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OPERA AS A CULTURAL HERITAGE OF CHINA

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ОПЕРА ЯК КУЛЬТУРНА СПАДЩИНА КИТАЮ

The history of “Chinese opera” is a long and rich journey, spanning over a thousand years. It represents a unique blend of music, dance, drama, literature, and visual art. Chinese opera has evolved through numerous historical periods, influenced by cultural, political, and regional factors. It is one of the oldest forms of dramatic art in the world.

Chinese opera traces its roots to ancient forms of performance that existed as early as the “Shang” (1600–1046 BC) and “Zhou” (1046–256 BC) dynasties. During these periods, ceremonial music, dance, and rituals played important roles in religious and courtly life. Early performance arts were closely tied to shamanistic rituals, harvest festivals, and worship, with performers often telling stories of deities and mythological figures.

By the “Han Dynasty” (206 BC — 220 AD), performance arts began to develop further. During this period, popular entertainments such as “baixi” (百戏, “hundred entertainments”) emerged. These were grand shows that combined acrobatics, music, dance, and pantomime. Although not yet formalized opera, these performances laid the groundwork for the operatic traditions that would develop later.

The Tang Dynasty is often considered a golden age of Chinese culture, and it was during this period that the first formalized operatic performances emerged. One key figure was “Emperor Xuanzong” (685–762), who established the “Pear Garden” (梨园, Líyuán) in the capital city of Chang’an. This was an imperial academy for training musicians, dancers, and actors, often considered the birthplace of professional Chinese opera.

Tang Dynasty performances featured elements of music, dance, and storytelling, and were performed at court for the imperial family. These early performances were relatively simple in terms of narrative, but the Pear Garden laid the foundation for the artistic skills and traditions that would later define Chinese opera.

During the “Song Dynasty” (960–1279), Chinese opera began to take a more structured form. This period saw the rise of “zaju” (杂剧), a type of variety play that combined comedic sketches, dance, and music. “Zaju” became especially popular in urban areas and was characterized by its lively performances, often centered around humorous or satirical themes.

The “Yuan Dynasty” (1271–1368) marked a significant period of development for Chinese opera. The Yuan era saw the rise of a more formalized form of zaju, which combined “prose, poetry, and music” into a single performance. The structure of these plays included a combination of “spoken dialogue” and “singing”, with music playing a central role in narrating the story. Yuan zaju often had four acts, each accompanied by a specific melody, and were performed in both court settings and public theaters.

During the “Ming Dynasty” (1368–1644), Chinese opera continued to evolve, with regional styles becoming more distinct and codified. One of the most significant developments was the rise of “kunqu” (昆曲), a highly refined and elegant form of

opera that originated in the Jiangsu province. “Kunqu” featured graceful movements, sophisticated poetry, and a highly ornamental singing style. It became the dominant form of opera at court and among the literati during the Ming and early Qing dynasties.

The “Qing Dynasty” (1644–1912) saw the emergence of “Peking opera” (京剧, Jīngjù), which would become the most famous and influential form of Chinese opera. Peking opera originated in the late 18th century and reached its peak in the 19th century. It combined various elements from different regional operas, such as “Hui opera” and “Han opera”, and was strongly influenced by “Kunqu”.

“Peking opera” features highly stylized movements, elaborate costumes, and vivid makeup that symbolizes characters’ traits and social roles. It employs four main role types:

- “Sheng”: Male roles (scholars, officials, warriors);
- “Dan”: Female roles, including young maidens, warriors, and older women;
- “Jing”: Painted-face roles, typically representing warriors, gods, or powerful characters;
- “Chou”: Comedic or clown roles, often bringing humor to the story.

Peking opera performances rely heavily on a combination of singing, speaking, dancing, and martial arts. The music uses traditional Chinese instruments, such as the “erhu” (a two-stringed fiddle), “jinghu” (a smaller version of the erhu), “pipa” (lute), and various percussion instruments.

During the Qing Dynasty, other regional forms of opera also flourished, including:

- “Cantonese opera” (粤剧, Yuèjù) in southern China;
- “Sichuan opera” (川剧, Chuānjù) in the southwest, known for its “face-changing” (变脸, biàn liǎn) technique;
- “Huangmei opera” (黄梅戏, Huángméixì), a folk style originating from the Anhui and Hubei regions.

The 20th century brought significant changes to Chinese opera, especially during the “Republic of China” period (1912–1949) and the “People’s Republic of China” (1949 — present). Traditional Chinese opera faced challenges with the arrival of Western theatre, film, and new forms of entertainment.

During the “Cultural Revolution” (1966–1976), traditional Chinese operas were suppressed, and only a few “model operas” (“yangbanxi”, 样板戏) that reflected communist ideology were permitted to be performed. These model operas combined revolutionary themes with operatic techniques and were heavily influenced by political propaganda.

Following the end of the Cultural Revolution, traditional Chinese opera experienced a revival, with efforts to preserve and restore regional opera forms. Government and cultural institutions began to recognize the importance of traditional opera as a key aspect of Chinese cultural heritage. In 2001, “Kunqu opera” was listed as a “Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” by UNESCO, and in 2010, “Peking opera” was also included in UNESCO’s “Intangible Cultural Heritage list”.

In the 21st century, Chinese opera continues to evolve, with modern adaptations and innovations introduced to appeal to new audiences. Some productions incorporate elements of Western theater, such as modern staging, lighting, and even fusion with other genres, including jazz and electronic music.

However, the core of Chinese opera — its symbolic use of gestures, makeup, and music — remains a vital part of Chinese cultural identity. Efforts to preserve traditional operatic forms, while also finding ways to modernize the genre, continue to shape its future.

Chinese opera is a deeply rooted cultural tradition that has evolved over centuries from ancient rituals and folk entertainment to a highly developed form of dramatic art. With numerous regional styles and forms, each representing the unique culture of its area, Chinese opera remains a testament to the diversity and longevity of China's cultural heritage.

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PECULIARITIES OF CHINESE VOCAL TECHNIQUE

Дін Гайрон

ОСОБЛИВОСТІ КИТАЙСЬКОЇ ВОКАЛЬНОЇ ТЕХНІКИ

Vocal techniques in Chinese music, particularly in Chinese opera and traditional folk singing, are highly distinctive and differ significantly from Western vocal styles. These techniques are deeply rooted in cultural aesthetics and are tied to the unique characteristics of the Chinese language, such as its tonal nature, as well as the storytelling traditions found in various forms of opera and folk performance. One of the key vocal techniques and characteristics of Chinese music is the technique of opera singing.

Chinese opera incorporates various vocal techniques that are used to express emotions, highlight character roles, and advance the narrative. The singing in Chinese opera is highly stylized and emphasizes clarity, projection, and ornamentation.

In Chinese opera, there is frequent use of “falsetto”, especially for “Dan” (female) roles that are traditionally played by male actors in genres like “Peking opera” (京劇, Jīngjù). The performers must skillfully switch between “true voice” (zhēnshēng, 真人聲) and falsetto (jiāshēng) to achieve a clear, high-pitched tone, which is considered elegant and graceful for female characters.

This technique is used to produce a bright and piercing sound that can cut through the accompaniment of instruments, projecting the voice over a large performance space without the use of amplification.

Similar to Western operatic technique, Chinese opera performers use both “head voice” and “chest voice” to achieve different vocal colors. “Head voice” is typically used for high-pitched, ethereal passages, while “chest voice” gives power and authority, often employed by male characters or in more dramatic moments.

Gliding between pitches, or “glissando”, is an essential technique in Chinese opera singing. Singers frequently slide between notes to create emotional emphasis or transition smoothly between different pitches. This technique is especially important in “Kunqu” (昆曲) and “Peking opera”, where it contributes to the stylized, flowing nature of the music.

Chinese opera vocal lines are often ornamented with various “grace notes” and “turns” that make the melodies more intricate and expressive. These ornaments, such as quick upward or downward slides, add complexity and are a hallmark of operatic performance.

In Chinese opera, great emphasis is placed on “clear enunciation” of the lyrics, as the words and their tones play a crucial role in conveying meaning. This is especially important because Chinese is a tonal language, and a slight change in tone can alter the meaning of a word. Therefore, singers must ensure that their pronunciation is accurate and that the tones of the words are preserved, even while singing.