

Kunqu

A Classical Opera of Twenty-First-Century China

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Preface

How does one tell the multifaceted story of kunqu, a 600-year-old genre of Chinese opera that was hardly performed in the late 1980s but is now frequently staged in theaters in China and around the world, mesmerizing audiences with literary lyrics, flowing melodies, and exquisite dances? This was the question I continuously wrestled with during the long process of writing this monograph. I finally chose to tell the story as I had experienced it as a devotee of kunqu, a music scholar and teacher, and a university administrator who had produced Chinese cultural shows on the campus of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Thus, my telling of the kunqu story blends ethnographic and historical data, kunqu practitioners' inside knowledge, and academic analyses driven by international theories of opera as well as social and cultural theory.

I first encountered kunqu as a college student in Hong Kong. Sometime in 1974, I attended a performance of the "Flee by Night" ("Yeben") and found myself mesmerized by the music and dance. Being young and uninformed, I did not fully understand what the performance signified, but I will never forget how the hero of the story sang and danced with so much emotion as he found himself chased by assassins, vowing speedy vengeance.

Between the mid-1970s and late 1980s, I did not pursue kunqu systematically—I was busy studying ethnomusicology and musicology in Japan and in the US. During those years, I attended a number of kunqu shows in Hong Kong and Taiwan and listened to some cassette recordings by Mei Lanfang (1894–1961), Yu Zhenfei (1902–1993), and other legendary performers. I also read what I could find about the genre. In 1983, I briefly entertained the idea of writing a dissertation on kunqu, a proposal my wise mentor, Professor Rulan Chao Pian (1921–2013) of Harvard University, instantly vetoed. She told me that I had neither the cultural nor musical know-how to tackle that complex subject, nor did I have the time. I did not understand her reasoning then, but I do now.

So I gave up kunqu as a dissertation topic, but I did not forget the genre: its stories, arias, and dances continued to fascinate me. I continued to listen to kunqu music and read about it whenever and however I could. In 1988, I took kunqu singing classes for several months. In 1994, I published an article on the *Nashuying qupu* (Ye Tang's

library of kunqu scores) by Ye Tang (fl. 1780s–1790s), a seminal notated source of kunqu history. In 1999, I invited two scholars to write about Chen Shizheng's controversial production of the *Peony Pavilion* (1998–1999; *Mudang ting*) for an academic journal I edited. In 2004 and 2005, I attended Bai Xianyong's production of *Peony Pavilion*, a show that made kunqu a trendy subject for debates about traditional and contemporary Chinese culture. Four years ago, UNESCO had declared the genre a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

In 2006, I decided to study kunqu systematically. Since then, I have been conducting fieldwork, attending kunqu shows and conferences in China and the US, teaching kunqu classes and seminars, publishing writings on the genre, and producing kunqu shows in Ann Arbor. Between 2009 and 2019, I visited China three or four times per year, attending shows and meeting with my kunqu research partners and friends. In the summers of 2016 through 2018, I taught kunqu as a visiting professor at Duke Kunshan University, using that opportunity to study the genre as it was produced in the cities of Kunshan, Suzhou, and Shanghai. In short, for almost fifty years, kunqu was in and out of my academic and personal life, affecting my emotional and intellectual being and shaping the ways I understand and write about Chinese music and music culture.

By the early 2000s, I felt an urgent need to find out how Ming dynasty (1368–1644) music actually sounded. I had studied the scores of historical Chinese music for more than twenty years, but I hardly knew what it had sounded like in the past. To explore Ming kunqu sounds as they were performed and heard, I began by examining the opera as it is performed today. Supposedly, contemporary kunqu performance practices faithfully continue the tradition established since, at the latest, the mid-Qing dynasty (1644–1911).

In 2006, I encountered kunqu as a microcosm of Chinese lives and dreams. That summer, I hosted an academic conference on late Ming music and culture. To render the event musically substantive, I had a kunqu show performed as a feature attraction. That production opened doors for me to a Chinese operatic world more artistic, discursive, and multivalent than anything I had experienced before. The production process brought to me the epiphany that I could hardly separate kunqu performers from the characters they enacted on stage. I could not tell which was more “real.” I learned that off-stage, the actress who played a seductive young widow was in fact a plain-looking 60-year-old; yet on stage, she was as seductive as any man could imagine; her acting, singing, and dancing were all unforgettable. Then and there, I realized that I had got myself stuck in a hermeneutic dilemma: had I dismissed the staged widow as “unreal,” I would have had to negate what I had learned/imagined about what a seductive Chinese widow is/should be; had I accepted the show as “real,” I would be “fooling” myself—how could I allow a virtuoso performance to “mislead” me to accept something that could not be “true”?

That epiphany compelled me to explore kunqu as both a performance and a discourse of Chinese lives and dreams. To that end, I designed a hands-on course

on kunqu in the winter of 2009 and invited Madame Zhang Xunpeng (b. 1941), a celebrated kunqu performer and pedagogue, to co-teach it. In the first eight weeks of the course, I lectured on kunqu history and theories. In the remaining weeks, she taught the class the basics of kunqu acting, dancing, speaking, and singing. She taught me how performance communicates what words and thoughts can only suggest, and her lesson was confirmed by my students. A female undergraduate student who took the course confided to me that only after she had learned from Madame Zhang how a Ming dynasty Chinese lady walked could she understand why kunqu was so charming.

At the end of the course, I produced a performance of “Autumn Farewell” (“Qiujiang”) from the *Jade Hairpin* (*Yuzan ji*) featuring UM students as well as Madame Zhang and Maestro Cai Zhengren (b. 1941), a giant among twentieth-century kunqu performers. To provide instrumental music for the show, I hired instrumentalists from New York. Producing and marketing the show made me realize that kunqu serves the various needs of many stakeholders. My UM production, for instance, had to serve at least four contrasting groups of participants/stakeholders: the two kunqu master performers from Shanghai; the instrumentalists from New York; the UM students, who had only studied the operatic genre for two months and lacked well-honed skills to perform it; and Ann Arbor audiences, who had never seen a Chinese opera performed live—what kind of kunqu would appeal to them?

After 2009, I produced or co-produced a number of kunqu shows in Ann Arbor. In September 2010, I presented one with performers from the New York Kunqu Society. In September 2012, I collaborated with the University Musical Society of the University of Michigan to present two grand performances of kunqu by the internationally renowned SuKun (Jiangsu sheng Suzhou kunju yuan; Suzhou Kunqu Opera Theater of Jiangsu Province). In March 2017, I invited Danny Yung, Ke Jun, and other ShengKun (Jiangsu sheng kunju yuan; Jiangsu Province Kunqu Opera Theater) artists to perform traditional and experimental kunqu on the UM campus. In April 2019, I presented the *Lute: Cai Bojie* (*Pipa ji: Cai Bojie*), a contemporary kunqu that SuKun had premiered two years earlier. And throughout the 2010s, I invited many kunqu artists and scholars to visit Ann Arbor and give lecture-demonstrations.

As I got to observe kunqu from different angles, and as I learned more and more about its history and current developments, I began to comprehend the genre’s underlying theories and performance practices. Kunqu blurs Chinese lives and dreams, an observation that the kunqu aphorism *yanhuole* (bringing characters alive on stage) underscores. Indeed, for many kunqu performers and audiences, life is but a dream, and opera affords them a stage to objectively and subjectively perform and negotiate their humanity. And to perform on this stage, one has to understand kunqu from different positions. To encourage such understandings, I offer this monograph.

Kunqu

A Performance and Discourse of Twenty-First-Century China

An Overview

Twenty-first-century kunqu has a long and multifaceted history, one that needs to be approached from different perspectives. To holistically introduce kunqu, this chapter presents five accounts: (1) a bird's-eye view of kunqu history and its revival during the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; (2) an ethnographic report on a contemporary and representative kunqu event, demonstrating the ways in which the genre informs us about Chinese lives; (3) a critique of popular arguments about the genre's contemporary developments and significances; (4) a preview of the holistic interpretation of kunqu offered by this monograph; (5) and a brief outline of the chapters that follow.

Kunqu is a centuries-old genre of Chinese opera, one that first blossomed in Jiangnan, in central and coastal China, in the late 1500s. By the early 1600s, it had become a nationally popular form of operatic entertainment. From the late 1600s to the end of the 1700s, kunqu performance practices grew more diverse and refined, as well as virtuoso, securing the genre's historical reputation as a classical Chinese performing art. After the early 1800s, however, kunqu began to decline, gradually yielding center stage to regional operas and performing arts that had recently become fashionable throughout China. By the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, kunqu had ceased to be a viable genre of operatic entertainment; even so, its tradition was sustained by small but influential groups of educated and nationalistic patrons and connoisseurs in Beijing and Shanghai-Suzhou.

In 1921, a team of Suzhou kunqu patrons tried to revive kunqu by launching a modern school of kunqu performance. It recruited and trained fifty-five young students, who subsequently became vital teachers of the genre and are now celebrated as the Chuanzibei Masters. In 1956 a groundbreaking kunqu performance, the *Fifteen Strings of Coins* (*Shiwu guan*), premiered successfully in Beijing, generating national interest in the genre, and this led to the founding of seven government-supported troupes/schools of kunqu performance. Over the following decade, kunqu flourished;

the development was, however, cut short by the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), a turbulent time during which kunqu performances were banned. From the late 1970s through to the mid-1990s, the genre was meagerly sustained by a community of dedicated performers, connoisseurs, and scholars, who strove to keep the genre alive. Their efforts, however, attracted little national attention or enthusiasm. As remembered by many kunqu actors, their shows staged in the late 1980s or early 1990s often had more singers and dancers on the stage than audience members in the seats.

In 1998–1999, Chen Shizheng, a Chinese-American theater director, staged an “authentic and complete” production of the *Peony Pavilion* at the Lincoln Center in New York City. That performance won praise from many Western audiences but also antagonized some Chinese kunqu practitioners. To assert their ownership of kunqu, and to demonstrate its “authentic” expressions and performance practices, they mounted their own version of the opera.¹

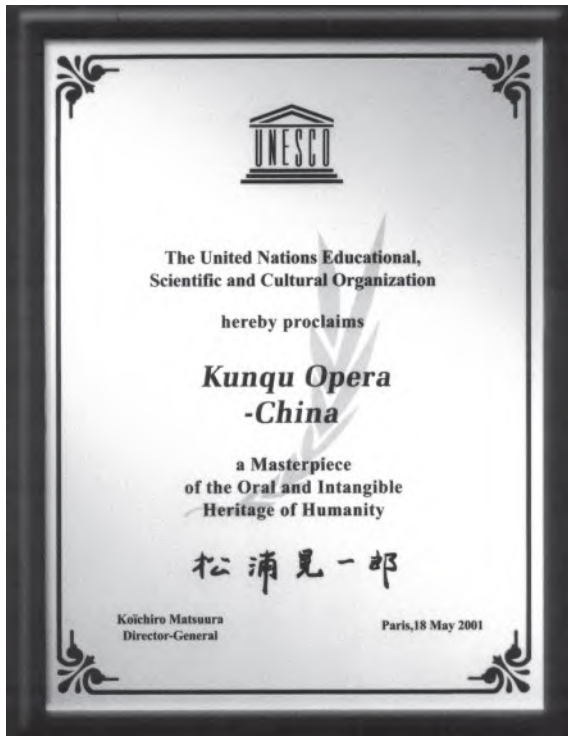


Figure 1.1: UNESCO honors kunqu as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Source: Wu Xinlei, ed., *Zhongguo kunju dacidian*, front matter.

1. For further discussions on Chen’s show, see Chapters 4 and 8.

In May 2001, UNESCO designated kunqu a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. That honor prompted the Chinese government to generously promote the genre, which stimulated regular performances of new and traditional shows and nurtured new generations of professional performers and young urban fans. Since 2001, a number of seminal kunqu events have taken place, attesting to the genre's restoration as a form of classical Chinese opera. In 2002, two authoritative reference works on kunqu—*Zhongguo kunqu dacidian/A Dictionary of Chinese Kunqu Opera*, edited by Wu Xinlei, and *Kunqu cidian* (A dictionary of kunqu), edited by Hong Weizhu—were published in Nanjing and Taipei respectively. In November 2003, China launched the Kunqu Museum in Suzhou, thus making that city the centre of the genre's revival. Suzhou is now the permanent site of the national Kunqu Festival (*kunqu yishu jie*), held every three years. Each iteration of the festival offers an extensive program of traditional and new operas by professional kunqu performers and an international conference of kunqu scholars.

In 2004, efforts to revive kunqu shifted into high gear. In April and May of that year, the *Young Lovers* (*Qingchun ban Mudang ting; Peony Pavilion, the Young Lovers*), a groundbreaking performance that staged kunqu with its "original sauce and taste" (*yuanzhi yuanwei*), premiered in Taipei and Hong Kong. Over the following summer and fall, the show was presented in Beijing, Hangzhou, Suzhou, and Shanghai, mesmerizing tens of thousands of young, educated, arts-loving Chinese college students. Their enthusiasm for the show not only launched a national discourse about kunqu as part of China's cultural heritage but also a heated controversy over its *qingchun* (beautiful, classical, youthful) aesthetics and performance style.² Also in 2004, a grand new production of the *Palace of Everlasting Life* (*Changsheng dian*) premiered in Taipei and Suzhou, demonstrating the performers' vision of what authentic kunqu was, is, and should be.

In April 2005 the Chinese central government issued a national policy on safeguarding and developing kunqu: each year between 2006 and 2010, the ministries of culture and finance would invest an annual sum of RMB10,000,000 to support the genre's performance, training, and research. In March 2006 the *1699 Peach Blossom Fan* (*1699 Taohua shan*) premiered in Beijing, consolidating the *qingchun* aesthetics and performance practices that the *Young Lovers* had launched. In September and October of the same year, the *Young Lovers* was staged in Berkeley, Irvine, Los Angeles, and Santa Barbara, winning critical praise and nurturing international interest in kunqu. The year 2007 saw the premier of a Shanghai production, the *Palace of Everlasting Life*, demonstrating Chinese efforts to both preserve and develop the genre. In May 2008, a sensational Chinese–Japanese version of the *Peony Pavilion* was staged in Beijing, underscoring the extent to which the genre had attracted international attention. The artist who performed the leading female role in the production was Bando Tamasaburo (b. 1950), an internationally renowned Japanese kabuki

2. See Chapters 4 and 8 for further discussions of the show's innovative features.

onnagata (female impersonator), whose unique performance generated critical debate among kunqu fans.³

New and traditional kunqu performances are now regularly staged on Chinese and international stages. Domestic and overseas communities of kunqu fans are steadily expanding. These fans are now generating a demand for the genre and fostering the online circulation of audiovisual recordings of kunqu shows, performance scripts, music scores, and commentaries. Twenty-first-century kunqu is blossoming as a fashionable art form in China today.

An Ethnographic Report on a 2018 Kunqu Event

Kunqu is blossoming because it offers a stage for Chinese people to construct and negotiate their culture, history, and personhood, a fact that is palpable at grand performances, such as that of the *Palace of Everlasting Life* that ShangKun (Shanghai Kunju tuan; Shanghai Kunju Troupe) staged from May 10 to 13, 2018, at the Shanghai Oriental Arts Center.⁴ A dramatization of the romance between Tang Minghuang (685–762), a Chinese emperor, and Yang Guifei (719–756), his beautiful consort, the performance unfolded as a sequence of four operas presented over four nights.⁵ Each evening performance ran about 150 minutes, realizing scenes from a script that Hong Sheng (1645–1704) completed in 1688.⁶

The four parts together tell a romantic story with virtuosic acting, singing, and dancing; that story inspires debate over a number of Chinese issues. As scripted and performed, the first show includes two highly romantic scenes: “Pledging Love” (“Dingqing”), about how Tang Minghuang embraces Yang Guifei as his lover by presenting her with a golden hairpin and a bejeweled box; and “A Gift of Hair” (“Xianfa”), which shows how the consort, who has been banished from the palace for having displeased the emperor, wins back his love with a personal gift of her hair, a token of her femininity and charm.

The second installment features scenes that appeal to Chinese eyes, ears, hearts, and minds. The scene titled “Listening to Music; Notating Music” (“Wenyue; Zhipu”), for example, presents a fanciful story: the consort travels to the moon in a dream, where she listens to a rehearsal of the *Rainbow Skirt of Feather* (*Nishang yuyi qu*) and learns its melodies and rhythms. Upon her return to earth, she notates the

3. See Chapter 9 for further discussions of Bando Tamasaburo’s performance.

4. For links to the online audiovisual clips of the show, see “Links to Online Audiovisual Kunqu Recordings.”

5. For further details about the *Palace of Everlasting Life*, see Chapter 3.

6. For further details about the ShangKun production, see Shi Jian, *Nichang yayun yongting fangfei Shanghai kunju tuan tuanjing sishi zhounian jinian* (Shanghai: Shanghai Kunju Opera Troupe, 2017). On the production’s claim of “returning to tradition,” see Pan Yanna, “‘Huigui chuantong’ de linian yu shijian—Shanghai kunju tuan quanben *Changshen dian yanjiu*”/“The Idea and Practice of ‘Returning to the Tradition’—a Case Study on the Full Version of the *Palace of Everlasting Life*, produced by the Shanghai Kunju Opera Troupe,” dissertation, Shanghai Conservatory of Music, 2011.

music she has learned, teaches it to the palace musicians, and has them perform it to entertain the emperor. Dramatically, the scene conflates historical memories with fictional imagination, a standard feature in kunqu operas. Yang Guifei was renowned as a talented musician and dancer, and the *Rainbow Skirt of Feather* is a celebrated work in Chinese music history. By tracing the work's provenance to supernatural forces, the scene underscores that kunqu is the music of heaven.

The third installment emphasizes how kunqu operates as opera (*xiqu*)—literally, the Chinese term means “theatre” and “songs”; conceptually, it defines Chinese opera as a performing art that tells stories with words, songs, and dances. The definition vividly manifests itself in the scene titled “A Garden Party; Shocking News” (“Xiaoyan jingbian”). Realistically, it presents the imperial couple drinking and flirting with each other, evoking games Chinese lovers play, and demonstrating the horrors that war would bring to the Chinese world. Kunqu audiences love this scene, and actor-singers yearn to perform it. Madame Zhang Xunpeng, a senior female kunqu performer, once told me that she loved the scene for its affective projection of the consort’s charm and her love for the emperor, as well as for enabling performers to showcase their skills.

The fourth installment wraps up the heart-rending love story with a happy conclusion, a convention in traditional Chinese opera. The climax of the show is the scene titled “Ballad Singing” (“Tanci”), a masterpiece of kunqu music.⁷ It presents an itinerant old balladeer, a former court musician, singing arias for a paying audience and relating key events in the imperial romance that he has witnessed. Melodically intricate and narratively dramatic, the arias in the scene include a set of nine variations. All were, and still are, popularly sung by old amateur male kunqu performers, who enjoy the tunes and use them to reminisce about their youthful dreams.

As noted earlier, the ShangKun performance of the *Palace of Everlasting Life* enabled kunqu audiences to vicariously experience, or imagine, romantic and historical Tang China. Even while empathizing with Tang Minghuang and Yang Guifei, they could not forget their contemporary selves and realities. The young cast of the performance reminded the audience that they were witnessing a transition between different generations of performers. Cai Zhengren, a celebrated kunqu actor, performed the leading role of Tang Minghuang in two scenes of the performance; in the other scenes, the role was performed by his students, young but accomplished ShangKun performers. Cai’s sharing of the Tang Minghuang role in the 2018 production confirmed the passing of kunqu performance tradition from one generation of ShangKun performers to another.

Even while the audience enjoyed the young performers, they were reminded of kunqu’s present-day social significance. The performance they attended was more than an operatic presentation—it was also a commercial and social event in

7. For a study of the scene and its music, see Joseph S. C. Lam, “A Kunqu Masterpiece and Its Interpretations: *Tanci* (the Ballad) from Hong Sheng’s *Changsheng Dian* (*Palace of Everlasting Life*),” *Chinoperl* 33, no. 2 (December 2014): 98–120.

contemporary Shanghai.⁸ The performance had been sold out five days before opening night. Ticket prices were barely affordable; the most expensive cost RMB¥800. Thus, the cost of attending all four evenings of the performance added up to one quarter or more of a typical Shanghai salaryman's monthly pay.⁹ However, tickets could be scalped on-site at the last minute. An hour or two before 7:15 p.m. when the show began, scalpers were offering tickets by the entrance to the venue; prices dropped as showtime approached. Commercial activities also occurred inside the arts center. In its expansive lobby, sponsors had set up counters offering advertisement brochures, product samples, and souvenirs—all prominently marked with corporate sponsors' logos. Placed along aisles in the lobby were carts selling snacks and beverages, as well as books and media products about kunqu.

The commercial and social aspects of the performance were brazenly exposed by the empty seats at the "sold-out" event. At each of the four shows, around 20 percent of the seats were empty, and some seats were occupied by persons who were obviously not regular operagoers. This underscored the Chinese practice of giving out complimentary tickets in the kunqu world of contemporary and socialist-capitalist China. Only people/institutions with financial and social resources can afford to get or give complimentary tickets. Those who receive hard-to-get tickets are honored and are obliged to later return the favor somehow. Some gifted tickets had been passed on to the casual audience, who betrayed their unfamiliarity with kunqu in several ways. They squirmed in their seats throughout the performance, checking their smartphones, reading program notes, and showing their confusion or boredom. A few actually left before the performance was over. Those who stayed until the end might perhaps have become kunqu fans.

As indicated by the audience at the ShangKun performance, kunqu fans are diverse. Most of the audience at the shows appeared to be Chinese, most likely Shanghainese. Most were in their late twenties through to their fifties. Most dressed informally but neatly, indicating that they were financially and socially comfortable. A few among the audience wore formal evening dresses or suits, which made them stand out among the crowd, underscoring their business reasons for attending the shows. Many among the audience appeared to be regular operagoers, who responded positively or negatively to the performance. Some were serious connoisseurs who held in their hands performance scripts and/or notated scores of the opera being staged. A few among the audience were non-Chinese tourists exploring kunqu as Chinese culture and/or entertainment.

8. As listed in the program pamphlet of the shows, the institutional sponsors of the performance were: Center for Chinese Culture Transmission, Shanghai Headquarters, and Shanghai Hongwan Cultural Transmission Corporation.

9. As of 2018, average monthly salaries of mid-career college professors in Shanghai ranged between RMB¥6000.00 to RMB¥12,000.00.

Kunqu Appeals and Debates

Searching for answers, the audience would promptly confront personal, social, and political issues in their own lives. At which point they would ask what the *Palace of Everlasting Life* or kunqu was, is, and should be, as well as who wanted to see kunqu performances now, and why. Many Chinese critics—in particular those who are knowledgeable about the genre's content and history, have formulated a number of useful but partial answers to these questions, clarifying some issues while obfuscating others. For example, most kunqu practitioners declare that the genre is being revived for its beauty (*mei*) and classicism (*dianya*).¹¹ While informative and self-explanatory for fans of kunqu, this point of view ignores the fact that kunqu is only one of many beautiful, charming, classical, and culturally as well as historically significant genres of Chinese opera. And above all, it does not answer why kunqu should be given a lion's share of the nation's attention and resources at the expense of other equally traditional and deserving Chinese operas, such as Cantonese opera and Shanghai opera. What makes kunqu uniquely significant in contemporary China?

Some kunqu professionals, such as Zhou Bing and Jiang Wenbo, proudly assert that the genre is being revived because it is the “mother of all Chinese operas.”¹² History tells us that kunqu dramas, artists, and practices have strongly influenced Peking opera, Cantonese opera, and other “younger” genres of Chinese opera. However, the “mother” argument does not explain why and how kunqu has touched hearts and minds of Chinese today. Luo Zheng, a Peking University professor, reports that kunqu appeals directly to practitioners' artistic, emotional, and intellectual selves.¹³

Some kunqu practitioners, such as Zhou Qin, contend that kunqu's appeal stems from its Jiangnan roots.¹⁴ There is some demonstrable truth to this argument. Kunqu stories, characters, aesthetics, and performance practices are closely aligned with Jiangnan biographies, histories, sentiments, and values. And many kunqu practitioners were/are sons and daughters of Jiangnan. Nevertheless, Jiangnan attributes did not prevent kunqu from declining in times past, nor have they endeared it to all Chinese today. Indeed, many contemporary Jiangnan sons and daughters do not find kunqu appealing; many would even dismiss it as an old-fashioned, even obsolete, form of Chinese opera.

Some critics have analyzed current kunqu developments in terms of theories about commodification, tourism, modernization, Westernization, and various other national and international forces. However insightful these analyses are, they can be factually and theoretically challenged. A case in point is the argument that greed and

11. This view appears in numerous introductions to kunqu. See, for example, Yu Dan, *Youyuan jingmeng: kunqu zhimei* (Taipei: Lianjing 2008).

12. See Zhou Bing and Jiang Wenbo, *Kunqu liubai nian* (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 2008), 80–91.

13. See Luo Zheng, “Wo he kunju,” in his *Zhongguo kunqu ershi jiang* (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2007), 307–312.

14. See Zhou Qin, *Suzhou kunqu* (Suzhou: Suzhou daxue chubanshe, 2002).

tourism are driving current developments in kunqu.¹⁵ There is no denying that some kunqu producers and performers have kowtowed to market demands, thus compromising their artistic integrity. Yet few kunqu productions are staged merely for financial or political gain. Most are staged with some aesthetic and/or cultural goal in mind, such as to restore forgotten masterpieces or to revive cultural heritage. Shows produced with little more than sensational acting, singing, and dancing are often forgotten soon after they have premiered. Only kunqu performances that are artistically sophisticated and of cultural, social, and political value are performed repeatedly in contemporary China and perennially discussed by knowledgeable fans.

Some critics suggest that the Chinese state has engineered the current rise of kunqu. As noted by Ke Fen, a young kunqu scholar, and Yang Shousong, a senior kunqu author and activist based in Kunshan, Chinese officials have played a vital role in shaping twenty-first-century kunqu.¹⁶ However, Chinese officials and government institutions cannot totally dictate the genre's development and meanings. Officials who work with kunqu performers, critics, scholars, and fans may adjust the genre but they cannot single-handedly transform it.

A Holistic Hypothesis on Twenty-First-Century Kunqu

Kunqu is a multifaceted and multivalent performance and discourse of historical and contemporary China: thus, no single, linear description can comprehensively describe the genre's large repertory and diverse stories, its contrasting and iconic characters, its sophisticated performance practices and materials, or its diverse and evolving operations. And as analyses and interpretations driven by disciplinary theories or methodologies tend to highlight some facets of the genre at the expense of others, interdisciplinary and multiple perspectives are needed to holistically explain kunqu.

Kunqu practitioners are creative, informed, intellectual people. Even as they stage its performances, they debate its features and meanings with an insiders' vocabulary. Kunqu practitioners, be they fans, connoisseurs, celebrated performers, or authoritative critics and scholars, approach the genre with the following assumptions:¹⁷

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15. The argument arises in many negative comments hurled at touristy kunqu shows, such as the abridged *Peony Pavilion*, which premiered in 2007 at the Imperial Granary Theater (Huangjia liangcang) in Beijing. For a more "neutral" view, see Colin Mackerras, "Tourism and Musical Performing Arts in the First Decade of the Twenty-First Century: A Personal View," *Chinoperl* 30 (2011): 155–182; see also his "Performance Review: The Imperial Granary Production of *Mudan ting* (*Peony Pavilion*)," *Chinoperl* 26 (2010): 209–216.
 16. Ke Fan, *Shuying youlan—zhongguo kunqu de dangdai chuancheng yu fazhan* (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 2014), 61–66 and 203–205; Yang Shousong, *Kunqu zhi lu* (Beijing: Renmin wuxue chubanshe, 2009), 31–39, and 48–54.
 17. My kunqu research partners repeatedly discussed these themes as their fundamental concerns/understandings.

1. Kunqu is a microcosm of Chinese culture, history, and personhood—the genre both performs and reflects Chinese lives and dreams.
2. Kunqu is a genre of classical opera with a large repertory and a codified system of virtuoso performance practices—as such, it is a cultural heritage that today's China needs and should use to show its true self to the world.
3. Kunqu is a continuous tradition that has been faithfully transmitted through generations of mentors and disciples—artistic genealogy and legitimacy is thus a primary criterion in kunqu valorization and criticism.
4. Kunqu is a collaborative, recreative, and evolving art form—the genre's performances are collaboratively created/produced by regional schools/teams of artists over periods of time, and those performances evolve as the performers fine-tune their performances for audiences at specific times and sites.
5. Kunqu connects Chinese hearts and minds—much about kunqu performance and discourse is personal and subjective.

As kunqu practitioners passionately debate their genre, they tend to jump from topic to topic, generating a web of facts and interpretations, which include, to cite the obvious, documented data about historical developments; structural and expressive details about diverse dramas and performances; memories of past and present artists and their works, lives, and careers; and communal and personal experiences and feelings that kunqu performances and discussions continuously generate. Viewed close-up, the kunqu web of artistic-biographical-cultural-historical-political-social facts and claims indexes a bewildering conglomerate of objective and subjective Chinese lives and dreams.

Twenty-first-century kunqu resists linear description. That said, as a phenomenon it can be approached productively by way of the following holistic and heuristic hypothesis. As contemporary Chinese become more prosperous and self-confident, they yearn to present themselves as civilized, amicable, and responsible actors in world culture, economy, and politics. This desire, however, runs up against historical and negative images/memories of late imperial China, which Western and imperialist powers humiliated for two centuries. To counteract these negative images and memories, Chinese today seek cultural and historical evidence to legitimize and/or justify their contemporary selfhood. They find what they need in kunqu, a genre of Chinese opera six centuries old that presents characters who personify idealized Chinese society and values. Thus, contemporary Chinese eagerly reclaim kunqu as a means to perform and promote their reborn China and idealized selfhood. In doing so, they package kunqu into a classical opera of contemporary China, one that not only pleases their hearts and minds (*shangxin leshi*) but also serves their present and practical needs. Furthermore, as entertainment, kunqu is a “cultural heritage that can go out” (*wenhua zou chuqu*) to the world. It can rightfully claim a place in the global market for leisure.

The artistic-cultural-economic-social-political phenomenon of twenty-first-century kunqu is not an isolated development. History has seen many comparable phenomena in the performing arts, such as French ballet, Japanese *noh*, and Wagnerian (German) opera. Contemporary kunqu is however a unique phenomenon; it presents *Chinese* aesthetics, emotions, facts, imaginations, and processes that Chinese have experienced and want to share with the globalized world. Examining it in this light, kunqu has something worthwhile to tell about twenty-first-century and global efforts to reclaim historical genres of performing arts around the world.

Chapters

This monograph has ten chapters, which discuss various interrelated facets of contemporary kunqu. The present chapter provides a historical and ethnographic introduction to kunqu, as well as a proposal that we understand it holistically. Chapter 2 introduces institutional and intellectual facets of the genre; to that end, it introduces troupes that stage formal and informal shows, explains key words and tropes that kunqu practitioners use to discuss the genre and its meanings, and expounds theories from around the world that have guided this interdisciplinary examination of contemporary kunqu.

Chapter 3 discusses how the Chinese have idealized kunqu as “heavenly” opera and describes its codified system of virtuoso performance practices and materials. To illustrate, three scenes from the *Palace of Everlasting Life* will be analyzed. Chapter 4 presents kunqu as an earthly and malleable heritage of China, using two retrospective accounts and an analysis of three contrasting productions of the *Peony Pavilion*. The first account describes the historical context in which demands for reclaiming kunqu arose. The second summarizes kunqu history as it is pragmatically told nowadays. The analysis demonstrates the ways in which kunqu staging practices have been adjusted to cope with evolving aesthetics and market demands.

Chapter 5 highlights biographical, historical, and technical sources and models that have shaped kunqu performance and discourse. It surveys the genre’s preserved performance scripts, notated music scores, and theoretical treatises, and it traces the artistic genealogies that have guided its performers’ aesthetics and performance styles. Artistic genealogies have played critical roles in shaping kunqu performance and discourse. Performers declare their artistic lineages to legitimize their performance artistry and expressions; connoisseurs reference the genealogies to evaluate the performers’ performances and artistry. Kunqu shows stage many historical personages as dramatic characters. To illustrate this historical and dramatic facet of kunqu, this chapter sketches four representative and popular shows, namely “Kneeling by the Pond” (“Guichi”), “Yearning for the Secular World” (“Sifan”), “Flee by Night” (“Yeben”), and “Dog Exit” (“Goudong”).

Chapter 6 describes contemporary kunqu operations in local, national, and global contexts. Kunqu is routinely described as a unique Chinese performance

tradition, but in fact, it is an amalgam of localized/regionalized institutions and individual stakeholders, who strive to pursue their goals, making tactical use of available resources at particular times and sites, thereby asserting their individuality and values. To illustrate regional differences in the contemporary kunqu phenomenon, the chapter surveys kunqu's manifestations in Suzhou, Taipei, and Beijing. To demonstrate specific operations and distinctive results of localized kunqu troupes, the Nanjing production of the *1699 Plum Blossom Fan* will be examined as a case study.

Chapter 7 analyzes the collaborative and creative/re-creative processes whereby kunqu practitioners stage preexisting and/or original shows with known and/or unknown performance practices and materials, thereby eliciting diverse responses from connoisseurs. To illustrate kunqu creative and production processes, this chapter presents a historical overview of the *Jade Hairpin* and analyzes three contrasting productions of "Zither Seduction" ("Qintiao"), a popular scene from that drama.

Chapter 8 examines a controversy surrounding kunqu instrumental music that was triggered by the *Young Lovers* production of 2004. To contextualize the controversy and its arguments, this chapter begins with a historical overview of kunqu instrumental music and its model, *minyue* (Chinese instrumental music). The controversy will then be analyzed and illustrated with comparative analyses of musical renditions of the "Zaoluopao ("Dark Silk Robe") aria in "Strolling; Dreaming" ("Youyuan jingmeng").

Chapter 9 presents kunqu as a phenomenon of contemporary and globalized Chinese culture and society. Thus, the chapter discusses overseas performances of kunqu shows; the UNESCO ICH (intangible cultural heritage) policies and practices that China appropriated to justify their efforts for safeguarding and developing kunqu; kunqu's unique attributes as a mirror of an idealized China; and challenges from non-Chinese kunqu shows, such as Bando Tamasaburo's *Peony Pavilion*.

Chapter 10 ends this monograph by showing that twenty-first-century kunqu is at a crossroads. Today's kunqu practitioners face challenges to connect with the past and sustain the genre in the present and into the future. To illustrate this, this chapter examines a number of seminal kunqu activities and works from the 2010s, identifying overarching continuities, prominent changes, and bold explorations in kunqu. This volume ends with an overview of kunqu scholarship, musical scores of several arias discussed in the monograph, and other reference materials.

Kunqu Lives, Dreams, Documents, and Character Models

Introduction

Opera is life and life is opera; both are real and illusive like dreams. So claim kunqu practitioners.¹ Carved into the stage in the restored Zhengyici Theater in Beijing is a couplet that reads: “Performing human sadness, happiness, separation, and reunion on stage, actors show that current affairs repeat historical ones; watching protagonists being suppressed, promoted, praised, and criticized on stage, audiences find the same characters sitting among themselves.”² Many kunqu operas have been created, performed, and understood as lives or dreams. In the *Peony Pavilion*, Du Liniang dreams of Liu Mengmei, her future husband. In *Chenyu Fen’s Dream* (*Nanke meng*), an ambitious young man falls asleep under a tree and experiences life as a successful man; everything vanishes as he wakes up.³ In the *Butterfly Dream* (*Hudie meng*), Zhuangzi, a Chinese philosopher, dreams about his wife as a widow and finds human fickleness and tragedy.⁴

Kunqu performances tell archetypal stories and present iconic characters that Chinese culturally and historically know and personally and communally identify

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1. For an insightful discussion of Chinese life, dream, and opera, see Zheng Chuanyin, “Renshen rumeng: Xiqu yu menghuan di gouliao,” in his *Chuantong wenhua yu gudian xiqu* /Traditional Culture and Classical Drama (Taipei: Yangzhi wenhua, 1995), 275–318. Many kunqu dramas and biographies have the word *meng* (dream) in their titles. And many others reference past lives; see, for example, Guo Chenzi, *Kunqu: Jinsheng kandao de qianshi* (Beijing: Xinxing chubanshe, 2006). For a scholarly analysis of dreams as human experiences in Chinese history and culture, see Lynn A. Struve, *The Dreaming Mind and the End of the Ming World* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2019); see esp. “Introduction” and “Epilogue,” 1–15 and 243–257.
 2. For information on the theater, google: http://theatrebeijing.com/theatres/zhengyici_theatre.
 3. See Tang Xianzu, *Nanke meng*, in *Tang Xianzu xiquji*, ed. Qian Nanyang (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1981), 509–698.
 4. For historical information on *The Butterfly Dream* and the making of its current version, see Lei Jingxuan, ed., *Kunju hudiemeng: yibu chuantongxi di zaixian* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2005).

with.⁵ Many kunqu stories have been developed from Chinese historical events, and many iconic characters are modeled after Chinese historical figures. All are realistically staged with virtuoso performance practices that generations of master kunqu practitioners have created and polished. As they perform or attend kunqu, the genre's practitioners have to decide for themselves whether what a show tells is true or untrue, representative or not, relevant or irrelevant to their own lives and dreams. As they answer such questions, the practitioners encounter still more questions: How should a historical story or person be performed on stage, and why? What historical/biographical facts and memories can be employed to substantiate interpretations and performances? However kunqu practitioners answer these, the stories and characters they enact on stage are simultaneously lifelike and dreamlike.

To elaborate on how Chinese biographical and historical facts are learned, interpreted, and then dramatized as successful kunqu productions, this chapter surveys the genre's material and human resources, ranging from preserved scripts and notated scores to practitioners' biographies and treatises. To highlight the transmission of kunqu memories and skills from one generation to the next, this chapter also sketches out the genealogies of seminal kunqu individuals: primordial ancestors, prominent performers and pedagogues, and influential patrons, critics, historians, and theorists. All have played critical roles in shaping the genre's performative features and discursive meanings. To demonstrate the kunqu blending of Chinese past and present lives and dreams on and off stage, four favorite *zhezixi* will be analyzed.

Kunqu Documents: Historical Scripts, Notated Scores, and Theoretical Treatises

Kunqu performances are scripted, and many historical scripts have been preserved, providing models and sources for the genre's contemporary performance practices and materials. Singularly and collectively, the scripts demonstrate how dramatists constructed realistic stories in the past and how their texts have been repeatedly copied and printed, interpreted, and realized on stage. Many historical kunqu scripts have been published with informative introductions that explain why the stories and characters were created and what they tell us about Chinese culture and history.⁶

An authoritative collection of kunqu scripts from Ming and Qing China is the *Guben xiqu congkan* (Collection of historical manuscripts and prints of Chinese dramas).⁷ Compiled and published in the 1950s and early 1960s, this collection preserves more than 1,000 *chuanqi* scripts, many of which were repeatedly staged in Ming

5. Many kunqu performers personally identify with the characters they enact. For example, Cai Zhengren has told me after performances of scenes like "Lamenting" that he felt sad like Tang Minghuang, a man who had lost his beloved and regretted having done something wrong.

6. For a collection of these introductions, see Cai Yi, ed., *Zhongguo gudian xiqu xuba huibian* (Jinan: Qilu shushe, 1989).

7. Zheng Zhengduo et al., *Guben xiqu congkan*, 10 series and multiple volumes (Beijing: Guojia tushuguan chuabanshe, 2020).

and Qing China. Many scenes from these dramas are still being performed as *zhezixi*. An equally significant collection is the *Shanben xiqu congkan* (Rare books of Chinese dramas), comprising 104 volumes of facsimile copies of performance scripts that have been preserved in Western libraries and museums.⁸ The quantity and global spread of these scripts suggests that they were widely circulated in late imperial China. Many kunqu performance scripts were anthologized in China in the early twentieth century. A representative collection is Yi'an zhuren's *Huitu jingxuan kunqu daquan* (A comprehensive and illustrated collection of selected kunqu plays and scenes), published in 1925.⁹

Many traditional kunqu performance scripts include informative illustrations. A celebrated example is a woodblock print of the "Painting a Self-Portrait" ("Xiezhen") scene in a Ming printing of the *Peony Pavilion*.¹⁰ It shows three faces of Du Liniang—her physical face, its reflection in a mirror, and its representation on a scroll. Graphically, the print underscores the realism with which kunqu characters were, and still are, constructed and staged. Since the turn of the previous century, many kunqu photographs have been taken, providing a visual record of historically celebrated kunqu performers and performances.¹¹ Collectively, woodblock prints and early photographs indicate visually how kunqu was performed a hundred or more years ago. This information is now regularly consulted and interpreted to strengthen creative productions in the present day. For example, Beikun's 2016 production of the *Dames in Love* was billed as a historically informed show; it featured stylized costumes and makeup designs modeled after documented Qing samples.

A wealth of historical kunqu scores have been preserved. A detailed system for kunqu/*gongche* notation had been developed by 1746, the year in which a seminal and notated anthology of 4,466 kunqu arias was published. Since then, many kunqu scores with *gongche* musical notation have been produced.¹² Kunqu practitioners today sing arias and play instrumental pieces according to historically established scores; proudly, they announce the titles they consulted for their historically informed performances.¹³ The following are three eighteenth-century sources that kunqu practitioners cherish:

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8. Wang Chiu-kui, comp., *Shanben xiqu congkan*, 6 series and 104 volumes (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1984).
 9. Yi'an zhuren, *Huitu jingxuan kunqu daquan* (Reprint, Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin chubanshe and Sanjin chubanshe, 2018).
 10. For an insightful study on the print, see Wu Hung, "The Painted Screen," *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 1 (1996): 37–79.
 11. Many of these historical photographs have been reprinted in kunqu references, such as Wu Xinlei's *Zhongguo kunqu dacidian* and Hong Weizhu's *Kunqu cidian*.
 12. For a survey of kunqu scores, see Isabel Wong, "The Printed Collections of K'un-Ch'ü Arias and Their Sources," *Chinoperal* 8, no. 1 (1978): 100–129.
 13. A thought-provoking case on kunqu scores and authentic interpretation concerns Zhou Xuehua's claim that Zhou Chuanying and Yu Zhenfei, her mentors, entrusted to her the task of accurately transmitting and transcribing kunqu music preserved in Ye Tang's *Nashuying qupu*. See her *Kunqu—Tang Xianzu Linchuan simeng quanji Nashuying qupuban* (Shanghai: Shanghai jiaoyu chubanshe, 2008).

1. The *Jiugong dacheng nanbeici gongpu* (A comprehensive and notated formulary of northern and southern arias in nine musical modes) of 1746, a court compendium of 4,466 operatic arias prepared under the supervision of Prince Yun Lu (1695–1767).¹⁴
2. Feng Qifeng's *Yinxiang tang qupu* (A kunqu score from the Studio of Music and Fragrance) of 1789, which preserves the earliest available and complete *gongche* scores for the *Peony Pavilion* and the *Palace of Everlasting Life*.¹⁵
3. Ye Tang's (fl. 1740s–1790s) *Nashuying qupu* (Ye Tang's library of kunqu scores), published between 1784 and 1792, a collection of notated kunqu music that Ye Tang, a legendary kunqu musician, composed or arranged for Tang Xianzu's four dream operas and more than 360 *zhezixi* culled from various *chuanqi* dramas.¹⁶

The following four authoritative notated sources have preserved late nineteenth-century kunqu music:

1. The *Eyunge qupu* (Kunqu scores of the Studio of Soaring Singing), published by Wang Xichun in 1893,¹⁷ which preserves kunqu arias and speeches from eighty-seven *zhezixi* often performed in late Qing China.
2. The *Zengji liuye qupu* (Expanded collection of kunqu scores from the Studio of Cosmic Principles), which Zhang Yusun published in Shanghai in 1922,¹⁸ preserving the music of 204 *zhezixi*. Zhang sourced the music from Yin Guishen (1825?–after 1896), a legendary late-Qing performer and pedagogue who produced and bequeathed to posterity a wealth of *gongche* music scores.
3. The *Jicheng qupu* (A comprehensive collection of kunqu scripts and scores), compiled by Wang Jilie (1873–1953) with the help of Liu Fuliang (1875–1936) and published in 1925.¹⁹ A scholarly compendium, this document has preserved edited and notated performance scripts for 416 *zhezixi*; it includes

14. Yun Lu, ed., *Jiugong dacheng nanbeici gongpu*, in *Shanben xiqu congkan*, vols. 87–104 (1746; facsimile; Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1984). For a current study on this important kunqu source, see Wu Zhiwu, *Xinding jiugong dacheng nanbeici gongpu yanjiu* (Beijing: Renmin yinyue chubanshe, 2017).

15. Feng Qifeng, *Yinxiang tang qupu*, 1789, facsimile, accessed May 15, 2021, <http://www.guoxuem.com/shumu/303169o.html>.

16. Ye Tang, *Nashuying qupu*, in *Shanben xiqu congkan*, comp. Wang Chiu-kui, Vols. 82–86 (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1984). For an account of the historical reception of Ye's scores, see Joseph S. C. Lam, "Notational Representation and Contextual Constraints: How and Why Did Ye Tang Notate His Kunqu Opera Arias?", in *Themes and Variations: Writings on Music in Honor of Rulan Chao Pian*, ed. Bell Yung and Joseph S. C. Lam (Cambridge, MA and Hong Kong: Department of Music, Harvard University, and the Institute of Chinese Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1994), 26–35.

17. Wang Xichun, *Eyunge qupu* (Shanghai: Zhuyi tang, 1893).

18. Zhang Yusun, *Zengji liuye qupu* (Reprint, Taipei: Zhonghua shuju, 1977).

19. Wang Jilie, *Jicheng qupu* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1925).

several substantive theoretical essays by Wang, who explains kunqu music with reference to Western musical concepts and practices.²⁰

4. Yu Sulu's (1847–1930) *Sulu qupu* (Yu Sulu's scores of kunqu arias), published by his son and musical successor, Yu Zhenfei, in 1953.²¹ A small collection of arias taken from twenty-nine *zhezixi*, this score is now considered an authentic representation of Ye Tang's nineteenth-century kunqu practices, the foundation of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century Yu School of kunqu music and singing.

Since late Ming China, scholarly kunqu practitioners have been writing and publishing formal and informal treatises on the genre, bequeathing a wealth of creative theories and performance practices to posterity. All have become source materials for contemporary kunqu aesthetics, history, performance practices, and reception. Five seminal kunqu treatises are included in the *Zhongguo gudian xiqu lunzhu jichen* (A compendium of classical treatises on Chinese operas) of 1959.²²

Xu Wei's (1521–1593) *Nanci xulu* (An account of southern arias) is one of the earliest historical accounts of kunqu's rise as a genre of southern opera. Xu's account is considered authoritative and reliable because he was a prominent Ming scholar-official, author, dramatist, and painter who had witnessed the rise of kunqu.

Wei Liangfu's (fl. mid-1540s) *Qulü* (Principles for kunqu composition and singing) has been preserved as a set of eighteen short prescriptions for kunqu musicians, which can be summarized as follows.²³ Singers should accurately enunciate the lyrics; otherwise, their flowing melodies will be artistically and intellectually worthless. Singers should perform with energy from their abdomens and with poise; they should coordinate their rhythms with the drum and clapper strokes. To sing accurately, singers should use their muscles properly so that their faces do not turn red, their neck veins do not show, and their heads do not shake—all are signs that they are misusing their bodies and vocal apparatus.

Singers should develop their skills by practicing arias one by one for extended periods. They should realize that every *qupai* is a unique model. For example, the melody of “Huangying'er” (“Yellow oriole”) unfolds steadily, while that of “Ji xianbin” (“Gathering of virtuous guests”) moves with sudden leaps and dips in pitch. Insights learned from a particular *qupai* can apply to singing in general. Singers should study

20. One of the theoretical essays has been published as a standalone kunqu treatise; see Wang Jilie, *Yinlu qutan* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1934). Wang had been trained as a physicist.

21. Yu Zhenfei, ed., *Sulu qupu* (Reprint, Shanghai: Cishu chubanshe, 2011).

22. Zhongguo xiju yuan, comp., *Zhongguo gudian xiqu lunzhu jicheng*, 10 vols. (Reprint, Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1980). Li Yu's *Xianqing ouji* is in Vol. 7, 1–114; Shen Chongsui's *Duqu xuzhi* is in Vol. 5, 183–319; Wei Liangfu's *Qulü* is in Vol. 5, 1–14; Xu Dachun's *Yuefu chuansheng* is in Vol. 7, 145–188; Xu Wei's *Nanci xulu* is in Vol. 3, 233–256.

23. Wei Liangfu, *Qulü*, in *Xiqu yanchang lunzhu jishi*, ed. Zhou Yibai (Beijing: Shogun xiju chubanshe, 1962), 67–111.

Kunqu as a Twenty-First-Century Chinese ICH and World Opera

Introduction

As discussed in the previous chapter, kunqu performance and discourse enfold a multitude of *yue* items, events, stakeholders, *yuescapes*, and agendas as they tell stories about Chinese culture, history, and personhood. Those stories in turn expose various facets of contemporary kunqu, including its transformation into a world opera from China. China today is promoting the genre throughout the world, staging many shows in London, New York, Paris, Tokyo, Seoul, and other cities with diaspora Chinese communities. Audiences the world over have grown to appreciate kunqu performance practices and materials, even becoming dedicated kunqu fans and performing it themselves, viewing it as a significant cultural heritage of China and of the whole world.

To discuss kunqu as classical Chinese opera in the twenty-first-century globalized world, this chapter presents four accounts, each on a specific facet of the genre's recent transformation. The first surveys kunqu overseas performance in order to demonstrate how the genre serves as a tool of cultural exchange and/or soft power—that is, how China is using kunqu to connect itself with Chinese diaspora communities and make international friends. The second analyzes the sinicization of international ICH theories and practices, a process that is shaping Chinese approaches to preserving and developing kunqu. The third compares kunqu with various other Chinese and non-Chinese ICH/performing arts, highlighting how Chinese are packaging kunqu as a classical opera that reflects their contemporary and *qingchun dianya* selves. The fourth reports on Bando Tamasaburo's thought-provoking production of the *Peony Pavilion* (2008–2010), a show that heralds the rise of international kunqu artists and their challenges to China-centered performance of and discourse on the genre.

Overseas Kunqu Performances

Contemporary China is an integral part of the twenty-first-century world; sizable Chinese diaspora communities can be found in cosmopolitan cities in Australia,

Europe, North America, and Southeast Asia. Many push and pull forces are involved in exporting/importing Chinese culture, including performing arts like kunqu. When kunqu shows are performed outside China, they not only provide operatic entertainment but also build cultural and diplomatic bridges that connect China with the world. For example, Chinese diasporas welcome kunqu shows as operatic confirmations of their ethnic heritage and diaspora identities. At the same time, their non-Chinese compatriots engage with these performances as representations of Chinese culture, history, and personhood, thus demonstrating their benevolence toward Chinese people. Overseas kunqu shows are operatic *yue* events that both Chinese and non-Chinese practitioners/stakeholders can employ tactically to advance their agendas.¹

Overseas kunqu performances began more than a century ago.² In 1919, Mei Lanfang performed Peking Opera and kunqu in Japan, promoting both Chinese opera and his own stardom in what was a rapidly developing East Asian and colonial power. Nine years later, Han Shichang toured Japan as well, displaying his kunqu artistry and stardom, which rivaled Mei's. In 1930 and 1935, Mei toured the US and Russia, generating Western admiration for Chinese operatic aesthetics and performance practices.

In April and May 1958, Yu Zhengfei led a government-sponsored tour of kunqu to twenty-four European cities. The tour presented adapted versions of traditional *zhezixi* like "A Garden Party; Shocking News," "Burying Yang Guifei" ("Maiyu"), and "The Princess Gives Her Lover a Sword" ("Baihua zengjian").³ Politically charged was the *yuescape* that shaped the tour and was in turn transformed by the tour. In the late 1950s, newly established socialist China set out to woo European nations. At the time, the Korean War had been fought (1950–1953), and China and the US were at odds with each other. To cultivate cultural and diplomatic friendships with European nations, China sent them kunqu, a classical representation of Chinese lives and dreams. Between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s, however, China was experiencing internal struggles and sent no grand kunqu shows overseas.

In the late 1980s, China resumed sending kunqu shows to friendly nations, staging grand productions in the capitals and major cities of France, Finland, Japan, and South Korea, as well as to Los Angeles and New York. In the 1990s, China repeatedly sent kunqu shows to Japan, a prosperous and technologically advanced East Asian nation that late twentieth-century China wanted to emulate. To demonstrate its friendly intentions and interest in Japanese culture, China created kunqu

1. For a study on Chinese operas in cross-cultural exchanges, see Cao Lin, and Yu Jiangan, eds., *Kuawenhua yujing zhong de zhongguo xiqu* (Beijing: Zhongguo xiqu chubanshe, 2009).

2. For chronological checklists of overseas kunqu performances, see Wu Xinlei, *Chatuben kunqu shishi bianmian*; and Zhou Lijuan, *Zhongguo xiqu yishu duiwai jiaoliu gailan, 1949–2012* (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 2014), 19–55, 120–138, 177–197, 244–253, and 314–336.

3. For a study of the tour and the *zhezixi*, see Liu Siyuan, "The Case of Princess Baihua: State Diplomatic Functions and Theatrical Creative Process in China in the 1950s and 1960s," *Asian Theatre Journal* 30, no. 1 (2013): 1–29.

shows with Japanese elements. In 1994, BeiKun staged the *Crane (Xihe)*, a contemporary kunqu opera based on a popular Japanese myth. The following year, ShangKun produced its own version of the same story.

In the late 1990s, as China began to prosper and its arts and culture began to attract the First World's attention, two prominent kunqu shows were staged in the West. In May 1998 in Vienna, Peter Sellars opened his avant-garde production of the *Peony Pavilion*, a hybrid show featuring a traditional kunqu *shenduan* performance by Hua Wenyi, a celebrated kunqu star who had immigrated to the US, as well as kunqu-informed contemporary vocal music by Tan Dun, a Chinese-American composer.⁴ After the premiere, Sellars took the show to London, Rome, Paris, and Berkeley, CA. Sellars's production was warmly received in the West, though it charmed few Chinese kunqu practitioners. They did not accept the American director's innovative and individualistic presentation as a kunqu work.

The other production was the 1998–1999 Lincoln Center staging of the *Peony Pavilion*.⁵ This one began as a “friendship project” between China and the US but ended up fomenting a cultural and diplomatic controversy. Directed by Chen Shizheng, a Chinese-American theater director, the production aspired to present the *Peony Pavilion* as it was originally staged in Ming China. Billed as an authentic performance, the show presented all fifty-five scenes of the drama; it played kunqu music notated in the authoritative *Nashuying qupu* (Ye Tang's library of kunqu scores) published between 1782 and 1794. So that the show would appeal to modern international audience, Chen had introduced many bold artistic innovations. For example, he tried to evoke the classical Chinese landscape by building on his stage a pavilion overlooking a pond on which live ducks swam. The *mis-en-scène* delighted New Yorkers but perplexed connoisseurs of traditional kunqu, who were used to the minimalist kunqu stage, whose standard props were simply a table and two chairs. Chen also evoked historical and ritual China with ghostly characters and sounds and sights from rural China.

Shanghai officials found Chen's innovations disrespectful to and misrepresentative of classical kunqu and historical China. Disagreements between Chen and the officials led to a breakdown in relations. In the summer of 1998, to block Chen's show,

4. For a scholarly study of Sellars's work, see Catherine C. Swatek, *Peony Pavilion on Stage: Four Centuries in the Career of a Chinese Drama* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 2002), 203–230; and “Boundary Crossings: Peter Sellars's Production of *Peony Pavilion*,” *Asian Theatre Journal* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 147–158; see also Min Tian, “Intercultural Theatre at the New Fin De Siecle: Peter Sellars's Postmodern Approach to Traditional Chinese Theatre,” in *The Poetics of Difference and Displacement: Twentieth-Century Chinese-Western Intercultural Theatre* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 113–137.

5. A video recording of the show is available online: *Peony Pavilion*, 1999, performance at the Lincoln Center, accessed May 16, 2021, <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1zs411E7FB?from=search&seid=9542734331279525047>. For scholarly studies of Chen's work, see Catherine C. Swatek, *Peony Pavilion on Stage*, 231–241. See also David Rolston, “Tradition and Innovation in Chen Shi-Zheng's *Peony Pavilion*,” *Asian Theatre Journal* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 134–146.

the latter forbade the shipping of costumes for the New York performance. Chen had no choice but to postpone that show. A year later, he was able to stage it, but with custom-made costumes and stage props.

Chinese objections to Chen's show underscored the nation's control of kunqu as its cultural capital and nationalistic voice. Officials were most "offended" by Chen's representations of a backward and superstitious China, which included the parading of ghost characters wearing tall conical hats and one-piece gowns—vernacular symbols of the Chinese "underworld." Shocking to the officials was Chen's stage prop in the "Judgment" scene; it showed a woman's legs protruding from a large barrel, as if she had been tortured and was being disposed of.

Traditional kunqu and its cultural, social, and political significances were not unknown in New York. Since 1988, the New York Kunqu Society has been staging traditional kunqu performances in the city, meeting the artistic and cultural needs of the Chinese diaspora in the greater New York area. Many of the shows staged by the society feature leading kunqu artists from mainland China. They come to promote the genre as representative of classical China, socialize with friends and family members, and see the US, the "beautiful country," with their own eyes. They also anticipate that successful overseas performances will further polish their stardom back home. Performances by kunqu stars from China attract Chinese diaspora audiences. Many drive hours to see celebrated performers, whose singing/dancing takes them back to the China they have left but continue to cherish. Needless to say, many also use the shows as opportunities for business transactions and social gatherings.

Non-Chinese audiences at overseas kunqu shows gradually increased after 2001, after UNESCO declared the genre a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. One overseas kunqu event that excited many American audiences was the 2006 west coast tour of SuKun's *Young Lovers*. As a *yue* event, the tour succeeded for many reasons. Bai Xianyong, its artistic director and organizer, was an internationally known Chinese author and a Professor Emeritus at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He was well-connected to California authorities and patrons. His tour had generous support from the University of California and local institutions and agents, all of whom wanted to showcase authentic Chinese culture and promote friendship between China and the US.

Bai's tour opened a path for staging grand kunqu shows in the US. As it transpired, 2012 was a bountiful year for kunqu in both America and Britain. In March of that year, a group of ShengKun performers presented a program of *zhezixi* and scenes from the 1699 *Peach Blossom Fan* in Los Angeles, Irvine, and Downey, CA. The shows were co-sponsored by UCLA and the Western US Kunqu Society (Meixi kunqu she). The educational goals of the former were as clear as the diasporic aspirations of the latter. The choice of shows was practical: the 1699 *Peach Blossom Fan* was ShengKun's hit *qingchun dianya* show of the time.

In May 18–20 of the same year, ShangKun performed not only *zhezixi* but also two masterpieces in New York, namely the *Story of the Mountain of Rotten Axe Handle*

(*Lanke shan*) and the *Monkey King: The Journey to the West (Xiyou ji)*. Sponsored by the Asia Society, the Museum of New York, and the Ministry of Culture of China, these performances celebrated cultural and friendship ties between New York and Shanghai.⁶ They also thrilled audiences with many acrobatic acts that US audiences could appreciate without any knowledge of the Chinese language and operatic practices.

On September 28 and 29 of the same year, SuKun performed, in Ann Arbor, Michigan, highlights from the *Young Lovers* and a selection of favorite *zhezixi*.⁷ Co-produced by the University Musical Society of the University of Michigan and the Confucius Institute at the University of Michigan, the performances promoted Chinese culture and arts in southeastern Michigan. To help Michiganders understand kunqu as a classical opera of China, the University Musical Society arranged pre-performance lectures and published explanatory program notes.

In November 2012, the New York Metropolitan Museum presented an abridged version (seventy minutes) of the *Peony Pavilion* in its Astor Court, a Chinese garden within the museum compound.⁸ Featuring Zhang Jun, a progressive kunqu artist from Shanghai, the show revealed to its American audience the latest Chinese fashion of staging kunqu shows in gardens or on stages built in scenic settings—ironically, the practice had been launched by Chen’s show of 1998 and 1999 and had been critically dismissed. As a form of cultural exchange, and as an international dialogue, the museum show served both its Chinese and its US stakeholders. Zhang Jun got to present the kind of kunqu he promoted, and he was handsomely rewarded for doing so—the show helped seal his status as a “Prince of Kunqu” and a UNESCO cultural ambassador. The New York Metropolitan Museum got a unique show that complemented its exhibition of precious Chinese *objets d’art*. Seeing kunqu close-up in a garden setting afforded New Yorkers an opportunity to imagine elite lives in Ming and Qing China.

Successful as the Astor Court show was, its impact as an overseas production and a diplomatic exercise paled by comparison to what took place in the UK that same year. On April 23, 2012, ZheKun performed selected scenes from the *Peony Pavilion* in Stratford-upon-Avon for a British audience. The performance was part of a series of events staged to promote Chinese–British cultural exchange and friendship. Two weeks before the performance in the Bard’s hometown, a celebratory kunqu

6. For an online announcement of the show, see Asia Society New York, “Three Shanghai Kunqu Performances for New York Audiences,” accessed May 6, 2016, <http://asiasociety.org/new-york/three-shanghai-kunqu-opera-performances-new-york-audiences>.

7. For a description and video recording of the performance in Ann Arbor, see “Zhezixi,” 2012 performance at the University of Michigan, accessed May 16, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=as4GguYZXcs&t=72s>.

8. For a discussion by Tan Dun, the producer, and Maxwell K. Hearn, curator of the museum, see “A Conversation with Tan Dun: A New Peony Pavilion in an Old Context,” uploaded by the Met on December 6, 2012; accessed April 23, 2015. A full audiovisual recording of the performance can be viewed at the Museum’s website: <http://www.metmuseum.org/metmedia>.

Appendix 1

Current Kunqu Scholarship

A Sketch

Since 2001, many general and specialized studies about kunqu have been published, registering a wealth of facts and theories about the genre's biographies, performance scripts, histories, current developments, and social-political significances. To present an overview of these studies, which have guided my research, and which demonstrate the strengths and limitations of conventional kunqu scholarship, I present this sketch—publication data for the studies referenced here will, however, be presented in “Works Cited.”

Currently, there are five multivolume and substantive references on kunqu that bring together conventional scholarship:

1. *Kunqu congshu* [Kunqu monographs], two series of monographs edited by Hong Weizhu and published since 2002; they include, for example, *Kunqu yanjiu ziliao suoyin* [An annotated index of kunqu research materials] and *Kunqu yanyijia qujia ji xuezhe fangwen lu* [Interviews with kunqu performers, music masters, and scholars].
2. *Kunqu yu chuantong wenhua yanjiu congshu* [Research monographs on kunqu and traditional Chinese culture], 10 volumes, written by multiple authors, and published in 2005; two representative monographs from the series are: Wu Xinlei, *Ersbi shijie qianqi kunqu yanjiu* [Early twentieth-century kunqu studies]; and Zhou Yude, *Kunqu yu Ming Qing shehui* [Kunqu and Ming Qing society].
3. *Kunqu jingbian jumu diancang* [A collection of critically edited performance scripts for 300 *zhezixi*], edited by Tang Xiaobo; the collection was originally prepared as performance scripts for teaching and rehearsals at the Shanghai Academy of Theatre.
4. *Kunqu baizhong: dashi shuoxi* [One hundred kunqu masterpieces: Master performers' lecture-demonstrations on their signature shows] of 2014; a set of five books and 110 DVDs published with Ye Zhaoxin's sponsorship and coordination efforts, it preserves twenty-nine senior kunqu masters' creative and performance experiences with their celebrated *zhezixi*.
5. *Kunqu yishu dadian* [A comprehensive compendium of kunqu resources], edited and published in 2016 by the *Zhongguo yishu yanjiuyuan*; a gigantic collection of 149 volumes of printed words and illustrations, and 100 hours of early twentieth-century audio recordings, and 350-plus hours of audiovisual recordings of mid- and late twentieth-century performances.

There are two monumental dictionaries on kunqu. The first is Wu Xinlei's *Zhongguo kunqu dacidian/Dictionary of Chinese Kunqu Opera*, a tome of 1,149 pages. It covers practically every important topic on kunqu and provides a wealth of primary data, including representative music scores and rare photographs of historical performers and performances. The second encyclopedic reference is Hong Weizhu's *Kunqu cidian* [Kunqu dictionary], a two-volume work of 1,615 pages. In addition to concise descriptions on all important kunqu topics, it includes a chronology of kunqu history and informative catalogs on repertoires, audiovisual recordings, and historical performance venues.

The number of single-volume works on kunqu history and theory is increasing. Noteworthy ones include: Chen Fong's study on kunqu performance and transmission; Hu Ji and Liu Zhizhong's panoramic account of kunqu developments; Lu Eting's pioneering work on kunqu performance history; Tian Shaodong's study of kunqu singing practices; Wu Xinlei's topical studies of kunqu history; and Zhou Qin's narrative of kunqu in Suzhou.

Since the early 2000s, many anthologies of kunqu aria lyrics, performance scripts, and notated scores have been published. Some of these are reprints of seminal works compiled or published around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These include notated anthologies by Wang Zhenglai, Yu Zhenfei, Zhou Qin, and other authoritative performers and scholars. Publications about kunqu choreography, costumes, and stage designs are limited. Two informative ones are Liu Yuemei's study on kunqu costume, and Ma Changshan's introduction to kunqu staging arts.

There are many kunqu autobiographies, biographies, and essay collections by individual writers. To mention but a few, they include the martial actor Hou Shaohui's autobiography; Tang Baoxiang's critical biography of Yu Zhenfei; Sang Yuxi's biographies of the Chuanzibei Masters; Zhang Weidong's essays on kunqu preservation and modernization; and Zhang Yunhe's kunqu diary.

Biographical works seldom elaborate on kunqu music and its technical features, a lacuna that has been somewhat remedied by the 2014 publication of the *Kunqu baizhong: dashi shuoxi* mentioned above. There are, however, some informative studies, which include Liu Minglan's musicological studies on kunqu composition and performance practices; Wang Shoutai's discussion of kunqu *qupai* structures and uses; Wu Junda's analyses and theories on kunqu music structures and styles, and Zhu Kunhua's study of kunqu as a vocal performance art.

An increasing number of master's theses and doctoral dissertations are being produced in mainland China and Taiwan. Noteworthy ones include, but are not limited to, Xuan Leilei's dissertation on current kunqu scholarship; Pan Yanna's examination of the ShangKun production of *The Palace of Everlasting Life*; Ke Fan's study of contemporary kunqu transmission and development; and Chen Chunmiao's historical study of kunqu scores published in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century China.

Many kunqu studies have appeared in academic journals and conference proceedings. Two leading kunqu serials are: the *Zhongguo kunqu luntan* (Chinese kunqu discussions), published since 2010, and the *Zhongguo kunqu nianjian* (Yearbook of kunqu opera—China), published since 2012. Many papers presented at occasional kunqu conferences

Appendix 3

Music Examples

These music examples are notated to demonstrate structural features of the kunqu arias being discussed. Melodic, rhythmic, and linguistic-tonal details and phrasal divisions reflect traditional interpretations that Wang Zhenglai, Yu Zhenfei, and Zhou Qin have presented in their *gongche* and/or *cipher* scores of kunqu music, which are, respectively, the *Quyuan zhuiying*, the *Zhenfei qupu*, and the *Cunxin qupu*. Romanizations of Chinese words in the lyrics are provided to facilitate comparison of different singers' kunqu-stage pronunciation with *Putonghua* of contemporary China. Music Examples 1 through 7 and 9 were notationally created with Sibelius by my assistants, Casper Chan, Huang Jingyun, and Conner VanderBeek. Musical Example 8 is a transcription by Ye Yancheng. Music Example 10 is taken from Zhou Youliang's published score.

The image shows a musical score for a vocal aria. It consists of four staves of music, each with Chinese lyrics and pinyin below it. The music is written in a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The lyrics are: 天淡 (Tiān dàn), 雲閑 (yún xián), 列空數 (liè kōng shù), 長行 (cháng háng), 新雁 (xīn yàn), 御園中秋色 (yù yuán zhōng qiū sè), 瀾斑 (lán bān), 柳 (liǔ), 添黃 (tiān huáng), 滅綠 (miè lǜ), 紅蓮 (hóng lián), 一抹 (yī mǒ), 離欄 (lí lán), 噴香桂 (pēn xiāng guì), 花初綻 (huā chū zhàn).

天淡 Tiān dàn
 雲閑 yún xián
 列空數 liè kōng shù
 長行 cháng háng
 新雁 xīn yàn
 御園中秋色 yù yuán zhōng qiū sè
 瀾斑 lán bān
 柳 liǔ
 添黃 tiān huáng
 滅綠 miè lǜ
 紅蓮 hóng lián
 一抹 yī mǒ
 離欄 lí lán
 噴香桂 pēn xiāng guì
 花初綻 huā chū zhàn

Music Example 1: "Pink Butterfly" ("Fendie'er") Aria 1 in "A Garden Party; Shocking News."

1
 羞 哀 呻 悔 面 悲 傷 歎 不 得 月 猴 花 龐! 草 人 全 無 主 張,
 Xiū āi shēn huǐ miàn bēi shāng tàn bù dé yuè hóu huā páng! cǎo rén quán wú zhǔ zhāng,

10
 不 合 呵, 將 他 輕 放 我 當 時 若 肯 將 身 去 抵 罪 犯
 bù hé hē, jiāng tā qīng fàng! wǒ dāng shí ruò kěn jiāng shēn qù dī zuì fàn

21
 君 王, 縱 然 犯 了 罪 犯 何 妨? 泉 台 上, 倒 博 得 水 成 雙! 我 如 今
 jūn wáng, zòng rán fàn le zuì fàn hé fāng? quán tái shàng, dào bó dé shuǐ chéng shuāng! wǒ rú jīn

32
 獨 白 誰 無 問 除 生 有 甚 風 光? 只 落 得
 dú bái suī wú wèn yú shēng yǒu shèn fēng guāng? zhǐ luò dé

39
 淚 萬 行 愁 千 狀, 人 間 天 上 恨 能 忘 償?
 lèi wàn háng chóu qiān zhuàng, rén jiān tiān shàng hèn néng wàng chāng?!

Music Example 2: "Taking the Cloth Shirt Off" ("Tuobushan"), "Short Liangzhou" ("Xiao Liangzhou"), and "Repeat," Arias 4 through 6 in the "Lamenting."

1 吓 Xià 哈 hǎ 恰 qià 正 zhèng 好 hào 喜 xǐ 孜 zī 孜 zī 裳 cháng 歌 gē 舞 wǔ,

6 不 bù 提 tí 防 fáng 探 pǎn 通 tōng 通 tōng 漁 yú 陽 yáng 戰 zhàn 鼓 gǔ,

10 劇 huà 地 dì 裡 lǐ 慌 huāng 慌 huāng 急 jí 急 jí 紛 fēn 紛 fēn 亂 luàn 亂 luàn 奏 zòu 透 biān 書 shū,

16 送 sòng 得 de 個 ge 內 nèi 重 chóng 懼 jù 懼 jù.

20 早 zǎo 則 zé 是 shì 驚 jīng 驚 jīng 恐 kǒng 恐 kǒng 卒 cù 卒 cù 挨 āi 挨 āi 擠 jǐ 擠 jǐ 搶 qiǎng 搶 qiǎng 攘 rǎng 攘 rǎng 出 chū 延 yán 秋 qiū 西 xī 路 lù,

Music Example 3: "The Peddler, the Sixth Variation" ("Huolang'er, liuzhuan"), Aria 8 in the "Ballad Singing."

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