

Icons of the Beijing Opera

The Beijing Opera is a prized form of theater in China. It continues to bring to life many ancient stories and heroes that help shape Chinese culture. Learn about some of the most famous opera characters and explore the unique features of this amazing form of cultural entertainment.

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Upper Intermediate 2200 headwords

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Before You Read

This story is about the country of China, its culture and its customs, focusing on Beijing Opera. Though this type of opera is from Beijing, it is popular almost everywhere in China.



A. Chinese Opera. Read the paragraph. Then match each word with the correct definition.

While Beijing Opera is the most famous type of opera in China, it is not the only one. In fact, there are more than 300 styles of opera in China. Most are regional, although some, such as the Yue, Ping, Kunqu, and Huangmei Operas, are loved and appreciated far outside of their home areas. Typically, the stories used in Chinese operas are based on old legends. Some stories are more heavily linked with certain operas, and many operas feature stories that are no longer found anywhere else. Most opera styles in China include martial arts as well as singing, and actors usually wear heavy makeup. Generally, each opera uses the dialect² of its region and has its own personality.

1.	appreciate	 a. a story from the distant past
2.	feature	 b. physical skills used in self-defense and attack
3.	legend	 c. to be valued and thought important
4.	martial arts	 d. one's nature or qualities
5.	personality	 e. to highlight

¹makeup: paints or powders used to make a face more beautiful, or used by actors when performing ²dialect: a regional style of language **B.** Beijing Opera's History. Read about the history of Beijing Opera and look at the photos in this reader. Then answer the questions below.



In the beginning, Beijing did not have its own style of opera. According to legend, Emperor³ Qianlong (1711-1799) had seen and enjoyed some Huiban performances when he toured Yangzhou, Jiangsu Province.⁴ The word ban refers to an opera company, while the word Hui probably refers to Anhui Province. There were many famous Huiban groups performing in Yangzhou, and they performed various opera styles, including Erhuang and Kungu. Since Qianlong had enjoyed Huiban performances so much, four Huiban groups were invited to perform in Beijing for Qianlong's 80th birthday celebration in 1790. They proved a hit

and made their home in the capital, mostly performing for the **imperial**⁵ court, and then later also performing for the public. In 1828, they were joined by opera singers from Hubei Province. Over the years, Beijing Opera developed and changed, borrowing parts of other opera styles, particularly Kunqu Opera, which had been popular in the imperial court before 1790.

- **1.** Have you ever seen a Beijing Opera performance? If so, what was it like?
- **2.** What do you know about Beijing Opera?
- **3.** How might a Beijing Opera differ from a Western or any other form of opera?

³emperor: a ruler over several countries or a large country ⁴province: a large district of a country ⁵imperial: of an emperor or an empire

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In short, the story is about a girl, Hua Mulan, whose father is called up to war. As Hua Mulan worries that her father is too elderly to fight, she decides to dress as a man and go in his place. After many years of war, she is offered a reward for her service, but turns it down so she can go home to her family. It is only much later that the friends she made during the war discover she is not a man.

Like nearly all Beijing Operas, not all of the opera is sung. There are large parts of it which involve one person talking, a dialogue, or a conversation with more people, but nearly always delivered in a singsong voice. 6 The person playing the role of Hua Mulan, as is typical of female characters in Beijing Opera, speaks and sings in a high falsetto.⁷ This might be a remnant⁸ of past customs, when the female characters were all played by men who used artificially high-pitched voices.

⁶ singsong voice: a way of speaking where the voice rises and falls, as in a song ⁷ **falsetto**: an artificially high singing voice ⁸ remnant: something that remains



Beijing Opera sets are often quite simple, so mime9 is common. For example, we see Hua Mulan dancing on the stage while carrying a riding crop. 10 Though there is no horse on the stage, the riding crop is used to suggest that she is in fact riding a horse, and her movements show that she is traveling over rough mountains and through wild valleys on her journey.

Later, we see a battle between two armies. Most Beijing Opera actors are highly skilled in various kinds of Chinese martial arts. However, while the fighting moves are real, the way they are performed on the stage is more like dance. Some of the soldiers have flags sticking up from their backs. Nearly everything in Beijing Operas symbolizes something. Here, flags are used to symbolize that these are generals who are prepared for war.

Hua Mulan is an iconic character to many Chinese people because she strongly illustrates values that they appreciate. A loyal daughter, she fights first for her family and then for her country, showing bravery and complete selflessness in her actions, winning praise and admiration from others, and bringing great honor to her family.

⁹ mime: to describe or express something, using movements

¹⁰**riding crop**: a short whip used when riding a horse



M After You Read

A. Multiple Choice. Answer the questions below by choosing A, B, C, or D.

- 1. On page 4, what does the phrase "get a grip on" mean?
 - **A.** to control
 - **B.** to hold on to
 - C. to understand
 - **D.** to imagine or see
- 2. On page 10, when it says, "begs him to recognize her as his wife," what does "recognize" mean?
 - **A.** to acknowledge
 - **B.** to identify
 - **C.** to recall
 - **D.** to notice
- 3. Why did Chen Shimei probably not tell anyone that he was married and had children?
 - **A.** He might be refused a government position.
 - **B.** He wanted to start a new life.
 - **C.** He was in love with a princess.
 - **D.** He simply forgot.
- 4. In what way is Cao Cao a complicated figure?
 - A. He behaved very badly and was not to be trusted.
 - **B.** He treated his men kindly and he is famous for his military smarts.
 - **C.** He has a reputation for being cruel and crafty, but he treated his men kindly.
 - **D.** While his mask is almost pure white, he can be kind.
- **5.** What would be a good subtitle for Huarong Trail?
 - A. Guan Yu Disobeys an Order
 - **B.** The Power of kindness
 - C. Cao Cao Was a Good Guy After All
 - **D.** Zhuge Liang was right

B. Complete the Chart. Complete the chart below with words in the box.

a chou a general Bao Zheng Cao Cao Guan Yu a rider







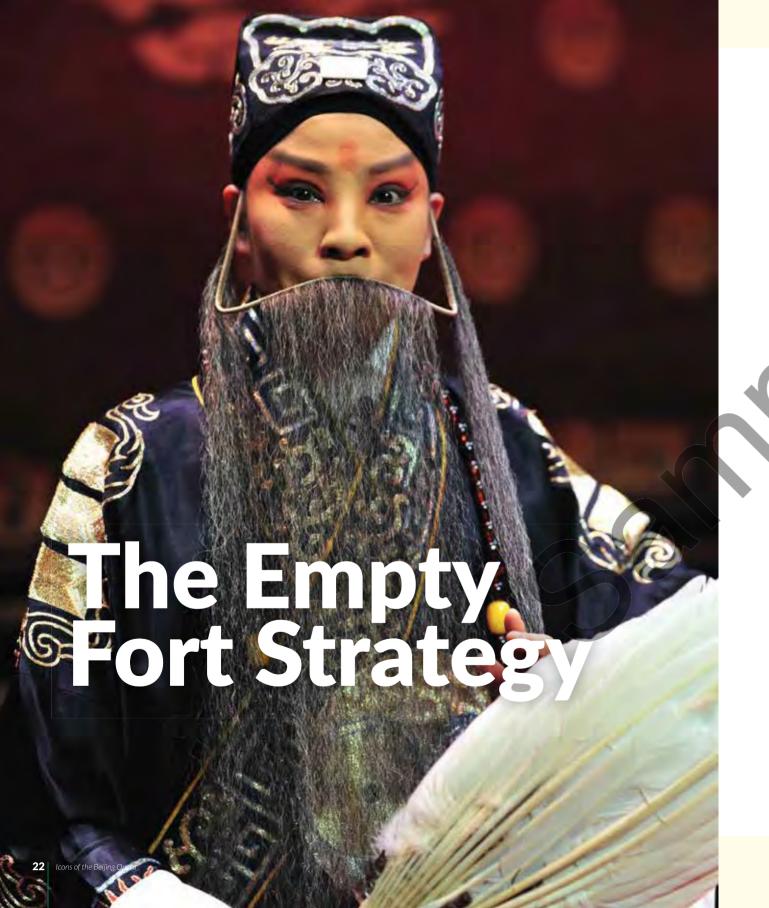






- C. Answer the questions. Use information from the passage to answer the questions below.
 - **1.** What is the purpose of the article?
 - 2. What does Beijing Opera tell us about Chinese culture?
 - **3.** Which of these operas would you like to see most? Why?

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One of the most popular Beijing Opera figures is Zhuge Liang, who is considered a prime example of intelligence and cleverness. The Empty Fort Strategy, like many of the Beijing Opera stories about Zhuge Liang, comes from The Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

In this story, Zhuge Liang takes five thousand men to Xicheng to defend it. While around half of his men are busy outside of the city, riders arrive and report, "Sima Yi is coming with one hundred and fifty thousand men." Zhuge Liang then climbs the city wall and sees dust clouds in the distance as Sima Yi's army advances for battle.

Zhuge Liang orders all the flags to be put out of sight and he forbids anyone to pass in or out of the city. Next, he orders the city's four gates to be opened wide. At each gate, a group of twenty soldiers, dressed as commoners, sweep the road. Meanwhile, Zhuge Liang sits on the city wall playing his gugin (a kind of musical instrument).

When Sima Yi's scouts reach Xicheng, they see the gates open wide and Zhuge Liang calmly playing a gugin on the city wall. They immediately report this to Sima Yi, who rides forward to view Xicheng from a distance. Puzzled, Sima Yi turns his army around toward the hills to the north. His son, Sima Zhao, asks, "Why leave, Father?" Sima Yi answers, "Thuge Liang has always been cautious. He opened the gates because he wanted to trap us. Hurry, let's get out of here!"

When Sima Yi and his army are well into the distance, Zhuge Liang rubs his hands together and laughs. But his men are amazed. One of them asks, "Why would a general like Sima Yi run away after one look at you?"

"He assumed I was cautious. He saw my preparations, suspected a trap, and left. What choice did I have?" Zhuge Liang replies, adding, "Sima Yi is sure to head for the northern hills. I have already told Guan Xing and Zhang Bao to be waiting for him there." His astonished men say, "We would have abandoned the town!"

"But would you have gotten far enough to escape Sima Yi?" Zhuge Liang asks.

