

Chinese Opera and Qin Wenbao: When Costumes Become Living Canvases

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Abstract

The indigenous music-theatre of China (*xiqu*), commonly translated as Chinese opera, incorporates elements of song, dance, speech, music, and acrobatics into an integrated whole. There are over 300 forms performed regionally and Beijing opera (*Jingju*) is considered nationally dominant. The actors train in stylized vocalization and movement to present role types of male (*sheng*), female (*dan*), painted face (*jing*), and clown (*chou*, lit. “ugly”) characters. Each role type will appear in conventionalized costumes in every performance of any play performed by the many Beijing and Chinese opera troupes, enabling their ready recognition by the audience. The combination of brilliant colors, elegant silks, intricate embroidery, and glittering ornamentation presents an idealized world that is opulent, exquisite, and unforgettable.

Qin Wenbao (1967–) is a contemporary Chinese costume designer who is reimagining this traditional convention by painting the inner thoughts of the characters abstractly on their costumes. His costumes becoming living canvases and inspire the actors to adapt their performances to evoke the expanded expressions on the costumes. The costumes no longer follow the movement, they motivate it. Through a review of the traditional and innovative costumes side-by-side, a deeper understanding of the richness of his unique approach fusing past and present, conventional and contemporary, a reinterpretation and vitalization of Chinese opera costumes emerges.

Keywords: Beijing Opera; Chinese Opera; Costumes; Abstract Painting; Embroidery.

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Chinese Opera Costumes

China has more than 300 forms of indigenous theatre, all of them incorporating song, dance, and music. These different forms of music-drama (*xiqu*), commonly translated as Chinese opera, evolved and were staged in specific regions around the country. Of these regional performance styles, Beijing opera (Jingju) matured in the middle of the nineteenth century. It fuses song, speech, dance, music, and acrobatics simultaneously into an integrated performance style. Today it is the most widespread, influential, and nationally dominant of the theatre forms. A readily recognizable characteristic of Beijing opera is the elaborate and vibrant costumes which have evolved from imperial court dress and theatrical invention, and have influenced other Chinese opera forms. The costumes and makeup play a significant part in identifying the roles for the audience. Insights into the foundation of the system of the conventionalized costumes of Beijing opera as performed in the early 21st century will set the stage for a greater appreciation of the new designs of Qin Wenbao (1967–), an innovative costume designer bringing his contemporary aesthetic to Beijing opera as well as regional styles.

During the several millennia of history of the country, the Chinese people have believed that personal dress and adornment were a visualization of being cultured and civilized. Dress was also used to identify people, an outward expression of one's place in society. Clothing differentiations represented status, rank, and position through the assignment of embroidered symbols, significant colors, and specific garments. A traditional theatre emerging within this rank and clothing conscious environment logically absorbed a language of design emphasizing clothing that provided many clues towards the identity of onstage characters. As many of the stories depicted are about historical characters, the costumes reflect the visual and historical context of the imperial courts, battles, and daily life.¹

Though traditional Beijing opera costumes appear to replicate imperial dress, the two forms are quite distinct for several reasons, both historical and practical. Theatre emerged from ritual dances when adherence to period authenticity was not a consideration. During the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), rules were established prohibiting the populace from wearing garments of status. Emblems on imperial clothing projected power and significance. Anyone who had not earned the right was forbidden to wear them. With these images disallowed, the designs of costumes necessarily avoided realistic representations. Performances were often staged outside in open air venues, so the colors, embellishments, and size were frequently exaggerated to increase visibility. In these ways, historical dress was interpreted and styled for the stage to support the visualization of the story. Many of the costumes have evolved from both the Ming and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties and most, if not all, of the historically based costumes have been transformed in some way from their original period appearance of their models. Others have clearly been invented specifically for dramaturgical necessity, making theatrical style a significant component of all the costume imagery. For example, high-soled boots (*boudi xue*) were added for scale (Fig. 3) and white silk water sleeves (*shuixiu*) for expression (Fig. 1). In reviewing the costumes of Beijing opera currently onstage, the two key differences from imperial dress are that the costumes have the added dimension of theatrical style and, as a living art form, Beijing opera has continued to evolve since the end of imperial influence in 1911.

Costume Conventions

Commercial acting troops were not wealthy, and the elaborate costumes were expensive. The precedent developed for reusing costumes for similar characters within the role types over many years and the life of the garments. As prior to the use of gas and electric lighting, indoor theaters could be quite dim, repeating similar costume silhouettes, embroidery, and colors also helped to clearly identify the role types onstage. With recurring viewings, the audiences came to recognize the role types by their visual image. This practice formed the foundation for the ongoing system of conventionalized costumes to project the identity and status of the roles.

1. Information about Beijing opera costumes has been extracted and synthesized from the author's book, Bonds, Alexandra B. *Beijing Opera Costumes: The Visual Communication of Character and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

To mount performances within these costume conventions, each traditional Beijing opera troupe now maintains a stock of these standardized garments, which must include a range in color and embroidery in the specific costumes worn by each role type in their repertoire of traditional plays. Each troupe's wardrobe staff members are trained which of these costumes are required to present each role and role type in every play, as they are responsible for maintaining the integrity of the costume conventions. This range of costumes is typically stored in cabinets and trunks, originally set up for touring, and the dressers select from among the available choices of a given garment which are suitable for the characters and role types in each performance. Because of this practice, a specific character is likely to look very much the same in performances of the same play by different troupes. These conventions visually project the characters' physical appearances and personal circumstances such as status, age, occupation, and wealth through the costumes and makeup, and the audience will be able to identify them when they first appear onstage before they utter a word.

Color

The vivid colors of the fabrics might initially appear to be arbitrary and unrestrained, yet those colors represent a complex system of meanings which are relatively fixed. The colors of the costumes are divided into a system of upper five (*shang wuse*) and lower five (*xia wuse*) colors with each color ascribed with a distinct meaning. The upper colors are red, green, yellow, white, and black, corresponding with the colors of the five directions of the Chinese compass, with yellow representing the center, a symbol of China, the Middle Kingdom. The upper colors are used for the costumes of nobility, officials at court, and generals, and commonly appear more on male and leading characters. Red signifies respect, honor, and loyalty, (Fig. 1), and black indicates an honest and upright person (Fig. 9), to mention a few. Some variables occur in the list of the lower colors because these colors are blended. Lower colors are more likely to be worn for domestic scenes. They are generally listed as purple (which looks like maroon), pink, blue, lake blue, similar to sky blue or turquoise, and bronze or olive green. Pink and lake blue are worn by young roles (Figs. 8 and 4) and olive is worn by mature roles (Fig. 7). Beyond these ten designated colors, neutral browns, greys, and beiges are used for the lower class, the elderly, and servants (Fig. 11).

Embroidery

The meanings of the embroidery in stage garments originate from imperial dress, though some of their potency has faded over time. The floral, faunal, and emblematic symbols carry social connotations. For instance, flower imagery in pretty pastels is preferred for young, unmarried ladies and their young suitors of good social standing to represent their elegance and youth (Figs. 2, left and 4). When animals were embroidered on clothing in the past, they were meant to endow the wearer with attributes associated with those animals. Lions and tigers indicated courage and fierceness when embroidered on the armor of a warrior. Dragons, associated with the emperor, are generally stitched in gold threads on the clothing of male generals (Figs. 1 and 9) while phoenixes are portrayed with brightly colored feathers in multiple hues for female generals. Creatures could also be auspicious. Interestingly, bats were associated with good luck because of a phonetic pun. Sets of five bats represented wishes for the five happinesses: long life, riches, health, love of virtue, and a natural death.²

The Four Major Costumes

There are four major costumes in the Beijing opera wardrobe: the court robe (*mang*) (Fig. 1), the formal robe (*pi*) (Fig. 2), the armor (*kao*) (Fig. 3), and the informal robe (*xuezi*) (Figs. 4, 5, and 6). They are worn for specific occasions by the male and female roles. The names of the latter garments are modified by the word for woman (*nü*). The focus on these few garments reflects the limited range of clothing styles in daily life. However, choices of fabric color and embroidered imagery make possible a great visual variety onstage and more precise identification of each character.

2. Eberhard Wolfram, *Dictionary of Chinese Symbols* (Singapore: Federal Publications, 1990), 32.

Water sleeves (Figs. 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, and 10) are extensions of white silk attached to the hems of the sleeves of garments for higher status characters. They are present on the court robes, the formal robes, and the informal robes for both male and female characters. They are emblematic of the symbiotic interface between the actors and their costumes, as they amplify movements of arms and hands making emotions more visible. In repose, they are folded at the wrist. When dropped to hanging, quivering the hands to make them ripple can indicate fear, and they can be flung high to make bodily motion or speech more emphatic (Fig. 10). The actors wear rehearsal garments with water sleeves during their training so they can develop their skills in manipulating their sleeves effortlessly.

The court robe is the most respected of garments as the dragons adorning them represent the emperor. It is a hybrid of Ming and Qing court robes and is worn by the emperor and the highest-ranking members of the court, usually in the upper colors and elaborately embellished with metallic dragons. This blending of dynastic dress enables the same costume to represent all eras and locations of royalty. The sedate dragon rondels are worn by the civilian men while large, twisted dragon designs stretch across the shoulders and torso of the court robes of the military roles. In addition, the imperial design of the terrestrial world with waves, mountains, and clouds surrounding the dragons appears on the court robe. It can be worn with a court headdress with six-foot pheasant feathers and a circular jade belt hanging below the waist. The sleeves end with water sleeve extensions (Fig. 1).³

The formal robe resembles a historical robe worn as early as the Song dynasty (906–1279). Onstage, it is worn for daytime wear at non-court functions. It opens down the center front and has a neckband ending at mid-chest. The body is slightly flared, and the sleeves are tubular and longer than the actor's arms with water sleeves attached. The formal robe for male characters is full-length and worn over trousers, and it is knee-length and worn with a pleated skirt for female characters. The color and embroidery can present age and character (Fig. 2 left).

Though stage armor bears some resemblance to the historical counterparts, theatrical license has influenced the development of these costumes, with noticeable changes in the silhouette, ornamentation, and the addition of four flags on the back of the actor to symbolize the troops under the character's command. The segmented sleeves and wide padded pieces at the waist front enlarge the wearer. Their explosive choreography during battles entails spinning, leaping, and even somersaults, all made more frenetic by the flying pieces (Fig. 3).

The ancient precedent for the informal robe, possibly as early as the fifth century BCE, had an asymmetrical closing to the right and tubular or fuller sleeves. This asymmetry preserved in the stage version designates it as less dignified informal dress, though it has water sleeves. With different fabric colors and embellishment, it is suitable for a range of positions and status from emperors to impoverished grandmothers. It is also worn under the court robe and formal robe, so it is the most widely worn of the robes (Figs. 4, 5, 6).

The Role Types

All characters in Beijing operas are assigned to a role type based on the character's significant personality traits, their circumstances in the play, and the skills that actors performing these roles must be able to display. There are four primary categories, standard male (*sheng*) (Fig. 1), female (*dan*) (Figs. 2 left, 5, and 6), painted face (*jing*) (Fig. 3), and clown (*chou*, lit. "ugly") (Fig. 2 right). Each major role type can contain subtypes further delineated by position, status, age, and the performance skills of vocalization and movement required for portrayal. Though characters belonging to each major role type or subtype all share some characteristics, a wide variety of personalities are assembled in each role type or subtype. Personality may surpass status, for instance, as a court official may be assigned to the male, painted face, or clown role type depending primarily on the true nature of his character. The performers are specifically trained vocally and physically to perform a particular role type or subtype in an idealized persona that will not vary much across different troupes. Each role type and subtype can be recognized by their

3. Figures 1–6 are from the author's book.



Figure 1: The mature men who are members of the imperial family or high officials wear the court robe embellished with round dragons, waves, mountains, and clouds. Credit: *Silang Visits His Mother (Silang tan mu)*. Character: Yang Silang, actor: Du Peng. Beijing Jingju Company (Beijing Jingju Yuan), Beijing, China. October 7, 2001



Figure 2: The left figure wears a formal robe embroidered with flowers. Her hair is decorated with pins and flowers. “Colorful” female clowns are played by male actors. On the right, the makeup and clothing is a caricature of the dignified young woman for this “ugly stepsister.” Credit: *The Phoenix Returns to Its Nest (Feng huan chao)*.

Left character: Cheng Xue’e, actor: Zhang Liwen, right character: Cheng Xueyan, actor: Zhu Jinhua. Beijing Jingju Company (Beijing Jingju Yuan), Beijing, China. July 9, 2000



Figure 3: The stage armor draws from armorial precedents mixed with theatricality to evoke a commanding image for generals. Credit: *Women Generals of the Yang Family (Yangmen nüjiang)*. Character: Wan Wen, actor: Wang Dufu. National Jingju Company (Zhongguo Jingju Yuan), Beijing, China. October 3, 2001



Figure 4: The dignified young man's flowered informal robe has blossoms embroidered around the neck and on the opposite hem. Credit: *Hongniang* (*Hongniang*). Character: Zhang Junrui, actor: Song Xiaochuan. National Jingju Company (Zhongguo Jingju Yuan), Beijing, China. October 5, 2001

movement and vocal techniques, as well as by their distinctive patterns of hair, makeup, headdress, dress, and shoes.⁴

The standard male roles are for dignified and decent men who are loyal and deserving of respect with subsets reflecting characteristics such as age, status, or skill set. One example of a subset is the mature males (*laosheng*), typically scholars and/or officials, members of court, and/or heads of households. They are often model characters who can remain composed in the face of adversity. They have long, sparse, three-part beards and skin-toned makeup, and their performance skills focus on song, speech, and dance-acting. Their formal robes with water sleeves are often maroon or olive green to show their age and are decorated with round geometric patterns. Their court robes in similar colors have round dragons. They appear in the red court robes to show their loyalty or an olive green one to indicate their age. Their boots have white thick soles (Figs. 1 and 7).

Dignified young males (*xiaosheng*), another subset, are generally under 30 and unmarried, though interested in love. They are the scholars, princes, dandies, and lovers. They frequently appear in a pastel informal robe embroidered with flowers with water sleeves, and high-soled boots. Their makeup is pale with light cherry blossom cheeks and an arc of rouge between their brows, and they don't wear beards. Their headdress is typically a soft hat. They are trained in song, speech, and dance-acting (Fig. 4).

The female roles are all contained within a single category of female. The subset for mature women (*laodan*) includes the revered mothers and dowagers, as well as poor grandmothers, and all should be of good moral character. The example pictured is an old woman in an informal robe worn by destitute elderly women. They wear very little makeup and have grey to white hair, obscured by a scarf wrapped around the head. They sing and speak with a hearty voice and are often seen walking with a staff. Their robes are typically knee-length with water sleeves and are worn with a pleated skirt (Figs. 5 and 11).

Young to middle-aged women of good character are known as the black clothing role (lit. *qingyi*) for the plain black informal garment they wear primarily during their days of neglect and poverty. They are the dignified young women who are the filial daughters, faithful wives, empresses, and noblewomen. They have a pale face with cherry blossom blush from the eyebrows to the cheeks. Their black hair is dressed in a complex style which frames the face with jeweled curls and additional hairpins for decoration. They train in song, speech, and dance-acting to project demure and delicate manners. In times of good fortune, they typically don their knee-length pastel embroidered formal robes with water sleeves and a pleated skirt underneath with flat shoes. (Fig. 2 left). On the other hand, when these roles are in distress, they wear one of the lowliest forms of dress for dignified young women, the women's black cloth informal robe. Aptly labeled, it is primarily made of plain black silk and has blue borders with white piping and long white silk water sleeves. Though meager, it is considered a noble garment, as it is worn by women who are intrinsically dignified and are likely to prevail. Knee length, it is worn with a white pleated skirt and simplified headdress with fewer jewels (Fig. 6).

Painted Face

The painted face role type is for powerful men of great strength and formidable physical or mental powers, such as ferocious warriors and upright judges, as well as malicious bandits and supernatural beings. They can be identified immediately by their multi-color face paint patterns which are individualized for each character. Those patterns make visible aspects of their character through abstract or non-realistic elements using color, line, and symbolism. For example, a judge who reviews cases at night or in the underworld has a crescent moon on his forehead so he can see through the darkness.⁵ The actors shave their heads at least from their foreheads to the tops of their skulls, originally because all men had to do so during the Qing dynasty, and later to retain the surface needed to paint the face patterns as originally designed. Their beards are long, thick, and not divided. These larger-than-life figures wear shoulder and chest padding, high headdresses, and high-soled boots to increase their stature. When they are dressed

4. A selection of role sub-types is included. For a complete list, refer to Alexandra Bonds, *Beijing Opera Costumes, The Visual Communication of Character and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 2–11.

5. For example, Judge Bao in *Judge Bao and the Case of Xianglian* (*Qin Xianglian*).



Figure 5: The plain old women's informal robes are worn by destitute elderly women. The scarf around her waist further reduces her status. Credit: *A Sorrow that Transcends Life and Death (Sheng si hen)*. Character: Li Yu, actor: Ye Ping. Beijing Jingju Company (Beijing Jingju Yuan), Beijing, China. July 30, 2000



Figure 6: The black cloth women's informal robe gives the dignified young women role type their name and indicates her meager circumstances. Credit: *The Red-Maned Fiery Steed (Hongzong liema)*. Character: Wang Baochuan, actor: Deng Min. Beijing Jingju Company (Beijing Jingju Yuan) Beijing, China. October 6, 2001

for battle, they wear the armor described which also adds to their powerful image. Their singing voice is commanding, with greater strength than the other roles, and for military roles they are experts in the martial movements for battle (Fig. 3).

Clown

The clowns provide the comic relief in the plays. They are divided into categories not by age, but by notable characteristics, civilian, military, and female roles (*caidan* lit. “colorful” female) which usually are performed by men.⁶ The “colorful” characters are undignified women who are in the trope of ugly stepsisters and matchmakers. They may have a parody of the makeup of the dignified women’s makeup and hair and can wear unattractive versions of the formal robe and pleated shirt. Their characters are often mocked as an object of humor (Fig. 2 right). The clown performance skills include speech and dance-acting, and other abilities are developed depending on their sub-type.

Summary

In a cultural context where fine textiles and adornment were long admired, the costumes utilized today for the performance of Beijing opera plays can now easily compete with the former grandeur of the courts and textile arts and exemplify a pinnacle of Chinese stage costume. The visual image of each actor is carefully created to reflect the theatrical interpretation of the emblems and aesthetics of Chinese cultural life and expression. The audience is drawn into a world where the visual language of clothes plays a significant part with the spoken word in identifying the characters and stories portrayed.

Qin Wenbao and Costumes as Living Canvases

Contemporary costume designer, Qin Wenbao, burst into the world-wide awareness of international performance designers at the World Stage Design in 2017 in Taipei, Taiwan, an international theatre design-based quadrennial exhibition. His striking and ground-breaking designs captured in breathtaking photography were recognized with the Gold Medal for costume design that year. While everyone in attendance could appreciate the dramatic impact of his creations, they might not have grasped how he is inserting refreshing and innovative changes while working within the traditional precepts of stage costumes in Chinese operas, both Beijing and regional forms.

The system of conventionalized costumes in traditional performances described above may appear formal, remote, and daunting to newer audience members. Around 2005, Qin Wenbao began considering how a contemporary costume designer could bring more meaningful imagery to the audience’s visual experience in Chinese opera performances. He initially turned to Chinese ink brush painters to seek a new expression of the characters on the surface of their garments. In the second half of the 20th century, Chinese ink brush artists were faced with the same dilemma of how to be simultaneously true to thousands of years of tradition in their art of realism (*xieshi*), a tradition in which elegant replication was one of the main expectations, and the demands and expectations of modern China. They strove to define a new, more spontaneous art form, freed from the restrictions of the past by abandoning realism and painting expressionistic freehand (*xieyi*). Inspired by this movement, Qin Wenbao began experimenting with applying this style of brush painting to his costume designs and it has now become the foundation of his artistic approach to his unique technique of painting on silk for the costumes.

Qin Wenbao has challenged himself to create a new costume image that can exist harmoniously within the performance conventions of the traditional Chinese opera while infusing these costumes with the emotions of stage characters that were unexpressed in the standardized costumes. By creating individualized costumes for his characters, as well as conveying the given circumstances of their role type, and the status, age, occupation, and wealth described above, Wen Bao is visualizing the internal emotions

6. Also called female clown (*choudan*) or placed within the female (*dan*) category.

of the characters through his application of ink brush painting. In his costumes, he has chosen to focus his reinterpretation of traditional opera costumes primarily on the surface embellishment to express emotions, yet he sometimes also alters the silhouette. While the embroidered images on traditional costumes have been used to identify the role type and social context, the character's personality has not been expressed through these same elements. By removing and reimagining the surface design, Qin's costumes can still define the role types through the other elements of design, the silhouettes and colors of the costumes. In addition, he includes the traditional hair, headdresses, and makeup to project the role type and social status of a character to the audience. As Qin retains certain of these conventional designs the audience is still able to read the language of the costumes and identify the characters while gaining the fresh insights into their interior feelings made visual through his expressive painting.

Qin's use of brush painting techniques transforms his costumes into living canvases.⁷ Rather than being passive servants of the narrative, dedicated primarily to explanation and representation, Qin's costumes aim to present a moving, emotional visual scene. As his process has evolved, he has shifted from traditional ink painting towards abstraction with more experimental and unique ways of creating the patterns to illuminate the characters. Qin described his work at the World Stage Design in Sharjah UAE in October 2025:

Abstract painting liberates color, line, and form, freeing them from attachment to concrete objects and instead appealing directly to the viewer's emotions and subconscious. Jackson Pollock's splashes, Kandinsky's musical compositions, Mondrian's geometric order... they offer not story but energy, rhythm, and structure. Infusing this concept into costume design means that the starting point of our design is no longer "who is he," but "what is his emotional state?" and "what is the internal rhythm of this scene?"⁸

To envision the finished composition, Qin initially plots the design of each costume in his renderings, indicating the shape and location of the paint and embroidered embellishments of the costume on the actor. The execution process begins with a flat length of silk on which the cutting lines of the garment pieces have been marked. Qin must imagine the finished effect in three dimensions on the actor and determine how those patterns will join together on the seamlines. The strokes must be deconstructed for the application of paint onto the flat pieces. Embroidery is added for additional layers of color and to interact with lighting to dance on the stage. The geometric order of the costume is then reconstructed when the garment is sewn together. When the performance activates the vision, the magic happens. In motion on the body the painted brushstrokes reveal the hidden emotions within. The new full-body environment of these costumes can inspire the actors to develop fresh, more dramatic body language tailored to the costume. The costume no longer follows the movement, it motivates it.⁹

From the same presentation, he continues:

Abstract painting is more than a style choice, it is a new stage philosophy. It elevates costumes from being a narrative aid to an independent visual subject, a fluid, emotional energy field. The costume and the actor merge into a complete flowing work of art. The artist's painting action is finally completed through the actor's performance, achieving a perfect transformation from action painting to action costuming.¹⁰

The combination of traditional and contemporary visual elements in Qin's hybrid costume designs becomes an extended canvas of expression for the character that flow, transform, and come to life with the actors' breathing and movement. A selection of his designs illustrates this fusion and innovative nature of his expressive costumes. The style of painting can be different for each play depending on the context of the story and the emotions to be depicted. As his designs are deeply linked to the stories of the plays

7. Canvases is Qin's word choice for his designs.

8. Qin Wenbao, "From Canvas to Body: How Abstract Painting Reshapes the Artistic Dimension of Costumes" (presentation Sharjah UAE, October 20, 2025).

9. Qin.

10. Qin.

and the natures of the specific characters, descriptions of the circumstances and their personalities have been included to reveal the contents of the images when pertinent.

Court Robe and Mature Male

This mature male character, Liang Jian, wears a green court robe from a Wuxi opera (Xiju) performance in Wuxi, Jiangsu Province, of the play, *Meng Lijun*, named after its main character, Meng Lijun. Liang Jian's age is revealed by his plain makeup and long gray beard, and further by the olive color of his robe, a convention for older characters. His court robe has water sleeves and a hooped jade belt suspended around the waist. He also wears the high-soled boots assigned to dignified mature men, the general role type for this character. Qin's imagery on the robe below the belt makes clear references to the traditional terrestrial embroidery on the court robes. The waves and mountains are readily recognizable despite their freer use of abstraction. In contrast, the dragon roundels at the front hip and on the bottoms of the sleeves are closer to the traditional Chinese opera style in execution. Both types of imagery on his court robe encode his high government identity. His soft headdress of matching fabric is one conventional style for men at court (Figs. 1 and 7).¹¹

Dignified Young Women in Formal Robe with Young Male Scholar in Informal Robe

The Oath Made at Blackstone (*Wushi ji*) is an example of Kun opera (Kunqu, lit. songs of Kunshan), a predecessor to Beijing opera with beautiful melodies, classical language, and graceful movements. The two performance forms share basically the same language of conventional costumes. This play tells one of the traditional stories involving the filial daughter of a rich family, the dignified young woman role, and a poor yet dignified young male scholar who is studying for his exams yet expected to move up into government service. This image from a production in Changsha, Hunan province is of their first meeting in the freshness of their youth and relationship. Pink is one of the standard colors used for portraying young lovers and they often are dressed in the same or similar color. Instead of using birds or flowers as for traditional opera costumes for such characters, Qin has designed abstract painted and embroidered shapes in the color celadon, associated with scholars in Chinese culture. This young scholar wears the side closing informal robe, which is usually assigned to this role in domestic situations. His makeup, hair, and soft cap are a direct transfer from the standardized choices. The dignified young woman wears a robe that opens in the front, longer than the formal robe typically assigned for similar characters (Fig. 8 both). The dignified young women in both the traditional (Fig. 2) and Qin's version feature the cherry blossom makeup and bejeweled hair that is emblematic for this and similar role types. Incidentally, the capes worn by the two figures do not mean bad weather, rather that they are traveling.

Martial Mature Ruler in Armor

Cuan Bo was a Han Chinese who emigrated from central China to Yunnan and with others established an independent kingdom there. He is the main character of a newly rewritten play, *The Lord of the River* (*Wangzhe Jiangshang*) presented in Dian opera style in Yuxi, Yunnan Province. The play was rewritten by female playwright, Yang Jun, especially for this actor, Li Weimin, who plays Cuan Bo. Cuan Bo is a unique stage character whose role type changes from a martial mature dignified male to painted face as he becomes emperor. The character's future transition to painted face is foretold in the photo by the absence of hair on his forehead (Fig. 9). On his upper body he wears a reflection of the traditional armor worn by generals (Fig. 3). Armor may be worn without the four flags when the role is not actively engaged in combat. His traditional headdress retains the gilded tiers of filigree and woolly pompoms associated with generals. The shoulders and sleeves resemble the layers of gold embroidered pieces of the traditional stage armor. The shoulder pieces have been further enhanced with dimensional dragons indicating his imperial status. Below his waist the message of the garment shifts from presenting the character to visualizing the situation in this moment. The emperor is crossing the river in a boat. In

11. Figures 7–12 are courtesy of Qin Wenbao.



Figure 7: This mature male is wearing a court robe and typical headdress. Credit: *Meng Lijun* (*Meng Lijun*). Character: Liang Jian, actor: Pan Hua. Wuxi Jiangsu Province Opera Company (Wuxi Juyan), Wuxi, Jiangsu Province, China. August 20, 2015



Figure 8: The young male scholar wears the informal robe with a matching soft cap. The dignified young woman is clothed in the formal robe and the conventional hairstyle and makeup. Credit: *The Oath Made at Blackstone* (*Wushi ji*). Left character: Liu Zhan, actor: Huang Bingqiang, right character: Li Ruoshui, actor: Luo Yan. Hunan Province Kun Opera Troupe (Hunansheng Kunqu Yuan) Changsha, Hunan Province, China. July 5, 2018



Figure 9: Cuan Bo is dressed in a version of armor with padded golden accents and a flowing skirt that signifies a river of blood. Credit: *The Lord of the River (Wangzhe Jiangshang)*. Character: Cuan Bo, actor: Li Weimin. Yuxi (Yunnan Province) Dian Opera Company, (Yunnan Sheng Yuxi Dianju Yuan) Yuxi, Yunnan Province, China. November 3, 2018

Chinese tradition the relation between the ruler and the people has been compared to a boat in the water. The water (the people) can either support or overturn the boat (the rulers), so rulers must respect the people and their needs and wants. The free-flowing silk skirts of the costume portray this mutable relationship between the king and the people. When he moves onstage the painted hem of his costume undulates to reveal the hidden colors indicating the water is turning to a river of blood.¹²

Dignified Young Woman in Black Cloth Informal Robe

Wang Baochuan is the daughter of a Prime Minister in this Yue opera performance from Zhejiang Province, *The Embroidered Engagement Ball* (*Xiuqiu ji*). As happens in several traditional Chinese plays, though more rarely in real life, she has been allowed to select her husband-to-be by throwing an embroidered ball to her choice. She picked a poor young man the audience has reason to believe will prosper in the future yet whom her father resolutely rejected. Wang left the mansion of her father to go live with her husband in an abandoned kiln. To improve his station, her husband went to war and eventually married a foreign princess. When he returned home 18 years later, he found Wang still living where he left her. Wang was outraged he had abandoned her while she had kept her vow to him. In breaking her ties with her family she had neglected her filial devotion, a significant expectation of obedience in Chinese tradition. In this photo, Wang has just learned of the death of her father and realizes she can never resolve her estrangement from him now. She is releasing her repressed emotion and grief with the conventional gesture of flinging both water sleeves away at once (Fig. 10). The costume Qin has designed for her echoes the black cloth informal robe worn by dignified young women who have lost their place in society. Her headdress also resonates with the conventional minimalism of fewer jewels for this type of character (Fig. 6). Qin has eliminated the rigid borders, straight closing, and changed from a robe and skirt to a single garment. These shifts allow for more dynamic fluidity between the black and white colors, which now bleed from the garment to the water sleeves without breaks or seams thereby exemplifying her fluid transformation towards independence. The end of the story is enigmatic as to whether she will choose to continue her life of self-imposed isolation, or if she changes to life as a modern and self-determining woman. While the audience doesn't know exactly what she will do, it is clear that she has rejected the traditional character's decision to be forever submissive to her husband. The playwright, Qu Zhaoji, used her contemporary education and values to reconstruct the original story to create a new and modern Wang Baochai.¹³

Mature Male Official, Mature Poor Woman, and Clown Official

The First Village Compact (*Tianxia diyi yue*) is a Qin opera and was performed in Xi'an, China. The older woman in the center is struggling against the dual constraints of family and society. Each character has a different style of calligraphy painted on their costumes to project their affiliations (Fig. 11). In ancient China, rules and other important texts were carved on stone and copies could be made by placing a damp piece of paper over the calligraphy, then rubbing charcoal or brushing ink onto the surface. This produces a negative image of the text from the stone. The first compact, the one featured in this play, was composed by an elder of the Lü clan, the dominant clan in the village. The mature male on the left with black ink characters on his robe, unfortunately covered by his beard, is a member of the Lü clan and the family rules have been painted on his robe. His makeup and thin, tri-partite black beard fit his role type, though the lack of water sleeves does not. The court robe of the government official on the right, played by a big clown, has rubbings of the village compact. The gold paint reflects the gold embroidery conventionally applied on these robes (Fig. 1). He wears a heavier, undivided beard and a conventional court headdress. The old woman is dressed in the poorest form of informal robe with a belt and without water sleeves to represent her advanced age and impoverishment (Fig. 5). She is vigorously fighting for her rights as she sees them, and the determination and passion on her face is matched by the wildness of the cursive black calligraphy on her informal robe. Additional highlights of white embroidery have been stitched on her shoulders. She has a gray scarf around her head and a bun of gray hair on top to indicate

12. See Qin Wenbao, conversation with author, October 22, 2025.

13. Qin, conversation with author, October 22, 2025, and January 2, 2026.



Figure 10: The dignified women wear a black cloth garment when their circumstances have been reduced. The water sleeves and bold painting expand her expression of grief. Credit: *The Embroidered Engagement Ball* (*Xiuqiu ji*). Character: Wang Baochai, actor: Xu Xiaofei. Ningbo [Zhejiang Province] Young One Hundred Flowers Yue Opera Troupe, (Ningbo Xiaobaihua Yueju Tuan) Shanghai, China. October 10, 2013



Figure 11: The old woman is struggling with two men of power. She wears the poorest form of clothing indicating old age and poverty. Credit: *The First Village Compact* (*Tianxia diyi yue*). Left character: Lü Dazhao, actor: Lei Tao, center character: Qiao Sanniang (Liu Qingqing), right character: Liu Xun, Cui Chaochao. Lantian District of Shaanxi Province Theatrical Troupe (Shaanxi Lantianxian Jutuan) Xi'an, China, June 18, 2019. Performed in the style of Qin opera (Qinju)

her age and role type. This garment usually is worn with a skirt, yet she has on trousers, an indication of her strong spirit.¹⁴



Figure 12: This “colorful” female clown, played by a male actor, wears an attractive brightly colored costume. *Chen Ying Sells Water* (*Chen Ying maishui*) Character: Ye Fanhua, actor: Yi Bin. Tongzhou Song and Dance Troupe of Nantong (Jiangsu Province) (Jiangsu Nantong Tongzhou Gewu Tuan/Tongju Tuan), Nantong, Jiangsu Province, China. May 30, 2023

“Colorful” Female Clown

In this Tong opera performance of *Chen Ying Sells Water* (*Chen Ying maishui*) from Nantong, Jiangsu province, a male actor, Yi Bin, cross-dressed to perform the female character, Ye Fanhua. This cross-dressing for the “colorful” female clown, when in Beijing operas, is expected to be recognized by the audience. These characters are typically portrayed in an unflattering manner with ill-fitting clothing, unattractive pasty white makeup, and undignified performance. This design differs from the traditional costume for this role type in every way, focusing on creating an attractive and sympathetic image to draw

14. Qin Wenbao, conversation with author, December 8, 2025.

the audience to the character (Figs. 2 right and 12).¹⁵ The selection of colors includes a true purple which is not listed in the conventional upper or lower colors usually used prescribed for Beijing opera costumes. The free-flowing pattern of color and loosely fitting garments project a unique exuberance. The makeup, rather than an uncomplimentary caricature of the polished young dignified young woman, is a simplified version of the ideal. The headdress has a bouquet of flowers and a lovely fan arranged in an original design. In rehearsals, the actor began by playing the role as the traditional comic figure. However, viewing Qin's appealing costume design stimulated his creativity and gave him the confidence to reveal his feminine side and reinterpret the character more respectfully. Yet with all these changes from what would be expected from this a "colorful" clown role, this new design and the actor's approach leave the audience in no doubt about the intensions for this character.

Conclusion

Qin's designs achieve an elegant integration of ink, silk, and stitches with a boldly distinctive result. As the only costume designer experimenting with this combination of ink on fabric, his groundbreaking designs are also a unique affirmation of the beauty and integrative quality of Chinese arts. This artistic shift creates a rejuvenating blend of past and present to make the costumes accessible to long-time fans and new audiences for Chinese opera. Understandably, the audiences initially have had mixed responses to Qin Wenbao's innovations. The long-time fans are inclined to resist innovations they see as threatening to tradition. Younger audiences who haven't learned or followed the traditional system appreciate the heightened visual and emotional sensibilities embodied in his costumes. To them, his blend of the classical forms with innovative surface designs brings a fresh and welcome newness to Chinese opera, an art that has sometimes been dismissed as too conservative and alienated from modern life.¹⁶ His designs do not replace the traditional Chinese opera aesthetics, they strengthen the structure to convey emotion in modern ways for a different theatrical experience. Qin admires the culturally enriched costumes of traditional Beijing opera and wants to see this historical treasure continue onstage in parallel with the process of imagining new forms of costume design. In his courses, he teaches the original conventionalized system of costuming containing the aesthetic beauty of the past so that emerging designers will have a solid foundation upon which to create new interpretive designs that speak to contemporary modern society.¹⁷ His appreciation and knowledge of the traditional clothing and makeup is always evident in his fusion of the conventional elements from that system with his new concepts. Both styles affect the actors' portrayals and shape the impact of the performances on the audiences who view the plays by encouraging their reflection upon the context of their past and the present cultural moirés. The important stories in China's timeline are revered lessons brought to life in the theatre and are similarly served by the venerable traditional costumes and the enlivened modernizations. Based on his design concept, the favorable aspect of the traditional heritage is still evident for the next generation.¹⁸

Qin's designs, interestingly, are no longer generic or suitable for all characters within a role type as established in the conventional system of costumes. They can only be used again in revivals of the performances for which they were created. He has conceived of costumes which are designated to present specific characters at a specific moment in their lives, bringing an added depth of their visual expression to the performance. As a contemporary costume designer, he is broadening the previous limitations and definitions of the costumes in search of innovative possibilities to reflect the changing cultural and social contexts. The addition of his brilliant costume designer's eye, the insertion of ink brush art, and the corresponding modifications in the actors' performance style have heightened the standards of both beauty and communication of character. In conceiving of new developments in the art of the stage, Qin Wenbao has fused the classical and modern design elements with new energy to appeal across the ages.¹⁹

15. Qin, conversation with author, October 22, 2025.

16. Qin, October 22, 2025.

17. Qin Wenbao, conversation with author, January 2, 2026.

18. See Qin, January 2, 2026.

19. Qin, January 2, 2026.

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Glossary

- caidan*: lit. "colorful" female clown role.
- chou*: lit. "ugly" clown roles, foolish magistrates, nagging women.
- dan*: female roles main category.
- houdi xue*: tall boots with high soles for men.
- jing*: painted face roles, men of great strength, wisdom, supernaturals.
- Jingju: capital drama, Beijing style of Chinese opera combining music, speech, song, pantomime, dance and acrobatics into a single presentation.
- kao*: stage armor for generals and high-ranking military roles.
- Kunqu: lit. "songs of Kunshan," Ming-Qing performance style.
- laodan*: mature women roles, usually dignified and venerated.
- laosheng*: mature dignified male roles, scholars, statesmen, and members of the court.
- mang*: court robe for emperor and highest-ranking courtiers and generals.
- nü*: women or women's, applied to costumes for female roles.
- pi*: formal robe with center opening worn for domestic scenes.
- qingyi*: lit. "black clothing," a role type for young to middle-aged women who have or have had high social status and dignity: also the black-colored garment worn by these characters when in destitute circumstances.
- shang wuse*: upper colors, higher ranking for court and official clothing: red, green, yellow, white, and black.
- sheng*: standard male roles with intrinsic dignity.
- shuixiu*: water sleeves, white silk extensions from the cuffs of the sleeves.
- xia wuse*: lower colors, commonly used for domestic scenes: maroon, pink, blue, lake blue, olive.
- xiaosheng*: young dignified men, generally under 30 and unmarried.
- xieshi*: representational brush calligraphy.

xieyi: expressionistic brush calligraphy.

xiqu: Chinese indigenous drama. entertainment with songs and music.

xuezi: informal robe with asymmetrical opening.

Sitography

Links to performances with Qin Wenbao's costume designs: the provider for each video is <https://www.bilibili.com/>. Each video will play for 30 seconds and then stop. Press play again after the video stops (they want you to become a member). It should then continue in without interruption.

Chen Ying Sells Water, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Vp4y1g7JR/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click

Meng Lijun, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1C1wmevETu/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click

The Embroidered Engagement Ball, <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV16m4y1G7u1/>

The Lord of the River, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1gTtMzZEge/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click

The Oath Made at Blackstone, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1rK4y197K1/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click

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