

THE EARLY INFLUENCE OF WESTERN EUROPEAN OPERA ON THE VOCAL STYLES OF CHINESE OPERA SOPRANOS (LATE 19TH-20TH CENTURY)

Qing Gong

South-West University “Neofit Rilski”, Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria, 418490314@qq.com

Abstract: This article aims to examine the early influence of Western European opera from the late 19th century to the 20th century on the soprano vocal art of Chinese traditional opera. Against the background of cultural communication and theatrical reform between China and the West, this influence represents not only a clash of artistic concepts but also a dialogue between vocal technique systems, which is crucial to the transformation of modern Chinese opera vocals. Using historical document analysis and comparative musicology, combined with first-hand materials such as *Collected Works on Theatre by Cheng Yanqiu* and *Memoirs of Mei Lanfang*, as well as research findings in vocal physiology. This paper systematically explores how opera penetrated Chinese opera soprano in technical dimensions including breath control, resonance adjustment, and ornamentation techniques, and in dramatic dimensions including dramatic structure, narrative function, and character portrayal. The results show that these three skills were applied localization. That is, Cheng Yanqiu integrated thoracic-abdominal breathing with the “Dantian breath” in *The Golden Purse*, Mei Lanfang combined head resonance with the “back-of-the-head voice” in *The Drunken Concubine*, and Xun Huisheng introduced staccato techniques and localized them in *Hongniang*. It forms an interactive model of “taking tradition as the essence and science as the application”, which demonstrates the integrative feature of “partial reform while upholding the fundamental essence”. This study also reveals that the integration of Chinese and Western vocal art was not a simple imitation or replacement, but a selective absorption and adaptive transformation based on the aesthetic characteristics and linguistic laws of Chinese opera. Such a path provides an important paradigm for the modern development of traditional performing arts. It is concluded that this early exploration improved the scientificity and expressiveness of Chinese opera vocals while adhering to the laws of Chinese phonetics. It provided historical experience for Chinese opera sopranos to break through traditional conventions and expand the dimension of psychological depiction, and laid a foundation for in-depth dialogue between Chinese and Western vocal arts. Future research is suggested to further investigate the physiological mechanisms of technical integration and cross-media transmission paths. Future studies can combine acoustic measurement and voice science to conduct more accurate empirical analyses of the practical effects of the integration of Chinese and Western vocals. Supplementary data are derived from vocal analyses and relevant literature of operas including *The Golden Purse*, *The Drunken Concubine*, *Tears of Wasted Mountain*, and *Sister Jiang*.

Keywords: Western European opera, Chinese opera soprano, vocal art, cross-fertilization

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the late 19th century, the spread of Western learning to the East has promoted profound cultural collisions between China and the West. As a core elite art form of the West, Western European opera gradually influenced the field of Chinese opera through performance spaces in the Shanghai concessions, media technology, and active reference by Chinese opera reformists (Jiang, 2016). Opera’s scientific vocal system centered on bel canto and the dramatic concepts of “integrating voice and drama” contrasted sharply with the vocal systems of Chinese opera based on “dantian breath” and “back-of-head resonance”. It also provided a new reference for Chinese opera sopranos to break through the experiential limitations of “oral instruction and heart transmission”.

The establishment of the Lyceum Theatre, visits by Italian opera troupes, and systematic introduction by the Shanghai Municipal Band and the National Conservatory of Music jointly built a complete communication network for Western European opera in Shanghai (Zhang, 2023). Mei Lanfang watched opera performances during his visit to the United States in 1930 and studied diaphragmatic breath and resonance systems (Mei, 2023). Cheng Yanqiu investigated European music and theater in 1932, focusing on the matching between opera soprano voice types and character traits. It was the conscious exploration of these pioneers that transformed opera’s vocal techniques and dramatic concepts into catalysts for internal innovation in Chinese opera.

Against the background of Sino-Western musical and cultural exchanges from the late 19th century to the early 20th century, this paper focuses on the influence of opera on the vocal development of Chinese opera sopranos. It restores the basic paths of early infiltration and integration from three dimensions: technical communication, dramatic structure, and role portrayal, and extracts the core principles of localized mutual learning, so as to provide a basic framework for understanding the historical dialogue between Chinese and Western vocal arts.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopts a methodological framework that combines historical musicology and comparative musical analysis. First, from the perspective of historical musicology, through textual research on primary sources such as *Collected Works on Theatre by Cheng Yanqiu* and *Memoirs of Mei Lanfang*, it systematically reconstructs the historical context and cultural motivations behind the contact, cognition, and appropriation of Western European opera by reformist scholars of traditional Chinese opera during the first half of the 20th century (Cheng, 2022). Second, using comparative musical analysis, it selects representative works including Cheng Yanqiu's *The Golden Purse*, Mei Lanfang's *The Drunken Concubine*, Xun Huisheng's *Hongniang*, Zhang Junqiu's *Wangjiang Pavilion*, as well as modern operas *Sister Jiang* and *Camel Xiangzi*. Focusing on vocal techniques (such as breathing, resonance, ornamentation), dramatic structure, and character portrayal, it conducts cross-cultural morphological comparisons to reveal how operatic elements are concretely manifested in traditional Chinese opera texts (Liu, 2024). On this basis, drawing on research findings from vocal physiology and acoustics, it explains the interoperability between Chinese and Western vocal techniques from physical and physiological perspectives such as respiratory mechanics and resonance adjustment, providing scientific evidence for the morphological analysis (Han & Zhang, 2017). Finally, situating the above analysis within the theoretical landscape of comparative and cross-cultural communication studies on Chinese and Western vocal music over the past five years, it offers a multi-dimensional theoretical interpretation of the deep logic, integrative characteristics, and historical significance of early cross-cultural infiltration (Zhao, 2021).

3. RESULTS: MULTI-DIMENSIONAL INFILTRATION UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF OPERA

Technical communication in breath and resonance constitutes the physiological foundation of early integration between Chinese and Western vocal arts. The combined chest and diaphragmatic breathing in Western bel canto provides superior breath control, suitable for long phrases and grand narratives. The “dantian breath” in Chinese opera takes the area below the navel as the fulcrum, with flexible breath delivery that adapts to melodic flexibility. Although they derive from different cultural contexts, they share homology in the physiological mechanism of deep breathing relying on the diaphragm.

In “The Pavilion of Autumn and Spring” from *The Golden Purse*, Cheng Yanqiu synthesized operatic breath control with traditional dantian breath to enhance his vocal delivery. By deepening diaphragmatic contraction, he enhanced breath stability to smoothly perform long melodic passages while retaining traditional breath skills such as “stealing breath” and “changing breath” (Cheng, 2022). This integration improved vocal coherence and timbre unity, ensuring stable resonance and artistic appeal in both high and low, strong and weak passages.

In terms of resonance, opera emphasizes the integration of head, chest, and pharyngeal resonance. Chinese opera's “back-of-head resonance” also relies on the control of the soft palate and posterior pharyngeal wall, sharing similar principles. Mei Lanfang combined the two in *The Drunken Concubine*, achieving a clear and transparent tone through precise control, which laid an acoustic foundation for the integration of Chinese and Western vocals (Chen, 2024).

Xun Huisheng drew on operatic staccato techniques in “Ode to the Good Moment” from *Hongniang*, using clear and elastic staccato to replace some traditional trills, vividly shaping the lively character. He completed localization based on the Huguang accent system and upheld the principle of “correct pronunciation and rounded singing” (Liu, 2024). When using coloratura in *Wangjiang Pavilion*, Zhang Junqiu also proposed that coloratura must serve emotion and pronunciation rather than virtuosic display (Zhang, 2023). This idea of “singing according to pronunciation and integrating technique into emotion” enabled foreign techniques to effectively serve character portrayal.

The creative paradigm of Western European opera arias centered on “emotional condensation” provided an important reference for the transformation of singing parts for *qingyi* (dignified female protagonist in Chinese opera) in Chinese opera. Cheng Yanqiu's “Spring Autumn Pavilion” in *The Golden Purse* is of landmark significance: the twenty-eight-line regular slow aria broke through the traditional narrative framework, forming an independent emotional space through undulating melody and orchestral accompaniment. Using modulation to enhance inner fluctuations, it presents the distinctive characteristics of arias in Western European opera (Cheng, 2022).

In “Weaving at Night” from *Tears of Wasted Mountain*, Cheng Yanqiu further opened with wordless humming and combined sustained bass to create a psychological time and space, elevating stylized tragedy to universal life anxiety, transforming the *qingyi* from an ethical symbol into a dramatic subject with deep psychology.

Hua dan (lively young female role in Chinese opera) dramas showed a trend of recitative integration of speech and singing. Traditional *hua dan* dialogue was rhythmically free and lacked strict musical structure, while operatic recitative lies between singing and recitation, promoting narration and depicting inner worlds with regular beats (Jiang, 2016). Dramas such as *Picking up the Jade Bracelet* melodized and rhythmicized spoken parts while

retaining Huguang accent and Zhongzhou rhyme, combining free rhythm with banqiang beats, functioning similarly to recitative. Meanwhile, the integration of speech, singing, and body movements strengthened psychological depiction while retaining freehand aesthetics, shifting narration from plot exposition to delicate psychological presentation.

Traditional qingyi roles were mostly dignified and restrained, conforming to ethical norms. The strong penetration, wide range, and dramatic tension of operatic dramatic sopranos provided possibilities for the modern transformation of qingyi. The modern Peking opera *Sister Jiang* is a typical example: when facing torture, full chest resonance and metallic high notes express firm will; in lyrical passages, traditional vocal decorations reflect the delicate emotions of Eastern women (Zhang, 2023). The work improved power and endurance through bel canto breath while retaining vocal position and artistic charm of Chinese opera, achieving unity between heroism and Eastern gentleness.

Hua dan roles achieved a breakthrough from stylization to individualization. Traditional hua dan was mostly lively but limited in expressing human complexity. The singing of Hu Niu in *Camel Xiangzi* integrated multiple schools and operatic elements. In passages such as “Drunkenness” and “Death”, flexible use of chest resonance, wide range, and alternation of real and falsetto made voice change dynamically with character psychology. No longer a fixed identity label, the voice became the externalization of complex inner world and tragic fate, marking an important transformation of hua dan performance toward individualization and psychological depth.

4. DISCUSSIONS: LOGIC AND BOUNDARIES OF LOCALIZED INTEGRATION

The above analysis shows that the influence of Western European opera on Chinese opera soprano vocals from the late 19th century to the 20th century was not simple technical transplantation, but a profound cultural selection and creative transformation. Opera artists represented by Mei Lanfang, Cheng Yanqiu, and Xun Huisheng maintained a high sense of cultural consciousness and artistic subjectivity in the process of reference, forging a path of mutual learning that adapted scientific methods without sacrificing traditional essence (Mei, 2023).

The key to this practice lay in the precise grasp of the boundary between “integration” and “adherence”. In vocal techniques, they boldly absorbed scientific singing methods of opera to improve the traditional singing system. Cheng Yanqiu’s systematic introduction of diaphragmatic breath was essentially a scientific enhancement and physiological optimization of traditional “dantian breath” theory. While applying modern breath concepts in *The Golden Purse*, he retained traditional breath art, setting breathing points at key phrases to ensure musical integrity and enhance rhythmic appeal (Cheng, 2022). Xun Huisheng’s reference to staccato was a modern expansion of traditional hua dan’s enunciation features, always rooted in the vocal and linguistic logic of Peking Opera (Wang, 2022).

In aesthetic principles, they adhered to the bottom line of Chinese phonetic rules, banqiang structure, and the primacy of artistic charm. Zhang Junqiu’s localization of coloratura strictly followed “singing according to pronunciation”, designing melodic trends according to tonal changes. Mei Lanfang absorbed Western resonance techniques while retaining the traditional timbre, and upheld the core principles of “correct pronunciation, rounded singing, and integration of voice and emotion” while learning breath methods. This path of innovation in inheritance and adherence in openness truly safeguarded the cultural subjectivity of Chinese opera.

Meanwhile, artistic integration during this period remained partial improvement. Deeper musical structures such as orchestral thinking and harmonic language of Western European opera were not systematically absorbed, with influences mainly concentrated on vocal techniques and dramatic concepts. In addition, limited by the high cost of records and scores, the spread of Western vocal techniques was mainly concentrated in central cities, showing a significant “center-periphery” distribution. Nevertheless, this process was not one-way technical transplantation, but creative transformation filtered by local aesthetics. The aesthetic subjectivity of traditional vocal art always dominated the depth and boundary of technical integration (Han & Zhang, 2017).

This historical experience provides important enlightenment for contemporary Sino-Western artistic dialogue: real integration is not superficial collage, but creative transformation based on one’s own tradition through understanding and dialogue. Despite different cultural roots, opera and Chinese opera are both committed to “telling stories with songs and conveying emotions with sounds”. Their mutual learning is essentially a continuous exploration and expansion of the possibilities of human emotional expression (Li, 2006).

5. CONCLUSIONS

In early cross-cultural exchanges from the late 19th century to the 20th century, the influence of Western European opera on the vocal art of Chinese opera sopranos showed a distinct feature of “partial reform while adhering to the artistic essence” (Jiang, 2016). Technically, mutual learning of Chinese and Western breath, resonance, and vocal decoration improved the scientificity and artistic expressiveness of Chinese opera vocals. Structurally, explorations of “aria-like” and “recitative-like” creation expanded the narrative function and psychological depiction dimensions

of Chinese opera. In terms of role portrayal, the modern transformation of vocals and characters enabled Chinese opera sopranos to convey more complex human connotations and contemporary themes (Wang, 2022). The core value of this historical practice lies in that the modernization of traditional art does not mean breaking with tradition, but creative transformation based on a profound grasp of its own cultural context (Mei, 2023). It provides important enlightenment for the contemporary development of Chinese opera in the context of globalization: only by adhering to its own aesthetic roots, maintaining cultural subjectivity, basing on national traditions and extensively drawing on diverse cultural resources can genuine artistic innovation and sustainable development be achieved in global cultural dialogue.

REFERENCES

- Chen, Y. (2024). A study on the vocal physiological mechanism of the fusion of Peking Opera “Hounaoyin” and Bel Canto head resonance. *Journal of Musicology*, (3), 78-87.
- Cheng, X. (2022). The inheritance and innovation of Cheng Yanqiu’s vocal art in the context of Sino-Western music integration. *Journal of Central Conservatory of Music*, (3), 98-105.
- Han, Q., & Zhang, R. (2017). Acoustic analyses of the singing vibrato in traditional Peking Opera. *Journal of Voice*, 31(4), 511.e1-511.e9.
- Jiang, J. (2016). *Through the eye of the dragon: Opera art in cross-cultural dialogue (1919-1937)*. China Renmin University Press.
- Li, H. J. (2006). *A comparative study of Peking Opera Qingyi and Bel Canto Soprano* [Master’s thesis, Hangzhou Normal University].
- Liu, X. Z. (2024). Unfinished experiment: Historical reflections on the formal innovation of Mei Lanfang’s ancient costume song and dance plays. *Art of Chinese Opera*, 45(5), 43-51.
- Mei, B. (2023). Mei Lanfang’s exploration and practice of Western opera performance concepts. *Chinese Opera Art*, (1), 56-62.
- Wang, L. (2022). On the absorption and localization of Western vocal techniques in the singing of Peking Opera Qingyi. *Chinese Music*, (4), 156-163.
- Zhang, Y. (2023). The integration and innovation of Bel Canto and Peking Opera vocal music art. *Journal of Nanjing Arts Institute (Music & Performance)*, (2), 89-96.
- Zhao, M. (2021). Cross-cultural communication and artistic mutual learning of Chinese opera and Western opera in the early 20th century. *Journal of Drama Literature*, (10), 124-129.