



THE STUDY OF THE CHINESE BEL CANTO THEORY OF PEKING UNIVERSITY'S OPERA RESEARCH INSTITUTE: A CASE STUDY OF THE OPERA JIANG JIE

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to study the Chinese Bel Canto theory of Peking University's Opera Research Institute through a case study of the opera Jiang Jie. This study aimed to explore the theoretical connotations and practical approaches of Peking University's Chinese Bel Canto theory, analyze its specific application and artistic expression in Jiang Jie, and examine its influence on teaching models, performance practices, artistic creation, and cultural promotion. This research employed a qualitative methodology, utilizing literature review, interviews, observations, comparative research, and theoretical discussion.

The researcher divided the research method into five steps: (1) analyzing previous studies on Peking University's Chinese Bel Canto theory and Jiang Jie to establish a comprehensive theoretical foundation, (2) collecting historical and performance-related data of Jiang Jie through literature surveys and database retrieval, (3) conducting interviews and observations with performers and

audiences to evaluate the opera's reception and its role in disseminating Chinese Bel Canto theory, (4) comparing Chinese and Western vocal techniques, emotional expression, and performance styles to assess the application of Chinese Bel Canto in Jiang Jie, and (5) exploring the development and innovation of Chinese Bel Canto in contemporary opera through theoretical discussion. The data was analyzed using descriptive analysis.

The results showed that: (1) Peking University's Chinese Bel Canto theory integrates traditional Chinese vocal techniques with Western operatic singing, forming a unique vocal approach that balances resonance, diction, and emotional expression while reflecting core values of Chinese aesthetics, including balance, harmony, and poetic expression; (2) the opera Jiang Jie serves as a representative work that embodies Chinese Bel Canto principles, while also conveying themes deeply rooted in Chinese culture, such as loyalty, perseverance, and collective identity, which align with Confucian, Daoist, and revolutionary ideals; (3) the theory significantly influences vocal pedagogy, performance styles, and artistic creation, enriching Chinese opera while reinforcing traditional storytelling methods that emphasize moral values, national pride, and historical continuity; (4) a comparative analysis revealed the nuanced differences between Chinese and Western vocal aesthetics, highlighting the influence of Chinese tonal languages, traditional folk singing styles, and the philosophy of "qiyun shengdong" (气韵生动), which emphasizes expressive spirit and dynamic vitality in artistic performance; (5) Chinese Bel Canto theory plays a crucial role in preserving and innovating Chinese opera while fostering greater international recognition and appreciation of Chinese vocal arts, aligning with China's broader cultural mission of revitalizing and globalizing its artistic heritage. This study highlights the theoretical and practical significance of Peking University's Chinese Bel Canto theory and its contribution to the evolution of Chinese opera. It also provides insights into the relationship between vocal performance and Chinese cultural traditions, emphasizing how the integration of Western operatic techniques with Chinese artistic philosophy enhances both national identity and global cultural exchange.

Keywords: Chinese Bel Canto Theory; Opera Research Institute

Introduction

In the new era of Chinese opera development, how can outstanding Chinese opera works that meet the demands of the times be created? What qualities must these works possess to be widely accepted by Chinese audiences and to represent China on the world stage, gaining international recognition? Since the birth of Chinese opera, two main performance forms have existed: one is derived from Chinese traditional opera and drama techniques, forming a performance style of "combining realism and stylization, with an emphasis on realism supported by stylization (Jin, 2018)." The Peking University Opera Research Institute has provided its answer in this new era of opera development. For many years, the Institute has been committed to forming a unique Chinese opera school and has continuously practiced and promoted the Peking University Chinese bel canto theory in this process.

The Peking University Opera Research Institute's version of the opera "Jiang Jie" addresses the key issue of combining "Chinese language with bel canto technique." The special linguistic habits in Mandarin, such as the four tones, rhyme, articulation, and phrasing, have always been central to the Sinicization of the bel canto technique. Although this issue has been discussed for many years, it has yet to form a universally accepted theoretical basis, and there has been a lack of convincing practical examples. The Peking University Opera Research Institute has filled this gap through its staging of "Jiang Jie." Therefore, this paper will elaborate on the singing philosophy of the Peking University Opera Research Institute in interpreting Chinese vocal works, analyze the solutions to issues related to the four tones, rhyme, articulation, and phrasing in their teaching philosophy, propose experiences of bel canto technique in Chinese performances, and explore its positive significance for the formation of future Chinese opera schools (Zhang, 2017).

Issues such as the singing technique of Chinese opera, the Sinicization of the bel canto technique, the improvement of opera performance teaching, and the

study of Chinese opera performance styles are all areas of great concern today. The Peking University Opera Research Institute's practices in opera teaching, repertoire creation and staging, and opera theory construction have provided valuable experience and theoretical support for the development of Chinese opera. This paper will conduct an in-depth analysis of the theoretical basis behind these practices from the perspective of the history of opera development in both China and the West (He, 2016).

As a specialized institution engaged in opera teaching and research, the Peking University Opera Research Institute has achieved outstanding accomplishments in opera talent cultivation, creation, and production over its ten-year development process. This success is closely linked to its efficient and targeted opera talent training methods and curriculum system. At the same time, the exploratory Chinese opera philosophy has also provided solid theoretical support for its actions. These achievements are the result of the stage experience accumulated over many years by professors at the Peking University Opera Research Institute and Chinese opera performance artists. They have gradually formed a set of Chinese opera theories with promotional value, which can provide strong support for the formation of future Chinese opera schools.

Although research on Chinese opera has gradually increased in recent years, especially in the promotion and practice of bel canto singing, some scholars have also explored the possibility of how bel canto can be combined with the characteristics of the Chinese language (Gao, 2017). However, current research still has several shortcomings. On one hand, existing research tends to focus on theoretical discussions and historical reviews, lacking practical and representative artistic creation cases, especially the specific application of bel canto in opera works, particularly in the interpretation of works with profound cultural backgrounds such as "Jiang Jie"; on the other hand, there is still a lack of systematic and in-depth academic discussion on how bel canto can be combined with the unique linguistic features of China (such as the four tones and the final rhymes).

Currently, although some scholars have proposed preliminary analyses of the bel canto interpretation in the opera "Jiang Jie," in-depth research on the theoretical basis behind this transformation and its application methods in teaching and creation is still relatively weak. Therefore, this study aims to fill the research gap in this field by analyzing the innovative performance of the Beijing University Opera Institute in the staging of "Jiang Jie," and to provide new perspectives and empirical support for the theoretical construction of the bel canto in Chinese opera.

Research objectives

1. Explore the theoretical connotations and practical approaches of Peking University's Chinese Bel Canto theory.
2. Analyze the specific application and artistic expression of Peking University's Chinese Bel Canto theory in the opera " Jiang Jie ".
3. Analyze the specific influence of Peking University's Chinese bel canto theory on teaching models, performance practices, artistic creation, and cultural promotion.

Literature Reviews

The Development and Characteristics of Chinese Opera: As a comprehensive art form, opera was introduced to China in the early 20th century and has undergone nearly a century of development. Its development is closely linked to the historical processes of Chinese society, spanning important historical periods such as the Republic of China, the founding of the People's Republic of China, and the reform and opening-up. Mr. Jin Xiang, in his article "A Glimpse of the Development of Contemporary Chinese Opera: Also on 'Opera Thinking and Opera Creation,'" divides the history of Chinese opera into three stages: the initial period from the early Republic to after the Anti-Japanese War (1928-1949), the period from the founding of the People's Republic of China to the reform and opening-up (1949-1979), and the period from the reform and opening-up to the present (1980-). This article summarizes these three stages as the initial, growth,

and diversification and innovation periods of Chinese opera development. Each of these stages is represented by a typical opera work, reflecting the thematic ideas and cultural connotations of the works during different periods (Zi, 2019).

Initial Period (1928-1949): The initial period of Chinese opera can be traced back to the early 20th century, particularly under the influence of the May Fourth New Culture Movement when Western opera began to be gradually introduced to China. During this period, Chinese musicians and intellectuals actively explored how to combine Western opera forms with Chinese national music and opera elements to create a unique form of Chinese opera. The work *The White-Haired Girl* became a landmark achievement of Chinese opera during this period. *The White-Haired Girl* was not only the first Chinese national opera with a complete form but also reflected the core values of Chinese revolutionary literature and art. By combining traditional Chinese folk music with Western opera forms, the work successfully expressed the social conflicts and revolutionary spirit of the time (Jin, 2018).

During this period, the creation and performance of Chinese opera mainly focused on expressing social conflicts and revolutionary emotions, laying the foundation for the future development of Chinese opera. It is worth noting that although Bel Canto theory had not yet been systematically applied in early operas like *The White-Haired Girl*, the exploration of vocal performance provided a practical foundation for the development of Chinese Bel Canto theory. The works of this period emphasized national and revolutionary themes in content, while in form, they combined the narrative techniques of Western opera with the expressive methods of Chinese opera, laying the groundwork for the unique artistic style of Chinese opera.

Growth Period (1949-1979): After the founding of the People's Republic of China, Chinese opera entered a new stage of development. During this period, opera became an important tool for state ideology, especially under Mao Zedong's policy of "serving the workers, peasants, and soldiers." Opera creation was highly focused on revolutionary struggles and the portrayal of revolutionary heroism. The revolutionary-themed opera *Jiang Jie*, representing this period, achieved great

success. Jiang Jie not only realized the combination of Chinese Bel Canto theory with revolutionary themes in art but also became a classic work in Chinese opera art through vivid character portrayals and emotional expression (Wang, 2022).

As the representative work of this period, Jiang Jie not only continued the revolutionary opera tradition established by *The White-Haired Girl* but also achieved a fusion of nationalization and Bel Canto in musical style. The composers combined traditional Chinese music elements with Western Bel Canto, ensuring that Jiang Jie retained both the artistry of Bel Canto and the charm of Chinese national music in its vocal expression. Particularly in the use of vocal techniques, Jiang Jie demonstrated the initial exploration and practice of Chinese Bel Canto theory, laying a solid foundation for the success of Chinese opera during this period. Analyzing Jiang Jie reveals that the creation of Chinese opera during this period not only emphasized national and revolutionary themes but also began to gradually incorporate the technical demands of Bel Canto, providing an important reference for subsequent opera creation.

Diversification and Innovation Period (1980 to Present): Since the reform and opening-up, Chinese opera has entered a new period of diversification and innovative development. During this stage, with the opening of society and the exchange of diverse cultures, Chinese opera was no longer limited to single revolutionary themes but began to explore broader social issues and human themes. Representative works like *Wilderness* demonstrated breakthroughs in the themes and forms of Chinese opera through profound emotional expression and innovative musical performance. Opera creation during this period became more diverse in content and began to incorporate more modern artistic elements, such as modern stage design and multimedia technology, bringing Chinese opera to the international stage (Liu, 2021).

During this stage, the reinterpretation of Peking University's opera Jiang Jie became an important practice in the further development of Chinese Bel Canto theory. By combining traditional Bel Canto with modern artistic techniques, Jiang Jie's performances in the new era not only preserved the artistic essence of classic

operas but also incorporated the aesthetic needs of contemporary society. This innovation was evident not only in the enhancement of vocal techniques but also in stage performance, character portrayal, and emotional expression. Analyzing Jiang Jie demonstrates that the diversification of Chinese opera during this period was reflected not only in theme selection but also in innovation and international exploration of artistic expression (Jin, 2018).

Characteristics of Chinese Opera: During its development, Chinese opera gradually formed some unique artistic characteristics. Firstly, national identity is one of the most prominent features of Chinese opera. Composers emphasize the absorption of the essence of traditional Chinese music and opera, combining these elements with Western opera forms to create opera works with Chinese characteristics (Zi, 2019). Secondly, Chinese opera has a strong narrative nature, emphasizing the expression of complex emotions and social themes through the combination of music and drama. This narrative approach is not only reflected in the structure of the plot but also in the musical expression techniques, enhancing the artistic appeal of the works. In addition, Chinese opera also has a unique style in performance. Compared to Western opera, Chinese opera emphasizes the integration of overall artistic effects, including the comprehensive use of various art forms such as music, dance, and drama. In recent years, Chinese opera creation has also continuously absorbed modern art and technological means, promoting the diversification and modernization of opera expression. Particularly in the modern performances of Jiang Jie, the combination of traditional Bel Canto and modern stage art demonstrates the innovation and development of Chinese opera in terms of expression (Liu, 2010).

Development Trends of Chinese Opera: With the increasing frequency of global cultural exchanges, the creation and performance of Chinese opera are gradually moving onto the international stage. In the future, the development of Chinese opera will continue towards diversification and internationalization. On the one hand, composers and directors will continue to explore how to absorb and integrate more international artistic elements while retaining national characteristics. On the other hand, Chinese opera will further enhance its status on the world cultural and artistic stage through more international cooperation and

exchanges, promoting the innovation and prosperity of Chinese opera art (Chen, 2020).

In this context, representative Chinese operas such as Jiang Jie have shown the potential of Chinese opera on the global cultural stage through innovative artistic expressions and extensive international performances. In the future, the further development of Chinese Bel Canto theory will provide new impetus for the internationalization and diversification of Chinese opera art. Through continuous innovation and integration, Chinese opera will continue to occupy an important position in world opera art, bringing more unique artistic works to global audiences.

Research Methodology

The researcher divided the research method into five steps: (1) analyzing previous studies on Peking University's Chinese Bel Canto theory and Jiang Jie to establish a comprehensive theoretical foundation, (2) collecting historical and performance-related data of Jiang Jie through literature surveys and database retrieval, (3) conducting interviews and observations with performers and audiences to evaluate the opera's reception and its role in disseminating Chinese Bel Canto theory, (4) comparing Chinese and Western vocal techniques, emotional expression, and performance styles to assess the application of Chinese Bel Canto in Jiang Jie, and (5) exploring the development and innovation of Chinese Bel Canto in contemporary opera through theoretical discussion. The data was analyzed using descriptive analysis.

Results

Firstly, Chinese Bel Canto theory demonstrates a unique advantage in cultural adaptability. Rather than merely replicating Western Bel Canto, Chinese Bel Canto has been adaptively modified to better align with the unique aesthetic and artistic needs of Chinese culture. This adaptability is not only evident in innovations in vocal techniques but, more importantly, in the fusion of emotional

expression and cultural symbolism. As a representative work of this theory, Jiang Jie successfully integrates Eastern and Western vocal techniques, achieving a successful transformation of Bel Canto within the Chinese cultural context. This success not only showcases the artistic vitality of Chinese opera in the new era but also provides a new perspective for the global development of Bel Canto theory.

Secondly, the application of Bel Canto theory in Jiang Jie demonstrates the innovative potential of this theory in practice. Through a detailed analysis of vocal techniques in Jiang Jie, it is evident that Chinese Bel Canto theory does not limit itself to traditional Bel Canto methods but includes many innovative attempts. For instance, in reconciling the vocal characteristics of the Chinese language with Bel Canto, performers adjust their vocal techniques to better align with the rhythm and phonetic characteristics of Mandarin. This innovation not only enriches the application scenarios of Bel Canto theory but also expands its applicability across different languages and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, in terms of performance style, Jiang Jie incorporates gestures and movements from Chinese opera, breaking the traditional restrictions of Bel Canto on stage movements, thereby enhancing the visual impact and cultural depth of the opera. This multidimensional innovation opens new avenues for the artistic expression of Chinese opera.

Thirdly, this study reveals the bidirectional interaction between theory and practice. The case study of Jiang Jie shows that the successful application of Bel Canto theory in this work not only validates the feasibility of the theory but also drives its further development. For example, during the rehearsal process of Jiang Jie, performers and directors continually explored and practiced Bel Canto theory, constantly adjusting and optimizing vocal techniques, enunciation, and stage performance. These experiences, fed back into theoretical research, provide important empirical evidence for the refinement and development of Bel Canto theory. This bidirectional interaction not only enhances the practical relevance of the theory but also fuels continuous innovation and development.

Lastly, the leading role of the Peking University Opera Research Institute in promoting the development of Chinese Bel Canto theory cannot be overlooked. As a significant base for the research and practice of Chinese Bel Canto theory, the Peking University Opera Research Institute, through the creation and performance of works like Jiang Jie, has not only cultivated a large number of opera talents with international competitiveness but also made important contributions to the development of Chinese Bel Canto theory. Through years of teaching and research, the institute has gradually developed a Bel Canto theoretical system with Chinese characteristics, which is fully demonstrated and applied in works like Jiang Jie. This system not only enriches the theoretical foundation of Chinese opera but also provides a solid theoretical support for the promotion of Chinese opera on the international stage.

Discussions

Although this study has achieved meaningful results in several areas, there remain issues worthy of further discussion. Reflecting on the research results allows for a clearer understanding of the limitations of the current study and provides a reference for future research directions.

Firstly, challenges in cultural integration still exist. While Jiang Jie has achieved significant success in cultural integration, the process of cultural fusion is not without difficulties in practice. For instance, in integrating Bel Canto with traditional Chinese vocal techniques, performers often have to balance between the two. This balance is not simply a choice of technique but involves multiple layers of emotional expression and cultural symbolism. In some specific scenarios, the technical requirements of Bel Canto might conflict with the expressive forms of traditional Chinese vocal arts, requiring performers to find a balance between emotion and technique (Wang, 2022), which often demands extensive practice and experience. Thus, how to better achieve cultural integration in actual performances remains a topic that requires further exploration.

Secondly, the gap between theory and practice persists. Although this study shows that the application of Bel Canto theory in Jiang Jie has been successful, its promotion and application in other operatic works are not as

satisfactory. Especially in some operas with stronger local or traditional characteristics, performers and directors tend to prefer traditional vocal techniques over Bel Canto. This phenomenon may be related to the extent of the theory's dissemination, the performers' acceptance, and the audience's aesthetic preferences (Chen, 2020). Therefore, how to narrow the gap between theory and practice, and how to effectively educate and promote Bel Canto theory for broader application, are issues that need to be addressed in future research.

Moreover, the limitations of field research cannot be ignored. While field research provided rich empirical material for this study, the limitations of the research scope and sample may introduce some biases. Specifically, this research focuses primarily on the Peking University Opera Research Institute and its related works, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other institutions or regions. Additionally, since the research subjects are mainly performers and staff involved in the production of Jiang Jie, their understanding and attitudes toward Bel Canto theory may be influenced by their personal experiences and positions, leading to a certain degree of subjective bias in the results. Future research should consider a broader research scope in field studies and adopt more diverse methods, such as participatory observation and in-depth interviews, to reduce research bias and enhance the generalizability of the results.

Lastly, the direction of future research is worth further exploration. This study reveals the great potential of Bel Canto theory in Chinese opera, but there are still many unresolved issues in this field that warrant further investigation. For example, how can Bel Canto theory be applied to more traditional Chinese operatic works? How can Bel Canto theory be deeply integrated with other art forms, such as traditional Chinese opera and dance drama? Additionally, as Chinese opera gradually enters the international stage, the adaptability and challenges of Bel Canto theory in a global context have become an issue of interest (Zhu, 2016). How can Chinese Bel Canto theory maintain its cultural characteristics while drawing on and incorporating global vocal theories and practices, thereby thriving on the international stage? This will be a key topic for future research.

New Knowledges

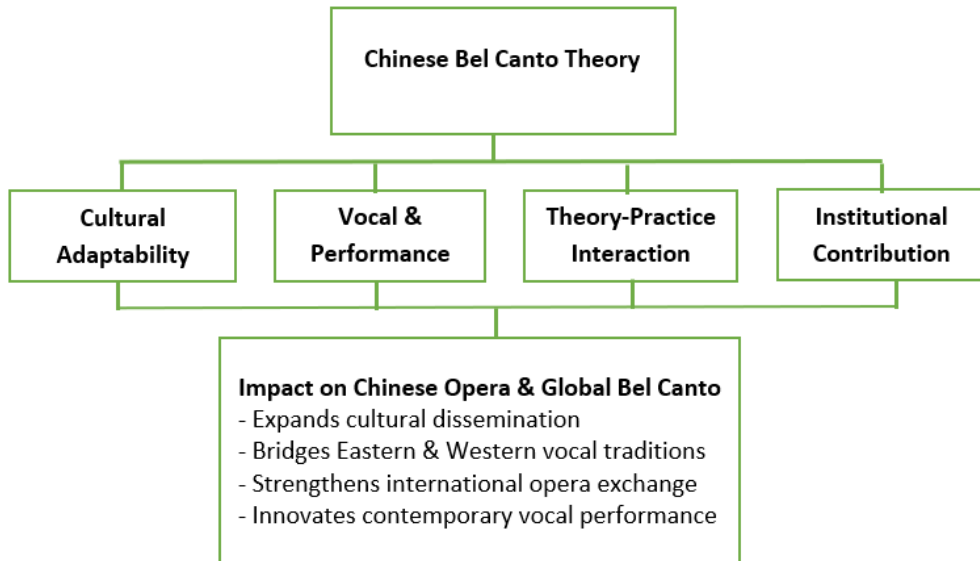


Figure 1: New Knowledges Diagram of The Study of The Chinese Bel Canto Theory of Peking University’s Opera Research Institute: A Case Study of The Opera Jiang Jie.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the study of Peking University’s Chinese Bel Canto theory through the case of *Jiang Jie* highlights its unique adaptability, innovation, and theoretical significance within Chinese cultural and artistic contexts. Unlike a mere replication of Western Bel Canto, Chinese Bel Canto has been carefully modified to align with the aesthetic values, linguistic characteristics, and emotional expressions deeply rooted in Chinese traditions. The success of *Jiang Jie* in integrating Eastern and Western vocal techniques demonstrates the artistic vitality of Chinese opera and its potential contributions to global Bel Canto development. Furthermore, the opera’s innovative application of Chinese Bel Canto theory, including adjustments in vocal techniques to accommodate Mandarin’s phonetic structure and the incorporation of traditional Chinese opera

movements, showcases its potential to expand across different languages and cultural backgrounds. This research also underscores the dynamic interaction between theory and practice, as the continuous refinement of vocal techniques and performance styles in *Jiang Jie* provides empirical support for the evolution of Chinese Bel Canto theory. Additionally, the pivotal role of the Peking University Opera Research Institute in advancing this theory through research, performance, and talent cultivation has been instrumental in establishing a Chinese Bel Canto theoretical system, which not only enriches the foundation of Chinese opera but also enhances its presence on the global stage. This study affirms that Chinese Bel Canto theory serves as both a bridge between cultural traditions and modern artistic innovation and a significant force in the global dissemination of Chinese opera.

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