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# CULTURAL FILES

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商務印書館  
The Commercial Press  
SINCE 1897

2011, Beijing

**图书在版编目(CIP)数据**

中国文化档案 = Cultural Files; Intangible Heritage.  
非物质文化遗产 / 《汉语世界》杂志社编. —北京: 商务  
印书馆, 2011

ISBN 978 - 7 - 100 - 07399 - 8

I. ①中… II. ①汉… III. ①文化遗产—简介—  
中国 IV. ①K203②K928.7

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(2010)第 188494 号

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**中国文化档案: 非物质文化遗产**

《汉语世界》杂志社 编

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商 务 印 书 馆 出 版

(北京王府井大街36号 邮政编码 100710)

商 务 印 书 馆 发 行

北京 瑞古冠中印刷厂印刷

ISBN 978 - 7 - 100 - 07399 - 8

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2011年4月第1版

开本 889 × 1194 1/16

2011年4月北京第1次印刷

印张 8

定价: 98.00 元

**Publisher:** Yu Dianli

**Production Supervisor:** Zhou Hongbo

**Mastermind / Chief Editor:** Cao Quan

**Art director / Designer:** Yuke Wang

**Executive Editors:** Wen Xuechun, He Hongtao, Huang Yuanjing

**Proofreaders:** Yu Libin, Zhao Yuhong

**Special thanks to:**

Suzhou Kunqu Theatre of Jiangsu Province, Northern Kunqu Theatre, Kunqu Museum of China, Beijing Kunqu Academy, Laoshe Tea House, Jinyang Restaurant, Guizhou Hotel, China World Hotel, The Museum of Wuqiang New Year Pictures, Yangliuqing New Year Prints, Zhu Xiaojian, H. R. Lan (USA), David N. Tool (USA), Li Bing, Cui Yonghua, Zeng Fanhua, Yan Chao, Gao Lei, Andy Deemer (USA), Jonathan Heeter (USA), Robert Lewis Livingston (USA), Nicholas Richards (Canada), Tian Wenzhu, Zhao Zhankun, Ma Shirui



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2. Truth of Kunqu Opera
3. The Codes of Kunqu Opera
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# KUNQU OPERA ALL ITS GLORY

Kūnqǔ — Sì Nàbān Chà Zǐ Yān Hóng  
昆曲——似那般姹紫嫣红

By Chu Dandan, Hua Sha  
Theme by Wang Ling  
Photographs by Mao Yaoquan, Xu Peihong  
Translated by Wei Lingcha, Chen Liping

**K**unqu Opera, known as “The Mother of All Operas,” boasts a 600-year history. The opera originated from Kunshan, Suzhou in southern China. Nurtured in scenic gardens and fostered by nobles keen on enjoyment, the opera developed into a graceful and refined art. An integration of poetry, song, dance and drama, the opera is distinguished by its form, content, and ambience, all highly aesthetic. The stylized facial patterns and movements are all imbued with multiple messages – codes for the audience to decipher.

Kunqu Opera enjoyed its Golden Era in the 16th and 17th centuries when it found favor with the upper classes, including the emperors. Yet, the next two centuries witnessed a gradual decline of the opera due in part to the rise of other regional operas and in part to the changes in lifestyle. In China, however, there have always been people who love, safeguard and transmit Kunqu Opera and niches for this art form in big cities. Shabby or splendid, such places are crowded with Kunqu fans, equally enthusiastic and content.

Kunqu Opera was proclaimed a Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2001. *The Peony Pavilion*, a classic in Kunqu form, has been adapted into a “Young Lovers Edition” and has toured widely in China and abroad over the past few years. Performed more than 100 times, the new version has caught the fancy of young audiences, as a result of which, Kunqu Opera has come back into public favor. Despite its amazing resilience and tenacity, we have to consider how the 600-year-old opera can survive in modern society and what the future holds.



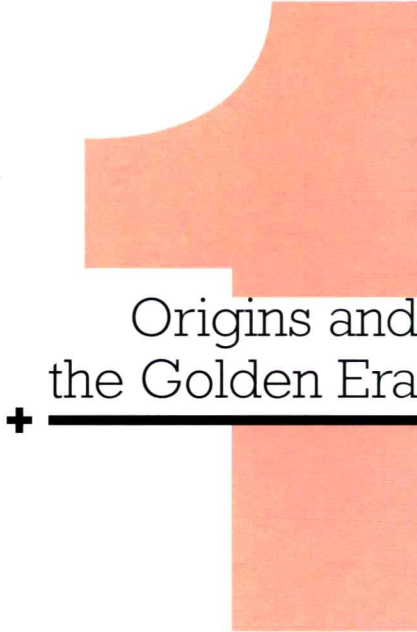
## **SECTIONS:**

- 1.** Origins and the Golden Era
- 2.** Truth of Kunqu Opera
- 3.** The Codes of Kunqu Opera
- 4.** Decline
- 5.** Where is Kunqu?
- 6.** The Return of Kunqu
- 7.** Future of Kunqu Opera









Origins and  
the Golden Era

+

Cóng Dànshēng Dào Huángjīn Shídài  
从诞生到黄金时代

**K**unqu Opera originated in the gardens of Suzhou, places that are considered the most exquisite, picturesque and cultured in China.

**During the Golden Era of Kunqu Opera four to five centuries ago, the Chinese were enchanted by drama.**



Cartoon of Kunqu by Gao Made

**A** mere mention of Suzhou is always a reminder of the famous saying: “Up in heaven there is paradise, down below, Suzhou and Hangzhou (上有天堂, 下有苏杭).” This praise refers not only to the beautiful gardens but also to the elegant and extravagant lifestyle. 600 years ago, Suzhou was one of the richest and busiest cities in the world. Many literati, nobles, and retired officials converged on this city. They bought a parcel of land and walled it off from earthly noise and constructed their private gardens to maintain an exclusive and elitist lifestyle. They invited folk musicians to compose music and men of letters to write lyrics and train singers and actors to perform them. Hence from among little bridges and gurgling streams often wafted melodious singing. The appearance of the most wonderful gardens gave rise to a new romantic and gracious art – Kunqu Opera.

Gradually this graceful entertainment went beyond those private gardens and swept the country as a fashion. In the 16th century, the cultured elite were all proud to be both listeners and singers of Kunqu. On festival occasions, they would invite troupes to their homes for family entertainment. Some nobles or retired officials even kept a private troupe at home and often joined in the operatic creation and performance. However, admiration for Kunqu Opera was not confined to private gardens or a certain class. The Annual Kunqu Festival at Huqiu of Suzhou was such a carnivalesque event, where the entire city, hilarious with joy, would gather, giving evidence to its popularity during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Matteo Ricci (1552-1660), the famous European missionary, was an eyewitness to such Chinese enthusiasm for Kunqu Opera. In *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matteo Ricci* (《利玛窦中国札记》), he wrote, “I see that the whole nation is so fond of drama performance that there are numerous youngsters engaged in it. Some troupes toured extensively across China, busy with performances, public or private. There is no banquet





A theater built 120 years ago

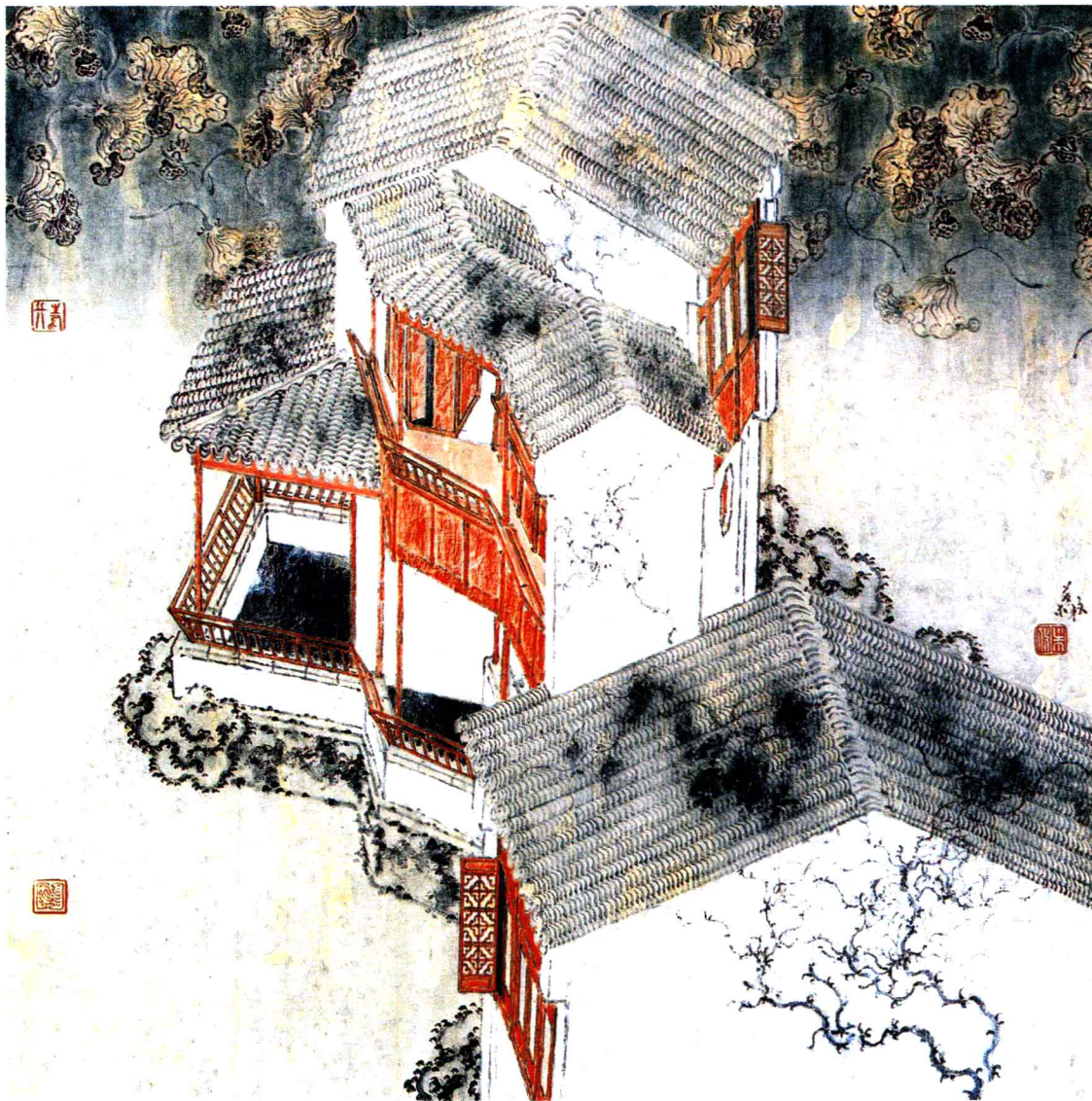
without the presence of a troupe. The guests are entertained with the performance while enjoying the feast to their heart's content. Sometimes, a banquet even lasts for ten hours, with the different plays staged one after another.” In fact, around the same time, in Italy, homeland of Matteo Ricci, opera was also on the rise, though its Golden Era was about two hundred years later than that of Kunqu Opera.

Kunqu Opera reached its zenith in the 17th century when both the common people and the emperors were all fans of the art. Emperor Kangxi (康熙, 1654-1722) and his grandson Emperor Qianlong (乾隆, 1711-1799) were both keen on Kunqu Opera – the refined art form from the South, although they were ethnic Manchus living in the North. It is said that Emperor Kangxi would go and watch Kunqu at local officials' homes whenever he visited Suzhou. Even more enthusiastic was Emperor Qianlong, who kept over 1,400 Kunqu performers in his palace alone. Grand stages could be found in all his residences, such as: the Imperial Palace, Yuanmingyuan (Garden of Perfect Splendor), the Summer Resort in Chengde. Magnificent and mighty, those three-storied stages held more than a thousand performers.

#### CHINESE YOU NEED

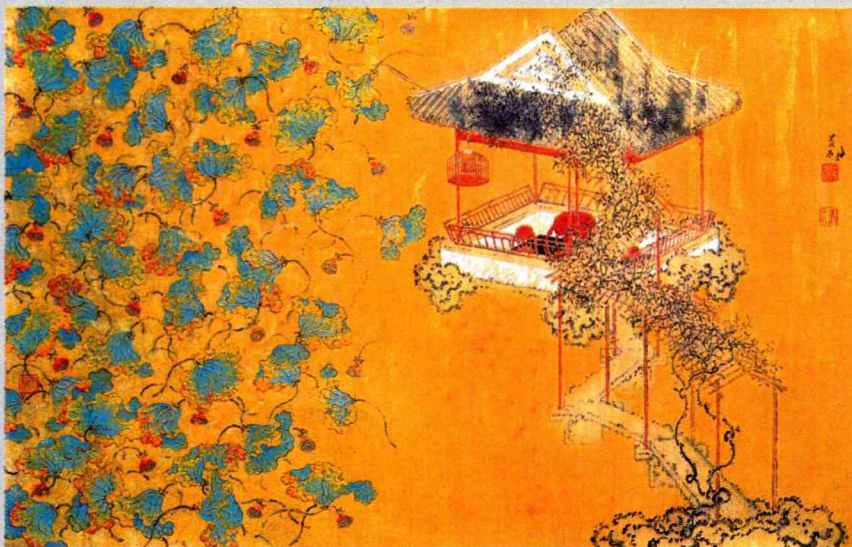
昆曲 Kūnqǔ  
Kunqu Opera

风靡 fēngmǐ  
great popularity



**Old Garden in the Dream, Ink Painting by Ye Fang**

The Kunqu Opera is traditionally called “Water-like Music,” so its theater is beside river through which people enjoy the opera.



**Lotus Pavilion (II), Ink Painting by Ye Fang**

The garden with clear water and fragrant lotus is a perfect place to play and enjoy the opera.

Hànyǔ Zhōng de Xìqǔ Cíhuì

汉语中的戏曲词汇

THEATER TERMS IN CHINESE

zì bào jiā mén

自报家门

(give a self-introduction):

在某些戏曲片段中，演员一出场先把自己扮演的角色的姓名、家世、来历介绍给观众。现在常用来比喻作自我介绍。

In some plays, the performer introduces to the audience the role he or she plays when arriving on the stage. This term is now used to mean a self-introduction.

Lìjù: Qǐng xīn lái de tóngxué zì bào jiā mén ba!

例句：请新来的同学自报家门吧！

Example: Will the new students introduce themselves to us?

liàngxiàng

亮相

(1. strike a pose on the stage 2. make one's debut):

戏曲演员上场下场时或表演舞蹈时，摆一个短时静止的姿势，以突出角色情绪，加强戏剧气氛。现在还可以用来比喻某人或某种产品在公众面前出现。

The actor strikes a short pose upon entry, during performance or before exit to highlight the role's mood and create a dramatic atmosphere. This term now means the first public appearance of a person or product.

Lìjù: Zhè kuǎn xīn shǒujī xiàgèyuè jiāng zài Zhōngguó shìchǎng liàngxiàng.

例句：这款新手机下个月将在中国市场亮相。

Example: This cell phone will make its debut in the Chinese market next month.

fěn mò dēng chǎng

粉墨登场

(enter the stage with makeup):

“粉”，敷在脸上的白粉；“墨”，画眉毛用的黛墨。“粉墨登场”原指戏曲演员化妆上台演出。现在多用来比喻登上政治舞台，含讽刺意。

“粉” means the powder on the face whereas “墨” means the ink applied to the eyebrows. The term means to appear on the stage with makeup. As an idiom, it is usually ironically used, meaning to embark upon a political venture.

Lìjù: Guójiā zāoyù zhànluàn de shíhòu, yìxiē bié yǒu yòng xīn de rén chènjī fěn mò dēng chǎng.

例句：国家遭遇战乱的时候，一些别有用心的人趁机粉墨登场。

Example: Some people with ulterior motives seize the chance to embark upon the political venture when the country is in disasters of war.





# 2

+ Truth of Kunqu Opera

Kūnqǔ de Zhēnróng

昆曲的真容

**P**ut simply, Kunqu Opera is a performing art incorporating poetry, singing, dancing and drama.