

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF KUN OPERA IN CHINA (1940S-2015)

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Da Lin, PhD

University of Pittsburgh, 2017

My dissertation is a political economic history of contemporary Kun opera (*Kunju*), a 600-year-old operatic genre that originated in Kunshan, China. Based on a range of broader narratives about political and economic change, ideological values, and nation-building in the People's Republic of China, I argue that the production, circulation, and consumption of Kun opera must be analyzed in relation to the history of different political and economic structures. I show how Kun opera articulates with different forms of capital within the history of contemporary China (1940s to 2015): as political capital that only submits to a centralized power, as cultural capital that expresses a sense of symbolic distinction, and as economic capital that enables commodification and exchange. My research shows how Kun opera as a cultural activity reflects political and economic patterns in a society, and how the competition for political and economic interests conditions the dominant meanings and values of the genre.

I utilize Pierre Bourdieu's "capital theory" to analyze the production and consumption of Kun opera in terms of economic, political, and cultural capital. I situate the production of Kun opera and the circulation of its meanings within three main political and economic conditions in contemporary China: (1) the establishment of state-ownership of troupes under maximal political administration (the late 1940s-1982), (2) the financial crisis in the state subsidy system after the "Opening-up" period of political economic reforms (1983-2002), and (3) state-owned troupe's delegated power of working with private investment in China's growing cultural industry in the 21st century (2003-2015). Further, I explore various forms of labor that create different forms of

capital, including performers' artistic labor of producing operas, audiences' labor of appreciating a performance, cultural entrepreneurs' labor of trading Kun opera products, government officials' labor of promoting (or censoring) the genre, and scholars' labor of criticizing or consecrating certain plays. I show how these forms of labor have engaged with the production of meanings and values of contemporary Kun opera.

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PREFACE

On May 1st, 2007, China Central Television (CCTV) aired the seven-episode documentary *Kunqu liubai nian* (600 years of Kun opera).¹ In this documentary, Kun opera,² one of “the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage” proclaimed by UNESCO in 2001, is depicted as an elegant entertainment for privileged literati throughout the history of China to the present day. One scene shows a famous traditional painter Ye Fang holding an elegant gathering in a pavilion of his private garden called *Nanshipi ji*.³ Two of Ye’s guests, a singer and a flute player, are performing the aria mode “Lan huamei” (Too Lazy to Paint My Brows) from the excerpt “Qin tiao” (Flirting with the Zither) in the play *Yuzan ji* (The Jade Hairpin). On the other side of the pond, Ye drinks tea and chats with the rest of his guests. A narrator describes the scene as typical for elite literati from hundreds of years ago.

I was shocked by this portrayal of this scene for its bold expression of social distinction through the consumption of Kun opera. Kun opera is not only depicted as a traditional theatrical genre, but also a symbol of cultural taste, luxurious entertainment, and social privilege. I was even more surprised to find out that this documentary series was commissioned by the Suzhou City Government of the Jiangsu Province, and jointly produced by China Central Television and Jiangsu Province Television, the mouthpiece of the Communist Party and the Jiangsu Province,

¹ CCTV and Jiangsu TV, *Kunqu liubai nian* (Six hundred years of Kunqu), Episode 1, television documentary film, DocuChina video, 40:00, <http://docuchina.cntv.cn/kqlbn/videopage/index.shtml>.

² The operatic genre of *Kunqu* is translated into English as *Kunqu* opera in the candidature file submitted to UNESCO. I problematize this translation in Section 1.1 of this dissertation to reflect *Kunqu*’s association with broader literary, vocal, and operatic practices. The ICH candidature file refers to the operatic genre, which is termed as *Kunju*, i.e. Kun opera. In order to specify my focus on operatic practices, I use Kun opera instead in this dissertation.

³ The garden is located in the Nanpishi Alley. Ye Fang named this garden *Nanpishi ji*, which means the “Landmark of the Nanpishi Alley.”

respectively. In this documentary series, the association between Kun opera and an elite lifestyle is sanctioned and promoted. My curiosity was aroused by the meaning of this old operatic genre: How did this 600-year-old opera form become a symbol of cultural distinction and elite taste for contemporary Chinese in 2007?

Driven by this question, I made my first fieldwork trip to China in 2010. But I soon realized that I needed a more focused subject due to the broad concept of Kun opera. In my preliminary study on Kun opera, I encountered two terms: Kunju 昆劇 and Kunqu 崑曲. Both are used to refer to what I considered as the same genre. Some scholars use these terms interchangeably (Wong 2001; Li 2004), but in my fieldwork, my interlocutors told me that these two terms were associated with two different practices: *Kunqu* denotes the pure vocal form, and *Kunju* or, Kun opera, refers to the onstage operatic performances. This distinction of pure vocal and onstage operatic performances is tightly connected with the amateur culture and the professional culture of many genres of Chinese music, such as *qin* music and *Chaozhou* opera (Lee 2009; Yung 2009b). This distinction between Kunqu and Kunju is significant, particularly for amateur singers of Kunqu. For instance, in my first skype communication with Jiao Lei, an experienced amateur singer and flutist of *Kunqu*, I introduced my research plan using both *Kunju* and *Kunqu* to denote my subject. He interrupted me and said: “Wait, what exactly do you study? *Kunju* or *Kunqu*?” With deep confusion, I asked him: “Don’t these two terms mean the same thing? What is the difference?” He sighed with disappointment, and replied: “I see. You don’t know what you are studying at all.” I refined my answer and said: “I will surely focus on the singing.” And he sighed again and asked: “Do you study *juqu* (lit. operatic songs of Kun) or *qingqu* (lit. pure songs of Kun)?” He answered my question on the comparison between Kunju and Kunqu by introducing a new pair of concepts, *qingqu* and *juqu* (Jiao Lei, pers. comm., June 4th, 2011). I started to get confused by these terms,

but gradually realized there existed a difference between opera-making and the aria-singing associated with the genre. From that moment, I found the description on the webpage of the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritages on UNESCO's official website ambiguous, in which the genre is translated in English as Kun qu opera, which literally denotes a combination of both opera and a repertory of songs.⁴

My participatory observation in the circle of professional troupes and the circle of singing amateurs reveal that it is not only a musical distinction, but also cultural (ideological), and social (political and economic). In the summer of 2011, I visited the Shanghai Kunqu Research Society (Shanghai Kunqu yanxishe), an amateurs' society in Shanghai. I participated in their singing section, during which senior members advised others to sing arias based on song books handed down from different periods in the imperial era. This advisory process is called *pai quzi* (lit. clap to the song). One member asked me what I studied. I told him frankly that I was having a dilemma about what to study: the opera performances by professional troupes or the amateurs' singing. He laughed at me and said, "Opera performances by professional troupes? That's not traditional Kunqu." "What is it then?" I asked him. He thought for a while, and said: "I don't know. It's something new. It mixes Kunqu with some other parameters, such as political parameters. The operation of professional troupes is complicated. They need to consider many parameters external to Kunqu. And the result is quite often chaos" (Pan Jia, pers. comm., June 25th, 2011). This "chaos" directed my focus toward the contemporary changes of Kun opera, and the social conditions that made these changes possible.

In 2012 and 2013, I began my research on the state-owned Kun opera troupes in Nanjing, Suzhou, Hangzhou and Beijing. I focused on the Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Troupe, where I not

⁴ One example of the ambiguous description of Kun opera can be found on UNESCO's list of ICH. "Kun Qu Opera," *UNESCO*, accessed September 10, 2011, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/kun-qu-opera-00004>.

only learned about the history of the genre, but also looked into the new trend of state-ownership, which I will call the “corporatization” of a state-owned troupe. The development of this troupe involved three generations of professionals’ personal experiences, career paths, and dire predicaments. In this process, they survived political, cultural and economic transitions, and presented performances on stage that are currently known as Kun opera. In addition, they constantly negotiated with their sponsors about the meanings of the genre, and at the same time negotiated the values of their performances in various political economic situations. The history of these professionals’ navigation through numerous social transitions in contemporary China is the focus of this dissertation.

Note on Translation and Romanization

Publications in Chinese about Kun opera performances, the history of troupes, cultural policies, and criticism constitute a major source of this dissertation. These include writings published in journals, newspapers, webpages, and personal blogs. Unless otherwise noted, all English translations of Chinese are my own. Except for names of places and individuals that are widely known in the West in other transliterated forms, all translations of Chinese names, terms, and other words into English in this dissertation follow The *Hanyu Pinyin* romanization system used in the People’s Republic of China.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

My dissertation is a political and economic analysis of contemporary Kun opera (Kunju), from the 1940s to 2015, in relation to narratives about social change, ideological and economic values, and nation-building in the People's Republic of China. Kun opera is regarded as one of the oldest extant forms of Chinese opera, dating back some six hundred years to the middle of the Ming Dynasty. It flourished during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, but with the decline of literati culture in the early twentieth century, professional troupes diminished in number and the form nearly disappeared. Since the 1940s, however, the form has been revived and maintained through state incorporation, political monitoring, marketization, and cultural management strategies. In 2017, the genre was mainly performed by seven state-owned Kun opera performing groups. The establishment of state-owned Kun opera troupes in the 1940s, and changes it underwent during the following seventy-five years, constitute the contemporary history of this performing art.

There are now approximately six hundred and fifty Kun opera performers active in China (Zheng 2006, 58). Most of them were or are currently affiliated with seven state-owned Kun opera groups (including six troupes and one research association). The eldest generation of active performers, now in their seventies, was trained in the mid-1950s by teachers who had performed Kun opera for a living in Republican China in the 1940s. Performances were suspended during the political turmoil during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Since the 1980s, these performers have anchored their troupes, and some of them continue to play an important role in promoting the genre even after retiring at ages 60 to 65. The youngest generation of performers are in their twenties, having just finished their ten-year training at local Chinese opera schools, and having

passed strict pre-employment assessment to become employees of state-owned Kun opera troupes. Some of them have been involved in collaborations with private investors and independent producers and have thus acquired fame extensively beyond the field of state-sponsored performances. Despite their various experiences, these performers belong to the same structure of social relations which I view as the field of Kun opera production. In this field, performers always engage in competition for resources that are important to this field in a given period of time, for instance the political recognition before the Maoist period, and the period of economic profitization after the mid-1980s. Performers compete within the field of Kun opera for resources, and the rules of competition are connected to the underlying social order in China.

I will examine the development of Kun opera in the People's Republic of China from the first modern state-financed Kun opera troupe in the late 1940s to the collaboration of private capital with state-owned Kun opera troupes in the mid-2000s leading up to my research in 2015. Throughout those approximately seventy years, the genre has passed through many stages of public opinion. Kun opera was lauded as a political success for reforming the cultural conventions of an old China in the 1950s; criticized as a "poisonous weed" and banned in the 1960s and '70s; re-embraced as a representative of "outstanding national culture" in the 1980s and '90s; proclaimed an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in the early 2000s; and exploited as a money-making tool in the 21st century. This series of changes in economic relations, from nationalization (the 1950s to the early 1980s), to marketization (the mid-1980s to mid-2000s), and finally to collaboration with private capital (mid-2000s to present) have accompanied the changes of professional performers' understanding of their art.

My dissertation addresses the following questions: How have the meanings associated with Kun opera changed in relation to changing political and economic conditions? How has censorship

helped to condition the meaning and value of the genre? Is there a correlation between the production of meanings of Kun opera and the economic operation of troupes? How might a study of theatrical practices provide a scheme for understanding not only the development of Kun opera, but, more broadly, of social developments in cultural, political, and economic institutions during the growth of the PRC?

To answer these questions, my analysis focuses on how power relations in Chinese society affect the production and consumption of Kun opera as a symbolic resource. Using archival analysis of synopses of plays, performer's memoirs, and government documents, as well as ethnographic study of performances and interviews with performers gathered during my fieldwork (2010-2013), I analyze the interrelationship between Kun opera professionals, their patrons (including the state and private investors), and their clientele (i.e. the buying public). The core of my inquiry in this dissertation is to explore how the production and consumption of Kun opera performances are embedded in social relations, which are framed and governed by the rules of competition for interests and resources; in other words, the political economy of Kun opera.

1.1 DEFINING KUN OPERA

Kun opera is a complex artistic form that combines singing, acting, and instrumental music. The performance consists of a series of practices that produce sounds and motions in consort with visual presentations, such as costumes and stage setting, and each element in this whole is subject to certain aesthetic codes of Kun opera. So, the opera-watching public essentially engages a process of decoding these codes. For those who know these codes, a Kun opera performance is a complex network of symbols with a high degree of specificity: a character wearing a specific

costume or a specific make-up and hair style, appears on the stage with a specific pose, begins his or her part with a particular aria or speech.

Its vocal element was mainly developed based on *Kunshan qiang*, a codified system of tunes, vocal techniques, and rules for melodic embellishment originating from the area of Kunshan in the southeastern part of present-day Jiangsu province, adjacent to the Shanghai Municipality. Originally, the vocal style of *Kunshan qiang* was mainly performed in the form of *zuochang* (singing while sitting). In the 1550s, *Kunshan qiang* gained great popularity after the scholar-official Wei Liangfu (1522-1573) refined the principles of the relation between text and music by standardizing the rules of rhyme, tonal contour, ornamentation, pronunciation, and notation. Wei named the vocal style as *shuimoqiang* (lit. “the water-milled style”), which describes the refined and polished nature of this new and highly melismatic vocal style, as a metaphor for “flowing water” (Li Mark 2013, 17). Later generations of literary aficionados accepted Wei’s principles as the aesthetic fundamentals of singing Kun opera, and further contributed to the connection between this vocal art and polished literary language.⁵ Almost at the same time, *Kunshan qiang* was being used by professional performers in their staging of southern plays (*nan xi*) (Lu 1980, 38). The frequent use of *Kunshan qiang* in onstage performances of plays, as well as the refinements made by literati practitioners, such as Wei Liangfu led to the rise of an operatic genre, later known as *Kunju*.

There has been a large body of academic literature on the theatrical and musical features of Kun opera. Because I am limiting my scope to the political economy of the genre in contemporary China, I will not offer a comprehensive introduction and discussion of the entirety of this literature. Instead, in the following section, I will briefly introduce the musical and theatrical

⁵ Around 1547, Wei’s ideas of singing *Kunshan qiang Nanci yinzheng* (Guide to the Refined Singing of Southern Songs) was compiled and widely circulated among the literati (Lu 1980, 26-27).

features of Kun opera, with an emphasis on seven defining features that were affected by the changes in the genre between the 1940s and 2015. These are: *qupai* (labeled tunes), repertoire, ensemble, notation, text-and-music correspondence, Kun opera composition, role types and vocal skills.

Qupai

As a vocal art, Kun opera can be viewed as a musical presentation of *chuanqi* drama (“tales of the marvelous”; Wong 2001, 290-91), a genre of Chinese literary drama that flourished during the late Yuan and throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties. *Chuanqi* dramas depict fictional biographies and heroic adventures as well as erotic romances in literary language (Wong 2001, 290-91; Li Mark 2009, 226). The script of *chuanqi* drama is composed of spoken dialogue interspersed in a suite of lyric poems called *qu*⁶ (aria). Each piece of *qu* verse comprises a set of metric and tonal patterns, termed as *qupai* (lit. labeled tune). *Qupai* are melodic models that form the basis for Kun opera music. There are two main categories: vocal *qupai* and instrumental *qupai*.⁷ The former is used in arias, and the latter is used in instrumental interludes that connect arias, provide certain theatrical moods, and accompany acting.

Each *qupai* is identified by a name derived from one of the prototypical preexisting tunes from the repertoire of *chuanqi* drama (Wong 2001, 290-91). Therefore, a *qupai* in Kun opera has a dual nature: it denotes a poetic model, consisting of lines that comprise an unequal number of characters, characterized by specific metric and tonal patterns; it also denotes “a musical repertoire of melodic models” whose rhythmic and melodic features generally correspond to the literary structure (Thrasher 2016, 3). A number of labeled melodies can be put together to form a set of

⁶ *Qu* is used in both the Chinese literature studies and Chinese music studies and can mean different things in different contexts. *Qu* refers to a literary genre of texts that can be sung with musical accompaniment; it also denotes a melody without lyrics, i.e. a tune. I translate *qu* into “aria” in the former context, and “tune” in the latter.

⁷ For a systematic study of vocal and instrumental *qupai* used in Chinese performing arts, see Thrasher 2016.

qupai arias, termed as *qupai liantao* (lit. serial sets of labeled tunes) (Li 2004, 23; Thrasher 2016). These serial arias constitute the primary musical structure in Kun opera.

Music crafted in the *qupai* pattern is structured in three ways in Kun opera: (1) a single *qupai* pattern can be used as an independent aria for a vocal part, called *danzhi qu* (single-piece song); (2) several *qupai* patterns can be linked together in sequence to form an aria suite, called *qupai liantao*; or (3) the instrumental repertoire of ensemble music (without the text) uses *qupai* to establish particular moods in the dramatic performance (Li 2004, 23).

Conventionally, the librettist of Kun opera is expected to compose the lyrics according to the metric and tonal patterns of *qupai*; otherwise, the musicians will not be able to set the lyrics to the corresponding tunes. Therefore, librettists must be familiar with a variety of *qupai*, and the conventional suite format that connects certain *qupai* together. This convention was greatly challenged in the mid-1950s when the iconoclast ideology was getting popular in socialist China. As I will show in chapters two and three, some librettists who had no experience composing lyrics for Kun opera were assigned to reform Kun opera plays and their conscious or unconscious innovations ignored the rules of *qupai* conventions.

Zhezi (excerpted scenes)

A complete play of Kun opera consists of numerous episodic scenes, usually ranging from thirty to fifty. For example, the classical play *The Peony Pavilion* by Tang Xianzu comprises fifty-five scenes. It would take nearly a week to perform it in its entirety. In the late Ming and early Qing period, around the seventeenth century, excerpted scenes emerged as a form of performance that only featured the most popular parts of a long play. These excerpted scenes, once called *zhaijin* (lit. “to pick the essence”), became prevalent beginning in the Qianlong reign of the Qing dynasty

(1736-1795), and were established as convention by the nineteenth century. It was common practice to put together a number of excerpted scenes from the same play or even different plays into a performance, in order to suit the needs of audiences who were well acquainted with the full-length narrative from which those scenes were drawn and would not need to sit through a whole play (Li Mark 2009, 226). At the same time, some theater specialists began to compile collections of excerpts. For example, *Zhuibaiqiu*, an anthology of popular opera scenes, was compiled at various times between 1688 and 1774 and published by the bookseller/publisher Qian Decang (Li Mark 2009, 238). This anthology includes four hundred and twenty-nine excerpts of Kun opera, in addition to fifty-eight scenes from plays of other genres (Dai 2001, 33).

The popularity of excerpted scenes impacted the contemporary development of Kun opera: many plays became fragmented, and only the popular scenes from these plays were preserved. The text of four hundred and twenty-seven scenes are still extant. Between 1949 and 2009, the performances of four hundred and fourteen scenes were passed down to the younger generation, among which the current professional troupes can only stage two hundred and forty-three (Zhou 2011, 80, 82). One result of the excerpted-scenes-based repertoire is that contemporary librettists could only rely on the extant excerpts to reconstruct relatively complete plotlines of those old plays. In Chapter 5, I analyze the emergence of what I call the “neo-classical grand opera.” These Kun opera plays were usually developed from one or a limited number of excerpted scenes, and provide audiences with more complete and complicated plotlines than those of excerpts. I will show that the revision, rewriting, and combination of extant excerpted scenes became common practice in the late 1980s; these practices are still used by Kun opera professionals to produce neo-classical grand operas to appeal to contemporary audiences.

Repertoire

The repertoire of Kun opera has dual meanings. First, it denotes *qupai taoshi*, i.e. a repertoire of melodic models⁸ that musicians use to set to lyrics and craft arias. These models are mainly derived from two sources: (1) the repertoire of preexisting pentatonic tunes known as *nanqu* (southern tunes), and (2) the repertoire of preexisting heptatonic tunes developed from Yuan drama, a popular musical theater of northern China since the eleventh century (called *beiqu* or “northern tunes”) (Wong 2001, 291). It has been a convention that a number of arias should be combined and arranged according to a prescribed sequential order, called *taoqu* (aria suite) (Wang 1997). There are a number of ways of forming a suite. A Southern suite (*nan tao*) consists of music models from the repertoire of southern tunes, and a Northern suite (*bei tao*) includes music models from the repertoire of northern tunes. One can also select music models from both repertoires to form a Southern and Northern mixed suite (*nanbei hetao*). The selection of music models and the arrangement of a suite are the basic elements that determine the musical and literary structure of Kun opera.

A break with conventions for combining arias entails radical changes to the structure of Kun opera. In Chapter 2, I analyze the so-called “revolutionary change” to the music and text of the Kun opera play, *The Fifteen Strings of Cash* in the mid-1950s. The unconventional use of music/literary models and the new way to form the suite of music models were among the primary changes that librettists made to this classical work. In Chapter 5, I examine how librettists in the 1980s rediscovered the conventional structure of Kun opera and intended to reconstruct a suite

⁸ I borrow the translation of “melodic models” from Alan Thrasher (Thrasher 2016). This translation precisely describes the way that Kun opera aria masters exploit pre-existing tunes as raw materials for the crafting of new arias. Although many aria masters dedicated themselves to the exploration of the correct method of re-working the melodic models, their methods are highly varied. Therefore, these melodic models do not provide any formula that offer a fixed method of crafting new arias.

according to preexisting examples. Their effort directly contributed to the rise of what I call “the neo-classical grand Kun opera.”

Second, the repertoire also refers to *jumu*, i.e. all the plays that a troupe can perform. There are generally three main categories of Kun opera plays that I discuss in chapters 2 through 7: (1) the traditional repertoire including pre-existing excerpted scenes, most of which were orally transmitted; (2) the reformed plays in the 1950s and early 1960s which were a result of the Opera Reform in the PRC; (3) what I call “the neo-classical grand Kun opera” since the 1980s, which is the outcome of the collaboration between contemporary librettists and musicians’ adaptation and rewriting of traditional plays, and directors’ design of theatrical effects and innovative use of traditional elements of acting. In these chapters, I explore the objective conditions that caused the changes to these different categories of repertoire, including policies of censorship, propaganda requirements, and market needs.

Ensemble

The basic ensemble of Kun opera usually consists of a flutist on a transverse flute (*Kun di*), a percussionist on wood blocks (*ban*), small gongs (*xiao luo*), and a drummer on the single-skinned drum (*dan pi gu*). Other melodic instruments often used in a Kun opera ensemble include the three-stringed lute (*sanxian*), the mouth organ (*sheng*), the four-stringed lute (*pipa*), and the twenty-one-stringed zither (*zheng*). Some instruments that are not part of a typical Kun opera ensemble are used to innovate the music. As I will show in Chapter 5, some directors of Kun opera plays added three kinds of drums to depict the historical period of the play, and their experiment was considered quite innovative in their time.

Notation

Traditionally, music in Kun opera is notated in *gongche pu*, a solfège system that was in use as early as the eleventh century, which indicates the modes,⁹ the tonic solmization of the melody on the flute and/or string instruments, as well as the meter and rhythm shown by using *banyan* (Chen 2001, 163). In professional Kun opera troupes, the percussion part is notated in the national system of *luogujing*, which not only provides the meter and rhythm for wind and string instruments, but also functions as signals for performers' actions. Due to the flexibility in the arrangement of actions and performances, historically the percussion part was much less stable, mainly transmitted orally, and not widely circulated. Hence, music written in *gongchepu* offers a much more fixed score compared to *luogujing*, and is therefore more common among later generations.

There are three primary formats of Kun opera scores written in *gongchepu*: the vertical format (*zhishi*), such as that used in *Jiugong dacheng nanbei ci gongpu* (A Comprehensive Anthology of Texts and Notation of the Southern and Northern Tunes in Nine Modes); the tilted format (*xieshi*), as used in *Jicheng qupu* (An Anthology of Songs); and the horizontal format (*hengshi*), as in *E'yunge qupu* (The Song Book of the E'yun Studio). Among the three, the tilted

⁹ There are two systems of modes of Kun opera music. The first system is called *gongdiao*. In a score, a *gongdiao* appears in front of each aria. The use of *gongdiao* can be traced back to the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), but its original meaning has been obscured. *Gongdiao* is now often interpreted as a set of categories that classify tunes according to their emotional associations (Gu 2012, 122-23). The other system is called *dise* (lit. the color of flute), which is similar to the “key” in Western music and refers to a type of scale consisting of the seven notes in *gongche pu*, such as *xiao gong diao*. Some Kunqu theorists argue that *gongdiao* also denotes *dise* because certain *dise* scales correspond to specific types of *gongdiao*; therefore they form a cross-referential relationship (Wu 2000 [1916]; Gu 2012). At this writing, *gongdiao* is still a controversial concept. For instance, in the 1990s, Chinese theater specialist Luo Di proposed a hypothesis that *gongdiao* may refer to a category of pre-existing poetic structures that use the same rhyme, rather than being indicative of the musical features of *qupai* (Luo 1998, 3). In spite of the scholarly controversy over what *gongdiao* means, it is a fact that *gongdiao* no longer plays a functional role in the current development of Kun opera. Musicians that I interviewed told me that a librettist chooses a *qupai* from some modeled sets, and directly copies the *gongdiao* written in front of the *qupai* as granted. Musicians do not rely on *gongdiao* either, because each model *qupai* is also notated in a *dise*, which is indicative of a precise scale. So *gongdiao* is currently functionless in their composition. The lack of precise musical meaning of *gongdiao* is also described in some scholars' writings (Li 2004, 18; Luo 2012, 14).

format, also called the *suoyipu* (lit. “woven rush raincoat” notation), gained great popularity among both professionals and amateurs due to its distinct layout. Music is grouped according to the characters in the lyrics, and transcribed in a diagonal line on the right of the corresponding character. This style is named after a type of woven rush raincoat due to the resemblance between the shape of the music score and that of leafy fibers of the raincoat. Nowadays, *suoyipu* has been widely used among Kun opera amateurs, and has also become the primary format of some newly compiled Kun opera song books. Figure 1 shows an example of the format of “woven rush raincoat” notation from *Quyuan chuoying* (A Compilation of Essential Arias), a song book compiled and edited by Wang Zhenglai in 1981 and currently used as teaching material in Jiangsu Province Indigenous Opera School.

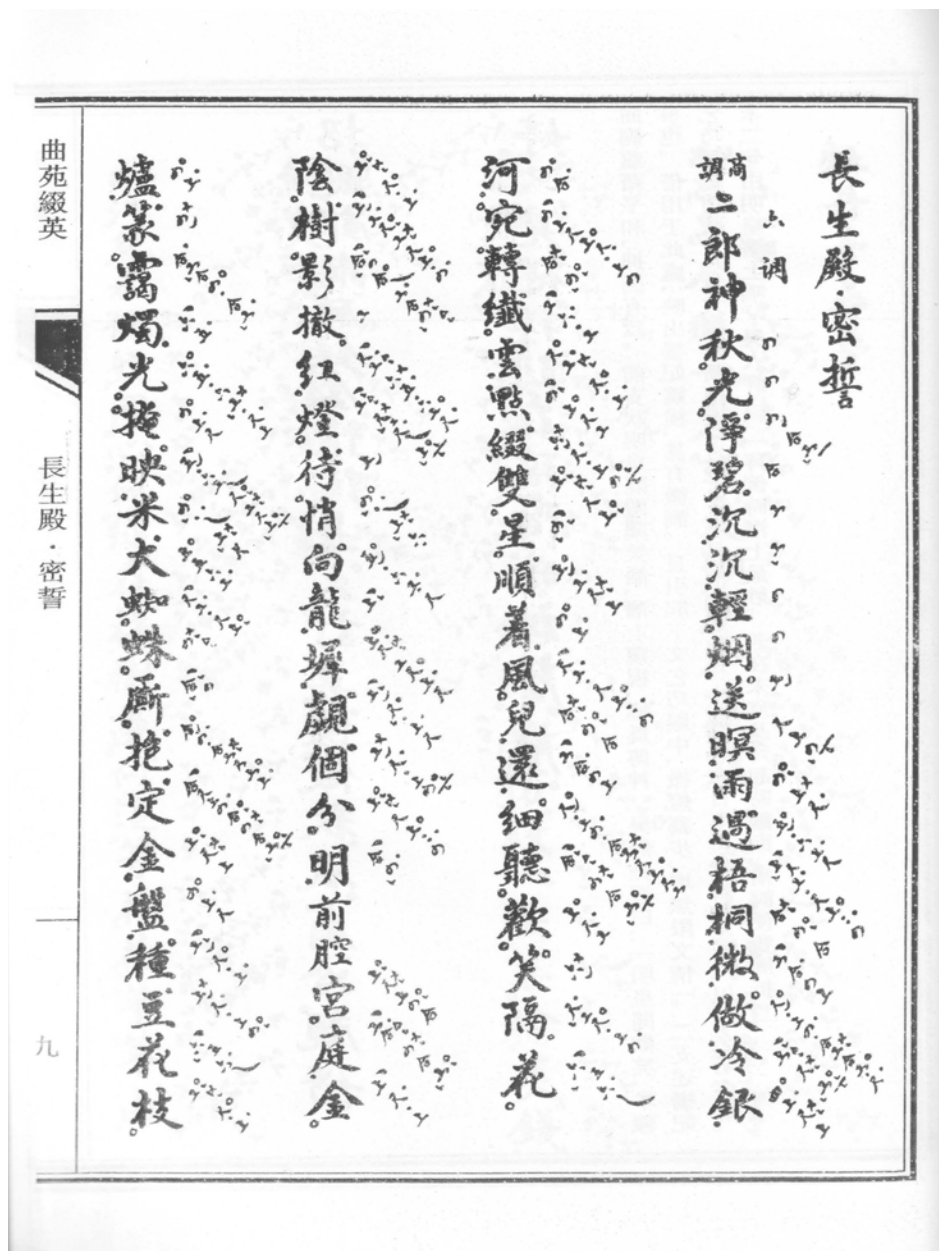


Figure 1. The format of “woven rush raincoat” notation from *Quyuan chuoying* (*A Compilation of Essential Arias*).

In addition to gongche pu, the numbered solfège notation (*jianpu*) was also used to notate Kun opera, for the numbered solfège notation was increasingly popular in contemporary China. As early as 1931, Kun opera specialist Liu Zhenxiu published a song book entitled *A New*

Introduction to Kun Opera, in which music was written in the numbered notation. Liu stated in the preface that many outsiders were intimidated by the technical jargon of Kun opera, and considered the notational knowledge as the rare erudition of Kun opera specialists. Hence, the author transcribed the music in the numbered solfège notation for the purpose of making the score more comprehensive to the average music lover (Liu 1931, 3). But the numbered notation did not completely replace *gongche pu* in the professional training of Kun opera performers until the mid-1960s, right before the Cultural Revolution. In my interview with Shi Xiaomei and Zhang Hong from Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Troupe, who received professional training at Jiangsu Province Opera School in the early 1960s, they mentioned that the scores used for educational purposes at school were written in *gongchepu*. After the genre was resurrected in the late 1970s, however, scores were widely notated in *jianpu* (Shi Xiaomei and Zhang Hong, pers. comm., June 5th, 2012). Similar accounts can be found in other scholars' research. For instance, Taiwanese scholar Zhang Yating briefly traced the learning experience of Liu Jiyan, a performer who was trained to perform Kun opera in the mid-1950s. According to Liu, old scores written in *gongche pu* were generally in use among Kun opera professionals and students; these old scores were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution (Zhang 2006, 55).

In this context, the return of Kun opera scores written in *gongchepu* in the early 21st century is indicative of some professionals' consciousness of resurrecting a music tradition of the genre. I will explain the connection between the making of *gongche pu* pocket books and a pursuit of Kun opera as a body of erudite knowledge in Chapter 7.

The Singing of Arias: The Issue of Text and Music Correspondence

The core principle of music in Kun opera is the relationship between text and music. In a

tonal language such as Chinese, the relationship between syllabic tones of the text and musical tones has interested not only contemporary Kun opera theorists (Fu 1961; Xiang 1963), but also many ethnomusicologists and linguists (Chao 1956; Pian 1972; Yang 1981; Yung 1983; Picard and Lau 2016). As a popular form of entertainment among Chinese literati, Kun opera was developed into a vocal genre, the compositional methods of which strictly conform to a set of rules for setting text and music. As *qupai* specialists François Picard and Kar Lun Alan Lau describe, the text-music phenomenon of Kun opera is among “the deepest, most complex, and in fact, most controversial aspects of the *qupai* paradigm” (Picard and Lau 2016, 120).

The correspondence between text and music exists in two main aspects.¹⁰ First, the tonal nature of the Chinese language acts as “a modulator of musical pitches” (ibid., 121), the changes in direction of which form a referential outline to which the melodic contour is confined. Second, the melodic phrasing of a *qupai* needs to correspond to the verse structure of the poem, and the grouping of syllables of the textual template (e.g. 2+2+3 in a seven-syllable phrase) provides the structural and temporal framework for the melody (ibid.).

Drawing on my observation of amateur vocalists’ gatherings and some professional performers’ rehearsals, the text and music correspondence is one of the most important rules that senior vocalists teach their junior students. And for many contemporary aria masters, one’s mastery of arias depends on their ability to discriminate between correct and incorrect. An example of the correctness of the use of standard ornaments is given in Chapter 7, in which I focus on a Kun opera composer’s explanation of the correct rendering of Kun opera based on the text-music

¹⁰ Several studies in English offer insights into the text-music principles of Kun opera. For instance, François Picard and Kar Lun Alan Lau examine closely the interrelationship between words, pitch, and melody, as well as structural and extra-musical parameters in *qupai* of Kun opera (Picard and Lau 2016, 119-54). Some recent literature explores how these principles are kept or changed in contemporary practice. An example is Juliane Jones’s research on two contemporary Kun opera composers’ methods of crafting/composing music (Jones 2014).

correspondence in a commercial project.

Composition

The correspondence between text and music in Kun opera raises a question about the composition of Kun opera. In historical documents, compositional methods (*zuoqu fa*) generally referred to the method of composing lyrics based on metric patterns of *qupai*, rather than music (Li 2004, 10). Music composition, termed as *zhipu* (lit. “crafting the score”) or *tianpu* (lit. “filling in the score”), takes place after the lyrics are finished.¹¹ The music is not original, and is usually adapted from a melodic model. As ethnomusicologist Bell Yung points out, the Chinese opera composer may not compose “individual pieces with unique structural elements such as melody, rhythm, and harmony”; instead, they “introduce innovations into the singing of old tunes” (Yung 2001, 277). Therefore, composed tunes may be considered more like adaptations of the basic tunes.

The librettists of Kun opera usually compose the lyrics first according to selected *qupai*, and then ask musicians to set the text to melodies, using pre-existing tunes with which a *qupai* is associated, and adjust melodic and rhythmic details to form a variation of the prototype tune (Picard and Lau 2016, 120; Jones 2014). My interviews with Chi Lingyun, a Kun opera composer, and Zhang Hong, a librettist, also confirm this compositional process. Based on these interviews, I came to understand that Kun opera is a musical presentation of literature, in addition to an entertainment form and a theatrical genre.

The procedure of composition determines that music must be dependent on the text, and must be derived from a *qupai* that is associated with a pre-existing tune model. Therefore, the

¹¹ *Tianpu* is also called *dingpu* (lit. “fix the score”) (Jones 2014, 36). The actors follow a score that includes the music and lyrics. The librettist composes lyrics according to the metric pattern of a pre-existing melodic model. Then, the composer reworks the pre-existing aria, by adjusting the melody to fit the tones of the newly composed lyrics. Therefore, the music composer’s job is to add melody and “fill in the score.”

creation of new pieces of music relies on musicians' crafting of a variation (Jones 2014). Furthermore, orthodox music should be in compliance with both model tunes and tonal and metric patterns of pre-composed lyrics.¹² Therefore, the level of creativity in composing Kun opera is relatively limited (Chi Lingyun, pers. comm., 27 December 2013; Jones 2014) Some music composers who strictly follow the composition orthodoxy prioritize whether music is free of errors (*bu chucuo*) over whether music pleases the ear (*yue'er*).

The subordinate status of music composition was related to musicians' low social status before the early 20th century. Compared to the lyricists who were usually literati, musicians were commoners and their contributions were usually belittled. According to the renowned Kunqu master Wu Mei in the 20th century, librettists of Kun opera in most cases were only concerned about the literary principles of their textual composition, and did not care about the music. In addition, they disparaged music composition as an insignificant skill subordinate to their creation; it was mainly used to fill the need of rendering their literary work in musical form. The indifference toward music resulted in an unequal transmission of compositional methods of text compared to music. Despite the huge body of essays and treatises on methods of composing lyrics,¹³ the study of methods of putting text to music has rarely been documented, theorized, or transmitted. Until the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the methods of crafting music had been unknown to most Kunqu practitioners.¹⁴ Since the mid 20th century, musicians began to enjoy an equally respectable

¹² Some scholars have explored both the traditional and contemporary compositional skills of Kun opera. The most recent attempt was Juliann Jones' dissertation in 2014, entitled *Contemporary Kunqu Composition*. In this highly inspiring work, Jones introduces two active composers' understandings of the traditional principles and steps of composition, and examines their personal approaches of composing music used in Kun opera (Jones 2014, 135-204).

¹³ For instance, the renowned Kun opera scholar in the 20th century, Wu Mei (1884-1939), theorized the methods of lyrics composition in great detail in *Guqu zhutan* (Wu 2000 [1916]).

¹⁴ In *Guqu zhutan*, Wu Mei lamented that skills of crafting music of Kunqu were dying out. As he noted: "There is only one thing that the song masters are unaware, even if they are aware of it, they don't understand it thoroughly, i.e. the methods of crafting music. When learners sing songs, do they even probe into the differences between those arias that are labeled as the same qupai, but are different one from another? ... Each qupai, must have its specific metric and melodic patterns. But each song, albeit in compliance with the same tonal structures, consists

status as librettists. In addition, some pioneering Kunqu scholars, such as Wang Jilie (1873-1952), adopted the analytical methodology for the study of music in Kun opera, and set the cornerstone of the contemporary study of *qixue* (the study of songs) by forging empirical practices and knowledge of Kun opera into a hermeneutic study of the genre (Liu 2004, 37). Moreover, music scholars' growing interest in explicating the rules of crafting music in Kun opera gave rise to the music study of *Kunqu* as a legitimate academic discourse in ethnomusicology and music composition.

Role Types and Vocal Skills

The last two parameters of music in Kun opera I introduce are the role types and their vocal skills, which are usually interrelated. The role types are called *jiamen* (lit. the class of families) in Kun opera. Among the five major family classes shared by many genres of Chinese indigenous operas -- *sheng* (male), *dan* (female), *jing* (painted-face), *mo* (elder male), and *chou* (clown) -- there are as many as twenty sub-role-types in Kun opera. Each role-type has a specific set of vocal and performance skills that enable the actors to depict the characters in audible and visible ways. For instance, the family of *sheng* are characterized by frequent utilization of falsetto. And the young male, *xiaosheng*, particularly features the switch between natural voice and falsetto.¹⁵ In contrast, elder male roles more often use a guttural timbre when singing and speaking. Painted-

of different tones, different articulation between aspirated and unaspirated, between *yin and yang*, therefore can hardly be attuned to the same piece of music. Hence, music crafters should examine the yin and yang of each character in the lyrics, and then craft music accordingly, in addition to the consideration of the melodic and metric patterns of the *qupai*. As a result, it gives rise to different songs of the same *qupai*, rather than identical songs. However, literati did not know these rules, and selected pre-existing music score of the *qupai* from a certain excerpt as a blueprint, that is to say, to use an old score to sing new lyrics, which is truly an erroneous opinion (Wu 2000 [1916], 78-79). In this passage, he not only introduces his understanding of how to craft an appropriation variation of modeled tune, but also problematizes the literati's indifference to the significance of music in Kun opera.

¹⁵ As the famous *xiaosheng* performer Shi Xiaomei told me, this vocal skill can depict men's voice break during the period of voice change (Shi Xiaomei, pers. comm., July 5, 2011).

face roles are usually military characters who are considered imposingly masculine, and their voice is characterized by strong chest resonance, called *tangyin*, and a dry and coarse voice that ruptures in one's throat, termed as *zhayin* (Li 2004, 60).

In the female family, young female roles are characterized by a refined voice with falsetto, and falsetto is used even when they speak. In contrast, elder female roles more often use a natural voice with guttural timbre when singing and speaking. Due to the various vocal skills, different role types have specific vocal ranges and musical expressions and arouse different emotions. They often appear in specific themes, for example *xiaosheng* and *wudan* or *guimendan* (young lady) are the two main roles in romantic stories. And *daguansheng* (senior official male role) often appears in royal court stories or tales of officialdom. The role type is important in the current dissertation in that it provides an analytical perspective through which I can probe into what kinds of character types are considered captivating in a certain period of time.

1.2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON KUN OPERA

Before I proceed to my research approaches and methodology, I will provide a critical introduction to English and Chinese academic writings on Kun opera, mainly from the 1940s to the 2010s. This modest literature review does not exhaust this comprehensive and diverse source of Kun opera studies. Instead, my main concern is with what features of this operatic genre have attracted academic interest of contemporary scholars, what perspectives they have taken, and what methods they have used. I will be focusing on five major discourses that characterize contemporary studies of Kun opera in the People's Republic of China: (1) aria studies that theorize the principles of tonal and rhythmic patterns, vocalization, intonation, and *tianpu* (filling in the score); (2) historical

research on the general history of the genre; (3) biographies of Kun opera scholars and professional performers; (4) theater studies on directing, performing, the theatricalization process, and the relationship between tradition and innovation; and (5) the preservation and development of Kun opera as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) after 2001. This literature review is intended as a critical summary and assessment of these trends.

The scope of selected writings needs clarification at this point. In some of the writings reviewed in this section, authors may emphasize various Chinese opera genres using a generalized concept known as Chinese *xiqu* (opera), rather than treating Kun opera as the main subject. These authors tend to focus on characteristics that many genres share and use Kun opera as an instance to exemplify certain issues and trends. Nonetheless, there has been a clear trend since the mid-1980s that Kun opera studies are gradually separated from the general studies of Chinese opera as a result of wider recognition of the genre's long history and elite cultural origin.

Aria Studies

Historically, scholars paid more attention to the spectacle of singing arias than other perspectives, and their theoretical studies of arias, termed as *quxue*, have greatly influenced the understanding of the genre itself. As ethnomusicologist Isabel Wong explains, “Kunqu denotes either the musical theater originating in Kunshan or, more specifically, a codified system of tunes, vocal techniques, and ornamental elements associated with Kunshan theater, in other words, the *shengqiang* of Kunshan, or Kunshan *qiang*” (Wong 2001, 289). In Chinese literature, the character “qu” refers to the verse form used for the lyrics of a chuanqi play; but in Kun opera studies, this concept also includes the metrical patterns of musical tunes that conform with the verse of the lyrics. Therefore, as Chinese theater specialist Luo Di noted, singing arias is a combination of

literature and music (Luo 1995, 1). Aria studies have a long history. Since the first theoretical treatise *Qulü* (The rules of arias) that Wei Liangfu finished around 1560 and first appeared in print in 1616 (Wong 2001; Li 2004), research interests have developed into an area that consists of poetry composition, musical versification, and vocalization. The purpose of this research is to theorize or standardize the rules of singing. The main methodology is literature-based, for the authority of scholastic writings heavily depends on the authors' ability of interpreting historical documents.

Aria studies in the 1940s mainly extended a modern trend formed primarily around the early twentieth century when scholars, including Wu Mei and Wang Jilie concentrated on compiling pre-existing writings in and before the nineteenth century (Wu 2000 [1916]) and using Western-influenced methods to re-analyze and re-theorize the theatrical conventions (Wang 1928). Some contemporary Kun opera scholars attribute the analytical trend to a Western-influenced scientific concept, after which studies of Kun opera were transformed from a guide for practitioners toward a hermeneutic research area for scholars (Liu 2004, 37). Following these pioneering works, Kun opera theorists, including Xiang Hengfang and Xiang Yuancun (Xiang and Xiang 1944; Xiang 1963), continued to explore analytical methods for theorizing the knowledge recorded in pre-existing documents about linguistic tones of characters in lyrics, articulation, pronunciation, and rhymes. These scholarly writings published in the period of the Republic of China became the cornerstone for Kun opera studies in the People's Republic of China after 1949.

Scholarly publications on arias slowed down during the early 1960s, and leading up to the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). During this iconoclastic social movement aimed at purging remnants of capitalist and traditional elements from Chinese society and imposing Maoist thought as the dominant ideology within the CPC, studies of traditional artistic and cultural practices were

considered anti-revolutionary and thus criticized and prohibited. Many old scores were destroyed during the political upheaval of the Cultural Revolution.

After the Cultural Revolution, many Kun opera scholars were quick to spot the importance of resuming aria studies. Scholars' main focus was put on the restoration of pre-existing repertoires. Scores of Kun opera arias were based on two sources: preexisting anthologies of repertoire, and oral performance. For example, in *Kunqu chuantong qupai xuan* (A Selected Repertoire of Traditional Kun Opera Aria Models) compiled by Gao Jingchi and Fan Buyi (Gao and Fan 1981), 150 pieces out of the 185 pieces in total were transcribed by Fan based on the flute player Gao's performance; the scores of the remaining parts were based on several Kun opera books published in the Ming and Qing dynasties and the Republican era. Some renowned Kun opera vocalists dedicated themselves to compiling scores that they or their family members had collected, such as Yu Zhenfei (Yu 1982, 1996 [1953]). A more extensive selection of repertoire exemplars is *Kunqu qupai ji taoshu fanli ji* (Examples of Kun Opera Aria Models and Suites) (Wang 1997), a compilation of preexisting aria models and music analysis of each model in terms of musical structure, tempo, and verse and tonal patterns. These scores were notated not only in *gongche* notation, but also numbered notation, such as the famous *Zhenfei qupu* (Yu Zhenfei's Song Book).

In addition to compiling arias, a large body of research on compositional theories, rooted in Chinese literati's strong interest of studying *zhi pu* (the crafting of the score), the techniques of fitting melodic contours and rhythmic patterns more appropriately to the contours of word tones and verse patterns with appropriate innovations and standard ornaments.¹⁶ As Kun opera expert Wang Shoutai noted, in the 1980s, theories of aria composition had gradually become a body of

¹⁶ For the writings on the crafting of scores in the 1920s, see Wu Mei, *Guqu zhutan* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2000).

lost knowledge (*juexue*) (Wang 1982, 1), and the waning passion in this area not only resulted in the decline of scholarly research, but also a reduction in the creativity of new Kun opera repertoire. Therefore, Wang and his contemporaries were dedicated to rediscover, transmit, and reinterpret the rules of crafting arias.

Since the 1980s, contemporary Kun opera scholars developed interested in “translating” compositional rules described in historical documentations into a contemporary academic language consisting of modern terminologies in Western musical theory, linguistics, and Chinese literature. In *Kun opera changqiang yanjiu* (Research on melodies in Kun opera), Wu Junda particularly drew on the issue of *zhipu* (the production of scores) (Wu 1993). Using examples and theories from several authoritative historical resources, such as *Jiugong dacheng nanbeici gongpu*, Wu demonstrated how melody and lyrics fit together. This book can be seen as a contemporary translation of the traditional rules based on historical musical examples.

This approach can also be seen in Wang Shoutai’s book *Kunqu gelü* (The Regulated Forms of Kun Opera) (Wang 1982). Drawing on historical documents, Wang explained the notational codes used in Kun opera, and the rules of music composition. The latter includes two aspects: (1) the rules of “tune accommodation” (Wong 2001, 293), a process in which the composer “[matches] the tonal movement of a melody with the linguistic tones of the text,” with an emphasis on the accurate enunciation and projection of the text (Yung 2001, 277); and (2) the disciplines of arranging various aria models with different types of modulations. This book distinguishes itself from others due to the author’s phonological methods. Tracing the historical relationship between linguistic tones and musical tones in Chinese vocal music, Wang illustrates the correspondence between linguistic tones of the text and musical pitches.

Another monograph dedicated to the research on the compositional theories of Kun opera

is *Kunqu yinyue yu tianci* (Setting Lyrics to Music of Kun Opera) by Zheng Xicun (Zheng 2000). Based on the analysis on different verse forms and corresponding musical examples, Zheng illustrated the versification process that he theorized as “*tianci*” (filling in lyrics) in terms of how to fit the metrical patterns of aria with the prescribed verse forms, or the other way around. This study shares great similarities with the study of Chinese classical poems.

Western scholars also made contributions to the study of arias through musicological and ethnomusicological perspectives. For instance, ethnomusicologist Juliane Jones investigated the compositional methods of contemporary Kun opera (Jones 2014). Cultural anthropologist Lindy Li Mark questioned the orthodox concept that melody of Kun opera arias is a mere amplification of the libretti, and analyzed the examples in which music is characterized by its particular aesthetics which made the text more difficult to understand (Li Mark 2013). François Picard and Kar Lun Alan Lau Fran illustrated the text-music issues in Kun opera through their analysis of melodic features and textual features (Picard and Lau 2016).

The aria studies of Kun opera is characterized by contemporary scholars’ interpretations of preexisting terminology into a relatively modern/Westernized term system which covers music theories, literature studies, and linguistic research. This area constitutes an essential component in contemporary Kun opera research from the 1940s to the present.

Historical Research

There are two major aspects of the historical research of Kun opera studies since the 1940s: the study of the history of the genre, and biographies of Kun opera performers, amateurs, and scholars. Although these two aspects of historical research overlap with aria studies, the historical research is characterized by an enlarged scope and different approaches. As mentioned before, the

aria studies constitute a literature-based area in which scholars often use textual interpretation as the prime method. As a result, aria studies have been gradually developed into a branch of the study of the history of Chinese literature. Additionally, aria studies have developed into an autonomous area in which, throughout hundreds of years of accumulation, theorists of Kun opera were primarily concerned with their predecessors' analyses of and prescriptions for the metrical patterns of verse, and their own compilation and amendment of anthologies of exemplars. Most of these issues are more concerned with internal rules of Kun opera than external parameters that affect the development of the genre, such as the social history of Kun opera making.

The focus of historical research is twofold: (1) the exploration of the social functions of Kun opera performances, and (2) the public dissemination of Kun opera as a regional genre that gradually gained its popularity in the 17th and 18th century but declined after the 19th century. Particularly after the late 1970s, the academic scope shifted to a concern with the development of this genre from a cultural sociological perspective and different types of literal representations of the history of Kun opera. This change led to a large amount of writings that associate performances of Kun opera with specific socio-cultural and economic contexts.

A number of Kun opera scholars dedicated themselves to writing comprehensive histories of Kun opera. For instance, Lu E'ting's *Kunju yanchu shigao* (A History of Kun Opera Performances) comprehensively explored the development of Kun opera, the spread of the genre from South China to North China, variations of performing activities, and histories of famous troupes (Lu 1980). "Annals of the History of Kun Opera (1324-1997)" in *Zhongguo Kunju da cidian* (The encyclopedia of Kun opera) edited by Wu Xinlei is another work that outlines the development of the genre (Wu 2002).

In addition to these comprehensive historical research projects, a large body of literature

has focused on particular subjects of Kun opera history. One of the most popular subjects is the relationship between Kun opera and Chinese literati. The connection between Chinese classical literature and the writing of Kun opera scripts, which is a long-held tradition of the Kun opera scholarship, was expanded into a more comprehensive exploration of Kun opera performances as a cultural expression. For example, Shen Grant's research on theater activities in imperial China, including performances of Kun opera plays, offered an insight into the connection between cultural elite's lifestyle and Kun opera making (Shen 1998, 2005).

In addition, Chinese opera scholars have turned to new approaches and perspectives. Drawing on a variety of historical documents instead of Kun opera scholarship exclusively, many scholars retell histories of Kun opera with various foci that no longer center on the internal principles of Kun opera from a sociological and anthropological perspective. Kun opera is treated as a subject that has its own cultural history which is embedded in an even broader social history (Li 2004). Research from a sociological perspective focuses on the social functions of Kun opera in various historical periods and cultural expressions of not only the elite class, but also lower classes who took Kun opera as a popular entertainment or a cultural practice in rituals. Based on personal journals, performer's memoirs, and local chorography during the Ming and Qing dynasties, Zhu Lin examines the descriptions of Kun Opera performances in religious rituals, festivals, socializing occasions, and entertainment in the region of Jiangnan, which includes the southern part of Jiangsu Province and the northern part of Zhejiang Province nowadays (Zhu 2007). In this book, Kun opera performances are viewed as a way of sociality in the public social life, as opposed to "pure" aesthetic activity, and this angle allows Zhu to further explore the reasons that Kun opera gained its popularity in terms of the consumption capacity in the geographical area, the connection between its consumers' aesthetic dispositions and their social strata, and the ethnic

bias in the cultural policies. Li Mark scrutinizes the development of Kun opera performances in Yangzhou as a form of entertainment and analyzes cultural influence from Yangzhou on the Yangzhou vernacular dialect in the comic roles of Kun opera (Li Mark 2009).

The production and consumption processes of Kun opera described in historical documents attracted scholarly attention after the 1990s. One example is Chinese literature specialist Zhou Qin's study of three discrete roles in Kun opera productions. As he wrote, "as a cultural activity, the aesthetic values and material values in a society depend on what the community create, spread, and finally accomplish. This community [which produces the art of Kun opera] consists of three parts: artists (performers), literati (librettists), and audiences" (Zhou 2000, 124). Zhou proposed a binary structure in which performers and literati are responsible for the production of the meanings and aesthetic standards of Kun opera art, and audiences consume the cultural messages created for them.

With the influence from communication studies, the dissemination of Kun opera performances in different historical periods has become one of the dominant issues in Kun opera research, particularly after 2000 (Song 2005; Yang 2005; Wang 2004a, b, 2006b). Drawing on the dissemination issue, Wang Tingxin argued that Kun opera consumers actually came from different social strata, and Kun opera was not only performed in literati's "elegant gatherings," but also in brothels (Wang 2004a, b). He questioned the sublimation effect of Chinese opera history that gradually elevated many forms of Chinese opera from folk genres to "high arts" and suggested a re-examination of the history of Kun opera (Wang 2006b, 18). In his book *Kunqu de chuanbo liubu* [The dissemination of Kun opera], Chinese opera specialist Song Bo used three communication paradigms (the dominant paradigm, the solitary paradigm, and the balanced paradigm) in his analysis on the dissemination and perception of Kun opera performances.

Drawing on the interrelationship between professional performers, critics, and consumers, Song viewed Kun opera as a cultural product on the one hand, and a medium for cultural communication on the other (Song 2005, 12).

The social function of Kun opera as public communication is particularly stressed in Joshua Goldstein's article "From Teahouse to Playhouse: Theaters as Social Texts in Early-Twentieth-Century China" (Goldstein 2003). Focusing on the late Qing teahouse as a performative space for various genres of Chinese opera including Kun opera, Goldstein discovered that the architectural design and seating arrangements of a teahouse facilitated the performance roles on-and-off-stage, and further argued that the separation of representational and social space in the teahouse coordinated the distribution of gendered social and political differences.

Biographies

Historically, biographical research was an important component of Kun opera studies. The protagonists in these biographical writings are usually *qujia* (masters of Kun arias) who are aria theorists and amateur vocalists. Professional performers were scarcely documented. Although this legitimate tradition has been extended to contemporary scholarship (Zhao and Zhang 1987), biographies of contemporary Kun opera professionals gradually became a legitimate subject after the 1980s. Different from the traditional biographies in two aspects, the methods used in these writings were no longer exclusively based on written documents, but also used oral narratives as legitimate materials.

The shift of protagonists is partially caused by performers' rising social status after the establishment of the PRC. Before the proletarian reform, the occupation of musicians and actors/actresses was usually associated with the population who came from a poor economic and

social background and could only make a living by serving and entertaining others. Their low social status contributed to a long literary tradition in which they were either neglected in writings or constantly suffered from the derogatory tone of the literati who wrote books and essays on music. Under the new socialist regime, Chinese opera performers acquired higher social status. With the nationalization of professional opera troupes, musicians and opera performers became state employees, and engaged in political propaganda campaigns. Some influential performers even won political seats in the National People's Congress and Political Consultative Conference (Fu 2002, 1-3).

In academia, performance-oriented research quickly grew after 1950s. A large number of articles focus on famous performers' experience, their performing skills, and the successful reformation of their plays to suite political needs (Ding 1956; Chen 1956; Tu 1956; Zhao 1956; Yao 1964). In the 1980s, professional performers were gradually recognized as carriers of an important performance tradition. As mentioned above, the milestone research of Kun opera professional performers was Lu E'ting *A History of Kun Opera Performances* (Lu 1980). Lu drew mainly on historical documents about performing activities in the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. Wu Xinlei adopted a similar framework in his research of Kun opera performances in the region of Nanjing from the late Ming dynasty to 1992 (Wu 1996). In addition to historical documents, some scholars relied on popular novels in the Ming and Qing dynasties, with the intention of unravelling Kun opera performances depicted in these novels as daily life scenes. For instance, Zhang Wei-hua examined both texts and illustrations related to music-making scenes in the Chinese naturalistic novel "Jin Ping Mei" written in the late Ming dynasty, and looked into the training, performance, sponsorship, and other aspects of private troupes that play a variety of Chinese operas, including Kun opera in the Ming dynasty (Zhang 1992).

Since the early 1980s, some scholars shifted their interest to documenting senior performers' life experiences. The Cultural Revolution was thought to have caused severe damage to the traditional theater due to the ban on traditional plays and the persecution of a large number of talented artists (Yang 1984, 92). In the early 1980s, the rescue of traditional theater before the passing of old actors was widely considered as the most urgent task. In this context, the *Chuanzibei* (the Generation of Transmission) Kun opera performers became the subjects of a series of biographies. The performers of the Generation of Transmission were trained and graduated from Kunqu Chuanxi Suo (The Transmission Institute of Kun Opera) in Suzhou in the 1920s. The Generation of Transmission have been widely considered by the later generations of performers and scholars as the transmitters who received the most traditional Kun opera training, and preserved the performing tradition of Kun opera (Wu 2001). The plays and excerpted scenes they mastered became the basic components of Kun opera repertoires that are still staged today (Zhou 2011, 80).

This type of biography greatly challenges the scholarship about Kun opera in which professional performers do not have agency. The Kun opera master Zhou Chuanying's biography written by Luo Di based on Zhou's oral narrative has been one of the early attempt in this area (Zhou and Luo 1988). Luo finished the first draft using the third-person narration in 1980, and later the publisher suggested that he change it to the first-person narration (*ibid.*, 213). Behind this change was an awareness of the politics of representation: the use of self-narrating empowers performers and allows them to speak for themselves. In addition, this book not only introduces Zhou's entire training process, his career experience during the social transition from the Republican era to the People's Republic of China, but also includes his opinions on the acting of certain characters. Historically, literati were the primary writers of artistic critiques, and these

critics could hardly reflect on personal professional experience. But in these biographies, performers are able to explicate the meanings that they created in their performances.

Another important example of autobiography pertains to Liang Guyin, a famous performer of *dan* (female) roles (Liang 2009). In this book, Liang not only narrated her life experiences, but also described her acting techniques on stage. She analyzed the characters in Kun opera in extensive detail. The rise of performers' biographies indicates the increased agency of professionals in the Kun opera scholarship of this era.

The Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) status of Kun opera is another social parameter that helped boost biographical writings. Since 2001, the year Kun opera was proclaimed as one of the “Masterpieces of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity” by UNESCO, there have been two primary preservation projects launched by the Beijing government, “National Preservation, Protection, and Support Project” in 2004, and “The Project of the Preservation of Intangible Cultural Heritages” in 2005. These two projects introduced a new perspective through which professional training in Kun opera was viewed as cultural transmission (*wenhua chuancheng*). Professional Kun opera performers were assigned a new cultural identity of “cultural transmitter (*wenhua chuancheng ren*).” Some of these cultural transmitters who were held in high esteem by their peers and have won prestigious honors, have also become the protagonists of biographies. For example, as part of the National Kun Opera Art Safeguarding, Protection, and Preservation Project (Guojia Kunqu yishu qiangjiu baohu he fuchi gongcheng), a series of biographies entitled *Biographic Documents of Kun Opera Artists* was published consecutively from 2007 to 2009 (Hou 2007; Yue 2008; Zhang 2008a; Zhu and Yao 2009). This series includes the biographies of Zhang Jiqing, Yue Meiti, Hou Shaokui, and Li Chuchi. The first three performers were proclaimed as National Level ICH Transmitter, and all of the four Kun opera artists learned from the Generation

of Transmission performers. This orthodox educational background legitimized them as their transmitter titles, and also empowered them to serve as advisors for later generations. In these biographies, these performers were able to not only comment on aesthetic values of their performances, but also explain, define and represent this art.

Theater Studies

A central question that has concerned many scholars is how theater practices of Kun opera differ from performing literature. Kun opera scholarship has been influenced by Chinese literature studies so much that many Kun opera scholars have started to question to what extent the approach used in Chinese literature studies can reveal the dramatization of Kun opera plays. As Chinese opera theorist Liu Zhen noted, one direct result of Chinese literati's intervention in playwriting is the literalization of Chinese opera, which reduced the development of opera to the development of performing literature (Liu 2011, 119-20). He argued that pure poetry cannot give rise to a play on stage and he called for more theater studies on Chinese opera that extend beyond literature-oriented research (ibid.).

Theater studies have introduced an increasingly popular perspective on modern Kun opera performances from the 1990s through 2015. The art of staging Chinese opera has been extensively studied by scholars in theater studies, Chinese literature and performing arts, and ethnomusicology (Goldstein 1999; Karl 2000; Wichmann 1990, 2000; Yan 2003; Yung 2009a; Zeitlin 2002). Scholars have focused more on the collaboration between librettists, performers, and musicians, than the librettists' own creation.

Two issues have been raised about the productions of Kun opera after 2000. The first is the theatricalization of Kun opera repertoire on the contemporary stage, the process of producing a

Kun opera play on the stage based on a preexisting dramatic text. Is there a core or essence of the stage tradition of Kun opera that remains unchanged over time, and, if so, what is it? The second issue is the theoretical debate on the dilemma between “tradition” and “modern”: should new characteristics should be adopted in the contemporary productions of Kun opera performances, and, if so, to what extent?

Theater studies writings have mainly concentrated on three aspects of the theatricalization of a Kun opera play: the writing/adaptation of libretti, directing, and performing. The research on libretti often focuses on how librettists adapt or rewrite the original text in a way that shortens the aesthetic distance between an old text and a contemporary audience. As early as the mid-1980s, Chinese opera professionals pointed out that restaging a traditional play should be based on its contemporary significance (*xianshi yiyi*) (Cong 1985, 58). It has become a principle of adaptations of Kun opera since then that adaptations of traditional plays must be relevant to contemporary society (Du 2001, 234). In his article “Historicity and Contemporaneity: Adaptations of Yuan Plays in the 1990s,” Chinese theater theorist Du Wenwei analyzed the adaptation of the Kun opera play *The Lute* (*Pipa ji*), which was originally written in the late Yuan dynasty (the early 14th century) and was adapted by Guo Hancheng and staged by the Northern Kun Opera Theater in 1993 and 1996 (Du 2001). Du argued that although the adapters followed the original plot faithfully, they portrayed the protagonist, a filial son, differently for the purpose of questioning and criticizing the passive, ignorant, and blind side of filial piety. Such a change in characterization, as Du argued, is because librettists realized that a play should embody historicity and contemporaneity.

The issue of the emergence of directors of Chinese opera has drawn increasing attention since the 1980s, although there have been only a few academic works on the rise of the director in

the field of Kun opera. The role of the Chinese opera director is still very much in flux, because traditionally Chinese opera was not directed by a director, but relied on the principal performers' creation. The new role of director began with the introduction of Western-style realistic spoken drama in the Republic of China in the early 20th century.

After the 1990s, scholars increasingly focused on the directors' creative input in new productions of Kun opera (Evans 2007), and the directors' strong desire of legitimating their contribution on a theoretical level (Cong 1985; Wang 2006a; Tian 2007). Early resources were based on directors' notes. For instance, Cong Zhaohuan's directing note is one of the early analyses that draws on the entire theatricalization process through which a libretto was dramatized for stage performances, in which both a respect for performance conventions and novel ideas are required (Cong 1985). Three years later, director Shen Bin published his notes on directing the Kun opera play, *The Palace of Longevity*, in which he attempted to theorize the principles of his work (Shen 1988a).

Megan Evans traced the history of the emergence of Chinese opera directors to the early twentieth century (Evans 2007). She attributed contemporary directors' remedial function to the decline of the technical and creative abilities of Chinese opera performers (Evans 2007, 496). In working with the Chinese Opera Academy, she deemed that the director's creativity in the PRC was severely confined by the cultural policy that "the main functions of drama are to promote patriotism among the people and encourage heroism in revolutionary struggle" (ibid., 483), and the formulation of directorship that "[Chinese opera is/should be 'director led, performance centered'" (ibid., 491). Evans concluded that the level of control a director exerted depended on "a complex intersection of resources and demands," including the demands of the literary play text, the set of specific performance skills offered by the cast, political hierarchies of the theater

production company, and, finally the conventional performance language honed over generations by master performers.

Preservation and Development of Kun Opera as an Intangible Cultural Heritage

In his book *Kouchuan xinshou yu wenhua chuancheng* (Oral Transmission and Cultural Heritage), sinologist Zheng Peikai clarified the distinction between entertainment product and cultural heritage by saying that “entertainment products have to attend to the needs of consumers; in addition, the purpose of consuming these products is to achieve pleasure, alleviation, and enjoyment. However, the main function of cultural heritage is pedagogical, and spectators need to be educated to appreciate its essence” (Zheng 2006, 175). Therefore, according to Zheng, the commercialization of Kun opera performances may not lead this genre toward a promising future; on the contrary, it may lead to the incorporation of the genre into the mainstream popular musical industry. In another article, he spells out his objection to the commodification of Kun opera, and the music market in general: “Culture and art should have their own independent values and significance, and should be used to elevate human beings’ thoughts, rather than an entertainment commodity which follows the rules of the market, or a tool of moneymaking, or a call girl who satisfies the masses’ consumption” (Zheng 2008, 15). Zheng’s analysis presumes the passivity of most audiences whose appreciation of Kun opera must be geared toward self-improvement.

Cai Zhengren, director of Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe, shows his concern about the marketization issue from a different angle. Instead of worrying about the purity or authenticity of this genre, Cai questions the reasons for preservation policies. He states: “Why do we need to preserve Kun opera? It is because there is no such market for Kun opera, and this genre cannot survive on its own. . . . the preservation of Kun opera needs a long-term program, rather than a

makeshift one. Some government officials also urge us to marketize Kun opera in order to promote Kun opera [rather than rely on government sponsorship]. It is not because we don't want to. [The paradox lies in the fact that] if the market is really prosperous, there is no need for preserving it" (Zheng 2006, 102-103) . . . the biggest problem we have so far is still funding" (ibid., 105). Hence, for Cai Zhengren, it is undeniable that economic capital plays an irreplaceable role in managing the troupe and preserving the genre, but his complaint also implies that the government should not push the responsibility of preserving cultural heritage to the market.

To respond to these negative opinions about the commodification of Kun opera, Kun opera scholars Wang Tingxin and Gu Lingsen argue that the key to preserving Kun opera lies in the performance of its aria repertory. By increasing public performances of Kun opera aria, troupes were efficiently preserving Kun opera in their own way (Gu and Wang 2008, 117). In terms of the adaptation of the classical plays, they argue that these adapted versions should be viewed in a more positive perspective, for audiences are not subordinate in the development of Kun opera, on the contrary, their critiques on the innovations and adaptations of Kun opera performances are the important dynamic that perpetuates the development of this opera; on the other hand, historically Kun opera artists more or less replied on the feedback from their audiences to revise and improve their techniques, and to constantly adjust the balance between the convention handed down from the elder generation and the newly arisen aesthetic dispositions in order to win the recognition of contemporary audiences (ibid., 123).

The difference between Zheng Paikai's conservative preservation strategy and Gu and Wang's radical development lies in their different identification of the nature of Kun opera as an ICH: should Kun opera be considered as a static cultural specimen exhibited in museums or a dynamic form of art that lives and changes along with people's life. In terms of this disagreement,

cultural scholar Liu Chenghua proposed an eclectic approach, as he explained:

The “preserved” intangible cultural heritage merely exists in the isolation from its original environment, and is a display after being moved from its field to its glass showcase. The long-term isolation will lead to its loss of survival mechanism, an ability of growing and developing on its own. It will keep withering until the day it completely dies. Therefore, we should develop a new outlet for these intangible cultural heritages to make them survive, in addition to the “preservation.” (Liu 2008, 4-5)

Although this eclectic solution may seem to dissolve the dispute over the preservation crisis, the practical methods Liu Chenghua suggested are presumably too idealistic and lofty. He proposed four elements in the reconstruction of the cultural environment of Kun opera: an abundant economic base, a rich cultural atmosphere, support from mass media, and a decent number of receivers. However, Liu Chenghua skirted around the most important part in his framework—how to achieve these elements? For example, in terms of how to prepare an abundant economic base, he explained that “It has been thirty years since the economic reform was initiated and the economy of China was accelerated, so the economic fund should not be a problem. No matter if the money is from the government or private resources, it is not a difficult task” (ibid.). Apparently Liu underestimated the difficulty of the preservation project on a practical level.

These criticisms have brought the details of the preservation of Kun opera onto the surface, and reveal the cultural institutions’ dilemma between preserving the art form and surviving in the market, between the cultural value and economic values of traditional arts. Although it does not seem likely that the debate on the commodification of Kun opera can be resolved merely through a discussion, the diversification of the relevant opinions plays an important role of balancing the cultural policies of preserving and commercially exploiting Kun opera as an intangible cultural heritage in a long-term consideration.

In this literature review, I have focused on five areas of research: aria studies, historical research, biographies of Kun opera scholars and professional performers, theater studies, and Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) after 2001 to illustrate what I deem as the most important literature about Kun opera from the 1980s to present. In doing so I have indicated that theoretical assumptions about Kun opera have shifted from the study of the internal rules within the language of this art itself, such as the rules of composing and singing, to a more external perspective which approaches Kun opera as a genre living through various social changes, a theater form shared and constructed by people from different social strata, and open to further change.

I have emphasized the multi-vocality of Kun opera agents as reflected in recent studies of Kun opera. Historically, literati connoisseurs were the primary agents in studies of Kun opera, as can be discovered in a considerable amount of historical documents. Although contemporary academic researchers still play an essential role in Kun opera scholarship, recent developments have been greatly influenced by three new forms of agency: government, professional performers, and individuals who can establish a collaborative relationship with professional troupes. In this new context, the government has taken the central position. However, the newly fostered cultural industry will possibly invite more collaboration and provide Kun opera professionals with more access to social resources. The enhanced multi-vocality may lead the field of Kun opera toward a reconfiguration process in which scholars, professionals, the government, and cultural entrepreneurs will play their respective parts.

1.3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this dissertation, I adopt a political economy approach to interpret the contemporary development of the genre. Contemporary performances of Kun opera have been carried out in a number of economic relations affected or confined by laws, policies, social norms, and power relations in contemporary China. Therefore, it is my intention to not only examine the development of the genre according to the rules that affect economic interests and exchange, but also take into account the norms of the distribution of power and social resources.

My dissertation will go beyond conventional approaches of documenting the performance activities of each troupe, or analyzing musical works mainly from the parameters within music rather than social determinants. Instead, I utilize Pierre Bourdieu's "capital theory" (Bourdieu 1986) to analyze the relationship between cultural practices related to Kun opera and other forms of social practices in the political economy structure. Bourdieu's capital theory views any accumulation of labor, both in a materialized form and an embodied form, as a type of "capital." Accumulation and conversion of capital enables social agents to appropriate social energy or to make use of social resources (Bourdieu 1986). The notion of capital offers me a theoretical tool to examine how these agents deploy their capital to reproduce and exchange for social assets that a society considers necessary, rare, and worth seeking. In the reproduction and exchange process, capital presents itself as something other than what it is; new meanings and values of capital are produced in the process. I will show that a rich body of meanings and values of Kun opera was not derived from individual creativity (e.g. performers themselves), but from the creation of artistic mediators, e.g. cultural administrators, political agents, and independent producers. They are the holders of political and economic capital, and the meanings and values of Kun opera are largely created in their activities of inspecting, praising, criticizing, and promoting Kun opera plays.

Therefore, “capital theory” facilitates my approach of examining the development of Kun opera in the political economic sphere. I will explore a wide range of labor, including performers’ artistic labor of producing operas, audiences’ labor of appreciating a performance, cultural entrepreneurs’ labor of trading Kun opera products, government officials’ labor of promoting/censoring and reforming the genre, and scholars’ labor of criticizing or consecrating certain plays. I will show how various social agents deploy different forms of capital derived from this range of labor to compete for political, economic, and cultural benefits. The totality of their social relations and activities constitute the political economy of contemporary Kun opera.

To explore the political economy of Kun opera, I focus on the changes of production modes, characterized by different production motivation, exchange rules, and consumption needs of Kun opera from the late 1940s to 2015. This approach helps me better understand the twists and turns of Kun opera inscribed in political economic structures, or in Jacques Attali’s words, “a succession of orders,” or “differences” (Attali 1985, 19). The seven Kun opera performing groups in China (including six troupes and one research association), are the products of a succession of dominant orders. The emergence of the first of these troupes, the heyday of their performing activities, the political struggles they underwent, and the marketing strategies they adopted to overcome financial hardship were developed in conjunction with changes in these social orders. Professional performers, namely the direct producers of the genre, are both inheritors of old orders and heralds of the new.

These production modes do not necessarily replace each other in a strict order of succession as in Attali’s theory. Therefore, it is not my intention to generalize a production mode to a specific period of time. Rather, they may coexist with each other in what Raymond Williams described as a whole cultural process (Williams 1977, 121). While I am making an epochal analysis in my

dissertation, I view these production modes as the dominant mode in a specific period of time, and as, what Williams calls, “residual” or “emergent” in other periods (ibid. , 121-27).

It is my intention to show that cultural activities of Kun opera have always been organized according to specific economic relations governed by the politics of Kun opera-making. My view problematizes a common understanding that Kun opera was only thrown into the process of commercialization in the 1980s when China implemented economic reforms, and degraded into a money-making tool in the cultural market prospering in the new millennium (Zheng 2006). I will show that the production mode of catering to the masses to pursue monetary benefit is only one of many production modes that Kun opera professionals have carried out since the late 1940s.

The key to understanding the rise and fall of Kun opera in contemporary China is to examine (1) Kun opera professionals’ relationship to politics and economics, and (2) processes of consumption. Professional artists play an essential role in mediating of social change (Weintraub 2004; Winegar 2006). I explore how Kun opera professionals participate in the creation of meanings and values in several periods of social, economic, and political transformation in contemporary China.

As Bourdieu argued, “consumption [of a work of art] is, in this case, a stage in a process of communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code. . . . A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded” (Bourdieu 1984, 2). Stuart Hall’s reception theory provides a theoretical framework for my understanding of Kun opera making as the operation of codes. As Hall noted,

The ‘object[s]’ of [mass communications are] meanings and messages in the form of sign-vehicles, at a certain moment (the moment of

‘production/circulation’) like any form of communication or language, through the operation of codes within the syntagmatic chain of a discourse. The apparatuses, relations and practices of production thus issue in the form of symbolic vehicles constituted within the rules of ‘language.’ (Hall 1992, 91)

It is with this discursive form that the moments of “encoding” and “decoding” take place, with which people in a society or culture make sense of social events. Opera-making and opera-watching may constitute, in Stuart Halls terms, “a dominant cultural order” (Hall 1992, 98). In this order, messages are encoded in the form of a meaningful discourse under the discursive rules of language that allow audiences to realize a preferred meaning. The realization of a message is a process of appropriating a meaningful discourse—that is, by decoding the message.

The pre-existing code constituted what Stuart Hall calls “a meaning structure,” in which the rules of singing, speaking and acting that Kun opera insiders accepted were dominant. The meaning structure was constructed through a series of complex perceptual, ideological, and aesthetic consequences resulting from a long process of exploration and testified through on-and-off-stage communications with audiences and performer peers. The long-term accumulation of “knowledge-in-use” or “historically defined technical skills” (Hall 1992, 92) enabled many performers to assume a high degree of symmetry between their meaning structure and that of audiences. As I will show throughout the dissertation, opera-making and opera-watching constitute moments of production and circulation of the dominant code in which an opera may function as a pedagogical tool.

1.4 METHODOLOGY

Data for my dissertation were gathered during fieldwork trips in the summers of 2010, 2011, 2012, and the fall and winter of 2013. Most performance activities and interviews took place in Beijing, Nanjing, Suzhou, Shanghai and Hangzhou, five cities where four active state-owned Kun opera troupes are based, with an emphasis on the activities of the Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Troupe (JPKOT) in Nanjing; this troupe is the only corporatized state-owned troupe. The systematic transformation of the JPKOT troupe serves as an example to illustrate the characteristics of the centralized production mode and financial concerns shared by other state-owned troupes, as well as a growing trend of pioneering managerial strategies and seeking independent financial survival in market competition. With the increased collaboration between this troupe with private capital, they have actively reached out to audiences in other cities, such as Shanghai and Beijing. During my fieldwork, I travelled to relevant places according to their performance plan. Among the seven state-owned Kun opera performing groups, I have chosen not to study the two troupes in Chenzhou and Yongjia, partly because their performance activities are less frequent, and partly because their situations do not differ markedly from other troupes.

Fieldwork data are composed of four types of sources: (1) written sources, including government documents, performers' memoirs, and popular print media; (2) interviews with opera performers, librettists, music arrangers, producers, troupe directors, and fans; (3) performances in theaters, tourist attractions, and aficionados' gatherings; and (4) multi-media sources of Kun opera products, including audio and video as well as public lectures.

First, the majority of the written sources are in Chinese. Government documents were obtained mainly through the online open sources affiliated with or supported by the state, such as the Library of Cultural Policies of the Central Academy of Cultural Administration (Zhongyang

wenhua guanli ganbu xueyuan).¹⁷ A large number of currently valid regulations and instructions of cultural administration are available on the official website of the Ministry of Culture of the People's Republic of China.¹⁸ For government documents that were announced and/or implemented between 1949 to 1966, a large proportion of which have now expired, I refer to the *Wenhua gongzuo wenjian ziliao huibian* (The compilation of the documents of cultural administration) (1949-1966) compiled by the General Office of the Ministry of Culture. The provisions in these documents represent the government's intention to accomplish certain goals of cultural administration, but were not necessarily implemented, as has been indicated in my dissertation. In addition, I also worked at the Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Troupe's archive to look into specific government documents that governed their operation. Some popular print media, such as *The People's Daily*, the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, is used as an authoritative propaganda source that represents the Party's voice, although it is less official than government documents.

Performers' published memoirs and biographies are the most important sources to understand performers' career paths and relationships with authority during political turmoil. The biggest problem I had with interviewing performers was the self-censorship of personal suffering caused by political factors. Their concern for recalling the difficulty of survival during the Cultural Revolution has made that entire decade a taboo topic. My interviewees either refused to talk about their experiences, or were unwilling to give my permission to release their accounts. In contrast, the published memoirs and biographies offer me much more detailed chronological accounts which I used as reference to compare with the timeline presented in government documents. In addition, biographical materials provided more detailed descriptions of the procedures of cultural

¹⁷ "Library of cultural policies," *Zhongyang wenhua guanli ganbu xueyuan*, <http://www.cpil.cn>.

¹⁸ "Regulations," *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo wenhuabu*, <http://zwgk.mcprc.gov.cn/?classInfoId=21>.

events from the performers' perspective, such as the organization of showcases, and the allocation of state funds. Even though these documents may not provide the most solid and faithful evidence of performers' personal feelings, they have turned out to be of great significance for my research on the institutionalization of Kun opera performing groups.

The second source is interviews. I interviewed eighteen Kun opera professionals in Nanjing and Suzhou, two professional producers in Beijing, and four university professors who are Kun opera specialists from the three cities cited above. Voices of my interlocutors help me answer questions about the production of a Kun opera play, the management of a commercial show, and socio-cultural meanings of certain plays. Musicians helped me understand the technical issues of Kun opera music and text, such as music composition as a process of "filling music in the textual framework," and the rearrangement of complete plays based on extant excerpts. In Nanjing and Suzhou, I worked with both senior and junior performers and participated in some off-stage activities, such as advanced teaching sessions, called *niexi*. I made video recordings of their formal rehearsals. Casual conversations with performers after the teaching and rehearsals gave me fascinating insights into the similarities and differences of training in different generations, and the personal relationships among members of their troupe, and between their troupe and other "brother" troupes. In-depth interviews with five performers of three generations enhanced my understanding of state employees in different time periods. Troupe directors in Nanjing and Suzhou, and independent producers in Beijing, taught me about essential aspects of show business, including how to mount a play, find the suitable venues, design related products, develop public presentations/lectures on specific topics of Kun opera, and generate publicity materials. My communication with four university professors, all of whom also have a great wealth of experience as local troupes' consultants and evaluation committee members in showcases, have improved my

understanding of the institution of showcases, the state's role in cultural administration, and "legitimate" aesthetic principles from their points of view. My interlocutors sometimes had difficulty remembering the specific time and location of a performance, or the concrete provisions of a reform document. I resolved the issue of uncertainty through looking into written sources, such as newspaper reports, or referring back to government documents.

Data used for the analysis of repertoire, the study of actual performances, and the commercial management of plays are based on my lived experience of cultural activities during fieldwork trips in the summers of 2010, 2011, 2012, and the fall and winter of 2013. These activities included Kun-opera-going, participant-observation of off-stage activities, visits to tourist attractions where Kun opera performances are given, and communications with Kun opera aficionados. I visited the Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Troupe in Nanjing, the Suzhou Kun Opera Troupe in Suzhou. I watched weekly performances by the Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Troupe at their own theater the Orchid Garden, and occasionally at other theaters such as The Zijin Grand Theater, and The Jiangnan Theater in Nanjing during my stay. I also visited the Jiangsu Suzhou Kun Opera Theater, and watched three plays at the Suzhou Troupe's own theater. Based on these regular performances by the two troupes, I learned their style of routine performances, as well as the average conditions, such as the audience size and the atmosphere in the theater. In addition to performances at theaters, I explored some performances at tourist venues. I visited the Kun Opera Archaic Theater in the Village Zhou near Shanghai in 2012, and analyzed the garden-version of *The Peony Pavilion* at the Kezhi Garden in the Village of Zhujiyajiao in 2013. I obtained direct aesthetic experiences of these formalist "de-theaterized" productions of Kun opera plays. As a consumer, I was able to get an understanding of the commodity context in which the genre has been integrated with the business of tourism. My interaction with Kun opera aficionados mainly

took place in Shanghai, Beijing, Nanjing and Suzhou, where I watched shows, attended campaign presentations, and participated in amateur singer's regular gatherings. Many aficionados are not only regular theater-goers, but also frequent participants at amateurs' gatherings, and festival-goers. A large number of aficionados were in contact with each other. Therefore, my opera-watching activities between 2010 to 2013 was also a process of making friends among their community. Their experiences gave me insight into the relationship between troupes and their regular audiences whose voices constitute an important part of the market reaction to the troupes' performance.

The last type of data are media materials of Kun opera plays and public lectures which provide me with direct experiences of appreciating performances produced in different time periods. These media materials include published media products, such as the DVDs of Kun opera plays that I purchased from the music store of the Jiangsu Province Performing Arts Group Ltd. in Nanjing, and unpublished material, such as the public presentations produced by Shi Xiaomei Kun Opera Studio. These audio-visual materials document the performances and activities that were considered legitimate by their producers in their own time. The oldest video can be traced back to 1956. These materials enabled me to do a comparative study of the chronological change of the repertoire, musical features, staging effects, and even the fundamental conception of Kun opera (e.g. the text-music principle).

This dissertation is not a "transcription and analysis" study of the music in Kun opera. Although I adopt the method of "transcription and analysis" to explore the direct connection between specific musical features (e.g. melodic contours and metric patterns) and corresponding symbolic connotations and aesthetic principles, this method can only partially reveal the changes of this operatic genre. Other changes, for example, the selection of excerpts, are essential

characteristic that determine the structure of Kun opera, and yet, cannot be revealed in a note-to-note transcription.

Instead, I focus on the intersectionality of music and other expressive elements that characterized the style(s) of the genre in different periods. In this dissertation, I address the changes of Kun opera performances mainly by analyzing the selection of *zhezi* (excerpted scenes) that form a play, creation of new plays, *qupai* (the metric patterns of versified lyrics), alteration of *qupai* (the metric patterns of versified lyrics), theatrical sites and effects, performance venues, and consumption environments.

Music is central to my analysis not only as “the music itself,” but in the ways, that it interacts with other modes of expression (e.g. language, drama, body movements and gestures, and other visual elements). My analysis reveals how troupes navigated relevant cultural policies via self-censorship of their performances by altering their repertoire, creating new plays, and deleting or adding certain theatrical excerpts. Vocal skills, dramatic intonation for speech, and metric patterns are widely considered as key elements that define the operatic features of the genre. An analysis of the intersectionality of these elements reveals a vocabulary of aesthetic principles considered “politically acceptable,” “aesthetically correct,” or “tastefully popular” in their communication with state sponsors, critics, and consumers. And through an analysis of staging effects and performance venues and consumption environments, I show how Kun opera was marketed in ways that appealed to different types of audiences.

1.5 RATIONALE AND SIGNIFICANCE

My dissertation is significant in three ways. First, although scholars have produced a large body of literature on Kun opera, comprising studies of its history, repertoire, dramaturgy, and literature, this is the first dissertation to explore the political economy of contemporary Kun opera. In the increasingly capitalist cultural market of China, Kun opera is closely associated with state development, market exchange, and consumption practices. My research reveals how contemporary practices of Kun opera are configured by competing political and economic interests (capital). I trace the political economic dynamics that led social institutions to invest in this genre and reveal how both symbolic and material values of Kun opera have been forged in the past seventy years. From this perspective, Kun opera is a cultural activity that embodies particular political economic patterns in contemporary China.

Second, my dissertation will contribute to studies of professional performers of Chinese Opera, whose labor practices and life experiences remain under-researched. In Imperial China, professional opera performers were disparaged, as manifested in the derogatory labels for them, such as *xizi* or *jiangong* (lit. “lowly worker”) (Lu 1980, 9). Opera professionals were viewed as entertainment servants who practiced a genre for the service of others. As a result, the producers of operas were scarcely documented in the history of Chinese opera and scholarly studies focused more on texts than performance. In contemporary discourse, Kun opera performers have received increasing attention from scholars, such as Lu E’ting and Hong Weizhu. But Lu’s groundbreaking book, *Kunju yanchu shigao* (A History of Kun Opera Performances), only covers the time period from the early 16th century to the 1930s. Professionals’ activities after the 1940s, including the rise of state-owned Kun opera troupes, have not been explored until now. Hong mainly adopts a biographical approach in his studies of contemporary Kun opera professionals (Hong 2002). My

study will not only provide a social history of Kun opera troupes, but will stimulate scholarship on the relationship between political economy and performing arts in China.

Further, this dissertation will contribute to studies of political economy of music in non-capitalist societies. Although there has been a large body of writings on the popular music industry with a global scope, most economic questions addressed in these works are largely based on capitalist societies in which a free market is taken for granted and government intervention can hardly manipulate the laws and forces of supply and demand (e.g. Taylor 2012). Analyses of cultural production and consumption are largely situated in one type of economic order in which the dominant position of economic capital is taken for granted. But China has not fully adopted a market economy, and the Chinese government selectively sanctions certain economic activities that are common in capitalist societies. Half of the dissertation is dedicated to the command economy between the 1950s and the 1970s, before the government allowed private property, encouraged accumulation of personal income, and sanctioned legal contracts. In this command economy, economic capital was less valuable than political capital, and products could not be exchanged based on individual interest. Consumers' desires did not matter as they do at present. Therefore, this dissertation will expand the research horizon of economic ethnomusicology and musicology that focus on a rich variety of music economies.

2.0 THE GENESIS OF THE STATE-OWNED KUN OPERA TROUPES (1940S-1956)

In this chapter, I will explore the Guofeng Troupe, a collectively owned private variety troupe founded in the Republic of China¹⁹ (1912-1949) that was turned into a state-owned Kun opera troupe through an intensified form of affiliation with the local government in the new political regime. I will outline its transformation in three stages: (1) the revolution of social codes during the change of regimes from the Republic Era to the socialist regime; (2) the officialization of opera production via troupe registration and Official Showcases; and (3) the nationalization that entailed changes of ownership and managerial structure. In 1956 the troupe was officially transformed into the Zhejiang Kun and Su Opera Troupe, the first state-owned Kun opera performing troupe in the People's Republic of China.

I will argue that the relatively egalitarian structure of the Guofeng Troupe in the 1940s became the cornerstone of subsequent state-owned Kun opera troupes in the People's Republic of China. This transition is concretized in terms of ownership, managerial structures, and the relationship between the troupe and the government. In addition, I will explore the political meanings of Kun opera generated in the nationalization of the Zhejiang Kun Opera Troupe based on an analysis of their signature play *Shiwu guan* (*The Fifteen Strings of Cash*).

Since the 1910s, new thinking about the reform of traditional operatic genres handed down from Imperial China was promulgated in the Republic of China. Empowered by this new thinking, many cultural activists and drama reformists initiated the "New Drama Movement" (*Xinju*

¹⁹ The Republic of China was a state preceded by the last imperial dynasty of China, the Qing dynasty, and ended with the Chinese Civil war between 1945 and 1949. After the civil war, the losing government of the Republic of China retreated to Taiwan, and the Communist Party of China established the People's Republic of China on the Mainland. The *Kuomintang*, often translated as the Chinese Nationalist Party, was the only ruling political party of the Republic of China before 1949 and later the region of Taiwan until the democratic reforms in the 1990s.

yundong) to extend the influence of the anti-imperialist May Fourth Movement in 1919, and to modernize the domestic genres by gleaning aspects of Western theater arts, such as realistic expression. The New Drama Movement was a result of the political atmosphere between the 1910s and 1940s, during which the thinking of intellectuals, musicians, and artists was influenced by various Westernized and modernized ideas. For example, the notion of constructing a modern democratic society gained in popularity. The New Drama Movement also stimulated artistic and intellectual communities, including the circle of Chinese indigenous opera performers, an occupational group that had long been disparaged and held very low status in terms of political rights in the history of China. Some pioneering indigenous opera troupes sought a modern, democratic institution to replace the old owner-centered system.

In this context, some pioneering opera investors dedicated their efforts to modernizing Chinese indigenous performing troupes. The opera class was increasingly criticized by professional performers for the economic exploitation of their personnel. In the field of Chinese indigenous opera, troupe founders started to follow the Western example of modern corporations, exploring the shareholding model to structure their enterprises, while narrowing the income gap between leading roles and supporting roles. Their attempt gave rise to a new institution widely known as the “republican troupe” (*gongheban*). This new organizational structure was considered to be in tune with the social transition necessitated by the move from monarchy toward the newly founded republic.²⁰ Many republican troupes were often named “drama groups,” in order to distinguish from the old institution of “opera classes.” Different from the sequential order and

²⁰ Some of these new troupes adopted the shareholding structure by selling shares of stock in the troupe. For instance, in the Memorandum of Henan New Drama Group (Henan xin jutuan), one of the earliest “drama groups” established in 1912, the founder declared that this new “drama group” “originated from a time when the autocracy was ended, and the democracy just emerged” (Huang 2011, 33). This troupe was mainly raised through floating shares and donation.

hierarchy that “class” implies, the use of the Chinese character “group,”²¹ which literally refers to a group, society, or organization, implies a relatively democratic interrelationship among all participants of a collective.

The drama group²² emerged in the field of Chinese indigenous operas in the Republic of China, a constitutional republic beginning in 1912, which put an end to 4000 years of Imperial rule in China. Drama groups were viewed as a new and modern organization that replaced many old-style “opera classes” which usually involved a high degree of exploitation of employees and apprentices by troupe owners. *Jutuan* (lit. “drama group”) were based on collective ownership, whereas the traditional troupes were known as *xiban* (lit. “opera class”).²³ Before the rise of *jutuan*, *xiban* was the primary model on which troupes were organized. The Chinese character for “class” here refers to both “sequence” and “order” in addition to its use as a classifier meaning “group.” It was usually used as a suffix after the name of an opera troupe, such as *Jifangban* (lit. “The Class of the Floral Collection”) in the 1820s, *Hechunban* (lit. “The class of Harmonious Spring”), *Sixiban* (lit. “The Class of Four Joys”), *Sanqingban* (lit. “The Class of Three Celebrations”) in the 1870s (Lu 1980). Although there were some sub-types of opera classes,²⁴ they were all characterized by a hierarchy and division of specialized labor. For instance, Chinese theater specialist Qi Rushan describes as many as thirty different kinds of work (Qi 1935). These jobs

²¹ See *Xinhua zidian* 新華字典 (Xinhua Dictionary), s.v. “tuan” 團, <http://xh.5156edu.com/html3/9887.html>.

²² In order to clarify the subtle differences between *jutuan* and *xiban*, I will use their literal meanings in Chinese, rather than commonly used English terms, such as “troupes” and “companies,” which may suffer from unspecificity in the current context when referring to these grouping units.

²³ In English, *jutuan* and *xiban* are commonly translated as theaters, troupes, and companies. However, each of these terms in Chinese designates a specific institutional system, a particular manner of organizational structure of a group of professional performers, and even indirectly implies relevant operational methods. I will use the literal translation in this section to stress the specificity of the institutional differences between the old and new performing groups.

²⁴ The sub-types of opera classes were mainly determined by factors such as different kinds of owners/investors and their different approaches of investing in a troupe, such as wholly-owned or joint venture (Qi 1935).

varied from the highest ranks, such as investors/owners (*caidong*) and *chengbanren* who are sometimes principal performers themselves, to the lowest, such as a principal's personal assistant (*haojue suidai rennyuan*) (ibid.) A strict hierarchy also existed within each category of labor division. For instance, the performers were divided into first-class roles (*toudeng jue*), second-class roles (*erdeng jue*), third-and-below-class roles (*sanlu yixia jue*), and so on. The hierarchized structure of an “opera class” organized its members by importance and created social distinction within its community.

Economically, this distinction manifested in the unequal distribution of income. In an “opera class,” one's position in the hierarchy of jobs was homologous with one's level of income. Therefore, the economic activities of these “opera classes” formed an organizational system that some scholars have termed an “owner-centered system” (*banzhu zhi*), and “principal-performer-centered system” (*zhuyan zhongxin zhi*) (Zhang 1988, 61). Accordingly, the operation of an opera class usually relied on vertical management, meaning that supervisors passed orders from the top of the organizational pyramid down, meanwhile creating a high level of control over the entire group. Variations on this model extended the dictatorship of the troupe owner to an extreme degree and vitally damaged the interests of the dominated in the troupe—in some cases, even their right of survival.

2.1 THE GUOFENG TROUPE—THE EARLY “REPUBLICAN TROUPE” OF KUN OPERA IN THE 1940S

The year of 1949 has often been viewed as a watershed in the history of China, for it marked the advent of the People's Republic of China (PRC), a new political order. However, if we reach

further back, we can observe social relations embedded in cultural practices that are prophetic of the future relations within the socio-political organization. For instance, the shared ownership of assets and benefits by all troupe members, and relatively equal relationships between managers and performers, leading roles and supporting roles was not a revolutionary creation instituted after the founding of the PRC. Rather, it was present in embryonic form in the political thought of a democratic organization of performers: the “republican troupe” of the 1930s and 1940s. The Guofeng Troupe, the precursor of the first state-owned Kun opera troupe in the PRC, was one of these republican troupes in the Republic of China.

In the mid 20th century, there were no pure Kun opera troupes. The genre was mainly kept and performed by a number of variety troupes that performed a heterogeneous repertoire. Historically, Kun opera troupes were regarded as *benban* (lit. “the fundamental troupe”), named after their vocal style called *benqiang* (lit. “fundamental qiang”²⁵) (Luo 2010, 34-35). This fundamental style featured the use of the phonetic system of *Zhongzhou yun* (Rhymes of the Central Plains)²⁶ in the singing of songs that were characterized by the strictly regulated relationship between text and music and were notated in a score (ibid., 36).

As mentioned in the Introduction, the fundamental style of Kun opera was closely associated with literati amateurs. The early documents that theorized the rules of rhyme, tones, pronunciation, and notation were written by literati, such as Wei Liangfu’s *Nanci yinzheng* (A

²⁵ The concept of *qiang* is used to refer to systems of tunes made up of related modal characteristics and vocal ornamentations (Yung 2001, 277).

²⁶ The *Zhongzhou yun* is a phonological system based on the Zhongzhou dialect. Before the group of Northern dialects was accepted as the basis of Mandarin, the *Zhongzhou yun* had been considered as the national standard pronunciation of official language for centuries. The use of *Zhongzhou yun* in singing was also considered an orthodox feature of a vocal genre. The English translation of the term is attributed to Lindy Li Mark (Li Mark 2009). However, the *Zhongzhou yun* has historically been a vague and continually evolving concept. As Chinese music specialists François Picard and Kar Lun Alan Lau have noted, the use of *Zhongzhou yun* in the singing of contemporary Kun opera has become “an agglomeration between stylized forms of archaic northern Chinese, which bear similarities with the Beijing dialect of modern Mandarin, and linguistic elements especially from the Suzhou dialect of the Wu language” (Picard and Lau 2016, 134).

Guide to Southern-Style Arias). The term “fundamental style” was no longer used after the 1950s when the concept of operatic genre (*juzhong*) emerged as a legitimate classification system of all styles of Chinese opera, and Kun ju became the legitimate name of the genre (*ibid.*, 35-36). In this sense, as Chinese performing literature specialist Luo Di argued, at least in the period between the 1920s and 1950s, no troupe exclusively performed the fundamental style of Kun opera. Based on his analysis of the entire repertoire of the last “orthodox” generation of Kun opera performers, known as *chuanzibei* (lit. “the generation of transmission”) performers,²⁷ Luo argued that the repertoire was hybrid, because in addition to *bentaixi* (fundamental style operas), the generation of transmission performers also learned an additional two categories of plays: *zaxi* (variety operas); and *shixi* (contemporary operas) or *xinxi* (new operas).

Luo postulated that the concept of *juzhong* (lit. operatic genres) became a popular classification of Chinese theater art after the 1950s (Luo 2010, 33). Before that, it was a common practice for many troupes to keep a heterogeneous repertoire. Luo argued that the pursuit of formalist consistency in the genre probably did not exist or matter to the opera professionals.²⁸ He particularly questioned the assumption that operatic characteristics of a historical cultural form should be consistent with a contemporary understanding of the formalistic features that involves a modern term. As he wrote: “It is necessary to point out that for professional performers of Kun

²⁷ The generation of “transmission” consisted of about fifty performers who enrolled in the Kunju Chuanxisuo (Kun Opera Transmission and Training Institute) in 1921. They were active between 1921 to 1938. The Institute, founded by amateur vocalists, offered a five-year training program in which students studied with former professional performers of the Quanfu Troupe (Lu 1980, 345). In 1927, the graduates of the institute founded their own troupe, called Xin Yuefu, in December, and the troupe was disbanded in 1931. In October, over thirty performers re-organized a troupe, called Xian Ni She, the activities of which were attenuated between 1937 and 1938, when Japan conquered Shanghai. Many performers of the generation of transmission died or quit performing during the war. In 1938, there were only twelve members who were on tour (Wu 2002, 989-993).

²⁸ Luo Di contended that the current concept of genres of Chinese indigenous operas was a result of the reform of local operas in the 1950s. It is arguable whether the formation of the concept of local operatic genres is a result of the social practice in the 1950s, for the early attempt of theatricalizing the genres of narrative singing into some local operas can surely be traced back to the 1940s. For example, Su opera was developed from a form of narrative singing, called *tanhuang*, and between the 1930s and 1940s the vocal genre was reformed into an operatic genre by Zhu Guoliang (Gu 2015, 177).

opera, it doesn't matter to perform whatever categories of opera, whichever play, or how to perform. . . . To view Kun as a specific genre the text of which is exclusively based on *chuanqi* and *zaju* and requires a certain stylistic expression is nothing but a kind-hearted person's wishful thinking" (Luo 2010, 17). According to Luo, the literati amateurs were more concerned about maintaining the fundamental style, albeit without forming a consensus on all the details of the rules, as opposed to professional performers who were more concerned about appealing to audiences.

If the hybrid repertoire was not a problem for the last "orthodox" generation of Kun opera performers, and it did not bother the audience, then it was probably the normal state for a performing group to give diverse performances that included Kun opera plays. In many cases, the inclusion of Kun opera was so limited that, as Luo Di described, the genre functioned as *weizhisu* (*aginomoto* in Japanese, and MSG in English) which "cannot be solely consumed as food, but can be added to food to enhance its flavor" (Luo 2007, 61)

The first state-owned Kun opera troupe, the Zhejiang Kun Opera Troupe, was developed from such a variety troupe, the Guofeng Troupe (*Guofeng jutuan*), founded by Zhu Guoliang in 1941 (Peng 1986, 57). The Guofeng Troupe mainly staged *mubiaoxi* (lit. "act-programmed opera"), a program composed of highly improvised performances based on a roughly drafted outline of acts and scenes, rather than detailed play scripts (Wang and Zhou 1998, 1056). The content of the hybrid program was a *da zahui* ("a big hodgepodge"), including Su opera, Kun opera, *tanci*,²⁹ popular songs, *shidiao*,³⁰ *shenqu*,³¹ farce, and spoken drama, among others (Wen 1956, 40). The

²⁹ *Tanci* (lit. "plucking verses" or "plucking lyrics") is a genre of narrative singing in China. Lyrics of the songs in this genre are usually composed in a prosimetric form (employing alternating passages of verse and prose) (Mair and Bender 2011, 552). The local forms of *tanci* are rendered in local dialects, such as Suzhou *tanci*.

³⁰ *Shidiao* (lit. "popular tunes") refers to the popular short songs inspired by and based upon ballads and popular tunes. It is performed by one singer accompanied by a small ensemble. *Shidiao* gained great popularity among the lower class in cities.

³¹ *Shenqu* (lit. songs of the region of Shen) was a vocal genre in Shanghai and its adjacent areas. Tunes used in *shenqu* were adapted from local ballads from the drainage areas of the Lake Tai, the Huangpu River and the Wusong River. With the intervention of a local educational office, a large number of these local ballads were refined into a

troupe was officially named the Guofeng New Su Opera Troupe (*Guofeng xinxing Sujutuan*) (Peng 1986, 57; Zhou and Luo 1988, 78). The so-called Su opera was a newly formed operatic style adapted from a genre of narrative singing using the Suzhou dialect, called Suzhou *tanhuang* (Gu 1998; Qian 2002). The program of *tanhuang* was divided into front-tan (*qiantan*), consisting of tunes adapted from classical excerpts of Kun opera plays (Zhou and Luo 1988, 78), and back-tan (*houtan*) which comprises musical comedies and other short plays. In 1943, Zhu Guoliang recruited Wang Chuansong and Zhou Chuanying as performers, two members of the “generation of transition” and ex-members of *Xian Ni She*³² before their troupe was officially disbanded in 1941. After they joined the Guofeng Troupe, the proportion of Kun opera excerpts significantly increased. In spite of that, the primary element of the Guofeng Troupe was Su opera, and Kun opera continued to be used as the “MSG” to improve the taste of the entire show.

The Guofeng Troupe distinguished itself from many other troupes in its time in two respects. First, by adding modern themes for plays, Zhu Guoliang composed a highly diverse repertoire (Peng 1986, 57-59). Second, unlike many Chinese opera groups of the time, the organizational structure of the Guofeng Troupe was based on collective ownership (*jutuan*) rather than the organization of a traditional troupe (*xiban*).

vocal genre, named Shenqu (Hu 2010, 102). In the early 1940s, *shenqu* was further adapted to theatrical performance by multiple characters, and was made known to the public as Hu opera, particularly after the establishment of Shanghai Hu Opera Society in 1941. The name of *shenqu* was completely replaced by Hu opera after the socialist regime came into power in the late 1940s (Gu 2015, 177).

³² Xian Ni She (lit. “The Fairy Rainbow Society”) was a republican troupe that was in business between 1931 and 1941 (Zhou and Luo 1988, 34). Founded by Kun opera performers who were of the generation of transmission, Xian Ni She was founded by several performers of the transmission generation in an attempt to create a joint venture based on shareholders’ agreement to pool their investment in the operational cost. I consider the Xian’ni she as a transitional troupe which changed its management from the owner-centered system to the performer-dominated system. The primary purpose of its founders was to establish a system that guaranteed performers’ interest, rather than an egalitarian troupe with equal distribution of income. Moreover, performers’ status was not completely equal. According to Zhou Chuanying’s memoir, some members advocated the principal-performer-centered system, and demanded that the troupe feature their names as the starring role (*gua toupai*) on advertisement posters (Zhou and Luo 1988, 69-70). Therefore, I view the Xian Ni She as a pioneering republican troupe that ended the owner-centered management and led to more egalitarian management, as that of the Guofeng Troupe, which I consider to be the genesis of the state-owned Kun opera troupe in socialist China.

In 1941, Zhu Guoliang and Hua Hesheng founded the Guofeng Troupe by merging their own groups, the Guofeng Drama Society (*Guofeng jushe*) and the Zhengfeng Society (*Zhengfeng she*) led by Zhu and Hua respectively. This joint venture was named *Guofeng xixing jutuan* (lit. “The Guofeng New Drama Group”). This joint troupe staged a diverse repertoire of different genres firstly in Shanghai between 1941 and 1945 and subsequently toured in Suzhou, Hangzhou, and the adjacent rural areas (Peng 1986, 57). The Guofeng Troupe almost fell apart between the Anti-Japanese War (1938-1945), when Hua quit the troupe due to a gloomy prediction of its economic future. Zhu became the backbone of the Guofeng Troupe, and worked with the members to survive the Chinese Civil War period, which began in 1945 and officially ended in 1950.

According to Zhou Chuanying’s memoir, Zhu’s education background was different from his colleagues. He was not trained to be a professional actor,³³ but he was enthusiastic about adapting the narrative genre of Suzhou *tanhuang* into Su Opera to create new plays with contemporary plots, which was considered an achievement of modernization in his time. He also intended to theorize the performance activities of all professionals of Suzhou *Tanhuang*, so he founded the first *Tanhuang* Research Association (*Sutan yanjiuhui*) around 1934 (Zhou and Luo 1988, 79-80).³⁴ He was passionate about changing the power relations between troupe leaders and employees, and so he organized his own republican troupe, namely the Guofeng Su Opera Troupe.

As a republican troupe, the Guofeng Troupe was formed based on a venture partnership between two groups of performers with cooperative ownership of assets, including instruments, costumes, and stage props. Compared to the troupes that operated with the principal-centered

³³ Zhou Chuanying recalled that Zhu Guoliang graduated from Institut de Droit et Politique de Shanghai (Shanghai Fazheng Xuetao, Shanghai Faculty of Law and Administration), an educational institute known for its Westernized/modern pedagogy and influence among reformist scholars. But Zhu Guoliang’s educational background has been scarcely documented, except in Zhou Chuanying’s memoir (Zhou and Luo 1988, 80).

³⁴ The time of the foundation of *Tanhuang* Research Association is not specified in Zhou’s memoir. He mentioned that the association was founded about the same time as the Shenqu geju yanjiuhui (Shanghai folksongs and opera research association) which was founded on November 18, 1934 (ibid.).

distribution in an opera class, i.e. with a disparity between high and low positions,³⁵ the Guofeng Troupe featured an almost egalitarian distribution of income and benefits. It is recorded in *Shanghai xiqu ziliao huicui* that the Guofeng Troupe was characterized by equal distribution, regardless of leading roles or supporting roles, even those who did not perform could get their share of the income (Peng 1986, 58). Zhou Chuanying, a Kun opera performer of the “transmission” generation who joined the Guofeng Troupe in 1943, also confirmed the egalitarian distribution, but he offered his own interpretation of economic relations in the troupe. As he recalled:

At that time, the Guofeng Troupe fostered a sense of solidarity. In order to unite everyone, you [troupe director] need to be tolerant. Zhu Guoliang respected his peers, no matter what genre you performed—he particularly respected Kun opera [performers]—no matter where you came from; he welcomed anyone that was willing to join the group, and treated everyone equally (*yishi tongren*). ... No matter how difficult life was, everyone was on the same track, living or dead. The Guofeng comprised several families... so [we formed] a “*jiazu banzi*” (family troupe) ... We toured with our sons and daughters, and each family member was taken care of, we shared meals, porridges, and money...none of the senior troupe members ever abandoned *xiban* (lit. “opera class”), and most members who joined later also stayed with us together through thick and thin. (Zhou and Luo 1988, 89)

What Zhou Chuanying described as the family bond, and the tolerance and personal charisma of Zhu Guoliang reflects the economic structure of the Guofeng Troupe as a “republican troupe,” a collectively owned organization whose operation depended on the consensus of its representatives of members.

Although Zhou Chuanying attributed the cohesive community to the family bond, which did play an important role in uniting troupe members, there still existed a fundamental distribution

³⁵ The equal distribution of income was becoming a new norm in show business in the 1930s, and was welcomed by many performers who played supporting roles. An ex-member of Xin Yue Fu, a troupe that performed the repertoire of Kun opera, recalled that the disparity between the income of principles and that of supporting roles directly led to the conflict among troupe members, because the people who played supporting roles considered the relatively equal income in a republican troupe a more reasonable and fair system. This disagreement on the hierarchical payment eventually caused the disbandment of Xin Yue Fu in 1931 (Mu 2011, 87).

principle that made sure the unrelated members were treated equally. Each adult member represented their own interest or that of a specific sub-group as their own family, and these sub-groups and unrelated individuals enjoyed equal status and economic rights in the group. They shared ownership of property (e.g. stage props and revenue), agreed to rules governing the finance, distribution, and uses of collective property, and made plans for performances together. This structure took into account each member's economic interest, and provided a shelter for all members during the decade-long war period.

However, it is important to notice that there exists a discrepancy between Zhu Guoliang's revolutionary idea of organizing a republican troupe, and the Guofeng members' understanding of their troupe as a "family troupe" (*jiazu banzi*). *Banzi* is an informal word for *xiban*. Zhu Guoliang never named his troupe a *xiban*, which usually denoted centralized management, neither did he limit his recruits within any ties of kinship. But from the perspective of members who had familial relationships with one another, the collective ownership was more like an extended version of self-ownership. The operation of a republican troupe did not necessarily mean that Zhu Guoliang successfully created a democratic community of performers who held the same beliefs as its pioneering founder.

The structure of the republican troupe enabled the Guofeng Troupe to survive the coming socialist reforms that challenged social conventions and social relations, because the institution was prophetic of social relations within the professionals' community after 1949. Based on the democratic relationships among members of the Guofeng Troupe, the formative process of state-owned Kun opera troupes began.

2.1.1 Officialization of the Guofeng Troupe in Socialist China

The socialist regime officially came to power after the founding ceremony of the People's Republic of China on October 1st, 1949. The new government immediately turned its attention to cultural production, and particularly to performances of Chinese indigenous performing arts, due to these genres' wide social influence and incomparable popularity in both urban and rural areas in the late 1940s and the early 1950s. Zhou Enlai, first Prime Minister of the PRC, announced "The Instruction Concerning the Work of Opera Reform" on May 5, 1951 in which he declared that "People's opera is an important weapon to educate the masses about the spirit of democracy and patriotism" (Zhou 1951, 49). The "weapon" metaphor points to the political authority's awareness of the social power embedded in the communicative process of opera's production and reception, and the potential danger inherent in cultural communications left uncontrolled; moreover, it reveals the state's strong intention of making the social influence of indigenous genres of performing arts serve the political purposes of the new regime. The new government ambitiously included almost all forms of Chinese indigenous opera into tools of ideological propaganda (e.g. to educate the masses). This agenda would entail a set of rules that would control not only the content of performances, but also the relationship between performing groups and the political establishment. The goals were to achieve the symbolic universalization of private interests, to draw the troupe's delegation into the political authority, and to forge individual representations into official presentations.

In this new political context, the first question that the Guofeng Troupe faced was how to acquire legal status in the People's Republic of China to continue their business. However, to re-establish themselves in the "new China" required not only administrative approval from the new government, such as a business license, but also the symbolic reform of their repertoire and the

creation of an affiliation with the local government. An essential prerequisite for making a living as a troupe under the new regime was to find a place in the new social order. They would have to serve the interests of those occupying a dominant position in an emerging social structure. To reform Chinese opera, the new dominant political order comprehensively changed pre-existing socio-cultural codes of Chinese operas into a set of new codes in the “Opera Reform” of the 1950s.

2.1.2 The Liquidation of “Old Operas” in the “Opera Reform”

The new government’s political agenda of turning indigenous operas into tools of ideological propaganda was primarily implemented through an enduring cultural movement known as *Xiqu gaige* (the Opera Reform).³⁶ The fundamental idea of the Opera Reform was first raised in 1948 by the Drama and Music Work Committee founded by the People’s Government of the Region of North China.³⁷ The reformists drew an ambitious blueprint of a nationwide opera reform in an editorial of *The People’s Daily*, published on November 13th, which asserted that “old operas” (*jiuju*) with outdated feudalistic contents must be reformed.³⁸ These reforms would make opera suit the political purpose of establishing a cultural system of the New Democratic Revolution (*xin minzhu zhuyi geming*).

The New Democratic Revolution is a theory derived from Mao Zedong's plan of changing the form of Chinese society, from its colonial, semi-colonial, and semi-feudal character, in order to produce an independent and democratic society. During the New Democracy phase (1938-1956),

³⁶ The “Opera Reform” is denoted almost all forms of performing arts, including various genres of Chinese indigenous operas and narrative-singing.

³⁷ The article “You jihua you buzou di jinxing jiuju gaige gongzuo” 有計劃有步驟地進行舊劇改革工作 [To implement the work of the Opera Reform step by step according to plans] published in *The People’s Daily* in November 1948 by the Drama and Music Work Committee in the Huabei Region was generally considered one of the earliest documents that brought the Opera Reform to public attention.

³⁸ See Editorial, *Renmin ribao* (People’s Daily), November 13, 1948.

the aim of social revolution was to overthrow feudalism and achieve independence from colonialism. George Moseley and other scholars have identified long ago that period since the publication of Mao's "New Democracy" theory in 1938 through 1956 as a "new democracy" phase (Moseley 1966, 18-24; Dreyer 1976). And the Opera Reform was one of the social reforms that the CPC deployed to create a revitalized society characterized by new politics, economics, and culture.

After the CPC came into power in 1949, the Opera Reform was officially put into action and became one of the driving forces propelling a series of nationwide acts and programs. On July 27th, 1949, two months before the founding ceremony of the People's Republic of China, the National Opera Amelioration Committee of China (*Zhonghua quanguo xiqu gaijin weiyuanhui*) was formed, taking charge of the reform. On November 3rd, 1949, the Bureau of the Amelioration of Opera (Xiqu Gaijin Ju) was established and became the first authoritative organization delegated by the central government to tackle opera reform (Fu 2002, 3-4). Following the model of the Bureau of the Amelioration of Opera, local governments established a variety of administrative offices that took charge of implementing orders from the upper level of authority. After the nationwide bureaucracies of Opera Reform were formed, concrete instructions were passed from Beijing to the lower levels of authority.

On May 5, 1951, the Beijing government promulgated the "State administrative council instructions concerning Opera Reform work (*Zhongyang renmin zhengfu zhengwuyuan guanyu xiqu gaige gongzuo de zhishi*) signed by the Prime Minister. In this official document, often referred to as the "Five-five Instruction" (*Wuwu zhishi*) due to its release date, three areas of reform were clarified, including the reform of repertoire, performers' thoughts, and institutions (*gaixi*

gairen gaizhi) (Zhang 1994, 27).³⁹ Bureaucrats regarded the “Five-five Instruction” as a set of canonical rules concerning the cultural administration. The three areas indicated are the main areas of the pre-existing field of Chinese opera production that the Beijing government considered most “problematic,” and thus needed to be liquidated before the new order of culture could be established.

2.1.2.1 Reform of Repertoires

Chinese indigenous opera included a large proportion of plays adapted from pre-existent popular works of literature. During the Opera Reform, these traditional repertoires were generally referred to as “*jiu ju*” (old opera). In the feudalist era, these “old operas” functioned as powerful pedagogical media through which doctrines, policies, and moral standards could reach the public. This understanding was an extension of an iconoclastic position derived from a large-scale intellectual involvement in the theorization of Chinese opera as an ideological apparatus and pedagogical tool in the early 20th century (Pang 2007, 17). According to this position, watching Chinese opera was not only a process of generating aesthetic pleasure, but also a process of decoding, learning, and recognizing or disapproving of moral principles, social relations, and ethical standards. If the meanings of pre-existing repertoire of Chinese opera were maintained, the norms of the older society would continue to reach the public, regardless of social change. Opera reform was thought to provide a solution to the potential risk of disseminating old and incorrect messages. People would be inculcated with revolutionary thoughts through plays defined by the state as good and revolutionary.

³⁹ Scholarship on the repertoire reform in the 1950s and 1960s has grown into a significant scholarly area. Due to the limitation of my topic, I will only briefly outline its principles, and problems arising from the implementation. I will focus on how the policy impacted the survival of the Guofeng troupe in the political transition in the late 1940s and the early 1950s.

Five categories of old operas were ordered to be either reformed or banned: (1) those that paid tribute to feudal emperors and promoted the feudalistic social order; (2) those that promoted superstitious beliefs about ghosts, gods, and fatalism; (3) those that promoted pornographic content and offended public decency; (4) those that distorted history, or inappropriately interpreted facts; and (5) those that disparaged the poor or defamed the masses.⁴⁰

The CPC's fundamental intention of implementing the Opera Reform was based on the idea that the meanings of traditional opera were wholly or partially obsolete in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The CPC introduced an "oppositional code" (Hall 1992, 103) to change the dominant or preferred meanings of the old operas. Reformists liquidated the pre-existing code, and made sense of the story within a frame of their new preferred code, which originated from an iconoclastic ideology. The reformers deemed older plays to be containers of "backward" and "noxious" ideologies, particularly concerning the way people lived and the values they held in the distant past. Hence public performances of these plays were thought to have the effect of spreading the ideas associated with the old social order.⁴¹

When there is a lack of equivalence between the two sides of encoding and decoding, distortions of meaning or misunderstandings may arise. The instruction to ban or reform the five categories of opera was a result of the operation of an oppositional code. For instance, most of the old operas were based on stories written in Imperial periods when the critique of feudalism had not yet emerged. The reformists viewed the stories as "products of the feudalistic society (*fengjian shehui de chanwu*),"⁴² which is to say, they were the embodiment of ideologies and a social order

⁴⁰ Jizhong jiuju yanjiu shencha weiyuanhui [The Hebei District Committee on the Research and Censorship of Old Operas], appendix to *Zhongguo xiqu zhi: Hebei juan* [Annals of Chinese Operas: The Volume of Hebei] (Beijing: Zhongguo ISBN Center, 1993), p. 706.

⁴¹ Editorial, *People's Daily*, November 13, 1948, sec. 1, http://58.68.146.102/rmrb/19481113/1/7975c1800a884114a61ef5f86a60f58f_print.html.

⁴² *Ibid.*

that were becoming obsolete. This critique is derived from decoding within a frame of reference that could only take place after the feudalist social order was replaced by another social order. Some old operas featured characters who swore loyalty to their emperors; this was read as submission to the hegemony of a monarch; stories about ghosts and gods were read as promoting superstition and fatalism, which conflicted with the atheistic beliefs held by the socialists; similarly, romantic stories were read as pornographic.

The Opera Reform was made possible due to the central government's understanding of Chinese opera as a symbolic processor: Chinese opera could convert the input of the dominant code into belief output, or even behavioral output. As a result, the new government introduced a new frame of reference that could be used to encode meaningful discourse of Chinese operas. This new framework mainly consisted of signs of anti-Imperialism, patriotism, and socialist blueprints. The Opera Reform Committee intended to filter out the "inappropriate," "obsolescent" and "wrong" messages, thus preventing their circulation, while keeping the beneficial ones. After the reform committee's inspection of the messages, all traditional opera plays were divided into two categories: the banned repertoire, and the approved repertoire (Fu 2002, 11).

However, the central government did not want to encourage the public to read the newly introduced repertoire in an oppositional way. It was the central government's intention to legitimize their code as the dominant code with which opera audience decode "preferred meanings" (Hall 1992, 98). As then-Prime Minister Zhou Enlai stated in "The Instruction of the Opera Reform":

"[The heritage of Chinese opera] has been partially exploited by the feudalist rulers as a tool of lulling people into a false ideology and poisoning the minds of people. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish the good and get rid of the bad, and reform and develop Chinese opera on a new basis in line with the interests of the state and the people. ... Chinese opera performers have the responsibility of entertaining and educating the masses." (Zhou 1951, 49)

The central government hoped that the purified repertoire would be appreciated just as planned. They hoped that all the messages they intended to deliver (encoded) in the Opera reform would be perfectly understood by audiences (decoded). In Zhou's instruction, he considered Chinese opera a propaganda machine, and the masses were depicted as passive victims of ideological manipulation. Due to the social function of Chinese opera, he stressed the political goals of theater and enabled reformed opera to achieve a dominant-hegemonic position (Hall 1992, 101). The "Instruction" liquidated the old code and legitimized the new, and helped the masses read the messages completely inside the new dominant code. In the decoding process, audiences were expected to be fully passive receivers, as much as they had been in the feudalist epoch.

As the Opera Reform was instituted, a range of plays of various genres of Chinese opera was prohibited from being staged due to the association with the "five categories." Traditional repertoires shrank dramatically, which led to a sharp decline in opera performances across the country in the early 1950s. The lack of appropriate repertoire threatened the survival of all indigenous opera troupes. In reports submitted to the Beijing government between 1949 and 1951, local officials showed clear concern about the paucity of repertoire that had survived the censorship process; for instance, in the entire region of Northern China (*Huabei diqu*),⁴³ there were only 83 plays of all operatic genres that could legally be staged (Fu 2002, 11). After the late 1950s, the radicalization of the Opera Reform became a weapon that the political cliques within the core leadership used to attack one another. One example is the controversial play *Li Huiniang*. The story of *Li Huiniang* features a concubine who, having been killed by the cruel prime minister, then returns as a ghost seeking vengeance (Greene 2012). Between 1966 and 1979, the play

⁴³ The region of Northern China is a vast region that covers the Yellow River Basin and expands north to the Yangtze River. It is considered one of most important political, military, and cultural regions of the PRC.

triggered a debate between different factions of the CPC cadres on whether the play should be prohibited or promoted. The debate escalated to the point that one of the factions was persecuted for its position (Qu 1979; Liu, Wang, and Yu 1979; Cong and Chen 2007). Subsequently, the original purpose of ideologically reforming the “old operas” was shifted from the Party’s main focus. The Opera Reform was never officially ended; instead, it established a precedent for the intolerant atmosphere, and a much more extreme ban on opera, during the Cultural Revolution of the mid-1960s.

2.1.2.2 The Reform of Performers and the Reform of the Troupe Institution

Before the early 1950s, many performing groups were organized based on severe exploitative relations. Traditional apprenticeship entitled master performers to employ apprentices as cheap labor in exchange for basic lodging, food, and training. This relationship, called *jing li ke*, often involved multi-level booking agents who benefited from finding jobs for performers, and other forms of employment such as contractual relationships (Fu 2002, 7-9).

Starting in the early 1950s, all troupes were required to reorganize into “republican troupes.” In an official instruction⁴⁴ issued by the Ministry of Culture in 1954 (Ministry of Culture 1982, 190), the central government considered the republican troupe suitable for a socialist society if it satisfied the following four elements: (1) the operation of the troupe relied on all performers’ collaboration, and no longer relied on employment between employers and employees. The socialist government considered this joint venture as one way to eliminate economic exploitation; (2) members of the republican troupe shared some property, including costumes, sets, and props,

⁴⁴This instruction, entitled “The Instruction on the Enhancement of the Leadership and Management of nongovernmental professional troupes” (Wenhua bu guanyu jiaqiang dui minjian zhiye jutuan de lingdao he guanli de zhishi), [WL] No. 5348-3, was issued on May 26th, 1954.

which the government identified as public property; (3) the republican troupe usually did not sign the pre-paid fixed salary contract, called *baoyin* (lit. contractual silver). In this economic relationship, performers usually contracted to perform in the troupe for a certain period of time, in most cases one year. Performers should give up their collaboration with other troupes or other partners. In return, the troupe owner should prepay the performers according to the contract by season (Qi 1935, 90). In a republican troupe, performers/shareholders usually received their share from the box-office revenues, hence they were pre-paid themselves. The socialist government largely promoted the republican troupe's income distribution which later was termed as "distribution according to one's labor" (*an lao fen pei*) in official documents; (4) the decision-making in a republican troupe depended a democratic process that included all troupe members.

Given these advantages, the government promulgated the institution of the "republican troupe," which was termed as the reform of troupe institution. Performers were educated on their social responsibility in addition to making profits. This ideological education of performers was regarded as the reform of performers.

Multiple levels of political agents, from local cultural administrators to cultural cadres, were engaged in the nationwide enterprise of "enlightening" performers about the social function of their performances as political propaganda (e.g. to criticize the large and middle-class landownership, and to praise the merits of the proletariat), rather than as pure entertainment (Liu, Wang, and Yu 1979; Liang 1999; Fan 2002; Fu 2002). Professional performers from all kinds of performing arts were encouraged to partake in ideological education at local cultural institutes, such as government-run cultural centers (*wenhua guan*) in towns or cities. In the first several years of the PRC, local governments tried to enlighten the performing community about the concurrent

social transition, new China's political situation,⁴⁵ and the greatness of socialist reform, in order to "awaken" opera performers from a state of numbness. These educational programs were intended "to elevate the level of performers' political awareness" (*tigao zhengzhi juewu*)" (Fu 2002, 4). The ideological education of performers also included correcting "bad styles of life," such as gambling and addiction to drugs; their education included highlighting the distinctions between the old society and the new, and examining critiques of the social discrimination against the performing professions. Performers were also informed of their social status as new masters of their own country China, as well as the Chinese Communist Party and Chairman Mao as the creators of the social order (Fu 2002, 7-9).

The rise of the political significance of opera was accompanied by the downgrading of the economic significance of performance activities. What opera performers frequently assumed to be principles of market activity—such as staging popular plays that sold well, and mounting plays that appealed to audiences' tastes—became secondary to ideological production.⁴⁶ Performers were encouraged to stage politically supreme plays, regardless of economic return.

The implementation of the Opera Reform imposed a socio-political relationship between the newly assigned political agents and professional performers. Before the intervention of the new government, professional troupes had managed their activities with self-conscious planning according to their economic requirements. During the Opera Reform, troupes needed to take into account the new government requirements, so that they could rework their communication with audiences accordingly.

⁴⁵ The political situation includes not only the new legislations, but also certain political social events. For example, one of the vital events that opera performers were supposed to know in the early 1950s was China's involvement in the Korean War as a righteous deed and performers were encouraged to make a donation to the army (Liang 1999, 4).

⁴⁶ A reformed Chinese opera performer in Nanjing once reflected: "From now on, when we stage the old operas, we should first examine from which social class the characters we act are, for which social class the content of the play speaks; those [that] should be reformed must be reformed" (Liu 2013, 42).

The reform of performers and the reform of the troupe institution were often carried out as part of the same process, in which performers were educated to accept a new social relation with society, and a new social relation among themselves. The former was aimed at shaping performers' understanding of the socio-political responsibility of their profession as propaganda agents, and the latter was aimed at annihilating the economic exploitation inherent in the hierarchical distribution of benefits.

Therefore, the Opera Reform was not only aimed at the liquidation of "old opera," but also the legitimization of a set of new codes of opera making, including not only the repertoire, but also a hierarchal social relation between the cultural administrators as the dominant encoders and performers as the dominated decoders, with an equal social relation among performers themselves. The government's ultimate purpose was to create a centralized structure of performing arts in China. As Chinese theater specialist Fu Jin noted,

The new government felt an urgent need for transforming hundreds of thousands of opera professionals who relied on performances to make a living into a team of executors and educators that promote policies among the masses, based on the paradigm of cultural troupes in military forces (*jundui wengongtuan*). (Fu 2002, 4)

This paradigm of "cultural troupes in military forces" presupposes a structure in which all members were in compliance with the core authority's command. In this new structure, the political power delegated a role to cultural administrators, who were to participate in the cultural market and supervise the communication between performers and audiences. The supply and demand of opera productions were expected to align with the dominant code planned by the central government. The Opera Reform marked a centralizing structure for the production of Chinese indigenous opera in the PRC.

2.1.3 Troupe Registration and Official Showcases

The political action of the Opera Reform was eventually exercised not by legitimate violence, but by the effects of “officialization,” which resulted in self-censorship and a disposition of assimilation within a system of power. Inspired by Bourdieu’s theory of “officializing strategies” (Bourdieu 1995, 38-43), the officialization in the current context refers to a public declaration by which opera troupes bind themselves to the occupational group and the society in general. It involves a normalizing process through which opera troupes teach themselves the new order, cultural codes, and the structure of cultural production; provide themselves with a representation of their social relations (either with the authority, their peers, or with their audience); and tacitly lay down a dividing line between possible and not possible. I argue that in the early 1950s, the “troupe registration” and “Official Showcases” provided two examples of officialization through which members of private troupes, such as the Guofeng Troupe, associated themselves with the political authority and their peers.

In the early 1950s, the Opera Reform was not carried out smoothly. One apparent reason that opera professionals did not comply is because they would not have benefitted economically from the new political requirements. Many troupes were unwilling to give up their economically successful but politically inappropriate repertoire, hence, they came up with various approaches to evade their “social responsibilities” (Fu 2002; Liang 1999). The government authority soon realized the difficulty in censoring live performances. Unlike publications, paintings, or other tangible forms of art, live performances constitute an intangible, instant, and un-repeatable medium of communication. That means an inspection cannot possibly be conducted without a supervisor’s physical presence on the spot. Further, the popular tradition of performing *mubiaoxi*, the roughly programmed fragments of plays without scripts, greatly increased the difficulty of

ensorship, because performers of *mubiaoxi* were highly skilled improvisers capable of changing and deleting lines, movements, or even acts spontaneously. Liang Bing, a former member of the cultural cadre who participated in the Opera Reform in Nanjing as a supervisor, revealed the painstaking effort of imposing new regulations on performing groups. He vividly documented the battle between troupes and government inspectors:

[I]t is not easy to get to know the real situation on and off stage. I remember there were many troupe owners and gangmasters (*batou*) who sent people to spy on Opera Reform cadres. When we just arrived at the theater entrance, the gatekeeper would turn on a little red light to “warn” the backstage. Even though it left no time for them to change the program, (there was enough time to) instantly restrain tacky performances, to refine vulgar lines, to conceal the improper appearances of characters on stage, to turn their boring, filthy and even anti-revolutionary ad-libs and jokes into (politically) progressive slogans. After we left, everything resumed. In addition, the primary repertoire was in the form of *mubiaoxi*, (leaving us) no script to inspect, and that increased the difficulty of our work. (Liang 1999, 3)

To solve the problem, the government attempted to “naturalize” the reform process by cultivating performers’ “self-consciousness-and-willingness” (*zijue ziyuan*) to cooperate with the political agents in a form of affiliation.⁴⁷ From 1949 to 1956, the affiliation was created through the enactment of troupe registration and the institution of Official Showcases. In this process, a centralized field of Chinese indigenous operas started to be shaped when many troupes competed for a chance to bind themselves to a local political authority in order to continue their routine management, or acquire greater social resources. The registration significantly contributed to the growth of the government’s power to administer private troupes within given regions, and the showcase enabled the government to mobilize the largest number of possible performing groups for official occasions. Thus, the officialization greatly enhanced the new government’s legitimacy

⁴⁷ As Zhou Enlai required in *the Five-Five Instruction*, the reform of the troupe institution should be implemented based on performers’ “self-consciousness-and-willingness” (*zijue ziyuan*) (Zhou 1951, 50).

in cultural administration.

Troupe registration was initiated in the early 1950s. From 1953 to 1955, the Ministry of Culture ordered its subordinate levels of cultural administrative offices to promulgate the registration and reorganization (*dengji zhengbian*) of performing groups across the country. Multiple government edicts were issued during this period of time, such as “Ministry of Culture Instructions Concerning the Reorganization and Enhancement of Work of Troupes Nationwide” (*Wenhuabu guanyu zhengdun he jiaqiang quanguo jutuan gongzuo de zhishi*), “Several Notices of the Ministry of Culture concerning the Reorganization of Troupes Nationwide” (*Wenhuabu guanyu quanguo jutuan zhengbian gongzuo de jixiang tongzhi*), “Instruction of the Ministry of Culture concerning the Registration and Reward of Private Troupes” (*Wenhuabu guanyu saying jutuan dengji he jiangli gongzuo de zhishi*), “Instruction of the Ministry of Culture on Strengthening Leadership and Management of Private Professional Troupes” (*Wenhuabu guanyu jiaqiang minjian zhiye jutuan de lingdao he guanli de zhishi*),⁴⁸ “Instruction of the Ministry of Culture Concerning the Work of the Registration and Management of Private Professional Troupes” (*Wenhuabu guanyu minjian zhiye jutuan de dengji guanli gongzuo de zhishi*), and Supplementary notice of the Ministry of Culture on registration work of private professional troupes (*Wenhuabu guanyu minjian zhiye jutuan dengji gongzuo de buchong tongzhi*) (Ministry of Culture 1982, 181-201).

Since the initial stage of the implementation, troupe registration was not a matter of enacting legislative procedures, for getting registered did not entitle a troupe any legal status, such as a license. Rather, it functioned as a symbol of official recognition of the connection between a

⁴⁸ The *minjian zhiye jutuan* refers to private professional troupes. The literal meaning of *minjian* is “that of the populace,” and it is used in the government documents in the 1950s to specify privately owned troupes, as opposed to those *gongjia* (public-owned) or *guoyou* state-owned troupes.

troupe and the administrative office of local government. According to the instructions and notices above, un-registered troupes, which either failed to submit a request or were declined, would fail to get business credentials. A troupe without business credentials could still sign contracts with those theaters or clients that did not require credentials, but the lack of performance credentials would damage their reputation. It was not until 1954 that the Ministry of Culture issued another edict that announced that there would be a deadline for troupe registration after which registered troupes of various forms of ownership (including state-owned, private-collective-joint, or private enterprises) would be prohibited from collaborating with un-registered professional performing groups. However, the effective date of the deadline was not specified.

In practice, registering at the cultural administrative office of a local government became a tricky endeavor for private troupes, such as the Guofeng Troupe, because their requests were evaluated with a high degree of subjective decision-making from local government officials. It took the Guofeng Troupe more than two years to eventually become registered. In order to achieve their business credentials, the troupe had to relocate several times to find a local government that was willing to incorporate them into the registration list. This painstaking process became the ritual of officialization through which troupes such as the Guofeng Troupe sought a sense of political security. Driven by this motivation, the Guofeng Troupe learned the tacit limits of the new social order.

In 1950, the Guofeng Troupe first tried to register in Suzhou, the hometown of most troupe members. But they failed for unknown reasons. A local cultural administrator was unwilling to register them, despite the fact that their variety repertoire consisted mainly of local genres, such as Suzhou *tanhuang*, and Kun opera, which originated in Kunshan, an area adjacent to Suzhou. Their failure was primarily caused by vague government instructions. The central government did not

specify the evaluation criteria in any government document. The most overt standards, publicized as “the concrete methods of registering private opera troupes,” stated:

With respect to pre-existing private professional drama groups, opera classes, societies, the provincial and municipal government may require them, within a certain period, to submit an application for registration to local cultural administrative departments, by filling in registration forms, and providing proof of association, resumes of performers and staff members, and repertoires in appendices. Upon approval of the cultural administrative departments that received the request, a registration certificate shall be issued. (Ministry of Culture 1982, 188)

However, the Ministry of Culture issued no further or more detailed rules or regulations concerning how to assess private troupes’ proof of association, or other relevant parameters.

The lack of criteria directly empowered local political agents, because their opinions became the most important criteria in the decision-making process. However, these administrators could exercise power that they were not given. In the case of the Guofeng Troupe, the cultural administrator in Suzhou prohibited them from giving performances in Suzhou, an order issued without any legal basis.

The rejection of the Guofeng Troupe’s registration request made the troupe members realize that troupe registration was a serious matter. They started to view registration as the legislative means of acquiring legal status. They became aware of the decisive role that the local political agents played, and started to explore some tactics to impress these agents. As Zhou Chuanying noted:

Couldn’t get registered anywhere, [we] were *naturally* an illegal troupe; *without zuzhi guanxi (organizational relationship),⁴⁹ we were like children without father or mother.* To make a living, we had to submit a registration request to each cultural administration office in each place we visited. At the same time, we tried even harder to stage plays that conformed to the situation. (Zhou and Luo 1988, 97-98; emphasis added)

⁴⁹ Although the term “organizational relationship” was originally used to describe the institutional authority of the CPC and the interrelationship between lower ranks of Party members with high ranks, Zhou used the phrase to refer to the relationship between private troupes and the local government that granted performance credentials.

Between 1949 and 1951, many troupe members like Zhou Chuanying “naturally” perceived themselves as belonging to an illegal performing group. Although they were still allowed to give public performance in other places without registration, the lack of official credentials added uncertainty to their operation, and they could encounter any prohibition for any reason, as happened in Suzhou. Therefore, the registration, i.e. an affiliation with a local government, was thought to be a shelter that provided political security under which a troupe could maintain its regular operation.

The Guofeng Troupe attempted to impress local agents by proving their competence in staging politically appropriate operas, legitimately encoded. Between 1949 and 1951, they constantly self-censored their traditional repertoire using a method called “*laoxi xinchang*” (lit. “to sing old operas in a new way”). Within the new frame of reference, they deconstructed their plays in the legitimate way, by deleting lines, excerpts, or acts that were read as either anti-social class struggles, feudalistic, or superstitious, and then revised the plotline into the appropriate stories.

One example is their revision of *The Fifteen Strings of Cash* (*Shiwu guan*). A pre-existing version of this play includes the act entitled “Lodging in a Temple” (*su miao*). In this act, the protagonist lodges in a Buddhist temple and has a dream in which a deity appears and gives him a hint about a crime suspect. Based on the code of the Opera Reform, the troupe members read the theme of this act as banned, for it was tinted with superstitious beliefs about deities. They completely deleted this act (Zhou and Luo 1988, 98). To enrich the plot, they portrayed the protagonist’s logical reasoning, which led him to the crime suspect. Another classical play they revised was *The Peony Pavilion*. This play depicts a romance between a young scholar and his lover—a noble lady resurrected from another life. In order to avoid the heroine’s appearance as a

ghost, they rewrote the main plotline into a story about a young couple that “breaks through the confinement of feudalist concept of marriage” (ibid.). Some plays could not be reformed at all, due to their problematic themes. For instance, they stopped staging the play “Assassinating the Tiger General” (*Ci hu*), which depicted a former palace maid in the court of the last Ming Emperor who took her revenge on a military general of the rebel army led by Li Zicheng. At that time, Li Zicheng was portrayed as the anti-feudalist hero who successfully led a peasants’ rebellion. As a troupe member explained, this entire play could not be staged because it questioned Li Zicheng’s role in history and distorted the historical value of the peasants’ rebellion.⁵⁰ Instead, they composed another play, *Taiping tianguo* (“Heavenly Kingdom Movement”), which depicted the peasant rebellion known as the Heavenly Kingdom Movement, which lasted from 1850 to 1864, and praised it as an anti-feudalist uprising (ibid.).

Troupe members believed that their arduous efforts at censorship of old plays had played an essential role in proving the political legitimacy of their troupe to the local government, and thus they received tacit approval for public performance. As Zhou Chuanying wrote: “Cultural administrative offices in those places [where we toured] thought we were very serious about everything, and eventually did not treat us as an illegal troupe” (ibid.). It also means that their approach to reforming old operas was a successful strategy.

Performers’ eagerness to be registered was indicative of the powerful effects of officialization, which were to define and create a new standard. The Guofeng Troupe wanted to regularize its status in a newly emerging social order. And this desire to be normalized enabled the entire troupe to break with its previous empirically-generated, self-sustaining, profit-oriented practices centering on economic gain. Instead, attaining political legitimacy arose as the foremost

⁵⁰ The leader of the rebel peasant army, Li Zicheng, is depicted as an anti-feudalist hero in the official propaganda in the socialist regime.

concern for the troupe. In order to create an affiliation with a local government, they sought recognition from cultural administrators, which became the new motivation of their performance.

The Guofeng Troupe soon had the chance to more actively satisfy the demands of official rule by performing in a newly fostered institution, called “Official Showcases” (*hui yan*). These provided the essential change of relations between the Guofeng Troupe and the Hangzhou municipal government. The preliminary Official Showcases emerged in 1951. Officials at different levels of government held these events, and invited selected performers or groups to perform. In the beginning, the invitation to the official showcase was a symbolic demonstration of the relationship between performing groups and the local political authority. It recognized participating groups, but also filtered out—or demobilized—other performing groups that were not selected to participate. Among the participants, there was also a competitive atmosphere. Gathering a number of performing groups within a certain area, the political agents usually organized a competition between those groups according to the hosts’ evaluative criteria. Awards would be granted in the form of subsidies, honor, or both. The Official Showcases were quickly institutionalized in the early 1950s and have persisted until the present as a regular activity for the local government to evaluate performing groups.

The Official Showcases were an important means of officialization, through which political authority accorded social significance, in the form of reputation and honor, for performers’ artistic labor. In this way, an impressive performance at an official showcase may accrue social capital for a troupe and bring them political benefits in the long term.

In the fall of 1951, the Guofeng troupe received a notice (*tong zhi*) from the government that required their participation in an official showcase held by the prefectural government of the Jiaxing district (*Jiaxing zhuanqu*). The troupe was excited about this opportunity. A performance

at the showcase was different from a contractual performance in a public theater in three ways: First, the clients were officials of a local government, rather than anonymous audiences; second, the clientele had specific criteria for appreciation, so the troupe had a clear idea of the clients' demands, which were mainly political interests; and third, there were a number of participant performing groups, among whom there emerged a competition to cater to host officials' political interests.

To prepare for the showcase, the Guofeng Troupe mounted a new play to provide moral support for the most important event in China in 1951, namely *kang mei yuan chao* (the war to resist America and aid Korea). The result was "The Family of Glory" (*Guangrong zhijia*), which the troupe finished rehearsing within ten days before the official showcase in Jiaxing. Using a hybrid style combining Su and Kun operas, performers depicted a patriotic family united against the invasion of the Jin in the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279 AD). The plotline metaphorically represented the Chinese People's Volunteer Army in the Korean War against the foreign invader, the US army (Zhou and Luo 1988, 99).

The relations between participant troupes and official hosts at the showcases changed the function of the Guofeng Troupe's performance from an entertainment jointly enjoyed by multiple audiences to a tribute to a singular central political power. In this transition, performances were more tightly connected with political power than cultural needs. Any honor or recognition granted by government officials became "credits" of political legitimacy that would be recognized within a region they governed. A closer affiliation with the local government was one of the rewards that the politically advanced troupe could acquire. After their impressive performance at the showcase, the Guofeng Troupe was officially registered in the prefectural government of Jiaxing, Zhejiang Province. As Zhou Chuanying stated, "each troupe member was tremendously excited about [the

registration], and celebrating that we eventually became members of a legal performing group” (ibid.).

The political credits earned could be converted into economic benefits over the long term. For instance, *The Family of Glory* was highly praised by government officials for the political significance of the story. This recognition effectively advertised the play and soon attracted several performance contracts from the army, including both the Chinese People’s Liberation Army and the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army.⁵¹ The influence of this play also reached adjacent areas, the local governments of which soon booked several performances with the Guofeng Troupe. Therefore, an economy of Official Showcases emerged that was dependent on the political relations between participant troupes and the political power. The growth of this economy manifested in the accrual of both monetary benefits, and political credit, which became increasingly valuable as a source of economic returns.

After the affiliation was established, the political authority had more control over the management of the registered troupe. The cultural administrative officials legitimately intervened in the management of the Guofeng Troupe. In 1951, the cultural affairs office of Jiading appointed Zhu Shigou (the daughter of former director Zhu Guoliang) to be the director of the Guofeng Troupe, and Zhou Chuanying as the vice director. The former director was removed from leadership. The name of the troupe was officially registered as Guofeng *Jutuan* (Guofeng Drama Group). In 1952, the Guofeng Troupe was confirmed to participate in the official showcase hosted by the Hangzhou municipal government, the capital city of Zhejiang Province. Provincial and municipal leaders made the decision to relocate the Guofeng Troupe from Jiading to Hangzhou,

⁵¹ The Chinese People’s Volunteer Army was the armed forces deployed by the People's Republic of China during the Korean War. The Chinese People's Volunteer Army were actually transferred from the People's Liberation Army under orders of the Chinese Communist Party, but the People's Volunteer Army was separately constituted in order to avoid an open war with the US and other UN members.

and assigned them to perform at the Hangzhou People's Entertainment Hall. The troupe subsequently settled down in Hangzhou, which has remained its base until present.

The process of officialization resulted in the relocation of the Guofeng Troupe, a move that heralded the advent of centralized planning of Kun opera production. Each registered troupe needed to be attuned to the cultural affairs office that administrated its operation. That meant that the troupes could only tour in the specific area where they were registered. Troupe members were excited about their settlement in Hangzhou, as in Zhou Chuanying's words, the Guofeng Troupe was no longer a vagabond troupe (*jianghu ban*: lit. "a troupe that travels along rivers and lakes"), but a city-based troupe (*zuocheng ban*) (Zhou and Luo 1988, 97). But the relocation would also limit the Guofeng Troupe's activities. Any shows traveling outside their area needed to be approved by the local cultural administrator in coordination with the administrator of the office at the troupe's destination.⁵² Therefore, the registration actually limited troupes that, in the past, would have toured along with market demands.

In addition, the government's planning (e.g. to summon troupes to showcases) dissociated opera performances with actual market conditions, and reduced troupes' sensitivity toward real audiences' needs and feedback. Since 1951, the drive based on the logic of conquering the largest possible market was replaced by the logic of competition for political benefits granted by the authority, an outcome that would soon become the norm of state-owned Kun opera troupes.

⁵² The mobilization of private troupes' performance was openly discouraged in government documents. As declared in "Wenhua bu guanyu sayingjutuan dengji he jiangli gongzuo de zhishi" [Instructions concerning the work of private troupe's registration and reward issued by the Ministry of Culture] on December 12th, 1953, that "If there is a performance plan of traveling, (the troupe) must file with the cultural affairs office of the local government, and also request for a touring certificate. Upon their arrival, (the troupe) should report to the cultural affairs office of the destination, asking for assistance and guidance of their work, and after the travel finishes, (the troupe) should request the office that released the certificate to cancel it" (Ministry of Culture 1982, 187-190).

2.2 NATIONALIZATION OF THE GUOFENG TROUPE

After the Guofeng Troupe was officialized in 1951, this private troupe became involved in the socialist transition. In 1953, the CPC promulgated “the General Line for the Transition Period,” with the intention of stimulating the growth of the state sector of China’s economy, while confining the private sectors. In the field of the performing arts, one approach was to nationalize qualified private troupes. The “General Line” replaced the New Democracy policy adopted in 1949, which had tolerated all private firms under the Communist Party’s rule except those owned by foreign and bureaucratic capitalists (So 2002, 682). From 1953 to 1956, numerous private enterprises were reorganized into three forms of ownership: (1) public-private partnership in the form of private-collective joint ownership, termed in Chinese as *gong si he ying*; (2) publicly subsidized private ownership, termed *minyng gongzhu* in Chinese; (3) completely nationalized (or state-owned) enterprises, termed *guo ying* in Chinese. During this period, the Guofeng Troupe was first transformed from a republican troupe into a publicly subsidized private troupe (#2 above). In 1956, the troupe was then completely nationalized (#3 above) into the first state-owned Su and Kun opera troupe (*guoying jutuan*), and also became well-known among local officials.

The nationalization of the Guofeng Troupe poses several questions: How was the nationalization implemented? What significant changes happened to the troupe during the process? And what made the troupe so well-known within such a short period of time? Drawing on records of the nationalization of the Guofeng Troupe between 1953 and 1956, I will examine the transition in the troupe’s ownership and the relationship between the troupe and the state.

I argue that in the course of the nationalization process, the troupe members’ right to control their production was reduced to a form of delegation relationship. Political perspectives became the most important lens through which the Guofeng Troupe’s artistic labor was evaluated, and

government officials gradually deployed their performances as a political resource. Through layers of political investment, in the form of recognition, recommendation, and promotion, the Guofeng Troupe's play *The Fifteen Strings of Cash* was politically valorized, and captured some high-ranking officials' attention. This recognition eventually led to the nationalization of the troupe in 1956.

2.2.1 The Formation of Delegated Production

The change in the Guofeng Troupe's ownership was part of the nationwide socialist reform of China's economy. The formulation of "the Guide line" enacted in 1953 marked the official phase of shaping the socialist economy from "a loose concept without a coherent policy-oriented meaning" (So 2002, 686) into a concrete policy aimed at spurring the economic recovery primarily in the interests of the state.⁵³ In 1953, the core leadership of the Chinese Communist Party made the decision to confine the private sector of China's economy in order to enhance the growth of the state sector (ibid., 688). The state, represented by the delegated bureaucrats, had the strong intention of deploying social resources in all aspects of governance (political, economic, and cultural). Chinese opera performances were one of the most important resources.

From 1953 to 1956, the Guofeng Troupe went through two changes of ownership, along with the increase in state support and control. Both changes were planned by the local government and enacted by cultural administrators. The first change, taking place in August, 1953, was from a private troupe (*minyīng jutuan*) to a publically subsidized private troupe (*minyīng gōngzhǔ jutuan*). Toward the end of July, immediately preceding the change, the Cultural Bureau of the Zhejiang

⁵³ In this sense, some scholars have argued that the socialist reform of China's economy between 1953 and 1956 shared great similarities with state capitalism (So 2002).

Province informed the troupe that a political education course in August required the entire troupe to suspend all performances in preparation for the ownership change. To compensate their pecuniary losses, troupe members were allotted boarding fees and basic stipends. Additionally, they received special funding for costume purchases (Zhou and Luo 1988, 101). After the political education course, the troupe was registered as one of the ten important publicly subsidized private troupes that the government counseled (*zhongdian fudao minying gongzhu jutuan*) in Hangzhou (Wen 1956, 40). The name of the troupe was officially changed to the Guofeng Su and Kun Opera Troupe (*Guofeng Su Kun juntuan*), a name suggested by Tian Han, then Director of both the Committee of Opera Reform and the Department of Arts.

The publically-subsidized private ownership was a form of the public-private partnership through which the government made greater use of private resources. Eligible performing groups had the advantage of receiving state subsidies when they promoted certain cultural policies and executed orders from the government. State subsidies were distributed based on particular needs rather than on an ongoing basis, and could not completely cover the troupe's operational expenses. Therefore, the operation of the subsidized troupes still largely relied on box-office revenues. According to Zhou's memoir, the troupe maintained its regular tours in 1954 (Zhou and Luo 1988, 102). Occasionally members received a special allowance. For example, in the summer of 1954, the majority of the troupe members were ill and could not work. The troupe received a special allowance from the Bureau of Cultural Affairs of the Zhejiang Province to compensate their financial loss throughout their recovery (*ibid.*, 103).

Apart from the financial support, these subsidized troupes had a close connection with governmental agencies. As a result, the Guofeng Troupe enjoyed the prestige of participating in showcases hosted by various levels of government offices (e.g. municipal, provincial, and even

national), entertaining many influential politicians for diplomatic purposes. So, the troupe's publically subsidized private ownership actually became an advantage that their peers without subsidies wished to have.

The second change of ownership into a state-owned troupe was in April 1956. In that year, the Guofeng Troupe was discovered by a high-ranking cultural official who liked their performance so much that he delegated local cultural cadres to help promote the troupe. The promotion activities gradually became a political investment in the troupe's play *The Fifteen Strings of Cash*. Political agents' intervention gave rise to government delegation of Kun opera troupes.

My use of "delegation relation" is inspired by the work of Chinese political scientist Susan Shirk. In her research on the political logic of China's economic reform, she described an administrative structure in which political power worked through a delegation relationship between the communist party and the government: "the communist party has formal political authority over the government but delegates to the government much of the actual work of administering the country" (Shirk 1993, 55-56). Although Shirk uses the term to investigate the political authority's role in economic reforms, I find this term useful to describe how the government delegated cultural officials to take control of the troupe's activities for the purpose of political propaganda. I argue that the Guofeng Su and Kun Opera Troupe started to accept their subordinate role through the ownership change, and resulted in the formation of what I call "delegated production."

After the Guofeng Troupe became a subsidized private troupe in 1953, the troupe received more suggestions regarding their selection of plays from local political agents. Although in 1954, the troupe was allowed to retain the right to manage their commercial performances, the troupe

was later assigned to perform certain plays. In these projects, the troupe only gained the “delegated power” of staging the script, and in some cases even the script was prepared for them. In contrast, political agents had the real power of deciding which plays to present, revising scripts, arranging venues for performances, and even controlling the number of performances. The difference between the troupe’s role as a delegated agent and the political officials’ decision-making role can be exemplified in the process of mounting *The Fifteen Strings of Cash* (henceforth *Cash*).

The opera script of *Cash* was adapted from a *chuanqi* play *Shuang xiong meng* (The dream of two brothers named Xiong) written by Zhu Sucheng in the seventeenth century. The plot focuses on a misjudged case: You Hulu, a bibulous butcher carrying fifteen strings of cash, is killed by petty thief Lou-the-Rat. The next day, Lou-the-Rat directs suspicion toward the butcher’s stepdaughter Su Xujuan, who was misled to believe the cash was from selling her as a slave girl. She runs away on the night of the murder. Soon Su is discovered in the company of Xiong Youlan, a merchant’s apprentice who travels with Su and happens to carry fifteen strings of cash to purchase goods for his master. Both Su and Xiong are thrown into jail and condemned to death by Guo Youzhi, a self-righteous judge who requires no other proof than the circumstantial evidence available. On his way to the execution, Kuang Zhong, a local prefect who is supposed to supervise the execution, is enlightened by the Town God on the night when he lodges in the City Temple about the injustice of the case. Kuang obtains permission to conduct a further investigation into the case, even at the risk of losing his official position. Disguised as a fortune-teller, he tracks down Lou-the-Rat at the City Temple and obtains crucial clues to solve the case. Lou-the-Rat is eventually arrested, and Su and Xiong are absolved of any wrongdoing.

According to the memoirs of some senior troupe members, such as Zhu Shiou and Zhou Chuanying, the staging of the play by the Guofeng Troupe can be traced back to 1952 when the

troupe was struggling to attain registration. As previously mentioned, Zhou recalled that their early staging was characterized by a hybrid style that combined the vocal features of Su opera and Kun opera. In order to reform the play, they left out sections associated with superstitious beliefs, such as the entire act of “Lodging at the Temple,” as required by the regulations of the Opera Reform, even though the act was an essential turning point in the original plotline.

Cash would not have become a legend if a cultural official had not discovered it. In November 1955, Huang Yuan, Vice Director of the Culture and Education Department of Zhejiang Province and Head of Cultural Bureau of the Zhejiang Province, watched a performance of this play in the Working Theater (*Laodong Juchang*), a shabby theater near a railroad where roaring trains constantly shook the stage (Zhou and Luo 1988, 105). Huang watched the Guofeng Troupe’s performances regularly, partly for the purpose of entertaining his guests, and partly because of a political task he was given (Huang 1995, 9). In the spring of that year, Huang Yuan received an instruction from Sha Wenhan, Governor of the Zhejiang Province, who required Huang to prepare a suitable play for the Guofeng Troupe, because the Director of the Department of Arts, Tian Han required Governor Sha to present the troupe to the central government in Beijing (*ibid.*, 8).

In the winter of 1955, Huang took another official, Zhang Junxiang, Director of the Film Bureau of Shanghai, to watch the performance. Zhang was visiting Hangzhou at the time. Huang Yuan found the story of *Cash* quite suitable for the purpose of promoting a political instruction that Chairman Mao issued to the lower levels of government. The instruction concerned how to avoid a miscarriage of justice through comprehensive analysis and objective judgment (Huang 1995, 9). Huang read *Cash* as a precise example of Mao’s instruction.

Huang proceeded to polish the play. He asked the troupe for a copy of the script, and consulted some Chinese theater specialists to gather their opinions, and invited them all to watch

the performance. Afterwards, Huang organized a revision team consisting of three cultural representatives: Zheng Boyong, Chief of the Section of Arts under the Culture and Education Ministry of the Zhejiang Province (*Zhejiang sheng wenjiaobu yishuchu*), Chen Jing, playwright and director of the Zhejiang Province Yue Opera Troupe (*Zhejiangsheng Yu jutuan*), and Huang Yuan himself (Zhou and Luo 1988, 105). Although none of the three members of these cultural cadres had any experience in writing Kun opera scripts, they made radical changes to the plotline, the speech, and the lyrics in arias. For instance, after they removed the act of “Lodging at the Temple” in which the prefect Kuang Zhong learned the truth of the case from a hint given by the God in the City Temple, the revision team wrote another act to replace it which depicts the fair-mindedness of Kuang Zhong. In despair, Su and Xiong appeal to him. After listening to their accounts of what transpired, Kuang obtains permission to conduct a further investigation into the case. This new act was thought to reflect Mao’s proposition of “seeking truth from facts” (*shishi qiushi*).

However, it is an essential feature of Kun opera that the script can affect the music, because a script includes both speech and arias, the lyrics of which are composed in a way that conforms not only to the rules of aria suites, but also to the metrical and tonal patterns of a given aria mode. However, due to their lack of professional experience, the revision team did not strictly conform to the rules of the genre. Their revision was an intervention that led to “revolutionary changes” in the music of Kun opera, discussed in the following section.

2.2.1.1 “Revolutionary Changes” to the Music of *The Fifteen Strings of Cash*

After the script of *Cash* was finalized, the Guofeng Troupe was responsible for dramatizing the new script and rendering the lyrics in arias. It is recorded in Zhou Chuanying’s memoir that from the day they received the revised script, it took the troupe a mere twenty days to finish the

production, which included filling in music, rehearsing, and devising the stage setting (Zhou and Luo 1988, 105). In this efficient process, the music composer rushed through the process of crafting the music for *Cash*, neglecting to conform to the crafting rules because the lyrics themselves were not composed according to the rules. These non-traditional elements were praised as brave and revolutionary attempts to reform the music of Kun opera.

The “revolutionary changes” in the music of this play are manifested in three primary aspects. Firstly, the music composer mingled different aria modes from two different repertoires in a non-traditional way. There are two main sources of tunes for arias, *beiqu* (lit. “the northern repertoire”), and *nanqu* (lit. “the southern repertoire”). And normally there are three ways of forming a suite of aria models: (1) put together a number of northern tunes to form a *beitao* (a set of northern arias); (2) put together a number of southern tunes to form a *nantao* (a set of southern arias); or (3) combine southern tunes and northern tunes in an alternating manner, called *nanbei hetao* (a combined set of the northern and southern arias). However, the combinations of arias in the reformed play are not consistent with any of the rules above. For example, in the excerpt of “*Panzhan*” (“sentenced to death by decapitation”), one southern tune “*Jie san xing*” was added to a complete set of northern tunes. Some Kun opera theorists praised the irregular mingling of tunes as “a brave and cautious surgery of the aria system and a successful break that replaces the convention of the qupai suite” (Gu 1996, 49).

Secondly, the tonal patterns of lyrics were highly flexible. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, Chinese is a tonal language. There are four tones: *ping* (level), *shang* (rising), *qu* (departing), and *ru* (entering), used in the tonal singing of Kun opera. These four tones are grouped into two categories: (1) level, which includes the even tone and (2) oblique, which consists of the other three tones, namely the rising tone, going tone, and entering tone. To form a tonal contour

that undulates pleasantly, one should avoid forming a phrase by using characters of a single tone pattern, e.g. a seven-character phrase consisting of all level tones or all oblique tones, because a single-tone phrase does not flow, and cannot provide a referential guide for musicians to fill in music. One should also avoid using characters of two-tone patterns in succession, because this generates a repetitive rigid up-and-down tonal contour. Nevertheless, these tonal taboos appear often in the play. Many phrases are composed of single tone characters. For example, one phrase is “*li kai ta jia cai huang hun,*” and the tone patterns of these characters are “level, level, level, level, level, level, and level.” Another phrase is “*tingye duori xinnei jiao,*” and the tonal patterns are “level, oblique, level, oblique, level, oblique, and level.” Chinese theater specialist Luo Di cited these two tonal mistakes and commented that when the famous flutist Li Rongyin was asked to craft music for the play, he felt the lyrics were unsingable, or in his words “*kai bu chu kou de*” (impossible to open one’s mouth) (Luo 2007, 65).

Thirdly, the *shuimoqiang* (lit. “the water-milled style”) that has characterized music of Kun opera was replaced with a faster rendition of music with strong punctuation. Traditionally, Kun opera is famous for its *manqu* (lit. “slow songs”) (ibid., 66). Slow songs are usually set in *sanyan ban*, or *yiban sanyan*, a rhythmic pattern that features one *ban* (strong beat) followed by three *yan* (weak beat), which is similar to 4/4 in Western music. *Sanyan ban* is good at creating a slow pace for mellow and emotional narration of lyrics. In addition, *sanyan ban* can be elongated and enriched through a technique called *jia zengban* (to add extra beats). Using this technique, one can increase a 4/4 measure to twice its size in a number of ways (Liu 2004; Jones 2014, 285-87).⁵⁴ The enriched musical phrase is characterized by the musical expression of *yizi zhichang*, *yanzhi shuxi* (one character in the text can last several breaths), hence it can achieve the refined and polished

⁵⁴ There are some writings in English that introduce the methods of adding extra beats to manipulate the rhythmic structure (Jones 2014).

nature of the highly melismatic vocal style (Lau 2016, 43; Li Mark 2013). The greater potential for elaboration is the reason why the slow songs of Kun opera are also called “water-milled tunes.”

In *Cash*, the water-milled style was almost entirely eliminated and replaced by a more dynamic and much faster musical expression. Throughout the play, there are only a small number of tunes that are set in *sanyan ban* or *sanban* (free rhythm), while the majority of arias are *yiyan ban* (Wu 1978, 44). *Yiyan ban* refers to the rhythmic pattern of one strong beat followed by a weak beat, similar to 2/4. In many places, the tempo of these arias was accelerated to facilitate dramatic tension. But the excessive use of *yiyan ban* destroys the slow style that Kun opera was traditionally known for.

The changes above greatly weakened the traditional text-music relationship that was considered of elegant taste and the essence of Kun opera. The flexible combination of the northern and southern repertoires of *qupai* breaks the rules related to composing poetic suites. The casual sequence of the tonal patterns of the lyrics caused trouble for musicians when crafting music. Particularly the single-tone phrases would inevitably make the traditionally established relationship between linguistic tonal contour and musical contour irrelevant with respect to one another. Moreover, the most essential musical expressions of Kun opera, i.e. the water-milled tune rendered in elongated rhythmic patterns, were rarely used, which immensely diluted the “taste” of Kun opera. Luo Di criticized the music in *Cash* in 2007: “In the signature play of the only Kun opera troupe in the Zhejiang province, *The Fifteen Strings of Cash*, there is hardly one passage of lyrics that conforms to the literary rules of songs, one aria that conforms to the principles of singing the text” (Luo 2007, 65).

Luo’s critique poses a question about the intention of the original lyricist and music composer who, together, made these revolutionary musical changes: was it their intention to

challenge the tradition and aesthetics of Kun opera? One of the librettists, Chen Jing, explained later that these “revolutionary changes” were derived from his ignorance of the principles of Kun opera. Chen admitted that he mainly composed Yue opera, which is a genre of the *bangqiang* system.⁵⁵ He was not familiar with the composition of genres of the *qupai* system, such as Kun opera, which required not only the mastery of the metrical and melodic features of a given aria, the skills of composing uneven lines, but also the familiarization with a variety of aria suites. After Chen realized that his lyrical composition had caused problems for the musical setting,⁵⁶ he explained that his script was not questioned by the troupe in the first place. The Guofeng Troupe completed the score based on the script and finished rehearsing without a single complaint. Chen attributed the troupe’s neglect of these problems to two factors:

First, the script was delivered to them from the Ministry of Propaganda; and second, there was no salary (for the troupe) at that time, and to produce this play could bring them a guaranteed income of RMB ¥20,000 to help them survive. So, the entire troupe was grouped together with a desire to mount the play.⁵⁷

Chen Jing’s account provides a valuable description of the relationship between the Guofeng Troupe and their superiors from the government. In the process of revising *Cash*, the troupe did not have or did not think they had, the right to revise the script. Instead, they were only responsible for dramatizing, crafting music, singing, acting, and setting the stage. It is also clear

⁵⁵ *Banqiang* system is a beat-based vocal form that texts are arranged in terms of repeating couplet phrases. Each couplet contains a paired phrase structure of an “opening/upper antecedent” (*shangju*) and a “closing/lower consequent” (*xiaju*). Through changing the rhythmic patterns, one can generation a set of metric variations of a tune (Yu 2016, 157). There is no strict correspondence between tonal contour and melodic contour in vocal form in the *banqiang* system.

⁵⁶ Chen Jing’s compositions were considered controversial in 1956. For instance, Chen Jing’s composition of lyrics was soon problematized by a music critic in 1956 (An 1956, 18).

⁵⁷ “*Shiwu guan* juben xiugai wenti zuotan jilu” [A record of the colloquium on the revision of *The Fifteen Strings of Cash*], notes taken by Chen Xileng 陳西冷, June 12, 1986. The original copy of the record is currently stored in the Zhejiang Kun Opera Troupe Archive, Vol. B6, quoted from Fu Jin, “Kunqu *Shiwu guan* xinlun” 昆曲《十五贯》新论 [A new perspective on the Kunqu play “*The Fifteen Strings of Cash*”], *Xiju* 120 no. 2 (2006): 74n.

that the re-staging of *Cash* was not carried out based on a performance contract. It was a task assigned by the government. The main goal of the troupe at that time shifted from producing a refined Kun opera play to fulfilling a political commission.

2.2.2 The Political Values of *The Fifteen Strings of Cash*

In January 1956, *Cash* premiered in Hangzhou, but it did not impress the press. Few newspaper articles reported the performance. In February 1956,⁵⁸ the Guofeng Troupe began a tour in Shanghai and at first performed in a small theater located on the seventh floor of a department store. Unfortunately, the play did not appeal to general audiences. After about five performances, due to low box office revenue, the play folded. Instead, the troupe had to switch to performing popular excerpts from classical plays (Zhou and Luo 1988, 106).

The less than satisfactory audience feedback caused Huang Yuan to turn to similar minds with similar political interests. He began to tap his personal relationships with government officials to promote the play. He asked some peers from the Culture Bureau of the Eastern Region of China (*Huadong ju*) in Shanghai to invite Shi Ximin, the Head of the Publicity Department of the City Committee of Shanghai, to watch the play. Huang also managed to move the venue to a bigger theater, *Zhong su youhao dasha* (the Mansion of Friendship between China and the Soviet Union; the present Shanghai Exhibition Center). The Head of the Publicity Department in Shanghai additionally invited Lu Dingyi, the Minister of the Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee, to watch the performance.

These high-ranking officials promoted the play, and the Guofeng Troupe itself. Lu Dingyi

⁵⁸ In Zhou Chuanying's memoir, *The Fifteen Strings of Cash* was staged in Shanghai during the Lunar New Year in 1956, which was February that year.

recognized the significance of the play, as Huang discovered it to be an excellent example that reflected Mao's instructions on anti-subjectivism and "seeking the truth from facts," and he subsequently supported the promotion campaigns (Huang 1995, 12). Lu also arranged for cadres from all regional governments in Shanghai to come to see the play. High-ranking officials' opinions were soon transmitted to lower levels of bureaucrats, who helped form a consensus on the political values of *The Fifteen Strings of Cash*. After this performance, the troupe received unanimous praise from local officials, some of whom started to book more performances for their government branches (ibid.).

This sensational effect among the bureaucracy went far beyond the troupe's expectations.

As Zhou Chuanying recalled:

Unexpectedly, some leading comrades, including Wei Wenbo, Secretary of the Eastern Region of China, Chen Pixian, Secretary of Municipal Party Committee of Shanghai, and Lu Dingyi, Minister of the Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee, attended [our] performance. After watching the play, Lu Dingyi decided to take *The Fifteen Strings of Cash* to Beijing ... The troupe *could not wait until the commercial contract [in Shanghai] expired* and directly returned to Hangzhou to prepare (for the performance in Beijing). (Zhou and Luo 1988, 106)

Taking the play to Beijing indicated a plan of arranging the core leadership of the PRC to watch the play. At this time, economic contracts started to become less attractive than arranged performances to impress the supreme power of the country. The troupe would rather default on contracts than miss the chance to curry favor with the central government regime.

Unanimous praise of the play in Shanghai and the news of a planned tour to Beijing soon reached Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province. Huang Yuan brought the troupe back to Zhejiang Province and arranged another public performance for local officials. The President of the Zhejiang Higher People's Court, Wu Zhonglian, recommended it to the system of public security officials. Soon

her husband, Jiang Hua, Secretariat of the Provincial Committee of CPC, approved the troupe's request to perform *Cash* in Beijing in April.

The rapid accumulation of political value for the play convinced local bureaucrats to transform the troupe into a state-owned performing group. After being incorporated as a politically significant troupe into the official system of cultural services in the Zhejiang Province, the Guofeng Troupe would bear the stamp of authority of the provincial government. The transformation of the Guofeng Troupe was carried out with striking efficiency. On April 1st, four days before the troupe's departure to Beijing, the Bureau of Culture of the Zhejiang Province announced the transformation of the Guofeng Troupe from a subsidized private troupe into a state-owned troupe, and changed the group's name to the Zhejiang Province Kun and Su Opera Troupe. On April 5th, Chen Shouchuan, Vice Director of the Bureau of Culture, was appointed as the supervisor of the troupe during the tour to Beijing (*ibid.*). The troupe was thoroughly rendered into a public agency that had completely lost the ability to self-consciously plan its endeavors, which was the fundamental feature of a troupe in the open market.

The nationalization of the Guofeng Troupe was the result of political approbation of the political values of *Cash* by the troupe. It began from a cultural official's effort to launch a promotional campaign within the field of officials, and ended with the incorporation of the troupe into the centralized administration that separated them from market conditions. An individual official's reading of political messages from the story was gradually produced among the officialdom, and was quickly echoed by a social group with political power. The play was eventually brought to the attention of some high-ranking government officials who invited the troupe to present the play to the central power in Beijing. This invitation indicated the honor that the state's core leadership bestowed not only on the troupe, but also on local officials who

discovered the potential political values of a play that could be used to advocate Mao's political doctrine. Within the troupe, becoming state-owned conferred the title of "state employees" on all troupe members, which served as an official attestation of the quality of their artistic labor. In addition, nationalization could potentially expose them to more official resources than before.

The changes in the ownership of the Guofeng Troupe from a cooperative private troupe, to a publically subsidized private troupe, to a state-owned troupe, was the result of a close relationship between the troupe and political authority. This transformation was carried out first by the troupe members' sacrifice of private interests for public interests (e.g. to self-censor the popular plays in the Opera Reform), followed by their sacrifice of self-conscious planning (e.g. the delegation relationship), and finally, with political agents' taking control over meaning-interpretation and their promotion campaign. The promotion among the bureaucrats, usually termed as *kuoda yingxiang* (lit. "to spread out the influence"), mainly relied on the relationship to political authority, rather than to commercial endeavor. Each level of government officials associated the play with the decoding of political interests through the dominant code (i.e. Mao's instructions), and recommended the troupe to their superiors, until they reached the core leadership of the country in Beijing. Multiple levels of political agents invested their political authority in the play and the labor of the Guofeng Troupe, and turned the performances of *Cash* into their discovery of political resources. Political agents' control of the production meant that production, planning, and even distribution made the troupe "cogs in machinery" (Mueller and Max 1982, 158). At the same time, the "cogs" enjoyed the economic benefits yielded from political agents' mobilization of social resources, e.g. various arranged performances and a reliable stipend. The nationalization of the former Guofeng Troupe indicates the birth of the first state-owned Kun opera troupe in contemporary China, i.e. Zhejiang Kun and Su Opera Troupe.

3.0 THE NATIONAL SYSTEM OF STATE-OWNED KUN OPERA TROUPES

(1956—1982)

Between 1956 and 1982, the incredible success of the Zhejiang Province Kun and Su Opera Troupe's performances in Beijing gave rise to a national system of state-owned Kun opera troupes. *The Fifteen Strings of Cash* was upheld as a paragon of the style and was copied in many places. Between 1956 and 1962, Kun opera production boomed. Professional Kun opera performers, including both performers without affiliation and students graduated from newly formed teaching programs and indigenous opera schools, were quickly institutionalized in several newly established state-owned Kun opera troupes. But during the socio-political turmoil of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), performance activities by troupes in the national system were suspended. These troupes resumed their activities in the late 1970s and the early 1980s.

The rise and decline of Kun opera performing groups within less than three decades raises questions about the relationship between Kun opera professionals and political power. What caused the boom in Kun opera production between 1956 and 1962? Subsequently, why was the genre banned during the Cultural Revolution, and resumed later in the 1970s? What was the role of the institution of state-owned performing groups during these radical changes? What does the development of the national system of state-owned Kun opera troupes tell us about the state's agenda of nation building?

In this chapter, I analyze three features of the national system of state-owned Kun opera troupes: (1) Kun opera was legitimized as a source of political capital, which was rapidly reproduced during the nationwide boom of the genre; (2) state-owned Kun opera troupes operated in a command economy, an economy in which the production, investment, prices, and incomes

were determined centrally by the government. Therefore, the values and meanings of Kun opera were derived solely from performances for political uses; and, (3) the political authority gradually gained the power to impose meanings of Kun opera according to their agenda. Political agents and Kun opera professionals alike began to accept the meanings as a legitimate form of knowledge, a common sense in the field. All these features were deployed by the new socialist government to enforce the rules of the society, before they achieved absolute power over the new political regime.

I argue that the boom, hiatus, and subsequent resurrection of Kun opera production between 1956 and 1982 represent three phases of production by the national system of Kun opera troupes. The formation of the system was driven by local political agents' pursuit of legitimate political capital through Kun opera performers' labor. As a result, Kun opera performances were more closely affiliated with political agents' needs than with audiences' needs. The political capital of Kun opera almost exclusively relied on the central authority's encoding of meanings within the genre. As part of the national system of Kun opera production, professionals' survival strategies were limited to the option of coping with the central authority's shifting judgments about the political value assigned to their activities.

In April 1956, the newly transformed Zhejiang Province Kun and Su Opera Troupe (henceforth the Zhejiang Troupe) performed *The Fifteen Strings of Cash* in Beijing. After making a name for itself in Shanghai, the troupe followed a similar route to public success by relying on government officials' recommendations and arrangements for bookings. Their performances drew the attention of the core leadership in Beijing, which extended its high appraisal of the play and the troupe to the genre itself. Their positive opinions were soon promoted by official mass media across the country. Within weeks, *Cash*, the Zhejiang Troupe, and the genre of Kun opera became keywords among bureaucrats.

In the following section, I consider the success of *Cash* and the legitimization of Kun opera as political capital. I will analyze the two stages in which the legitimization process was accomplished. First, I will describe how the highest level of political authority acknowledged the political values of *Cash* and the genre. Here, I focus on the official mass media's role in disseminating the core leadership's appraisal on a massive scale, thus shaping a nationwide recognition of Kun opera. Secondly, I examine how some government officials interpreted the core leaders' appraisal as an impetus to develop the genre. Thus, some provincial and municipal bureaucrats began to compete for political capital by producing Kun opera in their administrative areas, which resulted in the boom of state-owned Kun opera troupes between 1956 to 1962.

3.1 THE LEGITIMIZATION OF KUN OPERA AS POLITICAL CAPITAL

Political leaders' recognition played an essential role in the official encoding of meaning in *Cash*. Under Mao, the meaning of *Cash* took on a particular political valence. The story tells how a legal case was misjudged by an official and is later corrected by another official. Huang Yuan, the cultural official who took charge of the promotion campaign, stated:

This play reveals the struggle between idealism (*weixin zhuyi*) and materialism (*weiwu zhuyi*), and a struggle between seeking truth from facts and subjectivism ... [the message is that] those who make any judgement not based on objective reality, isolate themselves from the masses, and arrogantly disobey the objective laws of the world, will become subjectivists, and cause losses to the revolution. (Huang 1995, 10)

He cited a number of terms used in Maoist thoughts, including idealism, materialism,

seeking truth from facts,⁵⁹ and subjectivism. His interpretation was widely accepted and became the dominant code people used to interpret the meaning of this play. Mao himself was also convinced, and used the play to support his own political theory (Mao 1986b, 356; 1986a, 354).

I argue that the political valence encoded in Maoist thoughts officially sanctioned the political values of the play. Then Prime Minister Zhou Enlai's famous attribution of "*yi chu xi jiu huo le yi ge juzhong*" (a play that salvages a genre) expanded the recognition of *Cash* to the entire genre of Kun opera. Many local officials took these authoritative endorsements as a tacit instruction to develop Kun opera production, which officialdom began to see as a form of political capital. In this process, the Zhejiang Troupe became a household name, and their signature play, *Cash*, was turned into a paragon of reform for old Chinese opera.

Despite the painstaking promotion among mid-level officials, *Cash* did not achieve market success in Beijing initially. After two showcase performances, which were only open to high-ranking political agents in Beijing on April 8th, and April 9th, 1956, the newly nationalized Zhejiang Province Kun and Su Opera Troupe regular theater-goers' feedback: the play was staged publicly in a theater with a seating capacity of more than 1000 on April 10th, but only sold forty-odd tickets (Zhou and Luo 1988, 107). The disappointing box office turnout revealed the stark contrast between political agents' admiration of the play and anonymous audiences' indifference toward it. At least, based on the market feedback in early April, the play did not cause a sensational impact in Beijing.

However, after *Cash* received approbation from two core leaders of the PRC, Chairman Mao Zedong and Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, the receptiveness of audiences completely changed.

⁵⁹ The slogan was firstly quoted by Mao Zedong during a speech at the Sixth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 1938, in reference to pragmatism. It later became one of the key elements of Maoist theory. See "Shi shi qiu shi," CPC News Web, accessed Jan 19, 2015, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2012/1024/c350530-19376400.html>.

The turning point was the political leaders' encouraging gestures and positive comments after watching the play. On April 17th, the Zhejiang Troupe was sent to Zhongnanhai,⁶⁰ where they performed *Cash* in Huarentang Hall for Chairman Mao. Afterwards, the troupe's box office revenues suddenly boomed (Fu 2006, 68). During the performance, the entire cast nervously paid close attention to Mao's reaction. As Zhou Chuanying recalled, "when I stepped on the stage, . . . I really wanted to catch a glimpse of Chairman Mao, but I was acting, and dared not glance at the audience. Until the act of *Jian du* (Meeting the Judge), I heard Chairman Mao's laughter several times. When the show came to the end, we saw that Chairman Mao stood up from his seat, applauding while laughing. And everyone applauded warmly . . ." (Zhou and Luo 1988, 107).

After the troupe made a favorable impression on Mao, the play suddenly became popular in Beijing. On April 19th, the troupe staged the play again publicly in the Guanghe Theater and Zhou Enlai watched the performance, sitting among the audience. Compared to the cold reception on April 10th, this performance achieved great success.

After the show, Prime Minister Zhou fully recognized the troupe's effort of "doing a good thing: (performing) a play that salvages an entire genre" (*yichuxi jiu huo le yige juzhong*).⁶¹ He particularly praised the act called "Meeting the judge" for the sarcastic depiction of a subjective, self-righteous bureaucrat. As he commented: "The appealing drum in the act of 'Meeting the Judge' [is good]. You request to appeal a judicial case, but [the judge] declines it. When you hit the drum, he had to answer your call... Some of our officials are even more bureaucratic than the judge in the play, for they will not show themselves even after 'the drum is hit'" (Zhou 1980, 4; Zhou and

⁶⁰ Zhongnanhai was an imperial garden in the Qing dynasty. After 1949, it was used for day-to-day administrative activities of state leaders and residents of some core leaders.

⁶¹ Prime Minister Zhou asked the cultural official of the Zhejiang Province Chen Shouchuan who arranged the Zhejiang Troupe's tour in Beijing the following question: "why didn't they come to the First National Opera Showcase in 1952?" Chen's answered: "We did not discover them by then" (Zhou and Luo 1988, 109). The dialogue provides further evidence of two facts: (1) Official Showcases were organized through local offices' recommendation, and (2) favorable performances were interpreted as political resources.

Luo 1988, 109).

Mao's positive feedback and Zhou's strong interest in both the play and the genre of Kun opera soon spread among officialdom. Political agencies in Beijing reacted affirmatively in a number of ways between April 21st and May 17th, 1956. On April 21st, the Ministry of Culture rewarded the Zhejiang Troup RMB ¥5000,00 for their excellent performance, and announced Mao's assessment of *Cash* as a good play. It needed promotion, and the government recommended that troupes of all genres nationwide should stage it. This troupe (the Zhejiang Troupe) should be rewarded (Zhou and Luo 1988, 210). Mao's official praise was viewed effectively as an order and led to a series of promotions of the play. On April 25th, the play was restaged in the Auditorium of the State Council, and Mao attended the show again.

The supreme leaders' praise soon spread in the cultural administrative branch of the government and their affiliated non-profit organizations. On May 17th, The Ministry of Culture and China Theater Association co-hosted a symposium on *Cash*, in *Ziguan ge* (the Hall of Purple Light) in *Zhongnanhai*. Prime Minister Zhou attended the symposium with more than 200 authoritative cultural cadres. He made an hour-long speech in which he contended that

The reform of Kun opera can promote the reform of other operatic genres nationwide. Your efforts can change the social atmosphere. *Cash* not only revived Kun opera, but also set the cornerstone for the policy to 'let hundreds of flowers bloom, and bring forth the new through the old.' Although the national showcases have been quite fruitful, this performance is even more representative, hence (its accomplishment) should be celebrated and propagated, promoted and acclaimed through newspapers. (Zhou 1980, 5)

Quite effectively, on the following day, May 18th, Zhou's comment appeared in the heading of the editorial article of *the People's Daily*, the mouthpiece of the Party. In this article, entitled "Talking about 'a play that salvages a genre,'" the laborious promotion of *Cash* was not mentioned.

Instead, it was described as a sensation that amazed audiences in Shanghai and Beijing from the very start. The play was acclaimed as an achievement that testified to the product of opera reform, and proved that realistic and educational significance could be unearthed from the old operatic genres.⁶²

These official promotions constituted an unchallengeable authority, shaped the general opinion about the political values of the play, and led directly to nationwide reverence of *Cash*. The Troupe directly benefited from a surge in the number of performances and their revenues. According to the statistical account of the Zhejiang Troupe, they gave forty-six performances in total from April 10th to May 27th, and admissions hit 70,000 (Zhou and Luo 1988, 110). From April 21st to mid-May, the revenue of each performance went up about 44%, from RMB ¥450 to RMB ¥ 650 (Fu 2006, 68).

This political promotion of the play should be distinguished from the marketing campaign of a cultural product, because the exchange did not pay heed to market rules. Firstly, the intention of political promotion was not profit-oriented, but propaganda-driven. For instance, this play was quickly copied, or “transplanted” (*yizhi*) by other troupes into other genres. This kind of adaptation, which Mao openly encouraged, would reduce the market share of the Zhejiang Troupe, but from the government’s point of view, it was a form of dissemination, in which the more people shared it, the more influential the message would become.

Secondly, a considerable proportion of tickets were bought by institutions based on a planned consumption model. That is to say, demand was required. And there was little coincidence of evaluation between sellers and buyers (Myers 2001) or of matching of supply and demand (Bourdieu 1984). Both sides of the exchange were commanded or orchestrated. Hence, there was

⁶² “Talking about ‘a play that salvages a genre’.” *The People’s Daily*, May 18, 1956.

no promotion campaign as there might have been in a market economy. Known as *baochang* (lit. “reserve the whole theater”), the planned/imposed consumption was usually booked by government agencies, or state-owned institutes. The troupe benefited considerably from these reserved performances. A report entitled “the Statistics of the Number of Audiences who saw *Cash* by the Zhejiang Kun and Su Opera Troupe between 1955 and 1959 (Zhejiang Kun Su Jutuan 1955 nian zhi 1959 nian yanchu *Shiwu guan* guanzhong renshu changci tongjibiao), documented that the troupe staged *Cash* forty-four times in Beijing from April 10th, to May 26th. After the troupe was invited to perform for Mao in the Huairen Tang on April 17th, the troupe started to get contracts for reserved performances and reception performances booked by various government branches. The first of such performances was made for Tsinghua University on April 21st at the cost of RMB¥400, and toward the end of April and May, the cost went up to RMB¥450. In mid-May, the troupe gave the last two reserved performances at the cost of RMB¥650 each. It was a significant increase of revenue compared to the troupe’s box-office revenue of RMB¥100 in Hangzhou in December 1955 (Fu 2008, 24-26) With the growth of state-owned performing groups, this planned/imposed consumption increasingly became an essential resource of the troupe’s revenues, and the norm of demand in China’s planned economy.

Following the frenzy around *Cash*, many local governments made the decision to organize their own Kun opera groups to produce their own reformed plays, in order to demonstrate their political performance as delegated authorities. Kun opera was not a popular genre before 1956, so there weren’t many professional performers who knew the genre. The foundation of Kun opera troupes actually began with the short-term training of performers. For example, the Jiangsu Province Troupe was developed from a collectively owned troupe, the Minfeng Experimental Su Opera Troupe (*Minfeng shiyan sujutuan*), founded by a *Sutan* performer Wu Lanying in April

1951 (Qian 2002, 47). In March 1956, the troupe was registered in the city of Suzhou and renamed as Suzhou Su Opera Troupe. The troupe remained in a state of collective-ownership and held full responsibility for its profits and losses (Zhu and Yao 2009, 20). On October 23rd, 1956, the Cultural Bureau of Jiangsu Province transformed this troupe into the Jiangsu Province Su and Kun Opera Troupe. After the transformation, the troupe was eligible to receive a state subsidy, thus the ownership status changed into a subsidized private troupe. In addition, a historical-landmark complex was assigned to the troupe for their daily use for training and rehearsals. The transformation was made mainly for the purpose of establishing a provincial troupe that could perform Kun opera. As the point of origin of the genre, the Jiangsu provincial government felt a responsibility to establish a Kun opera performing group of its own (ibid., 21).

However, at the time of the reorganization, this troupe did not have Kun opera performers. A training program was established to solve the problem. Forty-three young troupe members, some of whom had been trained in Su opera since childhood, were enrolled in the program in 1956 and 1957. According to the educational tradition of Chinese indigenous opera, new students were usually given a shared middle name to indicate their position within the training process.⁶³ Performers enrolled in 1956 were called the generation of *ji* (inheritance) to indicate their responsibility to promote the heritage of Kun opera. The training program was systematically designed by Gu Duhuang, and taught by forty-eight specialists from a number of locations who gave lessons in acting, vocal technique, phonological instruction, history of the genre, and Chinese poetics, respectively.⁶⁴ The training process was incredibly efficient. Some newly trained performers made their debut at the First Indigenous Opera Showcase of the Jiangsu Province in

⁶³ The norm of giving generational middle names in the field of Kun opera was banned during the Cultural Revolution and was never officially resurrected afterwards.

⁶⁴ The details of the program in 1957 are well elaborated in Zhang Jiqing's biography (Zhu and Yao 2009).

April 1957.

Similar to the foundation of the Jiangsu Province Su and Kun Opera Troupe, local governments subsidized six troupes, and offered numerous teaching programs of Kun opera in a number of Chinese opera schools in both Northern and Southern China between 1956 and 1962. For instance, the Northern Kun opera Theater was founded in Beijing on June 22nd, 1957. With support from the Ministry of Culture, this Kun opera group developed out of the Northern Kun opera delegation, a temporary group consisting of some independent opera artists assembled by the Ministry of Culture for the purpose of promoting Kun opera in Shanghai, Hangzhou, Suzhou, and Nanjing between 1956 and 1957 (Han 1957, 15). In autumn of 1957, Kun opera was officially added to the Wenzhou indigenous opera-training program. In September 1958, the Jiangsu Province Opera School held its first Kun opera program and enrolled more than twenty students. And the Zhejiang Province Opera School established its first Kun opera program in January 1959. In December of that year, Tianjin Opera School initiated its Kun opera program. On February 27, 1960, the Xiang Kun Opera Troupe was founded in Chenzhou, Hunan Province. In March, the Hebei Province Kun Opera Troupe was founded in Baoding. In April, 1960, the Jiangsu Province Su and Kun Opera Troupe developed a subordinate branch based in Nanjing. In September 1960, the Suzhou Opera School had its first Su and Kun program. On August 1st, 1961, the Shanghai Opera School announced the establishment of the Jing and Kun Experimental Troup, which was expanded into the Shanghai Youth Jing and Kun Opera Troupe in 1962⁶⁵ (Wu 2002, 1000-1001).

In the previous section, I examined the transformation of the Jiangsu Province Kun and Su Opera Troupe in 1956 from a private troupe that mainly performed Su opera into a state-owned troupe that learned to stage Kun opera plays. I showed that the local cultural administrators

⁶⁵ The “Jing” of the Shanghai Youth Jing and Kun Opera Troupe denotes the genre of Peking opera.

considered fostering Kun opera groups as an effective way of pandering to the central government's recognition of Kun opera. With the local government's sponsorship, Kun opera performances by state-owned or state-sponsored performing groups were deployed as a means of reproducing political capital. The boom of Kun opera production reached its peak in 1962 when political zealotry from officialdom penetrated the sphere of cultural production.

Political agents' pursuit of political capital brought on the boom in state-owned Kun opera performing groups between 1956 and 1962. The rapid development of Kun opera performing groups and training programs after the great success of *Cash* in May 1956 were a result of China's emerging command economy. In this command economy, many managerial and marketing norms, such as mounting a show based on audience feedback, choosing performance venues according to budget and turnover, and enrolling students according to a growing popularity of a genre, no longer dominated artists' decisions. In this command economy, it became increasingly clear that cultural production was driven by political needs and expanded by political arrangements. Political benefits, such as honors and recognition that the state and political agents conferred, were even more valuable than money in terms of the capacity to convert into social resources.

This situation led to two changes. First, the dominance and prevalence of the political value of Kun opera allowed the political capital to replace the economic capital as the most important form of capital in the field of Kun opera production. Second, the political agents reached a consensus on the dominance and prevalence of the political value of Kun opera productions. With these changes, professionals' labor became a legitimate way of acquiring political capital, not only for troupe members who could directly benefit from pre-arranged performances and have access to more social resources, but also for local bureaucrats who would like to prove their capability to the central government that delegated them to implement cultural policies. These local

administrators began to reproduce the political capital of Kun opera by training more performers, establishing more Kun opera troupes, with the intention of producing more plays like *Cash*. Both changes led to a quick expansion of Kun opera performing groups across China between the mid-1950s to the early 1960s.

3.2 THE NATIONAL SYSTEM OF KUN OPERA PRODUCTION

Newly established state-owned Kun opera troupes between 1956 and 1962 formed a national system of Kun opera performing groups. The employees of these troupes achieved a new status of state employee, called *gongjia ren* (lit. “people of the state”) in Chinese. With the rapid increase of state-owned Kun opera troupes over the course of five years, a competition emerged among these state-owned troupes for institutionalized political capital in the form of the central authority’s recognition and deployment. I argue that this competition for political capital made Kun opera performances a socio-cultural service restricted to political uses, as manifested in Official Showcases, diplomatic Reception Shows and Goodwill Delegation tours. Getting chances to win awards at showcases, to entertain at political events, and to join the cultural delegation of Chinese performing arts and tour abroad were factors at stake in these competitions.

In the following section, I elaborate on the social function of restricted performances by the national system (*guojia tizhi*) of Kun opera troupes, and then analyze how the system operated within a command economy. I will show that political capital replaced economic capital as the main and only source of value that enabled Kun opera professionals to access social resources, and the competition among all state-owned troupes for the delegation rights granted by the government constituted the core structure of this national system of Kun opera production.

3.2.1 Restricted Performances of Kun Opera

“Restricted performances” refer to the performances made for a closed circuit of audiences related to the political authority, including political officials and their guests, and other state-owned performing groups, as opposed to the general public. Inspired by Bourdieu’s term “restricted production” (Bourdieu 1993), I use “restricted performances” of Kun opera to define those performance activities that are made to gain symbolic value, involving prestige, consecration, and social reputation, which represent the volume of political capital that a troupe holds. To offer restricted performances was, and has been, the most important function of all state-owned Kun opera troupes. This function privileged these troupes compared to troupes run according to other models of ownership.

The first form of restricted performance was diplomatic Reception Shows. In the early 1960s, the political demand for Reception Shows replaced the market demand as the driving force behind state-owned Kun opera troupes’ production. Performances required for entertainment at diplomatic events directly propelled the growth of state-owned Kun opera performing groups. The Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Troupe was based in Suzhou before 1959. Apart from its regular ticketed performances, the troupe was often summoned to give “Reception Shows” (*zhaodai yanchu*) in Nanjing, the capital city of the Jiangsu Province. The reception show was a special performance usually ordered by political agencies in connection with official ceremonies that expressed the host official’s courtesy. The reception show was not open to the public. The host covered the complete expense. The Jiangsu Province Kun and Su Opera Troupe proudly entertained a large number of domestic and international political leaders in the early 1960s,

including Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, Ne Win,⁶⁶ and Norodom Sihanouk,⁶⁷ among others (Lu 2010, 73).

In these Reception Shows, professionals of the Jiangsu Kun and Su Opera Troupe played the role of servants for the political authority, and their artistic labor was used primarily to express the host's hospitality in the ritual of maintaining and extending political relations. It was different from a ticketed performance open to the public in that performers usually held a sense of honor in serving the political authority that represented the state or other countries, a feeling that they could hardly achieve by performing for an anonymous audience, no matter how sizeable the crowd.

Frequent trips between Nanjing and Suzhou caused great inconvenience for the Jiangsu Province Troupe. The direct distance between Nanjing and Suzhou is about 117 miles. The train ran further due to the lakes and rivers between the cities. Both cities were popular choices for diplomatic events; however, the troupe often had trouble commuting between the cities to give Reception Shows, which were usually commanded at short notice (Qian 2002, 53). Hence, in April 1960, the CPC Jiangsu Province Committee and the Municipal Committee of Suzhou made the decision to establish a branch of the Jiangsu Kun Su Opera Troupe in Nanjing (Qian 2002, 53; Lu 2010, 73). More than thirty professionals including actors, actresses, and musicians, were transferred to the Nanjing troupe, while the rest of the original troupe stayed in Suzhou. The troupe was expanded mainly for the purpose of fulfilling the political need for Reception Shows. In turn, this commanded expansion further increased the reliance of these troupes on the political need for Reception Shows.

The second form of restricted performance was the Goodwill Delegation. Sending goodwill

⁶⁶ Ne Win was Prime Minister of Burma from 1958 to 1960, and from 1962 to 1974. In 1962, Ne Win founded the Burma Socialist Programme Party.

⁶⁷ Norodom Sihanouk was the King of Cambodia from 1941 to 1955 and from 1993 to 2004. He kept friendly relations with the People's Republic of China.

performance delegations abroad was an act of political power. Since the foundation of the People's Republic of China, Goodwill Delegation teams usually included those most influential genres of indigenous performing arts that the political authority considered most representative of Chinese art. These performances were produced to appeal to foreign audiences and promote the nation's image as a country with a long history and rich cultural diversity. The delegation members often maintained the idea that their performances represented the highest expression of Chinese culture and civilization, and therefore considered their delegation eligible for great honors. The first delegation tour of Kun opera performers can be traced back to December 1961. The Peking and Kun Opera Experimental Troupe in Shanghai was assigned to give performances in Hong Kong, which was then a colony of the United Kingdom, hence the trip was considered a tour abroad (Xie and Niu 2012). In my interviews, senior Kun opera performers cited a number of their delegation experiences to prove the quality of their artistry, as compared to their peers. This comparison was not only made with Kun opera professionals, but also with performers of different genres. Kun opera performers were very proud of their ability to participate in cultural delegations, and laboriously elaborated on how hard it was to be selected as a delegation member, and how exciting it was to have the privilege of traveling abroad with the delegation team.

The last form of the restricted performance type of Kun opera was for Official Showcases. Established in the early 1950s, the Official Showcases became the arena *par excellence* for enacting struggles over honor, which inherently consisted of symbolic approval of individual values, authority among peers, and more importantly, political recognition conferred by political authority. In contrast to competition between commercial troupes for higher box-office revenues, larger market shares, and greater popularity among audiences, the competition between state-owned troupes centered on the struggle to participate in showcases, and to win awards in

competitions with members of other state-owned Kun opera troupes as well as performing groups from other genres. Usually hosted and organized by political agencies, such as the Ministry of Culture, these performances were dedicated to a politically important ceremony or occasion, usually entitled a “Report Show” (*huibao yanchu*),⁶⁸ tribute show (for example, *xianli yanchu*), or “internal communication” within the national system of Kun opera groups, also known as “mutual studying shows” (*guanmo yanchu*). These showcases were usually contests in which troupes would be ranked in the order of how much they impressed the evaluation committee, whose members were usually from, or associated with, the Ministry of Culture.

These restricted performances were regarded as “report shows” or “tribute shows” because the plays were usually prepared to meet a political need; often, the troupes presented the plays as reports on their production status, or as tributes to a relevant political agency. As a result, the success of the restricted performances also relied completely on the political agents’ assessments, which were a matter of concern to troupe members. This concern for political agents’ approval is well illustrated by an article by Yu Zhenfei, a renowned Kun opera performer and the backbone of the Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe during the 1970s. As he wrote before the troupe was going to Beijing to present their tribute plays:

The first performance that Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe gave in Beijing was the play *Cai Wenji* in 1979, as a tribute to the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the nation; the second time [we] performed three plays, *The Peony Pavilion*, *Chaitou feng* (The Phoenix Hairpin), and *Lankeshan* (The Lanke Mountain); and this time [we are] incredibly honored to dedicate our shows, including two or three grand plays and seven traditional excerpts, to the thirty-seventh anniversary [of the founding of the nation]. Based on the guidelines laid out by Wenhua bu zhenxing Kunju yishu zhidao weiyuanhui [the Advisory Committee of Revitalization of Kun opera Arts, the Ministry of Culture], we have improved our job of preserving and transmitting [Kun opera] so far by enhancing the traditional heritage in the repertoire. *We would like to take this opportunity to invite*

⁶⁸ The inspection of indigenous operas can be traced back to the First Opera Showcase organized by the Ministry of Culture on July 26th, 1952 (Wang 2012).

inspection of our work of learning traditional performing arts from the leaders of the central government as well as the audience in Beijing. (Yu 1986, 8)

In his statement, Yu frankly prioritized political success over market success. Although Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe's tribute performances in Beijing were open to the public, the troupe's primary concern was not individual audiences, but the opinion of the Ministry of Culture. The main purpose of the trip to Beijing was to meet the standards established by the supervising political agencies and present performances as a political tribute.

The fact that these showcases constituted the most important aspect of state-owned Kun opera troupes' performances indicates that the real market consisting of the general public would barely affect these troupes' operation. Neither would it affect professionals' accumulation of political capital, or the conversion of political capital into economic capital. Therefore, these state-owned troupes were not motivated to attract wider audiences beyond the political sphere. When making performance plans for the coming year, Kun opera professionals were usually inclined to allocate the best cultural resources, that is, the best cast, costumes, and quality time, for preparing restricted performances, which were circulated within a closed circuit of political agencies and other troupes only. The growth of restricted performances would further reduce the troupes' reliance on ticketed performances available to the public, and their sensitivity toward sales and audience needs. The prominent role of restricted performances for state-owned Kun opera troupes largely remained the same between the mid-1950s and the early 1980s.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ One may argue that the situation must have changed during the Cultural Revolution, after Kun opera was banned. My point mainly focuses on the relationship between professional performers and the political authority, which never changed essentially between the mid-1950s and the early 1980s.

3.2.2 Command Economy of the State System of Kun Opera Performing Groups

In this economy, the acquisition and accumulation of political capital could be converted into economic capital, and “guarantee ‘economic’ profits in the long run” (Bourdieu 1993, 75). Rather than use the common term “planned economy,” I will use the term “command economy” for the type of activity we are examining in post-revolutionary China, as well as other socialist societies (Naughton 1995; Winegar 2006). Command economy most accurately describes the dominant power of socialist planners in the field of state-owned Kun opera groups in the period between the mid-1950s and the early 1980s. Economist Barry Naughton points out two fundamental features of a command economy:

First, resource allocation decisions are made in response to commands from planners rather than in response to prices. The most important signals in the system are commands from the administrative hierarchy, rather than prices from the market. Second, command economies concentrate a large volume of resources in the hands of planners, allowing them to assume command of the economy as a whole. (Naughton 1995, 26)

The operation of state-owned Kun opera troupes in the command economy was characterized by the dissociation of labor from market prices. State-owned troupes’ restricted performances were considered a form of cultural services patronized by the state (e.g. Reception Shows that entertained politicians), and financed by state subsidies. Political agents became the only actors that determined and maintained the patronage of Kun opera performers. Accumulated political capital provided the basis for state patronage, which was carried out in two distribution forms: the monthly provision of supply and the salary scale.

The monthly provision of supplies (*gongji zhi*) was adopted as a practice in the mid-1950s. The purpose of the monthly provision was to transform the salary system into a similar supply

system (Qian 2002, 48). Qin Ying, then Cultural Administrator in Suzhou, recalled that “in those years, my leaders attempted to cultivate [the Suzhou Kun Opera Troupe] into soldiers of arts (*wenyi zhanshi*) as in the art troupes of military forces. Their remuneration was largely distributed in non-monetary form based on rationing, which had been carried on since wartime in the 1940s. Except RMB ¥12 of board expenses and RMB ¥3 of pocket money that each person got per month, some necessities, such as toothbrushes, toothpaste, towels, and performance supplies were distributed periodically. But along with the reform of state cadres, salary allocation was also applied to [opera professionals], but their remuneration was still very low” (ibid.).

The monthly supply model disavows the economic function of individual labor. It encourages individuals to dissociate their work from monetary benefit. To work for a state-owned troupe, or state-owned enterprise was not considered a salaried job, but an undertaking of social revolution in which each employee could feel proud of their participation (ibid.). The dissociation of individual labor from monetary income was pervasive, in both the state sector and the private sector of the economy. For instance, at least in the mid-1950s, the privately owned and managed profit-making groups that were not incorporated in any nationalized performing groups were regarded as civilian professional troupes (*minjian zhiye jutuan*), a name that is still used in official documents today. As clarified in one of the meeting reports of the Ministry of Culture: “the improvement of management also helps reform the business of these troupes. (These troupes were called private troupes, or collaborative troupes in some places. All of these titles put too much emphasis on the aspect of economic managerial attribute, therefore it is suggested that privately managed troupes be renamed civilian professional troupes)” (Ministry of Culture 1954, 8; parentheses in the original document). By replacing the “privately-run” with “civilian professional,” the policy makers intended to construct a conceptual framework of a political economy of opera

production in which any terms and concepts rooted in or implying economic capital can be orally and legibly concealed.

This economic relation shares the same logic with that of the art troupes (*wenyi gongzuo tuan*, usually abbreviated as *wengongtuan*) in military forces. The art troupe functioned as a type of special military unit that entertained the army and enhanced morale by regularly giving propaganda shows among military forces. The objective of the art troupe was to assemble artists, musicians, dancers and other relevant professionals together in an integrative team, and put them to work for communicating political propaganda. In this economic arrangement, the concept of box-office revenue did not play a part. Troupe members were discouraged from pursuing economic benefits, and encouraged to sacrifice their accumulated labor for the enterprise of socialist culture. In the early years of the nationalization of opera troupes in the 1950s, rationing was practiced for a very short period of time before being replaced by the wage scale.

The system of wage scales according to centralized principles was introduced from the Soviet Union into China in 1953, and was officially implemented nationwide in state-owned and collectively-owned enterprises with modifications in 1956 (Björn Gustafsson et al. 2001, 3). In November of 1955, the Ministry of Culture promulgated the wage rate system among cultural institutions and enterprises affiliated with the Ministry of Culture. In an adjustment notice announced on July 11th, 1956, personnel of state-owned opera troupes were included in the wage rate system⁷⁰ (Ministry of Culture 1982, 335). Professionals of various operatic genres were classified into eleven wage classes, each divided into sixteen levels, according to their skills and proficiencies. The final decision was largely based on a performer's symbolic capital, measured

⁷⁰ The Ministry of Culture, “Wenhuabu guanyu banfa quanguo wenhua shiye, qiye gongzuo renyuan gongzi biao zhun he zhengli gongzi de tongzhi” 文化部关于颁发全国文化事业,企业工作人员工资标准和调整工资的通知 [The Notice about the Wage Standard and the Change of Incomes of Employees of Cultural Institutions and Enterprises Issued by the Ministry of Culture], *Wenhua gongzuo wenjian ziliao huibian*, vol. 1, p.335.

by his or her prestige, reputation among peers, and the impression he or she left on the cultural administrator. For instance, in this notice, the Ministry of Culture suggested that troupe leaders should rank their personnel in order of the quality of their performance, and then seek the views of all troupe members. If the order passed, then it would be used to match the wage scale. Once a performer's level and class was determined, his or her wage was largely fixed.

However, the conversion of symbolic capital into economic capital posed a difficulty for policy makers, for it required a shared standard upon which opera professionals' symbolic capital could be quantified and compared. Policy makers failed to devise an ideal solution to this difficulty, and the evaluation criteria of opera professionals' performance remained unclear; furthermore, the classification system put into use was not guided by any publicized principle. Instead, the Ministry of Culture forwarded a list of incomes of famous Chinese opera performers as a reference. The list was drafted by the Administration Bureau of Arts Enterprises, a subordinate body of the Ministry of Culture, for the purpose of instructing the China Theater Association⁷¹ on how to set the wage scale. The Ministry of Culture hoped that the list would serve as a reference for the local cultural administration offices to figure out the scale according to its own financial situation. Considering that the sample was incredibly small, the Ministry of Culture commanded that the reference list should only be circulated among cadres and should not be publicly announced as a final instruction (Ministry of Culture 1982, 339).

With fixed wages, every aspect of the operation of the state-owned troupe had to comply with the performance arrangements made by the supervising agencies from provincial and local bureaucracies. Local offices of cultural affairs, such as the Bureau of Culture, usually played the important role of planning the entire economy of Kun opera, including both production and

⁷¹ The China Theater Association represented the professional community of performers, playwrights, and other occupations in the field of Chinese operas in the 1950s.

consumption of performances. The political agents' duties included seeking performance opportunities for troupes, organizing joint events that a variety of troupes of different genres could participate in, and arranging various types of competition among opera professionals to honor the best plays or performers with prizes. In addition, political agents were given the power to supervise performances to be staged in the near future. "The Instruction Concerning the Organization and Reinforcement of the Work of Nationwide Troupes" from the Ministry of Culture required that the "state-owned troupes must produce a program every three months or half a year for the next season or the other half of the year. After being inspected and approved by the direct supervising office, the program should be carried out exactly as planned, and not be subject to any changes."⁷² Therefore, the production of Kun opera by a state-owned Kun opera troupe was planned, produced, and consumed largely based on bureaucrats' command. On the contrary, a troupe's self-conscious planning and independent choice making, which private troupes had relied upon to survive the supply and demand of the free market, was no longer tolerated.

At the same time, the central power was struggling against a thorough de-marketization of state-owned Kun opera troupes. In fact, it was not the CPC's intention to completely turn nationalized troupes away from a so-called "market" (which indicated the masses' needs within the CPC's governing boundaries). Rather, it was the Party's will to have a self-sustainable propaganda machine. It became increasingly clear that the Party's final goal was to cultivate these state-owned troupes into financially independent enterprises, but at the same time the troupes had to remain loyal to the political authority. As indicated in the same "Instruction" from the Ministry of Culture:

State-owned troupes should adopt the management approaches of enterprises, in

⁷² Wenbu zhouzi [53] No. 10, issued by the Ministry of Culture on January 29th, 1953 (Ministry of Culture 1982, 181).

order to gradually achieve self-sufficiency. Cultural administrative offices of all levels should appoint relevant theaters to sign contracts with relevant troupes, to ensure troupes' acquisition of fixed performance locales. When the conditions are ripe, troupes will be allowed to manage the theaters. State-owned troupes should object to the idea of simply relying on state subsidies, and should also avoid the wrong thought of purely making profit. (Ministry of Culture 1982, 182)

This document points out the Party's concern for the dangers of monetary accumulation, which might turn employees of state-owned troupes away from political commands that in many cases could not bring monetary benefits. Therefore, although the CPC encouraged the financial independence of troupes, the pursuit of the accumulation of economic capital was never encouraged in the command economy of Kun opera.

3.3 FROM “POISONOUS WEED” TO “CULTURAL TRADITION”: THE DEVALUATION AND REAPPREICATION OF KUN OPERA AS POLITICAL CAPITAL FROM 1963 TO 1982

In this section, I discuss the political economy of Kun opera production from 1963 to early 1982. The time span covers a short pre-Cultural Revolution period (1963-1965), the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and the initial stage of the “Opening-up” period from 1978 to 1982. The development of Kun opera during these two decades is indicative of the contradictions of the political control exerted over society, and of the instability of cultural production in China. During the Cultural Revolution, the majority of traditional Kun opera plays were criticized as “poisonous weeds” (*ducao*) and were prohibited from being publicly staged; in the late 1970s, however, the same plays were re-embraced and crowned with the designation of “cultural heritage” (*wenhua yichan*), a glorious title that the current field of Kun opera still enjoys today. The Cultural Revolution, which

is often termed “*shinian haojie*” (ten years of holocaust), has been described as a peculiar period of silence that is separate from the contemporary history of Chinese performing arts.

I am proposing a shift in the way these periods are viewed that allows the political economic structure of Kun opera production from 1963 to 1982 to be examined through the fundamental logic underlying the political economic activities of Kun opera professionals before and after the ten years of holocaust. Although performances of traditional repertoires of Kun opera were banned, and Kun opera troupes established before 1962 were dismissed, the political economic structure of Kun opera production did not change. In this structure, political capital remained the dominant form of capital; moreover, it became the only form of capital that could determine an individual’s career path and personal life, as well as the social values of Kun opera.

This chapter describes the polarity between two socio-cultural meanings associated with Kun opera: first, the devaluation of Kun opera as a “poisonous weed” from 1964 to 1978, and second, Kun opera’s re-sanctioning as “cultural heritage” of China. I will describe the changes in professional performers’ lives from being dismissed to being re-institutionalized, which was a pattern in accord with the devaluation and subsequent re-appreciation of Kun opera as a source of political capital. I argue that these two contrasting markers of the political value of Kun opera were the result of the same political economic structure in which the political power dictated the meanings and values of cultural forms. Between the iconoclastic political power that achieved a temporary victory and the post-Mao nationalist reform, Kun opera professionals sought their survival strategies by leaving and then reclaiming their positions in the field of Kun opera.

3.3.1 Devaluation of Kun Opera

In 1963, before Mao set the Cultural Revolution in motion, politicians started to appeal to state-owned performing groups to produce contemporary plays. To respond to the request, some state-owned Kun opera troupes adapted contemporary stories for Kun opera. On January 1, 1963, Ke Qingshi, a senior leader of the CPC in the 1950s and 1960s, came up with the slogan, “extensively writing about the thirteen years of the PRC (“*daxie shisan nian*”). Ke stressed that only those works that depicted social life in the socialist period could be regarded as socialist performing arts and literature, hence he required the state-owned performing groups to base their performances on contemporary stories that were published between 1949 and 1962. In response, the Zhejiang Province Kun and Su Opera Troupe adapted *The Tale of the Red Lantern* (*Hongdeng ji*) for Kun opera. This play was based on a novel *There will be Followers of Revolution* by Qian Daoyuan, which was first published in 1958.⁷³ The play depicted the daring exploits of the communist underground activities under Japanese occupation in 1939. The Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Troupe soon sent a team of performers to learn from the Zhejiang Troupe about the Kun opera adaptation of these contemporary plays (Zhu and Yao 2009, 45).

Ke’s emphasis on contemporary plays soon fermented into criticism of traditional elements in various cultural forms. In the field of Kun opera, a trend emerged of criticizing historical plays, and the dominant code of the Opera Reform was again imposed on the reading of all plays produced in the early 1960s. Between June and July 1964, the Kun opera play, *Li Huiniang* by the Northern Kun Opera Theater was criticized as a ghost play. *Li Huiniang* was based on an opera classic, *Hongmeiji*, and the text was written by Meng Chao in 1959. The story is set in 1275, and

⁷³ *The Tale of the Red Lantern* was also adapted for a reformed Peking opera, and the Peking opera version was promoted as one of the eight revolutionary modal dramas during the Cultural Revolution.

tells of Li Hui-niang, the concubine of an influential minister of the Southern Sung Dynasty. Murdered by the minister, Li Huiniang's spirit becomes a phantom seeking revenge (Meserve and Meserve 1978; Wagner 1990; Greene 2012). Regarding the meanings of Li Huiniang, there emerged two ways of decoding the play. In 1961, the play made its debut and received high praise from cultural and political authorities for its powerful plot and elegant writing (Greene 2012). But after the iconoclastic political power became dominant, the government imposed its own code and re-interpreted Li Huiniang as a ghost play, reading it as "a promotion of superstitious beliefs" containing "an implication of anti-communist Party" values (Cong and Chen 2007, 58). These meanings directly led to a halt placed on the play.

The devaluation of traditional plays of Kun opera in the mid-1960s was a result of the predominance of iconoclastic political power as represented by Mao and later the Central Cultural Revolution Group Mao supported in 1966. They challenged the pre-existing dominant cultural code set by the central government in 1949 by imposing a new extremely iconoclastic code based on a speech Mao Zedong gave in 1957. At the Chinese Communist Party's National Conference on Propaganda Work, Mao officially claimed that there still existed "erroneous ideas" (*cuowu sixiang*), "poisonous weeds" (*ducao*), and "ghosts and monsters" (*niugui sheshen*) that manifested bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideology, and anti-Marxist ideology. These erroneous ideas needed to be criticized (Mao 1957, 26-27). His claim was gradually generalized and developed into the nationwide campaign of "Destroy[ing] the Four Olds" (*po sijiu*) in 1966, the dawn of the Cultural Revolution. The Four Olds referred to "old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas." In the field of performing arts, the majority of traditional genres and repertoires were identified as among "the Four Olds" and needed to either be reformed or completely eradicated. As a result, Kun opera was harshly criticized and nearly banned from the mid-1960s to the late-1970s. In Chinese theater

specialist Fu Jin's study of *Cash* and the historical values of the play, he quoted an investigation report, written in 1967 but never officially published, that was entitled "a big black flag that advocates the restoration of an anti-revolutionary monarch: An investigative report of Kun opera, *The Fifteen Strings of Cash*" (Yi mian xuanchuan fan geming fubi de da heiqi—Kunqu *Shiwu guan diaocha baogao*) (Fu 2006, 69). In this report, *Cash*, once a milestone play that won praise from Mao himself, was eventually identified as an anti-revolutionary work. The contradictory meanings within this play can be attributed to the two distinct dominant codes that different political authorities decoded.

In response, state-owned Kun opera troupes halted the "problematic" repertoire and tried to stage modern plays of socialist revolutionary themes. Their purpose was to prove that the genre of Kun opera was merely a neutral vehicle of culture making, so it could be adapted to the new trend of iconoclasm. Around 1965, one year before the official beginning of the Cultural Revolution, most Kun opera professionals in state-owned troupes passionately cooperated with the political need of eradicating "old culture," as much as they cooperated with the Opera Reform in the early 1950s. They actively participated in the production of modern plays (*xiandai xi*) that reflected the new social order. For instance, Shanghai Jing and Kun Opera Troupe mounted *Qionghua* in 1965, and Jiangsu Province Kun Su Opera Troupe produced *After the Harvest* (*Fengshou zhihou*), and *Storm of the Countryside* (*Shanxiang fengyun*) in 1966. Instead of depicting "emperors, kings, generals, chancellors, young scholars, and beauties" (*diwang jiangxiang caizi jiaren*)—the common subjects of traditional Kun opera plays, which were criticized as feudalistic "poisonous weeds"—these modern plays told stories from revolutionary struggles against foreign invaders and class struggles between the dominant class and the dominated social classes before the advent of socialist China, and glorified the victories of the

People's Liberation Army. During the early period of the Cultural Revolution, some Kun opera troupes were allowed to mount new plays, which were viewed by troupe members as official recognition of their efforts, and also indicated their secure position in the state-owned system.

However, Kun opera performers' attempt to cooperate failed to stop the political devaluation of Kun opera. Between 1966 and 1970, Kun opera troupes in Beijing, Hangzhou, Shanghai, Suzhou, Baoding, Chenzhou and Yongjia were either disbanded or changed their style to modern Peking opera and performed Revolutionary Model Operas (Zhu and Yao 2009, 54-57; Wu 2002, 1002). In this situation, the Nanjing branch of the Jiangsu Province Kun and Su Opera Troupe were commanded to adapt *The Taking of the Tiger Mountain (Zhiqiu Weihushan)* from one of the eight revolutionary modal dramas, *Linhai xueyuan* (Tracks in the Snowy Forest), into a Kun opera version.⁷⁴ The entire troupe was excited about the assignment, and finished the adaption within ten days according to the requirement of the Workers' Propaganda League of Mao Zedong Thoughts, a social organization empowered by Mao himself (Zhu and Yao 2009, 54).

In these Revolutionary Model Operas, operatic features of Kun opera were rapidly disintegrating. Performers who had held prominent positions in their field disappeared along with the traditional style. In these changing circumstances, Kun opera professionals began to explore strategies of position-taking (Bourdieu 1993, 30) corresponding to new possible positions. To blend the Kun opera style with other genres became a feasible strategy. As Zhang Jiqing, a pillar of the Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Troupe, recalled, the adaption of *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* was almost a faithful copy of the Peking opera version from the eight revolutionary model dramas. Zhang described the process: "while the performers were humming through the songs, the composer would transcribe the tunes" (Zhu and Yao 2009, 54). Presumably the tunes of songs

⁷⁴ The Peking opera version of *Tracks in the Snowy Forest* was based on the novel of the same title by Qu Bo published in 1957. The story tells of a conflict between the People's Liberation Army of China and a bandit gang.

were largely based on the original tunes from the Peking opera version, with minor ornamental changes that slightly and inexplicitly implied the style of Kun opera. But at that point, the troupe's primary concern was not to maintain the authentic features of Kun opera. Rather, critical attention was given to proving (1) the neutrality of the genre of Kun opera, which could be adapted to new political needs if filled in with appropriate content; and (2) the versatility and flexibility of the Kun opera troupe. In addition, the Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Troupe also collaborated with other performing groups to keep their style as hybrid as possible. Under these conditions, in 1969, the Nanjing branch worked with another state-owned troupe that mainly performed musicals, Jiangsu Province Song and Dance Troupe (*Jiangsusheng gewu tuan*), and co-produced an opera, *Sunflowers* (*Xiangyang hua*), which is based on the life experience of Gu Atao, a representative activist in the learning of Mao Zedong's thought (*Xuexi Mao Zedong sixiang jiji fenzi*). By borrowing pre-existing tunes in Su and Kun operas, two collaborative troupes crafted the music of this opera, and they named this hybrid genre Su and Kun songs (*sukunge*) (Zhu and Yao 2009, 54-55). In the same year, the Nanjing branch was required to merge into the Jiangsu Province Peking Opera Troupe, and was incorporated into the Revolutionary Model Troupe (*yangban tuan*), a performing group that only performed politically- and musically-correct modal operas promoted by Jiang Qing (Xie and Niu 2012, 54; Yue 2008, 67-68). Ex-performers of Kun opera were assigned to play supporting roles. Accordingly, all Kun opera professionals started to learn to sing in Mandarin Chinese (Zhu and Yao 2009, 55), which is made up of a group of related varieties of Chinese spoken across most of northern China, and began to use it in these operas. The change of the phonetic system from *Zhongzhou yun* (Rhymes of the Central Plains) to Mandarin Chinese eliminated the last trace of Kun opera in these works.

In the midst of political turmoil, only a small proportion of Kun opera professionals were

able to maintain a position in the state-owned system of performing arts by converting their performance to the dominant style of revolutionary-model drama. However, the majority of this community was less fortunate. Their devotion to the Maoist revolution failed to win them a position in the Cultural Revolution. Political capital monopolized all other forms of capital (such as cultural capital) and therefore governed personal success and even survival in the field. Social and economic profits, in the forms of prestige, subsidy, and even a free dinner after reception shows, were unevenly distributed among a limited number of performing groups that were newly favored by the iconoclastic political authority. The rest of the performing community had to survive by means of shifting (actively or passively) into a new field, with minimum involvement in their previous occupation, i.e. Kun opera performances. The political values of the genre were tremendously devalued, and performers were deprived of their legitimacy in the new social space. Many Kun opera professionals were transferred to factories or countryside farms to undergo ideological re-education and perform manual labor. For instance, Cai Zhengren, the pillar of Shanghai Youth Peking and Kun opera troupe, was sent to the May 7 Cadre School (*Wuqi ganxiao*) where many famous intellectuals were “re-educated” (Xie and Niu 2012, 54). Many professionals in Nanjing and Suzhou were transferred to Liuhe County of Suzhou to do farm work (Zhu and Yao 2009, 55).

As reflected in the experiences of many individuals who underwent personal suffering, the primary forms of social mobility of Kun opera professionals between the late 1960s to the early 70s were, in Bourdieu’s terms, “transverse movements,” rather than “vertical movements” in the general social space of this period. Vertical movements refer to those upward or downward in the same field (e.g. from performing supporting roles to leading roles and even administrators of personnel, or vice versa) depending on the volume of the dominant capital one has. Kun opera was

viewed as legitimate political capital. The vertical movements only required an increase in the volume of political capital: that is, one only needed to make more Kun opera plays, to perform leading roles, or to be promoted as a troupe manager.

However, along with the devaluation of Kun opera capital in China, most Kun opera performers had to relocate themselves in the social space, shifting toward positions that could earn them more political capital, and some of those positions were in other fields. Yue Meiti, a renowned male impersonator in the Shanghai Youth Peking and Kun Opera Troupe, recalled her determination to become a worker in a factory in the early 1970s after Kun opera performances were halted. She visited her advisor at the Shanghai Chinese Opera School, Yu Zhenfei and informed him about her choice. As she wrote,

I told [Mr. Yu] my current status, trying to reassure him [that I was fine]. [I said,] ‘I have left the troupe, and become a worker in a factory!’ He replied doubtfully, ‘It is good to be a worker!’ ... Maybe he really meant it from the bottom of his heart. In those precarious years of criticizing feudalism, capitalism, and revisionism,⁷⁵ and criticizing black line in literature and arts,⁷⁶ everyone wanted to get rid of this trap, particularly Kun opera, the most ancient operatic genre, which was criticized as the most anti-revolutionary, most stubborn cultural fortress of feudalism, [and] therefore needed to be overthrown thoroughly, and criticized thoroughly. I faced a change of my career as a male impersonator. To be honest, my greatest wish then was to be a worker. *I decided to abandon everything that I had acquired in the past ten years and then strive to become one of the working-class in the rest of my life.* (Yue 2008, 67-68; italics added)

Jobs in factories at the time were assigned with much higher political value, because, together with peasants and soldiers, workers were among the three essential pillars of the new

⁷⁵ Revisionism generally refers to the ideas, principles and theories that are based on a significant revision of fundamental Marxist premises (Fitzpatrick 2007). In the 1960s, the CPC used this term to attack Nikita Khrushchev and the Soviet Union over various ideological and political issues (Garver 1980).

⁷⁶ The “black line in literature and arts” is short for the “Theory of the Dictatorship of the Black Line in Literature and Arts (*wenyi heixian zhuanzheng lun*). Put forth by Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing in 1966, the Black Line in Literature and Arts was used to “cast aside” (*gaodiao*) writers and artists who were perceived to be bourgeois, anti-socialist or anti-Maoist (Yan and Gao 1996, 352)

Chinese society. During the Cultural Revolution, workers in these occupations were portrayed as the rulers of the country, hence were considered to have high volume of political capital. In addition, a factory worker required a shorter period of training. In contrast, positions in the field of Kun opera that required a decade of training were easily devalued. As a result, there were many Kun opera performers who made the same decision as Yue at the cost of leaving behind their years of expertise as Chinese opera performers.

What did not change was the unassailable value of political capital that could be used to measure other forms of capital. Individual performers could only rely on their accumulation of legitimate political capital to survive. Between the mid-1960s and the early 1970s, finding a position with access to higher political capital became the most reasonable choice for many Kun opera performers.

3.3.2 Re-institutionalization of Kun Opera Troupes in Post-Mao China

Kun opera performers did not reclaim their previous status in society until the late 1970s, when the cult of Maoism was in decline. In this era, political cultural forms that were criticized by the iconoclastic political power regained their value, albeit cautiously. In 1976, shortly after Mao's death, members of the Gang of Four (*siren bang*), the political faction composed of four Chinese Communist Party officials including Mao's fourth wife, were arrested. The succeeding government led by Deng Xiaoping gradually dismantled the Maoist policies associated with the Cultural Revolution. The Beijing government in the post-Mao era sought a nation-building strategy to enhance nationalist legitimacy in order to replace the cultural cult of Maoism, which had purged remnant capitalist and traditional elements for over a decade. Kun opera was re-embraced as a traditional cultural form that represented the history of Chinese performing arts, and was re-

assigned high political value in China's nation-building process. In this context, many Kun opera professionals began to reclaim their positions in the state system of Kun opera troupes.

The new political power repudiated the legitimacy of Maoist iconoclastic cultural policy, and shifted the focus of cultural production from filtering the traditional cultural elements, toward constructing "nationalist socialism" (Winegar 2006, 2). This agenda required a connection between art practice and national ideology, and made the nation the dominant frame through which the community of artists "[made] sense of the major social transformation" (ibid.). To achieve this goal, the political authority needed to legitimize those cultural forms that could be traced back to form the genealogy of the modern nation of China. Subsequently, old operatic genres, such as Kun opera, were reinvested with political value for their long history of dissemination and enduring influence in society.

Beginning in the late 1970s, a competition between Mainland China and Taiwan for international recognition of the preservers of traditional Chinese culture also accelerated this process. In her study of the development of Peking opera in Taiwan, ethnomusicologist Nancy Guy pointed out that the Nationalist government in Taiwan portrayed itself as the guardian of traditional Chinese culture, which, in turn, bolstered its claim to legitimate rule of all of China (Guy 2005). Peking opera, one of the most popular forms of traditional opera, was appropriated as a political symbol to spread the Taiwanese government's political ideology of governing domestically (ibid.). This strategy came into being as a result of the Beijing government's iconoclastic cultural policy between 1966 and 1976. However, in the post-Mao era, the Beijing government began to adopt a similar strategy of appropriating the symbol of "traditional Chinese culture" to shape its national image.

It was during this period of time that Kun opera, together with many other cultural forms

in Mainland China once criticized as “poisonous weeds,” was reintroduced to the social arena. In this transition, the concept of “old opera” disappeared in official documents, and was replaced by a new socio-cultural concept of “traditional opera” (*chuantong xiqu*).

The use of “traditional opera” indicates the central government’s new agenda of building the nation-state in post-Mao China. It was formed by a totalizing force that would tolerate, neutralize, and appropriate most cultural forms for the purpose of locking these heterogeneous and fragmentary cultural conventions into a nationalist frame. On the one hand, it inevitably erased the temporal distinctions between cultural forms flourishing in different historical periods, before and after the “socialist” regime; this ensured that the year 1949 could no longer be taken for granted as a watershed year in the differentiation between “old” and “new.” On the other hand, the contemporary cultural forms also cemented with the old forms to produce a cohesive and recognizable culture. Fang Kun, the representative of the cultural delegation organized by the Ministry of Culture, explained the socio-cultural meanings of “traditional music” in China at the second Durham (England) Oriental Music Festival (August 4th to 17th, 1979), noting, “The classification of traditional music cannot be based on time. ... We cannot maintain the antiquarian view that the older a thing is, the more traditional it is” (Fang et al. 1981, 5). And at the same time, the government instituted processes of traditionalizing and canonizing certain contemporary works. Therefore, *Cash*, a Kun opera play based on a Ming legendary drama, which had been staged by the Guofeng Troupe in the Republican period, radically adapted by political agents in the 1950s, and politically exploited by Mao himself in 1956 to promote his political instructions, became a representative of Chinese traditional opera.

In the field of Kun opera, the concept of “traditional opera” enhanced the political capital of the genre, and necessitated the restoration of the institution of state-owned Kun opera troupes

within the state system of performing arts. Since 1976, there was a tide of resurrection and reorganization of state-owned Kun opera troupes. Kun opera professionals were dedicated to reclaiming their positions and resuming their careers as state-employed Kun opera professionals. The authorized number of personnel (*bianzhi*) of the troupe was re-approved by the local government. In October 1976, Yongjia Kun Opera Troupe in Wenzhou resumed its operations and merged with Yongjia Peking Opera Troupe. In June 1977, the Provincial government of Zhejiang approved the performers' request to restore the Zhejiang Province Kun Opera Troupe, and sanctioned performances of their signature plays, including *Cash*. In November, 1977, the Kun Opera Troupe in Chenzhou, Hunan Province was approved to resume their performances of historical plays and was reorganized into the Hunan Province Kun Opera Troupe in 1984. In March 1979, the Northern Kun opera Theater in Beijing was re-established.

Some troupes were expanded, and others became independent, including the Kun opera troupe in Nanjing. In November 1977, the Cultural Bureau of Jiangsu Province made two decisions: first, to recall state-employed Kun opera professionals who were sent to other performing groups, farms, and factories during the Cultural Revolution back to Nanjing; and second, to officially establish the Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Theater. In November 1977, the Nanjing branch of the Jiangsu Province Kun and Su Opera Troupe was separated from its mother troupe, and was expanded into an independent troupe that performed Kun opera exclusively. In addition, they were assigned to an independent theater, Lanyuan Theater (The Orchid Garden), a large complex of the Chaotian Palace (*Chaotian gong*) built in the 19th century on the site of the Imperial Central University (*Tai xue*) in the Southern Dynasties (420-589 AD). This theater was put under the troupe's direct management. The new troupe was named the Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Theater (*Jiangsusheng Kun Juyuan*). Also upon the approval of the provincial government of Jiangsu, its

mother troupe was reorganized into the Jiangsu Province Suzhou Su Opera Troupe, which later also shifted their repertoire to Kun opera, and grew into what is now known as the Jiangsu Province Suzhou Kun Opera Troupe (*Jiangsusheng Suzhou Kunju Yuan*) (Zhu and Yao 2009, 58-59; Wu 2002, 1002). Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe followed a similar route. In October, 1977, the Shanghai Municipal government approved the request of restoring Kun opera performances in Shanghai, separated Kun opera personnel from the pre-existing Shanghai Youth Peking and Kun Opera Troupe, and established a new troupe, called the Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe.

Political assignments for promoting China's nationalist image came immediately after these troupes were restored, primarily in the form of diplomatic delegations. Starting in the early 1980s, China reconnected with the world, and "goodwill" performances were resumed. Kun opera performers were particularly proud of their participation in these diplomatic activities as compared with that of Peking opera performers (Zhu and Yao 2009, 71). As noted in Zhang Jiqing's biography, goodwill performances had been primarily assigned to Peking opera troupes since the foundation of the People's Republic of China (*ibid.*). In 1982, Kun opera performers were recruited for cultural delegations sponsored by the government, with the purpose of strengthening friendships with foreign countries and presenting a positive image of China on the global stage. A cultural competition between the Nationalist government in Taiwan and the Communist government in China was formed to attain international recognition of the cultural legitimacy of the Chinese regime (Guy 2005). In Taiwan, Peking opera not only played a part in evoking "memories of a nostalgic past" of the mainland population in Taiwan, but also functioned as a national symbol that legitimated the regime that had been removed from mainland China. After the iconoclastic turmoil in the mainland was attenuated in the late 1970s, the PRC soon adopted a similar policy of dispatching cultural delegations to represent traditional Chinese culture abroad.

Kun opera, promoted as the oldest form of extant operatic genres in China,⁷⁷ was hailed as the “mother of all Chinese operas” (*baixi zhi mu*). Historically, performers of other genres, such as Peking opera, were believed to be inspired by the artistic attributes of Kun opera, particularly the acting and vocal skills. This helped make sense of the rising political value of Kun opera as compared to that of Peking opera, for Kun opera could be dated back to an earlier period in the genealogy of the nation-state. In this way, Kun opera became embroiled in a competition for cultural legitimacy between Mainland China and Taiwan.

International cultural exchange programs and cultural festivals provided a perfect venue for such a political agenda, and soon more Kun opera troupes were dispatched to cities in Europe and Asia. To join the cultural delegation and perform abroad became the most important motivation for many state-owned Kun opera troupes. The main performers of the Jiangsu Troupe were divided into two teams: Team One was regarded as *chuguo tuan* (lit. the “abroad” team). It mainly consisted of established performers and was responsible for giving foreign tours or entertaining foreign guests invited by the government; Team Two was called *bendi tuan* (the local team), which took charge of regular shows in Nanjing. Zhang Jiqing, then-Director of the Jiangsu troupe, was the backbone of Team One. Her professional experience from the 1980s to the 1990s was marked by honors and acclaim and she had participated in numerous tours around the world (Zhu and Yao 2009, 71-112). The career path of Cai Zhengren, Director of the Shanghai troupe, and Lin Weilin, Director of the Zhejiang Troupe, resembled Zhang’s closely.

Cash, the iconic play that had “savaged the entire genre” in the 1950s, resumed its position as the most successful and valuable Kun opera play that contemporary professionals had ever produced. Its supreme status was derived from its political capital. This play became the first play

⁷⁷ See the brief introduction of Kun opera on the official website of UNESCO’s ICH program. <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/?RL=00004>, accessed March 20, 2015.

that Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Troupe staged after the Cultural Revolution (ibid., 59), which was also the first historical play of any genre resumed in the Jiangsu Province in general. In the renowned actress Zhang Jiqing's biography, Zhang mentioned a consensus on the play's value at the 60th Anniversary Conference of the Foundation of Kun Opera Transmission Institute, sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and co-hosted by the Chinese Theater Association (CTA), the Bureaus of Culture of Shanghai, Zhejiang Province, Jiangsu Province, and the China Theater Association in November, 1981. *The Fifteen Strings Cash* was depicted as the supreme legend in the traditional repertoire that successive plays could not surpass, as illustrated in the metaphor that "a *Sixteen Strings of Cash* failed to appear as people expected" (ibid., 64). The fabricated title of *The Sixteen Strings of Cash* implies an expectation that a successor would have emerged that could beat the values of *Cash*. However, none of these the newly produced plays since the late 1970s, such as *Chaitou feng (The Phoenix Hairpin)* by the Shanghai troupe, *Yang guifei (The Imperial Consort Yang)* by the Zhejiang Troupe, and *Jianhu nüxia (The Heroine of Lake Jian)* by the Jiangsu Troupe, was acclaimed by any of the core leaders of the state or by official media as they had been in 1956. Neither did Kun opera professionals consider any of these new plays a nationwide example for other troupes. In the early 1980s, the dominance of centralized production, promotion and distribution of cultural works, as in the case of *Cash*, declined.

3.4 CONCLUSION

Bourdieu argued that in any given field, agents compete for available positions and in some cases create new positions (Bourdieu 1993). They engage in competition for control of the interests or resources (the dominant form of capital), that are specific to the field in question. In the economic

field, for example, agents compete for economic capital by way of various investment strategies to accumulate it. In the field of Kun opera between 1956 and 1982, Kun opera troupes competed for political capital by seeking recognition, consecration, and prestige granted by the political authority.

In this chapter, I examined the formation of the system of state-owned Kun opera troupes as such a field. The competition for political capital in this field began with political agents' general recognition of political value of the genre in the field. After *Cash* by the Zhejiang Province Kun and Su Opera Troupe was acclaimed by cultural officials in 1956, the core leadership of the state legitimized the political values of Kun opera. This was the first time that the genre was considered to be political capital by the official government. Subsequently, political agents' decision to reproduce the political capital embodied in Kun opera caused the boom of state-owned Kun opera troupes. These political agents not only had the power to dominate the production of Kun opera plays, but also had the right to organize consumption of the products, for instance, in the form of Reception Shows, Goodwill Delegation tours, and Official Showcases. Therefore, their administrative commands directly gave rise to the restricted performances of Kun opera within a closed circuit consisting of political authority and peer state-owned troupes. State-owned Kun opera troupes engaged in the competition for political capital through performances planned by the political power. Hence a command economy of Kun opera was formed in which the planners had the power of allocating resources to state-owned troupes, and troupe members' labor was dissociated with market needs, and tightly linked with political needs, as determined by commands from the administrative hierarchy.

This political economic structure largely remained the same throughout the Cultural Revolution, until a short period after Mao's death in 1976. During this period, Kun opera was

associated with two contrasting socio-political meanings. It was criticized as a “poisonous weed” and then re-endowed with value as a “traditional cultural form.” Both meanings were attributed to the political needs of two factions of the political power, namely the iconoclast faction and the nationalist faction, which dominated the sphere of cultural production in China during the Cultural Revolution and in the post-Mao era respectively. In spite of the shifting political power, political capital remained the dominant form of capital that affected the operation of state-owned Kun opera troupes and professional individuals’ career paths and life choices. Kun opera performers made life choices based on the political value associated with their positions, as indicated in many performers’ choice to leave the field when Kun opera was drastically devalued and to reclaim their positions after the genre was re-legitimated. Kun opera professionals’ labor was dissociated from real audiences’ needs, market prices, and artistic autonomy. Rather, they played the role of delegated agents who produced plays according to the commands and arrangements made by the political authority, who were effectively “the creators of the creators” and had the real power of encoding meanings and assigning values to performers’ labor. The twists and turns in the development of state-owned Kun opera troupes from 1956 to 1982 attests to the political power that governed social relations within which the political economy of Kun opera was inscribed.

4.0 CONTESTING KUN OPERA (1983-1986)

After the re-institutionalization in 1982, seven state-owned Kun opera groups devoted themselves to bringing back senior professionals who were sent to labor camps or factories during the Cultural Revolution. They cautiously re-staged the old repertoire⁷⁸ and recruited new members. Many troupes were hoping that the operation of their troupe would eventually return to what it had been in the first seventeen years of the PRC, the heyday of Kun opera. However, few could anticipate the advent of a new social environment in which the command economy that their operation relied upon began to decline, while the market economy was soon to soar.

In 1978, the central government announced the post-Mao economic reform known as the “reform and opening-up” (*gaige kaifang*). In the initial period (1979-1983), the central government intended to experiment with a strategy of combining the plan and the market; hence there emerged a classical policy cycle in which a phase of energetic reform policy was followed by a phase of cautious retrenchment (Naughton 1995, 97). What was certain was that the Party-state had to loosen political control over society in order to let the market economy burgeon.

However, the desire among urban youth to reach out to foreign cultural forms and modern lifestyles quickly grew ahead of the government’s reform program. Many “foreign” genres were introduced to the younger Chinese generation through unofficial channels. Early sources of exotic genres, for example, pop and rock music, appeared on tapes and later CDs that were legally brought

⁷⁸ It is known that as far back as the late 1970s, the banned repertoires were not openly resurrected. For instance, in June 1977, the Ministry of Culture received a request from the Bureau of Culture of Sichuan Province about whether it was appropriate to restage the *Fifteen Strings of Cash*. The Ministry of Culture replied that although the play was affirmed by both Chairman Mao and Prime Minister Zhou during their lifetime, the central government had not made any official decision or announcement about when this play could be re-opened (Fu 2002, 150). It was a common practice for many troupes to stage certain politically risky plays “half-openly,” due to the unknown acceptability in the opinion of the central government (ibid., 149-154).

in or smuggled from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Western countries.⁷⁹ With the growth of China's TV and radio, new media technologies spread new forms of entertainment across the country (Zhao 1998; Baranovitch 2003).

The wide reception of new cultural products cultivated new tastes associated with new entertainment practices. Performance of indigenous operas in theaters was no longer the dominant entertainment form for youth which had the free choice to listen to music on the radio and cassette tapes in their bedrooms. In this increasingly open cultural market, the growing power of individual consumption started to draw economic capital into the central position of the social space, and hence undermine the dominance of political capital. In this economic transformation, Kun opera professionals began to realize their genre had become less valuable in people's lives.

To defend the status of indigenous operas such as Kun opera against the "new tastes" of popular music flourishing in China in the early 1980s, cultural cadres and state-owned performing groups established contests as a means of constructing artistic values of Chinese indigenous operas. State-owned Kun opera troupes' competition for political capital was transformed into a competition for cultural capital.

In this chapter, I investigate the development of Kun opera from 1983 to 1986 in the following three sections: (1) Kun opera and other indigenous genres encountered challenges from the opening and modernizing of the cultural market, characterized by the growing "new tastes," which were disseminated through new forms of mass media; (2) the variety of cultural products formed a new competition for cultural capital inscribed in audiences' disposition toward modern/Western-influenced culture. Kun opera troupes encountered the lack of "ideal audiences" which had the competence to decode traditional plays; and (3) influential opera contests, such as

⁷⁹ The illegal dissemination of early popular music in China Mainland has been extensively studied (Brace 1991; Baranovitch 2003; de Kloet 2010).

the Plum Blossom Performance Award (*Meihua jiang*) founded in 1983, were launched and Kun opera professionals attempted to define the artistic values of the genre. These contests became the source for a troupe's cultural capital, which could be converted into economic capital in China's newly emerging market economy.

I argue that the Party-state's retreat from the political control of the cultural life of the masses directly caused the decline of the command economy of Kun opera, and led to the decline of political capital in the field of Kun opera production. Thus, Kun opera troupes were engaged in a new search for legitimate values to support their own capital, i.e. cultural capital. Contests in the early 1980s were the source for obtaining cultural capital. Through the contests, Kun opera professionals started to confer with their peers, the government, and the public on the meanings and values of the genre.

4.1 THE LACK OF AUDIENCES

In the post-Mao period, China's contact with the outside world grew. In the cultural sphere, the opening-up was characterized by the rapid growth of a variety of cultural products flooding into China legally and illegally.⁸⁰ These foreign cultural products, together with various resurrected traditional genres, constituted possible cultural choices for individual consumers to make based on their will rather than political obligation. Consumption was no longer planned, and this factor would fundamentally change the command economy that state-owned Kun opera troupes had relied upon.

⁸⁰ As Nimrod Baranovitch has noted, an important resource of foreign music products was tapes smuggled from the regions of Hong Kong and Taiwan into mainland China (Baranovitch 2003).

Popular music's impact on the economic activities of state-owned Kun opera troupes can be traced back to at least the late 1970s. The less restrained cultural policy and the economic reform in the pipeline moving from a planned economy toward a market economy prepared the way for the rise of "foreign" cultural products, e.g. "popular music" (*liuxing yinyue*).⁸¹ Propelled by the promotion of cassette technology, popular music penetrated China's state-controlled cultural space via a private "hand-to-hand" media exchange that involved borrowing and copying smuggled or privately-owned cassettes (Brace 1991; Baranovitch 2003). Chinese consumers' growing passion for cultural products such as popular music soon formed commercial interests that appealed to the state-controlled media network, which was being transformed from a fully-subsidized public service into profit-making institution (Zhao 1998). Mass mediation eventually contributed not only to the spread of popular music products, but also the dominant position of "new tastes" in the cultural market.

The early "foreign" trend was from Hong Kong and Taiwan,⁸² where popular music industries featuring the Western influence and local adaptation had emerged. These songs were characterized by a soft musical style and mainly expressed individual sentiments about urban life through mellow melodies and slow rhythms. The musical style sharply contrasted with the mainstream style of revolutionary songs and model operas which emphasized the revolutionary

⁸¹ The term "popular music" as it is used in this chapter refers to the music popular with urban Chinese youth that can be directly or indirectly traced to a "foreign" source outside Mainland China. Although I am aware of a broader definition, the use of a narrow sense of this term is necessary in the context of 1980s China, because the wide variety of different genres of popular music and their subgenres were simplified into a single concept, *liuxing yinyue*, which was seen as a subculture in general. Much less attention was given to the blurred distinction between genres than they are today.

⁸² After World War II, Hong Kong was a British colony and its sovereignty was not transferred to China until 1997. Since 1948, Taiwan was ruled by the Kuomintang (the Chinese Nationalists) and adopted a multiparty democracy in the 1980s. Although the Beijing government never admitted the independence of Taiwan and always considered it as part of China, the cultural sphere in Taiwan was characterized by hybridity that incorporated traditional Chinese elements, Japanese culture, and Western values. Cultural products from both Hong Kong and Taiwan were considered "foreign" in 1980s China due to the "foreign" ideologies and cultural elements they were associated with.

spirit, and put to music the hatred and miseries from wars and social struggles.

New meanings and messages, including individuality, private emotions, and personal opinions, were delivered through mellow romantic songs, synthesizer-created orchestration, and the disco pulse (Brace 1991; Friedlander 1991, 18), none of which were encoded in the “national” cultural products by state-owned opera troupes.

To confront the threat of popular music, the defenders of national music came to the conclusion that pop performers had little or no talent, and popular music was of low artistic value. These ideas were characterized as “spiritual pollution” (*jingshen wuran*) from the West (Brace 1991, 43; Hamm 1991; de Kloet 2010, 205n20). In these critiques, the musical features of popular music were soon linked to capitalist lifestyles and ideologies, and escalated cultural competition into political denunciation. In 1983 and 1984, the pervasive influence of popular music was officially brought to the attention of the central government in Beijing. As noted in the *yuandan shelun* (the editorial on New Year’s Day) of *the People’s Daily* in 1984, to purge spiritual pollution and to strengthen the ideological leadership of the CPC was listed as one of five most significant tasks of the year.⁸³

These administrative measures and serious criticism by official media sources barely affected the young generation’s passion for these new cultural products. Since the mid-1980s, consumers of these new tastes demonstrated individuals’ important role in the burgeoning market economy in China. Audiences were changing from planned passive recipients of cultural meanings toward active consumers who had achieved the right to express their opinions about cultural meanings via consumption choices. Subsequently, cultural consumption increasingly shifted toward personal purposes, such as aesthetic pleasure, through personal expenditure.

⁸³ *People’s Daily*, Editorial, Jan 1st, 1984, 1.

These changes took place when the political authority began to view consumption as an important part of promoting economic growth. This represents a fundamental change in the social function of culture and the economic relations of circulating cultural products. During the Maoist period (1949-1976), the central government adopted the policy of low consumption and high accumulation of capital for national development, and encouraged an ascetic ideology, as manifested in the popular slogan of “hard work and plain living” (Yan 2009, 210-11). In this ideology, all forms of entertainment were politicized and the political authority’s code was the dominant code that determined the meanings of cultural forms. Further, other forms of codes were prohibited. Individual pursuits of pleasure and comfort from participation in entertainment activities were restrained and condemned. In the economic transition, the government encouraged consumption. State employees in urban areas received their first wage raise in twenty years, and contributed to overall purchasing power. People were introduced to a new slogan: “[being] able to make money and know how to spend it” (*nengzheng huihua*) (ibid., 211).

The advent of market exchange resulted in changes in the relationship between Kun opera troupes, the government, and audiences. State-owned troupes now had to trade their labor with individuals rather than government agencies, and this significantly weakened the power of administrative commands in the planning of troupes’ economic activities. Having more choices, individual consumers gained greater bargaining power in the market, and were able to influence producers’ opinions. In this economic situation, audiences gained an advantage over performing groups in the negotiation for cultural products and prices. Market needs soon upstaged political assessment as the determinant for cultural products.

State-owned Kun opera troupes had difficulty adapting to the new exchange rules due to their heavy reliance on the support from influential cultural cadres and political leaders who had

played the role of arranging performances for the troupes since the mid-1950s. But the government attempted to force the troupes to join the market competition, and was required to evaluate the troupes' production based on their market performance, measured by audience statistics and box office revenues.

In this political economic transition, state-owned Kun opera troupes felt the urgent need to appeal to a wider audience. The troupes attempted to prove that Kun opera was valuable for the public, and they turned to cultural values. Kun opera professionals were hoping that their audiences would appreciate their performances as a form of art. Therefore, the meaning of their performances had to be decoded based on the internal aesthetic code formulated from within the history of the genre itself. Those who could decode the artistic code were their new clientele, their ideal audiences.

However, the troupe soon realized their ideal audiences were few in number. Professionals could not help but notice the rarity of the culturally competent connoisseur-consumers, which was indirectly reflected in their poor box office showing. The number of these ideal consumers was far below the number they needed to maintain their routine performances and management. The reasons for this lack were rooted precisely in the decades of socialist reform of indigenous operas. The decade-long ban on Kun opera resulted in the absence of the "Chinese operatic tradition" on public stages, including an enormous number of historical dramas, lyrics written in classical Chinese, and aria modes. And the ban effectively suspended the transmission of the cultural codes the artistic genre was inscribed within. In the post-Mao era, cultural capital played an essential role in the search for the cultural meaning of Kun opera in a nationalist framework, without which audiences could scarcely make sense of the formalist style of the genre. However, generating an aesthetic disposition is the result of a long process of inculcation, which involves long-term

exposure to works of art. The recovery of the code would take a much longer time than the political intervention.

Kun opera was labeled as a profound genre that few people could fully appreciate. Some Kun opera professionals began to regard their performances as “too highbrow to be popular” (*qugao hegua*) (Cai 1981, 47). Performers blamed the unmarketability of Kun opera on the so-called “highbrow” quality that was believed to be intrinsic to the genre. This sense of “cultural distancing” (Lee 2009) separated Kun opera from mundane practices of everyday life, and from the dictates of popularity in the marketplace. According to this communicative model of cultural consumption, an insider consumer of Kun opera—a connoisseur, for example—has the capacity to implement schemes of perception and appreciation, as manifested in his/her familiarity with the internal logic of the work, the stylistic elements, the operatic scripts written in Classical Chinese,⁸⁴ the poetry, and other “codes” that aesthetic enjoyment of Kun opera presupposes. Their aesthetic appreciation of Kun opera inevitably presupposes a cultural competence within the genre, i.e. a specific kind of cultural capital concerning the genre that a perceiver possesses, such as knowledge about the history of this genre, repertoire, operatic scripts, singing skills, musical expressions, acting skills, ensemble accompaniment, and other aesthetic criteria (see Chapter 1).

This competence of decoding the meaning of Kun opera, i.e. as an embodied form of cultural capital, was relegated to the very bottom of the hierarchy of capital in the Maoist period. A large proportion of this set of aesthetic codes was the very subject that the Opera Reform was dedicated to eliminating. Although a classical repertoire of Kun opera was quickly restored after the end of the iconoclastic ethos of the Cultural Revolution period, a habitus for this genre was not.

⁸⁴ Classical Chinese (*guwen*, lit. “ancient text”), also known as Literary Chinese (*wenyanwen*, lit. “text of written language”) refers to a spare monosyllabic style of Chinese particularly used in classical poetry and prose (Hurst 2000, 2). In the early twentieth century, the modern spoken form of Chinese based on the vernacular, known as *baihuawen* (lit. “spoken text”) overtook *wenyanwen* (ibid.).

Limited exposure to Kun opera during the Cultural Revolution directly caused a generational rift among audiences. The majority of people born between the 1960s and 70s regarded this old genre as reflective of feudalist values. To them, watching Kun opera was a backward and even an anti-revolutionary cultural practice. For these audiences, the restoration of old Chinese operas was probably as arbitrary as the ban of these operas. Their ideas about Kun opera had been formed in the Maoist period, and they continued to hold on to those ideas even after the traditional cultural operatic codes were re-validated. In post-Maoist China, their experience, understanding, and appreciation of revolutionary cultural practices were still present, but subdued as “a residual cultural element” (Williams 1977, 122). This disposition tended to perpetuate itself in the future.

For a performing art like Kun opera, it usually takes years to acquire the necessary cultural capital to participate in its appreciation. The text is composed in classical Chinese, the grammar of which is different from Mandarin. The script is composed in a language that most people do not readily understand and thus takes time to acquire the cultural capital that one accrues from participating in. In addition, the lyrics are sung in the dialect of *Zhongzhongyun*, which is an agglomeration of stylized forms of archaic northern Chinese, that bears similarities with the Beijing dialect of modern Mandarin, and linguistic elements especially from the Suzhou dialect of the Wu language (Picard and Lau 2016, 134). *Zhongzhou yun* (Rhymes of the Central Plains) was not commonly used either in the colloquial or written language of contemporary Chinese, phonetically and syntactically. Even in the 2010s, most contemporary audiences in the theater still needed subtitles to comprehend the lyrics and speeches onstage.

Before the Cultural Revolution, Kun opera aficionados were usually from a cultural pedigree of Kun opera culture⁸⁵ in which the cultural competence for appreciating the genre could

⁸⁵ I attribute my use of “a cultural pedigree” to Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital in *Distinction*.

be more easily cultivated. This pedigree was more closely related to one's seniority in Kun opera culture, usually entailed by social origin (e.g. family background), rather than one's educational capital obtained from schooling. Slow familiarization via family influence was one of the most important manners of acquiring cultural capital about Kun opera. Those who grew up listening to or watching Kun opera could not directly "inherit" the knowledge or disposition toward the art of Kun opera, as they had inherited economic capital. Instead, one had to spend time learning the code. One's early exposure to the genre in family activities played an important part in cultivating one's appreciation of Kun opera. An aficionado not only needs to be familiar with the classical poems in the lyrics, but also must know the tunes that go with the lyrics, so he or she can sing the excerpts properly and fill music in their own poems properly. And more importantly, one must be a regular theater-goer to learn from real performers concerning their stylized speech and their detailed and subtle renderings of aria modes that are not transcribed in any kind of notation. Some families even hired professional Kun opera performers to tutor their children in singing, speaking and even acting. For example, the renowned modern educator Zhang Wuling hired You Caiyun, a famous female impersonator of Kun opera to teach his two daughters, Zhang Yuanhe and Zhang Yunhe singing and posing gestures (Zhang 1985).

In my interview with a Kun opera connoisseur/amateur performer Prof. Zhou Qin at Suchow University, who is also the founder of the Dongwu Kun opera Association (*Dongwu Qushe*), Zhou introduced his and his daughter's experience of acquiring and accumulating Kun opera capital that mostly derived from a family milieu:

I learned to sing Kun opera and play the flute from my father when I was little. It's *handed down as a family heritage (jiaxue yuanyuan)*. ... My daughter sat in my Kun opera class when she just started kindergarten. I taught the singing of Kun opera every evening. She learned the pieces even faster than my college students. She was little, so it was easier for her. She was just like me, *learning how to sing Kun opera before we knew what Kun opera was*. (Zhou Qin, pers.)

comm., 3 July 2011; italics added)

In a short article on introducing a set of poems entitled *Buxu qu* (lit. “A Song of the Unnecessary”) that she and her sisters and friends composed together, Kun opera master Zhang Yunhe recalled her early unconscious exposure to Kun opera:

“I from dream returning, orioles coil their song,”⁸⁶ the first phrase of “*Youyuan*”⁸⁷ (Wandering in the Garden), brought me back to my childhood sixty years ago. It was the second day of the Chinese Lunar New Year. ... [We] were called into my father’s study, a place we were normally not allowed to enter. [He used] colorful costumes and theater-going to provoke our interest [in Kun opera], and eventually we decided to learn the tunes and body movement of the excerpt “A Walk in the Garden” with Mr. You Caiyun, the female impersonator in the Quanfu Troupe. (Zhang 1985, 41)

Born to scholarly families with a strong interest in Kun opera, Zhou Qin’s daughter and young Zhang Yunhe experienced a similar path of acquiring their cultural capital: they started from unconscious exposure to this genre, consciously guided by their fathers. They became acquainted with and finally mastered the components of this performing art such as learning scripts, pronunciation according to Chinese historical phonology, classical repertoire, and rhetorical expression of poetry, which would bestow an aesthetic disposition upon them. The mastery of the instruments of appreciation required prolonged contact in a disciplined manner of learning, such as regular theater-going, and contacts with cultured insiders, for example connoisseurs and renowned professionals.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ The original text is “menghui yingzhuan.” The English translation is by Cyril Birch (Birch trans., 2002).

⁸⁷ “Wandering in the Garden” is one of the most famous excerpts in the Kun opera play *The Peony Pavilion* written by Tang Xianzu around 1598 A.D. This excerpt has also become the most popular excerpt that many Kunqu beginners learn to sing.

⁸⁸ Unfortunately, there has been no extensive survey conducted regarding family milieu as a source of inculcation of Kun opera culture, so direct evidences concerning the slow familiarization and acquisition of cultural capital I can find so far are mainly some brief accounts of personal, early experiences, like those quoted in the text.

This manner of acquisition of cultural capital proved a fatal problem for the expansion of Kun opera audiences in the 1980s, because most audiences did not have the family milieu in which they could undergo a similar process of slow familiarization. Furthermore, the requisite cultural pedigree was consistently interrupted by political movements. State-owned Kun opera troupes could not afford years for future audiences' cultivation of cultural capital. Instead, they needed to invent a fast process of inculcation that could influence the public as efficiently as possible.

4.2 INCULCATION OF NEW AUDIENCES

Kun opera professionals at first thought the key to quick inculcation of audiences lay in a competition for control of publicity. Some state-owned Kun opera troupes initiated long-term programs, some of which continue to this day. These programs include giving free lessons as well as appreciation sessions via mass media, both aimed at spreading Kun opera knowledge.

The free teaching turned to be of dubious benefit for troupes. Some troupes gave free Kun opera lessons at middle schools (Yu 1990, 39), trying to expose a younger generation to this genre so they might grow into potential consumers in the near future. Some Kun opera connoisseurs brought the genre into college education courses in the late 1980s. The Department of Chinese at Soochow University even offered a Kun opera undergraduate program in 1989 (Zhou 2007, 4).⁸⁹ This strategy was aimed at providing a more efficient acquisition of cultural capital in the absence of an appropriate family milieu. The rational teaching of Kun opera culture at school substituted for the gradual unconscious/subconscious internalization of direct aesthetic experiences. Therefore,

⁸⁹ The undergraduate program of Kun opera at the Soochow University was only offered in 1989. This program ended, after the graduation of the undergraduate students of this major in 1993.

taking a course such as “An Introduction to the Art of Kun Opera” aimed to provide a shortcut for those students who wanted to obtain the cultural competence to appreciate Kun opera over a semester, rather than ten years.

However, this method suffers from three main drawbacks. First, it cannot produce consumers instantly. Although school education may effectively shorten one’s learning process, the inculcation still requires a certain period of time. That is to say, taking a Kun opera course does not immediately or necessarily turn a student into a fan of Kun opera. The second problem is that this strategy can hardly generate instant economic benefits. The marketization of Kun opera relies heavily on a prompt cash flow from investment so that the troupes can have enough money to develop more performances and public activities, such as free lessons at school. Hence, most Kun opera troupes cannot count on school education as a method to increase their revenues, and in turn this economic dilemma makes it more difficult to sustain the method.

The third problem is that cultural interests and competencies acquired through these pedagogical activities do not lead necessarily to consumption behaviors. Even if those college students gradually accumulate the cultural capital, they may not choose to go to theaters to satisfy their aesthetic needs. In fact, a lot of these young Kun opera fans developed their interest of singing and performing Kun opera from these free lessons, and subsequently became amateur performers themselves and formed their own amateur Kun opera societies, called *qushe*. Instead of going to theaters, they organized regular Kun opera gatherings within their society, during which they would practice their favorite arias and volunteer to play instrumental accompaniment for other singers. This trend can be observed from the rising popularity of Kun opera amateurs’ societies on college campuses. Professional troupes could not benefit from these amateurs’ passion. Since all troupes were required to shift their financial sourcing toward market exchange, they needed quick

turnover of money in order to sustain their productivity. Therefore, this method of “cultivating potential audiences” was a long-term strategy involving great uncertainty.

Alternatively, the idea of promoting Kun opera via mass media generated high expectations in the early 1980s. Cai Zhengren, then-director of the Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe attempted to reach out to wider audiences by improving publicity (*jiaqiang xuanchuan*) (Cai 1981). He managed to work with Shanghai radio programs to broadcast the recordings of the troupe’s performances. A successful attempt was Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe’s frequent participation in a radio program called “Xingqi Xiqu Guangbo Hui” (Weekly Broadcast of Chinese Opera). This program was initiated in 1983 by Shanghai Renmin Guangbo Diantai (Shanghai People’s Broadcasting Station), and broadcast a variety of genres of Chinese opera every two weeks. One of the purposes of this program was to promote different regional operas by spreading fundamental knowledge about these genres and introducing some classical repertoires to audiences (Xin 1991, 1).

Publicity (*xuanchuan*) was by no means a new concept for state-owned performing groups, for they deployed publicity agents in their heyday. However, a nationwide economic reform of state-owned mass media, known as “media commercialization,” was gradually changing the meaning of publicity in China. Mass media scholars often trace the beginning of media commercialization in China to the first appearance of advertising on Shanghai Television in February 1979 (Zhao 1998, 53). (Zhao 1998, 35; Polumbaumm 1988). Before that year, the CPC had tight control over radio, television stations and newspapers, and these media were mostly limited to the central and provincial levels. Media content was carefully censored. In this media network, publicity was a propagandist vehicle that carried the information of the Party’s policies, regulations, and decisions with the purpose of educating the masses.

However, the government ended state-owned media organizations' complete financial dependence on state subsidies and made them find other sources of financing. The new propaganda for economic prosperity supplemented the previous narrowly defined task of political propaganda (Zhao 1998, 53). This reform led to the rise of a new management philosophy that shifted from seeking official support toward pursuing public support. Advertising, one of the essential nongovernmental financial sources, was reintroduced to China in this situation. In 1982, the government formally acknowledged that advertising was beneficial to the reform of media commercialization. The official approval sanctioned mass media's pursuit of commercial benefits.

Therefore, starting from the early 1980s, spectatorship became economically valuable. Consumers' time and attention could directly affect commercial values of advertisement delivered through the media. Achieving growth of spectatorship became a significant goal that all media organizations strived for.

By 1985, with the CPC's promotion of economic reform, journalists shifted their attention to audiences/consumers' demands (e.g. what audiences might like) and their right to information and to their own opinions (Zhao 1998). Hence, I contend that after the mid-1980s, publicity increasingly became an economic vehicle utilized in mass media to seek audiences' attention and to stimulate audiences' demands. This new concept of publicity legitimized the meanings of the mass' cultural choices, which then gave rise to economic values of these choices.

This change quickly impacted the production of media content and contributed to the formation of a hierarchy of genres in the cultural market based on popularity among audiences. And this hierarchy deviated from that promoted by the cultural organs of the CPC. For instance, the government strongly disapproved of popular music which was labeled spiritual pollution from the West. Hence, popular music was often considered inferior to mainstream musical works (e.g.

revolutionary songs). However, radio and TV stations increasingly incorporated popular music in entertainment programs. Even though the state had control over a nationwide system of TV and radio stations and their services, known as *guangbo dianshi xitong*, mass media were by no means a pure propaganda machine, nor a container of dominant messages. With the economic incentive from the market, mass media started to shift its attention to meanings that were important for the public. Some pioneering media quickly sensed the growing need for popular music and maneuvered for more exposure of selected songs in their programming. Their efforts significantly improved the status of popular music in the hierarchy.

The milestone event was the broadcast of an alleged “pornographic song” via CCTV Channel 1. In 1983, a popular song, “Xiang Lian” (Nostalgia) sung by mainland vocalist Li Guyi was broadcast on CCTV as part of the 1st Gala Show of Spring Festival. This song, which resembled popular songs from Hong Kong and Taiwan, was highly controversial due to its mellow musical style, Li Guyi’s feminine and soft vocal style termed *qi sheng* (lit. “voice of breathing”), and the use of electronic keyboard and drum set. Despite its controversial style, this song was one of the most requested songs in a survey conducted before the recording of the 1st Spring Festival Gala Show. Wu Lengxi, then Minister of Radio and TV Broadcasting, ran the risk of promoting “pornographic” media contents and approved the inclusion of the song “Xiang Lian” in the final broadcasting program of the show (Wu, Chen, and Li 2006, 21). This official media exposure made “Xiang Lian” “the pioneering work” (*kaishan zhizuo*) of Chinese popular songs in the history of the PRC (*ibid.*), and also contributed to the rapid growth of the general field of popular music via official distribution channels. Subsequently, more popular music stars from Hong Kong and Taiwan were invited to perform in CCTV gala shows (Guo 2015).⁹⁰

⁹⁰ For instance, Zhang Mingmin from Hong Kong, Xi Xiulan from Taiwan, and Fei Xiang, a Taiwan born American singer were invited to give performances at the CCTV gala shows.

Individual aesthetic choices increasingly became an important reference, based on which state-owned mass media reckoned socio-cultural values of musical works and adjusted their broadcasting programs accordingly. Kun opera was not favored by the mass media as much as it had been in the mid-1950s, because the mass media saw less benefit from featuring the genre. This led to a decline of publicity for Kun opera.

Throughout the 1980s, due to the economic reform of the mass media, state-owned Kun opera troupes failed to achieve the level of media exposure they had expected. For instance, in Shanghai, Kun opera was scarcely broadcast in the Weekly Broadcast of Chinese Opera, an hour-long bi-weekly program on the Shanghai People's Broadcasting Station. Compared to the total time of 9600 minutes devoted to music, this session dedicated to Chinese operas (including Kun opera) only constituted a small share, while the largest share was given over to "light music," a broadly defined genre that is equivalent to "Easy Listening FM programming" (Hamm 1991, 7-8). Political intervention in media exposure of Kun opera was no longer arranged; the nationwide media exposure of Kun opera in 1956 could no longer be repeated.

As a result, the competition for media exposure in the market economy evolved into another form of competition for audiences, and competition between tastes. Compared to the booming new tastes, Kun opera was a very small market segment consisting of niche consumers. Why were Kun opera and other indigenous genres at a disadvantage in the 1980s? I contend that the answer lies in the negotiation between cultural producers and consumers concerning aesthetic dispositions in a new market economy, in which mass media played the role of promoting the tastes of the majority.

In the Opening-up era, state-owned Kun opera troupes were positioned in a cultural competition with modern/foreign genres, new tastes, and new economic rules that were based on

individual consumption. When the nationwide network of mass media was changed from a tool of ideological inculcation into a profit-oriented industry resource, and it became more inclined to embrace popular genres, the golden age of the marriage between Kun opera and mass media ended. Kun opera, together with many other indigenous genres, quickly went downward relative to the hierarchy of popular genres.

4.3 THE LEGITIMATION OF CULTURAL CAPITAL THROUGH CONTESTS

In 1983, some cultural cadres affiliated with the government wished to legitimate the cultural capital of Chinese performing arts by holding performance contests. The fundamental purpose was to construct relatively independent artistic values of Chinese performing arts, which would provide an institutional form for recognizing these awardees' performances as cultural capital. The Plum Blossom Performance Award (*Meihua jiang*) founded 1983 was one of the most influential contests that significantly affected the development of Kun opera in the 1980s.

In this section, I explore the political economy of the Plum Blossom Performance Award (PBPA) in three respects. First, I analyze the original intention of establishing performing arts contests such as the PBPA in 1983. Second, I focus on how artistic values of Kun opera were enhanced in the contest on the basis of stylistic and technical principles of performance, and were separated from political values of the work. And last, drawing on the experiences of some Kun opera awardees of the PBPA, I explore the conversion of awardees' cultural capital into other forms of capital.

4.3.1 The Plum Blossom Performance Award

In 1983, the PBPA was founded by editors of *Xiju bao* (*the Magazine of Theater*),⁹¹ who were also members of the China Theater Association (*Zhongguo xijujia xiehui*) (hereafter referred to as “CTA”). For the first time, a cultural association was able to found and organize an authoritative award of Chinese theater which later became the most prestigious honor among all Chinese opera performers. The fundamental intention was to reestablish the cultural and artistic value of Chinese indigenous arts and reshape the image of indigenous performing arts from old-fashioned cultural practices into transcendent national art.

In the early 1980s, these editors and other CTA members considered old age (of both opera performers and audiences) as the primary reason that led to the poor market reception of Chinese opera. You Mo, one of the founders and also a member of the association, once noted that the prize was established to “meet the requirements of the time” (*shiying le shidai de yaoqiu*) (You 2013, 16), which refers to a generational gap of Chinese performing arts mainly caused by the interruption brought on by the iconoclasts during the Cultural Revolution. The ban on the performances directly impacted the production of Chinese operas and other forms of performing arts on stage in the 1980s at least in two ways: first, the training of Chinese opera performers was halted between 1976 and 1976. Therefore, when various genres of Chinese opera were resurrected in the late 1970s, few young performers could play principals; second, the younger generation of audiences were unable to watch traditional Chinese opera during the Cultural Revolution, and in the late 1970s, Chinese operas were new to the younger generation (He 2002; You 2013).

Ethnomusicologists have suggested that a more severe crisis behind the cold reception of

⁹¹ The title of the journal was changed into *Renmin xiju* (People’s theater) in 1976, and then *Zhongguo xiju* (Chinese theater) in 1983.

Chinese opera might be due to the modernization in the cultural sphere enhanced by a more liberal cultural market ((Brace 1991; Rees 2009). The younger generation did not appreciate the older generation's performance skills or repertoire. Compared to Western musical culture, including both popular music and classical music, Chinese traditional music was considered to be aesthetically inferior (Rees 2009, 47-50). Many traditional local genres were viewed as "backward." The devaluation of aesthetic values of Chinese indigenous performing arts, including Kun opera, not only caused the decline of audiences but also the decline of pupils. Even though courses in the study of indigenous genres were offered at music educational institutions, including Chinese opera schools and music conservatories, it was rather difficult to convince music students of the intrinsic cultural value of the indigenous genres.

In this context, the PBPA was founded with the intention to recognize cultural and artistic values of young performers on the one hand, and to legitimize social values of indigenous performing arts on the other. The statute of the PBPA was drafted and published in 1984,⁹² according to which the prize was held annually for artists under 45 years of age whose performances were to be publicly staged in Beijing within a year. Ten prizes were given to honor outstanding achievements in Chinese Opera, and five to honor that of spoken drama (Xijubao 1984a, 8). The rules have undergone numerous changes since then in terms of the eligible genres, affiliation restrictions, and the qualifications for reapplication.⁹³ But it remained a relatively stable prize compared to many other short-lived awards and contests, until 2015 when the PBPA was

⁹² The first competition was held in 1983, but the statute was not published until the second competition held in 1984.

⁹³ The boundary of genres was expanded to include Western-influenced genres in 1984. Based on the development of Western opera in China, the committee added the genre of Western opera into the eligible styles (Xijubao 1984b, 3), and the quota of spoken drama and Western opera constantly varied. But the constants must be from state-owned performing groups, so the PBPA later grew into an incentive for state-employed artists. And this affiliation restriction was cancelled around 2000. Since the 11th PBPA in 1994, previous awardees who were under 65 can re-apply for the prize, and the awardee to two prizes were honored as *er du mei* (receiving the second Plum Bloom Prize).

incorporated into the China Theater Award.

Nationwide opera contests can be traced back to the showcases initiated in the early 1950s, but the PBPA marked a new era of Kun opera contest in the 1980s, as cultural capital for the first time appeared as a dominant form of capital in the field of Chinese performing arts. The cultural elites in the field of Chinese indigenous performing arts were given their own voice. The PBPA was granted by an evaluation committee consisting of members of the host organization, i.e. the China Theater Association (CTA hereafter), and other theater professionals. In first competition in 1983, for example, the chair of the evaluation committee was A Jia, the renowned playwright of Chinese opera and also Vice Chair of CTA. The other Vice Chairs of the committee were Shu Qiang, and Liu Housheng. The former was a famous opera director and then Council Member of CTA, and the latter was a highly-esteemed opera theorist, and then-Chief Secretary of CTA. The core of this evaluation committee had no direct relation with political agencies, hence this was different from the operation of the Official Showcases, which were usually under the direct control of government officials, as in the command economy before the 1980s.

Economically, the organization committee reduced the financial reliance on the government by seeking financial support from non-governmental sponsors. Between 1983 and 1988, the PBPA was the one of few national competitions completely dependent on fundraising.

As He Xiaochong, a member of the CTA, noted,

since the foundation of the PBPA, [the organizers] did not ask the state for a penny. The evaluation and award ceremonies require funds, particularly the latter requiring more, which exclusively relied on social support, especially from those entrepreneurs who are passionate about drama. ... Once [we] accept the notion that social activities should be sponsored by the society, [we] managed to hold the prize regularly [through fundraising]. (He 2002, 10)

Therefore, from its establishment, the PBPA was identified as a social activity (*shehui*

huodong) relying on non-governmental resources, as opposed to official activities (*guanfang huodong*) organized by the state. The social resources mainly included donations from performing groups, non-government enterprises, and individuals. It marked the separation of economic capital from political capital.

Due to the increasing difficulty of fundraising, donations were gradually replaced with advertising revenues.⁹⁴ In 1989, the organization committee gave up their fundraising efforts and began their collaboration with the Bureau of Culture in Shenzhen in 1989. Since the tenth prize cycle (1993), the PBPA has been jointly held with *Zhongguo xiju jie* (Chinese Festival of Theater) outside Beijing, sponsored by some local Bureaus of Culture (He 2002, 10; You 2013, 17).

It is important to note that political capital still mattered in the field of performing arts, albeit not in a decisive way. The operation of the PBPA was sanctioned and legitimized by the state. The appearance of the core political leaders at the opening and award ceremony symbolized the state's support and the authority of the prize. Since the award ceremony of the first PBPA in 1984, a report article on the politicians' speech became a norm that indicated the prize's legitimacy. For example, in Figure 2, an article in the *Magazine of Theater* featured the high-ranking three high-ranking members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, Xi Zhongxun, Chen Pixian, and Yu Qiuli, in an on-the-spot close-up photo (Xijubao 1984b). These politicians'

⁹⁴ The scope of the fundraising for the PBPA was firstly among performing groups, such as Shenyang City Spoken Drama Troupe (Shenyang shi huaju tuan) that donated RMB ¥ 2000 in 1986, then included companies that manufacture costumes or stage props, and later included companies that are not related to the field of performing arts, such as Beijing Insurance Company, the Luzhou Laojiao Liquor Company, and Yantan Polaris Clock Company (Jiang 1988). In return for entrepreneur sponsors' earnest help, a brief acknowledgement of the company would be published in *the Magazine of Theater*. Toward the end the 1980s, these acknowledgement articles increasingly resembled advertisement. For instance, in 1988, an acknowledgement was essentially an ad. it introduced the long history of the liquor of Luzhou laojiao, and regarded the liquor as an internationally famous liquor that had won two international gold awards, and had the highest export record among Chinese alcoholic drinks (Jiang 1988). Primary sponsors would be invited to the award ceremony. Except advertising sponsors' enterprises and media exposure at the ceremony, there is no document indicating that these sponsors took a part in the evaluation process or the nomination, and the economic support acted as a cost of advertising.

appearance at the ceremony indicates that, although the state support was reduced to a purely symbolic form, political capital retained its underlying importance in the institutionalized competition for cultural capital.

首届戏剧报梅花奖授奖大会在京隆重举行

习仲勋、余秋里、谷牧、陈丕显、张爱萍、
王昆仑、钱昌照、朱穆之、贺敬之、阳翰笙、周巍
峙等领导同志到会祝贺



习仲勋、陈丕显、余秋里同志在授奖大会主席台上。
(夏小奇摄)

本刊讯 全国戏剧界瞩目的首届戏剧报梅花奖授奖大会，四月十七日在首都政协礼堂隆重举行。习仲勋、余秋里、谷牧、陈丕显、张爱萍、王昆仑、钱昌照、朱穆之、贺敬之、阳翰笙、周巍峙等领导同志到会祝贺，并向梅花奖获得者李雪健、张继青、叶少兰、任跟心、晓艇、尚丽娟、刘长瑜、李维康、郭泽民、刘文治、谷文月、刘玉玲、冯宪珍、蒋宝英、王曼琴颁发了奖品、奖金与获奖证书。

出席授奖大会的还有各界人士李伯钊、吴作人、荣高棠、马彦祥、阿甲、吴雪、赵寻、冯牧、陆石、魏传统、李瑛、王光美、舒强、刘佳、张东川、李超、任桂林、徐晓钟、李紫贵、俞琳、鲁刚、石丁，以及首都戏剧工作者

和观众代表共一千四百余人。

习仲勋同志在授奖大会上作了重要讲话，他说：“今晚的盛会表明戏剧界正在开创一个新局面。对中青年演员进行评奖，意义很大。现在各条战线都在建第三梯队，做到后继有人。今天的大会说明了戏剧界是后继有人的，但是，这还不够，我们还要培养出更多更优秀的中青年演员，使我们的戏剧舞台更加繁荣。”习仲勋同志还鼓励获奖演员戒骄戒躁，在艺术上更上一层楼。会上还宣读了人大常委会副委员长许德珩为“梅花奖”的题词：“祝青年演员朋友们在发扬祖国文化，创造社会主义精神文明的事业中，取得更大的进步。”

中国戏剧家协会书记处常务书记、《戏剧报》主编、“梅花奖”评委会副主任委员刘厚生向大会汇报了评选经过（全文另发）。山西省临汾蒲剧院青年演员任跟心代表十五名获奖演员在大会上表示决心，要继续勤学苦练，为社会主义的戏剧事业作出更大的贡献。

大会之后，由获奖演员刘长瑜、叶少兰、张继青分别演出了京剧《卖水》、《罗成叫关》与昆剧《痴梦》。

· 3 ·

Figure 2. The article in *the Magazine of Theater* reporting the 1st award ceremony of PBPA in 1984.

The PBPA as a socio-cultural activity offered a relatively independent site for the competition for cultural capital, on which the cultural elite had the authority to make new rules for what they considered good art, while redefining the artistic values of opera performances. In this

aesthetic transition, Kun opera was favored and soon promoted as a representation of the classical art of Chinese indigenous genres.

4.3.2 The Construction of Artistic Values of Kun Opera

The evaluation committee of the PBPA shifted the focus of evaluative criteria from the censorship of ideological connotations toward artistic concerns. The PBPA was a contest for best performance skills only. Drawing on the technique-oriented contest rubric, the cultural elite on the evaluation committee took part in the construction of artistic values, which mainly included the refined performing technique, the serious attitude about artistic creation, and the ability to make the characters more convincing and impressive (Xijubao 1985, 3). The contest empowered artists, critics, scholars, and other relevant cultural agents to break with external demands, such as political power. Only the performers who could impress the committee with their artistic accomplishments would be honored, regardless of the characters they acted, or the ideological ramifications their performances might cause.

In this competition for cultural capital, Kun opera performers took the dominant positions compared to other genres. In the 1st PBPA, the famous Kun opera actress Zhang Jiqing got the most votes and became one of the ten awardees in 1983. She was recognized for the extraordinary skill of her performances in the excerpt of *Xun meng* (Reflection on the lost dream), in the play *The Peony Pavilion*, and in the excerpt of *Chi meng* (A maddening dream) in the play of *Zhu Maichen xiuqi* (The Divorce of Zhu Maichen). Both were famous excerpts from two classical plays.

Zhang's performance impressed the evaluation committee mainly through her vivid portrayal of Du Liniang, the heroine in the classical play, *The Peony Pavilion*. A Jia, a renowned specialist in Chinese theater arts and Director of the PBPA evaluation committee, praised Zhang's

articulation, vocal skills, her design of body language, and facial expressions:

She does not express the lyrics through mechanical actions, but deeply probes into the meanings of each passage. She uses the elegant gestures to vividly portray the character in the play. That is her re-creation based on the lyrics. ... Zhang Jiqing knows how to flexibly use the principles [of tones and pronunciation]. Her pronunciation is very clear and precise, and her enunciation is smooth and ample. Moreover, she fully uses her highly skilled combined resonance of head voice (*touqiang*) and chest voice (*xiongqiang*) to deliver her powerful and sonorous voice of singing ... In the soliloquy of Du Liniang, the rhythm of music and movements in most parts was rather slow. But she just had her way of attracting audiences' attention, making them hold their breath, and focus on her beautiful singing and choreographic movements in each second. Her gesture and restrained facial expressions were calmly rendered as if in a slow-motion movie scene, like a budding flower, opening one petal after another. (A 1985)

This comment significantly contrasts with that of *Cash* by the Zhejiang Kun Opera Troupe in 1956. The committee member favored Zhang's depiction of a female character, Du Liniang, a high-born young lady in imperial China with an attractive and feminine appearance. And a character like Du Liniang did not conform to the proletarian aesthetic promoted by the Party during the Cultural Revolution. In addition, the evaluation committee member elaborated on her skills using a number of professional terms of vocal art to emphasize on the attractiveness of the performance itself, which was minimally associated with any mainstream political ramifications.

The evaluation committee paid close attention to the expression of characters' inner world, and preferred the performers' exploration of the complexity of humanity to an overt exaggeration of a stereotyped character's certain features, “*gao, da, quan*” (a lofty, great, full-hearted hero), which were the fundamental characteristics of the protagonists of revolutionary model operas during the Cultural Revolution. Due to the new aesthetic change, another character by Zhang Jiqiang won her accolades, i.e. a mad woman, Cui Shi, in the play *The Divorce of Zhu Maichen*. In this play, the heroine, Cui, Zhu Maichen's wife, left her husband due to her intolerance of

poverty and a hopeless life. Several years later, she finds out that her ex-husband has become a high-ranking official, and she commits suicide in guilt. As a famous Ping opera (*Pingju*) actress Xin Fengxia, who used to act the same character, commented:

This play has been staged in many genres, also in the Ping opera. When I was 14, I acted this role, and portrayed her as *poladan*,⁹⁵ and I vilified and satirized this character as [much as] possibly I could. A lot of actresses do not like acting this role. (But) Zhang is full of compassion for Cui, and has therefore depicted her as a pitiful but sometimes also an abhorrent woman...therefore struck the audience with the complexity of the character...The play of *The Divorce of Zhu Maichen* doesn't have many speeches, or theatrical conflicts. The plotline is very straightforward, involving two to three characters. But Zhang maximized the emotional impact. It is a *zuogong xi*,⁹⁶ with just a few lines of lyrics, however, she significantly impressed her audience with her excellent performance skills to such a degree that even the youngsters were very into it, (as if) sharing the breath with the character on stage. (Zhu and Yao 2009, 78)

Zhang's exploration of the complexity of a character's humanity began to be favored in the early 1980s. Performers were trying to get rid of the stereotyped style that was popular during the Cultural Revolution, when most characters were politicized and arbitrarily divided into heroes and villains. And the evaluation committee's appraisal of Zhang's ability to explore the inner world of a character as a person, rather than a political symbol, began to set the new standard for good plays.

The growing interest in artistic forms themselves started to de-politicize Kun opera, and the relevant new aesthetic dispositions favored pure techniques of singing, speaking, and acting. Among these techniques, singing skills and principles were a popular subject in pre-existing theories, widely known as *quxue* (lit. "studies of singing songs"), most of which were theorized

⁹⁵ *Poladan* is a subcategory of female characters, and refers to shrewish women with bold and vigorous personalities.

⁹⁶ A *zuogong xi* refers to a type of performance that mainly relies on body gestures, chorographic movements, and facial expressions to advance the plot.

before the early twentieth century.⁹⁷ These theories were rediscovered by Chinese opera specialists and assigned cultural and artistic value. As early as 1976, the music and vocal technique of Kun opera were given scholarly attention. After some major research published about a decade and a half ago, such as *Quyun yitong (An easy introduction to the use of rhyme of Qu)* by Xiang Yuancun, which was finished in 1958 and published in 1963, studies of this genre were resumed as a legitimate academic discourse. In 1981, *Zhenfei qupu (Zhengfei song book)* was published. Compiled by Yu Zhenfei, a highly esteemed master of Kun opera and Peking opera, this songbook systematically introduced several “traditional” principles of singing Kun opera, such as the accuracy of pronunciation of Chinese characters, the use of breath, musical expressions of emotions (*quqing*), and standard ornaments (*qiang’ge*).

Through the exploration of these rules of singing, a concept was formed of “pure aesthetics” of Kun opera, which recognizes no jurisdiction other than the formal refinement of this artistic genre. The mastery of phonological characteristics and versification of prose constitutes the core of singing Kun opera and crafting the music, and at the same time bestows artistic autonomy upon this body of knowledge. Kun opera professionals began to believe in the autonomy, i.e. the transcendent beauty, of Kun opera, which can be partly expressed in their virtuosity. Although some members of the evaluation committee criticized Zhang Jiqing’s performance by noting it could not be appreciated by the general public,⁹⁸ the limited social influence did not affect the

⁹⁷ Kun opera connoisseur and amateur vocalist Liu Runen once noted that in the late 19th century and the early 20th century, Wu Mei (1884-1939) collected and summarized pre-existing treaties on the singing of Kun opera, and initiated the contemporary study of Kun opera. Based on Wu’s contribution, Wang Jilie (1873-1952) adopted Western analytical methods and developed the area into a hermeneutic discipline (Liu 2004).

⁹⁸ Feng Mu, former Vice President of China Writers Association, commented on Zhang Jiqing’s performance of *The Peony Pavilion*: “Zhang Jiqing’s performance is faithful to the original play. While I was appreciating this play, I also felt its shortcoming, which is that perhaps only certain audiences who have relatively high competence of appreciating Chinese operas can fully accept it, but for the general audience, the play has great limits” (Zhu and Yao 2009, 153-54). Feng’s opinion implies a concern for the exclusiveness of this genre, and its inability to serve the general public.

artistic value of Kun opera, and Zhang was awarded the prize.

The construction of artistic value of performances as honored by the PBPA also enhanced the prestige of individuals. Awardees were no longer invisible performing arts laborers, but rather, they were endowed with a new title: *yishujia* (artists). A connection between artists and their representative plays, and even the particular genre, was created. For instance, Zhang Jiqing became known for her performance of three “signature” excerpts of Kun opera, including the two excerpts that won her the PBPA. Zhang was promoted as the supreme actress of Kun opera (A 1985). Through her performances, she embodied the artistic values of Kun opera, and she became a holder of great cultural capital. Hence, the PBPA served as an institutionalized delegation that authorized its awardee, i.e. its spokespersons, to represent their own genres.

4.3.3 Trouble with Capital Conversion

Contest evaluation committee and PBPA awardees’ devotion to the artistic aesthetics of Chinese opera invoked a recognition of economic values for these art forms. Kun opera professionals’ cultural capital legitimized by the PBPA did not enable them to directly enjoy social resources. In order to achieve other forms of benefits, awardees needed to convert their cultural capital into other forms of capital. Drawing on the case of the PBPA awardee, Zhang Jiqing, I examine Kun opera professionals’ attempts at capital conversion in 1985 and 1986. I argue that the mid 1980s was the transitional period in which the rising significance of economic capital challenged the dominance of political capital, when China’s economic system was transformed from planned economy to market economy. While Kun opera professionals had high hopes for the political benefits of their work, the government’s power of mobilizing social resources merely through administrative orders declined. Although the government was still capable of making decisions

within the state sector of cultural production, they could not affect private consumption. This meant that Kun opera performers' accumulation of political capital could not contribute to the increase of their economic capital from the market. The exclusiveness of the artistic values of Kun opera also determined that their cultural capital was not widely recognized by the public. In this situation, Kun opera professionals turned back to the political agents, negotiating for a higher rate of capital conversion, from their cultural capital directly into economic capital.

The PBPA functioned as the legitimization of participants' cultural capital within a small circle of cultural agents, consisting of journal editors, members of the CTA, scholars, and professional performers. The authority of PBPA awardees was generally recognized in the field of performing arts, particularly Chinese opera. The symbolic reputation that both awardees and nominees were endowed with can be implicitly translated into their volume of cultural capital in contrast to their peers. The pathway for a non-established performer to become a PBPA winner follows a vertical movement (Bourdieu 1984, 131-32), which was often reified in the consensus that the PBPA is the highest honor (*zuigao rongyu*), as I often hear from my interlocutors in my fieldwork, that a Kun opera performer, or a performer of any form of Chinese opera, could ever receive.

This intermediary of the prize as the institution of cultural consecration in the field of Kun opera production made capital conversion possible, and it aimed at ensuring the best possible material and symbolic return in the state system of performing arts. After Zhang Jiqing was awarded the PBPA in 1983, she became the only Kun opera performer among the fifteen awardees of the year, and thus reached the peak of her career. The honor of PBPA soon brought her a number of performance opportunities. In June 1985, the Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Troupe was selected to participate as a cultural delegation in the World Cultural Festival "Horizon" in West Berlin, and

Festival dei Due Mondi in Italy. Zhang was featured as the principal actress. The troupe presented excerpts from *The Peony Pavilion*, *The Divorce of Zhu Maichen*, *The Story of the Jape Hairpin*, and *Cash*, etc. (A 1985). This was the “first tour performance that a Kun opera troupe gave abroad in the history of the People’s Republic of China” (Zhu and Yao 2009, 80-85); it was promoted via the most widely-circulated newspaper, *the People’s Daily*, on June the 15th, the date of the troupe’s departure. In this article, the author A Jia, Chair of the evaluation committee of the PBPA, highly praised Zhang’s artistry, which the PBPA also testified to as unquestionably valuable. After the troupe finished the tour, with the recommendation of several cultural officials including Mei Xing, then-Vice Director of the Research Office of the Secretariat of the CPC Central Committee, and Liu Yizhen, member of Chinese Theater Association, JPKOT was invited to perform for core leaders of the state at the headquarter venue of CPC, Zhongnanhai ⁹⁹ (ibid., 87). These performances acted as the official pronouncement of the political recognition of Zhang’s artistry, the genre, and the troupe.

Although the official recognition of Zhang’s performance and of her troupe JPKOT quickly fermented as much recognition as was gained by *Cash* and the Zhejiang Troupe in 1956, the effort to promote JPKOT’s plays to the public received a cold reception in the market in 1985. This cold reception made Kun opera professionals realize the limits of the government’s administrative power to mobilize social resources. It began with the political authority’s scheme of marketizing state-owned troupes’ performances into cultural commodities, and the first attempt was to produce a Kun opera film based on the JPKOT’s signature performance of *The Peony Pavilion*, featuring Zhang Jiqing as the heroine. After Zhang’s performance in the Zhongnanhai, two cultural officials

⁹⁹ Zhongnanhai is an imperial garden in Imperial City, Beijing, China adjacent to the Forbidden City; it serves as the central headquarters for the Communist Party of China and the State Council (Central government) of the People's Republic of China.

Mei Xing and Liu Yizhen, suggested a film shoot of *The Peony Pavilion* to Wang Hong, then Head of the Department of Culture of the Jiangsu Province. Wang Hong officially proposed this plan at the CPC Group Meeting of the Department of Culture, on which group members approved the project proposal and reached the unanimous decision of assigning Nanjing Film Studio (*Nanjing Dianying Zhipianchang*) to take charge of the filming (ibid., 86). Other branches of the provincial government were coordinated to not only utilize administrative power to facilitate the filming, but also to seek financial support. At first, the Nanjing Film Studio was unable to accept the assignment, because they had reached their quota of film-making for the year that the Department of Central Broadcasting, Film and Television had assigned. In order to put the filming of *The Peony Pavilion* on the schedule, the CPC Group of the Department of Culture submitted a request to the Ministry of Central Broadcasting, Film, and Television to exceed the quota assigned to the Nanjing Film Studio. After it was granted, Wang Hong raised funds by persuading Gu Xiulian, then-Governor of Jiangsu Province, to support the project. Eventually, the Provincial Department of Finance allocated RMB ¥350,000¹⁰⁰ to *The Peony Pavilion* film project, an extravagant budget for any production by any Kun opera troupes (ibid.).

The film was finished in 1986, and was submitted for inspection in Beijing, and received high praise from the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Broadcasting, Film and Television. A symposium on the film of *The Peony Pavilion* was held to spread its influence in the field of performing arts and theater literature. In November 1986, the film was presented at the 1986 Tang Xianzu Memorial Conference, co-organized by the Ministry of Culture, the China Theater Association, the Department of Culture of Jiangxi Province, and the Jiangxi Province Theater Association. The film was a failure and was screened only once. Cinema managers had little

¹⁰⁰ The exchange rate between CNY and USD in 1985 was about 1:3, and the amount was worth approximately US \$116,667.

confidence in the film generating attendance and they were reluctant to accept copies of the film (Zhu and Yao 2009, 88).

From the ambitious preparation to one public screening, the short life of the film of *The Peony Pavilion* reveals the conflicts between the command economy and the rising market economy. The film was a product of the government's plan and political intervention. Cultural agents who were involved in the project were hoping that the market could be guided/corrected by the legitimate quality of this film that they produced according to their aesthetic criteria—a logic derived from a reformist concept that envisioned plans and markets could permeate (*shentou*) one another (Naughton 1995, 110). However, the film market in the mid-1980s was transformed into a mass market. The reception and circulation of a film relied on audience feedback and could hardly be controlled by the state administration. The state monopoly over cultural consumption was eliminated, which means consumers at this time had the right to purchase or not purchase cultural goods. They were no longer audiences who sat in a hall with colleagues and watched *Cash* collectively booked by their work units. They were individual consumers who paid for what they demanded. A growing number of many other competing films in the mid-1980s¹⁰¹ further increased consumption choices and empowered consumers. In this cultural market governed by private consumption, political capital became less important due to its compromised ability to allocate social energy. Affected by the change, Kun opera professionals began to negotiate with the state for a new strategy of converting their cultural capital into a particular form of political capital, i.e. a preservation policy for Kun opera.

¹⁰¹ Chinese film specialists often regard the mid-1980s as the beginning of “the New Chinese Cinema” (Zhang 1997). With the efforts of the directors of the “Fifth Generation of Film,” the popularity of Chinese films grew rapidly and were brought to international attention (Yau 1993).

4.3.3.1 1986: The Year of Kun Opera

Although the prospect of conversion of their cultural capital into economic capital was proven disappointing, Kun opera professionals adopted the strategy of turning back to political capital for the financial support the Kun opera troupes needed. As early as 1984, some influential Kun opera agents made an appeal to the central government for preservation measures of Kun opera. On October 5th, 1985, the Ministry of Culture issued the “Notification of the protection and revival of Kun opera” (*Guanyu baohu he zhenxing kunju de tongzhi*),¹⁰² in which it instructed local governments to raise the wages of employees of state-owned Kun opera troupes, and provided financial support for preservation programs which mainly included the affirmation of personnel, re-allocation of budgets, the increase of salaries and welfares, and guaranteed reimbursement of managerial expenses, among others (Lin 1986a). This document formed the basis for a series of supplementary government documents, known as “Notification of adopting special policies for the protection of kunju art” (*Guanyu dui kunju yishu caiqu teshu baohu zhengce de tongzhi*) issued in 1987, in which the government urged local authorities to implement preservation measures stated in the 1985 document (Wu 2002, 1006; Wei 2011, 95).¹⁰³ In January 1986, the Kunju Revival Advisory Committee (*zhenxing kunju zhidao weiyuanhui*) was established by the Ministry of Culture. Based in Shanghai, this institute took charge of organizing training programs for young Kun opera performers, which were mainly dedicated to the preservation of rarely staged plays

¹⁰² WYZ [1985] No. 1604, issued by the Ministry of Culture (Wu 2002, 1006).

¹⁰³ To affirm the positive effects of the PBPA is not to claim that the PBPA caused individual’s acquisition of political capital or triggered the state’s scheme of supporting the genre. Scholars have identified other elements that may have contributed to the political advantage of Kun opera in the mid-1980s. For instance, Zhou WEI pointed out that in 1984 Yu Zhenfei, a legendary Kun opera master, wrote a letter to Hu Yaobang, the then-General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPC, appealing to the central government for immediate action in tackling the problems that threatened the further development of Kun operara. Wei deemed that this petition coincided with relevant appeals from other channels and caught the attention of the government (Wei 2011, 94-95). But it is undeniable that Zhang Jiqing’s distinction as the awardee of the 1st PBPA in 1983 played an important part in the growing sentiment that prompted cultural agents to take action to seek external support.

based on song books (Liu 1987; Wei 2011, 95). The operational expenses of the organization were covered by the Ministry of Culture. The special grant was not institutionalized, so it temporarily relieved, rather than solved, the financial difficulties of Kun opera troupes. In addition, this notification also stressed the necessity of training new professionals, creating more performance opportunities, and establishing archives of Kun opera (Wei 2011, 95). These planned activities greatly advantaged Kun opera performing groups and turned the year of 1986 into, as Liu Yizhen, the cultural agent of the China Theater Association commented, the “Year of Kun opera” (*Kunju nian*) (Liu 1987).

However, the financial support that state-owned Kun opera troupes obtained from these special preservation measures caused the unequal distribution of state subsidies, and essentially became a financial privilege for Kun opera. Many other state-owned performing groups complained about their unfair status. For instance, a proceeding from a symposium documented a brief mention of the complaint from performers of other genres. On April 11th, 1986, at a symposium held by *the People’s Music* on the reform of state-owned performing groups, Li Xianglin, then Director of Beijing Song and Dance Ensemble (*Beijing gewu tuan*), a state-owned performing group, criticized the unfairness of grant distribution at the time: “To support Peking opera and Kun opera is currently a hot topic. But what about music and dance? Music and dance groups fail to draw sufficient attention” (Liu et al. 1986, 11). This unequal distribution was caused by the unequal volume of political capital institutionalized in various genres.

Kun opera troupes’ accumulated cultural capital was not only converted into political capital that brought a temporary grant, which was then reconverted back into cultural capital. The government’s involvement brought back the nationalist frame in which values of Kun opera were mainly derived from its history in the genealogy of Chinese culture. For instance, a theater critic

commented on the rationale of the preservation program, noting “We should prioritize the development of excellent national cultural heritage. It would be a crime if we discard national treasures, including Kun opera” (Lin 1986b, 49). The political values attracted more political investment in the genre. In 1986, there were at least three series of Kun opera showcases organized by different branches of the central government and local government: in September, the Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe was invited by the Ministry of Culture to give performances in Beijing. The troupe was rewarded for its contribution to the preservation and development of the genre; in October, to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the performance of *the Fifteen Strings of Cash*, the Zhejiang Provincial government invited seven state-owned Kun opera groups to participate in the Showcases of Outstanding Kun Opera Performers from the North and the South (*Nanbei Kunju qunying huiyan*) (Wang 1988, 6). During the event, two senior artists, Zhou Chuanying and Wang Chuansong were rewarded for their contribution to the training of younger generations; in November, the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe, the Northern Kun Opera Troupe, and the Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe were invited to give three Kun Opera performances in Beijing in memorial of Tang Xianzu, the great playwright of *The Peony Pavilion* (Liu 1987, 37). These Kun opera activities were later acknowledged as efforts to preserve the national treasures of Chinese performing arts (Wang 1988).

Political agents’ support was viewed as proof of the cultural values and artistic quality of Kun opera, the cultural values and artistic qualities of which became self-evident in the relevant preservation measures, i.e. the basis of the cultural capital that Kun opera professionals held. It further increased the volume of Kun opera performers’ cultural capital and thus yielded a credit of prestige in contests such as the PBPA. In 1986, Kun opera performers received six PBPA prizes out of twenty in total, among all contestants who performed various forms of Chinese opera,

Western opera, and spoken drama. Among the six awardees, Ji Zhenhua, Hua Wenyi, Cai Zhengren, Yue Meiti and Wang Zhiquan were from the Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe, and Zhang Jidie was from the Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Troupe. The overwhelming dominance of Kun opera performers was a result of the consecration of the genre via contests, special state grants, and preservation programs.

The power of consecration was primarily attributed to cultural agents, cadres, and relevant officials who served on the evaluation committees of the PBPA. They played the essential role of promoting the status of Kun opera in society during the transitional period when the political power retreated from the control of people's cultural lives, and performing groups were striving for higher socio-cultural esteem to prove the meaning and significance of their genres to their potential clientele in a growing cultural market. Many Kun opera professionals were fully aware that their cultural capital was converted from political capital rather than from economic capital. As indicated in a PBPA awardee's speech, Yue Meiti, a forty-five-year-old performer when she won the prize, acknowledged the evaluation committee:

In an era when various genres of cultural art were impacted by modern popular art, the situation of Kun opera was even more difficult as if a single boat sailing along a rapid river between cliffs. Unexpectedly, a cheerless old operatic genre by a performer who has passed her best years had passed won the prize! I felt very much unsettled and guilty when I was surrounded by a younger generation of representative performers of various genres, ... and placed among a group of stars... I was far from the pinnacle of performing arts, and the stage in reality belongs to these popular stars. They have tens of thousands of spectators/fans! They are young and gorgeous! I feel ashamed for not utterly deserving my "awardee" title. I told myself, it is an award conferred by the society and evaluation specialists upon a performer who endured her lonely career. (Yue 2008, 182)

Yue's acknowledgement implied a clear difference between success in a professional contest and the open market. The value of her performance was almost exclusively attributed by

cultural agents, who took the dominant position in the circle of official agents of cultural production.

Kun opera professionals' capital conversion between 1983 and 1986 was made possible by a small circle of cultural cadres who took dominant positions in the field of cultural production and were usually associated with the dominant political power. It was their intention to create and promote the artistic values of the genre. Hence Kun opera professionals' acquisition of social resources relied on a loop of capital conversion, from cultural capital into political capital, which was converted into either economic capital, or back into cultural capital. And the Year of Kun opera in 1986 was the result of Kun opera professionals' social privilege jointly given by cultural elites who wished to maintain the cultural advantages of the genre they appreciated most, and those political agents who wished to deploy the genre in the nationalist aim of preserving a "national heritage."

The appreciation of the artistic value of technical parameters of contestants demonstrated that performers' labor became an accumulation of cultural capital institutionalized in the form of contests. However, the symbolic value of the PBPA contests did not transform Kun opera into a popular genre in the cultural market, and neither was Kun opera professionals' cultural capital converted into economic capital. The failure of capital conversion was mainly caused by the asymmetry between the awardees' cultural capital recognized by the award evaluation committee and that recognized by the public. Many individual holders of economic capital, i.e. consumers, acknowledged less value in PBPA performers' cultural capital. The government remained the most important holder of economic capital and political capital with whom cultural agents could negotiate for financial support. And this capital conversion between Kun opera professionals, contest committees, and the government peaked in 1986, and formed a paradigm of a contest

economy of Kun opera production.

5.0 NEGOTIATIONS FOR VALUE BETWEEN MARKET AND STATE (1986-2002)

In the mid-1980s, following significant gains in agriculture and industrial enterprises, economic reforms ushering in marketization began to affect the cultural production of state-owned performing groups. While Kun opera professionals turned to the government for political capital and staged music contests in an effort to legitimize their cultural capital, it was economic capital that emerged as the new decisive criteria that the central government adopted to measure the importance and worth of any potential enterprise. Economic growth was prioritized over political struggle as the primary aim of government activity.

In 1984 and 1985, the central government designed and publically promoted a set of measures to rationalize state-owned enterprises. Then, between 1986 and 1988, the proposed project was implemented via a series of reforms in finance, labor, authority relations, which had a gradual, cumulative impact on the management of state-owned Kun opera troupes (Naughton 1995; Shirk 1993). Among these, reforms of the contract labor system had the most severe impact. These reforms replaced guaranteed lifelong state employment with a short-term contractual approach to employment within the state. This change triggered wage reforms which in turn established a correspondence between enterprise productivity (revenue) and the total wage bill—hence, the less an enterprise’s revenue, the lower the monthly salaries of its employees. Due to the low market value of Kun opera in the early stages of this economic transition, these reform measures put all state-owned Kun opera troupes into financial difficulty. As a result, many professional Kun opera performers were forced to leave their jobs.

In this section, I focus on the “rationalization reforms” that were inaugurated in 1986 and implemented within the state system of performing groups, and I explore three aspects of the Kun

opera professionals' survival strategies in their wake. First, I describe the reform measures and analyze how they affected the management of Kun opera troupes. Based on experiences of two Kun opera professionals from Suzhou Kun Opera Troupe and Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe respectively, I explore performers' personal choices during the precarious period between wage reform and corporatization. Second, I investigate the negotiation for political and economic support which took place between the state and its subsidiary Kun opera troupes after the troupes' failed marketization efforts. And, third, I analyze the rise of neo-classical "grand opera" repertoire as an effect of state-owned Kun opera troupes' attempt to curry economic benefits from both the state and the paying public.

With the rapid growth of the private sector, resulting from the planned economy of the 1980s, an increasingly large volume of economic capital was circulated in the cultural marketplace, beyond the state's direct control. I argue that the acquisition of economic capital was officially divided into two forms: an internal form of financial support, granted by the state, and an external form situated within consumers' economic capital, reliant upon individuals' cultural needs. State-owned Kun opera troupes attempted to attain both forms of economic capital. Their creation of the neo-classical "grand" Kun opera was a result of state-owned troupes' negotiation for both political value within the state and cultural value among consuming individuals.

5.1 RATIONALIZATION OF STATE-OWNED TROUPES IN THE MID-1980S

The economic reforms inaugurated in the 1980s were the result of a marked decentralization in state control over economic activity and policy within agricultural, industrial, and cultural production. In tandem with this process, the ideological basis for social production shifted from

devotion to socialist revolution and personal sacrifice toward dedication to contributing to “socialist profit.” The “law of value” was rehabilitated (Naughton 1995, 98). Deng Xiaoping promoted the nascent “socialist” market economy between 1978 and 1983, during which time the central government encouraged the “expanded autonomy” of enterprises through profit retention. Profit retention directly led to the rapid growth of worker bonuses, as a major component of employee compensation (ibid., 99). Accordingly, the link between individual labor and individual profit was re-established.

Economic reforms were characterized by incremental measures in multiple areas combined to push the economy toward marketization. These reforms affected the field of Kun opera production in its second phase, from 1984 to 1988. The central government encouraged the managerial autonomy of state-owned performing groups in order to stimulate their market performance. The government proposed to partially cover basic operating expenses of selected state-owned troupes, and it urged troupes to increase box office revenues in order to balance the remainder of their expenditure. The government claimed that the plan would help state-owned troupes to gradually shift their income source from state-allocated funds to box office revenues.

This plan was enacted via wage reform and labor reform, specifically with regards to contractual employment. Wage reform was derived from a 1984 consensus among state bureaucrats regarding “the concretization of the resolution of an economic reform” (ibid., 202). Reformers of the central government opined that the main factors limiting productivity in state-administered cultural production¹⁰⁴ were lifelong employment and the rigid wage system. In order to incentivize cultural enterprises to increase their wages through lucrative activity, the

¹⁰⁴ The reformers considered the rigid employment and wage system as a general cause of the limitation of production motivation in almost all areas of the state-owned enterprises and institutes. For reforms in the industrial enterprises during 1984 to 1988, see Naughton 1995, pp. 200-220.

government was willing to accept gradually increasing inter-enterprise differentials in wages (ibid., 209).

In 1985,¹⁰⁵ differentials in wages were linked to the wage bill, via the productivity of performers' labor (*anlao fenpei*). In state-owned troupes, an employee's wage was divided into four parts: 1) base wage (*jichu gongzi*); 2) post wage (*zhiwu gongzi*); 3) bonus for length of service (*gongling gongzi*); and 4) reward wage (*jiangli gongzi*). This proportional wage distribution was termed the "structured wage system" (*jiegou gongzi zhi*). Implementation of the structured wage system marked the transition of state-owned Kun opera troupes from a fully state-funded institution to one funded through "balanced allocation" (*cha'e bokuan*). The latter meant that the government sought to provide moderate capital that could cover part of the entire cost, such as labor, and the remaining operational costs relied on the troupes' profitability.

The primary portion within the structured wage was the post wage, which was determined by an employee's artistic level (*yishu dengji*). Four ranks of artistry were formulated in the reform proposal, the ranking designating the range in quality of a performer's artistic achievement. A consequent measure was the codification and institutionalization of a rubric for evaluating artistic ranks (*yishu dengji pingding*). On April 1, 1986, the Leader Team of the Central, established by the central government, issued "the Notice of Artistic Professional Posts (Artistic Ranks) Experimental Rules and the Suggestions for Implementation" drafted by the Ministry of Culture (Central Leading Team for Professional Posts Reform 1986). In this evaluation rubric, nationally prestigious prizes were officially recognized as an essential indicator of the artistic quality of first

¹⁰⁵ "Wenhua bu suoshu wenhua yishu shiye danwei gongzuo renyuan gongzi zhidu gaige shishi fang'an" 文化部所属文化艺术事业单位工作人员工资制度改革实施方案 (The Measure of the Wage System Reform of Employees of Cultural and Artistic Institutions Affiliated with the Ministry of Culture). This proposal officially implemented on July 1st, 1985, became the main reference for the nationwide wage reform of performing groups affiliated with various levels of cultural administrative offices.

rank candidates. The rubric stated that:

[Those] who have highly refined artistic quality, and have achievements in terms of acting a role and portraying a character, [and] who have rich performing experience and skills, developed proficiency in skills, well-formed distinctive artistic styles, contributed magnificently to the performing arts, and enjoy nationwide fame, can be employed or appointed as first-class performers.¹⁰⁶

Although the rubric suffered from a low degree of operability due to vague terms, such as “nationwide fame,” the PBPA soon became an indicator of the highest level of artistry that Chinese opera performers could achieve.¹⁰⁷ The rubric for the “Evaluation of Artistic Levels” provided a means of directly converting cultural capital, institutionalized in performers’ honors and prizes, into economic capital in the form of wages, housing benefits, and other forms of welfare. More importantly, the accumulation of cultural capital was sanctioned as a legitimate method of accumulating profits.

The first reform measure pertained to labor reform, and it primarily entailed the state-owned groups’ gradual transition to contract-based employment. Beginning in 1986, state-owned performing groups signed contracts with performers as individual employees, depending on the individual’s artistic rank, and assigned them to different posts in accordance with their artistic ranks. Before this program, artistic labor in state-owned institutes and performing groups tacitly adhered to the unofficial practice of lifelong employment—a status enjoyed by the vast majority of China’s state labor force (Naughton 1995, 211). Under the new system, state-owned performing

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., Article 18.

¹⁰⁷ The new rubric’s replacement of the old hierarchy among performers based on career duration was not a smooth process. It took a number of years for the entire field of Chinese Opera to accept the PBPA as an undebatable indicator that proves a performer’s First Level quality. The conflict between the old rubric and the new can be seen from the incident of Tu Huiling. In 1988, a cultural cadre published an article on *Chinese Theater*, to appeal against the decline of Tu Linghui’s application of the Second Level performer. Tu is an actress of Gan opera (*Ganju*) who was awarded the PBPA in 1986. One month later, this appeal was supported by five highly esteemed cultural cadres who praised Tu’s artistic achievement and regarded her winning the PBPA as the strongest evidence of the supreme quality of her art (Xiao 1988; Yi 1988).

groups were required to hire professional cultural specialists based on employment contracts (*pinren hetong*) and to give employees corresponding post wages when they accepted a contract (Central Leading Team for Professional Posts Reform 1986). Although troupe directors did not have total authority in hiring or firing, employees could no longer enjoy legally permanent positions within the state system. The new contract-based labor system indicates the state's intention to make employment relations more flexible so as to create a motivating sense of crisis in performers who otherwise would never have worried about the security of their employment and professional careers. Employment contracts were designed to incentivize performers to link their artistic labor to the general profitability of troupes which had gradually lost financial security since the mid 1980s.

These two reform measures—wage reform and the move to contractual employment—proved to be much less effective in stimulating cultural productivity in comparison with similar measures which not only improved agricultural and industrial production between 1984 and 1988, but also led to solid economic growth and drove the transition from finely-tuned economic administration to a more de-regulated market economy. Implementation of the two reform measures did not intrinsically improve the performance of state-owned troupes. On the contrary, the economic status of these troupes worsened in two respects. First, although the measures indeed incentivized troupes who attempted to increase their performances, the market reaction was quite negative. This ultimately reduced performance activities because troupes failed to generate sufficient performance revenue to cover the expense generated in the process. One actress of the Suzhou Kun Opera Troupe, Wang Fang, recalled that her troupe had to halt performance activities due to the public's lack of interest in the late 1980s:

[The situation] was better before 1983, when audiences were still passionate about

our *chu matou* [lit. going out of harbors] shows¹⁰⁸ and [our performances] were normally fully seated. It didn't last long. The last *chu matou* we gave was in 1985. On the third day of the first month of the lunar year, we left for the area of Danyang. Normally there should be five shows in a place, but there were no spectators coming after the first two shows. We proceeded to the next 'harbor,' and had to stop after giving merely two or three shows. Actually, the society at that time was impacted by foreign influences. The most popular entertainment then was Disco and Karaoke. At that time, while walking in the street, [some] young people carried a radio player with big speakers which were playing music loudly, fully pleased with themselves! Very trendy! People didn't watch Kun opera, or other genres of Chinese operas. The entire field of Chinese operas was [experiencing] a big downturn. (Jin and Wang 2011, 132)

In this situation, reducing the number of performances became the most economical solution, as it lowered costs. The biography of Ke Jun, a First-Rank Kun opera performer of the Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Theater and 2005 PBPA awardee, describes that troupe's economic predicament, which extended well into the 1990s.

The more the troupe performed, the more they lost [economically]; it had created a vicious circle. Once they gave a performance in another city, there were twenty performers on stage, but there were only three spectators off the stage: one was sleeping, another was smoking, and the third was cracking and eating watermelon seeds!

In 1996, the troupe overcame great difficulty and mounted a new play *Kan qian nu* (The Penny-Pincher) which won a prize in an official showcase. But when they brought it to a theater, the manager squinted his eyes, knitted his brows and asked: "What genre do you play?"

"Kun opera." Ke Jun answered.

"Is each show RMB ¥2000 in the contract?" He asked again.

"Yes."

"I will give you ¥3000, and you will leave tomorrow."

The Kun opera artist's dignity was extremely hurt, and many performers started

¹⁰⁸ "*Chumatou*," or "*paomatou*" (lit. running out of harbors) refers to the performance activity of touring in a certain region. Traditionally it was a popular way of managing performances of local operas and narrative singing. *Paomatou* was discouraged in the mid-1950s when most professional artists were required to register at a local cultural administrative office and prohibited from freely giving performances in other regions.

to regret choosing Kun opera as their major at the Jiangsu Province Opera School as if it was a big mistake in their life. (Gu 2011, 2)

The cold reception of Kun opera troupes between the mid-1980s and the 1990s poses a question for the ‘incentive theory’ underpinning rationalization of state-owned performing groups: Can a state-owned troupe improve its profitability by increasing the number of its performances? Is the artists’ passion sufficient to do the work of attracting more audiences? Kun opera professionals realized that the simple strategies of reaching out or increasing performances could not solve their problems. Their market failure was not merely the result of the audience’s ignorance of their cultural products; rather, it was caused by the audience’s indifference to the plays themselves.

Unsatisfactory box-office revenues led directly to a drastic decrease in total wages after implementation of the structured wage system in the early 1990s. Considering the difficulties of achieving self-sufficiency and sustainability purely through the market revenues, the structured wage reform underwent revision several times for the benefit of state-owned institutions. In the “Notice Concerning the Acceleration and Deepening of the System Reform of Performing Arts Groups,” issued by the Ministry of Culture on September 23, 1993,¹⁰⁹ the distribution of structured wages in the field of state-owned performing groups was explicated as “the system of artistic structured wage” (*yishu jiegou gongzi zhi*), consisting in a post wage for one’s artistic profession (*yishu zhuanye zhiwu gongzi*), an allowance for cast rank (*biaoyan dangci jintie*),¹¹⁰ an allowance for the number of performances given (*yanchu changci jintie*), and a bonus (*jiangjin*). A post wage

¹⁰⁹ The Notice Concerning Speeding up and Deepening the System Reform of Artistic Professional Performing Groups, issued on September 23, 1993, Article 5, <http://www.cpll.cn/law2062.shtml>.

¹¹⁰ The performance rank refers to a performer’s specific role in a cast, varying from star (*lingxian zhuyan*), lead (*zhuyan*), secondary lead (*cizhuyan*), supporting performers (*yanyuan*), auxiliary performer (*yanchu fuzhu ren yuan*) (Guowuyuan 2005, 142).

was relatively fixed, since it was determined by a performer's artistic rank, but the other three aspects of performers' wages directly depended upon their actual performances and, hence, were quite flexible. Furthermore, the relative proportion of fixed to flexible wages was set in the "Notice about the Issue of the Wage System Reform Concerning Government Offices and Public Institutions," issued by the State Council on October 1, 1993. This notice stipulated that the fixed part of a state employee's wage (i.e., the post wage) should be 60% of the entire wage, and the flexible part, including all forms of allowances, should constitute the remaining 40% of the wage (State Council 1993). The State Council's notice was carried out by the Ministry of Personnel (*renshibu*) and the Ministry of Culture after April 19, 1994 (Ministry of Culture 1994).

According to these notices, if a troupe did not give profit-seeking performances, its performers could obtain only their post wages, which was 60% of the maximum amount they could earn. In my interviews with Kun opera professionals, two generations of performers mentioned that they got a "partial wage" in the late 1980s and the 1990s. Despite differing personal experiences in those two decades, there nonetheless existed a consensus regarding their economic predicament: Kun opera performers were poor in comparison with professionals in other fields.

With limited performance revenues, Kun opera troupes and their employees sought out alternative ways of making a profit. Starting from the mid-1980s, the Suzhou Kun Opera Troupe expanded their business into real estate by turning their office building into a hotel. Due to their location near the Suzhou Train Station, their office building became a well-known hotel that pedicab drivers would recommend to arriving passengers. As a result, the troupe was largely known for their hotel business. Troupe member Wang Fang recalled that period with a self-deprecating tone:

One day, Master Wang¹¹¹ (of Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe) joked about the huge fame of our troupe among pedicab riders. I answered that it is because we run a hotel, and the pedicab riders often transported some passengers from the train station. If the pedicab riders brought us passengers, they would be given a kickback. So many people got to know us as the Suzhou Kun Opera Troupe Hotel. At that time, a number of senior performers of the generation of inheritors (*jizibei*)¹¹² worked here as hotel staff. (Jin and Wang 2011, 132; parentheses in the original)

Such attempts to increase income by providing profit-seeking services apart from normal performance activities were cautiously encouraged by the government. As affirmed in “The Provisional Means of Developing Profit-Seeking Services and Managerial Activities of Cultural Public Institutions”—which was implemented on January 1, 1987 and co-issued by the Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Finance, and Industrial and Commercial Bureau of the State—extra ‘services’ were regarded as potentially contributive to socialist profits:

In order to better satisfy people’s needs for cultural life, and to enhance sustainability, public cultural institutions in various regions have recently exploited their knowledge, artistry, technique, and devices, etc., to develop certain paid services and acquired income for the purpose of supplementing the operational cost. [...] It is proven in practice that cultural public institutions benefit from the gradual transition from pure service relying on “allocated monthly supply” toward profit-making managerial services; and [these means] are beneficial to the supply of diverse services and the expansion of the scope, and the increase in service quality in the promotion of socialist cultural and ethnical progress; and [these means] are beneficial to the prosperity and development of cultural and artistic undertakings.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Master Wang refers to Wang Shiyu, a highly esteemed Kun opera actor of the Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe.

¹¹² Performers of the generation of inheritors are the first generation of professional Kun opera and Su opera performers who were trained in Suzhou in the early 1950s after the establishment of the PRC. Most of them were recruited in 1954 and were officially assigned posts in 1956 when the Youth Team of “the Generation of Inheritors” (*“Jizibei” qingnian yanchudui*) was affiliated with the newly nationalized Suzhou Kun Opera Troupe. Zhang Jiqing was one of the representatives.

¹¹³ “Wenhua shiye danwei kaizhan youchang fuwu he jingying huodong de zanxing banfa,” *Zhongguo gaige xinxiku* (The database of Chinese reforms), accessed March 10, 2016, <http://www.reformdata.org/index.do?m=wap&a=show&catid=320&typeid=&id=19854>.

Sanctioned by the state, such subsidiary services as running hotels superseded performances as the main service that state-owned troupes provided to achieve economic growth. This fact posed a challenge to many Kun opera professionals' belief in their primary occupation—that of artist employed by the state. Thus, the oldest extant form of Chinese opera lost its aura, and became virtually interchangeable with any other profit-making activities. From the perspective of economics, the economic value generated by a professional opera artist was even less than that generated by a hotel servant. Moreover, state-employment was no longer associated with lifelong stability and career security. As economic value became the dominant form of value, employment with a state-owned Kun opera troupe lost its social and economic advantages in the competition with other jobs.

5.1.1 Labor Migration

After the wage reforms of the mid-1980s, state-owned Kun opera troupes kept their operating budgets low, and performers had to learn to survive on a 'partial wage.' Some Kun opera professionals chose or were inclined to migrate to other fields with more economic capital, regardless of their status as state employees. There were usually three pathways for labor migration. The first was to transfer (*diaodong*) within the state system to other public institutions that had better or more stable benefits. For instance, Wang Fang's husband—who was an employee of the Suzhou Kun Opera Troupe and played the role type of *wu xiaosheng* (the martial young male role)—requested an internal transfer to the state-owned Xinhua Bookstore (*Xinhua shudian*), which was administrated by the same government office as supervised the troupe (Jin and Wang 2011, 132).

Another option was to give up state employment entirely and instead seek individual

development in the broader society—a practice called *xiahai* (lit. going out to sea). Historically, the term *xiahai* was used in Chinese opera to refer to the transformation of an opera amateur, performing for self-entertainment, into a professional performer, performing for monetary gain.¹¹⁴ From the mid-1980s, the term *xiahai* gained new meaning in China—not only among the Chinese opera performers but also in other areas—as it came to refer to the transformation of state employees who reserved their labor exclusively for the government enterprises and in return received relatively fixed salaries, into independent individuals who exchanged labor for profit not only to ensure their survival but to maximize their own individual interests. *Xiahai* or “going out to sea” became a trend as the private sector of China’s economy rapidly grew. The owners of private enterprises were usually willing to pay higher remuneration, and that compensation was a strong attraction that many Kun opera professionals could not resist. Indeed, some chose to “go out to sea” regardless of professional specialty.

In the early 1990s, the trend of “going out to sea” had formed in the field of state-owned Kun opera troupes. Wang Fang was one of the many who attempted to expand their opportunities:

[My husband] left the troupe in 1985. After that, many male colleagues from our work unit also left, with the concern about having no future [if they stayed]. The Peking Opera troupe [in Jiangsu Province] was dismissed. Everyone was worried that the Kun opera troupe might be dismissed as well... [In 1990,] I think, I needed to learn a skill that could support my survival, at least as a means of making a living. So, I applied for a job at a wedding photography studio, a Sino-foreign equity joint venture (*zhongwai hezi*), and learned to do bridal makeup. I started from the most fundamental work, from cutting films, editing photographic negatives, to the reception desk, and to doing makeup, directing poses and managing outfits, and designing hair styles, etc. I learned very quickly and well and soon took charge of all of these divisions. (Jin and Wang 2011, 133)

¹¹⁴ Historically, the phenomenon of “*xiahai*” was a controversial, and therefore, difficult choice for amateurs due to the low social status of opera performers. *Xiahai* in relation to amateur performers in the early twentieth century has been studied by Ren, Rong (2015).

The job at the wedding photography studio brought Wang much better remuneration — twenty times her wage with the troupe. As she compared it: “I got the highest wage at the troupe at that time, which was merely RMB ¥140 per month; after I worked at the wedding photography studio, my boss gave me RMB ¥3000 each month. Economically, it was very generous” (ibid., 133). Despite the economic advantages of working at private enterprises, holding a position within the state system was still considerably significant. Hence, in 1990, many performers who migrated to other areas obtained an indefinite unpaid leave of absence (*tingxin liuzhi*), hoping that they could return once the troupe’s finances improved. For instance, Wang Fang requested unpaid leave in 1990 and returned back to the troupe in 1994; in the interim, she volunteered in the troupe’s public performances without requiring pay.

A third option available to Kun opera performers was to work part-time while keeping their position in the troupe. Throughout the 1990s, the relationship between performers and their home troupes became increasingly flexible due to the low economic capital of Kun opera. Maintaining one’s status as a state employee while earning extra income at private enterprises became a common survival strategy for many professionals. The fewer performances they gave, the more time they could dedicate to part-time work. And, in some cases, the part-time employment became their primary source of income, rendering their work with the troupe less significant. The experience of Zhang Jun, a famous performer of the *sheng* role who worked at the Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe between 1994 to 2009, exemplifies many state-employed Kun opera professionals’ hesitancy when faced with the choice between a professional career in the troupe and part-time employment outside the field of Kun opera. After graduating in 1993 from the Shanghai Chinese Opera School (*Shanghai shi xiqu xuexiao*), Zhang Jun was accepted in 1994 by the Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe. That same year, he organized a popular music band called “The Eastern Tribe”

(*Dongfang buluo*), which later changed its name to “*Feng*” (The wind). The band consisted of Zhang and two classmates from opera school who were also colleagues in the troupe: Ding Shengyang, who played the role of *laosheng* (the elderly male role), and Sun Jinghua, who was trained in the role of *xiao hualian* (the small, painted-face role, often known as ‘the clown’). These three young musicians quickly fostered a routine in which they worked with senior performers at the troupe during the day and then rushed to the pubs to earn extra income (*zhuan waikuai*) playing popular music at night. The income they earned over several nights of performing in pubs was equal to their monthly wage in the troupe. Moreover, they experienced a sense of self-achievement when performing at the pubs. As Zhang Jun said: “What intrigued us [at the pub] was happiness. To master those popular songs was like an easy drive on a familiar path; turning two somersaults could immediately bring you acclamation, applause, fresh flowers, and money. Everything turned out to be so easy, even sparing us from sweat” (Zhang 2008b, 99).

However, with the rising popularity of their band, these young performers’ busy schedule of commercial pop shows started to conflict with their primary jobs in Kun opera. In 1997, Zhang Jun was forced to make a difficult choice between a ten-year contract with AVEX, a Japanese entertainment company, and an opportunity to play the protagonist role in a full-length production of *The Peony Pavilion*, directed by Chen Shizheng. This version of *The Peony Pavilion* included all fifty-five excerpts, the total runtime of which was twenty-one hours, and therefore required the cast’s full-time devotion. Ultimately, Zhang Jun chose Kun opera. He quoted his teacher Cai Zhengren to summarize the final result of his inner struggle:

[My teacher] said, everyone can hardly avoid the desire [for monetary gain]; the strong ones can control it, and the weak ones are fooled by it; he said, it is young people’s privilege to wade in the river groping for stones,¹¹⁵ and it’s also an

¹¹⁵ The idiom of “to wade in the river groping for stones” (*mozhe shitou guohe*) is a metaphoric expression that describes an unfamiliar situation in which people have no precedent to refer to. It first appeared in a talk that Chen

inevitable test for young people; he said, if one is unsure about what Kun opera means for him or her, then what's the use of others' intervention? (Zhang 2008b, 100)

Although Zhang Jun chose to be the “strong one” and fight against his desire for monetary benefits, his partner Ding Shengyang chose to completely change fields and to explore his potential in the commercial entertainment industry. Ding left the Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe, changed his name into Ding Xiaofeng, and began his career as a professional TV host.

The migration of artistic labor from Kun opera was directly caused by the decline in the conversion of cultural capital to economic capital. In the market economy, earning monetary benefit became the new criteria of success, one which reconstructed the value hierarchy of performing arts on the basis of consumer demand, thus redefining the value of performers' labor. The privilege Kun opera derived from state support quickly dissolved in the market, which was increasingly affected by the purchasing power of individual consumers. Even the extolling of Kun opera's cultural values through the contest of PBPA could not elevate the genre's status in this new economic hierarchy.

However, many Kun opera performers, particularly those PBPA awardees, still maintained a strong belief in the socio-cultural values of their cultural capital, even though it was not recognized by outsiders. This belief provided the basis for their own personal motivation and expectations for self-fulfillment, and their persistent devotion to Kun opera performances continued to exalt the genre. Indeed, French theorist Pierre Bourdieu has argued that the artistic or scholastic consecration correlates with artists' and scholars' ambition of production (Bourdieu 1993, 136). This point helps explain Kun opera professionals' belief in their vocation to continue

Yun, one of the core leaders who took charge of economy, gave in 1950. Its far-reaching influence is usually attributed to Chen's re-use in 1980, and later quoted by Chairmen Deng Xiaoping.

their careers with little or no economic profit. During the economic difficulties of the 1980s and 1990s, there was a related correspondence between a Kun opera artists' "vocation" and their sense of self-fulfillment, gained through acquisition of the best possible symbolic return. A number of Kun opera professionals were able to maintain their ambition through a pursuit of symbolic return. For instance, when Zhang Jun chose to stay in the Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe rather than sign a commercial contract with AVEX Entertainment Company, he had the high expectation of performing the protagonist role in the most complete version of *The Peony Pavilion* in his time, which in his understanding carried great significance. He described this choice as "self-evident," saying "actually I was crystal clear in my mind, and I did not need to choose, because Kun opera has been blended into my blood, so how can I abandon it?!" (Zhang 2008b, 100). This sense of inseparability was determined by his feeling for 'vocation,' and an unquestioning belief in the cultural and artistic values of the artistic genre. In a similar case, Wang Fang made her ultimate choice to leave her well-paid subsidiary job as a make-up artist and return to the Suzhou Kun Opera Troupe in 1994. She explained that she made this decision because she felt that a PBPA awardee was responsible for her home troupe. Referring to herself, she stated:

Actually, you were not an ordinary performer, because you got The Plum Blossom Performance Award, so you have a different identity, and also a responsibility (*zeren*). For instance, [you] would not easily complain about the difficulties and trouble you had, because you represent the Suzhou Kun Opera Troupe; maybe there are things that you were originally unwilling to do, but [now] feel that you should do. You are the only PBPA awardee of the troupe, so you represent the troupe, not merely yourself, ... because you are the symbol of the troupe. (Jin and Wang 2011, 133)

Wang's responsibility to represent her troupe was derived from her embodied cultural capital as a PBPA awardee. The prestige and recognition she obtained through the contest made her one of the top performers in her field. As a result, the core values of Kun opera became highly meaningful to her and could not be easily replaced by economic profits.

In the 1950s, no Kun opera play aroused a such sensation as did *The Fifteen Strings of Cash*—a single play, the artistic and political values of which were extoled by the political leaders of the state, and which pushed the entire genre to the summit of planned Kun opera production, overshadowing other performing arts forms. Kun opera troupes’ clients and patrons multiplied, expanding from state patrons to heterogeneous audiences. Thus, their status in the cultural competition with their artistic peers shifted, the rules of which depended on the cultural choices of the majority of audiences. These new criteria for judging cultural products cultivated a new hierarchy of material and symbolic profits (such as box-office revenues and fan bases), which particular practices or artistic creations were able to procure.

This new cultural and economic context presented an enormous challenge to Kun opera troupes. The special grant they received from the state may be conceived as interim financial support from a primary patron who encouraged them to increase their market share. Wage reform was one among many top-down measures implemented to stimulate the productivity of state-employed Kun opera artists who took the stability of state employment for granted. However, these measures did not intrinsically improve the competitiveness of Kun opera in the marketplace, mainly because they had minimum effects on influencing consumers’ aesthetic dispositions. The measures failed to increase market demand. Ironically, in the two decades of their implementation, the continuous decline of Kun opera marketability led directly to the affirmation of the consecration of Kun opera among the professionals. Simultaneously, many were less certain about their “vocation” as performers and started to doubt their choice as Kun opera performers, and some even began to envision Kun opera as a genre without a future.

The rationalization of state-owned troupes from the mid-1980s through the 1990s resulted in a steady outflow of professional labor that had enduring ramifications for the field of Kun opera.

In 2006, only about seven hundred Kun opera professionals worked at six state-owned Kun opera troupes and one state-owned Kun opera institute. Among these, only about three hundred could give performances (Zheng 2006, 96). These three hundred professionals were given the honorific title “the three hundred heroes” (*sanbai zhuangshi*)—a metaphorical expression honoring their courage to hold fast to Kun opera in an environment of fierce competition for survival in an increasingly capitalized cultural market (*ibid.*).

5.2 INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL ACQUISITION OF ECONOMIC CAPITAL

In the 1990s, economic capital became increasingly important and could no longer be conceived as subordinate to political or cultural capital, as in the command economy. The acquisition of economic capital enabled people to purchase goods and, purportedly, to achieve individual gratification through these purchases. The tension between demand and supply began to change in the early 1990s, when a buyer’s market emerged in which consumer expenditure began to shift from food to other goods, including cultural products (Yan 2009, 214). People began to purchase goods that they wanted but did not necessarily need; hence, a variety of purchase desires formed that quickly grew beyond state ideology. Consumer accumulation of economic capital catalyzed a tension between consuming individuals and the state. With the development of private cultural business, economic capital increasingly circulated outside the public sector of state-sanctioned cultural production. For cultural producers, resources for the acquisition of economic capital were divided into what I call ‘internal acquisition’—the acquisition of economic capital within the state system of cultural production—and ‘external acquisition’—that is, acquisition of economic capital circulating outside the state system, in economic relations between private enterprises and

individual consumers. The latter external acquisition, is what “the market” in government documents most attest. Between the state and the market, state-owned Kun opera troupes navigated economic changes by developing a new repertoire of neo-classical plays that could both fit in the cultural sovereignty of nationalism and assimilate with the choices of the buying public.

In this section, I will outline the tension between consumer and government interests during the 1990s, and analyze state-owned Kun opera troupes’ reckoning with the conflicting value systems embedded in those interests. This section will begin from Kun opera professionals’ understanding of the consumption needs of the mass market and their consequent exploration of values reified in the connection between Kun opera traditional plays and Chinese classical literature. I will then describe a return to and enhancement of the political frame of state socialism and nationalism, which was ignited in 1990 in fierce opposition to the neo-liberalization movement of 1989. I will further explore how Kun opera professionals made use of the key nationalist political concept “excellent national culture,” and pursued state investment to develop a renovated classical repertoire that would simultaneously appeal to the public.

I argue that state-owned Kun opera troupes acquired economic capital from both the state and the market. Their exploration of renovated classic plays from the Kun opera repertoire in the early 1990s was a result of professionals’ marketing experimentation with individual consumers’ inclination, using financial support they had won from the state. Accordingly, it was with a new kind of flexibility, rooted in internal and external acquisition of economic capital, that state-owned Kun opera troupes secured sufficient resources to create and reproduce their cultural products.

5.2.1 Understanding Consumers' Needs

State-owned Kun opera troupes drastically changed their attitude toward market dynamics and consumer needs in the early 1990s. Many professionals began to realize that the relative popularity of their plays also influenced their status in the cultural hierarchy. This stemmed from the realization that many of the award-winning plays of Kun opera were not as popular as they were expected to be in the market, despite the fact that performers achieved high honors in contests and plays were heavily promoted by opera professionals and cultural cadres within the state system. Moreover, the unreliability of the state subsidy put them in a financially precarious position, forcing them to find economic success on the open market, outside the protections of the state system. Thus, the question of whether artists should cater to the masses by lowering their artistic quality was gradually replaced with the new question of how to renovate the genre based on what they were already producing to fit the needs of the increasingly significant clientele, i.e. consuming individuals.

Increased appreciation for the patronage of individual consumers was an investable result of the increasingly capitalized society then opening up in China. The decade-long financial difficulty in Kun opera dispelled the myth of restricted production, that is, the reliance on state support. The general reticence of Kun opera practitioners to cater to the masses was not an absolute disavowal of economic capital, but rather a refusal to acquire economic capital outside the state system. In the early 1990s, there were still a few scholars who appealed to Kun opera professionals to remain dedicated to pure aesthetics, regardless of monetary profits, and to learn from the older generation of performers, who gave performances despite a lack of basic necessities to live (Li 1991, 46). Then, in the mid-1990s, the critical role of economic capital in the production of Kun opera became unavoidable. As one advocate of economic reforms for state-owned troupes wrote

in 1996: “the capital used for artistic creation and production is the source of a troupe’s life, without which a troupe can hardly speak of its survival and development” (Chang 1996, 23).

To acquire more economic capital, Kun opera professionals began currying favor from the state system of performing arts. In addition to the internal capital granted by the state, the external form of capital, from the buying public, became an increasingly valuable source. In the mid-1990s, the prosperity of Chinese opera troupes depended upon the consumption needs of the buying public, consisting of individuals who consumed operas based on their own aspirations. According to some scholars of Chinese theater studies, the purchasing power of consuming individuals was increasingly depicted as a decisive determinant for Chinese opera. For instance, one Chinese opera specialist wrote:

If there are no spectators, there are no dramas. [...] In the history of Chinese culture and arts, no other artistic form has had a larger receptive population than Chinese operas. Chinese operas were essentially derived from the populace, rooted in and cultivated from the soil of people’s life. The populace, mainly consisting of peasants, city dwellers, as well as medium-and-low-level landowners, and lowborn intellectuals, constitute the majority of Chinese opera audiences. It is because of the populace that the mainstream of healthy and distinctive Chinese operas was shaped; without them, Chinese operas would not have emerged. (Zhao 1990, 1-2)

Zhao depicted the “populace”—meaning a large crowd not affiliated with the government or other forms of legitimate power—as a group of cultural consumers who had access to Chinese opera and were capable of engaging in the reception of operas for centuries. The “mainstream of healthy and distinctive Chinese opera” was a defense against the prevailing dismissal of popular taste, and hence against the longstanding notion that Chinese operas must be censored before they reached the masses. Moreover, audiences were not merely passive receptors. Rather, Zhao attributed Chinese opera’s artistic achievements to the populace’s long-term choices, and he

accordingly regarded the general public as an indirect creator of the operatic arts. The cultural status of consuming individuals was for the first time appreciated in the field of Chinese opera production.

The relationship between artists as cultural producers and audiences as cultural consumers may seem a natural byproduct of the cultural market by those accustomed to a market economy which involves minimum government intervention. But, for cultural agents living through the transition from a planned economy to a market economy, Zhao's opinion is relatively subversive. He fully recognized the legitimacy and agency of anonymous audiences whose consumption choices may shape cultural products, and at the same time calls into question the feasibility of cultural planners' programming and filtering of cultural products.

This reading precipitated further studies of how Kun opera troupes attracted audiences by altering the genre to accord with consumer needs. For instance, Chinese theater specialist Zhang Geng examines key features of consuming individuals with regards to the elasticity and the heterogeneity of consumption needs. In this work, the audience was defined as a collective—one comprised of various individuals, all belonging to different social classes and each with varying cultural tastes, who were gathered as one in the same performance space—and this collective audience was the key determinant of the success of a play. But if audience dispositions were excessively heterogeneous, the wide variance of their reactions might prevent the cultivation of a tolerant or favorable atmosphere (Zhang 1990, 12). In addition, audiences' tastes were conceived as fluid dispositions that favored the new rather than the old (*xixin yanjiu*). Moreover, the aesthetic needs of different generations were not identical (ibid., 21-22). Therefore, in order to renovate Chinese opera, Zhang suggested expanding the repertoire, and he encouraged the study of realistic aesthetics, as epitomized by Western theater arts, as well as exploration of the directors'

significance in the contemporary production of Chinese operas.

5.2.2 Nation and “Outstanding National Culture”

The mounting significance of economic capital empowered the masses as consuming individuals, but weakened the state’s control of social life. Consumers’ expanding interests soon encompassed various subjects that were discouraged by the government—from soft romantic songs to lyrics that expressed individualism and individual freedom. Through consumption practices, individual consumers’ curiosities and desires were expanded beyond the comfort zone of the party-state and, in 1989, gave rise to a pro-democracy movement that transformed China’s public sphere in a number of ways.

First, the central government reinitiated a propaganda campaign promoting “Outstanding National Culture” in order to fight against the “spiritual pollution” embedded in cultural products imported from the West. Second, the party-state sought to invigorate state cultural production through investment in state-owned performing groups, and to thereby influence the public in the cultural market. In this political situation, state-owned Kun opera troupes reinterpreted the values of Kun opera, vis-a-vis the renewed nationalist frame, and they negotiated with the state for a new wave of internally sourced economic capital, largely through their reckoning with genealogies of the “Outstanding National Culture.”

Sociologist Anthony Smith’s analysis of national symbols helps me understand the change in the basic tenets of nationalism from socialist ideologist toward cultural heritages. Smith noted that “the panoply of national symbols only serves to express, represent and reinforce the boundary definition of the nation, and to unite the members inside through a common imagery of shared memories, myths and values” (Smith 2010, Kindle Location 286-288). The events at Tian’anmen

Square in June 1989 interrupted neoliberal economic reforms, marking a turning point in China's political and economic transformation.¹¹⁶ Party authorities ascribed the political turmoil to adverse ideological influences from Western capitalist countries; the iconoclast ideology of Maoism and alleged socialist egalitarian society nonetheless were no longer the basic ideal of the nationalist ideology. New nationalist symbols were needed to epitomize the special qualities of China.

In this situation, the genealogy of Chinese traditional culture was given unprecedented significance in the PRC, for it offered a sense of national unity, national autonomy, and national identity that most Chinese advocated. And music genres, performing arts, works of literature and other artistic forms that have a long history along the genealogy were candidates for nationalist symbols. In 1990, the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee promoted "Outstanding National Culture" as a legitimate scope in which appropriate nationalist symbols could be selected.

On January 10, 1990, at the Forum on National Literature and Art Work, Li Ruihuan, Politburo of the 13th CPC Central Committee, approached the representatives of all cultural cadres within the state system, stating:

The most severe influence from the Bourgeois liberalization (*zichan jieji ziyouhua*) impacted the battlefield of literature and arts. There are some articles and works against the Four Cardinal Principles (*sixiang jiben yuanze*),¹¹⁷ disseminating skeptical-ness and mistrust against the Party and socialism; some people were involved in the political turmoil between the spring and summer last year, and few even stood on the opposite side of the Party and the people. To encounter this situation, comrades from the field of literature and arts should have a clear understanding, and should not underestimate [the situation], nor cover up

¹¹⁶ The event at Tian'anmen Square in June 1989 is also known as the June Fourth Incident. The events initiated from the student and intellectual movement opposed to monopoly and special privileges and aimed at promoting democracy. The protest escalated into a conflict between protesters and the government in Beijing through April and May. After the government condemned the protests as a counter-revolutionary riot, the Party authorities declared martial law on May 20th, and the protest was suppressed on June 4th. The public discussion and remembrance of the events are still prohibited until this day, and the official description of the events has been characterized as "political turmoil."

¹¹⁷ Stated by Deng Xiaoping in 1979, the Four Cardinal Principles refer to the four non-negotiable issues of the politics in China, which are the principle of upholding the socialist path, the principle of upholding the people's democratic dictatorship, the principle of upholding the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, and the principle of upholding Mao Zedong Thought and Marxism-Leninism.

[the problems]. [...] In the meantime, [we] should vigorously promote those practices that advocate socialist literature and arts, occupy the ideological and cultural territory with healthy and outstanding works of literature and arts, in order to effectively weaken and even diminish the influence from the Bourgeois liberalization, and to consolidate and expand our achievement of anti-Bourgeois-liberalization. (Li 1990)

In the same speech, Li interpreted the most important political concept to impact the development of Kun opera throughout the 1990s, namely, “Outstanding National Culture” (*youxiu minzu wenhua*).¹¹⁸ He stated:

Whether in the East or the West, every nation in the world has its unique and specific culture. Culture and arts cannot be separated from people’s lives, conventions, thoughts, and emotions. Due to the differences between various’ people’s languages, between historical developments, geographical environments, and forms of economic and social developments, there always exists an issue of national forms and national styles of culture and arts. Relatively speaking, the national conservativeness of culture and arts is strong, for many classical works can last for centuries, and will still be transmitted and adored by successors. It is a commonly shared regular phenomenon in the history of the development of human beings. [The national culture] constitutes the psychological bond that connects members in a nation together and forms an essential part of the life of a nation. To achieve the prosperity of literature and arts, a country must concentrate on the research and transmission of characteristics, styles, and outstanding heritages of its national culture. In the thorough change of social reforms, in the radical process of modernization, there will inevitably emerge new changes regarding the content and form of culture, but the study of characteristics of national culture should never be neglected. To discard the outstanding cultural heritages of a nation will not only be a tragedy of the nation itself, but also the loss of all human beings. (ibid.)

Li’s talk essentially frames national culture as a genealogy of cultural practices.

Anthropologist Jessica Winegar argues in her study of the politics of Egyptian arts that nationalist

¹¹⁸ The meaning of “*minzu*” is notoriously slippery in official documents of the PRC. It can refer to ethnic groups as in *shaoshu minzu* (ethnic minority); used without a prefix, it denotes “nationality,” as it often appears in government documents and public press. Therefore, the *minzu wenhua* refers to its macro connotation as “national culture,” rather than “culture of ethnic groups.”

ideology in socialist Egypt became the dominant frame cementing the historical constitution of visual arts through the institutions of colonialism and, later, nationalist socialism and national ideology, through which the majority of artists made sense of their social transformation (Winegar 2006, 2). I argue that “Outstanding National Culture” in the Chinese government’s agenda played a very similar role by forging the genealogies of Chinese national culture. The concept of “Outstanding National Culture” provided new significance for those artistic genres and cultural conventions that were long-established but increasingly marginalized in processes of modernization in China. In this way, it incorporated these genres into a political domain to which they had not historically belonged. The state’s attempt to exploit cultural traditions for the enhancement of nationalist socialist solidarity was rooted in a conception of “nationalism” as a sentiment that was not purely political, but cultural as well. In other words, the state intentionally forged a cultural identity of ‘Chinese-ness,’ at the cost of stereotyping cultural forms, thereby divorcing relevant cultural practices from their original practitioners (Helbig 2009, 178-80). The separation of purely cultural and political forms of national sentiment helped foster a sense of cultural nationalism that was primarily concerned with cultural identity, social harmony, and moral purpose (Smith 2010, Kindle locations 1697-98). The power of cultural nationalism was that it appealed to political authority as a way of restoring social harmony and arousing public awareness regarding so-called ‘cultural invasion’ and ideological permeation from the capitalist West. Hence, political authority might deploy such power as a psychological adhesive to bind social members of the nation together when the legitimacy of political nationalism was challenged.

Meanwhile, the talk did not provide a set of rubrics for evaluation of the “outstanding-ness” or prominence of national culture. On one hand, this ambiguity left political authority the right to reinterpret or readjust their rubrics in accordance with political needs; on the other hand, it created

flexibility for Chinese opera performers to reckon with political values in relation to their own needs.

My use of the term “reckoning” is inspired by Winegar’s argument that “reckoning is a way of creating knowledge that can be a new formulation but is never without reference to a ‘tradition’ in the sense of a set of discourses” (Winegar 2006, 7) Thus, ‘reckoning’ constitutes an interpretive and social process. Beginning in 1990, Kun opera agents honed a survival strategy vis-à-vis the party-state’s promotion of national culture. In this situation, historical constitution of the genre became a value resource from which Kun opera performers could augment and extend the meanings of their performances. As political specialist John Armstrong puts it: “an extended temporal perspective is especially important as a means of perceiving modern nationalism as part of a cycle of ethnic consciousness” (Armstrong 1982, 4). Kun opera was thus given particular meaning as Kun opera agents reached back into the past and then moved forward, integrating the past they had reclaimed into a renewed “national culture.” Kun opera, as the oldest extant Chinese opera, had an advantage with respect to the conception of long-term history in helping create a continuum of ‘Chinese-ness’, a cultural identity and a collective sentiment. And the destination of genealogies of the national culture would return to current cultural sovereignty, as governed by the CPC.

This interrelationship between cultural nationalism and political nationalism in the 1990s helped explain two changes in the field of Chinese indigenous opera. The first change was that the state took over the rights for hosting contests—including the Plum Blossom Performance Award—and re-invested in state-owned troupes which performed indigenous operatic genres. The second change was opera professionals’ ‘reckoning’ with the genealogies of Outstanding National Culture.

With respect to the first of these changes, in Spring, 1990, after Li Ruihuan’s address, the

Ministry of Culture decided to allocate a special fund to support the PBPA (Zhongguoxijiu 1990b, 5). Then, on June 15, 1990, the PBPA award ceremony was broadcast live on the China Central Television, Channel 1 at 7:45pm; Li Ruihuan attended the ceremony (see Figure 3), together with other high-ranking leaders from the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee (Zhongguo xijuZhongguoxijiu 1990a, 5). Their appearance legitimized the political cache of the award and garnered nationwide media coverage. The organization committee made several changes in response. For instance, they added various forms of patriotic education to the series of awarding activities, consisting in various forms of patriotic education (e.g. visiting the newly built accommodation village for participants of the 1990 Beijing Asian Games), such that ceremony activities lasted a whole week. The PBPA's press report had a strong tone of social struggle in which the award was described as giving motivation to all awardees who would continue their battle in cultural competition against their cultural rivals. For instance, the closing sentence of a report in *Zhongguo xiju* was that: "Up till now, awardees have brought the central officials' orders and their peers' expectations in Beijing with them, and return to the frontier of artistic creation to encounter the new change!" (ibid.).

The government's promotion of "national culture" extended to an international level in 2000, when China enthusiastically participated in UNESCO's program to recognize "masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity." Wang Ankui, a Chinese theater specialist at the Chinese National Academy of Arts, announced that he was commissioned by the Bureau of Foreign Relations to organize a team to take charge of compiling the application file of Kun opera (Wang Ankui, pers. comm., 2012). In 2001, UNESCO proclaimed Kun opera as one of "the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity" (ICH)—the first ICH proclamation that China received.



Figure 3. Li Ruihuan (center) with five awardees of the 1990 Plum Blossom Performance Award at the award ceremony.

Economically, the input of political capital into Chinese opera precipitated a new source of internal economic capital, as well as a new wave of state funding for state-owned troupes and their employees. After Li Ruihuan's talk, the Ministry of Culture allocated funds to support the 1990 Plum Blossom Performance Award (*Zhongguo xiju* 1990a). Apart from the financial support of the PBPA, the government also increased investment in Chinese indigenous opera by establishing official awards directly organized by the Ministry of Culture, such as the Wenhua award, in 1990. That year, Kun opera actress, Hu Jinfang, from the Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Theater, won the award, together with other eight performers from other genres. The government hosted more showcases and short-term training programs in which only state-employed opera performers were eligible to participate. For instance, the fifth showcase and symposium for indigenous opera performers (*di wu jie xiqu yanyuan guanmo Jiangxi hui*) was held by the Ministry of Culture and

the Chinese Theater Association between December 20, 1990, and January 14, 1991. During this showcase and symposium, participants were required to accept ideological education focusing on how to construct the correct view of arts and artistic belief, and how to choose the correct artistic career as a young or middle-aged performer. Attendance at Li Ruihuan's symposium talk was listed as one of four main tasks of this component (Lin 1991, 10). The costs associated with these activities were fully reimbursed by the state. All these measures, carried out via internal capital, were aimed at cultivating the growth of cultural products that epitomized "national culture" and could arouse patriotic feelings in consumers.

Some articles by influential cultural cadres published between 1990 and 1991 also continued promoting Party leadership in the contemporary history of Chinese operas—such as Liu Naichong's article "Dang de lingdao shi xiqu gongzuo de shengming suo xi" ("The Life of Work of Chinese Operas is Tied to the Party's Leadership," (Liu 1990), and Ma Shaobo's article "Xiqu gaige shi Zhongguo Gongchandang de guanghui yeji" ("Opera Reform is a Magnificent Achievement of the CPC," (Ma 1991).

The Party's investment in Chinese indigenous opera provided an opportunity for Kun opera professionals to request internal capital in order to support declining state-owned Kun opera troupes. In the early 1990s, cultural cadres with political influence suggested that the government increase financial support for Chinese indigenous operas. For instance, in 1991, Zhao Xun, a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and Vice President of China Theater Association, made a speech at the Fourth Session of the Seventh National People's Congress and Political Consultative Conference. In this speech, he said that implementation of the promotion of national culture, as proposed by the central government, should rely, primarily, on an increase in state subsidies and, secondarily, on the formulation of

specific policies to protect those arts. Zhang Jiqing, then-director of the Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Theater, officially complained to the government about the failures of rationalization and problems of labor migration, stating:

Due to the high expense of giving performances, the more we perform the more expenditure we face. In order to reduce the cost, the troupe chooses not to perform at all. The remuneration of opera performers is really low, so some chose to make popular music, and some to make TV dramas. How can [we] revitalize national performing arts, to promotion national culture? We need to focus on traditional plays, but also need to work on new plays. (Xin 1991, 3)

Kun opera agents spoke out strongly in July 1993. Fifteen highly influential theater specialists and cultural officials—including some renowned theater masters, such as Cao Yu and A Jia—jointly filed an appeal to the government for increased funding for state-owned Kun opera troupes. In this appeal, these theater specialists stressed the cultural importance of Kun opera as the origin of Chinese indigenous operas, arguing that “Kun opera is the representative genre of Chinese traditional opera. It not only represents the apex of literature and performing arts, but also nurtured many other brother genres” (A 1993, 17). In addition, they urged the relevant cultural administrative offices to organize a nationwide showcase for young Kun opera performers in early 1994, to arrange classical play showcases of Kun opera within three or five years, and to establish a fund of five million RMB which would support the development of Kun opera. Last but not least, they urged the government to implement two official documents, issued in 1986, which promised the allocation of special grants for state-owned Kun opera troupes (*ibid.*).

Furthermore, the Revitalization Committee of Kun Opera (*Zhenxing Kunju zhidao weiyuanhui*) established in January 1986 was also accused of having a purely nominal existence (*Zhongguo xiju* 1993, 19). Kun opera agents took this opportunity to question why top-down measures and programs suffered from a fade-out implementation, characterized by an energetic

beginning upon implementation and a gradual decline into relative oblivion. Their appeal ended with an affirmation of the social value of Kun opera as an icon of “national culture,” noting: “Currently, Kun opera encounters numerous difficulties. We sincerely hope that the relevant offices of the government and the society can pay attention to it, enhance the leadership and support, and make this old tree re-bloom. It fulfills the need for promoting Outstanding National Culture, as well as strengthening national confidence and dignity” (ibid.).

In the following years, the state fulfilled this request. On June 15, 1994, the First Exchange Showcases of Young Kun Opera Performers were held in Beijing; it was hosted by government offices, the Party’s mass media, and association under the state’s administration, including the Art Bureau of the Ministry of Culture, the CCTV, the Department of Culture and Arts of the People’s Daily, the Bureau of Culture of the Municipal Government of Beijing, and the Chinese Kun Opera Research Association. The event enjoyed the support of several provincial governments as well, such as the Department of Arts of the Jiangsu Province, the Department of Arts of the Zhejiang Province, the Department of Arts of the Hunan Province, and the Bureau of Culture of the Municipal Government of Shanghai, and the city government of Suzhou (Cong 1994). By coordinating these government branches, the joint host assembled a nationwide showcase with ninety-six participants, most of whom were young and hailed from six state-owned Kun opera troupes, the National Academy of Chinese Theater Arts (*Zhongguo xiqu xueyuan*), or an amateur society of Kun opera from Japan.¹¹⁹

After UNESCO’s ICH proclamation in 2001, the Ministry of Culture prepared to allocate special funds for the preservation of ICH. Multiple measures were implemented to provide

¹¹⁹ To include amateurs’ Kun opera societies abroad has become a common means used in official cultural events to indicate the international influence of the events. Similar methods were also used to promote other genres of Chinese indigenous music, such as *Jiangnan sizhu* (Witzleben 1995). See Lawrence Witzleben 1995.

financial support for ICH genres, such as the establishment of national level ICH and the institution of transmitters, among other things (Rees 2012). Kun opera—the oldest Chinese operatic genre and first cultural form to be awarded ICH status—was again accorded prestige. From 2005, the Ministry of Culture began to organize training programs in Beijing, Suzhou, Shanghai, Nanjing, and Hangzhou, and fully covered the expense of these undertakings. In October 2009, the Ministry of Culture launched the ‘Safeguarding, Preservation and Support Program of National Kun Opera Art.’¹²⁰ In this program, Kun opera was designated the “ancestor of hundreds of Chinese operas” (*baixi zhizu*) due to its influence on subsequent genres, including Peking opera. As part of the program, both central and local governments would provide special funding to support performance and transmission activities of state-owned Kun opera troupe.

The production mode of official events, like the 1st Exchange Showcase in 1994, returned to the planned production model of the command economy, as arrangements for the event relied completely on coordination with administrative organs. Thus, production was more closely related to the closed circuit of Kun opera cultural producers than to the public. Kun and Peking opera specialist Cong Zhaohuan described the showcase as a “dream-come-true” that Kun opera professionals had harbored since 1990 (Cong 1994, 15). This was a metaphorical expression of Kun opera professionals’ desire for internal capital from the state to help them survive intense market competition. Many professionals came to realize that their decade-long efforts to convert cultural capital into economic capital failed to cover even their basic operational costs. Hence, they needed some stable financial input that could be achieved via internal capital, that is, via state investment in Kun opera troupes.

The production of Kun opera in the 1990s largely hinged on negotiations between state-

¹²⁰ Index no. 000014348/2009-03477, issued by the Office of Arts, the Ministry of Culture on Oct 27, 2009.

owned troupes and the cultural branches of the government. The announcement of “Outstanding National Culture” in 1990 provided Kun opera professionals with a new political frame, within which they might reckon with the exigencies of national culture. The announcement also gave Kun opera an advantage in securing state investment. However, the political frame in the 1990s differed from that of previous periods in that a new link between Kun opera professionals’ labor and their remuneration was established, and political recognition became important only when it could garner state investment. As a result, the acquisition of external capital from the cultural market became the main motivation of long-term production; thus, the future of Kun opera also depended on the troupes’ production of popular plays for which consumers would be willing to play.

5.3 NEO-CLASSICAL GRAND OPERAS

The development of a new Kun opera repertoire played an essential role in both Kun opera troupe’s negotiation for political investment and their pursuit of individual consumption needs. On the one hand, Kun opera agents developed productions carefully within the boundary of permissibility set forth by the government’s nationalist frame; on the other, they began to explore what kind of performances might appeal to audiences. A successful Kun opera repertoire needed to meet both political criteria *and* the cultural market’s consumption needs. The result was what I term a “neo-classical repertoire,” consisting of grand operas (*daxi*) based on Chinese classical literature. The creation of this neo-classical repertoire fulfilled the state-owned Kun opera troupes’ dual pursuit of internal and external capital: on the one hand, many repertoire plays were awarded the government’s prizes honoring excellent works that represented “Outstanding National Culture”; on the other hand, these plays were well received in theaters and gradually evolved into what many

state-owned Kun opera troupes represented as “traditional” plays later in the twenty-first century.

In this section, I analyze three features of this neo-classical repertoire: (a) historical plots deriving from Chinese classical literature; (b) the contemporary composition of complete dramas; and (c) modern staging with new directing ideas.

5.3.1 Chinese Classical Literature

Most Kun opera scholars considered the renewed concentration on Chinese classical literature to be self-evident, because it resumed a long tradition of staging Chinese literature in Kun opera and because the aesthetic codes of Kun opera were largely derived from it. The staging of classical literature could more completely rely on the pre-existing code than could the staging of contemporary literature, which inevitably involved new codes and was criticized as unauthentic.

From the point of view of a faithful audience who prefers to decode a play within the dominant code, his or her appreciation of a Kun opera is usually a process of judging the correctness of characters’ appearances, poses and movements, singing and speaking, and even the stage settings and props. In the observer’s view, any new elements must undergo an encoding process through which the new element does not conflict with or negate any pre-existing elements. Otherwise, the conflict can cause a chaos of decoding, i.e. what Hall termed an “oppositional code” (Hall 1992, 102-103) This is one of the main reasons that many dramatists and Kun opera professionals criticized new plays based on contemporary stories as being inauthentic or not having the taste of Kun opera. For instance, the lyrics of Kun opera arias are composed in the literary and musical structure of qupai which sets the texts, together with tunes, in certain metrical patterns. However, these metrical patterns are no longer used in modern Chinese literature, needless to say in everyday spoken language. To render a contemporary dialogue using this historical stylistic

expression creates a feeling of temporal displacement for some aficionados. Therefore, textually, most dramatists find that classical literature is more conveniently adapted to the metrical patterns of Kun opera than contemporary stories (Zhang Hong, pers. comm., July 9, 2011).

In addition, traditional stylistic expressions such as costumes, movements, and poses might appear strange or ‘weird’ in the context of contemporary stories. Gu Duhuang, a renowned Kun opera specialist, mentioned two situations in which contemporary plays rendered in the form of traditional opera appeared as odd, genre oddities (*guai tai*). The first situation was when actresses walk the *pao yuanchang* step wearing high heels, and the second was when actors performed the genre of *shanbang* in a *Zhongshan* suit (Gu 1988, 72). *Pao yuanchang* is a traditional term for a type of quick step which circles around the stage and signifies long-distance via a simple walk; this was normal in earlier performance eras but is increasingly rare in modern life. It was particularly unrealistic for modern women who wear high heels. Indeed, the literal meaning of *shanbang* is “the mountain shoulder.” It depicts one of the fundamental choreographic sequences used in Chinese indigenous operas. To finish the sequence, the performer raises his or her arms above their head (in some cases one after the other), separates and opens them outwards, horizontally, to form the shape of the 山, which is the Chinese character for “mountain.” It is normally the pose used by a martial character to announce his imposing appearance. The *zhongshan* suit is a modified Western suit introduced by Sun Yat-sen, a reformist and the first president and founding father of the Republic of China. Its design was endowed with strong political and governmental implications, such as the five center-front buttons, which were said to represent the five branches of government (legislation, supervision, examination, administration, and jurisdiction), and the three cuff-buttons, which were to symbolize Sun Yat-sen’s “Three Principles of the People” (Nationalism, Democracy, and the People’s Livelihood). Therefore, Gu

implied that a character wearing a *zhongshan* suit had nothing to do with a martial character's pose. Hence Gu's criticism points toward a distortion or confusion of meanings, which formed in the process of combining pre-existent symbols with newly invented ones.

According to Kun opera insiders, an old story either from classical literature or other historical accounts can be encoded in a similar way as the extant repertoire of traditional plays. Their appropriation and innovation therefore requires a minimum of changes in coding rules, artistic expressions, and techniques which have been stylized and formulated to convey what they believe to be the essence of Kun opera. For this same reason, it is more difficult to incorporate contemporary stories into extant repertoire than it is to incorporate classic ones, because the presentation easily exceeds cultural producers' accumulative routines of production, and inevitably involves new techniques and new symbols of expression, beyond what is considered orthodox or authentic for Kun opera. Thus, the new play appears heretical or loses the taste of Kun opera. This explains the consensus of Kun opera agents about the composition of a new repertoire based on stories from Chinese classical literature.

5.3.2 Contemporary Composition of Complete Dramas (*quanbenxi*)

The second feature of neo-classical repertoire is the contemporary composition of complete plays. Since the sixteenth century, many dramatists and playwrights shifted their attention from writing scripts for *quanbenxi* (complete dramas), towards rewriting old stories or refining *danzhe* or *danchu* (single acts of an existing play) (Chang 2011; Zhou 2011, 3). This trend became what Chinese literature specialist Kang-I Sun Chang regarded as "a national obsession among Ming men of letters" (Chang 2011, 51), and it directly contributed to the popularity of staging excerpts. Famous excerpts, despite being the fragments of complete stories, were usually the most popular

parts of a well-known story. And, in writing different versions of old stories, rewriters would render familiar plots and motifs into their strikingly original forms of expression (ibid.). Since the Ming Dynasty, the success of excerpt performances was based on a symmetry between the producers' encoded message and the audience's decoded message, and the excerpt did not seem to bother aficionados. This is because even though an excerpt contains only part of a complete plot line, aficionados were so familiar with the complete story that they were able to reposition the excerpt in a meaningful discourse, focusing only on the famous arias or impressive dialogues in the excerpt and skipping over the rest of the story.

However, when these excerpts were staged in the 1980s and '90s, at a time when the number of Kun opera aficionados was quite small, these once popular parts of Kun opera plays were no longer decoded as the essence of a drama, but only as fragments of an old drama that people barely knew. As a result, traditional excerpts handed down from earlier generations of Kun opera performers could not attract new, uneducated audiences, even though insiders were still attracted to them.

One way to complement the partial messages of excerpts was to reinsert them into a complete story. But the difficulty in doing so was twofold. First, a vast number of the stage scripts of complete dramas were unavailable. The cultural literati's obsession with refined excerpts created an apex in the convention of excerpt performance; whereas, it was partially responsible for the decline of staging complete dramas since the Qing. When Kun opera professionals attempted to promote the genre as "Outstanding National Culture" in the 1980s and '90s, their repertoire consisted mostly of excerpts. The number of complete dramas available for staging was too small to meet a troupe's operational needs. Second, although there were a number of complete dramas, each would consist of more than ten acts; hence, productions were too long for contemporary

audiences who wouldn't want to watch a drama over the course of several consecutive nights.

To make performances more comprehensible, many state-owned Kun opera troupes attempted to extend extant excerpts into complete plays (*quanben xi*),¹²¹ the duration of which was suitable for the contemporary stage. An extended play would have more complete and complicated plotlines, involve more characters, and often create more dramatic tensions. Compared to excerpts, complete dramas could better inform audiences about the story and interrelationship of characters, and could more easily lead uninitiated viewers through the development of plots.

Since the mid-1980s, extant excerpts, song books, and texts of *chuanqi* plays became the most authoritative resources for Kun opera librettists who sought to imitate old scripts by rearranging and rewriting the extant materials. Scholars also contributed to this trend by investigating how complete dramas were staged historically. For instance, Chinese literature specialist Xu Fuming introduced staging methods through his study of historical documents, including abridging plots, *pinzhe* (combining several excerpts),¹²² and *shanqu touwei* (lit. "cutting the head and the tail of the original story") (Xu 1989; 1992). Although these methods were documented by literati, concrete performance steps were based on professionals' empirical practices and were not systematically handed down. As a result, many professionals started to explore and theorize their own rules of adapting classical plays according to multiple extant resources, such as texts of *chuanqi* plays, volumes of opera excerpts from different dramas, called *juben xuankan* (e.g. *Zhuibaiqiu*), volumes of arias or song books, called *qupuji* (e.g. *Nashuying qupu*), and collections of songs, called *sanquji*.

¹²¹ It is important to note that the concept of complete dramas onstage is different from the concept of *quanben* of literature, because the former refers to operatic performances, and the latter denotes the complete literary work of *chuanqi* plays or novels, although they often became the source of onstage performances.

¹²² *Pinzhe* has been a popular method of "composing" complete plays. This method was still being used by the Xian Ni Society in the 1930s (Lin 1992, 105).

These innovative efforts significantly contributed to the emergence of neo-classical plays, which mainly concerned the composition of text and music. Performers abridged details of the text in both excerpts and plotlines, and created a balance between “traditional” musical patterns and individual musical creativity. I will explain these processes in the following section.

Literary composition usually involved rearrangement, rewriting, and more importantly abridgement of an old *chuanqi* play. Composition of the classical play *The Peach Blossom Fan* is one of the most successful experiments during this period. In 1986, Zhang Hong, then a young librettist of the Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Theater, rearranged an excerpt from a classical literature *The Peach Blossom Fan*, the textual form of which was composed by Kong Shangren (1648-1718). Before Zhang’s rearrangement, this excerpt had disappeared from the stage because it was not among the traditional repertoire of the transmission generation of Kun opera professionals. Zhang explained the process of his rearrangement:

Firstly, I revised the excerpted scene of “*Tihua*” (“Inscription on the Painting”). There is no extant complete script of *The Peach Blossom Fan*, and only three excerpted scenes were recorded in *Liu ye qu pu* (Liu ye aria book): “*Fangcui*” (“A visit to the beauty”), “*Jishan*” (“Sending the fan”), and “*Tihua*” (“Inscription on a painting”). My revision was based on *Liu ye*. Many people think this is a traditional excerpt, but only the text of certain arias is traditional. The arrangement was mine, and the performance was entirely designed by contemporaries. After [my collaborator] Shi Xiaomei and I finished mounting the excerpt, we chose not to announce that it was a rewritten piece, because otherwise, some people might have bias (against the new composition). We were rather young by then, in our thirties. So, only after the excerpt was premiered, and people believed it was traditional, did we tell them [the evaluation committee of a showcase] the truth. Everyone became quiet. Then we were told that our approach [of revising and rewriting] was fine. Of course, we highly respect classical works like *The Peach Blossom Fan*, so we were deeply apprehensive that our revision would go wrong, particularly because we were young. *We attempted to apply what we considered as “rules” that we had summarized from traditional plays we had learned, to see if the rules worked.* (Zhang Hong, pers. comm., 9 July 2011; emphasis added)

In the version which premiered in 1986, Zhang kept three arias, *Qingbeixu* (Preface to an

overturned cup), *Yufurong* (Jade hibiscus), and *Xiaotaohong* (Little red peach) of the scene “Inscription on the Painting,” with minor changes to several Chinese characters with the same tones in order to improve the meaning; but he kept the tonal contour intact. He also deleted several paragraphs of dialogue to make the story more concise, and he moved certain lines of speech from long dialogues into arias to elaborate the singing, thereby creating dramatic tension in the performance. The only addition he made was a monologue of the hero, Hong Fangyu, which is delivered when he makes his entry and recounts a brief summary of the previous plot. This short statement of a previous storyline is typical of all excerpts that can be staged independently. Zhang’s rearrangement is basically an abridged version of this excerpt from *Liu ye qupu* (Liuye aria book). His method of keeping arias and rewriting the text also complies with the orthodox rule of rewriting *chuanqi* plays. In the rearrangement of the excerpted scene “Inscription for a painting,” there was no need to compose music, because *Liu Ye Aria Book* not only provides lyrics and speeches, but also a musical score of arias notated in *gongchepu* (see Figure 4).

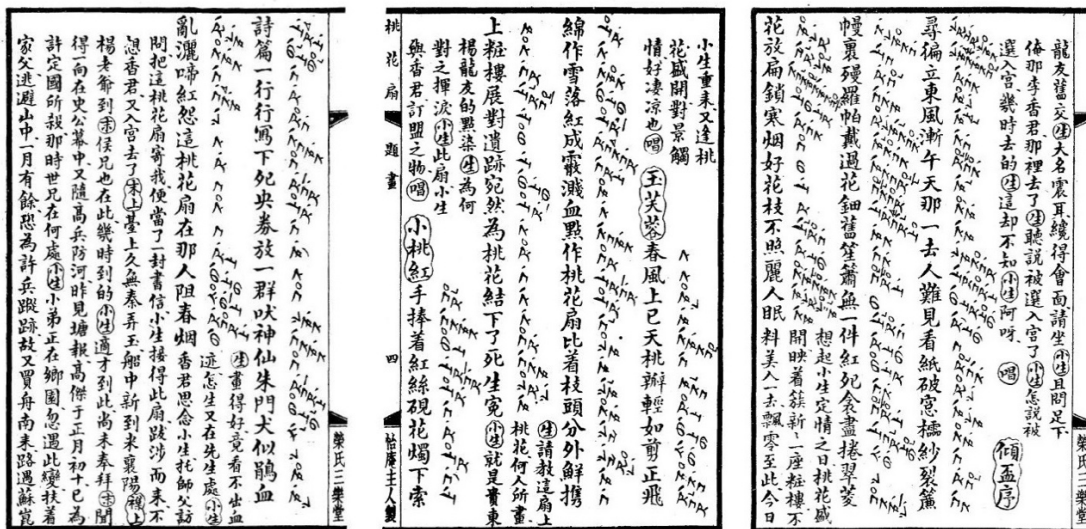


Figure 4. The score of three arias “*Qingbeixu*” (Preface to an overturned cup), “*Yufurong*” (Jade hibiscus), and “*Xiaotaohong*” (Little red peach) recorded in *Liu Ye Aria Book* (right to left).

Abridgement, or *jiancai*, to use Zhang Hong's own word, was the primary method he used in adapting the play. *Chuanqi* plays are known for their length. A complete play is composed of multiple scenes, varying from about twenty to fifty (Xu 1992, 29). Each scene is made up of monologues, dialogues, or a mixture of both, as well as a suite of arias. Therefore, it requires days to stage a complete play faithfully based on its entire literary text. This length becomes increasingly unsuitable for modern audiences, who are less likely to go to the theater over several consecutive nights to watch a single play. As a result, it is the librettist's responsibility to select what he or she considers essential scenes from the original, and to fabricate and reorganize these materials into a series of scenes that can be performed in one or two nights. Zhang Hong contended that the art of adapting old stories was an art of abridgement which reflects a librettist's understanding and interpretation of the original work. As he said, "In order to cut out parts of a play, one needs to blend in one's own thoughts. It is impossible to adapt a play without showing yourself. The selection of classical works represents your recognition of those plays, reveals your interpretation of the author's intention, and involves your own aesthetic consciousness" (Zhang Hong, pers. comm., 9 July 2011). Although some scholars suggested that the classical plays should be kept intact, Zhang said that an abridgement of a complete play was inevitable for modern audiences.

The success of the premiere greatly encouraged Zhang Hong, who gained more confidence about adapting extant excerpts. He collaborated with Wang Haiqing in rewriting the complete version of *The Peach Blossom Fan* in 1989. Based on a similar logic, they extended the excerpt "Inscription on the Painting," merged it with the scene "*Houfang*" ("A Revisit"), and selected another six excerpts—two from *Liu Ye Aria Book* and four from the original *chuanqi* play—to form a complete plot. In addition to the method of abridgement, Zhang and Wang also innovated

the old story by crafting some new parts while imitating the original's older style. Some dramatists regard this method as *bianjiu weixin* (to give a new appearance to the old) (Huang 1991, 20).

New music needed to be composed to accompany the newly added arias. Between the 1980s and '90s, many Kun opera professionals began to investigate the traditional way of filling music in a textual structure of a given *qupai* by looking into pre-existing Kun opera studies. They gradually formulated a procedure for composition. In most cases, literary composition was the initial step, because it not only sets the plotline, provides characters' speeches, but also creates lyrics for arias. At the same time, the librettist also determines the use of aria types—that is, the fundamental framework for composing music. As mentioned in my Introduction, the concept of music composition in Kun opera is different from that of Western music. Singing Kun opera arias is considered a musical presentation of the poetic lyrics, and the melody of a song or aria must be homologous with the tonal contour of the pronunciation of text, such that singing can most accurately deliver the recitation of poetry written in Chinese (a tonal language). Mismatches between melody and tonal pronunciation is considered an error, called *daozi* (lit. “inversion of text”), because it may cause misunderstandings of lyrics based on incorrect tones.

Although there has been a substantial body of literature dedicated to the study of the principles of composing the poetry of arias, there have been few works on the theory of composing music to accompany these poetic texts. Indeed, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the craft of musical composition in Kun opera was almost lost.¹²³ A number of Kun opera theorists

¹²³ Kun opera theorist Wu Mei wrote about the rarity of the skills of music composition in his own time: “The rules of composing music (of Kun opera) declined a long time ago. New poetic songs by literati can no longer be accompanied by ensembles, so they cannot be sung, due to the ignorance of how to compose music.” He included a short account of a piece of poetry composed by Mr. Yu Yinfu, a famous scholar in his eighties when Wu was young. Yu composed a set of Northern songs, and the structure of *qupai* imitated that of the excerpt *Tanci* (“The Ballad”) in the play *Changshengdian* (*The Palace of Eternal Life*) by Hong Fangsi (1645-1704). Yu commanded a professional musician to write music to accompany the poetry, and the musician copied the exact melody used in another excerpt, without changing a note. He commented that there were probably hundreds of song specialists in the region of Suzhou and Shanghai, but less than one tenth among them had mastered the skill of filling in music (Wu 2000 [1916], 83).

theorized the compositional methods for “filling music” in poetic lyrics during the early twentieth century, and their works were adopted by Kun opera successors in the 1980s and ‘90s as instructional materials. For instance, Kun opera theorist Wu Mei (1884-1939), suggested a method of “filling music” based on pre-existing music scores: by comparing different scores of *tongming qupai* (arias that have the same model titles), one can summarize the essential musical structure of the aria models, and can apply this structure to other poetic lyrics composed in the same aria model, with some minor adjustments.¹²⁴ Later, Kun opera theorist Wang Shoutai (1908-1992) proposed the theory of *zhuqiang shuo* (“the theory of melodic skeletons”), in which he suggested that each aria type can be reduced to a melodic skeleton, consisting of its most important notes, and that there was a hierarchy of models, from the original and standard to the barely recognizable (Wang 1982; Jones 2014).

These contemporary theories formed knowledge about the principles of composing text and “filling music.” Kun opera professionals increasingly relied on preexisting music scores recorded in various historical song books, and they considered them the most authentic sources to provide the musical structure of Kun opera arias. Particularly, Wu Mei’s induction method gradually became the most dominant method for composing new music to accompany new scripts, such as Zhang Hong’s creation during this period.

As a result, a set of Kun opera composition methods formed which ethnomusicologist Juliane Jones regarded as “neo-traditional” (Jones 2014, 62) which essentially imitated the traditional tunes. For music composers who adopted this neo-traditional method, the composition of Kun opera music was rather like a process of crafting melodies that followed the metric patterns

¹²⁴ As Wu Mei stated that “There are musical examples (in aria books) notated in the *gongche* notation. One can use these examples as reference to fill the melody (according to the aria pattern), and then make some minor adjustments according to the pronunciation of new lyrics” (Wu 2000 [1916], 35).

and tonal contour of poetry in any given aria, which was already decided by librettists. Therefore, music composers of Kun opera who comply with old rules of crafting music often regard their work as *tianpu* (filling in the score), rather than *zuoqu* (composition). The famous composer Chi Lingyun called himself a *tianpu ren* (lit. “the person who fills in the score”), rather than a *zuoqu jia* (composer). He described the process of his work as follows:

When the script is in the hands of a librettist, s/he has already selected the aria patterns, and even the suite of aria patterns, as well as the text. As a creator of music, there is little room for creativity in your work according to the rules of Kun opera. It is not your decision to choose a fast tempo when you feel the section should be lively, nor to write a piece of cheerful music. It is different from the concept of contemporary composition. It only allows limited changes, that is, you can add *zengban* (extra beats) based on the basic structure of the aria model, (by expanding 4/4/ into 8/4) you can create twice the space between the positions of strong beats [that correspond to the metric structure]. But with regard to the pitches, there is very limited space for adjustment. (Chi Lingyun, pers. comm., 27 December 2013)

There are other, albeit limited, ways that a composer can make changes. For instance, one can break up clusters of arias that were treated as sets in old song books, as can be seen in the complete version of *The Peach Blossom Fan* produced in the late 1980s. Or, when the tones of newly filled text differ considerably from that of the model aria—making it impossible to retain the melody from a model aria—it is the composer’s responsibility to adjust pitches of the model melody so as to comply with the contour of speech-tones.

In practice, many composers have their own theories for determining the skeletal tones (*gugan yin*) of an aria type and providing alternative versions. And, to indicate the authority of their changes, these composers look for a version of the same aria type that has a speech-tone similar to the new lyric, using it as a reference to generate alternative versions. If the alternative versions are not based on a specific reference, the changes are considered new elements and

regarded by insiders as newly created arias. This composition method of filling new music elements into an old skeletal structure is often termed “altered method” (*gaibian fangfa*). Jones describes in detail how Zhou Xuehua, a composer of the Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe, created new arias for new operas using this method (Jones 2014, 154-164).

In spite of the variety of methods for crafting melodies based on pre-existing arias, and despite composers’ edits in accordance with their aesthetic goals, musicians maintained the basic and traditional aesthetic of Kun opera in operas composed during this period. For all newly composed works, the melodic contour must comply with the shape of the text’s speech-tones, which was either edited or composed in accord with the regularity of the metric structures and tone principles (*gelü*) of given aria types. Music could not be composed independently, because it served the purpose of accurately expressing and imitating the tones of the text such that audiences could comprehend the lyrics without misunderstanding. The historical connection between Kun opera and a literati culture which revered the Chinese language was thus resumed in contemporary compositions of neo-classical complete dramas.

5.3.3 Realistic and Modern Staging of Grand Opera

Compared to the composition of text and music, the staging of neo-classical Kun opera became increasingly creative after the 1980s. A rising consciousness emerged among opera directors who orchestrated script dramatization and ensured production cohesion. Modern lighting and props were increasingly used to present a fuller expression that extended beyond individual performances.

For the current dissertation, I will focus on a primary feature of the staging of neo-classical repertoire during the 1980s and 1990s, namely, the coordination of the staff team—not only stage

performers and ensemble musicians (a traditional troupe's two main departments), but also departments imported from Western theater, including costume, props, lighting, and set staff.

Drawing on the Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe's staging of *The Palace of Eternal Life* (*Changsheng dian*) and *Go to the Spiritual Mountain* (*Shang lingshan*), I will analyze how new staging trends appealed to audiences' changing tastes and developed into the "grand opera" (*daxi*) style, which became the most representative style of production in various indigenous opera contests during this period.

Before the rise of contemporary Kun opera troupes that staged their performances in the modern architectural space of theaters (*juchang*), Kun opera productions were performer-centered, as in most other genres of Chinese indigenous opera. The style of staging was usually abstract and simple: performances took place on a plain stage, without a stage set, and props were quite simple, usually one table paired with a chair or two, known as *yizhuo liangyi* (one table and two chairs). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the most common stage setting was a plain set with folded curtain on either side of the stage and *yizhuo liangyi* in the center (see Figure 5). The entire performance was coordinated by the principle drummer, called *dagulao* (or *gulao*, in other genres), who directed the performance by using rhythmic signals to both ensemble and actors to begin and end their parts. This simple style of staging often suited the performance of excerpts involving a relatively short plot and only a few characters.

From the mid-1980s onward, an increasing number of stated-owned Kun opera troupes experimented with staging styles in an effort to compete with other entertainment forms, such as television shows and movies. In March 1987, the Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe mounted a complete production of *The Palace of Eternal Life*, a classical *chuanqi* play by Hong Sheng (1645-1704). Although a number of excerpts in the play had been handed down from the transmission generation

of Kun opera performers, complete productions were rarely staged. The 1987 version of *The Palace of Eternal Life* distinguished itself in that the two directors, Li Zigui and Shen Bin, assumed responsibility for designing stage effects and coordinating all departments of the troupe. Although *The Palace of Eternal Life* in 1987 was not the first Kun opera play to engage a director in its production, these two directors set the standard for a director-centered production mode that was widely imitated, significantly impacting the style of Chinese “grand opera.”



Figure 5. Stage photo of the excerpt “*Jizi*” (“Entrusting the son”) from the play *Huansha ji* (“Washing silk”) performed by Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe in 1982. (Courtesy of Shi Xiaomei’s Kun Opera Studio)

Based on the published directing notes of Li Zigui and Shen Bin (Li 1988; Shen 1988a, b), their ideas and production designs were manifest in three main areas. First, the two directors divided scenes according to their importance to the plot, and they designed changes in dramatic

rhythm both within individual scenes and across all scenes collectively. Second, they collaborated with performers to shape characters by designing costumes, accessories, and even body language (both poses and movements). To shape a character in accordance with his interpretation, Shen deconstructed traditional, stylized performances and rearranged their element in a new combination which he thought would better portray the character in his play. For instance, Shen asked the actor playing Emperor Ming of Tang (*Tang ming huang*) to exaggerate his *lü rankou* movement (the long stroking of one's beard) in the manner of a *wenwusheng*¹²⁵ when beginning to sing the aria pattern “*Dongfeng yizhi mei*” (lit. “a branch of plum flower in an easterly wind”). The aim of this performance detail was to accurately depict the character's age, identity, and charisma. Shen argued that the traditional expressive convention of the role type of the *daguansheng* (senior crowned male)¹²⁶ was not adequate to depict the character of Emperor Ming of Tang; accordingly, he suggested that the performer should borrow the expressions of other role types—such as those of *laosheng* (an important senior male with a black triangle-shaped beard) and *mo* (a less important senior male with black long full beard)—in order to shape a fuller image of the character (Shen 1988b, 65-66). According to Shen's directing philosophy, although role types were highly stylized and formulaic, the use of expressivity to construct particular characters did not have to be stylized and formulaic. It is through the flexible use of Kun opera's conventional and formulaic codes that Shen expressed his creativity as a director.

Third, the directors communicated with the music ensemble to manipulate musical details. Changes were generally made to the percussive parts which connect arias and accompany performers' movements when not singing. One example is a change made to the opening of the

¹²⁵ The character type of *wen wu sheng* refers to both martial roles with acrobatic movements and scholar roles with outstanding vocal skills.

¹²⁶ The role type of senior crowned male includes characters who are middle-aged, powerful, and enjoy high social status. Emperor Ming of Tang is one of the representative characters of this role type.

traditional excerpt “*Xuge*” (“Frivolous Commotions in the Chamber”). This excerpt portrays Lady Yang’s unannounced visit to Emperor Ming the morning after he had secretly summoned his former favorite concubine for a tryst. Lady Yang expresses her anger, frustration, self-pity, sadness, and devotion through a series of arias that eventually lead Emperor Ming to admit his infidelity and rekindle his favor for her. Shen wrote that this excerpt traditionally begins with five slow strikes of the *xiaoluo* (a small gong) to accompany and announce Lady Yan’s appearance, which is conventionally codified as a series of movements, including slow steps toward *jiulong kou*¹²⁷ and *dou xiu* (the shaking of sleeves to reveal one’s hands). But Li Zigui deemed the slow tempo insufficient to depict Lady Yang’s anxiety upon discovering the tryst between the emperor and his other concubine. Li therefore asked the percussionist to replace the five slow strikes with a fast tempo rhythmic pattern, called *shuang maozitou*, to quickly propel the rhythm of performance so that Lady Yang could take fast steps toward *jiulongkou* and begin her aria expressing jealousy and anger (Li 1988, 27; Shen 2016, 6). Following the same logic, Shen matched different movements with corresponding percussive effects based on pre-existing patterns of *luogu* (percussion music), thereby building up the tension (Shen 1988b, 67-68). In addition, both Shen and Li added three kinds of drums — *zhenggu*, *jiegu*, and *dagu* — that, though popular during the Tang dynasty, were not part of the conventional Kun opera ensemble. They used these drums to depict the prosperity of the historical period in which the play’s legendary romance was supposed to have taken place (ibid., 70).

Further, the directors used new visual stage effects to enhance the space of each scene. Shen stated that it was his intention to fully explore an aesthetic of stage design which would

¹²⁷ *Jiulong kou*, lit. the mouth of nine dragons, is the term for a particular spot on the stage about one meter away from the entrance of the stage where characters pause their steps, tidy up their clothes and officially announce their appearance to the audience.

visually attract audience interest in opera performance (ibid.). Unlike the plain set used in most Kun opera performances in its original period, the stage sets of *The Palace of Eternal Life* were more complex and realistic; directors utilized multiple sets for different scenes in a performance. For example, stage designers created six stripped screens with curtains to portray the graceful and sumptuous surroundings in the royal palace (see Figure 6). The numerous props portrayed a detailed and realistic environment. In the scene of “*Mishi*” (“The pledging of love”), a parrot’s play-stand was erected on one side of the stage, beside the table and chairs, and an incense burner was placed on the opposite side to indicate the internal space of the Palace. The back curtain was decorated with a moon and two stars, representing the night sky. The use of a piece of stone around the stage exit symbolized a garden outside the palace. Compared to traditional staging, which did not distinguish spaces, such a realistic distinction between the “internal” and “external” spaces of the stage was quite pioneering.



Figure 6. Stage photo of *The Palace of Eternal Life*, as performed by the Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe in 1987.

The directors also explored the different effects of modern lighting. Shen considered lighting technology a mere fad in theater arts; he contended that “along with the development of technique, the simple use of *dabaiguang*¹²⁸ has become incredibly outdated” (Shen 1988b, 71). He experimented with the dramatic effects of multiple lighting designs which provided varying degrees of visibility. He used the spotlight to trace a heroine, or to change a scene’s mood via the use of colorful lights emanating from various directions around the stage—for instance, cold blue lights flowing on the stage side, or green backlighting emitted from the rear lighting rack and shone on performers (*ibid.*). Shen also believed that the use of modern stage lighting played an important

¹²⁸ The literal meaning of *dabaiguang* is “big white light.” It refers to the fundamental lighting on the stage distributed evenly from the ceiling and/or the front edge of the stage, with no special colors distributed across the stage.

role in supplementing the effects of music and acting in on-and off-stage communication. He wrote: “Under blue side-lighting and green back-lighting, the entire stage was covered in the shade of sadness, making one feel breathless. When the curtain slowly came down with music, spectators burst into tears and broke into sympathetic applause. The power of lighting, the dynamics of music, and the charm of art, all derived from the comprehensive ability of a director” (Shen 1988b). The comprehensiveness of the new staging, as Shen pointed out in his directing note, was key to the success of the production *The Palace of Eternal Life*.

By combining the traditional art of Kun opera singing with creative uses of formulaic elements—such as stylized movements, percussive effects, realistic sets, and modern lighting — directors put together a multi-faceted performance of a complete Kun opera play, one which was later termed “grand opera” (*da xi*). This new performance soon replaced the performances of single, simply-staged excerpts as the dominant form of Kun opera performance in the 1990s. The concept of grand opera (*da xi*) can be traced back to at least the Qing dynasty, as recorded in Li Dou’s *Yangzhou huafanglu: Xin cheng bei lu-xia*,¹²⁹ where it was used to denote full operas that involved many role types, complex plotlines, and magical effects. However, it disappeared from Kun opera discourse as a result of the genre’s contemporary decline. The creative effort of Kun opera professionals in the 1980s and ‘90s brought this multi-faceted performance back to modern theaters, using modern technology in the process. The re-creation of Kun opera as grand opera reflects the producer’s efforts to innovatively use old elements to foster creativity and self-expression, and to appeal to heterogeneous, contemporary audiences.

¹²⁹It is recorded in *Yangzhou huafang lu-Xin cheng bei lu xia* 扬州画舫录·新城北录下 that “there is a kind of ‘grand opera’ staged in the area of the Heavenly Peace Temple, where officials, merchants and other civilians pray for blessings. Performances were given on a stage in a temporary tent in front of the main hall in which there was an altar, and the plays were usually myths about deities and Buddha, and mythical creatures, and stories in times of peace and prosperity” 天宁寺本官商士民祝釐之地，殿上敬设经坛，殿前盖松棚为戏台，演仙佛麟凤太平击壤之剧，谓之大戏。

In the mid-1990s, neo-classical grand operas were better received on the market than were traditional excerpts. According to the box revenue of the Shanghai Kun opera Troupe between 1993 and 1994, the troupe sold only seventy-six tickets for two performances of traditional excerpts. In order to attract audiences, some tickets were given away for free. On the other hand, a grand opera called *Shang lingshan* (“Go to the Spiritual Mountain”), which was adapted from the Ming novel *Journey to the West* (*Xiyou ji*), premiered in 1993 and achieved great success. This play, directed by Shen Bin, was staged twenty-five times in total, sold more than twenty-thousand tickets, and box office revenues reached RMB ¥160,000 (Dongfang 1994, 27; Shen 1994). Many dramatists and opera specialists criticized the play for incorporating too many innovative elements, such that it barely resembled a Kun opera play, but this non-Kun opera play attracted a much younger audience than ever before. Shen Bin later wrote that the Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe was not satisfied to fail in the competitive market, but that they were forced to “go to the Spiritual Mountain” in order to seek a market. The troupe could only sustain itself by catering to the taste of audiences and theater specialists (Shen 1994).

At the same time, the creation of the neo-classical grand operas was openly encouraged by the political authority. In the 1990s, the government provided more symbolic and economic support to promote the production of new works of traditional Chinese indigenous performing arts. For instance, in 1990, the Ministry of Culture established the Wenhua Prize (*Wenhua jiang*). This prize comprised two categories: (a) team prizes (including “Grand Wenhua Prize,” and “Wenhua New Play Prize”); and (b) individual prizes based on various occupations (such as the Wenhua Performance Prize, Wenhua Lyrics Prize, and Wenhua Director Prize). All these prizes were granted to complete grand plays (*zhengtai de daxing jumu*)—including newly composed, edited, and transplanted Chinese indigenous operas—and to individuals who participated in the

production and performance of these works (Ministry of Culture 1998). State-owned Kun opera troupes often mounted new plays to compete for the Wenhua prizes. After 1990, a number of neo-classical Kun opera grand plays won the Wenhua Prize. Among these were *Xue yuan* (“The Blood of Injustice”) and *The Peach Blossom Fan*, which the Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Theater won in 1991 and 1995 respectively; *Pipa ji* (“The Tale of Pipa”), which the Northern Theater of Kun Opera won in 1995; and the Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe’s *Sima Xiangru*, which won in 1995. Although these plays were not favored by opera specialists, the production of neo-classical grand opera provided troupes with a means of acquiring the symbolic benefits and internal capital granted by the state. Among these winning plays, some proved to be better accepted by audiences and, hence, more commercially successful at the box office than others. As a result, these plays were restaged more frequently and were incorporated into a troupe’s classical repertoire. The Jiangsu Kun Opera Theater’s *The Peach Blossom Fan* is a textbook example of this—although a contemporary, neo-classical grand opera that was in fact rewritten in 1990, it is now regarded as one of the truly classic plays of traditional Kun opera.

5.4 CONCLUSION

As part of the series of economic reform of “Opening-up” initiated since 1978, the wage reform began to affect state-owned Kun opera troupes around 1986 in primarily two ways. First, economic capital emerged as a dominant form of capital in China. In the state sector of the economy, profit retention became one of the central government’s main criteria for evaluating the success of state-owned enterprises. In the private sector, circulation of economic capital was increasingly based upon the economic relations between entrepreneurs and individual consumers; hence, economic

capital was no longer subordinate to political capital. Second, after the wage reform, the structured wage system was established as an incentive for state-owned performing groups to increase their revenues. Two reform measures made the management of state-owned Kun opera troupes worse: (1) the fixed wage system was replaced by a structured wage system which depended both on box-office revenues and performers' artistic qualification; and (2) life-long employment was replaced by contractual employment. These two changes precipitated the migration of labor power out of the state system of performing groups into other more profitable areas in the economy's newly emerging private sector.

Through the late 1980s, a convergence of key factors—namely, unpredictable state financial support, wage reform of state-owned troupes, and the declining market popularity of Kun opera—formed a new political-economic environment in which state-owned Kun opera troupes were forced to pursue economic capital from two sources. The first of these was internal capital, granted within the state system of performing arts in the form of subsidies, special grants, the fixed part of wages. The second was external capital, earned outside the state system, collected from anonymous audiences via market exchange.

On the one hand, state-owned Kun opera troupes cautiously negotiated for more state financing by reckoning with the “national culture”—a cultural strategy that, in 1990, the Central Government promoted as a tactic of resisting Western cultural influences. In 2001, Kun opera's ICH proclamation indicated an official recognition of Kun opera as a representative genre of Chinese indigenous opera nationally and internationally. On the other hand, professionals and cultural agents actively explored the aesthetic interests of audiences, a heterogeneous group of different generations, social classes, and cultural tastes.

In the late 1980s and through the 1990s, Kun opera professionals created neo-classical

grand opera to satisfy heterogeneous audiences. The creation of neo-classical grand opera was derived from Kun opera professionals' use of traditional Kun opera sources, revival of traditional composition methods, and innovations in staging. This new repertoire not only attracted the government's investment and carried supportive policies, but also appealed to audiences' tastes, to varying degrees.

By rediscovering and creatively reworking formulaic elements in historical *chuanqi* plays and aria singing, Kun opera professionals composed complete versions of old stories that remained within state standards of permissibility, yet presented them on the contemporary stage in innovative ways which were aesthetically accessible to their heterogeneous audiences. In this neo-classical repertoire, the plays which both complied with official criteria and garnered positive market feedback gradually consolidated to form what has become known as the "traditional" repertoire of these troupes.

The political economic structure of Kun opera production between 1986 to 2002 was characterized by two fundamental oppositions: first, the opposition between cultural production relying on centralized allocation and cultural production depending on market competition; and, second, the opposition between internal capital, granted within the state system of performing arts, and external capital, earned via market exchange outside the state system. Throughout the 1990s, the coexistence of the centralized planning and the market competition forced these troupes to carefully negotiate with the state to maintain internal capital, while simultaneously pursuing external capital on the open market.

6.0 CORPORATIZATION OF A STATE-OWNED KUN OPERA TROUPE (2003-2011)

The year 2003 marked a profound change in the Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Theater. This state-owned Kun opera troupe was selected as one of the subjects for the pilot project in a new wave of Cultural System Reform aiming to transform state-owned troupes into corporations. For those Kun opera professionals who had suffered financial difficulty following the mid-1980s wage reform, this newly promulgated policy brought unforeseeable uncertainty. Many troupe members interpreted it as a way for the state to reduce its financial burden by abandoning the Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Troupe. Everyone in the troupe was deeply concerned about the potential impact that this new reform would bring to their lives. These concerns led to the sit-in demonstration in front of the headquarters of the provincial government in the summer of 2003. After several months of negotiation between the troupe and the provincial government, senior professionals faced the choice of either retiring with a full pension, or signing a new contract as employees of the newly corporatized troupe. Junior members chose to stay and embrace their unknown future. In August 2004, when corporatization was officially implemented, most senior performers who had served the troupe for more than thirty years chose to retire with full pension, many of whom had not reached retirement age (Gu 2011, 2).

The corporation reforms in 2003 initiated a change in the political economic structure of Kun opera production. It impacted the operation of all state-owned Kun opera groups, even those troupes which to date have not been transformed into corporations. This new political economic structure was characterized by: 1) the pursuit of economic capital based on the state's initial investment; and 2) the sanctioned conversion of economic capital into political capital, since

earning monetary profit became the new political goal for state-owned performing groups. However, after 2006, the reform gradually lost momentum as its implementation encountered various obstacles—such as troupe resistance to the transformation and macroscopic shifts in policymakers' intention. Although the corporatization reform was ultimately suspended in 2011, its impact on the political economy of Kun opera production remains to this writing.

In this chapter, I examine the corporatization reform of the Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Theater from 2003 to 2011. First, I outline the transformation process starting in 2003, when the central government began to view the cultural production of state-owned performing troupes as not only ideological propaganda but also a cultural commodity. State-owned performing troupes were asked to follow the laws of market competition while remaining supervised by the government. Individuals were likewise allowed to invest in performances by state-owned troupes. Second, I analyze the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe's marketing strategy, which was characterized by a "large-scale production mode" and aimed to reach the widest possible range of audiences, maximizing investment profitability. I describe the troupe's efforts to explore the heterogeneity of audiences, which also greatly influenced the management of other Kun opera troupes that were not transformed. Finally, I argue that, between 2003 and 2011, economic capital was accorded unprecedented significance within state-owned Kun opera troupes, and so became the key determinant for state-owned troupes to acquire political capital. Corporatization reform during this period may be viewed as the government's attempt to influence and supervise public cultural life through the market.

6.1 THE JIANGSU PROVINCE KUN OPERA THEATER IN THE CULTURAL SYSTEM REFORM

In summer of 2010, I made my first fieldwork trip to Nanjing, hoping for the chance to meet, get to know, and conduct biographical research with Shi Xiaomei, and Hu Jinfang, two renowned Plum Blossom Performance Award winners of the Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Troupe. On the morning of June 2nd, I arrived at the troupe's address, No. 4 Chaotian Palace. A doorman stopped me and asked the purpose of my visit; I answered and then was told to wait in an office. While waiting, I started a conversation with a man in that office who turned out to be the Vice Director of the troupe, Wang Bin. Before I introduced myself, he took it for granted that I must be a journalist who had come to discuss "*gaiqi*," that is, "the corporatization transformation," which was a term I had not heard until then.

In his narrative, the corporatization transformation had been the biggest issue for the troupe since the sit-in demonstration in 2003. I was shocked by the information because there was barely any report of the demonstration in the press, at least not that I had come across. Curiosity drove me to ask Wang Bin more detailed questions about the event, because it seemed that troupe members would be the only source by which to probe this public event which had been overlooked or silenced by mass media. In this conversation—which, ultimately, changed my dissertation topic—Wang depicted a watershed of the recent development of the troupe by constantly referring to "*gaiqi qian*" (that is, "pre-corporatization transformation") and "*gaiqi hou*" ("post-corporatization transformation"), as if the transformation year was a turning point for this state-owned Kun opera troupe. What was the nature of the corporatization transformation? Why was it viewed as a key turning point that affected or even threatened many troupe members? What does it afford the political economy of Kun opera production at the beginning of the new millennium?

Drawing on the transformation process of the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe, I will describe the policy of the corporatization transformation and trace its implementation up to its suspension in 2011. I argue that this transformation began in the form of vigorous measures taken by the state to reshape the social function of Kun opera performances by state-owned troupes from civil services to commodity, and to transform the government's role in Kun opera production from that of manager to supervisor. However, from the perspective of the troupe members, this process was viewed as a deprivation of their financial security and potential threat to their individual welfare.

In June 2003, the Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Theater was selected as the subject of the pilot project (*shidian danwei*) for corporatization of the state-owned performing-arts groups. The troupe completed its transformation in 2004 and was incorporated into the Jiangsu Performing Arts Group Company Ltd. (*Jiangsu sheng yanyi jituan gongsi*), a group company established in 2001 and based on several state-owned cultural organizations.¹³⁰ In January 2005, the Jiangsu Kun Opera Theater officially registered with the Jiangsu Province Department of Culture as an enterprise of Kun opera (Ke 2011, 1). Although its peers and fans still refer to the troupe by its original name, the troupe changed its official name to “The Kun Opera Theater of the Jiangsu Performing Arts Group Company Ltd.” (*Jiangsu sheng yanyi jituan kunjuyuan*) (Gu 2011, 1).

The corporatization of state-owned performing arts groups was an integral part of the Cultural System Reform (*wenhua tizhi gaige*), which was initiated by the CPC Central Committee in June 2003. One of the objectives of the corporatization transformation was to give state-owned troupes sufficient autonomy and incentive to respond to market forces more efficiently. In this sense, corporatization reforms were an extension of the long-standing Chinese Enterprise Reform, which can be traced back to 1984, that aimed at transforming state-owned enterprises into

¹³⁰ The official website of the Jiangsu Performing Arts Group Company is: <http://www.jsyanyi.cn/jianjie/view.asp?id=341> accessed July 8, 2012.

relatively independent market entities (Naughton 1995, 204-205). Although Enterprise Reform had been an on-going process in China since the mid-1980s, most state-employed artists did not expect that state-owned performing groups would actually be corporatized. It was particularly inconceivable for Kun opera professionals, because the genre had just been proclaimed as one of the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2001. As ICH status was commonly viewed as evidence of the marginalized position of Kun opera in the cultural market, most performers took it for granted that the proclamation would bring more preservation grants from the government, and none of them foresaw a policy that forced Kun opera troupes to survive in market competition. Therefore, most troupe members viewed this reform as a threat not only to their professional careers, but also to the genre of Kun opera, for the perpetuation of a genre whose ICH status depended on their survival. As Ke Jun, then the mainstay of the troupe, stated:

We couldn't understand [the corporatization reform], because a corporation can close down, but can Kun opera close down? It's an Intangible Cultural Heritage of human beings, and how can it close down? We could not understand it. There were very few performances then, and there was no market for us, so after we were transformed into a corporation, and forced to compete in the market, it meant death! As a result, after we heard the news, many of us went to the Provincial Government to get up a petition against it, to stage a sit-in, and to ask why a genre that needs to be preserved and supported, an ICH item that is not marketable, was being corporatized.¹³¹

Therefore, when the local government vigorously implemented the transition to a corporate model, they encountered strong opposition from the performers of the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe. Confrontations between the troupe and the state culminated in the sit-in demonstration in front of the provincial government building in the summer of 2003.

¹³¹ “Wenhua tizhi gaige shinian jishi 3: Jutuan zhibian 文化體制改革十年紀事三劇團之變 [The Chronicle of the ten-year Cultural System Reform 3: the change of a troupe], iFeng video, 29:58, from a TV program “Fenghuang da shiye” 鳳凰大視野 televised by the Fenghuang weishi 鳳凰衛視 [iFeng TV] on November 14th, 2012, <http://v.ifeng.com/news/society/201211/1837777d-149b-4702-b310-73e5ac00c299.shtml>.

6.1.1 From a Public Service Institute to a Cultural Business

The performers' resistance to corporatization reforms resulted from their growing concern for their careers and financial stability in its wake. This concern was based on two changes wrought by the reform. First, after the reform, troupe members could lose their affiliation with the state service system, as the aim of corporatization reform was to transform the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe from a service institution (*shiye danwei*) into an enterprise (*qiye*). Although the notion of Kun opera's commercialization emerged as early as the late 1980s, it hadn't impacted the troupe's fundamental structure as a public institution. However, the 2004 corporatization reform was projected to permanently remove the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe from the list of *shiye danwei bianzhi*,¹³² that is, the authorized personnel of the service institute within the state administrative system ((Brødsgaard 2002, 363). Employees within the state administrative system enjoyed guaranteed financial stability, often regarded as *chi huangliang*, meaning "to eat imperial grain" (Brødsgaard 2002, 365). Affiliation with the state administrative system was also perceived as a social privilege providing easier access to all sorts of social resources.¹³³ As discussed in Chapter 2, beginning in the 1950s, some private troupes sought the opportunity to be nationalized, due to the social and economic benefits of being state-employees (*gongjia ren*). Although most state-owned Kun opera troupes experienced financial difficulties throughout the 1980s and 1990s, a position within the state system was still indispensable, because state affiliation provided them not only with a basic guaranteed income, but also the social identity of a civil servant, which at that time was considered socially superior to positions outside the state system, such as self-employed individuals (*getihu*).

¹³² *Bianzhi* referred to the authorized number of personnel in a variety of state-owned organs, institutions, and enterprises. the state exercises control over the state administrative apparatuses by controlling the *bianzhi* (Brødsgaard 2002, 363).

¹³³ In this sense, the *bianzhi* system is similar to "Nomenklatura" in the Soviet Union. Higher positions in the *bianzhi* system are often associated with more political power (Brødsgaard 2002).

Many Kun opera professionals believed that corporatization reforms would result in a downgrading of their social status as well as a termination of the financial guarantee. As Ke Jun said, “We actually hated this reform. Why? It is because we were sort of state cadres who enjoyed benefits from a civil service institution. There is no market [share] for Kun opera performance, and we solely relied on [financial] aid from the government to continue our careers. In spite of the few performances we gave, our life was very easy.”¹³⁴ After the reform, the prestige of Kun opera professionals as a cultural cadre affiliated with state organs waned. The nature of their labor also changed from being a civil service, which facilitated cultural production and political propaganda, to being a purely symbolic good.

The second reform that caused widespread concern among troupe members of the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe was related to payment and reward mechanisms. According to a 2003 government document stipulating measures to support and stimulate the cultural industry (Ministry of Culture 2003), the corporatization reform consisted of a series of new measures and policies such as personnel and labor system reforms. It also affirmed an allocation mechanism reform based on “the principle of participating in production factors such as labor, capital, technology and management, etc., in allocation according to contributions.” The allocation mechanism also permitted “culture and artistic talents and management talent with special abilities—as well as the immaterial assets they possess, such as intellectual property rights, creative achievements and scientific research or technological achievements, etc.—to participate in profit distribution” (Ministry of Culture 2003, Article 10) . These measures were intended as incentive mechanisms which would encourage cultural producers to improve their productivity in the pursuit of personal

¹³⁴ TV interview in “Wenhua tizhi gaige shinian jishi 3: Jutuan zhibian 文化體制改革十年紀事三劇團之變 [The Chronicle of the ten-year Cultural System Reform 3: the change of a troupe], iFeng video, televised by the Fenghuang weishi 鳳凰衛視 [iFeng TV] on November 14th, 2012, <http://v.ifeng.com/news/society/201211/1837777d-149b-4702-b310-73e5ac00c299.shtml>.

profit. Furthermore, the measures represented a drastic change to the previous distribution mechanism—that is, the structural wage system, implemented in the mid-1980s—in which each performer received a fixed wage in accordance with a given artistic level. For performers of an older generation such as Shi Xiaomei, who was fifty-five years-old in 2004, the new allocation mechanism was more of a challenge than an incentive, because it made allocations contingent on her participation in performance and she was unsure about her capacity to give as many performances as her junior colleagues. She was worried that she might be ineligible for the production of new plays due to her age, and this in turn would severely affect her income or even threaten her employment contract, not to mention her retirement pension. Thus, the labor system reforms and new allocation mechanisms ushered in dire uncertainties for senior performers.

In response, to soothe anxieties of senior performers and facilitate implementation of the corporatization reform, the local government proposed a retirement plan. This plan accorded with a government order outlining “Regulations on the Work Units of Commercial Undertaking and their Transformation into Enterprises within the Cultural Structural Reform (Trial Points),” which was issued in December of 2003 and implemented in January of 2004 (Office of State Council 2003).¹³⁵ According to this piece of regulation, “for personnel already retired before transformation, the original state provided a pension according to previous standards. Rules governing pension and gratuity to the employees retiring after transformation are to be implemented according to the relevant policies of documents LSBF [2000] No. 2 and LSBF [2002] No. 5” (ibid.). Therefore, if senior performers chose to retire before the implementation of

¹³⁵ The Regulations were issued as one of two attachments to the government document, GFB [2003] No. 105. “Wenhua tizhi gaige shidian zhong jingyingxing wenhua shiye danwei zhuanwei qiye de guiding (shixing)” 文化体制改革试点中经营性文化事业单位转制为企业的规定(试行) [The regulations on commercial undertaking work units transforming into enterprises in cultural structural reform (trial points)], issued by the Office of the State Council on December 31st, 2003.

corporatization reforms, they could keep their pension and other benefits as before. The eligible personnel included those who had reached retirement age in 2003, and those who had not reached retirement age but had nonetheless provided full-length service (20 years) in the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe.

Unsurprisingly many senior performers chose to take retirement in accordance with the plan in order to keep their pension and benefits of their original contract. These reforms consequently triggered a tremendous wave of retirement in 2003, right before the implementation of the corporatization reform. Most senior Kun opera professionals viewed retirement as a sensible measure that might prevent them from confronting the economic uncertainties of Kun opera's post-reform environment. When I asked Shi Xiaomei, a Plum Blossom Performance Award winner and troupe mainstay, why she chose to retire before she reached retirement age, she hesitated a little and then answered my question cautiously: "Because the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe will be transformed from a civil service institution into a company, we [myself and my husband Zhang Hong] chose to retire before the corporatization reform. It is mainly a matter of self-protection" (Shi Xiaomei, pers. comm., July 5, 2011). As Ke Jun later lamented, the elder generation of Kun opera artists—including all the PBPA winners—retired overnight in order to maintain their status as civil servants, which put the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe in a near-fatal situation (Gu 2011, 2).

Senior Kun opera professionals' consciousness of "self-protection" reflected their lack of confidence in the continuous cultural system reforms, starting from the 1980s, and betrayed a deep-seated fear of unknown situations that might negatively impact their personal lives. This fear and uncertainty mostly stemmed from personal experience. Shi Xiaomei and her generational peers had suffered through the Cultural Revolution and, later, the state-system wage reforms that affected their performing arts field beginning in the mid-1980s. Although these reforms were

initiated by the state as measures to stimulate cultural production, they all led to various forms of individual sacrifice and suffering. From the point of view of senior professionals, the 2004 corporatization reform was no exception in the history of reforms to their field, and retirement was their last chance to secure and protect their personal lives from an unforeseeable future.

6.1.2 “Muddling Through” the Transformation

Fear of uncertainty among troupe members was mostly likely caused by the vagueness and inconsistency of reform policies and measures. Many contemporary reforms in China share these two features, in both economic and cultural fields. As many have economists pointed out, there was usually a lack of detail in plans laying out the ultimate objectives and implementation processes of reforms. Each step depended upon a previous step, as implied by the Chinese expression “groping for stones to cross the river” (*mozhe shitou guohe*). For example, the PRC’s economic reforms, which had begun in the late 1970s, lacked an implementation blueprint and ultimate objectives, both of which emerged only gradually, after the reforms were announced and initiated (Naughton 1995, 98-99). Consequently, most reform implementation adopted the “strategy of not having a strategy,” or as political scientist and economist Charles Lindblom puts it “muddling through” (Lindblom 1959).

The corporatization reform’s vagueness and inconsistency was reflected in the uncertainty of the ownership, autonomy, and leadership in the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe. An intention to reshape the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe’s ownership structure into a multiple-shareholding, cooperative system is clearly evidenced in government documentation. For example, one government document specified that “methods of capital cooperation in new plays, and experiments in share-holder reorganization of state-owned performing groups should be actively

supported” (Ministry of Culture 2001). Another government document released in 2011 stipulates that:

Enterprises with all kinds of ownership shall be encouraged and supported to take part in the reform of state-owned performing groups through the methods of holding, equity participation, merger and reorganization. Performers and other individuals of cast and crew are encouraged to participate in the shareholding reform of the transformed troupes by means of holding shares by themselves. (Ministry of Publicity and Ministry of Culture 2011, Article 2)

However, neither policy-makers nor managers of the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe proposed measures to implement the policy. Attempts to transform the ownership structure of the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe had been unsurprisingly fruitless. In 2011, when I interviewed Gu Xin, the former Chief Manager of Jiangsu Performing Arts Group Company, he confirmed that the group was still a state-owned company, and refused to explicate the ownership structure of the company (Gu Xin, pers. comm., August 2, 2011). Furthermore, there was no evidence for the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe’s shareholding cooperative system even after seven years of reform implementation, between 2004 and 2011. As of 2015, the troupe’s official website specified that “the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe affiliated with the Jiangsu Performing Arts Group Company is a solely state-owned enterprise.”¹³⁶

Furthermore, the corporatized the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe never acquired managerial autonomy during the implementation period of the reform. Policies issued by the central government regarding the question of leadership in performing groups were inconsistent with one another. In the late 1990s, the central government promised to restrict its power within administration, and to transform its primary function from that of “running cultural production”

¹³⁶ The official web page of the Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Theater on the official website of the Jiangsu Performing Arts Group Company, <http://www.jsyanyi.cn/kjs.aspx>, accessed December 12, 2015.

toward that of “administering cultural production,” thus increasing the autonomy of individual performing groups. However, the central government also issued policies stressing the importance of “strengthening the state’s leadership” (*jiaqiang zuzhi lingdao*) of cultural entities, transformed enterprises, and the cultural industry. Interestingly, the phrase “strengthening the state’s leadership,” appears almost without exception in every single relevant official document. In fact, the central government has never withdrawn its power from performing arts troupes, even after corporatization reforms. According to the government document cited above (WZFF [2001] No. 45), the leadership of transformed state-owned performing groups should be comprised of Party staff members (*dangwu gongzuo renyuanyuan*) and troupe managers familiar with cultural production and management. As a result, troupe management was essentially supervised by delegated Party members. In Article 1, Section 1 of the government document entitled “Regulations on Commercial Cultural Undertaking Work Unit Transforming into Enterprises in Cultural Structural Reform (Trial)” the leadership of the Party was reassured that “[in] authorized trial units, original administrative management and Party leadership relationships *do not* change” (Office of the State Council 2003). In this sense, the leadership of the Party committee was by no means weakened or changed. This is actually one of a few points on which there was strict conformity of implementation from the beginning. As early as 2005, an officer in the Ministry of Culture noted that:

The objective of the cultural system reform is to overcome the drawbacks of the old system, to explore a cultural management system that is led by the Party Committee, managed by the government, self-regulated by the industry and operates legally, and a dynamic production and management mechanism of cultural products, in order to provide a long-term institutional guarantee for the development of advanced socialist culture. (Sun 2005, 7)

Moreover, the bureaucracy’s inertia within the administrative system also affected one of

the reform's main goals—namely, the financial decentralization of transformed performing groups. In the case of the JPKOT, the troupe actually lost its financial independence after reform, as it was amalgamated with the Jiangsu Performing Arts Group Company, becoming a branch company rather than an independent legal entity. This meant that all financial investment from the state would be distributed through the mother group company, filtered before it reached the troupe, thus restricting the JPKOT's flexibility to make capital allocation decisions. Ke Jun, director of the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe, later explained that, after reform, any expenditure of more than RMB¥ 2000 (approximately \$310 USD) had to be approved by the group leaders (Gu 2011, 35). Therefore, as a transformed enterprise, the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe continued to be restrained within the bureaucratic economy, bound in a net woven by numerous controls.

This top-down economic experiment gradually lost its momentum due to the absence of concrete plans for implementation. Policymakers started realizing the existence of great disparity between each trial unit and in each case tried to introduce flexibility into the decision-making process. In 2005, Sun Jiazheng, then Minister of the Ministry of Culture, proposed a new approach of “adopting a unique scheme to reform each troupe” (*yituan yice*) (Sun 2005, 9). In 2006, this approach appeared in an official government document which became a prescriptive opinion.¹³⁷ However, the lack of any macroscopic and programmatic implementation scheme remained a major obstacle. Ke Jun soon realized that the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe was not promoted as an exemplar of the corporatization of state-owned performing groups, but that the influence of the reform had gradually attenuated:

The first person who ate crabs would take the risk of being clamped!¹³⁸ [...] Neither did peers understand or support the corporatization transformation of

¹³⁷ WZFF [2006] No.1329.

¹³⁸ “The first person who ate crabs” (*diyige chi pangxie de ren*) is a Chinese idiom that denotes those who take the initiative in trying something new, dangerous, risky and uncertain.

Kun opera troupes; some government officials had different opinions about it. After the JPKOT's transformation, there was not a single successor of Kun opera troupe in any city or province that followed our pioneering case, which makes the corporatization transformation nothing but a slogan; it's like thunder without rain. (Gu 2011, 51-52)

Indeed, it turned out that the other six state-sponsored Kun opera groups did not follow through with the corporatization transformation after the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe, and retained their status as civil service institutions.

In October 2011, the Party's core leadership reached a new consensus to suspend the corporatization of state-owned performing groups. On October 18, 2011, the Central Committee of the CPC released its report of the Sixth Plenary Session of the Seventeenth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, *Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu shenhua tizhi gaige tuidong zhehuizhuyi wenhua da fazhan da fanrong ruogan zhongda wenti de jue ding* ("The Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Several Issues Concerning the Cultural System Reform That Promotes the Grand Development and Grand Prosperity of Socialist Culture"). In this report, the central power of the Party put forward several points regarding cultural production: 1) prioritize social effectiveness; 2) construct the public system of cultural services and develop non-profit cultural enterprises relying on public finance; and 3) enhance the preservation of national culture, natural heritage, and historical remains, as well as improve the construction of historical attractions and the transmission of intangible cultural heritage.¹³⁹ Although the corporatization reform of state-owned enterprises was still encouraged in this report, the fundamental value of cultural production was reverted to that of ideological supervision, the

¹³⁹ http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2011-10/25/content_1978202.htm, accessed December 15, 2016.

core of which was the promotion of national spirit of patriotism.¹⁴⁰

The official suspension of corporatization transformations in Kun opera was eventually made in 2011, with the release of one final government document (Ministry of Publicity and Ministry of Culture 2011). An appendix to this document was the “List of State-owned Performing Arts Groups,” identifying those groups which remained civil service institutions (*Baoliu shiye danwei xingzhi de guoyou wenyi yuantuan mingdan*). All six state-owned Kun opera groups, including the Beijing Northern Kun Opera Theater, Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe, Suzhou Kun Opera Theater, Zhejiang Kun Opera Troupe, Zhejiang Yongjia Kun Opera Troupe, and Hunan Province Kun Opera Troupe, were on this list and, thus, were able to keep their state subsidies. Although the government still encouraged these civil service institutions to complete their transformation in the future, inclusion of the list in the government document confirmed a temporary halt in corporatization reform, as well as settlement of the multi-year negotiation between the state and state-owned Kun opera troupes. As the result, the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe—the only state-owned Kun opera troupe to fully undergo the corporatization—became marginalized and unofficially excluded from state subsidies (Gu 2011, 52). Despite its ultimate suspension, the corporatization reform was still depicted in official documents as a successful movement that ought to be expanded in the future.

¹⁴⁰ In “The Decision,” Part 3, Section 3, it mentioned a goal of reform and renovation in the beginning sentence. The renovation was explained as a measure to promote nationalism and enhance the connection between people and the nation. (Ibid.)

6.2 KUN OPERA AS A SYMBOLIC GOODS

Although the centralized administrative structure of Kun opera production remained between 2003 to 2011, the corporatization of the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe ushered a new economic logic into the field of Kun opera production. A professional troupe was viewed not only as a political instrument in the promotion of nationalist culture, an organization of artistic creation, but also as a business seeking commercial profit. The performance of this genre was recognized as what Bourdieu calls “symbolic goods,” which contains “a two-faced reality,” namely, the combination of a commodity and a symbolic object (Bourdieu 1993, 113). The new economic logic configuring Kun opera performances as symbolic goods in the cultural market affected not only the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe but also other Kun opera groups that have not yet been transformed.¹⁴¹ In this section, I first describe how the new commodity attribute of cultural products was promoted in government documents. Then I analyze the rise of a large-scale production mode which was adopted by the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe in order to manage and market their Kun opera products and appeal to the widest range of customers.

6.2.1 The Duality of Attributes of Cultural Products

Since the inauguration of cultural system reforms in 2003, the commodity attribute of cultural products was accorded unprecedented importance by the central government. This attitude was

¹⁴¹ For instance, the Ministry of Culture initiated the National Stage Project (*Guojia wutai gongcheng*) in 2002, a form of financing that is provided by the government to state-owned performing groups that produce stage works that are deemed to have high potential of box office revenues. Therefore, although other state-owned Kun opera troupe were not corporatized, their operation was also impacted by the economic logic of “symbolic goods.” The National Stage Project is different from other government prizes in that it represents the state’s investment in works that were believed to be of the best cultural quality and have high commercial potential.

clearly expressed in official documents affirming the “dual attribute” (*shuangchong shuxing*) of cultural products. In 2010, Li Changchun—who was then Propaganda Chief for the Chinese Communist Party—published an article in the Party’s journal, *Qiushi* (“Seeking Truth”) which is also the Party’s main organ for promotion of the Party’s policies and theories. In the article, Li declared that the attributes of culture (*wenhua de shuxing*) were dual, in that they were simultaneously “ideology” and “commodity” (Li 2010, 5). This double-attribute theory of cultural products in China, however, did not necessarily indicate that the Party would give up its previous policy of using cultural production as a medium of propaganda. In the same article, Li Changchun urged that commodification and marketization of cultural products should achieve both social effects (*shehui xiaoyi*)—for example, “educating people” and “guiding social and ideological developments”—and economic effects (*jingji xiaoyi*) for achieving monetary benefits (Li 2010, 8). In Li’s theory, social effects should be prioritized over economic effects: “when the social effects conflict with economic effects, the latter should submit to the former” (Li 2010, 5). Ironically, economic effects were considered the primary criteria for examining the achievement of the social effects for certain cultural products. As Li wrote:

Under the conditions of a socialist market economy, *the essential standard of examining whether “the two effects” are integrated is to examine whether people like the products, and whether they are willing to purchase and consume them.* The more people purchase excellent cultural products, the more people will get cultivated; [therefore] bigger economic benefits will broaden [the influence of] social effects. In this sense, *social effects will amount to nothing without economic effects.* (Li 2010, 6; italics added)

Cultural policy in 2010 indicates this adjusted logic in the field of cultural production, which sanctions the conversion of cultural capital into economic capital. This new logic viewed cultural goods, such as performing arts, as ordinary commercial products, and adopted profit maximization as a unidimensional criterion for evaluating the success or failure of a given cultural

product.

Li's article represented the most authoritative voice from the central government, and shows that the central government placed particular emphasis on fostering the growth of cultural industries in China. His argument was reinforced in then-Prime Minister Wen Jiabao's March 5, 2011 report on the "Work of the Government delivered at the Fourth Session of the Eleventh National People's Congress" (*Shiyijie quanguo renda sici huiyi*). In the report, Wen claimed that the goal of developing cultural industries and fostering new cultural formats was to "push cultural industries to become a pillar of [China's] national economy" (Wen 2011).

The state's new policy greatly impacted the primary purpose of exchange rules and managerial strategies of Kun opera production. The policy also brought a market-oriented and consumer-centered economy to the attention of all state-sponsored Kun opera groups. The JPKOT, being selected as the subject of the 2003 corporatization reform's pilot project, began its attempt to reach the widest possible audience with a variety of commercial strategies, as described in the following section.

6.2.2 The Exploration of the Heterogeneous Audiences

The marketing philosophy behind the strategy of large-scale production is to create the widest possible audience in order to pursue maximum investment profitability. In the early 2000s, the widest possible audience for the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe appeared to be the anonymous public. The troupe had very little idea who might be interested in purchasing their performances, and their initial strategy was to fully explore the heterogeneity of audiences by staging performances in different venues without targeting any specific population. As former director of the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe Ke Jun explained:

I don't think we should look for a specific category of Kun opera audiences, because Kun opera is a performing art *that can be appreciated by audiences from different social classes*. Kun opera is not only an elite cultural form, but also an entertainment form that can attract the populace in general. There are many plain and interesting plays, such as lively action plays and humorous clown plays, which can meet the aesthetic needs of those less cultivated audiences. (Zheng 2006, 123-24; italics added)

The Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe's marketing strategies placed great emphasis not only on how to find or cultivate appropriate audiences and recruit consumers from a determinate consumer population, but also on how to develop a versatile performance program that might suit wider consumption needs. The Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe created three marketing strategies in order to adapt to their new environment and cope with conditions of rising uncertainty. I observed these three strategies in practice during fieldwork between 2010 and 2013.

6.2.2.1 Strategy 1: The Kun Opera Community

The JPKOT's first strategy was to explore regular Kun opera theater-goers and form a Kun opera community centering around their theaters, thereby enabling the company to keep routine consumers and to recruit from their established consumer population. This strategy placed more emphasis on intensifying or increasing the visits of a determined audience, and less on attracting new audiences. The Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe presented routine performances at their own theater, *Lan Yuan* (The Orchid Garden). Located in a historical landmark *Jiangning Fuxue* (The Nanking Academy),¹⁴² the Orchid Garden is a small, one-story theater with an audience capacity of 135 seats. The interior decoration is simple, featuring archaized caissons, emulating traditional

¹⁴² The predecessor of the Nanking Academy was Guozijian (the Imperial Central University) in the Ming Dynasty. Its name was changed to the Nanking Academy in 1652 and relocated to its current location, Chaotian Gong (the Chaotian Palace) in 1865.

zaojing patterns, and a compact, standardized seating area.¹⁴³ There is no balcony, gallery or other form of prestige seats (Figure 7). In 2011, ticket prices varied from RMB ¥30 to ¥150 (about US\$5 to \$25), which was quite affordable for most regular theater-goers. In this theater, the troupe gave routine performances on Friday nights and weekends.



Figure 7. Interior design and the seating area of the Orchid Garden, July 2012. (Photo by author)

In addition, every Saturday at the Orchid Garden, the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe also offered Kun opera singing lessons, taught by the company's professional performers. The beginner

¹⁴³ The *zaojing*-type ceiling is the dominant form of ceiling from the Sui and Tang onward. It uses a large number of decorative borders as a means of partitioning space (Rong 2013, 470-71).

class was free of charge, and the advanced class charged RMB ¥600 (about US\$97) for twelve lessons.¹⁴⁴ These lessons were open to the public, and students did not necessarily need to have any musical background. The class met weekly in one of the rehearsal rooms of the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe. This pedagogical arrangement was, to some degree, similar to the pre-existing approach adopted by other Kun opera troupes since the mid-1980s, but it had two distinctive features.

First, the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe created a Kun opera community based in their troupe theater, rather than based in the locale of learners, such as a campus area. This approach fostered a community bond with the troupe's cast and crew; hence, learners had a stronger and more concrete connection to performances in the theater than did those who learned the genre abstractly, via PowerPoint slides and classroom demonstrations. Belonging to a Kun opera study group which met within the yard of The Orchid Garden increased group members' theater attendance; indeed, some members chose to stay after class and returned in the evening for a show, when they could watch their Kun opera tutors perform on stage. Moreover, these teaching activities bestowed learners with a durable attitude that recognized the value of their tutors' craft and skills. The teaching helped formulate their schemes of understanding, perception, and expression, and it subsequently confirmed the cultural legitimacy of their tutors' artistry. In this way, the Kun opera pedagogical community—within which members could communicate regarding Kun opera events, information, and shared interests—helped turn the participants into regular theater-goers.

¹⁴⁴ Detailed information about their Kun opera class was announced and discussed in the online discussion group entitled “Sheng Kun Lan Yuan chuancheng ban” (The Transmission Class of the Orchid Garden of JPKOT) on douban.com., one of the most influential social networking service (SNS) website in China. The Douban page of the Transmission Class of the Orchid Garden of JPKOT's Douban page, accessed May 20, 2013, <http://www.douban.com/group/287796/?ref=sidebar>.

Similar information was also circulated in other discussion groups, also on douban, such as “Lan Yuan Juchang Nanjing Kunqu aihao xiaozu” (The Group of Kunqu Fans of the Orchid Garden in Nanjing.” The Douban page of the Group of Kunqu Fans of the Orchid Garden in Nanjing, accessed may 20, 2013, <http://www.douban.com/group/topic/22136068/>.

Moreover, the close relationship between students in the Kun opera class, and between students and their tutors, also helped establish an intimate sociality that created a sense of belonging vis-à-vis their own Kun opera circle.

My first attendance at a show given in The Orchid Garden revealed to me a strong atmosphere of intimate networking among audiences. It was a pleasant evening on June 26, 2010. I arrived at the theater around 6:45pm, half-an-hour before the show. The house was not open yet, so I stood alone in the yard, surrounded by audience members. Most attendees seemed to know each other and were familiar with the garden and architectural complex. They discussed scripts and tunes of certain excerpts, and occasionally greeted performers and musicians who walked rapidly by, until seating began around 6:50pm.

This case of “participatory communication” not only formed a connection between audiences and professionals; it also created an experience that cannot be replaced by acquisition of Kun opera culture from resources outside of the theater. Within this community, members had a feeling of belonging and a feeling of being associated with the show in their own unique and idiosyncratic ways. They regarded themselves as *the* appointed audience of a play which did not deliver its essence or message to outsiders of the community (including me).

6.2.2.2 Strategy 2: Value-Added Services

The Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe’s second strategy was to collaborate with other businesses and provide performances for those enterprises’ consumers as “value-added” services. This strategy allowed these customers to sample Kun opera plays, and the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe hoped the strategy might increase its chances of attracting these consumers to theater performances. Kun opera was introduced to spectators as an additive service that improved another main service. In this regard, Kun opera was used as a value-added product, that is, a supplementary element added

to a product that helps the business owner to increase the value of their products.

This strategy could bring instant economic benefits to the troupe. After the 2004 corporatization transformation, the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe faced government pressure to increase its profitability in the short-term, as monetary profit had become the unidimensional criterion for evaluating the success or failure of Kun opera products. However, the long-term familiarization strategy appeared insufficient and unsuitable for the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe as a means of boosting its short-term profits—for instance, quickly growing the volume of ticket sales outside of the small circle of professionals and connoisseurs. Discovering unexplored market spaces and creating new demands for Kun opera therefore appeared to be a “fit for purpose” business strategy. Embedding Kun opera performances in another service was considered a win-win tactic which allowed the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe to not only collect regular collaboration fees but also increase the exposure of Kun opera to potential customers. On the other hand, the main service provider could use Kun opera performances to enrich their customers’ experiences and create a distinctive feature that business rivals did not have.

In this section, I will describe the “value-added” business model through two case studies. The first is a Kun opera theater in Zhou village, a tourist town near Shanghai, and the second is a Kun opera performance at a high-end restaurant called the Twenty-One Club (*Nianyi huisuo*) located in the *Xinanli* district of Nanjing.

In January 2011, the Jiangsu Kun Opera Theater contracted with the local government of Zhou Village (*Zhouzhuang*) for daily Kun opera performances at the “Ancient Theater of the Zhou Village” (*Zhouzhuang gu xitai*). Zhou Village is a historic water town and famous tourist attraction situated in Kunshan, a city widely recognized as the cradle of Kun opera culture. In 2001, the town government officially founded Zhou Village Tourism Company Ltd., and developed the old

residential area into an enclosed scenic environment, specifically designed for tourism. The Zhou Village became renowned as a cultural heritage site, particularly after 2003 when it was proclaimed one of the “Historical and Cultural Towns of China” (*Zhongguo lishi wenhua mingzhen*) by the PRC Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development (*Zhongguo zhufang he chengxiang jianshebu*) and the State Administration of Cultural Heritage (*Zhongguo guojia wenwuju*).

The construction of the scenic area has made the Ancient Theater one of the must-visit sites for tourists. The scenic area of the Zhou Village is enclosed. Ticket barriers are erected at every alley that leads into the town. Tickets are usually sold as general passes which cover all landmarks in Zhou village. Most tourists visit the theater, as it is one of the tourist map’s featured landmarks, and so watching a Kun opera show inside the theater became a value-added service, since no additional fee would be charged for tourists. Most tourists would stop at the Ancient Theater briefly, watch a Kun opera performance for a very short period of time, and then proceed to their next stop.

The tourist significance of this historical and cultural town lies in the journey into an old-fashioned lifestyle that it provides. The village is known for centuries of old dwellings, narrow, pedestrian stone alleys, and boats with black awnings that transport villagers along a river which cross-cuts the entire town. Presenting heritage is a process that entails exhibiting both tangible remains, such as the obsolete buildings of the town, and intangible elements, such as cultural knowledge (for example, the history of the town) and cultural performances. The performances that tourists see nowadays are the result of careful curation by the Zhou Village Tourism Company. In an article published on the official website of the Zhou Village Tourism Company, Yang Shousong, former chairman of Kunshan Federation of Literary and Art Circles (*Kunshan shi wenlian*), revealed some difficulties behind the project:

The debate [about staging Kun opera performances in the Ancient Theater of Zhouzhuang or not] went back and forth. In the first several years, funding the Kun opera performances

at the Ancient Theater didn't generate much economic benefit; on the contrary, the maintenance of this attraction cost more than one million RMB each year. "Is it worth it?" Some [leaders of the local government] proposed that [we should present] other genres that can attract more audiences, such as Yue opera (*Yueju*), Hu opera (*Huju*), and Xi opera (*Xiju*), and even acrobatics and magic shows.

Fortunately, local leaders not only consider short-term economic benefits, but also cultural outcomes over the long run: annually, there are about three million tourists visiting Zhouzhuang, and the Ancient Theater is one of the attractions they will definitely pass through. Even if one tenth, or one hundredth of tourists stopped at, watched, or heard Kun opera, this means thirty thousand, or even three hundred thousand people would watch and hear Kun opera, among whom some may even develop their interest in Kun opera afterwards. At least, people would know *Zhouzhuang has Kun opera, and Zhouzhuang has its own culture*. Zhouzhuang is not only known for *wansanti*,¹⁴⁵ but also Kun opera, a cultural activity. (Yang 2013; italics added)

Thus, there was a carefully designed plan for what to include in the village for the purpose of attracting tourists, varying from the pork shank meals to live opera performances. Based on Yang's description, Kun opera was not an obvious choice for Zhou Village, but it finally triumphed over other genres due to the Zhou Village Tourism Company's consideration of enhancing the historical and cultural elements of the heritage on display. As cultural anthropologist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes, such exhibition plays such an important role in that it "endows heritage thus conceived with a second life" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995, 369). Kun opera performances were considered an appropriate cultural practice to be staged at the Ancient Theater of Zhou Village, particularly due to its long history. The genre's cultural symbolism was exploited to generate a sense of the past and a temporally remote domain where people lived quite a different life. In addition, Kun opera as a form of ICH was exploited as a symbolic good that adds value to the material heritage itself. In Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's terms, Kun opera could function as a "metacultural artifact" that augments the museological value of Zhou Village buildings to living

¹⁴⁵ *Wansanti*, Wan's marinated pork shank, is a famous local dish in Zhouzhuang.

people and performers. Not just any metacultural artifact was able to fulfill this role.

However, the enchantment of this intangible cultural heritage is, to a high degree, based on an arbitrary, imagined cultural exotification. First, there is no historical evidence that Kun opera was ever a popular theater form in Zhou Village. On the contrary, some genres mentioned in Yang's account—such as Hu opera and Yue opera—enjoyed greater popularity in the region, which is why those popular genres were on the company's list. Second, the so-called “Ancient Theater of Zhou Village” (*Zhouzhuang gu xitai*) is actually an archaized theater that was in fact built recently, in 2001—it is as young as the ICH proclamation of Kun opera itself (Yang 2013). The Zhou Village Tourism Company's intention of exhibiting an old performing tradition in a Chinese town follows a common logic of the cultural heritage industry—namely, as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett puts it, “a new mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995, 369).

The collaboration between the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe and the Zhou Village Tourism Company aimed to significantly increase public exposure of Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe's Kun opera plays. A key concept of this exposure was that it was designed not to familiarize tourists with Kun opera culture or to deliver precise knowledge about this genre, but to enhance Kun opera's quality of foreignness and remoteness from people's daily lives by constructing Kun opera as an exotic culture that tourists have never experienced. The presentation of Kun opera in a tangible heritage site would lead tourists to conceive Kun opera not as an obsolete cultural form, but as a valuable form of cultural heritage. Therefore, through exhibiting Kun opera performances, Zhou Village and the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe formed a reciprocal relationship. Zhou Village regarded Kun opera as a useful tool for adding value to its tangible heritage holdings vis-à-vis multiple aspects. The history of Kun opera elaborates the archaic (or archaized) interface of the

physical buildings. The cultural singularity of Kun opera contributes to the sense of cultural difference that an attraction needs to enhance its qualities of peculiarity or uniqueness. Furthermore, the reputation of Kun opera (epitomized by the ICH proclamation) upgrades a touring experience beyond mere food tasting and sightseeing. On the other hand, the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe benefits from this collaboration as well. First, daily performance at the Ancient Theater greatly increases the troupe's revenues, and in this context their income could be measured by the number of performances, not the number of spectators.

On a sunny afternoon in June 2012, I paid my first visit to the Ancient Theater of Zhou Village. The show began at 2:30pm. Performers from the JPKOT presented two excerpts from *The Peony Pavilion* and one from the *Tiger Purse Accusation (Hu'nantan)*, just as they did on every occasion. Three or four tourists were strolling in the yard. One of them took out a camera while passing the stage. Some paused and watched the on-stage performance for a minute or two, and then moved on. Only very few tourists chose to sit down on the bench facing the stage and quietly watch the show for a few brief moments. Apparently, courtesy rules in an opera house were not applicable in this tourist-attraction theater. Visitors were not obliged to arrive on time and sit throughout the show; rather, they may sit, walk around, and leave anytime they want. Around 3:00pm, a tour group consisting of twenty or so tourists wearing striking yellow hats with the travel agent's logo quickly passed the entrance of the theater outside. Attracted by the sound of Kun opera performance, four tourists left their team, stepped into the yard, and were about to sit down to have a closer look at the show on stage. Their tour guide suddenly rushed in and spoke loudly to urge them to leave: "Stand up, stand up. We are running out of time." Then those yellow hats swiftly left the venue.

The photo below captures a rather normal scene of tourists in front of the stage (see Figure

8). The lady is taking a picture, trying to include both her male companion, probably her husband, and the actress who is singing and acting on stage. Several steps away, a teenage girl, probably their daughter, is spectating. Through their photos, live Kun opera performances will be remembered as part of the exhibition content. The intangibility of Kun opera tradition is thus captured in a pictorial way, which makes Kun opera not less tangible than the historical landmark itself.



Figure 8. Tourists taking photos in front of the Ancient Theater of Zhouzhuang while the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe employee performs an excerpt from *The Peony Pavilion*, June 25, 2012. (Photo by author)

The nature of the contract between the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe and Zhou Village requires the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe performers to give performances in the Ancient Theater of

Zhou Village according to set schedules and under all circumstances—even in the absence of an audience. On June 26, 2012, I revisited the Ancient Theater and witnessed a performance without a single spectator. It had been raining heavily since early morning. The whole town was badly flooded, and rainfall coalesced in a rapid creek and flowed down the narrow alley. I took off my shoes and rolled up my pants, waded along the swift stream, and headed towards the theater. On my way, I thought the show would most likely be canceled, as nobody would come to watch opera in an open-air theater in such bad weather. To my surprise, I saw observed the MC announcing their program to a dozen empty benches. The show started strictly on time. Under the shelter of the pavilion, performers were able to stay dry and perform normally, but without spectators (see Figure 9). Thanks to the amplifiers on two sides of the stage, I could still catch the soft volume of Kun opera singers, which would have been otherwise deadened by the sound of the intense fall of rain.

Such a brief sampling of Kun opera performance at the Ancient Theater of the Zhou Village is unlikely to turn a tourist into a Kun opera lover, but what the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe intended to achieve was the aftereffect. A person who has seen Kun opera performances in Zhou Village could convey a positive comment to his or her friends, who may be interested in visiting Zhou Village and watching Kun opera there; or he or she may even develop personal interests to watch Kun opera in the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe's theater later. The underlying marketing logic is analogous to wine tasting—as Ke Jun once told me, “let people sample the wine first and then they probably will be persuaded to buy it” (Ke Jun, pers. comm., July 7, 2011).



Figure 9. Kun opera performance at the Ancient Theater of Zhou village on a rainy day, June 26, 2012. (Photo by author)

The second case I wish to consider is a collaboration between the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe and the Twenty-One Club (*Nianyi Huisuo*), a high-end restaurant in one of Nanjing's premier cultural districts, called *Xinanli*. During the dinner period, Kun opera performances were offered to entertain the diners. In 2009, the Jiangsu Kun Opera Theater signed a five-year contract with Qinyou Cultural Communications Company Ltd. (*Qianyou Wenhua Chuanbo Youxian Gongsi*), and established a boutique theater using the stage of the Twenty-One Club managed by the latter. This club is located in *Xinanli*—a famous cultural district comprising many of Nanjing's historical attractions—where it is juxtaposed to the Former Residence of Gan Xi (*Ganxi zhaidi*),

an opulent historical landmark. The Twenty-One Club is a multifunctional venue which includes an open-air theater, a restaurant, and a business center. The Qianyou Cultural Communications Company offers the troupe RMB ¥6000 (US\$920) per night for daily Kun opera performances at the Twenty-First Club.

The architectural structure of the entire performing space imitates a style found at the classical gardens of Suzhou. The architectural composition of this mansion complex articulates a conception of theater as consisting in both open-air and enclosed elements. The performance area is situated in a pavilion, surrounded by a pond that is located within the garden at the middle of the complex (see Figure 10).¹⁴⁶ Behind the pavilion stage, there is a rectangular backstage building where actors can change their costumes and makeup. There are two doors, covered by a curtain, that lead onto the stage and from which actors may enter or exit. In front of the stage, there is an open-air seating area, directly facing the stage, that seats around twenty viewers at most. The backstage building connects to two wings of two-story enclosed rooms. These wings immediately connect to the side; above the level of the stage are boxed seats, and beneath them is a dining hall filled with compartments. In these two wings, audiences can enjoy their meals and watch the play through either the large picture windows in the hall or the refined, lattice-like windows of their private boxes.

¹⁴⁶ <http://limuyuan820623.blog.sohu.com/130389015.html>, last modified on August 26, 2009.



Figure 10. Theater stage in the yard of the Twenty-One Club. (Photo by Gongzi Mu)

The refined Suzhou-style private garden typically owned by social and cultural elites is considered by some contemporary scholars to be an organic cultural environment for the growth and development of the genre of Kun opera (Zhou 2006). Garden pavilions were popular for theater

performances, particularly in the Ming dynasty, because of the poetic ambience formed by the natural settings of Chinese-style gardens (Shen 2005, 137). Spectators' aesthetic pleasure is not only triggered by performances on the stage, but also by some environmental factors, such as rich and varied poetic surroundings. Some scholars even assert the inseparability of Kun opera and this environmental feature, and attribute the fascination and vitality of Kun opera to its cultural "genes" in the Suzhou region—a cultural matrix that has produced Kun opera, Suzhou gardens, Suzhou embroidery, and other robust cultural forms (Zhou 2006). Since the early 2000s, these cultural scholars have played an important role in promoting the idea that Kun opera performances should be embedded in a garden environment, and in promoting the reconstruction of the historical entertainment spaces of elite cultural life. The Twenty-One Club was one experiment in these ideas.

The Twenty-One Club impresses its consumers with the dining environment, including the grandiose luxury of its interior decorating, its exquisite antique furniture on the private balconies, and its elegant fine dining plans—all paraphernalia that announce the noble status and refined tastes of consumers. In this club, diners can enjoy a feast for the eyes and stomach, and enjoy the mellow sounds of Kun opera singing. As introduced on the Twenty-One Club's official website, the club is dedicated to "reviving the lifestyle of aristocracy and elite literati" by creating an elegant, highly refined theatrical atmosphere for every guest who enters the Kun opera theater.¹⁴⁷ The experience of elite culture was the primary selling point of this advertisement; the key elements of this imagined lifestyle—such as the Suzhou style garden and Kun opera—were deployed as tokens that deliberately linked the cultural nobility of these elements, as icons of elitism, to the deluxe atmosphere of the club, as it created social distinction in real life.

Consumer spaces in the Twenty-One Club are characterized by the privacy that each box

¹⁴⁷ http://www.njspil.com/hs/fgey_content.aspx?tid=212&pid=1005&id=60, accessed February 15th, 2012 (the site discontinued).

or compartment affords; these partitioned spaces allow audiences to distance themselves from one another, after their own fashion and in accordance with their various budgets. The price of open-air seats is RMB¥ 100 per person with no meal and tickets for indoor seats cost RMB¥ 300 or RMB¥ 500 per person, depending on the different dining plans and type of room. Moreover, consumers may even distance themselves from the performance on stage. One customer who reviewed the Twenty-One Club on restaurant rating site dianping.com under the username *Aituangou11* (lit. “love group shopping online 11”) commented that:

I have no complaint at all about the food or the environment. There is a stage that each box can see. In the evening, you can watch *The Peony Pavilion* by the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe onstage. *If you want to listen [to the singing and music], you may open the window; if not, you may shut it (the windows seem to be of a special kind, because they completely insulate against noise from outside).* There is an LED screen hung on the wall [in the box], so you may see the performance from the TV screen.¹⁴⁸

According to this comment, the soundproof windows enable customers to enjoy this theater-restaurant as an ordinary food-only restaurant. For customers who do not appreciate Kun opera, the live performance on stage became nothing more special than a TV screen on the wall, that they could mute at any time by simply shutting the window.

In the social space of the Twenty-One Club, Kun opera performance is a supplement, and it makes these performances a “value-added service.” The performance appeals to social functions external to the appreciation of opera—for example entertaining consumers by accompanying their meals. This is clarified by the clubs’ advertising materials, which juxtapose the terms “culture,” “dining,” and “relax” (see Figure 11).¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ <http://www.dianping.com/shop/3134860>, accessed July 15, 2013. Parentheses in the original, and emphasis added.

¹⁴⁹ http://www.njspjl.com/hs/fyxt_content.aspx?tid=107&pid=1006&id=64, accessed May 22, 2013 (site discontinued).



Figure 11. Detail of a pictorial advertisement from the website of the Twenty-One Club.

The club sought to elevate the status of the restaurant via Kun opera—elevating the dining experience by associating with a transcendent cultural practice—and at the same time disavow the materialist expediency of Kun opera’s economic benefits. The official website of the Twenty-One Club declares:

[If] we want to watch a Kun opera play seriously, then it is not for the purpose of entertaining ourselves, but for appreciating its culture. So, the authenticity is of great importance. The cultural information that Kun opera contains has made this genre an essence of traditional Chinese culture—a feature that made Kun opera an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Therefore, a traditional Kun opera performance not only embodies aesthetic dispositions of pure entertainment, but is also an extension of internalized values of history and culture.¹⁵⁰

However, the alleged authenticity of Kun opera at The Twenty-One Club did not convince

¹⁵⁰ http://www.njspjl.com/hs/fgey_content.aspx?tid=212&pid=1005&id=60, accessed May 28, 2013 (site discontinued).

all spectators. A blog owner named “Qiaoshang kan fengjing” (lit. “take in the scenery on a bridge”) posted a blog entry reporting her impressions after seeing *The Peony Pavilion* that the JPKOT customized for performance at Twenty-One Club. The comparisons she drew between the Orchid Garden and the Twenty-One Club, her drama-critic writing style, and her personal connections with Kun opera professionals in Nanjing makes her perspective important in its own right:

I can only regard this version of *The Peony Pavilion*, exclusively emphasizing the heroine Du Liniang herself, as a microform of *The Peony Pavilion*, because [the playwright] has deleted so many excerpts from the original fifty-five excerpts in order to present a complete play within two hours. Even the most classical excerpt “Shihua Jiaohua” (“The Portrait Retrieved and Examined”) was skipped. When my student, a first-time viewer of Kun opera told me that she was amazed by this performance, I was so puzzled by her reaction, for based on my opinion this play is far from satisfactory. Can you call this a drama, without the portrait of extreme emotions in dramatic conflicts? After the show, I ran into the director of this production, Wang Bin, and exchanged opinions with him. He explained that this production is tailored specifically for this two-hour performance, and they can only prioritize only one protagonist, Du Liniang and the development of her emotion to finish the plot within time. For a Kun opera audience who was cultivated by watching [classical] excerpts in the Orchid Garden, I really cannot embrace this two-hour microform. ...

I wouldn't pay RMB ¥500 to go there if I had not been given a free opportunity. Some Kun opera audiences say that the Twenty-One club is forging an Imperial Granary¹⁵¹ in Nanjing. Until the present, I have had no chance to see the Imperial Granary production of *The Peony Pavilion* because I cannot afford their ticket price that easily exceeds RMB ¥1000.¹⁵²

Based on these comments, the blog writer seems quite familiar with other serious productions by the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe, for she easily noted the discrepancies between different versions and had a clear opinion about the play's abbreviation. The contrasting opinion of the blog writer, a regular theater-goer, and her student, who was a first-time viewer, shapes an interesting comparison between a regular theater-goer and an outsider to Kun opera culture. For a fresh audience, the club probably does a good job of presenting a fantastic Kun opera show in a

¹⁵¹ The Imperial Granary is a theater/business club in Beijing, which also features daily performance of the *Peony Pavilion*.

¹⁵² Qiaoshang kan fengjing (Taking in the scenery on a bridge), “Nianyi Huisuo de Kunqu yanchu” 廿一会所的昆曲演出 [Kunqu Opera performances at the Twenty One Club], *Sohu* (blog), August 25, 2009, <http://limuyuan820623.blog.sohu.com/130389015.html>.

poetic surrounding; but for a Kun opera connoisseur, who focuses on the performance itself more than any other elements in that space, this abbreviated version fails to satisfy his or her aesthetic expectations and appetite. Therefore, the blog writer's comment implies that the club may be an appropriate place for those who are rich in *economic capital* but relatively poor in Kun opera *cultural capital*. This blogger's estimation of the club is echoed, to some extent, in the producer's perspective.

Kun opera performer Shi Xiaomei, one of the backbones of the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe, told me that "I do not perform at the Twenty-One Club, neither do my partners, for the company only arranges the most artistically immature performers to perform there. They need more practice" (Shi Xiaomei, pers. comm., July 5, 2011). This casting arrangement reflects the company's marketing strategy of using luxury environmental advantage to compensate for less established performers' skills while simultaneously attracting audiences who are more concerned about the materiality of their consumption experience than the artistic expressiveness on the stage before them.

In the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe's collaboration with the Twenty-One Club, external demands from non-professionals and non-producers are given significant importance, and even prioritized over professionals' demands in the JPKOT's performing activities. As cultural entrepreneurs, the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe's production and managerial activities submit to "the laws of competition for the conquest of the largest possible market" (Bourdieu 1993, 115) and, in their collaboration with Twenty-One Club, the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe effectively generates economic benefit by attracting a certain number of consumers who are particularly rich in economic capital. This collaboration attracted criticism from some accredited advocates of artistically legitimate Kun opera theaters—mainly about keeping a complete storyline at the

expense of cutting out too many classical excerpts. Nonetheless, these negative insider comments are not likely to alter the logic of the Twenty-One Club project, because audiences' needs and expectations in the club may be different from those of theater cognoscenti. For many consumers, it is the dining experience that matters most.

6.2.2.3 Strategy 3: Reaching Out to the Anonymous Audience

The Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe's third strategy was not aimed at any particular consumer category. Instead, it assumed a mass-market position and used advertising campaigns to expose their Kun opera plays to average and anonymous audiences, almost blindly. This strategy placed more stress on the question of how to arouse public interest than on how to directly increase box office revenue. As Ke Jun said, the core tactic for attracting new audiences lay in a more active marketing approach that might reshape the public perception of Kun opera:

As far as I'm concerned, some audiences who resist Kun opera have not even watched a single play, but they may claim they would fall asleep during the performance. This is because they are not cognizant of the charm of Kun opera. Metaphorically speaking, Kun opera is like fine wine contained in an inconspicuous bottle. If you don't open, smell, and taste it, all you see is the rustic bottle and you will never know the goodies inside. That's usually why [people] miss the chance of getting to know it, or are even opposed to it. (Zheng 2006)

In pursuit of this goal, the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe took an active approach in reaching out to the widest possible audience. Unlike the spontaneous strategy that most Kun opera troupes had tried for three decades—that is, one which waited for its consumers to appear and only recruited those who had already been consumers—this active strategy could arouse the widest array of cultural interests by eschewing any controversial features in products as much as possible, in Bourdieu's formulation, conforming to “the highest social denominator” (Bourdieu 1993, 126). This is because attracting attention from a socially heterogeneous public required the Jiangsu Kun

Opera Troupe to minimize the valuation dispersion of their products—in other words, they sought to offer cultural products that could be appropriated and appreciated by everyone. Therefore, messages delivered via their advertisements foregrounded the universal appeal of their products. Additionally, these advertising campaigns were not necessarily based on their theaters, and could take place wherever the attentions of potential audiences might be won.

In this section, I analyze a Nanjing public transportation marketing campaign by the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe that displayed their performances to the broader public. On September 27, 2011, the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe moved their stage into the Nanjing subway, where they launched a two-part campaign. The first part was an on-stage performance at a fixed point in the subway system—the location of their stage. The stage was set up in the underground circular hall of the Xinjiekou Station, the busiest subway station in Nanjing that connects to several lines. There, in the public transit throng, performers played excerpts from the three classical Kun opera plays—*Changsheng dian* (*The Palace of Longevity*), *Taohua shan* (*The Peach Blossom Fan*), and *The Peony Pavilion*. Accompanied by a four-person ensemble consisting of a *dizi* (transverse flute), a *sheng* (mouth organ), a *pipa* (four-stringed fretted plucked lute) and an *erhu* (two-stringed bowed lute), three pairs of principals sang and acted on a small temporary stage for passersby who may or may not have been familiar with the theater form. The group performed as seriously as they would in a formal theater.

Beside the stage, an actor performing a *jing* (a male role with painted face) wore a white robe—an inner layer of costume, which would be covered by a formal fancy gown in his finished look. He looked into a mirror and concentrated on painting his face with brushes and colors, surrounded by passersby. This makeup process is an important element of stage preparation which is normally finished in a backstage dressing room; but, for the purpose of a thorough public

exposure, it was displayed openly as part of the formal exhibition. In order to make sure spectators could understand the lyrics, two bulletin boards with operatic scripts were erected along both sides of the stage. Some media staff, including two or three photographers and one cameraman, surrounded the stage and were shooting the scene with their professional devices. This involvement of official mass media spiced up the atmosphere in that the media shooting of the performance itself became part of the performance, and it caught the attention of passersby just as much as the on-stage action. In the midst of all this, some journalists and cameramen from Jiangsu Broadcasting Corporation busied themselves with reporting and interviewing here and there across the crowd. Some of their work was soon broadcast by Jiangsu Public Service Channel and later edited and rebroadcast by China Central Television (CCTV) Channel 13. These media activities kept expanding the social influence of this promotion even several days after the campaign.

The second part of this public transportation advertising campaign was a mobile performance inside a moving train. In between noisy cars, the performers repeated their performances, and then spread Kun opera-characters postcards around to random passengers. Some spectators used their smart phones to take photos and video as the performers walked by, and some chattered and whispered about uploading the pictures online and micro-blogging (*fa weibo*)—much of which may still be found circulating on social media today. The result of this marketing campaign was so sensational that, on December 29 of that same year, the JPKOT collaborated with the Nanjing Metro again to promote a new JPKOT production, *Honglou meng* (*Dream of the Red Chamber*).

One primary difference between this marketing campaign and the theater-based strategy is that the former carves out a mass-market stance, with the goal of minimizing the dispersion of demand. To achieve this goal, promoters usually “highlight the existence of the product, but will

not allow consumers to learn precisely their true match with the product's characteristics” (Johnson and Myatt 2006, 757). Therefore, in this mass promotion, the value of Kun opera is generally associated with the powerful but indefinite essence of Chinese traditional culture—a value which is vague in definition but which most people nonetheless support or subscribe to. In this slogan, calculated ambiguity in defining the values of Kun opera reflects promoters’ concern with reaching a socially heterogeneous public. Hence, the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe did not frame Kun opera as a harbinger of distinguished cultural taste as they had in their promotion project at the Orchid Garden. Nor did they adopt the marketing label of the Twenty-One Club, where Kun opera was presented as a symbol of consumers’ high social status. On the contrary, the Kun opera subway project’s promotional emphasis was on the accessibility of Kun opera. As Ke Jun introduced the project, “we usually perform Kun opera in theaters, so the populace may have very few chances to experience this art in person. Now we bring Kun opera into the subway for the purpose of shortening the distance between the public and this ancient theater art” (Luo and Ge 2011). In another interview, Ke Jun said, “By using this form of performance [in the subway], we are hoping to bring fortune and happiness to passengers. At the same, we can make the art of Kun opera step out of its ivory tower, and turn it into an art that can enter everybody’s inner world” (Tang 2011). Easy accessibility was the core concept of these kinds of marketing campaign.

Apart from its pursuit of the widest possible public, the Kun opera subway project also distinguished itself from the Orchid Garden project in that this subway campaign was carried out collectively and involved not only the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe personnel, but also their collaborators—the Nanjing Metro Company and media personnel from the Jiangsu Province Broadcasting Corporation. As one of the two primary hosts of this campaign, the Nanjing Metro Company coordinated with the JPKOT in some key ways, including placing Kun opera

advertisements on train handles and mounting six hundred advertising panels that provided introductory information about Kun opera and featured still photos provided by the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe (ibid.).

This kind of collaboration entails a transformation of the relationship between cultural producers and their products. Although producers benefit from the collaboration, to varying degrees they also have to compromise their autonomy or charismatic aura in negotiating the terms of the promotion. As manifested in the present example, although the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe succeeded in increasing the exposure of its plays to the public, the Nanjing Metro Company did expect compensation for its investment. The construction of a specific transportation culture was considered a knot tying together two seemingly unrelated entities—Kun opera and the subway. In the estimation of Nanjing Metro’s vice manager Xu Jianguo, this presentation of Kun opera, an ancient theater form, in Nanjing Metro’s modern transportation system was based on a wish to provide subway passengers with value-added services: “Our purpose of presenting live performances of famous Kun opera excerpts and exhibiting performers’ makeup preparation in the transfer station of Line 1 and Line 2 is to elevate passengers’ cultural tastes and to improve their happiness while commuting” (Yao and Jing 2011). In the marketing strategy of the Nanjing Metro, live Kun opera performance was considered as a value-added service that would improve their travel experience—which was the Nanjing Metro’s primary business—and that was available to passengers at no additional cost.

Thus, the Nanjing Metro’s promotion plans and the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe’s Kun opera revitalization plans were joined together, and their collaboration turned business publicity into a spectacle that veiled their commercial maneuvers. As Ke Jun introduced the idea to the press, “Safety, tranquility, and peaceful mind are necessities of a relaxing and elegant life style that Kun

opera represents. These features are exactly what is missing in modern society. We hope that we can spread around this quality (of life) and (cultural) taste” (Luo and Ge 2011). The Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe intended to spread an idea that Kun opera subway performances were not only for the sake of promoting their plays, but also for the purpose of contributing to the social space of passengers and bringing serenity and calm back to urban commutes.

The Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe’s effort to popularize Kun opera was accompanied by its concern for adaptability of Kun opera in a modern society. As early as 2010, during my first fieldwork trip in Nanjing, I came across a set of Kun opera promotional photos in the archives of the Jiangsu Province Performing Arts Corporation. These photos featured Kun opera performers wearing costumes and makeup, and posing in a subway car. Some were used as print advertisements for the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe and appeared on a wall in the yard of the Zijin Theater, the largest theater managed by the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe’s mother company, the Jiangsu Province Performing Arts Corporation (Figure 12). One of the advertisements depicts a *dan* (female) character leaning on a seat in the subway car. The image appears to me as a postmodern pastiche comprised of a modernized tradition, inclusive aesthetics, and (imagined) cultural nostalgia, surrounded by a contemporary urban circumstance. The slogan on the right reads, “To break through stereotypes of performance, to develop the [cultural] industry.” This series of photos and advertisements were a result of the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe’s strategy of reaching out to the anonymous market, and their bewilderment concerning how to effectively incorporate this old genre into urban life. They could not find a more successful strategy than staging Kun opera in public transportation venues. Indeed, despite a striking media effect, the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe achieved little more than a conceptual connection between Kun opera and busy passersby, as indicated in the series of promotion photos.



Figure 12. Print advertisement of the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe in the yard of the Zijin Theater. The slogan reads: “To break brough stereotypes of performance, to develop the [cultural] industry,” June 2010. (Photo by author)

6.3 CONCLUSION: THE RISE OF LARGE-SCALE PRODUCTION OF KUN OPERA

In this chapter, I introduced the corporatization reform of the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe, a state-owned Kun opera troupe which was transformed by the Cultural System Reform of 2003. That reform directly affected the troupe members’ affiliation with the system of state service institutions. After corporatization, the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe was removed from the list of state service institutions and reorganized as a profit-oriented corporation. The corporatization reforms suffered from inconsistency and the lack of a blueprint, and they eventually were suspended by the central government in 2011. But as an undertaker of the reform, the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe embarked on their exploration of market competition, beginning in 2004. Under the guidance of the central government’s theory of the “dual attribute of culture” as both ideology and commodity, the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe experimented with three main strategies to explore the heterogeneity of

audiences in their promotion campaigns: (1) to cultivate Kun opera theater-goers and form a Kun opera community centering around their theaters; (2) to adopt a value-added strategy to expand their potential consumers by providing Kun opera performances as a supplementary service within other business ventures; and (3) to reach out to the anonymous public via promotion campaigns. Their market strategy of appealing to the multitude gave rise to what Pierre Bourdieu termed the “large-scale production mode.”

Sociologist and philosopher, Pierre Bourdieu described “large-scale production” as a sub-field of the field of cultural production, one organized by the economic philosophy of “produc[ing] cultural goods destined for non-producers of cultural goods, ‘the public at large’” and, at the same time, pursuing investment profitability (Bourdieu 1993, 115). Based on its production purpose, target audiences, and diverse marketing strategies, I contend that the Jiangsu Kun Opera Troupe’s attempt to increase their market share was carried out in a large-scale mode of production. The economy of Kun opera performances increasingly relied on the troupe’s success in turning a socially, economically, and culturally heterogeneous public (e.g. those who have varying consumption capabilities, pursue diverse purposes when consuming the goods, and have various aesthetic dispositions and choices) into potential consumers of Kun opera. This large-scale production mode became an important economic logic for Kun opera production in China in the twenty-first century.

7.0 BEYOND THE STATE SYSTEM OF KUN OPERA PRODUCTION (2005-2015)

As the government corporatized the first state-owned Kun opera troupe in 2004, the government encouraged individuals and private enterprises outside the state system of performing groups to invest in the cultural industry and develop collaborative relationships with the transformed state-owned performing group (Ministry of Culture 2004). In 2005, the state encouraged private individuals and enterprises to purchase smaller shares of the transformed state-owned troupes (less than 51%) (State Council 2005). Individuals and enterprises without official affiliation and non-state capital assumed an increasingly important role in the cultural market and were eligible for collaboration with state-owned troupes. These private investors were more experienced with market rules and more sensitive to audience needs.

This process of collaboration gave rise to the role of producers (*zhizuoren*) in Kun opera. These individuals attracted the necessary capital necessary for collaboration projects; furthermore, they coordinated various aspects of cultural production, and oversaw a series of marketing activities. They began coordinating various aspects of production, including selecting scripts, deciding on the cast and crew, choosing venues, and creating publicity materials. With producers' help, live performances of Kun opera were combined with services and commodities (e.g. tourism and catering) to form the exchange value of the genre. By the mid-2000s, the production of Kun opera began shifting away from state-owned troupes toward individual producers, who played an active role in linking appreciation for the art of Kun opera to use-values in the daily lives of consumers, and in marketing the genre for the changing tastes of contemporary audiences.

In this chapter, I examine the influence of private individuals and enterprises on Kun opera productions in three aspects. First, I briefly trace the history of the role of producer, and describe

a producer's function in a typical production. Second, drawing on two producers' Kun opera productions, *The Imperial Granary Theater*, and *A Light Spring Breeze*, I analyze the producers' influence on the final products of Kun opera plays, based on their own tastes and audience tastes. And third, I interrogate the integration of Kun opera products with a "commodity context," in which the Kunqu performer's labor becomes a commodity, and detail how the socio-cultural values of Kun opera were brought into a new regime of economic value.

I argue that producers, by linking troupes and the buying public, played an important intermediary role in the formation of the new political-economic structure. They drove Kun opera production further away from the centralized cultural administration and closer to the market homology of supply and demand. Producers' labor significantly contributed to a range of services in which Kun opera professionals' performances engaged. The viewing of a Kun opera play in the commodity context was transformed into a utilitarian scheme and consumption ethos that systematically reduced the things of art into things of life. Kun opera performances were cultivated into a cultural practice which consumers used in order to identify themselves through consumption.

7.1 PRODUCER-CENTERED PRODUCTION

Producers were outsiders in relation to the field of state-owned Kun opera troupes. And their involvement in any given production often began from their production initiative, followed by cooperation with one or multiple state-owned Kun opera troupes. Their productions were distinct from the troupe's own performances in primarily two ways. First, the play was usually staged in a variety of commercial venues entailing high customer volume, rather than confined to the troupe's own theater. Second, each play was staged multiple times for the purpose of maximizing

production output; therefore, more and more plays aimed at a long-term reproduction. This ended the previous restricted production mode, which produced short-lived plays exclusively for contests or showcases. This staging for maximum output required the tastes of the performance to represent the highest social denominator shared by the broadest public, such that the maximum number of potential audiences could be recruited. Both features derived from an increasingly complex production process that expanded beyond a troupe's operation, and inevitably engaged the labor of participants from other professional areas.

Why and how did these changes occur, and what do they reveal about the social and cultural development of Kun opera beyond the state system of performing arts? Based on fieldwork conducted in China (2011-2013), I discuss the work of the producers Pai Hsien-yung, Wang Xiang, and Li Bin, whose distinctive visions have influenced the collective process of artistic creation. These producers serve as mediators between state-owned troupes and individual consumers. I argue that producer-centered production represents an increasingly complex division of artistic labor and the growing commodification of Kun opera in China's cultural industry of the twenty-first century.

7.1.1 Producers as “Outsider” Auteurs

Kun opera producers are usually outsiders to the state system of Kun opera production who intend to broaden Kun opera's appeal in order to market it to contemporary audiences. The precursor of what I call Kun opera producers can be traced back to Pai Hsien-yung, a Taiwanese writer, Chinese-literature specialist, cultural activist, artistic celebrity, and the son of *Kuomintang*¹⁵³

¹⁵³ The *Kuomintang*, often translated as the Chinese Nationalist Party, was the ruling political party of the Republic of China before 1949 and later the region of Taiwan until the democratic reforms in the 1990s.

General Pai Chung-hsi. Pai Hsien-yung initiated a paradigm of Kun opera production in which producers underwent a process of what Timothy Taylor calls “auteurization” (Taylor 2007, 130). Taylor uses the term to describe how artistic production reflected the personal vision of film directors (in the 1950s) and music producers (in the 1980s) realized their personal vision. Kun opera producers, like music producers in the popular music industry, have broad knowledge outside of other artistic forms and genres, emphasize collaboration, and bring new elements to a production. Drawing on the work and career of Pai Hsien-yung, I will analyze how he became the auteur of a specific edition of a Kun opera play.

Pai established his reputation as “a contemporary producer” of Kun opera (Fu 2013) after he produced what is commonly known as the young lovers’ edition of *The Peony Pavilion* (*Qingchun ban Mudan ting*). Pai was the first independent Kun opera agent who coordinated a production based on a complex collaboration among several state-owned Kun opera troupes and a number of universities. He put together a grandiose team from various state-owned troupes, including the main cast of the Suzhou Kun Opera Troupe and also specialists from other state-owned performing groups and universities, including directors Wang Shiyu from the Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe and Weng Guosheng from the Zhejiang Peking Opera Troupe, performance advisor Zhang Jiqing from the Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Troupe, and the production’s vocal and speech advisor Zhou Qin from the Department of Chinese literature at Soochow University.

The collaboration between the stars of various state-owned troupes was attributed to Pai’s celebrity status as the most renowned novelist and short-story writer in the second half of the 20th century. Thus, his reputation went beyond theater and his popularity was very broad. One of his most famous short stories is *Youyuan jingmeng* (*Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream*) about a Kun opera singer. Although he resides in Taiwan, his writings have been widely read

among Chinese worldwide.

In 2003, Pai decided to remount a complete edition of *The Peony Pavilion*, one of the most famous classical plays in the history of Kun opera. Pai took a part in almost every aspect of the undertaking's labor, and supervised every stage of the production process. Some scholars considered Pai the very spirit of the whole production, due to his thorough participation (He 2006, 150). Kun opera aficionados also often named this version of the play as “The White Peony” (*bai mudan*),¹⁵⁴ after Pai's family name, in order to distinguish Pai's specific contribution to the outcome of the play from other versions.

Although *The Peony Pavilion* has been staged many times by a number of Kun Opera troupes, Pai's production was known as the “young lovers” edition, because the actors were young and physically attractive. The nickname refers to the young cast that Pai selected. He chose two young performers, Yu Jiulin and Shen Fengying from the Suzhou Kun Opera Troupe—neither of whom was established in Kun opera circles—to play the hero Liu Mengmei and heroine Du Liniang, respectively. Although these young performers' skills were less mature than some renowned masters, their young age and attractive appearance would help to attract younger generations of both performers and audiences, and inject the vitality of youth into this centuries-old genre; a fresh young cast would introduce innovative ways of making Kun opera performances, one which would hopefully rescue the genre from its crisis (Pai 2006, 88-89)

Apart from his role in selecting the cast and designing the staging, Pai also actively managed activities beyond the marketing and management capacity of any single state-owned Kun opera troupe, including arranging nation-wide performances, touring abroad, and giving public lectures at famous universities to promote the show. Before the first performance in mainland

¹⁵⁴ The Chinese character of Pai's family name 白 is the same character of the color white.

China, Pai organized a news conference in Shanghai which attracted the attention of a large number of influential mass media outlets. At the press conference, Pai announced that the “young lover’s edition” would receive its mainland premiere at Soochow University in Suzhou on June 11, 2004. This promotion campaign turned out to be highly effective, and 7, 200 tickets of the three-day performances between June 11 and 13 were immediately sold out (Pai 2006, 92). Following a similar campaign, the young lovers’ edition was a hit yet again at another university in Hangzhou three months later.

In order to attract young, well-educated audiences to this genre, Pai extended the performances into a campus tour among other six most-influential universities in Beijing, Tianjin, Nanjing, and Shanghai. Pai gave a number of lectures at these universities that not only introduced the history of the genre, but also promoted his aesthetics, embedded in his production of *The Peony Pavilion*. Pai later summarized this tour as “the triumphant tour of the young lovers’ edition of *The Peony Pavilion* at eight famous Chinese universities” (*bada mingxiao xunyan shengkuang*). Between April 2004, the premiere of Pai’s version, and 2012, the production was staged some 200 times. Compared to Pai’s production, other plays (even the prize-winning plays) by other state-owned troupes were short-lived.

Pai’s social status as a cultural activist and celebrity played an essential part in implementing these performance plans. Based on his own narrative of organizing relevant events, he was capable of convincing the leadership teams of many universities—such as Nanjing University and Fudan University—to book Pai’s production of Kun opera for the founding anniversaries of these universities. Pai liaised between University of California, Santa Barbara, and Fudan University on an academic exchange program; in return, he received a generous allocation of exchange funding to support his performance at Fudan University. In 2006, Pai

brought his team to the US, and staged the young lover's edition in venues at American universities, including Zellerbach Hall of the University of California, Berkeley, and Kaye Playhouse at Hunter College in New York. It would be inconceivable for any single, state-owned Kun opera troupe in China to arrange these activities alone. Fully deploying his social capital, including his own achievement, reputation, and social network, Pai was able to mobilize various social resources to promote his version of *The Peony Pavilion*.

For many Kun opera aficionados who were born after 1980, Pai's edition was the first Kun opera play that stirred their interest in the genre. In my interviews with aficionados and Kun Opera specialists between 2011 and 2014, all of them were familiar with this production and could comment on the details of either the performance or the supplementary lectures Pai gave in different cities. Many young interviewees said that this play enlightened them regarding the culture of Kun opera. As Kun opera critic Wei Xiaoxi, who writes under the penname An Chumi, told me:

The first Kun opera play that I paid attention to was Pai Hsien-yung's *The Peony Pavilion*. In my impression, when I was six or even years old, there were a series of Kun opera performances in the Capital Museum [in Beijing, consisting of many excerpts, such as "Sifan" (Yearning for worldly pleasures), but I barely had any interest in them. I watched some performances, but I had no idea of who acted what. I don't remember it at all. So, I am very grateful for Mr. Pai Hisen-Yung for arousing my curiosity about Kun opera. Despite the criticism of this edition and his collaboration with the Suzhou Troupe, I think their contribution is irreplaceable in the development of the genre. (Wei Xiaoxi, pers. comm. with author, January 6, 2014)

Pai shaped a paradigm of Kun opera production characterized by three features. First, he built a team not based on the personnel of any single Kun Opera troupe, but based on a need for various specialists within and outside the field. By doing so, he broke the pre-existing structure of human resources grouped in an officially registered work unit—i.e. "state-owned troupes." Second, he used publicity campaigns to deliver messages about the performance to the audience. And third, he pursued long-term market influence by reproducing the performance as many times as possible.

The outcome of Pai's effort as producer is significant in terms of audienceship, the concept of production, and the meaning of edition. For the first time in the contemporary history of Kun opera, there was a Kun opera production that achieved a high number of stagings, and that did so not solely because of political influence. As a result, Pai's efforts began to establish long-term communication between cultural creators and audiences, the population of which grew with the successive restagings of the play. In addition, the concept of production was introduced to audiences and professional peers as a complex collaboration among different labor divisions across a range of specialties. Each production generally denotes the totality of a performance that forms a relatively fixed formulation which could be repeated in a certain period of time. This formulation is usually referred to as a version or edition (*ban*)—e.g. “the young lovers’ edition”— and one edition is distinguishable from other editions of the same play in terms of the cast and staff, stage art, costumes and props, plot, and the producer's general conception of the work.

With the development of the division of artistic labor involved in the collaboration of a Kun Opera project, the scope of a production continues to grow, and the latest version of this concept includes choreographers. With the producers' endeavor, the collaboration between these labor divisions produces a dramatized representation of a Kun opera play and assigns it specific meanings, different from that of the original text.

7.1.2 Marketing Tastes

The personal vision of Kun opera producers is related to the projected experiences of their imagined audiences to varying degrees, for they need to take into consideration the ways audiences will be engaged in their consumption, and be led to realize the final product through the process of objectification. Therefore, the outcome of producers' labor is beyond the preparation for

operatic enactment, or economic investment, that secures a representation onstage. The eventual outcome is a cultural product that will be consumed, exchanged for its use value, after which the performance will be turned into a commodity. Each production of a Kun opera play must distinguish between the value of the original work and the value of its onstage representation. The producer plays a leading role in convincing people that his edition is worth watching, even though the audience may already be familiar with the original work or its other editions.

In this imagined communication with their target audiences, producers usually produce and market tastes based upon their experiences and their projection of target audiences' experiences. My understanding of "taste" in a production of Kun Opera is inspired by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. He writes:

A cultural product [...] is a constituted taste, a taste which has been raised from the vague semi-existence of half-formulated or unformulated experience, implicit or even unconscious desire, to the full reality of the finished product, by *a process of objectification* which, in present circumstances, is almost always the work of *professionals*. (Bourdieu 1984, 231; italics added)

According to Bourdieu, the production of a cultural product is also a process of taste production, through professionals' labor of objectification. Although Bourdieu was writing about French culture in the 1960s, his ideas have helped me understand Kun opera productions after 2004. From the producers' perspective—those who are the 'professionals'—their designs of the performance derive from their taste, i.e. a system of aesthetic preferences. Their goal is to persuade audiences to agree on the merits and artistic values of their production. Producers do not expect audiences to be connoisseurs who already know the genre well in critical ways; rather, they hope audiences will become followers of their tastes who realize and then conform to the producer's aesthetic ideals as they are objectified in the final product.

Drawing on two successful Kun opera productions, *The Imperial Granary* produced by

Wang Xiang, and the series of “the Light Spring Breeze” by Li Bin, I explore the producers’ production of taste in two aspects: 1) their creativity viewed as a process of objectification, primarily manifested in their aesthetic choices; and 2) their method of creating receptive conditions to help audiences formulate taste.

7.1.2.1 “The Imperial Granary”

In 2006, after a craze for the young lovers’ edition of *The Peony Pavilion* overtook a number of universities in China, there emerged another edition of the same classical play, known as a “residential-hall” edition (*tingtang ban*) in the Imperial Granary (*Huangjia liangcang*), which gradually gained the reputation of reconstructing the authentic taste of Kun opera in the Ming dynasty. The Imperial Granary is named after the original function of its location, a six-hundred-year-old building in Beijing which was used as the Imperial Granary during the Ming dynasty in the fifteenth century. On a daily basis, this theater presents an abbreviated version of *The Peony Pavilion*, one of the most famous plays of Kun opera written in the late sixteenth century, together with luxurious beverage and food. The price varies from US\$60 to US\$300 per person, depending on the seats and dining plans selected. The Imperial Granary version of *The Peony Pavilion* achieved great economic and critical success. Since its opening in 2006 to 2011, the sixty-seat theater at the Imperial Granary entertained more than thirty thousand customers from all over the world.¹⁵⁵ Investor Wang Xiang, the founder and manager of Polo Arts (*Puluo Yishu*) Entertainment Company, was extremely proud of the production and its success became a selling point for Kun opera performances at his theater.

¹⁵⁵ Jingji banxiaoshi 经济半小时 [Half hour economy] with Zhao He 赵赫, “Kunqu tuwei” 昆曲突围 [The breakthrough of Kunqu], Jingji banxiaoshi video, August 24, 2011, <http://tv.cntv.cn/video/C10329/c8f365a480a8489fb5b6ce8f8560aa25>.

According to Wang Xiang, the original inspiration for renting such a historical landmark for Kun opera performance came from a temporal synchronization: The Imperial Granary is six-hundred-year-old tangible cultural heritage, about the same age as Kun opera as an intangible cultural heritage. To enhance this connection, the investor opened The Imperial Granary on May 18, 2007, the sixth anniversary of UNESCO's proclamation of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) status for Kun opera.

The granary architectural complex was constructed in the seventh year of the Yongle Period (1409) on the basis of the *Beitaicang* (the northern, grand granary) of the Yuan Dynasty. PoloArts rented two rooms in the middle of this complex and renovated it into the current Imperial Granary. Many customers would be firstly struck by the inner structure of the space. The main hall is supported by eight gigantic columns made of whole pieces of wood, each with a diameter of 0.8 meter. The measurements of the room are 22.9 meters by 16.8 meters, with a 9.9-meter-high ceiling. This approximately 500-square-meter space is surrounded by a 1.9-meter-thick wall, which was originally designed to control the internal temperature and humidity and also secure this important resource site for military purposes (Liu 2007, 27).



Figure 13. The stage area of the Imperial Granary Theater showing a Ming-style indoor theater delimited by a wood archway.

The Kun opera theater is located in one of the main storehouses, the inner structure of which was remodeled to imitate a Ming-style residential hall. A wood archway is erected in the hall to symbolically separate the stage area from the seating area (see Figure 13).¹⁵⁶ Sometimes, a red rug is used to more specifically define the acting area, which is another distinctive feature in a Ming residential-hall stage (Shen 2005, 129). Audiences and the ensemble are seated around the rug in the front, and on both sides respectively (see Figure 14), a design that imitates a Ming residential hall, which usually does not have a raised stage. Subtitles of the play are projected on the grey-brick wall behind the archway, and two monitors hung on each side of the red rug. Almost

¹⁵⁶ <http://bj.haodou.com/topic/198609.html>, accessed March 11, 2014.

every detail of the spatial arrangement, except the modern technological devices, copies the display of a Ming residential-hall.¹⁵⁷

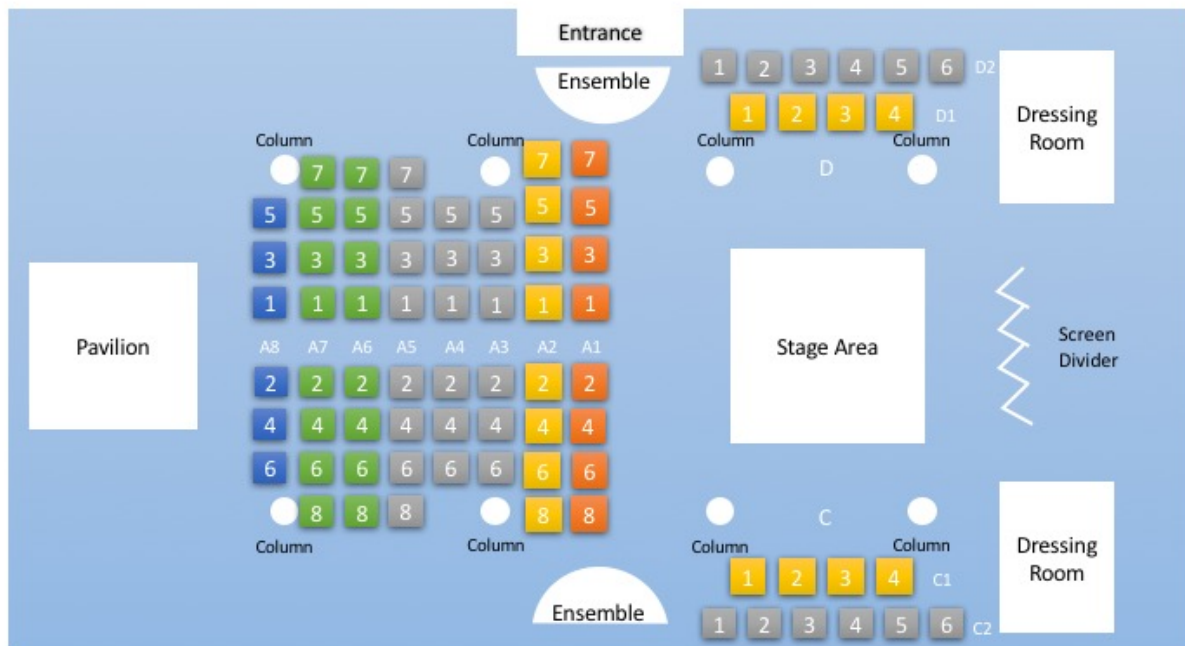


Figure 14. The layout of the auditorium of the Imperial Granary Theater illustrating the stage area, seating area, ensemble, and dressing rooms (Layout plan by author).¹⁵⁸

Apart from the architectural resemblance to a Ming-residential hall, the producer called for the objectification of cultural symbols in the performance. As introduced in the CD pamphlet of *Favourite Music in Kunqu Opera—Players from the Imperial Granary Theater* produced and

¹⁵⁷ Halls in the residential mansions provide the most usual spaces for private performances of Chinese opera. Based on extant architectural remains in old gardens and paintings, Chinese theater specialists assume that this type of performance space was popular during the 14th to 16th century (Shen 2005, 129-132).

¹⁵⁸ The layout plan is based on the plan on the official website of The Imperial Granary Theater, and is not drawn to scale. For the original plan, see <http://www.imperialgranary.com.cn>, accessed March 11, 2014.

issued by Polo Arts in 2008, there were several highlights of the performance.¹⁵⁹ For instance, between acts, a calligrapher wrote down the title of the act in Chinese characters on a paper lantern and suspended it on one side of the stage area. There were several glass fish tanks containing goldfish in the hall to represent the fish pond in the garden scenario where Du Liniang takes a walk with her maid Chun Xiang as her companion. Rose petals fell from the ceiling in the act “Interrupted Dream” (*Jingmeng*) and man-made rain dropped in the act “departed soul” (*Lihun*), diffusing a sense of Jiangnan style through the old and plain granary.¹⁶⁰ Hundreds of live butterflies, air-shipped from the Yunnan Province to Beijing, were released in the hall during the aria mode of “Butterflies in love with flowers” (*Dielianhua*). Thus, formalist reconstruction of a Ming residential hall and symbols of literati culture constructed an objectification of the producer’s taste.

In addition, Wang Xiang created a privileged opera-watching experience by presenting a formalist resurrection of the “family theater” (*jiaban*) once popular in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries. Publicity materials introduced the Imperial Granary’s presentations as “a return to operatic performance in the Ming Dynasty.”¹⁶¹ Publicity materials noted that “[i]nstead of the onstage operatic performances that have been popular since the late Qing period, we present to you for the first time the form of ‘a family theater’; performers and musicians all dress up in the Ming fashion; the design of stage props shows full respect to the original appearance of the Imperial Granary; and the theater is furnished in the Ming style.”¹⁶²

A family theater was a privately-owned troupe dedicated to entertaining nobles and their

¹⁵⁹ Wang Xiang, liner notes to *Favourite Music in Kunqu Opera—Players from The Imperial Granary Theater*, The Imperial Granary Theater Ensemble, POLOARTS POLO NFS-10293-2, 2008, compact disc, p.46.

¹⁶⁰ *Jiangnan* is a geographic area in China referring to lands immediately to the south of the lower reaches of the Yangtze River, including the southern part of the Yangtze Delta. It is also the region where Kun opera originated.

¹⁶¹ Wang Xiang, liner notes to *Favourite Music in Kunqu Opera—Players from The Imperial Granary Theater*, The Imperial Granary Theater Ensemble, POLOARTS POLO NFS-10293-2, 2008, compact disc, p.45.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

invited guests. To enhance the sense of privilege expressed in the exclusivity of this tradition, there were only sixty seats in the hall. The stage area was so close to the seating area that audiences could clearly see the performers' subtle facial expressions. It was as if the performance was made for a private theatrical communication that distanced the small circle of guests from the outside world. Here, the taste of prestige was objectified in the labor of the family theater. Here, audiences were absorbed in the routines and hobbies of the Ming dominant class, and they related themselves to the life style of a noble scholar-official. In this representation of privilege, Kun opera was objectified as an object of social status, through architecture, settings and props, and the high-ticket price.

This arrangement was derived from Wang Xiang's intention of producing an example of elegant elite taste that would conform to his high-brow audiences' ostentatious needs for retro-style (*fugu*) culture. As Wang said: "Few people understood Kun opera, and they only use this genre to show off their tastes in front of their friends and clients. But after they discover their client's excitement, they slowly develop their interest in it. That's how their elegance and a life style were gradually produced when mingled with those who love elegant culture" (Wan 2010, 66-67).

The sense of having the noble experience of watching Kun opera performed in a "family theater" became peculiarly intense as a historical attraction. Even though the venue was not designed for music-making, this did not concern most first-time Kun opera theater goers. On the contrary, the architecture has become one of the main reasons for many spectators to attend. The extraordinary life-span of the theater is usually taken as a "natural" reason for linking the old buildings and an old operatic genre in the same "cultural category," to use social anthropologist Michael Thompson's term. Therefore, the temporal synchronization between a six-hundred-year-

old space and a six-hundred-year-old performing art was quite often viewed as self-evident. The old architecture has the capability of surviving physical decline and obsolescence, hence successfully “prolonging [its] expected life-span” with “reasonable maintenance” (Thompson 1979), regardless of some factors which change through time, such as technology and fashions. Its own history functions as evidence of its transcendent nature and magically transforms it from an old building into cultural heritage. In a similar logic, Kun opera is injected with the value of the past, an essential parameter of its identification as Intangible Cultural Heritage. This recognition of values accumulated over time justifies the legitimacy of moving a Kun opera stage out of a modern opera house and into a historical attraction, a putatively well-suited location for staging a matching play in the temporal dimension.

However, the temporary synchrony may not be as ‘natural’ as is commonly perceived. The musical genre Wang Xiang selected in the original proposal for his theater project was not Kun opera, but Western classical music. As he articulated:

At first, I intended to use Classical music, because I have produced media products of Classical music, and also issued a magazine called *Gramophone*. Originally, I intended to make the Imperial Granary a multi-media center of *Gramophone*, but later this plan was proven to be over-idealized. This is because people who like to listen to [Classical] music are usually those who have a lot of time but little money. (Lao 2008, 28)

Wang Xiang’s first encounter with Kunqu was in June 2006, when he attended a performance of *The Peony Pavilion* at the Theater of Cultural Palace of Nationalities (*Minzu Wenhua Gong Dajuyuan*). Afterwards, Wang Xiang started to explore the similarities between the business space he rented and a traditional opera genre that he had recently discovered (ibid.). In his management, the heritage aura of the historical landmark not only gave the newly renovated old granary new life, but also created an imagined association between the space and Kun opera, a genre which would never have been performed in a granary six hundred years ago. Therefore,

the so-called restoration of the Kun opera family theater in an imperial granary was a creation of symbolic values based on cultural rarity. The royal ownership of the granary was emphasized and retooled as a symbol of wealth and power in contemporary society in order to re-establish higher monetary values for performances within this heritage. The exclusivity of a club and the presentational form of a family troupe justify each other and create the novelty of theater-going experiences unavailable in other opera houses.

In addition to the historical landmark, Polo Arts producers also sought endorsement from elite artists to enhance the value of its production. Two famous cultural agents lent their authoritative reputations to the performance. The assessment of cultural values in Kunqu performance has followed the logic of accumulating credit-based values, in this case reflected in the social and cultural capital of those agents. In all kinds of promotional activities, Wang Xiang always proudly and confidently featured Wang Shiyu as director and Lin Zhaohua as artistic director (*yishu zongjian*). Wang Shiyu—the honorary director of the Zhejiang Kun Opera Troupe, and also a national-level Intangible Cultural Heritage Transmitter—is one of the most important and influential stars in the field of Kun opera. And Lin Zhaohua is held in high esteem in the circle of spoken drama (*huaaju*).¹⁶³ Co-directing *The Peony Pavilion* at the Imperial Granary was actually their first collaboration. By bringing together two masters from different areas of performing arts, Wang Xiang was hoping to create communication between different genres, and to also broaden the potential scope of audience. In addition, the heart of the ensemble was two highly esteemed musicians in the field of Kun opera, flutist Qian Hongming and drummer Zhang Jinkui, who are now in their sixties and have been accompanying plays for decades in Jiangsu Province Kunqu

¹⁶³ Spoken drama (*huaaju*) denotes modern Western-style theater that was imported early in the twentieth century. The character “hua” (lit. spoken) is used to distinguish the Western genre from traditional drama types in China which rely heavily on singing.

Opera Troupe and Zhejiang Province Kunqu Opera Troupe, respectively.

Another selling point lies in the play *The Peony Pavilion* itself. From its opening in 2006 to the close of the production in 2012, this play was the only Kun opera play staged in the Imperial Granary. *The Peony Pavilion* is perhaps the most well-known Kunqu play in the current market, and a repeatedly tested classical play. It was a safe and prudent choice for the producer who wanted to stage an ‘authentic’ Kun opera. Written by the legendary playwright, Tang Xianzu (1550-1616), the main script of the play consists of fifty-five scenes and more than four hundred arias. Since the 1990s, there have been at least four major versions of this play, including the 1997 version directed by Peter Sellars, [didn’t I go over this already? This was your SEM paper, right?] the 1999 version directed by Chen Shizheng, another 1999 version performed by Shanghai Kun Opera Theater, and the 2004 young lover’s edition, produced by Pai Hsien-yung. Each production was characterized by the directors’ and the producer’s distinctive artistic ideas: the modern look of the contemporary style for which Pete Sellars is known (Swatek 2002, 148); Chen Shizheng’s allegedly most faithful selection of scenes and arias “in its entirety for a total run of eighteen hours” (Zeitlin 2002, 126); Pay Hien-yung’s version featuring a physically attractive young cast; and Shanghai Kunqu Opera Company’s lavish production intended “to marry traditional Kunqu with a modern sensibility” (Zeitlin 2002, 130). The competition between these troupes and independent artist resulted in a surge in the fame of *The Peony Pavilion*. The rapidly increased media exposure soon made this play the most well-known Kun opera play staged since the 1990s, and associated it with classicism, elegance, refinement, and beauty. In addition, the translations of the text into English extended the influence of the play in a global scope.¹⁶⁴

The accumulated credits of creators and the tested cultural values of the play—what the

¹⁶⁴ Cyril Birch published the complete translation in English in 1980.

show creates for audience—is merely an enhancement of what the audience heard and expected before the show started. Unlike a normal opera house where playwrights, directors, musicians, and artists are nervous about and eager for the final reactions from their audiences, the Imperial Granary was more like an altar where the performers awaited the end to a ritual and received audiences’ reverent love and worship.

Compared to the star directors and extravagant environment, the producer did not give equal emphasis to the cast and musicians, whose artistry was not fully acknowledged by their peers in the circle of professionals. Hu Zhexing, the female lead, humbly admitted that she was selected by Wang Xiang to play the role of Du Liniang when she was only nineteen years old. Although she had spent three years studying at the Suzhou Opera School (*Suzhou xiqu xuexiao*), since age sixteen, the training period could hardly have assured her the chance of playing a principal role in any state-owned troupes. Therefore, the job offer from the Imperial Granary was quite beyond her expectations.¹⁶⁵ She partnered with a young male actor who was in an early stage of his career at the Zhejiang Kun Opera Troupe and was lent by his home troupe to the Imperial Granary for two years. Casting was a major concern for director Wang Shiyu, who also directed the young lovers’ edition of *The Peony Pavilion*. The cast at the Imperial Granary didn’t meet Wang Shiyu’s expectation; he politely demurred: “I need to be responsible for my audiences, but I am not responsible for training his [Wang Xiang’s] cast. Their training should have been accomplished ahead of time. He [Wang Xiang] was really brave to hire them.”¹⁶⁶

The inexperienced cast seemed to fit the producer’s production philosophy, in which the performers’ singing and acting was not the value credit that most legitimized the taste of the

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. Jingji banxiaoshi 经济半小时 [Half hour economy] with Zhao He (赵赫), “Kunqu tuwei” 昆曲突围 [The breakthrough of Kunqu], Jingji banxiaoshi video, August 24, 2011, <http://tv.cntv.cn/video/C10329/c8f365a480a8489fb5b6ce8f8560aa25>.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

production. In particular, vocal virtuosity was not the essence of this production. Wang Xiang defended his production. In 2008, his company Polo Arts published a CD entitled *Favourite Music in Kunqu Opera*. It featured twelve of the most popular arias from *The Peony Pavilion* performed by the Imperial Granary ensemble, consisting of a vertical flute, a drum, a *pipa*, a *sheng* (mouth-organ), an *erhu* (two-stringed fiddle), and a twenty-one-stringed *zheng* (zither). But these arias were reduced to pure instrument pieces. As printed in the liner notes and also on the jacket:

The literary enchantment of Kunqu can be found in the inserted nonmetrical phrases, allusions and their implications, all of which can be understood by only a few among us. Without the understanding of the text, the aria books that follow the principle of shaping the distinct melodic characteristics based on phonological contours (*yizixingqiang*) have already been mystified. Inevitably, we are losing the details and emotional resonances to Chinese classical literature. Thus, we prefer to pick up a flute and its whimpering melody.

The sensibility of the residential-hall version of *The Peony Pavilion* corresponded to a certain lifestyle in which a sense of social distinction was departing from the embodied cultural capital, i.e. the fundamental aesthetics of Kun opera as a vocal art rooted in the interrelationship between text and music.

7.1.2.2 “A Light Spring Breeze in March”

My second example is Li Bin, the producer of Shi Xiaomei’s Kun Opera Studio, who produced “The Light Spring Breeze” brand, a series of Kun Opera products she has been making in collaboration with performers from Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Theater since 2011. Unlike Wang Xiang’s production, Li Bin focused on the promotion of knowledge of Kun opera, and produced and marketed a markedly esoteric taste.

In 2011, Shi Xiaomei, a renowned Kun opera artist who retired from the Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Theater, founded the Shi Xiaomei Kunqu Opera Studio (see Figure 15) for the purpose

of continuing her creative activities and reaching out to a broader range of audiences. Li Bin, an aficionado of Shi's performance and later her friend, became the producer and also an investor in the studio. The studio's primary product is a brand called "The Light Spring Breeze" (*Chunfeng shangsi tian*), named after the phrase "Peach Blossom Petals flutter in the light spring breeze" (*Chunfeng shangsi tian, tao ban qing ru jian*) from the aria mode of "Jade Hibiscus" (*Yufurong*) in the excerpt "Inscription on the Painting" (*Tihua*) from the classical play, *The Peach Blossom Fan* (*Taohua shan*). The "Spring Breeze" brand is particularly famous for a series of activities that Li Bin designed to reveal her understanding of the core value of Kun opera—i.e. professional performers' cultural capital as embodied in the artistry of their performance skills and knowledge about the genre.



Figure 15. The logo of Shi Xiaomei Kunqu Opera Studio, the design of which is based on the silhouette of a male role that Shi Xiaomei is famous for. (Courtesy of Shi Xiaomei Kunqu Opera Studio)

Li Bin's productions are characterized by two main features: (1) onstage performances expressing the 'pure' aesthetics of Kun Opera with a traditional stage setting; and (2) public

lectures with demonstrations on decoding the aesthetics of singing and acting in Kun Opera. The performances demonstrate an austere pursuit of art, as manifested in minimal decorative settings and plain-looking props. Li Bin uses what she considers the most authentic and traditional stage for a Kun opera play: an empty stage with one table and a pair of chairs on each side in the center (*yizhuo liangyi*). Li Bin was not interested in following the sumptuous fashion of staging an opera in a realistic environment, like *The Imperial Granary*. She regards the integration of excessive decorative elements as an intervention, and believes that the beauty of the genre lies in acting and singing exclusively. Li's aesthetics largely depend upon performers rather than surroundings. As Li explained in an interview:

It is my purpose to present *a very pure performance*. I don't have any set design; neither do I hire [a specialist in] set design. Anything added into this will be very weird, for they will inevitably subtract something from Kun opera. You just let these Kun Opera people create the art according to their conventions in their original ecology. There is no subsidy distributed from the state officials who would ask 'Why is the stage so simple?' or tell you what to do. (Li Bin, pers. comm., Oct. 23, 2013; emphasis added)

Li Bin's personal vision of Kun opera as a body of knowledge and a form of embodied cultural capital, is epitomized by her production of performances and lectures. The empty stage and minimal props demand attention to intangible merits of operatic performances—i.e. singing, script, and acting—which many connoisseurs and scholars view as the essence of Chinese indigenous opera (Liu 2011, 124). This abstract representation challenges audiences' expectations for 'every-day' aesthetics that represents a reified world onstage. This emphasis on the empty stage (see Figure 16) and one table with a pair of chairs, which is an objectified form as much as a realistic representation, has been used habitually in all performances produced by Li Bin.



Figure 16. The poster of *The Peach Blossom Fan* on April 21, 2013, as part of the brand of “A Light Spring Breeze” featuring Shi Xiaomei as the hero Liu Mengmei with a black background. (Courtesy of Shi Xiaomei Kunqu Opera Studio)

Any realistic settings in addition to the one table with two chairs was considered a distraction for audiences or an obstacle for performers. In her coordination of the *Excerpts of Dream of the Red Chamber* production, which toured in Beijing and Nanjing 2013, Li Bin struggled with the Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Troupe’s leadership regarding the use of a stage setting that imitated the interior of a Ming-style mansion (see Figure 17). Li and Shi considered it a useless object onstage that disturbed the performers’ stylized movements. Artistic Director, Shi Xiaomei firmly opposed to the use of the set. As she explained:

I don’t think it’s necessary at all to add extra props or sceneries [...] Although it looks quite novel, it affects the performance [negatively]. Our entrances and exists are supposed to be directly from the rear (sides of stage). Using these new props means performers have to make a detour to enter or exit the stage, and that makes their actions unsmooth. (Shi Xiaomei, pers. comm., November 30, 2013; parentheses added)

Entering and exiting the stage is a particular skill, formed through a long process of the development of stage practices in Chinese operas. It has become an important skill in the training

of Kun opera, because it requires specific steps and gestures particularly designed for a simple stage without excessive props. Therefore, the use of new props may conflict with the strictly-stylized steps. Some other new designs—for instance, putting a real pavilion on stage¹⁶⁷—may also add difficulty for performers, because pavilion stairs would make it much more dangerous to step up and down, especially for male characters who wear high-platform boots (*gao xue*). Although many audiences may hardly notice the impact of these new props, professional performers are quite often confined or disturbed by some of these unconventional stage designs, and have to compromise their stylized acts in order to adjust to the new setting. Therefore, a stage which is dazzling to audiences may not conform to performers' criteria for a professional and convenient performance space. After its premier in Beijing, those settings and props were never reused.

¹⁶⁷ For instance, the real pavilion set in the center of the stage of *The 1699 Peach Blossom Fan* is one of the examples of these inconvenience settings.



Figure 17. The final bow after the premier of *Excerpts from the Red Chamber* produced by Li Bin in 2013. The stage settings that look like the internal structure of a Ming-style mansion were used only for the premier and then removed in later performances. (Courtesy of Shi Xiaomei Kunqu Opera Studio)

Li's aesthetic interest entails a degree of erudition as an essential part of Kun opera aesthetics. Her understanding of the core value of Kun opera is embodied in a set of principles that underlie the artistry of performing. In order to illuminate the pleasure generated by these principles, she produced public lectures with performance demonstrations on various salient topics—including the composition of melodic contour according to the tonal contour of the lyrics (*yi zi xing qiang*), the two groups of four tones (*yin yang*), methods of articulation (*kou fa*), and standard ornaments (*qiang ge*). The lectures included the participation of performers, musicians, and

playwrights who worked with Li Bin. These presentations, with an admission charge between US\$5 to \$10 per person, served the purpose of explaining some fundamental elements of performance. It is through these pedagogical presentations that Li Bin and her collaborative artists communicated their codes as *the* legitimate code for decoding their art.

Chi Lingyun's presentation on the interrelationship between music and lyrics is a good example of this process. On May 15 and 16, 2015, Chi gave a presentation entitled "*Yizixingqiang*" (see Figure 18). This title literally means "to develop the tunes according to the characters," and the idiomatic expression is commonly used by Kun opera vocalists as a fundamental rubric for fine-tuning the relation between the phonological tones of characters' pronunciation and the musical tones of the melody. As the title suggests, Chi provided his interpretation of what he considers the most legitimate and traditional way of singing arias in Kun Opera. Using about 150 slides, Chi explicated the norms of *yun* (rhyme), *yinyang sisheng* (four tones), *kou fa* (methods of articulation), and standard ornaments.

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Figure 18. The composer, Chi Lingyun, explaining the tones and methods of articulation in his presentation entitled “*Yizixingqiang*” on May 15, 2015. (Courtesy of Shi Xiaomei’s Kun Opera Studio)

For Chi Lingyun, it is essential to understand the Kun opera score, because it is the ultimate tool needed to appreciate the art form properly. He considers the aesthetic impression that one achieves spontaneously in theater to be less reliable than that acquired through prudent reasoning:

There are few people who understand this stuff [the operatic principles of Kun Opera]. As long as the setting is beautiful and performers are attractive, spectators will applaud, and the play will succeed. No one will probe into what aria suite your singing is based on, whether or not you correctly use the aria modes, whether you skip certain arias in a suite, according to what norms you skip them, or whether the characters are filled in the aria according to the form of versification, and whether your music is filled in according to the tonal patterns of metrical verse. [...] Desktop scripts allow¹⁶⁸ one to carefully examine the score to detect errors, but few people can instantly decode any errors onstage in theater. (Chi Lingyun, pers. comm., December 27, 2013)

¹⁶⁸ Desktop scripts, termed in Chinese as *antou ben*, refer to printed scripts produced primarily for reading, as opposed to *taiben* (stage script), which are produced mainly for performing.

In the medium of lectures, speakers explained their knowledge about the genre. For example, Chi Lingyun intended to illustrate the interrelationship between the tonal contour of a character, and melodic contour (see Figure 19). The four different colors indicated the four directions of sounds. The tonal directions of the four characters are also marked in the four different colors. Li used this slide to explain that the development of the melody should correspond to the rising and falling of the phonological tones.

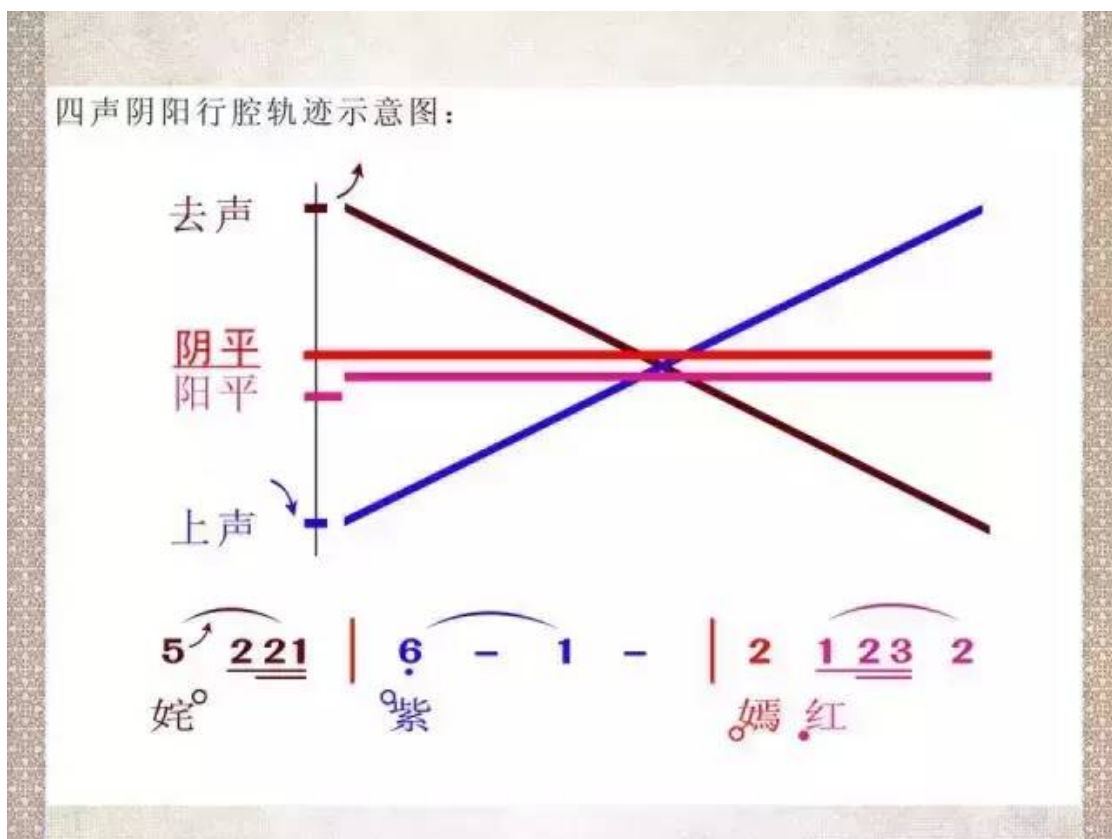


Figure 19. A slide from Chi Lingyun’s PowerPoint illustrating the relation between the phonological contour and melodic contour in the phrase “chazi yanhong,” from *The Peony Pavilion*. (Courtesy of Shi Xiaomei Kunqu Opera Studio)

The purpose of this type of analysis of Kun opera directed listeners to the orthodox aesthetics of Kun opera, which center on the rules of the text-and-music, rather than, for example, the sheer sensation of audible pleasure. Any deviation from these norms was viewed as “unorthodox,” “non-Kun opera,” or, simply, “wrong.”

Through the dissemination of “correct aesthetic codes,” spectators learned to understand the interrelation between text and music in the vocal part, and realized the pleasure of decoding different signals from the drummer and performers’ corresponding gestures. Rather than emphasizing immediate pleasure, lectures emphasized acquiring satisfaction and self-fulfillment through one’s mastery of aesthetic codes. After consuming these lectures, one became an insider in the esoteric culture of Kun opera, and could enjoy the performance as a true connoisseur.

Through these lectures, objects previously treated as the musicians’ tools and references achieved the status of works of art that are equally important to the performance onstage. These objects included song books and texts from the original *chuanqi* dramas that depict fictional biographies and heroic adventures, as well as erotic romances in high literary language (Wong 2001). Notes from artist lectures were bound in pamphlets, and shared with audiences who paid to learn how to decode this genre. Music and stage scripts were transcribed in traditional *gongche* notation, with text recorded in *fantizi* (traditional Chinese characters)¹⁶⁹ and music scores notated in the style of *suoyipu* (def.).¹⁷⁰ Music scores and stage scripts were printed as folded pocket-books (*shouzhe*). These objects were turned into commodities and sold as related products in the studio’s online shop (e.g. the bookmark of a Kun opera character in Figure 20). These objectified forms of

¹⁶⁹ Traditional Chinese characters were used in China before the character set of simplified Chinese characters was put into use in PRC in the 1950s and 60s. And song books compiled before the PRC were written in traditional Chinese characters.

¹⁷⁰ *Suoyipu* (lit. “woven rush raincoat” notation) is one of the three primary formats of *gongche* notation. Music is grouped according to the characters in the lyrics, and transcribed in a downward line tilted toward the right of the corresponding character. This style is named after a type of woven rush raincoat due to the resemblance between the shape of the music score and that of the leafy fibers of the raincoat.

cultural capital became necessary for the appreciation of Kun opera.



Figure 20. A metal bookmark in the silhouette of a female character in Kun opera, clipped onto a folded pocket book of the Kun opera play *The Peony Pavilion*, featuring the music score notated in the style of *suoyipu*. Both were sold in the studio's online shop in 2013. (Courtesy of Shi Xiaomei's Studio)

The design of these related products attracted primarily college students, the preferred audience. College students are interested in reading and writing, willing to invest money in the acquisition of cultural capital (which may or may not bring an economic return), and they have culturally omnivorous orientations. After graduating, the cultural capital that they possessed could be converted into other forms of capital.

Most of these presentations were held in auditoriums at Peking University, a university held in high esteem particularly in humanistic research. In this scholastic space, the presentation imposed a legitimate way of appreciating the art of Kun opera, in a mode similar to that of the classroom. The delivery of the presenter's aesthetic opinions resembled that of a professor's, with a degree of scholastic consecration. And the purpose of presenters' lectures was more about the cultivation of a 'correct' way of decoding what is encoded in the culture of Kun Opera. And alternative strategies of decoding were usually discouraged. In this context, people were divided into those who knew the knowledge of Kun opera and those who did not. And entrance into this context—that is, to chance to become one of the community—itsself became a commodity.

Producers' tastes demarcated an idiosyncratic manner of regarding Kun Opera and other elements associated with the genre, whether a Ming scholar-official's residential hall or a classroom. Tastes were produced when these elements were objectified in a cultural form under specific conditions designed by the producer. A producer was an auteur of taste who selected venues, visual aspects of stage presentation, and cast and ensembles. These aesthetic preferences were made to communicate with audiences' personal dispositions. To facilitate the expression of these tastes, they created particular ways of training spectators (e.g. the family theater and Kun opera lectures). In a process of objectification, which is also a process of taste production, producers functioned as authorities to defend their creation of taste, as manifested in their products, which meet the different cultural interests of their consumers (be they businessmen or college students), with the promise of satisfaction.

The Imperial Granary and "The Light Spring Breeze" show a divergence of tastes created by two different Kun Opera producers in the early 2000s. Wang Xiang embraced a taste for the prestigious and elegant life-style of the Ming era, in which the social elite in twenty-first century

China found cultural resonances through their appreciation of Kun opera performed in the revived family theater. Li Bin emphasized an austere period piece in which connoisseurs were trained to decode the interrelations between text and music. The core value of her production lies in knowledge of Kun opera, which could only be understood by consumers who held enough cultural capital.

One of the consequences of the rise of Kun Opera producers is the separation between Kun-opera-making and the production of taste. The genre was not associated with only one taste—choosing between the elegant and the vulgar, the sacred and the secular, or the dominant and the dominated. Rather, through different producers' creative labor, the genre of Kun Opera was reified as aesthetic expression shared by multiple groups with varying cultural, social, and economic backgrounds. Hidden behind different producers' production of taste, were different consumer groups holding different relations to the culture of Kun Opera, as reified in their choice of preferences. These relations depended on the conditions in which they acquired their cultural capital.

Despite differences in their personal vision of taste production, both producers' works share great similarities in two respects. First, they played an important role in moving Kun opera performances between two regimes of values (Appadurai 1986; Myers 2001). Live performances of Kun opera were transformed from a propaganda tool in the framing of national identity into an object pertaining to another regime of value—that is, the market frame delineated in the art/commodity opposition (Myers 2001, 31). The cultural products of “The Light Spring Breeze” series are not only symbolic struggles over the legitimate definition of Kun opera and modes for evaluating the genre, but also an economic struggle over the virtues of its cultural and social legitimacy. The meanings of performances in the political frame were re-conditioned and given

new meanings as they were assigned to a different category of objects, one which could be exchanged for different purposes (aesthetic pleasure) through different means (market exchange between supply and demand).

The second similarity lies in their production and marketing of taste through the expression of a sense of cultural distinction, whether that distinction be an exclusive lifestyle or the mastery of esoteric knowledge. Kun opera was known as national heritage by many, but the appreciation of a Kun opera play was limited to only some.

In the production of taste, Kun opera performers' labor was deployed as one of many elements in the producers' series of arrangements. Successful long-term Kun opera productions became increasingly producer-centered, and troupes gradually became a specialized type of labor. Through this production and marketing of taste, Kun opera became increasingly objectified and dependent on new forms of capital in the twenty-first century.

7.2 THE COMMODITY CONTEXT

In 2006, the pioneering production company Polo Arts produced an abbreviated version of the classic play *The Peony Pavilion* in a six-hundred-year-old granary, The Imperial Granary. The commercial success of this production initiated a trend of moving Kun opera performances out of the theater and into what I call "neo-settings," such as gardens and historical attractions. These neo-settings are different from an auditorium, theater, or opera house, which are designed to present great music or opera as a near-religious experience (Thompson 2002, 47). A neo-setting does not require rapt attention from audiences, nor does it require audiences to adore the performance as an expression of "art for art's sake." Neither does it separate audiences from their

secular routine or control the behavior of audiences through an enclosed space, as does an auditorium. Rather, a neo-setting is embedded in a network of relationships linking cultural producers, consumers of a particular performance, and other commodities.

The success of Kunqu performances in neo-settings raises a key question about the commoditization of Kun opera as a product in the current cultural marketplace: How did Kun opera become a popular product after the performance space was moved from a theater to settings such as a garden or a historical attraction? Why were audiences more attracted to Kun opera in these new settings? What is at stake in the commoditization of Kunqu?

Inspired by cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's concept of the "commodity context" (Appadurai 1986), I examine the shift in status of Kunqu as a commodity in relation to new performance spaces and a new conception of Kun opera performer's labor. Drawing on two examples, *The Imperial Granary*, and a 'garden version' of Kun opera performances, I will analyze the formation of a commodity context, and then interrogate the traffic in aesthetics and utilitarian values created within this new commodity context. I argue that the neo-setting moved Kun opera into a commodity context which invites traffic in the criteria of commodity; in this way, the setting breaks the boundary of the artistic enclave of theaters and turns live performance into a service. The utilitarian values of Kun opera in the commodity context extend the genre into a thing of everyday life.

7.2.1 A Traffic in Aesthetics

The neo-setting usually offers a more complex series of commercial and aesthetic links; hence, it more easily forms a commodity context in which the Kun opera performance is exchanged as a cultural good. Appadurai described a "commodity context" as the variety of social arenas that help

link the commodity candidacy of a thing to the commodity phase of its career (Appadurai 1986, 15). By doing so, the commodity context becomes a social matter that “may bring together actors from quite different cultural systems who share only the most minimal understandings about the objects in question and agree only about the terms of trade.” (ibid.) Various actors may develop diverse knowledge characterized by increased social, technical, and conceptual differentiation about the object, and Appadurai describes the totality of this knowledge about the commodity as “a traffic in criteria” (Appadurai 1986, 54). I argue that a “a traffic in criteria” played an important part in the commodity context of Kun opera, because it provided the main arena for diverse aesthetic experiences to co-exist, whether the experience was based on expertise, credentials, or cultural origin. In this sense, there always exists a traffic in aesthetics concerning Kun opera performances in these neo-settings.

The Imperial Granary was an early successful experiment in moving Kun opera into a commodity context that invited a trafficking in aesthetics. The Imperial Granary enjoyed an esteemed reputation among its consumers, particularly those who were new to Kun opera. The press often considered this esteemed reputation among the masses to be a critical success and even a commercial mystery in show business. As one CCTV journalist described it: “The Imperial Granary production has received intense attention from, for example, many celebrities. Even non-Kunqu-theater-goers are willing to pay to see it. Its ticket price is nearly the highest within the performing arts market in Beijing.”¹⁷¹ It was quite usual to attract the uninitiated with high ticket prices. The uninitiated were not equipped with a connoisseur’s aesthetic, hence they had little or limited knowledge of the history of the genre, repertoire of play scripts, classical excerpts in

¹⁷¹ Jingji banxiaoshi 经济半小时 [Half hour economy] with Zhao He (赵赫), “Kunqu tuwei” 昆曲突围 [The breakthrough of Kunqu], Jingji banxiaoshi video, August 24, 2011, <http://tv.cntv.cn/video/C10329/c8f365a480a8489fb5b6ce8f8560aa25>.

famous scenes of well-known plays, or of technical principles, such as versification and use of rhyme in classical poetry, and the phonological accuracy of certain characters. Why, then, did inexperienced spectators find performances at The Imperial Granary valuable?

New or “apprentice” audience members were usually amazed by the formalist novelty and exquisiteness of the performance settings, even though they were not familiar with connoisseurs’ understandings of the internal logic and aesthetic principles of Kun opera.¹⁷² Zhang Yue, a TV host, recalled her experience at The Imperial Granary: “The moment I entered that old granary and was seated, I was transported into another time and space, where rose petals were falling into fish tanks and goldfish were swimming in the water. At that moment, my heart felt so peaceful and serene. I knew *I could not only endure listening to the opera*, but also realized what a luxurious enjoyment listening to opera can be!”¹⁷³ Liu Qingbang, a professional writer, was also deeply impressed by the theatrical props in a performance. In his short commentary of less than two hundred words, he generously dedicated half that length to describing the fancifulness of the live butterflies.¹⁷⁴

However, Kun-opera insiders were not impressed with the props and setting. Wei Xiaoxi, an experienced Kun opera audience and critic, commented on the general use of props:

I focus more on the performance itself, including singing, theatrical speech (*nianbai*), gestures, etc. [I usually] don’t concentrate on stage props, because the traditional stage should only be made up of a table and two chairs. If the props are presumptuous, I am annoyed. (Wei Xiaoxi, pers. comm., January 6, 2013)

When I asked her about the setting at the Imperial Granary, she stated:

¹⁷² “Reviews of the Imperial Granary,” accessed March 9, 2014, http://www.dianping.com/shop/2217283/review_all_3star; “Reviews of the Imperial Granary,” accessed March 10, 2014, http://www.fantong.com/biz-215240/comments/#bd=baidu_map (site discontinued).

¹⁷³ Zhang Yue, liner notes to *Favourite Music in Kunqu Opera—Players from The Imperial Granary Theater*, The Imperial Granary Theater Ensemble, POLOARTS POLO NFS-10293-2, 2008, compact disc, p.56. Translation by author. Italics added.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.55.

The key point [of that production] is to create an atmosphere, that's why it's in a granary, a small theater. It lets people know what a Kun opera play looks like, to know *its form*. But actually, if you ask about its intrinsic value, well, it was so-so. (ibid.; emphasis added)

Apprentice audiences were more interested in the “form,” i.e. the environment and some eye-catching artistic effects, whereas experienced audiences focused on the “content,” including characters, acting, singing skills, and plotlines. Theatrical effects were regarded as “gimmicks” (*xuetou*) among most Kun opera insiders, but they offered new audiences more direct and visceral satisfaction that did not require the decoding of any connotative meaning or underlying values beyond the spectacle of what they saw or heard in performance.

The apprentice audiences of the Imperial Granary came from a variety of cultural backgrounds, had accomplished various professional achievements, and enjoyed different degrees of social esteem. Yet, they were all characterized by their unfamiliarity with the internal logic and aesthetic essence of Kun opera. Nevertheless, this unfamiliarity did not prevent them from appreciating Kunqu performances at the Imperial Granary and giving recommendations to other apprentice audiences. The liner notes to the album *Favorite Music in Kunqu Opera*, produced and issued by Polo Arts, included comments from twenty-six influential audience members who were renowned in their own fields.¹⁷⁵ They included a celebrated university professor, a Nobel Prize winner in Physics, a Chief Representative of UNESCO in Beijing, two composers, a pop singer, a renowned soprano of Western opera, a movie director, a fashion designer, a music critic, a researcher from the ICH Preservation Centre of China, a program organizer of Cultural Exchange Programs between Germany and China, a TV director of NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation), the Vice President of Cirque du Soleil, a French Ambassador, two TV hosts, two writers, a

¹⁷⁵ Liner notes to *Favourite Music in Kunqu Opera—Players from The Imperial Granary Theater*, pp.48-59.

newspaper journalist, a bamboo flutist, a chief manager for Nokia, an orchestra conductor, the Director of the Central Ballet Company of China, a Peking opera actor, and a Kunqu actress. Except for the flutist and two Chinese opera specialists, the rest of the group had hardly any connection to Kun opera. Most of these VIP spectators admitted frankly that it was their first time ever to watch a Kun opera play.

As outsiders to the culture of Kun opera, these apprentice audiences had never been tied to a Kun opera community as manifested in regular opera attendance, Kunqu-singing gatherings, or even frequent conversations centering around the genre. Moreover, they were not familiar with aesthetic codes shared among a group of community members. But an enchanted experience at the Imperial Granary in no way excluded their unfamiliarity with *The Peony Pavilion* or Kunqu, nor did it prevent them from applying Kunqu outsiders' own codes deriving from their life experiences, cognitive acquisitions, and cultural dispositions. Many of them approached the performance with keen observations on the basis of their ordinary experience, and they applied their own criteria of value. Chen Qigang, a famous composer and recipient of the 2005 Symphony Music Award of the Société des Auteurs, Compositeurs et Éditeurs de Musique (SACEM), commented after he watched *The Peony Pavilion* at The Imperial Granary: "It is very tasteful [to watch Kun opera] in this context, and the performance by actors and ensemble musicians was truly excellent. The stage effect was also innovative. It pleased my aesthetic senses."¹⁷⁶ This production likewise impressed Wood Hoffman, a German cultural activist: "I really liked the heroine, particularly her voice. Her beauty totally accorded with Western aesthetic dispositions."¹⁷⁷ They had developed their own ways to realize how Kun opera conforms to their own aesthetic dispositions.

Together, celebrities' recommendations and the sensational marketing of The Imperial

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 50.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p.53.

Granary expanded the traffic in aesthetics to such a degree that many spectators were more interested in The Imperial Granary than in Kun opera. In a blog post entitled “Appreciating Kun Opera *The Peony Pavilion* at the Imperial Granary in Beijing,” a blogger called Little Fox (*Xiao huli*) explained her choice of going to The Imperial Granary in a humble and frank way: “I don’t have any ‘artistic cells’ [in my body]’ and rarely watch shows like this. I only want to experience it and [so I] decided to purchase a ¥380 ticket, the most inexpensive in their price range.”¹⁷⁸ This post implies that the ability to understand Kun opera is biologically determined rather than culturally learned. Therefore, the only way for the blogger to participate in Kun opera was through economic exchange. In this sense, The Imperial Granary constitutes a specific traffic in aesthetics wherein a producer’s taste became the token in circulation.

Kun opera insiders largely disagreed with the opinions of these apprentice audiences. I interviewed more than twenty Kunqu professionals, amateurs, aficionados, and scholars in Nanjing, Shanghai, and Suzhou. Most of them had no interest in the Imperial Granary due to the little-known performers, and they were unwilling to pay so much for a ticket—indeed, they thought the money would be better spent on a meal than the performance. Some told me that they would prefer to withhold their opinions on the authenticity of *The Peony Pavilion* as performed at the Imperial Granary, and suggested that the taste of Kun opera should be derived from content rather than form.

Therefore, from the point of view of these Kunqu insiders, there existed a clear differentiation between economic and artistic value in the commodity context of Kun opera. They accepted that productions in neo-settings helped Kunqu professionals exchange their labor for

¹⁷⁸ Xiao Huli [Little Fox], “Huangjia Liangcang shang Kunqu *Mudanting*” [Appreciating Kun opera, *The Peony Pavilion* at the Imperial Granary in Beijing], Beijing Huli [Beijing Fox] (blog), June 13, 2011, http://beijingfox.blogspot.com/2011/07/blog-post_23.html.

monetary benefits, but the cultural significance of these projects in the long run was still questionable. Kunqu connoisseur and amateur singer and flutist Jiao Lei assessed these commercial Kunqu projects carefully:

It is the production mode of not just the Imperial Granary, but also of the garden-version that Zhang Jun produced, and even the version of Suzhou Kunqu Opera Company [a state-sponsored Kunqu company]. I went to see *Peony Pavilion* produced by Suzhou Kunqu Opera Company. ... The effects were actually fine, full of gimmicks to sell [the play]. ... It sells, so it can support performers and ensembles. [...] The project of The Imperial Granary may succeed as a model that helps Kunqu survive and makes money at the same time, that's fine, but it may not be that meaningful regarding the preservation and transmission of Kunqu. Let me give you an example. An old Chinese painting can be sold for more than one million RMB now, but can you say the price indicates that the status of Chinese paintings of the style is elevated? These are two [different] concepts. (Jiao Lei, pers. comm., November 23, 2013)

Jiao Lei's comments point toward two categories of meaning in Kun opera. One denotes the meanings these apprentice audiences realized concerning Kun opera as a commodity, and the other denotes the meanings that were significant for connoisseurs and amateur singers who viewed Kun opera as a traditional cultural practice that could not be measured by economic value. Moreover, connoisseurs doubted the impact of these neo-setting productions according to the second category of meanings. As Kun opera critic Wei Xiaoxi told me:

The primary meaning of these productions lies in that they bring the genre to the attention of some celebrities who have money or strong social influence, and get them involved in the promotion of this genre. The transmission of Kun opera probably indirectly benefits from the raised level of attention. But the direct contribution of these projects to the Kun opera transmission may be quite limited. They are not immensely valuable in that regard. (Wei Xiaoxi, pers. comm., 6 January 2013)

But at the same time, connoisseurs were surprisingly tolerant of the commodity context of Kunqu, and not opposed to a growing market cultivated through these commercial productions, because they did not negate a Kun opera economy.

Following the logic of commoditization, producers of these Kun opera productions in neo-

settings intended to transform performances from a cultural form appreciated by only Kun opera devotees into a commodity in an undifferentiated cultural market. Kun opera was thus moved into the commodity context. In this process, appropriation modes were expanded from a proprietary connoisseur aesthetic, toward a more generic popular aesthetic. While many Kunqu connoisseurs kept trying to define the *correct* criteria for appreciating Kunqu Opera, new audiences enriched the meanings of performances according to their own aesthetic criteria. Each group held a different stance in relation to meanings and values of Kun opera. Therefore, the current Kun opera economy operates in a field of social, technical, artistic, and aesthetic differentiation. Different modes of aesthetic appropriation contributed to the complex traffic in a commodity context of cultural goods, such as *The Imperial Granary*, concerning what Kun opera is and why it is valuable.

7.2.2 The Utilitarian Dimension

Kun opera performances can be exchanged as commodities in the commodity context mainly for the production of use values that are essentially derived from what Appadurai terms “regimes of value” (Appadurai 1986, 15). Within a regime of value, acts of commodity exchange do not always presuppose a complete cultural sharing of assumptions; rather, exchange acts are made according to a range of standards of cultural sharing (Appadurai 1986, 15). The commodification of Kun opera performances depends on a regime of value in which consuming audiences do not need to confine their sharing of assumptions to any particular standard of cultural appropriateness, such as a connoisseur’s belief in the inherent beauty of Kun opera. On the contrary, they can expand to other forms of assumptions and meanings. Ultimately, the use values of Kun opera are not limited to aesthetic pleasure, but may encompass any experience of the senses connected with heterogeneous utility. Hence Kun opera consumption is essentially transformed into a utilitarian

dimension of social life, and performers' artistic labor is transformed into a service. I propose that the key to understanding the commodification of Kun opera performances in a commodity context does not lie in the rate of converting new spectators into Kun opera fans, but in the degree of merging Kun opera performances with spectators who used the service for different purposes.

The example I analyze in this section is the garden version (*yuanlin ban*) of *The Peony Pavilion*, co-produced by Tan Dun, the Oscar-winning composer, and Zhang Jun, one of the most famous actors of young male roles in Kun opera. Zhang gained his reputation through years of work with the Shanghai Kunqu Opera Company. In 2009, he quit the troupe and founded the Shanghai Zhang Jun Kunqu Art Center (*Shanghai Zhang Jun Kunqu Yisshu Zhongxin*), and began his independent exploration of Kun opera production. He was named a UNESCO Artist for Peace in 2011 for his work propagating Kun opera.

In 2010, Zhang mounted a garden version of *The Peony Pavilion* in collaboration with Tan Dun and a famous Chinese choreographer Huang Doudou. The result is a seventy-minute version performed in the Mansion of Ma's Kezhi Garden (*Kezhi yuan*). The Kezhi Garden is at the northern edge of *Zhujiajiao*, a well-preserved old canal town fifty kilometers from the urban center of Shanghai. The construction of this garden began in 1912 and was finished around 1927. This version of *The Peony Pavilion* features real garden scenery, including a river that runs through the stage area, two bridges, and a pavilion on a small man-made island surrounded by water (see Figure 21). Facing the pavilion on the other side of the river is the seating area, which is divided into two parts: three rows on the patio extending out above the water constitute the VIP area, and a section in an open corridor behind the patio is the area for second-, third-, and fourth-class seats. Ticket prices vary from RMB ¥880 (approximately US\$145) to RMB ¥140 (US\$30).



Figure 21. The seating area in the Kezhi Garden. (Courtesy of Annie Li)

The garden version of *The Peony Pavilion* made its debut in the Kezhi Garden on June 5, 2010. Within what Tan Dun called “an operatic environment,” filled with the singing of birds and sound of wind, producers “abandon the framed perspective of a theater, and intend to bring the pavilion of peony back in a real garden, and restore the dream composed by the original playwright Tang Xianzu to pure reality.”¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁹ “Promotion Page of the Garden Version of *The Peony Pavilion*,” Douban tongcheng 豆瓣同城 (website), accessed October 8, 2014, <http://www.douban.com/location/drama/25928143/>.



Figure 22. Curtain call of the “garden version” of *The Peony Pavilion*. (Courtesy of Annie Li)

The garden unquestionably offered a visual-based pleasure, and a different audible experience than other productions. Like many other open spaces, it offered omnidirectional flows of sound and therefore sound effects unlike those of a theater, where audiences experience clear, directional flows of sound. It can be a very challenging space for some soft instruments and performers who do not use amplifiers. But the space was not designed for listening only; rather, it aroused multiple senses by blending sounds from the environment with musical accompaniment and vocal parts; moreover, it invites spectators to explore elements external to the performance of Kun opera itself. In this space, the enchantment of Kun opera grows beyond a pleasure for the ears,

expanding into a delight for the body.

In the case of the garden version of *The Peony Pavilion* in Zhujiajiao, the core idea of the project was to turn the poetic depiction of the garden scenario in the play into “nature.” In addition, the garden provided an acoustic site through which Kunqu was fused with the natural environment and historical remains. Actually, the garden and the show have become inseparable. When Maxwell Hearn, Head of the Asian Art Department of the Metropolitan Museum, invited Tan Dun to bring a version to New York in November 2012, Tan’s team staged it in an archaized indoor garden in the Astor Court of the museum, a courtyard modeled on the “Master-Of-Nets Garden” (*Wangshi yuan*), a seventeenth-century garden built in Suzhou. In order to present the sounds of nature, Tan recorded the sounds of flowing water, birds, and insects in the Master-of-Nets Garden, and played these sounds as background music to accompany the Kunqu performance.¹⁸⁰ Tan explained: “Today you will hear sounds of birds, water dripping, [that] actually [comes] from thousands of miles away, from that original garden. It is kind of a reunion of different formats.”¹⁸¹ Tan Dun and his team presented a classical play of the Kunqu Opera with “modern shading.” First, the entire performance began with an exquisite newly composed prelude of *xiao* and *qin* (the seven-stringed zither) which is not an instrument conventionally used in a Kunqu ensemble. Second, the singing was accompanied by both a typical small-scale Kunqu ensemble—consisting of a transverse flute, a set of bamboo clappers, a small gong and a drum—and recordings of new music and sounds composed by Tan Dun, “emanating mysteriously from speakers hidden in the woods.”¹⁸² The music featured many non-Kunqu elements. For instance, highly dynamic *a*

¹⁸⁰ “A Conversation with Tan Dun: A New ‘*Peony Pavilion*’ in an Old Context,” YouTube video, 57:40, from a conversation presented on November 29, 2012, in conjunction with the exhibition of “Chinese Gardens: Pavilions, Studios, Retreats,” posted by “The Metropolitan Museum of Art,” December 6, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fjgdRZH4xNc>.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² David Barboza, “Reviving ‘The Peony Pavilion’ With Modern Shading,” *The New York Times*, August 17, 2010.

cappella and percussion parts were used to build the tension of the plot, and Mongolian throat singing (*hoomai*) appeared in the third scene to render an exotic and ghostly atmosphere when Du Liniang's soul slips from the netherworld to meet her lover in this world. Old and new musical elements were carefully fused with choreography by Huang Doudou, one of China's most prominent dancers, who transformed the restrained, subtle Kun opera movements into stomping and flourishing expressions.

Connoisseurs were shocked not only by experiments that modernize and alter the form of Kun opera, but also by the problematic abbreviation of the play's script. The complete script of *The Peony Pavilion* consists of fifty-five scenes. It can easily take around twenty hours to stage the play in its entirety, and a production therefore demands audiences' strong passion, great perseverance, and time. In order to present a complete story in one performance, the original fifty-five scenes were compressed into four scenes, lasting a total of about ninety minutes. A considerably large portion of the plot was deleted, and a great number of famous arias were also left out. Excessive abbreviation is also an inevitable choice for Polo Arts in the Imperial Granary project, and the original script was compressed into eight scenes totaling about a hundred minutes.

However, watching Kunqu Opera in this setting was not a matter of connoisseurship, but a matter of acquiring gratification based on consumption experiences. This cultural heritage village is forty-eight kilometers from the cosmopolitan center of Shanghai, but its commercially-developed tourism made this little water town not too remote from urban consumption life. Zhang Jun's theater was based on Kezhi Garden in Xijing Street, a tourist area filled with restaurants, hotels, coffeehouses, bars, and gift shops. I was struck by the prosperity of the comprehensive commercial context of Zhujiajiao and documented my first visit to Kezhi Garden in my field-notes the next day. I wrote:

The village of Zhujiajiao conforms to the stereotype of touristy attractions in many aspects. For many tourists, the Starbucks near the entrance of the tourist district betokens the beginning of their all-day-long expenditure. Both banks along the canal that run through the town are occupied by many different kinds of shops. Basins and tanks of live fish, crabs, and shrimps aligned outside of the restaurants are using their freshness to attract diners' attention. Western style patio furniture is placed in the small open spaces of coffeehouses to invite those customers to come back in a familiar environment in their city life. Bars become noisy at dusk. A variety of genres of live music played by different bands from different bars boom out over the loud chatters on the street.

It's a little hard for me to imagine how a refined Kunqu play which requires serious and quiet attention could fit in such an uproarious environment. Kezhi Garden is a nondescript architecture. From the outside, it looks like a typical Jiangnan-style residential mansion, with tall walls and a small front gate, which clogs the small alleys along the canals. I came with a friend from the Shanghai Kunqu Amateurs' Association, and we made our way there around 6:45pm, about one hour before the show, to make sure we had enough time to navigate through bridges and alleys when the time came. A large poster of *Peony Pavilion* on the wall indicated that we found the right place (Figure 23). At the entrance, people started to line up. Not far away was the Zhujiajiao Concert Hall where *Water Heavens (Shuiyuetang)* (Figure 24), another show featuring architectural music for strings, water, *pipa* and voice, composed and produced by Tan Dun played. Some tourists, holding the play tickets, were selecting souvenirs in small gift shops, or having dinner in a restaurant near the garden. Soon they would join the line entering the theater, letting the operatic banquet put an end to their tour with a sense of satisfaction.

We were allowed to enter fifteen minutes later than it said on the tickets, but soon realized that the show was postponed again due to the small-scale rock-n-roll concert from an adjacent bar. We were constantly comforted that the show would begin immediately, as soon as the concert from next door ended. Another fifteen minutes later, strong beats from the subwoofer nearby finally disappeared, and the newly composed preface of *The Peony Pavilion* eventually began at 8:15pm.



Figure 23. Audiences lining up outside the Kezhi Garden along Xijing Street, filled with shops, restaurants, and theaters, waiting to watch the garden version of *The Peony Pavilion*, October 19, 2013. (Photo by the author)



Figure 24. Two tourists having dinner in front of the box office of the Water Heavens Theater, October 19, 2013.

(Photo by the author)

The locality and tourism attributes of the performance space provide a social area that encourages commodity flows in which artistic products constitute one of the objects a visitor can consume, regardless of how much or little they know about the genre. The consumption of mundane Kunqu products abolishes the frontier which demarcates artistic products as a separate transcendent universe and, at the same time, overturns conventions of how one should appreciate this genre. This consumption thus creates and strengthens the relation between previously incommensurate realms, namely, Kun opera and tourism. In this process, Kun opera performers' artistic labors are not intrinsically different from those of a chef or a tour guide, once they have been reduced to the very fundamental dimension of labor, a key resource for exchange.

In the commodity context of Kun opera, the aesthetic pleasure that audiences acquire derives less from the act of deciphering of symbolic elements that define Kun opera, such as vocal technique, poetry, and movement, and more from the pleasure of their senses aroused by the consumption of other products and services offered in the same commodity context, such as the elegant environment and exquisite food. A regular attendee at the Imperial Granary performances recounted the aesthetic pleasures he had obtained:

Actually, I do not quite understand these high arts, but each time I watched the show, I felt very comfortable, as if I had just taken a cold shower. [...] What you get here is an experience, [but] what you get in a theater is an opera. That is to say, you are seeing far more than a play here, [because] you start from a delicious meal, during which you may begin enjoying the moment when performers are busy dressing up and putting on make-up.¹⁸³ Meanwhile you may appreciate the holistic sensation that Kunqu can bring to you and let it calm you down. You will immerse yourself in the beautiful environment even after the show.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸³ There is a monitor in the dining hall of the Imperial Granary. During the dining hours before the show, the scenes shot in performers' dressing room, such as drawing faces (hualian), fastening wigs (leitou) and wearing hairpieces are transmitted to the dining hall on the monitor, so diners may enjoy the art of dressing up backstage.

¹⁸⁴ Jingji banxiaoshi 經濟半小時 [Half hour economy], "Kunqu tuwei" 昆曲突围 [The breakthrough of Kunqu].

Verbal expressions such as “take a cold shower” imply that this new perceiver achieves his satisfaction based on criteria associated with bodily sensation. This pleasure centering on the observable feelings of the body contrasts sharply with the pleasure derived from contemplation—a kind of pleasure grounded in meanings that transcend the object, for example, the connoisseur aesthetic in which meanings of a Kun opera play are conveyed through terminology in the form of artistic critique. For the informant cited above, juxtaposing the pleasure of Kun opera with a pre-concert meal in an elegant environment indicates that, in his opinion, watching Kun opera is coterminous with other bodily pleasures. In his appropriation of Kun opera, the aesthetic practice of watching Kunqu has been incorporated into the utilitarian scheme of an ethos that systematically reduces the things of art to things of life.

These material features and uses are exactly what the producer considers to be irreplaceable elements contributing to the successful operation of his business. As Wang Xiang explains:

If you want to make it [the project of the Imperial Granary] a business-related performance space, you must include the catering. For example, if I want to ask you to see an opera on weekends, and [you ask:]

“To see what?”

“To see Kunqu Opera.”

[You may reply:] “I don’t have time.”

[But if I say:] “I want to invite you out for dinner, in a six-hundred-year-old granary, [that is] quite interesting. There is even an opera to see after dinner.”

[You will say:] “Really? Let’s go.”¹⁸⁵

This simulated conversation between two hypothetical consumers reveals the market niche of the ‘residential hall’ version of Kunqu Opera. In Wang Xiang’s business plan, Kunqu is actually defined as a value-added service available at little or no cost to promote the primary business, i.e. a social space primarily used for business meetings and other social intercourse. The first reaction of the invited customer is to reject a proposal to watch Kunqu Opera, because she or he may assume

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

that the performance will take place in a normal opera house. The answer “I don’t have time” explains the person’s unavailability or unwillingness to engage in serious spectatorship. However, when the location is changed to a complex social arena like The Imperial Granary, the customer changes his or her mind. The implication of this change is that there are multiple objects that they may consume during a gathering, and they may fulfill their primary social purposes in addition to appreciate performing arts, whether seriously or casually. Therefore, according to Wang’s hypothetical situation, a social space like The Imperial Granary is considered to be capable of offering imagined audiences an array of spectacular delights—fabulous architecture, exquisite costumes, privacy of space, vivid acting, physically attractive performers, and a considerably lesser degree of engagement with text, music, and plot.

One result of the fusion of Kun opera performances with other utilitarian services is the formation of the commodity situation in which performers’ labor becomes a symbolic good and a service dissociated from putatively legitimate modes of appreciation (at least according to aficionados or connoisseurs). *The Peony Pavilion* at The Imperial Granary Theater is not produced for purely symbolic intent or for purely symbolic appropriation. Rather, its consumption is incorporated into consumption of other commercial products (mostly material) and services.

Online review sites are the most important platform where consumers share their consumption experiences of The Imperial Granary. Many reviewers mention “the Kun opera play” rather than the play’s title. The play is only one of the features to be experienced at The Imperial Granary, juxtaposed with exquisite food, Ming-style furniture, and a unique decorative atmosphere. For example, on the review site *Dazhong Dianping* (“Mass Comments”)—one of China’s most popular websites for collecting and correlating consumer ratings for restaurants, entertainment places, and consumption coupons—The Imperial Granary is indexed under both

‘Chinese-style restaurants’ and ‘performance spaces.’ Many reviewers post photos to show their favorite dishes (such as roast duck), the theater, and details of the architecture, as well as a brief introduction to the hierarchy of seats, mainly measured by prices. Among seventy-three reviews¹⁸⁶ in total associated with the Imperial Granary, there were only twenty-nine reviews (39%) which included the keyword “theater.” It is even rarer to see comments on the quality of acting and singing, the selection of repertoire (e.g. the practice of choosing eight scenes to present a play originally composed of fifty-five scenes), or other aspects of the performance itself. Most reviewers regard The Imperial Granary more as a fancy restaurant that provides after-dinner entertainment than a serious opera house offering food and drink before the show.

For these consumers, their gratification was met mostly by conspicuous spending on a restaurant or theater, or on expensive seats to enjoy a highly refined supper and other signs of “quality” or “nobility.” Thus, they were gratified less by the cultural benefits gained from the show, such as the rarity of Kunqu performers’ artistry, the creative rearrangement of excerpts and musical accompaniment, the irresistibility of dramatic plots, and other aspects reflecting the work’s distinctive cultural values. A night-out at The Imperial Granary was more like an occasion for the consumption of things which are usually external elements of Kunqu. It was not an occasion for the consumption of symbolic elements embedded in gestures, vocal technique, poetry, and movement, i.e. the elements that defined Kun opera in previous eras. Similarly, the garden version of *The Peony Pavilion* in Zhujiajiao also appeared on various tourist websites. Reviews of the performances were posted not only by Kun opera fans, but also by tourists who visited the garden in the village.

Thus, whether surrounded by the seething crowd of tourists and stores selling snacks and

¹⁸⁶ The number is based on a web search on March 21st, 2014. The data has been updated, and many reviewers were no longer available.

souvenirs, or staged in a high-end club gathering businessmen and celebrities, an elegant Kun opera play in a connoisseur's artistic world was transformed into a commodity of mass cultural production, a prefabricated entertainment engendered by realist hedonism.

7.3 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I explored four Kun opera productions by private enterprises and individuals without state affiliations. In the early 2000s, the government encouraged private capital to invest in state-owned performing groups' cultural production. I contended that the new political economic environment gave rise to two important trends: the role of producers of Kun opera, and the formation of the commodity context.

The role of producers in Kun opera emerged in the collaboration between private capital and state-employment. The end product was an objectified theatrical enactment of producers' tastes. Moreover, producers took part in the commodification of tastes that they produced. The commercial success of their productions was determined by the legitimacy corresponding to a specific 'taste' bestowed by the choice of their own consumers—such as the elite taste of social distinction sanctioned by audiences who are rich in economic capital, and the erudite taste of cultural distinction advocated by audiences who have a disposition in cultural capital. Both tastes embraced a sense of distinction in their own ways. The commodification of Kun opera products has become a producer-centered struggle over the values of the social and cultural legitimacy that assign meaning and value to Kun opera products. Through the production and marketing of taste, the meanings and values of Kun opera have become increasingly dependent on new forms of capital (cultural and economic), and less reliant on the demand of the state, the holder of political

capital.

The incorporation of the aesthetic consumption in Kun opera links production to the consumption of mundane products, and abolishes the sacred frontier which marks artistic products as a separate universe; at the same time, this aesthetic consumption creates and strengthens the relation between otherwise incommensurate domains—in this case, opera, food, and tourism. The cultural consumption of Kun opera in such a context inevitably entails an economic cost, including not only tickets, but also eating, drinking, sightseeing, and the like. The locality and the tourism attribute of performance spaces provides a social arena that encourages commodity flows in which artistic products constitute part of the ‘objects’ a visitor can ‘use,’ regardless of how much or little they know about the genre. It is through the economic dimension of Kun opera products that aesthetic consumption is integrated into the world of ordinary consumption. All these productions operate within a commodity context, in which the communicative codes between producers and consumers are expanded via aesthetic traffic, in which the distance of a sublime and pure performing art from everyday life is annihilated through the integration of Kunqu arts into utilitarian services.

8.0 CONCLUSION

I would like to revisit the scene from the prologue of the documentary *Six Hundred Years of Kun Opera* discussed in the preface of this dissertation. In that scene, a famous painter has asked three performers from a state-owned troupe, Suzhou Kun Opera Theater, to give a private performance in his private garden. He sips tea with several friends in his pavilion, while watching a live performance of the aria model “*Zaoluopao*” (lit. “Black light gown”) from the most commercially successful Kun opera classical play, *The Peony Pavilion*, that is taking place on the other side of his pond.

In this documentary, the depiction of Kun opera switched between the frames of nationalist heritage and personal fulfillment, between artistic legend in history and commercial success at present. The collage of meanings and values attributed to Kun opera resonates with the interaction among three forms of capital that I have discussed in this dissertation: as political capital that submits to a centralized power and exploits the genre as a political symbol, as cultural capital that expresses a sense of symbolic distinction, and as economic capital that enables commodification and exchange.

The coexistence of Kun opera as these forms of capital was a result of more than six decades of changes in political and economic conditions, wrought in three main phases: (1) the establishment of state-ownership of troupes under maximal political administration, from the late 1940s to 1982; (2) the financial crisis caused by the political-economic reforms of China’s period of ‘opening-up,’ between 1983 and 2003; and (3) the delegated power of state-owned troupes in working with private investment in China’s growing cultural industry during the opening decades of the twenty-first century, from 2003 to 2015.

This periodization is different from a more commonly used periodization that divides China's contemporary political history into three primary periods—the seventeen years of 'new' China (1949-1966), the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and the post-Mao, 'opening-up' period (1977 to present). Instead, I have shown in this dissertation that the political economy of Kun opera was forged by a succession of social orders, which did not always correspond to the milestone narrative of political events. For instance, in Chapter 3, I discussed the development of the national system of state-owned Kun opera troupes in the mid-1950s, throughout the Cultural Revolution, toward the early 1980s. I postulated that the rise, halt, and resurrection of this national system of Kun opera production were all manifestations of the same social order in which the central power dominated cultural production and consumption. Another example is evident in Chapter 5, where I investigated Kun opera professionals' negotiation for values between the state and the market between 1986 and 2002. I consider the year 1986 to mark the beginning of a new social order, when market logic started to penetrate the field of state-owned Kun opera troupes. This is eight years later than the time postulated by conventional conceptions of the opening-up era (1978), and this delay is I believe merited on account of the inertia of state subsidization among these troupes. It was not until the wage reform of 1986, which significantly reduced state-employed professionals wage, that state-owned troupes were truly motivated to adapt their plays to consumer demands.

In this dissertation, I have used government documents, interviews, ethnography, and analysis of music and performances, to explore the political economy of Kun opera. My research shows how Kun opera as a cultural activity reflected political economic patterns in society, and demonstrated how competition for political, cultural, and economic interests (i.e. capital) shaped the political economy of an artistic genre. The dominant forms of capital constituted the political economy of Kun opera.

In the following sections, I first briefly review my analysis of the political-economic changes to Kun opera production in China between the late 1940s and 2015. Then, I elaborate on my use of “capital theory” to explain why I view changes in Kun opera in terms of dominant forms of capital. This theory has provided me with a conceptual tool for understanding the purposes and functions of professionals’ artistic labor in producing Kun opera, along with political-economic changes in China. Then, I review three production modes—delegated production, restricted production, and large-scale production—that took shape along with the structural transition of Kun opera production in different capital forms. I conclude by analyzing the political economy of Kun opera in contemporary China and Kun opera’s role as a herald of the laws of political economy in Chinese cultural production.

8.1 POLITICAL ECONOMIC CHANGES OF CONTEMPORARY KUN OPERA

I began my analysis from the rise of the first modern state-owned Kun opera troupe (Chapter 2). Kun opera was performed in the late 1940s by the Guofeng Troupe, a “republican troupe,” as part of the troupe’s variety repertoire consisting of a number of genres. Their collective ownership and egalitarian distribution of income were maintained in the opera reforms of the socialist regime, and also enabled the troupe to survive. In order to gain legal status in the new regime, the troupe explored the new social rules by self-censoring their repertoire. By seeking to be registered with a local government, the troupe gradually became a symbolic vehicle that liquidated those codes which the new government disapproved, and delivered new codes which the new government promoted. The troupe was nationalized as a state-owned troupe in 1956, as a byproduct of the close attention paid by the core leadership of the PRC; afterwards all troupe members became delegated

agents whose responsibilities and rights were reduced to performance alone.

I focused on the transition from Mao's legitimation of a Kun opera plays' political values toward the production of Kun opera as political capital (Chapter 3). The nation-wide pursuit of Kun opera's political value resulted in the establishment of more state-owned Kun opera performing groups and teaching programs. These activities that promoted the genre were essentially accumulated labor for political interests during this period. With the restricted performances between cultural administrators and state-owned troupes, Kun opera was produced and appreciated as political capital within the closed circuit of the state-system of performing arts. The acquisition and accumulation of political capital in Kun opera completely relied on a command economy controlled by the country's planners. The fluctuation of these planners' unitary judgement regarding Kun opera's political values directly caused the suspension of Kun opera and dismissal of Kun opera troupes during the Cultural Revolution. After Mao's death, the country's new planners re-recognized the political values of the genre, which led to the resurrection and even expansion of state-owned Kun opera troupes until 1982. The development of Kun opera between the late 1940s and 1982 was characterized by the dominance of political capital in the field of Kun opera groups and the government branches of the cultural administration.

In my lengthy narration of the cultural history of Kun opera, I dedicated a complete chapter (Chapter 4) to a short period of time, between 1983 to 1986. This period was important in my framework of "capital theory" in that it was characterized by the most active striving of a social group—consisting of cultural cadres and professional performers—for cultural values of Kun opera in the opening-up period. There were two threats to the genre during this time: political intervention (as always) and foreign cultural influences. In order to legitimize the cultural values of the traditional indigenous genre, this social group established the Plum Blossom Performance

Award without the state's financial support. The prize was expected to inculcate the emerging mass consumers about the values of the awardees' work, and to arouse their consumption desire. However, the conversion from cultural capital into economic capital was not successful. Instead, the cultural capital holders turned again to the government for political support. In 1986, the 'legitimation' of Kun opera as cultural capital was exploited as a means of seeking more state subsidies and protective policies.

Economic reform of state-owned Kun opera troupes is one of the most important themes of this dissertation. In chapters 5, 6, and 7, I examined a long gradual process of reform, expanding from the mid-1980s to the present. This process of reform indicates the rising status of economic capital in Kun opera production. The economic reform centered on two different reform strategies, varying from the wage reform from the mid-1980s to 2002 (Chapter 5), and the corporatization reform from 2003 to 2011 (Chapter 6). The second reform gave rise to the involvement of private capital in the operation of state-owned Kun opera troupes (Chapter 7). The first reform strategy focused on the improvement of productivity of state-owned troupes. As an incentive for troupes to pursue economic profits, performers' wages were transformed into structural wages, 40% of which was assigned to bonuses. But increased numbers of performances did not amount to box office revenues sufficient to generate enough profit retention. Thus, the wage reform directly caused a labor migration wave in the late 1980s and 1990s.

The discrepancy between consumers' interests and the government's interests was expanded in 1990. State-owned troupes began to negotiate with the state for profitable resources in the lack of economic capital from the mass market. The neo-classical repertoire of Kun opera emerged as state-employed professionals' attempt to pursue both internal capital, i.e. the financial support from the state in the form of subsidy and prize awards, and external capital, i.e. the money

of individual consumers.

In 2003, the central government emphasized the economic effectiveness of cultural production, thus promulgating the corporatization reform, and urged state-owned troupes to seek financial independence as market entities. The JPKOT, as the first corporatized state-owned troupe, began their exploration of the market through two main approaches: (1) to give performances as “value-added” services of another primary product; and (2) to expand the heterogeneity of their audiences. Their activities constituted a large-scale production mode in the field of Kun opera performing groups. However, with the central government’s adjusted cultural policy, the social effectiveness of cultural production was re-enhanced in 2011.

But the growth of Kun opera as economic capital was not suspended accordingly. As part of the reform package of the 2003 corporatization reform, private capital was allowed to collaborate with state-owned troupes. In their collaborative productions, individuals who had the power of allocating resources emerged as ‘producers’ to play the decisive role of selecting scripts, choosing a cast, designing stages, arranging performances, and planning promotion campaigns. These producers shaped their products to appeal to their targeted consumers’ tastes, and fulfill their needs for social distinction in various ways. They were also sensitive to consumption desires, and incorporated Kun opera into neo-settings where Kun opera performers’ labor became part of the exchangeable cultural products in an aesthetic traffic within which different consumers find specific utilitarian values.

8.2 PRODUCTION MODES OF CONTEMPORARY KUN OPERA

In the political economic history of Kun opera in contemporary China, three production modes have been formed in the transition from the planned economy to the market economy: delegated production, restricted production, and large-scale production, each featuring a specific kind of relationship between performers and their sponsors, including the state, their peers, or audiences. In Chapters 2 and 3, I analyzed the formation of delegated production, which was characterized by Kun opera professionals' role in production as passive advocators of a performance plan, rather than active creators. It was gradually shaped when the Guofeng Troupe—a collectively-owned republican troupe founded in the Republic of China—was “officialized” in 1953 and nationalized in 1956. A prerequisite condition of the delegation mode is that a troupe must establish an administrative affiliation with a branch of political power that gave orders or made decisions for the troupe members to advocate and implement. Unlike the market economy, which was the primary economic environment in which the Guofeng Troupe survived, the economy of delegated production is situated in the planned economy, which entailed economic cooperation among the cultural administrators as planners of performance contracts, Kun opera troupes as laborers, and local cultural officials as acceptors of contracts. In this economic relation, Kun opera troupes did not determine themes, create plays, arrange venues, or produce publicity materials. The troupe of the delegation mode largely or completely relied on state subsidy; therefore, their production motivation was based primarily on meeting cultural administrators' requirements. This economic logic became a norm in the planned economy of cultural production in China after the early 1950s. As I analyzed in Chapter 3, the legendary play, *The Fifteen Strings of Cash*, became a household name in this economy.

Restricted production took place within a closed circuit of cultural administrators, and

peers from state-owned troupes. Derived from Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of "high art" in France, this concept helped me understand the contest economy of Kun opera formed in the mid-1980s, when political power started to retreat from the cultural arena and cultural agents began to legitimize and establish cultural capital through contests based on performance skills. This restricted production was organized by reference to its own norms, derived from theater specialists and professionals' consensus on relatively pure aesthetics for performing arts. Mass consumers' opinions did not play a part in the principle of the production of Kun opera plays. In this production mode, Kun opera professionals disavowed the economy—i.e. commercial exchange of their works—and favored an idealized sponsorship in which financial support is distributed based on both their cultural capital (e.g. a national cultural tradition) and reproduction of cultural capital (e.g. transmission of a national cultural tradition). As detailed out in Chapter 4, their efforts led to the rapidly increased prestige of Kun opera professionals in the Plum Blossom Performance Award, and a special subsidy from the Ministry of Culture in 1986.

But with the rising influence of economic capital, some Kun opera troupes started to develop a new production mode, large-scale production, which aimed at the largest possible market. This production mode is made possible when consumer individuals' business is appreciated, and when the masses become the main sponsors of cultural products. Large-scale production was aimed at creating the widest possible public and pursuing maximum investment profitability. In this production mode, state-owned Kun opera troupes explore socially, economically, and culturally heterogeneous audiences. The individual consumers' opinions started to be taken into consideration in professional troupes' strategies of not only marketing but also producing their plays.

Although these three production modes emerged chronologically, they did not necessarily

replace one another. Rather, they might coexist with each other when Kun opera professionals were entangled in multiple relationships with various sponsors. For example, the Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Troupe was transformed into a corporation, yet it still maintained its administrative affiliation with the local government and received commission from branches of the government. At the same time, the troupe also participated in various contests—including the Plum Blossom Performance Award—in order to enhance its prestige among peers. In addition, the box office revenues played a significant part in their earnings; hence, they developed a variety of approaches for appealing to heterogeneous audiences. The concurrent heterogeneity of production modes also reflected the dynamic negotiation between political administrators, Kun opera producers and laborers, and consumers over the values and meanings of the genre. After the mid-2000s, the large-scale production mode also involved non-state-employees. Their investment and creativity has been accelerating the integration of Kun opera into the rapidly growing consumerist society in twenty-first-century China.

8.3 CAPITAL AND VALUES

Inspired by Bourdieu's "capital theory," I approach the political economic history of Kun opera as a transition between three main capital forms: political capital, cultural capital, and economic capital. The capital transition is tightly connected with the regimes of value of Kun opera in China's socio-cultural transition.

The core of capital theory lies in an understanding of accumulated labor as a force functioning in a specific field, inscribed in objective or subjective structures, and as a principle underlying the immanent regularities of the social world (Bourdieu 1986, 241-43). In this

dissertation, I examined professional troupes' efforts to produce Kun opera plays according to a variety of criteria from the late 1940s to 2015 as a form of accumulated labor, on which the community of Kun opera professionals relied to achieve an 'officialized' status in the society. Further, their accumulated labor was developed into a norm, or even a belief in the field of cultural production that influenced their self-censorship of plays, consecration of classical plays, creation of new plays, and reform of marketing strategies. Through all these forms of labor or effects of making Kun opera, professional performers intended to make sense of the social transformation from a socialist regime into an increasingly capitalist society, and to determine their own role in this social transition.

Therefore, I particularly focused on the ways in which Kun opera performances were meaningful for different agents, which was an extension of Clifford Geertz's argument that ethnography should be concerned with what is significant for social actors (Geertz 1973). The meanings that Kun opera was assigned has been in a state of constant change. Kun opera was an entertainment form in the late 1940s, provided by small private troupes that toured around following potential consumers. From the 1950s to the early 1980s, the genre was given political connotations, and political meanings became the driving force that determined the rise and fall of the genre and the performers' experience of it. Kun opera started to be considered an embodiment of cultural meanings in the mid-1980s, the 1990s, and the early 2000s, a social project that was dedicated to separating the genre from political control, and seeking independence through constant economic struggles. From 2003 to 2015, Kun opera was given economic meanings, as a cultural product in an emerging cultural industry. These changing meanings took place in a process in which the socialist cultural sovereignty thrived and wilted, and new capitalist social orders emerged. As I describe in each chapter, there has always been a dynamic course of action, in

addition to the actions of Kun opera-making, in which meanings were brought up, spread, and later commonly shared. This course of action, together with actions of Kun-opera making, constitute a value generation process. David Graeber noted that “value is the way actors represent the importance of their own actions to themselves as part of some larger whole” (Graeber 2007, 98). Kun opera performers have been constantly reckoning their actions with themselves and with other social actors, and most changes of their actions (e.g. self-censorship, the creation of neo-classical grand opera, and heterogeneous marketing strategies) are made to incorporate themselves into something larger than themselves, leading people to agree upon the significance of their actions.

Three main forms of values—political value, cultural value, and economic value—have been generated in Kun opera professionals’ reckoning. I examined how ascriptions of values were related positions, for instance troupes, cultural administrators, and producers (Winegar 2006, 24), and changes of the social relations between these positions, for example, the nationalization of troupes, wage reform, corporatization, and collaboration with private investment.

Ascriptions of values in social transformations helped me understand changes in the dominant position of different forms of capital in terms of what valued most to social actors who were in or related to the field of Kun opera production. Kun opera as political capital was mainly inscribed in the relationship between Kun opera professionals and the state. Within this relationship, Kun opera plays were viewed as vehicles of ideological codes, and the value of Kun opera production mainly lied in performers’ contribution to the promotion of ‘appropriate codes’ that conform to the state’s propaganda agenda. And it was a fundamental rule that the value of Kun opera as political capital was closely related to the political profits it yielded. This rule affected both the valorization and devaluation of the form. The valorization of political capital, i.e. the increase in the value of political capital, was closely related to the legitimization conferred by

political power. My analysis of the case of the consecration of *The Fifteen Strings of Cash* reveals that the political values of this play were gradually added with the recommendation of different levels of government officials, and that they reached an apex when the core leadership of the state and the Party appraised the play. The maximal aggrandizement of the political prestige of the play not only consecrated the play, but also represented the general recognition of the genre as a valid cultural form of political capital in the field of officialdom. The nation-wide tour of the play, the massive rearrangement of the play into other operatic genres, and the rapid establishment of Kun opera troupes represented the speedy reproduction of political capital—the pursuit of which often determined the chances for the success of a troupe or even of a local cultural administration office. And when the play was problematized during the Cultural Revolution, the political capital of Kun opera was suddenly devalued, which directly led to the suspension of Kun opera performances. Subsequently, the reproduction of the political capital of Kun opera was halted when professional personnel were assigned to perform other genres, transferred to factories, or imprisoned. But when the genre was re-identified as a useful political resource to generate new political profits in the late 1970s, and the early 1990s, its value as political capital quickly rose, and its reproduction was resurrected.

The cultural capital of Kun opera mainly functioned in the circle of scholars and artists. Its efficacy was revealed in the legitimization of ‘artistic value’ of Kun opera as an elegant and traditional genre of performing arts, which was essentially a symbol of superiority when compared to other genres. Kun opera as cultural capital arose in the situation when the state’s political support of the genre waned, and Kun opera troupes were compelled to join the market competition for monetary benefits in the initial stage of the Opening-Up period in the mid-1980s. Kun opera’s cultural capital was mainly legitimized through the institution of opera contests, such as *The Plum*

Blossom Performance Award (PBPA).

Founded by *Xijubao*, one of the most influential journals in the field of performing arts, the PBPA was the symbolic consecration of its awardees and the genres they performed. Kun opera professionals became its most successful candidates. The supreme honor of the prize divided the field of Chinese opera into two subgroups, the PBPA awardees, and the others. In this sense, the contest rules of PBPA established the rules for the competition for cultural capital. As a result, the Prize committee redefined the evaluation criteria of the genre by shifting the focus from ideological significance toward performance skills. And the prize itself had the potential to be converted into other forms of capital, such as political capital (in the form of a position in the cultural administrative system), and economic capital (in the form of monetary rewards associated with the prize). In spite of the low efficacy of capital conversion, cultural capital legitimized by the prize remain strong. Since the mid-1980s, Kun opera professionals' labor has been largely devoted to their pursuit of prizes. Motivated by the symbolic power of the prize, many professional performers stuck to their careers as professional performers, even though the economic benefit of this occupation increasingly declined from the mid-1980s to 2001.

Kun opera became a means of competing for economic capital as China started to explore the market economy with Chinese characteristics since the early 1980s, and gradually became a consumerist society. This social change was largely triggered by a series of top-down economic reforms, during which state-owned Kun opera troupes were at first encouraged and then required to submit to market laws of supply and demand, in order to achieve monetary profits from individual consumers. The truly effective changes in the field of Kun opera happened in the early 2000s, when the private capital investment in state-owned troupes was encouraged. In 2003, the corporatization transformation of Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Troupe imposed upon the troupe

an obligation to make profits. This transformation introduced a set of criteria for evaluating a troupe's success based on its profit earnings. It indicates that professionals' labor mainly contributes to the 'turnover' of economic capital. Although the transformation was halted in 2011, and did not reach the managerial structure of other state-owned troupes, the economic rule of competing for profit influenced other troupes. Moreover, the competition for economic capital reached beyond the circle of state-owned performing groups, when independent producers rose as intermediaries who integrated Kun opera performances into commodity context, intentionally or unintentionally turning the genre into an instrument of money making.

The producers' purpose was not only to accomplish the production process, but also to accomplish a value-realization process of the play, and the latter could only be achieved through the consumers' recognition of the performances as a meaningful object that suits their needs in their own way. Producers played a role in narrowing the gap between their work and targeted audiences, and in connecting the symbolic realm and socio-economic factors. Their personal visions created the link between performers' artistic labor and consumers' social labor which interpreted it. And the consumers' personal uses of Kun opera performances in their own sociality facilitated by producers assigned the use values to the genre, and moved Kun opera into the regime of economic value.

The development of Kun opera took place in real, social life, influenced by specific economic and political relations. The meanings of the genre in specific political economic conditions were created by various forms of labor, varying from government officials' labor of promoting (or censoring) the genre, cultural entrepreneurs' labor of trading Kun Opera products for profits, and audiences' labor of consuming a performance to find self-fulfillment or to gain social distinction. Within the matrix of meanings, Kun opera professionals always negotiated the

values of their labor in presenting a play to appeal to their audiences (whoever they were, government officials, peer artists, or audiences in general), and they perpetuated the genre in the social life of China. These values are results of the pre-existing social orders and continue to shape new ones. They, therefore, are at the core of the political economy of Kun opera.

APPENDIX A

CHRONOLOGY OF SIGNIFICANT EVENTS

- 1912 The Republic of China was founded.
- 1931 Japan invaded China. Kun opera performers who were of the "transmission" generation founded the Xian Ni She. Their performing activities were attenuated after the Japanese Army invaded Shanghai in 1937. The troupe was officially disbanded in 1941.
- 1937-1945 The Anti-Japanese War, also known as the Second Sino-Japanese War.
- 1941 The Guofeng New Su Opera Troupe was founded.
- 1949 The People's Republic of China was officially founded on October 1st.
- 1951 The Beijing government officially promulgated the "Opera Reform" on May 5th.
The Guofeng Troupe was officially registered as a private joint troupe in the prefectural government of Jiaxing, Zhejiang Province
The Minfeng Experimental Su Opera Troupe was founded.
- 1952 The Guofeng Troupe was required to participate in the Official Showcase hosted by the Hangzhou Municipal Government.
- 1953 The Ministry of Culture began to promulgate the registration and reorganization of performing groups across the country.
The ownership of the Guofeng Troupe was changed from a private troupe to a

publically subsidized private troupe.

The system of wage scales according to centralized principles was introduced from the Soviet Union into China.

- 1956 The Jiangsu Province Su and Kun Opera Troupe was established
- The Cultural Bureau of Jiangsu Province transformed the Suzhou Su Opera Troupe into the Jiangsu Province Su and Kun Opera Troupe.
- The Guofeng Troupe was completely nationalized into the first state-owned Su and Kun opera troupe, and renamed the Zhejiang Province Kun and Su Opera Troupe.
- The Minfeng Troupe was registered in the city of Suzhou and renamed as the Suzhou Su Opera Troupe.
- The Zhejiang Province Kun and Su Opera Troupe performed *The Fifteen Strings of Cash* in Beijing in April. The state leaders, including Mao Zedong and Zhou En'lai officially sanctioned the political values of the play.
- 1957 Kun opera was officially added to the Wenzhou indigenous opera-training program.
- The Northern Kun opera Theater was founded in Beijing.
- 1958 The Jiangsu Province Opera School held their first Kun opera program and enrolled more than twenty students.
- 1959 The Zhejiang Province Opera School established its first Kun opera program.
- 1960 The Jiangsu Province Su and Kun Opera Troupe developed a subordinate branch based in Nanjing.
- The Suzhou Opera School had its first Su and Kun program.

- The Xiang Kun Opera Troupe was founded in Chenzhou, Hunan Province.
- 1963 Influenced by the political slogan, “extensively writing about the thirteen years of the PRC, contemporary plays became the main subjects of Chinese opera.
- 1964 The Kun opera play, *Li Huiniang* by the Northern Kun opera Theater was criticized as a ghost play.
- 1965 The Shanghai Jing Kun Opera Troupe mounted *Qionghua*.
- 1966 The Cultural Revolution took place in China from 1966 until 1976.
The Jiangsu Province Kun Su Opera Troupe produced *After the Harvest* (Fengshou zhihou), and *Storm of the Countryside* (Shanxiang fengyun).
- 1969 The Nanjing branch of the Jiangsu Troupe co-produced an opera, *Sunflowers* (Xiangyang hua) with the Jiangsu Province Song and Dance Troupe (Jiangsusheng gewu tuan).
- 1976 Yongjia Kun Opera Troupe in Wenzhou was resumed and merged with Yongjia Peking Opera Troupe.
- 1977 The Cultural Bureau of Jiangsu Province transferred state employed Kun opera professionals who were sent to other performing groups, farms, and factories during the Cultural Revolution back to Nanjing.
The Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Theater was established on the basis of the previous Jiangsu Province Kun and Su Opera Troupe.
The Kun Opera Troupe in Chenzhou, Hunan Province was approved to resume its performances of historical plays, and was reorganized into the Hunan Province Kun Opera Troupe in 1984.
The Nanjing branch of the Jiangsu Province Kun and Su Opera Troupe was

separated from its mother troupe, and was expanded into an independent troupe that performed Kun opera exclusively.

The Provincial government of Zhejiang approved the performers' request to restore the Zhejiang Province Kun Opera Troupe.

- 1978 The central government announced the post-Mao economic reform known as the “reform and opening-up” (*gaige kaifang*).
- 1979 The Northern Kun opera Theater in Beijing was re-established.
- 1982 Kun opera performers were recruited in the cultural delegations sponsored by the government.
- 1983 The Plum Blossom Performance Prize (*Meihua jiang*) was founded by the editors of *Xijubao*.
- 1985 The Ministry of Culture issued the “Notification of the protection and revival of Kun Opera” (*Guanyu baohu he zhenxing kunju de tongzhi*).
- 1986 Kun Opera performers received six PBPA prizes out of twenty in total, among all contestants who performed various forms of Chinese opera, Western opera, and spoken drama.
- 1986 The Kun opera film, *The Peony Pavilion*, starred by Zhang Jiqing, the PBPA awardee, was presented at the 1986 Tang Xianzu Memorial Conference.
- The Kun Opera Revival Advisory Committee (*Zhenxing kunju zhidao weiyuanhui*) was established by the Ministry of Culture.
- The Leader Team of the Central, established by the central government, issued “the Notice of Artistic Professional Posts (Artistic Ranks) Experimental Rules and the Suggestions for Implementation” was drafted by the Ministry of Culture

and issued by the central government. The structured wage system was promulgated. Differentials in wages were linked to the wage bill, via the productivity of performers' labor. State-owned performing groups signed contracts with performers as individual employees, depending on the individual's artistic rank, and assign them to different posts in accordance with their artistic ranks.

Zhang Hong, librettist of the Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Theater, rearranged an excerpt from a classical literature *The Peach Blossom Fan*, the textual form of which was composed by Hong Sheng (1645-1704). He collaborated with Wang Haiqing in rewriting the complete version of *The Peach Blossom Fan* in 1989.

1987 The Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe mounted a complete production of *The Palace of Eternal Life*, a classical chuanqi play by Hong Sheng (1645-1704).

1990 Li Ruihuan, the core state leader, promoted the concept of "Outstanding National Culture" at the Forum on National Literature and Art Work in an effort to provide nationalist significance for those artistic genres and cultural conventions that were long-established but increasingly marginalized in processes of modernization in China.

The Ministry of Culture decided to allocate a special fund to support the PBPA. The Ministry of Culture increased investment in Chinese indigenous opera and founded the Wenhua Award.

1991 The grand Kun opera, *The Blood of Injustice*, by the Jiangsu Kun Opera Theater won the Wenhua Prize.

1993 *Shang lingshan* ("Go to the Spiritual Mountain") by the Shanghai Kun Opera

Troupe premiered and achieved great success.

The relative proportion of fixed to the flexible wages was set in the “Notice about the Issue of the Wage System Reform Concerning Government Offices and Public Institutions,” issued by the State Council. This notice stipulated that the fixed part of a state employee’s wage (i.e., the post wage) should be 60% of the entire wage, and the flexible part, including all forms of allowances, should constitute the remaining 40% of the wage.

- 1995 The grand Kun opera, *The Peach Blossom Fan* by the Jiangsu Kun Opera Theater, the grand Kun opera, *Pipa ji* (“The Tale of Pipa”) by the Northern Theater of Kun Opera, and the Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe’s *Sima Xiangru* won the Wenhua Prize.
- 2001 Kun opera was proclaimed by the UNESCO as one of the “Masterpieces of the Intangible Cultural Heritages of Humanity.”
- 2003-2004 The Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Theater underwent the corporation reform, after which the theater was incorporated into the Jiangsu Performing Arts Group Corporation Ltd.
- 2004 The young lover’s edition of *The Peony Pavilion* produced by Pai Hsien-yung received its mainland premiere at Soochow University in Suzhou.
- 2005 The Jiangsu Kun Opera Theater officially registered with the Jiangsu Province Department of Culture as an enterprise of Kun opera.
- The Ministry of Culture began to organize training programs in Beijing, Suzhou, Shanghai, Nanjing, and Hangzhou, and fully covered the expense of these undertakings.

The state encouraged private individuals and enterprises to engage in this corporatization by purchasing smaller shares, lower than 51%, of the transformed state-owned troupes.

2006 The Imperial Granary started to stage the “residential-hall” edition of *The Peony Pavilion* produced by Wang Xiang. The production closed in 2012.

2009 The Ministry of Culture launched the ‘Safeguarding, Preservation and Support Program of National Kun Opera Art’

Zhang Jun, a former employee of the Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe, quit the troupe and founded the Shanghai Zhang Jun Kun Opera Art Center (Shanghai Zhang Jun Kunqu Yisshu Zhongxin), and began his independent exploration of Kun opera production.

2010 Li Changchun, then Propaganda Chief for the Chinese Communist Party, declared the attributes of culture (wenhua de shuxing) were dual, in that they were simultaneously “ideology” and “commodity.”

Zhang Jun mounted a garden version of *The Peony Pavilion* in Zhujiajiao in collaboration with Academy-award winning composer, Tan Dun.

2011 Shi Xiaomei, a PBPA awardee who retired from the Jiangsu Kun Opera Theater in 2003, founded her private studio, Shi Xiaomei's Kun Opera Studio

The government suspend the corporatization of state-owned performing groups. Then-Prime Minister Wen Jiabao claimed the goal of making cultural industries a pillar of China's national economy in the report on the “Work of the Government delivered at the Fourth Session of the Eleventh National People's Congress” (Shiyijie quanguo renda sici huiyi).

2013 Shi Xiaomei's Kun Opera Studio announced a brand called “The Light Spring Breeze” produced by Li Bin.

APPENDIX B

GLOSSARY

- “Jizibei” qingnian yanchudui “繼字輩”青年
演出隊
A Jia 阿甲
anlao fenpei 按勞分配
antou ben 案頭本
bada mingxiao xunyan shengkuang 八大名
校巡演盛況
bai mudan 白牡丹
baixi zhi mu 百戲之母
ban yan 板眼
ban 板
ban 版
bangqiang ti 板腔體
banzhu zhi 班主制
baochang 包場
Baoliu shiye danwei xingzhi de guoyou
wenyi yuantuan mingdan 保留事業單位性
質的國有文藝院團名單
batou 把頭
Beifang kunqu juyuan 北方崑曲劇院
beiqu 北曲
Beitaicang 北太倉
beitao 北套
ben tai xi 本臺戲
benban 本班
bendi tuan 本地團
benqiang 本腔
bianjiu weixin 變舊為新
bianzhi 編制
biaoyan dangci jintie 表演檔次津貼
bu chucuo 不出錯
Cai Zhengren 蔡正仁
caidong 材東
Cao Yu 曹禺
cha'e bokuan 差額撥款
Chaitou feng 釵頭鳳
changqiang sheji 唱腔設計
Changsheng dian 長生殿
Chaotian gong 朝天宮
Chen Jing 陳靜
Chen Pixian 陳丕顯
Chen Qigang 陳其鋼
Chen Shouchuan 陳守川
chengbanren 承班人
Chenzhou 郴州
chi huangliang 吃皇糧
Chi Lingyun 遲凌雲
Chimeng 癡夢
chou 醜
chuazibei 傳字輩
Chuansong 王傳淞
chuantong xiqu 傳統戲曲
chuguo tuan 出國團
chumatou 出碼頭
chunfeng shangsi tian, tao ban qing ru jian
春風上巳天, 桃瓣輕如翦
Cihu 刺虎
cizhuyan 次主演

Cui shi 崔氏
cuowu sixiang 錯誤思想
dabaiguang 大白光
dagu 大鼓
daguansheng 大冠生
dagulao 打鼓佬
danpigu 單皮鼓
dan 旦
danchu 單出
Dang de lingdao shi xiqu gongzuo de shengming suo xi 黨的領導是戲曲工作的生命所系
dangwu gongzuo renyuan 黨務工作人員
Danyang 丹陽
danzhe 單折
danzhiqu 單支曲
daozi 倒字
daxi 大戲
daxie shisan nian 大寫十三年
dazahui 大雜燴
Dazhong Dianping 大眾點評
Deng Xiaoping 鄧小平
dengji zhengbian 登記整編
di wu jie xiqu yanyuan guanmo Jiangxi hui 第五屆戲曲演員觀摩講習會
diaodong 調動
Dielianhua 蝶戀花
Ding Shengyang 丁聲洋
Ding Xiaofeng 丁曉峰
dise 笛色
diwang jiangxiang caizi jiaren 帝王將相才子佳人
diyige chi pangxie de ren 第壹個吃螃蟹的人
Dongfang buluo 東方部落
Dongfeng yizhi mei 東風壹枝梅
Dongwu Qushe 東吳曲社
dou xiu 抖袖
Du Liniang 杜麗娘
ducao 毒草
E'yunge qupu 遏雲閣曲譜

erdeng jue 二等腳
Fangcui 訪翠
fantizi 繁體字
Fei Xiang 費翔
Feng 風
fengjian shehui de chanwu 封建社會的產物
Fengshou zhihou 豐收之後
fugu 復古
gaibian fangfa 改編方法
gaige kaifang 改革開放
gaiqi hou 改企後
gaiqi qian 改企前
gaiqi 改企
gaixi gairen gaizhi 改戲、改人、改制
Ganju 贛劇
Ganxi zhaidi 甘熙宅第
gao da quan 高大全
gaodiao 搞掉
gaoqiang 高腔
gaoxue 高靴
gelu 格律
getihu 個體戶
gongbi 工筆
gongchepu 工尺譜
gongdiao 宮調
gonghe ban 共和班
gongji zhi 供給制
gongjia ren 公家人
gongjia 公家
gongling jintie 工齡津貼
gongsi heying 公私合營
Gu Atao 顧阿桃
Gu Duhuang 顧篤璜
Gu Xiulian 顧秀蓮
guaitai 怪胎
guanfang huodong 官方活動
guangbo dianshi xitong 廣播電視系統
Guanghe Juchang 廣和劇場
Guangrong zhijia 光榮之家
guanmoyanchu 觀摩演出
guganyin 骨幹音

guimendan 閩門旦
Guo Youzhi 郭於執
Guofeng jushe 國風劇社
Guofeng jutuan 國風劇團
Guofeng Su Kun juntuan 國風蘇崑劇團
Guofeng xinxing Su jutuan 國風新型蘇劇團
Guofeng xixing jutuan 國風新型劇團
guojia tizhi 國家體制
Guojia wutai gongcheng 國家舞臺工程
guoying jutuan 國營劇團
guoying 國營
guoyou yuantuan 國有院團
guoyou 國有
Guqu zhutan 顧曲廬談
haojue suidai renyuan 好腳隨帶人員
Hechunban 和春班
Henan Xin Jutuan 河南新劇團
heng shi 橫式
Hong Fangsi 洪昉思
Hong Weizhu 洪惟助
Hongdeng ji 紅燈記
Honglou meng 紅樓夢
Hongming 錢洪明
Hou Fangyu 侯方域
Houfang 後訪
houtan 後灘
Hu Zhexing 胡哲行
Hu'nansheng Kun jutuan 湖南省崑劇團
Hua Hesheng 華和笙
Hua Wenyi 華文漪
Huabei diqu 華北地區
Huadong ju 華東局
Huarentang tang 懷仁堂
huaju 話劇
hualian 畫臉
Huang Doudou 黃豆豆
Huang Yuan 黃源
Huangjia liangcang 皇家糧倉
Huansha ji 浣紗記
huibao yanchu 匯報演出

huiyan 匯演
Huju 滬劇
Ji Zhenhua 計鎮華
jia zengban 加贈板
jiaban 家班
Jiajing 嘉靖
jiamen 家門
Jiandu 見都
jianghu ban 江湖班
jiangjin 獎金
jiangli gongzi 獎勵工資
Jiangnan 江南
jiangong 賤工
Jiangsusheng Gewutuan 江蘇省歌舞團
Jiangsusheng Kun Juyuan 江蘇省昆劇院
Jiangsusheng Su Kun Jutuan 江蘇省蘇崑劇團
Jiangsusheng Suzhou Kun juyuan 江蘇省蘇州崑劇院
Jiangsusheng Suzhou Kun Juyuan 江蘇省蘇州昆劇院
Jiangsusheng Yanyi Jituan Gongsi 江蘇省演藝集團公司
Jiangsusheng Yanyi Jituan Kun Juyuan 江蘇省演藝集團昆劇院
jianpu 簡譜
jiaqiang xuanchuan 加強宣傳
jiaqiang zuzhi lingdao 加強組織領導
Jiaxing zhuanqu 嘉興專區
Jiazheng 孫家正
jiazu banzi 家族班子
Jicheng qupu 集成曲譜
jichu gongzi 基礎工資
Jie san xing 解三醒
jiegou gongzizhi 結構工資制
jiegu 羯鼓
Jifangban 集芳班
jing 淨
jingji xiaoyi 經濟效益
jinglike 經勵科
Jingmeng 驚夢

jingshen wuran 精神汙染
Jishan 寄扇
jiti suoyou zhi 集體所有制
Jiugong dacheng nanbeici gongpu 九宮大成
成南北詞宮譜
jiuju 舊居
jiulong kou 九龍口
Jizi 寄子
Juben xuankan 劇本選刊
juchang 劇場
juexue 絕學
jumu 劇目
jundui wengongtuan 軍隊文工團
juqu 劇曲
jutuan 劇團
juzhong 劇種
kai bu chu kou de 開不出口的
kaishan zhizuo 開山之作
Kan qian nu 看錢奴
kangmei yuanchao 抗美援朝
Ke Jun 柯軍
Ke Qingshi 柯慶施
Kezhi yuan 課植園
kou fa 口法
Kuang Zhong 況鐘
Kunju nian 昆劇年
Kunju yanchu shigao 崑劇演出史稿
Kunju 崑劇
Kunqu 崑曲
Kunshan qiang 崑山腔
Kunshan 崑山
kunwei 崑味
kuoda yingxiang 擴大影響
Lanke shan 爛柯山
Lanyuan 蘭苑
lao sheng 老生
Laodong Juchang 勞動劇場
laoxi xinchang 老戲新唱
leitou 勒頭
Li Bin 李彬
Li Dou 李鬥

Li Guyi 李谷一
Li Huiniang 李慧娘
li kai ta jia cai huang hun 離開她家才黃昏
Li Rongyin 李榮圻
Li Ruihuan 李瑞環
Li Xianglin 李湘林
Li Zicheng 李自成
Li Zigui 李紫貴
liban 離班
Lihun 離魂
lingxian zhuyan 領銜主演
Lin Hai xue yuan 林海雪原
Liu Housheng 劉厚生
Liu Jiyan 柳繼雁
Liu Mengmei 柳夢梅
Liu Qingbang 劉慶邦
Liu Shaoqi 劉少奇
Liu Yizhen 柳以真
Liuhe 六合
liuxing yinyue 流行音樂
Liuye qupu 六也曲譜
Lou the Rat 婁阿鼠婁
Lu Dingyi 陸定一
Lu E'ting 陸萼庭
lǚ rankou 捋髯口
luogujing 鑼鼓經
manqu 慢曲
Mei Xing 梅行
Meihua jiang 梅花獎
Minfeng Shiyan Su Jutuan 民鋒實驗蘇劇團
minjian zhiye jutuan 民間職業劇團
minjian 民間
minying gongzhu jutuan 民營公助劇團
minying gongzhu 民營公助
minying jutuan 民營劇團
Minzu Wenhua Gong Dajuyuan 民族文化宮
大劇院
Mishi 密誓
mo 末
mozhe shitou guohe 摸著石頭過河
mubiao xi 幕表戲

Mudan ting 牡丹亭
nanbei hetao 南北合套
Nanbei Kunju qunying huiyan 南北昆劇群英會演
Nanci yinzheng 南詞引證
Nanjing Dianying Zhipianchang 南京電影制片廠
Nanpishi Ji 南皮石記
nanqu 南曲
nantao 南套
Nashuying qupu 納書楹曲譜
nengzheng huihua 能掙會花
Nianyi Huisuo 廿一會所
niexi 捏戲
niugui sheshen 牛鬼蛇神
Pai Chung-hsi 白崇喜
Pai Hsien-yung 白先勇
pai quzi 拍曲子
Panzhan 判斬
pao yuanchang 跑圓場
ping 平
Pingju 評劇
pinren hetong 聘任合同
pinzhe 拼折
Pipa ji 琵琶記
pipa 琵琶
po sijiu 破四舊
poladan 潑辣旦
Puluo Yishu 普羅藝術
Qian Daoyuan 錢道源
qiang'ge 腔格
qiantan 前灘
Qingbeixu 傾杯序
qingchun ban 青春版
qingqu 清曲
Qionghua 瓊花
Qiushi 求是
qiye 企業
qu 曲
quanbenxi 全本戲
qugao hegua 曲高和寡

qujia 曲家
Qülü 曲律
qupai liantao 曲牌聯套
qupai taoshi 曲牌套式
qupai 曲牌
qupuji 曲譜集
quqing 曲情
qushe 曲社
quxue 曲學
Quyuan chuoying 曲苑綴英
Quyuan yitong 曲韻易通
qu 去
renshibu 人事部
ru 入
sanbai zhuangshi 三百壯士
sanban 散板
sanlu yixia jue 三路以下腳
Sanqingban 三慶班
sanquji 散曲集
sanshan 三弦
Sha Wenhan 沙文漢
shanbang 山膀
Shang lingshan 上靈山
shang 上
Shanghai fazheng xuetao 上海法政學堂
Shanghai kunjutuan 上海崑劇團
Shanghai Zhang Jun Kunqu Yishu Zhongxin 上海張軍崑曲藝術中心
Shanghai xiqu xuexiao 上海市戲曲學校
shangju 上句
shanqu touwei 刪頭去尾
Shanxiang fengyun 山鄉風雲
shaoshu minzu 少數民族
shehui huodong 社會活動
shehui xiaoyi 社會效益
Shen Bin 沈斌
sheng 生
sheng 笙
shenqu 申曲
shentou 滲透
Shi Xiaomei 石小梅

Shi Ximin 石西民
shidai gequ 時代歌曲
shidian danwei 試點單位
shidiao 時調
shinian haojie 十年浩劫
shishi qiushi 實事求是
Shiwu guan 十五貫
shixi 時戲
shiye danwei bianzhi 事業單位編制
shiye danwei 事業單位
shiying le shidai de yaoqiu 適應了時代的要求
shouzhe 手折
Shu Qiang 舒強
shuang maozitou 雙帽子頭
Shuang xiong meng 雙熊夢
shuangchong shuxing 雙重屬性
shuimoqiang 水磨腔
Shuiyuetang 水樂堂
Sifan 思凡
Sima Xiangru 司馬相如
siren bang 四人幫
siren zhiye jutuan 私人職業劇團
sixiang jiben yuanze 四項基本原則
Sixiban 四喜班
Su Xujuan 蘇戍娟
Suju 蘇劇
sukunge 蘇崑歌
Sumiao 宿廟
Sun Jinghua 孫敬華
suoyipu 蓑衣譜
Sutan Yanjiuhui 蘇灘研究會
Suzhou tanhuang 蘇州灘簧
Suzhou Xiqu Xuexiao 蘇州戲曲學校
taiben 臺本
Taiping tianguo 太平天國
Taixue 太學
Tan Dun 譚盾
Tan Xinpei 譚鑫培
tanci 彈詞
Tanci 彈詞

Tang ming huang 唐明皇
Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖
tangyin 腔音
Taohua shan 桃花扇
taoqu 套曲
Tihua 題畫
Tian Han 田漢
tianci 填詞
tianpu 填譜
tigao zhengzhi juewu 提高政治覺悟
tingtang ban 廳堂版
tingxin liuzhi 停薪留職
tingye duori xinnei jiao 停業多日心內焦
tongsu gequ 通俗歌曲
tongzhi 通知
toudeng jue 頭等腳
touqiang 頭腔
Wang Bin 王斌
Wang Fang 王芳
Wang Haiqing 王海清
Wang Hong 王鴻
Wang Jilie 王季烈
Wang Shiyu 汪世瑜
Wang Xiang 王翔
Wang Zhiquan 王芝泉
Wangshi yuan 網師員
wansanti 萬三蹄
Wei Liangfu 魏良輔
Wei Wenbo 魏文伯
Wei Xiaoxi 衛小溪
weiwu zhuyi 唯物主義
weixin zhuyi 唯心主義
weizhisu 味之素
Weng Guosheng 翁國生
wengongtuan 文工團
wenhua chuancheng ren 文化傳承人
wenhua chuancheng 文化傳承
wenhua de shuxing, 文化屬性
wenhua guan 文化館
Wenhua jiang 文華獎
wenhua jingzhengli 文化競爭力

wenhua shiye danwei 文化事業單位
wenhua tizhi gaige 文化體制改革
wenhua yichan 文化遺產
Wenhuabu guanyu jiaqiang minjian zhiye
jutuan de lingdao he guanli de zhishi 文化部
關於加強民間職業劇團的領導和管理的指
示
Wenhuabu guanyu minjian zhiye jutuan de
dengji guanli gongzuo de zhishi 文化部關
於民間職業劇團的登記管理工作的指示
Wenhuabu guanyu minjian zhiye jutuan
dengji gongzuo de buchong tongzhi 文化部
關於民間職業劇團登記工作的補充通知
Wenhuabu guanyu quanguo jutuan
zhengbian gongzuo de jixiang tongzhi 文化
部關於全國劇團整編工作的幾項通知
Wenhuabu guanyu saying jutuan dengji he
jiangli gongzuo de zhishi 文化部關於私營
劇團登記和獎勵工作的指示
Wenhuabu guanyu zhengdun he jiaqiang
quanguo jutuan gongzuo de zhishi 文化部關
於整頓和加強全國劇團工作的指示
Wenhuabu 文化部
wenwusheng 文武生
wenyi gongzuo tuan 文藝工作團
wenyi heixian zhuanzheng lun 文藝黑線專
政論
wenyi zhanshi 文藝戰士
Wenzhou 溫州
Wu Lanying 吳蘭英
Wu Lengxi 吳冷西
wu xiaosheng 武小生
Wu Zhonglian 吳仲廉
wudan 五旦
Wuqi ganxiao 五七幹校
Wuwu zhishi 五五指示
Xi Xiulan 奚秀蘭
xiahai 下海
xiaju 下句
Xian Ni She 仙霓社
xiandai xi 現代戲
Xiang lian 鄉戀

Xiang Yuancun 項遠村
Xiangyang hua 向陽花
xianli yanchu 獻禮演出
xianlü 仙呂
xiao gong diao 小工調
xiaoluo 小羅
xiaosheng 小生
Xiaotaohong 小桃紅
xiban 戲班
xibei feng 西北風
xieshi 斜式
xieyi 寫意
Xijing 西井
Xiju Gaijin Ju 戲劇改進局
Xiju 錫劇
Xijubao 戲劇報
Xin Fengxia 新鳳霞
xin minzhu zhuyi geming 新民主主義革命
Xinanli 熙南裏
Xinhua shudian 新華書店
Xinju yundong 新居運動
xinxi 新戲
Xiong Youlan 熊友蘭
xiongqiang 胸腔
Xiqu gaige shi Zhongguo Gongchandang de
guanghui yeji 戲曲改革是中國共產黨的光
輝業績
Xiqu gaige 戲曲改革
Xiyou ji 西遊記
xiyue 西樂
xizi 戲子
xuanchuan 宣傳
xuetao 噓頭
xuexi Mao Zedong sixiang jiji fenzi 學習毛
澤東思想積極分子
Xueyuan 血冤
Xuge 絮閣
Xunmeng 尋夢
yanchu changci jintie 演出場次津貼
yanchu fuzhu renyuan 演出輔助人員
yangban tuan 樣板團

Yangshou huafanglu: xin cheng bei lu-xia
揚州畫舫錄·新城北錄下
yanyuan 演員
yi chu xi jiuhuo le yi ge juzhong 一齣戲救
活了一個劇種
Yi mian xuanchuan fan geming fubi de da
heiqi—Kunqu Shiwu guan diaocha baogao
一面宣揚反革命復辟的大黑旗—崑曲十五
貫調查報告
yi zisheng xingqiang 以字聲行腔
yiban sanyan 一板三眼
yinyang sisheng 陰陽四聲
Yinyue shenghuo 音樂生活
yishi tongren 壹視同仁
yishu dengji pingding 藝術等級評定
yishu dengji 藝術等級
yishu jiegou gongzi zhi 藝術結構工資制
yishu zhuan ye zhiwu gongzi 藝術專業職務
工資
yishu zongjian 藝術總監
yishujia 藝術家
yituan yice 壹團壹策
yiyban 一眼板
yizhi 移植
yizhuo liangyi 一桌兩椅
yizi zhichang, yanzhi shuxi 一字之長, 延至
數息
yizixingqiang 依字行腔
Yongjia Kunqu Chuanxisuo 永嘉崑曲傳習
所
Yongjia 永嘉
You Hulu 尤葫蘆
youxiu minzu wenhua 民族優秀文化
Youyuan jingmeng 遊園驚夢
Yu furong 玉芙蓉
Yu Jiulin 愈久霖
Yu Zhenfei 俞振飛
yue'er 悅耳
Yueju 越劇
Yufurong 玉芙蓉
yun 韻

Zaoluopao 皂羅袍
zaxi 雜戲
zengban 贈板
zeren 責任
Zhang Hong 張弘
Zhang Jidie 張寄蝶
Zhang Jinkui 張金魁
Zhang Jiqing 張繼青
Zhang Jun 張軍
Zhang Junxiang 張駿祥
Zhang Mingmin 張明敏
Zhang Yating 張雅婷
Zhang Yue Meiti 嶽美緹
Zhang Yue 張越
zhaodai yanchu 招待演出
zhayin 炸音
Zhejiang Kun Jutuan 浙江崑劇團
Zhejiang sheng wenjiaobu yishuchu 浙江省
文教部藝術處
Zhejiangsheng Yu jutuan 浙江省越劇團
Zhenfei qupu 振飛曲譜
Zheng Boyong 鄭伯永
zheng 箏
Zhengfeng she 正風社
zhenggu 鉦鼓
zhengtai de daxing jumu 整臺的大型劇目
Zhenxing Kunju zhidao weiyuanhui 振興昆
劇指導委員會
zhezi 折子
zhipu 制譜
Zhiqu Weihushan 智取威虎山
zhishi 直式
zhiwu gongzi 職務工資
zhizuoren 制作人
zhong dian fu dao min ying gong zhu ju tuan
重點輔導民營公助劇團
Zhong su youhao dasha 中蘇友好大廈
Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu shenhua tizhi
gaige tuidong zhehuizhuyi wenhua da
fazhan da fanrong ruogan zhongda wenti de
jueding 中共中央關於深化文化體制改革

推動社會主義文化大發展大繁榮若干重大問題的決定

Zhongguo xijujia xiehui 中國戲劇家協會

Zhongguo xiqu xueyuan 中國戲曲學院

Zhonghua quanguo xiqu gaijin weiyuanhui
中華全國戲曲改進委員會

Zhongnanhai 中南海

zhongwai hezi 中外合資

Zhongyang renmin guangbo diantai 中央人
民廣播電臺

Zhongyang renmin zhengfu zhengwuyuan
guanyu xiqu gaige gongzuo de zhishi 中央
人民政府政務院關於戲曲改革工作的指示

Zhongyang wenhua guanli ganbu xueyuan
中央文化管理幹部學院

Zhongzhou yun 中州韻

Zhou Chuanying 周傳瑛

Zhou Enlai 周恩來

Zhou Qin 周秦

Zhouzhuang gu xitai 周莊古戲臺

Zhouzhuang 周莊

Zhu Guoliang 朱國梁

Zhu Maichen xiuqi 朱買臣休妻

Zhu Shigou 朱世藕

Zhu Sucheng 朱素臣

zhuan waikuai 賺外快

Zhuibaiqiu 綴白裘

Zhujiajiao 朱家角

zhuqiang shuo 主腔說

zhuyan zhongxin zhi 主演中心制

zhuyan 主演

zichan jieji ziyouhua 資產階級自由化

zijue ziyuan 自覺自願

zuigao rongyu 最高榮譽

zuochang 坐唱

zuocheng ban 坐城班

zuogong xi 做工戲

zuoqu fa 作曲法

zuoqu 作曲

zuzhi guanxi 組織關係

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