

4+3

On Stage

The Art of Beijing Opera



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The Beijing opera is a rich and complex musical theatre that developed in the course of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the old capital Beijing, drawing on existing regional theatre traditions, and then enhancing and rearranging them. Classical Beijing opera combines music, dance, song, drama, recitation, pantomime, acrobatics, and martial arts to a total stage art. In conjunction with costumes, make-up, and props, the genres allow the performers to convey time, location, and contents of the play, but the intention is not to represent reality on stage. Typical features of the Beijing opera include enciphering and typecasting as well as allusions and abstractions. It is into these contrivances that the visually graspable reality is condensed. The audience, well versed in the codes, relies on its power of imagination to translate the experience into a total work of art. The characters and contents of the Beijing opera are taken from classical literature, old myths and

popular legends, as well as historical events. In more recent times, altered audience expectations, increased exposure to Western culture, political ambitions, and the wish for experimentation on the part of a few exceptional artists have led to the expansion of the repertory with regard to both content and form. As yet, the Beijing opera boasts well over a thousand plays, among them adaptations of European plays, such as Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

Today the Beijing opera is caught between preserving the old tradition for the benefit of a comparatively small group of connoisseurs, and modernising for that of a large audience. Only very few aficionados still command the knowledge required for decoding the complex movements, gestures, mimic features, and sparse props. What once used to be an almost bare stage has been replaced with a rich decor and enhanced by an array of technical equipment to improve visual experience and render the performance more realistic.

Opera festivals and competitions, television broadcasts, and overseas tours by famous

opera troupes help to keep the Beijing opera alive and have made it more popular among the wider public.

Following eleven stations we take you on a journey through the fascinating world of the Beijing opera, complemented by a twelfth station showing works by four contemporary artists whose works bear on the Beijing opera (level 3).

Abbreviations:

MLMM – Mei Lanfang Memorial Museum, Beijing
SPOT – Shanghai Peking Opera Troupe, Shanghai
MVH – Museum für Völkerkunde Hamburg
MC – Man Cao, Zürich
MKB – Museum der Kulturen Basel

4 Floor



3 Floor



Origins

The world of theatre during the Qing, or Manchu, dynasty (1644–1911) featured a broad variety in terms of form, style, and content. Regional precursors were refined, adapted, and mixed to create new versions. The roots of the present-day Beijing opera practice reach back to the eighteenth century. It then gradually evolved, in close conjunction with the imperial court, to become the “opera of the capital” (*jingju*).

Apart from the imperial pavilions, plays were performed on open-air stages, in tea-houses and in private mansions. The contents ranged from historical dramas to popular folk pieces. Prominent actor personalities established private ensembles and schools of their own, giving birth to future generations of performers. Many of these troupes moved to the capital Beijing, making it the thriving centre of stage art in the eighteenth century.

Shen Rongpu

(late 19th / early 20th century). *The 13 Unmatched Beijing Opera Masters of the Tongzhi and Guangxu Eras (1856–1908)*

Handscroll, ink and colour on paper, MLMM 00731

The painting ranks as a classic in the genealogy of the Beijing opera. The performers portrayed in their costumes were all masters of their discipline and significantly contributed to making the Beijing opera the most significant and prestigious form of stage art during the eras of Tongzhi (1856–1862) and Guangxu (1862–1908). Among others the painting shows the actor of female roles, Mei Qiaoling (1842–1881, top row, 2nd from left), grandfather of the famous Mei Lanfang, and Cheng Changgeng (1811–1880, bottom row, 3rd from left), celebrated for his portrayal of heroic, male figures, who gained such fame and appreciation that the emperor awarded him the title of a superior official.

Training

Traditionally actors commenced their roughly ten-year training when they still were children. They were instructed by a master, individually and by rote. Today pupils are also taught in groups. Apart from arduous physical exercise, basic training for each separate role type include learning the "Four Skills," that is, song, recitation, dance, and combat, as well as the "Five Techniques," which comprise the characteristic eye-, mouth-, hand-, and body gestures along with the typical steps in movement.

Usually an actor trains for one of the four typical role types, which he tries to bring to perfection in the course of his long training. Apart from costume, mime, gestures, and make-up, each role type is distinguished on the basis of pitch of voice, posture, and gait.

2

Bamboo vest (*zhu shan*)

before 1900, cotton, bamboo, MKB IId 279

This sleeveless undershirt made of knotted cotton threads and threaded bamboo tubules served to protect the outer garment from perspiration. Later the *zhu shan* was replaced by an absorbent cotton jacket, or blouse, the so-called water-jacket.

3

Undershirt (*chenyi*)

20th century, cotton, SPOT

Instead of a water-jacket actors may wear a plain cotton undershirt.

4

Padded waistcoat (*pang'ao*)

20th century, cotton, SPOT

Male actors wear a sleeveless waistcoat worn

crossed over the chest to create an air of dignity. It lends the torso fullness and counterbalances the height of the body increased by the high-soled boots and the headdress. The thickness of the padding varies according to role.

5

Inner collar (*huling*)

20th century, cotton, SPOT

The inner collar, a square, folded cloth placed around the neck, crossed left over right and tied at waist level, is worn practically in all role types. The top part, which protrudes from the outer garment, lends the costume a decorative white contrast.

6

Boots with long shaft and high sole (*houdi xue*)

20th century, silk, papier mâché, SPOT

Splendid boots, modelled on footwear worn

by courtiers in the Ming and Qing dynasties (14th–20th centuries), made of black satin with approximately ten-centimetre high soles are worn by stately figures in mature male roles. The high soles grant the wearer additional stature and therefore dignity. In order to make walking easier, the front part of the sole is bent upwards. The precursors of this type of boot were called "horse shoe," which indicates that people wearing these boots were used to travelling on horseback.

7

Boots with long shaft and semi-high sole (*chaofang*)

20th century, silk, papier mâché, SPOT

The sole of this boot is less pronounced, not only indicating the lower status but also the physical stature and energy of the man wearing the boots. Usually they are worn by comic officials and other subsidiary figures.

8

Boots worn by fighters and warriors (*baodi xue*)

20th century, silk, rubber, SPOT

Ankle-high boots with soft soles, black or in the colour of the figure's costume, are worn by male and female fighters and warriors, and by figures in servant and clown roles. The soft soles facilitate the acrobatic movements often performed by these figures.

9

Plaited shoes (*caoxie*)

20th century, silk, rubber, SPOT

Plain footwear made of plaited or woven straw, or silk, occasionally bound to the foot by string, is worn by low status figures, such as boatmen, guards, or prisoners.

10

Embroidered slippers (*caixie*)

20th century, silk, rubber, SPOT

Performers of young, vivacious female roles wear flat, colourfully embroidered slippers with a fringy silk tassel attached to the tip of the shoe. Matching the costume they come in different colour combinations. Ever since the Han period (206 B.C. – A.D. 220) high-ranking women had their feet bound tightly and fitted into tiny shoes (so-called lotus shoes), following the reigning ideal of beauty. The slippers represent a stage adaptation of the original lotus shoes, for easier walking.

11

"Good fortune shoes" (*fuzi lü*)

20th century, silk, velvet, papier mâché, SPOT

These slipper-like shoes featuring comparatively thick soles and bent upwards at the front, are worn by elder women. The term "good fortune shoes" is derived from the bat

motif (good luck symbol) featured on the black velvet appliqués.

12

“Flowerpot sole shoes” ***(huapen di/qixie)***

2011, silk, papier mâché, MKB IId 15504

The slipper-like, high-heeled shoes with a base in the shape of a flowerpot resemble the foot fashion preferred by women at the Qing, or Manchu courts. They are worn together with Manchu-style costumes and hairdos. The flowerpot shoes insinuate the bound “lotus feet,” deemed erotic in ancient China.

Transformation

Make-up looks back on a long tradition in Chinese stage art. Unlike a three-dimensional mask, which replaces the actor's face, so to speak, make-up leaves the facial structure discernible, moreover it intensifies facial expression. Light make-up or powder is applied by all male and female figures, while the real "painted face" is restricted to male role types. Relying on intricate facial designs the Beijing opera performers have created a complex idiom based on painted surfaces, lines, and symbolic motifs.

The painted-face roles include apart from supernatural beings (gods, heavenly beings, demons, and ghosts) male figures equipped with formidable physical and/or intellectual powers of both virtuous and roguish nature. The painted faces are complemented by long stage beards, padded waistcoats, high-soled boots, and towering headdresses.

The painted faces shown here are representative examples from a large array of facial

designs, numbering several hundred basic types.

13-26

Liu Zengfu, painted face designs

20th century, gouache and pencil on paper, MVH

13. Guan Yu (88.130:2)

The legendary and popular war hero Guan Yu (3rd century), to this day patron saint of all actors, is shown wearing a so-called full face in red, the symbolic colour of loyalty, righteousness, and courage. Along with many other popular stage figures, Guan Yu is the hero of the classic novel *A Tale of the Three Kingdoms*, which is set in the third century; its plot has been reworked and developed into several Beijing opera plays.

14. Cao Cao (88.130:5)

Cao Cao, a commander-in-chief and evil usurper, ranks among the top villains in Chinese literature and theatre. He too wears a full-face design. His white complexion speaks of his sly, treacherous, and distrustful nature; the wavy lines between the eyes

stand for the worries of a notorious schemer.

15. Zhang Fei (88.130:58)

The "ten-face" design worn by the hot-tempered General Zhang Fei features beautiful butterfly eyebrows. Like his blood brother Guan Yu, Zhang was admired for his courage and his unwavering devotedness.

16. Yuchi Baolin (88.130:42)

Yuchi Baolin was the son of the powerful military commander Yuchi Gong (585–658). In the play *Bailiang Pass* father and son are reunited after being separated for a long time and fight side by side against their enemy. The flower design on the young warrior's forehead is a symbol of his fighting skills, the "tiger mouth" of his courage and dauntlessness.

17. Huang Gai (88.130:59)

The "one-sixth" face was, above all, created to mark old, meritorious military commanders of exceptional skill and prowess. A famous case is the white-bearded General Huang Gai (3rd century), who served his

country with loyalty and cunningness.

18. Dou Erdun (88.130:35)

The complex design in the shape of a "broken-three-tile face" applied to the Robin-Hood-like figure of Chinese literature, Dou Erdun, points to his hot temper. He is said to have lived the life of an outlaw in the woods in the eighteenth century. His cheeks display in abstract form his favourite weapon, the "tiger-head-hook" (a type of sword). The painted face's blue foundation stands for his cunning and quick-tempered nature.

19. Meng Liang (88.130:49)

The motif on the forehead of this martial figure, a red gourd, indicates that he has a preference for setting things on fire, and that he carries the fuel he requires in a magical gourd. The more gentle side to General Meng Liang's nature, who features in the play *Yang Family Generals* together with Yang Yansi, is suggested by his "bird-like eyes."

20. Yang Yansi (88.130:34)

Yang Yansi was a fearless warrior in the battles against the raiders from the north in the twelfth century. The Chinese character for "tiger" painted on his forehead, which stands for courage and ferocity, tells of his skills as a warrior. The "tiger mouth" is an indication of his passionate nature.

21. Tang Qin (88.130:40)

Performers of comic roles also have painted faces. Small white specks of colour around the eyes and nose make the figure look crafty and dull-witted at the same time. The "bean curd face" featuring a white spot, suggests a ruthless, superficial character, an example being Tang Qin, a greedy and scheming parvenu during the Ming era (15th/16th century).

22. Jiang Gan (88.130:64)

Jian Gang, a minor official and spy (3rd century) in the play *The Gathering of Heroes* is an example of a so-called "kidney face." Figures featuring this design may show positive

traits, such as warm-heartedness, but also have a tendency toward being capricious and shrewd.

23. Shi Qian (88.130:53)

The so-called date-seed-shaped face was created particularly for martial and comic figures, such as the shifty thief and expert acrobat Shi Qian (12th century). The white section above the nose makes that part of the face look flat, thus distorting the real facial proportions. This creates the same effect as the red clown's nose in European circuses.

24. Buddha Shakyamuni

(88.130:16)

The Beijing opera repertory includes a large number of dramas in which supernatural beings play a part; their golden and silver-coloured facial designs are referred to as god and demon faces. Among them is the supreme heavenly being, Buddha Shakyamuni, who features in the novel *Journey to the West*, which is set in the Tang period (618–907).

25. Li Tianwang (88.130:15 und 97)

This divine figure is based on the general and strategist Li Jing (571–649), who became deified after his death and worshipped in temples. The “three-tile face” is the most common facial design in the Beijing opera. The forehead pattern often serves to identify the specific figure. In Li Tianwang’s case this is a golden halberd, indicating his great skill with this weapon.

26. Sun Wukong (88.130:17)

The most famous supernatural being is the rebelliously cheeky and charming monkey king Sun Wukong, whose facial design represents the face of a monkey. The self-appointed king of the monkeys uses wit and humour to bring chaos to the heavenly palace where he does not even shy away from challenging to battle gods, immortal beings, and other famed warriors.

Make-up accessories

2011, make-up foundation, fixation, and remover, blush powder, brush, colours, artificial hairpieces, MKB IId 15505 – IId 15551

Make-up is applied using four different methods, separately or in combination. In “rubbing,” the pigment is administered to the entire face by hand. This technique is usually employed for plain black or red facial designs. The white foundation applied to the whole face or, in comical roles, to a part of the face is “swabbed on” with the aid of a brush. “Breaking” by brush involves applying a combination of different colours and complex patterns in order to emphasise the features of complex characters. “Sketching or outlining” parts of the face or special facial features is used in all role types and represents the principal technique in linear composition. It too is done with a brush. Artificial hairpieces are added as a finish to the painted or partially made-up face. In the case of female roles the hairpieces are curled and/

or formed into sideburns to enclose the face.

28-32

Matthias Messmer, *The Transformation*

Shanghai Peking Opera Troupe, Shanghai, March 2011,
© Matthias Messmer

28. An actor who specialises in female roles is being prepared by a professional make-up artist for the role as Lady Whitesnake in the play *The Legend of the White Snake*. She first administers a thick oily foundation.

29. After applying rouge to the eyelids and cheeks, thick black lines are drawn around the eyes, emphasising the eyebrows. Shiny red lip gloss, typical of young female roles, is applied in such a manner that the mouth is made to look small, in the shape of a cherry, following the traditional ideal of beauty.

30. Preparing the hair is a vital and elaborate step, also quite painful at times. The

hair is concealed under a white cloth and forcefully drawn back, raising the eyebrows in the process. The “phoenix eyes” resulting from the operation are a key element in the traditional Chinese ideal of beauty.

31. Long and short strands of artificial hair are soaked in a sticky vegetable sap, curled, and placed on the actor’s forehead.

32. Hairpins and artificial hair applied to the temples and the chin complement the make-up design. The over-size headdress is a typical feature of Lady Whitesnake. It symbolises grief and tragedy. Transforming a male actor into a female figure takes roughly two hours.

Costumes

The splendour and colourfulness of the Beijing opera costumes are legendary to this day. They are made of fine silk and cotton fabrics and often richly embroidered. Colours and design tell of the stage figure's age, gender, social status, and character, and include indications whether the figure is rich or poor, whether he holds civilian or military office, and whether he is a Han Chinese or the member of a minority. Loosely attached parts of the costume and accessories echo the actor's movements, often even giving them special emphasis. Many stage costumes are reminiscent of the court costumes worn in the Ming and Qing dynasties. Similar to the painted face designs, the costumes convey a rich and complex colour symbolism. Red stands for respect, honour, and loyalty; pink is associated with youthfulness and, with regard to male roles, with good looks and a romantic nature. Men noted for their elegance, charm, and loyalty to their country, are dressed in white. However, the same colour may also signify grief.

**Ancient-style costume
(*guzhuang*) with fish-scale
armour (*yulin jia*) / Mei Lan-
fang's costume in the play
*Farewell my Concubine***

1930s, silk, gold and silver threads, metal appliques,
MLMM 001

The attire was designed by Mei Lanfang at the peak of his stage career. He wore it for his portrayal of Lady Yu, the legendary favourite concubine and sister-in-arms of King Xiang Yu (3rd century), in the play *Farewell my Concubine*. The costume also includes the two swords with which the heroine performs her famous sword dance at the end of the play, before committing suicide in the face of certain defeat in the impending battle.

Stage armour (*ruankao*)

18th century (?), silk, gold and silver threads, cotton,

paper, bast fibre, glass, brass, MKB IId 10625

Suits of armour created for the stage were modelled on traditional armours worn by generals; these were studded with metal fittings and tutelary animal representations. This costume, fitted out with several layers of appliqué, features three-dimensional animal emblems on the emphasised shoulder parts. In addition, the design – narrow sleeves (ideal for combat), collar, hip protections, apron, padded waist section – suggests that we are dealing with an early version of a soft stage armour.

35

Complete female stage armour (*nüyingkao*) with butterfly helmet (*hudie kui*)

1950s, silk, gold threads, wood, beads, feathers, SPOT 26-01 and B43-2

This attire of a female warrior, displaying long fringes and ribbons, as well as animal and flower embroideries, is complemented by a padded waist belt worn at the front. The

four pennants with ribbons attached to the back complete the costume's martial appearance. The popular stage armour, which first emerged in the 1860s, is worn for military parades, appearances at court, and important battle scenes.

36

Palace costume for princesses and concubines (*gongzhuang*) and phoenix crown (*fengguan*)

1950s, silk, gold threads, beads, SPOT 10-105 and B6-3

Colourful fabrics, décor elements, and a fringed scarf belong to the features of this elegant robe. The over-long sleeves are decorated with colourful circumferential ribbons and end in long white silk cuffs. These so-called water sleeves are only to be found on court robes and garments of high-ranking people. They lend the arm poses and hand gestures additional grace and beauty. The palace costume is worn together with the phoenix crown. The most fragile and elaborate of all headdresses is a masterpiece made

of gold or silver wire. Phoenix and flower motifs as well as inlay work made from blue-shining kingfisher feathers (today made of satin or plastic), precious stones, and hanging strands of beads that end in long tassels grant the crown an air of dignity and elegance.

37

Male dragon robe (*nanlongmang*) and prime minister's hat (*xiangsha*)

1950s, silk, gold threads, velvet, SPOT 1-98 and B20-1

This ceremonial robe embroidered with dragons ranks as the most prestigious costume of the Beijing opera. While the colour yellow is the prerogative of the emperor, the colour black refers to a person of moral integrity and a sense of justice, but who also has a dashing nature; here we are speaking of the legendary judge by the name of Bao Zheng. Female *mang* robes feature phoenixes. According to legend, the dragon and the phoenix once were lovers, which is why they

preferably figure on the attire of emperors and empresses and that of their entourage. Judge Bao is wearing the prime minister's hat, a sign of his prominent status. The main feature of this headdress are the protruding narrow wings, which have slightly upturned ends.

38

Formal male costume (*nanpi*) and gentry hat (*yuanwai jin*)

2011, silk, gold threads, MKB IId 15501

This floor-length robe with water sleeves and embroidered roundels showing good-fortune symbols belongs to the elderly male role type, that is, a scholar, a statesman, or a household head. The five bats that encompass the character for longevity indicate the five blessings: long life, wealth, health, virtue, and natural death. The costume includes a pair of inner pants, a three-part grey beard, high-soled boots, a gentry hat, and a fan.

39

Informal female costume (*nüxuezi*)

2011, silk, MKB IId 15502

The way this informal, knee-length robe with water sleeves is cut, including the stand-up collar and the symmetrical fastener at the front in the middle, shows that the garment belongs to a wealthy woman of high rank; the marine-blue colour and the chrysanthemum embroideries indicate that the role is that of a young woman.

Headdresses and Beards

Hairstyle, headdress, and beard enhance the visual expression of a stage figure, complementing the message already the costume conveys. Here, too, some pieces are based on historical models, others were created specially for the stage. Dressing and adorning the hair is the prerogative of female figures and reflects the taste of imperial court women for fashionable, opulently draped, and glittering hairdos. Embellishments include ornaments made of gold, silver, or metal wire, beads, kingfisher feathers and colourful stones.

40

Ornaments for the “complete hairstyle” (*datou*)

20th century, silver, kingfisher feathers, crystal beads, artificial beads, MC

In China the kingfisher stands for elegance and splendour. Its iridescent feathers were highly desired for decoration purposes, almost leading to the bird's extinction. The ornaments made of silver, kingfisher feathers and strands of beads are attached with hairpins and artfully crafted hairpieces to create a “complete hairstyle” used for diverse female role types.

41

Ornament for an “ancient hairstyle” (*guzhuang tou*)

20th century, plastic, ornamental stones, artificial beads, MC

This star-shaped crown made of crystal beads and red ornamental stones was worn

together with the "traditional hairstyle" developed by Mei Lanfang. The owner of the headdress, a Beijing opera actress, wore it in her role as a celestial fairy in the play written by Mei called *The Heavenly Fairy Spreading Flowers*.

42

Manchu woman's hairstyle (*qitou*)

2011, silk, MKB IId 15504

In the Beijing opera all non-Han-Chinese minorities are depicted in the Manchu style. Aristocratic Manchu women wear to their robes a "Manchu hairstyle" together with a diadem-like structure featuring two oversized, elegant bat wings.

43

General's helmet (*fuzi kui*)

20th century, silk, beads, plastic, SPOT B25-2

In the early Beijing opera this helmet served

as a headdress for General Guan Yu. This literary character from the historical play *A Tale of the Three Kingdoms* was venerated as a deity after his violent death in the third century. Today the helmet is worn by different warrior types.

44

Scholar's hat (*xueshi jin*)

20th century, silk, SPOT D13-7

This embroidered cloth cap belongs to the attire of a highly educated, virtuous man, irrespective of age. The arabesque shape of the Chinese "fungus of immortality" is a popular motif in Beijing opera costumes; it is a reference to the blessing "may your wishes come true."

45

Winged headdress (*yuansha*)

20th century, silk, velvet, cardboard, SPOT D24-2

This black, winged headdress belongs to the category of textile hats worn by civilian officials and ministers of different rank. The wings suggest that the figure belongs to the role type of foolish, dishonest, and corrupt official.

46

Lotus leaf hat (*heye jin*)

20th century, silk, SPOT D78-10

The hat belongs to a scholar official of the comic role type. An example of this stage figure is Jiang Gan (3rd century), a pompous, rather stupid bookworm. As in the case of the red pepper-shaped hat, the name is conveyed through form and colour.

47

Red pepper-shaped cap (*qinjiao mao*)

20th century, felt, cardboard SPOT D90-3

Headdresses can be divided into four main groups: crowns, helmets, hats, and cloth

caps. The latter includes this type of soft, towering headdress in the shape of a St Nicholas cap; it conveys that the figure is dumb and foolish.

48-49

White and black full beard (*rankou*)

20th century, artificial fibres, MVH 91.68:34 and 91.68:36

Originally produced from rhinoceros-tail hair, later from human hair and artificial fibres, stage beards have served to "magnify" real beards in the Chinese theatre ever since the thirteenth century. In terms of shape and colour they became ever more impressive, attaining their peak in the Beijing opera tradition. Colour conveys age and character: white signifies old age and honesty; a grey beard indicates an ageing person, while black suggests a solemn, awesome personality. Apart from that, there are red beards denoting a member of a minority of capricious nature.

50

Tripartite grey beard (*cansan*)

2011, artificial fibres, MKB IId 15501

Beards of all kinds (full and clipped beards, moustaches, etc.) are attached by wire clips fastened behind the ears. The tripartite beard is a feature of the elderly, male role type.

Props

The classical Beijing opera relies on very few but expressive props that can convey different meanings. The way the stage is set and arranged, with the aid of props, and through performance, the audience is informed as to location, time, and content of the play, providing that the spectators are accustomed with the codes applied. By way of gesture the performers enhance the import of the props to illustrate specific scenes and emotions.

Everything needed for the performance of a classical Beijing opera play fitted into the traditional "six suitcases." The so-called "prop man," dressed in black, is responsible for the stage equipment. Almost unseen he moves through the scenes on stage, arranging tables and chairs and passing to the performers the accessories they require.

51

Two war clubs (*chui*)

20th century, wood, paper, MC

The hero in the war drama *The Eight Sledgehammers* is the great warrior Lu Wenlong (12th century), a general in the army of the popular hero and commander-in-chief Yue Fei in the war against the Jurchens. Particularly impressive are the scenes in which Lu, in full armour, brandishes his mighty clubs.

52

Mei Lanfang's hand gestures in female roles (15 of 52)

photographs by Derek Li Wan Po, 2011

Actors rely on a variety of stylised gestures of the hand and fingers to signify different actions, modes of behaviour, and emotions. Mei Lanfang, a master in the representation of female role types, not only had command of the complete repertory of gestures, he also

helped to further develop them. From left to right and from top to down: sign of invitation, holding a fan, expression of shock, holding a writing brush, handling needle and thread, expression of fear, expression of praise, expression of respect, pointing into the void, holding a tray, holding a whip, holding a flower, expression of helplessness, wiping off tears, pointing with rage.

53

Sword (*jian*)

20th century, wood, bamboo, SPO

Battle scenes create an atmosphere of physical danger; often the dramatic element is enhanced by means of acrobatic features such as flips and summersaults. Among the most important of the eighteen weapons used on stage is the sword.

54

Spear (*qiang*)

20th century, plastic, MC

Stage weapons are, of course, made to look like real weapons but they are made of wood or plastic instead of metal. In duels or group combats the death of a participant is indicated by catching the thrown spear, and the victim sinking to the ground before quickly leaving the stage.

55

Handkerchief (*shoujuan*)

20th century, silk, MC

Handkerchiefs are used by vivacious and flirtatious young women, who tend to turn men's heads by applying charm, humour, and ruse, as, for example, Sun Yujiao does in the romantic play *Picking Up the Jade Bracelet*. Similar to the water sleeves, by swaying a handkerchief the performer is able to express different emotions and convey messages.

56

Round fans (*yuanshan*)

20th century, silk, wood, MC

Painted or inscribed fans are popular works of art in China. Folding fans in the Beijing opera stand for male contemplation and scholarship; round fans emphasise female beauty. Stylised movements with the fan can signify sheltering from rain or cooling and refreshing oneself. While more outspoken women may use the fan to point at their counterpart, demure women use it to hide their face when laughing, or crying.

57

Whip

20th century, silk, satin, plastic, MC

Depending on posture and how he holds the whip, the actor indicates whether he is riding a horse, dismounting or mounting, or leading it on foot. The red tassels signify that the horse is a sorrel.

58

Lantern

20th century, silk, satin, wood, SPOT

In Beijing opera nightfall is signalled by percussion instruments and by an unlit candle or lantern.

59

Banner (*shuaiqi*)

20th century, silk, gold threads, wood, SPOT

Beijing opera props also include flags, standards, banners, and pennants. Usually they are used in a military context, such as, for example, in the case of the "banner of the commander-in-chief."

Stage

Classical Beijing opera pieces were played on an almost empty stage. A cloth curtain with an entry and an exit, a table, and two chairs were enough to create the imaginary space of a scene. The arrangement of table and chairs signified the location: a courtroom, a bed, a palace living room, a boat, a bridge, or mountains. The stage setting changed in the course of the twentieth century, not least owing to Western influence and the use of modern stage technology. The stage is now no longer exclusively a space of allusions and encodings, with the effect that following the storyline has become quite a bit easier.

**Theatre structure showing
the performance of the play
*The Official of Heaven Bestows
Good Fortune*, lintel, He san-
you school, Canton**

1897, wood, gilded, MVH 28.79:60a–b

The upper section of this lintel from a temple shows a three-storey theatre structure, in which a large number of stage characters are interacting with deity figures. The figure riding on the dragon on the right in the lower section is probably Guandi, the Chinese opera performers' patron saint. The inscription below explains that the lintel was donated to the temple by Canton's most successful opera ensemble at the time, the Huatianle Troupe.

Movement

Movements and poses are basic skills required of every Beijing opera performer. Choreography is subject to a strict set of rules. The movements are made to look unnatural by design, and learning to perform them correctly takes years of practice. Subtle modulations in movement sequences serve to express emotions, to emphasise certain aspects, and to communicate moment, duration, and location of the action. Often gestures and movements are merely alluded to. Moving in a circle signifies a journey or the lapse of time; waking up is indicated by a nod of the head; if a figure is worried he shows it by frowning and making an undulating movement with the hand. Weeping is indicated by covering the face with a sleeve. In dance, sorrow, joy, calm, or exuberance become condensed. Acrobatic elements underline the nature of a character but also significantly contribute to the audience's entertainment.

*The Upright Judge Bao: A
Glimpse Behind the Stage*

Film by Jürg Neuenschwander, Container TV AG Bern/
Shanghai, 12 minutes, June 2011

Movement and transformation are key performative elements in Beijing opera. The film commissioned by the Museum der Kulturen takes the viewer backstage to the practice rooms of the renowned Shanghai Peking Opera Troupe in the famous old Yifu Theatre in Shanghai, and shows how the performers train. The focus of the film is on everything that goes on behind and beyond the stage. Hero of the lengthy opera – two and a half hours – is the righteous and fearless Judge Bao Zheng (999–1062), recognisable by his black “painted face.” He helps poor peasants to attain justice, even if it means standing up to powerful clans and landowners, even to the emperor himself.

Artists and Roles

The Beijing opera features four main role types: male roles, female roles – performed exclusively by men up to the 1920s – comic roles, and “painted face” roles. Each role type is divided into sub-categories reflecting age, character, and social status.

This highly standardised role set-up was often modulated and lent subtle nuances by the mode through which a few exceptional performers interpreted their role. Many famous actors of the past are still venerated today, above all Mei Lanfang (1894–1961), son of a famous Beijing family of actors. Mei was not only a fabulous and innovative performer of female roles, he was also highly creative as regards the development of song, costumes, music, dance, repertory of plays, and set decoration. In a period of pervasive political, social, and cultural reorientation he succeeded in bringing significant changes to the old stage tradition. Heralded as the icon of a new China he toured Japan, the United States, and the Soviet Union from 1919

onward, introducing for the first time traditional Chinese stage art to foreign audiences, and creating profound impact.

62-64

Unknown artist, scenes from pieces with Mei Lanfang playing the leading part (3 of 15)

before 1961, ink and colour on paper, former collection of Mei Lanfang, MLMM 0071:1, 8 and 9

62. Scene from the play *The Legend of Yang Yuhuan*

The play *The Legend of Yang Yuhuan* was created by Mei Lanfang. Premiered in 1926 it tells the tragic love story of Emperor Minghuang and his favourite concubine Yang Yuhuan (719–756). In a modern adaptation of the play, performed in the Grand National Theatre in Beijing in 2008, the role of the legendary beauty was played by Mei Lanfang's son, Mei Baojiu.

63. „Feather dance“ from the play *Xi Shi, The Beauty*

In this highly emotional and politically charged piece from the 1930s, Mei Lanfang

plays the role of the heroic beauty Xi Shi during the Warring States Period (475–221 B.C.). He choreographed the famous "pheasant feather dance," which he also performed on tour in Moscow in 1935 where it was seen by Bertolt Brecht.

64. Scene from the play *At the Bend of the River Fen*

The piece performed by Mei Lanfang on Broadway in 1930 and in Moscow in 1935 tells of the dramatic reunion of Liu Yingchun (7th century) and her husband, the famous general Xue Rengui, after being separated for eighteen years.

65

Contract

1913, MLMM, Inv.-no. 10616

Mei Lanfang made his first stage appearance in Beijing at the age of eleven. In 1913 he was invited to perform in Shanghai (on the "Premier Stage of the Red Osmanthus"). The contract contains agreements concerning

matters such as fee, accommodation, playing time. The successful event was a turning point in Mei's career. In the years that followed Mei Lanfang became the first great theatre star, attaining celebrity status in all walks of life, not least through the wide coverage by the Chinese media.

66

Playbill for *The Drunken Beauty*

1931, MLMM 103

The document features the programme for the year 1925 at the famous Tianchan Theatre in Shanghai, which still exists today. The play being announced is one of Mei Lanfang's favourites, *The Drunken Beauty*. The audience was enthralled by his singing and dance performance, in which he masterfully gave expression to the passion, pain, and grief of the rejected heroine Yang Yuhuan.

Appropriation

The traditional puppet theatre plays an important role in Chinese folk art.

Marionettes and rod puppets are traceable back to the Tang dynasty (8th century).

Similar to the Beijing opera, puppet plays are often based on classical works of literature, legends, myths, as well as love and ghost stories. Traditionally the storyline is accompanied by music that relies on the same instruments as the Beijing opera. The costumes and make-up designs also follow the iconography of the Beijing opera. The puppets, which are difficult to handle, are operated by a wooden rod, which the puppeteer holds in his left hand. With his right hand he moves the two ancillary rods, which are attached to the inside of the puppet's hands.

67-72

Rod puppets (*zhangtou*)

2011, silk, cotton, artificial fibres, papier mâché, plastic sequins, wood, pheasant feather, MKB IId 15514-19

67. Bao Zheng (*Bao Gong*)

The reverent son and wise official Bao Zheng (999–1062), also known as Judge Bao, is a popular figure in Chinese literature and stage art. The white crescent moon on his forehead signifies his ability to communicate with the underworld. Up to this day he stands for courage, justice, and incorruptibility.

68. Sun Wukong

The Monkey King Sun Wukong, who commands magical powers, is not only a famous figure in China but also in many neighbouring East Asian countries. In the West the Monkey King features in a variety of movies, comics, and computer games.

69. “Corrupt official”

Comic figures play an important part in

many Chinese theatre traditions. The clown satisfies the audience's wish for entertainment and spectacle, but also caters for political parody. This puppet represents a corrupt and rather stupid public official.

70. Young woman

The role type of the young or middle-aged woman comprises obedient daughters, faithful wives, and modest lovers. They are furnished with rosy-shining make-up designs and rich hairstyles studded with beads. The puppet master has to see to it that the elegant water sleeves remain in motion. The elegant movements of the sleeves are a way to enhance expressions of deep feelings.

71. "Top scholar" (*zhuangyuan*)

A famous example of a "first scholar" is Chen Shimei (11th century). Deeply impressed by his performance as top of the class at the imperial examination, the emperor offered Chen Shimei his daughter in marriage. He happily accepted although he was already

married. When his first wife came to visit him, Chen hired a killer to get rid of her. However, the assassin had pity on the wife and helped her to indict the emperor's son-in-law at the court of Judge Bao Zheng, who was famous for being incorruptible. In the end Chen was executed. Up to this day, the figure of Chen Shimei stands for the heartless and unfaithful husband.

72. Mu Guiying

The puppet shows famous freedom fighter Mu Guiying of the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127). In Beijing opera as well as in the puppet theatre she features as the "Lady with Sword and Horse," famous for her singing and martial arts.

Music

Unlike in the musical theatre of the West, songs and accompanying orchestral parts in the Beijing opera are not written by individual composers. Instead they comprise modularly assembled compounds of traditional music styles and melodies.

The music structures and lends rhythm to language and movement, underpins and accentuates emotions, atmosphere, and the storyline, introduces the single scenes, and accompanies the actors when entering or exiting the stage. The musicians are seated on the stage. Being in direct eye contact with the actors enables them to react to subtle nuances in the performance.

The orchestra consists of percussion instruments as well as string and wind instruments. Percussion instruments comprise, apart from the ones shown here, a large drum, large gongs, small gongs and the nine-chord set of gongs.

73

Moon-shaped mandolin (*yueqin*)

c. 1900, wood, bone, MKB IId 13257

The *yueqin*, often called moon guitar, or lute, owing to its round wooden body, is plucked with the aid of a plectrum or artificial fingernails. It produces a lilting and melodic sound. The *yueqin* features in every Beijing opera play. Together with the *jinghu* it is used for accompanying the vocal parts.

74

Small spike fiddle (*jinghu*)

before 1909, bamboo, wood, skin, gum, silk, horsehair, MKB IId 794

This small, two-stringed spike fiddle, which produces a high, rather piercing sound, is the most important string instrument in the Beijing opera. Together with the *yueqin* it introduces and accompanies the vocal parts. The fiddler moves the bow between the two

strings, which are of different thickness.

75

Spike fiddle (*erhu*)

before 1898, wood, bamboo, skin, intestine, hair,
MKB IId 202

Because instruments of this type are played resting on the thigh above the knee, they are collectively referred to as "knee fiddles". Ever since the emergence of theatrical music, the *erhu*, which produces an elegant and soft sound, has been used as an accompanying instrument in many local opera traditions. Mei Lanfang introduced the instrument to the Beijing opera in the 1930s for the play *Xi Shi, The Beauty*.

76

Small lute (*sanxian*)

c. 1900, wood, bone, snake skin, animal intestine,
MKB IId 13272

The musician plays this three-stringed

plucked lute placed horizontally on the thighs. The snake-skin-covered sound box in the shape of a drum produces a high-pitched, almost piercing sound. The long fretless fingerboard lends itself well for playing glissandi to express grief or a melancholic mood.

77

Transverse flute (*dizi*)

before 1953, bamboo, thread, MKB IId 4250

The transverse flute has a clear and lyrical timbre and produces a loud, pervasive sound, due to an additional hole, which is covered with a vibrating bamboo membrane and located between the blowing hole and the first finger hole. In the Beijing opera the *dizi* is used to imitate bird sounds and to accompany pantomimic acts (such as handing over a present, feasting, hairdressing, or sacrificial ceremonies).

78

Oboe (*suona*)

before 1853, wood, tin, MKB IId 203

This wind instrument with a flexible bell belongs to the category of shawms; it originated in Central Asia. It is played like a European oboe, but it has a higher pitch. Usually the *suona* is played during fighting scenes, for special effects such as the whinnying of a horse, but also on more solemn occasions such as processions, coronation ceremonies or weddings.

79

Mouth organ (*sheng*)

before 1898, wood, bamboo, stand, bone, MKB IId 97

The mouth organ ranks among the oldest musical instruments in China. It consists of a mouthpiece, an air chamber, and bamboo pipes of differing length fixed to a base and equipped with finger holes. A skilled player can produce six notes simultaneously.

80

Small cymbals (*xiaobo*)

c. 1900, brass, MKB IId 9874a

Cymbals appear in various sizes; the instrument's pitch depends on its diameter. The small cymbals have a bright, clear timbre and are used for merry scenes, in unison with gongs.

81

Small drum (*dan pigu*)

before 1909, wood, animal skin, MKB IId 742

The drummer, who plays the small drum resting on a stand and the wooden clappers, is the opera's orchestra director. The highly varied rhythm of the beat defines the pace of the movements as well as that of the sung and spoken parts; apart from that the drum is also used to emphasise mood changes in the figures.

82

sung by Meng Guanglu in the role of Judge Bao (2.46 min.)

Wooden clapper (*gun bangzi*)

2011, wood, MKB IId 15513

This traditional percussion instrument, of which there exist various versions, has a conducting function, similar to the drum. It provides the metre. Apart from that it is used to produce sound effects, such as the clattering sound of horses' hoo

83

Listening examples

1. Riding a horse / dance with a whip from the war drama *Mu Ke Stockade* (3.55 min.)
2. "Sword dance" from the play *Farewell My Concubine* (4 min.)
- 3a. From the play *Farewell My Concubine*, sung by Mei Baojiu (Mei Lanfang's son) in the role of Lady Yu (3.38 min.)
- 3b. From the play *Execution of Chen Shimei*,

Artistic Reflections on Beijing Opera

At a time when the Beijing opera is returning to China's stages but also performing in major theatre centres around the world, other media such as film, literature, art, blogs, and pop culture have also discovered the old tradition of Chinese stage art as a field and means of expression.

The exhibition *On Stage – The Art of Beijing Opera* is complemented by works of four renowned artists, who draw on the Beijing opera as a source to reflect on and deal with current realities shaped by globalisation and pervasive political and economic change.

Wang Jin, *The Dream of China*

Polyvinyl and nylon threads, Sigg Collection

For his series of garments labelled *The Dream of China* (from 1997 on), Wang had a set of splendid Beijing opera costumes reproduced in plastic. The encounter between traditional Chinese high culture and the modern plastic material raises questions as to "cultural authenticity" and the disappearance of traditions in a modern world focused on material values. Wang initially created his opera costumes as articles of sale at an auction show. The targeted "wearers" were tourists and art collectors in search of something "typically Chinese."

Wang Jin, b. 1962 in Datong, Province Shanxi, lives and works in Beijing.

Chen Nong, *Peking Opera, Nr. 1-7*

Hand-coloured, black-and-white photographs, XYZ Gallery, Beijing

For his photo series *Peking Opera*, painted over with self-manufactured colours, Cheng Nong produced all the props and costumes meticulously by hand, using fragile paper material. Then he chose a location to serve as a background for staging his rather stiff and severe-looking actor-friends, but not without throwing in one or two details to break up the theatrical rigor: a bearded man wearing camouflage trousers, a pair of modern sunglasses in an old chest used for props, or a mischievously grinning face behind a false beard.

Chen Nong, b. 1966 in Fuzhou, Province Fujian, lives and works in Beijing.

92-94

Guan Qijun, *Where were we from, where will we go*

2007, oil on canvas

Autumn

2008, oil on canvas

10 sketches

ink on paper, Collection of the artist

In his ardent preoccupation with Beijing opera, Guan Qijun creates colourful oil paintings that take the viewer on a journey of discovery. In addition to writings reminiscent of inscriptions on bronze ritual vessels, he also includes naked figures and animals. The artist merges techniques derived from Western expressionist and abstract oil painting with elements of Chinese ink painting in the non-realistic *xiayi* style. The aesthetics of this suggestive, reduce-to-the-max style of painting finds its counterpart in the performance practice of classical Beijing opera, which renders reality in abstract form, merely alluding to genuine actions.

Guan Qijun, b. 1950 in Shanghai, works and lives in his home city.

95-97

**Lin Tianmiao, *Hand Signals*
*Nr. 1, 5, 22***

2005, black-and-white photograph on felt, artificial hair, Collection of the artist

The work series *Hand Signals* reflects Lin

Tianmiao's personal involvement with the Beijing opera. She was inspired by Mei Lanfang, the famous Beijing opera performer. The many hand gestures that Mei applied in the various female roles he played, and which he cultivated, express, apart from typically female activities, emotions such as helplessness, fear, or anger. By means of coupling non-verbal modes of expression common to Beijing opera and modern visual vocabulary, Lin Tianmiao addresses the issue of the validity of symbols in general.

"I have many questions about Peking Opera. First, why were men enlisted to play the parts of women? ... Why are the hand movements of Peking Opera actors so important as a visual language used to express so many activities and movements with such quiet subtlety? ... However, by the time I got to the last work in the series, I still had not found the answers to my questions. While we live here in China, we in fact don't really understand China's traditions such as those of Peking Opera. ... A subtle gesture of the hand in Peking Opera can remain fixed forever in the viewer's memory."

Lin Tianmiao, b. 1961 in Taiyuan, Province Shanxi, has been living in Beijing since 1964.

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