



## Peking or Beijing Opera

Beijing Opera is the quintessence of China. The largest Chinese opera form, it is extolled as 'Oriental Opera'. Having a history of 160 years, it has created many 'firsts' in Chinese dramas: the abundance of repertoires, the number of artists, opera troupes and spectators.

Beijing Opera is developed from absorbing many other dramatic forms, mostly from the local drama 'Huiban' which was popular in South China during the 18th century. It is a scenic art integrating music, performance, literature, aria, and face-painting. Certain rules are set up and regulations are standardized during many artists' long practice on stage.

Different from regional plays, it is stricter on the variety of the workmanship. The combination of virtual and reality - a special technique of expression, keeps it largely free from the restriction of time and space on stage performance. Beijing Opera has had many interesting names since it came into being, such as Jinghuang, Daxi, Pingju, Jingxi.

### Four Means of Artistic Presentation

Beijing Opera presents dramatic plays and figures mainly by infusing four artistic methods: singing, dialogue, dancing and martial art. Singing is utilized to intensify the appeal of the art by all kinds of tones. Dialogue is the complement of singing which is full of musical and rhythm sensation. Dancing refers to the body movements requiring high performing skills. Martial art is the combination and transformation of traditional Chinese combat exercises with dances.

### Main Roles in Beijing Opera Performance

**Sheng:** It's a common name of male characters and composed of Lao Sheng and Xiao Sheng. Lao Sheng refers to the middle-aged man with a beard who acts as the decency figure; for example, Zhugeliang in 'Empty City Scheme'. Xiao Sheng means young man without a beard. Zhangsheng in 'The Story of the West Room' is a representative of Xiao Sheng.

**Dan:** The general name for female characters in Beijing Opera can be divided into Zhengdan, Huadan, Laodan, Wudan. Zhengdan is also called 'Qingyi', who mainly plays the part of the strong-minded middle-aged woman who behaves elegantly. Huadan refers to little girls who often live in the bottom of society. Laodan refers to the senior woman and Wudan indicates the female who is good at fighting.

**Jing:** Painted face often refers to male characters with unique appearance or personality, such as Baozheng and Caocao. Besides, Chou is a comic role or villainous character or righteous person. The actor's nose is painted by a piece of white powder, making him or her easily recognizable.

## Facial Painting (Lianpu)

Facial painting in Beijing Opera "Lianpu" is formed through dramatic artists' long-term practice and their understanding and judgment of the roles in plays. It is the colorful dressing on actors' faces. By using transformative and exaggerated figures, professional spectators would easily tell the characteristic of a role. In this way, it is called 'the picture of hearts'. There are certain formats of the facial painting in the aspect of color, type and shape. Usually, eyes, foreheads and cheeks are painted like wings of butterflies, swallows and bats.

Colors of Lianpu are varied with each representing a characteristic. For example, red symbolizes loyalty, such as Guanyu, a great general during Three Kingdoms Period (220-280). Black signifies honesty and frankness, such as Lord Bao, a righteous official during Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127), or abruptness and impertinence, such as Likui, an important figure in the famous Chinese ancient novel 'All Men Are Brothers'. White stands for cattiness and cunning, with Cao Cao as its representative, a famous politician in the late Eastern Han Dynasty.

## Stage Properties (Qimo)

Qimo is a general designation for all kinds of stage properties and simple settings used in Beijing Opera performances. It comes from the real life experience. For example, an actor can practice the scene of galloping the horse simply by using a horsewhip without riding a real horse on stage. A bridge is made up of two chairs standing on each side of a table. Storms are realized by performers dancing with umbrellas. The imaginary performance skills largely bring to performers the freedom to express more life scenes.

## Four Famous Artists

There are many famous masters who are good at performing Beijing Opera. Among them, the Four Famous Dans - Mei Lanfang, Cheng Yanqiu, Shang Xiaoyun and Xun Huisheng - are most well-known at home and abroad. They are experts in performing the role of Dan and each has his own artistic feature. Their wonderful performances are still appreciated by many audiences. For example, 'Farewell My Concubine' by Mei Lanfang, 'Injustice to Dou'e' by Cheng Yanqiu, 'Lady Zhaojun Going beyond the Great Wall' by Shang Xiaoyun and 'Matchmaker' by Xun Huisheng.

