

Fu Jin

CHINESE THEATER

Happiness and Sorrows on the Stage

Translated by Wang Wenliang, Wang Huan & Zhang Lina



CHINA
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Foreword

China is a country with multiple theatrical activities spread over its vast area. Currently, Chinese traditional opera (*xiqu*), an integration of singing and performance, is the most common, unique and representative form of Chinese theater.

Chinese traditional opera originated in the 12th century. Compared with ancient Greek and Indian Sanskrit drama, it was born rather late but with more exuberant vitality. Over more than 800 years, Chinese traditional opera has maintained its basic form, therefore, among the existing types of drama, Chinese traditional opera may have the longest history.

Rich in history and charm in artistic expression, traditional opera is deeply loved by ancient Chinese people. A formula is extensively used in Chinese traditional opera performances, with a special music metric and regulated singing. The speaking of dramatic characters requires compliance with the rhythm of the poetry and in military opera, pattern of martial arts is used to



At the backstage, theatrical actors are busy making up for a splendid show.



demonstrate fighting scene.

Singing, speaking, acting and acrobatic fighting are four basic types of performance measures in Chinese traditional opera. These types of performance are based on the virtual principle. (Going upstairs, for example, in which the actors make physical response by lifting clothes and legs, switching across windows and doors, even though there are no real doors and windows on the stage. Another example, snapping a whip means riding a horse while paddling means sailing.) On the basis of realistic deformation and refinement, every move the actors make on stage, a smile or even a frown, can be rich in meaning, with a strong narrative nature, vividly reflecting the inner emotions of the character.

Extensive use of music reinforces the lyrical feature of the theater, which gives a special advantage to the Chinese traditional opera in dealing with the delicate psychological activity in complex situations facing the characters. In the overall structure, the main characters are commonly assigned to most singing work, especially in the core scenes, where changes in rhythm and emotion leave the

Ancient Peking Opera Garden.



deepest impression on the audience. Excellent actors are often quite popular for their singing ability and their unique means of expression and strong voices. Different theatrical genres are, therefore, formed according to the actors' characteristic vocal expressions and stage performance.

Based on the aesthetic principles of traditional Chinese theatrical performances, the theater stage has a high degree of virtualization.

In addition to a simple table, two chairs and a few essential props, the story takes place through a virtual performance, monologue and dialogue. That's why theatrical performances are flexible and can move and change freely. For example, actors sometimes move in a circle, which can represent traveling around mountains and waters.

Chinese traditional opera has definite rules of dress. Historical figures' theatrical clothing from the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) has been transformed and beautified and is, as a general practice, used by almost every actor.

Make-up is often intense in color. Some male characters in particular have a fixed mask, which is exaggerated and uniquely shaped and often has a specific implication. A red-faced mask means justice, a black signifies bluntness, while white symbolizes treachery.

Singing, speaking, acting and acrobatic fighting are the four



Love story of wits and beauties is the everlasting theme on the theatrical stage.



basic techniques of expression, but theaters in different parts of China fall under different genres. Theaters are categorized, first and foremost, by differences in melody, notes and musical instruments. These differences are related to local language. Across China's vast territory, people use sharply different language. For this reason, lyrical and narrative intentions can only be realized by the use of dialects the audience can understand. At the same time, the use of dialects can affect the style of the melody. There were once 300 different theater genres in China with about 200 still circulating, showing China's extremely rich and diverse theatrical styles.

From the beginning of the 20th century, subject to the impact of the West, the modern drama or stage play without singing appeared in China. For more than 100 years, modern drama has been gradually integrating into Chinese culture, taken root and become very influential. The development and prosperity of modern drama has added a new landscape for Chinese theater, which, as a whole, has become more diversified.



The traditional Chinese opera can be roughly divided into the sing plays and the military plays. The former one is based mainly on singing, speaking and acting, while the latter one is acrobatic fighting, which is quite popular among children.



Prelude: the Origins of Chinese Theater



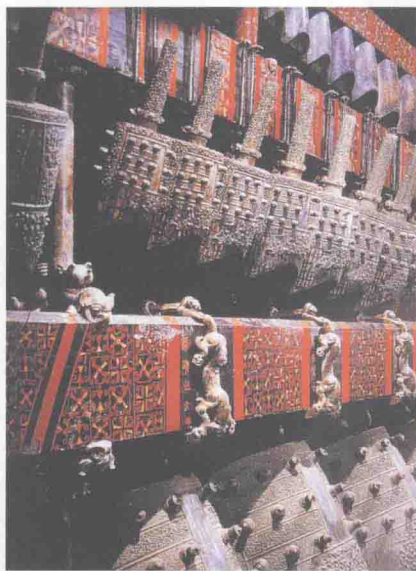
Sacrifice and Entertainer

The origins of Chinese theater can be traced back 2,500 years. At the beginning stage of civilization, witches in tribal and ethnic groups held considerable power. Sacrificial ritual music and dance performances based on certain norms were special ways for witches to communicate with the gods. They were the channel between Heaven and Man, unifying the human world and the seemingly elusive spiritual world on which people could rely. The original theatrical art is closely related to the rich and varied sacrificial ceremonies.

As with the various cultures around the world, the prototype of Chinese theater appeared almost simultaneously with its civilization. However, mature theater was born much later. Mature theater didn't emerge until the 10th century, thousands of years later than that in ancient Greece, ancient India and other cultural centers.

Early theater activities in ancient China were varied and interesting. In the embryonic stage of Chinese theater, singing was accompanied with dance; people dressed as animals and danced with a specific pace in the accompaniment of rhythmic music. These performances, often with connotative meaning, intended to tell some stories.

In *The Book of Songs*, completed in the Spring and Autumn Period (770–476 BC), China's earliest collection of poetry, a large number



Bronze chime bells of the Warring States Period, the main musical instruments in the sacrificial ceremony held by the imperial family and noblemen.





The musical tower of the Town God's temple of the Tang Dynasty, a place for drama performance and sacrifice offering.

of poems, especially those based on folk songs were performed by singing and dancing with some emotional content displaying a trinity of literature, music and dance. The sacrificial ritual in the southern state of Chu during the Warring States Period (475–256 BC) also provided us with broad space for the imagination. The famous poet Qu Yuan (340–278 BC) during the Chu Period left a considerable amount of related poems, among which, *Nine Songs* and *Nine Chapters*, in particular, expressed his personal thoughts and served as a script for Chu's sacrificial ceremonies.

National Martyr in *Nine Songs* described the memorial ceremony for the national martyrs, which was better after theatrical components included in the ritual ceremonies. A large number of Chu songs circulating in southern China reflected that the early Chu had set a basic pattern for these large-scale sacrificial ceremonies. Through these poems, we see ancient people in the sacrificial ceremony where they sang a story poem and danced a non-abstract dance with theatrical action.

These ceremonies were not the actual theater in classic sense, but



already had all the elements needed for a play.

At this period, in the court of vassal states, there were many entertainers aimed at pleasing the princes and aristocrats with comic performances. Their performances were also embryonic forms of theater.

The Spectacular Scene of Music and Dance

The Han Dynasty (202 BC–AD 220) witnessed a more rapid social development. During this period, various embryonic theater activities in both court and civil society entered a new phase.

Usually, Chinese ancient people prayed in spring and offered thanks of the harvest in autumn. That's why sacrificial activities with singing and dancing in spring and autumn were indispensable rituals for both court and people. What's more, the royal ceremony had already been highly systematized. In the meantime, the Han gradually developed an entertainment industry in towns and rural areas and developed some entertainment-oriented performances with folk artists living on acting. The court held large performances for the general public, which, to a certain extent, stimulated the private entertainment industry and allowed for a transfer of the center of entertainment performances from the court to the public. Together with frequent trade exchanges between China and Western countries, singing, dancing and acrobatics in Western Regions spread to Chang'an (present-day Xi'an). As a result, this political center of the Han became a meeting point and global center of multi-cultural entertainment performances.



The figurine of entertainer of the Han Dynasty depicts a comedian image.

During the Han Dynasty, many kinds of plays prevailed, including a variety of music and dance, acrobatics,





Theatrical characters in brick carving of the Han Dynasty.

and etc. A variety of performances from this era, including dancing and acrobatics, were closely related to the theater.

After the Han Dynasty, the development of music and dance was spectacular. The folk song and dance performance, *ta-yao-niang* first appeared during the Northern Qi Dynasty (550–577) and developed during the Tang Dynasty (618–907). *Ta-yao-niang* described family grudges. Its protagonist, a woman often bullied at home by her drunken husband told passers-by over and over about her miserable life, while her ugly husband beat his grieved wife in public. The story was accompanied by her singing and dancing. These two actors performed as a future song-and-dance duet (*er ren zhuan*), with a female lead and a jester. The female lead acted through song, dance and speech.

From the Han to the Tang Dynasty, song and dance forms like *ta-yao-niang*, *su-mu-zhe*, *lan-ling-wang* and *bo-tou* gradually took shape, meaning China entered a new era of entertainment culture. During the Sui (581–618) and Tang dynasties, the development of ancient Chinese music and dance reached a summit. In Dunhuang, you can see countless murals left from that time, reproducing the busy and flourishing life of

Song-and-dance duet (*er ren zhuan*)

Song-and-dance duet (*er ren zhuan*) is a popular folk art prevalent in Liaoning, Jilin, Heilongjiang provinces and eastern Inner Mongolia. It enjoyed nearly 300 years of history after its creation. Its typical expression is a man and a woman with bright clothes, fans and handkerchiefs dancing and singing high-pitched rough songs with witty humorous lyrics.





The Dunhuang mural painting artistically expresses the spectacular scene of music and dance of the Tang Dynasty.



The painting of *Musical Scene in Palace* depicts the scene where the maids in palace of the Tang Dynasty are enjoying a feast and playing music.



the era.

Xinong and the Art of Singing with Speaking

Funny and humorous performances can be traced back to the pre-Qin period, when entertainers in court made fun called *xinong*.

The *canjun* opera showed that the development of Chinese theater was close to maturity. The *canjun* opera was used to tease and had two roles. The teased was called *canjun* and the teaser was *canghu*. Until the late Tang Dynasty, *canjun* opera evolved to include more performers and a more complex dramatic plot with twists and turns.

From the dramatic point of view, the main purpose of the *canjun* opera was to poke fun but it had roles, stories and plots. It was an embryonic form of theater. Based on dialogue and humorous performances, *canjun* opera, along with performances such as *ta-yao-niang* constituted two basic forms of Chinese theater.



The mural painting of music and dance in a tomb of the Song Dynasty in Henan Province.





The painting of *Children Watching Acrobatic Show* of the Song Dynasty. In the picture, the acrobatic performer sings and beats the drum at the same time, attracting two children.

Canjun opera had a direct impact on the creation of *zaju* during the Song (960–1279) and Jin (1115–1234) dynasties. *Canjun* opera, as with entertainers' performances in early periods, was mostly improvised and allowed for the creation of new jokes on the spot. These occasional impromptu performances gradually became fixed programs, frequently staged during the Tang, Song and Jin dynasties.

Xinong, similar to *canjun* opera, developed quickly. These were the early form of Song Jin *zaju*. Such comic theater, mostly simple and short, in addition to jest-based burlesque, contained a number of miscellaneous play

rap. Song Jin *zaju* accumulated a great deal of material, and after the emergence of mature theater, its short yet sturdy forms were inserted into modern theater and became an integral part.

During the Tang and Song dynasties, sizeable cities such as Chang'an, Kaifeng and Hangzhou had prosperous economies and large populations that promoted the development of entertainment industries of considerable scale. A variety of performance-oriented entertainment and arts industries converged. Fierce market competition put tremendous pressure on the operation of theater, prompting people to continue to enhance the standard of performance.

In the Tang and Song dynasties, interpreting history was very popular and was considered as the first long narrative literature in Chinese history. The stories were created when these storytellers performed in public, then became more and more complex with many twists and turns on the way to become large-scale dramatic works.

Buddhism was also a catalyst in the emergence and prosperity of story-telling theater. It was introduced to China during the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220) and expanded its influence afterwards. The

