

# Chinese Performing Arts

No. 3  
October 2021

戲中  
劇國

- The History of Kunqu and Contemporary Artists
- A Tale at New Time: Written on the Eve of 400<sup>th</sup> Performances of Youth version of The Peony Pavilion
- Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre (sdac): Creativity- Quality- Diversity
- An Image Overview of "Sheng" and the Innovations Made by Actor Zhang Jun
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- The Research and Translation of Xiqu in Russia



国际戏剧协会  
International Theatre Institute ITI



上海戏剧学院  
Shanghai Theater Academy



(Image ©Yi Dao Theatre)

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# The Development of Kunqu

FENG YABIN

As an outstanding representative of existing Xiqu genres, Kunqu, the best preserved and oldest traditional Chinese drama, reflects best the artistic characteristic of “telling stories with songs and dances” and thus embodies the freely expressive spirit of Xiqu and culture.

Kunqu can be dated back to the middle of the Ming Dynasty (1460-1552). Before that, there had been a great cultural explosion during the Yuan Dynasty, with Zaju being the dominant form.

Zaju, which had been deeply influenced by poems of the Tang Dynasty and Ci-poetry of the Song Dynasty, is considered as the spiritual predecessor of Kunqu, because Kunqu had inherited its music and literary cultivation directly.

In the Yuan Dynasty, Zaju plays, with metrical patterns developed from Ci-poetry whose own emotional content and musical characteristics lent itself to Xiqu, emerged as the predominant form of cultural expression. Great works of Zaju included *Romance of West Chamber*, *The Orphan of Chao*, *Injustice to Dou E*, and *Autumn Rain on the Phoenix Tree*. Despite this, the exact form Zaju stage performances took remain unclear – all we have are vague historical documents which mention it.

Later, in the Ming Dynasty, the Qu poetry of the Yuan Dynasty assimilated with and learned from local tunes in the south of China gradually. A new singing style called “Nanbei Qu” (South and North Qu) was developed by assimilating Qu and Kunshan tunes from the Chinese provinces of Kunshan and Jiangsu. Based on Zaju, lore, full-length Xiqu plays were created in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Masterpieces of legends included *The Peony Pavilion*, *The Jade Hairpin*, *The Palace of Eternal Life*, and *The Peach Blossom Fan*. The musical characteristics of “Nanbei Qu” and the literary features of its legends in the Ming and Qing Dynasties together formed the performance pattern of Kunqu. After 100 to 200 years’ development, Kunqu reached its peak in the 17<sup>th</sup> century: spreading all over the country inspiring a number of different Xiqu forms itself. Indeed, it has had a great impact on almost all the Chinese local Xiqu in performance and singing.



■ Kunqu *Hu Family Manor*

While Xiqu was formed formally during the 14<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, initially there had been no public theatres. Instead most Xiqu, including those of the Kunqu genre, had their first performances in residences of the scholar-official class, within their parlors, courtyards, and gardens. The performance groups who acted there became private troupes. In order to ensure the highest performance efficiency in such venues, a private troupe ran a tight ship with a limited cast.

As a result of this, Kunqu placed emphasis on its actors and scripts as opposed to staging. Lighting and set design in modern theatres were not elements of traditional Kunqu performance, however due to its musical elements and freely expressive style, Kunqu did demand special requirements on the venues where it was performed. Despite this, it is fair to say much of its aesthetic was born of necessity; the natural scenes or simulated mountains and rivers in classical Chinese gardens provided ample stage background. This not only established Kunqu's defining aesthetic characteristics, but also led to Kunqu stages playing an important role in Chinese traditional garden architecture.

Societal changes, led to Kunqu being spread to the working classes. The home stages of the upper classes in which Kunqu's formation took place quickly became unsuitable as venues. However, the move to public stages led to problems in production (particularly regarding the expressive and intimate nature of the Xiqu



■ *Kunqu Fifteen Strings of Cash*

style) which still persist to this day. For instance, in modern theatres, artificial stage designs have had to replace rustic environments possessed by the original open stages. These man-made stage designs are at odds with the minimalistic styles of Kunqu. As a result it is recommended for a first-time audience member to view Kunqu in a smaller venue.

Due to its performance form of “telling stories with songs and dances,” Kunqu is freely expressive rather than realistic. Characters on the Kunqu stage are classified into categories according to social classification in the Ming Dynasty. This act of classification is known as “jiamen” in Kunqu. As a specific example, a young male scholar is classified into category “jin sheng” (jin, a hat worn by young scholars; sheng, a young male role). If he became an officer after passing the imperial examination, he then would be classified into the category of “xiao guan sheng” (a young official scholar role). When he is old, he would be classified into category “lao sheng” (an old male role).

According to the “jiamen” classification mentioned above, performance patterns for Kunqu characters, from raising their hands and feet or giving a smile to singing and acting, are stipulated strictly, which helps audience to understand the strict distinction among different “jiamens” at a glance. It is often questioned whether this contradicts the social compatibility of drama, for it is taken as read that drama



must emit an expressive social force, but another name for jiamen, “Jianghu twelve roles”, offers an answer to this quandary. In Chinese, “jianghu” refers to numerous living beings in the boundless universe. Kunqu performing artists could change freely within the stipulated pattern. A jiamen can play numerous roles. This stylized aesthetic is in accordance with a tremendous amount of colorful and classical Nanbei Qu works that were created under the rules and forms of classical poems.

Literary scripts of Kunqu are mainly based on legends of the Ming and Qing Dynasties. A complete legend consists of 30 to 60 units. Each unit is an individual performance segment, which is called “zhe” or “chu”. Although a whole legend is very grand in structure, every “zhe” has only a few main characters: three to five at most, or one to two at least. This matches along with the jiamen system. This system does not need too many characters interacting on the stage, but pays more attention to the concise and delicate performances among the characters. Sometimes, the stage is given to only one character, allowing him or her to vent their inner feelings with singing and dancing, even free from the bondage of the story. This kind drama form, with jiamen roles as the core, has set its character-centered outlook from the offset.

Traditional Kunqu stagecraft follows the space processing principle of “one table and two chairs”, which is a very concise but delicate stage processing method. A good performing artist must have extremely high control of the solid space of the whole stage, and even the space from the stage to the audience. This space is very concise and pure, allowing skillful artists to sing, act and dance in it. The artists deliver the drama’s rhythm from their inner hearts to the audience through the stage space. Various spiritual feelings of human beings, such as joy, sorrow, love and so on, can be expressed in a well-arranged way on the simple and unadorned stage.

Kunqu tells stories with songs and dances under its standard, “chengshi” (pattern), which finds expression in singing, elocution, gesticulating, and acrobatics. The first two are about singing, while the latter two about dancing. There are two principles for Kunqu pattern aesthetics. First is the exaggeration, through the skills of the artist, of life. For example, performers do their best to sing to show the beauty of the voice and rhythm and to dance to show the beauty of the body, in order to match along with different jiamens’ characteristics. Second is its strict performance code. Dances, called shenduan, also has a set of performance code “gongfa”, including trainings of the four limbs, the whole body, eyes, and facial expressions. According to requirements of different jiamens, the two principles work together and have set the basic aesthetic taste of Kunqu. In order to meet the requirements of singing and dancing mentioned above, Kunqu performers have to accept years’ basic and advanced training from childhood. The training includes accuracy in pitch, pronunciation, vocal music, limb harmony and dancing skills. Only by passing strict training, could performers really master the Kunqu patterns, and only the mastery of



■ Kunqu *The peony Pavilion* (©Yi Dao Theatre)

patterns could enable performers to dominate the stage.

At the beginning, Kunqu played the entire legends, which took days to perform whole legend from cover to cover. After long-term performance practice, repeated refinement, and screening elimination, only the most performative and ornamental parts remained and formed the highlights that represented the essence of Kunqu art on today's stage.

Thus, to learn and experience the charm of Chinese Kunqu, one must begin from watching the performance. Just as Du Liniang in *The Peony Pavilion* says, “how can you know the beauty of the spring without coming to the garden?”

# A New Age for Ancient Theatre: The Twenty Years After Kunqu was Listed as an “Intangible Cultural Heritage”

GUO CHENZI

Originating in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Kunqu began flourishing from the mid 15<sup>th</sup> century and declined from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. As a theatre form with a long history, it includes both a “long” prosperity and decline. In 2001, Kunqu was inscribed on the first list of “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” published by UNESCO, and it has since become increasingly popular after a period of silence. Twenty years is not a long time but merely a short moment in the course of Kunqu, but in this short time the “old appearance” of Kunqu has more or less transformed into a “new look”.

## From “Fever of Complete Edition” to “Fever of New Edition”

Note: “*Fever of Complete Edition*” is a literal translation, denoting *Xiqu* which were performed in full and the excitement they were initially met with. Conversely, the “*New Edition*” refers to the condensed versions of these plays which have since become more popular.

At the turn of the century, the director Chen Shizheng, who was living in the United States, rehearsed the complete edition of *The Peony Pavilion* at Shanghai Kunqu Troupe. Although the play failed to perform in the United States as planned, the resurrection of presenting the complete edition of *Xiqu* can be said to have begun in earnest. In the first ten years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Shanghai Kunqu Troupe successively rehearsed Tang Xianzu’s “Linchuan Four Dreams”, including three editions of *The Peony Pavilion* (2003), *Handan Notes* (2005), four editions of *The Palace of Eternal Life*



■ Kunqu *Hu Family Manor*

(2007), *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* (2008) and *A Dream Under the Southern Bough* (2010). Jiangsu Kunqu Troupe launched 1699 *The Peach Blossom Fan* in 2006, and The Northern Kunqu Theatre presented the first and second episodes of *Romance of the Western Chamber* in 2009 as well as *Xu Pipa* in 2010. Among them, the youth edition of *The Peony Pavilion*, produced by Bai Xianyong and performed by Suzhou Kunqu Troupe in 2004, had the most performances and influences.

Eventually, the *Romance of Western Chamber* returned to Wang Shifu's dictions and implications from adaptations of folk Xiqu, and Tang Xianzu's dream, as well as the disillusionment of his dream, was unfolded inch by inch. The two peaks of the Qing Dynasty legends, which demonstrated the rise and fall of the nation through depicting the separation and reunion of lovers, stood side by side on the stage, attracting the attention of the media and audience and thus becoming an iconic cultural event.

It is undeniable that the “fever of complete edition” as it is known in China, put simply the act of showing Xiqu in full, is linked to Kunqu’s rise as an “Intangible Cultural Heritage”, and its happening at a time where emphasis was placed on the revival of traditional cultures had a catalyzing effect on its reception.

It also reflects the performance level and performing ability of troupes after the long-term silence. In the second decade of the new century, troupes adopted the young generation of performers in most “plays of complete edition”. By April 2019, the youth edition of *The Peony Pavilion* had been performed for 342 times. In November 2018, “Linchuan Four Dreams” by Shanghai Kunqu Troupe participated in the Berlin Theatre Festival with a strong cast. In a sense, these accomplishments marked the success of Kunqu, to an extent which was difficult to imagine before.

However, the prosperous and widespread “fever of complete edition” eventually led to its own downfall. The demand was such that appropriate source material on which to base full-length Xiqu began to run out. Indeed, despite the huge number of legends and stories to base Xiqu on from the Ming-Qing Dynasty, there are only a few pieces that possess both high literary value and well-recognized Xiqu highlights. It is for this reason that Xiqu highlights have gradually become the mainstream in the performance history of Kunqu.

Looking back on those “plays of complete edition” and the short-lived fervor that surrounded them, it seems to be a little more than a flash in the pan. From 2011, the “fever of complete edition” receded. In 2012, only Jiangsu Kunqu Troupe, in cooperation with Taiwan troupes and foundations, continued to present the complete edition of *A Dream Under the Southern Bough*. In 2018, Shanghai Kunqu Troupe rehearsed *The Story of Pipa*; a condensed form representing a new approach to Kunqu, and what came with it was a “fever of new edition”.

Kunqu of the new edition are roughly divided into the following categories:

First, original new editions, including adaptations of literary works and stage plays, except for the reduction or rewriting of Ming-Qing Dynasty legends, as well as the transplantation of Xiqu genres;

Second, transplantations from other Xiqu genres, such as *Songs in Sichuan* performed by Shanghai Kunqu Troupe in 2014, the text of which was originally Guiju and was transformed to Kun by Zhou Changfu, and *A Story in the Palace Tower* jointly produced by Shanghai Kunqu Troupe and Taiwan Guoguang Troupe, which was adapted from Jingju;

Third, adaptations from original legends, like Shanghai Kunqu Troupe's *Jingyang Bell* growing out of the anonymous Qing Dynasty work *Iron Crown*.

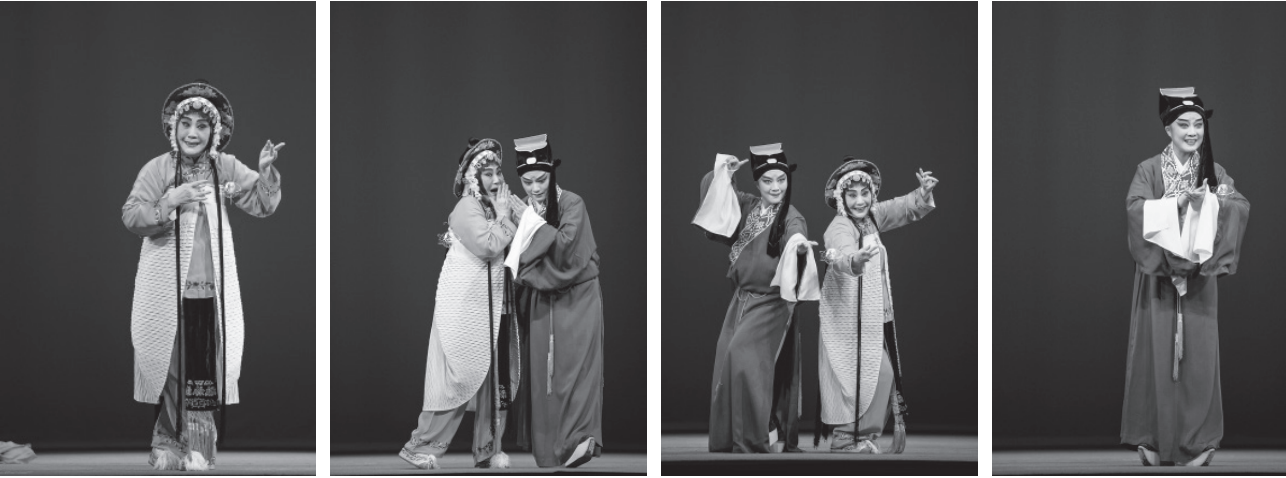
In addition, Rong Nian, a pioneer of experimental theatre in Hongkong, collaborated with Jiangsu Kunqu Troupe on the "Crested Ibis Project" from 2012 to 2015, to perform a series of experimental "vanward Kunqu" like *Faust*, *New Record of Past Dramatists*, and *Elope at Night*.

Compared with the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there were only ten revived traditional plays released, including *The Song of a Pipa Player* (Wang Renjie, 2000), the scriptwriting of Ban Zhao (Luo Huaizhen, 2001) and the scriptwriting of Shang Shi (Zhang Jing, 2003). It can be seen that the "fever of New Edition" has replaced the "fever of Complete Edition" to herald another ten-year history of Kunqu.

For a long time, Kunqu practitioners have been called "eight-hundred warriors", for there are only eight Kunqu troupes in the nation, and one private Zhang Jun Kunqu Art Centre (established in 2009). As a Xiqu genre with very limited numbers of troupes and practitioners (no more than 1000), it is surprising to see nearly 30 newly edited Kunqu presented on the stage.

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, Xiqu policies have always encouraged new editing of all Xiqu genres including Kunqu. However, Kunqu's "new editing" is far more difficult than other genres, because Kunqu has strict regulations of music as its key characteristic. Once the Qu tune (Qupai) is applied, a complex mood of emotional transmission is signified, meaning it is hard to make alterations to a piece at will due to its symbolism. What's more, based on Qu tunes, Kunqu have formed the performing paradigm of "every movement is dancing". The full integration of dancing and singing, as well as developed programs, has become classics, so it is hard for plays of the new edition with new postures to catch up with.

Since the number of new edition Kunqu plays raise exponentially with government funding and public interest, questions of authenticity of form become ever more prevalent: Does its music structure strictly abide by the old system? Does its diction austere follow the rules of word counts, tones, and rhymes? Does the performance



■ Kunqu *The Story of A Fisher Maiden*

reach the standard of Kunqu? Most importantly, does it maintain the aesthetic style of Kunqu? These questions all remain to be tested.

### From “Hall Edition” to “Garden Edition”

*Note: “Hall Edition” and “Garden Edition” denote two separate methods of portraying The Peony Pavilion – a standard Kunqu play, with Hall Editions taking place in auditoriums, and Garden Editions occurring outside.*

A performance set in the hall, which pursues grace and serves business activities, has appeared, or more accurately, “has returned”. In the new century, the “hall edition” of *The Peony Pavilion* was not born in the south but Beijing. It was not produced by any Kunqu troupes but was organized by a private cultural company.

In 2007, *The Peony Pavilion* (directed by Lin Zhouhua) was staged in the Nan Xin Cang, a 600-year-old royal granary. Known as “the ultimate landscape of Chinese traditional culture” and “the consumption model of neoclassicism for business elites in Beijing”, each show only accommodated 60 audience members. The next year, Kunqu Wufu Theatre opened in the “Jiuchao Club”, a business club built by the decoration company Boloni, to give performances of Xiqu highlights and claim to establish an exclusive Kunqu troupe.



■ Kunqu *The Palace of Eternal Life*

In 2009, the Modern Drama Valley in Shanghai launched the advertisement for “the first business theatre”. The performing environment of the Huaya Tang edition of *The Peony Pavilion* was a living room in an old house. The goal of the performance was also to “experience the extremely noble lifestyle”. Jiangsu Kunqu Troupe also cooperated with Xi Nan Li, a historical and cultural district in Nanjing, to present the Xi Nan Li edition of *The Peony Pavilion* which was only open to club members.

Despite differences with the “Hall (Tingtang)” for performance in the Ming Dynasty, it seems that modern retellings of the hall edition of the play attained the requisite level of refinement and high-culture which the setting determines to display. Nonetheless, business elites today are not literati and officials in the Ming Dynasty who supported troupes, so the “high-end” hall edition of *The Peony Pavilion* did not last for a long time. Its epilogue was the immersive *The Peony Pavilion* at “Xi Cha Shi Yi” in Yule Tang in Hangzhou.

At around the same time that the hall edition ceased its activities, the director Zhang Peng and young performers at the Northern Kunqu Theatre began to put the “Guan Qi Fu edition” of Kunqu on the stage. In 2010, Wang Xiang, the producer of the hall edition of *The Peony Pavilion* at the royal granary, planned the performance of *Lian Xiang Ban* at Zhengyici Temple Theatre. Six years later, Zhang Peng launched the “bosom friend edition”. In 2017, the “Guan Qi Fu edition” of the play was released.



“Guan Qi Fu” was derived from Lao Zi’s *Tao Te Ching*, meant to restore the original appearance of Kunqu and to witness the revival of Kunqu traditions. It claimed to concentrate on the minor art of temple theatre, which is differentiated from the orientation and expression of the “hall edition”, but there is internal continuity between the two editions.

It can be said then, that in the second decade of the new century, Kunqu returned to its other place of origin, the garden.

Since 2011, *The Peony Pavilion*, produced by Zhang Jun Kunqu Art Centre, and starred in by Zhang Jun, has been performed in a garden in Zhujiyajiao, Shanghai, annually during summer and autumn to show the live-action *Sweet Dream in the Garden*. Shanghai Kunqu Troupe has also been working with Fosun Group to present Xiqu like *Baoyu and Miaoyu* in Yu Garden since 2015.

In Suzhou, the Master-of-Nets Garden, which was built in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and rehabilitated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, has hosted activities including Kunqu and Pingtan. In 2019, Suzhou Kunqu Troupe began to perform the live-action garden edition of *Sweet Dream in the Garden* along with immersive additions of incense lore and tea culture. Also, in 2019, *Six Records of Floating Life*, written by Shen Fu of the Qing Dynasty, was staged in the Pavilion of Surging Waves which was constructed in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The interweaving of Kunqu and gardens, fictional characters and real figures, as well as the past and present aroused the yearning for ancient times in the audience’s mind. The event was also convenient for the audience to take pictures to post and spread on the internet.

Due to the impact of Covid-19, theatres were closed in 2020. In July, Shanghai Kunqu Troupe collaborated with the Internet tourism enterprise Ctrip to launch the “Pu Jiang Lan Yun” Kunqu performance, played Xiqu highlights such as *The Peony Pavilion: Sweet Dreams in the Garden*, *Madame White Snake: Lake Tour* and *The Jade Hairpin: Autumn River* during the night cruise on the Huangpu River. In order to revive the market, the Suzhou government especially planned the night economics program “Gusu 8:30”, in which Suzhou Kunqu Troupe performed the special edition of *Fifteen Strings of Cash* (four highlights within one hour) to promote the brand of “night economics”.

There is no doubting the commercial potential of theatre performances, and it is fairly unremarkable that performances are commodified - but it has been surprising to see a Xiqu prioritizing planning and marketing in the way Kunqu has. On the one hand, this has been determined by the characteristics of Kunqu. Unlike most popular Xiqu, Kunqu is elaborately polished by literati in gardens and halls, offering an arty-crafty opportunity for consumption of classics in modern cities; On the other hand, a number of intellectuals and cultural merchants who do not come from Xiqu/Kunqu communities have become Kunqu producers, opening up a new path for Kunqu to



■ Kunqu *Hu Family Manor*

locate the audience and expand its market.

Since the Qing Dynasty, the focus of Xiqu has shifted to performance. Famous actors are usually the head of a troupe, determining the repertoire and primary performance features of a troupe and even a Xiqu genre. Every element in performance centres on the famous actor, including the script, the band, costumes, make-ups, advertisements, and the box office. However, Kunqu is different, for it has no tradition of the “star system”, which may inadvertently have left space for the “producer system”.

The success of the youth edition of *The Peony Pavilion* and *The Jade Hairpin* by Suzhou Kunqu Troupe is undoubtedly inseparable from the contribution of the producer Bai Xianyong. Not to mention Bai’s cultural influence in China as a famous writer and cultural activist, the “youth edition” itself is a strategy to stimulate the classical beauty with the brilliance of “youth”. Since the “youth edition” came out, most performances of many troupes have been titled with “XX edition” to underline their features, which has indirectly proved the effectiveness of the “youth edition” strategy.

If the “hall edition” of the “high-end business consumption” promoted by private companies organized several Kunqu performances in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it was troupes that actively sought for cooperation in the second decade. After the establishment of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 2018, Kunqu has naturally become a part of “cultural tourism”. When Kunqu “returns” to halls and gardens, it will no longer belong to daily life as once to halls and gardens. Whether it is able to “return” to the public and performance market depends on the next decade.

Kunqu is called “panda” Xiqu due to its rarity. In the 20 years after its inscription on the list of “intangible cultural heritage”, there was a significant increase in performance opportunities and new scripts of Kunqu, winning the favour of a group of well-educated youths.

Despite all this though concerns still linger; exactly how much protection has been given to Kunqu as “intangible cultural heritage”? When Kunqu stood on the edge of extinction in the 1920s, the “Kunqu training school” was founded, recruiting students to inherit more than 400 Xiqu highlights. Today, the generation of Kunqu actors is expert in about ten pieces. As teachers grow older and pass away, many Xiqu highlights are in danger of dying out. Confronting the problem, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and troupes have carried out policies and plans. For example, in 2019, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism funded all Kunqu troupes in the nation to sort out and record 60 Xiqu highlights. Kunqu troupes of Shanghai, Zhejiang, and Yongjia organized the “Yangtze River Delta Joint Training” and received remarkable results. However, the rehearsal of newly edited plays still occupy too many resources. Although troupes keep performing Xiqu highlights every weekend, traditions and inheritance are still weak on the whole.

Kunqu is honoured as the “ancestor of Xiqu”. The significance of protecting Kunqu is to defend the gene of traditional Chinese theatre art, to retain yesterday for tomorrow, and to preserve the past for the future. It is always a controversial issue of how the ancient traditional art exists and stands in the present, and the cognition of “intangible cultural heritage” requires more prudence from ideas to practice.

# The History of Kunqu and Contemporary Artists

LI XIAO

With a history of more than 600 years, Kunqu is the culmination of ancient Chinese culture. It represents the convergence of different methods of diction, singing, speaking, performing, and the like, among which the most important is its tune, or Qupai as they are officially known. At the junction of the Yuan Dynasty and the Ming Dynasty, Nanqu (southern qu) was widely sung in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, and eventually a Kunshan tune was gradually formed. According to my research and investigation, Kunqu's history could roughly be divided into three 200-year periods.



■ Kunqu *The peddler and the beauty*



■ Kunqu *Mother Scolds Hong Chengchou*

In the first 200-years, or more precisely, from the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the early Kunshan tune developed very slowly and it was relatively rough. In the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, most musicians and literati in the Kunshan area were good at singing Beiqu (northern qu), and later they also learned to sing Nanqu. Over a 100-year period the early Kunshan tune had developed slowly. By the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it had been a fashion in Suzhou to sing the Nanqu and southern Sanqu (popular genre of song from dynasties, the Yuan to the Qing, with emotions as subject matter) with a Kunshan tune.

At that time, Wei Liangfu and others reinvented the Kunshan tune. His greatest achievement was that he had reformed the singing, and wrote an important book *Nan Ci Yin Zheng* (Correcting the Southern Ci) which had become a guide for later generations to learn to sing, helping to form the tradition of passing on the art through music masters. Instruments for accompaniment had also been developed to a great extent. In addition to flute, pipe, Sheng and Pipa, Xiao, Ruan and Zheng had been added to give better effects to the flowing and graceful Kunshan tune. According to the music theory of melodies for the Kunshan tune, Liang Chenyu created a legendary play *Huan Sha Ji* (*Tale of Washing Silks*) and performed it on the stage, which was a very important turning point in the history of Kunqu, because the stage performance spread the soft and gentle new melodies all over the country and created a new era for the Kunshan tune.

In the second 200-years, from the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the new melodies of the Kunshan tune developed rapidly, with Suzhou as



■ Kunqu *Horse Trader*



■ Kunqu *The Palace of Eternal Life*

the center, spreading to Beijing in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. At the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it entered into a period of prosperity. By the end of the Ming Dynasty, the name "Kunqu" had been popular all over the country. During this period, more and more new works were created by the literati. There were almost 100 authors, including Shen Jing, a master of Kunqu, and Tang Xianzu, a great dramatist, and nearly 300 kinds of legends were adapted and created. Tang Xianzu, as a famous playwright, advocated that creation should be based on "creative ideas, appealing points, inner spirits and literary grace". He created far-reaching "Four Dreams" legends, namely, *Story of Purple Hairpin*, *The Peony Pavilion*, *Nanke Dream* and *Handan Dream*. *The Peony Pavilion*, with the famous image of Du Liniang, was the most famous play. Its ideological and artistic qualities had reached a very high level. The theoretical research of Kunqu had been highly developed as well, and one of the famous works in this genre was *Qu Lv (Rules of Tunes)* written by Wang Jide. The literati's involvement in the creation and research of Kunqu was an important reason for its prosperity.

Kunqu had continued to flourish since the middle and late 17<sup>th</sup> century. The works of Suzhou school, headed by Li Yu (Yu for jade), were popular among the folks. These writers dared to touch the realistic contradiction and made new exploration in art, which promoted the development of the Kunqu stage art. Later, Li Yu (Yu for fishing), another unique dramatist and theorist of Kunqu, wrote a book "*Xian Qing Ou Ji (Occasional Essays at Leisure Time)*" with creative achievements. During this period, Hong Sheng's *The Palace of Eternal Life* and Kong Shangren's *Peach Blossom Fan* pushed the literary creation of Kunqu to new heights.

The performance of Kunqu entered a competitive era of Zhezixi (highlights) during the first half 18<sup>th</sup> century. A large amount of this kind performance made Kunqu move towards another kind of prosperity, that is, the high development of the performing art and the prosperity of Zhezixi. An anthology of Kunqu compiled by Qian Decang collected 430 pieces of Kunqu Zhezixi, which comprehensively reflected the performing features and characteristics of the times.

In the third and final 200-year period, from the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present day, Kunqu had entered an era that was dominated by Zhezixi, and its performances were extremely prosperous. The reason for this boom in popularity, notably in the cities Suzhou and Yangzhou, was that the Zhezixi performance level had reached its peak. In the history of Kunqu, this was a very special period, for it coopted and developed through osmosis with the development Huabu Xiqu (other local Xiqu), giving it an added vibrancy.

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Kunqu in Beijing, suffered a fatal hit and was replaced by Jingju completely. However, in the south, Kunqu still had power in its Suzhou and Yangzhou strongholds, continuing its prosperity. There were still 39 Kunqu troupes, including the Old Jixiu Troupe, and 198 main actors or actresses in Suzhou. They would be active as long as half a century. From the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Kunqu paid more attention to improving its performance. But at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, both in the north and in the south, the feeble Kunqu went downhill quickly. However, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, thanks to the advocacy of Jingju Master Mei Lanfang, Kunyi (kun for Kunqu and yi for Yiyang tune) troupes from rural areas came to Beijing one after another, regaining the vitality of northern Kunqu, but this newfound enthusiasm swiftly disappeared due to the outbreak of the Anti-Japanese war. In the south, four famous troupes, Dazhang, Daya, Hongfu and Quanfu, had been performing in Shanghai to maintain the “Suzhou style”. In 1921, the “Kunqu Imparting Institute” was set up in Suzhou to cultivate a new generation of actors or actresses with the middle-name of “chuan”, to continue the life of Southern Kunqu. However, the situation of Kunqu was hopeless. Until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both the northern and southern Kunqu were deep in a slump.

Thanks to the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the Kunqu art had a chance for revival. The new government gave special focus to Kunqu and recalled the scattered actors or actresses to educate new generations. In 1954, the East China Research Institute of Xiqu recruited the first batch of Kunqu students. Then Zhejiang Kunsu Troupe successfully adapted and performed “Shi Wu Guan” (*Fifteen Strings of Coins*) in 1956, which had a great influence on the overall revival of Kunqu. With the support of the government, more Kunqu actors returned to their positions and successively set up troupes to promote the performance actively. In the 1960s, the first generation of young Kunqu actors or actresses for the new country, such as Wang Shiyu, Zhang Jiqing, Hua Wenyi, Liang Guyin, Cai Zhengren, Ji Zhenhua, and



others besides, emerged and began to show talent. After "the Cultural Revolution", Kunqu Troupes and cadet classes in China were restored one after another, and seven troupes were reorganized once again. After several years of restoration and rectification, Chinese Kunqu made frequent visits and performances, and expanded its international influence. Young stars Shi Xiaomei, Hu JinFang and Zhang Fuguang also came to the fore as incredibly talented performers.

Although the Kunqu on the stage today is not as spectacular as that of the last century, insiders have made great efforts. They emphasize inheritance, and work hard with wisdom and spirituality. A number of shining stars of Kunqu have been cultivated. It is very gratifying to see that there are descendants in each Hangdang (image system of the Xiqu), including Sheng, Dan, Jing, Mo, and Chou.

To conclude this overview of Kunqu, I'd like to introduce three of most brilliant modern stars on the stage of Kunqu:

Zhang Jingxian, Dan (female role) and first-class actress of Shanghai Kunqu Troupe, has won the Plum Performance Award of Chinese Drama twice. She graduated from Huju School as a major of Gunmen Dan (female, unmarried and living in her boudoir) and had learned from famous Kunqu masters including Zhu Chuanming. Her appearance in costume and make-up is dignified. She has a beautiful voice, can perform a broad range of character types, and has a performance style capable of conveying hardness and softness. Her performance is delicate and vivid, and her singing and reciting is fresh and refined. She has starred in *Blood Hand*, *Sima Xiangru*, and *Ban Zhao*, which were all highly praised by experts. She is good at performing highlights like *Beheading Dou E* and *Stabbing the Tiger*, which showcase her singing

■ Kunqu *Hu Family Manor*



■ Kunqu *The Palace of Eternal Life*





■ Kunqu *The tale of Princess Baihua*

and reciting skills. In decades of artistic practice, she has created many memorable and varied moments on stage. Highlights, such as *Stabbing the Tiger*, are notably difficult performances to get right. In 1935, Master Mei Lanfang visited the former Soviet Union and his *Stabbing the Tiger* made Brecht feel the charm of Xiqu. In this play, Zhang Jingxian plays the role of a maid in the palace, pretending to be a princess to assassinate the enemy. With her exquisite acting skills, she depicts the ancient chivalrous woman who is soft outside but strong inside. She is also famous for her singing skills in *Beheading Dou E*. In the tragic atmosphere, Dou E's sorrow is promoted to solemn and stirring, and her emotion is strongly touching, which has showed that Zhang Jingxian has solid basic performance skills. She is always diligent and eager to learn, and has outstanding creative ability to shape characters. She plays different types of characters, and can explore different performance methods from different characters. She has played the role of Ms. Tie in *Blood Hand*, which is a brand-new image. She used a variety of Dan performance means to explore the dark psychology of the role's desire for power. She also played the role of Concubine Yang in *Palace Of Eternal Life*, a role of noble identity and with inner pursuit of eternal love. In different situations, the emotional tone of a role remains unchanged, but the dramatic behaviors are different—therefore, Zhang Jingxian is a very creative first-class actress.

Shi Hongmei, Dan and first-class actress in the Northern Kunqu Theatre, has won the Plum Performance Award of Chinese Drama once. She studied in the undergraduate and graduate programmes at the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts. This allowed her to train with several famous masters, specializing in Guimen Dan. She is gifted and intelligent. Her appearance in costume and make-up is pretty and charming. She has developed the skills of different Xiqu, such as Bangzi, Jingju and Kunqu. She can play a wide range of character types in both civil and military plays, and has a sweet and fluent voice, graceful and beautiful posture, exquisite skills and elegant stage manner. She holds high artistic accomplishment and is good at playing different types of roles. A performance style of “beauty in emotion, art and artistic conception” has been formed through her years of stage practice. Her water sleeve performance can be called a masterpiece, and was recognized with awards for “Unique Skills of Xiqu”. Her singing and dancing in *Lady Wang Zhaojun* could also be regarded as a masterpiece, possessing as it does clear rhythm, a sense of propriety, and excellent skills, strongly showing the role's characteristics in the specific situation: she could go deep into the hearts of the characters, and grasps the complex changing emotions of Zhaojun who was leaving her country to Hun (an ancient nationality in China) as a bride. Following the principle of blending feelings and scenes and combining the virtual and the real, her expression of the feelings has something to rely on and she has created a unique image of Zhaojun in northern Kunqu: being sorrowful and resentful. In *You Yuan Jing Meng (Visiting the Garden and Waking up from a Dream with a Start)*, a famous highlight of Kunqu, Shi Hongmei pays attention to the exploration of the emotional connotation of the roles, on the basis of inheriting



■ Kunqu *The Palace of Eternal Life*

the performance of her predecessors. She makes full use of the changes of her eyes and her postures to convey the role's different feelings: inner yearning, helplessness, joyfulness and attachment. In *Li Huiniang* and *A Noble Son Choosing an Incompatible Career*, she has created brilliant artistic images by using various performance means. Shi Hongmei is quiet and elegant, diligent in learning, and unremittingly pursuing art—pursuing the highest level of art with her soul and life. She is a rare excellent research-type performing talent.

Ke Jun, Wen Wu Lao Sheng (an old male role who is good at both civil and military plays) and first-class actor of Jiangsu Kunqu Theatre, is also the Plum Performance Award of Chinese Drama. He graduated from Jiangsu Xiqu School and majored in Wusheng (male role good at military plays). His exquisite military performance, mixed with notable civil performances, won him the Wenhua Award. His appearance in costume and make-up possesses soldierly bearing. He combined his solid military performing skills with his scholarly and unrestrained style of civil performance, which formed him a unique and distinctive performance style. Ke Jun's performance focuses

on exploring creativity on the basis of tradition. He has participated in the planning, production and directing of many original plays. He is good at performing *Nine Lotus Lantern*, *Lin Chong Flees at Night*, *Sinking in the River*, etc., and plays the leading roles in *Peach Blossom Fan* and *The Injustice to Dou'e*. His performance in *Lin Chong Flees at Night* is known as “living Lin Chong” because of his emotional expression of eyes, his rhythmic singing skills and complicated and changeable postures, endowing the role with soul and vividly showing Lin Chong's heroic spirit in adversity. He has a deep understanding of the performance of Kunqu and is good at revealing the inner world of the characters through the expressive power of the traditional Kunqu and creating forms to express the deep ideas of the characters. Therefore, while inheriting the tradition, he has tried some experimental Kunqu plays which are without plots, using traditional means to express an abstract and ethereal thought. In the experimental play *Faust*, he interprets Faust's devil psychological world and modern philosophy brought to the audience by the dialogues between body and soul. This kind of experiment has great repercussions in the domestic and foreign theatrical circles, which not only improves his artistic thought, but also trains his performing ability. Ke Jun, one of the excellent new generation of Kunqu actors, is good at thinking and holds the courage to explore new art.

The profound accumulation of Chinese culture, then, continues to breed the Kunqu art, which has the most perfect performance system of Xiqu. Chinese Kunqu has been inherited by generations of excellent actors, and has entered a new era.

## A Tale at New Time: Written on the Eve of 400<sup>th</sup> Performances of Youth -version of *The Peony Pavilion*

ZHOU QIN

*The Peony Pavilion* is the defining tale of Ming Dynasty theater. Such is its aura, it is said that a love for the play is “aroused unconsciously and makes you passionately devoted to it. You can die for it when you are alive, and you can live for love when you are dead” (Tang Xianzu, Inscription of *The Peony Pavilion*). Its literary merits of “gentle rain and soft wind, and a pleasant boat...as innocent as flowers, unaware of the time sweeping past like a river” (lyrics from *Jingmeng* of *The Peony Pavilion*) have also influenced many young men and women, informing their persistent pursuit of life ideal. For hundreds of years, *The Peony Pavilion* has become one of the three most popular Kunqu along with *Tale of the Pi Pa* by Gao Ming of Yuan Dynasty and *The Palace of Internal Life* by Hong Sheng of Qing Dynasty. Its vivid characters such as Du Liniang, Liu Mengmei, Chunxiang, Du Bao, Chen Zuiliang and Shi Daogu, even the ideas of talent of Tang Xianzu, the author of *The Peony Pavilion*, were all spread and accepted world-wide by the Kunqu theater.

There were 55 chapters in *The Peony Pavilion* legend, which was similar to most of the legends of Ming and Qing Dynasties. It was so lengthy that it took several days and nights to perform them all. Therefore, *The Peony Pavilion* has been performed on the stage in the form of selections for more than 300 years since the late Ming Dynasty and the early Qing Dynasty, when Kunqu theater entered its flourishing period. It was extremely rare for the whole play to be performed. *The New Collection of Zhuibaiqiu*, which was compiled and engraved in the 29<sup>th</sup> to 39<sup>th</sup> year of the Qianlong reign of Qing Dynasty, contained 12 plays of *The Peony Pavilion*, which were often performed in the Kunqu theater at that time, including Xuetang, Quannong, Youyuan, Jingmeng, Xumeng, Lihun, Mingpan, Shihua, Jiaohua, Wenlu, Diaoda and Yuanjia. But there were actually 11 plays when compared with Tang Xianzu's original works.

About 70 years later, during the reign of Daoguang, there were 10 frequently performed plays of *The Peony Pavilion* which were recorded in *Review on the Xiqu*, including Xuetao, Quannong, Youyuan, Duihua, Jingmeng, Xumeng, Lihun, Mingpan, Diaoda and Yuanjia. Compared with the original version, there were 8 plays in total. More than 70 years later, in the end of Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China, there were 14 frequently performed plays of *The Peony Pavilion* in the performances of Quanfu troupe, including Xuetao, Quannong, Youyuan, Yonghua, Jingmeng, Lihun, Huapan, Shihua, Jiaohua, Wenlu, Xunyuan, Diaoda and Yuanjia. It was 12 plays when compared with the original version. These plays were generally passed down by the artists of Suzhou “Chuan” generation. Taking into account the statistical errors that may be caused by the adoption of different Xiqu literature, the frequently performed plays of *The Peony Pavilion* changed a little during the past 200 years (from the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), but there was no significant change.

According to the principles of authenticity, integrity and inheritance that UNESCO must follow in identifying the world cultural heritage, it's unfortunate that only a dozen plays of *The Peony Pavilion* can actually be listed as the representative works

■ The poster of Youth-version of *The peony Pavilion*





■ The cast and creators of Youth-version of *The peony Pavilion*



of human oral and intangible heritage—i.e. as an organic part of Chinese Kunqu. These excerpts were well tempered, splendid and sustained, and could represent the highest achievement of Kunqu. However, it was difficult to fully show the ideological features of *The Peony Pavilion* since the plot was incomplete. Facing the modern theater and the young audience, editors and performers often fell into a dilemma: it was obviously not enough to perform only a few Xiqu highlights when promoting the *The Peony Pavilion* to a young audience. It must be complete and the plot must be coherent. However, there were many practical problems that were difficult to solve when performing according to the original works. The excessively long performance time was enough to discourage modern audiences. Therefore, the most important task was to adapt the desk text, rearrange the plots, and present a basically complete story on the stage, so as to make it adapt to the aesthetic needs of modern theatergoers and young audience as much as possible.

The earliest and most influential revised versions of *The Peony Pavilion*, were YuYan's version (premiered in Shanghai in December 1957, adapted by Su Xuean, and starred in by Yu Zhenfei and Yan Huizhu), Zhang Jiqing's version (premiered in Suzhou in October 1982, arranged by Hu Ji and starred by Zhang Jiqing and Dong Jihao), Chen Shizheng's version (premiered in New York in July 1999, directed by Chen Shizheng and starred by Qian Yi and Wen Yuhang), and Shangkun classic version (premiered in Shanghai in August 1999, edited by Wang Renjie, directed by Guo Xiaonan, and starred by Cai Zhengren, Zhang Jingxian, Yue Meiti, Li Xuemei, Zhang Jun and Shen Yili). Among these adaptations, Chen Shizheng's version had been widely criticized for being far away from the basic characteristics of Kunqu, and had never been performed in Chinese mainland. However, most of the rest gained certain social benefits and production experiences.

At the end of 2002, Mr. Bai Xianyong chose Suzhou Kunqu House as the base to invite cultural scholars and Xiqu artists from both sides of the Taiwan Strait to create a youth version of *The Peony Pavilion*. The essence of the so-called “youth version” was nothing more than trying to use young Kunqu actors to perform classical love stories of youth, so as to introduce the national traditional culture to the young generation of Xiqu audience. The foremost problem is the arrangement and editing of the script when telling and performing well of story of *The Peony Pavilion*. Based on a deep understanding of the theme and plot of *The Peony Pavilion*, the production team, guided by the principle of “only deleting but not changing”, followed the essentials of traditional production of “setting up the mainstream” (interpreting Tang Xianzu's theme of praising youth and love), “cutting the thread” (pruning the offshoots that are estranged from the subject), and “dense needlework” (paying attention to the detailed description of the whole structure and key parts). They deleted the original 55 episodes to 27 according to the development clues of *The Peony Pavilion* legend which was “dying for love”, “rebirth for love” and the “realization of love”. It was compiled into three volumevolumes: Love in Dreams, Love of Humans and Ghosts,

and Love between Du and Liu, which reflected the cultural spirit and the logic of the original work more truly and completely. The total performance time was expected to be about nine hours. Could the young audience stay so long? The answer was not clear.

Another problem was that, except for a dozen traditional excerpts, the rest of them were not preserved on the stage. Fortunately, both texts and music scores were preserved, and the skills of intangible cultural heritage were retained by the old artists, who could “make” out new plays according to the traditional performance formula. Thus, the performing artists Wang Shiyu and Zhang Jiqing were invited from Hangzhou and Nanjing to be in charge of the teaching and rehearsal. The orchestration process lasted for a whole year, from basic skill training, instruction of singing and reading to on-stage practice, as well as music arrangement, costume design, prop production, which has brought a radical development in the professional level and mental outlook of the performers and staff of Suzhou Kunqu House and its troupes. In the last rehearsal, the theater rented the first floor of the under-construction Marriott International Hotel, built a temporary stage according to the ratio of 1:1 mimicking the grand stage of Taipei Theater, and invited graduate students from the school of Arts of Soochow University as the audience. It performed two rounds and six performances in three days, which received a good response. Bai Xianyong said excitedly, “we are half done!”.

At around 11 pm on May 1, 2004, the Taipei premiere of the youth-version *The Peony Pavilion* of Suzhou Kunqu Theater came to an end. Taipei Theater, which could accommodate more than 1,400 audience members, remained fully packed, as no one wanted to leave. At last, the chief planner Bai Xianyong stepped onto the stage, and joined the main actors Shen Fengying and Yu Jiulin to greet the audience and took a curtain call. Then all the audience stood up and responded with a long period of enthusiastic applause. Major Taipei newspapers made an exception to publish large-scale stills and commentary reports of the youth-version *The Peony Pavilion* with a prominent front-page headline. The reporter believed that the theater's popularity even exceeded that of the popular pop stars, which was unexpected to the organizers.

Twenty days later, from May 21 to 23, the same grand occasion was repeated at the Shatin Town Hall in Hong Kong. It proved extremely hard to get a ticket, and the audience was wild with joy. The city was full of discussion about Du Liniang. The media exclaimed that there was a whirlwind of Kunqu in Hong Kong. Twenty days later, the whirlwind took advantage of the situation and headed north to Suzhou, the source of Kunqu. From June 11 to 13, “there was a stream of people which had not been seen for many years in front of Cunju Hall of Soochow University. The ticket holders walked into the theater enthusiastically in groups. People without tickets asked around anxiously, hoping to get one by chance”. Before the beginning, more than 2200 seats in the hall were occupied, and even the surrounding areas and aisles



■ Youth-version of *The peony Pavilion*

were full of people. Although college students of different majors, grades and genders have different tastes, they have a common feeling: “Kunqu is really the quintessence of Chinese culture!”<sup>1</sup>

Later, the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* has repeatedly succeeded and gained fame at many places, including the World Heritage Convention (Suzhou) in July, Chinese Art Festival (Hangzhou) in September, and the Beijing International Music Festival in October. In the next few years, the troupe performed in more than 20 large and medium-sized cities in Shanghai, Macao, Tianjin, Nanjing, Foshan, Tainan, Hsinchu, Shenzhen, Guilin, Guangzhou, Xiamen, Xi'an, Chengdu, Lanzhou, Fuzhou, Wuhan, Hefei, Zhengzhou, Fuzhou, Wuxi, Chongqing and Shenzhen, and traveled

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■ Youth-version of *The peony Pavilion*



across the oceans to the United States, the United Kingdom, Greece, and Singapore for performances. Wherever they went, the theater was full, the media was in hot pursuit and the praise was like a tide. At the end of 2011, the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* grandly held 200<sup>th</sup> performance and celebration reception in NCPA. The troupe set out again after a short rest. They visited more than 30 large and medium-sized cities, including Changzhou, Nanchang, Changsha, Yueyang, Yancheng, Jinan, Xuzhou, Dalian, Ningbo, Shijiazhuang, Zhongshan, Guiyang, Wenzhou, Kunming, Shantou, Nanning, Taichung, Taiyuan, Zhoushan, Zhuhai, Taizhou, Yangzhou, Quanzhou, Huai'an, Suqian and Lishui. In September 2016, they went to London to commemorate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the deaths of Tang Xianzu and Shakespeare. In July 2017, they went to Athens to participate in the China-Greece Cultural Exchange and Cultural Industry Cooperation Year, which contributed to the cultural exchanges between China and Europe. As of January 2021, the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* has had a total of 394 performances, and most of the previous performances were directly targeted at colleges and universities. The cumulative number of audience members was close to one million, and the audience which visited through the network and other channels made the grand total exceed 100 million. Among them, young audiences, mainly college students, accounted for the vast majority.

The global popularity of the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* has aroused widespread interest from academic circles at home and abroad. Zeng Yongyi, a famous drama scholar of Taiwan University, believed that “this is an epoch-making performance, and its significance is extraordinary.” “In terms of Xiqu being performed in modern society, it has caused great repercussions.” “For the future development of Kunqu, I believe it will have a boosting effect”, so it would become “a great event in the history of Xiqu in the future”. Ye Changhai, a famous drama scholar of Shanghai Theater Academy, summed up his impression of the play with three words: “pure, clean and elegant”. He thought that the performance “fully demonstrated the charm of Kunqu, so “it is the most beautiful Kunqu of *The Peony Pavilion* I have ever seen, which is closer to our ideal masterpiece”. Wilt Ideoma, a famous Sinologist at Harvard University, pointed out that “this performance is an ideal arrangement to use the vast stage and modern theater technology to perform Xiqu”, which amounted to a “very special aesthetic experience”. After 18 years of hard work, Bai Xianyong's team and Suzhou Kunqu Theater have erected an art monument, which has not only successfully expanded the living space of Kunqu, but also rejuvenated this ancient traditional art. It has not only cultivated a generation of young actors represented by Shen Fengying and Yu Jiulin, and pushed them to the center of Kunqu stage, Moreover, it awakened contemporary college students' enthusiastic concern and deep recognition of national culture, which could be called a major cultural spectacle in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The success of the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* lay in Bai Xianyong's creativity of “youth”. This has caused a lot of controversy in the circle: how could classical

tradition and youth fashion be confused since there was a great deal of difference between the two? However, Bai's idea is reasonable if we think deeply. The theme of *The Peony Pavilion* is to praise youth and love. This is a cultural theme with eternal significance, which is also the main reason why *The Peony Pavilion* has been performed for a long time. Therefore, no matter in terms of the cultural spirit of *The Peony Pavilion* or the survival status of Kunqu, this idea is undoubtedly reasonable. For this reason, the theater employed outstanding young actors to perform so as to more realistically approach and express the characters in the play from the aspects of appearance, posture and voice. As Wang Jide said, "the old teacher comes on stage", although "there is no flaw in the measure and step, it can't make people applaud"; while "young performers" may "say wrong words and make wrong steps", but they were "charming and romantic", which was "heartbreaking enough to attract people" (Volume 4 of *Qu Lv*). Shen Fengying and Yu Jiulin, who were responsible for passing on Suzhou Kunqu, were pure, elegant and gifted with good voice. Their temperament and appearance were most suitable for playing the role of *Sheng* and *Dan* in Kunqu. Shen Guofang, who played Chunxiang, Qu Binbin, who played Du Bao, Chen Lingling, who played Du's mother, Tang Rong, who played Judge Hu, Lv Jia, who played Yang Po, and Liu Chunlin, who played Hualang, were all graduated in the same year, in their early twenties. Under the guidance of famous teachers, hard training and cooperation, they finally interpreted the story of *The Peony Pavilion* in a touching and tortuous way.

Certainly, "youth version" cannot be simply equated with the use of young actors. Bai's creativity at least included youth theme, young audience and matched performance methods and aesthetic orientation. The most important thing was not to be separated from the traditional model. First of all, we should be in awe of the original *The Peony Pavilion* and the basic characteristics of Kunqu. The youth version adhered to the guiding ideology of inheritance first, separation of inheritance and innovation, that is, on the one hand, there was only deleting in script reorganization and no changing, and Tang's original words would be kept as much as possible. The famous sections were cautiously and meticulously preserved. They abided by Kun's singing rules, respected the traditional performance program and five methods, and paid attention to it carefully, so as to achieve perfection. On the other hand, for some specific postures, plots and even role arrangement, especially for some new sections that have to be rearranged to run through the plot, since there was no reference, they gave full play to the creative ability of the old artists and followed the practice of "making a play" of the old artists of the "Chuan" generation. Practice in the theater proves that the above ideas and practices were a great success. Wang Shiyu and Zhang Jiqing used their experience accumulated in 50 years of acting career to try the most reasonable way of expression according to their deep understanding of Kunqu, not sticking to one style and not abandoning one method. They built a bridge between the classical drama and the modern audience, so that the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* could be presented as perfect as possible on the stage. The old plays such

as Xuetang, Jingmeng, Xunmeng, Shihua, Mingpan and Yingkao were traditional but not hackneyed. The new plays such as Lvji, Hunyou, Yougou, Mingshi, Ruhang and Suoyuan were gorgeous but not kitsch. Shidaogu and Yangpo, who changed their make-up to look good, were also recognized by the vast majority of the audience. The style of the whole play is elegant, the old and the new style were blended in harmony, and it has reached a high level of directing and producing.

The best model of Kunqu performance is “Suzhou style”. Since this model was formed in Qianlong and Jiaqing period of Qing Dynasty, it is also called “QianJia tradition”. The old artists of “Chuan” generation recalled:

“The old man was very strict in teaching Xiqu performing. As long as one was taught by the old man, no matter who he or she was on the stage or taught students somewhere else, they all had a standard mode. People called this specification as “Kunqu model” and “Suzhou style” (Zhou Chuanying, *Sixty Years of Kunqu Career*).

This is actually the cultural characteristics of Kunqu art which are derived from the original environment: in terms of the form of expression, it is implicit, simple, elegant and unassuming, rather than luxurious, complicated and gaudy. As far as the method of expression is concerned, it is exquisite, normative and detail oriented. This is not the case that the artistic styles produced in Suzhou are the same, such as gardens,

■ Youth-version of *The peony Pavilion*





■ Youth-version of *The peony Pavilion*



crafts, Xiqu, folk arts, even costumes and furniture. Specific to the Kunqu itself, according to the description of people in Qing Dynasty, in the 49<sup>th</sup> year of Qianlong's period (1784), the elites of “hundreds of Kunqu's works from three counties of Suzhou, Hangzhou, Yangzhou” were gathered to greet the emperor in his inspection in the southern China. (*The Biography of Jin Dehui*, Gong Zizheng, Qing Dynasty). This is expanded upon further by Jinxiuban:

“Jixiu, is the best of Suzhou troupe. Actors of Jixiuban were all the masters in the operatic circle and managed to be faithful to the essence of arts. While the delicate rhythm and the fineness of work absorbed people, which made them feel like meeting with the ancient people. Only the first-rate could go there”. Yanlan Xiaopu by Wu Changyuan in Qing Dynasty).

It is crucial that any modern rendition has “managed to be faithful to the essence of arts”. In other words tunes and lyrics should be true to the nature and avoid rhetorical wording, performances should be soft in singing and dancing, and avoid hoarse exhaustion. There were only drums, flutes and gongs in the scene, but no noise, and there were only one table and two chairs for props. As for costumes, it would be better “wear worn-out than wrong ones”, and performers “attach importance to skills rather than appearance”. On the other hand, “using the tune of Shuimo, and beating time with clappers”, and “emphasizing on the pronunciation of the word, sound harmony, clear articulation” (Notes on Composing Music by Shen chongsui in Ming Dynasty), as well as pursuing delicate rhythm and the fineness of work, should be of paramount importance. As a result, the overall appearance of the “three small role” (including Xiaosheng, Xiaodan, and Xiaochou) as the domination, sentiment as the principal thing, vividness and delicateness is formed. This is the “Suzhou style” that has been regarded as the acme of theater for hundreds of years.

The youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* is based on the contemporary and reveres the tradition. Under the premise of fully understanding and respecting the formal norms of art and aesthetic characteristics of Kunqu, facing the modern theater and modern audience, they try to focus on the spirit of the times and emphasize the aesthetic pursuit of art. Here, “emphasis on skills but not appearance” is reasonably extended to “emphasis on both skills and appearance”, and “wear worn-out than wrong ones” is also renovated to “wear right and beauty”, which has been successfully practiced the modern extension of “Suzhou style”. In general, the new Suzhou style marked by the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* is gaining more and more understanding, support and applause.

The success of the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* also benefited from the unswerving sense of quality and advanced marketing concept. From script compilation to actor selection, from master rehearsal guiding to music production, from costume design to stage setting, from bilingual subtitles to advertising tickets, all



■ Youth-version of *The peony Pavilion*

of them were elaborately planned and polished. The team strived for overall perfection and exquisite details without calculating the cost. At the same time, they were not passively waiting for the choice of the market, but actively choosing the market, and determined the marketing focus as the young audience with college students as the main body. The production team discarded the obsolete notion of “good wine needs no bush”. They made full use of modern media such as radio, television, Internet, newspapers and periodicals and mobilized all means of communication to reach the audience and publicize widely, from news release, promotion lectures, exchange interviews and column blogs to soliciting articles. Bai Xianyong always took the lead to expand influence and gather popularity.

The youth-version of *The Peony Pavilion* represents the unremitting efforts and initial success of contemporary intellectuals in inheriting and rejuvenating Chinese traditional culture. Its experience undoubtedly has important reference significance, but it is difficult to apply or simply copy. In August 2007, Wen Jiabao, then Premier of the State Council, replied to Shen Fengying and Yu Jiulin to express congratulations and thanks. The letter commended the two for “doing a good job in protecting Kunqu, there is both inheritance and innovation, which has broken new ground for this ancient drama”, and then encouraged them to “edit and perform more, towards the

nation, towards the world, and make contributions to the development of Kunqu”. Premier Wen also happily wrote an inscription: “the colorful peonies are in full bloom, rising stars stand out from the beautiful scene on a pleasant day.” The first sentence commended the great success of the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion*, and the next sentence praised the healthy growth of the new generation of Kunqu talents, sincerely and inspiringly.

It is certain that the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* is not perfect, and some places need to be polished and improved. In addition to the problem of young actors' artistic accomplishment, the criticisms of experts in the same field are more concentrated on the non-Kunqu treatment of stage scenery and accompaniment music. These opinions may only be different opinions out of different aesthetic concepts but have been highly valued and deeply reflected by the production team, and have been absorbed as resources for further improvement. The Suzhou Kunqu Theater will hold 400 performances and celebrations this year. For this reason, the crew is stepping up the rearrangement in order to keep improving and make further progress. It is foreseeable that the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* will surely become perfect through brainstorming and repeated trials, and will eventually grow into a real fine art work, leaving a strong mark in the history of Xiqu.

# Shanghai Kunqu Troupe

YANG HAORAN

Shanghai Kunqu Troupe is a famous performing arts troupe in China. Its history can be traced back to the Jingju and Kunqu Experimental Troupe of Shanghai Xiqu School, which was founded in 1961. In 1978, Yu Zhenfei, master of Jingju and Kunqu, formed Shanghai Kunqu Troupe and served as its first leader.

At the beginning, the members of Shanghai Kunqu Troupe mainly graduated from Shanghai Xiqu School (including actors and actresses, musicians and stage designers). Under the leadership of Yu Zhenfei, Yan Huizhu, and other Kunqu masters, they quickly occupied a place in China's Kunqu circle with their profound artistic heritage and strong lineup.



■ still of Yu Zhenfei and Yan Huizhu

In addition to Shanghai and its surrounding areas, the troupe also performed in Hubei, Shaanxi, Sichuan and other places. In October 1986, the troupe performed in the capital, Beijing, which was warmly welcomed by the people, sparking a shortage in tickets. Cao Yu, a famous Chinese playwright, once praised Shanghai Kunqu Troupe as "the first-class troupe with first-class performances and performers". At present, Shanghai Kunqu Troupe has become the backbone of the Kunqu art inheritance and dissemination in China.

The real vitality of a troupe comes from its artists. Shanghai Kunqu Troupe was famous for having a

group of "national treasures". However, it did not stagnate because of this. Instead, it adhered to the mission and belief of these Kunqu masters, took on the impetus of heritage, and worked hard for the future of Kunqu art.

Under the guidance of the masters, teachers and students worked together and carried forward the inheritance spirit of Kunqu, and soon cultivated a group of outstanding artists, such as Cai Zhengren, Liang Guyin, Zhang Xunpeng, Hua Wenyi, Ji Zhenhua, and the like. In 1986, five artists from Shanghai Kunqu Troupe, including Cai Zhengren and Hua Wenyi, won the Plum Performance Award of Chinese Drama, the highest drama performance award in the country. These artists were active in both stage performances and the cultivation of new performers. They taught everything to the students.

Soon Zhang Jun, Li An, Shen Yili and other representatives of a new generation of Kunqu art talents quickly emerged. Since 2007, another five Kunqu actors from Shanghai Kunqu Troupe, such as Gu Haohao and Wu Shuang, have won the Plum Performance Award, garnering interest from Chinese drama circles. In 2015, the troupe set up the "Kunqu school system" to train Kunqu talents, and organize young actors to study systematically. In 2017, the outstanding performance of young actor Wei Li and actress Jiang Ke in *The Tale of Southern Bough* showed the growth of a new generation of Kunqu performers and brought hope for the future of Kunqu.



■ Cai Zhengren and his disciple Zhang Jun



■ Kunqu *The Tale of Southern Bough*

At the same time, Shanghai Kunqu Troupe was also committed to the construction of its performance repertoire, and has sorted out more than 300 traditional highlights in succession. Large scale plays, such as *Cai Wenji*, *Phoenix Hairpin*, *Pan Jinlian*, *New Butterfly Dream*, and so on, were adapted and written. Among them, *Jingyang Bell* was even recorded as a 3D drama film, and won the Golden Crane "Art Contribution Award" at the 31<sup>st</sup> Tokyo International Film Festival.

The troupe also actively tried to explore the possibility of performing modern stories



■ Kunqu *Mourning the Past*



■ Experimental Kunqu *The Chair*



■ Poster for *Four Dreams in the Camellia Hall*

new ground broken for contemporary Kunqu.

Shanghai Kunqu Troupe has also been active in managing its brand image, placing itself at the forefront of international cultural exchange programs. Its footprint has reached the United States, Britain, Sweden, Germany, Russia, Japan and other countries, as well as Hong Kong and Taiwan.

2016 was the high-watermark for the troupes international operations, as in that year

in Kun. For example, *Mourning the Past* was based on Lu Xun's novel of the same name. Since 2003, this play has been performed dozens of times and won the unanimous praise of the audience.

Another key example of innovative Kunqu comes from an adaptation of *The Chair* by Eugène Ionesco. Adapted by young playwright Yu XiaTing, directed by up and coming director Ni Guangjin, and starring Wu Shuang and Shen Yili, who have both received the Plum Performance Award, the Kunqu experimental play was expressed with the traditional "One table, two chairs" stage setup of orthodox Xiqu. It was through the innovative singing, recitation, acting and acrobatics of the performers – not to mention the virtual performance program – that saw

marking the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the deaths of renowned Kunqu playwright Tang Xianzu (and British playwright William Shakespeare), Shanghai Kunqu Troupe created and performed Tang Xianzu's representative works *Four Dreams in the Camellia Hall* (including *The Peony Pavilion*, *The Handan Dream* and other two works) for a global tour which broke box-office records for commercial Kunqu.

Shanghai Kunqu Troupe can be seen, then, not only as an upholder of an intangible cultural heritage, but also as a key innovator in contemporary operatic arts. With this troupe, the past and present well-being of this most beloved Chinese cultural expression align, allowing us to glimpse both former glories, and the rich potential of things to come.

*YANG HAORAN*  
*Doctoral student at STA.*

## Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre (SDAC): Creativity · Quality · Diversity

LIGUCHUAN



■ Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre

Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre was founded in 1995 after a merger between Shanghai People's Arts Theatre (founded in 1950) and Shanghai Youth Drama Troupe (founded in 1957) to form the city's sole state-owned theatre. SDAC currently owns three theatre venues: "Arts Theatre", "Drama Salon", and "D6 Studio", which is located in the centre's headquarters called the Drama Building.

Additionally, it also manages Shanghai International Dance Centre's two theatres. Through its subsidiary Shanghai Huayi Cultural Communications, SDAC further





■ Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre

operates the “1933 Micro Theatre” as well as the “Sky Theatre”. In 2019, the newly renovated Drama Building was infused with the fundamental concept of creating an “open” theater, with special spaces such as a “theatre space station” and “little dramatist’s house” for audiences to rest, think, and experience, in addition to enjoying shows.

### Overview: A Mission for Artistic Excellency

SDAC aspires to produce works that are inspiring, artistic, and engaging for the people. For more than 20 years, “Produced by SDAC” has come to denote a brand with a repertoire of a vast range of genres, including historical epic (e.g. *Shang Yang, Chancellor of the Qing Empire*), black comedy (e.g. *Scholar and Executioner*), literary adaptation (e.g. *Everlasting Regret*), vintage classicism (e.g. *Under the Shanghai Roof*), social progress reflection (e.g. *1977, Big Brother, The Heart of Heroes*), and much else besides. These works speak the truth, resonate with the public, and achieve both social influence and box office profits.

SDAC has participated in many domestic and foreign art festivals and repeatedly won national, provincial and municipal art awards. As the embodiment of Dean. Huang Zuolin and Prof. Xiong Foxi's theatrical concepts, the Centre gathered a group of artists whose iconic works represent the highest level of artistic achievement in today's China, including Jiao Huang, Lou Jicheng, Zhang Xianheng, Xi Meijuan, Lu Liang, Zhou Yemang, Tian Shui, Yin Zhusheng, Hao Ping, Xu Zheng.



■ Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre

In recent years, the excellent production quality and emphasis on the integrity of the overall performance have become the SDAC's trademarks. The repertoire and style have been deepened step by step, and four major brands have been gradually formed and developed in the field of artistic production: "Modern Original", "Global Stage", "New Wave", and "Classic Reinterpreted". A "New Scripts Production" platform has also been formed to cater to scripts in production.

Under SDAC's unremitting exploration and practice, the productions inherit a freehand drama style with Chinese characteristics, which strive to integrate global trends into their development.

## A home for Artists

At the beginning of SDAC's establishment, the proposed future blueprint included the establishment of a system that attracts and gathers talents, and introduces fair competition. Over the past 20 years, more than 300 Chinese and foreign works have been produced, and more than 10 million audience members have entered their theatres to see a show. The performances have also toured across cities in China, and participated in cultural exchanges with more than 50 countries. SDAC has cultivated a solid theatre market in Shanghai, attracting theatre companies from all over the country and the world to come and perform.

Step by step, SDAC has explored a path that fits its own development. In terms

of developing and producing works, based on clear intellectual property rights, a producer-oriented system has been established. Also, taking into account the uniqueness of the artists profession, an actor club management model has been developed to provide the needed supports and flexibility for artists. Furthermore, SDAC maximizes the usage of its performing and non-performing spaces, perfecting its ability to manage, operate and provide service to better support the need for a professional theater. SDAC continues to expand today and tomorrow's audience by engaging with communities and involves itself in theater education.

The goal of SDAC is to have performances every day in the theatre, rotating the performance programme every week, to have new shows every month, and have a hit every year. Learning from the experience of world theatre management combined with its position in an international cultural metropolis, SDAC is gradually perfecting the

■ Modern drama *The Wave*





■ Modern drama *Under the Shanghai Roof*



■ Modern drama *Shang Yang*

knowledge and talent structure of its management team.

SDAC emphasizes art and theatre education. In recent years, SDAC has paid special attention to young people and insisted on hosting the Shanghai College Drama Festival for 16 consecutive years, and the Shanghai High School Drama Festival for 7 consecutive years, not to mention the the “Drama on Campus” project which tours children’s shows to schools. Furthermore, SDAC’s “prison initiative” and “hospital initiative” brought theatre’s healing energy to prisons and hospitals with great success.

### **A Window to Connect the World**

Since the establishment of the “Asian Contemporary Theatre Season” in 2005, SDAC has gradually extended its reach to different countries around the world. In 2008, it was renamed as “Shanghai International Theatre Festival (ACT)”. ACT has become a communication platform and frontier for foreign art festivals to learn about contemporary Chinese and Asian drama works.

ACT focuses on exploring the margins of the performing arts. Each work reflects to varying degrees the forefront of the development of theatre in the country and region. In addition to performances, there are also extended activities such as workshops, post-performance talks, and reading sessions. So far, the performance groups come from countries and regions including Japan, South Korea, Singapore, India, Malaysia, the Philippines, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Spain, Turkey, Israel, Germany, Russia, and, of course, the various regions of China.



■ Modern drama *Slim Alley*



■ Modern drama *The Wave*

In the past, the performance of translated plays was the main channel for Chinese audiences to appreciate foreign plays. The translated plays by Shanghai People's Arts Theatre and Shanghai Youth Drama Troupe provided a unique perspective, which have become a tour de force of SDAC. After the establishment of SDAC, the performance of translated scripts has become more diversified. In the brand of "Classic Reinterpreted", world classics are performed with brand-new translations and contemporary directors from across the globe. Currently, the plays that have been staged include *Uncle Vanya* by Chekov, *The School for Wives* by Molière, *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams, *Henry V* by Shakespeare, *Electra* by Sophocles, and *Galileo* by Brecht.

The inheritance of a theatre's history and tradition doesn't stop with a set of plays or a building; it also encompasses its artists' vision and passion. The performances on Anfu Road have become a unique landscape in Shanghai. Going to Anfu Road to see a show, and trusting SDAC for its production have gradually become the thing to do, a way of life, and even a habit in the city of Shanghai.

**LIGUCHUAN**

*SDAC Vice Director of Literature & Arts Department.*

# An image overview of “Sheng” and the Kunqu Innovations made by Actor Zhang Jun

ZHONG JUNFANG



■ Final makeup photo of Zhang Jun

Hangdang (different role types) is a unique performing system of Xiqu, and each type has its corresponding image system in scripts and stage performances. As a representative of Hangdang and one of the major roles, Sheng has been the general name of the male protagonist in Nanqu(southern Xiqu) since the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

With the continuous development of Xiqu and the gradual development of stage performance arts, there have been distinct character image styles, and Sheng has been more specifically and diversely divided. The Xiqu script is fixed after the publication, but the stage image is constantly renewed.

The paper aims to help the audience quickly grasp the various image characteristics of Sheng when watching Xiqu, through introducing

the literary and stage image of ‘Sheng’ as well as the innovative exploration by the contemporary actor Zhang Jun, known for playing quintessential ‘Sheng’ roles.

## 1) The literary image of ‘Sheng’ in the romaunt of the Ming and Qing Dynasty

“Xiqu actors perform stories through songs and dances.” This argument of Wang Guowei points out that the Xiqu has stories and songs and dances, that is, both literariness and stage effects. Xiqu scripts have independent literary values. Recipients include not only the audience but also readers. Therefore, it is worth understanding the literary image in scripts.

### a. Gentle intellectuals

This type of character often appears in plays about talented scholars and lovely ladies, and their appearance tends to be romantic and charming. For instance, Liu Mengmei in Tang Xianzu’s *The Peony Pavillion* (Around 1600) and Hou Fangyu in Kong Shangren’s *The Peach Blossom Fan* (Around 1699), most of the male protagonists in these plays are young, gentle, considerate and eloquent. With great ideals and aspirations, they pursue honours and fame but never succeed, so they complain and shed tears over the changes of seasons and the unfairness of their life. The emergence of a large number of such images was not only related to prototypes in adapted texts and novels selected by Xiqu, but also to the policy during the Song and Ming Dynasties. (12<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> Century) The time when the ruling classes implemented civil service examinations and a bureaucratic culture, which the characters were said to reflect.

### b. Loyal and upright people

This type of character often appears in plays with a magnificent political theme, representing the author’s aesthetic ideal of men who dedicated themselves to the nation with their loyalty and sense of justice. They have a straightforward personality, worry about the country, keep loyal to friends and make a clear distinction between right and wrong. Representative characters include Guo Ziyi and Li Guinian in *The Palace of Eternal Life*, and Su Kunsheng in *The Peach Blossom Fan*.

## 2) The Stage Image of Sheng

Xiqu is a stage art, consisting of a concrete stage image created by performers. Besides storytelling and literariness, Xiqu must take stage effects into account. According to different methods of division, Sheng corresponds to distinct stage image systems.

In terms of the age of characters, Sheng can be divided into Wawasheng, Xiaosheng,



■ Final makeup photo of Zhang Jun



Zhengsheng, and Laosheng.

Wawasheng plays the role of male children in Xiqu. The actor wears children's clothes and usually sings with his natural voice, like Xue Dingshan in *Fenhe Bay* and Lu Tianlin in *The Lucky Purse*.

Xiaosheng normally refers to male characters of youth, and the actor's singing is often divided into two categories: one is singing with his natural voice and the other is combining falsetto and natural voice, which is more graceful and melodious. Finally, the defining characteristic of Laosheng, which also uses natural voice, is their solemn movement during the performance for effect.

In terms of costumes, Xiaosheng can also be divided into Jinsheng, Guansheng, and Zhiweisheng (also known as Jimaosheng). Costumes are symbols of identity in Xiqu, which correspond to the characters' identity, occupation, and status. The audience is able to realise the specific identity of a character through the difference in costumes. Costumes are named after their materials or pictographic patterns. Jinsheng got the name for the actors use of a hat made of a square handkerchief when performing. The actor often holds a folding fan, so Jinsheng is also called Shanzisheng. The corresponding roles of Jinsheng are ancient intellectuals, like Liu Mengmei in *The Peony Pavillion*. Guansheng, on the other hand, wear official hats, and the designated roles are for emperors, generals, ministers and young top scholars, such as Emperor Xuanzong of Tang in *The Palace of Eternal Life* and Wang Shipeng in *The Romance of a Hairpin*. Zhiweisheng is named after the two pheasant tails which appear on this archetype's hat, and is exclusively used for handsome young generals like Lv Bu or Zhou Yu.

In addition, Laosheng can be divided into Wangmao Laosheng, Paodai Laosheng, Jianchang Laosheng, and Zhezi Laosheng. Wangmao Laosheng often plays the role of emperors, while Paodai Laosheng is in gauze caps and official robes. Jianchang Laosheng generally refers to military officers in history.

Laosheng must wear artificial whiskers (Rankou) during the performance. In ancient China, men were required to sport facial hairs at the age of 50, otherwise they would be ridiculed by others. According to this, Laosheng wears Rankou in plays to indicate his age. Therefore, Laosheng is also called Xusheng, and those who do not wear whiskers are young people. The elderly at the age of 50 to 60 wears black whiskers, and those at the age of 70 to 80 wear white whiskers. There are about 20 distinct styles of Rankou, which are stylized external expressions of Xiqu characters' personalities. Characters of different personalities wear different styles of Rankou. Sanran, with three colours (black, pale grey and white), is the most solemn one. From the appearance, those whose whiskers with three locks are generally elegant literati or quiet warriors. Manran, with the same three colours, are usually worn by the wealthy. It covers the whole mouth when being worn. Some of the majestic characters also



■ Stage photo of Zhang Jun

wear Manran, such as Jiang Ziya, Sun Quan, and Cao Cao.

In terms of skills, Laosheng in Jingju has been divided into Changgong Laosheng, Zuogong Laosheng, and Kaoba Laosheng. Those skilled in acrobatic fighting in 'Sheng' are also divided into Duanda Wusheng, Changkao Wusheng, and Fanpu Wusheng. Changgong Laosheng is also called Angong Laosheng, majoring in singing with a few movements while performing.

One representative character is Chen Gong in 'Arrest and Release Cao Cao'. Famous actors as Changgong Laosheng include Tan Xinpei, Sun Juxian, and Wang Guifen. These brilliant performers have carved a niche in the history of Jingju with their exquisite acting, and schools inheriting their styles were gradually developed over the years. Nowadays, there are many actors who consider them as teachers and study their performing styles. Zuogong Laosheng is skilled in acting, especially in acting roles with rough personality and intense emotion. Changgong Laosheng and Zuogong Laosheng both belong to Wen (singing plays) Laosheng, representative roles including Song Jiang in 'Kill Yan Xijiao'.

Kaoba Laosheng refers to Laosheng who plays the role of military officers. In ancient

times, Kao meant armour, and Ba meant weapons. Kaoba Laosheng is Laosheng wearing armour and holding weapons, like Yue Fei in 'Eight Sledges' and Huang Zhong in *Dingjun Mountain*. Duanda Wusheng refers to those in short clothes and pants during the performance, with neat and vigorous movements. Changkao Wusheng often play famous ancient generals, so there is a high requirement for acting in order to replicate the style and features of the figure on the stage.. Fanpu Wusheng refers to those majoring in somersaults and falls. The actor does not speak when performing; instead, he presents thrilling action performances to attract the audience and increase the interest of the show.

### 3) Xiaosheng Zhang Jun's Kunqu Innovations

Zhang Jun is a famous Kunqu artist in China, majoring in Kunqu Xiaosheng. He has starred in many classical Xiqu such as *The Peony Pavilion*, *The Romance of Hairpin*, *The Palace of Eternal Life*, *Madam White Snake*, *Horse Trader*, *Pei Shaojun and Li Qianjin* and *The Peach Blossom Fan*, as well as multiple Xiqu highlights like *Visiting Mother*, *The Broken Bridge* and *Giving Sword in the Baihua Pavilion*.

He has created many distinct characters, and continuously committed to innovating the performing style and communication method of Kunqu in order to explore new possibilities of Kunqu's transformation from classical to popular styles.

#### a. Seeking new Venues for Kunqu

Kunqu, featuring singing, is considered as the ancestor of all Xiqu. Zhang Jun has a deep understanding of the beauty of Kunqu's singing, attracting large audiences to walk into the theatre and feel its charm. He extracts singing from the Xiqu, which is a comprehensive art, to present Kunqu singing performances.

He held a solo concert in the Mercedes-Benz Arena with an audience over 100,000, conveying the beauty of Kunqu's singing on the stage and turning the audience to listeners. Traditional theatres normally have a relatively simple stage and a small audience. Compared to traditional theatres, venues like the Mercedes-Benz Arena not only accommodate a larger number of people but also adapt modern technologies to create a more gorgeous and captivating stage design.

Zhang Jun focuses on singing, refining and professionalizing it to bring it to perfection. Kunqu is a comprehensive art, and every element of it has its independent and lofty artistic value. On the other hand, this approach also accords with market discipline. It introduces Xiqu into a broader theatre, liberating it from the shackles of seating in theatres. Therefore, one single performance can take in a larger audience, creating



■ Zhang Jun

the corresponding economic value of Kunqu to realize the win-win situation of art and business.

In addition to bringing Kunqu to the concert stage, Zhang Jun also performed Kunqu in the garden of Zhujiajiao, Qingpu, Shanghai. The performer and audience were both placed in the classical garden, with elegant librettos echoing with rockeries, plants, lakes, and boats all over the garden, which provided people with a more in-depth experience. However, traditional Xiqu settings emphasis minimalism, so that time and space are often dramatically transferred between scenes in the mind of the audience. The audience is supposed to imagine all scenes based on simple sets and actors' librettos. Real props are not allowed to be brought onto the stage. Zhang Jun's performance in the garden, to a certain extent, undermined the freedom of time and space in Xiqu, so its validity as a Kunqu piece is still under scrutiny.

#### b. Integrating Xiqu with Modern Music

Four hundred years ago, the group of Wei Liangfu reformed Kunshan Tune (a Xiqu backing) to make it more melodious, accompanying the original instruments with the flute, Xiao and Sheng. In the present day, Zhang Jun combines the Shuimo Tune (ie. Kunshan Tune) of classical Kunqu music with contemporary music styles, enriching the score with electronic music, Rock and Roll, and Jazz to present a new a fusion. It is a bold attempt to diversify the expression of Kunqu, and attract a young audience in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### 4) Conclusion

From ancient to modern times, the wheel of history has constantly moved forward, and with it the Xiqu arts have developed. Hangdang is a reflection of Xiqu stylization on the character image. With the continuous development of the Xiqu art and the emergence of new patterns and images, there may be more and more novel and distinct character images of Sheng on the stage continuing to shine brightly.

*ZHONG JUNFANG*

*MA student in the programme of Xiqu at STA.*

## Dialogue with Myth: Reviews on Meng Jinghui's *Tea House*

GAO ZIWEN

It would be hard to find people who would say that Meng Jinghui's rendition of the *Tea House* is an artistically flawless work.

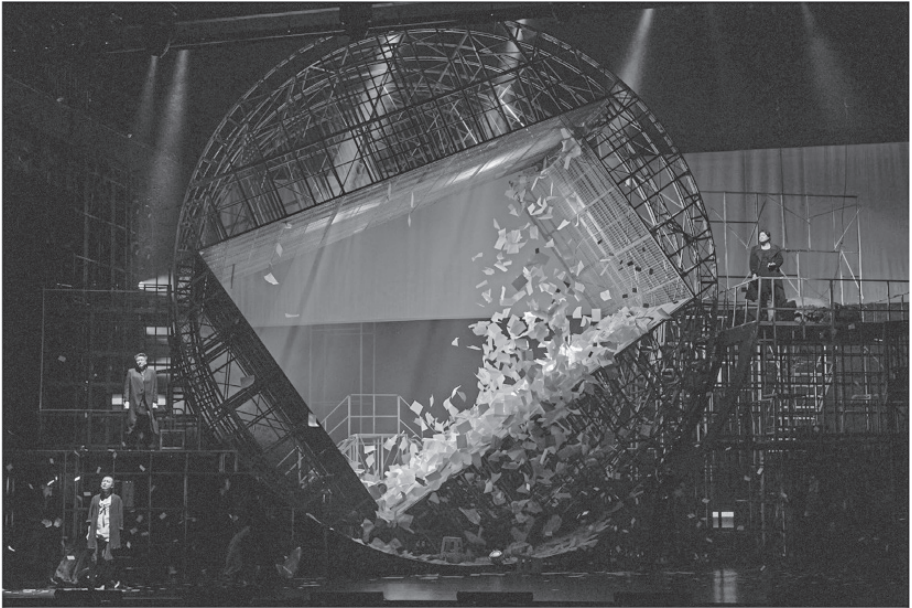
However, it is undeniably true that this crude, sharp, and fragmented version of the *Tea House* presented by Meng means more to Chinese audiences and theatre professionals than any other.

This new version highlights the key fundamentals of theatre creation, sincerity and openness to dramatic moments, while at the same time reflecting the audience's direct experiences. This level of sincerity and openness is rarely seen in recent interpretations of classic works. Indeed, the more classics are repeated, the less sincerity and openness are shown. In fact, it is often the case that classics allow subpar repertoires to hide. As Peter Brook said, "Of course nowhere does the Deadly Theatre install itself so securely, so comfortably and so slyly as in the works of William Shakespeare."<sup>1</sup> In this way, classics have become the shelter for mediocre and rigid performances.

At the same time, however, it may be dangerous to activate classics. The sincerity is likely to turn into an affront to sensibilities and expectations. It is exactly this type of complacent received wisdom which Meng's rendition clashed with; the *Tea House* is a dearly loved classic, with strict "Chinese characteristics". In the 70 years of the theatre history of New China, it is impossible to find another piece of work with such status as *Tea House*. As a play it carries with it the weight of history; Lao She's script is held as the apex of modern Chinese Theatre expression, Jiao Juyin and Yu Shizhi's original performance is still spoken of in hushed tones, and Beijing People's Art Theatre is held

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1 Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, trans. Xing Li, etc. (Beijing: China Theatre Press, 2006), P. 2-3.



■ Meng Jinghui's *Tea House*

up as a paragon of creative virtue.

*Tea House*, in a sense, has become a national myth in the theatre sphere. Nowadays, the Chinese audience's worship of *Tea House*, is imbued with a sense of nationhood, despite the fact that the contents of the play itself are historically dubious. Thus, Meng's deconstruction and rewriting of *Tea House* not only challenged Lao She, but threw down the gauntlet to the national realistic theatre tradition of Beijing People's Art Theatre, as well as to the theatrical accomplishments from the establishment of the new China.

It should be noted that Meng repeatedly expressed his esteem for *Tea House* and Lao She in opening remarks and interview. Despite this, his main purpose was not to present Lao She's work entirely faithfully. He adopted lines of the original play only in the first act but developed and recreated the rest based on the associated images and details of the original work. During the creative process, Meng utilized Lao She's novels and other literary classics to provide himself with a fulcrum of artistic construction. Meng Jinghui's *Tea House* then is not so much a stage recreation of the classic script, but rather a dialogue refracted through Lao She's classic which incorporates both the stage and literary canon.

Of all the dialogues, the most striking one is the narrative of the revolution. In the



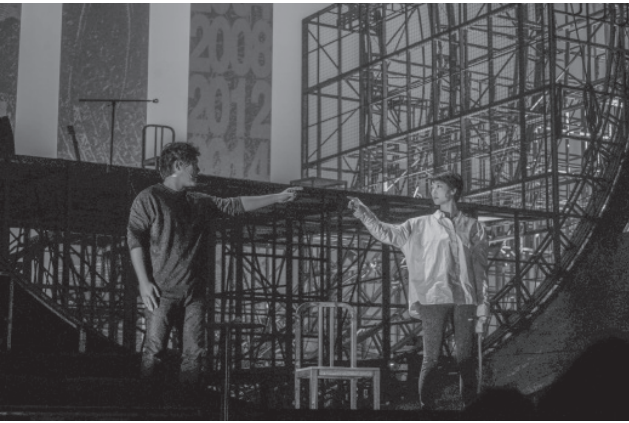
■ Meng Jinghui's *Tea House*

third act of the original work, the crucial reason why Wang Lifa got into trouble was to protect Kang Dali, who went to the Western Hills to participate in the revolution. Due to this behaviour, he was slapped by the son of Wu Xiangzi. The revolutionary action of Kang Dali won the unanimous support of the crowd. The narrative was a clear reflection of its tie and the original author's own political ideals. It is arguably for this reason, this astute political allegory of the modern China and the heroism of its characters in supporting the revolution, that *Tea House* became so popular. Indeed, the character of Kang Dali was so venerated that Wang Jisi included the play as an archetype in *Ten Contemporary Chinese Theatre Series (Tragedy Series, Comedy Series, and Drama Series)*<sup>1</sup>.

In Meng Jinghui's play, we saw something new. When the revolutionary played by Chen Minghao returned to his hometown to raise money, he gets into apparent trouble since people had no trust in him. By the time he says, "Let's fight for a losing battle! Let's go to the moon for revolution!", the audience is led to view the rallying cry with a skepticism akin to that of his fellow villagers on the stage, and see that it is tinged with absurdism rather than a defiant call of noble bravery. Even though the revolutionary in this version was not Kang Dali but Qin Zhongyi, the audience was still able to read its intertextuality, touching upon those Chinese people a deep psychological dissonance in the post-revolutionary era. And so, Meng's deconstruction of the revolutionary figure subverts the original revolutionary ideology of the *Tea House*.

<sup>1</sup> Wang Jisi, *Ten Contemporary Chinese Theatre Series* (Nanjing: Jiangsu Literature & Art Publishing House, 1993).





This dissociation from the ideology of Lao She's original script naturally leads to an mixed reaction from audiences. Similar issues arise when Meng's version of the play deals with the dramatic crux of the piece: the death of Wang Lifa. During production there was much debate about how Meng's team would interpret this event; ultimately, their rendering lends a new expression of the whole play.

From the contemporary perspective, Wang Lifa's suicide in Lao She's original script seems far-fetched in two aspects. First, the premise upon which the suicide is based is the assumption that historical living conditions of ordinary citizens became so bad in the late Qing – early revolutionary period that people committed suicide. But is this description consistent with historical fact? Second, from a dramatic standpoint, suicide is his own choice for internal psychological strife. So how can the audience relate to this via the onstage mimesis of external plights?

It is apparent that Lao She's *Tea House* is not about the accidental fate of an individual. In the original work, the death of Wang Lifa is inevitable. The tragedy can be made up of the slap of Wu Xiangzi Jr., the intimidation of Pang Siye's wife, and the forcible occupation of the town by Director Shen. Therefore, his death is not so much a suicide but a homicide. Characters like Wang Lifa are not rare in classical Xiqu. Indeed, suffering of this kind is the primary narrative model of Xiqu. Only villains have agency in this model, in the so-called tradition of 'villains interact with each other'<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Wang Guowei, *Xiqu History of Song & Yuan Dynasty* (Tianjin: Baihua Literature & Art Publishing House, 2002), P. 99.



■ Meng Jinghui's *Tea House*

Wang Lifa in Lao She's work is actually an individualized, anthropomorphized interpretation of certain ethics and historical views. It appears on the face of it that Wang Lifa has no agency like characters in Chekhov's works, but it is difficult to find such a clear representation of the machinations of evil in Chekhov's plays.

Meng Jinghui's team eventually found a psychological structure for Wang Lifa as Raskolnikov (the protagonist in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*). This treatment fundamentally differentiates Meng Jinghui from Lao She.

From the beginning of the performance, Wang Lifa's psychological plight has been established. The monologue goes as follows:

*I looked up in the sky and I saw a star. For the last two months, it has been reminding me that I am going to commit suicide tonight. Why did it choose me? Why did it prompt me to take my own life... If that girl didn't show up, I might have already*

died.<sup>1</sup>

In *Crime and Punishment*, the college student Raskolnikov murdered the landlady whom he believed to be “social garbage” due to his interpretation of Nietzschean philosophy. Later, he gets salvation after meeting Sonia, a prostitute. Same parallels with this character arc can be found in Ding Bao Jr. in the third act of *Tea House*. Ding’s character is similar to Sonia, who is innocent and vivid and glowing beneath the dirt of circumstance. If in the original production Wang Lifa commits suicide due to external pressure, in Meng’s reinterpretation he kills himself because he wants to – and it is the waifish Ding Bao Jr. who enables the narrative to make this clear, giving Wang someone to bear his soul to, and bring to light his introspection and motives through conversation.

Indeed, this love-like character relationship between Wang and Ding completely shifts the ideological core of Meng’s *Tea House* into a more psychological and emotive concern. This idea is furthered by its stage design; during Wang Lifa’s confessional monologue, a giant wheel resoundingly turns, and everything slowly begins to collapse under its pressure – denoting the climax of the performance.

Another element of the original which Meng had to deal with was imperialism. Many of Lao She’s work touches on the effect Western powers were having on China at the time often with the point being that China must free itself of foreign interference to stand any chance of becoming a mature nation. Tellingly, once again, Meng subverts these ideas in his piece with a speech shot through with nihilistic fatalism, as one of the female characters lambasts Wang Lifa:

*You think you are the greatest poet and the most affectionate man, but you have never seen the wine brewed by grapes in the sunshine, for the sky above you is full of dust and garbage... I thought you were different, different from the British, the Americans, the Russians, but in fact, you are all the same.*

If we consider the constant criticism of imperialism (the British, Americans, Russians) in Lao She’s works, the implication behind this line by Meng when uttered by a female character becomes more profound. It appears that Meng takes Lao She’s understanding of imperialism and makes it analogous to the relationship between the female and male. This is possibly the origin of Wang Lifa’s guilt. He was guilty of being a man. Moreover, he was guilty of being a man born in such a downtrodden country. By necessity of this Ding Bao Jr. becomes his only route to salvation.

Unfortunately, the logic of this expression is inconsistent throughout the performance. There is a lack of internal coherence, whether in terms of the theme or the form,

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1 Recorded during the performance. May be slightly different from the actual line. The same below.

throughout Meng's play. Indeed, this thematic gad flying is a common criticism of Meng Jinghui's *Tea House*; it is often said that it has too many ideas and techniques to express, which turned it into such a swollen and sluggish jumbo that many cannot fathom.

This, paired with the aforementioned reinterpretations of Lao She's original text, meant that the release of Meng Jinghui's *Tea House* aroused significant shock among critics. A considerable number of people refused to recognize its value, and more conservative audiences even considered it as an insult to Lao She.

Indeed, this reception raises wider questions of creativity: as independent artists, may we raise doubts about Lao She? May we communicate and exchange ideas with Lao She in an equal position? May we only fall prostrate in worship when it comes to classics? Particularly when, as is the case with *Tea House*, the original is by no means the most deserving of subversion when compared with other plays of the era. Works like *Spring Flowers and Autumn Fruits* (Beijing People's Art Theatre's first work) and *Bright Sky*, or those artistically more developed like *Beijing People* and *Guan Hanqing*, are far more derivative and pedagogic – why lampoon *Tea House* – which was a reconciliation between political correctness and artistic authenticity – over these works?

Indeed, *Tea House* itself at the time was a work laden with subversion; it lacked straight praise of workers, peasants, and soldiers<sup>1</sup>; for artistic authenticity, and it distorted the received wisdom that the revolution moved society towards modernization from the late Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China. Fortunately it did all of this with a tact and subtlety which arguably Meng's rendition lacks, never overstepping the mark.

With this in mind, it is easy to see why subverting *Tea House* and its original for upsets sensibilities; after all, modern productions are very much standing on the shoulders of giants, and critics are quick to point out the hypocrisy of writers who do not appreciate this fact.

Myths were ever thus though. When we talk about the excellence of *Tea House*, it always seems that we are discussing something in memory, an abstract impression, an idealized theatre art. This can never reflect the reality of the present, for no productions today are satisfactory; it may not even be the reality of the history, for *Tea House* in history has had few chances to be objectively and professionally examined as an artwork. There is only one societally acceptable way for us to draw near to myths: worshipping. Thus, when Meng Jinghui reopened *Tea House* as a free creation

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1 Liu Fangquan, Xu Guanlu and Liu Xiqing, "A Review for Lao She's 'Tea House'," *Du Shu*, no. 2 (1959): 7.



■ Meng Jinghui's *Tea House*

subject, his behaviour was bound to become an affront. Reinventing the myth? Who do you think you are?

But, it must be said, Meng's is by no means a lone voice. Even prior to his reinterpretation, there were plenty who poured scorn on the deification of Lao She's magnum opus. Lv Xiaoping pointed out that *Tea House* was in part exceeded by Guo Shihang's *Toilet* and Li Longyun's *Celestial Empire*, which used the external form of *Tea House* but abandoned its fundamental expression.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, these works can still be considered as the product of the impact of *Tea House*. In so doing, rather than denigrating the original, these works cement its place in the canon. To a certain extent, Meng does likewise; but his originality will likely save him from being seen as entirely derivative – though this remains to be seen.

All's we can be sure of is this; the myth of the *Tea House* continues to grow; but what happens to it remains to be seen.

GAO ZIWEN

Associate professor at Nanjing University.

<sup>1</sup> Lv Xiaoping, *The Canonicity of Toilet, Wotou Guild Hall, Celestial Empire and Tea House, Stage and Screen Review*, No. 1, 2014.P.7.

## An Endeavour — — On the Acceptance of Meng Jinghui's Production of *Tea House* in China

ZHU YITIAN

Meng Jinghui's production of *Tea House* was featured at the Avignon Festival from July 9<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019, and had 10 performances at Opéra de Confluence. This was the first time that a show from China was included in the Avignon "IN" festival (the main festival), which was known as "the highlight of Chinese drama". Olivier Py, director of the Festival d'Avignon, used six adjectives to summarize his feelings about *Tea House*: poetic, profound, crazy, incisive, critical, cold and sympathetic.

As a representative work of the Chinese drama that went abroad, the acceptance of Meng's *Tea House* at home was complex and diverse. It premiered in the sixth Wuzhen Drama Festival on October 18, 2018, and then toured the country many times. After the premiere, there was an explosive discussion in the drama circle, and its polarized evaluation brought it into controversy. The premiere was only limited to the interior of the drama circle, while along with the city tour, it was seen by more and more audiences, which allows us to get a clear picture of its real acceptance in a more in-depth and objective way.

Experts had tremendously distinct views on Meng's *Tea House*. After the premiere, several commentaries published in newspapers held a relatively negative attitude towards the performance. One of the most representative was an article titled "The Subverted and Deconstructed *Tea House*" by Hu Zhiyi, Professor of Zhejiang University and President of China Drama Research Association. In his opinion, Meng's version of *Tea House* was beyond recognition, and the integrity of the classic text had been destroyed. It was not *Tea House* at all. "Meng Jinghui can name the play by any other name, but not *Tea House* of Lao She. He can even name it under the western postmodernism or post drama construction".

On the contrary, another group of professionals spoke highly of Meng's *Tea House*. Professor Lv Xiaoping of Nanjing University said that "Meng Jinghui expressed his understanding of the world in a crazy form of rejecting rationality, which is interlinked with the human world described in Lao She's original works."



■ Meng Jinghui

Meng Jinghui's *Tea House* was like a stone thrown into the calm water, arousing thousands of waves. The criticism of the performance was still based on the first direct feeling of watching the play, with a severe polarization trend. Those who liked the performance thought that it was pioneering and bold, whereas those who didn't like it thought that the stage was full of meaningless images and the structure was scattered.

As time went on, the professional reviews during 2019 to 2021 were more complete, profound and philosophical. At the same time, combined with the creative context of the Chinese drama, the attitudes towards Meng's version of *Tea House* have changed a little. In the first issue of *Stage and Screen Review* in 2019, edited by Lv Xiaoping, two comments on Meng's version of *Tea House* were published: Zhigong's "Is Lao She Still our Contemporary? -- On Meng Jinghui's Version of *Tea House* and Contemporary Presentation of the Classics", and Gao Ziwen's "Dialogue with 'Myth' - On Meng Jinghui's Version of *Tea House*". Both of the writers were from Nanjing University. Coincidentally, both of the two commentaries believed that this was a bold attempt of classical modernization. Although there were some defects in the presentational effect, defects could not obscure the splendor of the play. Later, other commentators expressed their views on this, affirming Meng Jinghui's attempt on the whole, and believed that the adaptation connected the history and the present, deconstructed classics, and reconstructed new meanings in the new context<sup>12</sup>.

Contrary to the calm and rational analysis from the professional critics, the general audience's attitudes towards it were more emotional. On November 12, 2019, in

1 Hu Zhiyi: The Subverted and Deconstructed *Tea House*, *Wenyi Bao* (*Literary and Art Newspaper*), November 12, 2018, edition 004, page 2.

2 From Weibo of Lu Xiaoping, Professor of Nanjing University, June 30, 2019, [https://weibo.com/u/2584784292?is\\_all=1&is\\_search=1&key\\_word=茶馆#\\_0](https://weibo.com/u/2584784292?is_all=1&is_search=1&key_word=茶馆#_0).



■ Meng Jinghui's *Tea House*

Beijing Poly Theater, a frenzied audience member suddenly stood up during the performance and yelled to the stage: "Is this *Tea House*? You are letting Lao She down! Nonsense! Rubbish!" A lot of applause toward this comment from the audience showed the deep resentment. This also triggered a call for refunds.

Chinese drama audiences have always been reserved and inclined to passively accept what the creator conveys. Even if they are not satisfied with the performance, they will quietly exit. But this time, Meng's version of *Tea House* aroused the public anger. This became a major cultural event of 2019, and the reasons behind it are worth pondering. Lao She's *Tea House* has become a mythical classic due to the efforts of Beijing People's Art Theatre, writer Lao She, and Director Jiao Juyin. Behind this, there are also the shared public memories of the piece, and the inherent cultural impression of the nation.

Thus, the dichotomy appears. Professional drama critics were wont to analyze this edition of *Tea House* optimistically as a brave attempt to regenerate the classic text. Whereas ordinary audiences entered the theater with an "expectation" to respect the classics, and were met with a shock akin to being doused with cold water by Meng's *Tea House*. On China's "Rotten Tomatoes" website, "Douban.com" —a web site where ordinary audiences mark and grade movies and dramas they have seen—the classic version of *Tea House* performed by Beijing People's Art Theater is scored 9.3 out of 10, while Meng's version is only 6.9.



Here Let's select several short comments about Meng's *Tea House* from Douban.com:<sup>1</sup>

1.

*The form of Meng's plays is always greater than the content. The same words were expressed back and forth in a flowery way. In a word, a few ungrounded characters try to dig out some pains, to made up feelings of sorrow to fit the lyrical lines. The small world of the tea house shows people's life: bitter and difficult. But it only shows one corner. Meng's style is totally different. The biggest effect of this version is probably to push me to watch the Tea House by Beijing People's Art Theatre again to wash my eyes. Meng should produce a new play. Why did he use Lao She's brand?*

2.

*The name of the play should not be Tea House, but Interpretation of Tea House. It seemed that the actors could not understand the performance well. Let alone the audience. After watching it, I felt that avant-garde drama was a more characteristic form of performance. In the first act, many actors yelled at the audience, laying a low score for the whole play. Not using a microphone might be the director's special expression, but from the audience's point of view, it affected the understanding of the plot. The big spider in the second act was so confusing. Fortunately, later on, director Meng finally began to let the characters speak something reasonable, and the audience could understand that this was a tragedy, reflecting some human suffering and changes of the times. Finally, the giant wheel turned and the Tea House was broken. The character played by Wen Zhang jumped on the rotating wheel and started a long monologue to interpret the core idea of the play to the audience. As one of the audience, it admittedly sparked some resonance and thinking.*

3.

*I can understand the post-modern expression of the director, his attempt at the form of drama performance, his anger in his heart and his reflection on the phenomena of the times. But I really can't understand the whole play, and I don't want to pretend I understand it. I feel like I've been watching some behavioral art for more than three hours. I always believe that good art should be able to make the audience resonate and think. Obviously, this play has not achieved the goal.*

From these comments, we can see that some audiences have complaints about Meng Jinghui's form of expression. In fact, this non-mainstream form of expression is Meng Jinghui's active aesthetic choice. Twenty years ago, he said: "People do different things, and you must not be the same as other people...What I was most clear about at that time was that if you asked me to direct *Tea House*, I would not do it. I could not...But what I want to do is different from *Tea House*. Maybe it's better

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<sup>1</sup> The data comes from douban.com, <https://www.douban.com/location/drama/30358754/comments>. The selected short comments are listed in the order of Douban netizen name, comment date, comment level and comment content.

than *Tea House*...I'm not your disciple, but I want to create a new world."

Now, nearly 20 years later, Meng Jinghui has reached middle-age, and the *Tea House*, which he said he would definitely not do, has been moved onto the stage by him. But we believe his inner insistence has never changed. He never thought of presenting a version of *Tea House* similar to the classic one. Since 2003, Meng Jinghui's drama exploration has shown a parallel state of "poetic, social, and anti-mainstream". *Tea House* might be his medium to fight against the mainstream, and the difficulty of audience's acceptance has been taken into consideration at the beginning of its emergence.

Secondly, the influence of the May 4<sup>th</sup> New Culture Movement and the subtle influence of Marx's theory of literature and art, has determined the aesthetic orientation of the Chinese audience in a way that cannot be understated – in other words, it is realism which Chinese audiences respond to. This can be seen in the choice of Chinese textbooks in the national education, authoritative taste guidance and market performance which have informed the taste of the people, and perhaps made the rendition of the *Tea House* unpalatable.

Finally, environmental factors cannot go unnoted. Although the domestic drama market has been expanding in recent years, in fact, compared with film and television, drama is still a relatively small category of art. This leads to a uniformity of perspective from the audience-intellectuals in the first-and-second-tier cities. Their perspective is relatively monotonous. These reasons may partly explain why *Tea House* is so controversial among ordinary audiences.<sup>1 2</sup>

Generally speaking, Meng's version of *Tea House* impacts the audience's aesthetic judgment and acceptance ability with a bold vanguard posture. After the shock, the discussion about it is still ongoing, and the acceptance will change with the change of the cultural context. Maybe a few years later, when *Tea House* is no longer burdened with the "classic", people will rediscover the shining point of Meng Jinghui's *Tea House*. Perhaps it is also possible that with the expansion of the audience's horizons and the introduction of world drama, the audience will find that the so-called vanguard of Meng's *Tea House* is merely thus. Time will give an answer to it.

ZHU YITIAN

Doctoral Student at STA.

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1 Li Zhenlin: *The History of Chinese Film Performing Aesthetic Thoughts: 1979-2005*, Beijing: China Film Press, 2016, P. 138.

2 Meng Jinghui: *Meng Jinghui Vanguard Drama Records*, New Star Press, 2010, P. 321.

## Beijing Theatre Troupes During COVID-19

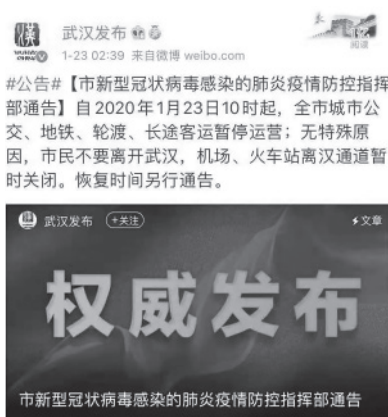
XU ZIQING, FAN RUIYI

Due to the outbreak of the COVID-19, everything was shut down in 2020. Theatre troupes in Beijing experienced many difficulties, such as shows cancelling, refunds, and shortage of funds just like many industries, but particularly performing arts industries, across the world.

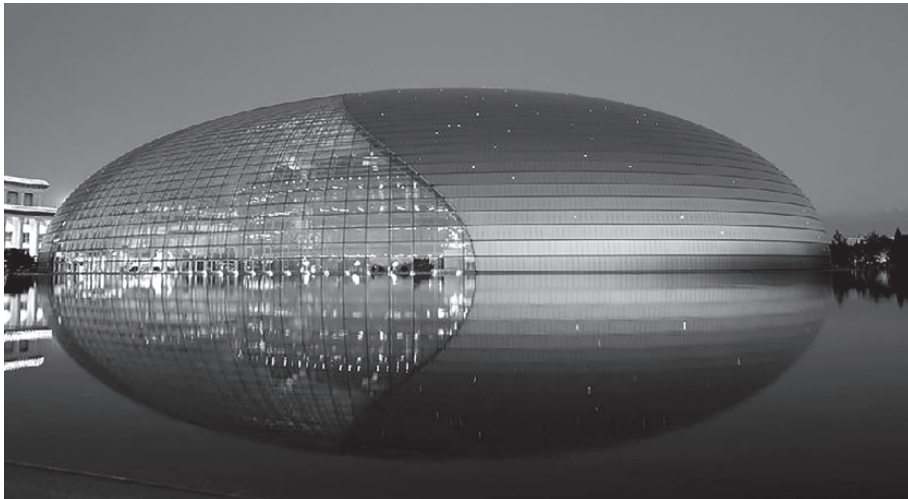
However, as Shakespeare said, "What's past is prologue". After a year of challenges from COVID-19, theatre troupes across the Chinese capital were finally ready to meet audiences once more. Looking back on this year, and the long process of returning to normalcy, it is hard not to be moved by the hardwork of the government, performing arts associations and individual artists, and their determination to ensure theatre could overcome the impasse of lockdown .

At the beginning of the Lunar New Year in 2020, COVID-19 broke out in Wuhan, and the city officially went into lockdown on February 23. Under the leadership of the Chinese government, all parts of the country quickly adopted effective control measures, and the performing arts industry was no exception.

As the capital, any action taken by Beijing had instructive significance. In order to effectively prevent the risk of the epidemic caused by crowd gathering, the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Culture and Tourism established a steering group to coordinate the work of epidemic prevention and control in the city's culture and tourism system. During the Spring Festival, the city had cancelled nearly 10,000 cultural events including commercial performances, and closed nearly 9,000 cultural and entertainment venues. On February 24, Beijing theatres issued announcements through their official channels, noticing the cancellation or postponement of



■ Cyberspace Administration of Wuhan issued a notice reminding citizens to be vigilant against COVID-19



■ National Centre for the Performing Arts



■ Sanitizing the venue

performances during the Spring Festival, and the refunds and updated policies that followed on from this.

Of all cultural entities the suspension of performances during the Spring Festival had a particularly serious impact on theatre troupes. At the outset, few of them were able to predict the severity of the pandemic, and they only prepared for a short-term lockdown for the month of February. In other words, no one thought that this cessation would last 7 months, which of course it did.

Even with theatres closed temporarily, expenses such as rent, salaries and social insurance still exist. No income paired with but the expenditure led to great hardship. Fortunately, the Beijing Municipal Government responded quickly. A series of measures had effectively alleviated the shortage of cash in theatres, and helped the industry to get out of its dilemma.



■ Information Office of Beijing Municipality news conference

In addition to the government's efforts, the theatres also began to pull themselves up by trying to perform online. Since February 2020, Chinese dramatists have worked hard to turn crises into opportunities, and continue to explore various innovations. Those seemingly helpless actions in this special period implied the budding of the digital diversification of the traditional theatre industry which have since become the normality for Chinese theatres.

In addition to the development of the theatres' own official websites and Official Accounts, theatres also actively cooperated with other platforms for performances such as Tiktok, KUAISHOU and other apps. Many performance institutions and theatres in Beijing were looking for opportunities for development on the Internet and achieved splendid results. As of November 2020, online shows of the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA) have had more than 1.027 billion views.

Online performances were also divided into for-profit and non-profit. Most of the non-profit performances were provided by nationalized theatres. The shows were rich in content and diverse in form, including classic repertoires from the past and contemporaneous anti-epidemic dramas.

For example, the Poly Cloud Theatre launched by the Poly Theatre is divided into four sections: "Drama", "Concerts", "Master Classes" and "Fight the Coronavirus". The copyrighted program videos are performed online, so audiences can click to watch them for free. Most of the profit-making troupes are private theatres, such as *Penghao Live* produced by the Penghao Theatre, which audiences had to pay to watch. Comprehensive theatres, such as NCPA, had rich online-performing strategies, including multiple platforms such as live broadcasts, video and WeChat content. As of December, the NCPA has launched more than 40 online series performances. In particular, the online live broadcast of the concert-*Sounds Like Summer Flowers Blooming*, which was held for the first time on May 9, 2020, was responded to by 22 organizations from 16 countries around the world, and the total number of hits has reached 35.6 million. On May 12, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism held the "2020 National Stage Outstanding Art Repertoire Online Show". Each theatre took advantage



■ Rehearsal scene of *Neighborhood Community*

■ On-line and off-line stage



of the communication opportunity to fully display its own outstanding works, while giving new audiences greater access to theatre.

Under such an exceptional background, various attempts of fighting against COVID-19, with new works continuing to emerge. For example, Beijing People's Art Theatre created the drama *Community Neighborhood Committee* based on the community during the epidemic. From a micro perspective, it describes the daily work of ordinary community workers in an everyday locale after the break-out documenting the daily life of residents. The show presented an ordinary and great journey belonging to the people, through all the severe and trivial, ordinary and moving aspects of life. Since May, the national epidemic has been basically controlled, and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism has gradually relaxed their extremely disciplined control.

On August 12, Beijing Municipal Bureau of Culture and Tourism issued the third version of the notice, announcing that theatres in low-risk areas could sell 50% of

the seats. From this day on, Beijing's live performance market has begun to bounce back. On the day the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Culture and Tourism made its announcement, 39 theatres reopened. The stagnation in the first eight months has also brought more inspiration to theatres. They have begun to explore more possibilities for the use of theatre venues, especially outdoor spaces. As Peter Brook says in "The empty space"; "Many troupes go to the community, the park, and they can act anywhere." On September 18 2021, the ticketing allocation was extended to 75% of capacity, and Beijing's performing arts market greeted its most prosperous time since the epidemic.



■ Drama East Town Series of Activities

The "Landscape of the Big Opera · 2020 South Luogu Lane Drama Festival" undertaken by Beijing Artists Management Corp., Ltd., combined drama with the urban environment, using the streets as stages to integrate multiple art forms. The festival had celebrated humanistic care in the face of the epidemic.

On the other hand, the use of theatre venues was not limited to performance. Even prior to the epidemic, the NCPA had an exhibition hall, an art gallery, and a cafe to attract people to enter the theatre outside of performance times in an attempt to create a greater theatre culture. These cafes and exhibition halls were the first theatre facilities to reopen after lockdown, and they provided a heartening communal spirit during the early stages of normalcy.

The epidemic had brought great losses to the Beijing performance market. Most of the Beijing theatres are non-profit organizations. In order to help them pull through, the Beijing Cultural Development Fund financed 115 projects in 2020 to the tune of over 100 million yuan. A policy of ticket subsidies for performances during the controlled reopening period was implemented, and 1,571 performances in 58 theatres declared subsidy schemes during this period. However, it is undeniable that industry-specific



■ The theatre during the prevention and control time

subsidies do not treat state-owned and privately-owned theatre troupes equally, and private performance agencies or production companies were not allowed to take relevant measures.

Gulouxi, a privately operated theatre troupe in Beijing, which was established in 2014, is regarded as a leader in private small theatres in China in recent years. Unlike many state-run organizations who have their own theatres, an independent theatre company such as this faces high monthly rents, high taxes, and increased personnel expenses.. Gulouxi was scheduled to tour in 2020, with a total of 56 performances, plus small theatre plays and rented performances, but they have faced countless postponements and cancellations. As a result, Gulouxi sold cherries from Yantai (a city located in northeast China) on its WeChat public account in a nod to Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, in order to make ends meet. This novel way of staying afloat led to increased publicity, so much so that when tickets for their new performance season were opened from September to December, they were snapped up.

Before the outbreak of the epidemic, in 2019, the Beijing performance market had 22,823 performances with an audience of 10.4 million, resulting in box office revenue of 1.744 billion yuan. Compared with the Beijing performance market in 2019, the Beijing performance market in 2020 had a total of 6,984 performances, with a box office revenue of about 280 million yuan, and an audience of 1.85 million. Despite the severe setbacks in the overall market, the theatre did their best to minimize losses, through combining the traditional theatre industry with emerging technologies to explore and develop a new path.

At the online celebration of World Theatre Day 2020, the President of the International Theatre Institute Mohamed Saif Al-Afkham issued a powerful letter of encouragement to all ITI members and friends. He said in the letter: "Under the epidemic, handshakes and hugs are impossible, but 'touching' the hearts and souls of each other is worthy





■ DrumTower West Theater at night



■ Photo from the National Center for the Performing Arts

of appreciation and welcome". The lengths Beijing dramatists have gone to overcome the difficulties caused by the epidemic, should be seen in this humanistic light.

At the time of writing, one year has passed, and it is March again, and the 2021 World Theatre Day is upon us. Chinese dramatists who have experienced hardships like their counterparts all over the world will continue to work hard to create more and better works, to give the audience greater relief and confidence.



■ Mohamed Saif Al-Afkham, President of the International Theatre Association (left)

*XU ZIQING, FAN RUIYI*

*MFA students in the programme of Arts Management at STA.*

# Shanghai Theatre Troupes during the COVID-19 Period, 2020

LIU SHIYUN, ZOU WENLIANG

2019 was a year of extraordinary achievement for China's performing arts groups. In Shanghai, eighteen municipal state-owned art troupes created 109 large-scale plays, with an income of 303 million yuan. A total of 10,790 performances were completed throughout the year, and the number of the attendances had reached 3.29 million <sup>1</sup>.

On the back of this optimism, there was a prediction that said, "2020 will be the Performing Arts' New Year". But this dream was dashed by the outbreak of the coronavirus in Wuhan, and the surveillance and control measures pressed by the country and the state government in Shanghai.



■ Shanghai Dramatic Art Theatre

As a result, an unprecedented crisis ensued. On January 23, 2020, Shanghai Dramatic Art Theatre sent a first message on its Official WeChat Account to their subscribers, the audiences, to notify them that present performances are canceled and a refund process had begun. Then all the theatres and troupes in Shanghai followed suit, with similar announcements made one after another. <sup>2</sup> Afterwards, a series of hard situations arose: no dramas, no performances -

1 Shanghai State-Owned Art Troupes Made An Extraordinary Achievement in 2019, *Wenhui Daily*

2 From the WeChat Official Accounts of all theatres.

no income. How was the Shanghai theatre scene to survive?

For the theatres, the matter that needed to be settled first was that of refunds after the cancellation of performances. Large theatres and art centres often sell their tickets through a third-party of agents online, making the operation of refunding more convenient.

However, the matter was not quite so streamlined for smaller theatres, meaning they had to oversee the refunding of tickets personally – while at the same time honoring concession schemes to the elderly and infirmed to further compound their box office losses.

The next issue to be dealt with was more philosophical than operational; How could Shanghai theatres keep in touch with their audiences through quarantine?

It was decided that arts education online would be an effective means of doing this. On February 17, Shanghai Grand Theatre's online channel launched *Moment Online* through their WeChat Official Account, Ximalaya FM (a podcasts app), and the theatre's own website, editing the content of more than 100 episodes art classes from the past five years into fifteen-minute audio programs for the audience.

*Mobile Theatre: Global Dramatic Tour* launched by Shanghai Dramatic Art Centre invited drama experts to teach their professional knowledge. The audience could check it on Ximalaya FM and NetEase Music. At the same time, many theatres collaborated with well-known actors and actresses, taking advantage of the social influence of celebrities to make themselves well-known. For instance, Theatre Above made a video collection *Theatre Online* on their WeChat Official Account, sharing star actors and actresses' experience of housebound life and wisdom from their time on



■ *Mobile Theatre: Global Drama Tour*

the stage with the audience.

SAIC Shanghai Cultural Square made their own project, too. *Bystage*, a live webcast program, spoke to famous drama artists about something on the stage. Taking these measures to get through the difficult times of pandemic was designed not only to satisfy the audience's need for drama, but also to bind them ever closer to the performing arts through a period of adversity.

Creation is fundamental to the survival of theatres, especially to the theatres which have their own troupe. When unable to perform, many theatres chose to continue creating by using the Internet. Theatre Above conducted online life-performance course training with its actors, maintaining their daily exercises and training while encouraging a positive mental attitude through quarantine.



■ 2020 Chinese Original Musical Incubation Project

On February 27, the 2020 Chinese Original Musical Incubation Project of Shanghai Culture Square announced that a special collection during the epidemic period would be added. Two original works were officially commissioned to go with this, encouraging the industry as a whole while exploring new models of musical production.

Following the initial lockdowns of the epidemic prevention and control measures, the government set about trying to reopen arenas and playhouses. The industry guidance document issued by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism on May 12 clearly stipulated that the maximum attendance rate of theatres and other performance venues should not be over 30% of the seating capacity. Under this limitation, the theatres always tended to give priority to the social

concession ticket holders.

On May 29, 2020 and On May 30, 2020 two special performances completed with musical selections were held by Shanghai Cultural Square, to which they invited a group of medical and transportation staff – key workers during the pandemic - to watch, with welfare ticket prices capped at 80 yuan.

Of course, some theatres continued to use the Internet to expand their influence. For example, the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre produced an online live performance entitled *The Taste of Hot-and-Dry Noodles* (hot-and-dry noodles are one of the most



- Two special performances: *May 29, 2020* and *May 30, 2020*

famous snacks in Wuhan), with an accompanying online live talk show *Gossiping during Intermission*, which attracted more than 165,000 online visitors.<sup>1</sup>

On August 10, as the epidemic was gradually coming



- *The Taste of Hot-and-Dry Noodles*

under control, a new document issued by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism raised the theatre attendance percentage from 30% to 50% of the total capacity. Even so, the theatre still ran the risk of financial loss and bankruptcy.

With this in mind, the question of how best to use spare spaces in theatres became more and more pressing. Shanghai Grand Theatre chose to refurbish the theatre space and to upgrade the function of space on the ground floor during this fallow period. Taking advantage of its prime location, Shanghai Cultural Square leased out the garage and the box office, boosting income by 600,000 yuan a month.<sup>2</sup> They also used the outdoor space to build a stage and held 28 live shows under various themes

1 From Shanghai Dramatic Art Centre's Official Account.

2 Xinmin Evening News (www.xinmin.cn).

which lasted seven weeks.

In October, according to the latest national regulations, the theatre attendance rate increased to 75%. Dramas became increasingly popular, with Shanghai theatrical companies making national tours to showcase their innovative works. For example, the original Shanghai Small Theatre Xiqu Festival hosted by the Shanghai Xiqu Art Centre was upgraded to the 2020 Chinese Small Theatre Xiqu Exhibition. Twelve small theatre Xiqu works from ten types appeared in the Sala Red Box and Sala Black Box Theatre in Changjun. The tour performances of various troupes in Shanghai not only expanded their own influence, but also contributed to the recovery of the national performance industry.

In the first half of the pandemic, as mentioned previously, theatre troupes used the Internet to hold performances and education activities online in order to save themselves. After the outbreak was considered under control in the second half of the year, some theatre troupes realized the potential of online activities, and continued to implement them.

On October 23, the Shanghai Grand Theatre held a press conference for the online performance season *Zero Stop*, seeing them cooperating with Broadway on Demand.



■ Shanghai Grand Theatre

■ *Zero Stop*





■ Auctioning art masks

In this cyber space, Chinese audiences and drama enthusiasts from all over the world could enjoy the high-level performances from the West End, Broadway, The Royal Ballet, The Royal Opera House, and much else besides. *Zero Stop* also produced various forms of original material, notably behind the scenes content to further entice their audience.

As a significant part of social institutions, theatres are also trying to fulfill their social responsibilities in their own way. On the afternoon of October 17, the Shanghai Dramatic Art Centre ushered in an unprecedented charitable activity: auctioning art masks designed by the twelve most influential contemporary artists in China. All income from this activity was invested in their public welfare art education projects.

Ultimately, theatres and troupes in Shanghai responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by launching online activities and developing comprehensive theatre functions. In addition, by renting unused theatre space and selling side-line products also increased the income.

While the primary purpose of these initiatives was to enable theatres to survive during a time of hardship, eventually they led to innovations which will likely be made permanent to assist the continued growth of theatre during the return to normalcy.

With China's effective control of COVID-19, we believe that Shanghai's theatre performances in 2021 will continue to innovate.

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# The Research and Translation of Xiqu in Russia

JIANG MINGYU

**ABSTRACT** The profound Xiqu culture in China not only carries the essence of Chinese civilization but stands in the world with unique beauty. The communication and influence of Xiqu around the world have become a particular literary and cultural phenomenon that cannot be ignored in global literature. This paper will review the track of the cultural transmission of Chinese classical Xiqu to explore how to accept and study this cultural phenomenon under different cultural traditions and outline an image of the mutual understanding of heterogeneous cultures, which are closely linked with the overseas translation, communication, and research of Chinese classical literature. From the Soviet Union's study of Chinese classical Xiqu in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this paper aims to raise the curtain of research in the field.

**KEYWORDS** Xiqu, Russia, Communication

The acceptance of Xiqu in Russia was first reflected in literary themes and script translations. It is generally acknowledged by academics that Russia's understanding of Xiqu began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The first Chinese classical Xiqu introduced to Russia was an episode of *The Orphan of Zhao* by Ji Junxiang of the Yuan Dynasty, in *The Monologue of Chinese Tragedy* translated by Sumarokov, a Russian poet and playwright from Germany, in 1759. In 1788, Nechaev translated *Chinese Orphan*,



which was adapted from *The Orphan of Zhao* by Voltaire, into Russian, publishing it in St. Petersburg and bringing it onto the Russian stage. In 1832, *Kia King*, a ballet based on the story of *The Orphan of Zhao*, was released at the royal theater in St. Petersburg, creating a stir in the Russian upper class.<sup>1</sup>

However, there are also different voices about this consensus. According to the renowned Russian sinologist Riftin's *A Study of Chinese Classical Literature in the Soviet Union*, Russian readers acquainted themselves with Chinese classical Xiqu in 1829, when the "Атеней" journal published an article titled *A Revenge of the Scholar's Daughter*, which in fact told the story of *Snow in Midsummer*. It also described the outline of another Yuan Zaju piece, *A Left Shoe*, with a character list and other relevant information.<sup>2</sup> The first Russian translation of Xiqu scripts was published in "Readings Series" (Volume 35, 1839), a journal in St. Petersburg, with the title *Fan Su, or a Deceitful Maid*. It was written by Zheng Dehui and signed at the end of the translation with "translated from Chinese by level-ten interpreter Razumnik Altamov Jr. Baibakov in Kyakhta". Compared to the original text *Zou Meixiang Hanlin Fengyue* by Zheng Guangzu, the translation had the same plot as the Chinese version except for its prologue.

The above content generally covers the origin of Russian's initial understanding of Chinese classical Xiqu. It is not difficult to notice that there were only translations of the European version of Xiqu in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Russian researchers had no direct contact with Chinese classical Xiqu because they were influenced by the image of China constructed by European scholars in the social context during that time. There were Russian scholars engaging in this work also in the 1840s, where *The Story of Pipa* was translated from French to Russian and published in offprint, but the translation did not have a preface.

The world's first Chinese literature history book, "Outline of Chinese Literature History", written by the famous Russian scholar and sinologist Vasiliev in 1880, also discusses Chinese theater. The book elaborates the author's view on Xiqu and its history. He did not agree with the traditional idea that Xiqu was first created in the palace of Emperor Xuanzong of Tang but suggested that "it is generally believed that Xiqu did not appear until the late Sui Dynasty and Tang Dynasty... this implies that all so-called Xiqu, composed of speaking and singing, began to circulate among the people in the Sui Dynasty"<sup>3</sup>. Compared to many Chinese scholars, he was the one who proposed early that Chinese theater might be influenced by Indian Sanskrit drama,

1 Bai Ruosi, "The Communication and Influence of Xiqu in Russia", *Journal of Chinese Ritual, Theater and Folklore* (March 2016).

2 Riftin, "A Study of Chinese Classical Literature in the Soviet Union", *Novel, Xiqu*.

3 Vasiliev, *Outline of Chinese Literature History*, 202.

“their understanding of theater might come from India, for Indian theater had already influenced Turkestan by that time”<sup>1</sup>. The author took Wang Shipu’s *Romance of the West Chamber* as an example, briefly describing the story and pointing out the reason why its script drew much attention. He assumed that the value of its script lies not only in the beauty of language but also in the perfection of the script.

With the emergence of sinologists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese theater and Xiqu gradually walked into the sight of Russian scholars and became a major research object. The research developed in two dimensions, breadth and depth. In particular, the research conducted by the Department of Oriental Studies of Leningrad University was rather professional and inheritable.

Professor Vasiliev of Leningrad University published a paper entitled *Chinese Theater* in 1929, which introduced the characteristics of Xiqu in detail, from roles and facial makeups to costumes, postures, and theater forms, but rarely involved scripts. It is worth noting that the paper refers to the works of Chinese scholars such as Wang Guowei, Liu Shipei, and Song Chunfang while describing the development history of Chinese theater. Vasiliev also translated a version of *Ruse of Empty City* into Russian and attached it to the end of the paper to help readers better understand.

Other noteworthy works during this period include Pozdneeva’s associate doctoral dissertation “Yuan Zhen’s *Yingying*” in 1932 and sinologist Aleksiev’s paper *Hero Performers in Chinese History* in 1935.

Menshkov’s associate doctoral dissertation *The Modern Reform of Chinese Classical Xiqu* (1955) was published in 1959. The book not only contains the history of Chinese traditional theater but discusses issues like Xiqu reform after the founding of the People’s Republic of China. Besides the work in Xiqu research, he also translated Wang Shipu’s *Romance of the West Chamber*, in which performer’s lines (Quci) were all translated in poetry. Later he published a paper entitled “Issues about the Author of *Romance of the West Chamber*”.

Professor Serebriakov of Leningrad University, who studied poems of the Tang and Song Dynasty at first but later became interested in Xiqu, wrote the paper “A Discussion on *Sorrow in the Han Palace* by Ma Zhiyuan of the Yuan Dynasty”. Solokin had published several papers on Yuan Zaju from the late 1950s and had continued this research since then. During his study in China in 1964, he received academic advice from Zhou Yibai and wrote “Chinese Classical Xiqu from the 13<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> Century: Origin, Structure, Image, and Plot”. He took 162 preserved Xiqu as research objects, not only briefly describing every story but listing all major characters and their

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1 Vasiliev, *Outline of Chinese Literature History*, 203.

roles. The depth and degree of specialization of his research result are a brilliant stroke in intellectual history. Solokin also had a more comprehensive discussion on Guan Hanqing's works in which he highly praised Guan Hanqing.

Malinovskaya, a top Ming Zaju researcher who also graduated from the Department of Oriental Studies at Leningrad University, holds an associate doctoral dissertation entitled "The Chinese Playwright Hong Sheng and his *Palace of Eternal Life*". She has been specializing in the study of Xiqu in the Ming and Qing Dynasties since 1960 and published a great number of papers, topics including Zaju in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, satirical theater in the Ming Dynasty, classical theater in the late Ming Dynasty, and *Romance of the West Chamber*. In 1996, she published a monograph titled *Chinese Classical Xiqu in the 14th – 17th Century: Outline of Zaju History*.

In 1958, there were events all over the world to commemorate the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Guan Hanqing's creation, among which the Soviet Union published *The Great Chinese Playwright Guan Hanqing* by the renowned scholar H. T. Fedorenko. It mainly introduces the historical background of China in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the situation of different literature in the Yuan Dynasty, the concept of the "book club", the Hangzhou city as the cultural center of the time, the characteristic of Xiqu, the development of traditional theater literature from the Song Dynasty to modern times, and the genre features of Yuan Zaju. It affirms the social significance of theater, "The momentous role of art is not only to reveal the reality and express the truth of life but to deliver justice and promote correct views of life". This event raised the curtain of worldwide research on Xiqu; meanwhile, papers of JI. 3. Fedorenko and B. Ф. Solokin, as well as translations of *Snow in Midsummer* and *Rescue of a Courtesan*, were consecutively published during this period. The research was not terminated with the end of commemoration events. Many relevant works were later published such as B. И. Shermanov's *A Discussion on Guan Hanqing's Playwrighting Features*.

In 1966, B. Petrov, a first-class Soviet sinologist and a lecturer in the Department of Oriental Studies at Leningrad University, published the Russian translation of "Yuan Qu", which records eleven scripts of famous Yuan Zaju, such as Guan Hanqing's *Snow in Midsummer*, Bai Pu's *Wutong Rain*, Ma Zhiyuan's *Sorrow in the Han Palace*, and Zheng Guangzu's *Qianny Lost Her Soul*. The translation was revised and annotated by Menshkov. All translators were sinologists of Leningrad, while Petrov personally wrote the preface of the book. There are introductions of Yuan Zaju in the work, which highly praises the female images in the script.

Riftin, also a graduate of the Department of Oriental Studies at Leningrad University, has a main research interest in Chinese mythology and folk literature, but he once brought Chinese theater into his academic view. When expounding *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, he proposed a relationship issue between the development of Chinese theater and the development of talking-singing art to explain the reason

why Chinese theater came late into being, which was “no well-developed epic”, for playwrights of ancient Greece or ancient India constantly extracted stories from epics.

Gaida has a main research interest in Chinese theater and her dissertation is “the Formation of Traditional Chinese Theater”. In 1959, the book *Chinese Theater* was completed, and Gaida’s monograph *Traditional Chinese Theater* was published in 1971. Its central idea is to prove that Chinese theater was born as folk art, but it did not entirely “grow out of the folk soil, also coming from the soil of court art”.

Sierova is a researcher specializing in traditional Chinese theater at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. She has long been concerned about Chinese classical theater, especially the study of Chinese social thoughts reflected in Xiqu of Ming and Qing Dynasties. In 1982, she published the paper “The Taoist Outlook on Life and Theater (16<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> Century)” in *Chinese Tao and Taoism*. In 1987, she published “The Social Ideal of Tang Xianzu’s *The Story of Nanke* in the paper collection “‘Utopia’ of the Chinese Society”. In 1990, she published the monograph on Chinese classical theater named *Chinese Theater and the Chinese Society from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> Century*, which is considered as the first research work on the theory of Chinese theaters and stage art in the Soviet sinologist community.

In summary, the transmission of Chinese classical Xiqu in Russia began in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, and relevant research reached its peak in the 1960s and 1970s. The characteristics of the research are as follows: In the preliminary stage, the majority of research was paraphrasing the original Xiqu, followed by brief descriptions and comments of the work. There were also certain unique specialized studies at this stage, occasionally accompanied by one-way academic confrontations with Chinese scholars. Later, as the research went further, researchers not only expounded the origin of Chinese classical Xiqu but also wrote about its image, structure, and composing rules, even touching upon internationally difficult issues like the systematic tune and rhythm. Last but not least, the most famous researchers come from the Department of Oriental Studies at Leningrad University. Besides, researchers from the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Soviet Academy of Sciences and some Russian sinologists have shown varying interests in Chinese classical Xiqu.

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## Introduction to Classical Xiqu Plays ( III )

HUANG JINGFENG

### **Huangmeixi- *Goddess Marriage***

Huangmeixi, formerly known as the "Huangmei Tune" or the "Caichaxi", originated in Huangmei County, Hubei Province, and has developed and grown in Anqing city, Anhui Province. It is called one of the "Five Xiqu of China", together with Jingju, Yueju, Pingju and Yuju. Huangmeixi is noted for its simple, smooth, bright and lyrical singing. Its performance is simple and delicate, but with accent on realistic and lively movements.

An archetypal example of a Huangmeixi can be found in the *Goddess Marriage* – a play which gained immense popularity in the 1950s. It tells the story of Dong Yong, a young man from a family so poor he is forced to sell himself into slavery to cover his father's funeral costs.

The seven fairy daughters of the mythic Jade Emperor are watching Dong Yong's travails from their vantage point on the Magpie Bridge, a place between heaven and earth. The seventh fairy daughter, who is herself unhappy and restless in heaven, gets so moved by Dong Yong's display of filial piety that she defies the strict celestial rules of heaven to visit the grieving wastrel on earth.

To do so, she transforms herself into a village girl, and meets Dong Yong under a huaiyin tree, where she wins his sympathy by pretending she too is a hapless orphan. Seeing that her words are taking effect on the young Dong Yong, she proposes they marry.

This proposal does not have the desired outcome for the fairy though, as Dong Yong, in keeping with the norms of the time, believes it to be absurd that a man should marry someone he has met purely by chance.



■ Huangmeixi *Goddess Marriage*

Upon seeing his reaction, the Seventh Fairy Daughter acts fast to cast a spell on a Pagoda Tree, making it take on the form of a matchmaker to convince Dong Yong that their love is predestined. This changes Dong's mind, and he agrees to marry her.

However, no sooner than he agrees to the proposal, Dong Ying breaks down in tears; he remembers that he is a slave, and that his lot in life as an indentured laborer will spell disaster and shame for his new wife.

To his relief, the seventh fairy firmly declares that she is willing to share weal and woe with Dong Ying, and that they should not be separated.

They travel with one another to the Fu Family Estate, Fujiawan, where Landlord Fu is waiting. He lays down an ultimatum to the newly married couple: if they want to leave, they must first honor the contract by waving ten pieces of silk overnight. If they succeed, the contract period would be shortened, otherwise, the period would be doubled.

The seventh fairy asks her six sisters for help, and ten pieces of silk are woven overnight. Thus, the three-year contract period was shortened to 100 days. At the end of the contact, the seventh fairy told Dong that she was pregnant. The couple were happily looking forward to the future.

But suddenly, in the climactic scenes, an edict comes from the mythic Jade Emperor, ordering the seventh fairy to return to the heavenly palace immediately, otherwise Dong would face the horrific consequences of his wrath. The seventh fairy has no choice but to leave Dong reluctantly; but she does agree, as a parting gesture, to transfer their child to the land of the living by leaving it under the pagoda tree next year.

From October 5<sup>th</sup> to November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1954, *Goddess Marriage*, starring performing artists of the Huangmeixi Yan Fengying and Wang Shaofang, participated in the East Xiqu Conference in Shanghai, where it garnered an emphatic reception. It won the first prize in a number of categories, including outstanding script, performance, direction, music and much else besides.

At the end of 1955, the film *Goddess Marriage*, adapted by Sang Hu, directed by Shi Hua and starring Yan Fengying and Wang Shaofang, was produced by Shanghai Film Studio. This release was equally successful, finding an audience the Sino-sphere and beyond, finding an audience in countries and regions as diverse as Mongolia, North Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore, Fiji, Canada, Guyana, New Zealand, Hong Kong and Macao by 1959.

The enduring appeal of the story *Goddess Marriage*, both at home and abroad, can likely be found in its universal depiction of love and longing. As an epoch making moment in the progression of Huangmeixi, it can be said that the most revolutionary aspects of the piece were its versatile script, exquisite musical accompaniment, and accomplished performances.

### **Shaoxingxi - *Monkey King Thrice Defeats the Skeleton Demon***

Shaoxingxi, also known as "Shaoxing Luantan" or "Shaoxing Daban", originated in Shangyu County and Shaoxing City of Zhejiang Province during the Jiajing period of the Ming Dynasty (1522-1567). It is mainly popular in Shaoxing, Cixi, Yuyao, Ningbo, Hangzhou and other areas in Jiangsu Province and Shanghai. It is one of the three major local Xiqu of Zhejiang Province, and has formed a unique artistic style with its high pitched and exciting singing, rough and simple music, and convergence of delicate culture with martial arts.

The Shaoxingxi, *Monkey King Thrice Defeats the Skeleton Demon*, was adapted in 1960 by Gu Xidong and Bei Geng based on the traditional plays *Beat the White Bone Demon for Three Times* and *Fight in Pingding Mountain*.

The story of the play is based on Chapter 27 of the Chinese classical novel *Journey to the West*, "The Corpse Fiend Thrice Tricks Tang Sanzang, the Holy Monk Angrily Dismisses the Monkey King", and chapter 31 "Pig Moves the Monkey King Through His Goodness, Sun the Novice Subdues the Ogre Through Cunning".

The main idea of the adaptation is as follows:

Prince Sanzang, and his three disciples a Monkey, a Pig, and a Monster, travel to



the west in search of Buddhist scriptures. When they arrive at Wanzhi mountain, a cave-dwelling Skeleton demon, plots to devour Prince Sanzang.

Wary of Sanzang's main protector, the skeleton waits for a moment when Monkey is on patrol in the mountain, before taking on the forms of a village girl and old woman concurrently to make Sanzang and his other two accomplices lower their guards.

The wily Monkey realizes what is happening just in time, and slays the village girl and old woman – earning censure from Sanzang for violating Buddhist precepts and harming human lives.



■ *Shaoxingxi Monkey King Thrice Defeats the Skeleton Demon*

Sensing division, the Skeleton Demon decides to try one more time; it transforms itself into the figure of a buddhist monk, and tells Sanzang that he must banish the Monkey from his travelling party. Unaware of the wiles of the demon in disguise, Sanzang agrees to banish his Monkey protector.

As soon as he banishes his friend and the Monkey is far away, the Buddhist takes on his true skeletal form, and begins wreaking havoc, destroying surrounding temples, slaughtering monks, and preparing to finally kill and eat Sanzang.

Fortunately, the Pig is able to escape and inform Monkey of what is going on; Monkey then returns to Sanzang and agrees to free him from the demon – but before doing so, he makes the skeleton demon take on the form of the village girl and old lady from earlier – thus proving Monkey's innocence to Sanzang.

Sanzang realizes the error of his prior judgement of Monkey, and lambasts himself for not being able to see through the demon's gins. Monkey, sated by Sanzang's groveling, agrees to become his protector once more, and defeats the skeleton demon in an epic final battle.

With this done, the four resume their Journey to the West.

\*

*Monkey King Thrice Defeats the Skeleton Demon* is a perfect example of the strengths of Shaoxingxi. It shows various artistic traditions, and has unique style and strong artistic appeal.

The Skeleton Demon tricks the Monkey King thrice by disguising itself as a village girl, an old lady, and an old man. In the Shaoxingxi, the three characters are played by (the character archetypes) Tsing Yi, Lao Dan, and Lao Sheng. They use simple and resounding, expressive falsetto or true voices to show disguised state of kindness and helplessness of these three characters, which naturally enhances deceptive power of the so-called “innocent people”.

The show stealing part is, without doubt, the Monkey. This character traditionally wields a magic, golden stick, requiring much dancing and movement from the person playing them, and giving one of the most enduring sights in Shaoxingxi.

The Monkey was played by Zhang Zongyi (Liulingtong) when the production premiered in Zhejiang Shaoxingxi Troupe. Zhang was quite creative in his performance, and vividly portrayed the image of the Monkey King both in posture and spirit. The fight scenes and reconciliation scenes usually mark the dramatic and performative high points of the character.

In the above rendition, The Monk was played by Xiao Changsheng, who vividly displayed the Monk’s indiscriminate personality. Pig (Zhubajie) was played by Qilingtong, who also gave full play to the “Erchouxi (a kind of Shaoxingxi)” of Shaoxingxi, and portrayed these characters very vividly.

Mao Zedong, Guo Moruo and other national leaders wrote poems in tribute to the show. In 1960, it was made into a colorful Xiqu art film by Shanghai Tianma Film Studio. It was greatly received at home and abroad when released. In May 1963, it won the Best Xiqu Film Award, ie the “Hundred Flowers Award”, from “Popular Cinema” magazine, and screened in 72 countries and regions around the world. The Shaoju “Wukongxi” is therefore well-known at home and abroad and has become a beautiful business card of Zhejiang Shaoju Troupe.

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