

# *The Inheritance and Innovation of Traditional Kunqu Opera in the Youth Version of the Peony Pavilion*

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**Abstract:** The long history of Kunqu has witnessed the convergence of the ages. From its beginnings, Kunqu has flourished to dormancy and then to rebirth. A youthful version of the Peony Pavilion is an essential link in this chain. The youth version of the Peony Pavilion has experienced the whole process of the development of China's cultural industry from its infancy to prosperity in the past decade. The success of the youth version of the Peony Pavilion is closely related to its own respect for tradition and the social environment in which it operates. Reviewing the development of the youthful version of the Peony Pavilion over the past decade is helpful for us to reconsider how to find a meeting point for the development of traditional Chinese cultural heritage between cultural inheritance and economic benefits.

## 1. Introduction

The youth version of the Peony Pavilion has been successfully staged for more than a decade, and Mr. Bai Xiangyong said, "How did the youth version of the Peony Pavilion succeed? I think it's a successful story..... The playwright, stage design, lighting design and costume design of the play are all Taiwanese; those calligraphers and painters are also Taiwanese. On the screenwriting side, we had a screenwriting group, of which I was the convenor, and we had three experts, Prof. Hua Wei, Prof. Zhang Shuxiang and Prof. Xin Yiyun who were familiar with Tang Xianzu and they were all experts on the Peony Pavilion. With the experts, it's a little bit tricky, *because they know too much, and if so, we'll get into trouble and have too many opinions*. And when people are brainstorming and can't handle it, I'm the arbiter at the end, and we spend almost five months on the script discussions that come and go, because the script is the soul and the root of a play." *The Peony Pavilion* by Tang Xianzu is already a classic, with beautiful words and phrases, and the words are too delicate to change. Therefore, when we wrote the screenplay, we finally established a principle -- that is, only delete, not change. Because its theme is "love"...<sup>1</sup>

This is a very memorable text, and if we look at it from the perspective of cultural phenomena, it documents the creation of the youth version of the Peony Pavilion from its inception to its final form. From the economic point of view, it is a record of how the youth version of the Peony Pavilion was created as a play with both "cultural" and "commercial" flavors. *How does the youth version of "Peony*

*Pavilion” find a meeting point between cultural inheritance and economic benefits for the development and progress of Kunqu Opera?*

## 2. The “Change” of Kunqu

Kunqu, formerly known as Kunshan tunes, or Kunqu for short, was named after Gu Jian, who lived near Kunshan at the end of the Yuan Dynasty. During the Reign of Jiajing and Longqing in the Ming Dynasty, a group of opera musicians, including Wei Liangfu, further processed and improved Kunshan tunes, and absorbed the musical composition of Haiyan and Yiyang tunes, so that Kunshan tunes spread more widely and became the most influential tunes in opera from the middle of the Ming Dynasty to the middle of the Qing Dynasty. After the reform of the Kunqu, the tune is delicate and flowing, soft and soothing, people call it “Water chamber”, “Cold-plate melody”. Such a reform laid a foundation for Kunqu opera to adapt to the development of the Time. Now, with the vigorous development of cultural industries in the past decade, the ancient Kunqu has ushered in another development opportunity another opportunity for development, and Bai Xianyong is one of the pioneers of this reform of Kunqu Opera.

## 3. Youth Version of the Peony Pavilion Reinterpretation of the Peony Pavilion

The youth version of the Peony Pavilion is a reinterpretation of the Peony Pavilion. From the structure of the storyline to the stage scenery, Bai Xianyong's team made a “connection” between the Peony Pavilion and the youth version of the Peony Pavilion.

### 3.1 Storyline Structure

The Peony Pavilion tells the story of Du Liniang, the daughter of Du Bao, the Southern Song Dynasty's Imperial Governor of Nan'an, who grows up in a suffocating feudal aristocratic family and lives in a boudoir for three whole years due to the constraints of feudal ethics. Her teacher, Chen Ziliang, was an old scholar who taught her about the virtues of the Empress in the Book of Songs, Guan Ju. At the encouragement of hers, Chunxiang, she stepped out of the room and walked into the garden. She was attracted by a great spring sunshine and fell asleep while resting in the garden. In the dream, she fell in love with a scholar and woke up loving and not. Then she felt depressed and eventually died. Her parents buried her in the garden, where they built a “Plum Blossom View”. Three years later, the scholar Liu Mengmei went to the capital to take the exams, but on the way, he had a bad cold and stayed in the Plum Blossom Hermitage. Nunnery After he recovered from his illness, he met the wandering spirit of Duliang in a nunnery, and they lived lovingly as husband and wife. *Soon, the Old Taoist for the old Taoist became aware of the matter, Liu Mengmei told her secret affair, and negotiated in private with he about digging the tomb of Du, Du Liniang was able to see the sun, and resurrected as before...*

In the process of adapting the story, White did not drastically alter the plot. He left the core of Tang Xianzu's “love” unchanged. “The Heart of Love” runs through the play. *Du Liniang's innocence and enthusiasm, the vision of the ideal, intoxication and the reality of the sentimental, disappointed.*”The love goes nowhere. Life is not to be confused with death, and death can be born. Those who are born but cannot live with death, and those who die but cannot return to life, are not the most compassionate. Why should a dream love not be real? Are there few dreamers in the world?”<sup>2</sup>. Bai Xiangyong

preserved the core of the Peony Pavilion, and he believes that “..... So, when we were writing the play, we eventually established a principle - that is, only delete, not change. Because its theme is “Love” .....3. And that's what will attract young people. Because the connection of “love” is almost non-generational.

*At the same time, in the plot structure of the Peony Pavilion, there is the plot of returning from the dead. This is the ancient version of time -travel. In recent years, the theme of “time -travel” has been repeatedly put on the TV screen, and the Peony Pavilion is undoubtedly the “ancestor” of the theme of time -travel. This provides a very good “selling point” for the promotion of the youth version of the Peony Pavilion. In the propaganda process, the young generation is willing to enter the theater to listen to the ancient Kunqu opera through “time- travel”.*

### 3.2 Stage Background Design

Tang Xianzu was a master of romanticism, “The beautiful flowers bloom everywhere, like this are paid with broken wells and crumbling walls, good times and beautiful scenery, where is the sky, who enjoys the pleasure of the courtyard”. This is a sung passage from “Peony Pavilion- Soap LuoRobe”. The choral images are very modern and colorful, from “beautiful flowers” to “broken wells and crumbling walls”.*From blossom to depression, it actually describes a situation in which a young girl was strangled under the feudal ethical code. The creators of the youth version of “The Peony Pavilion” also designed modern aesthetics from their own perspective from the stage lighting and costumes to the ancient “Peony Pavilion”.*

In terms of costumes, the costumes for the youth version of the Peony Pavilion are hand-embroidered with light and elegant tones. In terms of choreography design, it follows the traditional basic concept of “one table, two chairs”. At the same time, giving the theatre a contemporary feel, through a minimalist setting, is innovative while remaining original. In terms of the stage set, the stage is adjusted in accordance with the changes in the storyline. For the dance of the gods of flowers, the floor is covered with grey rubber and supplemented with lighting to connect the floor to the stage. In terms of stage design, in order to be closer to the public's aesthetic taste, better to attract young people to the theater. The composer absorbed elements of Western opera, and the team looked for inspiration and materials from traditional garden architecture, including the pink walls and leaky windows of Suzhou gardens, to create a beautiful stage effect.

### 3.3 Application of New Technologies

In the youth version of the Peony Pavilion, there is no obvious difference between the stage and the viewing space. The stage space is divided into two parts, dream and reality, by using thin ropes and screens, supplemented by technologies such as projection, body recognition and computer interaction, which make the audience's experience more three-dimensional, as if they are in this fantasy dream space <sup>5</sup>. The use of new technology appeals to a younger audience and also better represents the relevant content in The Peony Pavilion. The creators of the youthful version of The Peony Pavilion have tried their best to make use of modern technology to create a new version while maintaining the original taste. Bringing a fresh lease of life to the old Peony Pavilion.

#### 4. Inheritance and Innovation of Kunqu Opera in the Youth Version of the Peony Pavilion

Bai Xianyong's youthful version of The Peony Pavilion was cut down from the original 55 folds to 27 folds, insisting on “respecting the classics, but not following them; using modernity, but not abusing it”<sup>6</sup>. The youth version of The Peony Pavilion is a rationalized adaptation of the tradition. At the heart of its adaptation is “respect for tradition”. But how do you build on tradition and make it new?

“Because the Kunqu performers are getting older, the Kunqu audience is also getting older, and the Kunqu itself is getting older, and it's getting out of touch with the aesthetics of modern audiences. The purpose of producing a youthful version of The Peony Pavilion was to make an attempt to use the production of a classic Kunqu opera to develop a group of young actors, while using these youthful, handsome actors to attract young audiences and stir up their desire and enthusiasm for beauty.”

First of all, the way to continue the vitality of traditional art is to keep it infused with fresh blood. In his *The Peony Returns*, Bai Xiangyong mentions the need to develop a group of young actors and a young audience base. That's injecting fresh blood into the tradition. The development of Kunqu must keep it alive and well. Only living ancient art can be well preserved.

Secondly, a certain mass base is needed. The youthful version of The Peony Pavilion was a success, especially in its ability to be popular both at home and abroad. There is a strong cultural foundation. In China, The Peony Pavilion has long been famous and has a certain audience. Overseas, translations of The Peony Pavilion by foreigners have been appearing for a long time. And, get a very big response.” This laid the groundwork for the subsequent overseas tour of the youthful version of the Peony Pavilion.

Finally, an infusion of social capital is needed. When the Peony Pavilion performed overseas, Bai Xiangyong personally raised sponsorship funds to ensure that every aspect of the show was adequately funded. *The youth version of “Peony Pavilion” invested heavily in the promotion. When it was performed in Santa Barbara, The roadside telephone poles were hung with promotional stills, and press conferences and press conferences were held before the performance, which fully stimulated the media public opinion. Kunqu's youth version of The Peony Pavilion cooperates with China and the West in terms of its operation mode.* The American performances are run by the local Carl's Theatre Company, with box office revenues going entirely to the company, while the cast and crew are supported by sponsorship from producer Bai Xianyong.

#### 5. Conclusion

For a proposition like the inheritance and innovation of the youth version of the Peony Pavilion to Kunqu, it may seem like an age-old question. However, looking at the present, it is also a question worth reading again, as each thing takes on a different state in a new development cycle. The old Kunqu cannot be developed without capital support and reasonable artistic reinvention. From Wei Liangfu to Bai Xianyong, Kunqu is facing new opportunities and challenges. Only by finding a balance between economy and culture can we bring new vitality to the development of traditional Chinese culture.

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