

Analysis of the Current Problems and Improvement Methods of Kun Opera Teaching

Manting Xu^{1,a,*}

¹Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, 210000, China

a. xdd1104ya@163.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: Chinese opera revival has been advocated for many decades. There are some measures that can prove that, for example: Teaching textbooks always include units with the theme of Chinese opera. Many universities in China have recruited opera major students who are subsidized by the government. In this context, young people as the main power, still prefer to enjoy popular music like Jazz, rap, and ballads than Chinese opera. This article analyzes the factors that make Kun opera unpopular among young people, the existing problems in teaching Kun opera, the necessity of developing new methods for teaching Kun opera. This article has adopted questionnaire survey and observation method to analyze the reasons that make Kun opera unpopular among young people, the problems in teaching Kun opera and the importance of expanding new methods in Kun opera. It finds that most of the existing teaching methods are vocal teaching, which is difficult to study by students. Dependent on multimedia playback data, it is realized that the formal of Guzheng and Guqin in reediting Kun opera is more popular among the public. Guzheng has absolute advantages in multiple dimensions. These all reflect the importance of adding instrumental music to Kun opera teaching. This article advocates teachers to use new methods in teaching Kun opera that are more acceptable to young people. Teachers also use instrumental methods to let students feel changes in the music more intuitively and simply.

Keywords: Kun opera, existing problems, instrumental teaching, Guzheng.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, instrumental teaching methods have been more discussed and practiced throughout the world. For example, the Suzuki teaching method in Japan proposes that all children can learn music well and improve their overall quality, and learning music well should start with learning musical instruments [1]. As a classical kind of drama, it is important for Kun opera to be abstracted by young people. Therefore, teaching Kun Opera using a new method that integrates modern people's preferences will be more outstanding than teaching Kun Opera based on vocal music alone.

Chinese opera revival has been advocated for many decades—teaching textbooks always include units with the theme of Chinese opera, many universities in China have recruited opera major students who are subsidized by the government. This article aims to analyze whether students' love for Kun opera has increased, whether the acceptance of Kun opera by the student population has expanded, and the existing problems in teaching Kun opera, which are using questionnaire surveys and observation methods in this context. The author argues that it is necessary to explore new application

paths in the teaching of Kun opera, and by discussing the uniqueness of Guzheng in Kun opera teaching, illustrates the uniqueness and importance of instrumental music in the actual teaching of Kun opera. It is hoped that this will provide new ideas and provide for teaching opera to practitioners and innovative perspectives for inheriting traditional Chinese art and culture.

2. Existing Problems in Teaching Kun Opera

The author has learned a large number of cases of Chinese opera teaching courses, live performances and competitions. After interviewing a high school teacher from a middle school in Qinhuai District, Nanjing, the author has realized that using the vocal method is the main way of teaching Chinese opera. Occasionally, Qu Di is used as a tool for teaching traditional Chinese opera because in traditional Kun opera performances. Professor Yuan Jingfang pointed out in her works that “Qu Di is commonly used as accompaniment in Kun opera and in ensemble performances of various regional music genres in the south [2].” Qu Di is often used as an accompaniment to Kun opera. However, the following problems may arise: (1) Vocalization teaching methods are used in Kun opera teaching, which requires a wide vocal range and special vocal techniques for singing, which ordinary students who have not undergone professional Kun opera training cannot achieve. The main group for Kun opera teaching is middle and high school students, most of whom are in the stage of voice switching and have poor practicality; (2) When the Qu Di is used in Kun opera teaching, in order to play melodies with Kun opera characteristics, the performer needs to use a large number of vibrato with real and imaginary fingers, as well as high difficulty front and back leaning and overlapping sounds, which makes it difficult for students as beginners to learn; (3) Without incorporating popular songs that are currently popular among young students, traditional Kun opera eaching lacks appeal; (4) The teaching methods are single, and Kun Opera teaching methods need to be enriched. Guzheng, as the traditional Chinese instrument, can make up for these teaching shortcomings [3].

Some researchers support media applying in opera teaching due to the creativity of costumes displaying and vocal teaching [4]. Actually, it is convenient to opera teaching, but it has no creativity at teaching ways that only apply vocal methods. In the author’s opinion, it is necessary to expand new teaching methods that are harmonious with the performance style and singing style so that the emotional atmosphere of traditional Chinese opera can be better felt.

3. The Necessity of Exploring New Ways to Apply Kun Opera Teaching

The Chinese opera revival has been advocated for many decades. It is common to see that units with the theme of Chinese opera are included in the textbooks of each grade. Many universities in China have recruited opera major students who are subsidized by the government. The author conducted a visit and survey of students. The sample was selected from a middle school in Yancheng City, Jiangsu Province, and students at Nanjing Normal University. The survey results are shown in Figure 1. Among 103 participants, 94 participants (91.26%) have learned about famous Kun opera works from compulsory education textbooks (such as *"The Peony Pavilion"*, *"Peach Blossom Fan"* and *"The Romance of West Chamber"*), 77 participants (74.76%) said they haven’t read Kun opera texts, and 63 participants (61.17%) said they have not heard Kunq opera. Analysis shows that the proportion of students who have a deep understanding of Kun Opera is quite low, indicating that although many people have heard of Kun Opera, their actual exposure is limited and their understanding of Kun Opera is very limited. It can be seen that the traditional teaching mode of singing without music scores (so called "oral teaching": the teacher sings while the students understand the strength, rhythm, tone, etc.) and the teaching mode of singing with music scores are not effective. It is imperative to explore new ways to apply them to Kun opera teaching.

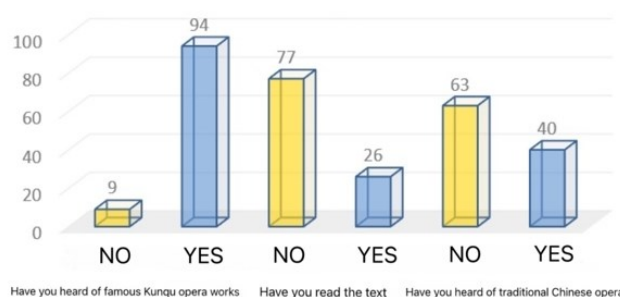


Figure 1: Diagram of Students' Understanding of Kun Opera.

Traditional Kun opera has been recreated into many secondary works, for example, *The Peony Pavilion* adapted into the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* and the new version of “*The Peony Pavilion*”, whose dramatic conflicts were enhanced, the composer weakened its serious and tense atmosphere, and added comedic elements. Media data shows that the work has been played an average of 50000 times on the Bilibili video platform, which has a large young audience. The data reflects the mainstream group's low interest in traditional Kun opera. However, Divine Damsel of Devastation (a modern creation drama in the game "Genshin Impact") has been broadcast 34.589 million times on the Bilibili platform in recent years, which doesn't need to be vigorously promoted. It can let youth groups who are not able to sing traditional Chinese opera start learning opera, and Divine Damsel of Devastation was spontaneously spread by international friends [5]. The niche music group - the ancient style circle (a group of folk spontaneous creation, singing, and dissemination, composed of ethnic music enthusiasts, workers, and listeners, most of whom do not have profit-making nature), has a large number of songs with one or two lines of opera style that are very popular. For instance, if the key word “Chinese classical music” was searched in the IOS system, the platform of 5sing Chinese original music can be found, which downloads amount to 33 thousand. A total of 32534 comments can be found (as of January 15, 2024) at 5 sing, which includes a total of 8429 comments on keywords such as Chinese classical style and related Chinese ancient style singers. Among Chinese ancient style singers, many professional singers, such as Xiao Ai's mother and Li Changchao (both online names), were born into opera families with excellent professional skills. Their artistic styles are a mixture of popular and Chinese opera elements. The unique vocal techniques of traditional Chinese opera combined with a few modern lyrics with traditional musical features are loved by many young people. From this, it can be proven that traditional Chinese opera is not without appeal. Interestingly, compared to the entire Kun opera, fragmented opera music creation is more popular among people. Some people have raised the question: whether only characteristic of ethnic music is loved. Regarding this question, this article collects, analyzes, and summarizes the following reasons why the entire Kun opera cannot be accepted by the student community.

This study collects and analyzes data, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Diagram illustrating the problems faced by students in the inheritance of Kun opera.

Frequency analysis results			
Name	Option	Frequency	Percent
The problem faced by the inheritance of Kun Opera - slow rhythm	NO	63	61.17%
	YES	40	38.83%
The problem faced by the inheritance of Kun Opera- The dialects used in Kun Opera are difficult to understand	NO	23	22.33%
	YES	80	77.67%

Table 1: (continued).

The problem faced by the inheritance of Kun Opera- The literary content expressed is too traditional	NO	58	56.31%
	YES	45	43.69%
The problem faced by the inheritance of Kun Opera- Weak conflict in drama	NO	80	77.67%
	YES	23	22.33%
Total		103	100%

The tempo of Kun opera is slow. A large amount of youth can't adapt to the low tempo of Kun opera, they prefer to listen to some songs more fast, such as jazz, rock, or country music [6]. The average Chinese can speak at a speed of 120-150 words per minute. The lyrics of Kun Opera are spoken at a speed of a sentence containing more than ten words is of only 20-50 words per minute. Taking *The Peony Pavilion* (Danwen version) as an example, in one part of the song Wandering Around the Ground, the eight Chinese words "Idle Courtyard, Fluttering Spring Like Silk" were sung for nearly a minute (06'28"-07'22"). Compared to the popular short videos nowadays, the rhythm of Kun Opera is very slow. It is normal for viewers to feel uncomfortable with the slow pace of Kun opera due to the influence of fast food culture represented by short videos.

Table 2: Student interest level chart for Kun opera.

Topic	Name	Gender (%)		Total	x ²	p
		Female	Male			
Are you interested in Kun opera	Not interest	35(41.67)	7(36.84)	42(40.78)	0.896	0.639
	Mildly interest	31(36.90)	6(31.58)	24(23.30)		
	Very interest	18(21.43)	6(31.58)	37(35.92)		
Total		84	19	103		
*p<0.05**p<0.01						

The chi square analysis in Table 2 presents the survey results on whether one is interested in Kun opera, analyzing the relationship between gender (female and male) and the level of interest in Kun opera (not very interested, very interested, okay). There were a total of 103 participants, including 84 females and 19 males.

The result of chi square analysis (χ^2) is 0.896, with a corresponding p-value of 0.639. In statistics, a p-value is used to measure the probability of an observed data result occurring. If the probability is low (usually set at a threshold of $p<0.05$), the result is considered statistically significant, meaning there is a significant correlation between two variables. In this case, the p-value is 0.639, far above the standard threshold of 0.05, indicating that there is no statistically significant correlation between gender and interest in Kun opera.

(1) A total of 40.78% of the participants expressed little interest in Kun opera, with almost half of the students believing that it is a niche culture. The majority of students do not understand Chinese Kun opera and think that the pace is too slow and the time is too long. There are also a few students who prefer popular elements and are influenced by foreign cultures. How to deal with this situation is still a major issue for Kun Opera to cater to the market and effectively spread on it.

(2) The high difficulty of local language makes it difficult for people to understand and sing [7]. Chinese opera is influenced by the cultural environment during its creation and has a distinct regional character. In the creation of traditional Chinese opera, local language is an important influencing

factor. Due to various differences in local languages, in addition to the Central Plains Mandarin and modern standard Chinese (northern local languages) that exist as Mandarin, most local languages such as Wu, Gan, Hakka, and Huai are very difficult to understand. For example, Huai Opera is performed on the basis of Jianghuai Mandarin, while also taking into account the languages of Huai'an, Yanfu, and other places, making it difficult to understand. Kun Opera is divided into Southern Kun Opera and Northern Kun Opera. Northern Kun Opera uses Zhongzhou Mandarin (close to Mandarin, easy to understand), while Southern Kun Opera generally uses the local language of Wu for recitation, which even most Kun Opera enthusiasts cannot understand [8]. Naturally, there are also many difficulties in dissemination.

(3) Kun operas are performed by ancient Chinese as usual, which requires a high level of literary proficiency. Although the teaching of ancient Chinese has been reflected in various stages of China's nine-year compulsory education and occupies an important proportion in Chinese language exams, it is still difficult to understand compared to modern language. As a comprehensive art form integrating music, literature, and dance, Chinese opera has left many classic literary works from the Song dynasty to the Qing dynasty. The general audience is the upper class, and literary and artistic qualities coexist, requiring certain aesthetic ability and literary level of the audience. For instance, Wang Wei, who wrote *A farewell song in the Town of Wei*, is well known all over China. A large number of students can recite his poetry due to school demand. When searching modern secondary creative works from *A farewell song in the Town of Wei*, the author found that the click through rate is much higher than the original full version of Kun Opera. Most students only stay at the level of understanding the names of a few Kun opera - *The Peony Pavilion*, *The Romance of West Chamber*, *Tempters in the Temple*, without truly listening to Kun and reading the text. For example, the title of the work *The Peony Pavilion* was found to be familiar to 70% of students through a survey, as it is a traditional Chinese opera. However, only 5% of students have further knowledge of the text and music of the work. Except for a few important sentences, such as "Last life Palace hall" and "I wish to be a pair of birds in heaven and a pair of branches in the earth," the rest of the musical phrases are rarely known. Due to the fact that early versions of Chinese opera were written in traditional Chinese characters, the cultural requirements for listening to Kun opera were high. Through feedback from viewers on site, in video comments, online communication and other channels, it can be found that most people's difficulties still remain at the stage of not being able to recognize some traditional Chinese characters, let alone further understanding and analyzing ancient Chinese.

(4) The dramatic conflicts in traditional Kun opera are relatively weak. This has gradually changed under the adaptation of modern creators, such as "Zhe Kou" in the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion*, which allows enemies to appear arrogantly and incorporate jokes. The dialogue has also been dramatized, bringing the audience a sense of appreciation. But there are not many works like this, and a large number of works still need to be created.

Due to the influence of media fragmented information, short videos of only one minute or even a dozen seconds are highly regarded as hot creative moments. In order to stimulate users' senses, works are often added with exaggerated music and roller coaster like plot conflicts, causing a large amount of dopamine secretion in the audience's brain. This sustained and high-intensity stimulation on the brain gradually raises the brain's tolerance threshold for information stimulation. Kun opera as an ancient entertainment was usually performed for a few hours and was more popular among the general public compared to short videos of several tens of seconds. For instance, in the Bilibili software with 4.91 million downloads (iOS App Store), the uploaded more traditional videos, such as the beauty of Kun opera taught by the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and the average playback volume of Kun opera enjoyed by classic works is about 50000. However, when the innovative and changing Kun opera forms are added, there is an overwhelming gap in the playback volume, and the national team of "Goddess Chop View" is really Wudan! For example, the video of "Guqin * Kun Opera" is popular,

"Guqin * Kun Opera" worships heaven and earth", "Kun Opera+Guzheng+Opera Tune=Rocket!" "HITA" Chiling "has an average broadcast volume of nearly two million, and most of the videos related to cross musical instrument creation and performance of opera are Guqin and Guzheng.

Most people cannot sing a part of traditional Kun opera, but when it comes to modern popular works such as "Chiling" (Tan Jing's version incorporates Kun opera *The Peony Pavilion*, HITA did not specify the addition of this element as the original singer), *Goddess Splitting the Temple*, *Drunken Concubine*, etc., most people can subconsciously sing a line: "In chaotic times, the floating duckweed endures the flames of war and burns mountains and rivers, and the humble do not dare to forget their concern for the country." This has resonated with countless young students. "Chiling" as a key word is searched at Bilibili software, which ranks the top ten most viewable works with an average of 9.9087 million views. In comparison, "*The Peony Pavilion*" as a key word only ranks with an average of 2.8115 million views. (Among them, the number of views was 19.779 million, with "Chiling" ranking first in terms of views. However, the introduction stated the addition of elements of Kun opera *The Peony Pavilion*, so it was included in the list). Mao Zedong emphasized at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art that all forms of literature and art are created by the people and serve the people [9]. Consequently, traditional thinking is abandoned, and popular works are recognized as natural products that emerge in response to the larger environment. The improvement of Kun Opera teaching is also a natural change.

In summary, the reasons why Kun opera cannot be widely accepted by student groups include slow story pacing, weak plot conflicts and the elevated threshold posed by local dialects and ancient Chinese language. Young students, as the main force for inheriting and promoting national art in the future, are a crucial group for traditional music culture transmission that cannot be overlooked. Mainstream media also needs to explore the Kun opera market in ways that can better appeal to young people. Teaching is a key method that can be integrated into students' daily lives. Although Kun opera occupies an important proportion in school-based textbooks, it is still deliberately ignored as a "difficult" unit in classrooms. By improving new teaching methods for teachers and new experience methods for students, Kun opera, as a national art form, can be promoted among young people, which is an important improvement for inheriting excellent Kun opera culture.

4. Conclusion

This article analyzes the necessity of exploring new ways to apply Kun opera teaching, the factors that Kun opera is not popular among young people, the existing problems in teaching Kun opera and demonstrates the uniqueness of the zither in teaching Kun opera [10].

Due to the recent emphasis on academic norms, most articles around 2000 did not cite references, making it difficult to trace the source. Therefore, the author tries to cite papers from scholars and experts as much as possible. When collecting APP related data, the software can display fewer comments and further data collection is needed. In recent years, the teaching of traditional Chinese opera has received widespread attention. As a teaching difficulty, traditional Chinese opera has rarely appeared in the evaluation of excellent courses in primary and secondary schools. However, in recent years, many traditional Chinese opera themed courses have appeared in the form of large units in primary and secondary school competitions. It is predicted that there will be many discussions on new ways, systems, and new creations of traditional Chinese opera teaching in the future.

This article recognizes the singularity of existing Kun opera teaching methods, the high difficulty of vocal teaching, and the importance of introducing instrumental music into Kun opera teaching. Through multimedia playback data, it is recognized that the Guzheng and Guqin are more popular in spreading Kun opera, and the Guzheng has absolute advantages in multiple dimensions in Kun opera teaching. According to the fact that the playback volume of traditional Kun opera music related to the use of video software by the public is mostly not ideal, while the playback volume of popular

opera music integrated with guzheng and guqin is surprisingly high, it can be seen that this is the aesthetic of the masses. Teaching Kun opera in a new way that is more accepted by the times, using a new way of classroom teaching that can move students more, and using instrumental music teaching to more intuitively and simply feel the changes in the music can also lay a solid foundation for the future development and inheritance of Kun opera.

References

- [1] Yixin Pian. *Talent is not innate - Reflections on "The Practice of Talent Development" by Suzuki Town* [J]. *Chinese Music Education*, 2004 (01): 25-27.
- [2] Jingfang Yuan. *Ethnic Instrumental Music (Revised Edition)* [M]. Higher Education Press, 2004.
- [3] Yingrui Wang. *Chinese zither music art in the 20th century* [D]. Chinese Academy of Art, 2007.
- [4] Liangyi Fu. *Research on the Current Status of Contemporary College Students' Cognition of Opera Art and Suggestions for Inheritance and Development: A Case Study of Tangshan Region*. *Drama Home*, 2019 (25): 12-14.
- [5] Mengjing He. *The implantation and online dissemination of Chinese opera in games* [D]. *Shanghai Conservatory of Music*, 2023. DOI:10.27319/d.cnki.gsyyy.2023.000230.
- [6] Tingsen Zhang. *Preliminary Exploration of Tango Music* [J]. *Journal of the PLA Academy of Arts*, 2009 (02): 91-93
- [7] Shouming Li. *On the Interactive Relationship between Local Language and Local Opera Music* [J]. *Chinese Musicology*, 2007, (04): 77-80. DOI:10.14113/j.cnki.cn11-1316/j.2007.04.013.
- [8] Congming Ding, Zhenlin Ji, Yu Lei, et al. *Local Language Diversity and Market Integration: A Perspective from Urban Agglomerations*. *Economic Research*, 2018, 53 (11): 148-164.
- [9] Zedong Mao. *Speech at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art* [J]. *Chinese Agricultural Science*, 1966 (08): 1-20.
- [10] Zitong Zhang. *On the Importance of the Left Hand Technique of "Following the Tone to Create Rhyme" in Guzheng Performance* [D]. Shanxi University, 2017.