



REVIEW

Kunqu Opera in the Last Hundred Years in China

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ABSTRACT

Kunqu, literally means kun melody, is one of the most ancient forms of Chinese opera. Originally her melody derives from Kunshan zone of Jiangsu province therefore it has been named Kunshan melody before, now Kunqu also known as Kunju, which means Kunqu opera. This paper mainly focuses on the development of Kunqu in the past 100 years and the influence of historical social and humanistic changes behind the special era on Kunqu, and compares the attitudes of scholars of different schools of thought in different eras to Kunqu and the social public to compare and analyze the degree of love of Kunqu.

1. Introduction

The original name of Kunqu is “tune of KunShan”, is the ancient Chinese opera intonation type of drama, now known as the “Kun drama”. Originated from the Yuan Dynasty (the middle of the 14th century), it’s a traditional Chinese culture and art of the Han ethnic group. Because it was derives from Kunshan of Jiangsu Province, so it is called Kunqu. It combines arts of singing, dance ,lines “spoken parts of a Chinese opera” and martial, it is known for elegant of lyrics and melody, intonation tactfully and exquisite performance. Most of Kunqu operas are also very superb in scriptwriting techniques, complete orchestration and the control of singing rhythm, which have reached an unprecedented level and it can be said to be a stage culture that integrates Chinese poetry, books, literature , instrument, painting, dance and music. Known as the “ancestor of the hundreds of operas”^[1]. Many kinds of

opera have been developed on the basis of Kunqu. It is the most complete type of drama in the history of Chinese opera, the biggest feature is the lyrical and delicate movements, the combination of singing and dancing is ingenious and harmonious ,in the costumes and make-up, the generals have various kinds of costumes, the civil servants have different levels of feudal social class wear, facial make-up uses Chou character(buffoon) and Jing character, occasionally use Sheng character and Dan character such as Sun Wukong (Sheng character), Zhong Wuyan (Dan character), their colors are basically red, white and black.^[2]

The 400 years between the 14th and 18th centuries was a period in which Kunqu became mature and prospered.^[3] It’s this rich and beautiful performance atmosphere, the deliberate pursuit of art that made Kunqu become increasingly elegant and abstract configurations. In the Ming Dynasty, the famous Kunqu opera masters came out. Among them, Shen Wei is the most famous representative artist of

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Kunqu in the Ming Dynasty. During the Wanli Period of the Ming Dynasty, Shen Yu advocated that Kunqu should be easy to understand and close to life, at the same time, it's based on the principle of the first law, which makes Kunqu gradually flow from the noble hall to the market stage, and promotes the prosperity and development of the professional troupe for profit. In the late Ming Dynasty, Kunqu entered the court and became a new form for the emperor's entertainment. Meanwhile Kunqu has broken through the regional restrictions and was widely spread in the north, truly and completely accepted by the whole society. At this stage ,during this period, both the opera writers, scholars and folk Kunqu artists are diligent in thinking and brave in practice, and rely on their own abilities and talents to lead Kunqu to a higher level.^[4] In the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, the dynasty replaced and social unrest, but these did not make the Kunqu fading, instead injected new vitality into Kunqu, due to the complicated political situation at that time, the news circulation of people was blocked, the city's citizens have produced a lot of rumors and gossip stories, and some literati have even thought of some stories, which has promoted Kunqu's new creative genre. The Suzhou area's creative group represented by Li Yu is called "Suzhou school", which has led to the creation of the city for 60 years, there are more than 160 kinds of works and nearly 70 kinds of works have been handed down.^[5] After entering the Qing Dynasty, Kunqu still maintained its momentum of continuous prosperity. Various family troupes and professional theater groups were still the main force of the performance. The performance of the palace Kunqu also developed. In the early years of the Qing Dynasty, the main performances of various classical plays were performed. During the Qian-long period, some cultural officials were ordered to create some of the long-lasting operas, and the Kunqu opera performance was completely included in the court culture. In the late 18th century, local operas began to rise. Their appearance broke the long-formed performance.

The development of opera also changed from royal aristocratic to popular. Kunqu began to decline.^[6] In the middle of the Qing Dynasty, Kunqu and other emerging operas went hand in hand, but they were no longer like the past and the pet. By the end of the Qing Dynasty, the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom had occupied Suzhou, and the Suzhou troupe had fled to Shanghai. There were few troupes left in Suzhou. Since then, the artists' creation of Kunqu has begun to fade. Afterwards, the feudal ruling class began to restrict and control Kunqu in order to imprison people's thoughts, and the influence and heat of Kunqu began to weaken.



Figure 1. Image quoted in "Chinese opera mask art" Jiangxi fine arts publishing press p.187

2. Siege of the International Legations, "May the Fourth New Culture Movement" Brought a Heavy Blow to Kunqu



Figure 2. Image quoted in "New Youth" Volume 5, Issue 4

In the reign of Emperor Guangxu of the Qing Dynasty in 1900, Siege of the International Legations ,with the intractable situation of foreign enemies and internal corruption, they suffered from the conflicts and collisions between Chinese and Western cultures. The old opera system, opera concept and opera aesthetic form were broken, and the whole Chinese opera began a difficult modernization of transformation, and here is nothing more than Kuqu.^[7] And the Opium War which just ended in 1842, was also the beginning of China's modern history. At this time, the Chinese economy has experienced unprecedented internal and external problems, and the national transport has declined and the people's livelihood has withered. The Westernization Movement, the Reform Movement, and the Revolution of 1911, each innovation movement ended in failure. Feudalism was like a heavy shackle that banned national thoughts. Therefore, a group of intellectuals began to travel across the sea to experience the culture and technology in foreign land, and strive to awaken the national mind with

art. At this time, there was a “spring drama”(China’s earliest drama player)Chinese modern drama begins to it, Kunqu flows from the folk art, from court art to folk art, and it mainly relies on the support of literati and merchants who love Kunqu in the civil society.

At the time of the “May the Fourth New Culture Movement” (1915-1923),the beginning was Chen Duxiu’s “Youth Magazine” (also known as “New Youth”), which was founded in 1915.The representatives of intellectuals in the movement include Chen Duxiu, Hu Shi, Li Dazhao, etc. The critique of traditional opera began in 1917 and reached its climax after the publication of “New Youth”Vol.5,No.4,” Theatrical improvement special” in October1918;^[8] the basic view of drama is to oppose the backward and conservative Chinese “old drama”(traditional opera headed by Kunqu)and to promote the new drama of Western Ocean. Hu Shi uses the concept of literary evolution to point out from a formal point of view that Chinese old drama has never been able to break away from the shackles of music, it hindered its evolution, and believed that music and facial make-up, voice, the gait of an actor or actress, martial arts, arts of singing, drums etc. (the elements of the opera)are the “destruction” left by the previous errand the Western drama has reached the “evolution of free development”. Therefore, Chinese drama must “seep out the old kinds of remains” and adopt new ideas, new methods and new forms that Western countries have continued to develop in the past 100 years, so that Chinese drama can hope for improvement and progress.^[9] However, during the argumentation, the key points of the old drama were not touched. Fu Sinian and Hu Shi’s views are completely consistent. He believes that” the old Chinese dramas are not indispensable. But there are too many bad habits, and they are not cleansing.” Of course, Chen Duxiu, as a “new youth”, is too radical and conceited to some extent. He wrote in the 1950 “discuss the opera” to write: “there is no one in the world who doesn’t like him, no matter how men and women are young and old, everyone is taught with sincerity and joy. He can be regarded as the world’s largest educator.”^[10]



Figure 3. Kunqu’s legend for making changes to facial make-up after May fourth new culture movement, image quoted in “*Chinese opera mask art*”, Jiangxi fine arts publishing press ,p.283

In the winter of 1906,the Spring Liu Society, established by the Japanese students Li Shutting and Zeng Xiaogu in Tokyo, in the Chapter of the Performing Arts Department of Chunliu Club, he proposed that “the establishment of the performing arts department, the improvement of the opera, in order to shift the atmosphere”, “to open the intellectual, inspiring spirit.”^[11] However, during this period, there are also conservative retro-styles defending traditional operas. Zhang House and Ma Er are the first to propose the preservation of old dramas. They believe that the Chinese opera is an excellent national culture of the Chinese nation. As sons and daughters of the Chinese nation, we have the responsibility and obligation to inherit them in their original farmland we cannot carry out any form or meaning innovation, and it’s even more impossible to accept the emerging foreign cultures from the West.

Under the argument of the two major factions, the people and the scholars of all sides could not distinguish where the intention was, and the two sides also countered their actions.^[12] The party that supports the introduction of new culture began to rehearse various stage plays, using vernacular as a line, and the emerging western band as an accompaniment. The songs written were also created by the Western opera as a prototype. And the other party supporting the old culture added a rehearsal session to the performance list of the troupe. This is a “death fight.” We see that among the leaders of the movement, those who are more radical are related to their political background. For example, Chen Duxiu was the revolutionary party in the late Qing Dynasty. He organized an assassination group. In the movement, his remarks always had an impossibility to discuss, and this is true in the attitude towards the Eastern and Western cultures, as well as on the issue of the literary revolution. Because at this time, along with the fierce criticism of traditional culture and the conscious study of Western culture, it’s also the transformation process of Chinese literature from classical to modern. People therefore think that classical opera is the carrier of decaying feudal thought, trying to replace it with new drama. It has deepened people’s resistance to traditional opera.^[13] One of the main reasons is also because of the traditional opera, especially the singing tune of Kunqu. The main vocal characteristics of Kunqu is that the mouth is light and round, the sound is purely fine, turn the pressure and adjust the tone, the effect of singing three sighs is formed between the lips of the word.^[14] For some scholars who advocated Western culture at that time, they believed that this kind of vocal is too sloppy and considered to be the representative of the decadent ideas of the feudal society in the old times; and some of the new scholars will be

the old time to kill the text of the complex difficult to become a word of the text, which is also the king of the period in this period with the cultural movement innovation. The people actually got more profit in such a struggle, but as such an anti-feudal society, people no longer want to be bound by the traditional decadent system, and people who come to the freedom are not slowly close to the new culturalism side, which doesn't mean that people don't love Chinese excellent culture. Just in such a political and social background and environment, it's natural to promote the development of new culture and the reform of Kunqu.

At this time, the people's rebellious attitude towards the feudal ruling order and the thinking psychology of the social status quo of the society is also evident in the drama repertoire such as "Shenzhoulei" "huJiaZhuang" "CaijiaZhuang" "HujiaZhuang"... a series of battles such as the peasant heroes against the feudal regiments and the armed forces were reappeared in a vivid and fascinating manner. In the clarity and directness of the rebellion, it's clearly better than the legendary repertoire "Shui Hu, which" is also the change that Kunqu made in order to survive in this period.^[15]

The transformation of Chinese opera in this period not only changed the concept of Chinese and foreign opera culture and the change of performing arts, but also the difference between the various operas of Chinese opera. The status of Kunqu opera declined during this period, the prosperity of Beijing opera art and many Kunqu artists have been transferred to the Beijing opera. This time many modern people have seen the Beijing opera (alternate name: Ping opera) as the representative of Chinese traditional opera, believed that Beijing opera is based on Kunqu opera as a prototype to carry out reforms and improvements in the new era, and can better reflect the perfect Chinese opera culture than Kunqu, lose this concept to the international community, making Kunqu in an awkward position in academics.^[16] Although many of Beijing opera's vocals, dances, and performances have evolved from Kunqu, the emerging Beijing opera culture is more widely distributed in role, and the writers are closer to modern society, so they have developed rapidly and are consistent with art literati at home and abroad. Praise and favor.

3. The War of Resistance against Japan Allowed the Country to Understand Kunqu

On July 7, 1937, Beijing's "Lugouqiao Incident" was the symbol, and the nationwide anti-Japanese war began. The living environment of the opera art has also undergone fundamental changes, with the fall of cities such as Bei-

jing and Shanghai and the National Government. During the migration, a large number of literary and art circles began to carry out radial migration from the central city to all parts of the country. During this period and there were several operas. Some scholars believe that they can't look backwards because of war. They should still take the cultural spirit first; let the people get the spirit of liberation first to fight against foreign enemies more uniformly.^[17] However, some scholars believe that it is because of the current enemy that people are the Chinese excellent culture are passed

down by the ancestors who should be used to consolidate the spirit of solidarity; the general public in the community is not interested in the development and direction of the opera at this time. Everyone is very panicked about the Japanese aggression and is afraid of the situation every day. Under the life, let alone go to the theatre. After the situation lasted for a while, because the Communist Red Army began to surround the city with the armed struggle strategy, the Red Army moved from all over the country to the remote villages nearby, which also made Kunqu, Beijing opera and traditional dramas have gained popularity and development in more remote areas.^[18]

4. The Founding of the People's Republic of China, the Transformation of Kunqu Opera

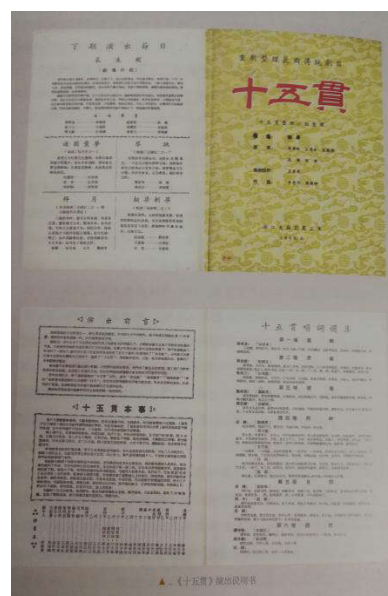


Figure 4. Image quoted in "Chinese modern opera history", Culture and Art Press, 2011, p.189

New China was founded in 1949. The opera art of New China was initiated by a large-scale opera reform movement, and encouraged the development of various modern and traditional operas. On April 1, 1950, "People's Dra-

ma” was launched in Shanghai. It is the inaugural issue and the turn of

the opera reform. It is the first systematic slogan of “reform” in the publicly-issued publications since the founding of New China.^[19] From October 6th, 1952 to November 4th, 1952, the Ministry of Culture organized a national opera performance viewing conference in Beijing. As a part of Kunqu, it began the road of revival. From November 27th to December 10th, the Ministry of Culture held the first national opera work conference. On May 5, 1951, the Administrative Council issued the “Instructions on the Reform of the Traditional Opera”, proposing the policy of reforming the system and reforming the people, and promoting the art of opera. In order to protect the outstanding cultural works and traditional art of the old opera world, we eliminated the unreasonable unscientific and uncivilized theatrical works and performance customs, so that the traditional operas face the public with a new look. In fact, Kunqu the reform has not only revolutionized the sound of music (the pronunciation bite is closer to the modern society, the sound chamber is more full and round). It is also driven by singing, and the workmanship has also been developed. In addition, the face has been further improved.

On May 18, 1956, “the People’s Daily published a commentator’s article”, “A play to save a play,” which is indeed one of the most important documents in the history of Kunqu since the 1940s.



Figure 5. Image quoted in “Chinese modern opera history”, Culture and Art Press, 2011, p. 226

There are almost no classes for special performances.^[20] Although the Kunqu actor training class was established in 1954, the Kunqu was considered to be the art of the feudal landlord class. At that time, it advocated the “art of the people” and later created the “Fifteen-Cross”. It was affirmed by the leaders, which changed the situation to a certain extent. In line with the political situation in China at that time, it was “reconciliation, false and wrong case” and “promoting the honest and upright official”. In the next one or two years, China has successively established six Kunqu Opera groups.^[21]

During this period, due to the entry into a new political structure under the leadership of Chairman Mao, the people are unconditionally supporting and advocating the leadership of the Communist Party of China in spirit, so there is little reaction to the reform and development of the opera during this period. Controversy, this period can be described as a period of transformation and revival of Kunqu .



Figure 6. Peony Pavilion (Mudanting)

5. Today, the Kunqu Art is Recognized by the World

In 2001, Kunqu became China’s first human oral and intangible cultural heritage. It was not only the first batch, but also the whole vote. After Kunqu became a non-legacy, it was comparable to a strong shot. It has made Kunqu an unprecedented position, influence and attention in the past 100 years.^[22]

In 2003, Bai Xianyong began to prepare for the youth version of “Peony Pavilion”. He premiered in Taipei in April 2004 and was included in the first performance after the completion of the National Grand Theatre. The youth version of “Peony Pavilion” became the most important culture in the new century. One of the phenomena is also

a landmark event in the history of Kunqu in the past 100 years.^[23] However, during this period, “the young people are reluctant to watch slow music, and the elderly are reluctant to spend money.” The situation of “Kunqu” is regarded as a fallout opera. Many young people begin to appreciate ballet or western classical music for the pursuit of fashion. In order to cater to this fashion, “Peony Pavilion” incorporates the packaging and propaganda of the new era, making the people realize that Kunqu is the charm of the long-standing history of the motherland culture. The newly-changed youth version of “Peony Pavilion” emphasizes and refines the theme of “Youth and Love” created by Tang Xianzu, and adds the popular idea of “anti-feudalism” and “anti-feudal ethics” in modern society, interpreting a lingering ancient and modern life and death, “love to” is the essence of this work.^[24] In addition, in the clothing and stage art, we have also added modern elements, such as changing traditional costumes in clothing, adding a lot of modern details, including actor makeup, and adding background effects such as led on the stage. The stage effect is more solid. Therefore, through this work, everyone’s eyes have begun to turn to the Kunqu art. And in 2001, the “non-legacy” formed the phenomenon of “Kunqu hot”.^[25]

However, the heat at this time can not fully maintain the position of Kunqu in the public heart, and since the premiere of the youth version of “Peony Pavilion”, the controversy has been very complicated. Some traditional scholars believe that this change will make the traditional excellent culture become the products of neither fish nor fowl and the traditional excellent opera culture is spoiled, so they even jointly applied to the relevant departments to stop the new edition of “Peony Pavilion” and demanded the establishment of rules and regulations. From then on, it is forbidden to tamper with traditional opera works without approval. The old artists of these traditional schools are very concerned about this boycott. They believe that traditional operas should not cater to the preferences and aesthetics of the times, and should maintain their most primitive form.^[26] In another part, the innovation group headed by Bai Xianyong believes that the traditional opera content will contain many feudal dogmas. As artists and scholars of the new era, they should take their essence and improve the old decaying traditional culture along the development direction of the times. Instead of blindly respecting the traditional operas of the old form, it is not good for the development of the opera, because modern media technology has been constantly innovated. And people’s entertainment is more extensive. If you do not innovate and develop Kunqu, For Kunqu itself, it will only make its audience less and less. As a traditional

opera with such a long history, the value and meaning of the audience will be greatly reduced, so no matter which aspect is considered, it cannot be considered. Continue to use the ancient feudal traditional Kunqu content.^[27] This period can be described as a major turning point and transition period of the Kunqu revival. In any case, the more enthusiastic the debate means the higher the attention to Kunqu, which has never been more popular since 1900.

6. The Rise and Fall of Kunqu over the Past Century: Civil And Official

The rise and fall of Kunqu over the past century, can be described as a process of civil and official interaction. In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Kunqu was the art of the court, but after the end of the Qing Dynasty, “it lost its traditional etiquette, morality, culture and so on, had to go to the folk to look for “, Kunqu entered the folk. The survival and development of Kunqu is instead maintained by a relatively stable circle. This small circle is mainly composed of literati and businessmen who love Kunqu. For example, the relationship between Rong Qings mass organization and Beijing University, and Su-Zhe-Hu (Jiangsu Zhejiang Shanghai)playwriting.^[28] Therefore, during the Republic of China, Kunqu was in a civil state and gained its living space. In the New China period, Kunqu met the political situation and gained survival opportunities. It was included in the New China Socialist Literary System and became a new Chinese opera. One of the traditional arts, such as drama, is also subject to such a system. According to the national cultural policy, Kunqu’s performances were performed. Until the 1980s and 1990s, Kunqu was still in the system, but at this time, politics was not needed anymore. In addition to popularization, politicization, and drama, it also faces a situation in which viewers are reduced. In the 1980s and 1990s, many performances and opera creations in Kunqu were in line with the political situation, such as “red glow”, “Li Hui Niang”, “Between Teachers and Students”, “Surprise Attack the White Tiger Group” and so on.^[29] In addition to the system, there are some folk hobby groups in Kunqu. In this complicated space, there are some Kunqu diehards who believe that the newly adapted Kunqu and the newly created works are “genetically modified Kunqu”. They don’t want to make a slight changes of the times. In addition to this, since the “non-legacy”, there have been some changes in the field of Kunqu, the first one is the change of the concept of Kunqu, from “the outdated art” to the “consumption fashion.” The second one is the expansion of the Kunqu Opera audience. As the saying goes, what kind of audience has the what kind of Kunqu, because the largest object

of Kunqu's production and performance is the audience, Kunqu has been more extensive and modernized since then.^[30] The third is the formation of three forces in the field of Kunqu: literati, businessmen and officials. The literati took into account the cultural heritage of Kunqu, and the merchants got more to gain higher profits in order to upgrade the performance. The official: because of Kunqu has been in the national cultural system, the Kunqu performance community is under the management of the national literary system. Therefore, the most important influence and guidance of officials on Kunqu, and it's also gradually balanced and harmonious in the three constraints and promotion of these three forces.

7. Conclusion

All in all, the rise and fall of Kunqu in the past 100 years is actually a history of Kunqu from the official to the folk and back to the official. In this gradually expanding field, they are performing a series of "intangible cultural heritage" metamorphosis of our times.^[31] It is also hoped that the Kunqu of the Chinese nation and even the Kunqu of world culture will continue to be inherited and developed in the world so that more future generations can feel the artistic culture of the abyss of human excellence.

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