

The Evolution of Mass Media and Shanghai-Style Suzhou Pingtan in Modern Shanghai

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With the development of urban culture in modern Shanghai, Shanghai style (海派 Haipai) has gradually formed its own features. As a crucial component of urban culture, modern mass media reflects the essence of Shanghai-style culture in its development. Its modernity, commerciality, openness, and innovation display the cultural trait of keeping up with the times. During the Xianfeng and Tongzhi periods of the Qing Dynasty (1851-1875), Suzhou Pingtan (苏州评弹) was introduced to Shanghai due to the influence of the Taiping Rebellion (太平天国战争), and began its Shanghai-style evolution in the context of modern mass media. On the one hand, modern newspapers and electronic media became crucial tools for the promotion of Suzhou Pingtan performers; on the other hand, the daily lives, performing careers, and public images of these performers became focal points of media attention. Mass media facilitated the Shanghai-style development of Suzhou Pingtan, and through it, changes in commercial awareness, performance styles, artistic expressions, musical innovation, and the celebrity-like performers all reflected the process of Shanghai-style development in Pingtan art.

Keywords: modern mass media, Shanghai-style Suzhou Pingtan, commercialization, process of becoming stars

Introduction

Since the Xianfeng and Tongzhi periods of the Qing Dynasty, Suzhou Pingtan entered Shanghai and embarked its Shanghai-style development. A milestone in this development was the establishment of the “Shenjiang Runyu Society” (申江润余社) in 1908. Thus, Suzhou Pingtan was divided into Suzhou style (苏道 Su Dao) and Shanghai style (海道 Hai Dao), with the former represented by “Guangyu Society” (光裕社) and the latter represented by “Runyu Society” (润余社) (Dong, 1940)¹. This division is marked by the professional organizations. The Suzhou Pingtan with Shanghai style contains various cultural elements. Besides the influence of urban culture in modern Shanghai, mass media also plays a crucial role in promoting the evolution of Pingtan art with Shanghai style.

There have been a series of researches on the development of Suzhou Pingtan in modern Shanghai². However, there is a lack of in-depth research on the relationship between mass media and the Shanghai-style

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¹ Tang Lixing, in his article “From Suzhou to Shanghai: Pingtan and the Changes of City Cultural Circles” published in *Shilin* in the 4th issue, 2010, also holds the view that the founding of the Shanghai branch of Guangyu Society shows the change of the center for Pingtan from Suzhou to Shanghai during the Taiping Rebellion to 1920s period.

² There are numerous related researches, such as the series “Research on Pingtan and Jiangnan Society” edited by Tang Lixing, He Qiliang’s *Between Business and Bureaucrats: Pingtan Storytelling in the 1950s and 1960s*, Shen Hao’s *Elegant Rhythms: Pingtan and the City*, Zhang Shengman’s *Pingtan 1949: A Study of Shanghai Storytellers During a Time of Great Change*, Zhou Wei’s *The Sweet Sound of Strings: A Study of Female Tanci Artists in Jiangnan Since the Late Qing Dynasty*, and other related academic papers.

development in Pingtan art. It is known that modern mass media is an important part of Shanghai's urban culture, and during the development of modern urban culture in Shanghai, mass media displays the features of Shanghai-style culture (海派文化 Haipai culture). Its modernity, commerciality, openness, and innovation demonstrate a forward-looking cultural trait. With the prosperity of modern Shanghai, Suzhou Pingtan artists rely on its mass media for their survival and growth. Additionally, their daily lives, performing careers, and public images become focal points of media attention. The vigorous development of modern mass media promotes the prosperity of Suzhou Pingtan in Shanghai, making Shanghai a new cultural center for Pingtan. Meanwhile, mass media facilitates the formation and development of Shanghai-style Suzhou Pingtan, distinct from Pingtan in the other regions with Wu-dialect. Shanghai style becomes an important artistic feature of Suzhou Pingtan after its introduction to Shanghai.

Advanced Mass Media Is An Important Component of Shanghai-Style Culture in Modern Shanghai

“Shanghai style” and “Shanghai-style culture” are hot topics in academia. “Shanghai style” is a dynamic historical concept, and researches about it are remarkable (Zhang, 1990; Chen, 1997; Xiong, 1996; Yang, 1994). The term “Shanghai style” initially refers to painters who came to Shanghai after it opened as a port. These painters changed traditional painting styles to cater to the market demands for their livelihood. Based on traditional Chinese painting and combined with Western techniques, they created a new style that appealed to both refined and popular tastes. As is reported at that time:

During the Tongzhi and Guangxu periods of the Qing Dynasty (1862-1908), the worsening political situation and declining painting standards made many painters settle in Shanghai, selling their works for making a living. Driven by the need to make a living, they had to cater to popular tastes to earn money. As a result, the quality of their paintings inevitably declined, becoming more vulgar, overly ornate and exaggerated, gradually forming the “Shanghai style”. (Yu, 1937, p. 196)

Similarly, “Shanghai-style Peking Opera” emerged. In Shanghai, “only pure Kunqu Opera (昆剧) was considered elegant... Peking Opera there made efforts to attract audiences but failed, leading to its decline after several years” (Xu, 1928, p. 5). To cater to the aesthetic tastes of local residents, Peking Opera gradually took up Shanghai style by breaking away from its old conventions. As the saying goes, “The Beijing style focuses on singing and acting while the Shanghai style emphasizes stage scenery and costumes. Thus, northerners ‘listen to opera’ while southerners ‘watch opera’, which shows this difference” (Shanghai Style, 1927).

From the emergence of the concept of “Shanghai style” to the later debates about the Beijing and Shanghai styles in the 1920s and 1930s, it is evident that Shanghai culture gradually formed the following basic features: inclusiveness, a blend of old and new, integration of Chinese and Western elements; acceptance of modern civilization; a pursuit of innovation and uniqueness by drawing on various strengths; appeal to both refined and popular tastes; a strong commercial awareness in its activities, and catering to the aesthetic preferences of the urban public.

Modern mass media, as an important part of Shanghai's urban culture, also displays the characteristics of Shanghai style during its development. After Shanghai opened as a port, with the birth and growth of modern mass media, various newspapers and electronic media continued to emerge, establishing Shanghai as the center of the newspaper industry in modern China, and making it the cultural hub for mass media. In the thriving commercial environment of Shanghai, well-developed mass media such as newspapers and radio presented many features of Shanghai-style culture.

Firstly, the development of modern newspapers, radio, and other mass media is a result of advancements in modern technology. Improvements in new printing techniques and the introduction of modern printing machines spurred the growth of Shanghai's modern newspaper industry. The pressman and educator Wang Tao (王韬 1828-1897) marveled at the modern printing technology of the London Missionary Society Press (墨海书馆): "They made an iron printing press, which was over ten feet long and three feet wide, equipped with two gears on sides. Using ox for power, it was operated by two men feeding paper into and out of the machine... Over 40,000 sheets of paper could be printed a day" (Wang, 1989, pp 118-119). He also quoted *Miscellaneous Poems of Yangjingbang* (洋泾浜杂诗) by Sun Cigong from Xiushui (now Jiaxing, Zhejiang Province), which stated, "The wheels of the printing press spin, spreading various volumes across the country. The busy ox, seemed to fully understand its mission, no longer plowing fields, but working in book production" (Wang, 1989, pp. 118-119). This witnessed the transition from traditional to industrialized printing and marked the advancement of Shanghai's newspaper industry. Due to the assistance of machinery, favorable environment, and various talents, Shanghai soon became the center of newspaper publishing in the country (Hu, 1986, p. 279). The statistics show that there were 129 types of daily newspapers in modern Shanghai (Hu, 1986, p. 312), and from 1896 to 1898, 48 new newspapers were established there, accounting for 44.9% of that during the same period (Qin, 1993, p. 47). Since then, Shanghai's status as the center of modern Chinese newspaper industry remained unchanged (Zhang, 1990, p. 925). Additionally, there were over 1,400 types of entertainment tabloids³, and more than 600 literary and art journals (Wu, 1995), reflecting the modernization of Shanghai's newspaper industry. With the introduction and development of modern technology, media technology was updated rapidly. In the 1920s, the emergence of electronic media such as records, radio broadcasting, and films marked the development of modern media. Due to its unique geographical location and political, economic, cultural, and other factors, modern Shanghai witnessed the rapid development of media technology. In the 1930s, more than 50% of radio stations in China were located in Shanghai⁴, and the city led the nation's record industry, with over 30 record companies established there (Qian, 2013). Furthermore, Shanghai became the center of the national film industry. According to the *China Film Yearbook* in 1934, there were 55 film production companies nationwide, 48 of which were located in Shanghai, accounting for 87%⁵. The development of modern print and electronic media was closely tied to advancements in technology, highlighting the modernity of Shanghai's mass media.

Secondly, the commercial awareness of mass media promoted its development in modern Shanghai. Western missionaries established modern newspapers in Shanghai, marking the beginning of modern newspaper industry. The public-interest newspapers were quickly replaced by privately-owned commercial newspapers. The philologist Hu Daojing (胡道静 1913-2003) once remarked: "The environment here is favorable: firstly, Shanghai's commercial prosperity; secondly, the protection offered by the concession areas, which allowed for a certain degree of freedom of speech... Shanghai newspapers inevitably became commercialized" (Hu, 1986, p.

³ According to Zhu Junzhou's statistics in *The World of Tabloids in Old Shanghai*, over half a century, 1,786 newspapers were published in Shanghai, of which 1,266 were tabloids, accounting for 70.88% of the total newspaper output at that time.

⁴ According to *Radio Q&A Journal*, edited by Su Zuguo and published by Asia-America Radio Company in June and September 1932 (Issues 11 and 18): In June 1932, there were 30 radio stations in Shanghai and 50 nationwide; in September, 40 stations in Shanghai and 60 nationwide; in July 1933, there were 44 stations in Shanghai and 82 nationwide; in December, 45 stations in Shanghai and 63 nationwide; in January 1934, there were 41 stations in Shanghai and 66 nationwide; in December, 39 stations in Shanghai and 92 nationwide; in January 1935, there were 40 stations in Shanghai and 92 nationwide; in August, 44 stations in Shanghai and 91 nationwide; and in December, 43 stations in Shanghai and 87 nationwide, etc.

⁵ Statistics on film companies according to *China Film Yearbook* (December 1934), compiled by the China Educational Film Association.

280). The publication of the privately-owned newspaper *Shenbao* (申报 also known as *Shun Pao*) marked the beginning of commercialized newspaper industry. Since then, various commercial newspapers were established. Major newspapers such as *The News* (新闻报), *The Current Events News* (时事新报), and *The Shanghai Times* (时报) each targeted specific reader groups, with commercialization as their core model. The general manager of *The News*, Wang Hanxi (汪汉溪 1874-1924), introduced an “Economic News Section” and advocated the approach of “neglecting politics and stressing commerce”, reflecting the commercialization model of the newspaper industry. Commercial competition among major newspapers like *Shenbao* and *The News* persisted throughout modern history. Especially in the 1920s and 1930s, as Shanghai thrived commercially, newspaper commercialization became the mainstream. Overall, since the emergence of modern media, various newspapers in Shanghai, whether broadsheets, tabloids, pictorials, or official and privately-owned newspapers, all had their specific reader markets. They allocated large space for commercial advertisements, especially in entertainment tabloids, nearly half of the pages were used for advertisements to secure sufficient funding, reflecting the commercial characteristics of Shanghai-style newspapers. Furthermore, various mass media engaged in intense market competition, expanding their reach from Shanghai to the entire country. Broadsheets and tabloids competed to publish local editions around Shanghai to gain greater commercial profits. For instance, *Shenbao*, *The News*, and *The Shanghai Times* adopted this approach⁶. After radio was introduced to Shanghai in the 1920s, its use as an electronic media quickly spread to households, leveraging partnerships with businesses. Many privately-owned commercial radio stations relied heavily on company or shop advertisements for survival, illustrating the close relationship between businesses and media. For example, Laou Kiu Woo & Co (老九和绸缎局) thrived after advertising on the radio (Fu, 1934); Taikang Biscuit Company placed special advertisements on the radio (Cao, 1998, p. 159). Shanghai became the center of modern mass media in China. Growing up in the developed urban commercial environment, mass media in Shanghai has shown its distinct commercial characteristics since its inception.

Thirdly, newspapers and other media are characterized by their openness. The openness of Shanghai’s urban culture also affects the open development of newspapers. This is evident in the diversity of newspapers’ types and content. There were various newspapers published by party and government groups, such as broadsheets, entertainment tabloids, pictorials, and specialized journals, all with diverse content. The topics involved the latest cultural trends, aesthetics, and modern material civilization. The latest pop culture spread quickly among the public through mass media. The acceptance of Western cultural elements was also evident in the form and content of these newspapers. This openness was particularly evident in Shanghai’s entertainment tabloids. For instance, “The name of *Game Newspaper* (游戏报) was inspired by Western newspapers’ game sections”⁷. Some tabloids directly borrowed foreign names, such as *Holmes*, *Chaplin*, *Robin Hood*, *Washington*, and *Fairbanks*. Others used translated names like *X-ray*, *Motorcar*, and *X*. Additionally, some were named after foreign items like *Venus*, *Hollywood Daily*, *Chocolate*, *Ice Cream*, and *Microscope*. This reflects the openness and diversity in the development of newspapers and other media.

Fourthly, newspapers and other media focus on the entertainment aspect. In modern Shanghai’s booming commercial and cultural environment, newspapers and electronic media highlighted their entertainment functions

⁶ For example, Shanghai’s *The News* jointly issued with Suzhou’s local paper *Morning News*. *Shenbao* also published a local edition in Hangzhou, etc.

⁷ See On the Original Intent of the Game Newspaper. *Game Newspaper*, August 25, 1897, 1st edition.

to compete for market share and survival. Both private and official party newspapers tended to cater to urban cultural tastes by reforming their layouts, creating newspaper supplements, and introducing entertainment programs. Examples included “Free Talk” section in *Shenbao*, “Joyful Forest” section in *The News*, and the rise of entertainment tabloids, pictorials, and literary journals, all reflecting the innovative development of the entertainment function in Shanghai’s mass media.

Mass media, as a part of modern Shanghai’s urban culture, adopted the Shanghai style gradually, reflecting the modernity, commerciality, openness, entertainment, and its other characteristics. Additionally, the interactions between mass media and urban society advanced the development of Shanghai-style culture.

Evolution of Shanghai-Style Suzhou Pingtan in the Context of Mass Media

Suzhou Pingtan, originating from the Wuzhong region (now Suzhou, Jiangsu Province), is a type of Wu-dialect storytelling and singing art enjoyed by both refined and popular audiences. Centered in Suzhou and mainly rooted in surrounding rural towns, it evolved from traditional storytelling and singing arts, originated from the Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1279) dynasties. Its reach is generally limited to the Jiangnan region, spanning from Jiaxing (Zhejiang Province) in the south to Wujin (Jiangsu Province) in the north. During the Xianfeng and Tongzhi reigns of the Qing Dynasty, due to the impact of Taiping Rebellion, Suzhou Pingtan artists moved to Shanghai, marking the beginning of its Shanghai-style development. The Shanghai-style evolution of Suzhou Pingtan was influenced not only by urban Shanghai-style culture, but also by modern media in Shanghai. The prosperity of mass media played a crucial role in shaping and promoting the Shanghai style of Suzhou Pingtan.

Mass Media and the Commercial Culture of Pingtan Art

In modern Shanghai, mass media such as newspapers, magazines, and radio, with their diverse pursuits and ways to commercial value, plays an exemplary role in the multidimensional development of commercial beliefs of Pingtan artists. This also helps advance the development of commercial culture in Pingtan art.

The gradually developed advertising resources in newspapers and magazines since the late Qing Dynasty have provided a platform for Suzhou Pingtan.

This newspaper recorded *The Four Famous Courtesans in Zhang Garden* (游张园四大金刚) at the turn of the autumn and winter of 1897, originally just for fun, but unexpectedly, it gained attention and turned into a popular topic. The four females mentioned within—Lin (Daiyu), Lu (Lanfen), Jin (Xiaobao), and Zhang (Shuyu), became widely known, and their reputations have greatly increased. (Four Famous Courtesans in Shanghai, 1899)

According to the research of Catherine Vance Yeh (2012, p. 229), during this period, the *Game Newspaper* spared no effort in reporting the four women (the four famous courtesans). The newspaper published various brief biographies, love letters, proses, and poems written by their admirers for them. Through newspapers, their public performance in Shanghai turned into national news. These four women used newspapers as their commercial platform in Shanghai. During the Republic of China era (1912-1949), Suzhou Pingtan artists took advantage of modern media, widely publicizing themselves through the press and attracting media’s attention to expand their business circles. Records of such activities are abundant.

Since the birth of radio in Shanghai in the 1920s, Suzhou Pingtan performers have built an inseparable bond with it. Being a new medium for Pingtan performers to gain popularity, the commercial operation of radio strengthened the business awareness of Pingtan performers, and through radio, they gained greater economic

benefits. The scheduling of Pingtan programs on radio far exceeded that of other entertainment programs (Lu, 1933a)⁸. As reported in the newspapers,

the fortunes of storytellers have flourished with the rise of radio... Several previously unknown storytellers are now quite wealthy, and as for “Xiangdang” (响档 the most popular performers), they earn thousands of *yuan* per month. Xue Xiaoqing (1901-1980), known for singing *The Pearl Pagoda* (珍珠塔), and Zhao Jiaqiu (1898-1977), famous for *Sad and Ridiculous Causes* (啼笑因缘), have both started taking cars. (Miao, 1933)

This kind of reports was everywhere, for instance, “After the popularity of radio, a new breed of storytellers emerged, enjoying great success for a time. The value of storytelling has also increased significantly” (Lu, 1933b). At that time, Pingtan performers who were broadcasting on the radio obtained more economic profits due to their special status, with a large portion of their income coming from advertising fees paid by clients (Zhou, 2003, p. 61). It was reported that “most programs were paid by stores. Depending on the program content and the quality of the broadcaster, fees varied. The most famous storytelling performers could earn 500 *yuan* per month” (Xin, 1938).

Mass media provided a platform for many Pingtan performers. They used mass media like radio to advertise themselves, which became a trend at that time. As reported by a journalist: “Recently, several storytellers made use of their names to do business, often exaggerating their sidelines on radio broadcasts, and 45-minute section was turned into a lengthy self-promotion” (Yi, 1938). The renowned Pingtan performer, Zhao Jiaqiu, utilized radio broadcasts to advertise his sidelines.

During his radio show, whenever a customer makes a purchase or orders by phone, he explains it in great detail. Each 45-minute program was dominated by his own company’s detailed promotions for at least 30 minutes. After deducting advertisements and the opening ballad, only 10 minutes were left for the actual storytelling. (Shi, 1938)

The emergence and growth of radio broadcasting facilitated the commercialization of Pingtan art. Pingtan performers, through performances in story houses and on the radio, enjoyed rich income and rapidly rose in economic status.

Innovative Development of Pingtan Musicality in the Context of Mass Media

Shanghai’s advanced media and commercial culture greatly influenced the development of Suzhou Pingtan. To gain higher popularity and stand out among their peers, Pingtan performers took the advantages of modern mass media, promoting the repertoire of Suzhou Pingtan and the development of its singing style.

First, the Suzhou Pingtan repertoire changed. Traditional full-length stories were the core content of Suzhou Pingtan performances throughout its history. Classics such as *The Story of Yue Fei* (岳传), *The Pearl Pagoda* (珍珠塔), *The Jade Dragonfly* (玉蜻蜓), *The Golden Phoenix* (描金凤), *The Legend of the White Snake* (白蛇传), *The Records of the Three Kingdoms* (三国志), *The Romance of West Chamber* (西厢记), *Three Smiles* (三笑), *Heroes* (英烈), and *Cultural and Martial Arts* (文武双球) have always been the mainstay of Pingtan performances. An important change in the Shanghai-style Pingtan is the emergence and popularity of the opening ballad (开篇). The opening ballad is a new performance form developed after Suzhou Pingtan entered Shanghai. With the commercialization of modern mass media, the newly composed opening ballad gained wider recognition from audiences and became a popular part of the Pingtan. To boost its circulation, *Evening News* (新闻夜报) printed all Pingtan programs in Shanghai, along with the performers’ names, radio stations, and the schedules...

⁸ Data show that within 24 hours, there were over 120 Tanci programs on Shanghai radio broadcasts.

As a result, Pingtan lovers either subscribed to or purchased the *Evening News*, leading to its high sales (Chen, 1989, pp. 154-155). The advertising effect of the newspaper attracted scholars and literati to create more opening ballads to be published in the newspaper, promoting the development of the opening ballad of Pingtan. At the same time,

with the rise of radio, Pingtan artists were as popular as stars. With many listeners and high demand, the opening ballad also became important. Thus, almost every literatus with a bit of talent for rhymed verse started to create opening ballads for fun. Even those who could barely write coherently tried to write opening ballads. The resulting works were often messy, filled with patched-together phrases, with little regard for proper rhymes. (Records of Spending Summer With Storytelling (IV), 1936)

The broadcasting advantages of radio spurred the prosperity of opening ballads to the point where “newly composed works constantly appeared, and listeners began to favor opening ballads over the main performances” (Lu, 1933a). It is found that the rise of modern radio media promoted the growth of opening ballads in Pingtan, making singing advertisements via opening ballads very popular on the radio. Sanyou Industry (三友实业) used radio for commercial advertising, inviting the renowned writer Bing Xin (冰心, 1900-1999) to promote domestic products through opening ballads in Pingtan⁹. Radio stations such as Sanruitang, Fuxing, Yongsheng, Yuanming, Huadong, and Yasheng competed to show the schedules of the opening ballads in the newspapers¹⁰, making it a widespread trend. Major stations competed to hire Pingtan artists to perform the opening ballads to meet public demand. Thus, performances of the opening ballads increased repeatedly, nearly overshadowing the main storytelling performances (Ni, 1935, Preface 15). Advertisements for the collection of opening ballads frequently appeared in the *Shenbao*¹¹. The Shanghai-style opening ballads became a popular trend for a time.

Secondly, the reform of Suzhou Pingtan’s singing styles in the media context led to a variety of new schools. In this context, competition among Suzhou Pingtan artists became more intense compared to traditional performances in the story houses. They used media to secure their place and innovated singing styles of Pingtan to cater to public tastes and make themselves stand out. A newspaper recorded: With the rise of radio stations, Pingtan performances became highly popular. Yan Xueting (严雪亭, 1913-1983), with his quick wit and originality, could perform new works such as *The Legend of the Unknowns* (十三妹), *Daming Prefecture* (大名府), *Pan Jinlian* (潘金莲), and *Two Sisters* (姊妹花) on the radio, earning widespread acclaim in Shanghai (Shu, 1948). An important evolution in the Shanghai-style Suzhou Pingtan is the “Chongchang” (重唱 Pingtan duet), which was jokingly referred to their path to success. Examples include the improved “Ma Diao” (the Ma Rufeitune) by Shen Jian’an and Xue Xiaoqing, Xu Yunzhi’s “Enchanting Tune” (迷魂调), Chen Qidang’s “Hypnotic Tune” (催眠调), Zhou Yuquan’s “Slow Tune” (温吞调), and Jiang Yuequan’s “Casual Tune” (拗调), etc. Everyone has their own tricks, each with his or her unique skills, whether striving for success or content with lesser achievements (Bai, 1948). The specialized “Shanghai Style” column in newspapers also influenced the development of the Shanghai style in Pingtan art. “Xu Diao” (the Xu Yunzhi Tune), “Jiang Diao” (the Jiang Yuequan Tune), and “Shen-Xue Diao” (The tune of Shen Jian’an and Xue Xiaoqing), all excelled in singing and music playing over speaking and joking. Their popular tunes established their status in the Pingtan field. Female Pingtan artist Fan Xuejun was known for singing new stories and striving to “make storytelling more theatrical” (Dingdongguanzhu, 1949). Other lesser-known Pingtan artists also achieved success in the flourishing media

⁹ See *Journal of the Radio Association*. Issue 21, November 1, 1930.

¹⁰ See *New Spring and Autumn*. June 28, 1932, 4th edition.

¹¹ See *Shengbao*. January 14, 1934, 1st edition.

environment by using unique skills. The phrase “In the waves of Shanghai’s story houses, artists continually toss about with innovation” (Shihuangbanlao, 1949) aptly describes this trend.

It was often reported in the newspapers that Suzhou Pingtan artists catered to diverse needs of audience by innovation.

Pingtan artists have traditionally used Suzhou dialect for both speaking and singing, similar to how Yue Opera (越剧) used Shaoxing dialect and Shanghai Opera (申曲) used Pudong dialect. Since the success of *Sad and Ridiculous Causes*, Zhu Yaoxiang and Zhao Jiaqiu started to use Mandarin for the spoken parts, marking a novel style to attract audiences. (Qian, 1948)

The reform of Suzhou Pingtan’s singing styles in modern Shanghai saw the emergence of many renowned artists and various styles. This was influenced by both the cultural environment of urban Shanghai and the promotion of modern mass media.

Evolution of Mass Media and Pingtan Performances

The advanced mass media in modern Shanghai to some extent changed the forms of Pingtan art. Traditional Suzhou Pingtan includes speaking, joking, music playing, singing, and acting. Pingtan performance on the radio, however, being an auditory art, lacked the element of “acting”, and therefore altered the traditional form of Pingtan art. In traditional story houses, listeners and storytellers face each other, creating a strong sense of presence where the storyteller’s expressions and emotions can be deeply felt. The storytellers sit upright, frequently interacting with the audience, using their voice, eyes, and hands in a continuous performance. However, Pingtan art broadcasted via radio loses some of this vitality.

For Pingtan artists, radio studios provide a more relaxed environment where they can freely express their speaking and singing skills. However, over time, performing on the radio can become a habit that lacks one of the key features of Pingtan—“acting”. On the radio, unlike on stage, there’s no need for facial expressions or gestures, and the storytelling must be slower and clearer. Once performers develop this habit, it becomes difficult to revert to the traditional stage performance style. Pingtan artist Jiang Binchu (1897-1939), when performing at Penglai Market, adopted a style similar to his radio performance, so he was criticized as “a zombie” (Pan, 1933, pp. 1-9). This happened because, unlike in traditional story houses, radio studios allowed storytellers more freedom without having to act out the characters’ gestures or behaviors. Some new performers or those performing newly composed stories would even place the script on the table and read directly from it. It is said that Xu Jixiang (1899-1943), who narrated *The Legend of Heroes* (英烈传), was so weak that, for a period, he would lie on the sofa in the studio while telling stories, with a stool beside him to use for knocking the Xingmu (醒木 the attention-catching block) (Jian, 1935, pp. 108-111).

Radio stations, as the cradle of the revival of storytelling art, attracted a lot of audience and often became a platform for younger artists to showcase their talents. However, radio programs offered much more convenience than traditional Pingtan story houses. With scripts available to read and no restrictions, many performers became complacent without striving for improvement (Cheng, 1941, p. 1). The vivid, engaging, and humorous performances of traditional Pingtan artists could not be fully displayed. To some extent, radio altered the essential performances of Pingtan art.

Mass Media and the Process of Becoming Stars for Pingtan Artists

In modern Shanghai, mass media turned Pingtan artists into entertainment targets for public consumption. Advertisements and detailed reports about Pingtan artists in newspapers and other media brought their private

lives into the public eyes. Their daily routines and personal grudges were exposed to the public, turning them into public figures and promoting their process of becoming stars.

Mass media's reporting on the appearance and talent of Pingtan artists promoted the development of Shanghai-style Pingtan art. Various newspapers played a role in the process of making Pingtan artists celebrity-like, including main newspapers like *Shenbao*, *The News*, and *The Shanghai Times*, tabloids like *Holmes*, *Jingangzhuan* (金刚钻), *Social Daily*, *Daguangming Daily* (大光明), *Small Daily*, *Shanghai Daily*, *Shanghai People's Daily*, and *Tiebao* (铁报), as well as magazines such as *Red Rose*, *Red Magazine*, *Southeast Wind*, *Hundred Beauties*, *Scenery*, *Tide*, and *Sea Breeze*. In addition, there were many specialized Pingtan publications, including *Storytelling Magazine*, *Tanci Pictorial*, *Weekly Storytelling*, *Storytelling in Shanghai*, and *Storytelling Weekly*. These newspapers, whether through advertisements, artist news, or promotional articles, all contributed to the process of making Pingtan artists celebrity-like. When *Shenbao* was founded, it frequently reported on the charm of female Tanci (storytelling) artists, focusing on their looks and talent. For example:

The Tanci girl is truly as beautiful as a flower. She gently turns the tuning pegs on the *pipa*, with the ring glinting as she moves. The most enchanting moment is when she pretends to smile, gently shaking her painted fan and adjusting her dark hair. (Bamboo Branch Song in Hubei, 1872)

Another example:

With gentle and graceful poise, she picks up the *pipa* and carefully tunes the strings. Just a few lines into the opening ballad, guests are drawn to her, and she has to put down her *pipa* to entertain these admirers. (Thoughts About Shanghai—to the Tune of Die Lian Hua, 1872)

At the same time, since its establishment, *Shenbao* frequently published information about female Tanci artists. In July 1872 alone, *Shenbao* mentioned 31 female performers in articles such as *New Songs of Female Tanci Artists* and *Odes to Female Pingtan Artists*. According to an advertisement in *Game Newspaper*, the Yipinlou Story House in Shanghai “invited 26 top performers from various regions, including Xiao Guifen and Lin Baozhu”, highlighting their charm and talents¹².

Since the 1920s and 1930s, Pingtan has become the most popular folk art in urban Shanghai. Reports on the talent of Pingtan artists were a common expectation of the media, fans, reporters, and listeners. Newspapers frequently published articles and advertisements that shaped the image of Pingtan artists and highlighted their skills. An advertisement stated, our company has expanded its entertainment offerings, inviting Tanci artists such as Wu Xigeng, Shen Lianfang, Zhu Lan'an, and Ju'an, as well as storyteller Ye Shi'e¹³. Other descriptions include:

Wei Yuqing: being gentle and elegant with the demeanor of a scholar, inherently kind with actions matching words, talented, and truly unparalleled. Fan Yushan: being generous and forthright, always open to advice, keen-eyed and kind-hearted, and never dull. Li Baiquan: being honest and virtuous by nature with moral integrity, knowledgeable, and always humble. Cai Xiaofang: being young and honest, free from the vices of the times, endowed with a bright future. Zhang Hongsheng: being extremely honest and talented with a slightly critical nature, however, these small defects do not affect his promising future. (Ming, 1935)

Some other reports commented that the female Tanci artist Zhang Lijun “appears lively and beautiful on stage, impressing frequent listeners, who consider her as a promising talent... She is regarded as the top beauty among today's performers” (Heng, 1947). “Jin Xiaotian's performance of *Three Smiles*... is very natural and interesting.

¹² See *Game Newspaper*. August 30, 1898, 5th edition.

¹³ See *Shengbao*. October 7, 1916, 15th edition.

She has a casual style on stage, speaking freely. Her elegance and poise are fascinating and leave the audience in awe” (Heng, 1948). These reports helped promote the process of making Pingtan artists stars.

At the same time, newspapers often set up special columns and features to promote their favorite performers. Female Tanci artist Xu Qinfang (1907-1985) was admired by Huang Bohui, the manager of *Tiebao*, who published a special issue with a large red-lettered headline in her honor (Mo, 1937). *Shengbao* (生报) published a special issue to praise Xie Hongtian (Special Issue on Xie Hongtian, 1939). Supporters of Wang Meiyun published *Traces of Fragrance and Snow* for her and promised to publish her writings in *Libao* (力报) and *Xibao* (锡报) (Wang, 1941). *Libao* published *A Special Issue for the Female Tanci Artist Qian Qinxian*, with journalists Zhang Jianfan, Wu Guanli, and Zheng Guoyi writing for her fame (Zuo, 1941). *Libao* also created sections like “Records of Female Tanci Artists’ Gossip”, “Soft Words From Red Lips”, and “Records of the Beauties in Storytelling Field”. *Fenbao* (奋报) opened columns such as “Records of Jade Guzheng”, “Records of Plum Blossoms”, and “Records of String Rhythms”. Even ordinary performers could quickly gain public attention and become stars through media promotion. “Recently, there have been many articles praising Xu Qinfang and Xu Xiaoqin, with a flood of praise, as if they are already top performers” (He, 1948). Pingtan artists, especially female ones, quickly became popular stars with the support of newspapers.

Mass media also utilized Pingtan artists to create “news events” and generate celebrity effects. After the establishment of the Pingtan professional journal *Storytelling Weekly*, Fan Xuejun, the Queen of Pingtan, was invited to write articles to attract readers. They also staged a paper battle between Fan Xuejun and Zhang Hongsheng, starting with Zhang’s article *Fan Xuejun’s Real Father* on the second edition of November 9, 1948 and ending with Fan’s *Notes From the Strings* on the fourth edition of December 5, 1948 issue. The back-and-forth paper battle attracted a lot of readers to *Storytelling Weekly*. Fan and Zhang both gained sudden fame, becoming news figures. *Evening Paper* fabricated a romantic story about Tanci artist Huang Jingfen to arouse readers’ interest (Huang Jingfen Finds Fortune in Misfortune, 1948). Additionally, *Storytelling Weekly* organized a selection of Shanghai’s Top 10 storytellers for over three months. After more than 100 days of voting by readers and listeners, the Top 10 Pingtan artists were chosen, creating quite a sensation in Shanghai. Such marketing strategy brought a positive impact and promoted the process of becoming stars for Pingtan artists.

In the context of mass media, Pingtan artists’ daily lives, careers, and especially their professional development, were closely tied to media. Mass media in Shanghai shaped the careers of many Pingtan artists, driving innovation in Pingtan art and contributing to its distinct Shanghai style.

Conclusion

Suzhou Pingtan, arising in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, is rooted in traditional socio-cultural environment. Its performance styles, repertoire, and organizations (such as Guangyu Society) all reflect the essence of Suzhou Pingtan. Since its introduction to Shanghai, Suzhou Pingtan has undergone the process of modernization in its performance styles and artistic forms. Moreover, influenced by the modern urban culture of Shanghai, Suzhou Pingtan shows an increasingly strong trend towards the Shanghai style. The evolution of Shanghai-style Suzhou Pingtan in modern Shanghai is owe to a complex set of reasons, including the influence of the urban Shanghai-style culture, its internal development factors, and the well-developed mass media culture of Shanghai during that period. The growth of Suzhou Pingtan is closely linked to mass media, and its development in Shanghai is driven by mass media. Especially in the 1920s and 1930s, the impact of Shanghai’s mass media on the growth of entertainment culture was evident. A reporter at that time noted the role of media in the growth of film,

“Shanghai’s newspapers and magazines promoted films, making them more advanced and popular... In contrast, Beiping (now Beijing) lacked public opinion, so audiences couldn’t judge the quality of films or develop interest in films” (Shen, 1928, p. 7). Mass media plays an indispensable role in the commercialization, performance styles, artistic forms, musical innovation, and the process of becoming stars for Pingtan artists, which are all characteristics of the Shanghai style. Exploring the evolution of Suzhou Pingtan with Shanghai style in the context of mass media offers an important perspective for the relevant research. Furthermore, the urban culture of modern Shanghai and its thriving mass media also influence some other local operas and folk arts from across the country, promoting their development with Shanghai-style.

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