

## AN ESSAY BY SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA PEACE THROUGH ART

*In this essay on Beijing Opera, President Ikeda makes the point that ‘art is a powerful “weapon” in the struggle for peace. It is one of the highest expressions of human victory.’ He praises artists for creating peace through their art.*

Brilliant mastery of dance; exquisite flowers of humanity. The tour of Japan by the China Beijing Opera Troupe, sponsored by the Min-On Concert Association, has been extremely well received. Each performance has drawn thunderous applause and cheers, the program being praised as one truly befitting the 50th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China, which the tour commemorates. This gives me great delight.

On Jan. 18, I talked at length about the fascinating appeal and spirit of Beijing Opera with representative troupe members who included Fang Jie, director of the troupe and vice president of the China Arts Festival Foundation.

The performers’ faces exude a tremendous sincerity and integrity. Each utterance, each gesture is a lovely blossom, an expression of dignified elegance and grace. Even out of costume, the lifeblood of art flows through their veins. Their artistic spirit shines from their lives with diamond brilliance.

The performers are the very life of Beijing Opera, and their training is incredibly strict.

Mei Lanfang, one of the most famous Beijing Opera female-role performers of this century, began his training at about age 7 or 8. Both his father and grandfather were famous performers, but when young Mei started out, he was completely inept. He was so slow on the uptake that his instructor eventually threw in the towel in disgust.

Still, the youth was determined to learn. After being accepted by a new teacher, he got up every morning before dawn and went with his teacher to the deserted city walls, where he practiced vocalization under his teacher’s strict tutelage. They would return to young Mei’s house, where his teacher would drill him rigorously in the basic movements and techniques of Beijing Opera, starting with the most elementary aspects like walking. Eventually, a voice as beautiful as an angel’s — a voice that pierced the heavens — issued from his young lips.

Among the performers who accompanied Mei Lanfang on his last tour of Japan, in 1956, was Yuan Shihai, one of the foremost Beijing Opera performers today. Now, his son, Yuan Xiaohai, highly acclaimed for his performances as Guan Yu in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, is a member of the Min-On tour. I had the pleasure of meeting him with the troupe representatives. Both father and son have now performed in Japan, contributing to two generations of China–Japan friendship.

As with Mei Lanfang, Yuan Shihai entered a school for Beijing Opera performers at around age 10, about seven decades ago. The school day was filled with rigorous practice starting early in the morning and continuing until as late as 10:00 p.m. Of course, conditions are different today, but the great masters of Beijing Opera teach us the eternal lesson that trials and challenges are the key to self-perfection.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of my first visit to China, the first step in my endeavors to build a golden bridge of friendship between China and Japan. Since then, we

have received many, many superlative Chinese artists, all of whom have been wonderful cultural ambassadors.

The performing arts groups that have visited Japan under the auspices of Min-On include the Peking Artist Group (1975); the Shanghai Peking Opera Troupe (1976); various artists and musical groups in the concert series “A Musical Voyage Along the Silk Road” (1979–present); the Beijing People’s Art Theater (1983, 1990); the Shanghai People’s Art Theater (1985); the Oriental Song and Dance Ensemble (1991, 1993); the Yunnan Song and Dance Ensemble (1995); the Xinhui Artist Group (1996); the Radio Nationalities Orchestra (1997); and the Central Nationalities Song and Dance Ensemble (1998).

I remember the 1976 visit of the Shanghai Peking Opera Troupe with a special fondness. The troupe presented contemporary, revolutionary operas such as *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*, which depicted events of the Chinese Revolution. The final performance of the tour took place in the gymnasium of Soka University in Hachioji, and I was fortunate to attend. After the performance, the troupe members joined some 50,000 youth, many of them waving Chinese flags in welcome, on the university’s athletic field for a friendship rally. I called then for the early conclusion of a China–Japan peace and friendship treaty.

The highlight of the evening was a chorus by all in attendance. Linked by a sense of deep connectedness, everyone there sang “I Love the Fate of Heavenly Peace in Beijing” in Chinese. By the end of the rally, the opera troupe members had linked arms with the members of the Soka Gakkai Brass Band and Fife and Drum Corps. Standing in front of a huge banner with the words “May the Friendship Between the People of China and Japan Long Endure,” they sang as one.

Their voices reverberated high, endlessly high, into the clear, blue skies.

The friendship that exists between the people of China and Japan today is not the work of political leaders. It is the work of an alliance of wise pacifists who ardently hope for the peace of both nations. It is the crystallization of the people’s will, and it was achieved through their combined effort. Anyone who would dare to exploit this friendship that is growing stronger between our two people and claim credit for it is insulting China and desecrating the incredible efforts of those who worked selflessly to forge this friendship’s foundation.

Art is a powerful ‘weapon’ in the struggle for peace. It is one of the highest expressions of human victory. The efforts that artists make in perfecting and performing their art are in themselves efforts to create peace and culture for all humanity.

Beijing Opera originated among the people. Though in Chinese *Beijing Opera* literally means opera of the capital, it developed first in rural areas. It is a product of the people’s energy. Eventually, it was adopted by China’s capital, going on to become a spiritual treasure of the entire Chinese people.

To me, this dynamic popular spirit, like the ever-recurrent rhythm of life, makes Beijing Opera a perfect, unsurpassed artistic tribute to the lasting friendship between China and Japan.