

[pp. 92-110]

<https://dx.doi.org/10.12795/Fedro/2024.i24.06>

## LA EVOLUCIÓN DE LAS FORMAS HISTÓRICAS DEL TEATRO CHINO Y SU INTEGRACIÓN DE LAS ARTES VISUALES

## THE EVOLUTION OF HISTORICAL FORMS OF CHINESE THEATER AND INTEGRATION OF VISUAL ARTS

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### Resumen:

El teatro musical nacional de China enfatiza su singularidad y su estrecha conexión con las tradiciones culturales y filosóficas de China. Esta forma de arte, que se originó entre los siglos VII y X d.C. y alcanzó su apogeo durante la dinastía Yuan, refleja tradiciones centenarias que la convierte en un elemento importante de la identidad cultural china. Para entender el teatro musical, hay que considerar su papel en la sociedad, donde la música y los rituales eran vistos como encarnaciones de conceptos filosóficos taoístas. La integración de textos canónicos como “Shijing” en las prácticas culturales de esa época subraya la importancia de esta forma de arte en la configuración de la sociedad y su cosmovisión. El desarrollo de las artes teatrales en China representa un proceso complejo y multifacético que ha pasado por diversas etapas de evolución y transformación. Desde el período temprano de la dinastía Song, cuando las formas teatrales apenas comenzaban a plasmarse, hasta el florecimiento del drama *zaju* durante la era Yuan, donde el teatro chino ha experimentó importantes cambios culturales y políticos. Las conquistas, la división del país y la posterior reunificación bajo el dominio mongol contribuyeron no

sólo al intercambio cultural y la interacción entre las tradiciones del norte y el sur, sino también al surgimiento de nuevas formas dramáticas.

**Palabras clave:** teatro nacional, teatro musical, tradiciones, artes dramáticas, cambios culturales

**Abstract:**

China's national musical theater emphasizes its uniqueness and close connection with China's cultural and philosophical traditions. This art form, which originated in the 7th to 10th centuries AD and reached its peak during the Yuan Dynasty, reflects centuries-old traditions, making it an important element of Chinese cultural identity. To understand musical theater, one must consider its role in society, where music and rituals were seen as embodiments of Daoist philosophical concepts. The integration of canonical texts such as "Shijing" into the cultural practices of that time underscores the significance of this art form in shaping society and its worldview. The development of theatrical arts in China represents a complex and multifaceted process that has undergone various stages of evolution and transformation. From the early period of the Song Dynasty, when theatrical forms were just beginning to take shape, to the flourishing of zaju drama during the Yuan era, Chinese theater has undergone significant cultural and political changes. Conquests, division of the country, and subsequent reunification under Mongol rule contributed not only to cultural exchange and interaction between northern and southern traditions but also to the emergence of new dramatic forms.

**Keywords:** national theater, musical theater, traditions, theatrical arts, cultural exchange.

## **Introduction**

The National Musical Theater of China is a unique phenomenon in world culture, combining ancient traditions, philosophy, and modern trends. The musical theater began to emerge between the 7th and 10th centuries AD and continues to develop, preserving its originality and distinctiveness. In this article, we will examine the history of the formation and development of the national musical theater of China, its main forms, and features. The research area of this article is the musical theater with its unique national artistic characteristics.

Research Object: Traditional forms of Chinese theater and their historical development.

Research Aim: To study the historical factors influencing the formation of national forms of musical theater in China based on representative samples of national art.

The National Musical Theater, which includes Peking opera, began to emerge between the 7th and 10th centuries AD. During the reign of the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1280–1367), it finally established itself as a tradition subject to research and systematization. Despite

significant differences in forms of dramaturgy and stage techniques, this tradition has become a stable phenomenon in the cultural life of China.

### **The Evolution of Forms of Chinese Theater**

Chinese culture is of a traditional type. Its main characteristics are the duration and continuity of development, meaning the absence of abrupt changes and revolutions. This is remarkable, considering the turbulent political history of the country, which has experienced numerous foreign invasions and internal disturbances. Despite all this, China remains one of the few countries that have preserved its main cultural traditions for several millennia.

In the process of continuous development, these traditions were constantly enriched, gradually acquiring new features and borrowing many elements from other peoples and cultures. However, the core of the culture remained unchanged. Borrowings were usually adapted and assimilated according to the needs of the native culture.

This is also true for theatrical and musical traditions: to understand many aspects of traditional Chinese theater, one must refer to the earliest periods of Chinese civilization. Ancient melodies have not survived to this day due to the lack of musical notation, but extensive information about the musical philosophy and theory of those times (up to the 4th century AD) allows us to reconstruct the musical thinking system of the ancient Chinese and understand their perception and attitude towards music.

Due to its unique characteristics, such as its acoustic and temporal nature, implying its “intangibility” and “elusiveness,” music was likely perceived as a direct manifestation of the Dao—the great principle that orders the universe: “Music appeared in the Great Beginning [of the appearance of all things], and rules arose after [the appearance of all things].” In ancient China, music was considered a fundamental aspect of being, not a result of individual or collective creativity. It was an integral part of rituals and held state significance. At the courts of the Zhou dynasty rulers and local lords, there were special positions for officials responsible for music. Moreover, sources indicate that for the ancient Chinese, music represented an inseparable unity of sounds, words, and dance.

“Singing, accompanied by playing instruments and dancing movements, is music,” says the ancient canonical book “Li Ji.” It also provides an explanation of the unity of words, music, and gesture: “A song consists of words, that is, of prolonged words. When a person experiences joy, he expresses it with a word. The word does not satisfy him, then he prolongs (sings) the word. The prolonged word does not satisfy him, he adds a choir of musical instruments.” Another quote states: “To express one’s feelings, one uses words. When words are insufficient, one starts to sigh prolongedly. If sighs are not enough, one begins to sing, and if that is still insufficient, the feet themselves start to dance.” This is

an excerpt from a relatively late text, the so-called “Great Preface to the Shijing,” one of the books of the Confucian canon, a collection of ritual chants. The creation of the Four Books dates to the first half of the 1st millennium BC. According to legend, a collection of 300 poems was finally approved and included in the Four Books by Confucius himself, along with works such as the “Book of Changes” (Yijing), the “Shujing” (a collection of information about the mythological and early written period of Chinese history), and the chronicle “Chunqiu” (“Spring and Autumn,” covering events from 722–481 BC).

The Four Books were conceived as a comprehensive collection of knowledge about the structure of the surrounding world and the place of man in it, accumulated by Chinese culture over nearly a millennium of development. The inclusion of the “Shijing” in the Confucian canon emphasizes the significance of syncretic song-and-dance rituals in the worldview of ancient Chinese people.

Historical sources mention not only ritual but also other street and playful forms of early theater. Actors working at the courts of local lords possessed skills in singing, dancing, and acting. They were divided into paiyu (comedians, jesters) and changyu (singer-actors). Historian Sima Qian (145 or 135 BC — c. 86 BC) in one of the chapters of his work “Records of the Grand Historian” dedicated a separate section to the biographies of comedians and court jesters (titled “Biographies of Actors”). According to his information, a talented and resourceful actor often managed to persuade the ruler to change an unjust or absurd decision, which court officials and advisors could not achieve.

In the Han era (206 BC — 220 AD), new forms of performances, such as baixi (hundred entertainments) and jiaodi (wrestling), emerged based on the development of folk song-and-dance art and the performances of court actors. These spectacles were held outdoors during major festivals. According to written sources, these performances included various circus tricks and acrobatic elements such as tightrope walking, fencing, strength competitions, and dances with large animal figure models. Late Han poet Zhang Heng in his extensive ode dedicated to the capital describes a performance as a short scene with a specific plot and several characters. Comments on the ode note that female roles were played by men. Several centuries of internal turmoil and foreign rule in the north of the country, following the fall of the Han dynasty, did not lead to significant advancements in the development of theatrical art.

The artistic specifics of Han-era Chinese theater are characterized by the influence of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, as well as the active development of social and religious conditions. New art forms reflecting the changed social and religious conditions appeared during this period. Han artists felt a greater sense of freedom in perfecting artistic forms, and their creativity became in demand among broader social strata.

The Tang era (618–907 AD) is marked by the intense development of cities, crafts, and trade, as well as the expansion of economic and cultural ties with neighboring countries, leading to significant cultural prosperity and the emergence of new art forms. The artistic specifics of Tang-era Chinese theater include complexity, virtuality, and symbolism. The xiqu theater combines songs, dances, comedic performances, and declamation, as well as folk art forms such as wushu, circus, and puppet shows. Virtuality is manifested in the flexibility of actions with stage time and space, and symbolism is expressed in the conventionality of actors' movements. At the beginning of the Tang dynasty, in the former capital of Chang'an, special entertainment quarters were created, contributing to the formation of a professional actor class. Government support for song-and-dance art is confirmed by the establishment of a court entertainment department (jiaofang), responsible for organizing such performances. During the reign of Emperor Xuanzong (712–756 AD), the "Pear Garden" academy was founded for training professional actors. According to legend, the emperor, being a great music enthusiast, founded this institution as a gift for his beloved concubine Yang Guifei.

Children from aristocratic families in the capital studied musical instruments, vocals, and dances, becoming apprentices. Their participation in the crown prince's court performances emphasized the high social status of talented actors and actresses. However, contemporaries did not perceive the theatrical dance performances at the court as dramatic art but as music, an element of high culture. An example of such a melody is "Rainbow Attire, Feathered Coat," mentioned by many Tang authors and composed by Emperor Xuanzong. This melody was never performed separately, and its title referred to a complex song-and-dance performance prepared by the actors of the "Pear Garden."

It should be noted that, according to many scholars, the melodic foundations were borrowed from external sources, so-called "barbarian" cultures. This phenomenon is related to an important cultural phenomenon of the Tang era. During this period, the active spread of elements of neighboring countries' cultures influenced the musical sphere. The traditional musical system of China changed significantly under the influence of musical elements from Goguryeo, Cambodia, India, and Central Asian states. Simultaneously, street theatrical performances in urban environments of the lower social strata actively developed and matured. Various authors of that time mention small scenes on historical themes, the spread of pantomime, and the so-called "canjunxi" ("small plays about Canjun"). These "plays about Canjun" were improvised satirical dialogues on topical issues, featuring two actors with clearly defined roles—Canjun and Cangu. The first delivered comic lines, while the second assisted him.

Unlike the court theater, which ceased to exist after the fall of the Tang dynasty, the plays about Canjun demonstrated remarkable resilience. They continued to exist and evolve

during the Five Dynasties period and persisted into the Northern Song dynasty, when a new genre of street theater, huajixi (“comic scenes”), emerged from them. From huajixi later emerged Song-era zaju—short scenes on historical themes, which should not be confused with the main genre of theatrical art during the Yuan period.

The similarity in the names of the Song dynasty’s zaju and the Yuan dynasty’s zaju is deceptive, as these genres have little in common and cannot be considered predecessors or sources of each other. However, one feature inherited from the Song dynasty zaju is the system of role types, which was preserved and transferred to Yuan drama. Historical documents confirm the existence of a role type system in Song theater, and archaeological finds in the tomb of a Song official in Shanxi Province have corroborated written sources. Among the artifacts found was a model stage with figurines of actors whose costumes and depictions correspond to descriptions in texts. The troupe consisted of four to five people, mainly members of one family and apprentices of masters. The main role was played by the moni or mo, a positive male character. There were also one or two supporting actors, yinsi, fujing, and fumo, who played secondary roles, and zhuanggu, a disguised official. However, the exact distribution of roles among these types is impossible to determine since the texts of Song plays have not survived, and their content is known only through contemporary accounts.

At the beginning of the Northern Song period (960–1125), there was a rapid growth of cities, an increase in production, and the development of commodity-money relations. This contributed to the formation of a third estate and a unique urban culture among the lower classes. Mass culture developed significantly thanks to the invention of xylography and printing in the 10th century, as well as the townspeople’s desire for entertainment. It is known that as early as the 11th century, religious performances based on legends of the Buddhist saint Mu-Lian, who saved his mother from hell, were held at Buddhist temples in the Northern Song capital, Kaifeng. Special stages near the temples were created for these performances.

In the Song capital, entire districts called wazi (which translates to “tiles”) appeared, where numerous performance venues known as goulan (“curved railings”) were located under tiled roofs. These open stages, surrounded by audiences sitting in tiers, hosted actors of various genres: from sketches and farces to pantomimes, puppet theater, and the newly emerged shadow theater. Additionally, wandering troupes from rural areas performed there.

At the same time, the imperial court’s interest in theatrical performances led to the creation of about 13 divisions responsible for court entertainment in the Northern Song capital. There was also a special staff of officials who managed these entertainments. Court actors were divided into ranks, each corresponding to a specific uniform. It is

known that high-ranking court officials held a kind of “corporate parties” on weekends and holidays, with actors as mandatory participants.

At the beginning of the Song dynasty, there were many forms of stage art. One of them was musical performances of guzi ci, also known as “drum stories.” This genre originated in the Tang era but reached its peak popularity during the Northern Song period.

The musical pantomime chanda was a choreographed performance with a specific plot. Of particular note is the zhugongdiao, which served as a transitional stage to the zaju plays that dominated Yuan dynasty theater. These performances combined singing and declamation and were based on a completed storyline.

An important feature of zhugongdiao was its division into parts, each performed to the melody of a particular tonal system. By the end of the Northern Song period, the distinction between northern and southern melodies, characteristic of medieval China, became evident. Northern melodies were based on a seven-tone scale, while southern ones used a pentatonic scale. Literary sources indicate that Song zhugongdiao used northern seven-tone scales, which is also characteristic of Yuan drama music.

In the 12th century, after the invasion of the Jurchens, northern China came under the rule of a new foreign dynasty. The occupied territories formed the state of Jin. The Song court, controlling only the southern lands, was forced to move the capital to Hangzhou. During this period, two new types of theatrical performances emerged, becoming the foundation of Chinese musical drama. In the south, the genre xiwen, also known as nanxi (“southern theatrical performances”), formed based on folk creativity, while in the north, the genre yuanben became popular. Both forms featured a combination of prose dialogues and poetic arias, fixed role types, and specific patterns of alternating musical fragments, characteristic of all subsequent Chinese dramatic forms.

The differences between the genres lay in their musical foundations (northern melodies relied on a seven-tone scale, while southern ones used a pentatonic scale), organizational aspects of the plays (such as the number of acts), and plots. Northern theater favored historical and fantastical themes, while southern plays mainly addressed everyday issues. Among the preserved works, “Wang Kui,” “About a Woman from the Zhao Clan,” and “Zhang Xie Who Passed the Capital Exams” can be mentioned. However, the number of examples of these genres is very limited, making it difficult to precisely determine their differences during the Southern Song period.

Nevertheless, xiwen and yuanben laid the foundation for two directions in the development of Chinese medieval theater—southern (“nanxi”) and northern (“beiqu”). Significant differences between these directions persisted until the middle of the Ming dynasty, corresponding to the boundary of the 16th–17th centuries.

During the brief reign of the Mongol Yuan dynasty in China, which united Southern and Northern China, Chinese drama experienced a period of flourishing. This rise was partly due to economic changes such as rapid urban growth and the increased role of the third estate, as well as political and cultural factors. At that time, the educated part of Chinese society, which also formed the bureaucratic class, faced severe repression from the conquerors.

The destruction of the traditional bureaucratic system, including the examination system for officials, led to the decline of traditional literary genres such as classical poetry and rhythmic prose. This also contributed to the emergence of educated individuals with literary abilities who could not realize their potential in government service.

With Northern China becoming the center of political and cultural life, the *zaju* genre, which evolved from the Song dynasty's *yuanben* performances, became the most popular. However, the *xiwen* genre continued to exist in the south of the country.

More than a hundred works from the Yuan era have survived to the present day. The artistic features of *zaju* defined the uniqueness of Chinese theatrical art in subsequent centuries. Performances of this genre included dialogues, songs, dances, and acrobatics. However, Yuan *zaju* are distinguished by their strict structure. A play usually consists of four, rarely five, acts (*zhe*). If the plot does not fit into this format, cycles of several plays, each with four acts, are created (for example, "The Western Wing" by Wang Shifu). Each act is performed in a single key using popular melodies selected by the author from the existing song repertoire. The basis of Yuan *zaju* is northern seven-tone melodies, the characteristic features of which are known only from contemporary literary descriptions. In each act, only one character (the main hero or heroine) performs all the arias, written in a single rhyme. Some freedom is allowed in *sezi*—prologues or interludes between acts—where general information about the time and place of the action or the main situation is provided. In such prologues, arias of two main characters may be sung simultaneously. Performances are conducted on an empty stage, which influences the plots (allowing for movement of action in time and space) and the actors' performances, who can describe the imagined environment, changes in time or place, and characterize themselves or their partner's appearance with words.

One of the features of Yuan theater is a complex and branched system of role types compared to the Song tradition. However, this system is not clearly worked out: often the same characters had different names or similar role types, making them difficult to distinguish. Unlike Peking opera, these role types reflected only the general characteristics of the role and did not have a detailed and stable set of stage techniques developed over centuries. Therefore, it is difficult to compile a complete list of Yuan theater role types.



It is known that the playwright actively participated in the creation and staging of the plays, performing the functions of a director. Important scenes were performed slowly and in detail, while secondary episodes were merely indicated.

In a classification compiled in the early 14th century, twelve types of plots are distinguished, although they can be divided into three main themes: historical, mythological, and domestic.

Among the major playwrights of that era is Guan Hanqing, the author of social tragedies (“The Injustice to Dou E That Moved Heaven and Earth”); domestic comedies (“Rescuing the Deceived,” “Xie Tianxiang”); and historical dramas (“Alone at the Banquet,” “Lament for Sunxiao”). Another playwright, Wang Shifu, is known as the author of one of the most famous love dramas of medieval theater, “The Western Wing.” Artistic merits are also found in the historical tragedies “Autumn in the Han Palace” by Ma Zhiyuan and “Rain on the Paulownia” by Bo Pu, as well as his comedy “The Rider by the Wall.”

During the Yuan dynasty, a new genre of plays called chuanqi appeared in southern theatrical traditions. In the initial stage of development, chuanqi borrowed not only the form but also themes, images, and plots from the southern drama nanxi of the Song period. For example, the famous work of this genre “The Lute” by Gao Ming (1340–1379) is based on the plot of the play “Zhang Xie, Who Passed the Capital Exams” by an unknown Song author.

From the very beginning of its existence, chuanqi was noticeably different from contemporary zaju plays due to the absence of strict compositional rules. The number of acts in these plays could vary and often reached several dozen, allowing them to be performed over several evenings.

Unlike zaju, actors in chuanqi were not divided into those who declaimed and those who sang, and in one act, arias could be performed by several actors without tonal restrictions and requirements for continuous rhyme, which enhanced the expressiveness of the language.

Additionally, in the tradition of chuanqi, not only classical canonical melodies for arias but also any popular folk melodies, as well as original melodies created by the performers themselves, were allowed, significantly enriching the musical component of the genre.

Thanks to its free form with great potential for artistic expressiveness, chuanqi gained wide recognition even during the Yuan dynasty. During this period, the process of integrating northern theater into the southern one began, caused by the mass migration of playwrights, actors, and musicians to the south due to internal unrest in the last years of Mongol rule.

During the Ming dynasty (14th–17th centuries), especially from the 16th century, Chinese theater reached its highest development, according to many scholars' research. At that time, the liberation of the country from foreign rule led to rapid economic growth, the revival of cities, and urban culture. The third estate, consisting of artisans and merchants, significantly improved its economic and social position. Wealthy merchants could afford to engage in patronage, create their own theatrical troupes, and invite famous poets, musicians, singers, and actors. Their support became an important stimulus for the development of theatrical art. Additionally, the strengthening of commodity-money relations and the expansion of connections between cities and villages facilitated the spread of new theatrical forms from rural areas to cities, becoming part of urban culture. In this new environment, the reborn creative intelligentsia turned their attention to theater. The beginning of the Ming dynasty marked a new flourishing of spiritual culture, the democratization, and spiritual liberation of the intellectual elite. Literature for a broad audience and theater became popular directions, associated with the rise in popularity of “low” genres. Notably, the formation of new theatrical art depended not only on poets and writers but also on representatives of the lower strata of society, such as actors and musicians.

In the 16th century, conditions in Chinese society began to foster the emergence of a national theater. By the 17th century, the Kunqu drama, also known as Kunshan musical theater after the Kunshan county in Jiangsu province—a popular retreat for the aristocracy—became the first regional form aspiring to this status. Kunshan melodies, belonging to the southern musical style, were predominantly performed on wind instruments. Their popularity grew due to reforms by actor and musician Wei Liangfu, who expanded the orchestra to include string and percussion instruments, and introduced vocal techniques from the northern tradition. Wei Liangfu also developed the theoretical basis for the Kunqu school, detailed in his work “*Xiulu*”, which formulated key principles of performance technique: strict adherence to the tonality of each melody, the duration of hieroglyphic pronunciation, and the rhythmic structure of melodies. Wei Liangfu advocated for pure *cinchuan* singing, arias performed in a chamber setting without speech fragments or stage movement. Arias were grouped into *sanqu* cycles, characterized by the unity of tonality across all melodies in a cycle.

The creation of Kunqu theater is traditionally associated with the renowned musician and playwright Liang Chanyou, also known as Lian Bolun (1509–1581), an avid follower of Wei Liangfu. Liang Chanyou founded a theatrical troupe known for staging his own plays in the Ming dynasty *chuanqi* genre, characterized by a complex and elegant literary style rich in quotations from classical Chinese poetry. Thus, by the 16th century, China had formed a theater that demanded not only exceptional vocal skill from actors but also deep knowledge of ancient poetry and high education. An important aesthetic criterion

was the performer's understanding of aria texts, written not only in wenyuan literary language but also in the enriched wenyane, abundant with quotations and reminiscences. Audiences also required extensive knowledge and good general preparation. Not surprisingly, Kunqu theater was considered aristocratic (yabu), in contrast to folk and mixed-genre (luantan) performances.

During the 16th to 17th centuries, Kunqu theater flourished due to the creative efforts of many outstanding playwrights. Two competing schools emerged during this period, each exerting significant influence on the theater's development.

The Jiangsu school, led by Shen Jin from Suzhou (Jiangsu province), adhered strictly to musical and poetic canons. Its representatives, such as Ye Xianzhu, Liu Tianchen, Wang Zide, and Feng Menglong, made significant contributions to preserving theatrical traditions.

Another direction, led by the renowned playwright Tang Xianzu and writers Wang Shizhen and Ma Zhiyuan, focused more on the content of their works and was willing to deviate from formal rules for expressiveness and credibility.

Tang Xianzu, the founder and key figure of this direction, became famous for works like "The Peony Pavilion", particularly popular for its tale of the love between Du Linxiang and a young scholar she saw in a dream while strolling in a garden. This work has survived in the repertoire of modern Beijing opera theater in the form of two excerpts: "The Walk in the Garden" and "The Interrupted Dream".

In the early 17th century, Kunqu theater reached its peak, spreading across the country. However, by the mid-17th century, the situation changed as the theater faced difficulties due to the Manchu invasion and military events. During this period, Kunqu gave way to more popular Yang opera melodies, which were better adapted to the tastes of a broader audience.

Yang opera was characterized by clear rhythmic melodies, dynamic battle scenes, and simple performance techniques, making it appealing to viewers. Yang actors adapted Kunqu plays to their musical characteristics and also staged works based on popular novels and chronicles, resulting in multiple versions of the same plot in folk theaters.

By the late 17th to early 18th centuries, Kunqu became a theater for the elite, preventing it from becoming a national theater. This elite reputation was upheld by two playwrights of the late 17th to early 18th centuries: Hong Sheng and Kun Shangzhen.

In the 18th century, the popularity of Kunqu declined, and the number of troupes performing in this genre decreased. The main centers for Kunqu became the cities of Yangzhou and Beijing. Yangzhou retained traditions of patronage and theater support

among the wealthy merchant class, which played an important role in the formation of a new branch of Chinese musical theater—capital drama or Beijing opera.

### **Visual arts play a crucial role in the development of Chinese theater.**

Visual arts is an important source of inspiration. Traditional motifs such as geometric patterns, depictions of the moon and lightning, and stylized drawings of plants and animals are employed within it. These elements are reflected in the costumes, stage decorations, and props of Chinese theater, enhancing its beauty and expressiveness.

In Chinese theater, the appearance of a character and their attire can change based on their emotional state or life situations. Costumes, their shades, vivid makeup, and changing masks serve as keys to the character's inner world, conveying more to the audience than words can express. Each detail holds meaning understandable to the Chinese audience. The color palettes and costume forms allow the audience to instantly grasp the character's personality and social status, enabling them to fully appreciate the actors' skills.

Understanding color symbolism is best achieved through the traditional system of the five elements known as Wu Xing. Chinese culture categorizes the universe and all its components into five categories: wood, fire, metal, water, and earth. Each element symbolizes life processes occurring in both humans and the universe. Colors are integrated into this system as well, with five primary colors forming the normative palette of Chinese culture—known as the “five colors”—each carrying a specific cosmological meaning. These colors include yellow, blue-green, red, white, and black, corresponding to the center, east, south, west, and north respectively.

All these colors originate from the cultural and natural-geographical conditions of ancient China. Yellow symbolizes loess soils, while blue-green embodies the bright spring foliage of trees. Red, like in other cultures worldwide, is associated with the sun and fire, possibly also due to the red earth of southern China. White clearly relates to the snow-covered peaks of the Tibetan-Qinghai Plateau, while black evokes the distant flow of the Yellow River. It's important to note that each of these “colors” represents a fundamental element of the chromatic spectrum, which can significantly differ from the meanings accepted in European color theory.

Ornamentation on clothing, featuring mythical creatures, fish, birds, animals, flowers, and ideograms, holds particular significance, revealing aspects of a character's personality.

Ornaments in the form of dragons on costumes demonstrate the high status of their wearer: such attire is only accessible to emperors or influential generals. Parade robes known as “man” (蟒), intended for performers playing imperial roles and high-ranking officials, are adorned with these patterns; military characters wear a type of armor known as “kao” (靠). Dragon motifs are traditionally considered masculine and symbolize

ascension, inspiration, and change. Popular patterns with auspicious symbolism include: “dragon and phoenix bringing luck”, “two dragons playing with a pearl”, “dragon flying, tiger running”, “dragon flying, phoenix dancing”, “dragon bringing rain from clouds”, “dragon as master of floods exhaling mist”, and others. Additionally, there are continuous closed patterns representing a simplified dragon image, symbolizing endless happiness and luck.

On warriors’ costumes, it is common to see depictions of tigers or lions, symbolizing their high level of martial arts skill, courage, determination, and sometimes a sharp temperament. To demonstrate that a character is capable of controlling their hot temper and acting calmly, figures of lions or tigers are incorporated into circular patterns on their clothing. On the attire of elderly officials, images of pine trees and cranes are often found, symbolizing longevity. These motifs are frequently combined with buzi patches (補子), insignia for officials. These patches come in two types: with images of birds (for civil officials) and animals (for military officials). They typically have a square shape and are attached to the chest and back.

The image of a mythical unicorn with a dragon’s head symbolizes an influential person, possibly a master of intrigue. The yin-yang symbol (or its variation with “fish yin-yang”) is associated with wise and thoughtful characters who contemplate the future and possess profound knowledge. This symbol is often combined with the bagua pattern (八卦, “eight trigrams”) and used on the costumes of wise advisors or scholars.

The phoenix image is commonly used to adorn the attire of empresses and may be accompanied by cloud motifs resembling meandering patterns. These designs are applied to the women’s court attire known as gongzhuang (宮妝), which traditionally consists of a brightly colored red or pink double-breasted costume. Gongzhuang, slightly shorter than man robes, features wide and long sleeves and includes a long skirt decorated with a multicolored embroidered sash with fringe. Over this, a double-breasted yunjian (雲肩, “cloud shoulder”) cloak is worn, resembling a round collar capelet. This cloak usually covers only the shoulders, has a wide hem, and is adorned with floral patterns.

In addition to phoenixes, women’s clothing is often decorated with floral motifs such as peonies or plum blossoms. Peonies symbolize wealth and prosperity, making costumes with this ornament preferred for performers playing roles of women, daughters of officials or landowners, concubines, or divine characters. Plum blossoms are associated with youth and pure love.

The cloud pattern serves four important functions: it separates other ornaments, creating distinct spaces for each; unifies all decorative elements into a cohesive composition; fills empty spaces; and enhances the overall expressiveness of the design. Symbolically, this pattern is associated with the Chinese cultic concept of heaven. Its significance lies in

the homophony of the words “cloud” (云 yún) and «luck» (运 yùn), making the cloud a symbol of luck and happiness.

The color of stage costumes plays an equally significant role. In traditional Chinese opera, there is a color-coded system for attire, dividing colors into “upper” and “lower” categories. The “upper” colors include red, green, black, white, and yellow, while the “lower” colors include blue, purple, light green, pink, and cream. Leading characters wear costumes in “upper” colors, whereas “lower” colors are used for supporting roles. These ten colors each have a specific function: they create a rich palette for the stage environment, and their various combinations highlight contrasts and change the mood of the characters.

Makeup completes the character’s appearance, making it cohesive. In Chinese theater, alongside traditional makeup, masks are also used. It is believed that a mask contains the spirit of the character, leading to the complete integration of the actor into the theatrical portrayal from the beginning of the performance. Masks and makeup, through skillful use of colors and symbols, reveal the character’s nature to the audience, demonstrating both their external features and inner emotions. This becomes an ideal way to express hidden emotions and motives of the character. Colors play a crucial role in their depiction: red signifies selflessness and courage, black signifies integrity and directness, white signifies cruelty and cunning, green signifies spiritual strength. Blue intensifies the meaning of green, sometimes emphasizing excessive cruelty. Gold and silver colors give mystical traits to characters, often used to depict spirits and immortals, while a purple shade symbolizes justice. Bright colors in mask design aim to create a complex image where each color indicates the dominant qualities of the character.

The swift transformation of masks through hand gestures (变脸 biànliǎn, literally “changing faces”) is the most spectacular aspect of Sichuan opera. Biànliǎn is known as “one of China’s closely guarded secrets,” passed down through generations exclusively along male lines, because women would leave their families when they married, increasing the likelihood of the secret being revealed. The strong desire to decipher the hidden methods of this theatrical art has always remained very strong. There are several theories about the origin of this unique phenomenon. One theory suggests that the idea of changing masks is associated with the image of noble robbers, for whom changing faces helped to remain unnoticed and evade arrest. As plays about them became popular, there was a need to change the appearance of actors. Another hypothesis suggests that during the genre’s formation period, actors often played multiple roles in one performance, and the biànliǎn art excellently solved this problem.

Early mask-changing techniques included several main methods. The first, called “blowing the face” (吹脸 chuīliǎn), involved the actor holding powder, gold leaf, and other

cosmetics in their hand or in a stage prop. When needed, they blew these substances in a way that the powder adhered to a specially prepared face. The second method, “applying the face” (抹脸 mǒliǎn), involved the actor hiding pigment in their palm, eyebrows, or sideburns, then discreetly rubbing it onto their face at the right moment during the performance. This technique could also change the color of the beard if the paint was hidden beforehand. The third method, “using breathing practices” (运气变脸 yùnqì biànlǎn), was based on qigong breathing exercises, where the actor, holding their breath, made their face turn red or white without using makeup. The most complex technique used in modern theater is «pulling the face» (扯脸 chěliǎn). In this method, masks made of thin silk or damask are layered on top of each other. Each mask is attached to the actor’s costume with a silk thread, so that with the movement of the hand or head, one mask disappears, revealing the next one. The first mask is pulled off the actor’s head or hidden inside their clothing under the collar with other threads. Initially, masks were made of paper and used only once because they deformed when removed, but silk masks quickly disappeared under clothing and could be reused many times. Depending on the actor’s skill and speed of movement, they can change up to seven masks in sixty seconds. Usually, the moment of mask change is accompanied by a bright musical accent, partly distracting the audience’s attention

## **Conclusion**

Chinese theater has undergone a long journey of development, starting from ritual performances and evolving into professional dramas. Throughout different periods of history, new genres and forms of theater emerged, including pantomimes, circus performances, comedies, dramas, and operas. China’s national musical theater emphasizes its uniqueness and close connection with China’s cultural and philosophical traditions. This art form is an important element of Chinese cultural identity and reflects centuries-old traditions. To understand musical theater, it is essential to consider its role in society and the historical events that influenced its development.

Visual arts are inseparable from Chinese theater, representing a unique language through which multi-layered symbolic meanings and emotions of characters are conveyed to the audience. Costumes and ornaments inspired by ancient Chinese motifs are crucial elements of the dramatic and visual expressiveness of theater. From geometric patterns to elegant depictions of mythical creatures, each aesthetic decision carries symbolism understood by the Chinese audience.

In Chinese theater, every element—whether color, pattern, or costume shape—holds significance, helping the audience instantly discern the status, character, and inner world of the hero. For example, dragons on the attire of emperors and generals symbolize power and inspiration, while tigers and lions on warrior costumes symbolize courage

and martial prowess. Peonies and plum blossoms on women's attire signify wealth, prosperity, and pure love. This symbolism not only embellishes the stage but also creates a deep cognitive context for audience perception.

The color-coded system deserves particular attention, dividing colors into "upper" and "lower" categories, where each shade conveys its emotional and social message. These distinctive features help the audience better understand the events on stage and engage with the plot on a deeper level.

Ultimately, Chinese theater, with its rich arsenal of visual tools, communicates its stories not only through acting mastery but also through multi-layered artistic images. This synergistic approach makes it a unique phenomenon that integrates drama, art, and symbolism into a unified work, leaving a profound impression on the imagination of viewers.



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