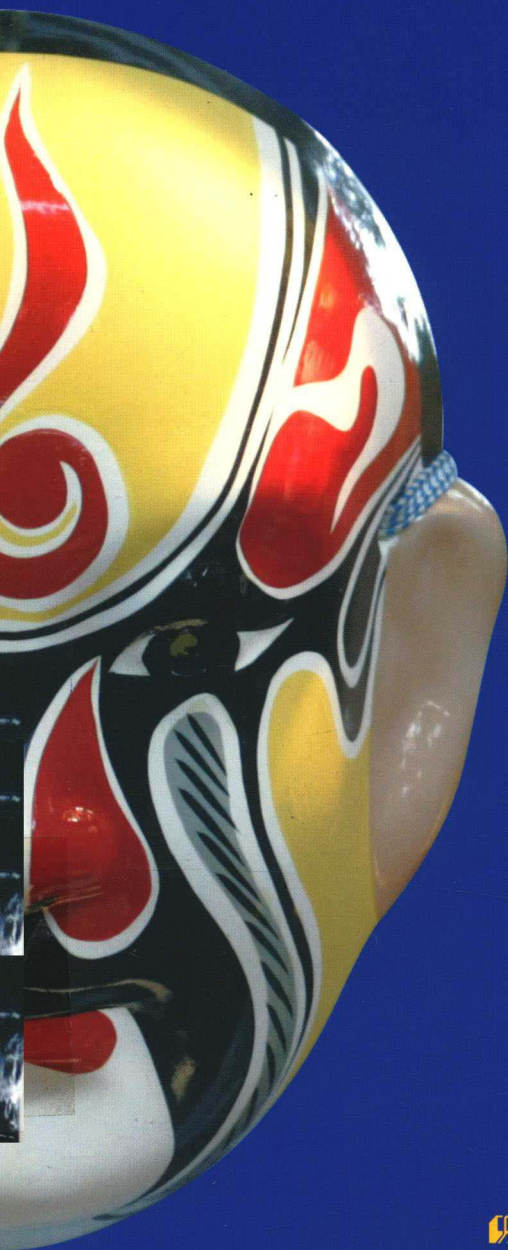


H E C H A R M O F B E I J I N G

# TRADITIONAL OPERA IN BEIJING



CHINA PICTORIAL PUBLISHING HOUSE

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Text by Yuan Jing

Photographs by Zou Yi

Translated by He Junlong



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**TRADITIONAL OPERA IN BEIJING**

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# PREFACE

China's Peking Opera, with its gorgeous costumes, distinctive singing style and unique choreography, has won the praise and commendation of countless overseas theatergoers. When visiting Beijing, a trip to the theater or teahouse to watch Peking Opera is as foremost on your must-do list as climbing the Great Wall or dining on Peking Roast Duck.



# CONTENTS

## PART I

### 1. FAMOUS BEIJING THEATERS

#### 3. ● Huguang Guildhall: Theater and Historical Site

*Havoc in Heaven (Nao Tiangong)*

*Picking up a Bracelet (Shi Yuzhuo)*

*The Wicked Inn Keeper (San Cha Kou)*

#### 12. ● The Chang'an Grand Theater: Venue Most Coveted by Performers of Traditional Opera

*All's Well That Ends Well (Long Feng Cheng Xiang)*

*Two Loyal Officials (Er Jin Gong)*

*The Legend of the White Snake (Baishe Chuanqi), Broken Bridge (Duanqiao)*

#### 22. ● Liyuan Theater: Where High-ranking Officials and the Common People Enjoy Peking Opera Together

*Xiang Yu the Conqueror Bids Farewell to His  
Favorite Concubine (Bawang Bie Ji)*

#### 30. ● Guangdelou Theater: Dedicated to Both Peking Opera and Quyi

*The Concubine Gets Tipsy (Guifei Zui Jiu)*

#### 37. ● Tianqiaole Teahouse: Entertainment Venue that Celebrates the Common People

#### 43. ● Zhengyici Theater: Living Fossil of Chinese Theater



46.

● Dongyuan Theater: Replica of an Imperial Structure

*The Fourth Son Visits His Mother (Silang Tan Mu)*

*A Bag of Jewels Tells a Story (Suo Lin Nang)*

54.

● Lao She Teahouse—an Epitome of Beijing Folklore

*Fend off Horse (Dang Ma)*



PART II

59.

THE PINNACLE OF PEKING OPERA: A VISIT TO THE MEI LANFANG MEMORIAL

61.

● Biography of Mei Lanfang

Pioneer of Artistic Innovation

Diligent, Thrifty and Easy-going

A Modest Gentleman

Cultural Ambassador Worldwide

68.

● Mei Lanfang's Artistic Achievements

71.

● Mei Lanfang Memorial Museum



### PART III

## 73. THE ABC OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE OPERAS

---

- 75. ● Origin of Traditional Operas in Beijing
- 78. ● *Kunqu*: Oral and Intangible Human Heritage
- 82. ● Peking Opera: An Important Representative of Beijing Vernacular Culture

## 88. ● Four Elements of Traditional Operas: *Sheng*, *Dan*, *Jing* and *Chou*

*Sheng*

*Dan*

*Jing*

*Chou*

- 98. ● Peking Opera Stage Makeup
- 101. ● Costumes and Musical Instruments Are Works of Art



# FAMOUS BEIJING THEATERS





Among Beijing's characteristic theaters popularly patronized by both local and overseas theatergoers are the Liyuan Theater, the Huguang Guildhall and the Chang'an Grand Theater. They have comprehensive software and hardware facilities that provide not only Chinese-English bilingual subtitles, but also simultaneous interpretations in English, Japanese and French. But it would be a pity to watch performances at these theaters — whether grand or modest, located in imperial gardens or simple alleyways — having no inkling of their fascinating background. All of them constitute important facets of Beijing's historical and cultural heritage.



## HUGUANG GUILDHALL: THEATER AND HISTORICAL SITE

The Huguang Guildhall was built more than 200 years ago. It consists of a group of Qing Dynasty buildings amid modern high-rises on the southwestern corner of the intersection at Hufangqiao, one kilometer west of Zhushikou, outside the Qianmen Gate.

The main Huguang Guildhall building dates back to the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). During Emperor Wanli's reign (1571-1620) it was the mansion of Prime Minister Zhang Juzheng, and during Qing Emperor Qianlong's reign (1736-1795) it was the residence of several high-ranking officials, and also of the great scholar Ji Xiaolan. The Ziwu Well within the Guildhall, which Ji Xiaolan mentioned in his book *Jottings from the Thatched Abode of Close Observations* (*Yuewei Caotang Biji*), is still there.

Huguang was formerly the name of a province during the Yuan Dynasty. In 1664 during Qing Emperor Kangxi's reign, it was separated into Hubei and Hunan provinces. In 1807,



the 12th year of Qing Emperor Jiaqing's reign, the then owner of the house donated it as the basis of the Huguang Guildhall. Other buildings were built on donations from the country's well-to-do merchants and residents of Hubei and Hunan provinces as a symbol of their lasting solidarity. The guildhall's original function was that of receiving candidates for the imperial examinations and housing officials waiting for notification of new appointments.

In 1840, the 20th year of Qing Emperor Daoguang's reign, Hunan native Zeng Guofan (1811-1872), who served as governor-general of Liangjiang (Jiangsu, Anhui and Jiangxi provinces) and Zhili provinces, called for refurbishment of the guildhall. Zeng Guofan is believed to have personally added the Fengyu Huai ren Hall and rockery to the construction plan and presided over their construction to ensure the original appearance of the guildhall was preserved. In 1892, the 18th year of Emperor Guangxu's reign, a four-year overhaul of the guildhall was undertaken at which time its scale and layout was determined.

The Huguang Guildhall has a skillfully compact layout. It consists of many buildings: the Grand Theater, Country Worthy Memorial, Wenchang Pavilion, Baoshan Hall, and Chuwan Hall, yet it has a spacious ambience. In its garden are green bamboos,







flowerbeds and rockeries. In imperial times they were the venue for the wedding and birthday banquets given for high-ranking officials. The Huguang Guildhall was also a place where artists gathered; most Peking Opera masters performed there at least once. In 1912, Sun Yat-sen, pioneer of the Chinese revolution, convened

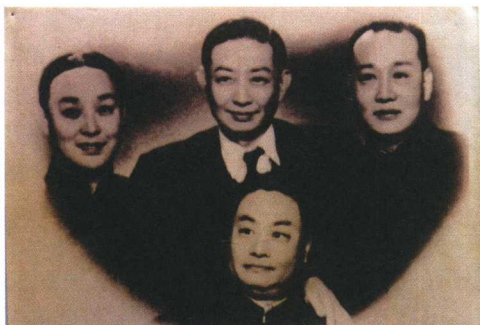
five political meetings at the guildhall. That held in August marked the founding of Kuomintang (KMT) or Nationalist Party.

The Huguang Guildhall is well preserved, especially its Grand Theater, whose performances attract many Chinese and overseas Peking Opera aficionados and amateur performers. This wooden structure is the original guildhall building. It comes under municipal protection, and is both historical heritage as well as a theatrical venue. Its protruding stage faces north, and the orchestra sits to its west. In boxes on the second floor are dozens of tables for eight, laid with fruit and teacups, where Peking Opera performances can be enjoyed while sipping tea, in the old style of Beijing inhabitants, making it an authentic experience of Beijing culture as well as entertainment. The two-story theater has a 280-person capacity. There are nightly performances, and ticket prices range from 150 to 580 yuan. The cost of a VIP ticket includes souvenirs, simultaneous interpretation and a photo taken with performers. Tickets for matinee performances, generally attended by old Peking Opera fans, are much cheaper.

In former times, many famous Peking Opera masters performed at the Huguang Guildhall. Civil plays performed there today include







*Picking Up a Bracelet (Shi Yuzhuo), Xiang Yu the Conqueror Bids Farewell to His Favorite Concubine (Bawang Bie Ji), and among the military plays performed are The Wicked Inn Keeper (San Cha Kou) and Havoc in Heaven (Nao Tiangong).*

There is a chance to get a glimpse of the long history and fascinating charm of Peking Opera at the Beijing Museum of Traditional Opera. It has a permanent exhibition entitled “A Brief History of Traditional Opera in Beijing,” and holds periodical exhibitions such as the “Exhibition of Facial Makeup by Famous Painters,” and “Exhibition of Clay Sculptures of Old-time Theatrical Characters.” Among the museum’s exhibits are stage costumes worn by famous performers, and the passes they wore in order to enter the imperial palace. Also on display are exhibits of *huqin* — a two-stringed bowed musical instrument played in accompaniment to the four great *dan* roles, playbills and stage photos from various historical periods.





## ※ Synopsis of Peking Opera Plays

### *Havoc in Heaven (Nao Tiangong)*

Sun Wukong – better known as the mischievous Monkey King — is possessed of vast magic powers, and his cheek and boldness incur the wrath of many celestials. Fearing that he might start a rebellion, the Jade Emperor sends him an envoy from the heavenly palace, offering him amnesty and a post in his heavenly dwelling. Sun is offered the sinecure of managing heavenly horses, which he accepts. One day, the Queen Mother of the West holds a peach banquet but does not invite him. Upon enquiring







about what he believes to be an oversight, Sun Wukong is swiftly dispatched back to his duties. Feeling insulted, he causes havoc at the banquet. The Jade Emperor is furious and sends troops to arrest him, but they prove no match for him and are swiftly defeated.

This is a story from the classic novel *Journey to the West* (*Xi You Ji*). The Monkey King is a character well loved by the Chinese people because he defies brute force and excels in martial arts. The many Peking Opera plays that feature him, in flamboyant facial makeup and executing spectacular acrobatics, are particularly popular with overseas as well as local audiences. *Havoc in Heaven* is the perfect introduction to Peking Opera.





### *Picking up a Bracelet (Shi Yuzhuo)*

As the maiden Sun Yujiao sits in front of her home doing embroidery, the young scholar, Fu Peng, passes by and asks the way. The two talk, become friendly and soon fall in love. When shy, demure Yujiao goes inside, Fu Peng places a jade bracelet in front of the door to her home as a token of his love. When Yujiao comes out, she sees and picks up the bracelet. Seeing this, Grandma Liu, a kind and humorous woman, teases Yujiao, but promises to help Sun Yujiao send a love token of her own to her sweetheart.

Pretty, lively Sun Yujiao is the archetypal *huadan* role of Peking Opera, and also a very popular character.



### *The Wicked Inn Keeper (San Cha Kou)*

This is a story from *The Yang Family Generals*. The principle character, Jiao Zan, is an officer under the command of Yang Yanzhao, sixth son of the famous military Yang family. Jiao Zan is exiled to Shamen Island by the imperial court for killing Xie Tingfang, a treacherous official. Yang Yanzhao, fearing that his lieutenant Jiao Zan might be murdered on the way to his exile, orders Ren Tanghui, another officer under his command, to don a disguise, follow and protect Jiao Zan. Jiao Zan and the government runner escorting him stay at a small inn at a crossroads. The innkeeper Liu Lihua recognizes Jiao Zan as a subordinate of Yang Yanzhao, and he and his wife discuss ways of helping him escape. Innkeeper Liu suspects Ren Tanghui, who has followed Jiao Zan to the inn, of being an assassin, which Ren also mistakenly believes of the innkeeper. In the knowledge that his inn is in an isolated position, innkeeper Liu Lihua maintains

