



## Lori JIN CHAO

### Abstract

Beijing opera (also known as “Peking opera”) is the national opera of China. For many it represents the quintessence of Chinese culture. It is a traditional Chinese theatre form that combines music, vocal performance, mime, dance, and acrobatics. Some trace its history back to the end of the 18th century but most agree that it did not become a fully developed new form until the middle of the 19th century. Around that time it began to be popular in the Qing dynasty court. Empress Dowager Cixi, the most powerful figure at court for most of the last decades of the dynasty, was a big fan and supporter, inviting whole troupes and master performers into the palace to perform for her. Known for the city in which it matured, Beijing opera also spread to other big cities, such as Tianjin, Wuhan, and Shanghai. After 1949 it spread to every province in China and also became very important in Taiwan. In 1930, the most famous performer of Beijing opera, Mei Lanfang, undertook an extended performance tour of the United States and later, in 1935, toured the Soviet Union.

There are three prominent artistic characteristics of Beijing opera that in total make it different from major theatrical performing arts of western countries: its synthetic nature (*zonghe xing*), its stylized use of conventions (*chengshi xing*), and its preference for suggestion over direct realism (*xuni xing*).

Traditional Chinese opera in general is a synthetic art form with a long history in China. Over time it successfully incorporated elements from folk song, dance, verbal play, acrobatics, the martial arts, the fine arts, and music. The synthesis of these various art forms reached a particularly high level in Beijing opera. In training and performance, there is a strong stress placed on the so-called “four skills” (*sigong*: singing, recitation, acting, and acrobatic fighting) and five patterns” (*wufa*: finger patterns, eye patterns, body patterns, general patterns, and walking patterns). The extent to which these individual skills and patterns have been developed and synthesized together make Beijing opera an outstanding performing art.

Beijing opera performance is particularly stylized because of its heavy use of conventions that have developed over the decades. Characters belong to a rich but limited number of role types (*hangdang*) whose appearance (make-up, costume, etc.), movement, and speech are differentiated according to a rich set of conventions for each role type so that once a viewer has become sufficiently familiar with these conventions, they can immediately recognize a character’s role type and often the character’s identity. For instance, “clown” (*chou*) characters are immediately recognizable by the flat-white patch of make-up in the

middle of their face, while in the case of “painted face” (hualian) characters (also known as jing) the entire face is painted in symbolic colors and patterns. Each of the painted face characters have their own “face patterns” (lianpu) that can vary depending on which school (pai) of painted face acting the performer belongs to. A wide variety of information about a character, from what kind of temper he has to his origins or fate, can be encoded into a character’s face pattern. The “out-sized” nature of painted face characters is shown not only in their face patterns but also in their booming voices and high-soled boots. Dignified, mature men are played by “older male” (laosheng) actors. They have comparatively natural make-up but their beards are divided into three parts and are more wispy than the full beards of the painted face roles. As might be expected, they speak in a very dignified and cadenced manner. “Flighty” young women who walk and move quickly and expansively, show their hands and feet, and can speak in a vulgar manner belong to one role type (huadan), while their more dignified sisters, who act opposite to them, belong to a different role type (qingyi). While there are four major role types (sheng, dan, jing, chou), these can each be in turn broken down into many subtypes. While it is most certainly not the case that every character belonging to one specific role type is performed the very same way, there is a clear family resemblance between them.

Each role type acts on stage in a different way from other role types. For instance, all of the motions of an actor performing a qingyi character will be delicate and restrained while if the same actor performs a huadan character then the motions will be more forceful and expansive. Scholars such as Qi Rushan, who helped plan Mei Lanfang’s successful performance tour of the US in 1930, have counted and categorized all the conventional movements made by Beijing opera actors. Cecelia Zung published a book in 1936, *Secrets of the Chinese Drama*, explaining many of them and using photos of Mei Lanfang to illustrate them.

Each role type also speaks and sings differently from the others. “Clown” characters speak rather close to the way ordinary people in Beijing once spoke, while more dignified role types speak in a more classical style that uses older and more specialized vocabulary and uses particular cadences. A painted face character will express his anger in a special way: Dawayaya! The way each role type sings is differentiated from that of other role types in similar ways. Because the most famous performers of female roles in the past were all men, the voices of young women speak and sing in falsetto. Young male roles (xiaosheng), because their voices (and characters) have not yet matured, speak and sing in a mixture of falsetto and natural voice.

While in Western opera the person who composes the music gets the most credit, Beijing opera uses musical forms for its arias that were created long ago anonymously, but which have to be adapted by master singers and musicians for each play. Most of the aria types belong either to the one of two musical modes, xipi, whose arias are in general more conducive to expressing excited moods such as happiness, anger, or agitation, and erhuang, whose arias are in general darker and better for expressing loss, sorrow, or melancholy. Set tunes (qupai) borrowed from Kun opera and melodies from regional theater are also used. Percussion patterns (there are about 100 basic ones) are used to accentuate almost all movement and singing on stage. The leader of the percussion orchestra in effect has the role of conducting the performance of the entire play. The most

important melodic instrument in the Beijing opera orchestra is the huqin, a spike fiddle with two strings.

Instead of relying on scenery, traditional Beijing opera uses the words and actions of the actors to stir the imagination of the audience so that they will visualize in their heads the world in which the characters on stage live. The meaning of some of these actions will be immediately understandable to even the uninitiated, while others require that an audience member be familiar with the world that produced the plays. For instance, a simple way that an actor shows that his character is entering a room is to lift up each foot as the character steps over an imaginary doorstep or threshold (menkan) such as traditional Chinese housing used to have at every door to keep dust and dirt out (these can still be found in temples). A viewer not familiar with such doorsteps will have a harder time understanding the significance of the lifting of the feet.

Beijing opera also does not use many props. The most commonly used set of props is “a table and two chairs.” Besides serving as tables and chairs, they can be used to indicate beds, bridges, mountains, gates, etc. Another very common prop is the horse whip, which is commonly used on stage to show that the actor is mounting, riding on, or dismounting a horse. The creative use of a limited number of props, along with the ability to call up scenes and vistas in the audience’s imagination through lyrics, speech, and movement, allowed traditional Beijing opera to present, in a very economical fashion, rich and varied worlds.

When Chinese scholars first began to compare Western drama and the most dominant form of Chinese drama, Beijing opera, in the early 20th century, they seized on these three characteristics of Beijing opera when they wanted to show the differences between it and western theater. Put simply, those three characteristics are: synthetic nature (zonghe xing), use of conventions (chengshi xing), and suppositionality (xuni xing). They remain the most talked about features of Beijing opera despite all the changes it has been through since its birth to the present.

## **Bio**

My English name is Lori, and I am a post-graduate student of the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts and my major is International Culture Communication. My postgraduate research is focused on the translation and interpretation of Peking Opera