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Peking Opera troupes attract younger audiences to a core art of Chinese culture

By CHEN NAN

chenan@chinadaily.com.cn

It is a typical Thursday night for Zhang Xiurong, a freshman at the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing. The Shanghai native moved to the capital about three months ago to start college. Majoring in finance, she has just finished a higher mathematics class, which she found very difficult.

Now though, instead of going to the library or hanging out with friends, Zhang is heading to the university's auditorium, where nearly 800 students are waiting for a show to start. However, this is not a show by some up-and-coming band, but instead a performance by actors and musicians from the Beijing Peking Opera Company.

"My grandfather is a big fan of Peking Opera. He likes listening to the Peking Opera songs on TV or on radio with his eyes closed, sipping tea," said Zhang. "I've never been to a Peking Opera show and I wondered what it would be like."

Besides the influence of her grandfather, 83, Zhang also gained an interest in Peking Opera from the 1993 movie, *Farewell My Concubine*, directed by Chen Kaige.

Starring Leslie Cheung, Gong Li and Zhang Fengyi, the film tells the story of two male Peking Opera artists in mid-20th century China. It won the Palme d'Or at the 1993 Cannes Film Festival.

"In the movie, the young Peking Opera actors go through hard training and even get harsh physical punishment. I am curious to know what Peking Opera performers are like in real life," Zhang said.

Peking Opera combines singing, dancing, martial arts and acrobatics, and was once enjoyed by both royal families and ordinary people, and catered to audiences of all ages.

However, the art form, known as *jingju* in Chinese, with a history of more than 200 years and inscribed as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2010, is struggling to find relevance nowadays.

To stop Peking Opera from dying out, the Chinese government launched a campaign aimed at attracting younger audiences. An initiative launched in 2006 by the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Finance has been bringing Peking Opera to schools. Artists, from established actors to those just starting out, give lectures to Chinese students of all ages.



Setting the stage for a comeback



From above: Peking Opera performers give various shows at universities in Beijing as part of efforts to arouse young people's interest in the old art form.

PHOTOS BY ZOU HONG / CHINA DAILY

In the auditorium of the University of International Business and Economics, the lights dim, the curtains part, and a young man wearing long whiskers, a black robe and thick-soled boots walks slowly toward the center of the stage to the beating of drums and small cymbals.

"He looks so handsome," Zhang whispered to her classmate.

As the actor uttered lines from *Ji Gu Ma Cao*, a classic Peking Opera piece adapted from the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, a 14th-century novel by Luo Guanzhong, everyone in the room falls silent.

The actor sings in a firm voice, using a wide vocal range, as his long sleeves roll in the air. He receives waves of applause, which finally erupts as he concludes his short performance.

"The role I played is generally called *sheng* in Peking Opera, which is a male role. There are *xiaosheng* (young male roles), *laosheng* (old male roles) and *wusheng* (martial arts male roles)," said the actor Liu Jing.

After Liu's performance, three other young Peking Opera performers display different parts — *dan* (female role), *jing* (painted-face male role) and *chou* (comic male role) — and elaborate on their performances afterwards.

"Though I had to look at the subtitles on the screen, I enjoyed the raw

emotions they delivered onstage," said Zhang, who filmed the performances and shared them via Sina Weibo, China's answer to Twitter.

"It was really beautiful," said Zhang's classmate Zhao Tian'ai, a Beijing native, who, like many young Chinese, learned the piano as a child. "It's just as exquisite as Western opera and the band performs like a small symphony orchestra."

"Love and hatred, vulnerability and fearlessness, life and death, Peking Opera can communicate raw emotions with sophisticated body language that no words can match," said Peking Opera actress Yuan Huiqin, who gave a lecture at the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts in Beijing, which gathered about 500 students from five colleges based in the capital, including Beijing Dance Academy and the Central Conservatory of Music.

Yuan, 51, born in Yichang, Central China's Hubei province, started learning Peking Opera at the age of 10. She is a winner of the Plum Blossom Prize, the highest theater award in China.

"Unlike Hollywood blockbuster movies or concerts by pop stars, Peking Opera is a sophisticated art, which requires the performers to practice for at least five years before they can actually perform onstage," said Yuan.

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