

Kunqu, also known as Kunju, K'un-ch'ü, Kun opera or Kunqu Opera, is one of the oldest extant forms of [Chinese opera](#). It evolved from a music style local to [Kunshan](#), part of the [Wu cultural area](#), and later came to dominate [Chinese theater](#) from the 16th to the 18th centuries. It has been listed as one of the [Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity](#) by [UNESCO](#). ([1]) Wei Liangfu refined the musical style of kunqu, ([2]) and it gained widespread popularity when Liang Chenyu used the style in his drama *Huansha ji* (*Washing Silk*). ([3]) In 2006, it was listed on the [first national intangible cultural heritage list](#). In 2008, it was included in the List of Representative Works of [Intangible Cultural Heritage](#) of Humanity. In December 2018, [the General Office of the Ministry of Education](#) announced that Peking University is the base for inheriting excellent [traditional Chinese culture](#) in Kunqu. ([4])

Kunqu takes drum and board to control the rhythm of singing, with [Qu flute](#), [three strings](#) and so on as the main accompanying instrument; its singing pronunciation is "Zhongzhou Rhyme."

History

Kunqu tunes are believed to have been developed during the [Ming Dynasty](#) by Wei Liangfu from the port of [Taicang](#), but based off the songs of nearby [Kunshan](#). ([5]) Wei created Kunshan tunes modified from songs of Haiyan near [Hangzhou](#) and Yiyang of [Jiangxi](#); he also combined the [nanxi](#) rhythms, which often used flute, with the northern [zaju](#), where plucked string instruments are preferred. The created elegant Kunshan tunes are often called "water mill" tunes (*shuimo diao*). The first Kunqu opera, *Washing Silken Gauze* (*Huan Sha Ji*) was created by [Liang Chenyu](#) who was born in Kunshan and used Kunshan tunes throughout the opera. ([6]) Kunqu is a form of [chuanqi](#), and its emergence is said to have ushered in a "second Golden Era of Chinese drama."

The most famous Kunqu opera is [The Peony Pavilion](#) written by [Tang Xianzu](#). Other important works include [The Peach Blossom Fan](#), and [The Palace of Eternal Life](#).

Kunqu performance influenced the performance of many other styles of Chinese musical theater, including [Peking opera](#), which contains much Kunqu repertoire. Kunqu was referred to as Yabu ("elegant drama"), and it came under competition from a variety of operas (e.g. Shaanxi Opera, Clapper Opera, Yiyang tunes, [Peking Opera](#), etc.) termed Huabu ("flowery drama"), and as a result, Kunqu troupes experienced a commercial decline in the 19th century. However, in the early 20th century, Kunqu was re-established by philanthropists and was later subsidized by the [Communist state](#). Like most traditional forms of Chinese opera, Kunqu suffered setbacks both during the [Cultural Revolution](#) and again under the influx of Western culture during the

Reform and Opening Up policies, only to experience an even greater revival in the new millennium.

Today, Kunqu is professionally performed in seven major Mainland Chinese cities: [Beijing](#) ([Northern Kunqu Theater](#)), [Shanghai](#) ([Shanghai Kunqu Theater](#)), [Suzhou](#) ([Suzhou Kunqu Theater](#)), [Nanjing](#) ([Jiangsu Province Kun Opera](#)), [Chenzhou](#) ([Hunan Kunqu Theater](#)), [Yongjia County/Wenzhou](#) ([Yongjia Kunqu Theater](#)) and [Hangzhou](#) ([Zhejiang Province Kunqu Theater](#)), as well as in [Taipei](#). Non-professional opera societies are active in many other cities in China and abroad, and opera companies occasionally tour.

In 1919 [Mei Lanfang](#) and [Han Shichang](#), renowned performers of *Kunqu*, traveled to Japan to give performances. In the 1930s, Mei performed *Kunqu* in the United States and the Soviet Union and was well received. ([7])

Its melody or tune is one of the [Four Great Characteristic Melodies](#) in Chinese opera.

In 2006, [Zhou Bing](#) acted as a producer and art director for *Kunqu* (Kun Opera) of sexcentenary. It won Outstanding Documentary Award of 24th China TV Golden Eagle Awards; it won Award of TV Art Features of 21st Starlight Award for 2006.

Kunqu Opera is a rarity in the traditional culture and art of the Han nationality in China, especially in the art of opera. It is called an "orchid" in the hundred gardens.

Kunqu Opera is a blend of singing, singing, dancing and martial arts. It is known for its elegant lyrics, graceful style and delicate performance. It is one of the operas under the Southern Opera system, known as the "ancestor of hundred operas." Kunqu Opera uses drum and plate to control the rhythm of singing, and Qudi and three-stringed instruments as the main accompaniment instruments. Its pronunciation is "Zhongzhou rhyme."

Recognition

Kunqu Opera was listed as a [masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity](#) by [UNESCO](#) in 2001, and was included in the Masterpiece of the [Intangible Cultural Heritage](#) of Humanity in 2008. ([8]) ([9]) ([10])

In December 2018, the [General Office of the Ministry of Education](#) announced Peking University as the base of Kunqu Opera excellent traditional [Chinese Culture](#) Inheritance. ([4])

Kunqu opera was showcased in the 2019 Chinese Opera Culture Week on Oct 2, 2019.

In November 2019, the list of national intangible cultural heritage representative project protection unit ", the northern kunqu opera theater, chief of hunan province, jiangsu province, the performing arts group co., LTD., Shanghai chief, always fine chief always fine

kunqu opera ChuanXiSuo (zhejiang), China academy of art qualification for "kunqu opera" project protection unit. ([clarify]) In September 2022, due to institutional reform, the protection unit was renamed [Yongjia](#) Kunqu Opera Troupe (Yongjia Kunqu Opera Training Institute).

Characteristics

Kunqu Opera is characterized by the character line cavity, cavity with the character walk. Singing also has a certain cavity, different from other operas can be given free play according to the individual conditions of the actors. Instead, there are four strict determinations: tone, cavity, plate and spectrum.

The main difference between Nankun and Beikun is not the geographical location of the troupe, but whether the music is southern or northern. Kunqu Qupai music can be divided into vocal qupai and instrumental Qupai according to its different uses.

The biggest feature of Kunqu opera performance is strong lyricism, delicate movements, and the combination of singing and dancing is ingenious and harmonious. Kunqu opera is a comprehensive art of song, dance, mediation, and white performance, and the performance characteristics of singing and dancing have been formed in the long-term performance history, especially reflected in the performance body of each character, and its dance body can be roughly divided into two types: one is the auxiliary posture when speaking and the dance of rewriting the intention developed by gestures; One is a lyrical dance with singing [lyrics](#), which is not only a superb [dance move](#), but also an effective means to express the character's character and the meaning of the [lyrics](#).

The opera dance of Kunqu Opera has absorbed and inherited the traditions of ancient [folk dance](#) and [court dance](#), and has accumulated rich experience in the close integration of rap and dance through long-term stage performance practice. To meet the needs of the performance venue of narrative writing, many dance performances that focus on description are created, and cooperate with "drama" to become a folding drama with a strong story. Adapted to the needs of the performance venue with strong lyricism and movement, many lyrical dance performances have been created, which have become the main performance means of many single-fold lyric song and dance.

The Nianbai of Kunqu Opera is also very characteristic, because Kunqu Opera was developed from Wuzhong, so its voice has the characteristics of Wu Nong soft language. Among them, Harlequin also has a local white based on the Wu dialect, such as Su Bai, [Yangzhou Bai](#), etc. This market language in the [Wuzhong area](#), has a strong sense of life, and often uses Allegro-style rhyme white, which is very distinctive. In addition, the singing of Kunqu opera has

extremely strict specifications for the sound of words, lines, rhythm, etc., forming a complete singing theory.

Industry

Kunqu opera is divided into three categories: sinian horn, fresh horn and pure clown. ([11])

Because the early Kun opera belongs to the Southern Opera system, it inherits the role industry system of the Southern Opera, and simultaneously absorbs the long of the Northern Zaju, taking the basic roles of Sheng, Dan, Jing, Mei, Chou, outer and paste seven acts. ([11])

Huan Sha Ji, ([12]) an early work, reflects the character branch method in the early stage of Kun Opera. In addition to following the seven lines of Southern Opera, it also borrowed the setting method of Xiao Mei and Xiao Dan in Yuan Zaju, ([13]) and added five lines of Xiao Sheng, Xiao Dan, Xiao Mei, Xiao Wai and Xiao Jing, a total of twelve lines.

During the boom of Kun opera in the late [Ming Dynasty](#), in the Ming edition of the legend of Mohan Zhai, the original "tie" was changed to "Old Dan," which also absorbed the branch method of Zaju in the [Yuan Dynasty](#). Other roles are basically the same as Kun opera in the early period. During the [Kangxi](#) period of the [Qing Dynasty](#), The role industry of Kun opera basically maintained the system of "twelve characters in rivers and lakes."

During the reign of [Qianlong](#), Kunqu Opera was the most popular, the performing arts were further improved, and new breakthroughs were made in the role industry system for characterizing characters.

With the development of performing arts, the division of roles in Kun opera has become more and more detailed. Between Jia and Dao, the role industry of Kun opera combines the original "twelve roles in rivers and lakes" with the later more detailed division of labor.

Under the five lines of "Sheng, Dan, Jing, Mo and Chou," ([14]) there are twenty smaller lines, called "twenty doors."

Traditional Kun opera professional class clubs usually only have 18 actors, commonly known as "18 nets," while only a few large class clubs have 27 actors. General class club as long as ten doors complete, can perform, other roles can be replaced by close to the door of the actor, the ten basic door is known as the "ten court column," they are: net, official health, cloth health, old age, end, Zhengdan, five Dan, six Dan, vice, ugly. ([11]) Some of the most readily recognizable qualities of performance are: net, old, official students, Zhengdan four doors.

Each line of Kun opera has developed its own set of procedures and techniques in performance. These stylized action language has formed a complete and unique performance system of Kunqu Opera in terms of

characterizing characters, expressing characters' psychological states, rendering drama and enhancing appeal.

Stage art

It includes three aspects: rich clothing styles, exquisite colors and decorations, and [the use of faces](#) [zh].

In addition to inheriting the costume styles of opera characters since the Yuan and Ming dynasties, some costumes of Kunqu opera are very similar to the clothes that were popular in society at that time. Reflected in the play, military generals have their own uniforms, and civil officials also have a variety of clothes according to the class hierarchy of feudal society. Face paint is used for the two lines of net and ugly. Very few characters belonging to Sheng and Dan are also used by chance, such as [Monkey King](#) and Zhong Wuyan (Dan), and the colors are basically red, white, and black. After years of running-in processing, Kunqu opera art has formed a fairly perfect system, and this system has long occupied a dominant position in Chinese opera, so Kunqu opera art is revered as the "ancestor of a hundred operas," which has a profound impact on the development of the entire opera, and many local operas have absorbed its artistic nutrients to varying degrees, among which there are still some Kunqu operas.

Significance

Kunqu Opera is the oldest existing drama form in China with a complete performance system, which has had a profound influence on later Chinese operas.

Chinese opera has been spreading on the stage since its formation. With the change of time, the script, the voice and the performance are constantly changing. Kunqu Opera, on the other hand, is known as a "living fossil" with less changes and more traditional features of traditional operas. It is the only one of the three ancient operas in the world that has been preserved so far. It is also the representative of the traditional culture and art of the Han nationality.

By region

Due to the extensive performance activities of Kunban, in the last years of Wanli, Kunqu opera was introduced to [Beijing](#) and [Hunan](#) through [Yangzhou](#), ranking first among all voices and becoming the standard singing tone of legendary scripts: "Four Square Songs Must Zong Wumen." At the end of the [Ming Dynasty](#) and the beginning of the [Qing Dynasty](#), Kunqu opera spread to [Sichuan](#), [Guizhou](#) and [Guangdong](#), and developed into a national drama. The singing of Kunqu opera was originally based on the Wu language pronunciation of Suzhou, but after it was introduced to various places, it was combined with local dialects and folk music to derive many genres, forming a rich and

colorful Kunqu opera cavity system, and becoming a representative opera of the whole nation. During the [Qianlong](#) period of the [Qing Dynasty](#), the development of Kunqu opera entered its heyday, and since then Kunqu opera has begun to dominate the pear garden, which has lasted for six or seven hundred years, becoming the oldest existing form of opera with a long tradition in China and even the world. ([15])

The Kunshan singing began to spread its area, initially limited to the [Suzhou area](#), and during the Wanli period, it expanded to the south of the [Yangtze River](#) and north of the [Qiantang River](#) with [Suzhou](#) as the center, and also flowed into [Beijing](#) at the end of the Wanli period. In the [Qing Dynasty](#), the [Kangxi Emperor](#) loved Kunqu opera, which made it even more popular. In this way, the Kunshan singing became the most influential vocal cavity drama from the middle of the [Ming Dynasty](#) to the middle of the [Qing Dynasty](#).

Fujian

Ming Wanli period (1573–1619) before the introduction to Fujian. ([clarify]) The earliest recorded introduction of Kunshan dialect into [Fujian](#) was in 1574. Kunqu Opera is widely distributed in [Fujian](#), and has had some influence on local operas in [Fujian](#) more or less, directly or indirectly. In the Confucian drama founded by [Cao Xuefu](#) [zh] at the end of [Ming Dynasty](#), the main vocal cavity, "Douqiang," contains the components of Kunshan dialect. For example, the representative opera "Ziyuchai," the main tune is "13 tunes." Kunqu Opera also appears in the folk form of sitting and singing. Qing Qianlong 35 years (1770), Jian'ou County established the "Zhai Ya Lin Qu Society", learn to sing Kunqiang, commonly known as "singing a big tune". ([clarify])

Zhejiang

Kunqu Opera, commonly known as "Cao Kun" and "Jin Kun," is a Kunqu opera spread in the [Jinhua](#) area of [Zhejiang](#). It is called "Cao Kun" because of its simplification or change of local customs in language and melody. Because of the long-term floating performances in rural grasslands and temple fairs, farmers as the main audience, the language is more popular, the pursuit of plot twists and turns, singing tone is not rigidly four-tone style, mainly performing martial arts, work drama. ([clarify]) Since the [Ming Dynasty](#), it has been regarded as the authentic opera of [Wu opera](#). In fact, Kunqu Opera is a tributary of [Quzhou](#) and [Jinhua](#).