Kunqu, the Classical Opera of Globalized China: A Long Story Briefly Told

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Three woodblock print illustrations from a late Ming edition of the Peony Pavilion
I - Introduction

In 2001, UNESCO declared kunqu, the 600-years-old grand opera of China, a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. The declaration not only affirms the artistic and cultural distinctions of the genre, but also creates a context for its revival in contemporary and globalized China. Noted for its perfect blending of dramatic literature, soulful singing, and elegant dancing, kunqu now delights young and mature audiences inside and outside China with shows that judiciously blend classical stories and traditional performance practices with contemporary staging interpretations and technologies. The current popularity of kunqu is culturally and historically significant, and demands international attention. Twenty some years ago, kunqu was practically dismissed as a classical but obsolete theatre. In the late 1980s or early 1990s, one notes kunqu performances attracted so few audience that performers on stage could occasionally outnumber audiences watching their shows. Now, kunqu makes hip and cool cultural events. Riding on waves of China’s transformation as a global superpower since the late 1980s, kunqu has risen from the ashes like a phoenix. Supported by national and international institutions as well as individual patrons and audience, kunqu is now the classical opera of globalized China. It affords people not only an artistic encounter with classical China but also an effective means to negotiate Chinese culture and identities. Dramatically and realistically, kunqu parades on stage Chinese characters/roles, revealing Chinese hearts and minds, and eliciting critical reactions from Chinese and non-Chinese audiences.

It is with great pleasure that the Confucius Institute at the University of Michigan collaborates with the University Musical Society of the University of Michigan to bring grand kunqu performances to Ann Arbor (September 27, 28, and 29, 2012). Featuring Mr. Yu Jiulin and Ms. Shen Fengying, winners of the 2007 Plum Blossom Prize, the most prestigious national honor for Chinese operatic performers, the star-studded performances by the Sukun, namely the Suzhou Kun Opera Theater of Jiangsu Province are must-see shows. They will not only make a memorable milestone in Ann Arbor artistic history, but build a long-lasting bridge of cultural exchange and friendship between China and Michigan. Ann Arbor citizens, I am sure, will fondly remember this kunqu event for many years to come.

To celebrate this event, and to introduce kunqu to Ann Arbor citizens, I present this short introduction, explaining why kunqu is artistically so appealing and intellectually so stimulating. There are six broad reasons why kunqu makes must-see shows: 1, it tells heartfelt and imaginative dramas; 2, it gives unforgettable performances; 3, it demonstrates Chinese emotions and perspectives; 4, it represents fashionable and conspicuous production and consumption in 21st century China; 5, it is globally relevant; 6, it is humanly controversial.

II - 1. Kunqu tells heartfelt and imaginative dramas

Kunqu delights contemporary audience because it tells heartfelt and imaginative dramas, many of which would critically discuss, on one hand, deep philosophical and human issues, and, on the other hand, playfully entertain audience with romantic, and even erotic, acts. For instance, the Peony Pavilion (Mudanting), a classical and popular kunqu drama, tells how a young and elite woman dies yearning for a lover whom she has only met in her dream, and then gets resurrected by him when he shows up in person in the garden she has deserted.

Told in the most poetic and evocative language, and illustrated with playful and seductive acts of love, the
Peony Pavilion asks a fundamental issue of humanity: without love, is life worth living? From this issue, many related questions arise. What would a man or a woman do to pursue love? Do they dare to break cultural and social norms to consummate their love? Are traditional Chinese practices of love effective in contemporary China? If not, what would work?

Heartfelt and imaginative Kunqu stories make convincing dramas, because their scripts are originally written as chuanqi ( fantastic narratives) drama by the most creative and expressive Chinese writers. The Peony Pavilion is, for example, written by Tang Xianzu (1552-1616), a giant among Chinese dramatists, and one who is now internationally recognized as a Chinese counterpart of William Shakespeare. Like Shakespeare’s dramas, Tang’s chuanqi works are not only literary gems but also revealing texts on contemporary cultures and issues. And just like Shakespearean dramas, Kunqu/ chuanqi scripts are often enjoyed and studied as literature and as cultural/historical records. In traditional China, one notes, many elite Chinese read and sing Kunqu texts by themselves and for close friends in private and intimate settings. When performed on public stage, however, Kunqu scripts make powerful theatre, one that often blurs boundaries between fact and fiction for their audience. Experiencing Kunqu, many appreciative audiences would ask: if art is imitating life, or it is the other way around.

II - 2. Kunqu gives unforgettable performances

With unforgettable, virtuosic, and mesmerizing performances, Kunqu prompts its audience to viscerally question their realities and imaginations. Having evolved for 600 years, Kunqu has its performance practices—acting, singing, speaking, make-up, costume design, stage prop, and so forth—fine-tuned by generations of creative, dedicated, and talented
artists. In other words, every kunqu performance practice has been perfected within its aesthetic and performance contexts. Unless they are taken out of their traditional contexts, kunqu performance practices as they are now known and implemented can hardly be topped. This artistic achievement is no accident; it emerges from a codifying, continuous, dynamic, and intimate process of transmission between mentors and disciples. Thus kunqu characters are divided by role-types, which include: the young, old, civil and martial male roles; the young, old, elitist or lowly female roles; the clowns; the evil or not so evil painted faces; and the dramatic corps. Wearing role specific and stylized make-up and costumes, performers of different role-types act out a diversity of characters who represent types and classes of peoples that Chinese have imagined and classified for themselves. To project genuine and individualized feelings and thoughts of specific characters on stage, kunqu performers manipulate every facial, limb and torso movements of their bodies. When combined with stylized and virtuosic singing and speaking, the movements would render the performed characters alive; in kunqu parlance, they feel and think with real blood and flesh.

They would also sing, speak, and act with musical accompaniment. Traditionally, kunqu music is created with preexisting tunes (qupai). While such tunes have established and known structural and expressive characteristics, each can be creatively and effectively manipulated by the composers and singers. In a way this creative-process of kunqu music is not unlike its counterpart jazz practices; the basic melodies, standard chords and phrasing, and other features of a famous jazz composition are all well known, but that does not mean they cannot be creatively played by master musicians. In fact, every time it gets performed by creative musicians, the composition becomes a new expression. Kunqu music is sonically stylized: its sung melodies flow endlessly, being closely accompanied by an ensemble of melodic and percussion instruments, which include, for example, *dizi* (flute), *huqin* (fiddle), *pipa* (lute), *sheng* (mouth organ), gongs, drums, and clappers.

As Chinese and classical as kunqu is, its idiosyncratic and idiomatic expressions can be cross-culturally understood by many. This is because kunqu performance practices are in principle realistic and are grounded in human intuitions and psychology. Any one watching kunqu the first time would promptly grasp that the funny guy with a white patch on his nose is mischievous, and that a big man with a totally white face is deadly, if not evil. Similarly, any audience, even a casual one, would conclude that the female performer walking on stage like a young and playful girl and is dressed in relatively plain clothes is not the lady of the house but her maid.
All these dramatic expressions/practices of kunqu are meticulously learned and virtuosically performed. Before any kunqu artist can perform like a master, they have to undergo years of intense training under a nurturing mentor, and they have to continuously develop their personalized art as they mature, acquiring more and more stage experiences. Only master kunqu performers can give unforgettable performances. When they do, however, they would bring the characters they enact alive on stage, constructing a realistic theatrical world for themselves and their audiences. In that artistic site, the performers and audience can blur their lives and imaginations, asking the deepest questions about humanity in the most creative and challenging ways. This theatrical world, one notes, is most inviting. With its multi-media and realistic expressions, it emotively appeals to all senses of the audiences, inviting them to enter the theatrical site. Its music, which includes vocal singing of endless melodies, stylized chanting and speaking derived from everyday conversations, and instrumental accompaniment and incidental music that articulate and comment on the drama unfolding, constructs a soundscape in which sonic and non-sonic meanings can be instinctively experienced and understood. Happy scenes, for example, always unfold with lively rhythms, and tragic moments are always marked by gliding tones and other sonic indexes of human suffering.

To see how kunqu is creatively crafted and virtuosically performed, one only needs to critically engage with any one of its representative shows. One among these shows is the “Zither Seductions” from the Jade Hairpin, a perennial favorite on the kunqu stage. To realistically dramatize the flirting between an involuntary nun and a failed scholar who have recently fallen in love with one another in a nunnery, but who have yet a chance to confirm their romantic intentions, the scene shows them meeting in a garden at nite, and taking turn to play the qin (seven-string zither), the musical par excellence of traditional Chinese elite, and the chosen tool for sounding out their inner emotions and thoughts. As the young couple listen to the music they play, identifying its titles and programmatic content, they learn of each other's intentions, hidden and not so hidden. For instance, to tease the young nun, the young scholar plays a tune describing a pheasant flying alone, prompting her to declare that his marital status is none of her business. To underscore her nunlike disinterest, she plays a tune about the cold palace in the moon, comparing herself to the moon goddess who has no interest in carnal pleasures. Being an opera, the couple converse in singing and stylized oral deliveries. Thus, they take turn to sing variations of three sets of arias, generating a well-constructed musical continuity that anchors the developing drama. The couple also act and dance to express themselves. To enforce his seductive efforts,
the young man pushes the qin table towards her as if he wants to touch her through the wood. To call her bluff of being disinterested in love, he taps, like a manly scholar, the qin table with his fan. Cornered, she pushes back by threatening to report his unbecoming behavior to his aunt, the abbess of the nunnery. At that point, he apologizes, begs mercy, and leaves the garden. Before he is really gone, however, she confesses her true intentions to the empty garden. Lingering by the exit, he catches every word she utters. Thus, he coughs to signal his presence—he has heard her words. With their romantic intentions exposed and mutually confirmed, they bid farewell once again. In the process, they register the love that they share but cannot openly say in a nunnery. Thus he meaningfully laughs, and she revealingly utters “cui,” a vocable or an “empty” Chinese word (xuzi) that tells everything in her heart without saying anything that is semantically specific. This zither seduction scene makes a most musical and psychological tease. Anyone who has used music/musical performance to communicate their romantic feelings to their beloved would promptly grasp the fun and effectiveness of this kunqu scene of zither seduction.

II - 3. Kunqu demonstrates Chinese emotions and perspectives

If kunqu audience find kunqu performances delightful, they would also find challenging and significant issues. Beneath the theatrical playfulness of kunqu performances, they would find genuine statements about Chinese emotions and perspectives, ranging from the mundane to the sublime. Through kunqu performances, audience can experience how Chinese experience and feel in their everyday lives, and what they would like to see happen in their practical and imagined lives. Kunqu connects Chinese fact and fiction: many kunqu scripts fictionalize historical events and personages, underscoring emotions, desires, values, and dilemmas that define Chinese culture and history.

A case in point is the Palace of Everlasting Life (Changshengdian) by Hong Sheng (1645-1704), a fictionalized account of the historical romance between Emperor Ming (Tang Minghuang, 685-762) of the Tang Dynasty and his beloved Imperial Concubine Yang (Yang Guifei, 719-756). A masterpiece of Chinese dramatic literature, the story vividly narrate Chinese myths and histories, underscoring their cultural and moral messages: how the imperial couple live lavishly and love indulgently; how rivaling officials torpedo the empire and its court; how the gods take pity on the imperial couple and restore them as deities in heaven, and so forth. These myths and histories represent cultural, historical, and religious emotions, memories, and perspectives that Chinese commoners would know in one way or another, but might not comprehensively and intellectually grasp. The myths and histories, nevertheless, become ideologically more intelligible and relevant for the average Chinese commoner when performed on stage.

This becomes clear with a simple look at the core message of the Palace of Everlasting Life. When An Lushan revolted against the Tang court, and his army threatened the capital in 756, Emperor Ming and his government hastily retreated from Chang’an, the capital, to Chengdu, a peripheral city in Tang China. On the way and at Hill Mawei, the army demanded that Imperial Concubine Yang, the femme fatale who drew the ruler’s attention away from state affairs and let them deteriorate, be ordered to commit suicide. To save his empire, and perhaps his own head, he acquiesced. Then he regretted day and nite for the rest of his
life, the drama tells, wondering if he would be better off keeping his woman and letting his empire go. By making Emperor Ming regret his decision, the drama transforms Emperor Ming from a son of heaven to a real man, one who has to confront many dilemmas in their lives: desire or duty!

Few Chinese men would actually experience traumas like Emperor Ming’s, but all have to make tough decisions in their lives. How they choose will affect their lives. How they learn to choose will also affect their lives. As Chinese history tells, many traditional Chinese learn social and moral lessons from dramas performed on stage, and many use drama as a discourse for their practical or theoretical views on life. Many contemporary Chinese empathize with dramatic characters, discussing the issues raised as if they were personal problems. Discussing the Palace of Everlasting Life with a female kunqu master, I learned what she thought: it was so unfair that Imperial Concubine Yang had to die for Emperor Ming’s failure in taking care of state business, she concluded—and thus she performed the concubine as a most charming and innocent woman! The kunqu master’s 21st century and feminist interpretation sharply contrasts with her partner’s understanding—he played Emperor Ming. He told me that Imperial Concubine Yang had to die; the ruler had no choice but to put the empire above his personal love. These gendered Chinese reactions to the Palace of Everlasting Life poignantly underscore how traditional and contemporary China are culturally connected by their theatres!

Kunqu’s connecting of China’s past and present is, one notes, historically grounded. The rise and decline of kunqu, for example, broadly reflect developments in Chinese culture and history. When kunqu first emerged as a regional genre of vocal singing in mid 14th century China, it indexed the rise of central and coast China (Jiangnan) as a cultural center being built by educated and enterprising local talents. When kunqu established itself in late 16th and early 17th century China as an elite and national opera, it registered the ways elite and rich Chinese in major cities enjoyed kunqu as an artistic and purposeful practice of conspicuous consumption. At that time, many elite connoisseurs of kunqu had their own household troupes mount elaborate production to entertain familial members or invited guests. Many also built exquisite halls and gardens where they enjoyed kunqu as theatre and as social-bonding exercises. Between mid 18th century and late 19th century, kunqu competed for audiences and their financial support with newly developed genres of theatre, such as Peking opera. The competition pushed kunqu to artistically develop further and further, making its expressions and performance practices more and more sophisticated. If such sophistication pleased the connoisseurs, however, it rendered the genre less and less appealing to commoner audiences. Kunqu’s artistic success became a cause of its financial collapse. Thus, in many ways, kunqu’s changing fortune mirrored cultural, social, and political battles fought by different groups of Chinese peoples living in socially hierarchical and culturally regionalized Qing China (1644-1911).

If kunqu enjoyed a sustained era of development in 17th and early 18th century China, its subsequent and long-term decline heralded the empire’s troubles in the next century. A widespread civil war, namely the Taiping Rebellion, took place from 1850 to 1864; it boldly challenged the authorities of the central government in the north, and the extensive battles it generated critically undermined the prosperity and cultural vitality of the Jiangnan area. Losing the Opium Wars (1839-42 and 1856-1860) to Britain, 19th century China exposed its internal weakness, and soon dissolved into a confused and weak empire that colonial powers and cultures from the West exploited. In 1911, imperial China ended and was replaced...
by a modernizing and westernizing Republican China. It did not, however, give Chinese people peace and prosperity as promised. More natural and man-made disasters followed until after WWII ended. Since the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Western cultures and perspectives penetrated China. Since the May Fourth Movement of 1911, cultural China looked up to the West for powerful and scientific expressions that would help China modernize. In westernizing and modernizing China, traditional performing arts, such as kunqu, received less and less support from either the public or private sectors.

In 1949, socialist China was launched to rebuild a down-and-out empire and civilization. Its lofty and productive efforts were, however, critically limited by political developments, including the devastating Cultural Revolution (1966-1977), which torpedoed a robust development of kunqu that emerged during the decade of 1956 and 1966. In 1956, an artistically creative and politically correct production of the Fifteen Strings of Cash (Shiwuguan) premiered in Beijing, earning cultural and political leaders’ aesthetic approval, gaining their financial and political support, and setting a vibrant example for operatic reform in socialist China. As headlined then, the show salvaged the tradition of kunqu, and triggered the launching of new kunqu schools in Beijing and Shanghai. Many current kunqu masters graduated from those schools. As young performers, they were promised a bright future, which they did not see until they have become aged. Their youthful and promising careers were tragically cut short by the Cultural Revolution—during that decade of social and political turbulence, kunqu was banned. Thus, the genre almost died, but its pent-up energy got productively released at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Before it can enjoy its current revival, kunqu had to overcome another major hurdle. Since the late 1980s when China began to revive as a nation, cultural and expressive China confronted a new and challenging force. Globalized and technologically advanced genres of entertainment, ranging from American popular music to Hong Kong movies, captured the attention of Chinese audience craving for performing arts different from what the government had forced on them. This fascination with imported culture gradually eased as 21st century China reestablished itself as a global superpower. Then as Chinese people feel confident about themselves and their culture once again, they begin to identify the beautiful and meritorious in traditional Chinese culture, appropriating them as resources to construct their new and 21st century identities. It is not accident that kunqu parades Chinese people as learned scholars and beauties who are classically rooted in their cultural being, youthfully charming in their physical and intellectually being, and productively successful in all their practical and intellectual activities.

Reviewing the eventual history of kunqu in the last six centuries, one sees how the genre embodies Chinese experiences, emotions and values, and understands why Chinese would always treasure the genre—white knights and their salvaging efforts always happen at critical moments. This is because kunqu is a microcosm of Chinese culture and history since the mid 16th century, and because Chinese people take kunqu as a revealing representation and an effective discourse of their lives. In fact, the more modern audience engage with kunqu, the more they see the authentic, beautiful, and expressive China hidden beneath the hybridized and globalized contemporary China. In addition, they also see themselves and their Chinese dreams in the same process.

II - 4. Kunqu represents China’s fashionable and conspicuous production and consumption

In 2003, the Suzhou kunqu troupe collaborated with the Shitou Publishing House of Taiwan to produce a grand performance of the Palace of Everlasting Life, featuring gorgeous and expensive costumes and stage design. In 2004 the same troupe produced, under the artistic guidance by Bai Xianrong, the Peony Pavilion, the Young Lover’s Edition, a grand spectacle of acting, dancing, singing, and speaking, one that
favorably compares with any grand theatre in the world. In 2006, the Kunju opera theatre troupe of Jiangsu Province produced the Peach Plum Blossom 1699, a spectacle that projects painted scenes of 17th century and culturally vibrant Nanjing on stage. In May 2007, the Imperial Granary theatre/restaurant in Beijing opened it doors and presented to national and international tourists an expensive and inclusive dinner show of kunqu. The performance/dinner show of 120 minutes takes place in a 700 years old and official granary of Ming China restored and refurbished as a theatre. Promoted as a must-see in Beijing, tickets for the show range from RMB $380 to RMB $1980 each. With its intimate and luxurious setting, the show offers a small audience of about 50 clients authentic kunqu experience, the company claims.

This performance/dinner show at the Granary represents contemporary China’s pursuit and repackaging of imperial and luxurious culture from historical China. The performance/dinner show makes not only an effective marketing strategy, but also a statement on 21st century Chinese sentiment and identities. China is now a proud global superpower, boasting a GDP that is second to only that of the US. Chinese people, and in particular those under 30 years of age, have few memories of China being poor and weak—a stigma their parents experienced growing up. Operating in a globalized world, and trying to sustain a thriving China economy permanently, Chinese are creatively constructing new identities and products for themselves and for their Chinese and non-Chinese partners. In such economic, social, and ideological contexts, Chinese are constructing themselves as classical, youthful, and successful citizens of the globalized world. They are authenticated by classical Chinese cultural heritages; their youthful energies will enable them to creatively activate all their potentials toproductively achieve their bright and successful future; their proud successes and expanding riches will earn them friends and partners inside and outside China.

If this constructed and desired identity of contemporary China and Chinese people is nationalistic and ideological, it is conspicuously produced and consumed. Telling signs include, for example, the 2008 Olympic Games Opening ceremony in Beijing, the newly built city of skyscrapers in Pudong Shanghai which was rural until it was marked for development since the 1990s, and the astronomical prices that rare Chinese antiques and object d’art are demanding in national and international markets.

Also demonstrative of this newly acquired rich and confidence of China are grand spectacles of theatrical productions. Kunqu is of course, a leading example of this Chinese phenomenon. There are now so many grand and expensive kunqu shows that critics have asked if the practitioners have confused artistic and cultural merits with theatrical grandiosity and luxury. Does the more expensive means the artistically superior? Should cultural
performances like kunqu produced and consumed like luxury and branded goods? For many new audience, nevertheless, the richness of kunqu performances, and its projection of the classical, youthful, and successful Chinese is most appealing and satisfying. It is no accident that many hip and cool Chinese citizens engage kunqu as a branded luxury of things Chinese.

II - 5. Kunqu is globally relevant

These hip and cool Chinese audience are not the only people who find kunqu globally meaningful and relevant. Chinese officials, entrepreneurs, diaspora, and students also find kunqu instrumental for their needs. Realizing the potentials for kunqu to project China as a classical, youthful, and successful national/civilization, Chinese officials actively encourage and support overseas kunqu performances. For example, when Premier Wen Jiabao officially visited Japan in 2007, his entourage included kunqu artists, who performed for the Japanese host. To advance cultural exchanges and friendship between China and Britain, national and local officials of the two countries built a cultural connection between Yichang and Stratford-upon-Avon, the hometowns of TangXianzu and William Shakespeare. Enterprising kunqu producers and performers actively seek performance opportunities outside China. Patriotically, they want to globally share kunqu as a masterpiece of humanity; practically they know that successes outside China will bring more prestige and profit to their own troupes and to themselves as stars. The efforts to export kunqu are closely matched by the importing exercises of Chinese diaspora and their non-Chinese colleagues in learned or communal institutions in the West. American universities, for example, would often collaborate with local institutions and individuals to present Chinese cultural shows, which help build their profiles of cultural diversity. Chinese diaspora strive to make their non-Chinese compatriots understand Chinese culture, an effort that not only promotes cultural exchange but also generates pride and personal satisfaction for Chinese overseas. As kunqu performances become more and more frequent outside China, its theatrical expressions, Chinese messages, and traditional performance practices become more and more recognized. Kunqu is rapidly becoming a widely known genre of world theatre, and a branded manifestation of Chinese culture, history, and people. For that reason, anyone who wants to engage with world theatre and anyone who wants to know China would want to learn more about kunqu. To know kunqu is to know Chinese culture and history as they were and are.

II - 6. Kunqu is humanly controversial

This is particularly true when one confronts controversial features of contemporary kunqu, which is in many ways a microcosm of contemporary Chinese culture and society. Contemporary China, one notes, is
struggling to reinvent itself so that it can successfully operate in
the confusingly and continuously transforming 21st century world.
Since the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, China has strived
to modernize itself by embracing Western theories and practices.
As a result, contemporary China is, on one hand, deeply anchored
in historically Chinese and native grounds, and on the other hand,
undeniably westernized and hybridized. Many have found this
bipolar China perplexing: which is the real China? Would it become
more authentic if its non-native elements are purged? Would that
purge, however, rob China of its youth energy and talent for success?

Approaching these challenging questions in the abstract renders
them more manageable, but that is a misleading illusion. Anyone
who approaches the issues practically would find problems that
have no easy solutions. Anyone who listens to kunqu music with
informed ears would, for example, find its hybridized sounds
simultaneously delightful and troublesome. Regardless whether
the music features harmonies, contrapuntal textures, and other
Western musical practices with judicious control or unrestrained
enthusiasm, the music registers what traditional and contemporary
Chinas are and are not. What is real Chinese music, if there is one that transcends times and sites? And
what is real kunqu? If there is nothing that can categorically and permanently defines kunqu as a Chinese
musical expression, what does constantly evolving kunqu signify? Does it really qualify as a masterpiece of
humanity? Is it nothing more than a performance of dramatic stories, or a package of beautiful tunes and
pleasing rhythms?

These dramatic and musical questions promptly activate issues concerning the future of the world’s diverse
and intangible cultural heritages/performing arts, which index different peoples’ creativity, experiences, and
identities. What makes a cultural practice/expression worthy of preservation? How? How should kunqu be
preserved and sustained in the present and for the future. Many kunqu practitioners who strive to preserve
their beloved genre as a masterpiece of humanity would ask how kunqu and other traditional performing
arts can be preserved in the globalized and commercialized world? Preserving cultural heritages from the
past needs tremendous human and financial resources? Who would pay for these expenses? Do those who
pay have a say in what should and should not be preserved. Do causal tourists who pay a lot have a right
to influence preservation acts of traditional culture? How does preserved cultural heritage make people
pay? By tailoring to popular demands or creative imaginations? These are, needless to say, humanistic
issues for postmodern citizens who care about traditions and cultures. How they care affects not only the
performing arts they love but also the society they build for themselves and their descendents. This is why
caring about kunqu, finding its hybridized features delightful or troublesome, is humanly significant. What
would happen if the globalized world loses its traditional performing arts? Should that happen, where and
how would people find means to either forget or confront their everyday realities?

### III - Kunqu scenes and masterpieces

On September 27, 28, and 29, 2012, the Suzhou Kun Opera Theater of Jiangsu Province will present three
performances of representative kunqu scenes (*zhezixi*). Since the mid 18th century, kunqu has developed
a tradition of performing selected scenes from *chuanqi* scripts; a performance of a full script of 30 or more
scenes cannot be launched with a wealth of human and materials resources that few have. To perform the
selected scenes as narratively self-contained stories and theatrically appealing performances, the scenes have been adjusted to include the best acting, dancing, singing, and speaking. As a result, all popularly performed scenes are time-tested kunqu masterpieces, a fact that becomes apparent with the following description of the scenes that the Suzhou Kun Opera Theatre of Jiangsu Province will perform in Ann Arbor.

The Sukun will perform two representative scenes from the Jade Hairpin; they are namely the “Zither Seductions” (“Qintiao”) and the “Stealing Poems” (“Toushi”). The Jade Hairpin by Gao Lian (1573-1620), a celebrated scholar-official, dramatist, and book collector is a representative chuanqi drama, one that has been continuously performed as kunqu since its publication. It tells a playful romance between a young man and a young woman who fall in love with one another inside a nunnery. A war refugee, Chen Miaochang, the young woman, becomes a reluctant nun; a young scholar who has failed his examinations, Pan Bizheng visits his aunt, the abbess. Having found one another in the nunnery where they cannot openly engage with one another, the young man and woman secretly meet, seductively flirt with one another, yearningly express their desires in their spoken and written words, and boldly consummate their love inside the religious site. Once their affair is exposed, he has to leave immediately, only to return as a successful scholar-official and a faithful lover. As a whole, the drama is filled with playful actions, melodious singing, elegant dancing, and emotive moments, all of which delight audience’s senses while challenging their understanding of social norms.

One of the most popular scene from this drama is the “Zither Seductions.” It portrays Pan Bizheng and Chan Miaochang meeting in a moonlit garden, taking turn to play the seven-string zither, singing out their romantic intentions, and testing their partner’s true intentions. Caught off guard by Pan’s manly advances which get bolder and bolder, she acts out a protest. He apologizes, begs mercy, and leaves a rejected man. As soon as he is out of her sight, however, she confesses her genuine feelings to the empty garden. Lingering by the garden exit, he clearly hears every word of hers, and then tactfully coughs to announce his presence, and evasdropping of her confession. With their romantic intentions thus exposed, they declare their love to one another.

As performed, this scene is a masterpiece of dramatic acts, sounds, and words. The man and woman characters take turn to sing three sets of variations of three distinctive arias, generating a theatrical dialogue that is musically coherent and dramatically contrasting and developing. The man character makes bold kinetic moves: seductively he pushes the zither table to tease her; calling her bluff, he taps it with his fan. The laughing and utterances the characters do are most theatrical and expressive. Catch the most sexy “cui” that the woman character utters in the later part of the scene! There is no effective English translation for that word/vocable that a sophisticated Chinese woman would utter to romantically rebuke her lover.

“Stealing Poems” is another popular scene from the Jade Hairpin. It begins with Chen yearning for Pan in her studio, committing her thoughts on paper. Then she falls asleep. Trying to see Chen, Pan sneaks into her studio, and finds her asleep at her desk with her arms pinning down the manuscript. He pulls the paper out, reads the poems written there, and learns how Chen misses him. Emboldened by his discovery, he wakes her up and seduces her. She rejects his advances and threatens to report his unbecoming behavior to his aunt. At that point, Pan shows Chen the manuscript, forcing her to admit her desires for him, and triggering a most playful chase on stage. Finally, she gives in to his demand and gets her poems back. The scene concludes with them making their conjugal vow. As performed, the scene shows how kunqu theatre can be comical and romantic at the same time.

Another comical romance that the Sukun performs in Ann Arbor is the “Joining the Secular World Together” (“Shuang xiashan”), which comes from The Secular World of Troubles, a court or vernacular drama from Qing China. A comical and romantic drama, the drama tells how a young nun and a young monk find their
lives as clergywoman/man unacceptable, choose to leave their monastery/nunnery built on mountain tops, and go to the town by the foothill to search for secular happiness. As performed nowadays, “Joining the Secular World Together” begins with the nun and the monk meeting one another on their way, and falling in love immediately. Surprised and delighted, they ask one another whence they come from, why they are traveling, and whither they go. They answer with made-up excuses, hiding their secrets. Trying to control their desire, they behave properly by pretending to move on with their trips.

They have, however, fallen in love with one another, and thus each would immediately and stealthily turn around to look at the other. That triggers another round of questions and answers; both make further excuses to hide their true intentions. At the end of the dialogue, they pretend to move on once again. Before long, however, she finds an old temple, goes inside, and waits there to see if the monk would come to look for her. He does. Then they confess their escaping to one another. And innocently, he asks her to travel along with him, posing as husband and wife. She accepts but asks how they can fool people with their shaved heads. To avoid attracting people’s suspicions, they work out a scheme: each would take a different route to go to their rendezvous point by sunset. As they embark on their trip, they find a stream of cold running water which she dares not cross. He then carries her across the stream on his back, an action that seals their fate as husband and wife. The scene is a comical show of questions and answers accompanied by realistic and entertaining acts of a nun and a monk shyly falling in love.

Compared to the above scenes, the “Captured Alive” (“Huozhuo”) that the Sukun performs is darker and less innocent. “Captured Alive” is a scene from All Men are Brothers (Shuihu zhuan), a classical and internationally known Chinese novel/drama of heroic men bonding as sworn brothers, fighting the rulers’ abuses, while living as bandits. As performed, “Captured Alive” mixes seduction, horror, and moral exhortation in a mesmerizing package of virtuosic singing, speaking, and dancing. The scene begins with Yan Poxi coming on stage as a ghost—notice her ghostly steps! A young and deceitful woman, Yan is not only the wife of Song Jiang, the main hero of the novel, but also a mistress of Zhang Sanlang, a petty officer and a lothario. As the result of a domestic squabble, she dies from Song Jiang’s hands. As a ghost, however, she yearns for Zhang’s love, and thus she emerges from the underworld to get him.

Arriving at his house, she knocks at his door, calls him and asks him to let her in, hoping that he would recognize her voice. Her calling of his name, Sanlang is a most theatrical act; in fact, as the scene progresses, her calling gets more and more dramatic. As he fails to recognize her voice, the two play a titillating game of guessing, in the process of which he asks many bawdy questions. Eventually he lets her in, and finds her as a ghost. Frightened, he tries to chase her.
away with a magical charm that he has just learned, generating a most entertaining performance of playful interactions between a living man and his deceased mistress. Finally, as Zhang calms down, and finds the ghostly Yan more beautiful than before, he seduces her by confessing how he has cried for her death. Reminiscing their love affair together, they dance out their feelings for one another. This dance is arguably one of the most entertaining and scary *pas de deux* in Chinese theatre! After the dance, Yan comforts Zhang by caressing and strangling him at the time. He drops dead with an acrobatic stunt—catch it as it happens on stage! As the couple exit to the underworld, they perform another macabre dance: taking charge, she manipulates him like a corpse/puppet.

The eroticism of “Captured Alive” is bold but hidden. Its lyrics are, for instance, written with opaque references to romantic men and women in historical China; only those familiar with their biographies would catch the eroticism thus expressed. This intellectual and literary eroticism sharply contrasts with the comical, vernacular, and often improvised erotic acts of the scene. As performed, Zhang Sanlang of the scene speaks in Suzhou dialect that only locals can fully decipher; when translated, this vernacular eroticism loses a bit of its punches.

As a theatrical presentation, “Captured Alive” makes a double-edged statement. It boldly reveals Chinese eroticism and ghostly imaginations—this is why moralistic Chinese ban the scene repeatedly. It also poignantly ridicules indulgent men and women—some would, for example, interpret the show as a male warning: stay clear of bad women; even as ghosts, they would get you! This is, however, why the show can always justify its performance as an exhortation, and manages to survive the censors’ cut.

As compared to “Captured Alive,” “Garden Party” (“Xiaoyan”) that the Sukun performs makes a most lyrical performance. “Garden Party” is a favorite scene from the *Palace of Everlasting Life*, a much admired and discussed Chinese drama that fictionalizes the historical romance between Emperor Ming of the Tang dynasty and his Imperial Concubine Yang. Emperor Ming is historically held responsible for allowing a destructive rebellion to happen and torpedo the empire’s fortune, and Imperial Concubine Yang is conventionally, if not misogynously, blamed for monopolizing his attention that indirectly induces his neglect of state affairs. As written by Hong Sheng (1645-1704), a giant among Chinese dramatists, the *Palace of Everlasting Youth* is less history but more a romantic play about Chinese culture, politics, duties, desires, and regrets. As the *Palace of Everlasting Youth* tells the historical romance in its social and political contexts, what it showcases is the emperor’s love for the concubine before and after her death.

As dramatized by Hong Sheng, the “Garden Party” is not a self-contained scene but makes only the first half of a much longer and dramatic scene. The “Garden Party” is followed by the shocking news of a military rebellion, and the court’s fleeing the capital in haste. Dramatically speaking, the “Garden Party,” is more lyrical than action-packed—it is the calm before the storm. As performed today, “Garden Party” simply portrays an imperial couple enjoying themselves in the garden, cavorting their love and drinking wine. Making such a portrayal theatrically effective can be most challenging. Having been polished by generations of kunqu master performers, the “Garden Party” has nevertheless become a kunqu masterpiece, one that master performers use to showcase their dramatic skills and talents. In the “Garden Party,” the performer portraying Imperial Concubine Yang has to bring alive on stage one of China’s four supreme beauties; she would seductively smile, suggestively gaze, meaningfully point with her flowery fingers, and voluptuously move her torso and limbs. Playing against such a beauty, the performer portraying Emperor Ming has to act imperial, masculine, but also playful. Cavorting with her, and making her drink more wine than she should, he charms his woman. Whenever kunqu performers bring Emperor Ming and Imperial Concubine Yang alive on stage, they theatrically demonstrate genuine human love in action. Kunqu is, afterall, a masterpiece of humanity.
In its Ann Arbor performances, the Sukun presents four seminal scenes from Tang Xianzu’s masterpiece, the Peony Pavilion, which simultaneously tells a love story and launches a philosophical debate of humanity. As written by Tang, the Peony Pavilion is a complex drama of 55 scenes, telling how Bridal Du, the daughter of an elite family, finds meanings of life through love, death, and resurrection. A gist of the drama runs as follows. One day, Bridal Du ventures into the family garden, finds flowers blossoming among crumbled walls and dried up wells; there and then, she realizes how a life without love is meaningless. Emotionally exhausted, she takes a nap in the garden, and dreams a rendezvous with her future beloved, only to wake up with an insatiable yearning for him. Then, she comes back to the garden, trying to find her dream lover again. She goes back to her boudoir disappointed. Soon, she falls love-sick and dies. To preserve herself for her lover, she makes a portrait of herself before her untimely death, and has it hidden by a giant rock in the garden after her funeral. Meeting her judge in the underworld she begs and gets another chance to live again. She is to be resurrected by her destined husband, Master Liu, a talented young scholar. Searching for love and career, he comes to the Bridal Du's town and finds her portrait in the garden she left behind. Gazing at the painting, he finds Bridal Du’s beauty irresistible; thus, he worships her painted presence, and begs her to come alive. She does, and they begin to cavort with one another. Having his love for her, dead or alive, assured, she reveals her ghostly identity to him, and asks him to resurrect her. With the help of a Daoist nun, he opens up her grave, finds her in perfectly human form, and wakes her from her death. They begin to live as husband and wife. Living in the human world, nevertheless, they have to secure their conjugal bliss by having his career as a scholar-official launched. Thus she sends him to the capital to take the national examinations, the gateway for male careers in imperial China. He passes the examinations as a top candidate. Before he can take the good news to his wife, however, he has to convince his stubborn father-in-law, a powerful court official whom he finds in the capital, that he is not an evil grave digger, and that she has actually been resurrected. Only with the emperor’s intervention, the father is persuaded. And the drama concludes with a grand and happy finale, the way Chinese chuanqi stories end.

The four scenes that Sukun performs in Ann Arbor represent major dramatic turns in the Peony Pavilion. The first scene is the “Strolling in the Garden and the Interrupted Dream.” It shows Bridal Du and her maid strolling in the garden and her meeting with her destined husband in a romantic dream. This scene is arguably the most frequently performed scene in contemporary kunqu. Its main aria, the “Black Silk Gown,” is one of the most discussed and performed compositions among all kunqu arias. The second scene is the “Pursuing the Dream,” which tells how Bridal Du returns to the garden and attempts to meet her destined husband again. She cannot, and thus she falls love-sick and then dies disappointed. This scene is a favorite among kunqu masters doing the young female role. It affords them opportunities to sing and act their best, expressing female desire and demeanor that Chinese audiences idealize and want to see for themselves.

The third scene is the “The Portrait Retrieved and Examined.” It tells how Master Liu finds Bridal Du’s portrait, tries to figure out who she is, and concludes that she is an angel from heaven, who has nevertheless become the object of his desire. Through acting, singing, and chanting by himself—for almost 30 minutes, the
performer doing this scene would dramatically project a young and talented man falling in love with a woman whom he has yet to meet in person. As such, the scene is a theatrical workhorse for the performer to showcase not only his performance skills and talents but also the ways traditional Chinese imagine what a learned and romantic scholar-official would feel and do. The scene powerfully negotiates elitist and scholarly Chinese manhood. The fourth scene is the “Nightly rendezvous,” which is Chinese love-making symbolically staged. Hearing Master Liu’s genuine calling for her, Bridal Du comes out to meet him in his studio, the scene tells. Surprised to see an unknown beauty coming to his room uninvited, he asks who she is. She answers that she is the beauty on the painting whom he begs to appear. He then asks why she comes, and she tells him that she wants to spend the nites with him. Spending the nites together they do. This scene is musically and visually expressive and emotive. The performers would not only sing melodies that sonically twist and turn, but also symbolically caress one another with their long and flowing sleeves (shuixiu).

IV. Suggestions for further reading, viewing and listening

A wealth of recorded clips from performances, informative descriptions of kunqu history and biographies, and revealing illustrations of characters, make-up and costumes are available in various websites. Youtube has many kunqu video clips which can be accessed with words of “kunqu,” and names of famous kunqu plays, stars, and troupes. There is also a wealth of scholarly writings written in Chinese. The following websites are leading sites that offer representative recordings, discussions, and bibliographic suggestions.


“中国昆曲网/Zhongguo kunqu wang.” http://www.kunquopera.net/

“kunqu.” http://www.52kunqu.com/index.asp

http://www.confucius.umich.edu/


www.jsszkjy.com