

# Opera, Regional

## Dìfāngxì 地方戏

**About 330 types of regional opera in five broad categories exist in China, the great majority of which are popular or folk theater; many have religious aspects as well. The government has supported regional operas as an art form that can reach the masses, but many Chinese, especially urban youth, have come to prefer more modern forms of entertainment.**

**R**egional operas in China (*difangxi* 地方戏) consist of 330 or so traditional drama (*xiqu* 戏曲) types. Ranging from small-scale folk theaters, with casts of only two or three, to large-scale complex art forms, at the pinnacle of which are the Beijing Opera (Jingju) and Kunqu, almost all of the regional opera types take their names from their place of origin. Although a few stories are specifically local, the dramatized tales do not vary much from region to region, many being based on the ancient arts of storytellers, novels, and old dramas. While regional variations exist in such aspects as gesture, costumes, and makeup, the main differences among regional *xiqu* types lie in the music, including melodies and instrumentation, and the dialect of the lyrics and dialogue.

### Origins and Development

Musical traces from the thirteenth century exist in such surviving *xiqu* types as the *Liyuan xi* (Pear Garden Drama) of southern Fujian Province. Already in existence

at that time was the musical pattern called “joined-song structure” (*lianquti*), which means in essence that dramatists add words to existing and named tunes. By the Ming dynasty’s (1368–1644) later years another pattern called “beat-tune structure” (*banqiangti*) came into use, in which metrical and tune patterns are developed appropriate to the desired dramatic effect.

*Xiqu* types originating in the south tended to follow the *liantuqi* pattern, those in the north the *banqiangti*. Beginning in the fifteenth century regional theater proliferated in China, gathering momentum and yielding a large array of drama types in which originally northern and southern *xiqu* types mingled.

### Five Categories

The five broad categories of China’s regional operas are (1) The Yiyang *qiang* system, (2) Kunqu, (3) clapper operas (*bangziqiang*), (4) the Pihuang system, and (5) all others.

Yiyang *qiang* songs and music arose in Yiyang, Jiangxi Province, probably in the fourteenth century. Beginning in the sixteenth century this opera spread to southern China and even to Beijing, becoming an integral part of many regional *xiqu* types under the name “Gaoqiang,” including Sichuan Opera (Chuanju). Its main features, according to the drama historian William Dolby (1976, 91), are that “It [uses] drums and cymbals for the rhythm, [has] *bangqiang* [helping tunes] choral backing in the final lines of the songs, and [is] brisk, vigorous and loud in delivery.” Its music follows the joined-song structure.

Kunqu, one of the oldest and most literary forms of traditional drama, combines music, poetry, dance, and highly stylized hand gestures that correspond to the music and percussion, and draws as well on mime, farce, and acrobatics, elements of ancient Chinese theater. Its name comes from a type of music characteristic to the form, and dating to the fourteenth century, that originated in the district of Kunshan, in modern Jiangsu Province. The cast members include male characters (*sheng*), female characters (*dan*), clown characters (*chou*), and the strong male character with the painted face (*jing*). Although performance of Kunqu declined dramatically after reaching its peak in the eighteenth century, it regained popularity after the opening of China, and today some 700 troupes, many veterans of Beijing Opera, perform all over China.

Clapper operas are named for the hard wooden clapper (*bangzi*) that sets the rhythm. The earliest of the systems to follow the beat-tune structure, clapper operas also have string accompaniment, mainly from the *yueqin* (moon guitar). Arising in the Shaanxi area of north China

in the sixteenth century, they quickly spread over the north and, by the seventeenth century, even to Hunan and Hubei provinces. This type of opera makes strong use of local folk songs.

The Pihuang system, which also follows the beat-tune structure, is actually the combination of two *xiqu* types: the *xipi* (literally “western skin” but meaning “song from Shaanxi Province” in the west) and Erhuang, a *xiqu* type probably developing in Yihuang, Jiangxi Province, in the late Ming dynasty. *Xipi* music is vigorous and bright, whereas Erhuang is more lyrical and darker in texture. Pihuang *xiqu* types share musical accompaniment by the two-stringed fiddle *huqin* as well as the *ban* (clapper), two loosely connected pieces of hardwood, one striking the other to beat out the rhythm. By the eighteenth century *xipi* and Erhuang flourished together as Pihuang in south China, forming a major part of such important regional *xiqu* types as Sichuan Opera, Anhui Opera (Huiju), and Guangdong Opera (Yueju)—(this Yueju is not to be confused with Shaoxing Opera, which also goes by the name

**A modern Chinese opera performance of *Cai Wenji* by Guo Moruo. The Mongol chief at center and his four concubines observe the drama of Princess Wencheng’s return to China and her reunion with her father as the Mongol army stands by. Qun xu (Kunqu) opera style. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.**



Yueju; even though the sound is identical, the characters for “Yue” are different). Most important, the Beijing Opera belongs to the Pihuang system.

The fifth category covers those regional opera *xiqu* types that do not belong to any of the systems, among them being many small-scale village folk theaters, most with small casts, and ethnic minority theaters. Other than Yueju, those attracting particular attention include the following:

- 1 Huangmei Opera (Huangmei xi) is based on local tea-picking songs in Huangmei, Hubei Province, and nearby Anhui. By the nineteenth century it began to perform full stories and in the twentieth was introduced to the city of Anqing, Anhui Province.
- 2 *Nuo* ritualistic dramas of minority areas in Guizhou and Hunan Provinces and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region share the use of masks. Diverse in color, shape, and pattern, these make symbolic use of such factors as character, status, age, and gender.
- 3 Tibetan Opera (*ache lhamo*) is the only ethnic minority drama in China to develop independently of the Han. Of fifteenth-century origin, it also makes much use of masks. Singing is high-pitched and flows smoothly, and accompaniment is limited to drum and cymbals.

## Social Setting

A major reason for the proliferation of regional operas was their close association with society. Becoming familiar with these popular dramas was part of everybody's childhood socialization. Most *xiqu* types originated in the countryside, many then becoming more complex and moving into the cities.

Occasions for regional operas were many. Three of particular importance were popular festivals, religion, and fairs. These three were often interconnected, since festivals usually had religious connotations and fairs often took place at temples. Of all the festivals, the most important throughout almost all of China was the Spring Festival or Chinese New Year. This was generally the occasion for people to go out and celebrate, with an opera performance being part of the festivities.

Authorities regarded these popular performances with great suspicion, and both central and local governments adopted many rules against them. Authorities saw such performances as an occasion for sexual misconduct and demanded the separation of the sexes, often forbidding women even to attend at all. Authorities also saw regional operas as an occasion for social disobedience, for rebels to incite the people against legitimate authority. Authorities were particularly suspicious of operas based on the novel *Shuihu zhuan* (Water Margin), which concerns rebels and tends to characterize them positively. On the other hand, Confucian thinkers tried to use drama to spread their own thinking by emphasizing filial piety and loyalty in characterization.

During the Ming dynasty single-sex acting troupes became all but universal and remained so until the twentieth century. The great majority of troupes were all-male, which meant that cross-dressing of males impersonating females became a major artistic and social feature of Chinese theater. Boys began learning acting skills at a young age; their training was conducted within the acting

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### “The Old Time Fighting Priest and a School Teacher. Peking, China,” an historic photograph of performers from the Peking (now Beijing) Opera.



troupe itself, so pedophilia and homosexuality were common. Although folk troupes existed in the villages, many urban-based performers spent much of their time strolling around the countryside, especially during the peasants' idle seasons. As wanderers with socially despised morals, actors not surprisingly held a low status. In addition, they were subject to discriminatory laws and enjoyed no government protection.

### STAGES FOR REGIONAL OPERAS

Although records indicate the existence of public indoor theaters in China's capital cities under the Song dynasty (960–1279), they had disappeared by the Ming dynasty. Until the rise of teahouse-theaters in Beijing, public performances of regional operas took place not in theaters but rather on outdoor square or rectangular stages or in other available spaces.

Many temples had a stage near or at the exit, popular regional operas being frequently part of religious ritual. The stage might be erected opposite the statue of the deity to whom the temple was dedicated. The performance was then offered to the deity, even if its content was secular. Dramas could also be performed outside the entrance of the temple.

Temporary stages also were used. They were erected for just a few days during the drama season or the temple fair and then dismantled. Sometimes such temporary stages were erected near each other, with a range of performances taking place simultaneously.

Although the stages were covered, audiences were not. They usually stood around and did not necessarily stay for the whole play. In dramas performed to honor a particular god, the human audience members were theoretically no more than incidental onlookers. Men outnumbered and stood or sat separately from women. Audiences were not required to be silent during a performance.

Tibetan drama performances took place in the monasteries in specially designed tents or in open spaces. If a performance took place in a tent, the actors stood in the center, entering or exiting through a narrow corridor, while the audience could stand or sit around on the floor, as appropriate. High-ranking guests had special seats.

## People's Republic

The government of the People's Republic of China (founded in 1949) reformed the regional operas in several ways. It took over existing troupes and gave members formal salaries, attempting not only to improve actors' quality of life but also to raise their social status. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) recognized regional operas as positive art forms ideologically because they were attended by such large groups. At the same time theater workers reformed the operas' content, eliminating material they regarded as antisocialist and promoting what could be used for propaganda purposes. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), during which CCP leader Mao Zedong (1893–1976) had his wife Jiang Qing (1913–1991) carry out a class-obsessed "revolution" in the Beijing Opera, the regional operas mostly disappeared from the stage or simply copied the stereotyped patterns of the model revolutionary operas in which traditional themes were totally excluded. After the reform period began in the late 1970s the regional operas returned like a pent-up flood. Early in 1978 the main architect of the reform policies, CCP leader Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997), explicitly encouraged actors in his native Sichuan Province to restore traditional themes in his beloved Chuanju. Since that time many traditions have revived in the regional operas, both in terms of content and social context. Some good regional opera works have been created, but in most *xiqu* styles output has tended to dwindle since the high point of the 1980s.

The modern public proscenium stage—darkened during performance and with the audience seated in front of it in rows and tiers, possibly at a significant distance from the performance—was introduced to China in Shanghai in 1908. Although they were not initially intended for performance of regional operas, theaters built since 1949 follow modern patterns, whatever kind of drama takes place within them.

Amateur folk troupes still perform, especially at festival times, but young people are tending to become more interested in modern art forms. The number of state-run troupes throughout the country (excluding the Beijing Opera) was 1,450 in 1998 but only 1,412 in 2006. The number of performances that these troupes gave held fairly steady during the same time, being 195,000 in the countryside and 60,000 in the cities in 2006, but the total



**A scene from the opera *Queen of the Jade Brothel*, in which an unfairly accused concubine appeals her case to provincial court. Suzhou Opera Company. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.**

number of audience members fell from 323 million in 1998 to 275 million in 2006.

Although regional operas survive, especially in the countryside, competition from more popular modern forms of entertainment are exercising a harmful influence on them.

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