Ever since antiquity, teahouses, traditional theatres, public markets, elegant gardens, and other indoor or outdoor spaces in China have set the stage for regional storytelling and storysinging (shuochang). Local storytelling traditions that are still alive in China in oral transmission are traceable to the sixteenth century. More important, the tradition-bearers of Chinese storytelling/singing are still among us, and we may listen to their living performances even today.

The spectrum ranges from truly sophisticated art forms such as Suzhou storysinging (suzhou tanci), Yangzhou storytelling (Yangzhou pinghua) and southern love balladry (Nanguan) to all kinds of lesser known forms: rural or urban, professional or amateur, with or without music, rough or refined. Some genres are sung throughout, many alternate between singing and speech, or rely on speech altogether.

The concept of shuochang—shuo ‘tell’, chang ‘sing’—is broad in the sense that it includes professional, semi-professional and non-professional forms of verbal art, and embraces full-fledged artistic performance traditions along with ballad-singing, folksongs, nursery rhymes, jingles and ditties of all kinds. It encompasses artists who primarily offer public entertainment as well as ritual and religious specialists whose narrative performances cater to very specific needs.

In opposition to the wide range of the term shuochang, the notion quyi points to those genres of shuochang that are performed by professional artists for a public audience. In general the quyi genres require professional training, and most of these genres have a long history as professions.

Language is a major dividing criterion: the oral arts are intimately bound to the local dialects of the regions where they prevail. Many Chinese performance genres combine prose narrative with recitation or singing of poetry. However, only some of the Chinese oral performance genres of shuochang are truly prosimetric in the sense of having a balanced alternation between verse and prose. Other genres are cast in metric verse throughout, and still other genres, such as Yangzhou storytelling, are mainly in prose with only occasional poems inserted. Verse does not automatically imply singing or musical accompaniment. In some genres verse passages may be recited, not sung, so that the alternation between prose and verse has a different character from that of the genres with singing.

The sung genres are often accompanied with musical instruments. The most commonly used instruments are lutes, fiddles, drums, clappers, gongs and cymbals. The narrative content draws on everlasting historical, religious and spiritual themes, and ranges from classical tales about love, betrayal and heroism to ghost stories, gossip, local news, political commentary and commercial advertising.

While the oldest still extant genres may not be traceable beyond the sixteenth century, many features of contemporary storytelling and storysinging—for example the continuing predilection for percussive or string instruments—can be traced further back in history, to the Tang, Song and

---

**Story Singing and Storytelling in China**

**Workshop Programme**

**Thursday 16 to Sunday 19 October, 2014**

Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Island of San Giorgio, Venice

**Coordinated by Frank Kouwenhoven and Vibeke Børdalh**

Even in this anti-antiquarian, traditional theme-oriented, public markets, elegant gardens, and other indoor or outdoor spaces in China have set the stage for regional storytelling and storysinging (shuochang). Local storytelling traditions that are still alive in China in oral transmission are traceable to the sixteenth century. More important, the tradition-bearers of Chinese storysinging are still among us, and we may listen to their living performances even today. The spectrum ranges from truly sophisticated art forms such as Suzhou storysinging (shuochang—shuo ‘tell’, chang ‘sing’—) to all kinds of lesser known forms: rural or urban, professional or amateur, with or without music, rough or refined. Some genres are sung throughout, many alternate between singing and speech, or rely on speech altogether.

The concept of shuochang—shuo ‘tell’, chang ‘sing’—is broad in the sense that it includes professional, semi-professional and non-professional forms of verbal art, and embraces full-fledged artistic performance traditions along with ballad-singing, folksongs, nursery rhymes, jingles and ditties of all kinds. It encompasses artists who primarily offer public entertainment as well as ritual and religious specialists whose narrative performances cater to very specific needs.

In opposition to the wide range of the term shuochang, the notion quyi points to those genres of shuochang that are performed by professional artists for a public audience. In general the quyi genres require professional training, and most of these genres have a long history as professions.

Language is a major dividing criterion: the oral arts are intimately bound to the local dialects of the regions where they prevail. Many Chinese performance genres combine prose narrative with recitation or singing of poetry. However, only some of the Chinese oral performance genres of shuochang are truly prosimetric in the sense of having a balanced alternation between verse and prose. Other genres are cast in metric verse throughout, and still other genres, such as Yangzhou storytelling, are mainly in prose with only occasional poems inserted. Verse does not automatically imply singing or musical accompaniment. In some genres verse passages may be recited, not sung, so that the alternation between prose and verse has a different character from that of the genres with singing.

The sung genres are often accompanied with musical instruments. The most commonly used instruments are lutes, fiddles, drums, clappers, gongs and cymbals. The narrative content draws on everlasting historical, religious and spiritual themes, and ranges from classical tales about love, betrayal and heroism to ghost stories, gossip, local news, political commentary and commercial advertising.

While the oldest still extant genres may not be traceable beyond the sixteenth century, many features of contemporary storytelling and storysinging—for example the continuing predilection for percussive or string instruments—can be traced further back in history, to the Tang, Song and

---

**How to reach the Fondazione Giorgio Cini**

From San Zaccaria Monumento, Ferrovia, Piazzale Roma to San Giorgio:

- vaporetto number 2 every 12 minutes

**How to reach the Fondazione Giorgio Cini**

From San Zaccaria Monumento, Ferrovia, Piazzale Roma to San Giorgio:

- vaporetto number 2 every 12 minutes

**Fondazione Giorgio Cini**

Instituto Interdizionale di Studi Musicali Comparati

Via Oudin 5

30124 Venezia

T 041 2710357

musica.comparata@cini.it

www.cini.it

Coordinated by Frank Kouwenhoven and Vibeke Børdalh

Suzhou performer

Suzhou performer

Gao Bowen,

Suzhou performer

Lu Jinghua,
Kuan Syphaite, and even earlier: Some traditions may borrow a part of their narrative content from foreign sources. The most obvious are stories that have been transmitted in many cultures and are much more recent, or rely on such oral transmission that it would be impossible to determine their original sources. There are a number of influences of other media on Chinese storytelling, for example the 'Talking bamboo' (clapper story) genre.

Chinese folktales are orally transmitted from one generation to the next. Frequently passed on the profession from father to son or mother to daughter by working tellers who spend much of their free time telling stories and novels. Opportunities to hear storytellers and storysingers in Southeast Asia are mainly found at events like local festivals and in schools. Some have been set up to capture the master performers and may occasionally be heard on radio and television. Traditionally, many performances were used in local schools which guided their professional and business interests.

The public interest for narrative performance in China is still considerable. It has decreased over the last 50 years from the decline of narrative traditions, but some local celebrities still trigger a good deal of excitement and considerable audiences when they perform. Party officials sometimes hire storytellers or storysingers to liven up their political meetings, and performers may be asked to adapt their repertoire to meet special political, social, religious occasions.

Because of the language barrier, opportunities to hear tales of Chinese tales in Europe are even more limited. However, there are a number of events and festivals where Chinese storytelling can be heard, such as the 'Invisible Story House: Transmission of Suzhou Prose Storytelling' in the Greater Suzhou area. The cultural model of yanyi in Chinese storytelling is based on storytelling in the Greater Suzhou area, with its roots in the Yangzhou tradition.

Notes on Southern Drama. From the Nine Mountain Society to Xu Wei’s (1521-93) "The White Snake (Zhetian)". Festival of the Song Cycle of Wu Guang (1592-1682). Notes on Southern Drama.