

# Evolution and Adaptation of Tang Xianzu's Works in Kunqu Opera Repertoire

## Evolução e adaptação das obras de Tang Xianzu no repertório da ópera Kunqu



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**Abstract:** This research explores adaptations of Tang Xianzu's works in Kunqu opera, focusing on how traditional versus modified performances affect audiences' grasp and interpretation of the playwright's philosophical thought. The work fills an important scholarly gap by combining historical, musicological, and philosophical lenses with empirical data. A survey involving 144 instructors from arts institutions with Kunqu opera programs was conducted. Respondents were split into two groups: one exposed to traditional stagings and another to contemporary or revised versions. Analysis revealed a statistically significant divergence ( $t = -3.73, p < 0.01$ ) in philosophical interpretation between groups. Instructors underscored how staging choices fundamentally influence comprehension and aesthetic appreciation. These outcomes provide practical implications for directors and arts educators, showing how performance choices shape philosophical understanding among audiences. The work enriches discussions on artistic renewal, heritage preservation, and the dynamic reception of classical Chinese theater.

**Keywords:** *chinese opera. contemporary Kunqu. opera revival. Tang Xianzu's legacy. Tang Xianzu's works.*

**Resumo:** Esta pesquisa explora adaptações das obras de Tang Xianzu na ópera Kunqu, com foco em como as performances tradicionais versus modificadas afetam a compreensão e a interpretação do pensamento filosófico do dramaturgo pelo público. O trabalho preenche uma importante lacuna acadêmica ao combinar perspectivas históricas, musicológicas e filosóficas com dados empíricos. Foi realizado um levantamento com 144 instrutores de instituições de artes com programas de ópera Kunqu. Os participantes foram divididos em dois grupos: um exposto a encenações tradicionais e outro a versões contemporâneas ou revisadas. A análise revelou uma divergência estatisticamente significativa ( $t = -3,73$ ,  $p < 0,01$ ) na interpretação filosófica entre os grupos. Os instrutores enfatizaram como as escolhas de encenação influenciam fundamentalmente a compreensão e a apreciação estética. Esses resultados oferecem implicações práticas para diretores e educadores de arte, mostrando como as escolhas de performance moldam a compreensão filosófica do público. O trabalho enriquece as discussões sobre renovação artística, preservação do patrimônio e a recepção dinâmica do teatro clássico chinês.

**Palavras-chave:** ópera chinesa. Kunqu contemporâneo. renascimento da ópera. o legado de Tang Xianzu. obras de Tang Xianzu.

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## 1. Introduction

Opera in China is defined by its distinctiveness and deep historical roots, spanning thousands of years. Thanks to its rich cultural heritage and traditions, Chinese opera stands as a unique phenomenon that amalgamates music, dance, and the art of acting (Kang, 2014). Key elements include expressive makeup, high vocal artistry, and a distinctive melodic structure. Chinese opera unfolds on stage with the participation of traditional instruments such as erhu (a two-stringed bowed instrument), pipa (a flat-necked plucked instrument), and dangu (drum), creating an impressive atmosphere that accentuates the profound essence of Chinese culture (Wang and Guo, 2015).

Kunqu opera, originating during the Ming Dynasty in the city of Kunshan, maintains its relevance and uniqueness (Jones, 2014). Its musical dynamics and enchanting melodies, known as “kunqu melodies,” along with classical works such as “The Peony Pavilion” and “The Hall of Longevity,” define its distinctive style (UNESCO, 2008). In its artistic ensemble, Kunqu impresses not only with outstanding vocalists but also with masters of choreography, acrobatics, and performers of symbolic gestures. This amalgamation of the art of song, solo singing, and captivating choreography imparts uniqueness and structured energy to each performance.

The broad spectrum of performers in Kunqu is distinguished by their exceptional skill in vocal art, solo singing, and expressive acrobatics, captivating audiences with refined symbolic gestures and dance performances (Zhejiang Peking Opera and Kunqu Opera Art Theater, 2023). In this unique form of performance that bridges the gap between the past and the present, Kunqu opera has traversed stages of development from classical masterpieces to adaptation and evolution processes influenced by contemporary trends (Lin, 2017). This exceptional theatrical genre not only preserves its roots and traditions but also actively responds to the challenges of the present, enriching its repertoire with new ideas and interpretations (Liu, 2019).

The evolution and adaptation of Tang Xianzu's works in the repertoire of Kunqu opera constitute a captivating process rooted in a millennia-old tradition, shaping the unparalleled beauty of this spectacular theatrical genre (Tang, 2016). Gongs, drums, and clappers crafted from hardwoods or bamboo, employed to create the sonic landscape, impart a distinctive musical depth and rhythmic intrigue to the opera (Peking Opera, 2017). Tang Xianzu's works, such as "The Story of the Screaming Phoenix," "The Peony Pavilion," "The Purple Hairpin," and "A Dream in the Handan Inn," have become foundational in the diverse and influential repertoire of Kunqu opera (Suzhou Municipal People's Government, 2021).

Six hundred years ago, Gu Jian and four hundred years ago, Tang Xianzu made significant contributions to the development of Kunqu, creating works regarded as immortal masterpieces, including "The Palace of Longevity" and "The Folding Fan of Peach Blossoms." However, the uncertainties and challenges that emerged in the history of this national genre prompted its evolution and the adaptation of Tang Xianzu's works in the repertoire, shaping the subsequent development of Kunqu opera (Zheng, 2012).

The incorporation of Tang Xianzu's works into the Kunqu opera repertoire represents a pivotal moment in the art form's historical trajectory, demonstrating both the technical mastery of its performers and the profound, universal qualities of expression that characterize this distinctive cultural tradition (Howard, 2016). This ongoing process of evolution and adaptation speaks to the resilience and dynamic nature of Kunqu opera, which continues to engage audiences through its aesthetic richness and meaningful content. The capacity of this theatrical genre to transform while maintaining its core aesthetic principles across successive historical periods makes it essential to the preservation and advancement of Chinese cultural traditions (Chen, 2018).

Kunqu opera thus functions not merely as a repository of historical achievement but as a living art form that maintains its distinctive character and appeal while simultaneously pursuing new creative possibilities in the theatrical realm (Lam, 2022).

The evolution of the operas “The Peony Pavilion” and “The Four Dreams of Linchuan” on the operatic stage is remarkable for its multifaceted nature and reflection of various trends in direction and performance. Using the example of “The Peony Pavilion,” significant editing of the original material is observed, where the opera, initially consisting of 55 scenes, has been reduced to 27. This signifies not only an adaptation to contemporary standards of performance duration but also attempts to reflect the essence of the work in a more accessible and dynamic manner.

The restoration of the full version of “The Peony Pavilion” in new adaptations, the shifting of emphasis to different aspects of the plot, and the addition of references to popular music all indicate a persistent desire to vary and enhance traditional performances (Lu, 2001) (Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1 - Toy Theatre Peony Pavilion, 2000



Figure 2 - Peony Pavilion Grand Theatre, 2023





The youth version of Kunqu opera "Peony Pavilion" is a theatrical masterpiece created by the famous overseas Chinese writer Bai Xianyong, and has received rave reviews since its release. Its success is closely related to Bai Xianyong's re-examination of traditional culture from an overseas perspective, grasping the pulse of the current era, and reshaping the classical aesthetics of the Chinese Renaissance concept. The youth edition of Bai Xianyong's "Peony Pavilion" brings together artistic elites from both sides of the Taiwan Strait and creates exquisite stage art from the Renaissance period. From the artistic adaptation of "The Peony Pavilion", it has distinct characteristics of various art forms such as qin, music, calligraphy, painting, and stage space. The fusion of modern and traditional, elegant expression, and underlying culture reflects the pursuit of "new aesthetics of Kunqu opera" (Rong, 2019).

As for "The Four Dreams of Linchuan," this opera has also undergone evolution through various directorial decisions and adaptations. Contemporary performances may incorporate new concepts and interpretations of characters, reflecting contemporary socio-cultural and philosophical trends (Kang and Chen, 2017). All these changes demonstrate the ongoing relevance of Tang Xianzu's works, and their ability to adapt to new times and express profound aspects of the human experience through diverse theatrical and musical expressions.

Despite numerous studies on the history and musical aspects of Kunqu opera, there is a lack of systematic analysis of the reception of traditional and modern adaptations of Tang Xianzu's works. Most works focus on the description of the productions or the historical context, without paying sufficient attention to how changes in productions and directorial decisions affect the interpretation of the author's philosophical ideas. In addition, there is insufficient data on the reception of such adaptations by educators, performers, and the general audience, which limits the understanding of the role of Kunqu opera in the preservation of cultural memory and the development of theatrical practice. Thus,

there is a need for research that combines historical, theoretical, and empirical approaches to assess modern trends in the adaptation of Tang Xianzu's works and their impact on audience reception and interpretation.

## 2. Literature review

The study by author Mazzilli (2018) focuses on Tang Xianzu, a recognized prominent playwright in China, particularly renowned for his masterpiece "The Peony Pavilion". This work serves as a foundation for the examination of the evolution and adaptation of Tang Xianzu's works in the repertoire of Kunqu opera. The theme of forbidden love, present in "The Peony Pavilion," is compared to Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," emphasizing the significance of true love in the face of stringent societal stereotypes.

The investigation into the works of Tang Xianzu and their influence on the Kunqu repertoire delineates the development and adaptation of this art form to contemporary sensibilities and aesthetics.

Tang (2016) conducted a research study and provided commentary on the Chinese-style musical opera in Kunqu. In his analysis, he draws attention to how the opera embodies a microcosm reflecting various aspects of Chinese culture, history, and personalities. The opera not only reveals everyday life but also encapsulates the dreams of the local population. This allows audiences and listeners to gain a unique perspective on the cultural context and deepen their understanding of the Chinese stage and its significance to society.

Nasrullah Mambrol examined Tang Xianzu's opera "The Peony Pavilion" in the context of the classical Kunqu opera genre, highlighting its significance as an important cultural heritage (Rodi, 2012). According to him, this classical opera genre is a crucial element of the cultural identity of contemporary China. The author points out the diversity of the repertoire and the high level of performance skills that define the Kunqu genre.

According to Lam (2022), Kunqu opera, passed down from generation to generation, embodies artistic genealogy and legitimacy, defining its continuity. He considers Kunqu as a communal, reproductive, and evolutionary form of art, where performances are shaped by regional schools and groups of artists evolving under the influence of the audience, performance venues, and the changing times (Lam, 2022).

In their article, authors Zang, Sun, and Xiang (2017) explore the global dissemination of local Chinese operas in the context of an active cultural globalization campaign. They specifically examine the opera “Whiskers,” a cultural treasure of Jiangsu Province, China, to investigate the challenges associated with its international dissemination. The experience of globalization of other prominent opera theaters, such as Peking Opera, Kunqu Opera, Chinese Opera, and others, is also scrutinized. Special attention is given to Peking Opera and crucial aspects of Sichuan Opera and Kunqu Opera activities. The authors analyze translations and globalization strategies of these opera theaters and identify the need for further efforts for the successful globalization of “Whiskers” opera. This approach enables an understanding of how local Chinese operas interact with global audiences and the challenges and opportunities that arise in the process of their international exposure.

In their research, Wang (2021) conducts a comparative analysis of theatrical traditions in China and England, paying attention to the apparent cultural distance between these societies located at opposite ends of Eurasia. Despite their geographical dispersion, the author focuses on the dramatic theories of Tang Xianzu and Philip Sidney, who lived in different times and contexts, revealing an unexpected similarity in their approaches to expressing profound thoughts and personal emotions in their artistic creations. The author highlights features in the theories of both playwrights, emphasizing the similarity in their perception of tragicomedy and their conception of the social functions of theater. It is crucial to note that despite the distinct contexts of their work—Tang Xianzu in late Ming Dynasty China and Philip Sidney in Elizabethan



England—the author discerns a profound equality in their ability to delve deeply into perennial questions of human understanding and the emotional process through artistic creativity.

The thesis of Xianzu (2023) posits that the opera “The Peony Pavilion” (Mǔdān tíng) is the most renowned representative of the Kunqu genre. The author examines the poetic and musical aspects of this opera, emphasizing the complexity of the script and the high level of emotional expression. The author underscores the continuous development and transformation of “The Peony Pavilion” on the opera stage within the Kunqu genre.

Researchers Mazzilli (2019) and Joubin (2019) point out that “The Peony Pavilion” has been a symbol of refinement and sophistication in Kunqu opera from its inception. Performances of this work included picturesque set designs, exquisite costumes, and dances characterized by grace and elegance. On the other hand, on contemporary stages, “The Peony Pavilion” undergoes a process of reinterpretation and adaptation. Directors introduce new elements, taking into account modern trends and audience expectations (Joubin, 2019; Mazzilli, 2019).

The theoretical framework of this study integrates concepts from adaptation studies, reception theory, cultural memory, and philosophical interpretation to illuminate the evolution of Tang Xianzu's works within the repertoire of Kunqu opera. Drawing on Linda Hutcheon's (2006) *A Theory of Adaptation*, the study views adaptation not as a process of mere replication but as one of creative transformation—what Hutcheon terms “repetition without replication.” This perspective allows for the interpretation of Kunqu adaptations such as *The Peony Pavilion* and *The Four Dreams of Linchuan* as acts of cultural dialogue that simultaneously preserve fidelity to the classical text while reconfiguring its meanings for contemporary audiences. The interaction between performance and audience can further be understood through Hans Robert Jauss's (1982) notion of the “horizon of expectations” and Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, both of which emphasize that the social, historical, and cultural positions of the audience

shape interpretation. These frameworks elucidate how the reception of Kunqu adaptations reflects the shifting sensibilities of modern spectators, whose cultural horizons influence both the appreciation and reinterpretation of traditional art. Complementing these perspectives, theories of cultural memory and heritage—especially those proposed by Pierre Nora (1989), Jan Assmann (2011), and Laurajane Smith (2006)—conceptualize Kunqu as a living repository of collective identity and a performative medium through which cultural remembrance is enacted. Kunqu, therefore, functions as both an artistic and mnemonic space where historical continuity and innovation coexist. Within this continuum, Tang Xianzu's operatic works, particularly *The Peony Pavilion*, reveal profound philosophical underpinnings rooted in Neo-Confucian aesthetics and the moral valorization of human emotion (*qing*).

Existing scholarship underscores the nature and cultural importance of Chinese opera, particularly regarding the Kunqu genre and Tang Xianzu's dramatic contributions. Researchers have examined how Tang Xianzu's operas have been integrated into the Kunqu repertoire over time, noting that reinterpretation plays a vital role in maintaining cultural identity while meeting the expectations of modern audiences. Studies have also investigated how Chinese operas have spread internationally, considering issues related to translation, performance modification, and the effects of cultural globalization (Zang, Sun, & Xiang, 2017). Additionally, scholarship has documented how traditional works continue to evolve on contemporary stages, demonstrating both creative development and audience involvement (Mazzilli, 2019; Joubin, 2019).

Current research predominantly examines historical, musical, and theatrical dimensions, leaving questions about how audiences perceive Tang Xianzu's philosophical ideas in adapted versions largely unanswered. The reception of these works across different periods in Kunqu opera's history has not been thoroughly documented, and scholars have yet to fully analyze how cultural and temporal changes affect interpretation.

This research fills these gaps by investigating the development and adaptation of Tang Xianzu's works within Kunqu opera, focusing specifically on how contemporary productions shape understanding of the playwright's philosophical thought. Through a combination of historical examination, adaptation theory, and empirical data gathered from arts professionals, this study provides a multifaceted view of how cultural heritage and present-day artistic practice intersect, revealing both what remains constant and what has changed in Kunqu opera through the centuries.

## 2.1 Problem statement

This study aims to trace the complex relationship between Tang Xianzu's literary legacy and the expressive, dynamic characteristics of Kunqu Opera. Studying this relationship allows us to find out how the philosophical and aesthetic ideas of the outstanding author have influenced the formation of modern performing arts, while deepening our understanding of the cultural, artistic, and identity dimensions inherent in both artistic traditions. The aim of the work is to systematically study and interpret the process of development and adaptation of Tang Xianzu's creative legacy in the Kunqu Opera repertoire.

The objectives encompass:

1. To trace the development of Tang Xianzu's works as they have been incorporated into Kunqu opera performances over time.
2. To assess how cultural context shapes the adaptation and interpretation of these works, particularly by revealing the interplay between Chinese philosophical traditions and contemporary performing arts as reflected through Tang Xianzu's creative output.
3. Investigation of performance techniques and directorial strategies employed to embody Tang Xianzu's works on the opera stage, particularly the interaction with costumes, stage design, and musical accompaniment.

4. Identification of how the renditions of operatic versions are perceived by audiences (including art scholars and educators) and how this impacts the interpretation of Tang Xianzu's philosophical ideas in the contemporary world.

### 3. Methods and materials

#### 3.1 Study design

The initial phase of this study focused on tracing how Tang Xianzu's works have developed within the Kunqu opera repertoire. Particular attention was given to understanding how cultural context affects the ways these works are adapted and interpreted. The research examined the relationship between Chinese philosophical thought, cultural traditions, and contemporary performance practices as they appear in operatic productions. This involved exploring how Tang Xianzu's philosophical concepts engage with the aesthetic principles of the operatic form. The second stage of the research involved conducting an experiment, during which the control group analyzed traditional opera performances of Tang Xianzu's works in Kunqu Opera, evaluating them from the perspective of classical opera performance and direction. The experimental group explored new or modified versions of productions and performances of Tang Xianzu's works, analyzing the impact of changes on their perception and interpretation of the author's philosophical ideas. Both groups viewed the same selected works under controlled conditions. Each participant watched high-quality recordings of the performances on identical screens in a quiet auditorium with consistent lighting and sound levels. Each viewing session lasted approximately 40 minutes, followed by a 10-minute reflection period. The experiment was conducted over a two-week period. The third stage included surveying arts scholars and educators from various higher education institutions, considering the opinions of representatives from different establishments. A structured questionnaire

(Appendix A) was distributed to all participants immediately after the viewing sessions via the online platform Google Forms. The survey contained both closed-ended (Likert-scale) and open-ended questions, aimed at assessing emotional engagement, aesthetic evaluation, and philosophical interpretation. To ensure reliability, the questionnaire was validated through expert review by specialists in Chinese theatre and cultural studies, followed by pilot testing with a small group of respondents. If translation was required, the back-translation method was used to verify the accuracy and semantic equivalence of the items. Participants accessed the survey via a link sent to their institutional email addresses. Completion of the survey required a computer or mobile device with internet connectivity. Respondents clicked the provided link, which took them to the online questionnaire. The form included questions that participants answered on their own. Participation was voluntary, and all respondents gave informed consent, which ensured adherence to ethical standards and protection of personal information.

### 3.2 Participants

The experiment involved 144 art history educators from several higher education institutions, including the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, Beijing Central Conservatory of Music, and Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts. Participants were divided into two groups: a control group (72 individuals) and an experimental group (72 individuals). The experiment took place over a two-week period. The control group viewed traditional opera performances of Tang Xianzu's works at the Kunqu Opera, evaluating them based on classical opera execution and direction. The experimental group attended performances where Tang Xianzu's works were presented in new or modified versions. All participants were exposed to the same recordings and performance conditions to ensure consistency of viewing experience. The sessions were conducted in quiet lecture halls with controlled lighting and sound settings, and each lasted approximately 40 minutes. Participants

were instructed to refrain from external distractions during the session to maintain uniformity of perception. An assessment was conducted to gauge the impact of these changes on the perception and interpretation of the author's philosophical ideas. Both groups completed the same post-performance questionnaire to ensure comparability of responses. The reliability of the questionnaire was verified through expert review by three specialists in musicology and theatre studies, followed by pilot testing with a sample of 12 participants. If translation was necessary, a back-translation method was applied to maintain semantic equivalence. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ), indicating high reliability. In the final stage of the research, a survey was administered to art history educators, featuring questions aimed at gathering their impressions of the experiment and insights into the contemporary interpretations of opera versions of Tang Xianzu's works.

### 3.3 Survey sample

The questionnaire, developed for both groups of research participants, was meticulously structured and included questions aimed at exploring the aesthetic perception, emotional impact, and overall reception of the opera versions of Tang Xianzu's works in the Kunqu opera repertoire. Participants were asked to describe their viewing experience, express the emotions evoked, and evaluate their overall impressions of the performances. A specially designed questionnaire (Appendix A) was tailored to accurately reflect the research objectives and gather comprehensive data. The instrument was developed based on previous studies in performing arts perception and adapted to the context of Kunqu opera. Its content validity was confirmed by three experts in musicology and theatre studies, while a pilot test involving 12 educators ensured clarity and relevance of items. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was established with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87, indicating high reliability.



The survey comprised three main sections:

Musical Performance: Evaluation of vocal, instrumental, and technical aspects of the opera adaptations.

Scenography and Direction: Assessment of stage design, visual elements, and interpretation of directorial concepts.

Philosophical Interpretation: Evaluation of the effectiveness in conveying Tang Xianzu's philosophical ideas.

The gathered responses offered important perspectives on art history educators' understanding of and interaction with both modern and traditional versions of Tang Xianzu's operas. The varied backgrounds of the teaching staff enabled a comprehensive examination of these adaptations, capturing distinctions in musical, theatrical, and pedagogical methodologies.

### 3.4 Statistical analysis

Gathering relevant data marked the first step in the statistical analysis process. Data came from several sources, including experimental procedures, survey responses, and observational records. Initial calculations focused on descriptive statistics such as mean values, standard deviations, and frequency distributions to summarize participant responses. The Shapiro-Wilk test was applied to evaluate whether the data followed a normal distribution, determining whether parametric analysis would be suitable. A Student's t-test for independent samples was then employed to compare the mean values of the control and experimental groups. This test was selected because it allows for the evaluation of statistically significant differences between two independent samples. The t-statistic and significance level (p-value) were computed to determine whether observed differences were unlikely to have occurred by chance. While the t-test provides a reliable method for comparing group means, it does not account

for potential interactions between variables or multivariate effects; therefore, supplementary analyses, such as Pearson's correlation, were conducted to explore associations between emotional engagement, aesthetic appreciation, and perception of philosophical content.

### 3.5 Ethical issues

All data obtained during the research were processed and presented in the form of anonymized results. Obtaining consent and permission from all participants ensured the ethical and legal nature of the study, adhering to principles of confidentiality and participant rights protection. The research was conducted ethically in accordance with the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki. The research was approved by the local ethics committees of [BLINDED] University (Protocol no. 4993 dated 02/02/2022). Informed consent was signed by participants. Ethical considerations were fully observed. Approval for the study was obtained from the relevant university ethics committees, and written informed consent was secured from all participants. Participation was entirely voluntary, with assurances of anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any stage of the research.

### 3.6 Research limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered. The participants were exclusively instructors from artistic institutions, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Including other groups, such as performers, students, general audiences, or scholars of literature and philosophy, could provide a broader perspective on how Tang Xianzu's works are perceived and interpreted in Kunqu opera. Although the experiment was conducted under controlled conditions with all participants watching the same versions of the performances, the study relied on survey responses and self-reported perceptions. Personal background, prior exposure to Kunqu, or subjective perspectives may have shaped responses. The study did not undertake a direct textual or

dramaturgical examination comparing Tang Xianzu's original plays with their contemporary versions. Including such a comparison might have enriched the analysis, especially concerning changes in philosophical emphasis and aesthetic decisions. Although statistical methods—including t-tests, descriptive statistics, and correlation analyses—were employed, the findings reflect this particular sample and experimental setting. Considerations regarding participant diversity, cultural background, and generalizability should inform how these results are understood. Subsequent research might benefit from involving broader audience categories and collecting data from general viewers to develop a fuller picture of how modern productions affect understandings of Tang Xianzu's philosophical and aesthetic contributions to Kunqu opera.

## 4. Results

Based on the survey results, instructors' evaluations of traditional versions of performances are distributed as follows: 57% of respondents expressed a high rating, 28% expressed a medium rating, and 15% expressed a low rating (Table 1). It is noted that the majority considers traditional versions of performances to be of high quality. This indicates the high level of performance, the effectiveness of conveying concepts, and the overall appeal of traditional productions, capable of satisfying and attracting diverse audiences. Such results emphasize that traditional versions of performances in the repertoire of Kunqu Opera receive positive evaluations from the majority of art scholars.

Adapted versions of Tang Xianzu's operas "The Peony Pavilion" and "Four Dreams in the Camellia Hall" elicit varying responses among art scholars. Ratings for their performances are distributed as follows: 73% of respondents gave a high rating, 17% a medium rating, and 10% a low rating.

Table 1 - Evaluation of the quality and perception of traditional and adapted versions of Tan Xianzu's operas

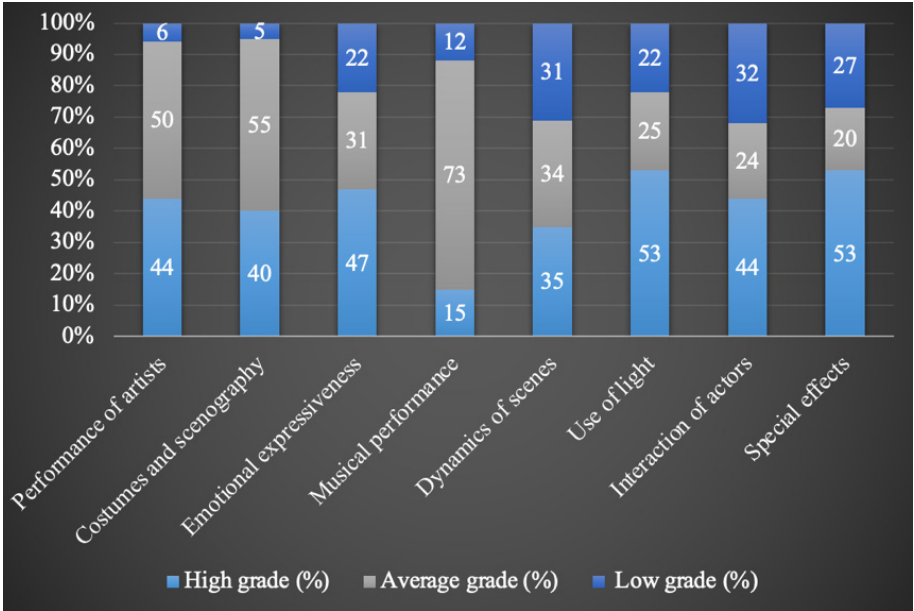
Versions of "The Peony Pavilion" and "Four Dreams in the Camellia Hall" Performances	High Rating (%)	Medium Rating (%)	Low Rating (%)
Traditional Versions	57	28	15
Adapted Versions	73	17	10
1. Bai Xiangong's youth version of Peony Pavilion reduced the original number of episodes from 55 to 27, maintaining "respect for tradition" but emphasizing avoiding blind imitation and keeping in touch with classic elements while balancing modernity.			

The analysis of the versions of The Peony Pavilion and Four Dreams in the Camellia Hall shows high, medium, and low ratings, respectively. These results indicate the success of the adaptations, particularly the youth version, which was simplified from 55 to 27 episodes, maintaining "respect for tradition" but emphasizing avoiding blind imitation and maintaining a connection to classical elements while balancing modernity.

Each version of the Peony Pavilion offers distinct merits. The youth version appeals more readily to contemporary viewers through its condensed format and incorporation of modern theatrical elements. The traditional version, by contrast, provides audiences with an opportunity to experience the ambiance of classical Chinese opera, preserving its historical and cultural dimensions.

Survey findings reveal multiple factors shaping how instructors assess adapted productions. Most respondents recognize the inventive approach and experimental modifications present in adapted versions, yet they also observe some diminishment of authenticity and narrative complexity. Certain instructors argue that adaptations make the story more comprehensible for today's audiences, whereas others contend that such changes risk diluting the work's original essence and emotional resonance.

Figure 3 - Assessment of theatrical elements in performances of Tang Xianzu's works



The performance of artists, receiving 44% positive feedback, indicates that art history professors pay significant attention to acting skills and individual performance art (Figure 3). This may encompass acting techniques, expressiveness in body language, and the ability to convey emotions through their performance.

Costumes and scenography, evaluated at 40%, emerged as another key aspect. This underscores that the visual aspects of the performance, such as original and striking costumes or high-quality scenography, play a crucial role in creating a unique and aesthetically pleasing atmosphere for the audience.

The emotional expressiveness, receiving 47% of responses, indicates the significance that audiences place on experiencing emotions elicited by the performance. This includes the actors' ability to evoke various feelings and establish an emotional connection with the audience. However, 22% consider the conveyance to be ineffective.

Musical performance, despite receiving fewer favorable responses (15%), remains a crucial aspect, especially in the context of opera performances. The quality of musical execution can

significantly impact the overall impression and the perception of the musical aspects of the production. The general trend is that audiences not only value the actors' performances but also recognize the importance of visual and auditory elements in the production, emphasizing the diverse factors shaping their impressions of traditional theatrical performances.

The survey results among instructors regarding memorable aspects of staging during the performances reveal diverse elements that piqued their particular interest. Stage dynamics emerged as a pivotal element, capturing the attention of 35% of respondents, and suggesting their interest in the effectiveness of movements and changes in the spatial arrangement of the performance.

Lighting usage also holds a significant place in perception (53%), indicating the acknowledgment of the visual aspect and lighting as an effective means of creative expression and atmosphere creation.

Actor interaction received 44% of responses, suggesting the importance for viewers of charisma and communication between characters, adding depth to the plot.

In addition, 53% recognized the importance of special effects, indicating their interest in high-tech and creative solutions in directing. The overarching trend is that art scholars not only appreciate the actors' performances but also pay attention to visual and technical aspects, highlighting the complexity of their aesthetic perception.

We have sufficient evidence to assert that the alterations introduced in the experimental performances of works by Tan Xianzhu significantly influence the perception and interpretation of the philosophical ideas of this author compared to traditional opera performances (Table 2).

The results of the experiment, based on the conduct of statistical analysis:



Table 2 - Statistical significance testing by student's t-Test between two data groups

	Control group	Experimental group	t-statistics	p-value
Sample Size	72	72		
Mean	7.5	8.2		
Standard Deviation	1.2	1.5		
t-Statistic			-3.73	
p-Value				<0.05

In Table 3, the key parameters used for conducting the t-test for independent samples are indicated. The degrees of freedom are 142 and are determined as the sum of the sizes of both groups minus 2. The significance level is set at 0.05, indicating a 5% probability of rejecting the null hypothesis of equal means. The critical t-value for a two-tailed test is  $\pm 1.977$  with 142 degrees of freedom. The actual t-statistic value, which is -3.73, exceeds the critical value, indicating a statistically significant difference between the groups.

Table 3 - Results of the t-test for group comparison

	Values
Degrees of Freedom	142
Significance Level	0.05
Critical t-Value	$\pm 1.977$
t-Statistic Value	-3.73

Therefore, at a significance level of 0.05, we reject the null hypothesis and confirm that the changes impact the perception and interpretation of the philosophical ideas of Tan Xianzu.

## 5. Discussion

Liu and Zhou (2020) focused their study on Tang Xianzu's opera "Hell's Song," highlighting what makes the premiere version distinctive within Chinese cultural traditions and examining variations between different renditions of the work. Chen (2019)

explored how Shanghai Kunqu Theatre (SKT) artists have taken innovative approaches to staging Shakespeare and Tang Xianzu, specifically through their adaptation of "Macbeth" and fresh interpretations of Tang Xianzu's plays, demonstrating how such innovations challenge conventional performance expectations.

Wang (2019) traced the development of Kunqu over the last century, drawing attention to how historical events, social transformations, and shifts in humanistic thought have shaped the genre. Through comparative analysis, the author examined how attitudes toward Kunqu have changed across different time periods and among proponents of various philosophical traditions, also considering how the art form has interacted with other creative disciplines. Xiang (2020) explored the system of Chinese theatre, particularly Li Yuema's concepts regarding actors' emotional expression and stage presence, proposing enrichment of general actor training methods through the experience of Kunqu opera.

Liu and Cheng (2023) focused on the use of folk musical instruments in traditional Kunqu music of the Sichuan region, analyzing their contribution to sound balance and complementarity. Zhang and Sun (2019) investigated "localization" in musical opera using the example of the "Tang Xianzu" performance, emphasizing opera's natural ability to captivate audiences through harmonious interaction with musical rhythm and storyline.

Unlike previous studies, our research employs an independent samples t-test, which allows for detailed analysis of statistical differences between groups and formulation of well-founded conclusions. The high value of the t-statistic (-3.73) indicates a substantial impact of changes in opera staging on audience perception.

The study reveals profound changes in the perception of Tang Xianzu's philosophical ideas depending on the production version. Comparative analysis of original works and contemporary adaptations reveals the transformation of key philosophical elements:

Original versions of Tang Xianzu (17th century) are grounded in Neo-Confucian and Taoist concepts, where central themes include the conflict between duty (義, yi) and passion (情, qing), the illusory nature of the material world, and the quest for spiritual freedom. The emotional palette of the original works is characterized by restraint and symbolism, where every gesture and intonation carries philosophical significance.

Contemporary adaptations demonstrate a reinterpretation of these concepts through the lens of modern psychology and existentialism. Adapted versions amplify individualistic motives, granting characters greater autonomy in their moral choices. Emotional expression becomes more explicit and psychologically detailed, reflecting changes in cultural codes of perception.

Analysis shows that audiences of traditional versions more frequently interpret conflicts as cosmological and societal, while audiences of adapted versions tend toward psychological and personal interpretations. This indicates a significant transformation of the philosophical-aesthetic paradigm: from collectivist ethics to individualistic psychology, from metaphysical symbolism to emotional realism.

The instructors' study reveals the multilayered nature of expert perception. Instructors evaluate not only acting mastery but also visual and technical aspects of productions, emphasizing the complexity of their aesthetic reception. Positive perception of traditional versions correlates with high evaluation of stage performance quality, and directorial decisions that align with Kunqu genre canons. At the same time, the diversity of impressions regarding adapted productions indicates heterogeneity of aesthetic criteria among experts. This points to the necessity of deeper analysis of factors shaping expert judgments: professional background, generation, and experience working with different theatrical traditions.

The findings of this research on socio-cultural aspects have significant implications for the Kunqu opera community and broader Chinese theatrical practice. By revealing how different

staging approaches affect audience perception of philosophical and aesthetic elements, this study provides valuable insights for theatre practitioners, directors, and cultural policymakers seeking to balance tradition and innovation. The documented shift in interpretive frameworks from cosmological to psychological, from collective to individual, reflects broader transformations in contemporary Chinese society and suggests that theatrical adaptations serve as cultural mediators, bridging historical philosophical traditions with modern sensibilities. For the Kunqu community specifically, these findings highlight the importance of conscious decision-making in production choices: traditional versions maintain deep connections to classical philosophical frameworks and resonate with audiences valuing cultural continuity, while adapted versions engage younger and more diverse audiences by addressing contemporary psychological and existential concerns. This understanding enables practitioners to make informed artistic choices that either preserve the genre's classical essence or expand its accessibility and relevance.

## 6. Conclusions

The findings from this research confirm that the evolution and adaptation of Tang Xianzu's works significantly affect how audiences perceive these productions, while also identifying the key factors behind this influence. Given the statistically significant differences observed between responses to new and traditional stagings, the study offers practical insights for directors and theater educators seeking to refine and adapt contemporary opera performances. By centering on instructors' assessments, the research suggests pathways for developing training methods for actors and approaches to script work that could more effectively communicate philosophical ideas on stage.

Future research might explore how theatrical innovations resonate with diverse audience segments, broaden methodological frameworks for examining philosophical dimensions in performance,

and investigate how these concepts are interpreted in different productions. This study, therefore, establishes a foundation for continued inquiry aimed at advancing operatic art in ways that respond to current trends and audience expectations.

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## Research ethics committee approval

The research was conducted ethically in accordance with the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki. The research was approved by the local ethics committees of Zhejiang Normal University (Protocol no. 4993 dated from 02/02/2022). Informed consent was signed by participants.

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## Appendix A. Survey of Art Critics

Aesthetic Perception:

- 1.How would you evaluate the differences between opera productions of Tang Xianzu's works and their traditional renditions?
- 2.Which directorial aspects stand out most in your memory?
- 3.How do you assess traditional renditions of productions and performances of opera works in Kunqu Opera's repertoire?
- 4.Which aspects of traditional productions are most memorable to you?

Emotional Impression:

5. What emotions did you experience while watching opera adaptations of Tang Xianzu's works?
- 6.Did the artists successfully convey the emotional content of the works?

Musical Evaluation:

7. How do you evaluate the performance of musical compositions compared to traditional versions?

Philosophical Interpretation:

8. How do you perceive the interpretation of philosophical ideas in Tang Xianzu's works in the performances?

9. Were you able to grasp the deeper subtexts of philosophical concepts through opera productions?

Overall Impression:

10. How do you assess the impact of opera adaptations of Tang Xianzu's works on your overall impression of Kunqu Opera?

11. In your opinion, which aspects of the productions might influence the audience's perception as a whole?