

AROUNDJIANGSU

Kunqu Opera stands the test of time

By ZHENG XIN
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Kunqu Opera is one of the oldest extant forms of opera. Its rhythmic patterns have been a dominant influence on other forms of opera in the country, including Sichuan and Beijing operas.

Kunqu has a complete system of acting and a distinctive, wide-ranging repertoire that features delicate and elegant tunes. The orchestra features the bamboo flute in a leading role as well as the *xiao* (a vertical bamboo flute), a mouth organ and a string instrument with a fretted fingerboard.

Representative works include *The Peony Pavilion*, *Fifteen Strings of Coins*, *Love at First Sight*, and *Escorting Jingniang Home*.

Kunqu has gone through several stages of change over the past hundreds of years. It was initially composed of long and short lines, with a singer singing solo and the orchestra coming in at the end of each line.

During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), it became more mild, smooth and graceful, with performers attaching great importance to how clearly they recited and sang lines. The songs were written in seven-character or ten-character lines. This contrasts greatly from the opera's emphasis during the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), when



only percussions were used in the chorus. In the style that developed during the Ming Dynasty, more musical instruments, including stringed instruments, bamboo flutes, drums and clappers were used.

Known as the mother of all Chinese operas, Kunqu, also called *Kunshanqiang*, is named after its birthplace, Mount Kun-

shan, located near Suzhou, Jiangsu province.

UNESCO listed Kunqu Opera as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2001, which aims to ensure that the best of each country's traditions is well preserved, developed and promoted throughout the world.

Chinese composer Chen Qigang said *The Peony Pavilion* has a spiritual dimension.

"I heard this tune for the first time when I was very young. I was highly impressed. Ever since, it reminds me of my childhood," said Chen, the music director for the 2008 Beijing Olympics.



ZHOUSHUANG WILL OPEN FALL SESSION

The fall session of *Kunqu Opera in Four Seasons*, co-organized by Zhouzhuang and the Kunqu Opera Theater of the Jiangsu Performing Arts Group, will be staged in October.

Many performers will be invited to present classical Kunqu Opera shows.

The winter session of the Kunqu Opera will start in December and the summer session wrapped up in July.

In Zhouzhuang, six Kunqu opera shows are staged from 10 am to 3:30 pm every day. "Kunqu Opera Nights", which runs from April through October, will present regular Kunqu operas on Fridays and Saturdays in Zhouzhuang.

Revivalists expand artform to a wider audience

By ZHENG XIN

For Zhou Yude, the former principal of the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts, the future of Kunqu Opera is golden.

"The existence of different versions of the opera itself is a sign of Kunqu Opera's prosperity," he said. "It indicates that Kunqu Opera is still full of vitality in a modern era."

Kunqu is the oldest extant form of Chinese operas that dominated Chinese theater from the 16th to the 18th centuries.

Over the centuries, the opera has faded from the limelight. It was once feared that it would one day disappear after hundreds of years of prosperity.

But as traditionalists seek to promote Kunqu Opera, it is undergoing a makeover that has been attracting new audiences around the world.

One of the most well-known Kunqu operas, *The Peony Pavilion*, has been staged all over the world with many modern theater flourishes to appeal to a more contemporary audience. The dramatic change has succeeded in attracting younger audiences and igniting people's passions for the opera.

First performed in 1598 and written by Tang Xianzu during



the Ming Dynasty (1368 - 1644), *The Peony Pavilion* is one of the most romantic stories in Chinese literature and is often compared to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

Taiwanese writer Pai Hsien-yung adapted a younger version of *The Peony Pavilion*. While preserving the story's integrity, Pai has cut the original 55-act performance down to 27 for the stage version. He has also selected mainly young actors to inject more vitality into the story.

Staging the updated version of the famous opera, the performance has been well received at more than 20 universities nationwide.

"The story's theme of love and beauty still resonates," said Pai.

He said college students need to appreciate the arts such as Kunqu Opera and that the updated version could help bridge the gap with China's youth.

"I hope that this new version can provide college students a fresh perspective on the opera to help them ignite their confidence in the traditional performance art," he said.

Revivalists are also making efforts to promote the opera's popularity around the world.

The Suzhou Kunqu Opera Company took their version of *The Peony Pavilion* to Sadler's Wells Theatre in London in

2008 to promote the opera. It reportedly made a big stir among Brits and overseas Chinese in the UK.

Wang Shuaiwen, a 6-year-old Chinese-Canadian famous for his musical talent, recently held a charity concert combining piano and Kunqu Opera in Kunshan's Culture and Arts Center to mark the 44th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Canada.

During the Mid-Autumn Festival gala organized by China Central Television in Suzhou on Sept 8, audiences will be presented with an adaptation of *The Peony Pavilion*, according to gala director Zhou Xiaolan.

The Beijing Imperial Granary's rendition of the play has also helped to stimulate new interest in Kunqu Opera.

The well-preserved storehouse that is more than 600 years old is located in Beijing and was adapted into a performance venue as part of the Nanxincang Cultural Complex that includes dining, art galleries and nightspots.

Audiences will enjoy a fusion of performance and culinary arts. Before the Kunqu performance, guests will be treated to a banquet, with dishes named after songs from the opera.