**Elided Transformations: Constant Change in *Kunqu*'s Traditional Repertoire**

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Traditional repertoire in *xiqu*is often thought of as static. This paper considers how recorded living *kunqu*actors' accounts of how and why they learnt and performed particular *kunqu*scenes frame the question of authenticity. While authenticity and tradition are foregrounded in actor accounts when approached at a granular level, deep and pervasive alterations are perceived. Such changes have altered performance practice for any given scene on moralistic, political, aesthetic, or dramatic grounds, and these alterations were made (and unmade) at all periods of PRC history.

Kunqu theatregoers often subscribe to “the idea that each Kunqu scene has its own unitary choreography of performance, identical across all performers and lineages” (Hunter Gordon 2016a, 7), but in fact the constant and ongoing alteration of its repertoire make it impossible to identify as an unchanging series of practices. Accounts of the contingent nature of transmission and the protean shape of any given performed scene tend not to jive well with contemporary orthodoxies which nowadays often also carry the authority of a legitimating PRC state, which integrates kunqu-as-tradition or other forms of xiqu into tourism offerings and official cultural programming and textual materials. But much of the text and context to pursue such arguments is unavailable to theatre studies scholars working outside of Chinese languages, and disregarded by Chinese studies specialists who are not theatregoers and therefore aren’t familiar with either the specific histories or the associated discourses.

It is in many ways fundamentally through speaking to actors (and musicians, and costumers, and fans, and administrators, etc.) that some of the basic questions of Chinese theatre practice can become elucidated. Such texts and conversations allow us to understand the ways in which tradition is constituted of both basic technical capital and constant change, comprehend the interaction of the state power, through cultural policy, on the stage arts; and grasp the incredible variability of performance over space and time. To help provide readers with some of the context upfront, the introductory sections provide lists of plays, authors, theatre figures, troupes, role types, etc. and some clarifications about technique and structure.

As each lecture shows, training, instruction and performance are dynamic and dialogic processes. Repertoire is not unchanging either in the larger view (what scenes and plays are regularly performed?) nor in detail (what music, text, and choreography composes any given scene?). These perspectives are particularly valuable given the totalizing weight often assigned in popular and official rhetoric to “tradition.”

**Nature of Changes**

In actor-centred texts such as biographies and autobiographies, kunqu actors will often explain in detail the nature of their changes. While this is not the place to go to establish a list of changes, which are extremely numerous, it is possible to mention several types of changes that have been made in kunqu repertoire in recent decades

* The resumption of pieces of repertoire with little or no recent performance history
* Changes in costuming and make-up for aesthetic purposes
* Changes in costuming, lines, plotting, movement and characterization to create “healthier” characters and relationships
* The elimination of distracting lines that are difficult to understand
* The addition of new lines or motions to aid understanding
* The addition of new movements to augment dramatic tension
* The elimination of arias because they are repetitive or because the scene is long
* The changing of lines to be less rude or erotic
* The borrowing of elements from other scenes or genres because deemed appropriate

The more rigorous categorization of such changes must be set aside for present purposes, but almost any actor account is one simultaneously of continuity and of change.

**Actor Knowledge in a Network**

Actors of Chinese traditional theatre (xiqu)have access to a large class of knowledge about their craft—history, technique, aesthetics, anecdote— that is not easily available to others except through interaction with them. Fortunately, in recent years, published actor accounts have proliferated, usually from an immediate oral basis—conversations or lectures transformed into book form. Since tools of xiqu pedagogy have remained overwhelmingly oral, and textbooks are neither widely available nor in common use, there are many topics that can only be elucidated with reference through insider accounts—and, as with any oral history or artistic transmission—the pool of knowledge for the remoter past is constantly diminishing.

Master actors represent a vast reservoir of technical, historical, and theoretical knowledge, but it generally remains confined to the circles of performers, musicians, students, and fans. University programs within China, while maintaining cordial and sometimes warm relations with theatres, tend to focus on China’s historical performance traditions in their textual expressions. Consequently, there are no greater authorities on the philology or version histories of Chinese theatre—subjects on which actors are often weaker—but engagement with the contemporary stage is sporadic, and conducted within parameters set by the party-state.

It’s generally acknowledged that xiqu is in practice “performer-centered rather than playwright/director/ composer-centered—the performer is the focus of creativity at many if not all levels of fundamental performance structure” (Wichmann 1994, 98). Music and script were both much altered and developed by generations of actors, in late imperial China as in the present day (in which administrators and directors will also have a great deal more sway). But while it can be fairly considered that “performers—rather than playwrights, composers, directors, or performance theorists-have functioned as the aesthetic, creative, and performative center of Beijing opera [jingju]” (Wichmann 1990, 146), such claims must be tempered in the case of kunqu by the fact that numerous plays are valued also for their literary content and regarded as authorial achievements. In other words, while the dramatic literary canon and troupe repertoire have a relatively distant relationship in most genres, in kunqu they are closely linked. Despite these acknowledgments, in practice the voices of Chinese xiquperformers are seldom heard in English. (Auto)biographical works tend to circulate among fans but are seldom used as sources for xiquscholars.

One challenge with translating actor knowledge is the dense web of reference in which their knowledge is communicated. As these pages amply show, actors explain their art in terms of other scenes, other roles, actors, troupes, genres, teachers, playwrights, techniques, and performance instances. The discursive system is very open in one sense—in that any number of performers, performance traditions, and events may be referenced—but also quite discrete and bounded, in that Chinese spoken theatre, cinema, literature, and academic discourse and theory (let alone non-Chinese elements of all these) enter into only on the margins of it—the exception in these lectures being Hua Wenyi (Lecture 6), due directly to her decades abroad and consequent wide performance experience abroad and in experimental productions.

One major aspect of the network is teacher-student lineage. As one scholar writes, actors and aficionados might consider that “in one performance of the role of the concubine Yang Yuhuan, Mei Lanfang incarnates all the styles of his various teachers” (Riley 1997, 28). Master-disciple might be another valid translation of the relationship, and in many cases such bonds are close to kinship. In this book, the use of “Teacher Wang” or “Master Li” has been removed in favor of full names, but the respectful adoption of master-disciple terminology typically remains. Indeed, ‘Teacher,’ is also the normal and respectful name that a fan or aficionado would address more actors. These relationships create lineages which transmit knowledge and confer prestige.

The corpus of a single actor’s performance career also operates as a network. The recollection of an actor’s “previous performances, especially if these are effective ones, will inevitably remain as part of the theatrical institution, and through casting, publicity, and collective memory, future experiences of audiences in the theatre” (Carlson 1994, 113). Role types, genealogies, and on-stage performance movement extend this intertextuality not only to an actor’s own performances, but also to those of their teachers, rivals, and students. Discussing a kunquscene is for most audience members a discourse of comparison: between an actor at present, in the past and potentially in the future; between this actor in this role and another; between this actor and other actors in the same role.

**A History of Transformation**

Although it was the period commonly conceived as having ‘saved kunqu,’ the 1950s was also a period during which much xiqurepertoire was banned or sanitized on grounds such as obscenity, superstition, feudalism, or misogyny. A relevant directive from 1951 stated that “all xiqu plays that advocate resisting invasion, resisting oppression, loving the motherland, loving freedom, loving labor, extolling people's integrity and kind-heartedness should be encouraged and promoted; conversely, all xiqu plays that promote the ideology of feudal slavery, encourage savage, horrifying, or lewd and obscene behavior, or vulgarize and humiliate the laboring masses should be opposed” (quoted in Liu 2009, 395). At the latest by the 1950s, it becomes “impossible to speak of an unadulterated Kunqu tradition: reconstruction work was an unavoidable reality of Kunqu preservation, as written scripts outnumbered the known repertoire of performance conventions” (Rebull 2017, 63). Though many scenes disappeared from repertoire, never to return, the period saw the creation of several works that remain in repertoire today as well as the first inclusion of kunqu tours abroad in cultural diplomacy.

The Cultural Revolution broke out in 1966. Troupes were disbanded and actors dispersed. Although some found work performing revolutionary operas, the period was disastrous for traditional troupes, actors, and repertoire. Recovery after the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, however, was relatively swift. The early to mid-1980s were “a period of cultural and political enthusiasm for excavating and reestablishing traditional culture following the end of the Cultural Revolution,” with several kunqu events and institutions set up to transmit or ‘excavate’ repertoire (Hunter Gordon 2016a, 91). The septuagenarian performers of the “chuan” generation received greater recognition, and its remaining actors—in 1981, 16 of the original 60—were organized to instruct the younger generations (Yang 1984). The actors whose talks are presented in this volume rose to stardom in a revived theatre world that was still large, but faced a caesura— a generation of youngsters who had grown up with little or no access to these stage traditions.

The broad national base for xiqu has since diminished by new technology and the attractions of foreign culture, kunqu has in recent decades been able to build its particular cachet. Since the late 1990s, the state, identifying itself as the “guardians of a so-called Chinese national culture once” is able to “arrogate a monopoly of definition over the authenticity of lived cultural practices” including kunqu (Riemenschnitter 2009, 14). Kunqu has been increasingly built up as the ‘classical’ genre in tension with, but complementary and related to, the ‘national’ status of jingju. The establishment of the Kunqu museum in Suzhou (1994), the creation of a triannual Kunqu Festival in 2000 and especially the UNESCO recognition in 2001 were all signs that official interest in kunqu was picking up. Efforts have since continued to position and depict “kunqu as China's preeminent performing art form” (Sutcliffe 2011, 134).

UNESCO recognition has widely been understood as a fillip to kunqu practice, and certainly has brought the genre to wider attention, although traditionalists also lament the modernization and commercialization this has produced. Large-scale efforts on huge stages and with enormous casts constitute “attempts at interpreting classic plays for the purpose of building a new audience base and seeking new development for kunqu” (Wei 2011, 11), not always with great regard for cherished artistic conventions or established orders of precedence.

For traditionalists, a frequent concern is that “innovation, predicated upon the aesthetic preferences of the new audience, would be achieved at the expense of kunqu theatre’s age-old tradition” (Chen 2019, 329), and indeed core audiences are frequently far from welcoming of overt innovation (Stenberg and Cai 2017). Another concern is that reorienting for the tourist market may have deleterious effects, potentially by diverting performing time and privileging shorter and more easily digestible formats. Economic liberalization has necessarily changed troupe structure. The loosening of the danwei (“work-unit”) system has allowed some actors to strike out on their own, and the development of cultural entrepreneurship (and, less often, philanthropy) has generated other models of performance. Today kunqu is broadly perceived as a genre for “educated urbanites” who regard it as “ancient and complex” (Ong 2020, 255) as well “as a highbrow theatrical form fully worthy of their modern-day appreciation” (Xu 2011, 231).

There is both a fount of tradition and a practice of constant adaptation and alteration constantly occurring in kunqu, and “what UNESCO calls a six-hundred year-old performance tradition has, in many cases, not only been pieced together by “excavation” 挖掘 (wajue) and “re-arrangement” 整理(zhengli) from the 1980s onwards, but is all the richer because of that work” (Hunter Gordon 2016b, 151). Perhaps the best framework for ‘transmission’ i.e. the production of a theatre with classical roots in contemporary society, is the idea of “dynamic inheritance.” This term, developed in the adjacent area of Chinese dance research, aptly conveys the interdependence of materials of pre-20th century origin constituting kunqu tradition and the structured innovation that actors bring to a given work of theatre (Wilcox 2018). The term is also useful for navigating the dangerous discursive pass between recognizing the wealth of tradition and the relevance and reality of contemporary practice.

**Conclusions**

Deeper consideration of the stakes of authenticity and tradition discourse in contemporary *xiqu*and related 'traditional' arts is necessary, and proposes that the *xiqu*reform of the 1950s should be considered only a beginning to wide PRC performance alterations. The discourse of authentic *kunqu*tradition, which posits an unchanging past and a loyal present, appears both as a marker of continuity with pre-twentieth century textual, musical, and stage practices as well as a means for a particular genre to garner high status (and funds) in the contemporary PRC state-led theatre economy.  Tradition is dynamic and changing, and so the ‘ancientness’ or static views of tradition do a disservice to the important creative work of generations of actors.

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