

# The Differences Between Chinese Art Songs and Western Opera Arias

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## Abstract

The field of art song in contemporary China has shown a trend of diversification and prosperity, blended a variety of musical styles and provided a richer musical experience for both music creators and listeners. China's music industry continues to grow, with the popularity of digital music platforms providing more opportunities for musicians. Chinese singers and musicians have emerged on the international music scene, spreading Chinese music globally and contributing to the internationalization of Chinese music. China's musical future is full of potential and opportunities and will continue to contribute to the diversity and richness of global musical culture.

**Keywords:** Differences; Chinese Art Songs; Western Opera; Arias

## Introduction

The early development of Chinese art songs, spanning the historical period from the early 20th century to the 1940s, was a phase full of innovation and fusion. During this time, the Chinese music scene underwent many changes, being influenced by foreign and Western music, as well as pioneering new art song styles based on traditional musical elements. The developments of this period are described in more detail below. In the early twentieth century, China underwent a series of political, social and cultural changes that had a profound impact on the modernization of Chinese society. Historical events of this period, such as the Xinhai Revolution and the May Fourth Movement, brought about a completely new social and cultural climate in China, and also triggered revolutionary changes in the field of music. The Xinhai Revolution broke out in 1911, leading to the collapse of the Qing Dynasty and the end of the feudal imperial system in China. This event brought about the first democratic revolution in China and announced the birth of the modern state (Yang, 2023). With the change in the political system, the society began to move towards modernization and music was gradually integrated into this historical trend. The May Fourth Movement, on the other hand, took place in 1919 and was another important social movement in modern Chinese history. This movement arose out of dissatisfaction with the Treaty of Versailles, signed by foreign powers at the Versailles Peace Conference, which ceded China's mountain and sea rights and interests to Japan. Young intellectuals, students and cultural figures played a key role in this protest. The May Fourth Movement emphasized the principles of democracy, science, freedom of expression and cultural independence, and these ideas also influenced music-making at the time. During this period, Chinese musicians began to actively absorb international musical trends, especially musical elements from the West. The Chinese music scene was gradually influenced by styles such as jazz, pop and rock. The rhythms and harmonies of jazz, the pop melodies of pop music and the rebellious spirit of rock music all found a place in Chinese music. These musical elements provided new creative inspirations

for Chinese music creators and injected fresh vigour into Chinese musical culture. During this period, some outstanding musicians and singers began to fuse Western musical elements with traditional Chinese music to create musical works with unique characteristics. The musical compositions of this period reflected Chinese society's desire for modernization and became part of social change and cultural development (Lin, 2022).

### **New Literary Movement and Lyric Song (1920s-1930s)**

In twentieth-century China, the New Literary Movement and the rise of the lyric song signaled a revolutionary change in the fields of literature and music. The historical context of this period created opportunities for the spread of new ideas and cultures, as well as the forging of many classic lyric songs in Chinese music history, such as *The Songstress at the Ends of the World* and *Jasmine Flowers*. The 1920s and 1930s were a time of political, social, and cultural change in Chinese history. During this period, China experienced the fall of the Qing Dynasty and the establishment of the Republic of China, and society underwent great changes. At the same time, a new wave of thinking swept across the country and became the core of the New Literary Movement (Guo, 2022). The New Literary Movement aimed to overthrow the shackles of traditional literature and called for the birth of modern literature, laying the foundation for this change. Literary scholars and cultural figures began to experiment with new ways of expressing emotions and ideas, and music became an important tool of expression. Literary works of this period were characterized by strong emotional expression and realism, which also influenced the creation of lyric songs. Lyric songs, as a form of music, began to be based on literary works, transforming the emotions and themes of literature into music. This musical style emphasizes the sincerity and depth of emotions and is characterized by poetic expressions in the lyrics. Lyric singers often use their unique voices and emotions to convey the content of their songs.

*The Songstress at the Ends of the World* and *Jasmine Flower* are two classic lyric songs in Chinese music history. Their uniqueness lies in the deep expression of the lyrics and the emotional impact of the melody, which made them representative works of this period and deeply touched people's emotions and thoughts (Xu, 2022). First of all, the lyrics of the song "The Song of the End of the World" were composed by the famous literary scholar Wen Yiduo. The song is known for its wonderful melody and profound lyrics, which glorify the magnificent scenery of nature and express the deep longing for the hometown. The descriptions of "the end of the world" and "the corner of the sea" convey the infinite longing for the vastness of the earth, while the longing for "relatives in the hometown" triggers an emotional resonance deep in the listener's heart. The singer of the song conveys the emotions of the song to the audience in a touching way, making people cherish the beauty of their hometowns and nature even more. It is still considered one of the classics in the history of Chinese music because of its deep emotion and musical quality. Another lyrical song, *Jasmine Flower*, also has strong emotions and musical quality. With its lyrical melody and lyrics, the song conveys a deep longing for home and a yearning for freedom (Xiong, 2021). The "jasmine flower" in the song symbolizes the hometown, while the lyrics "May I be like the star and the king be like the moon, and the nightly streams of light be bright and clean" expresses the deep love for family and relatives. The lyrics of the song have a strong poetic meaning, and the melody of the song is warm and touching, triggering the listeners' empathy for their hometowns and relatives, and making people miss their freedom and homes even

more deeply.

These two songs struck a deep chord in society at the time because they not only reflected the ideas of the New Literature Movement, but also touched people's deepest emotions. The lyrical songs of this period brought emotional depth and cultural prosperity to Chinese music, and they became precious musical memories in people's hearts. The influence of these songs continues to this day, and they are still popular among people of all ages, becoming an important milestone in the history of Chinese music and demonstrating the depth of Chinese culture and thought. Overall, the 1920s and 1930s were a golden period in the history of Chinese music, when the New Literature Movement and the rise of lyric songs injected new vigor into the development of Chinese music. Lyric songs composed during this period are still much-loved today, passing on the precious legacy of Chinese music and at the same time demonstrating the profound connotations of Chinese culture and thought (Tian, 2021).

### **Republican period (after 1949)**

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Chinese art songs underwent profound political and social changes, and the music of this period reflected the country's political direction and social sentiments. The government encouraged songs to reflect socialist themes and revolutionary sentiments, which led to a series of changes in the Chinese music scene and the emergence of a large number of political songs to promote communist and socialist ideas. During the Republican period, Chinese society underwent major political, economic and cultural changes. The regime of the newly established People's Republic of China introduced a socialist revolution that transformed private ownership into state ownership, which had far-reaching effects on the music and cultural scene. The government wanted music to be a tool to promote socialist values, revolutionary sentiments, and communist ideals as a way to strengthen national unity and unite the people in a common consciousness (Pan Hui. 2021). During this period, political songs became one of the dominant music styles. These songs usually glorified the party and the government, praised the socialist system, and expressed reverence for the heroes of the revolution and the greatness of communism. The lyrics of the songs emphasized the superiority of socialism and the belief in communism, encouraging people to contribute to the development of the country and the cause of communism.

During the Republican period, political songs such as "The East is Red", "Without the Communist Party There is No New China" and "March of the Volunteer Army" became the musical representatives of this era and were widely sung, deeply rooted in people's hearts and minds, arousing patriotic feelings and socialist fervor. These songs played an important propaganda role in Chinese society at the time, shaping socialist ethics and morals and promoting the concept of communism. "The East is Red" is an iconic political song that celebrates the great achievements of socialist China with its uplifting melody and lyrics. The song emphasizes the rise and prosperity of China and eulogizes the triumph of communism. It has been widely sung in society, inspiring pride in the country and love for socialism. "No New China Without the Communist Party", on the other hand, directly expresses the key role of the CPC in nation-building. The song emphasizes the Party's leading position, praises its wisdom and spirit of sacrifice, and calls on people to unite and work together for the success of the socialist cause. "The March of the Volunteer Army" is the military anthem of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) and has become a symbol of China's socialist military power.

With its stirring music and firm lyrics, the song expresses the valour and loyalty of the Chinese army. The song stresses the importance of national defense and national liberation and inspires concern for national security. In contrast to political songs, lyrical songs also had a place in the music of this period. Although their subject matter differed from that of political songs, the lyrics of lyrical songs usually expressed sentiments about family, kinship, and love. These songs were warm and moving, providing an outlet for people's emotions while also conveying socialist ethics. However, the government expected music to reflect socialist values, so even lyrics to lyrical songs were often subject to political censorship and constraints to ensure that they conformed to the framework of socialist ideology (Lu, 2021).

### **After the 1980s**

After the 1980s, Chinese art songs experienced an exciting renaissance. Considered the golden age of China's music industry, this period saw a fusion of many different musical styles, including rock, pop and folk, bringing new diversity to Chinese music creation and performance. Famous singers such as Deng Ziqi, Li Yuchun and Mao Amin came to prominence, attracting the attention of a wide audience and injecting new vigour into the Chinese music scene. In the early 1980s, China's music industry began to emancipate itself, and a variety of musical styles emerged. Rock music began to emerge in China and became an important way for the younger generation to express themselves and their emotions. The rebellious spirit and liberal style of rock music attracted young people and challenged the traditional concepts of music and culture. A number of bands and rock singers, such as Dou Wei and Blade Runner, began to make a name for themselves in China, laying the foundation for the rise of rock music in the country.

After the 1980s, China's pop music industry experienced a boom and diversification. A new generation of pop singers and creators emerged, bringing new vigor and innovation to Chinese music (Yue, 2021). One such pop icon is Li Yuchun, who rose to prominence through her participation in China's version of the "Supergirl" talent competition. Her music combines a variety of musical elements, including pop, rock and folk, to create a unique musical style. Lee's music is popular with young people and has brought a new sound to Chinese pop music. Her music has broken through the barriers of the traditional music industry and is highly sought after by the younger generation, making her a star in the Chinese music industry. Another high-profile female singer is Deng Ziqi, who has gained widespread attention for her unique musical style and musical talent. Fusing pop, R&B and electronic elements, Deng's innovative music has won the hearts of young listeners. Her energetic musical compositions, profound lyrics and passionate vocals have attracted a large number of fans. In addition to winning great success domestically, she also rose to prominence on the international music scene, contributing to the international spread of Chinese music. Folk music also developed significantly during this period. Some folk singers, such as Mao Amin, were famous for their profound emotional expressions and realistic themes. Their musical compositions conveyed deep thoughts about life, love and social issues, attracting a group of listeners who preferred deep lyricism. With their sincere and heartfelt songs, these singers injected new vigor into Chinese folk music (Zhuo, 2021).

The revival of music during this period was not only diversified in musical styles, but also benefited from the rise of modern technology and social media. Advances in music production and recording technology, as well as the widespread use of the Internet, made it easier for musicians to create, record, and share their music. Social media platforms provide musicians with the opportunity to interact with their fans, making the connection between music and listeners even stronger. Overall, after the 1980s, Chinese art songs experienced a period of diversification and prosperity. The fusion of different musical styles, including rock, pop and folk, as well as outstanding musicians and singers, combined to drive the prosperity of China's music industry. The rich and colorful music culture of this period reflected the diversity of Chinese society and the innovative spirit of the younger generation, injecting new vitality into the Chinese music scene. These outstanding musicians and singers not only won wide recognition within China, but also emerged on the international music stage, contributing significantly to the internationalization of Chinese music (Zhang, 2019).

### **Contemporary Development**

In contemporary times, Chinese art songs continue to show a trend of diversification and prosperity, incorporating a wide range of musical styles such as pop, rock, jazz, and folk, bringing a richer musical experience to music creators and listeners. Chinese singers and musicians have also achieved a certain degree of influence on the international music stage, spreading Chinese music globally and further strengthening the international music community's recognition of Chinese music. On the one hand, China's music industry continues to grow, providing more opportunities for creators and singers. The rise and popularity of digital music platforms has made it easier for music works to be produced, released and distributed. This provides more opportunities for independent musicians and small music groups to grow, release their music on their own via the internet, build their own fan bases, and achieve a balance between artistic creativity and commercial success. The continued popularity of pop music in China has also played a positive role in the prosperity of the music industry. China's pop music is stylistically diverse, with singers and creators constantly pushing the boundaries of what is possible, attracting the attention of the younger generation. Some Chinese pop singers, such as Brilliance, Jacky Cheung and Yoga Lin, have achieved widespread success both at home and abroad, contributing to the international spread of Chinese music. Rock music also continues to grow in China and has attracted a large and loyal audience. Some rock bands such as New Pants, Mayday and No Party in Caodong have made significant contributions to the legacy and development of Chinese rock music through their unique musical expression and rebellious spirit. Chinese rock music is not only popular in China, but has also attracted the attention of the international music industry, opening new doors for the internationalization of Chinese music. Jazz and folk music are also gaining prominence in China, attracting listeners who love these styles of music. Some Chinese jazz musicians and folk singers have won acclaim for their skills and musical creations, contributing to the diversity and richness of Chinese music. In addition, Chinese musicians and singers have achieved increasing success on the international music scene. They participate in international music collaborations, music programmers and music competitions, representing Chinese music to the world. Chinese pop singers such as Li Yuchun, Deng Ziqi and Wu Yifan, as well as rock bands such as Mayday and New Pants, have established their reputations on the international music stage, contributing to the internationalization of Chinese music in no small way.

## Differences between Chinese art songs and Western opera arias

### Musical style

#### (1) Traditional music elements

The uniqueness of Chinese art songs lies in the fact that they incorporate a wide range of colourful traditional musical elements, which add a unique musical charm and cultural depth to the songs. Traditional musical instruments play a key role in Chinese art songs, not only enriching the sound texture of the music, but also leading the listener to the rich cultural traditions of China. Chinese art songs often make use of the guzheng, a thousand-year-old traditional Chinese silk stringed instrument. The unique sound and gorgeous melodies of the guzheng add an oriental flavour to the songs. Its unique playing techniques, such as finger picking, sweeping and rolling, give the songs a distinctive sound. The erhu is another fascinating traditional instrument. It is a stringed instrument known for its unique sound and playing style. The erhu is often used to play passionate melodies, infusing songs with depth and emotion. The pipa is an ancient plucked string instrument with a refined tone and musical tradition. It has a colourful range of musical techniques and sonorities and is often used to create melodic musical pieces. The flute is a wind instrument with a lilting tone, which is often used in the introduction or interlude parts of songs. The musical expressiveness of the flute makes it ideal for expressing emotion and mood (Liu, 2023).

The use of these traditional instruments not only enriches the sound of Chinese art songs, but also conveys the deep connotation of Chinese culture. They give the songs a unique musical texture that makes Chinese art songs different from other musical styles. At the same time, playing these traditional instruments requires a high level of skill, so singers and musicians are often professionally trained to ensure that these instruments are perfectly represented in the songs. This fusion of traditional instruments allows Chinese art songs to maintain their traditional cultural ties, while also bringing new and diverse elements to the music. This has given Chinese art songs a wide appeal on the international music scene, attracting listeners from all over the world. It also reflects the pluralistic and ever-evolving nature of Chinese music, injecting new vigour into Chinese music creation.

#### 2) Modern Music Style

The uniqueness of Chinese art songs also lies in its ability to comfortably blend traditional and modern musical elements, a fusion that enriches the expressiveness and appeal of the music. Modern music styles, such as pop, rock and ballad, have injected new vigour into Chinese art songs, giving them a wider influence in the music field. Arrangement is an important manifestation of modern musical elements in Chinese art songs (Zhang, 2023). Arrangements of popular music often feature modern instruments such as guitars, basses, drums and keyboards, as well as electronic sound effects. These elements bring a modern feel to the songs while also adding to the rhythm and energy of the music. Rock music arrangements often emphasise guitar and drum parts, giving the song strong emotion and power. Folk music arrangements, on the other hand, are usually simple and close to life, featuring guitars and acoustic instruments, with an emphasis on lyrics and emotion. In addition to arrangements, modern musical elements can be found in the rhythm and sound of the songs. Pop music is usually characterised by bright rhythms and catchy melodies, which makes Chinese art songs more likely to resonate with listeners. Rock music is characterised by strong drum beats and

guitar solos that convey emotions of power and freedom. Folk music, on the other hand, usually emphasises storytelling and emotional lyricism, and the singer's voice is often close to nature and simple.

The fusion of modern musical elements not only gives Chinese art songs a broader musical language, but also makes them easier to resonate with modern listeners. This fusion creates vibrant musical works that reflect the innovative spirit and respect for multiculturalism of Chinese music creators. As a result, Chinese art songs have retained the characteristics of traditional culture while maintaining a close connection with modern music trends, giving new impetus to the development of the Chinese music scene and attracting the attention of a wide range of listeners. It also demonstrates the pluralistic and ever-changing nature of Chinese music, opening up a broader path for the future of music (Zhao, 2023).

### **3) Western Opera Aria**

Western opera aria is a unique musical form whose roots lie in the Western classical music tradition. This musical form usually uses orchestral accompaniment and follows the harmonic structure and musical norms of classical music. Opera arias have a high degree of musical drama, with an important emphasis on the vocal technique of the singers and the drama of the music. In an aria, the vocal technique of the singer is crucial. Singers need to be professionally trained to ensure that they are able to cope with the complex demands of the music, including intervallic leaps, the handling of high and low notes, and musical expressiveness. Singing in arias requires singers to have excellent vocal skills in order to express the drama and emotion of the music. Musical drama in aria is another of its distinguishing features. Opera is usually a form of musical theatre whose purpose is to tell a story through music, lyrics and performance. Arias often serve as the highlight of an opera, driving the plot through musical expression and emotion. These musical moments are intensely dramatic and can convey the emotions, conflicts and development of the characters. Unlike Chinese art songs, Western opera arias do not usually blend traditional and modern musical elements. They adhere to classical music traditions and follow the harmonic structure and musical norms of classical music in order to maintain their unique musical identity. Aria usually occupies an important place in operatic works and is highly valued for its musical and dramatic qualities (Liang, 2023).

### **Language of Lyrics**

The lyrics of Chinese art songs usually use Chinese as the main language of expression, a choice that reflects China's dominant linguistic and cultural traditions as well as bringing a unique character to Chinese music. As the official language of China, Chinese is widely used, so there are some significant advantages to using Chinese lyrics in the music field.

Firstly, Chinese is the primary language of China, so using Chinese as the language of lyrics ensures that songs are more easily understood and appreciated by listeners in mainland China and the Chinese-speaking world. This helps singers to establish a more intimate connection with the general audience, making it easier to convey the emotion and content of the songs.

Secondly, Chinese, as a musical language, has its own unique phonetic and phonological characteristics. Pronunciation and pitch changes in Chinese can bring a variety of musical expressions to songs. Singers can express their emotions and create expressive singing through the sound characteristics of Chinese.

Although Chinese is the main language of lyrics, there are examples of other dialects or languages used in Chinese music, which further enrich the diversity of Chinese music. China is a multi-ethnic country with many languages and dialects, so some musicians choose to use local dialects to express specific regional cultures and emotions.

Overall, Chinese as the main lyric language for Chinese art songs has a unique cultural background and musical characteristics. This choice not only helps singers to establish a closer connection with Chinese audiences, but also provides music creators with an important tool to express their emotions and cultural identity. Compared with other musical languages, Chinese has infused Chinese musical works with unique musicality and cultural depth.

Western opera arias are usually written in original libretto languages, which usually include Italian, French, German, English, etc., depending on the origin of the opera and the choice of the creator. This choice of language is dramatically and culturally important in opera because different languages can convey specific emotions and expressions. The language choice of an opera is usually closely related to the country of origin and the cultural tradition of the opera. For example, Italian operas usually use Italian, French operas use French, German operas use German, and English operas use English. This choice of language helps to preserve the musical traditions and cultural characteristics of each country, giving the opera a more national character. The use of original languages in opera also helps singers to better express the emotions of the characters and the details of the plot. This is because original language can fit better with the melody and rhythm of the music, making performances more natural and fluid. Singers are usually professionally trained to ensure that they are able to accurately pronounce and express the meaning of the lyrics, thus giving more depth and emotion to the characters. In addition to this, the original language of the opera reflects the history and cultural traditions of the opera. Different countries and regions have made unique contributions to the development of opera and their language choices reflect this. This choice of language helps the opera to retain its historical and cultural values, while also providing a variety of musical experiences for an international audience. In conclusion, Western operatic arias usually use an original libretto language, and this language choice has important musical and cultural significance in opera. Different languages can convey different emotions and expressions, and help singers to better interpret roles and express the drama of the music. This tradition also reflects the contributions and characteristics of different countries and regions in the development of opera (Bi, 2023).

### **Musical Drama**

The musical dramaturgy of Chinese art songs is relatively low, focusing more on the expression of emotions and the content of the lyrics than that of Western opera arias. This difference reflects the different characteristics and purposes of different musical forms. Firstly, Chinese art songs usually focus on the content and emotional expression of the lyrics. The lyrics of these songs are often rich in depth, reflecting a variety of emotions and themes, such as love, family, friendship, and social issues. Singers usually devote themselves to conveying the emotions in the lyrics when they sing, in order to trigger the audience's empathy. This emotional expression is the core of Chinese art songs, making it easier to establish an emotional connection with a wide range of listeners. Secondly, Chinese art songs are usually sung independently, rather than being performed in the dramatic context of an opera or musical. This means that these songs usually do not require role-playing or dramatic acting, but rather focus

on the singer's musical performance and emotional delivery. This form of performance is usually more concise, focusing on the music itself rather than dramatic acting. Alternatively, Chinese art songs can be accompanied by music videos or films to enhance the expressiveness and emotion of the song. This multimedia presentation can give the song more visual elements and make it more appealing. Music videos are often used to emphasise the emotions and themes in the lyrics, whereas films can combine the songs with storylines to enhance the drama of the music (Gan, 2023).

Overall, Chinese art songs focus on emotional expression and the content of the lyrics, and their relatively low musical drama makes them more suitable for independent singing, as well as being enhanced by multimedia methods such as music videos and films. This musical form has an important place in the Chinese music scene, reflecting the rich diversity of Chinese culture and emotions.

Western opera arias are usually an important part of the operatic work and have a high degree of musical drama. They are not only an integral part of the opera as a whole, but also play a crucial role in the opera and are often regarded as the highlight and climax of the opera. Firstly, arias are usually used in opera to advance the plot and character development. They express the emotions, inner conflicts and development of the characters in musical form, which helps the audience to better understand the storyline. Aria usually carries the inner world and emotional changes of the characters, and conveys these emotions through the expressive power of music, thus making the audience more deeply involved in the plot. Secondly, arias have a high degree of musical drama in opera. They not only require singers to have excellent vocal skills, but also require them to be able to express the emotions and drama of the character through music. Arias often contain high pitches, low notes, intervallic leaps, and complex musical demands, and therefore require singers with a high level of expressiveness in both music and acting. In addition, arias are often seen as the highlight of an opera. They are usually the musical moments that audiences look forward to the most because of their high musical and dramatic value. Aria often has an emotional climax and is a turning point for the character, thus attracting the audience's attention and emotional involvement (Shi, 2023).

## **Conclusion**

Overall, Western opera arias have an important musical-dramatic aspect in operatic works; they are used to drive the plot and character development and are a key element in opera. This musical form not only requires singers to possess a high level of musical and acting skills, but also provides the audience with a profound musical and dramatic experience, which is an important part of opera.

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