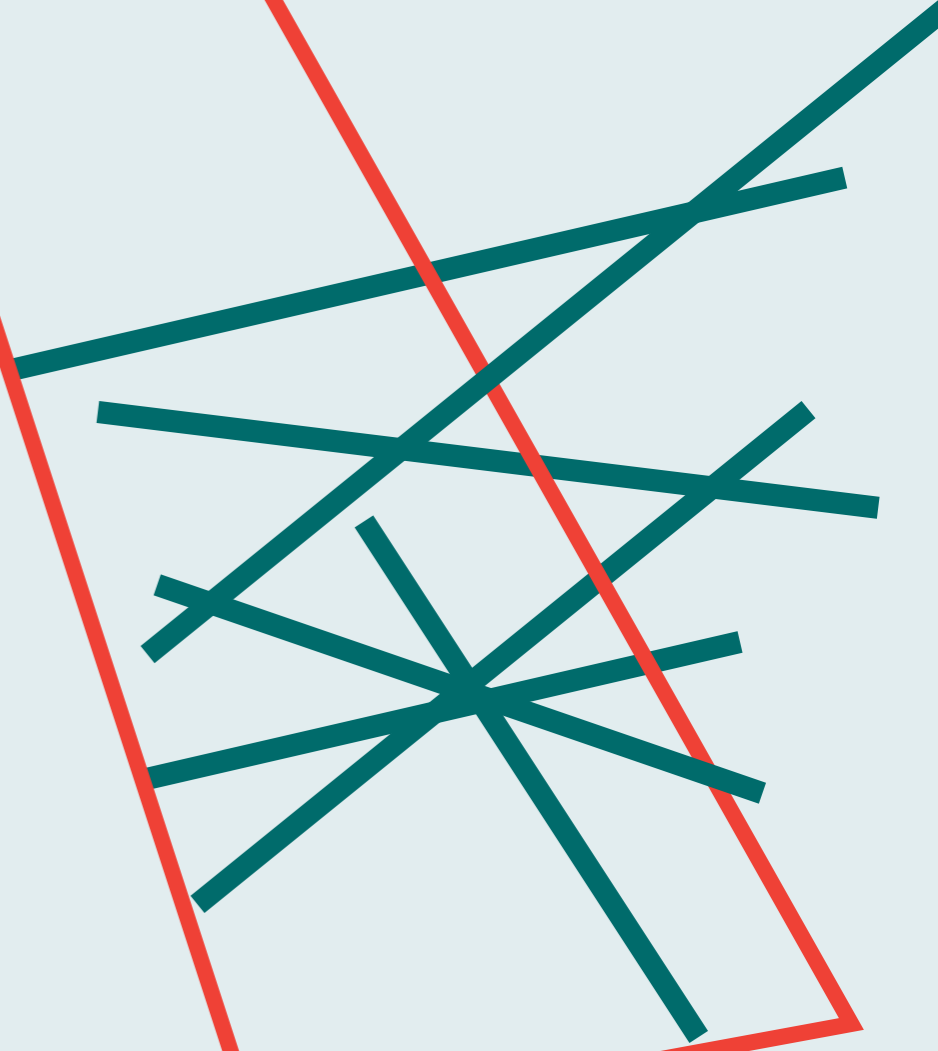


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A Brief Account of My Participation in
the Peking and Kunqu Opera Course by
Lee Woo Sing College of the CUHK



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Text
Kang Di

The Peking and Kunqu opera course offered by Lee Woo Sing College of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) was jointly founded in 2014 by Dr Lee Woo-sing, patron of the College and acclaimed Peking opera connoisseur; Dr Koo Ti-hua, a member of the Committee of Overseers of the College and a disciple of Chinese opera maestro Yu Zhenfei; and Mrs Dorothy Koo. It was the first credit-bearing course that included Peking and Kunqu opera performance training for students at a local university. It encompassed three main areas of training—the *dan* (female) role in Peking opera, the *sheng* (male) role in Kunqu, and the *dan* role in Kunqu. Apart from the credit-bearing course, there was also a non-credit class for advanced learners. Starting from early 2016, I took part in the training for the *sheng* role in Kunqu. What follows is a record of my learning experience.

In the beginning, it was necessary to create a Kunqu performance course at a local university from scratch. Thanks to Dr Koo's tireless planning and Dr Lee's ardent support over the past years, persistent efforts were then made to improve the curriculum. During the five semesters from the spring of 2016 to the spring of 2018, and in collaboration with the Chinese Opera School of the Shanghai Theatre Academy and the Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe, expert instructors flew in from Shanghai to teach every weekend. The credit-bearing course began with an overview of Peking and Kunqu operatic culture, based on teaching material tailor-made by Dr Lee and Dr Koo. The performance section started with vocal drills, followed by training in fundamental stage moves. After a few classes, students were asked to perform a simple dramatic sequence to ensure that, within the limited time frame, they were able to get a basic understanding of Kunqu. To enhance their learning, students were given the chance to undertake seven to ten days of intensive training at the Chinese Opera School in Shanghai during the holidays. Participants had to follow the timetable of their mainland counterparts: basic stage moves training in the morning, singing technique and

repertoire study in the afternoon, and practice in the evening. In addition to training, students were also able to view performances by their mainland schoolmates and the Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe. In the second and third years, courses on weaponry, makeup and wardrobe were offered in order to broaden the students' skill set.

Over the five semesters and under careful guidance of the teachers, namely Dai Guoliang, Pan Jiehua, and Shi Xiaojun at the Chinese Opera School, as well as Zhang Ting at the Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe, we Kunqu students learnt parts of excerpts such as "The Interrupted Dream" and "Finding the Portrait" from *The Peony Pavilion*, and "Yearnings for Earthly Delights" from *Story of the Karmic Sea*. Dr Koo, Mrs Koo and Dr Lee always showered us with encouragement despite our inexperience. Every year they also put together a campus tour called "Myriad Blossoms" and secured other performing opportunities for us to demonstrate what we had learnt. Just as Mr Zhou Zhigang said, onstage performance matters above all in Kunqu training: "Ten rehearsals cannot beat one rehearsal with live music, and ten rehearsals with music cannot beat one formal performance." Alongside lessons and training, Dr Koo also conducted talks and singing sessions for us. Whenever any Peking or Kunqu opera greats came to perform in Hong Kong, our teachers always bought us tickets so that we could watch and learn.



The "Myriad Blossoms" campus tour in 2017 — Photo courtesy of the author

Starting a Kunqu course in Hong Kong was an uphill battle against many constraints, such as a lack of instructors and a lack of university course time. To go from nothing at the beginning to eventually a teaching model with a curriculum, intensive training and public performance, was indeed a massive achievement. Dr Koo, who has received tutelage from Yu Zhenfei and Zhang Shusheng (helmsman of the Red Bean Hall), makes it his calling to keep his masters' legacies alive. He considers both audiences and actors as pillars of the industry. It is therefore his heartfelt mission to nurture a generation of young opera goers.

In the fall semester of 2019, Mrs Koo invited two veteran performers from the Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe, Zhou Zhigang and Zhu Xiaoyu—both of whom have years of experience teaching in the mainland and Taiwan—to coach us in Hong Kong. Thorough discussions among our teachers finally brought forth a new curriculum for the two-year training.

In the first semester, students of the credit-bearing course with no prior knowledge were taught only singing and basic postures like standing and walking, but not any specific repertoire. The first aria they learnt was “Zui Tai Ping” from “The Hunting Tour”, an excerpt from the play, *Story of the Gauze-washing Maiden*. It is a Kunqu ensemble piece sung by a group. Teaching newcomers an ensemble piece is a long-standing practice in professional Kunqu opera troupes. Students got to learn how to pronounce the words and deliver the tonal patterns, and, through repeated practice, gradually familiarise themselves with the vocal essence of Kunqu singing. During the drill session, students were asked to put their desks side by side and sit in a circle. This reminded me of Master Zhou Chuanying's (from the legendary “Chuan” generation of Kunqu artists) recollection in the book *Sixty Years in Kunqu Opera*—a hundred years ago, when the Chuan masters first embarked on their professional training, they too gathered in a circle and sang the same aria, “Zui Tai Ping”.

On the other hand, the non-credit class for more advanced learners was divided into three groups, each of which studied the following: the aria “Xiao Tao Hong” from the “Autumn River” sequence of *The Story of the Jade Hairpin*, tailored for a young couple; the aria “Yan Zi Le” from the “Finding the Portrait” sequence of *The Peony Pavilion*, tailored for the *sheng* role; and the arias “Zao Luo Pao” and “Hao Jie Jie” from the “Stroll in the Garden” of *The Peony Pavilion*, tailored for the *dan* role. The training always began with vocal drills—ideally, each aria had to be sung for a hundred times or so before stage moves were taught. When it came to stage moves, progress was not the key objective, rather nuances and precision; we had to learn to draw from our inner stamina and make sure our techniques were driven by the drama. The credit-bearing course and non-credit class

complemented each other and proceeded step by step. Master Zhou indicated that two years of training in this way would lay the groundwork for further development.

The teaching programme lasted until November 2019, and came to a halt due to the closure of the university. Although the visit from Master Zhou and Master Zhu was short, students made obvious progress under their guidance. One student even came to realise that he “did not know a thing at all” before taking the class. These benefits to students come about due to the veterans' superb artistry and painstaking attitudes. At the same time, students' direct experience and subsequent understanding also bear witness to the sound methodology of traditional Kunqu teaching.

The art of Kunqu opera encapsulates the best of traditional Chinese culture. Its original logic, aspiration and teaching methodology are different from what we are familiar with nowadays. More often than not, our perceptual system is so ingrained that we are inclined to learn things in a fixed manner. Much like the Windows OS, whenever a Mac programme hits us, our system fails to detect or accommodate it despite the merits we see in it. Doubt and blockage then arise. We even find it necessary to amend the programme so that it fits in with our own system. Here, if we change our perspective, shut down the old system for a while, it is not so difficult to tune in to our predecessors and gain a new understanding of Kunqu and the primordial wisdom of Chinese culture that it embodies. For instance, Kunqu may seem to be so slow that it fails to keep up with the pace of modern life and the theatrical norms of today. Many insist that it has to go faster, and to that end, the plot has to be tightened, and the minor characters and their vocal passages excised. However, modern life is far from perfect. Anxiety and other emotional problems are common. If Kunqu audiences could feel the serenity and calmness of our predecessors, and get inspired by the way they controlled their desires in order to reach a deeper sense of inner wellbeing, Kunqu would double as a medicine for the mind. Emptying ourselves of old preconceptions, experiences and beliefs in order to gain space for fresh input—this is the virtue of *xuji* (emptying the self) in Chinese culture.

Ever since our primary school years, we have been trained to think logically and acquire knowledge from books and other texts. However, according to Chinese opera, poetry, calligraphy, painting, *guqin*, Chinese medicine, *qigong*, or the literary classics, “discerning, feeling and understanding” matter much more, as these capacities determine whether a new learner is doing exactly what s/he is meaning to do. Art is passed down by people. Through years of training and comprehension,



Dai Zhengkun teaches *bazigong* at the Chinese Opera School in 2018 —
Photo courtesy of the author

performance artists turn themselves into a medium of what they are practising. They become one with their craft and master all the skills effortlessly. The messages they send, whether on stage or off, are not confined to the verbal or the logical—we have to listen with our hearts, and contemplate with our souls. Our great teacher Zhou Zhigang is not only Yu Zhenfei’s disciple; he also studied under Shen Chuanzhi, one of the masters of the “Chuan” generation. During class, he demonstrated his superior acting skills and encouraged us to fully inhabit our roles, seeing what the characters see and feeling what they feel. The ability to catch all these non-verbal messages is the difference between a well-trained actor and a genuine artist.

A real grasp of Kunqu necessitates the shaping of the brain and the heart. It calls for consistent practice in singing, speech, and performance over an extended period of time. Mastering a Kunqu tune requires much more effort than picking up a pop song. This age-old craft seems far away from us today, and it is no easy task to reproduce its nuanced flavour. A student can probably imitate all the stage moves in a short time, but s/he cannot possibly imitate the inner spirit of the art,

which requires years of training. Dr Koo, now a revered Peking and Kunqu opera connoisseur, has persisted with his practice every single day ever since his teens. He says his debut play, the Peking opera *Nine Dragons Mountain*, took nine months of hard work before he could manage it. In the first few years after the course at Lee Woo Sing College commenced, every time we performed in public we performed “The Interrupted Dream”. Some audience members were not entirely pleased to see the same work over and over again. But in fact it is a guiding principle in Kunqu teaching that performers should polish one single piece patiently, rather than hastily jumping into something new.

Since its inception, the Lee Woo Sing College’s Peking and Kunqu opera course has nurtured one group of young learners after another. I have watched them walk through the gateway into the wonderful world of Chinese opera. Many of the graduates have since left Hong Kong and have taken their fondness for the art to different parts of the globe. Other students kept coming back even after they had started working, offering their support for the course’s continued development. As one of the participants, I am well aware that there were countless hurdles to overcome before this could happen. The three course founders are already in their 70s. Even so, they took care of all things big and small and never stopped searching for better ways to keep forging ahead. Their willingness to shoulder responsibility, their perseverance, and their commitment to safeguarding and continuing the legacy of Peking opera and Kunqu is truly awe-inspiring.

(Translated by Elbe Lau)

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