

What movement skills are significant for the *Wu dan* character in Beijing Opera?

Beijing Opera is viewed as a cultural treasure in China. Jiang (2010:podcast) believe it is the 'realisation of an ideal world' which allows beauty, techniques and culture to blend on stage. It is a dynamic art form, where the role of the *Wu dan* is encapsulated by her movements. However, through the movement skills of the *Wu dan* one can appreciate the cultural treasure of Beijing Opera. The *Wu dan* movement techniques have been shaped through history and training. An exploration of specific skills provides an insight into an art form, which is struggling to stay in touch with modern China (Lim: 2007:1). To understand the importance of the *Wu dan*, one must first understand Beijing Opera and the other roles, which interact with the character.

Beijing Opera is a distinct form of Theatre. It is also referred to as Peking Opera, jingju, jingxi and pinju however it's Chinese character carries its true meaning. (Goldstein: 2007:2). 京剧 represents "capital drama" hence its title Peking or Beijing Opera. Beijing Opera originated from Anhui and Hubei provinces and incorporated techniques from other local operas. It uses history and folklore to perform dramatic stories using 'dialogue, specialized music and singing, expressive movements, acrobatics and martial arts' (The Kennedy Centre: 2005: 8). By Chinese standards, Beijing Opera is relatively new coalescing in 1845 (Goldstein: 2007: 3; Tian: 2000:91; Wichmann: 1990: 146). During this formation period that the four key roles were established.

Through the beauty and techniques of the characters that Beijing Opera engages the audience who recognize the symbolism of the art form. This symbolism occurs through the costume, make up and movements of the four key characters – *Sheng*, *Jing*, *Chou* and the *Dan* (Chinese Civilisation Centre: 2009; Goldstein: 2007; PekingOperaSh: 2007; Pourazar: Email: 29<sup>th</sup> Sept 2010;The Kennedy Centre: 2005:8). The *Sheng* are the leading male roles that are divided into four main subgroups – *Lao sheng* (old man); *Hong sheng* (red faced male); *Xiao sheng* (young male from distinguished birth) and the *Wu sheng* (the fighting male). The second male characters are the *Jing*. These are painted faced characters that symbolise the warriors, heroes or demons. Again they can be divided into *Zheng jing* (first ranked singer), *Fu jing* (minor painted face) and *Wu jing* (acrobatic fighters). The final male character is the *Chou*. These are the clowns, which can either be portrayed in a funny or devious manner (Chinese Civilisation Centre: 2010; Ni Hao Magazine: 2006:9- online; PekingOperaSh: 2007). The final category is the *Dan*, from which the *Wu dan* is a sub category.

The beauty of Beijing Opera can be seen in the female *Dan* roles. As Mei Lanfang (cited in Banu, Gibson & Wiswell: 1986:161) states a *Dan's* task is to express themselves through beautiful dance movements. The *Dan* is divided into sub type based on their social status, age and personalities. *Qing yi* are the roles of the demure and dignified young or middle aged women. The *Hua dan* represents the young women with quick wit and humour. The *Hua shan* is an actor that combines aspect of both the fore mentioned characters allowing for versatility in the storyline. *Lao dan* represent the old female characters while the *Chou dan* are the female clowns. This leads to the final category of *Wu dan* (Chinese Civilisation Centre: 2010; Ni Hao Magazine: 2006:9- online; PekingOperaSh: 2007) which is the focus of this essay.

Martial arts and acrobatics are the key focus of the *Wu dan*. The meaning of the character comes from the two words – *wu* meaning martial and *dan* meaning maiden (Chiang quoted in Chang: 1974:189). Over time, this category has been further subdivided into *Wu dan* (military maiden) and *Dao ma dan* (sword and horse maiden). The different *wu dan* can be identified by their costumes. The *Dao ma dan* usually wears female warrior costumes with flags (see Fig 1) and carry *hua qiang* (spear). The costumes are of a longer length, which also impedes their ability to complete acrobatics. Their movements also consist of the *qi ma* (*riding horse*) sequence (Liu: pers comm.: 15<sup>th</sup> Sept 2010).



(Figure 1 – *Dao Ma Dan*- China Daily: 2007)

The *Wu dan* costume however is of a shorter length and can also include the *lingze* (See Fig 2). *Lingze* are the two long peasant tails worn on warrior's helmets (Ancient Chinese Culture: 2010; Chinese Civilisation Centre: 2010; Ni Hao Magazine: 2006:9- online; PekingOperaSh: 2007). Traditionally, the *wu dan* performed wearing a *cai qiao*. These were shoes that replicated the foot binding practice, hence forcing the actor to walk on their toes. As foot binding is no longer practiced within China, this technique is no longer current in Beijing operas (Chen: pers comm.: 17<sup>th</sup> Sept 2010). The *Wu dan* utilises a variety of fighting skills including weapons such as *hua qiang* (spears), *jian* (single sword) and *shuang jian* (double sword)(Guan: pers. comm: 27<sup>th</sup> Sept 2010). Physical skills are vital techniques for the *Wu dan* to master.



(Figure 2 – *Wu dan* with *Lingze*- Tao: 2010)

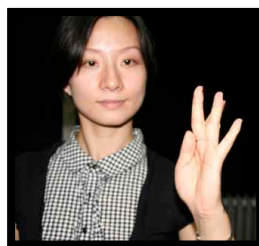
The physical technique of the *Wu dan* were influenced and changed by Wang Yaoqing. Before the Chinese Cultural Revolution of 1966, female impersonators performed the role of the dan, with the tradition of male dan being traced back to the Han dynasty (206 B.C- A.D 219) (Goldstien: 2007: 18; Tian: 2000:81). Wang Yaoqing was the premier *Wu dan* performer of his generation. He refrained from using the *cai qiao* therefore

influenced the way the *Wu dan* walked and moved (Goldstein: 2007: 258). With the freedom of movement, Wang was able to adopt other techniques, not from other *dan* but from the male marital role – the *Wu sheng*. During the 1930s, that “Four Famous Dans” in particular Mei Lanfang and Shang Xiaoyun revolutionised traditional interpretations of Beijing Opera. Shang Xiao continued in the development of the *Wu dan* incorporating more *Wu sheng* techniques into his performances (Ibid). Thus the modern *Wu dan* training incorporates acrobatic and martial training.

Training to become a *Wu dan* performer requires a lifetime dedication. There is an old saying that ‘Peking Opera is not taught, it is beaten into you’ (Pourzar: pers. comm.: 29<sup>th</sup> Sept 2010). Although not as brutal, as this implies, it is still an arduous journey. For all roles, actors will start basic training between the ages of 8 to 11 in one of the Beijing Opera Academies (Guan: pers comm.: 29<sup>th</sup> Sept 2010; Levin: 1995; Qiao quoted by Bernstein: 2010: para 15). The length of stay can be between 6 to 15 years, depending on the role the student is performing, if they choose to complete a high school certificate or go to university (Guan: pers comm.: 29<sup>th</sup> Sept 2010; Wichmann: 1990: 163). For the student learning the *Wu dan*, training is longer as the martial arts (fighting) and the acrobatics usually takes longer to learn. Once a *Wu dan* has completed their academy training, they are apprenticed to a Beijing Opera troupe to consolidate and learn specific *Wu dan* techniques and stories before taking the stage (Guan: pers comm.: 29<sup>th</sup> Sept 2010). For Beijing opera, these techniques determine the creation of the character (Jiang: 2010 - podcast).

The techniques of the *Wu dan* are based on ‘gestures in real life, synthesized and accentuated to become art’ (Mei Lanfang quoted in Banu, Gibson & Wiswell: 1986:168). They can be grouped into skill domains including *Shou shi* (gestures), *Tanzi* (acrobatic) and *Bazi* (combat) skills. These are highly stylized to accentuate the symbolic and aesthetic nature of the art form. Traditionally, these skills were performed according to highly choreographed patterns. (Levin: 1995; Yang: 1971:5) With the decline of popularity of Beijing Opera (Bernstein: 2010), there has been a revision of some elements to make it more accessible, such as an adaption of Hamlet and Lady White Snake by the Shanghai Peking Opera troupe (PekingOperaSh: 2007) and the touring productions of the International Center for Beijing Opera (Pourazar: Email: 29<sup>th</sup> Sept 2010).

The gestures of the *Wu dan* are critical to the portrayal of the character. They are symbolic in such a way that every motion and gesture is carefully manipulated to avoid sharp angles and straight lines (Chen, J: 1997:18). The *lan hua zhi* (Lotus hand) is an essential gesture for all *dan* characters. The thumb is placed on the middle finger with the other fingers tilted backwards (See Fig 3). This hand position is maintained by the *Wu dan* when working with the *lingze* or if her swords are sheathed (Chen: pers comm.: 20<sup>th</sup> Sept 2010).



(Figure 3 – Ms Chen - Lotus Hand)

*Lingze* skills are representative of various emotions. The *lingze* is the manipulation of the pheasant tails feathers worn on warrior's helmets. The *Wu dan* can control the feathers by one or two hands, dependant on whether a weapon is held (See Fig 4). The movement of the feathers, together with the head and body movements can express emotions such as surprise, hatred and happiness. (Ancient Chinese Culture: 2010; Chinese Civilisation Centre: 2010; Ni Hao Magazine: 2006:15- online; PekingOperaSh: 2007) The control of the *lingze* can be divided into slow and fast *huang*(four tunes)(Chen: pers comm.: 20<sup>th</sup> Sept 2010).



(Figure 4: *Wu dan* with spear and *Lingze*- personal)

Gestures for *Ma bu* (riding a horse) for the *Da ma dan* are intrinsically linked. A *Wu dan* actress has a *ma bian* (See Fig 5), which indicates the horse. The simplified sequence develops from leading the horse into the stage (see Fig 5), to gathering the horses bridle (See Fig 6) hopping on the horse (See Fig 7) and leaving the stage (Liu: pers comm.: 15<sup>th</sup> Sept 2010).



(Figure 5 - Ms. Liu - Leading the Horse)



(Figure 6 - Ms. Liu - Gathering the bridle to climb on)



(Figure 7 - Ms. Liu - Hopping on the Horse)

*Tanzi* skills are the acrobatic skills that enthrall Beijing opera audiences. *Tanzi* derives its name from the carpet that these skills are practiced on. Together with the leg and waist exercises, the *Wu dan* performs somersaults, leaps, and falls. (Ancient China Culture: 2010; Ni Hao Magazine: 2006:15 - online) The particular *Tanzi* will perform is based on the weapons the *Wu dan* is carrying (See Fig 8).



(Figure 8 – *Wu dan* performing *Tanzi* – Ancient China Culture: 2010)

The final area for the *Wu dan* actress to master are the *Bazi* skills. These fighting skills are divided into three categories: First, long weapons such as the *shua da dao* (broadsword), *hua qiang* (long spear) and *gun bang* (staff); the second are the short weapons such as the *jian* (sword), *shuang jian* (double sword) and *xiao jian* (the dagger); the final area is the actors bare hands. (Ancient China Culture: 2010; Guan: pers comm.: 20<sup>th</sup> Sept 2010; Ni Hao Magazine: 2006:15 - online) No fight sequence is set in stone as it is dependant on the type of *Wu dan*, the other characters and the play being performed. Two significant fighting skills for the *Wu dan* are the *Da duo hua* (big knife flower) and the *san da bai gu jing* (beat the white bone evil three times), both sequences use the *shuang jian* (Chen: pers comm.: 20<sup>th</sup> Sept 2010; Guan: pers comm.: 20<sup>th</sup> Sept 2010)

To perform the *Da duo hua*, the *Wu dan* must follow a movement sequence. When meeting her opponent, the *Wu dan* faces the audience to demonstrate her prowess. Ms Chen (Ibid) demonstrated how to perform the *Da duo hua*. The first position involves the left hand in the front of the body and the right hand is in the behind (See Fig 9).



(Figure 9 - Ms Chen –Position One - Big Knife Flower)

For the whole of the movement, the left leg is in the front and the right leg is behind with the toe resting on the floor (See Fig 10).



(Figure 10 – Ms Chen - Leg position)

In the second position, the *Wu dan*'s left hand moves down to the armpit of the right arm, whilst the right hand gradually comes to the front (See Fig 11).



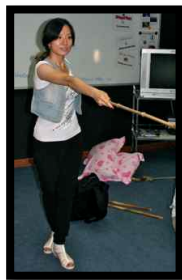
(Figure 11 -Ms Chen -Position Two - Big Knife Flower)

In position three, the right hand moves to the left side of the shoulder and the left hand gradually coming to the front (See Fig 12).



(Figure 12 - Ms Chen - Position Three - Big Knife Flower)

Next the right hand is in front of the body and the left hand is in the back (See Fig 13). After completing position four, the *Wu dan* needs to repeat the sequence on the opposite side.



(Figure 14 - Ms Chen - Position Four - Big Knife Flower)

In the Beijing Opera play 'Monkey King makes Havoc in Heaven', the *Wu dan* is the evil demon. The fight sequence, *san da bai gu jing* is a vital skill that the *Wu dan* must learn (Chen: pers comm.: 20<sup>th</sup> Sept2010; Guan: pers comm.: 20<sup>th</sup> Sept2010). When the *Wu dan* commences a fight sequence, she is always positioned on the stage left of the character she is fighting. Her first position is the *liang xiang* (to come and show audience) is with the swords crossed and her hands near her hips (See Fig 15).



(Figure 15 – Ms Chen – Challenge position)

Then crossed swords are maintained as the *Wu dan*'s arms are rotated left in a 540 degree movement. At the completion of the rotation the *Wu dan*'s swords meet the spear of the opponent (See Fig 16).



(Figure 16 – Mr. Guan and Ms Chen – Sword defense)

The *Wu dan* has a defensive movement that controls the double swords up and down then into a 360-degree turn which is completed, by then attacking the opponent with a single sword. She attacks on the left first and then the right side (See Fig 17).



(Figure 17- Ms Guan and Ms Chen – Single sword attack)

The opponent then rotates the *Wu dan*'s single sword 180 degrees away from the initial sword contact and then re-engages the second sword and moves both swords again in a 360-degree circle (See Fig 18).



(Figure 18 – Mr. Guan and Ms Chen – Sword rotation)

The final element of the sequence occurs when the *Wu dan*'s swords touch the ground indicating that she has been defeated. (See Fig 19) The defeat is the catalyst for the *Wu dan* to leave the stage (Chen: pers comm.: 20<sup>th</sup> Sept 2010; Guan: pers comm.: 20<sup>th</sup> Sept 2010).



(Figure 19 – Mr. Guan and Ms Chen – Defeat of the *Wu dan*)

The *Wu dan* is the quintessential female character of Beijing Opera. Through her movements she captures the beauty, techniques and essence of an artform that stretches back in time. History has helped to create the movement of the *Wu dan*. Training and performance allows the actress to perfect and nurture one of the highest expressions of Chinese culture. The recognized skills of *shou shi*, *tanzi* and *bazi* allow the audience to engage in a spectacle that creates an appreciation of the *Wu dan*. The *Wu dan*'s symbolic movements are an essential element to the spectacle of Beijing Opera.