

# A Comparative Analysis of the Kunqu “Shi Wu Guan” and the Qinqiang “Shi Wu Guan”: Based on the “Zhong Kuang’s Judgment of Execution” Scene

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## Abstract:

As a classic piece of traditional Chinese drama, “Shi Wu Guan” features a vivid and gripping plot, particularly in its segment “Zhong Kuang Judges the Beheading.” This paper conducts a comparative analysis of the same work, “Shi Wu Guan”, by examining the artistic performance characteristics of Kunqu and Qinqiang. The study highlights the similarities and differences between these two versions in terms of character performance style, traditional musical forms, and the portrayal of emotions. Through this analysis, the paper aims to contribute to opera research and explore the enduring artistic charm of these operatic traditions, which transcend time and space.

**Keywords:** Kunqu, Qinqiang; “Shi Wu Guan”; comparative analysis; Zhong Kuang execution.

## 1. Introduction

Kunqu and Qinqiang are two forms of traditional Chinese operatic art, each with distinct musical characteristics that reflect their unique regional cultural origins. Both opera styles are treasures of Chinese traditional music culture. As such, they serve as rich mediums for understanding the similarities and differences across regional music traditions.

“Shi Wu Guan”, a classic Chinese drama, has been adapted in both Kunqu and Qinqiang, with the segment “Zhong Kuang Judges the Beheading” serving as a key turning point in the narrative. However, few scholars have explored this segment’s differences in terms of character performance, traditional music and singing styles, and the portrayal of character

emotions. This study aims to address this gap by examining how Kunqu and Qinqiangs shape the same character through their respective traditional musical styles.

The paper proceeds as follows: first, the plot and character dynamics of “Shi Wu Guan” are introduced. Next, the differences in character expression styles between Kunqu and Qinqiang are examined. The third section focuses on the operas’ musical compositions, including melody, singing style, and the use of traditional tunes (“Qupai”) and accompaniment. Finally, the analysis explores how both operatic traditions depict the emotional trajectories of their characters.

## 2. Dramatic Analysis of “Shi Wu Guan”

### 2.1 The Story Background and Plot of “Shi Wu Guan”

“Shi Wu Guan” is an adaptation of the original work “Shi Wu Guan Chuan Qi” by Zhu Suchen and later revised by Ming Dynasty writer Feng Menglong in “Jing Shi Heng Yan”[1]. Thus evolved into the version we see today. The main background of the story is based on the corrupt governance and vulgar officialdom of feudal society. It praises the protagonist’s unremitting persistence and struggle, as well as their indomitable spirit of resistance, conveying the pursuit of fairness and justice, condemning subjective speculation and bureaucratic disregard for human life, and reflecting the dark side of feudal society and the suffering of ordinary people under the oppression of power at that time. The plot unfolds along two main narrative lines: one focusing on the relationship between Hou Sangu, the adopted daughter-in-law of Feng Zhichen, and scholar

Xiong Youhui, and the other on Su Xujuan, the adopted daughter of You Hulu, and merchant Xiong Youlan.

In the drama, Xiong Youhui was implicated due to her neighbor Hou Sangu’s money (fifteen guan) being taken away by a mouse and her husband accidentally eating poison and dying. She was wrongly accused of adultery and murder by the magistrate of Shanyang County, and was executed on a certain day. His brother Xiong Youlan learned of his news and borrowed fifteen guan to rescue him. On the way, he met Su Xujuan and the two of them traveled together. By coincidence, Su Xujuan’s foster father, You Hulu, is murdered by a thief named Lou Ashu, who steals the exact fifteen guan. The magistrate wrongly convicts both Xiong Youlan and Su Xujuan of adultery and murder, sentencing them to death.

Nowadays, “The Complete Fifteen Chapters” has been further adapted, with a focus on highlighting the entire process of Xiong Youlan and Su Xujuan’s wrongful case from its inception to its resolution, making the characters’ images more typical, profound, vivid, and artistically infectious. The main characters are shown in the table below. (Table 1)

**Table 1. Characters in “Shi Wu Guan”**

Characters	Brief introduction
Zhong Kuang	Officials who are fair, honest, pragmatic, and meticulous. He not only upholds the principles of fairness and justice in judicial practice, but also dares to take the risk of losing his official position when facing erroneous judgments, personally investigate cases, and ultimately reveal the truth. It embodies the deep expectations of the people for judicial justice and clean officials.
Aa Loushu	The antagonist character is symbolized by a „rat“. Increased character recognition and deepened the audience’s understanding of their quick witted and cunning personality traits. Implies his fate of being shouted and beaten by everyone like a rat crossing the street. He committed a crime due to greed and ultimately escaped justice.
Guo Yuzhi	Represents the image of incompetent officials in feudal society who make subjective judgments and hasty decisions. Relying solely on one’s own judgment to wrongly accuse innocent people has led to the occurrence of wrongful convictions and undermined the fairness of the judiciary.
Xiong Youlan and Su Xujuan	They are the victims in the drama, who have gone through hardships due to being wrongly accused and imprisoned. The experience of the two reveals the helplessness and despair of the lower class people in feudal society when facing injustice. Their ultimate salvation is not only a tribute to justice, but also a longing for fairness and justice among the lower classes.
Zhou Chen	A conservative bureaucrat. When Zhong Kuang requested a retrial of the case, he even used the big hat of „resisting the Heavenly Regulations alone“ to suppress Zhong Kuang, reflecting the bureaucratic image of society at that time.
other characters	Some characters are the driving force behind the development of the story plot, and together they form this complex and vivid story world.

### 2.2 Presentation of Conflicts in “Shi Wu Guan”

In “Shi Wu Guan”, the conflict primarily revolves around the tension between Zhou Chen, the governor of Wuxi

County, who hastily concludes the case, and Zhong Kuang, the governor of Suzhou, who strives to challenge the verdict and insists on a retrial.

Zhou Chen, he based solely on surface evidence and bias, wrongly convicts Xiong Youlan and Su Xujuan, You Hulu's daughter, as the culprits in the case, preparing to have them executed. Upon hearing of the case, Zhong Kuang insists on re-examining the evidence, uncovering several suspicious elements. Using his wisdom and determination, he ultimately unravels the truth, exonerating the innocent and exposing Zhou Chen's reckless approach.

The drama highlights the dangers of obstinate thinking—Zhou Chen stubbornly believes in his judgment, refusing to accept challenges or reconsiderations. This dispute has reached an irreconcilable point. Zhong Kuang, however, remains undeterred by Zhou Chen's authority and, through persistence, succeeds in clearing Xiong Youlan and Su Xujuan's names.

This conflict not only showcases Zhong Kuang's fairness, selflessness, and commitment to truth but also critiques the incompetence and recklessness of feudal bureaucrats, who often become fixated on their judgments. At the same time, it also profoundly reveals various drawbacks and unfair phenomena in the judicial system of feudal society, triggering people's profound thinking on justice, fairness, and the judicial system.

### 3. Character Expression Styles in the Kunqu and Qinqiang Versions

#### 3.1 Zhou Chen in Traditional Chinese Xiqu— A Representation of Bureaucratic Incompetence and Recklessness

Zhou Chen, the governor of Jiangnan, is portrayed as a typical representative of bureaucracy in the drama. When Zhong Kuang asked for orders late at night in the drama, he showed an irresponsible, hasty, and confused attitude by being wise and protective

In "Shi Wu Guan", Zhou Chen's stubbornness and carelessness are emblematic of feudal officials' incompetence. His actions not only compromise judicial fairness but also cause serious harm to the people, symbolizing the corrupt nature of the feudal judicial system.

#### 3.2 Zhou Chen in History – A Capable and Talented Official

Zhou Chen effectively solved the financial problems in the Jiangnan region during the mid Ming Dynasty. He provide relief to farmers, stabilize agricultural production, and leave a name in history. However, the character of Zhou Chen in "Shi Wu Guan" is a literary creation and not

based on the historical figure. In the play, he represents the flaws of the feudal judicial system rather than reflecting his historical accomplishments.

#### 3.3 The Positive Character of Zhong Kuang

In history, Zhong Kuang came from a poor family with a straightforward character and was appointed as the governor of Suzhou by the court. During his tenure, he rectified the bureaucracy, defended the people's grievances, and was deeply loved. His reputation as an honest and just official earned him widespread respect and admiration.

### 4. Musical Analysis of the Kunqu and Qinqiang Versions

As a classic work, "Shi Wu Guan" offers distinct musical and stylistic differences between the Kunqu and Qinqiang versions, particularly in melody, singing, recitation, use of traditional tunes ("Qupai"), and the arrangement of accompaniment bands. These elements showcase the unique charms of both opera traditions.

#### 4.1 Similarities and Differences in Melodies

The melody of Kunqu's "Shi Wu Guan" is known for being melodious, gentle, and delicate. Kunqu uses the same musical instruments to create varied musical images, carefully expressing the thoughts and emotions of different characters. In "Shi Wu Guan", the rise and fall of the melody are closely tied to the progression of the plot, reflecting the inner emotional shifts of the characters. Kunqu Opera also commonly uses gift boards, which is a commonly used board type[2]. the technique of slowing down the rhythm, to soften and refine the tone .

In contrast, the melody of Qinqiang's "Shi Wu Guan" is famous for its grandiosity, excitement, and intensity. The rhythm is distinct and the speed is fast, striving to present a strong dramatic conflict and tension through the ups and downs of the melody, stirring the audience's emotions and feelings. This style enhances the emotional stakes and creates a striking contrast with the gentler approach of Kunqu.

#### 4.2 Similarities and Differences in Singing Styles

Kunqu follows a connected singing style, which is one of the large-scale musical structures in traditional Chinese music[3]. In "Shi Wu Guan", the singing design is carefully planned: first, the playwright selects the palace tune and melody according to the play's content. Next, lyrics are

crafted to match the rhythm, followed by the final musical composition, which considers the plot, character development, and harmony, so as to better serve the plot and character development.

On the other hand, the singing in Qinqiang is known for being sonorous, powerful, and inspiring. In “Shi Wu Guan”, the actors vividly portray the emotional states of the characters in the play through their high pitched voices and rich tone variations. Additionally, Qinqiang emphasizes melodic fluency and coherence, resulting in a smooth, continuous singing style that enhances the overall art form.

#### 4.3 Similarities and Differences in Recitation

Nianbai refers to the “speaking” in traditional Chinese opera performances and is also an important means of expression in opera music[4]. The recitative in Kunqu’s “Shi Wu Guan” is simple, vivid, and close to the essence of real life, making it easier for the audience to understand and accept the plot. It is often used for narration and emotion, expressing the emotions and personalities of the characters.

In contrast, Qinqiang’s speech places a greater emphasis on rhythm and emotional expression. The recitative sections in “Shi Wu Guan” often feature character dialogues and inner monologues, allowing the actors to showcase the characters’ personality traits and emotional transformations. These recitations use concise and expressive language, enabling the audience to gain a deeper understanding of the plot and characters.

#### 4.4 Similarities and Differences in “Qupai” (Musical Structures)

“Shi Wu Guan” uses a large number of musical instruments. It incorporates a variety of musical instruments, using different combinations and variations to shape the musical narrative. The flexibility of these instrumental arrangements supports both the plot and character development, making the music a vital part of the storytelling. Qinqiang, too, features a distinct use of “Qupai”, with each tune carrying a unique style and performance function. In “Shi Wu Guan”, musical instruments are selected and combined based on the plot’s needs and the emotional arcs of the characters. And different melodies and rhythmic changes add rich musical layers and expressiveness to the entire play.

#### 4.5 Similarities and Differences in Accompani-

#### ment Bands

Kunqu accompaniment bands are distinguished by their unique instrumental arrangements. Key instruments include the flute, xiao, sheng, pipa, sanxian, and drum board, which play a significant role in the musical support of “Shi Wu Guan”. Through skillful coordination and cooperation, the musicians produce a rich array of sound effects that enhance both the singing and the melodic components of the opera.

Similarly, Qinqiang features a distinct accompaniment ensemble, comprising instruments such as the banhu, erhu, flute, suona, gongs, and drums. Creating a dynamic and theatrical soundscape that enhances the emotional impact of “Shi Wu Guan”. The band members, through their technical proficiency and teamwork, provide essential support for both the singing style and the melodic flow, ensuring a cohesive and engaging musical experience.

### 5. Stage Presentation of the Kunqu and Qinqiang Versions of “Shi Wu Guan”

The Kunqu and Qinqiang versions of “Shi Wu Guan” each offer distinct yet captivating stage presentations. Though both are interpretations of the same traditional drama, their performance styles, costume designs, action expressions, dialogue content, and dialect outputs highlight their unique artistic qualities and regional differences.

#### 5.1 Performance Style

The Kunqu version of “Shi Wu Guan” is known for its delicate and graceful performance style. The actors emphasize both form and spirit, meticulously portraying the characters’ emotions and inner worlds through a combination of singing, dance, and folk art. The performances in Kunqu are rhythmic and elegant, creating an air of subtlety and refinement.

In contrast, the Qinqiang version of “Shi Wu Guan” features a bold, passionate, and energetic performance style. It mainly focuses on singing, supplemented by various forms of expression such as recitation, speaking, acting, fighting, and dancing, making the audience feel refreshed.

#### 5.2 Costume Design

The development and inheritance of Kunqu art cannot be separated from the expression of stage art, and Kunqu costumes are the most intuitive means of stage performance[5]. The costumes in the Kunqu version of “Shi Wu Guan” reflect the cultural aesthetics of Jiangnan, known for its water towns. The designs feature detailed embroi-

dery and symbolic patterns, with particular attention to the color palette used for each character. For instance, the cool color scheme of Zhong Kuang's clothing reflects its calmness, restraint, and rationality. Xiong Youlan's clothing color emphasizes the unity of words and deeds while Su Xujuan's soft, elegant colors emphasize her youth and innocence. Lou Ahuo's dark clothing with red and white accents conveys his complexity and criminality.

On the other hand, the costumes in the Qinqiang version, which originates from the Shaanxi-Gansu region, are more bold and vivid. For example, Zhong Kuang's robe is adorned with symbols like clouds and bamboo leaves, signifying his integrity and noble character. Lou Ahuo's costume features rodent-like embroidery, symbolizing his cunning nature.

While both versions focus on integrating costume design with character traits and plot, they differ in their regional influences. In terms of its differences, the Kunqu version of "Shi Wu Guan" incorporates more cultural characteristics of Jiangnan water towns in its clothing colors, with a delicate, elegant, and harmonious style; While the Qinqiang version of the "Shi Wu Guan" was influenced by the culture of the northwest, with a strong, bright and contrasting style.

### 5.3 Action Expression

The actors of the Kunqu version of "Shi Wu Guan", pay attention to the sense of rhythm and cadence, showcasing their characters through delicate and beautiful body movements and rich facial expressions.

The Qinqiang version, by contrast, incorporates larger, more dramatic movements. Actors use strong body language and incorporate acrobatic elements such as rolling and combat, infusing the stage with tension and power. This expressive physicality aligns with the vigorous tone of the performance, creating a more intense atmosphere.

### 5.4 Dialogue Content

The dialogue content of the Kunqu version of "Shi Wu Guan" emphasizes literary and artistic qualities, giving people a sense of elegance. It quotes a large number of poems and allusions, enhanced literary value and dramatic connotation. The language is often rich with rhetorical devices, which serve to develop the characters' inner worlds and elevate the dramatic tension.

The lines of the Qinqiang version of "Shi Wu Guan" focus on being easy to understand and close to life, full of strong local characteristics and folk flavor, and the use of vivid colloquial expressions makes it easier for the audience to

have resonance and identity.

### 5.5 Dialect Output

The Kunqu version of "Shi Wu Guan" often uses the "literary pronunciation" of Wu dialect, which is deeply influenced by Wu culture. Its pronunciation is based on "Zhongzhou rhyme", which is close to Mandarin but still retains local characteristics. It transcends specific dialects and has become the universal phonetic standard for Kunqu. So much so that the audience finds it difficult to hear obvious regional dialect features, but instead feels the quaint and unified style of opera phonetics.

Conversely, the Qinqiang version of "Shi Wu Guan" uses Shaanxi dialect for performance. It not only makes Qinqiang more close to the reality of local audiences, but also enhances the local cultural color and regional identity of opera, bringing more cordial and grounded experience of watching opera to the audience. For example, in Su Xujuan's line, "My father is greedy and sold me, I don't want to escape as a slave," the use of the word "father" in the Shaanxi dialect adds a layer of intimacy and emotion that would resonate deeply with local audiences.

## 6. Conclusion

Both the Kunqu version of the "Shi Wu Guan" and the Qinqiang version of the "Shi Wu Guan" are based on traditional classic stories, with a shared focus on exposing wrongful convictions and celebrating the wisdom and courage of honest officials. However, their distinct regional and artistic styles lead to notable differences in how these stories are conveyed.

The Kunqu version emphasizes the intricate psychological portrayals and complex emotional landscapes of its characters. Through its rich use of "Qupai" (tune patterns) and arias, it offers a delicate and nuanced depiction of emotions. In contrast, the Qinqiang version of "Shi Wu Guan" focuses more on the tightness of the plot and the intensity of conflict. It directly communicates the urgency of unjust cases and the righteousness of honest officials, making the performance more intense and emotionally impactful for the audience.

In terms of music, Kunqu primarily employs plucked instruments, which produce gentle, lyrical melodies and subtle rhythms. This allows for a careful arrangement of music that delicately mirrors the emotional shifts of the characters. Qinqiang, on the other hand, uses gongs and drums as its musical backbone. The result is a grand, rhythmic sound that stands in stark contrast to the gentler tones of Kunqu, creating a more powerful and dramatic

atmosphere.

On the stage, the Kunqu and Qinqiang versions differ greatly in performance style, costume design, action expression, dialogue content, and dialect output. These differences stem from their respective regional cultures. Kunqu is characterized by its grace, elegance, and subtlety, while Qinqiang embodies boldness, directness, and intensity.

Both versions, in their own way, explore the complexity of human nature and societal realities through the depiction of unjust cases and the praise of honest officials. They convey a noble spirit of seeking truth and advocating for the people, which holds deep contemporary relevance. These plays serve as important cultural artifacts, reflecting social realities and calling for fairness and justice.

Looking ahead, this comparative analysis of the Kunqu and Qinqiang versions of “Shi Wu Guan” offers a foundation for future research, providing theoretical support for scholars interested in traditional Chinese opera. Both versions contribute their unique strengths to the rich and

diverse world of traditional Chinese opera, showcasing the art form’s ability to portray complex emotions, societal critiques, and the quest for justice.

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