

# Opera, Beijing

## Jīngjù 京剧

**Jingju (Beijing Opera) is characterized by simple and spare stage sets, highly stylized gestures and movement, and elaborate costumes and headgear replicating those worn in the Ming-dynasty; it is historically renowned for the skill with which women's roles were once portrayed by female impersonators.**

Jingju (Beijing Opera or Peking Opera) is the style of regional opera that originated in Beijing late in the eighteenth century. Jingju is sometimes regarded as a national Chinese theater. It belongs to the Pihuang system of regional operas, which combines the two musical styles: *xipi*, which is vigorous and bright, and Erhuang, more lyrical and dark.

### Origins and Development to 1900

The *xipi* and Erhuang styles first occurred together in Beijing in 1790 when actors of the Sanqing (Three Celebrations) Company came from Anhui Province. In time three others—Chuntai (Spring Stage), Sixi (Four Joys), and Hechun (Harmonious Spring)—joined the Sanqing to form the “four great Anhui companies” (*sida Huiban*). These dominated nineteenth-century Jingju, the Chuntai lasting until the Boxer Uprising led to the destruction of Beijing's theater district in 1900.

Initially the most famous Jingju actors were female

impersonators (*nandan*, literally “male female characters”). A system of indenture developed by which entrepreneurs bought little boys in Jiangsu and Anhui provinces under contract and took them to Beijing, teaching them the Jingju arts. The Taiping Rebellion (1851–1866) stopped the practice of bringing boys from the south, but acting talent ran in families, and boys could be found in Beijing to carry on the tradition.

By the 1830s the *nandan* were joined by the great *laosheng* (old male) actors. The most famous was Cheng Changgeng (1811–1880) from Anhui, who led the Sanqing company from about 1845 until his death and developed the *laosheng* arts to such a degree that many still call him “the father” of Jingju. Many plays were considered the property of particular actors, but the playwrights are rarely known.

**A man in a park sings in the style of a Beijing Opera performer.** PHOTO BY TOM CHRISTENSEN.





Despite a tradition of female warriors, male characters dominate the “military” (*wu*) plays, whereas in the “civilian” (*wen*) plays, which deal with family matters and romance, the female characters are just as important. Content is based on old dramas or novels. A major source of military plays was the novel *Sanguo yanyi* (*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*), which deals with the civil wars of the third century CE and includes incidents showing heroism, treachery, and skillful strategy. The military plays feature battle scenes, characterized by thrilling gymnastics displays.

## From 1900 to 1949

The twentieth century featured profound change in society, culture and politics in China, a lot of which was inspired by the West. In fact, the term *colonial modernity* was coined to describe many of the processes of change. The most important actor—and the most famous China has ever produced—was Mei Lanfang (1894–1961), who brought the art of Chinese female impersonation to its highest level. He also introduced several major reforms. For instance, he took on female disciples and performed in plays with social content. One of them was the long *Niehai bolan* (*Waves of the Sea of Sin*, 1914) about prostitution, which featured a strong social message, realistic acting, and contemporary costumes. Like actors of previous times, Mei had a repertoire of plays that was special to him, but in contrast to tradition, Mei collaborated with a particular playwright, the scholar-theorist Qi Rushan (1877–1962), himself the author of many works of Jingju.

One group of thorough-going reformers was the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In May 1942 CCP leader Mao Zedong (1893–1976) declared that all art represents class interests and demanded that the CCP’s art should be propaganda for the revolution. This demand did not mean eliminating traditional opera, but it did mean reforming old plays to suit revolutionary purposes or writing new ones that showed rebels against the feudal system as positive and the old ruling classes as evil. In January 1944 Mao even wrote a letter of praise concerning the revolutionary Jingju called *Bishang Liangshan* (*Forced Up Mt. Liang*), which premiered the previous month in the CCP’s headquarters at Yan’an. Based on the traditional novel *Shuihu zhuan* (*Water Margin*) about the rebels of Mount Liang, the opera concerns how ruling-class oppression forces protagonist Lin Chong to throw in his lot with rebellion.

## Performance

The traditional Jingju stage is square and bare, with simple properties, a carpet on the floor, and a curtain at the back but not the front. The basic role types are *sheng* (male), *dan* (female), *jing* (painted face), and *chou* (clown), the last usually a negative character and noted for the white patch on his nose. Jingju has many subtypes of *sheng* and *dan* indicating character, age, and other qualities. In contrast to stage simplicity, costumes and headgear are complex and colorful, matching status, gender, personality, and calling. Costumes copy the clothes of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), no matter when the play is set. Movements and gestures are highly stylized, with mime central to many of the civil (*wen*) plays.

Musically, Erhuang tends to be sedate, slow, and low, appropriate to serious contexts, whereas *xipi* is vivacious and higher, suited to more light-hearted circumstances. Both have two or four beats to the bar, but *xipi* also has quick free rhythms. The orchestra is small, with the two-stringed fiddle *jinghu* usually the dominating instrument, but the clapper (*ban*), drum, and cymbal are also important. Other instruments include the *yueqin* (moon guitar), the three-stringed *sanxian*, and the double-reeded *suona*.

## People’s Republic

The CCP’s initial policy was to support Jingju but to reform content along the lines of Mao’s 1942 proposals. Many traditional Jingju were simply banned or never performed. The CCP tried to raise the social status of actors. For instance, Mei Lanfang was lionized and appointed to the National People’s Congress. Although the old *nandan* were supported, new female-role trainees were girls.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) reform was taken to extremes. Operas with traditional content were banned and replaced by some fifteen model revolutionary operas (*yangban xi*), most of them Jingju. Apart from the heavy propaganda and class content of these models, the old costumes and role types were eliminated and the music greatly changed, for example, with Western instruments added for heroic effect.

The reform period since the 1980s has included the revival of traditions and newly written Jingju plays. At the beginning of the twenty-first century about two hundred



**A small troupe performs an opera in the park.** PHOTO BY TOM CHRISTENSEN.

traditional plays are considered outstanding. Women play almost all female roles; the *nandan* having almost disappeared.

On the whole Jingju has not done well under reform. The number of troupes fell from 248 in 1978 to only 93 in 2006, and many of the audience are tourists. However, regular festivals are held, and Jingju retains a following not only in Beijing but also in other cities such as Shanghai and Wuhan.

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