

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO BEIJING OPERA

By Ann L. Silverberg



Source: Screenshot from the 1993 film *Farewell My Concubine*, directed by Chen Kaige. ©1993 Miramax Films.

Beijing opera is a colorful, spectacular performance art that dazzles, fascinates, and often puzzles foreigners. A quintessentially Chinese art form, its elaborate costumes and makeup, gestural and acrobatic stage movements, highly symbolic and stylized content, and unique musical style amaze and intrigue audiences. The art might be best thought of as a confluence of stylized patterns of dress, makeup, action, staging, text, and music (instrumental and vocal). Each of these parameters is the fruit of a system several centuries old, presented as living art through the work of highly trained performers. This essay attempts to provide useful basic information about Beijing opera as well as selected helpful details sometimes absent from elementary guides to the art. The goal here is to present an introduction to Beijing opera that provides insight for teachers and students approaching the art while avoiding excess specialized terminology.

Beijing opera (known as *jingju*, or opera of the capital in mainland China) is one of more than three hundred types of traditional Chinese opera, and it is probably the best-known. Four Chinese opera types are now inscribed in the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's "Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity." Beijing

opera was added to this list in 2010.¹ A grasp of some aspects of Beijing opera will enable the casual listener to begin to appreciate not only Beijing opera, but *Kunqu* and *Yuefu* opera as well; these southern opera types (also inscribed in UNESCO's "Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage") employ some sonic and visual characteristics that are parallel to, or reminiscent of, Beijing opera. The UNESCO website features short introductory videos narrated in English for each of the four types of Chinese opera inscribed on its list (that also includes Tibetan opera).

Many modern Chinese do not enjoy Beijing opera at all; like Western opera, it seems to be both an acquired taste and a genre mostly appreciated by older Chinese. This may simply indicate that a taste for Beijing opera is often developed over several decades of a person's life, as is often the case for the Western operas, such as those written by Giuseppe Verdi, Richard Wagner, and others. Nevertheless, Beijing opera is commonly performed for tourists in China, at festivals for Chinese audiences, and on tours worldwide. It is also disseminated via DVD/video and audio recordings, Chinese television broadcasts, and YouTube (naturally!), among many Internet sources.² It is highly prized by the Chinese in general as an artistic, historically significant, representative art form.



Photo of male and female warriors (front line), painted face roles (middle line) and soldiers (rear). (Photo by Steve Hyndman, used by permission.)



Mei Lan Fang in *The Drunken Concubine*. Source: <http://tiny.cc/lj80L>.

History and Context

Beijing opera traditionally features singing actors and actresses wearing magnificent costumes reminiscent of Ming dynasty (1368–1644) dress, although modern operas—those created since 1912, when imperial rule ended—may call for modern dress. The bulk of Beijing operas date from imperial times and involve characters from Chinese history, legend, and myth; a compilation of Beijing opera stories published in 1980 includes more than 1,220 items.³ Beijing opera performances often consist of famous scenes excerpted from several different stories rather than illustrating a single narrative plot. Beijing opera is an amalgam of regional opera types that have been in existence for centuries.

Plays and spoken narratives with music have been performed in Chinese villages, towns, and cities for centuries, attracting mostly lower-class, likely illiterate, audiences. Performers were also low-class and often stigmatized. Many began their rigorous training in childhood, sometimes being cast off or orphaned by their families, enduring years of hardship and punishment at the hands of their trainers. In the long history of Chinese opera types, the late eighteenth century was particularly significant, as members of the imperial family began to take an intense interest in these art forms. One of the most important figures of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736–1796) followed the lead of his mother in ordering opera performances for the imperial court. The year 1790 marked a watershed in the history of the art form. To celebrate the Qianlong emperor's eightieth birthday, several opera troupes came from Anhui Province to perform in Beijing. The shows were highly successful, and the art began to attract patrons and audiences in the capital and evolved traits that eventually distinguished “opera of the capital” from other types. In the nineteenth century, Beijing opera grew in popularity, and important families of actors passed their art on to successive generations. A famous painting by Shen Rongpu, painted during the second half of the nineteenth century, portrays thirteen noted opera actors, illustrating typical costuming for role types and also showing that male actors portrayed both men and women on stage. During the final decades of the nineteenth century, the Dowager Empress Cixi (1835–1908) was a notable supporter of Beijing opera. She had special palace opera theatres built to indulge her interest in the art.

Beijing opera continued to attract attention in the decades between the end of imperial rule in 1912 and the founding of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949. Four Beijing opera actors became especially famous for their portrayals of women on stage during this era. Of these, Mei

Lan Fang (1894–1961) was the most famous, eventually performing in Japan, America, and Europe; some of his work was filmed.⁴ Mei Lan Fang specialized in playing young women and was celebrated for embodying these roles perfectly. His influence in China as well as in the West cannot be overestimated. By the end of his 1935 trip to Russia, Germany, and America, his work had gained the admiration of Western theater luminaries, including Constantin Stanislavsky and Bertolt Brecht.⁵ In the twentieth century, the use of male actors impersonating female characters on stage gave way to female actresses portraying women in a majority of cases. Nowadays, some performances feature female performers impersonating male roles, bringing the tradition of cross-dressing in Beijing opera full-circle.

The policies of the Cultural Revolution (ca. 1966–1976) included the transformation of Beijing opera into a strictly limited number of approved “Model Plays” conveying appropriate political messages. Finally, during the Opening Up period (ca. 1978 to the present), Beijing opera regained some of its former luster, with a wide variety of plays (both traditional and modern) being performed; opera troupes, theaters, and training schools have garnered some official governmental support. Chinese communities abroad brought their operatic traditions with them. Live performances of Yuefu (Cantonese) opera have been enjoyed in San Francisco since the late nineteenth century, and contemporary organizations such as the Confucius Institutes continue to support performance tours of Chinese opera worldwide.⁶

Beijing Opera Types; Roles, Costumes, and Makeup

Beijing opera is often classified according to its age and content; thus, there are traditional plays, newly edited traditional plays, “new plays” (those written after the end of imperial rule), and the “model plays” of the Cultural Revolution. Because traditional Beijing operas are derived from Chinese history, legend, or myth, Chinese audiences are typically familiar with the events portrayed. *The Monkey King*, *Causing an Uproar in the Dragon King's Palace*, *Silang Visits His Mother*, and *The King Bids Farewell to His Favorite* (this last is the source for the opera story portrayed in the film *Farewell My Concubine*) are among the most famous traditional plays. An evening of Beijing opera may consist of short scenes drawn from several different stories, rather than representing a contiguous narrative series of events that build suspense and result in an exciting denouement. The point of watching performances comprised of excerpts is to appreciate how each scene is portrayed rather than to follow a storyline; tourists today often encounter performances of this type. The newly edited traditional plays favor a narrative plotline with linked scenes from a single story.

There are four main types of roles in Beijing opera: male (*sheng*), painted-face male (*jing*), female (*dan*), and clown (*chou*). Each of these role types has several different subsets differentiated by age and personality. An experienced operagoer recognizes role types immediately because of their association with specific costumes and makeup. Costumes and makeup are stylized rather than life-like. For instance, martial characters often wear a set of four pennants or flags attached to the back of their costumes. Obviously false beards and exaggerated facial makeup function as symbols for communicating the character's status.⁷ The male *sheng* characters (subcategorized by age and profession) often have some sort of beard and relatively naturalistic facial coloring, but the painted-face male *jing* roles call for brightly painted facial designs in vivid colors, including red, black, white, blue, and yellow.⁸ *Jing* characters are powerful men, sometimes even supernaturally so. The colors used in *jing* makeup have specific connotations. For example, red indicates loyalty and bravery; yellow connotes clever deviousness. Female (*dan*) roles fall into groups such as *qingyi* (young lady), *wudan*



Source: Screenshot from the 1993 film *Farewell My Concubine*, directed by Chen Kaige. ©1993 Miramax Films.

(woman warrior), and *laodan* (old woman). The *jing* and *qingyi* roles feature elaborate headdresses and robes. Just as pennants or flags worn on the back indicate a martial role, extremely long white sleeves are worn by upper-status men and women. Skillful manipulation of these “water sleeves” is an art in itself. Clown (*chou*) characters are identified by a patch of white in the center of the face. Most Beijing operas feature a happy or at least satisfying ending, but the plays are characterized as serious (involving conflicts between emotional, family, or patriotic loyalties, etc.) or light (involving lighthearted romance and/or mischief).⁹

Singing Style and Texts

Beijing opera singers vocalize with a tonal quality that can be characterized as bright, straight (nonvibrato), and nasal. These sounds are quite dissimilar from Western operatic vocal production. The singing features long, drawn-out syllables, and rarely does it feature the extremes of held-out high pitches combined with vocal agility highly prized in Western opera. The nature of the Chinese language (which is tonal and features many sounds not found in English or other European languages) contributes significantly to the emphatic rendering of Beijing opera's melodic passages. Because the singing style is much less relaxed and rounded than much Western singing, Beijing opera often sounds harsh to American audiences. Lyrics for Beijing opera are most often in the form of couplets—groupings of two lines—and fall into two large language categories: *wenyan wen* (classical Chinese) and *baihua* (plain or vernacular language).¹⁰ The use of classical Chinese, with its distinct syntax and semantics, and vernacular speech is aligned with the character portrayed. Both types of locution are highly structured according to patterns of rhyme, number of syllables per line, and metrical accent. Because Beijing opera relies heavily on displaying the complexity of these linguistic attributes, it is not surprising that it is doubly difficult for non-Chinese listeners to appreciate it fully. Melodically, Beijing opera utilizes two frameworks: the lively, generally higher *xipi* mode, and the lower, more sedate *erhuang* mode.¹¹ Each character and scene calls for specific types of lyrics and melodies, just as costumes and makeup are configured from suitable established stylized types.

Instrumental Music

Beijing opera features an instrumental music ensemble that functions as an accompaniment to singers' voices and rarely performs as an independent unit.¹² The Beijing opera orchestra typically features fewer than a dozen

players who are led by a conductor playing a wooden clapper and a drum. Other than the conductor, who is called on to perform throughout an opera, the instrumentalists generally fall into two groups: civilian, or *wenchang*/string and wind, and martial, *wuchang*/gongs and drums. Essential instruments in the civilian ensemble are the *jing hu*, *erhu*—bowed two-string fiddles, the *jinghu* sounding high pitches and the *erhu* lower—and *yue qin*—the plucked “moon lute” with a round body. In the martial section, the clapper and drum, and two types of gongs plus a pair of cymbals are the most basic instruments. The gongs used in Beijing opera have distinctive tones that rise and fall. The civilian and martial sections of the orchestra play together during most parts of the opera, and additional instruments are commonly heard. These include the *san xian*, *ruan*, and *pipa* (plucked string instruments), *dizi* (horizontal flute), *suona* (“Chinese oboe”), *sheng* (a type of mouth organ), and a variety of drums and gongs. In general, the *jing hu* doubles melodies as they are sung, and other melodic instruments reinforce the line, adding slight rhythmic variations. Percussion instruments punctuate speech and serve as accompaniments to dance and combat scenes as well as undergirding the work of the civilian ensemble.

Scenery, Acrobatics, Dance, and Mime

In terms of scenery, Beijing opera is minimalistic, but in terms of stage action, it is frequently dramatic, energetic, and strenuous. Beijing opera is therefore nearly the opposite of Western opera in terms of scenery and stage action. Western opera usually favors carefully constructed, often massive sets and is notably undemanding of physical action on the part of singers. No matter the venue, Beijing opera scenery is likely to be no more than a carpet, a few chairs, and perhaps a table and cloth. Beijing opera performers and audiences use their imaginations to envision a room suggested only by a table or a few chairs or perhaps a mountainside. Performers usually engage in elaborate acrobatic feats and/or dance during the course of the opera, delighting audiences. Actions involve jumping, whirling, dancing, twirling various sorts of props, climbing and balancing, and somersaults, all demanding a high level of athletic training. Stylized actions occur: short circular walks symbolize events such as long journeys; wriggling fingers denote high emotion. Dancing is often called for by the storyline rather than being extraneous to it. In *The King Bids Farewell to His Favorite*, the king's favorite concubine performs a dance in order to lift the king's

spirits: a climactic moment in the story. Solo as well as ensemble dances are commonly seen. Mimed portions of operas include actions such as sewing, opening and closing doors, and pouring tea, all done in a stylized but recognizable fashion. The ability of the actor to evoke the action is prized, whereas the addition of props or scenery for the purpose of direct illustration would probably seem clumsy and obvious.

Conclusion

A journey to Beijing can easily include a live Beijing opera performance. The Chang An Grand Theatre (on Chang An Avenue) and the Liyuan Theatre at the Qianmen Jianguo Hotel (near the Qianmen Gate) produce Beijing opera on an ongoing basis. The Chang An Grand Theatre projects subtitles in Chinese and English during its productions. Variety shows featuring many different types of performance arts, including opera scenes, can be enjoyed at the Lao She Teahouse, which is near the Qianmen Gate and subway stop. These are only a few of numerous venues where Beijing opera can be heard in the capital. Less ambitious visitors might simply turn on television or radio while in China: the former will more than likely offer a taste of Beijing opera as part of a variety show (especially during holidays) or a contest, if not featuring a recorded opera performance. Because Beijing opera is a cultural icon, it often figures in ordinary television dramas in some fashion. Such shows may feature an older man or woman who is incidentally an opera fan or a military man who entertains his friends with a rendition of a familiar opera aria when tipsy. Gala holiday performances often include an opera scene or two. Opera training schools are attached to troupes currently active, and China's music conservatories train singers to vocalize in operatic style. Beijing opera training schools allow students to perfect the multiple performance skills necessary for a successful career.

Only a small fraction of the Chinese currently take an interest in Beijing opera, and this has led to the perception that the art will eventually die out. Still, because China's population is so large, even a small percentage of Chinese citizens equals a relatively large number of individuals. Beijing opera enthusiasts are likely to number in the hundreds of thousands, if not millions. There are ample additional reasons to be optimistic about the future of Beijing opera. Although opera enthusiasts do seem to be older adults, a seg-

ment of the younger population is nevertheless interested in the art, and it may be that as they age, their appreciation for the art will grow. Children with talent for acting, acrobatics, dancing, and singing in operatic style are certainly not in short supply in China, and artistic talent competitions (some of them televised) with contestants of all ages attract considerable attention. Interest in fostering the traditional arts is strong, both in China and in diasporic communities, and on certain festive occasions, there seems to be no adequate substitute for a Beijing opera performance. The Chinese government has extended support to training schools, troupes, and theaters, including the Chang An Grand Theatre. Tourists, both Chinese and from abroad, continue to enjoy the art. Finally, amateur interest and performance groups are alive and functioning in China, and some of these are based at Chinese universities. The fact that UNESCO has inscribed Beijing opera in the "Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity"—but not among those items in need of urgent safeguarding—is indicative of the high value the Chinese accord Beijing opera and its current health, boding well for the future of this unique, distinctively Chinese art form. ■

NOTES

1. "Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity," United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, Peking Opera, UNESCO, accessed November 10, 2011, <http://bit.ly/p0rfCK>.
2. Leslie Cheung, Fengyi Zhang, and Kaige Chen, *Farewell My Concubine*, (Burbank, CA: Miramax, 1999), DVD. This film, originally released in 1993, is one of the most famous films about Beijing opera. The novel upon which this film was based is Lillian Lee's *Farewell to My Concubine*, trans. Andrea Lingenfelter (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1992).
3. Colin MacKerras, *Peking Opera (Images of Asia)* (Hong Kong, Oxford, and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 31–32. This book is a short (sixty-seven pages) introduction; for more detail, see MacKerras's *The Rise of Peking Opera 1770–1870: Social Aspects of the Theatre in Manchu China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).
4. MacKerras, *Peking Opera*, 14–16. The film *Forever Enthralled*, directed by Chen Kaige (Guangzhou: Dejin Cultural Broadcast Company, n.d.) is a relatively recent biography of Mei.
5. Georges Banu, "Mei Lanfang: A Case Against and a Model for the Occidental Stage," trans. Ella L. Wiswell and June V. Gibson, *Asian Theatre Journal* 3, no. 2 (1986): 153–178.
6. Daphne Pi-Wei Lei, *Operatic China: Staging Chinese Identity across the Pacific* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); information about Confucius Institutes worldwide and their activities, along with information on Chinese language and culture, can be found on the Confucius Institute Online website, accessed November 10, 2011, <http://www.chinese.cn/>.
7. Alexandra B. Bonds, *Beijing Opera Costumes: The Visual Communication of Character and Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008) is a detailed, beautifully illustrated description.
8. These facial designs are painted on the skin. The use of masks is exceptional and usually reserved for animals such as wolves and for gods (but not, for instance, for the Monkey King Sun Wukong, who is featured in many plays based on *The Journey to the West* saga. He is portrayed with a red, white, and black makeup design described as a pictogram of a monkey's face).
9. Elizabeth Wichmann, *Listening to Theatre: The Aural Dimension of Beijing Opera* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1991), 17–18. This monograph provides extensive detail about the textual and musical content of Beijing opera.
10. MacKerras, *Peking Opera*, 53; Wichmann's *Listening to Theatre* closely examines song style.
11. Wichmann, 25–26.
12. Wichmann's *Listening to Theatre* includes a thorough description of the makeup and function of the orchestra on pages 225–262.

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Links to online Beijing/Peking Opera Videos

Peking Opera—<http://bit.ly/p0rfCK>

This UNESCO video provides a succinct nine-minute introduction to the art of Beijing opera with narration in English.

Peking Opera *White Snake Girl*—<http://tiny.cc/o0bfbw>

This very short video of a famous scene from *The White Snake* is captioned only in Chinese. A *sheng* (a man in a blue costume with a black hat) opens the scene, and then a *dan* in an "upper color" costume, elaborate headdress, and "water sleeves" sings an aria (solo song) in *xipi* mode (fast and lively).

Beijing Opera Performance—<http://tiny.cc/jzbfbw>

A seven-minute illustration of martial instrumental music (*wuchang*), played by drums, gongs, and a clapper, fitting for a battle scene. The scene features an elegantly stylized (danced) acrobatic battle between *sheng* and *qing* (painted face) characters wearing battle pennants on their backs.

Beijing Opera in Liyuan Theater—<http://tiny.cc/2wbfbw>

Actually an advertisement, this short video has captions in broken English and illustrates key points in recognizing types of makeup for *qing* roles. It shows scenes filmed at the Liyuan Theater in the Qianmen Jianguo Hotel, one of Beijing's most popular tourist venues for sampling Beijing opera.