Lexical Features of Yang Mingkun’s Performance Language

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Three transcribed versions of the Yangzhou storytelling of Pi Wu lazi 皮五辣子 (Rogue Pi Wu) describe how Pu Lin 蒲琳 (fl. 1780), Yu Youchun 余又春 (1919-1995), and Yang Mingkun 楊明坤 (1949-) tell the story of Pi Wu in performance (Wang Yingzhi 王颖芝, 1996; Wang Cheng 王澄, et al., 1985; Yin Boda 殷伯達, et al., 2015).1 The taoyu 套语 (stock phrases or setting phrases) and verses employed by Pu Lin in his oral performance have been transcribed to create the atmosphere of a storytelling event (Vibeke Børdahl, 2013, pp. 113-130, 172, 333).2 In contrast to Pu’s version, the transcribed texts of Yu and Yang are simple, as there are more stock phrases and verses applied to the Yangzhou pinghua in Pu’s version than in the other two versions combined. Moreover, the differences in the use of colloquial words between the three versions are considerable. Yang Mingkun’s narrative of Rogue Pi Wu relies on the lexicon of the Yangzhou dialect; the Yangzhou dialect acts as a vital comedic element in Yang’s presentation. Why does his version demonstrate a specific linguistic style of expression among the three transcribed texts? In this article, I will examine the differences in wording among the three texts and explore the comedic elements in Yang’s presentation with a view to illustrating why Yang’s narration of the story of Pi Wu sounds colloquial and why Yang uses the current style of language expression. Firstly, I will explore the differences in the application of stock phrases, verses, and colloquial words among the three texts. Then, I will explore why Yang relies on the lexicon of the Yangzhou dialect when reciting the story of Pi Wu. Next, I will explore the comedic elements applied by Yang Mingkun during his performance. Finally, I will argue that Yang has developed a special style in line with the expectations and requirements of the audience.

Keywords: Yangzhou storytelling, performance language, lexical features, comedic elements

Diction

Chinese dialects belong to the “spoken language” and have no corresponding written forms, and the Yangzhou dialect is no exception. Fortunately, in the 21st century, with the development of microcomputer composition techniques that have taken over from conventional typesetting, it is now possible to transcribe oral speech in dialects into written form. The text of Yang’s repertoire was transcribed and published in 2015, and his performance speech was recorded in the Yangzhou dialect.

Owing to undeveloped publishing techniques, many dialect words in Pu’s and Yu’s repertoires might have been replaced by literary words in the process of transcription. In this circumstance, the wording styles in the two texts that were transcribed and published in the Qing dynasty and in 1985, respectively, to some extent,
have deviated from the originals. In the present time, each phonetic realization in the local topolects can find a corresponding written Chinese character by following two methods. Firstly, one can borrow the characters applied in Standard Mandarin. For example, in the text of Yang, many homophones are borrowed from Standard Mandarin, such as nong 嗲. 嗲 is realized as [noŋ] in Standard Mandarin, meaning “garrulous”; it is realized as [lɔŋ], meaning “passable”, by Yang according to the [n-] and [l-] distribution rule in the Yangzhou dialect. Secondly, new Chinese characters are coined to express phonetic realizations in other dialects. For example, gang 口冈 is a newly created Chinese character applied in Yang’s transcribed text to mean “garrulous”.

However, undeveloped publishing techniques cannot explain the usage of all literary words in the transcribed texts. As Børðahl points out, literary words and taoyu or “stock phrases or setting phrases” and other rhetorical devices were used to create the so-called “storyteller manner” of narration by the Ming and Qing authors when writing fiction (Børðahl, 1997, p. 19). Pu Lin’s repertoire was first transcribed into text and published under the title Pure-Wind Dyke during the Qing dynasty. Although quantities of literary words and stock phrases were identified in this text, Pu might not have used all of them or perhaps used some of them. However, contemporary editors inserted all of them or some of them into the text, aiming to stimulate or highlight the atmosphere of a storytelling event when transcribing Pu’s repertoire into text. On the other hand, Pu might have applied all literary words and setting phrases in his recitation, because the storyteller decides the wording in any performance. In an interview in 2016, Yang stated, “My master’s repertoire is in literary style and mine [is] in colloquial style”.3 Yu Youchun, Yang’s master, preferred to use literary words in his performance. Yang also said, “If my audience members are highly educated, I will choose more literary words in the performance”. Because this article focuses only on the lexical features of Yang Mingkun’s performance speech, I limit my study to the performance wording of Yang Mīngkūn. I will not examine whether or not Pu Lin applied literary words or setting phrases in his performance.

The three transcribed texts show how Pu Lin, Yu Youchun, and Yang Mingkun dealt with storytelling stock phrases, verses, and colloquial words in their performances. Only a few taoyu are identified in Yang’s transcribed text. In one interview, he said, “I do not recite a poem at the beginning of my recitation. I like to tell my story directly”. When performing, Yang sometimes bangs his desk with a wooden block to catch the attention of his audience. Conventionally, a Yangzhou pinghua storyteller reads a poem before telling the story in order to attract the audience’s attention; the poem is introduced by the setting phrase shiyue 詩曰, meaning “the poem says”. In the transcribed text of Yang, introductory verses with the setting phrase shiyue are absent. In contrast to Yang, Pu Lin starts with introductory verses. His introductory poem is a heptasyllabic poem of four lines.

In the transcribed text of Yang’s repertoire, only the folk wisdom marker sushuo 俗説 (folk saying goes) is identified. Sushuo is one of the many stock phrases in a storytelling narrative. In contrast to Yang’s simple style, narrative transition phrases, such as huashuo 話説 (the story goes), zaiyan 再言 (meanwhile, let’s tell) or zaishuo 再説 (meanwhile, let’s tell), and sushuo, frequently appear in the transcribed text of Pu Lin’s repertoire. In addition, at the end of each narrative episode, Pu ends with the stock phrase qieting xiahui fenjie 且聽下回分解 (please listen to the explanation in the next round). In the transcribed text of Yu, pre-verse

3 Interview with Yang Mingkun, 18 April 2016.
4 Interview with Yang Mingkun, 18 April 2016.
phrases *zhenshi* 真是 (truly), *youshuoshi* 又説是 (it is also said as), and *haishuoshi* 還説是 (it is also said as) are identified. For example, Yu uses three pre-verse phrases successively to narrate three verses. His narrative is as follows:

真正 (truly):

[...]

又説是 (it is also said as):

[...]

還説是 (it is also said as):

[...] (Wang et al., 1985, p. 106)

Many of the stock phrases mentioned above are absent from Yang’s performance narrative. As he explains, “I think, we storytellers should keep up with the times”\(^5\). Indeed, traditional storytelling narrative formulas such as the stock phrases do not match the language acquisition of the modern audience, because they are simply adopted from classical Chinese works.

Owing to the development of the Yangzhou dialect, primarily from the aspect of phonetic realization over the past 50 years, Yang does not cite as many verses as Yu. In fact, Yang retains some verses initially created by Pu by converting them to prose. Pu’s verses and Yang’s prose are shown in Table 1 (Wang et al., 1996, p. 47; Yin et al., 2015, p. 158):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pu’s verses</th>
<th>Yang’s prose</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>落地無聲是蓮蓬,</td>
<td>落地無聲.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>四足能行是個兔.</td>
<td>四條腿跑的是只兔.</td>
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</table>

| 所以能行是個兔. | 四條腿跑的是只兔. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pu’s verses</th>
<th>Yang’s prose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>落地一場霧。</td>
<td>落地一場霧。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>天上下的霧，落到地上可是靜悄悄的?沒得聲音哎，落地無聲。</td>
<td>落到地上可是靜悄悄的?没得聲音哎，落地無聲。</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 還是四條腿跑的動物?兔子,霧,順音. | 落到地上可是靜悄悄的?没得聲音哎，落地無聲。 |

| Lokdi wusheng shi lianpeng, | Luodi yichang wu, tianshang xia de wu, luo dao dishang keshi jing qiaoqiao de? Meide shengyin ai, luodi wu sheng. |
| sizu nengxing shi ge tu. | Si tiao tui pao de shi zhi tu, tuzi bushi si tiao tui pao de dongwu? Tuzi, wu, shunyin. |
| What silently falls to the ground is fog. | What falls to the ground is fog. The fog, falling from the sky, touches the ground silently, doesn’t it? Silently! When touching the ground, it is silent. |
| What walks with four feet is a rabbit. | What walks with four legs is a rabbit. A rabbit is an animal walking with its four legs, isn’t it? Tui (rabbit) and wu (fog) rhyme. |

Pu’s verses might have enjoyed popularity in Qing Yangzhou, but this is not the case in the present time, as not all contemporary audiences enjoy verses or understand their meaning. Taking the audience’s tradition of spoken language into consideration, Yang expands the verses into prose by including new explanations for them. Otherwise, the audience would be confused when listening to verses.

Moreover, the verses created by Pu Lin were realized in the old Yangzhou dialect, which was popular in Yangzhou city during the Qing period. However, his verses do not rhyme in the modern Yangzhou dialect. For example, four lines from the game speech *sazhang* 撒帳 by Pu are as follows:

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\(^5\) Interview with Yang Mingkun, 18 April 2016.
撒帳撒帳北，名花自是開金穀。賓人休得枉垂涎，刺蝟想吃天鵝肉。
Sazhangsazhang (interjection) in the north, the brilliant flowers bloomed in the golden blooms. Visitors shall not drool over a swan; as does a hedgehog yearn to have its meat. (Wang et al., 1996, p. 8)

For the verses to follow the rules of antithetical parallelism, the syllables bei 北, gu 穀, and rou 肉 (shown above in bold type) share the same rhyme [ɤ˧˥] with the entering tone. Yang realizes bei and gu as [pˀɤ˧˥] and [kˀɤ˧˥], respectively, but he realizes rou as [lɿɯ̍] without the entering tone. The word rou has lost its entering tone in the present Yangzhou dialect; it was pronounced [lɿɤ˧˥] in the Qing period, but it is now pronounced [lɿɯ̍] (Lu Qin 陸琴, 2003, p. 24). As a result, Pu Lin was able to read the verses in rhyme, but Yang cannot. Yang cannot incorporate this verse into his performance owing to the differences between the old and the modern Yangzhou dialects.

On reading the text transcribed from Yang Mingkun’s repertoire, I find that his narrative is colloquial. The transcribed text records all the dialect words spoken by Yang in his performance, including slang words, folk sayings, interjections, and onomatopoeia. Furthermore, over 1,300 dialect words are noted in the latest interpretation by the editor. Every time when I read Yang’s text, I will feel as though I were listening to him reciting the story. Unlike Yang, Pu and Yu applied fewer dialect words. Moreover, in the transcribed text of Pu, dialect words have no explanation; in the text of Yu, 118 words are supplemented with an explanation. The numbers of the dialect words noted and explained in the three texts are listed in Table 2:

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<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>1,300</td>
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Of the Yangzhou dialect words in Yu’s and Yang’s versions, 1,418 are not identified in Pu’s. The text of Pure-Wind Dyke reprinted in 1996 indicates to me that it is written in a literary style as seen in a contemporary fictional work. Most of the words in this version, for example, buke 不可 (must not), zu 足 (foot), and mu 目 (eye), are not included in the lexicon of Yangzhou dialect. These three words are commonly seen in the lexicon of classical Chinese; they are expressed as buxing 不行, jiao 腳, and yanjing 眼睛 in the Yangzhou dialect, respectively. Although a few Yangzhou dialect words appear from time to time, they do not interrupt the flow of the text. In contrast to Pu’s literary style, Yu’s wording is much more colloquial. Most of the words in the transcribed text of Rogue Pi Wu, published in 1985, are the words that can be read as either the literary word or the colloquial word—literary/colloquial word (Table 3).
Table 3

<table>
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<th>Words in the Three Texts</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Pu</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>L_fuyou 复又 (again)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L_ciri 次日 (the next day)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L_xun 塑 (look for)</td>
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<tr>
<td>L_jingmian 淨面 (wash face)</td>
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Notes. L: literary words, C: colloquial words, L/C: literary/colloquial words.

As seen in Table 3, to express “the next day”, Pu uses the literary word *ciri*; Yu and Yang use *di er tian*, which is commonly seen in the colloquial lexicons of both the Yangzhou dialect and literary works. In addition, Yang adopts many Yangzhou dialect words that are absent from the text of Yu. For example, *jiezhu* 接住, *nong* 嚣, *Yalibuyaxia* 雅裡不雅瑕, and *guaiquailongdidong* 乖乖隆地咚 found in Yang’s transcribed text are commonly seen in the lexicon of the Yangzhou dialect, but they are absent from Yu’s text.

The storyteller decides the wording in any performance. Yu Youchun adopts more colloquial words than Pu. However, his repertoire still sounds literary in form when compared with Yang’s. As seen in Tables 2-3, Yu uses many literary words. In addition, he “produces” literary words. For example, the introduction to Pi Wu in Yu’s and Yang’s narratives is presented below (Table 4) (Wang et al., 1985, p. 7; Yin et al., 2015, p. 24):

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction to Pi Wu</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yu</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>頭戴通天小帽, 身穿百空短袍,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>吊腳裤子半截腰, 斷底鞋生及套。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>日間街坊詐詐, 夜來身棲破廟,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>人人見他拔腿跑, 皮五辣是尊號。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toudai tongtian xiaomao, shenchuan baikong duan’ao,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diaojiao kuizi banjieyou, duandi xieqian jitaos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rijian jiefang ezha, yelai shenxi pomiaos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>renren jianta batuipao, piwula shi zunhao.</td>
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Wearing a hat without the top, dressed in a short robe with a hundred holes in it, skinny legs wearing short trousers revealing half the waist, the shoes have no soles as if they were only covers.

Bullied the neighbours in daytime, sleeping in a broken temple at night, people ran away immediately when seeing him, Rogue Pi Wu is his honorific title.
When introducing the protagonist Pi Wu, both Yu and Yang apply a short “poem”. At first glance, the first four lines of both poems appear to be very similar. However, in terms of wording and rhyme, Yu’s version is closer to a poetic form. Yu omits the suffix -zi in laizi. The suffix -zi is a common symbol in the Yangzhou dialect. Yu omits this to transform the dialect word laizi to la, aiming to simulate a literary word. Unlike Yu, Yang uses present-day dialect words in his poem, such as du jiujiu 賭舅舅 (Gamble Uncle) and ewang dadi 誠王大帝 (king of rogues). In addition, in Yu’s version, the last syllable of each sentence, except for the fifth, shares the same rhyme [ɔ]. In contrast, in Yang’s version, only the last syllables of the even-number line share the same rhyme [i].

Based on the examination above, I find that Yang changes his language expression in many ways to adapt to the requirements of the audience and developments in the Yangzhou dialect. As a result, the three transcribed texts based on the three storytellers’ repertoires have considerable differences, ranging from stock phrases and verses to colloquial words. The text transcribed from Pu Lin’s repertoire is literary, as stock phrases, verses, and literary words are used frequently. In contrast to Pu’s text, Yang’s text uses few stock phrases and verses but numerous colloquial words. Compared with Yang’s colloquial style, Yu’s is close to a literary style as he prefers to use more words that are “literary/colloquial words”. Yang’s text is reflective of the language used in contemporary Yangzhou.

Nong, Yalibuyaxia, Guaiguailongdidong, and Huolodo

Nong, Yalibuyaxia, guaiguailongdidong, and huolodo豁碌篤 (onomatopoeia: sound of closing a door or a drawer) are the four words frequently applied by Yang when he tells the story of Pi Wu. These terms are also used in the daily conversations of ordinary Yangzhou people today. In this section, I will explore why Yang Mingkun relies on the Yangzhou dialect when reciting the story of Pi Wu.

The Yangzhou dialect can accurately describe the daily lives of Yangzhou people. In Yang’s version of the story, there are more than 400 figures who are portrayed as Yangzhou locals; in a way, the Yangzhou dialect is the best tool for him to tell the story from their point of view. In the Yangzhou dialect, nong噥 refers to a situation in which someone uses something he does not like or adapts to the situation that does not meet his requirements (Li, Wang, & Huang, 1996, p. 342). When Pi Wu lives in poverty as a rogue, his life attitude is nong. Due to his unfortunate fate, he was rejected by his social circle when he was a teenager. Thus, he has no opportunity to change his life. He wanders the streets every day, makes a living through his knavish conduct, and indulges in gambling. He is not satisfied with his life and is unhappy with many things around him.

Nong is usually associated with manman慢慢 (slowly), chaoqian朝前 (moving forward), and yitianian一天天 (day by day). Manman nong means to “put up with something”, delivering a sense of “being helpless”. For example, one day, Pi Wu and Mama Zhang greet each other in the street. Pi Wu says, “You must have made a big fortune! I have not seen you for a few days. You’ve got a big fortune”. Mama Zhang responds and says, “How could I have got a big fortune? I make a living by selling flowers. How poor I am! Manman nong慢慢噥 (I muddle through my life slowly)!” (Yin et al., 2015, p. 26). Mama Zhang is a peddler, selling fresh flowers in pre-modern Yangzhou; her small business brings her only a small profit. Manman nong indicates that her life is not easy, and she has no choice but to carry on as she is. Another example goes like this:

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6 In the Yangzhou fangyan cidian, nong is written as “多農” by the editor.
when Pi Wu argues with Sun Xiaogu because he does not believe her, Xiaogu is sad and says to herself, “Since I got married to you, I have lived a bad life. I do not complain about it! I squeeze my nose, control my bad emotion, and *genzhun manman nong* 跟著你慢慢嚙” (Yin et al., 2015, p. 274). In this sentence, *manman nong* suggests that Xiaogu has no choice but to live with Pi Wu because she is his wife.

When *nong* is associated with *shenghuo 生活* (live; life), the phrase *nong shenghuo or shenghuo nongxialai 生活嚙下來* refers to a person who makes no effort to seek progress in his life. In reality, the poor have no option but to stay in the same place because they do not have the opportunity or money to change their lives. As a result, they seem to make no effort in their lives. *Nong shenghuo* appropriately describes their situation. For example, when Pi Wu sees his neighbour Ni Si, he says to himself,

Ni Si sells a load of vegetables each day; the profit he gets from the small business is enough for a day’s expenses for his three-member family. *Yitian de shenghuo jiu nong xialiale 一天的生活就嚙下來了* (They just live through a day). (Yin et al., 2015, p. 278)

It seems that Ni Si does nothing to improve his life as he does nothing but sell vegetables every day. However, to Ni Si, selling vegetables is the only thing he can do to make a living. The phrase *shenghuo jiu nong xialiale* effectively reflects the situation of Ni Si.

The word *tian* 天 (day) is associated with *life*; *yitian tian rizi 一天天嚙日子* means “struggle to live day by day”, suggesting a hard life. *Chaoqian* means “face forward”; *chaoqian nong* suggests that life is laborious, hope lying ahead, though. In the story, a woman wants to purchase medicine for her dying husband; she says to Pi Wu, “If he is cured, *women fuqi haineng chaoqian nongnong* 我們夫妻還能朝前嚙嚙 (My husband and I may still live a laborious life but with some hope)” (Yin et al., 2015, p. 308). She means that she still has hope in her life when she lives with her husband, even though they are in poverty; when she lives alone, her life stops moving. Pi Wu understands her situation by the word *chaoqian nongnong*, and thus decides to play tricks on Jin Erpang to obtain money for the woman.

*Yalibuyaxia* is a word commonly found in the lexicon of the Yangzhou dialect, derived from another Yangzhou dialect word *ya*. When transcribed into written form, *ya* 雅 borrows the character *ya* 雅 from Standard Chinese. In Standard Chinese, *ya* 雅 is an adjective, meaning “elegance”. However, the application of *ya* in the Yangzhou dialect has no relationship with “elegance”. In the Yangzhou dialect, *ya* becomes a verb, meaning “enjoy”, or an adjective, meaning “comfortable”. Acting as an adjective, the commonly spoken term associated with *ya* is *yaxia* 雅瑕. In the story, Ni Si has never ridden a sedan chair before. When describing his first experience of sitting on it, he says, “*chege man yaxia de* 這個蠻雅瑕的 (This is very cozy). It also has handrails”. When the sedan chair arrives at the destination, he does not want to get off as he is enjoying the feeling of sitting on it. As Pi Wu says, “*ta zheng yazhu ne* 他正雅住呢 (he is enjoying the feeling of sitting on the sedan chair)” (Yin et al., 2015, pp. 604-605).

*Xiaoya 小雅* refers to activities that involve enjoying the beauty of ordinary daily life. This includes experiences such as each delicious food and relaxing. These daily life experiences are not as refined as appreciating calligraphy, paintings, or literary and musical works. However, Yangzhou people think of the experiences of enjoying delicious food and relaxing as the most interesting things in their lives. Thus, they attach *xia* 小 (small; little) to the verb *ya*. *Xiaoya* suggests that Yangzhou people appreciate the beauty in their daily lives. For example, a man invites Pi Wu to go out to enjoy morning tea; he says, “Old Wu, go have fun with me! […] There are many steamed rice cakes there, *dao nakuai xiaoyaxiazi 到那塊小雅下子* (go
there to enjoy delicious rice cakes), and then have a cup of tea” (Yin et al., 2015, p. 50). In this sentence, xiaoya refers to the joy of having steamed rice cakes.

When yaxia is applied in the structure “xxx li 裡 bu 不 xxx”, the interesting word yalibuuyaxia emerges, referring to something or someone as beautiful but not necessarily graceful (Ming Guang, 2015, p. 184). Sun Qiangshi is beautiful, but her standing posture and speaking tone are rather common. Thus, Yang Mingkun uses this term to describe her lack of manners. In normal circumstances, yalibuuyaxia is abbreviated as bu yaxia. Pi Wu takes a bath at the Baiyutang Public Bath House the day before his wedding. He plans to steal a suit coat from a rich man who takes a bath there. When he sees a coat belonging to an old man, he says to himself, “The style of the coat is out of date. It is not suitable for me! Ba wo jiehun chuangilai buyaxia 把我結婚穿起來不雅瑕 (Wearing it on the wedding ceremony is not graceful)” (Yin et al., 2015, p. 103). In this sentence, buyaxia means “not graceful”. Interestingly, the second meaning of yaxia emerges partly from sharing the lexical meaning of Yalibuuyaxia, which is then used to refer to all improper speech and conduct (Li, et al., 1996, p. 84).\(^7\)

Interjections act as comic relief in Yang’s narrative, as well as in the daily talk of Yangzhou people. Guai guai long didong is one example of this. It is a five-syllable interjection, delivering a sense of astonishment. The tones of the five syllables are shown as 1st 1st 2nd neutral tone 1st. By referring to sisheng 四聲 (four traditional Chinese syllable types), all five syllables are pronounced with pingsheng 平聲 (level tone). Generally, each interjection in the Yangzhou dialect contains zesheng 仄聲 (oblique tone), because zesheng syllables efficiently deliver a sense of astonishment, happiness, and anger. The tone difference between guai guai long didong and other interjections means that the former is given the label of the Yangzhou dialect. Guai guai long didong is abbreviated to guai guai 乖乖. Repetition of guai guai sounds interesting. For example, when Pi Wu is surprised to see his niece, he says, “guai guai guai guai guaiguai, guai guai, it’s you!” (Yin et al., 2015, p. 743). Five guai guai used in succession have no lexical meaning, but they successfully suggest Pi Wu’s astonishment at seeing his niece. The interjection pochi gui 潑嗤鬼 is also a comical term, likened to guai guai long didong, but with a negative connotation. Mama Zhang uses this term in her daily conversation with Pi Wu, as the latter often says improper things to her.

Also, onomatopoeia serves as comic relief in Yang’s narrative, as well as in the daily speech in Yangzhou. In conversation, Yangzhou people are fond of adopting onomatopoeia to create a sense of ease. For example, “Huo lo do, she closes the door. Huo lo do, Mama Zhang opens the closet. Huo long dong 呼隆咚 (sound of closing the door of the house or cabinet), she covers the small cabinet” (Yin et al., 2015, p. 37). The two onomatopoeia huo lo do and huo long dong enhance the liveliness of an otherwise simple action. Another example is the use of the onomatopoeia zhiga 吱嘎 to mimic the sound of a moving sedan chair. “Zhi ga zhi ga zhi ga zhiga, he is out of the city. Zhi ga zhi ga zhi ga zhiga, he arrives at a street out of the city. Zhi ga zhi ga zhi ga zhiga, he is in the countryside” (Yin et al., 2015, p. 714). In this sentence, not only does zhi ga zhi ga zhi ga zhiga describe the sound of a moving sedan chair but it also adds a sense of humour for the audience.

The daily lives of the Yangzhou people are reflected in the Yangzhou dialect; interjections and onomatopoeia act as comic relief in daily speech. Thus, the Yangzhou dialect plays a vital role in Yang Mingkun’s recitation. He successfully portrays around 400 figures in the story of Pi Wu by depicting their daily lives and conversations, as well as delivering a sense of humour to his audience through the Yangzhou dialect. This is because he is aware that only the Yangzhou dialect can best describe the story of the Yangzhou people.

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\(^7\) In the Yangzhou fangyan cidian, yaxia is written as “丫霞” or “雅霞”.
Comedic Elements

Xue 嚧, or xuetou 嚧頭, refers to humorous speech or activities (Dictionary Editorial Office, Institute of Language, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 1998, p. 1430). Shuo 說 (telling), xue (quipping), tan 弹 (plucking musical instruments), and chang 唱 (singing) are the four skills in Suzhou pingtan 蘇州評彈 (Suzhou storytelling and ballad singing) performance. As the saying about Suzhou pingtan goes, “Quips are treasures in storytelling”, which suggests the importance of humour and witty remarks in Suzhou singing and storytelling. This saying also applies to Yang Mingkun’s performance. In this section, I will focus on the comedic elements in the Yang Mingkun’s performance speech. Other characteristics, including Yang’s facial expressions and mouth acrobatics concerning comedic elements, will be discussed in my other articles.

Yang’s narration of the story of Pi Wu is filled with comedic elements, because he wants his audiences to feel at ease and happy when watching his performance. He does not try to please the audience with crude jokes or vulgar language. Yang Mingkun knows that his audiences consist mostly of Yangzhou people and “that Yangzhou pinghua will lose vitality when it leaves its birth place”. Rapport between the performer and the audience contributes significantly to a successful performance. Thus, Yang builds his humorous narrative on the shared mentality that centres upon the Yangzhou dialect, daily life experiences, and even what the people have learned throughout their lives. Yang told me about a failure he has experienced in his performance career. This happened in Beijing in 1985 when he was nominated as one of the 10 most outstanding artists in China. For this particular performance, nearly all of the audience members were native speakers of Northern dialects; they did not laugh as they listened to his comical presentation because they did not understand the Yangzhou dialect, having never lived in Yangzhou, and they did not share the same psychology as Yangzhou people. For these reasons, they were not able to understand the punch lines Yang delivered.

The Yangzhou dialect words act as a vital comedic element in the humorous presentation narrated by Yang Mingkun. I have listened to Yang performing the story of Pi Wu many times and I am always impressed by his vivid and comical descriptions. He wants the audience to feel, watch, and even taste what he is doing in his performance. He prefers to narrate the story from the stance of the characters in the story, not from that of an omniscient narrator. His real-life expressions of the characters’ speech and thoughts satisfy the audience’s curiosity. For example, Units 31-32, “Sticky rice cakes are fragrant and delicious” and “Boss Wang is cheated”, contain an impressive depiction of the shape and taste of the sticky rice cake served in the shop. Yang does not directly describe how delicious and beautiful the rice cakes are from the narrator’s point of view, instead, he portrays the rice cakes’ features through a conversation between Pi Wu and Wang, the owner of a rice cake shop. A few lines from their conversation are given below (W: Wang, P: Pi Wu):

W: Have a taste! Tell us about their taste.

P: The rice cake made in your shop must taste good.

W: Taste it! Do not comment on them before tasting.

P: OK! It is sweet! Sweet bean paste! It is my favourite! Oh, it is hot! Good! Very sweet! This one, stuffed with vegetables, guaiguai, also has lots of shrimp and shrimp eggs. Yummy! The vegetables are green. Good! Guagua jiao 呱呱叫 (excellent)! Guaiguai! It is with sweet sesame paste and sweet-scented osmanthus! Tastes good! This one with

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8 Interview with Yang Mingkun, 18 April 2016.
9 Interview with Yang Mingkun, 18 April 2016.
cubed pork fat. Guaiguai! Not bad! This one with nuts! Good! Guaiguai! Another one is with stuffing as big as a pork ball. Guaiguai! The excellent aroma is filling my mouth now! (Yin et al., 2015, p. 255)

In the above dialogue, the different types of rice cake are presented to the audience simply and directly through Pi Wu’s narration of the tasting experience. Pi Wu can only specify the stuffing, temperature, and shape of the rice cake, as he is a rogue and cannot describe his taste experience with sophisticated words. Considering Pi’s life experience and educational background, Yang organizes the speech of Pi Wu with just a few nouns and adjectives and two funny interjections that are commonly used by ordinary Yangzhou people. To generate the humorous tenor, in the brief comment on the rice cakes by Pi, the interjection guaiguai/guaguajiao is used five times.

Unlike Yang’s narrative style, Pu directly describes the smell and taste of the rice cakes in literary words by applying the rhetoric device of exaggeration, acting as an omniscience narrator. The lines describing the rice cake in the text of Pu Lin are given below: “The smell of sticky rice cake directs one to the twelfth floor from the ground. Rice cakes not only satisfy people’s taste but are also good for their health; they stimulate people’s appetites, too” (Wang et al., 1996, p. 49).

The imagery of the sticky rice cake constructed by Pu is not as explicit as that created by Yang. Pu’s narrative delivers little information about the sticky rice cakes to the audience, nor does it create a sense of humour.

Yang’s depiction of his characters may appear simple, but it is refined by the application of dialect words. He shapes the characters through their appearance, conduct, and speech; his characterization is vernacular and comical. For example, Sun Qiangshi is an evil and vicious woman. The elderly Yang Pan is a hooligan living in the Yang Family Village; he always receives small favours from others by sweet talking or promising to help ordinary people solve their problems by talking to county officials. The depiction of these two figures by Yang Mingkun is as follows:

When describing Sun Qiangshi, Yang applies the dialect words yalibuyaxia and qu gege 趣咯咯 (coquettish), shown in the bold type above. Generally, the two words are applied with caution because they indicate a sardonic attitude towards women. Sun Qiangshi is a woman who has killed her husband and buried his body in the kitchen. She did this in order to marry her step-son. She is always flamboyantly dressed, even when devising evil plans. In addition, her standing posture at the door is linked to that of a woman always seeking adventures and an indication that she is not a person of good virtue. These two dialectical words generate

孙强氏就朝门口一站。她站在那裡, 雅裡不雅瑕的。什麼樣子? 打扮得花枝招展的, 頭上簪環首飾戴著, 手巾捏兒往胳肢窩裡一夾, 手朝腰眼上一叉, 蘭花指頭一豎, 小指甲往牙縫裡一鬥, 趣格格的。

模样还不错, 个头高高的。穿了件大褂子, 一手拎住大褂子一角, 一手大拇指遛遛的, 嘴上胡子硬茬茬的, 嘴唇油光光的, 好像才吃过喝过, 脸上非常得意的笑, 笑嘻嘻的。

Sun Qiangshi stands at the door. She looks beautiful standing there. What does she look like? She is flamboyantly dressed, wearing hairpins on her head and jewellery. She holds a handkerchief under her armpit and puts her arm on her hip. She does a hand gesture with her thumb and middle finger joined, using her small nails to pick at her teeth, throwing a coquettish look.

He looks pretty good. He is tall, dressed in a large coat, with one corner in hand. He cocks his thumb in the other. His beard is stiff; his oily lips glisten as if he just came back from a feast. Smiling with great satisfaction, he grins from ear to ear. (Yin et al., 2015, pp. 11, 27)

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a type of humour, as they not only indicate that Sun is beautiful but also emphasize her odd dressing style and standing posture. When listening to the short passage about Sun, the audience members who understand the Yangzhou dialect will grasp Yang’s intention, as well as picturing Sun’s appearance and gestures vividly in their minds.

Similarly, Yang Mingkun shapes Yang Pan using dialect words, with a focus on his subtle actions. As shown in the bold type above, he successively applies three tri-syllabic words: *yìng chā chā* 硬茬茬 (stiff), *yóu guāng guāng* 油光光 (glistening with oil), and *xiào xī xī* 笑嘻嘻 (grins from ear to ear) to describe the funny appearance of Yang Pan. The lifted thumb, oily lips that glisten and facial expressions while walking suggest that Yang Pan is an outgoing man. Additionally, the name Yang Pan itself is a joke, as it shares phonetic similarity with the dialect word *yangpan* 洋槃 (a mouther).

Dialect words have a further significant role in Yang’s narrative. For example, he takes advantage of the four expressions of “death” in the Yangzhou dialect to construct a facetious conversation between Pi Wu and a young lady who is going to jump into a river. The conversation is given below (P: Pi Wu, Y: Young lady):

P: 我来问你啊，你家大舅舅呢？
Y: 大舅舅，大舅舅死了。
P: 你家二舅舅呢？
Y: 二舅舅，二舅舅翘了辫子了。
P: 三舅舅呢？
Y: 三舅舅捺了腿了。
P: 四舅舅呢？
Y: 四舅舅嘎咕吃汤饭了。

P: Let me ask you, how is your eldest uncle?
Y: My eldest uncle, he is dead.

Phrases such as *qiao le bianzi* 翘了辫子, *na le tui* 捺了腿, and *gagu chi tangfan* 嘎咕吃汤饭 in the Yangzhou dialect mean *si* or “death”/“to die”. Native speakers will not use these terms, except when they wish to express an explicitly playful attitude to the dead. Usually, they prefer using literary words or euphemisms such as *qushi* 去世 (left the world) or *zoule* 走了(gone) to indicate the death of an acquaintance or family member as a sign of respect for the dead. However, the young lady applies them consecutively to refer to the
Yang Mingkun uses the Yangzhou dialect to create funny conversations, as per Chinese storyteller parlance, *wuqiao bu chengshu* (無巧不成書) (no chance no story). Including *si*, there are four expressions denoting “death” in the Yangzhou dialect. Coincidentally, the young lady has four uncles and they all are dead; Pi Wu becomes her fifth uncle, matching his name Pi Wu or the fifth Pi perfectly. Yang ingeniously creates this comedic conversation by centering on Pi Wu. Local audience members can easily catch the humour in the conversation, as they completely understand the usage of the alternative expressions of death.

As mentioned earlier, the Yangzhou dialect and local traditions are the sources of inspiration for Yang’s fictional creation. This is also the case for his comedic expressions. For example, in the Yangzhou dialect, *pāo* 跑 means “walk” when pronounced with the second tone and “run (away)” with the third. Yang takes advantage of this homograph in creating the narrative of Unit 49, “Run Away With a Pair of Shoes”. As indicated in the headnote, this unit elaborates on how Pi Wu obtains a pair of new shoes through his trickery. The most interesting part of the narrative on this event is the conversation between Pi Wu and the owner of the shoe store. It reads as follows (W: Wang, P: Pi Wu):

W: Walk [跑 means “to walk” when realized as *páo* in the Yangzhou dialect!] You will feel better when walking in the new shoes. Walk! Walk! Walk faster!

P: OK! You ask me to run away [跑 means “to run away” when realized as *páo* in the Yangzhou dialect], why not! *Dido* 滴篤 (onomatopoeia: the sound of steps), *dido, dido*.

W: Walk faster!

P: OK! Walk faster! *Dido, dido, dido*.

W: Walk! The faster, the better!

P: Boss Wang, you asked me to “run away”, didn’t you? [Indeed, Wang asked Pi Wu to walk]

W: Yes!

P: I am going to run away.

W: Just walk as you want!

P: OK! Run! *Didaó dida*.

Pi Wu swings his arms and runs at full speed. [...] This gets him a new pair of shoes. (Yin et al., 2015, p. 404)

The lines above create a sense of humour for the audience. The audience realizes that Pi Wu is playing a trick on Boss Wang, as he pretends to understand *pāo* realized in the third tone, meaning “run (away)”. Pi Wu knows all along that Wang means “walk” when saying *pāo* in the second tone, but he says to himself, “You (Boss Wang) asked me to run away, didn’t you? … You asked me to run away, why not!” Pi Wu is a rogue, but he takes advantage of the minor phonetic difference in the tones of *pāo* that give different lexical meanings. In addition, he successfully gains a pair of shoes by cheating Wang using the phonetic difference. Audience members who do not understand the Yangzhou dialect will not grasp Yang’s punch line in this excerpt.

Yang’s comedic presentation also draws on the daily life experiences of Yangzhou people. Their traditions of worship and taboo are turned into Yang’s comical presentation. The popular tradition of sacrifice to the
Kitchen God in Yangzhou city is one of the sources of his narratives, as shown below (W: Elderly Wang, P: Pi Wu):

W: It is not possible to hold the wedding ceremony on the twenty-fourth day of the twelfth lunar month.

P: Why?

W: Traditionally, we need to sacrifice to the Kitchen God on that day.

P: To sacrifice to the Kitchen God, you can choose another day such as the twenty-fifth or twenty-sixth of the month.

W: How can you say that? We cannot sacrifice on those two days.

P: (Pi smiles.) I know our tradition very well! Soldier sacrifice on twenty-third, we the ordinary people on 24, turtle and soft turtle on 25 and 26, respectively. You are not a turtle! So, you need to hold a wedding ceremony for your son and also sacrifice to the Kitchen God on the same day, twenty-fourth of the twelfth lunar month. As the proverb goes datuishang cuoyuanzi—yishou yijiao 大腿上搓圆子—一手一脚 (Making a ball on the thigh, one arm one leg). (Yin et al., 2015, p. 421)

Audience members who are not familiar with the sacrifice tradition in Yangzhou will not understand the punch line when listening to the lines above. To resolve this problem, Yang Mingkun interprets the tradition of the sacrifice to the Kitchen God from the stance of Pi Wi, by enriching Pi’s conversation with Old Wang. The tradition of offering sacrifices to the Kitchen God in Yangzhou generates the type of humour found in this conversation. Pi Wu advises Wang to sacrifice to the Kitchen God on the 25th or the 26th of the 12th lunar month instead, with the intention of mocking Wang as a turtle. Gui 龜 (turtle) or wangba 王八 (soft turtle) in the Yangzhou dialect mean “bad guy”. Old Wang is a man without good sense, and he always finds excuses to delay his son’s wedding ceremony. For this reason, Pi Wu intentionally chooses the upcoming 24th day of the 12th lunar month for Wang to hold the ceremony for his son. If Wang avoids the promise to arrange his son’s marriage on the 24th day using the excuse of offering sacrifice to the Kitchen God, he must offer the sacrifice on the 25th day and be mocked as a turtle.

The worship activities of the Yangzhou people during the Qing dynasty lend material sources to Yang in his creation of the humorous presentation. In historic Yangzhou, people worshiped various gods, such as the Wealth God, the Kitchen God, the Moon God, the Jade Emperor, the City God, and other auspicious gods. However, in the story, people worship silver, mirrors, and even a toilet lid. Wang Er’s wife looks ugly, but she wants to look beautiful at any cost. As a result, she kowtows to the magic Reunited Mirror 81 times. The description of her worship to the Mirror reads as follows:

She follows his [Pi Wu’s] suggestion to light joss sticks and candles, puts the Reunited Mirror on the desk together with the Bodhisattva. While kneeling, she says, “Please seat yourself here, magic Reunited Mirror”. Subsequently, she plays eighty-one kowtows before the mirror and prays loudly. (Yin et al., 2015, p. 378)

Another example is that of a boss worshipping the silver earned from his first deal; the description is as follows: “He draws silver out from the drawer and puts it just in front of the Bodhisattva, conducting several subsequent kowtows to the silver and the Bodhisattva at the same time” (Yin et al., 2015, p. 78).

Interestingly, Pi Wu worships a toilet lid that has blessed him in gambling. He attributes his great fortune to the toilet lid and worships it as a bodhisattva. How Pi Wu treats the toilet lid is described below:
Pi Wu goes back home, holding a toilet cover. He puts it on the centre of a desk, lights joss sticks and candles, and prepares to kowtow to it. When conducting kowtow, he prays: “Great General toilet cover, please bless me in table gambling”. From then on, the toilet cover becomes his god. (Yin et al., 2015, p. 563)

The most ironic worship recorded in Rogue Pi Wu is the sacrifice made by the Shandong thieves before their theft. The description of their conducts is as follows:

Shandong thieves brings an incense burner and candlesticks onto the desk, drawing out three sticks of incense, three pieces of yellow paper, and a big bowl of water.

What are they doing? Are they burning for a fortune?

After lighting the incense, the thieves pray, “By my faith, we come here for the first time, so we do not know who is rich. Please indicate the right direction to the rich”.

Subsequently, they light the paper and throw it into the sky and let the burning paper float in the wind. Paper ash floats in the south-westward direction. The Shandong thieves say excitedly, “God exists around us!” (Yin et al., 2015, p. 580)

As shown in the four passages above, the worship activities performed by Wang Er’s wife, the shop owner, Pi Wu, and the Shandong thieves are not consistent with the common sense of modern audiences, as all contemporary audience members know that people cannot become beautiful by worshiping a mirror or become rich by worshiping both the silver and toilet lid. Thus, the passage shown above provokes laughter because the audience cannot believe the mirror and the toilet lid would be worshiped by someone living in the Qing era. Most astonishing is the fact that the Shandong thieves do not hide the fact that they plan to steal, but actually sacrifice and tell the truth to the god. They hope that the god will lead them to the rich family so that they can steal as large a fortune as possible. Yang’s narrative of the Shandong thieves’ illogical idea and activities goes against the common sense of the modern audience, generating a sense of humour.

Pi Wu is portrayed as a funny rogue because he cares about the taboo to thieves. He knows that thieves will run away as soon as they hear the syllable Zhuo 捕 (catch), because they are afraid of being caught by court officials. He considers the syllable Zhuo to be taboo to thieves in daily conversation. Thus, Pi Wu reminds Ni Si not to use this syllable when he talks at his wedding ceremony as most of his wedding guests are thieves. This is described as follows:

Ni Si asks Pi Wu, “Why should we call Zhuozi (desk) Taizi 檯子 (desk) tomorrow?”

Pi Wu says, “Tomorrow you must not say Zhuozi, you must say Taizi. As all the people who will come to my wedding ceremony tomorrow are thieves and rogues, they will be afraid of hearing the syllable Zhuo [catch]. They will run away quickly when you say Zhuozi. Remember to say Taizi, understand?” (Yin et al., 2015, p. 132)

Pi Wu is very considerate when he gives Ni Si the friendly reminder, as described in the passage above, because he considers what the thieves will think. The audience catches the humour when they hear that Pi Wu demonstrates consideration for the thieves, as he himself is also afraid of hearing the syllable Zhuo. After all, he is a rogue who cheats on others.

In addition, Yang adds his own life experiences in Yangzhou to the story of Pi Wu. Liquor brands such as Shuanggou 雙溝, Nü’erhong 女兒紅, and Yanghe 洋河, all of which enjoy a good reputation in modern Yangzhou, appear in the conversations of Pi Wu (Yin et al., 2015, p. 145); when Pi Wu mentions a traditional Chinese medicine shop, he refers to Dadesheng 大德生, a contemporary Chinese medicine chain store (Yin et
Furthermore, in many cases, he embellishes his humorous comments on incidents in the story by drawing analogies or comparing them with current events. For example, Sun Xiaogu feels shy when talking to Mama Zhang about her marriage. To help the audience appreciate this, Yang compares Sun’s feelings of shyness about marriage issues with the feelings of a modern girl talking about her love experiences in public.

His narrative is as follows:

In ancient China, parents arranged their daughters’ marriages. When talking about marriage issues, girls felt shy and blush. They tried to avoid this topic.

Girls of our time are different. For example, one day I met some girls. They were eighteen or nineteen years old at the most. One of them spoke to me, “Mr Yang, you do not care about me” I said, “Why did you say that?” “I am around eighteen years old”. “Yes, you are”. “You have got many friends, haven’t you? Introduce a good boy to me, and then we might fall in love”. They felt proud when talking about love experiences. The more experiences they had, the more honoured they felt. “Mr Yang, I have fallen in love six times so far”.

Girls living in ancient China felt shy when talking about their marriages, so Sun Xiaogu does not answer Mama Zhang’s question about her wedding due to shyness. (Yin et al., 2015, pp. 165-166)

When the audience listens to Yang’s narration of modern girls talking about their love experiences, they strongly feel the difference between girls living in Qing Yangzhou and those in the present day. At the same time, they are able to comprehend Yang’s exaggeration as they know that a girl aged around eighteen years in Yangzhou will not usually conduct herself in the way Yang describes. Yang applies exaggerated narration to produce a striking contrast in relation to the social backgrounds of girls living in Qing Yangzhou and those in contemporary Yangzhou.

In addition, Yang draws on his early childhood experiences when narrating about Pi Wu walking alone at night. Some of the lines are as follows:

Indeed, Pi Wu is fearless and courageous. He sings while walking alone at night. When walking alone at night, we feel braver if singing a song or saying something to ourselves. Pi Wu is not an exception! He plans to sing a folk song. Take me as an example; when I was a child, I used to sing a song when walking on a lane without any lighting. What did I sing? I sang the song “Dahai hangxing kao duoshou” 大海航行靠舵手 (We Rely on the Sailors When Sailing at Sea). “Dido (onomatopoeia of the sound of steps) dido dido dido”. I went through the dark lane by singing a song. Pi Wu is smart, and he is a master of opera such as Beijing opera, Su opera, Kun opera, Yangzhou opera and Huangmei opera. (Yin et al., 2015, p. 307)

When listening to the presentation above, the audience is amused to discover that the fearless Pi Wu is afraid of the dark. Yang speaks about his own experiences of walking alone at night at a young age to explain why Pi Wu plans to sing a song while walking in the dark. However, given the title of the story and the knavish conduct of Pi Wu, the audience’s impression is that Pi Wu must be a fearless person. In this presentation, the image of the fearless Pi Wu does not develop in the way the audience expects, and his weakness is revealed. The plot twist in the narrative generates humour.

As well as the plot twist, the list of the opera genres that Pi Wu is said to know also generates humour. Yang says that he sings the song Dahai hangxing kao duoshou when walking at night, aiming to show Pi’s favourites. According to Yang’s narrative, Pi Wu is familiar with various genres of opera such as Beijing opera, Su opera, Kun opera, and Huangmei opera, which are still popular today. It is not important to know whether Pi Wu is a master of such genres; Yang lists them merely to create a connection between Pi Wu and the contemporary audience. The audience can resonate better with Pi Wu knowing that they share the same interest.
Yang also draws on riddles, folk sayings, witty words, interjections, and onomatopoeia in the Yangzhou dialect to create a sense of facetiousness. For example, at the very beginning of Unit 1, a rogue asks an old fortune-teller to tell his fortune. The fortune-teller does not like the rogue and is reluctant to tell him anything. To make fun of the rogue, the smart fortune-teller recites a poem, making hints that the rogue is a beast in public. His poem is as follows:

眉如直八，一世发达。二目不同，一世不穷。

鼻如玄田，一世有铜钿。嘴如牛一，一世有得吃。

Your eyebrows look like the character \textit{ba} 八 (eight), you will be wealthy in life. Your eyes look distinguishable, you will never live in poverty in this life. Your nose looks like the character \textit{tian} 田 (farming field) and suggests that you do not lack money in your life. Your mouth looks like the characters of \textit{niu} 牛 (cow) and \textit{yi} 一 (one), and it implies that you will not lack food in your life. (Yin et al., 2015, p. 3)

The characters \textit{ba} 八, \textit{tian} 田, \textit{niu} 牛, and \textit{yi} 一 are structural components of the two characters that form the word \textit{chusheng} 畜生 (beast). The riddle relates to the word \textit{chusheng}. Contemporary audience members are not familiar with riddle games and may not be able to solve the riddle. To resolve this issue, Yang includes Pi Wu’s father-in-law Sun Dali, a well-educated county official, in this narration.

In traditional Chinese culture, a riddle is a type of game that consists of two parts: \textit{mi mian} 謎面 (question) and \textit{mi di} 謎底 (answer). Pi Wu sets a series of riddles relating to the names of dishes, aiming to cheat the boss. Some of the riddles created by Pi Wu are as follows (P: Pi Wu, B: Boss):

P: I will tell riddles and you, please guess the dishes’ names.

B: No problem. Riddles, please! I will work out all of them.

P: Let us start with eight dishes’ names. \textit{Jiaohuazi shenghaizi} 叫花子，生孩子 (literally, “a beggar gives birth to a baby”). What is the dish?

B: \textit{Huashengrenzi} 花生仁子 (peanut), is that right?

P: A pole cannot touch the bottom of the sea. What is the dish?

B: \textit{Haishen} 海参 (sea slug), is that right? (Yin et al., 2015, p. 144)

Fifteen riddles are set by Pi Wu in this episode; each riddle relates to the name of a dish. Pi Wu’s ability to create riddles relating to the names of dishes not only shows that he is a master of trickery but also amuses the audiences greatly.

Folk sayings are as witty as riddles but much easier to understand than the latter; hence, Yang included quite a few of them in the narrative. We can take the conversation between Sun Qiangshi and Mama Zhang as an example (S: Sun Qiangshi, Z: Mama Zhang):

S: 你要放在心上呢. You need to keep this in mind [place in your heart]!

Z: 掛在肝上呢. It is now hung on my liver! (Yin et al., 2015, p. 18)

\textit{Fangzai xinshang} 放在心上 is a common phrase in the Yangzhou dialect: It means to “have something in mind”. However, the phrase \textit{guazai ganshang} 挂在肝上 does not exist and is produced by following the structure of \textit{fangzai xinshang}. Yang creates the phrase and includes it in the conversation to generate humour.
On a few occasions, Yang directly resorts to exaggeration to construct a comical narrative. Generally, “partiality” is translated into pianxin 偏心 (literally, “deflective heart”) in the Chinese language. Yang uses the literal meaning of pianxin in his narrative. It reads: “Many people are selfish and show partiality all the way. Their hearts move elsewhere while beating. Beat and beat, their hearts move to the armpit” (Yin et al., 2015, p. 23). The heart does not actually change position while beating. However, in Yang’s narration, the heart of a selfish person moves far away from where it should be while beating, to the armpit. Yang’s exaggerated narrative not only amuses the audiences but also strikes a chord in the audience’s heart, as he uses a sneering tone to demonstrate his negative attitude towards selfish people.

The onomatopoeia guadi guadi 呱滴呱滴 is used to liven up a long conversation (Yin et al., 2015, pp. 165, 167). The interjection pochigui 潑哧鬼 is Mama Zhang’s pet phrase—she applies it when she wants to express denial. When Pi Wu is listening to Mama Zhang explain why she has chosen him as Sun Xiaogu’s husband, only five interjections, an 哎, en 嗯, a 啊, ao 嗨, and ai 哎, are used in the long conversation. Yang’s narrative is: “Pi Wu said, ‘An,’ ‘en,’ ‘an, an, an,’ ‘en,’ ‘The bad guy!’ ‘En, en, en,’ ‘a?’ ‘ao.’ ‘ai’” (Yin et al., 2015, pp. 47). What Mama Zhang wants to say to Pi Wu has already been mentioned to the audience. From the stance of the storyteller, Yang Mingkun understands that it is not necessary to repeat this to the audience. He applies five interjections and arranges them in Pi’s response to Mama Zhang’s explanation. The five interjections spoken by Pi Wu in different tones generate humour, because the intonations of the five syllables realized by Yang Mingkun match the ups and downs of the facts told by Mama Zhang.

Yang Mingkun applies folk sayings frequently to the story of Pi Wu, as almost all the characters are depicted as Yangzhou locals. Folk sayings are the wisdom of the ordinary people and most of them are funny. For example, gongji hai sangzi—buti 公鷄害嗓子—不提 (Yin et al., 2015, p. 160). Gongji hai sangzi means the rooster has a sore throat, so it cannot crow, which is expressed as buti 不啼 (cannot crow) in the Yangzhou dialect. Buti sounds identical to another word buti 不提 meaning “do not mention”. Thus, when Yang Mingkun needs to use the word 不提, he uses the folk saying gongji hai sangzi instead. The audience will find such references humorous.

Folk sayings produced by Yangzhou locals express their simple yet humorous attitude to life. For example: zhusun wei tizi 竹筍煨蹄子 (beat a person with a bamboo stick); maomaoyu dahuuer sasa 毛毛雨大傢夥兒灑灑 (share the profits with others) (Yin et al., 2015, pp. 40, 181). Stewed pig trotters with bamboo shoots (zhusun wei tizi) is a popular Yangzhou dish. It is used to imply that a person has endured a severe beating with a bamboo stick. Inspired by the features of the natural weather phenomenon of maomaoyu 毛毛雨 (drizzle), maomaoyu dahuuer sasa suggests that people with good sense should share their profits with others. Yangzhou locals are intimately familiar with these sayings. Yang readily applies them in his performance, creating a strong connection between himself and his audience. These folk sayings also create humour, making Yang’s performance distinct and impressive.

As discussed above, Yang Mingkun prefers to narrate the story of Pi Wu in a facetious tone. The Yangzhou dialect, the life experiences, and the mental make-up of Yangzhou people form the comedic elements of his presentation, since the majority of his audience consist of Yangzhou locals. Thus, the punch lines in his narrative are generally well received.

**Conclusion**

As a performer, Yang Mingkun bases his language expression on the requirements and cultural
background of the contemporary audience, as well as on the lexical features of the Yangzhou dialect. Firstly, considering the phonetics and lexis changing of the Yangzhou dialect over the last four centuries, he transfers the verses initially created by Pu into prose without changing the original meaning and omits almost all the stock phrases applied in the Yangzhou pinghua narration. In addition, he has tried to use the literary words that existed in the repertoire inherited from his master Yu Youchun and instead adopts colloquial words. Secondly, considering the fact that the majority of the audience's of the Yangzhou pinghua are locals of Yangzhou, he bases his humorous narratives on the Yangzhou dialect, the mental make-up of the Yangzhou people and their daily life experiences. Yangzhou dialect words are the most vital comedic element in his comical expression. He successfully turns local traditions into a humorous presentation. Finally, by narrating the story of Pi Wu accurately, as well as shaping figures reliably and vividly, Yang makes good use of the Yangzhou dialect in his depictions of daily conversations and life scenes.

References


