

Foreword

Of all of China's diverse theatrical traditions, traditional Chinese opera is perhaps the most unique. Originating in the twelfth century, traditional Chinese opera has a rich history and an enchanting style which remains popular today. The music and singing follow set rhythmical patterns and characters' speech is based on particular poetic meters. In operas about wars, the rhythm of martial arts is used to evoke battle scenes.



Actors preparing ready backstage.

Singing, speech, movement and acrobatic fighting are the four basic methods used in the performance of traditional Chinese opera, which is a form of physical theatre. Other than perhaps a simple table, two chairs and a few essential props, performances take place through the use of the techniques of physical theatre, as well as monologues and dialogues. To represent going upstairs, for example, an actor might mime the action by lifting their clothes and legs. To represent doors and windows, actors might use their bodies to create these



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objects. Other examples include snapping a whip to represent horse-riding, paddling with an oar to signify sailing and moving in a circle to represent traveling around mountains or through water. These techniques mean that traditional Chinese opera has a versatile and flexible form. Performances can move location easily and narratives can be changed freely. Every move the actors make on stage, be it a smile or a frown, can be rich in meaning, vividly reflecting the inner emotions of the characters.

The extensive use of music in traditional Chinese opera reinforces the lyrical nature of the form, which is particularly suitable for portraying intricate and nuanced psychological changes of characters facing complex situations. Typically, the main characters are assigned most of the singing, especially in the central scenes, where changes in rhythm reflect changes in emotion. Certain performers often become popular because of their

The Ancient Peking Opera Garden.



singing ability and their unique way of expressing feelings. In fact, individual performance styles have, at times, helped to shape different operatic genres.

Traditional Chinese opera uses costumes based on the dress of historical figures from the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). Make-up is often intense in color. Some male characters wear masks with exaggerated shapes or symbolic colors. A red-faced mask means justice, a black one signifies bluntness, while a white mask symbolizes treachery.



Love stories are a perpetual theme on the Chinese theatrical stage.

Although operas may be distinguished from each other on the basis of the style of the singing, speaking, movement and acrobatic fighting, operatic forms can be differentiated first and foremost by differences in the melodies and musical instruments they employ. These differences arose due to the many local languages and dialects which existed across China's vast territory. Opera performers had to use dialects which their audiences would understand, and these dialects influenced the style of the melody. There were once 300 different operatic forms in China and about 200 still exist today, showcasing China's rich and diverse array of theatrical styles.

From the beginning of the twentieth century, and as a result of Western influences, modern drama and stage plays (without



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There are two main types of traditional Chinese opera: lyric operas and acrobatic operas which include stage fighting.

singing) appeared in China. For more than 100 years, modern drama has gradually been integrated into Chinese culture and its development and prosperity has signaled a new era for Chinese theatre, which, as a whole, continues to diversify.



Introduction: The Origins of Chinese Theatre

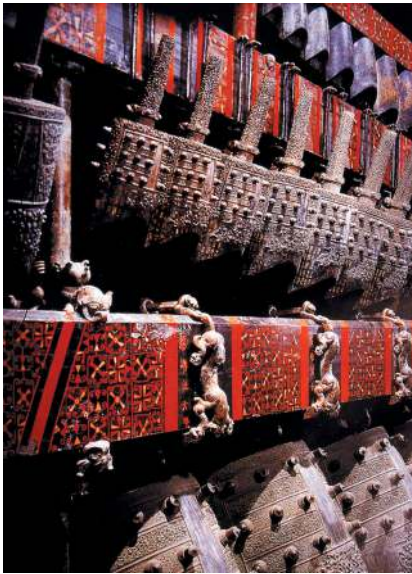


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Sacrificial Entertainments

The origins of Chinese theatre can be traced back 2,500 years. At the beginning of Chinese civilization, shamen in tribal and ethnic groups held considerable power. Sacrificial ritual music and dance performances were considered ways in which shamen could communicate with the gods, and acted as a channel between the gods and man, thus unifying the human and spiritual worlds. Early Chinese theatre developed from, and was closely related to, these sacrificial ceremonies.

Whilst basic theatrical forms had been present from the beginning of Chinese civilization, a more developed theatre did not emerge until the tenth century, thousands of years later than the theatres of ancient Greece and ancient India. In ancient China, theatrical performances consisted of symbolic story-telling by actors dressed as animals who danced and sang to set rhythms,



These bronze chime bells of the Warring States Period were the main musical instruments used in the sacrificial ceremonies held by the imperial family and noblemen.

accompanied by music. Poems, especially those based on the folk songs of *The Book of Songs* (China's earliest collection of poetry, which appeared between 770–476 BC), were performed by singing and dancing, fusing the emotional effects of literature with those of music and movement. Sacrificial rituals in the southern state of Chu during the Warring States Period (475–256 BC) also provided opportunities for performance. The famous poet of the Chu Period, Qu Yuan (340–278 BC), produced



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The musical tower of the City God's temple of the Tang Dynasty, a place where theatre was performed and sacrifices offered.

several volumes of poetry including *Nine Songs and Nine Chapters*, which were adapted for performance at sacrificial ceremonies. “National Martyr” from *Nine Songs*, which describes the memorial ceremony for the national martyrs, was one such adaptation. A large number of Chu poems circulated in southern China and set a basic pattern for large-scale sacrificial ceremonies, where poetry was sung and accompanied by dancing. Although these ceremonies could not be described as “theatre” in a classic sense, they contained all the elements required for theatrical performance. In addition, the comic performances of jesters and entertainers at the courts of the vassal states might also be considered as early forms of theatre.

The Development of Music and Dance

Rapid social development during the Han Dynasty (202 BC–AD 220) signaled a new phase for theatre, both at court and in civil society. The ancient Chinese usually prayed for a good harvest



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A figurine of a comic entertainer during the Han Dynasty.

in springtime and gave thanks in the autumn, which is why ritual singing and dancing at these times was vital, both at court and among common people. The court held large performances for the general public, which, to a certain extent, stimulated town and country entertainments and allowed for the decentralization of theatrical performances. Whilst the royal sacrificial ceremony was highly standardized, in towns and rural areas entertainments gradually

evolved through folk artists who made a living from their performances. Assisted by increasing trade between China and the west, singing, dancing and acrobatics from the western regions of China spread to Chang'an (present-day Xi'an) and the political center of the Han also became a global center for multi-cultural entertainment.

Following the Han Dynasty, music and dance developed significantly. The folk song and dance performance *ta-yao-niang* first appeared during the Northern Qi Dynasty (550–577)



Brick carvings of theatrical characters during the Han Dynasty.



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A Dunhuang mural painting depicting scenes of music and dance from the Tang Dynasty.



This painting, entitled *A Musical Scene from the Palace*, depicts maids in a palace of the Tang Dynasty enjoying a feast and playing music.



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

The song-and-dance duet (*er ren zhuan*) is a popular folk form prevalent in Liaoning, Jilin, Heilongjiang provinces and eastern Inner Mongolia. It is typically performed by a man and a woman wearing bright costumes and holding fans and handkerchiefs as they dance and sing high-pitched songs with witty lyrics.

and developed during the Tang Dynasty (618–907). *Ta-yao-niang* is a family saga. It tells the tale of a woman, bullied at home by her drunken husband, who repeatedly tells passers-by about her miserable life, as her husband beats her in public. The female lead would perform through song, dance and speech, whilst together with a jester the actress would perform a song-and-dance duet (*er ren zhuan*). The popularity of song and dance forms like *Ta-yao-niang*, *Su-mu-zhe*, *Lan-ling-wang* and *Bo-tou* peaked during the Sui (581–618) and Tang dynasties. In Dunhuang it is possible to see many murals from that time which depict the busy and flourishing theatrical life of the era.

Xinong and the Art of “Singing with Speaking”

Canjun Opera was the most advanced form of early comic theatre in China. It had at its core two roles, the person being mocked, “canjun,” and the person doing the mocking, “canghu.” However by the end of the Tang Dynasty, Canjun Opera had evolved to include more performers and more complex plots and dramatic twists. Canjun Opera combined comedy with tragedy, and had a direct impact on the creation of *zaju* during the Song (960–1279) and Jin (1115–1234) dynasties. Canjun Opera was mostly improvised, allowing for constant innovation in the creation of comic routines. Occasional, impromptu performances gradually became regular shows that were staged during the Tang, Song and Jin dynasties.

