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"Audiences easily get lost while watching Peking Opera shows due to the unique rules for its techniques and slow-paced way of telling stories."

However, Yuan said that since most Peking Opera pieces are adapted from old Chinese folk tales and historic events, the art form is not just a great performing art but also an art, which contains traditional Chinese virtues and values.

Since 2003, Sun Ping, dean of the School of Art and Research at Beijing Foreign Studies University, and a highly regarded Peking Opera artist, has proposed making the art form part of the country's primary and secondary school curriculums.

Sun is also a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), China's top political advisory body.

In her 50s, she has led studies and overseas promotions of Peking Opera at Beijing Foreign Studies University and Renmin University of China. She also wrote a 10-volume series, *The English Translation Series of 100 Peking Opera Classics*, published by the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

"Our nation has already performed so greatly in various ways, including culturally. But for culture, more top-level policy design to facilitate the survival of Peking Opera is needed," she said in an earlier interview.

"When we rethink the world of Peking Opera, it's one of the core arts of Chinese culture and it should reach out to people as much as possible."

Besides Sun, Peking Opera master Mei Baojiu (1934-2016), the ninth son of the most celebrated Peking Opera artist of all time, Mei Lanfang (1894-1961), was also dedicated to promoting Peking Opera to the younger generation.

In 2009, Mei Baojiu, who is also a member of the CPPCC, put forward a proposal to introduce Peking Opera to elementary schools. In March 2012, he submitted a proposal to introduce an animated form of Peking Opera to get more teenagers



Students from the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing try different roles of Peking Opera. A student from Togo (top) tries a painted face male role and a student (above) plays a female role.

PHOTOS BY ZHU XINGXIN / CHINA DAILY

interested in the art.

National Peking Opera Company, founded in 1955 with Peking Opera master Mei Lanfang as its first president, has given nearly 400 shows and workshops across the country, attracting an audience of around 400,000 students, according to Liu Rong, the director of the performance management department of the company.

"Usually we give a 30-minute introduction, which helps the students to comprehend the characters and the stories told through the performances. We also invite students to visit backstage to try on Peking Opera costumes and makeup," said Liu, adding that the company visits schools in cities as well as remote areas, such as those in the southwestern Yunnan and Guizhou provinces.

Besides established Peking Opera artists, younger generation artists share their stories of becoming Peking Opera actors.

"Those young actors are about the similar age to the students and can easily connect with them," she said.

Li Shiyou is deputy director of Beijing Peking Opera Company, one of the largest and most prestigious

Peking Opera troupes. Founded in 1979, the troupe started working with schools to teach students basic knowledge of Peking Opera and demonstrate some classic Peking Opera pieces, including *San Cha Kou* (Divergence) and *Ba Wang Bie Ji* (Farewell My Concubine).

"In the earlier years, we sent just a dozen of Peking Opera artists from our troupe to participate in this program and now we have nearly 100 Peking Opera artists involved due to the rising demand from the school," said Li.

Since 2014, the troupe has worked closely with three primary schools in the Fengtai district of Beijing where the troupe is based.

The number of students attending the Peking Opera classes increased from 465 in 2014 to 2,168 in 2017, and the government's financial support has doubled during the past three years from about 4 million yuan (\$604,000) to 8 million yuan a year.

"We didn't expect the warm feedback of the students and parents, which is very exciting for us. Now, we not only provide knowledge about Peking Opera in classes but also teach them how to perform onstage," Li said.

Infusing new life to old art form

Modern tech and adaptations point way forward for artists trained in centuries-old techniques

By CHEN NAN

In 1790, four famous Anhui Opera troupes came to Beijing as part of the celebrations for the 80th birthday of Emperor Qianlong (1711-99) of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). They proved to be a big hit, which enabled them to stay.

In 1828, some famous Hubei Opera troupes came to Beijing. The artists of the Hubei and Anhui troupes often performed jointly on the stage, and around 1840, Peking Opera began to formally take shape. The art form grew even faster during the reign of the Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908), who was a Chinese opera lover.

In 1904, Peking Opera actor Ye Chunshan opened the country's largest and most established Peking Opera school — Fu Lian Cheng, which trained about 800 top-level performers, including Yuan Shihai and Ma Lianliang.

One of the unique practices of Peking Opera is *nan dan* (men playing the roles of women) as at that time women were forbidden onstage. The *nan dan* performer wears dazzling costumes and sings a soprano aria.

The heyday of *nan dan* was the first half of the 20th century, when Mei Lanfang (1894-1961), Shang Xiaoyun (1900-76), Cheng Yanqiu (1904-58) and Xun Huiheng (1900-68), who have been called the Four Great Dan, established the four *dan* styles that bear their family names.

Mei Lanfang was the first actor to present Peking Opera outside of China. He toured the United States in 1930, visiting New York, Chicago and San Francisco. The tour lasted five weeks rather than the originally scheduled two, due to the great acclaim he received. His son, Mei Baojiu, who died in Beijing in 2016, aged 82, carried on his father's legacy. With no children, Mei Baojiu passed on his teaching to his apprentices, both male and female.

Like many traditional art forms, Peking Opera has been facing an increased market competition and shrinking viewership. However, Peking Opera companies and the government have been seeking to revitalize the art through employing contemporary technologies and offering modern adaptations of old classics.

For example, in 2001, veteran Peking Opera actress Yuan Huiqin adapted the Peking Opera piece, *Empress Dowager Xiao*, which focuses on the ethnic nomadic tribe Qidan during the Liao Dynasty (916-

1125), into a six-episode TV drama. The series took a contemporary approach to Peking Opera and featured Yuan in the lead role.

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

One of the most successful Peking Opera artists among the younger generation is Zhang Huoding. The 46-year-old is one of a few Peking Opera performers who can receive the acclaim usually reserved for a pop star in China.

Zhang's main job now involves teaching at the National Academy of Chinese Theater Arts in Beijing. Born in Baicheng city in Northeast China's Jilin province, Zhang began her studies in Peking Opera in Tianjin in 1986.

Upon graduation three years later, she focused on the Cheng school — one of the four major Peking Opera styles that emerged in the early 20th century — under accomplished performer Zhao Rongchen (1916-96).

The Cheng school, founded by famed Peking Opera master Cheng Yanqiu, is known for its sorrowful and graceful singing, especially when portraying vulnerable and constrained female roles.

Zhang caused a sensation in 2015 by performing the famous Peking Opera pieces, *The Legend of the White Snake* and *The Jewelry Pouch*, at the Lincoln Center in New York.

Given her influence and popularity, the National Academy of Chinese Theater Arts launched an art heritage center named after her in November 2015. The center is dedicated to teaching, performing and research into the Cheng school of Peking Opera.



Zhang Huoding performs *The Legend of the White Snake* at the Lincoln Center in New York in November 2015.

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