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Aesthetic Breakthrough and Cultural Intervention in the Productions of Two Modern *Kunqu* Plays

This article investigates two recent modern *kunqu* productions, *Dang Nian Mei Lang* [*The Young Mei Lanfang*] and *Qu Qiubai* (its title is the name of its protagonist), both produced by Jiangsu *Kunqu* Theatre House. Despite the obstacles faced by *kunqu* during its process of modernization, these two productions have accomplished a number of aesthetic breakthroughs: a unique form of fictional realism on the stage; its implicit use of conventionalization (that is, conventional, classical *kunqu* modes and their attendant aesthetic outlook); and the incorporation of recognizably up-to-date modern elements ('fashion') in the stage work. Meanwhile, these impressive aesthetic innovations signal, as well as facilitate, *kunqu's* re-entry into the landscape of contemporary Chinese theatre as a forceful agent of cultural intervention.

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CHINESE *xiqu* (traditional Chinese theatre) still thrives today, both in its traditional form and modern configurations.¹ While the performances of classic scripts strictly follow traditional rules, creations of modern *xiqu* explore new areas both aesthetically and culturally. Recently, a large number of modern *xiqu* plays of different genres have reflected and addressed life in modern times, giving rise to a new phenomenon of modern *xiqu* aesthetics that needs to be analyzed.

As one of the oldest *xiqu* genres in China, *kunqu* (*kun* opera) also participates in this modernizing endeavour. Contemporary stages, both in China and abroad, thus witness performances of four different types of *kunqu*: the traditional *kunqu*; newly written historical *kunqu*; modern *kunqu*; and experimental

kunqu – among which modern *kunqu* plays have generated heated discussions. These plays are different from traditional *kunqu*, which largely realizes scenes from the *kunqu* scripts written by the 'literati' group in ancient China, but also from the experimental *kunqu*, which breaks away from the *kunqu* tradition through the use of innovative or non-Chinese elements.² Modern *kunqu* plays are based on modern scripts written by contemporary playwrights who seek to represent the modern lives of Chinese people through the codified system of classical *kunqu*. They do so not only in terms of the composition of dramatic texts but also in terms of the intricate style of their performances.

Most of the classical *kunqu* stories are derived from *chuanqi*, a literary/musical

genre that first blossomed in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), during which time large groups of literati were engaged in the refinement and development of *kunqu*.³ The literati not only polished and systemized *kunqu*'s singing style but also enriched its literary value and scope by writing numerous scripts for *kunqu*, usually in the form of *chuanqi*. Many are still being used in the contemporary performances of classical *kunqu*. *Chuanqi* plays usually tell very complicated stories, which means that many of them encompass over thirty or more scenes. For example, *Mudan Ting* [*The Peony Pavilion*] has fifty-five scenes. The scripts usually consist of *quchang* – songs or lyrics written according to pre-existing patterns with a prescribed number of phrases, phrase length, and other linguistic-musical features – and *nianbai*, which are recitations and dialogues written in non-metrical but rhythmic patterns and which are often delivered in a vocal style slightly different from standard Mandarin.

Stage realization of the scenes from *chuanqi* plays is no less demanding. Through the efforts of generations of *kunqu* artists, audiences, and connoisseurs, the textual and performance systems of *kunqu* have crystallized into highly conventionalized norms, diligently followed by contemporary *kunqu* performers. As a result, the modernization of *kunqu* becomes extremely challenging for multiple reasons. Whereas the complex textual tradition poses great challenges to modern playwrights of *kunqu*, the sophisticated stage conventions of *kunqu* can also become highly restrictive, especially due to the rarefied status of *kunqu* as both a national treasure and a UNESCO ICH (Intangible Cultural Heritage).

Nevertheless, the Jiangsu Kunqu Theatre House in Nanjing has produced several modern *kunqu* plays in recent years, among which *Dang Nian Mei Lang* [*The Young Mei Lanfang*] and *Qu Qiubai* stand out. Both productions received unanimous critical acclaim and won over audiences from different age groups, making them notable representatives of modern *xiqu*. In analyzing the performances of these two *kunqu* productions, together with their cultural backgrounds, this article throws light on the unique aesthetics of modern *kunqu* performance, as well as the cultural roles *kunqu*

plays in the socio-political landscape of contemporary China. Three aspects of the aesthetic innovations of modern *kunqu* plays are here analyzed: fictional realism, achieved by unique dramaturgies; hidden forms of conventionalization (conventional stage practices); and the incorporation of modern, fashionable elements on the stage. This article also discusses the ways in which these aesthetic innovations contribute to *kunqu*'s reclaiming of cultural prestige and its re-establishment as a significant part of the social and cultural discourses of modern China.

Negotiating Reality with Modern Dramaturgy

Traditional *xiqu* is famous for its heightened sense of fiction and its minimal reliance on realistic stage design. The stage is often bare, with no more than 'one table and two chairs', as the dictum goes. Actors are supposed to interact with these props and, together with the imagination of cooperative audiences, they turn the stage into a world of fantasies and dreams. *The Young Mei Lanfang* and *Qu Qiubai*, however, challenge those traditional formalities of *kunqu* with some dramaturgical innovations.

Lighting played a marginal role on the traditional *kunqu* stage. However, these two modern productions incorporate modern lighting in their stage design and create a poetic sense of reality through the creative employment of light and shade. In the second act of *The Young Mei Lanfang*, Mei practises his arias in his host's courtyard, a man who is one of the richest bankers in Shanghai. Instead of depicting a courtyard, the creative team uses light to create the shadow of leaves on the floor, signalling the time and space of this dramatic event. The symbolic manipulation of light and shade corresponds with the ink painting projected onto the screen at the back of the stage, and creates an atmosphere of elegance and nostalgia, evoking the minimalist beauty of the traditional *kunqu* stage.

In addition to contextualizing the dramatic event, lighting also participates in creating an effective *mise-en-scène*. In *Qu Qiubai*, the shadow created by the lighting becomes a

third actor in the dramatization of Qu's fictional encounter with his deceased mother Jin Xuan. In real life, Qu's mother committed suicide while Qu was away from home. Therefore, the mother and son's reunion on the stage is Qu's wishful dream in which he emphasizes his mother's devotion to the well-being of the entire family. Qu reimagines his mother's farewell visit to the sleeping family before her suicide, with a candle in her hands. Kong Aiping plays Jin Xuan in the traditional style of *hundun* ('ghost heroine'), taking fast and dainty steps. As she walks slowly to the footlight on the left of the stage and stoops down as if to watch over her sleeping children, her shadow is magnified and projected onto the screen behind her, towering over the meditative Qu on stage, as if she were trying to hold Qu in her last lingering gaze. This dramatic juxtaposition of Jin's shadow refers to the devotion of thousands of Chinese parents who do their best to take care of their children, even when they have grown up (Figure 1).

Apart from the affective use of light and shade in these two performances, the dramatic structure and stage representation also reflect conscientious engagements with the time-space of the *kunqu* stage. Structurally speaking, both plays are different from traditional *kunqu* in that they do not employ the epic and linear dramatic structure typical of traditional *kunqu* plays. Instead, they adopt a retrospective structure. For example, *The Young Mei Lanfang* retells the story of young and ambitious Mei through the perspective of his old and seasoned self, and intersperses his struggles with reflective wisdom and recollected emotions. The play is composed of four acts, one epilogue, and an interlude. While the major acts delineate young Mei Lanfang's difficult rise to fame, the epilogue and the interlude capture his reflections on his youthful years. This dramaturgical juxtaposition of the old and young selves suggests the birth of modern subjects – something that was rarely seen on the *kunqu* stage before.



Figure 1. Kong Aiping's shadow as Jin Xuan, Shi Xiaming as Qu Qiubai. Photograph by and courtesy of Jiangsu Kunqu Theatre House.

While Mei's image as a thoughtful artist is brought out in the play's retrospective structure, Qu's tormented soul is embodied in the structure of *si zhe shuang xian* (四折双线结构: four acts, two plotlines), which the playwright Luo Zhou had created for *Qu Qiubai*. Luo Zhou divides the play into four acts (*ze*), each consisting of two episodes titled *zhou* (day) and *ye* (night). While the *zhou* episodes recreate Qu's imprisoned life before his execution, the night episodes represent his imaginative reunions with his mother, his wife Yang Zhihua, and his best friend Lu Xun. The *zhou* and *ye* sections are interwoven so as to connect Qu's strong faith in revolution with his deep personal emotions. In this way, Qu is starkly differentiated from 'the heroic figures' of the so-called revolutionary 'model plays' during the time of the Great Cultural Revolution (1966–76), who are expected to give up their personal feelings for their ideals of revolution.

This structural montage of different time-space is complemented by special stage design. *The Young Mei Lanfang* utilizes a revolving stage to allow the actors to remain on stage after they finish parts of their performance, which increases the dramatic tension of the performance as a whole, especially when the characters are not supposed to hear each other. In the first act, Mei turns his back towards the audience and remains motionless after his conversation with his colleague and friend Wang Fengqing. The stage revolves him out of sight, and a newcomer, Boss Xu, who is Mei and Wang's patron, takes centre-stage. At the front, Boss Xu disdainfully doubts Mei's artistic virtuosity. Meanwhile, on the other side of the stage, Mei listens silently, his shoulder and chest moving up and down rapidly, as if trying to suppress his anger. Mei tries to control his emotions, and walks calmly into the room to reclaim his fan, thus asserting his dignity to Boss Xu. This juxtaposition of actions in two spaces brings out Mei's personality as a determined and resourceful young man.

These two plays also create imaginative characters who embody the real difficulties that confront the protagonists. In the third act of *The Young Mei Lanfang*, Mei appears, looking very preoccupied. Even though he

had just left the after-party of his successful debut, he has already begun to worry about what to perform on the last day of his tour in Shanghai. He is caught in a dilemma as to whether to secure his reputation with a familiar repertoire or to strive for artistic excellence with risky pieces. Unable to find his answer, he takes a stroll outside the restaurant. There, he meets Li A Da, an imaginary rickshaw puller, who takes him to the most popular lanes and down the most deserted streets of Shanghai. During this imaginary journey, Mei and Li share with each other their life stories. At the end of the journey, Mei asks Li a question:

MEI: At your age, Old Uncle, how can you compete with the young and strong, pulling a rickshaw for business?

LI: Nothing more than going round turns and corners. And I'll go on any bumpy road! Far-off places where even the night cats won't crap. Other people won't go, but I'll go.

MEI: Meaning?

LI: I take the customers who want to take the tricky roads. Other people won't go, but I go.⁴

Li's plain and powerful words inspire Mei Lanfang and reconnect him with his own artistic ambition: to do what others would prefer not to do and to achieve what others dare not try. Thus, the image of Mei as a great artist takes strength from this incident.

While the imaginary Li externalizes Mei's inner struggle, the grey character in *Qu Qiubai* helps to explore the psychological depth of the characters on the modern *kunqu* stage. 'Grey characters' refer to those in modern *xiqu* plays who do not fall into the stereotypical dichotomy of black and white or good and bad of the traditional *xiqu* stage.⁵ Song Xilian, the officer in charge of Qu's imprisonment, is a case in point. Song's emotional and moral stances are ambiguous. While he is emotionally attached to Qu, and even to some extent identifies with him because of Qu's moral integrity, his political views and official duties are diametrically opposed to those of Qu. Zhou Xin, who plays Song, brings out the character's conflicted state of mind through selective use of different *kunqu* acting conventions.

A specific form of fictional reality is created on the stage of *kunqu* productions through the interactive use of light and shade in the scenography, the juxtaposition of different time-spaces, and the exploration of the psychological and emotional depth of dramatic characters in the form of fictional and grey characters: all this constitutes an alternative to established traditional *kunqu* means and methods. Through innovative dramaturgies, these modern *kunqu* plays become capable of representing the lives of historical figures in modern times. Such innovations, however, are firmly embedded in the performance conventions of *kunqu*, although in a less obvious manner.

Implicit Conventionalization

Convention characterizes the performing aesthetics of Chinese *xiqu*. Defined as 'xiqu's way of representing life', convention in *xiqu* cannot only be applied to sequences of stylized bodily movements, but can also be detected in expressive and normative forms such as the dramatic text, role types, music, vocal styles, costume, and facial make-up.⁶ *Kunqu*, generally referred to as *baixi zhimu* ('the mother of one hundred operatic forms'), sets great store by the required conventions of acting, singing, dancing, and reciting, which, however, can both liberate and restrict modern *kunqu* performers when they want to modernize *kunqu*. For example, each word in *kunqu* has its own specific pronunciation and intonation, and each line is sung according to strict musical scores, to which specific body movements must be accompanied, either supplementing the meaning of the words or just enriching the beauty of the singing.

Even when the actors are not dancing or singing, their dialogues and movements are also delivered in a stylized and rhythmic fashion. Furthermore, the synthetic nature of *kunqu* performance demands the seamless cooperation of every element of the performing system. Any rigid or careless use of old conventions, irrespective of the particularities of new situations, can result in a sense of aesthetic incongruity that could prove detrimental to whatever production is at issue.

The Young Mei Lanfang and *Qu Qiubai*, however, have found ways out of this dilemma by creating new conventions as well as energizing old conventions through subtle reorganization. The creation of new *xiqu* conventions, according to Su Guorong, is a process of accommodating chaos.⁷ Different artistic elements (singing, acting, reciting, acrobatics, and dancing) form a synthetic unity under the rhythmic guidance of music. For instance, Shi Xiaming and his co-actor Sun Jing have created a new *la-che* ('pulling the rickshaw') convention in the third act of *The Young Mei Lanfang*. Since rickshaws had never been represented on the *kunqu* stage before, Shi Xiaming and his partner Sun Jing had to start from scratch. They chose an oil lantern and a rope to symbolize the rickshaw, drawing inspirations from the conventionalized performance of horse riding in which a horsewhip is used to represent the horse. With these two items in hand, they choreograph a rhythmic dance piece incorporating movements such as stopping the rickshaw, getting on the rickshaw, and pulling the rickshaw. Both audience and theatre professionals are deeply impressed by the rhythmic beauty, the succinct symbolism, and the expressive power of this new conventionalized routine.

Old conventions are also brought back to life in these two plays through subtle reorganization and combination. Hidden conventional forms such as *zi bao jia men* ('self-introduction speeches') abound in *Qu Qiubai*. *Zi bao jia men* usually consists of *liangxiang* ('showing one's face/entrance'), and *dingchang shi* ('the poetry of setting'). In the *liangxiang* part, a *kunqu* performer in elaborate costumes and symbolic make-up walks in conventionalized steps and rhythms from backstage to left-centre downstage, stops, and presents himself to the audience in stylized gestures. Afterwards, all performers will either sing or recite a rhyming passage, making self-introductions and emphasizing the motivations behind their actions. In *Qu Qiubai*, the actors no longer wear traditional make-up, and their costumes are modern clothes. The role of *dingchang shi* is heightened in this way. When Song Xilian appears on the stage for the first time, he recites a *dingchang shi*:

Battle after battle heralds calamities and sorrow.

The expanse of the country strains under a dark haze.

Men are laying down their lives on the front line.

Yet I have been ordered away from the action to interrogate an intellectual.⁸

These four lines both contextualize the events of the play and reveal Song's tormented self. The country is in a state of war. As a patriotic captain who would rather fight for his homeland, Song has to interrogate an intellectual in prison instead. This conflict between his personal inclination and his political duty is also shown in the different acting conventions that the actor Zhou Xin employs for portraying Song.

In *kunqu*, there are different types of *sheng* (male role), each with its own specialized acting conventions and costumes. *Wusheng* ('male warrior' type), for example, is often used to portray captains or generals. *Shamao sheng* ('male officials with embroidered hats') is often used to characterize officials. Song, both a captain and an administrative officer, must balance between these two role types. Usually, the *wusheng* walks in a slightly faster pace than the *shamao sheng*. When Song appears on the stage in a captain's combat clothing, his steps are quick and sharp, but he will change into a leisurely stroll when, as an administrative officer, he interrogates Qu in prison. Moreover, Song's modern clothes blur the boundaries between different types of roles and open up the possibilities of creating more complex characters. As Zhang Manjun, the director of *Qu Qiubai*, has noted:

The actors from Jiangsu Kunqu Theatre House have accepted my demands to act both symbolically and realistically. They do not inherit the conventions without thinking. Rather, they design the sound and gesture for their characters according to their psychological logic, for they believe that *kunqu* is a form of art that truly attends to the logic of psychological realism. In this way, we reach a consensus. What's more, the rhyming speech in *kunqu* has created an un-lifelike atmosphere, which enables the actors to access *kunqu* aesthetics smoothly in terms of singing, gesture, and *mise-en-scène*.⁹

Shi Xiaming also adopts this psychophysical acting style in his embodiment of Mei Lanfang.

In order to embody Mei Lanfang on the *kunqu* stage, Shi has to cross the boundaries of both genres and genders. Since Mei Lanfang is a *jingju* (Peking Opera) artist and *The Young Mei Lanfang* includes many episodes of Mei's performance, Shi has to learn Peking Opera in order to represent Mei's artistic excellence. While Mei was well known for his performance as a *nan dan* (a specialist male impersonator of female roles), Shi plays *xiaosheng* (the 'young gentleman' type), which means that Shi has to do male-to-female impersonation as well, whose complexity is brought out in the first act of *The Young Mei Lanfang*.

In the first act, Mei Lanfang pays a visit to Wang Fengqing. Before taking his seat, Mei thanks Wang for his hospitality. At this cordial moment, Mei playfully uses the convention of a woman performing a curtsy from *jingju* to indicate shyness and gratitude. His crossed legs and bent knees, the *lanhua zhi* (fingers crossed and twisted into the shape of an orchid flower), and avoiding eyes are characteristic of a *dan* (female role). Although the actor wears the clothes of a gentleman, his gesture and voice indicate the male *dan* convention. This juxtaposition of conventions from different performing traditions shows Mei Lanfang as a witty and playful young man.

The practice of convention of *xiqu* is not restricted to body movements but also applies to other aspects of *xiqu* such as the type and organization of the dramatic text, role type, music, vocal style, make-up, and costume.¹⁰ The use of props enjoys a certain freedom as well.¹¹ A table can be used to indicate a mountain. A horsewhip can represent a running horse. Such conventions are cultivated through the history of the theatre experiences of both actors and audiences, which open up the semiotic space for a single prop. In *Qu Qiubai*, the actress Kong Aiping realizes this freedom with a single piece of red silk. When Kong appears on the stage, the red silk is tugged at her waist as part of her costume. As the play progresses, this red silk comes to symbolize bills, matches, a cup of wine, and so on. Its symbolic meanings vary according to the actress's acting and require the audience's cooperative understanding. Although not strictly belonging to any familiar forms of

theatrical convention on the *kunqu* stage, this piece of red silk taps into the customs of spectatorship that connect audience and actors in traditional Chinese theatre.

Through modifying and renovating conventions, *The Young Mei Lanfang* and *Qu Qiubai* accommodate the changes and challenges of modern life. More importantly, these new forms of conventionalization – the rebirth of the traditional form of *zi bao jia men* in Song's readjusted, modern performance, the cross-genre and cross-gender performance used by Shi in his portrayal of Mei Lanfang, and the free associations created by a single piece of red silk in Kong Aiping's hands – demonstrate that traditional *kunqu* is capable of encompassing newly developed changes. The latter, while revitalizing *kunqu* on the modern stage, also indicate that tradition and innovation do not simply repel each other but can reinforce each other. Although newly modified, and not always immediately apparent or easily accessible, such conventions continue to affect the audience, and challenge their habits of spectatorship.

The Incorporation of Fashion Elements on the Stage

The physical appearance of actors and actresses is an integral part of the overall performance, contributing significantly to the formation of a character's cultural identity.¹² In *The Young Mei Lanfang* and *Qu Qiubai*, new stage images of Mei Lanfang and Qu Qiubai are created through innovative make-up and costume designs, increasing their appeal to modern audiences.

In traditional *kunqu*, conventionalized facial stylization plays a vital role in characterization. The symbolic use of colours in the masks brings forth the personality of each character. Equally important is the conventional and hierarchical wardrobe of the different role types. In these two modern productions, however, the performers chose to give up the traditional mask and adopt a naturalistic style of make-up. Boss Xu in *The Young Mei Lanfang* does not wear any symbolic make-up. Nor does he wear any elaborate headpieces. This goes against *kunqu* aesthetics, according to which a villain or a

merchant like Boss Xu is often cast in the role of *jing*, who usually wears a white mask with symbolic paintings. Xu's facial stylization deviates from the *kunqu* norms (Figure 2), and coexists with the fashionable costumes designed for the character, all of it creating a new appearance that marks the birth of modern characters on the *kunqu* stage (Figure 3).

Typical *kunqu* costumes follow strict sartorial rules that usually reflect the hierarchical order of society and designate the character's social status, life situations, and inner qualities. Furthermore, *xiqu* costumes are not beholden to specific dynasties or seasons. They are rather trans-historical.¹³ Historical fidelity, was not, therefore, a necessity in traditional costume design. For example, Cao Cao, a warlord of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), is often represented on the *kunqu* stage wearing a *xiangdiao*, a special hat worn by the highest-ranking official in the Song dynasty (960–1279), and a *mangpao*, a jacket with the embroidery of dragon-like creatures that belongs to the Ming dynasty (1368–1644).¹⁴ This anachronistic costuming is not a rarity on the stage of both modern and ancient *kunqu* performances because traditional *kunqu* costumes are not regarded as an integral part of a character's individual personality.

The costumes in *Qu Qiubai* and *The Young Mei Lanfang* break through the traditional restrictions on costume design, reflecting the changing fashions across historical periods and the personality of their protagonists. In *The Young Mei Lanfang*, Mei has three completely different costumes, strictly tailored to each dramatic action. In the first act, when he and his friend Wang Fengqing meet at Wang's house in Beijing, he wears the traditional clothes of a Manchu gentleman with a woollen scarf around his neck. This outfit not only indicates the period of the historical event, the end of the Qing dynasty (around the beginning of twentieth century), but also, by adding a long western-style scarf, suggests Mei's acceptance of new forms of clothing, thus establishing Mei's image as an open and fashionable young man. After Mei moves to Shanghai, his costume changes into a smart three-piece and his hairstyle becomes more fashionable (Figure 4).



Figure 2. Zhao Yutao as Zhong Kui in a traditional play. Photograph by and courtesy of Yuan Wei.

While in *The Young Mei Lanfang* the fashionable and stylish costumes have endeared Mei to young audiences, in *Qu Qiubai* Qu's historical and realistic clothes appeal to their patriotic feelings. Costumes worn by Shi Xiaming are designed according to photos taken exactly on the day of Qu's execution (Figure 5). To enhance the realistic effects, the clothes also seem tattered and dirty, symbolizing the harsh reality that Qu had undergone. Jiangsu Kunqu Theatre House's realistic costume design for *Qu Qiubai* indicates those artists' willingness to challenge the restrictions of traditional rules and explore a more individual interpretation of a revolutionary hero.

The stylish presentations of the characters are augmented by modern stage settings. Like the Elizabethan stage, the traditional *kunqu* stage is neutral: 'The secret of the performance

art of *xiqu* lies in the fact that, through their body movement, actors not only express emotions and feelings, but also the setting of action. Thus, settings reside in the artist's body.'¹⁵ The props on the stage are often used only for their decorative function. The stage design of *Qu Qiuba*, by contrast, plays an integral role in the dramatic action, working seamlessly with the actors' performances to tell Qu's story. There are two large screens on each side of the stage. The left screen is black, from behind which Qu's enemies appear and disappear. The screen on the right is white, mainly used as an entrance by Qu, his friends, and his sympathizers. Between those two screens is a narrow lane, and a shaft of red light shoots through this lane. According to Zhang Manjun, the entire stage design refers to the 'passion born through the clash between the black and the white'.¹⁶



Figure 3. Zhao Yutao as Boss Xu in *The Young Mei Lanfang*. Photograph by and courtesy of Jiangsu Kunqu Theatre House.

This symbolic setting interacts effectively with the dramatic action. The big screens not only carry symbolic meanings, but also function as visual decorations. In the second part of the first act, Qu, aware of his imminent death, visits his mother's coffin in his dream. There is no real coffin on the stage, but a large shadow of a coffin is projected on the white screen. Qu talks with the shadow of the coffin and is almost overwhelmed by its huge size. This has a strong visual impact on the audience and allows them to experience Qu's deep feelings for his dead mother. Such symbolic stage settings, together with the fashionable appearances of the performers, create a space for representing modern and powerful individuals.

In a nutshell, the breakthroughs achieved by *The Young Mei Lanfang* and *Qu Qiubai* in terms of dramaturgy, performance, and scenography attest to the vitality of *kunqu* as an art form that not only captures the attention of modern audiences aesthetically,

but also participates in creating affective discourse that seeks either to challenge or to supplement the cultural narratives about Mei Lanfang and Qu Qiubai in contemporary China.

Reviving Mei Lanfang as a Cultural Idol

As one of the most famous, if not the most famous, of Peking Opera performers of the twentieth century, Mei has enjoyed a cultural revival in recent years, with numerous TV series, films, and dramas retelling stories about him. In 2008, the notable Chinese film director Chen Kaige directed the film *Mei Lanfang*, starring the famous Chinese actor Li Min and the actress Zhang Ziyi. Chen's film focuses on Mei's love affair with Meng Xiaodong and his determination not to perform for the Japanese army officers during the Second World War. It introduces Mei's patriotic passion to the general public. More and more productions about Mei



Figure 4. Shi Xiaming as Mei Lanfang and Sun Jing as Li A Da. Photograph by and courtesy of Jiangsu Kunqu Theatre House.

subsequently appeared, among which are the 2010 small theatre Peking Opera *Mei Lan Fang Hua* [*Mei Lanfang's Best Years*] and the 2012 multi-media spoken drama *Mei Lanfang*. Both focus exclusively on the mature Mei Lanfang and his achievements. While the former shows Mei as a great artist, exhibiting some highlights from his best performances, the latter retells the story of Mei's adult life both on and off the stage.

This public cultural revival of Mei Lanfang can be attributed to different reasons. As one of the most famous Peking Opera artists, Mei Lanfang fits in perfectly with the nation's agenda of cultivating cultural confidence through reviving traditions. In addition, Mei's successful international tours to America, the former USSR, and Japan spread knowledge of Chinese culture in the world, influencing other cultures. More importantly, Mei remained open to innovations and was deeply aware of the fact that 'the future of theatre would change

with the times and with the needs of the audience'.¹⁷ His great achievements in traditional art and his openness to innovation contribute to making him an iconic image for modern Chinese artists.

Mei Lanfang was also an active and resourceful patriot. During the Sino-Japanese war, he was already an international star, and the occupying Japanese army in Shanghai wanted him to perform for it. Mei declined the invitation and started to grow a beard. Given the fact that Mei was trained in the male *dan* tradition, growing a beard meant giving up his career. Mei's decision won him the respect of Chinese people at a time when theatre artists enjoyed relatively low social status. The decision not to perform during the Japanese occupation challenged people's stereotypical impression of *jingju* artists as mere entertainers. Mei thus showed his deep concern for the country and was not afraid to show his attitude openly, in spite of the potential risks to his life. This image of Mei and his



Figure 5. Shi Xiaming as Qu Qiubai (left) and Sun Jing as Wang Jiefu (right). Photograph by and courtesy of Jiangsu Kunqu Theatre House.

moral integrity in respect of the Japanese turned him into a hero.

The Young Mei Lanfang adds to the rich cultural imagination regarding Mei Lanfang by tracing his difficult rise to fame. It recaptures Mei's earlier struggles, when his fame was only in the making. In the first act of the play, his colleague and best friend Wang Fengqing talks to Mei about the difficulties that he had overcome during his apprenticeship:

WANG: When we started learning *xiqu*, Master Zhu said that you were too stupid to learn. 'The Master does not bestow you with livelihood.' What was your reaction? Were you afraid? Would you practise?

MEI: I was afraid and I had to practise.

WANG: When we started to perform on stage, Master Wu said to you, '[You] have no sparkle in the eyes, and your talent is merely average.' Were you afraid? Did you continue practising?

MEI: I was afraid, but I continued to practise.

WANG: When you were performing *Fenhe Wan* [*The Bay of Fenhe*] with Boss Tan, he stole your words and changed the dialogue.

MEI: I, as Liu Yinchun, just finished reciting, 'In this cold cave, how can someone find decent food?'

WANG: Tan, as Xue Pinggui, snapped, '[in Peking dialogue] Cook me a bowl of dumplings.' When that happened, were you afraid, were you willing to continue the performance?

MEI: I was afraid, but I had to sing!¹⁸

The obstacles that Mei was confronted with – insecurity about his talent, slights and ridicule from others, an unfriendly working environment, and complicated interpersonal relationships – are not very different from what we experience today. Mei chose to follow his passion, despite these setbacks. This turned him into a role model for young people. Furthermore, his candid admission of his feelings of fear and frustration when misunderstood and mistreated also endeared him to audiences.

While the young Mei Lanfang has inspired young audiences with his stamina in the face of difficulties, his determination to reclaim his family glory further added to his charm as a cultural idol. In the last act of the play, Mei has a dispute with his friend Wang Fengqing. While Wang insists that Mei should perform a familiar piece on his closing

night, Mei prefers the challenge of one of the most difficult and risky pieces, *Muke Zhai* [*The Village of Muke*]. Both men are reluctant to give up their stance, and their friendship almost reaches breaking point until Mei reveals the reason behind his choice. It turns out that Mei's insistence on performing the risky piece is a gesture to reclaim his family's glory. His grandfather, also a virtuosic performer, had an accident when performing this piece in front of the Empress Dowager Cixi at the end of Qing dynasty. The piece was shelved and no longer performed by any of his family members. Mei's determination to restore family glory against the odds of losing his fame not only wins over his best friend, but also reaches the hearts of contemporary Chinese audiences. Marked attention to how Mei cherishes his family tradition coincides with the nation's determination to revive traditional culture. By its emphasis on Mei Lanfang's youthful days and by reviving Mei as a cultural idol, *The Young Mei Lanfang* conveys the important message that young people play an important role in the national agenda of regenerating past glories as well as revitalizing traditional art and strengthening cultural confidence.

Rewriting the Red Classic in *Qu Qiubai*

Since the early twentieth century, revolutionary pioneers started to employ *xiqu* either for propaganda purposes or for agendas on mass education. Tian Han, one of the founding fathers of *huaaju* (spoken drama), wrote a good number of new plays for *jingju*, many of which are infused with revolutionary ideas and ethics. During the Great Cultural Revolution (1966–76), 'The Revolutionary Model Play', a combination of *jingju* and modern ballet dancing, was invented and took the nation by storm both politically and aesthetically. In spite of its prominence in the contemporary Chinese cultural landscape, *jingju* was not the only form of *xiqu* that has been involved in the effort to modernize Chinese theatre. Other local genres such as *chuanju* (Sichuan Opera) and *guiju* (Guizhou Opera) have also participated in these endeavours with considerable success.

Likewise, *kunqu* also experimented with modern plays. In the early days of New China, modern *kunqu* plays such as *Wang Xiunuan* and *Mama Jiehun Le* [*Mama is Getting Married*] received relatively good reviews. However, most of the modern *kunqu* performances were consigned to obscurity, giving rise to the claim that, instead of creating modern plays, *kunqu* should stick to preserving the traditional repertoire and producing new historical plays.¹⁹ The successes of *Qu Qiubai* and *The Young Mei Lanfang* have challenged this discourse. *Qu*, in particular, has not only realized *kunqu*'s potential to tell modern stories, but also demonstrated *kunqu*'s capacity for cultural intervention.

Qu Qiubai, one of the founding members of Chinese communist party, has attracted much attention in different media in recent years: a series of dramas and TV series and films have started to remodel familiar narratives about him. The 2011 film *Qiu Zhi Bai Hua* [*The Love of Soul*], starring Dou Xiao and Dong Jie, focuses on the love affair between Qu and his second wife Yang Zhihua. Audiences received it warmly because of its young and beautiful film stars and the romanticized portrayal of Qu's emotional life. In addition, a large-scale government-sponsored entertainment programme called *China in Stories* produced a special feature on Qu Qiubai from the perspective of his daughter Qu Duyi. This programme took an interactive approach to Qu's life. His friends and family were invited for talk shows; workshop for actors were organized to have them learn about Qu's life; important episodes of Qu's life were staged, starring some of the most famous young actors in contemporary China (Chen Xiao, for example). This immersive re-narrativization of Qu's life stories through the combination of documentary facts and dramatic re-imagination shows a subtle change in the contemporary cultural discourse on revolutionary heroes, which, by incorporating multiple perspectives, seeks to unravel their complex and eventful lives.

Kunqu Qu Qiubai contributes to this refashioning of Qu's public image in two ways. First of all, the poetic and affective quality of *kunqu*

performance enhances *Qu*'s appeal to the emotions and connects *Qu*'s individual fate with that of a nation. In the words of Kui Wang: 'It is through *xiqu*'s poetical emphasis on human subjectivity that the red and revolutionary culture has successfully connected with the national culture and history.'²⁰ By visualizing and concretizing *Qu*'s individual feelings through *kunqu*'s elegant singing and its literary text, *Qu*'s human dimension merges with his revolutionary idealism. Furthermore, *Qu*'s double-plotline structure encourages the audience to connect *Qu*'s abstract beliefs in revolution with his individual emotions, making him an extraordinary revolutionary hero. In the end, the poetic and the patriotic *Qu* blend, making him a multi-layered and resolute individual, ready to take responsibility for each of his decisions.

Through the combination of *kunqu* and revolutionary narrative, *Qu Qiubai* also challenges the stereotypical impression that *kunqu* can only tell romantic love stories like *Mudan Ting* [*The Peony Pavilion*]. Due to historical reasons, *kunqu* had faded from public attention before it was added to UNESCO's list of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2001. In 2004, Bai Xianyong collaborated with Suzhou Kunqu Theatre House and created a youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* and started to promote it both in China and internationally. While Bai's production re-introduces *kunqu* as an updated and elegant art form to the public, especially to young people, its exclusive focus on the beauty and sorrow of love has further consolidated the partial impression that *kunqu* can only tell romantic stories. *Qu Qiubai*, by recapturing the life story of a revolutionary hero in the form of *kunqu*, challenges this stereotypical inclination to associate *kunqu* only with romantic stories, thus opening up *kunqu*'s aesthetic space to accommodate various forms of narrative.

Such enrichment of *kunqu*'s aesthetic scope revitalizes *kunqu*'s power of cultural intervention. Given the fact that many of the famous and classic *kunqu* plays, such as *Tao Hua Shan* [*Peach Blossom Fan*] and *Changsheng Dian* [*The Palace of Everlasting Youth*], were written by literary figures concerned with the fate of the

nation and have greatly influenced Chinese history and culture, it would be no exaggeration to assume that modern *kunqu* endeavours to rewrite the red classics via *Qu Qiubai* can and will pass on this tradition of cultural intervention and show that *kunqu* is able to continue playing an active role in cultural renewal and replenishment today and in the future.

Conclusion

The success of *The Young Mei Lanfang* and *Qu Qiubai* allows multiple interpretations and offers valuable lessons. At the most basic level, it absolves Chinese *kunqu* artists from the fear that *kunqu* is about the past and has little to do with what has happened and is happening in the contemporary world. Thanks to its rooted tradition, this ancient art form can still flourish on the modern stage, both in conventional forms and modern configurations. Drawing on the rich tradition of *kunqu* aesthetics, the two modern productions by Jiangsu Kunqu Theatre House manage to create a new form of fictional reality, re-energize the power of convention through subtler means, and introduce fashion elements to the traditional stage to attract contemporary audiences. Such an aesthetic breakthrough not only realizes the cultural ambition of *kunqu* to participate in the national revival of traditional culture, but also contributes to reviving *kunqu*'s cultural tradition.

Kunqu's successful regeneration also instils confidence in the modernization of *xiqu* in general. Both *The Young Mei Lanfang* and *Qu Qiubai* have won prominent artistic awards and prizes and have been broadcast on national TV channels. Their widespread influence and national appeal can also be felt in the theatre communities. Wang Renyuan, for instance, has enthusiastically affirmed the inspirational force of *The Young Mei Lanfang* for the entire creative community of *xiqu*.²¹ Scholars such as Ma Ye were very excited, and regarded *The Young Mei Lanfang* as 'a significant event' that solved the problem of modernizing *xiqu*.²² Scholars' excitement and praise are, in fact, indicative of the yearning of

the public to form a more nourishing relationship with its cultural heritage and the desire to build a more robust connection with its past glories.

The success of *kunqu* to overcome the binding restrictions of conventions and its ability to respond to modern times can also shed new light on the development of traditional art forms in general, both in China and in other parts of the world. By exhibiting a dynamic interaction with the traditions of *kunqu*, these two modern plays have demonstrated the great potential of traditional art for innovation. Thus *kunqu*, as 'the mother of all operatic forms', which means that it has the most elaborate semiotic system and is probably the most 'conventionalized' form of traditional *xiqu*, will benefit the future of different genres of traditional theatre rather than stifle their growth. Given *kunqu*'s ability to produce convincing and appealing modern plays, other operatic forms may well find it easier to experiment and innovate, paving the way for traditional theatre to reconnect its art with the changing times and become integral to the new era.

Notes and References

1. This article was sponsored by China National Key Research Project in Arts Studies, 'Frontiers of Contemporary Theatre Theories in the West', No. 18ZD06.
2. 'Literati' refers to the group of well-educated men of letters in ancient China who not only served as governmental officials but also had outstanding literary talents. During the Ming dynasty, a large group of literati become enamoured of *kunqu*, and started to write plays for it. For more details, see Ji Hu and Liu Zhizhong, *Kunqu Fazhan Shi* [The History of the Development of Kunqu] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2012).
3. Ji Hu and Liu Zhizhong, *Kunqu Fazhan Shi*, p. 24.
4. Translations from the video of the performance on the internet and the original texts are from the unpublished manuscripts of the playwright Luo Zhou.
5. 'Grey character' is a term used by scholar Zhang Qinfei in his comparative analysis of Song Xilian and Qu Qiubai. It refers to the characters with conflicted personalities and an ambiguous moral standard or belief, often seen in modern *xiqu* creations. See Qingfei Zhang, 'Xinyang Zhiguang Yu Guzhi Xinliu – Pin Yuanchuang Geming Ticai Xiandai Ju Qu Qiubai [The Light of Faith and the New Branch on Old Stock: Commentary on the Original Revolutionary Modern Play Qu Qiubai]', *Zhejiang Zhiye Yishu XueYuan Bao* [Journal of Zhejiang Vocational Academy of Art], XX, No. 2 (2022), p. 53.
6. Geng Zhang, 'Zhongguo Xiqu [Traditional Chinese Theatre]', *Zhongguo dabaike quanshu xiqu quiyijuan* [Encyclopaedia of China: Volume of Traditional Chinese

Theatre and Folk Arts] (Beijing: Encyclopedia of China Publishing House, 1983), p. 3.

7. Guorong Su, *Xiqu Meixue* [*The Xiqu Aesthetics*] (Beijing: The Publishing House of Culture and Arts, 1995), p. 196–7.

8. Quotations from the unpublished playscript by Luo Zhou, translated by the authors.

9. Zhiwei Zhang, 'Zhang Manjun: Haofeng Pin Jieli – Jianxin Xiqu Wutai de Xiandai Zonghe [Zhang Manjun: Good Wind Comes Through Help: Practising Modern Synthesis on the Xiqu Stage]', *Zhongguo Wenyi Pinlun* [*China Literature and Art Criticism*], VII (2022), p. 100. Authors' translation.

10. Geng Zhang and Hancheng Guo. *Zhongguo Xiqu Tonglun* [*General Discussion of Chinese Xiqu*] (Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Publishing House, 1989), p. 168.

11. Xiuxun Ding, *Kunqu Biaoyan Xue* [*The Study of Kunqu Performance*] (Nanjing: Phoenix Education Publishing, Ltd, 2015), p. 8.

12. Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Semiotics of Theatre*, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 64.

13. Guorong Su, *Xiqu Meixue* [*The Xiqu Aesthetics*] (Beijing: The Publishing House of Culture and Arts, 1995), p. 231.

14. Hede Gong, 'Lun Xiqu Chuandai Guizhi [On the Norms and Rules of Costume-Wearing of Xiqu]', *Xiqu Yishu* [*Journal of College Chinese Traditional Opera*], II (1983), p. 85.

15. Jiaotian Gai, *Gai Jiaotian Biaoyan Yishu* [*The Performance Art of Gai Jiaotian*] (Hangzhou: Hangzhou Wenyi Publishing House, 1984), p. 299.

16. Zhiwei Zhang, 'Zhang Manjun', p. 98.

17. Min Tian, *Mei Lanfang and the Twentieth-Century International Stage* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), p. 4.

18. Direct quotations are from the unpublished playscript of Luo Zhou's *Dang Nian Mei Lang*. Authors' translation.

19. Fan Ke, 'Kunqu Xiandaixi Chuangzuo Shijian Pinshu [Commentary on the Creations and Practices of Modern Kunqu Plays]', in *Yi Yuan* [*Arts Forum*] (2010), p. 96.

20. Kui Wang, 'Xiqu Hongse Geming Ticao De Wenhua Jiazhi Yu Fazhan Kongjian [The Cultural Value and Development Space of Revolutionary Content of Xiqu Red Classics]', *Zhongguo Wenyi Pinlun* [*China Literature and Art Criticism*], IV (2021), p. 36.

21. Renyuan Wang, 'Kunju xiandaixi de zhongdai tupo – xikan kunju Mei Lanfang-Dang Nian Mei Lang Chuyan [The Great Achievements of Modern Kunqu Plays: A Close Look at the Performance of *Dang Nian Mei Lang*]', in *Zhongguo Xiqu* [*Chinese Xiqu*], I (2020), p. 21.

22. Ye Ma, 'Kunju Mei Lanfang-Dang Nian Mei Lang de Shuangchong Jiazhi [The Two-fold Value of Kunju *Dang Nian Mei Lang*]', *Zhongguo Xiqu* [*Chinese Xiqu*], I (2020), p. 26.