the storyteller's performance, you can really connect with him; and, at the same time, when the storyteller can see that the audience is interacting with him, he naturally becomes more involved in his performance and full of enthusiasm.

Some audience members seem to become disconnected from the ambience, judging merely from their behaviour. Almost every participant has a cup of green tea at their side. The story house also prepares large flasks full of hot water for their use. Hence, particularly in the winter, a lot of audience members are seen holding both hands around the glass and squinting at the storyteller's performance. Some slowly move over to fill up the drinking glasses provided by the story house or their own stainless steel vacuum flasks. In sung narrative sections, they might actually close their eyes, and look as if they were asleep. Indeed, eating snacks during live performance is always allowed. Audience members crack seeds, chew peanuts and eat sweets or candied fruit. This relaxed behaviour may be surprising to the observer, but it can also reflect how well the storyteller is performing. If the performance is really extraordinary and brilliant, the audience might stop their other activities and focus on the stage. Otherwise, they enjoy their afternoon tea first and the *ping-tan* second. Some notable habits I encountered in the story house should be understood: audience members with their eyes closed and who are even nodding their heads are not necessarily falling asleep. This is the typical behaviour indicating someone used to becoming involved in the performance by this means. Once I gently nudged a man sitting beside me to remind him not to go to sleep in case he got cold. He turned to me and said he was just listening carefully, and asked me not to disturb him again. Presumably, experienced

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<sup>65</sup> Personal communication, 23 January 2012.

storytellers are able to identify whether individuals are taking a nap or listening carefully to the music at any given moment. Functionally, as part of the 'feedback loop', the motion of closing one's eyes indicates that either an audience member is getting bored or alternatively that they are immersed in the music. It is a sign for the on-stage storyteller to evaluate how the performance is going at that moment, and to adjust the performance accordingly.

### **3.6 Summary: The 'Feedback Loop' Effect in Live *Ping-tan* performance**

This chapter has explored the interconnectedness between performer and audience in the form of the 'feedback loop' of communication, in which nonverbal gestures are employed to realise a live *ping-tan* performance. Highlights from the use of gesture by storytellers have been illustrated, particularly as these gestures are associated with delivering the verbal text, and are used to create communication with the audience, as well as drawing and keeping its attention. In response, the audience also employs body movements to express appreciation or disapproval of aspects of the performance, and this also is a demonstration of the audiences' lively involvement.

Evidently, live *ping-tan* performance features reciprocal communication between the storyteller and the audience. As Berger and del Negro (2002: 76-78) suggest, within different live performances the organisation of awareness between audience and performance displays dynamic feedback loops, and this indicates various intercommunication aspects. For the *ping-tan* 'feedback loop', the essence of interconnectedness is that the connection between the performer and audience never pauses. Storytellers initiate the loop from the moment they step onto the stage, and their duty is to involve as many audience members as possible in this loop. Members of the audience consciously or unconsciously critique the stimuli created by the performer and, most importantly, respond to them with approving or disapproving acts, such as applauding or being distracted by others respectively. In this sense, communication reflects back to the performer. Regarding this aspect, the storytellers' reported soulless studio recording experiences are evidence of performances in which the 'feedback loop' is missing – which is further discussed in Chapter 7. In other words, it is the instant 'feedback loop' that generates and enlivens a *ping-tan* performance with its characteristic vitality.

Live *ping-tan* performance is the form that most encourages the interconnectedness between the storyteller and the audience. Participants generate manners of behaving according to the roles that they play. The next chapter moves on to explore how the storyteller and audience members carry out their various roles in a live performance, in such a way that supports this 'feedback loop'.

## Chapter 4. Participants' Roles Both in and out of Performance

'Ruler rules, minister ministers, father fathers, and son sons.'

Confucius (cited by Bevir, 2010: 272)

The previous chapter discussed how the 'feedback loop' connects the storyteller and audience members. It demonstrated that in a live *ping-tan* performance, the intercommunication dynamics between the storyteller and audience members rely upon both sides. Storytellers have a range of skillful means to appeal to their audience through the performance, and they also interpret the implications of bodily gestures among spectators to help them understand instantaneously how their performance is being received. In this situation, the storyteller and audience each fulfil a duty of communicating with the other. This role-playing relationship is described by Confucius in his well-known dictum (above). This chapter will demonstrate that in *ping-tan* performances, it is apt to paraphrase Confucius here: the performer performs and the audience 'audiences'. In this chapter, I will reveal how storytellers and audience members fulfill their roles and respond to a range of obligations that are specific to the *ping-tan* context. Not only are the performer and audience playing roles throughout the performance time, but these also carry over into social roles outside of the performance environment. Here, it is important to bear in mind Goffman's (1959) observation that everyday activity conducted by individuals can be referred to as 'performance', just as is that which takes place on a stage. In daily life, *ping-tan* storytellers generally keep the title *shuoshu xiansheng* (literally 'Mr. Storytelling') that is given to them in the story house. It carries various meanings in different contexts, and this is one of the focal points to be explored in this chapter. Specifically, I will analyse the various roles that are implied in the jargon term for storytellers, *shuoshu xiansheng*, illustrating its nuanced meanings in cultural context.

In particular, *xiansheng* denotes the occupation of 'teacher'; it has also been used historically to address those who are educated and have a certain level of literacy. This is similar to the usage of *sensei* (せんせい) in Japanese,<sup>66</sup> and, in fact, the characters (先生) for this word are the same in both languages. In this sense, storytellers serve as teachers to deliver knowledge and social values to the audience through their stories and performances. Although *xiansheng* is a term for males, the word can be feminised to *nü xiansheng* ('female storyteller'), and this indicates that respect is extended to all practitioners engaged in the

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<sup>66</sup> In Japan, the title *sensei* is used to refer to teachers, doctors and civil servants.

business. Along with the storytellers, however, audience members also serve a crucial role in *ping-tan* performance. In this chapter, I will also explore the obligations involved in the audience roles. Members of audiences for many kinds of musical performance are generally assumed to passively receive verbal, visual, or musical communication. However, in the *ping-tan* context, they are more likely to occupy a role that Albert Lord calls the ‘critical audience’ (2000: 15). These are recipients who also impact upon the performer and the progress of the performance. Thus, I aim to show that intercommunication is central to a *ping-tan* performance and, in this chapter, I specifically emphasise that established patterns and expectations shape these processes.

During on-stage performance, the storyteller shifts roles in accordance with narration and singing conventions. Tsao (1976: 96-97) indicates that storytellers must become adept at switching between, on one hand, casting the role of a character within the plot, and on the other, their own persona as commentator. This is mainly achieved by utilising contrasting vocal articulations. Wan (2004) provides a comparative textual analysis of the stories *Lü Mudan* (‘Green Peony’) and *Tianbao Tu* (‘Picture of Sky Treasures’) in two different forms, novel and ballad. He identifies how the versions of these texts that are meant to be performed show particular types of linguistic transformation in comparison with the original versions. He extends Hodes’ (1990: 167) argument that, rather than simply being narrated, the greater part of the plot is played out in performance dialogue in both verse and prose. Although these papers do not explicitly explore all the vocal and gestural means by which performers undertake role shifting during narration, they do suggest that linguistic transformations are crucial in role shifting. Bender also suggests that these processes can be clearly observed in a duo *ping-tan* performance. They are emphasised at the points where the roles of character and narrator are exchanged between the two storytellers, as well as in ballad passages (1998: 334).

Outside of the performance time, the storyteller’s role of teacher or trainer exists as part of a teaching lineage. The teaching and learning of *ping-tan* has continuously followed a traditional method, called *baishi* (‘revering a master’). Specialist training within a college context has also developed since the 1950s (Bender, 2003: 33-36; Liu, 2009: 71-78; Tsao, 1988; Zhou, 1988: 177-185; Zhou, 2011). Both of these forms of pedagogy are based on inheritance through a lineage. The lineage tradition is reflected in shared repertoire and stylistic features among its members, as well as the ways in which *ping-tan* trainers interact with one another on a personal level, as reflected for example through how they address one other. Illustrations of how skills and knowledge are transmitted through lineages can be

found in the Journal *Ping-tan Yishu* ('The Art of *Ping-tan*').<sup>67</sup> Monographs on *ping-tan* also record masters talking about their own career experiences, such as *An Oral History of Storytelling* (2006), compiled by Jiang-Zhe-Hu Ping-tan Gongzuo Lingdao Xiaozu ('Leading Group of *Ping-tan* in Jiangsu-Zhejiang-Shanghai' areas). Zhang Yanli's PhD dissertation (2012) examines how the formation of *ping-tan* performance schools involves artists, audiences, and successors operating under the influence of commerce, politics and performance space. Working in conjunction with the lineage system, official *ping-tan* guilds and troupes group storytellers together, promoting them as professionals.

As I have already emphasised, the audience's role in a live performance is significant. The audience's response is the basic force responsible for the continuity or discontinuity of the performer's behaviour. This reaction can be examined from the perspective of 'cultural behavior' (Thompson, 1946; Hymes, 1996). These individual actions contribute to the general culture of the events. With regards to *ping-tan*, Zhou argues that 'art has a function of entertaining, but not all entertainment is art' (2000: 183). On the one hand, a storyteller should convince the audience by means of accurately expressing the values of the stories; on the other hand, the audience members' ways of thinking and educational backgrounds also influence whether they are able to communicate with the performers (*ibid.*, 184-188). Wu (2011: 169) gives the example of audience members disagreeing with the storyteller's narration and instantly talking back to the storyteller. Although interrupting or otherwise inciting conflict is thought of as bad behaviour for an audience member at a story house, it pushes the storyteller to revise their telling and singing in a positive way (*ibid.*).

It is not just that music happens 'in society', but also that society happens 'in music' (Stokes, 1997: 2). In this case, storyteller and audience respectively perform their own roles, and attend to the obligations that they are each responsible for. It has been demonstrated in Chapter 3 that both sides are involved in generating the 'feedback loop'. How these participants' roles are shaped in live performance, as well as in general society, needs to be further considered from the perspective of role theory. This has been illustrated in Biddle and Thomas's (1966: 4) work:

Individuals in society occupy positions, and their role performance in these positions is determined by social norms, demands, and rules; by the role performance of others in their respective position; by those who observe and

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<sup>67</sup> *Ping-tan Yishu* includes essays, some of which have been written by *ping-tan* masters while others have been dictated by the masters to *ping-tan* connoisseurs. This journal was first published in 1982 and continues to be compiled by Suzhou Ping-tan Yanjiushi ('Suzhou Ping-tan Studies Department').

react to the performance; and by the individual's particular capabilities and personality.

Role theory is described as a science concentrating on 'person and their behaviors' (Biddle, 1979: 4), and it extends to consider how people's behaviour changes in various contexts. It explores how behaviours "characteristic of persons within contexts and with various processes...presumably produce, explain, or are affected by those behaviours" (ibid.). This notion has been explored in Linton's (1936: 113-114) anthropological work highlighting the association between role and status:

A status, as distinct from the individual who may occupy it, is simply a collection of rights and duties... A role represents the dynamic aspect of a status. The individual is socially assigned to a status and occupies it with relation to other statuses. When he puts the rights and duties which constitute the status into effect, he is performing a role. Role and status are quite inseparable, and the distinction between them is of only academic interest. There are no roles without statuses or statuses without roles. Just as in the case of status, the term role is used with a double significance. Every individual has a series of roles deriving from the various patterns in which he participates and at the same time a role, in general, which represents the sum total of these roles and determines what he does for his society and what he can expect from it.

Linton's remarkable interpretation of role and status implies that both are elements of society; an individual's behaviour can be understood as role performance; so that role bonds individual behaviour and social structure together. In addition, regarding the presentation of self in everyday life and intercommunicative behaviour, Goffman's sociological theory (1956 (1990); 1959; 1974) also sheds light on ethnomusicological studies, such as Drewal (1991), Bealle (1993), Polak (2007), and Clayton and Leante (2015).

Drawing upon Biddle (1979: 79), I approach observation as the most effective means to examine the distinguishing behaviour of persons when they tackle real-world problems and contexts. Derived from fieldwork data, as well as storytellers' oral histories, this chapter addresses the storyteller's stage roles of narrating and commentating, as well as the social role of teacher in the context of *ping-tan* apprenticeship. This chapter will also illustrate how audience members become sophisticated and active participants in *ping-tan*. The audience undoubtedly performs an influential role in determining the prevailing ambience of *ping-tan*

through their live reception. As Holbek (1996)<sup>68</sup> states, if narrative meaning is to be understood, the traditional audience has to be seen as working in conjunction with the narrator. To contribute to nuanced meaning in performance, audience members must immerse themselves in watching live performance for many years, and eventually become recognised as '*ping-tan* followers' with strong bonds with the storytellers and the art. Thus, enlightened by Goffman's social theory about social life as drama, as well as Biddle's studies on role theory (1966; 1979), I will address the relationships between *ping-tan* participants both on the stage and off.

#### 4.1 Storyteller's Role as Character and Narrator during Performance

Traditionally, storytellers are called *shuoshu xiansheng* with no explicit justification. In the *Brief Ping-tan Dictionary*, *shuoshu xiansheng* is defined as follows (Wu, 2011: 10):

*Shuoshu xiansheng* has been sanctioned by usage to indicate *ping-tan* performers. ...The performers are generally knowledgeable, wearing a long gown, and therefore addressed as *xiansheng*. The appellation can be called for short as *shuoshu de/ shuoshu ren* (the person who tells stories) or *changshu ren* (the person who sings stories).

This definition conjures up a vague impression of the *ping-tan* storyteller's appearance and attributes, as commonly recognised within the culture: they are graceful and cultured, earning their livings by telling or singing stories. Comparison with the opera actor highlights some key aspects of the *ping-tan* storyteller's nature. The former is understood as *yiren yijue*; in other words, one performer is dedicated to one role from the beginning to the end of a performance. The latter entails *yiren duojue*, with one performer manipulating several roles to realise the storyline. Thus, the storyteller needs to swap roles under certain circumstances.

##### 4.1.1 The Storyteller's Role of Character Portrayal

As Zhou (1988: 37) suggests, in opera performance, the performer should ideally remain immersed in a character throughout the performance. However, in *ping-tan* performance, the storyteller should constantly swap between roles, holding each for only a limited period. Zhou Liang differentiates *ping-tan* performance from general drama and opera performances (1988: 27):

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<sup>68</sup> First published in 1987.

The purpose of *ping-tan* is to *tell* [sic] a story, which is different from *performing* a story in *xiqu*. In operatic and dramatic playing, the performer acts as the character in the story to the audience. The scriptwriter delivers his feelings and opinions through the *role's* [sic] speech and behaviour; while the *ping-tan* storyteller takes to the stage, telling the story through his own storyteller's identity. *Telling* and *performing* [sic] is the essential distinction between *quyi* (such as *ping-tan*) and *xiqu* (including *xiqu*, drama and opera).

The speech in storytelling and the words sung in ballads can be either in verse or prose, and they use various types of writing. Verse uses certain prosodic metres, and prose is less restricted. The requirements for verse style, especially in *tanci* ballad composition have been discussed in Chapter 2. Verse style is apparently more suited to expressing emotion, while prose text is more commonly utilised for narration. However, to transcribe the performance text into written script might not be straightforward or particularly clear to read. The narrative shifts between different types of writing, and between first-person and their-person's views. These shifts can only be clearly identified by experiencing a full performance. The storyteller's shifts are based upon switching between different types of writing, but they use means beyond the text to make it clear to the audience that they have, for example, temporarily taken on the role of being a character in the plot, or that they are currently occupying a third person's perspective. Thus, the text is only really brought to life and made comprehensible by the storyteller's efforts to emphasise the playing of different roles at different times. Historically, the *daiyan ti* (first-person narrative) way of delivering a text was popular at the beginning of the Qing dynasty, and this kind of presentation in ballad singing thus brings to the narrative the characteristics of a chantefable (Sheng, 2008: 51). Following Hsia Tsi-an's research (Hsia, 1980),<sup>69</sup> Bender (1984: 121-122) explains that some *tanci* scripts featuring rhyming lyrics in variations of 'seven-word extended verse' (*qiyan gelü*) are only intended to be read and not to be performed on stage. These passages are written in the *wen-ci* ('literary verse') form developed as *tanci xiaoshuo* ('novel in *tanci* form') in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Bender, 2003: 151). For instance, *Zai Sheng Yuan* ('Love Reincarnate') was written in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century by a female author Chen Duansheng. It has been described as a "gigantic work of a million words" (Hsia, 1986: 121) contained within sixteen volumes (Sheng, 2008: 233). Most of its text features this seven-syllable literary form. However, even such a substantial work as this might still be categorised as relatively modest in comparison with some others. *Bi Sheng Hua* ('Flowering on the Pen') was written by Qiu Xinru over the course

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<sup>69</sup> Hsia's article was originally written in 1957.

of thirty years, and *Feng Shuang Fei* ('Flying Phoenixes') took Cheng Huiying over twenty years to write (ibid., 240). I mention these enormous works to emphasise the distinction between, on one hand, literary texts, and on the other, script that are meant for performance and indeed require performance in order to achieve their intended effects. The texts used in *ping-tan* clearly fall into the latter category.

Moreover in *ping-tan*, during ballad singing, storytellers quite often sing out *biao* ('narrative') using a first-person point of view so as to express a character's inner voice. By this means, the storyteller unfolds the story and reveals the hidden thoughts that lie behind certain character role. This creates the effect that the story characters are "sit[ting] in the audience and comment[ing] on the story" (Bender: 1984, 122). Again, in the examples of the novel and ballad versions of *Lü Mudan* and *Tianbao Tu* mentioned by Wan (2004: 367-369), it seems that success is achieved in the latter as a result of the variety contained within the ballad singing. Wan deems that the *Tianbao Tu* ballad being played out in both verse and prose dialogue makes the performance more vivid, and the language more comprehensible to the audience than that of typical literary usage. A first-person narrative perspective is employed, which is a more straightforward means of expressing character than third-person narrative. This transition also influences the storyteller's role in performance. In a third-person narrative, because the storyteller enjoys an omniscient perspective, focus falls entirely on content. When first-person narrative is used, a restrained perspective allows the storyteller to reveal the plot by conveying the deep internal voice of character. Again, it is the combination of text and role that makes these works suitable material in the story house.

To illustrate the complexity of shifts between first- and third-person role-playing in *ping-tan* performance, I present an excerpt derived from the story *Baishe Zhuan* ('The Tale of the White Snake'). This example is directly translated from a version written by the *ping-tan* story composer Chen Lingxi (Zhou, 2007: 116). In the original written story, the material is presented as through-composed, with no specification of role. In order to explicitly illustrate each shift of role between first- and third-person forms, I indicate the role being occupied and the type of delivery employed. In a real performance, however, this role-shifting is evident in audible changes in vocal delivery.

This section of plot, 'Chi Huntun' ('Eating *Won Ton*'), depicts the stinginess of the character Wang Yongchang. The storyteller shifts between the first-person roles of Wang Yongchang, and Xu Xian (his uncle), either in monologue or dialogue. There is also a third-person role containing plot narrative.

**Narrator:** Wang Yongchang is extremely stingy. As a businessman, he not only has to avoid being taken advantage of by others, but also attempts to gain extra advantage in whichever transactions he is involved. His mind is not even at ease in such mundane tasks as ordering won ton. On the present occasion, Wang orders fifty *won ton*, but is wary that the food store might try to get away with providing fewer.

**Wang (monologue):** Now, I must count the *won ton* carefully.

**Wang (dialogue):** “My nephew, you eat first.”

**Xu (dialogue):** “Uncle, after you.”

**Wang (dialogue):** “Nephew, you are the guest, you please.”

**Xu (dialogue):** “Uncle, you are my elder, you should be the first one to eat.”

**Narrator:** Faced with his nephew’s protestations, Wang Yongchang realises –

**Wang (monologue):** I cannot reveal my true intention, so I cannot start to eat before you. I will count the number.

**Wang (dialogue):** “Dear nephew, it is just a simple dish of light refreshments. Come on, it will go cold.”

**Narrator:** Xu Xian is thinking –

**Xu (monologue):** Well, I am not going to offer an excuse, I’ll just accept the offer.

**Narrator:** Then Xu Xian takes three *won ton*. But he thinks –

**Xu (monologue):** If we just eat without chatting a bit, it will be embarrassing.

**Xu (dialogue):** “Uncle, are you staying at home?”

**Narrator:** Meanwhile, Wang Yongchang is concerned –

**Wang (monologue):** If I count the *won ton* one by one, and there are so many pieces, I am likely to make mistakes. Xu Xian has taken three pieces, so I will help myself to two pieces. Keeping track of the multiples of five will make it easier to count.

**Narrator:** Then, he takes two pieces.

**Wang (dialogue):** “Yes, staying at home makes it more convenient to look after the family. Ah, please help yourself.”

**Wang (monologue):** “One-five”,

**Narrator:** Wang Yongchang is counting while he is eating. Xu Xian then takes another four.

**Xu (dialogue):** “Uncle, it is troublesome for you to take me to visit aunt.”

**Narrator:** Wang Yongchang sees Xu Xian take four.

**Wang (monologue):** I can only have one piece.

**Wang (dialogue):** “Nephew, don’t say that. I am old, and sometimes my mind is not so clear. It doesn’t matter. Help yourself!”

**Wang (monologue):** “One-ten.”

**Narrator:** Xu Xian did not eat anything, so he is hungry. The taste of *won ton* is really good, so he takes five more, and they are piled up like a tree.

**Xu (dialogue):** “Uncle, what is aunt’s venerable age?”

**Narrator:** Wang Yongchang looks –

**Wang (monologue):** Five, ah, formidable, but I cannot have five as well. Five for you, five for me, and this pot of *won ton* will be eaten up very soon, what should I do? Let me take a sip of soup.

**Narrator:** Wang Yongchang, the other person is asking you how old aunt is, who knows that he is still counting how many *won ton* there are.

**Wang (dialogue):** “Emm, fifteen.”

**Xu (dialogue):** “Ah! My aunt is only fifteen years old?”

**Wang (dialogue):** “Ah, no, no, fifty, fifty.”

In this excerpt, the narrator begins with a third-person’s omniscient perspective to give an impression of Wang Yongchang’s personality. With the appearance of the personal pronoun ‘I’, the narrator changes to a first-person point of view. The text of the dialogue between Wang Yongchang and Xu Xian is difficult to follow in the original written text, especially considering the mixture of these two perspectives. Another complicating factor is the presence of the narrator’s own comments, at times even reminding the character that Wang Yongchang should answer Xu Xian’s question of how old his aunt is. It is only through the

addition of vocal and performative effects that all of the roles within this excerpt are clearly distinguished and interpreted.

Examining how personal pronouns are employed, Zhou highlights the ternary identity of the storyteller in performance (2007: 73):

The storyteller's language adopts a third person's position relative to the roles in the story and the audience seating in the story house. However, a storyteller often talks to the audience, indicating himself or herself as 'I', while the audience members become 'you' or 'you all', or sometime 'you audience'. Simultaneously, a storyteller may refer to the characters in the story as 'he/she' or use 'I' to dialogue-ize a character.

Zhou (1988: 36) illustrates four factors of role shifting in *ping-tan* performance, which expose the storyteller's principles in casting characters. First, the storyteller makes no effort to alter their physical appearance to distinguish between characters, for example by changing costume. Second, the storyteller remains in a relatively fixed position on the stage. Third, when portraying a character (as opposed to presenting narrative, description, or introduction), the storyteller also has to describe the character's actions and expression. Fourth, the storyteller has a large degree of freedom to manipulate the timeline and sense of space, often shifting backwards and forward between different times and locations.

*Ping-tan* performance requires the storyteller to play a range of roles in solo or non-solo formations – male and female, young and old, good and bad, powerful and powerless, rich and poor – without applying any makeup. The storyteller does not walk around the stage, or hold other instruments and props if it is not necessary during the performance. Therefore, when portraying a role, the storyteller is only able to manipulate narrative, utterance, vocal register, facial expression, gestures, and so on. The lower half of the storyteller's body remains largely static, so only the movement of the upper body contributes to the narrative or expressive effect of the performance. In other words, the storyteller is only ever partially imitating a role, rather than fully 'being' the character. These moments are often very short. Even in dialogues, there are many interventions from the storyteller's own commentary. Thus, 'jumping into the role' does not mean 'being immersed in the role'. Storytellers treat these dimensions in a highly flexible way as long as the plot is fully understood by the audience. All of these demands are undoubtedly complex, and it is clear that being a *ping-tan* storyteller has many specific challenges.

#### 4.1.2 Storyteller's Role as Narrator

From the above example of 'Eating Won Ton', it can be gleaned how the storyteller uses narrative to differentiate one role from another, adding necessary information and personification to enrich the plot. In order to enhance their skills and therefore their income, storytellers work hard to improve their articulation of both language and music by extending and personalising the interpretation of plots. One extraordinary example, which is almost invariably selected to illustrate this phenomenon, comes from the story *Zhenzhu Ta* ('Pearl Pagoda'), the plot of which describes how, due to the ancient social concept that males and females should only meet in controlled circumstances, Lady Chen Cui'e is nervous about going downstairs to give a pearl-made pagoda to her nephew Fang Qing as a gift. Current *ping-tan* practitioners relate how storytellers of the past used to polish this plot in a highly sophisticated way,<sup>70</sup> describing Chen Cui'e's indecisive thoughts and her descent of the stairs in great detail, and taking a remarkable eighteen days of performance to recount the episode. This exaggerated psychological description does not appear in the original novel. Although this example has become common lore in *ping-tan* performance history, it can be imagined that many additional narrative episodes and narrative devices of enhancement were used to support the overarching story development and appeal to the audience. The skill of maintaining the audience's curiosity is highly valued. Storytellers have to continuously refine their stories over the generations, polishing the most central pieces of repertoire.

Storytellers recount many tales of skillful narrative extension. For example, Zhang Hongsheng recalls He Yunfei's story-telling accomplishments (Xu, 2011: 94). Once He Yunfei gave a performance at *lao yi he* story house in Suzhou, telling the story of the thief Shi Xiu, who is one of the heroes of *Shui Hu Zhuan* ('Water Margin'). When the plot moved to the exciting point at which 'Shi Xiu was ready to jump out of the restaurant window', an audience member, who was due to be away on business for the following five days asked the storyteller to reveal the result right away, in that day's session. Instead of bringing the dramatic event forward, however, He Yunfei promised to postpone it until the audience member was back on the sixth day. For five days, the storyteller then filled the sessions with additional tangential stories without advancing the main plot line.

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<sup>70</sup> This example was mentioned to me in interviews with Hui Zhongqiu (5 Feb 2012), Lin Jianfang (21 September 2012), Pan Yiling (27 September 2013), Zhou Hong (9 September 2013), and other anonymous audience members.

Storytellers also portray character and emotional content through ballad singing. An audience member, Gu Xidong (Gu, 2011: 117), recalls listening to the master Xia Hesheng's performance of the story *Miao Jinfeng* ('Etched Gold Phoenix'). He expresses his admiration for Xia's trademark '*xiang tan xiang chang*' ('loud plucking and sonorous singing') style, as well as his usage of subtle eye gestures to deliver the character's sentiment. Once Xia Hesheng intended to complete the day's session by singing a long ballad to recount the farewell moment between Qian Yucui and Xu Huilan. He closed the story with the words 'Xu Huilan walked further and further away, with Qian Yucui still waving to him, enthralled by the sight of his figure descending into the distance'. When Xia Hesheng finished this narrative, there was a protracted moment of silence. Some audience members sniffed back tears and Xia Hesheng suddenly put down his *sanxian* and concluded: "Xu Huilan has already left, please come back tomorrow early", implying that the performance had finished, and the audience members could leave.

Besides, audiences also judge the third-person's narrative involved in singing. Gu Xidong (ibid.) gives an example of an audience member commenting on two versions of a ballad performed by storyteller Yu Xiaoxia and Qi Lianfang. This ballad is from *Miao Jinfeng* ('Etched Golden Phoenix'). Although it is impossible to know every detail of how storyteller Xia Hesheng sang the ballad, details of his extraordinary performance can be inferred from Gu Xidong's comment (ibid.):

[I heard] the boss of a grocery store once say: listening to Yu Xiaoxia's singing of Yu *diao* and Qi Lianfang's performance of Qi *diao*, you should not only prick up your ears, but also marvel at their performance. In terms of his long ballad singing, I listened to another master Yu Hongxian's performance several years ago. Her voice is absolutely beautiful, but I think her performance is still not as good as Xia Hesheng's. At least I did not feel sore in my nose. Besides, the ballad text of *Miao Jinfeng* is not as brilliant as the story *Zhenzhu Ta*. Actually it is mediocre. He [Xia Hesheng] sang the general lyrics to extraordinary effect; so he deserves to be called '*miao wang*' ('the king of *Miao*'), referring to his wonderful performance.

Narration is significant for both storytelling and story singing. It is presented from a third-person point of view in the story, linking all parts within the plots smoothly and logically. Just as when touching on character roles, a storyteller is also required to present narration in an appealing way to attract the audience's attention.

### 4.1.3 Storyteller's Role as Commentator

In *ping-tan* performance, storytellers are obliged to provide personal commentaries and evaluations regarding the unfolding plot. With *xiansheng* denoting 'teacher', the common label for the storyteller of '*shuoshu xiansheng*' can be interpreted as 'the storytelling teacher' emphasising the pedagogical role of educating the audience. In the preface of the *Brief Ping-tan Dictionary* edited by Wu Zongxi (2011) however, it is argued that when storytellers are on-stage, they are no longer themselves. While involved in the performance, being a storyteller becomes yet another role.

This notion of the storyteller's role was famously highlighted by the great master Liu Jingting who was active in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. He deemed that storytellers should forget their own business, appearance, urgent matters, the time, and even their own identity during the performance (Wu, 2011: 63). The storyteller Jiang Wanfu also stresses the importance of providing commentary in storytelling: "if a storyteller does not mention *shi* (勢), the trend of the times in *pinghua*, or *shi* (世), the ways of the world in *tanci*, then the storyteller is not qualified as great" (Zhou, 1988: 201). Besides, in an interview with Lin Jianfang,<sup>71</sup> the vice-chairman of the Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe, he told me that *ping-tan* is an art form which delivers positive energy by telling stories that never depart from moral norms such as loyalty, filial piety, courtesy, righteousness, humanity, integrity, love, and sense of shame. The storyteller's personal views and interpretations that are uttered onstage should propagate and spread these moral values through the performance. In particular, negative views and discordant opinions are not allowed to be conveyed to the audience. In this sense, then, the storyteller does not have unlimited freedom of personal expression, but has to occupy the role expected of them.

The following example is selected from the story *Shezhan Qunru* ('A Verbal Battle with the Intellectuals') in Zhang Guoliang's edition of *San Guo* ('The Three Kingdoms'). It presents the storyteller's comments on a part of the plot when Zhuge Liang, also known as Kongming, eavesdrops on a conversation (Zhou, 2007: 82):

Kongming walks slowly and quietly to the closed window, eavesdropping on the conversation. But Kongming, you had better not listen to it, otherwise you might explode!

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<sup>71</sup> Personal communication, 21 September 2012.

As an active commentator, the storyteller not only implies what is going on from a third-person omniscient perspective, but by adding more, he also reminds the audience that this is a dramatic point from which conflict will surely arise.

Among several diverse types of narration, these supplements and comments from the storyteller are distinctive. Wang Zhoushi, a storyteller active in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, states in his work of *Shu Ji* ('The Taboos of Storytelling') that the storyteller should display his personal values by commenting on the content of the story. For example, in Yao Yinmei's edition of *Tixiao Yinyuan* ('Fate in Tears and Laughter'), the storyteller comments on the character Fan Jiashu's manner of preventing a marriage proposal being advanced that would betroth him to a woman he is not keen to marry, namely Guan Xiugu (Guan Shoufeng's daughter). This takes place in the episode '*Guan Shoufeng Qingyan*' ('Guan Shoufeng Setting a Banquet'). Here, the storyteller demonstrates his own personal response, while also leading the audience's value judgements and setting up interpretations for the ensuing plot (Zhou, 2007: 83):

This [Fan Jiashu's comment] makes Guan Shoufeng wary about setting up a marriage proposal on Jiashu's behalf... Some might say that this shows Jiashu to be a cunning person, but I don't judge him so. Instead, I admire his brightness. Why? Because he is single-minded in his love for Fengxi, while his attitude to Guan Xiugu is merely respect and nothing more... So I still sympathise with him, and his way of dealing with this situation is understandable.

In an interview with storyteller Zhang Jianzhen,<sup>72</sup> she noted that when she gives performances of classic repertoire, she pays particular attention to the comments and judgements that express her own personality and thoughts:

Audiences are familiar with these classic performances, and do not pay much attention to the content of the stories. When story houses advertise that they are going to perform *Yu Qingting* ('Jade Dragonfly'), audiences instantly react in their minds to the editions performed by the masters Jiang Yuequan and Zhu Huizhen. As soon as you step onto the stage, they immediately start to compare your every word and movement to the performances of the masters. As a performer living in this time, I have to develop my style to put my own personality and characteristics into performances. So I insert modern elements

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<sup>72</sup> Personal communication, 30 August 2013.

into these classics. For example, I add catchwords that are significant to the current times into my storytelling.

Her husband Ma Zhiwei further adds:

Many stories are set during the Ming dynasty, when feudal society was at its peak. It was understood then that if all governing organisations worked well then society would naturally achieve a state of harmony. In reality, Ming society was beset with shaky and unstable political crises but, despite there being a number of over-indulgent emperors, this still lasted for 276 years. However, that time has become too distant and unfamiliar for modern people. The story themes involve nothing more than political conflict, the settling of lawsuits, and the love between intelligent gentlemen and beautiful ladies, and these stories have been polished to perfection over generations since the late Ming dynasty. However, it is now difficult to shape the story properly for modern audiences, inserting contemporary news and values. Usually, people come down against the treacherous court official or the beautiful lady, considering the latter to be a 'femme fatale'. However, in *ping-tan*, we aim to expose the real problem that caused the empire's collapse, which precisely is the emperor's incapacity and fatuity.

Expressing one's opinion through comments in the story is a very effective way to highlight key points. For instance, the storyteller Wu Junyu (1984: 62) mentioned that, in the excerpt 'Lu Junyi's banishment' from *Wu Song*, when Lu is being led away by official escorts Dong Chao and Xue Ba, the storyteller used the characters to deliver a debate about the nature of injustice. Lu Junyi insists that 'good and evil will always be repaid', while the official escorts claim that 'those whose actions suit what is required at the time are wise, so only by ingratiating oneself with the bigwigs can one earn benefits, and those who disobey the bigwigs will suffer a beating'. At this point, the storyteller utters his judgement on these contradictory opinions saying, in his role as storyteller, that good and evil will be repaid; it is only a question of time. He states that 'history is merciless, and ultimately will draw conclusions on good and evil.' The audience responds to this judgement with warm applause, reflecting society's belief in the moral norm that 'a good man is rewarded'.

The controversial storyteller Yang Zijiang who was from Shanghai, was well-known for offering radical comments on political affairs and politicians – such as the Cultural Revolution and Liu Shaoqi (President of the People's Republic of China) – during

performance. Although his performance skills are admired and approved by both *ping-tan* professionals and the audience, he was occasionally banned for certain spells in Shanghai, Hangzhou and Wuxi, due to his more controversial utterances. A saying has even spread among the audience that, 'if you want to hear devious political comments, listen to Yang Zijiang's storytelling.' Bi Kangnian,<sup>73</sup> who is the chairman of Suzhou Association of Performing Arts, told me:

As an outstanding and skilful storyteller, Yang Zijiang's performance was very sophisticated, especially during the heyday in his middle age. He did suffer a lot during the Cultural Revolution, and his miserable experiences impacted his opinions. It is understandable that he vented his temper and anger through his performance. However, as a senior storyteller, he should have controlled his behaviour. He was allowed to give a performance in Suzhou before his death in 2011 because we [the leaders of the Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe and his colleagues] valued his storytelling gifts. We were more tolerant and considerate to him, especially because he was such a good storyteller and also an old man. Although his revelations denouncing corruption were warmly welcomed by some audience members, his comments were sometimes too overpowering. I told him that he had been criticising political events for decades and that was enough. I also urged the audience not to encourage him to make any such controversial comments – the type of comments that audience members themselves would not dare to say. The audience should also take responsibility to protect a good storyteller.

But Yang Zijiang's comments were not always applauded by audiences. Those who benefitted and enhanced their prospects under Mao's regime were not slow to oppose Yang, and strongly advocate the Party and government line. They quarrelled fiercely with one another. However, such conflicts in the performance space are unlikely to happen again since he passed away. Indeed, other storytellers who tell similar stories rarely provoke such a fierce debate. As an exceptional figure, Yang Zijiang was shown respect and taken good care of by his colleagues in Suzhou, in contrast with his treatment in many other cities. Many storytellers who now hold positions of authority, such as Jin Lisheng and Wang Chiliang, learned from him for periods in the past; this might be another reason that Yang Zijiang was never completely thrown out of *ping-tan* circles.

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<sup>73</sup> Personal communication, 26 September 2012.

Goffman (1959: 24) stresses the moral obligations that are placed on others when an individual adopts a particular role, marked by a set of agreed-upon characteristics:

Society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in an appropriate way. ... an individual who implicitly or explicitly signifies that he has certain social characteristics ought in fact to be what he claims he is. ... He automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them to value and treat him in the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect.

The values and judgements expressed by the storytellers are usually in accordance with conventional folkways and social principles, as most of the stories demonstrate the good being praised and evil being punished. Echoing Lin Jianfang's earlier comment about '*shi*' being understood as a homonym in this context, with one '*shi*' signifying the trends of the times and the other '*shi*' the ways of the world, the narratives typically celebrate the core values of loyalty, filial piety, courtesy, righteousness, integrity, and sense of shame. Because storytellers are recognised as having the capacity to express forcibly their own opinions through the narrative's characters, audience members tend to become particularly sensitive during those episodes when characters are being either praised or criticised for their behaviour. Besides, if the storyteller's personal view contradicts the audience members' beliefs and values, the audience members sometimes wilfully enter conflict, asserting that their own interpretations are more valid. Although the storyteller's didactic and pedagogical roles were of course more pronounced in earlier times, when fewer audience members had access to thorough schooling, they continue to be defining characteristics within the storyteller's role: he or she is still honoured as a knowledgeable teacher and still holds that responsibility. The much rarer instances in which storytellers have used the stage as a platform to express more controversial personal views have significant implications for understanding the distinction between the storyteller as an individual and the storyteller's onstage role. When they comment upon the story, they appear to show the audience their true self. However, it has become clear that this version of the self is actually one that is constrained to talking about certain topics and values that are considered normal. When a storyteller moves away from this territory, it is evident that the self portrayed is a construction to fit the expectations of the performance context just as is the case when the storyteller temporarily jumps into any other character role that features in the plot.

## 4.2 The Storyteller's Role as Teacher in Traditional Apprenticeship and Modern Schooling

Although teachers are commonly addressed in modern Chinese as '*laoshi*', the older traditional form of address, namely '*xiansheng*', remains the standard for *ping-tan* masters; it is the term used by apprentices and audience members alike. Hence, it is common to hear the storytellers say 'my *xiansheng*' to indicate their teachers within the lineage of *ping-tan*. Meanwhile, this form of address based on the apprenticeship system also influences audience members who refer to the storytellers as *shuoshu xiansheng* in general conversation, and greet the storyteller with this expression in face-to-face communication.

### 4.2.1 The Storyteller's Role in Traditional Apprenticeship

Practitioners have individual motives for dedicating their lives to *ping-tan*, including family expectations (for those with a family history of involvement), economic necessity, or personal interest in the art (Bender, 2003: 33). Before one can be accepted by a *ping-tan xiansheng*, especially for *tanci* students, it is necessary for the beginner to demonstrate a good quality of falsetto vocal register. As master Yang Renlin explained in his article written in 1960 (Yang, 1985: 165), the *Ma diao* and *Yu diao* which every beginner starts off by learning, extensively use falsetto to cast young gentleman and lady characters. Afterwards, the student usually sends a letter of request to the storyteller they would like to study with, and pays the first instalment of tuition fees. The price normally has been negotiated and decided before their first meeting.

The symbolic marking of an individual's initiation into this field of activity is through a ceremony called *baishi*. In the past, the *baishi* ceremony usually occurred in the teacher's home. The young student would be led by his father or an elder member of the family, with a box containing a contractual letter of agreement (*baitie*) signed by the student and his accompanier. This letter would then be bestowed to the teacher. Master Xu Yunzhi recalled his *baishi* ceremony, in which he became apprentice to master Xia Liansheng, in an article 'My Artistic Life: Art Learning and Performing Experience' (Xu, 2011: 17)<sup>74</sup>:

A pair of candles and incense was lighted. I kowtowed four times to my teacher on a red carpet. Then I kowtowed to *tai shifu* (my teacher's father who was also his teacher) and to *shimu*, my teacher's wife. I gave each of them two silver dollars as a gift. Xia Liansheng *xiansheng* received eight students in his

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<sup>74</sup> Narrated by Xu Yunzhi, collected by Wang Zhuoren.

life, and I was the sixth. He gave me a new performing name Yunzhi (韵芝), but I changed the characters to Yunzhi (云志) when I was nineteen.

Once the student completes the ceremony, during their period of study they may live with the teacher's family and serve them. Meanwhile, the student learns to play an instrument, vocal exercises, tune singing and portrayal exercises as basic skills. In Xu Yunzhi's case, he could already play the *sanxian* before he underwent the ceremony. He was then taught how to play the *pipa* by his teacher's wife (*shimu*). This began with reciting *gong che pu* notation<sup>75</sup> for the *pipa*, learning basic skills through pieces such as *Lao Liu Ban* ('Old Six Beats') and *Meihua San Nong* ('Three Variations on Plum Blossom'). Afterwards, he started to learn the instrumental interludes of old Yu *diao*. After memorising these, he started to play the ballad tunes on the instrument. Three months later, he learned to sing the opening ballad *Qing Xian Fu* in old Yu *diao* from *shixiong* (the senior fellow apprentice)<sup>76</sup> Xia Xiaolian. As the various tunes used within each *diao* are quite similar, it was easy for him to learn the other ballads within this *diao*.

Closely observing one's teacher's live performances during tours is an important way of learning *ping-tan*. In reference to the geographic feature of canals, which are prevalent throughout the cities, towns and villages of the region, the jargon term *pao maotou* (literarily 'running dock') denotes a storyteller's performance tour. In my interviews, a lot of storytellers highlighted the importance of following their teacher's *pao maotou* as a formative experience during their careers. Generally, after watching a teacher's full-length performance just once, students are expected to internalise a rough impression of the storyline and how it unfolds day by day. As storytellers are normally specialised in telling only a small number of stories, students have ample opportunities to re-observe the same storyline, revising the content and developing an understanding of how to vary it effectively. As Jin Lisheng told me,<sup>77</sup> some strict teachers may push students to memorise everything in one performance, insisting that after a daytime performance, the student enacts the same story episodes. In some cases, the teacher would conceal the script and not correct the student's errors but in others, the teacher would show relevant passages from the written

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<sup>75</sup> *Gong che pu* is a Chinese traditional musical notation method in which musical pitches are represented by Chinese characters. Its employment is less widespread in learning Chinese traditional music nowadays.

<sup>76</sup> *Shixiong* is an address for a male student who is in undergoing the same apprenticeship, but who started learning earlier.

<sup>77</sup> Personal communication, 26<sup>th</sup> September 2012.

script. Because of this pressure to learn quickly, some students would surreptitiously attend the performances of other storytellers to supplement their learning.

However, usually students were not allowed to watch and learn other storytellers' skills and stories. If a storyteller saw another one's student visiting his performance, the storyteller could drive the student away. Even if the student paid for the ticket as a normal audience member, he was only allowed to watch two days of sessions; otherwise, his behaviour would be treated as 'story stealing' and he would be expelled. Yet, many of the masters from the older generation tell the younger generation of their own past experiences of 'stealing' story content and performing skills from others. The master Zhong Yueqiao admitted that<sup>78</sup> in 1937, in order to learn from the master Zhu Jiesheng's way of singing in *Yu diao*, he called the radio programme to request Zhu's opening ballad *Dongbei Kaipian* ('Northeast Opening Ballad') and managed to obtain it. He later sang the same ballad on the radio and received praise from the audience.

To learn the skills of storytelling and story singing is no mean feat. Zhong Yueqiao mentioned that learning the stories *Yu Qingting* ('Jade Dragonfly') and *Baishe zhuan* ('The Tale of the White Snake') from Zhang Yunting involved challenges of memorisation. He recalled his learning experience of the *Yu Qingting* script (ibid., 32):

The interpretation of the plot from 'Wen Bu' ('Divination') to 'Guo Ji' ('Adoption') is made up of ballad singing, verse, and portrayal description in rhyme, without any colloquial speech. During daytime performance, I concentrated closely on the teacher's performance and memorised as much as possible, so that I could transcribe it at night. I missed a lot of sleep during that time. Very soon, I was allowed to assist in my teacher's performance, singing the opening ballad and some ballads within story as my debut.

Another difficulty in learning is that the teacher might not give as much supervision as anticipated; some students have had to even find chances to 'steal' their teachers' knowledge or skills. Zhong Yueqiao also recalled his experience not only of assisting his *xiansheng's* performance in a daytime and evening performance on the stage, but also of serving him as an attendant every day for two months at his first *matou* ('dock') in Gaoqiao town in Shanghai. The master's relationship to his apprentice is somewhat paternal in nature, as Zhong himself mentioned. Consequently, Zhong's teacher paid extremely close attention to his progress, offering advice and guidance where perhaps a less paternal

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<sup>78</sup> See his narrative article 'My Artistic Career', recorded by Xiang Zhengming (Xu, 2011: 31).

teacher might decline to contribute. Through his everyday performance training, Zhong Yueqiao learned a lot. If he forgot the content, or said something wrong, the teacher would instantly perceive the mistakes, continuously interrupting, and offering advice in a tactful way, so that the performance could get back on track. This technique was also admired by the audience. Only once did the *xiansheng* Zhang Yunting harshly blame him because he wrongly pronounced a single character in a ballad performance. When Zhong Yueqiao wrote about this period of learning from Zhang Yunting, he said (ibid., 33):

During the two years of tutoring, my teacher only corrected my wrong pronunciation this one single time. Later I realised that the best teaching was his performance on the stage: the gestural posture, the narration and role casting, the use of eye and facial expression, the way to depict and identify a role with its typical characteristics, the way to attract the audience and so on. This is the best demonstration. ... You have to learn by heart. Otherwise you are not able to develop. A master may supervise several students, but not everyone can engage in storytelling as a career... This is described as '*xue bu chu*' ('not being able to finish one's apprenticeship').

If a storyteller wishes to improve his or her skills, or to learn a long episode story from other storytellers (who are usually in the older generation or senior), he or she will invite several colleagues and the other storytellers in the same apprenticeship to witness his or her *baishi* ceremony. This event will sometimes be broadcast as an important and exciting event by local news. Some storytellers who are in their 30s or 40s, despite having been regular performers in a *ping-tan* troupe, will be encouraged by the troupe to extend their repertoires and improve their skills in this traditional way of learning. This is especially true for young storytellers aged in their 20s who have just graduated from *ping-tan* school. Although nowadays, *ping-tan* learners do not have to live with their teachers and serve the families, the ritual of the *baishi* ceremony embodies the intimate relationships within a lineage.



Figure 4-1 A contemporary *baishi* ceremony on 20 December 2015 (provided by Yin Dequan).

#### 4.2.2 Storyteller's Role in Modern Schooling

A new frame for *ping-tan* study was established in 1961 with the opening of the Suzhou Ping-tan School. Nowadays, this school offers five years of training in *ping-tan* skills, containing three years of study equivalent to high school level and two years of study at college level. Most of the active middle-aged storytellers received their basic training from the Ping-tan School, except the freelance storytellers. As a student of the first enrolment in 1961, Jin Lisheng, who is now the vice-chairman of Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe, recalled the year in an interview.<sup>79</sup> He told me that he was one of about eighty students. They were divided into three classes and were taught by some of the most famous *ping-tan* masters. In the first term, they learned four pieces of old Yu *diao* from Zhu Jiasheng to become accustomed to *ping-tan* music, and focused on correct enunciation. In the second term, they learned Xue *diao* from Jiang Wenlan, and this was aimed at the basic techniques of breathing, enunciation and vocal skills. Later, Xue Xiaoqing, the creator of Xue *diao* took over the teaching of his singing school. Meanwhile, the other basic skills relating to storytelling were taught by other storytellers.

In August 1962, after Jin Lisheng's early graduation, he started a career as a storyteller in the Suzhou Renmin Ping-tan Tuan Er Tuan ('The Second Suzhou People's Ping-tan Troupe'). To improve his performance skills, Jin Lisheng was taken to meet master Li Zhongkang by a troupe leader. Without a traditional *baishi* ceremony, Yu Hongye told Li Zhongkang that the decision to accept Jin Lisheng as Li's apprentice had already been made by the troupe. Even

<sup>79</sup> Personal communication, 26 September 2012.

without a kowtow, which was actually regarded as a backward social practice during that epoch, Jin Lisheng became Li's student, and he is now the most outstanding successor of Li Zhongkang *diao*. From the beginning of September 1962, Jin Lisheng started to follow Li Zhongkang by giving performances as an apprentice performer. Jin Lisheng describes his relationship with the *xiansheng* as having being close to filial, as Li Zhongkang also personally noted.

Aiming at training professional *ping-tan* employees, the Suzhou Ping-tan School offers a three-year secondary technical school education and a two-year junior college education, recognised by the National Ministry of Education. The former chairman of the Central Advisory Commission, Chen Yun, who was one of the most influential leaders of the PRC during the 1980s and 1990s, but who also appreciated *ping-tan*, promoted the establishment. He wrote the school motto '*churen, chushu, zouzhenglu*', which can be translated as 'to cultivate an outstanding young generation of storytellers, to compose new *ping-tan* repertoire, and to take the right path'. In the same year, Chen Yun wrote an influential document entitled '*Muqian guanyu xuetou, qingsong jiemu, chuantong shuhui de chuli de yijian*' ('Comments on humour insertion, easy performance and traditional repertoire') (1982: inset), which was intended to curb the absurd and obscene, as well as the humorous elements inserted in *ping-tan* stories. Wen (1983: 31-33) and Si (1983: 34-36) note that Chen had been concerned that he had encountered these while conducting local governmental affairs in Shanghai. Chen's 'comments' still profoundly influence *ping-tan* today. Evidently he was keen to mould *ping-tan*'s future in a particular direction, and this spurred his founding of the Suzhou Ping-tan School. Arguably, his input encouraged the composition of new repertoire that would attract larger audiences. Considering that this occurred in the 1960s, there is a strong implication in the phrase 'taking the right path' that *ping-tan* should follow the political ideology of the central government. However, the key concept of training up young generations and creating *ping-tan* performances to meet the audience's expectations and tastes seems to be the 'right path' to preserve and develop *ping-tan* even now.

In order to understand the ways in which the Suzhou Ping-tan School provides the professional training for the students, I personally observed the teaching and learning there on 4 September 2013. The school President Pan Yilin and Vice-President Sun Ti introduced me to the syllabus, teaching programmes, and agreed to be interviewed. In addition, I was fortunately permitted to observe teaching and one-to-one supervision, as well as the examinations after the summer holiday.



**Figure 4-2** The gate of Suzhou Ping-tan School (downloaded from the school website).



**Figure 4-3** The scene in the campus (downloaded from the school website)<sup>80</sup>.

The entrance examination must be taken before students receive an offer, a rule in place since the first enrolment in 1961. Due to the high linguistic demands involved in performing *ping-tan*, only middle school graduates who are from Jiangsu province, Zhejiang province, and Shanghai are qualified to apply for the school. According to the enrolment report of 2014 uploaded onto the official school website, 50 out of 2167 students eventually received

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<sup>80</sup> See Fig. 4-2 at <http://www.szptxx.com/a/xiaoyuanfengmao/2011/1130/1237.html> and Fig. 4-3 at <http://www.szptxx.com/a/xiaoyuanfengmao/2011/1130/1232.html>.

an offer after the three-round examination.<sup>81</sup> This proves the competitive nature of the school.

Another statistic displays how *ping-tan* study has expanded in recent years. There were 35 graduates in 2011 and 48 graduates from the Suzhou Ping-tan School in 2012. These graduates either gained employment in *ping-tan* troupes as occupational performers, or engaged in other employment relevant to *ping-tan* training; this might include becoming a programme host or a teacher to non-specialists who wish to learn the basics of this genre. These trainers can take an ‘Arts Grade Examination of China’ in *ping-tan*, which is a similar grading examination to the associated board exams in UK, such as the ABRSM (The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music). The following table provided by the Suzhou Ping-tan School presents the increasing popularity of these exams. It shows the number of students taking this exam alongside the number of full time students at the Suzhou Ping-tan School:

**Table 4-1 Non-specialist, and the full time studentship at the Suzhou Ping-tan School 2010-2012**

<b>Non-specialist, and the full time studentship at the Suzhou Ping-tan School 2010-2012</b>		
<b>Number of non-specialists taking the annual ‘Arts Grade Examination of China’ in <i>ping-tan</i></b>	2010	666
	2011	1069
	2012	1839
<b>Number of non-specialists from 2010-2012</b>		<b>3574</b>
<b>Average number of non-specialists from 2010-2012</b>		<b>1191</b>
<b>Number of full time students enrolled in the school from 2010-2012</b>		<b>316</b>
<b>Ratio of full time to non-specialist students</b>		<b>1: 3.8</b>

The data above demonstrates that there are more than three times as many non-specialists as full time students in *ping-tan* school. *Ping-tan* has gradually raised in importance among the most popular artistic specialties such as playing the piano or violin. This is for self-cultivation rather than for the purposes of highly specialised training for a small minority. Considering that there are also amateurs playing *ping-tan* for self-amusement, who receive private courses with teachers but do not take part in the subsidiary class for annual graded examinations, the total numbers might be far higher.

<sup>81</sup> See <http://www.szptxx.com/a/xinxizhongxin/xiaoyuanxinwen/2014/0424/1442.html>.

While the first steps towards *ping-tan* are not difficult for audiences, basic professional training can be harsh for new students. Aimed at achieving the fundamental *ping-tan* skills of ‘speech, humour insertion, playing an instrument, singing, and acting’, the curriculums<sup>82</sup> include correcting enunciation in the Suzhou dialect, *ping-tan* narrative training, *sanxian* and *pipa* playing, singing, portrayal shaping for performance practice as well as theoretical studies of Chinese drama and music theory for *ping-tan* composition. In particular, for instance, the course for correcting dialect enunciation takes one year and progresses systematically from teaching the phonation rules of the Suzhou dialect to accurate vowel and consonant pronunciation, tone, intonation in sentence, and so on. Pan Yilin told me that even the students from the locality cannot articulate the Suzhou dialect proficiently.<sup>83</sup> Modifying their articulation and utterance is crucial in *ping-tan* study. Otherwise, the students who cannot speak standard Suzhou dialect will be laughed at by the audience; in fact, they may even fail to secure a career in *ping-tan*. All the teachers of professional courses are *ping-tan* performers, who have been involved in *ping-tan* performance in story houses for decades. The same is true of the schools’ presidents and other heads of departments. Some of them are also performers employed by the Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe. The playing of western instruments is an alternative skill offered to students.

On a narration course for second year students that I visited on 4 September 2013, a teacher was demonstrating how to act out the part of an old lady from a rural area. She stressed the importance of articulating the words with strong intonation, explaining a method of imitating a toothless old lady from the countryside. In order to describe this technique, she gave the students an analogy, likening the unique phonation technique to ‘holding cotton next to gums’. Pan Yilin further illustrated the means of learning this character acting:

This way of speaking is utilised particularly when acting as an old woman from a rural area, and it is different from when playing those of high social status. This character sometimes serves as a chamberlain of a wealthy family in traditional repertoire. To act this role, you must add the accent and slang to your performance. Once students get over this role acting, when they meet similar characters in a story, they know how to make the performance more lifelike.

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<sup>82</sup> See Appendix 2.

<sup>83</sup> Personal communication, 4 September 2013.

The school arranges for the teachers to perform their most advanced piece of work in order to aid students' learning. For instance, in order to teach the singing and typical instrumental accompaniment of *Qi diao*, they employ the retired performer Lu Yue'e, who excels at singing the representative opening ballad of *Qi diao Qing Wen Buqiu* ('Qing Wen Mending a Fur Coat') from the story *Hong Lou Meng* ('Dream of the Red Chamber'), which originally stems from the folk tune *Suo Nan Zhi*.<sup>84</sup> For the few students specialising in performing *pinghua*, the school employs Wang Chiliang, who is famous for telling the historical story *San Guo* ('Three Kingdoms'), to enact his performance to them.

After four years of study, students should have picked up all of the requisite skills of *ping-tan* performance. Afterwards, they are intensively trained during a fifth year, especially the outstanding students who are selected and gathered in the *chuancheng ban* ('inheriting class'). This so called 'occupational education', however, is very competitive. Those who are not qualified enough to be selected for the *chuancheng ban* take advantage of this year to seek other jobs outside of the profession. Most of the *chuancheng ban* students are thought of as the candidates for roles as formal *ping-tan* performers employed by the *ping-tan* troupes in Shanghai, Suzhou, Wuxi, Changshu, and the surrounding area. Although all of the students are given one-to-one supervision from their first year, approximately ten students will be selected to receive the special 'forge' training. This involves the school separating these students into several duos according to their individual vocal skills, personal characteristics, and performing qualities. After a panel of teachers has discussed the students' abilities, each duo learns a long episode story from the nominated repertoire, and is supervised by the best predecessors of this work. For example, in 2012, there was only one male student selected to join this special class. As a result, the panel decided to teach the story *Xixiang Ji* ('Romance of the West Chamber'), which is more suitable for all-female duo performance. On the other hand, in 2013, there were fourteen students in total, of whom the numbers of male and female students were equal. Hence, the panel designated three long episode stories for them to choose between, which were *Baishhe Zhuan* ('The Tale of the White Snake') taught by Qin Jianguo, *Zhenzhu Ta* ('Pearl Pagoda') taught by Gao Bowen, and *Shimei Tu* ('Picture of Ten Beauties') taught by Mao Xinlin. Pan Yilin told me that when it comes to accommodating a student's musical preference, the decision from the

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<sup>84</sup> '*Suo Nan Zhi*' is a *qupai* folk tune that can be traced back to the middle of the Ming dynasty. The original number of syllables in a line-stanza is 9, but the whole piece is composed of 35 syllables. This was recorded in *Jiugong dacheng nan bei ci gongpu*, which is one of the most popular Chinese operatic collection compiled from the 6<sup>th</sup> year of *Qianlong* (1741) to 11<sup>th</sup> year of *Qianlong* (1746). It comprises 82 volumes within 2094 *qupai* melodic tunes, and 4466 folk tunes. However, in *ping-tan* ballad singing, it is changed to a line-stanza of 10 syllables, with a total of 40 syllables in the full piece.

school's panel is flexible. Once a student was keen on Zhang Jianting's Zhang *diao* and wished to follow this performance school. Since his vocal condition and quality were suitable for this specific singing school, the panel agree for him to learn the story *Shimei Tu*.

In order to enable the students to become accustomed to real performance settings, the Suzhou Ping-tan School creates many chances for the fourth and fifth year students to refine their training. The students are distributed to local community centres to give daily long-episode performances. This experience is certainly different from simply reciting the story during training in school. On top of this extra practice, the students are encouraged by the school to attend *ping-tan* performances at story houses as much as possible.

Even though this training is strict and selective, the professional *ping-tan* business cannot absorb the 'high production' of these potential practitioners. This has been influential in transforming the organisation of *ping-tan* troupes. The Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe, for example, has changed its employment system from permanent to contractual.

Overall, although the Suzhou Ping-tan School provides systematic preparation and fairly distributes chances for students to further their careers, the teacher and student's relationship is still considered close to that in a traditional apprenticeship. Alongside the solemnity of the ritual *baishi* ceremony, the most distinguishing factor is that in the traditional way of everyday learning either through a teacher's supervision or a teacher's performance, the student has to learn the profession through their own initiative. The reason is, in the traditional apprenticeship the student is not only the successor to the teacher's art in a way that honours this legacy, but is also a potential competitor to the teacher's own career. Therefore, to maintain one's success in the business, both teacher and student should strive to improve their knowledge, performance skills and so on. Furthermore, the modern schooling system cannot provide an authentic performing environment. Consequently, students need to become accustomed to performing on the stage, learning to develop away from the rigid recitation that is typical of their presentations at school.

### **4.3 Becoming Audience Members**

The storytellers usually address the audience members as their '*yishi fumu*' (literally meaning 'the parents foster them with food and clothes') in my interviews. This indicates the close interrelationship between storyteller and audience as seen through the eyes of the storytellers. There are a lot of widely spread anecdotes relating just how much audience members are devoted to *ping-tan* performance. Wu (2011: 165) records an accident in

which an audience member sat on the edge of a water vat in the story house because there was no more space for him. He dropped into the vat and was therefore soaked, but remained unwilling to leave, insisting on listening to the performance to the end. As long as the audience members are willing to attend the performance, this business will continue.

Wu states that (2011: 166), when the audience members go to the story house for a performance, they rarely mention the name of the story that is being performed; instead, they refer to the storyteller's name. For example, they would not say "I am going to listen to the story *Yu Qingting* ('Jade Dragonfly')"; rather they would say "I am going to listen to Jiang Yuequan". Nevertheless, Wu further suggests, to appreciate the art of the storyteller is not equal to merely listening to the story content. Only through means of exquisite performing skills can a storyteller interpret the beauty of the story and the art. In this case, the storyteller acts as a vehicle to launch artistic performing ability and skills. Thus, although the audience members express their willingness to 'listen to and watch the storyteller', they appreciate the art of *ping-tan* as a complete production. Indeed, people go to listen to Jiang Yuequan's art. This comment suggests that being acquainted with the story content is far from the only requirement of being a sophisticated audience member. For the people who approach *ping-tan* without much experience, they may find it difficult to understand the slang language in the dialect, and the sophisticated techniques utilised in the performance, as well as the identification of various singing schools and ballad tunes to which they need time to become accustomed.

Many audience members start listening to *ping-tan* from childhood; thus, listening to *ping-tan* has become a part of their life. Wu (1984: 2-7) states that he lacked concentration when he was a teenager, except when watching *ping-tan* performance. He can still recite some long ballad songs and mimic the storyteller's way of performing. Not only are children interested in *ping-tan*, even undergraduate students skip class to watch. A *ping-tan* follower Jin Junkuan (2011: 108) recalls that he would rush to the story houses after school in the afternoon, even if the performance only lasted for 15 minutes. If by chance a famous storyteller was performing in the evening session, he was willing to go hungry to finish watching the performance, and then hurry on his way home. After entering Fudan University in Shanghai, he and his friends would cycle to the *Xizang* story house almost every day after dinner. As a poor student without any income, however, the daily ticket became a burden for him. Yet, listening to *ping-tan* had become his addiction and he felt he could learn more from *ping-tan* stories and broaden his horizons far more effectively than at university. As a result, he and his friends earned money to pay for *ping-tan* tickets by writing articles for

newspapers and journals. Once they played truant from school to watch the master brother duo Zhang Jianting and Zhang Jianguo performing their remarkable story *Lin Ziwen* (named after a character in the story), but forgot to remove the school emblem from their clothes. Unluckily, they were found by the university president Chen Wangdao, who was not only a leading scholar well-known for translating the *Communist Manifesto* into Japanese, but also a *ping-tan* aficionado sitting in the story house. To Jin's surprise, the president did not blame them, but told the boys that *ping-tan* is a good means by which people can be cultivated to become virtuous. The president invited them to accompany him to watch *ping-tan* performance on the weekends. From that time onwards, he paid for all of the students' tickets, drove them to the story house and back, and sometimes treated them to a night snack after the performance.

In my fieldwork, I encountered many audience members who immersed themselves in watching *ping-tan* as their hobby and lifestyle. Although it has been suggested by many people that the gradual ageing of the core audience is inevitable, there is still a portion of the audience who are in their thirties and come to the story house whenever they have time to attend a daily session. One audience member, Gu Wenzhong,<sup>85</sup> who is a 35-year-old doctor, told me about his experience of listening to *ping-tan* in the story house:

My grandparents went to the story house to listen to *ping-tan* performances very often. I was thereby influenced. When I was in kindergarten, though I was brought to the story house passively, I quickly found that the mimicry of a whinnying horse was funny. But the tune singing was unpleasant to me, because I didn't understand what the lady was singing about. In my impression, the voice is like a swallow's song. However, it was not until I was in high school that I went to the story house by myself, and started to become aware of how to appreciate *ping-tan*.

Gu Wenzhong suggests that whether a person becomes accustomed to attending story house *ping-tan* performances or not depends on that person's family habits. If family members treat watching *ping-tan* as a lifestyle, other family members are more likely to be affected. One of the reasons that people do not get bored is that there are lots of story houses either in the city or surrounding the city. People have a variety of choices, enabling them to seek the stories in which they are most interested. Furthermore, unlike nowadays when the full story is given in fifteen day sessions, a storyteller gave two-hour long

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<sup>85</sup> Personal communication, 15 September 2013.

performances each day for months on end without any break, such as from Mid-autumn Day (around September) until the end of the lunar year (around January), or from Tomb-sweeping Day (around April) to late July. After a break in the hot summer, a new session started from Mid-autumn Day again. This required the storytellers to have abundant skills in manipulating a performance over a few months, and in consistently tempting the audience to come for the next session. In other words, the storyteller is the main draw for people to become part of an audience. Nevertheless, it is not until the audience member is able to appreciate at least part of the performance that they will then frequent the story house regularly, becoming a habitu  and an upholder of the *ping-tan* tradition. Gu explains further:

An audience selects what they are going to listen to according to their own preference. As for me, the story *Jade dragonfly* makes me feel relaxed. The characters in the story are very close to the people in real life. Along with more experience in enjoying parts of performances, I immerse myself in the ways of interpreting *ping-tan*. The story also arouses listeners' sympathy for the values and aesthetics delivered by *ping-tan*.

Gu recalled that in the past, people were more entangled with decisions about which story house to attend. For example, on *Lindun* Road, which is 1.6 km long, there were seven story houses along just one side, including *Sihai Lou* and *Jiuru* story house, and *Jingu* story house. These enjoyed brisk business and had full audiences. The managers of the story houses would place a board stating 'full house' outside, not only to inform people that all of the tickets were sold, but also to promote the fact that they had an excellent storyteller performing. In other words, as long as the audience had acknowledged the excellence of the storyteller's performance, the *ping-tan* business could operate profitably.

Yet, since the days referred to by Gu, the audience and the environment of the story house have changed. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were few types of entertainment; therefore, going to the story house to enjoy *ping-tan* became the main form of entertainment for the majority of the general population, from children to old people. Lin Jianfang<sup>86</sup> told me that, in the 1940s and 1950s, at their peak, story houses offered morning sessions (either starting at 7 am or 9 am), afternoon sessions (1 pm), and evening sessions (6 pm or 7 pm). Day sessions attracted audiences of a more advanced age, but the total number of audience members was fewer than the evening session, which had more members of younger generations participating. Lin further suggests that, although these

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<sup>86</sup> Personal communication, 21<sup>st</sup> September 2012.

young people were tired from their daytime work, they were keen to attend evening *ping-tan* session as a form of relaxation. In addition, as a story house sometimes has a teahouse on the ground floor, it provides people a space in which to socialise. Considering that there was no particular services market in the past, the house was something unique. In this case, the story house offered the chance to drink socially or, as it is known in jargon, *he shehui cha* ('drinking a social tea'). Regarding the *ping-tan* business, as there was no special administrator or manager in charge of dispatching storytellers to the story houses in need, the storyteller and story house manager popped into the typical story houses in which people often assembled to discuss further business. Moreover, this also related to people's daily habit of drinking morning tea (*'he zao cha'*), and then taking in *ping-tan* performances. This habit is still maintained. For example, the *Guangyu* story house opens at 7 am for customers, providing them with a social space.

The reputation of a story house was gauged by the levels of attendance. If one had more audience members than in the other story houses, especially those located in a prime area, then this one was called a *mianzi shuchang* ('face story house') in jargon.<sup>87</sup> Others that could not effectively canvass for audience members, or the ones in a lane (rather than on the main road) were called *lizi shuchang* ('the lining story house') in jargon. Both types have since been impacted upon by modern lifestyles. Especially in developed areas, the evening sessions gradually dropped out of existence from the 1980s. Lin Jianfang explains that it does not mean that the people no longer going to story houses are less interested in *ping-tan*; due to the development of the radio and television *ping-tan* programmes, these people could enjoy *ping-tan* via a variety of alternative means, rather than by entering the story house. Thus, this circumstance does not mean that *ping-tan* has become old-fashioned, but that its transmission and means of participation has been changed.

Among audiences, only the very sophisticated members of the audience are addressed as *lao er duo* (literally meaning 'old ear') to emphasise their knowledge and experience of *ping-tan*. For instance, these individuals can elucidate the content of the stories, distinguish the various tunes and singing schools, and identify shifts between several *diao* in a modern piece of music. The ability to recognise the musical flavour is an especially crucial indicator of an 'old ear'. These 'old ears' might be well-educated or of a high social status, or alternatively, be less educated.

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<sup>87</sup> The concept of 'face' includes 'gaining face' or social recognition in certain situations. Here, though, the expression is involved in a comparison between the story houses located in a main street, and those in a less prominent places. This refers to a piece of clothing, where *mianzi* describes the frontage surface, while *lizi* is the inside of the garment.

It is usually taken for granted that ‘old ears’ are more likely to be people of a more advanced age. However, among older listeners, there is a certain portion of people who are new regular listeners. They might be comparatively young within the advanced age group. Lin Jianfang shared his observation with me:<sup>88</sup>

These new audience members did not have time to watch live performances before their retirement, as most working people do nowadays. Although they retire from work roughly at 55 years old, due to the one-child policy, they still need to contribute in their new retired life by looking after their grandchildren. Thus, these people are only thoroughly free and gradually start to enter the story house when their grandchildren need less care. And we call them *laonian xin tingzhong* (‘advanced-age new listeners’) to highlight that, though an old man should have as much experience as an ‘old ear’, they are fresh to the *ping-tan* art.

These new listeners are certainly welcomed by the story houses. The increasing numbers in audiences reflects a prosperous market that the *ping-tan* business relies on. On the other hand, ‘old ears’ are less inclined to accept these new listeners. Their first concern is that new listeners tend to evaluate a performance by story content, rather than savouring the arts within performance, such as the way of interpreting a story and mellow ballad singing. Lin Jianfang further suggests that being able to engage with the singing sections requires years of practice by immersing oneself in the story house. Only becoming familiar with the story content can people then move focus onto the other components of a performance, starting to build up a mature judgement on the show, and identifying their personal preferences. The second concern is – though this is probably a result of the first – that storytellers cannot obtain useful feedback from new listeners to improve their performances. An ‘old ear’ audience member Lu Kai,<sup>89</sup> who was the former head of local cultural bureau, gave his view on the importance of sophisticated audience reception:

Nowadays, some storytellers are less self-critical and active than the previous generations. Even worse, simultaneously, enthusiasm for *ping-tan* among members of the audience has started to decline. The lack of intercommunication has significantly affected the current development of this genre.

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<sup>88</sup> Personal communication, 21 September 2012.

<sup>89</sup> Personal communication, 23 January 2012.

Lu Kai is disappointed by this situation. He rarely sits to appreciate full performances and only pops into the story houses to take photos of the performers as records of the decreasing level of both the performances and the audiences. He said: “I take photos for *ping-tan*, as if I am taking the last portrait of a beautiful lady.”

The third concern about the new listeners relates to their expectations when sitting in live performances: they listen to the literature performed by storytellers to remind them of their pasts. Due to their poor eyesight, this group of people often cannot read well, and they often show a decreasing ability to remember things. Thus, these people have fewer demands for a decent performance; instead, they focus on the story content, especially the stories that recall the life and history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The *ping-tan* performance actually fulfils for these people what might otherwise be gained by reading. Therefore, for these audience members, *ping-tan* performance is nostalgic, reflecting the experience and memory shared by a collective.

#### **4.4 Summary: Participants’ Roles both in and out of Performance**

In this chapter, the basic observation of the performance in story houses has been extended from on-stage performance to off-stage involvement in *ping-tan*-related activity. As Goffman (1959: 26) indicates, “a ‘performance’ maybe defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any the other participants. Taking a particular participant and his performance as a basic point of reference, we may refer to those who contribute to the other performances as the audience, observer, or co-participant...” In this case, the performance is all of the activity surrounding *ping-tan* performances that I observed through fieldwork. The role perspective provides a view that the participants in a performance cannot simply be seen in a dualistic relationship between performer and audience. The reality of participation is more complex.

The term ‘*shuoshu xiansheng*’ has a more profound meaning than merely referring to a performer or an entertainer. Although the historical view suggests storytelling is a job of low social status – and this concept still carries weight – the complexity of understanding is revealed by considering their different performance activities.

First, within the performance, the storyteller is required to take on different roles at different times. These include a cast of dramatic characters, the narrator, and the commentator. Various performing techniques and a conscious awareness of ‘jumping in and out’ of playing these roles means that a storyteller can deliver a performance in a more attractive and engrossing way. This chapter suggests that, rather than fluency of recitation

or any other skill, the storyteller's understanding of his or her role taking in a certain plot is probably one of the keys to accomplishing a satisfactory performance. Shifts in roles during a performance stem from changes in telling and singing.

Second, during the performance time, the storyteller delivers social and moral values, knowledge, folklore, customs and personal views to the audience through storytelling and singing. As well as amusing people, *ping-tan* serves a role of spreading positive energy to society. This chapter has explained that this means the occupation is highly valued by contemporary society. Moreover, the storytellers' personal views transmitted in these ways can be criticised by the audience, and receptions can vary greatly. Clashes of ideas between the storyteller and the audience, and sometimes those also involving the cultural bureau, can lead to social debates. Furthermore, it is notable that the views expressed within a performance are not necessary representative of the storyteller's real opinions. There is a compromise between the roles of the storyteller and one's real self.

Third, the storytellers hold the role and responsibility of ensuring that the performance community, comprised of learners, more accomplished performers and the various types of audience member, remains a close-knit social unit. Both the traditional apprenticeship and modern schooling have their own merits. Nowadays, professional employees still learn from a master through a traditional apprenticeship. This chapter suggests that, on the one hand, all practitioners are competitors, and this competition inevitably exists between the teacher and the student, as well as the trainees who have learned from a same teacher, and so on. On the other hand, all practitioners are bonded tightly within an apprenticeship, which functions not only as a marker to exaggerate one's selling points, but also brings a sense of belonging to a certain group to share and bear.

Finally, being a *ping-tan* audience member often involves many years of experience. Ideally, a local person's interests and knowledge are cultivated unconsciously during childhood, and as they get older they become sophisticated listeners. Although most current audience members do not reflect this ideal, they do have some general things in common. For all, *ping-tan* plays some form of role in their daily life, and it is part of their personal local soundscape. After their retirement, interests in *ping-tan* are stimulated for reasons such as nostalgia for past life, meeting old friends and new people, or passing time. This chapter suggests that people with these feelings have the potential to become senior audience members in years to come and consumers who can maintain the continuity of the business into the future. Encouraging these 'advanced-age new listeners' to engage more and more

deeply is perhaps a more realistic method than pursuing engagement with the younger generation.

Examining *ping-tan* participants' performances from a role perspective is significant, helping us to understand how *ping-tan* performance endows the participants with certain roles in the activities of performing and watching. Furthermore, participants' roles in live performance also extend to their off-stage *ping-tan* life, and in this way they build up an intimate relationship with this oral tradition. It is perhaps all of this role taking that makes up the *ping-tan* ecosystem, so that – as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter – performer performs, and audience audiences.

## Chapter 5. The Identities of *Ping-tan* Participants

Having looked at the various roles performed by *ping-tan* participants, in this chapter I move on to discuss the related issue of identity; in other words, the more enduring sense that these people belong to or identify with particular social groups. Generally in the humanities and social sciences, and in music studies in particular, the various perspectives from which identities are explored include nationality (Baily, 1994; Reily, 1994; Comaroff, 1995), gender (Magrini, 2003; Silverman, 2003; Harris, Pease and Tan, 2013), occupation (Hale, 1998; Beissinger, 2001), ethnicity (Stokes, 1994; Radano and Bohlman, 2000), religion (Barz, 2003; Engelhardt, 2009), race (Jackson, 1998; Radano, 2003) and so on. As *ping-tan* participants mostly share a similar cultural and geographic background, which is based upon their residence in the city of Suzhou city, these perspectives are less relevant here. The discussion of identity in this case is narrowed to a combination of 'role' and 'affinity' (Shelemay, 2011). These two forms of identity are those constructed by the sharing of values, thoughts, patterns of behaviour, habits, and so on within the *ping-tan* context. In particular, the storytellers' occupational identities, being either a *shangshou* ('upper hand') or a *xiashou* ('lower hand'), are derived from their training and relate to their roles in performance. Members of their audiences, on the other hand, can be divided into categories on the basis of affinity: connoisseurs (*hangjia*, 行家), enthusiasts (*ping-tan mi*, 评弹迷), aficionados (*aihaozhe*, 爱好者), habitués (*changke*, 常客), and amateurs/*ping-tan* fans (*piaoyou/fensi*, 票友/粉丝). Besides, tourists (*youke*, 游客) constitute an important group of *ping-tan* listeners, which will be discussed as well. These are categories I have identified from my interviews with participants and from other fieldwork observation.

The previous chapter explored the performer-audience relationship from a role perspective, starting from the live 'feedback loop' that underpins the dialogue between storytellers and audiences, and expanding its understanding to take account of radio and television broadcasts of *ping-tan*. In this chapter, identity is the perspective used to refine the analysis and examine differences between individuals within each of the two groups. For storytellers, the occupational identity division of being an upper or a lower hand follows an individual's talents shown in training for leading and assisting, and also their abilities in narrating and singing. For audiences, though most members appear similar insofar as they belong to older generations, I identified various different motivations, values, and activities that contribute to a more diverse picture of the identities within audiences.

In ethnomusicology, scholars discuss different types of identity presented in musical events. For example, according to Rice (2007: 21-23) the first article employing identity as a central theme in ethnomusicology was written by Waterman (1982), and discusses Nigerian popular music and its association with social identity. Stokes (1997: 24) investigates various topics such as ethnicity, nationality and gender, examining how these factors determine people's identity through the vehicle of music, as it is performed, danced to, listened to and even thought about. In this chapter, I am going to examine the 'internal' identity of individuals and social groups; by 'internal' identity I mean primarily the ways in which people think of themselves, as opposed to 'external' identity, the labels imposed from the outside. As *ping-tan* is a regional folk-art, nationality, ethnicity and gender are not the core issues in this topic. Rather, individual and group identity is the key. Several studies have examined *ping-tan* from an identity perspective, and they tend to take a historical approach. McDaniel (1997) explains how the storyteller's identity changed in line with expansions in social mobility between 1849 and 1949. She discusses how storytellers' identity was radically transformed from the period in which they were treated as beggars, following the development of the occupational guilds. The guilds' activities raised their social status towards becoming artistic creators. Focusing specifically on lineage transmission, Zhang and Dong (2011) examine how national policies reshaped the storytellers' skills and identity from 1949 to 1953. All of these perspectives are insightful when we look at the big picture of *ping-tan* from the perspective of historical transformation. However, I focus on the current situation, involving specific individuals, from a microscopic point of view.

I propose that 'affinity' is the central way of understanding the *ping-tan* community. As one of three types of musical community, Shelemay describes 'affinity communities', which 'derive their strength from the presence and proximity of a sizeable group and for the sense of belonging and prestige that this affiliation offers' (2011: 373). She highlights how affinity binds individuals with others as they become involved in musical activities. Thus, affinity denotes the connection between people who share the same interests. People take for granted that *ping-tan* audiences are grouped according to age, and sometimes, gender, as there are more male audiences than female watching daily performances. However, from a micro-perspective, these affinity connections generate different groups within the larger body. Specifically, people are driven by shared motivations, values, thoughts and habits to group together. For instance, habitués, though they visit the story house every day, do not care about what is being performed on the stage. Their reasons for attending have more to do with their general lifestyles. On the other hand, aficionados are less committed visitors to

the story house but dedicate their time and energy more into peripheral affairs, such as producing homemade newspapers and websites to support *ping-tan* and storytellers.

People who are in the same group share specific habits. Turino provides a habit-centred perspective to frame the concepts of self, identity, and culture, because ‘habits are both relatively stable and also dynamic and changeable’. They are said to balance the dynamic nature of individuals with cultural formation. In particular, he defines self, identity, and culture as follows (2008: 94-95):

... I conceptualize the *self* [sic] as comprising a body plus the *total* [sic] sets of habits specific to an individual that develop through the ongoing interchanges of the individual with her physical and social surroundings. *Identity* [sic] involves the *partial* [sic] selection of habits and attributes used to represent oneself to oneself and to others by oneself and by others... *culture* [sic] is defined here as the habits of thought and practice that are shared among individuals.

Turino suggests (2008: 95) that when people share certain habits in a particular way, these “shared habits bind people into social groups according to specific aspects of the self (gender, class, age, occupation, interests, etc.)” as ‘cultural cohorts’. Prevalent patterns of shared habits are considered *cultural formations*. In particular, he uses terms *cultural cohort* and *identity cohort* to refer to “social groupings that form along the lines of specific constellations of shared habit based in similarities of *parts* of the self” (2008: 111). In the *ping-tan* context, these groups of people can be thought of as cultural cohorts. So, connoisseurs, enthusiasts, aficionados, habitués, and amateurs/*ping-tan* fans join together to form the larger group – the *ping-tan* audience.

It has already been shown that storytellers are often identified – and they often define themselves – according to occupational aspects. The audiences are identified according to their cultural cohorts. These two different kinds of identities come together to form the *ping-tan* community. Shelemay (2011: 364) defines specifically ‘musical community’:

A musical community is, whatever its location in time or space, a collectivity constructed through and sustained by musical processes and/or performances. A musical community can be socially and/or symbolically constituted; music making may give rise to real-time social relationships or may exist most fully in the realm of a virtual setting or in the imagination.

This musical community is useful in understanding the *ping-tan* phenomenon. It also endorses a general sense among local people that *ping-tan* is a cultural symbol of the locality.

Biddle (1979: 5) states that “persons who share roles are also likely to share a common identity”. However, following the discussion of the playing of roles, this chapter will argue that *ping-tan* followers who appear to share the same role often distinguish themselves through belonging to different cohorts. The aim is to reveal participants’ self-expression within their specific identities, and within cohort identities. In particular, for the storytellers, upper and lower hand roles are two distinct identities existing in a mutually cooperative relationship. While there must be interaction between upper hand storytellers or lower hand storytellers, it is not this but storytellers working in duo cooperation that will be the topic of this chapter. The most intensive communication between the storytellers occurs when working in cooperation. In addition, as *pinghua* storytelling is always played solo, the discussion will not refer to it. No existing research has explored the sub-groups within the *ping-tan* audience. The audience is generally only described vaguely as elderly people. This chapter will categorise *ping-tan* audiences into several groups according to their motivation for engaging in diverse activities. It will illustrate how they express their identities throughout all kinds of communication with others. From my fieldwork observations, it seems that an individual is often highly conscious of his or her identity, while neglecting the subtleties of the identities of other people, thinking of them simply as ‘others’ or ‘some people’. Intercommunication or overlap between these cohorts is rare, and observations are mainly based on interviewees’ analysis of their own self-identity. This chapter conceptualises the categories of connoisseurs, enthusiasts, aficionados, habitués, amateurs/*ping-tan* fans, and tourists as specific audience cohorts. By examining these cohort identities and their relevant behaviours, a *ping-tan*-centred community shall be depicted.

## **5.1 The Identity of Storytellers in Duet Performance: Upper Hand and Lower Hand**

The *dandang* (‘solo’) has gradually been replaced by the *shuangdang* (‘duo’) as the most common form of *ping-tan* daily performance. In *ping-tan* jargon *pindang* (‘forming a partnership’) describes the agreement of being partners. All of the partnerships I discuss in this chapter are mixed-sex with a male upper hand, and a female lower hand. Mixed-sex

duos are almost always arranged in this way, although in exceptional cases women can be the upper-hand.

However, as Wu (2011: 107) suggests, the musical feature had been enhanced in early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although the solo *tanci* storyteller played a *sanxian* banjo to enrich performance, the focus for appreciation was constantly on the narration, rather than the often poorly-played musical episodes. Along with the appearance of female storytellers, the accompaniment of a *pipa* lute enriched *ping-tan* with more melodic playing. Acceptance for the formation of duos materialised in 1924, when male storytellers Shen Jian'an and Xue Xiaoqing's monumental *hutuo* ('commutative/mutual support') concept broke through the limitations of solo *ping-tan* performance. They became one of the 'top three duos' during the 1920s and 30s, the other two being the brothers Zhang Jianting and Zhang Jianguo, and the mixed-sex pair Guo Binqing and Zhu Xueqin. This collaboration demands that the two instruments support the solo singing. Later, duet singing enhanced emotional expression, mostly in the form of modern compositions written during and after the revolutionary period. The popularity of the duo form broke the male domination of the *ping-tan* world, introducing mixed-sex and all-female combinations onto the stage. Accordingly, people began to describe a duo partnership using the upper hand's name followed by that of the lower hand.

The lower hand takes more musical responsibility in the form of playing and singing, while taking only a small portion of the narration and dialogue role-playing. Regarding musical factors, more attention began to be paid to instrumental playing. For example, the lower hand storyteller Xue Xiaoqing added the long drawn-out tremolo and various ornamentations into the *pipa* accompaniment to accommodate singing of the Shen *diao*. Besides, based on the original Ma *diao*, Xue Xiaoqing created a unique interlude phrase called *qu tou yao weiba* ('cutting the head and biting the tail'). Specifically, the *pipa* rests at the beginning of most of the musical phrases, continuously playing in unison with the voice at the penultimate syllable of a stanza. Xue's innovation led to Shen Jian'an's stylish Shen *diao* in the *pipa* accompaniment.

But the essential job of a lower hand is to serve consistently as an assistant, elaborating the dominant upper hand's presentation. Bender (2005: 88-102) interviewed three female lower hand assistants about their duet cooperation. He discusses the challenges that the three interviewees confronted in their careers, such as difficulties in following the upper hand's performance, and more general inconvenience in the life of working with a male partner. All

of these discussions support the sentiments behind a saying in *ping-tan*: finding a perfect duo-partner is much more difficult than finding a perfect marriage.

### 5.1.1 Being an Upper Hand or a Lower Hand

At the beginning of student training, an individual is assigned either the upper or lower hand role according to their talent. Those who are good at narrating become upper hands, and those who excel at singing and playing instruments become lower hands. It is rare to swap roles during a career, even if the later development of an individual makes them more suited to the opposite role, or they find themselves in a duo where the skill levels are not balanced. In these cases, a duo will break up rather than swap roles. That they are supposed to play different instruments is another reason that the upper and lower hands cannot swap; the upper hand must play the *sanxian* and the lower hand must play the *pipa*.

An upper hand must possess professional attributes, for instance sophisticated narrative skills and extraordinary leadership, which require many years' experience. The upper hand leads most of the performance, which puts stress on that individual's voice, sometimes causing permanent damage. For example, the female upper hand Yu Hongxian eventually lost her voice after changing from the lower hand to the upper hand role. Moreover, the upper hand takes more responsibility for perfecting the performance than the lower hand. The lower hand should react to the upper hand's implications in performance, and offer assistance as much as the upper hand wants. In Bender's interview (1998: 337) with lower hand Cai Xiaojuan, she mentioned that a proficient lower hand assistant is "poised, attentive, and, if necessary, able to help out the lead if he or she gets lost or confused".

Neither the upper nor the lower hand is able to take over a duet without the cooperation of the other. This is especially true of the lower hand. An enjoyable partnership is always a precondition for a duo, but is not easy to achieve. Besides, it is more difficult for high-level masters to find a matched partner who is at the same level to cooperate with, so they give fewer long-episode performances in the story house than others; instead, they only perform for festival galas – one-off shows for large theatre audiences. Lin Jianfang explained:<sup>90</sup>

For some outstanding lower hand performers like Wu Jing and Zhang Lihua, their progress as artists meant they outdid their previous upper hand partners. The upper hand performer should always be able to lead the performance. Thus lower hands tend to seek partners better than themselves

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<sup>90</sup> Personal communication, 25 September 2012.

to work with. If both of the performers are matched to each other, for instance, the upper hand Sima Wei and the lower hand Cheng Yanqiu, they conduct a very smooth and successful career.

After splitting from an unbalanced duo, referred to as *chaidang* ('dismissing a partnership'), storytellers generally prefer to look for a partner of the opposite sex. Mixed-sex collaboration carries advantages in terms of a number of factors, such as the balance between vocal registers, performing styles, stage effects, and so on. Within the limited *ping-tan* circle, the news that a performer is seeking a partner, or that one has just split from a collaborator is never a secret.

## **5.2 Four Case Studies of Upper-lower Hands' Cooperation**

In the field, I interviewed several duos, ranging from prestigious performers to beginners recently graduated from school. To illustrate how far performers identify with the upper and lower hand labels, the next section will draw on the experiences of several partnerships: the husband and wife pair Ma Zhiwei and Zhang Jianzhen; the renowned duo Xu Huixin and Zhou Hong; the freelance team Hui Zhongqiu and Dai Xiaoli; and the young pair Xu Wenlong and Sun Yu, who are still in the early part of their careers.

### **5.2.1 Husband-wife Partners: Ma Zhiwei and Zhang Jianzhen**

Ma Zhiwei and Zhang Jianzhen graduated from the Suzhou Ping-tan School in 1991 and 1992 respectively. After graduation, they embarked on duo performance as employees of the Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe, and soon were married. They inherited the traditional and classic story *Yu Qingting* ('Jade Dragonfly') from the famous duo Wang Baiying and Jiang Wenlan. Other repertoire items include the traditional story *Si Xiang Yuan* ('Four Aromatic Relationships'), and a rearranged historical story *Xuexing Jiulong Guan* ('The Bloody Nine-dragon Crown'). Ma Zhiwei is an expert in Jiang *diao*, and Zhang Jianzhen is proficient in singing Yu *diao*. Zhang's exquisite *pipa* playing is also well known.



**Figure 5-1 Ma Zhiwei and Zhang Jianzheng's *Guanyu* story house performance on 30 August 2013.**

My conversations with other storytellers and audience members gave me the impression that Ma Zhiwei and Zhang Jianzheng are considered a 'perfect couple' in the *ping-tan* field, due to the seamlessness of their performances and their tacit understanding. This is a quality prominent in many husband-wife combinations. Indeed, the boundary between the married upper and lower hand is not as strict as for other teams. Off stage, they work on their individual parts, and then rehearse together. On stage, they support each other's part as much as possible. As the upper hand, Ma usually takes the main role, while the lower hand Zhang assists her husband's performance. Occasionally Ma's control of the performance is distracted by unusual circumstances, such as being sick, losing his voice after a tiring performance, or absent-mindedly allowing some blemishes to creep in. At these times, Zhang instantly takes over the narration and moves the plot along. Ma does the same if his wife requires support. As they are extremely familiar with each other's portions of the content, if one makes an error in performance, the other is able and willing to compensate for it, harnessing another relevant character in the story in such a way so as to prevent the audience from registering an embarrassing pause. If the mistaken content must be uttered by one specific character, Ma Zhiwei told me, he usually covers the missing part in the other plot afterwards, in order to sustain the logic and fluency of the storyline.<sup>91</sup> All these quick responses to remedy each other's blemishes rely on their enormous experience in saving predicaments and resolving embarrassments. Zhang Jianzhen suggests that this is a challenge for young performers: "If one forgets the content, the other also stops. They are not able to offset the missing content in their own voice."

<sup>91</sup> Personal communication, 30 August 2013.

From a practical perspective, living and working together is another advantage of husband-wife duos. Working in a troupe requires a minimum of 200 daily performances per year, while they actually worked more than 300 days at the beginning of their career. However, shifting between family life and a work mood can trigger arguments. Zhang Jianzhen confesses that, especially during intensive long-episode performance tours, disagreements about the other's presentation can cause tension in their daily life, with both of them insisting on their own opinions. To solve these issues, they either ask for advice from other people, such as their teachers, or find an agreeable way through performance practice.

Even though the pair try to arrange their work in places from which they can return home quite often, being outside of Suzhou means that Ma Zhiwei and Zhang Jianzhen sometimes are unable to take care of their family, and are apart from their child. For this reason, maintaining normal social life with friends is also not easy for them. Indeed, many husband-wife duos in the *ping-tan* circle have been unable to adhere to this job as a result of the comparatively low incomes; the arguments brought from performances to daily life; the difficulties in taking care of their families; the constraints on social lives, and so on.

Both Ma and Zhang suggest that if either the husband and wife are aggressive or bossy – desiring to be the dominant one either in life or on the stage – rather than yielding to the hierarchy between upper and lower hands, both spouses suffer. This philosophy seems to be a positive way to balance a husband-wife duo's daily life and work.

### **5.2.2 Renowned Long-term Partners: Xu Huixin and Zhou Hong**

The upper hand Xu Huixin, who was born in Shanghai in 1958, and the lower hand Zhou Hong, who was born in Suzhou in 1967, form one of the most prestigious contemporary *ping-tan* duos. Before they started to perform as a duo in 2010, they worked together several times for gala occasions. No matter where they perform, audiences crowd into the story house. Quite often, the tickets for their performances quickly sell out. They have many loyal fans, especially among the young generation. I had a chance to interview them when they gave a fifteen-day performance in Suzhou in September 2013. Subsequently, I found that a lot of students of Xu Huixin were waiting for his supervision, so I chose to conduct several further interviews with Zhou Hong alone, focusing on their duet cooperation from her point of view.



**Figure 5-2 Xu Huixin and Zhou Hong's performance on 1 September 2013, *Meizhu* story house. The stage scenery of plastic plum blossoms and bamboo symbolises the literal meaning of the name *Meizhu*.**

Zhou Hong is one of the leading lower hand assistants in the *ping-tan* circle. She has immense experience of supporting both male and female upper hands. She explained the most crucial points in duo cooperation, telling me that tacit understanding is the most important aspect:<sup>92</sup>

The most ideal duo collaboration in *ping-tan* is brotherhood, and then sisterhood, husband and wife couples, and then mixed-sex partnerships. The reason is, in a brotherhood, both the upper hand and the lower hand feel fewer restrictions about criticising each other. They can voice their personal concerns regarding the cooperation, such as 'today your *pipa* playing was absolutely awful, I could hardly sing!' The second reason is they know each other so well. For example, performances of the Yang brothers duo [Yang Zhenxiong and Yang Zhenyan] were as if one person was performing. You could hardly find a blemish between their connections.

In the past, lower hands were merely required to sing well and play the *pipa* in a reserved way, so that upper hands could take the spotlight. Zhou Hong suggests, however, a successful upper hand should not be an arbitrary leader,

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<sup>92</sup> Personal communication, 9 September 2013.

but also should give the lower hand useful suggestions to shape a better performance. In addition, the upper hand should help to improve the lower hand's skills, ensuring that they make progress together.

Zhou Hong affirms the significance of the lower hand's position in this cooperative work, and told me her opinion on what a good lower hand assistant should do:

During performance time, I pay attention to having good control of what I should do on the stage. When I sit down in the lower hand position, I always remind myself that the upper hand and myself, we are telling *one* story, and giving *one* performance.

There are various reasons that the cooperation between the upper hand and the lower hand might not be smooth. But a notable reason is jealousy from the upper hand, and less tolerance between each other. When the audience applauds the lower hand more than the upper hand, the upper hand can become annoyed and then make the lower hand upset both on the stage and off the stage. This situation happened quite often during my previous work with other colleagues. Now with Xu Huixin, we enjoy the partnership very much, because our focus is on polishing the performance and improving our skills, rather than competing with each other.

It is common that in duos, one performer is more able than the other. Zhou suggests, when the lower hand is better than the upper, the former should always remember that "you are at the lower position; you should not show off. You must be reserved in your performance, though you can still complete it perfectly".

Xu Huixin and Zhou Hong's performance styles involve great flexibility, tolerance, and careful consideration. Talking about their tacit prediction of the other's performance, she told me that she can always perceive the upper hand's spontaneity and improvisations, and the reasons behind them. Therefore, although their representative story *Qiu Haitang* has been performed many times, no performance is the same as the previous ones. Indeed, if at some point they feel a plot should be extended with a deeper description, they simply do so. All these factors affect how the content is spread out through the whole story. Zhou Hong explained:<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Personal communication, 1 September 2013.

Most storytellers are not able to be flexible in telling stories, especially the young generations. Because they can only recite the content taught by their teachers, even if they give a performance ten times, the beginning and the end points of each episode are the same. Otherwise, they don't know how to begin with the next day's session from a different point. So rather than 'storytellers', there are more 'story-reciters' nowadays. However, in the past, this was a fundamental skill of this occupation. It has become a challenge for the current young storytellers.

In addition, audience reactions are also helpful in inspiring a performance. For instance, if the live atmosphere is enthusiastic and warm, the tempo of the story naturally speeds up. In this case, the performance is more intense and possesses a smooth fluency. If audiences applaud too vigorously, however, sometimes the performance can be interrupted for a few seconds, and the fluency disrupted.

Audiences' expectations regarding singing are mostly conservative. Listeners naturally compare what they hear with maestros' classic performances from the past. However, Zhou Hong and Xu Huixin still make efforts to adapt the ballads. Zhou gave me an example from her latest performance. In order to coordinate with the upper hand's portrayal of an angry character, Zhou Hong changed her singing register:<sup>94</sup>

I am adept in singing Li *diao*. This tune is ideal to express a soft and gentle mood. However, today the character requires the opposite mood. If I still sing in the old way, it is unsuitable. So I borrowed the tune from Yang *diao*, but added the manner and the vocal register of Li *diao* to compromise with the emotional expression. Besides, I can understand Xu's interpretation: even though a person is in great anger, he actually feels down at that moment. Thus, I sang in a softer way in today's performance.

As Xu and Zhou told me, this illustrates how not being able to guess what and how they are going to perform is an important part of a successful performance.<sup>95</sup>

Zhou was told by the maestros: in duo performance, the upper hand and the lower hand should be just like one person performing; while in a solo performance one person should

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<sup>94</sup> Personal communication, 15 September 2013.

<sup>95</sup> Personal communication, 14 September 2013.

produce the effect of being like a crowd. Zhou interprets this in her own performances to mean that when the upper hand has more to express than simply narration can achieve, this is the moment for her – the lower hand – to replace the narration with singing. The process should not be abrupt but smooth and natural, and no matter how short the singing is, the expression should be intense.

A loyal follower of Xu and Zhou's duo, Pan Lie, a 30-year-old senior office worker, gave her view on the fluency of their performance<sup>96</sup>:

When the upper hand 'sets a hook', the lower hand instantly 'receives it' and moves the performance on. Zhou Hong accurately ties in with Xu Huixin's direction.

In Pan's view, role-casting moments demonstrate Xu and Zhou's remarkable ability to implicitly understand each other. Zhou generally plays the protagonists, while Xu plays the other characters. Especially when there are three or more characters in a scenario, they carefully distinguish the roles by means of timbre, accent, or other manners and registers. Pan gave her view on this seamless cooperation:<sup>97</sup>

As Zhou Hong has experience of being an upper hand with her lineage colleagues, she has a 'bird's eye view' of a performance, though she is a lower hand assistant. This experience is rare among other lower hand performers.

Zhou Hong told me that after one performance, a young audience member found her and said "I once felt that I wanted to die when I listen to *ping-tan*, but today, I am aware that I listened to the 'wrong' storyteller's performance before!" This audience's experience suggests that successful cooperation enhances the enjoyment of a performance for audiences.

### **5.2.3 Freelance Partners: Hui Zhongqiu and Dai Xiaoli**

Hui Zhongqiu and Dai Xiaoli are freelance performers, not employed by the main *ping-tan* troupes recognised by the local authorities, but by a number of more marginal troupes. My first encounter with storyteller Hui Zhongqiu was at his *dandang* solo performance at the Suzhou Ping-tan Museum in 2011. During fieldwork, many audience members told me that a

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<sup>96</sup> Text communication conducted through phone, 24 September 2014.

<sup>97</sup> Personal communication, 1 September 2013.

performance by Hui was a guaranteed big seller. Thus, in January and February 2012, when he performed with lower hand storyteller Dai Xiaoli, I took the opportunity to explore their cooperation.

Hui Zhongqiu is adept at solo *tanci* performance. He has been called a *matou laohu* ('tiger of the dock'), this nickname denoting a competitor so strong that others in the area are left struggling to find business. Usually, solo performance is less attractive to audiences than duo performance. However, the story house is always full for Hui's solo performances, and the tickets sell out quickly. His success is attributed to his productivity in new composition: he has composed twenty-three long-episode *tanci* works, and more than twenty opening ballads during a twenty-year career. Recently, Hui has embarked upon a new project to perform twenty of his works in solo, and twelve works in duo form, and to film them.

*Ping-tan* enthusiast Lu Zhigang has helped Hui to intermittently film his performances in Suzhou for more than seven years.<sup>98</sup> He told me about these new stories and Hui's narration:

Hui Zhongqiu's compositions are of a rough quality, because there is an enormous amount of information to accommodate. Generally, *ping-tan* stories focus on depicting the details as exquisitely as possible. If you extract the outline, a story consists of only a few events. We old men are more interested in the history. Hui is good at arranging historical figures' biographies. His performances do not get entangled in the details, but move the story on.

He is good at narration, not singing and playing the *sanxian*. So I prefer his solo performances, because he sings less in solo. If I want to listen to excellent ballad singing, I choose other storytellers' performances.

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<sup>98</sup> Personal communication, 2 October 2012.



**Figure 5-3 Hui Zhongqiu and Dai Xiaoli's *Wuyuan Shenchu* story house performance on 8 February 2012.**

When I reported Lu's comments to Hui Zhongqiu, he explained that his unusual way of telling a good story distinguishes him from others in the business, and he decides whether to present his works in solo or duo form according to the story content. For instance, in the story *Hu Xueyan*, which is adapted from the life story of a real historical figure, a plot describes Hu Xueyan's elder cousin's attempts to arrange a marriage for him.<sup>99</sup> The storyteller Hui analysed:<sup>100</sup>

Today I quickly skip over this event in one sentence. If I deliberately arranged musical components to fully expose her [Hu's cousin's] inner voice, I could make this section of the plot as long as eight episodes, in a duo. But I have more important parts to expand upon.

Hui judged that music must be added only when it is helpful in revealing the character's emotions and unspoken words. Correspondingly, the development of the storyline is adjusted, and the lower hand needs to sing many ballads. However, Hui confessed, even in a duet performance, he himself dominates the majority of the performance. He only hands over a little narration, dialogue, and ballad singing to the lower hand. For instance, in his collaboration with Dai Xiaoli on two fifteen-day stories called *Li Shishi* and *Chen Yuanyuan*, he explained the storyline to Dai, and she wrote down and practiced what he said.

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<sup>99</sup> Hu Xueyan was a successful businessman from Anhui, who lived from 1823 to 1885.

<sup>100</sup> Personal communication, 8 February 2012.

Dai Xiaoli told me that a two-hour session normally covers no more than two pages, and usually Hui tells her the next day's content after each day's performance. She recites the content fluently before they come together to practice. During the rehearsal, they thoroughly check sentence-by-sentence to avoid any wrongly-timed interventions. Dai appreciates her upper hand encouraging her to add her own designs, particularly by extending the inner voice of female characters from her woman's perspective. Regarding the sung ballads, she said: "Hui Zhongqiu teaches me the tune and every single detail to ensure I express what he expects."<sup>101</sup> Hui later explained to me, he prefers to mix various singing schools to serve his composition, a technique which is generally not advocated:<sup>102</sup>

Lots of audience members have said my ballad tunes are nondescript, implying that the pieces are not up to standard in quality. I composed the melodic contours mainly corresponding to the intonation of lyrics, distorting it a little according to the expression of the mood. And the music suits my vocal condition. It is just like a coat that looks beautiful on me, but may look different on you. But anyhow, the basic principle is that the musical pitch and the rhythm should be accurate.

Dai Xiaoli is happy that Hui's arrangement of the ballad singing and most of her narration saves work for her. The rest of the work that she completes as a lower hand is almost half of that which she does with other partners. When it comes to splitting the income, Hui treats Dai well because of her stressful financial situation. Instead of following the general trend to divide the money 60-40 in favour of the upper hand, they agree to split their earnings equally.

Hui Zhongqiu is confident about the value of his performance, and has a unique arrangement for splitting the profits with the story house. Other storytellers are paid a fixed price for a one-day session (usually 200 *yuan* for a solo and 350 *yuan* for a duo) by the story house, no matter if the box office takings cover the cost. This distribution guarantees the storyteller's income. Hui, on the other hand, takes a cut of ticket sales: the ticket price at the *Guangyu* story house is 5 *yuan*, and he takes 3.5 *yuan* from each one. Considering his huge popularity, he can earn at least two or three times more than others, while Hui's

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<sup>101</sup> Personal communication, 8 February 2012.

<sup>102</sup> Personal communication, 26 September 2012.

performances bring the story houses more profits than normal. This is a win-win situation. In terms of profit, Hui described his *pin dang* with Dai Xiaoli as a 'reduction'.<sup>103</sup>

In 2011, Dai Xiaoli gave 330 performances, while I performed less than 100 performances but earned more. I am single, but she carries a financial burden to feed two daughters. According to her artistic qualifications, she and other upper hand partners can only earn 350 *yuan* together per day, which they divide.

My solo performance brings me more than 500 *yuan* per day. I can easily earn 10000 *yuan* in one 15 day-session, even more than a general office employees' income. But working with Dai does not mean there are bigger audiences. So I have negotiated with the story house that, for sake of my prestige, the story house still gives 500 *yuan* per session, so each of us earns 250 *yuan*.

Once we gave a performance in Wuxi. I asked the manager of the story house for at least 5000 *yuan* in total; if the total income was less than 5000 *yuan*, I would be compensated the remainder. The reasons are, first, I have to take responsibility for my lower hand's income. Secondly, 500 *yuan* per session is the highest price of a fixed profit in this business. I must keep it up for the sake of my reputation. Dai Xiaoli is delighted with our cooperation. Usually, her solo performances are less than half full. She could never attract such large audiences in either solo or duo performances; not to mention a full house.

During my fieldwork, on rare occasions, I saw audience members holding out money in their hands, requesting any available ticket even though the performance had started. In these rare cases, the ticket box staff would have to ask the receptionist to maintain crowd order. Only the few top storytellers are able to produce such an effect, not to mention freelance storytellers. Hui's compositions are judged to be insufficiently exquisite and polished, and his works have not received the approval of his colleagues. Hui agreed that he should do more revision in the future, but judged that for the majority of audiences who go to the

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<sup>103</sup> Personal communication, 26 September 2012.

story house to kill time, their requirements are satisfied. Fewer, he argued, are seeking top-class art. Yu Changli, a follower of Hui endorsed his judgement:<sup>104</sup>

I like Hui Zhongqiu's narration very much. Indeed, his composition is a bit 'wild' and not of professional or exquisite standard. After all, he was a worker in a textile factory who later shifted to *ping-tan* because of his enthusiasm for it. He did not even get a middle-school education. However, he works much harder than other people. This is how he has become successful in this business.

Lu Zhigang told me that he has tried to persuade Hui to take the advice of audiences that he is more suited to solo performance, but Hui insists that an assistant saves him a lot of labour. Hui Zhongqiu has thus become one of the most outstanding freelance storytellers. In the realm of duo cooperation, however, perhaps he and his partner require more effort to become among the best.

#### **5.2.4 The Novice Duo: Xu Wenlong and Sun Yu**

Before graduating from the Suzhou Ping-tan School in 2012, Xu Wenlong and Sun Yu were brought together to perform as a duo. Afterwards, they began working as temporary members of the Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe. Their special expertise lies in performing the traditional long-episode story *Yang Naiwu Yu Xiao Baicai* ('Yang Naiwu and Xiao Baicai'), which has been passed down through the generations, and is well regarded by *ping-tan* audiences. Because they are junior storytellers, they mainly perform in community centres, and at the story houses in rural areas attached to Suzhou and other cities.

As students from 2010, Xu and Sun learned and polished their skills for each position in duo performance. Since graduating they find themselves not flexible enough to deal with unexpected developments and they are very shy on the stage; they can only strictly follow what they learned from their teachers. Xu Wenlong evaluated their performance:<sup>105</sup>

We are not allowed to modify narration or singing – not even a word – because it is already accepted as classic. We are allowed to insert humour or comments into the narration, but as we are inexperienced in making instant judgements, we simply copy those from others. But not every joke is suitable for people of our age to tell, as the audience is much older than us.

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<sup>104</sup> Personal Interview, 25 September 2012.

<sup>105</sup> Personal communication, 13 September 2013.

In order to improve their performances, they receive specific training from the troupe. Sun Yu told me that at school, they were outstanding students and were selected to become members of the *chuancheng ban* ('inheriting class'), who are trained by upper and lower hand experts in performing this story. However, these credentials did not prove enough for them to confidently confront the genuine stage-performing environment. Thus, they keep refining their interpretation of the story under training from the troupe. For example, their school training in ballad singing required them to memorise the melody; now they must avoid even the smallest imperfections, while mastering ways to sing special ornamentation, and correcting singing habits that go against the customs of certain singing schools.

Unlike the performers already profiled, whose stage-performing is mature and sophisticated, this young duo is not sufficiently qualified to perform in professional story houses such as *Guangyu* and *Meizhu*, where the audience appear to care much more about the performance art. As is the plight of all junior storytellers, Xu and Sun usually face audiences with less taste for *ping-tan*. The distinction between the professional story houses and the community centres is remarkable. Sun Yu explained that because of the well-meaning policy of the Suzhou local government, most community centres are free or charge one *yuan*. This is meant to encourage more people to approach *ping-tan*. By this means, the government intends to support the *ping-tan* business, and also reward residents. However, the reasons that some people take advantage are not necessarily those intended: in order to save on energy bills through reducing the use of air conditioning units at home, a number of elderly people qualifying for free city bus travel even commute to these community centres in order to enjoy the comfortable environment and kill time. Some people spend more than an hour in return travel every day. Some elderly women peel vegetables and chat to each other, ignoring the performance.



**Figure 5-4** Xu Wenlong and Sun Yu’s performance at *Shishan Shequ Zhongxin* (*‘Shishan Community Centre’*) on 13 September 2013. An audience member takes a nap in the foreground.

This kind of irritating behaviour distracts the performers, and reduces their motivation to perform well on the stage. As Xu Wenlong said “they do not care about what is being performed at all”, but for young storytellers there is no option but to remain in these low-grade venues. In addition to the performers, however, some audience members also cannot bear such rude behaviour and have to change positions in the room, or decide to visit professional story houses, and become regular members there. An old couple that I met during fieldwork even takes a two-hour round-trip bus journey from home to the *Guangyu* story house several times a week.

Among these less satisfactory story houses, Xu and Sun conclude that whether or not there is an entry fee is a good indicator of the sincerity of the audience’s involvement in the performance. The duo has had better experiences with audiences paying even a small amount of money. They think that ticket buyers value the payment that they make. At the same time, under these circumstances the duo receives more pressure, and if they do not perform well, audiences do not return the next day. Xu and Sun prefer being under more pressure, and would rather this than draw a fixed payment to entertain and endure rude audience members. They are still on the way to consolidating their careers, showing their credentials as upper and lower hand storytellers. By their performance in Wuxi in 2014, they had made great progress, having built up a reputation among that day’s audience. Sun Yu

told me that after these years of performances, the skills of both had improved and that they now feel much more relaxed about confronting unexpected scenarios.<sup>106</sup>

However, a different problem has also arisen during these years of practice, and it involves the artistic relationship within the duo. It has become clear that Sun Yu is more adept at narration, while Xu Wenlong is better at singing. When I asked her if it is possible to swap upper and lower hand roles, Sun told me frankly that it would not happen because in a mixed-sex duo, it is always the male that is the upper hand, and the female who assists. Sun said:

We find that I am not good at ballad singing, and he is not good at narration, because he always forgets what he is going to say. Thanks to our mature unspoken consensus and our familiarity with each other's parts, I am able to 'receive' his sections, and make up for what he has missed. But for me, as a lower hand assistant, when I start to sing, I cannot adjust my throat into a relaxed condition. Xu Wenlong's singing is more beautiful than mine.

She also feels pressure from their teacher and troupe leaders to maintain this partnership. Moreover, as they perform in community centres, when Xu makes major errors in his telling, no one is aware except her. In the professional story house, on the other hand, audiences would chatter and complain in similar circumstances. The troupe gives the duo an annual test, for which their supervisors train them intensively. It is more challenging to improve singing in a short time than it is for narration, and thus Xu, the upper hand, has performed better than Sun, the lower.

Indeed, the intentions of teachers and supervisors might not necessarily be wrong. Considering Xu Wenlong's ability to summon more resolve than usual when he faces a large audience, as well as his enchanting vocal register, he is thought of as a promising upper hand performer. Thus, it is reasonable for Sun Yu to take the lower hand role. The future for this duo is still uncertain. As Sun Yu said, however, she will strive to constantly improve as a lower hand storyteller.

'Upper hand' and 'lower hand' are profoundly different identities. Each one has very specific obligations. This section has argued that duo partnerships vary remarkably in quality and in inter-personal dynamics. The four cooperation types described above are the most common

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<sup>106</sup> Text communication conducted through phone, 16 May 2014.

in *tanci*. The different kinds of interpersonal dynamics within each one impact upon on-stage cooperation in significant ways.

### 5.3 The Diverse Identities of *Ping-tan* Audiences

The diversity of the *ping-tan* audiences should not be underestimated. During my fieldwork at the *Wuyuan Shenchu* story house in 2011, I chatted informally with different audience members. Some of them could not even tell me who was giving that day's performance, even though they had come every day for more than a week. Some people claimed that they were *ping-tan* amateurs, and made numerous comments about the storytellers and their performance. Some people pointed to a connoisseur seated somewhere else, suggesting that I consult him for details. Soon I realised that the composition of audiences is far more complicated than is usually assumed, when spectators are simply classed as 'old people'. From then on, I began to keep constant track of the types of people I encountered.

Turino (2008: 102) argues that the foundation of social identities is the foregrounding or recognition of habits that an individual shares with others. In my interviews of audience members, rather than telling me their occupational identity, they generally identified themselves in a way relevant to the *ping-tan* context, according to their involvement in its affairs. Turino (2008: 106) points out that:

In-group and out-group status are marked by a broad range of signs... As public articulations framed to receive special attention, often the arts are key rallying points for identity groups and central to representation of identity. Some markers of group identity, such as speech accents or gendered ways of walking, may be such old habits that they operate low in focal awareness most of the time. Other identity markers are consciously used for self-presentation and identity.

The basis of my categorisations is as follows: for individuals who identify themselves as being within a specific cohort, I follow these self-categorisations directly. This often occurred for aficionados, habitués, and amateur/fans. If, on the other hand, an individual does not identify with a certain cohort for some reason, such as being humble, but shares similar behaviour, habits and values with one particular group, I use that label to describe them in this dissertation. Often this was necessary for connoisseurs and enthusiasts. Members of *ping-tan* audiences belonging to a certain group can recognise others whose habits are different from their own. However, despite the fact that they are often clearly aware of their identities within a cohort of people sharing similar habits, this does not necessarily imply

that there is intimacy between individuals within a cohort. People who share the same cohort identity might not even communicate extensively with members of the same group. Indeed, the prevailing atmosphere is for members of different groups to hardly communicate at all.

Although the meanings of the terms ‘enthusiast’, ‘aficionado’ and ‘amateur’ have some degree of overlap, their original Chinese versions imply different degrees of involvement. The nuances of meaning between them illustrate the diversity of identities in the *ping-tan* arena. Connoisseurs (*hangjia*, 行家), enthusiasts (*ping-tan mi*, 评弹迷), aficionados (*aihaozhe*, 爱好者), habitués (*changke*, 常客), and amateurs/*ping-tan* fans (*piaoyou/fensi*, 票友/粉丝) all display subtly different patterns of behaviour, habits and values.

### 5.3.1 The Connoisseur Audience

Connoisseur audience members usually do not use this term to describe themselves; rather, other people, including storytellers do so. Some characteristics that connoisseurs share may explain the reason: first, they are people of a comparatively advanced age. Although the term connoisseur does not necessarily imply seniority in age, it does highlight an assimilation of experience, knowledge and involvement of *ping-tan*. Secondly, other audience members possessing less knowledge usually do not dare discuss *ping-tan* with them. Often, those within the connoisseur category have known each other for decades, and often have worked in *ping-tan*-related jobs. They have little need to socialise with other members of the audience. In story houses, they may sit together and chat, and others may find it hard to penetrate or disturb this group. Thirdly, the connoisseur cohort has a comparatively higher educational background and social status than the others. This also serves to separate them from the average *ping-tan* audience.

One of my interviewees, Lu Kai, was the former head of the Culture and Broadcasting Bureau. He has a high reputation among fellow audience members, not only because of his status in wider social life, but due to his wide knowledge of *ping-tan* and his insightful opinions. Another interviewee, Bi Kangnian, the current chairman of Suzhou Quyi Committee, is also very familiar to his fellow spectators. Both of them have a close relationship with *ping-tan* practitioners, but also enjoy greater freedom to judge the storytellers’ performances than those directly working in the business.

Perhaps, knowing *ping-tan* deeply, these individuals have pessimistic views on the present artistic level and on its future development. They tend to discuss *ping-tan* from a long-term

point of view. This contrasts with most practitioners and audience members. Lu Kai used the analogy of *ping-tan* being a deeply rooted tree, but one that is sick.<sup>107</sup> Although Lu still goes to the story houses to listen to *ping-tan*, he cannot enjoy the performances. Rather, as he said, he is a witness to the decline of *ping-tan*. In our interviews he expressed his worries for the future of this field and gave a series of explanations for the tree's bad health. First, performances are less polished, or not exquisite enough. Sometimes even the quality of new compositions is ragged and makes little impact, not to mention their presentation. Secondly, storyteller's rewards have declined greatly in the last two decades. Lu gave me an example:

The storyteller Jin Shengbo could afford a full house in the centre of Suzhou after giving three months of performances. Nowadays, under the pressure of limited material rewards, lots of excellent storytellers have despaired about this job. Although there are policies to fix a certain level of rewards if a storyteller is designated a *Guojia yiji yanyuan* ('National Class-A Artist'), this goes against the *ping-tan* principle that the more competitive the environment, the better storytellers and stories will come out. Once storytellers strived to survive against forceful competition, and they overcame the difficulties. It should be the market, not the administration to decide if a performer survives or not. The current prosperous scene of *ping-tan* is fake. Thanks to the support of audience members and the media *ping-tan* programmes, *ping-tan* is still alive.

He further explained that fixing a minimum token fee eliminates the natural competition between the storytellers. The government attempts to sustain low ticket prices to attract larger audiences to follow *ping-tan*. However, it simultaneously harms initiative among the storytellers to improve their artistic level. Lu provided his solution to this dilemma:

The government pays a lot for official galas and competitions that are hosted by the *ping-tan* troupes. If this money was spent to subsidise the story house box office, the situation might be changed. Particularly, keeping the present ticket price, but subsidising each ticket sold, then storytellers could earn more. Besides, reviving the approach of allocating profits according to attendances, rather than paying a minimum token fee, would encourage storytellers financially.

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<sup>107</sup> Personal communication, 23 January 2012.

Overall, Lu Kai's suggestion is that storytellers should gain audience approval at an artistic level before achieving a foothold in the *ping-tan* circle. It should be the market that decides a storyteller's fortune. In contrast to Lu Kai's view on these market mechanisms, Bi Kangnian attributes the decline of *ping-tan* to the storytellers' lack of effort in improving themselves:<sup>108</sup>

Since the 1960s, no singing schools emerge anymore. Heritage is the essence that precedes development. Indeed, to cultivate great talents is the priority. Hardware facilities [infrastructure] are easily built up, while software [cultivating talents] is vital in sustaining development. Despite there being a lot of excellent performers in the *ping-tan* troupe, it is rare that they are potential maestros. This situation exists not only in *ping-tan*, but in other art genres over the country as well. If you compare it with the *Yangzhou pinghua* and cross talk in Tianjin, the situation of *ping-tan* is not bad at all!



**Figure 5-5 Bi Kangnian in his office on 3 October 2012.**

Bi summed up his attitude towards the decadence he perceived, noting that people are inclined to “learn by force”, rather than to “learn by will”. In particular, ‘National Class-A Artists’, who are the most outstanding performers, are kept busy with office-based work,

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<sup>108</sup> Personal communication, 26 September 2012.

and do not give long-episode performances in the story house anymore. In addition, these people are highly rewarded for part-time shows because of the great fame they enjoy. Thus, Bi Kangnian suggested that these part-time windfall jobs should be restricted. Instead, the troupe should encourage outstanding storytellers with higher rewards for giving more daily performance in the story house. By this means, storytellers could focus more on refining their performing skills and presentation:

Today, storytellers' working conditions have improved a lot. In the past, they had to carry their instruments and rush by boat to give their next performance. Now, they can drive to the story house and go back home, rather than staying in the poor conditions of story house for months. We think out different ways to reward outstanding and hard-working performers. But, for those who have made it to the top, they have less motivation to make further progress.

Bi also made a more optimistic suggestion: the chain of *ping-tan* preservation – the school, troupe, story houses, museum, and research institution – this cycle remains the vitality of *ping-tan*. Although it is difficult to stimulate the storytellers with competitive salaries, *ping-tan* is not as incurable as most old genres in China.

These connoisseurs have an intimate relationship with *ping-tan*, working closely with the genre. Not everyone working in or with *ping-tan* is treated as a connoisseur. What distinguishes those considered connoisseurs from their colleagues, in addition to their great knowledge about *ping-tan*, is perhaps their ability to view the *ping-tan* field from a long-term perspective. Although they sometimes hold conflicting attitudes about the future development of *ping-tan*, their sincere concern for its success is venerated by other *ping-tan* followers.

### 5.3.2 The Enthusiast Audience

The enthusiasts may be the group that engages most actively in *ping-tan* affairs. Enquiring from these people is the most direct way to learn about recent *ping-tan* shows in Suzhou, and when I initially embarked upon fieldwork, chatting with them was my first port of call to understand live *ping-tan* performance. They have very intimate relationships with the professional story houses, and with the storytellers that they are fond of. Lu Zhigang told me about his network:<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Personal communication, 9 February 2012.

The staff of the box office rings me as soon as they know the latest programme and they reserve tickets for me. They also inform other enthusiasts. We have watched *ping-tan* in the story house for so many years, so the staff is acquainted with us. Likewise with storytellers, if I want to enjoy a performance by the storyteller Hui Zhongqiu, but the venue is in a rural area that I am unfamiliar with, I call Hui and ask him to reserve tickets for me. If Hui is going to perform in Suzhou, he phones me. Sometimes I treat him to a meal as a reward. After my retirement, this *ping-tan* social group became more important in my daily life.



**Figure 5-6 Lu Zhigang and his wife in their home on 2 October 2012.**

Few audience members enjoy such priority and convenience in relations with both the story house and the storyteller. Indeed, these enthusiasts have been regular audience members for many years, and possess an assimilated knowledge of *ping-tan*, to the extent that they are recognised by the house staff and can communicate personally with the storytellers. To some extent, these relationships are a sign that an audience member has approached the core of the *ping-tan* social circle. Thus, it is understandable that these audience members are delighted to be called *ping-tan mi*; this means that they are enthusiastic fans of certain favoured storytellers, and that the storytellers also distinguish these individuals from other spectators.

Not every one of them is keen to socialise with the storytellers whom they appreciate. Instead, some maintain a distance that allows them to freely express critical judgements of the storytellers and their performance. They criticise all details about performances, and are inclined to express disappointment about the present performers and performances when

they compare them with the great performances of past masters. These kinds of comments often trigger antipathy from current performers. In addition, enthusiasts also often express their disappointment to their fellow audience members about the latter not being able to appreciate the art of *ping-tan*, and only focusing on the story content. However, at the same time, they asked me not to record this information because “these are negative to *ping-tan*”. For example, one anonymous enthusiast told me about his way of judging whether a storyteller’s performance is mature or not. He argued that a performer’s stagecraft is crucial. He then pointed to the stage, judging the storytellers giving the performance that day by saying:

These two young storytellers have just graduated from school and are considered to be professionally trained through their years at school. However, due to a lack of experience in performing on the stage, it is difficult for the young generation storytellers to handle live conditions. Besides, they put less effort into preparation, and excellent performers work much harder than them.

Another audience member Chen Youcai gave his thoughts on the younger storytellers, saying that they can only recite what they were taught at school; therefore, their performance style is stiff.<sup>110</sup> Although some senior storytellers have performed for decades, they may also be considered less prepared, as their style is casual. Particularly, Chen complained about the storytellers applying a chatty presentation style, and sweeping into the storyline whatever jumps into their mind, instead of telling the story with a good structure. Moreover, if storytellers commit too many errors, their performance is considered a failure. Chen gave an example:

Good storytellers hardly say a single word out of place, or get stuck in their articulation. For example, once the storyteller Gao Bowen gave a performance in sessions covering fifteen days. He perfectly completed all the instalments without committing even one mistake, not to mention adding extra words to fill the gaps between sentences. His articulation is extremely full and clear.

Mistaking the name of a character, or missing some key information is not acceptable. Some storytellers may apologise to the audience immediately, whereas some people simply continue telling the story without drawing

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<sup>110</sup> Personal communication, 25 September 2012.

attention to the mistake. It is inevitable to wrongly articulate sometimes in telling a story. With a new story, making errors can be understood. It is unforgivable in telling classic stories.

However, when Lu Zhigang outlined to me his attitude towards making mistakes, he suggested that if a storyteller exploits his own advantages to full use in a performance, they can be regarded as a successful storyteller. He gave the example of Hui Zhongqiu:<sup>111</sup>

Hui Zhongqiu is acquainted with Chinese history, thus most of his story compositions have historical themes. If you listen carefully, you discover that certain historical figures that he is more familiar with are often encountered in his stories. He manages to insert these figures into the relevant plots of different stories.

Chen Youcai highly praised the performers who are excellent in their own specialities. He agreed that in order to become a successful performer, being extremely adept at even one single skill, such as sophisticated instrumental playing, or well-placed gestural acting can bring a storyteller success in this business. Lu Zhigang notes that, for some repertoires, the enthusiasts in the audience are thoroughly familiar with the storylines and development. When they watch a performance, they only choose to pay attention to what they are most fond of among all of its elements, for instance, sections of exquisite narration, ballad singing, or role-playing.

Enthusiasts are demanding about the aesthetics of a performer's behaviour, and are adamant that their appearance should more or less embody and mimic the character presented in the story. Lu Zhigang explained why the storyteller Gao Bowen finds success in telling the story *Zhenzhu Ta* ('Pearl Pagoda'):

*Zhenzhu Ta* is about the love between a young scholar and a beautiful lady. Hence, compared to an aged storyteller, a young storyteller enjoys the advantage of being able to play the part of the handsome young man better. Gao Bowen has a smart look. He has charming and sophisticated skills in singing and telling. Can you imagine a duo of older storytellers acting out a plot about courting? Older storytellers are more convincing at acting as emperors and more general roles than younger ones.

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<sup>111</sup> Personal communication, 9 February 2012.

Chen Youcai also agreed with this point of view, and suggested that appearance is the only thing that cannot be changed in *ping-tan* performance. Unlike with operatic costumes and cosmetics, the storyteller can only rely on his or her own physical appearance as they play the entire role. Although exquisite skills can offset a storyteller's disadvantages in terms of appearance, Chen suggests that a good-looking storyteller presents a pleasant stage manner to the audience's eyes. He gave the example of Cheng Yanqiu's stage manner:

Cheng Yanqiu's stage manner is temperate and she appears comfortable in her own skin. She is a beautiful lady, so I appreciate her performances. Nevertheless, her articulation and presentation are explicit and clear, offering the audience aural enjoyment. I savour the pleasure from taking in her performance to the full!

On the contrary, some storytellers neither have an attractive look and manner on the stage, nor are they equipped with certain compatible skills. How can you appreciate these *ping-tan* performances? These performances are not easy on the eyes and ears.



**Figure 5-7 Sima Wei and Cheng Yanqiu's *Guangyu* story house performance on 3 October 2012. The house is so full that a member of staff (standing) arranges extra seating in the courtyard.**

Enthusiasts may have fixed ideas regarding their criteria for good singing, and often these ideas offend storytellers. The enthusiasts usually welcome close resemblance to the performances of past maestros. In fact, these listeners do possess great knowledge in identifying the various tunes from diverse singing schools. This separates them from the less experienced audience members. In addition, they often apply strong personal tastes to their judgements, and are well-informed about details of their favoured singing schools. For

instance, Chen Youcai's preference for Jiang Yuequan's *Jiang diao* is illustrated in the following interview excerpt:

I am fond of *Jiang diao* very much. Among the younger generation [referring to the storytellers who are in their 30s], Zhang Yimou's singing qualification goes without saying. A lot of storytellers specialise in singing in *Jiang's* tune because of its popularity. The singing of these two performers highly resembles Jiang Yuequan's original version, in aspects such as their wonderful timbre and vocal register. The other tunes of Zhang, Yan, Shen, as well as the tunes generally sung by females such as Yu and Li, [more so than *Jiang diao*] each of these has its own characters. Well, some people like these [tunes] very much.

In order to review the performances and to enjoy again their highlights, Chen Youcai often brings his own camera to film live performances. He burns the recordings onto DVDs for his own collection. He mentioned in particular that the husband-wife duo Zhang Yimou and Guilan's collaboration in the story *Yu Qingting* ('Jade Dragonfly') is splendid, and that he enjoys this recording at home very often.

However, sometimes a judgement that a storyteller's singing or telling is similar to that of a maestro's original, although meant unequivocally as a compliment and as an endorsement of a performer's heritage, is not always approved of by storytellers. This contradiction is especially acute when it comes to singing. The storyteller Zhou Hong commented:<sup>112</sup>

There are a lot of listeners who say that our performance should be as similar as possible to the original storyteller's. If the storyteller sang with a rough vocal timbre, you should sing in that way, regardless of whether this will hurt your throat. When they listen to our singing, they are simultaneously thinking of that person [the master], and start to compare.

Thus, one of the most important characteristics of the enthusiasts is that they can influence performers with their feedback. This group tends to hold particularly strong opinions. Its members are also often active in expressing these views to storytellers, who generally treat this feedback seriously even if it is sometimes old fashioned and might cause the storytellers to sing in ways that are potentially harmful to their voices. For example, they expect storytellers to imitate the masters heard in famous recordings, an approach often attractive

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<sup>112</sup> Personal communication, 1 September 2013.

to those with less knowledge of *ping-tan* or those particularly respectful towards authority. Zhou Hong explained that allegiances towards certain masters can be irrational, as these masters created their *diao* singing schools according to their own natures. Followers, on the other hand, might not share the same natural characteristics:

The ages of thirtysomething or fortysomething are considered to be a performer's peak for singing. After forty-five years old, the throat becomes naturally less capable of difficult work. The maestros had to adjust their singing skills to suit their natural voice. But people are keen on the mature and sophisticated singing that they produced during late middle age. Young storytellers then devote their learning to pursuing this later-age kind of singing. That is why lots of excellent performers cannot sing well anymore: you cannot sing in the way that is unsuitable for your throat and your natural voice.

Zhou Hong explained her own experience of singing Li *diao* in a way that was modified to suit her own personal characteristics. When her teacher Xu Lixian, the creator of Li *diao*, sang a representative ballad *Luohan Qian* ('The Luohan Coin'), Xu exerted herself to vocalise at a loud volume because her voice had this natural capability. However, Zhou Hong keeps her volume level low when singing this piece, but adds more *vibrato* and slides. Apart from preventing potential harm from singing at high volumes, she suggested that this more refined way of singing actually allows her to express the reminiscent emotions of this ballad.

### 5.3.3 The Aficionado Audience

There are a small number of aficionado audience members who go to story house punctually every day as if going to work. Unlike the enthusiasts, they do not immerse themselves in the performances; rather, they bring cameras and other equipment to shoot or record the live performance. These people devote themselves as volunteers to *ping-tan* after retirement: running newspapers, organising the *ping-tan* collection institution, and administrating *ping-tan* websites and blogs. Respectively, three figures will be presented as examples here: Wang Gongqi, who privately publishes a newspaper to propagate *ping-tan*; Yin Dequan, who hosts the Suzhou Ping-tan Shoucang Jianshang Xuehui ('Suzhou Ping-tan Collection and Appreciation Institute'); and Reng Kangling, who is the main leader conducting a prestigious *ping-tan* website, and a senior member of the Suzhou Ping-tan Collection and Appreciation Institution.

The first figure of the aficionados, Wang Gongqi, was born in Suzhou in 1928. After receiving three years' primary school education, he became an apprentice in a fabric store when he was thirteen. In 1950, he got a chance to become an office worker for the newspaper *Suzhou Ribao* ('Suzhou Daily'). He was later accepted by the newsgroup to learn how to write news releases, and embarked his professional journalist career until his retirement in 1994. Wang Gongqi had been keen on *ping-tan* since he was a child. He even learned *pinghua* from a storyteller for a month. Thus, *ping-tan* has been a focus in his news releases. He started to run a fortnightly newspaper *Ping-tan Zhi You* ('Friends of Ping-tan') since June 2005, doing all jobs of the collection of materials, news writing, copy-editing, printing, and posting. *Ping-tan Zhi You* was inherited from another private publication *Lao Tingke* ('Old Listening-customer') that was compiled by a Shanghai aficionado Jiang Xilin since 2002. Due to Jiang's death in June 2005, Wang Gongqi took over his job. *Ping-tan Zhi You* has been widely subscribed to by *ping-tan* followers not only from local Suzhou, but also from other parts of mainland China, Hong Kong, Macaw, Taiwan, and abroad such as Japan and Australia. From 2013, due to Wang Gongqi's advanced-age, he has handed over many responsibilities to the Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe.

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主编:王会金(总编) 副主编:王会金(总编) 编辑:215004 苏州市春香路彩虹苑52幢106号



## 丽调开篇成为哈佛教材

文/周 王会金

孩子,能安全地长大,就幸福于自己心中,从中获得生命的喜悦。这种喜悦的天赋实在对艺术所成的长久影响,在写自己的自传时,飞以欢笑,甜方面,得到了别人的帮助,从而有了自己的艺术之梦。十五岁那年,小徐第一次在台上,唱了那首《绣像》,之后,走上了台,唱了那首《绣像》,得到了大家的赞扬。

徐丽娟的童年,青葱时代,是“音乐”度过的。那是父母对她的培养和熏陶。有时,她一天只吃几顿饭,还交不了,就哭开了。那时,她听到了那首《绣像》,受到了那首《绣像》的熏陶,徐丽娟才有了今天,有了今天,她唱出了那首《绣像》,有了今天,她唱出了那首《绣像》,有了今天,她唱出了那首《绣像》。

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创的成就来自“闯”——徐丽娟

## 开创“丽调”流派唱腔

1958年,上海文艺界为繁荣创作,组织文艺界人士,对评弹进行了广泛而深入的调查。当时,评弹界涌现出一大批新人,他们带来了新的唱腔,这些唱腔有的来自民间,有的来自书本,有的来自生活。徐丽娟就是其中之一。她根据自己的嗓音条件,创造出了“丽调”唱腔,这种唱腔新颖、动听,深受听众喜爱。

## 九岁起学弹唱曲

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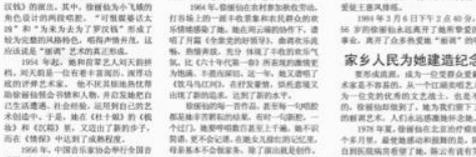
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## 评弹之友 半月刊

2009年8月5日出版(复刊第100期) 加强时效 八月二期 提前出版

主编:王会金(总编) 副主编:王会金(总编) 编辑:215004 苏州市春香路彩虹苑52幢106号



## 丽调开篇成为哈佛教材

文/周 王会金

孩子,能安全地长大,就幸福于自己心中,从中获得生命的喜悦。这种喜悦的天赋实在对艺术所成的长久影响,在写自己的自传时,飞以欢笑,甜方面,得到了别人的帮助,从而有了自己的艺术之梦。十五岁那年,小徐第一次在台上,唱了那首《绣像》,之后,走上了台,唱了那首《绣像》,得到了大家的赞扬。

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Figure 5-8 The front and back sides of the 100th volume of Ping-tan Zhi You.

In order to report the up-to-date news that happens in the ping-tan circle, though Wang has difficulty with walking and must use a walking stick, he insists upon collecting the latest information and interviewing the relevant people during the daytime, and writing all the

drafts in the evening. Wang Gongqi told me that sometimes he works too much, then he suffers with not seeing clearly, and he has to use a magnifier to help him to see and write.<sup>113</sup>

This *Ping-tan Zhi You* is an octavo double-sided design newspaper. The contents includes advanced announcements of performances in the story houses, and special programmes scheduled to be broadcast by radio and television *ping-tan* platforms; reviews of ongoing performances; introductions to the *ping-tan* storytellers; reports of *ping-tan* circle news such as apprenticeship ceremonies and obituary notices; introduction to texts and analysis of stories and ballads; profiles of regular audience members and so on. Wang Gongqi uses the pen name Zheng Lairen, or sometimes 'editor' in order to reduce the duplication of the number of the appearances of his name because only rarely do other people contribute their articles or reviews from other cities, such as Shanghai, Hangzhou, and even Beijing and Hong Kong.

*Ping-tan Zhi You* has played an important role in connecting *ping-tan* followers beyond the geographic boundaries. In its 100th issue, a reader Zou Yixin from Shanghai, gives a complimentary appraisal of its various contributions, in "delivering copious amounts of information from the *ping-tan* circle to connect all the participants; holding fair-minded attitudes to the performances and performers to convince the readers; offering the platform for the readers to make their voice heard; collecting *ping-tan* anecdotes to recall and restore the affairs in the past."<sup>114</sup> In its 147th issue, in reader Fei Lin's article, he admires the spread of the newspaper to worldwide readers who love *ping-tan* but live out of the *Yangzi* delta region, as well as Wang Gongqi's constant contribution to this publication.<sup>115</sup>

Although a lot of audience members refer to Wang as a connoisseur of *ping-tan*, he persists in describing himself as a *ping-tan* aficionado:

I am a journalist. Not like the connoisseurs who had previous jobs in the *ping-tan* circle and still keep their involvement, I am keen on reporting the news as my contribution to *ping-tan*. No matter where there is a new long-episode performance, I travel there and report it, then rush to another performance venue. I interview the performers and the audience members. I usually write complimentary reports about novice storytellers to encourage them. I am

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<sup>113</sup> Personal communication, 24 January 2012.

<sup>114</sup> See 'Xiao baozhi, Da gongneng' ('Small journal, major functions'), *Ping-tan Zhi You*, No. 100, 5 August 2009.

<sup>115</sup> See 'Yige lao baoren he tade *Ping-tan Zhi You*' ('An old journalist and his *Ping-tan Zhi You*'), *Ping-tan Zhi You*, No. 147, 1 August 2011.

willing to dedicate to *ping-tan* all my effort in compiling this newspaper, spreading the news of *ping-tan* to the people who love it.

One highlight of Wang Gongqi's dedication to reporting on *ping-tan* is his book *Shutan Chunqiu* ('Spring and Autumn Story Altar') published in 2003, compiling all the *ping-tan* news releases written before his retirement. In 2011, he followed this up with a collection of further news releases from *Ping-tan Zhi You*, along with some excellent pieces written by readers, calling it *Shutan Chunqiu Xu* ('Spring and Autumn Story Altar II').

The second figure among the aficionados, Yin Dequan, is not only famous for his job as a producer of *ping-tan* television programmes on local stations, but is also well known for his personal *ping-tan* collection and is one of the leaders of Suzhou Ping-tan Collection and Appreciation Institution, which is a community-run organisation.



**Figure 5-9 Yin Dequan in his office on 21 August 2013.**

With the flourishing of *ping-tan* in the 1980s, Yin Dequan immersed himself deeply in the genre, recording radio programmes and collecting materials about *ping-tan* before becoming a producer. He and some other listeners met casually and then assembled as a social *ping-tan* club named *Zhiyin* ('Confidant'). At first, its members only exchanged their *ping-tan* materials and recordings. Later, they started visiting and consulting *ping-tan* experts and connoisseurs, as well as the storytellers. During these activities, on the one hand, they took advantage of various means to collect the *ping-tan* themed books, journals, performance programmes, photos, as well as the instruments and props used by the storytellers. On the other hand, they built up the network between people in the *ping-tan* circle. However, it was not until autumn 1993 that, due to their high influence within the *ping-tan* circle, the establishment of Suzhou Ping-tan Collection and Appreciation Institution

obtained the support from the *ping-tan* circle and society, becoming the only registered *ping-tan* society with a legal license from the local Civil Bureau. Yin Dequan became the general secretary of the institution, and nominated the senior member Ren Kangling as the chairman.

The Suzhou Ping-tan Collection and Appreciation Institution has around eighty members, of whom roughly thirty are from the Suzhou area, approximately thirty are from Shanghai, and the others are from the neighboring cities of Yangzhou, Changshu, Changzhou, Wuxi, Hangzhou, Pinghu, and one member is from Xi'an in the northwestern part of China. Most of these members are teachers, doctors and journalists, who not only have comparatively higher educational backgrounds and social status, but also have great enthusiasm for *ping-tan*. The chairman Ren Kangling gave his comments on attending this institution.<sup>116</sup>

People should have some special hobbies that they are deeply involved in. *Ping-tan* is artistic and abundant; people in the institution enjoy their own special collections. For example, one guy's collection focuses on storytellers' signatures. He has collected more than one thousand signatures already so far. Another guy collects the painting and calligraphy works drawn by storytellers. Not to mention others who have large collections of tapes, phonograph discs, storytellers' scripts, photos, and so on.

Yin Dequan has various stories about his collecting of *ping-tan*. He shared his experience to me:<sup>117</sup>

Once I recorded the story *Baishhe* ('White Snake') performed by Jiang Yuequan and Zhu Huizhen from the radio programme. It was first broadcast at 7 pm, and was replayed at 5:30 am in the next morning. Because the signal was terribly disturbed by other radio programmes, I decided to record the replay in the chilly winter morning. However, I got up late and missed the opening section of that episode. I was so regretful! After five years, when this performance was replayed on the radio, I grasped the chance to remedy the missing section.

This institution is unique from other amateur's clubs in maintaining an exclusive attitude towards membership. It serves the role of communicating between *ping-tan* followers and

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<sup>116</sup> Personal communication, 6 September 2013.

<sup>117</sup> Personal communication, 6 September 2013.

storytellers. Both audience members and storytellers highly respect these people. The institution also keeps an intimate relationship with the scholars of *ping-tan* research, such as Zhou Liang from Suzhou, Wu Zongxi from Shanghai, and Shi Zhenmei from Hangzhou. Thus, when the institution holds an annual meeting, they are able to invite these three scholars to attend, as well as some master storytellers. Besides, sometimes storytellers may ask the members' favour to make a copy of their own performance recording. Identically, when institution member is looking for a storyteller's early recordings, storytellers will give help; once, a storyteller even sent his last copy to enrich the collection of the institution. Nevertheless, when the Suzhou Quyi Committee hosts a public *ping-tan* 'study group', the institution will be invited to assist the organisation work.

Yin Dequan says that he would not be able to adopt another hobby alongside *ping-tan*, "because *ping-tan* has already become a large portion of my life." On the back cover of Yin's book published in 2012, the poet Su Shuyang writes a tribute, making clear the value of Yin's contribution to *ping-tan*: "The happiest thing of one person's life is, his heart is full of arts; he is able to express these cultural accumulations by his favorite means; and, he is able to present these things that he has accumulated."

The third figure among the *ping-tan* aficionados is Ren Kangling who is nearly ninety years old. Aside from being the chairman of the Suzhou Ping-tan Collection and Appreciation Institution, since 2000 his main contribution is to run the website *Zhongguo Ping-tan Wang* ('China Ping-tan Website'). This website has become the most prestigious among other *ping-tan* websites and blogs, such as the *Shanghai Ping-tan Wang* ('Shanghai Ping-tan Website') conducted by the Shanghai Ping-tan Troupe, and a highly impressive private *ping-tan* blog 'Tianlong Qinchuan' (天龙琴川), which specialises in uploading *ping-tan* videos, and essays written by the blogger.



**Figure 5-10** Ren Kangling helps an amateur club film their activity and collects materials for a *ping-tan* website at *Guihua Xincun Shequ Zhongxin* ('*Guihua* Community Centre') on 15 September 2013.

*Zhongguo Ping-tan Wang* was first initiated by an aficionado Yu Naishun, who was also a member of the Suzhou Ping-tan Collection and Appreciation Institution, and was the vice-chairman of Changshu Television Station. On 10 September 2000, the website started running publically. After Yu passed away in 2002, Ren Kangling took over all his jobs, operating the website until the present day with eight volunteer assistants, of whom four are from Suzhou, three (including an elderly couple) are from Hangzhou, and one is from Shanghai. They assume all responsibility for collecting performance information in story houses, taking photos of the performances, recording samples of live performances, writing articles, and uploading materials onto the website. The website is updated at least ten times per week. Ren Kanglin explained his regular work:<sup>118</sup>

I am in charge of the website's email box. I check it once in the morning, and once in the evening every day. Especially on the BBS (Bulletin Board System) where people can post, if some visitors present offensive comments, I delete them. During the afternoon, I generally go to the story house to take photos, interview the performers, and meet the staff in the Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe [to collect up-to-date information]. If there is a *ping-tan* festival lasting for several days, then I write articles in the morning, watch performances in the

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<sup>118</sup> Personal communication, 16 September 2013.

afternoon, and talk to audience members to find anyone who can write for the website.

Through the members' efforts, the number of website visits had increased from 100,000 in the first year to over one million during recent years. Ren pointed out that most of the online friends are people who are not able to enter the story house because performances clash with their work commitments or they live in other places. They enjoy keeping up to date with ongoing *ping-tan* activities and keeping in communication with the people who delight in the same hobby online. Ren Kanglin explained how visitors get involved in online communication:

On the BBS, people get to know each other and extend their activities into real life. In Beijing, there is a cohort of *ping-tan* followers. They assemble together and establish the '*Beijing Ping-tan Zhi You She*' ('Society of Ping-tan's Friend in Beijing'). An engineer hosts this offline society. They organise monthly meetings and release all the meeting information on our website. Sometimes, there are new net friends asking about *ping-tan* followers living in Beijing, then I forward them to this society. Besides, if their members come back to Suzhou or we have members [i.e. the Suzhou Ping-tan Collection and Appreciation Institution or the acquainted net friends] who go to Beijing, together we will hold a meeting.

A net friend, whose online name is '*Baiyunxianren*' (白云闲人) is an old lady living in New Zealand. She occupies herself with two activities every day: one is reading newspapers; the other is listening to *ping-tan*. After she found our website, she became one of the most active members on the BBS. She posted an article named 'I read the Ping-tan website in New Zealand' on the BBS to express her delights. In 2008, when she knew a new published book of maestro Yan Xueting's biography, she was excited about it and asked for a copy. Fortunately, a friend of one forum member was going to New Zealand and managed to bring it to her. Later, she wrote sixteen articles online to share her reading.

Ren Kanglin is inspired by this old lady's experience. He noted that there are a lot of members of the younger generations who are in their twenties and thirties, using online resources to enhance their enjoyment of *ping-tan*. However, for their core group members

to organise the website, he confessed that they cannot rely on the young generations. He said:

There is no financial reward for doing this job. For young people, they are busy with working, and not able to commit to such heavy volunteer work. However, their involvement online demonstrates that the audience for *ping-tan* is not merely constrained to the story house. From this point of view, I contribute myself to maintaining this platform to assemble more and more people to approach *ping-tan*. Once there was a company wanted to purchase this website because of its brand value, but we refused. We hope this website can thoroughly serve the *ping-tan* followers, wherever they are.

It is quite common to encounter audience members in the story house who have come back from abroad, discussing their experiences of communicating on this website. During my fieldwork at the *Guangyu* story house on 1 September 2013, a middle-aged audience member, Zheng Deli, came to talk to me during the performance interval, asking if I would upload the video to the *Zhongguo Ping-tan Wang*. Zheng told me that he had been settled in Sweden for decades and he was back to visit family in Shanghai. He made a stop in Suzhou in particular to watch a live performance and this was his first time to watch *ping-tan* in a real story house. In Switzerland, he always plays *ping-tan* online at home to recall his life before going abroad.

#### **5.3.4 The Habitué Audience**

Most of the audience members who watch *ping-tan* performance in story houses every day are the habitués. This group of people is equipped with very limited knowledge about *ping-tan*, and this is the most common reason that both performers and other audience members often hold little affection for its members. Unlike the other groups, this one is not defined by its appreciation and involvement in *ping-tan* activities, but instead ‘habitué’ simply implies regular attendance among its group members.

However, certain aspects of their behaviour in the story house might also not be welcomed by others. Some habitués nap during performances or leave to smoke during ballad singing, and this is unacceptable to those who treat artistic singing and telling as the essence of listening to *ping-tan*. During my fieldwork, I often tried to ask questions to habitués but found that, unfortunately, they usually avoided answering my questions by saying “I don’t know about *ping-tan* at all”. This was not false modesty; some of them could not even tell me the performers’ names or how the plot had progressed. Some confessed to me that they

come to the story house to kill time, mainly because watching *ping-tan* costs less than other forms of entertainment. One habitué, who was not willing to tell me his name, said:<sup>119</sup>

Paying less than five *yuan* to kill time, how cheap! If you buy tickets for the whole of a fifteen-day long-episode story, you get a further discount! If you go to the teahouse, it costs you several times that amount! In the story house, I enjoy sitting on the soft sofa with a free cup of tea. If the story is extraordinary, then I listen to it. Or I can just read the newspaper.



**Figure 5-11 A member of the habitué audience group before the start of a *Guangyu* story house performance on 25 September 2012.**

Some habitués only visit one story house, no matter what repertoire is playing or who is giving the performance, regardless even of the weather conditions. Some people always sit on their own reserved seats whenever they buy tickets. A figurative saying in the jargon, *zuo*

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<sup>119</sup> Personal communication, 25 September 2012.

*zhuang tingke* ('a listener who sits on a stump'), describes those visiting as if they were residents and owned their specific stumps. The reason for this kind of habit is that the story house might be the closest one to the homes of these individuals or that it provides comfortable conditions.

Although these habitués cannot fully appreciate and savour *ping-tan*, their frequent attendance consistently contributes to the ticket sales. Rather than criticising these less cultivated listeners, a positive question can be raised: how can these people be encouraged to engage more deeply with the contents of *ping-tan* performance?

To answer this question, the manager of the *Guangyu* story house, Lin Jianfang, gave his opinions formed from personal observations:<sup>120</sup>

Unlike experienced audience members, these habitués are either less educated and so cannot appreciate the art, or mostly receive *ping-tan* through broadcasts at home. After retirement, they then have time to come to the story house to enjoy their later years. Thus, these habitués are of an advanced-age, but are actually new customers to *ping-tan*. They are *laonian xin tingzhong* ('advanced-age new customers'). Yet, it takes many years of persistently watching *ping-tan* before one can recognise the performing styles and the music. Therefore, listening to the story content is much easier than understanding artistic segments. This is why the storytellers and sophisticated listeners complain that the levels of appreciation among audiences has declined.

But there are a certain number of people who are well educated. They turn to listening to *ping-tan* because their declining eyesight does not allow them to read for long. The storytellers tell stories that they are already acquainted with, and thus they accept listening to *ping-tan* stories instead of reading. For this reason, these people prefer modern themes rather than classic repertoire. For example [they like] stories about the Sino-Japanese War, and the Cultural Revolution, to remind them of their early life.

Admittedly, only focusing on the story content is not considered a sophisticated way to appreciate *ping-tan*. However, both for the people who did not have time to enter the story house before their retirement, and for those who have trouble reading, memories are recalled when they sit in live performances. For the former, an impression of *ping-tan* has

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<sup>120</sup> Personal communication, 21 September 2012.

been rooted in their mind for decades. They are now available to approach it, and use it as a means of relaxation. For the latter, listening to stories brings back collective memories of the epoch and lives experienced in the past, by means of the storyteller's narration in this kind of artificial interpretation. Listening to *ping-tan* provides them a chance to return to a previous time of life.

A minor section of the habitu  group is formed of parents bringing children to the story house at weekends. Lin Jianfang suggested that there are three kinds of intention for parents doing so:<sup>121</sup>

I once asked a parent who was a new immigrant to Suzhou 'if you don't understand the Suzhou dialect at all, how can you enjoy the performance?' He answered me 'I am deeply conscious that if I want my kid to assimilate into this community, the first thing to do is to acknowledge local culture'. For local parents, bringing their kids to the story house is mainly for the purpose of broadening their horizons and accumulating knowledge through this artistic genre, so that the kids learn more after school. For *ping-tan* followers, they bring the kids or grandchildren to the story house simply because this is their habit in life. Sometimes, in the summer camp hosted by the Suzhou Quyi Committee, you see these young habitu s. Besides, these children may go to *ping-tan* training classes as an activity after school.

The storyteller Zhou Hong gave her ideas about how to inspire these young habitu s.<sup>122</sup> Indeed, her concept also suits other habitu s from all generations:

[As storytellers] we must understand why some audience members dislike *ping-tan*. I am eager to know what they want. Leading the audience by showing them wonderful performances, explaining the principles to them, [gradually] they will get closer to *ping-tan*. I met a lot of immature audience members; after communicating with them several times during non-performance occasions, all the feedback to me is that '*ping-tan* is so fascinating! I never knew that *ping-tan* could be so interesting. It is very different from the stereotypically stiff experience that I had in my mind previously!'

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<sup>121</sup> Personal communication, 25 September 2012.

<sup>122</sup> Personal communication, 1 September 2013.

Zhou's explanation has very clear implications for the question of identity. It shows that when habitués receive guidance and teaching, they are willing and able to explore the genre more deeply. In these cases, the label habitué is potentially more fluid than the other labels. A member of this group can begin to move towards the enthusiast group, although the process can take many years. Looking back to the question raised before, it is clear that, although helping new habitués understand *ping-tan* better is not easy, they do have a greater chance than the completely uninitiated to become sophisticated *ping-tan* followers. It is also fascinating to see that, although both new immigrants and local parents are busy working to earn money, they lay stress on enculturating the next generation into local culture.

### 5.3.5 The Amateur/Fan Audience

Unlike general *ping-tan* followers, who only listen to or watch *ping-tan*, the amateurs prefer to play *ping-tan* during their leisure time. Some of the amateurs address themselves as *fensi*, a word widely used as the transliteration of the English word 'fans'. The nuanced differences between amateurs and fans centre upon the indication that fans have less experience than sophisticated amateurs. But with no doubt, all amateurs and fans are full of zeal for *ping-tan*, assembling to practice and perform to each other during regular meetings. Sophisticated amateurs can even earn extra income by singing *tanci* ballads in teahouses or restaurants.

There is an interesting phenomenon among these amateurs and fans. Fans often group together to watch *ping-tan* performances in story houses. A well-known cohort of seven elderly lady fans, who retired not long ago, has taken on the nickname of '*qi xiannü*' ('seven fairy maidens', indicating the seven daughters of the jade emperor in Chinese folklore). However, sophisticated amateurs no longer enter story houses to watch live performances. My interviewee Lu Lihong, who is the head of a *ping-tan* society under the organisation of the local Chinese People's Political Consultative Committee (CPPCC), told me the reason:<sup>123</sup>

These amateurs are extremely busy meeting to practice together, playing and singing *ping-tan*, so that they have no time to go to live performances. Whereas, the people who attend live performances are not able to play *ping-tan*. Some amateurs are only good at playing three ballad pieces, but they never get bored.

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<sup>123</sup> Personal communication, 5 October 2012.



Figure 5-12 *Zhengxie ping-tan xiaozu'* (CPPCC *ping-tan* club) members assembled to perform for each other on 26 September 2012. Seated at the table and looking towards the camera is Lu Lihong.



Figure 5-13 The venue is located in a classical private garden, *He Yuan* ('Crane Garden').

There are about seven *ping-tan* societies dispersed throughout Suzhou. Some of these societies have close relationships with each other while others are more isolated. Lu presented the society of which she is in charge, saying that most of its members are retired cadres with better personal quality than the people of lower social status. Compared with societies organised by residential communities, the CPPCC *ping-tan* society imposes stricter rules on its membership. In particular, members should attend all regular activities;

otherwise, one must inform group leaders in advance. In residential communities, on the other hand, people are free to attend or quit the activities as they please. For this reason, the CPPCC *ping-tan* society runs once a week from 1pm to 4pm on Wednesdays, while other societies organise activities twice or three times a week. Lu gave me her opinions on why amateurs are keen on playing *ping-tan* alone rather than spending time with others, including storytellers:

Most of the amateurs are certainly so-called *lao erduo* ('old ears'), who have immersed themselves in *ping-tan* for decades, rather than *lao tingke* ('old listeners'), who have accumulated a lot of experience watching live performance as habitués. *Lao tingke* are not necessarily experienced in *ping-tan*, but just kill time for fun. That is why the level of the audience members in the story house is very low.

In addition, the present storytellers are far less competitive than previous masters. Thus, amateurs prefer to buy the records of maestros, rather than wasting time watching a bad performance. Ten discs of mp4s contain five thousand hours of recordings!

Moreover, amateurs consider themselves much better than the present storytellers at singing. They have sung the ballads they like for decades, and novice storytellers and freelance storytellers, in particular, are far away from their level.

As well as being simply private entertainment with fellow group members, these activities among amateurs also attract some retired storytellers. For example, the prestigious 'super lower hand' storyteller Jiang Wenlan, who collaborated with several past maestros including Jiang Yuequan, is a regular member of the CPPCC *ping-tan* society. Likewise, the husband-wife duo Zhu Liangxin and Zhou Jianying, who come from the lineage of Cao Xiaojun and Jiang Yuequan and have retired from the Zhejiang Quyí Troupe. Lu Lihong told me that these three masters are still active in the *ping-tan* field, and are busy supervising students in *ping-tan* schools in Suzhou and Shanghai.

In 2013, I had a chance to observe an activity run by a *ping-tan* society based at the *Guihua* ('Osmanthe') residential community centre. This society invites the teacher from a *ping-tan* school to give a training class to amateurs once every year. On 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> September 2013, they invited Tao Moujiong, a sophisticated teacher and expert in *tanci* music research to give a condensed two-day session. Twenty amateurs came to take part in this special event. During the first day and the following morning, Tao gave classes to explain the features of

articulation in various singing schools and the corresponding instrumental accompaniment, as well as short slots of one-to-one supervision. In the afternoon of the second day, the amateurs gave a recital one by one to show the improvements that they had made. Apart from two male amateurs who performed *pinghua* and gave short excerpts of storytelling, all of the others were paired in duos to sing *tanci* ballads. Those with instrumental skills enjoy the chance to accompany their fellows. Tao made notes and gave comments to each performer. Although some of the amateurs' performances were not particularly strong, perhaps as a result of nerves or a lack of practice, all of them treated this chance seriously as if it was a real performance, while the others earnestly played the role of the audience.



**Figure 5-14 Tao Moujiong supervises the *ping-tan* club of the *Guihua* ('Osmanthe') community on 15 September 2013. Wang Xuejuan turns to look at the camera.**

After the sessions, the organiser of the *Guihua ping-tan* society, Wang Xuejuan agreed to be interviewed.<sup>124</sup> She told me that, ordinarily, their members often also go to other societies' events to practice, and that she welcomed amateurs from outside of the society who wished to practice together. Therefore, she has a very busy schedule of participating in different groups during weekdays. Sometimes, when community centre *ping-tan* performances cannot find a storyteller to fill a slot, these amateurs are invited to give a show, and the amateurs are delighted to perform in front of a real audience.

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<sup>124</sup> Personal communication, 15 September 2013.



**Figure 5-15 During a recital, Ren Kangling begins recording.**

Regular society activities function as a ‘show time’ in which members practice in front of the others. Wang Xuejuan gave her opinion about how these amateurs constantly strive to perform well, even if they only have one ballad, and this contrasts with Lu Lihong’s view:

After giving a satisfying performance in front of the others, some people find it as enjoyable and agreeable as having an ice-cream in the summer time. If not, you can see the regret on their faces, and they will learn from the failure, anticipating the next meeting to perform well. That is why they never get bored from repeating one ballad a hundred times: the performance is different every time.

Amateurs tolerate each other’s bad practice because they have got to know each other’s level very well. Only with an extraordinary performance can they amuse the others, and obtain their compliments. Mainly, people entertain themselves during these occasions.

The regular meeting of Wang’s society takes place from 1:30 pm to 4 pm every Monday. Amateurs usually start to prepare and rehearse at 12:30 pm, with either solo or duo partners practicing hard before playing in the recital in front of the others. Sometimes one may only have one chance to perform as there are too many people queuing. After the meeting is finished, there are always some members who continue to practice and polish

their skills until the community centre closes. Some of these hard working members used to study at *ping-tan* school.

Singing and playing an instrument at the same time is not an easy task. Wang Xuejuan only started to learn the *pipa* lute after joining the society and she was taught by other amateurs. She described her embarrassment at 'being at a loser', receiving much kindness from the others as they told her the correct techniques. The advice she received often varied or was even contradictory. After studying with Tao Moujiong, she improved a lot and is now able to play several pieces very well. She also learns through listening to and watching the recordings of masters. Gradually, she immersed herself in appreciating *ping-tan*. Wang is not the only one to have experienced such a wonderful journey having started out with no knowledge at all, and she pointed to a cultural phenomenon to explain the great zeal among these amateurs for practicing *ping-tan*:

Especially for the local Suzhounese, it is easier for the individual to become addicted to *ping-tan*. Apart from the beauty of the variety of singing schools and tunes, the *ping-tan* art also expresses the typical aesthetics of *this* culture. Before coming to these regular meetings, I have always practiced at least sixty times at home during the week. Tasting the typical flavour of *ping-tan* is what makes us get together and contribute to it. So you can find *ping-tan* amateurs of different generations from twentysomething to eightysomething all coming along to join us.

Wang's experience explains well the amateurs' zeal in gathering together; *ping-tan* becomes the link connecting peoples' daily lives.

### **5.3.6 Tourists**

Alongside listeners from the local area, tourists are also an important group in *ping-tan* audiences. Although the art does not offer a unique identity for them as it does for the previous cohorts, they too identify it as a cultural marker of the locality. Listening to *ping-tan* becomes one of the must-do activities when tourists visit Suzhou. This is shown by an incident involving the storytellers Ma Zhiwei and Zhang Jianzhen. Once, after they finished a performance in a teahouse at 10pm and were preparing to leave, several university students who were travelling in Suzhou entered the teahouse and enquired about *ping-tan* performances. They told these visitors that the teahouse was closed. But the students implored Ma and Zhang to sing one ballad piece for them, because they were leaving Suzhou the next day and did not want to miss the chance to listen to *ping-tan*. Ma and Zhang then

switched on the stage light, and performed two opening ballad pieces for them. Before leaving the teahouse, these students remarked that “after listening to *ping-tan*, finally we feel that we have really visited Suzhou!”<sup>125</sup>

From my fieldwork observations, three factors emerge that mean tourists should not be neglected in examining the receivers of *ping-tan*. First, the enormous numbers in this cohort is striking. During an interview with Lin Jianfang<sup>126</sup>, he commented on the example of the *Fengqiao* story house built in the *Fengqiao* tourist area. The story house mainly serves tourists, allowing them to order tea along with the *ping-tan* performance. During 2014, it had about 200,000 visitors including both domestic and foreign people. Other tourist spots also invite students of the *ping-tan* school and even amateurs to sing for the tourists as an attraction.

Secondly, the employees who perform at tourist spots, such as in classical gardens, are usually not the storytellers who work in the normal story houses that local *ping-tan* followers choose to attend in the afternoons. Especially for performances in classical gardens, organisers do not care much about the performance quality, but rather the cost. These employees basically perform ballads at scenes meant to create ideas such as ‘a beautiful lady holds a *pipa* while singing *ping-tan*’<sup>127</sup> for tourists. Moreover, the high workloads make the employees tired and can lead to careless attitudes towards these jobs. According to Bi Kangnian, some employees simply repeatedly play one tune from morning until afternoon. This can fatigue the performer.

Thirdly, tourists occasionally visit the general story houses, and sometimes teahouses. It is common to see tourists calling into a story house but leaving soon, muttering: “I cannot understand the language. Let’s go.” On the other hand, they may prefer to order tea in a teahouse while listening to pieces of ballad-singing, although it costs much more. This is quite understandable. Many teahouses have subtitle projectors to display the lyrics, something that is not possible in general story houses. In addition, the atmosphere in a teahouse is much more relaxed than that in a story house. As Chapter 3 has proved, the most engaging part of watching a live *ping-tan* performance in a story house is to participate in the ‘feedback loop’. Linguistic barriers stop tourists entering the vernacular environment of watching *ping-tan*. However, for one subsection of this cohort – foreign visitors who cannot read Mandarin Chinese at all – watching a performance, feeling its exoticism, and

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<sup>125</sup> Personal communication, 30 August 2013.

<sup>126</sup> Personal communication, 5 September 2015.

<sup>127</sup> Personal communication with Bi Kangnian, 3 October 2012.

drinking tea shapes their experiences of touring in Suzhou. Nevertheless, ballad singing works better than storytelling to meet tourists' demands.

The attention of troupes, schools and cultural bureaus has been drawn to the issue of less-sophisticated performances representing the art in tourist spots. They are concerned as to whether the performers here are well-enough qualified to represent the area's cultural essence, and whether these low-quality performances harm the reputation of *ping-tan* in the outside world. This causes some anxiety within the *ping-tan* field. Perhaps, until an effective solution is proposed to improve this situation, tourist *ping-tan* performances seem likely to retain their present status. Yet for the tourists, who seek a taste of Suzhou culture from the sound of *ping-tan*, the art is still a major part of the Suzhou of their imaginations.

#### **5.4 Summary: The Diversity of Identities**

This chapter has identified and analysed the variety in *ping-tan* participants, from storytellers to audience members, borrowing from Turino's (2008: 94-95) habit-centred model. As he suggests, people shape their typical self-presentation, and present habits suitable in each situation (ibid., 102). This chapter has argued that beneath the categories of performer and audience, there lies a diversity and complexity of self-presentation within *ping-tan* daily performance and activities. The most significant elements of this are as follows.

First, the hierarchy between the identity categories of *ping-tan* is implied in participants' responsibilities, values, intercommunication, activities and more. All of these factors are conceptualized and presented through behaviour. For storytellers, although the role of upper or lower hand is bestowed for occupational reasons, this distinction decides much about a duo's cooperation: the upper hand storyteller's leadership is not only displayed in the realm of stage performance, but also extends to daily life. Although the lower hand assistant's professional skills may exceed that of the upper hand, hierarchical status concerns balance the relationship, and prevent disorder occurring on the stage. For audiences, the diversity of identities is often concealed by more obvious common factors among those in the story house; at first glance the majority in the audience are older people. Various hierarchies among audience members are revealed when we consider those with the closest connection and those with the most remote involvement in *ping-tan*. The habitué group is inclined to be the most loyal part of the audience for live performances, followed by the aficionados and the enthusiasts, while the amateur/fan group makes very little contribution to the box office. The connoisseur group tends to have the most intimate

knowledge of *ping-tan*, while the aficionados take second place, followed by the enthusiasts and then the amateur/fan group. Examining individual dedication and zeal for *ping-tan*, the aficionado group's contribution is the most significant, and the habitués are the least interested among all of these *ping-tan* followers.

Secondly, these identity hierarchies expose the complexity of intercommunication between groups. While the amateurs derive great enjoyment from their club activities, they are considered by the others to be an isolated group. They appear less at live performances and only entertain themselves; the implication is that they are remote from the fine art of *ping-tan*. However, the amateurs argue that the habitués are not faithful to *ping-tan* due to their motivation lying in passing time and saving money. Both habitués and amateurs may be criticised by connoisseurs (and probably enthusiasts too) for being a lower class of follower. That is to say, each group of people has very distinct criteria to judge intimacy with this folk art. Thus, rather than attempting to identify the highest-level audience group, perhaps conclusions should acknowledge the multi-faceted understandings, practices and values that exist around *ping-tan*. They deepen and expand the society centred upon *ping-tan*, and lead to vibrant associations and productive outcomes.

Thirdly, besides these microscopic hierarchies, intimacy in the *ping-tan* context is generated by the fact that both storytellers and audience members identify themselves, or are identified as being part of specific cohorts. Apart from the tourist group which has the least engagement with the *ping-tan* environment, other groups constantly shape and share among themselves agreeable habits, and also bind members together with a sense of belonging. The dynamics of communication between each group are less remarkable though, and are generally misrepresented when we focus on the duality between performer and audience; the *ping-tan* context assembles all kinds of people to share and enjoy a culturally-based rapport.

Close affinity with *ping-tan* enables local residents to express themselves within an extraordinary cultural context. This is impossible to find anywhere else, including places where *ping-tan* involves a notable number of people, such as Shanghai, Wuxi, and Changshu. Affiliation with *ping-tan* does not only exist in observable daily life, but also extends to mass-media platforms, such as radio and television. Each will be discussed in the next two chapters respectively.

## Chapter 6. Invisible Story House I: Transmission of *Ping-tan* via Radio Broadcasting

The previous chapters illustrated how *ping-tan* offers an artistic platform to gather people in the story house, demonstrating how local people enjoy the social engagement that centres upon *ping-tan* live performances. However, with the development of new technology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, traditional *ping-tan* watching habits have been partially replaced by radio and television. The spread of these new techniques had a remarkable influence on the development of *ping-tan* especially in the 1930s and 1940s. They were also particularly significant in the 1980s, when a post-Cultural Revolution revival of traditional story houses and teahouses coincided with new developments on radio and television. This chapter about radio, and the following chapter about television are both intended to contribute to my overall argument in this thesis that *ping-tan* has retained a significance in ordinary experience in the city of Suzhou. Here, I begin by showing how encounters with the genre through radio have extended and developed the intercommunicative ‘feedback loop’ in new directions, making the reception and appreciation of *ping-tan* a highly active experience.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, radio broadcast technology contributed to shaping a virtual world for all kinds of music, and particularly influenced the live traditional performances involving both performers and audience members in either active or passive ways. For instance, the ‘live responsive cycle’ (Neuman, 1990: 70) between performer and audience remains critically an important component within North Indian musical life and performance: the *mehfil* performance traditionally features a small audience group and has a distinguishing intimate atmosphere, which suffers when performance takes place in a much larger performance space. With a radio performance, performers are required to communicate and conceive the unseen and the unheard audience and *mehfil* performers particularly struggled to perform well on radio, as the delayed response to radio performances is comprised of newspaper reception written by the music and radio critics and the occasional letters written to the programme (ibid., 78). In the example of Egyptian Qur’an recitation on radio, the reciter’s loud and strong voice is not appropriate to the broadcasting environment, rather, it is the delicate voice with skilful and sensitive registration that positions Qur’an recitation towards a musical interpretation (Castelo-Branco, 1993: 1232; Nelson, 2001). Radio broadcast has also benefited young Shona mbira musicians in Zimbabwe, who learn mbira playing and *kudeketera* singing by imitating the senior performers’ radio appearances and recordings to enrich their own storehouse of this

music tradition (Kenney, 2003: 175). Each one of these case studies illustrates different kinds of adaptations that can occur when performance shifts from its original physical performing space to the radio platform.

Before radio broadcasting hit the *ping-tan* market, modern technology had facilitated a series of changes in the story house since late 1880s, as McDaniel describes (2001: 486). The introduction of running water into story houses satisfied both the customers and storytellers in terms of hygiene, so that “even the tea tasted better”,<sup>128</sup> and the introduction of electricity into story houses enabled them to stage an extra performance in the evening (ibid.). The convenience of an improved visiting experience in story houses boosted the numbers of high-class patrons and audience members, brought *ping-tan* practitioners a better profit, and also encouraged attendees to observe stricter manners and behave as ‘cultured people’ (ibid., 490). This culminated in Shanghai in 1925, when the appearance of radio broadcasting added significant impetus to the ‘sanitizing and standardizing’ of storytellers’ language. These broadcasts reached a large elite audience, and fostered new principles of urban behaviour and manners (ibid., 495). The significant influence of advanced technology on society and its activities is not a coincidence. In the study of ‘Radio American’ between 1925 and 1955, Hilmes (1997: xiii) suggests that radio should be regarded not only as a technology of ‘wires (collection), transmitters, and electrons, but as a social practice grounded in culture’. She endorses Pierre Bourdieu’s view of the history of broadcasting (Bourdieu, 1993: 34), highlighting the cultural ‘field’ of radio’s origin, rather than an origin only lying in a succession of technological developments (Hilmes, 1997: xiii-xiv). Not only the radio, but the loudspeaker system also played an important historical role in the audio programming in China (Gross, 1955: 291).

Since the adoption of the radio medium in China, commercialisation has become a remarkable trait of broadcasting. Hong Yu (2012) depicts the transmission of Suzhou *ping-tan* via the wireless radio broadcasting platform from the 1920s to 1940s, and demonstrates how *ping-tan* performers used radio for business ventures and commercial advertisements, and how *ping-tan* became an indispensable part of the wireless radio world in the region. This paper also gives an essence of storytellers’ living reality and social status during that time.

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<sup>128</sup> From Cao Hanchang’s 1994 interview commentary within McDaniel’s article.

In Benson's valuable research (1996) on the *ping-tan* themed programmes airing in Shanghai in the 1930s, he examines how *tanci* was employed to attract the target local customers who had the habit of listening to these performances on radio:

On the one hand, they [entrepreneurs] purchased air time from radio stations and hired storytellers to pitch their products over the air waves; while on the other hand, they equipped their stores with radios and played *tanci* to attract shoppers (ibid., 73).

... on the production end were advertising agents, station managers, media brokers, and commercial sponsors... on the listening end were petty urbanites and ordinary pedestrians as well as the middle- and upper-class urbanites, both males and females from different native places, whom sponsors targeted most aggressively (ibid., 75).

Benson explores how *ping-tan* was successfully spread through the local community of 1930s Shanghai by radio waves. He explains that "the propagandists of consumption were promoting the birth of consumer society", and at the same time, creating a community of many different kinds of links. He calls this phenomenon 'radio Shanghai' (ibid., 75). He claims that "listeners did not play a passive role in the formation of radio Shanghai", and "its entertainment was... not necessarily shared together in public" (ibid., 77-78). This is distinct from the watching experience in a traditional teahouse. Meanwhile, as for the storytellers – the other crucial participant in this radio industry – Zhang Yanli (2012: 55-59) asserts that they also benefited from their engagement with the commerce that could be stimulated.

Moreover, Benson (1996: 4) discusses how *ping-tan* became a symbol of Chinese popular culture according to two perspectives important in general popular culture studies: popular culture as the means that the elite uses to force, to control, or mobilize non-elites; and the response of the non-elites resisting manipulation from the elites. He suggests that middle- and upper-class audience members who managed to afford private radio sets accounted for the majority of listeners in the 1930s (ibid., 104-106). In addition, McDaniel (2001) also gives historical examples to illustrate how radio broadcasting merged diverse groups of listeners together to become involved in *ping-tan*'s new compositions and in actively giving feedback to the programmes.

*Ping-tan* radio broadcasting has had a number of further impacts. It has been argued both that the airwaves have greatly assisted traditional *ping-tan* business running in story houses, and also that they have been a negative influence (Hong Yu, 2010, 2012; Zhou Xuewen 2008;

Zhao Yingyin, 2009). This applies in terms of the locals' social life, in terms of people engaging less in live performance in story houses (Zhao Yingyin, 2009: 27).

Its geographical advantages combined with economic, political and cultural prevalence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century meant that Shanghai was offered the chance to play an indisputable pioneering role in Chinese radio broadcasting history. According to the above research, Benson's so-called 'radio Shanghai' phenomenon benefited *ping-tan* by allowing it to spread into a broader space. However, this radio phenomenon was certainly not limited to Shanghai. In Suzhou, listening to *ping-tan* programmes on the radio has come to be considered a traditional way to enjoy the art, profoundly merging with local people's life habit since the first introduction of radio in 1930, according to the *Suzhou Difang Zhi* ('Suzhou Local Chorography').<sup>129</sup> As information is sparse, fragmentary and derives mainly from non-academic sources, in order to explore *ping-tan* programming in the Suzhou area and its current situation, this chapter attempts to give a novel examination of: 1. the historical development of *ping-tan* programming on the radio in Suzhou before 1981; 2. the golden era of *ping-tan* radio programmes between 1981 and 2000; and 3. the *ping-tan* programmes production after 2000. It is necessary to explain the reasons behind choosing the years 1981 and 2000 as dividing lines. Especially after ten years of Cultural Revolution, it was not until the economic reforms in 1978 that the country started to emerge from the political turbulence since the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, and radio broadcasting was not the exception. In 1981, the Suzhou People's Radio Station upgraded to frequency modulation (FM) broadcasting, and at that time, the radio station sought a producer with a professional knowledge of *ping-tan*. To highlight the recovery that has taken place since 1981, I chose to interview the *ping-tan* programme producers – Hua Jueping, who was in charge of the reconstruction work between 1981 and 2000, and Zhang Yuhong, who took over Hua's work after 2000 and continues to the present – to gain first-hand materials from their genuine working experience. Moreover, their over thirty-year experience of *ping-tan* radio broadcasting work has significantly influenced the current programmes. As these two individuals are considered to be main representatives of two generations in charge of *ping-tan* programme affairs before and after 2000 respectively, I will separately discuss their work as two case studies. Thus, the changes and the trends in local *ping-tan* radio broadcasting in the last thirty years will be displayed and discussed through fieldwork data analysis.

Chin-Chuan Lee (2000: 10) summarises characteristics of the Chinese media as follows:

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<sup>129</sup> For a profile of 'Suzhou local radio stations before the revolution', please see the following online *Suzhou Chorography* resource: <http://www.dfzb.suzhou.gov.cn/zsbl/1662927.htm>, edited by Xu Bin.

“commercialization without independence’ and enjoying ‘bird-caged press freedom’” due to the authoritarian system (Chan 1994; Chen and Chan 1998). In this chapter, however, through historical review and ethnographic description, I will argue that within the approximate 85 years of history and praxis of *ping-tan* ‘radio Suzhou’ in this locality, certain noticeable issues either have been solved or are still ongoing. Moreover, especially during the period of the last thirty years, which will be the foremost focus of this chapter, it will be shown that an effective interplay between the programme producers, audience members, and the storytellers is still an important part of this traditional art even when modern means of transmission are involved.

## **6.1 A Historical Review: Ping-tan Radio Broadcasting before 1980 in Suzhou**

### **6.1.1 From 1930 to 1949**

According to the *Suzhou Difang Zhi*, the first radio station was set up by an amateur, Lu Xinsen, in 1930, and there were 18 radio stations in the city before Suzhou was completely emancipated in April 1949. Although the plethora of stations only lasted for several months in 1930 this historical experiment started a new age of radio broadcasting in Suzhou. By August 1931, three more amateur radio stations were delivering *ping-tan* programmes.

It was not until 1932, when the first private commercial radio station Jiuda Guangbo Diantai (‘Suzhou Forever Grand Radio Station’) was founded by Li Baolin that *ping-tan* programmes began to be disseminated through the airwaves. Holding the city’s second radio licence permit from the government, Jiuda radio station broadcast with a mere 15 watts of power, and was designated with the call letters XLIB (changed to a No. 23 permission licence in 1934). The station was initially located in *Wannian qiao* street and maintained its upkeep through advertising income. The establishment of Jiuda significantly promoted the radio business, and listening to the radio gradually became popular in Suzhou. Jiuda broadcast programmes in Suzhou dialect from 8 am to 10 pm or 11 pm every day. The timetable of the programmes was published in the local newspaper. In addition to *ping-tan*, the station played phonograph discs of other drama and operatic genres, pop song performances, and broadcast commercial advertising, weather reports, ‘life tips’, and religious content. Furthermore, a collection of *ping-tan* opening ballads *Yesheng Ji* (‘Collection of Evening Sound’) was published on behalf of Jiuda radio station. Jiuda later moved to the 4<sup>th</sup> floor of *Renmin bazaar* (‘People’s bazaar’) and obtained better, more powerful equipment, so that the improved signal projected not only to the local, but also to the surrounding areas. In

1937, the Japanese army occupied Jiuda and used it to spread propaganda to counter the idea of resistance against their occupation (Xu, n.d.).<sup>130</sup>

This first influential storyteller-running private commercial radio station Bailing Guangbo Diantai ('Lark Radio Station'), with the call letters XLIL and XHIC and producing 25 and 75 watts of power, was set up by storyteller Yang Jingchun in autumn of 1932. The broadcasting time was from 7 am to 10 pm with a break in the middle, and the station hired *ping-tan* storytellers to host programmes in the Suzhou dialect. The Bailing funded its activity with advertising and Yang Jingchun obtained supports from his father Yang Yuecha and uncle Yang Xingcha who were also *ping-tan* storytellers. In addition to the same types of programme as Jiuda, the broadcasting included inviting the local elite to give public speeches, and interviewing entertainment personalities. In addition, the *Bailing kaipian ji* ('Collection of lark opening ballad singing') was published on behalf of the radio station, and it was a popular resource with *ping-tan* listeners.

Suzhou Guangbo Diantai ('Suzhou Radio Broadcasting Station') was set up by Wu Keming in September 1935, with the call letters XLIP and 50 watts of power. It broadcast from 9 am to 10 pm with a short break. The types of programmes were almost the same as on Jiuda, but this station specialised in playing western phonograph discs. It issued a two-volume journal *Tiansheng ji* ('Collection of Sky Sounds'), providing information about radio station operation, a programme guide, *ping-tan* opening ballads, and photographs of the staff. In 1937, due to the Japanese occupation, the station abandoned broadcasting; in 1940, more than 300 phonograph discs and other equipment was taken by the Japanese army.

From 1937 until 1945, all local radio stations came under the control of the Japanese army. Although the types of programmes remained mostly unchanged, including the playing of *ping-tan*, Japanese language teaching was broadcast as enculturation propaganda, and the Chinese staff was not allowed to intervene in these programme arrangements. In addition, every radio set had to be registered and fees were charged by the receiving department;<sup>131</sup> any set without a registration could be confiscated.

In August 1945, the second Civil War started. From 1945 to 1949, during the period governed by Wang Jingwei's regime, radio broadcasting was again utilised as a tool to

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<sup>130</sup> For a profile of 'Suzhou local radio stations before the revolution', please see the following online *Suzhou Chorography* resource: <http://www.dfzb.suzhou.gov.cn/zsbl/1662927.htm>, edited by Xu Bin.

<sup>131</sup> There were four departments subordinate to Suzhou broadcasting radio station during the Japanese occupancy period, the technical department, broadcasting department, general service department, and the receiving department – charged with manipulating the news release.

propagandise the ideology of the *Guomin Dang* (the Nationalist Party). Although there had been a trend to open radio stations by the various authorities, the government soon announced that only one radio station would be allowed in the city of Suzhou from 1946 onwards. The other seven private radio stations, including Jiuda, were forced to close. Although radio stations had strong connections with politics during that period, *ping-tan* programmes continued to be broadcast.

### **6.1.2 From 1949 to 1980**

After the national foundation in 1949, the Suzhou Xinhua Guangbo Diantai ('Suzhou Xinhua Radio Station') that had been established on 15 May 1949 changed its name to Suzhou Renmin Guangbo Diantai ('Suzhou People's Radio Station') on 10 August 1949. It became one of 32 radio stations in the country and was soon broadcasting to the public. Later the government banned *ping-tan* broadcasting on 1 June 1962, but it was revived on 1 April 1972.

Another station, the Suzhou Renmin Youxian Guangbo Diantai ('Suzhou People's Cable Radio Station') was founded on 1 January 1953. Its range grew quickly after 1958, and it joined the medium wave channels in 1979. During the Cultural Revolution, loudspeakers came on at 6 am to wake people up and played official announcements and music, including *ping-tan*. However, traditional themed stories were forbidden and were placed in the category of 'feudalism, capitalism and revisionism', and the relevant phonograph discs were lost or destroyed during that era. Instead, modern-themed stories of patriotism and love for the party were composed and widely disseminated.

After 1978, the reconstruction of radio broadcasting took place under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (Hamm, 1991: 2). In Hamm's (ibid., 24-26) research, he cites an excerpt from Zuo Fanyang's article (1988) explaining the situation. Zuo was the former Chairman of the Shanghai Radio and Television Bureau and subsequently Chairman of the Shanghai Radio and Television Research Institute. He depicts the scene after returning to the radio station in 1979 (ibid., 2):

... the station was in ruins. Studios were destroyed. ... The past ten years had left only nothingness. Live broadcasting had been prohibited, so that announcers could not hold conversations with the audience. Only pre-recorded programs could be aired. ... We decided that in order to revive interest in radio we should put emphasis on the development of FM. The problem was to find materials for stereo radio programming. ...

At that time imported stereos and cassettes were rare. Some young people walked around the city carrying their stereo sets, to show off. One could hear recordings of popular singers from Hong Kong and Taiwan. This phenomenon was the result of the long-time policy of cultural isolation and the dullness of music radio programming. A hunger for music and culture made such people swallow anything that came along. In order to enrich our programs, we had to break the boundaries of city, province and nation, to communicate nationally and internationally.

From Zuo's comment above on the reconstruction of the radio station in Shanghai, it can be seen that, on one hand, there was a tremendous shortage of materials for the radio station to broadcast; on the other hand, audience members longed for greater variety in entertainment. This supply versus demand reality also appeared in Suzhou radio broadcasting. After the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, the *ping-tan* programme of AM 1080 was intermittently hosted by the former programme producer Wang Leying. Amongst the three AM channels and the solitary FM channel under the Suzhou Radio Station by early 1980s, AM 1080 took most of *ping-tan* broadcasting schedule.<sup>132</sup> Today, AM 1080 remains the most important platform to play all kinds of the *ping-tan* programmes – having retained its popularity among radio listeners in Suzhou and the surrounding provinces and cities for decades.

## **6.2 The Golden Era: AM 1080 *Ping-tan* Broadcasting from 1980 to 2000 in Suzhou**

In 1978, Deng Xiaoping's economic reform was brought in practice, and people's lives became more settled and stable. In order to meet people's increasing demands for entertainment and to revive the regular broadcasting, the *ping-tan* programme *Guangbo Shuchang* ('Broadcast Story House') sought to recruit a specialist to conduct this *ping-tan* programme in 1980. My interviewee Hua Jueping took this position and became programme producer in 1981, officially starting his radio programme producing work in January 1982. Having formally retired in 2003, his insight is informed by his association with the revival of the *ping-tan* radio broadcasting era from its inception throughout its peak in the 1990s.

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<sup>132</sup> See <http://www.dfzb.suzhou.gov.cn/zsbl/348927.htm>.



**Figure 6-1 Hua Jueping at a teahouse on 27 August 2013.**

Hua Jueping had a profound affinity with *ping-tan* that originated long before he began working for the radio station. He was one of the first students enrolled in the Suzhou Ping-tan School in 1962. As part of a cooperative project between Shanghai Ping-tan Troupe, Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe and Jiangsu Province Ping-tan Troupe, Hua Jueping was assigned to Shanghai in 1963 and became a professional performer there.<sup>133</sup> In 1981, after working twenty years, he learned of the Suzhou radio programme recruitment and thus began his *ping-tan* programme producer career, during which he became a witness to how the revival of radio broadcasting benefited *ping-tan* in a mediated way. He was immediately faced with significant challenges including the shortage of materials for broadcast and lack of sponsorship.

### **6.2.1 Storage of Broadcasting Materials and Sponsorship**

By the early 1980s, *ping-tan* had been broadcast on the radio for almost fifty years since 1930s when the so-called ‘commercial radio station’ first appeared in Suzhou. Due to the war and revolution, there were only 400 hours of *ping-tan* recording left in stock in 1982, including some pieces of ballad singing and the *zhezi* (‘one-episode stories’). Some of these were copied from Shanghai Radio Station, including 53 episodes of Xu Yunzhi and Wang Ying’s *San Xiao* (‘Three Smiles’), and 53 episodes of Zhou Yunrui and Xue Junya’s *Wenwu Xiangqiu* (‘A Sweet Ball’). Moreover, 150 episodes of *Yue Zhuan* (‘Yue’s Legend’) performed by Cao Hanchang were recorded by the Suzhou Radio Station to assist transcribing work for

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<sup>133</sup> The Shanghai Ping-tan Troupe was called Shanghai People’s Ping-tan Troupe (*Shanghai renmin ping-tan tuan*) at that time.

a project run by the Suzhou Ping-tan Yanjiu Suo ('Suzhou Ping-tan Study Institute'). Because each *ping-tan* story covered a long period of daily performances, the radio broadcasting had to be in alignment with this feature, which necessitated playing daily instalments. Thus, the limited stock of recordings hardly met the needs of operating a *ping-tan* radio programme.

Hua Jueping told me, at the same time, Suzhou Radio Station had a limited budget to extend *ping-tan* recording storage. Although the programme could record the live performances from the story houses and broadcast them, the broadcasting technique and limited equipment constrained the programme for a long time. When Hua Jueping took over the job from Wang Leying, there were only five reel-to-reel tapes for producing programmes: an episode performed in a story house can be split into two sessions on the radio, thus, every day the programme needed two tapes for recording the live performance; one for broadcasting the performance recorded the day before; and one that had already been broadcast needed to be erased. To meet the broadcasting needs with such limited resources, no records were kept permanently. Later, in order to broadcast live performances from two of the largest and best story houses in Suzhou – the *Suzhou shuchang* ('Suzhou story house') and the *Kaiming xiuyuan* ('Kai Ming theatre') – Hua Jueping requested that the radio station install two cables directly into the story house and the theatre from the radio station, so that their daily performance programmes could be simultaneously broadcast through loudspeakers. A special performance such as a festival gala, could be broadcast simultaneously via loudspeakers and radio. Although the materials were very limited, Hua Jueping tried to broadcast different stories on the wired loudspeaker and the wireless radio, and many audience members chose to listen to them both.

The limited budget made it difficult for the Suzhou Radio Station to compete with the Shanghai Radio Station in inviting storytellers to make recordings. The Suzhou Radio Station paid only a small fee for the *zhuan lu* ('special recording sessions') performances in the studio, not the *shikuang luyin* ('live recordings sessions') in the story house. For studio recordings, the Suzhou Radio Station paid 5 *yuan* per episode, while in Shanghai the fee was 20 *yuan*.<sup>134</sup> Considering that both the cities could receive programmes from the other, it was tough to compete locally with the *ping-tan* programmes broadcast in Shanghai; meanwhile, Shanghai programmes had a comparatively larger stock of *ping-tan* recordings, and the Shanghai Ping-tan Troupe were able to assemble more outstanding *ping-tan* masters at the time. The programme *Guangbo Shuchang* in Suzhou operated under very severe

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<sup>134</sup> Huan Jueping explained that for his position as a programme producer, he earned 50 *yuan* per month, which was considered as a higher subsidy because he previously worked in Shanghai; while for the average salary of this position was around 30–40 *yuan* per month.

circumstances: indeed, even the Suzhou local audience preferred listening to the Shanghai *ping-tan* programmes. All these disadvantages drove Hua Jueping to devise alternative ways of making *Guangbo Shuchang* more self-sufficient.

It was not until Hua Jueping first saw advertisements inserted in the intervals of TV series broadcast by Shanghai television in late 1983 that he was enlightened as to the possibility of doing the same in *ping-tan* radio programmes. Soon, his proposal of introducing advertisement passed. In this way, not only could performers receive more than a small fee, but also more blank discs could be purchased so that recordings could be kept rather than erased every day. In addition, 20 percent of the advertising fees were allocated to the programme. Since advertising on radio was still in its early stages after the period of political turbulence, in order to gain more sponsorship, Hua Jueping either used his personal relationships, or went to factories and institutes to 'sell' advertising slots in programme intervals. Thanks to the popularity of *ping-tan* among the people, the programme gained more financial support after these efforts.

The Suzhou Radio Station became the fourth in the country to update to the FM stereophonic model on 1 October 1985. The upgraded broadcasting system delivered better reception quality to the local community, facilitated *ping-tan* and advertisement broadcasting, and benefited storytellers and the programme in remarkable ways: the small fee was raised to 20 *yuan* to match Shanghai. Later, the *ping-tan* programmes in Shanghai raised their small fee to 30 *yuan*, and Hua Jueping's programme soon followed. Furthermore, the storytellers whose live performances were recorded for the radio programme got a small fee as a reward. The programme also benefited from a greater budget for phonography discs to store copies of these recordings. The cost of each disc was around 30 to 40 *yuan* – as much as the average monthly salary for some employees – and each disc could record only one episode.

As Shanghai preserved more collections of the great masters than Suzhou did, Hua Jueping took the initiative to exchange existing records with Shanghai Radio Station so that each could make copies of the other's materials. After negotiating with Shanghai Radio Station to gain access to a full story performed by Jiang Yuequan, Suzhou would provide copies of two full stories told by less famous storytellers. If performances were of a similar quality, or were told by the storytellers who were nearly at the same level, the radio stations would carry out a one-to-one exchange of mutual benefit.

By this model of self-sufficiency, the stocks of both live performance recordings and studio recordings of *ping-tan* accumulated over ten years exceeded 4500 hours, and included more

than 100 pieces of long-episode storytelling and story singing works. Nowadays, these recordings are treated as treasures by *ping-tan* followers. When Hua Jueping shared his experiences with me, he showed his pride in the quality and quantity of the recordings produced under his supervision. Current *ping-tan* programmes still largely rely on these recordings, which have been transferred to digital archive after Zhang Yuhong took over the job from Hua Jueping.

### 6.2.2 Storytellers' Support of *Ping-tan* Programmes

After expanding the storage, the next difficulty for Hua Jueping was that the storytellers were wary of recording live performances for the radio programme. They were concerned that it might impact their business within the story houses because *ping-tan* storytellers were focused on improving the quality of their storytelling, rather than the quantity. In other words, storytellers usually only specialised in a very limited repertoire, establishing their fame on the bases of one or two stories. For this reason, Hua Jueping had to persuade them that the programming of their live performances actually was of mutual benefit. But for the master storytellers, this was not a problem at all. Hua explained:

For the *ping-tan* masters, it is unnecessary to worry about [the negative impact]. Once I recorded Jiang Yunxian's *Tixiao Yinyuan* ('Between Tears and Smiles') and broadcast it, the audience members' feedback was very positive. They admired in her performance that one performer could play so many different roles! People asked, 'How many people exactly tell the story?' Afterwards, when she again came to Suzhou to perform, she achieved more remarkable ticket sales.

Unlike recording the live performance, storytellers were not prejudiced against studio recording. In fact, they were stricter and more serious in this work. Hua Jueping recalled that once the storytellers Yu Hongxian and Shen Shihua from Shanghai Ping-tan Troupe were invited to record the story *Shuang Zhu Feng* ('Double-Pearl Phoenix'). During a piece of ballad singing within the story lasting fourteen minutes, they made a so-called *hua* (a blemish) in the thirteenth minute.<sup>135</sup> The performers asked to erase the recording and start again. However, the recorder 'national mode 635' used by the programme was not convenient for editing, and technicians would need more than half an hour to splice the tape from the middle. The performers still insisted on re-singing this ballad until they thought it

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<sup>135</sup> To make an error or a vocal blemish during singing is called *kai hua* 开花 (literary 'flower blossom') in *ping-tan* jargon.

was perfect. In addition to performers' self-discipline in presenting their best work, Hua Jueping was also strict about the recording quality. If one string on one of the instruments was carelessly plucked stronger, or the quality of the sound was rough or raw, he would suggest that the performer record the whole piece of singing again.

Hua Jueping believed that holding a cautious and serious attitude to this work was also important for him to obtain storytellers' respect and support for his work:

You should be diligent in your work. People even take it for granted that recording live performances in a story house is something effortless. But maintaining a good social network with all factors is invaluable. For example, if the *changfang* ('manager of the story house') told me the forthcoming schedule, and it was precisely what I would like to record, I would visit the performers beforehand to ask their permission to record, even if the performer was not in Suzhou. Well, you know, mobile phones did not exist at that time [he laughed]. You cannot record without the performers' permission. If I contacted just when they just arrived at the story house, it was too urgent and impolite.

Once I heard that the storytellers Cheng Zhenqiu and Shi Yajun would perform in Suzhou after they were to give a performance at the *Luodian shuchang* story house in Baoshan district, Shanghai. I took a train and coach to visit them, and I came out with the request face to face, although they did not know me at that time. I introduced myself as a former storyteller and current programme producer. I told them that their performances were popular among the audience, and I would now like to record their performance for broadcasting. Usually, when people recognised that I was also a professional in the *ping-tan* field, they would accept my request.

Another time, when I heard Cao Xiaojun would perform in a story house in Suzhou, it was just before he was about to commence a long-episode performance the next day. I hurried to visit him at his elder brother master Cao Hanchang's home (he lived at his brother's house), and discussed my recording plan for broadcasting it. If I had not been active in dealing with these networks of people, we would probably have missed a lot.

To relay the live performance from the story house became the main purpose of *ping-tan* radio programmes. Fearing that this might negatively influence potential audiences away

from live *ping-tan* performance in the story house, not every storyteller was willing to contribute the performance recording to this broadcasting platform. However, because of the large storage capacity needed to meet the broadcasting requirement, a valuable diachronic archive of live post-1985 *ping-tan* performances in story houses remains and benefits current *ping-tan* programmes, the *ping-tan* followers, and *ping-tan* studies. Yin Dequan, a *ping-tan* expert who later became the television *ping-tan* programme producer, wrote a mini article in 1991 when he was still an amateur. In it he mentioned that some *ping-tan* enthusiasts were keen on collecting recordings, including those from the *ping-tan* radio programmes; some people had recorded more than a thousand singing ballads from two hundred storytellers (Yin, 1991: 165). He then concluded that some of these collectors had the potential to become *ping-tan* experts (ibid.). Later, Yin dedicated himself to his *ping-tan* career and he only recently retired as a television programme producer in the summer of 2015.<sup>136</sup>

### 6.2.3 Design of the Programme

Along with the growing size of the collection, Hua Jueping was able to design the *Guangbo Shuchang* programme. This involved producing the programmes in various ways, the so-called *huase dang* (literally meaning ‘variety of designs’), rather than always purely broadcasting long-episode stories in daily instalments.

Influenced by the *Liupai Yanchang Hui* (literally ‘Concert of Singing Schools’) form from Shanghai, Hua edited the programme by mixing the story singing ballads with opening ballads that were representative of various singing schools, so that the programmes’ content would be enriched. The advantage of this ‘broadcasting concert’ design – as Hua explained – was that it allowed flexibility to fit the specific requirements of each programme’s length. Sometimes, a mini section of storytelling would be added, so that audiences could either listen to the telling or the singing. In addition, with the popularity of *zhongpian* (‘medium-length’) stories that were newly composed within just four or five episodes, Hua Jueping set up another *ping-tan* programme, *Yayun Shuhui* (‘Elegant Aroma of Story Collection’), which specialised in medium-length stories from 2 pm to 4:30 pm on Saturdays. He explained:

As they were used to listening to long forms of storytelling and singing, audiences would expect something different from radio broadcasting. Broadcasting the medium-length story took some adjustment. Nevertheless, announcing information in advance about the medium-length stories at the

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<sup>136</sup> Personal communication, 7 October 2015

end of the Friday programmes was helpful in keeping audiences next to their radios.

In addition, Hua Jueping borrowed the idea of the *Bankuaixing Lanmu* ('Jigsaw Programme') from news report to accommodate all the *ping-tan* news and information into several sessions in one programme. This special programme was produced to play once or twice a week to introduce the lore and anecdotes of *ping-tan* and the *ping-tan* field. Another special programme Hua Jueping experimented with was *Yanzhi Xiaojie Xia Ping-tan* ('Lady Yanzhi Steps Down [from] the Stage of *Ping-tan*'). 'Lady Yanzhi' refers to the famous *ping-tan* storyteller Xing Yanzhi. Hua Jueping invited her to host the programme – mainly to read Hua Jueping's written text, but in a 'telling' register – to spread knowledge to the audience. This 'knowledge' was not only restricted to the lore of *ping-tan*, but also included stories and anecdotes from history, which were related to the stories told in *ping-tan*. To ingeniously combine all of these themes with *ping-tan* relevant topics, listeners could supplement their listening to an instalment of a story. Later, this programme changed its name to *Ping-tan Shalong* ('The *Ping-tan* Salon'), and Hua Jueping took on the roles of both editor and host. In the 1990s, in addition to inviting storytellers as guest hosts, he offered more chances for audience members to engage in the live programme by setting up phone-in features. Sometimes, the programme would also have 'quiz time', posing *ping-tan* trivia questions to encourage audience members to become involved. Besides, during festivals, the radio stations in Suzhou, Shanghai and Wuxi joined forces to launch special *ping-tan* concerts. Participating storytellers would sit in the respective three radio studios and communicate and perform over the airwaves, bringing the festival to each of the local audiences.

Hua Jueping gave me an example to introduce the *ping-tan* repertoire *Changsheng dian* ('Changsheng Palace') and its singing ballads. The programme began with presenting the historical figures of the Emperor *Tang Ming Huang* (Emperor Tang Xuan Zong, reigned from 712-756) and his most famous concubines. Hua suggested that although audiences were acquainted with the love affairs of the emperor, they might not know what exactly happened during his regime and the relevant historical records. Thus, the intention behind recounting these historical affairs was to enhance audience members' understanding of the lyrics and their meaning. Hua Jueping stressed:

To tell the story behind the *ping-tan* stories' is my principle in editing this programme. This idea is similar to the *ping-tan* jargon *wai chahua*, the 'stuck-in' content to enrich the telling. As an editor, I should find out the identifiable specialties for producing the programmes. Only playing the storytellers'

performance would be tedious to the audience. Thus, I must look up a lot of material, and watch television documentary programmes to learn more. In terms of the legends and tales, I should find out the possible origins, so that the information is reliable for the audience.

These [items of] ‘knowledge’ are usually exaggerated or omitted in the performance. Some historical facts could be distorted by word of mouth; I should clarify the wrong information and misunderstandings in this programme.

Hua Jueping’s notion of adding ‘stuck-in’ content, producing the special programmes and adding information that cannot be gleaned from the live performance, was appealing to radio listeners. This content was probably the key to the success to the *ping-tan* programme: by offering these extra but attractive pieces of information, on one hand, these special programmes made up for the disadvantage of missing the interconnection between the performer and the audience members that would be present during a live performance. On the other hand, the extra content brought more audience to the programme: the *ping-tan* followers enjoyed a different presentation with the radio broadcast, and if they were not able to attend the live performance, they could rely on the radio broadcast. For those who just encountered *ping-tan* by chance, it was more convenient to enjoy the *ping-tan* programmes on the radio that contained simplified aspects of *ping-tan* knowledge. In other words, the radio *ping-tan* programme created another extended performance space rooted in – and perhaps extending beyond – the live performances in the story house.

#### **6.2.4 Radio Listeners’ Involvement**

My own impression of *ping-tan* radio programme involvement was formed when I was a child. When my grandmother brought me to visit my great-grandmother after lunch during the summer holiday, my great-grandmother was sitting on a rattan chair in front of her bungalow, concentrating on listening to the *ping-tan* programme. The black radio set was put on a smaller bamboo chair next to her. Similar scenes could often be found in Suzhou before the city entered high-speed development in the late 1990s. However, not all the listeners passively received whatever the radio programme played to them. ‘Becoming stereo friends’ was a motto that enabled Hua Jueping and his colleagues to loyally serve their audiences by meeting their expectations and requirements, allowing the ‘invisible’ audience in front of their radios to engage in communication with the *ping-tan* programme.

Allowing audience members to call in and take part in live programmes, and inviting them to write letters was a means of responding to different types of programmes. This practice was inherited from the *ping-tan* programmes played in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In the programmes that offered audience members the chance to take part, usually the interaction was not simultaneous with the broadcast. Especially in the programmes that played repertoire requested by the audience, producers kept a gap of about three minutes to prepare the requested recording. Hua Jueping told me that when *ping-tan* fans had the chance to speak on the airwaves, they would often give not only their request, but also their opinions on the previous track played, critical comments about the performance, and even suggest a better version of the same repertoire.

In the letters written by the audience members, there were also a great number of demands for a certain version of one repertoire by a particular performer to be broadcast. They often commented on previously broadcast repertoires, expressing their affection and admiration, and only a very small proportion expressed a derision. The programmer would sometimes hand the audience's letters directly to the performers, in order to keep a neutral standpoint and reserve their own judgement.

As well as serving the local Suzhou audience, Hua Jueping says that he treated all his listeners' feedback equally. Hua Jueping shared a vivid memory of an occasion when members of the audience requested a certain performance by the storyteller Huang Yi'an, who was admired as a '*ping-tan* talent' by the previous Prime Minister Zhou Enlai. Huang Yi'an was once invited to record the first half of his well-known self-composed story, *Wen Zhengming*. Due to his advanced age, the storyteller's performance was not as accomplished as during his peak. However, after the story was broadcast, the Suzhou Radio Station received a letter signed by more than one hundred audience members from Shanghai that requested that the programme continue to record the remaining episodes of the repertoire, which the programme then agreed to undertake.<sup>137</sup>

Hua Jueping pursued his principle that only by treating the feedback from the audience seriously would the audience show their loyalty to the programme. *Ping-tan* radio broadcasting requires the audience members' long-term commitment in order to survive. Considering the raw materials out of which *ping-tan* programmes are constructed into dozens of episodes, the programme producers are tasked with much more than merely relaying live performances; in addition, they need to elaborate the most impressive

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<sup>137</sup> *Wen Zhengming* is a forty-episode story in its entirety.

moments to attract new audience members and maintain existing followers. Traditionally, it was almost exclusively the responsibility of the storytellers themselves to maintain the audience's curiosity and thereby sustain the tradition; nowadays, however, with the prevalence and prominence of radio broadcast *ping-tan*, the producers have taken on some of that responsibility. They take strenuous measures to ensure that the artform's original performer-audience 'feedback loop' retains its vitality, albeit in a transformed manner; while in the traditional story house the interactions were instantaneous and based on in-the-moment perception and reaction, for the radio performers and listeners, the interactions became protracted and mediated over many hours. Effectively, then, Hua Jueping plays a role similar to that of the storyteller in a live story house performance, in the sense that he pays careful attention to adapting the programme content to meet the audience's expectations. Although in this case the feedback is delayed, Hua nonetheless uses it to adjust the programme presentation much as a storyteller would do.

### 6.3 Challenges: *Ping-tan* Radio Broadcasting in 21<sup>st</sup> Century in Suzhou

My other interviewee Zhang Yuhong has been working in Suzhou Radio Station since 1984. She was designated as *ping-tan* programme producer of channel AM 1080 in 1999, and officially took over Hua Jueping's job in May 2003.<sup>138</sup> She agreed to be interviewed twice, on 26 August and 6 September 2013, when she talked about her job as a *ping-tan* programme producer, discussing the challenges that *ping-tan* programmes have encountered since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. She has been leading production of the programme *Guangbo Shuchang*, the 'Broadcasting Story House', during the day time, and *Yayun Shuhui*, 'Elegant Aroma of Story Collection' in the evening since she took over this job from Hua Jueping. She introduced her personal history with *ping-tan* to me, and her early engagement in this job:

I began my career at Suzhou Radio Station as a literary editor in 1984. The pace of work was not as intensive as it is nowadays. At that time, I was assigned to edit one programme per week with plenty of time.

Before this editing job, I occasionally listened to *ping-tan* in my daily life, and I considered myself as neither disliking *ping-tan*, nor loving it. However, I unconsciously became accustomed to *ping-tan* through these few occasions, and this benefited me a lot afterwards. The time I really began to develop a relationship with *ping-tan* was when I shared an office with Hua Jueping, the main *ping-tan* programme editor at the AM 1080 station. He always played *ping-tan*

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<sup>138</sup> She started to carry on Hua Jueping's work in 2000.

recordings in the office. When storytellers came to visit him, I started to become familiar with these practitioners' names, to understand the lore of *ping-tan*, and to build up relationships with these performers. After Mr Hua retired, I fully took over his work.

The *ping-tan* programmes of our channel have been popular for many decades. People recalled that because almost every family had their wirelesses tuned to *ping-tan* programmes, one could listen to a full episode while walking through the city, without missing a word. People treated the wireless as a kind of alarm that marked time in people's daily schedules – the *ping-tan* programme played at the fixed time of 1 pm. For this reason, the time for *ping-tan* programmes on AM 1080 has stayed the same. The theme tune is a particular melody from an opening ballad in *Xu diao* (Xu Yunzhi). When it begins to play on the radio, you know it is exactly 1 pm.

Producing *ping-tan* programmes requires specialist knowledge, but I knew little about *ping-tan*. I met a lot of difficulties in my work. Thanks to Mr Hua and the performers' help, during the first three to four years I was able to establish working relationships with storytellers and the troupes in Suzhou, Shanghai and other places. I learned a lot from them and from members of the audiences who had advanced knowledge. Now I can distinguish the various singing schools, although I still cannot tell which of the main schools many tunes come from.

In a rapidly developing contemporary society the challenges are more significant than when Hua Jueping first began operating this *ping-tan* radio programme. They include collecting new but valuable materials from a decreasing number of performances, seeking sponsorship to support production, and arranging new programmes. It also involves improving programme market share, which, among other things, is linked to advertising revenues. Although Hua Jueping also encountered similar difficulties, the challenges in fulfilling these tasks have become more intense for Zhang Yuhong in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.



**Figure 6-2 Zhang Yuhong (provided by Zhang Yuhong).**

In addition to AM 1080, by 2014, the Suzhou Radio Station's five channels had been integrated under the charge of the Guangbo Zhongxin ('Radio Broadcasting Centre') of the Suzhou Guangbo Dianshi Zong Tai ('Suzhou Broadcasting System').<sup>139</sup> All of the local *ping-tan* programmes share the same database of *ping-tan* archives. The following section discusses these other *ping-tan* programmes.

Channel FM 91.1 mainly broadcasts news, and like AM 1080 is administrated by *Xinwen Zonghe Pinlü* ('The General News Channel'). Hence, Zhang Yuhong is also in charge of this channel's *ping-tan* programme. The station airs *ping-tan* programmes from 4:30 am to 5:00 am to cover a gap in other programming. Although in the official documentation, market share stands at 0 percent for this period, Zhang Yuhong is sure that there is an audience for this 30-minute programme. She said:

Sometimes acquaintances greet me by saying 'Mrs Zhang, recently you played [such and such] at 4:30 in the morning, right?' to start a conversation. Besides, occasionally the programme has mistakenly repeated a track played the previous day or in the evening programme, and we have received phone calls of complaint from audience members, criticising us: 'how could the programme be so lacking in sense of responsibility?'

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<sup>139</sup> The 'Suzhou Broadcasting System' united the radio, television, and the 'broadcasting newspaper office' in 2002, becoming the only official broadcasting enterprise in Suzhou. The six radio channels are AM 1080, FM 91.1, FM 104.8, FM 102.8, FM 94.8, AM 846 and FM 96.5. Apart from FM 104.8 and FM 96.5, the other channels all broadcast *ping-tan*.

In order to fit the 30-minute slot, Zhang Yuhong splits the normal 50-minute track into two, as she said, “adjusting the head and the tail of each episode” to remind the audience of the previous slot’s ending.

Channel AM 846 is called *Xiqu Pindao* (‘The Drama Channel’) and specialises in playing Chinese drama and operatic genres. While it shares the same administration with FM 94.8 *Dushi Yinyue Pinlü* (‘The Urban Music Channel’), which only plays pop music, Zhang Yuhong is specially employed to control the *ping-tan* content of this channel. It plays two hours of *ping-tan* programmes as AM 1080 does, but its lesser local influence translates into a much smaller market share of between 6 and 8 percent. The *ping-tan* programmes are, though, prominent in comparison with the channel’s other programmes. To avoid overlapping with the programmes of AM 1080, the broadcast time is deliberately adjusted from 6 am to 7 am, and from 7 pm to 8 pm. However, content from AM 1080 may sometimes be repeated.

The channels FM 104.8 and FM 102.8 operate under the *Jiaotong Jingji Pinlü* (‘The Transport and Economy Channel’). While FM 104.8 has no programmes playing *ping-tan*, FM 102.8 keeps a one-hour slot for the *ping-tan* programme *Wan Ming Shuhui* (‘Wan Ming’s Story Meeting’; Wan Ming, the producer and host, was a storyteller before embarking on a radio career). From noon on weekdays it plays a ballad and an episode of long storytelling. During the same time slot at weekends, a special programme *Guangyu Shuhui* (‘The Guangyu Story Meeting’) plays recordings of performances in the *Guangyu* story house.

Wan Ming has a large collection of *ping-tan* recordings accumulated during his storytelling career. He sometimes plays his personal copies of master performances on the programme, some of which are rare nowadays. For this reason, Wan Ming’s *ping-tan* programme has unique points that draw significant audience attention. In addition, being a member of the Suzhou Ping-tan Shoucang Xiehui (‘Suzhou Ping-tan Collection Institute’), he is able to sometimes play examples of ballad singing from loyal followers of *ping-tan*. These tracks have either been recorded by him during past gatherings of the institute, or have been sent to him by audience members. However, as Wan Ming’s main priority is his heated talk-show programme *A Wan Chalou* (‘A Wan’s teahouse’) on AM 104.8, the weekend special programme on FM 102.8 may be replaced by long-episode stories because of lack of time to prepare for this programme. In such cases, audiences are often disaffected and complain. Besides, although the market share of Wan Ming’s *ping-tan* programme on 102.8 is consistent at 2 percent, this is outstanding in the context of the channel’s other programmes.

### 6.3.1 Programme Content, Market Share<sup>140</sup> after 2000 in Suzhou

During Hua Jueping's era, technology constrained choices regarding which performances were to be recorded and broadcast. However, since Zhang Yuhong took over from Hua in 2000, a more serious problem for the radio programme has become collecting material from daily performance in the story houses, as this job relies on the performers. Zhang lamented: "If the performers are not willing to promote their works through radio, what can I do?" Consequently, only 20 percent of broadcast content is newly collected from live performances every year.

She explained that the radio programme does not have the budget for such large-scale programmes as are affordable for television programmes. In addition, some performers increasingly regard their fame as particularly important, and believe that television is a medium through which they can obtain a greater impact in society. Television performers benefit from attractive makeup and graceful costumes, and generally radio has lower status and less cultural influence than television. Some are even less confident about the appeal of radio, and consider the *ping-tan* radio programme to be nearing its end.

These concerns are certainly exaggerated. Although there are fewer new performances being promoted through radio than before, it does not mean that audience members have less interest in newly-composed repertoire. Zhang Yuhong highlights the market share achieved by a broadcast of the story *Mudan Yuan* ('The Peony Garden') to show that a high-quality performance is always applauded.

Composers of 'The Peony Garden' Pan Zuqiang and Lu Yue'e gained significant acclaim performing their story throughout their careers. On one occasion, they were invited by a television programme to record it in the studio, but refused, considering themselves too old to project the desired image on television. Instead, they accepted an offer from the radio programme, feeling this form of recording to be less intensive. Zhang Yuhong recalled the circumstances.<sup>141</sup>

During the recording, they laid out their scripts in front of themselves to jog their memories. This way of performing is called *tan pugai* (literary 'unfolding bedding') in *ping-tan* jargon. It is impossible in television recording. Finally we recorded forty-two episodes of this story. The theme is conservative, and

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<sup>140</sup> If no other illustration is provided, all market share and ratings data comes from interviewees. Detailed reports are kept confidential for business reasons.

<sup>141</sup> Personal communication, 26 August 2013.

surrounds the extraordinary love between a young scholar and the three 'Madam Peonies' - who are a real lady, a villain and a chivalrous lady respectively. Just after programming this story, market share radically rose from 25 percent to 43 percent. Obviously, new compositions of high quality are welcome.

Not many storytellers have a particular desire to specially record for the radio programme as Pan Zuqiang and Lu Yue'e did. Apart from broadcasting recordings of selected live performances from story houses, the daily long-episode slots are predominantly filled by the records collected by Hua Jueping. From years of accumulation, programme editors have long been familiar with items in the repertoire of each storyteller that stand out from his or her other works, and the content of an episode that is more attractive to the audience. Some popular collections are irregularly rebroadcast every two or three years.

Interestingly, these old collections are generally more popular than new recordings. For example, the long-episode *tanci* story *Gu Dingchen* performed by storytellers Zhou Jianping and Zhang Jianguo was rebroadcast again in August 2013 on AM 1080. The market share peaked at 48 percent, while its average settled at between 42 and 43 percent. That is to say, between 1pm and 2pm, 48 samples out of 100 were listening to this *ping-tan* programme instead of any of the other FM and AM channels that can be received in local area. Similarly, the average market share of Zhao Kaisheng's long-episode *tanci* story *Zhenzhu Ta* ('Pearl Pagoda') was between 36 and 37 percent. Zhang Yuhong suggests that even for less-ideal performances, market share is normally in the 23 to 24 percent range, which would be considered outstanding for other programmes and channels.

Audience affection for these classic performances is a significant reason that the *ping-tan* programme remains top among all other radio shows in terms of market share. Zhang Yuhong again turns to market share to indicate the popularity of medium-length stories that were mainly composed during the Cultural Revolution. As these medium-length stories have not been played in a series before, she named this series, which began in March 2013, *Zhanbo Ji* ('Seasonal Exhibition').

At the very beginning of the series, the market share achieved gradually climbed to an effective 8 to 9 percent. Later, it broke through the 10 percent barrier and kept rising. Along with the success of advanced promotion, this rise is closely connected to awareness spreading by word of mouth. After six months, market share was stable at an average of between 22 and 23 percent. For evening *ping-tan* programme, this data is astonishing for the general average that is generally below 10 percent. However, it is notable that when the

programme broadcast so-called modern stories, whose content is closer to current life, market share would come down to 17 or 18 percent; when it aired traditional themes, for example master Yan Xueting's composition *Shiwu Guan* ('Fifteen Strings of Copper Coins'), the number would rise again.

Sometimes Zhang Yuhong frets about retaining high market share. Although this measure is a sign that audiences have been pulled back and attracted by the programmes, she actually feels more pressure in her work:

For the sake of the annual examination of our work, if market share is always at a high level, how can I improve my work in the coming years? The average number has been pulled up to 32 percent, with the peak at 48 percent! For this purpose, I arranged [performances] of several repertoire items that are not so favoured by the listeners, to pull down the market share figure. I once arranged the story *Bai She* ('White Snake'), but performed by Cao Xiaojun and Yang Naizhen, who were not as superlative as the Jiang-Zhu duo (Jiang Yuequan and Zhu Huizhen), but the market share did not really come down very much, it still remained in excess of 30 percent.

I guess it is not so easy to reduce the listener's enthusiasm – that's why I said our listeners have a high loyalty and firm connection to our programmes. As the market share has risen, it has become the audience's daily habit to listen to these *ping-tan* programmes. On the contrary, if you damage your work one day, it is also extremely hard to pull the audience back to you. The average market share of channel AM 1080 has declined to 12 percent from 30 percent during these years, but the 'Broadcasting Story House' not only remains at a high level of market share among the programmes, but even exceeds that. In other words, audience are truly fond of our programmes. Therefore, from this perspective, the content of programmes decides everything.

Thanks to Hua Jueping's work, there are plenty of long-episode performances to play. According to Zhang Yuhong's estimate, the most popular records can support daily programming needs with no repetition for three years. When audiences hear the same performance only after a three-year gap, they do not feel the repetition to be tedious.

### **6.3.2 Audience Nostalgia: a Key to Programme Popularity**

In comparison with the 1990s, the current number of listeners is much lower. The most affected programme is probably the evening show *Yayun Shuhui* ('Elegant Aroma of the

Story Meeting') broadcast on AM 1080 from 8 to 9 pm, and specialising in delivering long-episode *tanci* stories. Before the year 2000, as one of the most popular programmes, it would be rebroadcast during the following daytime. After 2000, with the depression of the radio broadcasting industry and the blooming of television, the market share for this evening radio programme gradually declined to between 7 and 8 percent. Zhang Yuhong explains that nowadays at 8pm, a lot of listeners shift to watch television. Besides, older people, who are the main audience, may be preparing for bed.

However, the audience still requests that this evening programme be rebroadcast the next day, so that they can catch up on episodes that they have missed. In addition, as mentioned above, analysis of market share has demonstrated that classic performances such as *Gu Dingcheng* performed by storytellers Zhou Jianping and Zhang Jianguo, *Bai She* performed by Jiang Yuequan and Zhu Huizhen, and Jiang Yuequan and Jiang Wenlan's *Yu Qingting* ('The Jade Dragonfly'), are more popular than modern stories. Zhang Yuhong suggests that enthusiasm for listening to *ping-tan* programme comes from nostalgic feelings for past life:

The majority of our listeners are older people, but they were once young. They have become older along with the performers. This intimacy cannot be replaced. Unfortunately, these masters have almost all passed away. Once we were joking in the office that 'we are now listening to the dead telling stories'. It is true, the real masters have died, and only very few are still alive. For example, among the so-called '18 pines' performers from the Shanghai Ping-tan Troupe, and the '7 malignant stars' referring to the 7 most competitive duets of performers, now, only Chen Xi'an and Wang Baiyin are still alive.

That is to say, the intimacy between the audience and their favourite performers is the key to pulling people back. Leaving aside the less auspicious fact that many stories are 'told by dead people', another disadvantage is that these recordings collected in the 1980s and 1990s are often of poor quality due to technical issues. Surprisingly, unlike television, which relies on newly-produced programmes, these poor quality recordings offer the radio audience a sense of history and memory. Zhang Yuhong believes that it is the restorative quality delivered by these recordings that hits people's hearts:

The listeners' feeling is that *ping-tan* is gracious and very familiar. People always feel nostalgic for times that they passed in an amiable mood. [For example], my first trip to Taiwan made me feel as if I was already greatly acquainted with the [rural] atmosphere, which resembled life in the 1980s [in Suzhou]. On the contrary, although I spent most of my university life in

Shanghai, it makes me feel awkward: the lanes there have been demolished, and the city has changed a lot. Shanghai looks very prosperous now, but I do not have this amiable feeling for it. The intimate feeling from old recording shares the same idea. Some people may question the playing of these poor quality and out-of-date records, and might think my job is just 're-frying cold rice'. But audiences are infatuated with these classic performances, and probably their pasts too.

Besides, the composition of audiences is constantly changing. Older members die; you cannot guarantee that the people who are keen on Jiang Yuequan's performances are all still alive. You must recognise that people naturally get bored if they merely listen to the same performance, no matter how excellent it is. But do not forget, each generation is getting old at the same pace. The group of people who were 50 or 60 years old are now around 70 or 80 years old. And the group from an even younger generation, who listened to *ping-tan* in their childhood and teenage years with their grandparents, they have become middle-aged. These people still have the habit of listening to *ping-tan*, and will be our new, but loyal audience. This is a kind of heritage passing from generation to generation. Thus anyhow, we will always have a kind of new audience.

Not only do older people have this nostalgia, but the middle-aged and younger generations may also have a similar mood. As a producer, Zhang Yuhong asked many audience members, "why do you listen to *ping-tan*"; and a common straightforward answer is, "I listened to *ping-tan* with my grandparents when I was a child". This is the local way that *ping-tan* is naturally passed from generation to generation. Unfortunately, with the accelerated tempo of life nowadays, very few people of the younger generations wish to slow down their life and spend more time with older people. Zhang said that even her own daughter does not deliberately make time to listen to *ping-tan*, although she does recognise the repertoire.

Admittedly, this circumstance should not only be attributed to individuals' lack of care. When Zhang's generation was young, there were not many forms of entertainment to choose from. For this reason, listening to *ping-tan* was a common form of domestic entertainment for people in those decades. Nevertheless, some people do change their previous lifestyle following retirement. For this group of people too, as Zhang Yuhong stressed, nostalgia also plays a part, especially for those born and bred in Suzhou. When these people cast their minds back, *ping-tan* must be a deep-rooted presence; an amiable

feeling for the acoustic qualities of *ping-tan* exists for them too. After all, listening to *ping-tan* on the radio was not part of these peoples' lifestyles, but they unconsciously shared that atmosphere. Again, when these fragments in their mind are put together, it is understandable for this group of people to become an 'advanced-aged but new loyal audience' for these *ping-tan* programmes.

### 6.3.3 Advertising, Market Share, and Audience Loyalty

Advertising is considered the main method of making profits for radio programmes. Sometimes, in order to create more income, an hour-long programme is shortened to 45 minutes, with advertisements inserted into the last 15 minutes. Considering the large influence and the preeminent market share of *ping-tan* programmes on AM 1080, advertisers are willing to accept deals in which their messages appear after the programme has finished. Zhang Yuhong told me feedback from enterprises suggests that the effect of advertising is remarkable, and has a real impact on profits.

However, advertising is a double-edged sword for the *ping-tan* programme. Zhang is concerned about the integrity of a performance, and that overwhelming advertising is harmful to the *ping-tan* programme. Generally, the materials collected from live performances in story houses last about 50 to 60 minutes. With the purpose of condensing the programme in 45 minutes, the presentation must be abridged in various places. For instance, the opening ballad is totally removed to retain time for the main performance. These actions actually annoy listeners. Zhang deems that decisions made by the bureau to save broadcasting time for advertising is displeasing:

The audience is loyal to this programme. They are very familiar with the story content and clear about the plot. They listen to *ping-tan* not only to follow the development of story, but actually for *ping-tan* music. Why do they listen to the same repertoire again and again? Not only is the music pleasing to ears, they truly listen to the music and the storyteller's performance!

Shortening a live performance recording involves a challenging editing job. Consistent logic and integrity in the storyline must be guaranteed, and any flaws that may trigger the interruption of coherence must be avoided. Even so, sophisticated listeners, especially *lao erduo* (literally 'old ears') can accurately point out where the original performance has been altered. Other content that is possible to remove includes the explanation of the lyrics after the opening ballad has been played, the unimportant repetition of plot features, and the so-called *nongtang shu* (literary 'lane story'), which is sub-branch of the plot. Although the

story may become more concise after these trims, the exquisiteness of storytelling and story singing might also be affected.

Zhang Yuhong turns again to market share to explain. Before the year 2000, the market share of the daytime programme was stable at around 36 or 37 percent. This was the highest figure for any of the radio channels that can be received in Suzhou. After 2000 when the programme decided to make time for advertising, especially in the first three years, the market share of daytime programme declined to an average of between 21 and 22 percent. Sometimes, it could drop to between 12 and 13 percent, and even go under 10 percent. The audience were annoyed and appealed to the programme to stop cutting the stories for advertising. However, the chief leaders of radio station were more concerned with finances, and it was also reasonable for them to pursue improvements in administration and management. Inserting advertisements into the most popular programme was considered a success to report to the upper bureau, and later, the evening programme was also forced to apply similarly damaging cuts. Market share then reduced to a disappointing 5 to 6 percent. In other words, audience numbers have withered significantly as a result.

In recent years, Zhang Yuhong has successfully appealed for the 15 minutes to be restored so that complete performances can be played during both the daytime and evening programmes. Accordingly, the market share of daytime programming has recovered to an average of 25 to 28 percent, and sometimes surges to 48 percent. For the evening programming, in an extreme instance, a peak of between 26 and 27 percent was reached in August 2013. Zhang Yuhong attributes these changes to “the content of programme being the determining factor”, and “audience loyalty giving the programme the chance to recover”. Thus, the two factors mentioned above – the evening programme hitting the low of between 7 and 8 percent, and the ‘seasonal exhibition’ of medium-length stories being broadcast from March 2013 – resulted in the first half-year of 2013 being a clear turning point in fortunes. The programme continuously seeks improvements to satisfy its audiences.

Interestingly, it is not always advertisements that occupy broadcast time earmarked for *ping-tan*. If there is no advertising or fixed programme to play on AM 1080, for example during the 4 to 5 pm slot, the channel fills the gap with *ping-tan*. Zhang Yuhong has recommended to the bureau that other drama and opera genres be played instead of *ping-tan* in these instances, because three hours of *ping-tan* in a day is considered too much. She also is aware that fans of other drama and operatic arts should be taken into consideration. The programme *Xiqu Chazuo* (‘The Teahouse of *Xiqu*’) for instance plays other Chinese drama and opera genres, but is only on air for one hour per day on AM 1080, and enjoys a

steady market share of between 13 and 14 percent. It seems that there is great potential in the field of Chinese music arts in Suzhou.

#### 6.3.4 Special Programmes

Zhang Yuhong deems that in order to meet audience expectations, to encourage listeners to become 'stereo friends', and to maintain market share, innovation is required. Apart from daily instalments of the dominant long-episode stories, it is necessary to create new forms to tempt the audience's interest. In 2010, Zhang Yuhong and her colleagues commenced designing new special programmes based on the one-hour programme *Kongzhong Shuhui* ('Meeting of Stories in the Air'). This show is broadcast every Sunday afternoon and contains ballad-singing, storytelling highlights, news from the *ping-tan* field, and audience requests, and it is presented in a 'journal' style. However, it was not until 2013 that four kinds of special programme began to achieve the desired audience reception.

The first form derives from the original one-hour *Kongzhong Shuhui*, and broadcasts recordings of ballad singing and storytelling from ballad concerts and other occasions performed in Suzhou and other cities. These are selections of highlights recorded in multiple performances from different story houses, and in order to integrate them into the radio show, Zhang Yuhong chooses those of the finest quality for immediate programming, and leaves the rest to be aired according to need on the Sunday programme.

This programme also relays special performances and important festivals. These include the debuts of new graduates from the Suzhou Ping-tan School, special individual performances given by young employees from *ping-tan* troupes in Suzhou and other cities, performances from the *Shuangyue Shuhui* ('Bimonthly Story Meeting') hosted by the Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe, and from the '*Jiangsu Quyi Jie*' ('Jiangsu Drama Festival') that is held every four years. All of these special performances are of a higher quality than daily performances, and therefore are very popular among audiences. From these special performances, Zhang Yuhong adds interviews from performers, connoisseurs, and audience members to give a full report of the events.

Before a performance, she might interview *ping-tan* connoisseurs to discuss their expectations. This is helpful for promoting the performance. For example, in preparation for the '*Ping-tan Yishu Jie*' ('*Ping-tan* Artistic Festival') scheduled on 10 September 2012, in early August, Zhang interviewed Bi Kangnian, who was the chairman of the Suzhou Quyi Xiehui ('Suzhou Quyi Committee'), to discuss details of the bureau's preparations. She also interviewed Su Ti, the vice-chairman of the Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe to find out how the

performers prepared for this event, and did the same for performers who would give performances at the festival. These programmes simultaneously promoted new repertoire and new performers, while encouraging more people to buy festival tickets. During the festival itself, apart from recording all of the performances for broadcast, Zhang also interviewed performers and audience members during breaks. Later, she edited the interviews and performances together, the combination of which is intended to bring a greater insight into what attending the festival is like. Listeners unable to attend the live performance could enjoy these top-grade performances and take in the event from a wider perspective. Moreover, the content was also produced in an elaborated way to reflect the special atmosphere of these performances.

Zhang Yuhong suggests that this efficient production process displays the advantage of the medium of radio. With interviews recorded in advance, the radio programme could air the event as soon as the afternoon following the performance. Although television *ping-tan* programmes might also relay the same performance, time-consuming production procedures would mean that the materials might be aired a long time after.

This speed of response is indeed an advantage of radio *ping-tan* programmes. While the televised news might briefly report the event during no more than a minute of air time, and newspapers may merely describe it in a hundred words, radio programmes are able to exhibit the event fully. Therefore, listeners can receive up-to-date information on events they have missed, in a convenient and comprehensive way. Tickets may have been sold out (the theatre for the opening ceremony has more than one thousand seats, while story houses for daily performances offer no more than three hundred seats as normal), listeners may have been unable to attend for some other reason, and others may have chosen one performance at the expense of others held simultaneously. A convincing demonstration of the great enthusiasm of *ping-tan* followers is the 44 percent market share achieved by programmes relaying this festival.

The idea for the second form of special *ping-tan* programmes was derived from university-style lectures. Zhang Yuhong was the first to accommodate this form in a *ping-tan* radio programme. Although her primary goal in producing special programmes was to increase market share, this lecture-form activity also received a lot of supports from storytellers. Some storytellers even expressed their willingness to forgo a fee to promote *ping-tan* by giving a lecture. Zhang recalled an ancient Chinese idiom '*jiu xiang bupa xiangzi shen*' ('good wine needs no bush', an idiom meaning 'something good does not need to be advertised') to explain. This saying literally means that a good wine can be smelt from a further distance,

hence, even if the wine is placed in a lane, people a good distance away at the other end of the lane can still smell it. Though *ping-tan* is a 'good wine', without promotion, it would be difficult for people unfamiliar with it to explore its beauty. Zhang Yuhong said,

Although the *ping-tan* programmes are the trademark of AM 1080, nowadays, good wine does need a bush and to be taken out of the lane. No matter how amazing the *ping-tan* art is, you need to make the programme attractive to bring the audience together. It is just like the connection between the people. If you have little communication with someone, your relationship will become estranged, even if you were very close in the past. Running a programme is the same. Although audience members have a deep connection with you, if you are not able to detain them, they will leave you one day. It is just as the idiom said: '*jin xiangling, yin qinjuan*' (literally 'golden neighbour, but silver relatives', meaning an intimate neighbour is better than a distant relative). Especially under pressure from the other new and popular FM programmes, how can we keep the recognition of our channel that has existed for 60 years already?

In 2011, Zhang Yuhong and her colleagues set up the *AM 1080 Ping-tan Da Jiangtang* ('AM 1080 *Ping-tan* Lecture Room') with the support of the storytellers. However, the first problem was that there was not a studio in the radio station capable of being used as a 'lecture room'. After negotiation, the Lao Ganbu Ju ('Bureau of Old Cadres') provided them a lecture hall, which held a hundred people. The reason for the bureau's support of the programme was that they considered the programme significant in spreading *ping-tan* culture, and many cadres had a personal interest in *ping-tan*.

The famous storyteller Wu Xinbo was very passionate after he heard of this new project, and soon decided upon the topic of '*Xunzhao ping-tan zai dangjin shehui de jiazhi*' ('Seeking the value of *ping-tan* in modern society') for the first lecture of the programme, which he would give. Zhang Yuhong suspected that the topic would prove too broad but Wu insisted on taking the chance to engage an audience in a subject he had been considering for many years. In July 2011, the first lecture was broadcast on the programme, and it achieved great success.

The advertisement for the first *ping-tan* lecture appeared in other programmes for the preceding two weeks, and alerted the audience interested in local Suzhou customs. Listeners could call the radio station to reserve a ticket, which they could collect on Thursday afternoons, the standard time set by the station for listeners to collect tickets or prizes. For a small group of devoted fans, the radio station sent tickets to their homes. Tickets were free,

and to guard against people reserving tickets but then failing to come to the event, Zhang Yuhong suggests that asking listeners to collect tickets at the radio station would make them cherish the chance more. At the same time, knowing how many people would come would enable her to prepare better.

By word of mouth, the programme attracted remarkable fame and gained a large audience. However, because the number of tickets was restricted by the size of the venue, many potential spectators could not attend the live lecture. Zhang negotiated with the culture centre of the Canglang district to borrow the *Kuanggong Ci* (Kuanggong Shrine) for subsequent lectures. This shrine was specially re-decorated in the story-house style to provide the *ping-tan* fans a space to run their regular club events.

This monthly *ping-tan* lecture series has established a 'virtuous circle' pertaining to their organisation. The quality of the lectures is assured by the storytellers' expertise in logically and skilfully delivering a speech to engage listeners. After Wu Xinbo's first lecture, another storyteller Yuan Xiaoliang gave the second lecture titled '*Shuo de bi chang de haoting*' ('Speaking sounds more pleasant than singing'). This introduced the speaking skills and the performance gestures used to enrich a narrative. Zhang Yuong told me, from audience oral feedback, Yuan's lecture was full of passion. One remarked that he wished he could dance to illustrate Yuan Xiaoliang's brilliant explanations. Chen Yong, who is an experienced teacher at the Suzhou Ping-tan School, gave a lecture '*Haoting de Suzhou ping-tan*' ('The tuneful music of Suzhou *ping-tan*'), exploring the variety of *ping-tan* music. Zhang Yuhong mentioned an interesting detail:

When he played recordings of old ballad singing sung by past masters such as Wei Hanying and Shen Jian'an, the audience kept extremely quiet. Although the recording quality was really poor, the audience was so intoxicated with the music! Chen Yong played an extract to give an example, but unexpectedly, members of the audience shouted 'don't stop, please go on playing it!' and 'we want to listen to it!' However as you know, each *ping-tan* ballad lasts at least 7 minutes and some can last up to 14 minutes, and Chen Yong had to finish the lecture on time. But the audience did not care about it at all, continuously expressing their desire to 'listen to it in full!' Chen Yong asked me what to do; I had to ask him to play the full track. Afterwards, when he gave examples of the development of *ping-tan* music by playing some new compositions from festival events, including his compositions, the audience became fretful.

Afterwards, Chen Yong sighed and said ‘the audience members are truly *lao erduo* [‘sophisticated listeners’], and the classics are classics! I put my heart and blood into my own composition, but it is not popular with the audience!’ I said ‘this is really the power of the classics!’ The complete composition must be accepted by the audience, and then you can say you have achieved success. Can you imagine that the poor recordings from 50 years ago are still cheered by the audience members 50 years later? Without the audience’s will and their impact on dissemination, you can hardly say you have got success.

The storyteller Xu Huixin is creative and active in *ping-tan* circles. Zhang Yuhong admired his special technique of composing a full story by extracting one or two sentences from well-known existing repertoire. For example, his rearrangement of the episode *Shu Zhuang* (‘Dressing Up’) derives from a scene from the story *Liang Zhu* (‘The Butterfly Lovers’).<sup>142</sup> His adaptation of the traditional episode *Poxi Xianghui* (‘Meeting between Mother-in-Law and Daughter-in-Law’), one of the most popular episodes from the classic repertoire *Zhenzhu Ta* (Pearl Pagoda), showcases his skill in devising plot and singing ballads. Therefore, Zhang invited Xu to share in a lecture how he excavates and rearranges materials from old stories. Zhang Yuhong told me that although Xu’s main skill is in composing stories, he was also well-prepared for his lecture, and it was a success.

Zhang Yuhong again changed the lecture venue because the *Kuanggong Ci* also proved to be too small for the increasing audience size. Here, some people had had to sit in the courtyard. Although audience members reported that this area was quite comfortable in moments of winter sunshine, others complained that they could not get an indoor seat even if they arrived very early. After negotiating with the Chenshi Wenhua Zhongxin (‘City Public Culture Centre’), which has a 200-seat hall and better acoustic equipment, the lecture moved to this venue in March 2012. As this centre runs a Laonian Daxue (‘University of the Third Age’) programme, offering training courses such as calligraphy, painting, literature, tai-chi, and piano to retired citizens, to host Zhang Yuhong’s radio lecture was a win-win situation for both sides.

After the first ten lectures were broadcast, the leader of radio station asked Zhang Yuhong to organise a special event uniting each of these ten performers for a gala performance. Zhang was concerned that it would be difficult to arrange a suitable moment in which such

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<sup>142</sup> The plot describes the story of a young woman Zhu Yingtai and her beloved Liang Shanbo. Zhu dresses in male clothing in order to go to school and met Liang, who is unaware of the trick. However, their eventual romance comes after Zhu’s marriage to Ma Wencai has already been arranged, and this causes much regret.

in-demand storytellers could come together on one occasion, along with their assistants.<sup>143</sup> Unexpectedly, all of these performers were very supportive and promised to attend. Eventually, all except Yuan Xiaoliang, who was giving a performance in Paris, did give this special performance with their duet assistants at the gala. Yuan also sent a video recording to greet the audience in his absence. The 400 free tickets were far from sufficient to match demand. During the gala, although each performer was requested to adhere to a time limit of 20 minutes for storytelling or 10 minutes for ballad singing, the audience greeted this *ping-tan* feast with unusual fervour. Zhang reminded the performers to keep time by joking “I can only give you this small fee, please don’t perform any encores, no matter how much the audience cheers and applauds!” This performance lasted three hours and achieved a frenzy of excitement.”

Zhang Yuhong compares this gala with the traditional annual event *Hui shu* (‘Story Meeting’), which is held during the New Year celebration and is considered to be the most exciting performance of the year. Here, the audience can watch one or two famous performers in action and enjoy the sense of competition for audience acclaim between them. During this one-off gala, natural competition between the storytellers and the encouragement from the audience members led the performance to hit unprecedented heights. Zhang replayed this event four times through Sunday special programmes.

These broadcast lectures also changed audience’s stereotyped preconceptions about senior performers. For example, Zhang Yuhong invited Sun Ti, who was the vice-chairman of Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe, to give a lecture on the subject of ‘*Ping-tan yu xiqu yinyue xinshang*’ (‘Appreciating *ping-tan* and drama music’). The majority of the audience was unfamiliar with Sun Ti and held a prejudiced impression of the speaker as a bureaucratic leader within significant knowledge of *ping-tan*. However, Sun Ti worked in the Suzhou Ping-tan Study Institution for 19 years and has abundant research and general experience in Chinese drama and *ping-tan* music. He even gives *ping-tan* performances, although not to a professional level. During his lecture, when he gave musical examples playing the *sanxian* and singing live, the audience were surprised and delighted. Sun used to give performances at Suzhou University, but the reception was poor because university students had little knowledge of *ping-tan*. However, after his broadcast lecture, the programme received positive feedback from the audience in the form of letters, phone calls, and messages sent through the *Weibo* microblog website. A message said “It’s worth going today! Surprised that the leader of the

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<sup>143</sup> They were Wu Xinbo, Yuan Xiaoliang, Zhou Minghua, Zhou Hong, Xu Huixin, Jin Lisheng, Pan Zuqiang with Lu Yue’e, Chen Yong, Gao Bowen and Xing Yanchun.

*ping-tan* troupe could sing so wonderfully!” As Zhang put it: “You cannot imagine how much applause he gained! It is also an encouragement to the *ping-tan* business.”

These broadcast *ping-tan* lectures benefited all parties involved. For storytellers, this face-to-face *ping-tan*-themed communication with the audience enabled them to share their thoughts and values not through the usual performing contexts, but by directly approaching topics such as ‘social value’ in a formal occasion. People are familiar with the stage appearance of these performers, as they play the storyteller role and maintain a sense of distance from the audience. For audience members, usually most return home to prepare dinner or pick up their grandchildren after daily performances. Even if they have a chance to exchange views with storytellers, this rarely expands beyond directly commenting upon the story and the performance. They have few chances to see the *ping-tan* performers as ordinary people. Besides, real fans of *ping-tan* are excited to see the masters, take photographs together and get autographs. Zhang told me that when Xu Huixin gave his lecture, the hall was so full of his fans that she had to jostle her way through the crowd to get to the stage. For the *ping-tan* programme, the lecture form is the most original of all the different kinds of *ping-tan* radio presentations, and it is capable of enhancing the station’s relationship with storytellers, as well as providing a boost to market share.

The third type of special programme is called *Ping-tan Mingjia Hui* (*‘Ping-tan Masters’ Gathering*). It has been programmed at 8pm every Saturday and Sunday night since March 2012. The show’s slogan *‘Ping-tan Mingjia Hui hui ping-tan mingjia’* gives a straightforward explanation of its aims: *‘Ping-tan Masters’ Gathering to meet ping-tan masters*. The show provides a platform to explore storytellers’ real lives after they step down from the stage. The idea came from the leader of the channel, and was again conceived as a means of raising the market share of the evening programme.

Zhang Yuhong has reservations about the importance of boosting the market share during evening intervals through this programme. She suggests that only a limited number of listeners have the necessary knowledge to understand and appreciate the storytellers’ personal stories, including details about performing schools and hybrid singing tunes. Other listeners would be bored by the content. However, the significance of producing this programme lies in recording storyteller’s real lives, something that is hardly known by outsiders to *ping-tan*’s oral history. Zhang gave an example of an interview with storyteller Hu Guoliang who had been in hospital for some time before his death:

I put a recorder next to him. He told me of his learning experiences and his career in *ping-tan* troupes. He recollected the process of composing *Baoyu*

*Yetan* ('Baoyu's Night Visit') and how he recorded discs. All of these are treasured, and I had a great time with him during the interview.

Zhang regretted missing the chance to interview the great master Xue Xiaofei in 2012 when she met him at the *Quyí* Festival. She asked Xue if he was available for an interview the following day, but he was busy meeting friends. A few weeks later, just before she had intended to contact him again, Xue suffered a stroke and soon passed away. Zhang lamented:

My colleague joked with me that 'anyone who accepts your interview passes away soon', and that actually emphasises the importance of recording the old artists' *ping-tan* life. I feel I am racing against time. You don't know if it is today or tomorrow [that they will die]. For this reason, I have chosen the oldest storytellers as priorities to be interviewed. I interviewed Wang Baiyin who was 90 years old. But for the masters who have already died, I can also interview their family members, relatives, friends and students.

Before conducting each interview, Zhang Yuhong sought out existing recordings of the interviewee in the archives, so she could engage them in stimulating dialogue regarding highlights of their careers and lives. She had two means of conducting interviews. One was to invite the storyteller to the studio, where the host would ask questions according to a prepared outline, agreed with the interviewee beforehand. The other was for the programme production team to visit interviewees living in other cities or with other factors making it difficult for them to come to the radio station. During the interview, storytellers might talk about their career-span of 60 years or more. Afterwards, Zhang would edit the materials and type written documents for preservation in an archive, consider the suitable points to insert singing tracks in the interview, and write the connecting scripts. For example, after Wang Baiyin described his experiences telling the story *Bai She* ('White Snake') in the story house, the programme played an extract from a recording of this repertoire accompanied by assistant Gao Meiling, so that the audience could understand his experience in connection with the performance. She explained the procedure:

If we have collected enough materials, we can arrange the interview in one to four episodes to broadcast. The more audio materials we have, the better the content can be made. For instance, the master Jiang Wenlan recorded a lot. We thus made several special topics, such as 'Jiang Wenlan and her male assistants', 'Jiang Wenlan and her female assistants', and 'Jiang Wenlan's accompaniment with Jiang Yuequan' to elaborate upon the raw materials we

collected. In Cao Zhiyun's case, there are very few recorded performances so we could only produce one episode.

In addition, we do not select controversial materials that might damage anyone's reputation and trigger potential conflict. Otherwise the audience could say 'the radio said...', about things that may not reflect our attitudes about certain arguments. We also have to be cautious about choosing 'master' interviewees. They must be recognised as such by *ping-tan* followers. At this point, I have already visited almost all the living masters.

There have been disagreements over programme content from the radio station leaders: old storytellers recounting their experiences and lives in a low voice and at a slow tempo are considered tedious for the audience. Zhang Yuhong argues that because the show's target audience is preparing to rest at the broadcast time of 8pm, it is not appropriate to present the content in an excitable tone. In addition, the content is taken from people's memories, making it impossible to ask old storyteller to speak at a fast speed. Zhang stressed that this tone of narrative is determined by the 'linguistic context', unlike, for example, reporting news, which should be done in a faster way. Moreover, regarding the idea of condensing contents from the leaders, she argued:

In *ping-tan* performance, sometimes the *nongtang shu* ['lane story'; subplot] is more marvellous than the main story line. I am processing a programme of art! When people talk about master You Huiqiu, you absolutely have to mention Zhu Xueyin's *pipa* plucking.<sup>144</sup> But the leaders don't know that. If you are familiar with *ping-tan*, it is clear that You Huiqiu's *You* tune relied heavily on Zhu Xueyin's *pipa* accompaniment. Similarly, when people talk about storyteller Gong Huasheng, you cannot miss his assistant Cai Xiaojuan. Even Gong Huasheng's most successful student Yuan Xiaoliang doesn't know all the stories about his teacher. So I interviewed Cai Xiaojuan about Gong Huasheng's life. But they [the leaders] were sceptical about putting the interview with Cai Xiaojuan in a programme about Gong Huasheng.

As well as students, family members and friends, Zhang also interviewed certain storytellers' biographers. For example, she spoke to the vice-chairman of the Shanghai Ping-tan Troupe Zhou Zhenhua in order to learn about the master Zhou Yunrui's life. Zhou Zhenhua referred

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<sup>144</sup> Zhu Xueyin's plays the *pipa* as a low-hand accompaniment in duet singing. She married the master You Huiqiu, whose typical singing tune is widely known as *You's* tune. The quality of their cooperation meant that this couple became a star duo in the *ping-tan* field.

her to the writer of Zhou Yunrui's biography, from whom she extracted significant details. For instance, an important point of discussion was that Zhou used to teach the module 'Chinese traditional music' in the Shanghai Conservatory of Music.

This kind of material was welcomed by the audience. Zhang Yuhong also received critical second-hand feedback about the programme:

Once I was told by an audience member about two old men discussing the latest '*Mingjia Hui*' programme in the park. They were chatting about the episode in which we introduced Xue Xiaoqing's off-stage life. One said to the other: '*Mingjia Hui* said that although Xue Xiaoqing wore a cheongsam on the stage, do you know how fashionable he was in the daily life? He lived a Hong Kong lifestyle! He had a hat, held a stick, and wore white pants. This all comes from his daughter Xue Huijun!' People enjoy talking about these anecdotes.

These stories are really funny. Once I made an episode about the master Yu Hongxian, and I invited her student storyteller Zhou Hong to share her stories about her teacher. She told me about once when she was sick and staying at Yu's house. She fell out of bed in her sleep, and it frightened Yu. She took her in her arms said 'Zhou Hong, Zhou Hong, wake up! You cannot die! How will I ever tell your parents?' and she woke up. Another story is about Yu Hongxian's cheongsam. Yu has a cheongsam made by her students. She liked it very much and always wore it at important performances. She would brag to the others that 'my students made it!' From these stories we can see a storyteller's real life and personality, rather than just the occupational behaviour that they usually display. Yu Hongxian's life and art should not be thought of simply as the figure on the stage singing her most famous piece *Die Lian Hua* ('The Butterfly Loves the Flower').

After editing the material, Zhang Yuhong always gave a copy to her interviewees. The interviewees often treated the recordings as more valuable than standard courtesies such as gifts. She shared her experience of when she revisited Yan Xueting's daughter:

She held my hand and said 'Xiao Zhang [referring to Zhang Yuhong], I listened to the copy of my father's special programme and I cried. To my surprise, you still think of my father! Yan Xueting has been dead for decades, but still alive in the fans' mind!'

During the interviews with her, I learned a lot about Yan Xueting's cautious attitude towards every detail in his performances. He even re-tailored the collar and sleeves of his cheongsam. I am glad that this information can be revealed to the audience so that people can understand the old storytellers' dedication.

Zhang Yuhong expresses her plan that in her retirement she will compile all these interview materials in a book introducing the off-stage lives of great masters, especially those not featured in the radio programme. She plans to call the book 'After the Storyteller Removes his Cheongsam' and include a disc of interviews.

In order to avoid any doubt as to the origin of the interview, Zhang Yuhong asked all of her interviewees to begin the recording by directly greeting the AM 1080 audience and introducing themselves. The oral history made by the radio programme is probably treated as gossip and anecdote by most listeners. For loyal *ping-tan* followers, other masters and people who have spent time with them, these *ping-tan* exponents are not simply storytellers, but are people with multi-dimensional lives. Stories from their true lives are often more interesting and richer than the stories they perform. From this perspective, the '*Mingjia Hui*' programme offered respect to great names in *ping-tan* history, and paid tribute to the wonderful voices in the recordings. These voices continue to tell stories to the current audience with vitality that is cherished along with *ping-tan* storytellers' lifelong contributions to this art.

The fourth form of the special programmes is a theme-based series. Although the '*Mingjia Hui*' programme was applauded by audience members and interviewees, its lifespan was tied to the limited number of *ping-tan* masters. Concern among radio station leaders about dropping market share on weekend nights led them to commission a new theme-based series of programmes. This idea was borrowed from a *ping-tan* television programme produced by the Suzhou Broadcasting System, originally created by producer Yin Dequan. The idea of the programme was to discuss a topic in each episode, such as 'the use of the fan in *ping-tan*', 'the legal expert character, typically from Shaoxing',<sup>145</sup> 'the waitress', 'family members' and so on. These would highlight interesting elements in *ping-tan* performance.

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<sup>145</sup> Shaoxing is a city in Zhejiang Province. The people there are considered 'intelligent' and 'smart'. Therefore, it is common for characters who are legal experts to be said to come from Shaoxing. This stereotype was first created by the master Yan Xueting, and he utilised various accents to distinguish the roles in different plots.

In order to reduce workloads, the leaders suggested asking storytellers to talk about these themes, rather than Zhang preparing drafts. For example, the storyteller Xing Yanchun was invited to introduce the character of the legal expert from Shaoxing as they appear in three different pieces of repertoire. In each of these three pieces, the character is said to come from a rural area, a semi-rural area, and an urban environment respectively. Xing Yanchun analysed these three characters' personalities, discussing their appearance on stage and relevant singing ballads, so that audience members could obtain a better understanding of the impact of these support roles on the story.

However, Zhang Yuhong expressed her concerns about inviting storytellers to give illustrations. Her first concern was that each storyteller is usually only familiar with the few pieces of repertoire that are spread within their particular lineages. That is to say, although storytellers may be able to explicitly analyse these specific roles and discuss the important factors shaping a certain character, they inevitably have only a limited view about unfamiliar work. Even for storytellers who tell the same pieces as do other individuals, it is likely that they hardly know each other's versions. Zhang's other concern was that storytellers would not judge the work of their peers in such a public forum, as this would potentially damage their own reputations. The third concern was *ping-tan* listeners might have minimal interest in listening to analysis of story content or ballad singing. Zhang said:

Audience members' knowledge may be greater and wider than that of storytellers. They have accumulated decades of experience in listening to *ping-tan*, and they can probably think of more evidence about a theme than certain storytellers can. In addition, the content of the programme should not be academic work. Otherwise, people will quickly get bored.

In producing this programme, Zhang Yuhong seemingly meets with more difficulties than for the other special programmes she produced. She did not follow up the leaders' suggestion of engaging with storytellers in this special programme. She admitted to feeling the pressure of not knowing *ping-tan* as well as the original creator of this format, the knowledgeable television producer Yin Dequan. Zhang told me:

The producers of television programme have much more knowledge than I had, and they had already produced it successfully. How could I improve on what they did? I found it really difficult. I have listened extensively to *ping-tan* during these years of work, but I am far from being an expert.

Zhang did not tell me any more about the solutions for the difficulties she met in producing this special programme. The obstacles make it clear again that in order to digest and master *ping-tan*'s lore, and to achieve a profound comprehension, decades of experience is needed.

#### **6.4 Summary: Transformation from Story House to Invisible Radio Broadcasting Service**

This chapter has reviewed the historical transformation in *ping-tan* radio programmes from their introduction in 20<sup>th</sup> century Suzhou, and explicitly examined the production of a prominent *ping-tan* programme on the AM 1080 channel from 1980 to the present. Radio has taken over as a medium to deliver *ping-tan* performances; the original physical performing space has become an invisible radio broadcast platform. There are several significant features in this history that should be pointed out.

First, relaying recordings of live performances has been the foundation of these programmes. The quality of the performances determines the market share alongside, of course, a number of minor factors such as the inclusion or exclusion of advertising. Thus since 1980, programme producers have continued to collect outstanding live performances as much as possible so that they can meet the requirements of daily broadcasts. As a result, *ping-tan* programmes maintain a monumental market share in comparison with most other local radio programmes. Furthermore, by examining market share figures, programme producers have been able to actively adjust their programmes to adapt quickly to targets set by their organisations. In a way similar to storytellers' live manipulation of the intercommunication with audiences in the traditional teahouse environment, there is an invisible and delayed 'feedback loop' between producers and audiences. In particular, the programme producer edits the programme and broadcasts it; the audience listens to the programme. Some of them express their approval and disapproval by writing letters or calling the programme after the broadcast. The programme producer then designs and adjusts the programme content according to this feedback so as to put into effect the audience's suggestions that are considered most beneficial. Moreover, the producers need to consider and balance the requirements of third parties, either enterprises or radio station leaders. This dialogue between the programme producer and the audience is a slower process, but has many similarities with the dialogue between the performer and the audience in a live performance.

Secondly, serving those interested in receiving more from live performances, and those not able to attend daily performances remains the essence of this *ping-tan* radio broadcasting. For these listeners, the radio platform has built up another public performance space

beyond the real story house environment, and has enabled performers to share their work with thousands of live customers. In other words, *ping-tan* radio programmes have created a fascinating platform to extend the traditional performance space. Simultaneously, these radio programmes have deeply embedded *ping-tan* listening habits in people's everyday lives, enabling *ping-tan* to become accessible to larger audiences.

Thirdly, novel and elaborate ways to present special *ping-tan* programmes distinguish the radio broadcast platform from the physical story house. To remedy the absence of visible and instant intercommunication, which serves as an important feature of the *ping-tan* art, the radio programme has its own unique appeal for its audiences: the diversity of the programme design enhances the entertainment value of the story house presentation; and the flexibility and convenience of editing enables radio programmes to present performances much earlier than television programmes can. That is to say, in order to maintain the popularity of radio *ping-tan* programmes among the multiple ways of appreciating *ping-tan*, the programme producers have to offer special features. However, as Zhang Yuhong describes it, the main challenges include acquaintance with the lore of *ping-tan*, and creativity in post-production work.

This chapter suggests that through a combination of storyteller support, audience loyalty and engagement, and effort from programme producers, *ping-tan* radio praxis has been significant in *ping-tan* dissemination and preservation. Through this autonomous broadcasting platform with its 85-year history in Suzhou, *ping-tan* radio programmes have become an indispensable part of this tradition.

## Chapter 7. Invisible Story House II: Television

Concomitant with the explosion of communication technology, disseminating *ping-tan* performance through television has become another prominent way to enhance the *ping-tan* art. It was not until 1994 that the *ping-tan* television programme *Dianshi Shuchang* ('Television Story House'), first aired on the Suzhou Dianshi Tai ('Suzhou Television Station'). Most television programmes have short lives and are generally replaced by other new programmes fairly quickly. However, this daily *ping-tan* programme has been broadcast for more than twenty years, continuously serving the greater Suzhou area of 8,488 square kilometres, including the cities of Changshu, Kunshan, Zhangjianggong, and Taicang. Since online television has become popular in the last decade, people have also been able to watch live television programmes from the website of CUTV (China United Television), and so the territory reaching a pinnacle is a mixed metaphor that transcends geographical constraints.<sup>146</sup>

First, it is useful to consider some of the main themes in existing literature. I will review the presentation of traditional folk arts on television, how these programmes are shaped by larger societal factors and also mirror the society from which they emerge, and the ways in which live performance is adapted to fit the needs of this medium. On the topic of presenting traditional music art forms via the mass media, especially on television, there are many academic accounts of the limitations and obstacles involved in transferring the performance to a small screen. Political authority carried by this one-way flow of information has been thoroughly discussed. Beltran (1980) criticises the Aristotelean concept of communication, which contains the profound elements of the speaker, the speech, and the listener. His research of Latin American contexts points out that the 'vertical' communication of mass media is undemocratic, top-down and can involve one-way manipulation (1980: 14). He defines communication (*ibid.*, 168):

Communication is the process of democratic social interaction, based upon exchanges of symbols, by which human beings voluntarily share experiences under conditions of free and egalitarian access, dialogue and participation.

In his context, communication is not treated as a technical question; instead its strong relationship with economic, political and cultural structures is seen as a microcosm of the

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<sup>146</sup> <http://tv.cutv.com>.

complexity of society. In other words, to study television is to study society. Lynch (1999) concentrates on the changed role of the media in the China of post-Mao reforms. It suggests that the reshaping of Chinese media can be attributed to the factors of new communications technology, property rights reform, and administrative fragmentation, which have led to commercialization, globalization, and pluralisation. In other words, the Communist Party has made more concessions to its control over 'thought work' in the mass media than ever before. Regarding the dissemination of *ping-tan* content through television programmes, although Bender (2003: 24) occasionally mentions those aired by Shanghai and Changshu television stations until the mid-1990s, for example the *Weekly Story House* programme from Shanghai, he does not give detailed information about the specific programme content, and how programme producers selected the content considered 'safe' to broadcast.

Nawaz (1983: 939) examines the role in social development of mass-media communication in Pakistan, highlighting its ability to motivate, inform, educate, change or affect the behaviour of the masses, and provide a mirror for society. Specifically, to explain the mirror effect, he gives the example of regional musicians in the country who have gained fame on a national level. Mass media helps foster a sense of national diversity, and encourages local people to move away from regionalism and separatist feelings (ibid., 943-944). Bates (2012: 364) gives an example of the Turkish long-necked *saz* lute to demonstrate how an instrument may carry various meanings within different sociohistorical contexts. In the mass media context, Bates (ibid., 378) suggests that with the broadcasting of studio performances of *asik* poetry and *saz*-centred ensemble performances, this instrument became recognised as distinct from the other Turkish instruments. In this case, the programmes of Turkish Radio and Television Corporation have played an important part in facilitating the fame of the *saz* since 1940, enabling it to assume a remarkable role in the *saz* family of various instruments. Hong's studies (1998: 5) of the process of change in China's television imports since the 1970s, puts forward a similar viewpoint that television can mirror the evolution of a society's past, present, and future by examining the problems, progress, changes, and development directions of television. In Suzhou, although *ping-tan* television programmes only appeared in 1994, the ongoing changes in their production over twenty years have been very meaningful as a mirror to reflect the relationship between the promoted value of the programmes, and their audiences' requirements for television entertainment.

Performances broadcast on television must be tailored and standardised to accommodate the length of the programme, and this differentiates them from live performances in original

contexts. For example, live Egyptian *takht* ensemble performances on radio and television are constrained by the length of the programme, as El-shawan (1984: 274) illustrates: *takht* consists of one to three *waslat* compositions<sup>147</sup> combined with vocal and instrumental improvisation and the characteristic composition *qasidah*, which lasts between 30 and 90 minutes.

The way to present a television product is also discussed, for example, in the work of Page (2013). Page highlights the serial-form narrative designs of many broadcast products, and proposes two coupled dimensions related to the concept of narrativity in such broadcasts (ibid., 34):

First, the process of narrative production entails a part-whole relationship between smaller units that incrementally constitute a larger narrative, such as episodes contributing to a single story line or a more complex expansion of a recognized story world. Second, the arrangement of the serial instalments usually takes place in a linear sequence as episodes that are read or viewed consecutively in time. As becomes evident when the analytic focus is widened to include social-media examples, however, modes of narrative segmentation and sequencing are more or less open to variation in the forms they take, yielding a range of narrative designs.

These elaborated designs serve to consistently tempt audience members. There is a range of specific challenges when narrative genres are presented on television. In particular, Page deems that serial form is not the only possible way to organise a plot; a problem-solution pattern does not have to be implied by a story line, and interpretive and aesthetic value need not necessarily fall on a point of closure. Furthermore, the construction of the narrative sequences does not necessarily require complication and resolution. However, Mittell (2006: 29-40) argues that television is constrained by the primacy of plot, and is forced to depend on sensationalist content or competitive structures to offer continuous narrative interest to the audience. Moreover, the episode break is also highlighted as a part of 'design'. Longacre (1983) suggests that episode breaks may be marked merely by a change in character, time boundary, and location. Page (2013: 39) further extends this, suggesting that the heightened sense of suspense or anticipation can serve as a boundary between narrative episodes.

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<sup>147</sup> Each *waslat* lasts between one-half hour and one-and-a-half hours.

Most studies do not display an overarching view or details of how traditional oral performance is accommodated on the television platform, especially those delivered through daily episodes. Like the previous chapter's exploration of the development of the radio *ping-tan* programmes, this chapter will focus on 1. the history of the television *ping-tan* programme *Dianshi Shuchang* produced by Suzhou Television Station; 2. the process and challenges of producing an episode of a *ping-tan* television programme in studio; and 3. the reception from the audience. My fieldwork included an interview with the *ping-tan* television programme producer Yin Dequan from the Suzhou Television Station, who has also been introduced and mentioned in the previous chapters.<sup>148</sup> He was in charge of the *Dianshi Shuchang* programme from the establishment of this programme until his retirement at the end of 2014. By exploring how Yin's career developed in parallel with the programme, the chapter shall elucidate how television broadcasting has influenced *ping-tan* transmission, and how an oral tradition has been transformed and reshaped by this broadcasting environment. In this way, the keys to the popularity of *Dianshi Shuchang* over twenty years can be revealed.

## 7.1 Introduction to Television in China and Suzhou

According to the *Year Book of Chinese Radio & TV* (2000: 567-569), early testing for television in China began in 1956. The first television station, Beijing Television Station (the predecessor of China Central Television, CCTV), started broadcasting on 1 September 1958. By 1960, television stations in a dozen major cities were transmitting programmes. Colour television began in 1973. After the end of the Cultural Revolution in the year 1978, changes in Chinese broadcasting were not only evident in the increasing number of television stations, but also in the function of the mass media in comparison with earlier in the post-1949 era.

Along with the rapid growth of regional radio stations throughout the country – mainly in the populous cities – China's mass media network has been rapidly expanding since the 1980s. Television programmes were broadcast through the country via microwave transmission, and also relied heavily on satellites. According to Chang (1989: ix), by 1984 there were 104 television stations in China; while by 1995 there were 924 television stations around the country (*Year Book of Chinese Radio & TV*, 1996: 565). At the same time, the increase in number of television sets was enormous. An official report by the Chinese

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<sup>148</sup> Personal communication, 21 August 2013, and 6 September 2013.

government shows that average rates of television exposure in 1990 reached 75 percent, which is high even on a global level (Hong, 1998: 6).

Suzhou Television Station was initially established in 1959. It was re-established on 22 December 1983, and started to broadcast to the local area with only one self-produced programme per week (*Year Book of Chinese Radio & TV*, 1994: 425). After ten years of development, its number of self-produced programmes increased to seventeen; the average broadcasting hours increased to five per day. Technical testing to update the cable broadcast system started on 18 January 1993, and formal broadcast using this system began with sixteen programmes on 17 January 1994; it became one of the 52 television stations in Jiangsu Province in 1995 (*ibid.*, 1995: 568).

### 7.1.1 The Television *Ping-tan* Programme in Suzhou

Similar to the programme 'Radio Broadcast Story House', the television *ping-tan* programme is called *Dianshi Shuchang* ('Television Story House'), and this became the name of the one television *ping-tan* programme produced by Suzhou Television Station. This pioneering way to utilise the television platform to assist *ping-tan* promotion initially arose in Shanghai around 1985, and was fully operational before 1990. My interviewee Yin Dequan recalled the epoch when radio broadcasting was the dominant form of mass media:

When I was a child, I listened to *ping-tan* on the radio quite often. However, I was always thinking: how wonderful it would be if the person telling the story could walk down from the radio! Just as I anticipated, television began to be popular from the 1970s. When Shanghai first produced a television *ping-tan* programme, people went crazy for it! However, among the other programmes, this specialist programme in a traditional folk art was rejected by young people. *Ping-tan* was considered to be an old-fashioned and unattractive performance by the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s. If you asked people 'where is the Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe?' or 'where can I find a *ping-tan* story house?', probably not many people would know. Can you imagine that there were only two or three story houses in existence in central Suzhou at that time? Folk art almost crashed!

Yin analysed the declining popularity of *ping-tan* television programmes in Shanghai. First, the employees of this new media business at that time were young people. As new technology spread in China, the younger generation had more chances than older people to

obtain jobs in these industries. Crucially, these young employees had less interest in traditional art genres such as *ping-tan*. Break-dancing, karaoke, and foreign pop stars were the most popular and fashionable trends at that time. Secondly, the producer of these Shanghai *ping-tan* programmes was of an older generation, he was not equipped with adequate knowledge of *ping-tan*. Thus, although the programme had far more resources than were available in any other city, the programme simply broadcast long-episode instalments every day, which proved to be uncompetitive among television series and dramas. Thirdly, and as a result of this failure to compete effectively, the *ping-tan* programme lost its prime time slot – during the early evening – and was relegated to late at night, where it did not fit in with *ping-tan* followers' daily habits for watching their favoured art. This triggered a collapse in market share in relation to other programmes, and led to irreversible consequences.

This is not the only case of folk arts suffering in China. With the introduction of mass popular culture, especially as it brought influence from western culture, a depression for indigenous folk arts spread all over the country. The Shanghai Television Station soon replaced their *ping-tan* programme with other more popular entertainment programmes, and *ping-tan* faded from the screen after 1990. However, at the same time, *ping-tan* followers in Suzhou who watched the programme produced in Shanghai were calling on the local government to start a *ping-tan* television programme to benefit its citizens. Although people continuously proposed this idea and petitioned local government conferences during the national 'two conferences' period for several years, a *ping-tan* television programme did not materialise.<sup>149</sup> During this time, the radio continued to be the main resource for the followers of *ping-tan* in Suzhou. Later in this chapter, I compare the presentation of *ping-tan* on the two platforms, radio and television.

### **7.1.2 The Establishment of a *Ping-tan* Television Programme in Suzhou**

It was not until 1993, when by chance the leaders of the Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe went to Beijing and met the minister of the CPC Central Committee's Publicity Department, Ding Guangen, that the aim of establishing a local television *ping-tan* programme was realised. Ding was born in Wuxi and is a follower of *ping-tan*. In response to the trend of decline among folk arts, the minister designated that, first, there must be at least one professional story house with advanced equipment; and secondly, that Suzhou was the obvious

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<sup>149</sup> 'Two conferences', *lianghui*, refers to the National People's Congress and the Chinese Political Consultative Conference that are held every early spring.

candidate city for televising *ping-tan* programmes. Soon, the vice-secretary of the Committee of Jiangsu Province Sun Jiazheng (who became Minister of State Administration of Radio, Film and Television in 1994, and Minister of Ministry of Culture in 1998) was charged with leading work to refurbish the *Guangyu* Story House, and to launch a *ping-tan* television programme to benefit local followers.

Being a television *ping-tan* programme producer required more skills than simply writing and editing. Ideally, the person would also have a close relationship with *ping-tan* storytellers. In 1993, Yin Dequan, who at this time was working as a salesman for a medical company but was well known for his enthusiastic *ping-tan* connoisseurship, was invited to produce the programme.

Since childhood, Yin had developed the hobby of collecting *ping-tan*-related material; at this time possessing several recordings was considered very unusual. In the 1980s, when *ping-tan* became common again on the radio, he enlarged his collection by recording local radio *ping-tan* programmes and taking notes. He also shared his collection with like-minded followers, debating their opinions, and exchanging ideas with storytellers and scholars. In addition to the recordings, other items in his collection included books, journals, performance programmes, photographs, autographs, storytellers' instruments and props, as well as *ping-tan* practitioners' calligraphic and traditional painting works. He also established the 'Suzhou Ping-tan Collection and Appreciation Institute' with other followers in 1993, which was reported by the China News Agency, China Radio International, Hong Kong Wenhui Newspaper and others. Yin is clearly a major figure amongst *ping-tan* collectors. Besides his production work, he also assisted radio stations in Suzhou, Wuxi and Changshu to produce special performances for Lantern Festival. Thus, Yin Dequan was perfectly matched to the needs of programme. At the beginning of 1994, Yin quit his job, embarking on a new career as a *ping-tan* television programme producer at Suzhou Television Station. After six months of preparation, the programme *Suzhou Dianshi Shuchang* was televised for the first time to the Suzhou locality on 18 July. Initially, episodes were broadcast four times a week, each lasting 40 minutes. Thanks to the support of *ping-tan* enthusiasts and private sponsors with an interest in the art, the programme achieved a successful opening.

### 7.1.3 Content of *Ping-tan* Television Programmes

After *Suzhou Dianshi Shuchang* was first broadcast to the local area, the daily viewing rating immediately hit 15 percent according to Yin Dequan's general memory of the numbers.<sup>150</sup> The fact that at its peak, ratings exceeded those of news bulletins is evidence of the audience's satisfaction and zeal for this new invention. Yin Dequan believes that this novel way of bringing *ping-tan* performances into the home was able to draw people's interests and retain their enthusiasm for a sustained period of time, while the joy of radio was only one-dimensional. Perhaps another reason for the mass popularity of *ping-tan* television programmes is that, despite experiencing a shaky political period, the underlying popularity of the artistic traditions of folk genres was deep-rooted.



**Figure 7-1** The studio for recording *Dianshi Shuchang* programme. The setting of *banzhuo* ('half desk'), chairs and other props for *ping-tan* performance are placed the same as in a story house.

With the goal of producing a batch of programmes that would meet the expectations of *ping-tan* followers, the programme's first task was to record and broadcast classic long-episode performances from *ping-tan* masters. Thus, inviting the storytellers to give studio performances in front of the camera became the initial work for the programme. There were

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<sup>150</sup> As has been mentioned in the previous chapter, all references to the market share and television viewing ratings are approximate figures based on the official data as remembered by the interviewees.

six members of staff whose daily responsibility was to produce a 40 minute long episode, from recording to post-production. Technical factors mean that post-production of television programmes is a far more extensive process than that of radio shows: every second of film is comprised of 24 frames; a skipped frame results in a black flash. In addition, adding subtitles complicates this post-production work, and I will discuss the importance of subtitles later. Therefore, to edit an episode of a television programme consumes much more time than editing a radio programme. However, Yin Dequan told me, compared with post-production work on other kinds of programming, such as weather reports, *ping-tan* programmes cost much less.

During the first couple of years, the programme recorded many older *ping-tan* masters' performances, in an urgent effort to secure a record of these figures. The storytellers treated studio recording seriously as a second chance to raise their personal reputation through the mass media, in addition to radio. In response, audiences were delighted to watch successive daily episodes of long storytelling. Yin Dequan draws an analogy between these daily programmes and television drama series. In order to enrich the content of daily long-episode programmes, producers would sometimes intersperse three or four episodes of medium-length stories with single-episode short stories. These short stories are highly valued for their refined and polished language and performance.

However, after a year of these formats, audiences were no longer satisfied with daily instalments so Yin Dequan conceived of a weekend special programme in 1995. This was a journal-like programme combining art, education and news and blending highlights from existing video collections. Being programmed at the weekend, the usual audience of elderly listeners was boosted by younger-generation listeners and people who had just retired from professions such as teacher, doctor or civil servant; they were highly educated and already had a basic idea of *ping-tan*. Accordingly, the pace of presentation was made more 'snappy' and linked to unifying topics and themes.

Yin experimented with various different ways of editing the programme. For instance, one series of episodes explored the employment of the fan as a stage prop. In one programme, the storyteller Wu Junyu explained about how the fan is used to represent objects such as a broadsword, imperial edict, tray, and letter. In addition, some 'fan-themed' traditional *ping-tan* repertoire was introduced in this series, including *Luo Jin Shan* ('Dropping a Golden Fan'), *Chenxiang Shan* ('Agilawood Fan'), and *Taohua Shan* ('Peach Blossom Fan'). The programme reviewed the highlights from these stories performed by the different storytellers, and also

analysed the relevant ballad singing from various performance schools. By this means, the programme interested people who had previously had little contact with *ping-tan*, imparting basic knowledge, and providing a shortcut for them to appreciate the art. The Sunday special programmes continued in this vein for five years. During this period, the programme cultivated and gathered a significant new audience, and these people gradually became loyal followers of *ping-tan*. Besides, Yin also pointed out that probably a larger proportion of the audience is attracted by dramatic and unusual plots in the storytelling, than by artistic elaboration. This observation perhaps implies that the bar for 'qualification' to join the *ping-tan* audience has been lowered.

Borrowing the idea of live broadcasts from radio programmes, in 1999 Yin Dequan produced six live shows airing from 2pm to 4pm on Saturday afternoons. The audience was invited to call the programme and request live performances. Each time, he contacted ten excellent *ping-tan* storytellers to attend. They were all asked to prepare two pieces for performance, each limited to 20 minutes in duration. The list of proposed performances was announced in advance in the local newspaper, so that the audience were aware of the choices when it came to the broadcast time. Yin revealed that the large number of responses from the audience was unexpected. Although the programme had specifically requested that the public call with their requests rather than send letters, producers still received a large amount of written correspondence. On the day of broadcast, telephone lines were opened from 2pm until 3:30pm. During this 90-minute period, the programme received more than a hundred calls from the audience. To deal with the calls, producers specially arranged for three members of staff to receive the requests. Yin Dequan explains to me that in his view the reasons for the audience's zeal for these live broadcasts are, first, that in the late 1990s it was very rare for audiences to have the opportunity to phone in requests for live performances. Audiences were said to be excited about the complicated technical support to use satellite trucks for better disseminating and receiving signals – although the final effect displaying on television had no obvious difference to the audience – and they were keen to discuss it. Second, ordering one's preference by phone and immediately seeing the beloved storytellers' performance on television at home had never happened before. This opportunity created a virtual environment, as if the yearly *huishu* competition event in the story house had been accommodated at home, and audience members were instantly satisfied just as in real performances. As has been mentioned in chapter 6, a normal *huishu* competition sees four storytellers giving performances, and it would be impossible to invite ten storytellers to compete with each other in an event. However, much earlier than the

radio, television programmes were the first to offer this spectacle to the audience. Thirdly, storytellers' desire to excel was real and spontaneous. Apart from affording the chance to give a performance in front of their colleagues, the number of phone requests was regarded as a sign of popularity. Therefore, all the storytellers endeavoured to show the best of their skills and art on this unique stage. Under financial pressure, producers were later forced to record these *huishu*-style live request specials in advance, and they changed the programme's name to *Ping-tan Jinqi Da Dianbo* ('Requesting the Golden Ballads of *Ping-tan*'). Although audiences could still request their favourite pieces by calling the programme while the studio performance was ongoing, they could not watch the performance immediately at home; rather, the performances were broadcast later during other special programme slots once a month.

To follow up upon the success of the *Ping-tan Jinqi Da Dianbo*, 40-minute long episodes of the special programme *Ping-tan Liupai Yanchanghui* ('Ballad Singing Concert') were produced. These shows gathered together impressive sung pieces from various singing schools. Yin Dequan suggests that a lot of *ping-tan* storytellers are very good at singing and instrumental playing, while the other skills involved in giving a full performance do not perhaps reach the same high levels. For this reason, the programme offered those performers a studio-recording opportunity to exhibit their expertise in singing. At the beginning of each performance, the programme host introduced the performer and the repertoire, providing background information about the ballad's content, the performer's outstanding characteristics, and, if known, the performer's personal values and attitudes towards their art. Later, this form was extended by adding other popular arts in the locality and was renamed as *Xiqu Baihua Yuan* ('Blooming Garden of Drama'), mainly consisting of *ping-tan*, *Kunqu* opera and other folk drama and opera genres.

Other special programmes including activity similar to the practices of *huishu* are the gala ceremonies during Spring Festival and the Lantern Festival. These follow Yin Dequan's principle of producing *ping-tan* programmes as '*ping-tan* entertainment programmes'. However, events of this kind are very expensive to produce. In order to save money, in the late 1990s the programme began to cooperate with the drama programme of the Shanghai Television Station. The programme added *ping-tan* storytellers' performance of other drama and opera genres to enhance the entertainment value of these galas. Recently, they have been produced according to a theme. For instance, the theme of the Spring Festival *Ping-tan* Gala in 2012 was '*Bainian Hao, Gusu Chun*' ('A Hundred Years of Good Marriage, Spring

Suzhou'), combining the topic of marriage with the festivities. Yin explained how he arrived at this idea:

In the past, the Spring Festival period was reckoned in Suzhou folklore to be an auspicious time to get married and hold a wedding ceremony. Nowadays, people even get married in June, which was considered by the locals to be a time to avoid. Thus, by picking up relevant sections from *ping-tan* stories, and combining them with explanations of local customs for wedding ceremonies, we presented transformations in the idea and value of marriage, and changes in etiquette through the performances of *ping-tan* and other local genres in this gala.

Similarly, in the Spring Festival Gala of 2011, we focused on how Suzhou people spend Spring Festival. There are lots of detailed depictions of folklore in *ping-tan* stories. This topic brought back local people's memories of festive habits and the happiness of what they had experienced in the past. But surprisingly, from audience members' feedback, this programme became a window for new immigrants to glimpse and become acquainted with the Suzhou lifestyle, and helped them to integrate themselves better into local society.

These festival gala *ping-tan* programmes received high levels of approval. As a successful example of television gala production, it is now held up as an important model for integrating folk arts and modern television presentation in the 'Television Programme Production' module by the Communication University of China. Yin Dequan is very proud of this festive programme:

Lots of television stations produce special programme to celebrate festivals. In general, the programmes invite pop stars to sing and dance. The biggest difference [between the *ping-tan* gala and these programmes] is how large the budgets are. Compared with these special programmes, this *ping-tan* gala performance saves money, while the effect is striking.

In order to introduce the life of master *ping-tan* storytellers in a focused way, after 2000, Yin Dequan borrowed an interview-type format and title from CCTV, launching a new programme *Yishu Rensheng* ('Artistic Life'). This programme especially invited older storytellers who could not give performances on the stage. Before compiling this special

programme, Yin recorded interviews with great masters when they were still alive in the 1990s. He compiled longer interviews into two-hour programmes, and shorter conversations into one-hour shows. Although over one hundred hours of material was presented, Yin stressed that it was, nevertheless, a selective process:

I recorded some programmes themed around *ping-tan* figures to save as documentaries in 1990s. The leading masters were still alive at that time, including Yang Zhenxiong, Yang Zhenyan, Jiang Yuequan, and Zhang Jianting. Now, even some of their important contemporaries, their family members, relatives and students have also passed away.

Among the living *ping-tan* storytellers, we carefully chose our interviewees. Some storytellers are very good at singing and playing instruments, but considering their artistic level in its entirety, they do not qualify as masters. In addition, some masters are too old to give performances, but they are pleased to give a talk about their life and *ping-tan*, and to communicate with the audience. This part of the programme consists of thirtyish current *ping-tan* figures and their valuable video materials.

This programme was appreciated very much by *ping-tan* followers. It satisfied a desire to see the storytellers who do not perform on the stage anymore. Although similar programmes also appeared on the radio, this television talk show-style presentation involved vibrant interaction between the storytellers and the live audience in the studio. It produced an atmosphere that was different from the radio equivalent. These programmes have become valuable archives.

## **7.2 When Television Meets Radio**

The exhibiting of *ping-tan* is certainly different when television and radio programmes are compared. Generally, people may take it for granted that television programmes offer more, as a result of their visual content. However, the television platform seemingly does not always prevail. Besides, apart from the possible competition from radio programmes, television broadcasting confronts a more complex challenge in maintaining its popularity. Here are two examples.

### 7.2.1 Differentiation in Presenting Television and Radio *Ping-tan* Programmes

For storytellers who are still performing on the stage, the provincial '*Jiangsu Quyi Festival*' ('Jiangsu Drama Festival'), held once every four years, and the yearly '*Ping-tan Yishu Jie*' ('*Ping-tan* Artistic Festival'), which both fall under the auspices of the Suzhou *Ping-tan* Troupe, are unmissable opportunities to cut a striking figure. Both radio and television *ping-tan* programmes record and broadcast these festive feasts. However, due to the restricted broadcasting time and the complex post-production of television, Yin Dequan can only show highlights from the festivals. For example, he only recorded the most famous storytellers' performances, and skipped the younger generations' events including the debuts of new performers. He said:

The young storytellers' performances are not good enough to promote and broadcast on a television platform; while the radio will broadcast everything. The radio merely delivers the 'acoustic image' to the listeners. Their performances are usually too rigid and stiff, and lacking the beauty of this art. These performances are not worth televising.

From the radio *ping-tan* programme producer Zhang Yuhong's perspective, the ability to relay 'everything' reflects the advantage of the radio medium: for radio programmes, post-production work is easier, and broadcasting is more efficient than for the television channel.<sup>151</sup> The radio is able to relay the recording in the next day's programme, while the television programme needs to tailor the material, and finally play it a long time afterwards.

Apart from the special programme, it is inevitable that radio and television occasionally broadcast the same long-episode story for their daily instalments. Zhang Yuhong gave me an example of broadcasting the long-ballad *tanci* story *Jiangshi Furen* ('Madam Jiang') performed by Sima Wei and Cheng Yanqiu. In January 2010, the storytellers were giving a 15-day performance in a story house. When Zhang Yuhong returned from a trip and caught up with their performance with the intention of beginning recording, they had completed the first seven days of performances and fourteen episodes. So Zhang only recorded the story from the fifteenth episode. Due to positive feedback from the audience, later the storytellers were invited by Yin Dequan to record their performance in the television studio, and Zhang was permitted to record the audio to supplement the missing episodes. Considering the further viewing ratings and the long post-production work required, Yin

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<sup>151</sup> Personal communication, 26 August 2012.

negotiated with Zhang to let the television version be broadcast first, leaving Zhang to programme some new performances during that time. The performers had no special preference regarding which channel would broadcast their work first. Eventually, Zhang did release this thirty-episode story on radio before the television programme was shown in March. Each episode lasted 50 minutes, and the whole story was completed in thirty days. However, the market share was around 22 to 24 percent, which did not meet Zhang's high expectations. Yin Dequan became worried about the prospects for the television version of this story. After several months, the television programme completed post-production work, and broadcast the story in thirty episodes, each lasting 38 minutes. The viewing figures hit 1.7 percent, which was outstanding among daily long-ballad story performances. Zhang Yuhong pointed out:

The regular audience groups for radio and television *ping-tan* programmes – though there must be overlapping portions – are separate. I did not advertise that the television programme was going to broadcast the same performance months later. If the radio and television programmes share the same audience, and they were disappointed with this performance, they would not have watched the television programme.

Taking the example of Sima Wei's performances on the three different stages – the story house, radio programmes, and television programmes – it is arguable that an audience less interested in the radio version would not be attracted by the television version of the same story. Considering that the lengths of each episode of radio and television programmes are different, the final interpretation of the same story performed by the same storyteller still varies slightly. Confronting the reality that radio programmes have exerted a profound and ongoing influence on *ping-tan* followers' appreciation habits for decades, it is vital for the television programme to build up and sustain its own brand loyalty.

### **7.3 Brand Loyalty in *Ping-tan* Television Programmes**

Hall (1997: 355) finds the key to audience loyalty for soap operas in *differentiation*, the employment of variety in a product, or the breaking of habitual ways of production:

Genre production, however, is not just about standardization – about fixing conventions and audiences. ... they would soon lose their audiences because they would become too predictable and repetitive. So genre production is equally about **differentiation** [sic] – managing product differentiation to

maximize, and appeal to, different audiences and to keep tabs on changing audiences. This manifests itself in two ways: the production of a *variety of genres* for different audiences, and *variation within genres* between one example and the next...

Both *ping-tan* radio and television programmes pay attention to differentiation in their productions. *Ping-tan* performance originated as the telling of stories in long daily sessions, and this day-by-day broadcasting has inevitably been the dominant form on the radio too, and also a standard for the televising of the art. Thus, as Hall warned, repetitive productions are a possibility. However, Hall (*ibid.*) also suggests that what tempts audiences to revisit the same genre is less *what* is going to happen, which is predictable, but *how* it is going to happen.

As Yin Dequan said, it is difficult for television programmes to maintain an audience because it is not the producer, but the viewer who holds the remote control. In other words, the programme might only survive for a few seconds if the audience changes channel. The very existence of the programme relies upon the choices of audiences, which are reflected in market share and viewing ratings.

First, in order to attract and maintain an audience of those who are not native speakers of the Suzhou dialect, the staff spend a large amount of time subtitling all of the *ping-tan* programmes. Considering that one can only understand *ping-tan* by knowing the dialect, subtitles provide more people with a bridge to approach the beauty of this art. This is especially true for the younger generation who speak less dialect nowadays, and for the increasing number of immigrants who have settled in Suzhou. Yin Dequan told me that the programme records eight long-episode stories every year; each of them includes roughly thirty 38-minute length episodes. That is to say, there are at least 240 episodes with 9120 minutes of material to subtitle. In addition, there are fifty episodes of *Kunqu* opera that also appear in the slot, as well as the special programmes broadcast at the weekends. Post-production work represents an extremely heavy burden to the production team. However, the main challenge of this work is not only the time required to input the subtitles, but it also comes from difficulties in the method. Most of the Suzhou dialect can be rendered in typical written Chinese characters, which are largely suitable for the Wu language family. For example, the character 𪛗 means 'do not' in Suzhou dialect with a *pinyin* spelling of *fiào*. However, this character is hardly used in Mandarin Chinese speech. It is very difficult to interpret some expressions in patois using Mandarin Chinese, let alone to find suitable

characters to deliver the meaning in writing. For this reason, Yin and his team consult expertise from local folklorists, linguists, literati, and academic professionals. He explained that the staff usually ask for at least three opinions from experts who have a long relationship with the programme. If the result is ambiguous, they have to seek alternative ideas and choose the most satisfactory. This work also consumes lots of time. But as Yin explained, these subtitles help to overcome linguistic obstacles preventing listeners from understanding the stories. They enable non-native people to follow the long-episode programmes. Thus, subtitling is significant in creating brand loyalty.

Secondly, since 2005 Yin Dequan has produced new versions of stories, matching storytellers from different troupes, or those that have never performed together before. The initial idea was to stimulate the audience's curiosity for a new performance that could not realistically happen in the live story house. This cooperative work is not always smooth, because harmonic duo work usually requires years of working together. In addition, because storytellers who have not worked together before are naturally unfamiliar with the details of each other's style, the lower hand assistant storyteller must follow the dominant upper hand, and this means memorising the full episodes and assisting the leading storyteller's performance. Yin Dequan told me:

Because the television platform is an advanced way of spreading one's image and raising one's fame, assistant storytellers compromise and defer to the leading storyteller's performing habits and preferences.

Zhang Yuhong<sup>152</sup> also demonstrated the necessity for television programmes to produce new performances:

For *ping-tan* radio programmes, the poor quality of recordings actually holds a nostalgic feeling. However, the television industry requires novelty and stimulation, especially visual excitement. Who would watch the same performance that has already been broadcast again and again?

News reports and television serials provide new information to the audience. As has been demonstrated in Chapter 6 on the other hand, repeated broadcasting of the same performance is acceptable and can even generate a high market share in some cases. But according to Yin and his colleagues' current work, producing new content for the programme serves as an important means to maintain its following.

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<sup>152</sup> Personal communication, 26 August 2012.

#### 7.4 Supplement Feedback in Television Recording

Audience feedback is also a significant part of the production of *ping-tan* television programmes. Just as was explained with regard to radio in Chapter 6, a delayed process of feedback and adaptation also serves to shape television presentations. This is one of the key points of the current chapter. The studio recording of long-episode stories involves no audience and only programme staff are present, the performances and reactions of storytellers can look less vivid, and appear stiff and rigid instead. Almost every storyteller I encountered in my fieldwork commented about this dilemma. The present master Jin Lisheng<sup>153</sup>, whose performances are sophisticated on all occasions, described the feeling of filming in a studio:

The dynamic between the performer and the audience is crucial in *ping-tan* performance. The audience's reaction stimulates and supports me to adjust my performance instantaneously. However, in an absolutely quiet studio without live intercommunication, I cannot borrow the dynamic from the audience! The quietness replaces the audience's laughter as the thing that bounces back!

Jin Lisheng points out that the second of silence after the delivery of a line in the story comes across as a gap, and appears very peculiar on television. This pause is not meant to be a silent moment, but should be filled by the audience's reaction. That is why especially experienced listeners complain that the storyteller's television performances look listless in comparison with their live performance in story house, and that they appear as if reciting the story rather than telling it. Yin Dequan explained to me that for a television programme, the primary job is to ensure the technical quality of key aspects of the recording, such as the clear sound and image, and then to strive for a perfect performance. Sometimes, if a storyteller inhales at an inappropriate moment, this section should be recorded again.

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<sup>153</sup> Personal communication, 26 September 2012.



**Figure 7-2** During the filmmaking process. Filming *ping-tan* programmes is one of these two cameramen's filming tasks.

In order to understand how this studio recording works, Yin Dequan took me to visit the studio when two storytellers were filming. My first impression of the studio was that the quietness triggers a cool feeling. All the lighting, filming, and sound equipment bring a cautiousness and seriousness to the environment. The fabricated scenery is constructed to revive the stage setting of the story house, and the decor and furniture express the typical cultural flavour of Suzhou. Three studio cameras and a spotlight are orientated towards the performers, and three cameramen either stand or sit behind the cameras, concentrating on the screen. Several monitors display the images collected from the camera, as well as the possible captured images controlled by a producer who is sitting in a higher room at the back of the studio. Red lights flash from all of the equipment in the darkness and indicate entry into an intensive working space, with no disturbances allowed. Generally, the storytellers film two to three episodes per day. On this occasion, during the break when the performers got changed before filming the second episode of the day, I noticed that an old-fashioned clock was positioned in the front of the middle camera. A cameraman reset the clock to 12 o'clock for the purposes of timing. One of the cameramen told me a story about timing work:

Once, two storytellers went to CCTV to record a performance. The filming work there is tougher and more demanding. At the end, the producer gave the performers a countdown for the last ten seconds. What a pity the producer did

not understand the *ping-tan* art! Storytellers improvise performance according to the required time duration, but how can they suddenly finish a full performance in ten seconds? It is curious!



**Figure 7-3 A clock lies in front of three cameras to remind the performers.**

I did not obtain the chance to interview the two storytellers due to their stressful workload. Yin Dequan told me that due to linguistic problems, the producers of CCTV are not able to edit their recordings in a way that fully displays the characteristics of *ping-tan*. This can make the final productions unsatisfactory. He explained to me that in order to offer storytellers a studio performing experience that is more genuine and authentic, he gathers some enthusiastic listeners to sit in the studio while the filming is ongoing:

For storytellers, they naturally give better performances when there is an audience sitting in front of them. The studio recording requires a quiet environment for the final television presentation, thus without audience, storytellers always perform less wonderfully than they do in the story house. They have more freedom in performance, as well as in expressing their thoughts. However, they are much more scrupulous and restrained about what they say on the television. If one's performance is at 85 percent, when he or she hears the audience applaud, they can give one final extraordinary

performance at 90 percent. As long as there is the sound of clapping, storytellers immediately summon their emotion and spirit.



**Figure 7-4 The cameraman was counting backwards to signal the beginning of the filming. The two storytellers were fully concentrated on the camera.**

However, Yin suggests that the clapping from the live audience must be sincere and genuine, and then it works magically on storytellers. When an audience is seated in the studio, they too behave cautiously. He said:

When filming a gala ceremony, although there were lots of *ping-tan* followers, they were restrained by the studio environment, and also worried about whether they should applaud or not. I had to lead and encourage them to applaud: I clapped my hands loudly. The live presentation was actually very warm, and so it was on the television. When the ceremony was finished, I congratulated the performer Shen Shihua on her wonderful performance that gained a lot of cheers, and she sighed: 'it is thanks to the lead that you gave.' The storytellers are very sensitive to every reaction from the audience.

In order to improve the awkward situation in which both storytellers and audiences behave unnaturally in the studio, audience members have been gathered to sit in recordings of

general long-episode story performances as well. With the popularity of social media through cell phone apps such as Wechat, the recruitment of volunteer audiences has become more efficient. Along with the television programmes themselves, the storytellers also proactively gather their fans for studio recordings. Before Xu Huixin and Zhou Hong gave a studio recording in late August 2015, both the programme and Zhou Hong posted the information on the Wechat blog platform. After completing the filming work, she again posted her gratitude to the programme and to the live audience for their support. By this means, the programme again strengthens its network with storytellers and audiences.

Maintaining the *Dianshi Shuchang* programme for two decades has not been an easy task. As Yin Dequan suggests, the life cycle of a television programme generally only lasts around three years; a programme running for five years is considered to have particular longevity. The twenty-year life of this *ping-tan* television programme is a striking case. Apart from news programmes, among all other television programmes currently broadcast in China, there are only five programmes heading into a third decade of broadcasting, and this Suzhou *ping-tan* programme ranks as the second oldest in the country.<sup>154</sup> According to official viewing figures, this programme has kept a market share of around 2 percent, in other words, at least has 120,000 people watch the show every day.<sup>155</sup> With the loyal support of programme followers, *Dianshi Shuchang* has been set up as the brand for an agency to disseminate the *ping-tan* art.

## 7.5 Summary: The Visible Invisible Story House at Home

This chapter has focused on the association between television and *ping-tan*, how this has benefitted and transformed the tradition, and how *ping-tan* performance has been shaped to adapt to the special television studio environment. *Ping-tan* performances have been visible at home since their first broadcasting to the public. However, in terms of the communication between the storyteller and audience, though the television medium has improved the audience's experience as receivers, mutual interactivity is still blocked on the direct face-to-face level, and the audience is still not able to obtain the same atmosphere as

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<sup>154</sup> The other four television programmes are: *Xiqu Dawutai* ('Big Stage of Xiqu') of Shanghai since 1994, *Xiangyue Hua Xilou* ('Gathering at The Flower Xiqu Theatre') of Anhui Province since 1994, *Qin Zhi Sheng* ('The Voice of Qinjiang') of Shaanxi Province since 1993, and *Liyuan Chun* ('Spring of Pear Garden') of Henan Province since 1993.

<sup>155</sup> Yin Dequan told me that according to the population census of Suzhou in 2014, the viewership has exceeded 13.5 billion. The general television audience is about 6 billion, and the number of viewers for the *ping-tan* programme has exceeded 120,000 per day.

in a story house. It is perhaps difficult for viewers at home to imagine themselves as part of a group of people all participating in the same experience. While collectivity in the live story house is usually self-evident, and something similar can be replicated well on radio through live call-in interactivity, a similar effect is hardest to achieve on television. Technical and practical limitations make intercommunication between the audience, the programme, and the storytellers less easy. Television show producers have not yet experimented with rebroadcasting old episodes as is common on radio. Thus, there is no clear evidence to show whether or not viewers experience the same nostalgic feelings as these rebroadcasts stimulate among radio listeners.

The *Dianshi Shuchang* programme has undergone an evolution over a twenty-year period. From zero, it has established the television channel as a transmitter of the *ping-tan* art. The initial task when the programme began was to rescue *ping-tan* from its decline in the late 1980s, preserving and disseminating as many valuable records as possible from splendid performances and performers of the mid-1990s. Later, its role was transferred to playing a part in exporting the lore of *ping-tan*, introducing this tradition to a great number of people, and enabling it to integrate better into modern society. Accordingly, the content of the programme has gone through remarkable updates that have reflected the accumulation of raw materials, and the changing demands from its audience. The programme producer Yin Dequan and his post-production team have played instrumental roles in these transformations. As Nawaz (1983) suggests, the development of mass media programmes mirrors the development of society. *Dianshi Shuchang* has witnessed technological advances such as satellite signals, as well as cultural preservation efforts in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Adding subtitles to *ping-tan* performances, for instance, demonstrates that the city has expanded and diversified.

Television studio performance offers both advantages and challenges to contemporary storytellers. On one hand, the programme provides the storytellers with a shortcut to being recognised outside the story house. Without the visible image, unless audience members watch *ping-tan* performance in story houses very often, it takes a long time for them to become acquainted with the storytellers. On the other hand, studio recording restrains the storytellers' performance. In the radio studio's recording process, where there is no audience involvement and they deliver their art while facing a wall, storytellers enjoy a relaxed environment and they can unfold a written draft of the story to prompt themselves. Television recording, on the other hand, is a far more pressured situation. Besides, the

disadvantageous lack of intercommunication can lead to awkwardness in the presentation of stories, triggering an uncomfortable experience for storytellers. The television medium can boost the fame of the folk art, as stated by Bates (2012). However, this chapter suggests that the disadvantages should be considered equally alongside its benefits.

To a large extent, television's main advances involve presenting the visual dimension of the *ping-tan* art. In order to maintain the loyalty of audiences, novel and unusual special programmes must be produced. As means for audiences to give feedback and to communicate with the storyteller or the programme, the established methods of communication by telephone and letters are highly practical. However, with new forums, such as online television platforms and cell-phone-based social media applications such as Wechat, innovations have emerged to enhance the intercommunication in the tripartite relationship of performer, programme, and audience. These, however, should not be relied upon excessively. After all, the genuine face-to-face 'feedback loop' accommodating in the story house is presumably irreplaceable. Radio and television are two of the most important ways in which *ping-tan* has developed in recent decades. They offer the clearest evidence that adaptations to suit contemporary society have been instrumental in keeping the genre popular and meaningful for the people of Suzhou. They show that the fundamental principles upon which *ping-tan* has always been based still underpin current practice. Specifically, this and the previous chapter have shown that the 'feedback loop' between participants that has always been a key feature of performances, is still present even in new forms. The 'feedback loop' has taken on new meaning in the era of radio and television, but there is a continuity in the centrality of this feature of *ping-tan* performance.

Finally, from the physical story house, to radio broadcasting, television and the internet, it can be argued that technological evolution has not changed the essence of the *ping-tan* art. It is only by cooperative work between storyteller and audience that the genre can spread and develop creatively in the future. It is arguable that through innovative techniques, intimacy between each individual involved in *ping-tan* has been enhanced, and the walls of the story house are no longer the solid barriers that they used to be.

## Chapter 8. Conclusion

This thesis has illuminated how *Suzhou ping-tan* maintains its vibrancy in the urban society of contemporary Suzhou. *Ping-tan* generates an influence that extensively underlies its followers' life habits, expressions of identity, and aesthetic values. For example, many audience members are involved in *ping-tan*-related activities on a daily basis, and structure their routines around them. The aficionados dedicate their retirements to voluntary work around the genre, and are motivated to report its beauty through various means, such as editing the *Ping-tan Zhi You* newspaper and *ping-tan* websites. As a folk narrative tradition, it performs local cultural identity. I explain the significance of this statement below.

Narrative performance is a vehicle possessing an abundance of notable characteristics. With the essential function of delivering stories through the channels of either telling or singing, linguistic factors play a crucial role. In *tanci* story singing especially, a balance must be struck between the comprehensibility of the language used and the melodic composition. Ts'ao's (1988) analytical studies compare the tonal inflections of spoken language with melodic contours to illustrate possible variations in scale material (*ibid.*, 251), and Chapter 2 of this thesis tackled some significant related factors that have not been explored previously in *tanci* studies. In particular, this chapter discussed the correlation between words and music in both the *diao* and *qupai* systems. In the former, the analysis illustrates how the *ping-ze* prosodic verse structure accounts for basic melodic tendencies, while the melodic detail is refined through the tonal distortion triggered by the linguistic sandhi effect in the Suzhou dialect. This sheds light on how and why an individual *diao* melodic formula can be applied to different ballads. For *qupai* tunes – settings of colloquial prose – it is usually less challenging to understand the meaning of the words. Unlike *diao* verse, these settings do not allow the tune to dominate at the expense of the words. These results demonstrate that in *tanci* music the relationship between the words and the music in semi-improvised *diao* and concrete *qupai* tunes, though negotiable, shows an accommodation of the basic phonetic demands and the tonal sandhi effect of the Suzhou dialect. This is consistent with a consensus in Chinese musical ideology – especially related to performances in Sino-Tibetan languages – that '*yi zi xing qiang, qiang sui zi zou*' (literally 'production of the tune is based on articulation, the tune follows the words'). It seems that this has been internalised unconsciously in music making.

As well as linguistic delivery in the form of speaking and singing, non-linguistic communication also plays a crucial role in *ping-tan* performance. It assists the storyteller in presenting the stories in an artful and precise way through an additional gestural layer of meaning, as well as in maintaining attention from the audience for as long as the story continues. Drawing upon Bauman (1975; 1977), Berger and del Negro's (2002) research that highlights the performer's initial motivation to generate communication with the audiences, Chapter 3 addressed the interplay between the storyteller and audience in live *ping-tan* performance, and illuminated their interconnectedness. To examine this process, this chapter referred to performance gesture analysis methods discussed and employed in Kendon (1972, 1980), McNeill (1992, 2005), Clayton (2005, 2007), and Leman and Godøy (2010). It extended Bauman's remarkable work, demonstrating that audiences also shape live performance through their conscious or unconscious responses being picked up on by the storytellers, and used to adjust the performance instantaneously. Accordingly, audience members' participation is a crucial element of this live interconnectedness – the 'feedback loop'. In other words, live performance of *ping-tan* encourages the storyteller and audience to fulfill their duty of communicating with each other.

Building upon the mutual communication addressed in Chapter 3, Chapter 4 expanded the discussion of 'performance' from that which occurs on the stage to observation of off-stage behaviour. Enlightened by Goffman's (1959) theory, this chapter examined the processes of role-playing among storytellers and audiences. The storyteller's 'title' *shuoshu xiansheng* carries multiple layers of meaning. A storyteller is expected to take a role within a performance (portraying character, narrating the story, and commenting upon the story from their own point of view); to be teacher-like, cultivating the *ping-tan* audience by delivering knowledge and social values through their performance; and to be part of the apprenticeship systems within their lineages. Correspondingly, to be a *ping-tan* follower requires years of engagement, accumulated knowledge, and personal experience. All these factors become the criteria to judge the different degrees to which *ping-tan* has centrality in an individual's daily life. In addition, responding to a general concern that *ping-tan* is declining and that members of the younger generations do not visit the story house (Bender, 1988), this chapter argued that the potential new *ping-tan* followers should not be thought of as young people, but instead as 'advanced-age new listeners', who are retired from work and have fewer responsibilities at home. Considering the criteria above for being a senior member of the *ping-tan* audience, this group of people is more likely to qualify after years of immersion in the story house. This chapter thus suggested that a pool of participants that

seems to be aging is not necessarily evidence of a decline in popularity. From this point of view, examining off-stage participation in *ping-tan* is equally significant when seeking to understand the intimate relationship between all of its participators and the art – to perform the unspoken obligation whereby the performer performs, and the audience ‘audiences’.

Storytellers contribute to maintaining high attendance levels by offering appealing stories and high-quality performances. However, audience members’ internal motivations for making *ping-tan*-related events a dominant part of their social lives and leisure experiences have not been tackled in existing *ping-tan* studies. Chapter 5 hence explored the reasons from the perspective of musical identity. It revealed deeper correlations between all of the participants and *ping-tan*. Among its main findings, this chapter suggested that a more refined analysis of performer and audience identities is required, in particular recognising varied sub-categories within both. Secondly, although some existing studies consider the storytellers’ identities of *shangshou* (‘upper hand’) leader and *xiashou* (‘lower hand’) assistant (Bender, 2005), this chapter argued that partnerships vary markedly in quality and inter-personal dynamics. In particular, I examined the most common mixed-sex cooperation types: the husband-wife partnership, the long-term partnership, the freelance partnership, and the novice partnership. Thirdly, the diversity of identities within audiences points towards the existence of a relatively complex *ping-tan* community. This conclusion draws upon Turino’s (2008: 102) interpretation of social identities, in which an individual shares the foregrounding or recognition of habits with others. Therefore, this chapter categorised *ping-tan* followers into five groups: connoisseurs, enthusiasts, aficionados, habitués, and amateurs/*ping-tan* fans. Fourthly, although evidence shows that these discrete groups have hardly any direct inter-group communication, attitudes towards other factions of the audience provides clues to the values held by each one. Further, based on these judgements, it seems that identity-based hierarchy involves inter-group interplay via observation rather than via direct communication. All the above findings demonstrated that, on the one hand, *ping-tan* offers an artistic platform for local people and encourages diverse forms of social engagement beyond simply the watching of a performance; on the other hand, participants carry a unique *ping-tan* cultural identity, expressing themselves and sharing their experiences within the cohort of people of which they are members.

Enjoyment of *ping-tan* performance has spread beyond the confines of the story house. The ‘feed-back loop’ of communication has been extended to the platform of radio since it was introduced to Suzhou in 1930, although there are important differences between this and

the instant interplay that occurs in the physical story house. This study is the first to explore in any depth how *ping-tan* programmes have been and continue to be disseminated in Suzhou. Because Shanghai was the first city to accommodate radio broadcasting in China, and as it had a larger broadcasting market than that in Suzhou, Benson (1996), McDaniel (2001), and Hong (2012) have all focused on the history of *Suzhou ping-tan's* popularity in that city from the 1930s to the 1960s. Chapter 6 of this thesis thus tackled the 85-year history of the *ping-tan* programmes broadcast in Suzhou, providing a review of pre-1980 history and using interview material to analyse productions in the last three decades. Examining the *ping-tan* programmes produced by local the AM 1080 channel, this chapter depicted how they built up a shared performance space by establishing numerous channels through which the audience could engage. This has enabled followers to express their responses and deliver feedback surrounding the programme content. Market share statistics and the details of programme sponsorship show just how vast the following for *ping-tan* broadcasts has been. This chapter suggested that it is also meaningful to recognize the 'feedback loop' in this invisible performance space. Producers' efforts in collecting performance materials, in designing and editing programme content, and in passing the audience feedback to storytellers all enabled this platform to be established.

Following the discussion of radio in Chapter 6, Chapter 7 examined how television broadcasting assists the dissemination of *ping-tan*. As there was no prior research that explored the everyday programming of a traditional narrative genre on television, this chapter is likely the first ethnomusicological study of its kind. In this chapter, *ping-tan* has been taken as an example to discuss the accommodation of a narrative tradition on the television platform. In addition to illustrating how programmes have been produced, details of experiments with live and delayed audience participation, and the challenges of studio recording for the storyteller, this chapter also examined the potential competition between radio and television in attracting *ping-tan* followers. However, according to evidence from viewing figures and market share, as well as from interviews with producers, concerns about competition are minimal. That is to say, the regular audiences in the physical story house, and those of radio and television broadcasts are all quite separate. Overlapping portions certainly do exist but they are impossible to count. *Ping-tan* daily programmes have existed for more than twenty years and continue strongly, and this should be considered an extraordinary achievement considering the difficulties in programme production and competition from other types of shows. In other words, brand loyalty towards *ping-tan*

television programmes is firmly established among audiences, and they revisit the same genre as a consequence.

The implications for further study that arise from this thesis may cover not only *Suzhou ping-tan* studies, but also the disciplines of ethnomusicology and narrative performance studies. Enlightened by Albert Lord's fieldwork-based method and his broader understanding of 'literature' in folklore performance studies, this thesis has treated *ping-tan* performance as a 'performance literature'. The storyteller's voice should be transmitted to each corner of the performance space so that all the audience members can receive the spoken and sung words clearly. Accordingly, it would be fruitful to explore the acoustic associations between vocal production and the size of the performance space in future studies, possibly by combining ethnographic interviews with acoustic measurements. How do audiences receive the new trend for storytellers to use microphones? Can audience members express themselves equally in larger and smaller arenas? Furthermore, considering *Suzhou ping-tan* as a dominant traditional mass culture, it would also be feasible to examine how *ping-tan* affects the daily lives of local people outside of the live performance. Research in the existing historical archives of *ping-tan* recordings and other collections would benefit future *ping-tan* studies. Besides, surveys of the habits of listening to and watching *ping-tan* programmes on the radio and television may also be significant in understanding the atmosphere outside of the live performance context. In addition, *Suzhou ping-tan* has spread widely throughout the territory of the Yangtze Delta, extending its influence and that of the characteristic Wu culture in this broader region. Do performances outside of the city serve to express a different set of identities? What unique influences are at play here? These questions along with *ping-tan's* coexistence with other narrative folk arts employing the Wu dialects, also requires further illumination, particularly that which focuses upon interdisciplinary studies of verbal texts, gesture and melody. For example, *Yangzhou pinghua* and *Yangzhou tanci* offer rich material for this kind of analysis.

The narrative vocal tradition *Suzhou ping-tan* has been associated with the local people and way of life. It has served as social critique, cultivation, entertainment, and more. Undoubtedly, *ping-tan* inspires interconnectedness between storytellers and audiences during and outside of the performance. As one of the fundamental bases of the art, the story house performance space is more than a physical iconic component. In the past, a story house served as a vital forum for social activity. It still serves both functions today – providing performances and a place for people to gather and drink tea – but the focus is now

much more on the story experience and less on the tea business. Nowadays, a new type of teahouse has appeared, which uses traditional décor to provide an old-fashioned atmosphere, and which employs storytellers or *ping-tan* students to give brief performances supplementing the business. Customers are given a 'ballad menu' at the same time as a tea menu, and pay a set price to hear a ballad of their choice sung. This trend seemingly echoes the circumstances of the past, when storytellers 'sold' their singing in teahouses and built up their reputations before they could be invited to perform in a real story house.

In addition, the story house constitutes the locus of authority from the viewpoints of both performers and local followers. Historical accounts (both oral and written) demonstrate that storytellers' careers followed a prescribed trajectory from the beginning of their training. They embarked on their careers in villages and small venues, before building up sufficient levels of reputation to give performances in the town, and finally in well-recognized story houses in big cities. Ideally, they would eventually earn the respect of other performers and audience members and become a master with their own disciples. Still today, performances in the story house are met with high levels of expectation. No matter how highly esteemed a storyteller is, if they deliver a single uninspired performance in a particular venue it becomes difficult to return to that stage in the future or even to perform in the same city again. Live performance in the story house operates according to a 'survival of the fittest' model. The judgments of loyal followers, especially the more sophisticated audience members, are crucial in this process. They also serve as impartial critiques that help storytellers to refine and improve what they offer. However, this process by which outstanding storytellers are promoted through the ranks might be less evident when *ping-tan* is transmitted outside of the story house, on radio, television or Internet. Although the evolution of technology has had an immense boosting effect on *ping-tan's* ability to reach a wider audience, it has not changed the essence of the *ping-tan* art. Instead, it supports the preservation and dissemination of *ping-tan*.

Certain elements of local history, including those related to the development of *ping-tan* itself, are to be found in the story house and are transmitted through this oral tradition in a non-fixed way. The *dashu* ('big story') *pinghua* genre advocates the martial spirit through splendid storytelling. The *xiaoshu* ('small story') *tanci* genre inspires a scholarly mindset and the building of decency and worldly wisdom through skillful and patient story singing. The association between the *pinghua* and *tanci*, then, seems to embody the dual temperaments of the city taken for granted by the local people: '*chong wen shang wu*' ('admire the scholar,

advocate the martial'). The Introduction to this thesis outlined the legend of Taibo's abdication that has circulated since the 12<sup>th</sup> century BC. Stories of this kind, filled with humane values have remained in the *ping-tan* repertoire, along with countless martial scenes from the 2500-year history of the local area.

Some ethnomusicologists and *ping-tan* researchers hold a concern that *ping-tan* story house performance might disappear in the future. The story house and the art-form fostered within it are rooted in the past, and they provide windows on past experiences and identities. This thesis has demonstrated that both may well have a brighter future than some commentators might suspect. People come to the story house not only to appreciate *ping-tan*, to have tea and to socialise with friends, but also to enjoy a nostalgic frame of mind in which they might connect with a golden age of local life that they may distantly recall or of which they have heard from older generations. As the poetry from 'Lin Jiang Xian' presented at the beginning of this thesis expressed, monumental passages of history are merely instants, and even the great historical figures are subject to the unpredictable powers of fate. However, by interpreting and reinterpreting all of these stories and encountering local history through *ping-tan* in Suzhou, local identity is constantly brought to life at the hands of the storyteller in the story house, and passed down through the generations.

## Appendix 1. The 2015-2016 Annual Syllabus of the Suzhou Ping-tan School

### Translation Key and Explanations<sup>156</sup>

Translation	Chinese	Explanation
Class Meeting	班会	
Composition	作曲	Focusing on basic Western composition techniques
Dancing	舞蹈	
Composition of Tune Singing	唱腔设计	Focusing on <i>diao</i> -based compositions
Electives	选修	Each student selects two courses from options including piano, <i>pipa</i> , <i>guzheng</i> (Chinese zither), singing, stage performance, dance, and so on
Form and Dancing	形体舞蹈	
Form Training	形体	Students are taught the techniques of controlling and manipulating the body in performance
Folk Art History	曲艺史	The history of Chinese <i>quyi</i> genres
Graduation Field Work	毕业实习	Students not planning careers in <i>ping-tan</i> are allowed to take this period to do other internship work
Group Rehearsal	综排	For members of senior grades, rehearsal of a long story, including the singing sections
History	历史	General Chinese history
Instrumental Practice	弹奏	<i>Sanxian</i> and <i>pipa</i> learning
Introduction to the Arts	艺术概论	General introduction to the arts, including painting, architecture, music, and so on

<sup>156</sup> Courses such as Chinese, English, and Mathematics that are self-explanatory are not translated here. Some courses such as 'Form Training' and 'Form and Dancing' share similar content, but are for different grades.

Applying Cosmetics	化妆	Teaching the techniques for applying makeup for <i>ping-tan</i> stage performance
Moral Education	德育	
Music Theory	乐理	Western music theory
Narration	说表	
Professional Practice	专业练习	Equivalent to a self-study course, specifically to practice profession-related skills
Rehearsal	排书	For members of junior grades, rehearsal of a short excerpt from an episode, without ballad singing sections
Sight-singing	视唱	
Singing	演唱	
Story Singing	弹唱	Focusing on the teaching of story singing
Story Singing Practice	弹唱练习	Focusing on the practicing of story singing
Supervised Learning	跟师学习	For the ‘inheriting class’
People’s Art Theory	群文理论	Elementary knowledge regarding work at official cultural institutions, and about preschool education
Vocal Music	声乐	
Web Designing	网络制作	A new course since 2015, introducing various forms of personal media and design
Writing	写作	Understanding the process of composing a <i>ping-tan</i> story

**Table Appendix 1 2015 - 2016 Annual Syllabus of Suzhou Ping-tan School**

<b>2015 - 2016 Annual Syllabus (Grade 1) - First Term</b>						
Time \ Day	<b>Monday</b>	<b>Tuesday</b>	<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>Thursday</b>	<b>Friday</b>	
1 8:20-9:05	Professional Practice	Moral Education	Professional Practice	Professional Practice	Professional Practice	
2 9:15-10:00	Instrumental Practice	Chinese	English	Singing	English	
3 10:20-11:00	Instrumental Practice	Narration	Moral Education	Singing	Narration	
4 11:15-12:00	Chinese	Narration	Music Theory	Chinese	Narration	
<i>Noon</i>			<i>Break</i>			
5 13:15-14:00	Mathematics	Singing	Vocal Music	Form Training	Chinese	
6 14:10-14:55	Sight-singing	Singing	Vocal Music	Form Training	Professional Practice	
7 15:05-15:50	Sight-singing	English	Professional Practice	Mathematics		
8 16:00-16:45	Class Meeting	Professional Practice	Professional Practice	English		
<b>2015 - 2016 Annual Syllabus (Grade 1) - Second Term</b>						
Time \ Day	<b>Monday</b>	<b>Tuesday</b>	<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>Thursday</b>	<b>Friday</b>	
1 8:20-9:05	Professional Practice					
2 9:15-10:00	Mathematics	Moral Education	Sight-singing	Singing	Singing	
3 10:20-11:00	Chinese	Chinese	Sight-singing	Narration	Singing	
4 11:15-12:00	Music Theory	English	Moral Education	Narration	Chinese	
<i>Noon</i>			<i>Break</i>			
5 13:15-14:00	Narration	Instrumental Practice	Instrumental Practice	Mathematics	Vocal Music	
6 14:10-14:55	Narration	Instrumental Practice	Instrumental Practice	English	Vocal Music	
7 15:05-15:50	English	Singing	English	Form Training		
8 16:00-16:45	Class Meeting	Singing	Professional Practice	Form Training		

**2015 - 2016 Annual Syllabus (Grade 2) - First Term**

Time \ Day	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
1 8:20-9:05	Professional Practice				
2 9:15-10:00	Narration	History	Chinese	Chinese	Music Theory
3 10:20-11:00	Narration	Vocal Music	Instrumental Practice	Narration	Instrumental Practice
4 11:15-12:00	Chinese	Vocal Music	Instrumental Practice	Narration	Instrumental Practice
<i>Noon</i>			<i>Break</i>		
5 13:15-14:00	Singing	English	Vocal Music	Moral Education	English
6 14:10-14:55	Singing	English	Vocal Music	Moral Education	Chinese
7 15:05-15:50	English	Form and Dancing	Sight-singing	History	
8 16:00-16:45	Class Meeting	Form and Dancing	Sight-singing	Professional Practice	

**2015 - 2016 Annual Syllabus (Grade 2) - Second Term**

Time \ Day	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
1 8:20-9:05	Professional Practice				
2 9:15-10:00	Chinese	Narration	Vocal Music	Instrumental Practice	Vocal Music
3 10:20-11:00	Instrumental Practice	Narration	Vocal Music	Instrumental Practice	Vocal Music
4 11:15-12:00	Instrumental Practice	History	Chinese	Chinese	Chinese
<i>Noon</i>			<i>Break</i>		
5 13:15-14:00	English	Form and Dancing	Narration	Professional Practice	Music Theory
6 14:10-14:55	Sight-singing	Form and Dancing	Narration	History	English
7 15:05-15:50	Sight-singing	English	Singing	Moral Education	
8 16:00-16:45	Class Meeting	English	Singing	Moral Education	

**2015 - 2016 Annual Syllabus (Grade 3) - First Term**

Time \ Day	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
1 8:20-9:05	Professional Practice	Professional Practice	Professional Practice	Professional Practice	Professional Practice
2 9:15-10:00	Story Singing	English	English	Composition	English
3 10:20-11:00	Story Singing	Chinese	Story Singing	Story Singing	Comosition of tune singing
4 11:15-12:00	Moral Education	Folk Art History	Story Singing	Story Singing	Folk Art History
<i>Noon</i>			<i>Break</i>		
5 13:15-14:00	Rehearsal	Rehearsal	Story Singing Practice	Applying Cosmetics	Rehearsal
6 14:10-14:55	Rehearsal	Rehearsal	Story Singing Practice	Applying Cosmetics	Rehearsal
7 15:05-15:50	Chinese	Form and Dancing	Writing	Moral Education	
8 16:00-16:45	Class Meeting	Form and Dancing	Writing	Chinese	

**2015 - 2016 Annual Syllabus (Grade 3) - Second Term**

Time \ Day	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
1 8:20-9:05	Professional Practice	Professional Practice	Professional Practice	Professional Practice	Professional Practice
2 9:15-10:00	Chinese	Folk Art History	Introduction to the Arts	Rehearsal	Comosition of tune singing
3 10:20-11:00	Rehearsal	English	Chinese	Rehearsal	Story Singing Practice
4 11:15-12:00	Rehearsal	Chinese	English	Composition	Story Singing Practice
<i>Noon</i>			<i>Break</i>		
5 13:15-14:00	Moral Education	Form Training	Writing	English	Story Singing
6 14:10-14:55	Story Singing	Form Training	Writing	Moral Education	Story Singing
7 15:05-15:50	Story Singing	Story Singing	Rehearsal	Applying Cosmetics	
8 16:00-16:45	Class Meeting	Story Singing	Rehearsal	Applying Cosmetics	

**2015 - 2016 Annual Syllabus (Grade 4) - First Term**

Time \ Day	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
1 8:20-9:05	Professional Practice	Professional Practice	Professional Practice	Professional Practice	Professional Practice
2 9:15-10:00	Story Singing	Web Designing	Group Rehearsal	Group Rehearsal	Story Singing
3 10:20-11:00	Story Singing	Web Designing	Group Rehearsal	Group Rehearsal	Story Singing
4 11:15-12:00	English	Story Singing Practice	Chinese	English	Moral Education
<i>Noon</i>			<i>Break</i>		
5 13:15-14:00	Group Rehearsal	Electives	Applying Cosmetics	People's Arts Theory	Art Appreciation
6 14:10-14:55	Group Rehearsal		Applying Cosmetics	People's Arts Theory	
7 15:05-15:50	Chinese		Dancing	Electives	
8 16:00-16:45	Class Meeting		Dancing		

**2015 - 2016 Annual Syllabus (Grade 4) - Second Term**

Time \ Day	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
1 8:20-9:05	Professional Practice	Professional Practice	Professional Practice	Professional Practice	Professional Practice
2 9:15-10:00	English	Story Singing Practice	Chinese	English	Moral Education
3 10:20-11:00	Group Rehearsal	Group Rehearsal	Web Designing	Story Singing	Group Rehearsal
4 11:15-12:00	Group Rehearsal	Group Rehearsal	Web Designing	Story Singing	Group Rehearsal
<i>Noon</i>			<i>Break</i>		
5 13:15-14:00	Chinese	Electives	Dancing	Electives	Art Appreciation
6 14:10-14:55	Story Singing		Dancing		
7 15:05-15:50	Story Singing		Applying Cosmetics		
8 16:00-16:45	Class Meeting		Applying Cosmetics		

**2015 - 2016 Annual Syllabus (Grade 5) - First Term**

Time \ Day	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
1 8:20-9:05	Graduation Field Work				
2 9:15-10:00					
3 10:20-11:00					
4 11:15-12:00					
<i>Noon</i>			<i>Break</i>		
5 13:15-14:00	Graduation Field Work				
6 14:10-14:55					
7 15:05-15:50					
8 16:00-16:45	Class Meeting				

**2015 - 2016 Annual Syllabus (Grade 5) - Second Term**

Time \ Day	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
1 8:20-9:05	Graduation Field Work				
2 9:15-10:00					
3 10:20-11:00					
4 11:15-12:00					
<i>Noon</i>			<i>Break</i>		
5 13:15-14:00	Graduation Field Work				
6 14:10-14:55					
7 15:05-15:50					
8 16:00-16:45	Class Meeting				

<b>2015 - 2016 Annual Syllabus ('Inheriting Class' of Grade 5) - First Term</b>						
Time \ Day	<b>Monday</b>	<b>Tuesday</b>	<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>Thursday</b>	<b>Friday</b>	
1 8:20-9:05	Supervised Learning					
2 9:15-10:00						
3 10:20-11:00						
4 11:15-12:00						
<i>Noon</i>			<i>Break</i>			
5 13:15-14:00	Supervised Learning					
6 14:10-14:55						
7 15:05-15:50						
8 16:00-16:45						
<b>2015 - 2016 Annual Syllabus (Grade 3) - Second Term</b>						
Time \ Day	<b>Monday</b>	<b>Tuesday</b>	<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>Thursday</b>	<b>Friday</b>	
1 8:20-9:05	Supervised Learning					
2 9:15-10:00						
3 10:20-11:00						
4 11:15-12:00						
<i>Noon</i>			<i>Break</i>			
5 13:15-14:00	Supervised Learning					
6 14:10-14:55						
7 15:05-15:50						
8 16:00-16:45						

## Appendix 2. Glossary

### Performance and Performance-related Terms

Pinyin	Chinese	Explanation
'Chang sha Zhengzhu Ta'	唱煞珍珠塔	'To die singing <i>Zhenzhu Ta</i> ', a <i>ping-tan</i> proverb
'Churen, chushu, zouzhenglu'	出人，出书， 走正路	'To cultivate an outstanding young generation of storytellers, to compose new <i>ping-tan</i> repertoire, and to take the right path', a motto of Chen Yun
'Dandang nanyu bu jimo, shuangdang nanyu tongyu'	单档难于不寂 寞，双档难于 同语	A <i>ping-tan</i> proverb describing the challenges of finding balance in performance: for the soloist, the difficulty is not to get bored; in a duet, it is difficult to elaborate the performance as if it were one person performing
'Dashu yigu jin, xiaoshu yiduan qing'	大书一股劲， 小书一段情	'Storytelling is a portion of vigour, story singing is a moment of emotion', a <i>ping-tan</i> proverb
'Qu tou yao weiba'	去头咬尾巴	'Cutting the head and biting the tail', Xue Xiaoqing's creation of an interlude phrase
'Xue bu chu'	学不出	'Not being able to finish one's apprenticeship'
'Yi zi xing qiang, qiang sui zi zou'	依子行腔，腔 随子走	'Using articulation to produce the tune, the tune should follow the words'
'Yiren duojue'	一人多角	One performer swaps between several roles, for certain story contents
'Yiren yijue'	一人一角	One performer is dedicated to one role from the beginning to the end of a performance

'Yu jia xue'	雨夹雪	Literally means 'sleet', but is also interpreted as an abbreviation of 'Yu diao and Ma diao'
'Yu tou ma wei'	俞头马尾	'Yu's head and Ma's tail', the feature of <i>Xiaoyang diao</i>
Bai	白	Vernacular pronunciation
Baishi	拜师	The ceremony of revering a master as teacher
Ban zhuo	半桌	'Half desk', a desk that is half the size of the <i>baxian zhuo</i>
Baxian zhuo	八仙桌	'Square desks'
Biao	表	Narrative
Chaidang	拆档	Dismissing a partnership
Chang qiang man ban	长腔慢板	'Extended melody in slow tempo'
Changfang	场方	Manager of the story house
Changpian	长篇	Long-episode story
Chen bai	衬白	'Highlighting narration'
Chen diao	陈调	Chen's tune
Chuantong shu	传统书	'Traditional stories'
Dandang	单档	Solo performance
Dashu	大书	'Big story', denotes the <i>pinghua</i> genre of <i>ping-tan</i>
Diao	调	A representative tune, named after its originator
Duanpian	短篇	Short-length story
Er lei shu	二类书	'The second category of stories'
Fu zan	赋赞	'Rhapsody speech'

Gu bai	咕白	‘Murmuring’
Gua kou	挂口	‘Hooking mouth’, an introductory verse narration, in particular recited at a character’s first appearance
Guan bai	官白	‘Officer’s narration’
Hou diao	侯调	Hou’s tune
Hua	花	A blemish in singing, see <i>kaihua</i>
Huase dang	花色档	Producing the programme in various ways
Hui shu	会书	‘Story meeting’, a traditional competition event held at the end of a year
Hutuo	互托	‘Commutative/mutual support’, describing the demand that the two instruments support the solo singing
Jiang diao	蒋调	Jiang’s tune
Jiben diao	基本调	‘Basic tunes’
Jiben diao fanfu ti	基本调反复体	‘Repetition of initial tune’, a typical structure of <i>diao</i> music
Kai hua	开花	To make an error or a vocal blemish during singing
Kuai Yu diao	快俞调	‘Fast Yu’s tune’
Lao Chen diao	老陈调	‘Old Chen’s tune’
Lao erduo	老耳朵	‘Old ears’, sophisticated <i>ping-tan</i> listener
Lao tingke	老听客	‘Old listeners’, <i>ping-tan</i> habitués who have accumulated a lot of experience watching live performances
Lao Yu diao	老俞调	‘Old Yu’s tune’

Li diao	丽调	Li's tune
Li Zhongkang diao	李仲康调	Li Zhongkang's tune
Liu bai	六白	Six types of narrative in <i>ping-tan</i> performance
Liupai	流派	Performing school
Lizi shuchang	里子书场	'Lining story house', a story house hidden in a small lane
Luoju	落句	The second part of the <i>jiben diao fanfu ti</i> structure
Ma diao	马调	Ma's tune
Matou	码头	'Dock', the places holding a performance, such as a specific city, town, or village
Matou laohu	码头老虎	'Tiger of the dock', a nickname denoting a competitive storyteller in an area
Mianfeng	面风	'Facial wind', facial expressions
Mianzi shuchang	面子书场	'Face story house', a story house prominently positioned on a main street
Nongtang shu	弄堂书	Sub-branch of the plot
Nü xiansheng	女先生	Female storyteller
Pao matou	跑码头	'Running between docks', describing a storyteller giving a performance tour
Pingdang	拼档	'Forming a partnership'
Pinghua	评话	Storytelling genre
Ping-tan	评弹	A compound word of <i>pinghua</i> and <i>tanci</i>
Pipa	琵琶	Chinese 4-stringed lute
Qi diao	祁调	Qi's tune

Qi jiaose	起角色	Role-playing
Qiju	起句	The first part of the <i>jiben diao fanfu ti</i> structure
Rou li xue	肉里噱	‘Humour in the meat’, a comic element that is embedded in the plot context
Sa gouxue	洒狗血	‘Sprinkled with dog’s blood’, when a storyteller fails to restrain his own acting and becomes overwhelmed by it
Sanxian	三弦	3-stringed Chinese banjo
Shangshou	上手	‘Upper hand’, the lead storyteller in a duo
Shangshu ren	唱书人	Storyteller, specifically meaning ‘the person who sings stories’
Shen diao	沈调	Shen’s tune
Shoumian	手面	‘Face of the hand’, gestures
Shu diao	书调	‘Tune of story’
Shu lu	书路	‘Story road’, the storyteller’s attitude towards the unfolding of the story, along with certain other features
Shuangdang	双档	Duo performance
Shuo biao/ Shuo bai/ Biao bai	说表 / 说白 / 表白	The speaking registers
Shuofang shu chang	硕放书场	A story house in Wuxi
Shuoshu de	说书的	A casual way of saying storyteller
Shuoshu ren	说书人	Storyteller
Shuoshu xiansheng	说书先生	Storyteller

Si bai	私白	'Monologue'
Tan pugai	摊铺盖	Laying out the story text scripts to jog the memory during a performance on radio
Tanci	弹词	Story singing genre
Ting bi jiao shu	听壁角书	'Listening to a back-corner story'
Ting shuoshu	听说书	'Listen to the storytelling'
Toushu	偷书	'Stealing stories'
Tuo bai	托白	'Supporting narration'
Tuo liu dian qi	拖六点七	'Dragging the sixth and dropping the seventh', the cooperation between the words and music
Wai chahua	外插花	The 'stuck-in' content
Wai chahua	外插花	'Outwardly inserted flowers' or 'stuck-ins', elements that are extended from the plot in the form of inserted explanations, metaphors and analogies
Wen	文	Literary pronunciation
Wen-ci	文词	'Literary verse', the verse lyrics in <i>ping-tan</i> performance
Xiang tan	乡谈	'Countryside dialect'
Xiao mai	小卖	'Small sales', brief witticisms or humorous acts inserted as one-offs
Xiaoshu	小书	'Small story', the <i>tanci</i> genre of <i>ping-tan</i>
Xiaoyang diao	小阳调	<i>Xiaoyang</i> tune
Xiashou	下手	'Lower hand', the assistant storyteller in a duo
Xin Yu diao	新俞调	'New Yu's tune'

Xue diao	薛调	Xue's tune
Xue/Xuetou	噱 / 噱头	Jokes
Yan diao	严调	Yan's tune
Yang diao	杨调	Yang's tune
Yang mian	阳面	The natural register
Yangzhou pinghua	扬州评话	Yangzhou storytelling
Yin mian	阴面	The falsetto register
Yin zi	引子	Introduction
Yiqu baichang	一曲百唱	'One tune can be sung in hundreds of ways', a widely held belief concerning <i>tanci</i> music
You diao	尤调	You's tune
Yu diao	俞调	Yu's tune
Yun bai	韵白	'Rhyming speech'
Zhezi	折子	One-episode story
Zhongpian	中篇	Medium-length story
Zhou diao	周调	Zhou Yuquan's tune
Zhu Jiesheng diao	朱介生调	Zhu Jieshen's tune
Zhuangyuan zhuo	状元桌	'Number one scholar's table', the audience table just opposite the stage in the middle of the first row
Zuo zhuang tingke	坐桩听客	'A listener who sits on a stump', the habitués visiting as if they were residents and owned their specific stumps

## Names of Works, Persons, Story Houses, Organisations, and Other Terms

Pinyin	Chinese	Explanation
'Baoyu Yetan'	宝玉夜探	'Baoyu's Night Visit', an opening ballad
Beijing Ping-tan Zhi You She	北京评弹之友社	'Society of Ping-tan friends in Beijing', an amateur <i>ping-tan</i> club
'Chi Huntun'	吃馄饨	'Eating Won Ton', an excerpt from <i>Baishe Zhuan</i>
'Chong wen shang wu'	崇文尚武	'Admire the scholar, advocate the martial', the motto of the city of Suzhou, often used by local authorities and local media
'Die Lian Hua'	蝶恋花	'The Butterfly Loves the Flower', an opening ballad
'Dongbei Kaipian'	东北开篇	'Northeast Opening Ballad'
'Fang Qing Chang Dao Qing'	方卿唱道情	'Fang Qing Sings Dao Qing', an opening ballad
'Fengjian zhuyi, ziben zhuyi, xiuzheng zhuyi'	封建主义, 资本主义, 修正主义	'Feudalism, capitalism and revisionism', a slogan
'Guan Shoufeng Qingyan'	关寿峰请宴	'Guan Shoufeng Setting a Banquet', an excerpt from <i>Tixiao Yinyuan</i>
'Haoting de Suzhou ping-tan'	好听的苏州评弹	The tuneful music of Suzhou ping-tan', an episode of a <i>ping-tan</i> radio programme
'Jiyao fanshan yueling, youyao yixie qianli'	既要翻山越岭, 又要一泻千里	'Able to tramp hill and dale, as well as to flow down vigorously', storyteller Liu Tianyun's description of Yu <i>diao</i>

Keman	客满	Full House
'Lin Chong Taxue'	林冲踏雪	'Lin Chong Walking in the Snow', an opening ballad
'Mei Zhu'	梅竹	'Plum and Bamboo', an opening ballad
'Ping-tan Mingjia Hui hui ping-tan mingjia'	评弹名家会会评弹名家	' <i>Ping-tan</i> Masters' Gathering to meet <i>ping-tan</i> masters'
'Ping-tan yu xiqu yinyue xinshang'	评弹与戏曲音乐欣赏	'Appreciating <i>ping-tan</i> and drama music', an episode of a <i>ping-tan</i> radio programme
'Qing Xian Fu'	清闲赋	A <i>tanci</i> opening ballad
'Shuo de bi chang de haoting'	说的比唱的好听	'Speaking sounds more pleasant than singing', an episode of a <i>ping-tan</i> radio programme
'Taibo Ben Wu'	泰伯奔吴	'Taibo Flees to the Land of Wu', the first chapter of <i>Shijia</i> in <i>Shiji</i>
'Tingtang Duozi'	厅堂夺子	'Retake the Son at the Hall', an opening ballad
'Wu Song Da Hu'	武松打虎	'Wu Song Fights The Tiger', an opening ballad
'Xiang tan xiang chang'	响弹响唱	'Loud plucking and sonorous singing', Xia Hesheng's performing style
'Xiao Nigu Si Fan'	小尼姑思凡	'The Little Nun Wondering about the Mundane World', an opening ballad
'Xunzhao ping-tan zai dangjin shehui de jiazhi'	寻找评弹在当今社会的价值	'Seeking the value of <i>ping-tan</i> in modern society', an episode of a <i>ping-tan</i> radio programme

'Yingying Caoqin'	莺莺操琴	'Yingying Plays Qin', an opening ballad
'Yingying Shao Yexiang'	莺莺烧夜香	'Yingying Burns Incense at Night', an opening ballad
'Yishi fumu'	衣食父母	'The parents foster them with food and clothes', the intimate relationship between the storyteller and the audience
'Zhu Zhishan Kan Deng'	祝枝山看灯	'Zhu Zhishan Watches the Lantern', an opening ballad
'Zijuan Ye Tan'	紫娟夜叹	'Zijuan's Sigh at Night', an opening ballad
A Wan Chalou	阿万茶楼	'A Wan's Teahouse', a <i>ping-tan</i> radio programme
Aihaozhe	爱好者	Aficionado
AM 1080 Ping-tan Da Jiangtang AM 1080	评弹大讲堂	'AM 1080 Ping-tan Lecture Room', a <i>ping-tan</i> radio programme
Bai Mao Nü	白毛女	'The White-haired Girl', a <i>tanci</i> story
Bai She/ Baishe Zhuan	白蛇/白蛇传	'White Snake'/ 'The Tale of the White Snake', a <i>tanci</i> work
Bailing Guangbo Diantai	百灵广播电台	Lark Radio Station
Bailing kaipian ji	百灵开篇集	'Collection of lark opening ballad singing'
Baitie	拜帖	A contractual letter of agreement, signed by the student and his accompanier before their first visit to the teacher's home
Baixi	百戏	Acrobatics

Bankuaixing lanmu	板块栏目	'Jigsaw programme'
Banqiang ti	板腔体	The composition system for setting texts in which the music is subsidiary to the text
Baoshan	宝山	A district in Shanghai
Beijing Ping-tan Zhi You She	北京评弹之友社	'Society of Ping-tan friends in Beijing', an amateur <i>ping-tan</i> club
Bi Sheng Hua	笔生花	'Flowering on the Pen', a <i>tanci</i> work
Cai Xiaojuan	蔡小娟	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Canglang	沧浪	A district in Suzhou
Cao Hanchang	曹汉昌	A <i>pinghua</i> storyteller
Cao Xiaojun	曹啸君	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Cao Zhiyun	曹织云	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Chang	唱	Singing
Chang mao	长毛	'Longhairs', the nickname of the <i>Taiping</i> rebellion used by the people
Changke	常客	Habitué
Changsheng dian	长生殿	'Changsheng Palace', a <i>tanci</i> work
Changshu	常熟	A city
Changzhou	常州	A city
Changzhou pinghua	常州评话	A storytelling genre
Chen Bixian	陈碧仙	The author of <i>Shuang Zhu Feng</i>
Chen Cui'e	陈翠娥	A character in <i>Zhenzhu Ta</i>

Chen Duansheng	陈端生	The author of <i>Tixiao Yinyuan</i>
Chen Jingsheng	陈景生	A <i>pinghua</i> storyteller
Chen Lingxi	陈灵犀	A <i>ping-tan</i> story composer
Chen Xi'an	陈希安	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Chen Yong	陈勇	A teacher in the Suzhou Ping-tan School
Chen Yuanyuan	陈圆圆	A <i>tanci</i> work
Chen Yun	陈云	The former chairman of the Central Advisory Commission
Chen Yuqian	陈遇乾	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller who lived during the Qing dynasty
Cheng Huiying	程蕙英	The author of <i>Feng Shuang Fei</i>
Cheng Yanqiu	程艳秋	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Cheng Zhenqiu	程振秋	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Chenshi Wenhua Zhongxin	城市文化中心	City Public Culture Centre
Chu Pingwang	楚平王	King Pingwang of Chu, a historical figure who lived in the Spring and Autumn Period
Chuancheng ban	传承班	'Inheriting class' for special intensive training in the Suzhou Ping-tan School
Cixi	慈禧	A character in <i>Hongding Shangren Hu Xueyan</i>
Daiyan ti	代言体	First-person narrative
Dao Qing diao	道情调	A <i>qupai</i> folk tune

Daru Xiang shuchuang	大儒巷书场	'Lane of Great Scholar story house', a story house in Suzhou
Dian Jiang Chun	点绛唇	A <i>qupai</i> folk tune
Dianshi Shuchang	电视书场	'Television Story House', a television <i>ping-tan</i> programme
Dong Chao	董超	A character in <i>Wu Song</i>
Dousha Ximen Qing	斗杀西门庆	'Killing Xi Menqing', a <i>tanci</i> excerpt from <i>Shui Hu</i>
Dushi Yinyue Pinlü	都市综合频率	The Urban Music Channel
Er Jian Gu	二见姑	'Second Meeting with Aunt', an excerpt from <i>Zhenzhu Ta</i>
Ershiyi Shi	二十一史	'Twenty-one Histories', a classical <i>tanci</i> work
Er-wu ju	二五句	'Two-five verse', the quatrain arrangement begin with a <i>ping</i> tone syllable
Fan Jiashu	樊家树	A character in <i>Tixiao Yinyuan</i>
Fan Linyuan	范林元	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Fang Qing	方卿	A character in <i>Zhenzhu Ta</i>
Fei Jia diao	费伽调	A <i>qupai</i> folk tune
Feng Shuang Fei	凤双飞	'Flying Phoenixes', a <i>tanci</i> work
Fengqiao story house	枫桥书场	A story house locates in the <i>fengqiao</i> tourist area
Fengqiao yepo	枫桥夜泊	'Anchored at night by Maple Bridge', a Tang poem

FengXi	凤喜	A character in <i>Tixiao Yinyuan</i>
Fensi	粉丝	Transliteration of the English word 'fans'
Gan ban	干板	The rhythmical narrative section in <i>Luan Ji Ti</i> tune
Gao Bowen	高博文	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Gao Chong	高宠	A character in <i>Yue Zhuan</i>
Gao Meiling	高美玲	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Gaoqiao	高桥	A town in Greater Shanghai
Gong che pu	工尺谱	A Chinese traditional musical notation method
Gong Huasheng	龚华声	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Gouwu	句吴	Tai Bo named southeast China 'Gouwu', and this Yangtze Delta region is henceforth abbreviated to 'Wu'
Gu Dingchen	顾鼎臣	A <i>tanci</i> work
Guan Shoufeng	关寿峰	A character in <i>Tixiao Yinyuan</i>
Guan Xiugu	关秀姑	A character in <i>Tixiao Yinyuan</i>
Guangbo Shuchang	广播书场	'Broadcast Story House', a <i>ping-tan</i> radio programme
Guangbo Zhongxin	广播中心	'Radio Broadcasting Centre' of the Suzhou Radio Broadcasting Station
Guangyu shuchang	光裕书场	'Honour and Abundance', a story house in Suzhou

Guangyu Shuhui	光裕书会	'The Guangyu Story Meeting', a <i>ping-tan</i> radio programme
Guanpu	关扑	A game of throwing hoops for prizes
Guci	鼓词	'Drumming speech', a story singing genre, featuring the accompaniment of drumming
Gui Lan	归兰	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Guihua ping-tan xiaozu	桂花评弹小组	Guihua ('Osmanthe') <i>ping-tan</i> society
Guihua Xincun Shequ Zhongxin	桂花新村社区中心	'Osmanthe' Community Centre
Guo Binqing	郭彬卿	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Guo Ji	过继	'Adoption', an excerpt from <i>Yu Qingting</i>
Guochu Bangwen	国初榜文	'The National Announcement', a governmental document promulgated in the Ming dynasty
Guojia yiji yanyuan	国家一级演员	'National class-A artist'
Guomin Dang	国民党	The Nationalist Party
Hai Qu	海曲	A <i>qupai</i> folk tune
Hangjia	行家	Connoisseur
Hangzhou	杭州	A city
He shehui cha	喝社会茶	'Drinking a social tea', the story house offers the chance to drink socially
He Yuan	鹤园	'Crane Garden', a classical private garden
He Yunfei	何云飞	A <i>pinghua</i> storyteller

He zao cha	喝早茶	Drinking morning tea
Helü	阖闾	A historical figure who lived in the Spring and Autumn Period
Helü Dacheng	阖闾大城	'Helü's Giant City', the origin of Suzhou city founded in 514 BC
Hong Lou Meng	红楼梦	'Dream of the Red Chamber', a <i>tanci</i> work
Hong Xiuquan	洪秀全	A character in <i>Hongding Shangren Hu Xueyan</i>
Hongding Shangren Hu Xueyan	红顶商人胡雪岩	'The Officer-Businessman Hu Xueyan', a <i>tanci</i> work
Hongniang	红娘	A character in 'Yingying Shao Yexiang'
Hou Lijun	侯莉君	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Hu Guoliang	胡国梁	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Hu Xueyan	胡雪岩	A character in <i>Hongding Shangren Hu Xueyan</i>
Hu Xueyan	胡雪岩	A <i>tanci</i> work
Huaian pingshu	淮安评书	A storytelling genre
Huang Yi'an	黄忆庵	A writer
Huzhou	湖州	A city
Jiang Nan	姜南	The author of <i>Rongtang Shihua</i>
Jiang Wenlan	江文兰	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Jiang Xilin	蒋锡麟	A <i>ping-tan</i> aficionado
Jiang Yuequan	蒋月泉	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller

Jiang Yunxian	蒋云仙	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Jiangdong Ershiyi Shi Tanci	江东二十一史弹词	'Tanci of Jiangdong Twenty-one Histories', a long narrative poem composed by Yang Shen
Jianghuai	江淮	An area between the Yangtze River and Huai River, crossing the current Jiangsu and Anhui provinces
Jiangshi	讲史	'Telling histories', a storytelling genre to interpret historical stories in the Yuan dynasty
Jiangsu Quyi Festival	江苏曲艺节	Jiangsu Drama Festival
Jiangsu Sheng Ping-tan Tuan	江苏省评弹团	Jiangsu Province Ping-tan Troupe
Jiangxing	嘉兴	A city
Jiang-Zhe-Hu Ping-tan Gongzuo Lingdao Xiaozu	江浙沪评弹领导小组	'Leading Group of <i>Ping-tan</i> in Jiangsu-Zhejiang-Shanghai' areas
Jiao se	角色	Role playing
Jiaotong Jingji Pinlü	交通经济频率	The Transport and Economy Channel
Jili	季历	A historical figure who lived during the Western Zhou dynasty, a younger brother of Taibo
Jin Shengbo	金声伯	A <i>pinghua</i> storyteller
Jin xiangling, yin qinjuan	金相邻, 银亲眷	'Golden neighbour, but silver relatives', meaning an intimate neighbour is better than a distant relative
Jindian Fu	金殿赋	A rhapsody typically describing the 'Golden Imperial Palace'

Jingu	金谷	A story house in Suzhou
Jiqiu	击球	Battling
Jiu xiang bupa xiangzi shen	酒香不怕巷子深	'Good wine needs no bush'
Jiuda Guangbo Diantai	久大广播电台	Suzhou Forever Grand Radio Station
Jiugong dacheng nan bei ci gongpu	九宫大成南北词宫谱	A Chinese operatic tune collection
Jiuru	九如	A story house in Suzhou
Kaiming xiyuan	开明戏院	'Kai Ming theatre'
Kongzhong Shuchang	空中书场	'Story House in the Air', a <i>ping-tan</i> radio programme
Kongzhong Shuhui	空中书会	'Meeting of Stories in the Air', a <i>ping-tan</i> radio programme
Kuai ban shu	快板书	'Fast clappertales', a storytelling genre
Kuanggong Ci	况公祠	Kuanggong Shrine
Kunqu	昆曲	An opera genre developed in Suzhou
Lao Ganbu Ju	老干部局	Bureau of Old Cadres
Lao Liu Ban	老六板	'Old Six Beats', a <i>pipa</i> work
Lao yi he	老义和	A story house
Laonian Daxue	老年大学	University of the Third Age
Laonian xin tingzhong	老年新听众	'Advanced-age new customers'
Laoshi	老师	Teacher
Laozi, Zhezi, Xiaozi	老子, 折子, 孝子	'The Old Father, the Deposit Book, and the Dutiful Son', a <i>tanci</i> story

Li Baolin	李宝麟	The founder of the Jiuda Guangbo Diantai
Li Haiquan	李海泉	A storyteller who lived during the Qing dynasty
Li Shishi	李师师	A <i>tanci</i> work
Li Yu	李玉	The author of <i>Qing Zhong Pu</i>
Li Zhongkang	李仲康	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Liang Shanbo	梁山伯	A character in <i>Liang Zhu</i>
Liang Zhu	梁祝	'The Butterfly Lovers', a <i>tanci</i> work
Lin Ziwen	林子文	A <i>tanci</i> work
Lindun Road	临顿路	A street in Suzhou
Liu Jingting	柳敬亭	A storyteller who lived during the late Ming dynasty
Liu Shaoqi	刘少奇	The former president of the People's Republic of China
Liu Zhiyuan Zhu Gong Diao	刘知远诸宫调	'Liu Zhiyuan's Zhu Gong Diao' a transcript
Liupai yanchang hui	流派演唱会	'Concert of singing schools'
Lu Junyi	卢俊义	A character in <i>Shui Hu Zhuan</i>
Lu Junyi	卢俊义	A character in <i>Wu Song</i>
Lü Mudan	绿牡丹	'Green Peony', a <i>tanci</i> work
Lu Xinsen	陆辛森	The founder of the Jiuda Guangbo Diantai
Lu Yue'e	陆月娥	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller

Luan Ji Ti	乱鸡啼	A <i>qupai</i> folk tune
Lun Junyi Jin Shan	卢俊义进山	'Lu Junyi's banishment', an excerpt from <i>Wu Song</i>
Luodian shuchang	罗店书场	Luodian story house, in Shanghai
Luohan Qian	罗汉钱	'The Luohan Coin', a <i>tanci</i> work
Lüshi	律诗	'Regulated verse', a seven-syllable Tang poetic quatrain pattern
Ma Rufei	马如飞	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller who lived during the Qing dynasty
Ma Wencai	马文才	A character in <i>Liang Zhu</i>
Mao Xinlin	毛新琳	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Meihua San Nong	梅花三弄	'Three Variations on Plum Blossom', a <i>pipa</i> work
Meizhu shuchang	梅竹书场	'Plum and Bamboo', a story house in Suzhou
Miao Jinfeng	描金凤	'Etched Gold Phoenix', a <i>tanci</i> work
Miao wang	描王	Xia Hesheng was called 'the king of <i>Miao</i> ', denoting his excellent performance of <i>Miao Jinfeng</i>
Min ge	民歌	Folk song
Minjian qiyue	民间器乐	Folk instrumental music
Mo Houguang	莫后光	A storyteller who lived during the late Ming dynasty
Mudan Yuan	牡丹园	'The Peony Garden', a <i>tanci</i> work

Nan Wu diao	南无调	A <i>qupai</i> folk tune. ‘Nan Wu’ is an abbreviation for Namō Amitābha, a fundamental invocation of the Buddha
Nanjing	南京	A city
Nanjing baihua	南京白话	A storytelling genre
Nanjing baiju	南京白局	A story singing genre
Paizi	牌子	‘Standards’, same as <i>qupai</i>
Pan Zuqiang	潘祖强	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Piaoyou/Fensi	票友/粉丝	Amateurs/ <i>Ping-tan</i> fans
Ping	平	‘Level’, one of the <i>sisheng</i> tonal movements, as well as the tonal arrangement of <i>ping-ze</i> in a quatrain
Pinghu	平湖	A city
Ping-tan mi	评弹迷	<i>Ping-tan</i> enthusiast
Ping-tan Mingjia Hui	评弹名家会	‘ <i>Ping-tan</i> Masters’ Gathering’, an episode of a <i>ping-tan</i> radio programme
Ping-tan Shalong	评弹沙龙	‘The <i>Ping-tan</i> Salon’, a <i>ping-tan</i> radio programme
Ping-tan Yishu Jie	评弹艺术节	<i>Ping-tan</i> Artistic Festival
Ping-tan Zhi You	评弹之友	‘Friends of <i>Ping-tan</i> ’, a <i>ping-tan</i> newspaper
Poxi Xianghui	婆媳相会	‘Meeting between Mother-in-Law and Daughter-in-Law’, an episode from <i>Zhenzhu Ta</i>
Qi Lianfang	祁莲芳	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller

Qi xiannü	七仙女	'Seven fairy maidens', a nickname of an amateur cohort of seven old ladies
Qian Dutiao Qiu Yu	钱笃笤求雨	'Qian Dutiao Praying for Rain', a <i>tanci</i> excerpt
Qian Yucui	钱玉翠	A character in <i>Miao Jinfeng</i>
Qiang Fu	枪赋	A rhapsody typically describing a spear
Qianglong	乾隆	An Emperor in the Qing dynasty
Qieyun	切韵	An ancient Chinese dictionary of rhymes
Qihai pinghua	启海评话	A storytelling genre
Qihai tanci	启海弹词	A story singing genre
Qin Jianguo	秦建国	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Qing Wen Buqiu	晴雯补裘	'Qing Wen Mending a Fur Coat', an excerpt from <i>Hong Lou Meng</i>
Qing Zhong Pu	清忠谱	'The Royal Pedigree of the Qing', a piece of classical literature
Qiu Haitang	秋海棠	A <i>tanci</i> work
Qiu Xinru	邱心如	The author of <i>Bi Sheng Hua</i>
Qiu Yu Tai	求雨台	'Rain Prayer Terrace'
Qiyán gelü	七言格律	'Seven-word extended verse', a piece of Chinese poetic prosody
Qu	去	'Departing', one of the <i>sisheng</i> tonal movements
Qupai	曲牌	'Labelled melody', same as <i>paizi</i>

Qupai ti	曲牌体	The composition system for employing fixed melodic templates as structural formulae
Quyi	曲艺	An umbrella term for Chinese storytelling and story singing genres
Rongtang Shihua	蓉塘诗话	'Rongtang Poem and Speech', a piece of classical literature
Ru	入	'Entering', one of the <i>sisheng</i> tonal movements
San Guo	三国	'The Three Kingdoms', a <i>pinghua</i> work
San Xiao	三笑	'Three Smiles', a <i>tanci</i> work
Shan ge	山歌	'Mountain tune', a type of folk song
Shan ge diao	山歌调	A <i>qupai</i> folk tune
Shang	上	'Rising', one of the <i>sisheng</i> tonal movements
Shang	商	The second degree of the scale of the Chinese pentatonic scale
Shang Shu	尚书	<i>Book of Documents</i> , a piece of Chinese classical literature
Shanghai Ping-tan Tuan	上海评弹团	Shanghai Ping-tan Troupe
Shaoxing	绍兴	A city
Shen Jian'an	沈俭安	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Shen Shihua	沈世华	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Sheng Xiaoyun	盛小云	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Shengdiao	声调	Tone

Shengmu	声母	Initial consonant of a Chinese syllable
Shezhan Qunru	舌战群儒	'A Verbal Battle with the Intellectuals', an excerpt from <i>San Guo</i>
Shi Xiu	时秀	A character in <i>Shui Hu Zhuan</i>
Shi Yajun	施雅君	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Shi Zhenmei	施振眉	A <i>ping-tan</i> scholar
Shiji	史记	'Records of the Grand Historian', a dynastic history record of China
Shijia	世家	'Hereditary houses', a catalogue in the <i>Shiji</i>
Shikuang luyin	实况录音	'Live recording sessions'
Shimei Tu	十美图	'Picture of Ten Beauties', a <i>tanci</i> work
Shimu	师母	Teacher's wife
Shishan Shequ Zhongxin	狮山社区中心	Shishan Community Centre
Shiwu Guan	十五贯	'Fifteen Strings of Copper Coins', a <i>tanci</i> work
Shixiong	师兄	Senior fellow apprentice
Shu Ji	书忌	'The taboos of storytelling', the rules of storytelling written by Wang Zhoushi
Shu Zhuang	梳妆	'Dressing Up', an episode from the <i>tanci</i> work <i>Liang Zhu</i>
Shua haier	耍孩儿	'Playing with kids', a <i>qupai</i> model
Shuang Zhu Feng	双珠凤	'Double-Pearl Phoenix', a <i>tanci</i> work

Shuangyue Shuhui	双月书会	'Bimonthly Story Meeting', a <i>ping-tan</i> radio programme
Shui Hu (Zhuan)	水浒(传)	'Water Margin', a <i>pinghua</i> work
Shun Dian	舜典	'Canon of Shun', an episode from <i>Shang Shu</i>
Shuo	说	Speaking
Shuo shi meiyue yinyue de chang, chang shi you yinyue de shuo	说是没有音乐的唱, 唱是没有音乐的说	'Speaking is singing without music, singing is speaking with music'
Shuo shu	说书	Storytelling
Shuo, xue, tan, chang, yan	说、噱、弹、唱、演	'Speech, inserting humour, singing, playing instruments, and performing' are at the centre of <i>ping-tan</i> training, and of the criteria with which to judge a performance
Shutan Chunqiu (Shang/Xia)	书坛春秋(上/下)	Wang Gongqi's collected works (I/II)
Sihai Lou	四海楼	A story house in Suzhou
Sima Qian	司马迁	The author of <i>Shiji</i>
Sima Wei	司马伟	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Si-san ju	四三句	'Four-three verse' indicates the quatrain arrangement begin with a <i>ze</i> tone syllable
Sisheng	四声	'Four tones', the Chinese tonal movements
Songci/Ci	宋词 / 词	A literary poetic style developed in the Song dynasty

Su Shuyang	苏叔阳	A playwright
Subei dagu	苏北大鼓	A drum-singing genre
Subei qinshu	苏北琴书	A story singing genre
Suo Nan Zhi	锁南枝	A <i>qupai</i> folk tune
Suzhong daoqing	苏州道情	A story singing genre
Suzhou Kunju Chuanxisuo	苏州昆剧传习所	Suzhou Kunju Inheriting Institution
Suzhong wenshu	苏州文书	A story singing genre
Suzhou Guangbo Dianshi Zong Tai	苏州广播电视总台	Suzhou Broadcasting System
Suzhou Guangbo Diantai	苏州广播电台	Suzhou Radio Broadcasting Station
Suzhou Ping-tan Bowuguan	苏州评弹博物馆	Suzhou Ping-tan Museum
Suzhou Ping-tan Shoucang Jianshang Xuehui	苏州评弹收藏鉴赏学 会	Suzhou Ping-tan Collection and Appreciation Institute
Suzhou Ping-tan Shoucang Xiehui	苏州评弹收藏协会	Suzhou Ping-tan Collection Institute
Suzhou Ping-tan Tuan	苏州市评弹团	Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe
Suzhou Ping-tan Yanjiu Suo	苏州评弹研究所	Suzhou Ping-tan Study Institute
Suzhou Ping-tan Yanjiushi	苏州评弹研究室	Suzhou Ping-tan Study Department
Suzhou Quyi Xiehui	苏州曲艺协会	Suzhou Quyi Committee
Suzhou Renmin Guangbo Diantai	苏州人民广播电台	'Suzhou People's Radio Station'
Suzhou Renmin Ping-tan Tuan Er Tuan	苏州人民评弹团二团	The Second Suzhou People's Ping-tan Troupe

Suzhou Renmin Youxian Guangbo Diantai	苏州人民有限广播电 台	'Suzhou People's Cable Radio Station'
Suzhou Ribao	苏州日报	'Suzhou Daily' newspaper
Suzhou shuchang	苏州书场	A story house in Suzhou
Suzhou Xinhua Guangbo Diantai	苏州新华广播电台	'Suzhou Xinhua Radio Station'
Suzhou Zhuzhi Ci	苏州竹枝词	'Suzhou Zhuzhi Poem'
Taibo	泰伯	A historical figure who lived during the Western Zhou dynasty, an elder brother of Jili
Taibo Miao	泰伯庙	Shrine of Taibo
Taiping Tianguo	太平天国	<i>Taiping</i> Rebellion
Tanci xiaoshuo	弹词小说	'Novel in <i>tanci</i> form', a literature form developed in the 18 <sup>th</sup> century
Tandong sixian pai dong mu, shashijiman shuoshu chang	弹动丝弦拍动木, 霎 时挤满说书场	'Plucking the strings slapping the wooden block, the story house is fully sparkling'
Tang ming huang	唐明皇	An emperor, a character in the <i>tanci</i> work <i>Changsheng dian</i>
Tangshi kaipian	唐诗开篇	'Tang poetry opening ballads', the lyrics are composed in the prosodic requirements of Tang poetry
Tao Zhenhuai	陶贞怀	The author of <i>Tian Yu Hua</i>
Taozhen	陶真	A rhyming storytelling genre for telling tales and legends developed in Song dynasty

Tian ge	田歌	'Field song', a type of folk song
Tian Rucheng	田汝成	The author of <i>Xihu Youlan Zhiyu</i>
Tian Yu Hua	天雨花	'Rain of Flowers', a <i>tanci</i> work
Tianbao Tu	天宝图	'Picture of Sky Treasures', a <i>tanci</i> work
Tianchan Yifu wutai	天蟾逸夫舞台	' <i>Tianchan Yifu</i> stage/theatre', a theatre in Shanghai
Tianci	填词	'Filling the lyrics in', a process in composing <i>qupai ti</i> music
Tianjin shidiao	天津时调	A folk tune genre
Tiansheng Ji	天声集	'Collection of Sky Sounds', a collection of <i>ping-tan</i> opening ballads
Tixiao Yinyuan	啼笑姻缘	'Between Tears and Smiles', a <i>tanci</i> work
Wan Ming Shuhui	万明书会	'Wan Ming's story meeting', a <i>ping-tan</i> radio programme
Wang Baiyin	王柏荫	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Wang Chiliang	王池良	A <i>pinghua</i> storyteller
Wang Jingwei	汪精卫	A politician
Wang Leying	汪乐英	A radio programme producer
Wang Ying	王鹰	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Wang Yongchang	王永昌	A character in <i>Baishe Zhuan</i>
Wang Youlin	王友林	A character in <i>Hongding Shangren Hu Xueyan</i>

Wang Zhoushi	王周士	A storyteller who lived during the Qing dynasty
Wannian Qiao lu	万年桥路	Wannian Qiao Road
Wei Hanying	魏含英	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Wen Bu	问卜	'Divination', an excerpt from <i>Yu Qingting</i>
Wen Zhengming	文征明	A <i>tanci</i> work, also a famous scholar who lived during the Ming dynasty
Wenwu Xiangqiu	文武香球	'A Sweet Ball', a <i>tanci</i> work
Wu Feng Yuan	五峰园	'Five Mountains Garden', a classical private garden
Wu Jing	吴静	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Wu Junyu	吴君玉	A <i>pinghua</i> storyteller
Wu Keming	吴克明	The founder of the Suzhou Guangbo Diantai
Wu Song	武松	A <i>pinghua</i> story
Wu Xinbo	吴新伯	A <i>pinghua</i> storyteller
Wu Zixu	伍子胥	A historical figure who lived during the Spring and Autumn Period
Wu Zongxi	吴宗锡	A <i>ping-tan</i> scholar
Wudi	吴地	The land of Wu
Wuren	吴人	The people of Wu
Wuren cheng tanci yi yue shuoshu	吴人称弹词一曰说书	'The Wu people also call <i>tanci</i> as <i>shuoshu</i> '
Wuxi	无锡	A city

Wuyuan shenchi	吴苑深处	'Deep in the garden of Wu', a story house in Suzhou
Xia Hesheng	夏荷生	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Xia Liansheng	夏莲生	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Xie Chunlian	写春联	'Writing Spring Festival Couplets', a <i>tanci</i> work
Xihu Youlan Zhiyu	西湖游览志	'A Travel Note of the West Lake', a travel note written by Tian Rucheng
Xijiang Yue	西江月	'Western River Moon', a format of <i>ci</i> poetry
Xiju	戏剧	According to Zhou (1988: 27), it includes <i>xiqu</i> , drama and opera
Xinbian Dong Diao Da Shuang Hudie	新编东调大双蝴蝶	'New Version of Big Double Butterfly in Dong Tune', a transcript
Xinbian Song Diao Quanben Baishe Zhuan	新编宋调白蛇传	'Newly Completed Version of Tale of White Snake in Song's Tune', a transcript
Xing Yanchun	邢晏春	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Xing Yanzhi	邢晏芝	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Xingqi Shuhui	星期书会	'Weekly Story Meeting', a <i>ping-tan</i> radio programme
Xinwen Zonghe Pinlü	新闻综合频率	The General News Channel
Xiqu	戏曲	Chinese opera
Xiqu Chazuo	戏曲茶座	'The Teahouse of <i>Xiqu</i> ', a <i>ping-tan</i> radio programme
Xiqu Pindao	戏曲频道	The Drama Channel

Xiu Xiangnang	绣香囊	'Embroidered Sachet', a <i>tanci</i> work
Xixiang Ji	西厢记	'Romance of the West Chamber', a <i>tanci</i> work
Xu Huilan	徐惠兰	A character in <i>Miao Jinfeng</i>
Xu Xian	许仙	A character in <i>Baishe Zhuan</i>
Xu Yunzhi	徐云志	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Xu Yunzhi	徐云志	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Xuanmiao Guan	玄妙观	'Xuanmiao Daoist Temple', in Suzhou
Xue Ba	薛霸	A character in <i>Wu Song</i>
Xue Huijun	薛惠君	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Xue Junya's	薛君亚	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Xue Xiaofei	薛小飞	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Xue Xiaoqing	薛筱卿	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Xuexing Jiulong Guan	血腥九龙冠	'The Bloody Nine-dragon Crown', a <i>tanci</i> work
Xuzhou huagu	徐州花鼓	A story singing genre
Xuzhou qinshu,	徐州琴书	A story singing genre
Xuzhou yugu	徐州渔鼓	A drum-singing genre
Yan Xueting	严雪亭	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Yang	阳	'Bright', a subdivision of <i>sisheng</i>
Yang Jingchun	杨景春	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Yang Naiwu Yu Xiao Baicai	杨乃武与小白菜	'Yang Naiwu and Xiao Baicai', a <i>tanci</i> work

Yang Naizhen	杨乃珍	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Yang Renlin	杨仁麟	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Yang Shen	杨慎	The author of <i>Jiangdong Ershiyi Shi Tanci</i>
Yang Xiaoting	杨小亭	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Yang Xingcha	杨星槎	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Yang Yuecha	杨月槎	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Yang Zhenxiong	杨振雄	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Yang Zhenyan	杨振言	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Yang Zijiang	扬子江	A <i>pinghua</i> storyteller
Yangping	阳平	A tonal movement
Yangqu	阳去	A tonal movement
Yangru	阳入	A tonal movement
Yangshang	阳上	A tonal movement
Yangzhou Qingqu	扬州清曲	' <i>Yangzhou</i> tunes', a <i>qupai ti</i> form genre
Yangzhou tanci (Yangzhou xianci)	扬州弹词 (扬州弦词)	A story singing genre
Yanzhi Xiaojie Xia Ping-tan	晏芝小姐下评弹	'Lady Yanzhi Steps Down [from] the Stage of <i>Ping-tan</i> ', a <i>ping-tan</i> radio programme
Yao Yinmei	姚荫梅	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Yayun Shuhui	雅韵书会	'Elegant Aroma of Story Collection', a <i>ping-tan</i> radio programme

Yesheng Ji	夜声集	'Collection of Evening Sound', a collection of <i>ping-tan</i> opening ballads
Yin	阴	'Dark', a subdivision of <i>sisheng</i>
Yinpiao	银票	An ancient form of Chinese cheque
Yinping	阴平	A tonal movement
Yinqu	阴去	A tonal movement
Yinru	阴入	A tonal movement
Yinshang	阴上	A tonal movement
Yisanwu bulun, ersiliu fenming	一三五不论，二四六分明	'Disregard the first, third and fifth syllables, and strictly follow the second, fourth and sixth syllables', a composition rule of seven syllable poetry
Yixing pinghua	宜兴评话	A storytelling genre
You Huiqiu	尤惠秋	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Yu Fu	雨赋	'Rain rhapsody'
Yu ge	渔歌	'Fishing song', a type of folk song
Yu Hongxian	余红仙	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Yu Hongxian	余红仙	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Yu Naishun	郁乃顺	A <i>ping-tan</i> aficionado
Yu Qingting	玉蜻蜓	'The Jade Dragonfly', a <i>tanci</i> work
Yu Xiaoxia	俞筱霞	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Yu Xiaoyun	俞筱云	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller

Yu Xiushan	俞秀山	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller who lived during the Qing dynasty
Yuan He	袁和	A character in <i>Hongding Shangren Hu Xueyan</i>
Yuan Xiaoliang	袁小良	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Yue Fei	岳飞	A character in <i>Yue Zhuan</i>
Yue Zhuan	岳传	'Yue's Legend', a <i>pinghua</i> work
Yue'er Wanwan Zhao Jiuzhou	月儿弯弯照九州	'Quarter Moon Shining Upon the Earth', a folk song
Yugu	渔鼓	A story singing genre with the accompaniment of a bamboo-made drum
Yugu zhui	渔鼓坠	A drum-singing genre
Yunmu	韵母	Simple or compound vowel of a Chinese syllable
Yuzhi Daming Lü	御制大明律	'The Royal-making Law Book of Ming', the promulgated law book in the Ming dynasty
Zai Sheng Yuan	再生缘	'Love Reincarnate', a <i>tanci</i> work
Ze	仄	'Oblique', the tonal arrangement in a quatrain
Zhai	摘	Artificial harmonic, a technique employed on <i>pipa</i>
Zhanbo Ji	展播季	'Seasonal Exhibition', a <i>ping-tan</i> radio programme
Zhang Fu	张符	The author of <i>Suzhou Zhuzhi Ci</i>

Zhang Guoliang	张国良	<i>A pinghua</i> storyteller
Zhang Hongsheng	张宏声	<i>A pinghua</i> storyteller
Zhang Jianguo	张鉴国	<i>A tanci</i> storyteller
Zhang Jianting	张鉴庭	<i>A tanci</i> storyteller
Zhang Lihua	张丽华	<i>A tanci</i> storyteller
Zhang Yimou	张毅谋	<i>A tanci</i> storyteller
Zhang Yunting	张云亭	<i>A tanci</i> storyteller
Zhao Kaisheng	赵开生	<i>A tanci</i> storyteller
Zheng Lairen	郑来人	<i>Ping-tan</i> aficionado Wang Gongqi's pen name
Zhengxie ping-tan xiaozu	政协评弹小组	'CPPCC <i>ping-tan</i> club', an amateur <i>ping-tan</i> club of the local Chinese People's Political Consultative Committee
Zhenzhu Ta	珍珠塔	<i>A tanci</i> work
Zhiyin	知音	'Confidant', an amateur <i>ping-tan</i> club
Zhong Yueqiao	钟月樵	<i>A tanci</i> storyteller
Zhongguo Ping-tan Wang	中国评弹网	'China Ping-tan Website'
Zhongzhou yun	中州韵	<i>Zhongzhou</i> rhyme
Zhou Enlai	周恩来	The first Premier of the People's Republic of China
Zhou Jianping	周剑萍	<i>A tanci</i> storyteller
Zhou Jianying	周剑英	<i>A tanci</i> storyteller
Zhou Liang	周良	<i>A ping-tan</i> scholar

Zhou Minghua	周明华	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Zhou Yunrui	周云瑞	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Zhou Zhenhua	周振华	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Zhu Huizhen	朱慧珍	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Zhu Jiasheng	朱介生	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Zhu Liangxin	朱良欣	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Zhu Xueqin	朱雪琴	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Zhu Xueyin	朱雪吟	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Zhu Yaosheng	朱耀生	A <i>tanci</i> storyteller
Zhu Yingtai	祝英台	A character in <i>Liang Zhu</i>
Zhu Yuanzhang	朱元璋	The first emperor of the Ming dynasty
Zhu Zhishan	祝枝山	A character in <i>San Xiao</i>
Zhu Zhishan Shuo Dahua	祝枝山说大话	'Zhu Zhishan's Boast', an excerpt in <i>San Xiao</i>
Zhuan lu	专录	'Special recording sessions'
Zhuge Liang/ Kongming	诸葛亮 / 孔明	A character in <i>San Guo</i>
Zi duo qiang shao	字多腔少	'More words, less tune', a feature of <i>Ma diao</i>
Zuo Zongtang	左宗棠	A character in <i>Hongding Shangren Hu Xueyan</i>

### Appendix 3. List of Interviewees

Name	Description	Interview Place	Date
毕康年 Bi Kangnian	Chairman of the Suzhou Quyi Committee, retired in 2015	Suzhou Quyi Committee	26.9.2012
陈有才 Chen Youcai	<i>Ping-tan</i> habitu�, retired	<i>Guangyu</i> story house	25.9.2012
戴小莉 Dai Xiaoli	<i>Tanci</i> storyteller	<i>Wuyuan shenchu</i> story house	5.2.2012
		<i>Wuyuan shenchu</i> story house	8.2.2012
		<i>Wuyuan shenchu</i> story house	9.2.2012
高博文 Gao Bowen	Principal of the Shanghai Ping-tan Troupe, <i>tanci</i> storyteller	<i>Wuyuan shenchu</i> story house	7.9.2015
高永琪 Gao Yongqi	The lecturer of Linguistic studies at Suzhou University	Suzhou University	27.3.2013
顾笃簧 Gu Duhuang	A renowned local scholar, his speciality is in Kunqu opera studies, retired	Suzhou Kunju Inheriting Institution	17.9.2013
顾闻钟 Gu Wenzhong	Hospital doctor, lecturer in the Medical school at Suzhou University	<i>Meizhu</i> story house	9.9.2013
		A teahouse	14.9.2013
华觉平 Hua Jueping	Producer of <i>ping-tan</i> radio programmes, retired	A teahouse/caf� next to the Suzhou Radio Broadcasting Station	27.8.2013
惠中秋 Hui Zhongqiu	<i>Tanci</i> storyteller, died in July 2015 during a performance at <i>Shuofang</i> story house in Wuxi.	<i>Wuyuan shenchu</i> story house	24.1.2012
		<i>Wuyuan shenchu</i> story house	25.1.2012
		<i>Wuyuan shenchu</i> story house	5.2.2012
		<i>Wuyuan shenchu</i> story house	6.2.2012
		<i>Wuyuan shenchu</i> story house	8.2.2012
		<i>Wuyuan shenchu</i> story house	9.2.2012
		<i>Guangyu</i> story house	26.9.2012
		<i>Guangyu</i> story house	30.9.2012
金丽生 Jin Lisheng	Vice-principal of the Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe, a <i>tanci</i> storyteller	Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe	25.9.2012
		Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe	26.9.2012
		Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe	5.10.2012
林建方 Lin Jianfang	Vice-principal of the Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe, manager of the <i>Guangyu</i> story house	Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe	21.9.2012
Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe		25.9.2012	
		Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe	5.9.2015

刘红 Liu Hong	Professor at Shanghai Conservatory of Music	Shanghai Conservatory of Music	10.9.2013
陆凯 Lu Kai	The former Director of the Culture and Broadcasting Bureau	<i>Wuyuan shenchu</i> story house	23.1.2012
陆利红 Lu Lihong	Head of the CPPCC <i>ping-tan</i> society, retired	<i>He Yuan</i> garden	26.9.2012
		Interviewee's home	5.10.2012
陆志刚 Lu Zhigang	<i>Ping-tan</i> enthusiast, retired	<i>Wuyuan shenchu</i> story house	9.2.2012
		Interviewee's home	2.10.2012
马志伟 Ma Zhiwei	<i>Tanci</i> storyteller	<i>Guangyu</i> story house	30.8.2013
缪育平 Miao Yuping	<i>Ping-tan</i> amateur	<i>Wu Feng Yuan</i> Garden	30.9.2012
潘冽 Pan Lie	Senior office worker	<i>Meizhu</i> story house	1.9.2013
		Text conversation conducted by phone	24.9.2014
潘益麟 Pan Yilin	President of the Suzhou Ping-tan School, retired in 2015	Suzhou Ping-tan School	4.9.2013
		Suzhou Ping-tan School	27.9.2013
任康龄 Ren Kangling	Chairman of Suzhou Ping-tan Shoucang Jianshang Xuehui; main editor of the 'China Ping-tan Website', retired	Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe	16.9.2013
盛小云 Sheng Xiaoyun	Vice-president of the Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe, <i>tanci</i> storyteller	Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe	26.9.2012
宋翼华 Song Yihua	Member of staff at the <i>Shishan</i> Community Centre	<i>Shishan</i> Community Centre	13.9.2013
孙惕 Sun Ti	President of the Suzhou Ping-tan Troupe, President of the Suzhou Ping-tan School, researcher at the Suzhou Ping-tan Study Institute, <i>tanci</i> storyteller	Suzhou Ping-tan School	26.3.2013
孙瑜 Sun Yu	<i>Tanci</i> storyteller	<i>Shishan</i> Community Centre	13.9.2013
		Text conversation conducted by phone	16.5.2014
陶谋炯 Tao Moujiiong	Lecturer in the Suzhou Ping-tan School	Suzhou Ping-tan School	27.9.2013

王公企 Wang Gongqi	Journalist, privately publishes a <i>ping-tan</i> newspaper <i>Ping-tan Zhi You</i>	<i>Wuyuan shenchu</i> story house	24.1.2012
汪平 Wang Ping	Professor of Linguistics at Suzhou University	Interviewee's home	27.3.2013
王啸 Wang Xiao	<i>Ping-tan</i> follower	<i>Meizhu</i> story house	1.9.2013
		Interviewee's home	6.9.2013
汪雪娟 Wang Xuejuan	<i>Ping-tan</i> amateur, organiser of the <i>Guihua ping-tan</i> society, retired	'Osmanthe' Community Centre	15.9.2013
徐惠新 Xu Huixin	<i>Tanci</i> storyteller	<i>Meizhu</i> story house	9.9.2013
		<i>Meizhu</i> story house	14.9.2013
徐青 Xu Qing	Member of staff at the Suzhou Ping-tan Museum	Suzhou Ping-tan Museum	22.1.2012
		Text conversation conducted by phone	18.5.2014
		Text conversation conducted by phone	26.8.2014
		Text conversation conducted by phone	27.8.2014
		Text conversation conducted by phone	6.9.2015
徐文龙 Xu Wenlong	<i>Tanci</i> storyteller	<i>Shishan</i> Community Centre	13.9.2013
许毅 Xu Yi	Professor of Speech Sciences, Department of Speech, Hearing and Phonetic Sciences, University College London	Email conversation	8.12.2014
		Email conversation	11.12.2014
		Online telephone conversation	18.12.2014
杨同威 Yang Tongwei	Former Director of the Suzhou Broadcasting System, retired	Interviewee's home	30.9.2012
殷德泉 Yin Dequan	Organiser of Suzhou Ping-tan Shoucang Jianshang Xuehui; producer of <i>ping-tan</i> television programmes, retired in 2015	Suzhou Radio Broadcasting Station	21.8.2013
		Suzhou Radio Broadcasting Station	6.9.2013
虞昌黎 Yu Changli	Engineer and <i>ping-tan</i> follower living in Switzerland	<i>Wuyuan shenchu</i> story house	7.9.2015
余正心 Yu Zhengxin	Senior member of the Suzhou Kunju Inheriting Institution, retired	Suzhou Kunju Inheriting Institution	17.9.2013

张建珍 Zhang Jianzhen	<i>Tanci</i> storyteller	<i>Guangyu</i> story house	30.8.2013
张玉红 Zhang Yuhong	Producer of <i>ping-tan</i> radio programmes	Suzhou Radio Broadcasting Station	26.8.2013
		Suzhou Radio Broadcasting Station	6.9.2013
郑得利 Zheng Deli	Businessman living in Switzerland, <i>ping-tan</i> follower	<i>Guangyu</i> story house	1.9.2013
周红 Zhou Hong	<i>Tanci</i> storyteller	<i>Meizhu</i> story house	1.9.2013
		<i>Meizhu</i> story house	9.9.2013
		<i>Meizhu</i> story house	14.9.2013
		<i>Meizhu</i> story house	15.9.2013

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