

# *Kunqu Opera Film the Zidu: A Case Study of Cross-Media Communication Research of Kunqu*

Zhifei Chen\*

*School of Cultural Creativity and Media, Hangzhou Normal University, Hangzhou, China*

*\*Corresponding author*

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**Abstract:** “How to continue its life” or “how to rejuvenate itself” is a major issue facing traditional Chinese arts, and traditional opera is naturally no exception. Therefore, cross-media communication is extremely important for the long-term development of traditional opera. As a way of cross-media communication, film has been combined with opera to produce opera films, opening up a new dimension of communication. As an attempt to answer the above questions, the Kunqu opera film *The Zidu* achieves a perfect integration of Kunqu repertoire and film art. The film not only makes it possible for the Kunqu classical repertoire *Gongsun Zidu* to survive forever but also helps to spread and promote the art of Kunqu.

## 1. Introduction

Cross-media communication refers to the flow and interaction of information between different media, which has two meanings: the cross-pollination and integration of mutual information between different media, and cooperation, symbiosis, interaction, and coordination between media. The social foundation for cross-media communication is cross-media communication. Cross-media communication is created when the needs of the audience cannot be met by a single form of communication. From a market perspective, cross-media communication is motivated by the search for better survival and growth opportunities among media [1].

The modern Kunqu play *Gongsun Zidu* is based on the traditional Peking opera *Fa Zi Du*, whose historical details are found in “The Eleventh Year of Lord Yin” in the *Zuo Zhuan* and the fifth and seventh books of *Chronicles of the Eastern Zhou Kingdoms* [2]. It is a Kunqu opera production that was drafted by Zhejiang Kunqu Opera Troupe in 1997, has undergone “four name changes and ten script changes”, and has been frequently performed based on inherited tradition. During the Spring and Autumn period, when Zheng was invading Xu, the second-in-command, Gongsun Zidu, was so eager to win that he used an arrow to kill Yingkao Shu. In 2008, *The Zidu*, a film based on the Kunqu play *Gong Sun Zi Du*, became the first opera to be filmed since the Kunqu was inscribed as a World Cultural Heritage by UNESCO in 2001. It is also an initiative of the Zhejiang Kunqu Opera Troupe to promote and develop the ancient art of Kunqu.

This paper concludes by examining the successful cross-media communication experience of the Kunqu play *Gong Sun Zi Du* in its transition from opera to film, and then analyzing the significance of Kunqu film for cross-media communication of Kunqu in conjunction with the film and some

survey data.

In summary, this paper attempts to explore the successful experience of cross-media communication of the *Gong Sun Zi Du* by looking at its transition from opera to film, and from there, to analyze the significance of Kunqu opera film for cross-media communication of Kunqu with some survey data.

## 2. Respect the Essential Properties of the Media, Change the Way Not Change the Nature

The unique properties of an object are those that are exclusive to it and do not apply to other objects. There are essential properties and non-essential properties among the unique properties of things. Consequently, the essential property of a thing is a unique and decisive property. A thing's non-essential property is a distinct, derived property [3].

Although both film and opera are comprehensive arts, when the film is used as a medium, misunderstanding of the essential difference between the two may occur, if we simply include film and opera into comprehensive arts again. Therefore, the first step is to define the essential characteristics of the film medium.

What are the fundamental characteristics of the film medium? For one, beginning with the sense of depth and motion, attention, imagination, and memory, movies create the illusion of depth and motion. Second, the film is capable of producing scenes with varying styles and perspectives. Thirdly, films depict characterization and character psychology with greater care, and through scene changes and intricate scene scheduling, the audience can feel the emotions of the characters even when they are not speaking [4].

In creating the film *The Zidu*, Zhejiang Kunqu Opera Troupe respects the medium's essential characteristics and employs audio-visual language to vividly convey the story. First and foremost is the depiction of battle scenes. In order to present a more realistic and shocking siege scene within the framework of theatrical and virtualized performance, the film employs 15 seconds of continuous soldier flips and continuous running to create an intense atmosphere in which the audience is unable to take a breath. Secondly, in the scene where Zi Du and Uncle Kao have a disagreement, Zi Du tries to fight Uncle Kao but fails, and then shoots a hidden arrow to harm someone. The intonation of Zi Du's first line, "It is difficult to tolerate reason, Uncle Kao, Uncle Kao, you don't allow me, and I can't allow you," reflects his inner struggle. Then, a close-up shot is utilized ingeniously to depict the firing and flight of the hidden arrow, which builds up dynamic momentum while expressing fluidity. Immediately following Uncle Kao's scream when he is struck by the arrow and the terrified reaction shots of the soldiers, the 40-second, eight-shot clip vividly depicts Zi Du's hesitation before the assassination and the tension when he executes it in front of the audience. The film is a visual feast that focuses on the shocking power of film art performance.

As noted by Professor Zhou Huabin, "Since the 20th century, the advancement of science and technology has provided the theatre with new carriers and media, along with new audio-visual language and expression techniques. drama is a vast mother body, and various dramatic forms with their own unique characteristics have never left the overall laws of drama and cannot escape the nutrition and genetic factors provided by the mother body." [5] Therefore, despite the changing distribution channels of Kunqu repertoire, the essence of the art form as opera should remain the same.

*The Zidu* gives full play to the actors' performances of singing, reciting, acting, dancing, and playing, in accordance with the traditional aesthetic principles of Kunqu opera—"abstraction, writing, lyricism, and poetry" [6]- while respecting the medium of film and having a cinematic feel. According to film director Sendao, "That *Zidu* rides a horse is the magic of Kunqu, and the actor does not need a particularly tall horse. All of these exquisite details can be expressed simply by

holding a whip in his hand, causing the horse to gallop, lose a hoof, and hesitate. The body movements of the actors have been passed down from ancient ancestors for centuries, and the lead actor Lin Weilin is known as the ‘one leg of Jiangnan’, and his ‘heavenward stirrups’ require decades of practice; these are what the opera film is intended to demonstrate to the audience.” [7] The film adaptation of *Gongsun Zidu* respects and perpetuates the essential characteristics of the film medium, preserves the traditional artistic core of Kunqu while transforming it into a film art form, and inherits and perpetuates the artistic presentation style of the original repertoire; these experiences are unquestionably worth studying and learning from.

### 3. Aesthetically Relevant and Thoughtful

Traditional Chinese theater has always been able to “teach and educate” on a grand stage. Historically, traditional Chinese theater has been the most effective means of exhorting and educating the masses by incorporating morality and ethics into art, so that both literate and uneducated people can be morally taught and attain the complete unification of morality and art. [8] The major moral of the Peking opera *Fazi Du* is that both good and evil will be rewarded in the end, and the killer who plots to kill the righteous and virtuous people is punished, demonstrating the importance of punishing evil and supporting virtue. The Kunqu opera *Gongsun Zidu* successfully adapts a martial arts play into a “spiritual” drama that is “both civil and martial” by penetrating deeper into human nature, capturing the jealousy of the main character, Zidu, and establishing the tone of a psychological drama, thereby transcending the simple central theme of “karma and retribution”. At this time, it is elevated from a simple examination of ethical ideals, in which good is rewarded with evil, to an analysis of the psychological aspects of human nature, making the aesthetics of the entire work more profound and philosophical.

Nevertheless, as a result of the reform of the market economy, the integration of multiple cultures, and the deconstruction of postmodernist culture, cinema has gradually become a spiritual consumer good and a form of entertainment for the general public. In order to cater to the audience’s preferences and contemporary aesthetics in a more grounded manner, films should constantly adjust their artistic creation angle. The film *The Zidu* continues to make more realistic adaptations of the original play by simplifying the plot and substantially shortening its running time. Undoubtedly, the film adaptation’s creative team was aware that the aesthetic sensibilities of the film market are vastly distinct from those of the opera market. The film focuses on the communication and reconciliation between Zi Du and Uncle Kao, as well as Zi Du’s internal repentance. The film’s use of montage to demonstrate the transition from psychological to material and back to psychological reality fully satisfies the aesthetic psychology and experience of the audience. The central theme of the entire film is expressed by Zidu’s confession at the end of the film: “Man! A single thought of chastity creates a hero, whereas a single thought of sin creates a sinner. Never is the thought of chastity difficult, but the thought of sin is simple!” The final story is a fable to soothe the anxious and impatient mind, but it is also “dense with the tragic spirit, comparable to Shakespeare and ancient Greek tragedy.” [9]

### 4. Psychology as the Core, Balancing Cinematography and Operatic Beauty

We can easily conclude from the above that the aesthetic taste, life consciousness, historical contemplation and human reflection carried by traditional Kunqu are able to transcend time and space through the brilliant presentation of film language. But why do many excellent Kunqu plays fail to shine on the big screen after being adapted into films?

This issue is, in my opinion, largely due to the inadequacy of the film’s central plot composition and audio-visual language, and *The Zidu* wins on this point. According to the distinction between

theater styles in the book *Fifteen Lectures on Dramatic Art*, Gongsun Zidu should be classified as a psychological drama based on the composition of the plot, which “addresses the overall dramatic structure with character, fate, and psychology at its center” [10]. Due to the fact that *Gongsun Zidu* is primarily a psychological drama, the whole film is dominated by psychological scenes, so in the film, the prolonged viewing of the camera and the display of details in close-ups are particularly important, which is exactly what the language of film can do. When the strengths of film art can improve the expression of the opera repertoire, the aforementioned issues will be resolved.

The film’s balance between cinematic and operatic beauty is particularly evident in the sequence in which Duke Zhuang of Zheng and Zi Du are questioned by one person and dodged by the other in the courtroom. At the beginning of the scene, Zi Du kneels down in front of Duke Zhuang of Zheng, and the two are in the lower right and upper left corners of the screen respectively. The skewed presentation of the picture is undoubtedly an externalized expression of the relationship between the top and bottom and the inner pressure of Zidu. Secondly, the close-up shots render the characters’ emotions. Duke Zhuang of Zheng repeatedly emphasized that he wanted Zi Du to look at him with his eyes and then said, “Seeing the eyes is like seeing the heart”, which instantly poked Zidu’s apprehension and fear. A close-up shot of Zi Du does not dare to look directly into Duke Zhuang of Zheng’s eyes, matching Zidu’s inner monologue “his heart is worried and does not dare to look”; then the camera slowly advances toward Duke Zhuang of Zheng’s gaze, matching Duke Zhuang of Zheng’s inner monologue “his eyes flicker with fear, and he cannot guess what is in his mind”, and in the second half of the sentence, the camera returns to the uncertain and anxious Zidu, whose eyes are wavering and always avoiding Duke Zhuang of Zheng’s sight. While the camera closely tracks the two’s expressions, the use of light is also very intriguing. Except for the bright lighting in the eye area, the rest of the scene is dark, so the audience’s eyes have to focus on the actors’ rich eye performance, which also amplifies the shocking effect of “seeing the eyes is like seeing the heart”, allowing the audience to feel the inner struggle of Zidu, and the pressure of being tested and scrutinized. The camera is like a dissecting knife, turning the observation and performance of Zidu from outside to inside, revealing his soul and his rich and complex inner world to the audience.

Overall, the film *The Zidu* skilfully balances cinematography and operatic beauty because of its correct choice of repertoire, which places the psychological activities of the characters as the core of the plot.

While most previous opera films are mainly plot narratives, the storytelling in this film is on one hand, and on the other hand, it focuses more on showing the psychology of the characters to the audience through many elements such as camera language, singing, and images. At the same time, the film also has magnificent war scenes, lyrical and tender love scenes, unreal and ethereal dreams, and scenes of dialogue between humans and ghosts, etc. The ebullience and relaxation of Kunqu can be reflected in the film.

## 5. The Significance of Kunqu Films for the Cross-Media Communication of Kunqu

At the level of cross-media communication, I believe that the primary significance of Kunqu films for Kunqu is to help promote and preserve circulation.

Numerous times, the medium of film has helped revive the art of Kunqu. The first generation of the “Chuan” generation of the Zhejiang Kunqu Opera Troupe produced a film titled *Fifteen Strings of Cash* fifty years ago, which was credited with “saving a genre with a single play” and leaving a significant legacy for Kunqu opera. In 1985, the second generation of the “Shi” generation and the third generation of the “Sheng” generation of Zhejiang Kunqu Opera Troupe produced the film *The Romance of a Scholar and Two Girls*, which revived the splendor of Chinese Kunqu following the

reform and opening up. In 2008, *The Zidu* became the signature work of Zhejiang Kunqu Opera Troupe’s fourth generation of the “Xiu” generation and the fifth generation of the “Wan” generation.

With the rapid development of society, the influence of Kunqu is not what it once was, so the Zhejiang Kunqu Opera Troupe’s greatest hope for the film *The Zidu* is that it will help promote Kunqu. “We turned Kunqu into a film because, in addition to the need to preserve it, we wished to promote it to a wider audience. We did not expect our investment to be recouped at the box office.” director Sendao stated. Similarly, the lead actor Lin Weilin emphasized, “We made Kunqu into a movie to do promotion. Through viewing this film, the perceptions of more individuals regarding Kunqu or even traditional Chinese opera can be altered.” [11] Clearly, the creators of Kunqu are eager to spread and promote it.

Traditional opera has a high aesthetic threshold and a strong sense of ritual compared to film; however, since Kunqu is the “elegance of elegance” among opera genres, film is a more accessible and acceptable medium for promoting Kunqu. After the Kunqu repertoire has been disseminated across media through film art, it is no longer just about stage performance, but also about audio-visual effects, and the efficacy of dissemination has been greatly improved. This improvement is directly related to the artistic language of cinema, and the public is enhanced when stage art is transformed into film art.

In addition, I utilized a survey questionnaire. Among the 169 valid questionnaires collected, the question “What is the significance of Kunqu films for the propagation of Kunqu art in your opinion?” was answered in a majority of cases. Figure 1 displays the results of a multiple-choice question with three options.

What is the significance of Kunqu films for the propagation of Kunqu art in your opinion?

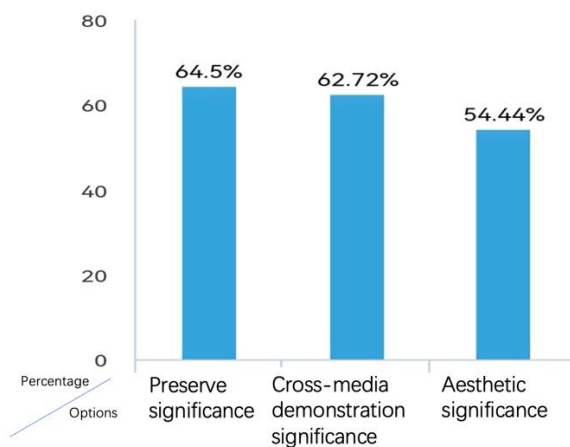


Figure 1: Survey Results Statistics

According to the survey data, 64.5% of respondents selected “to preserve the significance of Kunqu and assist in its transmission,” while 25 respondents selected this option exclusively; 62.7% of respondents selected “to demonstrate the significance of cross-media and expand the dissemination area,” while 13 respondents selected this option exclusively. The significance of “Aesthetic significance, expanding the range of works included in Kunqu art” was selected by 54.44 percent of respondents, and by 11 respondents alone.

## 6. Conclusion

Kunqu is not only a treasure of our national culture but also one of the wonders of the world’s cultural heritage, with a reputation as an “operatic dinosaur”. As a combination of Kunqu art and film art, Kunqu film has created a new form of Kunqu communication and allowed the general

public to experience the unique allure of Kunqu. The film adaptation of the original Kunqu repertoire is an effective effort to revitalize and innovate the “fossil”. In comparison to other opera films that have not yet found their niche, Zidu’s beauty is not limited to the fact that it is not a stage documentary. It respects the essential qualities of the film medium and bridges them with the content of opera, so that although the communication channels have changed, the essence of both mediums remains the same. As a play that is ideally suited for the big screen, this film interprets the beauty of opera using film techniques, achieving a balance. From the success of this film, two major implications for the cross-media communication of Kunqu can be derived: promoting and maintaining circulation. It is believed that the art of Kunqu will be able to keep up with the times and actively participate in cross-media communication using more and more innovative media carriers in order to gain the love and appreciation of a larger audience in the new era.

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