

# Onstage: Kunqu Dramatizations of Chinese Beauties, Clowns, Heroes, and Villains

## I. Introduction

Kunqu, an UNESCO Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, is a 600-year-old genre of Chinese opera, one that tells revealing stories about Chinese men and women, while pleasuring audiences' ears and eyes. Since the 2000s, kunqu has experienced a series of restorative and innovative transformations, and is now popularly performed and discoursed inside and outside China, affording opportunities and materials for performers and audiences to engage with Chinese biography, culture, and history. Through kunqu, audiences can find themselves and their peers in all kinds of real and imagined times and sites.

As a multi-media genre of performing arts, kunqu dramatizes Chinese stories with colorful costume and make-up, eloquent monologues and lyrics, dynamic rhythms and flowing melodies, and virtuoso acts of chanting, dancing, singing, and speaking. Thus, kunqu can be enjoyed in different ways, ranging from reading its scripts as dramatic literature, to listening to its musical arias and instrumental playing, and to discussing its cultural and historical messages. Each is meaningful in its own ways; collectively, they make kunqu a most entertaining and informative performance and discourse of Chinese men and women. For example, most kunqu *zhezixi* are playful or satirical dramatizations of what the staged characters would do in real life situations.

All kunqu characters are created, enacted, and interpreted with reference to a diversity of role-types/personalities/social identities, the four basic categories of which are: *sheng* (elite and young man), *dan* (young and beautiful female), *jing* (masculine man—staged with a painted face), *mo* (mature man), and *chou* (clown). As staged, each kunqu character is marked with its distinctive costume, facial-makeup, and dancing and singing styles. For example, *jing* characters have their faces all painted up, revealing their dramatic attributes with symbolic colors and graphic patterns. Kunqu speeches are life-like, and lyrics, poetic. Their vocalizations, ranging from speaking to singing, are melodically and rhythmically affective; instrumental playing accompanies such vocalizations with flowing melodies and elastic rhythms, affording a soundscape for performers and audience to understand the drama being staged and with one another.

Kunqu is noted for its performance virtuosity and cultural significances. Kunqu performers continuously learn, perform, and fine-tune their virtuoso artistry. It is no exaggeration to say that a minute of superlative performance on the kunqu stage results from years of dedicated training and creative practice. Today, twelve master performers—5 actors, 5 musicians, and 2 stage artists—from the Kun Opera Theatre of the Jiangsu Performing Arts Group of Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, China, will present to us four traditional and one newly created kunqu *zhezixi*. Each is a short and self-contained play developed from preexisting or newly written libretti.

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## II. The Five *Zhezixi*

### 1. “Zuizao/The Drunken Runner” from *The Story of the Velvet Pear Flower (Hongli ji)*

This *zhezixi* is a comedy featuring a district court runner. As the play begins, he comes onstage and recounts how he has been busy but made little money, and is now eating and drinking with his colleagues in a tavern. Then his son comes to the tavern and tells him that the district magistrate wants him to fetch a scholar. Before the runner leaves for the scholar’s residence, he drinks three very large bowls of wine. He travels with drunken steps but manages to find the scholar’s house. The *zhezixi* ends before they meet. By patronizing the lowly runner, the play underscores his gendered living in a hierarchical society.

Enacting the drunken runner well is quite a performative challenge. A *chou* enacting the character has to perform a variety of physical slapstick movements, such as his walking and falling on slippery grass in the garden of the scholar’s house. In addition, he has to affectively and intelligibly chant monologues and sing arias lyrics, so that audiences would know exactly what he is seeing and feeling as a petty official.

### 2. “Tiqu/ A Self-pitying Concubine Writes a Lament,” from *A Cure of the Jealous (Liaodu geng)*

This *zhezixi* portrays Qiao Xiaoqing, a young and talented woman who falls into concubinage because of family misfortune, and is being abused by her husband-owner’s jealous wife. After reading the *Peony Pavilion*, a masterpiece of Chinese love story, Qiao cannot help but laments on her predicament, and dreams what if she could boldly love like Du Liniang, and get a handsome husband like the character did. “Tiqu” develops with four episodes: Qiao reading the romance story in a raining night, feeling more and more lonely and love-sick; Qiao summaries the *Peony Pavilion* story, reporting its protagonists’ rendezvous; Qiao dreams of herself looking for love in a magical garden, and wakes up heart-broken; Qiao composes a poem to tell the world how she yearns for a better life.

Narratively, “Tiqu” is erotic and feminist; culturally and socially, it is a challenge to chauvinist China—to soften the feminist challenge, some kunqu critics would argue that Qiao is not a “real” Chinese concubine, but an illusion of Chinese men looking for soulmates, or imagining their object of desire. Performative, “Tiqu” is a masterpiece of subtle and suggestive theatre; the concubine’s feminine thoughts and emotions are affectively projected with flowing melodies/singing and nuanced bodily movements and facial expressions.

### 3. “Yeбен/Flee by Night,” from the *Story of the Precious Sword (Baojian ji)*

This *zhezixi* portrays Lin Chong, an army commander who is being wrongfully persecuted as a criminal by an abusive senior officer. To save his own life and to find a way to avenge, he flees by night. As the play begins, Lin travels over dark and deserted land, heading towards Liangshan where a group of righteous and martial men have gathered as a resistance force. As Lin travels, he laments why and how he has fallen from a powerful military commander to a powerless fugitive fleeing under the cover of darkness. Then, he takes a rest at a deserted temple, where he requests the temple deity’s protection, and promises to restore the temple to its former glory when he returns. Waking from his dream up with a sweat-- the deity has warned him that his murders are approaching—Lin hurries towards Liangshan, telling how he misses his mother and wife like a filial son and a loving husband, and vowing to crush his enemy like a real hero that he was and will be.

Narratively, “Yeбен” portrays a complex hero, one who is emotional as he is virile. To bring Lin alive on stage, a performer enacting the character must act, sing, and dance in ways that seamlessly shift between Lin’s martial and sentimental sides with expressive acts like wiping soulful tears, kicking virile legs high, and uttering determinations to avenge. Many Chinese men, including Chairman Mao, identify with such a hero.

### 4. “Wangxiang/Homeward Gaze,” from the *Shepherd’s Story (Muyang ji)*

This *zhezixi* tells the tragic story/myth of Su Wu (140 BCE- 60 BEC) and Li Ling (d. 119 BCE), friends who got entangled with military and political struggles between the Han Chinese court and its Xiongnu and ethnic rival. As the *zhezixi* begins, it shows Su Wu living as a Xiongnu captive living in a deserted land. Lamenting on his harsh living conditions, and declaring his loyalty to Han China, Su wonders wonder Li wants to visit him there and then. As Su and Li meet, they commiserate each other. Then, Su learns that Li has indeed deflected. And the latter justifies his action by reporting that the Han Chinese court executed his family after his military failure. Then, Li invites Su to visit his newly built office by the border, so that the two can gaze at Han China in the south. There, Su makes obeisance to his Han ruler, ancestors, and surviving mother. Seeing Li doing the same, Wu protests, declaring that as a Xiongnu official/citizen, Li has no right to pay respect to Han China. Li retorts that he is still the only surviving son of the Li clan, and engages Su to look at their destinies in practical terms, and accepts the Xiongnu invitation to serve in the ethnic court. Responding to such words, Su reasserts his loyalty to Han China, and scolds Li as a shameless man. Then they part.

Some Han Chinese audiences see “Wangxiang” as social-political theatre—the story has been staged to excite patriotic and ethnic pride and emotions. Many would, however, appreciate the *zhezixi* as a masterpiece of theatre on humanity. Its script describes human emotions of being caught between ideals and reality, all of which are affectively and performatively illustrated by

artistic but subtle expressions of acting, dancing, and singing. “Wangxiang” is a lyrical opera. It features 16 arias and demands the best of expressive singing skills.

5. “Chuxi/New Year Eve” from *Stories about Talented Tang Dynasty Men (Shi yan: Tang caizi chuan)*

“Chuxi/New Year Eve” is a newly created kunqu comedy, one that dramatizes twists of fate that torture talented but underappreciated men with deprived lives but reward them with posthumous fame and glory. As scripted, “Chuxi” presents Jia Dao (779-843; a posthumously celebrated Tang dynasty poet) as a clownish monk, one who has nothing but his pride and poetry. On one New Year’s Eve, he finds a visitor to his temple. Escorting the richly dressed man, who is actually an emperor disguised as a commoner scholar, to the main hall of the temple where he can pray and offer incense to the deity, the monk tells the visitor how he has had mishaps one after another in his life. Then the monk shows the visitor his poetic works; impressed, the visitor improvises his poetic response. Finding the response an insult to poetry writing, the monk shoos the visitor out of his temple. Later, and upon learning that the visitor is an emperor, the monk realizes that he has had another mishap in his life.

As a comedy, “Chuxi” affords a theatrical space and time for a *sheng* and a *chou* to dynamically interact, showcasing their performance skills, and projecting traditional Chinese notions of scholars and their expressive practice. For example, Jia Dao, the involuntary and poor monk, speaks in dialect, dresses in a patched-up gown, and acts rustically, while his partner, Li Ang, the emperor disguised as a commoner scholar, speaks proper language, wears expensive clothes, and conducts himself elegantly. The contrast makes audience asks why and how fate pampers some men and torture others.

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### III. The Artists

The performers of today’s show are award winning professional kunqu artists from Nanjing. All are officially recognized disciples of authoritative 20<sup>th</sup> century kunqu master performers; all would, on the one hand, strive to sustain kunqu as a classical genre of Chinese opera, and on the other hand explore ways to develop it as an artistic expression of contemporary and globalized China.

The performers include four actors and one actress, five musicians and two stage technicians. As a group, they are led by Mr. Shi Xiaming, the current director of Kun Opera Theatre of the Jiangsu Performing Arts Group of Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, China. A specialist of *sheng* roles, Mr. Shi has won many awards, including the Plum Blossom Prize, the highest

national honor for performers of Chinese theatrical and performing arts. The show today is produced by Mr. Sun Jing, currently the associate director of the internationally renowned kunqu institutions of Nanjing. A specialist of *jing* and *mo* roles, Mr. Sun is also a winner of many national and regional awards. The clown in the group is Mr. Qian Wei, a recognized talent in the current generation of young kunqu performers. Being similarly noticed is his colleague, Mr. Lyu Tingan, who specializes in the role-type of martial man (*wusheng*). Ms. Xu Sijia, the only female performer of the visiting group, specializes in *dan* roles, and has won many national and regional awards. The five instrumentalists and two stage technicians in the group work closely with the stars of today's show. Their musical and technical support is what that allows their colleagues to shine on stage.

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#### IV. Acknowledgements

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