A 600 years old but still blossoming genre of Chinese opera, and an UNESCO Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, kunqu (opera from Kunshan, China) is famous for its portrayal of love on stage. With poetic lyrics, flowing melodies, dramatic acting, exquisite dancing, attractive make-up, and fancy costumes, the genre dramatically parades on its stage Chinese men and women characters in love. And the parades delight Chinese and non-Chinese audiences, satisfying their pursuit of personal love and happiness, and asking them what they would do for their lovers.

This exhibition presents eighteen representative photographs of Mr. Xu Zengquan, an Ann Arbor artist, who is professionally an engineer but is artistically a master photographer of Chinese portraits. Divided into three groups, the photographs present six men, six women, and six couples embodying Chinese love on the kunqu stage. Notice the characters’ facial and gestural expressions which kinetically demonstrate intimate feelings. Enjoy the colorful make-up and costumes which visually identify the characters as men and women in specific social roles, and help tell their romantic stories.

– Joseph S.C. Lam
Director, Confucius Institute at the University of Michigan
**An Imperial Consort Drunk with Love**

This photograph comes from the “Garden Party” scene of the Palace of Eternal Youth (Changshendian), a drama about the historical romance between Emperor Ming (685-762 A.D.) of the Tang Dynasty and Imperial Concubine Yang. The scene tells a simple story of an imperial couple cavorting with one another and drinking wine, but makes a wonderful show of man and woman in love. In this picture, the performer enacts Imperial Concubine Yang drunk with love and wine, but still flirts with gazing eyes and suggestive finger gestures.

**A Nun Laments Her Loneliness**

This photograph comes from the Jade Hairpin (Yuzanji), the story of a young couple falling in love in a nunnery. The young woman enacted on stage and captured by this photograph is a reluctant nun: she is a war refugee hiding in the nunnery. Beautiful and musically talented, she laments her lonely life inside the nunnery. Notice the seven string zither she holds, and her sad demeanor—kunqu tells so much with bodily movements and poses! She will soon meet her lover, Master Pan Bizheng.

**A Maiden Wakes Up from a Dream of Love**

This photograph captures a dramatic moment from the Peony Pavilion, when Bridal Du wakes up from a dream in which she meets her destined husband. By throwing her long sleeves up and out, the performer projects the energy and joy Bridal Du feels.

**Flirting with Her Lover**

This photograph comes from the Jade Hairpin, showing Chen Miaochang, the reluctant young nun flirting with her lover, a young scholar. The photo vividly captures the actress' performance talents: notice how she acts with her eyes, fingers and torso, projecting a playful woman.
This photograph comes from a performance of the Romance at the West Mansion (Xilouji), capturing a classic pose of a young and talented scholar with his charming beauty. The performers’ indirect and shy gaze reveals their budding love with one another.

This photo comes from the Palace of Eternal Youth, showing Emperor Ming giving Imperial Concubine Yang a gift, his token of love. Kunqu acting is dramatic and realistic: notice how he offers the gift devotedly, and she playful waits to see what it is.

This photograph registers a climatic moment from the Jade Hairpin, when the young nun and scholar vow to become husband and wife.

This photograph comes from “Captured Alive,” a scene from the classical Chinese novel entitled All Man are Brothers (Shuihuchuan). Yearning for love, Yan Boxi, a slain wife, emerges from the underworld to fetch Zhang Sanlang, her former and living lover. Just before she takes him to the underworld, they gaze at each other intensely, confirming their desire for one another.

This photograph comes from the “Strolling in the Garden and Interrupted Dream” scene of the Peony Pavilion. One day, Bridal Du visits the family garden, gets tired, and takes a nap there. Asleep, she dreams of her future husband and frolicks with him in the garden. How they play with one another is clear from this photograph.

The photograph comes from the Romance of the West Chamber, one of the most celebrated Chinese love stories by Wang Shifu (1250-1307?), and one that has been traditionally performed as kunqu. The story tells how Scholar Zhang and Lady Cui fall in love and secretly pursue their relationship after her mother tries to force them apart. He jumps over garden walls to meet her at night, sharing intimate moments that this photo captures.
A Romantic & Confident Scholar

From the Romance of the West Mansion, this photograph is a portrait of the idealized young man on the kunqu stage. He is handsome, learned, talented, confident, and ready for a bright career and the hands of a beauty.

A Scholar Fakes a Challenge to His Lover

This photograph also comes from the Jade Hairpin, but it shows a more masculine and confident Pan Bizheng. He has just found out that Chen Miaochang, the object of his desire, actually craves him, and has committed her thoughts on paper. He has her poetic confessions in his hand. Emboldened, he tries to make Chen accept his love.

An Emperor Longs for His Consort

This photograph from the Palace of Everlasting Youth shows Emperor Ming longing for his beloved, Imperial Concubine Yang, who has now deceased. He regrets letting Imperial Concubine Yang, a femme fatale, commit suicide, the price his army demands for protecting him. This is a heart-wrenching moment in the Palace of Everlasting Youth, one that the performer expressively enacts, and one this photograph admirably registers.

A Scholar Reads a Love Letter

This photograph shows Scholar Zhang of the Romance of the West Chamber reading a love letter from Lady Cui. He is delighted that she loves him as much as he craves for her. The character's pose reflects a more contemporary style of acting, but it is dramatically most expressive.

An Emperor Drunk with Love

This photograph shows Emperor Ming of the Palace of Everlasting Youth drinking wine with his lover, Imperial Concubine Yang. Even when he is cavorting with his beloved, the emperor has to act like he is in charge, an impression that the performer has expressively projected, and beautifully captured in the photograph.