

GUIDE TO XIAO

4 MAIN ROLES IN CHINESE OPERA



8 THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW

SAY IT OUT:
xìqǔ: see-chuee

- 1 Xiqu when loosely translated from Mandarin, means musical theatre. It is more commonly referred to as Chinese opera in English.
- 2 The art form comes from China and it is more than a thousand years old.
- 3 There are more than 300 different types of Xiqu genres.
- 4 The art form combines a spectacular display of singing, dancing, acting, recitation, martial arts and music.
- 5 In the early days of Xiqu, people went to teahouses to watch a performance. Patrons did not pay money for admission to watch the show. Instead, they paid for tea. If they wanted to get seats, they had to give the waiter a tip to find them seats.
- 6 Xiqu plots are usually based on popular Chinese literature, and historical and folk stories.
- 7 Today, people often say they 'watch an opera performance'. However, audiences who have been exposed to the art form for a long time refer to the experience as 'listening to an opera'. True blue Chinese opera fans are known to listen to the performance with their eyes shut and their hands beating in time to the songs.
- 8 How do you know when the actor is riding a horse, rowing a boat or opening a door? Look at the actor's body movements, footwork and gestures. In Xiqu, most of the acting is based on suggesting what is happening through movements.

DID YOU KNOW?

Xiqu came to the streets of Singapore in the late 19th century. It was brought over by Chinese immigrants as part of their religious rites. Soon, Chinese street opera adopted the Malay term 'wayang' to refer to the art form.



生

SHĒNG
MALE ROLE

DÀN
FEMALE ROLE

旦

4 Main Roles in Chinese Opera

净

JÌNG
MALE CHARACTER
WITH A COLOURFUL
PAINTED FACE

CHǒU
CLOWN ROLE

丑



SHĒNG

MALE ROLE



COMMON SHENG ROLES



LAO SHENG

- An elderly man or a middle-aged man
- Usually emperors, scholars and even an important military official

LOOK OUT FOR:

- A fake beard
- A white beard tells you that it is an elderly man
- Black or grey beard tells you that it is a middle-aged man



XIAO SHENG

- A young man who is usually the hero of the story
- Usually scholars or court officials
- *Xiao sheng* characters are usually refined and knowledgeable

LOOK OUT FOR:

- Headwear like a gauze cap or a cap with long, pheasant feathers



WU SHENG

- A young man who is very knowledgeable in martial arts
- An actor who plays this role has to know martial arts well

LOOK OUT FOR:

- Characters that carry weapons
- Some carry armour flags on the back

DID YOU KNOW?

The singing voice of a *xiao sheng* is higher pitched than a *lao sheng* to show his youthfulness.

DAN

FEMALE ROLE

COMMON DAN ROLES

LAO DAN

- An older female role
- Usually a mother, aunt or empress

LOOK OUT FOR:

- Make-up, posture and gait that make the characters look older
- Some may use a walking stick

QING YI OR ZHENG DAN

- A middle-aged or young woman who is gentle and graceful
- A *qing yi* is someone who has good virtues
- She can be a young empress, a faithful wife or even a dutiful daughter

LOOK OUT FOR:

- Plain and simple robes
- Movements that are smaller and more steadfast than a *hua dan* character
- The female character with the most singing parts

HUA DAN

- A young or middle-aged woman who is lively, playful and full of life
- Can be any female character, from a maidservant to a young princess
- Performers who play this role must be able to sing and mime well

LOOK OUT FOR:

- A character wearing a flowery blouse or apron
- Some will hold a red handkerchief

WU DAN

- Female warrior
- Performers in this role must be good at martial arts
- Some fight on horseback and carry swords

LOOK OUT FOR:

- Female performers who are dressed in shorter tops and long pants
- Some put on a headdress with long pheasant feathers
- Some wear heavy armours with four flags on the back

DID YOU KNOW?

Men used to play *dan* roles before women were allowed to perform. In fact, from the 1920s to 1940s when Peking opera (a Xiqu genre) was at the peak of its popularity, the four great *dan* performers - Mei Lanfang, Cheng Yanqiu, Shang Xiaoyun and Xun Huisheng - were all men!

JING

MALE CHARACTER WITH
A COLOURFUL PAINTED FACE



COMMON JING ROLES

ZHENG JING

- Usually the main jing
- They are usually elderly or important men in society, for example noblemen or court ministers
- Actors who take on this role must have a good singing voice

FU JING

- Livelier and less serious in character than a zheng jing role
- An actor who takes on this role usually focuses more on his acting skills rather than singing skills

WU JING

- Characters in this role are martial experts, just like a wu sheng
- An actor who takes on this role must be fit and know martial arts and acrobatics well

LOOK OUT FOR:

- Colourful faces which represent the qualities of the character



DID YOU KNOW?

The singing of a jing character is usually louder and bolder than other types of characters. This is why actors with rough and strong voices usually take on a jing role.

CHǒU

CLOWN ROLES



Chou characters provide the comedy as they are portrayed as being foolish and funny. They are the jack of all trades in Xiqu, as the role requires them to have some knowledge and understanding of all the other roles. In many Xiqu genres, the chou character will also need to improvise their script and acting according to the audience for each show.

COMMON CHOU ROLES

WU CHOU

- Must know martial arts and acrobatics well as their role require agility

WEN CHOU

- Do not need martial or acrobatic skills but requires mastery of movements and expressions
- Can portray many different characters such as a lowly emperor, a peddler or even a court official

LOOK OUT FOR:

- White patch of make-up around the nose and eyes – these characters are male clowns
- Reddened face with black eyebrows – these characters are female clowns

TEST YOURSELF!

Test your new-found knowledge and spot these characters when you have a chance to catch a Xiqu performance.



INTERESTED TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE ARTS?

Check out www.esplanade.com/offstage/schools for more resources!

Offstage is your all-access backstage pass to the performing arts at Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay, and a guide to Singapore and Asian arts and culture. Produced by Esplanade, Singapore's national performing arts centre, Offstage is for everyone, including families, schools and researchers.