



In the past, people visiting Beijing would invariably go to a theater to see a Peking Opera performance. When we see a show today, we say “watch an opera.” But old Beijingers say “listen to an opera” instead. What counts in Peking Opera is singing, whereas performance is highly stylized. Audiences are wont to listen to singing with eyes shut and hands beating time. When they like a particular line, they would shout “bravo!” These are typical fans.

Old-style theaters where Peking Opera was performed before the 1950s were called *xiyuanzi*, which literally means “opera courtyard.” Facilities in a *xiyuanzi* were rather simple. The stage was square, with three sides extending right into rows of seats for the audience. At an early date in the Qing period (1644-1911), *xiyuanzi* was called “tea courtyard.” At the time, audiences paid for the tea but not the opera they watched. For customers, their main purpose in coming to the “tea courtyard” was to drink tea, whereas watching an opera was sort of “incidental.” In the Qing period, a show in a *xiyuanzi* could last as long as 10-12 hours, all in the daytime. Customers also paid for snacks such as sunflower seeds and roasted peanuts. Tea charge was not charged until before the start of the last but one item on the day’s theatrical program. A striking feature of *xiyuanzi* in old Beijing was “hot towel throw.” Waiters, shouting “here comes the towel,” would throw steaming



see his mother. This is a play in which the *sheng* role and the *dan* role have equal importance. Mei Lanfang repeatedly played the role of the wife, while Li Shaochun, Zhou Xinfang and Ma Lianliang, all famous *sheng* impersonators, took turns playing the son on the same stage with Mei.

The first act of the play, in which Yang Silang and his wife of 15 years had a serious dialogue, is often staged separately as a *zhezi xi*. And the dialogue is conducted in beautiful singing. Many audiences are so familiar with the singing that they can accompany the singer in silence.

Grand Wedding in the Enemy Camp (long feng cheng xiang)

Based on *A History of Three Kingdoms*, the play tells the story of how Liu Bei goes to the enemy territory to marry his counterpart's sister, thwarting a plot to ensnare him.

This is also a famous full-length play with a full range of roles; and many of its acts can be performed separately. In the past, no actor or actress of fame cannot play a role in the opera.

Despite there being a full range of roles in the play, leading roles are *sheng* and *dan*. When Mei Lanfang and Ma Lianliang made a joint appearance on the stage, Mei's name was placed



A *qing yi* role.
Photo by Zhao Dechun.

name at an early age and, on his way to fame, received much help from Tan Xinpei and Yang Xiaolou. Mei was an innovator of the Peking school of Peking Opera; and when he sought development in Shanghai, Mei obtained nourishment from the Shanghai school. Mei Lanfang went successively to Japan, the United States and Europe, exporting Peking Opera to the rest of the world.

In the 1950s Peking Opera entered a new flourishing period with a host of new plays created. Well-known actors and actresses active on the stage during the period included Li Shaochun (playing the *sheng* role), Zhang Junqiu, Zhao Yanxia and Guan Sushuang (*dan* role), Ye Shenglan (*xiao sheng* role), and Qiu Shengrong and Yuan Shihai (painted face). Younger artists added luster to the stage at the time. They included *dan* players Du Jinfang, Yan Huizhu, Yun Yanming, Xue Yanqin, Li Yuru, Tong Zhiling, Zhao Rongchen, Li Shiji and Li Huiyang, and *lao sheng* players Li Hezeng, Tan Yuanshou and Ma Changli.

Active today on the stage is a new crop of artists, graduates of opera schools. They include Liu Xiurong, Yang Qiuling, Liu Changyu, Li Weikang, Li Guang, Geng Qichang, Yu Kuizhi, Diao Li, Zhang Jianguo, Zhang Huoding, Geng Qiaoyun, Chen Shufang and Li Haiyan.

Ways of enjoying Peking Opera have undergone several stages. The first was the listening stage when audiences went to an old-style theater mainly to chat with one another with their ears catching singing from actors. In the second stage, thanks to endeavors by Tan



At the sixtieth anniversary of his stage life, Zhang Junqiu put on *Grand Wedding in the Enemy Camp* (*long feng cheng xiang*) together with his family members. photo by Wang Kexin.



Old Beijing in Peking Opera's Heyday

Peking Opera had its heyday in the 1930s when there were more than 10 theaters in Beijing alone, most of them scattered in the Qianmen area. This is a big number given the fact that Beijing at the time was quite small.

Residents of the area and traveling businessmen living in dingy hotels there were Peking Opera's principal audiences.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Peking Opera was a fashionable and important entertainment. Compared with other forms of entertainment, it held absolute dominance. Liu Zengfu is a Peking Opera specialist as well as a renowned physiologist. He recalls that when he attended Tsinghua University, the first thing he did when Sunday came was to get over his "opera addiction" by watching a Peking Opera at one of the theaters. Once his German teacher, a foreigner, cancelled the German lesson for the following Monday, saying he had to attend a friend's wedding on Sunday evening in the city. But when Liu sat in a theater for a Peking Opera performance on Sunday evening, he saw his German teacher sitting right in front of him. Teacher and student exchanged knowing smiles.

In early 1938 Yang Xiaolou, a master Peking Opera actor, died at the age of 61. Almost all famous Peking Opera performers attended his funeral. His fans and audiences all turned out to say good-bye to their beloved actor. The fact that an actor's