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ISBN

9798277444726

Author

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Publication Date

2026-03-19

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

All Things Return to Spring (*wanwu guichun* 万物归春):
Xiangsheng as a Spatial Production of Tianqiao (1900-1966)

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in East Asian Studies

by

Yu Zhuang

2026

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2026

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

All Things Return to Spring (*wanwu guichun* 万物归春):
Xiangsheng as a Spatial Production of Tianqiao (1900-1966)

by

Yu Zhuang

Master of Arts in East Asian Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2026

Professor Andrea S. Goldman, Chair

This thesis examines the historical relationship between *xiangsheng* (cross-talk comedy) and the space of Tianqiao in Beijing from approximately 1900 to 1966. Rather than repeating the conventional understanding of *xiangsheng* as a linguistic or literary art form (or as pop culture), it argues that *xiangsheng* must be construed as an everyday practice produced through specific spatial formations. Using performers' memoirs, oral histories, documents from the Beijing Municipal Archives, contemporary newspapers, and recollections from later periods, this thesis reconstructs the social ecology of Tianqiao on paper, thereby demonstrating how Tianqiao performers, in order to eke out a living through words, developed a set of techniques closely tied to the district's distinctive spatial formation.

The divergent trajectories of two amusement parks—the New World Amusement Park and the South City Amusement Park—opened in the greater Tianqiao area further illustrate the futile Republican-era efforts to modernize Tianqiao and the South City. Despite how municipal authorities and elite observers often depicted the area as a chaotic world, Tianqiao prospered. After 1949, Tianqiao did not immediately disappear; instead, it continued to serve as a final refuge for performers and some urban laborers, sustained by the recurring social relations that had long structured Beijing’s urban life.

Drawing on Henri Lefebvre’s concept of the production of space and Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of social fields and convertible capital, the thesis shows how *xiangsheng* materialized through the everyday spatial practices of performers and audiences embedded in Tianqiao, as well as the broader population of Beijing urbanites who wandered into the area. Instead of treating Tianqiao as a community without hierarchy, the thesis explains how the community produced and maintained its own internal hierarchies, which replicated the larger social structure of Beijing society.

By situating *xiangsheng* within a specific spatial formation, this thesis contributes to broader discussions of urban culture and everyday life in Beijing by arguing that entertainment and cultural practices were not merely reflections of urban social hierarchy but active participants in producing it. Tianqiao, therefore, was not merely the birthplace of *xiangsheng* but the spatial formation that made the art form historically possible.

The thesis of Yu Zhuang is approved.

Michael Berry

William Marotti

Andrea S. Goldman, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2026

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to offer my sincerest thanks to Professor Andrea S. Goldman, who has been more than an advisor and has always done everything she could to help her students. I could never have reached the point I am at now without her guidance and assistance. As the old Chinese proverb goes, “Good horses are more than common, but a trainer who can recognize them is rare 千里马常有，而伯乐不常有” I still remember the day in her office when I approached her with two possible research trajectories: Chinese opera and *xiangsheng*. She chose the less agonizing of the two, which eventually set the stage for the final curtain of my master’s journey. I must also apologize for her having to put up with my constant discursive writing and my easily derailed trains of thought.

Because of Professor Goldman, I was able to meet David Moser, who generously lent me a hard drive containing part of Hou Baolin’s and Ding Guangquan’s personal archives, and Hsun-Wen “Land” Chou, who helped me stay in tune with the *xiangsheng* community in Beijing today. I would also like to thank several generous scholars in mainland China: Jiang Huiming at the *Quyí* Research Institute, and Lu Yingkun, Professor Emeritus at the Communication University of China, both offered invaluable suggestions regarding research materials, as well as Professor Li Jian and Professor Zhu Pengcheng at Peking University, who kindly offered advice on my research.

Finally, I would like to apologize to all my committee members, Professor Michael Berry and Professor William Marotti, for indulging my procrastination and for receiving my draft so close to the submission deadline.

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All Things Return to Spring (*wanwu guichun*)万物归春: *Xiangsheng* as a Spatial

Production of Tianqiao (1900-1966)

The Opening 垫活儿

On February 9, 2013, the Spring Festival Gala 春节联欢晚会 once again announced the arrival of the Lunar New Year. By then, the Gala had become a national ritual, repeating punctually every year since 1983. Its thirtieth anniversary passed without much commemoration, except for a familiar anxiety: did the Gala still know how to hold its audience?

Comedy was expected to rescue the evening, as it had in earlier decades. However, Zhao Benshan 赵本山, the Gala's longtime comic pillar, was absent that year. In Zhao's old dressing room, Guo Degang 郭德纲 and Yu Qian 于谦, Guo's longtime *xiangsheng* partner, were making final preparations.¹ By 2013, Guo was arguably the most popular comedian in mainland China, though he and his troupe, *De-yun she* 德云社, remained largely outside the state-sanctioned cultural establishment. His arrival on the Gala stage was therefore both anticipated and improbable, especially given that Guo had long touted himself as THE non-mainstream 非主流 performer and joked about the improbability of ever appearing on the Gala's stage.

The anxiety surrounding his appearance on the Gala was not misplaced. Guo's *xiangsheng* did not travel easily across performance venues. Its force had never resided solely in language. Much of his *xiangsheng* was performed in small playhouses 小剧场, where performers and audiences shared the same physical space, and in which heckling and interruption were integral to his act. His performance happened through real-time negotiation. *Xiangsheng*, in such

¹ The Gala's production team actually placed Guo Degang in the same dressing room that had been occupied by Zhao's performance team for more than one decade.

spaces, depended on contingency, improvisation, and the possibility of deviation.² The space did not merely host the performance, but also made it happen.

The production team attempted to replicate such negotiation by drawing the audience closer to the two performers, restoring “traditional” stage elements: a performance table (*changmian zhuo* 场面桌), the hand towel, and a piece of wood used to call for attention (*xingmu* 醒木), and the fan, and even permitting interjections from the audience. But what appeared as spontaneity on television remained choreographed (because they were indeed). Proximity could be staged, but not be reproduced. The spatial logic of the Gala—grand, mediated, national—was fundamentally different from that of the playhouse.

The incompatibility revealed something essential about *xiangsheng*. It was never simply a repertoire of routines, nor merely an art of verbal pyrotechnics. It was a practice embedded in specific spatial formations that structured special performer–audience relations. Humor emerged not only from words but from the bodies and expectations, from shared spatiality and temporality. Thus, to comprehend *xiangsheng* historically, we cannot simply trace it back to its textual or ideological origins, but rather, to the spaces within which performance was produced.

² This dynamic has also been beautifully elucidated by Yu Shi: “In live performance, with the presence of consumers, the performer witnessed the full lifecycle of his cultural products, detected market demand, experienced the execution of his virtuosity, and received applause and reward for his labor.” See Yu Shi, “Tensions on the B-Side: The Global Gramophone Industry and *Quyí* Performances in Early Twentieth-Century Beijing,” in *Twentieth-Century China*, 47 (3): 223–42. <https://doi.org/10.1353/tcc.2022.0029>.

The Setup 瓢把儿: Spatializing the History of *Xiangsheng*

Just as *xiangsheng* performers first learn their craft by reciting others' routines, a new approach to its history must begin by reviewing the existing Sinophone and Anglophone scholarship on the genre.

Xiangsheng in PRC and Anglophone scholarship. The first monograph that sought to construct a comprehensive genealogy of *xiangsheng*—although simultaneously casting a long shadow over all subsequent attempts—was *Xiangsheng suyuan* 相声溯源 [On the origins of *xiangsheng*], co-edited by scholars Xue Baokun 薛宝琨, Wang Jingshou 汪景寿, Li Wanpeng 李万鹏, and the legendary performer Hou Baolin 侯宝林.³ Canonizing the now-familiar four pillars of performance—*shuo* (talking), *xue* (imitating), *dou* (teasing), *chang* (singing) 说学逗唱—their work did more than set artistic standards for performers and audiences. It quietly erected boundaries around what counts as *xiangsheng* and, by extension, where scholars should direct their attention. To be fair—and as I will later demonstrate—neither younger performers nor audiences have ever followed these standards with unwavering fidelity. For performers, *xiangsheng* was rarely a profession with the luxury of stubborn artistic purity; it was a lifelong craft, or much more commonly, a modest “silver bowl” by means of which one eked out a living. For audiences, the only criterion that truly mattered was simple: did it make them laugh?

Despite *xiangsheng*'s murky origins, previous scholarship on the art has not lacked historical concern. What it has lacked, however, is historicity. Much of the writing, both within and beyond mainland China, has been preoccupied with identifying the sui generis essence of

³ Xue Baokun 薛宝琨, Wang Jingshou 汪景寿, Li Wanpeng 李万鹏 & Hou Baolin 侯宝林, *Xiangsheng Suyuan* 相声溯源 [On the origins of *xiangsheng*] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1982).

xiangsheng: What is *xiangsheng*? rather than how did *xiangsheng* become what it was at different historical junctures? The result has often resembled a puppy chasing its own tail. In this regard, I have found Ni Zhongzhi's 倪锺之 *Zhongguo xiangsheng shi* 中国相声史 [The history of *xiangsheng* in China] to be one of the most comprehensive historical narratives to date.⁴ Although Ni stretches *xiangsheng*'s lineage back to the pre-Qin period, his well-documented account of *xiangsheng* since the late imperial era refuses to treat it as a cultural totality. This, in itself, marks an important shift toward historicity rather than myth making or inventions of the past.

Still, many attempts to theorize *xiangsheng*—exclusively after 1949—tended to land in formalistic cul-de-sacs. Since the founding of the PRC, cultural workers, cultural cadres, and intellectuals (including scholars) have tried to reform, theorize, and discipline *xiangsheng* into ideological usefulness. Lao She 老舍 and the linguist Luo Changpei 罗常培 published foundational essays in *People's Daily*, urging that *xiangsheng* be aligned with the Party's cultural line. Luo's 1955 article, “*Xiangsheng de lai yuan he jin hou nuli de fang xiang* 相声的来源和今后努力的方向 [The origin(s) of *xiangsheng* and the direction it must strive for going forward],” advocated that *xiangsheng* be yoked to satire and criticism 讽刺与批评.⁵ Another of his articles, “*Xiangsheng gai jin le* 相声改进了 [Xiangsheng has improved],” argues explicitly

⁴ Another (even earlier) attempt to systematize the history of *xiangsheng* can be found in Wang Jue 王决, Wang Jingshou, and Fujita Kaoru 藤田香, *Zhongguo xiangsheng shi* 中国相声史 [A history of *xiangsheng* in China] (Tianjin: Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 2012). I do not discuss this work in the main text because the analysis of late-imperial and Republican *xiangsheng* operates almost exclusively through an artistic lens, which is precisely the problem I critique throughout: the pervasive neglect of *xiangsheng* as a historical construct. In their account, *xiangsheng* literally has no history prior to 1949. See Part II (第二编), 53–176; Ni Zhongzhi, *Zhongguo xiangsheng shi* 中国相声史 [A history of *xiangsheng* in China] (Wuhan: Wuhan daxue chubanshe, 2015).

⁵ Luo Changpei 罗常培, “*Xiangsheng de lai yuan he jin hou nuli de fang xiang* 相声的来源和今后努力的方向 [The origin(s) of *xiangsheng* and the direction it must strive for going forward],” in *People's Daily*, 12/10/1950.

that *xiangsheng* could function as a propaganda tool: “*Xiangsheng* is beloved by the masses because it is both good at satire and highly amusing. If utilized well, it can become a very effective tool for propaganda.”⁶ Lao She’s later essay, “*Xiangsheng yuyan de gexin* 相声语言的革新 [Reforming the language of *xiangsheng*],”⁷ underscores the relationship of language and humor, eventually endorsing Mandarin over regional dialects. Soon after, Wang Liye’s 王力叶 “*Tan xiangsheng de jicheng he fazhan wenti* 谈相声的继承和发展问题 [On the Question of the Inheritance and Development of *Xiangsheng*],” revived the familiar (since the late Qing) dyad of essence 精华 and dross 糟粕.⁸ The four conceptual pillars crystallizing in these early PRC-era writings—satire, propaganda, language, and essentialism—have dominated *xiangsheng* discourse ever since. They also placed the art form inside an intellectually “safe” enclosure, where scholarship could rehearse acceptable interpretations without contributing new insight.

A central paradox in *Xiangsheng suyuan* lies in its very premise: although the title claims to trace *xiangsheng*’s origins, it shows remarkably little commitment to identifying an actual point of origin.⁹ The only moment it gestures toward one is through a sweeping statement on *xiangsheng*’s “rebirth” after 1949:

⁶ Lao She 老舍, “*Xiangsheng gaijin le* 相声改进了 [*Xiangsheng* has improved],” in *Lao She Quanji* 老舍全集 Vol. 17 (originally published in *Xinminbao* 新民报, 6/12/1950), 191.

⁷ Lao She, “*Xiangsheng yuyan de gexin* 相声语言的革新 [Reforming the language of *xiangsheng*],” in *Lao She Quanji* Vol. 17 (originally published in *Quyuan* 曲艺, Vol. 9, 9/24/1959), 618-620.

⁸ Wang Liye 王力叶, “*Tan xiangsheng de jicheng he fazhan wenti* 谈相声的继承和发展问题 [On the question of the inheritance and development of *xiangsheng*],” in *Quyuan* 曲艺, Vol. 5 (1961).

⁹ The selectivity of the sources of its origin the editors attend to has been eloquently critiqued by Marja Kaikkonen: “The change from bannerman life to artistes earning their living with their art was not socially appreciated. But the combination of the *qingmenr* and *hunmenr* traditions have certainly enriched the *xiangsheng* genre a great deal. There is no doubt that the *bajiaogu* tradition has influenced *xiangsheng* even in many other ways. For instance, many traditional pieces are still known as pieces originating among *qingmenr* artistes; that is, originating in the stories or jokes that were told in *bajiaogu* shows. It is therefore quite remarkable that the main work on *xiangsheng* history, *Xiangsheng su yuan*, pays no attention to this tradition at all. Even many other sources refused to recognize the Manchu influence.” See Marja Kaikkonen, *Laughable Propaganda: Modern Xiangsheng as Didactic Entertainment* (Stockholm: Institute of Oriental Languages, Stockholm University, 1990), 62-63.

Especially ever since Liberation, *xiangsheng*—once devastated and left “on the verge of death”—has gained new life and developed rapidly. It has no longer been confined to a few northern cities, nor circulated only within a narrow urban citizenry, but has spread nationwide from North to South, from city to countryside, and across all social strata, becoming the art “known to women and children alike, enjoyed by both the refined and the popular.”¹⁰

Such a triumphant, trans-spatial narrative went hand in hand with the PRC’s project of forging new “imagined communities” amid the “dilemmas of a swift victory”—and never left. More precisely, it simultaneously eschews the messy historical particulars, namely, (1) why *xiangsheng* was considered “on the verge of death” to begin with (a claim that is, at best, historically contestable), and (2) through what concrete transformations *xiangsheng* changed after 1949. These unresolved questions—too often answered through ideological shorthand—are precisely what this project seeks to revisit.

To me, the most compelling scholarship to date on these questions is Zhu Pengcheng’s 祝鹏程 monograph on *xiangsheng*, *Wenti de shehui goujian: yi “shiqi nian” (1949-1966) de xiangsheng wei cankao duixiang, 1949–1966* 文体的社会构建: 以“十七年”(1949–1966)的相声为参考对象 [The Social Construction of Genre: Centered on Crosstalk (Xiangsheng)].¹¹ My own project is deeply indebted to Zhu’s pioneering work in both *xiangsheng* and folklore studies. One of Zhu’s central insights is to situate *xiangsheng* within what he terms the “social construction of genre,” showing how its post-1949 transformations were inseparable from

¹⁰ Xue Baokun, Wang Jingshou, Li Wanpeng & Hou Baolin, *Xiangsheng Suyuan*, 1.

¹¹ Zhu Pengcheng, *Wenti de shehui goujian: “yi shi qi nian” (1949-1966) de xiangsheng wei kaocha duixiang* 文体的社会构建: 以“十七年”(1949-1966)的相声为考察对象 [The Social Construction of Genre: Centered on Crosstalk (*Xiangsheng*), 1949-1966] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chu ban she, 2018).

broader processes of cultural institutionalization and societal formation. In this sense, *xiangsheng*'s history is in tandem with what might be called the invention of the past, as genre boundaries, aesthetic norms, and political expectations were retrospectively stabilized through socialist reform as well. What Zhu's work excels at is telling, through his oral history, the other side of this invention, namely, the participation of *xiangsheng* performers.¹²

Anglophone scholarship on *xiangsheng* is considerably more limited, and its scarcity alone cannot justify the kind of intellectual inertia that usually lingers in its analytical frameworks. Perry Link's pioneering engagement with *xiangsheng* deserves recognition for bringing the art across both linguistic and academic borders. His affection for *xiangsheng* and his efforts to translate, twist the unfamiliar humor, and present it to Western audiences remain foundational. However, the political lens through which he approached *xiangsheng*—particularly in his early writings—often tilted toward an anti-Communist, if not explicitly anti-CCP, reading. This orientation sometimes flattened the historical negotiations that were central to *xiangsheng*'s development within the PRC and the years before. In *Chinoperl Papers* No. 16 (1992/93), Link translated a “non-vegetarian” 荤段子 (*hun duanzi*) *xiangsheng* routine, presenting it to Anglophone readers with considerable verve, retaining, arguably, the flavor of the original humor, but his choice sat uneasily among *xiangsheng* performers in mainland China, who worried that such material, long sanitized through decades of “cleansing,” might reinforce perceptions of *xiangsheng* as vulgar and lowbrow.¹³ Their concern was not unsubstantiated,

¹² I think that, contrary to what the title “inventing tradition” might suggest, the main (shared) concern of the contributors to the volume is less in the act of “inventing” itself than in how such inventions came to be taken for granted by those who were not their direct beneficiaries, in the words of Eric Hobsbawm: “The politics of German nationalism in the Second Empire cannot be understood only from the above. It has been suggested that to some extent nationalism escaped from the control of those who found it advantageous to manipulate it—at all events in this period.” See, Eric Hobsbawm, “Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870-1914,” in *the Invention of Tradition*, ed., Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983): 263-307, 307.

¹³ I owe thanks to Professor Goldman for sharing this valuable “backstage story.”

though, inasmuch as post-1949 cultural campaigns had all but excised such elements from the stage, and *xiangsheng* performers' reputations had been rebuilt through careful self-curation. Link's translation, while linguistically bold, inadvertently resurrected a version of *xiangsheng* that the PRC performers had politically abandoned long ago—and that many preferred to keep tucked away in the archival attic.

In another early essay, Link recounts his personal encounters with the sound of *xiangsheng* and reflects on the challenges of translating its linguistic components—puns, dialect wordplay, and comic timing that seldom travel smoothly across the Pacific Ocean.¹⁴ Even though his writings on *xiangsheng* marked a crucial early effort to situate *xiangsheng* within global performance studies (and on the stage), on some occasions, the historical contextualization eluded his grasp. For instance, in his 1992 article, he misrepresented key details about the Group for the Improvement of *Xiangsheng* 相声改进小组 (*xiangsheng gaijin xiaozu*), including its proponents and purpose. Such an interpretation reduced the complex negotiation between performers and audiences and the state to a more simplified narrative of top-down imposition. Nevertheless, Link's "The Crocodile Bird: *Xiangsheng* in the Early 1950s," is an important study of the *xiangsheng* of the early and mid-1950s. By examining the political drama surrounding what was, arguably, one of the first major *xiangsheng* routines produced after 1949, Link brings readers back to the cultural-political atmosphere of the time. After Ma Sanli 马三立 performed the routine, it immediately became a hit at the grassroots level. Ma Daha 马大哈, the sloppy and irresponsible protagonist of the routine, later even entered everyday Chinese vocabulary until

¹⁴ In fact, Ma Ji 马季 and Tang Jiezhong 唐杰忠 performed a routine 友谊颂 [Ode to Friendship] in 1973, in which the opening [垫活儿] features Tang's effort to translate *xiangsheng* into English, but eventually fails to capture the raucous nature of its language; Perry Link, "Struck in *Xiangsheng*," in *Chinoperl Papers* No. 14 (1986): 27-36.

today; at the same time, it embodied the new role assigned to *xiangsheng* by cultural authorities: that of the whistleblower and naysayer.¹⁵

A politically more neutral and structurally concise introduction to *xiangsheng* appeared in *Chinoperl Papers* No. 9, written by Shu-ying Tsau. Tsau provides a succinct overview of *xiangsheng*'s historical development, techniques, and performance conventions, meanwhile offering an almost eulogistic tribute to Hou Baolin's artistic craftsmanship. However, Tsau's framework remains close to the mainstream conceptualizations in mainland scholarship, particularly in its embrace of the PRC's dominant discourse of "recalling past hardships and savoring present sweetness 忆苦思甜," which juxtaposes The New Society 新社会 (*xin shehui*) against The Old Society 旧社会 (*jiu shehui*).

The Age of Irreverence: A New History of Laughter in China, Christopher Rea's groundbreaking study of Chinese humor, and "Jiang Qing, the Iconic Anti-icon: Visual Dissection of Female Political Power in Post-Mao People's Republic of China" by Laura Pozzi and Damian Mandzunowski, first revealed to me the possibility of using humor to approach histories replete with pain, at least, in imagination. I follow their intellectual threads in treating humor as a serious analytic target, but the protagonists of my project reveal themselves in the opposite direction: not those witty provocateurs or pranksters who mobilized humor for overt societal or political critique, but vocational joke-crackers whose very lives were predicated upon humor itself. Their laughter was not an instrument, but a condition of survival, embedded in their labor, affluent or precarious livelihoods, and the spatial negotiations of performance.¹⁶

¹⁵ Perry Link, "The Crocodile Bird: *Xiangsheng* in the Early 1950s," in *Dilemmas of Victory: The Early Years of the People's Republic of China*, ed., Jeremy Brown and Paul G. Pickowicz (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007): 207-31.

¹⁶ Although Yu Shi mainly explores media in her work, she still vividly tells a story of how the drum singer Wei Xikui 魏喜奎 managed to climb the social and cultural hierarchy and eventually perform at a prestigious theater in

Many mainland *quyi* scholars—often themselves performers, relatives of performers, or deeply devoted fans—have relied on this ideological formation as a narrative crutch, attempting to reconcile the distorted relationship between *xiangsheng* and its main performance stage, Beijing. Such a futile effort has attested to a historiography that, while rich in affection and anecdotes, has always been entangled in a teleological narrative of Party-led redemption, a story in which *xiangsheng* is imagined as rescued from vulgarity, uplifted, and granted socialist purpose.

The aims of this project are slightly different. I have no intention of repeating the pragmatic notion of treating *xiangsheng* merely as a convenient propaganda tool—albeit it did at times function as one. Rather, I argue that *xiangsheng* became politically handy only through shifts in spatial formations. Nor do I wish to rehearse the narrative of a “Grand Socialist Rescue.” Any account of transformation must credit not only state intervention but also the performers and audiences who actively reshaped the art through changing its very space. In short, I do not view *xiangsheng* as “the art of language” 语言的艺术. I argue, instead, that *xiangsheng* is an “art of space” 空间的艺术.

Culture and Space. The central thesis of this project—*xiangsheng* as a spatially produced practice—may appear neither seminal nor provocative. I am not proposing a new theory of cultural history, nor construing *xiangsheng* as spontaneous resistance or escape from everyday life. Rather, I believe that *xiangsheng*, despite being subsumed under the category of *quyi*—itself a retrospective umbrella term—or treated as folklore or performance art, is, above all, quotidian.

Beijing with the help of appearing on radio. While radio itself is not a (virtual) space that I explore here, media would have meant little had it not transformed performance in real physical spaces. For Wei Xikui and 曹宝禄’s radio adventure, see Yu Shi, “The Stage Moves on Air: The Mediatization of Quyi in Early Twentieth-Century North China,” in *CHINOPERL* Vol. 44.2 (2025): 153-183, 168. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cop.2025.a978076>.

For performers and audiences alike, *xiangsheng* was not an elevated art form but part of everyone's lived mundaneness. It is therefore unintelligible without perceiving its embeddedness in everyday life.

The following pages trace the interrelationship between urban everyday life, the city of Beijing, and the resilience of its inhabitants. Although *xiangsheng* never did occupy the same pervasive social, cultural, and political preponderance in Republican or early PRC Beijing as Chinese opera did in Qing society, I invoke Andrea S. Goldman's observation that, not unlike opera, *xiangsheng* "suffused the very fabric of life." *Xiangsheng*, thus, provides a crucial analytical lens for examining Beijing between 1900 and 1966.¹⁷ Compared to Peking Opera, *xiangsheng* was undoubtably a genuinely domestic product of Beijing, but the significance does not lie in its originality. What matters is spatiality. In other words, the parallel between Goldman's study of opera in Qing Beijing and my own analysis of *xiangsheng* lies not in genre, but in the spatial embedding of cultural practice.

From Place to Space. The concept of "place" always presupposes a rigid state–society dichotomy, in which society appears concrete while the state remains abstract. If Tianqiao—the site that nurtured *xiangsheng*—is treated merely as a place, it would be nothing more than a reflection of "the true Beijing," and its relationship with municipal authorities would be inevitably antagonistic. Such a framework has long shaped interpretations of Tianqiao as chaotic, marginal, or energetic, in spite of the state.

My research moves beyond this binary. Space, unlike place, is not a passive container. It reveals vitality and negotiation that exceed the formula of "state dictates, society responds."

¹⁷ Andrea S. Goldman, *Opera and the City: The Politics of Culture in Beijing, 1770-1900* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 2.

Society responds not only to external intervention but also to its own internal rhythms. What appears as interiority and exteriority are in fact entangled in the everyday. By “everyday,” I do not only mean trivial scenes of “chicken feathers and garlic skins” 鸡毛蒜皮 (*jimao suanpi*), but instead refer to a fluid field in which spatial relations congeal and are constantly reshaped.¹⁸

The Politics of the Everyday. While Perry Anderson reminds us that class struggle is always political, politics should not be confined to pure abstraction or deliberation by a few.¹⁹ What seems more crucial to me is, as Xiaobing Tang has aptly put it, “the heterogeneous forms of everyday life can be transcended or emerge from only when they are endowed with the content of homogenized social relations and pursuits. A collective desire to resist the inertia of everyday life was an integral part of the grand socialist movement in modern China.”²⁰ My spatial approach, thus, does not abandon the “big question.” I, rather, tend to relocate it. Instead of asking what the state or society wanted *xiangsheng* performers to become, I examine what performers could extract from shifting social relations within particular spaces, and how, in the process, they changed those spaces. Stratification and de-stratification were negotiated spatially, and that negotiation was, above all, political. Indeed, I will argue, only in space does the state encounter society. Only there do people meet one another.

Spatial Production and the Production of Space. As Joshua Goldstein has noted, “concentrating on the everyday is by no means an attempt to bypass or avoid analyzing the modern. Modernity

¹⁸ One of the best works that discusses the constructiveness of the concept of “social problems in modern urban China is Janet Chen’s *Guilty of Indigence: The Urban Poor in China, 1900-1953* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

¹⁹ “Today, when ‘history from below’ has become a watchword in both Marxist and non-Marxist circles, and has produced major gains in our understanding of the past, it is nevertheless necessary to recall one of the basic axioms of historical materialism: that secular struggle between classes is ultimately resolved at the *political*—not at the economic or cultural—level of society.” See Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: NLB, 1974), 7-8.

²⁰ Xiaobing Tang, *Chinese Modern: The Heroic and the Quotidian* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 279.

is staged in the space of the everyday, in its myriad particular contexts, and modernity in many ways reproduces and reshapes the way the everyday is lived.”²¹ *Xiangsheng* is not merely an art of language, as I have suggested. Regarding it either as linguistic form or propaganda reduces it to a one-directional transmission of jokes from performers to the targeted listeners, which obscures the social relations that make performance possible at the first place. A joke only works because bodies share proximity, because audiences have paid to be present—though, in many cases, they did not—and because performers must gauge how far they can go before irritating their listeners. The spatial setting does not simply contain performance; it produces it.

For performers, space is not a neutral stage. In fact, it is performative. One becomes a *xiangsheng* performer by stepping into a particular social formation of bodies, expectations, and rhythms through a certain space. In this sense, space forms the material basis of performative identity. Performance is therefore not a finished product delivered to passive recipients, but an interaction sustained through negotiation. Space itself is not fixed as well. Repetition consolidates conventions: for participants in *xiangsheng* performance, successful routines stabilize expectations; failure redraws limits. Through these interactions, hierarchies and norms are substantiated via gradually institutionalized space. *Xiangsheng* is thus both produced within space and participates in producing space.

Combining a Lefebvrian conception of space with a Bourdieusian analysis of social relations, I approach *xiangsheng* in a manner similar to how performers master routines. *Xiangsheng* performers did not merely memorize others’ wrapped bundles or punchlines (*baofu*, 包袱), but learned how performances happened, how tensions are solved, and how verbal

²¹ Joshua Goldstein, “Introduction” in *Everyday Modernity in China*, ed., Madeleine Yue Dong & Joshua Goldstein (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 6.

delivery must be adjusted to a specific circumstance. What was transmitted was not words alone, but the logic of performance. In a similar way, I treat space as the site of convertible capital. The production of space occurs when different forms of capital—economic, symbolic, cultural—are converted from one into one another. Jokes generate money; wealth brews reputation; prestige produces economic return. When all of them happened simultaneously, a performative space is not simply occupied but also produced. Space emerges precisely through these acts of conversion.

The following essay retrieves the cradle of *xiangsheng*—Tianqiao—from the dusty attic of history. Did Tianqiao actually produce *xiangsheng*? Perhaps not. The possibility that *xiangsheng* was “made in Tianqiao” was hardly greater than that of its being produced in the Qing (Manchu) Banner households of Beijing: in both cases, the likelihood was nearly zero. In this sense, what Lian Kuoru 连阔如 called *jianghu* 江湖—literally “rivers and lakes”—described something more than the itinerant underworld or a vague notion of “society” opposed to the state.²² Tianqiao was alive, and it was a space. Therefore, Tianqiao was both a place in Beijing and a community of performers. By juxtaposing place and community, I present how space was produced in Tianqiao, and how this spatial production, in turn, produced *xiangsheng*. At the same time, *xiangsheng* itself participated in producing the social space of Tianqiao. The administrative creation of Xiangchang 香厂 District—often regarded as a section within the broader Tianqiao area—revealed that Tianqiao was not “on sale” according to modern planning schemes. Efforts to “modernize Beijing” following the model of the Xiangchang New District could never fully penetrate Tianqiao. Instead, the once underestimated South City Amusement

²² Yunyouke 云游客 (Lian Kuoru 连阔如), edited by Jia Jianguo 贾建国 & Lian Liru 连丽如, *Jianghu congtao* 江湖丛谈 [A Miscellaneous Talk on the World of Entertainers] (Beijing: Dangdai zhongguo chubanshe, 1995).

Park combined elements of Tianqiao and modern entertainment, producing a form of modernity that Beijing urbanites could finally accept. Through this process, both Beijing and Tianqiao worked hand in hand to facilitate the production a distinctive modern urban space.

The Main Body 正活: *Xiangsheng* in Tianqiao, ca. 1900-1966

Tianqiao has long been spoken of as if its meaning were already settled. Much of the existing literature from the perspective of the elites (some of which I will quote later) has regarded Tianqiao in terms of where it was situated within the city of Beijing. In other words, Tianqiao was first and foremost an idiosyncratic place within the larger city. Tianqiao, thus, has been characterized as either the residue of the former South/Outer City of Qing Beijing or as the underworld of the capital; or, if neither, still a rowdy quarter in which entertainment and destitution converged. Irrespective of whether dismissed as vulgar or remembered with nostalgia, Tianqiao has usually been treated as an area whose social character can be inferred from its location alone. Once placed on the map (see the Illustration A and B), it seems to explain itself. However, what I want to describe is not simply the borders of Tianqiao, but how it operated.



Figure 1. A Map of the Location of the Old Tianqiao in Beijing.²³

²³ The map depicts old Beijing (老北京城), including both the Inner City 內城 and the Outer City 外城. The Outer City occupies the lower half of the trapezoid-shaped urban area. The area encircled by the red lines indicates the (Greater) Tianqiao area.

Source: Beijing shi duiwai wenhua jiaoliu xiehui 北京市对外文化交流协会, Beijing shi Xuanwu qu Beijing lao Tianqiao huace bianweihui 北京市宣武区北京老天橋画冊編委會, and Wang Lixing 王立行, *Beijing lao Tianqiao* 北京老天橋 [Old Tianqiao in Beijing] (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1996), 6.

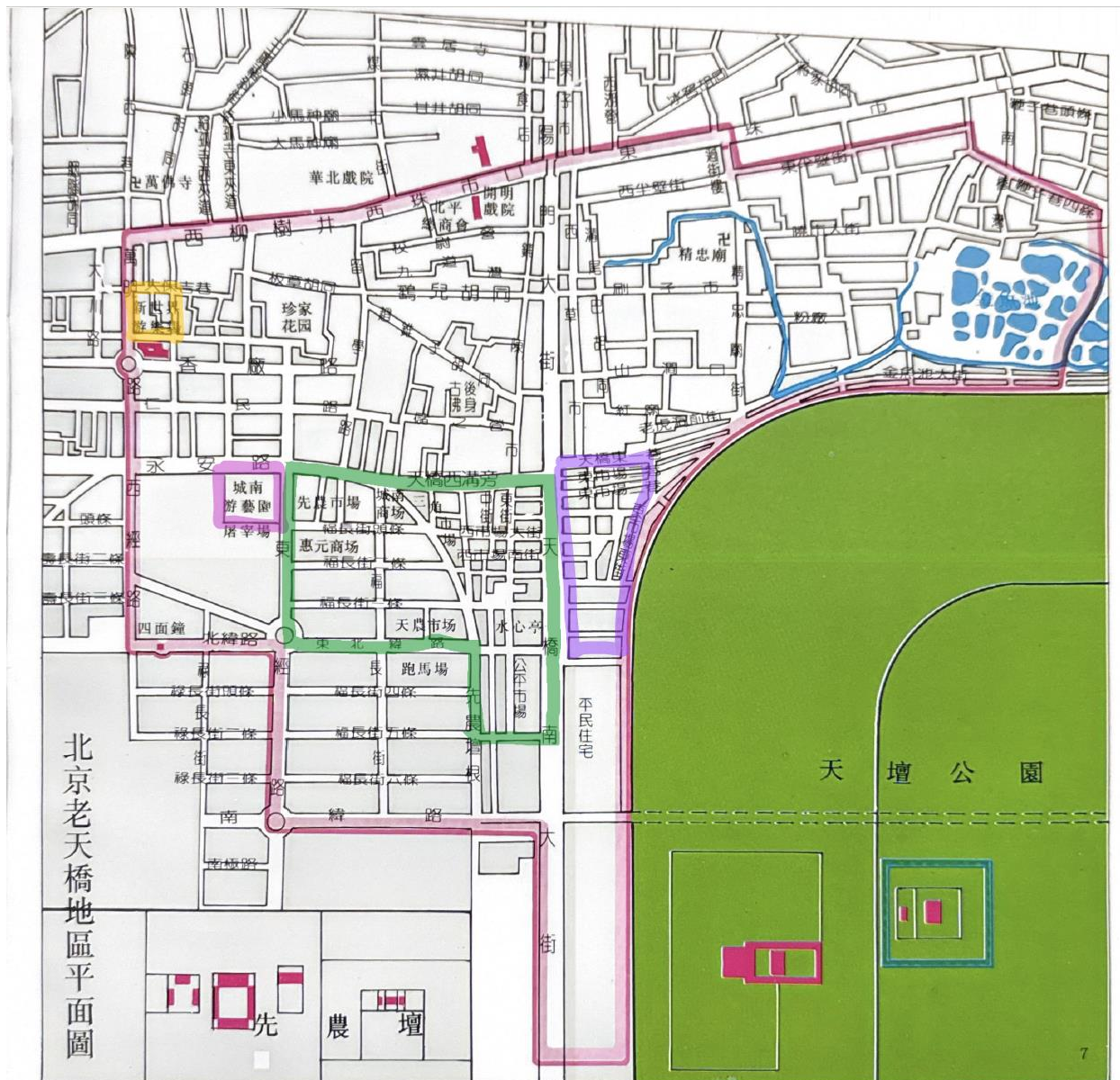


Figure 2. A Map of the Greater Tianqiao area (outlined in red).²⁴

²⁴ The highlighted lines have been added by the author. The area outlined in orange marks the location of the New World Amusement Park 新世界游艺场, while the fuchsia color marks the South City Amusement Park 城南游乐园 or 游艺园; the dark green lines demarcate the open performance area of Tianqiao; and, the purple indicates a part of the Tianqiao area that has often been neglected but was considered even socially and spatially “lower” than the area marked in dark green.

Source: Wang, *Beijing lao Tianqiao*, 7.

For one thing, its coherence did not derive from any architectural enclosure or administrative definition. It emerged from repetition of actual people's participation in this space. In this sense, Tianqiao was less a place than a constellation of social relations. Performances did not only gather there, rather they were rather drawn by Tianqiao's peculiar spatiality and temporality. Many laborers (whether Tianqiao-based or not) still drifted into this space after work. Itinerant performers occupied and vacated stalls that were never sewed into the fabric of Tianqiao. Spectators lingered between own errands. The boundaries among them or between spectators and performers were never static. All the above movements generated a recurring spatial formation in which recognition was always provisional and authority was always exposed. Tianqiao's chaos, as described by many contemporary observers, was, in fact, a form of kaleidoscopic concentration. Thus, to approach Tianqiao as a performative space is, therefore, to shift emphasis from representation to operation. The significance here lay not in what it was epitomized within Beijing's hierarchy, but in what way(s) Tianqiao, the space, organized encounters between everything. Time and space in Tianqiao were inseparable. Tianqiao's peculiar chronotope—one of recurrence without permanence—made all kinds of labor possible in almost unlimited ways. *Xiangsheng*—our protagonist here—did not exist prior to entering Tianqiao; it, like everything that happened to appear in Tianqiao, got crystallized within the Tianqiao space.

Tianqiao, a History

Tianqiao was hardly “old,” and certainly not ancient by any historical standard. The irony embedded in its name is almost too excessive: when it was literally a “Bridge to Heaven,” it was a ritual passageway forbidden to public entrance, not a marketplace. It lay between Yongding

Gate and Zhengyang Gate, a space traversed only by the emperor during sacrificial rites. As Zhang Cixi, writing in the 1930s, put it:

Tianqiao lay between Yongding Gate and Zhengyang Gate, a space traversed only by the emperor during sacrificial rites.: “Tianqiao lay between Yongding Gate and Zhengyang Gate. During the Qing dynasty, passage on the bridge was forbidden. Each year, when the emperor went to the Temple of Heaven to worship Heaven, or to the Altar of Agriculture to honor the God of Farming, yellow sand was spread upon the bridge in advance, and at ordinary times it was sealed with wooden barriers

天桥在永定门正阳门间，清代禁在桥上通行。每年天坛祭天，先农坛祀神农，皇帝由桥上经过，事先铺置黄沙，平时用辖管木将桥封锁。²⁵

To fulfill its sacred purpose, the bridge excluded everyone, because its sanctity depended precisely on absence. However, by the time Tianqiao became the “epitome of Beiping; ... a microcosm of life there,” the bridge itself had vanished without a trace: “In 1906, the stone slabs along the road from Zhengyang Gate to Yongding Gate were all removed and replaced with gravel.”²⁶ Tianqiao was rebuilt as a low stone bridge. In 1929, since the tramline made passage difficult, the bridge was leveled, yet its stone railings remained. By 1934, when the road was widened, even these railings were demolished.”²⁷ In 1936, Qi Rushan 齐如山 wrote, “Now, even its foundation is scarcely traceable 今则并基址亦渺不可寻矣.”²⁸

²⁵ Zhang Cixi 张次溪, “*Chunyou suotan, yan shi jiuwen* 春游琐谈 燕市旧闻 [Miscellaneous notes from a spring tour, old anecdotes of Beijing],” in Beijing shi duiwai wenhua jiaoliu xiehui 北京市对外文化交流协会, Beijing shi xuanwu qu “Tianqiao wangshi lu” bianji weiyuanhui 北京市宣武区天桥往事录编辑委员会, and Huang Zonghan 黄宗汉, *Tianqiao wangshi lu* 天桥往事录 [A Record of Tianqiao’s Past] (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1995), 9.

²⁶ Madeleine Yue Dong, *Republican Beijing: The City and Its Histories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 172.

²⁷ Zong Quanchao 宗泉超, “Untitled,” originally published in *Wenshi ziliao xuan bian* 文史资料选编 [Selected Historical Materials of Beijing], Vol. 8 (Aug. 1960), as cited in Huang Zonghan, *Tianqiao wangshi lu*, 11.

²⁸ Qi Rushan, “Tianqiao yi lan 天桥一览 [Tianqiao at a glance],” as cited in Huang Zonghan, *Tianqiao wangshi lu*, 10.

However, although the character *qiao* 桥 (bridge) lingered in the name even after the physical structure had been demolished, virtually no one remembered Tianqiao because of the bridge itself, not even the Qing court. Indeed, the Greater Tianqiao area had always been recorded as a commercial district, as early as it appeared in 1812: “The capital’s foremost district is where merchants and traders gather. Along Zhengyang Gate Street, peddlers and hawkers line up to trade, and though hard to regulate, they must be restrained to not obstruct the carriageway so that horses and carts may pass.”²⁹ Ironically, while the bridge itself was restricted to imperial passage, access to the adjacent streets was never tightly dictated by the court. The state guarded its ritual exclusivity, yet still tolerated density derived from commerce. From this partial acquiescence, we can get the sense that commerce in the area did not emerge from imperial design of any sort but from repetitive accumulation—of people, of trades, and of interactions. As authoritative as the Qing Court was, its actual control over its own capital (albeit the Outer City) was dubious to say the least. Spatial formation was therefore never a unilateral decree, but rather became territorialized through negotiation.

It is exactly within such a gap—between ritual prohibition and commercial tolerance—that Tianqiao started to assume a different temporality. The forbidden bridge required annual procession only, a market, however, took shape on the basis of daily return. Ritual (political) time was episodic and vertical. In contrast, commercial (everyday) time was recursive and horizontal. Once repetition replaced ritual ceremony as the main tempo of the area, Tianqiao ceased to be just a passageway and became an interval. It was no longer a bridge between the throne and the temple but a zone of lingering.

²⁹ *Qingding da Qing huidian shili* 钦定大清会典事例 [Imperially Commissioned Precedents of the Collected Statutes of the Great Qing], Vol. 303 (Shanghai, Shangwu yinshuguan, 1909), also cited in Huang Zonghan, *Tianqiao wangshi lu*, 15.

Moreover, if we are to regard Tianqiao as the birthplace of *xiangsheng*, the least we can do is to deem it as another “tradition” of Tianqiao as well, simply because Tianqiao entertainment did not even take shape until the final years of the Qing. As one account notes:

During the Guangxu and Xuantong reigns, Tianqiao was still mainly a market and a place for relays of horses; the place was without other entertainments. By the late Qing, a small playhouse opened next to the birdcage shop on the west street, known as the ‘Cut-Cake House.’ The owner made and sold rice cakes in the morning, and when business ended at dusk, the space was rented to mixed troupes of male and female performers [the mixture of male and female performers was exactly the scenario that the Qing court wished to avoid] to make a living. Most of their audience were people of the lower classes

是其时[光宣之间]天桥，虽暂成贾贩之市，与跑马之所，尚无他种娱乐也。迨至清末，街西鸟笼铺隔壁，开有落子馆，群呼之为切糕屋子。盖居彼者做切糕生意，晨曦初放，叫卖长街，傍晚归休，日以为例。其人即出，其屋必闲，清昼日长，遂以空宅赁与男女杂班入此演唱，而趋之者多为下流。³⁰

Hardly could the business owners have foreseen that their apparently casual decision to rent out the idle room would help set the course of the city’s future cultural landscape. However, framing this moment as a mere coincidence would be even more misleading than tracing the history of *xiangsheng* back to the Han dynasty. The emergence of performance in Tianqiao was less the result of chance than of accumulated conditions. What appears as an incidental rental was, in fact, enabled by an already high-paced rhythm of circulation and return.

The tempo of monetary circulation altered Tianqiao’s function within the city, but it did nothing to halt the larger spatial logic of Beijing. North and south remained unevenly weighted, even after actual bodies could move between them. The permeability of residential and

³⁰ Zhang Jiangcai 张江裁, “Untitled,” originally published in *Beiping Tianqiao zhi* 北平天桥志 [A Gazetteer of Tianqiao in Beijing], as cited in Huang Zonghan, *Tianqiao wang shilu*, 15-16.

commercial boundaries did not translate into equality. If Han families could now reside within the Inner City, and if playhouses also quietly reappeared there despite the prohibitions—both of which became prevalent in the late Qing—such crossings did not neutralize distinction.³¹ By the Republican era, Beijing spatial hierarchy no longer relied exclusively on formal restriction. The local proverb “wealthy east, noble west; lowly south, and poor north” 东富西贵，南贱北贫 thus acquired a renewed resonance, increasingly tethered to the perception of the Outer City. Chen Zongfan 陈宗蕃, writing from the perspective of a Han Beijing urbanite in the 1920s and 1930s, observed:

Opera houses were not permitted in the Inner City, and because of that, they say, ‘Within the Inner city there are pearls and jade and embroidered silks.’ At that time, Han officials posting in the capital mostly lodged outside Xuanwu Gate, while outside Chongwen Gate, merchants gathered in abundance, thus, goes the proverb, “A wealthy east, a noble west.” Today, with convenient transportation and changing streets and markets, the Outer City has grown somewhat desolate

内城不准设立戏园，故俗有‘中城珠玉锦绣’之谣。且当时汉人之宦京师者，多旅居宣武门外，崇文门外则为商人荟萃之所，故俗又有‘东富西贵’之谚。至于今日，则交通便利，市街移徙，而外城亦稍稍萧索矣。³²

³¹ For instance, Chong Yi (崇彝) enumerated two opera houses—Taihuaxuan 泰华轩 (in Dongsì Pailou 东四牌楼) and Jingtai 景泰 (in Longfu Temple 隆福寺)—in which *zashua* 杂耍 [vaudeville], *bajiaogu* 八角鼓 [octagonal drums], and *quci* 曲词 [lyric singing] were occasionally performed after the Daoguang reign. See Chong Yi, *Dao-Xian yilai chao ye zaji* 道咸以来朝野杂记 [A Miscellaneous Account of State and Society in Beijing since the Daoguang and Xianfeng Reigns] (Beijing: Beijing gu ji chu ban she, 1982), 8.

³² Chen Zongfan, *Yandu congkao* 燕都丛考 [A Miscellaneous Investigation on Beijing] (Beijing: Beijing chu ban she, 1991), 469. In contrast, a Manchu writer, Zhen Jun (震钧), appropriated the same proverb but interpreted it as a description of the Inner City, whereas the Mongol Banner scholar Chong Yi (崇彝) argued that the more accurate expression should be “the East is noble and the West is wealthy” (东西富贵). See, Chong Yi, *Dao-Xian yilai chao ye zaji*, 99. Both Chong Yi (崇彝) and Yang Maojian (杨懋建)—a Qing scholar with extensive knowledge of Beijing opera culture—attributed the phrase “the Middle City adorned with pearls, jade, brocade, and embroidery” (中城珠玉锦绣) directly to the opera houses located outside Qianmen/Zhengyang Gate (south of the Qian Gate). Thus, we can see how authors from different backgrounds conceptualized urban space in their own ways. Nevertheless, on one point they would likely have agreed: Tianqiao belonged to the Outer City, a place that was chaotic and vibrant.

While the Outer City no longer held the same prominence after Beijing ceased to be the national capital, Tianqiao remained one of its most vibrant districts. A contemporary survey noted: “Nowadays, while businesses elsewhere have withered, Tianqiao alone prospers. Tianqiao is a place where people from all regions meet together and could be regarded as the engine of the city’s prosperity 目下百商凋敝，独天桥商业发达：本市之天桥地方，乃是五方杂居，又可为全市繁荣之中心。”³³ Prosperity, however, could not easily purchase prestige. For example, one might summon a performance in the south to their house in the north without ever entering the social world of Tianqiao; or, one might help unload packages in the south and send them to the north without ever stepping their foot into the north. The divide was far from being erased. Entertainment made this distinction even more visible. When Beijing urbanites spoke of Tianqiao—even today—the name was tethered to a sense of social and cultural “lowness,” easily overriding its cartographic centrality.

Zhen Jun 震钧, a Manchu writer, lamented the disappearance of enclosed establishments in late-Qing Tianqiao: “Today, near Tianqiao there are no restaurants anymore, only performers of various entertainments, such as storytellers and rope walkers 今日天橋左近亦無酒樓，但有玩百戲者，如唱書、走索之属耳。”³⁴ Madeleine Yue Dong similarly observes that what had

For Chong Yi’s description, see Chong Yi, *Dao-Xian yilai chao ye zaji*, 8. For Yang Maojian’s point, see Yang Maojian, *Menghua suo bu* 梦华琐簿 [Miscellaneous Notes on My Dreamlike Splendor], in *Yang Maojian ji* 杨懋建集 [The Collected Writings of Yang Maojian], ed. Du Guiping 杜桂萍 and Ren Gang 任刚 (Nanking: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2019). <https://jingdian.ancientbooks.cn/6/4731159?article=4731169>.

³³ “Tianqiao shangchang shehui diaocha 天桥商场社会调查 [A social survey of the Tianqiao marketplace],” originally published in *Beiping ribao* 北平日报 [Beiping’s Daily] (2/16/1930 and 2/17/1930), also cited in Huang Zonghan, *Tianqiao wang shilu*, 47.

³⁴ I do not know the exact year when Zhen Jun completed his nostalgic account of the history of Beijing. The version I am using is based on a woodblock edition from 1907, and Zhen Jun mentions a fire that occurred in Beijing in 1890. The text therefore must have been written sometime between 1890 and 1907, during the final years of the Qing dynasty; Zhen Jun 震钧, *Tianzhi ouwen* 天咫偶闻 [Anecdotes from the Capital], Vol. 6 (Beijing: Beijing guji chubanshe, 1982), 136.

once been regarded as *ya* 雅 (refined) came to be perceived by certain elites as *su* 俗 (vulgar) in Republican Beijing.³⁵ The absence of restaurants symbolized, for Zhen, the erosion of refinement. In Tianqiao, open spectacle replaced interior consumption. Tianqiao's density, its informality, and its bodily proximity, all stamped "lowbrow" on Tianqiao entertainers, even as the district remained one of the most vibrant nodes of urban life in Beijing. A similar social and cultural segregation began to emerge within Tianqiao itself. According to a writer at the time, the most "lowly" market in Tianqiao was the Tianqiao Small Market (天桥小市), located on the east side of Tianqiao [South] Street (nowadays' 天桥南大街):

The market behind the performance sheds sold secondhand goods, such as old clothes, furs, and various utensils, along with stalls that sold foreign cloth. All were hidden behind the opera shacks. Transactions were often conducted through deception; unless one was experienced, it was rare not to be deceived. That was the condition of the Tianqiao Small Market. The spatial arrangement of those stalls was chaotic and without clear order

市中售卖旧货，如估衣皮货，以及各种器皿，并有洋货布摊，均隐于戏棚之后。售卖手续，类多诈骗，非熟于经济，鲜有不上当者，此天桥小市之情形。至其摆设形式，亦多杂乱无次。³⁶

Disorder and deception almost became shorthand for moral and social inferiority. However, within the same report, the western section of Tianqiao—adjacent to the streetcar terminal (天桥电车总站)—was described quite differently: "The west was more prosperous than the east... The area, in the west of Tianqiao and the east of the Altar of Agriculture, had by now become the most flourishing district in Tianqiao."³⁷ The western side was not only the most vibrant part of

³⁵ Madeleine Yue Dong, *Republican Beijing*, 181.

³⁶ *Shuntian shibao congtan* 顺天时报丛谈 [Miscellaneous Writings from the *Shuntian Times*], as cited in Chen Zongfan, *Yandu congkao*, 644.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 641-642.

Tianqiao but also one of the central nodes of Beijing's public transportation network. The streetcars tied Tianqiao directly to the city's mobility. In that sense, Tianqiao was never simply a marginal "mess." Anyone who relied on public transportation in Republican Beijing would, sooner or later, pass through it. Even those who preferred private vehicles could not entirely avoid the district, as rickshaws regularly carried members of the upper echelon to *laozi* playhouses 落子馆, restaurants, opera houses (or shacks) in Tianqiao.

area around Yongding Gate, Zuo'an Gate, and You'an Gate remained desolate, adjacent to reed marshes, vegetable plots, and grave mounds.”³⁹

Tianqiao, the Cradle of *Xiangsheng*

Madeleine Yue Dong aptly calls Tianqiao, “the city’s recycling center.”⁴⁰ She uses the term “recycling” to denote that “recycling was not simply bringing back the old. Instead, it involved applying labor to fragments of the past to rekindle and create new values in them.”⁴¹ *Xiangsheng* was one of the new values created there. “All things return to ‘spring.’ In the *jianghu* [also referring to Tianqiao], there are countless businesses, and so the term ‘ten thousand phenomena’ is used to encompass everything. Those in business call amusement ‘spring.’ No trade is without banter and joking to attract customers; hence the saying, ‘All things are spring’ 万物归春。江湖中的生意是无数的，所以就以“万象”包罗一切。生意人把乐儿称做“春”，每行生意都离不开插科打诨，逗笑取乐儿，所以有“万物皆春”之说。”⁴² Indeed, all peddlers in Tianqiao might need some *xiangsheng* to attract people, thus, *xiangsheng* was intimately tied to commerce. More than the dire needs of *xiangsheng*, everyone who could speak was a potential *xiangsheng* performer. Pierre Bourdieu has reminded us of “the influence of linguistic capital” that “language is not simply an instrument of communications: it also provides, together with a richer or poorer vocabulary, a more or less complex system of categories, so that the capacity to decipher and manipulate complex structures, whether logical or aesthetic, depends partly on the complexity of the language transmitted by the family.” However,

³⁹ Ibid., 471.

⁴⁰ Madeleine Yue Dong, *Republican Beijing*, 206.

⁴¹ Madeleine Yue Dong, *Republican Beijing*, 206.

⁴² Zhang Shouchen 张寿臣, “*Wanwu gui chun* 万物归春 [All things return to spring],” originally published in *Tianjin wanbao* 天津晚报 [Tianjin Evening News], 7/4/1962, also cited in Ni Zhongzhi, *Zhongguo xiangsheng shi*, 176-177.

I believe that *xiangsheng*, through the power of humor, has constantly revealed the preposterous side of language, showing every participant that no word is sacred.⁴³

Almost all *xiangsheng* superstars of the Republican era got their start in—or at least passed through—Tianqiao. Li Deyang 李德钊, before he became known as “The Charmer 万人迷,” had spent years performing on the streets of Beijing and Tianjin. His signature “shtick” gradually nurtured during those performances was, paradoxically, vegetarian jokes (*su baofu* 素包袱—jokes without vulgarity).⁴⁴ In areas that were so often associated with coarseness, Li’s restraint of language and the strategy of deliberately showing off a unique skill offered a unique entertainment connoisseurship among the targeted audience of Li’s.⁴⁵

Hou Baolin’s 侯宝林 experience in Tianqiao also shaped his later virtuosity in *xiangsheng*. He recalled that he was lucky enough to perform in a “North” playhouse (where he performed both Peking Opera and *xiangsheng*) inside the Xidan Department Store 西单商场 early in his career in the 1930s, earning a lucrative three silver *yuan* each day. When he was not performing in such indoor venues, however, he went to perform at a *xiangsheng* stand run by Jiao Dehai 焦德海 and Liu Dezhi 刘德智—both *xiangsheng* performers themselves—in Tianqiao, where he could still earn seventy to eighty *fen* for a half-day’s labor—not as much as he earned inside enclosed walls, but enough to survive.⁴⁶ In one video clip shot sometime between the 1950s and 1960s, Hou demonstrates what was known as “白沙撒字” (*baisha sazi*,

⁴³ For Bourdieu’s discussion of linguistic capital, see Pierre Bourdieu & Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*, trans., Richard Nice (London, Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1977), 72-74.

⁴⁴ Lian Kuoru, *Jianghu congtao*, 403-404.

⁴⁵ Considering one of the origins of *xiangsheng* was Manchu octagonal drum, I believe, vulgarity was another strategy developed when Manchu Banners, after losing the stipend from the Qing Court, met other “connoisseurs” in space like Tianqiao.

⁴⁶ Hou Baolin, *Hao Baolin zizhuan* 侯宝林自传 [The autobiography of Hou Baolin], Vol. 1 (Harbin: Heilongjiang renmin chu ban she, 1982), 48-49.

literally “white-sand character scattering,” or calligraphy writing using only sand instead of ink and papers), a way of attracting passersby to his performance that usually accompanied *taiping geci* 太平歌词 singing.⁴⁷ Hou explained that this was a trick he had learned in Tianqiao.

Interestingly, the most crucial characteristic of *xiangsheng* in Tianqiao was not the quaintness of those tricks, but their spatial logic. Before a joke could be said aloud, bodies had to be accumulated at first. Thus, performance began not with speech but with the manufacture of a bodily proximity. A “crowd” was not a given category but something that could be produced. In Tianqiao, *xiangsheng* performers first produced space; only then could they produce humor.

To be sure, Tianqiao was not the only womb that produced *xiangsheng* performers. Hou Baolin was in fact an exception. His devotion to *xiangsheng* can be traced back to his early years performing Peking Opera in open-air markets. While performances in such spaces, he had already developed an interest in *xiangsheng*. It was only after he began performing at the Xidan Market (西单商场) that he could regularly overhear *xiangsheng* performances taking place right next to his stand. The stand belonged to Gao Deming 高德明, where Zhu Kuoquan 朱阔泉—who would later become Hou’s teacher—often performed. Because *xiangsheng* stands usually staged with only a few performers, Hou was occasionally invited to fill in when Gao’s stand was short of performers.⁴⁸ At Gao’s stand, Hou began performing *xiangsheng* himself.

One practical reason behind Hou’s eventual change of career from Peking Opera to *xiangsheng* was simply the money: he could earn more from his *xiangsheng* performances.⁴⁹ Changing one’s performance specialty, however, was never an easy task. Entertainers placed

⁴⁷ Chen Qian 陈骞, Zhao Shujing 赵淑静, & Wu Qi 吴琦, *Yi bai nian de xiaosheng* 一百年的笑声 [A century of laughter], episode 1, filmed 2002.

⁴⁸ Hou Xin 侯鑫, *Yi hu hou shuo* 一户侯说 [The life story of Hou Baolin] (Beijing: Beijing Yanshan chu ban she, 2004), 46.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

greater importance on lineage and apprenticeship than individual ability. Hou Baolin's first *xiangsheng* teacher was Chang Baochen 常宝臣, though the latter did not teach him much. Much of Hou's *xiangsheng* skill was therefore self-taught. Nevertheless, having a *xiangsheng* performer mentor was the only way leading one into the door of *xiangsheng*.

The owner of Hou's Peking Opera troupe, however, did not allow his performers to "double-dip" between two genres.⁵⁰ As a result, Hou left Xidan and returned to Tianqiao to perform at the stand owned by Yunlifei 云里飞 (a.k.a., Bai Baoshan 白宝山). Back in Tianqiao, Hou continued to perform Peking Opera during the stand's regular hours. After the performances ended, however, he sometimes brought together Bai Quanfou 白全福 and Wang Baotong 王宝童—son and disciple of Yunlifei—to perform *xiangsheng* at the same stand.⁵¹ Since these *xiangsheng* performances usually took place at night, Hou even installed electric lighting at the stand.

Hou also developed the habit of performing wherever space became available. When he noticed that another stand had finished its regular performance, he would pick up the legs of stools to use as temporary props and perform *xiangsheng* there.⁵² He always carried small bamboo clappers 小竹板 (*xiao zhuban*), a storyteller's block (*xingmu*), or a bag full of white sand 白沙子口袋 (*bai shazi koudai*), all of which were necessary to gather crowds. Later, he even became a regular *xiangsheng* performer at the stand of Jiao Dehai 焦德海 and Liu Dezhi 刘德智. Because the two stars usually appeared only after three in the afternoon, Hou would perform *xiangsheng* at their stand from eight in the morning until one in the afternoon, before returning to

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

Yunlifei's stand to perform Peking Opera later in the afternoon.⁵³ Therefore, Hou Baolin's early *xiangsheng* career showed that Tianqiao was less a cradle of *xiangsheng* than a space in which performers could choose between genres and stands, through which performers gradually crafted their identities.

⁵³ Ibid., 47-48.



Figure 4. A Photo of young Hou Baolin performing a Peking Opera gesture at Yunlifei's stand, without full makeup or costume.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ The board behind him reads: "Yunlifei, featuring comedic *erhuang* (a singing style used in Peking Opera)." Source: Personal archives of Hou Baolin's *xiangsheng* disciple Ding Guangquan (1944-2018). Courtesy of David Moser.

Li Wenshan 李文山, who became a professional *xiangsheng* performer in the 1950s, offered a remarkable recollection of his youthful adventures in Tianqiao during the 1940s. Born in 1938, he did not witness the district's initial formation. His father, a street vendor selling tea drinks (*dawancha* 大碗茶), like many parents at the time, could not forbid his son's wandering through Tianqiao. There was little else to do in a child's spare hours, after all; and, his father, like most laborers in Tianqiao, was simply clutching at subsistence. By then, the main venues for *xiangsheng* stars had already migrated into playhouses or onto radio stations; nonetheless, as Li recalled, the old Tianqiao "ethos" lingered:

The performers weren't really performers, and the audience wasn't much of an audience either. Most folks spent their mornings doing hard labor, did groceries in the afternoon, then strolled across Tianqiao before heading home. The crowd was all poor fellows.

Performer or audience? Who could tell the difference? They were all just in Tianqiao together, scraping by

演员也谈不上演员，观众也谈不上观众。多数观众是上午干苦力，下午买点儿菜到天桥转悠转悠然后回家。。。演员观众都是这么一帮穷人，演员也没固定的，观众也没固定的，也谈不上演员和观众，就一块儿混吧。⁵⁵

Here, Li articulates something more radical than nostalgia. He has described a spatial formation in which the boundary between performer and audience was gone. In Tianqiao, one could be a laborer in the morning, a spectator at dusk, and perhaps the next day, might become a performer. Identity was not dictated by profession but circulated within Tianqiao. In other words, the space of Tianqiao, not kind of performer, was the shared identity. In this sense, Tianqiao was not only the cradle of *xiangsheng* celebrities. It was a training ground to test the spatial adaptability of *xiangsheng* performers. What those future stars learned there was less repertoire than rhythm:

⁵⁵ Zhu Pengcheng, *Xiangsheng*, 63.

how to read a crowd even before they showed up, how to convert laughter into coins, and most importantly, how to stabilize laughter among those who might, at any moment, walk away.

Hence, *Xiangsheng* was not born in Tianqiao as a finished genre. It was experimented with there because Tianqiao offered a particular spatial formation. Only in such an environment, humor functioned as a convertible capital. Those stars, in the future, would carry Tianqiao on their backs, even after they had physically and spatially abandoned it.

In striking contrast stands Zhao Qingge 赵清阁—a female playwright—who notes in her 1948 diary a visit to Beijing (then Beiping 北平). Her rendering offers a rarefied, if almost aerial (or encyclopedic) perspective on the city’s social hierarchy in its late-Republican twilight:⁵⁶

Passing through Qianmen, there stretches a long avenue—Qianmen Street—the busiest and most commercial district in Beiping. Walking straight ahead, I arrived at Tianqiao. It is somewhat like *Xiangguo* Temple in Kaifeng or *Da shijie* in Shanghai, a place for the poor to amuse themselves. For just a few cents, one can enjoy many performances; thus, the crowd is packed almost to suffocation. The so-called ‘upper-class people’ never visit. In their eyes, this is the dirtiest, most chaotic, and most ‘lowly’ place. I took a brisk spin and left for the Temple of Heaven

出前门，就是一条长长的前门大街，这是北平最热闹的地区，也是商业集中的所在。笔直走去，经过天桥，这里有点象开封的相国寺，上海的大世界，为贫民娱乐的场合。有各种杂耍游艺，只要花几分钱就可以看到很多的游艺，因此观众拥挤不

⁵⁶ It should be noted that her writings about the “olds” were removed during the Cultural Revolution. As valuable as the surviving manuscripts may be, she later filled in the missing portions from her own memory. In other words, her recollections of Beijing in 1948 cannot be treated as entirely uncontaminated by retrospective reconstruction. See her own foreword, Zhao Qingge 赵清阁, *Xingyun sanji* 行云散记 [Miscellaneous Writings of a Journey Adrift] (Tianjin: Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 1983), 16-17.

堪。所谓‘上等人’是不会光临的，在‘上等人’的眼里，这里是最脏、最乱、最‘下等’的地方！我匆匆兜了一圈，就往天坛去了。⁵⁷

Zhao did not have to linger there. She surveyed it as if she were a sociologist. Her gaze glided across Tianqiao the same way she might see an exhibit behind glass in a museum. The space appeared to her as annoyingly dense and without dignity, as utmost vitality without elegance. Her description made the chaos in Tianqiao “visible.”

However, Zhao still attended a performance by Hou Baolin 侯宝林 at Xidan Amusement Playhouse 西单游艺社—a classic North Street (街北 *jiebei*, literally “north of the Zhushikou 珠市口 street”) venue, unlike Tianqiao, but still a part of “South City.” Her dissection of Hou’s *xiangsheng* is tinged with admiration and faint condescension:

Hou Baolin is a famous ‘*xiangsheng* expert’ of Beiping [Beijing]. This is what Headmaster Mei has dubbed him. He is indeed quite good. His content is humorous and interesting, with some gist. His diction is fluent and clear, every line of his can make you laugh until you cry, and after the laughter passes, it still lingers like the aftertaste of an olive. But his performance also has moments of vulgar jesting that could make one slightly uncomfortable

侯宝林是北平著名的‘相声专家’，此乃梅校长称呼他的。他也很高明，他说的相声材料都很幽默有趣，内容也还有些意思。他的口齿流利清晰，每句话都能逗得你笑出眼泪，笑后象橄榄一样，仍可咀嚼余味。但也有耍贫嘴的地方，听了叫人不太舒服。⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Zhao Qingge, *Xingyun sanji*, 47; As a matter of fact, several of Yue Yongyi’s interviewees shared a similar sentiment: the South—referring to Nancheng 南城 [South City] or the entire Outer City 外城—was a place for “low-status people” 低层次的人 (*di cengci ren*), even though they were simultaneously, to varying degrees, nostalgic about the “old” Tianqiao. See, Yue Yongyi 岳永逸, *Lao Beijing zabadi’er: Tianqiao de jiyi yu quanshi* 老北京杂吧地：天桥的记忆与诠释 [The Zabadi’er in Beijing: Memory and Interpretation of Tianqiao] (Beijing: Shenghuo, dushu, xinzhi, sanlian shudian, 2011), 54, 86-7, 88, 153.

⁵⁸ Zhao Qingge, *Xingyun sanji*, 45-46.

Although Zhao's tone might have disappointed Hou—who, as he later wrote in “On the Question of *Xiangsheng*” 关于相声的问题, had, since 1943, already been dedicating himself to “reforming” *xiangsheng* through his Northern Arts Drama Troupe 北艺话剧团—her diary nevertheless reveals something more crucial than personal taste.⁵⁹

For Zhao, Tianqiao was less a space of performance than the site of (potential) contamination. It was a topography of class boundary. She could enter it briefly, but she would never choose to inhabit there. The smell, noise, and the “lowly” crowd “suffocated” her. And more importantly, her objection to Tianqiao was not that it was lowly, but that it was dangerous because of the bodily proximity.

The irony becomes sharper when we follow her route elsewhere. She notes, perhaps unwittingly, that her own thrift-shopping in the city's new “North” (in particular, the 琉璃厂 *Liulichang* area, which was still part of the “South City” in late Qing), offered scarcity rather than vitality: “Then I took a rickshaw to visit Liulichang alone... The marketplace was desolate. Who has spare funds or leisure to visit such places under today's economic pressure 然后一个人乘三轮车去琉璃厂.....市面冷清极了，生活高压下的今天，谁有余资闲情去光顾这些?”⁶⁰ In Liulichang, material scarcity replaced congestion. Liulichang, reminiscent of civilized taste, was almost lifeless. Tianqiao, albeit replete with vulgarity, was still alive.

Tianqiao, in other words, did not reflect hierarchy in Republican Beijing; rather, it produced it. And in producing it, it also produced the conditions under which humor could accumulate, circulate, and eventually disseminate outward. Elite people, such as Zhao herself,

⁵⁹ Wang Jue, Wang Jingshou, and Fujita, *Zhongguo xiangsheng shi*, 158.

⁶⁰ Zhao Qingge, *Xingyun sanji*, 42. For a survey of the commodities sold in Tianqiao at the time, see Zhang Cixi, *Renmin shou du de Tianqiao* 人民首都的天桥 [Tianqiao in the People's Capital] (Beijing: Xiugengtang shudian, 1951), 164-170.

might visit Tianqiao for its spectacle to satisfy their ethnographic curiosity, or even to offer a risqué adventure. But they often moved through it quickly, because they did not need to remain there. Others did not “visit” Tianqiao at all. Those people were there because they had no choice. Li Wenshan did not wander into Tianqiao as an observer. He was born and grew up inside it. The difference between them is critical. Zhao’s mobility was always horizontal, whereas Li’s was vertical. As Madeleine Yue Dong suggests, “at the heart of the recycling process was the tension not only between the old and the new but, more fundamentally, between agency and its lack.”⁶¹ Tianqiao recycled people as much as performances. Some arrived by choice; many arrived in chains. Why were people “stuck” in Tianqiao? The answer is not simply poverty, but the spatial limitation. Economic scarcity narrowed possible trajectories. To be “stuck” was to be inserted into a rhythm one did not design.

Tianqiao’ers—People without Ancestors

The names of the stars, some of whom I have just mentioned, have become almost synonymous with *xiangsheng*, but that was only one side of the story. The other side was made up of those who never gained fame or fortune—Tianqiao regulars, but also mediocre performers who could not make a living outside the space, those stuck there for life, or those without ancestors 祖先, as Cui Jinsheng 崔金生 put it:

“Performers of storytelling arts rarely held ancestral rituals. They were too poor; what ancestors could they even honor! People like Cai Jinbo, for example, were sold off as children; where would she find her ancestors to venerate! If she were to perform any rite, it would only be for the ancestors of the Cai family to whom she was sold.”⁶²

⁶¹ Dong, *Republican Beijing*, 206.

⁶² Yue Yongyi, *Lao Beijing zabadi ’er*, 197.

Starting one's life "without ancestors" was to be without lineage, thereby without ritual continuity, and ultimately, without symbolic capital. Poverty here was not only economic; it was inherited. In Tianqiao, even the thread of memory could be severed and then reattached to those of others.

Liu Jinglan 刘景岚 was born in Sanhe County 三河县, near Beijing but administratively under Hebei Province, in 1931. Since his father was a drug addict, he moved to Beijing to live with his grandmother at the age of seven after his mother passed away. He held many odd jobs across Beijing from the age of eight and, finally, at sixteen, started learning the craft of barbering, which later became his lifelong career until his retirement in 1988. Technically, his life was never confined to Tianqiao—although he was very familiar with the entertainment there—but after retirement, he nevertheless returned to Tianqiao to perform Peking Opera as an amateur enthusiast (or *piaoyou* 票友).⁶³ His memory of Tianqiao was saturated with the image of *changzi* (场子, stalls). As someone who had always seen the area as a place of amusement, he remembered it as a fragmented series of small enclosures arranged by stalls: "When I was a child, I wandered there all day long. I liked watching everything and wanted to see everything there."⁶⁴ Li Changrong 李长荣 became a painter in a construction team after 1954. Whenever he had any spare time, he would still visit Tianqiao occasionally.⁶⁵ For Liu and Li, Tianqiao was a mosaic of stalls, every one of which was a small universe. It was not a unified community, as those who were literally stuck perceived, but a constellation of temporary enclosures. His recollection is indeed visual and spatial, but also cartographic.

⁶³ Ibid., 80-81.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 83, 80-90.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 42.

In contrast, Wang Xuezhi 王学智, a versatile performer who could perform *xiangsheng*, *kuaiban* (快板, clapper tales), and even *layangpian* (拉洋片, peepshows), was actually born in the Tianqiao area. In his oral recollections—his “sonic memory,” as he was almost blind from birth—Tianqiao was always a holistic community, convivial to insiders but merciless to outsiders. Even beggars, he recalled, had to find their place of belonging: “Even beggars had their own gangs and territorial divisions... If you weren’t one of them, they would snatch your board, smash it, and burn it. There were factions here—not just anyone could beg wherever they pleased. If you weren’t part of a recognized group and tried to work on your own, someone would break your board, step on it, and destroy it.”⁶⁶ Lian Kuoru complained: “In these days, the *jianghu* [Tianqiao] has fallen into utter disorder. Even those who used to draw pots and play the *liuqin* [both referring to beggars] have gone ashore to do regular business in Tianqiao 如今这年月简直是江湖乱道，化锅、遍柳齐[琴]的亦都上了地做生意啦。”⁶⁷ In some sense, Tianqiao neither imprisoned the pitiable, nor did its performers wish to stay forever, but it was never up to them. Tianqiao was, in fact, “hard to get into, but easy to fall out of.” If one could make a life anywhere else, no one would want to stay behind. For Tianqiao performers, it was a space that trapped them even as it offered a livelihood; for regular audiences, it was a world they could enter and leave at will.

Tianqiao performers’ sense of belonging was a spatial one. Liu Jinglan recalled: “I heard that Tianqiao performers sometimes ‘drove out’ outsiders. The stalls in Tianqiao could never be left idle. Someone had to occupy them. If you took someone’s spot, where else were they

⁶⁶ Ibid., 111-12.

⁶⁷ Lian Kuoru, *Jianghu congtao*, 427.

supposed to go?”⁶⁸ Li Changrong shared the same view: “Every stall in Tianqiao was reserved. Outsiders, who wanted to make a living here, simply couldn’t take them.”⁶⁹ Although most Tianqiao performers did not actually live in the district, it was not their residence that defined belonging but the space itself—that is, Tianqiao was a metonym for livelihood.⁷⁰

Wang Xuezhi 王学智, though never having lived or performed in Tianqiao before 1949, spent much of his youth as a devoted spectator. That experience indeed shaped his entire life. With no prior stage training or even experience, relying only on what he had absorbed as an audience in Tianqiao, he later became the best *quyi* performer in Chaoyang District 朝阳区, and eventually became the head of its Peasants’ Performing Troupe 朝阳区农民曲艺队队长. Even the district chief and the party secretary were fond of his performance.⁷¹ Before the Cultural Revolution, several teahouses had spotlighted his name in their signboards, but such a reputation and admiration brought little material reward: “I earned only several dozen *mao* a day.”⁷²

He later returned to Tianqiao—where he had never performed before—to *jian bandengtui’er* 捡板凳腿儿 or, literally, “pick up stool legs,” meaning to take over leftover performance spots (as well as tables and stools, which explains the derivation of the name). Only when a stall’s scheduled performance ended could itinerant performers step in; regular ones paid 20 percent of their earnings to the stall owner, while these “stool-leg pickers” kept all they made, which, of course, was no match for the amount made by regulars at regularly scheduled times.⁷³ Later, Wang’s wife suffered from a nervous-system illness that exhausted their already meager

⁶⁸ Yue Yongyi, *Lao Beijing zabadi’er*, 85.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 102.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 102, 123.

savings. When she died in 1971, Wang and the couple's only son were left destitute. He soon remarried a woman who happened to be visually impaired. Their brief joy after marriage gave way to deepening poverty, "even worse than during the Old Society 比旧社会还苦," as he put it.⁷⁴ At that time, he resumed once again "the Way of Tianqiao": 画锅 (*huaguo*, "drawing the pot," or simply put, busking), although the physical Tianqiao was by then gone. The final curtain of Tianqiao was drawn in 1965—although Li Changrong recalled that all performances in Tianqiao had undergone reform or been abolished outright after 1956. Wang's life story shows that even after 1956, Tianqiao still lived on in practice and in memory, becoming a ghostly continuation of its former self.⁷⁵ Tianqiao, in other words, was carried by people, not the place. Tianqiao, as a place, may have been erased, palimpsested, or even rebuilt. But Tianqiao, as social relations, endured; once the people who made the space disappeared, Tianqiao would be gone forever.

The binding of a space needs everyone within it to participate in. Zhu Guoliang 朱国良, a renowned acrobatics performer in Tianqiao, reveals the other side of Tianqiao's transformation after 1949. The so-called "liberation of Tianqiao" was never as catchy as the phrase connoted:

What about Tianqiao in "The New Society"? Tianqiao was liberated in 1950. But, who was going to look after the Tianqiao performers? No one! No one from the Ministry of Culture, no one from the Bureau of Culture of the city. It was just a Tianqiao Management Office, which consisted of one man about my height named Zhang Yuqi, and a fellow from the local police station named Guo Chunlin. They organized a 'Tianqiao *Quyì* Improvement Group' and led us to perform. When we earned money,

⁷⁴ Ibid., 103.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 42, 123.

everyone split it evenly. There was no such thing as big shares and small shares. Whether you were good or not, it was divided equally. Later, missions were assigned—recruiting people for the [Korean War]. We had everyone—acrobats, martial arts performers, magicians, singers. Many went off to Korea. What about those of us who were left? We could not all go to Korea, could we? At that time, there was a troupe to perform for those ‘Liberated Areas.’ Zhu Guoquan and I joined it. After we came back, they did not let us go home. We had meetings at a princely house behind the Beijing Hotel—that was where the Bureau of Culture was located at the time. After the meeting, we were sent to Tangshan, and that was it. We settled down there

新社会呢？五〇年解放，那时天桥的艺人谁管呢？最后呢，文化部也没来人，文化局也没来人，那是指谁呢？就是天桥管理处，有一人，有我这么高的个儿，叫张玉奇，派出所的一个叫郭春林，组织了一个“天桥曲艺改进小组”，带着我们。那会儿，外五分局是李艳，女的，带着我们上吉祥演出，挣的钱下来大伙均分，不是说有大、小份儿。有能耐没能耐，都均分...最后，就下来任务了，找人，哪儿找去？你想，什么都有，耍、练、变、唱都有。有一班人就抗美援朝了...这班人，都抗美援朝了。我们剩下的人干吗呀？也不能全去抗美援朝呀？那会儿，还有“老区访问团”。我跟朱国全就参加老区访问团了...后来回来后，不让回家，就在北京饭店后边的一王府开会，文化局那会儿在那儿。开完会，就上唐山，就那么扎下去了。⁷⁶

What Zhu describes is not a triumphant “liberation” but merely a bureaucratic improvisation.

Tianqiao was not immediately seized by the grand Socialist design. It was reorganized piecemeal, through low-level cadres and “socialist” redistribution. Performers were mobilized not in the socialist way, but still in the Way of Tianqiao.

Despite Tianqiao’s significance as harboring Beijing’s itinerant performing community, it was hardly a priority in the minds of the new administration. Tianqiao’s fate had already been sealed by the envisioning the Communists had for Beijing. They chose not to coerce the

⁷⁶ Ibid., 153-54.

inhabitants to relocate to effectuate the utopia of the new Socialist capital, but to alter the very social relations that produced the space. It is worth noting that Republican municipal authorities also attempted to monitor Tianqiao, but neither regime fully “conquered” it through policing or bricks and cement. Bulldozers might level structures but could not dissolve the habitual social relations overnight. Space, in Tianqiao or not, is produced through participation. When those relations changed, space dissolved. When they persisted, space survived, even without architecture.

Tianqiao, the South City

Although Tianqiao remained the last resort for the hapless and hopeless, rarely did anyone there romanticize it as a “good old place.” Both *xiangsheng* performers in Tianqiao and their audiences always knew that Tianqiao was never a giddily sentimental version of their hardship. The reflexivity of the space was inseparable from the reflexivity of those trapped within it. Tianqiao did nothing to conceal everyone’s misery; it made it profitable.

Li Changrong, while acknowledging the popularity of *xiangsheng* in Tianqiao, recalled the performers’ own “confessions”: “In the past, when performing *xiangsheng*, if a woman happened to be in the audience, the performer would say, ‘Comrade, please go somewhere else. What we do here is *sacun*.’ You might want to ask what *sacun* is? It means speaking nonsense, talking roughly and crudely.”⁷⁷ Lao She made a similar observation: “Old-timer *xiangsheng* performers had a certain skill: they tailored their wording to the audience. When they went to Tianqiao or other outdoor sites to perform, where the environment might have been less ‘civilized’ and without women’s presence, their performances became lewder. But in private

⁷⁷ Ibid., 44.

banquets or salons, their language was clean and contained no obscenities.”⁷⁸ *Xiangsheng* was, thus, never stylistically or technically fixed. Its language was calibrated spatially, as they shifted with audience composition, gendered presence, and bodily density. What appears as “vulgarity” was, in fact, a spatial improvisation.

Like any other social space, the perception of Tianqiao was far from monolithic, even within Beijing’s entertainment world. For Peking Opera troupes, if a performer appeared in the area south of Zhushikou Street (珠市口街南, “street-south”), they would not be permitted to perform in “the north” anymore. For those performing in the street-north 街北, stepping onto a street-south stage would mean lowering their status. After 1949, the Beijing Municipal Bureau of the Culture 北京市文化局 occasionally arranged performances by street-south troupes in street-north venues. As it turned out, many street-north performers, even when invited by the officials, still refused to perform in Tianqiao, fearing a performance in Tianqiao could damage their future careers. Spatial stigma clearly outlasted administrative coordination.⁷⁹

Those “stuck” in Tianqiao were often regarded as beneath even the already unfortunate ones, again fixed by spatial perception. For instance, Qiu Shuhong 邱淑洪, a Manchu woman who came from a Manchu banner family, described how the whole family would avoid the place: “At that time, even if we were offered a place to live in Tianqiao, we wouldn’t go. They said it was a low and vulgar place, crammed with entertainers and brothels. Girls were not allowed to go there; as a matter of fact, any decent person simply should not 那会儿天桥让我们住我们都不住，说那儿是下流之地，有唱戏的，还有窑子，姑娘不让带着上那边去，一般的好人都

⁷⁸ Lao She, “Xiangsheng yuyan de gexin,” 618.

⁷⁹ Wei Xikui 魏喜奎, “Tianqiao hua jiu 天桥话旧 [Recounting old tales of Tianqiao],” originally published in *Yandu* 燕都, no. 4 (1986) (Beijing: Beijing yanshan chubanshe, 1985), also cited in Huang Zonghan, *Tianqiao wangshi lu*, 166.

不去。”⁸⁰ Meanwhile, her father was a tea attendant 茶役 at the Political Commissar’s Office 政委会, suggesting that the disdain for Tianqiao was not as much about class aspiration as about material comfort. In other words, moral judgment doubled as class positioning. Li Changrong agreed:

In the old days, the Inner City housed people of higher rank, and the South City was for those of lower rank. The hierarchy was strict... If you went to Tianqiao, people would ask: ‘Why are you going there?’ I once had a colleague; when others heard he lived in Tianqiao, no one would exchange housing with him. Once people heard ‘you live in Tianqiao,’ they’d think, ‘no good people live there.’ It was the same for performers. No matter how skilled you were, if you performed in the north of Zhushikou, you were respectable. But if you performed in Tianqiao, your value dropped, and you were literally done. Even the ‘Eight Oddities of Tianqiao’ couldn’t go north; Tianqiao was their home, and they couldn’t leave it.⁸¹

Tianqiao was not only a location, but a verdict affixing people within the class hierarchy. What Li perhaps overlooked, however, was that there were exceptions, especially for successful *quyi* performers. Hou Baolin, for instance, began his illustrious career in Tianqiao performing at his master *Yunlifei*’s 云里飞 place.⁸²

The irony for Tianqiao performers was that the lower a social position they started with, the greater the chance they might one day in the future escape the South City, even though the

⁸⁰ Ding Yizhuang 定宜庄, *Shiliu ming qiren funü koushu* 十六名旗人妇女口述 [Sixteen banner women: an oral history] (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2016), 10.

⁸¹ Yue Yongyi, *Lao Beijing zabadi ’er*, 54.

⁸² In the text, they are called “zashua yanyuan 杂耍演员,” but according to the context, I am pretty sure Wei Xikui, the author, who was also a *dagu* [Drum Singing] performer herself, is referring to all *quyi* performers. Wei Xikui, “Tianqiao huajiu,” also cited in Huang Zonghan, *Tianqiao wangshi lu*, 166-167.

quyi stigma was nearly impossible to eradicate. For a long time, *xiangsheng* performers were not even allowed to perform in theaters:

Hou Baolin once told me, people looked down on *quyi*, and especially *xiangsheng*. Even if a third-rate Peking Opera actor had a birthday banquet and invited performers to entertain, *quyi* performers had to go humbly. But even for the greatest *quyi* performers, such as Liu Baoquan—the King of Drumsong—if he ever wanted to invite a third-rate opera actor to perform at his house, no one would go. Within the *quyi* community, *xiangsheng* was frowned upon the most, as it was not even allowed into theaters for a long time.⁸³

Hierarchy here was absolute and recursive, irrespective of where the body was actually located.

However, Liu Jinglan recalled that although Hou Baolin would often perform in Tianqiao, he was never bound by it; he usually performed only one or two short routines there before leaving.⁸⁴ Xin Fengxia 新凤霞, a celebrated *pingju* 评剧 actress, had once been trapped in Tianqiao until the blockbuster cinematic adaptation of Liu Qiao'er 刘巧儿 lifted her beyond it after 1949.⁸⁵

More ironically, still, some street-north Peking Opera performers who had yet to gain fame might still perform in Tianqiao occasionally, but once fortune favored them and they gained

⁸³ Xia Yu 夏榆, “Tamen dangnian shuo *xiangsheng* 他们当年说相声 [When they performed *xiangsheng*],” originally published in *Nanfang zhoubao* 南方周末, 1/4/2007, <https://news.nankai.edu.cn/mtnk/system/2007/01/08/000003824.shtml>. Accessed Oct 6, 2025.

⁸⁴ Yue Yongyi, *Lao Beijing zabadi'er*, 84. Among Tianqiao performers, the practice that Hou Baolin engaged in was called “*gan bao'er* 赶包儿,” which basically meant that certain big shots like Hou would be invited to more dignified places. However, for most Tianqiao performers, the Tianqiao mark they bore haunted how people assessed their performance forever. Another example would be Liang Yiming 梁益鸣, who was called “the Ma Lianliang of Tianqiao 天桥的马连良.” Although he was not a disciple of Ma, he actually taught himself to be a Ma-School 马派 Peking Opera performer. His nickname already signaled his virtuosity, but he could not break the north-street-and-south-street boundary until after 1949. For the definition of *gan bao'er*, see Yue Yongyi, *Lao Beijing zabadi'er*, 161. For Liang’s story, see Yue Yongyi, *Lao Beijing zabadi'er*, 86.

⁸⁵ Yue Yongyi, *Lao Beijing zabadi'er*, 86.

name recognition, they would immediately renounce that part of their past, as if brushing the dust of the South City from their sleeves.⁸⁶ In this sense, Tianqiao and the South City it represented were not only spatial designations but rather an identity, which was inseparable from the geography but extended beyond it.

For those women performers, however, true escape was rarely viable. Once branded as female *quyi* entertainers in Republican Tianqiao, their stigma seldom dissipated. As Qiu Shuhong's recollection makes clear, "decent" women would never end up in Tianqiao in the first place. Tianqiao's *laoziguan* 落子馆 (smaller *quyi* playhouses usually featuring singing and drama performances) were among the few places open to female performers.⁸⁷ This is not to say that there was no art in these playhouses, but for every spectator enraptured by a female performer's angelic voice, there was another lurking lecher waiting to prey upon her. The social niche within was complicated and fragile. Liu Ziyu 刘梓钰, a *quyi* critic, described how *Xiao Caiwu* 小彩舞 (the stage name of Luo Yusheng 骆玉笙, a *dagu* maestro based in Tianjin), when traveling to Beijing, began by performing at the Mingyuan teahouse 茗园茶馆—a relatively more respectable place—but eventually could only find opportunities in *laoziguan*.⁸⁸

In Tianqiao, the existence of more respectable entertainment playhouses, like teahouses, however, was far from rare. The April 8, 1939 issue of *Xinmin bao* 新民报 described Tianqiao's most extravagant side within those teahouses:

People usually think of Tianqiao as a scene of utter chaos and poverty, but in certain corners, its luxury and extravagance surpassed that of any other place. By the door of

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ A simple description of *laoziguan* 落子馆 in Tianqiao can be found in Yue Yongyi, *Lao Beijing zabadi'er*, 86-87.

⁸⁸ Chen Qian, Zhao Shujing, & Wu Qi, *Yi bai nian de xiaosheng*, episode 1.

Yongsheng xuan, one could often see elegantly decorated, long-term rented rickshaws: some owned by those ‘drum maidens,’ others by wealthy patrons... Sun Yuzhen, the proprietor of *Yongsheng xuan*, had managed this teahouse for only a little over two years.

However, in Tianqiao, one could find many teahouses of such rich taste.⁸⁹

Indeed, many elites were also regulars and self-claimed “experts” of Tianqiao. They poured money and spare time into forming its amusements, which ultimately produced a paradoxical “Tianqiao farce”: “The seats in the theaters were always packed, yet hardly anyone would formally invite a friend to see a play there. One reason was that these theaters originated from open-air stalls; another was that ticket prices were so cheap that it seemed disrespectful to treat someone there.”⁹⁰ Tianqiao, in that sense, offered an extensively personal pleasure without public acknowledgment—until acknowledgment became necessary, at which point patrons fled.

The rented rickshaws waiting outside teahouses mostly belonged to female drum-song performers, if not carrying their wealthy patrons. Only a few could afford them, though. Still, wheels made a temporary exit possible, but they could never provide a social escape. Bodies could be transported, but their identities remained.

“If a female performer in a *laoziguan* was truly talented, trouble was inevitable. It wasn’t necessarily her troupe leader’s fault; it was the place itself. When she was invited to perform at a private banquet, could she ever say no? The patron had money and power, after all, so she had to go. And afterward, who knew what would happen? In such times, there was nothing to say: just take the money and move on.”⁹¹

⁸⁹ “Tianqiao bai xie 天桥百写 [Hundreds of reflections on Tianqiao]” in *Xinminbao* (4/8/1939), also cited in Huang Zonghan, *Tianqiao wangshi lu*, 165.

⁹⁰ “Tianqiao bai xie 天桥百写 [A hundred reflections on Tianqiao],” originally published in *Xinminbao* (4/12/1939), also cited in Huang Zonghan, *Tianqiao wangshi lu*, 164.

⁹¹ Yue Yongyi, *Lao Beijing zabadi'er*, 87.

For many female entertainers in Tianqiao, death was the only escape. Lianxiaojun 莲小君 recalled that two of the four great *pingju* performers of the 1930s—her mentor Ailianjun 爱莲君 and (Old) Baiyushuang (老)白玉霜—had both been sold into the *quyi* business while coerced into prostitution, serving low-end “clients” in their youth. Both died young—Ailianjun at 21, was almost tortured to death, and Old Baiyushuang died of uterine cancer at 35—despite their enormous fame and wealth, all of which in the end benefited their stepfamilies rather than themselves.⁹²

In fact, the path into Tianqiao was no broad avenue either. As the two *pingju* stars’ tragic lives have shown, had their families found any other way to survive, they would never have sold their daughters into this line of work. Meanwhile, only a few female *xiangsheng* performers appeared in Tianqiao; they were usually from *quyi* families (their parents or relatives were performers themselves) or performed as husband-and-wife duos. One duo, introduced by Liu Jinglan, was called “赛活驴” *Sai huolü*, a performance that the wife or husband would “ride” their partner as a donkey, showing off comical motions.⁹³

For those “without ancestors,” their mentors, or the families into which they were adopted, or sold, became their only kin, irrevocably binding them to Tianqiao. However, the broader Tianqiao community still maintained a certain degree of harmony, a quasi-concordia of poverty in which the sole measure of worth was whether one could “make it” there: “Those who made a living by performing in Tianqiao had masters, not ancestors. There was no mutual discrimination among Tianqiao performers. For instance, among storytellers, if you told a good

⁹² For a sketch of Baiyushuang’s stage career, see Yue Yongyi, *Lao Beijing zabadi’er*, also “Tianqiao bai xie,” originally published in *Xinminbao* (4/10/1939), also cited in Huang Zonghan, *Tianqiao wangshi lu*, 165; for Lianxiaojun’s interview, see Chen Qian, Zhao Shujing, & Wu Qi, *Yibainian de xiaosheng*, episode 1.

⁹³ Yue Yongyi, *Lao Beijing zabadi’er*, 87.

story, you had your patrons, thereby a livelihood; if you didn't, no one listened, and you couldn't survive.”⁹⁴

In Tianqiao, belongingness was more performative than residential. Most Tianqiao performers did not live in Tianqiao, though some residents owned property in Tianqiao or adjacent areas.⁹⁵ Surely, nobody would call the latter Tianqiao'ers. For performers, Tianqiao's boundaries were drawn by livelihood, and certainly not by administrative or residential lines.

Despite their own marginal status, Tianqiao performers maintained clear distinctions between “themselves” and the city's vagrants. Even among the desperate, hierarchy existed. As mentioned earlier, even beggars had to prove who they were to remain within the Tianqiao community. Such “disorder” (in the eyes of the elites) was actually regulated. There were two major categories of homelessness: *qiongrenbang* (穷人帮 the poor men's gangs, also called *qiongjiamen* 穷家门, poor households) and *yaofande* (要饭的 beggars). Both groups scoured for survival in the same streets, but their self-perceptions differed: “Beggars did nothing but ask for scraps. We, of *qiongjiamen*, didn't beg for food; we asked for money.”⁹⁶ The distinction may appear to us semantic, but I think it reveals a dignity among those who were deprived: to ask for money was the same as claiming exchange value, not for charity. They considered the whole interaction as a transaction rather than supplication.

Although they did not see themselves as performers and still recognized a hierarchy between them and the *quyi* “artisans”: “folks in *qiongjiamen* were different from the entertainers; the latter were a notch higher,”⁹⁷ *qiongrenbang* still valued the cultural production of Tianqiao.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 48.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 47.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 122.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

Performance from beggars conferred a cultural elevation. Thus, the ability to produce amusement—albeit in poverty—generated symbolic surplus.

However, this hierarchy was somewhat porous. “We never begged from storytellers; we only asked merchants. Storytellers were pals. Even though you might be a man of letters, we were all performers, we were in the same business, after all.”⁹⁸ Thus, within this fragile social ecology, survival itself became a profession. Everyone’s role was defined not strictly by class or birth, but by spatial interaction. Everyone—beggars, storytellers, or *pingju* actresses alike—played their unique yet interdependent positions within the same performative field within Tianqiao.

As Wang Xuezhi recalled, Tianqiao performers were classified strictly by their relationship with respective performance space, or what I call spatial performativity: “There were several ranks among Tianqiao performers: *huaguo* [itinerant street performing], *jiantui’er* [taking leftover time at a stall], *liaodi* [busking], *chaguan* [performing in teahouse], and finally *quyi tuan* [troupes].”⁹⁹ In Tianqiao, each performer’s notch in the hierarchy was dictated by how they occupied space, not necessarily by their training in particular genres. It was a spatial economy of presence—where every inch of ground had to be claimed, performed, and defended or shared: “Every line of work in Tianqiao had its respective distinctions, but all followed the same principle. Between different lines of work, there was no real difference. We were all insiders! There was no discrimination. If I were busking and someone approached me saying, ‘I have no way to make a living.’ I’d say, ‘Don’t worry! Let’s survive together.’”¹⁰⁰ The statement

⁹⁸ Ibid., 121-122.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 129.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 129.

here is not sentimental. It reflects a structural truth: solidarity did not arise from any ideology but emerged from everyone's shared dependence on the same ground.

What took shape in Tianqiao was, therefore, neither pure chaos, as in the eyes of Beijing urbanites at the time, nor pure marginality, in the eyes of today's sociologists. It was a rough but durable moral constellation structured by spatial position. Rank within Tianqiao was determined by how close one was to profitable spots, by accessibility to stalls, and by the ability to hold ground as much as possible. What lay beneath the hierarchy, however, was a mutual recognition: all were bound to the same ecology of scarcity and abundance. This is what I mean by spatial performativity. In Tianqiao, identity was enacted through the occupation of space. One became a *huaguo*, *jiantui'er*, or *liaodi*, not through an abstract category but through repeated spatial practices. Space did not merely host performance. It produced stratification and identity, but also solidarity. Tianqiao, then, was never a district that lodged entertainers. It was a field in which social rank, economic survival, and even morality were continuously negotiated through Tianqiao's spatial performance. The stage was everywhere in Tianqiao. And everyone standing on it knew exactly where they stood.

In one way or another, Tianqiao seemed to have never posted a stark difference compared to the temple-fairs in Beijing. Goldman's *Opera and the City* has underscored Beijing's temple-fairs as both "occasional and regular," in terms of temporality, whereas Susan Naquin tries to pinpoint the exact location of those permanent stages in Beijing's temples.¹⁰¹ Beijing's Temple-fairs in both scholars' accounts were somewhat permanent (at a fixed schedule and a relatively fixed location). Susan Naquin has argued that

¹⁰¹ Goldman, *Opera and the City*, 87.

“Temple fairs played a special role in tying Peking together and linking it outward.

Salesmen and entertainers accompanied religious festivals, promoting cultural as well as economic integration, even as they created and reinforced social distinctions. These fairs generated a kind of excitement that children and visitors remembered and associated with Peking life, but by the end of the dynasty, they were increasingly marginalized and gradually replaced by newer kinds of markets and entertainment.”¹⁰²

She further observes that

“The system—and it does seem to have been a system—helped define an undifferentiated urban community as those who relied on these markets, while, as tourist sights, the fairs also helped distinguish Peking and its culture in the minds of outsiders...Behind this neat structure of supply and demand was constant jockeying for advantage...Temple markets survived into this vastly different era and even intensified their schedules, but their place in the city had changed.”¹⁰³

Thus, in Naquin’s formulation, the spatiality of the temple fairs and their whereabouts are equally important. Beijing’s temple fair was more of a structured system of circulation, hierarchy, and competition than an event. In other words, one temple fair’s location and recurrence were constitutive of urban cohesion in Beijing. Tianqiao, in this sense, took up the social role of previously existing (or more or less coevally showed up in the early Republican years) temple-fairs. Tianqiao was, after all, a permanent space, even if its shape was often amorphous, that drew borderlines differently in almost everyone’s mind. The stalls, small shops, and performers on the ground were, in fact, more permanent than we usually think of a for a

¹⁰² Susan Naquin, *Peking: Temples and City Life, 1400-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 627.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 631-32.

bazaar. As the above recollections of Tianqiao performers have indicated, those who had secured a foothold in Tianqiao guarded their positions provocatively. “Permanence” here did not indicate a place with stone foundations. It connoted real occupation. Yes, Tianqiao has often been remembered as chaotic, even precarious. But like the temple fairs Naquin describes, it operated through rules, hierarchies, and continual negotiation as well. If temple fairs constituted a system, so did Tianqiao. When temple fairs tied the city together episodically, Tianqiao did so every single day. It was a fair without a festival, a market without a calendar, and a stage (for performers) without walls. And precisely because of this, it became one of the most enduring spatial formations in modern Beijing.

Tianqiao after 1949

Many playhouses and low-level entertainment venues near Tianqiao did not survive after the “liberation” of Beijing in January of 1949. Tianqiao, however, did not disappear. After 1949, the Beijing Municipal Cultural Commission 北京市文委 conducted a comprehensive survey of former *quyi* venues, including amusement playhouses (游艺社), teahouses (茶社), and vaudeville houses (杂耍园子). The survey found thirty-one privately owned places accommodating only nine *quyi* troupes, with a total of 178 performers.¹⁰⁴ Many *quyi* performers, including those figures central to this project, were not affiliated with any troupe whatsoever. They survived as individual performers. By June 1953, after a few years of rectification campaigns, another survey recorded that only twelve amusement houses remained, all located in the Qianmen, Xuanwu (where Tianqiao located), and Xidan areas.¹⁰⁵ The closure of enclosed

¹⁰⁴ Beijing dang’anguan 北京档案馆 [Beijing Municipal Archives, hereafter BMA], 164-001-00116, “Shi zhengfu wenwei youguan quyi yuan she, ying juyuan diaocha biao 市政府文委有关曲艺园社、影剧院调查表 [Municipal Cultural Commission’s survey on *quyi* playhouses and theaters],” also cited in Zhu Pengcheng, *Xiangsheng*, 321.

¹⁰⁵ BMA, 087-047-00011, “Weiyuan, huiyuan ji yidong 委员、会员名单及异动 [List of committee members and other members, with personnel changes].”

venues drastically narrowed already limited options. For performers who had not achieved fame before 1949 and who worked independently, open space remained the only viable sites. The attempted institutionalization of culture did not eliminate Tianqiao; quite the contrary, it reconfigured its margins.

Busking in Tianqiao continued after 1949. Ren Xiaohai recalled that crude curses could still be heard in *xiangsheng* performances there throughout the 1950s: words deemed unsuitable for other venues would end up in Tianqiao.¹⁰⁶ Even as late as 1958, few instructors 辅导员 (*fudaoyuan*) at the Beijing Youth Palace 少年宫 (*shaonian gong*) wrote to the *Beijing Evening News* criticizing *quyi* performers—especially *xiangsheng* performances—for using vulgar and frivolous language to attract and amuse children during temple fairs at White Pagoda Temple 白塔寺 (*Batai si*).¹⁰⁷ The endurance of such language suggests that political sovereignty did not immediately discipline performative space.

Wang Xuetai 王学泰 later wrote nostalgically about Tianqiao in the 1950s. As a child, he tipped two fen and was respectfully invited by performers to sit inside the stand as though he were an adult benefactor.¹⁰⁸ He believed that Tianqiao after 1949 largely retained much of its “original flavor,” despite the eradication of prostitution and underworld elements in Tianqiao: “For a kid around ten years old, Tianqiao was a place for us to enjoy ourselves, to play, and to open our minds 对于十来岁的孩子来说，天桥是我们看热闹、玩耍和开心智的地方。” He explained why: “the ‘food’ and ‘entertainment’ in Tianqiao were much cheaper than elsewhere.

¹⁰⁶ Zhu Pengcheng, *Xiangsheng*, 302.

¹⁰⁷ “Fudao yuan guang baita si miaohui 辅导员逛白塔寺庙会 [Instructors visiting the Temple Fair at Baita Temple],” in *Beijing wanbao* 北京晚报 [Beijing Evening News, hereafter BEN] (5/22/1958), also cited in Zhu Pengcheng, *Xiangsheng*, 303.

¹⁰⁸ Wang Xuetai, “Beijing Tianqiao zayi 北京天桥杂忆 [A miscellaneous recollections of Tianqiao in Beijing],” as cited in *Bolan qunshu* 博览群书 Vol. 3 (2004): 104-109, also cited in Zhu Pengcheng, *Xiangsheng*, 300-301.

Listening to performances was inexpensive, and for open-air shows, one did not even have to pay 这里的“吃”和“玩”都比其他地方便宜的多。听玩意儿也便宜,露天演出可以不给钱。”¹⁰⁹

For Wang, the most memorable figures were not the celebrated but the unsuccessful performers. Those who gained fame left for better venues; those who remained did so because they could not leave. He remembered performers, such as Xiao Jinya 筱金牙, a peepshow (洋片) performer who always put on a smile on his face; a storyteller surnamed Zhao (lacking a full name or moniker was itself an indication of lack of fame) who relied on only one vocal routine, *Yongqing shengping* 永庆升平 (*Everlasting Praise for Peace*); and an old *qigong* performer who always failed to attract spectators because he was: “Clumsy with words.” 拙于语言. Wang concluded: “In Tianqiao, no matter what you did, if you wanted to take money out of someone else’s pocket and put it into your own, the first thing you relied on was ‘speaking’ 在天桥, 不管你是干什么的, 要把钱从人家的兜里掏出来装到自己的兜里, 第一就是靠‘说’.”¹¹⁰ In post-1949 Tianqiao, spatial performativity survived after the regime change. Language still remained as the currency of Tianqiao success.

Xiangsheng, however, so predicated on the verbal arts, survived only in two places in Tianqiao: Sanjiao Market (三角市场) and Gongping Market (公平市场), both on the west side of Tianqiao Street. At Gongping Market, veteran performers such as Gao Deming 高德明, Gao Fengshan 高凤山, Luo Shourong 罗寿荣, and Sun Baocai 孙宝才 continued performing “traditional” routines before joining the Beijing *Quyì* Troupe (北京曲艺团) after 1957. Younger

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

performers there—often without any fame—left the profession entirely after Tianqiao was finally shut down in 1957. At Sanjiao Market, mostly younger performers performed alongside two female *xiangsheng* performers, including Hui Wanhua 回婉华 and a traveling entertainer from Shenyang surnamed Liu 刘. After 1957, they all joined the Xuanwu Quyi Troupe (宣武曲艺团).¹¹¹ Tianqiao, thus, became a transitional space, the final platform before institutional absorption in the emerging cultural infrastructure of the new state.

The administration's attitude toward Tianqiao was ambivalent. On one hand, the city funded the renovation of seven playhouses and vaudeville houses in the Tianqiao area. After reconstruction, tipping was replaced by ticketing in those venues. The conversion of gratuity into fixed-price admission marked a transformation from fluid exchange to regulated transaction. Simultaneously, the city pursued modernization projects in the broader Tianqiao district: the Beijing Natural History Museum (北京自然博物馆), the Sino-Soviet Friendship Hospital (中苏友谊医院), the Tianqiao Theater (天桥剧场), the Tianqiao Department Store (天桥百货商场), and the Yong'an Road Post Office (永安路邮电局).

On the other hand, authorities did not eliminate open-air performance outright. Zhang Menggeng 张梦庚, then chief of the Beijing Municipal Cultural Bureau (北京市文化局), stated: "The most important thing for us right now is that we must still accommodate the masses' traditional habits. We must disperse performances for the sake of their convenience, rather than concentrating them 更重要的是仍要以照群众传统习惯，分散演唱，便利群众，不能集中."¹¹² The Cultural Bureau even constructed a row of sheet-metal shacks for Tianqiao

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² BMA, 164-1-232, "Guanyu dui jiang Xuanwu qu daiguan de quyi zaji lingsan yiren fenbie jiao Xuanwu qu Xicheng qu lingdao de pifu 关于对将宣武区代管的曲艺杂技零散艺人分别交宣武区、西城区领导的批复

performers. However, what was envisioned as an infrastructural improvement became a total catastrophe. The metal structures turned into ovens in summer and freezers in winter. During rainstorms, the sound of rain striking the roof drowned out human voices. Once, Hui Wanhua 回婉华 attempted to overpower the rain with her voice but ended up vomiting blood. Performers mockingly called these structures: The Grand Alley of Formalism 形式主义大走廊.¹¹³ The authorities attempted to rationalize the spatial performativity through physical infrastructure, but such material manifestation restructured performance in a completely unintended way. Space, it seems, is never obedient.

Tianqiao's survival was not accidental. It was structurally embedded in the transformation of Beijing into an industrial model city. In 1953 alone, within two months, over 10,000 peasants, discharged soldiers (转业军人), and unemployed workers (失业工人) migrated into Beijing, most from Hebei, and approximately 6,000 of them did not leave.¹¹⁴ By the end of 1956, Beijing's urban population had grown to 3.09 million (4.12 million including suburbs), nearly doubling since 1949.¹¹⁵

[Reply to the leadership of Xuanwu and Xicheng Districts regarding the temporary placement of independent *quyi* and acrobat performers in Xuanwu District],” also cited in Zhu Pengcheng, *Xiangsheng*, 299.

¹¹³ “Rang quyi zhe duo hua kai de geng canlan—shoudu quyi jie renshi zuotan hui jiyao 让曲艺这朵花开得更灿烂——首都曲艺界人士座谈会纪要 [Let the flower of *quyi* bloom: details of the symposium of *quyi* performers in Beijing], as cited in *Quyi* 曲艺 (1957.3), 5-6, also cited in Zhu Pengcheng, *Xiangsheng*, 301-302.

¹¹⁴ “Beijing shi renmin zhengfu guanyu nongmin mangmu liuru jing shi qingkuang he chuli cuoshi xiang huabei xingzheng weiyuan hui, zhengwu yuan de baogao 北京市人民政府关于农民盲目流入京市情况和处理措施向华北行政委员会、政务院的报告 [Report from the Beijing Municipal People's Government to the North China Administrative Committee and the Government Affair Council on the influx of peasants into Beijing and counter-measures] (4/22/1953), as cited in *Beijing shi zhongyao wenxian xuan bian* 北京市重要文献选编 [Selected Important Documents of Beijing, hereafter IDB] (1953): 113-115, 113.

¹¹⁵ “Zhonggong Beijing shiwei guanyu kongzhi Beijing shi renkou wenti xiang zhongyang de qingshi baogao 中共北京市委关于控制北京市人口问题向中央的请示报告 [Report from the Beijing Municipal Committee of the CCP to the Central Committee of the CCP regarding the instructions on the control of Beijing's population] (1/14/1957), as cited in IDB (1957): 64-68, 64.

Socialist Beijing was never envisioned as a stern, cold fortress harboring the Central Party, but as an exemplar city that was open to everyone. The Party even imagined it as a beacon for the entire socialist bloc. The *Beijing Evening News* regularly contrasted Beijing's modernity with American cities, portraying Beijing's entertainment as healthy and progressive, while American culture was "poisoned" by Hollywood.

However, Socialist-Beijing-style modernization required certain sonic control. As early as 1955, the municipal government prohibited shops, cinemas, and theaters from broadcasting sound outdoors. Performances affecting nearby areas were required to end before 11:30 pm.¹¹⁶ The regulation of sound, hence, marked a new spatial regime.

Post-1949 Tianqiao demonstrated that space cannot be abolished by decrees. The local authorities did try to change Tianqiao, but Tianqiao's own spatial logic persisted. The new authorities had to follow the Way of Tianqiao, and not vice versa. The state could regulate venues by replacing tipping with ticketing, and it could silence loudspeakers. It even could erect museums and hospitals to modernize Tianqiao. But it could not immediately dissolve the social relations that had produced Tianqiao. Thus, Tianqiao, after 1949, neither simply survived in the new era nor did it become purely nostalgic. It was a transitional spatial formation in which spatial performativity slowly bowed to institutional incorporation. The bridge had long disappeared even before the Republican years. The markets were gone. The newly Socialist "iron houses" even failed. But the logic of speaking to Tianqiao's survival lingered. So, as long as that logic remained in place, Tianqiao was not entirely gone.

¹¹⁶ "Beijing shi renmin weiyuanhui guanyu jianshao chengshi caozha shengyin de guiding 北京市人民委员会关于减少城市嘈杂声音的规定 [Regulations of the Beijing Municipal People's Committee on reducing noise in the urban area] (5/20/1950)," in "Beijing shi renmin weiyuanhui guanyu jin yibu jianshao chengshi caozha shengyin de Tongzhi 北京市人民委员会关于进一步减少城市嘈杂声音的通知 [Notice of the Beijing Municipal People's Committee on further reducing noise in the urban area] (9/24/1958), as cited in IDB (1958), 790.

Xiangchang District

In his *Tixiao yinyuan* 啼笑因缘 [*Fate of Tears and Laughter*], Zhang Henshui's 张恨水 literary representation of old Beijing, the protagonist Jiashu 家树 warns his lover Fengxi 凤喜, not to fall into those *laoziguan* 落子馆, exaggerating them as decadent. Entertaining on the street 大街上卖唱 was, paradoxically, morally superior.¹¹⁷ Jiashu's (and by implication, the author's) moral coding is interesting here. A confined venue with walls was not automatically synonymous with "civilized" space. An enclosure might let corruption seep in just as easily as it could offer refinement.

The wrestling master Ma Guibao 马贵宝 recalled that his mentor forbade all his apprentices from visiting (or even stepping inside) drumsong playhouses 大鼓园子 (*dagu yuanzi*), because they would "learn bad habits 怕学坏了 (*pa xue huaile*)," but no one obeyed: "We knew all the people in the drumsong playhouses. Even when we wanted to take a leak, we would go there. But the guys in Tianle Theater [the location of today's *De-yun she* 德云社] would not let us visit the backstage 大鼓园子那些人，唱戏的我们都认识，上厕所都上天乐。天乐戏园子也不让瞧后台。"¹¹⁸ Even behind walls, the hierarchy of Tianqiao remained intact. No bricks could conceal the stigma.

¹¹⁷ I also recognize that *laoziguan* 落子馆 constituted a spatial setting completely different from the smaller playhouses where *xiangsheng* performers typically appeared. *Laoziguan* embodied a blend of the social stigma associated with *quyi* and simultaneously the precarious conditions encountered by many women from humble backgrounds. Zhang Henshui, *Tixiao yinyuan* 啼笑因缘 [*Fate in Tears and Laughter*] (Taiyuan, Shanxi: Beiyue wenyi chubanshe, 1993), 47.

¹¹⁸ Yue Yongyi, *Lao Beijing zabadi'er*, 269-270.

The Xiangchang district 香厂[地], adjacent to Tianqiao and later absorbed into its administrative boundaries, represented the Republican municipal dream of modern urban planning.¹¹⁹ Today, much of its trace is nowhere to be found, even in Beijingers' memories.

However, for *quyi* entertainers, especially those who relied upon their sonic artistry, open-space was hardly an ideal stage. Two major amusement complexes erected in Xiangchang defined Beijing's new cultural landscape: The New World 新世界, or the First Amusement Park, and The South City Amusement Park 城南游艺园.

These complexes integrated previously “low-end” *xiangsheng* performers into their broader entertainment repertoire. A spectator at the South City Amusement Park might witness both the most elegant Peking Opera stars Meng Xiaodong 孟小冬 and Fu Zhifang 福芝芳, and the jokes of Jiao Dehai in the same visit.¹²⁰ An advertisement in *Tianjin yishibao* 天津益世报 (*Social Welfare News*) displayed Chen Zizhen 陈子贞 and Guang Kuoquan 广阔泉 alongside “more civilized” entertainments.¹²¹ Thus, a spatial juxtaposition created cultural adjacency despite the cultural hierarchy.

¹¹⁹ Dong, *Republican Beijing*; Wang Ya'nan 王亚男, *1900-1949 nian Beijing de chengshi guihua yu jianshe yanjiu* 1900—1949 年北京的城市规划与建设研究 [A Study of Urban Planning and Urban Development in Beijing, 1900–1949] (Nanking: Dongnan daxue chubanshe, 2008).

¹²⁰ Dong, *Republican Beijing*, 202.

¹²¹ “Untitled,” in *Yishibao* (Tianjin) 益世报 (*Social Welfare News*) (4/4/1918), p.9.

The New World, located in the Xiangchang New City District (香厂新市区), embodied architectural modernity. A reporter described it thus: “The amusements within draw upon the quirks of many Eastern and Western countries, presented to perfection. Two elevators were installed, along with steam heating and electric fans, making everyone within warm in winter and cool in summer. Everyone gets the most pleasant and agreeable experience 园内各种游戏，参酌东西各国之法，精益求精，置升降机两架，汽炉风扇，冬暖夏凉，怡情悦性，最为相宜.”¹²³ Designed by the English architect L. Meyarva, modeled after Shanghai’s New World, the full-steel-skeleton building featured a roof garden (屋顶花园), underground parking, and elevators to move customers between six floors.¹²⁴ A writer, marveling at its height, quoted the Tang poet, Wang Zhihuan 王之涣: “going up one more [floor] to see things a thousand miles away. 欲穷千里目，更上一层楼.”¹²⁵ The New World represented vertical modernity—a new sense of modernity that was rare even at the time in Beijing: only the western-style Beijing (Peking) Hotel 北京饭店 was higher than the New World, also equipped with elevators, but the Hotel was not a place to which anyone could simply buy a ticket—with elevators themselves becoming spectacles that purveyed amusements within its walls.¹²⁶

¹²³ Huang Zonghan, *Tianqiao wangshi lu*, 57-61.

¹²⁴ “Untitled,” in *The Shuntian Times* 顺天时报 (2/18/1918); Huang Zonghan, *Tianqiao wangshi lu*, 57-58.

¹²⁵ Huang, *Tianqiao wangshi lu*, 63.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.



Figure 6. The New World Amusement Park.¹²⁷

¹²⁷ Source: Weng Jichuan 翁计传, ed., *Jindai chengshi shi yanjiu ziliao huibian* 近代城市史研究资料汇编 [Collected Historical Materials on Modern Urban History], Vol. 9 (Shanghai: Shanghai kexue jishu wenxian chubanshe, 2019), 12.



Figure 7. A Tower Inscription of the New World in Beijing.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ A Tower Inscription of the New World in Beijing. An editor of *Yishi bao* 益世報 (Social Welfare News) mockingly criticized the New World. The structure of the piece itself imitates the iconic tower-like form of the New World building. The translation reads:

The
New World—
far too indulgent—
ritual and propriety gone.
They call this “new business.”
Men and women mix without boundaries,
Teeming crowds jostle up against each other.
Their entertainments are nothing special—that’s too true.
Tho the money spent be trivial, the suffering caused is great
Flippant young men and wandering dames all shouting as one
Now that the capital has such a place that can appear so openly,
As time goes by, little by little troubles and mess will surely follow.
If those responsible do not maintain order, it perforce will become a chaotic world.

Source: “Beijing xin shijie taming 北京新世界塔銘 [Tower Inscription for the New World in Beijing],” in *Yishi bao* (Beijing) (2/18/1918).

Entrance admission replaced all the existing social boundaries with differentiated ticket hierarchies. The first boundary to collapse was: “the principle that men and women should not mix 男女授受不亲.”¹²⁹ (See the illustration F) Women performers appeared before heterogeneous audiences and women spectators began to show up in larger numbers.¹³⁰ The South City then became a stage for social mixing.

One Republican writer observed:

In Beijing, a small society has always formed by itself. Not only are the shoppers mobile, but residents also move throughout the day. Not unlike London’s East End, Tianqiao is the slum. People sleep outdoors or stay in cheap inns, and that is how their housing is resolved. Tianqiao has become a tribe of wanderers for Northern China. Those accustomed to Wangfujing and Dongjiaominxiang would never know that hell does exist with Beijing.

在北平自成小社会。不仅去买东西的人群是流动体，本地的居民也差不多是长日流动的。和伦敦的东区一样，天桥是北平的贫民窟。从露宿到鸡毛店，便完全解决了他们住的问题。天桥是游民在华北的一个部落。惯在王府井大街和东交民巷一带走动的人，是不会知道人间还有地狱的。¹³¹

However, Xiangchang was attempting to rewrite that verdict onto the Tianqiao area: “Shops are lining both sides of the street, next to those modern-style buildings. And, it [Xiangchang] is the most modern commercial district in Beijing. Restaurants abound, as so do cosmetics and silk

¹²⁹ “Untitled,” in *Social Welfare* 益世报 (Beijing) (2/18/1918).

¹³⁰ I am not suggesting that such crossings did not occur in the late Qing. Chong Yi 崇彝, for instance, described the decadence of a wealthy man named En Zhuchuan 恩注川, who purchased an official title but never actually held office. Instead, he frequented opera performances at Beijing’s temples, where women were permitted to attend only on special occasions, when temples sold “women’s tickets” (女眷票). See Chong Yi, *Dao-Xian yilai chao ye zaji*, 95.

¹³¹ Qian Gechuan 钱歌川, “Youmu yi feng 游牧遗风 [Lingering nomadic traditions],” in *Beijing hu: xiandai zuojia bi xia de Beijing (1919-1949)* 北京乎—现代作家笔下的北京 (1919~1949) [Alas! Beijing: Beijing as Depicted by Modern Writers, 1919-1949], ed., Jiang Deming 姜德明 (Beijing: Shenghuo, dushu, xinzhi, sanlian shudian, 1992), 567—570.

boutiques. Many new *laoziguan* have opened recently. This new urban layout cannot be said to be anything other than the latest evolution of Beijing (此项新布置未可谓非北京最近之进化).”¹³² Another writer commented on the broader social shift in Beijing: “After Shanghai’s vulgar fashions flowed into Beijing, men and women in Beijing have started to imitate those in Shanghai. This is the reason why amusement parks, theaters, hotels, and restaurants have now opened in Beijing 自申俗流入北京后, 一班风流士女, 皆效之. 是故游艺园、剧场、旅馆、饭店开.”¹³³ Hence, Xiangchang had promised modernity through the architecture. Tianqiao, on the other hand, was always en route to modernity because of its compactness.

¹³² Chen Zongfan, *Yandu congkao*, 656.

¹³³ “Youlan xianping: chengnan youyiyuan zhi heimu 游览闲评 城南游艺园之黑幕 [A visitor’s commentary: the hidden scandals of the South City Amusement Park], in *Xin shehui bao* 新社会报 [The New Society] (9/13/1921).



Figure 8. A Photo of Xiangchang Road (香厂路) in the Xiangchang New District (香厂新市区).¹³⁴

¹³⁴ All the buildings in the illustration were constructed according to a standardized plan. The New World (Amusement Park) stood at the far end of the road.
Source: Weng Jichuan 翁计传, ed., *Jindai chengshi shi yanjiu ziliao huibian*, 12.

The opening of the New World appeared to have staged the marvel of “modernization” in the South City and rendered it available for consumption to Beijing urbanites living in South City. Neither the spectacle nor the structure itself, however, lasted long. From 1918 to 1940, municipal authorities repeatedly demanded architectural corrections and remodifications. Modernization, therefore, was never seen as an achieved state but as an unstable project that was perpetually under construction and always in danger of collapse.

New World’s biggest competitor was the South City Amusement Park (城南游艺园).¹³⁵ Lin Haiyin 林海音 recalled that her mother would hand the nanny one yuan to take her to the park, to simply kill time. Similar to Tianqiao, the Park was not an exceptional pilgrimage of all entertainments, but only an infrastructure for idling: a place in which time could be killed cheaply, and without the commitment to connoisseurship or the formality of invitation.

From every angle, the South City Amusement Park was, quite literally, a park. Its horizontal layout distinguished it from the vertical stacking of the New World. A *Jingbao* 京报 editor mocked those who visited the Park, exaggerating the experience as: “Even the ticket price is the same as the New World, that is outrageous... Once you are actually there, you will feel you are ‘drinking the northwest wind.’ Who would pay and cause trouble for themselves? 其至所售门票[]与新世界同其价值，自欺欺人.....一旦身临其地直[觉?]所谓喝西北风耳，谁肯出此冤钱，自寻苦恼.”¹³⁶ He mocked the shabbiness of its setup as well: “Some seating was thrown

¹³⁵ An anecdote illustrated the rivalry between the South City Amusement Park and the New World. The front gate of the South City Park underwent two modifications. The first time, it was positioned directly facing the New World (与新世界相对峙). After the New World went out of business, however, the South City Amusement Park decided to relocate the entrance, see Chen Zongfan, *Yan du congkao*, 642.

¹³⁶ Bu Dong, “Chengnan youyichang 城南游艺场 [The South City Amusement Park],” in *Jingbao* 京报 (2/6/1919).

outside together; a few puppets set up inside the shed 外搭 [] 座席，棚内设几个傀儡。”¹³⁷ I suspect his contempt was more than simply aesthetic snobbery of the elites. It represented a “classic” reading of space. For the editor, horizontality read as makeshift, cheapness, and as “drinking wind” rather than a structural choice. The critique was not simply that the Park was poorly built, but rather that it refused the architectural grammar through which modernity wished to be recognized.

From its opening, the Park never enjoyed a day of peace. Local newspapers reported incessantly on its “darkness” 黑幕 (*heimu*), the corruption of management, structural failures that killed customers and performers, and even a gunshot incident in which a soldier attempted to “protect” his wife from the crowd drawn to the fireworks show.¹³⁸ In the moral imaginary of those middle-class editors, the Park became an allegory of the South City itself: crowded, unruly, profit-driven, and perpetually on the verge of scandal. However, crowds swarmed in. *Jingbao* 京报 (The Crystal)—the same newspaper that often mocked the Park—advertised the latest shows and star performers in the Park on a daily basis. It was this facet that enabled the Park to excel

¹³⁷ I cannot tell to whom the editor is referring here by his mention of puppets, whether performers, those who sat inside the stall, or both. Ibid.

¹³⁸ “Chengnan youyiyuan jingli taozou, jia zhipiao chong zhenkuan 城南游藝園經理逃走 假支票充賑款 [The manager of the South City Amusement Park fleeing after using forged cheques as relief donations],” in *Xinhua ribao* 新华日报 (1921-03-16); “Chengnan youyiyuan zhi heimu: jianzhu wei xian jingli yingsi wubi, chaibai huicui zaochu zhong zhong zuie 城南遊藝園之黑幕 建築危險經理營私舞弊 拆白薈萃造出種種罪惡 [The ‘dark secrets’ of the South City Amusement Park: unsafe buildings, corrupted management, and a gathering of swindlers],” in *Shehui ribao* 社会日报 (1922-08-04); “Chengnan youyiyuan tafang shangren: Gong Zheng erren shangshi shen zhong, qiyu qi ren buneng xingdong 城南游藝園塌房傷人 龔鄭二人傷勢甚重 其餘七人不能行動 [Building collapse at the South City Amusement Park injures several: Gong and Zheng seriously wounded, seven others unable to move],” in *Chenbao* 晨报 (1924-07-22); “Duoduo chengnan youyiyuan zhi da canju: kunjue xichang xilou taluo: yan jia xiaojie lishi yabi, shoushang zhe shi yu ren songru renmin yiyuan, shizheng dangju zhuzhang yanxing qudi 咄咄城南遊藝園之大慘劇 坤角戲場西樓坍塌 (本報十二日號外) 燕家小姐立時壓斃 受傷者十餘人送入仁民醫院 市政當局主張嚴行取締 [A tragedy at the South City Amusement Park: the western wing of the opera theater collapse causing one woman killed and more than ten injured; municipal authorities call for closing],” in *Jingbao* 京报 (The Crystal) (1921-02-14); “Chengnan youyiyuan zhi qiangsheng 城南游艺园之枪声 [A gunfire at the South City Amusement Park],” in *Social Welfare News* 益世报 (3/2/1926).

over the New World. The Park epitomized a split between representation and everyday reality. In discourse, the Park appeared as disorder, but in practice, it functioned as a stable machine of attraction—similar to Tianqiao. The very density that editors regarded as a moral failure was precisely the condition of the Park’s success. The Park produced a form of urban leisure that did not require refined behavior. A presence was enough. If the New World attempted to modernize the South City by pulling visitors upward through elevators, the Park kept them on the ground. It is said that the investor and first manager, Peng Xiukang, a Cantonese merchant, first chose horizontal construction because he believed that Beijingers would be too conservative to feel comfortable riding elevators. Whether or not this rumor is true, it captures a spatial intuition: modernity had to be domesticated to local bodily habits. Modernization was never merely the installation of the latest pieces of technology, but needed to be calibrated to the crowd.

Similar to the New World, the Park drew women as well. One editor commented: “Short jackets, short skirts, and furs were everywhere in imitation of the Western style. Arms exposed in the cold, with no one regulating [the practice], yet them still proudly speaking of ‘reform’ 短短衣环短短裳，皮毛处处仿西洋。寒生玉臂无人管，犹自扬扬说改良”¹³⁹ However, women’s presence in the Park should not be reduced to a narrative of liberation-decadence or consumption. The Park, not unlike Tianqiao, was also a pit of predation. Alongside female spectators who came for fun, a peculiar group of women was tempted by the jingling sounds of a different variety: watches, jewelry, and wallets.¹⁴⁰ The Park, in fact, intensified what Tianqiao

¹³⁹ “Guan chengnan youyiyuan zhi funü zhuangshu yougan 观城南游艺园妇女装束有感 [Reflections on women’s clothing at the South City Amusement Park],” in *Social Welfare News* 益世报 (1920-2-8).

¹⁴⁰ “Chengnan youyichang de nüzei 城南游艺场的女贼 [Woman thieves at the South City Amusement Park],” in *Chenbao* 晨报 (The Crystal) (1924-01-13).

had staged: the conversion of bodily assembly into economic opportunity, not only for *quyi* performers but also for pickpockets.

However, this is also where the spatial history of *xiangsheng* became obvious. If *xiangsheng* in Tianqiao was largely male-dominated and male-participated, *xiangsheng* performers in the amusement parks (and temple fairs) could not, at least in practice, say no to women's presence. General admission produced a depository of audience of different kinds. Spectators might arrive on a whim, much as they did in Tianqiao, though. The Park, therefore, preserved Tianqiao's logic of contingency, as the performer was facing a crowd that was supposed to be heterogeneous. But such a similarity should not mislead. Unlike Tianqiao's open diffusion, the Park still restricted crowds within managed pathways. It somewhat concentrated the conditions of attention and made bodily proximity more predictable, even if it still made it more volatile than the New World. Nevertheless, the Park did not abolish Tianqiao's spatial performativity but reformatted it.

The transformation, though, occurred only when *xiangsheng* moved into smaller playhouses. Their reduced capacity and stage (and theater) size pulled spectators closer, thereby producing a new intimacy of listening. Stemming from another kind of intimacy, connoisseurship, which Tianqiao could rarely manage to sustain, emerged. A more stable group of audience began to recognize artistic style, timing, and repertoire not merely as amusement, but as cultural taste. This shift did not elevate *xiangsheng* via ideology, but rather via space. Enclosed walls and fixed seats did what no discourse could—it stabilized an audience's attention long enough for judgment, distinction, and fandom to form. In other words, the South City Amusement Park marked only a transitional spatial regime between Tianqiao and the playhouse. It kept Tianqiao's crowd logic alive while introducing new forms for managing proximity.

“Modern entertainment” did not arrive in the South City. It was a new apparatus for producing audiences, regulating gendered presence, and rewiring the conditions under which humor could be converted circularly from money to fame, and eventually, to cultural capital.

Conclusion (One Last Punchline 攒底)

“I love *xiangsheng*, but I cannot stand the community that feeds on it
我太喜欢相声了，但是我太讨厌这支队伍了”—Ma Ji 马季.¹⁴¹

The *xiangsheng* performer Ma Ji (1934-2006) repeatedly uttered this rather negative remark in the later years of his career. Because of that, he deliberately cut his son's tie with *xiangsheng*, unlike many performer parents who often passed the craft down within their families.¹⁴² However, when Ma severed this tie, I believe what he meant was more than the routines themselves, but also a particular mode of social relations that once bound (or shackled, depending on one's view) one performer to an entire community in a specific spatial setting.

As I hope to have shown, *xiangsheng* was more an art of space than an art of language. Words and jokes meant little once separated from the context that produced them. However, what emerged in Tianqiao rarely stayed there. Words could be silenced and stalls dismantled, but the social relations that first produced and later had sustained *xiangsheng* proved far more difficult to be cut off. Gathering, lingering, and thereby listening together in a shared space formed the invisible infrastructure of *xiangsheng*. While these relations persisted, *xiangsheng* could survive as well. Tianqiao was, therefore, a peculiar space, indeed.

Both the Republican municipal administration and the early socialist government attempted to penetrate and reorganize it. Neither of them could make that happen according to their own designs. I believe what they encountered was not merely a marketplace or an entertainment district, but an intricate web of social practices that reproduced themselves through everyday interaction there. As see from the maps in Figures, 1, 2, and 3 above, even when

¹⁴¹ Ma Ji, *Yisheng shouhou* 一生守候 [A Lifetime Devotion] (Beijing: Tuanjie chubanshe, 2007), 209.

¹⁴² Ibid., 209-10.

Tianqiao was administratively reorganized or physically transformed, the spatial logic that kept it in place remained exceedingly resilient.

Without clinging too tightly to the jargon of Henri Lefebvre or Pierre Bourdieu, I view *xiangsheng* as a product of the Tianqiao space, just as the Tianqiao space itself took shape through the production of *xiangsheng*. Tianqiao was, therefore, not merely a geographical location but a space produced through everyday interactions—or what I call “performative space.” And, while any space may be considered performative; entertainment venues are one especially iconic example. Drawing on Lefebvre’s spatial trialectics, I have attempted to show how interactions within Tianqiao produced the space itself.¹⁴³ In Tianqiao—particularly through *xiangsheng* performances there—space was continuously produced through the circulation of performers, audiences, and the surrounding environment, concurring with the rhythms that were difficult to regulate within the open markets of the Tianqiao district.¹⁴⁴

These spatial practices also produced a particular kind of performer within Tianqiao. In Pierre Bourdieu’s terms, what appeared was not merely a profession but a habitus—a set of dispositions shaped by the conditions of performance within a specific environment (spatial formation). *Xiangsheng* performers learned not routines, but rather, ways of reading and

¹⁴³ The distinction between trialectics and dialectics is never intuitive. My interpretation has relied on the fluid and dynamic nature of the former. For too long, people have pinpointed Lefebvre’s “conceived space,” “perceived space,” and “lived space” in their research and forgotten the one crucial point that all these kinds of space are constantly interrelated and convertible. Similar to Bourdieu’s various forms of capital, I do not want to decide whether aesthetic taste belongs to symbolic capital or cultural capital; the correlation—or conversion—between them matters most to me.

¹⁴⁴ I borrow the notion of “rhythm” from Benjamin Kindler’s *Writing to the Rhythm of Labor*, in which he persuasively reveals the materialist base of an “intellectual” action—writing. I think what Kindler means by “rhythm,” in the context of his study of the first (roughly) thirty years of the PRC (or Socialist China, in short), is a form of temporality that can only be produced within a particular mode of social relations. In his book, this social relation is that between writers and laborers. In other words, I think Kindler is still speaking within an Althusserian understanding of the distinction between a capitalist mode of social relations and an alternative one (whether socialist, communist, or simply anti-capitalist). See Benjamin Kindler, *Writing to the Rhythm of Labor: Cultural Politics of the Chinese Revolution, 1942-1976* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2025).

gathering crowds, seizing any opportunities to perform, and responding instantly to shifting circumstances. Their craft depended less on written scripts than on a practical sense developed through recurring exposure to the unpredictable environment of Tianqiao. In other words, performers' skills grew out of the spatial and social conditions in which they lived and worked. In this sense, Tianqiao functioned as a field in which performers accumulated not only economic capital but also particular forms of cultural and social capital recognizable within the community of Tianqiao, if not in other social relations within Beijing.

However, this community was far from harmonious. Tianqiao was never a place where performers simply welcomed everyone with open arms. Because the space was so precarious and unpredictable, Tianqiao performers knitted together with their own "kind," often in the form of exceedingly exclusionary networks. Paradoxically, however, these strategies of self-protection further congealed the spatial order of Tianqiao itself. Survival in Tianqiao was never merely about securing a big meal for today; it was about ensuring a livelihood every day. Within this spatial formation, female performers stood at an especially precarious position. Their presence in Tianqiao was both a tragedy and a form of protection offered by Tianqiao. The phrase "death as the only escape," therefore, should not be understood simply as a description of misery. The paradox they encountered was apparent: attempts to escape hardship could undermine their means of survival, but achieving even a certain degree of financial stability exposed them to another set of exploitative social relations. Within the Tianqiao community, their own peers (their "families"—literally, owners—were the epitome of such an exploitative but protective social relation) might refrain from exploiting them, but the Tianqiao space itself never excluded outsiders who might do so.

For that reason, the production of space in Tianqiao must be understood as a contentious process rather than a harmonious one. The very strategies Tianqiao performers adopted to protect themselves helped to reproduce the spatial order of Tianqiao, even when that order often conflicted with performers own needs and interests. Therefore, all the performers there were constantly responding not only to outsiders but also to the constraints imposed by the space they themselves helped produce. In other words, the production of Tianqiao's space was never settled or organic; it was marked by ongoing tensions. And, it was precisely through these tensions that the space of Tianqiao took shape.

If one were to adapt the saying that “the road to hell is paved with good intentions,” Tianqiao might suggest a totally different expression: the road to hell is paved with adaptive intentions. Survival strategies, rather than noble plans, produced the social world of Tianqiao. In this sense, Ma Ji's remark captures the contradictory nature of *xiangsheng* better than any theoretical formulation. If *xiangsheng* is understood simply as the art of telling jokes, then perhaps the greatest joke lies within *xiangsheng* itself.

Feng Gong 冯巩, one of the most well-known comedians in contemporary mainland China, who himself started his career as a *xiangsheng* performer as well, once summarized in his master's thesis the techniques of *xiangsheng* that survived the vicissitudes of history. He described the *xiangsheng* after the 1950s as “泛相声 (*fan-xiangsheng*), arguing that the emergence of mass media brought *xiangsheng* into many new spaces which he called a transformation in the changing spaces of performance (“演出空间的改变”).¹⁴⁵ Departing from

¹⁴⁵ Feng Gong, “Xiangsheng yishu chuangxin de tansuo yu shijian 相声艺术创新的探索与实践 [Exploration and practice in the innovation of *Xiangsheng* art]” (MA thesis, Central China Normal University 华中师范大学), 10-11. DOI: 10.7666/d.y420575.

Feng Gong's focus on the "impeccable" techniques of *xiangsheng* that have been passed down through generations, I maintain that what remained was not merely technique. The inheritance of *xiangsheng* can only be understood through the spatial practices forged in places like Tianqiao, within which performance, livelihood, and urban circulation converged. Thus, Tianqiao was not simply the birthplace of *xiangsheng*, nor merely the stage upon which it was performed. It was the very spatial formation that allowed *xiangsheng* to exist in the first place. And, because Tianqiao produced *xiangsheng* through space, *xiangsheng*, in turn, produced Tianqiao as a recognizable social world that could be remembered through its participants' memory. Even after the stalls disappeared and the ground itself was reshaped by urban modernization, the spatial logic that once animated *xiangsheng* in Tianqiao continued to reverberate in other corners of the city—in playhouses, and eventually the modern theaters of the socialist capital.

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