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## Chinese Traditional Kunqu Opera under the Digital Age

### Introduction

With a history of over 600 years, Chinese traditional Kunqu Opera has evolved from the local tone of Kunshan in the Ming Dynasty and subsequently came to dominate Chinese theater from the late Ming Dynasty to the Early Qing Dynasty. Its popularity peaked as a result of its tactful tone and delicate performances. It originated from the combination of Kunshan local music and Wu dialect by dramatist Gu Jian. On the basis of this local tune, another dramatist Wei Liangfu brought together the strengths of different tunes from the south and the north and developed Kunqu Opera's artistic potential. With various wonderful plots, the time spent in the theater seems like a dream that allows the audience to witness the splendor and loneliness of the dynasties and the touching love stories. It has also gone through a low period during the prosperity of Peking Opera when people lost interest in it and it almost disappeared on the stage of Chinese opera. Nowadays, as technology advances, a variety of entertainment emerge in front of people, vying for their limited time. Correspondingly, people pay less attention to Kunqu Opera's performance and inheritance. The lack of audience interest and low attendance rate in the theater burden the development of Kunqu Opera. It is facing a precarious situation once again in modern times and needs to fight for survival. Fortunately, this has aroused the discussion of many researchers and it is gradually becoming a common awareness

that Chinese traditional Kunqu Opera has to embrace the new digital technology for development opportunities and better preservation.

The purpose of this essay is to first find out how China and the West have utilized different forms of digital technology to promote Kunqu Opera in different ways, so as to discover where China can further take use of such technology and contribute to Kunqu Opera's preservation. Here, digital technology refers to electronic platforms that process, store, and present data. While China and the West share the same understanding on using digital technology to protect Kunqu Opera, their focuses and the forms of digital technology indeed differ. In the next section, by taking reception theory model from Hans Robert Jauss, particularly the horizon of expectations, this essay will analyze the connection between Kunqu Opera and digital technology. It will start from interpreting the data from official reports about Kunqu Opera's current situation and summarizing the popularity of digital technology in people's daily lives. Followed by the interpretation, this essay will conduct several case studies to compare the different focuses of China and the West when they utilize different forms of digital technology. And then, this essay will summarize its previous analysis and prove that digital technology could promote information transmission and interaction between performers and audiences in Kunqu Opera. With that conclusion, this essay will finally propose some possible ways that may help to preserve Kunqu opera.

### Method

The following analysis in this essay is based on the conceptual framework of the horizon of expectations from the reception theory model introduced by Hans Robert Jauss.

Horizon of expectations refers to reader's potential aesthetic expectation for the work due to their accumulated aesthetic experience in the past. More specifically, as Jauss interprets, "the new text evokes for the reader (listener) the horizon of expectations and rules familiar from earlier texts, which are then varied, corrected, altered, or even just reproduced" (23). In other words, even if readers are unaware of their expectations, it is critical to reconstruct the readers' horizon of expectations in order for the work to be recognized. This theory applies to both readers and literary works, as well as audiences and artistic works. Thus, evaluating whether employing digital technology in Kunqu Opera meets audience's horizon of expectations has become an important analytical part in this essay. To find out how Kunqu Opera has made use of digital technology, this essay will use data analysis to show the status quo of Kunqu Opera and the wide application of digital technology in daily life. Besides, this essay will compare the different focuses of China and the West in using different forms of digital technology to help Kunqu Opera through case studies.

## Analysis

### I. Kunqu Opera's current situation

Kunqu Opera encapsulates various forms of art, including literature, music, dance and so on. Due to its artistic value and cultural significance, on May 18, 2001, Kunqu Opera was selected as one of the 19 "Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity" by UNESCO in the first batch. However, it is currently struggling to survive. In the following analysis, according to the data from China Association of Performing Arts, this essay visualizes into these figures to showcase the current situation of Kunqu Opera.

To begin with, the overall market of opera performance is relatively small nowadays. This essay takes the overall economic scale, an index of economic size, as a representation to examine the market of opera performance. Besides, due to the lack of detailed data for 2019, this essay will use that from 2018 to analyze the opera market. In 2018, the performance box office revenue of professional theaters, the venues where opera performances often take place, achieved 7,961 million yuan, accounting for 43.69% of the overall performance market economic scale of 18,221 million yuan in revenue.

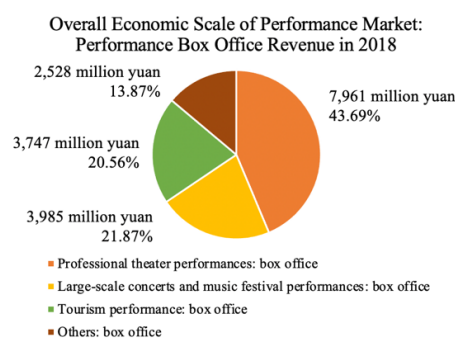


Figure 1: Overall Economic Scale of Performance Market: Performance Box Office Revenue in 2018

Source: China Association of Performing Arts

To be more specific, among all professional theater performance, opera has the smallest market size. As shown in the graph below, there are six categories in general: modern drama, opera, concerts and musicals, dance, Quyi (Chinese folk art) and acrobatics, and children drama. What is worth mentioning in the distribution data is that the box office of opera in 2018 only reached 806 million and accounted for 10.12% of all the performance revenue of 7,961 million yuan in professional theater. Compared with modern drama, the box office revenue of modern drama was 3.25 times that of opera. This indicates that opera market was the lowest among all the performances and opera is indeed facing challenges in its development.

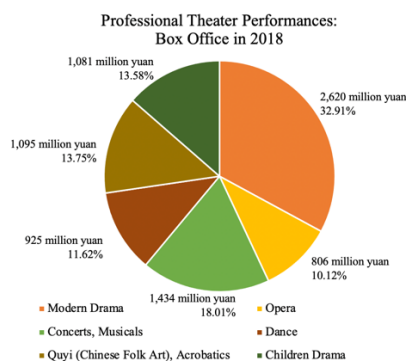


Figure 2: Professional Theater Performances: Box Office in 2018

Source: China Association of Performing Arts

On the contrary, there were 15,700 sessions that belong to opera in 2018, accounting for 15.47% of all the 101,500 sessions that took place in professional theater. Compared with modern drama again, the number of sessions of modern drama was only 1.11 times that of opera.

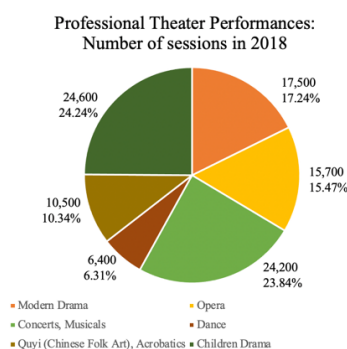


Figure 3: Professional Theater Performances: Number of Sessions in 2018

Source: China Association of Performing Arts

The difference in box office revenue and number of sessions between modern drama and opera in 2018 indicates that though opera has many sessions of performance, the low box office revenue could only be explained by its lower ticket price and attendance rate. This shows that the current state of the whole opera market is challenging and audience does not have much interest in opera.

Moreover, under the current low tide of opera market, Kunqu Opera's situation is worse than some of other operas. To examine the popularity and the corresponding trend of different operas, this essay takes Baidu Index as a relative standard. Baidu is one of the largest search engines in China, and to a certain extent, the search trend from Baidu Index can reflect the people's attention to the searched keywords in China. Therefore, this essay will use "Opera", "Kunqu Opera", and "Peking Opera" as keywords and compare their popularity trend by Baidu Index. From the figure below, it's obvious that within the nationwide, the index of "Opera" and "Peking Opera" are higher than that of "Kunqu Opera" at every point from May 16, 2021 to September 29, 2021. This indicates that Kunqu Opera is searched less and it has received less attention from the audience than other operas such as Peking Opera, which proves that Kunqu Opera is in a survival challenge nowadays in China.

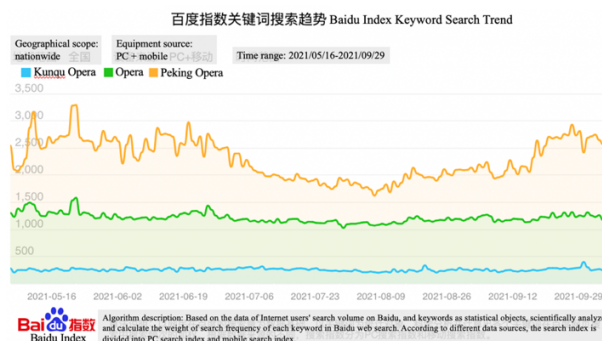


Figure 4: Baidu Index Keyword Search Trend of "Kunqu Opera", "Opera", and "Peking Opera"

Source: Baidu

## II. Digital Technology in China

Digital technology is commonly defined as electronic platforms that process, store, and present data in the form of digital tools. People could use digital technology to receive and transmit the information that is of interest to them. With rapid development of digital technology nowadays, the extent to which digital technology contributes to the preservation of

Kunqu Opera is closely related to people's overall exposure to digital technology. And one of the indicators for this degree of exposure is the Internet penetration rate, which refers to the percentage of the total population that can access the Internet in a specific area. As China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) reveals, of about 1400 million people in China, as of June 2021, the netizen size in China has reached 1.01 billion, and the Internet penetration rate has reached 71.6%. In particular, for online videos, as of June 2021, the number of users has reached 944 million, accounting for 93.4% of the total Internet users. Among the subcategories from online videos, the number of users of short video clips has reached 888 million, accounting for 87.8% of the total netizens. Besides, for live streaming, as of June 2021, the number of users has reached 638 million, accounting for 63.1% of the total netizens (17-25). The above data demonstrates that generally speaking, Chinese audiences have a relatively high degree of exposure to digital technology, among which people pay particular attention to online videos and live streaming. Such a high degree of attention provides support for the later analysis with regard to the effectiveness of using digital technology in Kunqu Opera to spread and develop.

In addition to the Internet penetration rate, it's critical to obtain the age distribution of the audience's exposure to digital technology, which is of great significance for investigating the future trend of using of digital technology in Kunqu Opera. As discussed above, Baidu Index, relying on Baidu's powerful search engine function in China, can effectively reveal the sensitivity of people of different ages to digital technology. Unfortunately, Baidu Index fails to record the statistic of the exact word "digital technology" as the keyword. So, this time "digital media", which often substitutes "digital technology" in Chinese, is selected as an alternative to

reveal people's interest in digital technology from different ages. Besides, TGI, target group index, refers to the strength or weakness of the target group in a specific research area. By comparing the TGI of users from one group with 100, this index is used to examine whether the group's users are more concerned about a certain type of problem than the overall level. As the following figure shows, from 1 Sep. 2021 to 30 Sep. 2021, among all Baidu users, about 9.69% are people younger than 19 years old, and 38.89% of these young people pay attention to “digital media”, which makes TGI index reach 401.4 and far exceed the average. And 28.78% of all Baidu users are in the age range from 20 to 29 and 41.45% of the users in this age range care about “digital media”, which makes TGI index reach 144.03 and exceed the average as well. Thus, comparing with the TGI index from people older than 30 years old, the TGI index for the group of people younger than 29 years old indicates that this group of people are more concerned about “digital media”. This reveals that the application of digital media, or digital technology as alternative, to other things will arouse this group of people's interests. Thus, using digital technology in Kunqu Opera is a way that attracts younger generation's attention, which will benefit Kunqu Opera's future development and preservation.

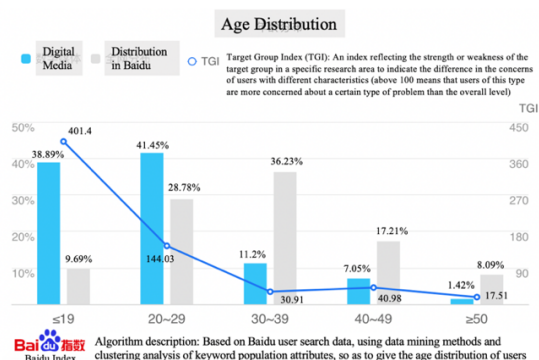


Figure 5: Baidu Index for Age Distribution of Keyword “Digital Media”

Source: Baidu

### III. Case studies from China and the West on Promotion of Kunqu Opera



#### a) Case Study: China

In China, digital technologies such as online videos and live streaming provide new ways to promote basic knowledge and performance clips of Kunqu Opera, benefiting Kunqu Opera's development. According to previous data analysis, in China, audience, particularly young people with the potential to protect and inherit Kunqu Opera, frequently use and pay attention to digital technology such as online videos and live streaming. Therefore, this form of digital technology presents an excellent opportunity for Kunqu Opera to break away from its traditional performance stage in China. Take the Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe as an example. According to Pan, the Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe has continuously launched nearly 30 online teaching videos and live streaming activities since March 8, 2020. Its fans on Tik Tok, a short video application, alone have increased more than sixfold from its beginning date to May 19, 2020, and some series has been viewed online by approximately 400,000 people. This demonstrates that by incorporating digital technology into Kunqu Opera, Kunqu Opera is no longer limited to the traditional theater mode, but instead moves to the platform of digital technology, which is familiar to the audience, and explores the new online stage.

In fact, Kunqu Opera in this form of digital technology receives a lot of positive feedback and support from the audience because it challenges their horizon of expectations. Zhang Jun, a Chinese famous Kunqu Opera artist, is the former vice president of Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe. As he stated in an interview by Cai, people in the heyday of Kunqu Opera had different ways of appreciating Kunqu Opera, making the rhythm and aesthetics of Kunqu Opera less appealing in today's world. In other words, Kunqu Opera was a form of art that surprised people in the past, whereas it gradually falls short of competing with many other

entertaining arts in modern times. However, with the popularity of online videos and live streaming, promoting Kunqu Opera in this form of digital technology is novel and interesting for the audience today. This is because that as society's pace is become faster, people tend to spend their time on arbitrary activities that don't take up much of their time (Yang et al.). Thus, short videos are becoming more popular as people's time becomes more fragmented due to the fast life pace. As a result, for online videos, the relatively short length meets people's need to watch things in their short time spans. And the casualty characteristic of live streaming enables people to watch it with greater ease. In accordance with this logic, Kunqu Opera in such a form of digital technology is more attractive and accessible than traditional in-person performance in the theater for audience nowadays. In this case, it's clear that digital technology in the form of online videos and live streaming allows Kunqu Opera to show its charm to the audience at various times and locations, thereby further propagating and popularizing Kunqu Opera.

#### b) Case Study: The West

The application of digital technology to the protection of Kunqu Opera in the West has transformed the space of theater to be interactive and immersive. Digital technology could change the clearly separated performers' stage and the auditorium in traditional theaters into a shared stage for performers and the audience. This allows performers and audience to interact with each other more closely and further immersed in the Kunqu Opera's performance. Take Qianhui Feng's project *Inner Awareness* in University College London as an example. In this project, Feng took Kunqu Opera's famous love story "*The Peony Pavilion*" and created a new form of theatre with an interactive and immersive experience. In this special immersive theater, audience is invited to walk around the stage and immerse in the performance from various

perspectives in order to feel the emotional power of Kunqu Opera. During this process, Feng would use Kinect, Processing (graphical programming language), and other digital technologies to record the movement of both performers and audience members, and respond in various colors and shapes. When performers dance and the audience walk around, Kinect can detect movement of their bodies and hands, causing the screen to respond with real-time animations like changing lines and shadows. Besides, such visual effects are tied to the plot. For example, when performers are performing sadness, no color is applied to the changing lines and shadows. This improves the interaction between performers and the audience, resulting in a more immersive theater experience for the audience to enjoy Kunqu Opera. According to Feng's project description of the use of digital technology in Kunqu Opera, "the collision and fusion of [Kunqu Opera] and contemporary [digital technology] has the potential to give the opera a new lease of life." That is to say, the interactivity and immersivity of the new theater in fact take the audience away from Kunqu Opera's old horizon of expectations. With the traditional theater of Kunqu Opera, audience could only expect to perceive Kunqu Opera under the stage from the seat. However, using such form of digital technology like Kinect expands the relationship between the audience, and the theater. The audience could now expect to create the theater environment with the performers and connect with Kunqu Opera more deeply. Therefore, this interactive and immersive theater broadens the audience's horizon of expectations. This case clearly shows that how the use of digital technology in the West has revolutionized the theater space, bringing the audience closer to Kunqu Opera's performance.

#### IV. The Relationship between Kunqu Opera and Digital Technology

Although Kunqu Opera was once a popular form of entertainment enjoyed by both emperors and commoners, its decline in modern times necessitates its adoption of digital technology, which opens up new opportunities for its development and preservation. Digital technology has the potential to transform the audience's horizon of expectations and promote the spread of Kunqu Opera-related information regardless of space and time. As Jauss states, "reception [of an art work] can result in a 'change of horizons' through negation of familiar experiences or through raising newly articulated experiences to the level of consciousness" (25). In other words, in order for Kunqu Opera to be widely accepted, audience's horizon of expectations in modern times should be constructed by either rejecting or broadening their previous cognition of Kunqu Opera.

On the one hand, Kunqu Opera uses digital technologies such as online videos and live streaming to spread and attract a larger audience. Kunqu Opera is more commonly associated with the theater than with the Internet, because people tend to believe that Internet is more casual in its presentation of such art. However, with the emergence of digital technology like online videos and live streaming, people's original horizon of expectations for Kunqu Opera have shifted. In this case, rather than the long-time and complete-plot performance in the theater, Kunqu Opera introduces its critical concepts and highlighted short clips of performance through online videos or live streaming. It fully utilizes the dissemination characteristics of digital technology to attract audience, assisting them in developing a preliminary understanding of Kunqu Opera. As a result, the collaboration between Kunqu Opera and popular digital technology is consistent with modern people's horizon of expectations. This helps to make it

easier for a larger audience to access Kunqu Opera, thereby promoting the preservation of Kunqu Opera.

On the other hand, digital technology transforms the traditional theater by creating a space in which the audience can interact with performers and immerse themselves deeper in Kunqu Opera. Instead of simply allowing the audience to perceive the performance, Kunqu Opera's use of digital technology constructs an interactive performance stage. This time, like performers, audience are expected to walk around the stage. Their movement will be recorded by digital technology such as Kinect. Such digital technology will respond in real-time animation with varying lines and shadows in different colors. This extends the audience's horizon of expectations by giving them the ability to walk around the stage and create the plot with performers. The audience could now expect the traditional Kunqu Opera to be merged with their personal interpretation. This could lead to an increase in the number of audiences, allowing more people to experience digital technology's ability to improve the expressiveness of opera (Benford and Giannachi). As a result, digital technology allows audience to interact more deeply with performers and Kunqu Opera, attracting a larger audience to learn about Kunqu Opera and contribute to its future development.

However, the appeal of Kunqu Opera may be reduced as a result of the use of digital technology in Kunqu Opera since digital technology no longer restricts the audience to perceiving Kunqu Opera in the theater from the seat under the stage. Firstly, perceiving Kunqu Opera through the screen in the form of online videos and live streaming can never be compared to the experience of seeing it in person in the theater. Kunqu Opera presented through digital technology was the result of the movement of cameras guided by the cameraman (Benjamin,

par. 8). The audience would only need to passively watch the scenes on the screen instead of thinking about the plot and actively following performance with their own eyes. Besides, when the audience is not physically present, performers are unable to make certain changes and adjustments to their performances based on the audience's real-time reactions. In this situation, "[the] audience's identification with the [performers] is really an identification with the camera" (Benjamin, par. 8). This indicates that digital technology would fall short of fully revealing the charm of Kunqu Opera. Secondly, the interactive theater formed by combining Kunqu Opera and digital technology has overturned the creation rule of traditional Kunqu Opera. This new form of theater even removed some important opera elements such as complete plots and conflicts, leaving the audience with a sense of lacking the sense of opera. Therefore, the application of digital technology in Kunqu Opera may reduce its appeal in terms of being perceived in person in the theater with a fantastic plot.

## V. Possible Approaches

Based on the preceding analysis, it is clear that Kunqu Opera should fully utilize digital technology in terms of information promotion and interactive experience. Some possible approaches are as follows:

- 1) Kunqu Opera can continue rely on the popularity of digital technologies such as online videos and live streaming, promoting Kunqu Opera at a faster speed and a larger scale;
- 2) As the audience's interest in interactive theater grows, Kunqu Opera could further expand its immersive form to allow more people to experience Kunqu Opera;

3) Kunqu Opera could further utilize the advantages of 5G technology in 4K ultra-high-definition video transmission, and create a new mode of perceiving Kunqu Opera with high resolution of 3840×2160 pixels.

### Conclusion

As Chinese traditional Kunqu Opera is the masterpiece of various kinds of art, it's well worth considering how to better use digital technology to develop and protect Kunqu Opera. This essay investigates the relationship between Kunqu Opera and digital technology by using the horizon of expectations model from Jauss' reception theory. This essay points out that Kunqu Opera is in a difficult situation in terms of audience's interest while the prevalent digital technology has the potential to help Kunqu Opera's future development and preservation. Following that, this essay investigates the case studies from China and the West respectively. The result shows that China is taking the form of online videos and live streaming while the West is focusing on increasing the interactivity and immersive experience in traditional theater. Then, this essay proves that digital technology can break audience's past horizon of expectations and expands the way of spreading and performing Kunqu Opera, thereby contributing to Kunqu Opera's development and preservation. Finally, this essay proposes three possible ways based on previous analysis.

Overall, this essay demonstrates that digital technology has a positive impact on Kunqu Opera's preservation. Its findings could serve as a model for other opera's preservation problems. By using new applications of digital technology in Kunqu Opera's preservation in China, this essay hopes to promote the prosperous revival of Kunqu Opera.

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