

An Introduction to the Aesthetic Grammar of Peking Opera

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Abstract

This paper explores the aesthetic canons of Peking Opera, a non-realistic art form that relies on a shared understanding between performer and spectator. It examines how the art form's didactic purpose—the communication of Confucian values—shapes its narrative conventions and codified 'forms' (*xing*). It argues that this highly stylized system is not an end in itself but a vehicle for achieving transcendent 'spirit' (*shen*), requiring the audience's active imagination to complete the immersive aesthetic experience.

Keywords

Peking Opera, Chinese Culture, Aesthetics.

1. Introduction

From its beginnings, Chinese opera has served the dual role of entertaining both gods and mortals. As Peking Opera rose to prominence from the historical contest between regional (*hua*) and courtly (*ya*) styles, it absorbed the skills of countless other genres. In doing so, this art form—though less than 200 years old—took on the profound educational role of China's traditional 'rites and music' (*li yue*) culture. It is an expressive art where the ancients of a century ago give form to the stories of their more distant ancestors, creating a world that can only be truly entered if modern audiences embrace an older way of seeing. This aesthetic rests on a foundation of theatrical convention (*jiadingxing*), which asks both performers and spectators to collaboratively shape the experience, both 'at the desk' (*antou*) during creation and 'on the stage' (*changshang*) during the performance. Together, they establish a shared set of norms—built on the script, performance, and the theater itself—that allow for a journey from the visible 'form' to the intangible 'spirit'. Ultimately, this shared experience achieves the didactic purpose of 'rites' and the emotional cultivation of 'music.' The door to appreciating Peking Opera, therefore, opens only when both sides willingly embrace this traditional aesthetic.

2. Script Aesthetics: Didactic Purpose in Conventional Form

The dramatic structures of Peking Opera are largely drawn from folk narratives. Following its historical rise—a process that involved the blending of regional styles, the refinement of its musical system, and its adoption by the cultural elite—Peking Opera gained immense prestige. With the patronage of the Qing imperial court, it was expected to fulfill a more pronounced social and didactic role. This meant communicating core Confucian values, such as loyalty, filial piety, chastity, and righteousness (*zhong, xiao, jie, yi*). The purpose of the drama was to promote good, punish evil, and ultimately reinforce a vision of social harmony and order.

This didactic focus gave rise to a dominant plot structure: reunion after separation, success after hardship (*xianli houhe*, *shikun zhongxiang*). In these narratives, the protagonists are often driven apart by conflict or misfortune, only to be brought back together for a 'grand reunion' (*datuanyuan*) ending. This resolution might be facilitated by fate, a sudden opportunity, the intervention of an upright official, or even the help of supernatural beings. Some critics argue that this model encourages an avoidance of reality, believing that only tragedy can lead to true awakening. However, a closer look reveals that for the common audience, the happy ending provides a powerful sense of hope and enduring faith. It reflects the collective cultural desire for harmony and togetherness (*hehe*) within a nation that has historically endured great hardship. In this way, the 'grand reunion' embodies an optimistic aesthetic, celebrating a belief in human goodness. There is a famous saying among opera lovers: 'Listen to an unfamiliar story, but watch a familiar play to savor its artistic merit.' A satisfying and predictable conclusion allows the traditional audience to fully immerse themselves in a deeper appreciation of the performance techniques—the singing, recitation, acting, and acrobatics (*chang, nian, zuo, da*). This focus on *how* a story is told, rather than *what* happens, is what allows them to watch the same plays over and over without tiring.

Due to their folk origins, many traditional scripts contain narrative flaws or anachronisms. Both performers and the audience generally choose to accept these conventions. For instance, *Fa Zidu* (The Assassination of Zidu) features a character from the Spring and Autumn Period (771-476 BCE) who speaks of military strategies from the much later Qin Dynasty (221-207 BCE). Traditional audiences tolerate such inconsistencies because they understand that Peking Opera is not a history documentary. As long as the story's premise is clear, they are satisfied. What the audience *truly* scrutinizes is the actor's 'living' skill and artistry (*huo'er*) on stage. A perfect example is *Mu Ke Zhai* (Mu Guiying's Mountain Fortress). The hero and heroine meet for the first time as enemies on the battlefield. Weapons drawn, they suddenly begin to engage in a stylized courtship, with lines like 'How truly majestic this young general is!' An experienced opera aficionado savors this stylized moment of emotional expression, while a modern viewer focused on realism might find it baffling. Later, when a great general is easily defeated by the heroine, the illogical plot twist doesn't stop the audience from roaring with approval for the actress's outstanding weapon-handling skills (*bazi gong*). Is this absurd? Perhaps, if viewed through a lens of realism. Temporarily setting aside Western dramatic conventions to adopt a traditional, expressive (*xieyi*) perspective enables a different appreciation of the artistry. When a spectator focuses on the 'micro-emotions' behind the performance and yields to the shared energy of the theater, they may discover a new aesthetic understanding.

The 'form' of a character, as defined by the script, serves three main purposes: to indicate their social status, reveal their moral nature, and show their temperament. These are communicated through a highly codified system:

- 1) Temperament (*shentai*) is assigned to role types:
 - The *laosheng* (old male) is dignified, proper, and strong;
 - The *xiaosheng* (young male) is elegant, dashing, and resilient;
 - The *wusheng* (martial male) is stylish, handsome, and crisp;
 - The *qingyi* (virtuous female) is graceful, gentle, and serene;
 - The *huadan* (vivacious female) is charming, lively and genuine;
 - The *tongchui* (black painted face, often a loyal general) is heroic, imposing, and weighty;
 - The *jiazi* (white painted face, often a villain) is fierce, arrogant, and swaggering.
- 2) Physical state (*xingtai*) is shown through specific postures:
 - The noble: an imposing appearance, a direct gaze, a deep voice, and heavy steps;

- The poor: a sickly appearance, staring eyes, hunched shoulders, and a runny nose;
 - The drunk: a drowsy look, unfocused eyes, a limp body, and stiff-legged steps;
 - The ill: a weary look, teary eyes, gasping breath, and a trembling body;
 - The foolish: a blank expression, vacant eyes, an open mouth, and a shaking head;
 - The joyful: bright eyes, a smiling face, and a cheerful voice;
 - The startled: a flushed face, a trembling body, and a choked cry.
- 3) Movement is stylized into animal forms (*wuxing*):
- The *qingyi* employs a steady and elegant ‘peacock walk;’
 - The *huadan* uses an agile and clever ‘chicken-form walk;’
 - The *wudan* (martial female) performs a strong yet graceful ‘phoenix walk;’
 - The *laodan* (old female) adopts a doddering ‘crane walk.’

Appreciating these character styles requires respecting the unspoken agreement between the audience and actors. Consider Guan Yu, who is revered in folk culture as the embodiment of loyalty and righteousness. On the Peking Opera stage, his divine status is absolute. The actor playing him follows a strict ritual, remaining silent backstage out of respect. On stage, he must adhere to Lord Guan's heroic ‘form’ to convey his divine ‘spirit.’ His movements, his fighting style, and his bearing are all part of a fixed routine (*taolu*) that is instantly recognizable. He needs only a symbolic round or two to defeat an opponent, showcasing his divine power. The actor must master this formula, and the audience, in turn, accepts and appreciates this iconic form. Through such characters, Peking Opera communicates a timeless message: loyalty and righteousness are virtues to be held in awe. The veneration of these ideals on stage is an expression of the collective values within the Chinese national spirit.

3. Performance Style: The Stage Logic of ‘Four Directions and Eight Fronts’

To effectively create ‘form’ on stage, Peking Opera abstracts and beautifies elements of daily life. It refines them into a series of performance elements that are logical and rule-based, and serve both character presentation and aesthetic appreciation. This allowed Peking Opera to transcend simple imitation and directly express ‘emotion’ (*qing*) and ‘atmosphere’ (*jing*). Through long-term interaction, both performers and audiences developed a shared practice of appreciating the ‘form’ of these performance elements. The most important of these forms are the ‘Four Skills and Five Methods’ (*sigong wufa*), a system that codifies the typical expressions and abstract techniques for different role types. The Four Skills are singing, recitation, acting, and combat. The acting skill is further broken down into the Five Methods: techniques of the hand (*shou*), eye (*yan*), body (*shen*), hair and beard techniques (*fa*), and step (*bu*).

The famous actor Gai Jiaotian used a mnemonic phrase to describe this principle of creating form: ‘A thrust and a stance, a movement and a turn, a step and a glance, a twist and a flip, a lift and a dodge, a sit and a look—all must consider the ‘four directions and eight fronts’ (*simian bafang*), so that it is a delight for all to watch.’ [1] This method is further explained as follows: ‘An actor must always be aware of their position on stage. They must ensure the stage appears balanced and full, not heavy on one side and light on the other, or crowded on one side and empty on the other... They must also ensure their own movements and postures are measured and beautiful, while being mindful of every audience member’s line of sight. From any corner of the theater, the audience should be able to clearly see your expression and the beauty of your pose.’

To be specific, we could take a look at the form of singing. In Peking Opera, singing is the voice of the heart. A song begins only at a critical emotional juncture, when a character is at a bursting point (*butu bukuai*), an urgent need to speak or ‘spit out’ one’s emotions, with feelings of anguish or ecstasy that must be released through song. Once the actor begins to sing, the

delivery must be resonant and the diction precise, with full emotion. The handling of specific vowel types requires great skill to ensure the result is harmonious. The audience's appreciation of singing focuses on the actor's mastery of six key elements: voice (*sheng*), diction (*zi*), breath control (*qi*), melody (*yun*), flavor/nuance (*wei*), and energy (*jin*). They watch to see if the actor can, within the given dramatic context, let the song arise from the heart, be moved by emotion, take shape in sound, and achieve a sublime musical expression.

Furthermore, most singing is supported by the Xipi and Erhuang musical modes. Xipi melodies are typically lively and exciting and often start on an off-beat, while Erhuang melodies are steady and profound, often starting on the downbeat. Besides these, other tune types exist, such as *Sipingdiao* and *Nanbangzi*. There are also instrumental pieces, or *qupai*, used to create atmosphere, such as [Shui Long Yin] (Dragon's Sigh) for a general ascending his platform, [Gong Chi Shang] (A Stately Air) for ceremonial entrances and exits, or [Ku Huang Tian] (Sacrificial Cry) for a memorial service. The famous *qupai* [Ye Shen Chen] (Deep Night), for example, originated from a sorrowful Kunqu Opera piece, but in Peking Opera, it becomes powerful and robust. Its application and effect in plays like *Farewell My Concubine* and *Beating the Drum and Cursing Cao* are vastly different, requiring the audience to have an aesthetic understanding of musical form. A key saying in Peking Opera is: 'Thirty percent singing, seventy percent striking.' In this context, singing refers to the actor's comprehensive performance on stage (singing, recitation, acting, and combat), while striking refers to the musical accompaniment from the orchestra.

The musical accompaniment is provided by an orchestra divided into the melodic section (*wenchang*) and the percussion section (*wuchang*), collectively known as the *wenwuchang*. The most essential instruments are the *jinghu* (a high-pitched fiddle) and the *bangu* (a clapper-drum), which provide a rich musical foundation and greatly expand the actor's expressive possibilities. Many star performers (*mingjiao'er*) had their own exclusive orchestras, regarding the lead *jinghu* player (*qinshi*) and the lead drummer (*gushi*) as their left and right arms, inseparable partners for every performance. During a performance, the *bangu* player gives all the cues. The drummer is thus known as the orchestra's general commander, controlling everything from the opening gong to actors' entrances, exits, and scene transitions. This importance is captured in the saying: the percussion is half the play. The formulaic skills used by the drummer are known as 'percussive patterns' (*luogudian*), and understanding them allows for a much deeper appreciation of the performance. For example, *A General Theory of Chinese Opera* describes the entrance of Mu Guiying in *Mu Ke Zhai*:

'On stage, gongs and drums sound in unison, and the *suona* (a shawm) sings out loudly. Before any character appears, an exuberant and soaring atmosphere is already established. Then, as Mu Guiying enters... the percussion plays a series of patterns in rotating succession. The intense and varied rhythms tightly frame Mu Guiying's every glance... and every step. Her bright eyes, the dancing pheasant feathers in her headdress, her swift circling of the stage, and her heroic pose—each is emphasized by the musical rhythm, painting in bold colors the image of a valiant and high-spirited young woman of the mountains.' [2]

In a sense, the drummer is the soul of Peking Opera music. The renowned drummer Wang Xieyuan, for instance, performed with many top actors, but his long-term collaboration with Mei Lanfang is legendary. Mei Lanfang considered him an essential 'pillar of the stage' (*wutai gugong*) and felt at ease only when Wang Xieyuan was personally at the drums for his major performances. For several of Mei's most important plays, including *Cosmic Sword* (*yuzhou feng*), *Farewell My Concubine* (*bawang bieji*), and even the film *Remorse at Death* (*Shengsi Hen*), it was said that only Wang's drumming could provide the right 'energy' (*jin*). This partnership remains a celebrated story within the world of Peking Opera.

4. The Actor-Audience Dynamic: An Empty Space for Myriad Realms

The stage layout in a traditional Peking Opera theater is minimalist but not simplistic. Typically, the stage holds only a table with a decorative skirt and two chairs with fabric covers, known as the 'one table and two chairs' (*yi zhuo er yi*). Traditional stages had no main curtain, though one was later added for functional purposes. A second curtain (*erdao mu*) is often used today to facilitate orderly prop changes, but the use of both is kept to a minimum to preserve a simplified sense of time and space—a principle in keeping with traditional Chinese expressionism.

Before an actor enters, the stage represents no particular time or place. The spatio-temporal world of Peking Opera is created entirely by the actor's performance. For example, when a character appears onstage, their singing, recitation, and movement can establish a specific setting (a dynasty, a location); as soon as they exit, that space vanishes. The next actor to enter creates a new world through their performance. An actor circling the stage (*yuan chang*) can represent a journey of thousands of miles, while conversely, a lengthy aria like a [Erhuang Lento Aria] that takes several minutes to unfold might only represent a fleeting moment of thought. A whip stands for a horse, an oar for a boat, a candle for nighttime, and a wine pot for a banquet—all these elements are brought to life through the actor's virtual, codified movements. This concept is perfectly captured in the proverb: 'three to five steps can cross the world, seven or eight people can represent an army.' This is the fundamental 'form' of time and space that traditional Peking Opera must obey.

With the rise of modern opera, stage design began to pursue elaborate, realistic scenery, which severely limits the actor's freedom in expression. Acknowledging this, the scholar Qi Rushan said, 'National opera, which privileges song and dance, needs no scenery.' He explained: 'The reason is that the actors' movements cannot coordinate with scenery. If any movement has to account for the scenery, it inevitably becomes a realistic action, which falls outside the scope of national opera.' [3] This statement gets to the essence of the matter: the scenery must all be on the actor's body. If the stage itself becomes solid and therefore too realistic, the actor's stylized techniques for representing time and space become redundant. The virtual and expressive nature of Peking Opera performance would be crippled. Therefore, when appreciating traditional Peking Opera, the audience must savor the actor's 'Four Skills and Five Methods.' By engaging their imagination, they can join the actor in 'traversing the cosmos' (*churu liuhe*), entering a realm where being and non-being transform into and give rise to each other (*you wu xiang sheng*).

Peking Opera costumes are primarily based on Ming Dynasty styles. Regardless of the season or dynasty depicted, actors and audiences must adhere to the aesthetic convention of this unchanging form. Costumes are generally divided into four types: the long ceremonial robe (*mang*, which includes the official's robe, or *guanyi*), armor (*kao*), the cloak (*pi*), and the commoner's robe (*zhe*). As a rule, emperors and officials wear the *mang*, generals wear the *kao*, and common people wear the *zhe*, with each garment signifying a social class. The patterns on these costumes are even more symbolic. Dragons, a symbol of authority, adorn the robes of royalty. Officials wear 'rank badges' (*buzi tu*) that reveal their rank at a glance (birds for civil officials, beasts for military). A general's cloak might feature tigers and leopards to symbolize valor, while a scholar's robe is decorated with plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum—collectively known in Chinese culture as the Four Gentlemen—to reflect their temperament. To distinguish minority characters or mountain chieftains, two foxtails are sometimes attached to the costume.

The art of facial makeup (*lianpu*) takes this expressive form-shaping to its zenith. Patterns are drawn from nature (sun, moon) or animals (tiger, eagle) and combined with different colors to define a character's role type. This itself is an aesthetic of 'form.' The use of *lianpu* is a long-standing agreement between audience and actor: the loyal are depicted with noble features,

while the treacherous are given ugly ones. Anyone familiar with Peking Opera can identify a character's basic personality from their face. However, new audiences are often bewildered by the array of colors. Red signifies loyalty and valor; purple, integrity; black, uprightness; blue, ferocity; white, treachery; and gold, divinity or strangeness. The playwright Weng Ouhong summarized these associations in a popular rhyme:

Red for the loyal, purple for the pious, black for the just, pink for the old; watery white for the wicked, oily white for the arrogant; yellow for the fierce, grey for the greedy, blue for the brave, green for the violent; for gods and spirits, gold and silver brightly gleam.

This color code reflects a collective understanding cultivated by China's tradition of rites and music, carrying strong moral judgment that embodies the preferences of the ruling class and, more importantly, the core values and appraisals of the common people.

5. Conclusion

Peking Opera embodies the rich historical and moral sentiments of the Chinese people and is intimately linked to their fundamental ways of thinking. With its unique philosophical foundation and distinctive creative methods, it stands as a classic and highly representative art. As the saying goes: 'the expert sees the technique, the novice sees the spectacle' (*hangjia kan mendao, waihang kan renao*). Its aesthetic does not aim for naturalism, but rather for a shared, virtual, and expressive experience between audience and performer.

To use an analogy of 'raw rice, cooked rice, and wine' to explain this 'form-shaping': the 'raw rice' of Peking Opera (its stories and materials) is not meant to be made into solid 'cooked rice' (a realistic portrayal). Instead, it is fermented into 'wine' (a transcendent artistic experience). In the intoxicating effect of this wine, everyone on and off the stage becomes enraptured and brings forth the quintessential beauty of Peking Opera.

Acknowledgements

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