

INTEGRATING SICHUAN QINGYIN SINGING TECHNIQUES INTO SICHUAN ETHNIC OPERA: A CASE STUDY OF THE OPERA

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Abstract

This study examines the innovative application and integration of Sichuan Qingyin singing techniques within the Sichuan ethnic opera Jiang Jie. Through qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews, participant observations, literature analysis, and focus group discussions, the research explores how Qingyin vocal methods, such as the distinctive "Haha tune," melodic leaps, and refined breath control, enhance dramatic expression, musical richness, and cultural authenticity. The study also identifies strategies for preserving traditional Qingyin methods while fostering their adaptation in contemporary contexts. Findings underscore Qingyin's critical role in reinforcing regional musical and cultural identities and propose recommendations for its sustainable integration and innovative development in Sichuan ethnic opera.

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Introduction

Opera, as an influential performing art, has evolved significantly within China's diverse cultural landscape, contributing remarkable works that reflect regional characteristics and national heritage. Among these, Sichuan ethnic opera stands out for its distinctive vocal tradition, known as Sichuan Qingyin. This vocal technique, characterized by a passionate and high-pitched style, significantly enhances the expressiveness and emotional resonance of performances, notably exemplified in the renowned opera Jiang Jie (Liu & Song, 2023). Sichuan Qingyin, recognized as an intangible cultural heritage since 2008, not only represents a critical component of regional identity but also contributes uniquely to China's broader cultural tapestry. Despite its cultural value, contemporary challenges such as changing audience preferences and the complexities involved in vocal training pose threats to its preservation and innovation.

Theoretically, investigating the integration of Sichuan Qingyin singing techniques into ethnic opera enriches the artistic repertoire and expressive capabilities of Chinese opera. The specialized vocal approaches, including intricate tonal variations and emotionally vivid performances, provide deeper insights into the fusion between traditional and contemporary musical elements. Practically, the effective application of Sichuan Qingyin in operatic works like Jiang Jie enhances the audience's immersive experience, creating powerful emotional connections between performers and viewers. Additionally, the vocal tradition's scientific characteristics and regional uniqueness offer valuable perspectives for vocal music education and performance innovation (Ran & Bai, 2020).

Therefore, exploring the inheritance, innovation, and practical application of Sichuan Qingyin singing techniques within Sichuan ethnic opera holds significant cultural and practical implications. It not only contributes to preserving a valuable intangible cultural heritage but also supports the ongoing artistic evolution and educational enrichment of Chinese national opera.

Objectives

1. To investigate the practical application of Sichuan Qingyin singing techniques in Sichuan ethnic opera, focusing specifically on the opera Jiang Jie, by analyzing how Qingyin techniques influence character portrayal, musical expression, and dramatic performance.
2. To examine the musical and cultural characteristics reflected by Sichuan Qingyin singing techniques within Sichuan ethnic opera, exploring the relationships among Qingyin's melodic structures, modes, qupai system, regional culture, and historical context.
3. To identify effective strategies and approaches for integrating Sichuan Qingyin singing techniques into Sichuan ethnic opera, proposing practical guidelines and recommendations for the inheritance, innovation, and sustainable development of Qingyin techniques in contemporary contexts.

Literature Review

1. Research on Sichuan Qingyin Singing Techniques

Zhang (2016) explored the distinctive features and comparative nuances between Sichuan Qingyin's "Haha Opera" and bel canto's "Flower Opera." He identified shared principles in breath control and resonance but emphasized critical differences in oral shape adjustments and vocal techniques. Zhang's analysis provides a foundational understanding of how Sichuan Qingyin uniquely integrates traditional and modern vocal methods.

Zhao (2018) investigated the impact of Sichuan Qingyin vocal training on general vocal performance, underscoring the method's regional characteristics and expressive power. The study demonstrated how specialized Qingyin techniques significantly enhance vocalists' expressiveness, highlighting its potential as both an artistic form and an effective vocal pedagogical approach.

Tian and Su (2020) conducted a detailed technical analysis of Sichuan Qingyin's signature "Haha Opera" technique. Their study examined distinctive elements, such as the rapid articulation and unique vocal ornamentation, emphasizing its importance for cultural heritage preservation and vocal education. This work emphasizes the artistic and instructional value embedded within traditional Qingyin singing methods.

2. Performance Analysis and Research of Opera "Jiang Jie"

Liang (2016) provided an in-depth technical examination of the vocal techniques used in the famous aria "The Liberation of Bashan and Shushui" from the opera Jiang Jie. Focusing on pronunciation, breath management, and emotional delivery, Liang offered practical insights into achieving an authentic and emotionally resonant performance.

Mao (2017) conducted comprehensive research on the musical performance characteristics of Jiang Jie, thoroughly examining melody structure, harmonic composition, and narrative integration. The study revealed the musical coherence within the opera, elucidating how singing techniques effectively support dramatic storytelling and emotional depth.

Xie (2012) focused specifically on the character portrayal of the protagonist, Jiang Jie, through vocal performance. By analyzing melody, rhythm, and lyrical content, Xie detailed how vocal nuances help vividly communicate Jiang Jie's revolutionary spirit, courage, and emotional intensity, contributing significantly to character development within the opera.

Jin (1992), from an international perspective, examined selected arias from Jiang Jie, analyzing their historical backgrounds and vocal interpretations. This research illuminated how Chinese ethnic opera's vocal traditions might be effectively introduced into global contexts, serving both as a cross-cultural bridge and as valuable resources for international vocal pedagogy.

Methodology

1. Population and Sample

This study investigates the inheritance and innovation of the Sichuan Qingyin singing technique in the opera Jiang Jie, focusing specifically on performers, music experts, cultural officials, and audience members familiar with Sichuan ethnic opera. Participants were selected from professional Sichuan-based performing arts groups, including the Sichuan Quyi Troupe, China Broadcasting Art Troupe, and Sichuan Conservatory of Music. A total of 24 participants comprised the study sample, categorized as follows: five opera performers and singers, seven academic experts specializing in Sichuan Qingyin, ten experienced audience members from Terengganu Concert Hall, and two cultural officials from Chengdu Ethnic Orchestra and Deyang Cultural Bureau. Participants were purposefully selected based on their expertise, stage experience, familiarity with Sichuan Qingyin, or their direct role in cultural policy and opera promotion.

2. Research Instruments

Qualitative research instruments used in this study included interview outlines, observation checklists, and literature research frameworks.

Interview Outlines: Semi-structured interview outlines were designed collaboratively by qualitative research experts and researchers. Questions were prepared to explore participants' experiences, perspectives, and insights related to the application and inheritance of Sichuan Qingyin techniques.

Observation Checklist: Structured observation checklists were employed during rehearsals and teaching sessions to record performers' vocal techniques, interactions, and learning dynamics in real-time.

Literature Research Framework: The literature review framework was developed to systematically organize scholarly contributions around historical contexts, theoretical underpinnings, artistic features, and future development trends of Sichuan Qingyin and the opera Jiang Jie.

Additionally, an iFlytek digital voice recorder (model: B1Y210) was utilized for accurate audio recordings during interviews and discussions.

3. Data Collection

The data collection process involved four qualitative methods: in-depth interviews, participant observations, literature analysis, and focus group discussions.

In-depth Interviews: Conducted face-to-face or via telephone with all 24 participants, these interviews captured detailed insights into participants' personal experiences, interpretations, and views regarding Qingyin techniques. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and confirmed by participants for accuracy.

Participant Observations: Researchers observed rehearsals of Jiang Jie performances and classroom settings where Qingyin techniques were taught. Detailed notes were systematically recorded, focusing on vocal and performance techniques, interactions, and educational approaches.

Literature Analysis: Comprehensive reviews were conducted using academic journals, theses, professional texts, and electronic databases (e.g., CNKI, Wanfang). Emphasis was placed on historical development, technique transmission, and contemporary application of Sichuan Qingyin in Chinese opera.

Focus Group Discussions: Group discussions conducted via video conferencing provided opportunities for participants to collectively explore challenges, experiences, and perspectives on Qingyin inheritance, innovation, and integration within contemporary opera performances. Discussions were carefully documented through audio recordings and researcher notes.

4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed qualitatively, employing thematic analysis and content analysis techniques.

Thematic Analysis: All qualitative materials—including interview transcripts, observation notes, and group discussion recordings—were digitally archived and coded systematically. The coding scheme comprised three hierarchical levels, identifying participant group, individual participant, and specific thematic content.

Content Analysis: Researchers conducted cross-source comparisons to verify data consistency, reliability, and thematic coherence. Information from interviews was triangulated with observational data and literature findings to ensure comprehensive and credible interpretations.

To ensure methodological rigor, three validation techniques were employed: triangulation (cross-validation), expert review, and member checking. Experts in qualitative research and Sichuan Qingyin singing evaluated the analytical accuracy, while participants reviewed transcriptions to confirm data accuracy.

Results

1. Application and Innovation of Sichuan Qingyin Singing Techniques in the Opera Jiang Jie

The Sichuan ethnic opera Jiang Jie innovatively integrates traditional Sichuan Qingyin vocal techniques, effectively enhancing its artistic expression,

emotional depth, and regional character. The Qingyin singing style, distinctive for its rich vocal dynamics, unique timbral variations, and expressive melodic techniques, significantly contributes to the characterization and dramatic narrative within the opera.

A key Qingyin technique employed in the opera is the "haha tune," which relies on rapid articulation, staccato rhythms, and intricate melodic embellishments produced through controlled breath and agile tongue movements. In the aria "Five Continents People Laugh Together," the agile rhythm and melodic leaps vividly express optimism and resilience. Specifically, the repeated, quick articulation on syllables effectively generates a vibrant, laughter-like musical atmosphere, vividly highlighting Jiang Jie's emotional transition from suffering to revolutionary joy (Figure 1).



Figure 1 Part of edigree of Jiang – 1 (Yan & Yang, 2000)

Another critical Qingyin characteristic integrated into Jiang Jie is the strategic use of sudden melodic leaps and dramatic intervallic jumps. This technique is vividly demonstrated in the famous aria "Red Plum Blossom Praise," where bold octave leaps and expansive intervals vividly express Jiang Jie's fearless determination and inner strength amid adversity. The large descending octave jumps create a compelling vocal representation of Jiang Jie's profound emotional state, enhancing the audience's connection with her revolutionary ideals and courageous spirit (Figure 2).



Figure 2 Part of edigree of Jiang – 2 (Yan & Yang, 2000)

Qingyin's emotional versatility is also effectively harnessed in the opera. Different emotional layers, such as passion, sorrow, optimism, and resilience, are powerfully communicated through subtle variations in vocal timbre and melodic movements. For example, Qingyin's characteristic descending vocal style, employed in critical emotional passages, effectively deepens the portrayal of poignant and reflective moments. Particularly in the aria "Embroidered Red Flag," Jiang Jie's contemplative and emotional farewell is poignantly rendered through a descending melodic contour, capturing her deep longing, sacrifice, and unwavering revolutionary commitment.

Instrumental accompaniment elements typical of Sichuan Qingyin, including the rhythmic and decorative embellishments performed by traditional instruments such as erhu and pipa, further strengthen the opera's emotional resonance. Such embellishments enrich the melodic texture and intensify emotional expression, as seen in the aria "Revolution to the End Will Be Like Steel," where subtle rhythmic decorations reinforce the emotional intensity of Jiang Jie's internal struggle and pain, vividly portraying her unwavering resolve amid hardship.

Additionally, the traditional Qingyin structural approach of combining slow-paced and rhythmic vocal phrasing ("slow pulling and slow singing") has been thoughtfully adapted in Jiang Jie. In the aria "Don't Say Goodbye with Crying," this technique is utilized to express Jiang Jie's complex emotional state as she confronts sacrifice and bids farewell to her comrades. The extended musical phrases and deliberate pacing create an emotionally charged

atmosphere, allowing deeper exploration of Jiang Jie's inner world and enhancing audience empathy.

Overall, the deliberate and innovative application of Sichuan Qingyin singing techniques in the opera Jiang Jie demonstrates a harmonious integration of traditional vocal artistry within contemporary opera performance. These techniques not only preserve but also creatively adapt Sichuan's rich cultural heritage, significantly deepening the opera's emotional impact and artistic expressiveness. This case exemplifies a valuable model for future innovation in Chinese national opera, affirming the continued vitality and adaptability of traditional vocal techniques in modern performance contexts.

2. Sichuan Qingyin Singing Techniques and Cultural Identity in Jiang Jie

Sichuan Qingyin singing techniques vividly embody the unique musical and cultural identity of Sichuan ethnic opera, as distinctly exemplified in the opera Jiang Jie. Rooted deeply in Sichuan's rich cultural heritage, Qingyin singing carries a clear imprint of regional traditions, historical contexts, and literary influences, significantly enhancing the opera's artistic depth and cultural resonance.

The musical identity of Sichuan Qingyin is prominently reflected through its sophisticated Qupai system, which consists of eight major tune families and numerous minor melodic forms. Drawing inspiration from traditional Ming and Qing melodies, regional folk tunes, and local operatic styles, Sichuan Qingyin exhibits remarkable musical diversity. Its structural richness ranges from concise single-piece forms to elaborate multipart compositions, frequently incorporating traditional operatic structures like plate cavities (banci). This structural versatility allows Qingyin to adeptly express varied emotions and complex narratives, greatly enriching the musical texture of Sichuan ethnic opera, including Jiang Jie.

Moreover, Sichuan Qingyin's melodic characteristics distinctly reflect the regional cultural temperament. Predominantly based on the Gong (do) and Zheng (sol) modes, Qingyin melodies frequently employ distinctive melodic patterns such as the "high-falling" melodic line, notable for extensive descending contours that highlight introspective or emotional depth. Another typical melodic technique is the "wave-like" melodic pattern, characterized by alternating short ascending and descending intervals, creating a gentle, fluid expression. Additionally, "intervallic leaps" further enhance melodic expressiveness, effectively capturing dramatic tension and emotional intensity in critical narrative moments within the opera.

The strong cultural identity within Qingyin singing also emerges clearly from its historical and geographical contexts. Sichuan's unique cultural landscape, enriched by Bashu folk traditions, has significantly influenced Qingyin's development. Qingyin melodies and rhythmic patterns consistently incorporate elements from Sichuan folk music and mountain songs, naturally embedding regional character into operatic expressions. Historically, Qingyin flourished amidst Sichuan's prosperous urban culture, where performances in tea houses and public venues fostered its popularity and cultural significance. Thus, Qingyin singing naturally resonates with local audiences, reflecting the collective memories and shared emotions of Sichuan's people.

This distinct cultural identity is effectively harnessed in the opera Jiang Jie, where Qingyin singing techniques contribute meaningfully to both musical and dramatic presentations. For example, the careful integration of Sichuan Qingyin's signature vocal techniques, such as the "haha tune," vividly captures local expressiveness, highlighting emotional nuances unique to Sichuan culture. Furthermore, Qingyin's characteristic melodic structures, such as expansive melodic leaps and dynamic rhythmic variations, significantly deepen the audience's emotional engagement with the opera's central characters, particularly Jiang Jie herself.



Jiang Jie also effectively employs Qingyin's narrative capabilities derived from its deep literary connections. Many Qingyin pieces historically draw inspiration from Sichuan's rich storytelling and literary traditions, combining narrative depth with musical expressiveness. The opera leverages this tradition by utilizing thematic melodies associated with characters, thereby strengthening their narrative depth and emotional authenticity. Jiang Jie's thematic melodies, shifting expressively between heroic strength and emotional tenderness, not only enhance her personal portrayal but also firmly anchor her within Sichuan's regional cultural identity.

In summary, the careful application of Sichuan Qingyin singing techniques in Jiang Jie vividly captures and expresses Sichuan's distinctive cultural heritage. By integrating Qingyin's melodic diversity, rich Qupai structures, and regional cultural elements into contemporary opera performance, Jiang Jie successfully reinforces the cultural significance and artistic identity of Sichuan ethnic opera. This approach not only highlights Qingyin's unique artistic qualities but also demonstrates its continuing vitality and relevance within modern Chinese operatic practice.

3. Strategies for Integrating Sichuan Qingyin Singing Techniques into Sichuan Ethnic Opera: Heritage and Innovation

This study identified key strategies to effectively integrate Sichuan Qingyin singing techniques into Sichuan ethnic opera, with particular reference to the opera Jiang Jie. These strategies not only facilitate the preservation of Qingyin's cultural authenticity but also encourage innovative development in contemporary contexts.

Firstly, ensuring effective inheritance and protection of Sichuan Qingyin is crucial. Traditionally, Sichuan Qingyin has relied heavily on mentorship and family lineage for its transmission. While these traditional approaches have safeguarded Qingyin's unique artistic characteristics, they face modern

challenges such as declining interest among younger generations. To address this, governmental and cultural institutions have actively intervened by designating Qingyin as intangible cultural heritage, providing targeted financial support, and establishing training centers, such as the Chengdu Qingyin Training Institute, to cultivate younger performers systematically. These measures help secure Qingyin's future and maintain its distinctive local identity.

Secondly, innovative adaptation of traditional Qingyin techniques enhances their contemporary relevance and appeal. Qingyin's distinct vocal techniques, particularly the delicate breath control and unique embellishments such as the "haha tune," have significant potential for integration with modern vocal methods. For instance, in Jiang Jie, the composer creatively combines Qingyin breath techniques with modern ethnic vocal methods, creating emotionally rich and dramatically compelling vocal performances. The integration of Qingyin's characteristic breath control—marked by clear enunciation and emotional depth—with modern vocal approaches has enabled singers to deliver nuanced portrayals of characters, deeply resonating with contemporary audiences.

One illustrative example is the aria "I Devote My Youth to Communism," where Qingyin's breath control and articulation enhance the emotional intensity, vividly conveying Jiang Jie's revolutionary ideals and personal determination (Figure 3). By blending Qingyin techniques with modern vocal resonance methods, performers successfully achieve greater expressive power and vocal stability, demonstrating how traditional techniques can be revitalized through innovation.



Figure 3 Part of edigree of Jiang – 3 (Yan & Yang, 2000)

Another significant innovation is the refined use of Qingyin's "haha tune." Traditionally limited in range and resonance, the "haha tune" has been adapted in Jiang Jie by integrating resonance techniques from bel canto singing. This innovation significantly expands the vocal technique's expressive capabilities, enabling more versatile and impactful stage performances.

Additionally, the incorporation of traditional Sichuan Qingyin recitative (Daobai) enriches the dramatic quality of the opera. Unlike Western operatic recitatives, Qingyin recitative maintains musicality while clearly delivering narrative content. For instance, in the scene "Burying the Jiang Family Dynasty with Laughter," Daobai effectively conveys the psychological complexity and emotional tension between characters, enhancing audience engagement and narrative clarity.

Lastly, strategic innovation is evident in the combination of solo singing with chorus techniques influenced by traditional Qingyin's accompaniment forms. Chorus sections, acting as narrative commentary, amplify dramatic effects, providing emotional depth and contextual clarity. Such use is prominent in the chorus "Revolution to the End Like Steel," which utilizes collective vocal expression to highlight the emotional transformation and revolutionary fervor central to Jiang Jie's character (Figure 4).



Figure 1 Part of edigree of Jiang – 1 (Chinese Quyi Music Compilation National Editorial Committee, 2009).

In summary, by systematically integrating Sichuan Qingyin singing techniques into Sichuan ethnic opera through strategic inheritance, innovative adaptation of vocal techniques, and refined dramatic expression, Jiang Jie exemplifies successful cultural heritage preservation and artistic innovation. This approach not only revitalizes traditional Qingyin practices but also demonstrates their ongoing vitality and relevance in modern operatic performance contexts.

Discussion

This study comprehensively explored the application and innovative integration of Sichuan Qingyin singing techniques within Sichuan ethnic opera, especially through a detailed examination of the opera Jiang Jie. By analyzing Qingyin's unique techniques—such as breath control, melodic variations, the characteristic "haha tune," and refined articulation—this research revealed their significant role in enriching the musical expressiveness and dramatic depth of Sichuan ethnic opera. Qingyin's distinctive regional and cultural characteristics provided a clear pathway toward maintaining traditional authenticity while simultaneously pursuing artistic innovation.

Compared with previous studies, this research extends the findings of Zhang (2016), who primarily discussed the technical aspects of the "Haha tune." While Zhang emphasized breath control and resonance from a purely vocal perspective, this study further integrates these vocal techniques explicitly within dramatic contexts, demonstrating how Qingyin techniques enhance character portrayal and emotional expression in contemporary opera performances. Additionally, although Zhao (2018) highlighted the expressive power of Qingyin singing in vocal training, this study uniquely contributes by illustrating its practical application in a specific opera, Jiang Jie, thus bridging theoretical vocal training with real-world operatic performance.

Moreover, this research confirms and expands upon Tian and Su's (2020) technical analysis of Qingyin's distinctive elements. While their study emphasized the preservation value of Qingyin, the current research innovatively demonstrates practical pathways to merge Qingyin techniques with modern singing methods, suggesting feasible approaches to cultural innovation and contemporary relevance. This integrative perspective offers practical guidelines beneficial for performers, composers, and educators, providing clearer strategies for adapting traditional vocal artistry to modern aesthetic demands.

Furthermore, governmental and institutional roles highlighted in this study resonate with Liang's (2016) and Mao's (2017) recommendations on preserving intangible cultural heritage. However, the present research explicitly articulates specific strategies, including targeted educational programs and innovative performance adaptations, offering more detailed recommendations for cultural policy and institutional support.

Nevertheless, the study acknowledges certain limitations, such as the primary focus on a single opera and the regional concentration in Sichuan, suggesting that future research should broaden both geographic and thematic scopes to enhance generalizability.

Based on the research objectives and questions, this study draws the following conclusions:

1. Qingyin Singing Enhances Sichuan Ethnic Opera:

Qingyin singing techniques, as illustrated in the opera Jiang Jie, significantly enrich musical and dramatic expression, contributing to character development and emotional depth. Techniques such as the "haha tune" and breath control strengthen the audience's emotional connection and enhance cultural authenticity.

2. Musical and Cultural Identity Reinforced:

Qingyin singing distinctly reflects the cultural identity and aesthetic preferences of Sichuan ethnic opera, effectively conveying regional and historical characteristics. This identity not only increases the artistic uniqueness of ethnic opera but also plays a vital role in cultural preservation and audience engagement.

3. Integration Methods for Qingyin Singing Techniques:

Effective integration involves systematic educational initiatives, innovative musical composition, modernized vocal training methods, and targeted cultural outreach. These strategies ensure that Qingyin's traditional essence is preserved while simultaneously meeting contemporary artistic demands and audience expectations.

4. Promotion of Sustainable Development:

To ensure Qingyin's ongoing vitality, sustainable development strategies—including governmental support, cultural policy enhancement, talent cultivation, and new media outreach—are crucial. These measures collectively contribute to maintaining Qingyin's relevance and its ability to adapt and thrive within modern contexts.

Recommendation

To address the limitations identified in this study and to further enhance future research, the following recommendations are provided:

1. Expand the Scope of Opera Research:

Future studies should include a broader range of Sichuan ethnic operas beyond Jiang Jie to develop a more comprehensive understanding of Qingyin singing techniques. Additionally, cross-regional comparative analyses should be considered to better appreciate regional variations and influences.

2. Increase Sample Diversity and Size:

Future research should involve a larger and more diverse group of participants, including composers, educators, directors, and emerging artists, to capture more diverse perspectives and insights. Such inclusivity can significantly enhance the depth and breadth of the research findings.

3. Employ Mixed Research Methods:

Integrating qualitative methods with quantitative approaches, such as surveys and experimental studies, would help generate more generalizable and objective data. Mixed methodologies can enhance the robustness and applicability of research findings, providing deeper insights into Qingyin's impact on modern opera practice and audience reception.

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