Anyone living in the West who has ever attended a performance of Chinese Beijing opera will immediately notice that the actors wear elaborate headdresses above their brightly painted faces and that rich costumes clothe their bodies on a stark stage with few props. While listening to thus attired actors sing unfamiliar tunes accompanied by Asian instruments, the audience will follow with its gaze their exaggerated body movement and stylized hand gestures. Without question, the costumes present the most accessible information about the characters and the unfolding drama. But that doesn’t make them any more understandable.

Alexandra Bond’s *Beijing Opera Costumes: The Visual Communication of Character and Culture*, nearly two decades in the researching and writing, is the reference we all need. Long intrigued by the role of costumes in Beijing opera or Jingjü (literally, capital theater), Bonds set out to understand and decode from her unique perspective of costume design the multiple layers of meaning embodied in them. Amply illustrated, the book consists of eight chapters, two appendices—one of costume pattern drafts; the other, a dictionary of Jingjü characters—and a Chinese/English glossary.

Chapter 1 gives an overview of the world of Beijing opera that itself only emerged in the nineteenth century. Reflecting the taste and patronage of the imperial court, Jingjü absorbed various regional influences (more than three hundred forms) and synthesized over time, fusing song, speech, dance, music, and acrobatics simultaneously into an integrated performance. Today, the term Jingjü encompasses three types of performance: traditional, newly written historical, and contemporary. This volume focuses on the traditional, which provides the foundation for the latter two categories.

The costumes are designed to help the intended Chinese audience—and non-Chinese audience by extension—distinguish four major character types. The first two are separated by gender: *sheng* roles for men and *dan* roles for women. Within each gender category, roles are then subdivided...
according to age: laosheng (mature men), xiaosheng (young men), laodan (mature women), qingyi (young to middle-aged women), and huadan (lively young women). In both gender types, those serving in the military are highlighted as wusheng (military men) and wudan (military women)—they sing less and perform the highly entertaining acrobatics.

The third major category is based on awe-inspiring moral fortitude: the jing (literally, “clean”)—all male roles as in upright judges, bandit chiefs, fierce warriors, even gods and spirits. The term jing refers to the mask painted onto the actor’s face, distinct from exaggerated but still human cosmetic enhancement on actors in other character types. Also known as hualian (“flower-face”), the jing roles show their personalities on their faces. Within this category are three more sub-categories: zheng jing (primary), fu jing (secondary), and wu jing (military). The fourth category of roles is the chou, or the clown. They often play foolish magistrates, nagging women, and servants. Three subcategories include the wen chou (civil), wuchou (the military), and caidan (female chou also known as choudan), generally played by men impersonating women. To fill out an otherwise sparse stage, additional players appear as supporting cast such as attendants to officials, soldiers, or maids. Fewer props meant easier touring for the regional troupes.

Roles in each category and sub-category require specific costumes and accessories, though they generally fall into four basic types: mang (court robe), pi (formal robe with central opening), kao (stage armor for high-ranking generals), and xuezi (informal robe with asymmetric opening). Women wear similar versions but coded in different colors and motifs. Beside gender (men/women), age (young/old), and the official function of civil or military, other distinctions include social status (high/low), wealth (rich/poor), and ethnicity (majority Han/minorities).

Of all these distinctions, that between the civil and military function mirrors the structure of the imperial bureaucracy—the underlying social order in both real life and theater, and one informed by Confucianism. The stories of the Beijing opera are highly moralizing, intended to reward good behavior and punish the bad. Elements of Daoism and Buddhism are liberally integrated as lived in life. (For a general and useful discussion, see Stephen F. Teiser, “Religions of China in Practice,” in Asian Religions in Practice, Donald S. Lopez, Jr., ed., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999, 88–122). Drawn from legends, folklore, and popular historical novels, most stories are familiar to theater-frequenting Chinese audience members. They come to see actors perform their favorite heroes and heroines whose romanticized lives permit the projection of wishes and
desires that might be difficult to realize in their own lives. It mattered little
that the audience would oftentimes know the outcome in advance.

Instead, both actors and audience share the goal of achieving and
appreciating the ultimate perfection of beauty as defined by the Jingjü
tradition. Bonds describes this as the integration of three aesthetic
principles: “synthesis, stylization, and convention” (28–29). Synthesis
refers to the simultaneous song and dance in performance; stylization to
the aesthetic rendering of daily behavior; and convention to the specific
performative vocabulary used to deliver coded messages. For these ideas,
she cites Elizabeth Wichmann-Walczak, who teaches the Jingjü tradition at
the Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa,
the “foremost place in the English-speaking world” outside China for
studying Beijing opera. It houses an impressive collection of Beijing opera
costumes, many of which appear as illustrations in this volume.

In subsequent chapters, Bonds explains different aspects of the costumes.
In chapter 2, “The World of Traditional Jingjü Costumes,” she reveals how
form, color, and the surface of the costumes are used to differentiate the
identity of the various characters and their subcategories. The actors
develop gestures and body movements in relation to the costumes which,
in turn, must also allow the actors to project the character through
movement. Realism is supplanted by the symbolic order where the action
dominate. Of interest to note, Bonds highlights the absence of time
period, season, and region in the cut and construction of the costumes.
That is, the costumes were designed without reference to whether the
drama derived from a story based in legends of the Song (960-1279),
Yuan (1279-1368), Ming (1368-1644), or Qing dynasties (1644–1911). Nor
do the costumes reveal if the events portrayed occurred in winter or
summer, or in northern or southern China where climatic conditions
differed. Such indications are in fact revealed in the refined motifs
ornamenting the textile surface.

This can be better understood after reading chapter 3, “The Form and
Historical Roots of Costumes”; chapter 4, “The Symbolism and Application
of Color”; and chapter 5, “The Aesthetics and Meaning of the Embroidery
Imagery.” Not a Chinese historian or an art historian, and admitting to
insufficient command of the Chinese language, Bonds relied on limited
translations and secondary sources.

Here one might wish for Bonds to have consulted more broadly scholarly
texts such as “Types of Symbols in Chinese Art” (Schuyler Cammann,
Wright, ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953, 195–231), “Botanical Puns in Chinese Art” (Terese Tse Bartholomew, “Botanical Puns in Chinese Art from the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,” Orientations 16, no. 9 (1985): 18–34), and Zhongguo fuzhuang secai shi lun (Yingqiang Li, Zhongguo fuzhuang secai shi lun, Taipei: Nantien, 1993) a discussion on the history of Chinese clothing colors, all of which would have greatly deepened the historical analyses. For example, an embroidered magnolia signifies spring to the audience (fig. 4.12) as the embroidered leafless plum blossoms symbolizes winter (fig. 5.10). Also, the embroidered butterflies, signifying longevity, on a military clown hints at his survival and hence victory (fig. 6.33). Nonetheless, such lack is more than compensated for by Bonds’s encyclopedic match of textual reference with specific theatrical application, frequently illustrated with photographs of actual performers in situ.

Chapter 6, “The Costume Compendium,” is the heart of this volume. Bonds generously shares her careful research during many years in Taipei and Beijing where she consulted numerous authorities and professionals in Beijing opera. Every imaginable category is presented in detail. For anyone wishing to produce a performance of Beijing opera, this chapter is indispensable, as is chapter 7, “Make-up, Hair, and Headdress,” and chapter 8, “Dressing Techniques and Costume Plots.” For Beijing opera lovers, the illustrated Table 6, “The Phoenix Returns to Its Nest: Comparative Costume Plots,” succinctly summarizes the visual vocabulary used to delineate various characters.

Indeed, these stock characters can be compared to those of the Commedia dell’arte that has enjoyed much popularity in Italy since the fifteenth century but can be traced back to Roman times. Characters wore easily recognizable costumes—that is, recognizable to the theater-frequenting audience in Italy. Just as they recognized Arlecchino the clown by his diamond patches, in China, the audience of Beijing opera easily identified by the hairy fur embroidery on his costume (fig. 6.57) the mischievous and much-loved Monkey King, who accompanied the monk Xuanzang in search of Buddhist sutras (adapted from the famous novel Journey to the West published in the 1590s).

For any student of theater, Bonds’s Beijing Opera Costumes opens a window for the comparison of theatrical costumes worldwide. It also grounds the reading of the few existing English-language texts on Chinese theater, such as J. C. Crump’s Chinese Theatre in the Days of Kublai Khan (Ann Arbor: Centre for Chinese Studies at the University of Michigan, 1990) and Daphne Lei’s Operatic China: Staging Chinese Identity across
the Pacific (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2006).

Angela Sheng shenga@mcmaster.ca