

Music Practice in *The Peony Pavilion* (Youth Version): An Aesthetic Perspective

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Abstract

Kunju is the most influential opera during the mid-Ming to mid-Qing Dynasty. It epitomizes the most elegant of literature and the most exquisite of traditional Chinese art form. *Kunju* is a classic Chinese opera with unique music style. *The Peony Pavilion* was a play well known in virtually every household in ancient times. The youth version of *the Peony Pavilion* is the latest adaptation well received by the audience, especially the youth. This paper takes an aesthetic perspective on the youth version and makes music analysis to illustrate that music practice should cater to aesthetic changes in modern audiences.

Keywords

The Youth Version of the Peony Pavilion, Music Practice, Aesthetic Perspective

1. Introduction

Kunju, mother of all traditional Chinese operas, is experiencing crisis or challenges in the commercialized and globalized world. Efforts to preserve, protect, and promote *Kunju* are continuously made by the government and artists. In order to attract more people, young audience in particular, *Kunju* has been modified or innovated to cater to the tastes or aesthetics of contemporary Chinese. *Kunju* troupes seek to combine the traditional with the modern in an attempt to restore, revive, and retain the popularity of this classic opera.

Kunju is a well-developed, comprehensive art, and embodies the spirit and aesthetics of traditional Chinese culture. It consists of multiple components, literature, music, melody, dance, makeup, performance, among others. The value of cultural heritage finds itself in the culture it represents. The scripts of *Kunju* cover various themes throughout Chinese history. The thriving *Kunju* in the

16th century is attributable to the humanism across China. *Kunju* originated in Kunshan, a county situated between Shanghai and Suzhou, home to prosperous businesses and intellectual elites. Economic and cultural development contributes to masterpieces, such as *The Peony Pavilion*, *Palace of Longevity*, and *The Peach Blossom Fan*. These plays have been performed from generation to generation.

Kunju is an anthology of Chinese opera. It boasts more than two thousand *qupai* (tune matrices) from poems, musical modes, mixed drama, nondramatic songs, religious music, folk songs, among others. Another feature of *Kunju* is the unique performance system characterized by a combination of singing and dancing, music and action. Unlike Western opera, *Kunju* sees singing and instrumental music as key components of almost all performances. It reflects reality by creating an aura. On the stage, daily utterances turn into poetic words while daily life and expressions turn into dance and performance. Real situations are imitated by settings and gestures. Actor's personal trait is expressed by makeup, facial painting, and costume. *Kunju* has long developed norms for performance.

Kunju is the most influential opera during the mid-Ming to mid-Qing Dynasty (1550-1850). It epitomizes the most elegant of literature and the most exquisite of traditional Chinese art form. *Kunju* is a classic Chinese opera with unique music style. Literally, *Kun* in *Kunju* refers to Kunshan, a county of Suzhou, birthplace of *Kunju*, while *qu* in *Kunqu* means music or song that develops from the Kunshan tune refined by renowned musician Wei Liangfu (1522-1572). The term clearly indicates that music plays a key role in *Kunju*. For example, *qupai* (tune matrices)¹ is an essential component of *Kunju*.

Historically, *Kunju* enjoyed unprecedented popularity and wide public participation, popularity that surpassed previous *zaju* (variety play) and southern opera, as well as various tunes later on. Like in any opera, it synthesizes acting, dance, costume, music, singing, and literature. This synthesis highlights its lasting value and unique charm. In this synthesized art, music plays a fundamental role. It is the soul of *Kunju*, because it “informs and organizes almost everything that takes place on the traditional Chinese stage” (Li, 2013). In other words, music gives clues about action, plots, atmosphere, characterization, structure, as well as time and space. It serves as a thread stitching all elements into a unity for good stage performance.

Kunju, as part of Chinese cultural heritage, has attracted much academic attention. The existing literature generally falls into five categories: aesthetics (Liu, 1983; Tang, 2016), literary study (Shen, 2000; Zhu, 1996), historical development (Lam, 2019; Li, 2009; Luo, 1997; Xiong, 1994, Yang, 2019), stage performance (Lam, 2014a, 2014b; Lu, 1994; Rebull, 2017; Stenberg, 2015), and music study (Frankel, 1976; Jones, 2014; Schoenberger, 2013; Strassberg, 1976; Xu, 2014).

¹*Qupai* is a term particular to traditional Chinese theater. Since no standard English translation exists, it is rendered in English as preexisting tune structures (Jones, 2014), tune matrices (Li, 2013), and aria matrices (Schoenberger, 2013). This paper uses tune matrices translated by Lindy Li Mark.

These researches examine *Kunju* from different perspectives, giving insights into this traditional theatrical genre. This paper examines the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion*, production that has been widely acclaimed at home and abroad. An aesthetic perspective is taken in the study.

2. Highlights of the Peony Pavilion (Youth Version)

The Peony Pavilion was created by Tang Xianzu (1550-1616), a distinguished playwright in the Ming dynasty. The plot focuses on the power of true love. Du Liniang is the young daughter of a scholar official called Du Bao who hires a good tutor for his daughter. She was led by Chunxiang, Liniang's maid, into the garden filled with colorful blossoms. While sitting in the Peony Pavilion, Liniang falls asleep and has a dream that a handsome young scholar named Liu Mengmei comes to the garden. They fall in love under the tree. Liniang wakes up to find that she is alone though she cannot forget the young scholar. She is lovesick, dies, and is buried in the garden. Sometime later, Liu Mengmei happens to see a portrait of Du Liniang. He recognizes that she is the young girl he fell in love with in a dream. Du Liniang was allowed to return to life and marry Liu Mengmei.

This play is a classic *Kunju* production with various adaptations from its debut to the present. The youth version of *the Peony Pavilion* is the latest adaptation, by Bai Xianyong, a mainland-born, US-educated Taiwanese writer. Bai's version focused on the theme of youth in a bid to attract the young audience.

This adaptation showcased a balance between tradition and change of *Kunju* in contemporary China. It was widely staged and highly acclaimed in China and beyond. Bai Xianyong took a bold approach to the adaptation with regard to music design, stage arrangement, costume selection, among others. His experimentation or innovation cast light on how to sustain *Kunju's* appeal in this commercialized world.

Music is the soul of *Kunju*, because it “informs and organizes almost everything that takes place on the traditional Chinese stage” (Li, 2013: p. 1). In other words, music gives clues about action, atmosphere, characterization, structure, plot development, as well as time and space. It serves as a common thread stitching all elements into a unity for good stage performance.

The performance tradition of *Kunju* is characterized by the four skills called *chang* (singing), *nian* (recitative), *zuo* (acting), and *da* (acrobatics). *Chang* (singing) tops the four performing techniques, followed by *nian* (recitative), a kind of musical stage speech. *Zuo* (acting) and *da* (acrobatics) are regulated by music for certain rhythmic pattern and dramatic effect. Music is essential to the four skills and achieves a unity in *Kunju* performance.

Kunju music is more complex and difficult, compared with literary and historical study of this traditional Chinese opera. That is largely because it involves the interactions and interdependency between text (playscript) and music in the framework of *qupai* (tune matrices)—an essential component of *Kunju*. Poetic

lyrics must follow rules of rhyme, rhythm, and tone, whereas tunes are largely determined by *qupai* (tune matrices). Since Chinese is a tonal language, words and tones work together to create certain melodic pattern.

Musical aspects determine the success of a *Kunju* play, as they unify and regulate almost every component of each production. Since the youth version of *the Peony Pavilion* has been highly praised in China and across the world, it must boast special traits that gain traction with the audience, the youths in particular. In other words, this play meets the aesthetic demands of the youths, as the youth version aimed at the younger generation.

Presentation and appreciation of *Kunju*, music in particular, is closely related to Chinese aesthetic principles. Vocal delivery features ornamentation or melisma, common practice in *Kunju* singing. The ornamental style may be difficult for Westerners to understand. But it is one of the key characteristics of *Kunju* music. Aesthetic demands or principles of *Kunju* underwent changes while retaining essentials or traditions, things that make *Kunju* as it was, is, and will be. Once essence or authenticity is lost, *Kunju* no longer exists. Simply put, *Kunju*, the Chinese classic opera, has to keep its authenticity intact while innovating to keep pace with the times or *Zeitgeist* (the spirit of the time).

3. An Aesthetic Perspective

An aesthetic approach helps advance our understandings of *Kunju* in general and the youth version of *the Peony Pavilion* in particular. According to Gamader (2004), aesthetics refers to the dialogue between interpreter and the expression of truth in a particular artwork (pp. 352-353). In terms of *Kunju*, aesthetics involves the interactions between viewer or audience and the presentation or performance of the play. *The Peony Pavilion*, a classic play, is still performed with different adaptations in China and other countries like the U.S. The youth version of *the Peony Pavilion* is the latest adaptation that has been hailed as a good example of *Kunju* innovation in contemporary China. It was staged widely in China and the U.S., attracting a large group of audience and receiving positive responses from viewers. This youth version aroused the aesthetic consciousness of the audience, who found resonance with this play.

Aesthetic study of the youth version of *the Peony Pavilion* focuses on aesthetic dimension of the play by investigating music practice of the production. As mentioned above, music is the soul of *Kunju*. Examination of music practice is more revealing. Aesthetic exploration of this production is intended to identify key features that appeal to the audience, especially the youths. Once aesthetic consciousness is raised (Gamader, 2004: p. 128, 130, 138), the audience would resonate and be obsessed with the youth version. Aesthetic principles of contemporary Chinese should be seen as the root cause underneath the mounting popularity of the youth version. This adaptation was a success, largely because it met the aesthetic preferences of the younger generation.

Aesthetics varied from generation to generation, due to different economic,

social, cultural, and political contexts. *The Peony Pavilion* was created by Tang Xianzu (1550-1616). Tang's creation was adapted for stage performance in different periods of time. The youth version was the latest attempt, which turned out to be a success. Aesthetic study is concerned with viewers' perspective to further understand this version's recipe for success.

While *Kunju* enjoys a long history and much development, it runs across increasing difficulties in contemporary China. Facing the same challenges as other traditional or classical genre, *Kunju* is losing its audience thanks to the changing landscape of consumer culture. Globalization intensifies interactions between different economies and cultures. Most Chinese embrace Western consumerism and cultural products while turning away from their traditional culture. *Kunju* faces challenges from Western popular culture. Though *Kunju* embodies classical literature, music, dance and stage conventions, it is no rival for electronic music, rock music, or Hollywood movies among youths. Young people are the target and consumers of popular cultural products. These challenges or crises facing *Kunju* have long been noted by government officials at division of culture, *Kunju* actors and scholars. They are all keenly aware that *Kunju* is losing audience and call for innovation to retain its appeal (Zheng, 2003). Given the urgency of preservation, government, scholars, as well as professional and amateur actors should work together to preserve and protect this cultural heritage. *Kunju* cannot and should not be museum art, and it is expected to expand the size and scale of the audience. In this sense, sheer preservation is inadequate, as innovation is needed to meet the changing ethos of the times.

Facing big challenges, Chinese government has made an all-out effort to protect and promote *Kunju* as a cultural heritage since 2001 when it was listed among the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. However, government support cannot guarantee *Kunju's* popularity if the genre lacks special appeal aesthetically, artistically, and culturally. In response, *Kunju* composers and performers have made bold experimentation or innovation in a bid to sustain this genre. Thus, *Kunju* has undergone transformations while trying to retain essentials.

The youth version of *the Peony Pavilion* is widely accepted as a successful attempt to innovate and revive *Kunju* in contemporary China. Innovations are made while tradition is best kept. This balance is hard, if not impossible, to strike. These changes are part of tradition in the future. This play demonstrated the boundary of innovation while seeking to preserve essence of this genre. Innovations cannot undermine the authenticity of *Kunju*. In other words, composers, directors, and performers have limited freedom in their concerted efforts to make changes.

These changes are made in line with contemporary viewers' taste and preference. Specifically, the audiences' aesthetic norms should be taken into consideration. Gadamer began his exposition of aesthetics with the concept of play. As

he put it, “a drama is a kind of playing that, by its nature, calls for an audience” (Gamader, 2004: p. 109). *Kunju* emphasizes dramatic effect on stage, generating response and resonance from the audience. Gadamer also stresses the importance of the audience. He maintains that “openness toward the spectator is part of the closedness of the play,” and that “the audience only completes what the play as such is” (Gamader, 2004: p.109). The audience is indispensable to the play. The play, he insists, “appears as presentation for an audience” (Gamader, 2004: p. 109). He argued further that a play[Schauspiel] is even seen as a game, for it has the same closed structure as that of a game. A play is also open to its spectator or viewer who helps the play win its whole significance. Those who watch the play—viewers—enhance the play to its ideality (Gamader, 2004: p. 109). The spectators or viewers play a major role in how a drama or play is presented and received, simply because every drama is open to those who watch it. The audience are absorbed in the play, and take the place of the player. Clearly, only through the appreciation of and interaction with the audience does a particular drama achieve its significance, value, and sustainability.

Only a few literature focused on the aesthetic dimensions in *Kunju*. Liu (1983) elaborated on the relationship between ornamental styles in *Kunju* singing and the aesthetic principles or Chinese philosophy underneath such vocal style. Nketia (1984) noted the aesthetic dimension in ethnomusicological studies. The study of aesthetics expands the scope of music research, reaching out to different social and cultural contexts. Tang (2016) investigates the aesthetic philosophy behind the traditions of Chinese Classical Theatre, especially *Kunju* and Peking Opera. Tang focuses on Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, the three pillars of Chinese philosophy. Good models and less successful examples are given to indicate the traditional aesthetics can either be preserved or lost. The existing literature does not concentrate on a particular piece of production to find out how aesthetics is revealed.

4. Music Design

Music design of the youth version of *the Peony Pavilion* showcased a balance between tradition and change. This play retained music essentials of *Kunju* while adding modern music style such as theme music, dance music, and chorus. This music design achieved unity and harmony of music in the play. The music structure created a romantic atmosphere. For example, the theme music for Du Liniang was taken from *qupai-zaoluopao* (dark silk gown), and the music for Liu Mengmei was adapted from *qupai-shantaohong* (red mountain peach). The theme music was repeated in performance to reinforce the audience’s impression and perception of *Kunju* music. This adaptation aimed to attract the young by catering to their aesthetics.

Chorus and polyphony helped make the plots and emotions coherent. The music effect enabled the audience to be absorbed in plot developments. As the younger generation are accustomed to multimedia, arrangement of music should

meet their aesthetics in order to boost *Kunju's* popularity.

The atmosphere of happy ending, typical of ancient Chinese opera, was achieved through design of musical instruments, duet accompaniment, ensemble, chorus, and duet singing. For example, the two *qupai-shuangshengzi* and *beiwei* were largely altered to move the heart and soul of young people. This successful attempt may pave the way for expanding the viewership of *Kunju*.

Analysis of one *qupai-zaoluopao* (dark silk gown) demonstrates correspondence or conformity between text and tune. In this *qupai*, the lyric was largely in line with melody. In the first phrase-yuanlai chazi yanhong kaibian, lai has yangping (rising) tone. Melody has La and Do. Cha has *qu* (leaving) tone or falling tone, and the main melody also uses falling notes such as Sol, Re, and Do. Zi is the third tone, starting from high to low and then to high. The musical contour follows Do, La, and Do. Performers often sing La, Sol, and Do, falling and rising tune. The word yanhong has rising tone, and the music notes are Re, Do, Re, and Mi. In Kaibian, bian has *qu* (leaving) tone, which is represented by Sol, Re, Do, and La. In Scene 9 Sweeping the Garden, the music of *qupai-zaoluopao* (dark silk gown) features conformity between tone of the text and melodic tune. The correspondence between tone and tune is one of the defining features of *Kunju* music.

【Zao luo pao】

♩=32 A tempo

原 来 姹 紫 嫣 红 开
Yuan lai - ai cha zi - i yiin hong kai

遍 似 这 般 都 付 与 断 井
bi - in si zhei bon du fu yu do - n ziin

The conformity between text and tune has long been a tradition of *Kunju*. While following this tradition, some changes were made in composition or aria. Take aria for *qupai-dielianhua* (butterfly on blossom) as an example. Originally, *Qupai-dielianhua* (butterfly on blossom) has no notation or music score. In the youth version of *the Peony Pavilion*, the music score was created in the form of solo and vocal accompaniment. In the beginning, *laosheng* (old male) sang in a tone reminiscent of historical sentiment.

Chorus for *qupai-dielianhua* (butterfly on blossom) also revealed changes or recreations. *Qupai-dielianhua* (butterfly on blossom) was used as the opening song in each of the three parts of the youth version. The phrase “danshixiangsi moxiangfu, mudantingshang sanshenglu” was designed as theme chorus that appeared in the opening and end of different scenes, with different tempos and

modes. The recurrence of theme music reinforced audience's impression and perception, as the audience were more familiar with the melody when the theme music is repeated multiple times.

【Die lian hua】



(男独) 忙 处 抛 人 闲 处 住, 百 计 思 量 没 个 为 欢
 mang chyü pao ren xian chyü zhyü be ji si lian-ng mo gou wei - ei hu



处。 白 日 消 磨 肠 断 句,
 chyü be ri siao- mo chang duan jyu

(女伴) 啊-----
 a



世 间 只 有 情 难 诉, 玉 茗 堂 前
 shi jian-an zhi-i yuou qing nan-an su yu min tang-ng qian

情 难 诉, 玉 茗 堂
 qing nan su yu min tang



朝 复 暮, 红 烛 迎 人 俊 得 江 山 助。
 zao fu mu hong zu yin ren jin de jiang shan zu

前 朝 复 暮, 俊 得 江 山 助。
 qian zao fu mu jin de jiang shan zu



(合唱) 但 是 相 思 莫 相 负 牡 丹 亭 上 三 生 路
 dan shi siang si mo siang fu mu dan tin shang san shen lu

The last two *qapai*—*Nan shuang sheng zi* and *Bei wei*—in scene fifty-five (Reunion at Court) were adapted to create the atmosphere for reunion. For example, the metric pattern of *Bei wei* was changed from free beat (散板 *sanban*) to one accented beat plus three unaccented beats (一板三眼 *yiban sanyan*), or duple rhythms of four beat units. The aria ended with actresses' chorus followed by actors' chorus, making a happy atmosphere of reunion.

Music score of Shuangshengzi

姻 缘 诧 姻 缘 诧
ying yu ca ying yu ca

姻 缘 诧 姻 缘 诧
ying yu ca ying yu ca

5

阴 人 梦 黄 泉
ying niang mong wang si

阴 人 梦 黄 泉 下
ying niang mong wang si - i ha

7

下 福 份 大 福 份 大
ha fe fang dou fe fang dou

黄 泉 下 福 份 大 福 份 大
wa - ng si - i ha fe feng-ng dou fe fang-ng dou

In the original score, the rhythm featured 4th note rhythm and 8th note rhythm. And one word conformed to one note or two notes. The adapted version used 16th note rhythm.

Music score of Bei wei

从 今 后 把 牡 丹 亭 梦 影 双 描 画
 chong jin hei ba mu dan tin mong yin shuang miao hua

从 今 后 把 牡 丹 亭 梦 影 双 描
 5 chong jin hei ba mu dan ting mong yin shuang miao

亏 杀 你 南 枝
 kui sha ni nan zhi

画 亏 杀 你 南 枝
 hua kui sha ni nan zhi

挨 暖 俺 北 枝 花 则 普 天
 ai nu-u an ben zhi hua ze pu tian

挨 暖 俺 北 枝 花 则 普 天
 15 ai nu-u an ben zhi - i i - hua ze pu tian

下 做 鬼 的 有 情 谁
 xia zhu gui di you qing sui

下 做 鬼 的 有 情 谁
 17 xia zuo gui di you qing sui

似 咱
 si zan

似 咱
 si zan

Bei wei is the last *qupai* in the last scene of both the original play and the youth version. The aria was changed while the lyric remained intact. Dramatic changes occurred in pitch, melody, and rhythm.

Though aria allowed no change in traditional *Kunju*, *Kunju* music must adapt to the changing socioeconomic and cultural landscape. The youth version retained classic aria while recreating some *qupai* for dramatic effect unified by chorus.

In addition to changes in *qupai*(tune matrices)and aria, the youth version also applied polyphony music. *Kunju* music rarely or never used polyphony music. But the youth version applied music of this type to highlight dramatic effect. For example, in the scene 28 Union in the Shades, aria for the *qupai-jinmayue* was made by polyphony music and theme motifs, plus multiple musical instruments, to generate several melodies.

[You gou]

读 Dou 书 shu - yu 窗, chuang

3
浙 xi 喇 la 喇, la

6

11

16
良 liang 夜 ye 省 xin 陪 pei 茶 cah 清 qin 风 fong 明 ming - ing 月 yue

19
知 zhi 无 wu 价 jia

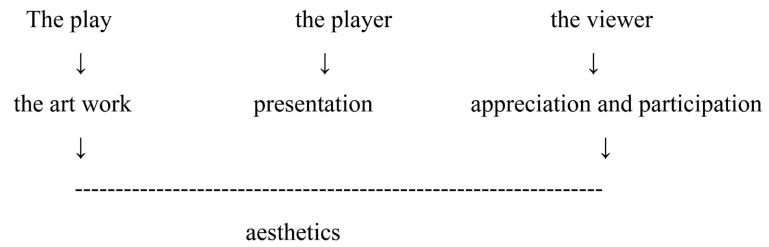
21

26

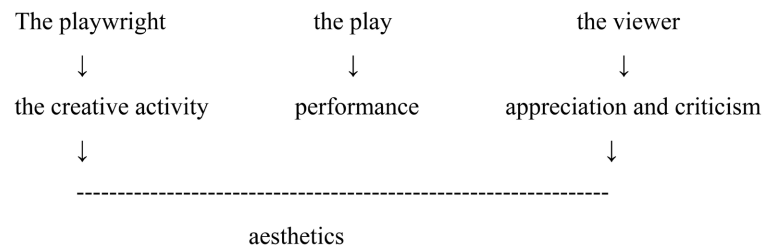
Theme music would leave a deeper impression on the audience. As some audience were not so familiar with *qupai* music, they found it hard to resonate with the melody, if every *qupai* appeared only once or twice. Theme music unified three parts with one particular melody.

The youth version of *the Peony Pavilion* was widely acclaimed in mainland China and beyond. It is a successful attempt to attract the younger generation to *Kunju* stage. Its success is largely attributed to music design. The music structure was adapted to contemporary aesthetics while retaining classic essentials. The music composition for opera was incorporated into the youth version. This play features theme music.

According to Gamader (2004), the play or artwork involves the play itself, player and viewer. The three parties interact with each other, but the viewer is the most important part from an aesthetic perspective.



He rightly noted the significance of viewer or spectator in identifying the truth of the play or drama. But the equally important role of the playwright or those who adapted the play is overlooked. As the playwright creates play for the viewer to appreciate and critique, he/she should bear viewers in mind in his/her creation. The stage performance of the play is delivered by performers who shape its presentation. For every play, playwright, performer, and viewer interact with each other. Their relationship is characterized as the following diagram suggests.



5. Conclusion

The youth version of *the Peony Pavilion* gave a good example of how composers and directors sought to cater to the aesthetics of the younger generation in terms of music practice. Those creators incorporated musical elements that young people are familiar with under the framework of *qupai* (tune matrices). Repetition of theme music helped the young audience understand and capture the essential melody of the play.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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