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## KUNQU BAIZHONG, DASHI SHUOXI (ONE HUNDRED PIECES OF KUNQU, MASTER PERFORMERS TALK ABOUT THEIR SCENES): A REVIEW ESSAY

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*Kunqu baizhong, Dashi shuoxi* 崑曲百種, 大師說戲 (One hundred pieces of *Kunqu*, Master performers talk about their scenes). 110 DVDs and an introductory booklet (55 pp.). Changsha: Hunan dianzi yinxiang and Yuelu shushe, 2014. RMB 1400.

*Kunqu baizhong, Dashi shuoxi* 崑曲百種, 大師說戲. 5 vols. Changsha: Hunan dianzi yinxiang and Yuelu shushe, 2014. 1694 pp. Simplified character edition. Paper RMB 1000. Regular character edition. Paper RMB 1400. These volumes contain written versions of the lectures.

*Biaoyan yishu jia shuo biaoyan yishu* 表演藝術家說表演藝術 (Performance artists talk about their performance art). Changsha: Hunan dianzi yinxiang and Yuelu shushe, 2014. 265 pp. Paper RMB 80. Material on the lecturers and their lectures.<sup>1</sup>

At the core of the project that is the subject of this review, hereafter referred to as *Dashi shuoxi*, is a set of 110 video lectures,<sup>2</sup> each between one and two hours long, by 29 “master” performers of *Kunqu* 崑曲, most of whom were aged around 70 at the time of recording. While *Kunqu* once denoted a style of music and singing, it also has come to refer to stage performance that makes use of that musical style.<sup>3</sup> Theater sung to *Kunqu* was dominant into the 19th century and has returned to a level of prominence since it was listed as “a masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity” by UNESCO in 2001. *Dashi shuoxi* is not the first project to attempt to document how *Kunqu* is, was, or “should be” performed, but it is certainly the most ambitious, both in terms of scale and its (problematic) attempt to present a definitive *Kunqu* repertoire within a highly systematized framework. For the researcher, it contains valuable information on the recent transmission histories

<sup>1</sup> The list price for all of the above items, plus some “souvenirs” (*jimian pin* 紀念品) from the masters, in what was called a “special collector’s edition” (*diancang ban* 典藏版), was RMB 9000.

<sup>2</sup> “One hundred” in the title should be understood as a “round” and not a precise number. A total of 108 or 109 separate performance pieces are the subject of the 110 lectures, as discussed below. See <http://www.dashishuoxi.com/>, accessed September 14, 2016 (which also gives the project’s preferred English title, “Master’s Lectures on 109 Excerpts: The Performing Art of *Kunqu*”). The term used most often for these performance pieces in the material under review is *zhezi xi* 折子戲, a performance genre/term that will be introduced below.

<sup>3</sup> Some prefer to use the term *Kunju* 崑劇 to refer to the stage tradition.

of *Kunqu* performance, plus some wonderful anecdotes and insights into the considerations that go into staging “traditional” Chinese theater in the present era. No other single resource provides as much insight into the development of *Kunqu* in the PRC and its publication will, I hope, inspire more scholarship into *Kunqu* as a genuinely contemporary theater practice, rather than simply a repertoire of historic dramatic literature or an emblem of Chinese soft power.

However, the way in which the project has attempted to certify one particular practitioner’s version of each piece of repertoire theater does deserve some scrutiny. One characteristic of *Kunqu* performance practice is that individual *zhezi xi* 折子戲 (independent scenes, usually developed from a longer play, that make up the performance repertoire<sup>4</sup>) are performed over and over again by various actors, often from different troupes. These *zhezi xi* can be performed independently or “strung” together to give an idea of the whole story covered by the play they were developed from. Regular audiences become familiar with both the performance routines of individual *zhezi xi* and the personal styles of the actors associated with them. However, it is often assumed by some—in particular the enthusiasts who are the immediate market for this set—that a perfected sequence of fixed movements for each item in the *Kunqu* repertoire has been transmitted from teacher to student over the generations from the mid-Qing dynasty or earlier. Actors are expected to maintain and transmit this performance tradition, the quality of which is popularly thought to be in general decline. As lecturers in this project, the senior actors therefore occupy a difficult position in which they are asked to represent both an anonymous tradition and also their own mediation of it.

In terms of format, the lectures are provided with Chinese subtitles on the videos, and the set also includes five volumes of written versions of the lectures.<sup>5</sup> The lectures include short passages spoken by a voice-over narrator that are inserted at fairly regular intervals. While these are more often disruptive of the videos than informative, they are perhaps useful in punctuating the written versions of the long lectures.<sup>6</sup> The basic format of the lectures is strongly reminiscent of *Baijia jiangtan* 百家講壇<sup>7</sup> and other lecture series that have been popular on television and

<sup>4</sup> The longer plays were usually *chuanqi* 傳奇 plays. *Chuanqi* plays were very long (some have more than 50 scenes) and thus difficult to stage in full. Even though the term *zhezi xi* is typically used for pieces that were developed from scenes in longer plays, it is also used to refer to short plays in the *Kunqu* repertoire with no such connection to a longer play. In the different lists of the lectures and their contents in *Dashi shuoxi* given in the introductory booklet, five items lectured on are not identified as having such a connection to a longer play, and one is modern evening-length production based on *zhezi xi* from the same play.

<sup>5</sup> Some of the lectures clearly underwent editing after they were recorded (there are breaks in continuity, for instance) and the written versions do not always attempt to record precisely what the master actually says (readability seems to have been privileged over the kind of accuracy and transparency expected if these were strictly transcripts).

<sup>6</sup> Editorial oversight for these passages is attributed to Zhu Weizong 朱為總, director of editing (*bianji zongjian* 編輯總監) for the project.

<sup>7</sup> When the voice-over narrator speaks, the text that is spoken is displayed, but when the master is lecturing, we see only what the camera sees. In *Baijia jiangtan* lectures visual material is sometimes inserted.

DVD in the PRC for decades now.<sup>8</sup> Some of the masters use a lot of gestures, some very few. Some use simple props or items of clothing, but none are in costume or stage makeup. Something inherently visual, such as differences in the face pattern (*lianpu* 臉譜) of a character as painted by a variety of performers, will be explained orally. At such times the interdiction on the use of visual aids to clarify what the lecturers are talking about is keenly felt. Although there is a common structure to the lectures, there is also a certain amount of variety. Some of the masters, for example, expand on topics such as the bitterness that they endured as students or muse on the challenges faced by a professional *Kunqu* actor both as stage performer and teacher.

The idea for *Dashi shuoxi* can be said to have developed out of two series of lecture-demonstrations by senior *Kunqu* actors at the Chinese Civilization Centre at City University of Hong Kong that began in 2005 and that eventually averaged between 20 and 30 a year. According to Professor Cheng Pei-kai 鄭培凱, director of the Centre at that time, Hong Kong financier Yeh Chao-hsin 葉肇鑫 attended all of the lectures, regardless of how bad the weather was.<sup>9</sup> In 2007, Cheng brought in Wang Shiyu 汪世瑜, a senior *Kunqu* performer and artistic advisor for Bai Xianyong's 白先勇 (Kenneth Pai) "Young Lover's Edition" (*qingchun ban* 青春版) of *The Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan ting* 牡丹亭) to give 15 lectures about that production. The following year, Cheng and Wang developed plans for a series of lectures concentrating on the transmission of *Kunqu* that brought more than ten performers to Hong Kong.<sup>10</sup>

According to Yang Shousong 楊守松, Yeh's interest was awoken by these lectures but he was ultimately unsatisfied with the limited amount of detail and depth they could provide. He had the idea to have lecturers analyze performance pieces like the "dissection of a sparrow" (*jiēpou maque na yang* 解剖麻雀那樣).<sup>11</sup> For his more ambitious project, Yeh asked Wang Shiyu to be the artistic director (*yishu zongjian* 藝術總監) and personally underwrote the entire cost of the project.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Yang Shousong 楊守松, *Damei Kunqu* 大美崑曲 (The great beauty of *Kunqu*; Nanjing: Jiangsu wenyi, 2014), p. 97, describes *Dashi shuoxi* as a "one person *baijia jiangtan*" (*yige ren de baijia jiangtan* 一個人的百家講壇). The "one person" he presumably had in mind was the producer, who will be introduced below, and not those who did the lectures.

<sup>9</sup> See Cheng Peikai 鄭培凱, "Bu xiaoxin chengjiu de dashi" 不小心成就的大事 (A great thing accomplished by accident), pp. 42–45 of the introductory booklet. Cheng's title refers to a saying of Yeh's about *Dashi shuoxi* that Cheng quotes at the beginning of the piece: "Yi bu xiaoxin, zuole yi jian dashi" 一不小心, 做了一件大事 (Because of an accident, a great thing was accomplished). The introductory booklet only contains a very short piece by Yeh (p. 4) that does not deal with the genesis of the project.

<sup>10</sup> Cheng Peikai, "Bu xiaoxin chengjiu de dashi," pp. 43–44. Cheng is credited as editor for Wang's *Putianxia you qing shui si zan: Wang Shiyu tan Qingchun ban Mudan ting de chuangzuo* 普天下有情誰似咱: 汪世瑜談青春版牡丹亭的創作 (Who matches us among lovers under heaven? Wang Shiyu on the creation of the young lover's edition of *Peony Pavilion*; Beijing: Beijing daxue, 2013). The first half of the title of the book plays on the last line that the heroine of *Peony Pavilion* sings. As part of the same series, Chen also edited similar volumes focused on Zhang Jiqing 張繼青 (she will be mentioned again below) and Hou Shaokui 侯少奎 (the master who gave the first lecture in *Dashi shuoxi*; see below).

<sup>11</sup> Yang Shousong, *Damei Kunqu*, p. 98. For an account in English of the genesis of the project, see Hu Bei, "The Quest to Save Kunqu," *Global Times*, August 6, 2013 (<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/801908.shtml>; accessed August 24, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Yang Shousong, *Damei Kunqu*, pp. 99–100. Yang says that Yeh's wife cried when she found out how much of their personal wealth he had committed to the project.

The fact that a project like *Dashi shuoxi* did get published at all is, however, probably related to the fact that there are many amateur *Kunqu* performers and aficionados of some financial means, both in China and abroad, to whom such a project would strongly appeal.<sup>13</sup>

A trial lecture that became the first lecture of *Dashi shuoxi* was recorded in January of 2010.<sup>14</sup> The recording of the rest of the lectures began in March of the same year and was finished by November of 2011. Gu Lingsen 顧聆森, whose name appears first in the list of members of the editorial board (*bianji bu* 編輯部), writes in a preface for the introductory booklet that a team of twelve scholars and “theoretical workers” (*lilun gongzuozhe* 理論工作者) were employed to help the practitioners prepare their lectures (p. 48). A statement in the “General Preface” (“Zongxu” 總序) of the introductory booklet (p. 5) claims that some of the lectures were completely redone (*quanxin de chongjiang chongshe chongzhi* 全新的重講重攝重制), at the request of the lecturer, production crew, or artistic director.

One of the strongest critiques of the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) movement is that, rather than preserve embodied practices as intangible culture, it has tended to make them tangible, attracting large sums of money to commit them to paper and film.<sup>15</sup> As a result, the record of past performance has been increasingly seen as more valuable and “authentic” than the living performances of the present day. This critique is broadly ignored in *Dashi shuoxi*, which in its “General Preface” (p. 5) goes so far as to boast that: “Chinese *Kunqu* is an intangible cultural heritage of all humanity. [*Dashi*] *shuoxi* is the tangible heritage of Chinese *Kunqu*” 中國崑曲是全人類的非物質遺產。[大師] 說戲是中國崑曲的物質遺產。

However, the important contribution of *Dashi shuoxi* is that the actors themselves—as becomes apparent throughout the actual lectures—in the most part do not talk about the choice of stage movements and gestures as assiduously preserved from the past, but rather as open to negotiation and intervention. We learn from Zhang

<sup>13</sup> Individuals interested in buying *Dashi shuoxi* were required to pay in advance in order to help fund publication. Overseas, the president of an amateur *Kunqu* organization in New York that teaches and stages plays wrote a piece for the introductory booklet (pp. 50–52). Her name, and that of the head of an organization located in greater Washington, D. C., that puts on *Kunqu* performances in the U. S., appears at the head of individuals who supported *Dashi shuoxi* (p. 54). Those two organizations oversaw the selling of copies of *Dashi shuoxi* outside China. According to Yang Shousong, *Damei Kunqu*, p. 100, Yeh wanted a “foreign language version” (*waiwen ban* 外文版; in English, presumably) of the lectures to appear, but the only movement toward that goal to date is the appearance of Josh Stenberg’s annotated translation of the second lecture in this issue of this journal.

<sup>14</sup> This lecture is striking in that it shows clear signs of post-recording editing and in how the lecturer remains seated throughout except for one brief period in which he stands up behind the desk he has been seated at. The DVDs are numbered according to the sequence in which the lectures were recorded, which does not end up grouping pieces from the same play or lectures by the same lecturer together. The introductory booklet also includes indexes according to (1) literary genre (the categories are *Yuan zaju* 元雜劇, *nanxi* 南戲, *Ming chuanqi* 明傳奇, *Qing chuanqi* 清傳奇, *shiju* 時劇, and *wuxi* 武戲) and piece title (the title of the larger play from which the piece was developed is given first and then that of the piece itself; the five *wuxi* [military plays], all of which only have one title, are the only exceptions), (2) the name of the piece, (3) name of the lecturer, and (4) the name of the role type of the characters the lecturers speak about.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Diana Taylor, “Performance and Intangible Cultural Heritage,” in Tracy C. Davis, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 91–104.

Jingxian 張靜嫻 in lecture 45, for example, that when, in the early 1980s, she went to study with the revered *chuan* 傳 generation<sup>16</sup> instructor Yao Chuanxiang 姚傳蕪 (1912–96), he would demonstrate the gestures one way one day and another way the next. On being asked which was better, he would reply that either was fine as long as it fits the emotion of the character.

This type of teaching, remarks Zhang, is particularly suitable for mature actors rather than young actors, who need a clear example to follow. Throughout the set there is a sense that while basic skills need to be *guifan* 規範 (standardized), the masters' own performance routines are in fact quite personal and even idiosyncratic. Yet there seems in *Dashi shuoxi* to be a conflict, at times palpable, between this fact and the general rhetoric of traditionalism, of presenting something that is universal, fixed, and unchanging. In his afterword to the volume on the lecturers and their lectures, Yeh makes clear his intention to preserve specifically that which is both exclusively *Kunqu* and that originates prior to the modern era:

The whole world is paying attention, future generations are prepared to transmit Chinese *Kunqu*, which basically means Ming and Qing dynasty *Kunqu* and *not* modern *Kunqu*, for otherwise it would not carry the title “heritage.” 全球正在關注，後代準備傳承的中國崑曲，大概主要是指明清崑曲，而不是現代崑曲，否則也就無所謂‘遺產’之稱。 (p. 262)

Aware of this traditionalist rhetoric, yet asked to dissect their performance move-by-move, the selected practitioners for the project are especially careful in setting out their positions, explaining what they preserved from their teachers and what they modified themselves, and why.

Watching the lectures, it is clear that many of the senior *Kunqu* practitioners in *Dashi shuoxi* have indeed personalized their performances, often making changes from what they present as “tradition.” Liang Guyin 梁谷音, in Lecture 83, for example, addresses this when speaking of how Tian-shi, the character she plays in *Shuoqin Huihua* 說親回話 (The proposal, The response) from *Hudie meng* 胡蝶夢 (The Butterfly Dream), should first come on stage:

Most important is that, whatever you do, don't come out in this traditional way [demonstrates briefly],<sup>17</sup> if you do it like that it will have no flavor. We need to add a bit of modern sensibility. I believe this is what we mature actors need to pursue. For young actors, with regard to the [five “channels”

<sup>16</sup> The students trained at the Kunqu Chuanxi Suo 崑曲傳習所 (Academy for the transmission and training of *Kunqu*), established in 1921, were all given the character *chuan* 傳 as the second element in their names. Those who managed to survive through the hard years, for professional *Kunqu*, of the last decades of the Republic, were instrumental in the training of new students of *Kunqu* in the PRC.

<sup>17</sup> In some of the written versions of the lectures, when the master demonstrates movements, speech, or song, this is notated by inserting “shifan” 示範 (demonstrates) or “biaoyan” 表演 (performs) in parentheses. That is not done in this instance. After demonstrating the “traditional way,” in the rest of this passage quoted here Liang only uses ordinary hand gestures to emphasize aspects of what she is saying. The most important differences between her demonstration of how to enter in the lecture and “the traditional way” is that the former involves a deeper level of characterization, of movement designed for Tian-shi the character rather than for the role-type in general.

(*fa* 法) of] hands, eyes, posture, *fa*, and steps,<sup>18</sup> you must absolutely follow what is standard and stick to tradition, you shouldn't change anything, because you haven't the ability to make changes. Once you've been performing for 20-plus years, you need to transform it [the role/movements]<sup>19</sup> into something that is your own; you need to stand out from the crowd.

一直就是,千萬不要像傳統的這樣出來,那就沒有味道了,我們要加一點現在的感覺,我就覺得這是我們老演員所需要的追求。年輕演員,手眼身法步,你完全要按規範按傳統,<sup>20</sup>不要去變,因為你沒有這個能力變,到了你已經唱了20多年戲以後,你就要把它化成自己的東西,要與眾不同。<sup>21</sup>

However, the question that remains unaddressed by Liang, and in *Dashi shuoxi* as a whole, is at what point does a change become the standard?

Some of the lecturers do refer to other versions in a manner that implies that they have an equal legitimacy, but this is comparatively rare and it is clear that such an approach was not brought to their consideration by the “theoretical workers.” The Jiangsu troupe actor Huang Xiaowu 黃小午, for example, acknowledges in Lecture 105 that there is a different, “northern,” version of *Caozhao* 草詔 (Drafting the abdication edict).<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in the lecture translated by Josh Stenberg in this issue, Zhang Jiqing also mentions an alternate Shanghai version, by Liang Guyin, of *Chimeng* 痴夢 (The mad dream).<sup>23</sup> But is the audience expected to recognize this “standing out from the crowd,” as Liang describes it, as a change or as the new standard? And, which version should the young actor learn?

While teaching lineages are important in *Kunqu*, the notion of belonging to a specific school or *pai* 派—a discourse that is very strong in *Jingju* 京劇 (Peking

<sup>18</sup> These five refer to basic performance techniques associated, with the exception of the fourth one, *fa* 法, with specific parts of the body. The fourth is believed to involve the coordination of the others and to possibly originate with a particular Buddhist use of the character. See, for instance, the entry on these five characters (*shou yan shen fa bu* 手眼身法步) in Wu Xinlei 吳新雷, ed., *Zhongguo Kunju da cidian* 中國崑劇大辭典 (Great dictionary of Chinese *Kunqu*; Nanjing: Nanjing daxue, 2002), p. 574.

<sup>19</sup> As for what “it” refers to, the original is vague. It could, for instance, be either singular or plural.

<sup>20</sup> These two sets of three characters are spoken by Liang in this order in the video but the subtitles and the written version reverse the order.

<sup>21</sup> For this passage in the DVD, see 23:20–23:55; in the written version of the lecture, see 4: 213.

<sup>22</sup> For this passage in the DVD, see 5:00–7:15; in the written version of the lecture, see 5: 242. Huang's information about the northern version is all second hand and not from direct observation. The only difference between the northern and southern performance traditions for the play that he notes is that in the former, after the main character gets his teeth knocked out and his tongue cut out on stage, he suddenly has strands of red added to his artificial beard to indicate the blood that is supposed to be flowing from his mouth. For a video of a member of the northern *Kunqu* troupe, Zhang Weidong 張衛東, performing the role, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GRKSpQjIEC8>, accessed August 25, 2016 (with his back to the audience, he gets his teeth smashed and tongue cut out at 28:56, and turns around to reveal the new streaks of red in his beard at 29:28). Huang also mentions that the play is also performed in local theatrical genres such as *Chuanju* 川劇 (Sichuan opera), and seems most concerned to indicate that the play has a kind of widespread importance.

<sup>23</sup> For her comments in the DVD, see 12:20–12:26; in the written version of the lecture, see 1: 17.

opera)—has been resisted. In *Kunqu* discourse, there are perhaps just two particular instances in which *pai* are generally discussed. One is a particular school of singing the *sheng* 生 (dignified male) role known as *Yupai* after father and son, Yu Sulu 俞粟廬 (1847–1930) and Yu Zhenfei 俞振飛 (1902–1993), and carried on by Yu Zhenfei's student, Cai Zhengren 蔡正仁. The other is for martial roles played by Hou Shaokui 侯少奎 (the only representative in *Dashi shuoxi* of the northern *Kunqu* tradition<sup>24</sup>), who learned most of his art from his father, Hou Yongkui 侯永奎 (1911–1981), thus carrying on a school of acting named *Houpai* 侯派.<sup>25</sup>

However, despite the general absence of a discourse of *pai* in *Kunqu*, many of its most iconic *zhezi xi* roles are performed by competing actors (some of whom studied with the same teachers) in often quite different ways. In line with a rhetoric that emphasizes the transmission of a perfected routine, there is almost no direct attention given to this kind of variety in *Dashi shuoxi* nor discussion in any real detail of the selection process for the project. The “General Preface” simply states that “each of these performance artists [chosen to lecture] is the authority on each particular *zhezi xi*” 這群表演藝術家，每一位都是那一折戲的權威 (p. 5). But where there are a number of established and differing performance traditions for a *zhezi xi*, presenting only one of these necessarily invests that one with a particular authority over the others.

While it is laudable that the lectures, at least, do not claim to represent an “original” *Kunqu*, the project as a whole does, however, end up giving the idea that there is just one authoritative contemporary version for each *zhezi xi* (the one represented in *Dashi shuoxi*). By appearing to certify certain versions and not others, *Dashi shuoxi* is surely attempting to determine for posterity the way in which these *zhezi xi* are thought to be performed “traditionally.” Neither this, nor the way in which the selection process was carried about is at any point acknowledged.

Despite a restrictive rule that stipulates “one lecture” for “one *zhezi xi*,” there are in fact two instances in which the same role in the same *zhezi xi* gets two lectures, one in which this is made explicit, the other in which it is partially hidden. In the first example, Lin Jifan's 林繼凡 Lecture 27 is about the male lead in *Huozhuo* 活捉 (Taken alive; originally a scene in *Shuihu ji* 水滸記 [The water margin]), as

<sup>24</sup> This tradition, in which military plays tended to be more prominent, was influenced by Qing dynasty palace performance practice, which often paired *Kunqu* together with a different musical tradition, *Yiyang* 弋陽, either in the form of programs that included both in separate plays or of plays in which some scenes were sung as *Kunqu* and others as *Yiyang* (play scripts for these plays that notated which was to be used for which scene have been preserved). Of the other geographically peripheral *Kunqu* lineages, Hunan is represented in *Dashi shuoxi* by only one master (Lei Ziwen 雷子文), who, like Hou Shaokui, is not said to have studied with any *chuan* generation actor (Lei's teachers are listed as two Hunan actors and one northern actor). The Yongjia 永嘉 troupe is unrepresented, its performance troupe having only been re-established in 2006 since disbanding in 1984.

<sup>25</sup> An online search of “侯派” that makes sure to restrict the general field of reference to *Kunqu* will produce many examples. Hou has a very prominent role in *Dashi shuoxi*. He is represented by six lectures (surpassed only by four actors of the Shanghai troupe, three of whom give eight lectures and one gives seven), one of which was the first, trial, lecture for the set. He is also honored by having a preface written by him included in the introductory booklet (it is one of only four prefaces written by lecturers; see pp. 36–41).



is Liu Yilong's 劉異龍 Lecture 75.<sup>26</sup> Both studied with the same teacher, but Liu is older.<sup>27</sup> The way the two of them talk about the *zhezi xi* and the character being performed (Zhang Wenyan 張文遠) is rather different, but not extremely so; Liu presents himself as more of an innovator than Lin does.

The second, partially hidden, example of two lectures covering the same *zhezi xi*, is that of Lecture 19, by Zhang Jiqing 張繼青, and Lecture 70, by Hua Wenyi 華文漪. Both cover the same *zhezi xi*, *Youyuan Jingmeng* 游園驚夢 (A stroll in a garden, Startled by a dream), but one is titled “*Jingmeng*” and the other “*Youyuan Jingmeng*.”<sup>28</sup> While Zhang is slightly older and presents her version as “traditional,” Hua talks about her own approach to the scene and of two productions of *Mudan ting* that she starred in: the Shanghai *Kunqu* troupe's 1982 production and Peter Sellars' hybrid production of 1998. These two instances in which the same *zhezi xi* are talked about by two different masters provides some opportunity to compare two different approaches to the same character in the same *zhezi xi*. One hopes, however, that future editions of *Dashi shuoxi* or projects of its type will be sure to both include the diversity in performance of the same *zhezi xi* and to highlight the fact that there are often multiple versions that are equally valid.

For this reason alone, *Dashi shuoxi* should not be seen as a comprehensive archive of *Kunqu* performance. But aside from omitting important performance versions of the same piece, the rigid structure of one master to one *zhezi xi* also means that many important character performances are left out.<sup>29</sup> In plays about the interaction of lovers such as *Jingmeng* or *Qintiao* 琴挑 (Seduction by *qin*-zither) from *Yuzan ji* 玉簪記 (Tale of the jade hairpin), for example, only one of the two lovers on stage is dealt with in the lectures.

Neither can the collection be said to be representative, a claim made by Yeh Chao-hsin in his afterword to the volume about the lecturers and their lectures. Yeh argues that the “standardization of traditional *Kunqu* performance” (*chuantong Kunqu biaoyan de guifanhua* 傳統崑曲表演的規範化) is most strongly instantiated in a limited number of *zhezi xi* and so as long as these “hundred classics” exist, so

<sup>26</sup> It is surely because of this overlap between these two lectures that it is repeatedly said in introductory material for *Dashi shuoxi* (both in the publication and in online introductions such as found at <http://www.dashishuoxi.com/> [accessed September 14, 2016]) that it covers 109 *zhezi xi* (rather than 110, the number of lectures).

<sup>27</sup> Lecture 75 is the third in a series of lectures that Liu recorded, one a day, over three days.

<sup>28</sup> As written by Tang Xianzu in the original *chuanqi*, the scene is just called “*Jingmeng*,” but has two different song suites and breaks into a first part (the stroll in the garden) and second part (the dream she has of a lover after she returns to her boudoir from the garden). In the *Kunqu* performance tradition, the first half can be performed separately under the name of *Youyuan* and the second separately under the name *Jingmeng*, and both can be performed together as a single item under the title of *Youyuan Jingmeng*. The title of Zhang Jiqing's lecture is “*Jingmeng*,” but she gives equal time to the garden stroll. Hua Wenyi, the former head of the Shanghai troupe who claimed asylum in the U. S. in 1989, is more noted for her performance of *Jingmeng* than *Youyuan*. Zhang, the former head of the Nanjing troupe and most senior of the living generation of actors, is known for her “Zhang Sanmeng” 張三夢 (Zhang's three “dreams”; *Jingmeng* is one of the three). It may have been that the plan was to have Zhang talk on *Jingmeng* in her lecture and Hua on *Youyuan*, but this is not borne out in the lectures themselves, which both give basically the same amount of attention to each.

<sup>29</sup> *Zhezi xi* in the *Kunqu* repertoire that only have one character who comes on stage are quite rare, despite the fact that some of them are quite famous. *Zhezi xi* with two important characters are quite common.

too will “traditional” *Kunqu* (p. 262). It is perhaps inevitable that the inclusion of certain items and not others would always seem unjustified, and some justification for choices should therefore be given,<sup>30</sup> but given the stated aims of the project, the choice to omit an entire role-type is particularly bewildering. The repertoire of *laodan* 老旦 (older females) is completely elided with neither acknowledgement nor explanation.<sup>31</sup> Although the repertoire starring that role-type is indeed small, there are obvious choices for inclusion, such as *Bayan* 罷宴 (An end to banquets). With no *laodan* actresses involved as lecturers, an entire branch of *Kunqu* performance is effaced in *Dashi shuoxi*.

In conclusion, *Dashi shuoxi* contains a vast amount of fascinating material to be mined by researchers who are interested in the stage performance of the *Kunqu* repertoire rather than just its textual and musical aspects. Those who take the time to listen to the lectures will certainly find the practitioners and what they have to say highly interesting and valuable. Also of interest, and perhaps unexpected in light of how the project has tended to present itself, *Dashi shuoxi* ends up revealing that what UNESCO calls a six-hundred year-old performance tradition has, in many cases, not only been pieced together by “excavation” (*wajue* 挖掘) and “re-arrangement” (*zhengli* 整理) from the 1980s onwards, but is all the richer because of that work. It is part of the irony of this project that some of the lectures describing more recent productions or reworkings of older pieces are among the most engaging and insightful. Many of these are *zhezi xi* that originally emphasized singing over acting, which in order to widen their dramatic appeal, were choreographed in the late 20th century.<sup>32</sup> But one cannot help but feel that much is lost, or at risk of being lost if in the future this set was considered either a comprehensive or representative archive of *Kunqu* performance. By imposing a highly systematized structure and unitary format for the lectures, the production team of *Dashi shuoxi* has perhaps neglected to take into account that it is not just transmission between generations that drives excellence, but also diversity and competition within the same generation. I would therefore not just recommend this set, but also encourage the viewer of any of these lectures to supplement their understanding of the *zhezi xi* in question with whatever materials are available on how other performers and singing masters (*qujia* 曲家) have approached it and its arias.

<sup>30</sup> Some of the most prominent classical *zhezi xi* omitted include: *Shuguan* 書館 (The study) from *Pipa ji* 琵琶記 (The lute), *Kao Hong* 拷紅 (Interrogating Hong Niang) from *Xixiang ji* 西廂記 (The western wing), *Naoxue* 鬧學 (Chunxiang causes trouble in the schoolroom) from *Mudan ting*, and *Jiamei* 嫁妹 (Zhong Kui gives his sister in marriage) from *Tianxia le* 天下樂 (Joy amid the mortals). Questionable inclusions include *Yingkao* 硬拷 (The harsh flogging) from *Mudan ting* and *Yaotai* 瑤台 (The jade pavilion) from *Nanke ji* (Dream of Southern Branch), both of which were first performed less than a decade before the lectures were recorded and have seldom been performed individually as *zhezi xi*.

<sup>31</sup> According to the list in the introductory booklet, pp. 27–31, the characters focused on in the lectures cover a total of five general role-types that are further broken down into a total of 18 more specialized role-types (*laodan* would be included in the latter).

<sup>32</sup> Examples in *Dashi shuoxi* include Huang Xiaowu’s version of *Jiulou* 酒樓 (The inn) from *Changsheng dian* 長生殿 (Palace of eternal life) and Wang Zhiquan’s *Chusai* 出塞 ([Zhaojun 昭君] Going beyond the border) from *Qingzhong ji* 青冢記 (The evergreen grave). Yet these versions are presented (both in *Dashi shuoxi* and in theatre performance advertisements) as “traditional” repertoire no different from other *zhezi xi*.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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