

## The Conceptualization of Urban Space through Records of Contemporary Conversations

### Abstract

Rumors and hearsay are products of verbal activities that have not received much attention from historians due to the scarcity of sources. Two early 17<sup>th</sup>-century publications in the genre of /ketan/(conversation with guests) that purported to be the records of conversations about the city of Nanjing among urban elites offer an unusual opportunity for us to explore the ways in which verbal communication took part in forming contemporary perception about Nanjing.

This paper argues that these conversations-turned-notes are not just collections of random gossip but an indication of the urban elite's self-perceived role in city life. The numerous conversations recorded in the works consistently revolved around the topics of urban administration, factual details about historical and contemporary Nanjing, fantastic urban legends and sensational street news—topics that appealed to urban elites in their multi-faceted roles as officials, scholars, and literati.

Moreover, these conversations also develop an interesting focus on the meaning of Nanjing-ness. From the entries of the two works we find two approaches to this issue. The first approach, parallel to the late Ming obsession over collection, assembles sets of trivia about Nanjing: its flowers, its street slang, its springs, as well as many other trivial facts that construed to represent the essence of Nanjing. The second approach focuses on Nanjing's spatiality. It distinguishes the city's five neighborhoods according to their individual dynamics between "host" (natives) and "guest" (sojourners) that contributed to the unique customs and ambiance of each neighborhood. On the one hand, the exuberant exchange between the hosts and guests at urban salons might have inspired and even informed contemporary perception of urban space to be similarly marked by the interaction between "hosts" and "guests."

On the other hand, the sharp distinction between natives and outsiders is also symptomatic of the social conflicts resulted from the rigorous population control policy from the early Ming.