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Ya Kunqu in Late Ming and Early Qing China

INTRODUCTION: Kunqu, China's Ya Heritage, a 600 years old genre of Chinese opera has now been revived and performed all over the world as an authentic representation of China's *ya* 雅 culture and history. The claim that kunqu is *ya* emerged soon after the genre emerged in mid Ming China; formal labeling of kunqu as a *ya* opera (*yabu* 雅部), however, only appeared only in the mid 1750s (Chen Fang, 2007: 24). A multivalent term, *ya* illusively refers to what Chinese commonly esteem as classical, desirable, elegant, elitist, meritorious, proper, refined, sophisticated, valuable.[1] *Ya* meanings become more definable when the word appears as part of bisyllable words, such as *dianya* 典雅 (canonically *ya*), loftily *ya* (*gaoya* 高雅), Confucianly *ya* (*ruya* 儒雅), and culturally or civilly *ya* (*wenya* 文雅). *Ya* is the antithesis of *su* 俗, a term that Chinese use to dismiss what they consider quotidian, rustic, vernacular, and even vulgar, meanings that bisyllable terms like quotidian (*tongsu* 通俗), low and cheap (*disu* 低俗), and vulgar (*bisu* 鄙俗) clarify.

Descriptions of *ya* kunqu regularly appear in historical and contemporary sources of the genre. For example, prefaces in kunqu scripts and anthologies would declare kunqu as a *ya* tradition and dramatic works. A number of recent books on kunqu have titles that allude to the genre's *ya* attributes, such as *A detailed discussion of ya tones and kunqu* (*Changyan yayin lun kunqu* 长言雅音论昆曲) or *Accurate tones of ya opera and a top leader among kunqu actors playing male official roles*: (*Yabu zhengyin guansheng kuishou: Cai Zhengren* 雅部正音官生魁首). (Gu Zhaosun, 2009); Xie Boliang 谢伯梁 and Niu Junyi 钮君怡, Yabu zhengyin guansheng kuishou: Cai Zhengren 雅部正音官生魁首：蔡正仁. Any one familiar with kunqu would readily identify features that connoisseurs conside *ya*. These include, for

[1] For a brief but theoretically insightful discussion of Chinese *ya*, see Sun Keqiang 孙克强, *Yawenhua* 雅文化 (Beijing: China Economic Publishing House, 1995).

example, kunqu's flowing melodies and elegant *acting and dancing* (*shenduan* 身段). Anyone who objectively examines kunqu would, however, always find features that hardly match conventional *ya* critieria. For example, many kunqu shows were/are bawdy, crude, indulgent, or even socially-politically transgressive. That many kunqu, such as *A butterfly dream* (*Hudiemeng* 蝴蝶梦)were historically and often banned indicates how kunqu could also be *su*. As Lu Eting declared, *ya* kunqu is a multivalent and evolving phenomenon; its theories, practices, and meanings are only clear in specific artistic, cultural, historical, and performance contexts. (Lu Eting, 2005:31-47)

This essay probes *ya* kunqu theories and practices by reviewing descriptions from late Ming and Early Qing China (1550 through 1800s), when the genre matured and became nationally prominent. To understand *ya* kunqu of the period is to identify the roots of the genre's current arguments. Judging from the data examined, this essay posits that kunqu *ya* theories and practices in late Ming and early China constitute a performance and negotiation of Chinese and elitist aesthetics, desires, identities, and values during a turbulent time. *Ya* kunqu was not merely art or entertainment, but a performance and discourse of cultural and elite living. Due to limitation of space, this essay will only reference but not analyze *ya* kunqu theories and practices in contemporary China, a topic that would be addressed in a future publication.

KUNQU, A BRIEF HISTORICAL REVIEW To contextualize close reading of representative records of *ya* kunqu, the genre's history needs to be briefly summarized here and with references to its transformative events, seminal figures, representative sources, and canonized works.[1] During the transition between Yuan and Ming dynasties, a genre of Wu area songs appeared in the Kunshan area in Jiangsu Province, and then developed into a vocal music from Kunshan (*kunshan qiang* 昆山腔); it was the

[1] For authoritative and concise descriptions of these and other kunqu topics referenced in this essay, see Wu Xinlei 吴新雷 ed., *Kunqu dacidian* 昆曲大词典. Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2002. and Hong Weizhu 洪维助 ed., *Kunqu cidian* 昆曲辞典. Taiwan Yilan: chuangyi zhongxin, 2002.

forerunner of what is now known as *kunqu*. Allegedly, *kunshan qiang* was musically beautiful and flowing, and thus it was able to pushed three other competing operatic music off the center of the operatic stage in Jiangnan China; the marginalized genres were, namely, *haiyan qiang* 海盐腔, *yuyao qiang* 余姚腔, and *yiyang qiang* 弋阳腔 of the time.

Then, kunqu became nationally prominent, a development that a music master, Wei Liangfu 魏良辅 (fl. 1522-1573?), triggered. Sometime after the 1550s, kunqu history tells, Wei transformed *kunshan qiang* of his time into kunqu or waterly smooth music (*shuimodiao* 水磨调), a genre of vocal music noted for its smooth and free-flowing melodies and virtuoso vocal skills. Wei's kunqu became a national standard with the success of Liang Chunyu's 梁辰鱼(1520-c. 1593) *Washing Silk* (*Hshaji* 浣纱记) of the 1580s (?), the first tale (*chuanqi* 传奇 drama specifically written for performance with kunqu music and singing style as defined by Wei. By the turn of the sixteen and seventeenth centuries, kunqu had established itself as the elite's opera. A prime example is Tang Xianzu's *Peony Pavilion* (*Mudanting* 牡丹亭) of 1598.

Since then, many kunqu masterpieces were created and performed, a development that continued until the early Qing when Hong Sheng 洪昇(1645-1704) completed his *Palace of Everlasting Life* (*Changshendia*n 长生殿) in 1688 and Kong Shangren 孔尚任, his *Peach Blossum Fan* (*Taohuashan* 桃花扇) in1699. Both are kunqu milestones; their literary, dramatic, and musical sophistication are undisputable, and *ya* credentials of their dramatists, extensively discussed and aligned with the *ya* features in their works. Also in the same period of late Ming and early Qing China, many anthologies of kunqu arias, historical accounts, and theoretical treatises were compiled, demonstrating the genre's artistic-intellectual maturation and growing prestige.

Among these writings are many comprehensive and insightful discussions and prescriptions for *ya* kunqu. Two celebrated examples are: Shen Chongsui's 沈宠绥(?-1645) *Required theories for composing and performing kunqu* (*Duqu*

xuzhi 度曲须知), and Xu Dachun's 徐大椿 (d. 1778) *Poetry and its transmission of music* (*Yuefu chuansheng* 乐府传声).[1] Both describe kunqu vocal performance practices in great technical details, demonstrating practitioners' pursuit of artistic, intellectual, and performance excellence. Performance artistry and virtuosity are clearly *ya* concerns and expressions. Literarily and linguistically-musically meritorious lyrics is another: linguistic tones of words in the lyrics should seamless match melodic progressions and ornaments.

From the early 1700s on and until the early 1800s, kunqu flourished, but artistic and creative efforts were spent more on staging of *zhezixi* 折子戏, and less on writing new dramas. *Zhezixi* are excerpted and adjusted scenes of dramatic climaxes or critical episodes from *chuanqi* plays. As such, *zhexizi* provide operatic moments when and where expressive acts of singing and *shenduan* are most critically needed, and can be virtuosoly delivered. As *zhezixi* became demanding exercises, they advanced the kunqu as a distinctive genre of opera. Many artistically demanding and substantive *zhezixi* such as *"Flee by Night"* ("Yeben" 夜奔) or *"Strolling in the Garden and an Interrupted Dream"* ("Youyuan jingmeng" 游园惊梦) became popular kunqu shows and signature piece of individual performers. Historical speaking, the *zhezixi* development elevated kunqu performance theories and practices to the highest levels achievable.

Indicative of such an achievement is the canonization of kunqu and the production of notated scores in the mid 1700s. Two authoritative and voluminous anthologies of kunqu music are, for example, the *Jiugong dacheng nanbeici gongpu* 九宫大成南北词宫谱 (A comprehensive anthology of kunqu arias in nine musical modes) of 1745, an anthology of the notated kunqu and kunqu-styled melodies for 4466 arias; compilation was launched imperial order and completed under the artistic

[1] For a modern edition of two works with English translation, see Koo Siu Sun and Diana Yue, *Xu Da-chun: The Tradition of Sung Poetry*. Hong Kong, OUP, 2006, and Koo Siu Sun and Diana Yue, Shen Chong-sui: Handbook for Qu-singing. Hong Kong, OUP, 2006.

direction of Prince Yun Lu 允禄, and Ye Tang's 叶堂 *Nashuying qupu* 纳书楹曲谱 (Mr. Ye Tang's library of kunqu scores) of the 1780-1790s.[1]

As kunqu became more and more sophisticated, and perhaps more and more elitist/*ya*, began to lose it audience. As a matter of fact, from the turn of the 18th-and 19th centuries on, kunqu was being challenged by a wave of popular operatic genres. As reported by Li Dou 李斗 in his *Painted pleasure boats of Yangzhou* (*Yangzhou huafanglu* 扬州画舫录), (Li Do, 2004: 5.107)[2] a variety of regional operas (花部 *huabu*) emerged in China, and in particular Beijing, the political capital and cultural center of the empire. By the end of the 19th century, kunqu was overshadowed by Peking opera and other local genres; its demise was being lamented, and its *ya* credentials, valorized more and more.

Had the Kunju chuanxisuo Academy for teaching and transmitting kunqu (昆剧传习所) not been launched in 1921, and had the institution not trained a critical corp of 20th century performers, collectively known as the Chuanzibei 传字辈 Masters, kunqu would have disappeare[3] From the 1920s through 1980s, kunqu only managed to survive. Wars and other natural or man-made disasters in mid 20th century rendered long and sustained development impossible. Kunqu faced the danger of oblivison again in the late 1980s and early 1990, despite some earlier and regional efforts to sustain it. Fortunately, in 2001, UNESCO declared kunqu a Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, an international honor that energized Chinese efforts to enthusiastically revive kunqu as a *ya* opera. Being prosperous and striving to reestablish its cultural and national pride, 21st century China actively promotes kunqu to perform and negotiate its culture, history, and identities inside and outside national boundaries.

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[1] Zhou Xiangyu 周祥鈺 et al. ed., [1746] 1932. *Jiugong dacheng nanbeici gongpu* 九宮大成南北詞宮. Shanghai: Gushu liutongchu, [1746]1932]; Ye Tang 叶堂 *Nashuying qupu* 纳书楹曲谱, reprint Beijing: Xuesheng Shudian, 1980s.

[2] Li Dou 李斗, *Yangzhou huafanglu* 扬州画舫录, Reprint Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004, 5.107.

[3] For their biographies, see Sang Yuxi, *Youban yayun lai chuancheng*: *Kunju chuanzibei pingzhuan* 幽兰雅韵赖传承：传字辈评传 Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing, 2010.

MUSIKING *YA* KUNQU As the above review of kunqu history demonstrates, what is *ya* in the genre and why it was, and is, significant make complex questions that cannot be simplistically answered. What was practiced and discussed as *ya* in late Ming and early Qing China, however, substantively overlapped with the zeitgeist of the time expressed through contemporary aesthetics, compositions and performance practices, which embodied personal and or communal desires, emotions, and identities. It is thus reasonable to hypothesize that late Ming and early Qing kunqu practitioners theorized and practiced *ya* kunqu to assert their artistic and elite lives and selves.

To analyze such a musical and social phenomenon, the hypothesis of *musiking* is instrumental. When people musik, they strategically manipulate music objects in particularized times and sites with targeted partners, striving to satisfy personal and communal desires/agendas.[1] Within the theoretical rubrics of musiking, music objects are diverse, ranging from specific compositions, styles, performance practices and sounds to their notated and/or verbal representations, and material embodiment in musical instruments and documents. Music objects being manipulated will define and are defined by temporal and geographical contexts in which musiking performance and discourse take place. Musiking processes are propelled by participating agents whose biography, discursive agendas and strategies define and drive their actions. How the practitioners interact with one another and whether they achieve the results they desire depend on what, how, when, and where they effectively negotiate. Applying these analytical preambles, one can productively investigate how kunqu practitioners in late Ming and early Qing staged *ya* kunqu to project meanings and construct their selves.

Ya kunqu musiking in late Ming and early Qing can be analyzed in multiple ways and from contrasting positions. This

[1] For another application of the musiking theory by this author, see Joseph S.C. Lam, "Eavesdropping on Zhang Xiaoxing's Musical World in Early Southern Song China." in *Senses of the City: Perceptions of Hangzhou & Southern Song China, 1127-1279*, edited by Joseph Lam, Shuen-fu Lin, Christian de Pee, and Martin Powers, pp. 25-54 .Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2017.

paper will investiage the phenomenon in two stages. The first stage is a broad review, generating general observations on musiking agents, sites, times, processes, and agendas of the time. The second stage analyzes specific cases, demonstrating particularized musiking processes and results.

As documented, late Ming and early Qing individuals who strategically musiked *ya* kunqu were primarily moneyed and privileged scholar-officials-landlords of the time. Educated, informed and well-off, they had the intellectual, social, and materials resources to manipulate kunqu in their roles as patrons, critics, pedagogues, and avocational but skilled performers. Culturally and socially active, these kunqu elite needed artistic and communicative activities to express themselves and to demonstrate their privileged status. This is particularly true when the gentlemen lived at home during career transitions, or were forced to retire young, or even denied career opportunities. As reported by Shen Defu (Shen Defu, 1997: 24.627), elite men of the Wu area dedicated time and resources to master music and performance skills, and many became very skilled. As reported by Zhang Dai, his father started the Zhang household kunqu troupe when he gave up his pursuit for a career as a scholar-official; after repeated failures at national examinations, he settled for an artistic and leisurely life. And as represented by Liang Chenyu, Tang Xianzu, and Shen Jing, many elite gentlemen of the time had lofty aspirations and much to tell about their culture and society (Zhang Dai, 2014: 119-120). To express themselves, many wrote *chuanqi* scripts, and had them performed as kunqu operas by their household troupes.[1] Many others also wrote occasional poems and essays,[2] describing their experiences with *ya* kunqu, and asserting artistic and elitist selves and agendas in the process.

[1] For two current studies on household troupes of musicians in late Ming China, see Liu Shuiyun 刘水云, *MingQing jiayue yanjiu* 明清家乐研. Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing, 2005, and Zhang Faying 张发颖, *Zhongguo jiayue xiban* 中过家乐戏班. Beijing: Literature Publishing House, 2002.

[2] For an anthology of these informative poems, see Zhao Shanlin 赵山林 and Zhao Tingting 赵婷婷 eds., *Mingdai yong kunqu shige xuanzhu* 明代咏昆曲诗歌选注. Taibei: Showwe Information Co., Ltd. 2014.

Their musiking was effective because they engaged with *ya* kunqu as a hobby or artistic expression. In other words, their artistica and social gendas were free from ambiguous roles or financial motives. Historical records show that once elite and avocational kunqu masters performed for commercial purposes, they would lose the *ya* aura of their kunqu activities. For example, Li Yu 李渔(1611-1680), one of the most creative and productive playwright and producer of kunqu opera and theory during the Ming and Qing transition period, was disparaged as a *su* practitioner, even though the artistic merits of his operatic output was noted, and the for-hire service of his familial kunqu troupe was welcome.[1] In imperial China, entertianers or anyone who sold their skills or produced goods were considered socially low and materialistic. They existed out of the four primary classes of Chinese people, which were scholars, farmers, craftsmen, and the merchant. Until the 1950s, most kunqu and professional performers were regarded as socially low, even though their artistry and companionship was actively sought by *ya* or moneyed and pleasure-seeking gentlemen.

As documented, kunqu scripts were purposefully written as personal expressions, cultural-social comments, and multi-media dramas. Literarily sophisticated aria lyrics set to smoothly flowing and richly ornamented melodies are often characterized as *ya* expressions. Indeed, any critical studies of the lyrics would show that they are, by any historical or modern standards, literarily meritorious and structurally coordinated. A prime example of such *ya* kunqu arias/composition is the popular "Zaoluopo" 皂罗袍 (dark silk gown) aria in the "Youyuan jingmeng" scene in Tang Xianzu's *Peony Pavilion*. Any examination of the aria and its multi-media performance will see that it is a skillfully composed piece of operatic expression. Its lyrics, which tells of an elite young woman's yearning for love,

[1] For comments on Li Yu's artistic and commercial activities, see Shen Xinlin 沈新林, *Li Yu Xinlun* 李渔新论. Suzhou：Suzhou University Press, 1997; see also Huang Guoquan 黄果泉, *Yasu zhijian—Li Yu de wenhua renge yu wenxue sixiang yanjiu* 雅俗之间—李渔的文化人格与文学思想研究. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2004.

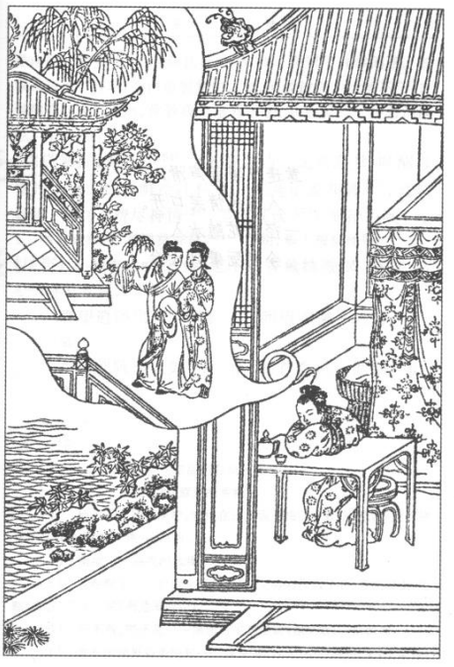

Fig.1 "Du Liniang Dreams of Her Future Husband," late Ming woodblock print, reproduced from Tang Xianzu, *Mudanting*.

is romantic but not bawdy; its melodies flow elegantly, and its *shenduan* kinetically demonstrate idealized femininity. As translated by Cyril Birch,[1] the first stanza of the aria lyrics runs as:

See how deepest purple, brightest scarlet
open their beauty only to dry well crumbling.
"Bright the morn, lovely the scene,"
listless and lost the heart—where is the garden "gay with joyous cries"?

The aria and its performance deliver not only sensory pleasures but also ask a deeply philosophical and personal question about humanity—what is life without love or desires fulfilled? Indeed, when the aria was performed in late Ming China, it poignantly underscored the contemporary pursuit of *qing* (情). The question was particularly relevant for women and men without power, and had their lives controlled by others.

Listening to the aria and contemplating its expressions, the same audience would also notice how the aria constitutes a seamlessly integrated expressions of words, music, and dance: linguistic tones of words in the lyrics match melodic progressions and vocal ornaments; verbal and dramatic meanings come alive with flowing melodies and dynamic rhythms. It is no accident that the aira is popular and has been cited as a prime example of *ya* kunqu; no matter how one reads, sees, or hears it, it makes an expressive music object.

How that musical *ya* serves, and for whom are questions for patrons, performers, and audience to negotiate. Much depends on the musiking agents, times, and sites involved. In late Ming and early Qing China, most *ya* performances of kunqu were held inside palatial mansions of the elite, or outdoors at their scenic gardens. There are many general records about these *ya* events, but few detailed descriptions of what was actually performed and heard. There are nevertheless a limited number of records that

[1] See Cyril Birch translated, *The Peony Pavilion/Mudanting by Tang Xianzu*, Paperback edition. Cambridge, Cheng & Tsui, 1994, 44. There are many audio-visual clips of "Youyuan jingmeng" by professional and amateur performers; to sample, google the *zhezixi* on Youtube, Youku and other websites.

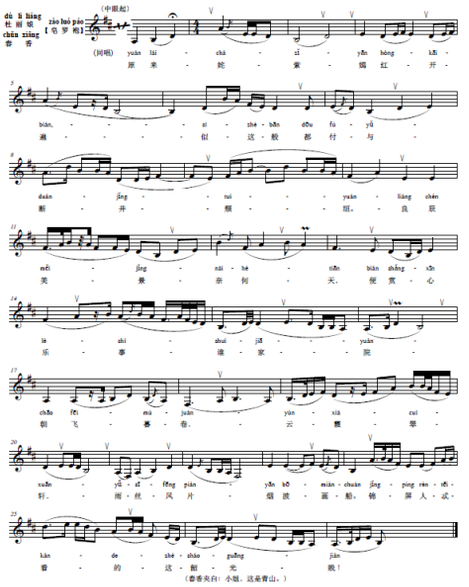

Fig.2 First stanza of "Zaoluopao," from Yu Zhenfei, Zhenfei qupu.

clarify how *ya* and *su* music were different and were separated. Among these records, two described music making at Huqiu at the seasonal celebration of the mid-Autumn festival.

As described by Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道(1568-1610) (Yuan Hongdao, 1998: 321-22). Huqiu in Ming China was a popular tourist spot, one that could be easily reached from Suzhou by boat. A scenic site, Huqiu is also a cultural-historical venue, one where the Cloud Rock Temple (Yunyansi 云岩寺), Thousand-People-Rock Terrace (Qianrenshi 千人石), and Sword Pond (Jianquan 剑泉) were located—they still stand there. As such, they were not only monuments of Wu culture and history, but also platforms for Wu people to gather and entertain themselves with foods, wines, music, dance, and games, while reminiscing their ancestors, heroes, beauties and their stories. Those who had talents could also perform their arts and assert their selves. Indeed, the Qianrenshi at Huqiu was the historical stage for singing kunqu late in the ritual day, after all the *su* merry-mongers had left, and their noisy acts had stopped.

As described by Zhang Dai 張岱 in his essay entitled "Midnight at Huqiu" ("Huqiu zhongqiuye 虎丘中秋夜") (Zhang Dai: 144-145), Huqiu gradually transformed from a *su* site to *ya* venue during the long evening of the ritual day. When the moon first shone over the site, Zhang reported, there were numerous tourists and merry-makers. They frolicked, sang, and played drums, gongs, and other musical instruments without stop, generating a soundscape so noisy that one could hardly carry a conversation. By the first night watch, the noisy frolicking subsided, and more presenta-tional singing, dancing, and ensemble music began. The soundscape then was still fairly noisy, and distinctive rhythms and musical structures could not be easily heard and understood. Then, the commoners left, and the wealthy moved their parties to their pleasure boats. At that time, the soundscape became more serene and conducive to critical listening of music.

By the second watch, only a few musicians remained in the Huqiu site, playing the *xiao* flute or singing intermittently,

conveying their personal sentiments with pure melodies. With the marking of the third night watch, when the bright moon shone through the clear air, everyone present at the site would become quiet. Then and there, the soundscape became uniqiue, and sharply contrasted with the confusing and noisy one heard earlier in the evening.

At that point, kunqu music masters would emerge one by one, positioning themselves on the Qianrenshi, and performing their best. Without any accompaniment by musical instruments, the music masters would spin out pure melodies so focused and powerful in their ascending and descending movements that they could crack the massive rocks at Huqiu, and pierce through clouds to reach the sky. Every tone and every rhythm of such melodies would also imprint on the hearts of the hundred or so connoisseurs sitting and listening on the Qianrenshi. Responding to the distinctive kunqu melodies being sung, they could do nothing but nodded their heads to show their approval. This is kunqu expression and performance at its best, Zhang argued; it was the *ya* kunqu he desired.

Judging from what Yuan and Zhang reported, *ya* kunqu means much more than expressive music composed and virtuosoly performed. Musical *ya* evokes something historical-social and rare, and something that was skillfully presented and respectfully received. Indeed, when performers and audience appreciated *ya* kunqu at the Qianrenshi, they performed and listened with full awareness of the site as a monument to Wu culture and history. Qianrenshi was also the stage where generations of master kunqu singers had performed their best, bequeathing to posterity models and standards for exquisite and virtuoso kunqu singing. Memories of the masters and their performances made people listened and judged music seriously and purposively. Through *ya* sounds, the performers and audience idealized kunqu for themselves and their appreciative others (*zhiyin* 知音).

REPRESENTATIVE CASES OF MING QING KUNQU MUSIKING The complexity and fluidity of *ya* kunqu in Ming

and Qing China can be further investigated with detailed examinations of representative cases like the following ones. For convenience of discussion, each case will be discussed with reference to the most prominent and identifiable elements being manipulated, and agendas, projected. Needless to say, each case is multivalent, and can be examined with alternative perspectives.

Reviewing available data, a fundamental agenda for musiking *ya* kunqu is artistic excellence and individualistic agency. The case of Wei Liangfu,[1] the alleged founder of kunqu (*qusheng* 曲圣) is exemplary. Without kunqu, he would be merely a commoner who lived in Taicang and practiced medicine. By transforming *kunshanqiang* into *shuimodiao* kunqu, which smoothly flowed like water, Wei became a seminal figure in Chinese music culture and history. As history registers, Wei's transformational efforts were inspired by his sense of being a Southerner and awareness of stylistic differences between northern and southern arias (*beiqu* 北曲, *nanqu* 南曲). He realized that as a southerner, he could not naturally and expressively sing northern arias like northern music masters did.

As Wei explained in his Principles of kunqu singing *(Qülu* 曲律) (Koo Siusun and Diana Yue, 2006), his *shuimodiao* is a performatively and expressively sophisticated genre of vocal music that one acquires after extensive training and continuous fine-tuning. Its sounds should come from the performer's *dantian* 丹田 which is two inches below his navel, and should come out of trained lips and other oral muscles. Those who could not control their oral muscles would only produce dull tones, and their learning to sing was a waste of time, Wei declared. When learning to sing, musicians needed to first develop their voice so that it could project sound. Then they needed to master the words in the lyrics, differentia-ting their linguistic tones, matching them to the melodies, and articulating their meanings with appropriate accents or grace notes.

[1] There are many biographical sketches on Wei Liangfu, for concise and scholarly samples, see "Wei Liangfu" in *Kunqu dacidian* and *Kunqu cidian*.

To become master musicians, Wei stated, singers should grasp the principles behind the ways the melodies flowed; mere memorization of melodic fixed and preexisting tunes and patterns (*qupai* 曲牌) would only lead to rigid performance and/or confused understanding. Only after much practice, and after mastering the principles, musicians could singing expressi-vely, transplanting what they had understood from one *qupai* to another, and from one musical mode to another. To sing individual kunqu arias perfectly, musicians should learn to analyze the tunes, so that they could adjust musical expressions, tailoring them to appropriate structures and lengths, smoothening spots where individual phrases connected. To manipulate rhythms and tempi of the arias, musicians should know how and when to use the clapper, striking it on the beats, after the beats, or at the end of phrases. To deliver musically effective performances, singers should realize that they could not polish either the melody or the rhythms at the expense of the other. This balance was particularly acute for recital-singing, when the voice was not accompanied or was barely accompanied; without the cover of loud gong and drum sounds, all vocal imperfections became exposed.

On stage, kunqu performers had to be disciplined, Wei instructed. When singers perform kunqu, they should project a sense of elegance, leisure, order, and seriousness; their music should sound pure, charming, mild, and silky (闲雅整肃, 清俊温润). To help achieve such music, musicians should strive to avoid developing habits that were not musically intrinsic and would negatively affect performance qualities. These habits included, for example, singing with so much inappropriate force that it reddened the singers' faces, blew up their neck veins so that they showed, agitated their bodies so that they shook their heads, tapped their feet, and stood crooked.

Wei Liangfu's *Qulu* attested that *ya* kunqu was a demanding and sophisticated art, one that embodied regional aesthetics and experiences of southern people living in Jiangnan China. As such, *ya shuimodiao* constitutes a most vivid performance and nego-

tiation of the artistic and talented self of Wei, and by extension, southern musical artists like him.

Wei did not become a *ya* kunqu representative by himself. Even though he took, or was given, the lion's share in establishing kunqu, his performance and discourse was a cultural-social phenomenon. History tells that while Wei dedicated his adult life to developing kunqu, he had help from local musicians, one of whom was Zhang Yetang, a northerner who was also Wei's son-in-law. And to make his *shuimodiao* a regional and national success, Wei had to win acceptance from elite and commoner audiences. One early follower of Wei and his kunqu was Liang Chenyu, who authored *Wanshaji*, the performance success of which helped establish kunqu as a *ya* and elite genre of Chinese opera.

Another demonstrative record of communal kunqu musiking is Yu Huai's essay entitled "Listening to kunqu singing in Jichang Garden" ("Jichangyuan wengeji" 寄畅园闻歌记) (Yu Huai, 2012: 48-49). Written as an endorsement for a music treatise by a local musician called Xu Junjian 徐君见—whose biography is currently unknown, the essay powerfully shows how *ya* kunqu was a cultural-social phenomenon supported by regionally connected patrons, critics, performers, and audience.

Strategically structured, the essay begins with a praise for Xu Junjian as a music master regionally noted for his composing and singing of kunqu arias. The praise declared Xu's achievement as a continuation of the tradition that Wei launched and that Xu and other local music masters continued. The essay then reported that even at the senior age of 60, Xu could still sing like a young performer with a delicate voice. Singing amidst natural sites of tall pine trees and resonating stones, Xu would make brilliant and far-reaching sounds, the essay reported. Referencing a cultural trope on ideal music that it would stop flying birds and swimming fish to listen, the essay declared that Xu's *ya* kunqu and transcendental vocal skills mesmerized his scholarly and poetic audience, making them lose their poise.

To project Xu's artistry and individuality and to make his words credible, Yu reported what Xu once told him and what he experienced himself: Xu confessed that he had grown old, and could no longer sing like the young singers that Censor (*taishi* 太史) Qin Liuxian 秦留仙 of Wuxi kept. In September of 1690, Yu passed through Wuxi, and was invited to a party at the scenic Jichang Garden when local gentlemen including Censor Qin attended. Arriving with his painted boathouse which glided over waves of the lake, Yu reported, Qin brought six or seven young singers, and had them performed at the party.

Dressed in simple blue hemn clothes and wearing colored head bands and silk shoes, the singers were gentle and calm like young students, and soft and charming like innocent virgins (*chuzi* 处子). Seated in a line, they plucked lutes and blew pipes. Then they sang, delivering melodies smooth like strings of pearls, free like clouds. Their music silenced the party, making the guests listen attentively and quietly. Experiencing this, Yu concluded that Xu's confession was true and Xu had neither lied to him or exaggered the transcendental skills of Censor Qin's young musicians. With such words, Yu highlighted the *ya* of not only kunqu but also that of Xu Junjian, Censor Qin, and himself. That *ya* signified not only artistic excellence but also a convergence of non-musical forces and desiderata: the social-political prestige of high officials, the youthful performers' charm and skill, their dramatic entrance to the performance site, its natural beauty, and the author's literary and promotional skills and words which would subsequently circulate wide and far through print and oral communications.

Yu's definition and promotion of *ya* kunqu and people is echoed by many other documents, two of which can be briefly described here. In his *The three natural sounds of southern arias* (*Nanyin sanlai* 南音三籟), Ling Mengchu (凌濛初 1580-1644) declared that every kunqu aria had its melodies, the shape of which could not be disrupted by additional musical notes or words in the lyrics. Recently, some musicians in the Wu area, Ling noted, wanted to show off their vocal skills by introducing

such notes and words, and by expanding the rhythmic structures in their recital-arias. In the end, they only produced noises that no master musicians or informed audience would want to hear. To engage with kunqu, Ling declared, audience should be able to tell how words in the aria lyrics were enunciated; rhythms, executed; and melodies, spun. They should not applaud just because the singers sang with good voices. That Ling targeted his warning to Wu people and kunqu practitioners is clear—only they would naturally master Wu dialect and kunqu performance practices. (Ling Mengchu, 1989: 58-60)

An author who also theorized kunqu as a tool for artistic excellence and regional selves is Shen Chongsui (?-ca. 1645). In addition, Shen also argued historically and philosophically. In his *Duqu xuzhi* (Shen, 189-190), he idealized music as a natural phenomenon and a Confucian tool of gentlemanly self-cultivation. Thus, he declared that technical components of music, namely, the twelve standard pitches, five-tones, and eight timbres of music were naturally derived, and were used as as guides for benevolent governance and proper living by the ancient sage kings. Asserting that perfect music existed in ancient times and was once heard by Confucius, Shen claimed that Wei Liangfu had revived ancient and perfect music in his *shuimodiao*. To sustain this idealized music, Shen offered his treatise to help fellow musicians perform kunqu correctly and efficaciously. What Shen theorized was linguistically and musically technical; what the technicalities underscored was, however, Confucian ideals and selves.

Shen's prescriptions are convincing because they are well formulated and comprehensively described. This intellectualize-tion and documentation of kunqu is one of the reasons why the genre is considered more *ya*, or bookish? than other genres of Chinese performing arts; the only exception is *qin* music, which Chinese consider *ya* too. One substantive evidence for scholarly features *ya* kunqu and its tradition is Ye Tang's anthology of notated kunqu music and lyrics, namely his *Nashuying qupu* 纳书楹曲谱, which is now canonized as an authoritative musical

source of the genre (Ye Tang: 151-52). In his "preface 自序" to the anthology,Ye presented himself as a natural musician, a diligent student, and explained why his music scores were authoritiative. He argued that the way of music was natural but illusive; this is why some people could simply open their mouths and sing harmoniously, while some would grow old without grasping the basics of the art. While nature was dynamic and thus followed no fixed patterns, Ye claimed, music always had patterns, which could be represented in music notation. In his time, patterns of *ya* kunqu were established by and recorded in the *Jiugong dacheng nanbeici gongpu* of 1745 that the Qing court compiled and published under the directorship of Prince Yun Lu. Emulating that authoritative compendium, a profusion of scores followed, but the process generated mistakes that lowly and uniformed singer-actors perpetuated.

In his explanations ("*fanli"* 凡 例) for the anthology, Ye Tang specified how unique and exemplary his music and score was. Unlike other notated sources which showed only the literary structures of preexistent *qupai*, his score demonstrated kunqu composition and singing realistically. Ye declared that if melodic-literary structures of kunqu arias were fixed, their rhythmic arrangements should remain free (*siqiang huoban* 死腔活板). This was why he did not specify the secondary beats (*xiaoyan* 小板) in the music he notated. Kunqu masters should be able to devise those rhythmic details on their own, Ye claimed. Marking all those secondary beats in his score would only hinder their performance and expressions.

Emphasing the authenticity and accuracy of his music anthology, Ye pleaded its users to refrain from casually changing his notated music to fit their own and individualistic singing; they should investigate how they could realize the notated music. Ye warned: by making even a little mistake, a performer could miss his goal of excellence by a wide wide margin. However one understands Ye's arguments, they attested to his kunqu ideal: kunqu is imperially canonized music that naturally gifted singers,

such as he was, would diligently study and then accurately notated, and expressively performed.

Ye's ideal is lofty, and cannot be reached by just any musician or person—he had to be musically gifted and socially disciplined; and his performance cannot be excessive or indulgent. This underlying preamble poignantly appears in Gong Zizhen's 龚自珍(1792-1841) report on a kunqu actor's failed attempt to own *ya* kunqu (Gong Zhizhen,1975: 180-82). Gong reported that by Ye Tang's kunqu had become prestigious in the 1780, so much so that even Ye's disciple Niu Shuyu (钮树玉 1760-1827) was admired as a music master. Learning about Niu's fame, Jin Dehui (金 德 辉 fl. 1780-1800), an actor-singer of a minor theatrical troupe, wrote to Niu, asking questions about kunqu singing. Then, they met and Jin sang for Niu who found the latter's performance deficient. To demonstrate what superb kunqu was, Niu sang what he had learned from Ye Tang, showing the actor-singer how each tone sung would coordinate with the singer's specific bodily move-ments, and how each of his bodily movements, regardless whether it was a moving of the person's torso or positioning of his feet, should clarify what the sung words meant. Dazzled by Niu's explanation and demonstration, Jin wanted to learn from Niu. He accepted the actor-singer as a disciple on the condition that the latter would study for three full years. Jin agreed, and then learned diligently. Before three years had passed, however, Jin was almost as good as Niu, and Jin's performance made him quite famous. Jin became even more famous when he performed for Emperor Qianlong during his 1784 tour to the south.

Being proud of his artistic prowness and imperial perfor-mance, Jin began to act as an important figure in Jiangnan; arrogantly, he presented himself not as an actor but an artist music master. Witnessing Jin's transformation, Niu informed him that his learning of Ye's kunqu was not yet complete. To help Jin further his kunqu artistry, Niu offered to teach actor the singing of the secret and expressive kunqu (*aimi zhi sheng* 哀密之声). As a result, Jin once again took lessons from Niu, and

every song and tone he learned he found transcendental (*shen* 神). Jin's learning lessons with Niu was intense and long: by the time a session had finished, all the woods burnt to warm up their music room had turned into ashes. After a while, Jin felt he had grasped the art of secret and expressive kunqu, and thus he tried to compose some himself.

One autumn after those learning sessions,[1] a rich merchant wanted to hear the best kunqu muic available, and thus he arranged Jin to perform at a party at his mansion. Then and there, Niu presented himself as an honorable guest, transgressing social boundaries among scholar-officials, merchants, and entertainers. Prompted by the host's request, Jin began to sing. At some point in his performance, he decided to show off the music he newly acquired/created. Thus, unique melodies came out of Jin's mouth. Guests who were no music connoisseurs could not comprehend what music Jin was singing. Connoisseurs, however, realized what it was, and they were delighted. Neverthless, after a while of listening to such exotic music, they began to leave quietly.

At that point, Jin was performing as if he was drunk (*zui* 醉), fell into a trace (*yi* 呓), became tired (*quan* 惓), losing his balance and having to lean on something (*yi* 倚), and hallucinating (*xuanmao* 眩瞀). Jin's voice had become hardly audible (*xi* 细) and strange (*jue* 谲), but it flowed like streaks of clouds flying in a clear sky, generating webs of spun emotions and expression（*chanmian can'an* 缠绵惨案）. For every one word in the lyrics that he sang, Jin made several tens of melodic turns. As Jin sang on, he seemed to have lost control (*bu ziji* 不自己), and finally, he made a sound like that of an old partridge bird descending from above the clouds, and suddenly ended his performance. By that time, all guests in the party had departed.

The next morning, Niu visited Jin and found him taken ill. With regret, Niu told Jin that supreme kunqu and performance skills could not be learned, owned by undeserving people, and

[1] The year of the party is not clear in Gong's text, but it cannot occur before Jin's second round of learning from Niu. Since Gong was too young to have directly witnessed the events that he described, his chronology of the singing lessons and the disasterous party is ambiguous. He only framed the events as having taken place during the years between 1784 and 1793.

flaunted inappropriately. Jin's musiking of Ye's ultimate kunqu music at the merchant's party was artistically licentious and socially inappropriate. Jin was regretful. Then Niu helped Jin to get up from his sick bed, and together they burnt the score of Jin's secret and expressive music. Eventually, Jin recovered, and continued to perform as a famous actor; he sang no more secret and expressive kunqu.

Gong's amazing story about Jin's learning and creating exclusive music demonstrates how *ya* kunqu was not merely an object, but also a performance by legitimate artists that unfolded in appropriate venues and for deserving audiences. Poignantly, Gong's story referenced the social divide between elite/ avocational and commoner/vocational performers, a critical boundary between what was *ya* and *su* in kunqu.

Another boundary stretched along musiking contexts, namely when, where, and who is performing what kunqu and for whom. Witness Yu Hai's poetic report on the kunqu performance held at A Humble Administrator's Garden (Zhuozheng yuan 拙政园), the celebrated Suzhou garden, which still stands in the city as an UNESCO designated World Heritage Site. Describing the event and his reaction to it, Yu wrote two *ci* songs, specifying that two celebrated *zhezixi*, namely "Youyuan jingmeng" and the "Lantern Dance" ("Dengwu"灯舞) from the *The story from Handan* (*Handanji* 邯郸记) were performed.

Set to the tune of "Patridges flying in the sky" ("Zhegutian" 鹧鸪天) (Yu Huai, 2011: 298), the two poems read:

Autumn waters and hibiscus flowers surrounded painted corridors of the mansion;

Red walls of its buildings were half covered by the setting sun.

Old and tall trees stood by the terraces on which cranes dance,

Winding bridges reached to the bamboo trees planted outside the dividing walls.

Wearing green capes,

And red make-up,

The willow-like actresses leaned on drunken flowers, teasing King Xiang.

As the music of songs and mouth-organ playing faded away from the musical hall,

The angels took their way home riding white chariots pulled by phenoix.

秋水芙蓉绕画廊，朱楼缥缈半斜陽，参羌鹤舞阶前树，宛转桥通竹外墙。披翠被,拥红妆。柳歌花醉恼襄王。笙歌院落人归去，归路犹骑白凤凰 。

The actresses were more charming than all women in their generation,

Their clients had their mind-hearts captivated.

Handsome and romantic were the lords,

Who gathered in this garden in Suzhou.

There, the rouged performers sang pure songs and told smart stories,

Their small bodies with delicate frames were light like swallows.

Dream-like performance vanished without a trace,

Dance lanters still shone,

Like the crescent and mid-night moon hang high above the lonely *wutong* trees.

Angels had descended into this land of pleasures,

Spilling multiple bins of pearls on the ground.

娇艳绝代，观者消魂。戚里风流假晋卿，西团重集阖阅城。清歌妙语红红丽，细骨微躯燕燕轻。

惊梦杳，舞灯明，疏桐缺月挂三更，温柔乡里神仙降，十斛真珠满地倾。

Picturesquely, Yu's report projected a kunqu event as *ya* as any kunqu connoisseur could imagine. In addition to an expressive performance of sophisticated kunqu *zhezixi* by virtuoso and charming actors, the *ya* of the event was also defined by physical charm of the venue and the social interaction

between host and guests. Strategically, they interacted on different but interrelated levels, be they artistic, intellectual, musical, social, and perhaps even erotic. Several non-sonic agendas and musiking strategies are clear. Yu's *ci* flattered the host, Wang Changan 王长安, the son-in-law of Wu Sangui 吴三桂, while asserting the poet's own identity as a famed literati and a honored guest of the party. Wang, the host, must have been pleased by the poetic report, which spotlighted his palatial home, immense wealth, social prestige, aesthetic sophistication, and charming household entertainers. Above all, Wang knew how Yu's *ci* and its subsequent circulation would monumentalize his *ya* kunqu party at Zhuozhengyuan. Critical readers would realize that the party was an exclusive event that commoners could dream but hardly participate. The event was not only a spectacular show of social privileges and rights, but also an ostentatiou consumption of human and material resources. Who else but handsome and romantic lords could afford it—judging from Yu's poetic words, the event was extravagant, even though the poems mentioned no financial transactions among the host, the guests, and the entertainers.

That *ya* kunqu unfolded around towering figures with no concern for financial gains is apparent, a fact that Zhang Dao's personal experiences attest. In an essay entitled Passing Sword Doors ("Guo jianmen" 过剑门), (Zhang Dai, 214-216), Zhang showed how *ya* kunqu was performed to negotiate personal and communal prestige, which may or may not bring financial profits. Nanjing courtesans, Zhang wrote, liked to perform kunqu to show off their artistic talents, acts that would enhance their stardom, and promote their entertainment service. Towards that artistic and practical goal, they invited celebrated masters to their shows, and took singing and performing lessons from the masters. Such lessons and social relations would not only help the courtesans develop their performing skills but also legitimize their artistic selves.

Zhang Dai once attended such a courtesans' show, but his presence almost ruined it. Once the show was well underway,

Yang Yuan, one of the lead courtesan performers of the evening, noticed something different in a fellow courtesan's performance. Thus, she went to the green room to find the performer and inquired what happened and why. The performer confessed that she was nervous because her former master, namely Zhang Dai, was in the audience, and that Zhang's high standards for performance were like doors made razor-sharp swords—only the best could go through it without getting hurt. Having learned Zhang's standards, Yang became nervous herself. Thus, when she entered the stage and began to perform, she could hardly project her singing voice, as much as she tried. Promptly, Zhang Dai realized Yang's predicament, and then chivalrously applauded her. Only with Zhang's approval, Yang felt at ease and then performed as she usually did. After this incident, Nanjing courtesans would frequently invite Zhang Dai to their shows, seeking his advice, and flaunting their interactions with Zhang to establish artistic legitimacy and geneaology. In return, Zhang Dai became more and more celebrated as an elite master of kunqu.

Zhang Dai's report about Nanjing courtesans musiking kunqu is not an isolated case. A famous dramatization of such activities is the music learning scene in Kong Shangren's *Taohuashan*.[1] An insightful description is Yu Huai's report that courtesans' kunqu musiking was not merely a commercial transaction.[2] Yu noted that courtesans ranked themselves socially and artistically higher than theatre actors who had to sing to entertain guests on demand. Musically talented courtesans would only sing after repeated and prolonged pleas from their clients—precious objects were not to be given easily!

When the courtesans sang in their studios and for targeted audience, they expected their clients to listen attentively, and even to musically interact by marking rhythmic beats with their

[1] Kong Shangren 孔尚仁, "Chuange 传歌," in *Taohuashan*, edited by Wang Jisi 王季思 et.al, Reprint Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2011, 18; the kunqu aria, Li Xiangjun sang was none other than "Zaoluopao."

[2] For descriptions of late Ming courtesan's musiking and other negotiations with clients, see Yu Huai 余怀, *Banqiao zaji* 板桥杂记 Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing, 2000.

fans. Such interactions between performers and listeners connect them musically and socially, and perhaps even intellectually and romantically. When the connections became known publicly, they made celebrated affairs in late Ming and early Qing China. Needless to say, gentlemen would like to showcase their masculine appeal (*fengliu* 风流) with the companionship of celebrated courtesans (*mingji* 名姬); this is particularly the case when their romance was pleasurable but not licentious.

Romance and gender performance is perhaps one of the reasons why so many *ya* kunqu, such as "Zither Seduction" ("Qintiao 琴挑) of *Story of The Jade Hairpin* (*Yuzanji* 玉簪记) and "Happy time" ("Jiaqi 佳期") of *Story of the Western Wing* (*Xixiangji* 西廂记) are so cherished. *Ya* kunqu provides a means and a stage for Ming and Qing gentlemen and ladies to musik their personal emotions, a fact that Li Yu pinpointed (Li Yu, 1998: 183). When people musik together, Li noted, they could charm one another: for instance, when a husband and wife musiked together, one singing, and the other accompanying, or both singing, they engaged with one another harmoniously; and when a couple musiked in a moonlit garden and by the flowers, enjoying the beautiful view, feeling the cool mist of the ponds by the pavilion, and celebrating their happy and leisurely times together, they would feel like they were in paradise.

The same gentlemen and ladies could, however, also perform *ya* kunqu to negotiate their intellectual and/or patriotic selves. In such performances, they could recall historical memories, live in the present, and/or make social-political warnings for the future. An example is what Zhang Dai did and reported in his essay entitled "Performing Opera at Night and at Jinshan" ("Jinshan yexi" 金山夜戏).[1] One mid-autumn nite in 1629, he traveled by boat from Hangzhou to Yanzhou. When he reached the river mouth by Beigu 北 固 mountain in Zhenjiang 镇江 County in Jiangsu Province, he found the moonlit and

[1] Zhang Dai, "Jinshang yexi 金山夜戏", in *Taoan mengyi*, 16-17. For an English translation of the description, see Yang Ye, *Vignettes from the Late Ming*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999, 87-88. For an analysis of Zhang's reminiscing and writing, see Philip Kafalas, *In Limpid Dream*. Norwalk, CT: EastBridge, 2006.

misty scene there and then intoxicating. To savor the moment, he suspended his trip and rested at a local vista, namely the Jinshansi (金山寺 Golden Mountain Temple). Getting there by the second watch of the night, he found temple halls standing tall and quietly at the site, where and when moonlight peeked through the trees, creating a snowy and shimmering scene. To monumentalize it and what he felt, he audaciously ordered his servants to light up the place and performed kunqu opera.

Deliberately, he ordered them to perform noisy and festive *zhezixi* that enacted Han Shizhong's (韩世忠 1089-1151) military maneuvures; Han was the great Southern Song admiral; in 1130, he successfully stopped Jurchens from crossing the Yangzi River with a 40-days long land and sea battles at the Huang Tiandang 黄天荡 area, where the Jinshansi stood.[1] Zhang's command performance awoke all the monks of the temple. Rubbing their eyes, some tried hard to see what was happening; some opened their mouth wide in awe, while some laughed. None dared to ask if the performers were human or ghosts.

Zhang thoroughly enjoyed himself. He probably smiled when he wrote down his memories of the event years later. He had a multi-year and multi-media *ya* kunqu experience. Complexly and substantively, it indexed a number of sharp contrasts which defined his live and the Ming-Qing transition. These included: the pleasure/shock of a serene evening abruptly terminated and then monumentalized by loud and military music deliberately chosen and performed; the authoritative, informed, and privileged kunqu patron who lorded over his obedient musical servants, and who dazzled monks detached from earthly living; the natural and sacred site that was momentarily turned into a secular and military soundscape; the present and physical edifice of the Jinshansi that witnessed Song dynasty military-naval battles and ethnic conflicts between Han and Jurchen peoples. When Zhang musiked at Jinshansi Temple in 1629,

[1] Han's military stories are dramatized in the Ming *chuanqi* entitled *Shuanglieji* 双烈记.

China was still ruled by a Ming and Han son of heaven; when Zhang reminiscended the event and described it with words, China had become a land ruled by the non-Han Manchurians. Was Zhang's nightly show at Jinshansi a warning for himself and his compatriots?

YA KUNQU, FROM LATE MING TO NOW As discussed above, *ya* kunqu in late Ming and early Qing China was a fluid and multi-valent phenomenon. It has continued to the present day; and perhaps it has become more complex and more diversely theorized and practiced. Kunqu is now being performed and negotiated inside and outside China as both an intangible cultural heritage and a marketable arts commodity. In their national and international efforts of musiking kunqu as art, gift and soft power, practitioners of the genre have to wrestle with the questions of what *ya* kunqu was, is and can be, and why it is significant in 21st century and globalized living. How they answer will justify and sustain the genre's current revival and future developments.

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