

Exploring the Foothold of Kunqu in Modern Society Through a Comparative Study of Different Versions of The Peony Pavilion

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Abstract: After the publication of the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* in 2004, Kunqu, a classical Chinese theatre, experienced a significant resurgence in both popularity and esteem. This renewal instigated a stronger emphasis on inventive and contemporary adaptations of the traditional repertoire. As culture evolves and advances, there is no doubt that classical theatre must also adapt to keep up with the times. The primary aim of this essay is to examine a contemporary phenomenon through a research methodology that compares and contrasts traditional and modern theatre styles. Specifically, this research focuses on the modern rendition of *The Peony Pavilion*, a renowned Kunqu opera that illustrates how traditional Chinese theatre can be adjusted to modern contexts while preserving its allure and importance. Additionally, this research project investigates the qualities and mechanisms of modernization in classical Chinese theatre. By concentrating on *The Peony Pavilion*, this study seeks to disclose how Kunqu integrates and embraces change while retaining its fundamental aspects. As a result, the research aids in crafting efficient techniques for modifying classical art forms to contemporary settings, guaranteeing that these traditional art forms remain significant and appealing over time. This will meet the increasing demand for contemporary performances while ensuring the longevity and preservation of classical arts in the ever-evolving 21st century.

Keywords: The Peony Pavilion, theatrical modernization, Kunqu, Bai Xianyong

1. Introduction

Research on modernized and adapted versions of the Kunqu opera *The Peony Pavilion* plays an essential role in exploring the foothold of the traditional art of Kunqu in modern society. Originating in the 14th century in Kunshan, Suzhou, China, Kunqu is one of the oldest traditional Han Chinese operas. *The Peony Pavilion*, composed by Tang Xianzu, is one of the representative repertoires of Kunqu, marking the highest peak of the development of the legend in the Ming Dynasty, with its anti-feudalism ideology being highly advanced at that time and the optimistic romanticism of its method of expression had a profound influence on later generations. *The Peony Pavilion* was first written for the Yihuang accent and has been widely adapted and interpreted for quite some time. In the middle of the Qing Dynasty, *The Peony Pavilion* was performed as Kunqu mainly in opera highlights and became popular among bureaucrats and wealthy merchants. During the late Qing Dynasty, the

traditional Kunqu art represented by *The Peony Pavilion* gradually declined due to the impact of war and social unrest. Since the 1920s, thanks to its high artistic value in terms of lyrics and literature, as well as the pioneering and advanced ideas it contains, *The Peony Pavilion* has gradually regained its vitality and returned to the public's view with the support of Chinese classical theatre artists such as Mei Lanfang, Yu Zhenfei, and Cheng Yanqiu. Since then, the relevant adaptations have shown more obvious characteristics of multiple perspectives and levels, adapting to the performance needs and aesthetic interests of the new era, and have gradually been staged nationwide. In 2004, the writer Bai Xianyong presided over the production of the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion*, which retained the rhythm of the classical genre and adapted to the visual requirements of a modern audience while maintaining the abstract and pictorial characteristics of Kunqu and making appropriate use of the concept of modern theatre, thus significantly increasing the popularity of *The Peony Pavilion* as a traditional Chinese art overseas.

The success of the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* brought the art of Kunqu, represented by *The Peony Pavilion*, more attention from the public and scholars in related fields and greatly encouraged the flourishing of adaptations based on the script of Tang Xianzu's *The Peony Pavilion*. Innovative adaptations of the traditional Kunqu opera *The Peony Pavilion* were presented in a variety of forms, including stage plays and films. Regardless of the form in which they are performed, these adaptations reflect modernization and are closely linked to the needs of audiences and society. Focusing on different adaptations of *The Peony Pavilion*, contemporary scholars have made remarkable achievements in exploring the status and driving forces of the modernization of *The Peony Pavilion*. Existing relevant research can reflect the integration and innovation of classical Chinese theatre with modern technology and concepts and promote the revival of classical Chinese theatre in modern Chinese society. However, the related literature mostly focuses on specific areas or specific works. It lacks a macroscopic study of its modernization, making it difficult to form a system that can reflect the gradual process of the modernization of *The Peony Pavilion*.

This paper adopts both documentary and comparative research methods in the hope of summarizing the common methods of adapting classical art forms to the demands of modernization and proposing practical and effective development suggestions for the foothold of Kunqu in modern society. This study takes three representative modern adaptations of the 2004 youth version of *The Peony Pavilion*, the 2014 master version of *The Peony Pavilion*, and the 2022 reunion version of *The Peony Pavilion* as examples. It analyses them mainly in terms of plot adaptation, stage design, actor configuration, and audience groups to explore the reasons for their successes and the problems that exist.

2. Case Introduction

The youth version of *The Peony Pavilion*, the production led by the auspices of writer Bai Xianyong, began touring the world in 2004 by cutting down the original fifty-five acts to twenty-nine acts and combining twenty-first-century aesthetic concepts with the traditional art of Kunqu. Unlike previous versions, it stars young actors and actresses to target the younger generation as the audience. This love story spanning life and death, is again presented in a youthful and vibrant manner, making the Kunqu *The Peony Pavilion* rediscovers the prosperity of 400 years ago. This is the third time author Bai Xianyong has been involved in the production of *The Peony Pavilion*, and the first time he has choreographed a production presenting the full story of *The Peony Pavilion*. The youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* became a spark, and its success brought this ancient art back into the limelight and allowed this treasure of classical Chinese art to shine in the world.

In 2014, the master version of *The Peony Pavilion*, featuring eighteen veteran Kunqu artists in their seventies, debuted at Beijing's Tianqiao Theatre. The collective appearance of the veteran artists, known as "masters" made this version a unique performance in the Kunqu world. The seven "Du

Liniang” and the four “Liu Mengmei” portrayed the characters with different interpretations and in their distinctive ways and vividly showed the audience the characters’ thoughts and emotions. With the veteran artists’ unique experience and deep understanding of the art of Kunqu, this version of *The Peony Pavilion* has indeed become a classic of modern Kunqu.

Premiering at the Shanghai Grand Theatre in 2022, the reunion version of *The Peony Pavilion* is not a series of traditional opera highlights but a complete presentation and interpretation of the original work. Only a handful of historical records of *The Peony Pavilion* are being performed in its entirety, and the vast amount of manpower and resources spent on it makes it difficult to realize. At the same time, the long-term performance of opera highlights has made the details of the singing and movements of the original episodes lost, and restoration has become another major problem. Overcoming all these difficulties, the reunion version of *The Peony Pavilion* has made a modern performance of the entire fifty-five acts as close to the original as possible, using modern technical means. This version of the performance is a natural combination of the most traditional plot content and the most modern way of presentation. It has become an extraordinarily typical and valuable practice in modernizing Kunqu art.

3. Analysis of the Modernization Features of the Classic Adaptation of *The Peony Pavilion*

3.1. Innovative Breakthroughs in the International Dissemination of *The Peony Pavilion*

The outstanding features of the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* are mainly in the adaptation of the script and performance, the choice of actors, and the audience. After Kunqu was declared a “masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of mankind” by the United Nations in May 2001, *The Peony Pavilion* became a representative work of the Kunqu repertoire[1]. However, due to the lack of a core cast with appeal and influence, the role of stars in popularizing the work has gradually become less important in modern times[1]. As a result, the central position of the actor was undermined, the position of the playwright as a communicator rose, and theatrical factors such as New Era choreography were gradually used more widely[1]. During this period, the emergence of the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* injected vitality into the development of contemporary Kunqu.

Produced and planned by Taiwanese scholar Bai Xianyong, the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* underwent rigorous discussion and planning before the stage performance, and the principle of only deleting, not changing, the script adaptation was finally established[2]. This ensured the performance time while better highlighting the main emotional threads and preserving the classical spirit of the original. The moving words and emotional ideas contained in Tang Xianzu’s original work were harmonized with the audience’s acceptance level and delivered to the audience appropriately. As for the performance adaptation, the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* introduces modern stage elements on the premise of adhering to traditional aesthetic principles, adjusting the characters’ way of displaying their psychological activities to adapt to the large-scale stage performance, such as enriching the expression of the subtle demeanor with more exaggerated movements[2]. The addition of modern elements, such as gorgeous costumes, lights, and sets, also makes this traditional classical art catch the eyes of the modern public.

Regarding “youth”, this version mainly embodies the celebration of youth, love, and life[1]. Bai Xianyong said, “One of the most important purposes of producing the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* is to solve the problem of Kunqu’s legacy, the aging of the actors, and the aging of the audience-this is the biggest crisis of Kunqu[5].” So, he chose young actors to recreate the magnificent love story of Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei, giving the audience a more vivid and realistic visual experience making them feel as if they were on the other side of the stage. At the same time, the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* takes young people with a particular cultural foundation, such as

university students, as the primary audience group, cultivating both young performers and young audiences, thus adding a double force to the modernization of Kunqu art[2].

The youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* has not only revitalized classical theatre across generations but also successfully achieved the cross-cultural dissemination of Chinese Kunqu. Bai Xianyong's team sought common ground while respecting differences, innovating for Western audiences, and breaking down the barrier between the national and the universal, making *The Peony Pavilion* famous overseas[6]. The youthfulness of the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* is reflected in the content, theme, and audience of the performance, making it a great example of how contemporary Kunqu has adapted to the progress of the times.

3.2. The Practice of Combining the Traditional Contents and the Main Role of Actors

The uniqueness of the master version of *The Peony Pavilion* as the beginning of the National Kunqu Heritage Reporting Performance 2014 lies in the fact that the same character is played by several performers and the exemplary performances of the “masters.” Each Kunqu performer has their understanding of the script, combining their own life experience with a detailed and in-depth understanding of the psychological state and emotional logic of the character. The focus of the master version of *The Peony Pavilion* is on how to use the ‘dead’ formula to express the ‘living’ characters[7]. In this version, the interpretation of the same character by different artists shows a very different style, but at the same time, it is reasonable and appropriate to make the character more complete. From the point of view of understanding the inner emotional logic of the characters, the masters combined their own rich performance experience and added some details rich in the flavor of life and emotional logic, thus enriching the means of stage performance and better conveying the characters’ state of mind to the audience.

The master version of *The Peony Pavilion* represents an era in which the youth of the veteran performers has passed, and the years have changed their appearance but united their performance skills[8]. Every move they make is for characterization, and they perform with the formulas accumulated over many years of practice, reflecting to the fullest their respect and understanding of tradition. Thus, the master version of *The Peony Pavilion* is characterized by “masters”, reuniting veteran artists with rich performance experience and bringing the ancient Kunqu opera *The Peony Pavilion* to a brand-new stage. This version is a treasure of the Kunqu world, bringing together the efforts and wisdom of the old generation of Kunqu artists.

3.3. New Attempts at Content Integrity with Modern Technology

The reunion version of *The Peony Pavilion* is the nation's only restored, full-length, 55-episode performance of *The Peony Pavilion*, using state-of-the-art stage technology and innovative transformations of props and sets. The full-length play is more demanding for the cast, crew, and audience, making there few records of full-length performances of *The Peony Pavilion*. In this performance, the collective performance of the “Five Classes and Three Generations” of the Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe, which has a well-established heritage, a complete line of work, and is well-equipped in both military and civilian arts, has achieved the guarantee of the performers’ manpower[9]. At the same time, the whole play vividly presents the ideology, religion, culture, history, folklore, social customs, and local conditions of the Song and Ming Dynasties, deepening the profound insight and critical awareness of Tang Xianzu's play on the ancient social reality, which is a unique artistic conception and humanistic pursuit, giving it particular historical value and practical significance[9]. This version of the whole play is not only a copy of the original work but also retains the original poem to the maximum extent, which effectively strengthens the sense of dialogue between performance and history, and reveals a thicker cultural background, making the dual

significance of its repertoire inheritance and cultural continuity more and more apparent[10].

In terms of stage presentation, the play integrates choreography and multimedia visualization of historical, cultural, and traditional aesthetic characteristics. The stage turntable treatment solves the problem of time and space transition of the 55 full-length plays while immersing the audience in the stage atmosphere. The Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe has given *The Peony Pavilion* a distinctive contemporary character in terms of stage design and actor performance, completing a reinterpretation of the classic. In the reunion version of *The Peony Pavilion*, the stage space is highly developed, and the mirror design spatially isolates Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei, creating a blurred sense of reality and illusion[11]. Moreover, the clever spatial design of the stage makes the transitions of each play as coherent as in a film, providing a smooth and natural viewing experience[10]. The reunion version of *The Peony Pavilion* is a harmonious fusion of the two extremes of tradition and modernity, using modern means to carry the classical spirit and realizing the re-deconstruction of traditional Kunqu across time and space[11].

4. Suggestions

4.1. Recommendations for Adapting Kunqu Art to Internationalization

The key to taking traditional theatre overseas is to modify the content by combining modern theatrical sensibilities based on the classical aesthetics of traditional opera so that it meets the modern aesthetic needs of a Western mainstream audience[3]. The youth version of *The Peony Pavilion*, as one of the most successful cases of spreading the art of Chinese classical Kunqu to the world while reconciling the traditional aesthetics of Kunqu and the degree of localization, has attracted the attention of the local mainstream media when it has toured abroad, with extensive reports and reviews of the play in *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times* in the US, and *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph* in the UK[3].

Traditional arts of a nation should aim to take a worldwide outlook, seeking to transcend temporal and spatial limits and cultural barriers. By actively exploring integration and innovation based on interconnection and commonality, they can demonstrate an artistic value universal to different nationalities and essential for all humans. This can be achieved by showcasing an openness to the traditional arts and cultures of other countries. Through this approach, regional classical art forms such as Kunqu can take on a global outlook and become art forms that are lively and energetic in a globalized society. This can help to meet the spiritual needs of people throughout the world[4].

4.2. Recommendations for Coordinating the Preservation and Advancement of Kunqu Arts

The youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* was abridged with the intent of remaining loyal to the original text while adapting it to the stage, and at the same time, creatively chose a group of young actors to perform. The seasoned version of *The Peony Pavilion* assembled veteran actors to act the same part, and the revamped version of *The Peony Pavilion* relied on technological means to deliver the complete repertoire effectively. All of the above performances have become productive practices blending the tradition's inheritance and development with modernization and innovation in the art of Kunqu.

The modernization of *The Peony Pavilion* in Kunqu reflects a straightforward integration of classical Chinese theatre with modern technology and concepts. The performance heritage of Kunqu represented by *The Peony Pavilion*, mainly emphasizes the characteristic of promoting strengths and avoiding weaknesses, while innovation embodies the trait of pushing forward the new. The development of its repertoire accentuates dialectical thinking, and while preserving the traditional flavor, it introduces new elements reflecting the current era and its contents.

5. Conclusion

This essay's research finds that the success of the modernized adaptation of *The Peony Pavilion* depends on its proactive approach towards seeking new opportunities compatible with the aesthetics of traditional Kunqu and the needs of the contemporary era. It explores the use of new technologies with an open attitude. Hence, this essay suggests that, in contemporary society, Kunqu should actively seek ways to present classical spiritual content in modernized forms. The modernization of Kunqu should be prioritized from the following perspectives. Firstly, according to the needs of the times, it demands an in-depth study of the meaning of outstanding plays and performances and the retention of their ancient and modern significance by eliminating irrelevant content. Secondly, innovation based on the audience requirements and preferences, while maintaining the fusion of changing dynamics of Kunqu and its audiences, is essential to enhance modern audiences' aesthetic inclinations, thereby achieving the cultural and practical value of Kunqu. In addition, a win-win situation in terms of cultural and practical significance can be achieved by flexibly using modern technological advantages and targeted publicity to ensure the long-lasting vitality of Kunqu outside its traditional boundaries.

This essay analyses the successful efforts made to modernize *The Peony Pavilion*. It suggests that the development of Kunqu, represented by *The Peony Pavilion*, needs to go beyond the traditional theatre scope. It must be explored and practiced culturally by integrating inheritance and innovation. Finally, this essay only takes *The Peony Pavilion* theatre as an entry point to study the single scenario of classical art adapting to modern society. It focuses on macro generalization but lacks a detailed interpretation of each version. Future research could analyze the further development of Kunqu art in detail and provide more directional suggestions.

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