



## REVIEW

# Discussion on the “Localization” Singing Technique Transformation of Opera in the Background of Chinese Culture

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### ABSTRACT

Opera has been developed in China for more than a hundred years as an “imported product” in the West. But the deep-rooted traditional ideas and the artistic aesthetics accumulated over thousands of years have also given the opera a new youth in China. Among them, the most affected area is singing technique. As one of the most intuitive external performance features of opera, singing technique has been the most affected by “localization” and has created a unique singing method belonging to China. Of course, this method is not formed in one fell swoop. The purpose of this paper is to explore the process of “localization” of opera singing technique in the context of Chinese culture, and to demonstrate it completely from the forms, methods, ideas and systems of change, so as to apply the theory more deeply to practical singing and teaching.

## 1. The Main Causes of the “Localization” of Opera

Opera has always been regarded as the most expressive art form. It combines music, performance, dance, drama, art, costumes, lighting and other arts. It has become a model of classical music and spreads around the world with its unique singing method and development structure. This art form with a huge system and structure was introduced to China with the war at the end of the 19th century.<sup>[1]</sup> It is worth noting that operas, like symphonies, Western instruments, or other forms of foreign art, are gradually labeled as “localized” after they are introduced to China. The so-called “localization” label embeds elements of Chinese national

style, characteristic temperament, lyrics, and situational conflicts into foreign art. In the long process of development, it forms an exotic product of Chinese characteristics and is deeply loved by the people. The reason is directly related to the background of the times and the aesthetics of culture.

The background of the era can be regarded as an opportunity for the introduction of Western music represented by opera into China. In 1840, the Opium War opened its doors for hundreds of years, and a large number of foreign missionaries came to China with thoughts, teachings and music. Those who first came into contact with these foreign arts were the pioneer representatives in Chinese cities and the students most likely to accept new

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ideas.<sup>[2]</sup> These people are also the most important group of opera development and communication in the early 20th century. To sum up, the pioneers and the students hope to use the Western music of opera and other Western music to evoke the feudal ideology of the Chinese, and rise up to resist the aggressors until 1949. From 1949 to 1979, the state resumed production and construction, and opera art as a discipline began to systematically and professionally influence society. After 1979, China implemented the policy of reform and opening up, and truly began to take the initiative to accept the stage of European cultural and artistic development. Until today, the exploration of the “localization” of opera has not stopped, and has achieved fruitful results.

Chinese people have their own unique and traditional aesthetic ideology, but they do not exclude the “invasion” of new art. Regardless of whether it is actively absorbed or passively accepted, the Chinese can be branded with “localization” according to their own way of understanding and expression. Without exception, the comprehensive art of opera is more convenient to carry national elements in all directions and at multiple levels. The focus of this paper is to extract the characteristics of the “localization” of the singing techniques of opera in the context of Chinese culture, and the other aspects are not described in detail.<sup>[3]</sup>

## 2. The Exploration on the “Localization” Reform of Opera Singing Technique

The study of “localization” of opera singing technique is divided into stages, because singing technique is one of the external expressions of opera, and the development of opera in China has a strong imprint of the times in different stages. Therefore, the following will start from three stages of research on the “localization” of opera singing technique.

### 2.1 The Budding Stage of the “Localization” of Opera Singing Technique (1920-1949)

In the 1920s, it could be regarded as the beginning of the “localization” road for many Western music forms, and opera is no exception. For the exploration of opera, we have to mention the famous musician LI-Jinhui, who is a pioneer of Chinese opera, Chinese musicals and pop music. From the twelve children’s songs and dances he created, it can be seen that the expression of vernacular and the children’s songs and songs have strong national characteristics. In terms of singing skills, LI-Jinhui integrated the traditional opera method, requiring the singer

to sing with natural sound, weakening the music itself, highlighting the lyrics content, and arranging the words with clear articulation and a mellow and full tune.<sup>[4]</sup> This is inconsistent with the characteristics of the pronunciation of the music in the Bel Canto in accordance with the direction of the music melody. It is also seen that LI-Jinhui has begun to pay attention to the integration of Chinese and Western singing characteristics before the creation. For example, in the singing passage “Endorsement Song” of the work “Little Painter”, the melody of this work is arranged according to the four pronunciations of Mandarin Chinese, and deliberately removes the traditional singing method of elongated initials and finals. It is unconventional on the basis of opera singing and is easy to spread.

During the seventeen years from 1927 to 1944, Chinese artists further explored the “localization” of the opera road. Although the works are quite rich, but in the singing technique, more is the direct use of opera or folk songs, and there is no real fusion.<sup>[5]</sup> The birth of the national opera “The White-haired Girl”, which was created until 1944, marked the official start of the “localization” of the opera and was also the “milestone” of Chinese opera.

### 2.2 The Growing Stage of the “Localization” Transformation of Opera Singing Technique

In 1949, the founding of New China, until the liberation of the nation in the seventeen years in 1966, the cultural undertakings have made great progress, and accelerated the process of “localization” of opera singing technique. Especially in 1956, after MAO-Zedong put forward the cultural principles and policies of “the ancient is used for today, the foreign is used for the Chinese”, the artists invested great enthusiasm in the opera creation. With the improvement of the singing level, the combination of Chinese and Western singing skills reached a new height.<sup>[6]</sup>

At this stage, the most typical representative was the opera “The Marriage of Young Blacky” created in 1952. “The Marriage of Young Blacky” opened the climax of opera creation at this stage, and also led to the new thinking of the “localization” transformation of singing technique. In the following years, the works such as “Liu Hulan”, “Song of the Grassland”, “Hongxia”, “The Red Guards on Honghu Lake” and “Sister Jiang” were further explored on the basis of their predecessors. For example, in the traditional long hair, there is a clear requirement for the air outlet when the air is ventilated, which inevitably compresses the space for the second

creation of the singer. After incorporating the skills of Chinese opera and folk music, such as rest, anger, and suffocation, the sound can be adjusted according to the plot without affecting the sound coherence, so that the whole work is more in line with the expression of the drama.

During the seventeen years since the founding of New China, the transformation and development of the “localization” of opera singing technique is obvious. Its more change lies in the direction and ideas of the combination of Chinese and Western, that is, to complement each other. After retaining the pronunciation method, resonance position and oral opening degree of the Bel Canto Science, combining the characteristics of Chinese initials, finals, and four sounds, the traditional Chinese opera is dominated by the true voice, the words are round and flexible, and the characteristics of the Chinese folk opera singing and Chinese opera singing are gradually formed. It has laid a solid foundation for the formation of a Chinese opera singing.

### **2.3 The Mature Stage of the “Localization” Transformation of Opera Singing Technique**

During the mature stage of the “localization” transformation of opera singing skills, musicians combine the characteristics of Chinese singing and the characteristics of Bel Canto according to the classification of breathing, resonance, biting and voicing, and then commonalities such as localized narration and opera announcements. The narration, the localization of the gang, complements the chorus, re-song, and accompaniment of the opera, and thus forms the singing method of the “localization” of China.

#### **2.3.1 Breathing Method**

During the budding and growing stages, musicians at that time recognized the importance of opera breathing. However, because the learning channel has not been able to fully integrate with the world, it is more “localized” innovation based on the abdominal breathing method. By the mature stage, the more scientific chest -abdominal breathing method of the opera was widely spread, and Chinese musicians also had the opportunity to learn from the national system and introduce it into the country. With the support of the scientific breathing method, the opera has been mostly played with the characteristics of true sound, making the sound high and bright to be more stable, and also weakening the confrontation between the vocal cord and the breath to ensure the possibility of reducing the down position.

#### **2.3.2 Resonance Method**

Chinese opera and folk tune traditional singing methods are mixed, and they like to use the drag and the improvisation. Therefore, there is no clear regulation on the use of resonance, and most of them are based on their own singing ability. From the perspective of today’s scientific resonance method, the resonance position of the opera requires the coordinated operation of the throat, nasal cavity, oral cavity, and chest cavity, so it gives a more cumbersome feeling, but it has a thick and full sense. The opera resonance chamber uses a single cavity, so the use of sound is bright and flexible, but it lacks certain appeal for the performance of specific characters. The introduction of the opera’s full cavity resonance method makes up for this deficiency.

#### **2.3.3 Articulation and Enunciation Method**

Opera sings from European origins, Italian, English, French, German and other European text pronunciation systems are mostly oral pronunciation, so the mouth can grow freely. The Chinese language is the opposite of the pronunciation, mostly for the former oral pronunciation, so the mouth tends to expand less in daily speech or traditional singing. If you use the European post-oral pronunciation to bite the words, the lyrics will become ambiguous. Moreover, Chinese will also be on the rhyme, as far as the word is concerned, it will be divided into the prefix, the vocabulary and the suffix, so the use of the Bel Canto concert is slightly blunt. But musicians have also found a way to neutralize after careful study. That is to reduce the suffix part of the Chinese vocabulary bite, but strengthen the prefix, so as far as possible to ensure the resonance, the wording is as clear as possible.

### **2.4 The Influence of Western Opera on the Development of Chinese Opera Singing**

#### **2.4.1 Western Opera Is the Foundation of Chinese Opera Development**

The reason why opera in China presents both the Western opera and the Chinese opera is flourishing. This not only benefits from the millennial inheritance and development of the opera art, but also reflects the eclectic aesthetic thinking of the new era. Western opera has also developed a scientific system after hundreds of years of development. It is only the Chinese people’s unremitting pursuit of beauty that grafts, grows and matures under the soil of China. Under the background of the reform and opening up, policies and the economy are prosperous and prosperous. More and more people have more and more space to carry out research on

theory, singing technique and creative techniques, which makes China's opera career develop rapidly. Throughout the 1990s, the opera works have reached new heights, both in terms of the difficulty of the works and the maturity of singing techniques. Incorporating the national characteristics under the premise of retaining the essence of art, the Chinese opera art has taken a new step. It can be said that Western opera has not been replaced by China, but it is more like a cornerstone and catalyst, nourishing the favorable development of Chinese opera.<sup>[7]</sup>

#### 2.4.2 Chinese-style Melody Is Formally Formed

The original intention of the formation of Western opera singing is itself formed in accordance with the aesthetic direction, expression and language characteristics of Europeans. The above analysis of Chinese language and European language pronunciation methods is different, so it basically leads to two results. One is to completely imitate and learn European singing and singing. The second is to combine the Western singing method with the Chinese language and vocal characteristics to form the "beautiful singing method" with Chinese characteristics, which is what we call the national vocal singing method. The essence of Chinese folk vocal singing is to use the breathing method of Bel Canto, and to add the drama of the opera on the basis of biting words and words. Chinese national vocal music is not the focus of this article. But nowadays, Chinese national vocal music has made great achievements and influences on the international stage. It has also become a business card for China. A large number of experts and singers have presented China's ancient artistic understanding to the whole world.

#### 2.4.3 The Inevitable Outcome of the Aesthetic of the Times

In my opinion, the preservation and continuation of traditional culture must ensure that the original essence of art and features remain, and that these essences should be merged with new art and foreign art, so that they can be unified with the ever-changing aesthetic standards. It can be said that the emergence of Chinese opera is an inevitable outcome of the times and aesthetics. Of course, this inevitability is not achieved overnight. In the history of the development of opera singing art in China, it has also entered the misunderstanding because of the simplification of aesthetic standards. The first misunderstanding is the advocacy of the whole westernization. It is believed that the entire process and singing style of Western opera should be completely introduced and imitated, and the westernization road should be taken, thus losing the essence of Chinese traditional culture and art.<sup>[8]</sup> The second misunderstanding

is to completely negate the Westernization and advocate the path of closed development. This misunderstanding is contrary to social development and aesthetic development, and it is completely unworkable. Fortunately for us, the musicians have embarked on the right path under the guidance of national policies. This kind of contending, inclusive mind, and the vitality of cultural and artistic confrontation and integration ensure the inevitability of Chinese opera, and the results are correct and gratifying.

#### 2.4.4 International Pursuit of Opera Singing

Opera is a two-way road in China. One is to completely learn Western opera, and the other is to absorb the essence of opera and draw on the Chinese national opera that features Western opera singing. These two operas have already stepped out of the country today and are on the world stage. The first international pursuit is embodied in people, including singers, composers and theorists. China's integration with the world after the reform and opening up has presented an unprecedented situation. It has also increased its efforts in local education and international education. The willingness to develop independently is strong, and the generation and influence of talents are expanding. A large number of musicians have been internationally recognized. The second nationalization pursuit is mainly embodied in the characteristics of Chinese opera, that is, the idea that "the nation is the world." China and the international community need to use Chinese culture as a "business card", and Chinese national opera has become a new business card for China's new era. Among them, we have seen a small number of works created by Chinese national opera elements in the performance of state leaders. In addition to this, a large number of international performances have also allowed foreigners to see the charm of Chinese opera and change the pattern of world opera.

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