

# Comparative Analysis of the Differences in Aria Melodies at Different Stages of Chinese National Operas

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**Abstract.** Since the New Culture Movement, Chinese national opera has been developed by generations of composers, giving birth to a large number of excellent operatic works. Chinese national opera, based on traditional Chinese musical elements, and at the same time borrowing the advanced Western experience in opera composition and creative techniques, is deeply loved by the Chinese public. Adopting the methodological framework of comparative study, this thesis selects six operas from three different stages of Chinese national opera, and chooses representative vocal excerpts with rich musicality for research. Based on the analysis of the existing literature and the musicality of the pieces, this thesis aims to comprehensively illustrate the differences of the chant melodies in the Chinese folk opera works of different stages from different levels and dimensions (e.g., melodic ranges, modal tonalities, musical elements, rhythms, etc.), so as to provide methodological frameworks and conclusions for more in-depth studies by scholars in the future.

**Keywords:** Musicology, Chinese National Opera, Melodic Analysis, comparative study.

## 1. Introduction

Chinese national opera is a work of art created by Chinese artists drawing on the experience of European opera creation and combining the elements of traditional Chinese music, which is in line with the aesthetics of Chinese people [1]. Since the New Culture Movement in 1919, the Chinese musician Li Jinhui created 12 children's operas, which are considered to be the beginning of the development of Chinese national opera. Since then, Chinese national opera has created a large number of excellent works with the efforts of generations of musicians, which follow the current affairs and reflect the social issues (wars, historical events) of China at that time. At present, there is no unified conclusion on the stage division of Chinese national opera in the academic circles. This thesis is based on Liu Hui's article Analyzing the development history of Chinese opera [2], which divides Chinese national opera into four periods: the period of germination and preliminary exploration of Chinese opera, the period of prosperity and development of Chinese opera, the period of barrenness and the early stage of revival of Chinese opera, as well as the period of diversification of Chinese opera. Since there is no obvious difference in the musicality of the operas created during the period of prosperity and development of Chinese opera and the period of barrenness and recovery of Chinese opera, this thesis does not choose the works created during the period of barrenness and recovery of Chinese opera in its analysis and research. The musical style of Chinese national opera is unique, integrating Chinese and Western musical elements, showing the unique musical characteristics and the advantages of multicultural intermingling under the aesthetics of the Chinese people [3]. The current academic research on Chinese folk opera is multifaceted and in-depth. The main areas of research focus on singing analysis, role analysis, aesthetics, historical background and so on. For the analysis of musicality, whether it is melody, or any other aspect of musicality, there are relatively rich academic results. However, there are no rich academic results on the comparative analysis of melodic development and evolution based on the historical timeline. Based on the historical timeline, this dissertation selects aria melodies and conducts comparative melodic analyses of arias from six different opera works of three different stages of Chinese national opera development with different musicality, aiming to comprehensively analyze the differences of melodies in the works of various stages of Chinese national opera from different levels and dimensions, and to explore the development

of Chinese national opera from this perspective. The study can enrich the academic results on such issues and provide a methodological framework and basic conclusions for more in-depth studies by scholars afterwards.

## 2. Opera Covered in This Study

This paper chooses the works *Little Painter* and *Tempest on the Yangtse River*, which are from the budding and preliminary exploration period of Chinese opera, for study. *The Little Painter* is considered to be the beginning of Chinese national opera, and was composed by Li Jinhui, whose works are centered on children, and he is good at observing the details of children's lives and their heart characteristics [4]. *The Tempest on the Yangtse River* was composed by Nie Er, whose lyrics were good at summarizing the typical moaning, anger and shouting tones of the people's revolutionary struggle, and at the same time possessed the strong, resonant and short melodies and rhythms unique to this era [5]. The period of prosperity and development of Chinese opera this paper chooses the works *The White-haired Girl* and *Jiang Sister* for study. *The White-haired Girl* was created in 1945, absorbed the characteristics of national music, according to the advantages of the previous traditional opera and foreign opera, the organic combination of domestic traditional music and foreign music, successfully constructed a new style of Chinese opera [6]. In this paper, three different arias in the opera *White-haired Girl* are selected for study, which show the musical style of the opera *White-haired Girl* in a more comprehensive way. The opera *Jiang Sister* is also a work of the same period, *Jiang Sister* was created in 1962, and its unique charm and national style impressed the audience deeply. The opera *Sister Jiang* retains the traditional Chinese musical instruments and theater performances, while adding the western opera form, the combination of various features played a unique national charm effect, and then the revolutionary background, the Chinese Communist Party members fear death, to the death of the heroic image of the heroism of the best show [7]. Chinese opera presents a diversified period of time this paper chooses the opera *Savage Land* and *Regret for the Past* for research. The opera *Savage Land* is an adaptation of Mr. Cao Yu's play of the same name, composed by the composer Jin Xiang. The opera *Savage Land* portrays many distinctive characters represented by Qiu Hu and Jiao Daxing, and through their thoughts and actions, it explores human nature in depth, realizes the shaping of dramatic character, and embodies the depth of humanistic concern [8]. The opera *Regret for the Past* is composed by composer Shi Guangnan, which brings the audience the feeling of sadness and unfulfilled, and its birth indicates to a certain extent that the Chinese opera in the 20th century has stepped onto a higher level. The opera *Regret for the Past* is a useful attempt for Chinese composers to use Western opera composition techniques in vocal composition. Based on the Western opera composition techniques, composer Shi Guangnan added a large number of Chinese folk music elements in the opera *Regret for the Past*, which demonstrated the artistic character of Chinese opera with the times, and drew the appreciators and creators closer to each other in terms of the aesthetic distance [9].

## 3. Melodic Analysis in Different Dimensions

### 3.1. The Range

The overall span of an aria relates to the musical expressiveness of the aria. Generally speaking, arias with a large span are more expressive when arias express exaggerations, conflicts, and twists and turns. The aria in the opera *Tempest on the Yangtse River* during the initial exploration period of Chinese opera, the highest note is d4, the lowest note is e3, and the overall span is seven degrees. The aria *Embroidered Red Flag* from the opera *Jiang Sister* in the period of prosperity of Chinese opera, the highest note is f4, the lowest note is b2, the overall span is pure thirteen degrees. The aria *Embroidered Red Flag* is 4.5 whole tones larger than the *Longshoreman's Song*. Although it cannot be concluded that an aria with a larger range is necessarily richer in musical expression than one with a smaller range, it is an important dimension, within which the composer has more room to create

music, and is more likely to produce music that is excellent and suitable for expressing the emotions contained in the aria. However, the wider the range is never the better; arias are meant to be sung by singers, and an aria with an overly wide range will be considerably more difficult to sing.

### 3.2. Rhythm

Rhythm is an important part of melody. In the opera Little Painter during the preliminary exploration period of Chinese opera, the rhythm is mostly based on the internal repetition of the bar and the repetition of the bar. Figure 1 shows the melody from the first aria of the first act of the opera Little Painter, in which the rhythmic patterns of the 2nd and 3rd bars are identical, with four sixteenth notes and one quarter note, corresponding to the same number of syllables in the libretto, and the 4th and 5th bars have the same rhythmic patterns, with two combinations of eighth notes and eighth notes, and two combinations of double sixteenth notes and eighth notes. The rhythmic patterns within measures 4 and 5 are also identical, with a combination of two eighth notes and an eighth note, and two double sixteenth notes and an eighth note, respectively (see Figure 1). Figure 2 shows the melody from the first aria of the second act of the opera Little Painter, Teacher's Training, in which the rhythmic pattern of the first and second bars is identical, with six eighth notes and one quarter note. The rhythmic pattern of the third and fourth bars is exactly the same, a combination of eighth and quarter notes (see Figure 2).

(中弱, 较慢)

1 - | 2 3 6 1 2 | 2 3 6 1 5 | 5 3 2 1 | 2 3 5 2 3 5 | 2 - | 6 1 2 3 5 |

(小画家唱) 尖 耳 朵, 长 嘴 巴, 看 见 主 人 摇 摇 尾 巴。 走 过 来,

Figure 1. From the opera Little Painter [10]

1 2 3 5 2 1 2 | 1 2 3 5 2 1 2 | 5 3 2 6 1 2 | 5 3 2 6 1 2 |

(丙)鸡 司 晨, (甲)鸡 司 晨, (乙)苟 不 学, 曷 为 人! (丙)苟 不 学, 曷 为 人!

Figure 2. From the opera Little Painter [10]

The rhythms of operas from the boom period of Chinese opera are generally more complex, Figure 3 shows the 11th bar of the aria Wishing the Red Army from the opera La Rouge. The aria here is in free tempo, and the rhythm is much more complex than in the excerpts from the opera Little Painter, with legato lines and long-time notes, as well as the phenomenon that the lyrics of one syllable correspond to many different notes, which is rare in Chinese opera during the period of its initial exploration (see Figure 3). Figure 4 shows the arias in the opera Regret for the Past from the period of diversification of Chinese opera - melodies from Unhappy life. In this melody, a shift in meter occurs, switching from a 4/4 row to 3/4 and then back to 4/4 between the five bars (see Figure 4).

Figure 3. From the opera La Rouge [11]

Figure 4. From the opera Regret for the Past [12]

### 3.3. Melodic Modulation Analysis

Modulation is the foundation of melodic composition and an important dimension in analyzing melodies. In Chinese folk operas, there are both melodies created with traditional Chinese scales and melodies created with western scales (major and minor, toneless), and even in one opera, melodic lines with very different styles can be heard. These melodies greatly enrich the musical expression of the opera. For example, the aria *The North Wind Blows* from the opera *The White-haired Girl*, which was written during the boom period of Chinese opera. The melody of this aria is composed of Chinese seven-tone modulation, divided into four sections, all ending at the fifth level. In addition, the aria from the opera *Savage Land*, from the period of diversification of Chinese opera, is *My Tiger Brother!* This aria is composed in the traditional Chinese six-tone mode, using the six notes of the first key (do, re, mi, sol, la, si), and is an aria with a melody in the Chinese style. However, in another aria from the opera *Savage Land*, "A man lives but once", one can see melodic lines composed of Western modes. Figure 5 shows the bars 1-4 of the aria *A man lives but once*, in which chromatic progressions occur, such as  $g_3$ ,  $g_3$ -flat, and  $f_3$  in bar 2, notes that are not found in Chinese modes. In addition, in measure 3, there is a longer-duration note, ascending  $d_4$ , which belongs to the seventh note in the key of E (see Figure 5). In traditional Chinese modes, the seventh note is used as a partial, usually for passing tones or melodic development that stops briefly at the seventh note, and longer-duration notes are not used. The composer's use of such a melodic progression enriches the expressiveness and drama of the music, and gives Chinese folk opera more possibilities for musical expression.

DaXing:  
金子, 金子, 刚才我做了一个梦,  
Jin Zi, Jin Zi, Just now I had a dream.  
梦见你头也不回, 一步一步走了!  
450 I dreamed you left me for good. Step by step you walked a-way,

Figure 5. From the opera *Savage Land* [13]

### 3.4. Melodic Interval Analysis

The melodic intervals between the melodic notes constitute the melodic intervals, and the analysis of melodic intervals is crucial in measuring the dimensions of melodic development. In the aria *Longshoreman's Song*, an opera from the initial exploration period of Chinese opera *The Tempest on the Yangtse River*, there are no intervals greater than three, and the melodic line of the whole aria is composed of melodic intervals of the same degree, second and third. Figure 6 shows the bars 57-62 of the aria *Longshoreman's Song*, which is also the conclusion of the aria *Longshoreman's Song*. In these bars, the melodic line develops from almost identical and diatonic intervals, with a few intervals of thirds interspersed, for example in the junction of bars 57-58 and in bar 62 (see Figure 6). In the aria *Tie the Red Head Rope* from the opera *The White-haired Girl*, which is from the boom period of Chinese opera, there are more melodic intervals than in the aria *Longshoreman's Song*. Figure 7 shows the aria *Tie the Red Head Rope*, bars 77-81, of which bars 78, 79, 80, 81 have pure fourths, and in bar 81 there is a minor seventh, which can enrich the musical expression (see Figure 7). In the aria *My Tiger Brother*, from the opera *Savage Land*, which was written during the period of diversification of Chinese opera, there is also an aria from *My Tiger Brother!* *My Tiger Brother*, similar examples can be found. Figure 8 shows the bars 5-8 of the aria *My Tiger Brother!* The melodic line in bar 8 has a minor seventh progression from  $b_3$  to  $a_4$  (see Figure 8). In fact, there are many examples of the use of minor seventh intervals in the opera *Savage Land*, and these minor seventh intervals become the motifs of the melodic progression in the opera *Savage Land*, forming a unique melodic line. In fact, there are many examples of the use of minor seventh intervals in the opera *Savage Land*.



Figure 6. From the opera The Tempest on the Yangtse River [14]



Figure 7. From the opera The White-Haired Girl [15]



Figure 8. From the opera Savage Land[13]

### 3.5. Transposition Analysis

In the initial exploration period of Chinese opera and the prosperous development period of Chinese opera, although has a small amount of modal extemporization, such as the melody in the aria I want to live in the opera The White-haired Girl. Figure 9 shows the bars 14-17 of the aria I want to live, and in bar 17 there is an ascending c4, which does not belong to the modal scale of the aria, but is an extramodal tone, but which is not transposed, and is only used as a passing tone (see Figure 9). In Chinese operas of the diversified period, examples of transposition are not difficult to find. Figure 10 shows bars 84-88 of the aria Unhappy life from the opera Regret for the Past. In bar 87 there is a reduction of d4, which, in combination with the accompaniment, here transposes the original key of F minor to C minor (see Figure 10). There are other examples of transpositions in the aria Unhappy life. Figure 11 shows the bars 20-27 of the aria Unhappy life the melodic mode changes from F minor to F major, a change of musical style which, combined with the content of the lyrics, expresses different emotions to the audience and enriches the expressive power of the music (see Figure 11). Another example is the melodic fragment of the aria A Man lives but once from the opera Savage Land of the same period. Figure 12 shows the bars 16-22 of the aria A Man lives but once, the contrast in musical styles is brought out by the change from the Western key of E major to the traditional Chinese key of F heptatonic (see Figure 12).



Figure 9. From the opera The White Haired Girl [15]



Figure 10. From the opera Regret for the Past [12]



Figure 11. From the opera Regret for the Past [12]



Figure 12. From the opera Savage Land [13]

### 3.6. The High Notes

Soprano is an important dimension in the dramatic presentation of an aria. Often, arias that are more dramatic will have a pronounced soprano, which stimulates the audience's sense of hearing and reaches a climax in the atmosphere. In the initial exploration period of Chinese opera, the obvious high notes are not common, but in the prosperous development period of Chinese opera, the high notes have become more common. For example, Figure 13 shows the bars 10-15 of the melody of the aria Tie the Red Head Rope in the opera White-haired Girl. In which a4 occurs in bar 12 (see Figure 13); in fact, a4 occurs five times in this aria, which proves that it was already commonly used in the opera The White-haired Girl. In the opera Savage Land, which was written during the period of diversification of Chinese operas, the c5 tone already appeared. Figure 14 shows the bars 41-43 of the aria A Man lives but once, and in bar 42 the composer provides both tenor and soprano with the opportunity to sing c5 (see Figure 14), which is more commonly used in Western operas, and which greatly enhances the expressive power of the music.



Figure 13. From the opera The White Haired Girl [15]



Figure 14. From the opera Savage Land [13]

#### 4. Discussion

The nature of melodic intervals is an important part of what constitutes a melody, and an important dimension in analyzing a melody. Generally speaking, the effect of the nature of melodic intervals on the melody itself can be analyzed through two different aspects: the size of the intervals themselves and the degree of harmony. In the aria melodies of Chinese national operas, the nature of intervals is more and more abundant in the melodies with the advancement of time and their own development. From the initial exploratory period of Chinese opera, when intervals were mostly confined to fifths and below, to the period of prosperity and development of Chinese opera, when a rich variety of intervals and different degrees of harmonic combinations appeared, and then to the period of diversified development of Chinese opera, when the melodic intervals became more and more varied. And the variety of melodic intervals is getting richer and richer. To a certain extent, this reflects the change and development of aria melody in Chinese national opera.

Modulation is an important part of melody and the basis of melody creation. In Chinese national opera, most arias are composed in traditional Chinese modes, which have distinctive Chinese musical characteristics, conform to the musical aesthetics of the Chinese public, and are also conducive to the expression of Chinese stories in the context of Chinese society. However, with the development of Chinese national opera, especially in the period of diversification of Chinese opera, some melodies based on Western major and minor modes or atonal modes appeared, and these arias played an important role in the development of Chinese national opera, which broadened the mode of musical expression of Chinese national opera and added some international musical elements to Chinese national opera. Due to the different ways of musical expression and different aesthetics, it is not possible to say which mood is more appropriate to be expressed in which way, but these melodies composed of different modes have put forward more possibilities for the development of Chinese national opera, and have made an important contribution to the development of Chinese national opera towards the world, absorbing and learning the excellent forms of musical expression of other countries and musical styles.

This study adopts the methodology of case study to carry out the research. The author selects six operas for comparative study among many Chinese national operas based on the research of related scholars and according to different stages of the development of Chinese national operas, which are selected from the period of preliminary exploration of Chinese operas, the period of prosperity and development of Chinese operas, and the period of diversification of Chinese operas respectively. The six operas are selected from the period of preliminary exploration of Chinese opera, the period of prosperous development of Chinese opera, and the period of diversification of Chinese opera. It should be known that the development of Chinese national opera has given birth to a large number of excellent works in these three stages. The conclusion of this thesis is only the result of the comparative analysis of the melodic level of arias in these operas. To know more about the differences in the melodic development of Chinese national operas in different phases, need to combine with more related works to conduct a comprehensive study.

## 5. Conclusion

The melodies of arias from different stages of Chinese national operas show a lot of differences, and in general, the melodiosity tends to be more complex with the advance of time and the development of Chinese national operas. Analyzed from the perspective of range, as time advances, the range of the aria melody is generally larger than that of the previous stage, which is especially obvious when analyzing the aria melody during the initial exploration period of Chinese opera and the period of prosperous development of Chinese opera. From the point of view of rhythm, the rhythm becomes more and more complicated with the advance of time, and the regular, repetitive rhythmic patterns gradually become irregular rhythmic patterns, and with the development of Chinese national opera, the use of free rhythm and the frequency of changing beat numbers gradually increases. From the point of view of melodic tonality, the melodies of arias in Chinese folk operas have developed more and more melodic modes and styles over time, with traditional Chinese modes and Western modes, and atonal melodies all being used in Chinese folk operas. From the point of view of melodic intervals, the variety of melodic intervals in arias of Chinese folk operas has gradually increased over time, and dissonant intervals such as major and minor diatonic, major and minor septatonic, etc., have also been gradually applied to Chinese folk operas. In the diversified period of Chinese opera, the transposition technique has been applied in large quantities, and the expressive power of the melody has been further strengthened. The transposition technique provides more musical expressions for the Chinese national opera in the expression of dramatic plot transitions and emotional transitions, and so on. Finally, the soprano voice has been gradually applied to Chinese national operas over time. In the period of prosperity and development of Chinese operas as well as the period of diversification of Chinese operas, some notes that can be recognized as soprano voice in a broad sense can be found, which adds rich dramatic expressiveness to Chinese national operas.

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