

Chapters 31-35

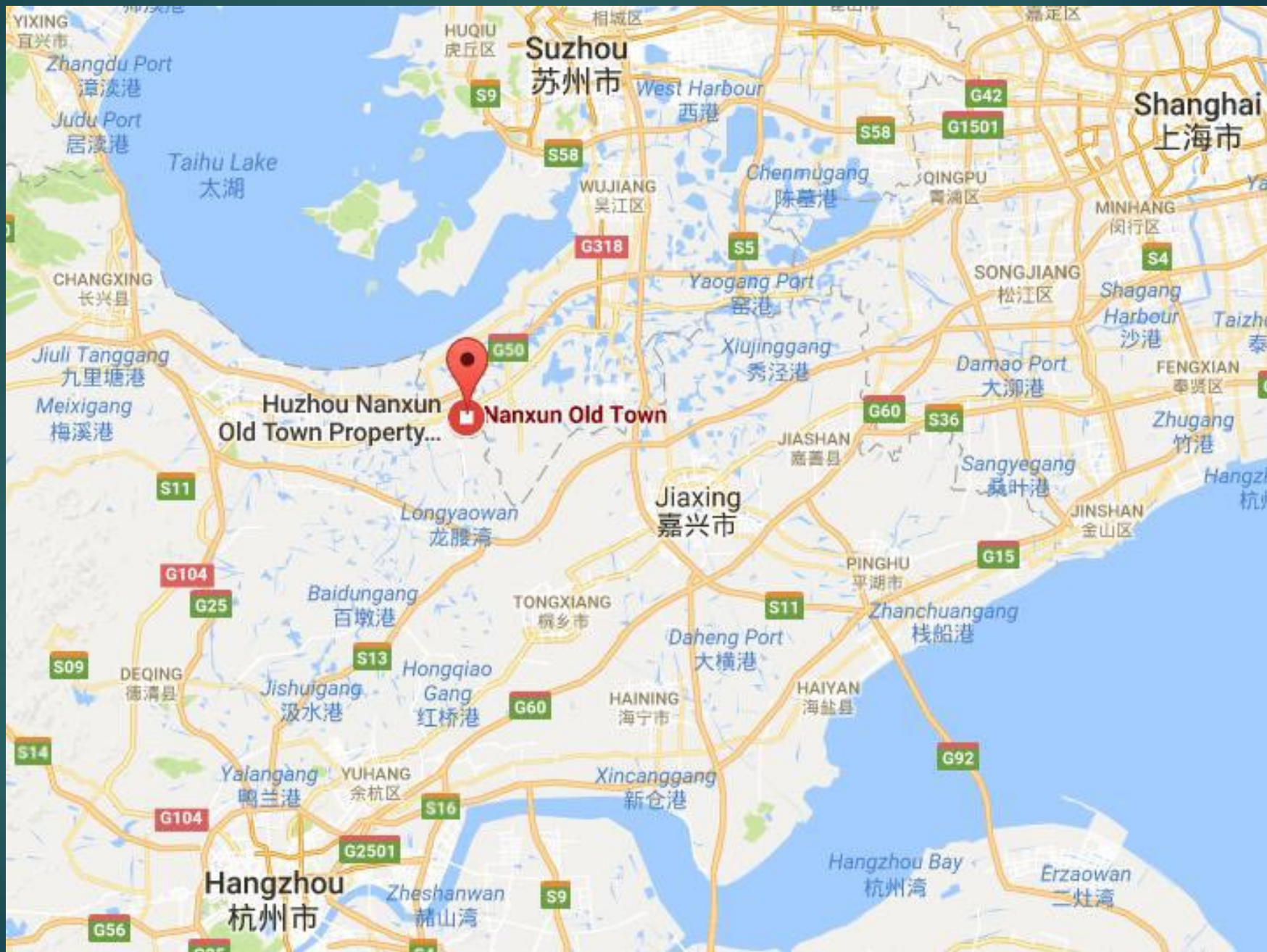
HSI-MEN CH'ING'S CAREER AS A MILITARY COMMISSIONER/JUDGE

MORE SILK BUSINESS AND SOUTHERNERS

WANG LIU-ERH: DEBAUCHERY IN A NEW KEY

Silk & Satin

- ▶ After expanding his business from the original apothecary into pawn brokerage, Hsi-men suddenly finds an opportunity to expand into the silk trade, which he adroitly seizes
- ▶ His first stock of silks comes from a merchant from Hu-chou, a wealthy city rivaling both Hangzhou and Suzhou, located more or less between the two; all three cities were centers of textile manufacture (silk, satin, brocade, etc.) & luxury goods generally
- ▶ Hu-chou's merchants are branded as dishonest by none other than Ying Po-chueh (!); but the name actually puns with the word for “nonsense/lying” 胡謔, and it is the final destination of the survivors of the Hsi-men family as refugees in Chapter 100 of the novel
- ▶ Satin (tuanzi 段子) as well as silk is beloved by Hsi-men's wives



Calligraphy, Chess, Lute, Painting

- ▶ Four teenage male servants are named after the “four avocations” of the literati: Shu (calligraphy/books), Ch’i (go or chess), Ch’in (Lute), and Hua (painting); t’ung means boy or youth
- ▶ Ch’in-t’ung (#2) and Hua-t’ung were brought into the household earlier in the novel, and become more visible in Ch. 29-30 (teasing Ch’iu-chü, running errands, etc.)
- ▶ Two additional “t’ung” enter in Ch. 31, Shu-t’ung and Ch’i-t’ung, just as Hsi-men Ch’ing is preparing his official garb, his office/studio, and other accoutrements of his new job as a judicial commissioner
- ▶ Shu-t’ung is a former “gate boy”, youths who served as both gatekeepers & sexual partners for local officials; he is a southerner, the putative “home” of male-male eroticism (*nán*=south or male]

Homoeroticism & the Literati

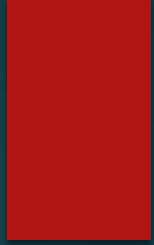
- ▶ The possession of “male favorites” (nánchǒng) was often-though not exclusively- associated with literati and/or other powerful men
- ▶ Hsi-men Ch'ing begins his affair with Shu-t'ung just as his career in the district court takes off with the case of Han the Second (in which Shu-t'ung becomes involved as a negotiator/middleman)
- ▶ Shu-t'ung's relationship with Hsi-men Ch'ing also mimics that of Kuan-ko: both boys are pampered with luxuries in the form of silks/satins, fine food, etc., & also treated leniently
- ▶ Shu-t'ung cannily allies himself with Li P'ing-erh, who appears to genuinely enjoy playing a semi-maternal role to him, in contrast to Chin-lien's jealous rants (he is fair-skinned, like Ping-er)

Business & Pleasure

Private & Public

- ▶ The confusion between public and private, official and family, business and pleasure, reaches new heights (or lows) in 31-40
- ▶ Hsi-men's intervention in his own silk store manager Han Tao-kuo's case is followed soon thereafter by the start of an affair with this very employee's wife (Wang Liu'er), & new punishment for Han's brother
- ▶ Avoidance (recusal) was an important principle of Chinese governance & jurisprudence (and the reason why officials usually were not allowed to serve in their home districts or even provinces)
- ▶ Shu-t'ung's role as official amanuensis, sexual partner, intermediary in court cases, & family conflicts or relationships makes him the leading example of bad behavior--but he is just one of many (Tai-an, the "sworn brothers," eunuchs & other officials, etc.)







Music

- ▶ To “sing” and to “prostitute” not only are exact homophones, they are written almost identically (唱 and 娼) and sometimes used interchangeably (as in “singer” for prostitutes like Li Kuei-chieh)
- ▶ Talent, training, and knowledge of singing is concentrated in the characters who either do so professionally (Li Ming, Li Kuei-chieh, etc) or share similarities in background or temperament to these entertainers (P’an Chin-lien, Ch’en Ching-chi, Shu-t’ung, etc.)
- ▶ Instrumental ability is limited to a few characters like Meng Yü-lou (moon guitar), Chin-lien (p’i-p’a), and to the maids and others who are taught by Li Ming to sing and pluck or blow, etc.
- ▶ Unaccompanied singing (Southern Songs) is Shu-t’ung’s specialty, requires special training (which becomes important later)

Literature as Musical Composition

- ▶ If *Jin Ping Mei* can be described as an intricately woven fabric of multiple plot lines, characters, motifs, images, objects, using elaborate & often subtle foreshadowing and incremental repetition, it can also be understood as akin to a musical composition of themes & variations, with different movements, tempos, etc.
- ▶ The *cihua* recension (“A”) is the most musical of all three versions, & the earliest as well as the basis for the other two (“B” and “C”)
- ▶ As Hsi-men’s wealth & power rise further in Ch. 31-40, so too does the prominence of both entertainment & entertainers in his household: the farce of Ch. 31, the lengthy excerpts from plays & song suites by prostitutes & Ch’en Ching-chi in Ch. 32-34, then culminating in long, elaborate Buddhist & Daoist storytelling & singing in Ch. 38-40

Chapters 31-40: Adagio

- ▶ Events in this decade mainly take place among household members & Hsi-men's "colleagues": celebrations, projects, cases...
- ▶ Wives are preoccupied by the birth of Kuan-ko, his implications for their future; #2 (Li Chiao-erh) & #4 (Sun Hsueh-o) recede further into the background as #1, 5, & 6 dominate, #3 (Meng Yü-lou) mediates
- ▶ P'ing-erh spreads her kindness & wealth (to Chin-lien's mother, to Shu-t'ung, to servants, to the neighborhood toughs & their families)
- ▶ Yueh-niang's "adoption" of Li Kuei-chieh is a sign of trouble
- ▶ Ying Po-chueh & other "spongers" & sycophants prosper thanks to their "brother" Hsi-men Ch'ing's successes
- ▶ Imperial relations, eunuchs, officials all seek Hsi-men's "help"