

# An Orchid in a Traditional Garden

*Kunqu* Opera blooms afresh 600 years after birth and subsequent decay

By Pan Xiaoqiao

The Northern Kunqu Opera Theater presents the opera *Peony Pavilion* in central China's Wuhan University of Technology on April 17





Imagine a star performer at the age of 60 still retaining the charisma of their heyday and keeping the audience enthralled during a three-hour performance, and you have the profile of the Beijing-based Northern Kunqu Opera Theater (Beikun), which has had the honor of performing in the 2012 London Olympics and re-popularizing an art form that is 600 years old.

To celebrate its 60th birth anniversary, Beikun served a cultural feast at the Tianqiao Performing Arts Center in Beijing in June, performing *Peony Pavilion*, a *Kunqu* Opera masterpiece based on the eponymous romance by Tang Xianzu, a dramatist and writer in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) who was William Shakespeare's contemporary, and other masterpieces, marking a *Kunqu* renaissance.

*Peony Pavilion* was staged with seven actresses playing the role of Du Liniang, the heroine, while six actors were cast as Liu Mengmei, the hero. By having several performers play the same role, Beikun offered its young cast an opportunity to go on stage while the audience could see different performing styles.

## New life for an ancient art

"During the anniversary week performances, more people got to know about *Kunqu* and Beikun," Yang Fengyi, Director of Beikun, said. "Our performers also harvested a lot of benefits. Particularly, their confidence in *Kunqu* Opera and in themselves was renewed. The audience's passion and support will encourage us to perform more and let more people know about *Kunqu*."

Beikun, established in 1957, is the only professional *Kunqu* opera troupe north of the Yangtze River. Apart from regular performances and tours, the recent years have seen it becoming increasingly active in propagating the opera among young students in universities. In April, Beikun sent a team to Wuhan, central China's Hubei Province, to stage *Peony Pavilion* in five universities, and also to deliver an art appreciation lecture on *Kunqu* Opera.

Shao Tianshuai, a rising star in Beikun, participated in the evening gala of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing on May 14.

"I was very excited to know that I had been selected," Shao said. "I was happy not only for myself but also for *Kunqu*. The chance was a milestone in the history of the opera. There was no *Kunqu* Opera performance in last year's G20 Summit in Hangzhou. So it was very encouraging to be selected. We were proud and pleased to see *Kunqu* so well received by leaders from around the world."

According to Yang, in the past, when Beikun planned performance tours abroad, it was not easy to get a foreign government department or organization willing to host them. But in the past years, they have been frequently invited to

## ↓ The Power of Love & Kunqu

Hailed as a classic of classics, "Chinese Shakespeare" Tang Xianzu's *Peony Pavilion* is a love story with supernatural elements. Du Liniang, a noblewoman, falls asleep in her family garden where she has a vivid dream of meeting a handsome young scholar and falling in love with him.

When she wakes up, she becomes obsessed by the dream and pines away for her dream lover. On her deathbed, she asks her family to keep her portrait under a stone in the garden.

Three years later, a young man stops in the garden while traveling to take his civil service exam. He sees the portrait and falls in love with it. Du's ghost appears before him, telling him that she is buried in the garden. If he can dig up the body, she will return to life. He digs up her corpse, which is miraculously preserved, and she comes back to life and the two are united.

*Peony Pavilion* breaks the feudal social barrier that prevented young people from looking for true love. It conveys the author's belief that as long as love is real and unwavering, the living can die for it while the dead can come back to life.

perform around the world.

Last year, a Beikun delegation visited Hungary and the Chinese and Hungarian cultural authorities decided that the story of *Princess Sissi*, Austria's longest-serving empress Elisabeth who was married to Emperor Franz Joseph I, would be enacted as a *Kunqu* Opera performance.

Beikun toured Austria with two operas, *Snow in Summer*, a masterpiece by playwright Guan Hanqing (1241-1320) chronicling the suffering of a filial daughter in law, and *Peony Pavilion*.

"There were no English subtitles or microphones and yet the nearly 1,000-strong audience watched in rapt silence," Yang said. "*Snow in Summer* is very difficult to understand, even for a Chinese audience, but everyone there was listening intently and quietly. Later, a lot of people came to tell us that they like the costumes, headdresses, music and almost everything we showed them."

The tour, Yang added, convinced her that traditional Chinese performing arts have a potential huge audience base in the world.

## Mother of all operas

With a history of more than 600 years, *Kunqu* is believed to be the mother of all traditional operas in China, showcasing the very essence



Youth-oriented version of *Peony Pavilion*

of ancient Chinese music and performing art.

China is home to more than 300 genres of traditional opera, which can be divided into roughly two categories: the Peking Opera type and operas which follow the *qupai* or fixed-melody style. Of all traditional operas that use *qupai*, *Kunqu* follows the strictest rules. Performers sing to the accompaniment of traditional Chinese musical instruments like the flute, *pipa* or lute, the zither-like *guzheng*, and percussions.

*Kunqu* Opera boasts of excellent drama scripts, which are literary masterpieces in themselves like *Peony Pavilion*, *The Palace of Eternal Youth*, a 17th-century classic about an emperor's obsessed love for a lady in the court which leads to a coup and tragedy, and *The Peach Blossom Fan*, a play that chronicles the fall of the Ming Dynasty and reportedly took playwright Kong Shangren (1648-1718) more than a decade to write. The monologues by the leading characters are poetic, written in beautiful and romantic language.

Love is a permanent theme of *Kunqu* Opera. "The beauty of *Kunqu* is reflected in the way it understands, depicts and expresses sentiments, [especially] love," said Zhang Jingxian, a *Kunqu* artist acclaimed as a national intangible cultural heritage bearer. "Take *Peony Pavilion* for example. Du Liniang is confined to her residence but still pursues love with valor. ►►





Wang Yueli (right), a 32-year-old *Kunqu* Opera teacher in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, teaches a student how to play the role of Du Linliang for the *Peony Pavilion* opera



An actor from the Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe demonstrates how to perform *Kunqu* Opera during a visit to Brussels, Belgium on October 4, 2016

She is even willing to die for true love, hoping she will be resurrected. This was not a common notion in the feudal society 600 years ago and is an important reason why *Peony Pavilion* is still so popular in today's modern society," said Zhang.

Given the sophisticated script, strict singing and performance criteria, and most importantly, the complicated sentiments to be conveyed, the bar for *Kunqu* performers is set very high. In the *Kunqu* Opera circle, there is a common saying that one minute

on stage needs 10 years of practice.

According to Shao, they have to read the script diligently, using ancient Chinese dictionaries to comprehend the meaning of each character. Then they have experienced teachers critiquing performances to push the performers closer to perfection.

Wang Pushi is studying *Kunqu* in Beijing Traditional Chinese Arts School. The 17-year-old was allowed to make his stage debut only after three and a half years of studying the opera. "I have to work very hard. I'm afraid I might



damage its beautiful image if I treat it casually," the teenager said.

## Ups and downs

*Kunqu* Opera began to take shape in the Ming Dynasty and reached its zenith in the late 16th century. According to historical records, during the reign of Emperor Wanli (1573-1620), in Suzhou of east China's Jiangsu Province alone, regarded as the birthplace of *Kunqu*, there were several thousands of professional performers, much more than the total number today.

The genre once outshone almost all other traditional operas and kept prospering for more than two centuries. However, by the middle of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), it gradually lost its vitality, the decline largely attributed to the lack of new dramas after master playwrights like Tang passed away. Another reason was it being out of reach of ordinary people. Without





Shao Tianshuai (center), an actress from the Northern Kunqu Opera Theater, performs a short extract from the *Eternal Palace* opera at an evening gala held on May 14 during the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation

a certain level of cultural or literary knowledge, it is impossible to understand *Kunqu*, let alone appreciate it.

Ke Jun, head of Jiangsu Provincial Kunqu Opera Theater, gave a bleak picture of the situation in rural Suzhou in the 1990s in a past interview: "That day, there were 20 performers on stage but only three people in the audience, of whom, one was sleeping, one was walking around and the third was cracking and eating melon seeds."

In 2000, Suzhou hosted the first China Kunqu Opera Festival. Held every three years, the successive editions have been presenting newly adapted classic dramas, bringing a lot of excellent plays and performers in the limelight. In 2001, *Kunqu* Opera joined UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List and since then, the opera began to regain its rightful place in modern times.

*Kunqu* is an art form that is handed down to

students by teachers orally and through demonstrations. China's Ministry of Culture has been offering a bonus of 20,000 yuan (\$3,000) to teachers who teach one classic *Kunqu* drama to a student to encourage the propagation of more classics.

The opera now faces a critical question: How to balance inheritance with innovation? "No one knows what *Kunqu* Opera was like 600 years ago as it kept changing to meet audiences' changing aesthetic tastes. You have to keep moving forward. But you should never abandon the roots or it would no longer be *Kunqu* Opera," Yang said.

A successful example is Beikun's new adaptation, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, based on the eponymous semi-autobiographical 18th-century novel, where violin has been added to the original band. "This change was widely accepted by the audience, who felt the violin made the music sweeter, without changing the

essence or style of *Kunqu* music," Yang said. As she sees it, innovation comes from the natural development of the art, rather than from changes made solely for the sake of innovation.

## Catching young people's fancy

Yu Hao, who was avidly watching Beikun's anniversary performance, said she saw her first *Kunqu* Opera seven years ago. "I was captivated by Cui Yingying, the pretty heroine of *The Romance of the West Chamber*, and since then have been irreversibly in love with *Kunqu* Opera," she said.

Though traditional operas in China are generally favored by the elderly, in recent years, *Kunqu* is becoming a fad among young people. This is largely attributed to the youth-oriented version of *Peony Pavilion* adapted by Pai Hsien-yung, a contemporary writer in Taiwan, in 2004. While some critics panned it for the "excessively modern" stage-setting, it has been well received by the audience, who otherwise may never have been attracted to the theater and *Kunqu* Opera.

Pai's version was performed for three nights in central China's Wuhan University in April 2008, with all the 6,000 tickets sold out. Students chose to stand in the aisles to watch, instead of going away.

When asked the reason for young people's rising interest in *Kunqu* Opera, Yang said she had asked the young fans the same question. "They all tell me it's because *Kunqu* Opera is so beautiful. The language is poetic, the music silky and the actors' motions graceful, making the opera attractive to the young, who hope to improve their cultural quality through watching or even learning to play the *Kunqu* Opera."

Yang also felt that young people's exposure to foreign cultures had grown more than ever before. Consequently, some of them are beginning to look for the very essence of Chinese culture. Besides, young people also have the cultural knowledge required to understand and appreciate *Kunqu* Opera.

Liu Xuan, a classmate of Wang in Beijing Traditional Chinese Arts School, has chosen to study *Kunqu* Opera because she thinks though it is hard to master, the opera improves her cultural aura and overall quality. "It is really beautiful and elegant and worth hard work," she said. Liu's aim is to work hard and get admitted to the Central Academy of Drama and then become a Beikun troupe member.

In two years' time, Beikun will see a new office building coming up, designed to be a modern, comprehensive and international art center. It will comprise three theaters, rehearsal studios and also a *Kunqu* Opera museum, giving *Kunqu* lovers, especially young people, easier access to the ancient art. ■

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