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Citation for final published version:

Ma, Haili 2019. Traditional opera consumption as the new game of distinction for the Chinese middle class. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 22 (3) , pp. 400-416. 10.1177/1367877918759711

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877918759711>

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Traditional Opera Consumption as the New Game of Distinction for the Chinese Middle Class

Abstract: Utilizing theories of Becker's art worlds, Veblen's conspicuous consumption and Bourdieu's capital forms, this article critically examines the formation of a new art world of the traditional Chinese opera *Kunqu*, with university students turned middle class as identified consumers. It argues that the art world has been developed through the innovation of artists working within the tight ideological control of the market. Only artists who support party-state ideological evolution, allowing access to 'central bank' capital in the forms of university curriculum, opera house and land use, may continue to experiment and innovate before a new audience taste is nurtured and a new art world is developed. This paper suggests that the rise of *Kunqu* reflects the political castration of the new millennium Chinese middle class, with their value and identity resting on a fantasized historical leisure class distinction and associated conspicuous consumption. The establishment of a new *Kunqu* art world exemplifies the characteristics of the Chinese art market, which is developed under party-state 'central bank' monopoly, for continued Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ideological evolution and legitimacy.

Key words: Chinese Opera, Art Worlds, Conspicuous Consumption, Capital, Middle Class, CCP, Legitimacy

Part I: Theoretical Framework, key elements for the creation of an art world

In *Art Worlds*, Becker (1982) articulates the key elements for the creation of an art world as artists' collaboration, experimentation, and most importantly, long-term investment. He reminds us that 'we should not confuse innovation with the development of an art world'. This is because 'new art worlds develop around innovations, but most innovations do not produce new art worlds' (1982: 310-311). The birth of a new art world is a process of long-term

investment in which people are to join in a cooperative activity on a regular basis to nurture the new audiences the unfamiliar conventions before they become the key aspect of the art world - the loyal consumers (1982: 64).

In order to apply Becker's theory to this research, we need to understand the condition of Chinese middle class consumers and the unique role of the Chinese party-state as the 'central bank'. Two theories which are most suited to complement Becker for this research paper are Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital.

Faced with a newly rising middle class in 19th century America, economist and social critic Thorstein Veblen (1899/1994) developed the concept of conspicuous consumption. Veblen articulated how the lower social class obtains equal ground distinction by imitating the upper 'leisure class', which 'traditionally consists of the noble and the priestly classes, together with much of their retinue' and 'the emergence of a leisure class coincides with the beginning of ownership', in particular the ownership of women and property (1899/1994: 1). Veblen insists that to be accepted as the leisure class, conspicuous consumption of luxury goods is not enough. Rather, one must also cultivate his tastes, must demonstrate the standard of the gentleman way of life, with refined manners and habits of life that are a useful evidence of gentility. This is because good breeding requires time, application and expense, and can therefore not be compassed by those whose time and energy are taken up with work. Veblen therefore describes the game of distinction as a development, from a predatory period of more brutal violent struggle into a quasi-peaceful period of social struggle, in which societies are stratified by their differential capacity and taste (1899/1994: 30, 31, 47).

As will be discussed in the following section, at the turn of the 21st century, China saw the emergence of a new middle class, who were keen 'to obtain equal ground distinction by imitating the upper leisure class'. Such conspicuous consumption behavior ranged from material goods, but increasingly so to cultural products, with the new middle class seeking a distinctive elite identity. In the process of cultural production and nurturing consumer taste, the role of Chinese government as 'central bank' has been crucial.

In *Practical Reason* (1998), Bourdieu proposed the concept of ‘central bank’. Bourdieu’s early years of military service in socialist Algeria contributed to his understanding of the different capital forms and powers constructed in a socialist regime. He argues that whilst in Western countries economic and cultural capitals may be obtained through market competition, in socialist regimes such as East Germany and the Soviet Union, all capital forms are tightly controlled by the party-state and distinction can only be made through re-distribution of capital forms by the ‘central bank’. Bourdieu’s concept of capital forms is not limited to the monetary sense, but expands to a wide range of exchange forms, such as education, cultural production and taste, which influence the construction of social hierarchical power. The unequal distribution of the source result in observable differentness in patterns of consumption and lifestyles (1998: 6, 16, 42).

China is a regime built on the model of the Soviet Union and the party-state monopolizes the market and acts as a ‘central bank’. Initial CCP values and beliefs were implemented and legitimacy gained through arts and educational programmes. In the post-Mao era, despite marketization and commercialization, cultural and educational institutions such as opera houses, TV, newspapers, museums, universities, and others, continue to be monopolized by the CCP to ensure its ideological evolution and legitimacy (Ma 2015: 2-10). When the middle class emerged at the turn of the 21st century, the party-state played a key role in releasing or withholding resources to the artists. Only artists who support party-state ideological evolution, allowing access to ‘central bank’ capital in the forms of university curriculum, opera house and land use, may continue to experiment and innovate before a new audience taste is nurtured and a new art world is developed. The process is exemplified in the creation of a new *Kunqu* art world at the turn of the twenty first century.

The following section provides a background to the historical Chinese scholar-official class and their associated cultural distinction, *Kunqu*, and the contemporary university students turned middle class searching for cultural distinction at the turn of the 21st century. The emphasis is placed on how traditional elite culture was identified as ‘soft power’ for CCP

insertion of legitimacy, both internally and internationally, and the implementation of such new discourse through ‘central bank’ resources, in the forms of university curriculum, opera institutions and other government incentives, which lays the foundation for artists innovation and experimentation, nurturing a new audience and creating a new art world.

Part 2: Kunqu, from Historical Scholar-Official to New Millennium Middle Class

1. Scholar-official distinction

In traditional China, the scholar-official (*shidaifu*) stood at the pinnacle of society; second only to members of the Imperial family. It was the Confucius examination, as the way of selecting political and social bureaucrats from around 200AD, that allowed Chinese scholars to obtain cultural, social and political prestige and privilege (Yen 2005, Yao 2000, Murck and Fong 1980: 1). The Chinese scholar-official elite class have historically distinguished themselves through their aesthetic taste and cultural consumption of classic poetry, calligraphy and painting. From the Ming dynasty (1366-1644), they pursued a new form of cultural distinction: the garden and *Kunqu*.

The rise of this scholar-official new taste corresponded with two political and social changes. Firstly, it was an act of artistic rebellion against the Song era’s (960-1279) neo-Confucian doctrine on natural repression, such as the infamous restrictions on women, which included widow worshipping and feet binding. Secondly, the Ming dynasty experienced the rise of eunuch political power and the persecution of scholar-officials. To have a piece of land and to build a garden where the scholar could retreat from the society they served, to escape from the political power struggle, became a popular desire (Zhu 2012, Dong 2011: 235, Du 2010: 128). A garden may have been the desire of all official-scholars but only a handful of property owning landlord scholar-officials could demonstrate such economic power (Clunas 2013, Cao 2005). More importantly, only a garden with *Kunqu* truly accomplished such elite class cultural distinction.

Kunqu derived from Suzhou, China's eastern coastal region and had been a popular music form across China (Xie and Wang 2005: 65, Ye 2013). Despite *Kunqu*'s wide popularity, it was the private *Kunqu* theatre that held the most distinction. By and large, the private *Kunqu* theatre belonged to the scholar-official elite class. The troupe of a private theatre was inclusively made of female performers, usually purchased from the ages of 6-7 into the family as semi-servants, who held an ambiguous status between performers and family concubines (Shen 2005). The private performance was held in a pavilion which was erected above the water in the garden. Scholars would sit across the water, the rocks and water serving as natural amplifying systems. Here they would be sipping fresh tea and discussing with peer scholars their newly composed classic lyrics, sung by their favorite young female singer (Ye 2013, Liu 2005).

As private *Kunqu* theatre disapproved of any financial compensation, only a select few of the landowner scholar-official class could sustain such a millionaire hobby for long. The private *Kunqu* troupe owners, with few exceptions, were landed official-scholars with exceptional literary skills and substantial financial power (Shen 2005: 22). *Kunqu*, as a leisure class way of life, together with the ownership, in particular the ownership of women and property, acted as evidence of gentility, marking the distinction of the historically elite Chinese scholar class.

Having dominated both private and popular markets for nearly 400 years, from the 1780s, *Kunqu* began to see rising competition from diverse regional popular opera forms, represented by *Jingju* or Beijing opera, appealing to mass consumers with vernacular speech, and adaptations with a focus on market entertainment (Li 2010, Goldstein 2007, Mackerras 1988). When challenged by newborn genres, *Kunqu* resisted popularization and continued to polish itself in classical lyrics and rhythmic music for the sophisticated taste of the literati. According to the early 19th century commentator, Li Guangting, '*Kunqu* was too refined to find listeners. Over the past sixty years, it gradually lost its soul mates (from the market)' (Cited in Li 2010: 15). Furthermore, following the loss of the UK-Sino opium wars in the 1840s and 1860s, and

a series of international invasions, China's long-established superiority was shaken to the core. Confucian doctrine and traditional cultural forms were viewed as the millstones around the neck of China's modernization. The abolition of the Confucius examination in 1905 formally ended centuries-long scholar class political prestige and social privilege (Wang 2014, McDermott 2006) along with their associated cultural distinction, *Kunqu*.

Meanwhile, new modern university institutions were established anchoring on the pursuit of 'science' and 'democracy'; modern scholar identity was underpinned by critical thinking and to lead the formation of a new China (Weston 2004: 6). Such ambition was interrupted by both the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and the Civil War (1928-1949). In 1952, shortly after the formation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the National Higher Education Entrance Examination or *gaokao*, which was the prerequisite test for entrance into all higher education institutions, was established. Although abandoned between 1966 and 1976, during ten years of Cultural Revolution, the university entrance examination, as the national scholar selection system, was reinstated in 1977 at the dawn of the post-Mao era.

2. New scholar middle class searching for cultural distinction

The concept of 'middle class' is very much a Western discourse and scholars are still debating how to quantify Chinese middle class, as there has been an uneven formation of economic, social, cultural as well as political capital accounts. What scholars do agree on is that Chinese university graduates, with their high educational capital and potentially high economic earning power, are generally regarded as the backbone of the Chinese middle class (Hulme 2014, Li 2010, Goodman 1998).

From 1978 to 2004, enrollment numbers in colleges and universities grew sharply, and the total nearly tripled from 1999 to 2003 (Yusuf and Kaoru 2006). Regional governments designed competitive policies to attract new university graduates to settle in their respective regions, such as registration identity, house purchasing and welfare access, and groom them to

be the pillar of regional social and economic growth (Chen 2013: 60-61, Crabb 2010, Liu 2008). According to surveys conducted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the first generation of the middle class emerged in 2000 and accounted for 15% of the total population of China. The figure had risen to 23% by 2006 and 30% by 2010 (Chen 2013, Chen and Lu 2011, Kharas and Gertz 2010, Tomba 2009). Economists forecast that the size of the middle class is to reach 74% by 2030 (Kharas and Gertz 2010: 43).

Despite high education and potential economic capitals, this new middle class displayed a general lack of cultural capital and associated cultural distinction (Andreas 2009, Kraus 1989). Researchers have highlighted the emerging middle class conspicuous consumption behavior, focusing mainly on Western products and cultural goods, ranging from luxury international brands to Hollywood films (Tsai et al. 2013, Henningsen 2012, Zhu and Berry 2009: 12). Since the abolition of the Confucius examination in the early 20th century, *Kunqu* faded to obscurity and diverse regional popular opera forms were criticized by modern scholars as a burden to Chinese modernization and they have purposely distanced themselves from the art forms (Wang 2014, McDermott 2006, Weston 2004). In Mao's era, state centralized production and consumption did try to revive *Kunqu*, with state *Kunqu* Opera Houses established as well as the elevation of regional popular opera forms to the highest artistic standards. At the same time, the system broke the once intimate audience-actor relationship and alienated opera from the population. Throughout the 1990s, China's unprecedented marketization and commercialization saw Western cultural products flourish in the Chinese market, competing with the traditional opera market. By the turn of the 21st century, few university students had heard or watched a traditional opera and there was a genuine lack of enthusiasm in traditional Chinese opera consumption (Ma 2015).

With China's growing economic power, and faced with globalization and Westernization, the party-state is increasingly aware of the importance of culture as 'soft power' in gaining a new global position, as well as articulating CCP evolution and legitimacy (Tsai et al. 2013, Henningsen 2012, Zhu and Berry 2009, Hu 2000). In 1994, the Chinese government

endorsed the first international conference on Confucianism in Beijing, with attempts to justify its revolutionary legacy through neo-Confucianism as a new discourse of nationalism (Liu 2004, Dai 2001, Goodman 1998). Scholars, however, remained distant from this official proposal. Still entrenched deeply in post-Tiananmen political apathy, with their self-conscious positioning as guardians of national cultural essence and values, scholars were equally overwhelmed and alarmed by waves of commercialism in cultural domains that rapidly relegated them to the social periphery and irrelevance. However, the scholars argued that Confucius could not serve as an indigenous ideology as CCP legitimacy, as the CCP as well as the modern scholar identity rested precisely on the overthrowing of the Confucius class. Instead, the scholars proposed the learning of 'elite culture' (*gaoya wenhua*) by invoking the names and reputations of the older scholars and art forms. Such a new proposition consecrated pure and autonomous scholarship, granted the intellectuals new cultural distinction, as well as permitted the CCP's renewed ideological evolution and legitimacy, both nationally and internationally, which became the foundation of China's latest national strategy of soft power (Su 2011, Liu 2008, Joy and Sherry 2004, Liu 2004: 33-35, Jiang 2002). It is this ideological direction that was implemented across the party-state 'central bank', in the forms of university and opera house funding.

Shortly after the crackdown of the 1989 Tiananmen Square student event, universities received party-state funding to impose compulsory 'patriotic education' programmes, to ensure student support of CCP ideological legitimacy (Dello-Iacovo 2009, Zhao 1998). From the late 1990s, such programmes began to swing emphasis towards 'elite culture' (*gaoya wenhua*). It became increasingly popular for universities to use the education programme funding to invite regional diverse opera companies to perform in campus (Ma 2015, Crabb 2010, Joy and Sherry 2004). From 2004, central policies were put in place that required all state traditional opera houses to stage 20% of their annual performances at universities, if full state funding was to be received; watching traditional opera performance became a compulsory credit bearing programme of 'elite culture' (*gaoya wenhua*) education for all university students (Ma 2015).

It is with the party-state ‘central bank’ resource, long term funding and policy development as support, that we begin to see new production and consumption patterns that changed the Chinese cultural landscape in the new millennium.

Although under the latest policy that all opera forms are considered ‘elite culture’, only *Kunqu* is historically related to the scholar elite class; and it is *Kunqu* that has been identified by artists to experiment and to offer to the university students as the cultural identity that they were seeking. The following section examines the making of a new *Kunqu* art world through the case study of three *Kunqu* productions of *The Peony Pavilion*, produced consecutively between the late 1990s and mid-2010s. The reasons for selecting these three productions are not only because each production served as vital inspiration and reference point for the next artist’s continued creativity and experimentation, key to the development of a new art world, but also as they highlight artists’ different approach towards the CCP ideological direction, which resulted in different artistic outcomes. Only artists who support party-state ideological evolution, allowing access to ‘central bank’ capital in the forms of university curriculum, opera house and land use, may continue to experiment and innovate before a new audience taste is nurtured and turning the most obscure art form, *Kunqu*, to a new art world.

Part 3: The Formation of a new Kunqu Art World: experimentation, innovation and long-term investment

Kunqu The Peony Pavilion was written in 1598 by scriptwriter Tang Xianzu¹. The story depicts a young lady, Du Liniang, of the elite scholar-official class, who had a dream in which she met a young scholar called Liu Mengmei and fell in love with him. Unable to fulfill her dream in reality, Liniang died of love sickness. Touched by her recounted love story, her soul was released back to the human world by the Judge of the Underworld. Liniang managed to find her dreamed lover, Liu Mengmei, who exhumed her body and brought her back to life.

¹ Unless specified, all Chinese names will follow Chinese convention with surname appearing before first name.

Contemporary writer Bai Xianyong comments that ‘although it (*The Peony Pavilion*) may not have achieved the highest classical lyric standard, what it has achieved is to have inspired the entire world of Chinese literature and theatre to search deep for the meaning of humanity’ (Six Hundred Years of *Kunqu*). It is this production that was most popular amongst artists for experimentation and innovation at the turn of the new millennium.

1. *End of the 20th century, Kunqu Art for Art’s Sake*

In 1998 the New York Lincoln Centre was anticipating the arrival of Director Chen Shizheng’s 20hr long *Kunqu, The Peony Pavilion*, with a full cast from the Shanghai *Kunqu* Company. It would be the first time that *Kunqu* was to be performed outside of Mainland China (Melvin 1998: 20). However, the production team were stopped at the airport by the Shanghai Cultural Bureau and the contract was annulled. According to the Shanghai Cultural Bureau, there were ‘pornographic’, ‘superstitious’ and ‘feudalist’ acts and the production was not *Kunqu*. To this, Dir. Chen replied that ‘there should be more than one interpretation of *Kunqu*’. Chen reformed the cast in the USA, using mainly local performers, with lead actors invited independently from Mainland China. A year later *The Peony Pavilion* was staged at the New York Lincoln Centre (Swatek 2002, Faison 1998). The reviews of Chen’s production were highly controversial. Whilst most audiences commented on the lead roles’ excellent *Kunqu* singing and performing skills, many were critical of Chen’s directing style and even regarded the production as a cultural betrayal: ‘an invented traditional Eastern scene through the lens of Post-Colonialism’ (Guo 2010: 10).



(Figure 1: *The Peony Pavilion* by Dir. Chen Shizheng. Image from Ye 2001)

Born in 1963, Director Chen grew up in Mao's era, which held least memory and association with the elite official-scholar class. Furthermore, Chen was trained in Hunan Huaguxi, or Flower and Drum opera, a regional folk art form that derived from beggar's singing, which had artistic distinction resting on a carnival spirit of colour, noise, coarseness and interaction between performer and audience (Bahktin 1984: 7). In this production, Dir. Chen inserted the symbol of *Kunqu* scholar elite class distinction - a garden pavilion was erected on stage with water surrounding it - and yet had the entire performance fully based on the folk carnival Flower and Drum opera form: throughout the performance the audience was entertained by the visual extravagance of colourful costumes, acrobatics and stilt walking and the occasional search for missing characters amongst the audience (Xiang 2016: 12, Zeitlin 2002: 129, Ye 2001).

Such fusion of elite and folk-art forms, with mixed class value and identity representation is exciting. Chen's imaginative artistic creativity would not have provoked such a reaction from Shanghai Cultural Bureau if his production was to have been staged within Mainland China, for throughout the 1990s many highly controversial and creative operatic pieces were produced which stretched audience appetite (Joy and Sherry 2004: 320-324). However, with an attempt to access the party-state's 'central bank' capital, of the Shanghai *Kunqu* Company, performing such a fusion production for the first time on the international

stage, amidst China's intensified cultural elitism as a national strategy of soft power in the late 1990s, was a direct challenge to CCP ideological direction and legitimacy. Chen's response of 'there should be more than one interpretation' to the party-state criticism is indeed correct from an artistic perspective, his innovation and determination to bring the production alive deserves admiration. Yet, without CCP approval, Chen was prevented from access to the party-state 'central bank' for any long-term investment, with no audience nurtured and no *Kunqu* world emerging. In fact, the New York Lincoln Centre was the only occasion that Chen staged his production.

Despite the outcome, the significance of Chen's production is that it inspired others to join in collaboration and innovation for the continued nurturing of audience new taste (Becker 1982). What is interesting is that most of the Chinese audience that attended Chen's *Kunqu* at the Lincoln Centre were the descendants of the elite official-scholar class, who had left the mainland before the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Chen's controversial experimental *Kunqu* served as a painful reminder of the lost 'gentleman's way of life' and elite scholar class distinction. The person who was most inspired to continue the innovation of *Kunqu* was Bai Xianyong. This time, through full access to the Chinese party-state 'central bank' resources, in the form of art institution and university funding.

2. *Early 2000s University Students audience nurtured*

Born in 1938, Bai Xianyong grew up in the South Delta of Mainland China. He was the son of the famous scholar general Bai Congxi of the Nationalist Party. Many of Bai's family parties were arranged and attended by Madam Jiang Jieshi herself. Bai's very first viewing of traditional Chinese opera was *Kunqu, The Peony Pavilion*. After the CCP took control of Mainland China in 1949, Bai moved to Taiwan with his family and later obtained degrees in both Taiwan and America before developing a career as a university professor in Taiwan (Bai 2013). As an island of exiles, the nostalgic memory of mainland China and traditional values provides the Taiwanese with a vague and yet strong sense of identity (Lei 2011: 18). After

watching Chen's production in New York, Bai was determined to 'present the most beautiful classical *Kunqu* to the world audience ... to be associated with the historical scholar cultural distinction' (Six Hundred Years of *Kunqu*). Bai had in mind a particular audience to nurture: the university students. This personal ambition fitted very timely with the party-state ambition of soft power insertion through intellectual elite national learning implemented through university students 'elite culture' (*gaoya wenhua*) education. Bai was therefore able to gain full access to the party-state 'central bank' in the form of opera house and university funding to innovate and nurture the new audience.



(Figure 2: *Youth Version of The Peony Pavilion* by Dir. Bai Xianyong, courtesy of Suzhou *Kunqu* Company)

In 2002, in collaboration with the Suzhou *Kunqu* Company, Bai began to produce *Youth Version of The Peony Pavilion*, reducing Dir. Chen's 20hr performance to 9hrs with the stage set as an empty black box to maximize audience imagination. Femininity and youth were the distinctive features of his production. Bai selected two young performers, with little stage experience but the most idealized feminine physiques, and had them trained by two renowned *Kunqu* performers, Wang Shiyu and Zhang Jiqing, both in their late 60s. Bai insisted that the most important part of the production was the youth, as the 'performers can portray the roles better and the movements are extremely difficult to get to perfection and to become beautiful'

(Bai 2013). It is, of course, questionable to claim that performers *need* to be of similar age to the roles in order to perform them better. Perfection of idealized feminine beauty is *not* ‘extremely difficult’ but rather obtained through the process of preselection and thorough training (Ma 2012). However, what is crucial is that the comments reveal the reinforced connection between *Kunqu* and ‘the ownership of women’. To revive the representation of *Kunqu* through youth and femininity is therefore not only for the fantasized consumption of the male gaze but, as Veblen reminds us, represents the power of elite class domination and distinction.

In 2004, *Youth Version of The Peony Pavilion* was debuted at Shanghai Tongji University and over the next six years the production toured around universities, both in Mainland China and overseas, accompanied by lectures, workshops and group discussions. To deliver lectures complementing opera performances was not new. What was new was the content of the lectures. Instead of talking about *Kunqu* through literature and performing techniques, Bai’s narration focused on *Kunqu* consumption as the historical elite scholar-official way of life and as class distinction (Ge 2013, Li 2009, Zhang and Li 2005). Veblen reminds us that ‘in order to gain and to hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence’ (86). Bai in turn reminded the university students that to be a true elite scholar and to be able to move into the class of distinction it was not enough to have just a degree certificate and even potential material wealth. The knowledge and ability to imitate the historical scholar-official elite class way of life is the vital evidence required to qualify oneself within the class of distinction.

In a survey conducted in 2012 over one hundred thousand audience members had watched Bai’s production, 70% were young people with degree level education and above (Wang 2012: 30). By then, *Kunqu* had become a recognized class distinction associated with university students, with reference specifically related to historical scholar-official elite class once held cultural distinction.

It is important to emphasize here that Bai was only able to articulate such distinction through access to the party-state's 'central bank' as 'long-term investment' in the form of art institution and university funding. The collaboration with Suzhou *Kunqu* Opera House guaranteed that access to high caliber professional artists, costumes and other facilities, such as rehearsal space, were free of charge, whilst performing costs and theatre rental at universities were all covered by the state. As watching traditional opera had become credit bearing compulsory education across Chinese universities, the nurturing of new audience taste was guaranteed. The birth of a new *Kunqu* art world began to emerge when innovation was presented at a regular basis to nurture the new audiences in the unfamiliar conventions before they become the key aspect of the art world - the loyal consumers (Becker 1982: 64).

Neither Chen nor Bai were commercially minded. Not because they did not want to be so, but the *Kunqu* market was at its bleakest at the turn of the new millennium. However, by the early 2010s the first generation of the university students turned scholar middle class began to mature. They were eager and able to consume *Kunqu* as their newly gained cultural distinction, and the artist to lead the establishment of a commercial world of *Kunqu* was Zhang Jun.

3. *Mid-2010s, Kunqu Conspicuous Consumption as Middle Class Cultural Distinction*

Back in 1996 Zhang Jun was selected as the lead role of Liu Mengmei in Dir. Chen Shizheng's *The Peony Pavilion*. After over a year of rehearsals, just before setting off to New York, Zhang was told, by his home institution Shanghai *Kunqu* Company, that the performance was cancelled, with no explanation given. Zhang felt a strong sense of frustration and became eager to take his art life into his own hands and control his own destiny (private communication 27th June 2015). Historically, Chinese opera was mostly produced and directed by the lead actor, although such practice ceased under Mao with the establishment of state opera institutionalization and centralization. In the post-Mao market reform era, many artists of regional opera forms set up personal studios but almost none survived (Ma 2015) and there

was certainly no independent *Kunqu* studio in the 1990s. Zhang described the disastrous and humiliating experience when he performed the famous *Kunqu The Peony Pavilion* at Tongji University in the late 1990s, the very university that Bai debuted his production half a decade later:

‘I remember that day very vividly. The night happened to be before the students’ final examination. No one was in the mood for watching *Kunqu* – something most students had never heard of and had no interest in anyway. The students were all anxious to leave and return to their revision. To prevent them from leaving the theatre, the university security locked all of the exit doors. Halfway through the performance, a student found a small hole on top of the theatre wall, one by one students climbed over the wall and left. Our performance *The Peony Pavilion* was later referred to as *The Story of Wall Climbing* (tiaoqiangji) (laughter)’ (private communication, 27th June 2015).

This experience summarizes the alienation of *Kunqu* to the university students in the late 1990s. From the early 2000s, following increased state requirement and funding available through university students ‘elite culture’ education, Zhang began to run a series of *Kunqu* talks, workshops and discussion groups in universities. Following Bai’s suit, Zhang’s talks did not just focus on literature and performing techniques, but more so on *Kunqu* consumption as the historical elite scholar-official way of life and class distinction (private communication, 27th June 2015, Ge 2013). By the late 2000s, after a decade of artist collaboration and experimentation, with access to the party-state ‘central capital’ long-term investment in universities and art institutions, *Kunqu* arose as a familiar art form amongst university graduates, and also the emerging middle class. With a secured loyal consumer base, in 2009 Zhang Jun, then the Vice President of the Shanghai *Kunqu* Company, resigned to set up the first independent *Kunqu* studio in China: Shanghai Zhang Jun *Kunqu* Arts Centre (Cultural Leader Forum 2013).

Zhang’s priority was to create a new production that would establish his artistic distinction and ensure commercial profit. He focused on staging a production that the new

Kunqu audience were all familiar with - *The Peony Pavilion*. Whilst Bai's production encouraged the university students to *imagine Kunqu* consumption as leisure class distinction, Zhang's vision was to stage the performance in a real garden to reinforce such conspicuous consumption experience. Zhang identified the Kezhi Garden as the ideal venue. It is a small public garden located in an elegant water town named Zhujiajiao, 49 kilometers from Shanghai. As all land is officially owned by the government, Zhang needed to have access to party-state capital before any further artistic experimentation and development was possible. Zhang negotiated with Zhujiajiao regional government and convinced the officials that this production not only support the central-party state's ideological direction of promoting 'elite traditional culture', but would also rebrand local regional identity, attract scholar middle class consumers, and most importantly to the local government, would develop tourism and boost the local economy (private communication, 27th June 2015). It was with the full political and financial support of Zhujiajiao government that Zhang was able to access the garden and in 2011 debuted his *Garden Version of The Peony Pavilion*.



(Figure3: poster of Zhangjun's *Garden Version The Peony Pavilion*, showing the highest ticket price as 880RMB; author's photo)

The Garden Version of The Peony Pavilion was to provide the audience a reinforced cultural distinction through the conspicuous consumption experience of historical elite class

Kunqu as a way of life, rather than *Kunqu* itself. The performing time was reduced from Dir. Chen's 20hr long production and Dir. Bai's 9hr performance to just 70minutes (Insight China 2011: 105-107). The audience sat across the lake facing the pavilion, as the historical elite scholar-official class once did. Highest quality acoustic systems were used to enhance the natural acoustic quality. Minute details were attended to, ensuring that the audience had maximized comfort and pleasure: special insect repellents with minimum odor were used and ice was stored under the seats to keep the atmosphere cool (Wang 2015, Zhang private communication 27th June 2015). As we see from Figure 3, ticket prices ranged from the lowest 50yuan² student price to 880yuan the highest. This was to ensure that students were still able to stand at the back of the seating areas to continue to have their *Kunqu* taste nurtured whilst the matured middle class consumers, with high disposable income with which to purchase such a conspicuous consumption experience, could occupy front row seats immediately across the water – just as the historical scholar-official elite class did in their private gardens.

Commercial urban opera tickets in 2010s China average between 200 and 300yuan with low audience attendance. 880yuan is a high figure, yet the production has been a commercial success. Since its debut, the performance has been staged throughout the summer seasons with tickets consistently sold out well in advance. Such a sustainable commercial *Kunqu* market symbolizes the matured scholar middle class consumer group, with *Kunqu* being their recognized new game of distinction.

In 2014, Zhang Jun's *Garden Version of The Peony Pavilion* was invited by the Metropolitan Museum of Art to perform at its Ming style garden, The Astor Court, at New York, USA (Hu 2013: 230). This was the second time that *Kunqu The Peony Pavilion* had visited New York since 1998, when Chen debuted his production. The difference was that this time Zhang's production was with the full support of the Shanghai Cultural Bureau and *Kunqu* had changed from an extinct ancient art form, with obscure artistic taste and class representation, to being firmly associated with the scholar middle class cultural distinction.

² In 2011, exchange rate was around 1sterling pound to 10 Chinese yuan.

Conclusion and Reflection

Utilizing theories of Becker's Art Worlds, Veblen's conspicuous consumption and Bourdieu's party state 'central bank' capital distribution, this paper has examined how a new art world of *Kunqu*, which was close to extinction in the late 1990s, has emerged by the mid-2010s as the Chinese middle class new game of distinction. The case studies, of the three productions of *The Peony Pavilion*, highlight that only artists who are able to access the party-state 'central bank' resources, such as university curriculum, art institution and land use, may continue innovation and nurture unfamiliar convention to the new audience – in this case the university students and college students turned middle class, for the development of a new *Kunqu* art world.

Whilst we applaud the establishment of a new *Kunqu* art world, I would like to remind readers of the origin of elite *Kunqu*: its rising popularity amongst scholar officials in the Ming dynasty (1366-1644) was associated with increased political persecution from the court. To have a garden and to be entertained by *Kunqu* was the way to retreat from the society they served, to escape from the political decay that they had no power to change (Du 2010: 128; Dong 2011: 235). The 1989 Tiananmen Square student event was followed by a decade of authoritarian led economic drive. In the past 30 years, the world has witnessed China's economic rise, accompanied by the acceleration of class polarization and escalating social and political discontent (Ding & Yan 2005). Although the new middle class has gained a degree of financial status and some intellectual autonomy, they hold limited political power and struggle with economic distinction. The common phrase to mock the middle class is in fact to refer to them as 'house slaves' (*fangnu*), for their struggle to own even a small flat in cosmopolitan cities. Still, intellectuals are increasingly judging the 1989 student activism in harsh terms (Weston 2004: 253). The middle class support the CCP rather than being critical of the regime,

as their distinction and legitimacy, although limited, are intimately tied with party-state policy support (Hulme 2014, Chen 2013, Goldman 2004, Goodman 1998).

For the middle class, to imitate the historical elite class *Kunqu* taste in a garden for 70minutes provides them with temporary escape from political and economic reality and, for a short period at least, is to achieve fantasized legitimacy and distinction. To support artists to revive such fantasized historical scholar-official leisure class, through contemporary *Kunqu* conspicuous consumption, is a satisfactory outcome suiting CCP ideological evolution and legitimacy, both internally and internationally. Modern universities may have been founded in the early 20th century with value underpinned by ‘science’ and ‘democracy’, and the university scholar’s new role of critical thinking may be intended to lead the formation of a new modern China (Weston 2004: 6), such ambition is still a struggle to fulfill.

In 2014 President Xi Jinping’s inaugurated speech, *Beijing Talks on Literature and Art*, Xi emphasized the role of artists as serving the Party and the People, placing traditional Chinese arts as the anchor of China’s future cultural and economic development (South China Post 2015). Throughout the past 30 years of China market reform, the CCP has not loosened but tightened ideological direction and party-state monopolization of the art market, for its own continued legitimacy and survival. Under such conditions, the future development of any art worlds within the Chinese art market will continue to depend upon artists’ full collaboration with the Chinese party-state.

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