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Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor: Rural Storytelling and Social Communication in Late-Imperial Jiangnan

ABSTRACT:

A cycle of vernacular stories named *Doupeng xianhua* (*Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor*, ca. 1660s) hitherto has been appreciated mainly as a literary device – that is, for its frame-narrative as a feature of bean arbor storytelling. This article, however, takes its setting seriously at the representational level and explores the text as an illuminating document of social communication among rural commoners. It argues that such informal storytelling in a public venue, such as a bean arbor, was a custom of rural Jiangnan that, due to its ephemerality, has left only few traces in the written tradition. *Idle Talk*'s unidentified author is likely to have attended such storytelling meetings and derived inspiration from them. From the detailed representation in the frame-narrative of *Idle Talk*, we gain unique insights into a narrative community with its goals of ethical education, the mediation of tensions in village society, intergenerational communication of knowledge and experience as packaged in stories, and the continuous negotiation of the community's ethos and aesthetics. Far from representing a purely oral culture of communication, *Idle Talk*'s storytelling practice betrays various touch-points with print media.

KEYWORDS:

Doupeng xianhua, *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor*, *informal amateur storytelling*, *bean arbor*, *gourd trellis*, *social communication*, *village society*, *narrative community*

INTRODUCTION:

SOCIAL COMMUNICATION IN LATE-IMPERIAL CHINA

For early-modern Europe, it has long been upheld as a truism that for the passing-on of traditions, of knowledge and experience, as well as remembrance of important events, common people predominantly drew on descriptions of events, stories, anecdotes, gossip, and rumors that circulated primarily by word of mouth. While it is beyond doubt that a lively and diverse oral culture formed the basis of the everyday communication at all social layers,¹ recent research has found,

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¹ For a survey, see Asa Briggs and Peter Burke, *Social History of the Media: From Gutenberg to the Internet* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), pp. 23–26.

however, that this image of a rural population largely untouched by the written word to be distorted and incomplete, and that, starting from the sixteenth century, print culture penetrated into, and interacted with, the realm of speech in numerous ways, and that “no one lived beyond the reach of the written and printed word.”² The realm of commoners’ oral social communication in early-modern Europe, nevertheless, has remained ephemeral and elusive in most regards, despite the wide range of preserved printed matter, from songbooks to broadsheets, that was at least indirectly related to the culture of oral communication. Actual or reconstrued instances of oral communication have only been documented under certain circumstances, such as when the state had an interest in monitoring public opinion expressed in it,³ or when a literary text mimetically reproduced situations of oral exchange.

For late-imperial China the situation is similar in many regards, except for the fact that, in cultural-historical research, the concern with oral communication has remained underdeveloped. Of course there are remarkable exceptions. Two in particular are by Philip A. Kuhn and Barend ter Haar, dealing with cases from the Qing dynasty in which rumors triggered massive social reactions that created a great enough stir throughout the empire to leave footprints even in official historiography.⁴ Moreover, there is Wang Hung-tai’s groundbreaking work on public opinion and its various media of oral discourse in the societies of the Ming and Qing empires.⁵ Just as in early-modern Europe, in China, starting from the late-sixteenth century, a range of middle- and low-brow printed materials, for example, songbooks, became increas-

² For early-modern England, see Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England 1500-1700* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2000); quotation from p. 19.

³ See, e.g., Robert Darnton, *Poetry and the Police* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard U.P., 2010).

⁴ Barend J. ter Haar, *Telling Stories: Witchcraft and Scapegoating in Chinese History* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006); Philip A. Kuhn, *Soulstealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard U.P., 1990). Similarly, there were cases of political “prophecies” (*yaoyan* 謠言), spread as children’s rhymes, which in retrospect were found to have come “true.” See, e.g., Pan Honggang 潘洪綱, *Xi shuo Qingren shehui shenghuo* 細說清人社會生活 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2008), pp. 252-60; and Chen Baoliang 陳寶良, “Mingdai minjian yulun tanxi” 明代民間輿論探析, *Jiangnan luntan* 江漢論壇 2 (1992), pp. 50-57.

⁵ Wang Hongtai 王鴻泰, “Shehui de xiangxiang yu xiangxiang de shehui: Ming-Qing de xinxi chuanbo yu gongzhong shehui” 社會的想象與想象的社會, 明清的信息傳播與公眾社會, in Chen Pingyuan 陳平原, Wang Dewei 王德威 and Shang Wei 商偉, eds., *Lishi chuancheng yu wenhua chuangxin* 歷史傳承與文化創新 (Wuhan: Hubei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2002), pp. 133-47; Wang Hongtai, “Ming-Qing de zixun chuanbo, shehui xiangxiang yu gongzhong shehui” 明清的資訊傳播, 社會想象與公眾社會, *Mingdai yanjiu* 明代研究 12 (2009), pp. 41-92; and Hung-tai Wang, “Information Media, Social Imagination, and Public Society during the Ming and Qing Dynasties,” trans. Luke Hambleton, *Frontiers of History in China* 5.2 (2010), pp. 169-216.

ingly accessible to non-elite readers with only rather basic levels of literacy. Some of these materials may have been related, in one way or another, to oral practices of social communication.⁶

Storytelling has been one such important type of oral media of social communication. Hitherto, though, the main interest has been on storytelling as a popular performing art (*quyi* 曲藝) practiced by professional performers, such as “plain talk 評話,” with a particular repertoire, comprising major narrative cycles, such as the *Water Margin* (*Shuihu* 水滸) saga. Such regional traditions of storytelling, some of which have survived up to our present time, have been researched in great detail.⁷ Throughout the late-imperial period, professional storytellers were a regular feature of the popular culture encountered in marketplaces, at temple fairs, and in other public venues in cities and towns. While professional storytelling was often looked down upon as a lowly metier, nevertheless it set the benchmark for both effective storytelling (that is, for gripping narrative performance) and the informal storytelling situations encountered in everyday life.

The latter – informal and casual storytelling – is known to have been practiced also in literati milieus. As an ingredient of learned conversation, private storytelling in a socially exclusive and intellectually distinct circle of peers served important functions for the socializing and networking of the literati-official elite, and we may assume that this was more than just a kind of playful entertainment to the male literati involved in such events. It was ostentatiously informal and casual, but nevertheless conventionalized to some degree. Leo Tak-Hung Chan’s studies of such storytelling sessions in literati circles highlight the conspicuous preference for tales about otherworldly themes, in particular ghosts and other spectral entities.⁸ From the mid-Ming onwards, and throughout later periods, we have evidence for the emulation of this model of informal storytelling in literati circles, as documented in a considerable number of published collections of classical tales, generically circumscribed as either “accounts of the strange” (*zhiguai* 志

⁶ Cf. Kathryn A. Lowry, *The Tapestry of Popular Songs in 16th- and 17th-century China* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005); Huang Xiaorong 黃小榮, “Ming-Qing minjian gonggong zhishi tixi, chuanbo fangshi, yu zishen jiangou: yi Ming-Qing quben wei cailiao” 明清民間公共知識體系、傳播方式與自身建構，以明清曲本為材料, *Zhongguo shi yanjiu* 中國史研究 3 (2007), pp. 111–26.

⁷ E.g., Vibeke Børdahl, *The Oral Tradition of Yangzhou Storytelling* (Richmond: Curzon, 1996).

⁸ Leo Tak-Hung Chan, “Text and Talk: Classical Literary Tales in Traditional China and the Context of Casual Oral Storytelling,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 56 (1997), pp. 33–63; and idem, *The Discourse on Foxes and Ghosts: Ji Yun and Eighteenth-century Literati Storytelling* (Honolulu: U. Hawai’i P., 1998), pp. 39–76.

怪), or “brush notes” (*biji* 筆記), at least part of the story materials of which admittedly had been gathered from these informal storytelling sessions. The collections of classical tales that have come down to us and that claim to be based on such informal storytelling were transcribed in complex processes of translation and stylization. Thus, they always remain aesthetically removed from the original act of storytelling, and were not meant to reproduce the act of oral performance for the reader. Due to the social exclusiveness of such private storytelling sessions in literati residences, it might be assumed that they were quite sharply separated from the actual lines of non-elite social communication. However, at the same time some of the story materials may have originated from non-elite contexts and, via the cycles of social communication, may then have been introduced into elite conversation. Conversely, through literary communication, when circulated as books some of their contents may also have been injected into the communicative cycles of commoners’ oral storytelling.

As another interlocking element between elite and non-elite contexts of storytelling, there is also the scarce evidence for elite literati interest in folk storytelling. In a collection of aphorisms by the late-Ming literati author Tu Long 屠隆 (1543–1605), we find the following passage: “In the bean arbor or the vegetable garden, when the sun is warm and the wind is mild, and when there is nothing else to do, we listen to idle men telling ghost stories. 豆棚菜圃, 暖日和風, 無事聽閑人說鬼.”⁹ Such attention to commoners’ storytelling, however, tends to be described as an ingredient of a refined literati lifestyle, like tea drinking or conversations with Buddhist monks.

It is safe to assume that informal, everyday storytelling must have been practiced extensively also among commoners in late-imperial China, as occurs in virtually any other civilization. Nevertheless, due to its ephemeral nature, next to nothing has hitherto been known about such folk storytelling, even less about any communal, quasi-institutionalized practices and venues of storytelling as part of the social communication in a rural setting, except for the regularly held, ritualized village meetings, termed “community pact,” or “community covenant” (*xiangyue* 鄉約), which provided opportunities for telling exemplary stories as part of moral preaching, and for the naming and shaming of commendable as well as condemnable events or persons.¹⁰

⁹ Tu Long 屠隆, *Suoluoguan qingyan*. *Xu Suoluoguan qingyan* 娑羅館清言. 續娑羅館清言, ed. Wang Fei 王飛 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), p. 16 (*j.* 1, item no. 7).

¹⁰ Kandice Hauf, “The Community Covenant in Sixteenth Century Ji’an Prefecture, Jiangxi,” *Late Imperial China* 17.2 (1996), pp. 1–50; Joseph P. McDermott, “Emperor, Élites, and

It is instructive to introduce here, as a comparative side-glance, what is known about quasi-institutionalized folk-storytelling practices in European cultural history.¹¹ In early-modern France, the custom of the *veillée* (“vigil”) was so widespread that the historical documentation about it is quite extensive.¹² The *veillée* was an evening gathering of peasant families from the same village, typically comprising between twenty and thirty people, who came together in one family’s barn or at their fireside. Such gatherings were held twice or thrice a week, particularly during the winter months. While the villagers sat together, some did handicrafts, others just drank and smoked; sometimes, music and dancing as well as courting were also part of such meetings. The most important activity, however, was telling stories. Besides the village gossip, other sources for telling included the adventures of those men who had traveled, either as soldiers or as merchants; moreover, there were stories from the newspaper, but less politics than the amusing or tragic events; some attendees were also able to recite old tales, such as ghost stories, historical tales, or pious tales with morals to edify the audience. Thus it may be said that the *veillée* consisted, for the main part, in various types and modes of informal storytelling.¹³ If there was a literate participant at a *veillée*, he might also read aloud stories that were, typically, from cheap editions of popular literature, which points to just one way in which the contents of printed books entered the cycles of oral communication.¹⁴ Similar customs of communal storytelling among common villagers were known also in other parts of early-modern Europe, such as the winter fireside in England,¹⁵ or the *veglia* in Tuscany.¹⁶

Commoners: The Community Pact Ritual of the Late Ming,” in Joseph P. McDermott, ed., *State and Court Ritual in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1998), pp. 299–351; Zhao Kesheng 趙克生, “Cong xundao xuansong dao xiangyue huijiang: Mingdai difang shehui de Shengyu xuanjiang” 從循道宣誦到鄉約會議, 明代地方社會的聖諭宣講, *Shixue yuekan* 史學月刊 1 (2012), pp. 42–52.

¹¹ For a survey of venues and occasions for oral storytelling in the villages of early-modern Europe, see Rudolf Schenda, *Von Mund zu Ohr: Bausteine zu einer Kulturgeschichte volkstümlichen Erzählens in Europa* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), pp. 83–130.

¹² Edward Shorter, “The ‘Veillée’ and the Great Transformation,” in Jacques Beauroy et al., eds., *The Wolf and the Lamb: Popular Culture in France: From the Old Regime to the Twentieth Century* (Saratoga, Cal.: Anma Libri, 1977), pp. 127–40; Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1975), pp. 201–2.

¹³ Shorter, “The ‘Veillée,’” pp. 129 and 135–36.

¹⁴ Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, pp. 201–2, 208, 213; Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England*, p. 42.

¹⁵ Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England*, pp. 181, 192 and 214–15.

¹⁶ Alessandro Falassi, *Folklore by the Fireside: Text and Context of the Tuscan Veglia* (Austin: U. Texas P., 1980).

In the following, it will be argued that, at least for a certain region and period of late-imperial China, in this case the Jiangnan 江南 region in the early Qing, we can trace the existence of a roughly comparable informal venue that provided a setting for non-elite amateur storytelling as a media of social communication at the village level. This kind of meeting place was called the “bean arbor” (*doupeng* 豆棚), referring to a wood- or stick-framed structure overgrown with bean twines, shaped like a “cottage 棚,” which provided shade and cooling during the hot summer months. It was this construction that also served as a storytelling venue. As for an alternative or complementary designation, such a place was also called a “gourd trellis 瓜架,” pointing to a different kind of vine the espaliered shape of which also formed a temporary space that served as a retreat from the summer heat. The bean arbor’s close association with the summer provides a seasonal contrast to the winter fireside, or the *veillée*, in early-modern Europe, though it likely served a comparable function.

THE NARRATIVE CYCLE *DOUPENG XIANHUA*

The bean arbor was such an ephemeral and informal kind of ad hoc quasi-institution that references to it in the written tradition, either anecdotal or topical, are quite rare. We are fortunate, though, to have a vernacular story cycle that not only carries the term *doupeng* in its title, but which indeed portrays the life cycle of such a storytelling venue – the work entitled *Doupeng xianhua* 豆棚閒話 (*Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor*, henceforth *Idle Talk*).¹⁷ This vernacular narrative offers itself as a socio-historically unique and mimetically rich source for the practice of informal storytelling among commoners, and more broadly for social communication in the rural world of seventeenth-century China. The artfully construed story cycle *Idle Talk* comprises twelve chapters (*ze* 則), more appropriately dubbed as “sessions.” Together they chronicle the life cycle of a bean arbor at some unidentified place in rural Jiangnan: how it is set up as a venue for leisure gatherings, but in par-

¹⁷ Aina Jushi 艾納居士, “Doupeng xianhua,” ed. Zhang Daoqin 張道勤, in *Xihu jiahua deng san zhong* 西湖佳話等三種 (Zhongguo huaben daxi 中國話本大系; Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1993; hereafter cited as DX); this critical edition will serve here as the reference text. There is a complete French translation of this text: Aina Jushi, *Propos oisifs sous la tonnelle aux haricots*, trans. Claire Lebeaupin (Paris: Gallimard, 2010); and a full English translation: Aina the Layman with Ziran the Eccentric Wanderer, *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor*, various translators, ed. Robert E. Hegel (Seattle: U. Washington P., 2017; hereafter IT). Previously, the first chapter was translated into English as: Aina Jushi, “Idle Talk Under the Bean Arbour. Chapter One: Jie Zhitui Traps his Jealous Wife in an Inferno,” trans. Yenna Wu, *Renditions* 44 (1995), pp. 17–32; cf. Yenna Wu, trans., *The Lioness Roars: Shrew Stories from Late Imperial China* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, East Asia Program, 1995), pp. 57–69.

particular for informal storytelling. We learn how it changes through the seasons, from spring to fall, due to the growth, maturation, and decay of the bean arbor's vegetation; and how the storytelling sessions under the bean arbor develop through the alternation of storytellers and a fluctuating audience. Finally, due to its gradual institutionalization, its increasing impact, and its being monitored by state representatives, it eventually and inevitably is brought to its termination.¹⁸ The beans and their growth serve as a leitmotif, the numerous variations and associations of which also become points of departure for many of the introductory talks and the stories told under the bean arbor.

Idle Talk's artful narrative structure involves up to three levels of narration, namely, the authorial frame-narrator, next the actual storytellers within the frame, and third, the internal, secondary storytellers whose stories are rendered by the dramatized primary storytellers at various occasions.¹⁹ What is more, the narrative regularly also includes the audience's critical feedback to the storytelling performances. The group discussions most of the sessions conclude with what may be read as a running commentary incorporated in the text. Additionally, some editions of the text also feature external chapter commentaries (*zongping* 總評) added by a person pen-named Ziran Kuangke 紫髯狂客 (Purple-Bearded Eccentric Wanderer), who appears to have been contemporary with the author, and who even claims to have been familiar with him. The author of *Idle Talk*, who hides behind the pseudonym Shengshui Aina Jushi 聖水艾納居士 (Lay Buddhist Old Monk's Cassock from Shengshui), has not been conclusively identified.²⁰ It may be assumed with reasonable certainty, though, that the text's author hailed from

¹⁸ For general introductions to *Idle Talk*, see Yenna Wu, "Tou-p'eng hsien-hua," in William H. Nienhauser, Jr., ed., *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana U.P., 1998) 2, pp. 158–62; Rainier Lanselle, "Doupeng xianhua (Propos oiseux sous la tonnelle aux haricots)," in Chan Hing-ho, ed., *Inventaire analytique et critique du conte chinois en langue vulgaire: Tome cinquième* (Paris: Collège de France, Institut des hautes études chinoises, 2006), pp. 197–242; and André Lévy, "Études sur trois recueils anciens de contes chinois," *TP* 52.1 (1965), pp. 110–37.

¹⁹ The term "frame" in my usage refers to the introduction and conclusion of each of *Idle Talk's* sessions of storytelling, in which the authorial, first-level, narrator describes the setting and improvises introductory thoughts or conclusory observations. The frame-narrator's role is to be distinguished from that of the several secondary storytellers. For a narratological classification of "frame-narratives" as "embedded narrative texts," see Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 3d edn. (Toronto, Buffalo and London: U. Toronto P., 2009), p. 57.

²⁰ Circumstantial evidence points to Wang Mengji 王夢吉, a Hangzhou literatus of minor renown, who is noted in the history of vernacular fiction as the author of the novel *Ji gong quanzhuan* 濟公全傳 (*The Complete Story of Honorable Ji*). See Patrick Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1981), p. 191; Meir Shahar, *Crazy Ji: Chinese Religion and Popular Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Asia

the Jiangnan region, likely from Hangzhou.²¹ Moreover, based on internal evidence in the narrative, some Chinese scholars believe that the author was indeed living in the countryside as a “remnant subject” (*yimin* 遺民), that is, a loyalist adherent of the defeated Ming dynasty who kept aloof from the new regime of the Qing, and therefore also may have felt detached from the culture of the urban centers of his time.²² All of this might serve to explain this literati author’s highly unconventional choice of storytelling in a small village community as the setting for his narrative cycle.

The earliest publication of *Doupeng xianhua* as a book is an imprint generally dated to the early years of the Kangxi era (1661–1722) of the Qing dynasty.²³ This edition by the publisher Hanhailou 翰海樓, located in the Hangzhou region, is a rather luxurious and visually pleasant illustrated book, carved in an exquisite cursive hand-writing style (*xiekeben* 寫刻本).²⁴ Remarkably, though, after this only-known early edition the book was not printed again for over a century. Only in the mid-Qing, between 1781 and 1805, did at least five different editions become published that provided the work a considerable degree of circulation and brought it to the attention of a wider readership.²⁵ After this brief period of lively reception in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth

Center, 1998), pp. 90–97; and Kogachi Seigi 古勝正義, “*Tōhō kanwa* no sakusha Ō Mukichi” 豆棚閒話の作者王夢吉, *Kitakyūshū shiritsu daigaku gaikoku gogakubu kiyō* 北九州市立大学外国語学部紀要 125.2 (2009), pp. 1–20.

²¹ Liu Yongqiang 劉勇強, “Fengtu, renqing, lishi: *Doupeng xianhua* zhong de Jiangnan wenhua yinzi ji shengcheng beijing” 風土, 人情, 歷史, 豆棚閒話中的江南文化因子及生成背景, *Qinghua daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* 清華大學學報 (哲學社會科學版) 25.4 (2010), pp. 54–66.

²² Guo Wei 郭瑋, “Mingmo Qingchu zaiye wenren shehui lixiang de xianshi kunjing yu xiangwang zhi guang: cong Aina de *Doupeng xianhua* shuoqi” 明末清初在野文人社會理想的現實困境與希望之光, 從艾納的豆棚閒話說起, *Jiangxi shehui kexue* 江西社會科學 10 (2011), pp. 136–39. The term *doupeng* appears in four items in the anthology of Ming-loyalist poetry *Yimin shi* 遺民詩 (*Poems by Remnant Subjects*), which suggests that it also may have served as a cipher of hermitic withdrawal; see Zhuo Erkan 卓爾堪, comp., *Ming yimin shi* 明遺民詩, ed. Xiao Hetao 蕭和陶 (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 2013), j. 4, 12–14.

²³ Robert E. Hegel, however, speculates that it might be dated slightly earlier, i.e., the Shunzhi era (1643–1661). See his *Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1998), p. 210. Evidence regarding the illustrator might point to a publication date around 1660. See Wilt L. Idema, review of *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor: A Seventeenth-Century Chinese Story Collection*, ed. Robert E. Hegel, *TP* 104.1–2 (2018), p. 213.

²⁴ Copies of this edition are extant in several P.R.C. libraries (Beijing, Nanjing, Tianjin). The copy in the National Library of China, Beijing, was photomechanically reproduced in the series *Guben xiaoshuo jicheng* 古本小說集成 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1990), vol. 331. Some authors consider the “Kangxi jian xiekeben” 康熙間寫刻本 and the “Hanhailou kanben” 翰海樓刊本 as two different editions, but that seems incorrect.

²⁵ Several copies of each of these five editions are extant: Shuyetang 書葉堂 (Suzhou, 1781), Dachengzhai 大成齋 (Hangzhou, 1785), Sandetang 三德堂 (1795), Baoningtang 寶寧堂 (1798), and Zhihetang 致和堂 (1805).

centuries, the next wave of editions occurred only later, in the 1930s, when the text was rediscovered, once again, and began to be circulated in modern typeset editions.²⁶

As another indicator for *Idle Talk*'s renown, there were repeated attempts at rewriting and reinterpreting it in other genres, particularly in dramatic forms. The most notable such attempt was the partial rewriting as a *zaju* 雜劇 (northern-style) singing drama, entitled *Doupeng xianxi* 荳棚閒戲 (*Idle Play under the Bean Arbor*, henceforth *Idle Play*) by Fan Xizhe 范希哲, a professional playwright from Hangzhou. Quite unlike the narrative *Idle Talk*, the singing drama *Idle Play* has remained an utterly obscure text.²⁷ While Fan Xizhe's life dates remain unknown, it is assumed that he also lived around the time of the dynastic transition and hence must have been roughly contemporaneous with *Idle Talk*'s unidentified author. Based on an indirect textual reference to *Idle Talk* included in the drama text, it is evident that Fan based his play on the narrative, not the other way around.²⁸ The six acts of *Idle Play* refer to the contents of three sessions (Sessions Two, One, and Seven, in this sequence) from the *Idle Talk* narrative cycle, with interludes in between. All of these notably are rewritings of well-known legendary subject matter, the "distorted" treatment of which is "corrected" in the drama.²⁹

²⁶ Among the known typeset editions of the Republican Period are: Shi Zhecun 施肇存, ed., *Doupeng xianhua* (Zhongguo wenxue zhenben congshu: di 1 ji 中國文學珍本叢書, 第1輯; Shanghai: Beiyue shanfang, Shanghai zazhi gongsi, 1935); and Zhou Weili 周惟立, ed., *Doupeng xianhua* (Shanghai: Dada tushu gongyingshe, 1936). The earliest edition in the P.R.C. was produced only as late as 1983 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe).

²⁷ It was included as a first in a series of three *zaju* 雜劇 singing dramas by Fan Xizhe, entitled *San huan ji* 三幻集 (*Three Illusions*), added as an appendix to his edition of eleven *chuanqi* 傳奇 singing dramas; see Fan Xizhe, *Chuanqi shiyi zhong* 傳奇十一種, 18 fasc. (Kangxi-era print held in National Library of China, Beijing). Moreover, the Capital Library (Shoudu tushuguan 首都圖書館, Beijing) holds a ms. copy by Wu Xiaoling 吳曉鈴 (1914–1995) that was published in reproduction as Fan Xizhe, "Doupeng xianxi," in Wu Shuyin 吳書蔭, ed., *Suizhong Wu shi cang chaoben gaoben xiqu congkan* 綏中吳氏藏抄本稿本戲曲叢刊 (Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe, 2004; hereafter, DPXX), vol. 1, pp. 305–56. References to the drama rewriting *Doupeng xianxi* will be to this edition.

²⁸ In the fifth act of *Idle Play*, the storyteller, given the task of telling the story of the ancient legendary characters Bo Yi 伯夷 and Shu Qi 叔齊, considers this easy since there exists a chapter from a narrative work (*xiaoshuo* 小說) about it, the title of which exactly corresponds to that of Session Seven in *Idle Talk*; this construes an intertextual link to the source text and identifies the play as a theatrical rewriting of the narrative; DPXX, p. 19a (p. 341).

²⁹ In *Idle Play*, there is only one storyteller under the bean arbor, an old village school-teacher, whose role is not generally acknowledged but criticized and undermined by other attendants of the meetings and eventually even monitored by an inquisitor – an immortal from Heaven. The final, sixth, act is set in the netherworld, where the storyteller, obviously after his death, is put on trial before King Yama (Yan wang 閻王) for his "misdeeds of slander 口舌之過," that is, his misrepresentation of ancient characters and their stories. *Idle Play* betrays a strong bias in its effort to defend a supposed "orthodox" tradition against any "heterodox" revision, and deliver an authoritarian warning to watch one's tongue (DPXX, pp. 23b [p. 350] and 26b [p. 355]; cf. p. 8a [p. 319]).

Another theatrical rewriting of one session from *Idle Talk* is found in the southern-style singing drama (*chuanqi* 傳奇) titled *Zhuan tian xin* 轉天心 (*Changing the Will of Heaven*, ca. 1750s), comprising thirty-eight scenes in two parts, by Tang Ying 唐英 (1682–1756).³⁰ This adaptation of the story of Session Five from *Idle Talk* not only provides it with a new title, but also expands it by a lot of additional content, claiming to have rendered its “complete version 全本.”³¹ In both dramatic rewritings, *Idle Play* and *Changing the Will of Heaven*, the initial stage directions require that a bean arbor is set up on stage,³² by which the writings also pay homage to the absolute centrality of the arbor venue in the parent narrative. However, while in *Idle Play* actual storytelling is indeed enacted on stage, in *Changing the Will of Heaven*, the bean arbor and the theme of storytelling are limited to the play’s beginning and ending (scenes 1–2 and 37–38, respectively). For this reason, it will primarily be *Idle Play*, with its significantly diverging representation of the storytelling practice under the bean arbor, that will be selectively included in the subsequent discussion.

As a sign of the appeal of *Idle Talk* around the time of its most vivid circulation, around 1800, a collection of classical tales entitled *Xiao doupeng* 小豆棚 (*The Little Bean Arbor*, preface 1795), by Zeng Yandong 曾衍東 (z. Qiru 七如, 1750–ca. 1825), was published. It clearly drew inspiration from *Idle Talk*, as its title already indicates. The reverence to its model becomes most evident in the collection’s final section, named “Explanation of Meaning” (“Shu yi” 述意),³³ which comprises a theatrical sketch set in a bean arbor. This bean arbor, located in the author’s own garden, however, is a private place that serves both as a writer’s studio, where the author finds leisure from his bureaucratic duties, while proofreading his collection, and as a venue for his extended family’s reunion and moral edification. Thus, this bean arbor does not serve as any site for communal storytelling, which renders it irrelevant to the present discussion.

In the course of the nineteenth century, the phrase *doupeng xianhua*, as derived from, or alluding to, the eponymous narrative cycle, would seem to have become synonymous with the theme of storytelling in a

³⁰ Tang Ying 唐英, *Gubotang xiqu ji* 古柏堂戲曲集, ed. Zhou Yude 周育德 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1987; hereafter, ZTX), pp. 205–320.

³¹ ZTX, pp. 210–11. Even though this rewriting focuses on one story matter, it nevertheless also represents it as part of a larger cycle of storytelling since it refers to Sessions Six and Seven, presented on the preceding two days; thus it projects a reversed sequence as compared to the parent text.

³² DPXX, act 1, p. 1a (p. 305); ZTX, scene 2, p. 210.

³³ Zeng Qiru 曾七如, *Xiao doupeng* 小豆棚 (Wuhan: Jingchu shushe, 1989), pp. 324–27.

rural setting.³⁴ Around the same time, this theme also became popular in pictorial representations.³⁵ Those entitled “Illustration of Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor” (“Doupeng xianhua tu” 豆棚閑話圖) are likely to have been inspired not only by *Idle Talk*, but indeed by the illustration of the bean arbor included among the front matter of its earliest edition.³⁶ In later examples of illustrations on this theme, however, the arbor seems to show professional performers – not so much commoners’ storytelling.³⁷

In Chinese literary history, *Idle Talk* gained singular renown for its frame-narrative, a feature that, while rather common in narrative traditions from India or Europe, is conspicuously rare in the Chinese narrative tradition. Therefore, the artful frame-narrative about the bean arbor as a venue for storytelling has been studied extensively as an ingenious formal device and appreciated as a milestone achievement in the Chinese history of fictional narrative.³⁸ For this feature, it has variously been compared with Giovanni Boccaccio’s (1313–1375) *Il Decamerone* (*The Decameron*; 1470),³⁹ although this comparison would not seem very enlightening. A much closer parallel to *Idle Talk* in European literary and cultural history is found in Noël Du Fail’s (ca. 1520–1591) *Propos rustiques de maistre Leon Ladulfi champenois* (*Rustic Remarks by Master Leon Ladulfi from Champagne*; 1547).⁴⁰ This work offers an extensive account of conversations and tales of a group of French peasants at a series of *veillées*, as witnessed by a frame-narrator, a secretary who records the men’s tales, rendering them with a fine sense for the oral and dialect

³⁴ For a reference in a fictional text, see Wenkang 文康, *Ernü yingxiong zhuan* 兒女英雄傳, ed. Song Yi 松頤 (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1983), vol. 1, chap. 18, p. 315. For references in local gazetteers, see *Songjiang fu zhi* 松江府志 (Jiaqing era, 1796–1820), j. 5, p. 12a; and *Huangyan xian zhi* 黃巖縣志 (1877), j. 39, p. 36b.

³⁵ For surveys, see Huang Xiaofeng 黃小峰, “Nongfu zhi le: Zhongguo huihua zhong de xiangcun xiuxian shenghuo” 農夫之樂，中國繪畫中的鄉村休閒生活, *Shoucang* 收藏 12 (2017), pp. 64–83, esp. 79–82; and Liu Xiang 劉祥, “Taoyuan jingshen de tuwen hujian: cong ‘Doupeng xianhua’ dao ‘Doupeng xianhua tu’” 桃源精神的圖文互見，從豆棚閑話到豆棚閑話圖, *Ming-Qing xiaoshuo yanjiu* 明清小說研究 133 (2019), pp. 125–38.

³⁶ See Aina Jushi, *Doupeng xianhua*, Hanhailou edn. (rpt. *Guben xiaoshuo jicheng* [cited n. 24, above]), sect. “Tu” 圖, p. 2a–b.

³⁷ In the theatrical rewrite *Changing the Will of Heaven*, a miniature painting representing the bean arbor community itself is mentioned (ZTX, scene 6, p. 223; scene 37, p. 317). This self-reflective device might also hint at this thematic pictorial tradition. For a reference to a “bean arbor tableau” (*doupeng tu* 豆棚圖), see Zeng, *Xiao doupeng*, p. 327.

³⁸ Yenna Wu, “The Bean Arbor Frame: Actual and Figural,” *Journal of the Chinese Language Teachers Association* 30.2 (1995), pp. 1–32; Shao Yiping 邵毅平, “Doupeng xianhua: Zhongguo gudian xiaoshuo zhong de kuangjia jiegou” 豆棚閑話，中國古典小說中的框架結構, *Zhonghua wenshi luncong* 中華文史論叢 66 (2001), pp. 140–77.

³⁹ Lévy, “Études sur trois recueils anciens de contes chinois,” pp. 133–35.

⁴⁰ Noël du Fail, *Propos rustiques de maistre Leon Ladulfi champenois* [1549 edn.], with introduction, notes and glossary by Roger Dubuis and Gabriel-André Perouse (Genève: Droz, 1994).

features of actual speech. The *Propos rustiques* has indeed been employed by cultural historians as an important source for the reconstruction of the *veillée* and of peasant culture in sixteenth-century France, as well as by literary historians as an outstanding example for the use of the frame-tale in the early French novella.⁴¹ Obviously, neither for *Propos rustiques* nor for *Idle Talk* is there any contradiction in appreciating the embedding device of the storytelling from a literary-historical point of view and, at the same time, studying the oral culture of informal storytelling that it represents, from a cultural-historical perspective.⁴² Indeed, as a necessary complement to appreciations of *Idle Talk* as a milestone of Chinese narrative art, the text also deserves to be studied as a rich source for oral storytelling and for social communication among commoners in the rural world of the early-Qing empire.

Needless to add, *Idle Talk* was not intentionally written as a document of social history or of folkways, but as an artfully crafted narrative. Just as in *Propos rustiques*, it was first of all “the *scene* of oral storytelling and conversation” that interested the author of *Idle Talk*,⁴³ and we might as well be hearing ventriloquism in the internal storytellers’ voices.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, in both texts, the changing storyteller-narrators and the responses from the audiences result in a multiplication of voices and viewpoints, and in the suspension of any monopoly on truth. Yet, the two authors would seem to differ in their mimetic representation of oral storytelling, at least by degree. While in *Propos rustiques*, the storytellers’ speech is “replete with ‘oral’ features – language tics, dialect, archaism, conversational features,”⁴⁵ there are surprisingly few such idiosyncratic elements in the standardized language of *Idle Talk*. In this regard, the theatrical adaptation *Idle Play* offers an interesting contrast, as it includes conspicuous elements of dialect and vulgar wording, and thus emphasizes the local and rustic features of the storytelling setting.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Kathleen Loysen, *Conversation and Storytelling in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century French Nouvelles* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), pp. 127–66.

⁴² Cf. Loysen, *Conversation and Storytelling*, pp. 129–30.

⁴³ Loysen, *Conversation and Storytelling*, p. 129.

⁴⁴ Yenna Wu, “Reconsidering the Innovation and Ambiguity in *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor* (Doupeng xianhua 豆棚閒話) [Review of *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor: A Seventeenth-Century Chinese Story Collection*, ed. Robert E. Hegel],” *Ming Studies* 80 (2019), pp. 53–54. On the concept of ventriloquism and its application to the Chinese vernacular story, see Shuhui Yang, *Appropriation and Representation: Feng Menglong and the Chinese Vernacular Story* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1998), chaps. 2–4; and Alastair Ewan Macdonald, “Reimagining the Vernacular Story: Textual Roles, Didacticism, and Entertainment in *Erpai*,” Ph.D. diss. (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2016), chap. 3.

⁴⁵ Loysen, *Conversation and Storytelling*, p. 13.

⁴⁶ As for conspicuous dialect elements frequently found in *Idle Play*, there are the verb

In *Idle Talk*, just as in *Propos rustiques*, there is sufficiently strong evidence supporting the assumption that its author wrote his text based on extensive first-hand experience with the milieu as represented in the text's setting, and likely even as an active participant in an informal storytelling community of this kind. While we would not go as far as to claim that the storytelling sessions were transcriptions of actual oral storytelling, it is nevertheless reasonable to assume that the practice of commoners' casual storytelling, as represented in minute detail in *Idle Talk*, had its *Sitz im Leben*, in other words, was firmly rooted in actual everyday-life experience, moreover, that such storytelling in a communal venue, variously termed as the bean arbor or the gourd trellis, was not an isolated, unique phenomenon, but indeed a rather common and widespread practice in the Jiangnan region and beyond.

If we thus take *Idle Talk* seriously at the representational level, we can rediscover this text as an exciting document of oral and social communication among rural commoners in mid-seventeenth-century China, with its close ties to other varieties of oral tradition as well as the media of the printed word. Moreover, from its detailed descriptions of the bean arbor as a venue, we can gain important insights into a quasi-institution for communal storytelling with a distinct ethos, rules, and aesthetic criteria that are continuously being renegotiated. What is more, the communal storytelling under the bean arbor also helps to integrate together the different aspects within village society and contributes to the coming together of various social types in the village and to the mediation of interests among them.

THE BEAN ARBOR AS A VENUE FOR SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

In *Idle Talk*, the bean arbor as a venue is first introduced by the authorial frame-narrator's voice in a passage that vividly evokes the sticky summer heat of Jiangnan in the fifth and sixth lunar months (roughly corresponding to June and July), when there is "no other place in which to survive," except for the cooling places arranged in distinct ways by different social groups:

At the top level, there are the rich and established clans, who have their pavilions for refreshment and their gazebos surrounded by water. Members of the clans can cool themselves by waving fans;

complement *-dejin* 得緊, the interrogative *zime* 仔麼 (as a variant for *zenme* 怎麼), and the first-person personal pronoun *wunong* 吾儂.

this is how they live in leisure and at ease. At the next level down – the mountain monks and hermitic elders who let loose their hair and unbutton their jackets; they are free and easy as they move in the shadow of tall pine trees; thus they too can beat the heat. But the ordinary households of modest or humble means have no recourse other than to get some goat’s-eye bean seedlings by the middle of the second month and plant them in the empty spaces around the house. For these they erect a trellis with a few wooden sticks or bamboo poles that they drape with lengths of straw rope, resembling festive hanging decor. Within half a month, the vines climb all over the trellis, winding and coiling along the sticks and poles. By this time, the bean arbors of the common people have become even cooler and breezier than the custom-built refreshment pavilions. All the members of these humble families repair to the arbor to fan themselves and enjoy the cool air – young and old, men and women, some bringing a bench, others carrying a chair, still others spreading out mats.⁴⁷

This introductory passage defines the bean arbor first of all by its primary function, as a place for cooling during the hot season. However, as a second, though not secondary issue, it defines the place socially, pointing out two groups whose members would typically not be found there: the wealthy local elites and men leading an eremitic lifestyle. Since we might think of other social groups that are not mentioned in the passage, it would also be worthwhile to think about why exactly these two are pointed out. It is likely that the author considered himself a member of the elite by educational and social background, though probably not in terms of material wealth; and given his presumable Ming-loyalist leanings (as a “remnant subject”), he in addition may have imagined being a hermit. Thus, the introductory passage implies that the authorial narrator, who is joining the rural folk under the bean arbor, does so on his own accord, not based on social belonging. The people who meet there are commoners, the petty folk from “ordinary households of modest or humble means 中等小家.” To them, growing a bean arbor is an economical, customary way of having a place in which to cool off. In addition to that, at a deeper level of significance, the bean arbor serves as a meeting place that is open to all inhabitants of the village, and as such it provides a natural venue for social communication.

⁴⁷ DX, p. 1. The translation is based, with modifications, on Wu, *Lioness Roars*, pp. 57–58; cf. II, p. 9.

The introduction does not describe the bean arbor as some odd phenomenon, but rather holds the implication that it represents a folkway that was widely known and practiced in the Jiangnan region during the mid-seventeenth century, and likely beyond. It is worthwhile to check the piecemeal evidence for this claim that we can get from other types of sources. Local gazetteers mention bean arbors rather rarely, and describe such places and their activities even less, although we have such examples as the following, taken from a local gazetteer of Jiyang 濟陽 county, in Shandong province:

I often witnessed how the village seniors, in their leisure time, took the initiative to attend the bean arbor or the gourd trellis. There they would sit closely together and chat about everything. They would tell about the flood or firestorm of a certain year, about the drought of this or that year, or about a disaster due to warfare in a past year, or about an epidemic. Although the events had happened in the past and the places were remote, talking about them still held a remainder of the pain, so all the youngsters surrounded them and listened quietly. To them it was just like attending a private tutor. 嘗見鄉村父老興作餘暇, 就豆棚瓜架, 抵掌縱談。謂某年水火、某年荒旱、某年兵災與天札。雖事過境遷, 言之猶有餘痛, 諸少年環拱靜聽, 亦如臨師保。⁴⁸

This passage strongly resonates with the practice of storytelling under the bean arbor as detailed in *Idle Talk* (as will be seen), in particular with regard to intergenerational communication and the range of topics.

In a local gazetteer of Ruijin 瑞金 county, in Jiangxi province, we find the remarkable observation that “in order to record oral lore, scholars addicted to the past and gentlemen who loved the extraordinary would attend the sessions under the bean arbor or the gourd trellis as guests and gather from a distance one or another story from old times, in order to pass on the lore of the past 記聞, 則固嗜古之儒、好奇之士, 旁搜遠采, 以及二三故老, 豆棚瓜架, 傳述舊聞。”⁴⁹ This intriguing passage renders it quite clear that the bean arbor (or alternatively, the gourd trellis) was not a place normally frequented by scholars and members of the literati elite. But even highly learned men might have been attracted to it, since there they could gather items from the oral tradition that they would then write down. This points to the role of the bean arbor as an interface mediating between oral and written methods of tradition. As

⁴⁸ *Jiyang xian zhi* 濟陽縣志 (1934), j. 20, p. 24b.

⁴⁹ *Ruijin xian zhi* 瑞金縣志 (1822), j. 16, p. 1a–b.

will be seen as well, it is implied in *Idle Talk* that its authorial narrator, himself apparently a learned person, takes a similar role as an observing guest, who also gets actively involved in the storytelling.

Mentions of the bean arbor, along with the gourd trellis, are found in classical literature, where the construction tends to serve both as a *topos* that could indicate a *locus amoenus* (that is, a “pleasant place”), and as a core element in a certain ideal about the rural lifestyle of the elite. The following lines from a song lyric (*ci* 詞) composed by Li Yu 李漁 (1610–1680), the famous dramatist and fiction writer, provide a typical example:

君來破我幽寂	You, sir, come to disrupt my solitude,
且慢出詩篇	As you slowly produce a sampling of poetry.
同去豆棚閑坐	Together we then go over to the bean arbor for a leisurely session,
再向花間小飲	Repeatedly toasting to each other among the blossoms.
口耳莫教閑	Meanwhile, mouths and ears are not left at leisure:
我聽君談鬼	I listen to your ghost stories,
君聽我談天	While you listen to my causerie. ⁵⁰

Here, as in almost any other example found in poetic literature,⁵¹ the bean arbor is described as a private place for elite leisure, not as a communal meeting site provided by and for commoners. Nonetheless, even in this example, the main activity under the bean arbor is storytelling of various kinds, either mere “causerie” (namely, social gossip), or telling ghost stories. The cultural prestige of the practice of telling ghost stories among literati can partly be referred to a – misconstrued – anecdote about the great Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101), who allegedly established the telling of ghost stories as a convention in conversation with his guests.⁵² This anecdote about Su Shi is also mentioned

⁵⁰ Li Yu 李漁, “Shuidiao getou: Xi you zhi” 水調歌頭, 喜友至, in Zhejiang guji chubanshe 浙江古籍出版社, ed., *Li Yu quanji* 李漁全集 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 1991), vol. 2, p. 473.

⁵¹ For more examples, see Liu, “Fengtū, renqing, lishi,” pp. 56–57.

⁵² Chan, “Text and Talk,” p. 46; idem, *Discourse on Foxes and Ghosts*, p. 52. The original source for this alleged practice of Su Shi, during his exile in Huangzhou 黃州, is an anecdote included in Ye Mengde 葉夢得, *Bishu luhua* 避暑錄話, j. 1, in Shanghai guji chubanshe 上海古籍出版社, ed., *Song Yuan biji xiaoshuo daguan* 宋元筆記小說大觀 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2001), vol. 3, p. 2583. The context of the anecdote in question indicates that Su, seeking to distract himself from the depressing exile situation, was hardly ever without any company. Therefore, he was rather indiscriminate in choosing his acquaintances, and he would deign to adjust the style and content of communication to match that of his conversational partners. “Those who could not make conversation, he urged to tell ghost stories. When they came up with the excuse that they didn’t know any, he would tell them: ‘Then talk for talking’s sake.’ 有不能談者, 則強之說鬼. 或辭無有, 則曰: 姑妄言之.” This indicates that to Su

in *Idle Talk*,⁵³ where a point is made about Su that, when he urged his guests to tell him ghost stories, he was well aware that they were telling him lies, but he would not make this an issue. The reference to Su Shi and the tradition of telling ghost stories in learned conversation, however, tends to be misleading, due to the distinct difference in the social composition of the storytelling community under the bean arbor. Moreover, it is characteristic that, in *Idle Talk*, not a single ghost story is told under the bean arbor.

A remarkable description of the bean arbor (or the gourd trellis) as a place of social communication among nonelite people is the following passage from the authorial preface to an 1874 collection of classical tales titled *Li sheng* 里乘 (*Chronicle of My Hometown*), by Xu Feng'en 許奉恩 (z. Shuping 叔平, 1816–1878), a scholarly author from Tongcheng 桐城 county, in Anhui province:

Whenever there was free time from work in the fields, some village seniors during a time of heat [would sit together] after dinner for a cup of liquor under a bean arbor or a gourd trellis; and in the cold days of the year [they would sit] around a pit stove dug in the ground or around an open fire. They would sit side by side and talk cheerfully, discussing the present and judging the past, questioning the origin of things and their end, telling fact from fiction, judging good and bad, and distinguishing right from wrong, until finally everything seemed perfectly evident. Sometimes, women and children joined them and listened on the side, and they did not realize that occasionally they began to move their hands and feet [in excitement]. As the speakers gave their praise and disparagement, the listeners expressed their joy and anger.

其或農工之暇，二三野老，晚飯杯酒，暑則豆棚瓜架，寒則地爐活火。促膝言歡，論今評古，窮原竟委，影響傳會，邪正善惡，是非曲直，居然鑿鑿可據。一時婦孺環聽，不自知其手舞足蹈。言者有褒有貶，聞者忽喜忽怒。⁵⁴

In the continuation of this preface, the author tells us that as a young boy growing up in the countryside, besides playing among the fields, he also loved to attend such storytelling venues and listen to the

the telling of ghost stories was a last resort in conversation. This, however, was later misconstrued as being Su's personal preference for ghost stories, which then was turned into a commonplace that was frequently quoted in prefaces to collections of ghost stories, prominently in Pu Songling's 蒲松齡 (1640–1715) own preface to his *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋誌異 (*Liaozhai's Chronicle of the Strange*). See Judith T. Zeitlin, *The Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1997), p. 44.

⁵³ DX, pp. 23–4.

⁵⁴ Xu Shuping 許叔平, *Li sheng* 里乘, “Xu” 序, in *Biji xiaoshuo daguan* 筆記小說大觀 (rpt. Yangzhou: Jiangsu Guangling guji keyinshe, 1983), ce 33, vol. 16, p. 205.

talks of such “village seniors.” He even claims that for part of his collection of classical tales he drew on some of the more recent ones of their stories. The quoted part of this preface (above) includes a rare statement indicating that the gathering around the winter fire (reminiscent of the French *veillée*) was a seasonal counterpart to the summery bean arbor (or gourd trellis). Moreover, it includes pertinent information about the social composition of participants in this quasi-institution, with its core of elderly villagers, and a mixed local audience that sometimes also included women and children on the side, whose uncontrolled bodily response to the storytelling is a sign of their enthusiasm, but at the same time also betrays their limited experience and lower level of competence with this kind of discourse. The account is particularly vivid in its description of the critical evaluation of the stories’ significance that would seem to be considered almost as important as the storytelling itself, for it serves the negotiation, consolidation, and passing on of commonly shared moral values, indeed very similar to the kind of discourse under the bean arbor that is represented in *Idle Talk*. In both settings, the normative dimension of storytelling, with its “reproductive capacity to reinscribe conventional meanings and relations,” would appear as clearly more important than any transgressive or subversive potential that it evidently also held (as we see in the section “Oral and Written Media,” below).⁵⁵

Yet another noteworthy item describing a rural storytelling venue is found in Jiao Xun’s 焦循 (1763–1820) preface to an 1819 booklet entitled *Huabu nongtan* 花部農譚 (*Peasant Chats on Popular Regional Theater*). Jiao Xun, an eminent classical scholar of his time, also wrote about his personal hobbies, which included the theater and in particular the popular theater of his native region Yangzhou that was termed *huabu* 花部 (literally, the “flowery section”). On his outings to the villages, he was eager to discuss his views with local commoners, and such discussions would typically take place under the bean arbor.⁵⁶ The few items that made up his short work *Huabu nongtan*, the author claims, were written based on conversations with villagers, the circumstances of which he describes in his preface as follows:

⁵⁵ Kristin M. Langellier and Eric E. Peterson, *Storytelling in Daily Life: Performing Narrative* (Philadelphia: Temple U.P., 2004), p. 4.

⁵⁶ Colin Mackerras, “Theater for the People in the Yangzhou Region: Jiao Xun’s *Peasant Chats on Popular Local Theater* (*Huabu nongtan*, 1819),” in Roland Altenburger, Margaret B. Wan, and Vibeke Børdahl, eds., *Yangzhou, a Place in Literature: The Local in Chinese Cultural History* (Honolulu: U. Hawai’i P., 2015), pp. 203–5.

During work breaks in the heat of the summer, the villagers gather in the shade of willow trees and under bean arbors. They tell stories, which more often than not come from the regional folk theater plays they have seen. 天既炎暑, 田事餘閒, 群坐柳陰、豆棚之下, 侈譚故事, 多不出花部所言。⁵⁷

While this short passage reconfirms, once again, the bean arbor's primary function as a storytelling venue, it also includes the instructive information that the theater stage, particularly of plays in the regional style, served as an important source of bean arbor stories. This point, we soon see, is also confirmed by *Idle Talk*.

STORYTELLING AND STORYTELLERS UNDER THE BEAN ARBOR

The pseudonymous author's foreword to *Idle Talk* mostly refers to a volume of poems entitled *Doupeng yin* 豆棚吟 (*Rhymes from the Bean Arbor*) that the foreword's author attributes to an otherwise unknown poet named Xu Jutan 徐菊潭, whom he identifies as a compatriot hailing from the same county, although from an earlier generation. Xu is said to have written in various poetic forms about "delightful events and unusual happenings from throughout the world, both ancient and modern." Together, these forms resembled a collection of stories. But although "cherished and appreciated for a long time,"⁵⁸ the poems eventually vanished, and only some gentlemen, the foreword writer claims, were able to recite one or two couplets from the original body of verse. Nevertheless, he includes a sample poem in full to serve as an introduction to his own collection of stories. It goes like this:

In my thatched cottage in the west, with nothing to do,
Nowhere can I find a cool place to escape from the heat.
In the sixth month, the ponds are always shallow;
In the woods, third-year saplings have not yet grown tall.
Growing beans, the arbor can well provide a cool nook,
Surpassing pavilions near water, and fragrant besides.
The evening breeze gathers old folks south of the rivulet:
They playfully chat through the twilight as cicadas call.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Jiao Xun 焦循, "Huabu nongtan" 花部農譚, in *Zhongguo xiqu yanjiuyuan* 中國戲曲研究院, ed., *Zhongguo gudian xiqu lunzhu jicheng* 中國古典戲曲論著集成 (Beijing: Zhongguo xiqu chubanshe, 1982), vol. 8, p. 225; translation adapted from Faye Chunfang Fei, ed. and trans., *Chinese Theories of Theater and Performance from Confucius to the Present* (Ann Arbor: The U. Michigan P., 1999), p. 92.

⁵⁸ Both quotations from Li Qiancheng's translation of the foreword, IT, p. 7; DX, p. i.

⁵⁹ IT, p. 7; DX, p. i. Liu ("Fengtu, renqing, lishi," p. 56) found that lines five and six of this poem exactly correspond (and with verbal echoes also in other lines) to a poem cited in Lang Ying's 郎瑛 (1487-1566) *Qixiu leigao* 七修類稿 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), vol. 2, j. 34.

This regulated-verse poem holds strong implications regarding the function of the bean arbor and the author's position in it. The summer heat makes the idle author leave his hermit's thatched hut to join the village elders' gatherings under the bean arbor and share in their "playful chat" through the evenings. The socializing and the sharing of stories also seem to be, for the author, the core "idea of the bean arbor 豆棚之意" that he wishes to "supplement 補" with his own collection of stories.⁶⁰ This provides suitable support to the implication that the author himself drew much of his inspiration from attending such sessions under the bean arbor.

As for the social composition of the bean-arbor narrative community, in the introduction to Session One the people attending storytelling events under the bean arbor are circumscribed as "ordinary households of modest or humble means."⁶¹ In the introduction to Session Two, this social definition is reconfirmed and further specified with regard to professional backgrounds, particularly mentioning tradesmen and land workers.⁶² The introductory circumscription of the audience also includes the phrase "young and old, men and women."⁶³ While the intermingling of generations is repeatedly being confirmed as an important feature of the social communication under the bean arbor, the alleged copresence of both men and women is open to doubt.

Genders and Seasons of the Bean Arbor

The double-page illustration added to the Hanhailou edition shows on the left-hand side an elderly woman holding a boy by the hand, who might be on the way to the bean arbor, but the mere fact of her being placed outside the bean arbor might as well indicate non-inclusion in it.⁶⁴ Commoner women in the countryside, and even more so women from lower classes, were less confined to the domestic sphere and may have moved about outside their homes to a certain extent. However, as a rule, spheres for work and leisure remained rather strictly segregated by sex.⁶⁵ Therefore, by common standards of decency, it would

p. 517. The poem there is titled "Xiari xiyuan" 夏日西園 ("The Western Garden in the Summertime") and attributed to a monk from Qiantang 錢塘 (i.e. Hangzhou) with the monastic name Dexiang 德祥 (z. Zhi'an 止庵).

⁶⁰ Quotations from the foreword, IT, p. 7; DX, p. i.

⁶¹ Wu, *Lioness Roars*, p. 57; DX, p. 1.

⁶² DX, p. 13.

⁶³ DX, p. 1.

⁶⁴ See Aina Jushi, *Doupeng xianhua*, edn. cited n. 24, above, "Tu," p. 2a.

⁶⁵ Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: U. California P., 1997), pp. 131-32.

be hard to imagine that in an open, semi-public place as the bean arbor there would have been any free intermingling of genders, although elderly women may have been an exception to this, especially when taking care of grandchildren. Correspondingly, throughout the chapters of *Idle Talk*, there is no evidence whatsoever for the presence of women among the audience under the bean arbor, and certainly none of the storytellers is female. Thus, in *Idle Talk*, the bean arbor is quite evidently represented as a male space. The storytelling discourse, too, is unambiguously male-centered, as becomes obvious from the gender-specific themes of some of the stories performed, in particular the topics of excessive female jealousy and the *femme fatale* treated in rather tendentious ways in the first two sessions.

It is noteworthy that Fan Xizhe's theatrical rewriting, *Idle Play*, which goes against the grain of its parent work in certain ways, as we saw, offers a counter model to the bean-arbor community's gender composition: in its third act, several female attendants step forward and get actively involved. One middle-aged woman, termed as "the village shrew 村嫌," due to her frequent spicy comments and authentic exclamations, serves as a hilarious character in the *chou* 丑 role, marked by unruly behavior, filthy language, and frequent interjections in the storytelling. She begins to attend the bean arbor meetings with two other elderly women and an abbess from a Guanyin shrine once they hear that an elderly man tells stories there every day. They discuss the problem that some people perhaps consider it "quite unsuitable 多不便" for them to congregate with men.⁶⁶ The storytelling schoolteacher, when he catches sight of them, also calls into question the "decorum 體統" of women who sit together with men under the bean arbor. The women then propose a symbolical spatial separation, with themselves sitting under the bean arbor and the men outside, corresponding to the inner/outer (*nei-wai* 內外) gender distinction generally, in the context of domestic space. The men, however, reject the proposal's inconvenience to themselves and put up with the women's attendance.⁶⁷ Once the women have established their place among the audience, their presence under the bean arbor indeed shifts the treatment of gender-related subject-matter, such as female jealousy, as the women (first of all, the shrew) forcefully defend their gender against prejudice.⁶⁸ In the end, in *Idle Play*, the women among the audience are more pleased with the storytelling performance than the men.

⁶⁶ DPXX, p. 9b (p. 322).

⁶⁷ DPXX, p. 10a (p. 323); p. 14a (p. 331).

⁶⁸ DPXX, p. 10b (p. 324).

In *Idle Talk*, the ranks of storytellers under the bean arbor include, in part, elderly men who relate stories that they have either witnessed themselves or heard from others, drawing on their life experience. Among these men we may also count the authorial frame-narrator, who in the narrative cycle implicitly places himself under the bean arbor, and who, according to what a chapter comment discloses about him,⁶⁹ was not only an erudite man, but also widely traveled. One of the elderly storytellers takes a special role due to his metier as a village schoolteacher. His professional duty as an educator is mirrored also by his storyteller's role. The other part of the group of storytellers is comprised of a few brave young men who wish to put to the test their aspiring talents as narrators, but who conventionally apologize for their limitations due to their youthful age and their modest level of education.⁷⁰

The meetings under the bean arbor, as described in *Idle Talk*, take place at irregular intervals between spring and autumn of one year. The number of twelve sessions evidently symbolizes the twelve months of the year, and hence related the storytelling sessions to the seasonal cycles of rural life. As a *chronotopos* in Mikhail Bakhtin's (1895–1975) sense,⁷¹ the bean arbor may be analyzed as a figurative, even emblematic place that epitomizes the universal life cycle and the embedding of the rural lifestyle in the cycle of vegetation. The bean arbor serves as a temporary communal gathering place that on the surface provides cooling against the unbearable summer heat, once the leafage on the arbor is fully developed. The bean arbor's deeper significance, though, lies in its function as a venue of social communication, where local people meet informally and exchange experiences and knowledge, packaged as stories. Yenna Wu argues that the primary object of representation in *Idle Talk* is not a plot, a topic, or a group of characters, but "significant discourse" itself.⁷²

As its author would seem to hint in his foreword, he is likely to have derived the idea of the bean arbor as the setting of the frame-narrative, the oral narrative culture practiced there, and perhaps even some of the story material elaborated in his narrative cycle, from his own experience as an active participant in such settings. As a matter of

⁶⁹ DX, p. 118; cf. IT, p. 169.

⁷⁰ DX, p. 36.

⁷¹ Cf. Alastair Renfrew, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 112–28.

⁷² Wu, "Bean Arbor Frame," p. 6; cf. Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: U. Minnesota P., 1984), p. 66.

fact, the text also includes narratological evidence supporting such an assumption.⁷³ *Idle Talk* has an authorial frame-narrator who introduces each chapter and each of the twelve sessions under the bean arbor. The chapter introductions come in ever new and original variants that serve the bean leitmotif. The beans' rich associations, metonymical extensions, as well as metaphorical connotations, provide links and starting points for a variety of prologue topics that in turn prepare the mood for the stories that follow. The frame-narrator also introduces the storyteller of each session, who typically presents an introductory story and a main story. On closer scrutiny, though, we notice that in Sessions Five and Nine the handing over of the narrator role from the authorial frame-narrator to the storyteller does *not* take place, and therefore in these two chapters it is implied that the authorial narrator himself is taking the role of the storyteller (see storyteller C, below). Moreover, in Session Five, the authorial narrator's words would seem to emphasize that he himself is also physically present under the bean arbor: "As we are sitting in the bean arbor today... 今日我們坐在豆棚之下..."⁷⁴ By locating himself under the bean arbor, the authorial narrator also hints at his own first-hand experience with such a venue. It is clearly more conclusive to include the authorial frame-narrator among the storytellers, and not to equate him with the bean arbor host.⁷⁵

Generations of Discourse and Dialogue under the Bean Arbor

Dialogism appears as an important feature of the narrative community under the bean arbor.⁷⁶ The audiences serve as dialogue partners to the various storytellers, offering critical feedback, manifesting appreciation or even acclamation, at rare occasions also disapproval. The author's narrative discourse, in Sessions Five and Nine, implicitly claims a higher degree of authority, and therefore it is fitting that these two sessions are not followed by any evaluative discussion by the audience. Despite the authorial frame-narrator's aptitude for self-irony, his

⁷³ For a precise narratological analysis of the text, see Wu, "Reconsidering the Innovation and Ambiguity," pp. 51–52.

⁷⁴ DX, p. 49; cf. IT, p. 73.

⁷⁵ Hanan suggests that the storyteller of Sessions Five and Nine "is to be equated with the background narrator and perhaps with the host of the bean arbor as well" (*Chinese Vernacular Story*, p. 193); Hegel proposes that he "may well be the owner of the bean arbor, the host for these gatherings" ("Introduction," in IT, p. xx). Wu at first admits that "we do not know who tells the stories in Chapters 5 and 9," but then concludes "that the host of the bean arbor is the one telling the stories in both these chapters, since he is physically present under the bean arbor" ("Reconsidering the Innovation and Ambiguity," p. 51).

⁷⁶ Cf. Yang Dongfang 楊東方 and Zhou Mingjian 周明鑒, "Duihua yu fanxing: Doupeng xianhua xushi yanjiu" 對話與反省, 豆棚閒話敘事研究, *Guizhou wenshi congkan* 貴州文史叢刊 3 (2008), pp. 99–103.

discourse apparently did not bear any critical objection. This, however, is not to say that the stories related in Sessions Five and Nine were generally truer than those presented at the other sessions, although some authorial utterances made in the two chapters indeed assert a higher claim to truth, such as when the authorial frame-narrator states that, while studying in preparation for the civil service examinations, the scholarly elite was losing all its ethical thinking.⁷⁷

For the ten storytelling sessions with storytellers other than the authorial frame-narrator himself, various storytelling personae, or voices, are introduced. Yenna Wu comes up with the number of seven to eight “intradiegetic foreground narrators,” while Robert Hegel discerns six different internal storytellers.⁷⁸ My own counting arrives at six second-level storytellers (A, B, D, E, F and G), not including the first-level authorial frame-narrator (C). It is indicated that three among them perform in a series of sessions: Sessions One, Two, and Eleven are presented by one storyteller (A), Sessions Three and Four by another one (B), and Sessions Six and Seven by yet another one (D). Storyteller A is identified as an elderly man, who earns his life as an elementary school teacher, and who hence is an educator by profession. In the final Session Twelve, he additionally assumes the role of the bean arbor community’s speaker. His older age provides the crucial criterion for his taking the storyteller role once again, because he is the only one present to have a memory of the period of social unrest and turmoil during the decade preceding the dynastic change. His knowledge of the world, moreover, derives not only from his old age and the formal education he received, but also from the long-distance journeys throughout the empire he claims to have undertaken as a traveling merchant while young: “I’ve traveled the roads and I’ve seen plenty, and I’ve heard many stories”⁷⁹ This also indicates that, for the narrative community under the bean arbor, two types of sources of knowledge are of primary importance: first-hand knowledge gathered as an eyewitness (*jian* 見), and “second-hand” knowledge accumulated from hearing (*wen* 聞), that is, by oral communication via everyday storytelling.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ DX, p. 57.

⁷⁸ Wu, “Reconsidering the Innovation and Ambiguity,” p. 51 (including a handy listing of all the storytellers); Hegel, “Introduction,” in IT, pp. xx–xxi.

⁷⁹ DX, p. 2; IT, p. 10. It is notable that in the dramatic rewrite *Idle Play*, the schoolteacher, described as a “pedantic scholar and impoverished licentiate 老迂儒窮秀才” (DPXX, p. 2b [p. 308]), is the only storyteller to present on all three consecutive days of storytelling under the bean arbor. In the other major dramatic adaptation, *Changing the Will of Heaven*, the village seniors (*yelao* 野老; ZTX, scene 2, p. 210) are indicated as the active members of the storytelling community, though no actual storytelling takes place in the bulk of the play.

⁸⁰ The word *jianwen* 見聞 (“what one has seen and heard”) appears twice in the bean ar-

Communication between the generations emerges as an important motivation for the storytelling under the bean arbor. On the one hand, there is a group of experienced and literate elderly men; on the other, a bunch of adolescent lads eager to learn more about life and the world “out there,” and hoping to listen to, and thus to appropriate for themselves, “stories from old times.” At the end of Session One, one youthful listener, full of enthusiasm, terms the bean arbor as something like “our academy for lecturing 我們一個講學書院。”⁸¹ The terminology employed is reminiscent of the “lecturing” (*jiangxue* 講學) movement practised by followers of Wang Yangming 王陽明 (Wang Shouren 守仁, 1472–1529), and the parallel revival of academies (*shuyuan* 書院), both of which served as venues for teaching and philosophical debate during the mid- to late-Ming periods.⁸² The “lecture gatherings” (*jianghui* 講會) of the Wang Yangming followers, in particular, were open to participants from all social and educational backgrounds, which may be considered a commonality with the bean arbor meetings. While the comparison might be dismissed as a self-congratulatory exaggeration, it nevertheless might be argued that the bean arbor narrative community indeed also serves the function of a rural institution of education. Its associations to and continuities with both lecture gatherings and community covenants are not incidental.

Initially, the youngsters ask the elderly participants for instruction, and the intergenerational communication of knowledge and experience basically follows the classic configuration, from teacher to student. The youngsters reward their teachers with gestures such as tea and dainties. In the course of the subsequent storytelling sessions, however, the rapport between the generations gets increasingly balanced, as four different young storytellers (B, D, E and F) step forward to perform in Sessions Three through Ten. Only as late as Session Eleven, does the elderly schoolteacher from the first two sessions (that is, storyteller A) return to the bean arbor to reassume the storyteller’s role based on his capacity as an eyewitness survivor of the wartime chaos during the fall of the Ming. At the point of his reintroduction as a storyteller, the importance of communication of personal experience from the older to the younger generation is emphasized once again. The audience comments on the benefits of social memory in the following terms:

bor community’s collective self-description of their practice, in Session Twelve (DX, p. 134; IT, p. 188).

⁸¹ DX, p. 11; cf. IT, p. 21.

⁸² Cf., e.g., Chen Shilong 陳時龍, *Mingdai zhongwanqi jiangxue yundong (1522–1626)* 明代中晚期講學活動 (1522–1626) (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2006).

... Even though we've all told a few stories, they're nothing more than ordinary tales about things past and present. You, dear uncle, are much older, and we've heard that you've experienced much of the pain of the fighting and separations of war. We beg you to recount those previous events, and make us youngsters listen up, so that during this time of prosperity we won't dare trample our food grains or squander our health.⁸³

The commemoration of hard times, their argument goes, raises the younger generation's appreciation of the present era's prosperity and peace. Moreover, as the authorial frame-narrator points out in advance, it prepares them for future hardships: "In case there will be years of crop failure that will turn into times of famine and chaos, they will have something like a railing to be guided by, something like a crutch to hold on to."⁸⁴ The elderly storyteller in question motivates his own survival as an eyewitness of war atrocities in even more forceful terms, claiming that it was by no means a mere contingency that he survived with his story, but in order to be able to "still talk idly about it here under the bean arbor."⁸⁵ The traumatic memory of the past is meant to serve a didactic function, which culminates in the teacher's urgent advice to the youngsters "to cultivate their virtues 修省," that is, to improve themselves in the sense of Neo-Confucian self-cultivation.

In discussing the main criteria for judging the quality of a storyteller's performance, the youngsters among the audience to Session One put forward a story's authenticity and verifiability as the most important requirements:

... Now please tell us the true story, and don't tell us some old lies just to swindle us out of some tea and snacks. We're still young and not widely read, but we want evidence from others before we'll believe you!⁸⁶

The principle that an account's truthfulness only gains evidence in comparison with similar accounts, is also in line with the bean arbor narrative community's practice to present two or more thematically related stories or anecdotes in one session. If a story is derived from a second- or even third-hand account, due to the high degree of mediation and the distance from any hypothetical events, it can only claim a very limited degree of trustworthiness. In several sessions, underneath the secondary level of storytellers' narration, third-level stories are em-

⁸³ DX, p. 122; IT, p. 171.

⁸⁴ DX, p. 122; cf. IT, p. 171.

⁸⁵ DX, p. 132; IT, p. 185.

⁸⁶ DX, p. 3; IT, p. 11.

bedded. For instance, in Session Six, one third-level storyteller relates an account about certain gruesome practices that allegedly occurred in Buddhist monasteries. He claims this piece of idle talk to be “absolutely true 乃是真真實實的。”⁸⁷ However, when for the next story item he admits that he “also picked it up from hearsay 也是聞得來的,”⁸⁸ the discursive status of the previous story is shrunk to a legend, or a mere rumor, and hence its dubious level of trustworthiness is revealed.

In the course of the storytelling sessions, the criterion of truthfulness loses importance, as it is gradually replaced by other criteria: at first, the “unheard-of 聞所未聞” quality of a story that is particularly appealing to young folks;⁸⁹ and then, at later stages, the criterion of effective, successful storytelling that meets the expectations of the audience. As early as Session Three, a young storyteller (B) comes up with the idea that the main goal of a story is to “resound in everybody’s ears and be well received 大家耳朵裏轟轟好聽。”⁹⁰ In Session Six, the first bean sprouts at the arbor are offered as a symbolic reward to the one person under the bean arbor who “can tell a good story 說得好故事。”⁹¹ The youthful storyteller of this session (D) indeed succeeds in affording the audience pleasure with his performance 說得痛快,⁹² and is rewarded accordingly. At the beginning of Session Seven, the audience raises the stakes even further, demanding from the same gifted young storyteller (D) that, in order to prove his talent, he relate a story which he has not “lifted from elsewhere 勦襲來的。”⁹³ Consequently, in Session Eight the narrative community redefines its expectations regarding a storyteller’s performance: “As long your story is lively and good to listen to, it doesn’t matter what dynasty it comes from or whether it’s true or false.”⁹⁴ Accordingly, henceforth, the storytelling’s entertaining quality is valued higher than the story’s historicity or authenticity. Thus, as a general tendency, the practical poetics of the storytelling community undergoes, within one seasonal cycle, the same shifting from historicity to fictionality that has been found generally in the development of the poetics of narrative genres in China.⁹⁵

⁸⁷ DX, p. 61; IT, p. 91.

⁸⁸ DX, p. 64; cf. IT, p. 94.

⁸⁹ DX, p. 12; cf. IT, p. 23.

⁹⁰ DX, p. 36; cf. IT, p. 54.

⁹¹ DX, p. 58; IT, p. 86.

⁹² DX, pp. 67 and 69.

⁹³ DX, p. 69; cf. IT, p. 101.

⁹⁴ DX, p. 82; IT, p. 118.

⁹⁵ Cf. Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, *From Historicity to Fictionality: The Chinese Poetics of Narrative* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1994), pp. 129–50.

The bean arbor narrative community as represented in *Idle Talk*, despite its modest beginnings as an improvised venue, gradually comes to resemble a formal institution of storytelling. At the outset of the final Session Twelve, the development is assessed as follows:

Once this particular bean arbor was erected and a good number of stories had been told here, listeners spread word of it in all directions, so that it gradually began to draw crowds in the afternoons. Nor did they diminish, any more than do the crowds around the storytellers' tables in the courtyards of shrines and temples.⁹⁶

The institutional aspirations grow not only with regard to the size of the crowd the bean arbor attracts, but also in terms of the community's self-conception as a place where the art of storytelling is being practiced. In the above-quoted passage, recitations of edifying morality stories in Buddhist temples (*yuanchang* 圓場) as well as the professional storyteller (*shuoshude* 說書的) performing in the marketplace are mentioned as points of comparison. As a matter of fact, the term *shuoshu*, denoting "[professional] storytelling,"⁹⁷ was already previously and repeatedly applied to the storytelling activity under the bean arbor,⁹⁸ thus blurring the boundary that distinguished professional-formal from amateur-informal storytelling.

In Session Eight, a young storyteller (E) traces his outstanding talent for telling stories to his habit as a child to squeeze into the crowd and "listen to some formal storytelling 聽人說些評話."⁹⁹ Even though he disclaims his skill as fit only for a "non-expert 不在行的" audience, in his opening speech he nevertheless employs jargon terms of the storyteller's trade, such as "entering the stage" (*shang chang* 上場) or "a complete episode" (*zheng duan* 整段) that betray his affinity to professional storytelling.¹⁰⁰

In Session Four, the storyteller of this particular session (B) makes the concluding remark that he had memorized this story not just for

⁹⁶ DX, p. 133; IT, p. 187.

⁹⁷ Vibeke Børdahl, *The Eternal Storyteller: Oral Literature in Modern China* (Richmond: Curzon, 1999), pp. 33 and 37.

⁹⁸ DX, pp. 81 and 121.

⁹⁹ DX, p. 82. For the term *pinghua*, as a southeastern reference to certain regional styles of professional storytelling, mostly on historical subject matters, see Børdahl, *Eternal Storyteller*, p. 3. In *Idle Play*, the critical audience demands that the schoolteacher should only be allowed to "perform storytelling" (*shuo pinghua* 說評話), instead of the "nonsense" he had presented on the previous days (DPXX, p. 1b [p. 306], p. 19a [p. 341]).

¹⁰⁰ DX, p. 82; cf. IT, p. 118. For the terms *shang chang* and *zheng duan*, see the entries for *changzi* 場子 and *duanzi* 段子 in the glossary of "Storyteller's Terms" in Børdahl, *Oral Tradition of Yangzhou Storytelling*, pp. 443 and 448, respectively.

fun, but it even cost him some money, since he gave a donation to the monk who told it to him, thus hinting at the commercial nature of professional storytelling. To this, the audience protests that the storytelling under the bean arbor would turn ugly, if it were about monetary profit. The storyteller then makes an immediate retreat and readily bows to the narrative community's amateur ethos, instead emphasizing his tale's edifying intention.¹⁰¹

As another aspect of the bean arbor ethos, any person from the audience can switch roles and become the storyteller for one session, taking the seat in the middle of the virtual bean arbor space.¹⁰² In Session Eight, the size of the audience gets temporarily diminished due to the fear of some among them that they themselves might be requested to perform a story, which they would then have to decline to their embarrassment.¹⁰³ The role switching of storyteller and audience member provides the most obvious criterion to distinguish amateur storytelling from professional storytelling. The basic interchangeability, or reverbability, of communicative roles in the narrative community under the bean arbor also warrants that its social communication reaches out well beyond the boundaries of its imaginary as well as real space.¹⁰⁴ This becomes apparent in a comment about a group of younger participants who, after the first storytelling session, went home with a bellyful of tales and "retold them all to their families under the lamplight."¹⁰⁵ This practice of retelling points to the processes of dissemination and multiplication starting from the bean arbor's circle of oral communication, but reaching out far beyond it. Moreover, the continuum of narrative communication goes both ways, as stories are not only carried out of the bean arbor but also into it. This is indicated by the remark of a new storyteller (B), in Session Three, who, as he is about to present his first story, explains that he heard it on a previous day at a relative's home.¹⁰⁶ Thus, it might even be said that the bean arbor serves as a trading venue for the exchange of stories. Narratives are picked up from there and carried home or circulated elsewhere, and the stories presented there by the few active storytellers likewise originate from larger cycles of communication and interaction with the world, which also includes input from other media, as will be discussed in the following.

¹⁰¹ DX, p. 46; cf. IT, pp. 70–71.

¹⁰² DX, p. 58.

¹⁰³ DX, p. 82.

¹⁰⁴ Langellier and Peterson, *Storytelling in Daily Life*, p. 3.

¹⁰⁵ DX, p. 12; IT, p. 23.

¹⁰⁶ DX, p. 23.

ORAL AND WRITTEN MEDIA

The storytelling practice under the bean arbor, as represented in *Idle Talk*, also offers exciting material for the study of the complex interrelationship between oral and written media of communication. At first glance, one might be tempted to consider the portrayed narrative community with its bean arbor setting as a purely oral communication situation; one might even be in danger of falling into the trap of the romanticizing idea of a non-literate community untouched by literacy, writing, or books.¹⁰⁷ However, as a matter of fact, the authorial frame-narrator and the various internal, secondary narrators, or storytellers, construe a number of links to forms of written and printed media that have a certain impact on the social communication under the bean arbor. The text includes sufficient evidence for the assumption that at least the more literate ones among the storytellers whose voices can be heard in the sessions under the bean arbor, have access to the world of books that, to a certain extent, also penetrated the rural world of the time.¹⁰⁸ For Du Fail's *Propos rustiques*, too, it has been argued that the storytelling culture it describes was strongly influenced by the book knowledge of rural notables and the urban culture of its author, and cannot be considered an unadulterated representation of a rural storytelling community.¹⁰⁹

The introduction to Session One includes the following straightforward statement on the types of story material presented under the bean arbor: "The male old-timers of the village would talk about the latest news in the court gazette, or on the local news, or they would tell old stories 鄉老們有說朝報的, 有說新聞的, 有說故事的."¹¹⁰ This listing of three types of content makes it clear, first of all, that the "idle talk" under the bean arbor – just like its European counterpart, the *veillée* – is by no means "pure" storytelling, but instead absorbs information and story material from a wide and diverse range of sources, both oral and written. The only primarily written source is the first one mentioned, the

¹⁰⁷ Ruth Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 145.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. James Hayes, "Specialists and Written Materials in the Village World," in David Johnson et al., eds., *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: U. California P., 1985), pp. 75–111.

¹⁰⁹ Schenda, *Von Mund zu Ohr*, p. 116.

¹¹⁰ DX, p. 1. The translation is based on Wu, *Lioness Roars*, pp. 57–58; cf. IT, p. 9. In *Idle Play*, it is said that what is being presented under the bean arbor is "old stories" (*gushi* 故事) and "new texts" (*xin wen* 新文) (DPXX, p. 16a [p. 335]; p. 18b [p. 340]). In the other dramatic adaptation, the storytelling activity is similarly described as the telling of "local news and old stories 新聞故事" (ZTX, scene 2, p. 211).

“court gazette,” termed here as *chaobao* 朝報, but also known as *dibao* 邸報, or *dichao* 邸鈔. It served the circulation of news on current events of imperial bearing, mostly on administrative and political matters, based on imperial edicts and proclamations of the ministries. It was selected, copied, and then distributed by the provincial government all the way down to the county level, where the local privileged circles were allowed to make excerpts from it. The hitherto available research on this ephemeral genre of semiofficial news, during the late Ming and the early Qing, remains divided about its actual reach: while some consider it as having been rather strictly constrained to literati-official circles, others believe that it had a socially rather wide distribution that included less literate readers and even illiterate folk to whom the news might have been read out aloud or interpreted in colloquial language.¹¹¹ Nevertheless, none of the stories that are related throughout the twelve sessions explicitly refers to the court gazette as its actual source, which might support the idea that the author, due to his likely Ming-loyalist leanings, might have deliberately sought to distance himself from the early-Qing court and the administration of his time.

The second source-type mentioned, the “local news,” or *xinwen* 新聞, points to the elusive field of hearsay, rumor, and gossip the inquiry of which in casual conversation was considered a custom of the Wu 吳 cultural region (roughly corresponding to Jiangnan), according to one late-Ming brush-notes collection.¹¹² Though obviously passed on primarily by word of mouth, local news also frequently provided story material for published vernacular narratives at the time.¹¹³ The “strange occurrences from everywhere 四方怪事” and the “common matters of everyday practice 日用常情” mentioned at the beginning of Session Two might reasonably be included among this category, and elsewhere even “ghost stories” are counted among the “local news.”¹¹⁴

The third category, “old stories,” or *gushi* 故事, likely refers to lore, whether local, regional or supra-regional, but mostly oral traditions that

¹¹¹ See Yin Yungong 尹韻公, *Zhongguo Mingdai xinwen chuanbo shi* 中國明代新聞傳播史 (Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe, 1990), pp. 107–8; Shi Yuanyuan 史媛媛, *Qingdai qianzhongqi xinwen chuanbo shi* 清代前中期新聞傳播史 (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 2008), pp. 38–96. See also Liu Yongqiang, “Ming-Qing dibao yu wenxue zhi guanxi” 明清邸報與文學之關係, in Wang Hui 汪暉 et al., eds., *Xueren (di san ji)* 學人 (第三輯) (Nanjing: Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe, 1992), pp. 437–64; Wang, “Information Media,” pp. 171–87.

¹¹² Li Yue 李樂, *Jianwen zaji* 見聞雜記 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986), j. 7, p. 4b (vol. 2, p. 594).

¹¹³ For a survey of references to local news as a source in late-Ming urban vernacular stories, see Dai Jian 戴健, *Mingdai houqi Wu Yue chengshi yule wenhua yu shimin wenxue* 明代後期吳越城市娛樂文化與市民文學 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2012), pp. 294–301.

¹¹⁴ DX, pp. 12 and 24.

nevertheless could also have been influenced by standardized versions of narrative traditions circulated in print. Among this type of source we may count, for instance, the peculiar regional version of the legend about the origin of the Cold Food (*hanshi* 寒食) festival,¹¹⁵ integrated into a local story about two historical personages named Shi You 石尤 and Jie Zhichui 介之推, related as the main narrative presented in Session One. Typically, the carriers of such old stories are the elderly villagers to whom the younger ones in the narrative community articulate their desire “of listening to their telling of old talk 聽說古話,” so they can appropriate, and hence also carry on, such lore. This process of passing on local knowledge from one generation to the next one is repeatedly pronounced as an important function of the social communication under the bean arbor.¹¹⁶

Popular songs are known to have played an important role in the oral social communication of the time. While this influence is not so perceptible among the bean arbor community, there is the conspicuous case of an extensive series of “bamboo-branch songs 竹枝詞” that describe Suzhou’s Tiger Hill (Huqiu 虎丘).¹¹⁷ At first sight, this might be considered a striking example of the penetration of another type of oral communication into the narrative community under the bean arbor. However, this particular genre’s position between oral and written literature is more ambiguous than it may seem. Bamboo-branch songs, despite their superficial similarity to heptasyllabic quatrains, lack any rigorous prosody and tend toward a vernacular style. They often came in long series and were employed especially for the description of places and local peculiarities, and often with an unmistakable satirical tendency. Mostly written by literati authors, series of bamboo-branch songs typically were circulated in writing, either in print or as manuscripts. Some may have gained a certain degree of local popularity, were memorized, and perhaps even recited in the streets.¹¹⁸

The cycle of twenty-two bamboo-branch songs inserted in Session Ten of *Idle Talk* was most likely also borrowed from a written source. It is included in an anthology of bamboo-branch songs about Suzhou by the title “Huqiu zhuzhici” 虎丘竹枝詞 (“Bamboo-branch Songs on Tiger Hill”), quoting an old manuscript of the same title as its source,

¹¹⁵ Wolfram Eberhard, *Chinese Festivals* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1952), pp. 117–19.

¹¹⁶ DX, pp. 12–13; cf. p. 23.

¹¹⁷ DX, pp. 105–10; cf. IT, pp. 150–54.

¹¹⁸ Roland Altenburger, “Observations of a Changing World: Lin Sumen’s Bamboo-Branch-Style Songs *Three Hundred Poems of Hanjiang* (*Hanjiang sanbai yin*),” in Altenburger, Wan, and Bordahl, eds., *Yangzhou, A Place in Literature*, pp. 174–75.

and attributing its authorship to an otherwise unknown person named Jia Wenshi 賈聞詩.¹¹⁹ In this session, which takes as its topic Suzhou people's "phoniness 空頭," the storyteller points out that not only do people from other places call them phony, but "even several scholars and learned men of the area have written bamboo-branch songs, or doggerel verses 打油詩 about them," some of which the storyteller found so amusing that he still remembers them.¹²⁰ In fact, the storyteller then goes on to quote the entire cycle of verses, even reproducing the titles of all except the first one. The literal correspondence of this series of bamboo-branch songs to its presumable written source would make it seem unlikely that it was transmitted by word of mouth.¹²¹

The theater stage must be considered an important source for story material. In late-imperial times, performances of singing drama by itinerant theater troupes are known to have served as a medium, especially to the illiterate or only rudimentarily literate rural population, for the oral dissemination and popularization of basic historical knowledge, of famous episodes and personages, and of the values and virtues they stood for.¹²² In Session Two, a young man from the audience refers his knowledge about the legendary ancient *femme fatale* Xi Shi 西施 to an act from the drama *Huan sha ji* 浣紗記 (*The Story of the Rinsed Silk Gauze*),¹²³ which he saw performed by a drama troupe in a neighboring village on a previous day.¹²⁴ He even remembers a line of verse that he recites: "The populace east of the river has none but my darling to look to 江東百姓全是賴卿卿."¹²⁵ When compared with the drama text by Liang Chenyu 梁辰魚 (1520–1580), the line is found to be a literal quotation,¹²⁶ which on the one hand reconfirms the expectation that a drama's sung verse passages, or arias, were considered its

¹¹⁹ Suzhou shi wenhua ju 蘇州市文化局, ed., *Gu Su zhuzhici* 姑蘇竹枝詞 (Shanghai: Baijia chubanshe, 2002), pp. 344–48.

¹²⁰ DX, p. 105; IT, p. 150.

¹²¹ As the only major difference, one verse on old prostitutes ("Laoji" 老妓), originally placed at the end of the cycle, in *Idle Talk* is regrouped with two other verses on prostitution (DX, p. 108).

¹²² Barbara E. Ward, "Regional Operas and Their Audiences: Evidence from Hong Kong," in Johnson et al., eds., *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, pp. 161–87; cf. Huang, "Ming Qing minjian gongong zhishi tixi," pp. 115–16.

¹²³ On Xi Shi lore and the singing drama *Huan sha ji*, see Olivia Milburn, "The Silent Beauty: Changing Portrayals of Xi Shi, from 'Zhiguai' and Poetry to Ming Fiction and Drama," *AM* 3d ser. 26.1 (2013), pp. 23–53.

¹²⁴ A corresponding reference to a performance of this drama watched elsewhere is also reproduced in *Idle Play*; DPXX, p. 2a (p. 307).

¹²⁵ DX, p. 16; IT, p. 28.

¹²⁶ *Huan sha ji*, scene 23, in Mao Jin 毛晉, ed., *Liushi zhong qu* 六十種曲 (rpt. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1958), vol. 1, p. 80; Cyril Birch, trans., *Scenes for Mandarins: The Elite Theater of the Ming* (New York City: Columbia U.P., 1995), p. 73.

truly memorable parts; on the other hand, a literal rendering without reference to the written text would seem unrealistic.

On several occasions, literary texts are openly referred to as sources for stories told under the bean arbor. This is most obviously the case where any actual or supposed textual origin is referred to by its title. However, as it turns out, some references to written sources in *Idle Talk* cannot be verified and therefore are suspected of being mere pseudo-references. For instance, the titles of two classical sources mentioned by the storyteller in Session Two have been found to be fictitious, and some references to vernacular narratives, too, have been considered spurious.¹²⁷ However, while Patrick Hanan considers such attributions found in *Idle Talk* overall a hoax, Robert Hegel lauds the author's "references to classical texts and Buddhist scriptures [as] precise and always apt."¹²⁸

As an example of this, consider Session One, which exhibits conspicuously strong links to written texts. The story in it takes its starting point in a "leisure book 閒書," apparently referring to the fictional narrative a young man is reading while sitting under the bean arbor, indicating the degree to which the printed book encroaches upon the storytelling realm.¹²⁹ Later on, a work entitled *Du jian* 妒鑑 (*Mirror of Jealousy*) is mentioned,¹³⁰ supposedly referring to a collection of anecdotes on female jealousy, which – allegedly – due to its popularity was later continued in several supplements and sequels. Since there is no bibliographical trace of any such book whatsoever,¹³¹ it would seem likely that its title was fictively construed and presented as an ironical example for the effect of knowledge disseminated via the printed word that was diametrically contrary to authorial intention, since the collection was meant to instruct men on how to guard against wifely jealousy, but once women got access to it, they read it as instruction from their reversed point of view, which then allegedly helped the fostering and spreading of a domestic culture of female jealousy.¹³² This might be viewed as implying criticism of the ambiguities of literary communi-

¹²⁷ DX, p. 19; IT, pp. 32 and 254, n. 16.

¹²⁸ Hanan, *Vernacular Story*, p. 206; Hegel, "Introduction," in IT, p. xix.

¹²⁹ DX, p. 2.

¹³⁰ DX, p. 2.

¹³¹ See Carolyn Ford, "The Afterlife of a Lost Book – *Du Ji* (*The Record of Zealous Women*) Fifth Century," in Daria Berg, ed., *Reading China: Fiction, History, and the Dynamics of Discourse. Essays in Honour of Professor Glen Dudbridge* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), p. 192, n. 81.

¹³² On the theme of female jealousy in premodern Chinese literature, see Yenna Wu, *The Chinese Virago: A Literary Theme* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1995); for a discussion of the present episode, see pp. 16–17.

cation via the printed book to which oral storytelling under the bean arbor is posited as a countermodel.

For the first of its two stories on female jealousy, the Tang-era collection of tales *Shuyi ji* 述異記 (*Records of Tales about the Strange*) is then cited as the source. However, we do know the actual source, which is given in *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (*Extensive Records of the Taiping Era*; 978 AD). It is *Youyang zazu* 酉陽雜俎 (*Miscellaneous Morsels from Youyang*; ninth century).¹³³ The narrative, rendered in a vernacularized version, adds a lengthy passage from a famous item in the sixth-century *Wen xuan* 文選 (*Anthology of Belles Lettres*), namely, Cao Zhi's 曹植 "Luo shen fu" 洛神賦 ("Rhapsody on the Luo River Goddess").¹³⁴ This long poetic description, with its flowery and semantically complex language,¹³⁵ appears strangely out of place under the bean arbor, since the audience there, given their rudimentary or outright lacking education, could by no means adequately comprehend it. Thus, this complex literal quotation of poetry further accentuates the tension between oral storytelling, on the one hand, and the written tradition, on the other. In the given context, though, the classical quotation primarily serves as a marker of education for the storyteller in question, an embedded, third-order storyteller, who, just like the secondary-level storyteller, is an elderly elementary schoolteacher at a village school (termed both as *mengguan de* 蒙館的 and *xuejiu* 學究).¹³⁶ Schoolteachers' propensities to make profuse quotations from classical sources may be viewed as a sign of their exaggerated educational habitus. The examination title "government student" (*shengyuan* 生員) that such men typically held, did not qualify them for office, and thus excluded them from the scholar-official class, for which reason they often suffered from insufficient status recognition. Nevertheless, their intermediary position between commoners and the local elite destined them to serve as a cultural interface at the village level, hence their propensity to injecting elements of classical education and the high literary tradition into the primarily oral culture of the common people. The schoolteacher's habitus of the petty scholar fixated on the older written tradition likely was, in any event, intended as a parody.¹³⁷

¹³³ Li Fang 李昉 et al., comp., *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), vol. 6, j. 272, pp. 2143-44. Lanselle ("Doupeng xianhua," pp. 205-6) suspects that the incorrect source identification was not due to an error but might have been intentional.

¹³⁴ Xiao Tong 蕭統, ed., *Wen xuan* 文選 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986), vol. 2, j. 19, pp. 897-98; cf. Xiao Tong, *Wen xuan, or Selections of Refined Literature*, trans. David R. Knechtges (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1996) 3, p. 359.

¹³⁵ DX, pp. 3-4.

¹³⁶ DX, pp. 3 and 5.

¹³⁷ Chen Baoliang 陳寶良, "Fu bu jiaoshu": Ming Qing shushi zhi shengcun zhuangtai jiqi

This is reconfirmed in Session Three, where the schoolteacher storyteller of the first two sessions stays away from the bean arbor, due to a change of weather. The young man who volunteers to succeed him in the storyteller role represents a significant shift away from the written tradition and towards a self-conscious poetics of oral storytelling. In the concluding discussion to his first round of storytelling he mentions that, in his childhood, he did not study books, but instead “picked up hearsay in the streets 道聽塗說,”¹³⁸ thus positing the oral communication of everyday life against the book tradition, and the street against the village school. Fittingly, this storyteller drops some rather disparaging remarks about his predecessor, the pedantic “village schoolmaster 鄉館先生,” who always adheres to words and historical details. In his own storytelling practice, this young storyteller claims, he broke radically free from such constraints: “The tale is from long ago, and the name of the dynasty, official titles, places, monikers are all made up off the top of my head.”¹³⁹ Moreover, he consequently transposes the story to his own time and region, thus anachronistically adapting and appropriating the past. While this storyteller sells this practice to his audience as a deliberate, aesthetically as well as pragmatically motivated, decision, it is also known as a characteristic procedure of oral literature and folk narrative more generally.¹⁴⁰

The underlying tension between oral culture and the written tradition erupts, with a new degree of intensity, in the final chapter, where a character named Rector Chen (Chen zhaizhang 陳齋長) appears on the scene. He is noted for being the first and only character in the entire frame-narrative with a name and an official-sounding title.¹⁴¹ Rector

xingxiang” “富不教書”，明清塾師之生存狀態及其形象，*Fujian luntan: renwen shehuikexue ban* 福建論壇，人文社會科學版 4 (2010)，pp. 64-70; Liu Xiaodong 劉曉東，*Mingdai de shushi yu jiceng shehui* 明代的塾師與基層社會 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2010)，esp. chap. 6.

¹³⁸ This phrase, somewhat ironically, also alludes to the – rather disparaging – historiographical *locus classicus* for the bibliographical term *xiaoshuo* 小說, albeit not yet in its much later meaning of “fictional narrative.” See Ban Gu 班固, *Han shu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), vol. 6, j. 30, p. 1745. See Daria Berg, “What the Messenger of Souls Has to Say: New Historicism and the Poetics of Chinese Culture,” in Michel Hockx and Ivo Smits, eds., *Reading East Asian Writing: The Limits of Literary Theory* (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), p. 177.

¹³⁹ DX, p. 36; IT, p. 54.

¹⁴⁰ Victor Mair et al., “Three Contemporary Western Approaches to ‘Oral Literature’: Implications for the Study of Chinese Folklore,” *Hanxue yanjiu* 漢學研究 8.1 (1990), pp. 12 and 16.

¹⁴¹ The term *zhaizhang* 齋長 for a school rector emerged in the Yuan. In the Ming, it was used as a designation for a class teacher at the Directorate of Education (Guozijian 國子監). In an extended sense, it was also used as a term of address for private tutors (*shushi* 塾師). Here, the implied parody might build on an allusion to the pedantic private tutor Chen Zui-liang 陳最良, in scene four of *Mudan ting* 牡丹亭 (*The Peony Pavilion*, 1599), who is referred

Chen has come to the village as a visitor from the county town, and hence his presence also points to the rural-urban gap with its socio-cultural tensions. Pretending to be a minor official, he behaves like a guardian of state orthodoxy, thus epitomizing the state's constant urge to check on its subjects. Moreover, as a bookish person about whom the villagers rumor, in parodistic exaggeration, that "he's read every book in existence 胸中無書不讀,"¹⁴² he would appear to represent the elite culture of books, of reading and writing, hence marking the counter-position to the non-literate storytelling culture. Rector Chen was alerted to the bean arbor community by the rumor about someone named "Friend Dou" (*Dou pengyou* 賣朋友), who was said to tell stories in a village outside the county town, which then turns out to have been a verbal misapprehension of the word "*dou peng*," or bean arbor.¹⁴³ What at the surface may appear as just a funny misunderstanding, indicates that the storytelling community is misperceived by the authorities, who tend to suspect villagers of subversive activities, particularly of sectarian preaching. It is outright ironical, though, that Rector Chen, as the self-styled representative of official culture, was misled by a rumor, the notoriously most unreliable form of oral communication.

Two representatives of the bean arbor circle then try to apologetically downplay the relevance of the storytelling under the bean arbor, emphasizing its oral, informal, and communal nature. As one of them explains:

... In our village they happened to put up a bean arbor where a few friends who have some spare time get together to gossip and tell tales about things old and new. These are just things seen or heard by a village school teacher, nothing worthy of sullyng your refined ears.¹⁴⁴

to as "Chen zhaizhang" 陳齋長. This tutor Chen formerly was a student of the Directorate of Education (*jiansheng* 監生), but remained unsuccessful in the examinations at the provincial level for forty-five years. As a consequence he has to earn his life as a private tutor in the residence of Prefect Du, where he instructs the landlord's only daughter, Du Liniang 杜麗娘. For a detailed discussion, see Sophie Volpp, "Texts, Tutors, and Fathers: Pedagogy and Pedants in Tang Xianzu's *Mudan ting*," in David Der-wei Wang and Shang Wei, eds., *Dynastic Crisis and Cultural Innovation: From the Late Ming to the Late Qing and Beyond* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), pp. 25-62; see also IT, pp. 225-26. Thus, it may be concluded that the term *zhaizhang* does not necessarily refer to a subaltern official position. Judging from the square cap (*fangjin* 方巾, DX, p. 133) he wears, he is a government student (*shengyuan*) by examination degree.

¹⁴² DX, p. 134; IT, p. 188.

¹⁴³ DX, pp. 133-34.

¹⁴⁴ DX, p. 134; cf. IT, p. 188.

Subsequently, the elderly man who himself served as the storyteller A in several sessions, including the preceding Session Eleven, defends the purpose and nature of the bean arbor and its storytelling practice in similar terms:

We humble folk have taken advantage of the cool breezes to share a little idle talk, but these were just things we've seen and heard, true events experienced while on the road, which are impervious to the classical writings and inaccessible by way of reason, just like "tracts for reforming our era." Fortunately, it is still early today, and not all of our friends have arrived yet. If by any chance I had not become aware of your presence, sir, and begun wantonly to talk nonsense, I am afraid I would have insulted your ears, sir. You even might have thrown up your early morning breakfast!¹⁴⁵

Interestingly, the elderly village schoolteacher (storyteller A) who himself is a representative of both the written culture and the oral culture of the village, downplays the tension as represented by the bean arbor storytelling practice, emphasizing that it stood in a complementary relationship to the high tradition of writing. Instead, he likens their storytelling to tracts of moral instruction (*quanshi wen* 勸世文, literally, "tracts for reforming our era"), a lowbrow genre of didactic texts written not only for reading but also for oral presentation, thus approximating it to the preaching practiced at community pact meetings, and tendentially misrepresenting the nature of the storytelling under the bean arbor.

Rector Chen, in his subsequent lecture on cosmogony,¹⁴⁶ asks for brush and paper to draw diagrams (supplied in all editions of the text), since he fears that "perhaps by speaking it would not be rendered clear enough."¹⁴⁷ The recourse to paper and brush even in lecturing emphasizes his proximity to writing and his distrust in oral communication. The educational lecture he offers in addressing the bean arbor audi-

¹⁴⁵ DX, p. 134; cf. IT, p. 188.

¹⁴⁶ As only recently has been discovered, this "philosophical dialogue" was translated very early into French, with extensive commentaries, by the Jesuit missionary Xavier Dentrecolles (1664–1741) and included in Jean-Baptiste Du Halde, *Description de l'Empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie Chinoise* (La Haye: Henri Scheurleer, 1736), vol. 3, pp. 42–64. See 尤德 (Daniel M. Youd), "Jie yu xiaoshuo yu feixiaoshuo zhi jian: Ming Qing baihua xiaoshuo de quanqiuxing yiji xin faxian de Qing chu huaben xiaoshuo zaoqi de xiyi" 介於小說與非小說之間, 明清白話小說的全球性以及新發現的清初話本小說早期的西譯, *Zhongzheng Hanxue yanjiu* 中正漢學研究 22 (2013), pp. 303–31; Huiyi Wu, "Nouvelle identification d'une traduction chinois-français (1735)," *Carnets du Centre Chine* (<<http://cecmc.hypotheses.org/7299>>, last accessed August 30, 2021); and idem, "Alien Voices under the Bean Arbor: How an Eighteenth-Century French Jesuit Translated *Doupeng xianhua* 豆棚閒話 as the 'Dialogue of a Modern Atheist Chinese Philosopher,'" *TP* 103.1–3 (2017), pp. 155–205.

¹⁴⁷ DX, pp. 135–6; cf. IT, p. 189.

ence is in a semi-classical style, closer to the written language than to the vernacular, with only occasional passages in more colloquial talk. Thus, he snubs the uneducated majority of the audience. Moreover, he repeatedly makes dismissive remarks about the common folk, calling them “profane common people 世俗之人,” or even “the foolish common people 愚俗之人” who believe in “absurd 荒唐” folk traditions, such as the one about King Yama, the ruler of the netherworld.¹⁴⁸ The villagers resent Rector Chen’s crude arrogance in his assault upon the folk-cultural beliefs they share. The narrative community’s resistance to his diatribe manifests in their frequent interruptions of the rector’s lecture.

The lecturer is eventually frustrated in his futile attempts at refuting “the stubborn, unbreakable convictions of the crowd.”¹⁴⁹ When leaving, he warns the village elder that if they would continue “advocating heresy to delude people’s minds, then this bean arbor might well become a meeting place for brewing up disaster.”¹⁵⁰ This thinly disguised threat against holding any more sessions under the bean arbor also renders it clear that what authorities feared most about such village storytelling was its possible involvement with sectarian teachings that might give rise to local rebellious uprisings. In the official perception, such subversive events were closely associated with a certain type of storytelling – the performance of “precious scrolls” (*baojuan* 寶卷).¹⁵¹ The official persecution of such potentially seditious activities in the early decades of the Qing is known to have been so merciless that the threat of a possible official crackdown on the bean arbor community in *Idle Talk* would not seem too far-fetched.¹⁵² That this official response is, once again, based on misperception becomes clear from a collective concluding comment by the bean arbor community:

The people said: “This despicable old rector held a pedantic sermon, in which he did away with all the stories that there are about gods and ghosts. But when we attend the bean arbor, we just tell idle stories; we have not the slightest interest in talking people into eating vegetarian food and praying to Buddha.”¹⁵³

¹⁴⁸ DX, pp. 142–44.

¹⁴⁹ DX, p. 146; cf. IT, p. 207.

¹⁵⁰ DX, p. 146; IT, p. 207.

¹⁵¹ See Daniel L. Overmyer, *Folk Buddhist Religion: Dissenting Sects in Late Traditional China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1976); and idem, *Precious Volumes: An Introduction to Chinese Scriptures from the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1999).

¹⁵² Hubert Seiwert and Ma Xisha, *Popular Religious Movements and Heterodox Sects in Chinese History* (Boston: Brill, 2003), pp. 209–10.

¹⁵³ DX, p. 146; cf. IT, p. 207.

The authorities' fears and expectations, as expressed by the rector's lecture, was primarily about any potentially sectarian folk-Buddhist contents that, however, played no role at all in the bean arbor storytelling discourse. In a brief comment that concludes the entire book, the elderly storyteller makes the following disparaging remark about Rector Chen's intervention:

The old man remarked, "There are so many affairs under heaven that have been ruined by such sermons of old bigots, not just this single bean arbor!"¹⁵⁴

In this implicative statement, the elderly spokesman of the bean arbor community expands the critique of Rector Chen's hegemonic discourse of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy into the larger social and political situation, hinting at a micro-macrocosmic analogy between the bean arbor and the empire. He would seem to imply that "such sermons of old bigots" were representative of the deluded minds of members of the literati elite, which, in the final consequence, had resulted in the loss of the Ming empire. Previously, in Session Five, the authorial frame-narrator juxtaposed the literati officials, who, in spite of having studied the classics, were morally corrupted by their careers, to the simple "village man 村鄙之夫," who might not know who the Duke of Zhou or Confucius had been, who never studied, and who likely could not even read, but who was "firmly standing on solid ground with both feet 兩腳踏著實地."¹⁵⁵

This critique of corrupted power, spoken behind the backs of the dominant, may be considered a good example of a "hidden transcript," in James C. Scott's sense.¹⁵⁶ The participants in the storytelling community insist that the bean arbor is not to be a place for preaching or indoctrination where one ideology prevails, but a place for the exchange of knowledge and experience, conceived as an open, dialogistic and pluralistic discourse, with broad topical limits that are renegotiated by the audience ad hoc, and with effective storytelling as the ultimate criterion of success.

The bean arbor, finally, is raised to a metaphor for the ephemeral character of the oral storytelling culture that it temporarily houses. When it collapses in the end, the audience just laughs about it as if about a slapstick scene. Nothing is lost by its disappearance, since what this imaginary institution is truly made of – people and their sto-

¹⁵⁴ DX, p. 146; cf. IT, p. 207.

¹⁵⁵ DX, p. 49; cf. IT, p. 73.

¹⁵⁶ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1990), p. xii.

ries – won't vanish and cannot be destroyed. As “incidentally 偶然” (a word appearing twice in the respective passage) as the improvised bean arbor came into being,¹⁵⁷ on private initiative and at a trifle initial expense, so does it incidentally vanish again, with the possibility of a revival in the following spring. The bean arbor community's dispersal is due to seasonal change rather than to political pressure from the local authorities. The ephemerality and ultimate uncontrollability of this quasi-institution might need to be rethought in the context of the “infrapolitics of subordinate groups,” to borrow another notion from James C. Scott.¹⁵⁸

CONCLUSION

The contraposition of the literati culture of reading and writing, on the one hand, and the rural oral culture of storytelling, on the other, with which *Idle Talk* concludes would appear as an assessment of both a socio-cultural stratification and tensions between high and low cultures in seventeenth-century China. However, in its narrative about the bean arbor storytelling community, any neat bifurcation of oral and written, and of popular versus learned, tends to be complicated by its representation of the actual practice of social communication, which turns out to be far more heterogeneous, and characterized by the frequent intertwining of various oral and written media, such as when the illiterate indirectly also participate in certain strains of written tradition, via the orally performed retelling of knowledge based on print media.

As argued in the present article, it is enlightening to reconsider the description of the bean arbor and of the storytelling taking place in it in *Doupeng xianhua* not just as an ingenious narrative framing device, but also as the representation of a custom, or quasi-institution, of rural Jiangnan (and likely beyond) in the late-imperial period. Due to the ephemerality and everydayness of the bean arbor (alternatively, the gourd trellis) as an informal venue of social communication in the village, it has left relatively few traces in the written tradition. A survey of scattered extant references nevertheless tends to reconfirm some important aspects of its representation in *Idle Talk*. Moreover, a cross-cultural comparison with the far better documented, widespread custom of the *veillée* in early-modern France turned out to be instructive, since both types of rural venues for social communication followed similar patterns and served some of the same purposes. Moreover, in Du Fail's

¹⁵⁷ On “incidentally,” see DX, p. 134.

¹⁵⁸ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, pp. xiii and 183–201.

Propos rustiques, based on the storytelling at a series of *veillées*, we found a rather striking European literary parallel to *Idle Talk*.

Literati's interest in the bean arbor, if at all, focused on its value as a source of local lore. It would seem likely that the author of *Idle Talk* himself attended such storytelling meetings under a bean arbor, as is variously hinted by the frame-narrative, such as when it construes the authorial narrator, the pseudonymous author of *Idle Talk* himself, as the storyteller in two sessions. This first-hand experience may have served him as more than just an inspiration, but also led him to appreciate the bean arbor as a model of social communication among rural commoners, that he positioned against the scholarly discourse of his time. He represented the communal storytelling under the bean arbor as an informal custom that primarily served the passing-on of knowledge and personal experience packaged in stories, but that also fulfilled important additional goals, such as ethical education, the integration of the various groups of village society, and the continuity of intergenerational traditions. The bean arbor community is described as developing and continuously negotiating its distinct ethos as well as its aesthetic criteria, which were influenced by professional storytelling. Far from being a purely oral communication culture, though, the storytelling actually betrays various touch-points with the written tradition and print media. The diverse insights gained from a cultural-historical exploration of *Idle Talk* contribute to the enhancement of our previously scant knowledge about the notoriously ephemeral oral culture in late-imperial rural Jiangnan.

LIST OF ABBEVIATIONS

- DPXX Fan Xizhe 范希哲, "Doupeng xianxi" 荳棚閒戲, in Wu Shuyin 吳書蔭, ed., *Suizhong Wu shi cang chaoben gaoben xiqu congkan* 綏中吳氏藏抄本稿本戲曲叢刊
- DX Aina Jushi 艾納居士, "Doupeng xianhua" 豆棚閒話, ed. Zhang Daoqin 張道勤, in *Xihu jiahua deng san zhong* 西湖佳話等三種
- IT Aina the Layman with Ziran the Eccentric Wanderer, *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor*, ed. Robert E. Hegel
- ZTX Tang Ying 唐英, "Zhuan tian xin" 轉天心, in *Gubotang xiqu ji* 古柏堂戲曲集, ed. Zhou Yude 周育德