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# Garden Kun Opera and Cultural Tourism

With a history of over six hundred years, Kun Opera is one of the oldest types of opera still actively performed in China today. In some Kun Opera plays, the story is set in a garden, which becomes an important narrative motif. Such plays were frequently staged in gardens, usually for private gatherings. The twenty-first-century revival of this type of garden Kun Opera took place during a strong wave of cultural tourism, aligning cultural preservation with economic development. A prototypical example is *Six Records of a Floating Life*, which, since 2018, has been performed at Canglang Pavilion, one of the classical gardens of Suzhou. An inventive yet historically informed production of garden Kun Opera, *Six Records of a Floating Life* provides an immersive aesthetic and more broadly cultural experience, situating Kun Opera in the economic, cultural, and social context of contemporary life.

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KUN OPERA, one of the most ancient and celebrated genres of traditional Chinese theatre, originated in Suzhou during the late Yuan dynasty (1271–1368). Suzhou, renowned for its exquisite gardens, provided a fertile ground for Kun Opera, whose aesthetic style resonated with the tranquillity and elegance of the gardens. During the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), when Kun Opera reached its maturity, literati, who were from the *shidafu* (scholar-bureaucrat) class and whose sensibilities aligned with both the gracefulness of Kun Opera and the serenity of gardens, started using gardens not only as a literary motif in Kun Opera, but also as performance venues. This gave rise to a culturally and aesthetically significant form of Kun Opera known as 'garden Kun Opera', which was primarily produced and enjoyed by literati in their private gardens. During the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), the Qing court, wary of the literati's potential neglect of official duties,

imposed heavy restrictions on Kun Opera, which gradually lost its literati audience and its cherished garden heritage. In the twenty-first century, some Kun Opera makers and performers have sought to rekindle the historical connections between Kun Opera and gardens by using them, once again, as performance venues. This time, however, the purpose is also to serve cultural tourism and local economic development.

Contemporary garden Kun Opera is not a mere replication of history but an adaptation to the cultural and social conditions of a contemporary Chinese society preoccupied with the interplay between economic development and cultural preservation. To meet both the economic and cultural demands of the times, cultural tourism – an increasingly influential force in reshaping and enriching theatre worldwide through production and publicity – has emerged as a viable strategy for contemporary garden Kun Opera to thrive. By

leveraging cultural tourism, contemporary garden Kun Opera has become an inventive yet historically informed approach to the preservation and promotion of traditional Chinese culture.

This phenomenon leads to several critical questions: in what ways has the integration of cultural tourism transformed contemporary garden Kun Opera in respect of its historical forms? Does this approach successfully balance tradition and innovation, as well as aesthetic appreciation and economic concerns, and if so, how? What are the benefits and potential risks of such balances for the everyday life of contemporary Chinese society? To address these questions, this article first maps out the historical interconnections between gardens and Kun Opera, specifically focusing on the motif of the garden in Kun Opera and the performance ecology of Kun Opera in gardens. It then considers an exemplary contemporary garden Kun Opera performance, *Fusheng Liuji* [*Six Records of a Floating Life*], made and staged in Suzhou, the centre of the (re)birth of Kun Opera since 2018. By examining the narrative and performance ecology of this prototypical example, it argues that contemporary garden Kun Opera has effectively come to reshape the theatrical representation of Kun Opera and the aesthetic experience of its audiences, attracting younger generations and facilitating their understanding and assimilation of Kun Opera in the economic, cultural, and social practices of their contemporary lives.

### The Garden in Kun Opera

The garden of the city of Suzhou encapsulates in its exquisite size the rich and expressive culture of the Jiangnan region, known for its nuanced and elegant appreciation of art and nature. Gardens here are varied in layout and design, whether of imperial magnitude, bureaucratic formality (official gardens), sacred serenity (temple gardens), or ordinary intimacy (private gardens); together, they constitute a distinctive Jiangnan garden culture expressed in Kun Opera. Gardens, in the latter, are not background settings, but are pivotal to narratives, particularly to the plot of

*caizi jiaren* ('love pledged between a gifted scholar and a beautiful lady'), according to which beautiful ladies reside in gardens while gifted scholars, unless invited, are kept out by walls. In the words of Yao Xufeng, 'swallows and kites' exist 'as important symbols connecting the walls inside and outside', tying together intricate emotions and destinies from two worlds.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have observed a gradual tendency towards realism in the literati's depiction of romantic love, moving settings from fairylands to earthly gardens, which started with *The Romance of the West Chamber*, written by Wang Shifu (1260–1336), the most famous Yuan *zaju* (a form of Chinese opera with a comic slant) in Chinese history. Tang Xianzu (1550–1616), author of *The Peony Pavilion*, is the pre-eminent example of this change. Its iconic scenes 'You Yuan' ['Sweeping the Garden'] and 'Jing Meng' ['The Interrupted Dream'] tell the fanciful but arresting story of Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei, who pledge their love in a garden. Other examples of romantic encounters in gardens include *Yuzan Ji* [*The Story of the Jade Hairpin*], *Hongli Ji* [*The Story of the Red Pear Blossom*], and *Chaichuan Ji* [*The Story of the Hairpin and the Bracelet*], all of which are from the Ming dynasty.

This alignment between garden and romance arises from the particular cultural and social structure of ancient China, where the upper class strictly followed the feudal ethics of arranged marriage, or marriage approved by parents according to social norms, leaving few occasions for young men and women to interact freely. Thus, romance in the garden usually progressed in secret as an act of resistance, and was emblematic of young people's unyielding desire for independent love. In *The Story of the Jade Hairpin*, the female protagonist Chen Miaochang develops a romantic relationship with the poor scholar Pan Bizheng in the temple garden, despite being a nun. In *The Story of the Hairpin and Bracelet*, Shi Bitao, against her family's will, invites scholar Huangfu Yin to the garden to promise him her allegiance. Such acts of secret defiance in the garden are mirrored in its natural scenery, which overflows with vitality and colour.

Beautiful scenery is ephemeral, however, in that secret romance inevitably provokes reactions from the established social order, and this is the core conflict of plots concerning pledged love. Nevertheless, after agonizing periods of separation and struggle, the conflict is often resolved when lovers eventually remove the barriers imposed by family and society. But there are also less fortunate outcomes, as occurs when the plot moves beyond the fictitious framework to real historical upheavals: *Changsheng Dian* [*The Palace of Eternal Youth*], from the Qing dynasty, chronicles the story of Yang Guifei and Emperor Xuanzong of Tang; *Taohua Shan* [*The Peach Blossom Fan*] narrates the fall of the Ming dynasty. These evoke melancholic feelings, arouse national sentiment, and prompt historical reflection.

Behind the cruel conflict in Kun Opera between human will and the social system lies the deep emotional frustration and repression confronted by the literati with unfulfilled aspirations. Literati, steeped in the stern Confucian education that demanded an official career be the highest pursuit in life, are often disillusioned by complete devotion to public duties, bureaucratic burdens, inflexible rules of promotion, and the strictest observance of social norms. They turn, then, to the literary domain of gardens for emotional outlet. The garden becomes an introspective sanctuary, an escape from the struggle for fame and fortune – regulated by asceticism and discipline – to the private world of natural inclination and emotional liberation. Gardens, of course, are not unregulated, but their beautiful exuberance inspires confined minds to break free of pervasive social norms from within. Such struggles between social repression and emotional yearning resonate in the core symbol of the garden in *The Palace of Eternal Youth*.

The Palace of Eternal Youth is located in the imperial garden of Huaqing Pool (华清池) in the outskirts of Chang'an, the capital of the Tang dynasty. It is there that Yang Guifei and Emperor Xuanzong pledged their vows on China's 'Valentine's Day', which is the seventh day of the seventh month. The deep affections between the Emperor and the concubine are echoed in the wonderful scenery of

the imperial garden, but Yang Guifei dreads the inevitable end of springtime, fearing that her love with Emperor Xuanzong of Tang will also fade away. This fear is echoed in how the garden, at the beginning of the scene 'Jing Bian' ('The Alarm'), begins to wither with the coming of autumn:

Clouds drift through the pale blue sky, and wild geese  
Fly past in rows; while autumn paints the garden  
With many colours: willow leaves turn yellow,  
The duckweed grows less green, and the red lotus  
Sheds all its petals; but there by the carved railings  
The cassia flowers in bloom give a sweet scent.<sup>2</sup>

Despite extravagance and celebration when the garden is in splendid bloom, the foreboding tones of autumn foretell the An Lushan rebellion (which occurred during the midpoint of the Tang Dynasty). Love in feudal society, whether between a gifted scholar and a beautiful lady or an emperor and a concubine, is perpetually overshadowed by the capriciousness of the world governed by rigid feudal diktats that disregard personal will. *The Palace of Eternal Youth* (along with other Kun Opera masterpieces) demonstrates that the garden is an inherent component of Kun Opera. On the one hand, it is the key to setting conflict in the given plot; on the other, it symbolizes the literati's struggling aspirations. The garden, then, in the history of Kun Opera has a unique cultural and social significance.

### Kun Opera in Gardens

Kun Opera, initially named *Kunshan qiang* ('the Kunshan melodic style') during its inception in the late Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), was limited in circulation and influence until the mid-Ming dynasty, when such literati reformers as Wei Liangfu (1489–1566) and Liang Chenyu (1521–1594) developed and popularized the form. Its popularity in Jiangnan grew substantially in the early years of Emperor Wanli's reign (1573–1620) and was soon embraced by the scholar-bureaucrat class. The literati of the upper class, who had

substantial resources, firmly believed that their private gardens were ideal performance venues for Kun Opera; they subsequently viewed both the construction of gardens and the management of family-owned troupes of Kun Opera as symbols of their social identity and status. These literati not only wrote scripts and composed music themselves, but they also personally coached the performers of their troupes. Such were the cases of Qi Zhijia (1594–1683), who strictly trained the family troupe in his Ke Garden, and Li Yu (1611–1680), who attempted innovative performances in his Mustard Seed Garden. Almost every owner of a family Kun Opera troupe had his own private garden where such performances, together with beautiful scenery, provided pleasure and repose.<sup>3</sup>

The literati saw private gardens as perfect venues for Kun Opera performance, and the affinity between art and garden had produced a singular performance ecology that sustained the literati's aesthetic tastes and emotional needs. Performance ecology, according to Ric Knowles, is a complex ecosystem of relational networks of 'actors' –performers, performances, institutions, artists, administrators, and audiences.<sup>4</sup> Drawing on Bruno Latour's theory of constantly shifting networks of relationships, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's rhizomatic theory concerning connections between points, and Nicolas Bourriaud's concepts of relational aesthetics, Knowles views the relational and rhizomatic networks in Toronto as its performance ecology;<sup>5</sup> and, since the term 'ecology' rarely incorporates ecological elements, it is used here metaphorically.

By contrast, Baz Kershaw uses the term 'theatre/performance ecology' more literally, referring to 'the interrelationships between theatres (or performances) and their environments, especially when interdependence between theatres/performances and their environments is implied'.<sup>6</sup> (This is pertinent in our era of ecological crisis.) Discussions of Kun Opera can integrate the above theoretical notions for a performance ecology defined as the relational networks between literati, performers, audiences, garden architecture, and natural scenery as they register the distinct

cultural and social values of garden Kun Opera.

The architectural design of literati's private gardens provides a perfect stage for the style of Kun Opera. Historically, literati liked to construct *huating* ('halls'), surrounded by blooming flowers, often by the water's edge; sometimes there were pavilions.<sup>7</sup> These halls and pavilions were simple, but tastefully furnished, and Chen Congzhou (1918–2000), the father of modern Chinese gardens, identified *ya* ('elegance') as their defining characteristic.<sup>8</sup> Refinement and tranquillity make these halls and pavilions ideal for Kun Opera performance as they throw into relief its precision in pronunciation, subtlety in gesture, and softness in tone. Unlike the boisterous melodic styles accompanied by resounding percussion, Kun Opera has evolved within the Chinese culture of elegance, drawing on *yayan* ('elegant speech') and *yayue* ('elegant music'),<sup>9</sup> while the intricacy of the private garden allows Kun Opera's lingering charm to permeate the air. Gardens are thus integral to the performance ecology of Kun Opera, acting as resonance chambers that connect every performance note with the surrounding elegance. They thereby create an immersive experience that seamlessly blends the beauty of scenery and the gracefulness of performance.

A similar symbiosis exists between the emotion of Kun Opera and the natural environment of the garden architecture of Jiangnan: the halls and pavilions, and their blossoms, undisturbed water, layered rockeries, and the misty green trees that surround gardens. These landscapes provide a real setting for Kun Opera stories set in gardens. More importantly, the refreshing charm of such natural environments perfectly suits the spiritual yearning of the literati audiences who invested their deepest inclinations in the making and appreciation of Kun Opera. In contrast to the merchants of Yangzhou, who staged theatre to entertain the wealthy, celebrate their prosperity, and elevate their influence, the private-garden ecology enfolding Kun Opera, in which friends enjoy natural beauty, sip wine, and recite poetry, speaks for the desire of the literati to keep their

distance from secular success. This is particularly evident in the names of the most famous gardens of Suzhou: Zhuozheng Garden, where 'zhuozheng' (拙政) translates as 'humble administrator'; Canglang Pavilion, where 'canglang' (沧浪) translates as 'blue wave'; and Wangshi Garden, where 'wangshi' (网师) translates as 'reclusive fisherman'. All three express reclusive joy, harmonizing with the emotional tenor of Kun Opera.

The architecture, the natural environment, the nuanced sounds and gestures of the performers, and the spiritual sentiments of the literati are interconnected through the Chinese philosophical and aesthetic principle of *xushi xiangsheng* ('interplay of reality and illusion'). The component elements of Jiangnan gardens (whose rockeries and other features are noted above) are tangible, while the ephemeral qualities of sound, light, shadow, and breeze are intangible – illusory – but it is through the combination of the two that the abundance and profundity of the world is revealed. As Shen Fu wrote in *Six Records of a Floating Life*: 'Laid-out gardens, pavilions, wandering paths, small mountains of stone, and planted flowers try to give the feeling of the small in the large, and the large in the small, and [the feeling] of the real in illusion, and illusion in reality.'<sup>10</sup> The highly conventionalized performance of *xiqu* (traditional Chinese theatre) and its minimalist setting instruct audiences to conjure up imagery in their imagination. The delicate and suggestive performance modes of Kun Opera consistently transport audiences into reveries of an unburdened life, free from social duties – a vision touched with longing. The performance ecology of garden Kun Opera and its interplay of reality and illusion allow the literati to contemplate the cosmos within constrained space. The ostensibly trivial theme of romance in Kun Opera discloses the grand spiritual quests of the literati as a social class.

In short, the elegance of Jiangnan garden architecture, the tranquillity of the natural environment, the refinement of Kun Opera, and the profound values, emotions, and tastes of the literati class are integrated in a rhizomatic network, displaying the rich aesthetic resources and cultural depths of garden Kun

Opera in Chinese history. This heritage, and its transformation in our contemporary context, can be clearly seen in *Six Records of a Floating Life*, which is one of China's most significant examples of present-day garden Kun Opera. It has been staged annually from spring to autumn since 2018.

### **The Garden Kun Opera: *Six Records of a Floating Life***

The heyday of garden Kun Opera occurred during the Ming dynasty. With the prosperity of theatre activities in gardens, not only the literati but also the royal family, the aristocracy, and the business elite followed suit to found their own family troupes. However, seeing the social trend of 'entertainment above all' as a potential threat to the foundation of the country, Emperor Yongzheng (1678–1735) and Emperor Qianlong (1711–1799) of the Qing dynasty banned officials' private troupes. This edict, which curtailed the traditional pastimes and creative liberties of the literati, triggered two significant shifts: the decline of the elite's patronage of Kun Opera, and the diversion of renowned private troupes to public performances that pandered to the preferences of common audiences.

During the Republican period of China (1919–49), the status and influence of Peking Opera skyrocketed. Meanwhile, the important innovations of modern theatre introduced from Europe sidelined various other kinds of Chinese traditional theatre, including Kun Opera. After the Liberation (1949), theatre reform gave Kun Opera hope for revival. The 1956 Kun Opera production of *Shiwu Guan* [*Fifteen Strings of Coin*] had a major impact in Beijing, and provided a template for the adaptation and survival of traditional theatre in modern China. Nonetheless, the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) soon proscribed traditional theatre, while the 'model opera' was the only genre allowed to be performed publicly. Only after this turbulent period did the state launch a campaign to revive traditional theatre. In 1985, the Ministry of Culture released the 'Notice on the Protection and Revitalization of Kun Opera', which led to the rescue and preservation of

over a hundred plays of this traditional form. In December 1987, the Ministry of Culture supported the Performance of National Rescue and Preservation of the Kun Opera Repertoire in Beijing, which signalled a fresh start for its contemporary development.<sup>11</sup> In 2001, UNESCO pronounced Kun Opera a 'Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity', thereby elevating it to the highest cultural status.

For contemporary Chinese audiences, however, especially the younger generation, Kun Opera remained relatively unknown. In response, with strong state support, Kun Opera makers strived to reimagine the art form while preserving its aesthetic style and performance heritage, and this has led to a variety of updated forms: *shishang kunqu* ('fashionable Kun Opera'), which appeals to the aesthetic tastes of young people, also highlighting a 'youth version' of *The Peony Pavilion* by Bai Xianyong (2004); *kunqu xiandaixi* ('modern Kun Opera'), represented by *Dangnian Meilang* [*The Year of Meilang*] in 2019 and the 2022 *Qu Qiubai*, in which the playwright Luo Zhou introduced modern sensibilities to the traditional *zhezi xi* ('highlighted excerpts') of Kun Opera; experimental Kun Opera, exemplified by New Concept Kun Opera;<sup>12</sup> virtual Kun Opera, which produces animation and digital Kun Opera; and immersive garden Kun Opera, which, rediscovering the historical relations between Kun Opera and gardens, has turned Jiangnan gardens into site-specific venues for Kun Opera performances.

Among contemporary types of Kun Opera, the latter has been the best received by the public and is the one most supported by the government. It came into being with Zhang Jun's immersive garden Kun Opera production of *The Peony Pavilion*, staged at Shanghai's Kezhi Garden in 2010.<sup>13</sup> Zhang Jun's production initiated a series of immersive garden Kun Opera performances, the most popular being *Six Records of a Floating Life*, which was first performed at the Canglang Pavilion in Suzhou in 2018.

*Six Records of a Floating Life* was an autobiographical collection of six essays written in 1808 by Shen Fu, a member of the literati

during the Qing dynasty who had served as a government secretary before he was obliged to sell paintings for a living. His essays document his and his beloved wife Yunniang's ordinary yet rich daily lives of leisurely mountain sojourns and literary discussions under the oppression of feudal ethical codes. They end poignantly with Yunniang's early death. In 2018, Yu Theatre, led by Xiao Yan and supported by the government of the Gusu District in Suzhou, adapted *Six Records of a Floating Life* for garden Kun Opera performance at the Canglang Pavilion – precisely where the events in the book took place. This site-specific and immersive production is a panorama of the literati lifestyle in Jiangnan, where poetry, painting, and music were components of life, complemented by flowing water, lotus ponds, and stone bridges.

Yu Theatre performances of *Six Records of a Floating Life* last ninety minutes, starting with a twenty-minute prelude in Ke Garden, followed by a seventy-minute main performance in Ke Garden's Canglang Pavilion. The prelude is at the entrance of Boyue House in Ke Garden, where the maid Hexiang and the servant Laifu interact with forty spectators, who are then divided into three groups to watch local *sizhu* and *pingtan* performances: the former is an elegant ensemble performance of string and wind instruments, while the latter is a form of storytelling and ballad singing. This prelude creates the spiritual ambience of the Jiangnan literati, offering a smooth experiential transition from the spectators' modern style of life to that of ancient aesthetics.

After the *sizhu* and *pingtan* performances, Hexiang and Laifu guide the audience from Ke Garden to the small bridge facing the entrance of Canglang Pavilion. There, in the evening light, Shen Fu, standing on a small boat, slowly approaches the audience. The main performance unfolds thereafter in six acts in the order of the seasons: 'Prologue', 'A Bowl of Spring', 'Summer Lanterns', 'An Autumn Excursion', 'Winter Blizzard', and 'Spring Again'. In 'Prologue', which is accompanied by music, two immortals, Wang Er and Yu Liu, appear, singing, in the illuminated rockery. Tasked with delivering six



**Figure 1.** *Six Records of a Floating Life*. Photo Courtesy of Yu Theatre and HDZ Culture.

scrolls to the peach banquet of the Queen Mother of the West, they promise to immortalize the literati named Shen Fu from Suzhou — the latter described as ‘heaven on earth’ — on condition that he fill the six scrolls with his recollections of his deceased wife Yunniang. This opening refers to the fantasy elements often found in Kun Opera and sets the theme of reminiscence in the production’s narrative (Figure 1).

The immortals then take the audience through the winding path leading to a small hill, where ‘A Bowl of Spring’ starts. Yunniang’s spirit floats down to music, in gentle light, to reunite with the pleasantly surprised Shen Fu. They happily remember drinking bowls of peach blossom porridge. In ‘Summer Lanterns’, the audience is led through corridors to *Wenmiaoxiang Shi* (‘the Fragrance Chamber’), where Shen Fu and Yunniang devise the strategy of taking Yunniang in

cross-dress to the lantern viewing, which denies access to women. They soon move to *Yaohua Jingjie* (‘the Realm of Splendour’) to reminisce about the exciting lantern viewing that they had experienced. Entering ‘An Autumn Excursion’, Shen Fu and Yunniang recall their old autumn outings when they carried shoulder poles in the shape of a camel, filled with snacks. These outings, together with the peach blossom porridge and the lantern viewing, are the most important of the memories of Shen Fu and Yunniang recorded in his book of essays (Figure 2).

These memories, in the performance, occupy a season each. At the end of autumn, the memory-full Shen Fu grows increasingly sorrowful as his parting with his wife approaches. The audience then moves to the disconsolate atmosphere of ‘Winter Blizzard’, performed at the foot of the Canglang Pavilion. Artificial snow falls and drifts into the pavilion, where Yunniang sits alone in dim light, and Shen Fu wanders about the pavilion in darkness. This is their unavoidable separation. Shen Fu realizes soon after that there is no point in becoming an immortal by himself and that he would rather stay in the city of Suzhou, where he had lived such a serene and fulfilling life with Yunniang. In the final act, ‘Spring Again’, which signifies the completion of the full cycle of the seasons, Yunniang miraculously reappears, this time to reunite with the older Shen Fu. The play ends with Shen Fu singing a soft melodious song on his blessed Jiangnan life with Yunniang:

Sipping wine on a painted boat,  
Songs of leisure float around the water.  
Under a bridge surrounded by water chestnut  
on a sea of lilies,  
We drift into sweet slumber.  
Together, we create moments poured like wine  
in this floating life,  
Living up to the ideal of eternal devotion.  
Like a cloud, we float into the secluded pavilion  
and garden.  
Envy not even the immortals in the azure  
heavens.<sup>14</sup>

The play thus reconstructs a fantasy reunion for the couple, following the convention of



**Figure 2.** *Six Records of a Floating Life*. Photo Courtesy of Yu Theatre and HDZ Culture.

happy endings in Kun Opera, which intended to console audiences for their heart-rending journey with the imagined protagonists of reminiscence and separation (Figure 3).

Compared with the more abstract stage of traditional Chinese theatre, the scenery of the Canglang Pavilion garden in Suzhou gives concrete existence to the route the audience takes, which Shen Fu and Yunniang took in the past. This was the couple's favourite route, as Shen Fu writes in his *Six Records of a Floating Life*:

We crossed the stone bridge, went in at the gate, and took a small winding path along the eastern side of the gardens. There were rocks piled up into small artificial mountains, and trees with luxuriant light green leaves. The pavilion itself stood on top of a small hill.<sup>15</sup>

The path's twists and turns in the performance narrative of *Six Records of a Floating Life* also represent life's ups and downs. A line from a poem titled 'You Shanxi Cun' ('Trip to the Mountain West Village'), written by Lu You

(1125–1210) of the Southern Song dynasty, captures this idea: 'After endless mountains and rivers that leave doubt whether there is a path out, suddenly one sees a silver lining, as there are a shade of a willow, bright flowers, and a lovely village ahead.'<sup>16</sup> Just like a garden that opens onto a wider vision of landscape after its zigzagging terrain, the plot of the garden Kun Opera *Six Records of a Floating Life* ends in happy reunion.

Wen Zhengming (1470–1559), the famous painter and poet from the Ming dynasty, wrote in *Wangshi Zhuozheng Yuan Ji* [*Records of Wang's Zhuozheng Garden*] that the route of a Zhuozheng Garden could be divided into seven segments: some leisurely, some with mysteries and mazes, and some mirroring each other, structured much like a narrative text.<sup>17</sup> This structural feature demonstrates the theatricality of the Jiangnan garden, showing the different sites and houses held together on a narrative thread full of surprises. In the garden Kun Opera *Six Records of a Floating Life*, this garden's theatricality is





**Figure 3.** *Six Records of a Floating Life*. Photo Courtesy of Yu Theatre and HDZ Culture.

ingeniously utilized and incorporated into the performance.

The garden Kun Opera *Six Records of a Floating Life* recreates the historical experience of literati life, but it also employs modern technology to adapt to the habits and needs of modern audiences, especially of the younger generation. Lighting is the most prominent element in this regard. As the performance starts in the evening, twilight in the garden creates an atmosphere that breaks separation between dream and reality, immortality and mortality, and heaven and earth. Digital screens show subtitles, or else subtitles are projected onto the available stones. This makes the performance more accessible to modern audiences, who would otherwise find it hard to understand the lyrics written in classical Chinese prose and sung in the Wu dialect of Suzhou. *Six Records of a Floating Life* thus integrates landscape, architecture, Chinese literature, Kun Opera, and multimedia technology in what could be called an intermedial performance ecology that

demonstrates an effective way for traditional theatre to evolve and survive in the contemporary era. Yet the significance of *Six Records of a Floating Life* goes well beyond the preservation and transformation of cultural heritage, for it also contributes significantly to the modern development and economic growth of contemporary Suzhou, especially of its cultural tourism.

### Garden Kun Opera and Cultural Tourism

Since its debut on Chinese ‘Valentine’s Day’ in 2018, *Six Records of a Floating Life* was staged 256 times (between February and April 2024) and was widely reported on the internet and other media. Its popularity derived from the high quality of the garden Kun Opera performance itself, as well as from its advancement of cultural tourism and associated cultural events. As Ma Haili argues: ‘In the [new] millennium, landscape performance and site-specific performance have been introduced to China and [have] become key

aspects of cultural tourism, attracting tourists for location-related experience and cultural consumption.<sup>18</sup> Ma closely analyzes Zhang Jun's production of the immersive garden Kun Opera *The Peony Pavilion* (cited above), highlighting its groundbreaking role in the promotion of Chinese cultural memory and the tourism industry. Following Zhang Jun's production, *Six Records of a Floating Life* further contributed to the growth of intangible cultural heritage, effectively integrating theatre performance in cultural tourism.

Attracting a great number of tourists interested in the garden Kun Opera performance, *Six Records of a Floating Life* builds around itself several cultural tourist products, including a 'two-day *Floating Life* tour', a 'half-day *Floating Life* experience', a 'six-senses study on *Floating Life*', and so on. The 'half-day *Floating Life* experience' offers a series of activities in Canglang Pavilion before the evening performance starts, where audiences can enjoy tea, experience the transcription of Gongche notation, wear Kun Opera costumes, learn to sing the famous aria 'Lanhuamei' (from *The Peony Pavilion*), participate in ancient-costume photo shoots, browse in a vintage market of intangible-heritage products, and taste a private meal prepared by a Michelin-starred chef. The 'six-senses study on *Floating Life*' includes studies on the historical knowledge and practice related to Kun Opera and gardens, such as fan painting and woodblock printing.

The merchandise related to the garden performance of *Six Records of a Floating Life* includes over thirty items – T-shirts, handwritten scripts, accessories, Suzhou fans, clothing, tea sets, and other Suzhou heritage products. Their consumers mainly come from outside Suzhou. Business has even registered the trademark 'Canglang Pavilion *Six Records of a Floating Life*' and developed the '*Floating Life* Collection' brand, which is both an online e-commerce platform and an offline market, selling merchandise and tickets for the performance and tours.

The high economic value of this project is fundamentally based on its promotion of experience. As B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore write, 'experiences represent an

existing but previously unarticulated genre of economic output'.<sup>19</sup> The consumers of the *Six Records of a Floating Life* project are not only attracted by aesthetic appreciation of the garden Kun Opera performance, but, more importantly, also by the immersive experience of the historical Jiangnan literati lifestyle. In the twenty-first century, the increasingly prominent role of the experience economy has led the Chinese government to stimulate the integrated development of culture and tourism, essentially centred on local cultural experiences; and tourism performance is considered to be a significant means for doing so. A series of tourism performance projects, such as *Yinxiang Lijiang* ('Impression Lijiang') in Yunnan Province, *Yinxiang Liu Sanjie* ('Impression Liu Sanjie') in Guangxi Province, and *Changhen Ge* ('The Song of Everlasting Sorrow') in Xi'an Province, proved to be highly successful, providing a window for audiences to appreciate fully the rich folk traditions of these geographical areas. Tourism performances are a means for preserving traditional culture while considerably boosting local economies.

This having been said, tourism performance projects have drawn criticism. Many scholars argue that cultural experiences performed for tourists are tailored and reshaped for entertainment value, and that cultural memories are inevitably distorted in the process.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, historical authenticity is not always a feasible goal in cultural tourism, since repeated attempts at authenticity constantly renegotiate the boundaries between history and contemporaneity.<sup>21</sup> Culture is inherently dynamic, and so the preservation of historical traditions and the production of cultural memories through tourism might be better assessed on criteria other than authenticity alone. As Margaret Werry argues: 'Tourism, then, is not a purely destructive, de-authenticating force imposed on an otherwise pure culture; it is a site of cultural creativity as well as cultural commodification.'<sup>22</sup> Cultural tourism thus needs to balance authenticity and new creativity to save marginalized forms of traditional culture from potentially fading into oblivion. Cultural experience need not necessarily reduce

cultural heritage to mere commodification stripped of historical significance.

The *Six Records of a Floating Life* project accomplishes this balance between authenticity and creativity, mainly by weaving Kun Opera into the fabric of contemporary daily life. Shen Fu's book, celebrated for its characterization of the natural simplicity of life in Jiangnan, has touched countless readers, consistently ranking among the top five best-sellers in China. Its garden Kun Opera adaptation inherits the spiritual essence of the original work by reviving this aesthetics of everyday life. It reintroduces Kun Opera – a traditional art form once deeply integrated in civilian life but now seen as elitist and marginalized – back to the everyday life of the public, infusing such everyday activities as food tasting and sightseeing with the immersive performance itself. The significance of the performance does not lie in a sense of historical authenticity, but in the cultural experience that is generated, making Kun Opera, once again, an everyday social matter in contemporary society. The historical integration between art and life demonstrated in Shen Fu's literati life in Jiangnan is reproduced for, and re-experienced by, the Chinese public, changing the division between elite art and everyday life in contemporary China.

## Notes and References

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10. Shen Fu, *Six Records of a Floating Life*, trans. Leonard Pratt and Chiang Su-hui (London: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 60.

11. See Fu Jin, *Zhongguo xiju shi* [A History of Chinese Theatre] (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2022), p. 267–8.

12. See Chengzhou He, "'The Most Traditional and the Most Pioneering": New Concept Kun Opera', *New Theatre Quarterly*, XXXVI, No. 3 (August 2020) [NTQ 143], p. 223–36.

13. Ma Haili, *Understanding CCI through Chinese Theatre* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), p. 65.

14. Zhou Mian, *Garden Kun Opera: Six Records of a Floating Life*, trans. Kim Hunter Gordon (Yu Theatre and HDZ Culture, 2018).

15. Shen Fu, *Six Records of a Floating Life*, p. 35.

16. The original Chinese text reads: 山穷水复疑无路, 柳暗花明又一村. (Our translation.)

17. Wang Qiwen, 'Jiangnan yuanlin de xijuxing: kunqu yu yuanlin de tonggouxing yuedu' ['The Theatricality of the South Garden: A Comparison of Kunqu Opera and South Garden'], MA dissertation, China Academy of Art, p. 35–6.

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20. See, for example, Zhu Lixin, 'Zhongguo dangdai de lvyou yanyi' ['Tourism Performance in Contemporary China'], *Sheke Zongheng* [Social Sciences Review], XXV, No. 4 (2010), p. 96–9 (p. 99).

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