

Fu Jin

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Refinement and Elegance:
Chuanqi of the Ming and
Qing Dynasties and
Kunqu Opera



Scholars Reinvent *Xiwen*

As Yuan *zaju* shifted its creative hub from the north to the south it did not take long for Wenzhou, along with neighboring Lin'an, the ancient capital of the Southern Song Dynasty, to become China's most important opera centers for what were now fully-fledged operative performances.

Xiwen re-emerged during the late Yuan and early Ming dynasties in the south of China in reaction to the dominance of northern *zaju*. In order to compete with northern *zaju* and its literary masters, *xiwen* works became more complex. One successful example of this modification was written by the playwright Gao Ming, elevating southern *xiwen* from the realm of folklore through plays such as *Story of the Pipa (Pi Pa Ji)*, so that it gradually replaced northern *zaju*, ushering in a new era of Chinese opera.

Gao Ming was born in the early fourteenth century and lived until the late Yuan or early Ming Dynasty. At the age of forty, Gao was serving as a minor official but he soon retired, moving to the town of Lishe in the east of Ningbo. It was here that Gao wrote his great work *Story of the Pipa*. It is believed that in order to write the play, he worked and slept in a small building for the three years that it took him to finish the work.

Story of the Pipa is about the joys and sorrows of Zhao Wuniang and Cai Bojie. The plot drew on an earlier *xiwen* work of the Song Dynasty where Cai Bojie is separated from his love, Zhao, when he leaves for the capital in search of an official position. However, once his efforts have met with success, he abandons his family. He is eventually killed by being struck by lightning. The story delved deeply into ethics and common values, focusing on the tragic life of Zhao Wuniang.

Southern *xiwen* during the Song and Yuan dynasties was considered to be a low art form which, despite portraying the differences between love and hate, lacked a literary quality.



Gao Ming rewrote the story, keeping the original content and sympathetic character of Zhao Wuniang, but placing the emphasis on Cai Bojie through an in-depth exploration of Cai's psychological states. In Gao Ming's version, it is the three disobediences of Cai Bojie which take center stage.

Story of the Pipa begins with the emergence of Cai Bojie as a dutiful son. He initially refuses the officials who want to recruit him, for the sake of his parents. However his father reprimands him, telling him to value his prospects rather than relying on family love and affection. Reluctant to leave home, Cai Bojie bids farewell to his parents and his wife and leaves for the capital to take part in the imperial examinations. He wins first place in the exams, but difficulties quickly ensue. The emperor wants to oversee the wedding ceremony of the daughter of a senior adviser named Niu, and orders Cai Bojie to marry her. Cai Bojie puts forward many excuses to avoid the marriage but to no avail. Finally, he asks to see the emperor and explains that he cannot serve as an official but must return home to look after his parents. However, the senior advisor uses his influence at court to cover up the fact that Cai Bojie has a wife and elderly parents. He urges the emperor to refuse his request, leaving Cai Bojie's wife and parents to suffer.

Refusing the examination, marriage, and an official rank, are Cai's three disobediences which see him transformed from the ambitious, callous man of the first version of the play into a helpless character who, despite coming first in the imperial examination, is eager to go home. Forced to stay at Niu's house, he misses his parents and virtuous wife and becomes depressed. He sings: "The old ties have been broken, but I am not accustomed to the new ones. It is impossible to have the old ties again, but I will fight hard to rid myself of the new ones. I have tried, but again and again I am thwarted by officials."

Story of the Pipa highlights Cai Bojie's anxiety, but also his virtue.





The Kunqu Opera *Story of the Pipa*, performed by the Jiangsu Suzhou Kunqu Troupe. In this scene Cai Bojie and Miss Niu get married.

Where the original leading character in the story had been Zhao Wuniang, Gao Ming made Cai Bojie the hero of his play, whilst maintaining the kindness and virtuousness of Zhao.

Story of the Pipa's plot consists of two parallel storylines set in two different locations.

The story uses the symbol of the lotus, moon and other scenarios to express the deep concern and longing of Cai Bojie. Zhao's hardships are portrayed through her actions; she eats chaff and shaves off her hair to become a nun. Zhao eats chaff and preserved vegetables so that her in-laws might eat the remaining grain, but her action is given another significance:

Vomiting is painful and fills me with tears. Oh, chaff! You were milled and screened and just like my own pains, you have experienced great hardships. A bitter person eats bitter food, we are two kinds of bitterness meeting, both hard to swallow.

Chaff and rice are mutually dependent, but they are separated by winnowing. One is mean and the other is noble, just like my husband



and I, having no chance to meet again. My husband, you are rice. You are gone, but I cannot look for you. I am the chaff but how can I save others from hunger with chaff? How can I serve my in-laws with good food?

Gao Ming uses the well-known metaphor of chaff, evoking the notion of a husk, in his depiction of the poor wife. Cai's parents die from sadness, one after the other. With no money, Zhao sells her hair to pay for their burials.

In traditional Chinese culture, hair is a symbol of the first formal marriage between a man and a woman. When Zhao sells her hair, therefore, this is a deeply meaningful moment. She even uses her clothes to carry soil to erect a tomb for her parents-in-law. She goes to the capital carrying a pipa and with help from Ms Niu, the couple are finally reunited. Ms Niu persuades her father to allow Cai Bojie to resign from his official post and return to his hometown to offer a sacrifice to his parents.



The Kunqu Opera *Story of the Pipa*, performed by the Jiangsu Suzhou Kunqu Troupe. In this scene Zhao Wuniang eats chaff of the remaining grain in front of her in-laws, invoking their pity.



The story ends with Cai Bojie taking his two wives to sweep his parents' tombs.

The greatness of *Story of the Pipa* lies in the fact that Gao Ming did not avoid the three weaknesses displayed by Cai Bojie; his failure to serve his parents when they were alive, to bury his parents when they died, and to offer a sacrifice to his parents after their burial. Instead, Gao Ming makes the audience sympathize with Cai Bojie, despite his failings. In this way, Gao succeeded in establishing a new kind of aesthetic, which fused scholarly philosophy with the concerns of common people. In this way, *Story of the Pipa* changed the ethical values of the plays about ungrateful scholars common in *xuwen* during the Song and Yuan dynasties. However it also changed their structures. *Story of the Pipa* consists of forty-two scenes, breaking with the four act pattern of Yuan *zaju*, which was constrained by its musical system.

Gao Ming was able to begin the play in a more dramatic way. The parallel storylines heralded a new, dual plot structure for *chuanqi*



The Kunqu Opera *A Wooden Hairpin* performed by the Jiangsu Kunqu Troupe. Here, Aunt Qian receives betrothal gifts from Sun's and Wang's families in Yulian's bedroom. She speaks highly of Sun's wealth, but Yulian insists on choosing the wooden hairpin from Wang's family.



and its influence completely changed the cultural status of *xiwen*. Zhu Yuanzhang, the first emperor of the Ming Dynasty (who reigned from 1368–1398) thought highly of the play, and claimed “If four books and five classics are daily necessities, as necessary as food and clothing, then *Story of the Pipa* is like a delicacy that wealthy or noble families cannot do without.”

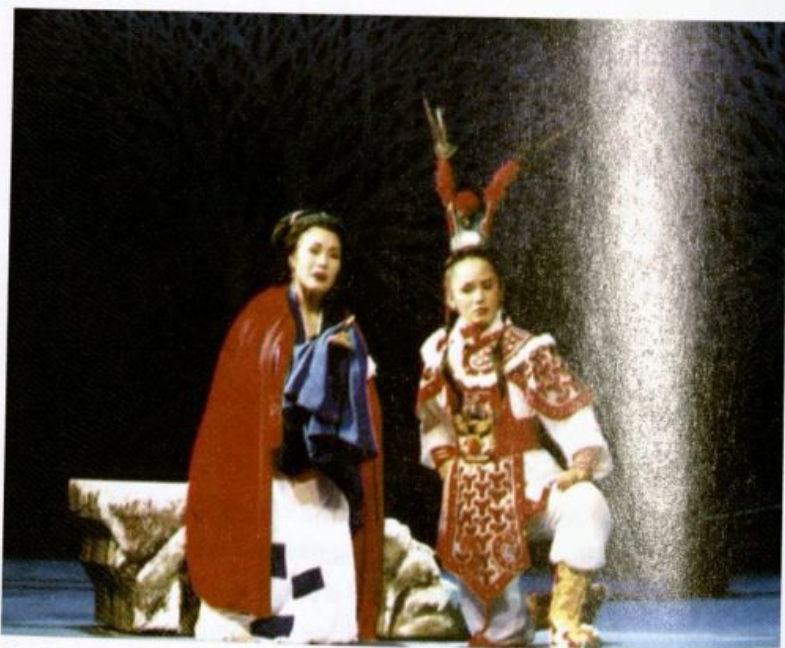
Due to the success of *Story of the Pipa*, Song *xiwen* scripts were elevated and soon replaced Yuan *zaju*, becoming the most influential operatic form in China during the Ming and Qing dynasties. With *Story of the Pipa*, Chinese opera entered mainstream culture.

The status of *xiwen* was further consolidated by the emergence of four plays, *A Wooden Hairpin* (*Jing Chai Ji*), *White Rabbit* (*Bai Tu Ji*), *Praying to the Moon* (*Bai Yue Ji*), and *Killing the Dog* (*Sha Gou Ji*) which were the most important operas to follow *Story of the Pipa*.

A Wooden Hairpin tells the story of a young woman named Qian Yulian who refuses to marry a rich suitor, Sun Ruquan, and instead marries Wang Shipeng, a scholar whose betrothal gift to Qian is a wooden hairpin. Once they are married, Wang goes to the capital to take the imperial examination and successfully passes. Moqi's daughter wants to marry Wang but he refuses and is banished. Problems arise when Sun Ruquan changes a letter from Wang to Qian Yulian, making it into request for a divorce. As a result, Qian Yulian's stepmother forces Qian to remarry. Qian refuses and jumps into the river, but is saved by Qian Zaihe, a newly appointed local official. Believing that Wang is dead, Qian Zaihe adopts Qian Yulian as his daughter, taking her to his official residence. Both Qian Yulian and Wang believe the other to be dead, but still pine for each other. Fortuitously the two meet by the river while offering sacrifices for the other.

White Rabbit is also known as *Liu Zhiyuan*. It is based on a play from the Tang Dynasty, *Zhu Gongdiao of Liu Zhiyuan*. It tells the story of Liu Zhiyuan who leaves home to join the army while his wife, Sanniang, is tortured at home by his brother and sister-in-law. Sanniang gives birth to a son in a mill. Using her mouth to





The Shaoxing Opera *White Rabbit*, performed by Zhejiang Wenzhou Shaoxing Opera Troupe. In this scene Sanniang and her son are reunited after fifteen years of separation.

sever the umbilical cord, she names him Yaojilang, meaning “one whose umbilical chord was bitten off.” She asks Dou Gong to send her son to Liu Zhiyuan. Fifteen years later, Liu Zhiyuan instructs his son to return to his mother. The son does not know where to find her mother, until he meets her drawing water from a well as he is hunting a white rabbit. Liu Zhiyuan eventually returns to the village with his men and is reunited with his wife.

Praying to the Moon is also known as *Story of the Quiet Bower* (*You Ge Ji*). It is adapted from Guan Hanqing’s *The Pavilion of Praying to the Moon*. In Guan Hanqing’s play the story takes place amidst the ravages and turmoil of war, where Jiang Shilong and Wang Ruilan meet while fleeing to safety and get married. The best parts of this work were incorporated into the southern *ximen* *Praying to the Moon*. The characters’ librettos are simple and vivid, maintaining the essence of the original work.





The Kunqu Opera *Killing the Dog*, performed by the Zhejiang Yongjia Conservatory of Kunqu Opera

Killing the Dog also developed from an earlier Yuan *zaju*, *Killing the Dog to Persuade the Husband* (*Sha Gou Quan Fu*). Sun Hua, the son of a wealthy family, plots with two local thugs named Liu Longqing and Hu Zichuan, to drive his brother Sun Rong out of the family. Sun Hua's wife Yang Yuezhen tries to persuade him against the plan but fails, so she kills a dog, puts it in a bag, and places it outside the gate of their house. Sun Hua returns home late at night and is frightened. He asks Liu Longqing and Hu Zichuan for help but they avoid him. The only one willing to help is Sun Rong, whose brotherly affection is stronger than that of Sun Hua's so-called friends. A classic story from the Song and Yuan dynasties, the detailed portrayal of family affection as well as the portrayal of Liu Longqing and Hu Zichuan was especially vivid.

Along with *Story of the Pipa* these four southern *xiwen* marked the beginning of the *chuanqi*, a new era in the development of Chinese opera.



Kunqu Opera and the Exquisite *Penny Pavilion*

The word *chuanqi* came into usage during the Tang Dynasty, when it referred to short stories. However when *xiwen* emerged during the Song and Yuan dynasties, the word *chuanqi* was used to describe an operatic style of narration.

From the Song Dynasty's *The No.1 Scholar Zhang Xie* through to the early Yuan *Story of the Pipa*, operatic plays shared similarities with *zaju*. They consisted of complete narratives told through music alternated with dramatic monologues, and *qupai* (melodies) lyrically represented the central characters.

However, these operas differed from the four-act *zaju*, where the *qupai* used in each act was set by a given formula determined by the palace. The *qupai* selected for *chuanqi* were more flexible. From *The No.1 Scholar Zhang Xie* (which is not divided into different acts) to *Story of the Pipa* (which consisted of forty-two scenes), *xiwen* no longer followed the predetermined musical scores of *zaju*.

The new characteristics of *xiwen* (commonly known as *chuanqi* during the Ming Dynasty) broke conventions on the kind of tunes and number of acts operas had, prioritizing dramatic features above musical requirements.

Chuanqi's musical styles were thus harder to regulate than those of *zaju*. The creators of *chuanqi* were mainly scholars, who sought a means of expression which could be directly reflected in the music. Wei Liangfu, of Taicang, Jiangsu, created exquisite Kunshan tunes, which became the archetypal tune of *chuanqi* of the Ming Dynasty.

Song and Yuan *xiwen* had developed in the Zhejiang region in the south, the product of local folk customs and musical forms.

Similarly, *chuanqi* of the Ming Dynasty developed in the southern regions where a variety of tunes sprang up, including the



Haiyan tune near Hangzhou in Zhejiang and the Yiyang tune in Jiangxi. These tunes replaced northern *zaju*.

When Wei Liangfu created the Kunshan tune, he modified the original arias of the Yiyang and Haiyan tunes, combining the rhythms of southern *xiwen*, which favored the flute, and the styles of northern *zaju*, which favored plucked string instruments.

The opera *Washing Silken Gauze* (*Huan Sha Ji*) by Liang Chenyu, marked the beginning of Kunqu Opera, which employs the Kunshan tune throughout.

Liang Chenyu, an important sixteenth-century dramatist, was born in Kunshan, Jiangsu. *Washing Silken Gauze* was based on *Spring and Autumn of the States of Wu and Yue* (*Wu Yue Chun Qiu*). It consists of forty-five scenes that explore the competition between the states of Wu and Yue. The State of Wu defeats the State of Yue,



The Kunqu Opera *Washing Silken Gauze*, performed by Northern Kunqu Troupe.





The revival scene from the Kunqu Opera *Peony Pavilion*. Liu Mengmei opens Du Lininag's tomb and she is brought back to life. The two then get married.

and King Goujian of Yue adopts a strategy devised by Fan Li, a senior official, to concede defeat and offer great gifts to the King of Wu, which include sending Fan Li's beautiful fiancée Xi Shi.

Following his victory, the King of Wu neglects state affairs while King Goujian lives a poor and hard life. In the end, the State of Yue becomes strong and overcomes its humiliation.

The author abandoned the simplicity of Yuan *zaju* in favor of elegant, rhetorically complex lines. The opera integrated the exquisite *shuimo* tune ("water mill" tune), attracting the praise of a generation of scholars.

From this point onwards, *chuanqi*-style operas followed the norms of the Kunshan tune. *Chuanqi* performed with the Kunshan tune appealed to scholarly tastes and this elegant music gained a special cultural status. Other local tunes of the same period were, by comparison, considered vulgar.

From the beginning of the mid-Ming Dynasty, Kunqu Opera began to spread widely, becoming a symbol of Chinese culture.





In *Interrupted Dream*, the 1960 film version of *Peony Pavilion*, the role of Du Liniang is played by the famous Peking Opera actor Mei Lanfang (on the right). Lanfang's student Yan Huizhu plays the role of Chunxiang.



Chuanqi reached its artistic peak through the writings of Tang Xianzu (1550–1616). Tang Xianzu, a famous Ming Dynasty scholar, was well-known for his *Four Dreams at Linchuan*, four outstanding plays that displayed his great literary talent. The four plays were *Tale of the Wooden Hairpin (Jing Chai Ji)*, *Peony Pavilion (Mu Dan Ting)*, *Nanke Dream (Nan Ke Ji)* and *Handan Dream (Han Dan Ji)*. They shared the common theme of dreaming. *Peony Pavilion*, also known as *Revival of Du Liniang (Huan Hun Ji)*, is perhaps the most outstanding *chuanqi* of the Ming Dynasty.

Peony Pavilion consists of fifty-five scenes and focuses on the erotic desires of Du Liniang, the daughter of Du Bao, governor of Nan'an. Du Liniang dreams of a young scholar she meets in a Peony Pavilion. Deeply moved by this dream, she takes a stroll in the garden and suddenly falls ill. She paints self-portraits and writes a poem, instructing her maid to hide these under a stone by the plum tree at Taihu Lake.

Shortly after, Du Liniang dies and is buried by the plum tree in the garden. Three years later, a scholar named Liu Mengmei comes to town to participate in the imperial examination. He falls ill and seeks a cure in a small shrine, finding the painting of a beautiful girl—Du Liniang. That night, he dreams of her and in his dream Liniang asks him to revive her. Opening her coffin, Liu Mengmei revives Du Liniang. The two lovers decide to get married and go to the capital—Lin'an (present-day Hangzhou).

Liu Mengmei visits Liniang's father Du Bao, and tells him that he has revived his daughter. However Du Bao accuses Liu Mengmei of being a grave robber, captures him and sends him to Lin'an. Unexpectedly, Liu Mengmei wins first place in the imperial examination but Du Bao refuses to accept his daughter's marriage, considering her to be a devil. However, the emperor himself believes Du Linaing and allows the marriage.

The distinctiveness of *Peony Pavilion* lies in its representation of Du Liniang's life and death. A young girl dreams of a lover, a figment of her imagination, but is then revived by the man of her





The Kunqu Opera *Peony Pavilion*, performed by the Suzhou Kunqu Troupe.

dreams years later. Du Liniang dies for her dream lover, and is revived by a real, loyal lover.

This curious story explores the limits of life and death. Tang Xianzu's lyrics sparkle with life, for example in his description of Du Liniang's erotic desires and hidden bitterness:

Already, bright purple and passion pink bloom in profusion, yet next to a crumbling well and faded walls, such splendor is abandoned. But in this glorious season, where are the sounds of joy in this garden? Mornings take wing, evenings unfold; beyond green arbor, rosy clouds soar. In windy strands of rain, gilded pleasure boats nod in misty waves. Maidens shielded by screens, are blinded to such glorious scenes!

All over the verdant hill, the azaleas are in full bloom. Beyond trellis vines, silky mist softly lingers. The peony is beautiful, but blooms late when spring is gone.



Peony Pavilion marks the peak of artistic achievement in *chuanqi* of the Ming and Qing dynasties. Despite displaying less precision in terms of Tang Xianzu's mastery of the rhythms of Kunqu Opera, a fact which drew the criticism and taunts of dramatists with a more familiar command of these rhythms, *Peony Pavilion* is an extraordinary tale which quickly became one of the most popular Kunqu Operas.

Other examples of Kunqu Operas which were widespread at this time include *The Schoolroom* (*Gui Shu*), *Interrupted Dream* (*Jing Meng*), *Pursuing the Dream* (*Xun Meng*), *The Portrait* (*Xie Zhen*), *Soul Departs* (*Li Hun*), *Infernal Judgment* (*Ming Pan*), *Finding the Portrait* (*Shi Hua*), *Union in the Shades* (*You Gou*), *The Pledge* (*Ming Shi*), and *Return to Life* (*Huan Hun*).

Palace of Eternity and Peach Blossom Fan

A very popular Kunqu Opera of the mid-Ming Dynasty was *Palace of Eternity* (*Chang Sheng Dian*) by Hong Sheng (1645-1704), who was born in Qiantang, Zhejiang. Despite his exceptional literary talent, Sheng had a hard life, and he drifted to the capital to make a living selling scripts. Hong Sheng's masterpiece *Palace of Eternity* took more than ten years of complete. The final version, which emerged from two earlier drafts (the first entitled *Chenxiang Pavilion*, and the second *Performing the Rainbow skirt and Feathered Cap Dance*), consisted of fifty different scenes which took two days to perform.

Palace of Eternity is a love story about Li Longji, Emperor Minghuang of the Tang Dynasty and his concubine Yang Yuhuan, and the troubled times in which they lived. It portrays the national outcry which resulted from Li Longji's excessive love for Yang Yuhuan. The first half of the opera focuses on portraying their love and the licentious behavior of Yuhan's brother, Yang Guozhong.

In the "Tribute of Litchi" scene, Li Longji orders the use of a swift horse to pay tribute from Litchi to Yang Yuhuan day and night from the south. The scene is a direct reflection of national complaints.

