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Modern Chinese Opera in the formative years: Extrapolation of music and its socio-cultural development

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Abstract

Modern opera in China has developed during many important historical periods, such as the Republic of China (1912-1949), founding of the People's Republic of China (1949) and the Reforms and Opening Up (1978). There is a lack of literature specifically introducing how Chinese modern opera matured. The exploration of this period in this paper can help scholars better understand the essential characteristics of modern opera. This study analyzes the sociocultural and historical background of modern Chinese opera during the first half of the 20th century, identifying the representative composers and works of each period. A qualitative research methodology is used in this paper, which mainly analyzes secondary data and scores. The study found that modern Chinese opera emerged from four periods. Modern Chinese opera entails a synthesis of traditional Chinese and Western operatic practices.

Keywords: Modern Chinese opera, History, Development, Music



Public Interest Statement

Several selected points of modern Chinese opera have been discussed in a constructive and inspiring manner in this paper, the purpose is encouraging a productive and inspiring discussion.

Introduction

Western audiences are relatively unfamiliar with modern Chinese opera. The majority of westerners subconsciously associate Chinese opera with Peking Opera or other traditional operas. Traditional Chinese opera originated in the 12th century, and European missionaries introduced it as “Chinese opera” in the 18th century (Thorpe, 2016). Since Western arts spread to China in the first half of the 20th century, the Chinese began to create their own modern operas (Yang & Saffle, 2017). There have been many important historical periods in the development of modern opera in China, such as the Republic of China (1912-1949), the founding of the People’s Republic of China and the Reforms and Opening Up. Modern opera challenges the dominance of traditional opera from the root, demonstrating its compatible with socialist development.

Modern Chinese opera has always incorporated traditional elements and learned from Western opera creation experience, resulting in a unique national style. Previous literature tends to concentrate on modern opera after Mao Tse Tung’s talk at the Yen’an forum on literature and art in 1942, despite this, existing documents does not provide much information about its development before 1942 (Jixian, 2014). Meanwhile, the research tends to be more theater-oriented, rather than from the music ontology perspective. This study examines the historical view of modern Chinese opera creation and the different responses of audiences in the past fifty years within the framework of musicology. Involving Chinese opera in the interactive relationship between music and politics will contribute to expanding the methodological vision of research and effectively connecting it with mainstream ideologies, as well as enriching relevant academic resources. The study adopts a qualitative approach, by analyze journals, official documents, archived and music scores to answer research questions.

As modern opera developed, various concepts emerged, such as spoken-drama-plus-singing, music drama and new opera, which reflect the debate on the definition of modern opera as well as the differences in the development path among Chinese opera and drama circles (BohnenkaMp, 2021). Many definitions make it difficult for people to comprehend modern Chinese opera. The purpose of this article is examining the path of Chinese opera in the first half of the 20th century, analyze the social and historical reasons for its rise, examine the development of modern opera in different historical periods, and identify the representative repertoire of each period. The phases of development in modern Chinese opera will eventually be identified and give an explanation of what modern opera is.

Literature Review

This section reviewed the definition of related concepts in this study. Spoken-drama-plus-singing is now a concept of negative criticism of Chinese opera. It means incorporating several arias or chorus songs in the form of a play to match the plot (Liu, 2009). A simple musical accompaniment emphasizes the scope of the storyline’s development. As Japan sought to invade China in the 1930s, a number of operas with anti-Japanese themes appeared. In order to promote opera, composers began using the form of Spoken-drama-plus-singing to express people’s determination to resist the Japanese. It is a new modern opera dominated by theatrical performance with Chinese characteristics, operas of this type have the advantage of being easy to compose music, and the music layout is flexible, which is more convenient for actors who have poor musical abilities (Ibid). A publicity campaign can be completed in a very short

creative cycle, allowing the play to have songs, which is undoubtedly an improvement. It is actually called an opera only for publicity purposes.

In the 1920s, proletarian literature rose to prominence. A slogan of revolutionary literature was put forward by the theater circle, Chinese Communist Party directs the left-wing theater movement (Liu & Hang, 2006). This influenced opera creation too. Left-wing operas emphasize popular culture and popularization. Popularization means reaching out to the masses. Workers and peasants' suffering are depicted in a large number of images and theater must go to the countryside. It also emphasizes on its propaganda function. "New opera" is the title adopted by the Chinese Communist Party's left-wing theater (Mackerras, 1973). Demarcating the old from the new is based on the inherent art of traditional Chinese opera. In those days, traditional operas were referred to as "old operas," and operas based on folk music and borrowing Western techniques were known as "new operas." (Ibid) Dialogue is interspersed with the characters' arias. New operas are more often adaptations of existing musical tunes with new lyrics.

The pentatonic scale is often used in folk music and ancient Chinese music. Five notes consist of the pentatonic mode, which is arranged in the perfect 5th interval. Assuming C as the starting note, the arrangement of the fifth interval is C-G-D-A-E. Therefore, sorting them by pitch is C-D-E-G-A. These five notes are Gong, Shang, Jue, Zhi and Yu. Using the pentatonic scale, each tone can be the tonic (see Example 1), thus the pitch position of the tonic must be indicated in each mode. For example, when C as the tonic, it is called C Gong mode and when D as the tonic in C. In the pentatonic scale, there are no sharp intervals like the minor second, and the major third (minor sixth) is formed between the Gong and Jue, hence it is particularly pleasant to listen to.



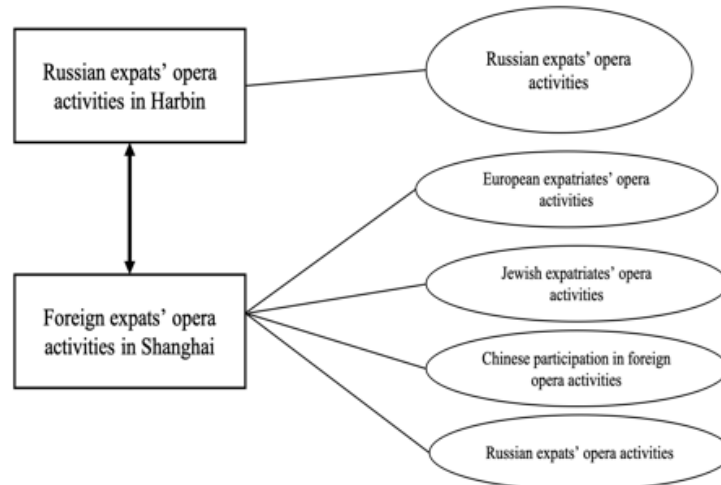
Example 1. Pentatonic in C Gong system

Findings

The influence of foreign musicians

China's two thousand years period of feudal society ended with the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty at the beginning of the 20th century. At this time, expats living in China conducting foreign opera performances and teaching activities have a lasting and effective impact on modern Chinese opera. In China, expatriates tend to concentrate opera activities in metropolitan cities like Shanghai, Hong Kong, Macau, and Harbin. Among them, Jewish musicians had the greatest impact on opera creation. This paper focuses on mainland China as the research area, hence the activities of expats in Hong Kong and Macau will not be considered.

Figure 1. The main space and relationship of opera activities for expats



Source: Shen, 2010

Jews from Tsarist Russia and the former Soviet Union make up the Jewish community in China. Russian Jews came to China in large numbers during the construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway, the Russo-Japanese War and Russia's two revolutions in 1905 and 1917 (Shen,2010). Their first major artistic activity took place in Harbin and its surrounding areas. As the Japanese occupied Northeast China, they moved south to Tianjin, Qingdao, and Shanghai. Shanghai Municipal Orchestra and Shanghai National Conservatory were greatly influenced by Jewish musicians, who often worked between the two organizations. The following two musicians illustrate how Jewish influenced Chinese opera during its formative years.

Russian-Jewish composer Aaron Avshalomoff (1894-1965, Russian:Авшломов) is the most influential composer in the history of modern Chinese opera (Winzenburg, 2012). In 1894, Avshalomoff was born in Nikolayevsk (Ibid). As a child, Avshalomoff fell deeply in love with Chinese Peking Opera, especially its performance and martial arts. In 1910, his father sent him to Switzerland to study law, but he chose to study composition at the Zurich Conservatoire instead (Shen, 2010). It was then that Avshalomov had the idea of writing an opera based on Chinese music. To collect music materials, Avshalomoff traveled to Beijing, Hangzhou, Shanghai and other places several times around 1916. For nearly 30 years, he has lived in China and is considered a master of Chinese music in the Western music circle. In addition, he is responsible for orchestration the national anthem of the People's Republic of China.

On April 24, 1925, Avshalomoff premiered his first opera *Kuan Yin* (also transliterated: Goddess of Mercy) based on a Chinese religious theme (Winzenburg, 2012). It is conducted by Avshalomoff himself, and his sister Shanna plays the role of *Kuan Yin*. Using the Chinese Buddhist folklore of *Kuan Yin* as the content, Avshalomov combined Western orchestral composition techniques with Chinese folk elements and combined Western opera form with Chinese aesthetics. The performers wore traditional Chinese opera costumes, while the singing style was adopted as Bel Canto. This opera was performed in the United States in 1926 at the Portland Theater. It ran for five weeks and was very popular. In the historical context the main significance of Avshalomov's activity is the creation of a new form of Chinese opera.

Alexander Nikolaevich Tcherepnin (1899--1977) is a Russian-American composer and pianist who has had a major influence on Chinese opera, along with Avshalomov (Ouyang, 2020). He wrote the

opera *Die Fee und der Landmann* based on Chinese folk tales that was performed in 1945 by Chinese soprano Zhou Xiaoyan at the Opéra National de Paris, France (Maguire, 2022). Tcherepnin doesn't seem to have much direct connection to Chinese opera initially. He did, however, have an indirect impact on Chinese opera through the title music he wrote, which was rich in Chinese culture, during his three-year stay in China. He studied traditional Chinese musical instruments, classical repertoire and folk songs while in China. There are many works by Tcherepnin that have Chinese folk music characteristics. He emphasized the creation of national music in his musical thoughts by incorporating folk tunes into his performances. Chinese traditional music features a single melodic line, almost no harmony. During the early 20th century, Chinese composers developed harmony by copying Western music. Tcherepnin uses the Chinese pentatonic scale not only in the melody, but also in vertical harmony. The use of such creative techniques is a major element of Tcherepnin's musical works, Chinese musical characteristics are evident in the work.

With Tcherepnin's contributions to new music in China, Chinese people have begun to think about integrating Chinese music with Western music. It became a guide for new Chinese musicians struggling to find their music path. He is therefore known as "the mentor of Chinese music" in China (Ouyang, 2020). Avshalomoff and Tcherepnin carried out in-depth localization and nationalization of Chinese opera in its early stages, promoting the exchange and integration of Chinese and Western music cultures. They influenced Chinese music personally and inspired the strong national self-esteem and self-confidence of Chinese musicians, introducing world cultural awareness and the original spirit of modern music into Chinese opera's future.

Overall, Jewish musicians have the most extensive and in-depth contact with Chinese society among foreign musicians. They are mainly engaged between 1910 to 1920. Chinese composers were not only influenced by their opera composition method and musical concepts, but also trained modern Chinese opera composers with their methods and aesthetic views of Nationalistic music. Opera has begun to be localized in China in various ways.

Modern Chinese opera composers and repertoires

1. Modern opera during the semi-colony period

China underwent a period of social transformation. The May Fourth Movement was a Chinese cultural and anti-imperialist political movement which grew out of student protests in Beijing on May 4, 1919 (Schwartz, 2020). For the first time, the pioneers of the New Culture Movement swept aside feudal culture and old artistic concepts after the May 4th Movement. During this period, modern Chinese opera, which was in its infancy, was once again used to enlighten people and inspire patriotic sentiment. Cai Yuanpei was an influential figure in the history of Chinese modern education, who served as head of Peking University in Beijing from 1916 to 1926 (Ibid). Different kinds of modern opera exploration are all directly or indirectly connected to Cai Yuanpei's ideas.

Li Jinhui (1891-1967) was invited to join the Peking University Music Research Association by Cai Yuanpei in 1919 (Jones, 2001). In the association, he was also the leader of the Xiaoxiang Music Group. He is dedicated to educating children in Mandarin and civil music. He served as chief editor of the journal *Children* from 1921 to 1922 while employed by the Chinese Publishing House in Shanghai (Ibid). These works gave Li Jinhui the opportunity to effectively combine his literary and artistic abilities to promote Mandarin through music and drama activities. Li Jinhui's children's opera was directly inspired by Cai's slogan "replacing religion with aesthetic education." He was the first to put forward the thought "the best way to learn Mandarin is through singing" in modern Chinese culture.

Li Jinhui's most concentrated works include 11 children's operas and 24 songs. The majority

of Li Jinhui's children's operas were created before the 1930s. From 1922 to 1929, Li Jinhui published all of his children's operas. The following are in order of publication year: *The Sparrow and the Child* (1921), *The Grape Fairy* (1922), *Moonlit Night* (1923), *Three Butterflies* (1924), *The Joy of Spring* (1924), *The Fairy Sisters* (1925), *Seven Sisters in the Garden* (1925), *The Final Victory* (1926), *The Baby Lamb Saves Its Mother* (1927), *The Little Painter* (1928), *The Death of Little Lida* (1929) (Jones, 2001). Children's operas don't use rhyming spoken parts in traditional opera, nor do they use spoken-drama-plus-singing. Instead, actors sing from beginning to end, with dance and music accompaniment to bring the plot together. In Li's opera, there are duets, arias, choruses, and unison singing. Unlike the traditional opera, it follows the act and scene structures of Western operas.

Using one opera *The Sparrow and the Child* as an example of how Li's opera music relates to traditional music: Only one of the eight pieces of music in *The Sparrow and the Child* is an original song. In the first scene of "Teaching to Fly", the old sparrow teaches the young sparrow to sing the *Flying Song* is adapted from the British children's song Dance Village. In the second scene of "Temptation", the Hu Nan province folk song *Chi Chi Ling* was used. *Changbai Mountain Song* was used in the third scene. In the fourth scene, the melody was from the traditional Northeastern ancient song Su Wu Shepherd. The fifth scene featured the tune from Peking Opera *Visiting Relatives*. Both the prelude and finale of this opera feature the traditional instrument music of Peking Opera, *The Big Door*. In Li Jinhui's children's musical accompaniment band, Western instruments are used to play Chinese-style music, and simplified notation is used in the band score. Li Jinhui's children's opera accompaniment orchestra combines Chinese and Western instruments, advocating the use of Western instruments to play Chinese-style music, which used simplified notation in the score. In order to educate and entertain them, cultivate their noble sentiments such as beauty and love for nature, and view society from a philanthropic perspective, all flowers, plants, birds, and animals are alive and personified. Children love these operas of his because they are children-oriented, easy to understand and artistic.

Li Jinhui's view of opera is obviously not the whole picture. Most of his works lack polyphonic musical thinking due to his lack of knowledge and vision of Western opera. Western opera arias and recitatives are rarely used, instrumental music plays only a rudimentary role. Considering it from today's perspective, it is difficult to fully agree with the reason why it is called an opera. In its emerging period, Chinese opera is childish. Although it is focused on political content and social functions, it is difficult to deepen artistically.

With the rise of citizen culture in big cities such as Shanghai during the 1930s to 1940s, Western scientific and democratic concepts were increasingly accepted. As a symbol of the decadent old culture, traditional opera was strongly criticized and denied by the standard-bearers of the New Culture Movement. Leaders of the left-wing cultural movement are even more extreme in their performance. They consider it their primary goal to promote the early collapse of old dramas (Yang, 2014). They sharply oppose modernity and nationality in drama: West is new, and the Chinese are old. The national theater movement influenced by Western concepts was launched by the left-wing artists, it utilizes Western theater principles (basically play principles) to improve Chinese traditional opera.

Wang Zhaojun, a five-act opera by Zhang Shu (1908-1938) was performed at the New Oriental Theater in Shanghai from September 3 to 17, 1930 (Jia, 2020). This is an improved opera and is the earliest operatic work composed by a left-wing musician. As the opera is based on the legend of Zhaojun being sent by the Han dynasty to marry the Emperor of Xiongnu Empire, the ancient script is used as its basis. There is little dialogue in this opera, and most of it is written through traditional Cantonese music. This opera uses traditional opera's symbolic moves and gestures, whereas the actor who plays Emperor Han sings the Western Bel canto. Our understanding of the opera has so far been limited to

the review articles in some newspapers since the opera’s score was stolen to Hong Kong. According to the above opera practice, some dramatists and musicians’ attitude towards opera localization is mainly based on the improvement of old operas. For a long time, theater and traditional opera circles used the term “modern opera” for their activities. This is mostly due to the fact that Chinese opera creation is still in its infancy and has few influences.

Aside from improved operas, other forms of opera were also performed during this period. For example, Nie Er’s (1912-1935) *Storm Over the Yangtze River* was classified as spoken-drama-plus-singing (Jin, 2011). According to literatures available about Nie Er, since the Yunnan period in 1925, he has been involved in theater activities extensively. He then moved to Shanghai and applied to Li Jinhui’s “Song and Dance School” in July 1930 in order to make a living. Li Jinhui selected him and admitted him as an orchestra trainee (Howard, 2012). Then, under the influence of Li Jinhui, whom he once respected, Nie Er devoted himself to opera performances for a year, and embarked on the path of self-taught composition. In *Storm Over the Yangtze River*, the dock serves as the backdrop to the story, describing the hard life of the dock worker and identifying the exploiter that inspired the coolies’ resistance.

There are four pieces of music that Nie Er composes in the plot, two at the beginning, one in the middle, and one at the end. The workers are portrayed from Nie Er’s unique perspective: By using brief musical motives and rhythms as well as one’s singing and other choruses, it describes the proletarian characters in the opera. The third chorus *Dock Workers* creates the most representative group image in the play. The song uses one themes and several episodes to alternate and develop dynamically, which has the structural characteristics of a Rondo (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. The music structure of Dock Workers

Musical Materials	A	B	A1	C	A2	D	A3	E	A3
Total Bars	4	10	16	10	16	7	6	8	6
Functions	Intro	Episode	Development	Episode	Transposition	Episode	Development	Episode	Coda

According to the score, the music is centered around G-B-D, a pentatonic scale, and incorporates European major modes principles and development techniques. As a result, Nie Er’s music has a strong national flavor as well as a contemporary feel. Shanghai Pier’s work song is the source of this music. To create the image of the coolie, Nie Er used a variety of musical expression techniques, such as syncopation, dotted notes and rests.

Example 2. Dock Workers’ score in *Storm Over the Yangtze River*



Source: Jin, 2011

Storm Over the Yangtze River's script utilizes theater play thinking to develop its dramatic structure. In this play, there are only four songs inserted at the beginning, middle, and end. The main characters' thoughts and emotions are expressed through dialogue. It cannot develop dramatic narratives and portray characters based on opera development principles; it still lags far behind the logic and completeness requirements of music. Nie Er's contribution to this work was to use these four songs to heighten the dramatic atmosphere. Music plays a subordinate role in this play. That's why this play has always been called "spoken drama plus singing". Despite the fact that there were many operas of this form in history, only *Storm Over the Yangtze River* survives today. In later generations, why is it rarely performed on the opera stage despite its high historical status? What led to the failure of the successors half a century later? It is argued that opera at that time was characterized by specific historical conditions that contributed to the play's success. Because it inspired strong patriotic enthusiasm in the audience, it left an unforgettable impression. Nevertheless, this so-called "opera" was unable to impress the audience again when the political situation outside the theater changed. Spoken drama plus singing reflected left-wing drama's popularization goal at that time. The form of this opera is obviously relatively rough if we consider opera standards.

2. Isolated Island Period Opera in Shanghai

The flames of war ushered in Chinese modern opera's development during the Anti-Japanese War and War of Liberation. The popularity of Chinese opera continues to grow. China was ruled by two major regimes from 1937 to 1949, the Kuomintang ruling area and the Communist Party's revolutionary base area. From 1937 to 1941, Shanghai was a foreign concession by the UK, the USA and the French (Du, Zhang & Wang, 2022). The Japanese army did not dare invade it, so it became an isolated island from a political and military perspective. This period is known as the Isolated Island Period. Different styles of opera were performed in Kuomintang-controlled areas, Communist Party's base areas and on the isolated island of Shanghai.

In Shanghai, opera works are mostly composed by students at the Shanghai National Music School. Qian Renkang (1914-2013) was one of the earliest opera composers. He earned a bachelor's degree in the composition department from the Shanghai National Music School in 1941. Based on the southern of the Yangtze's rural life, Qian Renkang created Jiang Village Three Scenarios in 1939. The three scenarios are actually composed of three independent one-act operas: *Fishermen's Song*, *Woodcutter's Song*, and *Plough Song*, however, they all express a rural theme. This form resembles Puccini's trilogy, *Il Trittico*. Which include *Il Tabarro*, *Suor Angelica* & *Gianni Schicchi*, premiered in 1918. It may seem at first glance that these three operas are unrelated, but they all deal with life's troubles and death. In *Woodcutter's Song*, a girl who collects firewood is far too sad to live in seclusion in the mountains. When she feels sad about flowers and birds, she happens to meet a young man passing by. After answering questions about wisdom, the two falling in love and go away together. In *Fishermen's Song*, a family of fishermen whose happy life was destroyed by bandits learns that only by uniting will they succeed. In

Plough Song, an old farmer loses his old cow and is helped by a young girl to retrieve it.

This opera has an overture and a finale. The music runs throughout, highlighting the plot's fun and liveliness. There is orchestral accompaniment to the dialogue between the characters and the music uses national style melodies derived from folk songs in the south of the Yangtze. The use of chorus, duet, solo and other forms. There has been some exploration of music expression for characters' personalities in this opera. The composition technique is clearly closer to Western opera than the previous opera. During the isolation period, Qian Renkang's opera inspired the anti-Japanese passion of the Shanghai people, but also used it to promote China's professional creative in opera field, which made outstanding contributions.

3. Operas in Kuomintang control areas

In addition to strengthening cultural control after the Kuomintang moved its capital to Chongqing, the government also tried its best to express its voice through art and culture (Kuo-tai, 1989). Most artists in Kuomintang-controlled areas have long been committed to patriotism and democracy.

The Kuomintang-controlled areas produced only one truly complete and widely influential opera seria – *Akiko* with two acts and five scenes. Huang Yuanluo (1910-1989) composed the opera (Zonghui, 2023). Having been ravaged by Japanese aggressors as a Chinese artist, his creation of *Akiko* did not vilify the kind and humane Japanese people, nor did it vilify the beautiful Mount Fuji. Despite this, the Japanese youth's loyalty to love sparked the people's love for justice, leading the audience to identify the real war criminals. In accusing the enemy of aggression using undiminished human nature, one strikes from the depths of Japanese soul. *Akiko* does not use stereotypical expressions or vilify the enemy in contrast to previous modern operas. As a result, the theme of the opera is very artistic and individual.

The dialogue was composed to recitative songs by Huang Yuanluo. Secondly, the poetry language has been adapted to the colloquial style of the opera stage. The original script is too literary to suit the audience, the lyrics are therefore written in the vernacular. Unlike the previous operas which included both singing and speaking, this correct choice undoubtedly reflects the serious theme better. Based on the adaptation process, Huang Yuanluo's intention was to use a majestic epic opera to express the anti-war actions of the awakened Japanese and the heroic anti-Japanese spirit of the Chinese. *Akiko* enhances the dramatic effect of the drama by abolishing the literary Chinese used in traditional operas, which should assist the audience in better understanding the stage language. Huang Yuanluo's revision of the script shows the subjective initiative of a modern Chinese composer in tailoring opera scripts according to his own aesthetic goals. The kind of courage Huang displayed in his creations was something no other composer had demonstrated before. He was also an independent and thoughtful composer.

The script was revised in two weeks, and the music was composed and orchestrated in eight months. Operatic music, according to Huang Yuanluo, unfolds dramatic conflicts by integrating vocal and instrumental music together. He adopted opera seria creation techniques. There are 43 songs in an opera without speaking parts, including arias, recitatives, duets, choruses, and orchestral pieces (premiere version). There are 11 arias, which account for about a third of the opera, and about a fifth are recitatives, duets and choruses. The first act contains 22 songs and the second act contains 21 songs. Starting in the second act, there are clearly more duets, which play a key role in revealing the protagonist's tragic fate. Huang Yuanluo's multi-voice writing skills are best demonstrated in the opera's duet. Dream of Love and Farewell Song are very expressive duets between male and female protagonists in terms of timbre and contrast setting. Similar to Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, the melody features mutual imitation of third, sixth and unison intervals sung by the couple.

It would appear that Huang Yuanluo had a solid foundation in both music writing technology and opera thinking. His composition level was outstanding in the Kuomintang-controlled area at that time, and he also had a fairly good understanding of opera's characteristics. By insisting on opera music's originality, he avoided the old path of improved operas by his contemporaries, as he saw the harmful for traditional opera written the lyrics in the old songs to make musicians' humble status. Modern Chinese opera can only be revolutionized by creating new music, according to Huang Yuanluo.

Akiko also has many historical limitations. The music style of *Akiko* was perceived as having a strong Western influence by the audience at the time. A nation that has been invaded by foreign countries for a long time may have a different mentality when accepting music. In contrast to the localization of Li Jinhui and Nie Er, Huang Yuanluo does not use Western major and minor music modes as naturally or as close to people. Secondly, his understanding of the recitative was limited. Operatic recitative contributes

greatly to the plot's coherence. Its tone and momentum can often trigger arias with a great deal of tension. The repetition of a single note in the recitative of Western operas is mainly due to polysyllabic Indo-European languages and accent restrictions. Mandarin, however, has four tones, Huang Yuanluo is usually adapted to the same note repeated in triplet form. His recitative sounds like a translated opera recitative.

While Huang Yuanluo's *Akiko* can be improved in terms of localization, the overall trend is for creating a modern opera with Chinese characteristics. As far as composition technology and music forms are concerned, the work is considered to be among the most advanced Chinese opera explorations at that time. Overall, the Kuomintang-controlled areas showed a willingness to learn from European opera's traditions. They are generally aware of world cultures and accept opera. Most people still expect localization of opera to carry forward the dominant national cultural spirit, whereas developing modern opera has become a consensus.

4. A genuine New Opera birth in Communist Party's base areas

In China, opera art has been spreading from metropolises to remote villages as the Communist Party grows in power. The opera culture evolved from being a new culture for citizens to becoming a new culture for farmers and was used as a propaganda tool in politics. Artistry and the contemporary character of opera gradually gave way to national and revolutionary character.

Opera activities under the Communist Party had its own artistic tradition and path: it inherited the cultural heritage and art form of left-wing theater, followed war's needs and carried out propaganda and education missions. Throughout artistic tendencies, there is always a revolutionary spirit. The Communists' national righteousness drew literary and artistic talents from all over the country to Yanan, the headquarters of the Chinese Communists. There are some of them from large cities where opera emerged earlier and some from coastal areas where cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries occur more frequently. Some of them have also studied abroad. These artists allowing the base areas' opera to show the profound influence of Western opera at the beginning.

Mao Tsetung delivered "Speech at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art" on May 2 to 23, 1942. He stated the purpose of the forum clearly:

"The purpose of our meeting today is precisely to ensure that literature and art fit well into the whole revolutionary machine as a component part, that they operate as powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy, and that they help the people fight the enemy with one heart and one mind. What are the problems that must be solved to achieve this objective? I think they are the problems of the class stand of the writers and artists... (Tsetung, 1942)."

In the speech, the Communist Party demonstrated its strong desire for literature and art to play a political role. As Mao Tsetung advocated literary and artistic work to find materials among the masses, he asked them to make their work accessible to the masses in order to improve their ideological consciousness. Therefore, artists create according to Mao's principles.

The "white-haired fairy" story was widely circulated among the people around 1940 and Lu Xun Academy of Art learned about it in May 1944 (Propaganda, 2014). A poor farmer's daughter was raped by a landlord and fled to the mountains, where her hair turned white. In the years following, the Eighth Route Army liberated her hometown and rescued the white-haired girl, giving her a new life. According to Academy's main leaders, the life content contained in the story has great social significance and is suitable for adaptation as an opera. With the theme of "the old society turns people into ghosts,

the new society turns ghosts into people”, it can not only eradicating superstition, but also mobilize the masses. At the same time, it combined revolutionary realism and romanticism. Ma Ke (1918-1976) led the composition team (Propaganda, 2014). The creation adopted a three-dimensional approach: on the one hand, they inherited the traditional opera’s expression methods, on the other, they used theater play expression methods close to life and on the third hand, they absorbed Western opera’s externalized forms.

White-Haired Girl utilizes traditional Chinese opera in a creative way. It takes advantage of traditional opera’s singing, speaking, gesturing, and acrobatics in artistic processing. To develop the plot, the opera uses rhythmic speaking from classical opera. Rhythmic speaking is a form of Chinese recitative. In the opera, highly colloquial speaking is used. For example, in act 4, song 60, the white-haired girl’s spoken part appears as follows: “Huang Shiren, I’m gonna bite you! I’ll pinch you! I’m tearing you apart!” In tone and pitch, the rhythmic speaking expresses the hostility towards landlord Huang Shiren. As well as rhythmic speaking, dance-like movements also used through the *White-Haired Girl*.

The opera uses folk song tunes to express the characters’ personalities. It consists of Hebei, Shanxi and Shaanxi folk songs. For example, a Hebei folk song shapes the image of girl. *Little Cabbage* is a Hebei children’s song about being bullied by a stepmother. It consists of three sentences, the first and second of which are symmetrical upper and lower sentence patterns, while the third is a supplementary sentence. The score is as follows:

Ex. 3 Hebei folk song Little Cabbage

Little Cabbage

Source: Ma, 1945

North Wind Blow is the first aria composer written for white-haired girl based on *Little Cabbage*’s musical elements. It is not just a copy of the original piece. Instead, it is shaped to match the tone and emotional needs of white-haired girl. In the score it circles the last note of each sentence. The structure of *Little Cabbage* is II-I-VI-V and *North Wind Blow* is III-I-VI-V, which means that *White-Haired Girl* retains the outline of the original tune. By expanding the range of the original melody, a cordial and smooth melody is created. Additionally, *North Wind Blow* changed the 5/4 times of the original folk song to 3/4 times, making the melody and lyrics more closely related. The first three sentences change to an ascending melody to express girl’s lively and lovely character. The sad and crying mood caused by the continuous descending melody in the original folk song has been transformed into a lively, joyful and joyful atmosphere in the *North Wind Blows*.

Ex. 4 North Wind Blow (First song from White-Haired Girl)

North Wind Blow

Source: Ma, 1945

The *White-Haired Girl* is referred to New Opera in academic circles (BohnenkaMp, 2021; Jixian, 2014; Yang, 2017) primarily reflected in its new content and new audience. Political significance and cultural significance play a larger role in denoting “new.” As a milestone in Chinese opera history, *The White-Haired Girl* marked a significant turning point in Chinese opera history. It set the stage for modern Chinese opera development and reform. New opera serves a specific society as part of the superstructure. It spreads the heroic spirit of different periods and creates various admirable and learnable heroic images by promoting the nation’s fighting sentiments. New operas are mainly based on traditional Chinese operas and folk music. The intervention of Western opera has also catalyzed the gestation and maturity of modern Chinese opera. Opera’s characteristics of the time, class emotions, patriotism, as well as its dramatic structure, symbols, musical materials, plot structure, character composition, etc., are deeply influenced by history.

Conclusion

This paper summarizes the four stages that modern opera went through before its birth, which were the influence of Western musicians from the 1900s, 1920-1929, 1930-1937, and 1937-1949. The foreign musicians’ stimulation led to the birth and creation of Chinese opera. Jews have performed operas in Shanghai, Harbin and other cities, contributing to the opera art taking root and gradually localizing in China. The children’s operas created by Li Jinhui in the 1920s adopted the structural of Western operas and sought musical originality. In this regard, it can be thought of as the fledgling stage of modern opera, since it avoids the process of improving traditional Chinese opera into modern opera. The Chinese musicians of the 1930s understood and positioned opera very differently. There are two directions of opera creation represented by Zhang Shu and Nie Er: improved opera based on traditional Chinese opera and spoken-drama-plus-singing. After 1937, in the isolation period in Shanghai and Kuomintang-controlled areas created operas based on Western forms. Under the Communist Party’s base areas, the opera main focus is on serving politics and nationalizing opera. The *White-Haired Girl* represents this period as a symbol of modern opera’s birth.

Trying to grasp the historical characteristics of Chinese opera can help us understand its development and definition from a modern perspective. In terms of themes, modern Chinese operas differ from traditional operas, the patriotism, nationalism, and humanitarianism have become its core values. Refer to art form, it incorporates modern drama, traditional opera, local playlets, Western opera, music, and dance. As far as its musical characteristics are concerned, modern opera is a sort of Chinese opera inspired by the expressive forms of traditional Chinese opera and most of the main character arias adopt folk tunes. Besides, it adopts Western composition technique, and pursues national style and local features on the whole. Several selected points of modern Chinese opera have been discussed in a constructive and inspiring manner in this paper, the purpose is encouraging a productive and inspiring discussion.

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