

# THE HISTORICAL ORIGIN OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE DRAMA (MING DYNASTY)

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Traditional Chinese drama traces its origin back a few millennia to ancient China, but the one, usually called Chinese opera, started to develop in the 12th century. The Ming dynasty play writers were mostly educated and hold relatively high social status, and chuanqi works were created mainly by scholars. Kunqu was regarded as an elegant part of the culture; it was promoted by scholars, and therefore became highly influential. In the Ming dynasty, southern yiyang tunes fused with Kunqu and spread widely. Yiyang tunes lacked formal rules, was more uninhibited and exciting, therefore more appealing to the local classes and easily fused with local musical styles and produced many high-pitched tunes in numerous local operas. Another important development was the emergence of Shaanxi Opera in the Northwest. During the Ming period, Chinese theatre may be divided into three categories by audience: imperial court, social elite, and the general public. Professional public troupes did not thrive until Ming elite class started to collapse.

**Key words:** Chinese drama; the Ming dynasty; opera; Kunqu; Yiyang.

Chinese drama has a long and complex history. Traditional Chinese drama regularly is musical in nature. These Chinese activities can trace its origin back a few millennia to ancient China, but the one, usually called Chinese opera, started to develop in the 12th century. [2, p. 10]

The origins of Chinese theatre can be traced back 2,500 years. At the beginning of Chinese civilization, shamans in tribal and ethnic groups held considerable power. Sacrificial ritual music and dance performances were considered ways in which shamans could communicate with the gods, and acted as a channel between the gods and man, thus unifying the human and spiritual worlds. Early Chinese theatre developed from, and was closely related to, these sacrificial ceremonies.

Whilst basic theatrical forms had been present from the beginning of Chinese civilization, a more developed theatre did not emerge until the tenth century, thousands of years later than the theatres of ancient Greece and ancient India. In ancient China, theatrical performances consisted of symbolic story-telling by actors dressed as animals who danced and sang to set rhythms, accompanied by music.

Poems, especially those based on the folk songs of The Book of Songs (China's earliest collection of poetry, which appeared between 770–476 BC), were performed by singing and dancing, fusing the emotional effects of litera-

ture with those of music and movement. Sacrificial rituals in the southern state of Chu during the Warring States Period (475–256 BC) also provided opportunities for performance.

The famous poet of the Chu Period, Qu Yuan (340–278 BC), produced several volumes of poetry including *Nine Songs* and *Nine Chapters*, which were adapted for performance at sacrificial ceremonies. «National Martyr» from *Nine Songs*, which describes the memorial ceremony for the national martyrs, was one such adaptation. A large number of Chu poems circulated in southern China and set a basic pattern for large-scale sacrificial ceremonies, where poetry was sung and accompanied by dancing. Although these ceremonies could not be described as “theatre” in a classic sense, they contained all the elements required for theatrical performance. In addition, the comic performances of jesters and entertainers at the courts of the vassal states might also be considered as early forms of theatre.

**The Development of Music and Dance** Rapid social development during the Han Dynasty (202 BC–AD 220) signaled a new phase for theatre, both at court and in civil society. The ancient Chinese usually prayed for a good harvest in springtime and gave thanks in the autumn, which is why ritual singing and dancing at these times was vital, both at court and among common people. The court held large performances for the general public, which, to a certain extent, stimulated town and country entertainments and allowed for the decentralization of theatrical performances. Whilst the royal sacrificial ceremony was highly standardized, in towns and rural areas entertainments gradually evolved through folk artists who made a living from their performances. Assisted by increasing trade between China and the west, singing, dancing and acrobatics from the western regions of China spread to Chang’an (present-day Xi’an) and the political center of the Han also became a global center for multi-cultural entertainment.

Following the Han Dynasty, music and dance developed significantly. The folk song and dance performance *ta-yao-niang* first appeared during the Northern Qi Dynasty (550–577) and developed during the Tang Dynasty (618–907). *Ta-yao-niang* is a family saga. It tells the tale of a woman, bullied at home by her drunken husband, who repeatedly tells passers-by about her miserable life, as her husband beats her in public. The female lead would perform through song, dance and speech, whilst together with a jester the actress would perform a song-and-dance duet (*er ren zhuan*). The popularity of song and dance forms like *Ta-yao-niang*, *Su-mu-zhe*, *Lan-ling-wang* and *Bo-tou* peaked during the Sui (581–618) and Tang dynasties. In Dunhuang it is possible to see many murals from that time which depict the busy and flourishing theatrical life of the era.

Canjun Opera was the most advanced form of early comic theatre in China. It had at its core two roles, the person being mocked, «canjun», and the person doing the mocking, “canghu.” However by the end of the Tang Dynasty, Canjun Opera had evolved to include more performers and more complex plots and dramatic twists. Canjun Opera combined comedy with tragedy, and had a direct impact on the creation of zaju during the Song (960–1279) and Jin (1115–1234) dynasties. Canjun Opera was mostly improvised, allowing for constant innovation in the creation of comic routines. Occasional, impromptu performances gradually became regular shows that were staged during the Tang, Song and Jin dynasties. [2, p. 6-10]

The nanxi of the Song and Yuan dynasties was considered a low art form due to its unsophisticated literary style, and its plays were often written by anonymous authors. The first nanxi work with a known author is Tale of the Pipa by Gao Ming, written in the late Yuan period. Tale of the Pipa elevated the status of nanxi, and was highly regarded by the first Ming Emperor Hongwu. It became a model for Ming dynasty drama. [1, p. 41]. Nanxi and other regional forms, such as Haiyan, Yuyao, and Yiyang tunes developed in Zhejiang, gradually replaced the northern zaju, and by the middle of the Ming dynasty, nanxi had developed into a more complex dramatic form known as chuanqi, which further developed into Kunqu Opera. [6]

The Ming dynasty play writers were mostly educated and held relatively high social status, [11] and chuanqi works were created mainly by scholars. Wei Liangfu created Kunshan tunes modified from tunes of Haiyan from near Hangzhou and Yiyang of Jiangxi, and he combined the nanxi rhythms which often used flute, and the northern zaju where plucked string instruments are preferred. The first Kunqu opera, Washing Silken Gauze (浣紗記, Huan Sha Ji) was created by Liang Chenyu who used Kunshan tunes. Kunqu was regarded as an elegant part of the culture; it was promoted by scholars, and therefore became highly influential. [2, p. 48–66]

In the Ming dynasty, southern yiyang tunes fused with Kunqu and spread widely. Yiyang tunes lacked formal rules, was more uninhibited and exciting, therefore more appealing to the local classes and easily fused with local musical styles and produced many high-pitched tunes in numerous local operas. Another important development was the emergence of Shaanxi Opera in the Northwest with a two-phrase structure and clapper-based instrumentation, introducing a new form of musical style called banqiang (板腔). Its spread was facilitated by a Shaanxi rebel Li Zicheng who ended the Ming dynasty, later influencing the development of Peking Opera during the Qing dynasty. [2, p. 68-73]

During the Ming period (1368-1644), Chinese theatre may be divided into three categories by audience: imperial court, social elite, and the general public. [7, p. 290.]

The Ming imperial court enjoyed opera, and Ming emperors generally kept their music entertainments within the palace. [3, p. 290] Ming theatre, however, had less freedom than the previous dynasty, Yuan. In the Yuan and early Song period, some plays may include a role of the emperor, however, Ming Emperor Taizu prohibited actors from impersonating any imperial members, high officials, or well-respected figures, although such restrictions were not always observed by opera troupes who performed for commoners in public theatre. [9] .

Private theatre troupes featured prominently during Ming China, and government officials, rich merchants, and eunuchs may manage private theatre troupes to entertainment guests in stages built in their private residences, or a sign of status. [8, p. 28–29, 129–132] A female courtesan in late Ming named Ma Xianglan was the only woman known to have owned a private theatre troupe. [10]

Developing a private theatre troupe represented a huge investment; the owners first pick potential actors from poor families or slave households and from performing schools, with more emphasis on their looks, and the owners would invest in further training for these people. The troupe leaders may hire retired actors to teach the actors, and some were trained actors themselves. The actors underwent strict training in singing, dancing, and role-playing techniques, which may take as long as eight years. While the performers were highly skilled, they were also regarded to be of low status in Ming society, as it was common practice for them to provide sexual services, both heterosexual and homosexual. Some actresses become their owners' wives or concubines. The common career span for actors were ten years. When actors passed their teenage years, they had the freedom to retire. [8, p. 36–67].

Professional public troupes did not thrive until Ming elite class started to collapse. [5] Due to the Ming's Confucian influence of gender separation, public theatres were dominated by males. [4, p. 57] Confucian influences extended to the plays; Ming plays often conveyed Confucian teachings, especially in private theatre troupes. For instance, as women desired more equality towards late Ming, Wang Tingne wrote a play called *Shi Hou Ji* (狮吼记) that emphasized male authority over women. [11]

The standard types of Ming actors includes Cai, Hui, and Zhi. Cai is extraordinary talent, and Hui is the wisdom that enables them to utilize their skills with flexibility. The most important one is Zhi, the ability to combine practical and abstract beauty on stage. [5] As for techniques, the actors needed to excel in singing, dancing, and role-playing. These actors developed out-

standing singing and dancing techniques to serve the ultimate goal of creating a character. [8, p. 99]

Western forms like the spoken drama, western-style opera, and ballet did not arrive in China until the 20th century.

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