



# A Study of the Interaction Between Mei Lanfang and Chang Xiangyu

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the spiritual connection, shared responsibility, and artistic dedication between Mei Lanfang and Chang Xiangyu, two icons of Chinese opera. Both adapted the legend of Mulan—Mei in Peking opera (\*Mulan Joins the Army\*) and Chang in Henan opera (\*Hua Mulan\*)—blending tradition with modern themes. During wartime, they used their art for patriotic charity performances, channeling national pride. Though not formally master and disciple, they shared a deep artistic bond, leaving a lasting impact on the preservation and evolution of Chinese opera.

**Keywords:** Mei Lanfang, Chang Xiangyu, Hua Mulan, charity performances

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## 1. Introduction

Chinese opera, a treasure of Chinese culture, reflects the nation's history and emotions while showcasing its heritage to the world. Mei Lanfang and Chang Xiangyu, two legendary figures, revolutionized their respective art forms. Mei Lanfang, founder of the Mei School in Peking opera, elevated female roles (dan) with his elegant and majestic style. Chang Xiangyu, creator of the Chang School in Henan opera, became a pioneer through her passionate singing and spirited performances. Despite their different traditions, they shared a deep bond, exchanging artistic ideas and dedicating themselves to preserving and innovating Chinese opera. Together, they left a lasting legacy on China's theatrical arts.

## 2. Spiritual Resonance Through the Lens of Mulan

The character of Hua Mulan in Chinese opera embodies not only traditional virtues such as bravery, wisdom, loyalty, and filial piety but also serves as a timeless cultural icon transcending eras[1]. The story of Mulan, originating from the Northern and Southern Dynasties ballad \*The Ballad of Mulan\*, was popularized in Ming dynasty playwright Xu Wei's drama \*Female Mulan Joins the Army in Her Father's Place\*, cementing her as a cultural icon. During critical historical periods, Mei Lanfang and Chang Xiangyu revived Mulan's legend through their artistic interpretations: Mei's Peking opera \*Mulan Joins the Army\* and Chang's Henan opera \*Hua Mulan\*. Though they never met, their shared portrayal of Mulan bridged tradition and modernity, addressing themes of national defense, survival, and gender equality. Through Mulan, their artistry achieved a timeless spiritual connection. Mei Lanfang transformed *Mulan Joins the Army* into a classic bridging Peking Opera and early cinematic art through adaptation and innovation. In 1917, deeply inspired by Mulan's spirit, he adapted the ancient Yuefu poem *The Ballad of Mulan* into the Peking Opera *Mulan Joins the Army*.

This play holds a unique place in the Mei School art, as it was the only time Mei Lanfang performed on stage in the role of a young male character (Xiaosheng). The Beijing Evening News once recorded: "On stage, dressed in armor and portraying a young general, his graceful and elegant demeanor completely lacked the usual charm of a female role (Dan). His rendition of a Xipi inverted and slow melody was entirely in the Xiaosheng style, exceptionally pleasing to the ear." In this performance, Mei Lanfang not only showcased the heroic spirit of Hua Mulan joining the army but also retained the intrinsic qualities of a heroine[2]. In 1926, Mei Lanfang further adapted *Mulan Joins the Army* for the silver screen, using the language of film to display the artistic beauty of traditional opera. This was not only a bold attempt in his artistic exploration but also a perfect encounter between traditional opera and the emerging art of cinema.

Mei Lanfang and Chang Xiangyu used the story of Hua Mulan as a medium to promote the concept of gender equality through two distinct forms of Chinese opera: Peking Opera and Yu Opera. Chang Xiangyu's masterpiece, \*Hua Mulan\*, was adapted in 1951 by Chen Xianzhang from the Peking Opera script \*Mulan Joins the Army\* written by Ma Shaobo. At the time, the entire nation was swept up in the fervor of "Resisting U.S. Aggression and Aiding Korea, Defending the Homeland." The debut of \*Hua Mulan\* was like a powerful east wind, stirring deep resonance and enthusiastic welcome among the masses. The Hankou Dagang Newspaper ran advertisements for three consecutive days promoting "Chang Xiangyu's 'New Hua Mulan' at the Zhongnan Peking Opera Theater (Qingyi Huashan)," highlighting its significant social impact. In 1956, Changchun Film Studio adapted this Yu Opera classic into the film \*Hua Mulan\*. The inspiring line from the opera, "Who says women are inferior to men?" became a blazing torch illuminating the path to gender equality, turning into a iconic

national discourse of self-renewal that resonated widely across China.

In his memoirs, Mei Lanfang reflected, "At that time, it was common for women to stay at home, relying on men for their livelihood, and reluctant to engage in society. Meanwhile, men generally believed that women were incapable of handling significant responsibilities. In that era, to correct these misconceptions and inspire women's patriotic spirit, the performance of \*Mulan Joins the Army\* was undoubtedly meaningful." This shows that Mei Lanfang had already raised the banner of "gender equality" when staging \*Mulan Joins the Army\*. As Yu Opera's \*Hua Mulan\* spread across the nation, the idea of "gender equality" was realized to the greatest extent. Thus, Mei Lanfang and Chang Xiangyu achieved a convergence in their artistic endeavors, despite taking different paths.

### 3. The Responsibility of Conveying Values Through Art

The reason Mei Lanfang and Chang Xiangyu became globally renowned masters was not solely due to their exquisite vocal techniques or superb acting skills, but also because they were compassionate, principled, and deeply connected to the people as true artists of the masses. Their artistic careers were profoundly intertwined with the collective spirit of the Chinese nation, embodying the enduring sense of unity, mutual support, and unyielding national resilience that has defined the nation for thousands of years[3].

During the Anti-Japanese War, Mei Lanfang actively organized patriotic fundraisers, staging plays like "Resisting the Jin Soldiers" in Shanghai to express his patriotism. In 1932, he led his troupe to perform in Beiping to benefit wounded soldiers, donating proceeds to medical efforts. In 1933, he sent 2,000 yuan for battlefield rescue. Facing Japanese threats, Mei grew a beard and withdrew from the stage, preferring hardship over surrendering to invaders. After the war, he returned to charity performances, including one in 1947 for General Zhang Zizhong's memorial and another in 1951 to support the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea. Mei also participated in donation performances in Beijing, with proceeds buying a fighter jet named 'Peking Opera' for the front lines. Under the influence of Mei Lanfang's patriotic fervor, "Chang Xiangyu and her Xiangyu Opera Troupe decided to embark on a six-month charity tour across major cities in China, donating the proceeds from their performances to fund the purchase of a fighter jet." On August 7, 1951, with the clear sound of the departure horn, the Xiangyu Opera Troupe began their tour, captivating audiences in cities such as Zhengzhou, Wuhan, Guangzhou, and Changsha. Everywhere they went, they caused a sensation, deeply moving the public with their profound patriotic spirit, which prompted generous donations. The troupe raised a total of 1,520,867,800 yuan (in old currency). However, Chang Xiangyu's patriotic sentiments did not stop there. With deep concern and high respect for the soldiers of the Volunteer Army, on April 1, 1953, she crossed the Yalu River Bridge into Korea to perform for the soldiers. Her tour lasted five months, during which she performed 651 shows for an audience of 360,000 people. The story of Chang Xiangyu is like a magnificent hymn, resonating with the strong voice of the era through her powerful singing.

Although Mei Lanfang and Chang Xiangyu were from different regions, they both used their art to convey profound values, closely intertwining their personal artistic pursuits with the fate of the nation. Through their exceptional performances, they captivated audiences, and through their noble patriotic sentiments and sense of responsibility, they earned the respect and admiration of the people. They are truly artists of the people.

### 4. Unwavering Pursuit of Art.

Mei Lanfang and Chang Xiangyu's pursuit of art transcended personal accolades; they were both dedicated to the inheritance and development of Chinese opera, crafting a story of mentorship that went beyond the traditional teacher-student relationship. From a young age, Chang Xiangyu harbored a deep fascination for opera, often listening to her father recount tales of "Mr. Mei." She once reminisced about how, while performing on makeshift stages in Mi County with her father, "he heard that Mei Lanfang was performing in Kaifeng and actually advanced several months' worth of earnings to go watch a few shows." Later, when Chang Xiangyu met Mei Lanfang, she always regarded him as her teacher and elder. Even when "in October 1952, she went to Beijing to participate in the 'First National Opera' and received high praise for her performance of Hua Mulan, earning an honorary award alongside Mei Lanfang, Zhou Xinfang, and six others," it did not diminish her reverence for Mei Lanfang in the slightest.

As a mentor, Mei Lanfang greatly influenced Chang Xiangyu's artistic development. At the 1952 World Peace Congress in Vienna, Mei advised Chang on stage posture and gifted her signed photos, emphasizing professionalism and sincerity. In Moscow, they both performed, with Mei guiding Chang, affectionately calling her "little girl," which eased her nerves. This was the first international showcase of traditional Chinese opera representing the new government. Mei and Chang displayed the allure and depth of Chinese opera to the world.

Beyond artistic exchange, Mei Lanfang and Chang Xiangyu jointly dedicated to inheriting and developing Chinese

opera. In 1957, they urged the opera community to produce more educational and refined works, avoiding vile or harmful content. In 1960, under Premier Zhou Enlai's directive, Mei led the Performing Arts Research Class at the Chinese Opera Research Institute, where Chang was a student. Despite not being officially disciplined, their bond resembled a master-apprentice relationship, evident in their frequent discussions at Mei's residence.

The story of Chang Xiangyu and Mei Lanfang's interactions is a tale filled with artistic charm and humanistic care. Not only did they individually achieve glorious artistic accomplishments on the opera stage, but through their mutual interactions, they also jointly promoted the prosperity and development of Chinese opera. From admiration to sharing the stage, from overseas dissemination to artistic research, they through their own actions embodied the responsibility and commitment of artists, leaving behind a precious legacy for the popularity of Chinese opera.

## 5. Summary

Mei Lanfang and Chang Xiangyu forged a deep friendship and significantly contributed to the inheritance and development of Chinese opera. Their works, such as Mei's Peking Opera "Mulan Joins the Army" and Chang's Henan Opera "Hua Mulan," showcased Hua Mulan's bravery and wisdom, infused with contemporary themes. During wartime, they used art as a weapon for patriotic fundraising and charity, demonstrating artists' responsibility. Their artistic pursuits transcend personal honor, leaving a precious legacy for Chinese opera. Their patriotic sentiments and artistic pursuits inspire contemporary artists and scholars. Let's remember these giants and continue to promote Chinese opera worldwide.

## References

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## Author Bio

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