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## INNOVATIVE APPLICATION OF CHINESE KUNQU OPERA COSTUMES STYLE PRINCIPLES IN MODERN DESIGN

**Goal:** *an in-depth study of innovative practices of contemporary design based on the values of China's intangible cultural heritage, in particular, the use of formative and decorative characteristics and techniques of the Kunqu Opera stage costume in the creation of modern models of clothing for dressy or casual use.*

**Methodology.** *The study uses historical, analytical, and chronological methods, as well as methods of formal and figurative-stylistic analysis.*

**Results.** *Based on the systematization of documentary materials, the unique features of the costumes of the main characters in different scenes of the youth version of «The Peony Pavilion» opera have been studied. Formative and stylistic approaches have been generalized, and the characteristics of the costume, such as the Style of the main constituent elements (The headdress, Horse-face Skirt, Pleats, Cloak), as well as Colors and Patterns, have been integrated into the author's own design solution for the design of modern costumes for dress purposes. Based on the example of the contemporary Chinese designer MUKZIN's collection, the article shows how the integration of expressive possibilities of stage costumes can shape aesthetic trends in contemporary design and expand its creative potential.*

**The scientific novelty** of the study is to identify the expressive characteristics of the Kunqu Opera stage costume and to propose an approach for its integration into modern clothing. The integration of intangible cultural heritage values into modern trends not only expands the possibilities of design but also opens up a way to preserve traditional culture.

**Practical significance.** *The study of the artistic and aesthetic features of the costumes of the Kunqu Opera in the Youth Version of «The Peony Pavilion» and the application of innovative design approaches is an important area of creativity and research not only for designers but also for stage designers and art and fashion historians. The materials of the research can be used in educational courses as well as in costume design practices.*

**Keywords:** *Kunqu Opera costumes, innovative design, intangible cultural heritage, women's attire, shaping, decorative finishing.*

**Introduction.** The problem of using intangible cultural heritage as a source of inspiration for the creation of new samples of fashion design requires separate consideration and the search for rational design techniques. Kunqu Opera is one of the representatives of ancient Chinese dramatic literature and theatrical art, also known as Kunqu or Kunqiang. It is acclaimed as the «ancestor of all operas» and was designated as a «Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity» by UNESCO in 2001 [10]. Kunqu Opera has gone through a long developmental journey, from its origins to maturity, prosperity, and eventually decline.

This article delves into how to pass down and innovate this unique traditional culture of Kunqu Opera through modern costume design, offering inspiration and insights for contemporary fashion design, while ensuring the cultural vitality of Kunqu

Opera as an art form in modern society. The focus of the article is the Kunqu Opera «The Peony Pavilion», exploring it from the following perspectives: Firstly, it provides an overview of the research background, innovative practices, and analysis in modern Kunqu Opera costume design; Secondly, it investigates innovative applications in modern Kunqu Opera costume design, examining aspects like style, colors, and patterns.

**Analysis of previous research.** The legacy of Kunqu opera costumes has been given attention by many researchers. Liu Yuemei's book «Chinese Kunqu Opera Costume Box» meticulously introduces Kunqu Opera costumes through a combination of text and images, showcasing the splendid and colorful stage costumes for different roles and families. The book is comprehensive, systematic, and precise, explaining the primary purposes, size proportions, materials, styles, colors,

patterns, and craft techniques of various costumes [7].

Wang Lili's work, «Kunqu Costume from the Aesthetic Perspective of Jiangnan Literati», analyzes the strengths of Kunqu Opera, which combines elements from Song and Yuan Nanxi drama and Yuan-Ming period variety plays [12]. Over the generations, it spread widely and developed within the literati and gentry class of the Ming and Qing dynasties. Kunqu Opera costumes are an integral part of Kunqu performance art and possess aesthetic characteristics rooted in the traditional Chinese theatrical system. According to the author, throughout the development of Kunqu Opera, the refined aesthetics pursued by Jiangnan literati, such as elegance, poetic beauty, and natural beauty, were integrated into Kunqu stage art, guiding the direction of Kunqu costume design. This resulted in Kunqu costumes having artistic features such as subtle and natural color palettes, intricate composition, a balance between realism and symbolism in patterns, and much symbolism.

Zhu Hengfu's work, «On Kunqu Opera Headwear and Dressing Principles», discusses the significant contributions of Kunqu Opera to the construction of theatrical headwear [12]. The author classifies Headwear in Kunqu can be broadly categorized into four classes: clothing, helmets, accessories, and props. Based on real-life aesthetics, these costumes underwent aesthetic modifications and were designed to reflect the time period and the personalities and roles of the characters in the stories. «The dressing principles for Kunqu costumes are aimed at making positive characters more beautiful and negative characters less appealing, ensuring that the costumes align with the characters' identities, facilitating the performance of roles, and contributing to the portrayal of supernatural and otherworldly environments», – the author notes [12].

The integration of style, form, and decorative elements of opera costume into contemporary design is increasingly evident in the work of designers. Thus, Zhang Jinbin in his article this paper analyzes the application of opera costume elements in modern costume design [11]. The author proposes a concept, and based on it under this concept, four kinds of modern ready-to-wear clothes with opera costume elements are designed. Taking the works as examples, the whole process of the application design of opera costume elements in modern costume design is presented, which

provides ideas and directions for the modern application design of opera costume elements in the future.

Based on a literature review, it was discovered that systematic research on the characteristics of Kunqu Opera costumes in a specific production is relatively limited. Many questions regarding Kunqu Opera costumes, such as their innovative design and integration, have yet to be fully addressed. Therefore, this study can provide guidance to scholars in related fields, offering significant reference value for the preservation, inheritance, and development of Kunqu Opera costumes while also promoting the research and dissemination of Chinese theatrical culture.

**Problem statement.** The objectives of the article are: to explore the distinctive characteristics of the costumes worn by the female lead in the Youth Edition of «The Peony Pavilion: A Startling Dream» from the perspective of visual and design studies; to track the methods of integrating elements of theatrical costume into modern fashion design; to analyze the significance of theatrical costume potential in the creative expansion of design features.

**The results of the research and their discussion.** Kunqu Opera, a traditional art form with a long and illustrious history of over six hundred years, gained renewed global attention when it was designated as a «Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity» by UNESCO in 2001. This recognition rekindled widespread interest in this art form. The prosperity of Kunqu Opera not only kindled curiosity about the art itself but also brought attention to Kunqu Opera costumes.

Of particular note is the Youth Edition of «The Peony Pavilion», a collaboration between Mr. Bai Xianyong and the Suzhou Kunqu Opera Theatre in 2004. In this version, not only were bold innovations made in music and choreography, but traditional Kunqu costume design, stage settings, and lighting art also underwent fresh experimentation. These efforts not only elevated the work's renown but also rekindled enthusiasm for Kunqu Opera, profoundly influencing the development of contemporary Kunqu Opera.

In Wang Peixi's «A Comprehensive Discussion on 'Peony': An Analysis of Costume Design in the Youth Version of Kunqu Opera's 'The Peony Pavilion'», it is pointed out that theatrical costumes are a crucial means of shaping the stage image in

drama. In Western theater, realistic techniques are employed to highlight the unique personalities of dramatic characters through the individualized differences in costumes. Chinese opera, on the other hand, uses a more symbolic approach, shaping stereotypical stage images through the regulation of costume types. Kunqu opera costumes are known for their strict conventions, guided by the principle of «better to wear out than wear wrong». Mr. Bai Xianyong and his team created the youth version of Kunqu opera's 'The Peony Pavilion,' which, while retaining the fundamental appearance of traditional opera costumes, expanded the artistic functions of opera costumes, updated the design concepts of opera costumes, and showcased a new sense of beauty in opera costumes [8].

### **Innovative Practices in Modern Kunqu Opera Costume Design**

Through the analysis of the costumes worn by the female lead in the Youth Edition of «The Peony Pavilion: A Startling Dream» in various contemporary versions, we can observe that they generally adhere to the fundamental elements of traditional Kunqu Opera costumes, such as the wearing patterns of the headdress (幘), horse-face skirt (马面裙), pleats (褶子), and cape (斗篷). As a result, traditional Kunqu Opera costumes have evolved over the ages, displaying a certain degree of standardization. This deeper understanding allows us to grasp the evolution and development of Kunqu Opera costumes.

Simultaneously, through the discussion of costume styles, we can also uncover the emotions, symbolism, and character portrayal embedded in the female lead's attire. This research not only enriches our understanding of Kunqu Opera but also provides valuable insights and inspiration for the preservation and development of Kunqu Opera costumes. Let's analyze the main components of the stage costume of the main characters of the Youth Edition of «The Peony Pavilion».

#### *1. Style of the main elements of the costume.*

Through personalized tailoring and meticulous sleeve adjustments, the Youth Edition accentuates the character's waistlines and performance details, infusing classic roles with a fresh and contemporary allure. This innovative design approach not only presents a more dynamic on-stage presence for the audience but also opens new possibilities for Kunqu Opera's development. The fusion of tradition and modernity, as demonstrated in the costume design

of the Youth Edition, breathes new life into classic characters, rendering «The Peony Pavilion» even more enchanting, as depicted in Figure

*1.1. The headdress.* In the Youth Edition of «The Peony Pavilion» innovative costume design breathes new fashion appeal into classic characters. The headdress (幘) worn by the female lead, Du Liniang, stands as a prime example of the fusion of tradition and modernity, radiating a distinct charm.

*1.2. Horse-face Skirt.* In the youth version of «The Peony Pavilion» the design of the female lead's horse-face skirt presents a style that is completely different from the traditional version. The youth version abandons the traditional horse-face design and instead opts for a finely pleated horse-face skirt. This design places a greater emphasis on the character's personality and fashion sense. The carefully designed pleats on the skirt, both on the left and right sides and in the middle section, showcase the natural drape and beauty of the skirt. The skirt is worn in a wrap-around style, customized to the waist measurements of the actors, ensuring a snug fit that highlights the beauty of the characters' figures. Additionally, considering the actors' slender figures, the skirt circumference has been moderately reduced to create a more elongated visual effect.

*1.3. Pleats.* Pleats, as an essential component of clothing, play a significant role in the youth version. They are typically located beneath the outer robe and are categorized as male pleats and female pleats. The length of female pleats generally extends to the knee area, with variations in design based on the character's age and role. Pleats for young women feature small collars and delicate lapels, emphasizing a graceful beauty, while pleats for older women have larger collars and lapels, portraying a more dignified and generous appearance. Pleat designs often incorporate symmetrical pleat folds that connect the lapels, and the skirts on both sides are designed with slits to facilitate movement during wear. Some pleats can be worn externally and typically come with water sleeves, adding a dynamic quality to the clothing. This design adjustment provides a fresh and streamlined visual appearance, avoiding the bulkiness that traditional outer robes may bring. Additionally, this design enhances the flexibility of actors during performances, allowing them to more naturally express character movements and emotions.

*1.4. Cloak.* In various modern adaptations of the Kunqu opera «The Peony Pavilion: Startling

Dreams», the costumes of the female lead exhibit a rich and layered appearance, featuring a unique design element of adding a cloak over the outer robe. The cloak is an accessory in the Kunqu opera wardrobe, alongside other accessories such as vests, waistbands, rice scarves, «four happiness» belts, straw raincoats, collars, auspicious symbols, tooth ornaments, Buddhist beads, ceremonial beads, silk sashes, handkerchiefs, bellybands, circular fans, folding fans, feather fans, and headgear, among others, contributing to a diverse array of character portrayals.

The cloak, also referred to as the «windcatcher», «bell-shaped cloak», or «fluffy robe», is a sleeveless outer garment that adds depth and atmosphere to the characters. Depending on gender, cloaks can be categorized as men's cloaks and women's cloaks. They vary not only in length but also in patterns, sometimes matched with fabrics of the same or different colors to create a more intricate effect. Cloaks play a vital role in shaping the overall appearance of characters.

In the youth version, cloak designs utilize a one-piece tying method and incorporate a back slit, allowing actors to adjust them as needed. This flexible design adds a dynamic element to the cloaks during character performances, aligning with the characters' emotions and actions.

2. *Colors.* The traditional color theory of Kunqu opera costumes is based on the 'Five Upper Colors' – red, green, yellow, white, and black – and the 'Five Lower Colors' – purple, pink, blue, lake (cyan), and fragrant (light purple). Typically, main characters wear costumes from the Five Upper Colors, while supporting characters wear costumes from the Five Lower Colors to distinguish the importance and status of the roles. In various versions of «The Peony Pavilion» the costumes of the female lead display a rich variety of characteristics, breaking away from the traditional Upper and Lower Colors scheme. This change isn't just about color selection; it's more about adapting to the character's identity, emotions, and the changes in the plot.

Especially in the context of the female lead's background as a young lady and a teenager experiencing her first love, the color of her attire emphasizes her personality and emotional state. Costume color choices for the female lead in different versions vary, often based on the needs of

the plot and scene changes, in order to maintain overall harmony and consistency in the color palette. By using combinations of warm and cool colors, complementary color schemes, and even incorporating white, the costumes maintain consistency while also showcasing a rich variety of beauty through contrast. This innovative use of colors not only adds depth to the female lead's character but also enriches the visual effects of the performance, allowing the audience to fully experience the characters' emotions and atmospheres while enjoying the play.

In the youth version of «The Peony Pavilion: Startling Dreams», the female lead's attire incorporates a unique youthful charm in different scenes. Leveraging modern technology such as lighting and stage design, the traditional elements of Suzhou gardens are cleverly combined with contemporary aesthetics. Lin Kehua, the stage designer, considered the aesthetic trends of young people at that time while creating the stage art for the youth version. This integration allows traditional elements of Suzhou gardens to engage in a dialogue with a modern minimalist style, giving the production a distinctive and contemporary appeal.

3. *Patterns.* Kunqu opera costumes showcase a rich array of traditional decorative patterns, drawing from various sources, including historical patterns, symbolic patterns, religious patterns, pictorial patterns, and text patterns. Additionally, Kunqu opera costumes place a strong emphasis on the symbolism of these patterns. For instance, the clothing of emperors typically features a «Manchu» floral layout, primarily adorned with dragon patterns and complemented by water wave motifs, symbolizing nobility.

In the youth version of «The Peony Pavilion», the male pleats worn by the character Liu Mengmei have a 'corner' floral layout with decorations of fresh gardenia flowers. This design not only reflects the character's scholarly and commoner status but also highlights his reserved personality.

In modern women's fashion design, decorative patterns have become a common technique, providing a straightforward means to express the theme of fashion design. Today, the techniques used for patterns in fashion are more sophisticated, and Kunqu elements, as a cultural symbol, carry the artistic style that has evolved over hundreds of years.



**Fig. 1.** Costumes of the main opera characters «The Peony Pavilion». Suzhou Kunqiu Opera House, Hong Kong, 2023 [13]



**Fig. 2.** Project proposal of modern clothing using style, form and decorative elements of Kunqu Opera costume. Chen Shulin. 2024



**Fig. 3.** MUKZIN. Models from the collection «The Theater of Mao'er». Fall/Winter 2017, Shanghai [4]

By consciously beautifying and innovating upon traditional pattern designs, Kunqu elements can be effectively and creatively incorporated into clothing, making the most of their distinctiveness.

**Innovative Applications.** Kunqu costumes are an important part of traditional Chinese opera, they not only reflect the identity, personality and emotions of the characters, but also show the artistic style and aesthetic features of Kunqu. When designing Kunqu costumes innovatively, we need to balance beauty, practicality and functionality, so that they can retain the traditional characteristics, and also adapt to the modern aesthetics and needs. This article takes the youth version of «The Peony Pavilion» as an example, and innovatively designs Kunqu costumes such as female pao, female pleated skirt, and horse-faced skirt, and explores and tries from aspects such as cutting, structure, fabric and details, striving to create modern women's clothing that has both Kunqu charm and fashion sense. The design drawings are shown in Figures 2.

First of all, we improved the cutting method of the female pao, making it more suitable for women's body and movements. We used the design of a cape and tassels to increase the sense of layering and fluidity of the clothing. The stand-up collar of the cape was treated with pleats, making the collar more three-dimensional and varied. The hem of the skirt used a curved shape, echoing the arc of the cape, forming a harmonious visual effect. The fabric of the cape was chosen as crepe, which has natural wrinkles and luster, and can reflect the elegance and agility of Kunqu. When sewing the cape, we paid special attention to aligning the floral patterns, to ensure the overall beauty of the clothing.

Secondly, we innovated the structure design of the female pleated skirt, making it more suitable for stage performance. We referred to the shape of the water sleeves, and designed loose sleeves, increasing the sense of

elegance and movement of the clothing. The lower garment style belonged to a pleated skirt, which has a classical charm and also conforms to modern fashion. We added floral and butterfly patterns on the skirt, which have both traditional meanings and modern colors. The collar type of the top used a cross-collar design, with a word buckle, presenting a unique pattern of flowers and butterflies, which matched the skirt.

Finally, we optimized the fabric and details of the horse-faced skirt, making it more exquisite and gorgeous. We chose high-quality fabrics, not only considering the appearance and texture of the clothing, but also the comfort and breathability of wearing. We used embroidery techniques on the horse face and the lower edge, and made simplified floral and butterfly patterns, echoing the pao above, forming a mirror-symmetric layout. We also added pattern changes at the edge, making the clothing more vivid and layered. The length and collar type of the skirt were also appropriately adjusted, making it more in line with the character's temperament and emotions.

In terms of color matching, we chose suitable tones and contrasts according to the characteristics of the characters and the background of the stage. We used techniques such as gradient, splicing, and embellishment, making the color of the clothing more rich and harmonious, and also more in line with the artistic style and aesthetic features of Kunqu. Through color matching, we not only enhanced the expressiveness of the character image, but also added a lot of fashion sense to the overall.

In summary, this article innovatively designed Kunqu costumes, and explored and tried from aspects such as cutting, structure, fabric and details, striving to create modern women's clothing that has both Kunqu charm and fashion sense. We hope that through this innovative design, we can make Kunqu costumes more adaptable to modern aesthetics

and needs, and also make Kunqu art more loved and respected by people.

Let us consider the experience of contemporary designers who use style and form elements of opera costumes in modern collections. Chinese designer MUKZIN has been committed to recovering the order of history, influencing modern lives, and creating possibilities through the media of costumes. He restructured the traditional opera costumes of Beijing and to present unique female images in the collection with special contours, structures and elements [5].

As we can see on the example of Fig. models, the designer uses modern laconic, slightly extended silhouettes. In turn, the decor in the form of embroidery of floral and zoomorphic elements actively fills the flowing forms and is a reference to the decor of opera costumes. The statement of He T. «Thus, Kunju has undergone transformations while trying to retain essentials» is fair [1].

**Conclusion.** A Kunqu opera costume is not merely about the appearance of the clothing; it is a product intricately woven with

multiple elements such as the plot, characters, and the stage. It provides visual enjoyment for the audience and offers a better platform for actors to perform. The main characteristics of the stage costume in the following components have been identified: Style of the main components of the costume (The headdress, Horse-face Skirt, Pleats, Cloak); Colors, Patterns.

In this article, we presented a project proposal applying Kunqu opera elements to modern Kunqu opera costume innovation, with a specific focus on the features from the youth version of «The Peony Pavilion». By harnessing the rich cultural heritage and unique classical style of Kunqu opera, along with meticulous costume craftsmanship, the aesthetics and comfort for modern individuals can be enhanced, offering new perspectives on costume innovation.

In subsequent design practices we will continue to innovate and break new ground, delivering even more spectacular and vibrant costume designs, injecting more vitality and charm into casual and dressy attire.

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## ІННОВАЦІЙНЕ ЗАСТОСУВАННЯ ПРИНЦИПІВ СТИЛЮ КОСТЮМІВ КИТАЙСЬКОЇ ОПЕРИ КУНЬЦЮЙ В СУЧАСНОМУ ДИЗАЙНІ

**Мета:** поглиблене вивчення інноваційних практик сучасного дизайну, що базуються на цінностях нематеріальної культурної спадщини Китаю, зокрема – на використанні формотворчих і декоративних характеристик і прийомів сценічного костюма Опери Куньцюй (Kunqu Opera) у створенні сучасних моделей одягу нарядного або повсякденного призначення.

**Методологія.** У дослідженні використовується історичний, аналітичний, хронологічний методи, а також методи формального та образно-стилістичного аналізу.

**Результати.** Грунтуючись на систематизації документальних матеріалів, досліджено унікальні особливості костюмів виконавців головних ролей в різних сценах молодіжної версії оперної вистави «Павільйон півоній» («The Peony Pavilion»). Узагальнено формотворчі та стильові підходи щодо таких характеристик костюма, як стиль основних складових елементів (головні убори, спідниця, накидки), а також колір і візерунки; дані характеристики інтегровано в сучасний костюм,



і через цей процес – запропоновано проектне рішення сучасних костюмів нарядного призначення в авторській розробці. На прикладі моделей колекції сучасного китайського дизайнера MUKZIN показано, як завдяки інтеграції виразних можливостей сценічного костюма формуються естетичні тенденції в сучасному дизайні та розширюються його творчі можливості.

**Наукова новизна** дослідження полягає у виявленні виразних характеристик сценічного костюма Оперу Куньцюй та запропонованому підході щодо їх інтеграції у сучасний одяг. Інтеграція цінностей нематеріальної культурної спадщини в сучасні тенденції не лише розширює можливості дизайну, а й відкриває спосіб для збереження традиційно культури.

**Практичне значення.** Вивчення художньо-естетичних особливостей костюмів Оперу Куньцюй в молодіжній версії «Павільйон півоній» і застосування підходів інноваційного дизайну є важливим напрямком творчості та досліджень не лише дизайнерів, а й сценографів, істориків мистецтва і моди. Матеріали дослідження можна застосовувати як в навчальних курсах, так і в проектних практиках костюма.

**Ключові слова:** костюм Оперу Куньцюй, інноваційний дизайн, нематеріальна культурна спадщина, жіноче вбрання, формотворення, декоративне оздоблення.

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