

Chinese Drama

Before the 20th century and the introduction of Western-influenced spoken drama via Japan, Chinese drama was sung. For this reason, it is often referred to as opera. In the Yuan dynasty (AD 1279-1368) a style of theatre known as *zaju* 杂剧 was popular and highly influential during subsequent developments in Chinese theatre. The Ming dynasty (AD 1368-1644) saw drama reach new heights with the advent of *kunqu* 昆曲 drama. *Kunqu* was developed in the area of the Kunqu Mountains near the town of Suzhou, Jiangsu province, in eastern China. What is usually considered to be the greatest of *kunqu* dramas, the *Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan ting* 牡丹亭), was written during the Ming dynasty in AD 1588, around the same time as Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*. William Shakespeare (AD 1564-1616) was an almost exact contemporary of Tang Xianzu 汤显祖 (AD 1550-1616), author of the *Peony Pavilion*. The sophisticated style of *kunqu* was enjoyed by the Chinese elite.

Peking opera developed from AD 1790 when opera troupes from Anhui province were invited into the capital to perform for the Emperor Qianlong's (r. AD 1736-1796) 80th birthday celebrations. Peking operas became an entertainment for the wealthy and privileged but eventually came to be appreciated by all levels of society by the 19th and 20th centuries. Regional operas also flourished with lyrics sung in local dialects. In the early 20th century, new styles emerged which were heavily influenced by existing forms of drama, including those from the West, for example the so-called *yueju* 越剧 of the Shanghai area, also known as Shaoxing 绍兴 opera.

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Supported by BP  A CHINA NOW legacy project 

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Also funded through the DCMS/DCFS
National/Regional Museum Partnerships
Education Programme 2008-09.