

THE INFLUENCE OF EUROPEAN ART ON CHINESE OPERA CULTURE

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Summary

The article examines the influence of European culture on the origin and development of Beijing opera, focusing on the penetration and assimilation of European opera's characteristic features into Chinese musical culture. It systematically analyzes these innovations within the historical context, elucidating their role and position in the broader Chinese cultural and historical processes. The study reveals that the primary avenue for introducing European musical canons was through school songs, which, due to their simple composition and ease of performance, served as the basis for incorporating structured European approaches into Chinese music. It notes that the creation of the first officially recognized Chinese opera, "Grey-hair Girl", followed the emergence of Children's Operas, which exhibited elements of Europeanization while retaining their melodic structure. The conclusions highlight that the development of the European experience within the opera genre unfolded in tandem with the evolution of compositional and dramatic patterns derived from Western opera. However, on a musical and stylistic level, Chinese composers remained rooted in the national tradition, endeavoring to achieve varying degrees of successful fusion between Western form and national content. It was only towards the latter part of the 20th century that a harmonious symbiosis began to emerge, integrating the organizational aspects of opera from the European experience with Chinese identity at different levels.

Key words: European culture, Beijing opera, assimilation, Chinese music, School songs, Europeanization, Chinese identity.

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1. Introduction

In today's world, active cultural contacts are an integral part of society. Thanks to the advancement of communication means and the reinforcement of globalization processes, peoples of other countries now have the opportunity to acquaint themselves with the traditions, customs, and cultural heritage of different countries. The extensive interaction between Western and Eastern nations, based on economic, political, and cultural ties, has particularly intensified in the 21st century.

In the present circumstances, the interconnections between the musical cultures of the East and the West have reached an unprecedented level of intensity. This can be attributed to the inherent non-verbal nature of the language of music itself, which enables direct dialogue without the need for an interpreter. Notably, the musical traditions of Europe and China, which had long developed in isolation from each other, are now actively converging across various academic genres, including opera. These developments underscore the significance of the present study, which aims to investigate the process of the development and assimilation of the European sonic tradition within Chinese opera during the 20th and 21st centuries.

The main key tasks: determine the history of the formation of musical contacts between Europe and China, particularly in the field of opera; highlight the main stages of mastering the European tradition; identify the ways and means of penetration of European opera into China. These tasks outline the goals of the research or analysis being conducted, focusing on understanding the historical background, stages of influence, and methods through which European opera was introduced and integrated into Chinese musical culture.

The research methodology is based on the following methods:

Historical (in an overview of the development of Chinese musical culture, of which modern Chinese opera has become a part).

Structural and typological (when determining the stylistic features of Chinese operas that have experienced the greatest influence of the European tradition).

Comparative-analytical (when elucidating the nature and characteristics of the counter influences of the European and Chinese traditions of musical theater).

Culturological (when characterizing the activities of leading opera groups and educational institutions).

2. The main stages of the relationship between European and Chinese musical culture

The concept of "Chinese opera" encompasses two active branches in the realm of music and theater. The first branch, known as "xiqu" (戏曲) or "Chinese traditional drama", developed autonomously without substantial European influences. It represents an original art form characterized by distinctive aesthetics and an expressive system. One of the most renowned genres within this branch is Peking opera, which originated in the 18th century. It is worth noting that the term "opera" was assigned to it by Europeans who lacked an alternative designation (*Wang, 2004* : 32).

The second branch, also referred to as "Chinese opera", emerged during the first half of the 20th century under direct European opera tradition influences and continues to undergo intensive development to this day. This particular branch is the main focus of the present study. Terms such as "modern Chinese opera", "new Chinese opera", and "Chinese national opera" are utilized in scholarly discourse (*Wang, Weng, 2011*).

The phenomenon of modern Chinese opera is regarded as a focused and sustainable process of assimilating the European experience while maintaining the excellence of its own national tradition. The formation and development of modern Chinese opera aligns seamlessly with this conceptual framework. Beginning with elements of borrowing and imitation seen in works such as "school songs" and "Children's operas" by Li Dinhui, it gradually evolved under the active influence of the European tradition, exemplified by the emergence of the first national opera, "The Gray-haired Girl". Modern Chinese opera represents a remarkably organic synthesis of two distinct national traditions, wherein the assimilation of European influences does not entail the erosion of national identity.

The first stage encompasses the decade preceding the Xin Hai Revolution (prior to October 1911) when the Qing dynasty was overthrown, and China embarked on a path of capitalist development. Music firmly established its place in the school curriculum during this period, thanks to the contributions of renowned educator Cai Yuanpei and composer Li Shutong (*Jing Jiang, 1991*).

The second stage spans the decade following the Xin Hai Revolution until 1919 when China transformed into the People's Republic. During this phase, the "school song" emerged as a recognized genre within the works of composers and teachers such as Shen Xingong, Zeng

Zhiming, Ke Zhenghe, and Xin Han. Many of them had received education in Europe and Japan, which facilitated the introduction of European educational traditions to China.

The third stage is associated with the May Fourth youth movement, a massive anti-imperialist movement characterized by closer interaction between Chinese culture, art, and the European tradition, including in the realm of song (*Pronko, 1967:56*). The Chinese population displayed a strong eagerness to acquire knowledge about European science and to engage with the latest discoveries in various fields. This period extends from May 1919 to the onset of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937-1945.

3. School songs and "Children's Operas" by Li Dinhui as a reflection of European influence on Chinese art

The presence of Christian missionaries in China played a significant role in introducing European musical instruments and imparting the fundamentals of European music theory to the local population. The establishment of church schools and higher educational institutions following European standards also contributed to the development of music education. Notably, religious contacts served as the primary avenue for the assimilation of European musical traditions into the musical life of China until the mid-19th century. This is indirectly evidenced by the limited impact of the first performance of European opera (*Chekkina* by N. Piccini), which took place in the Imperial Royal Palace, on the nascent musical culture (*Jiang, Zhongqi, 1999:21*). The principal influence of European art on Chinese art was primarily manifested through the incorporation of songs into the school curriculum as a fundamental component of education.

The phenomenon of the "school song" played a pivotal role in bridging the Chinese population with European culture. It originated in the early decades of the 20th century as an academic discipline and subsequently evolved into a distinct song genre, giving rise to a social and educational movement in the first third of the century. Scholars identify three distinct stages in the development of the school song (*Mittler, 2008*). From a musical perspective, the "school song" genre was characterized by simple vocal compositions, frequently recorded in unison melodies accompanied by uncomplicated harmonies or sometimes without any accompaniment. The songs were notated using traditional European five-line notation, although a simpler alternative in the form of numeric notation was available for those who were not familiar with standard notation. As for the melodic prototypes, they often comprised loosely adapted Western melodies with new Chinese lyrics. In his book "Sources of Xuetang Yuige", Professor Qian Renkang, a musicologist at the Shanghai Conservatory, analyzed 392 yuige compositions, revealing that 98 of them were written based on Western melodies (*Wang, 2004:98*). Also included various Western melodies, with German music serving as the source for 29 songs, followed by French (5 songs), English (14 songs), American (13 songs), Italian and Spanish (4 songs combined), and one song based on religious hymns. An exemplary illustration of this phenomenon is the popular song "Veface China" by composer Li Shutong, which draws its melodic foundation from the march theme in the first act of Bellini's opera "Norma". The utilization of borrowed melodies from Western composers played a significant role in facilitating the widespread integration of European tonalities into Chinese musical culture, including the popular opera repertoire.

Moreover, the "school songs" played a crucial role in teaching composers and musicians to think within the framework of the European musical coordinate system. In the later stages of the "school song" genre, a notable figure is Zhao Yuanzhen, who broke away from the tradition of borrowing Western melodies and began composing in a Western style (*Mittler, 2008*).

His contributions laid the groundwork for Chinese choral polyphony, which was not originally characteristic of traditional Chinese culture.

The compositions of Li Jinhui (1891–1967) played a significant role in the emergence of "adult" opera in the European model. While these productions may not have been full-fledged operas in the strictest sense, they encompassed all the essential elements of the genre, enabling the use of musical and dramatic means to present the plot and develop the characteristics of the main characters. Inspired by European opera, these works primarily adopted the principle of a composition's rational structure, featuring the alternation of arias, duets, and ensembles. Additionally, they incorporated conversational dialogues, dance numbers, and displayed compactness with no more than two acts and a small number of characters ranging from two to five, aligning them closer to the genre of operetta. The designation "children's" emphasized the intended audience of Li Jinhui's compositions, which consequently reflected the simplicity of the plot, the use of popular melodies, and the accessibility of musical elements.

Among the notable works by Li Dinhui were his "children's operas", particularly "The Sparrow and the Boy" and "The Little Artist". A careful examination of the musical material reveals the underlying connection between the pentatonic Chinese melodies and European harmony and texture. This fusion of musical elements was subsequently expanded upon by the composers of the first national operas in China.

4. Mastering the European experience in the Chinese musical theater 1937–1949

During the period of 1937–1949, the Chinese musical theater underwent significant developments in its quest to master the European experience. The era of "Chinese musical theater in wartime" witnessed a diverse range of experiments in the opera genre prior to the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 (Mittler, 2008). This period saw the emergence of musical educational institutions and the training of the first academic vocalists, instrumentalists, and composers. Various attempts were made to blend elements of Chinese and European traditions within the opera genre.

One notable approach during this time was the "drama plus singing" method, which involved adding musical numbers to existing dramatic plays. Traditional xiqu drama also exerted a significant influence on the experiments. Several works created during this period, such as "Wang Zhaojun" (1930), "Hurricane on the Yangtze" (1935), "Xi Shi" (1935), "March of the Army and People" (1938), and "Song of the Land" (1940), laid the groundwork for the interaction between European and Chinese cultures within the opera genre. Although their stage life was relatively short, these works broke the longstanding monopoly of traditional Xiqu theater and paved the way for the emergence of the first European-style Chinese national opera.

The immediate precursors to the first national opera were two works: "Qiuzi" by Huang Yuanlo (1942) and "The Great Wall" by Aaron Avshalomov (1945), who had resided and worked in China for an extended period. These works explored innovative combinations of European and Chinese musical traditions in terms of libretto, dramaturgy, and musical language. For instance, the plot of "Qiuzi" revolves around the dramatic fate of a newlywed couple – Japanese military officer Gongyi and Chinese girl Qiuzi.

The libretto of "Qiuzi" contains allusions to European operatic themes, such as the concept of "lovers from warring countries" with its rich history (as seen in Verdi's "Aida"). The character of Qiuzi continues the lineage of classical opera heroines who sacrifice themselves for love, while her beloved Gunyi, in his complete dependence on the captain, bears resemblance to Berg's Wozzeck. The dramaturgy of the opera represents a significant departure

from traditional Xiqu theater, as the author fully embraced European operatic genres and forms, forsaking the use of xiqu speech monologues.

Researchers have observed that all 12 arias in the opera are relatively brief, reminiscent of condensed and dynamic ariosos found in Italian verist operas. This highlights the influence of European operatic styles on the composition.

Huang Yuanlo's experimentation included the technique of quoting melodies from other national traditions within European compositions, particularly if they were relevant to the plot (*Wang, Weng, 2011*). This practice can be observed in examples like Bizet's "Carmen", where Spanish melodies are used, or Puccini's "Turandot", which incorporates the melody of the popular Chinese folk song "Jasmine". While the Japanese influence in Qiuzi may not be as apparent, allusions to it can still be detected, such as intonations in Qiuzi's part that bear resemblance to the Japanese folk song Sakura.

In Aaron Avshalomov's opera "The Great Wall", an original idea of synthesizing national folklore material with European developmental techniques is implemented. For the first time in China, a folk melody, the "Meng Jiangnu" song, becomes a leitmotif in a folk opera, drawing connections to Wagnerian discoveries. This motif appears multiple times in the opera and serves as the foundation for new themes. While in the introduction, the "Meng Jiangnu" melody emerges with a haze of ethereal figurations, seemingly from the depths of centuries, in the song from Act VI, its sound against a backdrop of "frozen" chords conveys a mournful numbness and the protagonist's denial. However, Avshalomov's approach to the keynote principle is not as all-encompassing as Wagner's.

Avshalomov's creative method extends beyond working with folklore. The composer also develops his own themes while incorporating well-known techniques from European opera classics. For example, in the Introduction, the theme of the Emperor is presented in an enlarged manner. The use of an enlarged orchestral texture has been a characteristic of European musical theater for over a century, but for Chinese opera, such experiments proved to be groundbreaking.

5. Chinese national opera "The Gray-haired Girl" in the context of mastering the European experience

The opera "The Gray-haired Girl" demonstrates a pronounced social character by presenting a realistic portrayal of the people, a concept previously unseen in China. Created during the establishment of the People's Republic of China, this opera embodies a mandatory national element. It is intriguing to observe the interconnectedness between the phenomena of Chinese folk music, particularly yang, and European classical opera of the 19th century within this opera. Structurally, "The Gray-haired Girl" follows the five-act model of French grand opera from the early 19th century. The heroic-romantic tone progressively intensifies throughout the opera. Additionally, it deviates from the traditional verismo plot scheme found in the operas of Mascagni and Leoncavallo (which typically involve outraged love, struggle, and revenge) by approaching it from a social perspective (*Jiang, 1999:234–237*).

Influenced by Wagnerian traditions, "The Gray-haired Girl" employs a leitmotif system. Each theme is associated with specific characters, exhibiting changes in intonation and flexibility that reflect the development of the stage characters. The opera engages in a dialogue with European opera tradition, progressing beyond mere borrowing and imitation of elements, to the creation of a new and original musical language. It has become an enduring source of inspiration for multiple generations of Chinese composers.

And although there was a period of regression in the history of Chinese opera in the years Cultural Revolution, it was the "Grey-haired Girl" that took the first step towards the conquest of the global artistic space by the Chinese musical theater.

6. Synthesis of traditions in modern Chinese opera

The second half of the 20th century witnessed a significant growth in the field of opera, characterized by the expansion of infrastructure with the establishment of new theaters and the training of performers. This period saw the emergence of Chinese artists who mastered the European style of singing, enabling them to present European opera masterpieces to the Chinese audience. Notably, Chinese performers successfully staged the first production of a European opera, "Carmen", in 1956, and continued to showcase various European operas in subsequent productions. This development marked an important milestone in the integration of European opera into the Chinese opera scene (*Jiang, 1999:315*).

During the 1980s, cultural ties between China and Europe in the field of opera took various forms. On one hand, European opera stars toured in China, while on the other hand, Chinese theater groups embarked on international tours. Opera festivals were also organized, featuring Chinese opera companies.

In terms of musical language, operas from the 1980s exhibited two notable characteristics. Firstly, there was a greater integration of elements from Chinese traditional music and European classical opera. This can be observed in works like Chen Zi's opera "Wei Bajun", where a four-part choral counterpoint, a European compositional technique, is combined with a national melody. The opera also featured polyphonic choir sections, with two main leitmotifs presented in a native style but connected according to European polyphonic principles. Chen Zi's arias in this opera showcased a more modern and dramatic approach, continuing the traditions of Verdi and Puccini.

Chinese composers began to skillfully employ techniques derived from European composers of the 20th century. For instance, in the opera "The Plain" (1987) by Jin Xiang, sonorics, pointillism, and aleatoric techniques were utilized alongside national elements. Notably, all sections of this opera, despite employing complex and seemingly "non-national" compositional methods, were imbued with the essence of Chinese traditional music.

These developments in the 1980s demonstrated the growing interaction between Chinese and European opera traditions, resulting in the creation of innovative and unique works that merged elements from both cultural backgrounds.

Chinese opera experienced a significant expansion in terms of themes, plots, stylistics, and composing techniques (*Jiang, 1999:514–522*). This period marked an accumulation of creative energy, leading to a significant breakthrough in the first half of the 1990s when Chinese operas were successfully staged on prestigious international platforms, even performed in the Chinese language itself. Notable examples of this achievement include works such as "The Plain" by Jin Xiang and "Notes of a Madman" by Guo Wenjing. These productions demonstrated the growing recognition and acceptance of Chinese opera on the world stage, showcasing the unique artistic contributions and cultural richness of Chinese opera in its own language. Modern Chinese opera culture represents a remarkable and distinctive phenomenon that harmoniously blends two seemingly contrasting traditions: Chinese and European. This unique fusion allows for a comprehensive examination of the subject, enabling it to be perceived as a universal model for the assimilation of foreign influences, while simultaneously highlighting the specific developmental characteristics inherent in Chinese culture. The versatility of this

model resonates with numerous studies exploring the interaction between Eastern and Western influences in various national cultures and artistic genres. By studying the dynamics of Chinese opera culture, we gain valuable insights into the complex dynamics of cross-cultural interactions that transcend geographical and artistic boundaries.

7. Conclusions

By tracing the historical development of cultural exchanges between China and Europe, we can draw several conclusions regarding the assimilation of foreign cultural experiences.

The "school song" played a crucial role in introducing European intonation to China. Initially, it was taught as an academic discipline and later evolved into a distinct musical genre. Through the medium of "school songs", European intonation was transmitted, with direct melodic borrowings being common. The successful interaction between Chinese and European theatrical and musical traditions can be seen in Li Dinhui's "children's operas" of the 1920s. These works marked an important milestone in the practical fusion of Chinese and European elements.

The Chinese musical theater actively explored its own path by assimilating the principles of European opera and incorporating musical material from various regions of China's rich folkloric heritage. This process led to the development of a unique singing style that combined European vocal techniques with a folk singing style. Modern Chinese opera is characterized by its ability to integrate the European tradition while preserving its national identity. It demonstrates a desire to transcend national boundaries while simultaneously cherishing and preserving its cultural heritage.

Overall, these developments reflect the growing compositional skills of Chinese authors and composers, as they successfully navigate the integration of foreign influences while nurturing their own artistic expression.

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