

## **PEKING OPERA MALE DAN ACTORS: THE NEW SITUATION OF INHERITANCE IN MAINLAND CHINA**

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### **Abstract**

In the realm of Chinese Peking Opera performance art, male "dan" actors play an indispensable and influential role in shaping the performance system and artistic genres of Peking Opera. This article focuses on the current status of the inheritance of male "dan" actors in contemporary mainland China and the underlying issues associated with this phenomenon. In mainland China, debates persist regarding the necessity of continuing the tradition of male "dan" actors in Peking Opera. However, it is undeniable that over the course of more than 200 years, from the inception of Peking Opera to the present day, male "dan" actors have consistently garnered attention and passed down their artistic legacy. Furthermore, this tradition of inheritance has evolved in response to contemporary circumstances. This article explores this inheritance within the context of its historical background, the communities involved, and the content being transmitted. Finally, taking into account the imperative of preserving Peking Opera's "dan" roles and the changing aesthetic preferences of modern audiences, this article offers insights and recommendations regarding the new dynamics of inheriting the tradition of male "dan" actors in contemporary mainland China.

**Key words:** Inheritance; New situation; Peking Opera Male Dan actors; Mainland China

### **Introduction**

In China's over 5,000 years of history, culture, and art, Peking Opera unquestionably holds a significant place. Peking Opera is regarded by the Chinese as the "national opera," and it carries a profound historical background and deep cultural connotations. Chinese Peking Opera, also known as "Jingxi" or "national opera," originated in Beijing and is one of the most famous and influential forms of Chinese traditional theater, considered a representative of Chinese culture. Peking Opera integrates various cultural elements, including music, singing, dancing, acting, martial arts, and drama. Combined with its distinctive makeup, costumes, and props, Peking

Opera performances are both rigorous and standardized. The themes of Peking Opera cover a wide range of topics, often drawing from historical stories, legends, wars, and palace life to convey intricate narratives and character emotions.

Despite facing new challenges in modern society, Peking Opera is still cherished by many as a precious heritage of Chinese traditional culture and continues to exert influence both domestically and internationally. The formation of Peking Opera as an art form was not a sudden occurrence. As one of the most iconic symbols of Chinese performance culture, Peking Opera is often employed to represent the beauty of Chinese culture and art and, by extension, China itself. Within the unique realm of Peking Opera, the art of "dan" roles, established by male actors, has played a pivotal role throughout its history and development. "Dan" refers to all female characters in Peking Opera performances, and the history of male "dan" actors can be traced back to the Qing Dynasty during the reign of Emperor Qianlong. Due to societal norms at the time, women were not allowed to perform on stage, necessitating male actors to portray female characters. Over time, this form of performance was gradually accepted and recognized by audiences, evolving into a distinctive style and ultimately becoming an indispensable artistic category within Peking Opera.

A qualified Peking Opera male "dan" actor undergoes rigorous professional training from a young age, developing proficiency in both external aspects such as voice and physicality and internal aspects like techniques and emotional expression. They must not only embody the fundamental characteristics of female roles but also convey the personalities and emotions of various characters through artistic performance. Depending on the character's age and identity, male "dan" roles can be further categorized into "qingyi" (young female roles), "huadan" (vivacious female roles), "daomadan" (female warrior roles), and more. Although the number of Peking Opera male "dan" actors in mainland China is now quite limited, the training methods and performance techniques for all female actors still adhere to the standards set by the original male "dan" actors. The male "dan" of Chinese Peking Opera, as a significant component of Peking Opera art, possesses a profound history and tradition. Their roles in Peking Opera are closely intertwined with its inheritance and evolution, evident from the development process and performance characteristics.

Amidst social changes and the evolution of theatrical arts, Peking Opera male "dan" actors face the dual challenges of inheriting tradition and fostering innovation. In summary, Chinese Peking Opera male "dan" actors, as a part of Peking Opera culture, bear rich historical and traditional significance. Their performance style and techniques continue to evolve through a blend of tradition and innovation, contributing significantly to the unique charm of Peking Opera.

While modern China now allows female actors to perform on stage, Peking Opera male "dan" actors persist and continue to develop. Their performances blend tradition with innovation, adapting to the aesthetic and cultural preferences of contemporary audiences. Male "dan" actors in Peking Opera undergo rigorous training and education to master unique performance skills, ensuring the continued legacy of this tradition and its revitalization on modern artistic stages.

### **Methodology**

The objective of this article is to delineate the contemporary circumstances surrounding the inheritance of male "dan" actors in Peking Opera within mainland China. To achieve this objective, the article employs three distinct methodologies, the outcomes of which can enhance

the general understanding of the relationship between Chinese Peking Opera as an art form and the male "dan" performers. This comprehension, in turn, aids in gaining a more nuanced perspective on the contemporary male "dan" community in mainland China and contributes to the safeguarding and transmission of Peking Opera's "dan" roles to a certain extent.

Firstly, a comprehensive review and analysis of extant literature and documentation concerning Peking Opera male "dan" actors were undertaken. Secondly, a combination of direct and indirect observation techniques was employed to gain insights into the authentic professional and personal lives of diverse Peking Opera male "dan" actors. Lastly, the information amassed through these approaches was systematically organized, and experts, scholars, and professionals with pertinent expertise were enlisted for interviews. These interviews encompassed multifaceted aspects of Peking Opera male "dan" actors, resulting in a comprehensive synthesis.

## **Results and Discussions**

### **Background of Inheritance**

The development of Peking Opera male "dan" actors in different periods has been influenced by specific socio-cultural contexts and national cultural and artistic policies. Concerning the development of the inheritance of Peking Opera male "dan" actors in mainland China, we can broadly divide it into two periods: the 1980s to the early 21st century (1980-2000) and the period after the 21st century (2000-2022), with a particular focus on the latter period (2000-2022).

The period from the 1980s to the early 21st century holds significant historical importance for Chinese society as a whole and represents a pivotal era that would profoundly affect China's future development. The comprehensive implementation of the policy of "Reform and Opening Up" not only reformed China's socio-economic development processes and improved living standards materially but also led to a renewal of ideas and concepts among a generation of Chinese. With the gradual openness of people's minds and the increasing acceptance of novel external influences, perceptions of certain traditional elements or phenomena began to change. There was a notable increase in the openness, understanding, and acceptance of various cultural phenomena. Society was evolving, moving towards a state where all functions harmoniously coordinated with each other. The notion that "what exists is reasonable" gained acceptance in culture and the arts, embraced by an increasing number of individuals within society.

As Chinese President Xi Jinping remarked at the "Celebration of the 40th Anniversary of Reform and Opening Up," "Reform and Opening Up is a great revolution in the history of the Chinese people and the Chinese nation's development." China's development history has never been separate from culture and the arts. In the post-Reform and Opening Up era, Chinese society achieved political stability, economic growth, public well-being, and cultural and artistic endeavors thrived in this favorable environment. For instance, the transition from the eight model operas of the Cultural Revolution era to the revival and revitalization of over 300 traditional theatrical genres after Reform and Opening Up was made possible by a commitment to advancing socialist advanced culture and the construction of Chinese socialist culture with distinctive characteristics. This was further fueled by a strong demand among the populace for the development of socialist spiritual civilization.

During this period, numerous aspects of China's outstanding traditional culture were discovered, rescued, protected, inherited, and promoted. The inheritors behind these exceptional traditions were safeguarded and respected. Moreover, cultural and artistic endeavors during this era progressively integrated with patriotism, collectivism, and the spirit of socialism. This prompted more people to learn about and study these cultural and artistic treasures, allowing them to thrive and persist to the present day.

From the inception of Reform and Opening Up to the onset of the 21st century, Chinese social development has consistently achieved remarkable accomplishments. These accomplishments are evident in various aspects of society, including politics, economics, technology, education, culture, healthcare, and particularly in the realm of socio-cultural development. Under the backdrop of striving to build a moderately prosperous society in all respects, the ideals and cultural self-confidence of the Chinese people from all ethnic groups have grown stronger. Leveraging the proliferation and dissemination of high-tech tools via the internet, China's national cultural image, cultural soft power, and the global influence of Chinese culture have witnessed significant enhancement. In a holistic sense, the 21st-century culture and arts are more closely intertwined with the general populace, reflecting the reflections and demands of different people in contemporary times regarding culture and the arts.

When material needs are satisfied, individuals shift their focus towards higher spiritual aspirations. Present-day society is highly interconnected, and this robust connectivity not only poses challenges but also presents numerous opportunities across various facets of society. These opportunities do not only affect economic development but also facilitate the promotion and propagation of cultural and artistic endeavors. Simultaneously, cultural and artistic expressions in this era emphasize individual participation and freedom. "Culture belongs to the nation, the world, but more so to the people." People are the masters of the nation and society, and naturally, they are the masters of culture and the arts in this era. Some artists can become household names overnight, gaining fame in their respective fields. However, there are also those who, in a single night, may fall out of favor with the public, thus losing their future prospects.

Contemporary Chinese society is relatively equitable, providing a platform for everyone, as well as all forms of culture and art, to choose their own path, grow, compete, and thrive. The society we presently inhabit is indeed the best era in history. Therefore, true understanding of our current socio-cultural environment, the ability to grasp its characteristics, adapt to its developmental trends, and make timely adjustments to one's own trajectory, allows any individual, culture, or art to find its place in this free, fair, stable, and prosperous societal milieu.

### **The Actor Community of Inheritance**

In the past, individuals engaged in Peking Opera or traditional Chinese opera performances, regardless of their roles, were generally referred to as Peking Opera actors or traditional opera actors, and there was no specific designation for male actors performing "dan" roles. Even today, some male "dan" actors may not commonly use this term to describe themselves.

Due to the influence of the socio-cultural context of the 1960s to the 1980s, the cultivation of Peking Opera male "dan" actors in the country remained relatively stagnant. While there were no explicit prohibitions on training male "dan" actors as seen during the later stages of the People's Republic of China, most formal drama schools and Peking Opera troupes did not

openly recruit and train male "dan" actors during that period. Consequently, in the 1980s and 1990s, due to a lack of young male actors specializing in "dan" roles, we primarily saw artists like Mei Baojiu, Song Changrong, Zhao Rongchen, Bi Guyun, and Zhang Junqiu, who were established male "dan" artists.

These veteran artists can be considered as growing up with New China and have personally witnessed the development and changes in Peking Opera performance art, especially in the realm of "dan" roles. Additionally, these artists share a common trait: they all studied under the founders of the four major schools of Peking Opera "dan" performance, known as the "Four Great Dan" of Peking Opera. Some, like Mei Baojiu, are even the direct descendants of renowned Peking Opera master Mei Lanfang. Therefore, whether in terms of performance skills or cultural and artistic cultivation, these performers have excelled in learning, inheriting, and promoting the most authentic and quintessential aspects of "dan" role performance. These aspects are often considered irreplaceable, and as such, they have become a permanent cultural treasure for the nation and the era.

In addition, there are Peking Opera "dan" masters like Wen Ruhua and Wu Rujun. Due to their affiliations with Peking Opera troupes and family backgrounds, they had certain advantages that allowed them to choose to learn "dan" role performance. Through their dedication and talent, they have become well-known "dan" role performers who are beloved by the audience and are making efforts in their own ways to ensure the inheritance and dissemination of Peking Opera "dan" role performance art.

From the Reform and Opening Up period to today, male "dan" actors in Peking Opera have experienced changes in terms of quantity, quality, and influence. Some of these changes are encouraging, while others are regrettable, even distressing. However, regardless of the circumstances, male "dan" actors have once again become a part of the lives of the general public. In this new era, they are not limited to themselves alone. They use their advantages and fame, whether in the field of culture and the arts or in media promotion, to explore new possibilities for Peking Opera "dan" role performance art.

In recent years, through various media and public platforms, the fame and popularity of existing male "dan" actors have been boosted, and the term "male 'dan'" has become widely known among the public. "Male 'dan'" has naturally become synonymous with male actors who engage in and perform this art. As a result, in many occasions and performances, you can often hear the introduction of "male 'dan.'" However, whether one can be considered a true Peking Opera "dan" and whether all male actors who perform "dan" roles can be called "Peking Opera male 'dan'" are professional questions that the general public may not necessarily be clear about or deeply concerned with.

Today, in mainland China, there are four Peking Opera male "dan" actors known as the contemporary "Four Great Dan." They are Hu Wenge (Mei school), Mou Yuandi (Shang school), Yang Lei (Cheng school), and Yin Jun (Xun school). They have earned recognition from audiences for their appearance, singing abilities, and performances and enjoy considerable fame within the Peking Opera community. They are frequently featured in large-scale performances and events and often appear on television and in the media. In turn, their apprentices, such as Bate, have also gained recognition and are seen as the next generation of inheritors of Peking Opera "dan" performance.

Hu Wenge (born in 1967) currently works as an actor at the Beijing Peking Opera Theater and is arguably the most well-known male "dan" actor today. His close association with the late Peking Opera artist Mei Baojiu has led him to appear in numerous high-profile performances and events. In addition to his professional commitments, he is frequently invited to participate in programs and shows on major television stations, and his performances have been witnessed both domestically and internationally. Thanks to his influence, his disciple Bate is gaining recognition and is considered the next inheritor of the Mei school of Peking Opera "dan" performance.

Yang Lei (born in 1978) is currently employed at the National Peking Opera Company in Beijing. His public appearances are not as frequent, which may lead to lesser public familiarity. Yin Jun (born in 1988), who graduated from the Beijing Opera School and the Chinese National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts, has dedicated more of his efforts to guiding and participating in the production of theatrical and film works based on traditional Chinese opera themes, achieving commendable results.

Mou Yuandi (born in 1983) is currently a professor at the Affiliated School of Traditional Opera at the Shanghai Theatre Academy. Apart from his routine teaching of Peking Opera, he is also involved in directing and advising on theatrical and film works related to traditional Chinese opera. His expertise is highly regarded by professionals in the Peking Opera industry. He places great emphasis on improving his own professional skills and continues to learn and rehearse outstanding classical works. Unlike the three actors in Beijing, Mou Yuandi has chosen to work and live in Shanghai. He dedicates most of his time to self-improvement, training, and passing down his knowledge to his students. This dedication has honed his profound expertise in traditional Chinese opera. As he puts it, "I can perform other people's roles, but others may not necessarily be able to perform mine."

Additionally, there are other male "dan" actors who have gained recognition through talent competitions, performances in variety shows, and online live streaming platforms. These include Liu Xinran, who successfully transitioned from being a civil servant to a Peking Opera "dan" actor, Dong Fei, who aims to revive Kunqu opera male "dan" roles, Yao Yiyao, who has appeared in numerous film and television productions, and Guo Yu'ang, known as the "TikTok opera anchor." However, it should be noted that not all male students who perform "dan" roles can be referred to as "male 'dan'." The definition of Peking Opera male "dan" in contemporary times will be explained in detail in the subsequent articles.

### **The Continuation of Tradition**

Even today, the development of Peking Opera male dan performers faces a practical and somewhat awkward issue: the risk of fading into obscurity once again. We can only revisit and study the performances of the older generation of artists through archived audiovisual materials. In the past, these esteemed artists rarely self-identified as male dan performers, and their performances were not singled out as particularly distinct due to their gender. When introduced to audiences, their performances were typically categorized into "color-singing" (with elaborate costumes and makeup) and "clear-singing" (without elaborate costumes or makeup). Nevertheless, audiences generally preferred their portrayals of characters in colorful attire. However, due to their age at the time, most of these older artists did not possess the ideal physical attributes to don elaborate costumes, whether in terms of appearance or physique. Consequently, it was common to see them perform in Western suits, traditional Tang-style

clothing, or Zhongshan suits. Moreover, a common trait among male dan masters, both then and now, is their short hairstyles. This visual and auditory contrast accentuates the "neutral beauty" characteristic of Peking Opera male dan artistry.

Regarding performance venues, aside from television recordings and program productions, performances typically occurred in theaters affiliated with the artists' theater troupe or in renowned theaters within their cities. Most provinces and major cities in China had their own Peking Opera troupes, such as the Beijing Peking Opera Troupe, Tianjin Peking Opera Troupe, Shanghai Peking Opera Troupe, Hubei Provincial Peking Opera Troupe, and Yunnan Provincial Peking Opera Troupe. Even during that time, opportunities to witness performances by male dan artists were becoming increasingly scarce. Their appearances on television, especially in major variety shows, offered audiences a glimpse of their artistry. Another significant medium was Peking Opera audiovisual recordings.

The Chinese Peking Opera audiovisual project, initiated in 1985 and completed its first phase in 2022, played a crucial role in preserving and propagating classic Peking Opera works. This project synchronized audio recordings of the original vocal performances of master artists with contemporary actors' stage performances. In some cases, it featured the original stage performances of the master artists coupled with the voices of other actors, creating enduring recordings and preserving or presenting these classical works to a wide audience. Many enthusiasts appreciated these recordings because they allowed them to enjoy both the timeless artistry of the masters and the talents of contemporary performers. However, contemporary male dan performers typically have fewer opportunities to participate in audiovisual projects. They primarily rely on television programs or live theater performances for exposure.

From the period of reform and opening up until today, the male dan performing arts community has witnessed changes in quantity, quality, and influence among its members. Some changes are cause for celebration, while others are regrettable and even saddening. Regardless, Peking Opera male dan performers have once again become a part of mainstream society. In this new era, they are not limited solely to their performances. They leverage their expertise and fame in various fields, contributing to the continued evolution of Peking Opera male dan artistry in both cultural and media contexts.

In recent years, the promotion and recognition of male dan performers have surged due to extensive coverage on various public media platforms. Audiences have become accustomed to the simplified label of "male dan." Consequently, "male dan" has become the ubiquitous term for male actors practicing this art form. In many instances and performances, it is common to hear them introduced as such. However, the definition of a true Peking Opera male dan and whether all male actors portraying female roles in Peking Opera can be considered "Peking Opera male dan" remain complex questions, often not fully understood by the general public. In contemporary mainland China, there are four male dan performers recognized by the industry and audiences as the "Four Great Male Dan" of their generation: Hu Wenge, Mou Yuandi, Yang Lei, and Yin Jun. They have gained recognition for their appearance, vocal skills, and performances, earning substantial fame within the Peking Opera community. They are frequently featured on television and in media coverage. These four male dan performers can be considered the first generation of male dan performers in China's reform and opening-up era, benefiting from the more enlightened social conditions.



Take Mou Yuandi as an example. He developed a deep interest in female role performances from a young age, displaying natural talent. After studying drama in school and with the support of teachers and school approval, he decided to learn female role performances and has become a versatile female role performer today. As he stated, "I am fortunate because learning female roles also requires opportunities. Many people want to learn but lack the chance, so they cannot acquire the skill." Another example is Hu Wenge, who, prior to entering the Peking Opera world, was a cross-dressing singer and not formally trained in Peking Opera. His encounter with the renowned Peking Opera artist Mei Baojiu and his dedication and hard work led him to become the third-generation inheritor of Mei school male dan.

Contemporary male dan performers have become well-known, thanks in part to modern media dissemination. The methods of traditional television and theater performances have been discussed earlier, but another significant mode of indirect performance is through film and television productions. Notable examples include classic films like "Farewell My Concubine" and "Farewell, My Love" and the recent popular TV drama "Beyond the Blossoms." These productions directly portray Peking Opera male dan artists and Peking Opera masters, showcasing numerous male dan performances. Some even invited Peking Opera male dan masters as artistic consultants or directly engaged renowned male dan performers for voice acting and singing, enriching the characters' performances. This represents a contemporary fusion of performance styles within the

### **Peking Opera male dan tradition.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on all offline performances during this period. Simultaneously, it has given rise to a new mode of performance: online performances. This explains why information and performances related to Peking Opera male dan are now easily accessible on self-media platforms in mainland China. Platforms such as Douyin, Weibo, Kwai, and Bilibili have undeniable advantages in terms of speed and reach in media dissemination compared to traditional television and theater. Many male dan performers, while specializing in Peking Opera, have gained recognition through these platforms and have quickly accumulated their fan base and followers. This phenomenon has undoubtedly increased the popularity of Chinese traditional opera, Peking Opera, and male dan performers in contemporary society, inspiring many to learn and imitate this art form.

Finally, let's consider the content of their performances. Peking Opera male dan performers predominantly focus on traditional works rather than modern dramas. Their performances primarily encompass classic pieces that are well-known to audiences. As Mou Yuandi, a representative of contemporary male dan performers, said, "If a master's artistry scores 100, then what I've learned might only be 60, and what I pass on to my students might only be 40..." Today, audiences in mainland China are more likely to watch these enduring classical works. However, savvy young actors integrate contemporary audience preferences and make appropriate innovations and adaptations, infusing traditional works with vitality and making them more appealing to modern audiences.

### **Conclusion and Suggestion**

Contemporary Peking Opera male dan performers in China encompass a diverse group, including veteran male dan artists, renowned professional male dan actors, emerging popular



male dan actors, and amateur male dan enthusiasts. The number of performances and the range of characters portrayed by Peking Opera male dan actors have not been explicitly documented. Their development characteristics have been influenced by various social environments and cultural policies at different times. These differences manifest in their performance styles, venues, and the content of their performances.

Peking Opera male dan actors rarely refer to themselves as "male dan," and the state's support for their training remains relatively stagnant. Currently, the active presence on the Peking Opera stage primarily consists of veteran male dan artists. They have learned, inherited, and promoted the most authentic and essential aspects of Peking Opera female role performance, which are irreplaceable and challenging to replicate.

In the 21st century, Chinese culture and arts are closely intertwined with the preferences and demands of the contemporary populace. In an era of highly interconnected information exchange, culture and arts emphasize individual participation and freedom. Society provides a fair platform for all forms of culture and arts, offering opportunities and challenges to both the general public and artists.

The current status of veteran Peking Opera male dan artists has seen a decline in quantity, quality, and influence in many aspects. However, a new generation of male dan performers has emerged as the mainstay of this art form in the contemporary era. They have actively promoted and publicized Peking Opera male dan performance in the cultural and media spheres. Despite the challenges, they have kindled hope for the continuity and development of this art form.

Marxist theory on social change suggests that societal shifts arise from the contradictory movements of production forces and relations of production. While this theory originates from Western thought, it can be applied to the evolution of Peking Opera male dan performers in contemporary China. Their emergence and growth are intricately linked to changes in societal conditions and the demand from the public.

During the early stages of China's reform and opening-up, significant societal issues and cultural shifts were evident. People were gradually adapting to new ideas and perceptions of culture and the arts. As China underwent political, economic, and cultural transformations in the 21st century, this societal transition influenced the development of Peking Opera male dan performers and their role in contemporary society.

In discussions about cultural functionality, Chinese culture and arts play vital roles in society. China's societal changes, while multifaceted, have largely been positive and conducive to the development of Peking Opera and male dan performers. This positive impact on Peking Opera and male dan performers is profound and far-reaching, driven by the transformation of societal values and cultural dynamics.

To understand the development of contemporary Peking Opera male dan performers in China, one must consider the specific historical and social contexts of different periods. Peking Opera male dan actors are products of both Chinese history and Peking Opera's evolution. Their long-term development and future are closely tied to the support of the Chinese Communist Party, the state, the people, and the government. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of Peking Opera and Peking Opera male dan development in different historical stages and China's national conditions is crucial for accurate and in-depth comprehension.

When researching the gender roles of Peking Opera male dan performers in China, it is essential to note that Chinese traditional cultural perceptions of gender and sexuality can be subtle and

complex. Hence, a nuanced approach should be taken in analyzing the specific characteristics and dimensions of the issue.

Regarding the transmission of Peking Opera male dan in contemporary China, it is essential to consider the growth of societal awareness and the shifting perspectives of various individuals. Different people have different backgrounds, standpoints, and angles of interpretation, influenced by personal preferences. To analyze this phenomenon, one should approach it from the perspective of cultural heritage, protection, and promotion in modern Chinese society.

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