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A mission to rejuvenate the oldest form of Chinese opera is gathering pace, writes **Kevin Kwong**

Kunqu fighting



It was the end of 1945 and renowned Chinese opera star Mei Lanfang had returned to Shanghai after an eight-year self-imposed wartime exile from the stage to perform not a Peking opera but kunqu classic *Mu Dan Ting* or *The Peony Pavilion*. Sitting in the audience was a nine-year-old who was completely mesmerised by the music, dance, costume and, of course, Mei.

"It was a big sensation," says writer Pai Hsien-yung, who still remembers his awe of the aesthetics and power of the play written by Tang Xianzu in the Ming dynasty (1368 to 1644).

"[Mei] gave four performances of kunqu, and the work happened to be an act from *Mu Dan Ting*. That was my first contact with kunqu and *Mu Dan Ting*."

It was love at first sight. Today, more than six decades later, Pai's passion for this ancient Chinese art form has not faded. Quite the contrary: the 71-year-old Chinese literature professor has, in the past four years, been actively promoting it on the mainland and in Hong Kong. He is now in town as part of an extensive lecture and

performance series on kunqu, the oldest form of Chinese opera, organised by the University of Hong Kong and supported by the Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation.

For six evenings starting on November 18, *Exquisite Beauty: The World of Kunqu* will feature full-length works as well as extracts including classics such as *The Western Chamber*, *The Palace of Eternal Life* and *The Ghost King Marries Off His Sister*.



All have been reworked and updated by Pai and will be performed by either the Suzhou Kunqu Opera Theatre of Jiangsu or the Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe.

The programme, which has taken more than a year to organise, is part of Pai's ongoing effort to "revitalise and rejuvenate" kunqu, especially among young people. His version of *The Peony Pavilion*, which premiered in 2004, has toured the mainland as well as North America and Europe for 160 performances.

This masterpiece, however, is not included in the upcoming programme because it has already been staged here twice. "So this time we'll have something different and there is more variety," he says.

Pai - who went to the US in 1963 to study creative writing and who is best known for his sophisticated writing and contribution to modern Chinese literature - says one of the biggest challenges in his mission is how to remain faithful to the original opera and still make it relevant to audiences in the 21st century.

He explains kunqu

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Pai Hsien-yung, writer

stems from a literary form known as *chuanqi*, or romance, written during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Operatic dramas based on these writings are made up of 40 to 50 acts and it can take up to a month to perform the entire work.

"In the old days, the well-to-do had lots of time on their hands and would throw a 'party' that would last for weeks," Pai says.

"They would each day have one or two acts staged, very much like how we watch television soap operas these days.

"Sometimes the 40 or 50 acts would last a whole month. But that is impossible nowadays. The modern versions are all edited to make them playable on stage."

He says the editing and re-editing takes a lot of time and work, and the selection of what to keep is very difficult. This task falls on a small team made up of four to five

specialists on *chuanqi* who will ensure the dramatic effects and literary value are not lost in the edited version.

"Then we'll pass on [the new] version to the kunqu masters to test if they're playable. Sometimes while it reads well, it doesn't necessarily work on stage. So all the works presented in *Exquisite Beauty: The World of Kunqu* is a combination of the old and new," Pai says.

Other than the aesthetics of the art form, what fascinates the professor about kunqu is the actual writings on which these operas are based. He says more than a 1,000 *chuanqi* titles were produced during the Ming and Qing dynasties but only a couple of hundred have survived to the present day. Some of them have become literary classics such as *The Peony Pavilion*, *The Peach Blossom Fan* and *The Palace of Eternal Life*.

There are two parts to kunqu: the singing and the dialogue. "The singing is all in verse and this is beautiful poetry, especially *Mu Dan Ting* and the *Jade Hairpin*," says Pai.

"Unlike the other Chinese operatic forms - Peking or Cantonese operas - they're not based on great literary classics. But in kunqu, some of the *chuanqi* works stand alone as literary canons.

They are great literature." Some have historical significance too, the writer adds. *The Palace of Eternal Life*, for instance, tells of the tragic love between Tang dynasty emperor Xuanzong and his imperial concubine Yang Yuhuan, also known as Yang Guifei. These are works of a political and satirical nature.

"During the late Ming dynasty, there was a period of liberation of Chinese intellectual thought," says Pai. "So, at that time, many very bold and daring literary works appeared, such as *Mu Dan Ting*."

"Here we have a 16-year-old maiden born to a wealthy family having forbidden dreams and a very romantic and sexual relationship with a scholar. The *Jade Hairpin* is about a passionate affair between a Taoist nun and a scholar inside a temple. It breaks all kinds of social taboos," he says. "There is this misconception that the Chinese are very conservative... not so, Chinese can be very daring too."

Other than introducing kunqu to the younger generation, Pai says his mission is to prevent the art form from disappearing.

He says the kunqu masters on the mainland are all in their 60s and he believes it is "urgent" they be given the chance to pass on their skills to the younger generation. Hence his version of *The Peony*



Pavilion and latest collaboration with the Ho family foundation. It's founder, Robert Ho Hung-ngai, says he wants to promote kunqu in China because he feels mainlanders, especially the young ones, don't have any idea what this ancient art form is about.

Pai says to rejuvenate the ancient art is now an important mission for him: "After all, kunqu is a national treasure of the Chinese people."

Exquisite Beauty: The World of Kunqu, Nov 18-22, 7.30pm, Nov 23, 2.30pm, Jockey Club Auditorium, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hung Hom, Kowloon. Public talk on The Beauty of Kunqu, Sat, 1pm-2.30pm, Room LT401, City University, all free. For details, go to www.hku.hk/kunqu

