

# The Nationalization of Western Opera in China

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**Abstract.** After the May Fourth Movement in 1919, Western opera, along with other Western cultures, entered China with little response. However, after a century of development, the collision and integration of these two cultures eventually led to the incorporation of traditional Chinese music elements into opera. The Chinese opera was gradually becoming an important part of Chinese music culture. How is the traditional Chinese music fused into the Chinese opera? What is the status of this music culture? This paper is going to explore the integration of traditional Chinese music elements and investigate the problems encountered in the process of nationalization of Western opera in China. Through the analysis of Chinese operatic works and the status of the musical form within its cultural context, the author concludes that the nationalization of Chinese opera is still an ongoing process.

**Keywords:** opera, traditional Chinese music, nationalization.

## 1. Introduction

Opera, as a music drama form originating from the West, enjoys great reputation worldwide. However, when it entered China, a country with a unique cultural background, its development was not smooth sailing. In China, opera faces a series of challenges and issues, while also constantly exploring and innovating to seek its own development direction [1]. And in this process, Chinese opera has continuously absorbed the artistic elements of Western opera, gradually integrating the characteristics of traditional Chinese music and culture, forming a unique artistic form with Chinese characteristics. In the process of nationalization, Chinese opera continues to explore and practice, integrating traditional Chinese music, opera elements, and folk art into opera creation to express the life and emotions of the Chinese people. The process of the nationalization of Chinese opera has gone through many stages, from the initial absorption of the themes and artistic conception of Chinese classical literature to the later in-depth exploration of the aesthetic value of Chinese traditional music, which is integrated into the creation of opera. At the same time, the elements of traditional Chinese opera are constantly integrated into the aspects of music and accompaniment instruments, which makes Chinese opera present a unique national style.

This paper explores the integration of traditional Chinese music elements and the problems encountered in the development of opera in China. Through the analysis of different opera works in different periods, this paper will illustrate the current situation of opera in China and try to put forward corresponding solutions. This will not only help promote the sustainable development of opera in China, but also provide useful inspiration and reflection for the global opera community.

## 2. Defining the Nationalization

The nationalization refers to the creative development and application of unique national artistic techniques, modes of artistic thinking, and artistic forms by artists to reflect real-life situations and express the unique thoughts and emotions of their nation, thereby endowing their works with a national character and style [2]. Opera, as a comprehensive art form originating from the West, carries a strong local style. In its dissemination process, different countries and regions have given different interpretations and explanations to it. This interpretation and transformation of opera through one's own aesthetic can be referred to as the nationalization of opera. This integration of foreign culture is quite challenging, as it requires balancing audience preferences and aesthetics while preserving the original characteristics. During the May Fourth Movement, China not only absorbed and embraced

Western culture, but also introduced the genre of Western opera to the country, marking the beginning of the nationalization of opera in China. The attempts made by composers to nationalize opera in China include the creation of "Xuetang Yuege" (School Music), children's operas, yangge operas, and the improvement of traditional operas. These attempts involved the nationalization of various aspects of opera, such as musical language, theatrical performance, and creative themes [3]. The nationalization of opera in Russia is a very successful example, which owes its success to the brilliant creations of artists and the rich heritage of Russian literature and folk stories. There are many similarities between China and Russia in terms of ideology and culture. It is helpful for the research and development of Chinese opera to learn from the successful experience of Russia [4].

### 2.1. Integration of the Traditional Chinese Xiqu

Since the Song and Yuan dynasties, there have been over several hundred types of Chinese Xiqu [5]. It is the embodiment of a comprehensive art form in China. Although Chinese Xiqu and Western opera differ significantly in cultural background, themes, and styles, they both use the stage to showcase and express the plot. Therefore, in the creation of modern Chinese opera, many writers have incorporated elements of traditional Chinese Xiqu into the works of opera, which is also one of the characteristics of the nationalization of opera.

As the first national opera in China, "The White-Haired Girl" is known as a milestone work in the development of national opera [6]. Based on the folk-dance drama (yangge opera), "The White-Haired Girl" incorporates elements of traditional Chinese opera and Western opera. Its use of traditional Chinese Xiqu elements is reflected in many aspects. In terms of singing style, the later singing sections of the female lead Xier and Yang Bailao's "Picking Wheat Roots" both use the singing style of Qinqiang Xiqu. The background music uses Hebei bangzi to express the characters' inner thoughts and motivations. In addition, the drama also uses traditional Chinese music elements such as storytelling and recitation, which are interwoven and combined with singing, greatly enriching the plot and character images. This combination of singing and storytelling was very popular and has since been frequently used in later works. In addition, many other opera productions have also incorporated elements of traditional Chinese Xiqu, such as the "shuaqiang" and "runqiang" techniques of Beijing Xiqu, as well as the use of different vocal styles, including the high-pitched and low-pitched tones, and the flowing sleeve dance of female roles. The two main features of Yuju, namely tone and glissando, have also appeared in many works.

In fact, it is not so much that Chinese opera has absorbed the elements of Xiqu as that Chinese opera has inherited Chinese Xiqu. Both are integrated arts of song, dance, stage performance, and on a grand scale, the two cannot be separated. When opera first entered China, it was called "foreign Xiqu" [7]. So, when opera entered China, the creators first had to solve this problem. Now it seems that this problem has been solved well, and the creators have found a balance between opera and opera.

### 2.2. The Chinese Folk Tune

A type of folk song or dance tune that is popular among the people and played in leisure time, characterized by delicate and intricate melody [8]. As a Chinese ethnic tune, it also holds a place in Chinese ethnic opera. The ethnic folk tune, mainly based on the pentatonic scale, rarely uses the "fa" and "ti" dissonant notes. Although the ethnic folk tune differs from the Western major and minor scales, their combined use in opera can create rich musical effects.

The ethnic folk tune runs through the opera "August Osmanthus Blossoms Everywhere". "The Osmanthus Tune" appears multiple times in the opera, and the author repeatedly uses this melody in different scenes to reflect the changes of characters and plot. The opera "The Road" uses Shandong folk tunes to match the theme and convey a sense of power. Apart from that, some ethnic tunes that were passed to the West in the 18th century were also used in some Western operas. The most famous one is "jasmine" from Puccini's "Turandot". The early works of Puccini showed his application of the Chinese pentatonic scale, while his last work "Turandot" integrated it into Western tonality, depicting

a more realistic portrayal of Eastern music [9]. In this opera, Puccini adapted and interpreted the floral melodies that are popular in the southern regions of China, which not only contributed to the opera's great success but also introduced Chinese culture to the world.

### **2.3. The Stage Design**

Compared with other ways, the change and nationalization of stage design is the most intuitive one. As a visual experience, it can make the audience feel the same, so the Chinese ethnic elements contained in the dance beauty are also very much. The costumes are selected to adapt to the opera text, representative costumes of different dynasties, floral costumes with Chinese rural flavor, and so on. In terms of makeup, the use of more colorful opera makeup to highlight and distinguish the characters. The background also often chooses something that can express the desired artistic conception. There is a saying in Chinese poetry of "using objects as metaphor for people", which is also reflected in the design of the stage of the opera. Traditional Chinese objects, such as screens and paintings, can both decorate the stage and assist in displaying characters and storylines. Garden and other traditional Chinese architecture also shows the Chinese folk customs. In terms of dance, it will also integrate traditional Chinese dance movements and forms, such as the use of props such as fans and long sleeves, to show beautiful posture and dance charm.

In terms of dance, it will also integrate traditional Chinese dance movements and forms, such as the use of props such as fans and long sleeves, to show beautiful posture and dance charm [10]. As the part directly presented to the audience, the stage design should not only fit in with the music, but also more perfectly interpret what the other parts of the opera want to express. Therefore, the nationalization of stage design is also important and necessary for the nationalization of Chinese opera.

## **3. The Usage of Traditional Instruments and Singing Methods**

### **3.1. The Traditional Instruments**

Considering the musical instruments, there are great differences between China and the West. Metallic instruments are more common in Western opera accompaniment, while most Chinese instruments are made of bamboo, wood, and silk strings. The accompanying instruments are also used in the opera while integrating Chinese musical elements into ethnic opera.

Currently, most Chinese operas use a combination of Chinese traditional ethnic instruments and Western instruments. The choice of instruments is related to the background story and the specific region. For example, in "Yimeng Mountain," the widely used instrument is the zhuiqin, a traditional Chinese bowed string instrument made of silk strings and wood. Some instruments are chosen because their unique features are suitable for expressing the emotions of the stage or characters at that time. For example, the pipa, with its bright tone and strong granular feeling, is often used to describe grand scenes such as battlefields. A particular case is when an opera is adapted from a solo piece for a specific instrument and the experiences of its composer. "Erquan" mainly tells the story of the renowned Chinese folk erhu soloist Yanjun Hua and his masterpiece "Erquan Yingyue," so the main accompanying instrument for this opera is the erhu.

Many Chinese operas heavily feature Chinese instruments, but it is not common to see operas that only use Chinese instruments or only use Western instruments. This also reflects the fact that Chinese national operas are developed and innovated based on integration, rather than complete rejection or wholesale acceptance.

### **3.2. The Singing Methods**

The difference lies in the use of traditional folk singing methods versus bel canto. These two singing styles differ in terms of theoretical framework, vocal techniques, breath control, and aesthetic principles [11]. Similarly to the use of instruments, both traditional folk singing and bel canto singing are utilized in operas, with the appropriate style chosen based on the background and emotions that

need to be expressed. The tonality and rhythm of the Chinese language are more fully reflected in Chinese operas, combined with the ups and downs of the singing style. When expressing emotions, traditional folk singing is generally preferred, while bel canto singing is more popular for dramatic effect. In modern times, due to cultural fusion, these two singing styles have also been integrated and borrowed from each other. Many performers have blended bel canto singing and traditional folk singing based on the sound production habits and singing styles of Chinese people, drawing on the essence of both to achieve better results [12]. Therefore, the difference between these two singing styles is not absolute, and the background and performance style of the opera also have a great influence on the singing style.

## 4. Chinese Opera as Niche Culture

### 4.1. The Current Situation

Since 2011, people have been using terms like "boom" and "surge" to describe the development trend of Chinese opera [13]. From 2011 to the present, China has produced nearly a hundred opera works almost every year. This number is quite significant on a global scale, and the country has also established specific programs to support the development of Chinese opera. In this year's Chinese Opera Festival, 24 opera works were performed, attracting 40,000 audience members [14].

It seems that Chinese opera is thriving, but in recent years, despite the increasing output, there have not been many successful operas. Most people are still familiar with early works such as "The White-Haired Girl" and "Sister Jiang", which were produced at the beginning of the development of national opera. Furthermore, the definition of national opera is not very clear, and the theoretical framework is still being established. Opera, as a comprehensive art form, requires the audience to have a good appreciation of the arts. It is a major challenge to cultivate a broad audience base. In today's diverse entertainment environment, opera, as an art form with a certain threshold, does not seem to easily attract a large audience. At the same time, as the times continue to evolve, how to innovate and balance innovation with inheritance is also a problem facing Chinese opera.

### 4.2. The Promotion

Although Chinese history is long and opera that uses historical stories as its subject matter is beneficial for the development of traditional Chinese culture, with the development of time, people's ideas have changed. If these themes are used without changes, it will be difficult to attract young audiences. Opera, while being an artistic endeavor, also needs to consider its economic viability to sustain its development. The production cost of opera is very high, it requires a long time, large venues, and many performers, all of which contribute to the high cost and time-consuming nature of opera.

It is possible to reduce costs while maintaining the integrity of the opera. For example, the 2005 Salzburg version of "La Traviata" had significant differences in costumes and scenery compared to other more traditional versions, mainly reflecting modernization and simplification. High production costs also result in high ticket prices, which can be a problem for audiences, who are unlikely to pay three to four-digit prices for tickets except for some classic operas. The author believes that opera can open online viewing channels, which can not only reduce ticket prices and strengthen promotion but also provide a clearer viewing experience. This approach can also alleviate the problem of uneven regional development in opera, as more remote areas may not have dedicated performance venues due to economic constraints. Creators can also incorporate catchy and memorable music into operas, as popular tunes are the best form of promotion. Successful operas often have their own classic arias, such as "The North Wind Blows" from "The White-Haired Girl" and "The Revengeful Flames Burn in My Heart" from Mozart's "The Magic Flute".

## 5. Conclusion

Through analysis of different opera works and the status of opera, it is evident that the process of nationalization of Chinese opera is still ongoing. It has been a long and complex process, during which it continuously absorbed elements from traditional Chinese music, injecting a unique color into this musical form. Innovation and development always adhere to the integration. While creators have been able to effectively incorporate traditional Chinese elements into opera, the reception of those works has been relatively limited. The high cost of opera has led to a series of issues such as high-ticket prices and uneven regional development, which also need to be addressed. However, with the support of the government, economic development, and the improvement of various technologies, the nationalization of Chinese opera will continue to deepen, and new attempts will be made. The prospect of Chinese opera is very broad, but it also needs to make corresponding changes to meet the preferences of the audience. In addition, Chinese opera can also strive to gain world recognition and ascend the world stage. In the future, we can expect that Chinese opera will continue to explore the excellent elements of Chinese traditional music and at the same time be in line with international standards. This article explores the traditional Chinese musical elements that have been incorporated into opera since its introduction to China. It also provides a detailed analysis of the current situation and challenges facing Chinese opera, along with several suggestions for its development. It is hoped that this article will be helpful for the further development of Chinese opera.

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