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## SILENT PASTS AND A RECONFIGURED PRESENT IN HISTORIES OF CHINESE (NEW) OPERA

### *1. Historiography of Chinese Opera: 'Chinese Folk Opera' and 'Chinese Opera'*

When we talk about 'Peking Opera', we typically know what we mean by that term, whether in a Western or an Eastern setting. 'Chinese Opera', however, is more difficult to define. Kim Man, the former Dean of the Academy of Opera at Peking University, attempted a definition in the 2013 *National Opera Forum* (2013 全国戏曲论坛) held in Fujian Normal University, which I will briefly paraphrase:

'Chinese Opera' should have prominent Chinese features, should be canonical works, should be interpreted by excellent performers, and should exert an international influence. The basic elements of 'Chinese Opera' should include Chinese composers, Chinese music, Chinese stories, and Chinese language; most important of all, 'Chinese Opera' should have profound substance, which can fully project Chinese people's sentiments and lives, and further embody the spirit of Chinese culture and a Chinese soul. 'Chinese Opera' should be spread throughout the world with Chinese as the main language. It has to be accepted by the world and become part of the cultural assets of human history. 'Chinese Opera' not only should include Chinese music, traditional drama, and literature but should also absorb the outstanding qualities of Western operas and Western culture.<sup>1</sup>

This statement seems all-embracing: 'Chineseness' has to be expressed at almost every level, from concrete aspects such as composition, performance, and interpretation to the abstract level of the embodiment of the 'Chinese soul'. In Kim's framework, 'Chineseness' is connected to the West in terms of production (compositional technique) and reception (distribution). The musicologist Yao Yaping has commented on Kim's definition by suggesting that her statement is not a definition but rather an expression of a "grand" vision, projecting the ideal for Chinese opera.<sup>2</sup> Sharing some parts of this grand vision with Kim, Ju Qihong, a prominent opera scholar, has claimed that the core of 'Chinese Opera' is a fusion, an organic integration of both advantages of Western opera and Chinese traditional

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<sup>1</sup> The statement was part of the opening speech for the *National Opera Forum* held in 2013.

<sup>2</sup> See YAO YAPING, "Some Observations on the Composition of Chinese Opera", *Music Culture Studies*, 2019, III, pp. 37-38: 38.

musical/dramatic forms.<sup>3</sup> The various criteria in Kim's definition and the hybrid form characterized by Ju reflect the complicated historiography of Chinese Opera. In historiographical accounts from the 1950s to the 1990s, Chinese scholars have adopted a certain ventriloquism, through which they reconfigure or "revoice" Western opera to serve their every "present" uses, that is, to serve the definition and promotion of Chinese Opera. Current textbooks on Chinese operatic history, as well as studies on 'Chinese opera', continue this perspective without providing critical reflection on this phenomenon.

Among the prominent and widely-used textbooks on the history of Chinese Opera is *The History of China Opera* (HCO, *zhōng guó gē jù shǐ*) published by Culture and Art Publishing House in 2012.<sup>4</sup> This two-volume textbook narrates the history of Chinese opera from the 1920s to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The periodization and the content follow a chronological order. They are arranged according to criteria such as major political or social events, stylistic innovations, and prominent aesthetic debates.

The chapters laid out in the HCO urge us to pay special attention to the term 'opera'. Under the umbrella of 'Chinese Opera', we can find 'Children Dance Drama' (*ér tóng gē wǔ jù*), 'Yankou Opera' (*yāng gē jù*), 'Folk Opera' (*mín zú gē jù*), 'Spoken Drama' (*huà jù*), 'New Opera' (*xīn gē jù*), 'Chinese Musicals' (*zhōng guó yīn yuè jù*), 'Operetta' (*xiǎo gē jù*), 'Small Theater Opera' (*xiǎo jù chǎng gē jù*), and 'Song and Dance Drama' (*wǔ dǎo yīn yuè jù*). Ju has introduced the term 'Chinese Opera Family' (*zhōng guó gē jù jiā zú*) to describe how these historically evolving and diverse genres coexist.<sup>5</sup>

Some of these genres are defined by the "invasion" of Western operatic style into pre-existing, traditional Chinese genres. This process of "invasion" is one of the most common ways that a distinctive Chinese genre emerged. This process reflects the constant negotiation between emulating Western practices and seeking a unique path for 'Chinese Opera'. This negotiation results in multiple undefined boundaries among dramatic forms and even destabilizes the concept of 'Chinese Opera'. For instance, establishing the precise relationship between 'Folk Opera' (*mín zú gē jù*), which flourished between the 1940s and 1960s, and 'Chinese Opera' is a particularly thorny issue for composers, scholars, and critics. Some scholars, including Ju, consider 'Folk Opera' that employs the *banqiang* style (*bǎn qiāng tǐ*), a

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<sup>3</sup> See JU QIHONG, "Some Observations on Chinese Opera", *Modern Music*, 2020, III, pp. 5-8: 7.

<sup>4</sup> *The History of China Opera* vols. 1 and 2, ed. by the Editorial Board of The History of China Opera, Beijing, Culture and Art Publishing House, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> JU, "Some Observations on Chinese Opera" cit., p. 6.

system of text setting in traditional drama, to be a self-contained genre.<sup>6</sup> Ju's suggestion, however, has been questioned by other scholars, who have sought to define operatic works that involve a pronounced Chinese folk culture that nonetheless do not employ the *banqiang* style. According to Yao, the motivation to separate 'Folk Opera' from 'Chinese Opera' was supported by discrimination against folk-style opera in the 1940s. With time, this discrimination disappeared, and the problem became one of "identity". The diverse and conflicting ideas of 'Chinese Folk Opera', according to Yao, are almost "out of control".<sup>7</sup> The problem of categorization may be related to a sense of crisis: 'Chinese Folk Opera' is highly ranked by Ju, and its decline since the 1980s perhaps compelled him to separate 'Chinese Folk Opera' from other Chinese operas.

In order to clear up confusion about 'Chinese Folk Opera', some critics in 2011 proposed the term 'Serious Opera' (*zhèng gē jù*), a third category distinguished from 'Chinese Folk Opera' and Western opera.<sup>8</sup> For Yao, the emergence of 'Serious Opera' does not resolve these issues, given that it also requires more qualifications and explanations. The proponents of this new category even admit that this borrowing of *opera seria* to mark a genre is not a perfect solution to the problem of the relationship between 'Chinese Folk Opera' and 'Chinese Opera'; it is instead a tentative strategy for creating a space for operatic works outside of this binary system.

## 2. 'Opera' Reconfigured

What does a Chinese genre that adopts a Western term such as 'Serious Opera' want to communicate with audiences? It is almost impossible for the connotation of this Western term to remain intact after it is transplanted into a new (Chinese) context without any modifications. The term 'opera' is in fact reconfigured in historiographical accounts of Chinese opera. Here I will paraphrase the basic account offered in the preface to the HCO: traditional Chinese drama, with its multivalent forms (music, poetry, and dance), had already emerged by the 8<sup>th</sup> century. This form can be understood as Chinese opera. Replacing the original term 'drama' (*xì jù*) with 'opera' (*gē jù*) is the first step in reconfiguring the imported Western term 'opera'. In legitimizing this exchangeability, the authors argue that people outside China also view traditional Chinese drama as 'opera', a convention expressed in the

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<sup>6</sup> *Ivi*, p. 7. Ju has expressed his personal appreciation of 'Folk Opera' where he finds a beautiful transformation between Western arias and the *banqiang* style.

<sup>7</sup> See YAO, "Some Observations" cit., p. 51.

<sup>8</sup> *Ivi*, p. 52.

English translation of *jīng jù* as ‘Peking Opera’ and *kūn jù* as ‘Kun Opera’.<sup>9</sup> Any traditional dramatic forms developed in China can therefore be understood as ‘opera’. It might be difficult for one to imagine that traditional Chinese drama and Western opera, with their own long and highly developed histories, can simply converge through the exchange of the words ‘drama’ and ‘opera’. This exchange encapsulates a specific aesthetic agenda and discourse: the project of absorbing as well as competing with Western opera. Guided by this desire, the comparison between Western and Chinese operas has been the dominant methodological approach in historiographical views of Chinese opera since the 1950s. In this way, Western opera has actively “participated” in historical narratives of Chinese opera.

Returning to the HCO as our case study, its account of Western opera is marked by repeated simplifications, misrepresentations, and distortions. It makes no attempt to incorporate critical views that would challenge its reporting on these older perspectives. As Yao has observed, Chinese composers and scholars from the 1940s to the 1980s “happily accepted the imported term ‘Opera’, yet how to conceptualize and understand it was the Chinese people’s business”.<sup>10</sup> Yao has provided insight into this unique phenomenon: when Chinese composers in the 1950s borrowed the term/concept ‘opera’, their main purpose was to reform the traditional drama instead of learning from Western opera.<sup>11</sup> During the 1950s, Chinese composers had difficulty accessing Western operas; to gain a comprehensive knowledge of Western opera was nearly impossible at this stage. The only meaningful element from Western opera known to them was Western-style melodies that composers could emulate and use to replace the “outdated” expressions of traditional drama. Yao has further argued that the ‘new opera’ that developed in the 1950s shared more characteristics with traditional Chinese drama than with Western opera. The term ‘opera’ was just a cover for the reformed traditional drama.<sup>12</sup>

Some claims proposed in the first *National Conference on Chinese Opera* in 1957 were guided by ignorance and even suspicion. One claim was that new operas were not “qualified” to deserve the title ‘opera’ if they followed a Western model. The subtext of this claim was that new operas had to undergo a transformation: only when they had caught up with the West could they deserve the term ‘opera’. Another claim was that Western opera should keep its own term, and the Chinese genre should avoid it. People who proposed this argued that Chinese composers should follow and cultivate their own aesthetic standard by leaving behind Western

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<sup>9</sup> *The History of China Opera* cit., I, pp. 1-2.

<sup>10</sup> See YAO, “Some Observations” cit., p. 54.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

models.<sup>13</sup> In the context of the second claim, a sense of nationalism and ideas rooted in traditional Chinese culture, however, made up for this limited knowledge of Western music. Both claims together fostered a strong dichotomy set in motion in the aesthetic debate known as the “Native versus Foreign” in 1957: Chinese traditional drama was considered more drama-oriented, whereas the Western model centered more on music. The suggestion that Western opera was merely music-oriented shows the limitations of Chinese critics in the 1950s.

The debate of the “Native versus Foreign” continued to the 1990s and passed down this simplified understanding of Western opera. For example, Li Shaosheng suggested that composers should adopt the Western model and give music a dominant position in operas.<sup>14</sup> The objections to Li’s suggestion repeated the claim that Chinese ‘new opera’ is superior to Western opera because it possesses more “drama”. Both positions neglected the fact that it is the complex and changing collaboration – and even tension – between music and drama in operatic dramaturgy that forms the aesthetic core of Western opera. Most importantly, operatic dramaturgy changes through history. Wagner’s view of opera, for example, has exerted a strong influence on analysts who seek unity and correspondence among opera’s competing expressive systems. According to Laurel E. Zeiss, however, recent scholars believe that “counterpoint and complementarity might be a better model for operatic dramaturgies and structures, rather than the unity and coherence Wagner purports”.<sup>15</sup> ‘Western Opera’ does not exist as a single model but instead as a plurality of forms. More recent Chinese opera scholars have still preferred to theorize Western operas through a single model; however, their standard differs from the past. Hu Xiao Juan, for example, has suggested that the aesthetic core of opera as a genre is to demonstrate how music serves drama. The unification of musical and dramatic structures is the highest aesthetic principle. Joseph Kerman’s *Opera as Drama*, according to Hu, is the paradigm.<sup>16</sup> Hu’s argument implies a promotion of Wagner’s views of music drama, and this promotion is explicitly articulated by Ju: “I personally approve of Wagner’s definition of opera; namely, the unfolding of drama is carried by music”. Ju has even argued that Mozart, who in his view prioritized music over drama, nevertheless miraculously realized an organic

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<sup>13</sup> *The History of China Opera* cit., I, pp. 331-332.

<sup>14</sup> *Ivi*, II, p. 269.

<sup>15</sup> L. E. ZEISS, “The Dramaturgy of Opera,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Opera Studies*, ed. by N. Till, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 179-201:197.

<sup>16</sup> See HU XIAO JUAN, “Unification of Dramatic Structure and Musical Structure in Opera”, *Art of Music*, 2020, IV, pp. 95-106.

integration of music and drama.<sup>17</sup> Both Hu and Ju envision Chinese opera through their advocacy of Wagner's music dramas as an aesthetic model.

HCO and current scholarship in Chinese opera rarely address the plurality and complexity of 'Western Opera' when they refer to Western opera, which has of course experienced profound historical change. We need more reflection on how knowledge of Chinese opera has formed in dialogue with understanding of, as well as unfamiliarity with, Western practices. A perspective of plurality of Western opera can make meaningful comparisons possible.

The intrinsic qualities of opera as a genre, such as large-scale form, the involvement of different media, and the use of spectacle, can effectively evoke nationalistic sentiment in audiences.<sup>18</sup> This aesthetic vision is embodied by the continuous development of new works, performances, conferences, and publications, a "mania" for Chinese opera supported by national and various institutions. Meanwhile, 'Chinese Opera' has also maintained a competitive or "dialectical" relationship with Western operatic practice throughout its history. The historical and aesthetic discourses surrounding Chinese opera have continuously positioned and repositioned the role of Western opera, a project which has served the need of establishing a distinctive Chinese style. A more critical and reflective understanding of Western opera will provide a more solid aesthetic foundation, pedagogical basis, and appreciation of 'Chinese Opera'.

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<sup>17</sup> JU, "Some Observations on Chinese Opera" cit., p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> Newly composed Chinese operas have constituted a significant repertoire on the contemporary Chinese stage. They have also become a "hot" research topic for Chinese musicologists. As an example of national support, the China National Arts Fund (*guó jiā yì shù jīn jī jīn*), which awards prestigious national grants, recently approved the 2022 research proposal on "Cultivating Performing Artists for Chinese Folk Opera" (*zhōng guó mǐn zú gē jù biǎo yǎn rén cái péi yāng*) conducted by the Tianjin Conservatory of Music. In the opening reception on 19 March 2023, the conservatory expressed the purpose of this project as narrating stories about China and letting Chinese folk-style melodies contribute to the cultural development of China. The vision of this project could be summarized as seeking to demonstrate Chinese spirit, Chinese characteristics, and Chinese style.