

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 evening, a tourist guide will take foreign visitors to the Chang'an Grand Theatre on the Avenue of Enduring Peace. In the foyer are counters selling handicraft articles, Peking Opera masks and Peking Opera-related books, picture albums and audio-video products. Inside the theatre, the stage is of a Western style. The



A scene from *The White Snake* performed by Du Jinfang and Yu Zhenfei. The hero and the heroine fall in love at first sight. The hero is lending an umbrella to the heroine to express his love.



PEKING OPERA



The film *Farewell My Concubine*, won an award at an international film festival. The film has introduced many foreigners to Peking Opera. The photograph shows film stars Gong Li (left), Zhang Fengyi (center) and Leslie Cheung (right) playing roles in the film. Photograph courtesy of China Film Archives.

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 theatre a classical flavor. Sitting in your seat, you might take a look at the Chinese audience around you. As soon as the gong and drum strike up, they all 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

Xiang Yu
Xiang Yu (233–202 BC) was the political and military leader who overthrew the Qin, China's first feudal dynasty. After the Qin regime fell apart, he crowned himself the *Great Conqueror of the Western Chu* and took over the lower area of the Changjiang River and Huanghe River. During his fight for the throne with Liu Bang (256–195 BC), the future emperor of the Han Dynasty, Xiang Yu was defeated and committed suicide. His legend is widely known in China. In the Peking Opera *Farewell My Concubine* he is the hero.



FOREWORD

actresses by shouting “hao!” This means simply “well-done” or “bravo.”

For first-time foreign viewers, Peking Opera is hard to understand. Indeed, many contemporary Chinese people feel more or less unfamiliar with Peking Opera. But as long as you are willing to explore and understand the artistic characteristics



PEKING OPERA

and cultural connotations of Peking Opera, you will find it fascinating.

Peking Opera came into existence in the not too distant past, but it is full of mystery for Westerners. Peking Opera is quite different from Western drama. Peking Opera performances in the Hunan-Guangdong Guildhall at 3 Hufang Road or in Zhengyici Guildhall at 220 Xiheyuan Street differ considerably from those at the modern Chang'An Grand Theatre. For tourists, these two old-style theatres are showcases of old Beijing. Watching a Peking Opera performance in one of these beautiful, traditional buildings transports the audience to a bygone era.

Seeing a Peking Opera performance for the first time, one might wonder: why are faces of actors painted red, white, black, yellow or green? Facial make-up in

Facial Patterns

There is a great variety of facial makeup: forehead makeup, eyebrow makeup, eye makeup, nose makeup, mouth makeup. Makeup patterns on each part of the face are varied and changeable, not without rules but not inflexible. For example, a white crescent moon is painted on the black forehead of Judge Bao, indicating his uprightness and incorruptibility. A red gourd is painted on the Meng Liang's forehead, indicating that he was an alcoholic. Zhao Kuangyin's dragon-shaped eyebrow indicates that he was an emperor; a Yin and Yang symbol is painted on the forehead of Jia Wei, indicating his resourcefulness and shapes of coins are painted on Zhao Gongming's face, indicating that he was the God of Wealth. The faces of Dou Erdun and Dian Wei are painted with regular weapons.



FOREWORD

Peking Opera is different from masks. Luciano Pavarotti, the great tenor of international fame, once had a Peking Opera actor paint his face with the makeup of Xiang Yu, a valiant ancient warrior portrayed in numerous Peking Opera plays.

Facial makeup is a unique means of portrayal in traditional Chinese theatre. There are thousands of different make up designs, each with a different meaning. At an early date, most faces were painted black, red and white. As plays increased 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 scholar of classic Chinese theatre. They drew inspiration 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



PEKING OPERA



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

be exaggerated, it 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, the methods of color application and painting are different. For some makeup types, such as for a hero, color is applied to the face with the fingers; 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.

Facial makeup points to the personality of a particular character. A red face indicates uprightness and loyalty, a black



FOREWORD



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

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 club-shaped eyebrows is a monk, a face with sharp eye corners and a small mouth is a court eunuch, and a face with a white patch is a minor character. Facial makeup can also allow actors to expand the scope of their 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 a scene where an army of shrimps and crabs fight an evil character. They are played by



A male clown. Painted by Zhang Jinliang.



A female clown. Painted by Zhang Jinliang.



PEKING OPERA

performers with faces painted as shrimps or crabs. 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 drama 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. Compared with *jing* characters, clowns have 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 many years of development, there are established rules on how to paint faces and what different facial patterns represent. Types of facial makeup can 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 has developed in operatic performances, masks have not been banished. In auspicious and mythological plays, characters use masks such as the “god of wealth mask” and “god of thunder mask.” In some plays, facial makeup and masks appear on the stage at the same time.

As a symbol of Peking Opera culture, facial patterns appear on an increasing number of popular handicraft souvenirs. Even in fashion design, Peking Opera makeup has become an inspiration. Together with clothes, it has entered the life of people today.



FOREWORD



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

In the past, Beijing residents liked to visit temple fairs. They were held at different locations in the city during Spring Festival, 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*



PEKING OPERA

to the West. Children would take a cudgel home and wield it in the way of the Monkey King. Of course, children could also tell one or two stories about the Monkey King and mimic his habit of ear tweaking and cheek scratching.

The Monkey King is a popular opera character in China. Every Chinese person likes this intelligent, resourceful, daring and just spirit, whose name is Sun Wukong. Children use the Monkey King mask and his golden cudgel to imitate his many feats.



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



A scene from *Havoc in Heaven* (*Nao Tian Gong*).

