

# *The Image of Chinese Opera in Australian Media in the Early 20th Century*

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**Abstract:** As the only country in the world that occupies an entire continent, Australia's unique geographical characteristics have provided it with a distinctive news dissemination environment. As a member of the Commonwealth, the reporting perspective of Australian newspapers also demonstrates a close connection with Western society. Since 1924, reports on Mei Lanfang and Chinese opera in Australian newspapers have gradually increased. Besides the curiosity and exploration of Chinese art and society, these reports also reflect how Australian mass newspapers use the image of Mei Lanfang as a reference point to compare and explore the development of Chinese art and society. For Australian society, the images of Mei Lanfang and Chinese opera in mass newspapers have transcended their original artistic scope, becoming reference objects and an important medium for Australians to understand and learn about China.

**Keywords:** Chinese opera, Mei Lanfang, Australia, media image

## 1. Introduction

Entering the 20th century, a large number of Australian merchants, travelers, missionaries, and speculators poured into China, bringing with them numerous reports about Chinese society through letters, telegrams, and other communication technologies. The keen Australian press also launched special publications like the China Express, systematically introducing the situation of Chinese society, and Chinese opera began to feature prominently in these newspapers. On the other hand, with the global migration of the Chinese population, functional Chinese enclaves, known as "Chinatowns," had emerged in areas such as Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane by the late 19th century. In these areas, Chinese theaters performed traditional dramas like Cantonese opera and Chaozhou opera for early Chinese immigrants, constantly attracting Australian audiences and appearing in newspapers in the form of "mystery exploration." From the content perspective, curiosity and exploration remained the main descriptive methods of Chinese opera in Australian mass newspapers, following a typical "othering" perspective in their portrayal of Australian Chinese theaters:

"We consider this play to be an opera; it looks like an opera, sounds like an opera, but it could also be a Chinese orchestra gone mad... The performance is accompanied by an orchestra, the entire chorus sounds like a free-for-all between a gale, a steam organ, and ten thousand cats, with the whispering of an iron roof blown off and colliding with a brick wall... Then a heroine appears, her singing resembling the sound of a cat's tail caught in a mousetrap." [1]

Before the 20th century, such exaggerated depictions of the differences between Eastern and Western drama were not uncommon in Australian newspaper reports. However, following Mei Lanfang's invitations to perform in Japan in 1919, 1924, and 1956, his performances in the United States in 1930, and his visit to the Soviet Union in 1935, along with other overseas activities, the Australian mass newspapers began to gradually pay attention to Mei Lanfang's worldwide performances, further noting the unique charm of Chinese opera. With Mei Lanfang's innovations in themes, dance, music, and art in Chinese opera, he broke free from the Western colonial "Oriental gaze" and the "response to Orientalism" exemplified by *Lady Precious Stream*, winning space for the development and dissemination of Chinese opera. This also allowed Chinese opera to break free from the consistent narrative context of Australian newspapers, continuously expanding the modern representation of Chinese opera in Australian newspapers and escaping the symbolic depiction of being scrutinized and gazed upon.

## 2. Conservatism and Adherence: The Scenic Construction of Chinese Opera

The earliest report on Mei Lanfang in Australian newspapers was about his performance at the Tokyo Imperial Theatre in 1924,[2] showcasing a geographically framed reporting strategy. It is noteworthy that by this time, Mei Lanfang and Chinese opera had already garnered global attention, especially in Western theatrical circles. However, for Australian mass newspapers, this influence was undoubtedly "isolated." In the information channels that Australian people relied on, Chinese opera did not appear as a traditional art form but rather as a scenic description in journalists' panoramic reports on Chinese society, symbolizing the conservatism of Chinese society. In November 1927, a special correspondent for *The Times* in Beijing sent back a report titled "THE CHINESE THEATRE, CONVENTIONS OF A DRAMA," which delved into the urban and rural areas of China, particularly showcasing the Peking opera stage activities in Beijing. Simultaneously, this special report achieved unprecedented dissemination, appearing in numerous newspapers in the UK, the USA, and Australia.[3]

In this article, Chinese opera performances became a unique landscape of cities and villages, particularly highlighting the traditional relationship between opera and the Chinese practice of deity worship. When watching opera in the villages around Beijing, the reporter viewed the performances as an "antiquated" custom, characterized not by the audience's habits but by a semi-religious nature of the performance. Even though modern opera had already undergone changes, the essence of the stage performances remained a "spectacle to delight the gods," since the venues for village performances were often in front of temples to allow "the gods to get a good view." This description undoubtedly imbued the opera performances with a sense of historical depth and timeworn feel, laying the narrative foundation for the news text. The author emphasized a point that Western readers should not overlook: in the "Old Play" continuously performed in Chinese villages and cities, the collaboration between audience and actors in adapting stories expressed their aversion to Western "modernity":

"Every play features an evil "barbarian," wearing a terrible mask, who is ultimately outwitted and defeated by the hero adhering to Chinese philosophical principles. This form of drama arouses widespread hatred towards all "barbarians" or foreigners, originally targeting Mongols and Tartars, but now shifting to the modern "barbarians" from Europe and America." [4]

The author presents the depiction of "barbarians" with clear chronological and genealogical clues. For a long time, the exotic setting in Western drama, especially in "Chinese plays," has been a place where wise philosophers coexist with barbaric rulers. Even in the derogatory and mocking "Chinese plays" of the mid-to-late 19th century, one can still see the protagonist seeking the help of sages in Eastern lands. When this scenario is shifted to the portrayal of Chinese opera, the description of "barbarians" undergoes a contextual displacement. When the "modern people" from Europe and America are considered barbarians by the "barbaric" Chinese, the implication of the opera for Chinese

audiences becomes more ambiguous, forming a deep-seated meaning within the framework of the news report. However, whether they are Tartars, Mongols, Europeans, or Americans, being labeled as “barbarians” itself establishes their subjectivity through historical retrospection. The meaning expressed in the text naturally shifts—hostility from the East extends to even more distant regions, falling upon Europe and America. The term “outwitted” mentioned in the article also reveals an “othering” perspective; this term often appears in Western-created “Chinese plays” to depict the protagonist eliminating evil with the help of Eastern sages. However, if combined with the later mention of “widespread hatred,” it shows more of a mockingly regretful lament for the current state of China.

Despite the primitive and barbaric descriptions of Chinese opera, Mei Lanfang’s appearance stands out, a common feature in Australian newspaper reports of this period. The opera in Chinese villages and towns and Mei Lanfang’s stage art occupy two extremes in the newspaper narrative. This corresponds to the polarized views of theater scholars and the mass media: opera in mass media represents China’s most antiquated customs and most stubborn ideologies, while for some travelers and dramatists, it represents China’s most beautiful art and most mysterious techniques. However, these seemingly polarized expressions can be classified as a scenic “othering” viewing mentality—a mix of curious exploration and disdain for Chinese society. Yet, if one adopts a top-down scrutinizing stance, viewing the primitive and outdated performances of Chinese opera as a premise, then no matter how graceful Mei Lanfang’s posture is or how exquisite his attire, the sound of the opera inevitably falls within the realm of noise, becoming an unbearable sound source:

“Mei Lanfang always plays female roles, just like almost all of the most famous Chinese actors. They are no different from the women on stage. Face, figure, gestures, even the voice, all are of a woman’s appearance. Almost no woman in the country is more beautiful than Mei Lanfang. However, his sharp voice is not beautiful. All Chinese singing, whether male or female parts, is not from the chest but from the throat, so the sound is thin and rather strangled.”[5]

The sharp singing style and noisy instrumental accompaniment have long been the direct impressions of Chinese opera in the Australian mass media. This fixed framework of description has been formed since the 19th century. Compared to the chest voice of Western opera arias, Australian newspaper reporters have always found the singing style and instrumental sounds of Chinese opera uncomfortable. Consequently, they depicted the singing style as “cat music” and constructed a dramatically impactful theatrical experience in the news text filled with noise. This has been the main narrative angle through which the Australian mass media constructed the image of Chinese opera. In a 1926 report in the *Nelson Advocate*, a special correspondent endeavored to depict the sounds of a Peking opera performance using various terms to illustrate the stage’s clamor. In this report, titled “Chinese Drama,” the author’s understanding of Peking opera evidently did not come from professional knowledge but rather from personal experience. He believed that the drums and cymbals in Peking opera were played for “chivalry” scenes, while the string instruments were for “civilian” scenes, and that Kunqu opera, compared to Peking opera, was more classical with softer music. This text, based on subjective experience, provides readers with a scene-based perspective through the construction of verbal symbols. Regardless of the reporter’s accuracy, the noisy performance scenes of Chinese opera come to life on the page, with the sounds of orchestras and cymbals surrounding the narrative:

“They use cymbals, gongs, and several types of drums, which create a large variety of complex rhythm combinations that not only vary within specific performances but also differ entirely across different types of battle scenes. Another type of slow music employs a full orchestra, allowing the actors to spin, strut, and leap to it.”[6]

To highlight the characteristics of Chinese opera, Australian professional journalists often compared it to stage arts familiar to Western audiences, facilitating the reception and image

construction of the textual information by readers. For instance, in the report “Chinese Drama,” the author mentions that Chinese opera values the “balance between the action and singing of the actors,” and compares this to Debussy’s *Pelléas and Mélisande*. This musical work by Debussy, composed in the early 20th century, was widely popular in Australian theaters. The piece adopts a recitative melody style and loose pure tone, notably abandoning the exaggerated style of Wagnerian opera, which greatly appealed to the Australian public.[7] Even though there are commonalities between Chinese opera and Western theater in stage performance, when it comes back to their essence and social connections, the prejudices against Chinese society resurface in the reporter’s writing:

“Why don’t (the Chinese) see that all these clashing sounds and clanging are just meaningless assaults on the ears, while the chivalry in drama and the systematic and rational accompaniment are what truly matter.”[6]

Therefore, in the eyes of Australian journalists, even if Chinese opera possesses artistic qualities comparable to those created by Debussy or Stravinsky,[8] qualities that can be recognized and appreciated by Western audiences, on the other hand, special correspondents believe that Chinese people fail to grasp Western “spirit,” thus unable to integrate it into traditional Chinese art to form an infectious artistic form. This state of affairs also means that Chinese people similarly fail to understand Western drama and present it on stage:

“Attempts by Chinese to create European-style dramas have progressed slowly. For example, *The Merchant of Venice*, although students perform it well, everyone (actors), even if different from Chinese, finds it difficult to integrate its spirit. It’s not just the actors; Chinese people love their dramas almost more than anything else; they won’t give up (opera).”[9]

### 3. Reversing Old Customs: The Transformation of Writing on Opera

Following the extensive reporting by Australian media on the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty after 1911, Australian audiences began to realize that Chinese society was undergoing a profound transformation, leading to a growing anticipation and curiosity about China. Some Chinese intellectuals educated in Western styles began to voice their opinions in Western newspapers, vigorously promoting the reforms in Chinese opera that emerged after the May Fourth Movement. Chinese authors attempted in their writings to discuss the differences between contemporary opera and “old opera” in the context of China’s social transformation and change. On February 25, 1928, *London Pictorial News* published a full-page article titled “The Modern Chinese Stage” written by George Kin Leung, focusing on the “new image” of female performers on the Chinese stage. This article was also reproduced in Australian newspapers. In the article, George Kin Leung did not focus on the artistic techniques of opera or stage imagery but rather discussed the social significance represented by the reforms in opera in China, specifically highlighting the differences in the status of female performers on stage between the Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China:

“The women on the professional Chinese stage” are relatively recent revivals because in the 18th century, the Manchu emperors issued decrees prohibiting women from appearing on stage. For most Chinese theatergoers, the young men who play female roles, known today as dan roles, or female impersonators, are an indispensable part of classical drama. In the concessions of Shanghai, men and women appeared on the same stage. After the founding of the Republic (1911), women’s theater troupes were established in Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and Guangzhou. [10]

Although George Kin Leung’s article showcases the modern transformation of the Chinese stage and reflects the social improvement of opera performers and the “new” elements in performances, his main emphasis is that the improvement of the Chinese stage is not an internal reform but rather a consequence of the integration of Western influences onto the stage. This outcome is manifested in Chinese women appearing on stage in “Western attire” or “comedy costumes,” and in formerly marginalized male dan actors experiencing a revival, thus becoming stars of the stage. Ultimately,

George Kin Leung argues that the “new” in opera merely signifies the removal of old conventions from the stage, but it is the dramas imbued with Western spirit that deserve more attention:

“The presence of women on professional stages in China has seen a relatively recent revival, as in the 18th century, Qing dynasty emperors issued decrees banning women from appearing on stage. For most Chinese theater audiences, the portrayal of female roles by young men, known today as dan roles or female impersonators, is an indispensable part of classical drama. In the Shanghai concessions, men and women appeared together on stage. Following the establishment of the Republic (1911), female troupes were formed in Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and Guangzhou. In all-female troupes, women played every role from wives, mothers, lovers to villains and generals.” [11]

In intent, George Kin Leung’s writings expound two viewpoints. Firstly, that theatrical art is not a microcosm of outdated customs in Chinese society but rather reflects a positive transformation of cultural heritage following societal and cultural changes. The theatrical art of the Qing Dynasty differs markedly from that of the ‘Republic era.’ Secondly, the current shift in societal thought is influenced by the ‘European model,’ evidenced by the extensive translation and performance of Ibsen’s plays in China. Even amateur theater troupes successfully staging and adapting ‘A Doll’s House’ is a response to the notion that ‘Chinese people cannot perform Western drama well.’ While George Kin Leung describes both Peking opera and Western drama in China as taking on new forms, this occurs under the precondition of China’s full embrace of Western ideologies, particularly evident when male dan performers such as Mei Lanfang, Xun Huisheng, and Cheng Yanqiu are still labeled as ‘Old Drama.’ The representation of ‘new’ and ‘old’ within the textual context thus undergoes subtle shifts, where the ancient and archaic are replaced by ‘purity.’ Despite theatrical art departing from its societal descriptive context to become a stage art standing alongside Western drama, it remains subject to Western spiritual systems, transforming and constrained within Chinese art.

Since the Mukden Incident in 1928 and the Jinan Massacre, Western media have extensively reported on Japanese atrocities in China. Through widespread coverage in numerous Western newspapers, films, dramas, and news documentaries, China was depicted as a “recipient,” with Western societies, led by the United States and Britain, cast as the “donors.” This extensive media influence established a historic connection between Western society and the situation in China. [12] In the early 20th century, Western ambivalence towards China began to shift. While for most Westerners, China remained a distant and exotic land, numerous international news reports about China gradually shaped a Chinese image willing to be forged and developed according to Western developmental models, thereby garnering widespread sympathy and recognition in the West. Even though Western journalists stationed in China knew little about the popular operas spread across the country, writing about opera became a lens through which they observed China’s current situation, making it a representative of the current situation, especially after Mei Lanfang gained fame in Western society. Reporting on Mei Lanfang’s circumstances became a way to indirectly depict China’s social conditions. Thanks to the wide dissemination and powerful impact of print media, comprehensive and multidimensional portrayals and discussions of Mei Lanfang’s artistic image in the domestic media undoubtedly attracted the attention of the Australian media. During this period, Australian reports on Mei Lanfang gradually departed from previous frameworks linked to outdated societal perceptions, beginning to view Mei Lanfang as a star within Chinese society. In a 1929 report, a journalist referred to Mei Lanfang as the ‘Pavlova of China.’:

“While film is becoming increasingly popular in Chinese entertainment, Chinese opera retains its unique style. Mei Lanfang, this renowned female impersonator, has brought extraordinary performances to the Chinese stage. Mei plays female roles in ancient historical dramas, but he possesses more elegance than any Western star.” [13]

With the shaping of Mei Lanfang’s celebrity image, Australian media also paid close attention to Mei Lanfang’s journey to the United States. They meticulously reported on his itinerary and

arrangements for performances in the U.S., even highlighting news about Mei Lanfang potentially filming with Paramount Studios. [14] During this period, Mei Lanfang and the image of Peking Opera moved away from previous scenic descriptions in media reports, departing from outdated narrative styles and beginning to connect with “modern theatre”:

“Chinese critics believe that Mei Lanfang has rescued Chinese theatre. He has mastered over a hundred plays. Most modern Chinese playwrights write for him, and he also draws from the best of classical theatre.” [15]

In this period of reporting, the conservative and stubborn adherence to tradition in early 20th-century Chinese society seemed to vanish overnight. It was replaced by towering skyscrapers on Shanghai streets and a variety of department stores. Chinese youth bid farewell to old customs and embraced modern life. Such scenes also shifted in the reporting of theatrical performances, highlighting a stark contrast. Especially when traditional Chinese theatrical norms clashed with modern life, Australian news texts also portrayed improvements in these old practices of Chinese opera:

“There are many customs on the Chinese stage that seem strange to Westerners, often making the play difficult to understand, even for those who speak Chinese. Among these customs is the tradition of doctors typically being comedic characters, resulting in doctors being mocked on stage despite the high respect their profession receives in this country. Last July, the Beijing Native Doctors’ Association discussed this matter with the Actors’ Union, declaring it a century-old insult to their profession and demanding a change in this practice. As China’s most famous female impersonator, Mr. Mei Lanfang has agreed to abandon this old custom.” [16]

#### 4. “Great Art”: Establishment of Theatrical Images

As Mei Lanfang’s influence grew through his performances in the United States, Australian newspapers became increasingly concerned with the artistic characteristics of Peking Opera. China, removed from scrutiny in the press, began to be discussed on an equal footing from an artistic perspective. The musical features of Chinese opera, through interpretations by Mei Lanfang and his followers in newspaper reports, shed their habitual alienation and scrutiny, existing instead as the unique charm of Chinese opera. In 1930, Mei Lanfang attended a performance of Richard Wagner’s “Die Walküre” from the “Ring” cycle at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. Zhang Pengchun, accompanying him, gave an interview to a music journalist from The New York Times after the performance, which was later reproduced by The Mercury in Australia. In his critique, Zhang Pengchun chose to set aside political and social influences and instead approached the discussion from a musical perspective, comparing Chinese opera with Western opera. He intended to highlight the musical demands inherent to opera and also emphasized the modernity of Mei Lanfang’s performance art: “From our Chinese aesthetic perspective, (Wagner’s) opera is quite imperfect. But we were moved by the music. Our music is the opposite of Wagner’s richness and organization. We prefer—fewer instruments, fewer notes. We hope each note carries more individuality and meaning akin to Wagner’s style. But let it pass for now. We can still enjoy this music, despite the opera’s philosophical and emotional ‘methods’ being unfamiliar to us.”

In the interview, Zhang Pengchun approached the comparison between Chinese opera and Western opera through the lens of Western Wagnerian music, elucidating the similarities and differences in their structural compositions. This was essentially a response and explanation to the Western audience’s perception of Peking Opera as “noisy,” not based on societal factors but rooted in the intrinsic nature of Peking Opera compared to other art forms. Zhang Pengchun also touched upon the “symbolism” in Peking Opera and provided a detailed explanation from an artistic perspective:

“We formalize everything related to artistic media. We have our stage movements, our gestures and symbolic actions, our falsettos, and so on. All of these have their relations and origins, but reality



is always patterned, not just isolated artistic phenomena, but designed to present predetermined symbolic forms and designs in a certain way.” [17]

Since Mei Lanfang’s performances in the United States, Australian society became increasingly curious about this renowned Peking Opera artist, prompting Australian newspapers to continuously request special correspondents in China to attend Mei Lanfang’s performances and write reports to meet reader demand. However, for financially constrained local Australian newspapers, reprinting articles from resident writers or journalists in China was more cost-effective and appealing to readers. In 1934, the Cairns Post in Brisbane published an article titled “We See Mei Lan-Fang,” reprinting Cecil Chesterton’s experience of watching Mei Lanfang perform at the Hardemen in Shanghai. In the article, Chesterton openly expressed his admiration and praise for Mei Lanfang’s Peking Opera art:

“The raising of the curtain had no effect on the audience, continuing their conversations, sipping lemonade, eating fruits, as if they were at home, on an open street, and then a tall and slender figure dressed in Chinese princess attire glided onto the stage—Mei Lanfang appeared as his female character. In China, as in the Elizabethan stage, young men often played female roles, and I could hardly believe that such a delicate creature manipulating the long sleeves trailing on the ground was a man! A white, delicate finger occasionally emerged like a flower from behind the curtain, forming gorgeous curves with the flick of the fan—as if an elegant miracle. I have never seen a better artist than this. His voice transmitted through the theater with accustomed falsetto, every word instinctual and direct in its emotion. His entire body adapted to the drama; the slightest movements, the most subtle gestures, all carried meaning, his personality so powerful.” [18]

As a national newspaper, The West Australian had the capability to support the expenses of their correspondent in China. In his coverage titled Chinese Theatre, special correspondent Henry L. Kelsall documented his experience watching Mei Lanfang’s performance in Shanghai. For overseas audiences, the performance times for Peking Opera were somewhat late; Kelsall arrived at the theater at 11:30 PM and was surprised to find the audience watching Mei Lanfang’s performance to be highly international, including Soviet diplomats in China, Japanese couples, and 20 to 30 individuals who were not Chinese. While Kelsall expressed admiration for Mei Lanfang’s performance, he still considered Peking Opera performances to be “primitive.” Throughout his description, he repeatedly emphasized, “this showed we did not understand the traditions of Chinese drama”: “For the Chinese, what matters is the story being told. Every gesture, every movement, carries clear significance and value. In distinguishing what is essential and what is not necessary, perhaps this shows a Western lack of true understanding of dramatic art.”

This seemingly contradictory expression actually reflects the cognitive bias of Western society at the time towards Mei Lanfang and his Peking Opera art. In this article, Kelsall on one hand vividly portrays the “backwardness” of Chinese theatres: suffocating cigarette smoke, bare stages, advertisements for cigarettes and medicines, and noisy audiences and orchestras; on the other hand, with Mei Lanfang’s appearance, the artistic charm of Peking Opera is revealed, challenging Kelsall’s inherent Western theatrical concepts:

“To Western thought, the overall form and execution (of Peking Opera) are primitive. The lack of scenery, mixed actors, musicians and attendants visible on stage, acrobatics, decorations, and splendid performers all brought smiles to our faces, yet it actually shows we do not understand the traditions of Chinese drama.” [19]

Kelsall’s perplexity similarly represents the Australian public’s lack of understanding towards the artistic expression of Peking Opera, especially as Mei Lanfang’s image has already dissociated from old China. Beyond the conventional news context, Peking Opera needs to be supplemented with descriptive articles of professionalism. For Australian society, there is a desire for publications to include relevant knowledge about Peking Opera. Articles promoting and popularizing knowledge

about Peking Opera also began to appear in newspapers at this time, particularly in understanding the formalization and virtualization of traditional operas:

“The pride of the great actor Mei Lanfang is that he can equally portray all female roles! An object can represent any number of things depending on how it’s used. For example, a table in different positions—upright, sideways, or upside down. It can represent a teahouse, a dining table, a courtroom, or an altar. A chair lying on its side could indicate a person reclining uncomfortably on a cliff or on the ground. If a woman is climbing a mountain, she would stand on a chair. Several chairs together could represent a bed.” [20]

In 1936, several Australian newspapers began reprinting excerpts authored by Eisenstein, elaborating to readers on what Charlie Chaplin referred to as “Mei Lanfang’s magnificent art.” Starting from Peking Opera stories, the article immediately delved into the differences in female roles within Peking Opera, listing a series of different female characters along with their distinctive traits. For instance, “Hua Dan” is typically “young women, sometimes maidservants, always lively and brisk”; whereas “Wu Dan” is “a heroic and militant character, a female warrior and strategist.” The article pointed out Mei Lanfang’s unique ability to “portray all female roles with equal distinction,” which epitomizes “symbolism,” where “an object can signify any number of things.” This article completely overturned the outdated and backward image of Chinese opera, severing its ties with old Chinese society, and becoming a subject worthy of study to enrich Western theatrical traditions:

“The experience of Chinese art should provide us with abundant learning materials, while enriching our artistic methods.” [21]

Alongside the establishment of the Sino-Australian strategic alliance against Japan, Mei Lanfang, as a representative figure well-known among overseas populations, frequently appeared in reports by Australian mainstream newspapers. However, he was not the primary subject of these reports; rather, he was portrayed as a representative symbolizing the determination of the Chinese people in the face of adversity and hardship. From numerous dispatches by Western war correspondents, Mei Lanfang’s unique character became synonymous with the Chinese spirit. In 1938, the Sydney Mail published a full-page feature titled “Brave New China,” expressing sympathy and encouragement towards China’s plight. Mei Lanfang’s integrity during the War of Resistance against Japan became proof of China’s “unconquerable soul,” demonstrating to Western society at the time that “beyond the tragedy there is still hope.” [22] As if rebounding from a low point, the image of China and the Chinese people suddenly became immensely towering. ‘Learning from China’ abruptly became a staple content in Australian mainstream media. Amid significant psychological disparity, Australian attitudes toward Chinese culture underwent a profound transformation. Many newspapers and journals began to assert that, compared to the West, Western culture was exceedingly flawed:

“The survival of sufficiently ancient customs and forms of etiquette has made the Chinese still appear the most peculiar people on Earth to Westerners. Everything the Chinese do is the opposite of what Europeans do. Of course, this is not the fault of the Chinese, for their ancestors practiced courteous social behavior, while ours completely lack manners.” [23]

Simultaneously, news of Mei Lanfang’s decision to grow a beard and defiantly refuse performances also became a hot topic across various Australian media outlets. Mei Lanfang’s unwavering integrity garnered unanimous praise and support from the Australian media. After Japan’s surrender in 1945, as Mei Lanfang returned to the stage, Western newspapers continued to extol his artistic achievements and admire his integrity. The News from Australia praised the great artist Mei Lanfang with the headline “Moustache Foiled Japanese”:

“Dr. Mei Lanfang won the title of ‘King of Actors’ in Chinese drama for his female impersonations, as during the Japanese occupation of Shanghai, he grew a beard, thus avoiding performing dignified dances and singing for the enemy. The distinctly masculine stubble on his lips was a direct response



to Japanese sweet talk. Now that the enemy has been driven out, Mei focused on reading and teaching drama during the war, painting watercolors, and he shaved off his beard.” [24]

## 5. Conclusion

From 1924 to 1945, spanning two decades, Australian media coverage of Mei Lanfang illustrates his crucial influence on the overseas portrayal of Chinese opera. With changes in international relations and the increasing global influence of Mei Lanfang, Chinese opera gradually broke free from the inherent news framing of old China and its customs. It emerged as an art form that could stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Western drama and opera. Similarly, through media reports in Australia, Mei Lanfang’s celebrity image entered the Australian social consciousness, shaping perceptions of Chinese opera and Chinese society. As Australian newspapers covered Mei Lanfang’s theatrical artistry, China ceased being a distant and alien landscape, transforming into a theatrical art that could be appreciated and experienced. Consequently, Peking opera in Australia shed its long-held fixed perspectives, evolving from a symbol burdened with stereotypes into an artistic form capable of representing the traditional cultural essence of China.

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