PEKING OPERA AND REGIONAL OPERAS

Traditional Chinese opera in its mature form first appeared a millennium ago during the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127). In the subsequent centuries it evolved into many regional forms, incorporating local language and musical characteristics, and influencing one another in a complex web of relationships. Shortly before 1800, several regional styles of singing from various provinces amalgamated into one style in Beijing and quickly spread and gained prominence throughout the land. This style later became known as Jingxi or Jingju (capital opera). Since the twentieth century, it also became internationally renowned, attracted scholarly attention from the West, and was named Peking Opera (also Beijing Opera in recent years by some scholars and some in the media). The history of Chinese opera in the modern period has been dominated by the development of Peking Opera.

Chinese opera, particularly Peking Opera, a repository through the centuries of creative literary, musical, and other artistic expression, is recognized as among the most sophisticated theatrical genres in the world. Until the middle of the twentieth century, Chinese opera also served several social functions. First, it was probably the most widespread form of entertainment, for both the elite and the masses, in both urban and rural areas. Second, most regional operas were intimately connected to many kinds of ritual, serving either as the core of the ritual or as a supplement to other ritual activities. Third, operas functioned as an important medium of communication and education, since before the twentieth century the vast majority of Chinese people were illiterate or semiliterate. Opera offered them a view of the wider world and played a major role in giving them a shared sense of history and mores. It thus helped to forge a cultural identity. These social functions have diminished in significance since the 1980s in the face of newer forms of mass-media entertainment, reduced practice of formal religious rituals, and greatly improved levels of literacy.

The development of Peking Opera and other regional operas in the modern period was founded to a large extent on their most eminent predecessor, Kun Opera (Kunqu), which emerged early in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Evolved from Kunshan melodies of the Wu region (around modern Suzhou), Kun Opera for centuries had attracted the interest and resources of the literati, who produced a large number of opera scripts, created refined verse for its lyrics, developed complex melodies for its singing, devised intricate and delicate gesture and dance movements, and established theatrical practices ranging from costumes and makeup to staging. By 1800, however, Kun Opera had declined in popularity and soon largely disappeared on the stage, although new scripts continued to be written for reading enjoyment. Though Kun Opera was no longer a major theatrical presence in the modern period, its performative elements exerted great influence on Peking Opera and regional operas. Prominent Peking Opera actors either were first trained in Kun Opera or later studied its singing and acting techniques, and they incorporated its repertoire into Peking Opera. In recent years Kun Opera has shown signs of revival, particularly after being declared a “masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity” by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2001.

PEKING OPERA

The origin of Peking Opera traces back to the late 1700s. After a century of stability, the Qing dynasty reached its peak of prosperity during the reign of the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736–1796). Government officials indulged in artistic pursuits and extravagant entertainment, including opera, as did the ordinary citizenry, particularly in the capital city. As the center of political, economic, and cultural activities, Beijing naturally attracted talented performers from other parts of the country, who congregated in the capital to vie for fame and fortune. Among the best-known actors of this period was Wei Changsheng (c. 1744–1802), who specialized in female roles in the regional opera of Sichuan, where he came from. Wei was the first of many stars who raised the popularity of opera in the capital, and he exerted tremendous influence on later generations through his many disciples.

Significantly, the Qianlong emperor himself was an opera aficionado, and in one of his famous six tours of the southern provinces, he was so impressed by the local operas that he personally brought performers back to Beijing. A seminal event was his eightieth birthday in 1790, when wealthy merchants in Yangzhou in the South sent opera companies, known as Anhui troupes, to celebrate the occasion. After performing in the Imperial Palace to great acclaim, these troupes stayed to entertain the masses. Their success induced more troupes from Anhui and other southern provinces to come. Two particular styles of singing, one called xipi, the other erhuang, combined to result in a new style called pihuang, a blend of the other two terms. Pihuang became enormously popular in Beijing and spread to many provinces during the first half of 1800s; it later became known as Jingxi, or Peking Opera.

Some of the most renowned actors during that period were Cheng Changgeng (1811–1879), from Anhui Province; Yu Sansheng (1796–1868), from Hubei Province; and Zhang Erkui (1814–c. 1865), who was from southern Hebei but grew up in Beijing. Cheng, who was trained in Kun Opera and Anhui regional opera, introduced the erhuang style of singing. Yu brought in the xipi style. Zhang used Beijing pronunciation and local singing
styles. All three were credited with critical contributions to the development of *pihuang*. Notably, all three specialized in the *laosheng* (mature male) role type, since considered an important singing part.

The social instability caused by the Taiping Uprising from 1851 to 1864 temporarily halted the artistic development of opera. But performances resumed soon thereafter, and in the second half of the century Peking Opera continued to flourish and established its identity. The imperial family, notably Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908), became avid patrons, and this support further raised its stature and attracted talented performers to join its ranks. The city of Shanghai, as it grew in prosperity from the mid-1800s, soon became a second center for Peking Opera, attracting performers from provinces along the Yangzi River basin.

In the second half of the century a new generation of actors creatively moved the art forward. While Cheng Changgeng continued for a few years as the dominant figure, a few outstanding younger actors asserted their presence and became the direct link to the great stars of the twentieth century. Tan Xinpei (1847–1917), from a Hubei acting family, began performing at age eleven, first in the *wusheng* (martial male) role type, later switching to the *laosheng* role type. Having performed in over 300 different plays—among which the most famous, such favorites as *Kongcheng ji* (Ruse of the empty city), *Jigu ma Cao* (Scolding Cao Cao while beating the drum), and *Wulong Yuan* (Black dragon compound), are still in today’s repertoire—he established his own style of performance, known as the Tan school (*Tan pai*). A generation younger, Wang Yaoqing (1882–1954), from Jiangsu Province but born in Beijing, was also from an acting family, his father being a famous Kun Opera performer specializing in *dan* (female) role types. Trained from the age of twelve in the *qingyi* (virtuous female) role type, Wang Yaoqing performed on stage shortly thereafter. He often partnered with Tan Xinpei, most notably in 1905–1906, when the two paired up to perform in the imperial palace. From 1926 Wang began teaching a younger generation of singers, and thereby influenced the next generation of *qingyi* performers, including Mei Lanfang.

The first half of the twentieth century witnessed political and military traumas, with resulting social instability and chaos, yet Peking Opera continued to thrive. Some of the most notable actors of the time were Yu Shuyan (1890–1943) and Ma Lianliang (1901–1966), both actors of the *laosheng* role type. However, the period was renowned for the popularity of singers of *dan* role type, headed by Mei Lanfang (1894–1961). He and his fellow actors Cheng Yanqiu (1904–1958), Shang Xiaoyun (1900–1976), and Xun Huisheng (1899–1968) were crowned by the public as “the four great female-role actors.” In collaboration with the scholar Qi Rushan (1877–1962), Mei spearheaded many new plays and innovations in artistic expression, borrowing liberally from Kun Opera and Western-style theater. Some of the more prominent plays that gained a foothold in the repertoire were *Bawang bie ji* (Farewell my concubine) and *Guifei zui jiu* (Guifei is intoxicated).

For centuries, troupes were either all male or all female, the mixing of sexes on stage being considered immoral. Ironically, the age of the great female impersonators in the early decades of the twentieth century saw the first appearance of female roles being played by women opposite male roles played by men. These women thus broke the long-standing tradition of single-sex performance. After the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, female impersonation disappeared almost completely from the stage. The new century also saw the establishment of operatic training schools with a systematic and comprehensive curriculum, including language and culture courses, as opposed to the traditional apprentice system.

As Shanghai prospered and operatic activities thrived, there soon emerged two styles of performance, one identified with Beijing, noted for rigidly upholding high standards for acting and singing styles, and the other with Shanghai, known to be progressive in creating new plays and performance practices. Many prominent artists performed in both cities, and the rivalry cross-fertilized further artistic development.

The establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949 led to a major reorganization of opera troupes and performance practices, such as the establishment of modern Peking Opera companies in Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Wuhan, and other cities and the creation of operatic schools to train professional actors. Old plays considered “superstitious” and “feudal” were banned, and new plays with “healthy” content were created. Some new plays were based upon preexisting stories but were given new treatments to convey “correct” messages, for example, *Baishé zhuan* (The story of the white snake) and *Yangmen niújiang* (Women warriors of the Yang family), while others had contemporary settings, such as *Baimao nü* (The white-haired girl).

During the Cultural Revolution all traditional plays were banned, and only a handful of newly created modern revolutionary Peking Operas (*gémíng xiăndài jīngjù*), also known as model operas (*yánghuăn xiè*), were staged. Being associated with Mao’s wife Jiang Qing, these plays disappeared from the stage after Jiang was purged in 1976. But their artistic merits were subsequently recognized, and several of them, such as *Zhiqū Weihushan* (Taking Tiger Mountain by strategy), have reappeared to great acclaim.

On Taiwan, Peking Opera experienced a unique trajectory following the retreat of the Nationalist regime to the island in the late 1940s. Supported by mainland immigrants and financed largely by the government, which declared it national opera, Peking Opera flourished from the 1950s
During the Cultural Revolution, when all traditional fare was banned on the mainland, Taiwan troupes prided themselves for preserving the traditional art. However, with the opening of the mainland in the late 1980s, with greater cross-strait flows of people and ideas in the 1990s, and with growing pressure from native Taiwanese to promote Taiwan’s own arts, Peking Opera lost its privileged status and came under heavy influence from the mainland. Through the mid-1990s. During the Cultural Revolution, when all traditional fare was banned on the mainland, Taiwan troupes prided themselves for preserving the traditional art. However, with the opening of the mainland in the late 1980s, with greater cross-strait flows of people and ideas in the 1990s, and with growing pressure from native Taiwanese to promote Taiwan’s own arts, Peking Opera lost its privileged status and came under heavy influence from the mainland.

China’s official policy of reform and opening up, launched in the late 1970s and developed in subsequent decades, has transformed China’s business, finance, media, and technology. As troupes and schools were privatized and popular entertainment in the mass media diversified and grew to compete for audience attention, Peking Opera suffered. Many talented performers moved abroad, while others were attracted to better paying jobs in film, television, and other forms of entertainment. To overcome the crisis and meet these challenges, producers and actors have struggled to preserve the art by drastically rethinking and redefining Peking Opera and plotting its future through bold innovation. One innovation is a breakdown of rigid performance practices, such as the singing and acting styles of role types. Another is adaptation of well-known Western plays and incorporation of performance concepts and techniques of contemporary avant-garde theater and other performance media, such as films and spoken plays. Examples include the staging of the Greek tragedy *Bacchae* by Zhou Long of Beijing in 1998, and of several Shakespearean tragedies (*King Lear, Macbeth*) by Wu Xingguo of Taibei beginning in the mid-1980s.

**REGIONAL OPERAS**

A survey conducted in the 1950s reported that there were over three hundred regional operas, each with its distinctive linguistic and musical features. The majority had small troupe sizes, limited repertoires, and relatively simple artistic expression. For example, the performance might consist of only two actors, one or two percussion instruments, and a single tune repeated over and over again. These theatrical...
forms were localized, often known only within a county or a small part of a province, and referred to in the literature as folk and minor operas.

In contrast, a few regional operas were known as major operas, with extensive repertoires, rich musical vocabulary, complex artistic expression, and large-scale productions involving many actors and instrumentalists, and elaborate makeup and costumes. They often have extensive audiences spread out to many parts of the country or even abroad among immigrants. For example, Chaozhou Opera and Fujian Opera are known in many parts of Southeast Asia, while Cantonese Opera is known in the Chinatowns of some North American and European cities.

Many major operas established their identities during the stable and prosperous reigns of Qianlong (r.1736–1796) and Jiaqing (r.1796–1820). For example, Sichuan Opera became renowned for its dance, acrobatics, and narrative songs, and during the 1800s spread beyond Sichuan to Guizhou, Yunnan, Hubei, and other provinces. Since Sichuan Opera faced the same challenges as Peking Opera in the late twentieth century, actors began seeking new directions. In 1999 the young actress Tian Mansha created a new opera based on the character Lady Macbeth, and in 2002 she collaborated with Zuni Icosahedron, an avant-garde theater group of Hong Kong, to develop new concepts of performance style based on traditional techniques.

Cantonese Opera developed in the 1800s after Canton (today known as Guangzhou) was declared in 1759 to be the only port allowed to handle China’s trade with foreign countries. This privileged status attracted from the northern provinces large numbers of businessmen, who brought great wealth as well as operatic troupes from their native areas. Popular throughout the Pearl River Delta, Cantonese Opera was known for its bold experimental spirit, and in the 1920s through the 1940s, it adopted many Western elements, which were easily accessible in Hong Kong. Hundreds of new plays were created and staged in the first half of the twentieth century, among which probably the best known was Dinü Hua (The flower princess), by the scriptwriter Tang Disheng (1917–1959), which still regularly draws large audiences.

While most major operas trace their origins to the Ming or Qing dynasties, there were exceptions, among which an outstanding example is Huangmei Opera of Anhui Province. It began as a minor opera, with two performers singing folk tunes and enacting simple stores, but through the creative energy of a few actors, particularly Yan Fengying (1930–1968), Huangmei Opera—with its gentle and melodious tunes, romantic stories, and simple performance style rooted in folk culture—became one of the most popular regional operas since the 1950s.

For centuries, the regional operas influenced one another as people migrated. Such cross-fertilization not only resulted in Peking Opera, but also further developed the artistic expression of these regional operas. Throughout its history, Chinese operas have depended critically on their social and economic environments. In the early twenty-first century, they face enormous obstacles as China undergoes unprecedented social change and economic growth in a global environment that provides both opportunities and challenges. This century will inevitably see major changes to Peking Opera and other forms of Chinese opera.

SEE ALSO Mei Lanfang.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bell Yung

PENAL SYSTEMS, 1800–1949

The penal system in late imperial China was based on legal regulations in the Qing Code (Da Qing lüli lüê) of 1740. The Qing code was modeled on earlier codes issued by each dynasty on its inception. The code was a body of core criminal laws containing rules that prescribed punishments for every infraction. Each offense was allocated an exact degree of punishment. The task of the judge (magistrate) was to identify the proper name of the offense disclosed by the facts. Determination of the correct punishment then had to follow the text of the law, with theoretically little discretion on the part of the judge. Imperial Chinese criminal justice operated on the basis of precise and complex regulations that provided guidelines to determine how officials