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Food and Local Place

Zhu Ziqing’s Essay “Speaking of Yangzhou” (Shuo Yangzhou, 1934)

Introduced, translated, and annotated by Antonia Finnane

In 1934, the publication of Chatting at Leisure about Yangzhou (Xianhua Yangzhou) was a new guidebook for this old and now dilapidated city, precipitating a war of words in the literary world of Republican China. The author of the book was Yi Junzu (1898–1972), a minor literary figure and Guomindang party member who in his official capacity (he worked for the Jiangsu Department of Education) had been forced to reside in Yangzhou for a few months in 1932. He was not impressed by the city, and in a lengthy introduction to the guidebook he described it in derogatory terms. Local outrage resulted, and numerous well-known writers of the time were stirred to print. Among them was Zhu Ziqing (1898–1948), whose essay “Speaking of Yangzhou” (Shuo Yangzhou) was published in a popular literary magazine a few months after the guidebook first appeared.

Zhu Ziqing is regarded as one of the finest essayists of his generation. Born to a family of Shaoxing origin, he spent much of his childhood in Yangzhou, where his father held a minor official position. Schoolchildren in China are familiar with him as the author of “Seeing His Back” (Beijing), an essay written about parting from his father at Pukou railway station in 1917. His father was at that time looking for a new post in Nanjing, across the river from Pukou, while Zhu himself was returning to his studies at Peking University. Father and son had not long since observed the last rites for Zhu’s grandmother in Yangzhou.

There was no rail connection to Yangzhou at that time. Pukou, one hundred kilometers southwest of Yangzhou, was the nearest station on the northern line, leading to Tianjin. Zhenjiang, across the Yangzi River to the south, was the nearest on the eastern. Located at the hub of an old communications network centered on water transport, Yangzhou was marginalized by the creation of railways in the early twentieth century. In the 1930s, it looked like a thoroughly old-fashioned place. To Yi Junzu it represented everything that China needed to discard: superstition, laziness, decadence, lack of hygiene, decrepit housing, public disorder, and a general moral turpitude that inclined women toward prostitution and men toward unpatriotic activities.

Among the many essays written in response to Yi’s book, Zhu Ziqing’s is distinguished by the author’s refusal to engage with the premises of Yi’s critique. He bypasses the issue of nationalism taken up by Lu Xun (1881–1936), and of the legacy of the past, taken up by both Yu Dafu (1896–1945) and—from a different viewpoint—Cao Jun (1900–1972). He does mention the association of Yangzhou with prostitutes, but dismissively. He does not especially defend the reputation of Yangzhou people. His own experience of Yangzhou society, where by his own account he was something of an outsider, was by no means all pleasant, as he states.

Instead, an essay that starts off being about the idiosyncrasies of local society ends up being an essay about food: nuts and melon seeds, noodles in soup, dried bean-curd threads, soup dumplings and stuffed steamed buns, among other things. At the time of writing, he was living in Beijing (or Beiping as it was then known), having been appointed to the Department of Literature at Tsinghua University in 1925. This may be why he was able to write so vividly about aspects of gastronomic life that in Yangzhou itself were
unremarkable: the fragrance of good sesame oil being added to five-spice beef; the crashing sound of gingko nuts being tossed in the wok; the succulence of well-cooked noodles steeped in pure broth. Brought to reflect on his distant hometown by the rash of articles about it, he was, very probably, assailed by a nostalgia that had its sharpest expression in memories of food.

In writing on this subject, Zhu Ziqing was not breaking new ground in Chinese literature. Food had historically been subjected to a range of literary treatments in works with which educated people of the Republican era were familiar: classic novels of the late Ming and Qing periods, poetry, "bamboo-branch songs" (zhushe), "random jottings" (biji), and colophons on paintings of food—fish, eggplant, melon, and bamboo shoots by Yangzhou painters Li Shan (1668–1760) and Luo Pin (1733–1799), for example. Eighteenth-century literati and bon vivant Yuan Mei (1716–1797) had even written a cookbook with which Zhu Ziqing, an admirer of Yuan Mei's poetry, was undoubtedly acquainted. Charles Laughton has remarked of essayists such as Zhu—the "modern promoters of the literature of leisure"—that they found something familiar in the "informal prose" works of late Ming and Qing writers. A comparison of "Speaking of Yangzhou" with Yuan Mei's writing on cooks and cooking would suggest just that.

Earlier writings about and from Yangzhou contained detailed passages on food, and how and where to eat it, in ways that seem to anticipate Zhu Ziqing's essay. "Yangzhou is known for its Huizhou noodles," wrote Lin Sumen in 1808: "one bite, and the mouth will be watered." The broth he described was made with chicken, fish, and pork, sounding very like the broth described by Zhu Ziqing the following century. The teahouses of my hometown are the finest in the empire," wrote Li Dou some years earlier, proceeding to explain how they were constructed and fitted out. The best was the Double Rainbow, with its specialty "Double Rainbow roasted sesame buns," filled variously with sugar, meat, dried vegetables, or amaranth (ciancai). At such places the spoil sons of the Yangzhou elite whiled away their mornings, as memorably depicted in the nineteenth-century Yangzhou novel The Dream of Romance (Fengyou meng). At the other end of the social spectrum were working men who conducted business at the wharf beyond the South Gate and supped there on bowls of dried bean-curd threads, a local specialty that in the 1930s was still capable of exciting Zhu Ziqing to heights of lyricism.

Not only is the fact of writing about food consistent across time among these Yangzhou writers; food was also steadily used by them to evoke what is local. Was Zhu Ziqing then simply continuing an established trend in local literature, or did writing about food in the Republican era take new forms? Clearly, the vernacular essay of the 1930s was a literary form unknown a century earlier, but the theme of this particular essay would seem to provide strong grounds for placing it within a tradition of writing about food. This would be consistent with the position Mark Swislocki takes in Culinary Nostalgia.

Yet the construction of and self-conscious engagement with that tradition was a twentieth-century phenomenon. Zhu Ziqing was subtle in the way he engaged with the past, and often overtly resistant to its pull: hence his critical comments in the opening lines of this essay, where he rejects Cao Juren's romanticized appreciation of Yangzhou. In this he was unlike another modern essayist, Lin Yutang (1895–1976), whose essay on "Eating and Drinking" was devoted in part to poking fun at attitudes to food in the English-speaking world and otherwise to parading before the reader's eye significant names and texts concerned with China's culinary history. Zhu Ziqing's essay eschewed nationalist issues and focused on local rather than international boundaries. It was also very much concerned with the present. A reference in the essay to the seventeenth-century writer Zhang Dai (1597–1679) shows him pointedly distancing himself from the past, in a decidedly modern way. If his description of noodles resonates with Lin Sumen's in an earlier era, his writing shows a distinctly modernist awareness of authorial position, audience, and the possibilities offered by an ambiguous, less than straightforward text.

In concluding a famous essay called "Selling Candy" (Mai tang), Zhou Zuoren (1885–1967) expressed his regret that so few literati thought it worth their while to write about food, which he thought an important way of writing about localities. Yet a number of writers active around this time were producing essays about food in a local context. Such essays were usually written away from home, typically in Beijing or Shanghai. For the writers, food plainly provided both a reminder of home and a way of remembering it. In 1923, Ye Shengtao (1894–1988), who was born in Suzhou, wrote wistfully of lotus root and, especially, water shield, which "back home we enjoy almost every day [. . .]. Of course here in Shanghai we don't enjoy this indulgence."

Whether the food was in itself important or was being used to talk about something else is worth considering. Zhu Ziqing's "Summer Days in Yangzhou" (Yangzhou de xiaari, 1929), written five years earlier than "Speaking of Yangzhou," is structurally similar to the later essay. He commences with the observation that when people (presumably in Beijing) heard the name "Yangzhou," they would usually respond by wagging their heads and
uttering the words: "A fine place! A fine place!" His comment on this is very like his comment on Cao Juren, in the opening lines of "Speaking of Yangzhou." In both cases, he was at pains to disabuse readers of illusions based on mere "impressions from poetry and history."

In both essays, too, Zhu either implicitly or explicitly compares his hometown with Beijing, or takes issue with views of Yangzhou in Beijing. In "Speaking of Yangzhou," his subject is food, and his point of departure is the muddled ideas in Beijing about Huai-Yang cuisine. In "Summer Days," his subject is water, something that defined the south and was absent from the north. The lakes of the former imperial gardens and the Summer Palace hardly counted in his view: "great flat expanses of water that the eye sees all at once," not at all comparable to Yangzhou's Slender West Lake (Shou Xihu). He goes on to talk about boats and boating on the lake with a level of incidental detail comparable to his description of food in "Speaking of Yangzhou."

The appeal of food as a topic is evident in the earlier essay. On the banks of Slender West Lake stood teahouses that served steamed dumplings to the passing boats, the recollection of which led Zhu to reflect: "Yangzhou's steamed dumplings are really not bad. I have been in seven or eight places since leaving Yangzhou, and I have never had such good dumplings. That really is something worth remembering." But these lines serve simply as a coda, operating in the same way as the concluding section on famous sites in the later essay. The weight of the author's attention in "Summer Days" is on the lake, just as in "Speaking of Yangzhou" it is on food. A natural feature of his hometown in the earlier essay gives way to culinary culture in the later, but both fit broadly into the category of everyday-life things, which, for some essayists in the 1920s and 1930s, had become the stuff of writing. These things lent themselves to ruminating on the village or hometown, which might in turn have been a way of writing about an ordinary, everyday China from which the big metropolises were far removed. Food was but one of numerous referents available to the writer seeking to pursue these themes.

At the same time, it is clear that for Zhu Ziqing, writing about food was not necessarily undertaken in the service of writing about home at all. In "Things to Eat" (Chide), written in 1935, he introduced readers to the food culture of England in an essay remarkably different from Lin Yutang's comparative essay "Eating and Drinking." Needless to say, he did not wax as enthusiastic over chips and crumpets in London as over bean-curd threads and steamed dumplings in Yangzhou, but this essay, like "Speaking of Yangzhou," is written in dialectical mode. He begins by noting the poor reputation of English food, a theme on which he elaborates detachedly before turning to what eating in England was actually like, where people did it, their likes and dislikes. He notes the range of restaurants—French, Italian, and Cantonese—together with teahouses, oyster bars, and chain-store cafés such as Lyons and ABC. He describes what crumpets are, "pitted with little holes, like honeycomb," not too thin, not too soft, a bit chewy, with a wonderful smell, and pleasing appearance, which accounted for the fact that they were steadily displacing the humble muffin. He notes the English penchant for afternoon tea with toast and butter, or if guests were invited, with ham and watercress sandwiches. He was diverted by the fondness of Londoners for nuts in the shell, and described how these were cracked open with a special tool, making a sharp sound, bits of shell and nuts flying everywhere—"great fun!"27

"Things to Eat" is a light, informative, and rather affectionate treatment of a food culture that has rarely received encomiums. Considered in conjunction with "Speaking of Yangzhou," it suggests that, in the middle of the 1930s, when the nation was in crisis and the times out of joint, it was possible to write about food and drink in terms sufficient unto themselves. While "Speaking of Yangzhou" was unarguably an essay about local place, it also, arguably, had another subject. A bit of it, surely, was just about small dishes (xiaochi). The telltale coda in his 1929 essay "Summer Days" lets us know that the poetry of steamed dumplings had long been germinating in Zhu Ziqing's breast. "Speaking of Yangzhou," a remarkably cool intervention in a now long-forgotten controversy, ultimately survives as a tribute to Yangzhou's bean-curd threads, well-cooked noodles, and steamed dumplings—all simply delicious.

**Speaking of Yangzhou**

Reading Cao Juren's essay "Chatting at Leisure about Yangzhou," published in issue no. 10 of this magazine, I couldn't help feeling that it was much more engaging than the famous book of that name. Yet while the book was too disparaging of Yangzhou, Mr. Cao has been rather too glowing. And it's not even a matter of being too glowing, since he has never actually been to Yangzhou. It's that he has relied too much on impressions from
poetry and history. These are of course aspects of Yangzhou, but they belong to the past. The present-day city does not present us with such a rosy picture.

I first came to Yangzhou when I was seven, and lived there till I went away to school at the age of twenty. My family was not registered in this locality, and in those years my father was still often away on business in other provinces, so we didn’t have much to do with the big families of the town. I didn’t share in their high-toned pastimes—visits to famous sites, poetry recitals, drinking games, paintings and calligraphy, haute cuisine. I actually knew nothing about such things. So despite living in Yangzhou for all that time, I never came to know it really well. That’s something I regret.

I just recall that after the restoration episode during the 1911 Revolution, a time father was very ill, we were fleeced by the ruffian running a so-called military government; and during my few years in middle school, I was witness to the antics of the so-called shuaizi gangs. Shuaizi is a Yangzhou-dialect word, which can mean somewhere spineless or craven, and also someone who couldn’t give a damn. It’s the latter sense that applies to the shuaizi gangs, of course. They were mostly the offspring of former government officials. They abused the power of their families, or of the faction they belonged to, and often created disturbances in public places—the theater, for example, where they would refuse to buy tickets, and then jeer and boo at the play. They were forever taking people to court, and were also known for harassing women.

Something even more notable about Yangzhou is the way in which servants of the local gentry were able to give orders to the district police chief. They used to swagger around town. All this was in the fifth or sixth year of the Republic, not while the Qing monarchy was still in place. I myself was young and full of spirit then, and would be enraged by their behavior. But the words of the weak carry no weight. I just had to bite my tongue.

Yangzhou used to be a place of some substance, as Mr. Cao has observed. Now that the salt monopoly is no longer in operation, it is just a small city without what you would call “visible means of support.” Most people there seem oblivious to this fact. Their view of themselves is entirely at odds with reality. They epitomize the meaning of “a big fish in a small pond.”

Yangzhou people are sometimes called Yang xuzi. Xuzi is used in two senses: making a lot of fuss about nothing, and talking something up. Both senses point to a tendency to bluster and bluster. Another term for Yangzhou people is Yang pan (Yangzhou dish). For example, if you have bought something at a high price, people will joke that you are a Yang pan, or a shopkeeper’s prices are too high, you can quiz him, “do you think you’re dealing with a Yang pan?” A pan is something you hold with both hands to show people, and it’s a good word for describing Yangzhou types with pretensions to grandeur. Then there’s what’s called the “merchant set” (shang-pai), a term mocking men who emulate the luxurious lifestyles of the salt merchants, the grandest of the grand. But this is only talking about the general situation. There are also gentlemen in Yangzhou, hardworking, earnest men. Some of my most dearly esteemed friends are from Yangzhou.

Mention the name Yangzhou, and many people will think of a place that produces women, yet I grew up there without ever seeing an obviously alluring woman on the street. Was it perhaps the case that few women were venturing out onto the streets at that time? But this word “produce” is used in the sense of producing lamb’s wool, or producing apples, and when in former times people talked about “producing women” (chu nüren), they usually meant concubines or prostitutes. In the Dream Reminiscences of Tao’an (Tao’an mengyi) there is a passage on “The Thin Horses of Yangzhou” (Yangzhou shouma) that records “producing women” in this sense. Personally, I have no acquaintance with the practice, and customs such as taking concubines and visiting brothels are moreover gradually disappearing. Sooner or later, the phrase “producing women” will have lost all meaning.

Other people think of Yangzhou as a place where people eat well. I can guarantee this. When people in Beiping talk about Jiangsu food, they usually mean something very sweet and oily. Only now that Huai-Yang food has become available do they realize not all Jiangsu food is sweet, even if they still think of it as oily, unlike Shandong food, which is very light.
fact, the oily style is Zhenjiang food. When that's served up you'll find it unbearably greasy. Yangzhou food prepared in the kitchen of a salt merchant family may not be as light as Shandong food, but it is succulent and full of zest. The flavors are fine and fresh, and the colors look wonderful.

Yangzhou is also famous for its noodle houses. The best thing about Yangzhou noodles is the pure flavor of the broth. What they call “white broth” is made from stewing the different meats in it: chicken, duck, fish, pork. What's good about it is that it's really thick, like eating bear's paw. Then there is “clear broth,” which is invariably chicken broth, and is really nothing out of the ordinary. Experts like their noodles “well cooked.” Ordinarily, noodles are just placed in a bowl and the broth poured over them. “Well cooked” means letting the noodles cook as a while in the broth, to enable them to absorb the flavor a little.

The most famous thing about Yangzhou is its teahouses. Whatever time you go, morning or night, they're always packed. They serve an immense variety of things to eat. Once you're seated and the tea has been steeped, peddlers come round selling a variety of snacks. They hold dun-colored wicker trays set out with little bags of things such as melon seeds, peanuts, and fried salted beans. Then there are the ones who fry up gingko nuts. The nuts are cooked on a portable wok, making a tremendous sound as they are shoveled around. First you say how many you want, then the peddler fries them up. They cook till the shell explodes, exposing the luminous yellow kernel. The peddler shoves them into the wire lid and serves them up hot and fragrant. And there are peddlers who sell five-spice beef. Get one of them to spread some out on a dried lotus leaf, call the waiter to bring a bit of good quality sesame oil, mix it in and eat it slowly. You can also buy white liquor from peddlers. Yangzhou people commonly drink white liquor.

Then you can ask the waiter to heat up some dried bean-curd threads for you. The dried bean-curd threads people in Beiping eat these days are what are known as cooked dried threads. They taste very strong, and although they're good for cooking a dish, they're not necessarily suitable for snacks. To make hot dried threads, you must take a large piece of dried white bean curd, slice it swiftly into thin slices, then again into fine threads. Place the threads in a small bowl and pour boiling water over them to let them cook. Then, after squeezing the water out, shape them into a cone, tip some sesame oil over the top, sprinkle the top of the cone with some shrimps and dried bamboo shoots, and it's done. It takes longer to say than to do. One minute you're looking at the bean curd being sliced, next it's being served up to you, all in the blink of an eye.

When you've cleaned up the hot dried threads, you have plenty of room for other things. Follow up with steamed dumplings. The soup dumplings served in the Huai-Yang restaurants in Beiping are really good, and rarely to be had in Yangzhou. Actually Huaiyin is the relevant name here. Yangzhou should not claim credit for them. Yangzhou steamed dumplings include pork dumplings, crab dumplings, dumplings stuffed with pork and bamboo shoots—these hardly require mention. The most mouthwatering things are steamed buns stuffed with vegetables, open-face vegetable dumplings, and steamed buns stuffed with dried preserved vegetables. The vegetables chosen are of the tenderest, minced finely, and flavored with a little sugar and oil. The dumplings are steamed till they're snow white and piping hot. They melt in your mouth, leaving a faint pleasurable aftertaste. The dried vegetables are also minced, with salt and oil added, giving them just the right degree of moisture; chewed slowly, they emit a flavor something like olives. Partaking of a little of every kind of snack in this way will not be too much for you. If you have a dinner engagement, you can stroll off at your leisure. But old-fashioned teahouse proprietors have their standards about all this. They will not stand for customers, locals or outsiders, who just pay a casual visit to the teahouse, wolf down their food, and then stagger out holding their bellies.

As for sightseeing around Yangzhou, the most important things are waterways and boats. I have written about this subject elsewhere, so can omit it here. The city has many historical sites, both within and outside the walls: the Tower of Literary Selections (Wenxuanlou), Heavenly Protection Wall (Tianbaocheng), Thunder Dam (Leitang), Twenty-four Bridge (Ershiquan), and so on. Yet few people pay any attention to these places. Most go just to Shi Kefa's Plum Blossom Hill (Meihualing), and no further. If you have a little leisure time, you might find it diverting to invite two or three people along to seek out some secluded ancient sites. You should of course take along some peanuts, five-spice beef, and a little white liquor.

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Notes

The author thanks Charles Laughlin for reading and commenting on this essay.
1. Yi Junzuo, Xianhua Yangzhou (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1934).

4. For a translation with commentary, and an introduction to Zhu Ziqing's life, see David E. Pollard, trans. and ed., The Chinese Essay (London: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2000), 216-221. The essay's title, as Pollard observes, is difficult to render in English and comes in many forms, the most common of which is probably "Back View."

5. Yu's diatribe was informed by accusations of collaboration on the part of Yangzhou people in Shanghai with the Japanese invading force during the 1932 occupation. See Emily Honig, "The Politics of Prejudice: Subei People in Revolutionary-En Shanghai," Modern China 15, no. 3 (1989): 243-274.


10. Spence, "Ch'ing," 272-274.


16. Li Dou, Yangzhou huafanglu, 166 (7/4).

17. See, in addition to the works already mentioned, Margaret B. Wan, "Local Fiction of the Yangzhou Region: Qinfengzhua," in Lifestyle and Entertainment in Yangzhou, ed. Lucie B. Olovovä and Vibeke Borch (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2009), 193.


19. See the discussion in Laughlin, Literature of Leisure, 25.


23. Charles Laughlin raises precisely this question with reference to Zhou Zuoren's "Wild Herbs in My Homeyard" (Guzi de yucai), see Laughlin, Literature of Leisure, 49-53.


25. Darvuda, Zhou Zuoren, 146.

26. On the origins of these cafes, see Michael Ball and David Sutherland, An Economic History of London, 1800-1914 (London: Routledge, 2001), 157.


28. Having published this essay in Worldly Affairs (Renjian shi) in 1934 (see above, note 4), Zhu Ziqing then wished to include it in a book of collected essays, Ni wo (You and me, 1937). The publisher refused, due to concerns that negative comments about Yangzhou in the essay might cause a repeat of the original controversy. Jiang Jien and Wu Weigong, comps., Zhu Ziqing niangpu (Anqing: Anhui jiaoyu, 1996), 138.

29. That is, Ye Jianzuo's Chating at Leisure about Yangzhou, see above, note 1.

30. The ruffian was Sun Tianheng, a native of Yangzhou, who took advantage of the 1911 Revolution to "restore the Han" in Yangzhou in November 1911. He was ousted by Xu Bashan (1886-1913). See Zhongping Chen, Modern China's Network Revolution: Chambers of Commerce and Sociopolitical Change in the Early Twentieth Century (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011), 186-187.

31. The four-character phrase yelang zida, taken from the Records of the Historian (Shiji), literally means "a man who in the nighttime [when he cannot see anyone else for the purposes of comparison] thinks he is a big fellow."

32. On Dream Reminiscences of Tao'an and "The Thin Horses of Yangzhou," see the contributions of Philip Kafals and Antonia Finanne, in Chapters 3 and 19, respectively, in this volume.

33. A 1935 guidebook for Beiying lists eight Huai-Yang restaurants, at least some of which had been quite recently established. There were twice as many Shandong restaurants. Ma Zhixing, Lao Beiying lixing chunian (rpt. of Beiying lixing chunian, 1935; Beijing: Beiying yangshan, 1997), 255-257.

34. Huaiyin lies around three hundred kilometers north of Yangzhou, near the junction of the Huai River with the Grand Canal.

35. I have adopted this descriptive translation of taoren, from Martin Stutham, The Fragrant Vegetable: Simple Vegetarian Delicacies from the Chinese (Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, 1986), 80. There are many different sorts of small wrapped things in Chinese cuisine that have various names in Chinese but may have available English terms.

36. The reference here is to his essay "Summer Days in Yangzhou." See above, note 24.

37. The Tower of Literary Selections referred to here was a reconstructed edifice on the grounds of the Jingzhong Temple (Jingzhongsi) in the Old City of Yangzhou, but its name
also recalls the tower of the same name built in the early eighteenth century by Yangzhou’s famous scholar-official Ruan Yuan (1764–1849). See Tobie Meyer-Fong, Building Culture in Early Qing Yangzhou (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), chap. 3, esp. 114–126.

38 Heavenly Protection Wall (Tianbaocheng) is actually the name of a Nanjing site. Wei Minghua speculates that Zhu Ziqing may have written it down in error, when he meant rather Baoceng, that is, the old city wall in Shugang, northwest of the walled city. See Wu Zhouwen, “Zhu Ziqing yu Yangzhou mingcheng wenhua,” Yangzhou da xue xuebao (renwen shehui kexue ban) 11, no. 6 (2008): 46.

39 Thunder Dam (Leitang) is the site of the tomb of Su Yangdi (r. 604–618), who as heir apparent was responsible for the flowering of Jiangdu (Yangzhou) in the late sixth century.

40 On Twenty-four Bridge, see the description by Philip Kafalas in Chapter 3, note 8.

41 Plum Blossom Hill, situated outside the north wall of the city, was the memorial site for the Ming defender of the city, Shi Kefa (1601–1645), whose clothes were buried there.

16 | Transformations of Local Theater

The Yangzhou Opera Taking Command at Age One Hundred (Bai sui gua shuai, 1952–1958)

Introduced and annotated by Liu Zhen
and translated by Jiang Ji

Yangzhou Opera (Yangju) is one of the famous local arts of Yangzhou. In the twentieth century this art had two golden ages of revival. The first was from the 1930s to the 1940s, when Yangju was performed in dozens of theaters in Shanghai and had a wide audience, mainly among the lower classes. Yangzhou operas comprised not only traditional titles that were derived from flower-drum opera (huaguoxi), incense-fire plays (xianghuoxi), and Yangzhou confused-strumming drama (Yangzhou luantian), but also an abundance of adapted plays with long and complex stories such as Meng Lijun, Zheng Xiaojiao, The Monk Ji Gong (ji gong), Generals of the Yang Family (Yang jia ji), and Exchanging a Leopard Cat for a Prince (Limag huan taizi). The second period, from the 1950s to the 1960s, was the heyday of Yangzhou opera. In 1966 there were thirteen professional troupes in Jiangsu Province, and large numbers of outstanding plays had been created.

Taking Command at Age One Hundred (Bai sui gua shuai), which was adapted in the 1950s from a traditional play, was the most successful and influential piece at the time. It became a milestone in the development of Yangzhou opera, and also made this local drama famous all over the country. Taking Command at Age One Hundred drew its material from Twelve Widows’ Expedition toward the West (Shi'er guafu zhong xi), a traditional Yangzhou opera play that had not been seen on the stage for decades. There remained only a simple plot outline, a “scenario script” (mubiao), so the adapters Wu Baitao, Yin Zhou (Shi Zengxiang), Jiang Feng, and Zhong Fei chose to base their work on the recollections of Zhou Ronggen, an old Yangzhou opera artist, and also asked Rong Fenglou, an old storyteller in Nanjing, for detailed advice. Three of the four adapters had close connections to Yangzhou and the region around, and the main editor was from Yangzhou.