

# Overview and Development of Yongjia Kunqu Opera

Yang Su

School of General Education, Wenzhou Polytechnic, Zhejiang Province, 325000, China

**Abstract:** As an essential genre within the realm of Kunqu Opera, Yongjia Kunqu Opera has been gradually garnering attention in recent years, riding the wave of the resurgence of the Eastern powerhouse. This article primarily delves into the overview and development of Yongjia Kunqu Opera, encompassing its distinctive vocal style, character composition, pivotal plays, regional attributes, and the significant revitalization efforts it has experienced in recent times, backed by support from various sectors of society and the government. The aim is to provide a comprehensive understanding of Yongjia Kunqu Opera to the wider audience.

**Keywords:** Yongjia Kunqu Opera, Overview and Development.

## 1. Introduction of Kunqu Opera

As an ancient vocal and theatrical form in China, Kunqu Opera is now also referred to as "Kun Opera." Its original name is "Kunshan Tune," often abbreviated as "Kun Tune." Kunqu Opera is often likened to an "orchid" among the diverse array of performances because it not only ranks among the oldest forms of traditional Han Chinese opera but is also a precious gem within the traditional cultural heritage of the Han people, especially in the realm of opera arts. Originating in the 14th century, Kunqu Opera was founded by Gu Jiantu, a native of Kunshan in Suzhou, China. During the Ming Dynasty in the Jiajing period, Wei Liangfu made improvements to it and promoted it nationwide. Subsequently, Kunqu Opera experienced explosive growth, leading the way in China's theatrical scene for nearly 300 years. Kunqu Opera is known for its refined lyrics, graceful vocalizations, and intricate performances. Its performance style combines singing, recitation, acting, dance, and martial arts, earning it the title of "ancestor of all operas." The vocal style of Kunqu is known as "Zhongzhou Yun," and its rhythm is controlled by drums and clappers, with primary accompanying instruments including *qudi* (a flute-like instrument) and *saxian* (a three-stringed instrument). While other types of Chinese opera have evolved in terms of scripts, vocalizations, and performances over time, Kunqu Opera has retained many traditional features, earning it the nickname of a "living fossil." As a result, in 2001, Kunqu Opera was designated by UNESCO as a "Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity."

## 2. The Artistic Characteristics of Yongjia Kunqu Opera

The Chinese Kunqu opera, due to regional differences, has given rise to various schools, one of which is the important Yongjia Kunqu, abbreviated as "Yong Kun." It is an ancient local theatrical genre from Zhejiang Province, China. It gained popularity in regions such as Wenzhou, Taizhou, and northern Fujian. Yongjia Kunqu evolved from the foundation of southern opera and the merits of Kunshan opera, featuring a tighter melody, faster rhythm, and the frequent use of Wenzhou dialect. Employing the flute as its main accompaniment, Yongjia Kunqu adheres strictly to fixed musical patterns in its performance. Originally a folk art, Yongjia Kunqu has retained the essence of southern opera's

vocal style, embodying a strong sense of daily life, with performances marked by simplicity and ruggedness, distinct vocal techniques, and a valuable legacy in the history of traditional opera. Moreover, the performance style of Yong Kun balances seriousness and humor, simplicity and elegance, closely resembling nature. Its performance content aligns with real-life logic, with actors' stage actions rooted in reality. For instance, when portraying ascending or descending stairs, actors ensure that the number of steps matches. When depicting boat journeys, they convey the genuine feeling of the bow and stern's synchronized movements. Yongjia Kunqu holds immense artistic value within the realm of traditional Chinese opera, as evidenced by the praise of Kunqu master Yu Zhenfei, who said, "Neither the Northern Kunqu nor the Southern Kunqu can compare to Yong Kun." Formed during the late Ming Dynasty, Yongjia Kunqu drew inspiration from the prevalent southern opera scripts of Yongjia, creating a unique style distinct from the Four Great Traditions of Chinese opera. Its development was propelled by societal factors, successfully inheriting the cultural genes of Yongjia's southern opera and establishing a strong foundation among the common people. Through the wisdom of its predecessors, traditional scripts were re-adapted into concise performances, shifting from melodious and soft intonations to a vigorous and rough style with increased pace. This transformation suited open-air performances in rural areas, allowing the audience to comprehend the plot within a certain timeframe. Yong Kun's innovative and distinctive performance style has been warmly embraced by the people in regions like Wenzhou, Chuzhou, Jinhua, Taizhou, and northern Fujian.

## 3. Key Plays of Yongjia Kunqu Opera

Yongjia Kunqu has over 120 plays in total. Apart from well-known Song and Yuan dynasty southern operas like "Jing Chai Ji," "Bai Tu Ji," and "Pi Pa Ji," as well as Ming and Qing dynasty legendary plays such as "Xiu Ru Ji," "Shi Wu Guan," and "Yu Zan Ji," Yong Kun also possesses its unique repertoire including "Hua Fei Long," "Ni Suo Ji," and "He Lian Hua." In addition, Yongjia Kunqu incorporates smoke and special effects, such as acts like "Heavenly King Supports the Pagoda," "Tai Gong Fishing," "White Snake Emerges from Cave," and "Twin Dragons Clasp the Pearl." Characters' entrances with smoke and effects adhere to certain conventions and rules. Some plays, like "Nine Dragon Pillar," "Heavenly Joy Pillar," and "Flame Mountain," which

incorporate more of these effects, are referred to as "colorful head plays." Yongjia Kunqu's roles are divided into three main categories: "White Face" roles, "Flower Face" roles, and "Bao Tou" roles. "White Face" includes characters like lead male roles, young male roles, supporting roles, and minor roles. "Flower Face" includes major flower roles, secondary flower roles, minor flower roles, and fourth flower roles. "Bao Tou" includes lead female roles, older female roles, young female roles, and painted face roles.

Yongjia Kunqu's "Zhang Xie the Top Scholar" is the earliest discovered and most complete ancient Chinese opera script to date. Its performance traces reveal the genetic characteristics of Chinese opera culture, making it a crucial historical document for studying ancient Chinese opera. It is hailed by the modern academic community as a "living fossil of opera." Originally a Yongjia southern opera script, "Zhang Xie the Top Scholar" shares a theme with long-standing works like "Zhao Zhen and Cai Erlang" and "Wang Kui Carries Guifei." These works depict the rise and betrayal of a man while highlighting the virtuous and hardworking nature of a poor woman, portraying her as charming and blameless. She sternly rebukes Zhang Xie for his ingratitude and treachery. In contrast, the main character Zhang Xie is consumed by fame and fortune, displaying cruelty and wickedness. However, the eventual happy ending weakens the emotional impact of the work. In 2000, the Yong Kun Opera Troupe re-adapted and performed "Zhang Xie the Top Scholar," causing a sensation and earning the reputation of "one play revitalizing a troupe." In addition to "Zhang Xie the Top Scholar," in 2007, the troupe also re-arranged the renowned "Pi Pa Ji," often hailed as the "ancestor of southern opera," to commemorate the 700th anniversary of the birth of the late Yuan dynasty playwright Gao Zecheng. In October of the same year, the Yong Kun version of "Pi Pa Ji" was staged at the "International Symposium on the 700th Anniversary of Gao Zecheng's Birth and 'Pi Pa Ji'" and received widespread acclaim. The play is set in the Eastern Han dynasty and follows the story of scholar Cai Bojie who leaves his parents and wife to take the imperial examination. He achieves success and becomes an official, eventually marrying the daughter of Prime Minister Niu. Meanwhile, his wife Zhao Wuniang serves her in-laws devotedly. During a famine, Cai's parents pass away, and Zhao Wuniang sells her hair to build their grave. Carrying a pipa (a musical instrument) on her back, she journeys to the capital to find her husband, singing filial songs along the way. Ultimately, with the help of the prime minister's daughter, the couple is reunited. This widely known and thought-provoking piece continues to be performed on the opera stage. Moreover, Yongjia Kunqu has reorganized and adapted other common plays such as "Golden Seal," "Pi Pa Ji," "Zhe Gui Ji," "Three Requests to Fan Lihua," "Jing Chai Ji," "Bai Tu Ji," "Killing the Dog," "Princess of a Hundred Flowers," "Peony Pavilion," "On the Wall," "Giving the Book," "Meng Jiangnv Presents Warm Clothing," and "Chai Chuan Ji," among others.

#### **4. The Historical Inheritance of Yongjia Kunqu Opera**

Legend has it that Yongjia Kunqu has a history of over 600 years. However, despite being a repository of rich traditions and standing out in the realm of Chinese Kunqu opera, Yongjia Kunqu has undergone a challenging history of inheritance and preservation, often facing the threat of

disappearance. In the late 1940s, due to social upheaval, various opera troupes struggled to survive and disbanded. Performers had to seek alternative livelihoods, leading to the gradual decline of Yongjia Kunqu, with only one or two troupes still active in rural areas. After liberation, scattered performers formed a troupe called the "Julu Kun Opera Troupe" in 1957, later renamed the "Yongjia Kun Opera Troupe" when placed under the administration of Yongjia County. Towards the end of the 20th century, the Yongjia Kunqu Teaching and Learning Center was established, but it soon faced difficulties due to a lack of performers, leaving it in an awkward situation where there were no plays to transmit. Shortly after the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, the Yongjia Kun Opera Troupe was disbanded. In 1970, the troupe was reorganized, but in 1984, it was dissolved again, causing Yongjia Kunqu to vanish from the stage. It wasn't until 1999 that the Yongjia County Committee and Government decided to re-establish the "Yongjia Kunqu Teaching and Learning Center," thereby rescuing Yong Kun and allowing it to continue its valuable contributions. In 2001, Kunqu, including "Yong Kun," was designated as a "Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity" by UNESCO, representing Chinese national opera. It was also listed as one of the first "Representative Works of Intangible Cultural Heritage" in China. The declining Kunqu opera finally saw a glimmer of revival. In 2003, with the rapid economic development of Yongjia, the Kunqu Teaching and Learning Center sent 10 students for training in Shanghai. After acquiring solid foundational skills, they returned to the ancient "Yong Kun" stage and showcased their talents. This marked the emergence of a new generation of inheritors for Yongjia Kunqu, along with renewed vitality and a solid team. In 2005, Yong Kun was included in the first batch of "National-Level Intangible Cultural Heritage" list. Simultaneously, Yong Kun finally reestablished itself as a troupe. The Kunqu Teaching and Learning Center held recruitment drives in 2006 and 2007, transforming the initial 11-member center into a fixed troupe with over 40 performing members. This professional troupe became capable of staging performances. Thus, Yong Kun, characterized by local themes, mixed with dialect and colloquial speech, melodious music, lively humor, and natural performances, once again stepped into the public spotlight.

The reason why Yongjia Kunqu has been able to persist despite facing a "twisting and turning" development path, shortages in personnel, and inadequate venues is inseparable from the deep and unwavering love the older generation of artists have for Yong Kun. The rise and fall of Yong Kun depend on the development and evolution of the times. Only when a country prospers and stabilizes, and its economy and society develop, can an exceptional regional theatrical genre flourish. Today, Yongjia Kunqu, as a treasure trove of Chinese opera, has become a living fossil for the study of "Southern Opera," gaining more attention. Society has begun to value the preservation and inheritance of Yong Kun, entering a new phase of development. In recent years, Yong Kun has actively organized public performances such as "Entering Schools, Enterprises, and Grassroots," with an annual count of around 120 performances. The Yongjia Kun Opera Troupe seeks to cultivate an opera ecological environment through these accessible and public performances, aiming to nurture an audience market and create a space conducive to the sustainable development of Kunqu opera. During the performance process, Yong Kun has integrated many modern

artistic forms, boldly innovating in costume design, stage aesthetics, scene transitions, and more. In addition, the Yongjia troupe has been exploring ways to make Kunqu opera deeply rooted in the community, transforming it into a down-to-earth art form loved by the people. The "First Yong Kun Performance Week in 2017" brought three classic Southern operas to the audience, allowing them to enter the Yongjia People's Assembly Hall for just one yuan to watch authentic Yong Kun opera. Troupe leader Xu Xiantiao explained that this initiative wasn't about making a profit. Instead, they aimed to encourage people to step into the theater by offering a symbolic "one yuan" ticket fee. The goal was to foster a cultural consumption mindset among the public, helping them better understand and respect the art of opera.

However, the Yongjia Opera Troupe doesn't stop at bringing Yong Kun closer to the people. They are also actively exploring ways to genuinely pique people's interest and foster their love for it. The troupe designs various programs and performance formats to cater to different audience groups. For performances in cultural halls or rural areas, they choose easily understandable and story-driven plays, such as "Zhezi Xi." For campus performances, considering the audience is predominantly young, they select well-known plays like "Peony Pavilion." They narrate and perform while explaining the story behind "Peony Pavilion" and its connection with Kunqu opera, aiming to spark the students' interest. The traditional Kunqu opera, once only performed on rural "ancient stage" platforms, has now stepped onto the grand stages of urban theaters. Kunqu performers have embarked on cultural exchanges in various cities across the country, including Hong Kong and Taiwan. Some of their productions are also broadcasted on the Central Television's opera channel. Simultaneously, Kunqu opera has initiated a series of outreach performances aimed at benefiting the public. This includes the "Four Engagement Performances": entering campuses, auditoriums, communities, and enterprises, which has led to a growing awareness of Kunqu opera among the public. Kunqu opera, with its unique value in literature, drama, and the arts, has received significant support and financial investment from various levels of government. Presently, Kunqu opera has established a path of government promotion, societal support, and market-driven innovation. This includes the formulation of a series of work outlines to protect, inherit, and promote Kunqu opera heritage. Initiatives like establishing Kunqu study centers and websites, developing Kunqu performance bases and venues, launching Kunqu campus engagement activities, and conducting various grassroots Kunqu events, have deeply rooted the art of Kunqu opera in the community.

## 5. Conclusion

The elegant and exquisite Yongjia Kunqu opera, with its graceful and melodious melodies, narrates the changing seasons of time and softly recites the poems of history on the stage. Every expression, every smile, every frown, every glance of the performers showcases their solid foundation. Whether it's the seamless flow of the theatrical rhythm or the jewel-like singing, they evoke a sense of longing and endless reverie. In the bright sunlit day, myriad purples and reds burst into bloom. Like a lotus emerging from the water, Yongjia Kunqu opera will surely flourish more passionately and exuberantly in the grand garden of Chinese literature and art in this new era. The winds of globalization have swept across every corner of the world, and Kunqu opera will ride this wind to sing the melodies of the East and convey the wisdom of the Orient. Whether it's the intricate structure resembling carved moonlight and arranged clouds or the ingeniously designed drama, Kunqu opera's unique artistic expression perfectly embodies the unparalleled craftsmanship and creative ingenuity of classical Chinese literature and art. After enduring the test of time, it will continue to thrive, remaining evergreen and rejuvenated. Kunqu opera is deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture, drawing nourishment from it and contributing back in return. Protecting Kunqu opera signifies a unique path for preserving Chinese culture's distinctive essence amidst the wave of globalization. Moreover, it holds profound symbolic and practical significance in shaping China's cultural creativity, attractiveness, and cohesion, both as a guiding symbol and a practical direction.

## Acknowledgment

Funding Project: Wenzhou City Philosophy and Social Sciences Project "The Inheritance and English Dissemination of Wenzhou Intangible Cultural Heritage 'Yongjia Kunqu' - A Case Study of 'Zhang Xie, the Top Scorer'" (Project Number: 21wsk335).

## References

- [1] Xu Hongtu. History of Zhejiang Opera[M]. Hangzhou: Hangzhou Publishing House, 2010.
- [2] Wenzhou Municipal Bureau of Culture, editor. New Script Collection of Wenzhou Southern Opera[M]. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2001.
- [3] Yu Weimin. The Transmission of the Five Major Southern Operas of the Song and Yuan Dynasties in Modern Local Operas[J]. Cultural and Artistic Research: 2009(4).
- [4] Zhang Ziwen. Investigation Report on the Current Situation of Yongjia Kunqu[D]. Wenzhou: Master's thesis, Wenzhou University, 2017.