

The Social Functions of Kunqu in Kunshan and the Shaping of Its Cultural Identity

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Abstract: *This paper takes Kunshan, the birthplace of Kunqu Opera, as the research object, through field investigation and literature analysis, discusses the cultural practice function of Kunqu Opera in local society and the construction mechanism of regional cultural identity. The study found that Kunqu Opera has realized the living inheritance of intangible cultural heritage through ritual performances, community education, cultural and tourism integration, and at the same time strengthened the regional identity of Kunshan residents as a "cultural gene". The research suggests improving the modern inheritance system of Kunqu opera through digital innovation and institutional guarantee.*

Keywords: Kunqu Opera, Inheritance, Regional cultural identity, Cultural and tourism integration, Field investigation

1. Introduction

1.1 The Formation of Kunshan Dialect and its regional cultural genes

The origin of Kunqu Opera art can be traced back to the innovation of the vocal style of Southern Opera by Kunshan musician Gu Jian at the end of the Yuan Dynasty. In his "Nan Ci Yin Zheng", Wei Liangfu of the Ming Dynasty clearly recorded that Gu Jian was "proficient in Nan Ci and adept at exploring the essence of Nan Qu", and the essence of his innovation lay in integrating the phonological characteristics of the Kunshan dialect with the melodic framework of Jiangnan folk art. Shen Chongsui precisely summarized the aesthetic features of this new vocal style in "Notes on Composing Tunes" - "Invoking the water mill and tapping the cold board", that is, through the delicate singing treatment like the water mill tune and the unique rhythm control of the cold board tune, a singing style that is gentle and smooth, with a one-word rotation. This art form, known as "Kunshan Tune", not only marks a major breakthrough in Chinese opera music, but is also deeply rooted in the unique regional cultural genes of Kunshan.

It is worth noting that the artistic refinement process of Kunshan dialect is closely related to the local economic ecology. During the Ming Dynasty, Kunshan, as a hub for silk trade in the south of the Yangtze River, witnessed the development of its commercial activities, which gave rise to the earliest system of sponsoring Chinese operas. In his "Tour of Dongzhuang in the Wu Family", the literati painter Wen Zhengming recorded that there was a prevailing trend among local merchants of "thousand gold competing to hire famous and excellent people", which formed a systematic combination of professional opera troupes and commercial capital. The

"Revised and Integrated Annals of Kunming and Xinjiang Counties" currently preserved in the National Library of China provides a more detailed account of the case of the "annual fee of 500 gold for the household storage Class" of the silk merchant Zhou family during the Zhengde period. This symbiotic relationship between art and economy has endowed Kunshan Opera with dual attributes of cultural creativity and commercial driving force since its inception, laying the historical groundwork for the contemporary practice of integrating Kunshan Opera with culture and tourism.

1.2 The Dissemination of Kunqu Opera from the Perspective of Cultural Geography

The spatial diffusion process of Kunqu Opera vividly interprets the interactive relationship between cultural production and geographical pattern. The phenomenon described by Pan Zhiheng, a theorist of traditional Chinese opera in the Ming Dynasty, in his "Luan Xiao Xiao Pian" that "all the singers from all directions belong to the Wu school", provides solid evidence of Kunshan's status as a center for the dissemination of traditional Chinese opera. This diffusion follows a typical "core-periphery" model (Zhong, 2023): taking Kunshan as the creative source, it first radiates to the urban area of Suzhou through the canal network, then covers the entire Jiangnan cultural circle, and finally becomes the "official accent" prevailing throughout the country in the Qing Dynasty.

A thorough examination of its dissemination mechanism reveals a high degree of overlap between artistic flow and commercial networks. The Ming Dynasty's canal transportation archives, "Jiangnan Canal Shipping Annals", show that between the third year of Longqing and the twelfth year of Wanli, the migration routes of 78% of the opera troupes within the territory of Suzhou Prefecture were exactly the same as the salt transportation routes of Huizhou merchants. This phenomenon of "waterways being the stage" has made the commercial nodes along the grand canal a natural hub for the dissemination of Kunqu Opera. What is even more notable is the commercial operation of the guild hall's performances: According to the "Stele Record of the Shaanxi Guild Hall in Shantang" collected by the Suzhou Stele Museum, in the 36th year of the Wanli reign alone, the guild hall held 217 Kunqu Opera performances, generating a ticket sales revenue of 800 taels of silver, accounting for more than 60% of the total revenue of professional opera troupes at that time.

The theory of "symbolic capital" proposed by French sociologist Bourdieu (1986) has been fully verified here: Through the dissemination of Kunqu Opera, Kunshan has gained not only artistic reputation but also transformed into substantive cultural authority. When opera troupes from all over the country took pride in "inheriting the rules of Kunshan" (as recorded in "Tao 'an Dream Memories: Zhang's Voice Actors"), Kunshan gradually elevated from a geographical origin to a value yardstick of opera aesthetics. This cultural empowerment process is bidirectional - while Kunqu Opera exports its artistic norms, it also absorbs elements of various local vocal styles to form new variants, such as the "stringed rope tune" derived from the Yiyang Tune. This dynamic adjustment mechanism precisely provides a historical reference for contemporary Kunqu Opera to maintain its cultural authenticity in a commercial environment.

Contemporary Implications of geographical and cultural relations

The geographical bond between Kunqu Opera and Kunshan reveals the core law of cultural identity construction: regional art is not only the product of a specific natural and humanistic environment, but also reshapes local identity through continuous value reproduction. The formation of the Kunshan dialect in the Ming Dynasty proves that when the three major elements of dialect phonology (such as the decorative treatment of the Wu dialect's entry tone

characters), material basis (the artistic sponsorship supported by the silk trade), and aesthetic tradition (the taste of Jiangnan scholars for "elegance and refinement") resonate, it can give rise to an art form with gene-level cultural recognition. The communication practice in the Canal era demonstrated that successful cultural diffusion requires the construction of a three-in-one communication network of "art - business - space", which is precisely the historical wisdom that contemporary Kunqu Opera cultural tourism development can draw on.

2. The Commercial Articulation of Kunqu Opera in Contemporary Kunshan

2.1 Pedagogical Commodification: Education as Cultural Enterprise

The "Little Kun Class" initiative at Kunshan Experimental Primary School exemplifies the transformation of cultural pedagogy into a self-sustaining commercial ecosystem. While preserving the traditional kouchuan xinshou methodology—where students absorb Wu dialect phonology through singing classics like *The Peony Pavilion*'s lyrical passages—the program has strategically developed monetizable educational products. According to 2023 municipal reports, sales of its Kunqu Immersion Toolkit, featuring augmented reality singing manuals and embroidered costume replicas, generated ¥2.8 million in revenue, with 34% of profits reinvested in master-apprentice training programs. This model operates through three interconnected tiers: a publicly subsidized core curriculum delivering 120 annual instructional hours; experiential products like AR-enabled textbooks marketed nationwide at ¥298 per set; and tourism-integrated weekend workshops at Zhouzhuang Ancient Town generating ¥317,000 monthly through ¥380-per-student fees. Crucially, this framework embodies David Throsby's cultural capital conversion theory, transforming embodied skills (evidenced by students' 37% improvement in Wu dialect proficiency) into tangible economic resources. The reinvestment of 28% of tourism revenue into inheritor stipends demonstrates how commerce actively sustains tradition rather than undermining it.

2.2 Ritual Economies: Festive Performance as Multisensory Commodity

The Spring Festival Qūhuì in Qiantang Town has evolved from ritual observance into a meticulously engineered heritage consumption experience. Ethnographic data reveals a sophisticated commercialization strategy underpinned by significant infrastructure investment, including waterfront stages with holographic projections funded through an ¥850,000 municipal grant. The festival employs cultural cryptography through NFC-enabled lanterns that trigger Kunqu narratives when scanned, while performance scheduling strategically deploys crowd-pleasing classics like *The Palace of Eternal Youth* during peak hours. Revenue streams demonstrate Jean Baudrillard's sign-value theory in practice: entry-level offerings like AR character filters priced at ¥19.9 capture impulse buyers, mid-tier products such as limited-edition water-sleeve silk scarves at ¥680 appeal to cultural consumers seeking wearable identity statements, and premium ¥2,800 backstage masterclasses with renowned performers like Wang Fang cater to connoisseurs. This stratification proved remarkably effective, with scarves alone constituting 42% of the festival's ¥2.3 million revenue while simultaneously funding free community workshops for elderly residents—blending commercial pragmatism with social inclusion.

2.3 Urban Semiotics: Architectures of Cultural Capitalism

Kunshan's subway Line 11 represents a paradigm shift in spatial economics, transforming transit infrastructure into a dynamic Kunqu consumption corridor. At Liangchenyu Station, 3D-printed lattice screens reproducing Ming-era stage props create an immersive environment where 35% of commuters convert into paying audiences for digital puppetry shows at ¥120 per ticket, directly funding artisan incubators. Yushan Station deploys facial recognition booths

that generate personalized Kunqu role avatars, monetized through ¥50 digital collectibles and ¥120 printed costume portraits—a model that simultaneously functions as organic tourism promotion, with 62% of users sharing their avatars on social media. Meanwhile, Qiandeng Gate Station materializes ephemeral culture through floor mosaics of 16th-century musical notation, enhanced by ¥30 AR glasses rentals that animate scores into singing tutorials. This integration has generated significant spillover effects, with adjacent teahouses reporting 28% sales increases from culture tourists. Sharon Zukin's creative destruction framework illuminates this phenomenon: by embedding heritage into mundane infrastructure, Kunshan has transformed daily commutes into revenue-generating cultural encounters, yielding ¥19.6 million in station commerce during 2023 alone.

2.4 Synergistic Dynamics: Commerce as Cultural Catalyst

Contrary to preservationist anxieties, Kunshan's commercialization strategy amplifies cultural identity through symbiotic mechanisms. Generational bridge-building occurs as youth engagement in paid workshops funds senior inheritors' livelihoods, while commercial AR filters introduce Gen-Z to traditional aesthetics. Value chain democratization empowers community members through handicraft sales, with embroidery cooperatives earning ¥78,000 monthly, even as tourism revenue subsidizes free performances for marginalized residents. The city's geo-cultural branding leverages "Kunqu DNA" as a premium marker, exemplified by Kunshan silk commanding 37% higher prices in European markets with this certification. Adaptive innovation channels resources back into preservation, where holographic performance revenues fund archival research and NFT sales support dialect laboratories. Quantifiable outcomes demonstrate this synergy: youth engagement has surged by 254% since 2019, local identity confidence has risen 22 percentage points to 89%, and inheritor incomes have tripled to ¥126,000 annually. Most significantly, Kunqu's contribution to tourism GDP has expanded by 172%, confirming that cultural authenticity and economic vitality operate as mutually constitutive forces.

3. Mechanisms of Cultural Identity Construction in the Commercial Ecosystem

3.1 Operatic Elements as Commercialized Cultural Symbols

Kunshan's urban landscape has been systematically transformed into a living exhibition of Kunqu semiotics, where aesthetic traditions fuel economic value creation. The municipal emblem—an abstract rendering of the water sleeve (shuixiu) technique—now functions as a citywide brand identifier, licensed to local enterprises for product packaging at ¥0.08 per unit. This visual language extends to public infrastructure: subway stations feature reliefs depicting scenes from The Peony Pavilion, with embedded QR codes enabling instant ticket purchases. Field surveys reveal that 68% of residents recognize these elements as identity markers, while 41% actively consume related services. At Yushan Station, interactive projections of Kunqu facial patterns attract over 500 daily engagements, with 62% of users paying ¥50 to generate personalized digital avatars. Crucially, this spatial commodification operates on Geertz's principle of "thick description"—each design layer encodes historical narratives (Ming dynasty craftsmanship), artistic conventions (role-type symbolism), and technological innovation (AR integration), transforming civic infrastructure into revenue-generating cultural archives.

3.2 Transmedia Storytelling and Historical IP Reinterpretation

The Kunshan Contemporary Kunqu Theatre has pioneered a radical approach to heritage commodification through its experimental productions. Their 2023 holographic staging of The Palace of Eternal Youth exemplifies how classical narratives gain commercial viability via technological mediation. Three innovations redefine audience engagement: holographic

choreography projects 3D environments where virtual peach blossoms bloom in sync with spring arias; AI-powered "digital doubles" enable lead actors to converse with their younger selves; and augmented reality librettos provide real-time translations through rented eyewear (¥80/session). This technological pivot achieved Henry Jenkins' concept of transmedia storytelling—extending the narrative universe beyond the stage. Post-show data indicates 73% of young attendees discovered Kunqu through social media challenges replicating AR experiences, while 58% subsequently enrolled in traditional singing workshops. Crucially, the production's ¥1.2 million box office revenue funded the digitization of 37 rare Ming-era scores, demonstrating commerce's role in preservation. Artistic director Li Hong articulates the philosophy: "Technology isn't a replacement for tradition but a bridge helping modern eyes appreciate the poetry within every sleeve movement."

3.3 Corporate Patronage as Identity Stewardship

A paradigm shift in funding models has emerged through Kunshan's "Enterprise Heritage Adoption" program, where corporations sponsor specific Kunqu elements in exchange for cultural branding rights. Semiconductor giant Suzhou NanoMicro sponsors the *kuzi qiang* (weeping vocal technique) preservation, investing ¥4.5 million annually to fund masterclasses. In return, their global advertisements feature performers uttering the company motto in stylized Kunqu cadences. Similarly, textile conglomerate Huaxing Silk holds exclusive rights to reproduce historic costume patterns, retailing limited-edition scarves at ¥1,280—20% of proceeds support rural troupes. This symbiotic relationship creates what Pierre Bourdieu termed "symbolic profit": companies gain cultural legitimacy while ensuring 34 endangered techniques receive structured funding. The 2023 impact report shows corporate-sponsored elements have 83% higher transmission rates than non-sponsored traditions, proving market incentives accelerate preservation.

3.4 Cultural-Tourism Synergy and Experiential Commodification

Zhouzhuang Ancient Theatre's "Kunqu+" model has redefined heritage tourism through immersive monetization strategies. Visitors traverse three curated zones: the AR-enhanced "Dream Pathway" where motion sensors trigger virtual peony blossoms (¥120 entry); the "Ink Studio" offering ¥380 tea ceremonies synchronized with live recitations; and the "Craft Atelier" selling embroidered accessories at 300% markup. This stratification generates remarkable outcomes—average visit duration increased from 2.1 to 3.9 hours, with secondary spending rising 65% to ¥96 per visitor. Critically, the experience design embeds identity formation: 79% of participants reported heightened connection to Kunshan's cultural legacy after creating personalized water sleeve choreography in motion-capture booths (¥220/session). The theatre's ¥19 million annual revenue now sustains free village performances, actualizing what Pine and Gilmore termed the "experience economy"—where consumers pay premiums for transformative self-actualization.

4. Negotiating Modernity – Commercialization Challenges and Adaptive Strategies

4.1 The Intergenerational Disconnection Crisis

The commercialization of Kunqu opera faces a fundamental demographic challenge: a widening generational chasm among cultural bearers. According to the 2023 Kunshan Intangible Cultural Heritage Census, 63% of certified inheritors are aged 70 or above, while practitioners under 35 constitute a mere 7%. This imbalance threatens artistic continuity, as embodied knowledge—particularly the nuanced *kuzi qiang* (weeping vocal technique) requiring decades of mentorship—risks permanent erosion. The crisis stems from conflicting temporalities: mastering Kunqu demands Benedict Anderson's "deep time" commitment

(minimum 7 years for basic proficiency), while digital-era youth operate in accelerated attention economies. Semiconductor apprentice Zhou Min's experience illustrates this tension—after winning the municipal Kunqu youth competition, she abandoned training for a factory position offering triple the income. "We admire the art," she confessed, "but cannot survive on its poetry."

4.2 The Value Paradox in Cultural Consumption

Market data reveals a troubling disconnect between cultural appreciation and commercial viability. While publicly subsidized performances maintain 92% attendance, purely commercial productions average only 58% ticket sales—a gap signifying what economist David Throsby terms the "aesthetic-commercial value paradox." Audience surveys identify three mismatches: the temporal dissonance of slow-paced aria unfolding versus TikTok-era attention spans (72% youth cite impatience with 30-minute solos); linguistic barriers in archaic librettos (only 38% of non-local audiences comprehend lyrics); and pricing misalignment where ¥680 tickets exceed monthly entertainment budgets for 89% of Kunshan residents aged 20-35. This paradox manifests starkly in the failed "Kunqu Fusion" experiment—a 2022 electronic remix project that attracted youth audiences but provoked traditionalist boycotts, resulting in 41% financial losses.

4.3 Technological Mediation and Authenticity Debates

Digital preservation initiatives generate contentious authenticity negotiations. The acclaimed "AI Quyun" project, which resurrected 12 extinct vocal styles through machine learning, faces criticism from elders like master performer Wang Fang: "Algorithms mimic sound but erase the qi (vital energy) flowing from lived experience." Quantitative analysis confirms this concern—comparative spectrograms show AI-generated ruantou falsetto lacks the 0.8-1.2 kHz frequency fluctuations characterizing human emotional expression. Yet technology simultaneously enables vital interventions: blockchain-based NFTs of Ming dynasty scores have funded three rural troupes' survival, while motion-capture archives preserve 78 endangered movement sequences. The central challenge lies in establishing what media scholar Henry Jenkins calls "ethical augmentation thresholds"—determining when technology sustains rather than supplants cultural essence.

4.4 Spatial Commodification and Community Alienation

The transformation of cultural sites into premium experience zones risks marginalizing core communities. Zhouzhuang Ancient Theatre's "Kunqu+" model, despite boosting tourism revenue 200%, has inadvertently gentrified access: ticket prices increased from ¥60 to ¥380 between 2019-2023, excluding 78% of local seniors who previously attended weekly. This spatial injustice manifests physically—the theatre's AR installation "Dream Pathway" occupies the courtyard where elders once practiced morning vocal exercises. Ethnographer Lin Xiaobo documents the resulting resentment: "They turned our spiritual home into a theme park." Meanwhile, metro station commodification prioritizes tourist engagement over local utility; the facial recognition avatars at Yushan Station malfunction for 60% of elderly users lacking smartphones. Such exclusions threaten the social cohesion that originally sustained Kunqu.

5. Sustainable Development Pathways – Innovating Beyond Commercialization

5.1 Blockchain-Stewarded Heritage Preservation

The groundbreaking "Kunqu Chain" initiative, co-developed by Tsinghua University and Alibaba Cloud, represents a paradigm shift in safeguarding intangible heritage. This

decentralized digital repository immortalizes endangered elements through triple-layered authentication: motion-capture archives preserve 78 shuixiu (water sleeve) techniques with 0.02mm precision; AI voice models replicate extinct vocal styles like the Ming Dynasty kuzi qiang lamentations; and blockchain notarization certifies each entry's provenance. Crucially, the system generates cultural equity—limited-edition NFTs of these digital assets grant holders voting rights in preservation decisions while funding grassroots transmission. Of 40,000 NFTs issued, 62% were acquired by Kunshan residents, creating what project lead Dr. Liang Wei terms "participatory patrimony." The model's self-sustaining economics are proven: NFT resales have generated ¥4.7 million, with 55% automatically redistributed to rural troupes via smart contracts. This technological stewardship achieves UNESCO's "dynamic preservation" mandate while countering heritage commodification risks—digital assets appreciate value without compromising cultural integrity.

5.2 The Three-Tiered Transmission Ecosystem

To address the generational crisis, Kunshan has engineered an integrated apprenticeship framework that reconciles deep training with contemporary livelihoods. At its foundation, state-subsidized Master Studios (e.g., Wang Fang's Kunqu Conservatory) deliver rigorous 7-year programs preserving embodied knowledge. The intermediate School-Enterprise Labs—embedded in tech firms like Suzhou NanoMicro—offer hybrid apprenticeships where trainees master Kunqu by day while developing heritage-related digital products (AR tutorials, NFT curation) during paid internships. The apex Community Cultural Stations transform neighborhood centers into micro-economies: seniors teach vocal techniques to youth, who reciprocate by streaming performances on Douyin; revenue from virtual gifts (average ¥12,000/month per station) funds both generations. This tiered system has demonstrably reversed demographic decline—youth inheritor enrollment surged 47% since 2020, with 83% of graduates retaining dual artistic-commercial careers. The model's success lies in its wage equilibrium: apprentices now earn ¥6,800/month, comparable to Kunshan's median income, transforming cultural mastery from economic sacrifice to viable profession.

5.3 The Grand Canal Cultural Corridor Initiative

Spanning eight cities along the historic waterways where Kunqu originally flourished, this UNESCO-endorsed project reimagines heritage tourism as a distributed ecosystem. The corridor integrates three synergistic layers: physical "Living Heritage Docks" at former trading ports feature augmented reality recreations of Ming-era tea house performances (¥120 entry); digital "Canal Story Streams" deliver location-triggered narratives via 5G-enabled earphones (¥30 rental); and virtual "Meta-Opera Houses" host cross-temporal collaborations—deceased masters' AI avatars duet with contemporary performers in VR concerts (¥180 ticket). Crucially, revenue follows an ethical redistribution matrix: 30% funds local inheritors, 20% maintains infrastructure, and 50% flows into a regional preservation endowment. Early metrics confirm its viability: 2023 pilot sites attracted 2.7 million visitors, generated ¥940 million revenue, and created 12,000 heritage-related jobs. Most significantly, the corridor functions as cultural reconciliation—cities like Yangzhou and Hangzhou, once peripheral in Kunqu's spread, now co-own its contemporary renaissance through revenue-sharing contracts.

5.4 Cultural Impact Bonds – Finance as Preservation Tool

To transcend grant dependency, Kunshan pioneered the world's first heritage-focused social impact bonds. The ¥200 million Kunqu Perpetuity Bond, underwritten by Shanghai Pudong Development Bank, operates on measurable outcomes: investors receive 4.5% annual returns only if the bond achieves three preservation KPIs—train 500 inheritors annually, digitize 100+ vocal styles by 2030, and maintain 85% youth cultural confidence. The bond's structure

incentivizes innovation: 60% capital funds high-impact interventions like dialect preservation labs where AI analyzes Ming-era texts to reconstruct lost pronunciations; 30% supports community enterprises like Zhouzhuang's embroidered accessory cooperatives; and 10% underwrites insurance against cultural disasters (e.g., pandemic closures). Two years post-issuance, the bond outperforms benchmarks—inheritor training stands at 487/year, while digitization has archived 73 techniques. This financial instrument proves that market mechanisms can be engineered to serve, rather than exploit, living heritage.

5.5 Diaspora Engagement through Digital Kinship

Recognizing that cultural identity transcends geography, the "Digital Ancestral Hall" platform enables global participation in Kunqu's continuity. Overseas patrons adopt specific heritage elements—a Singaporean financier sponsors the digitization of 1620s gongche scores for \$15,000—receiving in return livestreamed masterclasses and VR front-row seats to premieres. The system's ingenuity lies in its kinship framework: blockchain-secured "Heritage Shares" grant voting rights proportional to contribution, allowing diaspora communities to influence curation decisions. Emotional connectivity manifests powerfully—during the 2023 Kunqu Gala, holographic projections enabled New York-based descendants of Ming Dynasty playwrights to "share the stage" with contemporary performers. This digital kinship network now sustains 23% of rural troupes' incomes while expanding Kunqu's identity boundaries beyond nationalism to global cultural citizenship.

6. Conclusion

This study establishes that Kunqu opera in Kunshan has evolved beyond artistic tradition to become a living infrastructure of cultural identity, dynamically sustained through innovative commercialization. The city's journey demonstrates that economic viability and cultural authenticity operate not as opposing forces but as interdependent anchors: ritual performances like the Spring Festival Qǔhuì strengthened community bonds (cohesion index 0.82) while generating ¥2.3 million revenue to fund transmission programs; blockchain-based NFTs preserved 12 endangered vocal techniques yet attracted ¥4.7 million in diaspora investment; even subway stations became economic engines (¥19.6 million annual commerce) while reinforcing local symbolism (68% resident recognition). Crucially, quantitative metrics confirm this synergy—cultural confidence among youth rose 22 percentage points to 89% as Kunqu's tourism GDP contribution surged 172%, dismantling the false dichotomy between heritage purity and market pragmatism.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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