

The Cream of Chinese Culture

PEKING OPERA



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

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Peking Opera



Compiled by Yi Bian

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Foreword

前言



Formation of Peking Opera

Peking opera is regarded as China's national opera and is the most popular and widespread opera in the country. It is generally believed that Peking opera developed from

several ancient local operas during the mid- and late 19th century. In 1790, the 55th year of the Qing Dynasty Emperor Qianlong's reign, the Sanqing Anhui Opera Troupe moved from Anhui Province to Beijing to perform in the celebrations to - mark Emperor Qianlong's 80th birthday. Later, three more Anhui opera troupes - the Sixi, Chuntai, Hechun troupes - also came to perform in Beijing. Together with

Sanqing, they were referred to as the Four Anhui Opera Troupes. Each troupe had its own characteristic way of performing. The troupes and the Han opera performers from Hubei with whom they were working had a mutual influence on one another. The performers also borrowed some plays, melodies and performing techniques from Kunqu and Shaanxi opera, drew on some folk tunes, and showed

A folk theater



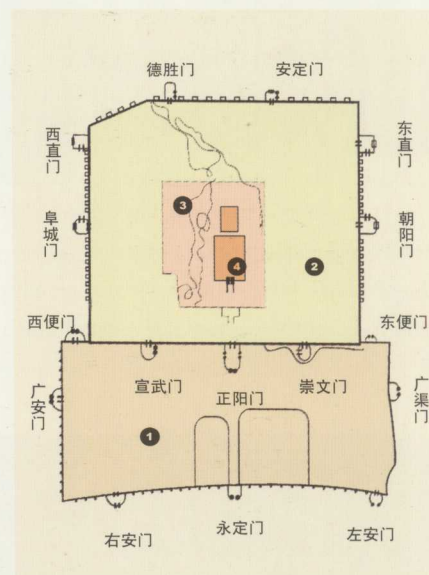
a greater and greater Beijing influence in terms of the lyrics, recitative and rhyme, gradually developing what is now Peking opera.

Peking opera is a comprehensive art that has singing, recitation, acting and acrobatics (dancing) at its core. Feelings and ideas are often expressed through symbolic

motions, and the unique format has developed over long years of performance. Using its standardized yet flexible format, many Peking opera artists have created a lot of vivid, touching characters with distinct personalities, thus helping Peking opera develop and prosper.

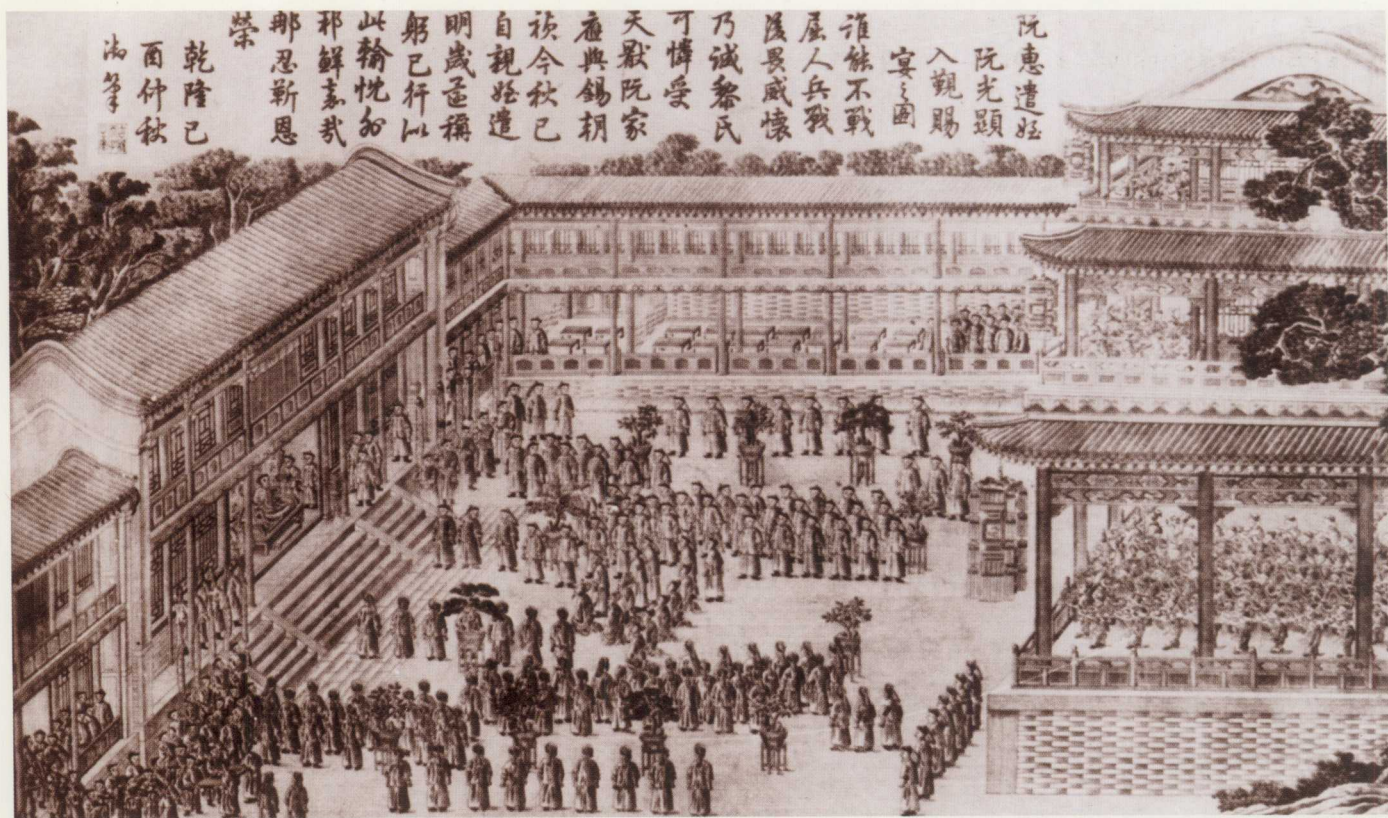
A map of the old city of Beijing

- ❶ The Outer City
- ❷ The Inner City
- ❸ The Imperial City
- ❹ The Forbidden City



A performance in a teahouse during the Qing Emperor Guangxu's reign (1875–1908)





The Qing Emperor Qianlong (r. 1736–1795) watching an opera at his mountain summer resort

Peking opera takes its name from the city of Beijing, where it developed. It was formerly called *pihuang* (after *xipi* and *erhuang*, the two

main types of melody in Peking opera), Beiping opera (after an old name of Beijing) and National opera, among other names.



A theater building

Beijing's South-Facing Gate (Zhengyangmen)



Types of Roles

Peking opera is a theatrical art that incorporates singing, dancing, acting and acrobatics. But what we see on the Peking opera stage does not imitate real life. For example, Peking opera uses special imagery in the creation of characters. All roles are classified according to sex, personality, age, profession and social status. *Hangdang* is the general term for role types in Peking opera. As we all know, there are four types of role in Peking opera today - namely, the *sheng* (male role), *dan* (female role), *jing* (painted face) and *chou* (clown). The *sheng* is the male protagonist, the *dan* the female protagonist, the *jing* a male supporting figure with distinct characteristics, and *chou* a comic or negative figure or foil for the protagonist. The four role types are a result of the large variety of roles from earlier stages in the history of Peking opera being combined and reduced.

A scene from the court play *Reed Catkins River* (*Luhua He*)





The *sheng* role type: Ma Lianliang as Qiao Xuan in *At the Sweet Dew Temple* (*Ganlu Si*)



The *dan* role type: Mei Lanfang as Yang Yuhuan in *The Drunken Beauty* (*Guifei Zuijiu*)



The *jing* role type: Qiu Shengrong as Yao Qi in General Yao Qi (Yao Qi) (Performer: Qi Xiaoyun)

The four basic role types have their subdivisions, each with its own specialties and techniques. For example, the *sheng* role is divided into elderly (*laosheng*), young (*xiaosheng*), military (*wusheng*), red-faced (*hongsheng*) and young boy (*wawasheng*) roles, and the elderly male role can be further divided into singing, acting and martial *laosheng* roles, and so on. The role types cover all the characters on stage, and every actor or actress specializes in a particular role type.

The role types in Peking opera have been artistically refined to categorize, systematize and standardize the myriad images in the complex life of society according to the practical requirements of opera performance. The role types distinguish the characters' inner traits, expressed through appearance. Thus came about Peking opera's unique system of imagery, which functions as a framework in

this integrated theatrical art and distinguishes Peking opera from other types of opera.

Based on the role types, a complete set of standards has been formed for aspects such as costumes and facial makeup. These aspects and the classification of role types supplement each other, both being very important in the creation of characters and demonstrating the full beauty of Peking opera.



The *chou* role type: Xiao Changhua (left) as Tang Qin in *From Trial of the Severed Head to the Killing of Tang Qin* (*Shen Tou Ci Tang*)

Costume

The costumes in Peking opera are based on Ming Dynasty fashions, also borrowing from the fashions of the Tang, Song, Yuan and Qing dynasties and modern times. They are as diverse as the roles: civil and military, male and female, and so on. Traditional Peking opera plays are mainly based on historical events, reflecting life in each dynasty, with characters ranging from emperors, generals and ministers to the common people. Characters from different dynasties and with different social statuses wear different costumes on stage, each having its own rules of dress.

Characters from *The Legend of Yang Yuhuan (Taizhen Waizhuan)*

