

PEKING OPERA



Xu Chengbei



Sharing the Beauty of China

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Foreword

Foreign visitors to Beijing usually first visit the Great Wall, the Forbidden City and the Temple of Heaven, representative sites of historical interest in the city. In the evening, a tourist guide will take foreign visitors to the Chang'an Grand Theater on the Avenue of Enduring Peace. In the foyer are counters selling handicraft articles, Peking Opera masks and Peking Opera-related books, picture



A scene in *The White Snake* performed by Du Jinfang and Yu Zhenfei. The hero and the heroine loved each other at the first sight. The hero is lending the umbrella to the heroine to express love.



Farewell My Concubine, a movie that wins an award at an international film festival. The movie has allowed many foreigners to know about Peking Opera. Photo shows film stars Gong Li (left), Zhang Fengyi (center) and Leslie Cheung (right) playing roles in the film. Photo by courtesy of China Film Archives.

albums and audio-video products. Inside the theater, the stage is of a Western style; seats in the middle and rear rows are soft sofas; but in the front rows are exquisite Chinese-style square tables and armchairs. The traditional seats lend the theater a classical flavor. Sitting in your seat, you might take a look at the Chinese fans around you. They all have a relaxed expression and wear ordinary clothes. Many of them are speaking in each other's ears. But as soon as the gong and drum strike up, they all calm down and watch the play intently. As the plot unfolds, they seem to know who should be the next to come onto the stage and when to applaud a particular actor or actress for his or her performance. More surprising, aside from applause, Chinese audiences show their appreciation for the performance of actors and actresses by shouting



“hao!” It turns out that this means simply “well-done” or “bravo.”

For first-time foreign viewers, Peking Opera is hard to understand. As a matter of fact, even contemporary Chinese feel more or less unfamiliar with Peking Opera. But as long as you are willing to explore for and understand the artistic characteristics and cultural connotations of Peking Opera, you will find that everything about Peking Opera is so interesting. One morning, you might find yourself in deep love with Peking Opera when you hear singing from Peking Opera fans.

Peking Opera came into existence in a not too distant past, but it is full of mystery for Westerners. Peking Opera rooted in Chinese culture is quite different from Western drama. You would have a different impression from the one you get from the modern Chang'an Grand Theater if you see a Peking Opera performance in the Hunan-Guangdong Guildhall at 3 Hufang Road or in Zhengyici Guildhall at 220 Xiheyuan Street. For foreign tourists, these two old-style theaters are showcases of folkways in old Beijing. Watching a Peking Opera performance in one of these traditional architectures with old-style interior decorations, you seem to be in the midst of a bygone era.

Seeing a Peking Opera performance for the first time, a foreigner would wonder: why are faces of actors painted red, white, black, yellow or green? Are they masks? But masks are separate from the face. Facial make-ups in Peking Opera are different from masks. Intrigued, many foreign tourists would go backstage to see actors and



actresses remove stage makeup and costume. Next time, they would go there before a performance starts to see how performers do their makeup. Luciano Pararotti, the great tenor of international fame, once had a Peking Opera actor paint on his face the makeup of Xiang Yu, a valiant ancient warrior portrayed in numerous Peking Opera plays.

The facial makeup is a unique way of portrayal in the traditional Chinese theater. Makeup types number thousands, and different types have different meanings. At an early date, most faces were painted black, red and white. As plays increase in number, opera artists used more colors and lines to paint the faces of characters, to either exaggerate or differentiate, according to Weng Ouhong, a researcher of the classic Chinese theater. They drew inspirations from classical novels, which portray characters as having “a face as red as a red date,” “a face the color of dark gold,” “a ginger-yellow face,” “a green face with yellow beard,” “a leopard-shaped head with round eyes,” “a lion’s nose” or “broom-shaped eyebrows.”

Color patterns painted on the faces of opera characters are called *lianpu*, or facial makeup. When a character’s face needs to be exaggerated, a makeup type is painted. The most common facial makeup types are *jing* and *chou*. *Jing* is an actor with a painted face and *chou* is the role of a clown. For different roles with different makeup types, ways of color application and painting are different. For some makeup types such as one for a hero, color is applied to





Third-year students of the China Opera School learn to paint faces. Photo taken in 1964.

the face with hand; no paintbrush is used. For most types of warrior, colors mixed with oil are painted on the face, and meticulous attention is paid to shades of coloring, the size of eye sockets and the shape of the eyebrows. For treacherous court officials, the face is painted white, with the eyebrows and eye corners slightly accentuated and a couple of “treachery” lines added.

A facial makeup type points to the personality of a particular character type. A red face indicates uprightness and loyalty, a black face a rough and simple character, a blue face bravery and pride, a white face treachery and cunning, and a face with a white patch a fawning and base character. To show kinship, father and son can have faces of the same color with similar patterns. A face with a dignified pattern belongs to a loyal official or a loving son, a blue-and-green face to an outlaw hero, a face with kidney-shaped eyes and wooden



Making facial makeup is a special skill for Peking Opera professionals. Zhang Jinliang, a famous clown player, is able to make close to 1,000 varieties of facial makeup. This is a self-portrait of Zhang Jinliang who played Chong Gongdao in *Yu Tang Chun* the Courtesan.

club-faced eyebrows to a monk, a face with sharp eye corners and a small mouth to a court eunuch, and a face with a white patch to a minor character. Facial makeup can also allow actors to expand the scope of acting. If animals are to be portrayed, there is no need to have real horses and cattle on the stage. For example, in the play titled the *Jinshan Temple*, there is an army of shrimps and crabs fighting an evil character. They are played by performers with faces painted with a shrimp or crab. With novel patterns, bright colors, standard or wry contours and thick or thin lines, facial makeup can arouse the interest of the audience and add interest to Peking Opera performances.

Jing characters are also called “painted faces.” As the name suggests, they wear faces with complicated patterns, and different *jing* characters have different painted faces. But the clown, or *chou*, in Peking Opera was the earliest character to have a painted face.



A female clown is usually played by a man. This is a female clown drawn by Zhang Jinliang.

Compared with *jing* characters, clowns have a simple facial makeup, though it is not limited to a white patch on the face. Clowns usually make a greater impression on the audience than *jing* characters.

After years of development, there have been established rules on how to paint faces and what different facial patterns represent. Types of facial makeup reveal the Chinese people's evaluation of historical figures. For example, Cao Cao, a Han Dynasty prime minister, and Yan Song, a Ming Dynasty prime minister, wear a white face, indicating they are treacherous and cunning; Guan Yu, a general of the Three Kingdoms period, has a dignified red face, showing he was a loyal person; and Judge Bao wears a black face, meaning he was impartial and incorruptible as a judge.

Knowledge of facial makeup can help audiences understand the plot of Peking Opera. While facial makeup develops in operatic performance, masks have not been banished. In propitious and mythological plays, characters use masks called, for example, "god of wealth mask" and "god of thunder mask." In some plays, facial makeup and masks appear on the stage at the same time.

For foreigners, the facial makeup in Peking Opera is quite



Portrait of an opera character made by an official painter of the Qing court. The style of the facial makeup is rather old. Photo by courtesy of Beijing Library.



A scene of *Havoc in Haven* (*nao tian gong*).

mysterious. As a symbol of Peking Opera culture, facial patterns appear on an increasing number of handicraft articles that hold a strong appeal to people. Even in fashion design, the Peking Opera makeup has become a chic factor shown on the T-shaped runway. Together with clothes, it has entered the life of people today.

Old timers in Beijing liked to visit temple fairs in a bygone era. They were held at different locations in the city during the Spring Festival, or the Chinese New Year, bringing great joy to children and adults alike. Peddlers sold a toy called the Golden Cudgel, a weapon used by the Monkey King, the hero in the classic novel *Pilgrimage to the West*. Children would buy a cudgel home and wield it the way the Monkey King was supposed to do. Of course, children could also tell one or two stories about the Monkey King and mimicked his habitual act of ear tweaking and cheek scratching.

The Monkey King is a popular opera character in China. Every



Portrait of the Monkey King. Painted in the Qing period.

Chinese likes this intelligent, resourceful, daring and just spirit, whose name is Sun Wukong. Children use the Monkey King mask and his golden cudgel to mimic his many feats.

Foreigners interested in Peking Opera are usually invited to see a Monkey King play. They will be dazzled by a group of hyperactive actors jumping and making summersaults like monkeys on the stage. The actor playing the omnipotent Monkey King will invariably leave a deep impression on the audience.

The monkey play in Peking Opera comes from *kunqu* opera, which originated in Suzhou, east China. Today, usually male actors play the role of the Monkey King. A performer needs to master a whole set of monkey-playing skills, portraying the Monkey King's breadth of vision as well as his resourcefulness, liveliness and adroitness. A few Peking Opera actors made their name by playing the Monkey King. They include Yang Yuelou (1844–1889) and Yang Xiaolou (1878–1938), who were father and son, Li Shaochun (1919–1975), Li Wanchun (1911–1985) and Ye Shenzhang (1912–1966). During 1937–1942, Monkey King plays had their heyday in Beijing. Often the Monkey King was staged in several theaters at the same time. Some theatrical companies even specialized in staging Monkey King plays, offering shows in series. In 1926, Peking Opera actors Yang Xiaolou and Zheng Faxiang staged Monkey King plays in Japan. At the time, plays such as *Havoc in Heaven* (nao tian gong) and *Water-curtained Cave* (shui lian dong), both episodes of *Pilgrimage to the West* featuring the Monkey King, were popular among foreign audiences.



The Monkey King in a shadow show.