

“People’s Character” and “National Identity”: The Role of the 1955 European Tour of the Chinese Classical Dance and Music Troupe in Promoting New China’s Diplomacy

Shuang Hao^{1,a,*}

¹*Department of Art Management and Culture Communication, National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts, Beijing, China*

a. hunterhao240@126.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: In 1955, the Chinese Classical Theatre Troupe toured Europe in two groups, attracting significant interest from local audiences and introducing the art of New Chinese opera to the European media. European newspapers and periodicals consistently reported on the performances of Chinese opera through news articles, special features, and drama reviews, thereby establishing an artistic image of China with distinctive characteristics and illustrating the methods and characteristics of shaping the image of New China. This study, utilizing collections from the troupe’s tour, oral histories, overseas digital newspapers, and archival sources, reconstructs the tour process and related media coverage. It not only provides a comprehensive evaluation of the achievements of the 1955 tour but also examines the construction of Chinese art abroad. Furthermore, it discusses the specific role of Chinese opera in China’s international cultural exchange, offering insights for the contemporary global promotion of Chinese opera.

Keywords: Chinese Classical Theatre Troupe, Peking Opera, Overseas Newspapers and Periodicals.

1. Introduction

In 1955, under the leadership of Zhang Zhixiang, the Vice Minister of Culture, and with Zhao Feng serving as Deputy Leader and Artistic Director, the Chinese Classical Dance and Music Troupe (also known as the Chinese Art Troupe) was formed, featuring renowned Peking opera artists such as Du Jinfang, Li Shaochun, and Wang Mingzhong. This troupe participated in the second International Theatre Festival in Paris, France, in June, achieving great success. Following this, they performed in Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Italy, and the United Kingdom from May 1955 to January 1956, with their European tour lasting as long as eight months[1]. Concurrently, at the directive of the Ministry of Culture and the Chinese People’s Association for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, a second Chinese Classical Dance and Music Troupe was formed in July 1955, primarily consisting of members from the Peking Opera division of the China Youth Arts Troupe. Led by Chu Tunan, with Ma Shaobo and Ren Hong as Deputy Leaders, this troupe toured the five Nordic countries—Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland—after participating in the World Festival of Youth and Students in Poland, performing until the end of 1955[2]. These Peking opera

performances by the two Chinese art troupes marked the first appearance of Peking opera in various European countries since the establishment of the People's Republic of China. As an extensive, long-term tour, Peking opera on stage drew widespread attention from audiences across Europe. During the performances, both troupes compiled press reports from the countries they visited, later translating these into cultural exchange materials such as *The Chinese Classical Dance and Music Troupe in the Five Nordic Countries* and *Selected Translations of European Press Reviews on the 1955 Chinese Art Troupe Tour in Western Europe*. After returning to China, troupe members and accompanying journalists published their tour experiences in domestic newspapers and magazines, including *Drama News*, *People's Daily*, and *World Knowledge*. Later, oral histories from troupe members, overseas digital newspapers, and archive database content contributed to a rich body of research materials. This wealth of resources not only highlights the accomplishments of Peking opera on the European stage in 1955 but also provides insights into the selective reporting and framing methods used by European media in their portrayal of Peking opera art.

2. Shining on the World Stage: Peking Opera's Debut in Europe

Since 1951, New China has sent numerous art troupes to participate in cultural exchange activities across the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and Southeast Asia, with Peking opera quickly becoming a focal point and highly acclaimed performance in these international showcases. From 1951 to 1962, the China Youth Art Troupe participated in six consecutive "World Festivals of Youth and Students," generating a significant impact in Eastern Europe and enhancing the global spread of Chinese culture. Peking opera pieces such as *The Crossroad Inn* and *Disturbance in the Dragon Palace* captivated audiences in Eastern Europe, with newspapers from East Germany, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland lauding the performances with phrases like "rich in expressive techniques," "showcasing the high skill level of young Chinese artists," "the highest level of classical dance," and "living wisdom of the people"[3]. However, for Western European media, geographical distance and ideological divides often led to limited coverage of Chinese art troupes' cultural exchange activities. Even when covered, reports frequently included prefixed terms like "Red China" or "Communist China," reminding readers of the differences in political systems and framing the performances within the context of ideological contrast.

2.1. The Western European Tour of the Chinese Classical Dance and Music Troupe

In June 1955, the Chinese Classical Dance and Music Troupe traveled to France to participate in the second International Theatre Festival in Paris. As this marked the first time since the founding of New China that Peking opera had performed on a "capitalist stage"—and given the prominence of the Paris Theatre Festival as a significant global event—Western media took great interest, with *The New York Times* in the United States expressing anticipation for the event: "For the first time in Paris, Peking Opera, with a 1,250-year history, will be presented." The Chinese Classical Dance and Music Troupe prepared extensively for this debut. To showcase the distinctive qualities of traditional Chinese art and culture to the Parisian audience, the troupe held a press conference before the performance. They collaborated with notable figures, including Vilgaux, the Honorary President of the France-China Friendship Association and President of the French National Committee of Writers, and Solia, the President of the Paris Literary and Artistic Society. Through a combination of actor demonstrations and explanatory commentary, they introduced the audience to the realistic traditions and characteristics of Peking opera, also answering various questions posed by attending journalists. This press conference, widely reported in French media, provided the public with a foundational understanding of Peking opera's performance style and stage aesthetics, while the enthusiastic support of French literary and artistic figures further bolstered the opera's reception in France. On the evening

of June 5, the Chinese Classical Dance and Music Troupe made its debut at the Théâtre Sarah Bernhardt in Paris, performing *The Crossroad Inn*, *Broken Bridge*, *Havoc in Heaven*, *Yandang Mountain*, and *Eliminating the Three Harms* before an eager audience of thousands. Influential French cultural figures such as André Maurois, Albert Camus, and the poet Louis Aragon attended and praised the artistic achievements of Peking opera. Jean-Paul Sartre remarked, “The barriers of language and customs create no obstacle.” Aragon later published several articles in *Lettres Françaises*, discussing the realistic tradition of Peking opera. Following their performances at Théâtre Sarah Bernhardt, the troupe moved to the Palais de Chaillot, a 2,700-seat venue, where demand was so high that showtimes had to be extended each night to accommodate the enthusiastic audiences.

After concluding their performances in France, the Chinese Classical Dance and Music Troupe traveled to Brussels, Belgium, where they held a series of “captivating” performances at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie from July 4 to July 9. Following this, the troupe performed in the Netherlands, Czechoslovakia, and Switzerland. In September of the same year, they participated in Italy’s 18th Theatre Festival and the 19th International Festival of Contemporary Music. On September 24, they made their debut at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice, where they were met with enthusiastic acclaim from Italian audiences, theater critics, and press editors, achieving tremendous success. In late October 1955, the Peking Opera Troupe arrived in London, England, planning a three-week run at the Palace Theatre. The Illustrated London News informed readers that Peking opera, with its “vivid colors, rich and beautiful oriental costumes, and outstanding choruses, combined with remarkable speed and the intensity and vitality of the performers,” would ensure a memorable experience[4]. On November 7, the troupe moved from the Palace Theatre to the Victoria Palace Theatre to perform *Yandang Mountain* at the “Royal Variety Performance.” Their masterful stagecraft won over the audience completely, even overshadowing Ruby Murray, the popular Irish singer of the 1950s in the UK. After the performance, Queen Elizabeth II personally met with Xu Juhua, the director of *Yandang Mountain*, expressing her admiration for the artistry of Peking opera and describing the performance as “simply fantastic”[5].

2.2. The Nordic Tour of the Chinese Classical Dance and Music Troupe

In early September 1955, the Chinese Classical Dance and Music Troupe, primarily composed of members from the Peking Opera division of the China Youth Art Troupe, set out from Poland and arrived in Helsinki, Finland, on September 6. The troupe's premiere took place on the evening of September 9 at the Finnish National Theatre, featuring performances such as *Havoc in Heaven*, *The Crossroad Inn*, *Autumn River*, and *The Drunken Beauty*. By the time of their final performance on November 30 in Reykjavik, Iceland, they had completed a total of 52 performances, with an audience attendance exceeding 65,000. According to the troupe’s post-tour report, although the duration of the Nordic tour was shorter than that of the Western European tour, the number of cities visited, performances given, and audience members reached was still substantial for a tour lasting over two months.

Throughout the tour, the troupe not only focused on their stage performances but also actively engaged in various social settings offstage, meeting with people from all sectors in the Nordic countries. These interactions helped establish a positive image of China, promoted Chinese culture, and strengthened cultural diplomacy. First, the troupe frequently met with royalty, ministers, and high-ranking government officials in each country, including the King of Sweden, the Prince of Denmark, as well as presidents, ministers of education, foreign ministers, ministers of culture, and major political party leaders. Additionally, during their spare time, they participated in local cultural activities, strengthening exchanges with the art community and connecting with artists, dramatists, and dancers from each country. Through these interactions, Peking opera was gradually embraced by European artists, leading to deeper dissemination of this traditional Chinese art form. Finally, and

perhaps most notably, despite a “very small number of individuals who were not receptive to the Chinese Classical Dance and Music Troupe’s tour in the Nordic countries,” the troupe received warm welcomes across various sectors. This tour made significant contributions to establishing the image of New China’s art and advancing cultural diplomacy.

3. “A Comprehensive Art”: European Press Interest and Appraisal of Peking Opera

Undoubtedly, Peking opera garnered widespread attention through the European tours of the two Chinese art troupes, sparking intense interest from European media. The coverage of Peking opera by European newspapers was notably diverse and comprehensive, including not only brief news items but also in-depth reports, theater reviews, and special features. The descriptions of Peking opera in these articles went beyond superficial expressions like “victorious,” “sensational,” or “stunning,” aiming instead to provide a deeper insight into the art form. Numerous lengthy review articles, written by professional theater journalists, critics, and other literary figures, approached Peking opera from various perspectives, examining its stage performance, music, and the comparison between Chinese and Western theatrical forms. This variety of analyses reflected European society’s evolving cultural understanding of Peking opera as a traditional Chinese art and highlighted its unique characteristics.

3.1. “Unity on Stage”: Exploration of Various Aspects of Peking Opera Performance

Most European newspapers regarded Peking opera as a highly integrated form of stage art, recognizing it as a comprehensive synthesis that combines singing, music, dance, mime, and acrobatics into a unified presentation. Many professional theater journalists observed that Peking opera performers embody multiple roles simultaneously, as “actors, mimes, dancers, singers, and martial artists,” achieving a high level of harmony in voice, facial expressions, and body movements. This seamless integration creates a cohesive, unified style in stage performance. For many reports, the vibrant costumes of Peking opera performers were the initial element that captivated audiences:

What astonishes the audience first is the dazzling array of colors in the makeup and costumes. China indeed has an extraordinarily long cultural history. From this rich heritage, they can select hundreds of costume styles, with patterns, colors, and embroidery so varied and exquisite that even the most imaginative artist could not conceive of such diversity[6].

European newspapers praised the Peking opera costumes showcased by the Chinese art troupe, admiring the impeccable style, color, and embroidery. These costumes were described as “well-crafted and varied, sometimes making the entire stage of performers appear like dazzling pearls.” In many performances, the costumes seamlessly blended with the stage, with each costume perfectly matching the choreography to create a unique artistic effect: “With a light green backdrop, red velvet side curtains, and a broad blue carpet, the costumes especially bring the scene to life, as each color holds symbolic meaning”[7].

The elegance and precision of Peking opera movements also captivated the European press. When the intricate costumes and makeup were combined with acrobatic-level precision, European theater critics were astonished, often devoting extensive coverage to the energy radiating from the stage. Iceland’s People’s Will described Peking opera stage movements as “unmatched in skill and technique in the Western world.” Finland’s People’s Labor News observed that performances like Flooding the Jinshan Temple, Assassinating the Tiger, and Havoc in Heaven transformed Chinese martial arts into an artistic expression: “Every roll and leap is meticulously calculated, appearing chaotic but actually in perfect order, forming a harmonious whole.” British newspapers echoed this admiration, deeming every aspect of Peking opera’s movement highly refined and flawless. Martial scenes in performances like Stealing the Immortal Herb, Yandang Mountain, The Crossroad Inn, and Siege of Sizhou were regarded as extraordinary feats, mesmerizing audiences with the “melody of

swords and spears” and the “graceful, swallow-like leaps and flips.” Thunderous applause during climactic moments confirmed that Peking opera had indeed won over even the most discerning European audiences and critics:

Warriors clad in bright yellow and blue silk flipped through the air, while generals in resplendent gold and blue costumes, one with a banner on his back, engaged in dignified yet scornful combat. The entire spectacular display reached its climax with four Chinese warriors, each performing successive backflips—or, more accurately, floating—over a six-foot-high wall![8].

Finally, European theater critics perceived Peking opera not only as a “fusion of mime, martial arts, color, dance, song, and music,” but also as a “synthesis of imagery and movement.” The highly stylized and abstract nature of Peking opera led to minimalist sets, directing the audience’s full attention to the portrayal of characters. As one critic noted, “spoken lines become song, movements become dance, costumes and makeup become painting, and everyone becomes an archetype,” thus transforming imagined characters into reality. For European audiences experiencing Peking opera for the first time, the stylized and symbolic nature did not hinder their understanding. The actors could convey everything missing from the set through their gestures. Audiences saw boats in *Flooding the Jinshan Temple*, mountains in *Assassinating the Tiger*, and, especially in *The Crossroad Inn*, even though the stage was brightly lit, they could envision the fight taking place in the dark of night. Viewers described feeling “a powerful, traditional, yet fresh and vibrant force of stage artistry” that was so astonishing it “made one’s hair stand on end.” A special correspondent from *The New York Times* shared a similar perspective, noting that although Chinese theatrical art might seem unfamiliar to viewers, the “mime and acrobatic techniques” were impressive enough to make it “one of the most popular entertainments to have graced Paris stages in years”:

One of the most interesting sketches—a series of longer opera excerpts filled the evening—featured a woman asking an old boatman to take her to see her lover. The only props were an oar and a bamboo pole. When the old man tries to row the ‘boat’ after stepping from the unsteady ‘boat’ into the ‘water,’ he finds that the ‘boat’ is stuck on rocks, only to discover that it’s because he hasn’t untied the ‘boat’[9].

3.2. “Excitement and Lyricism”: Exaggerated Descriptions of Peking Opera Music

Unlike the stage performances, Peking opera music was somewhat challenging for some European theatergoers to accept, as its instrumental style differed significantly from Western music. European newspapers often highlighted this distinctiveness, with some reports using terms like “harsh” and “cat-like wailing” to exaggerate the contrast between Eastern and Western theater music. Several British theater critics, for example, remarked in their articles that Peking opera’s “music is the worst part,” noting that “sometimes it’s all rhyme, while at other times it produces strange melodies,” which they felt weakened the overall stage impact and cohesiveness. Some Nordic newspapers also commented that Peking opera music merely created “an atmosphere for the performance” rather than providing an aesthetic experience, with vocal tones described as “a bit jarring.”

In contrast to these subjective critiques, other European publications took a more constructive approach, introducing audiences to the uniqueness of Peking opera music. The French poet and writer Paul Claudel praised the music, describing it as “astonishingly tense, confusing to the mind.” Finland’s *Häme Cooperation News* introduced instruments like the pipa (lute) and huqin (two-stringed fiddle) along with musical techniques, suggesting that while Peking opera’s music might seem strange, it was rich in exotic appeal. They noted that foreign listeners’ discomfort stemmed from Peking opera’s use of the pentatonic scale, in contrast to the heptatonic scale of traditional Western music, which gives Chinese music its unique tonal quality. Norway’s *Worker’s Daily* commented that while the high-pitched singing style in Peking opera initially seemed unsettling, it eventually felt surreal yet harmonious once one grew accustomed to it. Swedish newspapers offered particularly in-

depth discussions on Peking opera music. Many journalists considered it an essential part of the performance, embodying the elegance and passion of Chinese art. They noted that for audiences who found Peking opera music intolerable, the issue was often a lack of understanding of its symbolic meaning:

At times, Peking opera music is so stimulating that you can't sit still; other times, in scenes depicting love, it's so lyrical and enchanting. This traditional music might challenge our moss-covered conservatives to ponder why every Chinese person can understand and appreciate their own music. We must learn from this and avoid complacency with our own Western 'hypnotic' music[10].

3.3. "Peking Opera is Not Opera": Divergent Comparisons Sparked by Translation

Both the Chinese Art Troupe touring Western Europe and the Chinese Classical Dance and Music Troupe performing in Northern Europe translated Peking opera as "Peking Opera" on newspapers, posters, and programs, implying a direct equivalence to Western opera. This translation led European audiences, many of whom were seeing Peking opera for the first time, to expect similarities to Western opera, prompting them to search for familiar elements on stage. Consequently, reviews in both Western and Northern European press often clarified for readers that "Peking Opera" is not equivalent to what Western audiences understand as "opera." Many letters from audience members to newspapers expressed that Peking opera represented an art form vastly different from Western opera. Switzerland's *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* noted that while Western stages center on "the singer," Peking opera places "the complete performer" at the heart of its presentation. Sweden's *Sundsvalls Tidning* similarly explained to readers that Chinese theater arts are fundamentally different from Western forms, making them difficult to understand for audiences unfamiliar with them. When the Chinese Classical Dance and Music Troupe performed in Norway, Oslo's radio station even aired a special program titled "Peking Opera Talk" to clarify that, despite the translation as "Peking Opera," the genre is not opera in the Western sense:

When we think of opera, we think of Verdi, Puccini, Mozart, and perhaps Wagner. However, if we want to appreciate what Chinese 'opera' has to offer—the refined skills and beautiful imagery presented by the troupe—we must abandon all concepts associated with Western opera[11].

During the Chinese Art Troupe's tour, many European media outlets engaged in discussions around the differences between Peking opera and Western opera, primarily focusing on their contrasting stage performances. At the Paris Theatre Festival, the British theater magazine *Scope* noted that, like "all Eastern operas, Chinese performances appear strange to Western eyes," describing Peking opera as:

More like a blend of dramatic musical accompaniment, mime, and movement, and less like ballet. The works performed in Paris were excerpts from longer Peking opera productions. In these scenes, tragedy, comedy, and incomprehensible gestures stand out, with gods and humans mixed together, warriors in battle, and women lamenting unfaithful lovers. Audiences are drawn to the exquisite silk costumes and the diverse, vivid, and lively stage decorations[12].

In contrast, a correspondent for *The Times* in Paris offered a different perspective, suggesting that Peking opera delivers a viewing experience long absent from European and American stages and that it cannot be categorized within Western theater conventions. He emphasized that Peking opera's essence lies in "mime and dance" and "acrobatics," with "song and speech" as secondary elements:

These Chinese performers, dressed in the most magnificent—and sometimes heavy—costumes, display skills that even our best circus artists could hardly match. Even without knowing the meaning behind each conventional gesture, simply watching them is a pure pleasure[13].

This superficial comparison of Peking opera to Western opera frustrated some critics. A columnist from Denmark's *Daily News* remarked that debating whether Peking opera qualifies as opera reveals a peculiar narrow-mindedness among European audiences, who habitually compartmentalize art

forms, erecting rigid walls between singing, dancing, and acting. This approach prevents them from engaging with Peking opera on equal terms, instead obsessively separating its elements rather than appreciating it as a cohesive art form.

4. “People’s Character” and “National Identity”: The Role of the Chinese Classical Dance and Music Troupe in Advancing China’s Diplomacy

Following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, the transformed art of Peking opera—shaped by reforms aimed at "changing people, changing systems, and changing plays"—faced critical scrutiny from some European journalists. Given the political tensions of the era, these journalists often adopted a hostile perspective, claiming that the hundreds of Chinese theatrical works that had been edited and revised were altered not for artistic or market reasons but for political purposes. Many European newspapers viewed this export of reformed Chinese theater as potentially dangerous, suggesting that even if Peking opera could be appreciated from an entertainment standpoint, it fell short of being considered true art. However, the success of the 1955 Chinese Art Troupe’s performances in Europe shifted the narrative, transforming the artistic image of Peking opera in European media. Through Peking opera, the image of New China as friendly and benevolent began to resonate with Western audiences. This shift opened new avenues for Chinese diplomacy, especially on the cultural front following the Geneva Conference. As Sweden’s *Expressen* noted, “Chinese theater is seen as a cultural element, not a business venture.”

4.1. “People’s Character”: The New Image of China and Its Artistic Representation

In 1955, Western media often described Peking opera as “ancient,” “traditional,” and “steeped in history.” Yet, this antiquity and tradition did not imply stagnation. The Peking opera productions performed on stage reflected New China’s successful reforms in the art form, showing that while Peking opera draws from age-old themes, its methods have evolved with the times. Valuable traditions were preserved, while outdated elements were eliminated. This reform process was not the product of a few individuals but rather a collective inheritance, reform, and development by the Chinese people. As Switzerland’s *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* put it: “For the Chinese, theater is not only a matter for artists but also an element of people’s culture.” Czechoslovakia’s *Youth Union Gazette* emphasized “the close connection between Chinese theater and the people, as well as the outstanding artistic level directly related to it. The social environment that produced Chinese theater is still evident in every aspect of it today. The Chinese theater performed here is a testament to the great creative power of the Chinese people.” Belgium’s *Red Flag* described the stories in Peking opera as having “a notable people’s character,” commending the Chinese Art Troupe for introducing “the history and daily life of the Chinese people to the West with such unmatched quality.” European theater critics also viewed Peking opera as “a realistic drama with classical traditions”:

The essence of Chinese classical theater lies in its thorough adherence to tradition. It depicts reality in a way comparable to European drama, portraying human circumstances, characters, and conflicts—only the method of expression differs. It draws from nature and from the expression of human emotions[14].

American performer Charlie Chaplin, who missed the premiere of *The Crossroad Inn* due to a delay, stayed an extra day to watch it and expressed his appreciation backstage for the reforms in New China’s theater:

Twenty years ago, I saw Peking opera in Hong Kong. At that time, it was long and a mix of essence and dross. Comparing it with what I see today, it’s a world of difference. This has given me insight into New China...[15].

In the context of European press coverage, the concept of “people’s character” applied not only to the Peking opera performances on stage but also to the interactions and demeanor of the performers offstage. The artists’ skillful performances captivated the public, and in press conferences, seminars, and receptions, they seized every opportunity to showcase the success of Peking opera reform in New China. They built friendships with European artists from various fields, fostering mutual artistic understanding and exhibiting the optimistic and kind-hearted nature of the Chinese people. At the same time, the Chinese Art Troupe utilized various media outlets to promote Peking opera. In the UK and the Netherlands, performers made appearances on television and radio, recording programs that broadcast a comprehensive, multidimensional image of Peking opera to a wider audience. This exposure allowed the art form to reach beyond the stage and appear on screens, sparking a flood of letters from viewers to newspapers, expressing admiration for the performances. Some viewers even remarked in newspaper columns that the Chinese Art Troupe’s actors were the world’s greatest, suggesting that other nations’ arts paled in comparison and that seven hours of performance would still not be enough:

The magnificent performances of Chinese Peking opera make one regret having to wait years to watch them in color. The black-and-white display on television is like an incomplete monochrome rainbow, yet there is still so much to enjoy and admire. The speed, agility, and precision of the dancers’ leaps are exhilarating. In comparison, these simulated sword fights make Hollywood stunt work seem like child’s play[16].

4.2. “National Identity”: Reshaping New China’s Image and a Breakthrough in Cultural Diplomacy

Throughout the Chinese Art Troupe’s performances in Europe, both on stage and off, the troupe fostered mutual understanding and recognition between China and various European countries, presenting an art form grounded in the emotions shared by all people. As Milan’s *L’Unità* described, “The essence of Peking opera is simple, natural, and represents emotions that are universal to all people.” This approach aligned with a shift in China’s foreign policy at the time, as the Party and government increasingly emphasized the role of cultural exchange in diplomacy. Zhou Enlai, then Premier of the Government Administration Council and Minister of Foreign Affairs, frequently highlighted the importance of cultural exchange in China’s diplomatic efforts, stating, “Our diplomacy also relies on culture and trade; this is an important task.” In the 1955 European tour, Peking opera served not only as a cultural symbol of China but also as a vital art form for presenting the image of New China to the international community. Through extensive media coverage, both the on-stage performances and the off-stage interactions of Peking opera artists conveyed a warm, respectable image of New China, challenging longstanding negative stereotypes in Europe about China and Chinese people. Italy’s *Avanti!* praised the performances, noting, “The Peking opera leaves an impression that is both pleasant and deeply national.”

Through European media’s portrayal of Peking opera in 1955, it became a prominent representative of New China’s culture and an essential tool for cultural diplomacy. The extensive tour of the Chinese Art Troupe prompted European newspapers to issue calls for deeper engagement with China, advocating for more cultural exchanges and mutual understanding. The Netherlands’ *Vrije Volk* remarked, “The enthusiasm in the theater dissolved all differences, uniting audiences and artists in joy.” Finnish newspapers such as *Uusi Aika*, *Liberty News*, and *The Finnish Social Democratic* emphasized the tour’s historical significance, noting that these performances not only brought pleasure to Finnish audiences but also conveyed a “friendly and benevolent spirit” that transcended “national and linguistic boundaries,” as “human emotions are universal.” They urged for stronger cultural relations between nations, calling for more Chinese art troupes to perform in Europe because “actions speak louder than words.”

In France, Peking opera made a spectacular debut at the Paris International Theatre Festival, providing a rare opportunity to bridge the cultural gap between China and the United States, despite political tensions. During the Paris performances, Zhang Zhixiang, head of the Chinese Art Troupe, met with Robert Breen, director of the American “Everyman Opera,” also participating in the festival. Both leaders exchanged invitations and planned reciprocal visits for November 1955 or March 1956. The New York Times noted that if Peking opera, which had been a sensation in Paris, could perform in the United States as scheduled, it would serve as a “cultural olive branch, potentially adding a touch of green to the signs of a post-Cold War spring.” France’s *Libération* described the Chinese Art Troupe’s performance as “a truly moving gesture of peaceful coexistence.”

In the UK, even journalists who held biases against China admitted that although the performers on stage were from “Communist China” and the audience included Labour Party leader John Baird and other Labour members, “this purely entertaining performance bore absolutely no political undertone”:

You could seek out great social education, political insight, or other motives to watch this performance, but forget them; just enjoy it as pure entertainment[17].

Hannen Swaffer, a British left-wing theater critic known for his forthrightness, praised Peking opera, suggesting that such performances should run for six months instead of three weeks and should become a fixture in Britain’s annual theater season. Swaffer emphasized the political significance of the performance at Victoria Palace, noting that the simultaneous presence of China, the United States, and the Soviet Union—countries typically in opposition—on the British stage was not only an opportunity to break down the “Iron Curtain” but also a chance to showcase the “spirit of Geneva”:

As cultural exchange performances like this become more frequent, we hope to see a wide range of diverse cultural offerings from countries behind the Iron Curtain. Through these exchanges, we attempt to forge new friendships and pay mutual respects to each country’s achievements[18].

5. Conclusion

In summary, the 1955 tours of the Chinese Classical Dance and Music Troupe across multiple countries in Northern and Western Europe achieved success on several levels. Firstly, the troupe established a new image of China, one that was distinctly different from the past. Through the multifaceted performances of Peking opera, particularly the martial scenes, European audiences were introduced to the unique stage artistry of Chinese opera while also encountering a fresh image of New China. Secondly, the troupe members’ active participation in press conferences, media events, and various social gatherings across Europe presented a new, personable image of Chinese people, fostering closer connections with cultural figures overseas. This, in turn, garnered increased media coverage for Chinese diplomacy in Europe. Lastly, by recording programs with television and radio stations in various European countries, the troupes presented Chinese art characterized by “national identity” and “people’s character,” helping to address and reshape European perceptions of China and reduce longstanding stereotypes. This media presence expanded the reach of Chinese culture and diplomacy, and laid a broad foundation for political, economic, and cultural cooperation between China and European countries following the Geneva Peace Conference.

References

- [1] Zhao, F. (1956). *The travel performances of Chinese classical theater in Europe*. *Drama News*, (2), 28.
- [2] Ma, S. (2012). Ma Shaobo recalls the early years of Chinese opera exchange. In Z. Shaohua (Ed.), *Golden memories: Oral history of early cultural exchanges in New China* (p. 51). Writers Publishing House.
- [3] Chinese Ministry of Culture Party History Materials Collection Committee (Ed.). (2004). *When We Meet Again: A one-year anniversary of the Chinese Youth Art Troupe’s visit to nine countries* (pp. 267–290). Culture and Art Publishing House.

- [4] *A Chinese Company in London.* (1955, October 8). *The Illustrated London News*, 625.
- [5] *Queen and Duke enjoy 'Wonderful Evening'.* (1955, November 8). *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 3.
- [6] *Idelius, B.* (1955, October 18). *Peking opera.* *Göteborgs-Posten*, 23.
- [7] *Chinese People's Association for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, Bureau of Foreign Cultural Liaison.* (1956). *The Chinese Classical Dance and Music Troupe in the Five Nordic Countries* (p. 9).
- [8] *Chinese acrobatic ballet was enthralling.* (1955, November 10). *The Stage*, 12.
- [9] *Paris is diverted by Peiping opera.* (1955, July 3). *The New York Times*, 34.
- [10] *Daily Post.* (1955, October 25), 4.
- [11] *Daily Express.* (1955, October 25), 3.
- [12] *A 1200-year-old opera.* (1955, July 9). *The Sphere*, 62.
- [13] *A city of plays: The drama of many countries.* (1955, June 9). *The Times*, 1.
- [14] *Priestley, K. E.* (1952, January 23). *Stage and film in China.* *The Manchester Guardian*.
- [15] *Yun, Y.* (1956). *Nordic journey.* *Drama News*, (3), 33.
- [16] *Telecrit watching.* (1955, November 7). *Liverpool Echo*, 8.
- [17] *Brady, T. F.* (1955, July 30). *U.S.-Peiping trade of shows proposed.* *The New York Times*, 15.
- [18] *Swaffer, H.* (1955, November 12). *On come the dancers...* *Daily Herald*, 4.