Suzhou in History: City Layout and Urban Culture

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Introduction

This article aims to investigate the bidirectional relation between the physical form and the urban culture of the city Suzhou. By studying the city’s evolution through four historical stages—— the ancient, the imperial, the pre-modern and the contemporary, this article presents how social, historical and ideological backgrounds have shaped the physical formation and transformation of Suzhou, and how urban order is capable of effecting urban culture and life.

Chapter 1. The City in its Formation

Believed to be initially built in 514 B.C. during the first half of the Eastern Zhou dynasty (770 - 256 B.C.), Suzhou, situated at the center of the Yangzi Delta region in southeastern China, has been a city of great cultural and economic significance. Figure 1 below demonstrates the present topographic features of the city. Although never China's national capital, since the ninth century, it has been a hub of a region on which the nation’s economical prosperity largely depends.\(^1\) The first half of the Eastern Zhou dynasty, also referred to as the Spring and Autumn Period (770 - 476 B.C.), was characterized by continuous warfare between states competing for hegemony over China as the then existing ruler, the royal Zhou family, faced a recession of its power. The Yangzi Delta region was then occupied by the state Wu [吴], which established its capital at the site of present-day Suzhou. The city was named the Great City of Helü [Helü dacheng, 閣闾大城] after an emperor of Wu. The location of the city provided natural

advantages that later contributed to the city's flourish. To its north lied Yangzi River, flowing eastward from mid-west China to the nation’s costal boundary in the East over the stretch of sixty kilometers (equivalent to approximately 37 miles). It not only provided military protection but also served as a primary means of water transportation. To the West, the city was sheltered in the arms of Lake Tai, a major drainage basin in southeast China with connections to Yangzi River and the ocean. Lake Tai, along with numerous other lakes, made possible the boom of aquaculture in the region. The fertile soil and gentle climate also supported agriculture and led to overall material abundance. Major agricultural produce at the time included “rice and flax, kudzu vine, and leaves, providing raw materials for textile manufacture”. Fishing and livestock raising were also prominent means of livelihood. In addition, rich bronze and tin resources provided opportunity for tool making and weaponry manufacture. Culturally, as governmental authority weakened, education was no longer exclusively accessible for members of aristocracy. Confucius (551 - 479 B.C.) initialed private schooling that was accessible for civilians.

The Ideal Capital in Zhouli

Very few historical material or archaeological evidence exists depicting the building of the Great City of Helü. However, like many other things in Chinese tradition, the building of a capital supposedly followed certain rules and regulations formulated by educated government elites. The book Zhou li theorizes an ideal model of government structure and operation, including as broad as politics, military affairs and social hierarchy, and as specific as tax,

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2 Xu, The Chinese City, 11.

3 Xu, The Chinese City, 11.
Figure 1. Present topography around Suzhou. Excerpted from Xu, The Chinese City, 10.
costume, decoration and etiquette. It is unclear when exactly the book was created. Although taking Zhou dynasty as the stage of the ideal capital, the book was discovered and re-edited by scholars of Han dynasty (202 B.C. - 220 A.D.). The last of the six sections in the book, titled “Kao Gong ji” [考工记], presents regulations and instructions on tool making and engineering, including the construction of an ideal capital city.

Choice of Site

According to “Kao Gong ji”, the capital should be located at the center of a given piece of land. The precise location of the center should be measured by Da Si Tu [大司徒], a government official in charge of rituals and etiquette, with a gnomon plate [tugui]:

[The Da Si Tu], with the tugui method, measures the length of the sun’s shadow on the earth. [He] seeks [the place where] the sun’s shadow stretches in the true north and equals the gnomon in length, so as to find the center of the earth… The center of the earth is [that place where] the sun’s shadow at the summer solstice is one chi five cun. [This is the place] where earth and sky meet, where the four seasons merge, where wind and rain are gathered in, and where yin and yang are in harmony. Therefore the myriad things are at peace. Thus [it is here that] the royal capital is to be built.5

This method of site choosing reflects certain aspects of Confucian philosophy. As implied in the second half of the passage above, the city builder and the emperor hope to borrow natural forces to assist and guide human affairs. Heavenly forces, symbolized here by the sun, direct humans to find the center of the earth so that their emperor, honored as the center of the human realm, shall reside there. It is worth noting that, in a Chinese worldview, the natural and

4 1 chi [尺] equates approximately 14 inches; 1 cun [寸] equates approximately 1 inch.

5 Zhou Li, juan 24, p. 164-167; Juan 41, p. 289.
the divine are undistinguishable. The divine lies in the nature; the divine is the nature. The object of worship is not figures of deity but the fundamental order in the cosmos. (Certainly, divine figures are present in Chinese mythology, such as the God of the Earth, the God of the Sea and the Goddess of the Wind, but they are commonly considered as rulers or overseers each in charge of a natural element.) It is in fact less to be worshiped than to be observed, studied, applied to human affairs and ultimately unified with. This analogy between human and divine realms and the guidance of natural order on human order are deeply embedded in traditional Chinese cosmology and philosophy.

From this chosen focal point, a web of grid pattern shall expand in all four cardinal orientations to the end of the earth. (The ancient Chinese believed the world was a flat piece of land in a square shape.) Once the royal capital is properly situated at the center of land, cosmic powers would expand outward from there in all directions to the edge of civilization.⁶

According to “Kao Gong ji”, the Da Si Tu should also conduct auguries with milfoil and tortoise shell before the construction of a capital. The next step is to survey the contour of the site and investigate the water level at all four corners. Finally, the site needs to be made an even and leveled piece of land.⁷

**Cardinal Orientation**

The geographer Paul Wheatley observes that the ideal Chinese capital shares with many other Asian capitals these three characteristics: “cardinal orientation, cardinal axially and a more

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⁷ *Zhou Li, juan 41*, p. 289.
or less square perimeter delimited by a massive wall”.Nevertheless, Wheatley points out the ideal Chinese capital puts much greater emphasis on the south-north axes than any east-west avenue. The architect and urban planner Yinong Xu, in his book *The Chinese City in Space and Time*, analyzes the reasons for such preference. The first, he argues, is the pragmatic consideration of buildings’ greater exposure to the sun when facing south. The other reason may be related to “the equatorial character of Chinese astronomy, which concentrated attention on the Pole and circumpolar stars, as opposed to the ecliptic-emphasizing nature of Greek and medieval European astronomy and to astronomy based on azimuth and altitude as practiced by the Arabs”. Indeed, a passage in “Kao Gong ji” explains a method of determining cardinal orientations with the Pole star:

They [the artificers] erect a post [at the center of the leveled ground], taking the plumb lines to ensure its verticality, and with it observe the sun’s shadow [日影]. They take it as the determinator of the shadows of the sun at its rising and setting and discern their midpoint [indicating the true north]. In the daytime, they consult the sun’s shadows at noon; in the nighttime, they study the pole star, so that [the orientation of] true east and west, [and south and north] is precisely fixed.11

This emphasis on the Pole star is also depicted in *Lun Yu* [论语], a collection of Confucius’ lectures and teaching recorded by his students: “He who exercises government by means of his virtue may be compared to the north polar star, which keeps its place while all the

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11 *Zhou Li, juan 41*, p. 289.
stars turn around it”. The Chinese naturism is again reflected here as Xu pointed out that the north polar star guides humans on the relatively south-sitting earth to find directions just as the emperor, in his south-facing throne, watches over his subjects.

City Layout

The ideal layout of a Zhou capital is depicted in Zhou li as such:

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12 *Lun Yu* [论语], juan 2.

The artificers, as they built the capital, demarcated it as a square with sides of nine *li*, each side having three gateways. Within the capital there were nine meridional and nine latitudinal avenues, each of the former being nine chariot tracks wide.\textsuperscript{14}

Figure 2 below demonstrates such a layout based on the description in *Zhou li*. It is believed that this layout was a human imitation that echoes the ancient imagination of the universe. The grid pattern within the square city has its roots in the aforesaid belief that the earth resembles a square checkerboard. The subdivision within the city, Xu argued, is related to “the old well-field [天井] system of land settlement and cultivation”.\textsuperscript{15} The measurement of the grids was identical with those in the countryside field.\textsuperscript{16} Furthermore, legend holds that Yu [禹], a heroic emperor of Xia dynasty (2070 - 1600 B.C.), divided the land of China into nine sections [九州], among which the Middle Kingdom (zhongguo [中国], translated as China nowadays) at the center of the land was the most significant.\textsuperscript{17} It is reasonable to argue that the city layout of nine sections with the dominant royal palace at the center was designed to inherit the form of the ancient world as a way of honoring the nature and ancestors.

\textit{Location of Principle Structures}

“Kao Gong ji” states that, within the capital, the Ancestral Hall [zu, 祖] shall be in the East and the Altar of the God of the Earth [she, 社], in the West; the Imperial Court [chao, 朝] should be in the South while the market [shi, 市] lies in the North. In the center sits the south-

\textsuperscript{14} Zhou Li, \textit{juan} 41, p. 289.
\textsuperscript{15} Xu, \textit{The Chinese City}, 34.
\textsuperscript{16} Xu, \textit{The Chinese City}, 35.
\textsuperscript{17} Xu, \textit{The Chinese City}, 36.
facing royal palace. The arrangement of the Ancestral Hall and the Altar of the god of the Earth might have to do with the Chinese belief that the left is the superior direction as opposed to the right, the relatively inferior one. It could be argued that the superior orientation of the left, associated with Heaven, was kept for worshiping the God of the Earth, whereas the relatively inferior and earthly orientation of the right was assigned to human ancestors. A passage from Yi Zhou shu supports this argument:

The Dao of Heaven esteems the left [position], [hence] the sun and moon move westward. The Dao of Earth esteems the right [position], [hence] the waters flow eastward. The Dao of Man esteems the central [position], [hence] the ears and eyes serve the heart.

The placement of the market in the northern end of the city reflects the low social status of businessmen in the ancient Chinese value system. It was widely accepted that the North receives the least sunlight and therefore possesses more yin quality than yang. The inference could be made that the North was considered inferior because yang, commonly associated with masculinity, was better valued in the patriarchal society of ancient China.

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18 Zhou li,juan 41, p. 289.
19 Literally translated as way, path or method.
Figure 3. Geographic locations of Wu capital at three historical periods. Excerpted from Xu, *The Chinese City*, 11.
The Great City of Helü

Choice of Site

While *Zhou li* provides a theoretical model of the building of a royal capital, regulations such as situating the city at the center of land seems too unrealistic to be strictly followed. After all, the earth is not in fact a checkerboard. As aforesaid, the Eastern Zhou dynasty was an era of warfare among numerous independent states; it could be inferred that boundaries between states frequently shifted as a result of the competition of land conquering, which made the locating of the center even more difficult. In addition, realistic considerations played a significant role in determining the site of a capital. In the case of the Great City of Helü, the capital had been moved several times by the emperor Helü’s accession to the throne. The precise locations are yet to be investigated, but some scholars suggest the Wu capital had moved from the Northwest to the Southeast in proximity of Lake Tai. Xiao maintained that the move might have been the result of military and economic considerations. First, the area of middle and lower Yangzi River was occupied by the states Chu [楚], Wu [吴] and Yue [越], with Chu being the strongest among the three and Yue, the weakest. Figure 3 displays the three states’ occupation of territories in the region at three historical periods—— the early stage, the early Spring and Autumn period and late Spring and Autumn period. It is clear that Wu’s territory had expanded over the course. Geographically, Wu was located in the middle, with Chu to the West and Yue to the Southeast.

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The southeastward move allowed Wu to avoid the risk of being directly threatened by Chu and simultaneously gain initiative of attacking Chu when it was prepared. On the other hand, Wu could conveniently monitor and menace the seemingly weak but potentially dangerous Yue. Second, economy at the time relied largely, if not almost solely, on agriculture. Wu might have moved its capital into proximity of Lake Tai in pursuit of fertile land, rich natural resources and convenient transport system in the region. This decision is believed to have contributed to the eventual economic prosperity of Wu’s agriculture and foundry industry.

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Symbolism in Urban Construction

It is documented in Yue jue shu that the Great City of Helü was fortified by three concentric layers of city walls. Figure 4 demonstrates the rough layout of the city walls. The middle layer (da cheng 大城), defining the city proper, measured around 37 li (approximately equivalent to 9 miles) in perimeter. It was consistent with the description in Zhou li that the city wall shall adapt a perimeter of 36 li. Similarly, the three-mile perimeter of the inner wall (xiao cheng 小城) that surrounded the royal palace accorded with guidelines in Zhou li.25 The three concentric layers of fortification were not only the result of military considerations in an era of warfare, but also another embodiment of the esthetics rooting in classic Chinese cosmology as previously discussed. In addition, the presence of water gates implied that city moats lied at the foot of city walls around the palace and the city itself. A passage in Shi ji confirms their existence: “Wu has city walls [cheng 城] that are think and lofty, and city moats [chi 池] that are wide and deep”.27

Figure 4. Concentric City Walls of Helü Dacheng26

25 Yue jue shu,juan 2, p. 9.
26 Xu, the Chinese City, “Conjectural diagrammatic plan of Helü Dacheng. Based on literary descriptions, mainly in the Yue jue shu and Wu Yue chunqiu, and on the city maps of later dynastic periods”, 43.
27 Xu, The Chinese City, 48.
According to *Wu Yue chunqiu*, Wu Zixu was appointed to reconstruct the city for the emperor Helü. He consulted the universe concerning the building of the capital; “[He] followed the forms manifested in Heaven and the process taking place on Earth [xiang-Tian fa-Di 象天法地], and then constructed the great city wall [dacheng 大城]”. The similar method was documented in a passage in *Zhou Yi* that describes Fu Xi—— the mythological and, arguably, historical figure who is honored as the ancestor of all Chinese—— “devising the eight trigrams”:

In antiquity, when Pao Xi [i.e., Fu Xi] had come to rule all under Heaven, he looked up and contemplated the forms exhibited in Heaven, and he looked down and contemplated the processes repeated on Earth. He contemplated the patterns of birds and beasts, and the properties of the various habitats and places. Near at hand, in his own body, he found things for consideration, and the same at a distance, in events in general. Thus he devised the eight trigrams, in order to enter into relations with the virtues of the numinous and the bright, and to classify the relations of the ten thousand things.

As I previously discussed, the principles of city building in ancient China were in accordance with rules and orders in the cosmos and thus the capital was a miniature reflection of the greater universe. It is crucial to point out that traditional Chinese cosmology fundamentally differs from that in many other cultures. Eliade falsely interpreted Chinese religious experience with a typically western worldview:

The discovery or projection of a fixed point—— the center—— is equivalent to the creation of the world… By occupying it and, above all, by settling in it, man symbolically transforms it into a cosmos through a ritual repetition of the cosmogony. What is to become "our world" must first be "created," and every creation has a paradigmatic model—— the creation of the universe by the gods.

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28 *Wu Yue chunqiu*, juan 4, p. 25.
29 *Zhou Yi*, juan 3.
Although creation myths do exist in Chinese mythology, the concept of a creator never took roots in the culture. As afore argued, divine figures are essentially concrete manifestations of natural order and elements out of human imagination. A supportive evidence is that the Chinese character 天, often inaccurately translated as “heaven”, literally means sky. The American sinologist Frederick Mote eloquently writes, “The genuine Chinese cosmogony is that of organismic process, meaning that all of the parts of the entire cosmos belong to one organic whole and that they all interact as participants in one spontaneously self-generating life process”.

The British historian and scientist Joseph Needham made a similar argument:

The Chinese world-view depended upon a totally different line of thought. The harmonious co-operation of all beings arose, not from the orders of a superior authority external to themselves, but from the fact that they were all parts in a hierarchy of wholes forming a cosmic pattern, and what they obeyed were the internal dictates of their own natures.

Therefore, the effort to accord human order with cosmic order, originated from a collective worldview, exceeds superstitions and has gradually evolved to construct a tradition of esthetics. In the case of capital construction, Xu objects to Eliade’s opinion and asserts, “for the Chinese (at least for the classically educated), the discovery or projection of a fixed point was equivalent not to the creation of the world but to the finding of the world order.”

The gap between Chinese and western cosmology is arguably related to the nature of the languages. In reading works on sinology written in English, I perceive that translated texts of

33 Xu, The Chinese City, 49.
Chinese writings—— especially ancient scripts—— are often vague and confusing. This confusion is usually eliminated when I read the original text in Chinese for further explanation. This failure of translation, I believe, is to be blamed on the inherent limitation of language. The linguistic Eugene Nida stated, “For English and Chinese, perhaps one of the most important linguistic distinctions is the contrast between hypotaxis and parataxis.”

English, relying largely on grammatical devices to build connections between words and sentences, is significantly more specific than Chinese, which is mostly constructed with semantic connections. As a result, Chinese, as a language, is a medium capable of carrying and supporting great generality and abstractness of thinking. The concepts of \textit{yin} and \textit{yang} perfectly exemplify the dichotomic methodology to conceptualize the world in traditional Chinese philosophy. The concepts’ extreme broadness enables them to be applied and utilized almost universally. Paradoxically, there is also a tradition of projecting broad, abstract concepts unto concrete symbols in Chinese language. For instance, the two characters in the word “tian di” [天地] respectively mean sky and earth on a literal level, yet the word commonly refers to the world. Thus the Chinese tendency of concentrating grand abstract ideas onto mundane and concrete objects is profoundly related to concretization and symbolism in language and has prevalently permeated into everyday activities including city building.

In conclusion, the Chinese city before Tang dynasty was fundamentally a symbol of governmental authority. Its function was primarily political and its urban order was regulated by a set of cosmology-oriented urban planning principles.

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34 Eugene Nida and Charles Taber, \textit{The Theory and Practice of Translation} (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1982), 16.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dynasty</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Measurement</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Eastern Zhou</td>
<td>514 B.C.</td>
<td>Early Construction¹</td>
<td>(a) 47 li 210 bu 2 chi in perimeter²</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(b) 37 li 161 bu in perimeter³</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tang</td>
<td>A.D. 876</td>
<td>Reconstruction¹</td>
<td>12 li long north-south; 9 li long east-west;</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>42 li 30 bu in perimeter⁴</td>
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<td>Later Liang</td>
<td>922</td>
<td>Brick and Stone Facing for the First Time⁵</td>
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<td>1110s</td>
<td>Restoration⁵</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1123</td>
<td>Strengthening of the Brick and Stone Facing</td>
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<td>Southern Song</td>
<td>ca. 1180s</td>
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<td>1254</td>
<td>Heightening of the Parapets⁵</td>
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<td>ca. Late</td>
<td>Reconstruction¹</td>
<td>(a) Zhou (perimeter): 34 li 53 bu 9 fen⁵</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1360s</td>
<td></td>
<td>(b) 4482 zhang 6 chi 5 cun in length⁶</td>
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<td>1642</td>
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<td>1860</td>
<td>Repair⁹</td>
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¹. Events of relatively more importance.
². Yue jie shu, juan 2, p. 9.
³. Ibid. This figure is the sum total of the lengths of the four sides of the walled city. For more details, see Chapter 2.
⁴. Wudi jì, pp. 14, 111.
⁶. Ibid. This figure is the sum total of the lengths of the walls between every two of the six city gates. For more details, see discussion in Chapter 4.
⁹. Suzhoufu zhi, juan 4.5.

Figure 2.1 Records of the Construction of the City Walls of Suzhou, by Dynasty. Excerpted from Xu, The Chinese City, 99.
Chapter Two. The City in Imperial Era

City Walls Defining Urban Boundaries

The Great City of Helü was short-lived as the state Wu was defeated by neighboring enemies during the early fifth century B.C. The scarcity of historical record and archaeological evidence has resulted in the mystery of the city’s physical condition from the fall of the state Wu to 876 A.D. in Tang dynasty. Scholars can only be certain that, first, the city was protected by one or two layers of city walls with gates in them, enabling both land and water traffic. Second, a walled complex of prefectural institutions clustered at the center of the city.35 This is consistent with the ideal model proposed in Zhou li in the sense that the city had two or three layers of city walls— including the one surrounding the inner city center— with governmental institutions, i.e., the royal palace at the center. It is also known, as George Modelski claims, the population in the city of Suzhou had reached around one hundred thousand in 300 B.C.36 The city’s status as a capital met its end when the First Emperor of Qin united China in 221B.C. Traditionally, when a city loses its identity as a capital, it can no longer retain its original physical form, for form follows function and, as extensively argued in the previous chapter, serves as a symbol of royal authority. Suzhou, however, is one of the few exceptions to this convention because it continued to be a provincial capital and the existing royal palace functioned as prefectural institutions. Thus, it can be inferred that the change in its political status

35 Xu, The Chinese City, 128.

Figure 2.2 Stone engraving of Pingjiang tu, a map of the city Suzhou. As Xu suggests, the stele is now preserved in the former prefectural school attached to the Confucian Temple in the lower left, or southwest quarter of the city. Image excerpted from Illustrated Discourse on the City Walls of Wu County (吴县城图说).
did not cause Suzhou any dramatic transformation in its physical layout.\textsuperscript{37}

The first record on the physical form of the city after the fall of the Wu capital Helü dacheng is a reconstruction project of the city walls in 876 A.D. during the late Tang dynasty. Figure 2.1 presents a table of recorded construction and renovation of city walls in Suzhou throughout all imperial dynasties from the city’s establishment in 514 B.C. to Qing dynasty.

Upon the end of Tang dynasty (618 - 907 A.D.), southeastern China underwent frequent riots and battles, which caused severe demolition on urban infrastructure. In 875 A.D., a local military commander, Wang Ying, initiated a rebellion against the Tang central government and violently occupied Suzhou and the neighboring Changzhou. Although the riot was soon suppressed by the government, the cities suffered from damage and chaos.\textsuperscript{38} As a consequence, the city wall of Suzhou was repaired in the following year.

At the end of Northern Song period (960 - 1127) and the beginning of Southern Song dynasty (1127 - 1279), the royal authority was challenged by the Mongolian (Jurchen) invaders. Before their leader Khubalai Khan eventually gained hegemony and became the founding emperor of the subsequent Yuan dynasty, in 1130, the Mongolian troops invaded Suzhou, plundered and set the city on fire.\textsuperscript{39} The deconstruction was not dealt with due to the political and financial crisis of the Song government until about fifty years later, when a local prefect organized a reconstruction project of the city walls. However, historical documents suggest the

\textsuperscript{37} Wu Yue chunqiu,juan 4.
\textsuperscript{38} Xu, \textit{The Chinese City}, 100.
\textsuperscript{39} Zhou li,juan 24, pp. 164-167.
walls had already partially damaged or collapsed thirty years after the project and was in need of further repair. In addition, the city moats were taken over by marshes.⁴⁰ In 1223, a Suzhou prefect gained government funding to conduct massive reconstruction work on the walls and moats. The outcome of this engineering received contemporary compliments, and defined Suzhou’s city boundaries and basic layout through all the following imperial dynasties. The city plan was documented in a stone engraving produced by artisans in 1229. It was titled Pingjiang tu (A Map of Pingjiang 平江图) because the city was named Pingjiang at the time. This engraved map serves as the most important historical material in the investigation in this chapter not only because its tremendous details and accurateness, but also for there is a consensus among scholars that the layout of the city had not changed significantly since the 1220s until the fall of Qing Dynasty as Chinese imperial era met its end. The positions of city gates and important structures as well as the layout of the streets and canals as demonstrated in this map are proven to be mostly consistent with those in the maps of later periods.⁴¹

The Canal System

Scholars commonly maintain that Suzhou’s unique double system of streets and canals had started to take shape since as early as the third century.⁴² As discussed in the previous chapter, Yue jue shu and Wu Yue chunqiu documented that city walls of the Great City of Helü had eight land gates and eight water gates built in them, suggesting the existence of rivers within

⁴⁰ Song shi (History of the Song Dynasty [960-1279]), edited by Tuotuo (Toghto) 脄脫 and Ouyang Xuan 欧阳玄 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977).
⁴¹ Xu, The Chinese City, 112.
⁴² Xu, The Chinese City, 128.
the city since the Spring and Autumn period. The land and water transportation systems were documented in *Wudu fu* in the second half of the third century A.D.: “Open are two sets [i.e., land and water] of eight [city] gates, [connected by a network of] water ways and land routes [in the city]”.

It was not until the mid-Tang dynasty when sufficient historical records illuminated the condition of Suzhou. Wudi ji and numerous Tang poems provide evidence for “a well-developed network of streets and canals, intersected by over three hundred bridges, and the city was divided, though probably unevenly, into as many as sixty resident wards, which were very probably enclosed by walls and strictly controlled by the government”. Since Tang poetry marks with its high productivity and excellence one of the peaks of Chinese cultural and literary development, poems became a common medium for scholars to depict Suzhou’s cityscape during Tang dynasty. The great poet Bai Juyi, once a local officer of Suzhou, wrote about his experience of visiting one of the city gates, Chang Gate:

The city walls of Helü are emerald-green spread with autumn plants,  
The Raven Bridge is red bearing the glow of the setting sun.  
In front of storied buildings everywhere waft the melodies of flutes,  
And by the door of every house are moored ships and boats.

The poet Li Shen, when passing by Suzhou in a journey, wrote a poem on the water system in Suzhou:

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44 Zuo Si 左思, Wudu fu 吳都賦 (Rhymed Prose Pown on the Capital of Wu State [Suzhou]), juan 5, 27.
45 Xu, The Chinese City, 128.
46 Zuo Si, Wudu Fu, 12.
In the walls of the Wu capital city amidst mist
Chang Gate straddles the green water streams.
Green poplars are in the deep and shallow alleys;
The boats decorated with carved blue birds are floating backward and forward.\textsuperscript{47}

An even more renowned poem, written by Du Xunhe, elegantly depicts common street scenes in late-Tang Suzhou:

Reaching Gusu [i.e., Suzhou] you will see
People's houses pillowed on the rivers.
Within the old palatial area little land is vacant,
Over the rivers small bridges are many.
Water chestnut fruits and lotus roots are sold in late evening markets,
And spring boats are loaded with luxurious silken fabrics.
In the distance I know that wakeful under the moon,
Homesickness will be accompanied by fishermen's songs.\textsuperscript{48}

Clearly, the physical cityscape shaped the daily life of its residents, and the web of canals added to Suzhou a unique feature that had become a popular object of description in Tang literature.

The canals provided convenient daily use of water, firefighting (the use of fire for cooking and heating, of candles for lighting and of wood as the predominant material in architecture increased the risk of fire disasters), water transportation and beautification.

However, the most pragmatic function of the canals must had been to prevent floods in the city. A passage in \textit{Wudi ji} documents the function of canals as devices for defensing the city against flood in Northern Song period:

As observed within the city walls, numerous [artery] streams are running through the whole area, taking in and pouring out the water from [Lake] Zhenze [i.e., Lake Tai]. Their tributaries spread out, flanking the [city] roads and streets. Otherwise, perhaps there

\textsuperscript{47} Zuo Si, \textit{Wudu Fu}, 15.

\textsuperscript{48} Zuo Si, \textit{Wudu Fu}, 14.
would be no means of discharging excessive rainwater and settling the residents adequately.\textsuperscript{49}

In conclusion, city walls, finalized in the 1220s during Northern Song dynasty, defined the boundaries of Suzhou and served as a starting point for later formation and evolution of city layout within the boundaries. The walls also carried symbolic significance because they marked the division between the realm within and the realm outside, separating home from the rest of the world. On the other hand, the city gates built in the walls permitted interaction between the two realms. Furthermore, gates are ceremonial in nature in the sense that they call attention to the action of entering or exiting a place and concretization—— as ceremonies do—— the otherwise forgettable meaning in the action.

After the city walls and moats defined the stage for urban development, the system of canals and streets determined the way residents moved around in the city. They also helped to shape quarters and plots of land bearing various functions and thus served as a device of zoning. After the medieval urban revolution, which is the very next topic, the streets and canals’ role vessels of the city was brought to full play.

\textit{Medieval Urban Revolution}

Although some claim that Suzhou is a physical continuity of over two thousand and five hundred years—— that is to say, the city never went through any profound change in its site or

\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Wudi ji, juan} 2.
basic layout—— the principle of urban planning, land use and spacial arrangement in particular, did undertake essential transformation during the late imperial era.

Urban planning before mid-Tang, i.e., the second half of the eighth century, likely followed the principles in *Zhou li* concerning spacial arrangement and city regulation. Thus it can be inferred that the marketplace in a pre-Tang Chinese city took the form of a walled square compound with a gate on each of the four walls.\(^{50}\) It functioned as a forum for commercial and

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\(^{50}\) *Zhou li, juan* 14, 87-88.
social activities and was strictly monitored by the local government. Figure 2.3 presents two stone engravings of marketplaces during Eastern Han dynasty. According to Zhou li, the stalls in the marketplace were arranged in ranks while goods displayed on the stall were also restricted

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51 Zhou li, juan 14, 87-88.
based on their categories.\textsuperscript{52} In the market quarter, an Altar of the God of Earth received regular sacrifices and hosted rituals. An administrative office was commonly set up at the center of the quarter to enforce regulation on the operation of the marketplace. Each day there was the “morning market”, the “great market” around noon and the “late afternoon market”. \textit{Zhou li} also suggests regulation on the typography and location of the three daily markets:

The great market is held at midday, [and in it] commoners are the main participants. The morning market is held in the early morning, [and in it] merchants are the main participants. The afternoon market is held in the late afternoon, [and in it] male and female peddlers are the main participants.

During the "great market" hour, transactions had to be conducted in the central part of the compound; during the "morning market" hour, in the eastern part; and during the "late afternoon market" hour, in the western part.\textsuperscript{53}

Xu speculated based on historical materials that, before mid-Tang, a city that was in accordance with Zhou standards would be divided into blocks, among them residential quarters (\textit{fang}) took the shape of walled square or rectangular wards. Figure 2.4 is a map of the capital Chang’an during Tang dynasty. It provides an insight on the typical residential quarter that Suzhou had also similarly adapted. The residential wards, like the marketplace, was under governmental supervision and hosted an Altar of the God of the Earth at its center. Houses lined up along alleys within the wards, and residents were likely assigned to different wards based on their professions and social status. Only a high-rank government officer had the privilege to have the entrance of his house opened directly onto a main street. The reason for such extreme regulation on urban life, Xu suggests, was primarily military considerations. It is explained in

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Zhou li}, juan 14, 96..

\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Zhou li}, juan 14, 96.
Figure 2.5 Distribution of residential wards in Suzhou during Tang dynasty.
Zhou li that “once the city was in serious trouble, residents were then ordered to stay [close to the officials’ post] in their own wards, so as to stand by, as administrative decrees were pending”.  

It is recorded in Wudi ji that sixty residential wards (fang) existed in the early-Tang Suzhou, and each ward consisted of five alleys, along which houses situated. Figure 2.5, excerpted from Wudi ji, shows the uneven distribution of the residential wards. They tended to cluster around the central enclosed prefectural complex and toward the western side of the city.

Mark Elvin asserts, starting from the second half of the eighth century and continuing in the Southern Song, fundamental urban transformation, i.e., “medieval urban revolution” as he called it, took place initially in marketplaces and subsequently evolved into residential wards. Skinner further points out five institutional changes that contributed to this process of transformation: “(1) a relaxation of the requirement that each county could maintain only one market, which had to be located in the capital city; (2) the breakdown and eventual collapse of the official marketing organization; (3) the disappearance of the enclosed marketplace and the walled-ward system and their replacement by a much freer street plan in which trade and commerce could be conducted anywhere within the city or its outlying suburbs; (4) the rapid expansion of particular walled cities and the growth of commercial suburbs outside their gates; and (5) the emergence of great numbers of small and intermediate-size towns with important economic functions”.

54 Zhou li, juan 14, 96-98.
55 Wudi ji, 111.
As a consequence of the urban revolution, walled commercial and residential quarters were completely replaced by the much less rigid streets that hosted vibrant local business and housing of integrated population. The aforementioned poet Bai juyi wrote in a poem “by the door of every house are moored sailing boats”. This could not have been possible if houses were clustered in walled and gated wards, allowing no direct access to city streets (with the exception of Quan Tang shi, juan 444, 4968- 4969.)

Figure 2.6 Street plan of a section of the city of Suzhou, adapted from a picture map engraved on stone in 1229. Writings in the map label all the bridges and gates in the section. Image excerpted from Xu, The Chinese City, 71.
of the houses of the nobles). The poem by Du Xunhe, quoted on page 23, also proves the removal of walled residential wards in post-reform Suzhou, which allowed residents the freedom to reside by rivers.\footnote{Zuo Si, \textit{Wudu Fu}, 14.} Moreover, during Northern Song period, there was a documented trend of scholars and government officials settling down in Suzhou after retiring or being dismissed from the central government in the capital Bianliang 汴梁.\footnote{Xu, \textit{The Chinese City}, 112-13.} They could freely purchase land at any desired site and build houses and gardens.\footnote{Wujun ji, juan 3.} Thus I infer the mid-Tang urban reform had contributed to the rise and development of gardens in Suzhou (discussed in the following chapter).

Xu claims that it was between the late Northern Song and early Southern Song dynasties that the word “fang” changed its meaning from “residential ward” to “honorific gateway”.\footnote{Xu, \textit{The Chinese City}, 113.} Xu suggests the degeneration of the vocabulary’s original meaning indicates the complete abolition of the old residential ward system.\footnote{Xu, \textit{The Chinese City}, 113.} Figure 2.6 is a fragment of a detailed render of \textit{Pingjiang tu}. It is clear, by comparison to Figure 2.5, the revolution had encouraged a more organic street layout and allowed shops and houses to be reasonably located based on needs. It is not hard to imagine that urban life must have flowed more naturally since commercial and residential land use was no longer forcibly segregated but mixed to bring about greater

\footnote{59 Zuo Si, \textit{Wudu Fu}, 14.}
\footnote{60 Xu, \textit{The Chinese City}, 112-13.}
\footnote{61 Wujun ji, juan 3.}
\footnote{62 Xu, \textit{The Chinese City}, 113.}
\footnote{63 Xu, \textit{The Chinese City}, 113.}
convenience in daily life. Elvin commented that China at this time was the most urbanized society in the world.\textsuperscript{64}

More profoundly, the medieval urban revolution has changed the meaning and identity of cities in Chinese society from primarily a symbol of hegemonic presence and social orders as defined by the elites to a functional forum of commercial and social activities shaped and operated, to a certain degree, by its ordinary residents. Making a similar argument, Elvin wrote, “Up to this time [between about 900 and 1200], the large centers had been predominantly cities

\textsuperscript{64} Elvin, \textit{The Pattern of the Chinese Past}, 178-79.
of administrators and consumers, and the circulation of wealth and goods had depended primarily on the pumping mechanism provided by taxation. Now they also became commercial and industrial centers, in degrees varying from case to case.” Overall, this reform has brought urban life into full play and has also laid solid foundation for the boom of arts and culture during Tang and Song dynasties (elaborated in the following chapter). The vibrant urban life during that period is depicted in tremendous details in the scroll painting *Qingming shanghe tu* [清明上河图], produced in the late Northern Song period. The painting captures street scenes in the Song

capital Bianliang [汴梁] and therefore exemplifies the peak of urban dynamism and prosperity.

Figure 2.7 and 2.8 are sections of the seventeen-feet-long scroll.

A bustling sense of publicness can clearly be perceived from the painting. Indeed, the mid-Tang urban reform introduced genuine public space into Chinese cities. The streets —— and, in the case of Suzhou, the canals—— became venues where people of different professions and status could freely (to a certain degree) interact and conduct various activities. In terms of people’s perception of the city, the city could now be mentally mapped and conceptualized as a dynamic web of axes instead of a stagnant collection of rectangular plots. (Interestingly, lines tend to evoke a visual sense of movement whereas squares and rectangles are usually perceived as the most stable and immobile geometric shapes.)

Another outcome of the reform, as Skinner keenly suggests, was a departure from the cosmology-centered urban planning and the government-imposed zoning system. Replacing the regulated division of urban space, an organic distribution of land use led to the formation of two major districts as Skinner describes in Qing-dynasty Beijing. The business district was usually located off the city center toward or even beyond the city gates to provide convenient transportation for the merchants through the main roads rather than in proximity of residential clusters to favor the consumers. It was typically characterized by high density of two-story shops due to merchants’ desire to lower the expenses of renting or buying land. On the other hand, the gentry/governmental district was centered around prefectural institutions, such as the

66 Skinner, The City in Late Imperial China, 28.
67 Skinner, The City in Late Imperial China, 28-34.
68 Skinner, The City in Late Imperial China, 32.
Figure 2.8 Diagrammatic plan of the partitioning of urban space of Suzhou. Image excerpted from Xu, *the Chinese City*, 76.
city courthouse (yamen 衙门), the Confucian temple and the examination halls, and witnessed a high ratio of residence in the area.\(^{69}\)

Similarly, three major districts emerged in post-reform Suzhou. According to an encyclopedia of 1726, the eastern part of Suzhou had been a home of cotton fields because the

\(^{69}\) Skinner, *The City in Late Imperial China*, 32-33.
high terrain made it unsuitable for rice growing, which demanded abundance of water.

Consequently, eastern Suzhou became a center of textile industry since its residents mostly took spinning and weaving as their means of livelihood.\(^{70}\) Every morning laborers of different skills would wait to be hired at Flower Bridge (Hua Qiao), Guanghua Temple Bridge (Guanghua Si Qiao), and Lianxi Memorial Gateway (Lianxi Fang) in the eastern part of the city.\(^{71}\) As for the rest of the city, the same passage also defines districts of business and gentry:

Within the city walls, [Wu county] governed with Changzhou [county] the area that was divided into east and west parts. The west part was more boisterous than the east part.... The households in the area of Jinchang were all involved in trade and business, whereas its near suburbs were densely occupied by brokers. Within Xu [Gate] and Pan [Gate] were crowded prefectural and county yamen. [Therefore in this area] more yamen clerks resided, and families of letter were concentrated, especially at places in and near the well-regulated neighborhoods.\(^{72}\)

Jinchang refers to the area around Chang Gate at the northern end of the west city wall.

Figure 2.8 clearly demonstrates the distribution of these districts. The business district was at the northwestern section of the city, enjoying proximity to the Grand Canal and the commercial water route of the west city moat. The district of gentry and prefectural officials lay at the southwestern corner while the family-based textile industry located in the east. Figure 2.9 demonstrates the westward migration of provincial structures from the city center. Furthermore, shops scattered around the city; the wealthy and the poor integrated in residency.\(^{73}\) The Temple of Chenghuang in Suzhou was situated at the intersection of all three districts from 1370 onward,

\(^{70}\) *Wudi ji, juan 4.*

\(^{71}\) *Wudi ji, juan 4.*

\(^{72}\) *Wudi ji, juan 4.*

\(^{73}\) Xu, *The Chinese City,* 75-77.
Figure 2.10 The walled enclosure housing the prefectural offices of Suzhou in the Southern Song. Image excerpted from Xu, *The Chinese City*, 143.
reflecting the versatile functions of the Temple.\textsuperscript{74} (Chenghuang is a figure in Daoism who is believed to take charge of all affairs in a city and look after the residents. He could be considered the mythological counterpart of a mayor.)

The southwestward migration of prefectural establishments was made possible by the destruction of the enclosed inner city center during at the dawn of Ming Dynasty (1368 - 1644). As stated previously, a walled rectangular quarter of governmental institutions had sit at the center of Suzhou since the building of the Great City of Helü, and remained there after the fall of the state Wu as Suzhou became a provincial capital. Figure 2.10 is a detailed section of a stone engraving of the city plan in 1229. It presents the structures within the walled prefectural complex. At the end of Yuan dynasty in 1366, a local warlord Zhang Shicheng occupied Suzhou and took the inner enclosure as his palace. After ten months, when defeated by the Ming troops, Zhang had the enclosure burnt down.\textsuperscript{75} The governmental complex was consequently moved to the western past of the city. The original site was left vacant ever since because it had become a taboo after a failed attempt to relocate the governmental offices back there.\textsuperscript{76} In the early 1370s, a local prefect decided to rebuilt his office and residence at the city center because he was unsatisfied with his current ones, which were “cramped and ill-located in a low-lying and damp place”.\textsuperscript{77} His decision was reported to the central Ming government and was considered as “an act suspected of subversive and seditious implications”.\textsuperscript{78} (It was misunderstood as an act

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{74} Xu, \textit{The Chinese City}, 150.
\item \textsuperscript{75} Xu, \textit{The Chinese City}, 144.
\item \textsuperscript{76} Xu, \textit{The Chinese City}, 145-46.
\item \textsuperscript{77} Xu, \textit{The Chinese City}, 144.
\item \textsuperscript{78} Xu, \textit{The Chinese City}, 145.
\end{itemize}
honoring the previous rulers of Yuan dynasty; the incident of Zhang Shicheng also made the city Suzhou especially resentful for the Ming emperor at the time.) The death of this unfortunate prefect was immediately ordered with extreme punishment; he was cut in half at the waist.\textsuperscript{79} In

\textsuperscript{79} Xu, \textit{The Chinese City}, 145-46.
Figure 2.11, the absence of any city infrastructure, such as bridges and gates, in the central enclosure indicate the vacancy of the land. This incident indirectly made possible the adaptation
of the post-reform new urban order in the city center and therefore influenced Suzhou’s cityscape from Ming dynasty onward.
During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the districts within Suzhou had increasingly acquired distinctive characteristics. Xu made a comparison between the business and the gentry districts based on a 1759 scroll painting of Suzhou’s cityscape, Shengshi zisheng tu (Scroll of the Flourishing Times) by Xu Yang. Figure 2.12 and 2.13 are sections of the painting, respectively capturing areas around the provincial examination office and that at the northern part of the
gentry/prefectural district. Xu observed, in the Qing-Dynasty Suzhou as depicted in this
painting, the gentry/prefectural district at the southwest of the city “was characterized by the
relatively high walls of the residential complexes, more spacious courtyards with gardens, plenty

Figure 2.14 Section of a scroll painting depicting Changmen Street in the center of the business
district in Suzhou. Image excerpted from Xu, The
of plants, and the lack of firebreak walls (fanghuoqiang) to separate individual buildings attached to each other, suggesting that houses in this area were not as densely built as some in other parts of the city.”

He also noticed the streets in this district were mostly occupied by women and

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80 Xu, *The Chinese City*, 151.
children at leisure as opposed to working salesmen or laborers. The shops along streets were humble in appearance compared to the residential houses and governmental buildings in the area.

Figure 2.15 Section of a scroll painting depicting business district against outside of the city by the city wall around Xu Gate in Suzhou. Image excerpted from Xu, *The Chinese City*, 156.
Figure 2.15 (Continued) Section of a scroll painting depicting business
district outside of the city by the city wall around Xu Gate in Suzhou. Image

The signs suggest the shops conducted business related to academics and administrative
activities.\textsuperscript{81}

On the others hand, the streets in the business district, as depicted in Figure 2.14 and 2.15, were crowded with traders and flanked by two-story commercial buildings—— and some residential structures—— densely laid against each other with firebreak walls in between. The high land value, beside contributing to the density, also discouraged gardens and plantation to compete for space in the area.\textsuperscript{82} Figure 2.15 captures trading activities against the outer side of the west city wall between Xu and Chang Gates. The city moat lying at the foot of this section of the city wall, depicted as a busy transportation route in the painting, also functioned as part of the Grand Canal, and therefore was a hub of interregional trading. Like in the business district within the city, ornate two-story buildings were separated by firebreak walls. The shops included restaurants, teahouses, pharmacies, silk and cloth stores and bookstores. The painting also captures a stationery shop, a musical instrumental shop, a fortune-telling house, a store selling sundry goods from remote regions and other specialized shops. Transactions took place both in the shops and on the streets.\textsuperscript{83}

In conclusion, Suzhou carries a continuity of its site and overall layout throughout the two thousand and five hundred years since the establishment of the Wu capital Helü dacheng in 514 B.C.. Nevertheless, its spacial arrangement and urban order have undergone profound transformation primarily due to the nationwide urban reform in the mid eighteenth century. The reformed city, benefiting from greater freedom and organism of land use and urban planning,

\textsuperscript{81} Xu, \textit{The Chinese City}, 151.
\textsuperscript{82} Xu, \textit{The Chinese City}, 152.
\textsuperscript{83} Xu, \textit{The Chinese City}, 152-53.
welcomed its climax of economic and cultural prosperity in the imperial era. Fundamentally, the mid-Tang urban reform changed cities’ identity as an embodiment of cosmological symbolism and hegemonic presence into a dynamic mechanism of social, economic and cultural activities. The post-reform Suzhou had started to witness the formation of an urban culture, significantly shaped by its unique double networks of streets and canals. The next chapter investigates some of the most defining elements in Suzhou’s urban culture.
Chapter Three. Suzhou’s Urban Culture in the Imperial Era

This chapter discusses Suzhou’s urban culture in the imperial era, focusing on the period from Tang to Qing dynasty. Instead of an exhaustive survey, an investigation of a few selected aspects of the urban culture is presented in the chapter. These aspects, including Suzhou gardens and local theater, i.e., pingtan and kunqu, are believed to be unique to the city and have profoundly shaped the urban life during the imperial era.

Suzhou Gardens

The great garden designer and theorist Ji Cheng (计成), in his book Yuan ye (The Craft of Gardens 园冶), summarized Chinese garden’s ultimate esthetic pursuit as the human artifact’s infinite resemblance to natural creation. It reflects the ubiquitous Chinese philosophy of humans’s spiritual unification with the universe. More specifically, gardens supposedly create a space for communication with the Nature in the man-built city, which requires from the site of a garden rich natural resources and a graceful landscape. The mild climate and the numerous lakes and mountains in the Suzhou region make it an ideal site for garden building. Second, the garden is a luxury of leisure and thus relies on strong economic foundations. The area around Lake Tai, as aforesaid, has been an affluent region due to its abundant resources—— which has fostered

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84 Ji Cheng, Yuan ye (The Craft of Gardens 园冶), juan 1.
agriculture, aquaculture and handicraft industry—— and convenient location on the major route of commercial transportation in the nation. Especially during Ming and Qing dynasties, Suzhou was arguably the most affluent city in China. The city’s advanced economic status laid foundation for the rise of Suzhou gardens. Third, Suzhou gardens, especially the ones constructed during Ming and Qing, are primarily private gardens whose owners were highly educated scholars with experience of governmental administration. (The imperial officer-selecting system centered on education; erudition of classic historical, literary and philosophical texts and eloquent writing ability to express insights on politics are major criteria in the selecting examination.) During Ming period, records suggest, among the owners of over two hundred gardens in Suzhou, seventy percent was former government officials. Since garden owners found pleasure in constructing and designing their own gardens, it can reasonably be asserted that the demographic nature of garden owners ensured a certain degree of quality in the esthetics of Suzhou gardens. The concentration of scholars in the Wu region was a result of the local tradition of valuing and encouraging education. In a broader sense, the two-and-a-half-millennium continuity of the city’s civilization has cultivated an ancient and rich culture that was capable of nurturing artistic creations.

Suzhou garden started to take shape in as early as the Spring and Autumn period, developed during Han, Tang, Song and Yuan dynasties and eventually reaches maturity in Ming and Qing.

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The Spring and Autumn Period

Chinese gardens in this period were primarily royal gardens constructed in northern China because the political and economic centers in ancient China typically located in the North. According to *Zhou li*, the origin of Chinese gardens dates back to the eleventh or the twelfth century B.C.. They were initially merely spaces for nurturing animals and plants near human habitats, but it soon adapted functions of leisure and entertainment. In *Shi jing*, poems depict the experience of playing, sightseeing and hunting in the garden.

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The rise of gardens in the Wu territory in southern China happened later than that in the north, for the founding of the state Wu was posterior to that of the northern states. Historical records show that the first royal garden in the Wu territory, named Xiajia Hu, was built under the command of the emperor Shou meng who ruled the state from 585 - 561 B.C. The name Xiajia Hu, denoting “the lake for riding in the summer”, helps visualizing the activities and landscape associated with the garden. Wudi ji suggests, indeed, Xiajia Hu was the place where the emperor Shou meng rid [horse/ horse cartridge] and enjoyed the cool weather in the high summer. The garden was located near the west city wall of Wu capital at the time. (It was certainly not Helü dacheng because Shou meng’s reign predates that of Helü, who ordered the building of the Great City of Helü.) Literature and historical records suggest that site of Xiajia Hu was originally a lake with beautiful scenery. and while building the garden, pavilions were constructed on the lake. It is believed to remain as a functioning site for leisure entertainment after the death of Shou meng, since Helü and Chaifu both frequented the garden.

At the height of Wu’s development, the emperors Helü and Fuchai favored and commanded the building of royal gardens as sites of entertainment. Records show the existence of more than thirty royal gardens during the reign of these two emperors. According to Wu Yue chunqiu, Helü governed the state in his palace during autumns and winters and resided in the gardens over spring and summer. Fuchai favored elaborated decoration and use of luxurious

90 Wei Jiazan, Suzhou gudian yuanlin shi, 33.
91 Wudi ji, juan 4.
92 Wei Jiazan, Suzhou gudian yuanlin shi, 41.
93 Wei Jiazan, Suzhou gudian yuanlin shi, 36.
94 Wu Yue chunqiu, juan 3.
materials, such as gold, in his palace. Figure 3.1 is a water ink painting depicting the
landscape at one of the royal gardens in the region of Wu capital.

In general, Chinese gardens in the Spring and Autumn period represent an embryo of
garden design and construction. Some royal gardens were open to civilians for hunting and
touring. Gardens in the Wu territory were mostly locate in near suburbs of the capital and
therefore were generally spacious. Esthetically, the landscape was left largely unaltered in its
naturally wild state with few sign of design or touch of human hand. This differs greatly from the
late-imperial Suzhou gardens’ location within the city, small scale and fine artistic details.

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95 *Wu Yue chunqiu*, juan 3.
Suzhou Pingtan in Post-1949 China

(a section in Chapter 4)

Dating back to Song Dynasty (960-1279 C.E.), Pingtan is a type of oral and musical performing art where artists narrate stories in Suzhou dialect in the form of a monologue or dialogue. Although originated in Suzhou, Pingtan was popular in the broader region of southern Jiangsu province and especially flourished in Shanghai as a result of the city’s commercial and cultural development at the turn of the nineteenth century.

It has been widely agreed that traditional Chinese arts and culture suffered greatly from governmental suppression after the victory of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under Mao’s leadership in 1949, especially during the ten-year-long Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), when artists were prevented from practicing any form of art that was considered to contain feudalist or superstitious elements. Scholars have argued that under a planned economy, the government had replaced the market to become the only patron of Chinese culture. Mark Bender, a specialist in traditional Chinese performance, similarly argues that, during the Maoist era (1949-1976), “political authorities replaced the market as the driving force of Pingtan’s artistic innovation and creativity”.

However, in recent decades scholars have suggested a more complex view of the state of traditional arts and culture in Maoist China. For instance, Jin Jiang claims that the CCP's cultural

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97 Mark Bender, Plum and Bamboo: China’s Suzhou Chantefable Tradition (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2003), 16-18.
reform in the 1950s failed to completely place China's popular culture under state control.\textsuperscript{98} Supporting Jiang’s argument, Qiliang He, in his article “Between Business and Bureaucrats: Pingtan Storytelling in Maoist and Post-Maoist China,” contends that the governmental censorship of popular culture in the 1950s and 60s was “not strictly and efficiently enforced as has been assumed” and “the market continued to play a significant role in shaping China’s popular culture”.\textsuperscript{99}

He suggested four factors that prevented Pingtan from being completely regulated by governmental censorship in post-1949 China. First, Pingtan escaped the cultural suppression to a certain extent. Because it was performed in the Suzhou dialect, the bureaucrats considered it as merely a local art without a national audience and therefore it was incapable of any extensive influence as Beijing Opera had exerted.\textsuperscript{100} In cases where classic Pingtan plays were reported for containing elements of feudalism or superstition, the Ministry of Culture delegated the issue to local authorities, who feared that banning too many classic Pingtan plays might cause financial difficulty for the Pingtan performers. As bureaucrats were facing “a dilemma between political correctness and financial feasibility”, the Pingtan artists initiated the prohibition themselves not only out of political considerations, but also for economic reasons. Pingtan performers were less likely to succeed in their career if they fled mainland China like many writers, filmmakers and Beijing Opera artists did immediately after 1949, for the form of art was unlikely to survive in an environment where the performing language was barely understood. It was therefore natural for


\textsuperscript{99} He, Qiliang. "Between Business and Bureaucrats: Pingtan Storytelling in Maoist and Post-Maoist China" in Modern China 36.3 (2010): 243-68.

\textsuperscript{100} He, "Between Business and Bureaucrats" in Modern China, 246-47.
Pingtan performers, whose art was appreciated in no other places than the Yangzi Delta, to collaborate with political authorities.\footnote{He, "Between Business and Bureaucrats" in Modern China, 246.}

Secondly, in the late 1950s, Pingtan was fortunate to find shelter under an important political figure, who appreciated its artistic value as a form of traditional art. Yun Chen, the vice prime minister at the time, was born in suburban Shanghai and grew up viewing and enjoying Pingtan performances. He returned to the Yangzi Delta region in 1957 and re-acquainted himself to his old hobby of viewing Pingtan. Chen observed the prohibition of classic Pingtan plays and worried that this would likely raise difficulty in the livelihood of old performers. He also openly complained that “storytelling was overly politicized” and Pingtan had become as dry and tedious as “political reports”.\footnote{He, "Between Business and Bureaucrats" in Modern China, 248.}

The third factor has to do with the individualistic nature of Pingtan performing. After 1949, governmental censorship of culture was less effective and strict in practice than in theory. A survey conducted in Shanghai in 1954 showed that there were 139 troupes and more than 7300 performers of fourteen different types of theater in the city. The political authorities only assigned a minority of them to state-owned performing enterprises because the government could not bear the financial burden of collectivizing a large number of performers, each of whom expected stable monthly salaries. Even the collectivized performers resisted being put into state-owned troupes under centralized management, for their governmental patron paid far less than their value on the market. Due to the nature of Pingtan performing, which only required one to three performers, it is profitable for artists to be self-employed since they needn’t share their
earnings with their political colleagues like state-patronized performers had to or with numerous other performers like Beijing Opera artists had to. In other words, besides the government’s financial difficulties and the subsequent sizable market of Pingtan, its individualistic nature also guaranteed self-employed artists to profit more than state-patronized artists.

The government believed that “the threat of Pingtan to socialism resided in classic stories’ perpetuation of feudal and bourgeois values”. As a result, classic stories were to be gradually replaced by new stories about the CCP’s military heroism and political achievements. As pointed out be Yun Chen, the new stories were hardly engaging. In his talks and writings, Chen stressed that Pingtan should be entertaining. He particularly emphasized xuetou (humor; satire) was Pingtan’s key element to entertain the audience. Deprived of humor and satire, Pingtan had lost most of its charm and become a tool for glorifying the military and political accomplishments of CCP. [Qiliang] He points out the similar hardship Pingtan artists and Xiangsheng performers were facing. According to He, the problem was, “to borrow Perry Link's query about xiangsheng, ‘how could a fundamentally satiric art begin to 'praise' things?’ If satire was employed to discredit enemies of the new society, how could one ‘be sure that nobody will be amused for the wrong reasons?’”

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103 He, ”Between Business and Bureaucrats” in Modern China, 249.

104 He, ”Between Business and Bureaucrats” in Modern China, 250.


107 He, ”Between Business and Bureaucrats” in Modern China, 251.
Fortunately, the flexibility in performing Pingtan allowed freedom of expression to a certain degree. According to Mark Bender, Pingtan storytelling is composed of guanzi shu (crisis episodes), nongtang shu (elaboration episodes), and other non-episodic elements, where elaboration episodes were supposed to provide "minor subplots or less polished but entertaining digressions" to support the development of main plots (namely, crisis episodes). Nevertheless, in practice, Pingtan artists used elaboration episodes to address any topic, however irrelevant, that could entertain the viewers. It was also through these improvisational elaboration episodes the artists released their indignation and frustration with Mao’s political order. The bureaucrats failed to detect the mockeries and satires on scripts for the content of elaboration episodes were traditionally not documented on paper. As an ironic result, “the audience,” Perry Link suggested, “was misled to support exactly the things the (new) stories were designed to discredit”.

To sum up, Pingtan’s linguistic locality, fortunate protection by a political figure, individualistic way of organization and censorship-unfriendly nature of performing prevented Pingtan from being completely regulated. Furthermore, the government’s financial difficulties also raised obstacles in fully patronizing and collectivizing Pingtan. Qiliang He argues that “all these factors took shape in the Maoist era, but would gain more weight after the Cultural Revolution to contribute to what Richard Kraus terms that CCP’s ‘inconsistent censorship,’” for after Mao’s death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping loosened the high-pressure regulation on culture.

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108 Bender, *Plum and Bamboo*, 88.

109 He, "Between Business and Bureaucrats" in *Modern China*, 251.


and decentralized authority to regional/local autonomy, which weakened the CCP’s capacity of totalitarian control.\textsuperscript{112}

While the Cultural Revolution has exerted profound impact on traditional Chinese culture, and caused a certain degree of damage to Suzhou Pintan, I suspect that the stagnancy and decline of traditional theatre in contemporary Suzhou can also be attributed to the globalized economy of our modern society.

In 1956, the Chinese government enacted an ordinance that aimed to popularizing Mandarin as the national language. Growing up in Suzhou, I recall speaking Mandarin with my classmates at school as we were taught to do so, whereas my parents’ generation were accustomed to speaking Suzhou dialect in both public and private realms. Nowadays a continuous influx of population has made Suzhou dialect less universal in the city. The city’s economic prosperity and renowned urban livability have attracted population from over the nation—especially from northern Jiangsu Province—seeking employment and education. This demographic change has made an impact on the indigenous population; Suzhou dialect has become unfamiliar for the younger generation since it is less effective than Mandarin in communicating with the general public. In the long term, no longer can be taken for granted is the domestic environment for listening to, if not speaking, Suzhou dialect where both parents are native speakers. The demographic diversity raises the possibility of cross-linguistic region marriage and thus possibly reduces the chance of being immersed in a Suzhou dialect-speaking environment for future generations.

\textsuperscript{112} He, “Between Business and Bureaucrats” in Modern China, 246, 52.
This unfamiliarity with the dialect is indeed threatening because, as aforesaid, the language is the foundation of Suzhou’s local performing arts. It is thus reasonable to draw connection between the decline of traditional theatre and the decreasing usage of Suzhou dialect in daily life.