Traditional Opera Consumption as Chinese Middle Class New Game of Distinction

Abstract: This article critically examines the formation of a new art world in the new millennium, the recreation of traditional Chinese opera *Kunqu* and its associated new middle class taste construction. Previous writers have studied the new Chinese middle class’ consumption patterns of Western goods and luxury brand items. But this is the first article that investigates how a traditional Chinese art form has become a key part of cultural distinction for the new Chinese middle class. It argues that the art world of *Kunqu* has been developed through consistent government funding support over a decade, artists’ collaboration and experimentation, along with the specific targeting of university students, identifying them as the future middle class and nurturing them as future consumers. It is suggested that the evolution of a new Chinese art market and accompanying consumption habits reflect the castrated political power of the middle class, providing an escape route for comfort and survival under increasingly tightened Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ideological control.

Key words: China, Opera, Art Worlds, Market, Production, Consumption, Middle Class, Distinction

*Introduction*

This research examines how, in the late 1990s, the near-extinct traditional art form *Kunqu* gained a new art world, with the emergent Chinese middle class as its consumers by the mid 2010s. This research utilizes theories from both production and consumption to highlight the inter-connection between the development of a new product and a new consumption habit. It has three parts. The first part articulates the theoretical framework to be used and the reasons for such an approach. It will also raise research questions which will be answered within the conclusion. The second part provides the background of historical scholar-official distinction through *Kunqu* and examines the creation of the new Chinese middle class and their quest for
cultural capital. This part highlights the government’s role in actively directing the formation of a national identity associated with historical distinction to generate global soft power. Such state ambition is embedded within both cultural policy and the university curriculum. It is under the influence of such edicts that artists’ experimentation and collaboration gradually evolved the new art world of Kunqu, along with a new brand of Kunqu firmly associated with middle class consumption. The third part provides case studies of three Kunqu productions of The Peony Pavilion, produced at the turn of the 21st century to illustrate the theories in full. After these case studies there is reflection and conclusion, answering the questions initially raised and conveying the crucial role of government as well as artists in the creation of a new art world and associated cultural tastes. It suggests that the rise of Kunqu reflects the castrated political voice of the middle class, with their value and identity resting merely on consumer power and the fantasized historical distinction of ‘a leisure class’.

Theories on Production and Consumption

In Becker’s Art Worlds (1984) the author articulated the importance of long term investment, collaboration and experimentation before a new art world could emerge. He proposes that ‘we should not confuse innovation with the development of an art world’. This is because ‘new art worlds develop around innovations, but most innovations do not produce new art worlds’. The birth of new art worlds is the process of mobilizing people to join in a cooperative activity on a regular basis (Becker 1984: 310-311). Using Becker’s theory, this paper illustrates how a new art world of Kunqu has emerged and developed through a network of different participants over a decade of consistent innovation and collaboration. It examines how such a process has allowed the audience to learn the unfamiliar conventions and become the key aspect of the art world — the loyal consumers for a new art world to be created.

Theories on of cultural consumption draw on the notion of distinction. Aristotle defines the concept of distinction as referring to ‘the different’ and articulates the concept of
classes as subjective rather than objective entities. Such an understanding of distinction is developed by Bourdieu as a mark of legitimacy, or illegitimacy, based on power and influence. Through the differences in the consumption of culture, the different classes demonstrate their different status from other classes and participate in the ‘game of distinction’ (Bourdieu 1984: 57). Another important theorist who developed Aristotle’s concept of distinction is the 19th century economist and social critic Thorstein Veblen (1899/1994). Strongly influenced by Darwinian thinking and faced with a newly rising middle class in 19th century America, Veblen articulated the concept of ‘conspicuous consumption’ and ‘the leisure class’. The leisure class traditionally consists of ‘the noble and the priestly classes, together with much of their retinue’ (1899/1994: 1), and ‘the emergence of a leisure class coincides with the beginning of ownership’, in particular the ownership of women and property. Veblen insists that to be accepted as ‘the leisure class’, conspicuous consumption of luxury goods is not enough. Rather ‘in order to avoid stultification, he must also cultivate his tastes’ (Veblen 1899/1994: 47). One must demonstrate the standard of ‘the gentleman way of life’ with ‘refined tastes, manners, and habits of life that are a useful evidence of gentility, because good breeding requires time, application, and expense, and can therefore not be compassed by those whose time and energy are taken up with work’ (1899/1994: 30, 31). To Veblen, the game of distinction as a development from a predatory period of more brutal violent struggle translated into a quasi-peaceful period of social struggle in which societies are stratified by their differential capacity and taste.

Although both Bourdieu and Veblen have well-known theories on of class-related consumption and distinction, Veblen’s theoretical model, which was developed in the 19th century (when America was forming a new middle class), is more appropriate in analyzing the behavior of the newly emerging Chinese middle class. In particularly, Veblen’s concept of a ‘trickle down system’ on of how the lower social class obtains distinction by imitating the upper ‘leisure class’ way of life is most applicable in analyzing the reconstruction of Chinese emerging middle class taste. Therefore, this paper will use Veblen’s theory of ‘the
leisure class’ and ‘conspicuous consumption’ as the framework to for analysing how Kunqu has been revived as conspicuous consumption, for the creation of a new Chinese middle class distinction.

Guided by the theories of production and consumption, this paper seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How has the Kunqu art world managed to reinvent itself, from the least popular art form amongst urban youth in the late 1990s to the cultural distinction of the middle class by the mid-2010s?
2. Why would the middle class accept Kunqu consumption as a valued product for distinction?
3. What is the connection between production and consumption in the making of Kunqu in relation to our understanding of the macro evolution of China politically, socially, and economically in the new millennium?

We will first examine what Kunqu is and its link with the formation of the Chinese middle class. It is suggested that Kunqu, as the cultural distinction of the historical scholar-official class, has been identified with contemporary college graduates, turned new middle class, relating the two as a continued means of gaining social distinction and reconnected cultural distinction.

Kunqu as Scholar-Official Cultural Distinction

In traditional China, the scholar-official (shidaifu) stood at the pinnacle of society, second only to members of the Imperial family. It was the Confucius examination, as the way of selecting political and social bureaucrats from around 200 AD, that allowed Chinese scholars to obtain political and social prestige and privilege (Murck and Fong 1980: 1). Chinese scholar-officials have historically distinguished themselves through their aesthetic taste and cultural consumption in calligraphy, painting and poetry. From the Ming dynasty (1366-1644), the scholar-officials pursued a new form of cultural distinction: the garden and Kunqu.
The rise of the Ming garden corresponds with two political and social changes. First, it was an act of artistic rebellion against the Song era (960-1279) neo-Confucian doctrine on natural repression, especially the infamous restriction on women, which included widow worshiping and feet binding. Second, the Ming dynasty experienced the rise of eunuch political power and the persecution of scholar-officials. To have a piece of land and to build a garden where the scholar could retreat from the society they served, to escape from the political power struggle, became a popular desire (Xia 2009: 15; Du 2010: 128; Dong 2011: 235). A garden may have been the desire of all official-scholars but only a handful of property owning landlord scholar-officials were able to materialize such power (Clunas 1996: 10; Yu 2011: 10). However, a garden without *Kunqu* does not truly represent the cultured elite class taste.

*Kunqu* derived from Suzhou, China’s eastern coastal region, and was originally a kind of popular local singing. From the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), an annual *Kunqu* festival was held at the bottom of Suzhou’s Tiger Mountain and this continued for over 200 years until the rise of diverse regional opera in the early Qing dynasty (1644-1911) overtook it in terms of what we would now call its market dominance (Xie and Wang 2005: 65). Despite *Kunqu*’s wide popularity, it was the private *Kunqu* theatre that held the most distinction. By and large, the Ming private *Kunqu* theatre belonged to the scholar-official elite class. Virtually all of the best actors were owned by the scholar-official class and all recognized playwrights, directors and critics came from the social stratum of the scholar class. The troupe of a Ming private theatre was inevitably made of female performers, usually purchased from the ages of 6-7 into the family as semi-servants, who held an ambiguous status between performers and family concubines (Shen 2005). The private troupe performance was often conducted in the garden pavilion, erected above the water (Liu 2005). Scholars would sit across the water, with rocks and water serving as natural amplifying systems, sipping fresh tea and watching their newly composed lyrics performed by their favorite concubine singers.

As private *Kunqu* theatre disapproved of any financial compensation, very few of the landowner scholar-official class could sustain such an expensive hobby for too long (Shen
2005: 22). The private Kunqu troupe owners, with few exceptions, were landed official-scholars with exceptional literary skills as well as substantial financial power. Property and women, together with ‘refined tastes, manners and habits of life, are useful evidence of gentility’ which embodies the distinction of a leisure class (Veblen 1994: 20-22). In this case, a garden and private Kunqu troupe marked the distinction of the historical Chinese elite leisure class.

Following defeat in the UK-Sino Opium Wars in the 1840s and 1860s, and subsequently series of invasions from both the West and Japan, China’s long sense of superiority was shaken to the core. Traditional art forms and Confucian doctrine were viewed as the millstones weighing down China’s modernization. In 1905, the Confucius examination was abolished, therefore ending the centuries-long scholar-official class (McDermott 2006, Wang 2014). New modern universities were established and institutions such as Beijing University led the new cultural movement with ‘science’ and ‘democracy’ as the foundation of a new value and university students critical mind as the new identity of educated class (Weston 2004: 6). A new phase of modern China is in the making.

**Chinese Middle Class, consumers seeking distinction**

The development of critical minds and modern institutions have, however, met continuous challenges in modern Chinese history. After the university system was interrupted by both the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and the Civil War (1928-1949), in 1952 China established the National Higher Education Entrance Examination, or gaokao. This became the prerequisite test for entrance into all higher education institutions. The gaokao system was abandoned in 1966 following the Cultural Revolution but was reinstated in 1977. From 1978 to 2004, the number of students that enrolled in colleges and universities grew rapidly, the total enrollment in higher education nearly tripling from 1999 to 2003 (Yusuf and Nabeshima 2006). According to surveys conducted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the first generation of China middle class emerged at the turn of the new
millennium, and accounted for 15% of the total population in China. The figure rose to 23% in 2006 and 30% in 2010 (Lu 2002, 2010). Economists forecast that the size of the middle class could reach 74% by 2030 (Kharas and Gertz 2010: 43).

The concept of ‘middle class’ is very much a Western discourse and scholars are still debating how to quantify the definition of the Chinese middle class under unique socialist Chinese regime (Gu and Goldman 2004: 11, Griffiths 2012, Goodman 2013, Chan 2014, Hulme 2014). However, two elements of measurement agreed by scholars are university educational capital and potential economic earnings (Chen 2013: 157). College graduates, with their high educational level and potentially high economic earning powers, are seen as the backbone of the Chinese middle class (Chen 2013: 60-61, Crabb 2010, Liu 2008). New college graduates are welcomed into the city and groomed to be pillars of the middle class population (Wei 2007: 12–17, Yusuf and Nabeshima 2006). However, with modern China deliberately abandoning traditional culture and the limits on Western cultural consumption instituted during the Mao era, this new middle class emerged at the turn of the 2000 as a whole exhibited limited cultural capitals, both traditional Chinese and modern Western forms (Andreas 2009).

The new Chinese middle class are keenly aware of their limitation and have been consciously consuming products that would give them the associated distinction (Cheng 2010, Nias 2010). Research has highlighted the thirst for Chinese new middle class consumption, in particular Western cultural goods such as wine, coffee and luxury international brands (Guo 2016, Tsai and Yang and Liu 2013, Henningsen 2012). Meanwhile, there has been a genuine lack of enthusiasm in consuming traditional Chinese culture.

Since the abolition of the Confucius examination in the early 20th century, traditional art forms have been criticized by modern scholars who have purposely distanced themselves from the art forms (Wang 2014, McDermott 2006, Weston 2004). Kunqu, as the historical scholar-official leisure class way of life, gradually faded into obscurity. In Mao’s era, state centralization of art production and consumption provided limited options for traditional
cultural consumption and by the late 20th century virtually no university student had actually heard of Kunqu. A similar general disinterest applied across all traditional art forms in China (Ma 2015). Such unbalanced cultural consumption led to increased concern from Chinese scholars and the government. Scholar Hu Huilin from Shanghai Jiaotong University is one of the first scholars to warn of such Western focused consumption and escalate it to the level of national security risk:

Chinese indigenous cultural forms are now facing the turning point of life and death. Annually imported American films occupy over 60 percent of the Chinese native film market. Whilst American software companies are purposely making Chinese people addicted to pirate films, they pursue the Chinese for copyright responsibility and consequently hammer down Chinese media industry development. Such criminal planning leads the Chinese cultural sectors to suffer from endless piracy problems, and face the danger of survival. What the Chinese cultural business people strongly desire is to build a fence to prevent the new invasion. (Hu 2000: 13)

Hu’s assertion was heard by senior members of the CCP. On the 2002 Sixteenth Chinese Communist Party Report, the then President of China Jiang Zemin emphasized the importance of developing indigenous culture for individual and for national value and identity:

In today’s world, culture and economy are fused together and play a key role in displaying a nation’s competitiveness. The strength of culture is deeply rooted in the nation’s creativity. Every (Communist) party member must understand the strategic role cultural development plays and how such development may push forward the prosperity of Socialism. (Jiang 2002: 38)
Whilst Western cultural change was rarely imposed in this way from above, historically these changes throughout Chinese history have been governmentalized. Traditional Chinese culture is increasingly seen as a soft power, for the Chinese government to insert its value and distinction on the global stage (Mokyr 2002, Samuel Adshead 2004).

In the following section we will examine three productions of *The Peony Pavilion* produced at the turn of the 21st century. We will see that the three productions evolved from ‘art for art’s sake’ in the late 1990s, to ‘university students’ conspicuous consumption education’ of the early 2000s, and finally a firm association with ‘middle class identity’ by the 2010s. The process illustrates to us how a new art world and new consumption habits are created.

*Case Studies, Three productions of The Peony Pavilion*

The most famous *Kunqu* production is *The Peony Pavilion*. Written in 1598 by scriptwriter Tang Xianzu¹, the story depicts a young lady Du Liniang, of an elite scholar-official class who had a dream in which she met a young scholar Liu Mengmei and fell in love with him. Unable to fulfil her dream she died of love sickness. When the cause of her death was recounted to the Judge of the Underworld it touched the Judge and her soul was released back to the human world. Liniang searched and found her dreamed lover Liu Mengmei who exhumed her body and brought her back to life. Since its first production, *The Peony Pavilion* has been a favourite of the scholar class. Contemporary scholar Bai Xianyong comments that ‘it may not score the highest mark for scripts and lyrics, compared to other *Kunqu* productions, but it certainly achieved the highest literature standard in that it inspired people in the history of Chinese literature and theatre to search deep for the meaning of humanity’ (Six Hundred Years of *Kunqu*, 2011). It is this production that has become the most popular piece for artists to revive *Kunqu*.

¹ Unless specified, all Chinese names will follow Chinese convention with surname appearing before first name.
1. 1990s Kunqu, ‘Art for Arts Sake’

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

Born in 1963, Director Chen grew up in the era with the least memory and association of the classical elite leisure class, which gave him the freedom of artistic creativity, but also caused insensitive artistic fusions. Chen was trained in Hunan Huaguxi or Flower and Drum opera, a regional folk art form that derived from beggar’s singing. Like other folk art forms, the distinctive artistic characteristics of Flower and Drum opera are its carnival spirit: noise, coarseness and interaction with the audience through which brings renewal (Xiang 2016: 12, Bakhtin 1984: 7). In Chen’s 1998 production, the director inserted the distinctive Kunqu class symbol – a garden pavilion was erected on stage with water surrounding it. However, such an important symbol of historical leisure class distinction was then accompanied by elements of Huaguxi: throughout the performance the audience was entertained by the visual
extravagance of colorful costumes, acrobatics and stilt walking and the occasional search for missing characters amongst the audience (Zeitlin 2002: 129). Although Chen may well have been intentionally breaking down the elite scholar-official class distinction with lower class cultural representations, this was never clearly articulated.

![Image](image.jpg)

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

Chen’s imaginative artistic creativity would not have caused such a sensation from Shanghai Cultural Bureau if this production had been shown within Mainland China, for throughout the 1980s and 1990s many highly controversial and creative operatic pieces were produced which stretched audience appetite (Joy and Sherry 2004: 320-324). However, to have it performed for the first time on the international stage with such a mixed cultural class representation was controversial. Without Chinese government support, Chen’s production was never staged in China. In fact, the New York Lincoln Centre was the only occasion that Chen exhibited his production. Chen’s innovation and determination to bring the production alive deserves admiration. However, it stays at the level of innovation, without producing a new art world, nor change of audience taste.

The irony is that nearly all of the Chinese audience who were able to attend the Lincoln Centre, USA for this production in the late 1990s were people with both traditional classical cultural capital and Western cultural capital as well as economic capital. They were
predominantly the official-scholar elite class who left the mainland before the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Chen’s controversial experimental Kunqu served as a painful reminder of the lost and deeply buried memory of the elite scholar-official class distinction and the ‘gentlemen way of life’ once held. Amongst the audience was the Taiwanese scholar Bai Xianyong. After watching Chen’s production, Bai was determined to produce his own interpretation of The Peony Pavilion and to ‘present the most beautiful classical Chinese art form to the world audience’ (Six Hundred Years of Kunqu 2011).

2. Early 2000s Kunqu, the Conspicuous Consumption

Born in 1938 in the South Delta of Mainland China, Bai Xianyong was the son of one of the famous Nationalist party generals Bai Congxi. Growing up amongst the elite class, many family parties were arranged and attended by Madam Jiang Jieshi herself. Bai’s first view of The Peony Pavilion starred Mei Lanfang. After the CCP captured Mainland China in 1949, Bai migrated to Taiwan with his family and later obtained degrees in both Taiwan and America and developed a career as a university professor in Taiwan (Bai 2016). As an island of exiled diaspora, the nostalgic memory of mainland China and traditional values provides the Taiwanese with a vague and yet strong sense of identity (Lei 2011: 18). To revive traditional Kunqu elite class distinction was a national as well as personal ambition and Bai had in mind a particular group as audience – the young scholars of the universities.

Bai’s act would not have been possible if there had not been an active cultural policy in place from the mid-1990s to teach traditional Chinese art forms as cultural capital to Chinese university students. From the early 2000s, a new central cultural policy was in place which stated that for any state traditional opera house to receive full funding, 20% of performances must be staged at universities. Meanwhile, following the 1989 student protests, Chinese universities received state funding for suzhi education, which placed emphasis firstly on patriotic education and gradually swings emphasis onto traditional cultural education. Students watching traditional opera performances became a compulsory credit bearing
attendance (Ma 2015, Crabb 2010, Joy and Sherry 2004). With government policy support
and Bai’s social capital, the production did not need to worry about market profit. Such
distinction of Kunqu was key for Ming dynasty private elite scholars – any financial
compensation of private Kunqu theatres was regarded as being ‘beneath the scholars’ (Shen

In the early 2000s, in collaboration with Suzhou Kunqu Company Bai produced the
Youth Version of The Peony Pavilion, reducing Dir. Chen’s 20hr performance to 9hrs with
the stage set as an empty black box to maximize audience imagination. Femininity and youth
being the distinctive features of his production. Bai selected two young performers, with little
stage experience but the most idealized feminine physiques, and had them trained by two
renowned Kunqu performers, Wang Shiyu and Zhang Jiqing, both in their late 60s. Bai
insisted that the most important part of the production was the youth, as the ‘performers can
portray the roles better and the movements are extremely difficult to get to perfection and to
become beautiful’ (Bai 2013). It is, of course, questionable to claim that performers need to
be of similar age to the roles in order to perform them better. Perfection of idealized feminine
beauty is not ‘extremely difficult’ but rather obtained through the process of preselection and
thorough training (Ma 2012). However, what is crucial is that these comments reveal the reinforced connection between Kunqu and sexuality. As previously mentioned, private Kunqu performers were exclusively young females with ambiguous subservient and sexual status, who belonged to the land-owning scholar-official elite class. Such idealized femininity and performativity is not only for the fantasized consumption of the male gaze but, as Veblen reminds us, it represents the power of elite class domination and ownership. To revive the representation of Kunqu through femininity and beauty is therefore not artistically associated, but the establishment of a class distinction.

In 2004, Bai Xianyong debuted his Kunqu production, the Youth Version Peony Pavilion, at Shanghai TongJi University, and delivered a series of lectures, seminars and discussion groups on Kunqu, before or after performances. To have an opera company performance accompanied by talks at a university is not new; but such talks mainly emphasise the technique of Kunqu performativity. Bai, however, narrated Kunqu as a distinctive cultural capital of ‘what historically a gentleman’s life had been’, with emphasis placed on the aesthetic daily life in relation to garden and Kunqu (Zhang and Li 2005, Li, 2009, Yu 2011, Ge 2013). Veblen reminds us that ‘in order to gain and to hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence’ (86). Bai in turn reminded the university students that to be a true gentleman and move into the class of distinction it is not enough to have just a degree certificate and even potential material wealth. The knowledge and ability to consume Kunqu as a ‘gentleman’s way of life’ was the vital evidence to qualify oneself as the class of distinction in the new millennium. Appadurai (1996) states that late industrial consumption relies on a peculiar tension between fantasy and nostalgia that gives substance (and sustenance) to consumer uncertainty about commodities, money and self-identity. In the case of Bai’s Kunqu, nostalgia is aroused for the uncertain consumers to pursue a fantasized identity of the elite scholar-official, which in turn was educated to the Chinese university students.
For the next six years the production toured around universities both throughout mainland China and globally, consistently delivering lectures, alongside university performances. In a survey conducted in 2012 over 100 thousand audience members had watched Bai’s production, 70% were young people with degree level education and above (Wang 2012: 30). By the early 2010s, the very name Kunqu had become the embodiment of elite scholar class. Bai’s production may be a personal journey of soul-searching for once held class distinction, yet he has nurtured university students to consume Kunqu as the new game of distinction and created the concept of ‘a leisure class’.

3. Mid-2010 Kunqu – The Middle Class Cultural Distinction

Neither Dir. Chen, nor Bai were commercially minded. Not because they did not want to, but the Kunqu market was at its bleakest at the turn of the new millennium. However, by the early 2000s the first generation of the university students turned new middle class had matured and they were eager to take the conspicuous consumption for their cultural identity and social distinction (Chen 2013: 157). It is against this background that we see a new phase of Kunqu development, with the students turned middle class as the loyal consumers. This new movement is led by Zhang Jun.

Back in 1996 Zhang Jun was a Kunqu performer at the Shanghai Kunqu Company. He was originally selected as the lead role of Liu Mengmei in Dir. Chen Shizheng’s The Peony Pavilion. After over a year of rehearsals, just before setting off to New York, Jun was told that the performance was cancelled with no explanation given. Zhang felt a strong sense of frustration and became eager to take his art life into his own hands and control his own destiny (private communication 27th June 2015). Historically, Chinese opera was mostly produced and led by the lead actor, although such practice ceased under Mao with the establishment of state opera institutions and centralised productions and consumption. From the beginning of the market reform in the 1980s, many opera performers set up market oriented personal studios but nearly none survived (Ma 2015). Although Jun desired to take
his art life in his own hands and control his own destiny, there was no audience. Jun would never forget the disastrous and humiliating performing experience in the late 1990s when he led the troupe to stage *The Peony Pavilion* at Tongji University, the very university where Bai Xianyong debuted his production half a decade later:

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

This experience summarises the alienation of Kunqu to the university students in the late 1990s. This made Jun more aware of the importance of nurturing a Kunqu audience. He took the initiative of running a series of Kunqu talks, workshops and discussion groups in universities, middle schools, primary schools and anywhere he could meet up with a potential audience, even in Starbucks (Private communication, 27th June 2015). By the late 2000s, under a decade of government cultural policy support for traditional cultural education and art experimentation and collaboration through Dir. Chen, Bai and Jun, Kunqu become a familiar art form associating with elite scholar-official cultural distinction. In 2009, Zhang Jun, then the Vice President of the Shanghai Kunqu Company, aware of the emerging Kunqu market and new middle class consumers, resigned and established the first independent Kunqu studio in China: Shanghai Zhang Jun Kunqu Arts Centre (Cultural Leader Forum 2013).
For Zhang, to create a new production that both established his artistic distinction and ensured market profit was the priority. Zhang focused the market on the university scholar turned middle class, further consolidated the fantasy and nostalgia of the elite scholar-official’s way of life by staging The Peony Pavilion in a real garden. Zhang selected the venue of Kezhi Garden in an elegant small water town Zhujiajiao, 49 kilometres from Shanghai. It is also the regional neighbour of Kunshan, the town where Kunqu originated. Working collaboratively with the local government, Zhang convinced the officials of the potential of the reconstruction of local cultural identity, developing tourism and attracting middle class consumers. Eventually, Zhang obtained the right to perform at Kezhi Garden and produced The Garden Version of The Peony Pavilion.

The garden version of The Peony Pavilion was to provide the audience with the conspicuous consumption experience of the historical elite leisure class way of life rather than Kunqu itself. The performing time was reduced from Dir. Chen’s 20hr long production and Dir. Bai’s 9hr performance to just 70minutes (Insight China 2011: 105-107). The audience sat across the lake facing the pavilion, as the historical elite scholar-official class once did. Highest quality acoustic systems were used to enhance the natural acoustic quality.
Minute details were attended to, ensuring that the audience had maximized comfort and pleasure: special insect repellents with minimum odour were used and ice was stored under the seats to keep the atmosphere cool (Wang 2015, Zhang private communication 27th June 2015). In 2011, the Garden Version of *The Peony Pavilion* was debuted at Kezhi Garden, Zhujiajiao. Tickets ranged from the lowest of 80 yuan to the highest of 880 yuan, which had seats right across the lake facing the pavilion. It was a success. The performance has been staged every summer with tickets regularly sold out well in advance.

What is also important to highlight is the support Zhang obtained from regional government, under the central government call for the development of traditional art forms. Whilst Bai pushed sexuality to the centre, Zhang further development of *Kunqu*’s historical association with women and property, presented the audience with fantasised space and property associated distinction. Zhang’s personal acute sensibility on the market also fits into regional government economic development. It is for working in line with central government ideological direction and regional government economic development that Zhang is blessed for his artistic experimentation.

In 2014, Zhang Jun’s *Garden Version of The Peony Pavilion* was performed at The Astor Court, a Ming style garden at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA (Hu 2013: 230). This was the second time *Kunqu’s The Peony Pavilion* had visited New York since 1998, when Chen debuted his performance of *The Peony Pavilion*. The difference is that this time, *Kunqu* had changed from an extinct ancient art form and obscure class representation to the artistic identity of China’s new millennium middle class distinction, intimately linked with the historical Chinese elite scholar-official class power and status. By then, *Kunqu* consumption had become the standard ‘gentlemen way of life’ with ‘refined tastes, manners, and habits of life that are a useful evidence of gentility’ (Veblen 1899/1994: 30, 31) and the ability to consume *Kunqu* has become the identity of the new middle class and associated game of new distinction.

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2 In 2011, exchange rate is around 1 sterling pound to 10 Chinese yuan.
Conclusion and Reflection

We have examined how the near extinct Chinese traditional art form Kunqu was revived in the late 1990s to become the symbol of rising Chinese middle class. It has been argued that such market development is achieved in two areas: production and consumption. On production, through government funding support and artistic experimentation, targeting the specifically nurtured university students as future middle class consumers. Through this process, Kunqu as a new art world evolved as a desired cultural goods for the newly rising middle class, eagerly seeking consumption for distinction.

We will now answer the questions outlined at the beginning of this article. First ‘how has the Kunqu art world managed to reinvent itself from the least popular art form amongst urban youth in the late 1990s to the distinction of the middle class?’ It has been argued that it is through the collective effort of artists, educators and government to have a new art world develop. In this process, the government provided consistent funding to art institutions and universities for traditional art education. Such funding and policy support allows artists to engage in consistent collaboration and experimentation. Artists may have participated in the creation for different objectives, but their continued innovation and collaboration within the Kunqu circle allowed the emergence of a new art world. What is most important is the latter artist’s acute market awareness. Both Bai and Zhang actively involve the audience, educating them and establishing the ‘star and fan’ relationship building a new audience to learn the unfamiliar conventions. The effort eventually built the key aspect of the new art world, loyal Kunqu consumers.

The second question was ‘why would the middle class accept Kunqu as a valued product for consumption distinction?’ This is a much more complicated question to answer. Whilst we applaud the final market success and the consumers newly constructed cultural distinction through Kunqu, I would like to remind readers of the original nature of private elite Kunqu, it was established for the scholars to escape from the political turmoil. To have a
piece of land and to build a garden where the scholar could retreat from the society they served, to escape from the political power struggle that they have no power to change (Xia 2009: 15; Du 2010: 128; Dong 2011: 235). The 1989 suppression was followed by a decade of authoritarian led economic development. Further economic reform since the 1990s has provided China with a new national status that every Chinese has desired since the formation of modern China. However, the cost of such economic acceleration is class polarisation, rising social and political discontent and government initiated land grabbing and overheated property development (Ding & Knaap 2005). All taking place in the name of modernization and globalization.

Although the newly rising middle class has gained a degree of financial and growing intellectual autonomy, they hold limited political power and struggle with economic distinction. The common phrase to mock the middle class’ limited capital power is ‘house slave’ (fangnu), which refers to the struggle to own even a small flat let alone a garden with associated cultural garden activities. And yet, intellectuals increasingly judged the student activism of the 1980s in harsh terms (Weston 2004: 253). University students and middle class support the CCP rather than being critical of the regime, as their initial rise as well as continued development are intimately tied with party-state policy support (Griffiths 2012, Goodman 2013, Chan 2014, Hulme 2014). The critical mind associated with modern Chinese universities and university students is eroding. If Maoists were utopian in believing that they could build an egalitarian socialist society in China, Chinese liberal intellectuals are perhaps naïve in believing that a capitalist economy can be a free and spontaneous order without state intervention (Wang 2000). The rising popularity of Kunqu amongst the newly emerging middle class in China is not just about conspicuous consumption for distinction, it could be argued that it is the new practice for the new middle class to escape from political impotence. Such consumption is what Adorno states as being for the distracting pleasure and emphatic happiness of the bourgeois, which is pornographic and prudish at once (1991: 32).
The final question was ‘What is the connection between production and consumption in the making of Kunqu in relation to our understanding of the macro evolution of China politically, socially, and economically in the new millennium?’ I would like to highlight the role of the CCP behind the construction of the new art world and consumption habit. Throughout the past 30 years of economic development, China has been eager to insert soft power to the global stage, projecting a unified advanced cultural identity. Historical past and diverse regional culture have been seen as key in articulating its own distinction. Kunqu, is only one of many cultural heritages that the CCP is keen to reconstruct and develop into a distinction of the nation. We have discussed the CCP’s concern at Chen’s direction and production of traditional Kunqu. For the Shanghai government to annul the overseas contract clearly showed a strong objection to how its own image is presented globally. The success for both Bai and Zhang in gaining government funding support is precisely because the two provided no challenge to Chinese historical distinction, no challenge to how to interpreted the past distinction artistically. Only with such collaboration with the CCP could the artists manage to create a new art world and build consumers amongst university turned middle class consumers.

In the 2015 publication of President Xi Jinping’s Talks on Arts and Literature, at the People’s Congress, which serves as the latest Chinese cultural policy, Xi emphasised the role of artists as serving the Party and the People, placing traditional Chinese arts as the anchor of this new development (South China Post 2015). Under increasing ideological direction from the CCP, the survival and prosperity of the Chinese artists, as well as the middle class, will continue to depend upon their support to the CCP. Art, instead of challenging the established system, has become hedonistic and the social ideal of reconciliation and false harmony. This is the connection between production and consumption in the making of Kunqu in relation to the macro political, social, economic and social changes in China.
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