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In 1987, a group of Swedish students visited the National Academy of Chinese Theater Arts, in Beijing, to study Peking Opera.

Some of them learned the techniques of playing *lao dan* — old female roles. Yuan Huiqin was one of the Chinese students in the same course.

As a top student in her class, Yuan was chosen to demonstrate the singing and physical movements of *lao dan* roles for her Swedish classmates.

"The roles are usually performed in a rich and low-pitched voice," she said. "The roles mostly show female warriors and mothers with authority so they look serious and respectful."

Yuan is one of the most famous *lao dan* actresses in China and a recipient of the Plum Blossom Prize, the country's highest theater award.

"I recall a beautiful female Swedish student not being able to play the role initially. We spent a lot of time explaining to her what it is about and also helped her understand Peking Opera better."

In July, when Yuan was invited by the Ministry of Culture to launch a lecture tour to introduce Peking Opera overseas, she initiated the idea of visiting Sweden.

"It's been 30 years since I spent three months with the Swedish students (in Beijing)," the 51-year-old said, adding that they were eager to learn Peking Opera even back then.

"I believe that there are many around the world who still don't know much about Peking Opera. So, I want to bring it to them and let them appreciate the beauty of the ancient art form."

In September, Yuan led a team of young Peking Opera artists of the China National Peking Opera Company on their tour of Kazakhstan, Russia and Sweden.

Peking Opera has a history of more

Roles beyond her years

Peking Opera veteran known for playing elderly characters embarks on a foreign tour to share her expertise



Yuan Huiqin is famous for her *lao dan* (old female roles) performances. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

than 200 years and was declared a world intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO in 2010.

Yuan gave two lectures in each country, combining history and techniques of Peking Opera with demonstrations of classical pieces, such as *San Cha Kou* (*Divergence*) and *Ba Wang Bie Ji* (*Farewell My Concubine*).

She also introduced another Chinese art form, the Kunqu Opera, in her lectures, and artists performed parts of *The Peony Pavilion*, a play by Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) writer Tang Xianzu.

Theater students were in attendance in each country.

"I have performed abroad many times but I have never been to these

three countries. It will be a new experience for me," said Yuan before the tour. She was preparing to visit cities including St Petersburg in Russia, Astana in Kazakhstan and Goteborg in Sweden.

She has taught traditional Chinese operas at Peking University and Wuhan University in China. But Yuan said she planned to use a different approach in these countries where students need to know more about Chinese culture.

"Peking Opera is beyond performing arts. There is a profound culture behind it, especially the traditional Chinese philosophies and values, such as patriotism, loyalty and honesty," said Yuan, who has been working with the Beijing-based National

Peking Opera Company since 1993.

"I want to share these great cultures with Western audiences."

Yuan, who was born in Yichang, Central China's Hubei province, is credited with reviving the performing style of *lao dan* roles and is known for her performances in Peking Opera repertoires.

At age 10, Yuan, an only child, was chosen to study Peking Opera in a local art school in Yichang due to her talent in singing and dancing.

Her parents did not set goals for her and only hoped that she could enjoy the art along with other children of her age.

Unlike other such opera roles — *hua dan* (young female roles) and *wu dan* (martial arts female roles)



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— *lao dan* roles are not meant to look beautiful. The actresses typically wear gray wigs and makeup that look like wrinkles.

"But my mother persuaded me to practice the *lao dan* roles," recalled Yuan. "She told me, 'If you portray women who are much older than you, you could become a great actress.'"

Yuan became an apprentice of Peking Opera master Li Jinquan in 1983 and traveled to Beijing from her hometown frequently.

"I stayed in a small hotel near the Forbidden City while in Beijing and learned the opera. I would sing from early morning until evening. My master was very strict. I had to repeat singing one word for a whole day until he nodded.

"My biggest entertainment was to watch Peking Opera performances at a small theater near my hotel."

In 1990, when Peking Opera celebrated its 200th anniversary, Yuan played the lead role in the piece *Empress Dowager Xiao*, which focuses on the ethnic nomadic tribe Qidan during the Liao Dynasty (916-1125).

In 2001, this Peking Opera piece was adapted into a six-episode TV drama, which combines Peking Opera with contemporary TV, and features Yuan in the lead role of the royal woman.

"The TV drama enabled more audiences, especially the young people, to appreciate Peking Opera," said Yuan.

In 2008, Yuan initiated the idea of shooting a film, the first of its kind in China, based on the Peking Opera piece, *Dui Hua Qiang* (*Silver Spear*). She played the lead role of Jiang Guizhi, a loyal wife.

"In all roles that I play, I try to present women with sophisticated characters and rich emotions. It's not just about the gestures and singing the lyrics," she said.

Yuan now teaches at the National Academy of Chinese Theater Arts and hopes to inspire the next generation with her knowledge and experience of playing *lao dan* roles.