

Evolution of a Classical Chinese Theater—*Kunju*

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolution of a classical Chinese theater—*Kunju*. It looks into the history of *Kunju* by delving into literary documents and related historic records. Originally, *Kunju* used Kunshan tune, a local music style in Kunshan. Thanks to the contributions of Wei Liangfu and his contemporaries, Kunshan tune was refined into a new music style. This refined tune used official language (*guanhua*) and the melody was generated in accordance with the tones of the words. Besides, new music instruments were introduced to make vocal delivery more pleasing. These refinements helped Kunshan tune become a national music style before spreading from Suzhou to the rest of China. *Kunju* stresses on-stage dramatic performance and mimetic movements. This paper also identifies challenges facing this classical Chinese theater.

Keywords

Kunju, Challenge, Evolution, Revival

1. Introduction

Kunju is one of the oldest forms of Chinese drama. It has been a major genre in Chinese theater since the 16th century. It is viewed as mother of Chinese operas, as it has given rise to a wide variety of Chinese operas, including Beijing opera, now a national treasure of China.

It is generally accepted that *Kunju* is closely linked with Kunshan tune and *Kunqu*. Kunshan tune transitioned from a regional music style to a national singing embraced by the literati. *Kunqu* finds its way into the drama called *chuanqi* (marvel tale), making a new genre known as *Kunju*.

Kunshan tune was originally a local music style. Thanks to the contributions by Wei Liangfu and his contemporaries, it was refined into a new music style. This refined Kunshan tune uses official language (*guanhua*) and the melody was generated in accordance with the tones of the words. These two refinements help

Kunshan tune become a national music style, spreading from Suzhou to the rest of China. *Kunqu* refers to the opera singing, primarily pure singing, with refined Kunshan tune. It emphasizes singing or vocal delivery, while *Kunju* stresses on-stage dramatic performance and mimetic movements. In other words, *Kunqu* emphasizes vocal performance while *Kunju* highlights stage performance. That is, integration of vocal and choreographic presentations to accentuate dramatic effects.

The Chinese literature on *Kunju* consists of memoirs, treatises, and miscellaneous notes by the literati. These scholars did not use a set definition in their description of this classical Chinese art. In 2001, *Kunqu* was listed among the “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). *Kunqu* and *Kunju* are largely different, and thus shall be differentiated. These are clear indications that the scholarship has yet to reach consensus on the terminology. For example, as Wong (2009) put it, *Kun* in *Kunqu* refers to Kunshan, birthplace of *Kunqu*, while *qu* “denotes either aria lyrics, a vocal style, an aria repertory, or a type of musical theater, depending on contexts” (p. 15). Her interpretation is partially correct in that when *qu* means a type of musical theater it is called *ju* or drama rather than *qu* in Chinese or opera in English. She did not distinguish *Kunqu* from *Kunju*. This paper attempts to give a clear picture of the evolution of *Kunju* and deepen our understanding of this classical Chinese theater.

2. The Music Style of *Kunju*

Kunju originally adopted a local vocal music style called Kunshan tune named after its place of origin—Kunshan, a county between Suzhou and Shanghai. The Kunshan tune was recorded by Wei Liangfu in his book *Nanci yinzheng* (Guide to Southern Melody). As Wei (n.d.) noted:

There were a wide variety of tunes particular to certain regions—Kunshan, Haiyan, Yuyao, Hangzhou, and Yiyang. Yiyang tune was popular in Huizhou, Jiangxi, and Fujian. This tune spread farther south to Yunnan and Guizhou provinces in the time span from 1403 to 1424. But only Kunshan tune was authentic... Gu Jian lived some 15 kilometers south of Kunshan. He was an expert in Southern opera and ancient poetry. Learning about Gu’s impressive singing, a top commander summoned him but Gu refused flatly. Gu had many friends who were also keenly interested in Southern Drama, such as Yang Weizhen (literary name: Tiedi), Gu Aying, and Ni Yuanzhen. He authored books titled *Taozhen yeji* (Collection of Taozhen) and *Fengyuesanren* [Gu’s literary name] *yuefu* (Yuefu poem by Fengyuesanren). Gu was proficient in Southern Drama. Thanks to his efforts, Kunshan tune appeared in early Ming dynasty.

As Wei noted, the Kunshan tune was based on *nanxi* (Southern Drama). It was largely attributable to Gu Jian. The two passages quoted above indicated that Kunshan tune was a regional music style popular in and around Kunshan. This

local tune had two distinctive qualities. The one is that melody did not conform to the tones of the words. That is, the words were articulated in accordance with the melody. The other is that this tune used local dialect. These two characteristics were altered by Wei Liangfu and other musicians, whose concerted efforts produced refined tune with the accompaniment of new musical instruments.

Those innovations saw *Kunju* accompanied by *di* (bamboo flute), *guanzi* (a double-reed musical instrument), *sheng* (ancient Chinese wind instrument), and *pipa* (the Chinese lute). The singing style also changed. It was sung following the principle of *yi zisheng xingqiang* (moving the melody according to the tones of the words). But at that time the Kunshan tune was sung with local dialect rather than official language [*i.e.*, *Zhongzhouyinyun*, tones and rhymes of the Central Plains], so the tones of the words did not conform to the tune or melody. As Kunshan dialect was incomprehensible to non-locals, this dialectic barrier prevented this tune from spreading far and beyond.

That Wei Liangfu was a distinguished musician was recorded in *Jichang yuan wen ge ji* (*Record of Hearing at Jichang garden*), authored by Yu Huai (1616-1696), who lived in late Ming dynasty and early Qing dynasty, had records about Wei Liangfu (Zhang, 1630):

The Southern Opera was refined by Wei Liangfu, a Kunshan resident. He first attempted to establish himself in Northern Opera, but found himself overshadowed by Wang Youshan, a distinguished musician of Northern Opera. He then devoted himself to Southern Opera, and spent ten years in his study on the innovations and refinements of Kunshan local tone. At that time, Southern Opera was simple but unpleasing. Wei Liangfu turned it into *a new tune* [emphasis added]. This music, clear, resonant, fast or slow rhythmically, was in accordance with a common tune form. Wei Liangfu sang, with new rules of tone, tune, rhyme, and enunciation, expressing complicated feelings such as happiness, sadness, and bleakness. He outperformed senior musicians, Yuan Ran and You Tuo, for example, who felt that they were eclipsed by Wei Liangfu.

At that time, Wei Liangfu distinguished himself in Southern Opera by creating new Kunshan tune. But contributions of other musicians, such as Yuan Ran and You Tuo, should not be underestimated. Wei may be seen as a lead musician in this group of *Kunqu* artists. Wei Liangfu stood out among musicians of his days thanks to his achievements in refining the vocal tune for *Kunju*.

Wei Liangfu's contributions are at least two fold. First, the use of *guanhua* (official language, *i.e.*, *Zhongzhou yin*) or mandarin rather than Kunshan dialect helped remove dialectal barriers and thus enabled *Kunqu* opera to spread from places in and around Kunshan to the rest of China. All educated elites could understand *guanhua* (official language) or mandarin, but only a few had knowledge of Kunshan dialect. The new Kunshan tune, standardized by Wei Liangfu, made it possible for *Kunqu* opera to transition itself from a regional art to a national theatrical form for the elite, the literati class for example. This revised tune was

accessible to the educated.

Secondly, Wei Liangfu noted that there was a lack of correspondence between libretto and music in the early Kunshan tune. So he stressed accurate enunciation in singing. He set the rule of *yizisheng xingqiang* (moving the melody according to the tones of the words). The rule was later accepted as a national standard.

3. *Kunqu* as a National Singing Style

The new tune employed *guanhua* (official language, *i.e.*, *Zhongzhou yin*) or mandarin rather than Kunshan dialect, giving rise to a national singing style, favored by the literati, the wealthy, and the imperial court.

Kunqu was recorded in *Xinding shi' erlü jingqiangpu* (Beijing Tune Notation with Twelve-tone System), compiled by Wang Zhengxiang in 1684 (Wang, 1684).

In the Ming dynasty, Kunshan tune and Yiyang tune developed differently. The former prospered while the latter declined. *Kunqu* opera was promoted by literati like Gao Zecheng, Tang Liuru, Shen Qingmen, and Liang Shaobai. These playwrights improved pitch, tune, mode, and melody, among others. In contrast, Yiyang tune witnessed decline simply because it had few followers or patrons.

Kunqu belonged to Southern Opera, as patrons of *Kunqu* such as Gao Zecheng and Tang Liuru are natives of regions where Southern Opera was highly popular. As Hu (1983) noted, *Kunqu* was also commonly referred to as *chuanqi* [marvel tale], which often “used *Kunqu* for accompaniment”. On the other hand, *chuanqi* was made into a new form of theater by integration of *Kunqu*. But this new form of theater is also called *Kunqu* (Hu, 1983: p. 72). *Kunqu* was no longer confined to *Nanqu* (Southern Drama), and it also included northern *qu* and *chuanqi*. The scope of *Kunqu* was extended.

Over time, *Kunqu* was increasingly popular and so widespread that northern music was assimilated into or closer to the water polished melody created by Wei Liangfu. That indicated the new Kunshan tune, characterized by water-polished tunes, fast spread from Kunshan to the rest of China. This tune was adopted in singing Northern Operas as well as Southern Opera. It had soon become a national music form or style. Hu (1983) rightly noted that “‘*qu*’ in *Kunqu* could mean tunes, poems, and drama” (p. 72). He pointed out that *Kunqu* was elevated into a respectable literary genre pursued by literati, thanks to the achievements of Tang xianzu, the most successful playwright of his day, and other scholars (p. 74). When *Kunqu* means a literary genre, it can either be used for *qingchang* (pure singing) or *gongchang* (actor singing). *Kunqu* is more appropriate than *Kunqu* opera when it stresses stage performance rather than pure song.

Kunqu was characterized by *shuimo diao* (water polished melody) and *Lengban* (cold benches). *Lengban* is also called *Lengchang* or *qinchang* (pure sing-

ing). *Kunqu* has *qingchang* (pure singing) tradition. *Qingchang* refers to the non-theatrical, amateur singing tradition. It involves no make-up, costumes, and movements. *Qingchang* were highly popular among literati amateurs and former professional actors (Li, 2009). These singers regularly held performance among themselves, competing and studying with each other. This tradition persists to this day among *Kunqu* amateurs.

Li (2013) noted that Wei Liangfu and other musicians embraced the type of *Kunqu* “sung around a table or at banquets, not on stage, with no costume or makeup and with only very minimal and restrained bodily gestures of any sort” (p. 8). This kind of *Kunqu* was not set for stage performance, but was most sought-after by literati class—*Kunqu* devotees and enthusiasts.

4. *Kunju* as a National Theatrical Genre

While *Kunqu* was primarily used for *qingchang* (pure singing), non-theatrical, amateur performance, theatrical performance was focused on stage performance known as *Kunju*. While Wei Liangfu was the sage of song, Liang Chenyu was the pioneer of *Kunju*.

Liang Chenyu’s role and contribution was recorded in *Meihua caotang bitan* (Notes from Plum Blossom House), authored by Zhang Dafu (Zhang, 1630):

Liang Chenyu heard [about Wei Liangfu] and emulated him. He examined and edited Yuan drama, and created new productions such as *Jiangdong baizhu* [White ramie from east of the Yangtze River] and *Huansha [ji]* [Washing the Silken Gauze]. He also researched the rules and principles of musical sound with Zheng Sili, and sang with Tang Xiaoyu, Chen Qiquan, and others. His singing was like melodious knocks at stone and metal. His musical scores circulated in the aristocratic families, when families of high ranking officials wanted to hear music, they insisted on Liang’s music style called *kunqiang* [Kunshan tune].

Liang Chenyu adopted the music style refined by Wei Liangfu and other musicians. He was surrounded by a few singers and musicians, such as Zheng Sili, Tang Xiaoyu, and Chen Qiquan. Those friends and Liang worked together to advance the development of *Kunqu*. Like the refined Kunshan tune, *Kunju* was also the collaborative creation, with Liang as the lead composer and playwright.

Liang made further improvements by going beyond *Kunqu* or *qingchang* (pure singing), because pure singing was confined to some regions, and embraced by a relatively small group of people. These limitations prevented *Kunqu* from spreading to much of China and reaching out to the general public. As a response, Liang Chenyu not merely studied *Kunqu*, but composed *Kunju* for stage performance. He authored many *sanqu* or lyric song, also known as *qingqu* featuring *qingchang* (pure singing). More importantly, Liang is the first playwright to use *Kunqu* music style in his play called *Huanshan ji* (Washing the Silken Gauze). This play turned out successful, success that helped *Kunju* win national acclaim for its beautiful presentation of literary, music, and drama. The

three components are well integrated and mutually reinforcing. Liang made a breakthrough by composing the first *Kunju* play, enabling *Kunqu* transition from non-theatrical pure singing to theatrical performance.

Stage performance of *Kunju* highlights dramatic effects of the new Kunshan tune, which was used for atmosphere, characterization, and plot structure, among others. *Huanshan ji* (Washing the Silken Gauze), by Liang Chenyu, showcased Wei's thesis on refined Kunshan tune. This play was a success in music and performance. First, *qupai* (tune matrices) featured *qupai* suite of Southern and Northern opera. He integrated various *qupai* properly and makes them a unity in the aria. Secondly, this play built on the pentatonic mode of Southern opera while absorbing the heptatonic scale of Northern opera. Since this play was created for stage performance, Liang must design various modes and rhythms in line with plot structure and characters' sentiments, creating different atmosphere and onstage presentations. This work is more difficult than music arrangement for *qingchang* (pure singing) of *Kunqu*. Thirdly, Liang displayed his gift in selecting and combining *qupai* (tune matrices) and *qupai* (tune matrices) sets. Mode key must change in accordance with theme, plot advancement, and development of tension. Fourthly, Liang's ensemble for the play employed a mix of instruments for both Southern opera and Northern opera. Instruments used to accompany Southern opera were more appropriate for creating romantic atmosphere. In contrast, instruments for Northern Drama were primarily used for generating tensions in the advancement of plots.

In the mid-Qing dynasty, *Kunqu* did not merely designate non-theatrical performance but extended to stage performance. Such theatrical performance was still called *Kunqu* but it was actually *Kunju*. Since *Kunqu* was transitioning itself from *Kunqu* to *Kunju* in those years, this drama genre did not obtain the appropriate title *Kunju*. Instead, *Kunqu*—the dated term—was retained.

Kunju was recorded in *Yanlan xiaopu* (Yanlan Records) by Wu Changyuan who recounted stories of famous *dan* (female roles) of *Kunju* he was acquainted with in Beijing from 1774 to 1785. Wu (1785) noted:

“Yiyang tune and Bangzi tune are now called *huabu* [popular division], while Kun tune [Kunshan tune] is called *yabu* [elegant division]... Currently, only Kun tune was deeply moving with its pleasing tunes and vivid bodily gestures” (p. 6) “Zheng Sanguan...was *huada* [vivacious and unmarried women] in Kunqu opera...” (p. 20) “Wang Wu'er...was skilled at both Kunqu opera and Beijing Opera” (p. 22). “Wu Dabao...initially learned to perform Kunqu opera and later performed *luantan* (the confused plucking), because he lived in the same residence with Peng Wanguan, who was a professional actor from Sichuan province” (p. 23). “Jin Guiguan...had been performing Kunqu opera” (p. 34). “Zhang Faguan...initially learned to perform Kunqu opera, but began to perform drama such as *luantan* (the confused plucking) and acrobatics” (p. 40).

Clearly, *Kunqu* performed in those days emphasized the dramatic dimension,

or theatrical performance, including not merely singing style. But these theatrical performances were still called *Kunqu* rather than *Kunju*.

During and after the reigns of Emperors Jiajing (1522-1566) and Longqing (1567-1572) in the Ming dynasty, cities in the Yangtze River Delta were home to many commercial centers, Suzhou, Yangzhou, and Hangzhou, to name just a few. These urban centers hosted wealthy merchants and influential government officials. They lived a life of luxury and leisure. They regularly entertained each other with banquets and dramatic performance. For the literati class, not a single day went without attending banquet and watching drama (Lu, 2006). At that time period, banquet and drama were closely related or even inseparable events. This was customary in major cities across China such as Beijing, Tianjin, Yangzhou, Suzhou, and Hangzhou.

Theatrical performance at banquet was staged at family hall of the literati class. Those literati or scholar officials were experts in lyrics, melody, and performance. They were even engaged in creation and direction. Known for their expertise in music composition and stage performance, the literati enjoyed good reputation and admired by professional actors.

Besides stage performance often held at family hall of scholar officials, these literati also had family private troupes. Tian Hongyu, Ruan Dacheng, Mao Xiang, Wang Yi, to name just a few (Lu, 2006). Among those family troupes, the one owned by Ruan Dacheng stood out for its impressive and elegant performance. Ruan “personally trained the performers in enunciation, singing, dance, and other stage movements” (Hu, 1983). These scholar officials had expertise in *Kunju*, and involved themselves in the enhancement and perfection of this art form.

Since the court of the Qing dynasty preferred Beijing opera rather than *Kunju*, the latter was eclipsed by the former. Though *Kunju* lost favor with the court and the public, it enjoyed staunch support from devotees, singers, and musicians, though they are small in number. Most *Kunju* troupes disbanded. *Kunju* was marginalized to the brink of extinction. This crisis raised the awareness of rescuing this classical art form. A small group of people set up a school named *Kunju chuanxi suo* (*Kunju* Teaching and Training Institute) in Suzhou in 1921. This training school turned out *chuan* generation of performers, who played a key role in the preservation and protection of *Kunju* drama. Zhou Chuanying, former director of Zhejiang *Kunju* troupe, was among the graduates from that school in Suzhou. Some famous performers at the six *Kunju* troupes are disciples of the *Chuan* generation of performers.

5. Ups and Downs of *Kunju*

5.1 Collapse of *Kunju's* Patrons: The Literati Class

The first challenge facing *Kunju* is attributed to the collapse of the literati class. *Kunju* was promoted by scholar officials who were highly educated and well cultured. As those groups of people declined, *Kunju* lost its popularity.

Kunju originated in Kunshan, a small town between Suzhou and Shanghai. It became a major opera across the country. One of *Kunju*'s defining features is demonstrated in the integration of literature, dance, drama, speech, and song.

In late Ming dynasty, *Kunju* was the most sought-after opera among literati class. This class of people had economic and political clout in Chinese traditional society. These literati created literary works and dramas to express their ideas on moral and social issues, among other themes. They wrote famous *Kunju* plays, such as *The Peony Pavilion*, and *The Peach Blossom Fan*. In the Ming dynasty, literati interacted with each other regularly by drinking, discussing poems, or sightseeing. These gatherings also gave rise to *Kunju*'s popularity. Many literati hosted private troupe to entertain themselves and friends. *Kunju* was the first choice for entertainment. Such practices by literati contributed to the prosperity of *Kunju*. The Qing dynasty saw decline of *Kunju*, an opera that enjoyed some three hundred years' popularity in the Ming dynasty.

When the Manchus invaded China and assumed power, the literati class was dealt a heavy blow. Hence, *Kunju* lost its primary viewers and sponsors. The literati class of Ming dynasty in Zhejiang and Jiangsu accounted for some one quarter of the total (Xue, 2009). Some of them joined forces to fight against the Manchus while others secluded themselves in remote areas. Only a few surrendered and joined the rank of court officials. The dynastical transition wrecked havoc on society. The literati class was stripped of the opportunity to write plays or stage performances. This class collapsed due to unfavorable or even hostile circumstances in Qing dynasty.

The Qing dynasty was the last feudal empire in Chinese history. It is also the second dynasty ruled by ethnic minority. This dynastical transition broke the foundation of *Kunju*—the literati class. Emperors of Qing dynasty issued decrees destroying books, including *Kunju* plays, and banning private family supported opera troupe (Luo, 1991). Repressive policy by emperors contributed to the collapse of the literati class and the decline of *Kunju*.

5.2. Proliferation of Regional Operas

While *Kunju* declined, regional operas rose, Beijing Opera, Yue Opera, Han Opera, and Sichuan Opera, to name just a few. These regional operas differ in costume and speech, but they have something in common. First, performers had low social status while audiences were mostly ordinary people. Such operas, the literati class believed, lacked refined taste. Few, if any, of the literati class were engaged in production and performance of regional operas. In contrast, the general public sustained the development of regional operas, plays that enjoyed growing popularity among the masses. Secondly, regional operas feature flexible scripts and music accompaniment, compared with *Kunju*.

Beijing Opera was favored by emperors of the Qing dynasty, contributing to its lasting prosperity. 1790 saw the 80th birthday of Emperor Qianlong, and the court asked local opera troupes to perform on birthday celebrations. One troupe

stood out among its peers and secured a foothold in Beijing, conducive to the emergence and development of Beijing Opera. Unlike *Kunju*, Beijing Opera is not so closely related with play's poetic patterns. The promotion of imperial court partly contributed to the growth of Beijing Opera. On the other hand, the rise of Beijing Opera met the changing demands of the audiences. Regional operas in general and Beijing Opera in particular catered to the aesthetic changes of the public. The audiences' focus shifted from script and opera to performer and performance.

While *Kunju* focused on scripts and playwrights' theoretical reflections, Beijing Opera emphasized the importance of the performance rather than the beauty of scripts. Performance is a top priority for Beijing Opera. The audience focused on play instead of theater in aesthetic appreciation. Beijing Opera troupes had to promote themselves and survive the tough competition. As *Kunju* was losing major audiences, *Kunju* performers began to join Beijing Opera groups or other regional or local opera troupes. *Kunju* was struggling for survival. *Kunju*'s decline is attributed to its elegant style, loss of sponsors and viewers, change of public esthetics, and socioeconomic changes.

In early twentieth century, *Kunju* was on the brink of extinction. Jiangsu and Zhejiang hosted only a few small *Kunqu* opera troupes, which struggled to perform in small cities or towns. Given the hardships facing *Kunju*, some artists and businessmen decided to open a *Kunju* school named Suzhou *Kunju* Chuanxisuo (*Kunju* Inheritance and Study Institute). This institute aimed to train young performers for *Kunju*. The senior *Kunju* performers were invited to be instructors, producing a large group of promising actors. After graduation these students played a key role in *Kunju*'s survival and revival.

One student named Zhou Chuanying became a prominent *Kunqu* artist. He made great contributions to *Kunju*'s revival. He joined Xinyuefu troupe composed of the Chuan generation of performers graduated from Suzhou *Kunju* Chuanxisuo. After the shutdown of Xinyuefu troupe, they organized a new one named xiannishe troupe. The troupe lived a floating life from cities to towns. After Xiannishe troupe was disbanded, Zhou joined a local *Kunqu* troupe called guofeng and continued a hard performing life.

In 1949, an officer of the Liberation Army asked Zhou and his troupe to perform for the army. Opera was seen as instrumental to moral education. The troupe was invited to perform on many occasions. Zhou was told by provincial government to perform for the people and contribute to socialism. Supported by provincial government, Zhou was appointed director of an official troupe and *Kunju* survived before a thriving period.

5.3. *Kunju*'s Comeback

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the central government saw *Kunju* as a good vehicle to promote art for the masses, because *Kunqu* is the source of almost all local operas and it is the most elegant of ge-

nres. *Kunqu* is expected to help prompt prosperity of socialist art. In 1942, Chairman Mao expressed his idea on art. Art is to serve the masses. According to Chairman Mao, art is part of the superstructure of society. Artists are obliged to present works for the masses of the public. Central government made efforts to guide and help opera of various genres to flourish while eliminating dated elements.

The debut of *Shiwuguan* (The Fifteen Strings of Copper Coins) marked the beginning of *Kunju*'s Revival. In December 1955, a *Kunju* opera called *Shiwuguan* was performed in Hangzhou, capital of Zhejiang province. This play embodies artistic techniques of classic *Kunqu*, and was well received by the audience. The theme of the play centers around criticism of bureaucratism. Sponsored by government, some professional directors and playwrights worked together to revise this play for excellence. Some verses were made easier to understand by the audience while irrelevant plots were removed. The new version was staged in Hangzhou early 1956. In the run-up to the Spring Festival of that year, Zhou's troupe was invited to perform *Shiwuguan* in Shanghai, marking a strong comeback after decades' bitter exit from Shanghai stage. The performance was so popular that attracted large groups of audience. Some officials charged with cultural affairs also came to watch the play. Deeply impressed, they decided to recommend *Shiwuguan* for the second national theatrical festival in Beijing in April 1956. The play vividly depicted an impartial official who judged cases fairly for the masses. April 1 witnessed Zhou's troupes turned into a state-owned provincial troupe. Performance in Beijing turns out so successful that some high-ranking officials recommended the play to top leadership. On April 17, they acted in Zhongnanhai compound, where top leadership lived and worked. Chairman Mao highly commended the performance presented by Zhou and his troupe. Two days later, Premier Zhou also watched the play and highly praised the performance. "One play rescued an entire genre. *Shiwuguan* represents people's character, high artistic and moral value" (Zhang, 1994). Government's support is vital to *Kunju*'s revival. With the mounting popularity of *Kunju* came the establishment of more *Kunju* troupes in big cities. *Shiwuguan* highlighted sharp criticism of bureaucratism and subjectivism.

After Zhou's troupe successfully performed in Shanghai and Beijing, many cities started their own troupes. Over time, *Kunju* gained popularity across China. Zhou Chuanyin coached younger generation of performers while continuing to perform. *Kunju*'s rise was thwarted by one decade long Cultural Revolution.

In 1966, cultural revolution started in China aimed to create a new proletarian culture. All traditional operas were suspended and replaced by revolutionary model plays. Virtually no traditional opera was played in public until the end of Cultural Revolution. Eight revolutionary model plays were created and dominated all stages throughout China. As *Kunju* has no space for survival, Zhou-directed troupe was disbanded.

The end of the Cultural Revolution breathed fresh air into China. Art and li-

terature staged a comeback. The Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), held from Dec. 18 to 22, 1978, criticized wrongdoings in the Cultural Revolution. Traditional operas came back to stages over time. Various genres of operas proliferated across China. *Kunju* also regained its stage. In 1981, noted actors and experts of *Kunju* gathered to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of *Kunqu* Inheritance and Study Institute. All actors of Chuan generation alive were over seventy. In 1982, Suzhou hosted *Kunju* festival. Actors from Shanghai, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang, exchanged performances and ideas. *Kunju* was on the rise again. Zhou Chuanyin was appointed director of Zhejiang *Kunju* Troupe and played a crucial role in boosting its growth. In 1985, China's Department of Culture established the Advisory Committee for the Development of *Kunqu*, devoted to the preservation and development of *Kunju*. Zhou Chuanyin was nominated vice-director of the committee, largely because he was most capable of teaching traditional *Kunju* operas. He was tasked with starting *Kunju* teaching and learning class. This class lasted for only two years, due to Zhou's death of lung cancer. Under the guidance of Zhou, the troupe was widely acclaimed and won top prize for outstanding performance. This prosperity did not last long before a new challenge—market-oriented economy—arose.

Deng Xiaoping launched reform and opening up in 1978. This policy was intended to turn China from underdevelopment to comprehensive moderate prosperity. Before economic reform, *Kunju* troupes were government funded and enjoyed popularity among the public. The reform not merely cut government budget for *Kunju* troupes, but reduced the number of audiences of *Kunju*. On the one hand, economic growth became a top priority for individuals and all levels of government. On the other hand, western style popular culture found its way through Taiwan and Hong Kong into mainland China. People were fascinated with popular songs, American and European music and movie, and Japanese Karaoke, among other cultural products. The public shifted focus from traditional Chinese culture to Western culture. *Kunju* troupes were mostly thrown into financial difficulty. The more plays they performed, the more losses they suffered, largely due to low audience attendance. Since *Kunju* troupes had fewer opportunities to perform, performers began to quit their jobs, hastening *Kunju's* decline. *Kunju* is compelled to change itself to cater to the market-oriented economy. In other words, it cannot resist commercialization. Several forces merge: traditional art forms like *Kunju*, culture of the masses, and the commercial popular culture. This cultural formation after the Cultural Revolution highlights tensions between tradition and modernity in terms of *Kunju's* survival or revival.

Since the 1990s, popular culture production has gained dominance in China. By 1998, the number of cultural production companies has grown exponentially, in addition to state-owned cultural institutions. Popular music, movies, and fashion magazines were increasingly popular among the public. Cable network boasts over 400 channels. VCD and DVD had a large group of viewers before

being replaced by computers and laptops. Over the past decade, social media and smart phones expand access to cultural goods. In a word, China's culture landscape is characterized by consumer popular culture.

Kunju is losing its audience thanks to the prosperous world consumer entertainment sector. Globalization intensifies interactions between economy and culture. Information technology helps Western culture challenge if not threaten *Kunqu*. Though *Kunqu* embodies classical literature, music, dance and stage conventions, it is no rival for electronic music, rock music, or Hollywood movies among the youth. Young people are the target and consumers of popular cultural production. Given the urgency of preservation, scholars, actors and government should work together to preserve and promote this cultural heritage.

Besides preservation, it is necessary to reform and transform *Kunju* to meet the needs of potential audiences. No consensus has been reached on inheritance and innovation. Specifically, whether *Kunju* adheres to formal rules and principles or break some, if not all of them for innovation.

As China has become the world's second largest economy, it also stresses the importance of traditional culture. *Kunju* has been taken as part of national plan to promote traditional art in a globalized world. *Kunju* was proclaimed in 2001 and placed in 2008 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. In February 2011, Chinese government issued *Intangible Cultural Heritage Law of the People's Republic of China* in a bid to protect, preserve and promote intangible cultural heritage.

6. Conclusion

Kunju was based on *nanxi* (Southern Drama) and *chuanqi* (marvel tale), with new standards of makeup, costume, and bodily gesture. *Kunju* has unique musical performance, with mild, exquisite, and sentimental melody known as *shui-modiao* (water-polished music). Specifically, syllables of a word are usually divided into three parts—head, body, and tail—and sung in smooth transition. This music aesthetic sets *Kunju* from other operas. Traditional singing styles of *Kunju* feature small, subtle embellishments and regular accented notes. That is, both poetic phrases and musical notes have ornamentation and embellishments. *Kunju* has strict rules of poetic meter, and distinctive stylization of tunes. Poetic lyrics must follow rules of rhyme, rhythm, and tone, whereas tunes are largely determined by *qupai* (tune matrices). Since Chinese is a tonal language, words and phrases work together to create certain music. In both *qingchang* (pure singing) or *gongchang* (actor singing), music is essential to *Kunju*. While the genre experienced much development and periodic modifications during some 450 years of its history, it is important to examine how the genre sustained from all these challenges, challenges that compel *Kunju* to innovate to survive if not thrive. Music is one of the most important aspects in this genre, as it represents the aesthetics and authenticity of *Kunju*. As *Kunju* troupes seek to reach out to wider audience, *Kunju* has to be modified for the tastes or aesthetics of modern

Chinese.

China's *Kunju* stage is dominated by the six major *Kunju* troupes: The Northern Kunqu Opera Theatre (*Beifang Kunqu juyuan*), Shanghai *Kunju* Troupe (*Shanghai Kunju tuan*), *Kunju* Theatre of Jiangsu Performing Arts Group (*Jiangsusheng yanyi jituan Kunju yuan*), Suzhou *Kunju* Theatre (*Suzhou Kunju yuan*), Hunan province *Kunju* troupe (*Hunansheng Kunju tuan*), and Zhejiang *Kunju* Troupe (*Zhejiang Kunju tuan*). The six troupes are state owned, government financed and funded. They have established themselves in *Kunju* production and performance by preservation of *Kunju* repertoires and creation of new plays. These troupes are responsible for the preservation, protection, promotion, and prosperity of *Kunju*. *Kunju* is the most enduring musical and dramatic heritage, recognized by UNESCO in 2001. Chinese government has since committed more efforts to preserving and promoting this classical genre.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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