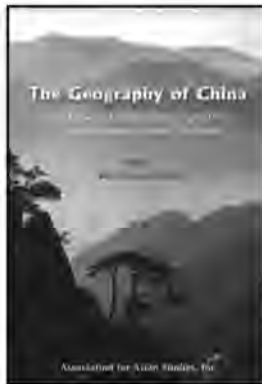


## FILM REVIEW



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RESOURCES FOR SCHOLARSHIP ON ASIA

## The Worlds of Mei Lanfang

A FILM BY MEI-JUIN CHEN

NEW JERSEY: LOTUS FILM GROUP

VHS. 57 MINUTES. COLOR. 2000

**M**ei Lanfang, the cross-dressing actor and “King of Actors” of early twentieth-century China, has long been touted as an icon of Beijing Opera (Jingju) and China’s cultural tradition. *The Worlds of Mei Lanfang* seeks to represent Mei’s multivalent life and career, ranging from a theatrical reformist to a “traditional” Chinese cultural practitioner and missionary; from an idol of mid- and high-brow audiences to superstar of popular culture; from the representative of feudalistic culture to the people’s artist in Communist China.



Mei Lanfang

Source: News Guangdong Web site at <http://www.newsgd.net/culture/art/200306240033.htm>

The documentary is, as a consequence, structured thematically instead of chronologically. The video begins with an illustration of Mei’s talents and versatility as an actor. He is acclaimed to be expert in playing a whole range of female roles (*dan*). In the second part, the filmmakers shift focus to Mei’s performances abroad, the most valuable part of the documentary. Film clips about Mei’s performance on Broadway and in Moscow are rare and precious records of his career and the history of Beijing Opera. The Moscow performance, filmed by Eisenstein in the mid 1930s, is of particular significance, as it featured Mei in his heyday. The vast majority of motion pictures concerning Mei were made when he was beyond his prime.

International prestige notwithstanding, Mei was a national artist for Chinese audiences. The well-known story about his refusal to collaborate with Japanese occupiers in the late 1930s is retold in this documentary. After the Communist party took over China, Mei enthusiastically embraced the new regime and socialist culture, though, as the filmmakers hint, the marriage between communism and Mei was not at all successful.

*The Worlds of Mei Lanfang* displays not only Mei’s art but also a history of modern Chinese theater and popular culture. It therefore serves as great visual material for undergraduate-level courses about such topics as Chinese cultures and cultural and social history in twentieth-century China. When instructors use the video, they should provide students with extra lectures and readings on the transformations of Beijing Opera in the last century because some interviewees in the documentary tend to enshrine Beijing Opera as a timeless native art, defying its change over time. ■

QILIANG HE is finishing his PhD degree at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, and is teaching history at the University of Minnesota, Morris. His research interest is urban media and cultures in 1920’s China. Qiliang He is an instructor at the University of Minnesota, Morris.