

Obituary

# Li Yuru

## Chinese opera singer, she survived the Cultural Revolution to pass on her knowledge

- Delia Davin
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Li Yuru, who has died in Shanghai aged 84, was one of the great Beijing Opera performers. She was born in Beijing in 1923 on the 12th day of the sixth month according to the lunar calendar. However, to make her seem younger, 1924 was put down on her registration papers at Beijing Theatre school, and she retained this as her birth year in all her official papers.

Her family, descended from Manchu nobility, had fallen into poverty. She was 10 when her mother sent her to the school. It was lonely, but she would be fed while she learned a profession. She changed her surname from Jiao to Li, her mother's maiden name, in order not to affect her family's reputation. In the past, all female roles had been played by men, and Beijing Theatre school was the first co-educational training institution. Her tutors for the dan (young female) roles she studied were male performers.

She worked hard, learning plays by heart in the traditional way, and doing the arduous physical exercises that were part of the training. After six months, she was given a small role, but was booed by the audience when she failed to reach the high notes. For some years, she was given only walk-on parts. Then before a scheduled performance, both the leading student-actresses lost their voices. Still only 14, Li took the major role and received rapturous applause. From that moment on her success was assured.

When she graduated, Li organised her own troupe with some classmates and they enjoyed a successful run in Shanghai. However, the 17-year-old soon found the pressure unbearable and disbanded her troupe. She worked under the protection of various male stars and was a private disciple of Mei Lanfang and other male masters of the dan role who had responded positively to the arrival of women performers. She became a great star, particularly known for her roles in *The Dragon and the Phoenix*, *The Courtyard of the Black Dragon*, *Two Phoenixes Flying Together*, and *Three Pretty Women*. She gave birth to two daughters, Li Li in 1944 and Li Ruru in 1952.

When the People's Republic was founded in 1949, Beijing Opera was seen as a popular art form but in need of reform. Plays were banned for reasons such as "too much violence", "sexual suggestiveness", "reactionary politics" and even "no ideological significance". With a relatively "clean" personal history, Li was considered suitable material for a "people's artist". She herself was hopeful about the new regime that had brought peace and stability and, like other actors, she was delighted that they would now be respected as equal citizens. In the course of "re-education", she made self-criticisms of her "crimes" - the bourgeois thought and individualism demonstrated in striving for fame; the make-up and fashionable clothes reflecting her bourgeois life style; and the



Li in *The Drunken Imperial Concubine* at Hong Kong City Hall in 1985. She first appeared in this, her favourite work, aged 11

counter-revolutionary romances and ghost plays she had performed. Although much of the repertoire disappeared, she performed plays such as *The Drunken Imperial Concubine*, *The Xin'an Inn*, *The Pavilion of Red Plum Blossom*, and *Imperial Concubine Mei*. She toured the Soviet Union and Europe several times, and gave Beijing Opera performances in Britain in 1958 and 1979.

All this came to an end with the cultural revolution in 1966. Li was incarcerated in an "oxpen" (a room used as an ad hoc prison) and separated from her daughters who were sent to work in the countryside. When she was released in the early 1970s the theatre had become a duller place; only the model works produced under the supervision of Mao's wife Jiang Qing could be staged. Curiously however, as these were all mutations of Beijing Opera, Li and her colleagues were now needed again.

Mao's death in 1976 brought transformations. Li could once more perform the roles she had made famous. Her favourite play was *The Drunken Imperial Concubine*, which she first appeared in aged 11. She performed it for the last time when she was 70. She regarded passing on her art as important and was generous in her help to younger performers. She taught many students, offering master classes and giving seminars in various theatre institutions.

Her marriage, in December 1979, to Cao Yu, one of China's greatest dramatists, led her to take up writing. She published a play in 1984, while a novel that appeared in 1993 was made into a 25-episode television serial and reprinted in 2008. Her research on the performing art of Beijing Opera has recently been published in Shanghai in a collection edited by her daughter.

Beijing Opera was a living tradition. Not only the arias, but the techniques, movements, symbolism and make-up were all passed down from one player to another. Looking back on her life, Li lamented that so many plays with their specific acting skills had been lost in the hands of her generation. What, she asked, would she say to her predecessors when she saw them in the other world? The answer should surely be that through her teaching she was also able to pass on to future generations much that would otherwise have been lost.

Li's husband died in 1996; she is survived by her two daughters.

- Li Yuru, opera singer, born July 25 1923; died July 11 2008