

# How the cultural revolution affected beijing opera

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



Beijing opera is a longstanding tradition in Chinese culture. It has been celebrated for many years, between high and low classes alike. It is intricate and specific. It has wrestled its way through reform and still retains its traditional values. Many people and parties have fought for control of it and many have succeeded. During China's Cultural Revolution, all arts suffered in their own ways, and Beijing opera is not among the least of them.

What is Beijing opera? It is a form of Chinese musical theatre that incorporates song, acting, bright and intricate costume and difficult acrobatics. Nancy Guy claims that it "is one of the most highly developed and best known of Chinese opera forms both in China and abroad." The city of Beijing is called Peking by most natives of the country; therefore Beijing opera also is called Peking opera by some people. The official Chinese name, however, is Jingju, literally meaning 'city opera'. The orchestra is split into two sections, the stringed and the percussive instruments. In addition to the orchestra, vocalists perform. In fact, vocals are the most important part of jingju. Frederick Lau explains in *Music in China* that there are four voice types and therefore four characters.

"The characters, which indicate age and social status, are young female (dan), young male (sheng), painted face (jing), and clown or comic character (chou). In addition to the facial makeup and costumes, each stock character is characterized by one vocal style and is identified by timbre, voice quality, volume, and manner of enunciation." (73)

The actors work on their role their entire lives and are greatly respected for what they do because the level of artistry is very high and specific.

Jingju had to evolve into that respect, though. It did not start with a great reputation within the palace. Chinese opera started out in troupes of people that would get together and perform for birthdays, which was a big tradition (Guy). In 1790, many troupes were called to the capital to perform for the Qianlong Emperor's 80th birthday. Guy states that " among the theatrical participants were troupes from Anhui province in central-eastern China, who specialized in the performance of the xipi and erhuang music." These are the core of Jingju. Historians believe that never before had these styles been heard together, and so have decided that 1790 is the year the Beijing opera began. Soon after, in 1798, it was officially banned (Guy). However, " the new opera prospered in Beijing." (Guy). Until 1860, Beijing opera was looked down upon as " vulgar entertainment" by imperials. Even so, in this year two opera companies performed for the Xianfeng Emperor's 30th birthday. Again in 1884 another troupe performed for the dowager empress Cixi's 50th birthday (Guy). This kick-started a good several years for Beijing opera, for from 1884 to 1910 several performances were enjoyed at the palace, " and some actors even took up residence at court, where they taught and performed" (Guy). If it were not for the imperials' shameless love of jingju, it might not have become as popular and widely practiced as it did. Instead of just farmer's entertainment, it had been raised up through the classes.

In the early 1900's, Beijing opera experienced a " golden age, with the art form being one of the most pervasive and popular types of entertainment in China... the work of actors, musicians and librettists of the early republican period remain unsurpassed in terms of volume, innovation and longevity" (Guy). After it became so popular, jingju was very important to many people

in many different ways. " Social activists... viewed it as a potentially powerful vehicle for social and political change" (Guy). The first attempt at government-organized change within Beijing opera was the Beijing Opera Reform Movement which had much power between 1908 and 1917. " Activists believed that the theatre served as a classroom for the largely illiterate masses and that the most expedient way to achieve broad social change was through opera" (Guy). This led to many changes within opera, such as gender equality and modernization of sets, costumes and general substance.

In 1949 the Republic of China became the People's Republic of China, or PRC. Attempts at reform became much stronger at this point because everyone wanted to follow Mao Zedong's way. Many people were added to the production of operas, giving actors much less control over their art (Wichmann-Walczak 96). " Mao saw all art as representing interests of a particular class and demanded that Beijing opera should serve the 'workers, peasants and soldiers'... art should be explicit propaganda for the revolution and should help to convert the masses to socialism" (Guy). Western artists were brought in to help change jingju and to make it more scientific. The Chinese government even went so far as to change the scripts to " emphasize patriotism, democracy and equality between the sexes" (Guy). In certain ways this helped the popularity of Beijing opera and it gained much more respect from most people.

This did not last for long. " During the 'ten-year catastrophe,' as the devastating Cultural Revolution of autumn 1966 through autumn 1976 is

usually now identified by people in the PRC, China's performing arts suffered considerably" (Yang 90). The arts were then completely controlled by the government and the actors no longer had any control or say of what was to become of them. According to Daniel Yang, " all traditional plays were banned and a great many talented artists died" (92). If famous actors were not killed, they were publicly shamed and some were also forced into retirement (94). The only music that was allowed to be performed during the Cultural Revolution was called yangbanxi, or 'model opera', " the themes of which were contemporary and revolutionary, with realistic staging and costumes" (Guy). Mao Zedong's wife, Jiang Qing, rewrote many of the operas " using contemporary themes and her own interpretation of the communist ideology" (Lau 137). It is believed that she is one that thought of 'model operas' and that she pushed for these reformed, rewritten operas to be the only ones that were acceptable to be performed. The subject of the yangbanxi was highly political and again directed towards those who were uneducated. It was meant as another form of brainwash into the communist idea and the reign of Mao Zedong. Most of them portray the party " as the benefactor of all oppressed people" (Lau 137) and as someone the people can have peace of mind around and not be afraid of. The party is there for the people.

Not only was the subject matter changed, but the musical style changed as well. There were many more Western instruments and instead of a small group of musicians entire orchestras were performing. There are far fewer percussive sections, which were usually attributed to fight scenes. Even the singing was westernized, following bel canto style. Ironically, Western

instruments were banned during this time, yet " were allowed to be performed because the music was based on 'model operas'" (Lau 137-138).

The end of the decade-long Cultural Revolution in 1976 marked the end of 'model opera'. People attributed it with " political turmoil" and unrest.

Traditional jingju made its way back to the theatres and is now regularly practiced, but much damage has been done. During that decade many actors died, retired, or simply lost the touch of their art because of the lack of ability to practice it. Yang claims that there are still plenty of older actors that made it through the Cultural Revolution and are still performing today (94) and that even though traditional Beijing opera has been greatly damaged, " traditional theatre in contemporary China is still thriving" (95). Operas are being reformed again, but this time simply to appeal to modern audiences and not in an attempt to control the content that is getting out to the public. For instance, " for intellectual urban audiences, plays with daring political and philosophical themes are staged with imagistic rather than realistic scenery and original, historically-based costumes, extraordinary classic-based scores, and innovative instrumentation" (Wichmann-Walczak 108).

Modern jingju still holds 200 years of tradition and is blossoming in its recovery from the Cultural Revolution. Many older operas are being performed, some in pure traditional style and some with modern twists. Considering every reform that Beijing opera has been through, one might be surprised at how much of the originality is still retained.