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MEMORIES AND PLACES IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY SUZHOU TANJI

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During China's Ming-Qing era, professional storytelling genres developed in economically and culturally advanced regions, alongside a mature book culture and major developments of theater genres. Since the eighteenth century, two Suzhou-dialect based storytelling genres emerged in the city of Suzhou and its neighboring area: tanci 彈詞 (plucking rhyme, chantefable) and pinghua 評話 (straight storytelling). Unlike pinghua's connection to time, i.e., the history of different dynasties, the most popular tanci stories excel in presenting space: characters from many different tanci stories traverse a narrative universe that is based on spatial-temporal imagination of a constructed Jiangnan during the "Ming" dynasty, often with Suzhou at its center. Therefore, tanci differs from many other performative genres, and functions as a highly localized practice of collective memory: as an oral performative art, Suzhou tanci negotiates with both official history and plebian lore and legends; as a daily communal activity, it invites local audiences to practice imaginative reconstruction of Suzhou's past by embracing plots and characters in specific places that have specific spatial structures. Therefore, the charm of tanci lies not in the development of new stories, but in resituating old local stories in the everchanging modern city to maintain a stable group identity for the locals.

This study focuses on six tanci stories and their manifestations around the city of Suzhou. It integrates narratology, reception history, and cultural studies to explore the narrative, the performative, and the lived spaces of and around tanci, exploring the unique role of tanci in the shaping of local collective memory and identity.

KEYWORDS: Suzhou, Suzhou *tanci*, place, local identity, collective memory

During China's Ming-Qing era, professional storytelling genres flourished in various linguistic zones, alongside a mature book culture and major developments in the theater genres. These storytelling genres developed alongside and in relation to written literature and elite culture, making them less interesting to anthropologists and historians looking for oral traditions separate from written literature or authentic voices of the illiterate.¹ On the other hand, these genres cater to the taste of a much wider audience than written books can, and in their generations of development, deserve to be studied not as orally transmitted written stories but as evolving oral, performing arts with distinctive local features and local impacts. Suzhou-dialect *tanci* 彈詞² (plucking rhyme, chantefable, lute ballad) is one of the most popular regional performance genres within this group.³

¹ Relationships between an oral story and a manuscript or printed text of the same title can vary greatly. Vibeke Børdahl argues that most of the *huaben* literature have been circulated as reading materials, while present-day oral storytelling likely found its source from earlier works of storytelling, rather than from “prompt books”. See Børdahl, *Oral Tradition*, p. 224. Margaret B. Wan's study on *guci* 鼓詞 or drum ballads shows that some *guci* texts are likely to be orally transmitted and then recreated independently on pages, while others indicate direct copying between written/printed texts. See Wan, *Regional Literature*, pp. 28-31.

² The term *tanci* is used to refer to a variety of both performative and written genres. As a performative genre in the Jiangnan region, there is another sister-form Yangzhou-dialect *tanci*, which shares some story repertoire and bears performative commonalities with Suzhou-dialect *tanci*. Though with many similarities and mutual influences, *tanci* as oral performative art is different from *tanci xiaoshuo* 彈詞小說 as a written literary genre favored by women writers and readers of the Ming-Qing era. Stories in the former may or may not have a written text and are mainly passed down from masters to their disciples in their training as storytellers in Suzhou dialect, while the latter is a written prosimetric genre in Mandarin published for a reading public. Mark Bender also mentions the *Wuyin tanci* 吳音彈詞 (Wu dialect *tanci*) written tradition from which many Suzhou *tanci* stories derived. This tradition has a closer relationship with Suzhou *tanci* as an oral performing art. See Mark Bender, *Plum and Bamboo*, p. 4.

³ According to Tang Lixing's 唐力行 estimation, during both *pinghua* and *tanci*'s peak era (1926-1966), there were over a thousand story-houses dedicated to their performance in the Jiangnan region. Over two thousand people were involved in the industry, and the number of people in the audience was only second to that of the movies. See Tang's preface to He Qiliang, *Geti yu jiti zhijian*, p. 6.

As a mature genre of professional storytelling, Suzhou-dialect *tanci* has been studied from several perspectives including its characteristics as a performing art, the origins and plot development of the stories, and the life of the performers and how they renovated and censored *tanci* in the shifting political climate of the twentieth century.⁴ Despite the fact that *tanci* is performed only in Suzhou dialect, catering to a subset of the Wu-dialect speakers, less effort has been made to explore the construction of space and places in both the *tanci* narrative and performance realms, a topic that is essential to our understanding of *tanci* as a distinctive genre of narrative art. Although almost all literary and cultural practices can be said to involve some local identity, what does this oral performative genre contribute uniquely to the audience's understanding of their city, their culture, and as a result, their own selves?

Tanci is not the only popular genre of local oral performing arts in the Suzhou area, but it has the strongest tie to the local identity of both the performers and the audience. Comparisons with other performing genres featuring Suzhou dialect show this to be so. Take, for example, the southern *chuanqi* 傳奇 plays, later known as *Kunqu* 昆曲 or Kun opera. Although these plays usually feature *Subai* 蘇白 or spoken lines in Suzhou dialect, as a theatrical genre, romantic *chuanqi* drama was mostly embraced by the cultural elites. Since the late Ming era, Kun opera has become an important part of the male elite culture across the country, and the Suzhou dialect elements reflect the social and theatrical conventions and story settings rather than the opera's imagined audience.⁵ Another genre closer to *tanci*, with overlapping performers and audiences, is Suzhou-dialect *pinghua* 評話 (straight storytelling). Both *pinghua* and *tanci* feature lengthy

⁴ For a study of *tanci* as literary and performative art, see Bender, *Plum and Bamboo*, and Zhou Liang, *Suzhou pingtan yishu lun*. For a study of *tanci* and its performers in early PRC era, see He, *Gilded Voices*.

⁵ Lower class characters' lines and vulgar jokes are more likely to be in Suzhou dialect (for example, the grave digger and Sister Stone in *Peony Pavilion*), while upper-class characters speak elegant, poetic language close to Classical Chinese (for example, the protagonists in *Peony Pavilion*).

and complicated stories told by professionals in daily installments for weeks to months, but they have distinctive features that separate them in origin, theme, and performance.⁶ In terms of its contents, *pinghua* portrays larger-than-life historic or fantastic heroes of any region, while *tanci* often features close-to-life characters in romantic or chivalrous encounters, often with urban lives of the Jiangnan area as the backdrop. Unlike *pinghua*'s connection to time in the form of dynastic historical tales, the most popular *tanci* stories excel in presenting space: characters from different *tanci* stories traverse a narrative universe that is based on spatial-temporal imaginations of a constructed Jiangnan during the fantasized "Ming" dynasty, with Suzhou at its center. As a result, *tanci* exceeds *pinghua* in its strong local identity, and thus is the sole focus of this paper.

My investigation of *tanci*'s construction of space and places in/of Suzhou is inspired by cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan's contention that places are constituted through language. What is "place," and how does it differ from "space"? According to Lawrence Buell's summary of Tuan and other scholars' discussions, "[p]lace entails spatial location ... But space ... connotes geometrical or topographical abstraction." "Places are 'centers of felt value', ... areas in which settings for the constitution of social relations are located and with which people can identify." "Place is associatively thick, space thin..."⁷ As centers of felt value, places in *tanci* stories have real-world associations embraced by *tanci* audiences and wider Suzhou locals. They are not seen as simply containers of plots and characters, but sites of lore and legends central to the

⁶ *Pinghua* is believed to have developed from *jiangshi* 講史 (the telling of history), while *tanci* can be traced back to a variety of ballad-singing genres since the Yuan-Ming era. *Pinghua* is a spoken genre, while *tanci* also includes singing accompanied by music instrument(s) as an important part of the performance. The dominant performing format of *pinghua* remains a single person. *Tanci* in the twentieth century gradually adopted a two-performer model. For a detailed description of the *tanci* genre and performance conventions, see Bender, *Plum and Bamboo*, p. 3. For more on *pinghua* and *tanci*'s similarities and differences, see *ibid.*, pp. 5-6, and Zhou Liang, *Suzhou pinghua tanci shi*, chaps. 1, 2.

⁷ Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, p. 63. The above quotation is based on Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place*, p. 4, and John Agnew, "Representing Space," p. 263.

construction of the local identity, through the medium of Suzhou dialect and the performance genre of *tanci*.

How does language create places that are “associatively thick”? First of all, language “can direct attention, organize insignificant entities into significant composite wholes, and in so doing, make things formerly overlooked—and hence invisible and nonexistent—visible and real.”⁸ Tuan emphasizes how objects and places acquire “emotion and personality” through the metaphorical power of language, and how “[t]he meaning of a real place is constructed... through accretional layers of gossip and song, oral history, written history, essays and poems.”⁹ Tuan’s attention to oral genres corresponds well with scholars of oral traditions, especially John Miles Foley’s synthesis and development of Milman Parry, Albert Lord, and Richard Bauman’s ground-breaking studies on oral-formulaic theory and performance-centered theory. Borrowing Foley’s words, we can appreciate *tanci* “as a situated, experienced event in traditional context,”¹⁰ as opposed to discussing it exclusively as texts or as performances. When storylines meet audiences and co-create “work”, it is also a process of constructing local places and local histories.¹¹

For the purpose and scope of this study, I restrict my exploration to six twentieth-century Suzhou-based classic *tanci* stories: *Sanxiao: Longting shu* 三笑: 龍亭書 (Three smiles: the Longting Story); *Sanxiao: Hangzhou shu* 三笑: 杭州書 (Three Smiles: the Hangzhou Story);

⁸ Yi-Fu Tuan, “Language and the Making of Place,” p. 685.

⁹ Ibid, p. 692.

¹⁰ John M. Foley, *Singer of Tales*, p. xiv.

¹¹ The edited volume *Yangzhou: A place in Literature* includes both oral and written literature related to Yangzhou. Introduction of this volume points out the interactive relationship between literature and place, and the many forms such interactions take place. Vibeke Børdahl’s introduction and translation of Yangzhou *pinghua* piece “Wu Song Fights the Tiger” also discusses ways Wu Song’s story were localized in this local oral tradition. See Altenburger, Wan, and Børdahl ed., *Yangzhou: A place in Literature*, pp. 6-8, 359-63.

Wen Zhengming 文徵明 (Wen Zhengming); *Miaojin feng* 描金鳳 (Etched Gold Phoenix); *Baishe zhuan* 白蛇傳 (Legend of the White Snake); and *Yu qingting* 玉蜻蜓 (Jade Dragonfly).¹²

The localization of *tanci* stories

When we look at the textual history of some *tanci* stories, we realize that the process of adapting a story for *tanci* is often also a process of localizing it. This localization materializes in two ways: 1, within the narrative, through emphasis on Suzhou as story's location setting, and additions of Suzhou elements as a part of the plot or of the cultural reference; 2, in the larger context of *tanci* culture, through the development of rumors and urban legends that associate *tanci* stories with local clans and elite members of the society.

Compared to versions in other forms of narrative or performance, stories adapted for *tanci* often “relocate” the plot to Suzhou or emphasize the part of the story that is related to Suzhou. In these stories, places within Suzhou are described in detail, while settings outside the city tend to be mentioned in vague, general terms.¹³ Take the example of the famous “White Snake” story tradition. In its many textual and theatrical iterations, the famous tale usually starts in Hangzhou, climaxes in Zhenjiang, before concluding back in Hangzhou, but the *tanci* versions greatly expand the part about the protagonists' life in Suzhou between the Hangzhou and the Zhenjiang parts. For example, in Cao Xiaojun 曹嘯君 and Gao Xuefang's 高雪芳 20-episode recording, the Suzhou part occupies episodes 10-20. While this performance period ends in the

¹² All but one of the sources are recorded audios. The exception is Yu Xiaoyun's *White Snake* transcription. I treat it as a *tanci* transcription since it bears minimal editing for the written medium, and largely preserves the performative convention and formula. *Wen Zhengming* is also known as *Huan kongxiang* 換空箱 (Exchange of Empty boxes); *Etched Gold Phoenix* is also referred to as *Qian Duzhao yu Wang Xuan* 錢篤招與汪宣 (Qian the Diviner and Wang Xuan).

¹³ Exceptions: some stories developed in Shanghai for Shanghai audiences generally have more details of the city of Shanghai. *Tanci* adapted from novels, such as *Tixiao yinyuan* 啼笑因緣 (Fate in tears and laughter), also keep the original novel's locations such as the *Tianqiao* 天橋 (sky bridge) area of Beijing.

middle of the story, Cao briefly mentions later Suzhou episodes such as “the Temple of the Immortals”, “the Dragon-boat Festival”, “Stealing the Immortal Herb” etc., indicating that the Suzhou section is much longer than the first nine episodes of the Hangzhou part.

The expansion of the Suzhou section to the story does not change its overall structure (the romantic encounter—the revealing of identity—the separation), but it re-characterizes the protagonists as newcomers who eventually become Suzhou locals, giving the protagonists emotional depth and affinity with the *tanci* audience. While in Suzhou, the protagonists’ residences, daily routes, encounters, and interactions are all embellished with meticulous geographic and cultural details of the city. Below is the male protagonist Xu Xian’s first impression of Suzhou city:

Xu Xian: Gusu¹⁴ is such a prosperous place!
(Sings:)
Strolling alone I enter Jinchang;¹⁵
I raise my head and look to my left and right.
Indeed, a flourishing and thriving district of fame:
From four directions merchants come here to trade.
Allowing five horses shoulder to shoulder the street is wide;
Lu Gaojian’s sauced pork looks deliciously red.¹⁶
Seven colors of brocade and satin in silk stores displayed;
“Eight-immortal” the ginseng store is trade-marked.¹⁷
A breeze brings the fragrance of wine to my nose;¹⁸

¹⁴ Gusu 姑蘇 is the old name of Suzhou. It appears in Han-era or earlier texts such as *Xunzi* 荀子, *Shuoyuan* 說苑, *Mozi* 墨子.

¹⁵ Jinchang refers to the Chang city gate. Since the Chang gate area historically is a very busy commercial district, the name Jinchang is often used as an alternative name for Suzhou.

¹⁶ Lu Gaojian 陸稿薦 is a famous deli in Suzhou that dates to the Qing dynasty. Soy sauce braised pork belly is its signature dish. In this passage, seven lines in a row start with numbers or their homophones; to keep this up the song uses “lu” 陸 here as a homophone of “liu” 六 (six) in Suzhou dialect. The same goes for *jiu* 酒 (alcohol, also homophone of “nine”) below.

¹⁷ Apparently, ginseng prices went up thousands of times between the Kangxi and Qianlong reigns, making ginseng stores both the perpetrator and victim of a variety of fraud. See Huang Shucan’s 黃叔燦 *Shenpu* 參譜 for ginseng inflation and fraud, and Wu Zhichang’s 吳熾昌 *Kechuang xianhua* 客窗閑話 for a story depicting a Suzhou ginseng store being the victim of fraud. Huang Shucan’s 黃叔燦 *Shenpu* 參譜 is included in *juan* 12 of Zhang Haipeng, *Jieyue shanfang huichao* 77-84, p. 1163. Wu Zhichang, *Kechuang xianhua*, pp. 19a-22a.

¹⁸ “Wine” (*jiu*) here is a homophone of “nine” (*jiu*) in singing, although they pronounce differently in telling (which uses Suzhou dialect).

“Ten rounds of drums and gongs” making their “*dong dong*” sound.¹⁹

A shoe and hat store next to the silversmith;
Across from the antique store is the bank.
A sauce and pickle shop faces the used clothing store;
Around the corner from the teahouse is the pawn shop.
Upstairs of the teahouse is a storytelling hall;
Downstairs also sells pan-seared buns and “Brown crab-shells.”
Approaching Baitong Bridge,
Turning to Wuqu Lane,
I see flutes and pipes of the musical instrument store;
Right next to it is the religious and theatrical costume store.
Beside the road is an octagonal well;
Women gather by the well to wash clothes.²⁰
People coming and going, rubbing shoulders;
Without realizing it I have arrived at the Oriole Lane,
And Yiyuan pharmacy is right ahead.

許仙: 姑蘇地方真是繁華呀!

(唱)

獨自行來進金閶,
舉目抬頭兩邊望。
果然是繁華昌盛名勝地,
四方遠客來經商;
五馬並行街寬闊,
陸稿薦醬肉紅堂堂;
七色綾羅絲綢店,
八仙商標人參行;
酒香撲鼻迎風來,
十番鑼鼓咚咚響;
鞋帽店隔壁銀匠店,
古董店對門是錢莊;
醬坊對面舊衣鋪,
茶葉店轉角是典當;
茶館樓上是書場,
樓下還賣生煎饅頭“蟹殼黃”。
走到百通橋,
轉彎吳趨坊,
笙簫管笛樂器店,
旁邊就是神袍戲衣莊;
路畔有口八角井,

¹⁹ *Shifan luogu* 十番鑼鼓, also named as “*shiyang jin*” 十樣錦, is a type of music troupe consisting mainly of percussionists. The genre of music these bands performed was popular in Suzhou area during the Ming-Qing era. See Shen Deqian, *Wanli yehuo bian*, *juan* 25, p. 32b.

²⁰ This was still a common scene in the late 80s and early 90s when I was growing up.

婦女們在井邊洗衣裳;
人來人往擦肩過,
不覺已到黃鸝坊。
邊走邊望來得快,
前面已是益元堂。²¹

The busy business district in and out of Changmen, one of Suzhou's city gates, was one of the popular themes in woodblock color prints of the 18th century. The same theme was depicted in Xu Yang's 徐揚 1759 painting *Gusu fanhua tu* 姑蘇繁華圖 (Prosperous Suzhou).²² Through Xu Xian's fresh eyes, the storyteller guides his audience through the famous Chang Gate district, enumerating its shops, goods, and people.²³ If it is pompous for locals to brag about the prosperity of Suzhou, it is entirely appropriate to borrow the fictional voice of a perceptive and interested outsider to celebrate both the storyteller and the audience's local identity.²⁴ Note that the street names and the views are largely historical, while the character Xu Xian and his destination Yiyuan pharmacy are fictional. The storyteller reveals his encyclopedic knowledge of the Chang gate district and its shops, establishing a good rapport with the *lao tingke* 老聽客 or "the regulars"²⁵ while providing new information to newer audience members.

In addition to localizing space in settings, *tanci* localizes stories through superfluous details and comments that reference Suzhou local sites, practices, and material culture. The

²¹ Yu Xiaoyun, *Baishe zhuan—Suzhou tanci*, p. 41.

²² For an example of woodblock color prints depicting Changmen, see Craig Clunas, *Art in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 195, fig. 109. The connection with *Prosperous Suzhou* was pointed out to me by Robert E. Hegel. This painting is itself an homage to the famous *Qingming shanghe tu* 清明上河圖 (Along the river during the Qingming festival) of the capital city of the Northern Song dynasty—celebrating Suzhou as the succeeding cultural capital since the Southern Song.

²³ Describing a city through the perspective of a new-comer's tour is also seen in earlier ballad stories (*cihua* 詞話). See Wilt Idema, "The Image of Kaifeng," pp. 149-64, esp. part one.

²⁴ Foley points out that both the performer and the audience are immersed in the traditional context that is their experiential heritage. See Foley, *Singer of Tales*, p. 28. Both the localized details and the style of lyric exposé are common in other regional genres in China, such as *guci* or drum ballads of the northern part of China. See a *guci* example of a stroll in Beijing in Wan, *Regional Literature*, pp. 39-40.

²⁵ This name usually refers to regular *tanci* audiences who are familiar with both the stories and different schools and generations of performers. *Tanci* performers often talk about how these regulars keep them on their toes on stage. They bear some similarity to the *haoshi zhe* 好事者 or "aficionados" in the Ming-Qing theater tradition, and the *piaoyou* 票友 (fans) group in traditional theater goers of modern time.

details of local life depicted in the example above already demonstrate this point. In addition, *Legend of the White Snake* also marks the passing of time with local festivals such as the annual Immortals Temple Fair on the 14th of the 4th lunar month, and the Dragon Boat Festival (5th of the 5th month). The storyteller provides details about the origin of the temple fair, the location (which since “then” was moved twice to its current location in real life), and special local goods sold at the fair.²⁶ As a newcomer, Xu Xian often needs directions to get around in Suzhou, which means the storytellers provide so many details about the routes he takes that the audience can trace his every movement within the city. *Legend of the White Snake* is a popular tale in many written and oral genres, but only in *tanci* versions can the audience experience alongside the protagonists their life in the good old days of Suzhou, and thus become attached to both the story and the city’s long history and past glory.

Outside the narrative, certain stories are localized through rumors and urban legends associated with their “origins.” The most famous urban legend concerns *Jade Dragonfly* and the Shen family. Since the nineteenth century, it has been widely believed that *Jade Dragonfly* tells the origin story of the famous late-Ming grand secretary Shen Shixing 申時行 (1535-1614), who was one of the most prominent scholar-officials Suzhou proudly produced. The *tanci* tale makes up Shen’s origin as the love child of a wealthy merchant and a beautiful nun. The baby is abandoned by accident and adopted by different couples until he grows up and uncovers his real identity through a jade dragonfly pendant (hence the title). Some scholars speculate that this story was written by Shen’s political enemies or disgruntled servants to ruin his and his family’s reputation.²⁷ During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Suzhou Shen clan filed

²⁶ For Xu Xian’s visit to the Immortal’s Temple, see Jin Yue’an’s 金月庵 and Jin Fengjuan’s 金鳳娟 *Legend of the White Snake*, episodes 1-3. For the Dragon Boat Festival in Suzhou, see *ibid*, episode 6.

²⁷ For example, Deng Zhicheng’s 鄧之誠 *Gudong suoji quanbian* 骨董瑣記全編 claims that “During the Wangli reign, Sheng Shixing of Wu County and Wang Xijue of Taicang slander each other out of personal hatred.

complaints and lawsuits to prohibit the telling of this *tanci*, with some success—during the 1920s-30s, the local government banned the performance of this piece within Suzhou city, ordered those performing outside of Suzhou to change the surname of the protagonist from Shen to Jin, and even arrested some storytellers who broke the ban.²⁸

In Suzhou dialect, *shuoshu* 說書 (storytelling) is synonymous with “fabrication” or “the telling of tall tales”, clearly discrediting *tanci* as a source of historic facts. But the conflicts between storytellers and the local gentry family demonstrate the impact of storytelling on local politics and society—apparently it provides a continuous channel for the popular voice to challenge the wealthy and the powerful by being entertained with stories of their ancestors’ scandalous origins. Since *tanci* performances cater to a much wider population than the formally educated class, the negative impact on one’s reputation can be quite thorny to fix. Compared to the elitist nature of written history, the continuation of local tales in *tanci* engages the wider local audience with the city and its legends. In the case of the *Jade Dragonfly* controversy, although the powerful Shen family was able to temporarily ban its performance, the story eventually survived the family, and is still one of the most popular *tanci* pieces in Suzhou. As will be discussed below, in the late twentieth century the city established a statue to mark the “fictional historical site” of the protagonist’s house.

Constructing Space and Place in *Tanci* Narratives

Wang produced *Jade Dragonfly* to slander Shen, and Shen made up *The Story of the Red Pear Blossom* in revenge. Both were the works of their cronies, and passed down till today. (萬曆間, 吳縣申時行、太倉王錫爵兩家私怨相構, 王作《玉蜻蜓》以詆申, 申作《紅梨記》以報之, 皆兩家門客所為, 相傳至今。) Deng Zhicheng, *Gudong suoji quanbian*, vol 1, pp. 212-13.

²⁸ On September 19, 1931, the headline of the local newspaper *Suzhou mingbao* 蘇州明報 reads: “Yu qingting *tanci* buzhun chang” 玉蜻蜓彈詞不准唱 (banning of the performance of *tanci* *Jade Dragonfly*). For a more complete list of multiple bans of this *tanci*, see Chen Wenying, *Suzhou tanci zonglun*, pp. 203-04.

Scholars in humanistic geography have pointed out the importance of space and place in human experience. Their arguments differ, however, in how place is construed. Yi-Fu Tuan believes that a sense of place “rests upon the assumption that place is stable, bounded, and familiar; as ‘an organized world of meaning’, place is ‘essentially a static concept.’”²⁹ On the other hand, Doreen Massey emphasizes space and place’s connection to time and process. She emphasizes “a global sense of place” and argues that we “[grasp] place in terms of its relations with what lies beyond it, as ‘a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus.’”³⁰ For the study of *tanci*, I believe both arguments are manifested in different aspects of *tanci*. Within the narrative, I observe space and place as stable containers of meaning, constructing a stable storyworld and narrative universe in which audiences engage themselves with the plot and characters affectively. In performance, space is often construed as nodes of connection with the real world, as the relationship between performers and listeners of *tanci* connects and extends their space with the storyworld superimposed on their lived space, creating a sense of open-endedness temporally and spatially, despite the self-contained narrative universe. In this section I explore the narrated space, and in the following section I discuss the performative space as nodes into different worlds.

While the entire performance period of a single title involves a mostly fixed storyline or “the story road” in their own jargon, individual episodes can be thick or thin in their engagement with the main line.³¹ Episodes with thick plot development are called *guanzi shu* 關子書 or “mountain pass episodes”, and those with thin plots are called *longtang shu* 弄堂書 or “alleyway

²⁹ Neal Alexander, “Senses of Place,” p. 41.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ See Bender, *Plum and Bamboo*, pp. 72-73. Bender compares the storytellers’ role to that of tour guides, who can take “their ‘group’ along in a space they manipulate in hopes of focusing attention on whatever sights come into view.” Ibid., p. 73.

episodes”. “Alleyway episodes” allow storytellers to engage their audiences in explorations of interesting sidetracks rather than a single main road.³² Take the example of *Three Smiles: The Hangzhou Story*. The plot is typical of *tanci*: it uses the device of crossdressing to solve the conflict of a thwarted marriage proposal between two young people who have deep feelings for each other. Episodes 28-32 are a series of “alleyway episodes” with a few “mountain pass episodes” inserted in between. Over the course of these episodes, the storytellers Hua Shiting 華士亭 and Jiang Wenlan 江文蘭 through verbal art construct Miss Wang’s boudoir in front of their audience through the perspective of her fiancé, Mr. Zhou. The abundance of information and richness of presentation are made possible because of the phenomenon of “shifting”, “which occurs when the storytellers change from one sort of genre, style, register, mode means or communicative channel to another.” Mark Bender observes that “[i]n Suzhou *tanci*, complex patterns of shifting frequently occur in many forms and on many levels, sometimes with dazzling rapidity, and each with differing ‘functional loads’ in the performance.”³³ Below is a table that documents the story space in these episodes and how Miss Wang’s space is defined—through a focalized tour, through objects in the space, and through association with the social and cultural world of Suzhou-centered Jiangnan:

episodes (Hua & Jiang version)	focalization	Items/senses in the space	Storyteller’s comments and anecdotes
28	Zhou from the bottom of stairs	Fragrance	Why unmarried gentry women’s bedchambers are known as “fragrant chambers.”

³² Foley’s term “pathway” is also helpful here. According to Bender’s summary of Bauman and Foley, “[t]he pathways through a given story in a given tradition are keyed by devices that stimulate the imagination by means of the shared knowledge and experiences of performer and audience.” *Ibid.*, p. 73.

³³ Mark Bender, “Shifting and Performance,” p. 182.

29	Zhou from the bottom of stairs	Stairs: width, carved handrails with themes from <i>Journey to the West</i> , fur drapes on railings, carpeted staircase floor	Comparing the carved handrails with the “carved mansion” of Dongshan, a famous site in the suburbs of Suzhou
	Zhou looking up from the middle of the staircase	Purple bamboo moon-gate with scroll-shaped plaque, inscribed with Miss Wang’s own calligraphy	How to judge Miss Wang’s calligraphy, and why judging standards should change according to gender and age.
	Zhou standing on top of the staircase looking at the corridor	hanging scroll of the famous beauty Xishi, couplets, furniture, souvenir, antiques, a <i>qin</i> zither, a go set	Why a go game is left unfinished on the set, revealing the friendship between Miss Wang and her maid.
30	Zhou in the outer room (drawing room)	Four ceiling lamps, focusing on the images of “four beauties” painted on the shades	How “four beauties” are known for their respective beauty, and why they are all imperfect. The starting date of foot-binding.
		Miss Wang’s writing on the desk (half of a couplet)	Why the couplet is unfinished, revealing Miss Wang’s good education and frustration as a learned woman who can never establish a career.
31	Zhou in the middle room (living room), looking around	imported glass, Burmese rosewood table, jade and jadeite arrangements	At that time, glass was rare and a symbol of status and wealth.
		a white jade Guanyin statue with companions Sudhana and Dragon Girl beside her	Why it is unusual for an unmarried girl to have a statue of Guanyin in her room. Why there are different types of Guanyin iconography.
		Above the statues, a painting of a plum branch, painted by the mistress herself, accompanied by Zhou’s own couplet when when he was 12 years old	The painting is the embodiment of Miss Wang’s love and frustration over Zhou. How she obtained Zhou’s childhood calligraphy to decorate her room.
	Zhou looking close to him	The teacups on the table are made of jade, with silver saucers in the shape of a plum tree trunk.	Miss Wang’s luxury stuns Zhou, himself also from a wealthy gentry family.
32	Zhou in the inner room (bedroom)	fragrance: a combination of different incenses from an incense burner on Miss Wang’s dresser by the side of	The strong fragrance may make people faint.

		the bed, the fragrance pouch under her comforter, the fragrance of makeup on her body	
A combination of Zhou's perspective and the storyteller's addition		carved large sandalwood bed with poles, canopy top, and removable window panels on sides of the bed	The use of removable window panels. It takes a lot of time and craftsmanship to make such a luxurious bed (ten years).
		the quality of the mattress, and the canopy (the fabric and the embroideries), gold hooks	Using the description of the canopy as an example, the storyteller demonstrates how excessive details are hard to put into a single ballad, therefore verbal narration is preferred for such details.
		Female mandarin duck embroidered pillows	Why it cannot be male-female couple mandarin ducks in this case.
		The antiques and incense burner on the dressing table	

Here the storytellers give the audience a focused tour of Miss Wang's inner chambers. They construct an affective space defined by a variety of unique objects, through which they establish Miss Wang's character as a sophisticated young lady: the material quality of the everyday objects in her room points to her gentry upbringing; her painting, poetry, *go* game, and zither point to her dashed scholarly ambition because of her gender; her unfinished *go* game demonstrates her friendship with her maid; her secret acquisition of Mr. Zhou's childhood calligraphy indicates her admiration of his talent. The audience's voyeuristic tour through Mr. Zhou's eyes sides them with Mr. Zhou emotionally: although his crossdressing and transgression are violations of Confucian ethics, it becomes understandable and even heroic in the story—he is able to save his marriage, rescue the object of his romantic feelings, and punish the evil brother of Miss Wang, whose rapist behavior poses a threat to the civil scholar-type masculinity represented by Zhou himself.

In addition to the plot and characterization, *tanci*'s affective space is also manifested in superfluous details less related to the development of the plot, but important in the formation of the storyworld. Inspired by Wolfgang Iser's "consistency-building" in Reception theory, the notion of "storyworld" in narratology highlights the role of reader/audience in the making of a work spatially.³⁴ It refers to "the story space completed by the reader's imagination on the basis of the principle of minimal departure."³⁵ First raised by Marie-Laure Ryan, "minimal departure" is "a principle that urges readers to build their mental representations of fictional worlds on the basis of their life experience and knowledge of the world, as long as this knowledge is not contradicted by the text."³⁶ In the reader's imagination, "the referents of actual place names enter the storyworld with most of their real-world properties."³⁷ The above example, full of actual place names and superfluous details of familiar material culture therefore encourage their audiences to form a coherent storyworld with real-world properties in their imagination.

In his study of oral performative narrative, John Miles Foley refers to "the apparently iterative quality of traditional oral narrative" as "a traditional multiform," in which "word" is not defined "as a lexeme or a chirographically distinct item, but rather as a unit of utterance in performance."³⁸ These units of utterance on the one hand can be seen as fillers to prolong the performance of a story without making audiences realize the passing of time. More importantly, they may serve as a "channel" or "pathway" to summon "all moments in the experience of audience and poet."³⁹ Foley uses idioms or epithets in the Homeric tradition as an example of a "word" in the oral tradition, but I think it applies to the evocation of locations in the storyworld

³⁴ See Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader*, p. 287.

³⁵ Marie-Laure Ryan, Kenneth Foote, Maoz Azaryahu, *Narrating Space / Spatializing Narrative*, p. 24.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Foley, *Singer of Tales*, p. 2.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

as well. In the above example, the storyteller references Suzhou through material objects in Miss Wang’s boudoir. Adopting the voice of a true connoisseur, he introduces the Jiangnan craftsmanship of woodcarving, furniture making, fabric industry and embroidery motifs, as well as religious practices and interior decoration conventions. He compares the craftsmanship of Miss Wang’s boudoir to the “carved mansion,” a famous tourist site near Suzhou. Although this tourist site features Republic-era craftsmanship, much later than the time frame of the story, it makes the connections to boost the audience’s visualization of Miss Wang’s space, as well as their pride in Suzhou’s material culture, passed down by storytellers as the renaissance person of Suzhou local celebrity, lore, material culture, and customs.⁴⁰

The summoning of “all moments in the experience of audience and poet” can connect individual moments in *tanci* into a larger narrative universe. Each of the six *tanci* stories I have examined impart minute details of the city of Suzhou, including street names, travel routes, popular sites, and business establishments. Since most of the popular *tanci* stories have similar temporal-spatial settings—the “Ming” Suzhou and neighboring areas—together they form a common narrative universe, where different stories take place in different corners of the city simultaneously with real-world places familiar in listeners’ lives or reconstructed in their memory. Following is a list of locations of all the protagonists’ residences, and where major events happen in six *tanci* stories:

stories ⁴¹	where protagonists live	where major plots happen (in Suzhou)
The <i>Three Smiles</i> trilogy	Zhu Zhishan: Fanzhuang qian Tang Bohu: Taohua Wu	the Chang Gate and the wharf Tiger Hill

⁴⁰ Børdahl points out that in Yangzhou *pinghua* tradition, the same basic plot from a written counterpart expands at least five or six times in length in oral performance, due to “a series of narrative devices intimately related to the oral communication situation, such as: dramatization of dialogue passages into scenes of considerable length; interruptive passages of storyteller’s comment; passages of descriptive detail; declamative intersections of the narrative prose by verse and verse-like passages; digressive passages of closer or looser relationship to the main story.” See Børdahl, *Oral Tradition*, p. 186. Suzhou-dialect *tanci* has the same feature.

⁴¹ For examined versions of these stories, see Works Cited.

	Wen Zhengming: Gaoshi Alley	
<i>Legend of the White Snake</i>	Xu Xian and Lady White: the Chang gate commercial district	the Chang Gate commercial district Xuanmiao Daoist Temple
<i>Etched Gold Phoenix</i>	the Qian family: outside of the Pan Gate Wang Xuan: Wangxing bridge Xu Huilan: Hulong Street (Chayuan Chang)	outside of the Pan, Xu gates Beisi Pagoda Xuanmiao Daoist temple the Chang Gate commercial district Zhujia zhuang
<i>Jade Dragonfly</i>	Nun Zhizhen: the foot of Tiger Hill Jin Guisheng and his wife Zhang: Nanhao street	the Chang Gate Shantang Street

We can draw some tentative conclusions from these simple and incomplete records. First, the six stories involve different districts of the city. The areas of activities for these characters are related to their social class and profession. The elite—scholar-artist protagonists of the “three smiles” trilogy—live in the northwestern part of the inner-city (quiet residential area south of the Chang gate district), close to each other and the government buildings. Xu Huilan from *Etched Gold Phoenix*, being the son of an Imperial censor, is the only character that claims identification with the same area before moving south to join his fiancée’s family of a lower social class. The wealthy merchant families—Lady White and Xu Xian’s pharmacy (*Snake*) and the house of the merchant Jin family (*Dragonfly*)—are located near the busy commercial district by the Chang gate, in northwest corner of the city. The wealthy-but-looked-down-upon pawnshop owner from Anhui lives and does his business at Wangxing bridge, in the eastern side of the city. The lowest in social class—nun Zhizheng (*Dragonfly*) and the fortuneteller Qian (*Phoenix*) are the most removed from the city, the former’s nunnery near Tiger Hill outside of the city, the latter outside of the least populated city gate district (the Pan Gate). There is no overlap in activity-space among people of different classes, with two exceptions: Xuanmiao Daoist Temple draws people of all walks of life, on days of festivals (*White Snake*), or public prayers (*Phoenix*); and the

Chang gate district, being the most prosperous marketplace, is featured in five of the six stories. Scholars from the *Three Smiles* trilogy hire boats there to travel to neighboring cities. Xu Xian gets his first impression of the city walking through the Chang Gate (*White Snake*). The wealthy merchant family of Jin Guisheng also lives nearby (*Dragonfly*). What emerges in the combined storyworld of these six stories, is a narrative universe of “old Suzhou,” with an orderly social hierarchy and a busy urban life. The seemingly superfluous details imparted by storytellers of different stories in different performances work together to complete this “city”, and storytellers, when mentioning a location in their current story, never hesitate to point out the significance of this site in the memories of the old generation or in another story.⁴²

On the other hand, the cityscape of Suzhou went through huge transformations during the twentieth century, making it inevitable that some street names have become obsolete, and some routes become altered significantly. Therefore, different generations of audiences are constantly reminded of the differences between the relatively stable narrative universe and their own changing lived spaces. Storytellers document such changes, linking fictional characters’ traveling routes in the “Ming” Suzhou with the audience’s daily routines traversing similar or altered landscapes having the same or different names. This evocation of detail, besides filling the space of the daily 2-hour performances, also opens the “oral territory” to new discoveries and comparisons between past and present, fiction and reality.⁴³

⁴² Jiang Yuequan has a famous *xuetou* (comic element) of himself making a mistake on stage. Once invited to perform the popular episode of “Antang renmu” 庵堂认母 (recognizing mother in the nunnery) in *Jade Dragonfly*, he started the episode impersonating Xu Xian banging on a door demanding to see his wife (from *White Snake*). After realizing that he made a huge mistake, he continued as Xu Xian, making him realize that he somehow unknowingly traveled to Suzhou and was banging on the door of Fahua nunnery instead of the Jinshan temple in Zhengjiang. Jiang relied on the audiences’ familiarity with the places in *White Snake* to cover for his mistake in performing *Jade Dragonfly*, turning it into a moment of comic relief.

⁴³ For more on “oral territory” and Suzhou *tanci*, see Bender, *Plum and Bamboo*, chapter 2.

One of the often-mentioned Suzhou streets is the central north-south street. In the *tanci* stories, it is referred to as “Malong jie” 馬龍街 (Horse-dragon Street) or “Hulong jie” 護龍街 (Protect-Dragon St.), but also nicknamed as “Matong jie” 馬桶街 (Chamber-pot Street) after the stinky chamber pot collecting and washing business that went through the street every day before flushable toilets were installed in households. This “chamber-pot street” is none other than the current “Renmin lu” 人民路 (People’s Rd), a street name that carries the core ideological message of the Communist party. The new name cancelled the unique identity of this street—it is now indistinguishable from all the People’s Roads in every Chinese city, just like the nameless masses being celebrated by this name. Through listing the different past names of the most prominent street in Suzhou, storytellers add to the toponymical text a historical dimension, as well as a formal/informal dichotomy between these names, reminding audience of their (post-)memory living through the rapid changes of the twentieth century. Arguably both the “dragon”-related names and the current name carry the wishes of the authorities, but the storytellers’ chuckle-inducing pairing of such formal names with the informal nomenclature of human feces conveys an attitude of irreverence towards authorities and grand narratives (and perhaps also an appreciation of the flushable toilet and modern sewage system, a milestone of modernization/westernization).

The sense of humor involving the naming of Horse-Dragon Street parallels with some of the most beloved local characters in *tanci*—disillusioned scholars who play tricks on the wealthy and the powerful (such as the “four scholars of Jiangnan” in *The Three Smiles* series), or socially marginal urban dwellers such as fortune tellers, match makers, and pawnshop owners (for

example, most of characters in *Etched Gold Phoenix*).⁴⁴ The “four scholars of Jiangnan” are known for tricking and conning a retired grand secretary, a local school leader, a young master whose father is the minister of war, and even a royal family member enfeoffed in Nanjing. The protagonist of *Etched Gold Phoenix*, fortuneteller Qian, tricks and cons all the way to the imperial court, and successfully convinces the emperor that he has magic powers. If *pinghua* focuses on traditional military generals and strategists, *tanci* can be viewed to be “antiheroic” by portraying tricksters in a positive light. In the *tanci* storycity, these characters constitute the meaning of being a Suzhou local, in the same way “chamber pot” distinguishes the main street of Suzhou from other roads—through defiance, ridicule, and self-deprecatative jokes.

Performative space and *tanci*

As performative art, *tanci* needs physical performative space. Although in the twentieth century, *tanci* reached a much wider audience through audio recordings, radio programs, and TV channels, its primary performative space is still teahouses and *shuchang* 書場 (story-houses) in Suzhou and neighboring areas.⁴⁵ Even when it is performed on the air, some are recordings of live teahouse/story-house performances with audience reactions as a part of the recorded content. Even when storytellers are recording it in a studio without audience, they do their best to deliver

⁴⁴ The “Trickster” as a protagonist exists in many oral traditions. For example, the “Trickster Myth” of the Winnebago Indians portrays a Trickster who “always had two sides, divine culture-hero and divine buffoon,” and the myth in its various forms satirizes important tribal rituals such as the warbundle ritual. See Paul Radin, *The Trickster*, pp. 125, 117.

⁴⁵ For a detailed description of story houses in Suzhou, see Bender, *Plum and Bamboo*, pp. 26-31. The current numbers of Suzhou *tanci* performers and audiences are hard to estimate. Chinapingtan.com.cn in 2015 lists 27 performing venues (with regular or irregular schedules) in Shanghai, 12 in Wuxi, and 8 in Suzhou, but the accuracy of the data is questionable. The website of Suzhou Pingtan School announces that it plans to recruit 55 new students in the year 2022, in the majors of drama and performance. Both websites were accessed in February of 2023.

their performance as if they were facing a live audience, addressing audiences directly and anticipating their virtual, asynchronous reactions.

Although some types of venues such as teahouses and opera houses allow for closer eye contact between the performers and their audiences than others like auditoria, storytellers always make it a part of their art to interact with their audience. Interactions do not mean that audiences would interrupt performance with shout-outs as in Peking opera or modern Western standup comedy. When a performance is in progress, storytellers on stage observe how audiences react to their performance and adjust the performance accordingly. On the other hand, storytelling venues are a social as well as a performative space. They are not meant to be an immersive experience for the audience, therefore dimmable lights and curtains are usually not used. Audiences are not obligated to stay quiet either, or even to pay the performers their full attention.⁴⁶ Some may be chatting on their own, while smoking, drinking tea, and snacking. Therefore, performers must attract the attention of the audience in order to make the performance a success. Their tricks include well-sung opening ballads to start the show, short skits to mime interactions between characters, arias to bring up the audience's emotions at key moments in the story, and lots of intra- and extra-diegetic jokes and jests to induce laughter. Some storytellers even made it their "brand" to tell "edgy" political or sexual jokes as commentaries on their stories, making them controversial figures within their own guild and subjecting themselves to government censorship.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ That being said, influenced by modern Western theater, more and more audiences and performers today consider it polite to have a quieter and more focused performance, than the older custom which allows audience members to chat and eat.

⁴⁷ For a study of *xuetou* (comic elements) in a live *pinghua* performance, especially *waicha hua* (inserted comic elements unrelated to the plot), see Wenwei Du, "Xuetou."

Interactions between storytellers and audiences often happen during intermissions and at the end of the daily performances. In the 1990s a typical *tanci* performance was two hours long, including an intermission in the middle. Since storytelling performances are daily installments that last for two weeks or longer, it is easy for strangers to become acquaintances after seeing each other every day and start chatting during intermissions or after the performance. These interactions are so important that storytellers often incorporate the best interactions they have had in their career into the storytelling performance, constructing the image of the “regulars” as their narratee or ideal audience.

Below is an example of audience-storyteller interactions that eventually become a part of the narrative: This episode locates in Xu-Wang version of *The Three Smiles: The Hangzhou Story*, episode 36, about Wen Zhengming’s and Zhu Zhishan’s visit to the former Grand Secretary Hua Hongshan in Longting (today’s Wuxi). When Wen and Zhu are taking their leave, the storyteller makes a point that Zhu’s page boy Zhu Tong runs back to their boat ahead of his master. The reason for him being so meticulous about the whereabouts of this minor character is as follows:

You may ask, why do I make a point of mentioning Zhu Tong the pageboy boarding the boat ahead of his master? Ayo, we storytellers seldom forget about storylines of main characters like Zhu Zhishan, but we have to settle the minor characters’ whereabouts first, otherwise we may forget about them! Once I was an itinerant storyteller performing in a venue and got distracted on stage—I forgot about the pageboy. At the scene of the Minister Hua’s mansion, I forgot to mention he also boarded the boat. It would not have mattered anyway, but the regulars were paying attention every day, and it was clear to them that I left the pageboy at the Hua mansion. At the time, they did not say anything. The last day of my performance, after it was over, one listener came to chat with me, “Greetings, Comrade Xu Yunzhi!” I replied, “Thank you, thank you!” “Your performance is over now!” I said yes it was over. “Then you are going back to Suzhou?” I said yes, I was stopping by Suzhou before my next trip. “Oh, I have to bother you with something!” I said, “sure what do you need, any local souvenir I can bring you?” “No souvenir needed. I just want to entrust to you Zhu Tong. Please take him back with you to Suzhou.” I was aghast, “What do you mean?” “Ayo, Zhu Zhishan came to visit Minister Hua’s mansion at Longting, and left his pageboy there! How forgetful of him! But luckily

you are also from Suzhou. How about you give him a ride home? Otherwise, he is stuck there.” I had no choice but to surrender. I said “You got it! I will just put him in my mesh tote bag and carry him back with me.” On the spot, that was all I managed to say.

Therefore, I won’t forget about this detail now. I make the pageboy board the boat ahead of his master, leaving no loopholes behind.

個麼奈哪行先拿個祝童麼先交代哩下船呢? 啊啲, 我倪說書啊, 叫啥格種主角個脚色麼祝枝山了倒弗會忘記個, 格種弗要緊格脚色倒要先交代脫個. 要忘記脫個啲. 我一轉子嗒了碼頭浪廂說麼說格回書, 叫啥書台上開開小差麼, 忘記脫子個祝童啲. 了華相府裏廂我勸關照哦 噠轉去了下船了勸關照, 忘記脫說. 格麼啊無所謂. 個老聽衆日照了浪聽個啲, 個麼蠻清爽一想個祝童篤了華相府裏廂, 因為奈物交代. 當場麼, 弗搭我提意見, 等到我啊, 最末一天, 書完結哉, 哩來敷衍我: “哦, 徐雲志同志啊!” 我說 “不敢不敢.” “哦啲奈書說完哉.” 我說說完哉. “奈要回蘇州去格哉.” 我說 “對啊到達蘇州啊.” “費心費心哦!” 我說 “啥事躄, 啊要帶點啥蘇州土產?” “土產是勸奈帶, 托奈吧, 啊有個祝童奈帶到子個蘇州去吧!” 那麼我呆脫則啲, 我說哪行道理? “啊呀祝枝山到龍庭鎮華相府裏廂, 拿個祝童忘記脫了個相府裏廂了. 個麼哩忘記脫麼, 奈橫豎蘇州人, 奈帶到哩蘇州去吧, 勸得弄僵則.” 那麼我也只好答應則哇, 我說: “曉得哉, 我拿一隻網綫袋拎拎轉去.” 也只好這樣一來則啲. 所以這樣了現在弗忘記哉: 祝童先下船, 啊是弗會說漏洞則啲.⁴⁸

Xu Yunzhi’s interaction with a member of the regulars present at the performance has changed how he handles minor characters in his narrative. Since it is told from the perspective of the storyteller, this “regular” can be read as a real audience member, and at the same time the ideal listener who knows and appreciates the storytelling art par excellence. In this case, this audience member demonstrates their undivided attention to details and their meticulousness towards the completion of the story. To them, it is important to “settle” (*jiaodai* 交代) the fates of every character before the ending of the storytelling cycle. Loose ends, no matter how small, make the audience less satisfied. This narrative tradition is in line with the written vernacular literature tradition during the Ming-Qing era—the extra-diegetic storyteller narrator’s voice is fixated on the completion of the narrative, the allotment of rewards/retributions, and likes to make comments on the making and consumption of the stories themselves.⁴⁹ Xu’s inclusion of the

⁴⁸ Xu, Wang, *Sanxiao: Longting shu*, audio recording, episode 36 (40:08-41:30), transcribed and translated by myself.

⁴⁹ Børdahl discusses the storyteller-narrator in her study of the Yangzhou tradition as “the voice telling the entire story of the performance.” He functions both “as narrator and as impersonator of the characters of his story.” Both storyteller-narrator and narratee “are to be understood as constituents or ‘agents’ of a fictive universe,” while at the same time “very close to the blood and flesh functions of the real storyteller and his audience.” See Børdahl, *Oral Tradition*, p. 182.

interaction with the audience that happened in the performative space also demonstrates that *tanci* is as much about the production process of narratives as it is about the narratives themselves. The interactive process of its production makes every reiteration of the story a unique version of the current time-space, concerning the current audience, despite its many stable and conventional narrative or performance elements.

From this episode we also observe that performative space is not a static container of interactions, but it is constituted out of social relations that form *tanci*. The audience member points out the dynamics between Suzhou as the cultural center narratively and performatively (where the main characters of the story return to, and where the performer returns to) and where the listener stands—the periphery to the cultural center (which applies to both Longting in the story and the anonymous location of the performance). The story depicts the “return” of the protagonists back to Suzhou after conning the politically superior but culturally inferior Hua Hongshan; at the same time, the characters’ return to the storyworld of Suzhou as the ending of the story parallels nicely with the storyteller’s return to Suzhou after concluding the performance period. The audience member’s “complaint” points out such parallelism, while indicating that the enjoyment of *tanci* as a performative art resides in the merging of realms between the storyworlds, the storytelling process, and the lived space of both the performers and the audiences. Xu the storyteller did such a good job on stage that the audience member would like to believe that he has acquired the capability to travel between the fictional and the real realms, therefore he can definitely bring back the pageboy for his fellow Suzhou denizen Zhu Zhishan. The storyteller’s “method” of carrying the pageboy in his mesh tote is his retort at the audience member teasing him about his omission, implying that a fictional pageboy does not take space at all in his luggage, therefore he is of no significance to the successful conclusion of this *tanci*

piece. The fact that the storyteller incorporated this interaction into his storytelling from then on indicates that the collective imagination of a space where realms merge brings such joy to both the performers and the audiences that it is worth retelling as a shared insider's joke.

In addition to bringing characters out to “the real world”, storytellers also incorporate themselves and their audiences into the stories they are performing, merging the performative space with the narrative space. The first episode of Huang's *Wen Zhengming* includes a metanarrative moment in which Tang Bohu listens to a *tanci* performance on his own life, written by his friend Zhu Zhishan:

Who would have known that in that moment, Tang Bohu is listening to his own story of “Three Smiles Lead to a Fortunate Matrimony”! This is to point out that the “Three Smiles” *tanci* has a long history. [The storyteller goes on to sing the lyrics of the ballad and depict Tang's reaction as an audience to his own story. Tang realizes the author of this ballad to be none other than his friend Zhu Zhishan...] The storytelling performance has ended, and the storytellers have left too. Although the storytellers are gone, the scathing opening ballad by Zhu is going to be passed down forever. The earliest scripts⁵⁰ of “Three Smiles” were developed out of this very ballad. Therefore, we can say that the ghost author of the “Three Smiles” is Zhu Zhishan himself. Thanks to his slander of Tang Bohu, Tang has no choice but to see his reputation tarnished for eternity.

格麼叫出色，啊誇張唐伯虎當時自己已經在聽自己的三笑姻緣則。所以說三笑的書啊，歷史悠久[...]茶館裏廂，書場已經散了，說書朋友也已經走脫則。那麼諾，說書的朋友走麼走脫哦，剛剛哩毒蛇兩句開篇吶，永遠要唱下去則。而且傳了傳，傳到後頭了，就是唱三笑第一本個老脚本，就是格隻開篇上來個。個編三笑第二個老祖宗麼就是祝枝山，一口咬殺唐伯虎個，唐伯虎冤枉苦頭麼也只好吃個。⁵¹

The complete clip features rapid shifts between an array of narrative voices: that of the storyteller-narrator, dialogue, inner-monologue, opening ballad in the voice of a character

⁵⁰ Although before the establishment of the *tanci* school in Suzhou, *tanci* stories were largely transmitted from masters to their disciples through apprenticeship, other forms of learning also complemented this form, such as the transmission of *jiaoben* 脚本 (scripts) and auditing other masters' performances (after the approval of one's own master and the other master performer). See Zhou Yuquan's 周玉泉 oral history piece from Jiangzhehu pingtan gongzuo lingdao xiaozu bangongshi ed., *Shutan koushu lishi*, pp. 6-7. For Yangzhou storytelling's usage of scripts, see Børdahl, *Oral Tradition*, p. 229.

⁵¹ Transcribed and translated from episode 1 (38: 52-48: 12) of Huang Yi'an, *Wen Zhengming* performance recording (49 episodes in total, undated).

performing storytelling on stage, the famous poet Lu You's 陸游 poem on storytelling, and even the sound of Zhu Zhishan's laughter.⁵² Through such an impressive combination of narrative, dramatic, and lyrical passages, the performers create a multi-dimensional scene, crossing boundaries between the fictional realm and the performative realm: they indicate that the very story the current audience is listening to, originates from the character in it! Not only did one *tanci* character write the first lines of the story, but two others are the first performers of this very tale, passing it down to its current narrator on stage. And the first audience includes another *tanci* character, who wonders how his reputation will pan out in Suzhou, the center of *tanci*. If the performative space of the current iteration of this story is a continuation of the fictional storyworld, then the storytellers and their audience at this moment are not different from the fictional characters performing, listening, and wondering about the impact of this tale. Suzhou as the city of *tanci* is not categorically different from the storycity of Suzhou in *tanci*. While modern storytellers are not different from Zhu Zhishan in the story—they are all telling tall tales about the city and its history—the emotional impact of *tanci* is even more real than what was noted in the forgotten historical record (indicated by Lu You's poem and Tang Bohu's worry).

The Commemoration of Suzhou as a *Tanci* Storycity

With the shrinking of the Suzhou dialect-speaking population and the acceleration of modern city life, *tanci* venues around Suzhou are shutting down due to lack of audiences. However, to its remaining fans, *tanci* is more than a genre of entertainment, it is also how they understand their lived space and construct their local identity. In the era of Internet, some *tanci* audiences have

⁵² For a detailed analysis of voices and devices in Yangzhou *tanci* (which is very similar to Suzhou *tanci*), see Børdahl, *Oral Tradition*, pp. 194-206.

taken on the task of annotating the city’s digital maps with their own narratives as aficionados of *tanci*.

Below is a screen shot of map.baidu.com, showing a section of Shantang Street. When one clicks on a site called “the historical location of the Tong bridge”, two entries with custom photos of the site show up on the screen:

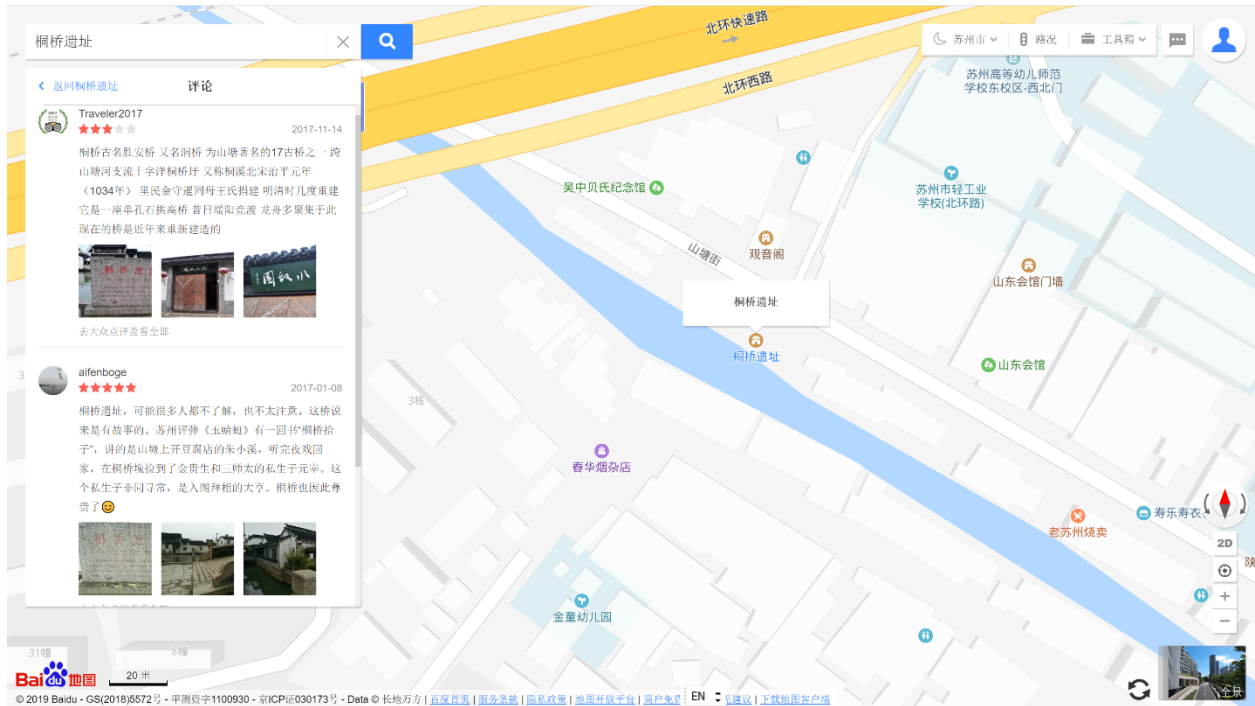


Fig. 1. Two annotations to the historical location of Tong Bridge on “Baidu map” (the most popular map application in China). Screenshot taken on 3/15/2019 from map.baidu.com. Both comments include pictures of the site, and both albums start with a stone tablet erected by the local government to mark the site of the bridge that no longer exists. If we treat the tablet—the monument commemorating this site for its cultural and historical significance—as being endorsed by the local authority, the two comments made by ordinary locals online are comments on both the site itself and the official endorsement. Commemoration and monuments are important aspects of the studies of collective memory. According to Barry Schwartz, “[c]ommemoration lifts from an ordinary historical sequence those extraordinary events which

embody our deepest and most fundamental values. Commemoration... is in this sense a register of sacred history.” Commemorating is evaluating events “invested with an extraordinary significance and assigned a qualitatively distinct place in our conception of the past.”⁵³ The comment from Traveler 2017, in a local historian’s voice, relates the gazetteer record of the bridge, citing data such as the initial year of its construction, the sponsors of the project, the cultural activities (dragon boat contests) on this site, and the rebuilding process. It is an expansion of the brief introduction carved on the stone. The long history of this site witnesses the prosperity of Suzhou, especially along Shantang Street all the way to Tiger Hill. The celebration of the bygone glory of the city is central to local identity, similar to what the storytellers made Xu Xian see in our earlier example. The entry from username Aifenboge, on the other hand, marks the importance of storytelling in the construction of the space: it focuses on the site’s connection to an episode in the *tanci* piece *Jade Dragonfly* titled “picking up an infant boy at the Tong Bridge.” The author of this entry first justifies his writing about this site, because “most people probably do not know, or care,” conveying their local cultural insider’s pride as well as their sadness that *tanci* is a dying art in its native city. He then brings his readers back to that critical moment in the story, when “Zhu Xiaoxi the tofu maker of Shantang Street, on his way back home after enjoying the evening theater, picks up the infant Yuanzai, who is the love child of Jin Guisheng and Third Sister (of the nearby nunnery).” Aifenboge concludes that “This love child is no ordinary being. He will become the future grand secretary. As a result, the Tong Bridge became famous.” A turning point in the entire story, “picking up an infant boy at the Tong Bridge” severs the baby’s tie with his birth parents’ family and prolongs the suffering of the two main female characters of the story, Third Sister and Jin Guisheng’s wife née Zhang

⁵³ Barry Schwartz, “Social Context of Commemoration,” p. 377.

(who otherwise would have received both the news of her husband's death and the infant Yuanzai as his heir). It also enhances the emotional depth of the story—audiences often shed tears when many episodes later, the teenage Yuanzai returns to the nunnery and convinces Third Sister to acknowledge him as her long-lost son.

Aifenboge celebrates the Tong Bridge as an affective locale of *Jade Dragonfly* that marks an important node in the storycity of Suzhou, which helps to construct the *tanci* audience's local identity. When put side by side, these two entries showcase how written and oral traditions construct places differently. Compared to scholars' effort to keep the record of places and their transformations in gazetteers and genealogies, storytellers and their audiences construct affective places and superimpose a storycity on top of their lived city of Suzhou. To be a true local means to have access to these affective spaces/places in *tanci* and to commemorate the city together with other "veteran listeners."

If the Tong Bridge tablet itself does not have any obvious connection with *tanci*, the city does have monuments that are directly related to *tanci* in recent decades. After the renovation of the Nanhao street outside of the Chang Gate, the local government established monuments marking "eighteen scenes of Nanhao" to attract tourists. Among them are two monuments related to two pieces of literature: "the site of the Gourd temple" (a temple from the eighteenth-century novel *Honglou meng* or *Dream of the Red Chamber*) and "the site of the protagonist's family house in *Jade Dragonfly*." The Chinese term used to refer to these two sites is *yizhi* 遺址. Literally meaning "remnant site" or "site of relics", this term is normally reserved for historical or archaeological sites. Marking fictional events as historical/archaeological sites, the oxymoron of "literary *yizhi*" indicates the cultural importance of storytelling in the collective memory of the locals, in a way similar to the meaning of the address 221B Baker Street to Londoners.



Fig. 2. *Jade Dragonfly* monument in Nanhao street, Suzhou. It consists of a white stone sculpture on a red pedestal with stone relief in the back. Photo taken by the author in 2018. While the Gourd Temple site is marked with a simple stone slab, the designer of the *Jade Dragonfly* monument put in more effort: it contains a standalone statue against a backwall of reliefs. The statue presents an open book partially supported by a pipa lute on one side. Resting on the book is a crudely carved dragonfly. The right page of the book reads: “long *tanci* story *Jade Dragonfly*.” The left page reads: “In the Jiajing reign of the Ming dynasty, Shen Guisheng, an extremely wealthy man of Nanhao St., had a quarrel with his wife, and left the Shen household on Nanhao St. ...” The relief on the backwall depicts the scene following the narrative on the left page: two men in scholarly robes followed by a pageboy are being greeted by a beautiful nun in front of Fahua nunnery. The inscription on the foundation of the statue reads: “the historic site of the former residence (*guju yizhi* 故居遺址) of the protagonist in *Jade*

Dragonfly.” It conveys a sense of historicity for this *tanci* piece, as well as the central position of this location within the Suzhou *tanci* repertoire.

As we have discussed earlier, there has been a controversy over relating *Jade Dragonfly* to a local historic figure Shen Shixing, resulting in lawsuits against and even arrests of *tanci* performers by police. But whoever drafted the inscriptions of this monument decided to use the old surname “Shen” instead of the agreed-upon replacement “Jin,” even though “Jin” is used in all performances recorded in the second half of the twentieth century. The construction of this monument thus signifies the official endorsement of the association between the historic figure Shen Shixing and this famous *tanci* tale, cancelling the Shen descendants’ effort in restoring their family name.

In the current age of homogenizing modern cityscapes, *tanci* fans and local government officials are actively integrating the collective memory in and of *tanci* into the geography of the modern city of Suzhou. For fans like Aifenboge, *tanci* marks the emotional realism in the city’s blood. For officials who approved the monuments and statues, this tradition of performance is connected to the economic growth of Suzhou as a tourist city. Either way, *tanci* stories are changing the physical look of the city, in an era when *tanci* performances are leaving local people’s lives and joining other traditional performative arts as museum pieces.

Conclusion

In the *tanci* pieces discussed above, places in and around Suzhou are not simply containers of plot, but “centers of felt value”, “areas in which settings for the constitution of social relations are located and with which people can identify.”⁵⁴ Through the art of storytelling, non-places

⁵⁴ Buell, *Future of Environmental Criticism*, p. 63. The above quotation is based on Tuan, *Space and Place*, p. 4, and Agnew, “Representing Space,” p. 263.

such as the former site of a collapsed bridge or the street address of a *tanci* character have gained meaning and emotional significance to the locals. French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs discusses remembering as a process of locating, or localizing, images of the past in specific places. Remembering “might be characterized as a process of imaginative reconstruction, in which we integrate specific images formulated in the present into particular contexts identified with the past.”⁵⁵ Using Suzhou’s streets and sites as mnemonic devices, Suzhou *tanci* has long served as the nexus of such imaginative reconstruction, threading together written history, urban tales and legends, local places, material culture, and local people’s lives. Through this tradition of oral storytelling art, individual memories contribute to the “elaborate network of social mores, values, and ideals” which is a distinctive local collective memory based on the memories of urban non-elite social groups.⁵⁶

What is *tanci*’s relationship with modernization? As a genre of storytelling art that gained huge popularity in the first half of the twentieth century, *tanci* benefitted from the invention of recording devices and radio broadcasting programs. After the ten-year break during the Cultural Revolution, *tanci* quickly regained popularity in Suzhou, Shanghai, and neighboring Wu-dialect regions. But since its peak of popularity around early 1990s, *tanci* has been losing both audiences and performers to other forms of entertainment. Many efforts are being made to “save” *tanci* from dying. Some contend that Wu dialect as its narrative language makes *tanci* inaccessible to wider audiences and call for more *putonghua* (standard Mandarin language) performances. Although it is not unusual for *tanci* performers to use an old-style Mandarin in impersonation of northern characters, using modern Mandarin as its narrative language has not become the norm, nor have such attempts resulted in more acceptance of *tanci* outside of the

⁵⁵ Patrick Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory*, p. 78.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Wu-dialect zone.⁵⁷ Efforts to present the ballad-singing parts of *tanci* to non-Wu dialect speakers as “elegant art” and samples of Suzhou culture cannot attract long-term engagements either, since the most attractive part of *tanci* lies in its narrative art, which is tightly connected to the spatialized collective memory of the Wu-dialect-speaking areas.

Others point to the limited repertoire of stories and call on younger generation *tanci* artists to develop new stories from written literature and movies. Evidence shows that newer stories developed as prequels or sequels of existing stories are more likely to succeed than entirely independent new stories, but since existing “classic” stories reached their maturity after generations of storytellers’ collective effort, it is hard for new stories to reach such a high level of polish and as a result they still receive constant criticism from the “regulars”.⁵⁸ It is obvious that the preservation and development of *tanci* have to take into consideration the interconnected nature of the *tanci* storyworlds and their function in the collective memory.

On the other hand, the practice of *tanci* and its convergence of social mores and values are inevitably nostalgic. As society moves forward, Suzhou’s connection with the language and the culture of the *tanci* narrative universe is becoming tenuous. The rapidly changing cityscape and fast-paced modern life make one’s navigation through layers of changes more difficult. It is inevitable that some “regulars” are left lamenting about their imaginary Tong bridge, feeling the urge to express their affinity to *tanci* but at the same time fearing that they will no longer be heard. If *tanci* stories long for an imagined “premodern” past, the longing itself, or nostalgia, is

⁵⁷ The famous *xiangsheng* 相聲 (literally “face and voice”, crosstalk) performer Guo Degang 郭德綱 adapted a part of *Etched Gold Phoenix* into his *dankou xiangsheng* 單口相聲 (single performer *xiangsheng*) repertoire, but apparently it did not result in a more enthusiastic audience towards *tanci*.

⁵⁸ For example, *Three Smiles: The Hangzhou Story* is a later addition to *Three Smiles: The Suzhou Story* and gained popularity because it enriches the characterization of existing characters such as Zhu Zhishan and Zhou Wenbin. *Suzhou diyijia* 蘇州第一家 (The First Family of Suzhou) is the prequel of *Jade Dragonfly*, developed after the latter gained huge popularity.

“at the very core of the modern condition,” since “[n]ostalgia is not merely an expression of local longing, but a result of a new understanding of time and space that made the division into ‘local’ and ‘universal’ possible.”⁵⁹ In this sense, Suzhou places in *tanci* are an illustration of what Svetlana Boym calls “off-modern.”⁶⁰ The jokes, jests, and comments incorporated into storytelling are nostalgic journeys that constantly sidetrack into reinventions of tradition and critiques of the modern cultural mainstream. This is what makes *tanci* charming, and a worthwhile study of the living past.

⁵⁹ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. XVI.

⁶⁰ Boym defines “off-modernism” as “a critique of both the modern fascination with newness and no less modern reinvention of tradition. In the off-modern tradition, reflection and longing, estrangement and affection go together.” *Ibid.*, pp. XVI-XVII.

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