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Kunqu in Europe

This overview presents *kunqu*'s historical journey, suggesting its future trends on European stages. Over the decades, *kunqu* has grown from traditional performances to avant-garde adaptations, including notable versions of *The Peony Pavilion* by Peter Sellars and also Chen Shizheng, which fostered intercultural dialogue. Key performances by troupes and artists have modernized *kunqu*, as exemplified by Bai Xianyong's youth edition of *The Peony Pavilion*, and its appeal to younger audiences. Pre- and post-performance lectures have enhanced European understanding of *kunqu*, contributing to its recognition internationally. The dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation, and local and global perception, reveals *kunqu*'s enduring relevance and its active role in cultural exchange.

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Key terms: traditional theatre, historiography, *The Peony Pavilion*, interculturalism, festival.

THE YEAR 2023 not only witnessed the revival of international theatre activities after the stagnation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic but also an increased urge to strengthen international connections between countries, despite conflicts and confrontations. *Kunqu*, one of the oldest artistic forms of Chinese theatre, has played an important role in strengthening old ties and forging new ones between China and Europe. Thus, in September 2023, Jiangsu Province initiated and hosted the 'Jiangsu Week of Chinese Kunqu Opera' in Paris, during which scenes from the classic *kunqu* play *The Peony Pavilion* were staged for two consecutive days. There was also a *kunqu* exhibition titled 'Emotions Unveiled, Affections Explored: A Special Exhibition on Chinese Kunqu Opera Culture', which was held at the Guimet Museum, as well as several outreach activities concerning Kunqu Opera in Schools and pop-up events at such iconic landmarks as the Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe. Additionally, the international symposium 'Kunqu Opera in Our Era: Cross-Cultural Dialogue and Civilization

Exchange' was held at China Culture Centre in Paris, bringing together experts from Europe and China to review the history of *kunqu* on the European stage and to discuss expectations for its future development. This contemporary revival of academic and artistic interest in *kunqu*, despite cultural differences and political conflicts between China and Europe, was made possible by decades of effort by various *kunqu* artists and troupes, continuous government support, and the enthusiasm of international theatre communities.

History of *Kunqu* in Europe

Unlike Peking opera, which began to garner global attention in the 1930s, largely due to Mei Lanfang's tours in Europe (notably Russia) and the United States, *kunqu* was relatively late in reaching European audiences. In 1958, a group of Chinese artists, representing various Chinese performance troupes, attended the third Théâtre des Nations in Paris. During this festival, three *kunqu zhezi xi* ('highlighted scenes') were performed, two

from the classical *kunqu* play *Changsheng Dian* (*The Palace of Everlasting Youth*) and one from *Baihua Gongzhu* (*The Princess of One Hundred Flowers*), to great acclaim from both theatre critics and audiences. French theatre critic Guy Leclerc, noticing the emotional expressivity of *kunqu*, remarked that, in *Baihua Zhengjian*, 'the emotions of the characters were mostly expressed through the manipulation of facial expression, which rendered their performance extremely subtle and vivid'.¹ The group later toured other French cities, including Lyons, Marseilles, and Nice, as well as other European countries, including Switzerland, Belgium, the UK, Luxembourg, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. During the 1960s and the 1970s, *kunqu* performance, along with other Chinese artistic genres, decreased due to turbulent domestic politics in China and tense relations between European nations and China under the shadow of the Cold War.

Starting from the 1980s, cultural communication resumed between China and Europe, and various Chinese professional *kunqu* companies began touring their classical repertoire in Europe. In 1986, Jiangsu Kunqu Theatre House performed *The Peony Pavilion* at the Paris Autumn Festival. In 2004, the Northern Kunqu Theatre House from Beijing attended the Eighth International Music Conference in Weimar, performing episodes from such classical plays as *Pi Pa Ji* (*The Story of Pipa*) and *Dou E Yuan* (*Injustice to Dou E*). In 2011, the Shanghai Kunqu Theatre House staged *Changsheng Dian* (*The Palace of Everlasting Youth*) in Köln, which ran for four consecutive nights. This increasing exposure of *kunqu*'s aesthetic richness, showing the different styles of companies, has led to a growing understanding and appreciation of *kunqu* among European audiences.

Moreover, these interactions were also mediated by scholars and cultural ambassadors committed to showcasing the artistry and historical significance of *kunqu*. The French film director Alain Mazars, moved by Zhang Jiqing's 1986 performance of *Du Liniang*, comments that 'among all the extant Chinese *xiqu* genres, *kunqu* has the most simple and pure form. The entire performance is executed on a minimalist stage with little

decoration.'² Starting from the 1980s, *kunqu* artists and scholars often organized pre- and post-performance conversations and lectures to help audiences understand the intricacies of performances and the meanings held within the plays. In 2004, for instance, when the Northern Kunqu Theatre House performed at the 8th 'International Music Conference' in Weimar, the host, Rudolf M. Brand, organized a lecture on *kunqu* for the students of the Music Department of Weimar University, as well as for enthusiasts of Chinese music. These efforts strategically mediated intercultural communication between China and European countries, laying the groundwork for *kunqu*'s subsequent acceptance in Europe.

Kunqu troupes have also appeared at various important international art and theatre festivals in Europe. In 1985, Jiangsu Kunqu Theatre House attended the 28th 'Two-World Art Festival' in Italy, where Italian National Television featured a three-minute report on their performance in its major news broadcast programme, introducing *kunqu* to its people. At the opening night of the Paris Autumn Festival in 1986, Zhang Jiqing and the Jiangsu Kunqu Theatre House performed *The Peony Pavilion*. The festival produced a 100-page brochure on Chinese *xiqu*, including an essay titled 'Aux sources du raffinement' by sinologist Jacques Dars, which outlined *kunqu*'s development and its connections with other forms of Chinese *xiqu*, and provided translations of the performance lyrics, together with selected stage photos.³ This brochure played a key role in educating French audiences about *kunqu*, enhancing their appreciation of this classical art form. Even though some of the European festivals were in an Orientalist framework, including several non-western traditional art forms mainly for their cultural exoticism, they also created inclusive platforms for *kunqu* to be open to international artistic communities. These international appearances have significantly contributed to *kunqu*'s recognition, in Europe and beyond, on a broader global level.

Kunqu also inspired innovative but also controversial adaptations of its classical plays on European stages and screens. In 1988, French filmmaker Alain Mazars directed an

experimental documentary featuring Zhang Jiqing, based on *The Peony Pavilion*. Two years later, he directed and released the film *Printemps perdu*, which explores the tragic fate of a *kunqu* actor. In 1998, Peter Sellars's avant-garde adaptation of *The Peony Pavilion* was performed at the Paris Autumn Festival to mixed reviews. The next year, the same festival witnessed the first complete version of *The Peony Pavilion*, directed by Chinese-born American director Chen Shizheng. Both versions deviated from the classical style of *kunqu* performance and the classical understanding of *The Peony Pavilion*. These experimental works have added vitality to *kunqu* performances on the European stage, expanding the boundaries of how this classical art form can be interpreted and appreciated, and sparking discussions on the evolution of *kunqu* in modern contexts.

In the meantime, some intercultural and experimental *kunqu* productions have also made their appearance. In 1987, the Shanghai Kunqu Theatre Troupe performed *The Story of Bloody Hands*, a *kunqu* adaptation of *Macbeth*, at the 41st International Edinburgh Festival. In addition to such large-scale intercultural productions, the European stage has also witnessed a series of experimental and avant-garde *kunqu* pieces by individual *kunqu* artists, notably Ke Jun and Zhang Jun. In 2004, Ke Jun, in collaboration with Danny Yung and Zuni Icosahedron, performed *Fleeing by Night* at the Norway Chinese Festival in Oslo. Four years later, London saw the performance of *I, Hamlet*, a 75-minute solo *kunqu* interpretation of Shakespeare's famous work by individual *kunqu* artist Zhang Jun. While Ke's work used post-dramatic dramaturgical methods to reframe the classical *kunqu zhezi xi* (highlighted scene) *Fleeing by Night*, Zhang's production externalized the complex personality of Hamlet through the creative interplay of the role-type conventions of *kunqu*. Such new configurations of *kunqu* bridge, to a certain extent, the traditional style of *kunqu* with contemporary European theatre practices, thus highlighting *kunqu*'s adaptability and its potential for continued cultural exchange and innovation.

Kunqu's historical journey in both traditional and avant-garde forms on the European stage

exhibits richness and variety. Furthermore, *kunqu* has inspired both innovative and controversial adaptations from European artists, and *The Peony Pavilion* stands out as their most frequently staged and widely recognized play. *The Peony Pavilion*'s prominence has grown to such an extent that it has almost become synonymous with *kunqu*. The following section of this article explores in detail the reasons behind this primary focus on *The Peony Pavilion* in Europe, referring to its thematic resonance, good translations, rich performance history, and the strategic efforts by Chinese cultural emissaries to promote this work.

Why *The Peony Pavilion*?

Written by Tang Xianzu (1550–1616) in 1598, *The Peony Pavilion* revolves around the extraordinary romance between Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei. Du Liniang, the beautiful and obedient daughter of two conservative parents, takes a stroll in a garden, falls asleep, and dreams of a romantic encounter with a young gentleman, later identified as Liu Mengmei. The next day, Du returns to the garden in search of her dream but finds none. Her frustrated longing consumes her, and she dies, leaving her self-portrait behind. Saddened by her death, her parents move to another town, leaving her tomb in the care of a nun called Shi Daogu. Three years later, Liu Mengmei, the scholar from Du's dream, arrives at the nunnery seeking shelter, and encounters Du Liniang's ghost. Liu falls in love with Du's ghost and agrees to help her resurrection. Ultimately, Du and Liu are united and get married as a real couple. Their love transcends the boundaries between life and death, dream and reality, and different social classes, making it a unique contribution to the universal and traditional understanding of love and romance.

In his preface to *The Peony Pavilion*, Tang Xianzu emphasized the transformative power of *qing* (emotion/love), writing that 'people's feelings arise from nowhere and grow deeper and deeper unbeknownst to their owner, until the living becomes the dead, and the dead comes to life again'.⁴ As demonstrated in *The Peony Pavilion*, these feelings, when frustrated,

can end a person's life but they can also revive a person when they become sincere and strong enough. This unique celebration of *qing* (emotion) has resonated with people not only in different stages of Chinese literature but also on stages across the world. Shang Xiaoling, a renowned *kunqu* actress, famous for her portrayal of Du Liniang in Chinese history, was said to have died of a broken heart during her performance, overwhelmed by Du's frustrated longing.

This poignant example underscores the deep emotional connections that performers and audiences may have with the play. Moreover, the fact that Tang Xianzu wrote *The Peony Pavilion* in the late Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) – a period in which the predominant philosophy 'stressed intuition and emotion over principle and ritual' – makes the work even more compelling.⁵ By endorsing Du Liniang's individual desires and by highlighting the transformative power of these emotions, Tang's work reflects a deep understanding of ordinary people's need to be valued in their authentic and intuitive feelings. This exploration of *qing* transcends national borders, resonating with audiences worldwide.

Before its debut on European stages, *The Peony Pavilion* had already been translated into several European languages because of its literary value. In 1933, Chinese scholar Xu Zhongnian compiled and published an anthology of Chinese literature titled *Anthologie de la littérature chinoise, des origines à nos jours*, which included selections of *The Peony Pavilion*, and hailed it as a representative work of Chinese literature.⁶ The complete French translation of the play was published in 1998 by André Lévy. In contrast, the German translations appeared much earlier. In 1937, the German sinologist Vincenz Hundhausen published a complete German version of *The Peony Pavilion*, making it one of the earliest translations of *kunqu* plays. Hundhausen's translation played a crucial role in sparking scholarly interest and influencing German interpretations of Chinese works in the theatre. These early translations stimulated the play's subsequent dissemination and reception across European countries, inspiring the

eventual staging of *The Peony Pavilion*, which bridged cultural gaps and enriched European theatre with Chinese literary and performance traditions.

While translations of *The Peony Pavilion* facilitate access to its themes and meanings, the play's 400-year history of continuous performances has formed a rich repertoire for its contemporary performances. Since its publication, *The Peony Pavilion* has been staged in different ways, ranging from pure singing at private gatherings to fully fledged performances in commercial theatres.⁷ Not only amateurs but also professional *kunqu* performers were eager to include the play in their repertoire. This rich performance history constitutes a great legacy for contemporary forms of the play as well. Nearly all the major contemporary Chinese *kunqu* troupes have developed their own renditions of *The Peony Pavilion*, each highlighting different aspects of the plot and incorporating distinctive stylistic elements in their perspectives. For example, *kunqu* troupes from northern China excel in the portrayal of male characters, particularly the martial type (*wusheng*) and elderly gentleman (*laosheng*), whereas southern troupes like Suzhou Kunqu Theatre House are known for their lady and young gentleman figures.⁸ This rich performance history and regional diversity have enabled *The Peony Pavilion* to adapt and resonate with new audiences continually, contributing significantly by its variations to its enduring success in Europe.

Another reason for the popularity of *The Peony Pavilion* in Europe lies in the strategical forms it presented to European audiences and critics. Typically, audiences during a *kunqu* performance night in Europe might see three or four *zhezi xi* (highlighted scenes), each from a different play. While these segments can stand on their own, they rarely offer a cohesive narrative. By contrast, the stage versions of *The Peony Pavilion* developed in China during the 1980s, which later toured in Europe, were 'condensed' versions of the entire play. By selecting different episodes from the same play, they preserved the continuity of the plot.

The 1982 production by Jiangsu Kunqu Theatre House, for instance, starring Zhang

Jiqing, featured five acts from the play, focusing on Du Liniang's dream and death. This streamlined version not only made the story more accessible but also showcased the artistic virtuosity of performers like Zhang Jiqing, the first recipient of the Plum Flower Prize in China for her exceptional portrayal of Du Liniang. The accessible plot construction and Zhang's outstanding performance have effectively demonstrated *kunqu's* aesthetic beauty, and have left a lasting impression on European audiences, contributing to the play's enduring popularity.

The frequent performance of *The Peony Pavilion* has also inspired innovative and experimental adaptations, the most striking of which, even to date, is that of the 1995 Peter Sellars version. Sellars collaborated with *kunqu* artist Hua Wenyi and Chinese American composer Tan Dun, premiering *The Peony Pavilion* in Vienna. Sellars made significant changes to Tang Xianzu's original script and used three pairs of actors from different acting traditions to interpret the roles of Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei. Highlighting Du Liniang's erotic, even dark side, he provoked controversies among critics who were used to the elegant and 'cute' style usually seen in the traditional *kunqu* repertoire.⁹

The second prominent adaptation is that of American-born Chinese director Chen Shi-Zheng, who chose to stage all fifty-five acts of the play with minimal changes to the script. However, Chen incorporated such cultural forms (other than *kunqu*) as puppetry and *pingtan* (a traditional form originating from Suzhou that combines storytelling, music, and performance), thus breaking through the traditional *kunqu* frame in order to intensify the authenticity of the work. The production premiered in 1997 at the Autumn Festival in Paris and toured extensively in three continents (North America, Europe, and Australia). By exploring the cross-cultural and avant-garde potential of this classical play, these two versions have further increased the impact of *The Peony Pavilion* on Europe. The cultural dialogues and controversies generated around these productions indicate that a vibrant interpretative community had formed around this play.

In a nutshell, *The Peony Pavilion*, with its remarkable 400-year history of continuous performance, emphasizes the power of human emotions – a theme that transcends cultural and historical boundaries. The play's various adaptations, and the diverse interpretive communities it has inspired, have led to vibrant intercultural reinterpretations and appropriations. Furthermore, the convergence of traditional Chinese aesthetics with European avant-garde expression, clearly evident in the case of *The Peony Pavilion*, has not only enriched *kunqu* performances but has also facilitated dynamic cultural dialogue. Looking forward, the continued interplay between innovation and tradition in *kunqu* may deepen this cross-cultural exchange, ensuring that *kunqu* plays, not least *The Peony Pavilion*, remain a compelling presence in the European theatrical landscape.

New Trends of *Kunqu* Performance in Europe

In 2001, UNESCO designated *kunqu* a 'Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity', which led to renewed efforts to preserve *kunqu* both domestically and internationally. While traditionalists advocate for a museum-based approach to excavating and preserving the classical *kunqu* repertoire, those concerned with its vitality in the contemporary world are exploring ways to increase *kunqu's* appeal to modern audiences. This includes modernizing the classical repertoire through contemporary dramaturgy, creating experimental *kunqu* practices deeply rooted in tradition, and facilitating collaboration between *kunqu* and other cultural art forms. These new forms of *kunqu* have also made their way to Europe in the new century and may well continue to exert an influence on European stages.

A notable example of the modernization of classical *kunqu* plays is the youth edition of *The Peony Pavilion*, co-produced by Bai Xianyong and Suzhou Kunqu Theatre House, which premiered in Taipei in 2004. Bai reduced Tang's original 55-act play to 27 acts and divided the latter into three units, each focusing on different aspects of love in Du

Liniang's life. The first part, called 'Mengzhong Qing' ('Love in a Dream'), focuses on Du Liniang's dream of love and her subsequent death. 'Ren Gui Qing' ('Love between Human and Ghost'), the second part, highlights the transcendence of love over the boundary between life and death: hence the romantic rendezvous between Du Liniang's ghost and Liu Mengmei. The last part, 'Ren Jian Qing' ('Love in the Human World'), captures the societal obstacles Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei meet after Du's resurrection. Bai's refinement and rearrangement of Tang's original acts have enhanced the unity of the plot and made it more accessible to audiences both at home and abroad.

Furthermore, Bai, who was concerned with increasing the appeal of the production to younger audiences, gathered such experienced *kunqu* artists as Zhang Jiqing from Suzhou Kunqu Theatre House, and also selected and trained young actors and actresses, mainly in their twenties, to perform the roles of Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei, which are traditionally played by well-seasoned *kunqu* artists in their forties or fifties. The impression created by these budding actors and actresses, along with the modern dramaturgy used by Bai's team, has made the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* a phenomenal success all around the world. This version later toured to most European countries, visiting such cities as London in 2006.

The success of the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* led to the creation of many similar productions, all emphasizing the youthfulness and the exquisiteness of the work. This includes Bai's two other works of cooperation with Suzhou Kunqu Theatre House: the youth version of *Yuzan Ji* (*The Jade Hairpin*) and *Bai Luo Shan* (*The White Shirt*). Some other Chinese theatre troupes also attempted to follow Bai's example. In 2006, the Jiangsu Kunqu Theatre House collaborated with drama director Tian Qinxin to create a new version of *Tao Hua Shan* (*The Peach Blossom Fan*), originally written by Kong Shangren (1648–1718) in 1699. Starring younger generations of *kunqu* actors such as Shi Xiaming and Shanwen, and incorporating modern dramaturgy of *huaaju* ('spoken drama'), this

production likewise drew a large group of young audiences, especially among fellow students, who followed the performance everywhere and wrote passionate reviews of the performance on websites and in magazines – to such an extent that some kind of fan following evolved around those young actors and actresses. All this rekindled young people's interest in classical *kunqu*, which is likely to be felt in European audiences as well.

Unlike classic *kunqu* plays that usually focus on the tales of the past, experimental *kunqu* plays tend to highlight the performers' subjectivity and their critical reflection on their relationship with *kunqu* tradition. A prominent figure in this experimental and reflective trend is Danny Yung, who, along with his cross-disciplinary company Zuni Icosahedron, has significantly influenced contemporary *kunqu* opera. Yung works extensively with *kunqu* artists from different generations to create highly experimental works that incorporate elements of multimedia and cross-cultural influence to explore and extend traditional and modern performance. One recent example is his project 'One Table, Two Chairs', in which *xiqu* (including *kunqu*) artists experiment with their well-trained bodies on a minimalist stage, usually without any traditional storylines and orchestra.

Ke Jun's 'New Concept Kun Opera' is another case in point. In 2006, Ke Jun performed *Cang Ben* (*Hide and Flee*) in Berlin, an 'intermedial' production in which Chinese calligraphy and *kunqu* were interwoven to address the contemporary performer's conflicted subjectivity.¹⁰ In 2012, the experimental *xiqu*, *Huan Hun San Die* (*Resurrection Story Thrice Told*), was performed at the Schleswig-Holstein Music Festival in Germany and was awarded UNESCO's ITI World Music Award. This production featured intra-cultural cooperation between different *xiqu* genres, including *kunqu*, *yueju*, and *jingju*. Such experimental *kunqu* explorations are frequently invited to different international art and theatre festivals, also stimulating a new direction in *kunqu*'s development in Europe.

In 2008, Bando Tamasaburo, a renowned Japanese kabuki performer, collaborated with the Suzhou Kunqu Theatre House

and produced a Sino-Japanese version of *The Peony Pavilion*. The production premiered in Tokyo in 2008, toured to France in 2013, and performed at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris that February. It attracted significant attention in theatrical circles and was widely covered in both local and international media. By subtly interweaving the performing style of Japanese onnagata with the male *dan* tradition of Chinese *xiqu*, this Sino-Japanese version created an East Asian paradigm of intercultural performance that challenges the West–East dichotomous paradigm prevalent on the international stage.¹¹

In 2016, to commemorate the 400th anniversaries of the deaths of Tang Xianzu and William Shakespeare, Jiangsu Kunqu Theatre House embarked on a significant Sino-British collaboration, seeking fusion between *kunqu* and aspects of western performance traditions, titled *A Shakespearean Handan Dream*. *Handan Dream*, by Tang Xianzu, tells the story of Lu Sheng, who falls asleep at a roadside hotel and dreams of a life full of rejoicing glories and painful setbacks. Awakened at the height of his fear, he realizes the illusoriness of fame and desire and, from then on, pursues a monastic life.

Tang's philosophical caution against the fleeting allure of superficial successes finds resonance in many of Shakespeare's works. Consequently, lines from various Shakespearean plays were woven into the script to complement the original themes in Tang's play. While Chinese actors performed in the conventionalized style of *kun* opera, the English actors acted in the style of psychological realism from within the Stanislavskian lineage, creating a unique event that showcased *kunqu*'s ability to engage in constructive and reflective cultural dialogue.¹² This production was warmly received in London, and toured to other cities as well.

Apart from the intercultural performances based on classical *kunqu* plays, new productions based on contemporary *kunqu* scripts also appeared, winning recognition on European stages. In 2009, Zhejiang Kunqu Opera House attended the 4th Traditional Chinese Opera Festival in Paris with their new *kunqu* play *Gongsun Zidu*, a historical play about the life of the titular character.

The production was awarded the Prix Sénart of that year. Furthermore, modern *kunqu* plays that address the lives of contemporary Chinese people are also gaining attention. In recent years, Jiangsu Kunqu Theatre House produced a series of modern *kunqu* plays such as *Dang Nian Mei Lang* and *Qu Qiubai*. These productions deviate from the traditional *kunqu* aesthetics by subtly rearranging the once explicit conventions of *kunqu* performances, introducing such elements as stylish fashionable clothes and make-up, which significantly increases their modern appeal. Moreover, these plays also demonstrate a conscious engagement with such contemporary questions as how revolutionary heroes can be depicted in China today, making them highly popular among young audiences. It is likely that these modern *kunqu* plays will travel to Europe in the future.

Although a refined art form, *kunqu* is by no means restricted to the refined tastes of art connoisseurs and preservationists, nor has it lost its connection with the market. In recent years, *kunqu* productions with a strong market-orientation also mushroomed in China, and some have travelled to European cities. In 2009, Zhang Jun, the National Class One Performer and a self-designated *kunqu* entrepreneur, left Shanghai Kunqu Theatre and established his own Zhang Jun Kunqu Opera Art Centre in Shanghai with the aim of repositioning *kunqu* in the contemporary arts market. Among his various productions, the Chinese garden version of *The Peony Pavilion* garnered considerable attention, both at home and abroad. Premiered in Shanghai Kezhi Garden in 2010, this production attracted many audiences, 'most of whom had never watched live *kunqu* performance before'.¹³ In 2012, the Arts Centre staged this version in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Astor Court in New York to five sold-out nights. This site-specific and market-oriented rebranding of the classical *kunqu* play could also initiate a new way of engaging with *kunqu* on the European stage.

As can be seen from the above, the designation of *kunqu* as a cultural heritage of humanity in its entirety has initiated and strengthened new trends of *kunqu* performances in Europe.

Not only are more and more classical *kunqu* plays (in addition to *The Peony Pavilion*) being introduced to European countries, in both traditional and modernized styles, but new *kunqu* plays representing the contemporary life of Chinese people are also being seen in Europe. This will give European audiences a more comprehensive and thorough understanding not only of *kunqu* but also of the Chinese culture that such enterprises embody. In addition, the avant-garde and experimental *kunqu* performances that included *kunqu* and European artists anticipate further diversified and vigorous presentation of *kunqu* in Europe.

Conclusion

Kunqu's historical presence and reception in Europe reveal aspects of both the alignment and challenge involved in typical cross-cultural journeys of a designated cultural heritage. Introduced to European audiences and critics, primarily through festivals of the calibre of the Autumn Festival in Paris, which showcased non-western traditional art forms from its very inception, *kunqu* was embraced not only for its exquisite beauty but also for its cultural exoticism, offering European audiences contrasts to their own artistic traditions. Over time, *kunqu's* vitality as a living tradition enabled it to break through the gaze of 'othering' and give rise to experimental *kunqu* productions and cross-cultural collaborations, reinforcing its capacity to be a transcultural art form. The production of modern *kunqu* plays, and the integration of contemporary dramaturgies in the production of classical plays, allowed *kunqu* to reinterpret the lives of ancient Chinese people through a modern lens and depict modern Chinese lives in a classical style.

The presence of *kunqu* on the European stage, both in style and content, is made possible by the interactions of, and negotiations among, various stakeholders. Professional *kunqu* troupes such as Jiangsu *Kunqu* Theatre House provided aesthetically refined performances, accompanied by informative lectures organized by the troupes themselves or the cultural institutions that had enabled these

performances. UNESCO's designation of *kunqu* as of World Cultural Heritage status, as well as subsequent systematic government support and popular interest in revitalizing *kunqu*, enabled its modern variations. The inclusion of *kunqu* in various international festivals, together with cross-cultural collaboration, has confirmed *kunqu's* status as a living tradition. It would not be an exaggeration, therefore, to claim that *kunqu's* encounter with Europe is culturally significant, given that individual and collective, domestic and international, and artistic and commercial efforts are joined together to ensure that this more than 400-year-old art form continues to flourish in the future.

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