1 What is Peking Opera/ jīngjù?

1.1 General introduction

The speaker of the Liyuan Theater at the Jianguo Qianmen Hotel welcomes the (mostly foreign) spectators to an evening show of *jīngjù* with the following words.[1]

> "Welcome to China and the Liyuan Theater to enjoy Peking Opera. It includes music, dancing, recitation, fine arts and martial skills. One of the major features of Peking Opera is symbolism. While the stage is bare of decorations you can understand a lot through the body language of the actors. That is: a long journey is symbolized by going around the stage once, a horse whip means riding a horse. A paddle means going on a boat. […] Well, dear friends, we believe that even though we speak different languages it doesn't matter at all. You'll be able to feel this very special performance here. You'll all be captivated by the artistic charm of the performers."

Jīngjù is not "opera" in the sense that most westerners understand opera. It was just called so by western people, who got in touch with the art in China and simply couldn't think of a better name for it**.** As the speaker puts it, *jīngjù* is a colorful mixture of acrobatics, dance, pantomime, singing and dialog as well as background music. Furthermore symbolic contents, which will be discussed more closely later in this chapter, play a central role in *jīngjù.* And lastly, the speaker makes the point that even though the performers and the spectators "speak different languages", he believes that the spectators can "feel" the performance thus implicating that there is a transfer of emotions from the stage to the audience. Chen Lin-Jui makes the point that even though *jīngjù* is highly conventionalized, it is essentially realistic as the stories are based on people's "hopes and strivings". He suggests that as such hopes and strivings are basically human they can be understood by spectators with different cultural backgrounds.[2]

Jīngjù began to develop in the end of 18th century from various folk theater traditions (mainly those from the provinces Ānhuī 安徽 and Húběi 湖北) to eventually become an independent art form.[3] It developed in two main streams; one at the imperial court and the other at the marketplaces and teahouse-theaters of old Beijing. The *jīngjù* plays performed at the court were mainly dramas based on the early history of China. They often had, and still have, a very long duration (up to 8 hours) and strong nationalistic contents. In this type of *jīngjù* singing

[1] Recording on 26. July 2009.
[2] Chen Lin-Jui, 1956: The Peking Opera. Supplement to *China Resconstructs* 7: 5.
[3] Yi Bian, 2005: The Cream of Chinese Culture. Peking Opera. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press: 3-4.

and dialog are the most important means of expression. Such plays are today performed in big theaters built especially for *jīngjù* in the bigger cities of the PRC and Taiwan. The pieces performed at the marketplaces and teahouses, on the other hand, had a lighter character with lots of acrobatics and humorous contents telling stories from the everyday life of the common people. They are never as long as the dramas. Such plays are performed today in small teahouse-theaters and some ancient palaces for visitors. However, serious *jīngjù* enthusiasts do not consider the lighter kind of plays as *jīngjù* as I have been often told. Only the dramas are considered as deserving the name. Both types of *jīngjù* contain folklore and have all kinds of magic contents**.** The stories of most *jīngjù* works are part of the Chinese cultural heritage. People know the stories; they understand what happens on the stage and they understand the moral messages of the plays.

At the beginning of 20th century *jīngjù* was not very popular in China. But as Méi Lánfāng 梅兰芳, the probably best-known *jīngjù* performer and theorist at that time, brought the art first to Japan in 1919, then to the United States of America in 1930 and to Europe in 1935, the art became more popular also at home.[4] After the revolution of 1949 *jīngjù* was not completely banned by the new government as many western sources today put it. The government regarded it as an important part of the traditional culture and invested funds in developing the art in a new direction. This was part of the comprehensive strategy of the government to classify and save certain contents of the "old culture" and then model them to suit the new state ideology. State-owned opera companies were founded and actors and actresses became state employees. A total of 37 new "revolutionary model plays" were written in assignment of the government and strongly propagated by it. However, these works never became really popular and are seldom performed today. The traditional kind of *jīngjù* lived on even if it was not performed openly. During the Cultural Revolution 1966 -1967 *jīngjù* in the traditional form was banned to some degree once more.[5] A friend of mine, who was a school girl at that time, told me that the children had to learn parts of the revolutionary plays by heart and perform them at public places such as railway stations. Today, however, *jīngjù* in the traditional form is acknowledged and propagated by the government as a "gem of the Chinese culture" and an important part of the Chinese national identity. Xu Chengbei makes the remark, though, that for the younger generations in China *jīngjù* is difficult to understand. The

[4] Xu, Chengbei 2003: Cultural China Series. Peking Opera. Beijing: China Intercontinental Press: 82-84.
[5] Xu 2003: 104, 123.

common attitude is “I don’t understand Peking Opera and I don’t like to watch it”.[6] This is exactly what I have been told by many young Chinese.

The latest development of *jīngjù* is represented, among others, by Lǐ Yù Gāng 李玉刚 (pictures on the following page), the winner of a TV talent show. He is an autodidact, who combines traditional *jīngjù* with modern pop music. Depending on what he performs he wears a modified modern costume or a traditional one. Lǐ Yù Gāng is a *dàn* 旦 actor. It means that he plays women’s roles (more about the different role types in chapter 5.6 on page 39).



[7]

Today *jīngjù* is shown in various theaters and on TV. Early in the morning one can see and hear *jīngjù* in many parks of Beijing and other towns, where amateur groups meet to practice and to perform for each other.

How is *jīngjù* presented to foreign audiences? As mentioned before, the first artist to introduce *jīngjù* abroad was Méi Lánfāng. Fully understanding that *jīngjù* has many aspects that are difficult to understand for people unfamiliar with the Chinese culture he took 183 painted scrolls as well as 1987 drawings with pictures and explanations with him when he made his first tour in the United States.[8] Furthermore, western and Chinese scholars have written books and articles explaining the art. Shortly before the Olympic Games of 2008 many new books on the topic were published in the PRC in English, French and German.

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[6] Xu 2003: 104, 124.
[7] http://photobucket.com/images/Li%20Yu%20Gang/, 20.03.2010 and http://www.google.ch/images?hl=de&q=li+yugang&um=1&ie=UTF-8&source=univ&ei=eIdSTMuFBoGeOKeZhJ8O&sa=X&oi=image_result_group&ct=title&resnum=6&ved=0CEIQsAQwBQ&biw=1280&bih=870, 20.03.2010.
[8] Choi Mina, et al. (eds) 2006: Mei Lanfang: The Art of Beijing Opera. New York: Better Links Press: 13.

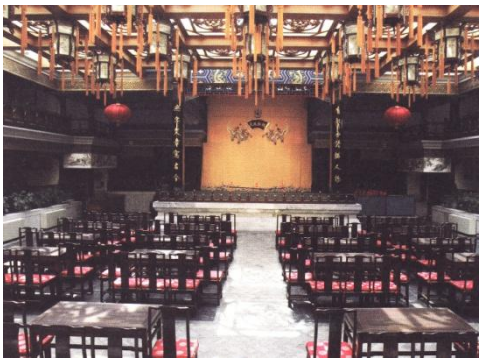
The following chapter will introduce some typical theater buildings as well as the traditional *jīngjù* stage and its props.

Typical theater buildings, stage and props

 [9]

The traditional marketplace *jīngjù* stages, e.g. during a temple fair, were open and sparsely decorated, because they were usually temporary constructions. Furthermore, the travelling theater groups could not transport much material with them and had thus to make do with as few props as possible. Only the imperial stages were a bit more richly furnished, but also they made use of the very basic props only. The traditional stage is open on three sides. A colorful curtain hangs at the back wall. There are a table and two chairs on the stage, which can have various symbolic functions. For example, the table can serve as a bed, a bridge, a tower or even a cloud. The arrangement of the chairs by the table and the materials with which the pieces of furniture are covered show whether the place is for instance. a court room, a room in a palace or in a simple house. Further props can be candles or lanterns, military insignia, horsewhips to symbolize horses and various weapons that are used in fighting scenes.[10] Much of what happens on the stage is expressed through body language. For example, windows and doors that cannot be seen are indirectly indicated by an actor, who using mime opens or closes them (more about body language in chapter 6 on page 48).

[9] Yi 2007: 3.
[10] Yi 2007: 21-22.



This is a typical modern teahouse-theater in the old town of Beijing.[11] The stage is open and has no props. At the front of the spectator area there are tables with tea and snacks to enjoy during the performance. Behind this area and on the galleries there are rows of seats. On the right hand side of the stage, partly hidden by a curtain, an orchestra with 8 musicians is seated.

The modern teahouse theater performances are usually quite short, mostly about 90 minutes long. Tourists as well as local people go to such theaters to watch comedies with acrobatics and short pieces from dramas.

This is the new Méi Lánfāng Grand Theater, 梅兰芳大戏院[12], downtown Beijing. There are several curtains to see. Also the stage props are more numerous than in a traditional theater. It is a high-end theater, where traditional dramas are shown. They are often performed on two consecutive evenings as a whole drama can last longer than 8 hours.

A *jīngjù* stage itself may be bare of decorations. A performance, however, is a most colorful and sometimes loud spectacle. The music, the richly painted masks and the elaborate costumes will be introduced in the following paragraphs. Some of their symbolic aspects will be touched upon as well.

Music

Music in *jīngjù* is not composed especially for a particular piece. There is a set of commonly known traditional tunes and sound patterns that are freely used and modified according to the scenes of a play. Nature sounds such as wind, rain and thunder as well as animal sounds belong to the musical accompaniment, too. No matter what instruments are playing what sounds, the music should always present a harmonious whole. Lyrics are written to fit the

[11] Yuan Jing 2008: The Charm of Beijing. Traditional Opera in Beijing. Beijing: China Pictorial Publishing House: 50.
[12] Picture: Katri Näf 2009.

tunes. The music is played by an orchestra which consists of percussion, string and wind instruments. The percussion instruments give the rhythm to the dancing and fighting scenes. String and wind instruments accompany singing and reciting. Xu Chengbei makes the point that "in traditional opera theory, a good performance is said to depend on front stage (acting and singing) by 30 percent and on backstage (music) by 70 percent"[13]. Singing is done either in the natural voice or in falsetto depending on the role type. Xu further points out that recitation tells a story, singing expresses emotions. The music is often loud. This has to do with the fact that marketplaces and palace theaters were (and still are) noisy places.[14] Furthermore Chinese spectators traditionally do not sit still in a theater. They talk together, eat and drink, make phone calls etc. This kind of behavior is changing now as Chinese spectators are beginning to imitate western behavior especially in theaters that are patronized also by western audiences.

1.2 *Makeup and masks*

The makeup, the masks, the costumes as well as the stage props are stylized and strictly standardized. They all have very clear symbolic meanings. The more a spectator knows about the symbolism, the better he can understand what is happening on the stage. The makeup and the masks give clear clues about the characters that are being impersonated. Encoding and decoding of symbolic meanings is of central importance in a *jīngjù* performance. The fact that the traditional stage used to be illuminated only by oil lamps explains partly the strong colors of the masks and the costumes. Here are just a few examples from a vast amount of colors and forms that can be used in a facial mask.


15


16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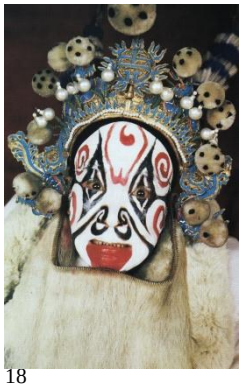
18

[13] Xu 2003: 56.
[14] Xu 2003: 54-56, 61 and 108-109.
[15] Sun Ping (ed.) 2008. Beijing Opera (Jingju) of China. Beijing: China Travel and Tourism Press: 65.


19


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22

Guān Yǔ 关羽 (top leftmost picture) was a distinguished general in the late Eastern Han Dynasty (206 B.C. – 220 A.D.), who appears in many historical dramas. The color red symbolizes his loyal, generous and just character.[23] Another historical person from the same period is Cáo Cāo 曹操 in the next picture. His allegedly sinister and treacherous character is symbolized by the white mask.[24] The color blue of the third mask on top symbolizes fearlessness.[25] The distorted mask of Wáng Bóchāo 王伯超, a general in the Tang Dynasty (618 -907 A.D.) symbolizes a character that brings bad luck to others.[26] The color black symbolizes an honest and brave character, but also a bold and daring one (picture down left). Masks with a gold or silver touch are reserved for divinities such as Lord Buddha, spirits and other immortal beings.[27] A white spot on the face marks a clown.[28] The impersonator of a young girl wears very little makeup.

The makeup used in the lighter kind of plays is usually not heavy, because the main characters are often young women and young men, whose role types do not require a real mask (see chapter 5.6 about role types). Perceiving emotions behind a mask is obviously more difficult, because the face muscles are less visible, the eyes being the main instrument for expressing emotions.

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[16] Peking Opera Facial Designs 2000: Beijing: Foreign Languages Press: 10.
[17] Peking Opera Facial Designs 2000: 47.
[18] Peking Opera Facial Designs 2000: 50.
[19] http://www.google.ch/images?um=1&hl=de&tbs=isch:1&q=Peking+Opera+Maske&sa=N&start=36&ndsp=18: 30.4.2011.
[20] http://www.fotosearch.de/bilder-fotos/chinesische-oper-maske.html. date
[21] Peking Opera Facial Designs 2000: 68.
[22] http://www.fotosearch.de/bilder-fotos/chinesische-oper-maske.html. date
[23] Peking Opera Facial Designs 2000: 2,13.
[24] Peking Opera Facial Designs 2000: 3,10.
[25] Peking Opera Facial Designs 2000: 47.
[26] Peking Opera Facial Designs 2000: 50.
[27] Peking Opera Facial Designs 2000: 3.
[28] Peking Opera Facial Designs 2000: 61.

1.3 *Costumes*

By the time of the Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644) the majority of the costumes used in theater performances had been conventionalized as theatrical costumes with brighter colors and more distinct decorations than daily clothing. As the theater groups did not have much money to use for their regalia they had to keep reusing old costumes. This may be one reason for the fact that certain costumes are now associated with certain roles. Depending on the play also older and newer styles as well as minority costumes are used. In the 1920's and 1930's Méi Lánfāng created a whole new style of costumes and hairstyles. The most important function of a costume is to show the social status and the social function of its carrier.[29] Costumes will be discussed with some details in the following chapter about the various role types of *jīngjù*.

1.4 *Role types*

The role type includes information on gender, age, temperament, social status and the profession of the character. They are further divided into "civil" and "military" types. As different roles require different skills, an actor usually specializes mainly for one role type. The masculine role types are divided into 6 main categories.

The male roles

1 *Lǎoshēng* 老生, old man

[30]

The *lǎoshēng*, the most common male role type, usually impersonate dignified middle aged or elderly men, who wear a beard and light makeup. The three men in the picture wear a common type of casual clothing and thick-soled boots. The *lǎoshēng* sing and recite in the natural voice.[31]

[29] Bonds Alexandra, B. 2008: Beijing opera costumes: the visual communication of character and culture. China: Kings Times Printing Press LTD: 26-29.
[30] Yi 2007: 29.
[31] Yi 2007: 29, 36. And Yuan 2008: 88.

2 *Jìng* 净 or *huāliǎn*, 花脸, painted face


32

The *jìng* or *huāliǎn* portreys a romatic type with a rough and bold character, who can impersonate a gallant and brave, but also a cruel and treacherous man. The *jìng* wear imposing costumes with thick-soled boots and often speak loudly to make themselves appear bigger than they are. The *jìng* wear a rich mask with symbolic patterns and a long beard. These characters sing and recite in the natural voice. The picture is of Bāo Zhěng 包拯 (999–1062 A.D.), an upright official appearing in many plays, who is still respected as the symbol of justice in China.[33]

3 *Wǔshēng* 武生, warrior or outlaw


34

The *wǔshēng* impersonate most often warriors, outlaws, rebels and bandits. The performers of *wǔshēng* roles must be skilled in martial arts. They also have to be able to move and pose in an elegant and stately way to show the grace of a general. Depending on the context of the play they wear a full armor or comfortable jackets and trousers, which allow them to move more freely. The person in the picture is a general in full armor.[35]

[32] Peking Opera Facial Designs 2000: 15.
[33] Xu 2003 : 33. And Peking Opera Facial Designs 2000: 15.
[34] Sun Ping 2008 : 40.
[35] Yi 2007 : 42.

4 *Xiǎoshēng* 小生, young man

 [36]

The *xiǎoshēng* are often young scholars or officers. They are clean shaven and wear only a light makeup. The ancient Chinese ideal of an elegant and gentle scholar has transmitted the picture of a somewhat feminized Chinese man to the western world. The man in the picture wears the typical costume of a scholar. The *xiǎoshēng* sing and recite both in the natural voice and the falsetto.[37]

5 *Wáwashēng* 娃娃生, little boy

 [38]

A *wáwashēng*, a little boy, symbolizes the childish innocence. This character wears little makeup, often a "boy's wig" and simple clothes. The role is often played by petite women. A *wáwashēng* sings and recites in the natural voice.[39]

[36] Xu 2003: 69.
[37] Yi 2007: 53.
[38] Yi 2007: 54.
[39] Yi 2007: 54.

6 *Chǒu* 丑, the clown

40

"No *chǒu* , no play" is a popular saying. The *chǒu* can impersonate all kinds of people with high or low social status, young or old, man or woman. He can impersonate a dull or a clever, good-hearted and humorous person, but also mean and deceitful characters. This is a very demanding role to play as a *chǒu* must be familiar with other role types as well in order to be able to imitate them and poke fun at them. Here is a group of American students playing clowns.[41]

The female roles

The female roles, *dàn* 旦, were traditionally played by men. Only since the end of 19th century women have been allowed to perform on a *jīngjù* stage. In the year 2009 about half of the *jīngjù* students at the National Academy of Chinese Theater Arts were women. I was told that this is so, because less and less men are willing to go through the hard training.[42] Today women can also perform masculine roles, if these suit their talents best, so in the future we will probably see more and more women performers playing male roles. The picture on the following page shows the so called "four great *dàn* actors".[43]

[40] Yi 2007: 145.
[41] Yi 2007: 92. Yuan 2008: 96. Xu 2003: 33.
[42] Interview on 30. June 2009.
[43] Xu 2003: 63.

Chéng Yànqiū 程砚秋, Shāng Xiǎoyún 尚小云, Méi Lánfāng and Xún Huìshēng 荀慧生


44

The female roles are divided into 5 main categories.

1 *Lǎodàn* 老旦, old woman.


45

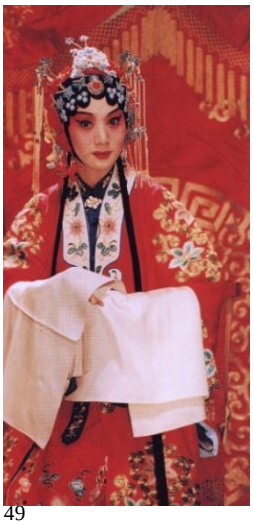

46

The *lǎodàn* are elderly women. The woman on the left has a high social status; the woman on the right is a servant. The *lǎodàn* wear a light makeup and light lines in the corners of the eyes and cheeks to indicate their age. The emphasis in this role type is on singing. *Lǎodàn* sing and recite in the natural voice.[47]

[44] Yi Bian 2005:113.
[45] Sun Ping 2008: 88
[46] Peking Opera Facial Designs 2000: 69.
[47] Peking Opera Facial Designs 2000: 7. And Yuan 2008: 91.

Qīngyī 青衣, virtuos woman

48



49

The word *qīngyī* means "black dress". This is the role of the virtuous women of the feudal society often wearing dark colored, simple costumes. The *qīngyī* are mostly young or middle aged. The woman on the right is an imperial concubine wearing a richly decorated costume. Nevertheless, also this role type belongs to the category of *qīngyī*. On the stage these characters move in a slow and dignified manner.[50]

2 *Huādàn* 花旦, young woman

51

The *huādàn* are young women, often servant girls with a low social status, or unmarried daughters of a good house. They wear colorful costumes, often short jackets and trousers. They are mostly lively, cheerful characters, who dance and sing. They sing and recite in the falsetto. The emphasis is on mime.[52] The young woman in the picture is the unmarried daughter of a respectable house in the very popular play called "Picking up Jade Bracelet", Shí Yùzhuó 拾玉镯.

[48] Yi 2007: 57.
[49] Liang Yan 2003: Initiation à l'opéra de Pékin. Beijing: Editions en Langues étrangères: 17.
[50] Yi 2007: 57-58.
[51] Liang Yan 2003: 60.
[52] Yi 2007: 63. Yuan 2008: 93.

4 Wǔdàn 武旦, female warrior

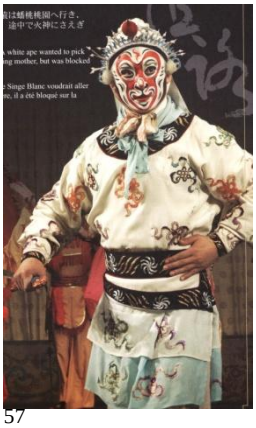
53

The *wǔdàn* must be good in martial skills. They impersonate e.g. female generals, like here in the picture, as well as heroic outlaws, fairies and spirits.[54]

5 Cǎidàn 彩旦 or *chǒu* 丑, female clown

55

The *cǎidàn* are mostly sly and humorous characters. Like their male counterparts they impersonate clever, good-hearted and humorous women but also dull, mean and deceitful characters. The *cǎidàn* wear a simple costume. They sing and recite in the natural voice.[56]



57

A very special character is *Sūn Wùkōng* 孙悟, the Monkey King. He is a mythological figure from the early history of China; half animal with human qualities and also a demigod. He is intelligent, resourceful, daring and just and he possesses superhuman powers. The performer must master a whole set of skills to play the part successfully. *Jīngjù* works with the Monkey King are immensely popular with young people and foreigners, because they include lots of brilliant acrobatics.[58]

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[53] Sun Ping 2008: 25.
[54] Yi 2007: 65.
[55] Yi 2007: 74?
[56] Yi 2007: 74?
[57] Liyuan Theater 2009. Peking Opera. Beijing: Qianmen Jianguo Hotel.
[58] Xu 2003: 10-11.

After having introduced *jīngjù*, I will next discuss the question: "What does it take to become a professional *jīngjù* performer?" The following paragraphs are partly based on information from two interviews with Chinese *jīngjù* artists, the son of a well-known *jīngjù* artist as well as an interview with the vice-dean of the National Academy of Chinese Theater Arts in Beijing.

1.5 *The training of jīngjù actors*

In the old China children learnt the trade by imitating a teacher, who would have been a male member of an artist family. An especially talented child was sent to a well known master, if his family could afford it. Someone born to a famous artist family profited from the reputation of the family and could make a career even with little talent. On the other hand, such a less talented child could be forced to find another occupation so as not to endanger the family reputation. Sometimes poor people sold their children to travelling *jīngjù* companies.

Today the training of actors mostly takes place in schools. However, learning still happens in the traditional way by imitating a teacher. There is a Chinese saying "The master gives you the key; it is up to you to make full use of it."[59] The family connections still play a big role in helping to start a career. A member of a well-known *jīngjù* family told me that even today it is very difficult for "outsiders" to climb the professional ladder.

The modern training generally begins in the age between 8 and 10 years and lasts from 10 to 12 years. The first part of the training is usually the same for all children. In this phase they learn the basic skills needed for all role types. After about 6 years of basic training the children go to a higher institute, where they then specialize in one role type that they play during their whole career (the role type is selected according to the child's physical and artistic abilities or simply according to what type of actors are needed at the moment.) This is why you can see old men playing young scholars and old women playing servant girls. The repertoire of an actor is normally limited to about 5 different plays. This means that there is little chance for variation for a performer. The emphasis lies on striving for excellence in the chosen roles.

Mr. Shū Tóng 舒桐, the vice dean of the *jīngjù* department of the National Academy of Chinese Theater Arts told me that, generally speaking, after 5 - 6 years in a primary school

[59] Chen 1956: 12.

children go to the vocational secondary school (theater arts). After two years of basic training the teachers will help them to select the suitable profession (the kind of role type) depending on their individual capabilities based on physical aspects as well as singing skills.
When I asked him about specific theories that are used in teaching about performing emotions, he mentioned the following three names: Berthold Brecht, Konstantin Stanislavsky and Méi Lánfāng.[60] Professor Peter Marx of the Institute of Theater Sciences at the University of Bern is, however, of the opinion that these names were probably mentioned, because the interviewer was a Western person, in order to make their teaching methods sound credible and that it probably wouldn't be very helpful to look into the above mentioned theories in the context of this paper.[61]

Ms. Liou, a middle aged Taiwanese *jīngjù* performer living now in Switzerland, told me about her training. She was a wild child, eager to perform in the family, but shy in the public sphere. Her parents believed that training in a *jīngjù* school would be good for her personal development. They regarded the training as a kind of character forming. At the age of 10 Ms. Liou took the entrance exam in dancing and singing for the National Taiwan College of Performing Arts. Out of 150 applicants 40 were accepted and could then begin their training. The school was far away from her home so she lived in a student home at the school premises during the week and went home on weekends, if there were no performances she had to take part in. The children only studied half of the curriculum of a normal school. The rest of their time was spent training the various skills needed in the art of *jīngjù*. During the first two years the training was the same for all. After that the children specialized for a role type during 6 – 8 more years. Ms Liou became a masculine role type (*jìng*) performer. She said that at that time it was very special for a girl to do that. Every year the students trained to play 4 – 7 roles. Later Ms Liou studied in Taiwan majoring in *jīngjù* to attain a Bachelor Degree and later in New York to attain a Master Degree in Applied Theater Arts.[62]

A mainland Chinese *jīngjù* performer, Mr. Jing (now 60 years old) told me about his training as follows. His father was an enthusiastic hobby *jīngjù* performer, but it had not been possible for him to become a professional artist. He often took his sons with him to the training and the performances of his amateur group. Mr. Jing liked the art and after passing the entrance exam of the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing. He began his education in 1960 at the age of 11.

[60] Interview on 30. June 2009.
[61] Discussion on 24. March 2010.
[62] Interview on 17. April 2009.

The school was a boarding school and he could go home only for short weekends. The curriculum included classes in history, mathematics and music among other things. During the first 2 years all the children trained skills necessary to play the role of an old man (*lǎoshēng*), even though their special abilities and skills for their later training were considered already at the entrance exam. Mr. Jing was then trained to play the role of a clown (*chǒu*). All learning happened through the imitation of the teacher.[63]

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